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Kouko Shirakawa



Seven Seas Entertainment





KOKYU NO KARASU

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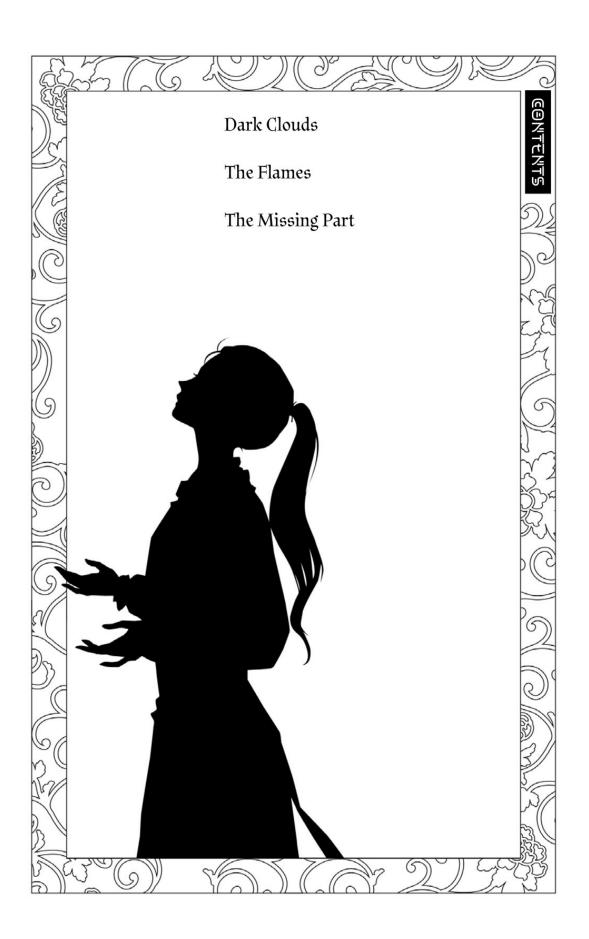
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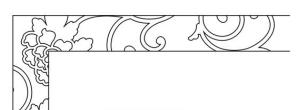
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Koshun

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 moderation vice-envoy in Ga Province.

EHARACTERS

Banka

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

Choyo

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

Hakurai

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

Injo

The young shrine maiden of the Eight True Teachings.

Reijo

Former Raven Consort. Deceased.

Gyoei

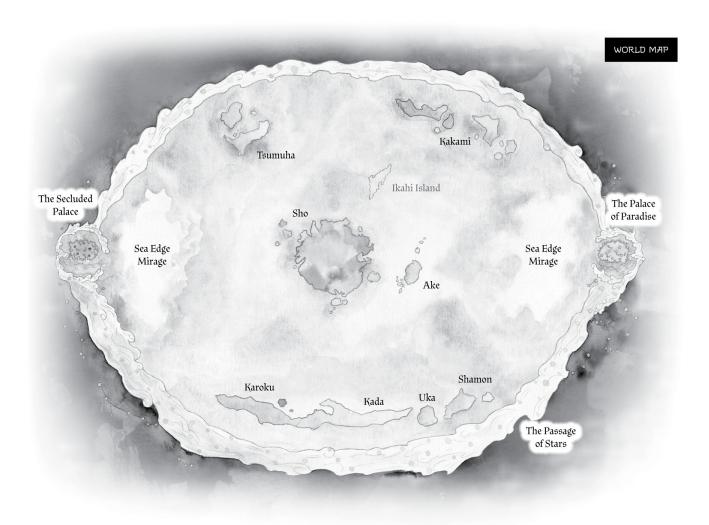
Former Winter Minister. Deceased.

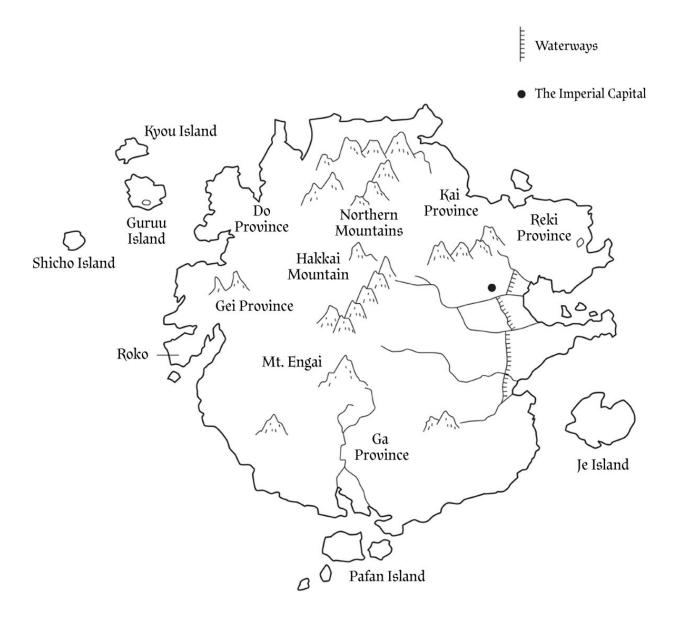
Senri

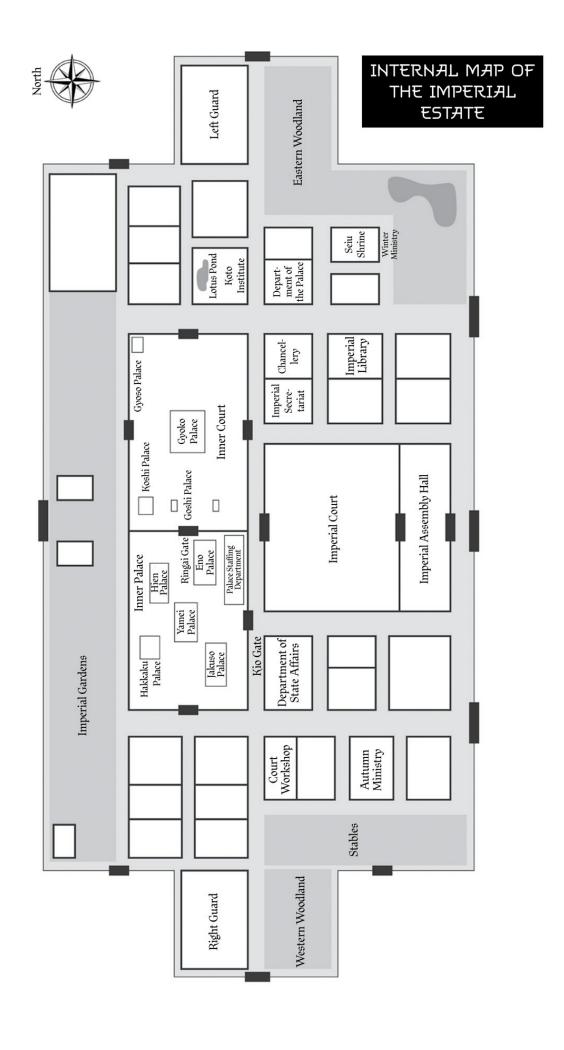
Current Winter Minister. One of Jusetsu's allies.

Kajo

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









W HEN JUSETSU had reached Koshun, the expedited messenger who was supposed to tell him about the underwater volcano's eruption still hadn't arrived.

"I'm going to Je Island," she said.

As soon as he'd finished reading the report from Reiko Shiki in his private room in the inner court, he put the letter down and stared at her. The young woman had a fraught, anguished expression on her face.

"Did Senri tell you something in his letter?"

It seemed likely that Uren Niangniang's missing half—a black sword—had sunk in the sea around Je Island. That being the case, Koshun had sent Senri and Shiki there.

Koshun had also received a report from Senri, and it took no stretch of the imagination to assume that he'd written a letter to Jusetsu too.

"There are strange things happening in the waters around Je Island."

"Well, Shiki told me that," the emperor said.

"That island lies on the border."

"The border?"

"The divine border between the Secluded Palace and the Palace of Paradise," Jusetsu explained. "When the waters get rough, it's because the sea god at the Palace of Paradise has been angered. Something's intruding into its territory. I have a terrible feeling about all of this."

Koshun went quiet for a moment. Originally, he'd planned for Jusetsu to go to Je Island too—but now that didn't seem like such a good idea.

"Hakurai is there."

Koshun passed the letter from Shiki to Jusetsu. In it, Shiki had informed the emperor of Hakurai's presence.

"That must mean that the ao god is there too," he added.

"Exactly," replied Jusetsu. "The thing that's intruding on that forbidden territory is the ao god. I have to hurry."

Does this mean the ao god is at Je Island to look for Uren Niangniang's missing half? Koshun wondered. If that was the case, he could understand why Jusetsu didn't want to waste any time. But even so, Koshun couldn't bring himself to acquiesce. He felt strangely uneasy.

While Jusetsu may have had a foreboding hunch about the situation at play, the very idea of sending her to Je Island as well gave him a bad feeling.

"I'll go with her," declared the star raven.

The bird was perched on the back of a nearby chair. Although he looked like a star raven on the outside, inside the bird was the Raven's older brother, the Owl.

"If the ao god *and* the other half of the Raven are there, then war's going to break out," he continued.

"I'd really rather it didn't," replied Koshun.

When Uren Niangniang and the ao god had last fought, it had plunged an entire island underwater. If that were to happen to Je Island, calling it a disaster would be an understatement. That island acted as a gateway for trade and was an important hub that brought considerable profits to the country. On top of that, it was inhabited by both Sho citizens and a large foreign population.

"Is the Owl really claiming that he'll accompany me?" Jusetsu cut in.

"Can you hear him?" Koshun asked, amazed. Until now, he'd been the only person who could hear the Owl's voice.

"No, not at all. The Raven just passed on the message."

"The Raven... Oh, I see. You're able to communicate with her, then?" Jusetsu nodded.

"I can't hear the Raven's voice, but I can hear the Owl—and for you, it's the other way around. It might take some time and effort, but at least we can all communicate with each other."

"On that note, I actually have a request for the Owl."

"From the Raven?"

"No, from me." Jusetsu then took a black pearl necklace out of her breast pocket.

"What's that?" asked Koshun.

"This was left behind by the Owl—or rather, by Shogetsu. It's what remains of the vessel that he was inside."

After the doll apparatus that the Owl had created—Shogetsu—had been destroyed, feathers were left behind. However, those feathers had transformed into black pearls overnight.

"Can you use these to create Shogetsu again?"

Koshun glanced at the Owl.

"Indeed I can," the bird said simply.

In the very next moment, the black pearls split open and became feathers again. They all gathered together in one place, and then in the blink of an eye, started to metamorphose into Shogetsu once again.

The vessel looked just like he had before—complete with his shiny, long black hair, his soft, porcelain skin, and his emotionless eyes. He was also dressed in his usual eunuch's robes.

"In this form, we should be able to talk to each other," said Shogetsu.

"We shall be able to correspond too—even if we are far apart," added Jusetsu.

I see what she's planning, thought Koshun. Jusetsu had a good idea.

"You're taking him with you to Je Island, then?" he asked.

"Precisely."

"Wait." Shogetsu raised his hand. "It's the other way around."

"The other way around?" Koshun and Jusetsu asked in unison.

The star raven flapped over and soared down by Jusetsu's side.

Shogetsu then pointed at the bird. "These two will go together."

"The Owl will head to Je Island with Jusetsu, and Shogetsu will stay behind with me?" the emperor asked.

Shogetsu nodded. "Yes. Otherwise, I would've been exiled for coming here for nothing."

The Owl had chosen to be banished from the Secluded Palace so he could save his sister, the Raven. It was obvious that if the Raven was going to Je Island, he'd want to go with her.

"Fine," Koshun said, after a pause. The fact that the Owl would be by Jusetsu's side provided Koshun with some peace of mind too. "Now, let us get everything in place for your departure. Eisei?"

Koshun called out to Eisei, who stood behind him.

Eisei appeared implicitly to understand exactly what was being asked of him. "The boat is already prepared."

"We should go, then," said Jusetsu—but as she was trying to make her way out of the room, Koshun called out to her.

"Jusetsu."

She halted and looked behind her—but Koshun didn't know what to say next. How was he supposed to express the anxiety that filled his chest?

The two of them exchanged glances.

A faint smile came to Jusetsu's face. "It'll be fine." With that, she left the room—with the star raven flying after her.

Koshun leaned as far back into his chair as he could.

"Master," Eisei addressed him cautiously. "Would you like me to make you some tea?"

"That'd be nice..."

Koshun closed his eyes and let out a sigh.

You'll come back, won't you?

That was what he'd wanted to ask her—but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

After dropping by the Hien Palace, Jusetsu returned to the Yamei Palace and quickly got dressed in her men's robes. She let down her hair and then tied it all together at the back.

"Jiujiu, take Kogyo and Keishi with you to the Hien Palace," she said. "I've asked Kajo to take care of you while I'm away."

Jiujiu was folding Jusetsu's clothes and putting them back into her storage chest. She looked up in surprise. "I'm coming with you to Je Island, niangniang," she protested.

"You can't," Jusetsu replied curtly.

For a second, Jiujiu looked like she was about to cry, but she immediately pursed her lips together to conceal any emotion.

"I'm coming with you," the lady-in-waiting said again.

"Jiujiu..."

"Give it up. It's too dangerous," interrupted an onlooker. It was Tankai. "We won't be able to take care of you—and neither will niangniang."

Tankai and Onkei were going along as Jusetsu's bodyguards, and so were Shinshin and the Owl. The two eunuchs were rushing to get ready.

"I don't need to be taken care of," Jiujiu said.

"You say that now, but I know what you're like."

"But niangniang..." Jiujiu held her tongue for a moment as she stared intently into Jusetsu's eyes. "If we say goodbye now, I have a feeling we'll never be able to see each other again..."

"Hey." Tankai frowned. "Don't say things like that just as we're about to leave. You'll jinx it."

"If I say I'm coming, then I'm coming," Jiujiu stubbornly insisted.

Just as the others wondered what triggered this new swell of obstinacy in her, they noticed that Kogyo had appeared from the kitchen. Jusetsu assumed she was coming to knock some sense into Jiujiu—but instead, the woman grabbed Jusetsu by the hand and squeezed it imploringly. As she was unable to speak, she simply stared fixedly into Jusetsu's eyes, then glanced back at Jiujiu.

"...Are you telling me to bring her along?" Jusetsu asked.

Kogyo gave her a firm nod. Since Kogyo was usually very firm with Jiujiu, seeing her be so insistent made Jusetsu feel weak.

"But..."

Kogyo shook her head from side to side.

"Take her with you. You'll need a female helper on your journey, anyway," said Keishi, who had just poked her head out from the kitchen. An uncompromising old lady, she refused to set foot inside the room, even in this situation.

Then Keishi held out a cloth parcel. Jiujiu took it and brought it over to Jusetsu. The parcel was warm and had a sweet yet subtle aroma coming from it. It smelled like baozi steamed buns. They were probably stuffed with lotus seed paste—Jusetsu's favorite.

"Reijo was right," Keishi said.

"Reijo...?" Jusetsu asked. "What did she say?"

"That you'd be the one to break the curse plaguing the Raven Consorts." *Reijo*.

Visions of her came to Jusetsu's mind.

"She was certain that you'd be the one to rid them of their sorrow."

"But...I didn't follow her rules. I didn't keep to myself," argued Jusetsu.

