



# Raven of the Inner Palace

WRITTEN BY

Kouko Shirakawa

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NOVEL

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Shirakawa



*Seven Seas Entertainment*



KOKYU NO KARASU

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The Blue Swallow

The Water's Voice

The Man in the Mask

Yearning Aroma







# The Blue Swallow



DEEP INSIDE the inner palace, there lived a woman known as the Raven Consort.

Despite being a consort by title, the Raven Consort was special. She never provided any sort of nighttime entertainment to the emperor, and instead kept a low profile, spending her days inside her jet-black palace and rarely emerging from its doors. Some claimed to have seen her from time to time, but their reports were inconsistent—for every person who said she was an old woman, there was someone else who said she was a young girl.

In hushed tones, people speculated she was immortal, or possibly a fearsome ghost. They even said she had mystical magic powers, and rumor had it that she'd take on any task you requested of her. From putting a deadly curse on somebody you hated to summoning the spirits of the dead to finding missing items, she could do it all.

Even though she was a consort who resided in the inner palace, she never received any visits from the emperor.

She would never kneel before him either.

That was how the Raven Consort was.

Jusetsu sensed something strange and looked toward the door.

“What seems to be the trouble, niangniang?” asked Jiujiu, her lady-in-waiting.

The deep indigo darkness outside the lattice window seemed as if it were silently seeping into the room. It was just that kind of night. The robe that Jusetsu wore, however, was even deeper and darker in color. Both her satin shanqun, which was embroidered with a floral leaf pattern, and her skirt—featuring a bird carrying a flower—were as jet-black as ravens’ wings. The black, fine silk shawl that she wore around her shoulders had obsidian embroidered into it and glistened mysteriously like starlight with every slight movement she made.

“Someone is coming,” she replied curtly, getting up from her seat.

Her golden chicken, Shinshin, ran about restlessly at her feet. And at that very moment, a voice came from the other side of the doors.

“Dear Raven Consort, are you in?”

It was a young woman’s voice. She must have been frightened, or perhaps nervous, because her voice was shaky and shrill.

“There’s something I’d like to request of you, if you’d be so kind as to accept.”

This was the stock phrase used by visitors to the Yamei Palace. Everyone said it, as if it were some kind of password. These people would turn up because they had a request for Jusetsu—or rather, the Raven Consort.

They would always sneak over in secret and ask her for something—whether it be for her to find a missing item, summon a soul, or even curse someone to death.

Jusetsu quickly reached out her arm and gently waved the tip of her finger, as if she were pulling an invisible string.

With that, the doors silently opened. The image of a lone woman—who was standing still, rooted to the spot—emerged from underneath the delicate moonlight. Only part of her face was visible in the thick darkness. She appeared to be a court lady. The woman was dressed in a simple ruqun, but her face wasn’t easy to distinguish, as she was covered from head to toe in a sheet made of thin, white silk. She hurriedly stepped inside—as if she were afraid that someone would spot her—and let out a slight sigh.

“What do you request of me?” Jusetsu asked bluntly.

The woman suddenly looked up. It was clear that she was gasping with disbelief behind her silk cloth—although the cause of her shock was less certain. Perhaps she was amazed to see that Jusetsu was a young girl of just fifteen or sixteen, or maybe it was her jet-black ruqun that had taken her by surprise.

“Are you...the Raven Consort?” she said, sounding bewildered.

By the sound of things, it was Jusetsu’s age that had stunned her.

“Yes, I am. Why do you ask?”

These kinds of exchanges were bothersome. Following Jusetsu's rather rude reply, the woman went silent for a short while, then scurried up to her without giving her a bow of any kind.

"Please, help me," the woman said with such urgency. It almost seemed like she was about to cling onto the Raven Consort.

Jusetsu shrank back a little. The woman beneath the thin silk cloth was breathless.

"I have no choice but to call on you for help, dear Raven Consort. Please..."

"And that's why I asked you to tell me your request."

The woman pulled back the hand she stretched out toward Jusetsu and brought it to her chest. She gripped her shaking hands tightly together and gulped emphatically.

"I would...like you to call back a spirit for me."

Her voice was as shrill and shaky as it had been when Jusetsu first heard it—but the young woman now realized that the visitor was neither scared nor nervous.

She was desperate. Jusetsu was her last hope.

Calling back a spirit—she was asking to bring someone back to life.

"I want you to revive somebody for me," she reiterated.

The woman's hands trembled violently. She went to argue her case even more vehemently, but Jusetsu raised one of her hands to stop her.

"...I am not able to revive the deceased."

The woman raised her voice, letting out a noise that could be considered neither a shriek nor a groan. Undeterred, Jusetsu carried on speaking.

"What I *can* do is help you by summoning their soul. I can call for their soul on just one occasion. That is all. And it's not that I am unwilling to do more—I am simply incapable," she explained slowly in a way that was easy to understand.

The woman's shoulders bobbed up and down. Her breathing was heavy. It looked like she was about to burst into tears.

“But... No, you must be lying. Then, who else—who else am I supposed to ask?!” Her voice, which was spilling out between her ragged, heavy breaths, sounded horrified.

“No one is capable of carrying out such an act.”

The woman let out some kind of scream and covered her face with both of her hands over the fine silk cloth. A muffled cry escaped her lips. The sight of her acting like this made Jusetsu feel like sludge was gathering deep inside her chest. Requests like this were rare. This was the first time that someone had asked Jusetsu herself for such a thing, but she had witnessed it a few times when the previous Raven Consort was still around. Her mentor had given the same response that Jusetsu had. Turning the person away was the only option. Jusetsu was left with no other choice either. She felt like she wanted to cast away the heavy sludge inside of her, but instead, she just let out a small sigh and pointed at the door.

“I recommend that you leave.”

The woman backed away, quiet whimpers escaping her lips. She rose to her feet and staggered as she turned around. At that moment, the white silk slipped off her head. Still shaky on her feet, the woman ran out of the palace building. Jusetsu nimbly flicked her wrist, causing the doors to close once more.

Jiujiu, who'd been standing stock still with bated breath, blinked as if she'd just come back to her senses. “I-is that lady all right?” she asked. Jiujiu then walked over to the spot whether the woman had been and picked up the fine silk cloth that had fallen to the ground.

“I don’t know,” Jusetsu replied, for lack of anything else to say.

“If she wanted you to bring a deceased person back to life...I suppose she lost someone who was very dear to her,” Jiujiu said with a sigh, gently folding up the fabric. She then offered it to Jusetsu. “What should we do with this?”

Jusetsu stared at the cloth. It had a velvety gloss to it, suggesting it was silk of the highest quality. The cloth had a gentle fragrance to it too, likely perfumed using incense. It held the refreshing yet sweet scent of lilies.

“Yearning Aroma...”

Jusetsu remembered this fragrance. The previous Raven Consort, Reijo, used to have it as well. A wave of nostalgia hit her. Jusetsu often got choked up when something suddenly and unexpectedly brought her memories of her predecessor to the surface, and the scent was doing that right now.

“That’s an incense that you burn for a lover, isn’t it? People gift it to the person they love.” Jiujiu sniffed the thin silk cloth, breathing in the scent.

“Why don’t we put it on the shelf? That court lady might come back to pick it up.”

That seemed unlikely. Considering she covered her face to sneak in without anybody seeing her, it was hard to imagine that she’d go out of her way to come all the way back to the palace to collect something she’d forgotten.

Despite thinking this, Jusetsu turned to Jiujiu. “If you’d like.”

Maybe it was the scent that was left on the fine silk cloth that made her act so easygoing.

Jusetsu then turned toward the back of the room, the sleeves of her black shanqun fluttering as she moved. In the back, layered fine silk curtains hung from the ceiling in front of her bed.

“Are you retiring for the night already?” asked Jiujiu.

“Yes.”

“In that case, let me help you get dressed into your...”

“I can do it myself.”

“I won’t let you, niangniang,” Jiujiu said defiantly. She pouted and followed her through the curtains.

Before Jiujiu came, Jusetsu had never had a lady-in-waiting, so she did everything on her own—whether it was changing or washing her face or anything else. Not only that, but she *wanted* to take care of herself. She only accepted Jiujiu’s help because the young woman insisted that otherwise, there would be no point in her being around.

Jusetsu gave up on arguing and allowed Jiujiu to take care of her. As strange as it was for a consort to trouble herself over her lady-in-waiting’s moods, it

made her feel uneasy whenever she hurt Jiujiu's feelings. She still couldn't get used to having someone by her side.

When Reijo was still alive, she didn't even have a single court lady, let alone a lady-in-waiting. The only help she had in the palace was an elderly servant woman. Since Reijo's death, only Jusetsu and her golden chicken, Shinshin, had inhabited the quarters.

That was how the Raven Consort was supposed to be.

Nowadays, Jusetsu had not only Jiujiu, but a court lady called Kogyo as well. She even had some curious people who came to visit her every once in a while. Jusetsu constantly wondered if this was really all right—after all, the Raven Consort wasn't supposed to mingle with others or allow people to get close to her.

Jiujiu reached out for Jusetsu's robe and undid her belt. As Jusetsu distractedly watched her do this, she felt a mixture of hesitation, regret, and relief.

Then she abruptly turned her face toward the door. "...Jiujiu, wait," she said.

Shinshin was flapping its wings about chaotically.

"Oh my, has somebody else arrived?"

"It would seem so."

"Could it be His Majesty?"

"Not a chance," Jusetsu denied flatly. "He was here just last night. He wouldn't dare be so incessant with his visits."

"Well, well. You're talking about him like *that* again."

Even so, whenever Koshun—the emperor—came, Jusetsu could tell it was him before she saw him. This was somebody else.

Jusetsu retied her undone belt and stepped through the curtains. She heard a feeble voice coming from the other side of the doorway.

"Uhm... Excuse me? Would you mind opening the doors?"

It sounded like the voice of a shy young boy—although, with this being the

inner palace, he was certainly a eunuch.

“Revered Raven Consort... Uhm... My name is Ishiha. Uhm...”

Jusetsu couldn’t quite hear his name properly, so she tilted her head slightly to the side.

“Oh my,” Jiujiu whispered, making Jusetsu turn to look at her. “I know him. He’s one of the eunuchs from the Hien Palace.”

That was the palace where Jiujiu used to work. With a turn of her hand, Jusetsu opened the doors.

A small boy was standing there dressed in a pale gray robe, looking about uneasily. He must have been just about ten years of age. Freckles lay scattered across his tanned skin. His eyes, which scanned the inside of the palace building, were round and endearing. He was an honest-looking boy with a somewhat naive air to him. When he saw Jusetsu, he blinked in surprise—but when he spotted Jiujiu, a relieved smile came to his face.

“Jiujiu...!”

The boy was about to turn to face her, but excitedly fell to his knees in disbelief. He put both of his hands together and bowed his head.

“P-please accept my most sincere apologies, dear Raven Consort. My name is Ishiha. I work for the Hien Palace.”

He was struggling to greet her properly. He must have been new to the inner palace.

“He’s a neophyte from the Hien Palace... A trainee eunuch. He’s a newcomer—Ishiha only arrived at the beginning of the spring,” Jiujiu explained, lending the boy a helping hand.

“I see,” responded Jusetsu. “Look up. You should stand.”

“Yes, miss,” Ishiha said, quietly getting to his feet. He looked scared, which may have been due to nerves. He stretched both his arms down straight and stood at attention.

“There’s no need to stand like that. Come and sit over here.”

Jusetsu pointed to the table and seats in the middle of the room, and she sat down opposite the spot where she wanted him to sit. Ishiha blinked hesitantly. Usually, eunuchs would *never* be seen seated in front of a consort—especially not opposite one. This, however, was the Yamei Palace, the Raven Consort's home. She didn't need to follow the same rules as the rest of the inner palace.

"Sit down," Jusetsu repeated curtly.

Ishiha stood there, fidgeting, as if something was bothering him.

"No need to fret. She won't get angry with you once you've sat down. You're very welcome to take a seat," Jiujiu added, urging him to comply.

Ishiha still wouldn't move. The boy simply hung his head, looking as if he were about to cry. As he stared at his feet, he wriggled his legs about.

The way he was acting gave Jusetsu an idea as to why he was so hesitant to sit down. "You've hurt your legs, haven't you?" she said.

Her words startled the boy, and his shoulders shuddered. *I must be correct, thought Jusetsu. Come to think of it, he had been acting cautious when he got to his feet again, and his face had been stiff too.*

"I take it you're unable to sit down because of the pain. It must be on the back of your thighs, then?"

Jusetsu drew closer to him and lifted the hem of his robe. Ishiha flinched nervously. Undeterred, Jusetsu rolled up the fabric and got Jiujiu to help her pull down his trousers, revealing pale thighs that clearly hadn't seen the sun in some time.

When Jiujiu saw them, she clasped her hand against her mouth. "How awful."

Bruises utterly covered the backs of his thighs. The middle was most badly hurt, with his skin peeling off and blood oozing out of the wounds. The entire area was red and swollen.

"You must have been hit with a cane many a time to develop wounds like these. Were you caned as a punishment?" Jusetsu was able to work out the cause of his injuries so quickly because she remembered what that was like herself. As a servant, getting a thrashing was a daily occurrence. Thanks to her

past, she had an idea of what Ishiha was going through.

“New eunuchs get hit by their instructor eunuchs all the time. But this is taking it too far...” Jiujiu’s face was white as a sheet.

“I haven’t been watching my language carefully enough...” Ishiha said softly. “My shifu is always getting angry at me for it.” Younger eunuchs typically called their instructors “shifu.”

“It’s not your fault you’re making mistakes. It must be hard enough just learning the language they speak around here,” Jiujiu remarked.

“...Where are you from?” asked Jusetsu.

The name Ishiha wasn’t local. There were numerous clans in the land of Sho, both big and small. Even Jusetsu herself originated from a minority clan from the north if one traced her roots far back enough.

“I’m part of the Hatan clan from Roko. Roko is in the south of Gei province. It’s next to the sea.”

“That’s quite far away,” Jusetsu said.

“It is—but many Hatan children do become eunuchs. You can’t support a whole family just by fishing, after all.”

In short, they were sending their children into service so that they had fewer mouths to feed. Once a child became a eunuch, they’d earn wages, and if they were promoted, there may have even been riches in their future. For every child who willingly became a eunuch hoping to get wealthy, there was another who—like Ishiha—had been forced into it. Becoming a eunuch involved giving up your manhood, biologically speaking. Some even lost their lives during the surgery. Embarking on a journey toward becoming a eunuch was an entirely different beast from simply going into service in other ways. It made Jusetsu wonder what Ishiha had been thinking when he had accepted that path.

As she inspected Ishiha’s wounds, Jusetsu asked Jiujiu to fetch her medicine case. Then, she dragged over the lounge chair that had been sitting in a corner and made Ishiha lie facedown on it. She took out a bundle and opened it up. It contained some cattail pollen, which was a medicine good for treating wounds.

She applied the cattail pollen to the wound, placed some cotton on top, and wrapped it up with a bleached cotton cloth. Ishiha remained frozen still while she tended to his injuries.

“All right. You can get up now.”

“Th-thank you...” Ishiha adjusted his robe, looking ashamed.

“As long as you make sure to sit on your bottom without your thighs touching the seat, it shouldn’t be too painful for you,” said Jusetsu. She then got him to sit down right there on the lounge chair.

Then, Jusetsu turned her chair to face him and sat down herself. “Now then,” she said, “what was your request?”

He couldn’t have come to visit her just to get his wounds treated. There was clearly something more important he wanted to talk about. Ishiha pushed his knees together and placed his hands on top of them. The young boy looked like he was trying to find the right words to say.

“Well...”

Ishiha looked up at Jusetsu as if he was trying to read her expression. There was fear in his eyes. He must have been wondering whether she was going to get mad at him. The torment he endured at the hands of his shifu must have ingrained that terror in him. The very thought of it made Jiujiu feel sorry for him.

“You must have a request for me. Everyone who comes through those doors wants *something*,” Jusetsu said in attempt to draw some information out of him.

Ishiha nodded meekly, then bravely began to speak. “There is a child standing there.”

“A child?” she asked.

“A child near my age, or maybe a bit older. He’s a eunuch. He’s standing in the garden of the Hien Palace.”

*The ghost of a young eunuch?*

Jusetsu gave him a small nod and urged him to continue.

“There are shallow-flowered irises blooming at the edge of the garden, and there’s a damp, marshy spot. He stands there, looking at the palace building. He doesn’t move. He just stares at it, making a really sad-looking face. But...”

His gaze dropped to the floor.

“I’m the only one who can see him,” the boy said. “I told the others about it, but they said they can’t see him. My shifu scolded me, telling me not to say stupid things.”

*He must have hit him for that too.*

Ishiha winced, as if he was experiencing the pain all over again. “He’s definitely there—no matter how I look at it—but people still insist that I’m crazy. Maybe I am? I don’t even know.” The young eunuch’s face tensed up. He was frightened. Whether or not it was a ghost, what he saw was scaring him.

“I’ve never heard about a ghost appearing at the Hien Palace...” Jiujiu whispered, bewildered.

Ishiha grimaced and looked as if he was about to burst into tears.

Jiujiu hastily attempted to comfort him. “I mean, the people I knew only discussed rumors about the ghosts of court ladies and consorts. Maybe I just never heard the ones about eunuch ghosts...?”

This consolation did not, however, have the expected effect. Ishiha began sobbing convulsively. Jiujiu looked to Jusetsu for help.

*Don’t look at me like that!* thought Jusetsu, but she felt compelled to say something anyway.

“If I come along with you, I’ll be able to find out whether or not there really is a ghost,” Jusetsu explained briefly. “But... Your shifu said, ‘Don’t say such stupid things,’ didn’t he?”

“Yes,” said Ishiha.

“He didn’t say, ‘Don’t tell lies,’ did he...”

“Uhm...” Ishiha blinked. “No, you’re right... He didn’t. He scolded me to not say it again, but he didn’t accuse me of lying.”

"In that case, it couldn't have been a lie. The ghost *is* there," Jusetsu said simply.

Ishiha was taken aback. "Do you...really think so?"

"I do."

If someone was reprimanding a child for saying they could see something that nobody else could see, they'd probably tell the child to stop lying. Ishiha's shifu hadn't said that, and he even told the boy to be quiet about it. That suggested that he knew what Ishiha had said was true. His shifu needed to be questioned.

Ishiha looked cheerful now. Jusetsu's insight must have lightened the load slightly.

"So, what is it that you desire? Would you feel better if I were to confirm whether or not that ghost really exists?"

"No, it's not that..." said Ishiha, shaking his head back and forth in a childish way. "The boy looks really sad. Do you think there's anything I could do to help? If I'm the only one who can see him, I thought there might be something I could do for him. After all, he's like me... He's a child from the Hatan clan."

Ishiha could tell from the very first glance that the ghost was from the same clan as him because of how he looked. Apparently, the ghost had freckles on his skin from the sun, coal-black beady eyes, flat features, and thick lips.

"I see," said Jusetsu, staring intently at Ishiha.

She could see that the young eunuch possessed none of the typical foolish traits that would warrant relentless punishment from his shifu. In fact, it may have been the boy's intelligence and upright character that were working to his detriment.

"You're smart, but you're not shrewd. I think you're too honest for your own good," Jusetsu remarked.

Ishiha didn't seem to be able to grasp what she was saying and tilted his head to one side in confusion.

"I know someone like you," she added.

A certain young man came to her mind. She had even seen him just the night

before. He was as still as a mountain in the winter. He was stern but had a tranquility to him too. Jusetsu grunted, then pushed the image of him out of her thoughts.

“You asked me whether there was something you could do, didn’t you? But you’ve already done it. You’ve come here.”

Jusetsu smiled, but her eyes showed no emotion.

It was late at night, so Jusetsu sent Ishiha home and went to the Hien Palace herself the following day. If he didn’t get enough sleep, it would hinder the young eunuch’s progress, and he’d end up getting caned again. Jusetsu would feel sorry for him if that happened. Reijo always told Jusetsu that children needed to get a good night’s rest.

The next day, Jusetsu left the Yamei Palace, accompanied by Jiujiu. She’d stand out like a sore thumb if she wore her usual black ruqun, so she chose her purple shanqun with the yellow skirt instead. That outfit was a gift from Kajo, another consort from the inner palace.

“Why don’t you wear that comb?” Jiujiu had complained. “It would go awfully well with your ensemble.” She was talking about the ivory comb in the shape of a bird, adorned with billowing waves. Koshun had even given it to Jusetsu to go with this particular outfit.

“I refuse,” Jusetsu said simply.

“But *why?*” Jiujiu continued. “His Majesty will be so upset.”

Jusetsu sullenly went quiet. She didn’t know how to put it into words—and even if she could, it wasn’t like she could talk to Jiujiu about it, anyway.

*“I want to become a good friend of yours.”*

Jusetsu and Koshun were now officially “friends.” When Jusetsu thought back on Koshun’s face as he made that pledge to her, she felt something that was both painful and warm at the same time. That something felt like it was going to overflow and burst out of her. She would never be compensated for any of the

emotions she experienced until that point, or for the pain that she would endure in the future...yet his words had really touched her heart. They had become a ray of light for her.

It was a faint, gentle light—but it offered her some salvation, nonetheless.

As good as it made her feel, however, it had left her unsure how to treat the young emperor. He would often visit her palace for some tea and chitchat, but she was still confused about what kind of attitude she should adopt around him. Was she supposed to give him a warm welcome, as one would a friend? She didn't even know *how* to do that. She barely knew what a friend was in the first place—and to make matters worse, Koshun wasn't too familiar with the concept either.

Jusetsu had a frown on her face as she walked toward the Hien Palace.

“Why do you look so displeased?” Jiujiu asked.

Her lady-in-waiting picked up on every little change in Jusetsu’s facial expressions and would ask her about them. *Leave me alone*, Jusetsu would think—but the truth was she’d feel lonely if Jiujiu *didn’t* ask her. She had never felt that way before, but now she knew what it was like, there was no going back.

Once they stepped inside the grove of bay trees and rhododendrons that surrounded the Yamei Palace, Jiujiu stopped in her tracks. She pointed at a branch.

“My, my, niangniang. Look at that unusual-looking bird!”

There was a bird with white spots scattered across its dark brown wings perched on in a tree. It seemed to be watching them with its black eyes.

“That’s a star raven,” said Jusetsu.

A star raven was another name for the spotted nutcracker. Many called the birds that thanks to their white spots that looked like stars. People said the bird was like family to the goddess Uren Niangniang. On the mural of Uren Niangniang at the back of the Yamei Palace, star ravens were bigger than any of the other birds included. Seiu Shrine—a shrine located in the imperial estate—was also named after it. “Seiu” was even written using the same characters one

would write “star raven.”

“I’ve never seen one before... I didn’t even know there were any living in the inner palace,” said Jiujiu.

“It only arrived here recently. It must have taken a liking to this grove and made it its home,” Jusetsu reasoned.

There were no owls of any kind in the inner palace, supposedly because Uren Niangniang detested them. Her hatred for them was so intense that even the word “owl” itself was considered an abomination, and people referred to them as “night-birds” or “strixes” just to avoid saying it. The fact that small birds could live such peaceful lives in the inner palace, however, may have been one positive effect of this. It was possible that the star raven had settled there for that very reason too. It had quite a loud and surprising chirp. Even now, it pointed its beak upward, and no sooner did it let out a squawk than it flew away.

“It’s a pretty raven,” said Jiujiu. “You think of ravens as being totally black, but it’s cute how that one had little white spots.”

Jiujiu seemed to have taken a liking to the bird. She kept talking about it—wondering what it ate, and other musings.

Once the two emerged from the grove and had been walking down the passageway for a short while, the Lady Banks’ roses that surrounded the Hien Palace came into view. The flowers had already finished blooming, but the greenery still looked beautiful. The blue-glazed roof tiles on the palace building gleamed beautifully in the white morning sunlight. Decorative swallow tiles sat on the roof, on top of which several sparrows rested their wings.

Jusetsu went around to the back entrance that assistant court ladies and servants used to come and go through. It’d be troublesome to call through the front door. Jusetsu hadn’t even met any of the Swallow Concubines who resided there, let alone learned any of their names.

In the rear of the palace there was a kitchen, a sewing room, and the court ladies’ dormitories. Jusetsu could sense them busily going about their work inside the building.

Suddenly, an older court lady stepped out of a door from a building to their right. She spotted Jusetsu and her lady-in-waiting.

“Are you Jiujiu?” she asked. The woman was holding a basket with pieces of cloth in it.

“Gugu!” Jiujiu called out, greeting her in a friendly way.

The older woman was Ashu, one of the court ladies who worked as a palace textile dyer. Even Jusetsu had met her once before.

“Weren’t you sent to the Yamei Palace to become a lady-in-waiting? What are you doing here? Don’t tell me that’s...”

Ashu gave Jusetsu a skeptical look. When they met previously, Jusetsu had been wearing a plain, coral ruqun—the outfit that the palace cleaners wore. Now, however, Jusetsu was dressed in the kind of flamboyant, patterned ruqun you’d expect a consort to wear.

“She’s the Raven Consort, gugu!”

“What?” said Ashu, staring at Jusetsu.

Jiujiu explained that Jusetsu had been pretending to be a court lady last time they met. That only made Ashu look even more skeptical, but she put her basket down and placed her hands together to bow to the Raven Consort anyway.

“I would like to see the shallow-flowered irises in the garden,” said Jusetsu.

The look in Ashu’s eyes suggested she wanted to ask why, but the woman decided to keep her nose out of it. She then showed her to the spot without any further questions.

The garden sat in the middle of the palace grounds. They went down a cobblestone path and passed by Japanese pagoda trees that were covered with green leaves. Jusetsu then spotted a spectacular cluster of irises ahead of them. The willow trees that surrounded them swayed gently in the breeze. There was a strong, damp smell in the air here. There was also a magnificent palace building in front of the bed of irises. It was easy to assume that this was where the Swallow Concubines lived. The area leading up to the palace was divided by

cobblestones and lined with purple irises, sweet flags, yellow irises, and other similar flowers. Although these blossoms looked similar to one another, they all had their own distinctive preferences—some thrived in marshy ground, whereas others despised moisture. It must have been a painstaking task to care for them all.

As Jusetsu silently gazed at the shallow-flowered irises beneath the pale sky, there was no visible sign of a ghost—but she *did* sense something. She could feel its presence among the shallow-flowered irises, flickering like a heat haze.

Jusetsu stood in the shadow of the trees and narrowed her eyes as she gazed at the flowers for a while. Then, she called out to Ashu, who'd been hanging behind, waiting for her.

"Have you ever heard anyone mention the ghost of a eunuch appearing in this location?"

A thoughtful expression came to Ashu's face as she appeared to rack her brains for a moment, but then she answered plainly. "No, I've never heard about anything like that."

Ashu was a veteran court lady, so she was well-versed in rumors that circulated in the inner palace. If she hadn't heard about something, then likely no one else had either.

However, she went on to add something unexpected.

"I *do* remember hearing a story about a eunuch from the Hien Palace, though—just not about a ghost."

"What kind of story?"

"A story about a eunuch who fell in love with a concubine."

"Oh my." Jusetsu turned around to face Ashu as the older woman told the tale.

"It occurred during the reign of the previous emperor. There was one eunuch from the Hatan clan who was working at this palace...some say he was only ten. In those parts, lots of children become eunuchs so their parents don't have as many mouths to feed. The region even gets dubbed the 'eunuch production

center' as a result. He was one of those children."

Ashu's way of speaking was quite different from before—now that she knew she was talking to the Raven Consort, she was being far more polite. Being much older, she seemed to have mastered switching between levels of formality.

"He was still a young apprentice, but he ended up falling in love with the Swallow Concubine at the time. Well, he was only a child, so calling it 'love' would be an exaggeration, but...I think the Swallow Concubine was a young girl of about fifteen or sixteen herself. She was said to be very kind and was the type of person who would talk to the eunuchs as if they were her equals. She became very fond of the bird feathers that the eunuch had gifted to her, for example."

"Feathers?"

"Feathers from a blue swallow. They were very beautiful. She would use them as hair decorations."

Blue swallows had deep blue wings and lived in the forests and woodlands of the inner palace. As beautiful as their feathers were, these birds were also known for their exceptionally crystal-clear cries.

"Naturally, nothing would work out between the two of them. He was a child, after all. I've heard that the eunuch passed away after that, but I don't know the full story. I believe the Swallow Concubine married General Yo from the northern imperial defense army, after the death of the previous emperor."

When an emperor died, his concubines were expected to leave the inner palace. Some returned to their family homes and lived out the rest of their lives as widows, but others would marry again. The majority would marry vassals of the emperor, but some tied the knot with more common people, like merchants. The only concubine who wouldn't leave—even after the death of an emperor—was the Raven Consort.

Or, perhaps more accurately, she *couldn't* leave.

"That's all I heard though. I don't know of any other stories regarding eunuchs in the Hien Palace."

“Do you know the name of that eunuch?” Jusetsu asked.

“Please accept my sincere apologies, but I do not.”

“I see. Would you know which eunuchs worked here during the time of the previous emperor, then?”

“No,” Ashu said as she shook her head, looking perplexed. “I don’t think any of them are still in the Hien Palace now, but I can’t say so for certain.”

“I see. Well, that’s all I need to know for now. Sorry for keeping you from your work. I greatly appreciate the help,” said Jusetsu.

She then thanked Ashu and dismissed her. Ashu stole a glance at Jusetsu as she was bowing—her eyes glimmering with curiosity—and then she started making her way back to her post. Jusetsu wondered what kind of gossip she would tell the other court ladies later. *“Guess what? I met the Raven Consort,”* she could imagine her saying. *“Who knew she really existed?”*

Jusetsu looked back at the throng of shallow-flowered irises. She brought her hand to her hair, which was done up in two loops on top of her head. She was also wearing a peony in it, which was a physical manifestation of her magical skills. Just as she was about to pull out the flower, she heard someone calling out.

“Raven Consort!”

Jusetsu put down her hand and looked in their direction. She could see a eunuch dashing across the cobblestones—Ishiha.

“Ra... Raven Consort...”

The young boy must have hurriedly run all the way there because he was gasping for air, his shoulders jerking up and down as he did. He was trying to get down on his knees to greet her, but Jusetsu stopped him.

“No need to bow. Is it all right for you to leave your shifu’s side?”

“It...will be...fine. My shifu...is checking up on the...Swallow Concubine. I’m...not allowed...to appear before her yet...”

He could only manage to get a few words out between each breath. Neophytes, who were just eunuchs-in-training, were not permitted to show

themselves in front of their masters—or in this case, the Swallow Concubine. It was up to their shifu to decide when they were ready to make their first “official” appearances.

Ishiha wiped the sweat from his forehead. Jusetsu doubted that something like checking up on the Swallow Concubine would take very long. They needed to hurry. It’d be a problem if the Swallow Concubine were to see them.

Jusetsu dragged Ishiha into the shadow of the trees so that they’d be harder to spot. She then pointed toward the shallow-flowered irises.

“Can you see the ghost?” she asked.

Ishiha turned his face toward the flowers and immediately nodded. “Yes. He’s there.”

Jusetsu nodded back at him and pulled a flower out of her hairdo. Once it was on her palm, it slowly changed shape. One at a time, its pale red petals turned to smoke—as if they were coming into bloom—and then melted away. Jusetsu let out a puff of air onto them.

The pale red smoke trailed from her hand and drifted down toward the shallow-flowered irises, like it was gliding toward them. The smoke gradually clumped together in one place, and the indistinct figure of a person appeared behind it. Little by little, the person became clearer. Jiujiu clasped her hands to her mouth in panic and let out a slight exclamation of surprise.

There was indeed a eunuch standing in the faint smoke. He looked young enough to still be referred to as a child. His features strongly resembled Ishiha’s—he had tanned skin and freckles, large dark eyes, and the same flat facial features. He was certainly a young eunuch from the Hatan clan.

He was standing among the cluster of blooming shallow-flowered irises, facing the Swallow Concubine’s palace building. He was simply gazing at it, his eyes so clear that they almost looked transparent—and yet they were full of sorrow. He looked like he was about to burst into tears at any moment, and he had the kind of look in his eyes that was easy to sympathize with.

Nothing could make you want to help more than the face of a tearful child.

The boy was clutching something blue in his hand. *Could it be...?*

“Blue swallow feathers...”

The young eunuch was clasping the tail feathers of a blue swallow in his hand.

Jusetsu remembered the story that Ashu just told her—how a young eunuch from the Hatan clan gave the feathers of a blue swallow to the Swallow Concubine as a present. Was this the ghost of the boy from that story?

Jusetsu slid up to him. His mouth was moving, and he was whispering something in a high, feeble voice. He was murmuring some kind of phrase, but she couldn’t understand what it meant. Jusetsu turned back to Ishiha, and he immediately ran over to her without her needing to say a thing. He was one smart boy.

“What is he saying?” Jusetsu asked.

She assumed it was something in the language of the Hatan clan. Ishiha listened carefully to the ghost.

“He’s saying... ‘sorry,’” the young eunuch explained.

“Sorry?” *What could he be apologizing for?*

Jusetsu almost found herself lost in thought, but this wasn’t the time for dawdling. She blew onto the pale red smoke, and it dissipated. At the same time, the figure of the ghost faded and became invisible. It wasn’t that it was gone, but just that Ishiha was the only one who could see it.

“I suppose you can see him because he’s around the same age as you, and from the same clan,” said Jusetsu with an unfazed and serene look in her eyes. “That’s enough for today. Go.”

She brushed his hand aside, urging him to go back. Ishiha bowed and left, but his face looked painfully reluctant as he glanced over toward the shallow-flowered irises again.

“Oh, how stupid of me. I forgot to ask him for the name of his shifu...” Jusetsu only realized this once Ishiha had gone. She knew she had to hear his side of the story.

“Why don’t you ask one of the other eunuchs to bring him to you...?” Jiujiu said curiously.

“And just demand that they call Ishiha’s shifu for me? If I inquire about the ghost in question, they’ll know that Ishiha came to me for advice. I doubt that’d bode well for him, considering he was told to keep mum.”

He might have ended up receiving another thrashing.

“I could say that I happened to see the ghost myself...but it’d be tedious to approach every single eunuch.”

All the eunuchs wore gray robes, but the exact shade of gray varied according to their rank. Jusetsu needed to look for a eunuch in a dark gray robe, but she didn’t know what degree of seniority he held.

“What a pain,” grumbled Jusetsu as she headed over to the palace building.

“You really are quite concerned for Ishiha, aren’t you, niangniang?” said Jiujiu. The lady-in-waiting followed her from behind.

“Not particularly,” Jusetsu responded.

“There’s something that you haven’t yet realized about yourself.”

“What?”

“You haven’t realized how kind you are.”

Jusetsu glanced at Jiujiu. “Who wouldn’t have compassion for a child who’s getting punished? That’s not kindness. It’s pity.”

“Well, yes, but that’s what makes you kind. You don’t just *think* about how sorry you feel for him—you’re doing everything in your power to help. Kindness is an action, not a feeling.”

Jusetsu was at a loss for how to reply for a moment. “You’re too soft-hearted, Jiujiu... You ought to be careful,” she said with a sigh.

“Thank you very much!” Jiujiu laughed.

The pair went around and into one of the palace buildings, but as they were leaving through the back, Jusetsu heard a sound that grated her ears. It sounded like a sort of tapping. She frowned.

*Isn’t that...?*

Jusetsu had a bad feeling about the sound. She started to run, dashing

between the palace buildings, and she came out in front of the Lady Banks' roses that surrounded the palace. There were no stones laid down in that area, so the ground was bare. The palace buildings around her must have been the eunuchs' lodgings. A number of eunuchs huddled together, standing in her way. Two of them were forcing a boy eunuch to kneel down, and the eunuch behind him was holding a cane. Next to them stood a eunuch in an even darker gray robe than any of the others were wearing. He was looking down at the boy eunuch with a stern look on his face. Jusetsu didn't even need to see the face of the kneeling boy eunuch to know it was Ishiha.

When Jusetsu noticed the eunuch lift the cane in his hand, Jusetsu raised her voice.

"Stop!" Her screech zoomed through the air, making all of them look over at her, surprised. Jusetsu quickened her pace as she approached them. "What do you think you're doing? Let go of him."

She scowled at the eunuchs who were holding Ishiha down, and they both hastily let go, overawed by Jusetsu's reaction.

"I'm so sorry that you had to see this, niangniang," said the eunuch in the dark gray robe, respectfully getting to his knees and placing his hands together.

He wouldn't have known who Jusetsu was, but he could tell that she was a concubine and was bowing to her to show his respect. The eunuch had smooth cheeks, but his complexion was sallow. His lips were thin and pale. He had a prominent forehead, making him appear intelligent, and he was good-looking too—but the way his eyelids hung over his irises and the whites of his eyes were visible beneath made him appear short-tempered. This eunuch had to be Ishiha's shifu. The color of his robe was darker than that of the underling eunuchs, but wasn't as dark as those that the high-ranking ones wore.

"I appreciate we must have given you a fright, but this is a common form of punishment for us eunuchs. I kindly suggest that you leave us to it."

His tone of voice was polite, but he was effectively telling Jusetsu to mind her own business. He probably concluded that Jusetsu was a low-ranking concubine since she only had one lady-in-waiting with her. He was essentially treating her like a fool.

Jusetsu looked at Ishiha. He was biting down on his lip, trying not to cry.

“What is your name?” she asked the man.

“I-it’s Koran.”

“Koran, then?” said Jusetsu. “Well, you may know me as the Raven Consort.”

For the first time, Koran’s face, which had been shrewdly studying hers, looked unsettled. “Th-the Raven Consort? No...” It seemed like he was struggling to determine the correct way he should act. She was *the* enigmatic Raven Consort, after all, who was said to possess mysterious powers.

“What was this young man being punished for?” Jusetsu asked, looking toward Ishiha.

Koran lowered his head and answered her. “We are punishing him for leaving his post without permission and disappearing from sight.”

“That was my fault,” Jusetsu replied.

“What?” Koran partially lifted his head, but quickly looked down again. Eunuchs weren’t supposed to gaze at consorts’ faces.

“I found this young man and ordered him to show me to the garden. Your name was Ishiha, wasn’t it? He told me his name when we were together earlier.”

“What...? Well, that *is* his name.”

“The fault, therefore, lies with me. I do apologize. Excuse him.”

“Is that true...? Understood,” replied Koran, but he didn’t look convinced.

*Maybe I should threaten him a little*, thought Jusetsu. She didn’t want him to just start thrashing the boy again once she left.

“Incidentally,” she said, “there’s something I wanted to ask.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“There was a eunuch who passed away from the Hien Palace during the reign of the previous emperor, wasn’t there?”

Surprised, Koran’s face froze.

“A eunuch from the Hatan clan,” she continued. “He was still a child—about the same age as Ishiha here. He’s in the garden, standing among the shallow-flowered irises, clutching a blue swallow feather...”

“Did Ishiha tell you that nonsense?” Koran interrupted her. Despite his stern scowl, his face was as white as a sheet.

Jusetsu looked down upon him, a cold look in her eyes. “I am just telling you what I saw with my own eyes. Are you calling it nonsense?”

“N-no...”

“Koran,” Jusetsu said, addressing him as she looked him squarely in the eye.

This startled Koran, and this time, he did look up. He met her gaze properly now, and he froze as if mesmerized. Jusetsu’s eyes had an obsidian-like shine. Although the darkness they carried was unfathomably deep, they were also deathly calm and clear—terrifyingly so, in fact.

“You cannot keep secrets from me,” she said.

“I-I know, of course not. I am aware there was a eunuch from the Hatan clan who died here in the Hien Palace long ago.” Sweat was pouring from Koran’s forehead, and his voice was trembling slightly. “I heard that he committed an insolent act and was beheaded for it. I don’t know the details. That is the truth.”

*So, he was executed. Was that because he was in love with the consort?*

“...And despite knowing that, you accused me of spouting nonsense?”

“M-my sincere apologies, Raven Consort. I was just afraid that if the Swallow Concubine were to hear, she might become upset.”

“Was that why you decided to remain silent about the ghost appearing?” Jusetsu asked.

“M-my sincere apologies,” repeated Koran. “The Swallow Concubine’s palace building is right in front of where the shallow-flowered irises grow, so that spot has the best view in the whole garden. If that’s where the ghost is appearing, then...”

“Do you know the name of the eunuch who died?” Jusetsu asked, interrupting his long-winded explanation.

"No," Koran replied.

Jusetsu followed up with another question. "Do you know any eunuchs who worked here during the previous emperor's reign?"

He insisted he didn't.

*I suppose I'll have to ask Koshun for help with that,* Jusetsu thought. She didn't want to request anything from him, but she had no other choice.

"Listen, no more unnecessary thrashings, understood? Be aware that if you do, nothing good will come of it. I know your name now," she told him.

As long as Jusetsu had someone's name, she could cast a spell on them. Jusetsu asked for his name at the start of their interaction so she could threaten him in such a way. Koran lowered his head to bow before her, his face still a sickly shade of white. Jusetsu glanced at Ishiha and found that he looked slightly relieved.

Once Jusetsu left the Hien Palace and on the way back home, she called out a certain name.

"Onkei!"

On cue, the eunuch nimbly got down from a tree and kneeled beside Jusetsu. This eunuch had a stunning face—albeit with a scar in the shape of a straight line on his cheek—and was not yet even twenty. He was also Jusetsu's bodyguard. He lowered his face and awaited his lady's orders.

"I would like you to pass a message to Koshun for me. Tell him to come to the Yamei Palace at his nearest convenience."

Onkei replied with just one word—"Yes."—and promptly walked away.

Once Jusetsu was out of sight, Koran finally rose from his knees. He might not have been running anywhere, but he was breathless, nonetheless.

"Are you all right?" a subordinate asked anxiously, sounding somewhat doubtful. As mysterious as the Raven Consort supposedly was, the other eunuch didn't think there was a reason to be *that* frightened of her.

Koran didn't even bother wiping away the ice-cold sweat on his brow and gulped.

"...It was in her eyes," he said, his voice raspy as the words tumbled from his lips. "It was in her eyes. The monster."

Koran suddenly started shaking.

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During the first watch of the night—between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m.—Koshun turned up at the Yamei Palace.

"Unusual for *you* to have a request for *me*, isn't it?" he said matter-of-factly, without even the slightest smile on his face. "Is something troubling you?"

"I want to know the name of the eunuch who worked at the Hien Palace during the reign of the previous emperor that was executed. He was still a child at the time and was from the Hatan clan. I also want to know where the eunuchs from that time are now," Jusetsu explained concisely.

Not bothering to ask why, Koshun simply gave Eisei—who was waiting behind him—a signal with his eyes. Eisei, who was the most handsome eunuch around, promptly responded.

"I shall get somebody in the palace eunuch institute to look at the registry."

The momentary look he shot toward Jusetsu, however, was clearly saying, "*Don't you dare do anything that will cause trouble for my master.*"

Jusetsu looked the other way, ignoring his gaze.

"There's a young eunuch from the Hatan clan in my palace building too," Koshun explained. "Many of the kids from that tribe become eunuchs at a very young age."

"It must be so that they have fewer children to feed."

"Well, that is one reason, but..." Koshun hesitated to finish his sentence, which was an unusual thing for him to do. He looked slightly troubled.

"What is it?"

Since Koshun wasn't answering her, she looked over at Eisei instead.

Eisei reluctantly spoke. “They can sell the children for a high price.”

“Sell? Does the imperial court *buy* them?”

“It’s the brokers who buy them. Then the Vulture High Steward—his role is to bring eunuchs to the inner palace—buys them from *them*. The higher the ‘quality’ of a young man, the more they cost—but they can also charge a high price for young children. It’s easier to educate a boy while he is still a child, and he’ll be more loyal. A nice-looking infant will fetch a very high price. After all, a lot of the consorts are fond of eunuchs like that.”

After finishing this explanation, Eisei added frigidly, “I must apologize for inflicting such a vulgar story on you, master—and on the Raven Consort as well. It couldn’t have been pleasant to hear.” Essentially, he was telling Jusetsu not to ask about this kind of topic up in front of the emperor again.

“It was *that* fool who brought it up,” said Jusetsu.

Hearing her refer to the emperor in this way, Eisei glared at her angrily.

Dealing with Eisei was a hassle, so Jusetsu broached another topic with Koshun. “Is it normal for cane punishments to play a role in a new eunuch’s education?”

“Did you see someone getting caned?” Koshun asked back.

Jusetsu nodded.

“...By their instructor,” Koshun said reticently. He was never very talkative, but this seemed like an especially difficult topic for him to talk about.

“It’s not a commendable practice,” Jusetsu explained. “It was simply abysmal to see multiple adults holding down that small kid and inflicting pain on him when...”

“Jusetsu,” Koshun interrupted her.

She immediately stopped speaking. Whenever Koshun called her name, it made her feel strange. His voice had a gentle warmth to it, like that of faint sunlight on a winter’s day.

“Don’t go into so much detail about that—not when a eunuch is around.”

Jusetsu looked toward Eisei.

He was looking down and smiling slightly. “Personally, it doesn’t bother me, master. There’s no need to worry about that.”

