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Kouko Shirakawa



Seven Seas Entertainment





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PROOFREADER: Stephanie Cohen
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: T. Burke

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

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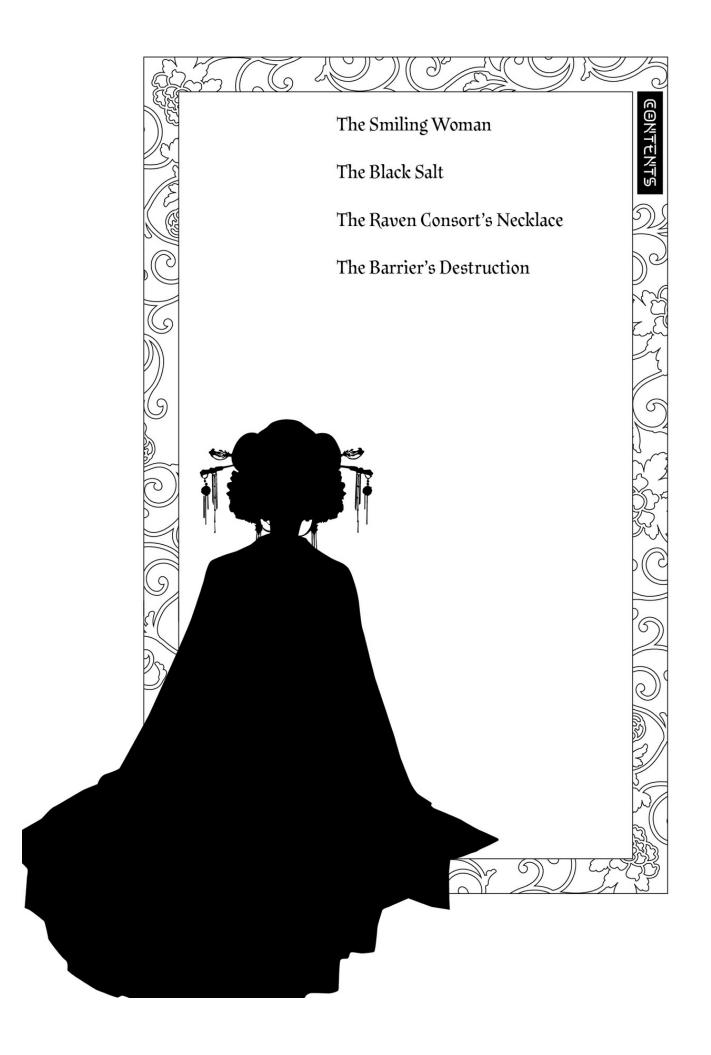
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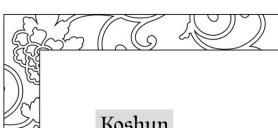
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#### Koshun

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

#### Jusetsu

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

# Eisei

A eunuch who pledges absolute loyalty to Koshun.

## Jiujiu

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

#### Onkei

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

### Tankai

Jusetsu's other bodyguard.

### Ishiha

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

#### Shiki

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



#### Banka

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

# Choyo

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

#### Hakurai

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

### Injo

The young shrine maiden of the Eight True Teachings.

# Reijo

Former Raven Consort. Deceased.

# Gyoei

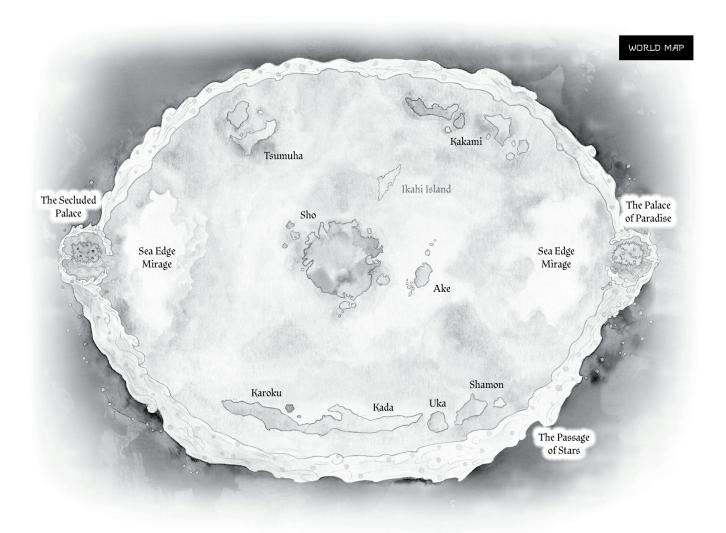
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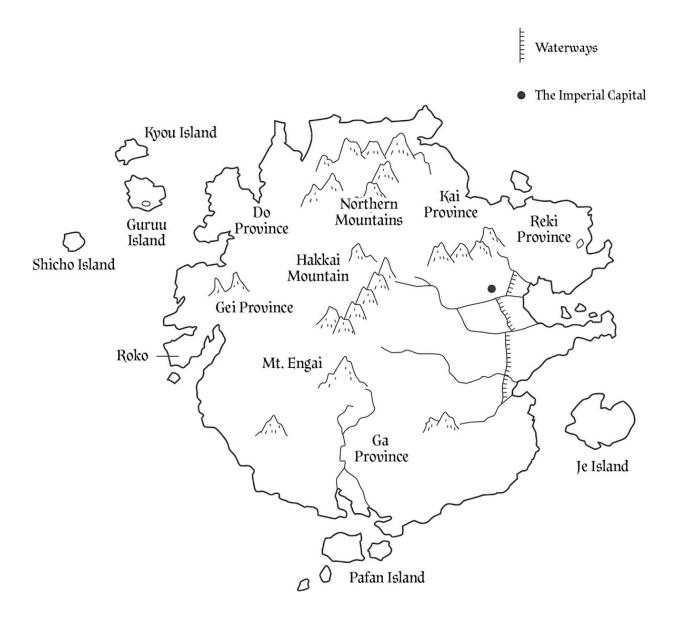
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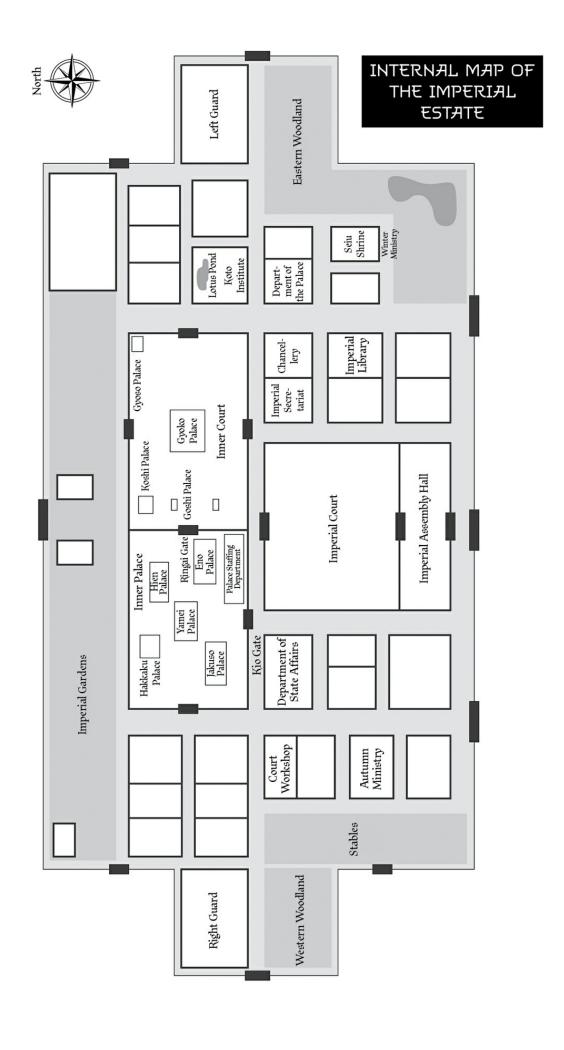
Current Winter Minister. One of Jusetsu's allies.

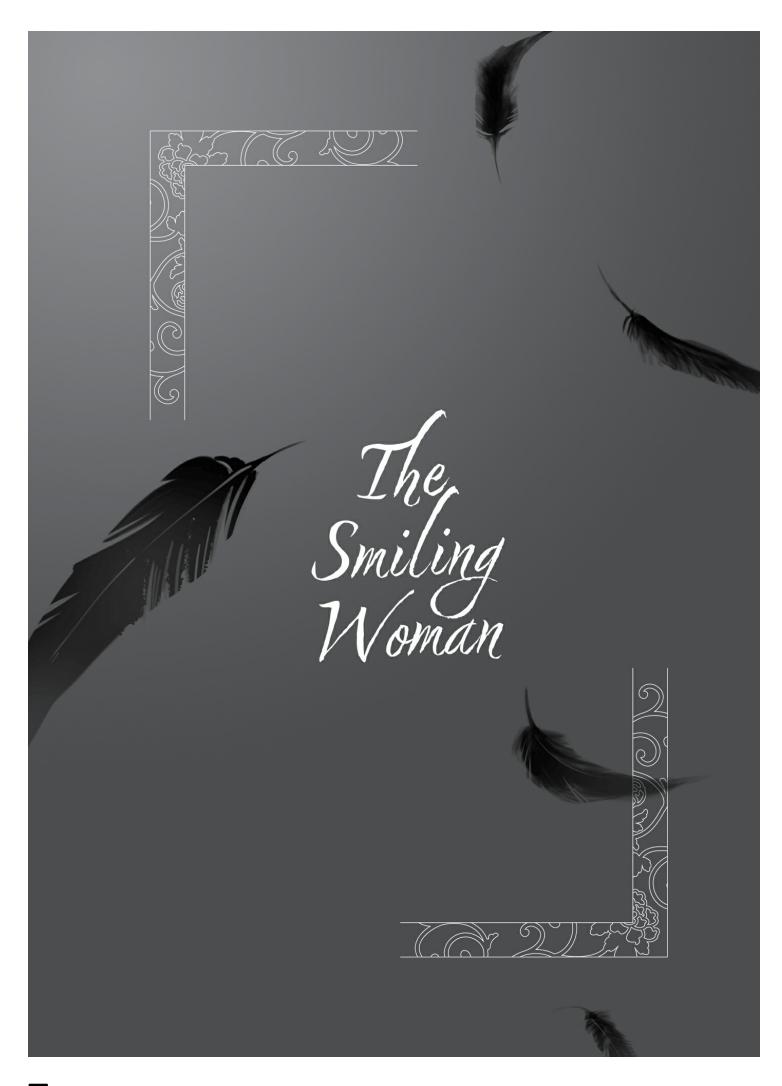
### Kajo

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









f THAT AUTUMN, the imperial estate was abuzz with celebrations. Not one, but

two of the emperor's concubines were discovered to be with child in close succession.

Just as the news of the Crane Consort's pregnancy spread like wildfire, it was revealed that the Swallow Concubine was also expecting a baby. The Crane Consort, Banka, was the daughter of the powerful Saname family from Ga Province, and the Swallow Concubine, Koei, was from the distinguished Sho family.

"Our master has been very tactical there," commented Tankai—one of Jusetsu's bodyguards—when the topic came up in the Yamei Palace.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Jusetsu.

"Do you know what 'equilibrium' means?"

"Equilibrium... When things are balanced, for example? Where does that come into play here?"

"I'm talking about equilibrium in the imperial court," responded Tankai.

The imperial court was the center stage for political affairs, and Jusetsu frankly knew nothing about it. Tankai, on the other hand, was well versed in matters outside of the inner palace, but it was a total mystery where he obtained this information from.

"Thanks to the disaster with the empress dowager, everyone is extremely wary when it comes to consorts and their relatives. The Saname family is a powerful one from out in the country, so they're far away from the influence of the central government. On the other hand, you have the Sho family, a group who has been prestigious since time immemorial. The point is, they might be supporters of the Un family, but just because the family has held a high status since ancient times doesn't mean they're influential. The current head of the family is a mild-mannered sort of guy. Compared to the previous grand chancellor, he's more like an adorable little puppy."

The previous grand chancellor, Un Eitoku, had played a pivotal role in elevating Koshun to the imperial throne.

"Are you saying that it was 'tactical' for him to get a consort from an Unsupporting family and a consort whose relatives don't seem like they'd kick up

much of a fuss pregnant at the same time?" Jusetsu asked.

"Well, yeah. I was half-expecting to hear this sort of happy news once the aftermath of the empress dowager's brutality was dealt with—and true enough, our master knows what he's doing." Tankai laughed dryly.

"He does take his role very seriously," Jusetsu said simply.

She and Tankai probably had different ways of looking at things. Jusetsu didn't see Koshun as an astute enough person to be praised as "tactical." However, as Tankai said, she could recognize that the emperor was worried about ensuring things were balanced—he just wasn't the type of person who'd vocalize that or show it on his face.

"What do you mean, 'tactical?'" said Jiujiu, Jusetsu's lady-in-waiting, with a disapproving look on her face. "His Majesty isn't a heartless, cold-blooded beast, is he? A baby is a blessing! It's not just something you can give to whoever you want to."

"Well, no," said Tankai, looking at Jiujiu embarrassedly. "You're very moody lately, aren't you, Jiujiu?"

"I am not."

"Yeah, you are," he said. "Stop taking it out on me."

"I'm not. But I have told Ishiha to inform Onkei that you're slacking off and chitchatting again."

"Ugh!" Tankai scowled—but at that very moment, a shadow cast across the entrance to the room. Sure enough, Onkei had appeared, not making a sound. Onkei was another one of the eunuchs who escorted Jusetsu. He knelt before the Raven Consort, bowed, and then shot Tankai a frosty look.

"Tankai. How many times do I have to tell you? You must fulfill your duties," Onkei said.

"But it's not like anyone even *comes* to the Yamei Palace these days, and niangniang doesn't go out either. I have nothing to do."

Onkei didn't reply, and instead simply glared back at Tankai in silence. His face was so beautiful that it gave his stare a menacing edge.

Tankai—for whom keeping quiet was the best policy here—reluctantly obeyed Onkei and made his way out of the palace building. The moment Tankai left, the place descended into silence. It even felt like the room had grown darker.

"Tankai might be loud, but I think that might just be his way of keeping you entertained, niangniang," said Jiujiu. "But...I'm sure his desire to slack off is his primary motive."

"Entertain me? It's not as if I'm particularly bored."

"But..." Jiujiu's eyebrows drooped as she looked around the room. "Don't you find it lonely when things are so quiet?"

For some time now, the Yamei Palace had been extremely still. No one visited to ask the Raven Consort for help. Jusetsu didn't even leave the palace building. What Tankai said was correct.

After the "Black-robed Niangniang" uproar broke out due to belief in the Raven Consort going too far, Jusetsu had shut herself away inside the Yamei Palace. She would have done so even if Koshun hadn't imposed a punishment in which she wasn't allowed to leave the premises.

The Raven Consort was the Winter Sovereign, chosen by the goddess Uren Niangniang. Once upon a time, there was a formal Winter Sovereign, the godserving ruler who presided over rituals, and a formal Summer Sovereign, the secular ruler who carried out governmental affairs. These two ruled the land as a pair. However, eventually, the Summer Sovereign killed the Winter Sovereign, and that led to an extended period of deadly strife and bloodshed. Then, the first emperor of the Ran dynasty, the same one who succeeded in once again unifying the country, hid the Winter Sovereign away in the depths of the inner palace in the form of the Raven Consort, afraid that the country would descend into turmoil once again.

The Raven Consort was supposed to be alone. Reijo had issued Jusetsu with that warning, and it had resonated with her deeply. Jusetsu had made a mistake in ignoring it. Unwittingly, she had become addicted to how good it felt to have other people rely on her.

Seeing how the pandemonium angered the emperor, the people of the inner

palace gave up on visiting the Yamei Palace. Even so, Jusetsu still had Jiujiu and her other helpers by her side.

There was no way she could simply cast away those she had embraced at this point. No, it wasn't that she couldn't—she wouldn't. She decided not to.

Koshun had told Jusetsu that they needed to unravel the tangled threads they were dealing with from a deeper, more fundamental level. It was only natural that the Winter Sovereign, the overseer of rituals, would garner faith from other people. The true mistake was that such an individual was shut away in the inner palace in the first place.

Those threads needed to be untangled, rather than forcibly cut loose or abandoned. At the end of the day, that wasn't going to solve anything.

The path that Koshun had chosen to take was likely the bumpiest of them all. He was choosing to rectify the mistakes of Kosho, the very first Raven Consort.

In other words, they were going to liberate Uren Niangniang, the goddess who had been sealed inside of the Raven Consort. In order to do that, they needed to locate the other half of Uren Niangniang's body, which had sunk into the sea during a fight with the ao god. But to even be able to search for it, the Raven Consort would have to leave the imperial estate...which required breaking the mystical barrier Kosho had put in place to prevent her from doing just that.

They knew what they had to do—but actually pulling it off would be a challenge.

Jusetsu let out a sigh, and dusky shadows fell across her face. Jiujiu lit a lantern, and a faint light illuminated her cheeks. The lantern's warm light reflected in her large, dark pupils. This sight of the lady-in-waiting sent a wave of calm through her.

Jusetsu wondered if this was what people meant when they talked about things putting their mind at ease. She wanted to ask Koshun about it at some point.

"Niangniang, if you were being honest, how do you *really* feel about this?" asked Jiujiu, her gaze still directed toward the lantern.

"How do I feel about what?"

"The consorts being pregnant..."

Jusetsu tilted her head slightly to the one side, not entirely sure what Jiujiu was asking her. "I don't think what Tankai said was necessarily incorrect. That fool does tend to overthink all kinds of things. He cares too much, even if that doesn't always bring about the best outcome."

"Huh? Well, yes, but..." Jiujiu trailed off.

"The sooner you have an heir, the better. He wouldn't want a child he conceived later in life becoming the crown prince—that's the worst possible scenario. Once an emperor has passed away, the child's mother and relatives start throwing their weight around."

"It's not those sorts of complex issues that I'm getting at."

"Then what are you trying to say?" Jusetsu asked.

The matters of pregnancy and heirs were so far detached from Jusetsu's standpoint that she honestly didn't have any real thoughts on the topic.

"I'm talking about the Crane Consort and the Swallow Concubine, for example..."

"From what I can glean from her letters, Banka seems to be doing well. All seems to be going smoothly with her pregnancy too. I'm more worried about the Swallow Concubine. Koshun says she's been feeling out of sorts."

Banka had been regularly sending Jusetsu letters since Jusetsu was declining her offers to visit. Whereas she used to write in formal, stiff-sounding prose, her letters were now more relaxed and cheerful. There was a joyfulness to them that suggested that she'd put some kind of problem behind her, and Jusetsu found the change staggering.

But on the other hand, there was the Swallow Concubine. Jusetsu had heard she was older than Koshun, but having grown up in the lap of luxury, the woman still gave off the impression of a sweet little girl in some way or another. Jusetsu remembered how fearful she seemed when the Swallow Concubine saw her for the first time. It was strange to think that someone like her was going to

be a mother.

"Is that right?" said Jiujiu, the expression on her face reflecting her mixed feelings—somewhat troubled, and yet somewhat relieved at the same time. "I take it you're not upset about their pregnancies, then."

"No." Jusetsu was unsure why she'd be upset about the emperor's concubines being pregnant. She must have made Jiujiu worry because she was so lost in thought. "I'm not particularly upset."

"Aren't you? Well, in that case, I'm pleased to hear it." Despite saying this, there was still a hint of concern on Jiujiu's face.

It would be a long time until Jusetsu realized what Jiujiu was worrying about.

In the middle of the night, Jusetsu suddenly looked up. At the same moment, Shinshin had started flapping its wings about and acting unruly. The bird had sensed someone arriving.

Who could it be? It had been a long while since Jusetsu last had a visitor. Even if a guest did turn up, Onkei or Tankai would usually turn them away—and yet...

"Niangniang."

Jusetsu heard Onkei's voice coming from the other side of the doorway. "Is it a visitor?" she asked.

"One of the Swallow Concubine's ladies-in-waiting wishes to speak with you."

"Hmph."

Jusetsu considered things for a moment. Onkei never did anything that wasn't strictly necessary. If he let a visitor come this far, then it had to be because the matter they were visiting regarding was so important that he couldn't bring himself to turn them away. The fact that the visitor in question was a lady-in-waiting for the pregnant Swallow Concubine was also concerning.

"I shall hear what she has to say, but that's as far as this will go," said Jusetsu.

With that, Jusetsu reached her hand up. With one wave of it, the doors opened, as if they were being pulled with a string. Chilly night air from outside

crept into the room. Onkei emerged from the cover of darkness, and behind him stood an older lady-in-waiting who seemed very pale. Jusetsu remembered seeing her before when she went to the Hien Palace. If her age was anything to go by, this lady-in-waiting must have been working for Sho Koei for a very long time.

"As I'm sure Onkei has already informed you, I am unable to take requests at the present time," Jusetsu said.

"The child of Koei—and by extension, of His Majesty—is of the utmost importance here. Please, listen to and accept my request." The lady-in-waiting then got to her knees and prostrated herself in front of Jusetsu. She appeared to be at a total loss.

"...That may well be the case, but their child still has nothing to do with me," said Jusetsu, as if to thrust her off.

This comment brought a hint of despair to the lady-in-waiting's face, making Jusetsu look away.

"But for the time being, just sit over there and explain the situation to me," Jusetsu urged.

"Were you aware that Koei is becoming the Magpie Consort?" the lady-inwaiting began, her face looking tired. If Jiujiu were around, she would have at least served her some tea, but unfortunately, she was long since dismissed for the night.

"I was not," Jusetsu replied. "Was she given that role as a prize for becoming pregnant with the emperor's child?"

In order of status, there was the Mandarin Duck Consort, the Magpie Consort, and then the Crane Consort. Below them came the Swallow Concubine. Despite not having the rank of consort, the Swallow Concubine had her own palace, so it could be said that she had her own special status of sorts. The Hien Palace was also the closest concubine palace to the Yamei Palace.

"The idea has been circulating for some time, ever since the Magpie Consort passed away... Now that Koei is pregnant, it's becoming official."

The Magpie Consort had lost her life in an unfortunate incident. Jusetsu still

felt remorseful when she thought back on what happened.

"The Crane Consort is remaining in her position while the Swallow Concubine is being promoted to Magpie Consort... Hmm."

Koshun must have had a motive or reason for making things that way.

"Whatever the case," Jusetsu continued, "aren't her pregnancy and her promotion to consort both things worth celebrating?"

"Well, yes, but..." The lady-in-waiting had a gloomy look on her face. It wasn't the sort of expression you'd expect to see from someone working for a consort with so much to celebrate. "Koei is insisting that she does not wish to become the Magpie Consort."

"Oh?" Jusetsu cocked her head slightly. "And why might that be?"

"She doesn't want to move to the Jakuso Palace."

Jusetsu thought for a moment. "Then why doesn't she stay where she is?"

"That's out of the question. Not when His Majesty has been so kind as to grant her this status."

"She should move, then."

"She doesn't want to..." the lady-in-waiting said.

Jusetsu was starting to find this all a bit of a nuisance. "So, essentially, she's throwing a tantrum about it?"

"If she were simply being difficult, we would be able to find some way of appeasing her—but Koei's grievances cannot be put aside in the way that simple selfishness could."

"What do you mean by that?" the Raven Consort asked.

"She says that the Jakuso Palace is unlucky."

Jusetsu looked down. So that's what this is about, she realized. It's beginning to make more sense now. "The Swallow Concubine is easily frightened, isn't she?"

"That's right," said the lady-in-waiting. "Unusually so."

"And that's why she doesn't want to live in the palace where the Magpie Consort died."

The lady-in-waiting nodded silently.

"People have died in the Hien Palace and the other palaces as well, you know."

The lady-in-waiting nodded again. "We've tried telling her that—how there's no end to the list of tragedies that have occurred in these palaces."

"Did that not help?"

"Koei was acquainted with the Magpie Consort to some extent, so I think that might make it even scarier for her," she explained. "There's a difference between a stranger dying, and somebody you knew..."

This was a fair point.

"Hmm." Jusetsu pondered the topic. "If she's scared, then there's nothing we can do to change that. It wouldn't be good for the baby if she were made to move against her will either, would it? I don't know for sure, but even so..."

"No, you are absolutely right. We've been worried about the baby being affected too."

"In that case, what do you want me to do? I'm no midwife," Jusetsu said.

The lady-in-waiting nodded, almost as if what she was about to say was obvious. "If you could kindly exorcize the Jakuso Palace of anything bad, I believe it would give Koei some peace of mind."

"...There's nothing bad haunting the Jakuso Palace."

"That doesn't matter," the lady-in-waiting said. "As long as you give it a onceover, Koei should be satisfied."

"I'm not a shrine maiden or a fortune slip vendor from the market, you know. If it's make-believe rites you're after, you should ask one of them instead."

Unyielding, the lady-in-waiting didn't even flinch at Jusetsu's clear annoyance. "It has to be you, esteemed Raven Consort."

Jusetsu was getting a glimpse of the self-respect and pride that ladies-in-

waiting who worked for the daughters of distinguished families possessed—something that court ladies of low standing didn't have.

"I don't care," Jusetsu said. "Find somebody else."

Jusetsu was forbidden from going outside anyway. She *couldn't* go to the Jakuso Palace to purify it.

The lady-in-waiting pressed further. "Koei is a shy individual, but strangely enough, she seems to idolize you. As long as you exorcise the Jakuso Palace, I'll persuade her to move. At the end of the day, she does listen to what I tell her."

The woman then puffed her chest out with pride. It suddenly occurred to Jusetsu that Koei might have a hard time with this lady-in-waiting as well.

"I'm not able to leave the Yamei Palace," Jusetsu eventually said.

"I am aware of that. But it's all right as long as you have His Majesty's permission, isn't it? His Majesty's child is of the utmost importance in this situation. Koei will put in a request with him and get permission for you, so no need to worry about that. I doubt he would object if she told him that she wants to exorcise the Jakuso Palace so that she can give birth to a healthy child."

This is one pushy woman. No matter what Jusetsu said, she wouldn't back down. She felt some degree of sympathy for Koei, having a lady-in-waiting like this working for her—and it may have been part of the reason why she was beaten down and forced into helping.

"You decided to listen to the Swallow Concubine's request?" Tankai said the next day, staggered by what Jusetsu had told him.

"The lady-in-waiting was the one with the request."

"It doesn't sound like that makes any difference. Scared to move palaces... What is she, a child?" Tankai mused.

"You're right in that she does still seem to act like a little girl in some ways, but she is a woman."

"How can someone like that be having the emperor's baby?" said Tankai, his

tone of voice harsh.

"Are you angry?" Jusetsu asked.

"I'm just shocked—shocked at how nice you are, niangniang."

"As I told you, nothing's decided yet. Unless I get Koshun's permission, I can't do anything."

"You weren't able to turn her down on the spot, so that's the same as accepting the job, more or less."

"Hmph..." Jusetsu then fell silent.

"I'm sorry," Onkei chimed in. "I should have sent that lady-in-waiting on her way."

"You should have," replied Tankai without a moment's delay.

Jusetsu shot him a scowl, then said, "Not necessarily. You can't turn away a concubine's lady-in-waiting, can you? Especially not the lady-in-waiting of the pregnant Swallow Concubine."

Ladies-in-waiting were above eunuchs in terms of rank unless the eunuch in question had a particularly high status. They weren't the sort of people you could drive away.

Tankai then frowned. "The Swallow Concubine presents a difficult conundrum. If she was an ordinary concubine, it would be a different story, but she's pregnant with the emperor's heir. If you were to decline her request and something were to happen to her, you would have to shoulder the blame."

"In that case..." Jusetsu began, but Tankai cut her off.

"On the other hand, if you were to take on the request and something were to happen afterward, then *that* might be blamed on you, too, niangniang."

Tankai's tone of voice was as casual as ever, but it was clear that he was seriously worried about Jusetsu.

"That means that doing nothing is the best option," he continued. "I'm sure you understand that, don't you, niangniang?"

Jusetsu could tell that Tankai's voice and Onkei's gaze were both fraught with

concern for her. "Well, yes..." she said, "but choosing to remain passive could also backfire. I don't think sitting back and holding my breath is appropriate in this instance."

Jusetsu considered how she could handle this situation. Keeping things in balance was not a problem that only Koshun had to contend with.

"There is some truth to that. You can protect yourself by making others indebted to you. On this occasion, though, declining the request is the safest option. This will involve the emperor's heir—nothing good can come of that," Tankai said.

"If I do turn the request down, that lady-in-waiting will end up resenting me at the very least."

"You're worried about the Swallow Concubine, aren't you? That's what this all comes down to." Tankai then let out an exasperated sigh. "Isn't that right? Please, niangniang, worry about yourself before you worry about anyone else."

Jusetsu never expected to receive a scolding from Tankai, considering he was usually the one being told off by other people—but now that she thought about it, she felt like she was always getting an earful from those around her.

"Well, would you look at that—Tankai giving niangniang a talking-to! You've come a long way."

Jiujiu came out of the kitchen holding a tray in her hands. Behind her—as one would expect—was the court lady Kogyo, also holding a tray. On top of the trays were heaps of steamed buns with wisps of steam rising from them. They'd also prepared some hot tea. There wasn't much to do in the Yamei Palace as of late, so the group had been getting together for tea more often.

"I've called Ishiha, so he and Shinshin should be over here soon too."

Although Shinshin didn't listen to a word Jusetsu said, the bird had taken to Ishiha from the very start. Jusetsu wasn't sure what was so different about the boy, but Ishiha was now well and truly Shinshin's caretaker.

The Yamei Palace was also home to an elderly servant called Keishi who was in charge of all of the palace's meals. The reticent old woman who had worked there since Reijo's time stubbornly refused to set foot in the room where they

were all sitting. Her reasoning was that it would be inappropriate for a servant to do so.

Once Ishiha arrived with Shinshin in his arms, the whole room livened up. Jusetsu had grown accustomed to this sight—the way things were inside the Yamei Palace had changed drastically. This also gave Jusetsu more to think about. She needed to protect what she had.

"They're so fluffy, and they taste great too."

Having just stuffed a bun into his mouth, Ishiha's eyes were sparkling. The boy eunuch was astonished and impressed by almost all the food served in the palace. Apparently, the foods people ate in his hometown of Roko were very different.

"Grain was so valuable that we couldn't afford to use it like this. The closest thing we had were dumplings that were given as an offering to our ancestors at festivals. They didn't have any flavor on their own, so we dipped them in pastes before roasting them on the fire and eating them."

"That sounds delicious in its own way," said Tankai. "But isn't Roko by the coast? Couldn't you earn cash by making and selling salt?"

"Tankai," Onkei admonished him calmly, "don't be so absurd. The trade of handmade salt is illicit and punishable by death."

"Well, yeah—technically speaking," Tankai said. "But tons of people make money from it on the down-low."

The state had a monopoly on salt, which meant that making and selling it yourself was criminalized. That being said, there was no end to the people who profited from buying and selling salt on the sly. Long ago, when Jusetsu was still a house servant, the master of the house she worked at seemed to be involved in some sort of illegal salt trade—although she had no way of knowing what became of that family at this point.

Ishiha responded to Tankai's flippant remark in earnest. "On one of the big nearby beaches, the fishermen's boss had lots of people to make salt and an official bought it...but that would be totally impossible in my village. For one thing, we don't have enough people to make it, and salt is so heavy. You need a

cow to take it to where it is going to be sold, and we don't even have the money to buy and care for one of those. Also, an elder in my village told me that it's very difficult to make salt that tastes good enough to be bought for a high price."

"Ishiha, you can just let what Tankai says go in one ear and out of the other, you know," Jiujiu suggested.

Suddenly, Shinshin—who'd been sleeping at Ishiha's feet—began flapping its wings about. Jusetsu thought that the recent chain of unusual events may have been continuing and there was another unknown visitor, but Eisei—the eunuch who worked for Koshun—appeared in the open doorway instead.

Eisei placed his hands together in a halfhearted show of respect and glanced around the room. "It's very lively in here, isn't it?" he said icily.

Ishiha hung his head despondently—as if he'd been told off—which prompted Jusetsu to glower at Eisei.

"We just happened to be taking a break at the moment," she said. "There's no need for you to voice your opinion on it."

"All I said was that it was lively," Eisei said.

"It sounded like you had an opinion about it, however."

"That's just in your imagination, esteemed Raven Consort." Then, as if nothing had happened, Eisei passed Jusetsu a note. "This is from my master."

While letters from the emperor would usually have been ceremoniously transported in a box, ones he sent to Jusetsu were delivered discreetly. The colored hemp paper was beautiful, with flecks of silver scattered across its light blue surface.

Jusetsu opened it up. It was a note about the request she had received from the Swallow Concubine's lady-in-waiting the night before. It seemed that the lady-in-waiting had already urged the Swallow Concubine to make an appeal to Koshun. In the note, the emperor stated that he would give Jusetsu permission to exorcise the Jakuso Palace.

"Is he sure about this?" Jusetsu muttered.

Koshun also went on to apologize for bothering her with the Swallow Concubine's affairs. That part made Jusetsu feel quite strange. She wasn't annoyed, but it did make her feel rather apprehensive and uneasy.

"I don't think this is something that Koshun should be apologizing for," she commented.

Eisei raised an eyebrow but didn't say a thing. Jusetsu folded the note back up and tossed it inside her cabinet. Noticing that Eisei wasn't leaving, Jusetsu shot him a questioning look.

Eisei simply said, "Where is your response?"

"Does a letter like this really require one?" said Jusetsu.

"If you don't have anything to say back, then that's fine."

"...Hold on a moment," said Jusetsu. "I'll write one."

Eisei didn't say much to Jusetsu lately, but he didn't show his emotions either. It may have been preferable to him getting angry at her, but she found it somehow unsettling.

Onkei and Tankai removed the teacups and the plates for the steamed buns from the table while Jiujiu prepared the ink. Jusetsu sat in her chair, hemp paper before her and brush in hand. She was a little unsure about which hemp paper to pick, but she ended up deciding on some with a white background and specks of gold sprinkled across it.

Jusetsu pondered what to write while Jiujiu ground the ink by her side, but nothing in particular came to mind.

"Here you go, niangniang," said Jiujiu as she passed her the ink-dipped brush.

Despite having failed to come up with any good ideas, Jusetsu gradually lowered the tip of her brush and began to write. She slid the brush smoothly across the page.

"Is that some kind of code...?" said Jiujiu, prompting Kogyo to elbow her side. She wasn't supposed to peek at what she was writing, but Jusetsu herself didn't particularly mind. It wasn't like she was writing anything she didn't want anyone else to see.

Jusetsu had just written "black," "white," and then some numbers.

"It's to do with Go, obviously," said Tankai as he peered at her letter from the side. "Black and white are the stones, and the numbers are the spots where they're placed."

Jusetsu nodded. Jusetsu and Koshun played Go together, although Koshun was a significantly better player.

"I'm black and Koshun's white. I want to know what move he would make next," she said.

Jusetsu waited for the ink to dry and then folded the paper up. She passed it to Eisei. She expected him to complain that his master didn't have the time to play Go with her at the very least—but instead, she was met with silence.

After Eisei was gone, Jusetsu began getting ready for her excursion to the Jakuso Palace. She may have received permission, but it was still safer for her to not stand out. She decided she'd go in her eunuch outfit.

"It's a shame, since you're finally getting the opportunity to go out for the first time so long..." Jiujiu wanted to dress Jusetsu up in a fancy outfit again, so she looked disgruntled as she helped her get changed. "I'm sure the red jacket I adjusted the other day would have looked lovely on you."

Jiujiu and Kogyo had both been sewing clothes for Jusetsu, despite the fact that she had nowhere to wear them to.

"I could just wear it around here," Jusetsu suggested.

Jiujiu's face lit up. "Would you really do that?"

The young woman's facial expressions were easy to read. Jusetsu ended up smiling a little too in return.

"In that case, wear the blue jacket with the flowers embroidered on it and the skirt with the twin fish pattern as well," Jiujiu started. "And don't forget the violet shawl..."

"I can't wear all of those things."

Jusetsu got the impression that Jiujiu was going to end up tailoring an endless number of garments for her if left to her own devices, so she hurriedly stopped

her from doing so and left the palace building.

The Jakuso Palace was located in the southwest part of the inner palace area. One could get there by going south from the Yamei Palace. Surrounded by redbud trees, there were decorative tiles made with images of magpies spreading their wings on the roof of the palace's buildings. When Jusetsu stepped foot inside its grounds, all she could hear was the chirping of small birds, the sounds of insects, and rustling leaves.

Jusetsu looked around her to see that the area was deserted, with no signs of life. She felt a quiet pain in her chest. The Magpie Consort wasn't here any longer, but she still felt as if she could see her in the back of her mind, the dead woman with blood spurting into the air.

"It's quiet, isn't it?" said Jusetsu to Onkei, who was standing behind her.

"It is," Onkei replied simply.

For some reason, Onkei felt like the right person to accompany her here, and he was the only one she brought along. Naturally, Tankai—being bored out of his mind—voiced his disapproval about that.

The sunlight filtered through the trees that wavered in the breeze. Jusetsu kept on walking forward until she stopped in front of the steps to the palace building. She stared up at it quietly. She'd gone quite far now, but there was still no sign of any ghosts that needed exorcizing inside the palace grounds, nor of anything cursed. In this case, it would be a better idea to cast a spell to ward off evil in order to avoid any future calamities rather than perform an exorcism.

Jusetsu removed some woven string from her breast pocket. Spells were the specialty of shamans, and ones for warding off evil were no exception.

"I want to go to the biggest redbud tree," said Jusetsu. "Do you know where it is?"

"I do." Standing in front of her, Onkei gave her a simple nod and began leading the way. He had infiltrated countless palaces as a spy, so he knew almost everything.

Jusetsu followed as he weaved between the trees. Piles of leaves that had accumulated on the ground were crushed beneath their feet as they walked, making a crunching sound. Jusetsu could smell a mixture of rotting leaves and soil wafting up from the ground. In the spring, these trees would have had beautiful, dark magenta flowers, but now, their leaves had taken on a golden hue, and brown pods hung down from their branches. They looked bizarre, but even so, there was something sublime about their appearance now.

Onkei halted and looked around. In front of him stood an older redbud tree with wide-spanning branches. The blue sky peeked out from behind its yellow leaves.

"Oh, what a lovely tree," said Jusetsu, satisfied.

Onkei responded with a faint smile. He tended to show more emotion at times like this when he wasn't expressing himself in words.

Jusetsu examined the shape of the branches. "That one will do," she muttered before placing a foot on the tree's trunk.

"A-are you climbing it, niangniang?" said Onkei, sounding unusually shaken.

"I have to tie this string around the branch."

"Have you ever climbed a tree before?" he asked.

"No, but I can probably manage it."

After a short, silent pause, Onkei spoke up again. "I'll climb up first and pull you up, niangniang," he suggested.

Imagining that what Onkei said was probably for the best, Jusetsu readily complied. As an acrobat, things like climbing trees were his forte.

Onkei nimbly went up the tree with ease. Jusetsu grabbed onto the hand he offered her and let him pull her up, using the bumps and hollows in the trunk as footholds. Even so, she slipped once or twice, and would have fallen if it wasn't for the eunuch's help. It was fair to say that his instincts had been correct.

"Phew..." Jusetsu sighed as she clung onto the tree's trunk. Climbing it was more difficult than she expected.

She wrapped the woven string around a branch as a sign to ward off evil. This

would act as a warning to spirits who were intent on bringing about misfortune and repel them. The more a marker stood out, the better, so this large, old tree was the best place to put one. The string was interwoven with orchids, holy basil, and other fragrant plants—all things used to defend against evil spirits.

After she secured the string, Jusetsu took in the view from the top of the tree. The yellow leaves below her looked like a brocade pattern. A gentle breeze swept past, causing the crunchy rustling of the leaves to spread about like a ripple.

"What a nice breeze," Jusetsu said to herself.

For people in the imperial capital, winds blowing from the east—from the sea —were considered good luck. However, winds blowing from the north or west —where the mountains were—were regarded as bad luck. That was partly because the cold winds that blew down the mountains were responsible for destroying crops, and the winds that came from the sea were said to carry the gods with them.

Jusetsu closed her eyes and listened carefully to the wind. On dry, sunny days, it felt like she could sense the voices of the dead mixed in with the wind coming from far, far away.

"Niangniang," Onkei called out softly.

Jusetsu opened her eyes and saw Onkei pointing toward the ground. There was a court lady walking among the trees, taking repeated looks behind her as if she were keeping an eye on her surroundings. She held a cloth parcel against her chest. Once she had gotten closer, Jusetsu could see the gloomy expression on the woman's otherwise sweet-looking face.

The court lady hadn't noticed Jusetsu and Onkei above, and she stopped and stared hard at the roots of the tree. She crouched down and brushed the dead leaves around her feet away. She then began to dig into the ground with her bare hands.

What is she trying to do...?

Jusetsu cocked her head to one side and looked over at Onkei, who quietly shook his head as if to say, "I don't know either."

It would be quicker just to ask her, Jusetsu reasoned.

"What are you doing there?" she called down from the treetop.

The court lady screamed and leaped to her feet. The cloth parcel she was holding fell to the ground, and the court lady toppled over and fell onto her backside. Her face was now as white as a sheet.

"I'm sorry, I didn't expect to give you that much of a fright," called Jusetsu.

The court lady shifted her gaze upward. She finally saw Jusetsu and Onkei and blinked at them in surprise.

"Let's go down," Onkei urged Jusetsu.

Jusetsu placed her hand on the tree trunk.

"I'll go first," she announced, but by the time she said that, Onkei already had two feet on the ground.

Nowhere near as agile as him, Jusetsu began to descend the tree slowly. Down below, Onkei had his hands spread out as if to assure her it was all right if she fell, but Jusetsu managed to lower herself unscathed. *Maybe I could climb the trees at the Yamei Palace next*, Jusetsu thought to herself—although she would need somebody there to help her.