"Reijo wasn't alone either, you know." A slight smile came to Keishi's face—something which was uncharacteristic for her. "She had *you*." With that, the woman withdrew into the kitchen.

"Keishi..." Jusetsu whispered, looking down at the cloth parcel in her hands. Its warmth had transferred into her as she held it.

When she closed her eyes, Reijo's stern yet kind gaze was the first thing she saw.

Reijo... I...

When she opened her eyes again, Jusetsu had something to say to Jiujiu.

"If you're coming along, change into some different robes. That outfit isn't going to work."

"I will!" Jiujiu energetically replied.

It was as they were sailing south down the waterway that Jusetsu heard the news.

"An eruption?"

"Yes. From the underwater volcano near Je Island, apparently." Tankai had gotten wind of this rumor while they were anchored at one of the waterway's docks. "I don't know whether it's still ongoing, but now isn't the time to be going there."

Jusetsu brought her hand to her chest. Was this what that sense of

foreboding was trying to warn her about?

"Has this news reached Koshun—I mean, the imperial capital?" she asked.

"I'm sure an expedited messenger is on his way. For all we know, he might have already got there."

"Owl." Jusetsu called out to the star raven, who was perched on the edge of the boat.

The bird's head spun around.

However, it wasn't the Owl who responded, but the Raven.

"It looks like the message has already reached him," said the voice of a young girl. It sounded like the voice was resonating inside Jusetsu's chest. Ever since she acquired the ability to hear the Raven speak, the Raven started to speak to her whenever she felt fit—regardless of what time of the day or night it was.

"That's what the Owl is saying," the Raven said.

"What is he saying, exactly?"

"...That the message has reached the imperial capital, and things are looking hectic... The emperor is speaking to his vassals."

"Do you know if Senri and Shiki are safe?" Jusetsu asked.

"According to the Owl...there hasn't been any news about them."

Jusetsu felt her stomach tighten.

I hope they weren't caught up in the eruption.

"Unless somebody can get in touch with Je Island's...foreign trade director? Then there's no way of knowing the situation on the island," the Raven explained to the best of her ability. "The eruption cut Je Island and the mainland off from each other."

Jusetsu nodded. "Understood. In that case, we'll send as much information as possible their way. Pass on the message."

The star raven narrowed its eyes in response.

"The Owl says he understands."

Jusetsu was the only person who was able to hear the Raven's voice. To an outsider, it'd seem like she was talking to herself while looking at the star raven —not that there was anyone other than Jusetsu and her companions on the boat anyway. Koshun had sent two military officers to act as additional protection for her, but they were stationed at either end of the boat, keeping an eye on the surrounding area.

"I think our only option is to go to the port in Ko Province and wait there until the boats are able to sail again," said Tankai. Since the shores of Ko Province were opposite those of Je Island, that was where boats to Je Island set sail from.

"I'm sure it'll be busy there..."

Onkei's expression clouded over. "It's going to be packed with stranded merchants..."

"That's a good point."

"There's been an eruption, though. Won't they all have fled?" said Jiujiu. She had a worried look as she held Shinshin.

"This is an *underwater* volcano we're talking about," Tankai said, cocking his head to one side. "It's not like when a volcano erupts on the mainland. All the sea merchants and fishermen want to get back out to sea as soon as the eruption settles. That's the trade they're in, after all."

As such, they'd likely be waiting at the port—not that there weren't some who'd try to make a run for it, of course.

"The port will be even more crowded with those who want to wait *and* those who want to flee lingering there," Jusetsu muttered.

Onkei nodded.

"Ko Province has a local militia, so their soldiers should be keeping things in check. I doubt the situation is bad enough to warrant the central army being

dispatched," said Tankai. "Unless the chaos gets out of hand, that is."

Unless the chaos gets out of hand.

I can only hope it doesn't come to that, Jusetsu lamented as she gazed ahead at the sky above.

When the boat reached the port of Ko Province, they discovered that it was—as anticipated—overrun with people. The area was extremely noisy and filled with angry shouts, crying children, the footsteps of people hurrying to ships, and the clattering of carts passing through. Looking out to sea from the boat, the volcanic smoke in the air was impossible to miss. It was billowing up like a cloud and carried a strange smell with it.

Jusetsu left Jiujiu and the birds on board for the time being and disembarked. A man who appeared to be some sort of public functionary for the port rushed over to her.

"You arrived quickly..." he began.

Jusetsu's party's boat had a flag with blue tassels on it flying at its bow. That was a sign that those on board were vassals working under the direct authority of the emperor, and this man seemed to think they were emissaries from the imperial capital as a result.

Leaving the military officers who Koshun assigned to her to dispel the misunderstanding, Jusetsu went for a walk around the area.

Although the eruption was happening far out at sea, the ensuing smoke and stench was still making its way here—and its ash was falling down on the land as well. The shore was covered in what looked like blackened stones.

Jusetsu picked one of the fallen stones up to find it had holes of all sizes in it. When she gave it a light squeeze, it crumbled in her hands.

"These stones must have been spouted out by the eruption," said Tankai as he picked one up and crushed it himself.

One of the military officers caught up to them. "It sounds like the volcano erupted five days ago."

"Five days ago, and it still hasn't settled?"

Jusetsu had no idea how long eruptions tended to last.

"Some volcanic eruptions are over in a day, while others continue for three or four months."

"Is that right?"

It seemed like there was a fair amount of variation, but how long would *this* one last?

"I hope this eruption doesn't go on for too long."

"At any rate, no boats are able to leave the port..."

The military officer—Sai—then frowned and glanced at the volcanic smoke. In contrast to his sturdy build, he had a gentle face and an affable personality. His friendly character was reflected in his facial expressions too.

Conversely, the other military officer with her, So, possessed not only an imposing physique but a stern face—the sort of physical attributes that one would expect from someone in his line of work.

"The Raven Consort's fame has reached Ko Province as well," Sai said. "The public functionary is extremely grateful that you've blessed the region with your presence."

"What?" Jusetsu stared at him. "What did you tell him?"

"I haven't told him anything. He just seemed under the impression that you were going to quell the eruption, so I went along with it. I thought it'd make things easier for you."

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"Wha-?"
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"Was that wrong of me?" he asked.

Jusetsu paused. I suppose not.

If the volcano was erupting because the sea god at the Palace of Paradise was enraged at the ao god, then defeating the ao god would allay that anger. That being the case, one could say that Jusetsu had come to quell the volcano—albeit indirectly. That cover needed to be relayed to Koshun so that everyone's stories were in alignment.

"The governor of Ko Province has asked that you take your rest at his home. Staying there while you are in the area seems like a good idea—and from my perspective as your bodyguard as well."

"All right..."

Jusetsu gazed at the smoke coming from the eruption, then raised her hand in Sai's direction to get his attention.

"I want you to tell the governor and the public functionary something. My job is to be a ritual coordinator, and I've been sent here by the emperor to quell the eruption."

Sai blinked in confusion, but soon accepted her instructions. "Understood," he responded, and placed his hands in front of one another in a sign of respect. He didn't seem particularly quick on the uptake.

It wouldn't be wise to make the Raven Consort walk around on her own. Jusetsu was planning on stopping the eruption, but that wasn't because it was her duty as the Raven Consort to do so—nor because she was a living descendant of the previous imperial dynasty. All the credit for the scheme had to go to Koshun.

What if this fails...?

If that happened, Jusetsu would have to shoulder the blame, and that would be all there was to it.

However, she had no intention of letting that happen.

Back among the hustle and bustle of the harbor, Jusetsu followed the military

officer's lead. An exasperated sea merchant was lashing out at a public functionary while others were attempting to placate him. Complaining to the functionaries wasn't going to make the eruption stop, and everyone was well aware of that, but the people simply didn't have anywhere else to direct their anger.

Recognizing that the local functionaries must have been in a difficult position, Jusetsu came to a stop. And among the crowd was a young man who stood frozen to the spot, dazed. She realized she knew his face—though he looked unwell and extremely tired, there was no way it was anyone else.

Jusetsu walked up to the young man and began to speak to him, though she couldn't recall his name. "Aren't you...the eldest son of the Saname clan?"

The young man turned around. As he stared at Jusetsu—wide-eyed with surprise—she realized he looked even paler from close up.

Is he seasick? Jusetsu wondered to herself. *Or has something even worse happened?*

The young man placed his hands together in front of his chest and bowed to her.

"You don't look very well," Jusetsu muttered after taking a long, hard look at his face.

The man pressed his hands against his cheeks. It seemed more serious than seasickness.

I'm sure I remember his name... Jusetsu thought. Shin. That was it—Shin.

Shin was supposed to have gone to see his father, Choyo, on Koshun's orders. Considering how many days had passed, the fact that he was here in Ko Province indicated he was on his way back to the imperial capital.

Did something happen in Ga Province...?

"Boats aren't able to sail to Je Island for the time being, so the provincial

governor from Ko Province has invited us to his home. Let's go and have some tea."

If there was something Shin urgently needed to tell Koshun, the quickest way to do that would be through the Owl. That was one reason why Jusetsu invited Shin along, but there was another, even more important reason.

"It's good to drink tea when you're tired," she added.

The man definitely looked like he needed some relief. Jusetsu didn't even wait for a response before beginning to charge ahead, but Shin obediently followed along, nonetheless.

The provincial governor's house was just a short distance from the port. It was his official residence, as opposed to being his private home. The eruption kept the provincial governor so busy that he could only offer them a brief welcome before going on his way, but his new visitors still received courteous hospitality. They were brought plentiful quantities of tea, alcohol, snacks, and other light refreshments to enjoy—likely because he assumed they were the emperor's emissaries.

"Ko Province's governor is well-respected for his shrewd nature, so that should be of some comfort to people," explained Sai. He stuffed his cheeks with baozi steamed buns—he was surprisingly unrestrained in the way that he ate.

Jusetsu placed a container of baozi and snacks in front of Shin and offered him some tea. "Drink it before it goes cold," she said.

Shin said nothing and took a sip, wrapping both of his hands around the cup as if in an attempt to warm them up.

"Have you had breakfast?" Jusetsu then asked.

"No..."

"Eat this, then. Do you like sweet things?" Jusetsu peeled apart the bamboo sheath that encased one of the rice dumplings, put it in front of Shin, and transferred the sweet insides onto a plate.

Jiujiu watched in fascination from a nearby seat. "You're taking care of somebody else, niangniang."

"I am capable of it, you know. I just have to follow you and Kajo's examples."

"Oh yes—that is a very Kajo thing to do."

As Shin drank tea and ate a rice dumpling, the color began to return to his face.

"Jiujiu, could you get us some more tea?" Jusetsu requested.

"Of course," Jiujiu said with a smile.

Once she had left the room, Jusetsu called out to the star raven. "Owl!"

The bird, which had been sitting on Tankai's head, flew over and perched on the chair beside her.

"Is that...really an owl?" Shin asked dubiously.

"No, it's a star raven," she replied, which only left Shin looking even more confused.

Jusetsu stared at the man, relieved to see him glancing at the others as he turned things over in his head. She took it as a sign that he'd regained some degree of energy, at least. He was probably going to be all right.

"What happened in Ga Province?" she asked.

Shin's face grew tense.

"If there's something you want to tell Koshun, saying it here would be the fastest way to get the message to him," Jusetsu explained. "Go ahead."

"Koshun...?" Shin murmured. In the next moment, he gasped and covered his mouth with his hand. "H-His Majesty? Why would it be quicker? I'd rather tell His Majesty directly..." Shin sounded confused.

"Think of this as a magic way to reach him. Koshun's listening," she said. It was a simple explanation, but it would only confuse him if she explained the whole thing in detail.

"Huh?" Shin was baffled.

Jusetsu could tell that she was dealing with a sincere yet inflexible man.

"I'm here as an emissary under the emperor's direct command," she explained. "I'm working as his ritual coordinator. What I hear, Koshun hears too. You can communicate with him through me."

"Raven Consort... Are you telling me that you'll send an expedited messenger to him on my behalf?" Shin asked.

"Well, I suppose you could put it like that... Just think of my words as his," Jusetsu responded with a nod. It seemed that Shin was even more rigid in his way of thinking than she initially suspected.

"All right," he said. "Pass this message onto His Majesty. Saname Choyo has sent an emissary to the tribes of the Northern Mountains. That emissary is his second son, Ko. That should tell His Majesty everything he needs to know."

Jusetsu looked down at the star raven, but the bird blinked sleepily.

"Koshun said, 'Understood,'" the Raven relayed to Jusetsu. "That's what the Owl passed along. Yozetsu Jikei is heading to the Northern Mountains too. There's no need to worry."

Jusetsu looked back at Shin. "All right. Let me tell you his response... The salt and iron envoy, Yozetsu Jikei, is on his way to the Northern Mountains. Jikei has contacts there, so things will probably be fine. You don't have anything to worry about."

"But Ko..." Shin hung his head, holding it in his hands. "Is there any chance he could save Ko? He's my younger brother..."

Jusetsu paused. "You can rely on Jikei for that."

These weren't Koshun's words, but her own. She figured that Ko had been dispatched to the Northern Mountains in order to instigate a rebellion. Such an act was punishable by death. Koshun hadn't answered that.

"Ko said that this will be the downfall of the Saname clan. I feel the same

way," said Shin. He started to turn pale again. "It's my own fault for being born. Our clan is going to collapse because of me."

Jusetsu frowned. "Because of you? What makes you say that...?"

"The person I thought was my mother...she wasn't my mother after all. I'm the son of the woman my father loved—the *only* woman my father ever loved."

Jusetsu wanted to ask who that woman was, but hesitated. Shin didn't look like his usual self, so she refrained from asking any more questions.

"That was where all the mistakes began," Shin said, continuing. "I'm sure it was at that point that he started taking the wrong path."

His voice was shaky, but it was hard to tell what kind of emotion was behind it. Was it anger, sadness, remorse, or disdain?

"I see," said the Raven—she was conveying whatever Koshun was saying verbatim.

"Choyo's inconsistency...makes sense now," the Raven continued. "Although Choyo claimed he wanted to maintain a distance from the imperial court in order to keep the Saname clan alive, he was interfering far too much for that to be the case—offering his daughter as a consort, devising plans... It was excessive. His actions contradicted his words."

This was a justifiable point.

"It must have been for Shin's sake," the Raven continued. "He wanted him to have the glory—his beloved son."

Glory? For Shin? Jusetsu stared at him.

"But that's not Shin's fault," the Raven went on.

Shin looked up.

"Choyo was acting of his own accord. If the Saname clan falls, then it'll be his own choices that cause its collapse. Shin doesn't need to take responsibility for his father's whims."

Shin stared back at Jusetsu, appearing absorbed in thought.

"Jusetsu—Koshun has this to say to Shin," said the Raven. "Go back to Ga Province. Order Choyo to retire and stay under house arrest. From now on, you are the most senior member of the Saname clan."

Jusetsu repeated the emperor's message word for word.

"What...?" Shin's eyes darted around the room. He looked flustered.

"You have no other choice. If you leave now, you'll still make it in time."

Koshun had indicated that Choyo's punishment was going to be a modest one. He was likely just being kind—that, or he was taking into consideration the fact that Banka was still pregnant.

"You don't want to see the Saname clan get annihilated, do you?" asked Jusetsu.

"Does this mean I have His Majesty's permission?" asked Shin.

"I assure you—you do."

Shin rose from his seat and got to his knees to bow before Jusetsu.