Jusetsu could deduce just from the look on his face that Eisei too had probably received a severe thrashing at some point in his past—so severe that he didn’t even want to remember it.

“...I’m sorry.”

Jusetsu’s apology made Eisei look up in surprise. He had a somewhat awkward look on his face.

“Anyway, is there a ghost of a eunuch in the Hien Palace?” Koshun asked calmly. At times, his voice was a bit *too* quiet. It had a serenity and a gentleness to it that was unbecoming of an emperor. His courageous-looking features were sharp—or could even be described as cold—but his eyes were gentle, giving him an air of maturity that belied his years.

Jusetsu knew that a bitingly cold flame of hatred burned beneath that calm exterior, but no one would ever guess it simply by looking at him.

“It’s the ghost of a child from the Hatan clan. He’s holding the feather of a blue swallow.”

“A blue swallow... That’s one of the most beautiful birds in the inner palace. On occasion, I’ve seen consorts using their feathers as hair decorations or to hang from their waists as accessories,” mused Koshun.

“I didn’t know you paid so much attention to what women wore.” She assumed he was too much of a bore to have any real interest in such gallantry, so this came as a surprise.

“I suppose,” replied Koshun evasively.

In the distance, they could hear the eunuchs on night watch loudly announcing the time.

Koshun got up. It looked like he was going home already. “One of my consorts is stuck in bed, sick. I’m going to go and check how she is.”

“I don’t need to hear about every little thing that you’re going to do, I assure

you,” quipped Jusetsu.

“I just felt bad that I couldn’t stay very long, considering you’re the one who called me over,” he replied.

“I only called for you because I needed something. There’s no need to linger around.”

“But I wanted to stay and chat. We’re friends, after all.”

At his remark, Jusetsu went quiet.

Koshun had said it with such earnest that she couldn’t bring herself to speak. He had such a sincere look in his eyes that there was no way she could hurl a wry comment his way.

“I...don’t really know what being a friend involves,” she revealed bitterly.

“No? Neither do I,” Koshun replied in a calm tone of voice. “If neither of us do, then we’ll just have to feel things out and come to a compromise together.”

Koshun took a brocade bag out of his breast pocket and placed it in Jusetsu’s hand. When she opened the top of it, a vaguely sweet aroma wafted out. There was some mijian lianzi inside—candied lotus seeds. Jusetsu couldn’t peel her eyes away from the sugar-coated treats.

“I suppose it’s your taste in food that I’m the most knowledgeable about,” said Koshun.

Lotus seeds were Jusetsu’s favorite. She was also fond of dried fruits, candy, and steamed buns. Koshun brought some food for her virtually every time he visited—and it was always wondrously delicious.

Holding the bag tight against her chest, Jusetsu glowered up at Koshun. “You think all you have to do is feed me, isn’t it?”

“I just wanted to see my friend smiling.”

Jusetsu fell silent once more.

Did he sincerely want that, or was he just cracking a joke? No, Koshun was the last man in the world who’d ever crack a joke. Jusetsu averted her gaze, not sure what to do with herself. She couldn’t be as straightforward with her

emotions as he could.

Jusetsu was a prisoner of the Yamei Palace—but Koshun wasn’t. The reason Jusetsu had to be confined to her palace was for the emperor’s—the Summer Sovereign’s—sake.

There was a Summer Sovereign, and there was a Winter Sovereign. The Summer Sovereign couldn’t exist without the Winter Sovereign and vice versa. The existence of the two had been firmly buried deep in history. One had gone on to become the emperor, and one had become the Raven Consort. The former Winter Sovereign—the Raven Consort—had been quietly hidden away in the inner palace in order for the emperor to retain his imperial status.

When she met with Koshun, sometimes the way she felt about all the injustices welled up inside her. It was a feeling that wasn’t quite anger, nor resignation.

However, Koshun tried to understand her suffering. He reached out to her, and she took his hand.

This was the only salvation she had. Her ray of light.

Jusetsu bit her lip, then looked up at Koshun. “...I don’t know what makes *you* happy.”

“Me?” Koshun’s eyes widened slightly, as if he was surprised by what Jusetsu had said. Despite that, his facial expression didn’t change much.

“There’s...nothing I find particularly enjoyable,” he muttered after a few moments of painstaking contemplation. “As I was moved toward what I wanted to accomplish, I ended up losing sight of what it really was that made me happy.”

That must have been how he really felt. He had been living a life where he avoided any joys or pleasures. He didn’t want to show any weakness in front of the empress dowager, the woman who had caused him so much pain—but she wasn’t around anymore.

“You...seemed to enjoy carving those birds,” Jusetsu suggested.

Koshun was good with his hands and was great at carving things. He was

taught that skill by a eunuch whom he had adored as a child.

“Did I?” Koshun asked, stroking his chin with his fingertips as he thought to himself. “Yeah. Maybe I did. Okay, you taught me one thing there.” He let out a small laugh, which was unusual for him. Perhaps he found that exchange “enjoyable.”

“I’ll be back,” he said. “I’ll send a messenger your way as soon as we find something out about the eunuch in the Hien Palace.”

With that, he left the palace building. A dozen or so eunuchs were gathered outside, and they knelt before him. Usually, he only had Eisei to accompany him when he came to the palace. Tonight, however, he was going to visit another consort afterward—which must have been why he had so many eunuchs with him.

Eisei should have been following as Koshun made his way down the stairs, but he abruptly returned to Jusetsu’s side.

He quickly whispered something to her. “Raven Consort, I can tell you’re concerned about the eunuch getting caned—but please, just leave them be.”

“What?”

“If you’re not prepared to take responsibility for his fate, don’t even *think* of helping him. It won’t...end well, for him,” he said. And just as quickly, he followed Koshun like a shadow again—as he always did.

Jusetsu stood motionless at the entrance to the palace and spent a while watching the entourage walk away.

The next morning at 8 a.m., the hour of the dragon, the messenger Koshun had sent arrived. It was Onkei.

“I’ve been kindly entrusted with a note from Attendant Ei. It’s the eunuch registry for the Hien Palace during the previous emperor’s reign.”

When Jusetsu opened the letter, she found some names written on it in neat brushwork. Eisei must have copied them right out of the registry. She noticed that not only was his lettering consistent, but the density of the ink was as well.

The fact that it was neither too light nor too dark anywhere was indicative of Eisei's personality.

"I believe the places where the eunuchs are currently working are written below their names," explained Onkei.

"I see."

He was right. Notes like "Hakkaku Palace" and "palace eunuch institute" were written beneath each name.

"And what about the eunuch who was executed...?"

"He was called Yuisa."

"Oh, this one."

His name had been marked with a red-ink stick. There was a large gap underneath it where nothing was written. It looked rather bleak.

"All right, fine. I shall ask these men about Yuisa."

"*You will, niangniang?*" Onkei said, his eyes widening with slight surprise.  
"There are about thirty of them."

"I won't need to speak to them all. The roles of eunuchs vary, even if they work for the same palace. As a result, they have different superiors. First, I'll need someone to tell me which of these eunuchs had the same shifu as Yuisa. I expect they will know the most about the case."

Jusetsu looked up from the note she was holding. She glanced at Onkei, who was kneeling beside her.

"Do you know any of these eunuchs?" she asked him.

He quickly glimpsed at the names, then nodded.

"Only one... This man, named Shiken."

The words "Eno Palace" were written beneath the name he pointed to. This was the palace where Kajo—the Mandarin Duck Consort—resided.

Jusetsu turned around to face Jiujiu, who was standing in wait right behind her. "Jiujiu, we're going to the Eno Palace," she declared.

Jiujiu gleefully went to prepare a change of clothes for her. When Jusetsu stepped behind the curtains, she found an outfit on a tray ready for her. A pink shanqun with a garnet-colored skirt had been taken out of her chest. This outfit had been a gift from Kajo. The consort seemed to enjoy having ruqun made for Jusetsu, who used to only have black robes to wear.

“Onkei,” Jusetsu called out to her bodyguard as Jiujiu was dressing her. “Have you always been a subordinate of Eisei’s?”

Onkei answered from where he stood on the other side of the curtains. “Yes. He’s been my shifu ever since I came to the inner palace.”

“He never hits his neophytes, does he?”

“No.”

Onkei shared no more information than what was called for. Jusetsu looked down at the robe she was being dressed in and carried on speaking.

“...If you were—theoretically speaking—getting caned, and an outsider were to come and save you, would that have caused problems?”

The man fell silent for a short while. Being Jusetsu’s bodyguard, Onkei had probably witnessed Jusetsu saving Ishiha from being caned from somewhere nearby.

“That...depends on your shifu’s temperament,” he replied slowly. “I think some shifu will give their apprentices an even harder thrashing later on for receiving help.” Then, speaking fairly quickly, he added, “However, since you threatened that shifu at the Hien Palace, I believe the risk of that happening is low.”

Jusetsu had given the man a warning because she was concerned that something akin to what Onkei described would happen. She was hopeful that it would work, but if it didn’t, if that eunuch was even more wicked than she thought...

Jusetsu exhaled deeply.

“This isn’t something you should be worrying yourself over, niangniang. This is simply what happens to most neophytes,” Onkei said, suggesting he may have

been concerned about Jusetsu. He was typically a man of few words. “I was just lucky to have Attendant Ei as my shifu.”

“How old were you when you came to the inner palace?” she asked.

“Sixteen.”

“Oh, my. I thought you would have been younger than that.”

Despite the scar on his cheek, Onkei was a beautiful man. Jusetsu had assumed that he became a eunuch at a young age after someone spotted the potential in his good looks.

“Until then, I was an acrobat in a Songbird Troupe.”

“A Songbird Troupe... Oh, those groups of entertainers who sing, dance, and play music, right?”

“Originally, they were diviners who toured the coastal areas, praying for bountiful catches of fish. Nowadays, they mainly perform on street corners or work for merchants and scholar-officials.”

Onkei explained to her that the Songbird Troupe that he’d been part of had been employed by a judge from a certain ministry.

“If you were an acrobat, that explains why you’re so nimble,” Jusetsu deduced.

“It’s also why I was made one of Attendant Ei’s underlings.”

It sounded like his skills from the troupe had worked to his advantage. Jusetsu wondered why he would quit being an acrobat to become a eunuch, but it didn’t seem appropriate to just ask him about that in passing. As Ishiha had proved to her, each person had their own reasons for going down that path.

After she finished tying her belt, Jusetsu came out from behind the curtains.

“I think it will be easier to get something out of that Shiken fellow if you are with us. Join us for the day,” she said.

Jusetsu then made her way toward the Eno Palace with Jiujiu and Onkei accompanying her. The bright morning sunlight beat down on the white gravel as they walked. There was a soft grating sound with every step she took on the

rocks in her brocade shoes. The sun sat high in the sky and the crisp coolness of the early morning hung in the air.

The red roses outside the Eno Palace were no longer at their peak of blooming, but the flowers could be seen among the leaves. They seemed to be on the verge of falling to the ground, one by one. These faded flowers were not as fresh and vibrant as they were in their prime, but they still had somewhat of a luster to them.

Polished cobblestones—so shiny that they almost looked wet—formed a path leading up to the palace building. As the group traveled over them, Kajo appeared from behind the open doorway.

“Welcome. It’s a pleasure to have you here, amei,” she said.

A pleasant smile came over Kajo’s face, and she started making her way down the steps. Her crowd of ladies-in-waiting followed behind her, holding up shades and canopies.

Kajo was wearing a flower-embroidered pale blue shanqun with a light sea-green skirt. She had a refreshing air about her like a light, balmy breeze. It was as if she brought the scent of peppermint with her wherever she went. The young woman was about ten years Jusetsu’s senior, which may have been why she seemed to think of her as a younger sister—she had said that her real youngest sister was about the same age as Jusetsu. She affectionately called Jusetsu “amei,” a nickname meaning “little sister,” and insisted that Jusetsu referred to her as “aje” in return, meaning “big sister.”

“That outfit looks marvelous. I knew the color pink would suit you. I think I’ll get a bright blue robe made for you out of raw silk next time. That’d be just perfect for the coming season, don’t you think? Oh, but wouldn’t it be nice to have a more subdued color as well? A dull brown, perhaps,” mused Kajo.

“I need neither,” Jusetsu said with a frown, but Kajo generally never listened—she would have clothes made for Jusetsu and take them to her unprompted. Jusetsu couldn’t bring herself to turn them down coldly.

“Come on in. I’ll make some tea for...”

“I didn’t come for that. I’m here to speak to one of your eunuchs.”

Kajo was about to climb back up the steps but turned around. “One of my eunuchs? In that case, I shall go call them for you.”

“There’s no need. I’ll visit them myself,” said Jusetsu, “Do you...know where the one named Shiken might be?” Jusetsu surveyed her surroundings. There were a number of eunuchs around, but Shiken didn’t seem to be there.

She exchanged glances with one of them. The man addressed her and said, “At this time of day, he’ll be preparing incense in the penetralia.”

“Understood. Lead me there,” said Jusetsu, urging him to show her the way.

She followed him along the passageway, heading toward the inner part of the Eno Palace. There were a few compact little palace buildings located within the complex that served as Kajo’s residence. It appeared as if each of these buildings were used to store her personal accessories, furnishings, perfumes, records, and books.

“I think he’s here, preparing incense to burn in niangniang’s room later.”

Unlike the others, the palace building that the eunuch had walked up to had raised flooring and was built with wood put together in a double-cross formation—presumably to avoid moisture from getting inside.

“Shiken, are you in here?” the eunuch called out as he opened the doors.

Inside the room, Jusetsu could see storage chests lined up in rows. One eunuch was crouched down among them, with a container sitting on top of a tray next to him. Inside the open container was a small piece of fragrant wood. Jusetsu recognized it as she burned incense on a daily basis as well.

“Shiken, it seems the Raven Consort has something she would like to ask you.”

The eunuch known as Shiken closed the lid of the container and set the tray aside. He then turned to face them.

He was a young man who appeared to be in his early twenties. He was tall for a eunuch, but—likely due to his lengthy, thin limbs—appeared rather lanky. His face was long and narrow and had no plumpness to it, but his eyes were gentle and kind. Although his looks were nothing extraordinary, his appearance was

quite endearing.

Shiken kneeled down in front of Jusetsu and bowed. “My name is Shiken. It’d be my pleasure to help you with whatever you may need.”

“Onkei,” Jusetsu called out to her bodyguard.

He immediately moved from behind her to appear at her side, lowered himself to his knees, and placed his hands together in a gesture of respect. “Yes, niangniang?” he replied.

“Is this definitely the Shiken that you know?”

“Yes, he is.”

Jusetsu nodded, then looked over at Shiken. “I apologize for interrupting your work, but there is something I want to ask you. Come with me for a minute.”

Jusetsu decided they should go outside to listen to what Shiken had to say. She asked the eunuch that had guided them there to take care of the incense he had prepared. Onkei went to kneel to her again, but Jusetsu stopped him. She sat down on the steps of the palace building.

“How do you know this man?” Jusetsu asked Onkei.

“I used to work here,” he replied. Since Onkei had been Eisei’s subordinate for the entire time that he’d been at the inner palace, he probably meant that he was at the Eno Palace as a spy.

There was no way they could discuss such a thing there, so Jusetsu simply said, “I see.”

Jusetsu then shifted her gaze toward Shiken. “The topic I want to discuss with you relates to the Hien Palace.”

“The...Hien Palace?” he repeated, looking puzzled. “Might you be talking about during the previous emperor’s reign?”

“Correct. You worked there, didn’t you? Do you remember there being a eunuch called Yuisa?”

Shiken’s eyes opened wide with surprise. It looked like this name rang a bell—which was to be expected, since Yuisa was the eunuch who’d been executed.

"I do..." There was some pain in Shiken's voice. No, perhaps that wasn't it—it was mournfulness. "He was the eunuch who was executed," he continued. "He was only a child."

"What was he indicted for?" asked Jusetsu.

"Sorry?"

"What crime was he executed for?" she asked again.

Shiken looked at her anxiously. "Well...I was only a child at the time, so I don't really know the detailed circumstances..."

"Did you have the same shifu as Yuisa?"

"No, I didn't. I think his instructor was a eunuch called Obun."

Jusetsu took the letter out of her breast pocket and checked over the names. According to the information Eisei had provided, Obun was now working for the palace eunuch institute.

"I've been told that Yuisa had fallen in love with the Swallow Concubine. Is there any truth in that?" she then asked.

Shiken narrowed his eyes for a moment, looking nostalgic. "I'm not sure whether 'love' is the right word for it... He was still a child, you see. It was something more akin to admiration. She was so far removed from us, after all."

"I heard he gave her a bird feather as a gift."

The moment Jusetsu said this, Shiken suddenly turned pale.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"N-no..." Shiken kneeled down on the spot, holding his hands together and bowing his head. "Please forgive me. I'm just feeling a little unwell..."

Jusetsu stood up and made him lower his hands. She noticed his face was a sickly shade of bluish white.

"Perhaps making you stand wasn't actually the right thing to do. It must have stopped the blood getting to your head. Stay put."

She had Jiujiu fetch him something he could use as a pillow, and Jiujiu came back holding a rolled-up cloth. She placed it underneath Shiken's head and

urged him to lie down on it. A short time later, the color started coming back to Shiken's face.

Jusetsu stared fixedly down at him. "Shiken, did you know that there was a ghost that appears at the Hien Palace?"

His face still blue, Shiken opened his eyes slightly.

"It's the ghost of Yuisa," Jusetsu went on. "Have you heard anything about it?"

He slowly shook his head no.

"I see," said Jusetsu.

Jusetsu left the court ladies and eunuchs of the Eno Palace to take care of Shiken and left. "We're going to meet Obun."

If the man was Yuisa's shifu, he would know the situation better than anyone else. It was also quite likely that he also received a punishment of some kind for the incident.

"But niangniang, aren't you going to ask Shiken about...?" Onkei began.

Jusetsu interrupted him before he had the chance to finish his question. "It's fine," she said. "I'll question him more later."

She realized he seemed to know something, but she couldn't force him to listen to her in his current state. People wouldn't always tell the truth if you pried their mouth open.

She was going to build a firm foundation first before returning, and that involved dragging as much information out of Obun as she possibly could.

The palace eunuch institute was located in the south of the inner palace. Other groups, like the palace chamber department, were a part of the institute. It was a corner that was surrounded by roofed mud walls. The palace eunuch institute was in charge of work like lighting lamps inside the inner palace and taking care of the curtains and blinds. Obun was also stationed there.

When they got to the palace eunuch institute building and went inside, they

saw an incredible number of shelves that were being used to store candles, candlesticks, oil cans, and other related items. Eunuchs were standing among them, busily working away. It looked like they were taking inventory and checking equipment for faults. At nighttime, the inner palace was illuminated by bright lights. There were hundreds of hanging lanterns in the inner palace, so it must have been hard work to go around lighting them every night. The only place here that was shrouded in darkness after the sun went down was the Yamei Palace.

Jusetsu approached one of the nearby eunuchs and got him to call Obun for her. The man in question came trotting from the back of the room. He looked to be about forty-something and looked rather agile. He had small eyes and seemed to have a habit of blinking constantly. The man was restless, and Jusetsu could tell that he was terrified to find out what she wanted from him. It was understandable—he *had* been summoned by a consort, and the Raven Consort, no less.

“Do you have any recollection of a eunuch named Yuisa?” Jusetsu asked him directly.

“How could I forget? He was a neophyte I looked after,” Obun replied.

“He was executed, was he not? What was he charged with?”

Obun paused before he could reply. “Bird slaying.”

“What?” said Jusetsu, visibly shocked. She hadn’t been expecting to hear that kind of crime. It was forbidden to kill birds in the inner palace, as they were considered to be Uren Niangniang’s family.

“Yuisa ended up killing a blue swallow. He was beheaded for it.” Obun let out an audible sigh and continued. “As his instructor, I received a caning. Not only that, but I was also relegated to an unimportant post,” he said. “Why did things have to end this way...?”

Ignoring Obun’s whiny monologue, Jusetsu asked him another question. “Why would he have murdered a bird?”

“Yuisa gifted bird feathers to the Swallow Concubine to win her favor. He caught a blue swallow to take its feathers but ended up killing it by mistake.”

It didn't matter whether it was an accident or on purpose—the punishment for killing a bird was always the death penalty.

"The then-empress was furious, saying how inexcusable it was that his inappropriate feelings he'd developed for the consort had led him to murder a bird for his own personal gain...and he was to be beheaded. She said he should just be thankful they weren't going to rip him apart by tying his legs to two moving wagons."

The "then-empress" he was talking about was the empress dowager—the same one who temporarily ripped away Koshun's right to the throne and had been executed herself not too long ago. *She was one to talk, considering the countless people she had killed for her personal gain*, Jusetsu thought, feeling sick to her stomach—but the woman was already dead. There was no one left to blame.

"Did Yuisa say anything before he was executed?" she asked.

"No," said Obun, shaking his head. "He just looked devastated and cried the whole time."

"I see." Jusetsu had a heavy feeling in her chest. The image of Yuisa's ghost standing among those shallow-flowered irises came to mind, and she thought of something else she wanted to ask Obun. "Did he ever say 'sorry?' In the language of the Hatan clan?"

"That's a tough one... I don't speak their language, you see. Umm..." Obun blinked repeatedly and looked at Jusetsu anxiously. "What kind of investigation is this exactly? Has a problem arisen concerning what happened at the time?"

"No. I was just curious."

She sent Obun back to work and went back the way she came. She was planning on heading back to the Eno Palace, but...

She left one of the buildings belonging to the palace eunuch institute, and as she was walking toward the gate, she found herself surrounded by several palace buildings, tightly packed together. One of them was the lodging house where eunuchs working for this department lived. This was the first place that new eunuchs who'd just arrived at the inner palace would go. There, they

would carry out chores for more senior eunuchs, who were known as chenren.

Next to the entrance to the lodging house, a rather small eunuch was crouching down, holding his knees.

“Is that...?”

Jusetsu turned in his direction. She noticed that the walls of the lodging house were originally white, but all the dust and mold had now left them slightly dingy.

“Ishiha,” Jusetsu called out to him, making him look up in surprise.

His eyes were red and swollen. It *was* him.

“Raven Consort,” he said, sniveling loudly and hurriedly rubbing his eyes with both hands. He stood up, then kneeled down again. “What are you doing here?”

Jusetsu had him stand and dusted the dirt off his knees. Ishiha tensed up in shock, which at least seemed to have stopped his tears.

“Is everything all right at the Hien Palace?” Jusetsu asked.

This simple question, however, made his eyes well up yet again. “M-my shifu...said he couldn’t look after me anymore...and told me to leave...”

“What?” Jusetsu felt the blood suddenly drain from her extremities, leaving them cold. *Was that my fault?* Her threat either hadn’t worked, or it had worked *too* well. Either way, she had messed up. “I’m sorry,” Jusetsu apologized.

Ishiha shook his head and waved his hands about. “No. It’s not your fault. I was the one who spooked him... I brought up the ghost. I’m the one to blame,” he said despondently.

Despite this, Jusetsu still got the impression he was covering for her.

“It turns out my shifu was easily frightened. He didn’t want to hear anything about the ghost, and you...” The boy then clammed up and hung his head.

Just as Jusetsu thought, her threat had been too effective—or at least, that’s how it seemed.

She turned back to Onkei. “What is a neophyte supposed to do if he gets dismissed by his shifu?”

“We get assigned to a different one—but until that happens, they go back to doing odd jobs for their chenren,” Onkei replied with no hesitation, suggesting that this kind of thing happened all the time.

“Right.”

“But...” Onkei added, “when a neophyte returns to his original position, he will be treated more harshly.”

Ishiha clamped his lips together tightly, and Jusetsu fell silent.

“Hey, Onkei...” Jiujiu said, pulling at his sleeve reproachfully. “Don’t you have anything a little more positive to share?”

Onkei’s reply was painful to hear. “No,” he said.

“All right then... Let’s ask Koshun—no, Eisei—for help. You’re an intelligent boy, so I’m sure you’ll be useful wherever you go. You may as well stay at my palace until they find you something else.”

Ishiha looked up. He’d been a sickly shade of white just moments earlier, but now his cheeks were flushed. “Th-thank you so much.”

“Can’t you just employ him at the Yamei Palace?” Jiujiu asked hopefully.

Jusetsu shook her head. “We don’t need any staff.”

She’d always been on her own. She couldn’t afford to take on anyone else. The Raven Consort was meant to be alone—keeping people at a distance and not attracting them to her. That’s just how it was. Even Reijo had lived her life like that.

Jusetsu also felt that there was nothing in particular that anybody could help her with. Working for her wasn’t like working for any other consort. Ghosts were involved in her work, and eerie incidents were sure to happen.

As Jusetsu silently pondered this, she realized that Ishiha was staring at her.

“What is it?” she asked.

“U-uh, n-nothing... I’m sorry.” Ishiha looked down. Eunuchs weren’t supposed

to stare at consorts, but it didn't bother Jusetsu. "Er, well, you see... You just have very pretty eyes," he said meekly.

"Do I?" Jusetsu replied with a slight smile. "Reijo—the previous Raven Consort—she once told me that too."

Jusetsu started walking again. Ishiha gazed at her from the side as she left. Onkei and Jiujiu followed her.

"I knew there wasn't a monster in her eyes," Ishiha whispered in the language of the Hatan clan. "They're just pretty." Then, he ran after the others to catch up.

Jusetsu returned to the Eno Palace. It'd be a bother if Kajo were to catch her there, so she entered through the back. Jusetsu called over a nearby eunuch and asked him how Shiken was doing.

"He seems to be doing all right now. He's in the back, grinding some tea leaves."

There was a small courtyard at the back of the penetralia. There was a table and chair set out, and Shiken was grinding tea on a mortar. Next to him, a young eunuch was squatting down, firing tea leaves in a hot pan. He was extracting the water from them. The tea leaves were being crushed, roasted, and ground from tea bricks. They were then sifted further before finally being boiled.

The air was filled with the aromatic scent of roasting tea leaves along with the subtle grassy smell of ground leaves. Noticing Jusetsu, the two eunuchs stopped what they were doing and stood up. They then faced her and bowed with their hands placed together.

"Fukuji, fetch a replacement to grind these leaves for me," Shiken said to the young eunuch.

The eunuch named Fukuji's eyebrows drooped worriedly.

"But the court ladies will only accept tea that you've ground. They'll be angry at me."

It sounded like Shiken was an excellent tea-grinder.

“I’ll apologize to them,” he said, before forcing Fukuji out of the courtyard.

Then, Shiken kneeled before Jusetsu again. “I’m terribly sorry for my rudeness earlier, Raven Consort. You even went as far as taking care of me when I deserved to be *scolded* for the way I acted. I wasn’t worthy.”

“Are you feeling better now?” she asked.

“Yes, I am. And it’s all thanks to you, dear Raven Consort.”

“All I did was make you lie down.” Jusetsu went and stood beside the table and peered into the tea grinding mortar.

“Are you a skilled tea-grinder then?” she asked.

“I’ve been told that the tea I grind smells wonderful when boiled. That’s why I always have the honor of assuming this role,” he stated.

Eisei was excellent at brewing tea. *If he were to brew the tea that Shiken had ground, it would be sure to taste delicious. I should tell Koshun about Shiken’s tea*, Jusetsu thought—but it occurred to her he probably already tried it sometime.

Once Fukuji had brought over another eunuch to take Shiken’s place, Shiken guided Jusetsu and her companions to another palace building on the outskirts of the complex. It was a cozy and simple building that appeared to be a lodging house for eunuchs. They entered one of the rooms and Shiken offered Jusetsu a seat.

The room was quite bare, with only two chairs and a small stool by the lattice window and a bed against the wall. As modest as it was, it was very clean. Onkei, Jiujiu and Ishiha waited behind Jusetsu, and Shiken stood opposite them.

The sunlight coming in through the lattice window made the dust in the air sparkle. A pale blue shadow was cast against the wall that the sun couldn’t reach. Although Shiken was surrounded by soft sunlight, it looked as if he was standing in the shadow.

“We met with Obun,” said Jusetsu. She was unsurprisingly direct, even in a situation like this. “Yuisa killed a blue swallow, didn’t he?”

Shiken hung his head. "Indeed. That is correct."

Earlier, he had insisted that he knew little about the situation because he was only a child, but now he seemed more willing to talk about it. That must have been why he brought Jusetsu to his private room, where nobody else was to overhear them.

"I heard he was trying to take its feathers to give to the Swallow Concubine," Jusetsu said.

"That's right," Shiken replied. "He...started off by just collecting feathers that had fallen to the ground—particularly blue swallow tail feathers. They were beautiful, so Yuisa would wipe off the dirt and give them to the Swallow Concubine. She was a kind person, and she always had been very caring toward young eunuchs like Yuisa and I, and she would always make an effort to speak to us. The fact that she was so young herself may have had something to do with it. At that time, she was barely even fifteen. She was an unaffected young woman and would often laugh out loud. It's rare to see a consort from a distinguished family laugh like that."

A smile came to Shiken's face as he talked about her—but it was a smile tinged with a mixture of nostalgia and sadness.

"She, too, would have helped me if I were to have passed out, I'm sure."

He looked over at Jusetsu. She knew he was about to divulge some secrets. Was it because he witnessed a familiar kindness from her that had made him more eager to discuss them?

"The Swallow Concubine was delighted to receive those feathers from Yuisa. From what I know, she didn't wear them in her hair—but rather she simply enjoyed looking at them. She wasn't quite old enough to show an interest in gemstones and the like. That may have been why she had more of an affinity for rare items than beautiful ones. From then on, Yuisa started taking time out from work to search the grounds for feathers. He could find them easily in the forests and the woodlands, but that wasn't good enough for him. He started going around looking for feathers that were even *more* rare or even *more* beautiful."

Pausing, Shiken let out a slight sigh.

“Before long, he started catching birds and pulling out their feathers. He’d use a basket or a net, taking care not to kill them mistakenly or damage their plumage. Whenever he managed to catch a rare bird, his face would light up as he told me about it. But then...”

Shiken looked down and stared at his feet. There was a shadow over half of his face.

“The more pleased Yuisa was, the less happy the Swallow Concubine was with what he gave her. Every time he gave her a feather, the Swallow Concubine’s reactions became less and less enthusiastic. Gradually, she started looking distressed when he came to see her. The Swallow Concubine had tired of it. Even the feathers that were initially rare lost their luster for her. Once that happened, it didn’t matter how rare a feather was. The feathers were just that—feathers, no more, no less. Still, being the kind person that she was, I don’t think the Swallow Concubine could bring herself to tell him she’d grown tired of it. ‘You don’t need to bring me any more,’ she’d say, but she never gave him a firm refusal. She just smiled at him uncomfortably. Yuisa, however, never noticed it—or rather, he pretended not to notice. He began to go after the birds even more intently. I should have stopped him.”

Shiken cast his eyes downward, his voice trembling as he said these last few words.

“I couldn’t, though. On the contrary, I actually ended up as a conspirator. Yuisa was desperately trying to catch those birds, but I couldn’t tell him to stop, nor could I leave him to do it alone. Giving the Swallow Concubine those gifts was the one thing that linked Yuisa directly to her. Yuisa clung onto that and couldn’t let it go. I was painfully aware of that, so I couldn’t stop him. If only I had...it wouldn’t have ended the way it did.”

He then went on to explain how the blue swallow had got caught in a trap that Yuisa had set and died.

“He hung a net between some branches. The blue swallow that got caught in it must have struggled terribly because it ended up breaking its wings. I can only assume that it wore itself out and died. When I found it, the bird was hanging from the net with its head down. Its feathers were scattered both inside the net

and on the ground. They must have fallen while the bird struggled... Yuisa just looked up at the dead bird, dumbfounded. I think it came as a terrible shock to him. I suggested we take the bird out of the net, and we silently removed the netting that the bird's legs were entangled in. Killing a bird is punishable by death, but we were the only ones there, so I proposed we keep quiet and bury it properly to give it a proper send-off. Yuisa didn't say anything, so I assumed he agreed with my idea. But..."

Shiken gulped and shook his head.

"Yuisa pushed the cold, blue swallow against his chest and...took it to the Swallow Concubine."

"What?!" Until that point, Jusetsu had left Shiken to tell the tale without interrupting at all, but now, she couldn't help but say something. "He brought her the dead bird?"

"Yes."

"But...why?"

"Not even I have a clear understanding of what Yuisa was feeling at that time," Shiken replied, struggling to get the words out. "But...I think it shows what a shock the blue swallow's death was to him. When he disappeared with it, I was certain that he went to bury it somewhere, so I just went ahead and put away the net. When I got back to the palace, though, it was too late. Yuisa was kneeling by the Swallow Concubine out in the garden, offering it to her with both hands. I believe he cried and explained to her he 'accidentally killed it.'"

Jusetsu was at a loss for words. *Wasn't that like asking for his own death?*

"The Swallow Concubine screamed and ran back into her palace building to get away from him. Yuisa was arrested and sent to the eunuch jail."

That was the place where eunuchs who had committed crimes were imprisoned before sentencing.

"The charges were obvious, without any need for deliberation. After all, he confessed to it himself..."

And so, Yuisa was executed.

Shiken clasped his shaking hands together in front of him. “For all that time...I was terrified. Right until the moment he was executed.”

Jusetsu looked up at Shiken’s face. “Terrified?”

Shiken nodded. His face was pale. Jusetsu went to get up—worried that he might have been feeling unwell again—but before she could, he said in a feeble voice, “No, I’m fine.”

“You ought to sit down. I’d hate to see you faint. I want to listen to what you have to say.”

Jusetsu sounded aggravated as she confidently issued this command, but Shiken obliged and finally sat down opposite her. Despite this, the color didn’t come back to his face, and he carried on staring at his hands.

“I...was terrified by the possibility that Yuisa might tell on me.”

“Tell on you?” she repeated.

“I helped him set up the trap that the blue swallow died in. I climbed the tree with him to place the net. I was part of the reason that the blue swallow died. I thought that Yuisa might’ve revealed that to make his own sentence less severe, or because he couldn’t stand the thought of him being the only one punished...”

Shiken hung his head, holding his forehead in his hands.

“The idea of Yuisa’s execution was frightening and painful for me—but on the other hand, I was terrified by the prospect that I, too, might receive the same fate. I just wished he would be executed quickly, before he had the chance to talk about me...” Shiken confessed. Beads of sweat sat on his pale face. “Yuisa was my friend. We came to the inner palace at around the same time, and he was a child, the same age as me. When our shifu hit us or beat us, we’d cheer each other up. But now...I can’t call myself his friend anymore.”

He bent over and covered his face with his hands. The sunlight that poured down on his back was glaringly white and painful to the eyes.

Jusetsu looked away. “...Dying is scary. It’s only natural to feel that way. Even I do,” Jusetsu whispered.

She touched her own tied-up hair. It was dyed coal-black. Jusetsu, a survivor of the previous imperial family, had been living her life with bated breath, terrified. She was scared of being killed.

“Let us not deny those thoughts,” she continued. “We should live out our lives with this regret. Our suffering is our punishment. That punishment is probably why I am still alive.”

It was thanks to this belief that she could tolerate being the Raven Consort. She thought of it as atonement for leaving her mother to die.

Shiken looked up and stared at Jusetsu’s face for a few moments. It felt as though the feelings of guilt they both had nestled in the depths of their hearts were communicating with one another. Shiken’s expression softened, and something akin to a tearful smile came to his face.

“Yes,” he said, “you’re right.” Then, he added in a quiet voice, “Thank you very much.”

His face and his voice seemed calmer again, and although there was now a serene gentleness in his eyes, there was also a haze of exhaustion over them. Even if the incident had happened long ago, he could still receive a heavy punishment if it were to come out that he had played a part in murdering a bird. The fact that he had confessed to it—or rather, divulged the truth—could have partly been because he wanted some of that weight to be lifted.

Jusetsu shifted her gaze toward the lattice windows, then back toward Shiken. “Did Yuisa ever say ‘sorry’ in the language of the Hatan clan?”

“In the language of...the Hatan clan? He did teach me a few words in his native tongue, but I don’t feel like I ever heard that one...”

“Ishiha,” said Jusetsu, turning toward the boy who was standing behind her. Ishiha stood up straight.

“Try saying sorry in the Hatan language.”

“All right,” he replied, before saying something in his native tongue.

As soon as Shiken heard it, his eyes opened wide, and he nodded. “If that’s the word, then yes, it does sound familiar. It was the word that Yuisa kept

repeating to the dead blue swallow."

Jusetsu thought back on what the boy's ghost was saying in the garden.

"Sorry, sorry..."

*So those words were directed toward the blue swallow.*

"Yuisa has been apologizing to that blue swallow he killed all this time," Jusetsu said.

Shiken just looked to the ground. "That must have been why Yuisa went and told her he'd killed the bird—to repent and make amends for what he did," he said.

"Perhaps after taking that small creature's life, he finally saw the error in his ways."

Yuisa been slowly venturing deeper and deeper into the abyss—first by wanting to get close to the concubine, then by wanting to win her favor, and then by wanting to make her smile. By the time he realized what was happening, it was already too late for him to make it back to shore.

How could they send that ghost off to paradise?

There was no need for suffering after death. He should have left suffering for the living. Jusetsu placed her hand on her temple and thought to herself.

"Raven Consort," Shiken called to her, "have you been doing this investigating in order to save Yuisa's ghost?"

"I...don't know if I can save him."

"But you're trying to," he said.

Shiken stood up and walked over to his bed. He crouched down and pulled a small box out from underneath it. He opened the lid, took its contents into his hand, and brought it to Jusetsu.

Shiken placed the item on top of the table.

"Is this what I think it is...?" asked Jusetsu.

It was a feather in a pure shade of dark blue—but when the sun shone on it, it brought out a slight hint of jade—a blue swallow's feather.

Jusetsu picked it up and stared at it.

"It's one of the feathers from the swallow that died... I was intending to get rid of it, but I just couldn't bring myself to throw it out. I feel like it's still carrying his spirit with it," Shiken said.

"I see. One of the dead bird's feathers," Jusetsu whispered, her eyes fixed on it.

Then she turned toward the doors. "I'm going to the Hien Palace," she declared.

Onkei promptly stepped forward and opened them for her.

Before going outside, Jusetsu looked back at Shiken. "Would you like to join me?"

"I appreciate the offer, but I have work to do here..."

"I'll ask for Kajo's permission."

Jusetsu speedily headed over to the palace building where Kajo was, received permission to borrow him, then left the palace. Shiken followed her, flustered. Jusetsu had left the Yamei Palace with a party of three, but now there were five of them. The group made their way to the Hien Palace in a gaggle. If this many people were to wander around the palace, the Swallow Concubine would be sure to hear about it—so as troublesome as it was, the group entered through the front.

"*You're* the Raven Consort? Well, that's creepy..."

The first Swallow Concubine they met in front of the palace building was a pretty lady. She appeared to be in her early twenties, or perhaps older—but her mannerisms and the way she spoke were immature for her age. She goggled fearfully at Jusetsu, covering her mouth with her fan.

"Huh? You're going to the garden? Oh, sure, do whatever you want," the woman said. She was about to disappear into the back, but then suddenly looked at Jusetsu again. "Hey, this doesn't mean there's a ghost in the garden, does it? I can't deal with stuff like that."

The concubine's eyebrows drooped worriedly. She looked deeply troubled by

the idea. Her expression was so innocent, like that of a little girl. A slight smile appeared on Jusetsu's face. *She's far cuter than I am*, she thought. The sight of Jusetsu smiling made the Swallow Concubine blink in surprise.

"I simply want to have a look at the shallow-flowered irises in the garden. I imagine they're just beautiful. Would you be so kind as to let me take a clipping with me?"

"U-uh... Sure. Take as much as you like." Flustered, the Swallow Concubine's face turned red.

"Show them to the garden," she told her nearby lady-in-waiting before rushing inside the palace building with her fan covering her face.

This concubine must have originated from a distinguished family, but she acted like a child.

Although Jusetsu would have known the way to the garden without being taken there, she followed the lady-in-waiting anyway. Once they came upon the shallow-flowered irises, the woman passed Jiujiu a pair of flower shears and left.

Jusetsu pulled the peony out of her hair and blew on it. The pale red smoke drifted away from her hand, heading for a spot above the irises. The figure of Yuisa appeared.

"Yuisa!" Shiken shouted.

Yuisa didn't even bat an eye. He was still clutching the blue feather in his hand.

Jusetsu took the feather out of her breast pocket. It was the one that Shiken had kept. She sandwiched it between her palms and blew on it lightly. Dark blue smoke rose from the gap between her hands. It wavered up and down as though it wasn't sure where it wanted to go, then gradually started converging in one particular spot. The moment it seemed to have finally settled in one place, quivering gently, the smoke would disperse and spread around again. Jusetsu reached out an arm and followed the smoke with her fingertips. It seemed to be guided by her movements, gathering together and coagulating.

The blue smoke turned into a blue cluster, and feathers materialized one by

one to form a wing. Then, tail feathers, the deepest and most vivid in color, appeared and stretched out.

Next, it grew a beak, eyes, and legs. The bird let out a clear, high-pitched cry, and then fluttered its wings. Jusetsu held out a finger, and the bird perched on top of it.

Yuisa's eyes were now glued to the beautiful bird resting on Jusetsu's finger.

Jusetsu moved her finger slightly. The blue swallow flapped its wings and took flight. Yuisa stepped forward, taken by surprise, and held out his hand. The blue swallow flew around in a small circle, not straying from the area where they were all standing. Then, it soared down to Yuisa and perched on his own finger, its tiny talons grabbing hold of it.

Yuisa lifted his hand up to look at the bird straight-on. The blue swallow buried its beak in its wings and groomed itself. Yuisa's eyes appeared to well up slightly, and the next thing Jusetsu knew, they were filled with tears. Streams of water rolled down his face.

Then, his mouth started moving and a voice finally escaped his lips. "I'm sorry," he was saying.

This bird was the one thing Yuisa was struggling to leave behind. His remorse for killing it had been keeping him anchored to this spot for all that time—but now, he could be freed.

The blue swallow took off from Yuisa's finger. It fluttered around in the sky for a while, and after letting out a beautiful chirp, it turned into smoke and disappeared. It almost looked like it had blended in with the colors of the sky, leaving its cry as the only sign it was ever there.

Yuisa gazed up at the spot where the blue swallow had vanished. Jusetsu could see that he was slowly fading away. The small ghost lowered his head and let out a slight sigh.

"Yuisa," Shiken called out to him.

At last, Yuisa turned and faced his old friend. He gazed at him with a look of amazement. Then he broke into a broad, gentle smile. Jusetsu could hear him saying something as he laughed, and then he was gone.

It was like the wind had swept him away. The sound of his soft, feeble laughter lingered in their ears slightly.

The blue swallow feather fell at last, landing on top of the shallow-flowered irises. Jusetsu picked it up and handed it back to Shiken. Shiken gazed at the feather she'd given him. It was a deep, entrancing shade of blue, like that of a blue sky in the summer.

"...He probably didn't even know it was Shiken to begin with," Ishiha muttered. "That's why he was so stunned. But when he realized, he smiled. Did you hear what he said at the end?"

"I heard him say something, but I didn't catch what it was," Jusetsu replied. "Was he speaking the Hatan language?"

"Yes," said Ishiha, "He said 'vurenda.'"

"What does that mean?"

"Friend.' It's a way of calling out to someone. A greeting—like 'hello, my friend,' for example."

Shiken held his breath. He stared at the spot where Yuisa had appeared above the shallow-flowered irises. He looked like he was whispering Yuisa's name, but no sound came out. His hand trembled as he clutched onto the feather.

Jusetsu gazed at the feather that Shiken was clasping in his hand.

"Friend..." Jusetsu whispered, but her voice was too quiet for anyone else to hear.

That evening, during in the second watch of the night—the time between 9 p.m. and 11 p.m.—Koshun arrived at the Yamei Palace carrying some lilies.

"I never knew you had it in you to bring me flowers," remarked Jusetsu, somewhat surprised.

"It wasn't me who got them for you," said Koshun, his face revealing a mixture of slight embarrassment and displeasure. It was rare for them to show emotions such as those. "It was Sho Koei."

"Who in the world is that?" asked Jusetsu.

"The Swallow Concubine. Didn't you meet her his afternoon? When I went to the Hien Palace, she told me to bring you these."

*That woman?* Jusetsu thought, her face springing to mind. She could have never said it out loud, but she couldn't believe that she was making the emperor behave like her little errand boy.

"I heard you took a clipping of those shallow-flowered irises and gave them to her. She was very pleased with them."

"They'd only wither if I displayed them in here, so I had no choice but to give them to her. The flowers were from the Hien Palace to begin with, so it makes no sense for her to give me a present in return."

"She took a liking to you, you know. Apparently, you even flashed her a smile."

"I have no recollection of that," Jusetsu snapped back. "The Swallow Concubine must be mistaken. She was mostly just afraid of me."

"She said she'd always imagined you to be this mysterious, scary consort, but you turned out to be lovely."

Jusetsu paused. "The Swallow Concubine is a little unusual, isn't she?"

"She was given a sheltered upbringing deep inside her mansion, so she knows very little about the ways of the world. She insists that men and older women frighten her. She's even scared of Kajo. I'm younger than her, so she seems somewhat all right around me. She prefers playing with children or other young girls."