"Are you all right?" she asked the court lady, who was still sitting on the ground.

The woman stared at Jusetsu's face like an eagle. "Umm... Are you the Raven Consort, by any chance?"

"Yes, why?"

Before Jusetsu got the chance to ask if they'd met somewhere before, the court lady got to her knees in a fluster.

"Please excuse me for being so rude. My name is Choshaku Shojo, and I work at the Hien Palace."

Jusetsu had set foot in the Hien Palace a couple of times before. This woman must have recognized her face.

"What is a court lady from the Hien Palace doing here?" Jusetsu asked.

Considering how the lady seemed like she was trying to avoid being seen and how surprised she was when Jusetsu called out to her, it didn't seem like she was here to prepare for the move to the Jakuso Palace.

Shojo glanced at the parcel that fell to the ground. Jusetsu looked at it too.

Onkei picked it up and brushed dust off of it. "What's this?" he asked Shojo.

"Umm... Well..." she began, fumbling over her words. "It's my makeup box."

"Why do you need to bury it?"

Shojo's eyebrows drooped. Going by her expression, it didn't seem like she wanted to bury it of her own free will.

Jusetsu gave Onkei a look, and he handed the cloth parcel back to the court lady. She clutched it against her chest.

"This box has been passed down through my family for generations..."

Shojo opened it up. Inside was a round, black-lacquered vanity case. It looked old, and the lacquer had peeled off in places. There was a picture on top of the black, drawn in vermillion.

"This is what they call lacquer painting," she explained. "My family are lacquer merchants. They do everything from harvesting the sap and applying lacquer to objects to selling it."

Shojo gave a vague description of what they did, perhaps so that Jusetsu could understand.

"Please, go ahead and take a look," she said, passing the box to Jusetsu.

The Raven Consort took it and gazed fixedly at the lacquer painting. The vivid red lacquer contrasted beautifully with the glossy black beneath it. The brushstrokes were thick and far from delicate, but it had a serene charm to it. The picture depicted a woman with a cheerful smile on her face, surrounded by a triangular pattern.

"It's a lovely piece," Jusetsu said simply, having taken a good look at it.

Shojo looked pleased. "Thank you very much. Not only is the quality of the lacquer outstanding, but so is the workmanship of the craftsman. Lacquer has

different characteristics depending on where it comes from, and it dries differently depending on the season. A craftsman must be able to assess and balance these factors in order to create a beautiful product. This red is a nice, deep color, but you can make many kinds of red—ranging from vermilion to reddish brown—depending on what's mixed into it. There are variations in quality, though... This red lacquer, cinnabar, is made by adding red dust to the mix. Beautiful cinnabar can only be produced in a few places, and I believe cinnabar of the very *highest* quality must have been used to create this red color. It's just so bright, and..."

Shojo had been rambling endlessly, but she suddenly clasped her hand against mouth. "I'm so sorry for going on and on. What I really wanted to talk about was this picture, however..."

"The picture?" Jusetsu asked.

"You see how there's a woman in it?"

"Yes?"

"I've seen her," said Shojo. "She has been appearing before me."

Jusetsu looked at the makeup box and Shojo in turn. *Oh dear,* she thought. *It looks like I've gotten myself involved in something troublesome again.* 

"...What do you mean, 'appearing?'" asked Jusetsu.

"She just stands there." Shojo seemed more puzzled than scared by this. "In the middle of the night, I suddenly woke up to find someone peering over me, like this," Shojo held her hand up over her face. "It was a red person. Well, she had a red face. It was dark, but for some strange reason, I was still able to make that out. And not only that, but..."

A half-smile came to her face. It looked as if she didn't know how to explain what she was about to say.

"She was smiling. The woman with the red face smiled as she looked at me. She never actually does anything though—she just stares."

Jusetsu looked down at the makeup box. The red woman was smiling in the image too.

Shojo continued to speak. "Before I knew it, I fell asleep again, so I wondered if it had all been a dream. It's very strange that the red woman was smiling, isn't it? But it went on for days, and eventually, the court lady I share a room with ended up seeing her too... She was very frightened and thought I was being haunted or cursed—after all, the woman was bright red."

"Bright red?"

"I've only seen the woman's face, but the other court lady saw her entire body, and said it was bright red. She doesn't seem to be able to describe it very well either, but apparently, it was a scary sight. A bright red woman from head to toe—as if she were covered in blood. When I think of a red, smiling woman, the only thing that comes to mind is the lacquer painting on this makeup box."

"Do you think this box is haunted?"

Shojo tilted her head to one side ambiguously. "The woman I share a room with insists that it *has* to be. She was crying and pleading with me to dispose of it, saying that I'd incur its wrath if I kept it with me, and its curse would extend to her..." The court lady looked as if she was about to cry. "I find the red woman unnerving too. But that doesn't mean I'd want to throw this away like it's nothing. This makeup box has been treasured in my family for generations."

"I see..." Things were becoming clearer to Jusetsu now. "You decided to bury it instead?"

"Yes. Everyone from the Hien Palace is moving here soon anyway, so I thought I could dig it up at a later date," she replied, shrugging her shoulders. "Umm... Since the Jakuso Palace is uninhabited at the moment, I didn't think anyone would question me if I came here to bury it. I assumed I wouldn't have to worry about somebody digging it up either."

And yet, to her surprise, some voices had called down at her from a tree and frightened her out of her wits.

"I thought I was being scolded by the owner of the Jakuso Palace or something, but when I realized it was you, Raven Consort, I felt like it was some sort of sign."

Shojo looked at Jusetsu with a pleading look in her eyes. Jusetsu had a bad

feeling about what was going to happen next.

"Please, Raven Consort. Would you be so kind as to look after this makeup box and take it off my hands? If it really is haunted by a ghost, I'd really appreciate it if you could exorcise it for me. It would mean the world to me, esteemed Raven Consort..."

Shojo got to her knees and prostrated herself in front of Jusetsu.

Oh dear. Internally, Jusetsu heaved a sigh. I never should have spoken to her at all, she thought, but it was too late for regrets now.

"There's nothing untoward haunting this box," Jusetsu said. "No evil will befall you for owning it. I recommend you tell that to your roommate."

"What? But then what's the red lady all about?" Shojo asked.

"I don't know."

"Raven Consort... I'll make sure you're amply rewarded for your help."

"I don't want a reward. I'm simply not taking on any requests at the moment."

A tinge of disappointment appeared on Shojo's face. Such an expression was hard for Jusetsu to see.

Jusetsu turned her face away and thrust the makeup box out in front of her. "Take it home with you."

Shojo shook her head. "I can't. If the Swallow Concubine or one of her ladies-in-waiting gets wind of this, I'll have no choice but to throw it away. Please—all I ask is that you keep it in your possession."

It would be easier to dismiss Shojo and insist that no meant no, but would that be enough? Jusetsu was unsure of how to handle this. Naturally, if she took on any request that came her way, she would end up repeating the same mistakes she made before. Still, maybe the two of them needed to find a compromise. It wasn't a clear-cut choice between taking on her request and not.

"How about we have somebody else hold on to it?" suggested a calm voice from behind. It was Onkei. It was very unusual for him to interrupt during a

situation like this.

"Somebody else? Like whom?"

"The Winter Minister, for example," he said.

"The Winter Minister..." After a short pause, Jusetsu almost found herself letting out a gasp of realization, but she stifled it. She was surprised by how prudent Onkei's idea was.

I see, she thought. Senri.

The Winter Minister was the chief of the Winter Ministry, the department responsible for religious services. The present Winter Minister was a man named To Senri. Prone to poor health, he was a fragile gentleman in his forties, but in contrast to his dour appearance, he had an exceptionally gentle disposition and was easy to talk to. He was also one of the people keen on helping Jusetsu out.

"The Winter Minister is extremely knowledgeable about a great deal of topics. You never know; he may even know a lot about cases like this."

"That's true..."

Publicly, there was no connection between the Raven Consort and the Winter Minister. The Winter Minister was a minister of worship in the outer court while the Raven Consort was concealed deep inside the inner palace. If the box was left in the Winter Minister's care and she let him take care of the rest, Jusetsu wouldn't have technically offered any help—in that case, Jusetsu could more or less look after the box herself, essentially using the Winter Minister's name to cover her tracks.

"I have a few connections within the ranks of the Winter Ministry's subordinates," Onkei said. "I'll go through them to request the Winter Minister's help."

Those subordinates were the men who worked under the Winter Minister. This talk of "connections" was obviously just nonsense that Onkei made up on the spot. Sometimes, he told lies without batting an eye. In a sense, he could be even more vicious than Tankai.

Onkei looked over at Shojo. "How does that sound? I'm sure the Winter Minister would offer us his assistance."

"Huh? Oh... S-sure." Shojo was flustered. She blushed and looked at the ground. "I'd appreciate that very much."

After accepting Onkei's offer with good graces, Shojo went home.

Jusetsu stared fixedly at Onkei's face. "Pretty" would have been the most accurate way to describe his appearance, she concluded. He was refreshing and pure, like a spring found in the depths of a calm forest.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing, really..." replied Jusetsu. "I just never saw you as that much of a fraud."

Onkei looked embarrassed.

Jusetsu was going to have to write a letter of apology to Senri for using his name without his permission. Once she returned to the Yamei Palace, she picked up her brush.

After writing down what had happened, she asked Tankai to act as her messenger. She finished getting changed as well, and Jusetsu finally confronted Shojo's makeup box.

"That's quite an old box, isn't it?" said Jiujiu, taking a look at it. "Where did it come from?"

"It was given to me to look after."

Jusetsu opened the lid, but there was nothing inside of it. She could only assume that Shojo emptied it in preparation to bury it. The entire interior was coated in black lacquer that had a luxurious and beautiful luster to it.

A smiling, red woman...?

Jusetsu told Shojo that the box wasn't being haunted by anything untoward. While that was technically true, there was another aspect to the situation that she left out.

The box was definitely being haunted by something—it just didn't happen to

be evil.

Jusetsu couldn't sense anything ominous from it. It was doubtful that such a thing would bring evil upon Shojo either.

Jusetsu pulled a peony out of her hair. When she blew on it, the flower broke apart and transformed into a pale red smoke. This smoke gently dispersed and encircled the box.

"...Hmph."

Jusetsu watched what it was doing for a short while. Eventually, she made a gesture with her hand that looked like she was flinging a curtain out of her way. The smoke dissipated and vanished into thin air.

*Isn't she going to appear?* 

Usually, her magic called out to whatever was haunting an object and made it show itself. Ghosts would feel the urge to respond to her. If this one wasn't going to appear, there must have been a reason for it. Or maybe, it was the other way around—perhaps this ghost didn't have enough of a reason to make itself seen to Jusetsu.

Jusetsu thought things through.

It might have to do with blood ties, she conjectured. Shojo said that this was an item passed down through her family for generations, so maybe the ghost wouldn't appear unless it was in the possession of a member of the family.

Jusetsu did, however, say that she was giving the box to the Winter Minister to take care of. It wasn't as if she could call Shojo over before putting her magic into practice.

"That girl's family name was Choshaku, wasn't it...?"

That was a rare family name. Where could she be from? Jusetsu thought for a few moments and then realized something. "Oh, right. She's from the Hien Palace."

Jusetsu turned back toward Jiujiu, who looked bewildered.

"Yes?" the young woman said.

"Do you know a court lady called Choshaku Shojo?" said Jusetsu. "She works at the Hien Palace."

"Oh, uhm, yes. She joined at the same time as me." Jiujiu previously worked at the Hien Palace, and that fact had completely slipped Jusetsu's mind.

"Do you know where she's from?"

"Bu Province," Jiujiu said. "They're famous for their tea, but they're also known for the lacquer they produce. I've heard there are lots of lacquer merchants and craftspeople there."

"Do you know anybody else from Bu Province?" Jusetsu asked.

"I do, but I don't know if she's from the same region as Shojo... If that doesn't matter, she works at the Eno Palace. She's a court lady, the same age as me."

Jiujiu wasn't shy—as Jusetsu had realized the first time the two of them met—so she had acquaintances all over the inner palace from when she acted as a messenger.

"She should suffice. I'm going to write a letter to Kajo, so I want you to speak to her when you go and deliver it. Ask her if she knows anything about the Choshaku family."

If this did have something to do with blood ties, then Jusetsu suspected there might be rumors or legends about the family itself.

The Eno Palace was home to the Mandarin Duck Consort, Un Kajo. Kajo had hurt her leg in the Black-robed Niangniang uprising, so Jusetsu decided to ask her how she was doing in a letter.

Jusetsu had been sending more letters to people instead of going out on visits. Most of the time, however, she was just replying to notes that other people sent her. These letters were almost exclusively from Kajo and Banka. In Kajo's letters, she expressed her concern for Jusetsu, constantly worrying if she was all right. Her handwriting was graceful and had a sense of composure to it. Even in her letters, she addressed Jusetsu as "amei," an affectionate term for one's younger sister—or someone you viewed that way.

Once Jusetsu had sent Jiujiu out to deliver the letter, a messenger eunuch

arrived at the Yamei Palace for an exchange of sorts. He was a messenger from the Hakkaku Palace, sent over by Banka. Today, however, he hadn't just brought over a letter, but also a thin piece of bright red silk. Jusetsu looked over the letter. Apparently, Banka's eldest brother had given her a great deal of silk as a gift, and she was sharing some of it with Jusetsu. Banka's father had already gone back to Ga Province, but his sons—his eldest and his third son—were staying at the imperial estate, likely out of concern for their pregnant younger sister.

Banka's writing was carefree and cheerful as she reported on how things were going at the Hakkaku Palace. She also updated Jusetsu on how her brothers had been. In the past, however, Jusetsu had found the young woman hard to figure out—it always seemed like Banka was in danger, like she was wandering through some sort of void.

Not even Jusetsu had any idea where this change in Banka had stemmed from. She toyed with the idea that pregnancy could provoke changes in people, but on the other hand, the Swallow Concubine, Koei, seemed to be the same as she always was. Either way, Jusetsu had no way of knowing what the cause was. She felt uneasy about it—almost as if she had something stuck in her throat—but she wasn't sure what was triggering this sensation. Jusetsu just assumed she was frustrated that this knowledge was out of reach.

Jusetsu wondered if she, too, would ever have a child with someone—if she were freed from the Raven, that is. She couldn't envision it at all.

In order to release the Raven from her body in the first place, they would need to break the barrier that Kosho had created. To achieve that, they needed one more shaman—destroying it required three people who could use magic. They already had Jusetsu and the old shaman Ho Ichigyo, but the third was a problem. There was only one other shaman that Jusetsu could think of—Hakurai—but he was the last person she could imagine would lend her a hand. She didn't even know his current whereabouts.

Banka's brothers...

Banka stared at the mountain of silk on the table, not really concentrating on

anything in particular. All of this silk had been a gift from her eldest brother, Shin.

"I wonder what this is really about," she muttered to herself.

Shin never gave her presents. If he gave her some stuffy, headache-inducing books, then it might have made more sense, but of all things, how would he give her feminine textiles? Shin himself was a refined individual and had good taste, but it didn't seem like he had any women around him. He wasn't married yet, nor did he have any mistresses.

Banka figured it wouldn't be long before that changed, however.

She suspected that his lack of enthusiasm for marriage might have been because of the curse that plagued the head of the Saname clan. The youngest daughter of the family's head was fated to pass away at the age of fifteen, without exception. Banka assumed her brother might have been scared to have children because of that. She heard, however, that the divine treasure that brought about this curse—a jewel—had been destroyed. As a result, the head of the clan was no longer bound by it.

Banka picked up one of the lengths of silk. It had a very faint hint of pink, much like a white lotus flower. As she would expect from her discerning eldest brother, he picked fabric that would suit Banka perfectly. Every piece of fabric he sent was pale in tone with muted hints of color.

She then remembered how one piece, one that was no longer in the pile, stood out among all the others. It was a thin piece of silk in a bright, vivid red—a shade that didn't suit Banka in the slightest. She wondered if it was mixed in with the others by mistake, but that would have been strange. This was *Shin*—he always saw that nothing was amiss. She could easily imagine Ryo, her brother who was closest to her in age, making such a slip-up, but not Shin.

Jusetsu immediately sprang to mind when she saw the red silk. Banka expected that bright red would look wonderful on her. Jusetsu had exquisite pale skin, along with big, black eyes that glistened like round, wet jet stones, and bright crimson lips. As such, Banka had sent the silk to the Raven Consort instead.

Whenever Banka thought about her friend, her father's face appeared in the

back of her mind. Banka didn't receive any letters from him anymore. He made a hasty return to Ga Province before anybody learned of Banka's pregnancy in an effort to avoid anyone trying to approach him in an attempt to gain his favor. That was the sort of person her father was. He kept his distance from the central government and focused on protecting the Saname clan. He didn't care one bit about Banka's health or anything like that. After all, she was the one who defied him.

Her father continued to put the Saname clan first, and Banka chose to do what she wanted to do. It seemed unlikely that their paths would ever cross again.

Banka stroked her stomach. Her bump wasn't especially visible yet, and the reality that she was carrying a child inside still hadn't hit her. She expected it might change once her belly had gotten bigger, though.

It might not have felt real, but being pregnant meant she needed to think about the future. Since she didn't have any instructions from her father, she would have to use her own judgment.

Banka picked out a few different fabrics—cyan, pale green, pale blue, and celadon—and passed them to the lady-in-waiting standing behind her.

"Give these to the Mandarin Duck Consort," she stated concisely.

The Mandarin Duck Consort, Kajo, was the emperor's highest-ranking consort. She had been injured in the uproar about Black-robed Niangniang, and part of the responsibility fell on Banka's shoulders for not being able to stop her own ladies-in-waiting. She already apologized and gifted her some fine silks, but the two of them were continuing to communicate with oner another. Banka found Kajo to be a trustworthy person.

I wish I could see Jusetsu too...

It was her father's fault that Jusetsu was confined to the Yamei Palace. Going by her letters, Jusetsu didn't seem any different from before, but Banka still wondered how she was doing. She wanted to apologize to her and see her in person.

Banka had considered going to meet her in secret countless times, but with

her being pregnant, her ladies-in-waiting never left her side and made it impossible.

"Banka, a messenger has arrived from the Yamei Palace," announced one of her ladies-in-waiting.

Those words made Banka jump straight to her feet.

"Don't make such sudden movements. It's dangerous." Banka's ladies-inwaiting were rattled. They had warned her time and time again about that, insisting that a fall could put her in a very serious situation.

"Standing up isn't going to make me fall over," said Banka, who had always been nimble and quick on her feet. Even so, her ladies-in-waiting would not accept this. They got her to sit back down in her chair and invited the messenger in.

"Oh my..."

The eunuch who'd turned up at the palace was an adorable boy eunuch with tanned skin.

"Ishiha, is it?" said Banka.

"Yes," replied Ishiha. He kneeled down on the floor with a nervous look on his face. Ishiha held up the letter reverently and with great care. He offered it to Banka. "This is addressed to you, from the Raven Consort."

"Thank you very much," said Banka. "Is the Raven Consort doing well?"

"Yes," replied Ishiha, whose face had now turned red from nerves. He had a charm to him that made you want to make a fuss over the boy.

"Oh, wait. Didn't we have some dried jujube?" said Banka, turning toward her ladies-in-waiting, before shifting her gaze back to Ishiha. "Do you like dried jujube, by any chance?"

"Wh... What? Me?" Ishiha asked.

"Yes. We'll wrap them up for you, so wait a moment before you go."

After sending a very confused Ishiha home with some dried dates, Banka opened the letter.

Jusetsu had an elegant way of writing that reminded Banka of a clear, flowing stream. Her precise prose appeared to capture the sincerity at her core.

After reading the letter once through, Banka suddenly looked up and then back down at it again. Noticing that the young woman was lost in thought, the ladies-in-waiting exchanged glances.

"What does the Raven Consort say?" they asked.

"Oh, nothing," she answered evasively before returning to silent contemplation. Unusual as it was, this letter contained a request from Jusetsu.

Jusetsu wanted something from Banka's older brothers, related to Hakurai. She was asking if she could meet with them.

Tankai returned from delivering the message to the Winter Ministry carrying a response from Senri. Jusetsu read it, the man's gently smile coming to mind.

In the letter, Senri stated that Jusetsu could feel free to use his name. He also expressed his own personal interest in the case in question and asked that Jusetsu share information with him once she found out more details. It was a small ask, considering that Jusetsu used his name without permission. She remembered how he claimed that the reason he helped her was not for her own benefit or out of obligation as the Winter Minister, but out of simple intellectual curiosity. She let out a little laugh at the memory.

Jiujiu returned from the Eno Palace long after Ishiha had come back.

"The court lady I told you about is the daughter of a processed tea merchant, and she's not from remotely the same area as the Choshaku family," Jiujiu explained. "However, she does know some lacquer merchants and heard some strange stories."

"Strange stories?"

"Not about the Choshaku family themselves, but about lacquer."

"Oh?" Jusetsu asked.

"There's an ancient legend about lacquer, you see. Word has it that good lacquer trees have grown in the region for a long time, especially around the

upper part of the river in the heart of the mountains. And..."

There was once a man who made his living fishing in that river. His method of fishing involved letting bark from butterfly bush trees flow downstream to paralyze the fish and make them easier to catch. It also killed small fish and insects. He caught a lot of fish, and for a time, made quite a lot of money from it. However, the authorities banned the practice after a while, and the man immediately found himself destitute.

That same day, the man—unable to catch anything—walked back to the head of the river. On the riverbed, he happened to spot some lacquer under the clear water. Over the course of many years, lacquer sap from the trees that grew along the river had dripped down and built up in the pit.

Lacquer could usually only be harvested from a single lacquer tree bit by bit, which meant it could be sold for a high price. The man frantically went about scraping out the lacquer. As you would expect, he was able to sell it for a lot of money, and from then on, he kept going back and harvesting the lacquer from the riverbed over and over again. He kept his find a secret and hogged it all for himself, making a fortune in the process.

But then, one day, he dove down to the riverbed just as he always did to find a large, coiled snake in the pit where the lacquer was. The snake's eyes were gleaming, and its bright red mouth was gaping open, presumably ready to swallow the man whole. In a panic, the man escaped and managed to make his way back onto the riverbank. After that, however, the big snake in the river wreaked havoc and caused a drought due to a lack of rain. People of the region referred to the big snake as a river god, and they blamed the man for angering the god by polluting the river with poison and taking away the lacquer.

The locals pressured the man to offer up his daughter as a sacrifice to quell the god's fury. She was already married to someone, but the man fetched her nonetheless and drowned her in the river. After that, the big snake disappeared, but there were no more fish to catch in the area where his daughter drowned, and the lacquer trees died as well.

"And that's how the story goes." After she finished telling it, Jiujiu let out a big sigh. "It might only be a legend, but it's really not a very pleasant one."

"How outrageous for his daughter to be dragged into that."

"I know." The legend clearly angered Jiujiu.

"Still, a sacrifice, you say ...?"

It seems like we've got a gruesome story on our hands, Jusetsu thought to herself—although she wasn't sure whether it had any relation to the Choshaku family.

Jusetsu thanked Jiujiu and picked up her brush. She wrote down the tale she had just heard, planning to share it with Senri.

Jusetsu realized she had suddenly found herself very busy with all the different people she was sending letters to. It was enough to make her hand sore. *Maybe I should ask someone else to write on my behalf,* she thought, but at that very moment, another messenger eunuch turned up.

Which consort's palace could this one be from? As it turned out, he came from the Gyoko Palace—he was sent by Koshun.

The boy eunuch was carrying a letter and was one who had been to the Yamei Palace before. Koshun's letter was a reply to the note that Jusetsu had sent. In other words, it contained his Go move. He wrote down the color of the stone and some coordinates. Jusetsu glanced at it, and the move he'd made brought a frown to her face.

"My master said he doesn't expect you to be able to respond immediately, so he doesn't mind if you get back to him at a later date," the eunuch said.

"Why would he assume that?"

She couldn't help but imagine the look on his face—cool and composed—and so set her mind to replying right away, no matter the cost.

"Wait here for a little while," she told the boy. "Weren't you a friend of Ishiha's? You can stay with him."

Jusetsu called Ishiha over, then called for some rice cakes from the kitchen for the two of them to eat. As the boys dug in, she gazed at Koshun's letter and thought about which strategy to take. If she moved to one spot she had in mind, it'd create a gap somewhere else... But then again, making another move she considered would leave her stuck a few turns later. No matter how much thought she put into it, no eureka moment arrived. Ishiha and the other boy eunuch had finished their rice cakes and were sharing the dried jujube from Banka.

But once all those were gone, the two boys reached a point where they had nothing else to do.

Jusetsu admitted defeat. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to reply at a later date after all... I apologize for keeping you waiting. I expect Eisei would scold you for coming back late, so show him this. I've written a letter to say I held you up."

Jusetsu passed the note to the Gyoko Palace eunuch, but the boy just gave her a broad smile.

"There's no need for that. Attendant Ei said that you'd try your very hardest to write a reply on the spot, so it wouldn't bother him if I came back late."

That impudent fool. He saw right through her.

Once the eunuch left, Jusetsu added Koshun's Go move to the end of her letter to Senri and asked him for his advice. She was sure it would make Senri laugh.

"Attendant Ei?" a voice called out.

Eisei turned around. He knew who the voice belonged to and why they were calling out to stop him. The other person was a eunuch in a dark gray robe and was responsible for organizing the emperor's nighttime escapades.

"Our master said he doesn't want to spend the night with anybody tonight either, but..."

"Two of his concubines are pregnant. I don't believe there's any need to recommend that he does," Eisei said.

"Yes... But..."

It looked like there was still something that the eunuch wanted to say, but Eisei left him behind and proceeded to go inside the Gyoko Palace. You could tell just by looking at Koshun that the news of his concubines' pregnancies had taken a weight off his shoulders. Of course, he didn't know the babies' genders yet, nor could he be certain that his concubines would have a safe birth. Even so, he was definitely relieved.

Creating an heir was an emperor's duty. Without one, things would fall into disarray. The lack of an heir could lead to the ruin of the whole country. Still, being rushed into creating one must have been difficult.

Unbeknownst to all but Eisei, Koshun didn't enjoy any sort of nighttime company. One could perhaps go as far as saying that he disliked it—or at least, that was what Eisei thought. He was adept at gauging how Koshun was feeling on the inside, even though the emperor never let his emotions come to the surface. It was hardly surprising that he, someone who grew up seeing what the inner palace was like under the empress dowager's dominion during the reign of the previous emperor, ended up feeling that way.

The inner palace was the emperor's beautiful flower garden, but it was the empress who had control over those blossoms. The inner palace was the empress' stronghold. Koshun destroyed that bastion by creating the Bridle House, an organization under his direct supervision—likely another result of the lasting impact her actions made on him.

Whether it was her dreadful legacy that was driving his decisions or not, Koshun was inevitably going to continue to make changes to the state of that so-called flower garden. While he did value tradition, he wasn't afraid of change either.

That being said, it was still concerning.

Koshun's interest in change was also the precise reason that he shifted his attention to Jusetsu and decided to help her. Eisei couldn't help but feel that there was a large pitfall lying ahead of him.

Eisei entered the room to find that Koshun was in the process of opening every single piece of reading material he had stacked up on his table. Eisei took a glance at the title slips—it seemed like he was reading Go game records. Eisei's heart sank. Koshun had been playing a game of Go with Jusetsu via letter. To the eunuch, it just seemed like the two of them were messing around.

Koshun's current expression was carefree and gentle, but it only made Eisei even more apprehensive.

If that girl ends up becoming his rock, that will present an enormous risk.

"Sei, take these to Jusetsu." Koshun had picked out a few scrolls and set them aside. "They should help her improve her Go skills."

"I think it might hurt her feelings if you were to say, 'Take these and study up,'" he suggested.

"Do you think so?"

As much as Koshun cared about Jusetsu, he didn't really understand the complexities of what would anger her or put her in a bad mood. Eisei probably had a better idea about that.

"In that case, perhaps I should forget it."

"I'm sure she'd prefer you to give her something to eat."

As Eisei said that, a faint smile appeared on Koshun's face.

"You know her so well," he said. "I'll have some refreshments sent over."

Eisei felt like Koshun was showing even more compassion for Jusetsu now that she was confined to the Yamei Palace. People looked fondly on those they took pity on—that was just how human emotions worked.

Eisei had worked for Koshun for many years. He sensed that, at this rate, these feelings of the emperor's would be hard to put a stop to. He was beginning to resign himself to that, but he was also preparing himself for the worst.

It was clear that Jusetsu presented more risks to Koshun than she did benefits. Depending on how things played out, she could trigger a tremendous disaster. It went without saying who Eisei would protect and who Eisei would put to the sword if it came to that.

If the need arises, I will kill her—even if she is my half-sister.

It was the obvious choice, but he could feel the wound on his forehead tingle. It was the one he got from defending Jusetsu, and one that should have healed

long ago.

Why did I defend her back then?

He told Jusetsu that Koshun had ordered him to do so, but that was a lie. If he waited until he heard Koshun's order before getting in her way, he wouldn't have made it in time.

Eisei's life had belonged to the emperor ever since he decided to work for him, but Eisei had another emotion driving him as well.

He had the feeling that maybe—just maybe—the Raven Consort had corrupted *him* with her sinister power too.

The following morning, Jusetsu received a letter from Senri.

The man had nice handwriting. Senri's lettering was fine, much like his own thin frame, and it flowed unhesitatingly with no trace of any errors. Although the content of his writing was complex, the way he wrote was concise and clear—a reflection of his intellect and thoughtfulness.

"There are some aspects of that legend that concern me," Senri wrote.

Jusetsu wondered what he meant. She continued reading.

"Namely, the parts about the sacrifice and the drought due to a lack of rainfall. Legends about lacquer being found in the bottom of a river are common in areas where lacquer is harvested, and they largely follow the same lines as the story you described—a person discovers lacquer in a river basin, hogs it all, and a large snake appears. In some stories, the snake eats that individual, while in others it simply threatens him so that he won't take the lacquer anymore. There are few examples in which the large snake is viewed as a river god, but they do exist. However, folklore in which the large snake is offered a sacrifice—and in the form of the man's married daughter rather than himself, no less—is unheard of."

"Further still, when a river god unleashes its wrath, it does so by causing rivers to overflow or by letting the sunlight dry up all the water. Droughts due to a lack of rainfall, on the other hand, are the domain of sun or rain gods. It makes no

sense for a sacrifice to be offered to a river god during a drought."

He was right. In the story that Jiujiu heard, a drought due to a lack of rain had ensued after the river god was angered, and then that god was given a sacrifice. It was very typical of Senri to point out the lack of logic in something.

"I believe the most likely scenario to be that the story was retold incorrectly, or another legend got mixed together with it," he went on to state.

So, it was either a mistake, or two stories were combined together? Jusetsu thought. Senri's letter didn't end there.

"As for the Choshaku family, have they resided in Bu Province for a long time? Or did they happen to move there from another region? The reason I ask is because there is an area called Choshaku on the southern coast of Ki Province, located on the lower reaches of the Shisui River that flows through Bu Province. There are many people with the last name Choshaku there."

Senri's wide-ranging knowledge never disappointed. His weak constitution caused him to spend a lot of time burying his head in books, and what he learned really stuck with him.

"I don't know whether that has any relation to the makeup box or not, but I will try to do a little more research on the matter."

With that, he brought his letter to a close. In the corner, however, there was a discreet note.

"Black, four, eight." It was the Go move Jusetsu had asked him to help her with.

"I see. So that's what I could have done..." Jusetsu muttered.

Jiujiu turned back toward her. "Have you got a new idea about the case of the makeup box?"

"Hmm? No, it's not about that... Well, I suppose I have, actually."

"Oh, you must have been talking about Go, then. I take it the Winter Minister made a helpful suggestion. You're such a cheat, niangniang."

"This isn't cheating."

Jusetsu turned her face away, making Jiujiu laugh. She hurriedly folded the letter back up and put it away in her cabinet, from which she proceeded to take out another piece of paper.

"What's that ...?" Jiujiu asked.

"Something I had Onkei look into for me."

When the ruckus about Black-robed Niangniang had unfolded, he had investigated the ties that the court ladies and eunuchs had to other palaces. Some of them had connections because of their regions of origin, so he'd written down where people had come from. There were just a few people from Ki Province. There was a court lady from the province working at the Hakkaku Palace, and another one working at the Eno Palace.

"Are you familiar with these court ladies?" Jusetsu asked.

Jiujiu pointed to the name of the court lady from the Eno Palace. "I know that girl. She's always nice to me when I go there to fetch scrap paper."

Jiujiu often visited other consorts' palaces to collect scrap paper for Ishiha to use for writing practice.

"Should I ask her about the Choshaku family next time I see her?" she asked.

"That would be a big help. If she knows anything about the family, droughts, or the sacrifices...I'd like to hear about it."

"The things that were mentioned in the legend I heard yesterday, then? Got it."

Jiujiu was quick on the draw and left the palace building right away. Jusetsu wasn't able to leave the Yamei Palace herself, so she constantly had to use Jiujiu and the others as her messengers. She went as far outside as the top of the steps and heaved a sigh.

"Niangniang." Ishiha ran to the bottom of the steps. "One of the Swallow Concubine's ladies-in-waiting came to deliver a message. She's asking if you had any updates on the case she asked you to help with."

"Oh..." Jusetsu was so distracted by the makeup box that she forgot to give Koei's lady-in-waiting an update. "Tell her that all went smoothly."

"Thank you." With that, Ishiha ran to the back of the palace building, his light footsteps fading away as he went.

Jusetsu looked up at the sky. She considered checking whether the red woman had visited Choshaku Shojo the previous night, but... *No,* she thought. *It'd be strange for me to ask.* She would have to get Senri to do it instead.

"...Onkei," she called out softly.

"Yes?" a voice beside her promptly responded. Onkei was kneeling in the outer passage.

"I'd like to know how Choshaku Shojo is doing. Could you go to the Hien Palace for me?"

"I already had Tankai check on her. It doesn't seem like she had any issues last night."

Once again, Jusetsu was struck with admiration for the attentive way that Onkei went about his work.

"If you were one of Koshun's aides, I'm sure you would get to climb your way up the ladder," she commented. In Jusetsu's eyes, there was no need for him to languish in a place as insignificant as the Yamei Palace.

"My master already has Attendant Ei," Onkei replied, his expression not changing in the slightest. "I intend on staying by your side."

Hearing these words gave Jusetsu a funny feeling in her chest. It felt as if the tension in her shoulders was being released.

"I didn't say that in order to test you," she said.

"I know."

As Onkei continued to kneel, the fall sunlight poured down on him, brightly illuminating his face.

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Just as Jusetsu was grinding some ink and toying with the idea of writing a letter to Koshun, a note from Banka arrived. Jusetsu passed her eyes over it, then pondered to herself as she went about grinding the ink once again.

"Aren't you grinding a little too much ink, niangniang?" Jiujiu called out to her, causing Jusetsu's hands to come to a sudden halt. "I would have done that for you if you waited until I got back."

"I can grind my own ink, you know."

"But I'm better at it."

Is this really something you can be good or bad at? Jusetsu thought to herself, but then she realized Jiujiu was right—there was a perfect consistency that could be achieved.

"Did you find anything out?" she asked instead.

Jusetsu could tell by the look on Jiujiu's face that she'd obtained some information. Jusetsu moved the inkstone out of the way and got her to sit down in the seat opposite her.

"The court lady from Ki Province doesn't know whether there's a Choshaku family residing there or not, but there has been a lacquer tree forest in the lower region of the Shisui River since ancient times, so that's where people involved in lacquer work congregate. There are various different kinds of lacquer workers, like those who apply it, those who create inlays, and those who create pictures with it. I assume it's more convenient for them all to live in one place where the supply is. Recently, powerful clans and merchants have created an area for growing lacquer trees without any governmental involvement and are employing all the best artisans."

The court lady was also familiar with a legend about the region.

"She heard it from her grandmother when she was a child, so she may be recalling some of the details incorrectly, but she also added that it would have been hard to forget since it was so upsetting for a child to hear," Jiujiu went on. "It mentioned a drought and a sacrifice."

Jusetsu then went on to tell the story.

Long ago, there was no rain for more than three years. The rivers dried up and all the crops withered away. Naturally, the lacquer trees were no exception. Having run out of all the grains in their stockpile, the desperate people offered sacrifices to the sun god to plead for rain.

In order to make sure their prayer reached the sun god, they burned their sacrifices for rainfall so the smoke would rise up high to the skies.

First, they burned a pig. No rain came, so they burned a cow next.
Unsurprisingly, it still didn't rain. This left people convinced that the god was absolutely furious with them.

Ultimately, they decided to burn a sorcerer—a woman who would serve a god. They chose a certain man's daughter. In those days, it was customary for the eldest daughter of a family not to get married and protect her family's shrine. However, this woman had already married into another family, and even had a child of her own. Despite being her parents' eldest daughter, the woman they chose as a sacrifice broke the rules. People blamed her break in tradition for the god's anger, and the god had stopped rain from falling as a punishment.

They burned the woman on a pile of firewood. Her young child cried out for her, so she smiled at him to comfort him as she was engulfed by the flames. The red flames reached up so high that it almost looked as if they could touch the sky, even though it was completely blocked out by the smoke. Eventually, those flames made way for dark clouds, and rain began to fall.

The rainfall continued for three days and three nights. The rivers overflowed and swallowed the people up. The only one to survive was the woman's small child, who allegedly grew up to be an excellent lacquer craftsman.

"That's how that story goes." Jiujiu placed a hand on her cheek and sighed. "What a horrible tale, just like the one I heard yesterday."

Jusetsu thought to herself for a while, then stood up and got the makeup box out of her cupboard.

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"It's fire," she said.
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"Huh?"

"This lacquer painting is depicting fire."

Jusetsu stared at the image of the woman and the pattern that had been drawn on the box with red lacquer. The woman was smiling, surrounded by a triangular pattern. Her face was red.

"The pattern around her is supposed to represent flames, and they're what's making her look red. This is the woman they burned."

Putting it into words gave Jusetsu chills. Jiujiu was speechless, her eyes open wide in shock.

Who would have made such a thing? Could it have been the woman's own child, the one who went on to become a lacquer craftsman?

This had been his way of recording how his mother looked as she continued to smile at him, despite being cruelly consumed by flames—although it wasn't clear whether he had done it to condemn those who had killed her, or out of grief for his mother.

"It's hard to imagine that he would have carried on living in the region where his mother was burned alive. Besides, if the river really *did* overflow, he may have had no choice but to have moved elsewhere."

"Are you suggesting he moved to Bu Province...?" asked Jiujiu.

"The story about the sacrifice was passed down alongside many others. That must have been why it ended up getting mixed up with other legends told in the area for generations."

Were the Choshaku family the descendants of that young child? If they were, then the red woman that was appearing before Shojo was...

"Still, this picture doesn't look like it's depicting such a gruesome scene. She looks more...serene. Gentle," Jiujiu said, looking down at the makeup box.

She was right. It wasn't just the woman's smiling face that made it look that way, but also the softness of the brushwork. The picture didn't give off any sense of resentment.

"...Shojo didn't seem scared either, did she?" Jusetsu muttered as she, too, gazed at the image. There was nothing frightening about the lacquer painting nor the woman that was appearing because of it.

Still looking down at the picture of the woman, Jiujiu said, "She's looking straight at us."

"The woman is facing straight ahead. It's as if she's looking at her child. Well, smiling at him, not just looking. Maybe that's why it seems gentle."

Oh, Jusetsu thought. That does make sense.

Perhaps this was the way she smiled at her own child. There was no hatred in her expression, only tenderness. The craftsman who painted the picture depicted the love his mother had for him.

"The woman who Shojo has been seeing may be a protective deity of sorts for the Choshaku family..." Jusetsu remarked.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know whether she is the sacrificed woman herself, though. It may be something that the lacquer craftsman's own thoughts and skills created..."

Either way, Jusetsu knew it was likely beyond the reach of the Raven Consort's capabilities.

"I shall have Senri write a note saying that the woman is harmless and return this makeup box to Shojo." Jusetsu let out a huff of laughter that was tinged with self-contempt. "I had you and the others running about as messengers and depended on Senri's knowledge, all for me to be completely useless here."

"Come on, niangniang." Jiujiu's eyes widened. "If we were useful, then that means that you were too."

"Based on what logic?"

"Well, we do what we do because it's for *your* sake." Jiujiu said that in an extremely matter-of-fact way, with no flattery or exaggeration in her words.

Jusetsu blinked repeatedly as she stared fixedly at her lady-in-waiting's face. "I'd do things for the sake of all of you too."

Jiujiu laughed cheerfully. "I know."

After delivering Senri a letter updating him on the situation, Tankai—acting as Jusetsu's messenger again—returned carrying his response. It seemed that Senri just so happened to be writing a letter to her as well.

There was a note for Shojo—as Jusetsu had requested—and a letter about the legend regarding the woman who was sacrificed. He'd found some notes about it among the records that Setsu Gyoei, the previous Winter Minister, had left.

"Gyoei left behind numerous records regarding regional legends," his letter stated.

It seemed that much of what Gyoei had written was still around—including his investigations into the Raven Consort, according to things Senri had mentioned to Jusetsu previously. He'd told her he was going to sort through those records and see if he could find anything out.

"I didn't think any of those regional legends had any relation to the Raven Consort, but if we take into consideration the issue of Uren Niangniang's missing half, then that might not necessarily be true."

Half of the Raven's body had fallen into the sea, most likely in the eastern part of it.

In his letter, Senri stated that he was going to do some research into those local legends. He thought they might contain hints as to the whereabouts of the other part of the Raven's body.

The whereabouts of the other half of the Raven's body...