"Understood. There's just one more thing I'd like to ask."

"Go ahead."

"May I give one of my brothers—Ko or Ryo—the most senior position in the Saname family instead?"

"Ryo...?"

"Ryo is in the imperial capital at the moment. With me in charge, I'll inevitably lead the clan to its ruin," Shin said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I am not going to get married. I'm not going to have any mistresses either. Without any heirs, the bloodline will die out. One of my brothers should be the head of the family."

Jusetsu found it strange, but Shin seemed to have made up his mind.

"All right," she said with a nod.

"That's perfectly fine," Koshun responded.

"Boats to Ga Province seem to be leaving, so I'll head there right away," said Shin. It looked like he was ready to leave the room at any moment.

"Why don't you rest first?" Jusetsu suggested.

Shin gave her a small smile but shook his head. "Your kindness is very much appreciated. I'm feeling slightly better now, thanks to you."

"Only slightly?"

"I will never feel true relief. After all, I'm living proof of my father's sins." Shin looked anguished—as if there was blood gushing out of his wounds. "My mother was my father's younger sister."

That was all Shin said before leaving the room at last.

Jusetsu quickly wrapped some candy in a handkerchief and chased after him. "Shin."

He stopped and looked behind him. Jusetsu placed the candy-filled handkerchief in his hand.

"Pay Banka another visit, won't you?" she asked. "I'm sure she's worried about you."

Shin simply smiled.

"Take care on your journey," she said.

Shin didn't respond. The cold hallway was silent save for the sound of sobbing.

"Is it completely impossible to get over to Je Island?"

After leaving the house, Jusetsu started heading to the port town. The streets

were full of sea merchants and sailors. They all appeared to be trying to while away the time, whether it was by drinking themselves silly or by playing Go in front of buildings. The prostitution district seemed to be doing good business as well.

"Can't they just circumvent the eruption...?" she asked.

"The sea currents present a problem too," replied Tankai. "If the sailors say it's impossible, then it must be."

"There's a fast tidal current that runs from the south to the west of the island before colliding with the current from Ake on the north," Onkei said, explaining what he heard from a sailor. "The colliding currents are pushed southward and then flow east of the island. To put it simply, Je Island is surrounded by fast currents—if you're not careful, they'll carry you right out to sea in no time at all."

"So you need to be able to predict the tides," commented Jusetsu.

In other words, they could *try* rowing haphazardly toward Je Island, but from the sound of it, that was very unlikely to be successful.

"We're not going to make any progress stuck here though."

The group proceeded through the town, then emerged at the headland. From there, they could see the smoke from the volcano. There was a vaguely warm breeze blowing here as well. It wasn't because of the eruption, however—this area apparently had a naturally temperate climate, even in the winter.

Jusetsu was reminded of what Senri had written in his letter.

"I had been worried that the sea winds would be cold during the wintertime, but the weather here is even milder than that in the imperial capital. The climate has proven to be far more pleasant too..."

The very thought of his handwriting filled her with emotion—emotions she had to bite her lip hard in order to hold back.

"There's no point in rushing, niangniang," Tankai said in an attempt to console

her, but Jusetsu said nothing and simply stared at the smoke.

Instead, Jusetsu called out to the being inside her. "Raven, is there any way to calm the volcano?"

"It's being caused by the anger of the sea god from the Palace of Paradise. Us meddling will only *add* to that anger."

Jusetsu stayed quiet.

"Not that I'd ever lose against the White Turtle," the Raven went on.

"Then let's defeat the ao god," Jusetsu suggested. "That should placate the sea god's anger."

"My missing half is on that island."

"What?"

"My missing half is on that island," repeated the Raven. "I know so."

"So...you're telling me that we can't defeat him unless we go there."

The Raven was silent for a while. She probably didn't want to admit that defeating the ao god wouldn't be as easy as she made it sound.

"The White Turtle probably won't show himself now. I know what he's like," the Raven said at last.

"What do you mean?"

"Unless he thinks he's going to win, he lays low. Let's set a trap and lure him out. He's a coward."

Jusetsu thought that over for a moment. "That sounds more strategic than cowardly."

The Raven fell silent again, but the star raven, who was sitting on Tankai's shoulder, flapped its wings about. It looked like the Owl had something to say too.

"The Owl agrees with you. He says I'm just an idiot."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far. The Owl is simply being rude," Jusetsu offered. "As expected."

The Raven seemed to have cheered up a bit now. It was hard to know how to deal with her—probably because she wasn't human. If you criticized her, she'd feel down—and if you defended her, she'd become cocky. She was emotionally maladjusted—quick to anger or burst into tears. It seemed like letting the Owl take the lead had been the right choice after all.

Jusetsu looked up at the smoke and began to think to herself.

"You need your missing half back," she started. "That missing half is on Je Island. The eruption has stopped any boats from sailing there, so we can't reach it, not even if we tried. We need to defeat the ao god in order to stop the eruption, but you need your missing half back to be able to do so... This whole thing just sends us around in circles. Until the eruption is quelled and we can travel to Je Island, there is nothing that we can do."

"The Owl," the Raven said.

"Excuse me?"

"The Owl says he'll figure something out."

Jusetsu paused. "Figure something out? Like what?"

"A way to quell the eruption. He's smarter than me." It seemed like the Raven was at least aware of that fact. "Not a way to quell it *completely*, but to contain it for a little while," the Raven then clarified. "In the meantime, we should go across the sea."

"I see."

In that case, we need to find a boat that'll take us there.

The boats that had come from the waterways were no good. The sailors on those vessels weren't the sort who sailed over to Je Island, so they wouldn't be able to understand the currents. Jusetsu and her group needed sailors who regularly traveled back and forth between Je Island and the mainland to help

them.

"What?"

"The boats that usually sail to Je Island are passenger boats, aren't they?" asked Jusetsu, looking around at Tankai and Onkei. "The eruption is going to settle for a little while. I want to go to Je Island during that interlude. Ask the provincial governor to prepare a boat for us."

"Understood," the two eunuchs responded. They both bowed to her and started running back to town.

The star raven then took off and flew out to sea. Jusetsu gazed on as it disappeared into the distance.

"The governor says he cannot help you," Onkei stated once he'd returned.

"The boats that sail to and from the island belong to the government, or in other words, to my master. Even if we are emissaries sent directly by His Majesty, he will not risk doing anything that may damage the boats or injure those sailing them. The information you have provided simply isn't reliable enough for him," Onkei relayed. "It sounds like the sailors who are skilled enough to navigate between Ko Province and Je Island are invaluable assets. Once the eruption has verifiably settled and it is deemed safe to set sail once

"I can understand his reservations... Just because someone tells you the volcano is going to settle for a time, it doesn't mean it's easy to believe them," said Jusetsu.

more, only then will he allow the boats out to sea."

She was sure Koshun would have trusted her, but that was just because she and Koshun had that sort of relationship.

"Not even I know how long the Owl will be able to contain the eruption for..." she continued. "There definitely is a danger here."

What are we supposed to do?

"Tankai is now searching for sea merchants and fishermen willing to set sail for us. Those sorts of people tend to be very brave and open-minded. I am sure there will be *someone* who's willing to cooperate with us."

"Right. In that case, I'll join the hunt too."

"But niangniang..."

Before Onkei had a chance to stop her, Jusetsu had already started charging ahead. She had to hurry. She didn't know when the Owl was going to manage to suppress the eruption, nor for how long he'd be able to do so.

Once she had reached the town, Tankai appeared from a side road and ran up to her.

"This isn't going to work," he said. "Unfortunately, this is the first time the underwater volcano has erupted. Both boats and sailors are valued commodities, so everybody's reluctant to put them at risk..."

"I thought it was *your* job to convince them otherwise," Onkei said, exasperated.

"Come on—you can't win somebody over when they're totally unresponsive to your arguments. Maybe if they were a little more eager, the discussions would lead somewhere, but..."

"I must say, you've got a real gift for coming up with excuses..." Onkei said, sighing.

"Why don't you go instead, then?" protested Tankai.

"It's not just a boat that we need, but the people to sail it as well," said Jusetsu, thinking aloud to herself.

What Tankai had said was right. If they could find someone who was open to the idea, bringing them on board would be a piece of cake. This wasn't the time to invest effort in convincing those who were entirely unwilling to cooperate.

"Raven Consort," the two military officers suddenly called out, their voices soft. They were now standing on guard.

Onkei and Tankai's expressions also grew tense.

A lone man was approaching the group, clearly aiming for them. He must have been making it obvious in order to indicate that he wasn't hostile. He was in his fifties or thereabouts and had a towering stature. His lips were pursed together in a surly manner, making him look quite grouchy, and he had a cold look in his eyes. This well-dressed man walked in an unhurried manner. He had the face of a cerebral palace official, but Jusetsu guessed that he was likely a merchant. At the same time, not all merchants were friendly.

"I suppose you must be Ryu Jusetsu..." the man said to her, having stopped a short distance away from the military officers.

He had a low, unemotional voice, but it wasn't stern in any way—in fact, there was a certain gentleness to it. *Perhaps refreshing is the right word,* Jusetsu thought to herself—but at that moment, she realized there was someone else who she'd describe in the same way.

Kajo.

The man gave Jusetsu a polite bow. "I heard that you were searching for a boat and crew capable of sailing it. If it's all right with you, our family would like to provide you with what you seek."

"Are you...?"

"I'm a sea merchant. I believe the two of us are connected, to some extent."

"Through Kajo?"

A slight smile came to the man's lips. "I am Kajo's father, Un Chitoku. I hear that you are a kind friend to my daughter."

"It's the other way around. She's the one who's been kind to me," Jusetsu said.

"She enjoys taking care of those who are younger than her, so I'm sure your company is very much appreciated either way."

Jusetsu couldn't help but feel surprised by the subtle display of kindness in his words. From what she'd heard from Kajo, she'd somehow ended up with the impression the man had no real interest in his daughter. It didn't seem like that was actually the case at all.

"The boat is ready to go," Chitoku continued. "Not that it can set sail until the eruption has settled, however."

"It will. I know it," she replied.

Chitoku nodded. "Very well. Now then, let us proceed to the boat." He then turned around the way he came and began walking back toward the port.

Jusetsu looked up at the sky. The plume of volcanic smoke, thick as rain clouds, was still hanging in the air of the darkened sky.

I'm counting on you, Owl.

Shiki could smell a decoction brewing. He took a peek inside the kitchen to find the old woman from the Sho lineage throwing medicinal herbs into a pot that was set on the stove.

Spoon in hand, she turned around to look at him. "How is To doing?" she asked.

"His fever appears to have gone down."

"He should be fine, then."

"Your decoction must have worked wonders," Shiki said. "Thank you so much."

"He has somewhere comfortable to sleep—that's the most important thing. The head of the Jo family has his good qualities too."

Shiki smiled back at her and went back to the other room. Senri had been put to bed and Ishiha sat beside him, soaking the handkerchief that had been placed on Senri's forehead in a washbasin while regularly changing it out for a

new one.

They were inside the home of the Jo family, a line of sea merchants. Shiki and his companions had gotten caught up in the underwater volcano's eruption and were flung out to sea as a result. After being rescued by sea swallows, they'd been brought here. Or, to be more precise, the sea swallows had told the old lady—an acquaintance of theirs—what had happened, and she'd knocked on the Jo household's door.

This old woman was descended from a clan of shrine maidens from Je Island, whereas the Jo family was a sea merchant family that had fallen from grace. Shiki and Senri had met both the old woman and the head of the Jo family the day they arrived on Je Island.

Shiki had regained consciousness as he was being carried along, and Cho had managed to wake up after about half a day. For Senri, however, it had been a close call, and he'd had a high fever ever since the incident. Given his inherently weak constitution, it was no surprise that the frigid sea water had been detrimental to his health—but at long last, his fever had thankfully begun to abate.

Cho worked under the foreign trade director, so he had returned to his post as soon as he felt well enough. He'd turn up every now and then to check how Senri was doing and provide updates on the eruption. According to him, the eruption had cut Je Island off from the mainland, so they hadn't been able to communicate with anyone there. There were plans to make contact by boat from the other side of the island by taking the current and bypassing it, but that was going to take quite a few days. There was also the possibility of using a messenger bird, but it was uncertain that such a bird would be able to reach the island due to the smoke from the eruption—something that was causing its fair share of problems in itself.

"The fishermen are also unable to fish because of the small stones covering the sea's surface. They're in a real fix," Cho had also grumbled. "Even if they were able to go out to sea, they wouldn't be able to use their nets—but what are we supposed to do?!"

Cho was a seaman from Ake and had also been a seafaring mourner—a sort of oracle for sea voyages.

Shiki left the house and made his way toward the headland. The salty sea breeze started to blow against his skin as he neared the exposed area. Right at the tip of the headland, he could see a young girl—Ayura, her loose, long hair flying about in the wind.

Shiki paused. "Where's Hakurai?"

Ayura turned around and looked up at him with her coal-black eyes.

"Hakurai. Don't you know where he is?" he asked again, more slowly this time.

Ayura simply stared fixedly at the man, then shook her head from side to side. It was unclear whether she didn't know the answer or if she just wasn't going to tell him.

Hakurai's whereabouts were currently unknown. No boats had been able to leave the port since the eruption, so he had to be on the island somewhere.

Shiki had heard that it was Hakurai who had found him and his companions washed up on the shore—but by the time Shiki had come back to his senses, he'd disappeared. Nobody had seen him since.

It was thanks to Hakurai that Shiki was safe. That said, it wasn't clear whether Hakurai had *intended* to save him at all.

Shiki certainly hoped not. He didn't want to believe that Hakurai was the sort of person who'd bother trying to help anybody. He was his younger sister's nemesis, not a decent person.

"It was her," said Ayura, pointing toward Shiki's sleeve. "She was the one that told him you were there."

Shiki's younger sister was clutching onto his sleeve. He was able to catch a glimpse of her—or at least, her pale hand—every now and then.

"Are you talking about Hakurai? What do you mean?"

"She asked for help. She called for help for you," Ayura said.

Feeling like he couldn't breathe, Shiki grabbed hold of his sleeve.

Shomei!

Inside his own mind, Shiki screamed his younger sister's name. His breathing still labored, he fell to his knees.

"Why...?" he asked.

He dug his nails into the earth and groaned. How can this be?

"You never know where and how you're going to meet someone..."

That was when Senri's words came flooding back.

"You never know where and how you're going to meet someone or whether they'll be able to help you. It's so curious how one single person can lead you to another, and then another, and another..."

Shiki had then asked Senri a question. "Do only living people count?"

With a tender look in his eyes, Senri had given him this response. "No," he'd said. "It applies to the dead as well."

"The god is searching for him too..." Ayura murmured. Her voice was so soft that the sea breeze drowned it out, leaving Shiki unable to hear what she was saying. "After all, he took the missing part of the Raven with him..."

Hakurai was traveling through the mountains. He was a considerable distance away from the Jo family residence now—and far away from the sea, as well.

There was very little flat land on Je Island. The few plateaus and gentle inclines that did exist had all become port towns, and all the remaining areas were mountains, mountains, and more mountains. Waves had carved sharp cliffs into the edges of the mountains, and they had been eroded further to

create caves and curiously shaped headlands. The island's geology and the sea currents that surrounded it gave the coastal areas a unique landscape, and the mountains that stood against the shore revealed colorful inner layers—some white, some red, and some even with patterns.