*And yet her parents still chucked her into the inner palace?* Jusetsu thought.

"Why don't you plant some chrysanthemums at the Hien Palace?"

Sho Koei shared a name with a chrysanthemum spirit from a famous tale, which brought this idea to Jusetsu's mind.

"Why would I do that?" Koshun asked, genuinely confused.

Jusetsu was appalled. "Don't tell me you've never once given her a

chrysanthemum flower?"

"Well...no. I haven't."

"She's supposed to be your wife! You once told me I was oblivious to the inner workings of those around me. Talk about pot calling the kettle black—you're clueless about women."

Koshun stood frozen to the spot, his mouth agape. It looked like he couldn't find the words to argue back. Kajo had probably told him this too.

While Koshun was speechless, Eisei—who was standing behind him—glared at her.

Koshun cleared his throat. "...Be that as it may, you are kind to young girls, aren't you?" he said.

"I can't recall ever having been kind to them."

"Well, I can count the number of times you've smiled in *my* presence on one hand—and you've never given *me* flowers," he retorted.

"That makes us even, then."

"I brought you flowers today, didn't I?"

"I thought they were from the Swallow Concubine," Jusetsu said plainly.

Koshun spoke in a straightforward manner with a blank expression on his face, so she could never tell whether he was joking or being serious. That being said, she knew he wasn't the sort of man who joked around. Whether or not he was being or serious, it was more trouble than it was worth.

Fed up, Jusetsu decided to change the subject. "What happened with Ishiha?"

He had been entrusted to Eisei, so Koshun glanced back at him.

Eisei got down on his knees and answered Jusetsu's question. "For the time being, he's working under me as a domestic servant in the Gyoko Palace."

"A bright boy, isn't he?"

"He is indeed bright."

There seemed to be more to his statement below the surface, so Jusetsu

decided to dig deeper. “Don’t you like him?” she said.

“It’s not that,” Eisei explained. “It’s just that he’s slightly *too* honest.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“He’s too rigid,” he said flatly. “He struggles to express himself in a subtle way.”

Jusetsu groaned. “Is he no use to you, then?”

“I wouldn’t go than far, but...” Eisei glanced at Jusetsu. “I can’t guarantee that he will make it out alive.”

Jusetsu frowned. The empress dowager might not have been around anymore, but it sounded like there was still danger lurking in Koshun’s shadow.

“Why don’t you take him in?” Koshun suggested to Jusetsu.

Still frowning, she lowered her gaze.

“It must be really inconvenient for you not to have a single eunuch around,” he went on.

“I didn’t even have a court lady until recently. It’s never caused me any particular inconvenience,” she replied.

“It’s only that you haven’t noticed how inconvenient it is. You could do with a few more people working here.”

“But I...”

“Once a neophyte has been abandoned by his shifu, he’ll have a hard time wherever he goes. Since you were the one to put him in that situation, you need to see that he’s taken care of. Isn’t it cruel to meddle with him, only to abandon him afterward and tell him to live a good life?” said Koshun.

His voice was so quiet and calm that it was almost a whisper—but for Jusetsu, his words stung, piercing her right to the core. She could remember Eisei telling her something similar as well. She wondered if, perhaps, something similar had happened between the two of them.

“...Are you saying you looked after him?”

Koshun went silent for a little while, then glanced over at Eisei.

"Yes," he replied. "When I recruited Eisei as my personal attendant, he was about twelve or thirteen. I took him away from his shifu at the time and employed him at the crown prince's administration."

He didn't say much, but Eisei's shifu had probably been a cruel eunuch.

"I caused him a great deal of suffering when I had my royal title taken away, though, so I'm not sure whether or not that was a good decision," Koshun said calmly.

Eisei opened his eyes wide, as if to say, "*Don't be so absurd.*"

"What are you talking about?" Eisei said aloud. "I didn't suffer in the slightest. Compared to the anguish I experienced before, it was nothing."

"If you say so," said Koshun with a slight laugh.

Jusetsu stared at the tea on the table, turning things over in her mind. *Isn't what I did the equivalent of what the former Swallow Concubine did to Yuisa?*

Unrestrained kindness and goodwill were an invisible poison. She shouldn't have offered him a helping hand so thoughtlessly. She made a mistake from the start. What was she supposed to do now?

"What about the previous Raven Consort?" Koshun said, making Jusetsu look up at him. "She taught you how to read and write, how to speak properly, and passed down her knowledge and wisdom. That wasn't particularly *necessary*, though, was it? What I'm saying is...that's what we call love."

Jusetsu could picture Reijo in her mind's eye. From the day she brought Jusetsu to the Yamei Palace, her mentor had looked like a very old woman. She wasn't the kind of person who smiled much—but she did have a lot of perseverance. She stubbornly worked to fill the empty container of Jusetsu's heart with love.

"You should have people around you that you give love to as well. It doesn't matter if it's just one or two people, or however many you want. I recommend you give that some thought."

Jusetsu looked down. She wasn't sure she understood what Koshun was saying. He was making something complicated sound far too easy.

“Ishiha will stay in the Gyoko Palace for a while. Let me know when you’re ready to welcome him in,” Koshun said, before getting to his feet. “If you’re having doubts about anything, I’m happy to talk things through with you.”

“Are you really?”

“Of course.”

Jusetsu found herself smiling slightly. “That shall not be necessary. You’re always too sincere.”

“Did you want some *insincere* advice? I’ll see what I can do.”

Koshun turned back and headed for the entrance. Eisei opened the doors. It was the kind of night where the sky looked like it’d been drenched in black ink. The moon wasn’t visible, and the stars weren’t very bright. Eisei went to light his candlestick, but at that same moment, Jusetsu pulled a peony out of her hair and held it out to him. The flower wavered and melted away, creating a pale red flame at the tip of the candle.

“It’s a new moon tonight. Take this so that Yeyoushen doesn’t catch you.”

Word on the street said that Yeyoushen—the god who patrolled the night—would find you if you roamed about at night, so people were discouraged from going out after dark. As a result, the city gates were shut to forbid people from coming and going.

“You said that Uren Niangniang wanders about in the form of Yeyoushen on nights when there’s no moon in the sky, didn’t you?” Koshun apparently remembered what Jusetsu told him before.

Jusetsu didn’t reply and changed the subject instead. “Don’t visit me tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Koshun said doubtfully. “Why not?”

“I’m going to be tired.”

“Why are you...?”

Koshun attempted to question her, but Jusetsu resisted and pressed him to go home immediately.

He stared down at her. "...I mentioned this before," he began, "but I do want to us to communicate with each other. I want you to talk to me."

"Talk?"

"I want to hear about what's troubling you, what's making you unhappy, and what's bringing you joy," Koshun said.

With that, he began making his way home. When he turned away, the glass decoration hanging from his waist swayed and glimmered in the light of the pale red flame. His decoration was a model fish made from glass. Jusetsu had one that matched as Koshun had given it to her. Koshun's was made from clear glass, whereas Jusetsu's was milky white with a pale red tint. These items acted as proof of the oath they had made to one another.

Jusetsu kept hers in her cabinet along with the other things that Koshun had given her—the amber fish and the rose carved out of wood. From time to time, Jusetsu would just gaze at them—such as on moonless nights like this.

When the moonlight vanished, the starlight would suck her in. The darkness was darker and gloomier than the night sky could ever be. She could hear rustling in the shadows. Something was out there, trying to make its voice heard.

Jusetsu felt the urge to call out, "No," but she covered her mouth to stop herself. She could see the pale red flame on top of Eisei's candlestick, wavering faintly in the distance, showing her where Koshun was. If she raised her voice, he might come back to check on her—what would happen then?

The darkness felt as if it was growing even stickier, clinging to her like clay. She went back inside and closed the door behind her.

She had already dismissed Jiujiu that night and sent her to get some rest. Jusetsu opened the curtains around her bed and went inside. There was a door at the back of her room leading to a narrow passage. Jusetsu opened the door and went down the passage.

At the end of it sat a small room. There was a painting of big black mysterious bird with a woman's face—Uren Niangniang—on the wall, with an altar standing in front of it. Jusetsu blew on the candlestick and a white flame

appeared in a flash, flickering before her. A musky smell drifted through the air.

Jusetsu took another peony out of her hair and tossed it into the glass bowl. A sound rung out like a bell, and the flower appeared to dissolve into nothingness.

This was a ritual she performed every three nights.

She left the small room behind and returned to the room she was in before. Jusetsu let down her done-up hair and laid down on her bed. Changing into her nightclothes was too much effort.

On moonless nights such as this one, she was afraid to close her eyes.

And yet her eyes closed involuntarily, regardless. Her legs became so heavy she couldn't move them. As she closed her eyes and the darkness came, she felt her body sinking deeper and deeper. The blackness that was clinging to her was cold and heavy. It was hard to breathe. It felt just like she was being dragged down to the bottom of the ocean.

Even if she were to sink to its deepest depths, she would still come up to the surface again. She'd rise far from the spot where she sank, but as she was making her way up to the surface, her body would come to a sudden stop. Her heart, and her heart alone, would be the only part of her that could carry on to the top.

Jusetsu let out a silent scream. As her heart was lifting, her body felt constricted, like silk threads were holding her back. The pain she felt was like if she was being torn apart. And still, without a care in the world, her heart drifted to the top of the water by itself—resting under a night sky far, far away from the one her body had been left under.

The thread had her bound. It was tangled around her and digging into her limbs. Then, at last, it tore all of them off of her.

She was now overlooking the imperial estate. Bright fires were lit everywhere, illuminating the dark night. Ignoring all this, her heart flew somewhere else. Her heart had wings—wings so glossy black they looked wet. Black wings that seem to suck everything in. The wings kept flapping broadly, further and further into the distance. With every beat, a twinge of pain shot through Jusetsu's body. The

pain was so intense that it felt like her flesh was ripping off of her severed limbs in shreds.

These wings weren't the wings of *her* heart, however. They were the jet-black wings of an eerie bird with a human head—the goddess who had crossed the sea.

Uren Niangniang.

Jusetsu resented Kosho, the very first Raven Consort. Why did she have to accept this suffering? Did she really love Ran Yu—the Summer Sovereign—that much? How could she feel that way about a man who shut her away in the inner palace and took away her title?

Kosho ended up being Uren Niangniang's keeper. She made sure that Uren Niangniang couldn't get away by becoming one with her.

The life of the Raven Consort was also that of Uren Niangniang. The consort made sure that Uren Niangniang could never escape. To do this, she shut the goddess away beneath the Yamei Palace.

However, on nights where there was no moon in the sky and the black of the night was darker than usual, Uren Niangniang could not be held back. She'd slowly and steadily melt into the darkness and begin to roam. As Uren Niangniang moved around, the Raven Consort would experience excruciating pain, feeling as if she was being torn apart.

On some occasions, Uren Niangniang would spend the whole night flying around. Other nights, she would only do one lap of the imperial estate before coming back. But on this night, it seemed like she was doing the former. She zipped past the imperial estate, flew through the land, and soared further and further away. Something smelled like stale water—there was a river below, and Uren Niangniang was flying along it. The river meandered about, crossed a sweeping plain, cut between villages, and went over a hill covered with strangely shaped rocks.

*Where in the world could she be heading?*

Overwhelmed by the pain, Jusetsu could only gaze at the scenery. The light of a town was finally coming into view. People had lit lanterns and hung them up

all over the place, fearing the arrival of Yeyoushen—which came as no surprise to her. Uren Niangniang soared over the houses. The people's homes were made of piled-up stones, and the doors and windows of them were covered with fabric. The lanterns on the eaves were an unusually round shape. The streets were narrow, convoluted, and hilly. There was no sign of anyone outside the houses. The air smelled like salt. *This town must be next to the sea.*

Then, some light escaped from the second floor of one of the houses. Someone had opened a wooden hatch, flipping the cloth upward. A young man peeked out from the opening. He was fair-skinned, and long black hair flowed down his back.

He looked up.

He was looking *her* way.

*The Owl!*

Jusetsu didn't understand what had made her think that, but those words rung out inside her head the moment she saw that young man's face—or rather, her eyes met that young man's.

Jusetsu opened her own eyes with a start.

Everything was silent again.

Breathing heavily, she slowly moved her neck again. She was back inside the Yamei Palace, on top of her bed.

Her back was damp and sweaty—uncomfortably so. The pain and sensations of being torn apart were over, but she felt that all of her strength was completely gone. She didn't have the energy to sit up, so she turned over in bed—albeit with difficulty. Once she was on her side, she felt a chilly gloom all along her back.

The moment Uren Niangniang spotted the young man, she shot back to the Yamei Palace in the blink of an eye. Jusetsu could sense a flicker of emotion in the way Uren Niangniang had reacted—it was a tinge of fear.

"Just... Who...was that?" Jusetsu managed to get out.

With a languid tongue and her dry throat, she couldn't put the words

together properly.

Nobody could answer Jusetsu's hoarse whisper. After all, there was only one thing lingering beside her—the darkness.

"...Put down the hatch, Shogetsu."

Ho Ichigyo warned his apprentice, who—despite there being a new moon out—had just opened the window.

"All right, prof," Shogetsu said with a blank look on his face. He obediently lowered the wooden hatch.

The man had a stunning pale face and black hair hanging down his back. Although he spoke crudely, he was a dutiful young man. About a month earlier, Ho found him collapsed on the street and picked him up. Since then, he'd stayed by his side as an apprentice, but he was effectively just a hanger-on who did odd jobs for him. Shogetsu didn't even complain—he simply aimlessly followed him. Considering all that, he never smiled or got angry. Not the slightest bit of emotion ever showed on his face. There were still some things Ho didn't quite understand about him.

Ho put down his brush and rubbed his eyes. Being an old man, writing at nighttime was tough on his eyes. He'd been asked to write a letter on somebody's behalf. There were few people in their small port town who knew how to write, so Ho was prized as a ghostwriter—although that wasn't originally his profession. There were many such port towns in the land they lived in, which was a large island surrounded by several smaller islands.

Shogetsu got Ho's bed ready for him. But before Ho retired for the night, he took his tools out of the pouch and checked them, just as he always did.

Cards with illegible, messy writing on them, cards with nothing on them, red ink, cinnabar, beehive wax, a needle... He briefly laid the items out on his table to inspect them, then carefully put them all back inside his pouch. Beside the table also sat a glaive.

Ho was a shaman, and these were all tools used in shamanism. However, he rarely put those skills to use. When the previous dynasty collapsed, Ho left that

life behind and fled the country. It was very difficult for him, especially considering he had a young apprentice in the previous dynasty's imperial family. Ho had even planned on adopting that young man.

"Prof, I'm done," said Shogetsu, pointing at the bed he'd prepared for him.

Ho placed his hands on the table and slowly got up with a groan. His knees creaked and ached. Shogetsu lent him a hand and helped the man get to his feet. Ho gazed at his face, which was now close to his. Shogetsu had a pale face and glossy black hair, and his sharp, upturned eyes were piercing but shiny. His fine features gave him a bit of an androgynous look.

*He doesn't look like him...*

Shogetsu didn't resemble the apprentice that Ho had previously intended to adopt in the slightest. That apprentice from years ago had silver hair—as radiant as moonlight—and possessed the kind of brilliant beauty that seemed to dispel the darkness that the night brought with it. Even so, Ho had given this young man—the one he found collapsed on the street, saying he didn't even know his own name—part of the name his once-apprentice used to have. It was probably because he was around the same age as his apprentice was—and they were about the same height too.

*Hyogetsu.*

Whenever that name sprung to mind, bitter regret and sadness spread through Ho's chest. Hyogetsu was a descendant of the emperor and had been executed. Ho, on the other hand, fled the imperial capital without even seeing his apprentice's dead body, snuck onto an anchored boat, and escaped the country. At that time, an arrest order had been issued for shamans that the previous dynasty's imperial family trusted. Many of those shamans were executed.

Ho was scared to die. He was acquainted with ghosts, so he knew that death was familiar and not to be feared—but when the possibility of being killed himself arose, he bolted—effectively leaving Hyogetsu to die.

He laid down on his bed and let out a deep breath. Even since returning to the land of Sho, he hopped from port town to port town, never once heading for the imperial capital. He didn't plan on setting foot there ever again. He wouldn't

allow himself to bow down in front of the Ran family's family shrine for Hyogetsu's sake—it wouldn't be right.

"Prof," Shogetsu called out to him, standing by Ho's side.

The strange thing about the young man was his voice. It wasn't indistinctly low-or high-pitched, but it had a ring to it that captivated anyone who heard it.

"What is it?"

"There's something I want to ask you."

It may have had something to do with where he'd been living before, but Shogetsu seemed to find everything around him unusual. He always had a question regarding just about anything. Expecting him to pose one of these questions again, Ho nodded and urged him to continue.

"Go ahead," he said.

"I want to go to the imperial capital. How can I go about doing that?" Shogetsu asked.

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Morning came at last, but Jusetsu still couldn't get up from her bed. She didn't have the strength. She had to muster up a lot of willpower just to move one of her fingertips.

Jiujiu was extremely worried. "Come on, get up," she told Jusetsu, but the young woman was so concerned that she sent a messenger to the medicinal department. Then, she brought Jusetsu some ginger and pine nut gruel along with some soy milk. Jusetsu had no appetite, but since Jiujiu and Kogyo were watching her so anxiously, she forced herself to pick up the spoon.

"If you don't feel like eating anything, drink the soy milk first. I put some honey in it to make it sweeter," Jiujiu explained.

The soy milk was sweet to the taste and seemed to soak right into her throat. Once Jusetsu slurped it down, she could eat the gruel as well. Food was helping her gain a bit of her strength back.

Now that Jusetsu had more color in her face, Jiujiu and Kogyo felt a bit less worried and put down their trays. Onkei then arrived to take their place keeping

watch over her. Since she was so worried about Jusetsu, Jiujiu had pestered him to go to the medicinal department as a messenger.

"The color's come back to your face," he said. Onkei had some medicine he concocted in the kitchen on a tray for her.

Jusetsu took one glance at it. "Oh. I'm sorry that you had to go out as a messenger for no reason." She was trying to get him to go away.

"I expect your body is in a weak state, so I believe it would be for the best if you were to take this," he said.

"Hmph..."

The medicine seemed to be made from an infusion of carrots and foxglove and astragalus roots. It was supposed to help her recover her physical strength. Onkei was right—she should have taken it—but medicines that were effective also tended to taste bitter.

Onkei silently followed her about, so she had no choice but to take the medicine from him. It was cold, but the smell coming off it was definitely bitter. Naturally, Jusetsu furrowed her brow, but she couldn't say that she didn't want to drink it because of the taste. She determinedly held her breath and chugged all the medicine down in one go.

It was *definitely* bitter. Unable to bear the gross taste that it left on her tongue, she scowled.

"Should I bring you some hot water?" Onkei asked.

Jusetsu groaned in response.

Onkei slipped away to the kitchen and brought her some. "There's honey dissolved in it," he said.

The warm water that filled her mouth had a tinge of sweetness to it. The soy milk she just drank was the same. Jusetsu figured it must have been her servant, Keishi, who told him to add honey. That woman had been there for a long, long time. When Reijo was still alive, she would always fetch Jusetsu some hot honey water after making her take her medicine. Keishi was a sullen and unfriendly old woman, but she was brisk in her movements and surprisingly

thoughtful in her actions.

*“Be sure to never take in a lady-in-waiting. One servant is enough.”*

Jusetsu recalled what Reijo used to tell her. Her mentor’s instructions constantly played in her mind. Along with that line, she also repeatedly warned her that having any eunuchs would be *completely* out of the question. Her reasoning was that they were inclined to form cliques.

The Raven Consort was not to have people gathered around her. They’d become groups and cliques and then grow bigger and bigger. Then, they’d end up as the Winter Sovereign’s elite troops.

To avoid that from happening, Jusetsu was to live a solitary life—and yet Jusetsu had already gone against Reijo’s teachings.

Jusetsu put the bowl back on the tray, but Onkei showed no intention of going away. He simply continued standing there. Finding this curious, Jusetsu looked up at him. He looked like he wanted to say something.

“What’s the problem?” she asked.

“You may think I that I am overstepping the mark, but...would you mind listening to what I have to say?”

“I don’t mind. Go ahead.”

Onkei thanked her, placed the tray on a small table nearby, then spoke. “It’s to do with Ishiha.”

Jusetsu cast her eyes toward the floor upon hearing his name.

“Do you regret helping him, niangniang?”

“If I hadn’t gotten involved, Ishiha wouldn’t have been ousted by his shifu,” Jusetsu said. “He likely would have been promoted up the ranks, as is typical. He’s a clever boy, after all.”

“Actually, coming from a regional minority tribe, he would have remained a rankless eunuch for the rest of his life unless someone specifically singled him out. The thrashings would have continued as well,” replied Onkei.

*That may be true, Jusetsu thought. But even so... The fact that she had stuck*

her nose where it didn't belong still remained—and the truth was that his life's path had unfortunately been altered because of it. The thought of getting involved with someone and changing the course of their life scared Jusetsu—regardless of whether that person was Jiujiu, Kogyo, or whoever else.

"Ishiha's life has changed because I got involved. Whether or not it was for his own sake, it's Ishiha himself who must take that new path now. I shouldn't have done anything."

Eisei and Koshun were right. Jusetsu had irresponsibly meddled with something that had nothing to do with her. Ishiha had been thrust down a new path with no signposts.

There were a few moments of silence, but Onkei broke it.

"I used to be an acrobat in a Songbird Troupe..."

"You told me that before," said Jusetsu, remembering how he mentioned it previously.

"One year, we were taken into the service of a certain judge," he began. "We were called upon whenever he was holding a banquet, for example. Some members of our troupe played music, while others specialized in magic tricks. There were many acrobats like me, too. And...one night, the judge invited his friends for a banquet—although I don't recall now what they were celebrating. The judge and his guests drank a great deal of alcohol. After being summoned, we returned to our rooms, but one of the guests asked us to send a member of our troupe to his sleeping quarters. The person he'd requested was a young girl who played the pipa, a type of lute. She was only thirteen."

Onkei briefly went quiet. Jusetsu didn't know why he'd started telling her this story, but she listened to it with bated breath.

"We didn't do that kind of business, so we declined his offer. But then..."

He seemed hesitant to continue, but after pulling himself together, Onkei carried on telling the tale once more.

"The guest dragged the young pipa player into his sleeping quarters by force. She was a kindhearted but meek girl, so she wasn't even able to raise her voice when he threatened her. Later on, she was nowhere to be found, so I went

searching for her. When I eventually found her, she was by the well in the backyard. She'd been washing her face and rinsing her mouth out. Her quiet cries were hidden by the sound of the water. Even now, I feel like I can still hear her sniveling away... After that, I headed for the guest's room—he was sleeping and snoring loudly—and beat him up. By the time the judge's lackey tore me away from him and restrained me, the man was covered in blood. My intention was to kill him, but I didn't succeed. And that's why I'm living the life I do now."

Onkei showed no expression on his face as he calmly told his story, but his voice became colder and colder as he went on.

"The judge kept the issue under wraps and intended on settling things privately. The guest who I'd left drenched in blood said, 'Make him a furen.'"

"Furen" was another name for eunuch, meaning "rotten person." Needless to say, it was a derogatory term.

"I was taken to the Pecking Chamber. That's where they turn you into a eunuch. The guest watched and laughed as they...‘cut it off.’"

Jusetsu was chilled to the core. She couldn't even speak properly—she only just about managed to whisper, "How cruel."

Onkei looked at her. "Not a single person among the judge and his cronies ever said that. Not when his lackey pinned me down. Not when his guest was beating me to a pulp for as long as he wanted. Not when the people around him found out what the guest did. Not when I was taken to the Pecking Chamber. Never. Nobody tried to stop it either. After all, I was a member of a Songbird Troupe—we were lowly people."

There were two types of citizens—good, law-abiding citizens, and plebeians. Slaves, prostitutes, performers, and other people of inferior status were all considered plebeians, and they were not permitted to marry any "good" citizens.

"Niangniang, there aren't many people who would speak up when something is cruel—and even fewer who would intervene when seeing a eunuch being flogged. You don't realize that. If only a single person had spoken up and said the way I was treated was 'cruel,' it could have saved my soul—even if it didn't save the day entirely."

Onkei's voice oozed with pain. It was as if fresh blood was pouring out from his wounds from that time that had still not healed over.

"Do you know how difficult it is for people like us to meet someone like you? Do you know much hope it gives us to know that there is someone out there who's willing to extend a hand to the weak? Please do not shoulder the blame for anything."

Onkei fell to his knees before her, touching his forehead to the ground as a sign of admiration.

"As a eunuch, I thank you. Thank you for helping Ishiha."

Jusetsu couldn't find the right words to say to Onkei as the man prostrated himself before her. She got down from her bed, knelt down on the floor, and placed a hand on Onkei's back.

"Onkei..."

Onkei was crying without making a single sound. His shoulders shook uncontrollably. Jusetsu simply stroked his back.

"I do apologize... I've not only corrupted your ears with my story, but now you're getting your hands dirty too."

After a short while, Onkei looked up once more. He had his usual expression on his face again.

"You haven't," Jusetsu told him, although it took all she had to say those words.

She used the hand she'd been using to stroke Onkei's back to help him to his feet. There wasn't even a single tear left behind on Onkei's face, but his eyes were moist, as if they were covered with a film of water.

"Can I ask you something?" Jusetsu said.

"What might that be?"

Jusetsu moved her face close to Onkei's ear and whispered into it. "Can I know the names of the 'judge' and the 'guest' you mentioned?" Her voice sounded so biting that it even surprised Jusetsu herself.

Onkei went silent for a moment, then softened his gaze. “It doesn’t matter anymore, niangniang. Attendant Ei asked me the same thing when I told him the story some time ago.”

In other words, Eisei had already sorted them out in some way.

“Oh,” said Jusetsu, her eyes opening wide. “I see. Eisei did, did he?”

“Niangniang, I highly recommend that you take Ishiha on as your eunuch. I’m sure he will be of great use to you. I might be your bodyguard, but since I work under Attendant Ei, there may be times in which I am unable to assist you. I think it would be good if you would train up a eunuch like him.”

“Raising a eunuch is most certainly beyond my capabilities,” she said.

“All you have to do is order him to run errands for you. He’ll learn that way. You should teach him how to read and write as well, though.”

“How to read and write? Reijo taught me that...” Jusetsu reminisced fondly.

“Once he’s reached his full potential as a eunuch, he could even go on to another post. It’s difficult to find somebody who will train a eunuch to such a level once they’ve been abandoned by their shifu like he has. That’s why...”

“That’s why I should do it?”

Onkei nodded. “Correct. You’re concerned about your own responsibility, but you insist you cannot keep him in the Yamei Palace forever. If that’s the case, this course of action seems the most apt, wouldn’t you say?”

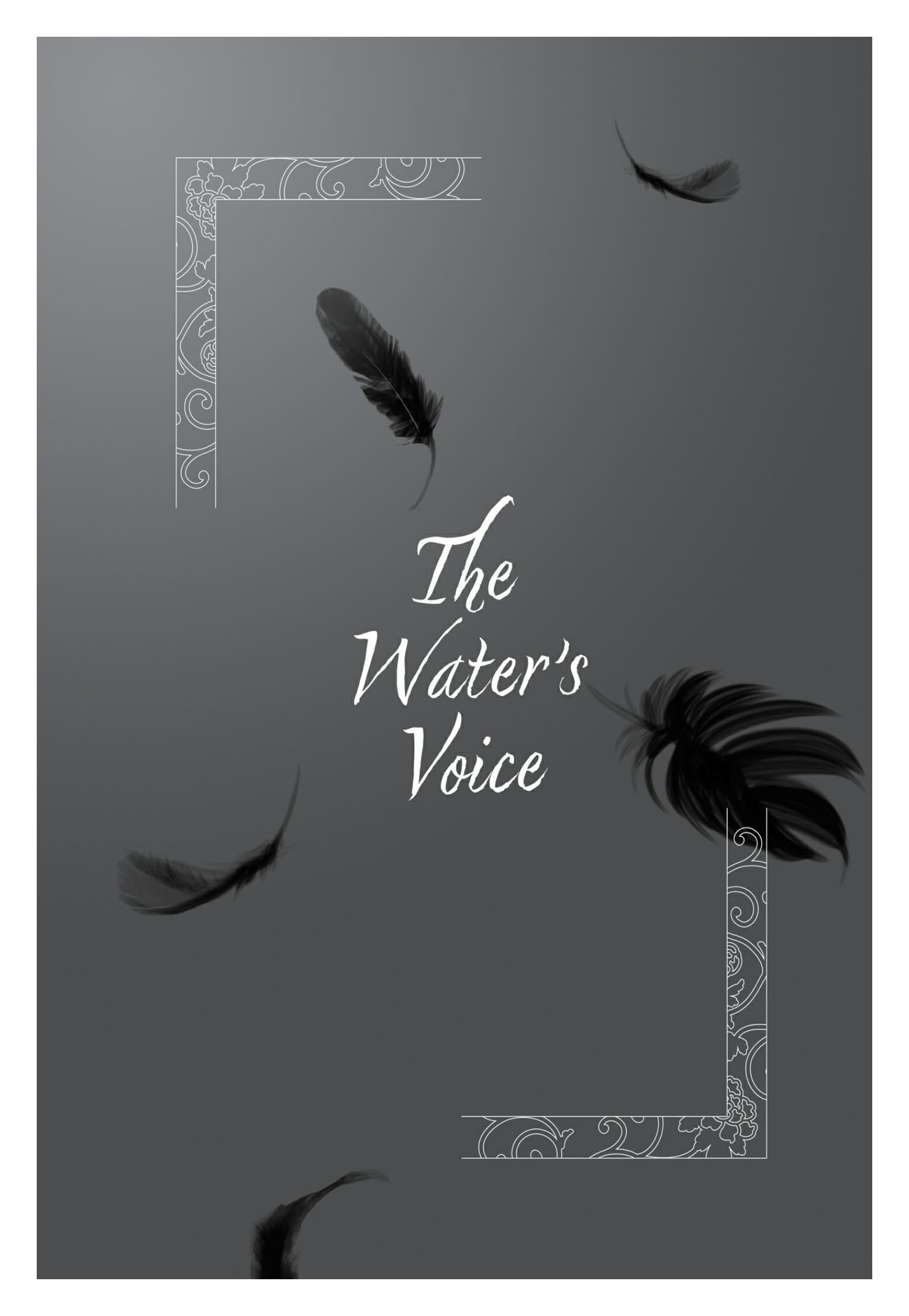
“I understand,” replied Jusetsu. “You’re a clever one, aren’t you?”

“It’s an honor to receive such praise from you, niangniang.”

On one hand, this plan seemed fine—but part of her felt that even doing that much was a bad idea. Even so, Jusetsu only gave her hesitation a moment’s thought before agreeing to Onkei’s proposal. She had probably been looking for a reason to keep Ishiha in the palace all along.

Jusetsu didn’t know whether or not this was the right choice...and it most likely wasn’t.





# *The Water's Voice*

WHEN KOSHUN got down from his litter, he walked through his kneeling subordinates and came to a stop in front of an old man—who was also on his knees, as expected.

“Are you well, Setsu Gyoei?” Koshun asked, encouraging the man to get to his feet.

“I can more or less move after taking my bitter medicine every morning and every evening. I think I shall have to consider retiring in the not-too-distant future.” His response was so weaselly that it was uncertain how he really felt.

To Koshun, the man looked plenty well enough, considering his age.

“I expect we’ll see a sudden rush of hot weather soon. That will be hard on an old geezer like me,” Gyoei continued.

“I can imagine you still being here in a hundred years, saying the exact same thing.”

“Don’t be so silly,” the man said with a laugh. The way he laughed was foguish and strained. It sounded like he was putting it on. “Now, what might you need from this old coot today?”

Koshun was guided to the Winter Ministry building in the center of the Seiu Shrine and sat down opposite Gyoei in one of its rooms. The shrine and its buildings looked as worn-out as ever. Perhaps the cleanliness made the peeling columns and old, faded tables stand out even more.

“There’s nothing urgent I need from you,” Koshun said.

“And yet you’ve made the effort to come and see this wrinkled and bearded old face of mine nonetheless? What an honor.”

The old man had a white beard, and his face appeared to be saying, “*You must be bored.*”

That, however, wasn’t the case.

“I came to hear about the Raven Consort.”

Gyoei raised his white, elongated eyebrows. The hawklike eyes that had been hidden underneath them opened wide. The man wore a deep gray robe, and a

dark ash-colored headdress called a futou. His garb was similar to that of the eunuchs, but this man was not one. Gray robes were the emblem of Uren Niangniang's manservants. On top of that, the Winter Minister was one of the few people who knew who the Raven Consort truly was.

"You said that when you came here last time. Now, I don't know the Raven Consort any better than the Raven Consort knows herself, but..." Gyoei said, being evasive.

"It's not the 'Raven Consort' I want to hear about, as such. It's Jusetsu, or even Reijo."

Gyoei went quiet and stared at Koshun from behind his eyebrows. "Why might that be?" he asked.

"Because I'm curious," replied Koshun.

"I don't think that's very wise of you." Gyoei made a sour face. "I'm surprised to hear you say that now, after finding out her circumstances. I advise that you and the Raven Consort have nothing to do with each other, Your Majesty."

"Even though it's *my* fault that she's locked up in there?"

"It's not *your* fault, Your Majesty. If it's anyone's 'fault,' then it's that of the first emperor of the Ran dynasty, Ran Yu."

It was Ran Yu who turned the position of the Winter Sovereign into the Raven Consort and shut the woman of the time away in the inner palace.

"For as long as I am in this position, I cannot absolve myself of blame. It is my duty to learn more about the Raven Consort. I am obligated to find out what kind of life the Raven Consorts have lived and what kind of life awaits the young woman of today. I must see it with my own eyes."

Gyoei heaved a sigh of despair. "You take things too seriously, Your Majesty. You're awfully bold as well. Perhaps I should say generous—no, that's not the word..." he said. The man sounded completely stumped.

Gyoei's eyes roamed about the room incessantly. He seemed to be looking for excuses to help him get away with what he said.

"Gyoei," Koshun said. "No crafty wisecracks. You can't wrangle your way out

of this one.” Koshun hardly ever raised his voice, but there was a hint of frosty harshness in his otherwise quiet tone.

Gyoei opened his eyes wide and awkwardly turned his face away. For Koshun, it was slightly satisfying to see the sly old man’s mask slip.

“You told me before that Reijo greeted you when the post changed hands. Did you meet her in person?” the emperor asked.

Gyoei reluctantly began to speak. “I...never saw her after she became the Raven Consort. The change in posts I was talking about was the one that occurs when the Raven Consort dies. As for that greeting I mentioned...”

Gyoei abruptly cut himself off and stared at the tea that was sitting on the table. He blinked a few times.

“The previous Raven Consort appeared before me after she passed away.”

“As a ghost?”

“Yes,” Gyoei replied, sounding bored. “She came to request that I take care of Jusetsu.”

“Reijo must have trusted you enough to do that, then,” remarked Koshun. “You didn’t meet her after she became the Raven Consort, but that must mean that you met her *before* then, doesn’t it?”

Gyoei frowned. The old man looked a little uncomfortable.

“Your assumption is correct, but I must admit that I find it somewhat difficult to talk to you when you’re interrogating me like that. You’re manipulating every single word I say to trip me up.”

“If I *didn’t* interrogate you about every little thing, then you wouldn’t tell me anything.”

Gyoei clammed up in response. The Winter Minister worked for Uren Niangniang and obeyed the Raven Consort’s orders. Gyoei had revealed as much before. He didn’t have to obey the orders of the emperor.

Koshun hadn’t brought Eisei with him today, but if he had been there, Gyoei’s attitude would’ve angered him. That was why Koshun chose to leave him behind.

The old man let out a sigh. "...Her birth family was my head family. Her father was the chief of our regional military organization, and my father was one of his family's soldiers. The chief was a rather down-to-earth fellow and was very kind to me. He said I showed promise, and he hired an academic tutor for me. That tutor taught both Reijo and I, together. Like her father, Reijo was intelligent and treated people equally..." Gyoei coughed. "Well, that's enough of that. Anyway, Reijo and I were vaguely acquainted with one another."

That seemed to be a vast understatement. Gyoei had more likely been a childhood friend of Reijo's—somebody that she could trust.

"When was Reijo chosen as the successor to the Raven Consort?"

"She must have been...perhaps about the age of fourteen or fifteen."

"That's later than I expected. I heard that Jusetsu was selected when she was six."

"It all depends on the wishes of Uren Niangniang. It's impossible for folk like us to fathom."

*I think you mean it all comes down to a whim,* Koshun suddenly found himself thinking.

"I assume she was then taken to the inner palace?"

"Indeed. When the previous Raven Consort passed away and Reijo took on the role, she was twenty-three years of age."

"I believe Jusetsu was fourteen when she assumed the post... It took eight years for both of them, didn't it? Could it be that the next Raven Consort is chosen eight years before the present one is to die?"

Gyoei didn't answer this question directly. He simply said, "Eight is the sacred number."

"Reijo knew how long she had left—and so she used that time to teach Jusetsu as much as she could, didn't she?"

Gyoei silently sipped his tea.

Koshun stared intently at his face. "When did you join the Winter Ministry?" he asked.

“Oh, so you’d like to know about this senile old fool as well, would you?”

“I was wondering whether you became the Winter Minister to help Reijo.”

“What could the Winter Minister possibly do to help her?” Gyoei said in a slightly angry voice before embarrassedly looking away. “I... I entered the Winter Ministry when I was twenty-four. At the time, if you weren’t from a prominent family, you couldn’t be appointed as an official—even if you passed the imperial examination and excelled at the highest level. The Winter Ministry, however, was the only department that had opened its doors to commoners. I believe that was the only reason why I was assigned to this post.”

“I see,” Koshun responded simply.

“It was slightly livelier when I first arrived here, though,” Gyoei said with a chuckle as he took another sip. “There was easily double the number of subordinates as there are now—although the fact that they were a jumble of rejects who didn’t make it as officials remained the same. Still, they’re all outstanding in their own right. I trained them myself, after all.”

“You just train them and then let them go, don’t you?”

Most of the subordinates in the Winter Ministry were appointed as officials after a few years. That was the route that was laid out for them. It was the route that Gyoei, too, had taken during his long life. He may have had a cushy job, but even the grand chancellor and the high official—Koshun’s right-hand men—would have acknowledged Gyoei’s superiority.

“Yes, although there are some outliers who stay behind. I’m planning on asking one of them to take care of my affairs for me when I’m gone.”

He spoke as if his retirement was imminent. Perhaps he really was intending on giving up his post soon.

“If you would like to retire, I will permit you to, but...before then, would you allow me to introduce Jusetsu to you?”

“The Raven Consort?” Gyoei said, skeptically raising one eyebrow. “What would she gain from being made to associate with an old fool like me?”

“Tell her about Reijo. She’d be thrilled to hear more about her.”

*Or at least, she likely would be. Probably.*

Gyoei stared at Koshun intently for a few moments. He didn't seem to be shocked, nor did he seem to be mocking him this time. He was simply staring intently at the young emperor, his eyes void of emotion. There didn't seem to be anything inside his gaze.

"All right. If you're certain that I'm fit for such an honor, then it would be my privilege to accept."

After making this declaration, Gyoei got up from his seat and bowed. As he did, it was impossible to see the look on his face.

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When Jusetsu was first brought to the Yamei Palace, she was a scrappy little girl covered in dust and grime. Reijo ordered her servant, Keishi, to bathe her in the washroom at the back of the palace building and dress her in a clean silk robe. Once she'd been cleaned up, the girl's striking silver hair was revealed—proof that she was a descendant of the previous dynasty's imperial family. The sight of it didn't surprise Reijo. She already knew everything.

Reijo was worried, however. Jusetsu had her hair dyed black, but she didn't truly comprehend Reijo's distress. She only understood it after Reijo had explained things to her.

Jusetsu was somehow related to the previous dynasty's imperial family. Every single one of them had been executed—including her own mother. Reijo explained how Jusetsu would now be required to live not only in the imperial capital, but under the emperor's thumb in the inner palace. She explained it was the decision of Ran Yu, an ancestor of Jusetsu's, to shut the Raven Consort away in the inner palace.

Jusetsu might have understood, but she didn't think much about any of it at the time. After losing her mother, the young girl's heart had been left empty. She didn't know how to feel emotions anymore, and she hadn't felt anything for some years at that point.

Jusetsu always seemed vacant and barely reacted to anything. Reijo patiently taught her how to write, how to read books, instructed her on how to speak

correctly, and taught her how to prepare meals. However, each new piece of knowledge brought suffering to the child. She found out how unjust her mother's execution was, and how ironic it was that she was now imprisoned in the Yamei Palace. She resented and lamented over what had happened, and the young girl just felt hollow. Once her emotions had run their course, she'd start over again, beginning with anger. She grew tired and weary of going around in circles again and again and never getting any answers. Jusetsu took out all her negative emotions on Reijo, as she had no other outlet for them.

As patient as Reijo was, she was also strict. She may have worried and feared for Jusetsu, but she didn't let any pity she felt make her go easy on the girl.

"It's you that has to keep living this life," Reijo had said, "not me."

Pity wasn't going to help anyone. She told Jusetsu to let her knowledge grow and make use of her intelligence. She insisted the girl had no choice but to see things through—nobody else could take her place.

Jusetsu still felt like she could hear Reijo's voice scolding her.

"Raven Consort."

Ishiha had been copying some lines and offered his piece of hemp paper to Jusetsu. Sitting opposite him, she took it out of his hands and reviewed it.

"Very good. You're a quick learner," she said with a nod.

Ishiha smiled, looking pleased with her feedback.

The two were in Jusetsu's room in the Yamei Palace, and she was teaching him the written word. Ishiha didn't have much trouble speaking, but he had virtually no idea how to read or write. Many eunuchs were illiterate—even those who *weren't* from minority tribes in the countryside.

"You should be able to read and write," Jusetsu had said to him, and she then took him into her care—to teach him, just as Reijo once taught her.

Jiujiu felt it'd be a waste to use fresh paper for writing practice, so she went to the Eno Palace and the Hien Palace to get some scrap paper for them to use. Kajo and Koei were both happy to give her some. Once Ishiha had filled a sheet of paper with his writing so it was completely black, the sheet would end up as

a toy for Shinshin. The bird was playing with paper at Jusetsu's feet, tearing it to shreds with his beak.

"Let's take a short break. There should be some figs ready to eat," she said.

"It's all right, I don't..." Ishiha said, deferentially reticent to accept Jusetsu's kindness.

Jusetsu left him there and turned toward the kitchen.

"Are you taking a break, niangniang?" Jiujiu said, looking at Jusetsu as she entered the kitchen.

Jiujiu was boiling tea in a pot. Next to her, Kogyo had tea ware ready. She flashed a smile at Jusetsu and used gestures to point at the space behind her. Kogyo communicated like that because her tongue had been cut off some time ago—she wasn't able to speak.

Jusetsu turned around and saw Keishi about to enter the kitchen with a bamboo basket in her hands. The woman had a large build, sturdy arms and legs, and was unusually strong for an elderly lady. Her lips were drawn tight and formed a straight line, but it wasn't because she was ill-tempered or angry—which Jusetsu found out about two weeks after arriving at the Yamei Palace. Until that point, the young woman had been a little afraid of her.

Keishi came up beside Jusetsu and silently but unhesitatingly held out the basket to her. Inside it, there were some red, ripe figs.

"Thank you," said Jusetsu, picking up three figs. "You may all eat the rest."

Jusetsu then went back into the other room. The figs that she was holding gave off a pleasant sugary scent—a particular aroma that only ripe fruit had.

As embarrassed as he felt to impose on the consort's generosity, Ishiha's eyes sparkled at the sight of the fruit Jusetsu offered to him. He was a growing boy, so he could demolish two whole pieces in the blink of an eye. Shinshin wanted some too and started acting unruly—Jusetsu gave some of her fruit to Shinshin as well to calm the bird.

That was when Ishiha explained to her that it was the first time he'd ever eaten figs. "They didn't grow any fruit in my village." Ishiha was from a fishing

village on the coast.

“When we went to the fisherman’s boss, he’d sometimes give us koji oranges—only occasionally, though. They were sour, but so delicious. My brothers and sisters and I all ate them together,” Ishiha said with a laugh.

He was still at the age where he must have missed his parents, but he never showed it. He must have been intentionally hiding it from other people.

“You said you were from Roko in Gei Province, didn’t you? What kind of fish can you catch in that area?”

Whenever Ishiha was asked questions about his hometown, he always gestured happily as he spoke.

“You can catch flatfish and mackerel. They let me ride on a boat and help with the fishing sometimes. Did you know that when you fish, you use the stars as your guide? The Big Dipper in the south is your signpost when you’re going home from fishing—and when the gold arrowhead constellation shows up in the sky, you know it’s fishing season. And when the flower comb constellation turns hazy, it’s a sign that the catch will be poor because of the stormy seas. At times like that, the old people in the village just told us stories about olden days—like the story of the big turtle monster that came out of the sea, or the story of the diver who drowned when his hand got caught in a large abalone at the bottom of the sea...”