If they got the other half back, then there was a chance that Jusetsu could be set free.

"Niangniang, shall I take these to Shojo?" said Jiujiu, pointing at the letter and the makeup box that were sitting on the table.

"Oh, right..." Jusetsu replied halfheartedly, the other letter still open.

"But what are we supposed to do if the court lady that she shares a room with objects? Won't the same thing continue to happen once she has the box back?"

Jusetsu abruptly looked up at Jiujiu.

Jiujiu cocked her head. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing... It's just that you make a sound point. She will appear again..."

But why?

Why did she appear in front of Shojo in the first place? Had this been going on for a long time, but Shojo only recently started noticing her? Or was she *deliberately* making herself seen now, appearing night after night at Shojo's bedside?

But...if she *had* been making an appearance for a long time now, Shojo probably would have noticed her earlier. There was a reason that she was showing up now.

Jusetsu got to her feet.

"Niangniang?" Jiujiu called out, but Jusetsu didn't answer her. Instead, she simply grabbed the makeup box and dashed out of the palace building.

Outside, the sun was setting. Jusetsu ran at a pace through the dim evening light.

I doubt she's asleep yet.

Jiujiu followed after her, out of breath. Tankai, on the other hand, overtook her with no effort at all and appeared at Jusetsu's side.

"What's going on, niangniang? Out for a walk?"

Onkei was probably somewhere nearby too. Jusetsu raised her voice so that he, too, would be able to hear her.

"I'm going to the Hien Palace," she said. "I don't mind which of you does it, but could one of you go ahead and summon Choshaku Shojo for me?"

"I'll do it," Onkei's voice called from among the clump of bay trees encircling the Yamei Palace. It was hard to see him in the shade, but she heard a whooshing sound as he whizzed over the grass.

"Do you have permission to leave the Yamei Palace?" Tankai asked.

"No," Jusetsu replied frankly, "I'll deal with the punishment later."

"Is Choshaku Shojo in danger?"

"I'm not sure. Hopefully my fears are groundless, but..."

Jusetsu clutched the makeup box to her chest. What if the woman suddenly began appearing in order to warn her about a pressing disaster? She couldn't help but suspect that was the case.

In the fall, it got darker earlier. By the time Jusetsu made it to the Hien Palace, a deep, indigo darkness surrounded it. Unlike at the Yamei Palace, the lanterns hanging in the outer passage and on the eaves shone brightly here, and there was still plenty of light, even at the back of the area. Jusetsu's black robe blended into the night, leaving only her face and hands visible in the obscurity as a faint flash of white.

"Niangniang." Onkei stood beside the passageway.

"Where's Shojo?" asked Jusetsu as she dashed over to him.

"I just got someone to call for her."

Just as Onkei said this, Shojo appeared from behind him and trotted over to them. She had a questioning look on her face.

"What do you need, Raven Consort?"

Jusetsu opened her mouth to speak, but at that very moment, an unpleasant sound rang out. It wasn't clear where the sound was coming from, but it sounded like a tree branch creaking and bending. Jusetsu looked up at the sky, searching for the sound's origin, and the others did the same.

The next moment, an earsplitting roar echoed through the air, almost as if a bolt of lightning had struck something. It was a terrible sound, enough to shake the ground beneath them. Tankai, who had been right by Jusetsu's side, immediately pulled her toward him and got her to crouch down on the ground. Wind and dust blew past them all, throwing Jusetsu into a coughing fit.

The sound reverberated in the air for a moment, then disappeared. Initially, Jusetsu thought it had gone quiet...but then, she heard the shrill scream of a court lady coming from somewhere not too far away.

A lightning strike? Jusetsu thought. But it wasn't that sort of weather...

When she looked up, she found Tankai and Onkei both looking up at a nearby palace building with stern looks on their faces. Jusetsu joined them in shifting

her gaze toward it. Dust was rising into the night air.

"What ...?"

"Argh!" groaned Shojo, sinking down to the ground.

"Niangniang," Jiujiu said as she clung to Jusetsu, her face pale.

Through all the dust, the group could see that half of the palace building's roof had collapsed.

"Niangniang, get back. The tiles might fall," said Onkei.

Jusetsu and Jiujiu both retreated, and Jiujiu clutched onto Jusetsu's hand.

"Is this the court ladies' quarters?" Jusetsu asked Shojo. Since this building was located to the rear of the palace grounds, Jusetsu assumed it was where either court ladies or eunuchs lived.

Still down on the ground, a trembling Shojo gave Jusetsu a nod. "Yes... That part is where my room is."

As she said this, a bustling group of court ladies rushed out of the building with the collapsed roof. A crowd of women and eunuchs from the surrounding buildings also gathered. The entire area was in an uproar.

"Niangniang, you should return to the Yamei Palace for now. You could end up in trouble," Tankai said quickly, encouraging her to leave.

Jusetsu was still holding onto Shojo's makeup box, but the scared look on Tankai's face made her bite her tongue. She swiftly left the Hien Palace and the people there stared fixedly at her as she walked away, her black robe blending into the darkness of the night.

A few days later, Tankai had gone to ask what had caused the roof to collapse.

"Apparently a water leak caused a beam to rot, and it just so happened to break that night," he explained. "The beam landed right on one of the court ladies' beds—Choshaku Shojo's bed, to be exact. If she was sleeping there, it would have killed her. Your visit saved her life."

Even so, several other people had been injured in the incident—but

fortunately, none of them seriously.

"Is that what the lady in the lacquer painting was trying to warn Shojo about...?" Jiujiu wondered.

"Probably," Jusetsu responded.

That was why she appeared at her bedside night after night. She was trying to tell her it was dangerous to sleep there.

"I've heard that this roof incident is going to bring the Swallow Concubine's move to the Jakuso Palace forward." Tankai had apparently gotten wind of all kinds of different rumors when he looked into this.

"Well, of course it would," Jusetsu said. "The court ladies don't have anywhere to live anymore."

"No, that's not the reason." Tankai waved his hand in front of his face. "It's because it's unlucky."

"Unlucky?"

"It's not very often that you hear of a roof collapsing," he explained.

"I thought the Jakuso Palace was supposed to be the place that was unlucky? Since people died there."

Jusetsu was a little shocked. If you kept ruling everywhere out as being cursed, you'd run out of places to live.

"I assume she isn't bothered about the Jakuso Palace now that you've placed that spell, niangniang."

Was that why she had a change of heart? Jusetsu gazed at the makeup box that was sitting on the table.

"I need to give this back to Shojo," she said. With all the ruckus at the Hien Palace, Jusetsu had missed her chance to return it.

"I'll go. I'm interested to see how things are going there," said Jiujiu, raising her hand. Having worked at the Hien Palace herself, she was likely worried about her former colleagues.

Just as Jusetsu was about to pass the makeup box to Jiujiu, Ishiha came to call

her.

"Niangniang, Choshaku Shojo from the Hien Palace is saying she'd like to meet with you," the young eunuch said.

What perfect timing. Carrying the makeup box, Jusetsu left the room.

Shojo was standing outside waiting for Jusetsu, camouflaging herself in the shadow of the palace building.

"I was just about to go and take this back to you."

"...Why would this makeup box be with *you*, Raven Consort?" Shojo looked at the box with a worried look on her face.

Oh, right—it was supposed to be in Senri's possession, not Jusetsu's.

"The Winter Minister returned it to me," Jusetsu explained. "He said it would be fine for me to have it here, since it's not harmful in any way."

"Is that right...?" Shojo had taken the makeup box from Jusetsu, but she still looked forlorn. Her gaze was focused on the ground.

"The Winter Minister wrote me a letter to say so. Wait here, I'll get—"

"Raven Consort," Shojo spoke up, still looking down. "Why did you come to see me that night that the palace building's roof collapsed?"

Since Shojo's face head was lowered, Jusetsu couldn't make out the look on her face properly.

"You knew it was going to happen, didn't you?" Shojo pressed.

"...No." She hadn't known that much.

"Some people are saying that you used your magic," the court lady said.

"What?"

"The people who saw that you were there are suggesting that it might have been *you* that destroyed the roof, Raven Consort."

Jusetsu was lost for words. How stupid.

"I-I don't believe that myself. But..." Still not lifting her head, Shojo backed away. "But I don't even want to imagine what they'd say if they knew I had any

dealings with you. You don't have any reason to visit me again, do you? You'll never come and see me again, right...?"

Shojo stuffed her hand in her breast pocket and pulled out a cloth parcel. She foisted it into Jusetsu's hand. There was something hard inside, and she could hear metal jangling together—money.

"This is to thank you for getting the Winter Minister to help."

The woman lowered her head, bowed, and awkwardly spun back around the way she came. Then, she sprinted away so fast that it looked like she was on the run from something.

Jusetsu simply stayed there staring right ahead at the grove of trees in front of her, the tips of their branches swaying in the wind. The only thing that enveloped the Yamei Palace now was the dreary sound of the wind blowing through the trees.

"Now that's what you call being ungrateful, niangniang."

Hearing Tankai's voice, Jusetsu looked behind her. The eunuch was lingering at the top of the steps, chuckling.

I see, thought Jusetsu. So, this is what Tankai meant when he said I could get in trouble.

"That girl has no choice but to live alongside those people though..." Jusetsu couldn't bring herself to dismiss Shojo's behavior as something as simple as "ungrateful."

"That's for her to consider, not you," he said. "It's all right just to feel annoyed. If I were in your position, I would have kicked her so hard she'd go flying."

"But you and niangniang are different," said Jiujiu, poking her head out of the doorway. "We're making rice cakes, so call Onkei so that we can all eat them together."

Jusetsu stared at Tankai's face, then Jiujiu's. A faint smile appeared on her face.

"All right."

That night, Jusetsu received a visitor.

"Niangniang..."

When Onkei announced that someone was there, he had the same tinge of puzzlement on his face as when the Swallow Concubine had come by.

"What? It's not another lady-in-waiting from the Hien Palace, is it?"

Jusetsu opened the door. Behind Onkei stood a woman in a navy-blue gauze robe. Her face was familiar.

"You're...Sho Koei, aren't you?"

It was the Swallow Concubine herself. Her appearance had a girlish cuteness to it, even though she was actually in her mid-twenties. When Jusetsu met her before, she found both her mannerisms and way of speaking to be somewhat immature. Her impression of the woman was that of somebody weak and unreliable.

Now, however, Koei seemed to have lost a little bit of weight, and there were dark shadows around her eyes. She naturally still had that same helpless air to her, but she also emitted a sense of composure.

Faced with Jusetsu, Koei was hanging her head shyly. "I wanted to thank you for exorcizing the palace..." she said. Her voice was feeble and soft, as airy as a bell chime.

"I have already received some thank-you gifts from your ladies-in-waiting. I don't require anything else." After all, Jusetsu had received various silks and gold and silver gems at Koei's bequest earlier that day.

Jusetsu glanced behind Koei. She could see a number of ladies-in-waiting and eunuchs standing there carrying unlit lanterns. They were all dressed in understated, dark robes. The older lady-in-waiting who visited Jusetsu a few days earlier didn't seem to be among them.

"Did you leave the Hien Palace without telling your watcher ladies-in-waiting that you were coming?" Jusetsu asked.

"Well, yes. They tell me I'm not allowed to come here!" Koei said sulkily. Her

puerile tone revealed a hint of the childishness that Jusetsu had noticed last time they'd met.

"They make a fair point. I'm under domiciliary confinement myself. You're not supposed to come here."

Jusetsu's stern response left Koei dejected. "Are you telling me off, Raven Consort?"

"...Not really."

"All people ever do is tell me off. No matter how much I protest against the move to the Jakuso Palace, they just tell me to stop being selfish. But I'm scared! I thought you would understand that."

"Well...you can't help being scared," Jusetsu said.

This was an emotional matter, so scolding her wasn't going to help.

"I can't, can I?" Koei let out a gentle laugh at that. There was no maliciousness or affectedness to her smile. You could have even described it as innocent.

*I suppose that's her charm,* Jusetsu thought to herself. She wondered if Koshun had thought the same.

She wanted to ask him that...but at the same time, she didn't. It was a peculiar feeling.

"I accept your thanks, so hurry up and go on your way home. The night breeze in the fall is chillier than you expect."

Jusetsu waved her hand in an irritated manner, but Koei just grabbed hold of it.

"Raven Consort—it *really* scared me, you know. The thought of living in the same place where the Magpie Consort died...on top of the thought of an actual person growing inside of my belly..."

Jusetsu looked at Koei's face. The woman was looking down and her long eyelashes trembled. It was difficult to tell, but it seemed like tears were welling up in her eyes. Koei could talk about being scared all she wanted, but seemed like her fear of the unknown was more intense than she could express in words —and was in danger of becoming too much for her to bear.

"I'm glad that you're around," Koei said. "Thank you so much."

Jusetsu was taken aback. Those words pierced her heart and infiltrated its deepest depths.

At last, Koei made her way home, taking her ladies-in-waiting with her. Jusetsu just stood there and stared as the lights from their lanterns swayed back and forth in the darkness. Her hand was still warm from when Koei had been clutching it.

There was one thing, however, that had completely slipped Jusetsu's mind.

And as a result, the person in question had grown impatient and decided to visit the Yamei Palace.

The sun hadn't even set when Tankai came dashing into the room in a panic, calling out for Jusetsu.

"What is it?" she said.

"My master is making an incognito visit."

Jusetsu examined Tankai's expression. It didn't look like he was joking. *Is it something urgent?* 

Koshun hadn't been to the Yamei Palace since the Black-robed Niangniang incident. After all, it wasn't as if the person who placed Jusetsu under palace arrest could openly visit her. He was sending her letters and food regularly instead.

Jiujiu and Kogyo prepared some tea in a panicked frenzy while Ishiha got the room ready for the emperor's visit. Although Jusetsu insisted that none of these things were necessary, Jiujiu got angry and told her that couldn't be further from the truth.

It had been a long time since Jusetsu had last seen Koshun, but he didn't seem particularly different.

"Are you well?" he asked in his usual indifferent tone.

"Yes, why?" Jusetsu responded.

"I didn't get any sort of reply from you, so I thought you might have been under the weather."

"Of course not. A reply...?" Jusetsu cocked her head in confusion, but then she realized what he was talking about. "Oh!"

Despite going as far as to get Senri's advice, she completely forgot to write back to Koshun with her Go move.

That's right, Jusetsu recalled. Just as I was about to write the letter, another arrived from Banka...

"I forgot," Jusetsu said honestly.

Unsurprisingly, Koshun's response was brief and nonchalant. "I see."

If Eisei had been there, he probably would have been glaring at her—but fortunately, he was on the other side of the doorway.

Feeling somewhat guilty, Jusetsu came up with a suggestion. "We should play here, since you've come over."

Jusetsu got the Go board ready, and the two of them sat down across from each other at the small table by the window.

"It wasn't that I hadn't come up with a strategy," Jusetsu explained as she put her stones in place. "I just so happened to receive a letter from Banka as I was about to write to you. I had more things I needed to tell you about, so I was just thinking about it."

"...A letter from the Crane Consort?"

Koshun shifted his gaze from the Go board onto Jusetsu's face. Not having noticed him looking at her, Jusetsu carried on putting down her stones. She used the move that Senri had told her about, which left her feeling pleased with herself.

"As I'm sure you're aware, Banka's older brothers are still in the imperial capital. I'd asked her whether or not I could meet them," she explained.

"Her brothers...? But why?"

"It's to do with Hakurai." Jusetsu looked up, and her eyes met Koshun's at

last. "They might know where he is. They must see things differently from their father, mustn't they? I thought they might lend me their assistance if I am persuasive enough."

Koshun looked down and went quiet for a short while.

"Forget about her brothers—it's Hakurai you can't get involved with," Koshun stated, calmly but decisively.

"Can't I?"

"I'm sure you're hoping to get him to help you break Kosho's barrier, with him being a shaman, but..."

Jusetsu nodded. Koshun casually shook his head, his face devoid of expression.

"That man has tried to hurt you time and time again. I can't imagine any scenario in which he'd be willing to help you. I'm against it."

Unusually for him, Koshun flat out rejected Jusetsu's idea. Jusetsu didn't argue back immediately. After all, what Koshun was saying was perfectly reasonable.

"There is a small chance I could use the situation to my advantage," she eventually said.

"Is there?" he asked.

"I would need to speak to Hakurai and exchange letters with him to have any chance of doing so, however."

Koshun frowned slightly, his eyes glued to the Go board. "Stop entertaining the idea of meeting him. If you do have any ideas you want to share, you should put them in writing instead."

Jusetsu did feel the same. If Hakurai were to place a curse on Jusetsu the next time she saw him, it would be more trouble than it was worth.

"And don't make any requests from people until you know what their intentions are—even if the people in question are the Crane Consort's brothers."

"I need to see them in order to work out what their intentions are, though."

Koshun fell silent once more, but it wasn't long before he spoke up again. "So? What was the Crane Consort's reply?"

"She said that if I had your permission, she'd convince her eldest brother to meet with me."

Koshun crossed his arms and looked down. He appeared to be thinking things through, but it was impossible to gauge how he felt from his facial expression.

"How about the Koshi Palace...? No, perhaps the Eastern Institute would be better," Koshun mumbled. Then, he looked toward Jusetsu. "I'll call the Crane Consort's eldest brother to the Eastern Institute. I'd like a chance to speak with him too."

"Am I invited?"

"Yes. If he does have a different stance from Choyo, then..."

Koshun left it at that. Although the present head of the Saname clan—Choyo—was an ally of Koshun's, he was an enemy of Jusetsu's. Koshun questioned whether "enemy" was an overstatement, but he was definitely not on her side. More to the point, Koshun wasn't supposed to be an ally to Jusetsu himself.

After all, Jusetsu was the Raven Consort—someone to be shut away inside the inner palace—as well as a surviving descendent of the previous imperial family.

This fool always tries to pick the most difficult path...

Sometimes, Jusetsu found herself wanting to know what was at the core of every choice he made. Was it integrity, justice, or hatred? Or was it all three?

Hearts consisted of two parts—the inner core that contained someone's innermost desires and motivations, and then a more pragmatic outer part. Jusetsu still didn't even know what the external structure of Koshun's heart looked like, let alone what lay inside.

Koshun's eyes were always calm when he looked at Jusetsu. Looking into them made her think of snow piling up silently, flake by flake.

Koshun looked down and casually placed a white stone onto the Go board.

"...Hmm?" Blinking, Jusetsu leaned forward. "I'm assuming you're continuing from here, aren't you?"

"Yes," Koshun said impassively.

Jusetsu furrowed her brow as she scowled at the Go board.

"Want to send a messenger out to Senri? I wouldn't mind." He figured out that Jusetsu asked for his advice.

"That shall not be necessary," she said.

"Any Go strategy has a sequence to it. If that sequence is disrupted, it becomes clear that the strategy was someone else's," Koshun explained politely. His face didn't even twitch, which Jusetsu found aggravating. "The moves you make are meek, while Senri's are skillful. It's best to avoid the mistake of mixing them up. You'll end up losing sight of where you were headed."

Jusetsu didn't know what to say. She presumed he was trying to tell her not to resort to petty tricks.

"I thought about sending you some Go records that might have been helpful, but Eisei stopped me. He said it'd make you angry."

"I...don't see why I would have been angry."

"Oh. In that case, I'll have them sent over." Koshun quietly got to his feet.

"Keep your next move in mind until next time you come here," Jusetsu said. "You'll have to come back now."

The emperor was restless. It wasn't as if he could afford to waste time lazing about with her—and Jusetsu knew that.

Now in front of the doorway, Koshun turned back to look at Jusetsu. "I'm glad you're well. I'd thought that being stuck in the Yamei Palace might have brought you down."

"I have so many letters from so many different people to reply to that I don't even have the time to feel down," she replied.

<sup>&</sup>quot;I see."

The look in Koshun's eyes softened. At times like this, Jusetsu felt like she was gently pushing her way into his heart. It was a soft feeling—but then, it would immediately disperse and slip out of her grasp.

Koshun had already turned his back to her and was walking away, with only Eisei by his side.

The sun had started to set. Its light—which had made the clouds shine a shade of gold—fell onto Koshun's back.

The breeze grew colder and drier as autumn went on. This dry breeze even blew through the dusk enshrouding the Koshi Palace, causing the lights inside to waver. The bronze banners that encircled the room made noise as they grated against one another. They would swing in and then out again, creating ripple-like sounds. When Koshun closed his eyes, he could almost convince himself he was out at sea.

He opened them again. The young man who entered the room promptly kneeled down next to him—Reiko Shiki.

"There's somewhere I want you to go for me," Koshun stated calmly, not taking the time to introduce the subject with a preamble.

"Yes...?" A tinge of hesitation appeared on Shiki's meek face as he bowed respectfully to the emperor.

"I want you to go to Kai Province."

"For salt?" asked Shiki, a man who was always quick to catch on.

"There's a certain family, the Yozetsu family, who lives there. They're powerful salt merchants."

"Correct."

Speaking to Shiki was easy because the scholar didn't waste any time, although Koshun did worry that he was a bit too quick on the uptake at times.

"I heard that the Yozetsu family experienced a downfall during the time of the previous imperial dynasty and lost their place in the imperial court..." said Shiki.

Koshun nodded at that. "The emperor at that time had opposing views on the politics of salt. I would like to welcome them back," he explained concisely.

Shiki directed his eyes toward the floor. It looked like he was turning this over in his head.

The state had a monopoly on salt. The state was the one that had control over it and took the profits. Since salt was a staple in people's lives and the government was its only distributor, it could—to put it simply—name its price. No matter how expensive salt was, citizens had no choice but to purchase it. It was, for all intents and purposes, the state's money tree. If the government wanted to make money in an easy way, the price of salt would naturally rise.

At the end of the previous dynasty, the price of salt sharply rose. When the current dynasty came into being, the price went down for a while, and restrictions on salt production were also eased. However, when the previous emperor came to power, he dragged the price of salt back up again—sometimes to as much as fifty to several hundred times the amount that it had been sold for previously. It was an outrageous move taken by the empress dowager and her supporters. Anyone and everyone who spoke out against the price hike was executed, causing an unfathomable amount of bloodshed.

"You, Your Majesty, have brought the price of salt down to a sensible rate and entrusted the production of salt to salt merchants themselves. I believe those were wise choices," Shiki commented.

"Un Eitoku has told me how the Yozetsu family head feels. I simply want to incorporate them to some extent."

The previous grand chancellor, Un Eitoku, had been Koshun's grand master—his tutor—when he was still the crown prince. Koshun had learned a great deal from him. Eitoku had said it would be a shame for the Yozetsu family to end up being just another salt merchant family.

"You wish to welcome the Yozetsu family back to the imperial court...?" Shiki's expression clouded over somewhat.

"I'm not going to give salt merchants preferential treatment," Koshun said, anticipating what Shiki was worried about. He was making an effort to dispel his doubts.

Since salt brought in such colossal profits, it could leave salt merchants with fortunes great enough to trigger rebellions. Such things had happened in the past, and one reason that salt was state controlled was in order to keep salt merchants at bay.

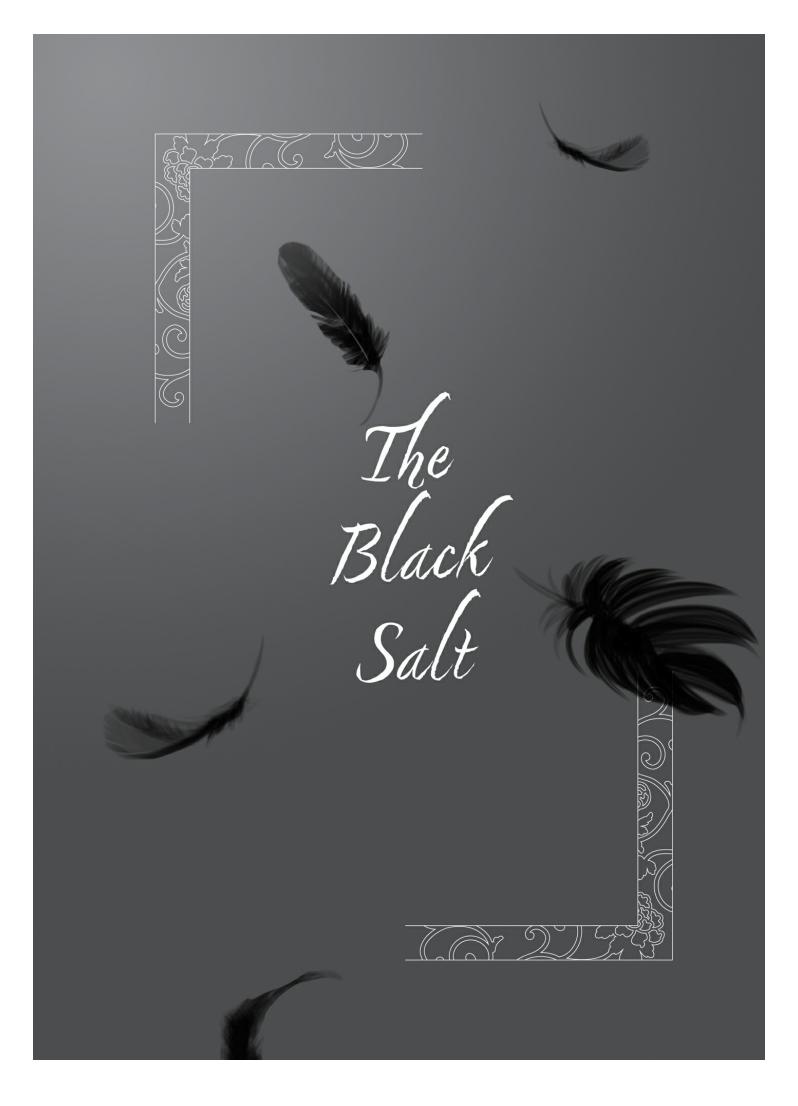
"I'm sure you're aware of what could happen, so that's not a concern to me. However..." Shiki looked like he was worried about something else after all. "I realize that he was demoted to mere commoner status following his conflict with the emperor at the time, but wasn't the Yozetsu family head a chief vassal long ago in the days of the previous dynasty?"

He was right.

While Koshun's expression remained unchanged, Shiki looked like a considerable weight had been placed on his shoulders.

"Are you *really* going to welcome the descendent of a vassal from the previous dynasty back into the imperial court...?" the scholar asked.

Shiki let out a small groan, drowned out by the sound of the banners overhead knocking into one another.



"SHIKI LEFT this morning," Ka Meiin, the grand chancellor, told Koshun. He knew that because Reiko Shiki had been staying at Meiin's house.

"If he goes down the Isui River and heads north along the coast, he should get to Kai Province in three days," Un Gyotoku commented casually.

Gyotoku was Un Eitoku's second son. Unlike his father, both his physique and personality were soft and well-rounded.

Koshun squinted at the dazzling sunlight that was flickering on the surface of the water.

The three of them were in a small boat, swaying about on the lotus pond at the Koto Institute. Eisei was manning the oars. The flowers had long disappeared, and wilted lotuses—which had a dreary charm of their own—now scattered across the water in their place.

"My father said Yozetsu would be quite difficult to win over," said Gyotoku.

"I'm sure Shiki will be able to fulfill his duty successfully," Meiin responded.

His tone was curt and could have even been described as cold. This, however, was nothing unusual for Meiin. Gyotoku didn't appear to be offended by Meiin's unfriendliness though, and instead, a dignified smile appeared on his plump face.

"The salt from Kai Province is delicious. You can really taste the difference when you use it for pickling turnips, for example," he said.

The look on Meiin's face seemed to be saying, "Isn't all salt the same?" He wasn't the sort to be fussy about food and didn't really see the importance of salt beyond consuming the appropriate amount of sodium required for his body to function.

"No, trust me. You should really try using salt from there. Poor quality white salt has a horrible odor and bitterness to it. Kai Province salt is so mild, there's no comparison."

Meiin was baffled by how animatedly Gyotoku was trying to make his case. "Right..."

Koshun let out a small laugh.

When the aging Eitoku resigned from his post as grand chancellor, Koshun gave Gyotoku a central role in his government instead—and the man had been doing an even better job than Koshun had anticipated.

Meiin was an intelligent individual, but it wasn't just his thinking that was sharp, it was his attitude as well—often excessively so. A man in his forties, it had been his own quick wit alone that had gotten Meiin to where he was today. That being the case, he was on bad terms with prominent families and didn't seem interested in improving his relationship with them either. The temperament of the grand chancellor was reflected in the imperial court. Koshun feared that policies would become too incisive with Meiin in the position.

Gyotoku wasn't as quick on the uptake as Meiin, but he wasn't particularly slow either. Most importantly, he was friendly. He was mild-mannered, broadminded, and even Meiin became less caustic in his presence. Having ended up as the representative for his well-known family in place of his father, he successfully managed to keep both the gripes of prominent families and Meiin's unsparingness at bay. That was the personal virtue that he brought to the table. Even Meiin seemed to respect him. Although Eitoku viewed his son's warmth as a weakness, it could be argued that he only viewed him in such a harsh light because he was his own son.

"Still, you quite literally have eyes in the back of your head when it comes to the Yozetsu family head, don't you, Your Majesty?" Gyotoku laughed. The joke was that Kai Province was positioned at the back of the imperial capital, on the other side of the mountains to the north.

"Reflecting on Eitoku's words gave me this idea," was Koshun's response. He would never be able to forget the respect and care he had for Eitoku.

"Your Majesty..." replied Gyotoku, a gentle hint of love for his family showing in his eyes, "What an honor. My father would be pleased to hear that as well."

Gyotoku was frank when it came to expressing affection and admiration—a rare trait among those from prestigious families as they tended to conceal their emotions. That was probably another reason why people adored him so much.

The boat returned to the bank of the pond and Koshun began to make his way toward the inner court. Gyotoku was going to head home, and Meiin was probably going to stay behind and carry on with his work. Imperial officials generally tended to come to the imperial estate at daybreak and return home at noon.

Koshun departed his litter in front of the Gyoko Palace. As he entered the palace building, a biting chill came over him. With a stone floor and a high ceiling, the palace was cool in the summer, but as winter beckoned, the cold began to creep in underfoot.

"Master," Eisei called out from behind, his voice almost drowned out by the thudding of his footsteps against the stone floor. He was the only eunuch who was allowed to accompany Koshun inside the room.

"What is it?"

"...Why the Yozetsu family?" he asked, the question fraught with doubt. It was rare for Eisei, who attended to his more personal affairs, to harbor suspicions about governmental issues.

Koshun glanced back around at him, then entered his own private room and sat himself down on his divan.

"I believe he will make the best salt and iron envoy," the emperor said.

As the name suggested, this was a position responsible for the management of salt and iron. This was a role that was not set out in the administrative code, meaning that Koshun could appoint someone to it at his own discretion.

The look on Eisei's face was stern, or perhaps it looked more like he was tormenting himself over something.

"A former vassal from the Ran dynasty? Are you sure?"

Koshun said nothing to that.

"What are you thinking?" Eisei continued, irritated. "Appointing him to a position of responsibility will have a different significance for those who know who *she* really is."

By that, he obviously meant Jusetsu.

"He may have lost his status during the Ran dynasty, but what if Yozetsu comes up with a plan to revive that dynasty...?"

"If I fear that, I'll never get anything done. That threat is never going away."

"But-"

"It could be argued that the threat is better reined in than left to run wild out in the countryside."

Rebellions generally broke out in rural areas. Powerful clans would join forces with merchants, and they would use their financial power to cause the insurgence to swell. With Yozetsu being the leader of a powerful clan *and* an affluent salt merchant, leaving him to his own devices was not a wise plan, even if Kai Province's geographical location—with mountains separating it from the imperial capital—made it difficult to gain information quickly.

"And most importantly," Koshun continued decisively, "the contacts he has as a merchant and the perspective he can offer on salt policy will be second to none. We need him."

Eisei didn't know what to say to that. Instead, he began preparing some tea for the emperor—as quietly as always.

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The salty sea breeze blew against Shiki's skin. Was the fishy stench that was seeping into his nasal cavities that of seaweed washed up on the beach, the smell of dead fish, or an odor being carried over from a faraway, distant land?

Shiki gazed at the calm, deep blue ocean that extended out before his eyes. Unlike the waters to the west, like those around Do Province, the waves here were gentle and the variation in the tide was subtle, making it great for salt production.

This beach was the biggest one in the whole of Kai Province. Banks had been created on the beach with salt pans inside. Women with the hems of their skirts hiked up stood at the embankment. Others filled buckets with seawater, which they then brought over to the salt pans on poles. The ladies' exposed shins were tanned and had sand stuck to their skin.

The seawater was then thrown into salt pans with sand at the bottom and was left to evaporate in the sun. As the water evaporated, salt crystals would form and stick to the sand. These crystals were then scraped up, placed into a hole, and the clear, upper portion was then transferred into a pot and simmered. The leftover product once the moisture was eliminated was salt. There were several other ways of making salt, but this was the method used on this particular beach.

Men were putting the crystals into the holes or using hoes to churn sand about. There was a row of huts next to the salt pans where steam rose from pots of boiling salt.

"This way, Reiko, sir," called a public functionary from the province in an effort to hurry the man along. With that, Shiki left the beach behind him.

As they were climbing a winding slope, a white wall came into view. The sunlight reflecting off of it was almost blinding. Shiki had initially assumed the wall to be a standalone one that surrounded the property like a fence, but it was actually part of the residence itself. This towering wall, along with the hill at the back of it, prevented anyone from seeing inside. The residence's windows were small, and the large wooden doorway at its entrance was decorated with exquisite relief carvings depicting fish and turtles. It looked extremely sturdy and almost made the residence seem like a fort. Its white walls, which contrasted strikingly with the gray roof tiles, were made from hard and robust-looking white stones. From close up, one could notice tiny black and gray bits mixed into it.

"This is a stone found on the Northern Mountains," the functionary explained, noticing that the unusual material made Shiki stop in his tracks. "You can't make or harvest salt there, as I'm sure you know. In the past, people from the mountains used to bring over their stone in exchange for our salt. They brought wood as well, I believe, as you need a lot of firewood to boil salt."

The older functionary wiped away the sweat that poured from him with a handkerchief as he spoke. Climbing the slope had really taken a lot out of him. It would have been better to take a horse-drawn carriage here, but Shiki had wanted to take a look at the surrounding area, and they ended up walking.

"Some people say that the white stone from the mountains is actually the bones of the large sea turtle god." With that, the functionary put his handkerchief back in his breast pocket and began to walk again.

Shiki followed him. "Has the Yozetsu family always made salt here?" he asked.

"So I hear. The name 'Yozetsu' seemingly has to do with salt, after all."

"...Does it?" Shiki cocked his head to one side, struggling to make the connection.

The functionary's face crinkled up as he smiled, his teeth fully on display. "It means 'sheep's tongue.' Sheep like salt, so they lick it. When people used to bring sheep down from the mountains to trade for salt, the animals would tear open the salt bags and lick at them, rendering it unusable. As a result, the first thing people used to do when people brought sheep here was cut off their tongues—or something like that."

"Oh," exclaimed Shiki. *How interesting,* he thought. Having worked as a regional official all over the country, Shiki had heard many local legends like this one—all of them fascinating. "I once heard a story about deer causing problems by licking iron, back when I was in the mountains of Do Province."

"Oh, yes. There are similar tales all over the land, sir. I didn't know you'd been to Do Province too, Reiko. That's where the tatara ironworkers who operate those foot-operated bellows are, isn't it?"

"That's it. The mountains go all the way out to the sea, so the waters weren't calm there like they are here."

"I hear that it's not just the sea that's rough there, but the people too. Folks around here, meanwhile, are as peaceful as our waters. Well, the boss of the Yozetsu family is a scary guy, but still," the functionary said, before roaring with laughter. This boss that he was talking about was the head of the Yozetsu family—the very man that Shiki was about to meet.

"Scary ...?"

Noticing that Shiki's expression had clouded over, the functionary scratched his head awkwardly.

"Only slightly. No, I say that, but it's not as if he'd punch you out of nowhere or anything. It'll be fine, I'm sure," he said, waving his hands about. "And I'm sure he'll like you."

I certainly hope so, Shiki thought as he looked up at the large doorway standing before him.

In historical records, there was no shortage of examples of rulers welcoming those they were hostile toward as their vassals—and every single one of these examples were from anecdotes about wise leaders. If somebody was a worthy opponent for such a great ruler, then they would possess abilities that would make a ruler want to assign them to that position. As a result, they themselves would want to work for such a smart leader.

The head of the Yozetsu family may have been a chief vassal in the days of the Ran dynasty, but he was removed from his position for disobeying the emperor at that time. Because of that, it would be hard to call him Koshun's enemy—but that said, it wasn't clear how he felt about the current dynasty either.

I expect part of my job is to find that out.

Koshun had given Shiki an important role to play without hesitation. He took the casualness with which this was asked of him as proof of the emperor's faith in him.

This made Shiki happy. It wasn't that Koshun had high expectations for him—he had *trust* in him. The emperor had thought that if anyone was going to be able to win over the Yozetsu family, it'd be Shiki.

The Yozetsu family's housekeeper brought them to what seemed like a guest room, and they waited for the master of the house to arrive. Footsteps could be heard coming down the passage, prompting Shiki to sit up straight.

The man who entered was composed and dignified. Shiki heard he would be in his late sixties and imagined him to be a dried-up old man, but he was astonished by the commanding appearance of the gentleman who appeared in front of him.

This man was the current head of the Yozetsu family, Yozetsu Jikei.

He was reasonably well-built with a sturdy physique, somewhat larger than Shiki himself. He had deep wrinkles in his tanned skin and piercing eyes, contoured by his thick eyebrows. His gaze and his curved nose reminded Shiki of a bird of prey. Even so, there was nothing unrefined about him—even his gait had certain decorum and grace to it.

"What business could a scholar from the imperial capital possibly have with a lowly salt merchant like me?" Jikei asked in a low bellow once he sat himself down in the seat opposite Shiki. His voice was both firm and well-projected. The look in his eyes, however, hinted that he was actually somewhat amused by the situation.

For the time being, it didn't seem like Shiki wasn't welcome. He was somewhat relieved by this, but he still felt nervous as he began to speak.

"I have been humbly instructed by His Majesty to welcome you to the imperial capital as an honored guest."

"The imperial capital, you say? Well...I don't have a clue what I might have done that would warrant me being dragged all the way there."

"As I said, you are to be welcomed there as an honored guest. His Majesty wants you to become his salt and iron envoy," Shiki explained plainly.

"Is that so?"

Jikei looked fixedly into Shiki's eyes. Shiki was overawed by the man's intimidating gaze. Noticing him begin to squint under the pressure, Jikei chuckled.

"His Majesty is both daring and prudent at the same time, I see."

Unable to grasp what Jikei meant by this, Shiki stayed silent.

"As a salt merchant," Jikei continued, "the political decisions His Majesty has made regarding the salt industry during his reign so far have given me good insights into his thoughts. The man has compassion for his people. That said...he also seems to be a terrific schemer."

Shiki was confused. He never got that kind of impression about Koshun, even if the emperor did tend to put a great deal of thought into his actions.

"With every move he makes, he's thinking way ahead into the far-off future. Schemers have got to be patient," said Jikei. "Reiko, was it? Sir, do you know the present moderation envoy for Do Province?"

Shiki nodded, although he couldn't help but wonder why the topic suddenly changed to Do Province. The moderation envoy had the job of supervising the administration of the local government, which used to be the one with the authority. The moderation envoy in Do Province was actually referred to as the western moderation envoy, as they managed several provinces in the west of the country in addition to Do Province itself.

"I've never met him directly, but I know what kind of person he is," Shiki said. "I used to work as a clerk under the previous moderation envoy."

"In that case, you'd know about those tatara ironmakers, wouldn't you? Those ironworkers chop down trees in the mountains so that they can cast their iron—and there's a whole lot of them as well. As demand for iron has increased, they've begun to travel further and further toward the Northern Mountains to get it. That is a problem as we, too, need wood to make our salt. Since ancient times, the trees in the Northern Mountains have been brought over for salt production in Kai Province. Essentially, a turf battle broke out. Did you know about that?"

"Well... I've heard some stories."

Many of the tatara ironworkers were disorderly types, and there were quarrels all over the place. The competition over who had the right to the mountains was one such fight.

"The current moderation envoy over in Do Province is doing a good job at preventing those hooligans from crossing the line. It was His Majesty who assigned that moderation envoy to his post, so his actions are a reflection of His Majesty's intentions, aren't they? As a result, His Majesty has already done something to put me in his debt."

The role of moderation envoy was a role that wasn't stipulated in the administrative code, which meant that Koshun could appoint someone to the role at his own discretion.

Was His Majesty thinking about appointing Yozetsu Jikei as his salt and iron

envoy even that far back?

While the idea of making this man his salt and iron envoy may have been a daring one, the way he went about it was both prudent and demanding of patience.

"We salt merchants suffered a lot during the reign of the previous emperor, but His Majesty has brought us back to life. At the end of the day, Reiko, it's kindness that motivates people." Jikei laughed. "His Majesty's schemes are compassionate ones. I'm sure those who work for him must be happy, sir."

Unsurprisingly, this positive statement had made Shiki's face light up. "Well, in that case..."

However, Jikei averted his gaze. A gloomy shadow fell across his face, and he suddenly looked much older. "I'm sorry, but I have no intention of returning to the political arena any longer. I don't have the guts for it."

Is he still wounded from losing his position during the previous dynasty? Shiki wondered, but it didn't seem like that was all there was to it. What else could be holding him back?

Judging by Jikei's expression, it seemed like the more adamant Shiki was, the more he was going to resist. That said, it wasn't as if Shiki could back down completely.

"...If you could regain the courage you once had, would you be able to return to politics?" Shiki asked.