There were stone quarries—or stone pits—dotted throughout the mountains. Whether it was hard rock—which was used for everything from walls and staircases to stone coffins—or soft rock, Je Island was truly a treasure trove when it came to stone. The stone cut from these rocks had two highly prized features. It turned a bluish color and developed slip-resistant properties when exposed to water. Unsurprisingly, such stone was primarily used for bathroom flooring. There were also pits from which silica stone—a type of stone utilized in the glass manufacturing process—and alunite were sourced. Sea merchant trade had started with the trade of these sorts of stones.

Extracted stone was transported to the port using a special road built for such a purpose, and that very road happened to be the one Hakurai was currently walking down. Stone that was transported to the port would then be taken to Sho's mainland or to foreign lands via boat.

Some of the stone pits were no longer in use—in some cases to avoid completely depleting all the rock, and in others because they had already been depleted. Hakurai set foot in a stone pit that hadn't been used in many years. There were large pieces of extracted rock here and there with the mark of the pit's proprietor carved into them, but it looked as if there hadn't been any need for them.

Hakurai sat down next to one of those pieces of rock. He clutched a sword in his hands—a black sword with a bare, unsheathed blade.

He raised the black sword in front of his eyes and gazed at its edge. Hakurai could see his own face reflected in the jet-black material. Suddenly, the image of a young girl flashed in his mind. Alarmed, he turned around, but there was no one there. Hakurai let out a sigh, then inspected the blade from one end to another once again. It possessed a mysterious radiance and exuded an

extraordinary divine power—just like the Saname clan's divine treasure that he'd gotten his hands on long ago.

Why did I leave?

He'd acted like he was trying to make a run for it. In fact, he was still acting that way.

This sword was most likely Uren Niangniang's missing half—the one that the ao god had ordered him to find.

The message that had been passed onto him through Ayura crossed his mind as well. The ao god had demanded that he locate the Raven's missing part. If he didn't, he was going to eat both Ayura and Ishiha. It was a clear threat, and one that left no room for interpretation.

He was supposed to give it to the ao god right away, and that would be the end of it. Hakurai and his companions would be saved. He knew that, and yet right now, Hakurai was on the run.

He was getting the feeling that something bad was about to happen. And every time this happened, he always turned out to be right.

Hakurai got back on his feet and disappeared into the woods.

The only things that could be heard were footsteps crunching against the snow. It sounded ridiculously loud. Every time Ko took in a deep breath it felt like his throat was going to freeze, so he took short, shallow breaths instead. Even so, it didn't stop his throat and nose from hurting. His eyelids stung as well. His only solace was that the snow had now ceased falling from the sky.

"Even those who live in the deepest depths of the mountains have roads that lead them all the way down to the sea. Why do you think that might be?" Jikei asked Ko, who was walking along behind him.

Ko didn't have the energy for chitchat, but he felt obliged to answer anyway. "Because...they need salt?"

"Exactly. Those who lived in the mountains got salt from those who lived by the water in exchange for the firewood needed for salt production. When I say 'those who lived by the sea,' I naturally mean my clan, the Yozetsu clan."

Although Jikei had initially been very formal in the way he'd addressed Ko, the more time they had spent together, the more casual his speech had become.

After having met him by chance at a market at the base of the Northern Mountains, Ko had asked Jikei to take him to the tribes who lived there. Since they lived so deep in the mountains, first-time visitors needed a guide in order to locate their settlements. The pair had already crossed one or two mountain passes. They had then continued their ascent and descent until sunset, stayed the night at a woodcutter's cabin, and were now finally approaching the mountain where the settlements stood.

"They call these salt wood roads."

Jikei looked down at his feet and stomped firmly on the snow beneath them. The snow made a squeaking noise.

"Because the wood needed to make salt was transported down them?"

"That's right. They're also referred to as boat wood roads because the wood used to build boats was transported down this same route. Trees from the mountains are used for all sorts of different things—even charcoal or woodwork."

Jikei's physique was surprisingly brawny for his advanced age, and he didn't even need to gasp for air as he spoke and walked at the same time. For Ko, however, these mountain roads had taken their toll—even though he exercised every day. He was dressed in a lamb-fur coat, a woolen robe, a marten-fur hat, and boots made out of yak fur—all items that Jikei had recommended—so thankfully, he wasn't going to freeze. That said, this attire was so weighty that it sapped a great deal of his energy. Jikei had slowed his pace to match Ko's, and they took breaks from time to time.

In front of Jikei, a goods transporter was pulling along a yak with bags of salt

attached to it. A goods transporter's job consisted exclusively of transporting things from the mountains to the town and back. Mountain residents didn't have to make the journey themselves every single time they wanted to buy or sell something.

Jikei had gotten his own attendants to stay at the foot of the mountains while he accompanied Ko on his climb. Ko had left his attendants behind too. The only ones walking these snowy roads were Jikei, Ko, the goods transporter, and the yak. Jikei let the goods transporter and the yak go on ahead and told Ko to take his time.

"Don't people use sleds?" Ko asked, watching as the goods transporter and his yak gradually disappeared into the distance. He couldn't help but feel that sleds would be an easier way to transport cargo on snowy roads.

"In this area, sleds are only used in early spring—never in the winter. The snow in the winter is powdery and lacks moisture, so sleds wouldn't be able to slide across it. They'd just sink instead. It's like sand, you see. The snow that falls in early spring, on the other hand, is icier, which allows the sleds to glide better. That sort of snow makes for much easier walking too," replied Jikei.

Ko could see where he was coming from. Every time he took a step forward, his feet sank deep into the snow underfoot. It was one factor of many that made the trek so arduous.

"In early spring, trees are taken to the river on sleds, and then are streamed toward the town from the river's mouth. Until that time of year comes around, folks have no choice but to stay shut away indoors, sometimes dabbling in some woodwork to keep themselves occupied. Life on warm, flat land is worlds apart from life here." Jikei glanced back at Ko. "If you don't take that into account when negotiating, they won't listen to a word you say."

Ko smiled awkwardly. "It doesn't sound like there'd be much demand for silk," he said.

"People would have no opportunity to wear it, would they? You may as well

go back to Ga Province before they send you away themselves."

"I wouldn't dream of going home without even trying to negotiate."

Jikei frowned, but his expression wasn't one of annoyance. Instead, the look in his eyes was more one of pity. Ko looked down and focused all his concentration on the sound of his footsteps against the snow.

The "negotiation" the two of them were referring to was not a business transaction. They were both aware of that fact, and yet neither of them would acknowledge it openly.

Ko couldn't quite grasp what Jikei's intentions were. It was widely known that Jikei had been a chief vassal of the Ran dynasty, and the Northern Mountains were where the Ran dynasty originated from. For him to try to make contact with the tribes of the Northern Mountains so soon after the existence of a surviving relative of the Ran clan had come to light... It was safe to assume that he had some sort of motive. Ko struggled to deduce what it could be. He'd requested his company with the goal of unearthing what it was.

The most realistic theory to him was that Jikei was going to urge them to embrace that living descendant and rouse them to action. However, as realistic as this idea was, it was also a reckless one. There were some people who were willing enough to make rash, reckless actions every now and then, but having spoken to Jikei, Ko couldn't imagine him being one of them. For better or for worse, he was an intelligent man. He wasn't the sort of person to embroil a whole clan in something so foolish just for the sake of proving his devotion.

That's right, Ko thought. This really is foolish.

It would be simply senseless to rise up in revolt just because one descendant of that dynasty happened to live.

Rebellions were quickly suppressed if no one joined in. Those who would follow were those who'd benefit from the downfall of the dynasty that was currently in power. The downfall of the current emperor would have a worse impact on salt merchants and similar individuals than that of the previous

emperor would have. The emperor had likely already warned his ministries and moderation envoys of the threat, so it was obvious that even if Jikei were to raise an army, it'd be swiftly dealt with. A small, one-off rebellion would act as nothing more than a warning signal.

Still, for Choyo, that would be enough. He had bid Ko go to the Northern Mountains in order to send such a warning. It would be enough to ensure the execution of the Ran Dynasty's remaining descendant—and her elimination was precisely Choyo's goal. After all, she was the obstacle who was getting in the emperor's way.

If a rebellion were to occur, Ko would be given the death penalty for his involvement—but if the Northern Mountains' tribes didn't want to play along, they'd kill him for proposing such an idea. Either way, Ko was marching toward his own death.

There's no way the Saname clan will get off scot-free.

Choyo wouldn't be able to feign ignorance once Ko was involved in the whole situation—he was his second son. Ko couldn't help but feel that his father was making a mistake, and yet he'd gone along with his instructions regardless.

Am I really that desperate for my father's approval? Ko deridingly asked himself. He doesn't even care whether I live or die.

Ko knew that at the end of the day, he was the most foolish of them all. Being treated like he was expendable just made Ko long for acceptance even more. He knew full well how idiotic and pointless that was, but he just couldn't help it.

"There it is."

Jikei stopped in his tracks and pointed ahead. A snow-covered settlement had come into sight, and a cluster of houses stood on a gently sloped clearing. These houses were built on top of stone foundations, with rocks piled up on top of one another to create a level surface. They had thatched roofs and their walls were constructed from intersecting wooden beams. One of the properties, set back from the others and standing on a more elevated patch of land, was

markedly larger than the others. It also consisted of several separate buildings.

"That residence belongs to the chief of the Yusoku lineage."

Ko breathed in and steadied his nerve.

"The whole community is probably in the middle of raking snow right now. Well, they call it *digging* snow around here—they'd never manage to clear any of it with a rake. Anyway, make sure you don't disturb them," said Jikei.

"It's not a very big settlement, is it?"

"This isn't the Yusoku lineage's only settlement—although they have fewer than they once did. And that's the case for all the tribes, not just them."

Ko had heard that there were as many as six tribes living in the Northern Mountains in total. The Yusoku lineage was said to be the biggest tribe of them all, which seemed to suggest that the total population of the Northern Mountains wasn't especially high—even if the Yusoku lineage did have multiple settlements.

"I wonder what they'll think about the eruption on Je Island..." said Ko.

Ko and Jikei had been told about it a few days earlier—and they were probably going to be the first people to pass that message on to the Yusoku tribe. Ko couldn't help but wonder how Jikei was going to share the news and how he was going to use it to his advantage. He took a look at him out of the corner of his eye.

"It'd be a different story if a volcano had erupted on the mainland, but this is an underwater volcano we're talking about—and one on an outlying island, no less. I doubt they'll be all that interested," Jikei answered plainly.

It was impossible to infer the man's intentions from his face. If Jikei hadn't come here to incite a rebellion, then there were only two more possibilities that Ko could think of.

Perhaps he's here to do some investigating.

To Ko, this seemed more probable. The emperor had personally granted Jikei

the position of salt and iron envoy, which was evidence of the trust the emperor had in him. He and Jikei were probably personally acquainted with each other and had formed a close relationship. Taking that into consideration, it was plausible that the emperor had ordered him to go to the Northern Mountains to get a sense of what was happening there. The fact that he used to be a chief vassal in the previous dynasty was a detail that was best left forgotten.

If his suspicions were right, then what was Ko supposed to think of Jikei? How was he supposed to treat him? Jikei had already realized that Ko was there to stir up a rebellion. Did he think it wiser to leave Ko do as he wished so he could observe how the tribes of the Northern Mountains would react? That's how it seemed to Ko, at least.

Should I keep that in mind while I carry out my mission? Ko wondered to himself. No, but then...

Ko was jittery and anxious, and those feelings left him with a burning sensation in his chest. The presence of someone as inscrutable as Jikei was messing with his head and clouding his judgment.

"Ko," Jikei, having begun walking ahead of him, turned around and called out his name. "When you're living in the mountains, death is never far away. It's much more common for babies to die here than it is in the flats. I'm always hoping that those who live here get the opportunity to grow old peacefully. Life is precious—and naturally, so is yours."

Jikei let out a laugh, but there was sorrow in his eyes.

"Do not rush to your death. You're still young."

Ko didn't say anything back. As they both exhaled, their breath turned to white clouds in the crisp, cold air before it drifted behind them.

Jikei had liked Ko from the moment he met him. He was clever, brave, and

quick-witted. With that intelligence came a certain brazen-faced impudence, but to Jikei, that just made him even more fun to chat with.

Ko was the second son of the head of the Saname clan—and as such, it was obvious why he'd come to the Northern Mountains—but that didn't mean Saname Choyo's coldness disgusted Jikei any less.

How dare he do such a thing to his own son...

He'd effectively sent his son to die. Jikei could feel it in his gut. Only Choyo would choose his own son over a stranger for such a role. Through Ko, he could see what sort of man the Saname clan head was.

Jikei felt terrible for the young man. He shouldn't have had any reason to listen to his father, considering how awful he was, but perhaps this was just how the Saname clan did things.

From Jikei's standpoint, there was almost no chance that the tribes of the Northern Mountains were going to stage a major uprising. However, there was a chance that some of them would be inclined to rebel, even if they were just a minority.

The difficult thing was whether that would be enough for Choyo. After all, it wasn't a rebellion that Choyo wanted. All he wished for was a reason for Jusetsu to be killed. There were many ways to ignite that fire—whether it be identifying those who wanted to rebel and snitching on them or coaxing them into doing something that resembled an uprising.

The distance made the situation even more difficult. If something occurred near the imperial capital, it'd be easy to verify the facts and speak with those involved. The Northern Mountains were instead a considerable distance away. If an incident happened there, everything would take more time. By the time notice of a rebellion reached the imperial capital, it'd be too late to suppress it or assert that it was a misunderstanding.

In all honesty, it would be easier to deal with an uprising that had already been staged. It was near impossible to avoid igniting a fire of any kind—and yet,

Jikei couldn't bear the thought of seeing any young people die in vain, whether it be Jusetsu or Ko.

What am I supposed to do? Jikei thought, wracking his brain for answers.

The gate to the settlement materialized from the snow. As they approached, they noticed there was a pattern designed to ward off evil carved into the gate, but even that had been covered in snow, and it was barely visible. The houses had the same detail. While most of them were just single-building properties, the surface of their intersecting beams had similar patterns to that on the gate carved into them—although the exact pattern varied on each house.

The snow had been neatly cleared away right up to the spot where the chief of the tribe's residence stood. The people in the settlement were hard at work shoveling the snow, wooden spades in hand.

"Oh, Yozetsu!" Recognizing Jikei, the people called out to him in a friendly, welcoming manner. "Our chief is waiting for you in his residence."

It seemed Jikei had sent the goods transporter on ahead to inform them he was coming.

"Oh, that doesn't sound good. Let's hurry over," Jikei urged Ko, quickening his pace.

"Is he hard to please?" Ko asked.

"No, far from it. He's very kind—although the mountain tribes see him quite differently. People assume all the tribes in the mountains are full of ruffians, but here, both the citizens and the chief are gentle and amenable folk."

"Here...? Do you mean to say that the other tribes *are* full of ruffians?" asked Ko, reading between the lines.

Jikei laughed. "You'll have to wait and see for yourself."

Ko looked slightly disgruntled. He still wasn't adept at concealing those sorts of emotions, and Jikei found it quite amusing.

I really don't want to let him die.

Ko was a decent young man with a world full of opportunities awaiting him. How could Jikei make him see that?