It was Jusetsu’s first time hearing many of these legends from that faraway village, so she was fascinated. However, some of these folktales were shared where she came from too.

“They also said that long, long ago, a god who sinned was chopped up and thrown in the water. Its body ended up becoming the islands that we now live on,” said Ishiha.

“The same story gets told in this area,” Jusetsu said. That was a myth that explained how the land had come to be. “I heard that Songbird Troupes used to go around telling stories like that. That’s why people all over the land pass on the same one.”

“Is that right?” responded Ishiha.

"What are you talking about?" asked Jiujiu. She came into the room, bringing over a basin for them to wash up. Their hands and mouths were sticky from the figs.

"A god who sinned was..." Ishiha started to repeat, but Jiujiu nodded and cut him off before he could finish his sentence.

"Oh, that one! The torso of the god who was chopped up formed this island, the head became Je Island, and their arms turned into Pafan Island...or so they say. Soil came, plants grew, and people were born from their mutilated corpse... A bit creepy if you think about it, isn't it?" Jiujiu said, not mincing her words. "After my grandma told me that story, I was so afraid to walk on the ground for a little while. I kept thinking about how it was made of a dead body!"

Ishiha blinked with surprise. It looked like the boy had never thought of it that way.

"Lots of different things wash up on the seashore. In my village, there was an inlet where people who fell into the sea would drift back onto land. Sometimes, I saw people floating there—so I think that's what the ocean is all about. I even saw a jellyfishy thing glowing in it. An elderly person from the village told me it was the soul of someone who'd died in the sea."

"Oh..." Jusetsu imagined a soul drifting around in the sea at night, glowing dimly. It was a beautiful, yet sad, scene. "How interesting," she said.

Ishiha looked pleased with himself and blushed. Then, he went on to tell a tale he once heard from an elderly resident of his village. Jusetsu listened carefully as she washed her hands in the basin. Before long, Kogyo brought over some tea and joined them. The afternoon sun pouring in through the lattice windows was bright and the Yamei Palace was imbued with a sense of calm. The sound of Jiujiu and Ishiha's laughter, as the warmth of Kogyo's smile, and the chatter they shared made Jusetsu feel like it was strange for she herself to be there.

At the same time, it was always at times like this that she grew anxious.

She felt a sensation like a cold hand suddenly grabbing hold of her ankle. "Halt," she could imagine Reijo warning her.

Jusetsu, however, was helpless to do anything. She felt like she was at a total loss.

That night, a visitor arrived.

It was very late, right in the middle of the night. Even Jusetsu, who retired much later than most, had already fallen asleep. However, she woke up to the sound of a woman's low and persistent voice coming from the other side of the doors.

"He...llo... Raven Consort..."

It was an old woman's voice, sounding so indistinct that it seemed as if it was about to disappear at any moment. Lying on her mattress, Jusetsu moved her head and looked around for her bird, Shinshin, who always raised the alarm when a visitor arrived. Shinshin was at the foot of the bed and had its head raised. It looked at the door, visibly irritated. Within moments, however, it appeared to lose interest, put its head back, and closed its eyes. It seemed like Shinshin's beauty sleep took precedence over this woman.

Jusetsu sat up and got out of bed. She put the jacket of her black shanqun on over the top of her nightwear and stepped through the curtains surrounding her mattress. She didn't know exactly what time it was, but going by the way she felt, it must have been around the fourth watch of the night—sometime between 1 a.m. and 3 a.m. Heat had built up in the area during the daytime, but it was naturally still cold late at night. As she made her way to the door, she formed a peony on top of her hand and tossed it into a lotus flower-shaped lantern to light it.

"Who's there?" Jusetsu asked the person outside.

"My name is An. There's something I would like to request of you. Would you mind listening to what I have to say?"

The visitor's voice was weak and showed her age, but that didn't make her tone of voice any less elegant. *She must be a consort's lady-in-waiting*, thought Jusetsu as she opened the door.

The person standing on the other side was indeed an elderly woman whose

hair was gray all over. She was dressed in an earth-colored court lady outfit. She'd just about managed to tie her clean gray hair into a small topknot. Her face was almost the same color as her robe, and she had deep wrinkles etched into her face and hands like cracks. The skin of her fingers was chapped, with prominent, deep, lacerated wounds. She was probably a court lady who worked as a scullery maid and spent her days doing kitchen work.

*I suppose I was wrong for expecting her to be a lady-in-waiting,* Jusetsu thought to herself as she let the old woman inside. Even so, the way she acted made it impossible to believe that she was a court lady of lower rank—everything from the way she bowed with her hands together to thank Jusetsu to the manner in which she walked and sat down in her seat seemed to hint of a higher status. *Maybe she started off as a lady-in-waiting but was demoted for some reason,* Jusetsu wondered.

Jusetsu seated herself opposite the elderly woman, An.

Then, An began to speak. “Please accept my sincere apologies for disturbing you so late at night, when you were getting some well-deserved rest.”

“It does not bother me. I do get visitors like you every now and then,” Jusetsu replied.

“There’s something I would very much like to ask for your assistance with. I’ve considered coming here for help on countless occasions, but was unable to do so... Tonight, though, I finally resolved to pay you a visit.”

The flame in the nearby floor lantern flickered slowly, creating a distorted shadow on Lady An’s face. The low light didn’t reach the corners of the room, so Jusetsu and her surroundings were enshrouded in a thick darkness.

“What would you ask of me?” Jusetsu asked directly.

An hung her head slightly, and the shadow on her face moved with her.

“It has to do with the consort I once worked for. I had the privilege of being the lady-in-waiting of Sai Enrin, the Magpie Consort from the time of the Flame Emperor.”

Just as Jusetsu had suspected, she had originally had a higher status.

"The Flame Emperor—the emperor before last—was around quite some time ago," remarked Jusetsu.

"Would you say so? To me, it doesn't seem that long at all. In fact, *yesterday* feels like it was longer ago. When you get older, time flies—the days and months flash by in the blink of an eye, whereas you can remember the distant past as clear as day. It feels like what happened to Enrin was just days ago."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, of course," replied An. However, her actions didn't make her look too eager to talk about it. She looked down, reluctant to speak, and stared intently at her hands sitting on top of her knees.

Then, at long last, she abruptly looked up. "I suppose you wouldn't know what the Flame Emperor's Magpie Consort was like or what kind of fate she met, being as young as you are. These days, I know very few people remember those times. After all, talking about her was frowned upon—in fact, those who even sympathized with her were found out and executed. As such, not many people discussed what had happened even after a new emperor came to power."

The shadow seeped into the fine wrinkles carved into An's face, making her look even older. The sense of melancholy made the darkness around her feel heavier and heavier.

"Would you mind if I told you her story? Once I'm no longer around, there will be no one else left who knows the truth about what happened to her. I'd like for you to know that. Then...I'd like you to save her soul. Please, find a way," An pleaded, and then went on to tell the tale of the former Magpie Consort.

When I began working for Enrin, I was twenty-two years old. Enrin had only just turned ten. Her father was the high official of the board of personnel and had raised her with the utmost care. She was the apple of his eye. I was a distant relative of theirs, so my lineage was closer to that of the main family in our clan than Enrin's. At that time, however, her father was the most successful of all our relatives since he had been promoted to high official. Naturally, the clan had high expectations for him, and they were particularly hopeful that

Enrin would enter the inner palace and end up as one of the emperor's concubines. She had to be highly educated and well-mannered in order to become a consort, and I was selected as the most appropriate member of our family to help her on her way.

By that point, I'd already been married once before and had returned to the family home after getting divorced. My day-to-day life was one of misery, but once I'd met Enrin, that changed completely.

Enrin was an absolutely charming young lady. Her smile was as beautiful as a garden rose and her voice was pure like crystal clear water. At that time, I swore that I would help make her the top consort in the land.

Enrin was a cheerful person without a care in the world. She enjoyed reading curious short stories and narrative poetry, but she seemed to have a distaste for the classic books that women and girls were supposed to read—like *Admonitions for Women* and *Rules for Women*. She preferred unusual tales and love stories to more difficult works, you see. That caused a bit of a problem, but I taught her the contents of those books in a simplified way, and she seemed to understand them.

A year went by—and then another—and Enrin's beauty began to shine like a polished jewel. Any gentleman would be captivated by her beauty—it would only take a single glance. Her skills on the qin—that seven-stringed instrument—were second to none, and she wrote and even composed poems. Her careless side—the way she didn't think things through at all—was the only flaw that the beautiful jewel of a girl had... But even so, I proudly believed that no other concubine in the inner palace could ever measure up to her.

However...two unexpected blunders occurred. The first one had to do with the person who Enrin was set to marry. Although he *did* want her to enter the inner palace in general, Enrin's father had no intention of sending his daughter to the Flame Emperor's inner palace, as he was the emperor at that time. He planned for her to go to the crown prince's administration. After all, the Flame Emperor was already in his senior years and had an empress and children, so the inner palace held no real significance for him. That being the case, few concubines were entering the inner palace at that time. Marrying Enrin off to the crown prince would have been the more reasonable thing to do.

Even so, the maternal relatives of both the empress and the princess consort put a halt to it. Both camps must have been worried that when the crown prince saw the good looks that a girl as highly reputed as Enrin possessed, he would become infatuated with her. This was also due to the fact that Enrin's father had a feud with the empress and the princess consort's maternal family. It would have been better if they could have undermined or gained favor with their relatives...but it seemed like their efforts failed, and in a complicated way.

As her father scrambled about making every effort to make things work out, somebody informed the Flame Emperor of Enrin's good reputation—likely someone close to the empress or the princess consort. The Flame Emperor then took an interest in her. The strange thing was that the Flame Emperor was not known as a ladies' man, but rather as a devoted husband—which makes you wonder why he even showed an interest in Enrin. Perhaps his mind had started playing tricks on him in his old age, or perhaps he wanted to be with someone young and beautiful one more time. But either way, it would seem that he was impressed by her—and as such, even Enrin's father had no choice but to send her to the Flame Emperor's inner palace. Whatever the case may have been, she got his attention, so at least there was that. Enrin's father seemed to have some qualms about the situation, but I thought it was wonderful. It seemed like a given that she would win the emperor's favor. Even if he did have an empress, Enrin would still be his highest-ranking concubine. We'd be living in splendor! I was elated and devoted myself to preparing for our entrance to the inner palace.

Enrin, on the other hand, didn't seem enthusiastic about it at all. That was where the second blunder came into play.

She must have understood that she was going to become a part of the inner palace from a young age—but, naturally, she was under the assumption that she would be going there for the crown prince. It was understandable that she'd be upset at this reality. The thing was, even if she were to join the crown prince's inner palace, there was no guarantee that she'd win his favor. Well, that's not true—Enrin was the kind of beauty that men couldn't help but be attracted to... Still, she was going to be one of the emperor's concubines because *he* wanted her. There was a big difference here, as her battle was

already won. I used this reasoning to encourage her. I was tough with her at times too, and I told her she couldn't be so timid. She needed to take hold of the inner palace and support her father—and she had to become the emperor's top consort.

My words seemed to strike a chord with Enrin. She smiled at me with tears in her eyes and said, "You're right. I'll make sure to think of it that way."

The next day, however, a thief broke in. The mansion was full of gold, silver, and jewels in preparation for Enrin's entry to the inner palace, so I assume they had their eyes on those riches. There were people outside the mansion on watch, but he caught them off guard and snuck in anyway.

The thief acted alone. Strangely, he didn't head to the vault, but instead forced his way into Enrin's room. My room was next to hers, but embarrassingly, I was fast asleep and didn't notice what was happening in time. The thief attempted to abduct her. There was a dazzling collection of treasures in the vault, but perhaps the tight security intimidated him, or whatever else the case may have been... I have no clue how he knew where Enrin's room was, but the thief was trying to take her away. I heard the fighting and woke up.

The thief seemed to be whispering to her in a pleading tone, as if he was trying to calm her down. Enrin's voice, on the other hand, was muffled and hard to understand, but it did sound like she was protesting again and again. As soon as I got up, I heard that exchange for a brief moment, dazed, then immediately jumped out of bed. I grabbed the knife underneath my pillow and tumbled into Enrin's room, which was connected to mine. My legs and feet were shaking so much that I couldn't stand, but I desperately cried out, "There's a thief! A ruffian!"

Members of the household came bounding in from all directions, and the thief was soon caught. When I saw his face in the light, I was shocked. It was somebody I knew. No, he was known not only to me—but it was someone that Enrin knew well too. It was a young man from the bookshop in the marketplace who had visited the mansion for years. He would always bring over the poetry and short story books Enrin enjoyed so much in secret. It wasn't a big bookshop, but it was a respectable one. Since the shop stocked classic books, the boy was by no means lacking in knowledge, and we all thought he was a

good person...

Since the culprit was no stranger, Enrin tearfully begged her father to let him off the hook. She was so kind. That didn't change the fact, however, that he had attempted to kidnap his daughter, who was on the cusp of entering the inner palace. It was the equivalent of opposing the emperor. If anyone were to have shown him mercy, they would have been suspected of treason. However, we couldn't risk a rumor that Enrin had almost been kidnapped getting out, so her father chopped the young man's head off in the garden. His parents were informed that he had broken into the mansion, the store closed down, and they were driven out of the imperial capital.

A person who Enrin had trusted and been close to for so many years had ended up being a thief and tried to kidnap her...and to make matters worse, he was beheaded for it. She was devastated. She would stare at the garden where he was decapitated, lost in thought... The soil had soaked up so much blood that her father had to have it replaced. Fortunately, news of this incident was never leaked to the emperor, and Enrin moved into the inner palace without issue.

The emperor bestowed the Jakuso Palace unto Enrin, and she was welcomed as his Magpie Consort. There may have been some stumbles along the way, but on the whole, Enrin had made a safe entrance to the inner palace.

If the emperor had doted on her as we expected he would, it would have been smooth sailing for us...but even two weeks after she came to the inner palace, the emperor still hadn't paid Enrin a visit. She waited and waited, but he was never to be found in the inner palace itself. We heard that the emperor was too busy laying the foundations for the new dynasty to spend any time in the inner palace, and that did actually appear to be the case. Officially, there had been a peaceful transfer of power from the previous dynasty, but that was only on paper. No, wait—that was out of line. Pretend you didn't hear that, if you would.

Still, not only was the emperor otherwise occupied, but his eunuchs appeared to be intentionally getting in the way. They came up with all kinds of excuses—telling him that the Magpie Consort wasn't feeling well that day or that it was her time of month, for example. It wasn't good, and I panicked. When it came

to internal affairs, a single comment from one of the emperor's eunuchs could have a phenomenal impact. I promptly sent a letter to Enrin's father and had him provide as much money and silks as we needed. I distributed them among the emperor's eunuchs, and they assured me that when their master would pay the Jakuso Palace a visit before long—as long as he was in a good mood. They meant they would put in a good word for us. I resented the fact that I had to bribe those silly eunuchs to do a favor for us, but sometimes you have to make sacrifices. I was doing it for Enrin.

While I was taking great pains to work something out for her, Enrin simply spent her time vacantly staring at the garden. I suggested she play her qin, but she didn't even want to touch it. It was so frustrating to me, as I had to swallow my pride and denigrate myself in front of those eunuchs...

Enrin had a little satin bag that she brought from home with her. She kept it safely in her breast pocket. I didn't know what it was inside. She would clutch it as she gazed out at the garden.

One day, I reached the end of my tether with her behavior and snapped at her. "He could visit you tonight, for all you know!" I said. "How can you be such a feckless coward? You're a consort!"

"I never wished to become a consort," she told me.

I was dumbfounded. I was the very definition of being stunned speechless.

"What are you talking about after all the effort we've put in to make this happen?" I repeatedly admonished her. I gently persuaded her it may have been the emperor's absence that was making her nervous. I had raised her since she was little, so I was very familiar with Enrin's temperament. "The eunuchs promised me," I told her. "His Majesty will be here before we know it."

"I wish he would never come," Enrin said, with a hopeless look on her face.

"What are you talking about?" I said. I felt the urge to lambast her again, but I suppressed it. But then...

"If you love His Majesty that much, why don't you become his consort instead?" she replied.

I was enraged. I raised my hand without realizing what I was doing. I was

about to slap her in the face but came to my senses just in time and didn't do it. Well, I didn't hit her *face*, but I still ended up hitting her. The satin bag that she'd been holding fell to the ground and opened up. Something spilled out—it resembled dirt. I realized it was indeed soil. I picked it up and brought it close to my face. It had a strong, metallic odor to it, and I could only assume it was the smell of blood.

I couldn't believe it.

I began asking Enrin where it had come from. She confessed it was from the garden at home. It was the dirt from the spot where that young man had been beheaded. Before her father had it replaced, Enrin secretly put some of it into a bag.

I couldn't work out why something like that would be so dear to her. Well, I *could* think of one reason, but it was hard to believe. Did Enrin really have feelings like that for him...?

I used both of my hands to scrape together the dirt on the floor. I ran into the garden, tossed it on the ground, and stomped on it. I trampled on it until the soil that was already in the garden and the dirt that was soaked with that young man's blood had mixed together. I ground it together with the soles of my shoes until they were one and the same. Enrin clung to my legs and pleaded with me to stop as tears poured down her face. She collapsed on top of the ground I'd trampled on and wailed.

I didn't recognize that young woman anymore.

I didn't know where the Enrin that I brought up had gone. This wasn't her. The man she fell in love with was not the emperor, or even a scholar-official—he was nothing more than a boy from a bookshop. There was no way that *my* Enrin would have broken down crying over somebody like that.

I felt as if I were enveloped in a pitch-dark haze, unable to think about anything. When I came around, I found myself sitting on an ottoman in a daze. At that moment, a eunuch arrived and announced that the emperor would be paying a visit that night. When I heard the notice, I finally pulled myself together again. His Majesty was coming. His Majesty was *finally* coming. Surely this was going to make everything all right. The events of earlier that day had to

have been a dream. The stress of the emperor not turning up had gotten to be too much. It had all been a daydream of mine.

But...where was Enrin?

I assumed she would be in her room at the back of the palace. I ran in there in high spirits to tell her the good news, but it was completely empty. Where could she have wandered at such an important time? She needed to take a bath and put on a striking, beautiful outfit. Perhaps red would be appropriate—or even a youthful pink. I would fix her updo, put in a jade hairpin, and give her some golden dangling ornaments to accessorize her ensemble.

As I pondered these options, I continued to look for Enrin. I realized there was a slight possibility that she was still crying in the garden. If she were, I'd have to give her a *really* strict scolding this time. No—perhaps soothing her would have been the right thing to do. I even considered using my own sob story to get my own way. But then, I remembered—it had all been a daydream anyway, so the garden was the last place I was going to find her.

She wasn't there. I was relieved. I *knew* I had dreamed it all. I could still see the traces of where I stomped on the ground, but I had asked a eunuch to cut the sorbaria shrub recently. That was probably where he had stepped. That's just how eunuchs were. If you instructed them to cut one type of flower, they would trample over the other flowers in front of them without a second thought. They could only do what they were commanded to do, after all. Sometimes, I wasn't even satisfied when they did do what I instructed. Stomping all over the ground like that... Well, I'd have to tell them to tidy it up again.

Still, I needed to find Enrin first, so I made a mental note to give them those orders later and proceeded to the far end of the garden. On that part of the grounds, there was a large and beautiful pond. The water's surface was always shining and still, like a mirror. I suddenly felt like I could hear Enrin's voice coming from that direction. The way it sounded reminded me of limpid water—clear and crystalline.

"Enrin," I called out to her as I arrived at the pond's edge. The surface of the water was glimmering invigoratingly, just as it always did. The willow trees

planted around the pond were reflected in the water. A slight breeze blew past me, causing their leaves to sway, and ripples appeared on the pond's surface. I felt like I could hear Enrin's voice again and looked around.

There were some lizard's tail plants growing at the water's edge. About half of their leaves had gone white—as if they'd been dusted with white powder—and their small flower buds drooped downward. Next to them sat a pair of brocade shoes. They were brightly colored and had a floral leaf pattern embroidered into them.

They were ones that Enrin liked to wear.

I ran over to them and looked over the water's surface. It was blissfully calm, with only the tiniest ripples appearing every now and then. I immediately went to turn back toward the palace building, but I hesitated.

Enrin was probably in there and I needed to pull her out quickly—but on the other hand, we couldn't afford for things to get worse. What if the emperor heard about this?

Still, there was no way I was going to dive in alone. I flung her shoes into the pond, went back to the palace building, and announced that Enrin had fallen into the water by mistake. I ordered the court ladies to start a fire and prepare lots of towels. I got the eunuchs to search the water. The pond was clear, so they found Enrin relatively quickly and managed to pull her out. However, her pulse had already stopped. No matter how long we waited, she never regained consciousness.

A consort had drowned herself prior to the emperor's visit. If such news came to light, disaster would follow. I skirted around the facts and said that Enrin had, by a perverse twist of fate, slipped and fallen in. Nobody had witnessed the incident, so they couldn't deny my account of the situation. It was decided that Enrin had passed away in an unforeseen accident. This didn't change the fact, however, that it had happened because of my incompetency. Enrin was a consort who was awaiting the emperor's nighttime company. The empress condemned the way she had been walking along the water's edge at all, calling it careless and shortsighted behavior that was unbecoming of a consort.

Naturally, the emperor was furious too. I was to be punished, along with the

eunuchs and court ladies who worked at the Jakuso palace. Even Enrin's father received some blame. If a consort wins the emperor's affection, the benefits of that extend to her relatives—but if she commits a blunder, then they are also embroiled in it. Her father was removed from his post as the high official of the board of personnel and was relegated to Gaku Province. The loss of his precious daughter, Enrin, must have depressed him greatly—he passed away just six months later in the area he had been sent to work.

I was sent to the cleansing quarters, where court ladies who committed crimes or fell ill wind up. The court ladies' grave, they call it. Since then, I've seen out my days washing dirty robes. My hands are constantly immersed in the water of a washbasin, and I don't even get a spare minute to wipe them dry. That's why I have these painful, gaping cracks in my hands. Why must I keep washing robes in cold water, day after day? If only Enrin were still alive, I wouldn't have had to suffer like this...

I can complain all I want, but what's done is done. Enrin isn't around anymore... When I'm watching the robes, I can hear her voice in between the splashing sounds. Her voice is as clear as the water I work with. I swear I'm not hearing things. I'm sure that her voice comes from that pond and reaches me through it. I can never pick up what she's saying, though. It almost sounds as if she's crying. I hear it all day, every day. I never go a day without it. She's calling out to me. Every time I submerge the robes, every time I scrub them clean, her voice rings out—beautifully and clearly.

I feel so sorry for Enrin. Her soul is still roaming around in that pond. Oh, it pains me to think of her suffering like that.

Dear Raven Consort, won't you please save her for me? Please send her soul across to paradise.

*Please.*

After An pleaded to Jusetsu for help, the old woman slowly disappeared like a cloud of smoke. Jusetsu let out a small sigh and got up from her seat.

It didn't seem like An had made it over to paradise.

*“I do get visitors like you every now and then,”* Jusetsu had said when An first arrived, and it was true. This wasn’t the first time she’d gotten a visitor like that — a ghost who came to see the Raven Consort. Some realized that they were dead, whereas others had no idea. An seemed to be one of the latter.

Jusetsu opened the curtains surrounding her bed and went back inside. She threw the jacket she was wearing onto the ottoman. Shinshin was sleeping soundly once again. She watched the bird out of the corner of her eye as she sat on her bed, then laid down.

“So, you want me to save Enrin, huh...”

Jusetsu stared blankly into the darkness before shutting her eyes again. Sleep soon followed.

The next day, Jusetsu attempted to ask Kogyo about the situation.

“Are you familiar with a court lady named An?”

Kogyo used to be in the cleansing quarters herself, so there was a chance that she knew of her. She blinked and cocked her head to the side for a moment, as if she were giving it some thought. Kogyo looked so pale when Jusetsu first met her in the cleansing quarters that anyone would have thought that she was at death’s door, but now, she looked healthy and had plump cheeks too. Jusetsu hadn’t asked her how old she was, but she must have been around the age of thirty. Compared to the hotheaded and moody Jiujiu, Kogyo was invariably gentle and calm.

“An was old lady who used to be the Magpie Consort’s lady-in-waiting during the reign of the emperor before last,” Jusetsu added.

Kogyo nodded her head again and again, as if she’d figured it out. That meant she knew her.

“Did she used to say that she could hear the voice of the late Magpie Consort?”

Kogyo nodded at that as well.

“Interesting...”

Jusetsu fetched some of the scrap paper that Ishiha had been using to practice writing on and placed it on the desk. She ground some ink and gave the brush to Kogyo.

“What kind of person was An?”

Kogyo held it as she thought for a moment before starting to write. *“Everyone watched her from an arm’s length because she gave them the creeps. She was always saying that there was a voice coming out of the water.”*

“Does that mean that nobody else could hear it?”

Kogyo nodded. *“I never spoke to her directly, so I don’t know very much about her nature.”*

After writing this, Kogyo dipped the brush in the ink, then slid it around the page. She drew a curved line. She wasn’t writing anymore and was instead drawing a picture. She drew eyes, a nose, a mouth, eyebrows...and in the end, there was a person.

“Oh, that’s very good!” exclaimed Jusetsu.

Before she knew it, Kogyo had finished drawing an old woman’s face. It was definitely An, who she met the night before.

“That’s her,” said Jusetsu. “I never knew you had a talent for drawing.”

*“I thought it would be quicker to draw,”* Kogyo wrote.

She started on a second image. It was a little simpler than the one she did previously. It was the face of a young girl. She had a cute, round face and pretty, skylark-like eyes. Jusetsu could immediately tell who it was meant to be.

“That’s Jiujiu.”

Kogyo grinned and nodded.

“Let’s keep this one. No, I should really have you draw it on some nicer paper...” Jusetsu thought aloud.

Kogyo shook her head, flustered.

“No? We shall just keep this one, then.”

As Jusetsu was gazing fixedly at the drawing again, Jiujiu brought out some

tea from the kitchen.

“Oh my, what’s the picture of?”

“Kogyo drew it. It’s your face.”

“What?!” Jiujiu marveled at the picture, wide-eyed. “Is this me?! You’re so good, Kogyo!” Jiujiu was delighted. “Draw niangniang as well, won’t you, Kogyo?” she asked.

“There’s no need for that,” said Jusetsu. “Is there anything else you can draw?”

Kogyo stared into space, thinking for a moment. She then slowly picked up the brush again and began to draw. She drew an outline with a strong chin, then a clenched jaw with a straight line for a mouth, followed by a pair of puffy eyes.

“That’s Keishi.”

She’d captured her meaninglessly grumpy expression perfectly.

“What about His Majesty, Kogyo? Could you draw him?” Jiujiu asked enthusiastically.

Kogyo raised her eyebrows and waved her hands back and forth as if to say, *“That would be preposterous.”*

Jiujiu looked disappointed and pouted. “I just thought that if we had a portrait of him, we’d be able to gaze at him whenever we wanted.”

“There’s no need for that—I can’t imagine that fool ever staying away from this palace for very long,” quipped Jusetsu.

“Perhaps not, but we can’t just sit there and stare at his face, can we?”

*Is his face really worthy of such close inspection?* Jusetsu thought. It wasn’t as if his expression ever changed very much.

“And if we put up a portrait of him, you wouldn’t have to miss him while he’s away, would you, niangniang?” Jiujiu added.

Jusetsu scowled. “I have no desire to display a picture of that fool in my abode. Besides, I wouldn’t feel lonely just because he didn’t show his silly face

at my door."

"You say that, but I've seen how bored you look on the days His Majesty doesn't show up, niangniang."

Jusetsu went quiet. She felt Jiujiu seemed to have a rather unusual perception of her. *What ever could have possibly brought her to that conclusion?*

"Then, how about Ishiha?" Jiujiu asked Kogyo. "Or Onkei, even?"

Kogyo was immediately able to draw Ishiha's face, but Onkei seemed challenging for her. She explained that she'd never actually gotten a clear look at his face.

"Of course not. After all, he's not usually here."

Onkei was Jusetsu's bodyguard, and as such, he was the kind of eunuch who didn't show his face in public very much. Whenever Jusetsu went out, he hid somewhere nearby to watch over her—and when Jusetsu was in the Yamei Palace, he patrolled the area surrounding the palace. It seemed like it would be boring—after all, Jusetsu didn't really have any enemies who were going to attack her.

"We must make sure you get a proper look at his face next time we get the opportunity. He's such a good-looking young man," Jiujiu said innocently.

*"We shouldn't get in the way of his work,"* Kogyo wrote, reprimanding her.

Jusetsu watched their interaction as she drank her tea.

"Niangniang," she heard Onkei's voice call out.

He'd shown no sign that he was there, so Jusetsu was so surprised that it almost made her drop her cup.

When she turned around, she found him kneeling in front of the doors that led to the outer passageway. "I didn't know you were here, Onkei," she said.

"I got back just now."

"And? How were things?" She'd sent Onkei to the cleansing quarters that morning.

"She passed away last night. She was suffering from a lung disease," Onkei

explained.

“I see.”

An had died that previous night. Her ghost had visited Jusetsu right away, which suggested that what happened with Enrin weighed on her mind greatly—although there was no way she would have forgotten it considering she heard her voice for all those years.

Jusetsu stood up from her seat. “I want to go to the pond at the Jakuso Palace.”

Onkei nodded. “I’ll show you the way.”

“If you’re going there, I’ll accompany...” Jiujiu began, eagerly stepping forward.

“It will only take a minute. Your assistance will not be necessary,” Jusetsu said, declining her help.

“But...” Jiujiu tried to persist, but then Kogyo prodded her, and she went quiet.

“Ishiha should be finished cleaning soon and will come back shortly. You and Kogyo should watch over him as he does his writing practice.”

Jiujiu smiled happily, looking pleased that she’d been given a job to do. “Understood. I’ll make sure his writing improves by leaps and bounds!”

With that, Jusetsu and Onkei left the palace building and headed toward the Jakuso Palace, which was south of the Yamei Palace. Once they passed through the rhododendrons and bay trees, Onkei looked up in the air in fear. They could hear wings flapping, and a bird flew past. It was brown with white spots—a star raven. One of its feathers landed at the pair’s feet.

Onkei finally relaxed. “I’m sorry about that,” he apologized.

“It’s all right,” said Jusetsu.

Jusetsu picked up the feather. It was beautiful, and she thought if she gave it to somebody as a gift, they’d be thrilled. A few faces came to mind, and Jusetsu let the feather go again. That wasn’t a way for a Raven Consort to be thinking. She quickened her pace.

The Jakuso Palace was marked by its decorative magpie roof tiles and the redbud trees that surrounded its buildings. In early spring, their deep magenta flowers dazzled onlookers even from a distance, and on cloudy days, they made the buildings look like they were covered in a red haze. The magpies on the decorative tiles were carved in pairs and held twigs in their beaks for making nests.

“The pond is at the bottom of the garden. It’s almost on the edge of the palace’s grounds.”

Onkei passed the redbud trees and went on ahead. The flowers had already fallen from their branches and green pods now dangled in their place.

“Were you stationed here at some point?” asked Jusetsu.

“Yes,” Onkei said. This short reply made Jusetsu wonder whether he had come here as a spy, or perhaps just to assess how things were going.

“Eisei really depends on you, doesn’t he?” said Jusetsu.

“If he does, then that would bring me more joy than I ever could ever wish for,” Onkei replied, not turning around to look at her. “Anyway, I’ve run this all by the eunuchs that work here.”

Whenever a eunuch started working for a palace, they would befriend the other eunuchs already there. It was probably because it would come in useful at a later date—just like now.

The pair went around to the back and entered through a door that scullery maids used. Past there was a kitchen and buildings that appeared to be where the court ladies and eunuchs lived. It seemed to Jusetsu that the palaces of consorts were built in the same way.

The pond was dimly lit. An had said that the surface of the pond was mirrorlike and beautiful, but as clear as the water was, a shadow was somehow hanging over it. That fact that people had given the area such a wide berth definitely hadn’t helped matters. The willow tree was still reflected in its waters, but ivy had tangled itself around it in an unruly manner. The tree’s drooping branches were withered. With the time of year being what it was, the plants at the water’s edge were aggressively overgrown. The stifling smell of

grass in the summer heat, along with a general damp stench, was so strong that it made it hard to breathe. Even the lizard's tail plants An had spoken of had multiplied to cover a much larger area than they likely had before. They were growing gregariously now.

To put it simply, the place was wild now.

"This pond is removed from the palace buildings and is where a consort once drowned. Few dare approach it. Even the current Magpie Consort avoids this area because of how dark it is. Because of all that, the pond has practically been forgotten," Onkei said.

"I see," said Jusetsu.

*What a shame, she thought. I'm sure all it needs is a tidying up, and it'd make a lovely scenic spot.* As Jusetsu took a brief look at their surroundings, a silhouette-like figure appeared at the edge of her vision among the long grass.

Onkei got ready to fight them off, but Jusetsu raised her hand to stop him. It was no person.

The thing that had appeared was faint like mist, not yet having assumed human form. As they watched the mist, it gradually began to take the shape of a person. Their face was covered in wrinkles and their mouth was gaping wide open. They were dressed in a faded, earth-colored robe as they stumbled along the water's edge.

It was An—but she looked even rougher than she had the night before. Her gray hair was disheveled, and her body was just skin and bones. Her skin was cracked and the color of earth, and she had such sunken eyelids that her eyeballs looked huge and bulging. The hem of her robe was tattered and tore with every step she took.

An crouched down by the side of the pond. With a grunt, she leaned over and peered into the water.

"My dear Enrin," she slowly called out, her voice resonating around the area. As she stared at the water's surface, she repeatedly tried to scoop up water with her hands—but being a ghost, she could not do so. Her hands just waved in the air instead. Even so, An carried on, trying to scoop up the water for what

seemed like forever.

Jusetsu walked up to the apparition. She could hear the woman mumbling something in a low murmur. The closer she got, the clearer she could make out what she was saying.

“You won’t die... Why...? If only... If only the water wasn’t there...”

“Can you still hear Enrin speaking to you?” Jusetsu asked.

An looked up and stared at Jusetsu. She then groaned and bowed down at Jusetsu’s feet, as if she were trying to cling onto them.

“Esteemed Raven Consort, you came. Please, find a way to save my dear Enrin.”

Jusetsu stared at the pond. Its surface was still, with the breeze only occasionally making ripples in it. Apart from An, there were no other ghosts around. There was no voice, either.

“Enrin...isn’t here. She must have already gone over to paradise.”

An’s sunken eyes snapped open in shock. “What did you say? How could that be when I can hear her voice so clearly?”

“There is no voice,” Jusetsu said.

“Listen. There she goes, calling me again. Her voice is calling for me, time and time again...” The old woman’s ghost argued even more vehemently, ignoring what Jusetsu said. She gazed fearfully out at the pond and began “scooping” at the water again.

“I must empty this pond of all its water... Once the water is gone, the voice shall disappear too. I’m sure of it...”

As An futilely repeated trying to take any water out of the pond, her fingers grew bonier, and her sharp nails grew longer. The woman’s hair became more of a mess, and a fire started blazing in her eyes. The corners of her lips turned up and seemed like they were cracking.

“Niangniang...” Onkei called out, a mix of caution and concern in his voice. Jusetsu insisted she was fine.

“What is it about the voice that frightens you so much, An?” she asked.

An froze and looked up at Jusetsu. It seemed like the consort’s words were still getting through to her.

If Jusetsu was no longer able to reach her and she changed form entirely, An wouldn’t be a ghost anymore—she’d be a demon.

“What is it that you’re *really* scared of?” Jusetsu continued.

An’s eyes opened wide, and her hands began shaking violently. “I’m...not scared at all. It’s just so heartbreakingly that my dear Enrin...”

Jusetsu quietly shook her head. “Stop trying to deceive me,” she said. “You don’t find it heartbreakingly. You don’t even feel sorry for her.”

An clammed up and stared fixedly at Jusetsu.

The Raven Consort continued. “Don’t demean her just to back up your lies. You’re using the poor girl for your own gain, even after her death. I feel so terrible for her.”

“Lies? How could you be so cruel as to accuse me of such a thing?” the apparition replied.

Tears were pouring from An’s eyes, but the water rolling down her grotesque face didn’t look quite right. With razor-sharp fingernails, she dug into the ground, disrupting the soil.

“I devoted myself to Enrin from the age of twenty-two. I doubt she ever would have been able to enter the inner palace if it wasn’t for my sacrifices. I took on the role of a lady-in-waiting for a young girl of only ten, who was from a family inferior to mine. I had nowhere else to go! After just two or three years of not being able to have a child, I was reviled for being barren. The family I married into sent me home. I can’t tell you how *ashamed* I felt, being back at my parents’ house. Have you ever heard of a barren woman with such a bad reputation remarrying? No—so I accepted the job. I couldn’t *stand* that father of hers or the young girl herself. She treated me like a lady-in-waiting without questioning a thing. And yet I still gave her a proper upbringing. Didn’t I do wonderfully?” An rattled on, her voice starting to sound more like a howl. “And then! Despite all I did for her, she had the audacity to be so *shockingly*

ungrateful!!!”

An pounded the ground with a fist. As the former lady-in-waiting vilified Enrin’s suicide for being “ungrateful,” Jusetsu felt overwhelmed with emotion herself.

“She’s dead.”

Jusetsu’s words were short and brief, but they were enough to make An abruptly stop what she was doing.

“Yes, yes. I know she’s dead. I’m sure she’s out there bearing a grudge against me. It’s true—it was my fault, after all. I *know* that. That’s why I’m scared. I’m frightened of the hatred she harbors for me,” An said flatly, seeming to have taken on a defiant attitude. “Please save me, dear Raven Consort. I can’t stop hearing her grudge against me. Please, protect me from her. She keeps calling out to me again and again from the bottom of the pond. She’s trying to pull me down there. Please help me, won’t you?” An pleaded, having almost reached her final, monstrous form.

Jusetsu stood there, motionless. She wanted to send as many ghosts as she could to paradise, taking away their pain...and yet she wasn’t sure what part of An she should help. How could she save her?

When Jusetsu fell silent, An tried to cling onto her—but she couldn’t grab hold of Jusetsu’s robe with her hand and just ended up fanning the air.

“I’m not the one who can save you,” Jusetsu declared.

“Raven Consort, that can’t be true...”

“The one who’s trying to pull you into the depths of the water isn’t Enrin. It’s you. The voice coming from the bottom of the pond isn’t hers, either—it’s *yours*. Listen to it carefully.”

An suddenly stopped trying to cling to the young woman before her. The ghost’s eyes welled up as if something were frightening her.

“It’s not Enrin that you’re scared of. It’s *yourself*.”

An shook her head, her disheveled hair scattering about as she did. “No... No!”

Someone who felt no remorse would never hear voices that didn't even exist. It had to be herself that she feared—as she was the person who drove Enrin to her death.

An let out a shriek-like cry and quickly changed direction, collapsing into the pond. She waved her hands around frantically, trying to bail out of the water—but its surface stayed perfectly calm. She gasped for breath and writhed about, trying to push away the water, but she started going deeper into the pond. She faltered and her body started sinking into the water, one bit at a time. Her waist disappeared from sight, followed by her shoulders. Then, finally, her head submerged underwater.

Her gray hair sank below the water's surface last.

"Oh... I can't hear her voice when I'm under the water," An said, brimming with joy—and that was the last sound she ever made.

The surface of the pond remained as still and as clear as ever, as if nothing happened.

"...Niangniang, what just happened?" Onkei called out.

Jusetsu just shook her head. "Perhaps the water made a move and saved her soul for me," she replied.

The chill and weight of the water that engulfed her, the sunlight that shimmered on the surface of the water, and the shadows that fell onto the depths of the pond... Together, they had probably polished, washed away, and melted the demon's soul. That was something that Jusetsu wasn't able to do on her own.

"Onkei, could you cut off some of that ivy for me?"

Jusetsu pointed at the vine that had tangled its way around the willow tree. Onkei went over to it and promptly brought back an armful of it. Jusetsu bundled it up into a loop, then took a paper string with red ink lettering out of her breast pocket. She tied the ivy together with it. She then flung the bundle toward the pond. The ivy traveled in an arc in the air and fell into the water, making a tiny splash before it sank. It left nothing but rings on the water behind it.

"That was a skill shamans specialize in. A shaman once taught it to Reijo. An won't be able to get out of the pond now—but I'd still advise people to stay away," Jusetsu said. Thankfully, the pond didn't seem like it had any visitors in the first place. "Let's go back."

Jusetsu turned away and Onkei followed her.

"May I have the privilege of asking you a question?" he began.

"What is it?"

"Did you do that because not even you could exorcize her, niangniang?"

Jusetsu thought for a moment before answering him. "...Exorcising, or exterminating somebody, is easy. But it's not pleasant."

"Why not?"

"When you exterminate someone like that, they don't go to paradise—their soul disappears entirely. It shouldn't be up to me to determine whose souls are worthy and whose aren't."

The dead were sad—all equally so. Jusetsu was alive. It'd be insolent for a living person to categorize the dead.

"By their very natures, the living and the dead are kept separate," she continued. "Sometimes, I bring them together, and other times, I sever them apart. That's all."

Wishing to save people was arrogant enough in itself, but sometimes, that desire was too strong to resist.

*I'm sure Reijo would have been able to deal with this better than I did.*

Jusetsu forced her heavy legs forward and walked away from the neglected pond. No voice could be heard from the bottom of the water.

When Jusetsu got back to the Yamei Palace, Ishiha was sandwiched between Jiujiu and Kogyo. The two women were teaching him how to write.

"Oh, Raven Consort!" said Ishiha, hurriedly getting down from his seat. He kneeled down by Jusetsu. "I have a letter for you."

“A letter?” said Jusetsu. “From whom?”

“From master.”

“Dispose of it.”

Ishiha looked up at her, startled and unsure of what to do. “But you can’t...”

Not wanting to upset a child, she reached out her hand. “Give it to me.”

“Of course,” said Ishiha, taking the letter out of his breast pocket with a sigh of relief.

The emperor’s letter was in an envelope made of decorated paper. Colored water had been used with stencils to create a design with two twin fish. The envelope had even been heavily perfumed. *Eisei must have done this to spite me*, Jusetsu thought. Koshun wasn’t the kind of refined man who’d perfume his letters to women by burning incense.

*If he wrote something silly, we could just use this for Ishiha’s writing practice and he can copy it*, thought Jusetsu as she opened it up. Koshun was a conscientious and neat writer, so his lettering would be a good example.

Once Jusetsu ran her eyes over the opened letter, she pursed her lips in thought for a short while.

“What’s wrong, niangniang?” Jiujiu asked.

“Nothing, really...” Jusetsu said, closing the letter. She put it away in her breast pocket.

*“The Winter Minister, Setsu Gyoei, is an old friend of Reijo’s,”* Koshun had written. *“You should meet with him and talk. I will arrange a meeting in the near future.”*

What good was meeting the Winter Minister going to do? Did Koshun have some kind of ulterior motive? Jusetsu couldn’t tell just from reading the letter.

Still, one thing piqued her interest. *An old friend of Reijo’s?*

“Would you like to reply to him? I’d be happy to deliver it,” Ishiha chimed in.

“Do I really need...” *...to reply?* Jusetsu almost said, but Ishiha’s eyes were glistening as he awaited an order from her. She gave in. He must have really

enjoyed doing what he was told.

“Give me a moment,” Jusetsu said reluctantly.

She got some colored hemp paper from her cabinet and selected a pale indigo sheet. She then picked up a brush to write one, simple thing: “*Understood.*” She folded it up and passed it to the young eunuch.

“I’ll make sure this gets to my master safe and sound!” Ishiha said enthusiastically. His cheeks were flushed with excitement.

“It’s nothing important,” Jusetsu told him, but Ishiha left the palace in high spirits, nonetheless.

“He just wants to pay you back for what you did for him,” said Jiujiu, smiling.

Kogyo was beaming too.

“Pay me back?”

“For taking him in when he had nowhere to go.”

“...I was the reason he *had* nowhere to go in the first place,” said Jusetsu.

“Oh no, you weren’t, niangniang. It was his shifu that kicked him out of the Hien Palace, not you,” Jiujiu retorted. “That man wouldn’t have been able to stay in his instructor role either way—I hear he’s gotten sick.”

“What?”

Kogyo prodded Jiujiu’s elbow. The young woman covered her mouth, and Kogyo mouthed, “*No chatter,*” to reproach her.

“Is he bedridden?” Jusetsu asked.

“No, it’s not that serious,” Jiujiu said. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it. I apologize.”

“It doesn’t matter. If you say something I don’t need to hear, I just won’t pay any attention to it.”

“Niangniang,” Jiujiu smiled broadly, but then Kogyo scrawled something on a piece of scrap paper and showed it to Jusetsu.

“*You shouldn’t indulge her,*” it said. Jusetsu giggled in response.

That night, Jusetsu sat at her table alone. Pieces of colored hemp paper in all different shades were spread out over it—pale red, yellow, apricot, the color of straw... Each and every one had scattered bits of gold and silver foil. Next to those sat a sparrow-headed brush with a mottled bamboo shaft. It was called that because its tip was as dainty as a sparrow's head. There was also a boat-shaped container of ink that had its place of manufacture engraved onto it. It was a local specialty from the east and was of the finest quality.