He then rummaged around inside his breast pocket, pulling something out and placing it on top of the table. It was a small parcel wrapped carefully in string. Jikei stared at it skeptically.

"That's not a bribe or something stupid like that, is it?"

"I don't know his intentions," Shiki said. "His Majesty simply commanded me to give it to you."

That was the truth, and Shiki hadn't even examined the item. Koshun had just told him to give the object to Jikei if the man was reluctant about accepting the position.

Shiki held the parcel out in front of him. Jikei casually took it and undid the knot.

Inside was a wooden model of a bird, small enough to fit in the palm of your hand. The bird looked like it was about to unfurl its wings at any moment, and its feathers, beak, and even its sweet round eyes had been carved in minute detail.

"...Is this a swallow?" Jikei kept turning the model bird to the sides and then upside down, looking puzzled by the sight of it.

"His Majesty said, 'This is a swallow made from the wood of a chinaberry tree, as found in the inner palace.'"

These words made Jikei fall silent for a few moments—but then, his eyes suddenly opened wide in amazement.

"No... It can't be..." The older man let out an anguished groan as he stared at the wooden bird.

Jikei's sudden panic shocked Shiki. Why in the world did this wooden model stir such emotions in him?

Quietly, Jikei continued to gaze at the bird for what seemed like forever. When he happened to look up, however, he said something unexpected.

"I have a request. I'll come to the imperial capital as long as my request is heard."

"What do you mean by that ...?"

Shiki was apprehensive. He didn't want Jikei to demand something from him that he didn't have the authority to provide, such as a payment in the form of money or a territory. Jikei's request, however, turned out to be something entirely different from what Shiki assumed.

"There's something I want to request the Raven Consort's help with. It has to do with my deceased daughter."

His words left Shiki dumbfounded.

Once the emperor's man left, Jikei sat there by himself with his arms crossed, staring at the wooden swallow.

"This is a swallow made from the wood of a chinaberry tree, as found in the inner palace."

That was no ordinary explanation. Instead, it was a riddle for Jikei to solve.

"Ran" was another word for the chinaberry tree. Since the color of swallows' wings made them look like they were wearing little black capes, these birds were also referred to as "rayen robes."

If he was being told there was a chinaberry tree in the inner palace, that meant that there was a "Ran" there—one dressed in a black robe.

Namely, the Raven Consort. A surviving relative of the previous imperial dynasty, who had supposedly been wiped out, had ended up as the Raven Consort, of all things.

"Hmm..." Jikei groaned, looking up at the ceiling.

How in the world...? If this was the truth, it would be quite an ironic turn of fate.

Even so, Jikei didn't understand the emperor's intentions. Why would he tell Jikei about it, knowing that Jikei used to work for the Ran family? Was this bait to lure him to the imperial capital? It seemed like an overly risky method to use if it was.

I really can't wrap my head around this.

Unable to discern the emperor's goal, Jikei had bought himself some time to probe into the situation by asking to make a request of the Raven Consort.

When Jikei's lady-in-waiting came to take away the tea, her eyes landed on the model bird on top of the table.

"A swallow? How sweet," she said.

Jikei had lost both his wife and his only daughter, so there was no need for him to have any ladies-in-waiting around. However, foreseeing that there might be situations where he might need some female help, his family was worried and sent a lady-in-waiting his way. She was intelligent and unexpectedly useful.

"It looks like it's about to take flight, doesn't it?" she went on.

Jikei looked at the swallow once more. Sure enough, its design did make it look like it was about to spread its wings and soar off into the sky at any moment.

Jikei grumbled to himself and sunk back into deep thought once again.

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"He has an earnest request to make of you," Koshun's polite letter stated.

Jusetsu cocked her head in confusion. She could already sense that this was going to be nothing but a nuisance for her, but she nevertheless obliged with the invitation and went to the Koto Institute. Naturally, she did so in stealth—dressed in her eunuch costume with Tankai and Onkei accompanying her.

When she got there, Jusetsu was greeted not by Koshun, but by Shiki. She had been forewarned of this in the letter. Koshun told her to let Shiki explain the details.

The look on Shiki's face was gentle as ever, but also somewhat sad. A spirit's pale hand was holding onto his sleeve—the hand of his deceased sister.

Jusetsu just couldn't seem to get along with Shiki, and as a result, she was always reluctant to meet with him.

"I have His Majesty's permission. I come with a request that you are absolutely required to listen to," he started.

"It's up to me whether or not I listen."

"On this occasion, that approach is going to cause problems."

Jusetsu frowned. "I don't care. It doesn't bother me if I cause problems for you."

"It's not me who it's going to cause problems for. It's His Majesty, and by extension, this country as a whole."

Taking Jusetsu's silence as submission, Shiki carried on speaking.

"His Majesty is hoping to appoint a man named Yozetsu Jikei from Kai Province to the post of salt and iron envoy. I went to Kai Province to inform Yozetsu Jikei of this, but he was hesitant."

Unable to grasp what this had to do with her, Jusetsu remained uninterested. She didn't acknowledge what he was saying, but Shiki was not discouraged by her lack of reaction and continued to talk.

"However, it seems like he'd be up for accepting the job under the right circumstances. He says he has a request to make of you regarding his deceased daughter. He says he will come to the imperial capital as long as you listen to this request."

Jusetsu grimaced. "Don't get me embroiled in politics."

"But Raven Consort..."

"In short, you failed to fulfill your duties as an emissary, didn't you?" she said. "And now you're asking me to pick up the pieces."

Now, it was Shiki's turn to go quiet. A trace of frustration flashed across his face, and he cast his eyes downward.

He might look gentle, Jusetsu thought, but he's actually the stubborn and unyielding sort.

"...You're right about that," he admitted. "I'm ashamed of myself. But I'm not asking this of you for my own sake. I want you to listen to this request for the sake of His Majesty, and for Yozetsu Jikei himself."

For Yozetsu Jikei himself...?

"It's about his deceased daughter, you say?" As soon as those words left her lips, Jusetsu realized how naïve it was to allow herself to even engage with the topic.

"That's right. Yozetsu Jikei had one daughter with his wife. The wife died an untimely death after becoming ill."

"And that daughter of his passed away too?"

"It's a heartrending story. In her case, it wasn't an illness. Please, take a look at this."

Shiki took a cloth parcel out of his breast pocket and opened it up.

It was a shell—or rather, two shells bound together with a hemp cord so they looked like a clamshell. The shells were broken, revealing a black, sand-like substance inside.

Jusetsu frowned at it.

"His daughter died because of a curse."

Shiki told Jusetsu the story that Jikei had told him, trying to discern the Raven Consort's reaction as he went.

"One day, his daughter fainted with no warning and passed away. Apparently, this shell was by her side... Inside it was seaweed salt—also called black salt, due to its color."

Seaweed salt was salt that was produced using seaweed. This was an old way of producing salt before the method of straining it through sand was discovered. Seaweed was covered with seawater to dissolve the salt on its surface. Then, this even saltier seawater was boiled. In the process, the color of the seaweed was transferred to the salt, making it a purplish dark brown—a color which earned it the label "black salt." To differentiate it, modern salt was also called white salt.

"One family elder said it was a curse. Black salt has apparently been used in religious services since ancient times, but it is also used to place curses. Yozetsu Jikei says he doesn't know why the curse was placed on her, and he wants to find out why his daughter had to be killed by it. He's holding onto a ray of hope that you might be the one who is able to explain what happened to him. Please, won't you take on this request?"

Jusetsu had been listening carefully and quietly to what Shiki had to say.

When she was sitting quietly like this, Jusetsu looked her age. Her eyes were as shiny as obsidian against her small, pale face, and her cheeks were as soft as any teenage girl's. Every so often, she would cast her eyes down while listening to Shiki's story as she thought hard about what he was saying, or dart them around like a cat fascinated by its prey.

Her eyes moved again, and Shiki looked up, startled. Whenever the young

girl's eyes were fixed straight at him, it made him feel guilty. He felt like he was being silently judged. Unwittingly, he rubbed at his sleeve—the one that his adopted little sister, Shomei, would undoubtedly be holding onto.

"Her name?" Jusetsu queried curtly.

"What?"

"What was his daughter's name?" she said.

Shiki stared at Jusetsu's face. This response implied that she was going to take on his—no, *Jikei's*—request.

"Yozetsu Ei." One could almost hear the relief in his voice as he said it.

"And how old was she when she died?"

"Twenty-two."

"Hmm," Jusetsu said, raising her eyebrows—although it wasn't clear how she'd interpreted this answer. "How many years ago did she die?"

"Fifteen years ago."

"In Kai Province?"

"Yes."

Jusetsu gave a small nod. "All right then. Go to Kai Province," she said.

"...What?" replied Shiki.

"Go to Kai Province and find out the details."

"What, me?" he asked.

"Yes. Why?" The look on Jusetsu's face seemed to suggest that this was the most obvious thing in the world.

Shiki was baffled. "I'm...not your assistant, you know."

Irritated, Jusetsu furrowed her brow. "Do I really have to spell everything out for you? You were the one who brought me this request. If you had successfully managed to win this person over, this request never would have been made, would it? It is unbecoming of an emissary to listen to such a demand. Clean up your own mess."

This hit Shiki where it hurt, and he was at a loss for words. He knew full well that any emissary that accepted a demand that was made of him was the lowest of the low. Koshun avoided forcing Jikei into his new position so it hadn't been an official imperial order, but since it was Koshun's personal wish for Jikei to take on the role, it may as well have been. The fact that Koshun placed his trust in Shiki and the man *still* failed to make Jikei accept Koshun's request only made him feel more ashamed. If it hadn't been for the wooden model that Koshun prepared, Jikei wouldn't have even given him *this* request, and he would have had no choice but to return to the imperial capital with his tail between his legs.

"Understood." Shiki looked back at Jusetsu, who was staring at him. "I have His Majesty's permission."

Jusetsu nodded. "If your research still doesn't lead to any answers, I could always summon her soul, but don't count on it. We might be able to find some things out by asking her directly, but not everything. Since you can only summon a soul once, we can't afford to waste that opportunity."

Shiki nodded too.

"It's probably more likely that she won't know who cursed her."

People could never know where and how they incurred someone else's hatred. Sometimes, even kindness was met with resentment—although no curse placed over something as silly as that was going to do much harm.

Jusetsu looked down and stared fixedly at the black salt-filled shell again.

Later, as she was leaving the Koto Institute, she turned back toward Shiki who was seeing her off.

"As far as I can tell, Yozetsu Jikei is a wolf in sheep's clothing," she said cryptically.

"A wolf...? I thought he seemed more like a bear," replied Shiki.

Jusetsu looked dumbfounded, her eyes opened wide with surprise. *She does make some childish faces sometimes,* Shiki thought.

"You always end up listening to people's requests in the end, niangniang," Tankai laughed as they made their way back to the Yamei Palace.

Jusetsu looked over her should at him and gave him a subtle scowl. "I just listened to what he had to say. It's Reiko Shiki who's going to do the work. I'm doing nothing."

"For now, at least."

Jusetsu didn't answer him and looked straight ahead again.

Seeing Shiki had left Jusetsu with a heavy feeling in her chest. For some reason, whenever she came face-to-face with that man, it gave her sense of frustration that she was powerless to stop, as if a fire was smoldering deep inside her heart. Was it because he was obstinately refusing to set his little sister free? In order to send the ghost of his sister over to paradise, he needed to the let go of the hatred inside of him and give up on getting revenge—revenge on Hakurai, who had caused his sister's death. Did Jusetsu feel that way because he showed no intention of letting go of that?

No, she thought. There's probably another reason.

"Still, master's being brave when it comes to this Yozetsu guy."

Tankai's words made Jusetsu stop in her tracks.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"Mr. Yozetsu was a chief vassal during the Ran dynasty. Though he *did* get booted out for opposing the then-emperor."

A chief vassal during the Ran dynasty? Jusetsu was so shocked that she became frozen to the spot.

"Niangniang?" Tankai said, peering skeptically at the look on her face.

Instead, Jusetsu spun away and began to walk again.

"Tankai, don't tell niangniang anything that she doesn't need to hear," said Onkei.

"What's your problem?" Tankai said, pouting cantankerously.

As she listened to the pair argue behind her, Jusetsu frowned. What could

Once Shiki obtained Koshun's permission, he headed straight to Kai Province. Being the time of year that it was, the land route would soon be blocked by snow, so he traveled by sea. Fortunately, he managed to make it safely to Kai Province's shores without any stormy weather hindering his journey, just as he had the last time. The first thing he did was visit the province council. If an official from the central government was going to be roaming in a rural area, it would make their life easier in more ways than one if they discussed it with the local public functionaries.

Rural areas had two governmental bodies: the provincial council and the envoy institute. The latter was where officials such as observation envoys, whose roles were not stipulated in the administrative code, worked. However, envoy institutes governed several provinces at the same time, and there didn't happen to be one inside Kai Province. Instead, it was under the control of the envoy institute in Raku Province. In his previous line of work, Shiki had hopped from one envoy institute to the next and had a better grasp of what he was dealing with when it came to those types of governmental institutions than the average person. However, without there being a branch here in Kai Province, he had no choice but to rely on the province council.

"Why hello again, sir, have you been demoted and transferred to our humble council?" The older functionary who showed Shiki to the Yozetsu family home on his previous visit greeted him with eyes wide with surprise.

"Not quite, but I look forward to working with you when it does eventually come to that," Shiki replied, laughing. The functionary laughed too, his teeth on display as he did. His name was Riki.

Riki brought Shiki over to see the province's chief, the provincial governor. Shiki announced to him that he wanted to investigate the case of Yozetsu Jikei's daughter's death.

"Yozetsu's daughter... That happened fifteen years ago, didn't it? I wasn't even in this post at the time." The provincial governor tilted his head in contemplation, then looked at Riki. "I expect you know more about that than I

do."

The provincial governor then shifted his gaze back onto Shiki. "Since this fine fellow is a local, Riki knows better than anyone about the natural disasters and incidents that took place long ago."

Riki just blinked in confusion at that. "Didn't the daughter of the boss of the Yozetsu family just die of a sudden illness?"

Jikei had also said this was what had happened—officially, at least.

"Don't you know any more than that?"

"Uhm..." Riki tilted his head to the right and then to the left as he appeared to rack his brain for more details. "I remember things being chaotic back then... Every single day, we were swamped with salt-related issues to attend to."

Shiki gave Riki a questioning look.

"You know what I mean. Salt was governed so strictly that even we were sent out to crack down on illicit activities. It was a real vicious circle. It didn't matter how stringent they made the rules—the higher the price of salt became, the more locals tried to sell it on the sly. There were tons of people doing it," Riki explained.

"Oh, I see."

During the reign of the previous emperor, salt prices were driven up, putting strain on a lot of people. At times, salt was being sold for hundreds of times its previous price, which meant that even if you were to purchase it on the black market for twice the usual cost, it was still far cheaper than obtaining it legally. As one would expect, illicitly traded salt—the handmade sort—was everywhere. A public office known as the patrol institute was in charge of cracking down on those sales, but it didn't sound like they had enough people to tackle this huge job by themselves.

"I think someone was arrested over at Yozetsu's place as well."

"What?"

"Well, not at his place, exactly," Riki said. "If I recall correctly, the guy was a carrier spotted coming and going from his place."

"A carrier... That's a salt courier, isn't it?" Shiki asked.

"You got it. They transport salt from place to place by tying bags of it to a cow's back. You can use a horse and cart as well, but cows are apparently better at crossing mountain passes."

"And one of those 'carriers' was arrested? Was this around the same time that Mr. Yozetsu's daughter passed away?"

Riki cocked his head at that. "Hmm, a good question, that is... I can't really remember."

"Do you know his name?"

Riki furrowed his brow apologetically. "No... I've never been good at remembering names, I have to admit."

"Then let's look it up," Shiki suggested.

"Huh?"

"We can't leave a single stone unturned when it comes to investigating those who may have had some involvement. If he was arrested, then there'll be a record of it. Let's go and pay the judiciary a visit."

The judiciary was the department that oversaw administering punishments inside a province, and Shiki was sure they would find something there. So with that, Shiki left the provincial governor's office, practically dragging Riki with him.

About ten days later, a eunuch from the inner court came to Jusetsu as a messenger. Shiki, now back from Kai Province, allegedly had something to tell her. When a vassal returned to the imperial capital, the first thing he had to do was report to the emperor. That meant Koshun must have already seen Shiki, and the emperor, upon receiving the update from him, sent a messenger to Jusetsu. The eunuch told her to come to the Koshi Palace in the inner court.

Jusetsu had visited the Koshi Palace a few times before, but she found the place peculiar. There were many strange things there, like the decorative tiles depicting an old man riding on a frog, the unpainted pillars, the general

austerity of its interiors, the bronze banners that hung inside the perimeter of the main room, and the star inlay on the floor. The banners and the floor were probably bound by some kind of magic. Still, it was supposed to be a place where the emperor could spend some time alone without anyone else bothering him, and it appeared to fulfill that purpose.

Jusetsu went up the stairs and stepped inside to find Koshun and Shiki already there. Koshun was sitting on his divan while Shiki stood by his side. The emperor was as composed as ever, and Jusetsu couldn't interpret any emotions from the look on Koshun's face.

She sat down in the seat that had been positioned opposite Koshun. "Let's hear the news, then," Jusetsu said, urging the men to hurry up and share their update.

"All right," Shiki said with a nod. "A short while before Yozetsu Ei's death, a small incident took place in relation to the Yozetsu family. A salt carrier was arrested for participating in the illicit salt trade. This carrier was one that transported the Yozetsu family's salt—but it didn't seem like the unauthorized salt he was caught with was made by the Yozetsu family. He was carrying a legitimate load, but there was more salt that wasn't on his register too. The man was executed after admitting that he was trying to sell it illegally."

"However..." Shiki paused and tilted his head slightly to one side. "The public office had a slipshod approach to carrying out hearings, perhaps because there were so many black-market salt traders at the time that they couldn't try them individually. You can tell this by seeing how simplistic the records were. The person may have admitted his guilt, but reasonable doubts remain over whether the case was properly investigated."

"If they tortured him, then of course he would have admitted to the crime," Jusetsu commented.

"That's exactly right," said Shiki. "And not only that, but the time between his arrest and his execution was extremely short compared with other criminals. It wasn't even two days."

"There's no way they could have investigated things properly in that short a time... Are you implying that the man was framed for the crime so that he

would be executed?"

"There's another aspect to this story that's even stranger," Shiki went on, avoiding giving a clear reply to Jusetsu's question. "Not long after the man was executed, the judiciary's chief adviser also died a sudden death."

"The judiciary's...?" Jusetsu asked.

"The head of the provincial judiciary," explained Koshun, who had been simply listening quietly to the conversation. "As the name suggests, the judiciary is in charge of implementing the judicial code."

"He was the functionary who decided whether he would get executed, then," Jusetsu reasoned.

"Exactly," Koshun replied.

"I see. That *is* suspicious. A man was executed in a hurry, and then the person who decided on that punishment died. Still, what does this have to do with the Yozetsu family's daughter?" she asked.

"I don't know for certain—but at any rate, this happened fifteen years ago. The functionaries don't remember it, and those who work at the Yozetsu family's salt pans are staying tight-lipped. That said, I was able to speak to somebody who worked as a salt carrier, just like the man who was executed."

"You did?" Jusetsu was genuinely impressed. Shiki worked in an efficient and thorough manner.

"According to what the carrier told me, Yozetsu Ei and the man who was executed were in love. He never said so himself, but you could apparently tell by the way the two of them behaved around each other."

"In love...?" Jusetsu murmured. "Yozetsu Ei was twenty-two when she died, wasn't she? She stayed unmarried all that time."

In this society, young women tended to get married at the age of fifteen or sixteen. Word had it that in the more distant past, girls were wed as young as twelve or thereabouts. On the other hand, it wasn't unheard of for men of a certain status to get married in their thirties or forties, so many couples had a considerable age gap. Marriage between individuals of a similar age was

actually quite unusual.

"It must have been her plan to marry the man in question. He'd been visiting the Yozetsu family since he was really just a child to help his father with his salt courier work, so I suspect they knew each other for a long time."

Jusetsu didn't know what to think about that. "When you say the functionary died suddenly, do you mean he became unwell?" she asked.

"It sounds like he simply collapsed and died out of nowhere at his home. It seems like people suspected he was poisoned, but it was still dealt with as a death from illness. Very similar to the way Yozetsu Ei died, isn't it? What are your thoughts on that?" Shiki asked Jusetsu.

Jusetsu quietly pondered this. Since she didn't answer his question, Shiki began to talk once more.

"The unusual nature of the circumstances leading up to the execution and his position make it obvious that the chief adviser was the one who rushed along the execution—perhaps because he feared that if a thorough investigation were to take place, it would become clear that the man was, in fact, innocent. That leaves the question of *why* the chief adviser may have wanted to frame and execute the man..." Shiki trailed off for a moment. "I can't help but think that salt concessions had something to do with it."

"What are those?" Jusetsu asked.

"In those days, the government bought salt for cheap and charged exorbitant prices when they sold it themselves, meaning that unfairly large profits could be made. Strict limitations were put in place on how much salt could be produced, and even the biggest salt merchants would be mercilessly punished if they broke the rules. However, this also gave functionaries an opportunity to take advantage of the situation, and they'd take bribes to turn a blind eye. This allowed some salt merchants to produce large amounts of salt in secret and sell it on the black market. In some regions, this was an open secret, and both salt merchants and functionaries would end up filling their pockets as a result."

"Are you suggesting that the functionary in question was trying to take advantage of the situation...?"

"There's a possibility that he attempted to, but Yozetsu Jikei refused to cooperate, leading him to execute his carrier out of spite or as a warning to others."

"Hmm," said Jusetsu, casually acknowledging Shiki's theory.

"Another thing—it's believed that another member of the Yozetsu clan played a role in what happened as well."

"Did they have something to do with placing the curse?" Jusetsu asked.

Shiki nodded. "Black salt curses have been apparently passed down within the Yozetsu clan since ancient times, and no one else would have been able to place such a curse so easily. Perhaps that individual worked with the general adviser in an attempt to eliminate Yozetsu Jikei."

"I see..." she said. "So, why do you think Yozetsu Ei and the general adviser died?"

"Yozetsu Ei and the general adviser died on the same day. It isn't clear at what time they passed away, so we don't know which of their deaths took place first. Even so, I don't think that matters in this instance."

"It doesn't?"

"The fact they were both killed is more important. I don't know anything about curses myself, and I suspect they might have been poisoned, but whatever the case may have been, I believe they were murdered in order to keep them quiet," Shiki reasoned.

"About what, though?"

"The general adviser was a co-conspirator, so either he got in the way, or they had a falling out. Yozetsu Ei, on the other hand, was in love with the carrier who was executed. She must have found out about the plot for some reason or another and was murdered for it. That would make sense, wouldn't it?"

"Oh..." Jusetsu then looked up at Shiki. "Did you discuss this theory with Yozetsu Jikei?"

"I did, just to check what he thought of it."

"And what did he say?"

Shiki looked embarrassed. "Well, nothing."

"Nothing?" she asked.

"He just said it was your opinion he was waiting for, not mine."

Jusetsu snorted. "And that's why I called him a wolf."

"I'm sorry...?" Shiki blinked, looking confused.

"I think he's always known the truth to a certain extent. That's why he's using this case to test me."

"...Why do you think that?" Koshun interrupted. His voice was calm and tranquil, yet well-projected.

"Jikei has avoided telling this man the most important part of the story, deliberately omitting it in order to mislead him. I wasn't sure what Jikei's intentions were, so I didn't mention it either, but..."

"Mislead me? About what?" Shiki asked.

Jusetsu took the cloth parcel out of her pocket to show to the shocked Shiki—it held the shells with the black salt inside. She opened up the cloth and held it out.

"This is a curse tool," she said.

"Yes, I understand that."

"No, you don't. This isn't an item that's given to someone in order to curse them—it's a hex item that the person placing a curse keeps in their possession."

"Someone...placing a curse... What?" Shiki's eyes widened. "Do you mean...?"

"Yes," responded Jusetsu, "Yozetsu Ei was the one who placed the curse."

Silence fell over the room.

Jikei only said his daughter died because of a curse.

He didn't say if she died as a result of a curse she placed, or whether she was killed by a curse someone else placed on her. Shiki, however, was convinced it was the latter. That would be anyone's assumption upon hearing the young woman died because of a curse, and Jikei likely worded it in such a way to lead

Shiki to assume that.

That was why Jusetsu called him a wolf in sheep's clothing. The man didn't tell a blatant lie, but he still knew what he was doing.

Jusetsu then looked down at the broken shell with the black salt coming out of it.

One could tell just by looking at it that it was a hex item. Hex items emitted an ominous air, the same way something might have a bad smell. This one was no exception.

She had learned about salt being used in curses from Reijo. Since ancient times, the substance was commonly used in both religious services and curses.

"This shell is broken, which shows that the curse the owner placed was successful—or in other words, they succeeded at cursing someone to death."

"And that 'someone' was..."

"That 'chief adviser' functionary, I presume. Think about it," Jusetsu said, trying to make her case. "Yozetsu Ei's lover was killed for a crime he didn't commit. It's not so complicated."

It was simply revenge.

Shiki stared at the black salt, stony-faced. "Then why did Yozetsu Ei die...?"

"If Yozetsu Jikei said that she died because of a curse, then it must have been the sort of curse that would cause the person placing it to die as well."

A curse for which you sacrificed your own life.

"If I were to answer Jikei's question of why his daughter died because of the curse, then my answer is 'revenge.'"

Shiki was quiet, and his face extremely pale. It wasn't obvious if he was doing it subconsciously or not, but he was clutching his own sleeve—the one with the ghost's pale hand holding onto it.

"But...I still don't understand. Why did Yozetsu want to test you?" Shiki asked in something of a whisper, shaking his head.

"I don't know," she said. "To give himself an excuse, I suppose?"

Jusetsu glanced over at Koshun, but the emperor's expression remained the same.

"He probably didn't want it to seem like he was eagerly accepting his appointment to a new position, so he made it look like he was hesitant about it."

"I don't think he's that sort of person... But either way, as long as I have you answer, he should consent. No, I'll make sure he does. Thank you very much for your assistance." Shiki then got to his knees and lowered his head.

"I haven't done anything. It's you who did all the work," Jusetsu commented.

"No. If it weren't for what you just told me, I would have remained mistaken."

Jusetsu suddenly wondered if Yozetsu was actually testing Shiki. If the way the man went about his work was anything to go by, using Shiki as his emissary was an example of excellent judgment on Koshun's part. He carefully and thoroughly investigated a case from fifteen years ago in just a matter of days. Even Jikei must have realized how capable he was.

That's why Koshun always keeps him close by, Jusetsu thought to herself. He's handy to have around.

She gazed down at Shiki, who was kneeling before her.

No—that's not the only reason why Koshun keeps him close...

There was something in Shiki's gentle yet somewhat sad face that Jusetsu could see in Koshun's too—the cold, smoldering flames of hatred. *That* must have been why Koshun kept him around. Perhaps it put him at ease, seeing something he possessed inside somebody else as well.

Jusetsu, however, didn't understand what that all-consuming fire of hatred was all about. It led her to believe that there was something that she and Koshun would never be able to understand about each other—while also being something Koshun and Shiki shared an intrinsic mutual understanding of, without even needing to express it in words.

Whenever Jusetsu thought about that, she found it painful to breathe...and she knew full well that was what was at the core of her grudge against Shiki.

Once Shiki had left the room, Jusetsu drew closer to Koshun.

"What are you planning?" she asked.

Koshun turned toward Jusetsu, both his expression and his tone of voice exceptionally serene.

"Are you talking about Yozetsu?"

"What is your intention in purposefully inviting a former vassal of the Ran dynasty into the imperial court?" she pressed. "And that's not my only concern. Why would *the* Yozetsu Jikei have made such a request of me? I don't see how he would know about my origins."

"I told him about you," Koshun replied nonchalantly.

He told him about me? Jusetsu found herself speechless for a few moments. "Wh-what...?"

What was he thinking?

Koshun looked at Jusetsu, his eyes as calm as a dark forest. "He was going to find out at some point. The previous incident made me realize something," he said, referring to the Black-robed Niangniang incident. "It'll be difficult to continue keeping this a secret, and even more so if you start being able to leave the imperial estate. If we rush to deal with the situation at that point, it'll already be too late."

"But that doesn't mean you had to do this," Jusetsu said.

"I informed him before he found out for himself—tempting him onto our side. I thought Yozetsu Jikei was a suitable target for that."

Jusetsu was the last person who'd know whether Jikei was a good candidate or not, but if Koshun had chosen him, then he must have been.

Even so... "Aren't you gambling on whether this will turn out well?"

A faint smile appeared on Koshun's face. "I always am."

Jusetsu stared at him in silence.

"You're mistaken when it comes to Jikei as well," Koshun then said.

She paused for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"I don't think he was testing you, necessarily. I believe he truly did want to find out why his daughter died."

"But he must've already known."

It was clearly because she placed a curse on someone in order to avenge her lover.

Koshun, however, was calmly shaking his head. "No. People's minds are complicated things... It's not that he wants to know the truth. Instead, he wants to rationalize why his daughter *had* to die. Of course, there is no way to do that —there's no logic to be found here. That, however, must be too painful to bear."

Jusetsu looked down. "In that case...I have no answer to give him," she said.

The look in Koshun's eyes softened. "Jikei will be coming to the imperial estate soon. You should meet with him."

Jusetsu turned her face toward the open doorway. It was bright outside, but dark inside the room. A breeze blew in, making the hanging banners flutter again. Sunlight rushed in along with the wind, so dazzlingly bright that it made Jusetsu squint.

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Jusetsu visited the Koshi Palace again about two weeks later. The person waiting for her inside was not Koshun, but a well-built older gentleman. He had tanned skin and deep wrinkles on his tough and masculine face. He had the sort of ferocious, determined look that could overpower those around him and make them stop in their tracks. Jusetsu remembered how Shiki previously compared the man to a bear.

The look he was giving Jusetsu, however, was an unexpectedly gentle one, and he kneeled down in front of her.

"I take it you are Yozetsu Jikei," she said.

"That is correct. Please, just call me Jikei."

Jusetsu made him stand back up. It was then that she realized how tall he

really was. Even looking up at his face was a challenge. Jikei let out a cheerful laugh and lowered back down to his knees. Once Jusetsu sat down in her seat, their lines of sight were perfectly aligned.

For a short while, Jikei just gazed at Jusetsu in silence. Then, he let out a small sigh and bowed his head deeply once more.

"Never in a million years would I have thought I'd get the chance to meet somebody like you in this manner," he said.

By that, he must have meant somebody with Ran blood.

It took Jusetsu a moment to figure out what to say. "I was born in the prostitution district, raised in the streets, and then brought to the inner palace. I know nothing of that clan."

Jikei nodded slowly. "His Majesty told me all about that. You've had a really tough time of things."

As simple as those words were, they made a peculiarly large impression on Jusetsu. In contrast with his physical appearance, Jikei's low, intense voice had the sort of kindness to it that permeated people's hearts.

Jusetsu gestured toward the divan, but Jikei just said, "I wouldn't dream of sitting in His Majesty's seat." Instead, she got up and sat there herself and urged Jikei to sit in the seat she left vacant. Jikei laughed and did as she suggested. The chair looked incredibly small with him in it.

"I asked His Majesty if I would be able to meet you, but I didn't expect our meeting to take place inside the Koshi Palace," Jikei said, looking around the room.

"Because it's in the inner court?" Jusetsu asked. The inner court was where the emperor lived, and technically, his vassals weren't allowed to step foot there. Even so, that didn't stop Koshun from regularly using it as a place to speak with them in private.

"No," said Jikei. "I see... Perhaps fewer people know about that sort of thing now that a different dynasty is in power."

"What do you mean?"

"The first emperor of the Ran dynasty had the Koshi Palace built as a way to protect himself. It's a magic palace," he explained.

"Oh..." Jusetsu suspected that might be the case, so it didn't come as a surprise to her—the place had a strong magical atmosphere to it.

However, what Jikei said next did shock her.

"It was the Raven Consort that he was trying to protect himself against too."

"What?" she asked.

"The first emperor was scared of the Raven Consort. The word 'Koshi' means bow and arrow, but it can also mean 'an arc that wanes and falls to the ground.' The name of the palace is therefore a spell, to 'let the arrow rot.' In this context, the arrow symbolizes the Raven Consort. The Raven Consort is chosen by the arrow of a golden chicken, and arrows are used to break her spells. In other words, it's a palace that curses the Raven Consort."

"Curses...the Raven Consort?" Suddenly feeling very cold, Jusetsu rubbed her arm.

A smile came to Jikei's lips. "Still, it's nothing for you to worry about. You might be the Raven Consort...but you've got the clan's blood in you too," he went on, avoiding mentioning the Ran dynasty by name. "This palace was built after the first Raven Consort died. Apparently, the emperor was terrified—so much so that he secretly made salted meat from her body."

"Meat...?"

"It was an ancient punishment to cut up somebody's body and pickle it with salt," he explained.

Jusetsu was taken aback. "A punishment? Was Kosho being punished?"

Jikei shook his head. "Hence why it was done in secret. She didn't do anything wrong, not on the surface, so it was impossible to penalize her. He wasn't trying to punish her for something done while she was alive—instead, he was scared she'd haunt him in death."

Jusetsu thought back to salt being used in religious services and curses.

"You do know quite a lot about all of this," she commented. "Is that because

you were once a chief vassal?"

Jikei let out a small laugh.

"I wasn't just merely a chief vassal, you know. The Yozetsu family's links with the Ran family go much further back than that. His Majesty knew that—he did his research. Our ties with them actually date back as far as the Hi dynasty."

The Hi dynasty was a historic dynasty whose base had been located at the foot of the Northern Mountains. The Ran family was supposedly from the same lineage.

"Even further back than that, to be precise. Before their dynasty came to power, the Hi clan lived in the Northern Mountains. Do you know how they, a people who lived in the heart of the mountains, and my ancestors, living on the coast, became involved with one another?"

"Was it because of the salt?" Jusetsu conjectured.

Jikei gave her a satisfied nod. "Of course."

"If they lived deep in the mountains, they would have no choice but to obtain salt by trading," she said.

"That's right. But there was more to my ancestors' connection with the Hi clan than just trade—there was a deep tie that linked them together. It had to do with the god my ancestors believed in..."

"A god? What god?"

"The ao god."

Jusetsu's eyes opened wide in amazement.

"And that also has to do with salt," Jikei continued. "Legend has it that the ao god was the one who taught my clan how to make white salt. They say that the ao god looks like a white turtle, so perhaps it's based off that idea. White is a precious color for our clan—as it was to the Hi dynasty."

Jikei looked at Jusetsu's face—or rather, her hair.

"The people from the Hi dynasty had silver hair, just like the Ran family did. Hair that looked white when it glistened. My ancestors believed that they were descended from the god. As a result, they exalted them and installed themselves as their vassals. My ancestors worked as men of virtue in the Hi dynasty, which meant that they worked for the priesthood. When the dynasty collapsed, we returned to our hometown, and the survivors of the royal family returned to the depths of the Northern Mountains—the Ran family. My ancestors were the first to rush to their aid when they staged a rebellion. Needless to say, it was a big help that my ancestors were salt merchants as well. And that's the link between the Yozetsus and the Rans."

Jusetsu sighed. It never even occurred to her that the link between the two would have gone *that* far back.

"Salt, salt, and more salt. Our clan is restrained by salt in every way possible. At this point, it's a curse." Jikei's laugh sounded somewhat exasperated. "I lost my own daughter because of salt. We should have given up trading it, back during the reign of the previous emperor when most of the other merchants stopped being able to make a living from it."

"Shiki carried out a lot of research into why your daughter passed away," Jusetsu commented.

"Reiko Shiki did? His Majesty has some fine people around him. That man is outstanding. He uncovered most of the truth in just a few short days."

"She was avenging her lover, then?"

"Yes." Jikei lowered his gaze. "At the time, salt production was strictly regulated by the government, and we were not permitted to sell any of the surplus. While prices were getting cheaper for the people, salt merchants all over the country were struggling to survive. I'd been meeting with fellow merchants from all corners of the country to devise a plan, so I was away from home a lot as a result. I was in another province when I happened to receive a letter from my daughter, but I assumed it was nothing urgent and brushed it aside. By the time someone in the house rushed in in a panicked frenzy, it was already too late to do anything. In the horse-drawn carriage on my way back to Kai Province, I opened the letter to discover that it contained a desperate plea from my daughter stating that her lover had been arrested and she needed my help. Her lover was a young man I had known well, since he was just a boy. My

plan was to one day pass my salt pans down to him and let him marry my daughter. But..."

Jikei let out a long, deep sigh. A shadow of sadness cast across his down-turned face.

"Reiko Shiki came up with a complicated theory about the chief adviser being bribed, but he was wrong about that part. The story is far simpler than that. The chief adviser was in love with my daughter too. He managed to arrest her beau and threatened her in an attempt to snatch her away for himself. He told her that if she wanted her lover's life to be spared, she had to surrender herself to him," Jikei explained. "My daughter accepted the chief adviser's demand... It was all laid out in the final letter I received from her. She offered herself to him, just like he wanted. But by that point, her lover was already dead."

Jikei's voice was low and hoarse. He was trying as hard as he possibly could to hold back his emotions.

"After finding out, my daughter decided to place a black salt curse. It's an ancient method of cursing someone, passed down by our clan through the generations. It's the kind of curse that requires sacrificing your own life. She had no other option. After all, her father—the man she relied on to help her—didn't even bother to read her letter."

Jusetsu let out a noise that wasn't quite a sigh, but not quite a groan either. No words would come out.

Why did his daughter have to die? Why wasn't he home at the time? Why wasn't he with her? Why didn't he read her letter...?

He may have been trying to hold himself back, but Jusetsu could hear Jikei's heart crying out. His voice was so fraught with grief that it left her choked up with emotion. The pain she felt for him was heartbreaking—but it didn't even come close to that which Jikei carried with him.

"In her letter, my daughter apologized to me. She asked me to forgive her for using the curse and dying before me. I so wish that she would have criticized me or blamed me instead..."

Jikei went quiet and pursed his lips. The breeze blowing through the room

made the banners sway overhead, their clinking together sounding like a young girl's cheerful giggle. This airy noise resonated sorrowfully around the room.

The man gazed intently at the fluttering banners. It almost looked as if he was searching for his daughter among them.

"Do you want to try to summon her...?" Jusetsu asked softly. "We can summon your daughter's soul...but only once."

Jikei looked at her. There was no ferocity in his eyes—just calm sadness.

His eyes then narrowed gently as he smiled. He shook his head. "It's all right. I expect she is at rest in paradise with her lover. I wouldn't want to disturb them."

Jusetsu gazed at Jikei's expression, then simply looked away.

"Meeting you reminds me of my daughter when she was your age," he said. "She was such a restless young woman. The only time she sat down quietly like you are was when we settled down to eat. She used to run about on the beach laughing, covered in sand..."

Every time the banners fluttered, the sunlight hit and reflected off of them. Jusetsu wondered if the sunny beach would have been just as bright. She had a vision of a young girl running about and laughing in the sunshine, but the image disappeared just as quickly as it came.

Once Jusetsu left the Koshi Palace, Koshun appeared from the door at the back. Jikei moved the sleeves of his robe out of the way and kneeled in the spot where he was standing. Koshun helped him to his feet and used a light wave of his hand to usher him to sit down in the seat. It was a calm, nonaggressive movement.

It's at these moments that this young emperor's temperament becomes evident, Jikei thought as he watched him.

"How did it go?" Koshun asked, keeping his question brief.

"I was reassured by how healthily she seems to be growing up."

He was talking about Jusetsu. When Koshun had explained the Raven

Consort's background to him, the man had envisioned a slightly more sullen girl than she turned out to be.

"She's kind, isn't she?" Jikei continued.

She was an empathetic person. Rather than offer up words of consolation, she silently gazed at the sunlight.

Koshun nodded. "Well, then?"

Jikei nodded too. "I accept."

The last time he was graced with Koshun's presence, the emperor asked him about something unrelated to his appointment to the new role—the role which Jikei had now accepted.

"My clan will support the Raven Consort and protect her."

Koshun let out a small sigh—one of relief. This was the first time that Jikei had seen any trace of an emotion from him since the two of them had first met.

*Is he* that *eager to help her?* 

When Koshun previously told Jikei that he wanted him to help Jusetsu, the man couldn't believe his ears. Not only had he revealed that she was an abandoned child from the Ran lineage, but he was even asking him to help her. It felt like he was asking Jikei to collude with him.

"Aren't you worried that I'll start a rebellion?" he'd found himself asking at that time.

"I don't see why you would," the young emperor had calmly responded. "You defied the Ran dynasty and departed from the public eye. Even when the Ran dynasty was overthrown, you did nothing. What reason would you have to stage a rebellion? Nobody would join you."

Quite a defiant thing to say with such an indifferent look on your face, Jikei thought.

He had followed that up with a big laugh. "Then why would you entrust a traitor like me with the Rayen Consort?"

"When you meet her, you'll find out."

There had been nothing superfluous about what Koshun had said. He was straight to the point.

And when I met her, I really did find out.

Jikei felt remorseful about what happened to those of the Ran lineage. He had swiftly forsaken them, despite his clan having served them since time immemorial, and had failed to take a stand when the dynasty was overthrown. It would be fair to say that Jikei hadn't been especially loyal, but he also hadn't wanted to let his entire clan die in vain. Even so, he couldn't let go of the guilt he felt for abandoning his master's family.

Jusetsu had Ran blood inside her. Not only that, but she was a young girl. She was kind, intelligent, and also struggling with her own suffering. It was hard not to compare her to his own daughter.

I want to help her.

An uncontrollable feeling surged deep inside of him. It wasn't duty or loyalty that was motivating him. Perhaps it was atonement he wished for—a way to make up for not being able to rescue his own daughter.