The chief of the Yusoku lineage welcomed the two of them inside with a friendly grin. He seemed just as affable as Jikei had painted him out to be, and his smile suggested he was a good-natured person. Upon hearing that he was the most senior member of his lineage, Ko had braced himself to meet someone similar to his father, so this came as somewhat as a relief.

"I'm sure those snowy roads were a challenge for you—it was snowing as recently as last night. Usually, it is a little firmer underfoot."

The chief of the Yusoku offered them some hot tea, or at least, that was what he called it. The drink had a viscous consistency and was milky-white in color. It had a salty taste with a hint of sweetness, but it also left an unfamiliar greasiness behind in your mouth. Just as Ko was thinking about how peculiar it was, it was revealed that the drink contained yak milk, and in this region, that was what they called tea. It warmed you up and alleviated fatigue.

It was so warm inside this home that it was hard to believe how different it was from the outside. There was a large, earthenware furnace-like structure against the wall, evidently designed to radiate warmth from the fire burning inside it through to the walls and floors. This room was partitioned off using woolen textiles, and animal pelts were layered on top of carpets over the wooden floor.

"I was just thinking about procuring some more salt, and now here you are. I really am grateful, Jikei."

"No need to thank me. We have a larger surplus than usual this year, so I've been dragging this doddery old body of mine around trying to peddle it to potential customers," Jikei said, laughing jovially.

Although most of his salt was purchased by the government, he was now free

to sell any surplus to whoever he wanted. This was a major reason why the salt trade—which had almost collapsed during the reign of the previous emperor—had been revitalized under Koshun's rule.

"You won't make any profit, bringing it all the way up this mountain. Not that I don't appreciate it, of course," the chief of the Yusoku lineage said with a relaxed smile. Likely around the age of fifty, this man had a full beard and an air of magnanimity to him—as well as a physique so robust that it'd give Jikei a run for his money.

"Jikei here kindly gives us a discount on the cost of transportation, you see," he then explained to Ko. "Goods cost thirty percent more for us than they do in the flats—and we have to sell our products for thirty percent less. Things effectively cost us sixty percent more than they would on the plains. The monopoly on salt has been a big help—nowadays, salt costs the same in the mountains as it does on flat land—but if you want goods transporters to carry it for you, they'll charge a fee too."

"I see..."

Since the monopolization system had set a universal price for salt, it received a fair share of criticism—but the fact that it now cost the same regardless of whether you were in the mountains or in a town was a godsend for those who lived in remote areas. That said, enlisting a goods transporter's assistance incurred extra costs—and there was no real alternative for these mountain-dwelling tribes. Trekking down to a town to make purchases was laborious, and no salt traders would go out of their way to climb the mountain to peddle their excess stock—it'd cost them more than it was worth.

That in itself was a good example of how hard life in the mountains was.

"Our families have been trading with each other for generations. If it wasn't for the wood that you sell us, we wouldn't make a dime." Jikei roared with laughter, then drank his last drop of tea. The chief refilled his cup for him.

"Are you disappointed to discover that you won't make any money from us?"

The chief shifted his gaze toward Ko. It felt as if he was seeing right through him, which gave Ko a fright.

"N-no... The honest truth is, I was being naive." Ko smiled. "I'm the secondeldest, so I need to learn how to stand on my own two feet at some point. That's why I considered offering to do business with you..."

"Why would you do business in a remote place like this? If you wanted to start trading with a new region, then why not somewhere between Ga Province and the imperial capital? It'd have to be somewhere wealthy if you wanted to peddle silk. Either that, or you could turn to foreign trade."

"You know the flats well, don't you?" Ko said.

"All I know is what Jikei has told me. We're so grateful that he imparts his knowledge to us, being as ill-informed about the world as we people are."

He must have been being modest as it was highly doubtful that the chief actually knew that little about the world around him. He was perhaps referring to other members of the tribe who were less worldly.

Ko said nothing.

If they were ignorant of the world around them, then they wouldn't know how pointless staging a rebellion right now would be. Still, doing such a thing to members of such a wise chief's tribe would be unforgivable.

After a pause, Ko spoke again. "Have you never considered living down in the flats? With all due respect, I think you'd have a much easier life there."

Ko's words brought a smile to the chief's face.

"It is true that the flats are more affluent—but I can't imagine us earning a livelihood there and living harmoniously with the local people. Life down in the flats can be grueling in its own way," the chief explained.

Ko nodded. "You're not wrong about that."

Not everyone who lived on flat land was well-off. There were still some who never knew where their next meal would come from.

"That said, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of people leaving the mountains—especially from the younger generations. Some of them successfully manage to blend in and build a good life for themselves, and they invite members of their tribes to follow suit. That isn't just the case for the Yusoku tribe, but for others as well. One day, there might be nobody left up here at all," said the chief. He sounded appalled by the possibility.

"Is that right...?" responded Ko.

"How are things going for the Yukyu and Yukei tribes as of late?" asked Jikei, inquiring about two other tribes in the Northern Mountains.

"Not much has changed. The Yukei tribe have skilled woodworkers among their ranks, so their bowls and pots appear to have been selling for a good price. As for the Yukyu tribe, they had a quarrel with the Yuji tribe in the spring, so who knows what will become of that."

"A quarrel?"

"About who owned which part of a burnt field." The chief then turned to Ko to provide him with some more context. "In the spring, we set fire to the mountains to create ash. We then sell that ash to the ash sellers. Good ash is used as color fixative for dye, or for removing astringency from hemp. Ash is lighter than charcoal, which is why people prefer it."

"Territory disputes are always a struggle—whether they're about how much land comes with a property or about who owns which part of a paddy field."

"That's right. It's a real burden."

"What happens when tribes get into a dispute?" asked Ko. "Do they go to battle against one another?"

"Nowadays, they don't use armed force so much... With all of the tribes dwindling in number, they can't afford to lose any of their workforce. Instead, they discuss things in a civil manner. Most of the time, the chiefs of the other tribes stage an intervention and aid in negotiations. If that doesn't clear things

up, then that's when we're in trouble."

The chief refrained from stating what specifically would happen in such an instance. Instead, he simply smiled. It was probably safe to assume, however, that such a scenario would lead to armed conflict.

"Firewood, woodwork, ash... All of the tribes have different ways of making a living, don't they?" said Ko.

"If we don't try our very hardest to do something unique, we'll end up like the Yukyu and the Yuji tribes," the chief said.

"Oh, I see. It's in order to avoid disputes."

"We spent so long repeatedly bickering and fighting against one another that it ended up decimating our tribes. That's why we settled on doing things the way we do now."

"But you're all still earning your money from wood, aren't you? Whether it's firewood, woodworking, or ash, the material you use comes from the same source." Ko then paused for a moment, having come to a sudden realization. "Oh, I understand now. It's so you don't have to compete for the same customers."

"Exactly. After all, different types of wood lend themselves to different specialties. That's one of the main reasons why we don't have any more disputes with the tatara ironsmiths of Do Province," the chief said.

"From Do Province?"

"They require a huge amount of wood in order to cast their iron, so they'd started coming all the way to the Northern Mountains to cut down our trees. That caused a real predicament for us."

"Do Province's moderation envoy has done an excellent job of keeping them in check—at the direction of His Majesty," Jikei elaborated.

"Is that so ...?"

In other words, the people here had no reason to defy the emperor.

"Still, now that we don't have those sorts of external enemies to worry about anymore, our tribes have started quarreling with one another instead—just like the Yukyu and Yuji tribes are doing. It's not going to end well," the chief said, sighing. "Ultimately, it could lead to their mutual ruin—in which case, our mountain population will diminish even further."

The chief smiled dejectedly. "Has anything new happened recently?" he then asked, turning toward Jikei. It seemed like he was trying to steer the conversation away from the tribes' potentially bleak future.

"I expect you've already heard that a living relative of the Ran Dynasty has been found, haven't you?"

"I have. A traveling salesman who visited the other day told me about her."

"If you want some more recent news, then there's the eruption at Je Island," Jikei offered. "Apparently, a nearby underwater volcano has erupted."

"What?" The chief's eyes widened in surprise. "An underwater volcano...? From a mountain dweller's perspective, I can't even imagine such a thing."

"It had been lying dormant and the bottom of the sea for all this time, and now it's erupting. I expect it's made it difficult for the sea merchants to travel. Their business will be on hold for a while."

"Can't they just use a different port...?"

"Surprisingly enough, there are very few ports that fit the bill. If they used small boats, it'd be a different story, but the sea merchant's boats draw deep... Or rather, they're quite large, so they go so deep down into the water that they'd never be able to fit in a shallow port. Then there's the sea currents to take into consideration too. Depending on the currents, you can get taken in an entirely different direction from the one you wanted to head in. If you're not careful, you could end up stranded or shipwrecked. Je Island, however, is suitable in those respects, so that's why it's the main hub for trade."

"This eruption must present a real quandary, then," said the chief, nodding in

awe.

"Well, yes, but this is an isolated island we're talking about. I doubt much of the upheaval will affect you here."

"I suppose not. Je Island is a fair distance away."

That being the case, the chief didn't show much interest in the eruption itself. When Ko happened to shift his gaze to the side, he spotted somebody standing in the shadow of the woolen fabric that partitioned off the room. He peeked at them out of the corner of his eye. Flustered, the person backed away and appeared to leave.

"Excuse me, but would I be able to take a little look around this settlement?" said Ko.

The chief willingly accepted and offered him a tour.

Just as Ko was about to decline, he changed his mind. "That'd be wonderful," he said.

The man who took on the role of Ko's tour guide was the chief's youngest son.

"My name is Seki," he said.

Seki was an honest-looking young man—around the age of twenty—with a somewhat smaller build than his father.

As Ko followed Seki through the settlement, he noticed that at every single house, men and women of all ages were working hard to clear away the snow with wooden spades.

"People have to dig every time there's fresh snowfall. Otherwise, we'd be submerged in it before we knew it. It'll snow again today, I believe. It's such tedious work, digging day in, day out."

Seki looked up at the sky, and Ko followed his gaze. Indeed, the sky was thick with gray clouds, and it looked like it was about to start snowing at any moment.

"What do you make of our life here?" Seki asked.

Ko shifted his gaze toward him. Seki's eyes were remarkably clear, like those of a young boy. They were full of hopes and dreams, as if all he could see was the future that lay ahead of him.

Don't act as if you've experienced all of the suffering in this world.

Ko gave him a faint smile. "Don't *you* join in with the snow digging?" Ko asked, not answering his question.

Seki's eyes widened and his face flushed red. He'd probably never even tried to shovel snow before. At his house, clearing the snow was likely a manservants' job. Either that, or he'd been mollycoddled like youngest children often were. All of a sudden, Ko's own siblings came to mind. The youngest child in his family was Banka, but he had no recollection of his father ever spoiling her. Her mother never really showed her face, and her father was cold—not just to Banka, but to Ko and his brothers too.

No... That wasn't right.

Ko's older brother was the exception. Their father spoke to him quite regularly—but mostly to give him instructions or scold him and never just to chat.

Even so...

How many conversations have I ever had with my father?

Their father was always polite to other members of the clan or outsiders. He was only cold to his own family. At other times, he was a dignified leader—considerate, extremely wise, and well-respected by all those who crossed paths with him. That fact filled Ko with pride, and as a child, had made him eager to earn his father's praise.

At least if I carried through with his orders and died out here, he might think I'd done a good job.

No—he wouldn't. Ko knew that.

It hurt to breathe.

"These people wouldn't have to go through this hardship if they were living in the flats, at least," said Ko after a few moments, as if their most recent exchange hadn't even happened.

"I-I suppose not..." replied Seki, nodding repeatedly. "Um, did I hear you mention something about an eruption earlier? Something about an underwater volcano..."

Unsurprisingly, Seki had been the one eavesdropping on their conversation.

Ko decided not to challenge him about it and instead flashed him a friendly grin.

"That's right. The underwater volcano near Je Island has erupted. Do you know anything about Je Island?"

"Yes," Seki replied, but he didn't seem very confident.

"It's an island to the southeast of Sho," Ko began. "It's very important, since it's used as a gateway for trade. This eruption is preventing people from traveling to and from it though, and that's causing a lot of trouble. We don't know whether the island has suffered any damage either."

"Is it really a big problem? It didn't sound like it was that serious, going by the way Yozetsu was talking about it."

"He has to downplay it. Otherwise, everyone will worry—especially considering there's still so much public unrest surrounding the discovery of the Ran Dynasty descendant."

That was a lie Ko came up with off the top of his head. The public probably weren't even that interested in the fact that there was a living relative of the Ran Dynasty. On the other hand, the eruption truly was a big issue—at least for those whose livelihoods were affected by it.

"Did you hear about the Ran Dynasty descendant?" Ko asked.

Seki nodded. "The Ran lineage originated from this area, after all. I don't know much about them, aside from what older members of the community

have told me."

He really doesn't know much...huh?

Ko could tell the young man wasn't particularly interested. Perhaps the Ran lineage seemed like ancient history to him. Ko had suspected this might be the case, but he hadn't expected him to be *this* unresponsive. There wasn't even a spark to ignite the fire with. What was he supposed to do now? Was he better off looking into the other tribes?

Or...maybe he could create a spark himself.

"Actually...I'd like to pay a visit to the Yukyu and Yuji tribes' settlements as well. Are they far away?" Ko asked.

"Not at all—they're basically right around the corner. Both of those settlements are just over this mountain pass. There are few habitable areas in the mountains, so we're all clustered together, more or less. That helps keep wild animals away too," Seki explained. "In the spring, we go into the surrounding mountains, set up huts and cut down the trees, moving to a different place every year."

I see, thought Ko. That's the sort of life they lead.

"I'm sorry, but would you mind showing me there?" he then asked.

"I wouldn't mind, but..." Seki looked skeptical.

"It'd be for business purposes. I want to go around all of the settlements in the area."

"Oh, is that right?" responded Seki. He was easily convinced.

If there was no spark to ignite the fire, Ko knew he had to become that spark.

"If that's so, then let me accompany you both," said a voice from behind.

Startled, Ko turned around to find Jikei standing there.

"I was just thinking how I needed to stretch my legs, so it's perfect timing," the older man went on.

Ko said nothing. He stared intently at Jikei's smiling face, but he still couldn't decipher what his true intentions were.

The three of them left the settlement together and began walking along the snow-covered road.

"Hopefully it doesn't start snowing," said Seki, looking up at the sky with a nervous scowl.

The thick clouds were still there, blocking out the sun.

"Ayura. Ayura," the god's voice called out.

As she gazed at the waves lapping up against the reef, Ayura focused her attention on his voice. It felt as if it was reverberating from the depths of the earth—and yet seemed to echo inside her head at the same time.

"Ayura... It's time for you to enter a sound sleep. That's a good girl. I'm just going to borrow your body for a little while. So long as you obey, Ishiha won't be eaten."

His voice had a soft, sweet ring to it.

Ayura closed her eyes.



WOULD IT BOTHER YOU if we stopped by the Yukei tribe's settlement before heading to see the Yukyu and the Yuji people?" asked Seki.

Ko and Jikei both obliged. The Yukyu and Yu tribes' settlements were on the other side of the mountain pass, and the Yukei tribe's settlement was immediately before it.

"The Yukei tribe? Isn't that...?"

"The Yukei people mainly do woodworking."

"Ah yes, they're the tribe with the excellent woodworkers," recalled Ko.

For some reason, Seki looked embarrassed.