When Ishiha went to deliver Jusetsu's response, he came back carrying these items, albeit with some difficulty. They were gifts from Koshun. This seemed like a way for him to say, "*Write to me more often.*"

*It's not as if we're lovers,* thought Jusetsu. *Can we really exchange letters that frequently?* That being said, "friends" probably exchanged letters too. Surprising as it was, Koshun seemed to have a penchant for writing. He apparently sent notes to his consorts quite frequently.

*How utterly pointless.*

Jusetsu gathered the hemp paper together and placed it on a lacquer tray. She put the brush and ink away in her letter case. When she stood up to stow it away in her cabinet, however, she felt as if something shattered inside her body.

"What was that?" She grabbed hold of her arm in fear.

She sensed that *something* was broken.

She hurried toward the doors. Shinshin flapped its wings about violently, but she ignored it. Once she was outside the palace building, she started retracing the steps she took that afternoon. Jusetsu's destination was the Jakuso Palace.

The moonlight lit her way. The shadows the trees cast on the ground differed from the ones they scattered during the daytime. The shadows were now bluish-black, and it seemed like they would swallow you up if you got too close.

Jusetsu heard a few insects in the distance, but they weren't yet loud enough to capture her attention properly. Summer wasn't in full swing yet, and then the insects would be a lot noisier.

She passed the redbud trees and went around to the back of the Jakuso Palace grounds. A light even more intense than that of the moon was pouring out of the palace buildings. The hanging lanterns in the outer passage were lit and shone brilliantly. But as bright as the lanterns were, the surrounding area was particularly quiet. Jusetsu headed over to the pond.

It may have been because of how dark it was, but the area didn't feel as wild as it did earlier that day. The overgrown ivy and plants now had a wistful elegance to them, with the moonlight illuminating them...but there was still something bleak about this sight.

*I knew it.*

The magic of the ivy loop that Jusetsu tossed into the water earlier was no longer working. What she felt moments ago was a sign that it had faded. And, to make matters worse...

Jusetsu stared at the surface of the pond. It was still, with the moon casting an icy light down on it. The willow tree's black shadow covered a portion of it.

There was no sign of An in there. Had she broken the spell and gotten away? *No, she couldn't have.*

Someone had broken it from the outside. Jusetsu could sense An wafting faintly through the air. There were traces of her here and there, tenuous and slight.

Jusetsu was slowly finding it hard to breathe as she tried to figure out what had happened.

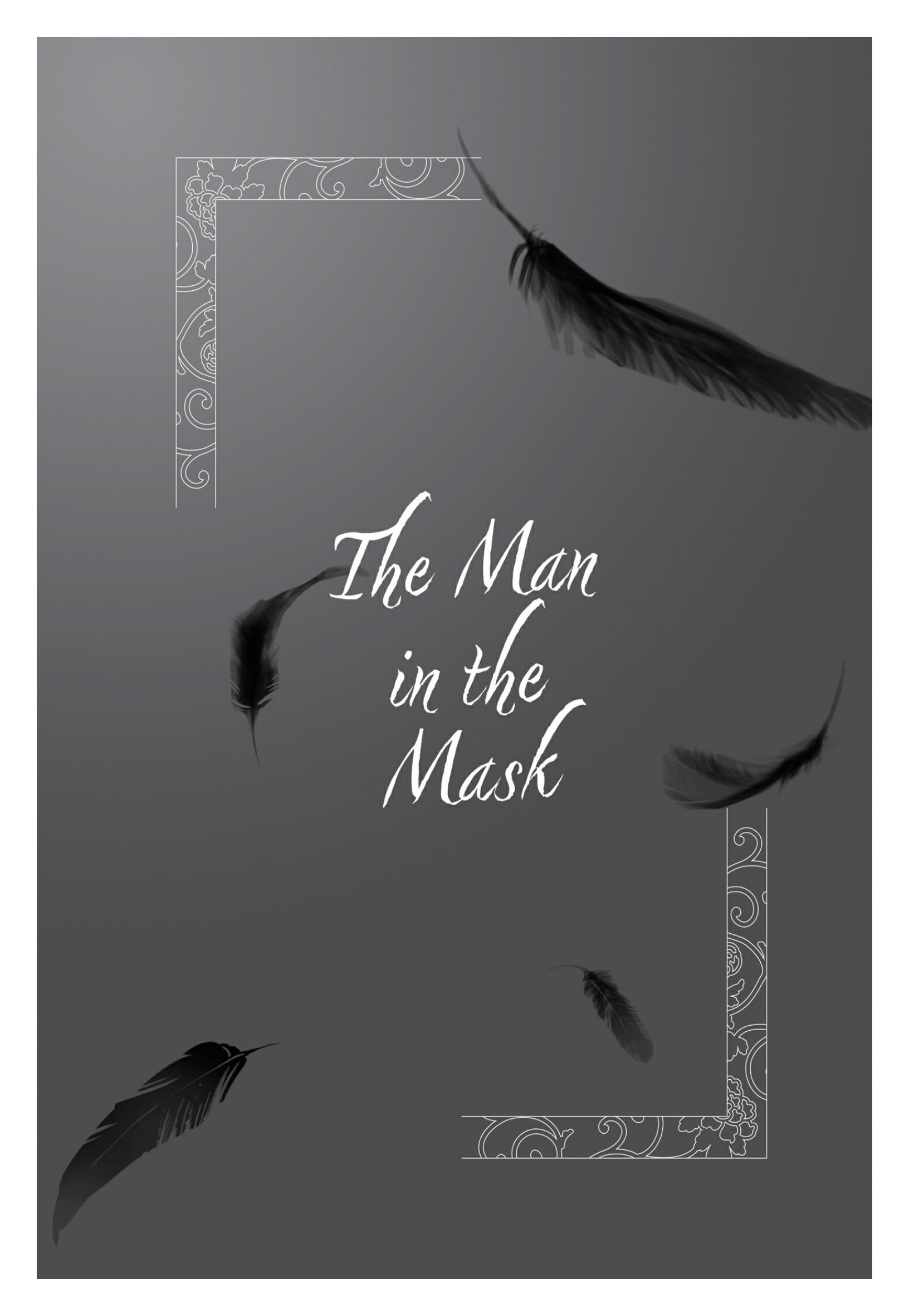
Why was she sensing bits of An scattered around all over the place? It was as if she'd been devoured...and the traces were just the scraps left behind.

Without thinking about it, Jusetsu backed away slowly. She was filled with terror and too frightened to run.

She realized she had experienced this fear before—on the night of the new moon, when Uren Niangniang saw that young man in the port town.

It was the exact same kind of fear.





# The Man in the Mask

KOSHUN HEARD the story of the mask from Ka Meiin, one of his vassals. He told him about it after the imperial council meeting when they were both gazing at the lotus pond from the outer passage of the palace building. The lotuses had already closed up, but their crimson-tinged buds were a refreshing sight. They had a gracious beauty to them as they faced the sky above. Dazzling sunlight bounced off the water's surface, and the air was already hot enough to make you sweat—even if you were in the shade.

"I have another curious story for you," Meiin said. He'd spent the past while telling the emperor about rumors and other talk from the area surrounding the imperial estate, but the man seemed to have even more tales. "Someone I know runs a silk shop. He's doing quite well for himself and has a big shop in the town in the west. He's a gifted merchant, but his pastime is a cause for some concern..."

The man's vice was collecting antiques.

"Well, perhaps I should say 'used things,' rather than antiques. He doesn't collect anything particularly luxurious. According to his wife, it's just junk," he said with an awkward laugh.

Meiin was over forty and had an intelligent look to him. His expression at that moment—one tinged with bitterness—suited him perfectly.

"It'd be bad enough if he were collecting expensive items that were of some value, but his wife *laments* that all he's accumulating is junk. It's not an appropriate hobby for a wealthy man like him—although I, for one, think it's better than chasing after women for carnal pleasures. Anyway, their house is full of eclectic items now. There're things like an ornament that looks half-cat, half-raccoon, metal fittings with unknown uses, exotic bits of glass that washed up on the beach... He likes to show them all off whenever someone visits, and that puts me in a bit of a difficult situation, too. Jumbled together with all that 'junk,' however, there was one *mysterious* item..."

"Mysterious? Do you mean to say that it was haunted?" Koshun asked.

"You would be correct," Meiin responded. "He said that he bought it from a traveling secondhand peddler. It's a cloth mask."

“Like those that musicians wear during rituals?”

“Precisely. It’s a square linen piece with a face drawn on it. There are also holes for the eyes and mouth. You put it on your face like this, you see—and tie it in the back with string.” Meiin mimed putting something on this face.

“I think it would be warm and hard to breathe with something like that on your face,” remarked Koshun.

“I agree. The cloth mask that my friend bought was stained, and the ink was almost totally faded—obviously not worth buying—but he insisted he liked its features. Once he’d mentioned that, I could see his point. It had a bit of an odd charm to it as the eyes and nose had a certain melancholy look to them. That still wouldn’t have motivated me to buy it, but each to their own, I suppose. Anyway, he got the mask and tried it on right away. I’m impressed that he put that useless rag on his face at all, personally.” Meiin scrunched up his face in horror. The man was a bit of a stickler for cleanliness. “But he said that when he did that, he could see a man.”

“A man? What do you mean?” asked the emperor.

“There were holes cut out of the mask for the eyes, so he could see through the mask. Well, he should have been able to, at least—but he said he couldn’t see what was in front of him. All he could see was the back of a man, standing in some kind of mist. He was wearing a grubby robe and was hanging his head.”

“Oh...” Koshun turned toward Meiin with interest. “Then what happened?”

“My friend was shocked and took the mask off, but that wasn’t the last time he tried it on. Perhaps he has a lot of guts because he runs such a big shop, or perhaps he’s just an oddball—but when he was hosting a banquet, he showed off the mask to his guests. He ended up putting it on, yet again. An act of drunken bravado, mind you.” Meiin disliked both attending banquets and getting drunk, so he said that with an expression of disgust on his face. “But when he did, the man on the other side of the mask...”

Meiin stopped there and looked at Koshun.

“These are the words of a drunkard, so please take them with a pinch of salt,” he warned the emperor before continuing. “He says that the man had his back

toward him, but he turned around. With a pale face and hollow cheeks, he stared intently at my friend with a vacant look in his eyes..."

As one would expect, Meiin's friend sobered up at the sight and he hurriedly ripped off the mask.

"But after that, he felt unwell, and he started having shivering fits. He brought the banquet to a close and hit the hay, but he came down with a fever and ended up confined to his bed. He told me he recovered in two or three days, but he put the mask away because it frightened his wife so much. Well, he was thoroughly intoxicated and had been causing a ruckus, with his belly out too! It's no surprise that he would feel under the weather, right? Personally, I doubt the mask had anything to do with it."

"...Does he still have that mask in his possession?"

"What? Oh, yes, indeed he does. Apparently, he's even too frightened to throw it away."

"My, my..." Koshun said, stroking the tip of his chin. "Do you think I would be able to borrow it?"

Meiin was dumbstruck for a moment. "Well, of course... That would be no trouble at all, but..." Meiin trailed off. The look on his face made it clear that he couldn't understand what the emperor would want with such a shabby mask.

"It's not that I want to see it myself. I want to show it to someone." *I expect that mask would interest Jusetsu*, Koshun had thought.

"Is that right?" Meiin sounded skeptical but didn't pose any further questions. "Understood." He bowed.

Right at that very moment, Eisei appeared and kneeled before Koshun. "Chief Secretariat Un is here to see you," he declared.

Koshun shifted his gaze to find Un Eitoku turning the corner of the outer passage and heading toward him. He was an old man of small stature, but he was steady on his feet with a brisk gait. When Koshun was still the crown prince, he had been his Grand Master at the crown prince's administration. He had been his strongest ally ever since. He was the present head of the distinguished Un family and was Kajo's grandfather. Without his help, Koshun

never would have been able to become emperor.

Eitoku bowed in front of Koshun and looked toward the lotus pond. “The lotuses are just about to come into full bloom. Have you finally developed an appreciation for flowers, by any chance, Your Majesty? You never showed the slightest of interest in them when you were small.”

“I have. It wasn’t until recently that I noticed that each of the consorts has different, beautiful flowers growing in their gardens.”

Eitoku looked staggered at the emperor’s words.

Koshun corrected himself. “No, I *did* know that—it’s just that I’d never paid much attention to them.”

“Well, you have had a lot on your plate, Your Majesty. I hope you will take some time to admire the blossoms with your concubines from now on,” said Eitoku. “Still, this does make me wonder—is your newfound appreciation for flowers the reason why you gifted a pot of chrysanthemums to the Hien Palace?”

“You’ve really got your ear to the ground, haven’t you? I know it’s not the season for flowers, but if I don’t follow through with things when the idea comes to mind, I’ll forget about it.”

“You are so kind and considerate, Your Majesty. I expect nothing less from you. I’m sure the Swallow Concubine was thrilled as well. Incidentally, I hear the red roses at the Eno Palace are quite stunning. I expect they’re past their peak now, but why don’t you and the Mandarin Duck Consort have a look at them together?” Eitoku suggested cuttingly.

Koshun gazed at the lotus buds. When Eitoku had spoken about the flowers being past their peak, he was also talking about Kajo. She wasn’t as old as the man made her out to be—she was just older than Koshun.

“Kajo would be more interested in me bringing her a book than looking at flowers,” the emperor said.

“Would she? My mistake then. You know her better than I do, Your Majesty. Forget I said anything. My apologies.” Eitoku laughed cheerfully before turning toward Meiin. “And how are things with you, son-in-law? Everything is going

smoothly, I hope?”

“All is well, thank you,” Meiin said, smiling back at him.

Meiin was married to Eitoku’s youngest daughter. Eitoku had spotted the potential in him, and he selected the man to marry his daughter. Now Meiin was the top imperial scholar and was even the vice-minister of the financial affairs department. He was given this official post as there were no official classifications for scholars—and that showed just how much he excelled at what he did.

“That reminds me—did you know, Your Majesty, that one of the eunuchs from the Hien Palace had a curse placed on him?”

“Oh yes,” said Koshun. “I did hear something to that effect.”

“The sick eunuch claims the Raven Consort placed it on him.”

“I’m sure that’s nonsense,” said Meiin with a sigh. “There are always ridiculous rumors going around in the inner palace, aren’t there? We must do more to rectify the morals of the people.”

“It may well be nonsense, but we have been hearing about the Raven Consort a lot as of late. Don’t you think so, Your Majesty?”

“I don’t know,” said Koshun, feigning ignorance. “I don’t really have a keen ear for gossip.”

Eitoku stroked the beard hanging from the end of his chin, looking embarrassed. “Well, it’s not as if I’m intentionally listening out for it either...”

Koshun laughed slightly. “I know that.” Then he turned back and moved away from the end of the outer passage. It was so bright outside that when he turned away, it made the shade look even gloomier than it usually did.

He stopped in his tracks for a moment.

“Where are you heading, Your Majesty?”

“...I’m going back to the inner court.” Koshun started walking again, and Eisei silently followed behind him.

“Your Majesty, word has it that disaster will ensue if you get involved with the

Raven Consort. You have so many other consorts you could choose to spend time with," Eitoku said, criticizing him from afar.

"I am aware," Koshun replied.

"I've asked you about this before, but if you're not content with the consorts you currently have, my youngest granddaughter is now of age. She's the younger sister of the Mandarin Duck Consort, you see, and..."

"The consorts I have at present are more than enough for me."

Leaving Eitoku calling out behind him, Koshun speedily turned the corner of the passage. He knew Eitoku had been manipulating the court ladies and eunuchs from the inner palace to act as his ears. He also knew that he was desperate for Kajo to have the emperor's baby. The man was growing impatient.

Koshun had looked up Eitoku from a very young age. He was wise, noble, and Koshun owed him a lot for the years of sincere support he had given him. That being the case, Koshun had to pay him back with something significant. That was just the way it was.

Eitoku probably wasn't thinking about it in that way. He was the very foundation that Koshun stood on, and as such, he needed to be strong. Therefore, blood ties were important. Koshun understood that. He knew that Eitoku's granddaughter—Kajo—was a pretty young woman, and that the man was trying to solidify and protect his position for him. He knew that more than anybody.

Even so, he could sense a hidden meaning behind Eitoku's words. He could sense that deep inside his heart, the man was thinking, *"After all I've given you, you mustn't betray or disobey me."*

Lately, Koshun had almost forgotten how Eitoku comforted him and encouraged him when his mother and Teiran were killed, and when he was put into confinement, and his title of crown prince taken from him. It was strange, considering that in comparison, he still couldn't get the empress dowager's roaring laughter out of his head.

He felt like chilling, gloomy footsteps followed him steadily from behind.

Jusetsu swayed about inside her litter. It was her first time riding in one. *This is shakier than I expected*, she thought to herself. She expected it to move much more smoothly.

Eunuchs carried her litter on their shoulders. There were more of them surrounding the litter from in front and behind too, and Jiujiu and Onkei were by her side. There were curtains around her so Jusetsu couldn't see what was going on outside. All she could hear were the unpleasant sounds of the eunuchs' orderly footsteps on the white gravel beneath.

The entourage was heading to Seiu Shrine.

*Is this all right?*

Setsu Gyoei was apparently an old friend of Reijo's, and that struck a chord with Jusetsu. She couldn't help but hope that she'd get the chance to hear about her mentor when she met with him.

The sounds of footsteps crunching the gravel came to a stop, and the litter was lowered to the ground. Someone opened the curtains and daylight poured in, making Jusetsu squint for a few moments. Once her eyes had adjusted, she got out. The air had gotten muggy inside the curtains, so she let out a long-awaited sigh of relief.

The members of the Winter Ministry were waiting on the other side of the gate, all dressed in ash-colored robes. The one exception was the old man in the center, whose robe was a deep greenish-gray. Jusetsu slowly walked up to him, making quiet sounds as she stepped on the paving stones with her shoes.

"Are you Setsu Gyoei...?" she asked him.

The old man gazed at Jusetsu for a moment, enthralled and seemingly having forgotten how to speak. He then slowly got down on his knees, his expression unchanged.

"You are correct. I am the Winter Minister, Setsu Gyoei."

"Reijo told me your name," said Jusetsu, staring at him. She extended her hand and helped the man to his feet. Gyoei's eyes lit up for a moment at the

sound of Reijo's name, and he exchanged glances with Jusetsu before immediately casting his gaze down again.

"It's a privilege to have you visit a place as remote as here."

Gyoei led Jusetsu to the building at the back of the shrine. She glanced at the shrine as they passed. *This has definitely seen better days*, she thought. Everything in the area was faded and shabby. Jusetsu had heard that Uren Niangniang's shrines had fallen into disuse, but it was still surprising to see it herself.

She was taken to a room, and she positioned herself opposite Gyoei. Her seat made a creaking sound when she sat down on it. The bright sunlight streaming in through the lattice window made the furnishings' wear and tear glaringly obvious.

"You haven't been obeying Reijo's instructions, have you?" Gyoei said quietly after one of his subordinates had served some tea and left. "You have a court lady *and* a eunuch with you."

Jusetsu glanced through the doorway. She'd asked Jiujiu and Onkei to wait for her outside.

"I wasn't intending on contravening them," she said. "One thing just led to another."

"Once you take in one person to assist you, your willpower weakens. You'll never be able to survive by yourself again now."

Jusetsu was at a loss for words.

"What would Reijo say if she were still alive?" Gyoei sighed.

Jusetsu bit her lip and hung her head. Hearing this from someone who knew Reijo well was hard.

Gyoei, however, just sighed at her again. "...I'm not in a place to speak myself, however. The Winter Minister is not supposed to meet the Raven Consort—and yet here I am, ignoring that warning as well. His Majesty's eagerness moved me."

Jusetsu looked up and saw that Gyoei wore a glum expression.

"In truth, I did want to meet you. I wondered how the little girl that Reijo had entrusted me with had turned out." A slight smile came over Gyoei's face. "You're dignified and beautiful. You look so much like Reijo—as one would expect, considering she raised you. When you came in through the gate today, I was shellshocked. It was as if Reijo was back."

Jusetsu blinked, staring at Gyoei. "...Reijo told me that if there was ever something that I just couldn't keep up with, I should turn to you."

Gyoei silently stared back into Jusetsu's eyes.

"There was one kind of incense that Reijo treasured dearly," she continued. "You don't smell it being burned very often—the one called Yearning Aroma. Even on the night she died, she wore a ruqun perfumed with that scent. I burned it for her when I mourned for her too... Was it *you* that gifted her that incense?"

Although Gyoei's expression remained unchanged, he suddenly narrowed his eyes.

"When Reijo passed away and she paid me a visit...I could smell Yearning Aroma. The thought that she burned it at all was enough for me," he said. "It was a long time ago now, but...I gave her that incense when it was decided that I was going to work for the Winter Ministry as a subordinate. I asked a eunuch to deliver it to her for me. I can blame my youthful indiscretion, but it was still an extremely inappropriate gift for me to send to her..." Gyoei paused there. He looked over at the lattice window and blinked. The sunlight seemed to make his white eyebrows glow.

"Reijo was the daughter of the family that employed my father. Someone of my position shouldn't have been sending her gifts," he said.

"Reijo always treasured what you gave her though."

Gyoei covered his mouth with his hand. She noticed his hands were frail, with ripple-like wrinkles on the thin skin that clung to them. She recalled Reijo's looking like that too. The woman's hands had been thin with protruding blue veins, but that hadn't stopped her from holding onto Jusetsu's hand tightly.

"I'm very grateful for that," said Gyoei, before going on to explain how he and

Reijo had learned together under the same tutor.

White sunlight filled the room as Jusetsu listened to him tell tale after tale about Reijo—stories of when she was an innocent child, and later, a tomboyish young girl who would put the boys to shame. The Reijo Gyoei spoke of was a brave and noble girl.

Jusetsu only knew what she was like in her old age. Hearing stories about her mentor in her youth was like hearing about a whole new person, but it still didn't feel like he was talking about a stranger. Reijo was Reijo.

"She was the same then, ever since she was a child," Jusetsu said with a slight smile.

Gyoei looked dazzled by the light coming in through the window.

"Winter Minister. Revered Raven Consort," a subordinate called out from the other side of the door.

"What is it?" Gyoei replied.

"His Majesty has graced us with his presence."

"What?!" said Gyoei. Jusetsu heard him grumble under his breath, "Not him appearing out of nowhere again..."

"Does Koshun come here often?" Jusetsu asked.

"He does. I don't know what he enjoys so much about this shabby place."

"I see. He must have gotten attached."

"Pardon?"

"To you," she said.

Gyoei made a strange face. "What...? No, that can't be. His Majesty only ever wants to ask about you."

Once a subordinate guided Koshun into the room, Gyoei *did* rise to bow to him, but the man made no effort to hide his aggravation.

"I was about to go back to the inner court, but it occurred to me that Jusetsu may have arrived, so I came here instead."

Seemingly unperturbed by Gyoei's attitude, Koshun sat down on the divan a subordinate had brought over for him. Jusetsu suspected that Gyoei always acted this way and that Koshun never paid it any mind. *If Eisei were here, I'm sure he'd be giving him an angry glare*, Jusetsu couldn't help but think.

"Do you make a habit of frequenting places where people are cruel to you?" she asked the emperor.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I didn't think you'd be so twisted."

"I come here because I want to. The same applies when I visit you," he said.

"There's no need. Don't you have anywhere better to be?" said Jusetsu.

Koshun suddenly looked the other way. "No," he said.

The look on his face was terribly forlorn—like that of a child who had nowhere to go—which got Jusetsu flustered.

"Why...don't you go and see Kajo?" said Jusetsu, thinking that she was the consort to which he was closest.

"Kajo is...Un Eitoku's granddaughter," Koshun said, still looking like a bothered child.

Jusetsu tilted her head to one side at his response.

Koshun, appearing to have come back to his senses, looked at her. "Never mind. It doesn't matter. Forget I said anything."

Jusetsu said nothing at that. She looked at him, but he averted his gaze. *I suppose being the emperor comes with its own difficulties*, Jusetsu thought before standing up.

"My business here is done. I'm going home," she said.

"Was that all?"

"I've heard all the stories I need. Now you two can have a chance to talk."

Koshun looked at Jusetsu full in the face. "...Thank you," he said.

Surprised, Jusetsu backed away somewhat. "There's no need to thank me,"

she said.

“I...think you’re a kind person, Jusetsu.”

Jusetsu scowled. “I couldn’t care less. Goodbye,” she said as she headed over to the door. As she reached out to it, she turned back toward Gyoei. “Could I... hear some more stories about Reijo another time?”

She half-expected Gyoei to respond by pulling a sour face, but contrary to her expectations, the man placed his arms together in front of him in a respectful bow.

“It’d be my pleasure. Whenever you like, Raven Consort,” he replied.

Jusetsu nodded, then left the room. Jiujiu and Onkei—along with Eisei—were waiting for her outside.

“Let us return to the inner palace,” she declared.

As she was about to start walking away, she abruptly turned toward Eisei.

“Eisei, about Koshun...” She wanted to ask him if something had happened to him, but she bit her tongue. It wasn’t something that she should be troubling herself with.

Instead, she simply said, “He seems quite low.” She then turned away.

Eisei’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Here is fine,” Jusetsu called out to the eunuchs, and they subsequently lowered her litter to the ground.

The group had just passed through the Kio Gate—the gate connecting the outer court and the inner palace.

When Jusetsu left the litter, she didn’t turn in the direction of the Yamei Palace, but instead set out southward.

“Where are we headed?” Onkei asked simply.

“The Jakuso Palace,” Jusetsu replied without stopping. “The pond.”

Onkei wordlessly followed her, while Jiujiu tagged along in a fluster.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“You could say that...” Jusetsu responded evasively, walking at a brisk pace.

There were flowering crab apples planted to the south of the gate. Their drooping light red flowers were a beautiful sight in the spring, but at this time of year, their fresh green foliage was much more vivid. They also had small, light green berries hanging from them. The group stepped over the gravel and walked through the trees. After a while, they came to a narrow river. Some campions sat in front of the vermillion-lacquered bridge that went over the water, blooming with red flowers. After crossing the bridge, some redbud trees came into sight. This indicated the area where the Jakuso Palace was located.

From the back of the palace, they headed toward the pond. Jusetsu was concerned and frightened by what she had sensed the other night. She had no idea what it was, nor why it had instilled such fear in her—and the anxiety of not knowing enough was infuriating her. She was extremely restless.

The pond was as wild as ever—and silent too. The area was so quiet that it made Jusetsu frown. There should have been the sounds of life from time to time, like leaves brushing against each other in the wind or insects jumping and crawling in the grass, but nothing of the sort could be heard.

It was as if all the living things in the area were holding their breath.

“It’s too quiet here, isn’t it...?” Onkei remarked suspiciously.

“Is it strange?” Jiujiu asked curiously.

Jusetsu took in her surroundings and sighed. There was no sign whatsoever of what she sensed the other night. She felt a mix of disappointment and relief. *What was I so frightened of?*

“Has the consort who lives here been experiencing any problems?” she asked Onkei.

“I’m not sure whether you’d call it a *problem*, but...I heard that she has been feeling a little under the weather as of late.”

“Is she sick?”

“Not even her eunuchs really know. Sometimes she can get up, sometimes

she's bedridden—but she hardly ever leaves the palace buildings. Even the master has paid her a few visits to check how she is.”

“Visits...? Now that you mention it, I do remember Koshun mentioning something along those lines.”

After coming by the Yamei Palace, he'd said he had to check up on one of his consorts and left. He must have been talking about the Magpie Consort.

*What could this have to do with the consort's ailing health?*

Jusetsu took another close look at the pond, but there was no way she was going to find an answer.

“Shogetsu,” a court lady called out. The man turned around to look at her. “The Magpie Consort wants to see you. Don’t flit about. You’re supposed to stay by her side, remember? We’ll be the ones stuck with the task of searching around for you if you don’t.”

The woman was cross with him.

“Sorry,” he apologized.

The court lady blushed slightly. “...Well, it’s okay,” she said, turning away. “Just hurry up and get back there. The Magpie Consort is helpless without you.”

The court lady tugged violently on Shogetsu’s arm. He did as he was told and followed her.

“You’re just a neophyte—how have you managed to curry such favor with the Magpie Consort? Well, I *can* understand it to a certain extent, with you looking like that and all...”

The court lady glanced back at Shogetsu. The young man was dressed in a light rat-gray robe and had a pale face. His long hair wasn’t done up in a topknot, but instead was tied back in a single ponytail. The Magpie Consort had given her permission for this deviation.

“I suppose I do have *some* connections,” Ho Ichigyo had told him.

That one night, when Shogetsu had said that he wanted to go to the imperial capital and insisted that there was something he wanted to do there, Ho Ichigyo had given him a somewhat baffled look.

"You probably don't know this, but in order to enter the imperial capital, you need a pass to prove you have the authority—and to go inside the inner palace, you must become a eunuch. Well, perhaps with *your* body, you'd be able to get in," Ho had said. "I have some old acquaintances who are employed by the imperial estate. I'll ask them if they can arrange a pass for you—but if they're not able to, then that's that, all right?"

The old man's tone didn't sound very hopeful—but Shogetsu ended up reaching not only the imperial capital but made his way to the inner palace too.

"That said..." began the court lady, eyeballing Shogetsu from head to toe, "there is something a little...*creepy* about you."

She left it at that, and they finally arrived at the palace building that the Magpie Consort lived in.

"Go on," she said, and she pushed him from behind.

His body lurching forward from being shoved, Shogetsu looked up at the palace building. His eyes showed no emotion whatsoever.

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Koshun showed up at the Yamei Palace again two or three days after seeing Jusetsu at Seiu Shrine.

"There's something I want to show you," he said. He had his typical unchanging and expressionless look on his face.

He signaled to Eisei behind him and had him bring over a box. It was small, flat, and made of unvarnished wood.

Koshun opened the lid. A grubby cloth sat inside of it. Jusetsu frowned.

"This is something that a friend of Meiin's managed to get his hands on," the emperor explained. "Do you remember Meiin? I think you've met before."

"He's that man who looks like he's got a whole library's worth of knowledge stuffed inside his brain, isn't he? About forty years old?"

Koshun paused. "Now that you mention it, he really does look that way, huh?"

"So? Why have you brought this to me?" Jusetsu said, urging him to continue.

Koshun opened up the cloth. It had a human face drawn on it—that of a man with a beard—and it had holes in place of the eyes.

"Is this a mask?"

"A cloth mask—the kind that musicians use. Haven't you seen one before?" asked Koshun.

"I've heard about them, but never actually seen one with my own eyes."

"They're mostly used at rituals or big banquets," Koshun explained. "You see these eyeholes? If you peek through them, you can see a man."

"Have you seen him?" she asked.

"I have."

Jusetsu was aghast. She couldn't decide whether this was fearless or careless of him. *Wasn't he scared?*

Jusetsu picked up the mask and put it against her face. Being as old as it was, the cloth had a unique, musty smell to it. The cloth was long enough to fall to her chest, but on a grown man, it would probably end at the base of his neck. There was a string attached to the top of the mask which tied at the back of the wearer's head, assumably to keep it in place.

Jusetsu peeked through the eyeholes. Under normal circumstances, she should have been able to see Koshun through it, but instead, all she could see was the back of a man standing among some sort of white haze. He wore a dull, greenish-gray robe, and he was hanging his head.

The musty scent made Jusetsu's nose feel itchy, and she sneezed. She placed the mask on the table with the face facing upward.

"He must serve in the imperial estate," she said, rubbing her nose.

His greenish-gray robe had been the clue. Commoners could only wear robes in limited colors. Generally, their robes were white and more or less undyed.

Officials and those with classified ranks, on the other hand, were allowed to wear robes dyed that same greenish-gray color. Jusetsu assumed that robe colors were determined more precisely by someone's status and the type of job they did, but even she didn't know that much about it.

"That's the color of the robes that those in the Bustard Residence wear."

The Bustard Residence was where the imperial court musicians and the women who worked as imperial entertainers were stationed out of.

"He must have been one of their musicians. Looking at it simply, I'd assume that the man haunting this mask was the one who used to wear it," Jusetsu whispered. She suddenly stopped herself and cast a sharp glance at Koshun. "Why do you have this? What did you expect to gain from showing it to me?"

"I just thought you might be interested."

"I couldn't be *less* interested, you utter fool," she snapped.

"Understood," said Koshun. He looked as if he were embarrassed, but it was hard for her to tell.

"She's a difficult one," Eisei said from behind Koshun. The eunuch had an extremely fierce look in his eyes.

Jusetsu was used to this by now, so didn't think anything of it, but this irritated Koshun. As painfully earnest as he was, it made him feel like he was in an awkward position.

"I've got my hands full with the number of ghosts and the like in the inner palace already—whether it's dead people that I'd rather have nothing to do with...or people who are suffering," Jusetsu said, explaining some of her thoughts.

Koshun nodded at that, seeming to have understood. "Ah, I see," he said with a note of admiration. "That...makes sense. My apologies."

Koshun went to put the cloth mask away, but Jusetsu grabbed his hand to stop him.

"You'll feel guilty if you take it back, won't you? You've showed it to me now," she said.

Koshun looked at Jusetsu's face and hand in turn.

"I suppose so," he said, withdrawing his hand and abandoning putting the mask away.

Jusetsu also yanked her hand back—not that it mattered that she touched his or anything. It wasn't like it was the first time. Still, she felt weirdly flustered.

"Do you know anything else about this mask?" Jusetsu asked. "Who that man is, for example?"

"I don't know. I just heard that Meiin's friend tried on this mask at a banquet he was holding. When he did so, the man who had his back toward him turned around."

"He turned around?"

"Yes."

*Why would that be?* Jusetsu stared at Koshun as she brooded it over.

"You always put some serious thought into these ghost situations, don't you?" he said.

Jusetsu looked up at Koshun. "I...don't have anything else to do," she admitted.

It was a slip of the tongue, but surprisingly enough, this was the truth.

"Saving ghosts is all I'm able to do here," she added, ridiculing herself. "Well, sometimes I even fail at doing that."

Jusetsu knew she was going to spend what seemed like an outrageous amount of time in the palace. She would remain there until her dying day. If she couldn't get involved with other people, then she had no choice but to make do with ghosts. Whether or not she *wanted* to was irrelevant—it was her only option.

"They may be dead, but ghosts are prisoners of life," she said. "Their memories and emotions from when they were alive are tying them down. I want to set them free."

*Whereas for me, getting away is out of the question.*

Jusetsu found the situation to be twisted.

“You...” Koshun began, staring at the expression on Jusetsu’s face. “You talk a lot more than you did at first. You’re more open about your feelings now.”

Jusetsu shut her mouth and pursed her lips.

“Sometimes, when you save a ghost, you save a living person too. You’ve saved more people than you think—not just spirits,” Koshun said calmly. His words softly piled up inside Jusetsu’s heart like a light dusting of snow.

Unable to say anything, Jusetsu averted her gaze. Without any warning, Koshun had touched her heart. She couldn’t tell whether this made her feel annoyed or happy—but she did know that her chest felt just a bit warmer.

“You said that it was during a banquet that the man turned around, didn’t you?” Jusetsu said, forcibly shifting the conversation back to its original topic.

“Yes,” said Koshun.

“If it was a banquet, wouldn’t there have been musicians there as well?”

“Yes... That’s true. The host runs a large shop, so I expect he has his fair share of them in his employ.”

“If the man in the mask was a musician, he could have been responding to the sound of the music.”

Koshun crossed his arms. “The music?”

“There’s a lot of different kinds of music, but if it was a banquet, then...”

“The qin, the moon guitar, the lute, the harp, the whistle and the panpipe, and then there’s those two free reed instruments, sheng and the yu... I suppose that’s about it,” said Koshun, rattling off instruments as he counted on his fingers.

Jusetsu didn’t even know what some of these instruments were.

“Maybe if we got this mask to hear them, the man would turn around again,” she said. If the man responded, that would provide Jusetsu with some sort of clue.

“If that’s the plan, then it’s probably best that we ask the merchant in

question which instruments were being played at the banquet rather than just using whatever we can lay our hands on. I'll ask Meiin," said Koshun. He then stood up.

"Are you going home?" Jusetsu asked.

"Well, yes?"

Jusetsu silently glared at him.

"...If you need me for something, I'll stay for a bit longer." Koshun sat back down.

The young woman frowned. "I don't," she said, her annoyance clear. "You barge in here uninvited even when you don't need anything, and yet you have the audacity to want *me* to have a reason?"

Koshun's eyes opened wide in realization. "...No. That's a fair point," he said. He then looked as if he was cracking a smile, albeit only slightly. "In that case, let's have some tea—like friends do."

He glanced at Eisei, and the eunuch headed over to the kitchen without making a sound.

*He'll never talk about anything important now I've stopped him from leaving,* Jusetsu thought. She didn't know whether he was aware of it himself, but despite being excessively concerned about Jusetsu's feelings, the emperor never talked about himself at all.

A few days later, Koshun came back with an answer.

"He said that they were playing the flute and the lute. The musicians weren't under his employ, but there was a Songbird Troupe hired for that day."

"A Songbird Troupe..." Jusetsu repeated.

"Based on that, I think it was the sound of the lute that the man in the mask was responding to," said Koshun.

"What makes you say that?"

Koshun had brought the box with him again that day. He opened the lid and

took out the cloth mask.

“The cloth masks have different holes cut depending on the instrument they play,” he explained after spreading out the cloth. “They all have holes in the eyes, though.”

Koshun pointed at the mask’s mouth.

“For flute players, there’s a slit to the side of the mouth so they can better play the flute while wearing it. For whistle players, there’s a single, vertical slit for their lips. And then those who play other instruments don’t need another slit cut out of their masks.”

This mask had no slits.

“This mask belonged to someone who didn’t play a wind instrument. Wouldn’t a musician respond to the sound of the instrument that he played himself?”

Koshun was suggesting that the owner of the mask was a lute player, as it was a stringed instrument.

“That’s why I thought we should get the man in the mask to listen to someone playing the lute, but actually, I already tried that once. I sent for a lute player from the Bustard Residence and had them play, but the man in the mask didn’t turn around.”

“That means he probably *wasn’t* a lute player,” said Jusetsu.

“Then why would he have turned around at the banquet? Was he perhaps drawn to the sound of the flute, despite not playing it himself?”

The two of them pondered over this together.

“A Songbird Troupe...” Jusetsu whispered.

When she heard that term, Onkei had come to mind.

“...Eisei,” she called out to the eunuch.

“Yes, niangniang?” Eisei replied, albeit skeptically. “What do you require of me?”

“Onkei should be outside. Can you call him for me?”

“Onkei?” Koshun asked doubtfully.

“There’s something I want to ask him. If a Songbird Troupe is involved, Onkei would be the person to ask. He used to be a member of one.”

“Did he really?” Koshun said, turning back around to Eisei.

Eisei, in turn, looked at Jusetsu in surprise.

“He did indeed,” he confirmed. “You know a lot about him, don’t you, niangniang?”

“He told me himself.”

“Did he? He couldn’t have...”

“Was it wrong of me to ask? I haven’t told anybody else,” she said.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. I apologize. I was just surprised.” Eisei then hurried through the doors to call for Onkei.

“Eunuchs don’t like to talk about themselves,” Koshun explained once Eisei was gone. “Onkei must have really trusted you.”

“I don’t know about that,” Jusetsu said. Upon remembering Onkei’s painful story and the way he cried, she clammed up. Onkei had trusted her with his heart.

*I wonder if I’ll ever be able to repay him for that trust,* Jusetsu wondered.

Eisei then returned, bringing Onkei with him.

Jusetsu called Onkei to her side. “I want to ask you something about the instruments that Songbird Troupe musicians play.”

“Yes?” said Onkei. He kneeled down, but Jusetsu made him stand up again.

“Are they...special instruments of any sort? Are they any different to the ones that say, the musicians from the Bustard Residence play, for instance?”

Onkei appeared to be thinking for a few moments. “Generally speaking, no.”

“Generally speaking?”

“I’m not familiar with *every* Songbird Troupe, only my own. Sometimes, things vary greatly depending on the region. As for me, there’s only one person I know

who used a unique instrument.”

“Only one?”

“Yes. A musician in my Songbird Troupe had an unusual lute.”

“A lute...”

Onkei and Jusetsu exchanged looks at that. A lute player in Onkei’s Songbird Troupe. Jusetsu didn’t say anything, but Onkei gave her a slight nod.

“The person who played it was a young girl. Her lute was on the smaller side, and it was easy for her to carry with her thin arms. She could play it beautifully as a result. It must have been a fair size smaller than normal. Usually, lutes have four strings, but hers had five. The part where the tuning pegs are at the top of the lute is usually bent backward, but on hers, it was completely straight. Apparently, her lute originated from a small island in the west—Shicho Island, to the west of Do Province. It’s an island of exiles. I heard that the first such lute was made by an exile from a foreign land, but I don’t know whether or not that’s true... Having said that, you see lutes like hers all the time in Do Province, but in this region, it’s rare. The one that girl had is the only one I’ve ever seen.”

“Koshun,” Jusetsu called out to him, but she still turned toward Onkei. “Was there anything special about the lute that was played at the merchant’s banquet?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Koshun responded. “But...I did hear that a woman was playing it.”

“What?” said Jusetsu, turning around to look at him finally.

“That Songbird Troupe is known as ‘Vermillion Bird,’ and their leader is called Sha. I verified their identity, so there’s no question about it.”

When Jusetsu looked at Onkei again, he was flabbergasted.

“That was the Songbird Troupe I was a member of.”

“So that means...” *That female lute player was...*

“The lute being played at the banquet had to be that peculiar one.”

“We need a lute from Shicho Island, then,” said Koshun, crossing his arms.

"It'd be ideal if we had the one from that specific Songbird Troupe, but they've already left the imperial capital."

"What?" said Jusetsu, her shoulders dropping in disappointment.

"Still...if that lute came from a foreign land, that *does* provide us with a clue—although we still don't know why it attracts the attention of the man in the mask."

"Would there be one at the Bustard Residence?"

"No," said Koshun. "But there is one in the Gyoko Palace treasure vault. Do you want to come and see?"

Jusetsu declined. That eunuch who worked as the treasure vault keeper, Ui, would be there, and Jusetsu didn't like him. Being near him felt like she was standing in front of a door that shouldn't be opened.

Koshun left shortly after, taking Eisei home with him to check on the lute.

Jusetsu looked up at Onkei, who stood by her side. "I'm sure we could find out more about how the people in that Vermillion Bird troupe are doing, if we asked," she said.

Onkei immediately shook his head. "No. It's all right. As long as everyone seems to be in good health, that's all that matters," he said, letting out a little laugh. "After I was sent to the inner palace, I worried that they may have had their passes taken away, or that they might not have been able to do business anymore, but Attendant Ei already was so kind as to look into that for me. Last I heard, they weren't in the imperial capital anymore, but they were able to continue performing safely." Onkei lowered his voice to a small whisper, "Even Kiji."

"Kiji?" Jusetsu asked.

"The lute player," he explained. "Apparently, she has a reputation for being one of the greatest players around."

"...I see." It didn't seem to her like he had any intention of ever seeing her again.

"Niangniang," said Jiujiu, appearing from the kitchen door. "Would you like us

to serve the plums that His Majesty kindly gifted you?”

“Oh, right...” Jusetsu started to reply, but at that same time, Ishiha peeked out from Jiujiu’s side, holding Shinshin. The young eunuch had somehow become Shinshin’s caretaker. This mysterious bird was never one to grow attached to people, but strangely enough, it seemed to take quite a liking to Ishiha. It looked like he was taking it outside at that moment.

“Shinshin hasn’t been swooping down on you or pecking at you, has it, Ishiha?”

“Not at all. It’s being a very well-behaved bird, niangniang.”

*Well-behaved?* Jusetsu thought. She was very doubtful, but Ishiha seemed to be serious about it.

Ishiha let Shinshin down on the floor and stood glued to the spot, nervously looking in Jusetsu’s direction. *He must want some plums*, Jusetsu assumed, beckoning him over.

“You’re welcome to have some,” she said.

“Umm, well, actually, it’s not that. No, thank you,” said Ishiha, flustered, as he came over to Jusetsu’s side.

“...Well then, I shall excuse myself.” Onkei went to leave, but Jusetsu tried to stop him.

“Eat some plums too,” she said.

“No, I...” he started to say, but an order was an order, so he decided to follow her command.

“You see...” Ishiha said to Onkei timidly, “I believe it was you who put in a good word for me, so that I could work for the Raven Consort. I wanted to express my gratitude, but I haven’t had many chances to see you—for which I apologize. Thank you very much.”

His delivery was still unsteady, but Ishiha spoke politely, carefully separating each and every word from each other. It appeared that his desire to say this to Onkei had been the reason for his nervousness.

“I only made that recommendation because I believed it would benefit

niangniang... It wasn't for you." Onkei seemed bewildered.

"You helped me greatly, nonetheless. That's why I'm thanking you."

Ishiha was straightforward, but that puzzled Onkei.

"Is that right? That's good then," he answered simply.