His Majesty understands the concept of emotions.

He also knew just how hard they were to suppress.

"So...what are you going to do next?" he asked, wanting to hear what Koshun's plan was.

"I want a daughter of the Yozetsu family," the emperor said, without any hesitation.

"In the inner palace?"

"Yes. I want her to live in the Hien Palace as my Swallow Concubine."

"Ah..." Jikei thought back on the wooden swallow that Koshun had given to him. "Was that the other meaning of the swallow?"

Predictably, Jikei hadn't quite read that far into it. Koshun nodded.

"The Swallow Concubine is of a different breed from her fellow concubines. Did you know that?" Jikei asked.

"I thought that was what you were hinting at with the wooden model. It was a swallow—a 'raven robe.' Traditionally, the Swallow Concubine would come to the Raven Consort's aid. A girl from our clan would be perfect for that role."

Jikei had conjectured that the emperor wanted to fortify his ties with the Yozetsu clan and have an ally by his side who was familiar with the Raven Consort's situation.

Next, Koshun posed another question to Jikei. "Do you happen to know any good shamans?" he said.

"Hmm..." Jikei huffed. "Shamans? If it's the scamming sort you're after, then I've kicked out plenty of those..."

A great deal of pretenders had come to Jikei claiming that his daughter was still holding a deep grudge and offering to invoke her soul, although it was a mystery how they got wind of what happened. Every time they arrived at his gates, he kicked them out.

"Oh. I thought you might still be able to find some, since you're far enough away from the imperial capital."

"Even if there are, they're probably keeping a low profile. They endured some truly horrendous treatment during the reign of the Flame Emperor, after all."

The Flame Emperor—or rather, Koshun's grandfather—hated shamans so much that he had them all executed or punished. They were not only persecuted within the imperial capital, but in rural areas as well, so it was still rare to come across one. Still, he knew they could probably be found somewhere.

"I've heard that a lot of them crossed the sea."

"Oh..." Koshun looked down. It looked as if he'd just remembered something.

The emperor had already told Jikei why he needed a shaman. It was to break the barrier put in place by the first Raven Consort—so Jusetsu would be able to leave.

"If you break the barrier, locate the other part of the Raven, and free the

Raven from the Raven Consort...what comes next?" Jikei asked.

Koshun looked up. *He has calm eyes,* Jikei observed. *Calm, yet with a ferociousness concealed behind them.* 

"The sea," Koshun said, his tone of voice as blithe as ever. "I shall send her across the sea."

Jikei's stared wide-eyed at him, startled. *I see,* he thought to himself. *So that's what he's planning.* 

Since the province of Kai faced the sea, Yozetsu family were knowledgeable about water routes used to transport salt.

Koshun was serious about saving the Raven Consort. Jikei could see that now.

"You're going to exile her..." he murmured in something of a growl.

As he accompanied Koshun on his way back to Gyoko Palace, Eisei glanced at the side of his master's face. He looked fearless, and yet as calm as tranquil water at the same time.

Exile? It hadn't even occurred to Eisei that it would come to that.

"...Is something the matter?" Koshun asked his attendant once they'd entered the palace building.

"Not really," he replied. "I just...thought you were planning to make her one of your consorts, master."

Koshun continued looking ahead. "I entertained the idea," he said calmly, "but it's not a possibility. I was the one who repealed the decree calling for the capture and execution of the Ran family. If I were to take a descendant of that very family as one of my consorts, people would think I manipulated the law to suit my own desires."

Laws formed the basis of public order. Eisei knew full well that Koshun believed the emperor had more of a duty to respect the law than anyone else in the land. It was likely that witnessing the empress' tremendous disregard for the law during his father's reign had led him to develop this view.

It was ridiculously ironic how the empress' immorality was one of the factors that carved Koshun into the fine man he was now.

Koshun was still restrained by her in every possible way. Eisei felt hopelessly sad that his master was continuing to carry that burden.

"If I really want to save Jusetsu...I have to let her go."

There was some sort of emotion lurking behind Koshun's hushed tone, but Eisei was unable to discern what it may have been.

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The Eastern Institute was a detached palace located at the far eastern part of the imperial estate. With a large garden and a pond, this was where the emperor went to take some time to rest. There was a pavilion beside the pond from which you could appreciate the garden—which was decorated with unusually shaped rocks—and watch waterbirds play on the water's surface.

Behind this pavilion sat a palace building. Inside of it, Jusetsu was changing out of her eunuch robe and into her ruqun.

She was now wearing a white jacket with a red design featuring birds and flowers printed on it along with a pale-yellow skirt with a circular pearl pattern embroidered onto it. She completed the outfit with a cloak made from fine, bright red silk. It had loose sleeves and was roomy at the bottom, so it ballooned out and fluttered in the wind when she walked. The red silk was a present from Banka—or, to be more precise, an unwanted cast-off from a present Banka's older brother sent her.

As she headed toward the pavilion, the breeze blew against her, making her cloak billow out. The wind carried the chill from the pond with it. A fallen leaf swept up in the breeze hit her cheek. She lifted her hand to touch it, and her sleeve waved about in the wind. This cloak is so loose that it's actually harder for me to move, Jusetsu thought, frowning.

Past her red sleeve, she could see two young men sitting in the pavilion. One was Koshun, wearing a deep blue robe. This wasn't a formal setting, so he was lightly dressed. The other young man, sitting across the table from him, was dressed in a long robe in an austere shade of yellowish green. It was different

from the round-collared robes that everyone, from the emperor at the top down to the manservants, wore on a daily basis. Instead, it was a long robe with an overlapping, V-shaped collar. It seemed like it had a pattern woven into it, a beautiful embellishment that stood out whenever the sunlight hit it. What a well-dressed man, Jusetsu thought. He was a person of refined taste with more of an appreciation for stylish simplicity than showiness. He had a commanding face, and his pursed lips made him look somewhat stern, but it was clear from his strong gaze that this was a proud man. In spite of this, however, he didn't look arrogant.

He was someone Jusetsu had seen once before—Banka's eldest brother, the heir of the Saname family. His name, from what she heard, was Shin.

Jusetsu made the effort to get changed because she was meeting him. Banka apparently informed him that she gave that silk to Jusetsu, so it was only polite for her to wear it when they met—at least, that was what Jiujiu said. Jusetsu left it to her lady-in-waiting to make something out of it, even though Jusetsu herself didn't really see the point. It wasn't as if Shin had gifted it to her personally.

Shin stood up and bowed with his hands in front of him. "It's an honor to have the privilege of meeting you again," he said.

It sounded like he knew he had seen her before. Perhaps it was obvious. At that time, Jusetsu was dressed in her typical black robe, that day when she and Hakurai went head-to-head at the detached palace. According to Banka, it didn't take much effort to figure out that a consort dressed in a black robe was the Raven Consort.

Shin's voice and facial expression made it hard for Jusetsu to work out what he thought of her, or whether he was planning to help her or not. She glanced at Koshun as she sat down. It was impossible to gauge what he was thinking, too, but that was far from unusual.

"Is Banka doing well?" Jusetsu asked. This question left Shin looking slightly bewildered. She didn't know if it was her tone of voice that had made him feel that way, or perhaps he was just confused that the Raven Consort was expressing concern for another consort.

He seems more expressive than Koshun, at least, she thought.

"She appears to be doing extremely well. I deeply appreciate you expressing your concern," he said. "Fortunately, she's always enjoyed good physical health."

While there was nothing gentle about his voice, Shin made up for that with his respectful manner of speaking. Banka had said he was self-important, but Jusetsu couldn't sense any of that so far.

"I heard your father has returned to Ga Province," she commented.

"Yes..." Shin looked down, a hint of sadness in his voice. Jusetsu interpreted this as a sign that he felt reproachful toward his father and looked toward Koshun.

Koshun then waded into the conversation. "Do you know where Hakurai is?" The emperor asked this so casually that he may as well have been asking what the weather was going to be like tomorrow.

Shin sat up straighter in his seat. "I do—Hakurai goes through one of our family's attendants to correspond with my father," he said. "The man had allegedly been working in the city as a street fortune teller or something of that ilk for some time. I don't know how he managed to curry favor with him, but he has now weaseled his way into a certain merchant's home."

The way he put this made it obvious that Shin had been keeping Hakurai at arm's length.

"He's in the imperial capital?"

Jusetsu was very surprised by this. She was convinced that the shaman had escaped to Ga Province or some other region. Was he really that brave? Or perhaps it would be easier to hide in the bustling imperial capital. It was either that, or he had no intention of hiding at all.

"In that case, you should be able to get this to him," Koshun said, prompting Jusetsu to do her part.

She took a letter out of her breast pocket and offered it to Shin. Shin took it off her with a meek look on his face.

"Do you and Choyo write to one another?" Koshun then asked him.

"We don't," said Shin, shaking his head. "My father doesn't bother with any unnecessary communication."

Is it really unnecessary, though? Jusetsu asked herself. I don't think sending a letter to your own child should be deemed frivolous.

She didn't know what Choyo looked like, but she could only envision him to be cold. He had to be to make his own child say something like that.

Then, Koshun asked Shin about how he enjoyed living in the imperial capital. Shin and his brother intended to stay in the imperial capital until Banka had her baby, so they purchased a property in the area surrounding the imperial estate. There were apparently a number of empty houses there, left behind by prestigious families that had fallen from grace.

"My father is against us staying in the imperial capital, but..."

A pained smile appeared on Shin's face. It was reasonable to assume that there was a lot more to the situation than his vague response implied.

Banka's brothers are quite nice, Jusetsu thought. They really care about her.

Suddenly, she found herself meeting Shin's gaze. He was looking toward her, and his eyes were brimming with hesitation.

"You'll have to excuse me, but would it be all right if I asked you a question?" he said.

Jusetsu tilted her head to one side slightly. "What is it?"

"Since I lived so far away from the imperial capital, I had never heard of the Raven Consort until Banka told me about you. Is it true that you are not one of His Majesty's concubines, despite living in the inner palace?"

So that's what he wanted to ask. He was so ridiculously polite about it that I was expecting something more serious.

"That's right," she said. "I am not one of the emperor's concubines, nor do I have any authority over you—so there's no need for you to be so courteous toward me."

Shin gazed at Jusetsu's face. "Oh..." he said, seemingly at a loss. With that cleared up, Shin took the opportunity to say goodbye to Koshun and rose to his feet.

"Shin," Koshun called out to him just as he was about to leave. "If you don't mind, I'd like you to come back again. There isn't anyone here similar in age to me, so it'd be great to have you to talk to."

This was the first time Jusetsu heard Koshun say something like that, so she was surprised. Besides, Shin was one of his subjects—he didn't need to preface his request with "if you don't mind" in order for him to come. He only needed to demand Shin's presence, and the man would have to comply.

Shin was dumbfounded. When he eventually came back to his senses, he simply said, "Understood." He gave the emperor a frantic bow. "It'd be my pleasure. Just call on me, and I'll come."

What in the world is Koshun planning? Jusetsu looked at his face out of the corner of her eye to try to gauge what he was thinking, but unsurprisingly, there was no trace of emotion to be found there.

Once Shin was out of sight, Jusetsu turned back toward Koshun.

"What are you scheming?" she asked.

The look on his face was cool and composed. "I'm not scheming anything."

"You're a liar. That 'it'd be great to have you to talk to' part sounded so contrived."

"It's how I honestly feel," Koshun said. "I'd like for he and I to develop a closer friendship."

"...But why?"

"Because he's not like his father."

Jusetsu stared intently at Koshun's face. He never went into much detail, so it was hard to grasp exactly what he meant. However, Jusetsu did have a vague inkling in this case.

Does he want to win him over to his side?

"I forgot to tell you something," Koshun said as he was leaving, as if the idea had only just crossed his mind. "I've decided to install a daughter from the Yozetsu clan as the new Swallow Concubine. She's going to be there to help you. You'll be able to depend on her."

## A new concubine?

Jusetsu wanted to snap back and say she didn't need any help, but welcoming a daughter of the Yozetsu clan to the inner palace must have been a significant move to make. She didn't feel particularly strongly about it, but the breeze blowing through her thin outfit suddenly felt abnormally cold. She didn't know why that was.

Koshun got into his litter and left the Eastern Institute. Jusetsu watched its curtains flutter in the wind as it faded into the distance.

"It's so cold," she whispered to herself, rubbing her arms.

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Once Shin left the imperial estate, he traveled down an alley to the east of the main street. This part of the city was where the homes of respected families could be found. In recent years, however, many of these renowned families had fallen down in the ranks of society. With no masters left to keep these homes running, their residences were being sold for dirt cheap. The house that Shin purchased was one such property.

Once you went through its old but sturdy front gate and passed through the other gate on the inside, a small estate came into view. Buildings stood on all four sides of the property's grounds, as if to encircle its maple garden. These buildings were connected to one another by corridors. Shin and his younger brother Ryo were the only people living there, so they didn't need an especially big place. Ryo had wanted to live somewhere more luxurious, but Shin had liked the property's austere appearance, and it was plenty spacious for the two of them.

He went down the passage and entered the hall where Ryo was playing his beloved lute. It had been passed down to him from his deceased mother.

Ryo glanced at his older brother. "You look like you're in a good mood," he

said. "That's rare."

"I don't think I'm in a good mood or a bad mood. I feel completely neutral."

"You're smiling," Ryo commented. "Did things go well with His Majesty? Or was the Raven Consort just that pretty?"

The only thing Shin told his brother was that Banka requested he meet with the emperor and the Raven Consort.

"His Majesty was a gentle and good man. He's very polite," Shin said.

It had taken Shin by surprise that the emperor had asked if the two of them could talk some more, but Shin had liked him. Holding the position that he did, he could get anybody to do whatever he wanted. Even so, Koshun hadn't showed even a single trace of arrogance—he seemed to be a humble and generous man.

"The emperor was acting all modest around you because you happen to be from a rich family? It must be so hard on him, having to butter up his subjects."

Ryo had a beautiful face, but he had a sharp tongue. He was assertive too.

"I was hoping to bring you along with me next time, as long as I had permission," Shin said. "I suppose you'll have to fix the way you speak about people first."

"I'm only saying it because it's *you* I'm talking to. Do you really think I'd say something like that in His Majesty's presence?" asked Ryo.

At least he's aware of how rude he can be, Shin thought. Even so, he was skeptical about whether his brother would actually be able to keep himself in check around the emperor or not.

"What about the Raven Consort? If she's one of the emperor's consorts, then she has to be beautiful."

"You've seen her before. At that detached palace, with Hakurai..."

Ryo frowned. "She wasn't that girl in the black robe, was she? Are you telling me *that* was the Raven Consort?"

Shin nodded. He hadn't been able to forget the beautiful, black-robed consort

from that day. After finding out about the Raven Consort through Banka's letters, he managed to put two and two together. She seemed like a unique, dignified young lady with a quiet and profound elegance about her. Speaking to her close-up only strengthened this impression.

"Apparently, though, she isn't one of the emperor's consorts."

"But she's the Raven *Consort*, isn't she? Doesn't she live in the inner palace?" Ryo asked.

"Well, yes... I don't really understand it either."

The link between her and Hakurai was a mystery, as was the fact Koshun was aware of this link as well. In other words, Shin knew virtually nothing about her.

That said, seeing her had confirmed that he made the right choice by sending Banka that red silk.

It wouldn't suit his sister, but he snuck it in among her gifts anyway, hoping that she'd give it to her friend instead. It was a long shot—never in his wildest dreams did he expect her not only to receive it, but to have something made from it to wear as well.

Dressed in that fine red silk cloak that fluttered in the breeze, she looked even more beautiful than he could have imagined.

"Shin...? Shin?"

Ryo was looking at him questioningly. Shin averted his gaze, acting markedly awkward.

"Did the Raven Consort ask you to do anything for her?" Ryo asked.

"No, not really," Shin found himself saying, even though it was a lie. He didn't know why he didn't tell the truth. Still, Ryo—who was very intuitive—scowled.

"Don't get yourself embroiled in any consort-related trouble, will you? Our father would hate that."

"It's a little late to worry about that, don't you think? You were the one who was angriest when he went home, showing no concern whatsoever for our pregnant sister."

Shin suspected his father had already given up on him and Ryo since he left the two of them in the imperial city without even bothering to listen to what they had to say. The thought of his father tossing him aside so he could make his middle son—who was still in Ga Province—his heir left Shin feeling shaken.

"Our father's cold to his own family. You and Banka are important to me too," Ryo said sadly. "That's why I'm here."

Shin understood Ryo's feelings better than anyone as he felt the same way. He stayed behind himself because he was worried about Banka. Her rebellion against their father may have also influenced his choices to some extent. Both Shin and Ryo were struggling to suppress their antipathy toward him now too.

"Shin," said Ryo, staring intently at his older brother. "I don't think you should get close to that Raven Consort person."

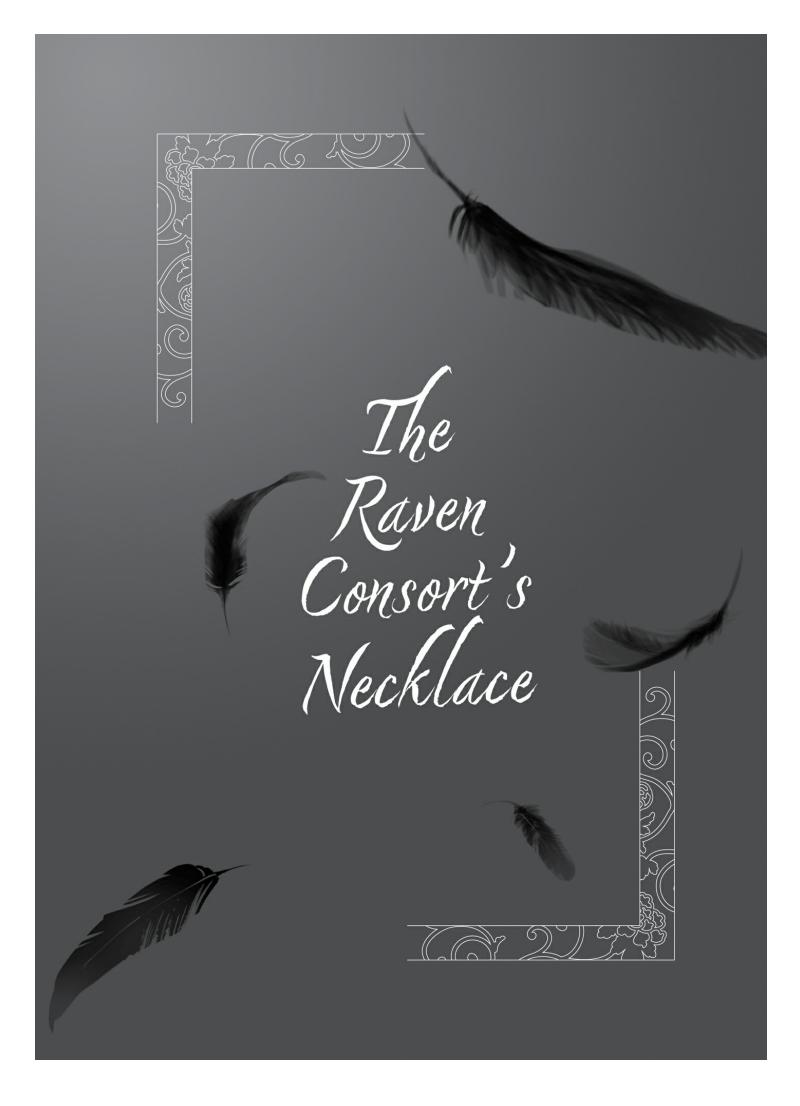
"...What makes you say that?"

"She's scary."

Ever since he was little, Ryo had had a remarkable sixth sense. Fear was written across his face.

"There's something terrifying about that consort..." he said.

His voice was quiet, almost as if he was frightened that someone was going to tell him off. His words, however, left a deep impression on his older brother.



**Y**OU'RE GOING to lose your life over troubles with a woman."

Hakurai's shaman mentor told him that long, long ago.

The man may have played the role of a mentor, but he didn't possess any real skills—he was practically a charlatan, in fact. That being the case, Hakurai simply laughed off the premonition—but his mentor did not.

"Be careful," the mentor warned him, and there was a tinge of melancholy in his eyes.

How ridiculous, Hakurai had thought at the time. I could never lose my life over something that stupid.

Hakurai stilled his fingers and moved his flute away from his mouth. The impatient man kneeling in front of him leaned in closer.

"Any luck, Kessha?" asked the man, who was roughly in his forties.

"Kessha" was Hakurai's pseudonym here. He went by countless different names over the years, and Hakurai wasn't even his real one.

"I can hear the sounds of riots. An inauspicious wind is going to blow in from the north. You do business with those from that region, don't you? Either avoid them, or you must devote yourself to the gate god—one of the four deities—and make regular offerings to him."

"Oh..." replied the man. "It's true, I was planning on dealing in some sea merchant stock through a merchant family to the north. Would that be a mistake?"

"You'll end up with defective products if you do."

"What?!" the man exclaimed. "Well, that was a close call."

Having fallen for Hakurai's nonsense hook, line and sinker, the man prostrated himself in front of him. "Thank you so very much. Thanks to you, Kessha, my business is doing fantastically. I'm so glad you came to visit me."

This man was a gem salesman who had a stall in the market. Hakurai initially met him about two weeks earlier. Or rather, perhaps it would be more accurate to say he chose him as an easy target.

Hakurai stood on a street corner in the market of the imperial capital and played the flute. It wasn't his musical talent he was selling, however—it was his fortune-telling services. This kind of clairvoyance involved listening for the wind in the sound of the whistle. The wind would convey all kinds of different things to the player. This style of divination originated from Kada, a country to the south of Sho, and was known as wind-reading. Hakurai, who wandered from place to place after being picked up by a songbird troupe, observed many foreign divination techniques himself on the many different harbors the group visited.

All towns had their own merchants' association—a group that consisted of people with the same occupation—in their marketplaces, so someone couldn't just set up their own stall without permission. It was the same for fortune tellers and was why Hakurai ended up as one working on the street, always scouring for people he thought he could take advantage of.

The gem-seller just so happened to have a malicious ghost affixed to his shoulders. After telling him a random story where he claimed the ghost was an ancestor of the man's who'd died "an untimely death," Hakurai exorcized the ghost for him. The gem-seller was so grateful for it that it moved him to tears. Apparently, it miraculously cured the excruciating shoulder pain the man had been experiencing for the past year or so. From then on, Hakurai took up residence in the man's house. Blessed with a talent for fortune-telling, he was able to accurately predict anything asked of him, and naturally gained the man's trust. It was just that easy.

Hakurai left the man's room and started making his way toward the room assigned to him. Residences in the imperial capital tended to consist of several buildings that surrounded the same courtyard. Hakurai walked down the corridor facing out onto this central courtyard, but just as he turned around the corner, he froze. A little girl was crouching down in front of his room, peering into a water basin. When she noticed Hakurai there, she looked up. She had tan skin and beautiful jet-black eyes.

"Injo," Hakurai almost found himself calling out, but he bit his tongue. She had a new name now—Houji, meaning abalone child.

"...Have you heard anything?" Hakurai asked.

She shook her head. "No. This basin is too small," Injo replied, pouting.

She was trying to hear the ao god's voice. Injo was the god's shrine maiden, and she could hear the god's voice whenever she was near water—by the sea, rivers, and even ponds. Unfortunately, this house did not have a pond, so she filled up a water basin, thinking it would be better than nothing. It seemed that hearing the god's voice was proving to be difficult task with such a small amount of water.

"How much water do you need?" Hakurai asked, but Injo just cocked her head disinterestedly.

He sighed. The young girl had a somewhat inattentive disposition and could also be quite capricious.

Hakurai knew there was a river to the east of the imperial capital. *Taking her there might be my only choice*. Injo gazed into the water basin again, but Hakurai couldn't really grasp what was so fun about it—it wasn't as if she could see anything reflected in there.

Maybe she needs a toy.

Hakurai didn't know anything about playing. Such things were unknown to him as a child, and he never even felt like a child when he was one. From the moment he was old enough to know what was going on around him, Hakurai had worked as a sorcerer, and after his entire clan was killed, he'd worked as a shaman in a songbird troupe.

"Is there anything you want?" he asked her.

Injo's eyes lit up. "Something I want...?" she asked. "Shells?"

"Surely that doesn't count."

Having been born and raised in a poor fishing village where she used to collect shells to sell to make money, it was second nature for her to hunt for some every time she was at the beach. The fact that shells were the only thing she could think of when asked what she wanted reminded Hakurai how hard her life was.

"You saw all kinds of different things at the market, didn't you? Silk, meat...

They've got everything there."

Injo cocked her head once again. She dipped her fingers into the water and splashed them about. "There aren't many fish, though."

The imperial capital was a long way from the water, so although some things were brought over via waterways, things that needed to be transported quickly weren't available. Most of the fish at the market were dried or salted to make sure they didn't go bad.

"Do you want to eat some fish?" Hakurai asked.

"No," she said. "I just noticed that there weren't many."

Hakurai still didn't know how to treat Injo. He wasn't good with children in general. When he bought Injo from her parents, he thought that as long as he clothed her, fed her, and gave her somewhere to live, that would be enough. However, even that had proved to be a challenge. It wasn't that he'd failed to provide these things for her—it was just that if he didn't pay close attention to her, she wouldn't eat, wouldn't even bother to change her clothes, and would just sleep wherever she felt like it. Looking after a child wasn't a job he ever thought he'd have to take on.

Hakurai looked down at Injo's head. It was small—she was just a child, after all.

The same words had been repeatedly echoing inside his head for some time now.

"Are you really planning to offer up a girl so tiny as a sacrifice?"

"The ao god requires people as sacrifices. Young girls. Didn't you know that?"

These were Jusetsu's words, and that was the first time he had heard about that. Hakurai couldn't hear the ao god's voice himself, so he only learned things through Injo. The girl never mentioned anything of the sort.

"Is it true that the ao god requires human sacrifices?" Hakurai had asked her, but Injo just cocked her head absentmindedly as she always did.

Was Jusetsu just trying to throw me off? Did she think saying that would make Hakurai abandon the ao god? Even if she was telling the truth, what was her

goal? He could easily—

Injo rubbed her eyes. She was sleepy.

"Hey, you can't sleep here," he snapped, but Injo seemed not to hear him and curled up on the floor.

Hakurai tutted. When the girl got like this, she was almost impossible to wake up, no matter how much you shook her.

Scowling, Hakurai picked her up in his arms. She was warm.

I could easily offer her as a sacrifice.

The more he thought that, the more it felt like he was trying to convince himself of something. He was starting to get an unpleasant feeling in his stomach.

"Kessha?" one of the residence's domestic servants called out to him.

Hakurai turned his head, the young girl still in his arms.

"You have a letter from the Saname family."

Hakurai took the letter from her, and it only took one glance to tell him that it was not, in fact, from the Saname family. For starters, it was on the wrong sort of paper. He went inside his room, placed Injo down on the bed, and opened up the letter.

He frowned. This is from the Raven Consort.

The letter was indeed from Jusetsu—why would it have come from the Saname family? Was it a false claim on Jusetsu's part? If it had come straight from her, though, how did she find out where Hakurai was? He pondered this as he looked over the contents of the letter. The creases in his brow became deeper and deeper as he did so.

She wanted him to help break the barrier that the first Raven Consort had put in place. That was what the letter was about.

"In exchange, I, too, shall help you," she asserted.

She didn't want Injo to be offered up as a sacrifice.

Hakurai ripped up the letter and scrunched the pieces up into a ball. He then

left the room, intending to burn the remains on the fire in the kitchen. The setting sun was painting the walls a golden hue. Hakurai looked up at the redtinged sky. The sun would soon set, leaving the moon to shine down on the land beneath it.

Or it wouldn't. Because tonight, there would be a new moon.

That night, Jusetsu went to the rear of her bedroom. Candlestick in hand, she proceeded down a narrow passageway, eventually coming to a small room at the end. Jusetsu lifted her candle to illuminate the wall before her. An image of a mysterious black bird with a human face emerged from the wavering candlelight.

It was part of Jusetsu's job to offer up a flower at this altar in the evenings, once every three days. A peony, to be specific—the powerful flower of the Raven Consort.

However, after gazing at the wall painting of the mysterious bird, Jusetsu quietly turned back the way she came.

"Kosho fed the Raven flowers. She did it again and again. But those flowers were poisonous. Intoxicating. The Raven has already...lost herself."

Everything the Owl said that day rang in Jusetsu's ears the entire time. The Owl was the Raven's older brother, and he wanted to save the Raven from her situation.

Ever since she heard what he had to say, Jusetsu stopped offering the flowers. Even when she did head over to the altar, she just couldn't bring herself to place a peony in the glass bowl.

She went back to her room and blew out the candle. The strong smell of smoke rose into the air. Jusetsu sat down on her bed, practically forcing her heavy body to move. Both her mind and body were screaming out that they didn't want to fall asleep.

Tonight, there would be a new moon. It was the night when the Raven would break free from her body and her soul would feel like it was going to be torn apart—the night when Jusetsu would be overcome by excruciating pain.

Fighting her desire to stay awake, her consciousness became hazy, and her eyelids closed against her will. Her body now too cumbersome to bear, she finally lay down. She began drifting into a deeper and deeper sleep—but when she finally reached the deepest point, she'd come rushing back up again. Before she knew it, she'd be rising to the surface. Even if she managed to stop her body from floating, her consciousness would rush upward on its own. The pain that came over her made her feel as if her entire body was tangled in silk threads that were becoming tighter and tighter around her. Tonight, once again, she had no choice but to endure it.

She screamed and screamed, but no sound came.

As Jusetsu suffered this agony, however, she suddenly noticed that something didn't feel quite right.

Her chest was expanding, almost as if she inhaled too much air. It was so painful, and the swelling wouldn't stop. Her ribs squeaked as they pushed out from inside.

A-ah...

It hurt to breathe. Her bones creaked and broke. Nonetheless, the swelling in her chest continued.

I'm going to burst.

Her body was going to split apart—from the inside out.

She thought she could hear the dull sound of bones breaking. Jusetsu let out a tremendous shriek.

"...Niangniang! Niangniang!!!"

Jusetsu opened her eyes with a start. She could see Jiujiu in front of her, the young woman's face glowing in the light of the candle she was holding.

"Niangniang... Are you all right, niangniang?" Jiujiu asked, sounding flustered.

Jusetsu, however, wasn't able to answer her. Her tongue was trembling, and her throat felt tight. Her arms and legs wouldn't work either. It felt like they were completely numb.

Jusetsu started to panic.

"Niangniang, please calm down," said Onkei.

Something warm touched Jusetsu's arm—his hand. Onkei was gently rubbing her arm.

"Close your eyes and breathe slowly," he said. "Count how many breaths you take."

Jusetsu did as she was told and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath, then another, and then another. *One, two, three...* By the time she counted to five, she was starting to calm down. Her fingers twitched and her arms and legs could move again. She let out a sigh of relief and opened her eyes.

It wasn't just Jiujiu and Onkei who were there, but Tankai, Ishiha, and Kogyo too. Each one of them looked as worried as the next.

"I heard a terrible scream, so I came dashing in," Jiujiu said.

"Is that so...?" replied Jusetsu, her voice raspy. "I...had a bad dream. I thought my body was splitting open."

Jiujiu stared at Jusetsu's face. "I'll bring you some water," she said, getting to her feet—but Kogyo gestured that she would fetch it herself, and hurried off instead.

Both Jiujiu and Onkei helped Jusetsu sit up in bed. Once she drank the water Kogyo brought, she felt a little more like herself again.

"I'm sorry for waking you all. It's probably still the middle of the night, isn't it?"

"You don't need to worry about that," Jiujiu replied, sounding almost angry. The others nodded as well.

"I'm fine now," said Jusetsu. "Go back to bed."

Jiujiu grabbed Jusetsu's hand, an apprehensive look on her face. "But..."

"You might have another bad dream," Tankai cut in. "Want me to sleep by your side?"

Onkei cast him an icy look. "We're going back," he said to Tankai and Ishiha. "Let's leave the rest to Jiujiu."

Once the boys made their way out, Kogyo also gave Jusetsu a worried look and returned to her own room.

"You can go too," Jusetsu said.

"No, niangniang. Your hand is so cold." Jiujiu had wrapped both her hands around Jusetsu's. "Your face is as white as a sheet as well. I can't bring myself to leave you by yourself."

"You won't get any sleep at this rate."

"I'll go to bed once you seem to be sleeping peacefully again," Jiujiu said.

Does that mean she intends to watch over me all night? Jusetsu wondered. She thought about it for a moment, then shifted slightly to the side.

"In that case, you can sleep here," Jusetsu said.

"What?" Jiujiu's eyes were wide with surprise.

"You can sleep here," Jusetsu repeated, patting the spot beside her.

"No, I can't. I wouldn't dream of it."

"I don't mind. Koshun's slept here, after all."

"That only makes the idea sound even *more* preposterous!" Jiujiu countered. "I can't sleep where His Majesty once slept."

"Either you sleep here, or you go back to bed. It's your choice."

The lady-in-waiting groaned. "I-I'll sleep here, then. I'm worried about you," Jiujiu conceded before slowly and diffidently lying herself down on the bed.

Jusetsu could feel Jiujiu's warmth right beside her. It was a peculiar sensation.

"Do you think you'll be able to sleep with me here, niangniang?"

"I'm already sleepy," Jusetsu answered.

Jiujiu laughed. "I'll hold your hand. You'll sleep better if it's warm."

"...Reijo used to massage my hands for me to warm them up."

She used to do that whenever Jusetsu woke up with a start after dreaming about her mother.

"The previous Raven Consort? Well, I'll do that then."

"Don't," said Jusetsu. "Just holding my hand is good enough."

Jiujiu looked at Jusetsu from the side. "All right. I'll do that."

She smiled and took hold of Jusetsu's hand. Jiujiu's hand was warm, and soft too.

When she opened her eyes the next morning, Jusetsu found she was just about to fall out of bed. Jiujiu was still sleeping, with her arms and legs stretched out wide, and had pushed Jusetsu right to the edge.

She looked at Jiujiu's face as she slept soundly, let out a small giggle, and gently got out of bed. By the time Jiujiu woke up, Jusetsu was already finished getting dressed.

"Oh, I'm so embarrassed! You got up while I was just sleeping like a log, completely oblivious."

Jiujiu felt extremely ashamed of herself as she got breakfast ready. Tankai seized the opportunity to make fun of her, and that only added insult to injury.

Jusetsu's breakfast included plenty of nutritious foods like gruel, pine nuts, chicken, and eggs. This was always the case the day after a new moon and was how Keishi showed she cared. When Jusetsu sipped the flavorful, hot broth, its warmth gradually spread from her stomach to the rest of the body, making her feel like she'd come back to life.

"I'm going to the Winter Ministry," Jusetsu announced after finishing her meal.

She called Onkei and asked him to get permission from Koshun for her.

"At this time in the morning, my master will have finished his imperial council meeting and will be at the Koto Institute," he said.

Mornings in the Yamei Palace began extremely late in comparison to those of the imperial officials. That being said, Jusetsu did regularly stay up until the early hours of the morning. Jusetsu was planning on asking Senri about the strange occurrence of the night before. The agony she experienced whenever there was a new moon was always so unbearable that it made her think she'd be better off dead, but she had never felt pain like last night's before. It felt like she was being ripped apart from the inside. She wasn't sure if Senri would know anything about it, but asking him was her best option. If not, there was always a chance that Ho lchigyo—who was also currently at the Winter Ministry—might have an idea.

Ho Ichigyo was a shaman who had worked for the Ran dynasty, and he was very knowledgeable when it came to matters about the Raven Consort. In the Ran dynasty, shamans had been tasked with supervising the Raven Consort and keeping her at bay. As a result, they had been allowed access to the inner palace.

Either way, it would be annoying to have to discuss the issue in writing, so Jusetsu had no choice but to get permission to leave the palace.

While Onkei was out working as her messenger, Jusetsu changed into her eunuch disguise. Before long, Onkei returned—but with Eisei with him.

"Under my master's orders, I shall accompany you to the Winter Ministry."

*Please, no,* Jusetsu thought—but her feelings must have shown on her face, because Eisei scowled.

"My master was thoughtful enough to suggest that things would be easier for you with me by your side," he said.

His tone of voice made it sound like he was trying to demand her gratitude, which left Jusetsu feeling indignant, but she knew this wasn't the place to argue. She generally couldn't win verbal altercations with Eisei, anyway. Jusetsu hurriedly left the Yamei Palace with him. It was true that having the emperor's eunuch with her would mean that she wouldn't need to show proof of permission and explain why she was leaving every time she passed through the inner palace's gate, and she wouldn't create a big stir. Eisei was right—his presence would just make things easier. That still didn't mean it would be easy for Jusetsu to accept emotionally, though.

Eisei didn't make a single sarcastic comment as they made their way to the Winter Ministry. He simply followed Jusetsu in silence. It felt like he was

watching her, which made her feel tense. Upon seeing Jusetsu's stony face, Senri—who had come out of the Winter Ministry to meet them—stared at her in round-eyed wonder.

When Jusetsu explained the reason for her visit, a solemn expression came over his face too.

"If this has never happened before, I think it may signify that Uren Niangniang has undergone some sort of change... Do you have any idea why that might be?"

"If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say it was because of the flowers," she said.

"The flowers? Meaning the flowers that you offer to Uren Niangniang?"
"Yes."

Jusetsu told him how she hadn't offered them Uren Niangniang for quite some time. The expression on Senri's face became increasingly grave.

"Is that right...? If these flowers do leave the Raven intoxicated, then perhaps not eating them has led her to awaken from such a state. That, however, could mean that intoxicating her restrained her and deprived her of all reason..."

"And now she can't be restrained anymore?"

"Who could say... There's no way for me to know for certain. Why don't we ask Ho what he thinks?"

Senri then got up from his seat and instructed one of his subordinates to call Ichigyo in.

"How is Ho Ichigyo's health?" she asked.

"He's as right as rain now. He's a walking encyclopedia when it comes to the Ran dynasty, so it's incredibly useful to have him around to answer any questions I may have. Oh, and thanks to him, sorting out the writings Gyoei left behind has been going quite well. I told you how I was going to look into regional folk stories, didn't I? He's been lending me a hand with that too."

Jusetsu never realized it, but it sounded like Senri actually worked people quite hard. Just as she was thinking this, Ho appeared. As Senri mentioned, he looked well. At one point, the man was bedridden and visibly frail, but now, his

cheeks were flushed and glowing.

But when he heard what Jusetsu had to say, Ho looked even more concerned than Senri had.

"Nothing else has changed, has it?" he asked.

"Nothing worth mentioning," she replied.

"Hmm..." Ho thought to himself. "I can't fathom whether this is a good sign or a bad one. Let's say the Raven has awoken from her intoxication and has come back to her senses—the Raven Consort, being effectively her shrine maiden, may now be able to communicate with her. That said...it's concerning what you said about feeling like you were splitting open from the inside."

Jusetsu rubbed her chest with a hand.

"It must be because the Raven is shut away inside of you," he continued. "There's a chance that she could become agitated and recklessly attempt to break out."

If she were to do that, what would happen to my body?

Images of the crumbling clay doll and of the Owl's apparatus scattering into feathers came to mind. They sent a chill down Jusetsu's spine.

"As far as I know, no Raven Consort has ever ceased to offer flowers to the Raven before. This is merely speculation on my part," Ichigyo went on.

"How would I go about talking to her?" she asked.

Ho shook his head. "I wouldn't know. No Raven Consort has ever attempted it before."

"I see," said Jusetsu, tilting her head slightly to one side. "Not yet, anyway. Actually...there's another thing I've been somewhat curious about."

"What might that be?"

"Has anyone ever attempted to break the barrier that Kosho created before?"

In order to break that barrier, the Raven Consort needed two shamans to assist her with the task. Considering that shamans were tasked with watching the Raven Consort—and were, in other words, her adversaries—it would have

been hard to bring two of them over to her side. Ho previously suggested that was why the Raven Consort would have failed to escape, even if she had tried to. Jusetsu assumed that meant no Raven Consort had ever attempted it. Naturally, though, after that Raven Consort escaped, the *real* trouble would have started.

Ho blinked, his eyes almost hidden among his wrinkles, and met her gaze again. "They have," he said bluntly.

"Really?"

"Yes. She didn't succeed, though, so that's why the barrier's still in place."

"When you say that she didn't succeed... What do you mean by that?"

"She died."

Jusetsu's face tensed up. Senri, too, went pale.

If this fails, I die.

"She tried to force her way through a gate without breaking the barrier and died. I didn't witness it with my own eyes—it was just a story that my mentor told me. He heard it from his mentor, who himself heard it from his own mentor... The story goes back numerous generations. The incident took place about halfway through the Ran dynasty, many years ago."

Ho looked up at the ceiling, as if he were trying to recall something.

"Word has it that Raven Consort was the daughter of a merchant family from out in the countryside. When she was brought to the Yamei Palace, she was seventeen years old. In those days, you would have usually been married at that age, but this girl had lost her mother when she was very young and had ended up being treated as a servant by her stepmother, who wouldn't even allow her to marry. Having received such tremendously cruel treatment from her stepmother, she was happy just to be able to leave home. She didn't seem to have a proper grasp of what the Raven Consort did and thought she was simply entering the inner palace to serve the emperor and be one of his consorts...

Once she began living in the Yamei Palace, she found out that the reality was rather different from what she'd expected, but it was still far better than her life at her family home. She was finally living a peaceful life—but that all

changed once she inherited the role of Raven Consort from her predecessor."

Ho glanced at Jusetsu, a distressed look on his face.