Like that of the Yusoku tribe, the Yukei tribe's settlement consisted of thatch-roofed houses standing side by side, although they were noticeably fewer in number. Here, the Yukei people were also hard at work trying to clear the snow.

"All right then. I'll see you later," said Seki before rushing into the settlement.

Jikei smiled as he watched him walk away. "Seki has a crush on one of the girls here, or so I've heard. She's the younger sister of one of the Yukei clan's most talented woodworkers."

"Oh, is that so?"

Jikei had a kind look in his eyes, as if he was watching his own grandson.

"I guess matters of the heart are the only interesting things that happen around here..." said Ko.

Jikei frowned. "There's no need for you to put it like that," he replied.

Ko fell silent and turned his face away.

"Oh, Yozetsu! Now there's a face I rarely see at this time of year."

One of the people who'd been clearing away the snow had looked up and was calling out to Jikei. He was an old man with a beard as white as the snow. He

rested against his wooden spade, using it as an impromptu walking stick to help him maintain his balance.

"I was wondering if you needed any more salt. Is the chief around?" Jikei asked.

"He is, but his hands are full at the moment—the Yukyu and the Yuji tribes have gotten into yet another fight over something trivial. Have you heard about it?"

"Something about a squabble over a burnt field in the spring."

"That's right—and they've been at it ever since. You know how the chief's niece married into the Yuji tribe? She's been dragged in to mediate. We've got enough on our hands with the snow at this time of year—this is the last thing we want," the older man explained.

"I suppose things get even more complicated when you're snowed in. It's terrific that the chief is so willing to help out."

"He's compassionate, that's the thing. He was a hotheaded fella in his youth, but fortunately, that's balanced out with age."

The old man burst into laughter, giving Ko a glimpse of the gaps between his teeth.

"Is this young man your heir, Yozetsu? I'm right in thinking you had a son, aren't I?" he then asked, looking at Ko.

"No, he's..." Jikei paused, seemingly having changed his mind about what he was about to say. "Well, I suppose you could say that."

Was Ko's real identity too much of a hassle to explain? Nevertheless, Ko stayed quiet.

Jikei crossed his arms and pondered to himself for a few moments. "I think I'll go and say hello to the chief anyway," he announced, beginning to walk ahead. "You too, Ko."

Having been urged to follow along, Ko trailed behind him.

The heads of the Yukyu and Yuji clan are here, but...

Ko mulled things over in his head. Jikei might have been entitled to weigh in on their discussion about the dispute, but Ko was a total stranger—there's no way *he'd* be able to get involved. If he was going to exploit anyone, it wasn't going to be the chiefs.

"I'm going to accompany Seki. It would only interfere with the chiefs' discussion if an outsider were to stick his head in," Ko stated, before turning in the direction that Seki had gone.

"Wait!"

Jikei tried to call out and stop him, but Ko pretended not to hear him and he disappeared down a different path.

This walkway had been barely cleared enough to allow a single person to pass through it. Tall walls of snow stood on both sides. As he was making his way down it, Ko flagged down a nearby snow shoveler.

"Do you know where I can find the most talented woodworker's house?" Ko asked.

"You're probably looking for the home on the western edge of the settlement," replied the person, although he was giving Ko a suspicious glare. He probably thought Ko was here to purchase some of the artisan's wares.

The home on the western edge of the settlement was small, consisting of nothing more than the main residential building and a separate workshop. There was no one shoveling outside. Without warning, some of the snow that had accumulated on the thatched roof silently slid off and landed beside the house.

Ko could hear the incessant sound of wood being whittled down somewhere nearby. He began to make his way toward the main house before he realized the sound was actually coming from the workshop instead.

"Excuse me," said Ko as he pushed open the workshop's wooden door.

The whittling sound stopped, and the warmth from inside the workshop gradually drifted toward the door. Not wanting the heat to escape, Ko swiftly stepped inside and shut the door behind him. In the corner of the room stood an earthenware furnace. A pot filled with water sat on top of it, steam rising from the water's surface up into the air. Ko took a look around the area. Wood chippings were scattered across the workshop's dirt floor. There were carpet-covered floorboards at the rear of the room, but unpainted wooden pots and bowls were stacked high there.

Two men and a young girl were in the part of the room with the dirt floor. One of the men was Seki, while the other one—who was sitting in front of a lathe stand holding a woodworking plane—appeared to be in his late twenties. A lathe was a piece of equipment used for whittling down wood. The wood was attached to the lathe horizontally, and by pressing on the footboard, a woodworker could rotate the lathe, enabling them to plane and smooth out the wood's surface. This was a process to make round wooden goods like bowls and pots.

A frightening amount of wood shavings were piled around the man. Seki stood beside him, and the young girl behind. The man looked wary of this sudden, unfamiliar visitor, and the girl's face had a look of terror. The man must have been Yukei tribe's best woodworker, which meant that the young girl was his younger sister—the object of Seki's affections.

Seki looked surprised. "What's wrong? I thought you were with Yozetsu." He then looked toward the woodworker to explain who Ko was. "This man is a visitor. He's from the Saname clan—a silk merchant clan."

"Yozetsu went to greet the chief. He's in discussions with the chiefs of the Yukyu and Yuji tribes, so I decided not to intrude."

"Is that so?"

"Was it all right for me to come inside?" Ko asked the woodworker.

"Yes," the woodworker responded tersely. He didn't seem especially friendly.

"I heard that you're a remarkably skilled woodworker," continued Ko. "I wanted to take a look at your wares myself."

"If it's bowls and pots that you're after, there are piles of them over there," responded the woodworker, jutting his chin in their direction.

What a glum-looking man, Ko thought to himself. The artisan had a gloomy, world-weary look in his eyes.

"This is Jo. He's the Yukei tribe's finest woodworker," Seki said proudly.

Jo showed no reaction. Instead, he just put his foot back on the pedal and started rotating the lathe again.

Ko sat down in the corner of the floorboard-covered section of the room and picked up a bowl from the pile. It was pleasant to hold and had an equally pleasant fragrance. Its sides and edges were smooth and free of any rough spots that might snag your fingers.

"That would make a beautiful bowl if you took it down to the lacquer craftsman at the foot of the mountains to lacquer. Even the lacquer craftsmen comment on how Jo's bowls are smooth and comfortable to hold..." Seki explained.

"That doesn't surprise me. These are some excellent pieces," said Ko, gazing intently at Jo's work. If the craftsman joined forces with a skilled lacquer painter who used quality materials, his items could command a very high price.

"Do you think they'd sell well in the imperial capital? Hypothetically speaking," Seki asked.

"What?" said Ko, looking up at him.

Seki's eyes were brimming with expectation.

"Well, as long as Jo was able to work with a good lacquerer, I'm sure he could bring in some steady sales. It'd just depend on the quality of the lacquer, I presume."

"That lacquerer at the foot of the mountain is really talented. With his

cooperation, Jo would definitely be able to make a life for himself down below..."

"Stop talking nonsense, Seki," Jo hissed, shutting Seki up.

Hmm. By the sounds of it, this woodworker has dreams of leaving the mountains, Ko conjectured. He must have discussed those dreams with Seki, and perhaps Seki shared the same dreams. Did he wish to flee the mountains too, taking Jo's little sister with him? A few moments earlier, the young woman had sat down in front of the furnace and begun to spin yarn on the spinning wheel set up there. Seemingly distrustful of the stranger who had just entered her brother's workshop, she hadn't said a word.

"It's not every day that we get the opportunity to speak to a merchant like this, though. We can't let this chance go to waste," Seki passionately protested.

Jo, however, responded coldly. "It's not as if the chief would allow it, anyway," he said, sounding listless.

"Won't your chief let you leave the mountain?" Ko asked him, but it was Seki who answered.

"He wouldn't want to lose a talented craftsman like Jo."

Jo carried on quietly, whittling away at wood.

Ko looked at the pile of bowls in front of him and pondered what he had heard. Seki kept asking him different questions about life on the flats as he did, and Ko threw in a few appropriate remarks every now and then just to be polite, but he wasn't actually paying attention.

A little while later, someone came and opened the door.

"Excuse me," said a cheery voice. "Is Ko in here?"

It was Jikei. The man scanned the room, and his eyes came to a halt as soon as he spotted Ko. He strode up to him and grabbed him by the arm.

"Wh-what do you want?" Ko asked.

"Come with me for a moment."

"Where to ...?"

Jikei forcibly dragged him out of the room. Seki was dumbfounded, while Jo—on the other hand—just took one brief glance at Jikei, not even stopping what he was doing.

"I've been talking with the chiefs, and they just can't seem to come to an agreement. Neither side is willing to budge since their tribe's profits will be directly affected. I, however, have an idea," Jikei said. "I have a favor to ask of you, Ko."

"What do you mean?"

Ko was unable to deduce what sort of favor this might be, and he was still none the wiser by the time he was forced into a seat at the discussion table. The chiefs were well-built men with full beards, all very similar to each other in both age and appearance. It was a challenge to tell them apart.

"Is this that kid from the rich family in Ga Province?" asked the chief of the Yukei tribe. He appeared to be the eldest of the group—probably in his sixties. His voice was low, muffled, and he sounded quite sleepy—or perhaps he was just tired of arbitrating.

"So, Yozetsu—what's your plan?" asked the Yukyu tribe's chief in a highpitched voice. He had big eyes with double eyelids, but the way he was constantly blinking suggested his eyes were quite dry.

"If you want us, the Yuji tribe, to even *consider* obliging, it'll have to be something extremely clever."

The chief of the Yuji tribe was the youngest of the bunch, but he was still in his early forties or so. His glossy skin gave him a youthful appearance and his voice was irritatingly loud. On first impressions, it seemed like the chiefs of the Yukyu and the Yuji clan were really butting heads. It was hard to imagine either of them giving in.

What could Jikei possibly want from me? Ko wondered. He stole a sideways glance at Jikei to find the man beaming smugly.

"In Ga Province, there's a large road that runs between the home of this young man's clan and the port," Jikei said. "Have you ever heard about that?"

All three chiefs looked skeptical.

"No," said the chief of the Yukei clan, speaking on behalf of the three of them.

"That road was built by the Saname clan, who were the region's rulers at the time. It's a well-made road—the soil was shoveled out in order to lay down stones, and then tamped down again and covered with sand. The sand improves drainage and stops the road from getting muddy when it rains."

"Right..."

The chiefs all looked confused and unimpressed. Ko, meanwhile, was simply surprised by how knowledgeable Jikei was.

"You need to be skilled in the art of surveying to build such a road, and there were members of the Saname clan who were. The Saname clan used to excel in such things." Jikei then shifted the conversation toward Ko. "Is that not so?"

Ko nodded. "We've always been good at considering the small details."

"Chiefs—the reason you keep getting to disputes is because you're sticking to the same overly-generous boundaries set by your ancestors. It's about time you draw out some clear, precise borders," said Jikei.

"Clear?" The chief of the Yuji tribe frowned, clearly dissatisfied with this suggestion. "In our case, the borders are already clear."

"In ours too," contended the Yukyu tribe's chief, enraged. "We've never taken a single step outside of the established boundaries! It's the Yuji tribe who aren't playing by the rules."

"What did you just say?!" raged the Yuji tribe's chief, veins practically bulging out of his forehead.

The chief of the Yukei tribe, sick and tired of their bickering, simply sighed. *Are they always like this?* Ko couldn't help but wonder. If so, it must have been really draining.

"That is what I'm trying to tell you. The boundaries that each of you believe to be correct actually overlap. It's inevitable for that to happen now, after all this time. These mountains have evolved too."

The two chiefs went quiet.

"So, why don't we measure the boundaries that both of you believe to be correct, work out the numbers, and then try to find a compromise?" offered Jikei.

Both chiefs hung their heads sulkily and crossed their arms.

"Measuring the boundaries isn't a bad idea," said the chief of the Yukyu clan, "but I can't see how it's going to solve anything."

"It's not as if either of us are going to agree on the measurements. We can't entrust such a task to a stranger either," the Yuji tribe's chief stated.

"That's why I called this young man here," explained Jikei, slapping Ko on the back.

That hurts, he thought—but he made sure to keep his displeasure to himself.

"The task will be in safe hands with the Saname clan," Jikei continued. "As I said before, there's an art to surveying. I can guarantee that clan'll do an impeccable job."

He isn't joking.

Ko had had a vague idea of where this was going ever since Jikei had mentioned the road, but he didn't know how serious the man was.

The two chiefs exchanged glances. They didn't look *totally* unhappy with this suggestion.

"Well... If you're willing to vouch for them, Yozetsu, then..."

"Yes. The Saname clan will be more trustworthy than a fool from the foot of the mountain, at least."

The local clans were very trusting of Jikei, given how long their respective ancestors had worked together.

This can't be happening, thought Ko, his face turning blue.

"D-don't be ridiculous, Jikei."

"I didn't think I was."

"Surely there must be someone else you can trust to survey the area—who isn't from somewhere as remote as Ga Province," Ko countered.

"You're the one who traveled all that distance to acquire a new sales client. This is a business proposal in itself—I'm not going to make you do it for free." Jikei then turned to the two chiefs. "Is that agreed, then?"

"Well, if all you say is true, then why not?"

"Of course."

I've got to hand it to him, thought Ko. He's done a great job of using my excuse for coming here to his advantage.

Ko had no reason to decline now. Jikei's audacity aggravated him, but there was no way he could let it show in front of the chiefs.

"Fine," said Ko at last, giving them a strained smile. "I'll let my family know and have them send someone over."

The two chiefs nodded. The one from the Yukei tribe let out what sounded like a deep sigh of relief.

As soon as Ko left the chief's residence—where the discussions had gone on—he lashed out at Jikei.

"You're unbelievable, Jikei!"

"Why? I thought you'd be happy—I organized a deal for you."

"This isn't a joke! We're not going to make any money from that. You know how much it costs just to get here."

"But you came here looking for business nonetheless?"

Jikei's words left Ko stumped. The older man then let out a cheerful laugh and slapped Ko on the back again.

"That hurts," Ko snapped. "It hurt the first time too."

Ko had been hoping to take advantage of the Yukyu and Yuji tribes' feud if luck was on his side, but there was little chance of that now. Their dispute had been solved—and he was the one who'd solved it. It was unbelievable. There was no point even heading to the Yukyu or Yuji settlements now.

Shit, Ko cursed to himself inside his head. At this rate...

Visions of Seki and Jo came to mind.

"Oh, it's snowing."

Jikei and Ko looked up at the sky above. Snowflakes had started drifting down from the gray clouds.

The chief of the Yukei tribe came out of his home.

"It's already coming down, isn't it? It won't be long until it starts piling up. It's almost dusk too. Walking down the snowy roads will be dangerous. You're very welcome to stay the night at my home."

"That'd be wonderful," said Jikei, gladly accepting his offer.

Ko, who'd now lost any motivation to call at the Yukyu and Yuji tribes' settlements, also decided to go along with this idea.

"I'll let Seki know," he said, before heading through the snow to Jo's residence. He could still hear the sound of wood being whittled coming from the workshop.

"It's snowing," said Ko, opening the door.

Seki, Jo, and Jo's younger sister were still inside.

"Snow? Again...?" Jo said despairingly, stopping his lathe.

"Seki," said Ko, "the chief said we could stay the night at his residence."

"Is that right?" Seki turned despondently toward Jo's little sister. "I'll be back tomorrow."

"All right," she responded, smiling shyly back at him.