Jiujiu brought over a bowl full of plums. The small pieces of fruit were so juicy that their strong flavors were about to burst out through their reddish-purple skins. A sweet aroma drifted through the air. Jusetsu gave Onkei and Ishiha a plum each before taking one for herself. She sat down on the ledge of her lattice window and bit into it.

In the summertime, everything around Jusetsu was vibrant and bursting with life. The sound of insects was deafening—even at night—and their calls obscured how dark it truly was. The brighter it got in the daytime, the fainter Uren Niangniang's shadow became. This was the Summer Sovereign's season.

Jusetsu had been gazing out of the window, but she then turned back around to Ishiha. "I heard the eunuch who was your instructor is sick. Did you know that?"

Ishiha—who was taking a big bite into his plum—wiped his sticky mouth. "Yes, I know. But I don't think it's an illness, as such."

"What do you mean?"

"My shifu—I mean, that man isn't my shifu anymore—is frightened. Everything frightens him. The sound of the wind, the sound of footsteps, shadows—the list goes on and on."

"What is he so scared of?"

"You, niangniang."

Jusetsu's eyes widened upon hearing Ishiha's response. "Me...?"

"When you came to my aid, you told him not to cane me anymore—and that if he did, nothing good would come of it. You said, 'I know your name now.'"

"Oh, yes." Jusetsu *had* threatened him. She'd threatened to use his name to place a curse on him. "...Are you really saying my threat was a bit *too*

effective?"

"I believe it was. He's become very fearful ever since. He says he saw a monster in your eyes, niangniang."

Jusetsu gulped, speechless. *A monster? In my eyes?*

"Ishiha," Onkei snapped at the boy reproachfully, startling him.

"I-I'm sorry. Well, I'm just saying that he was mistaken, and that's why he's frightened. There is no monster in niangniang's eyes."

Jusetsu clutched her own arm tightly. *What could that eunuch possibly have seen? A monster...?*

She was silent. She remembered the incident when she almost lost sight of herself—that time when Hyogetsu used Jiujiu as a pawn and injured her. An unstoppable rage and strength had surged inside her body, and she didn't feel like herself.

What, or who, had been controlling Jusetsu in those moments?

Suddenly, Jusetsu felt rather cold, like a shadow was creeping over her heart. A single bead of cold sweat trickled down her back.

The next evening, a messenger arrived from Koshun. It was Eisei.

"Could you please come to the Goshi Palace?" he said.

That was one of the palace buildings in the inner court, where the emperor lived. Jusetsu decided to take Onkei with her. Jiujiu made a pouty face at being left behind while Ishiha tried to pacify her.

"Does this mean there really was a lute in the vault?" Jusetsu asked.

Eisei didn't want to answer. "Save that question for when you see my master," he said curtly. He looked oddly disgruntled, but it seemed to be a regular occurrence.

They went through the Ringai Gate, which connected the inner palace with the inner court. The gatekeeper guards watched Jusetsu with blank looks on their faces. With her black ruqun and peonies in her updo, it was clear that she

was the Raven Consort.

The Goshi Palace was rather compact and was even closer to the inner palace than the Gyoko Palace. The blue glazed roof tiles gleamed in the evening light, and its vermillion-lacquered pillars looked darker in the shadows. The doors facing the outer passage were all wide open, letting the sound of music escape from the inside. Jusetsu could hear someone playing a string instrument—she assumed was indeed a lute. Its quiet, high-pitched, blunt sound rang out in the air, reverberating softly. It was as gentle as a ripple caused by drops of water falling onto the surface of a pond. There was also a faint scent of incense in the air. It had to be the aroma of fragrant wood. This was Jusetsu's favorite incense—the one she usually burned at home.

They continued making their way over the cobblestones that paved the path and went up the steps. They found Koshun sitting on a divan inside the palace building, listening carefully to the musician playing the lute. The eunuchs accompanying him stood next to the doors like stone statues. When Jusetsu appeared, Koshun raised his hand to stop the musician. The musician seated diagonally opposite him was wearing an ashy green robe and held an unusually shaped lute. The instrument was beautiful—it was tortoiseshell with inlaid layers of pearl shells, and decorated with a flower pattern.

"This is the exotic lute that was in the treasure vault," Koshun said, urging Jusetsu to sit in the seat next to him. "It's made of red sandalwood with tortoiseshell and pearl details from a marbled turban snail shell. It's smaller than an ordinary lute, and its neck is completely straight. It has five strings as well."

This lute had all the same features as the one Onkei had spoken of. Jusetsu looked over at him to find that he was facing toward her, nodding.

"It's the same shape as the one that Kiji had. Hers wasn't as luxurious as this fine piece, however," he said.

The box containing the mask had been placed by Koshun's side. He opened the lid and took it out once more.

"Take a look."

Jusetsu took the mask from him, spread it out, and peeked through the

eyeholes. Koshun commanded the musician to resume playing. A soft, blunt timbre began to resonate throughout the room.

Startled at what she was seeing, Jusetsu stiffened up. The man she could see through the eyeholes had turned around. His cheeks were emaciated, and his eyes were sunken. Underneath his shady, dark eyelids, his eyes had a piercing shine to them. His face was pale, and his lips were slightly open, although they were dry and drained of color.

Jusetsu moved her eyes away from the holes and glanced at the lute. As expected, the sound of the instrument seemed to be attracting his attention—but why? When Jusetsu looked through the eyeholes again, what she saw startled her. There was another pair of bloodshot eyes right in front of her, staring at her. They emitted a strange light. They belonged to the man in the mask.

Jusetsu found herself moving her face away.

“He’s peering at you, isn’t he?” Koshun said impassively.

Jusetsu nodded.

“He must be very...attached to the sound of this lute.”

“Well, yes.”

Koshun then stopped the music. “Let’s listen to what this musician has to say.”

He indicated the musician, using his eyes. He was an aging man in an ashy green robe. Most of his hair was gray, and it was tied in a topknot. His narrow face and hands were dry and deeply wrinkled. His fingers, however, were elegant. They were long and beautifully shaped—probably because he was a lute player.

The musician’s name was Sakyu Yo. He explained he had been in the Bustard Residence since the age of eighteen. Nowadays, though, he didn’t appear at banquets or rituals, and instead focused on training young musicians. In a stark contrast to his smooth lute playing, Yo’s voice was muffled, and he spoke haltingly.

"The other day...a young man from the Bustard Residence had the honor of being invited by His Majesty to play the lute for him. When I heard what that man had to say...I realized the man haunting the mask might have been an acquaintance of mine. Today, a messenger arrived—he came to call one of us to play this lute I'm holding now—so I told him about my suspicions."

"Who was this acquaintance of yours?" they asked.

"A man from the Bustard Residence, as I am. We were close in age and joined the Residence at about the same time. We both played the lute, but he was already celebrated as an accomplished player. His beloved instrument of choice was the five-stringed sort."

That man's name was Kitsu-puku Shihitsu, and he originated from Shicho Island, the small island in the west. That was also the island where five-string lutes were made.

"Shihitsu was a man of few words. He didn't socialize, and he never seemed to stray far from his instrument. To some extent, that was because the five-stringed lute is even more difficult to keep in tune than its four-stringed counterpart—the curved tuning peg part of the four-stringed makes it easier to tune, even during a performance. You play the five-stringed one with your fingers, but the four-stringed one is played with a plectrum, so that gives them different sound qualities. The five-stringed lute is difficult to play, and Shihitsu is the only musician I know who mastered it and could make it make the exact sounds he wanted it to. When he played, his lute produced sounds that no other person could replicate. The sound of his playing penetrated deep into your soul, making you feel like you were being enveloped in drizzling rain."

Yo looked down at the lute he was holding. It seemed more as if he was talking to the instrument, rather than Jusetsu.

"In contrast with the rich sounds he produced, however, Shihitsu was a gloomy and surly man. He spent day and night pouring all of his energy into silently polishing his craft, leaving no time for anything else. He would have been happy to spend all his waking hours playing the lute. I was envious of his ways, but at the same time, they scared me. Sometimes when he was playing, the sight of him would send a chill down my spine. It was almost as if he was

harboring a demon inside him. It felt as if playing the lute was the entire reason for his existence. I didn't know what would become of him if he didn't have that—and that thought scared me. As it turned out, I was actually right to be scared."

Yo stopped talking for a moment, looking tired.

"By that, you mean...?" Jusetsu said, urging him to continue. She also noticed that Yo hadn't looked over at the cloth mask at all.

"Anyhow, he never made friends with those around him, so a fair few of his peers gave him the cold shoulder. Some of that coldness stemmed from jealousy. Due to his disposition, he always failed to get people to enjoy themselves at banquets. As beautiful as his playing was, he lacked warmth... There wasn't one decisive incident, as such, but gradually, Shihitsu started being invited to play as a musician less and less. As it became more infrequent, the more his playing overpowered other musicians when he *did* appear in public—his skills were just that well-honed. Therefore, he was given even more of a wide berth. His outstanding playing stood out too much and spoiled the overall sound of a group. With no opportunity to show off his skills, Shihitsu devoted himself to refining his talent in the Bustard Residence. The sound of the Shihitsu's lute echoed throughout the place incessantly. He played constantly, without even taking a minute to rest... It was spine-chilling," said Yo. His voice trembled as he recalled the events of the time.

Jusetsu said nothing—so as not to interrupt his story—and let him continue.

"I did worry about whether he was eating, sleeping, and so on, but the most unbearable thing was being able to hear his playing at all hours of the day and night. It was far more impressive than the rest of the musicians, and it felt like relentless torment to us. Some of our peers filed complaints, but the sound didn't stop. One day, I reached the end of my tether and went to speak to him. He had been with his lute all day long and hadn't left his room, not even once. It had been a long time since I saw him last, so I was shocked by the way he looked. His cheeks were concave and sickly pale, and his body was horrifically thin. His sunken eyes, however, had a strange sparkle to them, and his hands wouldn't stop plucking away at his lute. Both its strings and its sternum had turned dark. They were clearly soiled by something—Shihitsu's blood. Playing

without a break had, as you would expect, hurt his fingers. Even when his skin had peeled off and his fingers were covered in blood, he carried on playing as if nothing had happened. I called out his name—‘Shihitsu’—but he didn’t even look at me. It felt as if his soul, and his soul alone, had already made its journey across the sea. I took the lute from his arms. He screamed and hurled himself at me. He threw his fists up into the air like a lunatic, and I was left badly beaten—but I knew that giving him the instrument again would be the wrong thing to do. If he continued playing it any longer, it’d kill him. I held onto the lute for dear life. I couldn’t understand why he was so desperate. He wasn’t a friend of mine or anything, so I hadn’t a clue... Before long, our peers heard the ruckus and came. They managed to restrain him. He was acting so unruly that they shut him inside his room and took his lute away. ‘Give me my lute back!’ Shihitsu kept shouting as he banged on the door, but by the time night fell, he went quiet. I assumed he gave up. The next day, however...we found him in his room, having hung himself.”

At that point in the tale, Yo looked up, but not at anything in particular. He let out a feeble sigh, then started talking again.

“I was left with Shihitsu’s bloodstained lute. I should have put it in his casket for him, but I was too shaken up at the time. I only realized I had it when I came back to my room after the funeral... That night, I heard a lute again. It was Shihitsu playing. It was that soul-penetrating, rain-like sound that nobody else could ever make—but it wasn’t coming from the lute. As quiet as it was, we could hear it from all over the Bustard Residence. We were all scared stiff. We thought that Shihitsu was still wandering about, unable to cross over the sea. We couldn’t bring ourselves to wait until the morning, so we threw his lute into a fire in the garden. At that point, the sound stopped. Everyone else felt reassured, but I was still nervous. He was probably still bearing a grudge against me. I was the one who took away his lute, after all. I checked his room again, because I was scared that if he left anything behind, he might come back. Only a few of his belongings were there, though. There was a writing brush, an inkstone, a worn-out robe, and last of all, a cloth mask... That one you have there.”

For the first time, Yo shifted his gaze toward the mask, but he immediately

looked away again.

“It was quicker to throw his possessions out than to burn them all—not that you can burn inkstones, anyway—so I asked our maid to dispose of them somewhere far away. After that, I finally felt at ease. It never even occurred to me it might still be around.”

He didn’t know whether the maid had sold it off instead of disposing of it, or whether someone else had picked it up and sold it after it was thrown out, but the cloth mask still existed.

“He never appeared at the Bustard Residence again, and we never heard his lute playing either—but it would seem that his soul still hasn’t made that journey over the sea, wouldn’t it?” Yo’s expression was strained. The man was terrified. “Shihitsu must want his lute. He wants to get back the instrument that I took from him. When I...confiscated it, it wasn’t out of concern from him. That’s how I justified my actions, but really, I just wanted to take away his musical talent. When I realized that was possible, I actually was delighted. That’s why I was so desperate not to let go. I envied his talent more than any of our other peers did. It’s *my* fault that he hasn’t been able to cross the sea.”

Yo’s face was pale as he admitted his true feelings. His voice sounded strained, as if a lump from the back of his throat was trying to come out of his mouth.

Jusetsu looked down at the mask again. She felt like she could see Shihitsu’s piercing bright eyes again, even without looking through it.

“...I suppose you could call it a ‘music demon.’ The man was possessed by music. He became even more attached to it after death. If you hadn’t taken away his lute, he likely would have transformed into a demon while he was still alive. In that sense, you could say that you gave Shihitsu the chance to die while he was still human, perhaps.”

Looking down, Yo shook his head. “That wasn’t my intention when I took his lute from him at all.”

“I don’t care what your intentions were,” Jusetsu rebuffed him. “Whether or not you meant to, you did stop Shihitsu from turning into a demon.”

Yo looked up at Jusetsu. “I see,” he said simply, nodding.

Jusetsu spread out the mask and held it up in front of her eyes.

“If we gave the man his lute after all this time, it could go one of two ways. Either his attachment would disappear, or he’d just become even more fanatical about it—in which case, he could still end up turning into a demon.”

While Jusetsu agonized about what to do, she looked over at the lute Yo was holding.

“Koshun, would it be a problem if we burned that lute?”

“Burn...?” Koshun said. His facial expression didn’t change—perhaps because he didn’t have the chance—but he seemed dumbfounded. “That...would indeed be a problem. A very big one, in fact.”

“Oh,” said Jusetsu.

“I can’t just do whatever I like with the things in the treasure vault. They don’t belong to me.”

“Fine,” said Jusetsu. Then, she turned to Yo. “Are there any five-stringed lutes in the Bustard Residence?”

“At present, there aren’t any five-stringed lute players there, so I don’t think so...but if I look hard enough, I might be able to find an old one sitting around somewhere.”

“If possible, a lute that nobody has used would be ideal. Have a look for me.”

Koshun called out to Eisei and had him head to the Bustard Residence with Yo. The Bustard Residence was located outside of the imperial estate, so it would take some time to go there and back again. Koshun had some tea and white honey dumplings prepared for Jusetsu. Koshun leaned back against the armrest as he watched the young woman cram the sweet snacks into her mouth.

“You must be aware, Koshun,” Jusetsu said.

“Aware of what?”

“I don’t take on requests for nothing. People have to give me something in

return."

"...It seemed like you took on Ishiha's request for free, though."

Jusetsu stopped eating and cast a sharp glance toward him. "Are you telling me I should force a *child* to pay?"

"But it's unfair, isn't it?"

"Things don't need to be fair. It was my decision. I make the rules."

Surprisingly, Koshun burst out laughing. "I see. I wish I could tell people that when they ask me questions too. I'm jealous."

Jusetsu had never seen Koshun laugh so hard that his shoulders moved before. Even the eunuchs who were standing next to the doors looked surprised.

But then, Koshun wiped the smile off his face. "...Never mind that. Forget I even said anything. It's inappropriate for me to say I'm jealous of you, considering the position you're in."

Jusetsu stared at Koshun's face. *He's far too earnest for his own good*, she thought. "I'm not *that* sensitive. You should say whatever you feel like saying. If I find something disagreeable, I shall let you know."

"I don't want you to find me disagreeable," he said.

Jusetsu went quiet, a huge scowl appearing on her face. He was so tiresome to deal with.

"Did you feel that way about me just now?" Koshun asked.

"No. I was just thinking about how tiresome you are."

"That's better than 'disagreeable.'"

*Is it?* Jusetsu thought. Still, grilling him about it would be tiresome too, so she held her tongue. She put yet another white honey dumpling in her mouth instead.

"How would you like me to thank you this time? With snacks? Or maybe some fruit?"

"Stop thinking you can get away with anything as long as you give me food," Jusetsu replied.

"If there's anything else you want, I'd be happy to provide it."

"There...isn't," Jusetsu responded moodily. It made Koshun laugh a little.

Before they knew it, Yo and Eisei were back. The musician was holding a small, old lute with five strings.

"Would something like this be all right?"

"Yes," said Jusetsu. "Play it for me."

Yo placed the lute on his knees and played the strings one by one, starting from the top. He fiddled with the tuning pegs to tune them, then played a short melody to check them again. Once he finished, he picked it up again and started performing a flowing tune.

The sound had a beautiful quality to it. The blunt, high-pitched sound was like a refreshing breeze gliding over some cobblestones. It was light and pleasant to the ear.

Jusetsu took the peony out of her updo and gently blew on its petals. They turned into something resembling fine silver powder and rained down on the surface of the mask. A flickering light twinkled and went out again as it touched the mask.

Facing the mask, Jusetsu called out his name. "Kitsupuku Shihitsu."

Initially, there was no response. After a few moments of waiting, however, they could hear a hoarse voice sighing during the pauses in Yo's lute playing. Suddenly, a white finger poked out through one of the eyeholes. Yo threw his head back in shock, but Jusetsu told him with her eyes not to stop playing. The man carried on—although his face looked tense.

The white finger moved about, and then it was followed by a crooked hand. It was just skin and bones—like an elderly person's hand. Next came an arm resembling a withered tree, followed by the ragged sleeve of a robe. The hand moved around, probing the air. Then, a shoulder slipped out, and the body of a man began to emerge, slithering through the eyehole which seemed almost impossible to slip through. This man placed his hands on the table and started to lift himself out of the mask. His face was pale and gaunt, and his lips were dry and cracked. His eyes were sunken in and misted over, but they were the only

part of him that had a strange light to them.

He looked about the room, wide-eyed.

Then his gaze fixed upward. Yo shivered but bit his lip, doing his best to hold back a scream. The ghastly man had his gaze on the lute. He squirmed along the ground, making his way toward it. Yo clearly wanted to run, but being a professional, he naturally kept on playing despite his nerves. The ghost seemed to have been seduced by the sound of the music and extended his bony hand. For a moment, it looked as if he was going to reach its strings, but then he started to crumble into dust and disappear. Perhaps he wasn't disappearing—no, he was being swallowed up by the sound of the lute.

As his body moved, he faded and became engulfed by the sound. First, his arms disintegrated into sand. Then, his shoulders and his face did too. The sand glistened like silver powder. His legs soon followed. Eventually, every last part of him—even to the very tips of his shoes—was gone. All he left behind him was a faint shimmer.

Jusetsu got Yo to keep performing for a little while longer, and then she raised her hand to stop him.

"That's enough," she said. She stood up, taking the lute from his hands while also holding the mask.

Jusetsu left via the outer passage and went down the steps. The sun had already fallen from the sky and a dim veil of darkness had descended upon the land. The buds on the pagoda tree planted next to the palace building were obscured by the darkness and looked to be a shade of bluish black. Jusetsu placed the lute and the mask next to the tree and stepped away. As she did this, pale red flames rose from the instrument. They weren't fiery—they were gentle. It flickered slightly in the blue darkness. The fire tenderly flicked at the lute and the mask, and they started to incinerate the items without making a sound. There was no unpleasant smell of things being burned. Instead, the air was filled with the scent of fragrant flowers. The lute and mask would flicker with a tinge of white inside the flames every now and then as they were being destroyed. Just before the two things were finished burning completely, Jusetsu heard strings being played—a sound which lingered even after the flame had

gone out.

The darkness returned at last.

Jusetsu turned back toward the palace building. Yo was standing in front of the doors, not moving.

"I believe Shihitsu has made it over the sea now," she declared.

Yo fell to his knees and gave her a deep bow, his hands placed in front of him to express his deference.

"The sun has set completely. I'll have Eisei take you home," Koshun said, looking up at the sky. Yo had already been sent back to the Bustard Residence.

"I don't need him to. I have Onkei."

"It's better to have two bodyguards than one."

"Are you aware of who you're talking to...?" Jusetsu said, staggered. The night was the Raven Consort's to rule over.

"You shouldn't overestimate your own strength. Sometimes, you need to remind yourself that you are still just a sixteen-year-old girl."

Jusetsu scowled, but Koshun forced her to leave with Eisei anyway. A throng of eunuchs followed the emperor as he left himself.

Eisei lit his candlestick, stood in front of Jusetsu, and started walking forward. He always followed Koshun's demands with unquestioning obedience, but he still made no effort to conceal his dislike of the young woman. He looked displeased on this occasion too.

"Is Koshun tired?" Jusetsu asked Eisei as he walked ahead of her through the gate.

Eisei glanced back at her. "My master is an extremely busy man, so there's never a time when he *isn't* tired."

"If he's that busy, why does he come to me with these requests?"

Eisei cast Jusetsu a sharp glance. It occurred to Jusetsu that this man was probably the only person who'd give her—the Raven Consort—such a ferocious

glare.

“I would like the privilege of asking him that too,” he said.

“I’m sure you could stop him,” said Jusetsu.

“I could never carry out such an irreverent act.”

“That doesn’t mean you can take your petulance out on me, though.”

Eisei frowned. “I’m not.”

Jusetsu wanted to ask him why he was making such a face—but didn’t. “Just go home. Onkei is the only bodyguard I need.”

“I cannot go against my master’s orders.”

Jusetsu had already shut her mouth. She didn’t feel like they were on the same wavelength at all.

“...Until this point, he and I had a shared focus—the empress dowager,” Eisei began after they’d been walking for a little while longer, although it wasn’t clear why he’d chosen to bring this up. “Something that had been lying dormant during that time is shackling him now that the empress dowager is dead.”

Jusetsu stared at Eisei’s back. This was a roundabout way of putting things, but she could understand what he was saying, to a certain extent.

“That which vexes the emperor has been more or less the same since time immemorial.”

Outside relatives—the kith and kin of his consorts.

“The top consort in the inner palace at present is Kajo. She’s the granddaughter of the Grand Chancellor, isn’t she?” asked Jusetsu.

“Grand Chancellor Un has been a close adviser to my master since his time as the crown prince.”

“Right. Then the Un family must be the most powerful family around at present,” Jusetsu said. “Did Koshun choose to take Kajo as one of his consorts to avoid her family’s wrath?”

“...What makes you say that?”

"Since he won't give her a child," she remarked.

Eisei didn't reply, but he didn't deny it either.

Kajo still had feelings for her deceased lover. She may have been in the inner palace as a consort, but she and Koshun weren't a couple. Naturally, having children was out of the question for them. In other words, the Un family weren't going to get their crown prince. From Kajo's relatives' perspective, if they had a crown prince in their line, Koshun would exhaust his usefulness. If his presence ever got in their way, he could be disposed of. Regardless of whether the Un family would actually go that far, Koshun was suppressing their tyranny by not having a child. And yet, because of this, he couldn't afford to weaken their strength too much either. Their ties to him were too strong, and they were his allies too.

Koshun's nerves must have been frayed.

"...He shouldn't have any time to bother with me," Jusetsu whispered.

"Exactly," Eisei replied coldly. "But my master is an earnest and kindhearted gentleman. That's why he can't leave you alone."

Jusetsu could almost hear the voice inside his head going, "*I wish he would, though.*"

Eisei stopped in his tracks and looked back at Jusetsu. His beautiful features stood out in the candlelight. "You, too, shall bring misfortune upon my master someday," he said.

The eunuch had a gloomy, exasperated look in his striking eyes, along with one of irrepressible fear.

Jusetsu gazed intently into them. "...Koshun is lucky to have someone like you by his side," she told him.

Eisei clasped his mouth shut and turned away from the young woman. He started walking quietly again, as if they'd never been talking at all. The light from his candlestick flickered in front of him, illuminating him in an outline.

When they reached the Yamei Palace, Eisei came to a stop in front of the steps and ushered Jusetsu inside. Once Jusetsu had climbed them and was

standing in front of the doors, she turned back around.

“Thank you,” she called out to Eisei and Onkei.

Onkei had been stealthily following them from behind, not saying a single word. The two men bowed to her and didn’t look up until she disappeared inside.

“Onkei... There’s something I want to discuss with you,” Eisei declared, turning back the way they’d come after making sure that Jusetsu had entered the palace building.

Onkei, however, didn’t move. “Are we going back to the inner court?” he asked, looking somewhat baffled. “I have my guard duties to take care of here at the Yamei Palace.”

Eisei was annoyed. “Don’t be mistaken,” he said. “You’re not a Yamei Palace eunuch. You’re our master’s eunuch.”

“I know,” Onkei said with a nod, as if this was a given—but Eisei frowned.

Onkei may not have been aware of it yet, but the man was already halfway to becoming one of Jusetsu’s eunuchs.

This was the cause of Eisei’s recent sour moods. Before he knew it, Jusetsu had managed to gather more and more people around her. Even Onkei—the person he’d treated with the utmost care since he was still a neophyte and trained up as his right-hand man—had gotten mixed up in it all. A feeling of uneasiness had spread throughout his heart. It was like when a single drop of ink dripped into some water—it muddied the whole glass.

“...In that case, let’s talk as we handle the night patrol.”

Eisei went to retrace the path they’d taken and turned toward the wood of bay trees and rhododendrons that surrounded the Yamei Palace. Onkei followed him.

“I didn’t send you to the Yamei Palace so that you could get in cahoots with the Raven Consort. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

He'd stationed Onkei with the Raven Consort so that he could give him detailed reports about her. First and foremost, his job was to be a spy.

Onkei's reply wasn't hesitant at all, but he still had more to add. "Do you really need to be so wary?" he asked. "Jusetsu is *helping* our master, not taking vengeance upon him."

"...Isn't that a reason to be afraid?" Eisei whispered, too quietly for Onkei to hear.

The other man looked puzzled, but Eisei said no more.

Jusetsu had helped Koshun by dispelling the empress dowager's curse. Eisei also knew that, despite her attitude, she was a good-natured and compassionate young woman. He also recognized that she was the person with whom Koshun could enjoy brief moments of peace. Those reasons were precisely why he was afraid. It was a fear that he couldn't put into words properly. He was scared that one day, this would turn out to be a trap—a trap of vengeance—and Koshun would fall for it.

The idea horrified him.

"Attendant Ei," Onkei suddenly called out, his voice tense. He was frozen to the spot.

"What is it..." Eisei started to say, but then he found himself taken aback as well.

The two of them were in the woods, with the moonlight shining down through the trees. Their surroundings weren't particularly dark, but the shadows were. They could smell something coming from deeper inside.

Both eunuchs fell silent—but when they exchanged glances, they could see a glint of caution in each other's eyes. The two steadied their breathing and proceeded in the direction that the smell was coming from, taking care not to make a sound.

The closer they got to the source, the stronger the smell became. It was a metallic, stale odor.

Blood.

Eisei and Onkei stopped. They had come to a spot where an old tree had decayed and fallen to the ground, leaving a gap where it once stood. Places like this could be found here and there in the forests and woodlands. With the branches and leaves that blocked sunlight gone, the sun could pour in during the daytime and young trees thrived. That was how woodlands renewed themselves.

At this time of night, however, moonlight was shining down on this spot. Its white light cast a glow on the rotting, moss-covered fallen tree. The light of the moon was reminiscent of a sharp blade—it was a lucent, sharp, and merciless light.

The moonlight illuminated a person lying near the fallen tree. It was a young woman dressed in a court lady's ruqun. Her vacant eyes looked up toward the sky, unmoving. One of her arms was stretched out and her fingers were frozen stiff and distorted. Both her robe and the ground below her were stained a dark red from the blood that poured out from her neck.

Something had taken a bite out of the young woman's throat.





Yearning  
Aroma



**“A BEAST...?”**

“Yes, or so I’ve heard,” Jiujiu replied as she combed Jusetsu’s hair.

When she woke up that morning, Jiujiu could hear the sound of birds chirping from the woods, making a lot of noise. She went outside to see what was happening. Nearby, she found several eunuchs from the Bridle House—an organization under the direct control of the emperor tasked with cracking down on crime within the inner palace—carrying swords in their belts. They were running about in confusion, looking nervous. Apparently, the body of a court lady had been discovered in the woods. Judging from her wounds, it was surmised that a beast likely attacked her.

“They say something took a bite out of her throat... What if it was a wild dog, a wolf...or a tiger?”

“A tiger might have been a possibility if we were in the mountains, but there aren’t any in a place like this. I’ve never seen a wild dog in the inner palace, either. Are there any around?” asked Jusetsu.

“I think wild dogs have gotten in on occasion. There was a eunuch who died after being bitten by one. Pus formed in his wounds, and he suffered terribly...” Jiujiu shuddered, her face pale.

“Which palace did the dead court lady work for?”

“Nobody knows yet. They’re asking around at all the different palaces to check whether any court ladies have gone missing.”

Jusetsu paused. “Could that court lady have been on her way here?”

...Had the unfortunate woman been coming to see the Raven Consort with a request, but had been attacked by a beast before she made it there?

Jiujiu peered at Jusetsu’s face in the mirror. “No. I’m sure the beast chased her, and this was as far as she was able to run,” she said in a fluster, trying to protect Jusetsu’s feelings.

Jusetsu stared into the mirror. Her reflection was gloomy, and she wore a helpless expression. She straightened up her back and tried as hard as she could

to look stern. The mirror was octagonal, and it was heavily ornamented. Materials like turban shells, amber, tortoiseshell, and lapis lazuli had been used to depict flowers and birds in a traditional inlaid decoration style. Jusetsu traced the edge of the mirror with one of her pale fingers and took a close look at her own face...or rather, her hair.

“Does my hair still look all right?” she asked.

“It looks absolutely fine. You’ve got beautiful black hair.”

Jusetsu was checking whether or not the dye had faded. Jiujiu didn’t know about Jusetsu’s situation, but she didn’t want to ask too much about it either. Koshun had repealed the order demanding the capture and killing of the entire Ran family, so there was no longer a chance of her being killed if people found out she was a survivor. Even so, she still couldn’t bring herself to go back to having silver hair. It would simply cause trouble.

There was one difference, however. She didn’t feel that harrowing fear of being hunted down anymore. Koshun had wanted to help her in some small way, and the effort he made to that end had given her relief. She no longer woke up every morning with an onerous sense of despair, dreading the idea of having to survive yet another day. Her heart felt a little bit lighter—and warmer too.

“I’m going to dress as a eunuch today,” Jusetsu said.

“Understood,” Jiujiu responded. She started to do Jusetsu’s hair and gathered it up in one section rather than her usual two loops. As she did that, however, she worriedly added, “Are you *really* going out? A wild dog might appear.”

“I expect they act during the night. That was when that court lady was attacked, after all. Besides, I’ll never be able to take a single step out of the door if you keep saying things like that.”

“You stay in more often than not, anyway, don’t you? Why do you have to go out on a day like this, of all days?”

“The Winter Minister could retire at any time.”

She was planning on going to see Setsu Gyoei. She found going there in a litter to be far too ostentatious—once was more than enough. Even so, she’d

stand out too much if she went on foot in her consort attire. Disguising herself as an official would have been ideal, but due to her size and appearance, Jusetsu would just look like a prepubescent boy if she dressed as a man. As a result, she opted to dress as a eunuch instead.

“And I bet you’re intending on just taking Onkei with you, aren’t you?” Jiujiu huffed.

“Weren’t you the one who was telling me it was unsafe because a wild dog could be out there?”

“If it’s dangerous for me, then that must mean it’s dangerous for you too, niangniang,” Jiujiu said sulkily, pouting. “I wouldn’t ask you to take me with you though... I’d hate to slow you down in the unlikely scenario that something *did* happen.”

Even as she said this, her hands moved like clockwork to tie Jusetsu’s hair up in a topknot. Behind them, Shinshin had its wings closed, behaving itself. Whenever Jusetsu was planning to go out, the bird kicked up a fuss, so this was unusual. It didn’t even try to go out through the curtains. Instead, it almost seemed like Shinshin was scared of some kind of outside enemy and was simply quietly listening out for any signs of it.

When Jusetsu had put on her light gray, mouse-colored robe and went outside, she could still hear the sound of birds chirping restlessly and fluttering their wings about in the trees.

“Do they still not know which palace that court lady worked for...?” she asked Onkei. The man was following her.

“They were able to determine that she worked for the Jakuso Palace,” he replied.

“The Jakuso Palace...?” Jusetsu repeated back in a whisper. That palace had been on Jusetsu’s mind as of late. “Was she trying to get to the Yamei Palace?”

“That has not yet been discerned.”

The fact that the victim was a court lady reminded Jusetsu of someone who visited her before. That woman was a court lady as well. She had pleaded with her, asking her to bring a dead person back to life. The scent of Yearning Aroma

had followed her about. Jusetsu didn't know what she had looked like since her face was covered by thin silk, but...what color was her ruqun that night?

*Who in the world was that court lady?*

Jusetsu silently turned these things over in her mind as she walked. Then she looked back at Onkei. "Did that court lady usually use Yearning Aroma?"

Onkei looked puzzled. "Well, it's hard to say. The stench of blood was so strong last night that I didn't get to..." He clamped his mouth shut with a start, but it was already too late.

"Onkei, was it *you* who discovered the corpse?"

Now that Jusetsu thought about it, it *did* make sense. He was the Yamei Palace's guard, after all.

"...It was," he admitted, looking frustrated that the cat was out of the bag. "I found her while we were out on our night patrol."

"You should have informed me."

"It wasn't appropriate for you to hear about it, niangniang. After all, the corpse was a gruesome sight to behold."

"Is it true that something had taken a bite out of her neck?"

Onkei frowned. "Did somebody disclose such information to you?"

"Jiujiu had gotten wind of it," Jusetsu explained.

Onkei looked troubled.

"She can be slightly too curious for her own good. Still, I know she's not a bad girl," Jusetsu continued.

"And that's all that matters." Onkei laughed a little. Once he'd gotten used to a person, his expressions were surprisingly varied.

"I've heard that a beast was behind it. Do you know anything about that?"

"Going by her injuries, I think she was definitely bitten, but..." Onkei hesitated. "The teeth marks looked more like those of a wild dog or a wolf rather than those of a beast."

“Does that mean it was a beast with no incisors? Would such a beast even attack someone?”

“Even apes have incisors. Perhaps it was...” Onkei went quiet, as if he was afraid to go on.

Jusetsu stroked her lip. ...*Humans have canines too*, she thought. *It couldn't have been a person, could it?*

“There was one more thing I found suspicious. There was an enormous amount of blood in the area, but very little of it was on the neck wound itself.”

Jusetsu placed a finger on her chin and gave this a little thought. “...Are you saying that she might've been brought there after dying somewhere else?”

“It's a possibility. If that's the case, then we should find additional evidence in the surrounding area as long as we look hard enough. It was too dark last night to tell much.”

The eunuchs still prowling about in the woods must have been there to look for it.

“Either way, I encourage you to refrain from going outside alone, niangniang.”

“Jiujiu wouldn't allow me to either.”

Onkei's expression softened. “Oh, of course,” he said. “Make sure you listen to her.”

Jusetsu got the feeling that he was starting to nag her as much as Jiujiu did.

By the time they arrived at the Seiu Shrine, there was already another visitor there—Koshun. There was a table set up in the outer passage and he sat opposite Gyoei. The two were playing a game of Go. The board was made of red sandalwood with carvings on the sides, and the red and blue stones had birds and flowers painted on them. When Jusetsu saw how luxurious it all looked, she figured Koshun had brought it with him. It wasn't even noon, so it was unusual to find him in a place like this.

“The imperial council meeting happened to finish early, so I came here,” Koshun responded to Jusetsu's yet-unasked question—he could tell by the look

on her face what she wanted to say.

Jusetsu peered at the Go board. “Are you holding back, Gyoei?”

Gyoei was holding a dark blue Go stone and appeared to be losing.

“No, no, not at all. His Majesty is an impressive player.” It sounded like the old man was being truthful. He grunted and stroked the beard at the end of his chin.

“Eitoku has been teaching me how to play since I was a child,” Koshun explained.

“Grand Chancellor Un once even defeated a Go master, didn’t he? I can see where you get it from now.”

Jusetsu sat down on the seat that one of Gyoei’s subordinates had brought over for her and loosened her collar. It was cool in the shade on the outer passage, but she was sweating because of how far she walked.

“I resign,” Gyoei declared. “Would you like a game, Raven Consort?”

Jusetsu glanced at the top of the board and frowned. “I’m not worth playing against,” she said.

“Oh, my. You aren’t a good Go player?” Gyoei asked.

“Reijo taught me how to play, but I never won a game. Making allowances for weaker players was not a concept that she acknowledged.”

“I used to play against her often too. She certainly always gave it her all, didn’t she?” Gyoei’s eyes narrowed with nostalgia. It was as if he could see Reijo’s face through Jusetsu’s.

“Which of you was the better player?” Jusetsu asked.

“Let me think... I think I had 123 wins, 105 losses, and 15 draws against her.”

*He remembered that well,* Jusetsu thought as she gazed at Gyoei’s face. He stroked his beard again and looked away. He then turned back to the Go board and started picking up the blue Go stones with his fingers. He put them back into a small container, one at a time, with the utmost care. With his head turned to the side, he was silently refusing to say any more about Reijo.

For him, the thought of her seemed to bring him both pain and nostalgia.

“...You say you want to retire, but what will you do after that? Will you return to your hometown?” Jusetsu asked.

Gyoei was unmarried and didn’t even have a residence outside the estate. Jusetsu wondered if he even had anywhere to go when he left.

“My younger brother does business in the area around the estate. He runs an oil shop. I’m planning on scrounging off him. Well, I say that, but I’m sure even an old fool like me could make himself useful in some way,” he said detachedly. He then offered the container full of Go stones to Jusetsu.

“Raven Consort, how about you add a few handicap stones when you lay them out? Five of them would do. You should be able to compete with His Majesty that way.”

He was suggesting she leave out some of the stones and have Koshun go easy on her.

“I refuse,” Jusetsu said moodily.

Gyoei let out a hearty chuckle. “I suppose you must have gotten your competitiveness from Reijo,” he commented. Then, he placed his hands on the table and slowly got up. “It’s tired me out somewhat, having His Majesty be my first opponent in such a long time. Please be so kind as to excuse me for today.”

With that, the Winter Minister foisted the container of Go stones on Jusetsu and left the outer passage to go back inside. Immediately after, he was escorted out of that room by his subordinates. Jusetsu glared at the container, but then reluctantly sat herself down opposite Koshun.

“I don’t mind whether you put out five handicap stones or nine,” Koshun said in a relaxed tone.

Jusetsu frowned. “You don’t need to go easy on me,” she said.

“Do I not? In that case, let’s start on equal footing.”

That meant not putting out any handicap stones at all. Jusetsu frowned even harder.

“I’m just going to...put out...three,” said Jusetsu, sounding so distressed that it

made Koshun laugh.

“That’s fine. Whatever you like,” he replied.

As it turned out, Jusetsu was—understandably—unable to claim victory with just three handicap stones in place. In their next game, she used five, but it was still utterly hopeless. Koshun had an unconcerned look on his face the whole time, which annoyed Jusetsu to no end.

“You give up too quickly,” said Koshun. He was criticizing every little move that Jusetsu made. “As soon as you’re at a disadvantage, you sacrifice your stones to me. Persevere.”

“What’s the use of being patient with something like this?”

“Well, you’ll only get upset if you lose.”

“Be quiet,” she snapped back.

They put the Go stones back in the container to play another game. Jusetsu hurriedly shoved them in there, making *click-clack* noises as she did so. Koshun instead calmly placed the stones inside the container one at a time.

“Now then,” he began, and picked one stone up...but right at that very moment, Eisei appeared from around the corner of the outer passage, with two—no, three—other eunuchs following behind him.

“Master, it’s time for you to go back.”

“Oh, is it that time already?”

Koshun put the Go stone back in the container, put the lid on, and stood up. He was quitting while he was ahead. He looked down at Jusetsu. “If that wasn’t enough to satiate you, I’d be happy to play with you another time.”

“I have no desire to play with *you* again.”

“Play with Eisei, then,” the emperor said, looking over at the eunuch.

Eisei’s face looked as if it were saying, “*If you so command, then there’s nothing I can do about it—but I’d rather not.*”

Jusetsu said, “Absolutely not.”

The fact that she turned down the very suggestion left Eisei looking

disgruntled. How was he supposed to react to that?

The eunuchs put the Go board away in a beautiful wooden case inlaid with colored ivory.

Watching that out of the corner of her eye, Jusetsu posed Koshun a question. “...Did you know that a court lady died near the Yamei Palace?”

“Yes, I did hear about that,” he replied with a nod. “They’re hunting for beasts in the inner palace as we speak. You should avoid wandering about too much.”

“Apparently, she worked for the Jakuso Palace.”

“She did,” Koshun said, before looking at Jusetsu. “Did you know her?”

“No...”

Even if the dead court lady was the woman who visited her that one night, it wasn’t as if there was anything she could do about it.

Still, Jusetsu went on. “If you find out what her name was, tell me. I’ll burn a silk feather for her. That way, she’ll be able to cross the sea with no hesitation.”

A silk feather was a bird’s wing made out of paper and was used to mourn the dead. Koshun signaled to Eisei with his eyes.

“Her name was Josei,” the eunuch answered.

Jusetsu asked how it was written and made a mental note of it. “Did she use Yearning Aroma?” she asked him.

“I wouldn’t know,” Eisei replied brusquely.

“Yearning Aroma?” Koshun said. “Isn’t that an incense you burn for your lover? The one that smells like lilies?”

Jusetsu was surprised to hear that coming from him. “I didn’t expect you to be so knowledgeable about those kinds of things.”

“I’ve heard of it before, you see. The Magpie Consort perfumes her robes with it.”

“...What?”

*The Magpie Consort uses it on her robes?* Jusetsu thought. No, it wasn’t as if

there was anything particularly strange about a consort using the scent of Yearning Aroma on her robes for the emperor—but Jusetsu still felt oddly uneasy about it. A sense of anxiety was creeping in, carrying a gloomy shadow along with it.

“I heard that the Magpie Consort was unwell... Is that still the case? I believe you went and paid her a visit before.”

“She’s no better. I sent errand runners to check up on her while I was unable to, but they said she was still bedridden.”

*I never expected him to take such faithful care of his consorts,* Jusetsu briefly found herself thinking—but she was now more concerned about the Magpie Consort’s condition.

“Is it a long illness of some kind?” she asked.

“She’s not *sick*. Well, I suppose it is a kind of sickness. She’s depressed and hasn’t been eating or sleeping properly.”

“That must be...really serious.”

Eating and sleeping were the foundations of life.

“It really is. It started when a loved one of hers passed away recently.”

“Oh?” Jusetsu asked.

“Yes, her brother. He apparently had been in good health, but he was hit in the wrong place when he fell off his horse.”

Jusetsu said nothing. A dead person and Yearning Aroma. Those things reminded Jusetsu of the woman who visited her that night, imploring her to bring someone back from the dead.

“I’m thinking about sending her back to her family home to recuperate if she isn’t going to get better as she is. The Kin family... Oh, the Magpie Consort’s name is Kin Keiyo, by the way. Her father’s name is Kokei, and he’s the vice-minister at the secretariat. He’s part of the Midwinter Faction, so I wanted to give his daughter a warm welcome by taking her as one of my consorts.”

“The Midwinter Faction?”

“To put it simply, they’re a family who has nothing to do with the Un family.”

He really had been surprisingly frank. In other words, he wanted to assign members of the Kin family to important positions in order to rein in the Un family.

“You should probably send her back to her parents instead of letting her die in vain in the inner palace,” Jusetsu said.

Koshun started walking along the outer passage, and Jusetsu went to go stand beside him. The eunuchs reverently holding up the case containing the Go board followed them. When they proceeded toward the shrine itself, they found Gyoei waiting there alongside his subordinates, presumably to see the emperor off.

“Take care on your journey home,” he said in a rehearsed fashion, then bowed.

“You should take care of yourself too. Don’t overdo it.”

Koshun’s concern made Gyoei laugh softly. “Thank you very much,” he said. “I shall do what I can.”

Koshun went to turn toward his litter, but then looked back at Jusetsu, appearing to have remembered something.

“Aren’t you...going to wear it?” he asked haltingly, glancing at Jusetsu’s belt area.

As vague as Koshun was being, Jusetsu knew what he was talking about—the glass fish. Jusetsu looked at Koshun’s waist, and there hung a glass fish of his own. The one that Jusetsu had was still stowed away in her cabinet.

“Didn’t you like it?” Koshun asked.

“It’s not like that,” she said.

Koshun fell silent at that. His face was expressionless, but somehow, he still looked kind of sad. Unable to bear it, Jusetsu quietly continued to speak.

“...I didn’t want to lose it. That’s the reason...”