"With every new moon, she became weaker and weaker. Unable to eat proper meals, she became emaciated, and her face grew paler and paler. She'd been convinced that she'd finally found herself in a place where she could rest after being freed from her stepmother, so facing the reality of the situation must have been especially difficult for her, both physically and mentally. Unsurprisingly, the shamans took pity on her. One young shaman, however, was particularly sympathetic, and showed real compassion for her. He and the Raven Consort were around the same age."

"A shaman... Does that mean that he was the one who helped her?"

Ho nodded. "He enticed her to break the barrier and escape from the imperial estate. I don't know the whole story, or much about how she planned to flee—but in the end, they didn't manage to break the barrier, and the Raven Consort died when she went through the gate. The shaman was also killed."

If the Raven Consort left through one of the imperial estate's gates, she would die. That was how the barrier worked.

"The moment she died, her golden chicken's arrow flew through the air, and a new Raven Consort was chosen. Since that successor didn't get the opportunity to learn from her predecessor like usual, the shamans played that role instead."

That was one aspect to the shamans' duties that Jusetsu hadn't known about. This reminded her once again that now that the Ran dynasty had fallen, all manner of affairs surrounding the Raven Consort had collapsed. It had been the Raven Consort that had created the role of the Raven Consort in the first place, though, so this was really no surprise.

"Over the years, some Raven Consorts found nights with a new moon so impossible to tolerate that they chose to end their own lives, and the same thing happened in that scenario too. As long as the emperor isn't the one who kills the Raven Consort, nothing can stop the golden chicken's arrow from flying through the air. I can't say that for the certain, however—that is simply what I have conjectured from the evidence at my disposal."

Jusetsu was grateful just to hear what he had to say, even if it was just his guess. Meeting him really had been a stroke of good luck.

"The Ran dynasty lasted for over three hundred years, so there were over a hundred Raven Consorts during that time. There were 136 of them, to be exact. Sometimes, the Raven Consort could be replaced three times in a single year. With there being such a large number of women, there was a wide variety of different personalities. One even attempted to kill the emperor—she was put into confinement as a result. She had tried to take the emperor's place. That's something that the Winter Sovereign has the potential to do, and is why the first emperor was so scared of the Raven Consort that he had his shamans keep an eye on her."

While the Winter Sovereign was indispensable to the Summer Sovereign, the reverse wasn't true. While emperors could be replaced and new dynasties could rise, the Raven Consort's presence was a constant. If she so felt like it, she could take control of the entire land.

People had said that the Raven Consort could have it all, if she just so wished —but in reality, it seemed impossible for her to be able to take the emperor's place. No one would let it happen.

Jusetsu was intrigued by the Raven Consort who attempted to kill the emperor, but for now, her priority was finding out more about the one who tried to break the barrier.

"How did that shaman and the Raven Consort plan on breaking the barrier with just the two of them?"

"Well, that's a good question... I was never told the details. Perhaps a simplified version of the story was passed down to prevent any other shamans or Raven Consorts from trying to do the same."

"Hmm..."

Jusetsu furrowed her brow. That was the bit she was most interested in finding out.

"If I can learn more about their plan, then I could avoid making those same mistakes," she said. "Do you know what that Raven Consort's name was?"

"No. I don't know the name of the shaman either. However..." Ho added, "I'm sure her necklace is still around."

"Her necklace?" she asked.

"A gemstone necklace that particular Raven Consort never took off. I believe it was a keepsake from her mother, or something along those lines. Isn't it still in the Yamei Palace?"

A necklace... Jusetsu thought back to the contents of her cabinet. Inside, there were various different hairpins and hair ornaments that Raven Consorts throughout history had worn. Jusetsu regularly made use of many of them.

"Oh, now that you mention it, there is a necklace in there. One with a rare gemstone on it..."

Its mysterious, dark blue stone shone all different colors when the light shone on it—reds, greens, and even yellows. Jusetsu found wearing necklaces to be ostentatious, so she never actually wore it.

"That's the one," Ho said.

"It should have been buried with her," she commented.

Previous Raven Consorts were buried in the imperial gardens—not that Jusetsu had ever been there.

"Maybe they were reluctant to let it go because it was such a fine piece of jewelry," Ho suggested.

"The shamans? It's not as if they were going to wear it."

"I assume they wanted to keep it for the next Raven Consort to wear. They would have wanted to give her something pretty as consolation, at the very least."

Is that why the furnishings and decorations in the Yamei Palace are so luxurious? Jusetsu thought to herself. Even so, why would they give someone the necklace of a dead Raven Consort who tried to escape?

Was it actually supposed to act as a warning? Perhaps meant to caution future Raven Consorts they would only die if they attempted to flee.

"Either way, I wish I knew more," Jusetsu muttered as she thought things over.

Since it had happened so long ago, all that remained were unreliable renditions of the story that had been passed down by word of mouth. If only she knew that Raven Consort's name, she would have been able to summon her soul and ask her some questions.

All she knew about the woman was that she was the daughter of a merchant family from the countryside, and that she was subjected to cruel treatment by a stepmother—and about the necklace.

I see, Jusetsu thought. A necklace.

She got to her feet. "I am going back to the Yamei Palace. Do let me know if you find out anything new about the story."

With that, she hurriedly left the Winter Ministry. The only thing she could think about was what Ho had told her, so it took her quite a while to notice that Eisei was following her.

"Oh... You're there," she said, looking back in surprise.

"Why wouldn't I be?" the look on Eisei's face seemed to say—but his actual reply was far more polite.

"I have been entrusted to accompany you," he said.

I know that much, Jusetsu thought.

"It wouldn't hurt to say something every now and then, you know. It frightens me, having you walking behind me in silence like that," she said.

"I'm just doing my job—accompanying you to your destination. I am not supposed to exchange intimate conversation with the person I am working for," he replied.

"But you and Koshun chat all the time."

"You and my master are not the same. Don't allow yourself to believe that."

It felt like he was saying that he didn't want to speak to her. This annoyed Jusetsu, but she was somewhat relieved that he seemed to be back to his usual

self.

"Is Koshun well?" Jusetsu asked.

Eisei raised one eyebrow suspiciously. "Why would you ask something like that?"

"No specific reason... It was just a casual thought, like wondering about the weather."

Jusetsu didn't really know why she asked him that—she was just making light conversation—so she didn't know how to respond to Eisei's question.

"My master is doing just fine," Eisei responded bluntly. "I have no particular changes to report."

"Is that right? I'm glad to hear that."

As Jusetsu said that, she got a peculiarly heavy feeling in her chest. Why was that? Lately, whenever she thought about Koshun, she found it hard to breathe. She felt choked-up—as if there was a haze hanging over her chest.

Eisei was staring at her. "What about you?"

Jusetsu looked up. Eisei closed his mouth. Then, appearing to have remembered something, he began to speak again.

"What do you plan on doing if you are freed?" he asked.

"What?" Jusetsu asked, unable to immediately comprehend what Eisei was saying.

"If you were to be freed from Uren Niangniang, where would you like to go? What would you like to do? I'm asking you if you have any particular wishes."

Eisei repeated himself intentionally slowly, almost as if he were talking to a young child. Jusetsu was annoyed again, but if she were to get angry at him here, they weren't going to be able to have a proper conversation.

"I'm not sure," she answered honestly. She wore a sullen expression on her face. "I'd never dreamed that such a thing would be possible before, so nothing comes to mind. Besides, we don't know for certain that I will be freed from the Raven. I have no..."

"The Raven Consort must not wish for anything."

This admonition that Reijo had hammered into her came flooding back.

"Desire creates suffering. Once you've let it engulf you...that's when a monster will be created from within you."

This warning had come from Gyoei. And neither of them were around anymore.

"I have no wishes," Jusetsu said, before turning her face away and pursing her lips together. She started to walk once again.

I have no such wishes.

It would be futile to hold onto any desires when she didn't even know if she'd actually be able to get away from the Raven.

That was what she told herself, anyway—but she felt a ripple of something go through her, disturbing her equilibrium.

As soon as they reached the Yamei Palace again, Eisei left to return to the inner court. Jusetsu declined Jiujiu's offer for some tea and went to open her cabinet.

Inside, there were not only inkstones and paper, but also hairpins and boxes housing dangling hair ornaments. Jusetsu couldn't help but be drawn in by several items unrelated to the task at hand—a glass fish, an amber fish, and a rose carved out of wood. All three were presents from Koshun.

She felt unsettled again. What was it that was messing with her head so much?

Jusetsu tore her gaze away from Koshun's gifts and looked at a flat box with a shell inlay that was lying underneath them. That box was the reason she went to the cabinet in the first place. She placed it on the table and opened the lid. A necklace sat inside it.

At the center of the string of gold and pearls was a blue gemstone. It had a deep color, and shades of red, yellow, and green appeared to swim across its surface every time it moved. It was the sort of stone that would enchant

anyone who looked at it, almost leading them to lose track of time.

"I didn't know you had a necklace like that. It's so pretty," said Jiujiu. She was peering over Jusetsu's shoulder and let out a sigh of admiration. "What's that gemstone called? I've never seen it before."

"Well... I'm not sure. I assume it's something rare."

Hoping that Tankai would be able to recognize it, Jusetsu called him over. Since he was born into a good family, she suspected he might know about these sorts of things.

To her surprise, however, he simply cocked his head in confusion.

"I've never seen a stone like that before. It must be from abroad," he commented.

"Abroad...? Hmm..."

Jusetsu pondered this. The rarer this thing was, the more likely it was that she'd be able to trace where its owner came from. If that led her to find out that previous Raven Consort's name, she'd be able to summon her soul.

"Jiujiu, grind some ink for me. I'm writing a letter," said Jusetsu.

The lady-in-waiting happily began getting things ready for her. Jusetsu disliked asking others to do things for her—she always did everything herself before—but since Jiujiu enjoyed helping so much, she tried to give her as many tasks as possible. Jusetsu had even grown somewhat accustomed to it as of late.

"Who are you writing to?" Jiujiu asked.

"Kajo."

"Would you like to use the light blue hemp paper? Or perhaps this pale seagreen paper would be a better choice?"

"I don't see the harm in using pink every now and then," Jusetsu said.

"Oh, of course! How about this color?"

To Tankai, the sight of Jusetsu and Jiujiu pulling out pieces of paper in all colors of the rainbow and deliberating over which one to use seemed absurd.

"Why all this fuss over a piece of paper? As long as you can write on it, who

cares!" He just couldn't understand that sort of attention to detail.

"Paper is to a letter as a face is to a person, you know. It's the first thing people see, so it goes without saying that it's important," Jiujiu replied in a huff.

In the end, Jusetsu settled on light orange hemp paper with a white gradient. She wrote a short note to Kajo about what she needed, then gave it to Tankai along with the box with the necklace in it.

"Are you giving this to the Mandarin Duck Consort?" he asked.

"No. There's just something I'd like to ask her, so I'm letting her borrow it for now."

"Right. Understood," said Tankai, and he left the palace building.

Kajo was copying a scroll when the eunuch from the Yamei Palace arrived with a letter from Jusetsu.

"Oh my, it's you... Tankai, wasn't it? Thank you so much."

He was the one who carried her all the way back to the Eno Palace after she was injured at the Hakkaku Palace. Being as good-looking as he was, he was popular at the Eno Palace as well.

"Now, what could be in this box?" she asked.

"It's a necklace that was in the Yamei Palace," Tankai replied respectfully.

"The Raven Consort has something she would like to ask you, so she is giving it to you to take care of."

Kajo opened the box, her head still tilted to one side. "Oh, how pretty..."

The necklace had a beautiful gemstone hanging from it. Even Kajo's ladies-in-waiting sighed in wonder at it.

"It's an iridescent indigo stone, isn't it? They're very rare," Kajo whispered. She then took a quick look at the letter.

In it, Jusetsu was asking her to find out the history of the necklace. It had belonged to a Raven Consort from many years ago, and she wanted to know who she was and where she came from.

"An iridescent indigo stone?" asked Tankai, seemingly having heard what Kajo had whispered to herself.

"They're gathered in the land of the Uka. Being as scarce as they are, you rarely see them being sold here in Sho. I've probably only seen one twice, perhaps three times before," Kajo recalled. "Oh, I wonder if Jusetsu asked me about this because she guessed the stone was foreign?"

Kajo's father was a sea merchant, so she had seen various items from foreign lands since she was very young. Thanks to her father's connections, she also received many gifts from sea merchants.

Kajo had discussed her family with Jusetsu in the past. Her father, the eldest son of the Un family, hated the world of imperial officials. He hadn't wasted any time in escaping it to become a sea merchant himself. Un Eitoku's next-eldest son, Gyotoku—Kajo's uncle—seemed to be successfully making a name for himself, having won over his colleagues with his good-natured personality. It seemed like an acceptable situation for the Un family.

"To own something like this, she'd have to be from a very rich family, or maybe the daughter major sea merchant... And one from Je Island, I'd surmise."

"Je Island?" he asked.

"That island has the biggest port. Back in the day, all sea merchants used to live there."

Trades boats would generally moor at Je Island because of the tides. As a result, sea merchants converged on the island. It was also the closest place to the neighboring country of Ake.

"According to the Raven Consort's letter, though, she was the daughter of a merchant from the countryside... Perhaps she wasn't from a sea merchant family on Je Island after all. In that case, my father's connections should be able to find out some more detailed information." Kajo smiled at Tankai. "I'll send my father a letter. Could you kindly ask the Raven Consort to bear with me until I find out more? It might take a little while."

Tankai passed on Kajo's message.

Jusetsu gave him a nod. "Je Island..."

Wasn't that the island to the southeast of the imperial capital? Jusetsu thought. Maybe I should ask to Senri to let me know if he comes across any legends from Je Island.

Jusetsu picked up her brush—but a messenger eunuch suddenly turned up, leading her to put it back down again.

He was an emissary sent by Koei, the Swallow Concubine—rather, the woman who was now the Magpie Consort.

"Thanks to your help, the Magpie Consort has safely moved into the Jakuso Palace. She is very appreciative, and has given you this gift as a token of her thanks and to notify you of the move."

All of this to tell me she moved? Jusetsu gazed at the different items lined up in front of her. Silks, hairpins, corals, and pearls were luxuriously arranged on a lacquer stand.

"Is the Magpie Consort doing well?" Jusetsu asked.

"Yes. She is in good health," the messenger replied politely, a nervous expression on his face.

"That's good to hear."

Jusetsu thanked the eunuch and dismissed him. The moment he finished descending the stairs of the palace building, he started to run away as if he were trying to escape from some sort of danger.

It's not as if this is a haunted house, Jusetsu thought.

Ever since the palace building at the Hien Palace collapsed, many people feared the Raven Consort—just like Shojo said.

"He's got no manners," said Tankai as he watched him dash away.

"That doesn't bother me," said Jusetsu, picking up her brush once again.

Things have just gone back to the way they were, she thought. This is how the Raven Consort is supposed to be.

"Oh..."

The ink dripped down from the tip of her brush—likely because it had too much on it—and left a stain on the hemp paper. Jusetsu frowned and swapped it out for a clean sheet.

Kajo had said she was going to write to her father, but to be more precise, she was actually writing to the elderly gentleman who had been her father's right-hand man for many years. She knew that if she were to address the letter to her father directly, he'd only end up giving the job to him to do anyway. The gentleman in question was a dutiful worker, so he swiftly and thoroughly researched the topic before sending Kajo a response.

Kajo had drawn a picture of the necklace and asked him if he knew any sea merchants on Je Island. Not only did this necklace have a large, high-quality stone, but the gold and the pearl on the necklace were also examples of superior handiwork. It led Kajo to suspect that it might have been some kind of family heirloom, passed down through the generations. Sea merchants who had been in the trade for many years might have heard stories about the necklace or had known about it themselves.

Kajo's guess was correct, because word came that it was likely the property of the Jo family.

The Jo family was one of the most well-established sea merchant families on Je Island, and they were even said to have been the island's former rulers. Rumors said they once kept an iridescent indigo stone necklace at their home. They apparently received the stone as a thank-you gift for rescuing shipwrecked sailors from Uka in ancient times, but there were also tales that they obtained it through some sort of secret business dealings that the public weren't supposed to know about.

This rumor had its roots in the fact that the iridescent indigo stone was too beautiful and too large for the other explanation to be plausible. Sailors from Uka had a rule—they were obliged to offer up the most awe-inspiring iridescent indigo stones they had on board to the sea god. In other words, they threw the most beautiful stones into the water, likely as part of a spell to pray for a safe

voyage. If sailors neglected to follow this custom, their boat would allegedly hit stormy weather.

The most awe-inspiring stone aboard, however, would naturally also sell for a considerable price—which meant that merchants, blinded by the prospect of making a huge profit, often sold them in secret. The stone used in the necklace may have been one such stone.

After getting their hands on it, the Jo family found themselves plagued by bad luck. Their boat ended up hitting a storm, and their cargo sunk along with it. The head of the family became sick, and the family went into a state of decline. Whispers on the street said that the Jo family stole a stone that was supposed to have been dedicated to the sea god, and that was why they had been struck by such misery.

Although the Jo family were still living on Je Island and working as sea merchants, they never regained the glory they once had and were now humble businesspeople. While some insisted that the necklace was still in their possession, others claimed they got rid of it long ago. Some stories even told how the head of the family threw it into the sea to give it back to the sea god, fearing that his run of bad luck would continue otherwise.

"Strange as it is, you never hear good stories about beautiful precious stones, do you?" said Kajo, having just shared what she'd heard with Koshun, who was visiting the Eno Palace.

He gave her a quiet nod. "There's no shortage of stories about cursed ones, though."

"I can understand why. These have a beauty to them that exceed the realms of human understanding."

Things that brought people happiness were always unsightly, whereas beautiful things only brought misfortune. That was how things usually went in old folktales. Still, it wasn't clear whether they were just warnings, or if beautiful things really did have that kind of power.

"I didn't know there was a necklace like that at the Yamei Palace," Koshun said indifferently.

Kajo stared at him. She expected him to show signs he was feeling down since he had to confine someone he cared about so much—Jusetsu—to her palace, but he was no different from usual. That said, he was never the type to let his emotions show anyway, so it was impossible to know how he felt about it deep down. He hadn't always been that way, though—it was his experiences with the empress dowager that had caused this.

"It sounds like the Raven Consort wants to find out the owner of that necklace's name. I'm getting my father to ask the Jo family about it. They're an older family, so they should have genealogical records around somewhere. The incident happened halfway through the Ran dynasty, so if they looked back at that time period, I imagine they'd be able to figure it out."

"I see," said Koshun. "Don't cause her any trouble, will you?"

Kajo stared fixedly at Koshun's face. "Why would you say something like that, Your Majesty? I'm just going along with the Raven Consort's request."

"No, it's just..." Koshun stumbled over his words and trailed off.

It was rare to see him so rattled. Koshun and Jusetsu really did appear to have a deep connection that Kajo knew absolutely nothing about. She'd had a sneaking suspicion that might be the case for some time, but his behavior confirmed it.

Even so, she couldn't tell whether it was romantic love, familial love, or just a feeling of compassion. The love that Koshun had for Kajo was familial love, the sort that you would have for blood relatives. That ruled out the possibility that this type was what he felt for Jusetsu—it was definitely different. Nevertheless, it wasn't seductive enough to be a romantic love, yet too intense and serious to be a friendship. His attachment to her was also too strong for it to be written off as mere compassion.

"How long will the Raven Consort be confined to her palace? Isn't it about time you let her out?" Kajo asked.

The inner palace was, essentially, the domain of the emperor's consorts, and as his present top consort, it was Kajo's job to control it.

Koshun clammed up and didn't reply.

"There are some people who fear her now," she said, continuing. "Did you know that? I'm sure you remember how the roof of a palace building at the Hien Palace collapsed. They're saying that was her doing."

"...I have received reports on the matter."

"It doesn't take a lot for people to turn on those who are revered and persecute them instead. She needs to maintain some degree of a relationship with the other palaces. Retaining links with my palace would be especially beneficial to her," Kajo explained.

Whenever Kajo came face-to-face with Koshun, she would end up remonstrating with him like a big sister. It had always been that way, and it was something that was never going to change.

"You're right." Koshun nodded meekly. "I should probably leave it to you to handle that situation."

"Feel free," Kajo said, beaming.

The truth was she had been practically itching for an excuse to see Jusetsu.

Before getting notice back from Kajo, Jusetsu received a letter from Senri. It was in response to her question about folktales from Je Island.

"I have come across a legend that may be relevant to your investigation, so I am writing to inform you of it," his letter began, and the rest told the tale.

At the home of an elder on Je Island lived a beautiful young woman. Having lost her mother at a young age, her father remarried, but her stepmother subjected her to heartless maltreatment. She would send her to the water with a broken net and order the young woman to catch some fish or would send her up to the mountains in winter, telling her not to come home until she found some ferns. At sea, the fishermen took pity on her and shared some of their catch. In the mountains, the woodcutters would give her some of the pickled ferns they had.

Her stepmother worked the girl like a servant. She never gave the young woman even a single new piece of clothing to wear, so she had no choice but to

go around dressed in rags. When her beautiful face was grubby with dust and her hair was sooty and dirty, her stepmother finally seemed satisfied. As soon as the girl had finished scrubbing off the grime in the bathtub, however, her stepmother would invariably yell at her and order her to clean up horse manure.

Even when she reached marrying age, the stepmother wouldn't allow her to marry out of the family and carried on tormenting her like always. As the years went by, the girl began looking more and more unwell.

One year, a messenger arrived from the imperial capital. He said that the girl been selected to become one of the emperor's consorts. Her stepmother insisted that there was no way her unsightly stepdaughter could possibly assume such a role, but the messenger wouldn't back down. The stepmother decided to let him see her rag-clad, scruffy stepdaughter for himself. It made no difference—the messenger still insisted that he was going to take her to the imperial capital. Infuriated, the stepmother chased after the cart that her stepdaughter was riding in, screeching all the way. The girl then boarded a boat. Even after she left the island's shores, her stepmother still tried to chase after her, and ended up falling into the sea. Even as the woman was drowning, she carried on, loudly hurling abuse at the young woman. Unable to bear it any longer, the sea god kicked up the waves, dragging the stepmother to the bottom of the sea, and she was never heard from again.

"To this day, she remains in the deep—but instead of hurling abuse, all she does is foam at the mouth," he had written.

The very first thought that Jusetsu had after reading this legend was, "What was her father doing all that time?" But of course, Jusetsu knew that when it came to old folktales, asking those sorts of questions wouldn't get you anywhere.

The messenger from the imperial capital didn't care how unsightly or dirty she was because she was chosen as the Rayen Consort.

Her abusive stepmother, however, assumed that the girl was going to become an ordinary consort—and that was why she was so deeply bitter about the situation.

The story made Jusetsu feel miserable. The tale was about a girl neglected by her stepmother finally getting a happy ending, but in reality, she didn't end up with a nice life at all. For her to have wanted to escape the inner palace, she must have been really suffering.

She would have been better off if she were never chosen at all...

Some people were probably destined to suffer forever.

Senri had written more.

"This story is not unique. It follows a similar narrative to other tales about abused stepchildren, but this one does include a reference to a volcano at the bottom of the sea."

This was the first time Jusetsu had heard about such a volcano. That must have been what the bit about the stepmother "foaming at the mouth" was all about.

"One part that intrigues me is how the stepmother was so relentless in following after her daughter. This deviates from other stories of this sort. While it would be understandable if a parent ran after their child to try to get them back, the hysterical nature of the stepmother's behavior doesn't sit right with me," he wrote.

"Another thing I find puzzling is that the story does not seem to have much to do with the water—only at the end do the sea god and the volcano factor into it. It doesn't quite add up."

Jusetsu reread Senri's letter a few times, then turned things over in her mind.

Soon after, another letter arrived—this time from Kajo. It had to do with the necklace, although she did make sure to clarify that the research was still ongoing.

"It belongs to the Jo lineage, does it...?"

The gemstone was meant to have been offered up to the sea god. Jusetsu picked Senri's letter back up.

"Hmm," she murmured to herself.

Several days later, Kajo appeared at the front of the building to pay the Yamei Palace a very public visit. Jusetsu was bewildered.

As it was Kajo's job to keep things in the inner palace in order, she hadn't come to see Jusetsu since Koshun ordered her into seclusion—and yet today, she brought a whole crowd of ladies-in-waiting and eunuchs with her. What in the world is going on? Jusetsu thought, puzzled by the whole scenario.

"I have the emperor's permission," she explained. "He said I was allowed to come here. I'm so pleased to get to see your face after all this time, amei."

Beaming, Kajo took hold of Jusetsu's hand.

"We've got an idea about what the Raven Consort with the necklace was called, so I wanted to take this opportunity to let you know—and have a chat as well."

One of Kajo's ladies-in-waiting held out the box with the necklace inside. Jiujiu took it from her and placed it on the table. Jusetsu then offered Kajo a chair and sat down opposite her.

"I already said this in my letter, but I asked someone who works for my father to get the Jo family to show him their family tree. I've received a copy of it as well."

With that, Kajo took a piece of paper out of her breast pocket and opened it out on the table. Although it was extremely long, Kajo adeptly folded the paper to show Jusetsu the relevant section.

"Judging by the era in which the incident happens, her name should be right here."

On the page, names were connected to one another by straight lines. Kajo pointed at one such name—"Nei."

"This 'Jo Nei' is thought to have become a Raven Consort. That said..." Kajo then pointed at the name above it. "This person is Jo Nei's biological mother. But beside the name of her father, the head of the family, there is yet another name—her stepmother. The Jo family has a family journal that chronicles their business and personal affairs throughout the generations, albeit in a simple manner. The journal does state that Jo Nei joined the inner palace, but it

doesn't go any further than that... It seems that her stepmother was previously her father's mistress, but he took her as his official spouse after the death of Nei's mother."

"I see," said Jusetsu, staring at the family tree.

"As for the necklace," Kajo continued, "it doesn't seem like there are any written records about it. That does add some weight to the theory that they received the necklace through an exchange they couldn't make public."

Jusetsu nodded. "As long as we know the Raven Consort's name, that's all that matters to me. Thank you."

Kajo gave Jusetsu a hard stare. "Are you going to summon her soul?"

Jusetsu had once tried to summon the soul of Kajo's deceased lover. That was why she knew what she needed the name for.

"Be careful, won't you? Summoning somebody who died in an unfortunate way could end up being a painful experience for you."

Kajo's concern for Jusetsu seeped into her heart like water.

A faint smile appeared on Jusetsu's lips. "It's all right. There's really no need for you to worry."

Kajo gazed into Jusetsu's eyes, still looking anxious.

"Is there anything else you wanted to say about that?" Jusetsu asked.

"Oh... No, not at all." Kajo forced a smile and shook her head. "Has His Majesty visited you lately?"

"He never does these days."

The truth was, he had come once in secret, but Jusetsu omitted that. It wouldn't be viewed favorably for the very person who put her into confinement to be paying her a visit—but that wasn't her main reason for saying nothing. For some reason or another, she just felt like keeping it a secret.

"Is that right...?" Kajo gave her a skeptical look, but it was soon replaced by a bright smile. "I assume you're exchanging letters, then. As soon as I get my hands on some nice foreign paper, I shall send it your way."

Then, she turned toward the lady-in-waiting standing beside her. The woman passed her a scroll.

"Give this to Ishiha. I copied it out for him. It's written in a simple way, so he should be able to read it just fine. It'll be good comprehension practice too."

Kajo often transcribed scrolls herself and gave them to Jusetsu or Ishiha to keep. Ishiha's main focus was practicing reading comprehension now, so this was a big help.

"Thank you," Jusetsu said, and called Ishiha over.

Moved by Kajo's present, Ishiha turned bright red and thanked her repeatedly. Kajo watched affectionately as he did so. She was very kindhearted toward those who were younger than her—Jusetsu included. *Maybe Kajo would prefer it if I sent Ishiha as my messenger to the Eno Palace,* she thought.

"As difficult as her position is, Hua niangniang never changes," Jiujiu said once Kajo went home. She tended to refer to her by that nickname, although she'd obviously never address her that way in person.

"What do you mean about her position being difficult? Do you mean because she won't have children?"

Kajo and Koshun weren't going to have a child together. They weren't even a couple to begin with, so this was a given. On the other hand, two of the emperor's other concubines had fallen pregnant in short succession. If their children turned out to be boys and became crown princes, what would happen to Kajo's position as the highest-ranking consort? Koei or Banka could end up taking her place at the top of the inner palace.

"If her grandfather were still the grand chancellor, things might have been different...but Hua niangniang's father isn't an imperial official now. Sure, the one who's going to carry the Un family on his shoulders next is her uncle and he's a nice person, but he does seem rather weak-willed, doesn't he?"

"Did Tankai tell you that?" Jusetsu responded, staggered by what she was saying. "He's a bad influence."

Jiujiu took offense. "No! I heard it from a court lady from the Eno Palace. She's worried."

"She has nothing to worry about." Jusetsu couldn't imagine Koshun ever casting Kajo aside.

"Well, I'd hope not, but still..."

"I doubt Koei or Banka would be allowed authority over the inner palace," Jusetsu commented. "Neither of them is cut out for it."

"That's true," Jiujiu said, finally giving Jusetsu a smile. "Now that Hua niangniang has come here, it would be nice if His Majesty would visit in a more official capacity too."

"He doesn't need to. I'm busy."

"That again?" Jiujiu laughed.

Funnily enough, Koshun turned up that very evening—although it was an incognito visit rather than an official one.

He interrupted Jusetsu after she dismissed Jiujiu and the other attendants for the night, just as she was considering attempting to summon Nei's soul. She made no effort to conceal her scowl.

"What do you want? I'm busy. If you think I'm going to play Go with you, you can think again. I'm not saying that because I haven't thought of any moves to make though, because I most definitely have. I just don't have a minute to spare."

The two of them still had a game of Go on hold.

Undeterred by Jusetsu's visible annoyance, Koshun sat himself down in a seat.

"We can resume the game another time. I heard that you've been investigating the Raven Consort's necklace."

"It's the other way around," Jusetsu said. "We're looking into the Raven Consort who *owned* the necklace."

"Right," Koshun replied. "Have you had any success?"

"We found out her name," Jusetsu answered succinctly. As she tried to wrap her head around how to explain the situation from the beginning, Koshun

began to speak again.

"Kajo told me about the necklace that belonged to Jo family sea merchants on Je Island—and about how the gemstone was meant to be dedicated to the sea god. These legends are fascinating, aren't they?" he asked.

"...Senri looked into another Je Island folktale for me. It's about a stepmother and her stepdaughter."

Jusetsu then told Koshun the story.

"So, that stepdaughter was the Raven Consort?" he asked.

"It's consistent with what Ho Ichigyo told me about her. Kajo asked the Jo family about it, and they confirmed that one of their ancestors did join the inner palace. It's clear that the story about the necklace and the story about the stepmother and stepdaughter have to do with the Jo family, but..." Jusetsu held up one finger on each hand and placed them together in front of her face. "For some reason, those two stories are told separately, instead of together."

She separated the two fingers.

"There's no story about the stepdaughter going to the inner palace with the necklace," she explained.

Koshun crossed his arms and gave Jusetsu a small nod, as if to urge her to continue with the story.

"Senri had doubts about why a stepmother would chase after her daughter so persistently and didn't understand why the sea god would suddenly come into the story at the end. I thought the same...but I think the necklace could explain those doubts."

"Oh?" went Koshun, intrigued.

"The story about the necklace is vague about where this necklace ended up. It seems to suggest that it's no longer in the Jo family's possession, but it's not clear when or how it disappeared. Since there's no definite consensus on that, there's no mention of it in the legends either. So, when and how did the necklace disappear? We know the answer to that—when Jo Nei became the Raven Consort, she brought it here."

The Jo family, however, didn't know that.

"That means Jo Nei snuck it out of her home in secret. Wouldn't that suggest that she would have received backlash if she were to take it with her? Or was her stepmother going to steal it? It couldn't have been hers to start off with. Even if it had been, her stepmother would have taken it from her. The necklace likely belonged to the stepmother."

"...Does that mean she chased her so relentlessly because she realized that Jo Nei took it?" he asked.

"If that was the case, then why wouldn't she just chase after her and insist she give it back? That would have united the two stories *and* cleared up the necklace's whereabouts. If she demanded her stepdaughter give the necklace back, the story would have said so. Maybe there was a reason she couldn't shout that out loud..."

"Are you saying that there was a darker reason that the stepmother had the necklace?"

Jusetsu nodded. "It wasn't supposed to be with the family anymore. If it was, it would be strange. If they sold it, they could have just said they bought it back. So, what does this all mean? The legends surrounding the necklace's gemstone can give us a clue," she said. "People thought they had thrown it into the sea."

They must have tried to offer it to the sea god once again.

"The head of the Jo family must have decided to throw it away, but why would he have come to such a decision? I assume he was trying to escape the sea god's wrath. Generally, such wrath would mean that your family's luck would decline, or disaster would befall them. Jo Nei's stepmother started off as her father's mistress and had become his real wife because the girl's mother had died. That suggests that his first wife must have been ill, doesn't it? He tried to offer the necklace to the sea god to pray for her recovery and stop her from dying."

But the necklace hadn't sunk into the sea.

"There was a possibility that if his first wife were to die, she knew he would take the mistress in her place. I don't know whether she knew this or whether

she was just enchanted by the gemstone, but his mistress likely took the necklace for herself. Jo Nei's mother died, and her father's mistress became her stepmother. Jo Nei knew she had it, so she took the necklace with her when she left the house. When her stepmother chased after her in a panicked frenzy, it must have been because she was worried her stepdaughter would tell on her to a high-ranking official, to the messenger, or even to the emperor. If her crime came to light, the head of the family would have kicked her out."

"In other words...the stepmother might have caused Jo Nei's mother's illness and also may have played a part in her death. Jo Nei either knew these secrets —or her stepmother certainly believed she did—so can't we assume that was why she chased after her in rage?"

Koshun's words made Jusetsu's eyes widen slightly.

"I hadn't thought that far ahead," she said.

"I have a habit of envisioning worst-case scenarios," Koshun said coolly. It was a difficult habit to live with.

"Either way..." Jusetsu cleared her throat and continued. "The necklace is the reason why Jo Nei's stepmother was so persistent in following her, and at the end of the story, the stepmother angers the sea god and sinks to the bottom of the sea, where she carries on, foaming away at the mouth. Either someone who knew the truth added that part as a metaphor, or the story changed after the truth came out."

Jusetsu just needed to ask Jo Nei herself, and then she'd find out which theory was correct.

"Anyway, why were you looking into that Raven Consort in the first place?" asked Koshun, delving into where this all started.

"Jo Nei is the Raven Consort who attempted to break Kosho's barrier alongside a shaman."

Koshun raised his eyebrows. "But they failed?"

"Correct. They didn't manage to break them, and she died as soon as she left the gate. I want to ask her why it failed and how they were planning on breaking the barrier. I needed to find out her name so that I could summon her soul."

"I see," responded Koshun with a nod. Then, he muttered to himself, "The Raven Consort from Je Island..."

He thoughtfully tilted his head downward. The light from the lanterns wavered, and a shadow fell over his eyes.

"Je Island is the gateway to foreign lands," he said in a voice so quiet that it was almost a whisper. It was hard to tell whether he was talking to himself, or to Jusetsu.

With her head cocked to one side, Jusetsu said, "It's a trading port, isn't it?"

"The seas from the west to the north of Sho are prone to variable weather, and the offshore currents are so rapid that the slightest misstep can send you far out to sea in one fell swoop. The coast isn't suitable for ports because of its steep cliffs. When the seas were stormy, ships often sank because there were no ports to escape to. That's why trading ships mainly come to the east side of the country. While the weather conditions in the east are calm, there are challenging currents which require excellent sailing skills to withstand. Also, since Ikahi Island sank, we traded with islands to the south like Karoku and Kada, and Je Island in the southeast became the most suitable port to use. However, the nation of Ake beside it was even more ideal. That being the case, trade flourished more in Ake than it did on Je Island. Sho's sea merchants shunned Je Island to make Ake Island the base for their business—Kajo's father included."

Although Koshun's tone was indifferent, he was going into great detail about this topic. It was rare that he spoke at such great length about anything.

All Jusetsu could muster as a response was, "Oh."

He explained further. "With things going so well in Ake, not only did people go there from foreign lands, but people there traveled to other countries too. When the Ran dynasty fell, a number of shamans fled to Ake." And Ho Ichigyo was one such shaman.

"Jusetsu." Koshun called her name stiffly. It gave Jusetsu a strange feeling whenever his calm voice calling her name resonated in the depths of her heart.

She felt like she couldn't resist being drawn in by it.

"...What is it?" she asked.

"How would you feel about going to Ake?"

Jusetsu was dumbfounded. She couldn't make sense of what he was saying.

"After you've broken the barrier, found the other half of the Raven's body, and are freed from your role as the Raven Consort, I mean."

"But we still don't..."

"It might be a 'what if' scenario, but you still need to give it some thought," he said.

Jusetsu fell silent. Koshun was probably right. She couldn't sweep thinking about the future aside just because she didn't know what would happen—and yet...

*Is he telling me to leave Sho?* 

"If you go to Ake, you can travel from there to Karoku or Kada. Yozetsu Jikei will make arrangements for you to head to Ake. He has sea merchant contacts, so once you're there, you..."

She interrupted him. "Don't get ahead of yourself."

Jusetsu glowered at Koshun, stony-faced. The emperor went quiet.

"Why do I have to leave my own country? Am I a criminal? If so, then just send me to the island where all the other exiles go."

"I'm not saying you're a criminal," he commented.

"You may as well be. You're going to banish me from Sho."

"No. I want the safest path for you. One that lets you live your life in freedom..."

"That's *not* for you to decide!" Jusetsu shouted. "You'd just be locking me up in a different cage! Freedom isn't something you *force* on somebody!"

Koshun furrowed his brow, and a despondent look came across his face. The night air felt as if it was getting colder and colder—almost as if it was going to

freeze. Jusetsu and Koshun glared at each other in silence.

Then, Koshun tore his gaze away and sighed. Jusetsu had never seen him so obviously irritated before.

"I'm not going to force it upon you," he said. "I was simply suggesting the best solution I could come up with. If you have a better idea, then go through with that."

Jusetsu didn't answer. If that was the best plan that Koshun could come up with, there was no better option. She knew that. She also knew that he must have thought long and hard about his plan to save her.

Even so, frustration swirled about inside of her, making it impossible for her to get any words out. Why did she have to flee the country? She hadn't done anything wrong. Why did Koshun have to suggest that?

She knew the answers to both of those questions, but her emotions just couldn't accept it.

"...I'm sorry for bringing this up out of nowhere. I'm not telling you that you have to decide now. Take your time," Koshun said calmly before getting to his feet.

Jusetsu hung her head and bit her lip. Koshun departed from the palace building, leaving nothing but the sound of his clothes rustling to ring in her ears.

## Why am I so annoyed?

Jusetsu understood painfully well that Koshun was going to great lengths to help her. Why, then, had she felt so affronted by his suggestion? Perhaps it was because it seemed like he made a decision for her without her input.

Or maybe the idea itself was the problem. She hadn't even considered what it'd be like to leave the imperial capital, let alone leaving Sho altogether and heading to Ake.

Still, the more she thought about it...the more reasonable it seemed. Jusetsu was descended from the Ran dynasty—and as long as she was in Sho, she would never be safe. The fear that someone would exploit her background for their

own malevolent aims would constantly loom over her.

I either die or I run.

"I'm going to have to leave Sho..." she whispered.

Once she did that, she'd probably never be able to set foot in the country again. And that meant never seeing Koshun again either.

Suddenly, a pain shot through her chest, like she inhaled some icy winter air. She stopped breathing and hunched over, clutching at her chest.

She stayed like that for a moment, frowning with her head down-turned, but eventually, she managed to release a deep breath and straightened her back.

As long as I'm in Sho, Koshun will have that fear looming over him too.

If Jusetsu needed to leave Sho, she would. Still, that wasn't something she'd have to face for a very long time. There were so many other things she needed to do before it came to that.

Jusetsu pushed Koshun's suggestion to the back of her mind for the time being and got to her feet. She took an inkstone and a brush out of her cabinet and quickly ground some ink. On a piece of paper shaped like a lotus flower, she wrote the name "Jo Nei" and placed the necklace underneath it. It was possible to summon someone's soul without having one of the person's possessions, but it made the process quicker if you did. Jusetsu then plucked a peony out of her hair and blew hard across it.

The flower slowly lost its shape and transformed into a pale red smoke. The haze enshrouded the necklace and the paper, and they gradually melted away.

Jusetsu placed her hand into the cloud of smoke drifting in the air. It was cold. As it wrapped itself around her fingers, she thrust it aside and fumbled around for the soul she was seeking.

Something immediately seemed off. She froze and stared into the smoke.

There was no resistance. She couldn't feel a soul being pulled at all. The smoke wrapped around her fingers was light and airy, showing no signs that it was going to assume a shape of any kind.

This is just like when I tried to summon Kajo's lover.

Jusetsu withdrew her hand and blew on the cloud. It dissolved into nothing, and the necklace returned to its original form.

"How could this be...?"

Jo Nei's soul wasn't in paradise. That's why she wasn't able to summon it.

There were two reasons why a soul couldn't be summoned—either the person was still alive, or they were in a state that meant a soul invocation could not be carried out.

It wasn't possible that Jo Nei was still alive, which meant the latter had to be true. This development brought a frown to Jusetsu's face.

Kajo's lover had been sealed away inside a pot using shaman magic. Had somebody done the same with Jo Nei's soul?

There was no way to find out. And if Jusetsu couldn't summon Jo Nei's soul, then she was at a dead end.

Still frowning, Jusetsu crossed her arms and pondered this. She didn't want to put Kajo and Senri's painstaking efforts to waste. Was there really nothing else she could do?

After spending a short while lost in thought, Jusetsu let out a small gasp and jumped to her feet.