By the time Seki and Ko stepped outside again, the sun was already beginning to set behind the edges of the mountains. The snow cloud-covered sky was turning an even darker shade.

As they walked along, Seki looked over his shoulder at the workshop with a sympathetic look in his eyes. "Jo's parents have already passed away. His father was crushed by a tree that was being cut down, and his mother died of an illness. That has made life so much more a struggle for him..."

"I suppose it was that struggle that drove him to become the Yukei tribe's greatest woodworker," said Ko.

Seki nodded. "The more you hone your skills, the higher a price your work can fetch. That said, it's the chief who's in charge of all purchases and sales, so no matter how much he polishes his craft and how much the tribe as a whole profit off it, Jo himself is never going to get rich."

"Oh... Is that how it works?"

This phenomenon wasn't limited to the mountains. Products manufactured in the countryside tended to be collected and traded by whoever happened to be in charge there. It would actually go against the manufacturer's interests if they had to transport items and negotiate prices themselves.

"Is that why he wants to live on the flats?"

Seki said nothing.

"It's true that someone as talented as him would probably make more money

working for himself than for the sake of everyone here—but the chief would never let such a thing happen, would he?" Ko asked.

"Well... Perhaps not..."

Seki sounded evasive. Ko sensed he was probably uncomfortable commenting on the affairs of another tribe.

"Here in the mountains, there are rules we have to follow," he went on.

"But of course," said Ko.

This was a given—they'd never be able to survive as a collective otherwise.

"But that's precisely why the young people want to leave. They abhor those old-fashioned rules. I'm not wrong, am I?" he continued.

"No..."

"Are you one of them?"

"What?"

"Do you want to leave the mountains too? With that girl?" pressed Ko.

Seki shook his head, looking rattled. "No, I could never. I'm not a talented woodworker like Jo... That, and she's scared of the flats. She'd never go."

"Oh."

This was somewhat anticlimactic, but it made sense. Seki and that coward of a girl would undoubtedly be better off in the familiarity of the mountains as opposed to thrusting themselves into the unfamiliar world of the lowlands.

Both men were silent for a while.

Then, Ko stopped in his tracks. The snowy road was so narrow that only one person could pass at a time. Seki, who was walking ahead, looked back at him.

"Is something the matter?"

"I'd like to have a quick business discussion with Jo. Go on ahead."

Ko turned back the way they'd come and began retracing his steps. The sun

had set early. The area was already enshrouded in a veil of dusky gloom, and flakes of white snow lightly fluttered through the air. His deep sigh formed a white mist before him.

Even though the sun had gone down, there were no lights on inside Jo's main house now. Ko could still hear the hum of the woodturning lathe coming from the workshop. He must have worked non-stop from morning until night.

When he saw that Ko had returned, Jo gave him a suspicious look and—unsurprisingly—stopped his lathe.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I wanted to have a brief conversation with you. It's about business."

Ko glanced toward Jo's younger sister. Sensing that Ko wanted her to leave, Jo instructed her to go and warm up the house. She looked hesitant, but did as her brother ordered nonetheless. She abandoned her spinning wheel and exited the workshop.

"So?" Jo spoke in a curt manner—one that suggested that he found having to converse with Ko terribly irksome.

"I heard that you wanted to leave the mountain. I'm going to help you out," Ko stated straightforwardly.

Jo raised his eyebrows. "How come?"

"Because I'm impressed by your skills. It'd be a shame for your potential to remain untapped."

"Do you really think I'm going to trust the flattery of some outsider?" Jo said, snorting.

"In the lowlands, everyone will be an outsider. Those outsiders are the ones you want to do business with, aren't they? Only an outsider will be able to free you from these mountains. Do you think you can pick and choose why somebody decides to help you?" Ko said with a smile, but Jo just scowled.

"Are you on board with this opportunity or not? You have one night to decide,

so give it some careful consideration," Ko declared, and then he left the workshop behind him.

He started making his way to the chief's residence, but just as he was approaching the narrow, snowy road, something startled him and brought him to a halt. It was Jikei, standing right there in front of him.

Even in the dim light, Ko could tell that the look on his face wasn't a happy one. He was flanked on both sides by walls of snow, so there wasn't space for Ko to squeeze past.

"What have you been doing?" Jikei asked in a low voice.

"Talking business with Jo. Why would that bother you? It's not as if I'm going to make much money from mapping out the mountains. An extra deal isn't going to hurt..."

"This region is not fit for the sort of 'business' you're looking for. I thought you knew that. I have a good idea of what Saname Choyo has sent you here for, but I can't comprehend why he'd make you do something so idiotic."

It seemed that Jikei was done with silently trying to deduce Ko's intentions. He wasn't going to mince his words anymore.

"You're an intelligent young man, Ko. You must have known from the offset that this plan was unwise."

As Ko had expected, Jikei had indeed come to the Northern Mountains to assess the situation in the area. Not only that, but he'd come to *stop* any potential rebellion that might break out. He was in the exact opposite position to Ko's.

Ko heard some snow tumbling off the branch of a tree. Jikei was giving him a hawklike glare, but Ko gazed serenely back at him.

"I don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"You're not going to escape this situation unharmed. Do you realize that?"

Ko tried to get past him, feigning ignorance, but Jikei grabbed him by the

collar and started aggressively reprimanding him.

Infuriated, Ko glowered back. "Of *course* I do. If I didn't, I wouldn't have put myself out on such a limb. I made peace with what I was getting myself into."

"You damn fool! Why in the world would you force yourself to accept it?!"

Jikei pinned Ko against a wall. Snow fell down from above, fine flakes wafting through the air like smoke.

"There's no need to panic. A small uprising or two should be suppressed in no time."

"Will that be enough to satisfy Saname Choyo, as long as it means the descendant of the Ran Dynasty gets killed?"

Jikei knew exactly what was going on.

His Majesty truly is a step above my father, Ko thought to himself, smiling slightly.

"Yes. Wouldn't that be best for His Majesty as well? He'd be rid of the hassle she causes him."

Jikei loosened his hold on Ko and let out a sigh. "Whether or not somebody is a 'hassle' does not decrease the value of their life."

Ko snorted with laughter, but Jikei just gazed at him with a forlorn look in his eyes.

I wish he wouldn't look at me like that, Ko thought.

Jikei's pitying expression messed with his head.

"That isn't only true for the descendant of the Ran dynasty either. You're right in saying that a small uprising could soon be quashed, but that would also mean that you and several other local people would lose their lives—lives that otherwise wouldn't have been taken so soon." Jikei slapped Ko on the back and then shook him by the shoulders. "Young folks like you shouldn't rush to their own deaths. I want you to live."

What is he talking about?

Ko stared at him. "Why is my life of such importance to you? I don't understand what you're so frantic about."

"You..."

At a loss for words, Jikei hung his head. His hands—which were still on Ko's shoulders—were shaking. When Ko peered questioningly at his face, he noticed that the man was crying. Understandably, Ko was taken aback.

"Wha... J-Jikei, wh-what's wrong?"

Ko wondered if he was unwell and if something was causing him physical pain. He was still an old man, no matter how solidly built he was. But just as Ko was about to place his hand on his arm, Jikei grabbed hold of it and squeezed tight.

"I can't let you die. No matter what plans you come up with, I'm going to put a stop to them. Do you understand?"

Why...?

Ko looked into Jikei's tear-filled eyes, perplexed. The two men continued to stand in the dim evening light as the snow began to pile up on their shoulders.

The boat that Kajo's father, Chitoku, had prepared was about half the size of the ones the sea merchants tended to use. He'd chosen a small boat because of the port that smaller boats used. It was a dugout canoe with additional gunwales attached to its sides and was also used for fishing.

"The ports where the passenger boats and fishing boats dock are further away from the eruption zone and are further inland than the large ports used by the sea merchants too. If another eruption were to occur, the boats wouldn't be damaged."

The water at that port was shallow, so larger boats wouldn't be able to fit. Jusetsu nodded when she heard Chitoku's explanation—it made sense.

A day had passed, but the eruption still hadn't settled, and the sky was still covered with volcanic smoke.

Jusetsu and the others waited by the harbor nonetheless, prepared for it to stop at any moment. Chitoku had lent them his best sailors, and they had gotten the ship ready to leave the harbor at a moment's notice. Onkei and Tankai—who was holding Shinshin—had now joined them. Jiujiu, understandably, had been made to stay behind at the governor's residence.

"You really are brave, aren't you, Chitoku?" said Jusetsu.

Chitoku gave her a faint smile. Although it may have looked cold, anyone who actually interacted with him would soon realize it wasn't.

"I'm flattered that you would say so. After all, you are the one who's about to sail across the sea this time."

"From my standpoint, sailing back and forth regularly seems far more daring," she said.

This was Jusetsu's first time seeing the sea with her own eyes. She hadn't imagined it to be so vast, so boundless. She couldn't see the bottom, and its waves were rougher than she'd expected. It was quite eerie.

"Ha ha... Once you grow accustomed to it, it becomes second nature. There's nothing quite like feeling the sea breeze from aboard your boat. Being on land is what feels more unfamiliar to me now."

"Really?" Jusetsu was surprised. "It sounds like you really like the sea."

"I do..." Chitoku began. "At first, it wasn't the water that interested me, but rather the goods the merchants brought with them. There were always merchants showing up at my family home, of course, but the ones who brought the most unique items were the ones from the sea."

Items with turban shell inlays, jewels with unusual lusters, strange masks, dolls... These were all examples that Chitoku gave of things they had brought with them.

"There was even a magic tool of some sort from Uka, the land of oracles. They have an oracle queen there."

"Oh really?"

"Not just Uka, but the nations of Kada and Karoku also have oracle queens. It's a whole different world compared to how things are here."

"You mean to say that those countries do things in a different way?"

"Exactly. Their traditions aren't like ours, and so is the way that people think. Well, that's the case for all foreign nations, but even so..."

"Oh..."

Chitoku carefully explained to Jusetsu what being a sea merchant was like, and all about foreign countries. This was all new information to her, and she had been enjoying listening to him talk ever since the two of them had first met the day before.

"Are there ghosts in other countries?" Jusetsu asked.

"There are indeed. Monsters, as well."

"Monsters? Are they like gods?"

"I'm not sure. I've never seen one for myself," he admitted. "I've met a ghost at sea, though."

"Are there really ghosts at sea?"

"There are, believe it or not."

These off-the-cuff anecdotes fascinated Jusetsu. He was an incredibly interesting man.

"Sea merchants and sailors tend to keep lucky charms with them at all times."

"What do you mean?"

"They're not written talismans, but physical objects. It is believed that things once worn by a blood relative are the most effective."

"What kind of lucky charm do you have, Chitoku?" Jusetsu asked.

There was a brief pause, and Chitoku awkwardly scratched his chin.

"Well, I have my daughter's... My daughter's shoes," he eventually admitted, sounding embarrassed.

"Shoes? They must be big to carry around."

"No—they're from when she was a just a kid. Ha ha..." Chitoku chuckled in an attempt to conceal his discomfort.

Jusetsu watched his face from the side. She couldn't help but wonder if Kajo had ever seen him looking so embarrassed.

"Oh! The smoke!"

Jusetsu was startled by the commotion that suddenly broke out. The people who had gathered at the port to watch the eruption began to make a lot of noise.

"Doesn't it seem like the smoke is getting sparser?"

"It's shrinking."

When Jusetsu took a look for herself, she noticed that the previously dense volcanic smoke that had been billowing up into the sky had not only faded, but it wasn't reaching up as high either. It was clearly losing momentum.

Jusetsu glanced at Chitoku and he looked down at her. After this exchange of glances, they nodded at each other.

"Let's go," Jusetsu told Onkei and Tankai and then boarded the boat.

"Go," Chitoku ordered the sailors that had gotten into position.

The sailors started rowing the boat's oars, and the vessel began to move. The pumice stones that covered the shoreline rattled against its sides, but it continued on its way even so. The sight of the boat caused a stir among the people at the port, who couldn't believe that someone was setting sail amid all that was happening. A flag flew from the ship—one with blue tassels, signifying

that those on board were working under the direct command of the emperor.

The boat diverted to the north on the current, heading for the port of Je Island. Jusetsu stood near the bow of the boat, gazing out to sea. The eruption had stopped, and the smoke that had been hanging in the air was growing fainter. The waves were now calm. The boat caught a gentle tailwind, making it glide across the water.

How had the Owl managed to placate the sea god at the Palace of Paradise?

"The Owl..." groaned the Raven.

"What's wrong? How did the Owl hold back the sea god?"

There was a pause before the Raven answered. "He offered himself as a forfeit."

"A forfeit...?"

"Yes. He promised that we will defeat the White Turtle that's causing the stormy seas. If we fail, he will offer himself up."

"Offer himself up...? What do you mean by that?"

"As a sacrifice."

Jusetsu gulped.

The Owl.

He was prepared to sacrifice himself to save the Raven.

"Is the Owl...with the sea god now?"

"Yes. He's a forfeit, so he can't fight with us." The Raven's voice was barely audible, and it sounded like she was holding back tears. "Even though he said he'd stay with me... That liar."

Jusetsu put her hand on her chest. "All we have to do is defeat the ao god. Nothing's going to change. That's right, isn't it?"

"All we have to do is defeat him... Yes. We can do that. It'll be fine. All we

need to do is get my missing part back."

"Exactly."

At that moment, the hull shook violently. Onkei pulled Jusetsu down and threw himself over her. Sea spray poured down on top of them.

"Is it the eruption?" she asked.

"No, it's just some sudden tall waves."

The boat rocked from left to right once again. The sailors pulled the oars back inside the boat to prevent them from being swept away.

"There's no eruption," said Tankai, shading his eyes with his hand as he looked out at the water.

Jusetsu got up and took a look for herself. He was right—there was no eruption. The weather wasn't bad either. The raging waves were all concentrated around Jusetsu's boat. Gradually, the current began to form a strange whirlpool, provoking screams from the sailors.

"Since the Owl came to an agreement with the sea god at the Palace of Paradise..." Jusetsu muttered, "That suggests that this is the ao god's doing."

"In that case..." said the Raven, before calling out Shinshin's real name. "Harara!"

Shinshin's body instantly began to swell. Or rather, its feathers had just fluffed up in the wind. Jusetsu found herself unconsciously reaching out to the bird, shocking herself. She realized it wasn't *her* controlling her hand, but the Raven.

Her fingers pulled a few feathers out of Shinshin's body. Instead of falling onto the deck of the boat, they rose up into the air, sparkling with a golden hue.

Jusetsu pointed out to sea, and each feather soared like an arrow before disappearing into the water. After a brief interval, the turbulent waters gradually calmed down. The whirlpool dispersed, and the water surrounding the boat reverted to the same serene state it had been in before.

"The waves have died down!" exclaimed the sailors, sounding relieved.

"It won't be long until we get attacked again. Hurry," the Raven warned, so Jusetsu passed the message onto the sailors.

The tailwind helped propel the boat along at a rapid pace. Wary that the waves could lash out again at any time, the crew persevered until they ultimately arrived at the port. It was situated at the mouth of a river with a long, narrow shoal, creating an inlet with shallow waters and gentle waves, making it the ideal spot. The shoal's gentle incline was paved with stones on which several boats were moored. These boats had been tied to a post that was lodged into the slope. As they approached the stone-paved shoal, the sailors climbed out into the shallows and began to push the boat up. They tied a rope from the boat to the post to keep it in place while Tankai and Onkei climbed ashore and grabbed hold of Jusetsu's arms. Clutching Shinshin, Jusetsu stepped out of the boat, but her toes got wet right away as the waves washed in behind her. Panicked, Jusetsu leapt away.