Koshun was quiet for a little while, staring at Jusetsu. “I see. In that case, I

shall make you something that you wouldn't mind losing."

"What?"

"I'll carve something for you. If you lose it, I can easily make you a replacement. I take it you'd prefer a flower rather than a fish?"

He must have said this because he remembered Jusetsu asking for a rose carved out of wood before.

"I don't want anything," Jusetsu said, turning him down.

Koshun didn't pay her words any mind. "There's no need to hold back," he simply said—and then he climbed into his litter. He was through the gates before Jusetsu had the chance to say anything else.

The moment Koshun passed the gates, Eisei turned his eyes toward Jusetsu, then looked away again.

As she was watching the group leave, Gyoei called out to her. "Raven Consort?"

Jusetsu turned around to find that Gyoei's subordinates had disappeared, and he was standing by her, alone. Onkei was waiting for her a little further away.

"Sympathy and love are two different things," the old man said. "You know that, don't you?"

His sudden statement made Jusetsu frown. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

"If you don't understand what I mean, it's best that things stay that way. I could tell you not to get any closer to His Majesty than you already are, but I expect that would be impossible."

"Tell that to Koshun instead. He's the one that always comes and visits me uninvited."

"His Majesty is a deeply compassionate fellow. Don't forget: 'The Raven Consort must not want for anything.'"

Gyoei didn't need to tell her this—this was what Reijo always warned her.

"I know," she said.

“Desire creates suffering. Once you’ve let it engulf you...that’s when a monster will be created from within you.”

Jusetsu gulped. A *monster*? She stood there, frozen to the spot.

Ishiha’s words played back in her head. “*He says he saw a monster in your eyes, niangniang.*”

Gyoei bowed to Jusetsu with his hands placed together and turned his back.

“When you feel like you are losing your way, please try to remind yourself of what I said.”

He left her with those parting words and went back to the shrine. They sounded more like a final farewell. When Jusetsu came back to her senses, she went to catch up to him, but he had already disappeared from sight. Left all alone, Jusetsu was at a total loss. She felt as if she’d been tossed up into the air with no one around to catch her.

But she *wasn’t* alone. Onkei walked up to her, his footsteps not making a sound.

“Shall I arrange a litter for you, niangniang? You don’t look well.”

“No,” said Jusetsu, shaking her head. “I’m fine. I’ll walk home.”

Walking would distract her from thinking. Jusetsu headed toward the gate, but then she glanced at Onkei.

“I’m glad I have you,” she told him.

She was feeling so helpless that she let her true feelings slip out.

All Onkei did was give her a small smile in return.

When they got back to the Yamei Palace, Jusetsu issued a request to Onkei.

“I want you to do some investigating into the Jakuso Palace. Please find out more about the Magpie Consort’s situation.”

“Understood,” he said.

Onkei left the palace in no time at all. Being as shrewd as he was, Jusetsu

expected he would be back before long, having learned what she wanted to know.

Jusetsu entered the palace building and called out to Jiujiu. “Do you remember that piece of silk that the court lady dropped and left behind? Get it out for me.”

Jiujiu brought the fabric in from another room. Jusetsu brought it close to her face. It still smelled like Yearning Aroma. She spread it out and examined it, seeing how it felt to the touch. The material it was made out of was astoundingly light, and it was sleek and smooth on the skin. It had been carefully woven using the finest quality silk.

“I thought so when I touched it the first time, but this is far too luxurious to belong to a court lady,” Jusetsu observed.

“Now that you mention it, you have a point,” said Jiujiu. “Some court ladies are well-off, though.”

Jusetsu thought back on what that woman looked like that night. She wore a court lady robe with this piece of fine silk on her head. However—from the moment she came in, to the moment she left—she didn’t bow to the Raven Consort once.

Not one single time.

Could that have been because she was in such a frenzy? Could a court lady—who would have had good manners hammered into her—really allow herself to not even offer a *consort* a single bow? The fact that she came to Jusetsu to ask her to bring someone back to life—a request made out of pure desperation—only made that even more implausible.

“What’s wrong, niangniang?” Jiujiu asked apprehensively.

“Nothing...” slowly replied Jusetsu. She stood there, clutching the fine silk with a grave look on her face.

Jusetsu instructed Jiujiu to put it away again. She then headed over to the cabinet to take out an inkstone and some ink. She also got out some colored hemp paper in the shape of a bird feather—the silk feather she mentioned earlier. Legend had it they used to be made of cotton, and even longer ago, tree

bark cloth was typically used. That went to show just how long such a custom had been used to mourn the dead. Jusetsu ground some ink and picked up her brush. She wrote the name “Josei” on one sheet of colored hemp paper, the name of the court lady who’d died.

Then Jusetsu carried the paper and a flower-shaped silver plate with legs out through the palace doors. She went down the stairs and placed the plate on top of the cobblestones. She touched her hair with her hand for a peony, but then realized that since she was still dressed as a eunuch, her flowers weren’t there. Instead, she turned her palm upward and held it out in front of her. A red light flickered, and then one—then two—petals took shape. Moments later, a full, blooming peony was sitting there in her palm. She clasped her other hand over it, then let out a puff of air. When she opened her hands, fine, pale red fragments fell onto the silver plate below and formed a pale flame.

Jusetsu tossed the colored hemp paper with the woman’s name written on it onto the flame, then threw in the blank wing-shaped paper as well. The paper quietly burned up. Jusetsu warmed her hands over the top. The pale red flame rose and clung to her fingers. The flame wasn’t hot, just lukewarm. Jusetsu gathered the flame up in her hands and grasped it tightly before opening her palms again. Out of her hands flew a small bird. The animal was a translucent, pale red, and it flickered like a flame every now and then.

The small bird flapped its wings higher and higher into the air, soared over the top of the trees, and eventually disappeared from sight. It would probably guide the dead court lady’s soul over the sea to paradise—at least as long as she hadn’t turned into a ghost or anything.

Jusetsu went back inside the palace building, carrying the silver plate underneath her arm. She found Jiujiu tidying up the table.

“Did you burn the silk feather?” she asked, picking up the leftover colored hemp paper. “For the court lady who died?”

Lots of people burned silk feathers to mourn the dead, not just the Raven Consort—although she *was* the only one who turned a flame into a bird to guide their souls to paradise.

“Well then, shall I help you get changed, niangniang?” said Jiujiu, opening the

curtains.

“This outfit is more comfortable though,” Jusetsu replied. The eunuch robe was far easier to move about in.

“I don’t think so. You do look lovely when you’re dressed like a man, but all in all, a ruqun suits you best!” Jiujiu said this with such fervor that Jusetsu decided to give in.

“Does it?” she asked. “All right...”

It was wise not to defy Jiujiu at times like these.

As Jusetsu was getting changed behind the curtains, Ishiha came into the palace holding Shinshin. It looked like he’d been giving the bird a dust bath.

“You haven’t been over toward the woods, have you?” Jusetsu asked.

They hadn’t found the beast that killed the court lady yet, so it was still dangerous.

“No, niangniang,” Ishiha replied. “I was at the back of this palace building. Not even Shinshin wants to go there.”

“Oh?”

Jusetsu stared at Shinshin. The magic bird, which was only vaguely visible through the curtain, had been awfully quiet as of late.

Once she finished changing, she went out through the curtains to find Ishiha had gotten to his knees and was looking down at the floor.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing, niangniang,” he said, looking up. He was blushing a little.

“You were in the middle of getting dressed, so it’s not as if he could just stand there looking at you,” Jiujiu explained.

“Oh, I see,” said Jusetsu.

Jiujiu was staggered by her reaction. “You need to be a little more self-conscious, niangniang.”

“Self-conscious?” Jusetsu repeated in a whisper. *At least I’m sensible enough*

*to get changed behind the curtains, she thought.*

With more people around, there were also more things that Jusetsu had to learn. Far from finding this a nuisance, however, Jusetsu found picking up new things fascinating.

“There’s no need for you to feel self-conscious around personal attendants like me and the others, but your ways cause problems for the emperor too. You’ve gotten dressed while the emperor was around like it was nothing before, haven’t you?”

“Have I? I don’t remember,” said Jusetsu.

“Gosh, niangniang...” Jiujiu grumbled exasperatedly. At that same moment, Onkei came in from the kitchen with Kogyo behind him.

“That was quick, Onkei.”

Onkei placed his hands together to bow to Jusetsu. As might be expected from Eisei’s junior, his bow was a beautiful and simply executed.

“I have been investigating the Magpie Consort’s surroundings as you instructed. There is still more work for me to do, but I thought I should inform you of what I’ve learned so far.”

“Yes?” said Jusetsu, willing him to continue.

“For the past few months, the Magpie Consort has been bedridden. It would seem that her elder brother died a sudden death, leading her to fall into a state of depression. She is currently being cared for by several ladies-in-waiting, and them alone. Neither her court ladies nor her eunuchs are able to get close to her. However...” Onkei clammed up, seemingly having second thoughts about what he wanted to divulge.

“What is it, Onkei?”

“There is one eunuch who she *does* favor, and he is the only one she has allowed by her side. Word has it she breaks down whenever he leaves.”

“Do you know anything else?” said Jusetsu.

Onkei had said that the consort favored this eunuch, but there must have been a reason for that. There was probably something unusual about him.

"He's a neophyte who only came to the inner palace recently. He's about twenty years of age. I haven't spoken to him myself, but I was able to see what he looks like."

Onkei looked to Kogyo, who was standing behind him. She held out a piece of paper she was holding.

"I told Kogyo his distinguishing features and she kindly drew a portrait of him for me," Onkei explained. He showed the piece of paper to Jusetsu. "His name is Ho Shogetsu."

When Jusetsu saw the portrait, she was so shocked that she felt like she'd been punched in the chest.

She knew that face.

The man—with his long black hair tied and hanging down behind him—had a face so beautiful that you could never forget it once you'd seen it.

*The owl.*

This was the man that Uren Niangniang had spotted that one evening when she went wandering about—the one who'd provoked a visceral fear in her. Jusetsu remembered experiencing that same terror when she was at the Jakuso Palace pond. Was that because...that man was in the palace?

"Do you recognize him?" Onkei asked.

Jusetsu couldn't bring herself to say a word and only just managed to nod her head slightly. Onkei gave her a piercing look.

"Ever since that man arrived, it sounds like the Magpie Consort began distancing herself from the people around her more and more. Not only that, but people reported peculiar sounds coming from her room from time to time..."

"What kind of sounds?"

"Slurping sounds...and moans."

Before she knew it, Jusetsu found herself clenching her fists. What could those noises be? One thing was for sure—she had a very bad feeling about it.

"It seems like something is going to happen to Shogetsu and the Magpie Consort. I'll go and do a bit more investigating," Onkei said simply. He gave Jusetsu a slight bow and started to make his way out.

"Wait," Jusetsu shouted despite herself. The sound of her own voice caught her off guard. She didn't know what she wanted to say. She just felt like she had to stop him.

Onkei waited for Jusetsu to continue.

"No... It doesn't matter. It's just...you don't have to dig too far," she managed to say.

"Understood," Onkei said, and with that, he left in the same manner that he had arrived—with silent, soundless footsteps.

Jusetsu took another look at the portrait he left behind and swallowed. What was that ineffable sense of anxiety she was feeling?

By the time night fell, Onkei had still not returned.

Jusetsu left the palace building in a fluster, only to find Koshun coming up the steps at that very same moment. Eisei was accompanying him, holding a candlestick. There was still a trace of the sunset hanging in the air, and it hung over the inner palace like a lilac veil. Although the sun had gone down, it was still far too early for the night to have entered its darkest phase. The daytime heat had not yet died down completely, and a heavy, lukewarm wind was blowing.

"Did something happen?" Koshun asked upon seeing Jusetsu. It seemed he immediately sensed that something was out of the ordinary.

"It's Onkei," Jusetsu said. "He hasn't returned from the Jakuso Palace."

Koshun frowned. "The Jakuso Palace? Why would he go to a place like that?"

"I asked him to. I wanted him to investigate what was happening with the Magpie Consort." Jusetsu bit her lip. "He came back with a report before going off again. He said he would look a bit further into what was happening between her and this one eunuch. I should have stopped him. No, I should have gone

myself. I..."

*I was scared.* Overcome by a mysterious feeling of anxiety, Jusetsu was daunted by the thought of going to check what was happening herself—and she foisted the task onto Onkei instead.

In the past, she used to do everything and anything on her own, but since she started having people to assist her, she grew dependent on them.

"I've gotten weak," she said.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. She wasn't supposed to rely on others, depend on others, or get other people embroiled in her problems.

"Jusetsu," Koshun said, grabbing her arm. "You're going to the Jakuso Palace, aren't you?"

The emperor looked intently into her eyes. She nodded.

"Then focus on that, and only that. You can worry about everything else another time."

Koshun's words shot straight to Jusetsu's core. They always did. In a way, his voice was able to control her actions—but on this occasion, it calmed her down. She gritted her back teeth and nodded again.

"I'll come with you. It should make things go faster."

Koshun stood ahead of her and started walking. As Jusetsu followed him, she turned around to take one look at her palace building. Jiujiu and the others peeked their heads out through the doors, looking worried. Jusetsu turned to face the path in front of her and quickened her pace.

Once the last remnants of sunlight had disappeared, it became dark quickly, and an indigo-hued darkness filled the inner palace. As they walked, the color only became deeper. The flame at the top of the candlestick that Eisei held as he led the way flickered. They stepped into the wooded area where the bay trees and rhododendrons were planted, but that very second, they heard a loud squawk accompanied by the sound of wings flapping. The three of them recoiled, startled. The silhouette of a bird flew by above their heads and its call resounded through the air. The bird rustled through the leaves and perched on

a branch. It was a star raven, and the white speckles on its wings seemed to stand out in the darkness. Jusetsu let out a small sigh and hurried onward.

The Jakuso Palace was silent, as if it was holding its breath. It was so quiet one could hear a pin drop. There were no sounds present in the area, not even the clicking of a bug scurrying about. They headed toward the palace building where the Magpie Consort lived, but its front doors and the doors facing the outer passage were all closed. Similarly, the lattice windows were all pitch-black. No lights had been lit inside, and the same applied to the hanging lanterns on the outside. All of the palace buildings and passages were covered in darkness.

*It's not as if this is the Yamei Palace. It makes no sense.*

Buildings were supposed to have bright lights at night in order to ward off Yeyoushen—so why was it so dark here?

Eisei stood before the front doors and announced that they were visiting.

“Please open the doors, revered Magpie Consort.”

There was no response. When Eisei called out to her a second time, the doors slowly opened at last.

It was one of the Magpie Consort’s ladies-in-waiting that opened them. She was extremely pale and emaciated.

“I do apologize for making you wait,” she said before kneeling down. It was completely black inside. “The Magpie Consort loathes having lights on, you see... I’ll light some for you now.”

The lady-in-waiting was so thin that it looked like she could snap at any moment. She hurried back and forth, lighting the lanterns. The room’s interior finally emerged from obscurity, giving them a vague idea of what it was like. The room was spacious and too big to be lit by just one or two lanterns. They could make out a faint outline of some curtains hanging in the back, and they could tell that there was a woman sitting up in bed behind them.

Koshun stepped into the palace building with Jusetsu following him. She was hidden behind Koshun in the low light. She looked around, but there didn’t seem to be any sign of any personal attendants there aside from the lady-in-

waiting who opened the door. The eunuch in question wasn't around either. Jusetsu covered her nose with her sleeve. The moment she set foot inside, she was assaulted by the suffocating smell of incense. It was one with a sweet, pure, lily-like fragrance.

Yearning Aroma.

The scent made her feel as if she had gotten lost in a lily garden. The room must have been so dim and hazy inside because of the smoke from burning too much incense. Beside the hanging curtains sat a cabinet—or perhaps a table—on top of which a porcelain incense burner had been placed. Smoke was pouring out of it.

Jusetsu couldn't help but feel like there was a slight metallic stench lurking just beyond the smell of incense. *Am I imagining it? No, I don't think so.*

"Your Majesty..." a faint voice uttered from inside the curtains. The woman had been sitting up, and she ripped off her bedding and tried to get down off the bed. She wobbled about as she moved.

"You can stay there. Don't overdo it," Koshun called out, approaching the curtains.

Eisei stuck to Koshun like his shadow as he kept an eye out for any potential threats in their surroundings. Jusetsu also joined Koshun in walking up to the bed.

"I'm so sorry. You shouldn't have to see me like this..."

Jusetsu could remember hearing this same feeble voice before. Koshun opened the curtains and went inside. Jusetsu followed him.

When the Magpie Consort looked up and saw Jusetsu standing there, her eyes opened wide and she gulped, startled. She was so scrawny that her cheekbones were worryingly prominent. She was still very pretty, but her skin had lost its luster. The woman had a refined look to her that could be described as graceful.

"Oh... You are..."

The Magpie Consort turned as white as a sheet and looked down. Her voice

was, without a question of a doubt, the same as the “court lady” who previously came to ask Jusetsu to bring someone back to life.

“I believe you left this piece of silk behind at the Yamei Palace,” Jusetsu said. “I’ve come to give it back to you.”

Jusetsu took the fabric that she stuffed up her sleeve out and tossed it onto the bed. It landed on the consort’s bedding without making a sound.

“Now give me back my eunuch.”

The Magpie Consort looked up, alarmed.

Jusetsu stared intently into her eyes. “If you do not, I shall never forgive you, Kin Keiyo.”

The Magpie Consort’s—or rather, Keiyo’s—face froze. All the blood drained from it. “Pl... Please forgive me, Raven Consort.”

“For what?”

“Well...” Keiyo covered her face with her hands.

Jusetsu felt her very last nerves slowly burning away inside of her chest. A cold sweat ran down her skin.

“Keiyo... Where is Onkei? Where is my eunuch?” she said, sternly pressing Keiyo for an answer—but then, a sound resembling the roar of a beast echoed throughout the room.

The sound came from behind the doors at the back of the room.

Where she found the strength to do so was a total mystery, but the Magpie Consort suddenly leaped up from her bed. She staggered and stumbled over to the door.

“Magpie Consort,” said her lady-in-waiting, hastily trying to cling onto her to stop her from getting away. Keiyo shoved her off and opened the doors instead.

A stifling smell wafted up everyone’s noses. It was that same metallic stench that had gotten mixed in with the scent of incense.

“...I smell blood,” Koshun mumbled.

Jusetsu peered carefully through the open doorway. It looked like it led to a

connecting room. There were no lights in there, and it was pitch black.

Even so, there was something there. Jusetsu could sense it.

She cautiously took a step forward, holding her breath.

Keiyo stood in front of the open door and spoke to the thing that was inside. “My dear brother,” she called out. Her voice was shrill and sounded off-key. It was peculiar and seemed to contain a mix of both fear and affection.

“Quiet down, my dear brother. You won’t have to wait for too much longer. I’ll ask His Majesty nicely for his help.”

“*Brother?*”

Keiyo turned her head around. Her eyes were directed toward Koshun, but since they were black as ink, it was impossible to tell what she was really looking at.

“Your Majesty, I’m so sorry. I’ve been keeping my brother hidden in here. His body doesn’t look like it normally does, so I had no other choice. So, please...”

“Wait,” Koshun said quietly. A slight frown appeared on his face. “Didn’t your brother pass away?”

Keiyo grimaced at that. It was like a thin piece of glass had shattered inside of her.

“He died. He died—but it makes no sense! He was always so *healthy!!!*” Her high-pitched scream rang out through the darkness, almost as if it were slicing through it. “He was never ill. Ever since he was young, he never stood still, so he’d always get small injuries here and there—but he never let that stop him. He’d be back on his horse before you knew it, galloping through the fields and mountains again, completely unfazed... We lived in the countryside, so there were lots of mountains around our residence that were perfect for taking little trips. Whenever my brother went out hunting, I was beside myself with worry thinking about how dangerous it was, but he always managed to come back unharmed. And yet...”

Whenever Keiyo’s voice seemed as if it was about to disappear at any moment, it would grow stronger. Although it would get shrill at times, she was

putting her heart and soul into what she was saying. It was as if she'd gotten carried away by her own enthusiasm. The way she was acting made everyone fall silent, unable to interrupt.

"It was just the two of us. He was my only sibling. Ever since I was a little girl, he took me under his wing and protected me. He'd scold me too, sometimes—no, *all* the time—and we used to have these silly arguments. We grew up together. My older brother was incredibly bright, and he was unrivaled when it came to martial arts. Even compared with his schoolmates, he was miles ahead. To me, he was the most outstanding gentleman around. He was lively, handsome, and fearless...and I..." Keiyo's voice trembled, and she covered her face with her sleeve. "I *adored* him. I came to the inner palace hoping that it would benefit my brother. He was eventually going to be a government official! But then, he... He..."

She carried on whimpering for a while before she was finally able to express herself properly.

"...There must be some kind of mistake. There's no way my brother could have died. That is why I asked the Raven Consort to bring him back to life for me."

Koshun silently glanced at Jusetsu.

"She told me it was impossible, and with that, my last glimmer of hope. I thought I'd be better off following in my brother's footsteps and dying as well. But then..." Keiyo's face suddenly brightened up, and her cheeks turned rosy again. "Someone appeared who could make my wish come true."

Koshun quietly interrupted her. "What exactly do you mean by... 'your wish'?"

Even in the face of Keiyo's bizarre showing, Koshun's voice was calm and composed. He may have always been that way, but his manner also looked like it was—albeit narrowly—keeping Keiyo's fervor in check.

"He told me that bringing my brother back to life wouldn't be so hard, after all," Keiyo explained. Her teary eyes glistened as she spoke. "Those were the words of a eunuch who'd only just arrived in the inner palace, so I couldn't quite believe him at first. He told me to fetch some of my brother's hair or a few of his bones, along with some clay. I wrote a letter to my father asking for

his help, and he sent me some hair. I...I hadn't even *seen* my brother's dead body, you know. All I got was a tuft of his hair, and that just made me even more desperate to see him, just one more time. The eunuch used that hair and the clay to make my brother for me. As he was constructing the clay doll, I thought he might have been planning on using shallow trickery to console me, but once it was finished...my brother was really there."

As Jusetsu listened to what Keiyo was saying, she quietly stepped into the connecting room. It was pitch-black inside, but after a few moments, her eyes adjusted to the lack of light. In the center of the room sat a chair where someone was sitting. Going by their height, it was probably a man—but she wasn't able to tell by their face.

However, the further she went into the room, the stronger the bloody smell became.

"It's really him," Keiyo went on. "He came back to life. He moves properly. He's not able to speak yet...but his face and his body are my brother's. It takes a little work to keep him alive—which is no small task—but it's fine. He won't cause you any problems. Well...occasionally he does get hungry, and I suppose that could be troublesome, but..."

Keiyo rambled on and on, her voice feeble. It was a mystery how someone with such a thin body was able to find the strength to keep talking. It wasn't so much that she was too worked up to stop, but rather, it almost seemed like she was talking in an effort to conceal her own anxieties.

Her voice was full of fear, and *that* was why it was so shaky.

"There won't be a repeat of last time, so please have mercy on him..."

Jusetsu strained her eyes as she glanced toward the back of the room. *What are those things?* There were several items on the floor. She couldn't tell much in the darkness, but they looked like buckets filled with coal-black water. *Wait, that can't be water. It's...*

"What do you mean, 'what happened last time?'" Koshun inquired reproachfully.

Keiyo choked on her words, her face tense. "Well, you see... Your Majesty. I..."

Keiyo's voice sounded like she was about to break. She took a breath in, as if she were sobbing.

Jusetsu looked toward the back of the room again. Beyond a row of buckets, she could see a person lying down in the corner. Jusetsu slowly stepped forward. Neither the person seated in the chair nor the person on the floor was moving. The latter had their back turned to her and it looked like they had their wrists tied together behind them. They were wearing a eunuch robe. Jusetsu couldn't see their face, but their height alone was enough to tell her who it was.

"Onkei!" she screamed and ran up to him. She ended up kicking over some of the buckets in front of her, but she couldn't spare a moment to care.

She kneeled down next to him and called out his name again. When she touched his arm, she was relieved to find that it was warm. She placed a finger on his neck and checked for his pulse. It was so dark in the room that she couldn't really be sure, but it didn't seem like he had sustained any significant injuries.

"Onkei," she called out again and again.

Eventually, he opened his eyes. "...Niang...niang?" he said in a hoarse voice.

"It's me," Jusetsu responded. She took hold of the rope that kept his wrists tied together. The knot was tight and difficult to undo, so it was taking her some time.

Onkei twisted his head around and looked up at her, but then his expression froze with fear. He directed his gaze to the area behind Jusetsu.

"What is it...?" Jusetsu asked, turning around to take a look for herself.

Despite still being tied up, Onkei jumped to his feet and stood in front of Jusetsu, prepared to defend her from a potential enemy. He was so nimble that it only took him a second.

There was now someone else standing right in front of them. It was too dark to see them properly, but it had to be the man who was sitting on the chair, as it was now empty. Jusetsu was filled with dread—she hadn't sensed anyone behind her at all. On the contrary, even now that this figure was standing before her very eyes, it didn't feel as if he had any life inside.

*What is happening here?*

“Big brother!”

Keiyo came running in. She tugged the arm of the man as he stood there and pulled him away from Jusetsu and Onkei. The man wobbled and shook as he moved. His movements were very unnatural.

A dim light—albeit only a small one—suddenly brightened up the room. Eisei had stepped inside, holding his candlestick. Koshun stood near the doorway, his gaze fixed on the man.

“...Is this your revived older brother that you spoke of?”

Keiyo dug her fingernails into the man’s arm. Jusetsu could now see his back and side profile from where she was standing. The man’s hands were tied together behind him, just like Onkei’s were. His face was pallid—and it didn’t look like it was an illusion caused by the dim light either. His lips were drained of blood and his eyes were blank and glazed over. Jusetsu could tell he had a handsome face, even from the side—but for some strange reason, she wasn’t able to see the beauty in it. Despite all of this, the man did still *look* like a person.

“This eunuch was able to bring him back from the dead...” Jusetsu whispered. She couldn’t believe it. “Not even shamans are able to perform such a feat...and neither can I.”

Keiyo twisted her upper body toward Jusetsu, with her legs staying put. “Shogetsu did it for me. He gave me my brother back.”

“Who is this Shogetsu? He can’t just be an ordinary eunuch,” Jusetsu asked.

“I don’t know. Personally, it doesn’t matter whether he’s a eunuch or a god of death—he helped me, and that’s what counts.”

“Where is he now?”

“He must be in this palace somewhere. I told him not to stray too far.”

This reminded Jusetsu of the report that Onkei had given her. “You have a horrible breakdown whenever Shogetsu leaves your side, don’t you?”

Keiyo looked away and clung onto her brother’s arm. “That’s...because

Shogetsu is the only one who can get my brother under control.”

“What do you mean ‘under control’?”

“My brother needs blood.”

With a smooth movement, Keiyo swung her arm out and pointed at the floor, to the row of buckets. The ones that Jusetsu had kicked over were still lying on their sides. The candlestick that Eisei was holding up illuminated them and the contents of the ones that had spilled out across the floor. A metallic stench was coming from them.

It was blood. And lots of it.

Jusetsu felt goosebumps all over. Where had all that blood come from?

“Do not worry, all of this blood came from beasts,” Keiyo said in a feeble voice. It was as if she’d read Jusetsu’s mind and knew exactly what she was worrying about.

“The only problem is my brother doesn’t like beast blood very much. He’s tried all sorts. Shogetsu says that if I don’t feed him blood, he’ll turn back into a lump of clay. He seems to like monkey and pig blood best...but even that’s a last resort. What he *really* needs is human blood, and that is quite hard to come by. Sometimes, my brother lashes out in demand of it. When he gets like that, Shogetsu is the only one who can stop him.” Keiyo had gone pale as she spoke. She was shivering.

“Is that why his hands are tied together?” Jusetsu asked, and Keiyo gave her a small nod in response.

“Keiyo,” Koshun called out.

Alarmed, Keiyo turned back toward the emperor. It seemed the sound of his voice—that which resonated so deeply with Jusetsu and tugged at her heartstrings—was just a source of fear for the consort.

“You haven’t answered my question from earlier,” Koshun said without a hint of emotion. “What did you mean by ‘what happened last time’?”

Keiyo hung her head and covered her face with her sleeve. “Please forgive us, Your Majesty. My brother...killed Josei,” Keiyo replied in a shaky voice.

Josei—the court lady from this very palace who was killed with a deadly bite.

“That night, my brother was *ravenous*. Beast blood wasn’t enough to satiate him, and he went on a rampage, desperate for human blood. Until that point, Renjo and I had been giving him some of our own to appease him before his hunger got the better of him.”

Keiyo turned up her sleeve. Bleached cotton was wrapped tightly around the length of her entire arm. Renjo must’ve been the lady-in-waiting who came to open the door. The two of them both looked emaciated and extremely pale—likely because they were short on blood.

“On that occasion, we didn’t stop him in time. I was rushing to call Shogetsu when Josei came into the room with some water at just the wrong moment. My brother bit into her neck... It all happened in a blink of an eye. He just stood there, sucking her blood, engrossed...” Keiyo’s face was deathly pale—and not just because of her lack of blood this time. She was shaking. “When Shogetsu finally turned up, it was too late. Josei was dead. We couldn’t just...leave her there. We couldn’t allow people to come search this palace for her—my brother’s existence has to be kept a secret. I ordered my eunuchs to take her corpse somewhere far away... I feel so terrible about what happened to her.” As she uttered that last line, her voice went so quiet that it almost disappeared.

“Your Majesty,” Keiyo then said, looking up. “I’ll take all the blame. Please, turn a blind eye to my brother. I beg you. It’s taken so much effort to bring him back to life, but we finally achieved it. If my brother dies again, I’ll...”

Keiyo had a fierce look of desperation on her face. Her voice had seemed as if it was going to vanish into nothing just moments earlier, but now it was tense and determined. Jusetsu stood up from her crouching position and stared at the man who was standing at Keiyo’s side, doing nothing. He was expressionless, emotionless, and his face appeared devoid of any thoughts whatsoever.

“Keiyo...this isn’t your brother.” As Jusetsu said that, she could taste bitterness in her own mouth.

“What...?” Keiyo replied, turning around to face Jusetsu with a stupefied look on her face.

“This person isn’t your brother revived. Shogetsu didn’t bring him back to life.

He just 'made' him. He's a clay doll."

"What are you talking about?" Keiyo asked.

"This person is not alive. They're hollow. I admit this vessel might look like your older brother, but his soul isn't there. No matter how long you wait, he'll never turn into the brother you knew."

Keiyo's face turned as white as a sheet. You could practically hear her heart shattering.

"You're lying," she uttered, but only the slightest sounds escaped her lips. "That can't be true. That can't be..."

Keiyo looked up at the man by her side. Upon seeing the lack of response on his face, she crumbled. Even she must have had an inkling somewhere deep down that this wasn't her brother.

"No, no. This is him. This is him, my only brother," Keiyo kept arguing with increasing vehemence, her voice trembling as she did so. She shook her head again and again. "My beloved brother, the only one I've ever had..."

Keiyo's pleas, steeped in pain, were directed toward him, but all the man standing next to her did was stare blankly into space.

Keiyo grimaced and tears came streaming down her face. It looked like she couldn't bear it any longer. "Big brother." Keiyo reached out her trembling hands and touched the empty-eyed man's cheeks.

That moment she did that, the man's eyes opened wide—it was the first time his expression had changed. He opened his mouth, and before anyone knew what was happening, he swiftly bent forward—far faster than any of the sluggish movements he had made before.

A surprised sigh escaped Keiyo's lips.

The man's teeth were in Keiyo's throat. He dug them into her pale neck, tearing through her skin. Blood gushed out of the open wound. The rest of them could hear the woman's flesh being torn away. Her blood spurted all the way up to the ceiling, and more poured down on Jusetsu's face like rain. It all happened in a blink of an eye.

Still biting into Keiyo's throat, the man slurped down her blood. Keiyo's arms hung weakly at her sides, swinging back and forth like pendulums. Her teary eyes were open, but now they looked as empty as her brother's.

Jusetsu yanked a peony out of her updo and transformed it into an arrow. She took a step closer to the man and immediately thrust it into his stomach.

The blood-slurping man froze.

If he was a doll, it would be easy to break the spell. She just had to remove the summoning object out of the vessel. That was the core of the magic creating his form. She knew there was only one place where it could have been implanted—the pit of his stomach.

Jusetsu pulled her hand out from his torso. She was clutching a tuft of hair in her palm.

The man's skin became dry and darkened. Clay clumped and fell off his face in small pieces. His hands, and then his arms, turned into lumps of clay and collapsed. His face then broke into pieces, starting with his mouth.

Keiyo keeled over onto the floor, and the man's body crumbled and fell on top of her.

All that was left behind of him was a pile of clay and a robe. They covered Keiyo like a duvet.

For a little while, nobody said a thing. No one could move. The strong stench of blood and the earthy smell of clay filled the room.

The first person to make a single noise was Keiyo's lady-in-waiting. Her sobs started echoing around the room, albeit faintly.

Koshun walked forward and kneeled down beside Keiyo. He reached out his hand and closed the consort's wide eyes for her.

"Ever since I heard the tragic news about your brother, I didn't think you seemed like yourself... I should have sent you back to your father sooner." There was a sense of remorse and shame in his voice. For a long while, he silently gazed at Keiyo's face.

Jusetsu tugged a handkerchief out of her breast pocket, squatted down, and

used it to wipe Keiyo's blood-soaked face. She then slipped the woman's brother's hair into her hand before she stood up and walked away.

As the Raven Consort left the room, she took one glance back over her shoulder. Koshun was still staring at Keiyo's face.

When Jusetsu left the palace building, a few faces that were peeking at the building from the edge of the outer passage hurriedly retreated. They were probably court ladies and eunuchs who were intrigued by the ruckus and came to see what was going on. Jusetsu went down the stairs and trotted over the cobblestones.

"Niangniang." Onkei ran over, catching up with her. It looked like he managed to untie his bonds himself. He offered Jusetsu his own handkerchief. "For your face," he said.

Jusetsu touched her cheek. It had blood on it.

"...Sorry," she whispered.

She took his handkerchief and wiped her face. *What have I done?* Jusetsu wondered as she did so. A court lady had died, and so had Keiyo. Keiyo had come to the Raven Consort asking for Jusetsu to bring her brother back to life—but most of all, she'd just been seeking help.

*And I did nothing.*

All Jusetsu did was show her the door.

"Niangniang... Jusetsu." Onkei offered her his hand. Jusetsu placed the handkerchief back in it. Onkei didn't put it away, but instead said, "Please excuse me," and started wiping the rest of the bloodstains off her face.

"...I'm sorry for what I did to you too, Onkei."

He stopped wiping away the blood and looked at her.

"I'm the one who must apologize," he said. "Not only did I fail to carry out your orders, but I also had to have you save my life. Please accept my sincerest apologies. It was a humiliating act of negligence on my part."

Onkei explained how he managed to track down one of the ladies-in-waiting, but just as he was about to listen to her story, someone punched him from behind.

“It must have been the Magpie Consort,” he added.

“I see,” Jusetsu murmured.

She turned back toward the palace building and looked up. The white moon lit up the decorative magpie roof tiles, making them glisten so much that it looked like they were wet.

“We need to look for Shogetsu,” Jusetsu went on.

“I’m sure Attendant Ei could arrange for a search, but shall we have a look inside the palace?”

“He wouldn’t be here anymore.”

If court ladies and eunuchs had come to take a peek at what was happening, it was safe to assume that Shogetsu would have noticed the commotion as well. He had certainly already taken off.

“Where is Shogetsu’s room?” Jusetsu asked. She thought perhaps she could use some of his hair or his belongings to track him down. Since she knew his name, she could use an errand bird to follow him.

“Well,” Onkei started, “Shogetsu doesn’t have a room in the eunuchs’ lodgings. He was employed as the Magpie Consort’s personal attendant, so I wondered if he had a room in *her* palace building there, but he did not... Nobody knows where he might sleep or take his meals.”

“What?” said Jusetsu, perplexed. *How was Shogetsu managing to get by?*

“Nobody has ever seen him sleep or eat,” Onkei added.

“It’s almost as if Shogetsu is...”

Keiyo’s brother—or rather, her almost-brother—came to mind. That clay doll with hollow eyes.

Jusetsu frowned. If she couldn’t track him down with her magic, there would be no other way to find him. She would just have to wait until Eisei’s eunuchs

located him.

“...Let’s go back to the Yamei Palace for now.”

Jusetsu bit her lip and scurried away from the Jakuso Palace, furious at herself for having been so useless.

It was nighttime, so the moon lit their way. Her shadow fell across the gravel underfoot, and she stepped on it as she made her way home.

She had just entered the woodland of bay trees and rhododendrons when it happened. A chill ran down Jusetsu’s spine and she stopped in her tracks—or, perhaps more accurately, she froze with fear and couldn’t bring herself to move.

“Niangniang?” There was skepticism in Onkei’s voice.

Jusetsu couldn’t spare a moment to answer him. She scanned her surroundings. The light of the moon shone down on the trees, creating numerous shadows on the ground. In the spots where light could get through, the ground was bright white, but in the places where the branches were crowded together, the darkness underneath was even denser than the shadows.

And there *it* was, atop one of those branches.

Two human legs rested on the branch of a bay tree. That was the only part of the person that was illuminated by the moonlight, and it looked as if they were protruding out of the dark night air. Jusetsu could tell by the hem of the person’s ash-gray robe they were a eunuch.

“Are you the Raven Consort?” a voice asked from the branch. It was a high-pitched voice, reminiscent of a bird chirping—but at the same time, it was deep like a dog’s growl. It had a silvery timbre to it, and yet it also contained a serene tranquility.

Onkei stood in front of Jusetsu to protect her. “Who’s there?” he said.

The person up in the tree didn’t reply. The branch bowed, and before they knew it, the man in question had landed on the ground. He didn’t make a sound himself. All they could hear were the leaves rustling against one another

overhead.

He had a thin, flexible body with a pale face. His long, flowing black hair hung behind him. He looked identical to that picture of Shogetsu that Kogyo had drawn.

The very same young man Jusetsu had seen that night was standing in front of her.

“It’s the owl!” Jusetsu shouted when she met his gaze—the same way that she had that night.

“Not quite,” Shogetsu replied coldly. “This isn’t me, not exactly. Just like you’re not the Raven, as such.”

As he said that, he placed his hand on his chest, as if to indicate his own body.

“This is just a vessel. An apparatus.”

*A vessel?*

As Jusetsu puzzled over his choice of words, she took a peony flower out of her done-up hair. Her body was moving on its own, like it was no longer hers. Her hands quickly tossed the flower toward Shogetsu. The flower transformed while it was in the air into an arrow, hoping to pierce his skin. Just when she thought the arrowhead hit his chest, it gently dissolved and seemed to be sucked inside him. Or that how it looked, at least.

“It’s pointless for people like us to fight one another. We’re from the same family. If you *do* want to fight me, then you’ll have to use your bird device,” Shogetsu said, sounding somewhat disappointed. He had a cold, unapproachable face that remained stoic as he spoke. “Don’t tell me you don’t know about that either... Or did the *Raven* forget? Must have eaten too many flowers...”

Jusetsu had broken out into a cold sweat. She wanted to run away, but her legs were stuck to the ground and wouldn’t move. She breathed heavily.

“Still, I know I’m scary. Hmph.”

“I... I don’t understand a word you’re saying,” Jusetsu said, her labored breathing making it hard to force the words out. Her voice was shaky and feeble

—she couldn’t remember ever hearing herself sound like this before.

“I know. It’s clear you don’t understand anything. Listen. I’m the Burier from the Secluded Palace—I think you call it an ‘executioner’ over here. I’m the Raven’s older brother.”

The Secluded Palace—that was the name of a land far, far away across the sea where the gods lived. *He’s an executioner from there?*

Shogetsu seemed to think this was a sufficient explanation. He then looked up into the sky.

“Oh,” he said, his voice holding a hint of amusement, but his expression remained the same. “There it is. I was looking for that. It took so much trouble to get to this island, so I was upset to have lost it.”

Then, he called out a name that sounded like “Sumaru,” and beckoned to something.

Jusetsu and Onkei could hear wings flapping and a bird cawing overhead. A bird perched on a nearby branch. It had white speckles on its brown feathers—a star raven.

“I told you to come *here*. To me. You really don’t listen, do you?” Shogetsu carried on to the bird, telling it to come over to him again and again. Eventually, it descended and perched on Shogetsu’s arm. “Sumaru is essentially a raven, you see,” he said.

Jusetsu opened her dry mouth and strung some words together. “Who is this ‘Raven’ you speak of? Is it...me?”

“Not quite,” he said, reusing his line from earlier. “The Raven is the Raven. The thing inside of you.”

Shogetsu pointed at Jusetsu.

“Inside of me?” Jusetsu held her hands to her torso.

“I’ve been watching over it for a long time. I wasn’t allowed to get involved. Interfering here is forbidden. This is the island of the shunned where those banished from our land—the Secluded Palace—wind up. Even when the Raven was cast away from the Secluded Palace for its sins, and even after she washed

up on this island, I was powerless to do anything.”

Shogetsu’s face didn’t change in the slightest, but his voice was tinged with a faint hint of sadness.

“The Raven and I were born from a sea bubble that split in two. We started off as the same, singular bubble. I was given the role of the Burier. The Raven assumed the role of the Headlander, the one who rode the currents and the winds to guide the souls of the dead in the direction they were supposed to go. Souls are beautiful. They have a faint white glow, and they flicker in the darkness like stars. The Raven and I lived in the night.”

For some strange reason, hearing this story stirred a sense of nostalgia inside Jusetsu, surging up from deep inside her. It wasn’t as if she never heard this tale before. In fact, she heard a similar story not too long ago—the folktale from Ishiha’s hometown that he shared with her. But more than that...she felt like she had known about this for a much, much longer time. She didn’t understand. Her memories were muddled up and confused.

The man continued. “But then, the Raven committed a crime. She was beguiled by one of the dead and sent their soul back to be resurrected. The Raven was a meek and foolish girl, and she didn’t know how serious a crime that was. She was my silly little sister, and that’s why I loved her. She was my only younger sister, but I wasn’t unable to do anything to help her. I just watched her drift away, and I sensed she washed ashore on an island far, far away. Intervening wasn’t allowed, so all I could do was watch from the Secluded Palace. But then...” There was a newfound strength in Shogetsu’s voice. “A little while ago, I felt the Raven’s power. That power was trying to rage inside of you. It brought back such fond memories for me, and it felt so precious that I couldn’t bear it. That’s why I sent this and Sumaru over here from the Secluded Palace.”

When he said the word “*this*,” Shogetsu had pointed at his own body.

“I persevered for a thousand years... Impressive, don’t you think?” Shogetsu said, before pulling out one of the star raven’s feathers. “I’ve come to put an end to your suffering, Raven Consort... My little sister.”

The feather transformed into a double-edged sword. Its brown blade was

straight and was speckled, just like the star raven's plumage. It was a beautiful sword, and it shone brightly in the moonlight. The moment Jusetsu realized what was happening, Shogetsu kicked the ground.

The star raven flapped its wings.

Onkei was the one who reacted first. He pulled a dirk out of his breast pocket. As soon as he unsheathed it, the clinking of blades striking against one another echoed through the air.

Shogetsu stepped away for a moment. He stood poised with his sword and stared intently at Onkei. He slowly backed away and distanced himself from Jusetsu's bodyguard.

"It's hard to move in this form. The waves and the moon are getting in the way. If only there was a new moon tonight..."

Shogetsu sounded like he was complaining, but his expression stayed the same. He was probably unable to change his expression while he was in this form—although Jusetsu wasn't sure whether his current body was a clay doll or something different entirely.

Jusetsu had gradually calmed down from her state of panic—perhaps because Onkei was there. If all she did was act flustered, he might end up in danger too.

"Are you saying you're here...to kill me?" Jusetsu asked to make sure.

Shogetsu paused before answering her. "I don't *want* to kill you—but if I want to lay the Raven to rest, then I'm going to have to break the vessel she's inside of. And that vessel is you," Shogetsu said, politely explaining his plans step-by-step. He seemed to want her to know.

"By Raven, you mean Uren Niangniang, don't you?" There was no other option she could think of.

Shogetsu left another gap in the conversation. "That's just a random name you've given her—not the name I know her by. 'Raven' and 'Owl' aren't their names either, but I don't want to reveal their real ones."

*So that means that the Raven is Uren Niangniang, and he's come to bury her.*  
And that meant that he would kill Jusetsu too, as collateral.

Jusetsu stared at Shogetsu. She couldn't read his expression. He was just a doll. Even so, judging by the way he spoke, he didn't seem like someone who would be impossible to get through to. He even had the integrity to try to explain things to Jusetsu that she didn't understand.

That being said...he *had* attacked her with a sword out of nowhere.

*Calm down*, Jusetsu told herself. She didn't get the impression that he was going to kill her in cold blood. If he did, Onkei would get embroiled in the conflict too. There was no way Shogetsu would do something so foolish at this stage.

"Is Ho Shogetsu not your name, then?" said Jusetsu, changing the subject slightly. She wasn't sure whether he would notice what she was trying to do.