The next day, Jusetsu sent a letter to Shiki. She assumed it would take him at least a couple of days to get back to her, but surprisingly, she received a reply that very evening.

"You depend on Reiko quite a lot, don't you, niangniang?" Jiujiu said.

Jusetsu looked displeased at that. "Not particularly. I simply don't know anybody else who can look into the official archives for me."

"Doesn't that mean you do depend on him, though?"

"Forget it."

Annoyed, Jusetsu opened the letter. Jiujiu was right—she did depend on Shiki. Whenever she asked for his help, he'd do whatever she needed in an efficient

manner. He was accommodating and flexible too. That must have been why Koshun relied on him for so many things as well.

Jusetsu took a look at the letter. She saw he researched exactly what she asked him too, which impressed her. How did he do this in such a short amount of time? Jusetsu wondered, but as she read on, Shiki revealed that he already knew more or less what he was looking for because he looked into something similar before, and that allowed him to find the answer to Jusetsu's query right away. Jusetsu figured he must have been talking about the research he did when that ghost appeared at the Koto Institute. At the time, he looked into the story of a copyist who was executed for a crime he didn't commit.

On this occasion, Jusetsu asked him to investigate if any shamans were executed around the middle of the Ran dynasty's reign.

Ho Ichigyo had claimed that the shaman who'd tried to break the barrier with the Raven Consort, Jo Nei, had been "killed," so Jusetsu wondered if he could have been executed.

If he had been an imperial court shaman with permission to enter the inner palace, it seemed unlikely that he would have been killed without due process. Even in the case of the copyist, they had to have a reason to execute him.

If Jusetsu's theory was true, it would have been logged—in which case, his name would be there too.

And that meant she'd be able to summon his soul.

"Only one shaman was executed at the time in question. He was beheaded for having an affair with a consort, and his body was put on display in the market. It seems like other shamans were executed for having affairs with court ladies and concubines in other time periods, so it probably wasn't such an uncommon occurrence. It's only natural that things like that would happen if shamans were given access to the inner palace."

It sounded like Shiki found the way the Ran dynasty's inner palace allowed shamans to enter suspicious, since they weren't eunuchs.

"The shaman's name was Gosei."

Jusetsu prepared her inkstone and brush.

Once Jusetsu had dismissed Jiujiu and was by herself, she summoned Gosei. She reached her hand into the pale pink smoke that was floating in the air and pulled out his soul.

She closed her eyes and sensed the weight around her fingers becoming heavier and heavier. Something cold and soft was starting to take form.

He's here.

Jusetsu carefully touched that something with her fingers and slowly grabbed hold of it. It felt like a cold hand with long fingers—the bony hand of a man.

The figure of a young man came into sight. He was dressed in a bluish-white robe and his eyes were shut. Jusetsu had heard that white was the cherished color of the Hi dynasty, but people like that shrine maiden and the conjurer still wore white clothing. Perhaps that was because they were believers in the ao god.

"Gosei," Jusetsu called out.

The young man opened his eyes. He was attractive and had a calm gaze.

"Do you know who I am?" Gosei seemed dazed for a moment—as if he'd just awoken from a deep slumber—but then he gawked at her, startled. "Th-the Raven Consort...?"

"That's right. I am indeed the Raven Consort. You're Gosei the shaman, aren't you?"

Gosei nodded, his face almost blue. "Have you...summoned my soul?" "I have."

Being a shaman, he seemed to come to terms with the situation very quickly.

"You attempted to break Kosho's barrier alongside the Raven Consort, Jo Nei, but failed and were subsequently executed. Is that correct?"

Gosei kept his gaze fixed firmly on Jusetsu, as if he was trying to make sure he was understanding her question correctly.

Then, he slowly shook his head.

What?

"Is that a no?" she asked.

"I understand why it may seem that way from an outsider's perspective, but I...did something even worse than that," Gosei said, wincing.

"Even worse?"

Gosei hung his head dejectedly. "I betrayed Jo Nei."

"What do you mean ...?"

"It all began when Jo Nei told me she wanted to go outside. At the time, she was incredibly thin, and even the sight of her filled me with pity... It felt so cruel that someone like her had been chosen as the Raven Consort and made to suffer."

"Because she lost her mother and was mistreated so callously by her father's new wife?" Jusetsu asked.

"Exactly. When she first came to the Yamei Palace, she didn't really know what kind of situation she found herself in. She was simply relieved to get away from her family home. But then..."

The look on Gosei's face clouded over. He explained that Jo Nei then took over the role of Raven Consort and experienced a new moon one evening. After that, her mental state took a sudden turn for the worse.

"She came crying to me, begging me to just kill her. She was in such a pitiful state, so I decided to spend as much time as I could by her side supporting her —but eventually, she couldn't bear it any longer. She was fixated on the idea of breaking down the barrier and making her escape."

"Did she want to get out so that she could search for the other half of the Raven?"

Gosei lowered his head at that. The fact that the other part of the Raven had sunk to the bottom of the sea was supposed to be kept a secret so that no Raven Consort would decide to go hunt it down.

"Against my better judgment, I made a suggestion. I told her that if she were able to locate the other half of the Raven, she might be freed from her

suffering... And that was when Jo Nei claimed she knew where it was."

"What?" Jusetsu eyes bulged as she found herself drawing closer to Gosei. "She *knew*? Jo Nei knew where in the sea the other half of the Raven was? Really?"

"Well, she didn't exactly seem confident about it. She never told me what she knew, so that remains a mystery to me," he said.

Jusetsu got goosebumps. Jo Nei must have had some sort of idea—but what was it? How had she known such a thing?

"Jo Nei asked me to help her break the barrier," he continued. "We needed one more person to assist us, so she asked if I could do anything about that as well... To be honest, I was stumped. I felt so sorry for Jo Nei, but the idea of setting her free was outrageous. I would have been immediately captured for doing such a thing. Even if Jo Nei, being the Raven Consort, wasn't executed, I would have been beheaded immediately. In fact, I was." Gosei forced a strained smile. "Even so, Jo Nei was set on the idea of escaping and showed no signs of giving up. So, I thought of a plan to get her to abandon the idea instead. I consulted my master and told him to make it look like he was on our side while pretending to use magic to break the barrier."

"Pretending? How?"

"He didn't actually do anything. I thought that if the magic failed, Jo Nei would give up, thinking that the barrier was impossible to break. True enough, she did. She abandoned the idea...and then fell into a state of despair."

Gosei turned even more pale. His eyes looked vacant now.

"We dressed her in shaman robes and tricked the guards at the gate of the inner palace into letting us out by saying we were going to perform a cleansing ritual. Then we performed a fake ritual at one of the gates to the estate. We told her we were performing magic to break the barrier disguised as a cleansing ritual—but of course, my master and I were only pretending. Naturally, the barrier didn't break. We tried to comfort Jo Nei, telling her it just wasn't possible. Jo Nei initially seemed dazed, but then she suddenly screamed and ran out of the gate. We didn't have the chance to stop her. As soon as she passed through it, she collapsed without saying a word, and that was that. She stopped

breathing. I don't know what happened. Her face looked so calm when she was dead, though—it looked like she had been released from her suffering. Still, that was no excuse. If I never revealed the secret about the other half of the Raven or pretended to break the barrier, she wouldn't have died... Accordingly, I was charged with a crime and executed for having an affair with a consort."

Gosei's gaze darted around the room before finally settling on Jusetsu.

"But in a way, maybe I *did* make her dream come true. She told me to kill her... Right up until the moment I was beheaded, I kept wondering whether it would have been better for her to die from physical and mental suffering or to die the way she did. I'm still not sure. Of course, what I did was wrong, but even so..."

Jusetsu opened her mouth, but no words came out, so she closed it again.

Gosei had thoughtlessly given her hope and then plunged her back into despair

—but Jusetsu wasn't in a position to criticize him for it.

"Gosei," Jusetsu said, asking him yet another question. "I'm not able to summon Jo Nei's soul. Do you know why that might be?"

Gosei cocked his head to one side, puzzled.

"I don't..." he replied. "Shouldn't you be able to summon anyone's soul as long as it hasn't been destroyed?"

Jusetsu was taken aback. *Had* it been destroyed? She hadn't even entertained the possibility.

If souls were exorcized without being sent over to paradise, they would disappear. There were very few people who could carry out such an act—usually just shamans or the Raven Consort herself.

"...Do you know why Jo Nei's necklace was kept here, rather than being buried with her?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "I asked my master to keep it here."

"You did?"

"I said that it was only Jo Nei and I who attempted to break the barrier, so my master wouldn't be punished for helping. In exchange, I asked him to make sure

the necklace stayed at the Yamei Palace."

"But why?"

"It'd be so sad if there was nothing left of her... The names of the Raven Consorts aren't logged anywhere, so there would have been no record of how much Jo Nei suffered, or that she even existed. I couldn't bear that idea... At least if her treasured necklace could be passed down to future Raven Consorts, then her legacy would live on. That's how it felt to me. I know it doesn't make up for what I did," said Gosei, looking down at the floor.

Jusetsu paused. "It was thanks to that necklace that I was able to find out about her."

When Gosei looked up, a broad grin came across his face. He looked like he was both crying and laughing at the same time.

"I apologize for making you talk about something so painful," she continued. "I'm glad I heard the story."

"No, I'm pleased I got to talk about it—and that you were the one who was so kind as to listen."

Gosei knelt down in front of Jusetsu, his hands placed together in a sign of respect. Jusetsu touched them and let out a puff of air. Pale red smoke swayed in the air, dissipated, and scattered, making the vision of Gosei disappear without a trace.

Jusetsu stood there for a while, staring intently at the spot where he had been.

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At the Winter Ministry where Senri worked, his subordinates had laid mats out in the shade of the courtyard to dry floss on. The weather had suddenly become very chilly, so people would loosen their robes and put wadding material inside in preparation for the winter months ahead. This floss was made by stretching out boiled cocoons and was extremely warm. Senri was someone who'd immediately come down with a fever if the area from the nape of his neck to his back got cold, so he made sure to use layers and layers of this wadding. Being as emaciated as he was, winters were tough on him if he didn't

wrap himself securely.

Senri gazed out the window at the wadding that was drying and squinted. He couldn't believe it was that time of year already. Last winter, Gyoei was still around. He could still see the old man's frowning face as he grumbled, "I can't stand winter. I feel like I'm being frozen to the bone." He was missing him more and more as of late.

"Senri?" Ho Ichigyo called out, making the man look behind him. Senri and Ho had been reading legends from all over the country together—the ones that Gyoei had compiled and written down. "Such stories are especially prominent in the Je Island area, aren't they?"

When Jusetsu asked Senri to look into legends from Je Island, he came to a sudden realization.

The volcano at the bottom of the sea...

Naturally, all that Senri knew about it came from written texts. He didn't know what all the talk of a fire-spewing mountain at the bottom of the sea was actually referring to. He found out that it released bubbles through books and scrolls as well. When he read the story about the stepmother and the stepdaughter, he was able to connect the dots. *This must be talking about the volcano*, he realized. *It's describing underwater volcanic activity*.

He suspected that there might've been similar accounts in other folktales from the area, and true enough, he did come across a few.

The reason Senri focused on this detail was because of the volcano. When the Uren Niangniang and the ao god were thought to have fought each other, the volcano on the island of Ikahi erupted and the island sank.

If the ferocity of their battle had affected the volcano, then perhaps it also had some sort of effect where the other part of Uren Niangniang's body sank. If it had caused unusual weather conditions and abnormalities on land and at sea, then such events would have lived on as folktales.

The eastern sea, where the missing half of the Raven was thought to be, was in the vicinity of Je Island. When Senri realized this, he felt like he'd found the thread he needed to unravel the mystery. He didn't have a sixth sense, so he

didn't count on his intuition. Instead, his hunches came from accumulating knowledge.

With Ho's help, he had been going through every single legend from Je Island, and also the coastlines that faced it.

In the end, they determined that there seemed to be an underwater volcano to the north of Je Island. There were legends of a large shell that blew bubbles at the bottom of the sea. There were also tales of boats disappearing despite the sea being perfectly calm.

"What do you make of this? It says the sea spouted water all the way up to the sky..."

Just as Senri had leaned forward to read the section Ho was pointing at, one of his subordinates entered the room.

"Winter Minister To. A letter has arrived from the Raven Consort."

I wonder what's happened now, Senri thought as he unfolded the letter.

"It seems the Raven Consort Jo Nei had an idea of where the missing half of the Raven was," the letter said, before going on to explain what the shaman whose soul she summoned told her.

I knew it, thought Senri.

Having been born and raised on Je Island, Jo Nei would have known legends about the volcano at the bottom of the sea, and she had deduced that it had some connection to the sunken half of the Raven's body.

Senri passed the letter to Ho. While Ho looked over it, Senri stared at the pile of papers on the table. Every single one of them had been written on by Gyoei. His somewhat unique handwriting brought back fond memories.

Obviously, Gyoei would have already known the answers that Senri had discovered—and yet he passed away without telling them to him. To Senri, this seemed like evidence of the mixed feelings Gyoei had harbored toward Jusetsu. After all, the person who *he* wanted to rescue was her predecessor, Reijo.

I know how you felt, Gyoei...but I'm going to save her.

If there was a way to save her, it was his duty to do so. Jusetsu was still a

young girl—a child, in fact—which made it even more important.

Deep down, Gyoei must have actually been planning on saving her.

Otherwise, he wouldn't have left behind all of these materials. He could have just gotten rid of it all and left without a trace.

I'm right, aren't I? Senri called out to him inside his head as he gazed at the letters that Gyoei had written.

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On the eastern edge of the imperial capital was an area with gentle hills and a small stream running through it. The riverbed, which would have been lush and green in the summer, was currently dry. Hakurai waded through the dry, kneehigh grass, occasionally glancing back in the direction he was coming from. Injo took in her surroundings with wide-eyed curiosity as she scurried along behind him. Hakurai had no idea what was so fascinating about the scenery to her—all they could see was endless plants and the sky stretching out above them.

Injo stopped in her tracks and pointed to the right. "There's something there."

Hakurai looked in the way she was pointing. A brown rabbit had lifted its head to look at them.

"It's a rabbit."

"Ooh."

"Do you want to eat it?" he asked.

"Huh?" Injo's eyes widened as she looked up at Hakurai, dumbfounded. Such a reaction was rare for her, so Hakurai found it somewhat amusing. "You...eat them? Those things?"

"There are plenty of them on sale in the markets. You must have seen them hanging up."

Seemingly unable to make the connection between the meat that was put on sale and the living rabbit, she simply blinked curiously.

Hakurai silently began to walk again. When they reached the water's edge, a cold breeze blew by. There hadn't been any heavy rain for a while, so the river

water was clear, free from debris from the sediment upstream.

Injo crouched down and put her hand in the water. "It's cold."

Well, obviously, Hakurai thought to himself.

Despite protesting how chilly it was, Injo kept her hand in the water and stayed incredibly still. She didn't seem to be looking at her hand or at anything in the river. She was simply blankly staring into space.

Once the breeze off the water finally got to her, she pulled her hand out of the water. It was red.

Hakurai pulled a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and wiped her hand with it. The tips of her fingers were as cold as ice. Frowning, Hakurai rubbed them with his handkerchief to warm them up again.

"Can't you hear the ao god's voice without putting your hand in the water? You can hear it through a shell when we're at the beach, don't you?"

"I can still hear it, but not very well." Injo clenched and unclenched her hands to warm them up. "You want me to listen to it, though, don't you?" she then asked.

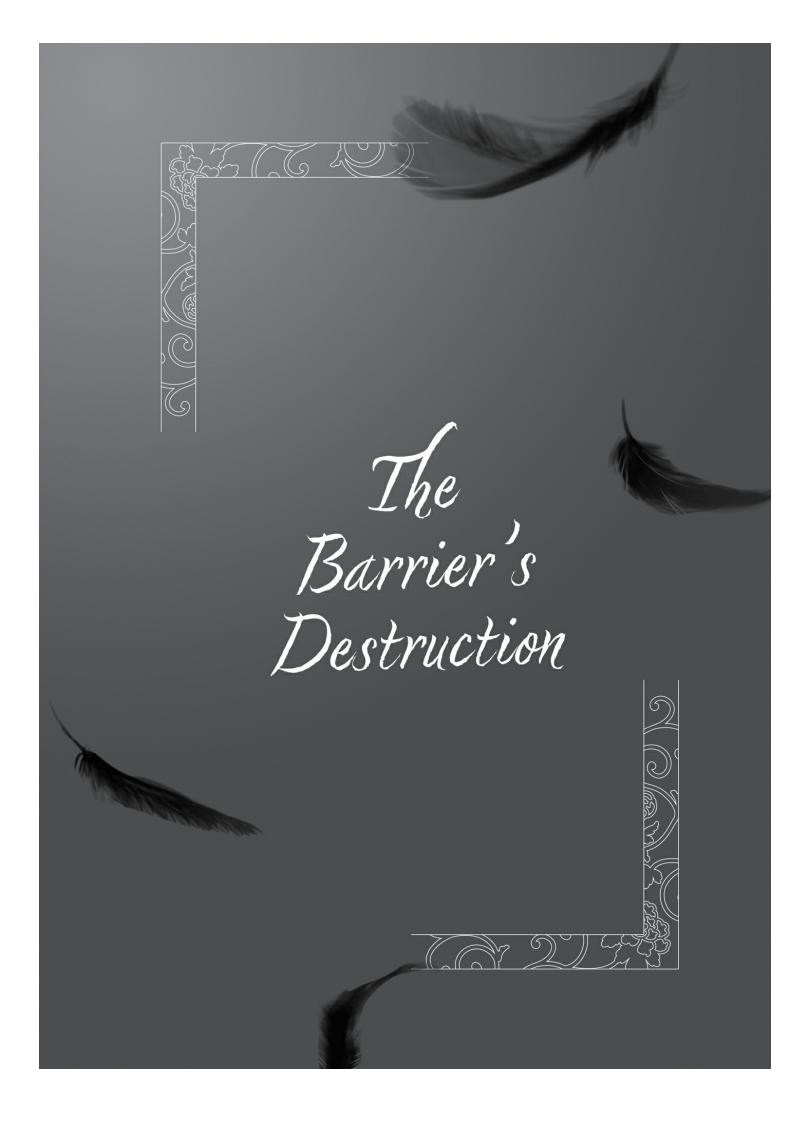
Hakurai clammed up. He was the one to tell her to listen to the ao god's voice. When he bought her from her parents, he told her that was her job.

"What did the ao god say?"

As Hakurai asked that, a thought crossed his mind. Rather than saying she *had* to listen to it, she said that Hakurai *wanted* her to listen to it. To Hakurai, it felt like this signified a difference in her mindset.

"Well..." she began.

When Hakurai heard the ao god's message from Injo's mouth, he gasped.



**N**OT A DAY went by that Jusetsu didn't think of Reijo, but lately, her predecessor's words were tormenting her even more than usual.

"You must not wish for anything."

"Make sure not to take in any ladies-in-waiting or eunuchs. The Raven Consort is meant to be alone..."

These rules were harsh, but whenever Reijo said them, she would look at Jusetsu with an invariably sorrowful look in her eyes.

Reijo seldom smiled, and it was rare for her to express any sadness or pain directly to Jusetsu either. On nights when there was a new moon, she wouldn't let Jusetsu come close to her, but at some point, Jusetsu began to stay by her side while she endured the agony, holding her hand and rubbing her back for her.

Jusetsu couldn't comprehend where in that woman's frail, thin body she had the energy to withstand the brutality of those nights. She endured it for decades, even as she entered her later years... When Jusetsu experienced that agony herself, her heart ached at the thought that Reijo had tolerated such pain for so long. It was so painful that it made her want to scream and rage about, and yet Reijo had just put up with it, breathing shallowly as she lay there curled up on her bed, perfectly still.

Every time she lay down on that same bed, Jusetsu was reminded of how Reijo would massage her hands to warm them up. Using her wrinkled hands and twig-like fingers, she'd bring the warmth back into Jusetsu's hands so that she'd be able to sleep better and wouldn't have any nightmares.

Now, Reijo had finally been freed from the suffering of the new moon and was likely resting in paradise.

That was the one saving grace that Jusetsu held onto.

When a messenger from Koshun arrived at the Yamei Palace, Jusetsu was playing Go with Onkei. Tankai was by her side, doing nothing but make unhelpful comments like, "Why would you move there?" and "That was a

terrible move." They were starting to get on her nerves.

The eunuch messenger was out of breath and pouring with sweat. "My master says...y-you need to r-rush...to the Winter Ministry," he panted. It seemed like this was very urgent business. "H-he also said...to bring two bodyguards with you."

Onkei and Tankai looked at each other.

"Sounds pretty drastic," Tankai muttered.

Jusetsu thanked the messenger for coming, told Jiujiu she could take a break, and left the Yamei Palace. As Koshun instructed, she took Onkei and Tankai with her. What could be so urgent that it requires me to bring two bodyguards? Jusetsu wondered, feeling uneasy.

When she reached the Winter Ministry, there was a peculiarly tense atmosphere in the air. Even the subordinate who showed her to where she needed to go had a stiff look on his face. As Jusetsu wondered what was going on, they reached a room with two military officers standing in front of it—in fact, it looked more like they were blocking the entrance to it. The imposing, intimidating looks on their faces seemed extremely out of place in the Winter Ministry. Jusetsu figured the men must have been Koshun's bodyguards. They bowed and opened the doors for her.

Soft light poured in through the windows and filled the room. Koshun was sitting in the white sunlight as Eisei stood unobtrusively behind him, as if to be guarding his back. Opposite Eisei stood Ho Ichigyo.

There was another man kneeling in front of Koshun, and he looked up at Jusetsu with a stern gaze. His left eye was covered with fabric. It was Hakurai.

I knew it. Jusetsu'd had a funny feeling he was going to be there.

She slowly walked forward, the bottom of her robe fluttering as she moved, and stopped in front of him.

Hakurai kept his eyes fixed on her and intently watched her approach. They both continued glaring at each other.

"Is this the urgent matter you called me here for?" Jusetsu asked Koshun,

keeping her eyes on Hakurai.

"That's right," Koshun said simply.

"So, what's it about?" she asked.

"This man says he wants to help us."

Jusetsu narrowed her eyes and stared at look on Hakurai's face. *Is he serious about this?* 

"What happened to that shrine maiden girl?" Jusetsu then asked him, but Koshun was the one who answered.

"Senri is taking care of her in another room."

Is that a nice way of saying she's been taken hostage? Jusetsu thought, but Koshun quickly dispelled this suspicion.

"As soon as she arrived, she fell asleep."

Naturally, Jusetsu was surprised. She couldn't say it out loud, but she was frankly stunned that somebody would dare fall asleep in the emperor's presence.

"...Ever since she started hearing the ao god's voice, she's been unbearably tired," Hakurai added in a low voice. "She can sleep wherever, whenever. It must really take it out of her."

That must be what being a diviner is like, Jusetsu thought. Allowing a god to come near you would erode your inner self.

"Raven Consort. In your letter, you said that if I helped you, you'd help me, didn't you?" Hakurai glowered up at Jusetsu with his one eye. "If that's correct, then I promise I'll help you break the barrier."

Jusetsu looked directly into Hakurai's eye. "It is correct."

He bowed his head at her and looked down. "...All right."

Jusetsu suspected he was going to oblige since he was the one who made the effort to come and visit, but she didn't expect him to give in quite so readily. It was somewhat suspicious. Was he really that invested in that Injo girl? Jusetsu thought that might be the case—after all, that was why she zoned in on that

topic when she spoke to him before.

"I shall have this man stay in the Winter Ministry," Koshun said. "Ho Ichigyo and Senri are here, after all. The military officers out front will keep an eye on him."

"What about the child?"

Koshun quieted, seeming unsure. Was he planning on separating her from Hakurai? It seemed like he was at a loss as to how to handle her.

"I wouldn't mind keeping her at the Yamei Palace," Jusetsu offered.

"No." Koshun looked thoughtfully down at the floor, then said simply, "I'll think about it."

Perhaps he had a plan he didn't want Hakurai to know about.

Then, Koshun posed a question to Ho. "I don't know much about magic, but when will you do it?"

"We could do it tomorrow, if we wanted to," Ho replied.

The emperor looked at Jusetsu and Hakurai in turn. Unlike some forms of magic, this act wouldn't require any particular plants or animals to perform. It simply relied on the power and the drive of the practitioners themselves.

Jusetsu nodded, and Hakurai did too.

Koshun, however, had other ideas.

"Wait at least three days," he said. "I've got things I need to arrange too. If this is going to take place within the imperial estate, I'll have to notify several places about it."

"Can't you just tell them we're cleansing the palace gates of evil?"

"That'd mean I'd have to come up with a reason why there was evil there in the first place—and I'd need to make sure the reasoning didn't contradict with any past records."

Being the emperor, Koshun could get away with anything—but that didn't mean that he'd do anything he could get away with. His temperament made things more difficult.

"I'll let you know when my preparations are complete," he said. Koshun then got up from his seat and began to walk away.

"Your Majesty," Hakurai called out to him.

Koshun halted.

"With all due respect, I must inform you of a prediction," Hakurai continued.

"A prediction? ...One of yours?" he asked.

"I don't care if you don't believe it. I'm just passing it on."

Hakurai's insolent manner of speaking brought a sharp look to Eisei's face, but Koshun simply said, "Go on."

"Is there a pair of siblings in close proximity to you? An older brother and a younger sister, most likely."

"There are the siblings from the Saname family, as you know," Koshun replied.

Koshun would obviously have known numerous pairs of brothers and sisters. It was a common tactic for fraudulent fortune tellers to act like they'd guessed something correctly, when in reality, they just stated a fact that would apply to almost anyone.

Hakurai looked somewhat disappointed by Koshun's response. "I'm not trying to trick you with a fake fortune. I obviously would never have the audacity to do such a thing to you, Your Majesty," he said. "The woman in question will either lose her life or meet a similar fate. Please be careful."

Jusetsu frowned. Was he saying that disaster was going to befall Banka? While Koshun's expression remained completely unchanged, Eisei looked pale.

"You should tell that to the Saname brothers," Koshun said.

"I can't. They loathe me," Hakurai responded flatly. "Not only that, but this prediction might not even have anything to do with the Crane Consort."

"If it's not about the Crane Consort, then it might be referring to the previous Magpie Consort. In that case, I'm afraid your prediction is a little too late—she's already dead."

Koshun's tone of voice was unemotional, but there was a slight hint of coldness to it. He was clearly shunning the man, but the expression on Hakurai's face was unperturbed. Perhaps he was used to it.

"I'll take good care of that girl you brought with you," the emperor continued. "I'll give her back once this is over."

Although his words seemed kind, he was actually warning Hakurai that he was essentially taking her as a sort of hostage. At that, Hakurai frowned, displeased.

Koshun left the room, accompanied by Eisei.

Jusetsu stared at Hakurai. Now that I think about it, the Raven was the Owl's younger sister, wasn't she? It wasn't clear who this prediction could possibly be about.

"Half-hearted fortunes do nothing but bring bad luck, you know," said Ho, giving Hakurai a harsh look. "You really ought to keep quiet if you come up with something like that."

Hakurai snorted with laughter. "That's rich, coming from a senile runaway. I'd rather not give a prediction that could get me in trouble and have my head chopped off, but I would hate for something to happen to the Crane Consort—if it *is* about her, that is. The Saname family are an important source of revenue for me."

"...Do you really not know whether it's about her?" Jusetsu asked.

"That is what I said, after all," Hakurai replied bitterly, not even bothering to look her in the eye. "I wasn't intending to predict something that no one even asked me about, but the wind shared this information with me on its own accord."

"The wind ...?"

"It's called wind-reading, a foreign fortune telling method. I've tried using countless other methods to check further, but none of them told me anything conclusive."

Jusetsu wondered if she should send Banka a lucky talisman but had second thoughts. It was probably best not to go overboard.

As Jusetsu thought this over, Hakurai asked Ho a question.

"How do we go about breaking the barrier?"

"The three of us will go to three different spots and each break a part of the barrier," Ho said. "This is replenishment magic at work, so..."

"What are the curse objects?" Hakurai asked.

"...The fingers and toes of the first Raven Consort."

Hakurai scrunched up his face as that. "Was she a deluded monster?"

"There is no doubt she put exceptional determination into creating the barrier." Even Ho looked pale as he explained it.

"There are nine gates. How are we going to split up?" Hakurai pressed.

"The most crucial is the small gate to the northwest, Kyokuro Gate, so we shall make that the Raven Consort's central point," Ho said. "We will also get her to attend to Seishin Gate to the west and Sakuro Gate to the north."

Ho removed a piece of paper from his breast pocket and opened it up. Written on it were the names and locations of each of the gates.

The imperial estate had nine gates in total—three in the south, one in the north, three in the west, and two in the east. On the western edge of the imperial estate was Kyokuro Gate, near the imperial gardens and the imperial guard. The large gate that stuck out further than that on the western side was the Seishin Gate, while the big one to the northern side of the estate was the Sakuro Gate.

Ho traced his finger from the gate in the west to the one in the north. Then, he pointed at the gates in the east and south.

"Shukuro Gate and Toshin Gate to the east, and Getto Gate in the southeast, will be your responsibility, Hakurai."

There were two gates on the eastern side of the imperial estate—Shukuro Gate, the small one on the northeastern edge, and Toshin Gate, which stuck out to the east. The gates to the south included the main gate to the imperial estate, but the one that Hakurai was being entrusted with was Getto Gate, the smaller one on the southeastern edge of the estate.

"I'll deal with Joka Gate—that's the main gate to the south—the smaller Gessei Gate, and Sokukon Gate on the southern part of the western side."

The main gate to the imperial estate was called Joka Gate. As the characters in its name suggested, its purpose was to ward off evil, but it was so big that it could easily be mistaken for the gate to a luxurious palace. The small gate in the southwestern corner of the estate was Gessei Gate, while the one on the southern edge of the western side was Sokukon Gate. Ho then pointed to the gates to the south and the west with his finger.

Hakurai stared at the picture of the gates, stroking his chin. "I thought the most important point of the barrier would have been one of the big gates to the north or the south..."

Ho let out a sigh, looking glum. "We have no way of knowing what the first Raven Consort was thinking."

And he was right. For that same reason, they couldn't predict what was going to happen.

"It's incredible that breaking the magic one little girl cast would take this much effort." Hakurai sneered, but Ho just gave him a questioning look.

"While it is true the first Raven Consort both administered this magic and died at a young age... How did *you* know that?" Ho asked.

"Since she was the Raven Consort, I had a hunch she would have been a little girl. Just look at this one." Hakurai jutted his chin in Jusetsu's direction.

Jusetsu was offended at being called a little girl.

Hakurai continued. "Anyway, I understand the particulars now. If there's nothing else you need to tell me, then show me to my room."

With a pained look on his face, Ho turned toward the doorway, not even telling Hakurai to follow him.

"Until we meet again, Raven Consort," he said to Jusetsu, giving her a polite bow.

Once the two of them left the room, Jusetsu headed over to the doors too. Onkei and Tankai were waiting beside them. The expression on Onkei's face

hadn't changed, but it was obvious from Tankai's that he had something he wanted to say. Jusetsu glanced at him but walked out anyway.

With the Winter Ministry behind them, Tankai—who must have been holding his tongue all that time—finally began to speak.

"Niangniang, what is this barrier the first Raven Consort created? What do you plan to do once it's broken?"

"Tankai..." began Onkei remonstratively, but Jusetsu stopped him.

"It's fine."

Naturally, she would rather that Tankai didn't dig too deep into the matter, but at this point, it was too late for that.

"The first Raven Consort set up a barrier at the gates to the imperial estate to stop future Raven Consorts from getting out," she began. "If we leave, we die. The reason she put this barrier in place was because Uren Niangniang is shut away inside the Raven Consort's body. She only has half of her body, however—the other half is somewhere in the eastern sea. I am going to look for that missing part so that Uren Niangniang can be released from my body. That's why we're trying to break the barrier," explained Jusetsu, simplifying the matter as much as she could.

Tankai looked stunned—it seemed to take him a while to comprehend what she was saying. Onkei, on the other hand, had a fairly good grasp of her circumstances despite not knowing everything. He looked conflicted.

"But even if Uren Niangniang is shut away inside of the Raven Consort, why would she do such a thing?" asked Tankai, voicing his doubts. Predictably, he was quick on the uptake.

Jusetsu, however, didn't answer. She had no intention of telling him any more than she already did. She didn't want to tell him how the Raven Consort was the Winter Sovereign, or that she was being concealed to stop the country from falling into chaos—nor about how Uren Niangniang was weakened, and it was becoming difficult to do things the same way they were done before. She also wanted to avoid admitting that she was descended from the Ran dynasty.

"Not all of this adds up for me, but I guess you're saying that breaking the first

Raven Consort's barrier is a necessity...right?" said Tankai in an effort to round the conversation off, having realized that Jusetsu wasn't going to answer any further questions.

"Yes."

Tankai let out a sigh. "I get it. It makes sense now," he said, before adding, "but if you go, I'm going to follow you."

"What?"

"If you're going to leave the estate to look for that missing part of the god, I'll come with you," he said.

Jusetsu looked at Tankai's face. That's right, she thought to herself. If I'm leaving the imperial estate, I have two options—I either leave them all, or I take them with me.

She hadn't thought that far ahead, but even so, she wasn't sure taking with them was a possibility. They worked in the inner palace, after all.

"You weren't planning on leaving us, were you?" he asked.

"No... It's just, I don't even know whether I'll be able to break the barrier yet," she said.

"All I'm saying is that I'll stay by your side regardless of whether you break it or not."

Regardless of whether you break it or not... Tankai's words replayed over and over again in her mind.

A smile suddenly came to her face. "You and Onkei say the same things."

"Onkei said that too?" Tankai glanced at the other eunuch out of the corner of his eye. "You're smarter than you look."

Looking unruffled, Onkei completely ignored Tankai's comment.

Their vows to stay by Jusetsu's side had made an indelible impression on her heart, one that she knew would remain with her forever.

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Hakurai was led to a room in the corner of the Winter Ministry where he was

met by two military officials standing guard at the doorway. He couldn't help but find this a bit over-the-top—after all, he had no intention of running away. He simply came here to carry out the ao god's orders.

Hakurai gazed through the lattice window. He could see the sun setting over the courtyard. The white sunlight was so bright that he had no choice but to avert his gaze. The somber shadows of the room he was in actually offered him some relief.

That day by the river, he received a revelation spoken through the mouth of Injo—though perhaps "revelation" was too impressive a word.

"Break Kosho's barrier," the god had demanded.

Kosho was the first Raven Consort—the mastermind who trapped Uren Niangniang inside the Raven Consort's body to stop her from escaping.

What would we be trying to accomplish by breaking it? Hakurai wondered, but seemingly having sensed his doubts, the ao god continued.

"I want that girl." The god must have been referring to Jusetsu. "She has Hi blood. That's why she is my oracle."

Hi. As in...the Hi dynasty?

That was an ancient dynasty that worshipped the ao god. Hakurai had heard that Jusetsu was a surviving relative of the Ran dynasty, but he didn't know that the Ran lineage was descended from the Hi dynasty as well.

A god's ability to manifest depended on how compatible they were with the oracle they were communicating through. The ao god seemed to favor those from the Hi dynasty.

"The blood of Hi daughters agrees with me exceptionally well."

Hakurai wondered if the god planned on eating her.

"Kosho was such a pitiful, foolish young girl, setting up a silly barrier like that," the god had said. "Besides, the further she went, the more the Summer Sovereign shunned her."

A sigh then left Injo's lips. It wasn't clear whether the god felt sorry for Kosho or if he was ridiculing her.

"When the barrier is broken, I'm going to snatch that girl from the Raven's grasp. Then, I will kill the Raven. I have no other option—she wants to kill me too."

Hakurai did wonder why the ao god couldn't just break the barrier himself, but the god explained that doing so would alert the Raven to his presence. Essentially, the ao god wanted it to be a surprise attack.

Hearing the ao god's words through Injo's mouth made Hakurai realize that gods were not noble beings—they tended to be even more vulgar in their actions than mortals. They had no qualms about deceiving people, causing pain, or attacking their adversaries without warning. In fact, they reveled in those things. They weren't concerned with ruling over people or protecting them, which meant they didn't need to possess the noble spirit that mortal rulers did.

As a result, they were even willing to take advantage of people's weaknesses.

"If I can take her, I won't eat this one," said the god. Hakurai hadn't even mentioned offering Injo as a sacrifice before.

Hakurai accepted the ao god's command—and *that* was why he was at the Winter Ministry.

Koshun disguised Injo as a eunuch and took her to the inner court. He left her at one of the palaces and instructed his staff to keep a watchful eye on her. Injo rarely spoke and spent her time gazing intently at the scroll with pictures of shells and fish on it that Senri had given her. Senri seemed to like children, so he had shown Injo the scroll at the Winter Ministry and spoken to her about sea creatures. "I'll look after her," he offered, but Koshun was apprehensive about leaving her in the same place as Hakurai. He took her into his own care instead. Eisei was the one to arrange everything, so he doubted there would be any oversights there.

Is Hakurai really intending on helping us?

Koshun was still slightly fearful that might not be the case. For some reason, Jusetsu didn't have the heart to doubt people very often, which worried him. *Is this really going to be all right?* Koshun wondered if they should look for

another shaman to take Hakurai's place, but knew this had the potential to delay the plan significantly...

As the reality set in that they were going to break the barrier at last, Koshun found himself tormented by a sense of restlessness. He felt both impatient and sad at the same time.

Senri notified him they had an idea of where the missing part of the Raven may have sunk.

I might be able to save Jusetsu.

They were getting close. At the same time, however, that meant saying goodbye.

Jusetsu had brushed off the idea of going to Ake, but either way, she was going to have to flee to a land where her safety wasn't threatened. At the very least, she'd have to stay far away from Koshun.

After much contemplation prompted by the Black-robed Niangniang uproar, Koshun came to the conclusion that rescuing her was going to require such consequences.

Now that he decided he was going to save her, there was no way he wouldn't go through with it—even if it meant parting ways with her.

All of that is trivial in the grand scheme of things, Koshun told himself, but he still felt like there was a dry, icy wind blowing inside his heart. The wind billowed and howled inside him, reminiscent of a winter gale rousing a grove of trees.

"...Sei," Koshun called out in an attempt to fight off his emotions. He leaned back in his divan. "Fetch me the shell."

"Of course," Eisei said in response to Koshun's succinct request. He retrieved the large sea snail shell from the cabinet and brought it to his master. The dark-colored shell acted as a certain god's messenger and allowed Koshun to hear the Owl's voice.

At least, that's what it was supposed to do.

The shell was placed on the table with brocade fabric underneath it, but no

voice could be heard. Whenever Koshun had free time, he would listen carefully, hoping that he'd be able to pick up the Owl's voice from the shell, but lately, he would hear nothing but silence. He hadn't even heard the tiniest sound.

## Did something happen?

The Owl had been jailed in the Secluded Palace's prison for breaking their ban on interfering with the living. Due to the Owl's incarceration and the conditions of the waves, he wasn't able to talk very often—but as of late, there was no response whatsoever.

Koshun still had a lot he wanted to talk to the Owl about—breaking the barrier, the sea in which the missing half of the Raven had sunk, and the ao god.

As he looked at the shell sitting on the table, Koshun felt a wave of somber unease creep up on him.

Once Hakurai agreed to cooperate, Jusetsu suddenly found herself very busy.

The following day, she made her way over to the Winter Ministry to discuss the whereabouts of the Raven's submerged missing part with Senri.

Koshun had announced that the barrier was to be broken in four days' time. They would do so under the pretext that they were performing a ritual to worship the gate god. Koshun had consulted with Senri before coming to this decision since the calendar specified in detail which god was to be worshipped on which day.

If they succeeded in breaking the barrier, Jusetsu would subsequently go on the hunt for the missing half of the Raven. Senri highly suspected that it sank near Je Island, as circulating legends claimed there was a volcano at the bottom of the sea. The Raven Consort who was originally from the Je Island, Jo Nei, had likely assumed the same—which explained why she'd attempted to break the barrier to try to get there.

"I believe there are still folktales from Je Island that are either different or more detailed than the ones we have. If you did some research into them on the island itself, you might uncover some new information," Senri said. "But I wouldn't know how to go about finding those stories, nor what to do if I were to track them down..."

"There's no need for you to worry about that now. After all, almost everything is a mystery to us at this stage. You're going to proceed one step at a time. With every step you take, something new might come into view."

Senri's tone of voice was calm, which alleviated Jusetsu's anxiety. As she listened to him, she found that everything he was saying made a lot of sense. It was strange. Perhaps it was because he wasn't simply making baseless assurances to make her feel better—his words were backed up by actual knowledge.

"I should head to Je Island once we've broken the barrier, then," Jusetsu said.

"Yes. His Majesty has agreed to the idea, so I'm sure he will have put some sort of arrangements in place. Since it's Je Island, he might ask the Un family for their help."

"But..."

Wouldn't Yozetsu Jikei be the first point of call? Jusetsu thought. He was likely going to show up at some point in the future, looking ahead to when Jusetsu was free from the Rayen.

Once her mind took that turn, she became lost in thought. Noticing Jusetsu's silence, Senri asked, "Is something troubling you?"

"I...won't be able to stay here once I'm freed from the Raven," she said, the words slowly falling from her lips, one after another. "The Raven Consort won't be needed anymore..."

Even if Jusetsu wasn't a descendant of the Ran dynasty, it still would have been the same. There'd be no need for her here. She wouldn't have to remain in the palace for the Summer Sovereign's sake any longer.

Senri took in Jusetsu's expression. "I can't comment on that at this point. That's why I'm suggesting you simply take this one step at a..."

Jusetsu shook her head. Senri wouldn't know she was related to the Ran dynasty.

"At the very least, I won't be able to come back here," she said.

A gloomy shadow cast across the room, filling it with a sense of despair. A chill immediately ran through Jusetsu, and her clothes felt cold and heavy against her skin.

Senri looked at her in silence for a few moments. He seemed both concerned and intrigued. "...Are you having doubts? About freeing the Raven?" he asked.

"Of course not," Jusetsu laughed. "I wouldn't have doubts this far in. It's already been decided."

Senri, on the other hand, didn't laugh. "What are you worried about?"

Jusetsu fumbled over her words. She couldn't voice her concerns properly. The distressing thought of leaving this place behind—having to leave Sho altogether—made her feel both helpless and angry. She didn't know what to say, nor how to say it.

Senri placed his hand on Jusetsu's cheek.

"We're trying to uproot everything from its very foundation, so it's only natural for you to feel uneasy," he said. "I'm sure you're worried, but try not to think about the negatives. Focus on what's right in front of you."

The palm of Senri's hand was cold, and his hands were bony and thin. It reminded Jusetsu of Reijo—his hands looked a lot like hers.

Jusetsu looked up at Senri's face. He had a faint smile on his lips and a kind look in his eyes. They seemed to be softly taking in all the inner turmoil she had been suffering from and relieving her from it.

"Focus on what's right in front of me..." muttered Jusetsu, quietly repeating Senri's words. She nodded.

Then, Senri narrowed his eyes and let go of her. "Are you doing well, physically?" he asked. "You mentioned something strange happening on the night of the new moon..."

"I'm fine."

"Try not to push yourself too hard, all right?"

Jusetsu smiled. "You too."

Senri simply smiled back at her.

As Senri saw Jusetsu off at the entrance to the Winter Ministry, he had a tinge of melancholy on his face.

This is worrisome...

Jusetsu had looked extremely uncertain. It was understandable, considering the situation, but even so, Senri was worried.

What could be upsetting her so much?

If they were able to release the Raven, there'd be no need for her to stay in the inner palace any longer. Change could be scary, but it should have been a happy thing too. She'd finally have her freedom.

However, Senri hadn't sensed an ounce of hope or joy from Jusetsu. When she'd mumbled something about not being able to stay in the imperial estate anymore, he'd heard some hesitation in her voice.

Had she grown attached to the inner palace? Naturally, Senri didn't know anything about what went on within its gates—but the thought of Jusetsu and Koshun enjoying a friendly game of Go together came to mind.

Is this because of His Majesty?

A gloomy, cold sensation suddenly spread across Senri's chest. The tinge of melancholy on his face intensified.

The quips that Gyoei would frequently come out with when he was still alive echoed through Senri's mind. Gyoei had been concerned about Jusetsu and Koshun, worried they were going to become too close.

"Desire gives rise to suffering," he'd said, "and suffering awakens the monster inside the Rayen Consort..."

A messenger from Kajo arrived at Jusetsu's doorstep to say that they were all going to celebrate Koei's safe move to her new palace together. Kajo had even

gone as far as providing Jusetsu with an outfit to wear, which the messenger brought with him. She must have taken into consideration the fact that black robes had been banned as a result of the Black-robed Niangniang incident. It was typical of her to trouble herself over such a detail.

The outfit that Kajo gave Jusetsu included a reddish-purple jacket with a dark red skirt, both of which had woven patterns featuring vines and birds. Jusetsu paired these items with her bright red cloak and draped a pink shawl over her shoulders.

When she arrived at the Jakuso Palace, she found that each of the girls were dressed in different colored outfits, which she assumed was Kajo's plan. Koei was wearing a bright golden yellow ruqun with golden embroidery; Banka was wearing a light green ruqun with silver flowers and birds painted on it; and Kajo was wearing a light blue ruqun with silver thread woven into the fabric. They were all sitting around a table, and they looked like an arrangement of bright, blooming flowers.

There were all kinds of different snacks laid out on the table including rice cakes and filled buns with steam drifting off them. Jusetsu picked up a baozi and broke it apart, revealing a generous filling of lotus seed paste inside. A sweet aroma wafted through the air.

"How are you both doing?" Kajo asked Koei and Banka as she drank her tea.

"I've been fine, as of late," Koei replied, the look on her face somewhat tense.

"Me too. My morning sickness has gotten better," Banka said. Conversely, her tone of voice was more relaxed.

Kajo smiled. "I expect you'll start showing soon."

Since their skirts were pulled up to their bosoms, it wasn't obvious if their bellies had started to swell or not. Koei and Banka nodded. Both of them looked to have plumper cheeks than they had before.

"My body feels so much heavier, it makes it difficult to walk," Koei added dolefully as she placed some dried fruit and rice cakes onto a dish. She then passed the plate to one of her ladies-in-waiting standing behind her. "Give these to the Raven Consort," she stated, then turned to Jusetsu. "These rice

cakes have crushed honey-simmered chestnuts mixed into them. I heard you enjoy sweet things, Raven Consort. I hope you like them."

When the lady-in-waiting brought the dish over to her, Jusetsu could see that the rice cakes did indeed have pale-yellow chestnut bits mixed into it. She tore off a piece and put it in her mouth, where the sweet chestnut flavor spread across her tastebuds.

"It's delicious," Jusetsu said honestly. Koei's face lit up at that.

"Amei, eat one of these as well." Kajo scooped some sort of honey-simmered food up with a spoon and offered it to Jusetsu. "It's simmered potato and dried jujube. It's delightful."

"You should try this as well, then," said Banka, placing some rice dumplings wrapped neatly in leaves onto a dish beside her.

At first, Jusetsu couldn't quite work out why they were all so insistent on feeding her, but then it clicked.

They organized this gathering for me.

While Kajo's message stated they were celebrating Koei's move, Jusetsu couldn't help but feel that it was actually a ploy to provide an opportunity for her to spend time with the other consorts. Was she trying to dispel the fear that the court ladies and eunuchs held toward the Raven Consort by bringing her closer to the consorts they worked for...?

Jusetsu looked at Kajo, who looked back at her and smiled. Jusetsu had deep admiration for how considerate the woman was. Both devotion and fear could cause chaos if they went too far. It was possible that the Black-robed Niangniang uproar had made the job of managing the inner palace even more difficult for her.

If the Raven Consort didn't exist, her life would have been so much easier.

"I see you've planted some chrysanthemums," Kajo commented.

Kajo looked through the open doorway at the courtyard and the lateblooming chrysanthemums that were in full bloom. Large yellow flowers with gorgeous puffy flowers, ones with vermilion petals as rich in color as the setting sun, pure white small ones... All of the chrysanthemums were blooming in all their glory.

"Those were a kind gift from his Majesty," Koei replied. "He thought that changing up the garden would put my mind at ease, since I was so frightened of coming to this palace..."

"Oh, how thoughtful. I expect nothing less from him."

Koshun had given the Hakkaku Palace's garden a makeover and had some gardenias planted before Banka arrived there too. As meticulous as he was, Jusetsu had actually given him the idea of giving Koei some chrysanthemums some time ago. She'd questioned why he'd never gifted her any, since the characters in her name had a connection to the flower. It was the least he could do, Jusetsu had insisted.

Despite being both meticulous and kind, Koshun was naive to the way women worked. It didn't interest him, because if he was interested, he would have put in the effort to find out. The inner palace may have been his own private flower garden, but Koshun didn't seem to possess the same vulgarity as an ordinary man. He lacked the greasy stench of white paste and sweat that permeated the pillars, walls, and beds of the prostitution district—the pungency that filled its rooms. Koshun didn't exude a whiff of it, and instead showed his deep care for his consorts by writing them letters, visiting their palaces, and checking up on them when they were sick. While these things seemed to contradict each other, the chances were that they both stemmed from the same cause—the pity and regret over what had happened to his mother.

Koshun was still wounded by the loss of his mother and had compassion for the women. At least, that was how it seemed to Jusetsu. Having witnessed his mother's suffering firsthand, he likely felt some animosity toward the inner palace.

Even so, that was only a theory.

Two of his consorts were pregnant now, and that was all that mattered. That issue wasn't something that Jusetsu should've been speculating about—and yet, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't help but do so.

Jusetsu stared at the other consorts as she brought a sweet honey-simmered

treat to her mouth. Although it was hard to tell because their skirts covered their bellies, both Koei and Banka did have baby bumps. Their faces were more rounded than before, and their hands were plumper. Suddenly, Jusetsu felt like she didn't recognize them anymore. For some reason, the fact that they were Koshun's *true* consorts now seemed abundantly clear.

*Unlike me,* Jusetsu thought. I'm the odd one out—I'll never be one of them.

Jusetsu recalled the time Jiujiu asked her what she thought about Koei and Banka being pregnant. She knew she would never be able to be like them, and now for the first time, the reality of this truly hit her.

A fantasy scenario in which Jusetsu too was a proper consort—sipping tea around the table with the others—came to mind. As she closed her eyes, it felt like a dry wind blew straight through her body.

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That evening, Koshun visited the Yamei Palace.

"I heard you saw Kajo," he said, placing a brocade bag on the table. Jusetsu assumed it contained a present for her.

"I did. Is there anything wrong with that?" Jusetsu opened the back to find dried apricots inside. "Kajo said she had your permission."

"There's nothing wrong with it at all. I've left those things up to Kajo to decide."

Jusetsu tore off part of the orange fruit and placed it in her mouth. Despite having been dried, the fruit's flesh was still soft. It tasted sweet, with just the right amount of sourness.

"I...expect Kajo is going to tell me off," Koshun said, so dejectedly that Jusetsu stopped tearing off pieces of dried apricot to look at him. "When she finds out I've suggested that you go to Ake, that is."

"I'm sure she'd understand, if she knew why."

Koshun glanced back at Jusetsu. "But you were angry as well, weren't you?"

Jusetsu looked away. "You can understand something and be angry about it at the same time, you know." Her face still turned in a different direction from the emperor, she then lowered her gaze. "I understand why you made that suggestion. I agree to go."

Koshun didn't stir at that. With her face turned, it was impossible for him to see the expression on her face.

"Obviously, none of this means anything unless our plan goes as hoped."

After all, it would only be relevant if the barrier was successfully broken, the missing half of the Raven was found, and the Raven was freed. The whole thing would be very challenging.

But if everything goes to plan...

As the thought crossed Jusetsu's mind, a chill swept through her—but she immediately pushed that fearful feeling away and told herself not to be so stupid.

"What's wrong?" Koshun asked, noticing her shaking her head.

"Nothing," Jusetsu answered, but the anxious, hazy sensation in her chest was showing no sign of abating.

Then, I...

Freeing the Raven was supposed to be Jusetsu's sole path to salvation, and yet...she was conflicted.

Once she left the imperial estate, she'd likely never be able to see Kajo and the others ever again. Then, there was the question of whether she'd be able to take her attendants from the Yamei Palace with her—after all, their home was the inner palace. She wouldn't be able to see Senri again either. And the same went for Koshun.

Jusetsu would have to throw away everything she now had.

If all goes well, I'm going to lose it all.

This realization left her feeling frozen to the core, a sensation that started in her chest before spreading throughout the rest of her body.

"...Jusetsu," Koshun began. The only noise that could be heard as he stood up was his clothes softly rustling against each other. "Will you step outside with

me?"

By the time he posed this question, he was already heading to the doorway.

Jusetsu hurriedly got to her feet. "W-wait for me," she called out.

Every now and then, Koshun would do something completely unannounced—acting just as calm as ever as he did so. It was a habit which left Jusetsu flustered.

It was cold and silent outside. At this time of year, it was fine in the daytime when the sun was shining, but if you didn't wrap up warm with wadding in your clothes or put on some sort of outer garment, you'd freeze in the evenings. Koshun walked away from the palace building and started pacing along the bank of the pond. It would have been even chillier by the water, but Koshun didn't seem cold—rather, he stood up completely straight. The half-moon was reflecting on the surface of the water, and the ripples in the pond caused its image to waver. Koshun seemed to be staring at the moon.

"In that song, it said that the moonlight cast down into the sea and turned into two gods..." Koshun looked up at the moon above him. "I can see it now. The moon has both light and shade."

Jusetsu looked up at it too. Half of it was shining and giving off a pure, white light, while the other half was obscured by a pitch-black shadow. The shadow was strikingly dark, even in comparison with the rest of the indigo night sky.

One was the god of shade. One was the god of light.

"That moon reminds me of me and you," Koshun said softly. Jusetsu shifted her gaze away from the sky and onto Koshun. "I'm not saying that one of us is the shade and one of us is the light. We're both shade, and we're both light. I think of you as part of me."

"Part of you...?" she asked.

"I'm not the Summer Sovereign because you're the Winter Sovereign... No, well, that might still be true, but still—you're an inextricable part of me."

Koshun then looked back at Jusetsu, the light illuminating his calm expression.

"Sometimes, you make me feel as if I'm looking in a mirror. If you're happy,

I'm happy. If you're struggling, I can't stay calm. That's why, as much as I want to save you, the thought of having to send you far away makes me feel like part of me is being taken away. It hurts."

His tone was unfazed as ever, and his voice was gentle and quiet—but there was a calm and strong emotion flickering in his eyes. The moonlight seemed to purify the darkness around them, and it was revealing the feelings that he shut away inside and allowing Jusetsu to see them.

She couldn't help but feel like the same kind of emotion was flickering in her eyes too.

"I...feel the same way," she found herself admitting. Although she wanted to be saved, thinking about what she would lose in the process was scary and painful.

Being saved means being separated from Koshun.

It was cold deep in her chest, almost as if snow was silently piling up inside her.

Something warm touched her face, startling her. Koshun had reached out and had placed his hand on her cheek.

Koshun gently stroked her cheek with his fingers, as if he were analyzing its contours. To Jusetsu, it felt like he was tracing the recesses of her heart.

Oh...

With his fingertips, he was delving deep into the emotions built up inside her heart and bringing them to the surface.

Koshun's eyes widened.

Before she knew it, Jusetsu's hand had moved on its own accord, and she was now touching his. His hand was so warm that it made her own fingertips feel excruciatingly cold.

Without saying a word, Koshun let go of her cheek and gently wrapped both of his hands around the fingers she placed on top of his. His warmth spread to her icy hand.

Koshun stood there, calmly looking down at Jusetsu below him, and

eventually let go. Silently, he turned on his heel and began making his way back the way he came. Jusetsu didn't follow, but instead watched him walk away.

Eisei had been waiting in front of the palace building and promptly approached the emperor. He seemed to glance back at Jusetsu too. Koshun didn't turn around. Eisei lit his candle and began leading the way. The small, flickering candlelight and the backs of the two men started to fade into the distance.

At one point, Koshun abruptly stopped in his tracks and turned around, but Jusetsu couldn't make out the expression on his face.

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The next morning, even Injo—who'd been shoved into one of the rooms in the building—could tell that there was a lot of hustle and bustle going on. There was a constant pit-a-pat of eunuchs coming and going from different buildings. Their conversations were quick, and she could even hear people snapping things like, "Not that one, the *blue* brocade," in exasperated tones. Injo pressed her face up against the lattice window to peek at what was going on outside. The doorway had been unlatched, with two eunuchs positioned in front of it as guards. Injo looked over at them.

"Hey, you," she said to the boy eunuch who was closest to her. "What's everyone rushing about for?"

The boy eunuch looked up at the older eunuch beside him. It looked like he was asking for permission to answer her. The older eunuch nodded, and the boy turned back toward Injo.

"There's a ritual being held today—outside."

Injo couldn't understand difficult words, so the boy eunuch spoke slowly and deliberately used simple vocabulary. He seemed unsure how to address her—after all, she was a little girl shut away inside a room in the inner court for some unknown reason, not a criminal.

"Ritual?" Injo repeated.

"Umm... It's when you worship a god. You pray to them. I don't really know much about it myself, to be honest with you."

"A god..."

"This ritual's for the gate god. There are other gods too, like the god of roads and the god of stoves," he explained. "You're supposed to worship different gods on particular days, so they're apparently going to start that up again to make up for having neglected the tradition for all this time. You know what 'neglected' means, don't you? It means they've been negligent... No, forget that —it means they haven't been doing it properly."

Injo nodded.

Seemingly relieved that she'd understood, the boy eunuch continued. "Maybe you don't have those sorts of gods where you come from. You must be from the Hatan clan, right? You look a lot like Ishiha."

Ishiha.

The mention of that name made Injo's eyes widen and her mouth gape open.

"Ishiha works in the inner palace... If you're from the same place, you might know him," he continued, but there was no point—Injo was too stunned to take in any of what he was saying.

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Beneath the cloudless blue sky, earth had been piled up in front of the gate to form a platform, and a plain wood pedestal had been placed on top. On a stand sat a vase full of aquatic plants such as water clover and waterweeds that were to be offered up to the god alongside a mountain of piled-up orchids and other fragrant plants. The platform was surrounded by banners made of brocade that fluttered in the wind.

Being located in the corner of the imperial estate, the Kyokuro Gate was a diminutive one located near another one for more general use. With a stone floor, red lacquer pillars and a tiled roof, it was a splendid sight to behold, but it was situated in a dark and gloomy spot. Few people liked to pass through it, and it was at this gate that the remains of criminals and eunuchs were taken outside.

Jusetsu climbed up onto the platform and knelt next to the stand. Similar platforms were set up at each of the imperial estate's nine gates. From an

outsider's perspective, these were ritual platforms from which the gate god would be worshipped. Jusetsu, Ho, and Hakurai weren't the only people stationed at the imperial estate's gates—members of the Winter Ministry, who were in charge of orchestrating the worship ritual, had also climbed up on their respective platforms.

The biggest platform by far was that which had been prepared in front of the main gate to the imperial estate, Joka Gate, where Senri was standing. That platform was surrounded not only by brocade banners, but also copper ones. There were musicians waiting beneath the platform as well. Koshun was prepared to watch Senri's ritual from a seat at the two-story gate to the imperial assembly hall building, which stood directly opposite the Joka Gate.

Originally, divine rites were performed by rulers, so it would have been appropriate for Koshun to take one of the platforms himself. However, Senri told him that back when the Summer Sovereign and Winter Sovereign had equal authority, the Winter Sovereign—being the one who presided over rituals—was in charge of all divine rites. The Summer Sovereign, the one who took care of governmental affairs, had nothing to do with them. As a result, even during the Ran dynasty, the emperor avoided getting involved with such ceremonies.

Further still, during the present dynasty, Koshun's grandfather—the Flame Emperor—detested all kinds of divine rites. It was rare for a ritual like this one to be held at all and was probably why imperial officials were crowded around to catch a glimpse of it. They mostly gathered in the vicinity of the main gate, but a fair few had been sharp-eyed enough to notice Jusetsu at the western edge of the imperial estate and went over to watch. As these officials were strangers to the inner palace, none of them had figured out that she was the Raven Consort, and seemed to believe she was a simple shrine maiden who was brought over to take part in the ritual.

Onkei and Tankai stood beside the platform, keeping a watchful eye to make sure that no one approached them.

The wind carried the sound of drums and bells through the area, signaling that the ritual at the main gate had begun. Jusetsu and the others each began their own tasks.

Jusetsu, Ho, and Hakurai were each using different kinds of magic. Jusetsu was using her Raven Consort magic, while Ho—being a shaman—was using a cane and a talisman which had been written on with a cinnabar stick. Hakurai was using both his shaman skills and his sea-dweller magic. All three of them needed to break apart the ties in the barrier. If one of the ties wasn't broken successfully, the plan would end in failure.

The deep blue brocade banners flapped and fluttered in the wind. Jusetsu kept her eyes fixed on a certain spot beneath the gate—under its stone floor was Kosho's barrier. Jusetsu slowly lifted her hand and pulled a peony flower out of her hair.

She felt surprisingly relaxed. There were no doubts in her mind anymore.

"I think of you as part of me."

Koshun's words had a peculiarly calming effect on her.

Oh, right, she thought at the time. I'm part of Koshun, and Koshun's part of me.

Those words settled at the bottom of her heart. The two of them were one—just like the light and shade of a half-moon, or the moon in the sky and its reflection on the surface on the pond.

"The thought of having to send you far away makes me feel like part of me is being taken away. It hurts."

In that moment, Koshun's emotions seemed to be pouring out of him. Jusetsu felt that same pain. Their feelings combined into one and their hearts connected. When Koshun touched Jusetsu's cheek with his hand, it felt like he was touching her heart.

That was enough for her to feel reassured.

No matter where I am, part of me will be here.

As such, it didn't matter where life took her. She could go anywhere.

Jusetsu blew a puff of air onto the peony. The flower appeared to dissolve and crumble before transforming into a light red smoke. It drifted about as it floated over to the gate.

Jusetsu sensed a snake wriggling underneath it. Something resembling a black mist began to seep up through the crevices in the stone floor. It appeared to writhe about as it crept over the stones and began to solidify into a singular form. Ordinary people seemed not to be able to see it, so no one made any real noise. As she carefully watched the mist, she turned two more flowers into smoke. She waved her hand, causing the pale red smoke to gather once again into one spot and take on a new form.

Now in its final form, the black mist had turned into a large snake with three heads. The snake's body looked like it was covered in gurgling mud and was a dark, sinister color. It also had a strange, intense glow. It coiled itself up underneath the gate, reared its heads, and bared its teeth at Jusetsu. The insides of its mouths were pitch-black and impossible to see into. These dark voids looked like they could swallow up and silence even the most piercing scream.

The light red smoke Jusetsu had created then transformed into an eagle and started flapping its wings. It circled the large snake before suddenly swooping down and piercing its body with its sharp claws. The snake's body heaved, and it twisted its three necks. There was a gust of wind, causing Jusetsu to crouch down on the ground. The sudden and violent blast of wind elicited shrieks from onlookers.

"Niangniang—" Onkei and Tankai shouted as they started running up to the platform.

"Stay away," she ordered curtly as she lifted her head.

Infuriated by the eagle flying around it, the large snake opened its mouths in an attempt to swallow it whole. Jusetsu pulled a single feather out of her breast pocket—brown with white spots, one she borrowed from the star raven she happened to spot in the grove next to the Yamei Palace the day before. The star raven was the Raven's apparatus, and its feathers acted as swords.

With a wave of her hand, the eagle reverted into light red smoke and thinly wrapped itself around the snake. Next, the smoke transformed into a rope and tied itself around the snake's body. The large snake shook its heads indignantly. Each head was moving in a different direction, and every time they moved,

another gust of wind blew past.

Jusetsu swung the feather she was holding, and as it moved through the air, it transformed into a brown, double-edged sword. With the snake still bound by the rope, she thrust her sword towards the creature's heads. Jusetsu made a decisive strike and one of the snake's three heads, the one on the far side, fell to the ground. The impact caused the gate to shake and the ground beneath her feet trembled, almost as if something was bursting up from below.

The snake's two remaining heads lashed about violently, and the ensuing whirlwind knocked down the banners. Jusetsu tumbled head over heels as she retreated away from the snake before once again striking down on it with her sword. She followed it up with a horizontal sweep, swinging the weapon at an astonishing speed. Rather than impaling the snake's body with it, however, she was using this weapon to counter the magic she'd found herself up against. A violent wind wailed overhead, sounding like the snake's own cry from its remaining mouth. Its gruesome, slimy, writhing body was a representation of the terrible magic Kosho had put in place.

What in the world is going on...?

This curse was so dreadful that it came as a surprise to her that it hadn't filled its surroundings with a horrific stench as well. A chill ran through Jusetsu. She held her breath and swung her sword down, severing the snake's last remaining head. A gust of wind blasted her, making her close her eyes. The land under her feet shook violently. The platform she was standing on, made from a mound of earth, began to collapse. As she got to her knees, she heard a loud rumble.

Although the rumbling quickly quieted down, clouds of dust drifted through the air. People were so stunned by the sight that they just stared at it dumbfounded, unable to even scream.

The gate had been utterly destroyed. Its tiled roof was now on the ground, and its red lacquer pillars broke at their bases and toppled over. Even the gate's mud walls had crumbled. What was also strange was that the pillars and doorway were fractured and now looked completely worn-out, as if they had rotted away.

Jusetsu got back to her feet and got down from the platform. She stood in

front of the collapsed gate and tried to see if she could sense anything. All signs of the snakelike creature underground were now gone.

She looked behind her to assess her surroundings. Naturally, none of the other gates were visible from where she was standing, but she had a feeling that something was different to how it had been a few moments ago.

The barrier is broken.

Jusetsu clutched the shaft of her sword. She knew she still needed to check to be certain, but even so, she was confident—the barrier had been destroyed.

This means I can leave.

The thought sent an unexpected amount of joy running through her entire body. She realized that up until this point, she tried not to give it too much thought. She didn't know if the plan was going to succeed, so she avoided imagining what it would feel like—but now...

"Ahh..." she found herself exclaiming. She could go outside now. It was truly happening.

Jusetsu turned toward the gate—or at least, toward the spot where the gate once stood. The blue sky stretched out on the other side of it.

Just as she was about to step over the wreckage of the gate, she stopped in her tracks. She could hear something, and it was getting closer.

What's that sound?

Jusetsu had failed to realize something. No—they all had.

They'd failed to recognize just how deep and horrendous Kosho's obsession was.

When he heard the earth-shaking rumble, Koshun leaped to his feet. A stir ran through the crowd of people gathered to watch as they speculated what in the world could have caused it. While the ground had shaken, it didn't look like the main gate had changed in any way. Did that terrible sound come from Jusetsu's gate? Koshun looked toward the west. Beneath the blue sky, he could just about make out a faint cloud of dust rising into the air in the distance. He

looked at Senri, who had stopped performing the ritual to look up at Koshun. With a dumbstruck look on his face, Senri gave the emperor a firm nod.

The barrier's broken.

Koshun called over a nearby bodyguard from the imperial army.

"Get the guards to report on the situation at each of the gates," he ordered.

In no time at all, he received word back. "The Kyokuro Gate has collapsed," the guard's report said.

That must have been what that cloud of dust was about, he thought to himself. Apparently, Kyokuro Gate was the only one that had been destroyed. That gate was also supposed to be the key point of the barrier. Until now, he simply assumed that *all* the gates might collapse if the barrier were to be broken, and he was actually relieved to find out that wasn't the case.

At that point, Koshun was still calm. However, when a group of pale-faced guards came rushing over from the gates in the west—looking like they were about to collapse—he began to frown.

They wouldn't look this distressed over a single gate collapsing, he thought to himself. There has to be more to it.

Before he had the chance to ask the guards what had happened, nearby bystanders started asking questions of their own.

"What are you trembling for? You're meant to be the guards of the imperial palace, and yet you're shaken up by the collapse of a gate..."

The guards shook their heads emphatically. True enough, they were all trembling. "We... We..."

As hard as they were trying to explain the situation, their teeth chattered so violently they couldn't even get the words out.

"Come on, spit it out!" a senior official snapped, but the group ended up bursting into tears. Unlike members of squads such as northern imperial defense army who acted as the emperor's own military protection, these guards weren't military men by nature. Instead, they were peasants who were conscripted into armed service. While they might have been physically tough, that didn't necessarily mean that they were mentally robust.

After descending the steps of the two-story gate, Koshun placed his hand on the shoulder of one of the trembling guards.

"Did you see a ghost?" he asked, his tone so calm and relaxed that it didn't seem to fit the situation. Further still, it was usually unthinkable for the emperor to stand at the same height as a guard when speaking to him, let alone speak to him directly or touch him. The guard was taken aback—but fortunately, the shock did seem to stop him from shaking.

"Well... Um... I don't *think* they were ghosts..." the guard responded haltingly, having been permitted to answer the emperor directly.

"I see." Koshun nodded. "They might not have been ghosts, but you've seen something else that's out of the ordinary."

"Yes, well... You see..." The guard turned white as a sheet as he appeared to recall what he saw. "Th-there were...corpses..."

"What?"

"A h-huge crowd of c-corpses...appeared in the imperial gardens."

Unsurprisingly, Koshun was left speechless. A huge crowd of corpses?

"They were dressed in black robes. Black-robed corpses, all crowded together..."

Black-robed corpses.

Upon hearing the guard's description, people nearby let out shrieks of terror. That caused even more of a stir among the onlookers, who previously just feared that something happened when the gate collapsed.

A familiar voice came cried out from overhead. "That's forbidden magic." Koshun looked up at the blue sky above him.

The star raven flapped its wings as it fluttered down toward him. The star raven perched on the emperor's shoulder, digging in its claws. It beat its wings about a few times, looking unstable as it repositioned itself.

This bird was the Raven's apparatus—and yet the voice he'd just heard belonged to somebody different.

"Are you the Owl?" Koshun asked.

The Owl was the Raven's older brother—the same one who went quiet and stopped speaking to him through the large snail shell.

"That's right," the bird replied.

"Why are you here?"

"We've got no time for leisurely conversation, Summer Sovereign. Go to the gate in the northwest." And with that, the star raven immediately leapt off Koshun's shoulder. "Kosho's forbidden magic has brought the past Raven Consorts back to life. The current Raven Consort is going to be killed. Hurry."

## What is that?

Jusetsu strained her eyes at the peculiar swarm approaching from the grove in the imperial gardens.

It was a great swarm of...black.

The Kyokuro Gate was situated next to the imperial gardens. These gardens were home to the northern imperial defense army's barracks, the Ran dynasty's ancestral shrine, and the graves of the Raven Consorts.

The graves of the Raven Consorts.

The black swarm wasn't running toward Jusetsu, but instead staggering and swaying in a strange manner as they made their approach. As the figures in the distance became clearer and clearer to see, the people gathered to witness the divine ritual take place began to scream. Jusetsu couldn't believe her eyes either.

"Niangniang... What's that?"

Onkei and Tankai had run up to Jusetsu and looked terrified.

In front of them, there was a horde of black—a horde of corpses dressed in tattered black robes, to be more exact.

Their black clothing looked familiar, as they were the robes typically worn by Raven Consorts. The exact same kind that Jusetsu wore.

Jusetsu's voice sounded hoarse as the words left her lips. "They're...the Raven Consorts."

The black swarm approaching them was a crowd of Raven Consorts—or at least, their remains.

As the flock of corpses got closer, the onlookers were stuck with panic and ran away screaming. Jusetsu, however, stood glued to the spot where she was standing.

Why was the focal point of Kosho's barrier this small gate on the western edge of the imperial estate? Why couldn't Jusetsu summon that Raven Consort's soul? These questions had plagued her for some time—but now, it seemed like she had an answer.

There was one thought at the forefront of her mind, however.

If those are the corpses of the Raven Consorts from times gone by, Jusetsu thought, then among them...

As the previous Raven Consorts approached one step at a time, waving their torn sleeves about as they did so, a change began to occur. As they moved forward, their flesh seemed to be gradually growing back. At first, they just looked like bones with dry tree bark stuck to them. Steadily, however, their skin began to return. Their bodies regained their moisture, and color came back into their faces. Their formerly hollow eye sockets were now covered with thin eyelids, and the shapes of their eyeballs had gotten rounder. The women's eyelids lifted to reveal moist eyes beneath. Their luscious black hair was styled up onto their heads and their peony flowers bloomed.

As the bodies made their way over, they all regained the appearance they had when they were still alive—and yet there was still no sign of life in any of their eyes.

"Niangniang, stay away."

Onkei stood in front of her to shield her and took a dirk out of his breast pocket. Tankai picked up a bow and arrow that a guard had dropped and

primed himself to use it.

The herd of bodies was clearly aiming toward Jusetsu.

"It's all right," she said. "You are the ones who should be staying out of the way. You won't be able to do anything to fight them off."

Jusetsu held the two of them back and stepped forward, clutching onto the star raven's sword.

If Hakurai or Ho were here...

She was certain Ho would rush over to help her, but Hakurai probably would have run away already. He already fulfilled his promise of breaking the barrier, after all. And while Ho might have run to her aid, at his old age, who knew how long it'd take for his legs to carry him there?

*Are they coming to kill me?* 

Was this Kosho's magic at play? Was it all meant to stop the Raven Consort from escaping, even if she did manage to break the barrier?

Jusetsu bit her lip. Using corpses to achieve that goal was unbelievable.

The Raven Consorts were now close enough for their features to be easily distinguishable. Jusetsu didn't recognize any of their faces. They all looked young—they must have been just young women when they passed away.

Suddenly, the reanimated Raven Consorts' movements sped up. The hems of their robes fluttered as they began to run, hurling themselves at Jusetsu. All of their faces were expressionless.

Jusetsu ducked and slashed her sword horizontally at her attackers' feet. Their lacerated legs collapsed and several of them fell to the ground silently, without a single change in their facial expressions. There was nothing reflected in the women's eyes.

While some of the reanimated Raven Consorts had collapsed on the ground, a seemingly endless stream of new ones appeared behind them. They trampled over the bodies of the other ones and stretched their hands out to reach Jusetsu. She clenched her teeth as she severed their arms with her sword. She stepped back, her breathing ragged. Just how many could there be? The black

swarm seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see.

As Jusetsu cut down the bodies that were attacking her, she made sure to check each and every one of their faces, praying that she wouldn't come across the one person she was anticipating seeing.

After spending an astoundingly long time living as the Raven Consort, that woman had finally reached the end of her life and was freed from her suffering...

"Kosho...! Kosho! Show yourself!" Jusetsu cried out.

If she used the corpses of other Raven Consorts as part of the magic she cast, then she had to be among them too. If Jusetsu could defeat her, then maybe the spell would be lifted.

Her hope, however, was short-lived.

"Kosho's not here."

Upon hearing that new voice, Jusetsu's hand froze, sword still in her grip. It was a familiar one.

...It can't be.

"Kosho's body was pickled with salt, so she can't be brought back to life. All that's left of her is this detestable forbidden magic, the product of her deeprooted obsessions."

The one person Jusetsu prayed not to be there appeared at the back of the swarm of black-robed women and was slowly making her way over to Jusetsu. Her hair was white, her thin face covered in deep wrinkles and her hands bony. An elderly woman, she stood out among the crowd of young faces.

"Reijo..." Jusetsu's voice quivered as she called out her name.

Reijo had a far-off look in her eyes. Jusetsu stepped back.

No... I can't do this.

She couldn't slay Reijo. She was the last person in the world she could ever do that to. She just couldn't.

"Do you remember how sealing magic works? You shut somebody away in a

pot in order to make use of their soul. Kosho did that at the grave of the Raven Consorts," Reijo said, speaking in the same solemn tone she used when she was alive. "I discovered she used that forbidden magic long ago, back when I failed to summon the soul of a Raven Consort. That was when I realized that one day, I, too, would be imprisoned in the same way."

Reijo then turned her eyes toward Jusetsu.

"I always thought that if anyone was going to break the barrier, it would be you, Jusetsu."

The look in her eyes was austere yet gentle at the same time—just as Jusetsu remembered it. Jusetsu's hand she was holding the sword with fell. The blade slid out and landed on the ground, where it turned back into a feather.

Reijo extended her hand and touched Jusetsu's cheek. It was wrinkly and dry, and her skin was very thin. It was the same hand that she used to stroke Jusetsu's cheek and stroke her head countless times before during her life.

"Don't worry," she said. "After I found out about the forbidden magic, I cast a spell of my own on the grave. I reversed the curse. This forbidden magic will soon break."

The movements of the Raven Consorts behind were becoming sluggish. They stretched their arms out to Jusetsu, but their hands couldn't reach her. They just grabbed onto Reijo's shoulders instead. They dug their nails into her thin back. Another Raven Consort bit into her neck.

"Rei-!"

When Jusetsu tried to tear Reijo away from them, the old woman pushed her away.

"It's fine," Reijo said. "This is Kosho's final attempt at useless resistance. After this, it will all be over. I'll finally..."

Somebody ripped off Reijo's arm. Jusetsu could hear the bones in the woman's neck breaking as her head fell to one side.

"Jusetsu..."

With that last word, Reijo's head tumbled to the ground. In the next moment,

the bodies of the Raven Consorts who flocked around her crumbled to the ground and turned back into bones.

The Raven Consorts behind them then did the same, immediately becoming skeletons. Thudding sounds rang out as their bones tumbled to the ground. A mountain of skeletons covered in black robes piled up where the undead Raven Consorts once stood.

Jusetsu gazed at the bones rolling about on the ground in front of her. A skull and various other pieces lay scattered around. There was also a black robe.

These bones used to be Reijo.

With shaking hands, Jusetsu gathered them up. It hurt to breathe. She didn't even know how to breathe anymore.

She thought back on how it felt when Reijo touched her cheek for the last time with her wrinkled hand with its cold and dry palm. The same one she used to massage the warmth back into Jusetsu's hands when she struggled to fall asleep at night.

"Kosho... How dare you..."

Jusetsu leaned over the bones she gathered up, a new fire blazing in her chest.

Reijo was alone for all that time...

Reijo silently endured year after year of loneliness and pain, carrying it with her into her later years.

How dare you do this to somebody like her...

It was Kosho's curse that caused her to suffer when she was still alive, and even after she passed away, Kosho tied her down and dishonored both her soul and body.

Why did Reijo have to experience such treatment?

A sob left Jusetsu's lips—a sob that soon turned into a wail, then into a scream. She couldn't stop. No matter how much she cried and how much she screamed, the pain burning inside her chest was never going to fade away.

"What's that ...?"

By the time Koshun had made it to the Kyokuro Gate, there was a great number of skeletons covering the ground beside it.

Among them sat Jusetsu as she screamed. Onkei and Tankai stood beside her. It didn't look like they wanted to interrupt her, and she didn't look like she was going to speak to them either. When the two of them noticed Koshun was there, they shook their heads, looking sorrowful. The other people in the area were cowering, their faces tense with fear as they stared at the mountain of bones in dismay. The guards and bodyguards who had followed Koshun to the gate also gasped at the sight stretching out before them.

Koshun started to walk toward Jusetsu, but he suddenly looked up at the sky. The star raven was circling overhead.

Gray clouds had formed above—directly over Jusetsu, in fact. The clouds swirled and swelled, rapidly becoming heavier and heavier. The now thicker clouds turned a deeper shade of gray and were hanging low in the sky. Jusetsu's pained screaming continued, and a faint roar of thunder resonated, as if in response. There was a flash of lightning inside the dark clouds. The rumbling of thunder sounded closer as the clouds spread out across the sky.

*Lightning? At this time of year?* 

There was then another burst of light in the sky above. Thunder roared, and at that very moment, a stomach-churning sound echoed from behind.

Koshun turned around to see a large pillar of water, somewhere in the direction of the inner court—which was strange as there wasn't a pond or anything of the sort over there. Showing no signs of calming down, the pillar of water rose so high that it could have almost reached the sky.

Isn't that where the Goshi Palace is...?

That was the palace building where the shell of the ao god had been used to decorate the floor. It apparently provided it with the ao god's divine protection. A strange sense of uneasiness came over Koshun.

What's going on? What in the world is happening?

He then heard what sounded like the flapping of a bird's wings—the star raven?

"Niangniang?"

Onkei's worried-sounding voice drew Koshun's gaze over to the eunuch.

Jusetsu was standing up now, and at her feet was a creature resembling a golden chicken. It was Shinshin, the bird that should have been back at the Yamei Palace.

At some point, Jusetsu's hairdo had come undone, and her long hair now hung over her shoulders, covering her face, and obscuring her expression.

Jusetsu pulled out one of Shinshin's feathers, and it instantly turned into a golden arrow. She held it in position, and as if by magic, a bow appeared right in the spot she needed it to be. Koshun had never seen anything quite like it. The bow was black and looked to be covered in lacquer. It was large—in fact, it looked far too large for Jusetsu to be using with her small frame. However, Jusetsu pulled the bowstring back as if it was nothing. She aimed up at the sky in the direction of the pillar of water and launched the arrow. It made an arc as it flew through the air and disappeared, leaving only a whooshing, soaring sound behind it.

In the distance, the water pillar burst. A sound resembling shattering glass, followed by a low groan, echoed through the air. The pillar of water was gone.

A large drop of water fell onto Koshun's cheek, which he assumed must have come from the water pillar—but that was incorrect.

There was another rumble of thunder, and gray clouds glided across the sky, covering it. The sky became so dark that it almost felt like nighttime. Another drop or two of water fell on the ground, and then suddenly, rain began beating down on the earth.

A flash of light illuminated the area in a shade of bluish-white light and another crack of thunder rang out. The rain poured down onto the white bones on the ground like a waterfall, covering them in mud.

The rain pelted painfully against everybody's skin, and no one could keep their eyes open. They almost felt as if they were being pulled underwater, unable to breathe. With the clouds covering the sky, the area was completely dark, save for the occasional flash of lightning.

"Jusetsu..."

Even this cry was drowned out by the storm. The combination of the rain and darkness had made it impossible to see anyone—let alone check where they were and confirm they were safe.

The rainfall was so intense that it wasn't too hard to imagine the entire imperial estate becoming submerged in it, but a short while later, it gradually began to ease off. It reduced to a light shower, and gaps appeared among the dense clouds that had been blocking out the sky, allowing for sunlight to seep through.

At long last, it was light again—but the sight that Koshun was greeted with made him gasp.

Jusetsu was standing perfectly still, in the same exact spot as she had been before. Her hair was now a glistening silver.

Was the downpour so severe that it washed the dye out, or was there another explanation? The way the faint light illuminated her hair made her look like something out of a dream.

The star raven frantically flapped its wings about and perched on Koshun's shoulder.

Jusetsu slowly looked up, her eyes directed at Koshun—or rather, at the star raven. The look in her eyes startled him.

Who is that...?

The figure definitely had Jusetsu's face, and yet she looked like someone completely different. Why was that? There was no way it could have been anyone else.

Jusetsu opened her mouth. "Owl, is that you?"

It was Jusetsu's voice, but at the same time, it didn't really seem like her.

A strained, low voice came out of the star raven's beak. "Hello there, Raven."

In that moment, all of Koshun's plans to save Jusetsu crumbled away.



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