"That's a name that the Professor gave me. He took care of me."

"Professor?"

"That's what other people called him. His name was Ho."

"What do you mean he took care of you?"

"It was difficult for me to get across the ocean, and I used up all my power taking on this form. Professor found me when I collapsed, and he saved me. He was even the one who brought me here."

Whenever Jusetsu asked Shogetsu something, he answered her honestly. It was strange, considering he came here to kill her. She couldn't work out why there was such a contradiction.

"...Do you need human blood too?" she asked.

"No," Shogetsu replied. His expression didn't change, but there was a hint of irritation in his voice. "That thing I made was a human. In order for him to maintain that appearance, he needed blood."

"That was no human. It was just a clay doll. Why did you make such a thing?" Jusetsu kept her voice down, but she couldn't hide the fury it carried within.

Shogetsu tilted his head to one side slightly and gazed at Jusetsu, as if he were observing her. "That consort asked me to. I thought I did a good job."

"You didn't do anything... You didn't bring a person back to life. It didn't have a soul. It was just an imitation of a human."

"The consort was definitely pleased, though. She thought it was her brother."

"Are you telling me you made it to please her?" Jusetsu asked.

"If that wasn't my intention, why would I have gone to so much trouble? She was in such a pitiful state, so I made it to comfort her."

Jusetsu was at a loss for words. She stared hard at Shogetsu's face.

"...There's a pond in the Jakuso Palace, isn't there? Have you ever been?" he asked.

A vision of the elderly court lady appeared in the back of her mind.

"I have," he said. "There was a demon in there, so I got rid of it. If you leave things like that to their own devices, they'll hurt somebody. It's unkind to the demons themselves too."

Jusetsu didn't know what he was talking about anymore and fell silent.

"Is that all? No more questions?" Shogetsu lifted his sword.

Onkei repositioned himself as well, holding his dirk.

"Wait...!" she cried out.

Shogetsu went to take a step forward, but he suddenly froze. Something skimmed over his toes and pierced the ground. It was an arrow. He glanced at it and went to pick it up, but another arrow suddenly pierced his shoulder. The shock made Shogetsu take a step back. More arrows could be heard flying through the air, but Shogetsu swiftly dodged them and hid in a tree. The arrows that had been shot at him fell to the ground.

Jusetsu looked around. A few silhouettes were lurking at the entrance to the woodland area, and Koshun was near the front. Eisei stood before him like a human shield. On either side of them, there were eunuchs from the Bridle House. They all were armed, either having fitted arrows in their bowstrings or unsheathed their swords.

Jusetsu shifted her gaze back toward where Shogetsu was. She couldn't see

him underneath the trees. If he felt the need to hide, then arrow attacks must have worked on him—even though Jusetsu’s magic didn’t. He was a doll—could that have meant he’d be in big trouble if his vessel broke? Now that Jusetsu thought about it, she heard the answer come out of his own mouth.

*In order to bury the Raven, he needed to break the vessel she was encased within...*

“Arrows won’t kill me, but if the arms or legs of this apparatus give way, then I’ll have to rebuild it. I’d rather save myself the time,” Jusetsu heard his voice saying from the treetops.

He must have climbed into a tree. With arrows in their bows, the eunuchs shifted their aim toward the spot where Shogetsu’s voice had come from. However, it was dark, and the branches and leaves were in the way, making it impossible to shoot at him.

Koshun silently drew closer.

Jusetsu looked him up and down. “Are you hurt?”

Koshun shook his head. “Is that Shogetsu?” he asked, looking up at the treetops.

“It is.”

“We were just looking for him. How fortunate.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. He’s no ordinary person,” she said.

“If he’s a ghost, that doesn’t bother me. I’m used to them now. But no, the arrow hit him, didn’t it? Hmm...” Koshun took a careful look at the treetops. “He said something about rebuilding. Does that mean he’s some kind of clay doll as well?”

“Well, I don’t know whether he’s made of clay, but...”

“If he’s a doll, then let’s break him,” Koshun suggested casually.

At that same moment, Eisei released something sharp from his hand.

Something slipped down from the darkness of the branches. It was Shogetsu. Even when he tumbled to the ground, the sound he made was peculiarly faint.

A knife was stuck in Shogetsu's ankle—Eisei must have just thrown it. Shogetsu didn't bother to pull it out, but instead crouched down and looked up at Jusetsu and the others. As always, the look on his face was blank. The arrow that had pierced his shoulder was still stuck there too.

"Are you the emperor?" he asked. "I'd rather you stayed out of this."

Eisei pulled a dirk out of his breast pocket, but Koshun raised his hand to restrain him.

"If you're intending on hurting the Raven Consort, then staying out of it is simply out of the question," Koshun replied, his voice calm and quiet.

Shogetsu eyed the emperor suspiciously. Koshun looked back at him, also appearing to be sounding him out.

"I don't necessarily *want* to kill this innocent young girl either. If you're going to bear resentment for someone, it should be Kosho."

Kosho—the first Raven Consort.

"Why?"

"She started all this. She was the one who shut the Raven away inside of you."

Koshun took a glimpse at Jusetsu. Then, he gave Eisei a signal with his eyes, and Eisei told the eunuchs from the Bridle House positioned nearby to move away slightly. They weren't to overhear this conversation.

"Kosho was the one who trapped Uren Niangniang in the Yamei Palace, wasn't she?" Jusetsu said. "And that's why the Raven Consort is her keeper."

That was what Jusetsu had been taught, at least—and the same thing was written in the historical record in the Yamei Palace.

"Keeper, heh," Shogetsu practically spat. Then he let out something of a sneer. "She was a sly little girl. She offered up herself and the many women that followed her as vessels. She sealed her away so that she couldn't escape, and then she stayed quiet about her crimes. She was a criminal. A monster. I *despise* her."

Shogetsu's voice was cold, and it looked like there was a shadow of hatred cast across his face—even though it must have been blank.

“Using a living person as a vessel is not something that should be forgiven. It always, without exception, causes distortions. Such a skill is taboo, both for you and for us. Kosho broke a taboo.” Then Shogetsu looked at Jusetsu. “I expect that you really suffer on every new moon, don’t you? Because the Raven inside of you gets out. At that point, your soul is close to being torn apart. Not even I can imagine how painful that must be. It’s the Raven inside you that causes that pain.”

Jusetsu didn’t even want to remember the agony she experienced on nights when there was a new moon. She was taught that the Raven Consort and Uren Niangniang were inextricable from one another. Was this what that meant? Jusetsu suddenly felt a knot in the pit of her stomach. Uren Niangniang was inside of her.

The word “monster” sprung to mind.

“You probably find me scary. But it’s not you who fears me—it’s the Raven. I’m the Burier, tasked with hunting down sinners from the Secluded Palace. You’re already half-Raven. You entered this world as yourself, but without you realizing, that had been stolen from you. That’s an extremely cruel thing to do to someone, but Kosho...” Shogetsu clammed up for a moment and then let out a deep sigh. “Kosho fed the Raven flowers. She did it again and again. But those flowers were poisonous. Intoxicating. The Raven has already...lost herself.”

Shogetsu sounded pained, as if it was difficult for him to squeeze the words out.

“Flowers...?” Jusetsu whispered.

She looked down at her palm. Was he talking about the flower that she offered to Uren Niangniang at night? Were they really poisonous?

“Even so, I just constantly watched over her from afar. I watched over her for so long that I ended up in a daze myself. But then, not long ago, I felt the Raven’s power almost overflowing. That was her scream of fury and of suffering. She was raging about inside you. I’m sure you must have felt that anger too.”

*Raging about...?* Jusetsu recalled the time when she was faced with Hyogetsu. She had felt like she was going to lose control of herself. That day, she felt heat

swirling around inside her stomach, and she was helpless to stop it.

“It’s time to let the Raven rest. I’ve come to bury my little sister, like any good Burier should. In order to do that, I’m going to have to kill you too.”

Before he’d finished saying this, Shogetsu got down on one knee and swept his sword sideways. The tip of the blade tore Jusetsu’s robe—Onkei had pulled the young woman back just in time. Shogetsu quickly stood back up and slashed his sword upward at Jusetsu again, since she had her balance. Onkei stopped the blow with his dirk, but Shogetsu repelled it with his next stroke of the sword. At that moment, Onkei fell to his knees. Shogetsu brandished his sword once more, aiming for Jusetsu’s neck.

The nape of her neck felt cold, which Jusetsu assumed was because of the way the air moved when he repositioned his blade. Just as she thought it was going to tear through her skin, someone grabbed tightly onto her arm and pulled her backward, sending her flailing onto the ground. She landed on her side, and she could feel the coldness of the earth and the strong scent of dew coming from the grass. *What strange things to pay attention to at a time of such peril.*

That wasn’t all, though. She could also feel the warmth of somebody’s skin. Somebody was holding her in their arms. For some reason, she knew who that warmth was coming from.

It was Koshun.

The emperor seemed to be hanging over her, and then he flinched. When he got up, Jusetsu got a whiff of something metallic.

Blood.

A shiver ran through her, and her fingertips went cold. She jumped to her feet. “Koshun...”

“Don’t worry. I’m all right.” Before Jusetsu could say anything, Koshun had gotten back up and was clutching his arm. He wore a blank expression on his face. “He just grazed me.”

It looked like Shogetsu had cut the emperor’s arm. He may have insisted that it was just a graze, but there was blood dripping from the cuff of his sleeve.

Jusetsu placed a hand to her chest. Her heart was racing. Her fingers were still cold and shaky.

She could hear blades clanging against each other. When she looked, she found Eisei had stopped another blow from Shogetsu's sword. Eisei's dirk flipped his sword upward. Eisei thrust out his blade while Shogetsu staggered slightly, but Shogetsu jumped back and distanced himself from him. Still holding up his sword, Eisei watched him intently to figure out his next move.

That was when a shrill cry echoed through the air. It wasn't the cry of a star raven, but instead was one that Jusetsu knew well. Something golden-yellow flew out of the bushes and appeared next to Shogetsu.

"Shinshin!" The bird flapped its golden wings and glided over to Jusetsu. "Why are you here?"

It wasn't necessarily an answer to Jusetsu's question, but Shinshin let out another cry.

"Harara!" Shogetsu called out, sounding disgusted. "What's that useless bird device doing here?"

Shinshin spread its wings open as if to intimidate the man. *Bird device*, Jusetsu thought to herself inside. Then she remembered what Shogetsu had said earlier.

*"If you do want to fight me, then you'll have to use your bird device."*

Jusetsu pulled out one of Shinshin's tail feathers. In an instant, it turned into a golden arrow—the same kind of arrow that was said to hurtle toward the next Raven Consort's location. *So, this is what that looks like*, Jusetsu thought—she understood what they meant by that now.

Jusetsu turned to Shogetsu and hurled the golden arrow toward him with as much force as she could muster. The arrow whooshed through the air, its sharp tip glistening as it flew in his direction.

The arrow struck Shogetsu's shoulder. In that instant, his shoulder shattered and burst open. A small bang rang out. However, what scattered to the ground at that moment was not pieces of flesh, but bird feathers. They were striped brown and white—the feathers of an owl. Before Jusetsu had the chance to

think further, she released another arrow. This time, it sounded like a piece of thin glass shattering as it struck its target. It looked like his chest had ballooned out, but then feathers scattered in all directions from his chest. His legs, then his arms, started turning into feathers in sequence. With no body left to fill it out, his robe limply fell to the ground.

The only part of his body that hadn't turned to feathers was head, which just fell in one piece. As one would expect, there was no expression on his face, but his lips did move as it happened.

No voice came out, however, so Jusetsu didn't know what he said. He was probably calling the Raven's real name.

Before his head reached the ground, it turned into feathers as well. Owl feathers covered the ground where Shogetsu had stood. He had disappeared without leaving any further trace.

All that remained was a pile of feathers with the moonlight shining down on them.

Koshun sat with his shoulder exposed and Eisei bound his arm with bleached cotton. Jusetsu watched them out of the corner of her eye as she gathered up the feathers Shogetsu left behind.

"It's only a small injury. It'll be better in no time. I've suffered much worse," Koshun said calmly after Eisei had finished treating his wounds. He rearranged his robe.

Jusetsu had gotten glimpses of Koshun's scars here and there, so there was no arguing with that—but he had still been injured. There was no way that it didn't hurt.

"...I'm sorry. And thank you," Jusetsu said simply.

Koshun and Eisei looked at one another.

Jusetsu silently stuffed a gunny sack with the feathers. She didn't know whether it was okay for them to be left around, so she decided she may as well collect them and keep them in the Yamei Palace. Onkei was helping her, but

they weren't exchanging any particular conversation. Jusetsu focused on the job at hand. She was ashamed that she hadn't been able to do anything more about Shogetsu, and as such, wasn't feeling energetic enough to talk. If Shinshin hadn't shown up, she would have been completely helpless.

Shogetsu had called Shinshin "Harara." Was that Shinshin's real name?

There was so much that Jusetsu didn't know.

Jusetsu placed her hand against her stomach. Gyoei's words echoed inside her head.

*"...A monster will be created from within you."*

*Am I going to turn into a monster?*

*"You're already half-Raven. You entered this world as yourself, but without you realizing, that had been stolen from you. That's an extremely cruel thing to do to someone, but Kosho..."*

Had Kosho not put that much thought into what she had done? Or did she know and choose to offer up the Raven Consort as a vessel anyway? Did Reijo and the previous Raven Consorts know about this? What about the Winter Minister?

The Raven Consort was imprisoned in the Yamei Palace—but now, it seemed like there was even more to it. Did this mean that neither Jusetsu's body, nor her heart, were her own?

She was losing something deep inside herself. It was crumbling away.

As a surviving member of the Ran family, Jusetsu had been hidden, let her own mother be killed, and then was chosen to be the Raven Consort. These were all things beyond her control, but she still stood on her own two feet and decided that she had no choice but to survive. That was how she had lived her life. She believed that the only thing that no one could come and take away from her was herself. It was simply a given for her—she didn't need to convince herself of it. With that belief at her core, Jusetsu could stand tall with her head held high.

But now, she didn't even know if she was herself anymore.

*Where does the Raven start and “me” end? Will I lose all of myself to the Raven someday? Or has it already happened?*

Jusetsu’s vision became distorted.

*I can’t take this, she thought to herself.*

“Jusetsu,” Onkei called out to her. She looked up. “I’m sure Jiujiu and the others will be waiting for you in the Yamei Palace. You must be cold in this night air. Why don’t you get them to make you some hot tea?” Onkei squeezed the top of the gunny bag shut and hung it from his waistband. Then he turned to the young woman and held out his hand. “Are you able to walk, Jusetsu?” he asked.

She stared at his offered hand and slowly reached out her own. She placed her icy fingers on top of Onkei’s warm hand, finally letting herself come in contact with the heat again. It felt like the warmth from his body was seeping into hers.

Onkei helped her up. Before they realized it, Shinshin had disappeared. Perhaps the bird had hurried back to the Yamei Palace.

“Jusetsu,” Koshun called out to her, and she turned around. He rummaged in his breast pocket as he walked in her direction.

“What is it?” asked Jusetsu. “Have you got some snacks for me again?”

If Koshun had something hidden in his pocket, it usually meant that he brought some kind of edible treat with him.

“No,” Koshun said. It seemed like this time was different. He took something out, glanced at it, and frowned. He then put it back in his pocket.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’ll show you another time.”

“Why? Can’t you show me? I’m sure I would be interested,” Jusetsu said.

Looking reluctant, Koshun pulled the item back out of his pocket. He took hold of Jusetsu’s hand and placed something into her palm. It was a hanging belt decoration—a goldfish. The wood carving was so intricately detailed that it had scales carved into it, and the fish’s tail fins looked as if they were about to

move.

“I must be seeing things. How did you make this so quickly?”

Jusetsu had told Koshun that she was scared of losing her glass goldfish, so he said that he would make one out of wood instead. That conversation had just occurred earlier that day.

“I can make something like this in no time. I was visiting the Yamei Palace because I wanted to give it to you.” And that was why Koshun bumped into her just as she was coming out of the palace building. “But I was careless. It looks like I chipped it when I fell.”

Now that Jusetsu looked closely at it, there was a slight imperfection on the goldfish’s back fin. *I thought that was the way it was supposed to look*, Jusetsu thought. She wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t mentioned it.

“I’ll make you a new one,” said Koshun, putting out his hand. It looked like he was asking for it back.

Jusetsu gazed at the goldfish. “I don’t need a new one.”

It had a pale red string attached to it. Jusetsu pulled the string through her belt and secured it with a knot. There was now a goldfish hanging down from her belt. Every time she moved, it swayed. It looked like the fish was jumping about.

“A small chip doesn’t make any difference to me,” Jusetsu said. “If this fish *didn’t* have any faults, it’d probably start moving on its own accord.”

“...All right then,” replied Koshun. As he watched Jusetsu wiggle the goldfish about with her fingertips, a faint smile appeared on his face. “If you like it, then I’m glad,” he added.

Jusetsu glanced up at Koshun, then averted her gaze. She turned back toward the Yamei Palace. “I do,” she whispered. “...Thank you.”

Then she quickened her pace without turning back around to Koshun. Onkei was in front of her, looking about as he walked forward. The moon was bright in the sky above.

The heavy chains that bound Jusetsu with their poisonous warmth were now

the thing to pull Jusetsu back and stop her from falling.

It may have been a mistake, and she may have broken the promise she made to Reijo, but...

“Eisei,” Koshun called out to his eunuch as they were walking back to the inner court.

Eisei was holding a candlestick and leading the way, but he sidled closer to the emperor. There were still some eunuchs from the Bridle House around.

“There are a few things I need to check,” Koshun said.

“Do they have to do with Shogetsu?”

Koshun nodded at Eisei’s great intuition.

The emperor had several doubts about Shogetsu—and his identity was the least of his worries. How had Shogetsu entered the inner palace as a eunuch in the first place? And not only that, but he was employed by a consort’s palace as well. How did he manage to obtain a pass?

“He’s working together with someone...” Koshun’s whisper was so quiet that it melted away into the darkness of the night.

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After Koshun passed through the gate to the Seiu Shrine, he headed straight to the palace building at the back. He hadn’t told the Winter Minister he was coming, so when his subordinates spotted him, they hurried out of the palace building and kneeled.

“Is Gyoei here?” Koshun asked, and they showed him to the same room as usual.

The old man appeared in no time at all. It was as if he’d been awaiting Koshun’s visit.

“I’ve been informed that you suffered an injury a few days ago. Are you making a good recovery?”

“You don’t miss much,” replied Koshun. “It’s nothing serious. Just a scrape.”

These words—and the fact that Koshun seemed like his normal self—appeared to put Gyoei's mind at ease, and he nodded. "I'm glad to hear that," he said.

"Does that make you feel better?"

"Indeed, it does."

"Good." Koshun shut his mouth and looked toward the lattice window. The sunlight outside was so bright that it made him squint.

He'd spent a long time trying to figure out how best to broach the topic. It was on his mind right until he'd arrived at the Seiu Shrine.

"The person who gave me this injury was a eunuch called Ho Shogetsu. He's a neophyte who recently arrived at the inner palace. Did you hear about that too?"

Gyoei stared intently at Koshun's face as if he was trying to work out his true intentions.

Koshun continued. "Shogetsu seduced the Magpie Consort, caused the death of a court lady, and sent the whole inner palace into chaos. It's only natural that his background would be closely investigated. He was issued a pass as the nephew of someone named Ho Ichigyo, but we know that he most definitely is not. In other words, the pass was issued under false pretenses. Who arranged it for him? And one more thing—Shogetsu was not a eunuch that the Vulture High Steward purchased from a broker. He was permitted to enter the palace because an official recommended him, and that's why the Jakuso Palace trusted him enough to employ him. Who recommended him? I found that the answer to these questions is Shukuko, the functionary from the board of personnel."

Koshun had been staring at Gyoei's face as he spoke, but the Winter Minister didn't look surprised at all.

"Shukuko used to be one of your subordinates, so I take it you know him well. He's one of the men you trained. From what I hear, none of them ever forget what you've done for them—they think the world of you. So...how did a man like that get caught up in this?"

It was only when Koshun said this that Gyoei's lip quivered, and he clenched

his teeth together. The old man remained silent otherwise.

“Shukuko never admitted to what you asked him to do, but people saw you visiting him. They heard you too. There is no way to hide such things, even if you meet in secret in the dead of night.”

“Did you torture him?” Gyoei asked.

“You were the one who tortured him,” Koshun said, calmly yet sternly.

Gyoei clammed up again at that.

“Why?” Koshun asked again. “Why did you send Shogetsu to the inner palace? What kind of relationship do you have with him?” Koshun carried on, spitting out his words. He felt suffocated. “Did you send him there knowing that Shogetsu had come to...murder Jusetsu?”

Gyoei didn’t avert his gaze. Koshun now felt like *he* was the one being scrutinized.

“I knew,” Gyoei admitted calmly, keeping his eyes fixed on Koshun’s. “I didn’t know about Ho Shogetsu at first. Ho Ichigyo was an old friend of mine. We hadn’t seen each other in years, but I received a letter from him for the first time in a long while. He said he wanted me to get a pass for him, so I asked Shukuko for help. At the time, I just thought of it as doing a small favor for an old friend. The surprise came when he arrived and visited me. He asked me to assign Shogetsu to the inner palace as a eunuch. Many penniless young men become eunuchs, so his request itself wasn’t especially unusual. Those with recommendations get preferential treatment once they’ve entered the palace. However, Shogetsu didn’t look like he was short on money, so I couldn’t really understand why he was so keen to become a eunuch. He was a peculiar man... no, he wasn’t a man at all. He was neither man nor woman, and as such, he didn’t even visit the Pecking Chamber to be made into a eunuch. In fact, it didn’t seem like he was a human at all.”

Gyoei let out a sigh and took a moment to catch his breath. He raised his glass and moistened his lips with tea. Then he went on.

“Shogetsu would answer any question you asked him. He said he wanted to go see the Raven Consort. When I asked him why, he said that he had to kill her.

I didn't ask him any more than that. Not only was he no ordinary man, but he was also someone with some kind of duty to carry out. I asked Shukuko for his assistance and sent Shogetsu to the inner palace, as you know."

"But *why*?" asked Koshun. It wasn't often that his voice lost its usual serenity, but on this occasion, he had lost his composure. "Isn't that the same thing as sending a murderer straight to the Raven Consort?"

"You are correct." Gyoei's response left Koshun speechless. "I believed that if Shogetsu was no ordinary man, it would be wrong for me to put a stop to things. It's not my place to decide whether Shogetsu kills her or whether she turns the tables on him. That's the rule—even if it leads to the Raven Consort's...Jusetsu's death."

"Are you telling me you didn't care? How can you think that way, knowing how fond she is of you?"

Jusetsu had visited the Seiu Palace on countless occasions. She was always engrossed as she listened to the stories Gyoei had about Reijo. Even Gyoei must have known how attached to him she'd become.

Gyoei's eyebrows moved, and his eyes welled up with tears. He dropped his head downward. "...You're always so sympathetic toward her, Your Majesty."

"What?"

"I've warned you again and again not to get close to the Raven Consort—but you haven't listened, Your Majesty."

"But I..." Koshun protested.

"The Raven Consort is a solitary being. She does not want for anything and keeps people at a distance as she lives out her years alone in the Yamei Palace. You keep asking me why that is, but I'd actually like to ask *you* something—why do you believe I welcomed Jusetsu with open arms? I can't help but wonder why it seemed that way to you."

Koshun looked at Gyoei, aghast.

"Jusetsu has eunuchs and court ladies as her personal assistants. She has you, as well. She lives a life of privilege. I don't pity her like you do. From the

moment you became concerned about her and paid me a visit, I've never once seen her that way. Jusetsu is surrounded by people. Even the emperor worries himself about her. The emperor never took notice of Reijo in such a way. None of the previous emperors even gave her a passing thought. Reijo was alone. She was always alone, all by herself!" Gyoei shouted. His croaky, bloodcurdling yelling echoed throughout the room. "Did anybody help her? Did anybody use their influence to make things better for *her*? Why Jusetsu? If only there had been an emperor who'd worried about Reijo..."

Gyoei pounded the table with his fists. The cups of tea tipped over and rolled along the surface. Their contents dribbled onto the floor. The *drip-drop* of the liquid was abnormally loud and almost sounded like teardrops.

Gyoei's fists were shaking.

Koshun stared fixedly at them. "...She had Jusetsu," Koshun said softly, causing Gyoei to look up at him. "Reijo had Jusetsu. She taught Jusetsu how to read and write, instilled her with reason and looked after her with the utmost care. You can tell just by seeing her how much love Reijo showered upon her. I can't even imagine how significant Jusetsu's presence would have been for her. Wasn't Jusetsu Reijo's salvation?"

Gyoei stared at Koshun in silence.

"You attempted to *murder* that girl." Koshun's voice was calm once again.

Gyoei's mustache twitched, but no words were coming out.

The emperor thought back on all the different snapshots of Gyoei that he had in his memory—his aloofness and somewhat sardonic tone, the faces he made when he was taken unaware, and the wrinkles between his eyebrows while he played Go. It wasn't just Jusetsu who'd made a habit of visiting him, after all.

The short periods of time that Koshun had spent with Gyoei had been—in some small way—moments of respite for him.

And now, those opportunities had been taken away from him. He would never get them back again. Ever.

Koshun got up from his seat. "You've been saying you wanted to retire, haven't you? Well, I'm giving you permission. Leave. And don't you dare say

another word."

He had no intention of publicly punishing Gyoei. The empress dowager had only recently disappeared, so he wanted to avoid the chaos that would come with being accused of another nefarious scheme.

Gyoei bowed with his hands together. "I deeply appreciate the kindness you've shown to me," he told the emperor.

Koshun said nothing and left the room. He hadn't been able to tell that Gyoei had been keeping so much anger and sadness inside at all. The young emperor had been completely oblivious. At times, Gyoei would hide his face so that nobody could read his expression, and Koshun didn't realize what that meant. Or perhaps he had realized—and had just been subconsciously avoiding examining it in depth.

All kinds of things were now slipping through his fingers. In the end, there would be nothing left. Koshun felt as if a gloomy, cold shadow had started to follow him from behind once again.

Gyoei vacated the Seiu Shrine before the end of that day and went to live with his brother in the area surrounding the imperial estate, as he previously mentioned.

A few days later, Koshun heard news that Gyoei had taken his own life.

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The Koshi Palace sat in one corner of the imperial estate. Despite being the emperor's private residence, it was small and not especially fancy. It was suspected that this was to be some kind of hideaway that allowed the emperor to spend time in seclusion.

One day, a messenger arrived with a litter in tow, telling Jusetsu to come to the Koshi Palace. Naturally, this message had come from Koshun.

When Jusetsu stepped out of the uncomfortable litter, she could see a plaque that read "Koshi Palace" on a tile-roofed gate. When she passed through it, she found one small palace building standing at the end of a cobblestone path. It

didn't even have a garden. The place was open and unobstructed, but she couldn't shake the feeling that it was somehow lonely. The palace building's pillars had no red lacquer on them but were instead just bare wood. There were decorative tiles that featured an image of an old man riding a giant turtle on the edge of the roof. Cast-iron hanging lanterns lined the eaves.

A eunuch opened the doors for her. Jusetsu could hear something rustling slightly in the wind. *What's that sound?* Jusetsu thought. She realized that the noise was coming from the copperplate banners around the room. They swayed and grated against each other. *What a strange room.* When she looked to her feet, she saw that there was a gold inlay covering the stone floor—circles and lines linked together. It seemed to be a depiction of a constellation. Jusetsu stared at it as she walked forward. Then, she spotted a divan at the back of the room. Koshun was sitting on it in a leisurely manner.

Jusetsu said the first thing that came to her mind. "What do you want from me?"

Koshun gestured to the spot beside him, encouraging her to sit down. There were no other chairs, so Jusetsu had no choice but to sit down on the edge of his divan. Usually no one was allowed to sit next to the emperor, but Koshun was keeping his promise to treat her as the Winter Sovereign when it was just the two of them around.

"We have a new Winter Minister. He wants to say hello to you, so I told him to come meet you here."

"Did Gyoei retire?" Jusetsu asked, somewhat disappointed. He'd been saying he wanted to retire for some time, but she had no idea that he went and did so without her knowledge.

"Yes," replied Koshun, keeping his answer brief.

*He should have told me before he retired,* Jusetsu thought, but neither Gyoei nor Koshun were obliged to inform her. Still, she was a bit sad to hear this.

"He said he was going to live with his brother and sister-in-law near the imperial estate, didn't he? Is that where he went?"

"Yes," said Koshun.

“I won’t be able to see him anymore, then.”

Jusetsu wasn’t allowed to leave the imperial estate. Unless Gyoei came inside, she’d never see him again.

Koshun said nothing and simply gazed at the stars on the floor.

“What’s the new Winter Minister like?” Jusetsu asked. “Have I met him before?”

“I don’t think so,” Koshun replied. “It sounds like he’s been focusing on taking care of some housekeeping so far. He’s the person who has kept the Seiu Shrine going despite its tight budget and lack of staff. He’s still a young man—only just past forty, I believe.” Koshun then explained that Gyoei had had him lined up as his successor for some time.

“If he’s the Winter Minister...then that must mean that he knows what the Raven Consort is, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Koshun, giving yet another curt reply.

“...I wonder how much he really knows,” Jusetsu murmured.

Up until now, she thought that the Winter Minister and the Raven Consort were privy to the same secrets, but Gyoei hinted that he knew that Jusetsu had a monster—or rather, Uren Niangniang—inside of her. That was something that Jusetsu previously had no idea about. There were likely other things that Jusetsu wasn’t aware of. Did the Winter Minister know about *all* of them?

“Master,” called out Eisei as he entered the palace building. He went over to Koshun with quiet, gliding steps. “The Winter Minister has arrived.”

Following this announcement, another eunuch guided a man into the room. He was wearing a dark, greenish-gray robe and a dark rat-colored futou with a northern pintail’s tail feathers in it. He was an exceedingly tall, thin man. His cheeks were hollow and pale, and he had a piercing gaze. He looked unwell.

The man came over to Koshun and Jusetsu and kneeled down in front of them.

“I am Token. My courtesy name is Senri. I have been bestowed with the honor of inheriting the title of Winter Minister.”

His voice was deep, but he was a surprisingly mellow and gentle person. At first glance, he looked tense, but perhaps he wasn't as nervous as he seemed.

"I've been prone to illness for many, many years, so I am not in especially good health. Even so, I look forward to fulfilling my duties in this position. And for the sake of Gyoei as well, as he so kindly supported me for so long," Senri said with downcast eyes. When he did that, they didn't look as piercing.

"Is Gyoei doing well in his retirement?" Jusetsu asked.

Senri looked at Koshun for a moment. He quickly shifted his gaze back to Jusetsu. "Yes," he said. "I believe so."

"I see," Jusetsu said. She imagined that he might have been playing Go with his younger brother at that very moment. "I wanted to play Go with him one day. I'm not very good, but I doubt that he's as skilled as Koshun."

A somewhat melancholic smile came to Koshun's face. She figured he was sad that Gyoei had retired too.

"I can play a little Go," said Senri. "If you don't mind playing against me, I'd be pleased to play a game with you whenever you like."

"I expect you're quite good. Your face says it all. Besides, 'I can play a little Go' sounds like exactly the kind of thing a proficient player would say," Jusetsu responded with a frown.

Senri laughed. His smile was unexpectedly unguarded, which surprised Jusetsu. Perhaps he was more cheerful than his appearance would lead one to believe.

"Anyway... Gyoei had spent a long time researching the Raven Consort," Senri said with a faint smile still on his face. "I think he was aware of things that the previous Hakuen...the previous Winter Minister was oblivious to."

"For example?" she asked.

"The fact that Uren Niangniang is sealed away inside the Raven Consort, for one."

Jusetsu found herself looking at Senri. He gave her a small nod.

"Those who inherit the position of Winter Minister are given the *Duo*

*Encyclopedia of History...* The *other* version of it, the same as the one the Raven Consort has. Nothing else is passed down to us. As a result, all Winter Ministers find out is what is written in that. However, it appears Gyoei did some further investigation on his own. I discovered this through the many notes that he left behind—that's why I say 'it appears' that way. I haven't sorted them all out yet, but it would seem that he was very passionate about this research. That said, I do get the impression that he brought it to an end after the death of the previous Raven Consort..."

*Oh, I see.*

To Jusetsu, this made perfect sense. Gyoei must have been doing that research in order to help Reijo. It was futile, though. He wasn't able to free her.

"I plan to start by sorting out all Gyoei's research. After that, I'll follow in his footsteps and continue the investigation he put on pause. That kind of thing has always been my strong suit, after all."

"Wouldn't it be quicker to ask Gyoei himself about his work?" Jusetsu asked.

"He'd scold me if I did that. 'Do you really have to come running to a retired old fool like me to help you make sense of this?', he'd say," Senri quipped sardonically, smiling. "I'm annoyed about it too. I see it as some homework that Gyoei left behind for me."

Jusetsu could easily imagine the old man being so wry. There was a mixture of nostalgia and adoration in the smile that was carved into Senri's hollow cheeks. It was clear Gyoei and Senri had had a relationship of mutual trust.

"If that can help you, Jusetsu...I believe I will have fulfilled my duty as Gyoei's successor," Senri declared, choosing his words carefully.

Jusetsu cocked her head slightly. *Why would helping me mean that he had fulfilled his duty?*

"You see, I believe that the Winter Minister's original purpose was to help the Raven Consort," he went on.

"You do...?"

"I would like to be able to aid you, at least."

Jusetsu stared at Senri's face. For some peculiar reason, he—despite being so sickly pale and emaciated—made Jusetsu feel safe. She felt as though she could depend on him. *Maybe this is what it would have been like to have a father*, she found herself thinking for a brief moment.

Senri took this opportunity to say farewell and return home. Jusetsu imagined that the Winter Ministry would be in safe hands with him around.

"I knew Gyoei would have trained a good successor to take over his role," she commented.

"He has," said Koshun, unsurprisingly keeping his response brief yet again.

Jusetsu looked over at him. "Is your arm hurting?"

Koshun seemed puzzled by her question. "No. Why?"

"Your face says it all," she replied, repeating the same line she'd said to Senri earlier.

Koshun let out a little laugh. "Does it now?"

"If you're tired, you should hurry back and rest."

"I should," said Koshun, but he made no effort to stand up. "I slept on your bed once, didn't I?"

"You did. It was a nuisance."

"That was the best night's sleep I ever had. I feel like I had a nice dream too," he went on, ignoring her comment.

"It's my bed, not yours. I'm not going to let you sleep there again."

"Maybe it was because you were there," Koshun continued.

"I'm not your bed either."

"Well, you're not wrong about that," Koshun said. This time, he stood up. "Sorry for talking nonsense. Forget I said anything."

Jusetsu looked up at Koshun's face. "Are you struggling to sleep?"

He looked down at her and paused. "A little."

Jusetsu gestured toward the spot beside her, encouraging Koshun to sit

down. It was the same thing that Koshun had done earlier when Jusetsu arrived at the Kosho Palace. Koshun obediently sat down again.

Jusetsu took his hand in hers. “You’re very cold. And it’s summer. Are you eating properly?”

“I’m eating.”

“Not being able to eat is a problem—but forcing food down isn’t good either. All it does is put a strain on your stomach. Don’t limit your diet to cold foods just because it’s hot outside. Try putting scallions and ginger in some gruel. It’ll warm you up. Lychee is a good option too, as it improves the circulation of your qi,” Jusetsu explained as she massaged Koshun’s hand. “Also...”

As Jusetsu was trying to think of something else that he should eat, she sensed a smile appear on Koshun’s face.

“What is it?” she said.

“Nothing, really... I just wondered whether Reijo had taught you that too.”

“Keishi did. She’s the servant at the Yamei Palace. She never stops fussing about nutrition. When I first came to Yamei Palace, I was as skinny as a rail, so she took care of me.”

Reijo had taught Jusetsu how to give a hand massage, however. When Jusetsu was startled awake by nightmares about her mother’s head being on public display, Reijo would often massage and warm up her hands so the young girl could sleep better.

She told Koshun this, then added, “If you can’t sleep, you should get someone to massage your hand like this.”

“Is that so...?” Koshun said, leaning back on the divan and looking relaxed. “The Magpie Consort died,” he said softly.

Jusetsu stopped what she was doing and looked at him.

“I didn’t want to let her die,” he went on.

“Of course not,” she said.

“I’m not simply sad about her death though. I needed to keep her alive for the

sake of her father too.”

“The Magpie Consort’s father... Wasn’t he the vice-minister at the secretariat...and a member of the Midwinter Faction?”

“Correct. He must hate me.”

“I doubt he...*hates* you. What the Magpie Consort did had nothing to do with you. That resentment would be misplaced.”

“No, it wouldn’t. What if she hadn’t come to the inner palace? What if I sent her back to her family sooner? Even if you reason it away, resentment like that keeps on smoldering deep in the depths of your heart. Eventually, the embers that those feelings leave behind will grow into an enormous fire,” Koshun said. “The same thing happened when I didn’t forgive the empress dowager. If it weren’t for what she did to my mother and Teiran, I don’t know if I would have gotten so fixated on ascending the throne. Emotions drive my heart. Everyone is driven that way.”

Jusetsu squeezed Koshun’s hand again. It had warmed up now, but she was sure that warmth still hadn’t reached his heart.

“I’m disgusted with myself for not being able to mourn the Magpie Consort properly as well,” the emperor said. Koshun’s voice was calm, but to Jusetsu, it sounded like a scream straight from his creaking heart.

“Burn a silk feather for her,” Jusetsu suggested.

“A silk feather?” Koshun repeated.

“Take a little bit of time to mourn her yourself. That’ll give you a chance to focus on grieving, and nothing else.”

Koshun stared fixedly at Jusetsu’s face. “Fine. I shall do that.”

“I’ll burn one for her too. I want to make sure she gets across the sea without a hitch.”

She wanted to make sure that Koshun wouldn’t go astray either.

And that was the first time she ever prayed for him.

When she got back to the Yamei Palace, Jusetsu took a silk feather out from her cabinet, wrote down the Magpie Consort's name, and burned it. She watched the small, pale red bird fly away and thought about Koshun. For the first time, she wondered if there was anything she could do for the man. She didn't want to pay him back for injuring himself to protect her, or for offering her a helping hand.

The idea just happened to come to mind.

She couldn't see the bird any longer. The azure sky was so rich that it seemed like it would turn your hand blue if you dipped your hand in it. The white clouds looked like they'd been kneaded together to create a mountain. The sky itself was shining so brightly that it was dazzling. Jusetsu gazed at it, squinting from the light, and then retreated inside her palace building. She headed over to the cabinet again and took out some hemp paper. She placed it on the table where an inkstone and a brush were already out and sat down in her seat. After spending a few moments thinking, she picked up her brush.

That day, she sent a letter addressed to a particular official.

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Koshun took off the upper part of his robe and Eisei removed the cotton bandages that were wrapped around his arm. His wounds had already healed over, and they didn't hurt anymore. Despite this, the sight of the scar they'd left behind made Eisei frown slightly.

"Master..."

The scar was a faint line, and the wound had actually healed rather quickly. However, a mark with a stripe-like pattern mysteriously appeared near it. It wasn't a bruise—it was a proper brown mark of some sort.

It looked just like an owl's feather.

"No, there's nothing particularly out of the ordinary," Eisei said.

Koshun put his robe back to the way it was. Indeed, the fact there was a mark there wasn't strange. It even seemed like it was getting fainter. Eisei was sure that it'd be gone in no time.

"If anything looks untoward, I'll let you know right away," the eunuch said. He still had a look of concern on his face.

Koshun left the room and headed from the inner court to one of the palace buildings outside. He walked along the passage and came out into the corner where a large lotus pond sat. He stopped in his tracks before he reached the water. He could hear the sound of insects. Once he stepped outside into the sun, it'd be so hot that he'd immediately break out in a sweat. Even so, a breeze glided over the pond, and it was cool in the shady passage.

As Koshun stared at the lotus buds—the flowers had already closed up—a eunuch informed him that one of his vassals had arrived.

The vassal kneeled in front of Koshun and placed his hands together in a show of respect. Koshun dismissed Eisei and the other eunuch who had been by his side and called out to the man kneeling before him.

"This way," he said. "...Kokei."

The man jolted upright and went over to Koshun's side. He was Kin Kokei—the Magpie Consort's father. He was in his fifties and had been a fine figure of a man. Now, however, he looked haggard—a mere shadow of his usual self. Until recently, his hair had been very dark, but half of it had gone gray.

It had been decided that he was to resign from his position as the vice-minister of the secretariat and leave the imperial court. Officially, the Magpie Consort had died of illness, and the court lady had been bitten by a wild dog. However, as her father, he couldn't evade the responsibility.

"I owe you the sincerest of apologies, Your Majesty," Kokei said. He was inconsolable. He lost his son, and now his daughter too. To make matters worse, Kokei was obliged to apologize to other people as well. Koshun couldn't even imagine how that must have felt for a father.

"You don't need to apologize. Just grieve for your children and take care of your wife," he told him.

"Oh..." mumbled Kokei. Unable to bear it anymore, the expression on his face crumpled, and he clenched his jaw. His eyes filled up with tears and they overflowed onto his cheeks. "I-I'm so..." he began, but he found it impossible to

get the words out. He wiped his face with his handkerchief instead.

The man was an honest person who the other officials deeply trusted. He was a reliable worker as well. This was going to be a big loss to Koshun.

"As brother and sister, those two always brought out the best in each other, ever since they were young..." Kokei began to explain haltingly after he'd wiped away his tears and regained his composure. "It was my mother who first mentioned that they were a little *too* close. Embarrassingly, I hadn't noticed it myself... My wife suggested we give her away in marriage before they made a mistake, but I didn't think that simply marrying her off to another family would be enough to end their relationship. If she went to the inner palace, though, she'd never see him again. I thought that either her feelings would naturally fade away, or she'd be forced to give up on him. It was an extremely impudent reason to send her to the inner palace. *That* was my crime. That was what drove Keiyo to what she did. I never expected something so...so...*terrible* to happen..."

Kokei grasped tightly onto his handkerchief. No amount of regret would ever be enough. Koshun tapped lightly on this arm as if to say, "*Don't be so hard on yourself.*"

Tears welled up in Kokei's eyes once again, and he hurriedly put a handkerchief to them. "Truly...if only Keiyo had been in love with a kind man like you, she would have been the happiest girl in the world..."

*Am I really kind?* Koshun thought. He let Keiyo die and lost Kokei because of it. He had expected this man to resent him instead.

There was no way that Kokei would have been able to read Koshun's thoughts by looking at his expressionless face, but he gave him a small smile, nonetheless.

"I know that you're a kind person, Your Majesty. You burned a silk feather for Keiyo, didn't you?"

Koshun was shocked. He hadn't told anybody about that. The only person who knew he'd done so in secret was Eisei, and he wouldn't have disclosed that information.

“How do you...?”

“I received a letter...from the Raven Consort.”

“The Raven Consort?” He was even more shocked now. *Had Jusetsu written a letter to him?*

“She said that she burned a silk feather to mourn Keiyo, to make sure that her soul didn’t get lost. She said that you did the same. It was all in her letter. I never would have imagined that I’d receive such a message from the Raven Consort, so I was astounded when I did. She was a mysterious figure to me—I didn’t know whether she was human or ghost—so I was surprised to get such a compassionate note... I could tell from her letter how heartfelt her condolences were. She’s a kind person, isn’t she? As are you, Your Majesty.”

Koshun was speechless. He’d never expected Jusetsu to do such a thing. What surprised him even more was the fact that she’d likely done it...for *him*.

He couldn’t sense any smoldering resentment whatsoever from Kokei, and Koshun found that strange. He wondered whether the man was just that good at hiding it, or whether he’d always been that kind of person.

Jusetsu’s letter had comforted Kokei.

He didn’t know why, but at that moment, Koshun was stricken by the urge to cry himself. Despite the gloomy shadow constantly at his heels, he felt like he finally remembered how to breathe again.

All this time, Koshun had been wanting to save Jusetsu. He felt a sense of guilt for having chosen to shackle her to the palace without saying a word. He knew that what Shogetsu told her would have only added to her pain.

Jusetsu must have been wounded all over. She might not have been physically injured, but she likely carried deep psychological anguish. *Why, after all that, did she spare the energy to think about me?* Koshun thought.

Koshun, of all people, being the Summer Sovereign who’d locked her, the Winter Sovereign, away.

That was the moment Koshun realized for the first time that he’d been underestimating Jusetsu. As she became aware of her own presumptuousness,

her heart—which had been frozen in fear of the shadows—had been slowly thawing.

She, too, could finally start to breathe.

That was her salvation. The same salvation Koshun had been longing for, even though he'd resigned to the fact that he'd never be able to get it.

“Your Majesty?” Kokei raised his voice, startled. “Are you...crying, Your Majesty? Because of Keiyo?”

She wasn't the reason. Unable to get out the words to correct this misunderstanding, Koshun stood frozen to the spot in silence.

A breeze blew across the surface of the pond and lightly brushed away the single tear that streamed down his cheek.



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