There were several other boats lined up against the shoal. These were fishing boats, the sailors explained. They weren't able to go out fishing because of the eruption, so there was no sign of any fisherman on the shore. They must have all been waiting inside the buildings for the eruption to subside. As a result, the area was quiet, completely drained of its previously lively atmosphere.

The sailors each had their own residences or inns that they frequented on Je Island, so they were to stay there until it was time to go back. After all, no one had a clue how many days it would take for Jusetsu and her companions to track down the missing half of the Raven and defeat the ao god.

"Let's start by saying hello to the foreign trade director," said Jusetsu, intending on heading to the port town—but Shinshin started kicking up a fuss in her arms and broke free.

"Come here, Shinshin," she called out, reaching out to grab the bird, but it was too late. It had already flown away.

Shinshin soared over the pine forest that stretched along the coast and disappeared from sight. Jusetsu and her assistants chased after the bird together.

Around the bend from the pine forest was another beach. A young boy with a diminutive build and tanned skin stood there, dressed in hempen clothing. Just as Shinshin was about to dive into his arms, Jusetsu and the others caught a glimpse of his face. They all gasped in astonishment.

"Ishiha!"

He might have been wearing different attire, but it was undeniably him.

Ishiha had spotted Jusetsu and her assistants too. He was standing bolt upright with Shinshin in his arms, his eyes wide.

"So, this is where you've been."

Ever since Ishiha had been kidnapped by the ao god, his location had been impossible to trace. Had he come to this island *with* the ao god?

"You haven't been injured, have you?" Jusetsu asked.

"No, niangniang," Ishiha replied. "I... I'm sorry I wasn't able to come home." He cast his eyes downward, looking apologetic.

"It's fine. I understand. I'm sure the ao god was there breathing down your neck."

"The ao god...demanded that we locate the Raven's missing half. If we didn't, then..."

"Then what?"

"He'd eat us." Ishiha looked like he was about to cry.

Jusetsu frowned. *I see,* she thought. *The ao god is far more cunning than the Raven—and far more tenacious too.*

"Who do you mean by 'us'?" inquired Tankai.

Ishiha turned toward him. "Me and Ayura," he clarified.

"Ayura... Wasn't she a childhood friend of yours?" asked Onkei, narrowing his eyes as he retraced his memory.

Ishiha nodded.

"She's the girl Hakurai was calling Injo, isn't she? The one that he brought with him," said Jusetsu.

She'd heard this from Koshun. Ishiha nodded again, confirming that she was correct.

"Ayura said that she could hear the god's voice—but she had to be near water to be able to hear it..." Ishiha glanced nervously around him.

"What's wrong?"

"I've been trying to find her. She keeps disappearing lately. That man Hakurai vanished too—along with Shiki..."

"Shiki? Reiko Shiki?!" Jusetsu exclaimed in astonishment.

"Yes, that's him," replied Ishiha, shocked by Jusetsu's reaction. "I think he got caught up in the eruption when he was out at sea and ended up washing up at the beach... I helped pull him out and carry him, alongside all the sea swallows."

Sensing Jusetsu's alarm, he hurriedly added, "He's fine now though. All three of them."

"All three?"

"Um, yes. Him, Senri, and Cho."

Senri!

Jusetsu didn't know who this "Cho" was, but she assumed he must have been a local from Je Island. Jusetsu was so relieved to hear that Senri was safe that her legs felt as if they were going to give way.

"I'm so happy to hear that..." she said.

"Senri spent a long time in bed with a fever, but he's woken up now. He's doing well."

"Where is he?" Onkei asked.

"At Jo's house. He's a sea merchant with a really big home..."

"Take us there," Jusetsu commanded.

Ishiha gave her a nod and started walking ahead. As they were making their way to the Jo family residence, Ishiha explained how he'd ended up on Je Island, how the sea swallows had taken care of him, and how Senri had seemed when he was rescued.

"There's an old lady from the Sho lineage who made a really good decoction for him, and Jo prepared a warm bed for him right away. They both seemed to know him, so they were very kind."

"Is that so?"

Whatever the case may have been, Jusetsu was just glad that he was all right—although she couldn't fully put her mind at ease until she saw him with her own eyes. The slope they were walking up was quite steep, but Jusetsu was in such a hurry that she simply didn't care. It wasn't until they arrived at the Jo family residence and Jusetsu saw Senri sitting up in bed that she realized how out of breath she actually was. She was drenched in sweat too.

"Raven Consort!"

Senri's topknot had been undone and his hair was tied loosely together. He was dressed in a comfortable-looking cotton robe. He did seem tired, but he didn't look exceedingly pale. He was holding a bowl containing an extremely bitter-smelling medicinal decoction.

"Are you...all right?" asked Jusetsu, unsure what she was supposed to say.

Senri grinned at her. "I'm just fine," he replied. "What about you? I see that you've awoken from your slumber."

"I woke up around the time that I received your letter. It's funny—I woke up, and then it was *your* turn to fall asleep!"

Senri gave her a friendly smile.

"Did you manage to sail over from Ko Province? What about the eruption?" he asked.

"The Owl has quelled it. The sea god from the Palace of Paradise is the instigator. No—in fact, it's the ao god who's really to blame."

Jusetsu walked up to Senri and sat down at his bedside. Onkei and Tankai waited at the entrance to the room.

"Anyway... I'm just glad that you're alive and well."

Jusetsu let out a sigh and wiped the sweat from her brow with her hand. Senri offered her a handkerchief that had been sitting on his tray.

"Let's get you some water," he said, giving Onkei and Tankai a meaningful signal with his eyes.

Immediately grasping what Senri wanted from him, Onkei slipped outside and returned a short time later with a water jug and some rice gruel.

"The old lady in the kitchen said you should eat this, To."

"Oh, you must be talking about Sho. Thank you very much."

The sticky gruel appeared to have boiled chicken mixed into it.

"Sho is the descendant of a shrine maiden clan from Je Island," Senri explained. "Her clan was mentioned in some of our records."

"Oh, yes... They managed to stop that eruption."

"Is the sea god from the Palace of Paradise in the ocean surrounding Je Island, then? That suggests that the sea god that the people of Je Island worship must be the same one."

"This island lies on a border, it seems. Between the Secluded Palace and the Palace of Paradise," Jusetsu told him.

"The border, you say? I didn't know such a concept existed... How utterly fascinating."

This was definitely the same old Senri that Jusetsu knew so well. He was always riveted by these sorts of revelations.

"Anyone would be angry to have their turf infringed upon. That's why the eruption occurred. We must defeat the sea god right away—the Owl has offered himself up as collateral." Jusetsu explained the promise the Owl had made to the sea god.

Upon hearing this, Senri frowned. "Then we must get our hands on the Raven's missing half right away," he said.

"It does seem like it's on this island..."

"Oh, about that..." Senri glanced toward the entrance once again. "Is Ishiha around?"

"He's in the garden. I'll go and call him," responded Tankai, before slipping away.

Ishiha soon showed up, Shinshin in his arms. "You called for me?" he said.

"Ishiha. Can you tell the Raven Consort what happened when you saved us?"

"All right," he obliged, although the way he kept blinking suggested he was somewhat confused by this request. He let go of Shinshin and politely walked over to Jusetsu.

"I heard that story earlier," she told Senri.

"But you didn't hear the part about the black sword, did you?"

"What?" The black sword—that was the missing part of the Raven. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Umm, it was Natari who saw it, not me, but..." Ishiha began. Natari was, as he went on to explain, a young sea swallow boy. "That man, Hakurai, he picked up a black sword that washed up on the shore. It had no sheath and a black blade, so it really stuck in Natari's memory..."

Hakurai has it?

In other words, the missing part of the Raven had come into the ao god's possession.

Jusetsu turned pale. "Where is Hakurai now...? Oh yes—didn't you say that he'd gone somewhere?"

"Yes... He disappeared."

"No boats are sailing, so he has to be on the island somewhere..." Senri said, looking thoughtful. "It's just concerning that Reiko isn't around either."

"Oh yes—Shiki's gone too." Jusetsu pondered this for a moment. "I hope nothing strange has happened to him."

"Strange...? What do you mean?"

"Hakurai is Shiki's younger sister's archenemy."

Senri let out a small yelp, then clasped his hands against his mouth.

"What's wrong? Are you feeling unwell again?" Jusetsu asked.

"No, I'm fine. It's just that I didn't know about that. He was his sister's foil, and yet..."

Senri scowled. Although he usually maintained an unflappable demeanor, now he appeared unusually flustered.

"Is there something I should know?" Jusetsu asked.

"Reiko asked me whether he should give up on getting revenge or not."

Jusetsu paused. "And?"

"I told him to accept his fate—that if he was going to follow his own will, he needed to be prepared for the consequences."

Jusetsu looked down at her hands. Had he prepared himself for the consequences? The consequences of what, exactly?

"Reiko was feeling lost. No—he probably still is."

"Yes... He's been struggling with that for quite some time."

Jusetsu thought to herself for a while, then got up. "All right. I'm going to go after Shiki."

"You are?"

"He's probably looking for Hakurai. Either that or he's already found him. Whatever the case may be, we need to work with him. If I can track down Shiki, then that should lead me to Hakurai as well." Jusetsu then turned to Ishiha. "Now, where is Shiki's bed?"

"This way," he said, before leading her into the next room.

Jusetsu asked Tankai to find her a piece of wood, and then she borrowed a dirk from Onkei.

"What are you doing?" the latter asked as she went to take it from him.

"I'm going to whittle this into a person-shaped doll," Jusetsu explained.

Onkei withdrew the dirk that he was just about to pass to her. "Let me do that. You want the wood to be carved into the shape of a person, right?"

"Wait, I'll do it..."

"You can't. Everybody has their strengths and weaknesses."

Jusetsu said nothing in return. He was right—she was not particularly good with her hands. Reluctantly, Jusetsu decided to leave the task to Onkei. It didn't actually matter who carved the doll, as long as it was in the shape of a person.

He whittled the thin piece of wood into a small human shape, then inked Shiki's name on it. Jusetsu had found some of Shiki's hair on his bed, and as soon as she wrapped it around the doll, heat began to gather in the palm of her hand. Pale red petals began to appear one after another, eventually forming a flower. She blew on it, and the petals scattered like shattered glass, falling down onto the doll. The doll trembled gently as it changed form, alternating between growing and shrinking. It eventually turned black in color and started to transform into a bird—a raven covered in black feathers. After giving its body a violent shake, it flapped its wings and flew away.

The raven soared out of the window. Jusetsu and her companions chased after it.

Is it taking us to the mountains?

The raven flew further and further inland, in the opposite direction from the port—more specifically, toward the mountains. The majority of the island's residents were fishermen and sea merchants who, due to the nature of their job, lived close to the water. As a result, the mountainous areas were sparsely populated—and yet for some strange reason, there were still roads there. At first Jusetsu wasn't sure why that was, but the stone pits the group began to pass by every now and then soon made it clear. It seemed that stone was quarried from these pits, cut into smaller pieces, and then transported to the harbor. Stonemasons were busily toiling away in some places, but other pits appeared to have already been depleted and abandoned.

The raven gradually made its way further and further into the heart of the mountains, where there were no longer any roads to tread. The terrain underfoot was rocky, and it was easy to fall if you weren't careful. The raven wove between the trees, eventually guiding the group to the top of a cliff where an open expanse stretched out in front of them. Judging from the mountains beyond, they appeared to be on the edge of some kind of gorge. The bird dove into it and disappeared from sight. Jusetsu placed her hands on the ground and attempted to peer into the gorge, but Onkei and Tankai stopped her.

Tankai got down on his belly and peered down himself.

"Oh. This valley is deep, but there's a small ledge sticking out directly below us. There are some people there—two men. One of them is that Reiko guy, and the other one... Hakurai, wasn't it? He has a cloth over one of his eyes."

"What seems to be happening?"

"It looks like they're talking to one another, but I'd be lying if I told you it looks like a harmonious exchange...not that I can see them very clearly from up here."

"Do you think we can get down?"

Tankai looked around, then surveyed his surroundings. "It should be doable, as long as we go all the way around," he said, pointing his finger to the side. "It'll be a roundabout way of getting there though."

He was pointing toward a gentle slope covered in trees.

"In that case, let's hurry."

With Tankai taking the lead, Jusetsu began to descend down the uneven, sloping ground one step at a time.

Shiki had figured out where Hakurai had gone. After asking the island's residents if they'd seen anybody that fit his description, he'd managed to work out that the man was in the mountains. Hakurai had a unique way of dressing, which meant that far more people remembered him than Shiki had originally anticipated.

Still, he didn't know why he'd headed for the mountains.

If he was planning on leaving the island, he would have gone toward the port and waited for boats to start leaving again. Was this a sign that he'd had no intention of fleeing the island yet, regardless of what happened with an eruption? Or was there something specific that he wanted to do out there?

Shiki passed the remains of the old stone pits, then entered the forest that lay ahead. The reddish-brown ground was covered in cinder stones with rock surfaces peeking through in places, hinting that there may have been large rocks buried underneath. Stones of varying sizes were everywhere on the ground. It was easy to lose your footing here, and walking was a struggle.

Shiki had spent his entire career traveling from region to region, but he'd never seen mountains like these before. They were nothing like Do Province's rugged peaks or Ga Province's picturesque foothills.

He huffed and puffed as he made his way to the top of the slope, and he

realized he was able to see so much more. The sky stretched out above him, and a gorge came into view down below. It was unfortunately cloudy, but the cold breeze cooled him off. He wiped the sweat from the back of his neck and took a swig of water from the bamboo tube that an islander had given him on his way, warning him that it'd be essential for his mountain climb. He stuffed some dried jujube—another gift from an islander—into his mouth and looked left and right. The terrain here was too hard for anyone to have left footprints behind them.

Which way could Hakurai have headed?

Shiki hunched down, straining his eyes in an intense effort to scour the area for any trace of the man. Suddenly, however, he noticed that some young branches appeared to have been cut away from some overgrown trees. It was as if someone had cleared them away to make it easier to walk past.

This isn't necessarily a sign that Hakurai was here, but still...

Heading in that direction seemed as good an idea as any, so he decided to stride ahead. Although the trees obstructed his view, the slope did seem to curve around toward the gorge. Grabbing hold of tree trunks and branches for support, he carefully made his way down the incline.

A fairly open plateau behind the branches came into view, and there was clearly a person there, crouching down on the ground.

Taken aback, Shiki stopped in his tracks. He could only see the person's back, but it was undoubtedly Hakurai. He appeared to be picking plants growing on the plateau, probably ones with medicinal properties. Hakurai didn't seem to have noticed Shiki.

Shiki's breathing was strained. He was about to take a step forward, but he sensed someone pulling at his sleeve. He turned back around.

It was Shomei, looking just like she had when she was alive. Her pale yellow jacket with its intricate flower pattern was unmistakable. He'd seen her hand pulling at his sleeve many times before, but he had never seen her appear with

her full human body. She looked exactly how Shiki remembered her—unassumingly beautiful with a forlorn look in her eyes. This was absolutely the
Shomei he'd known so well.

"Sho... Shomei..."

His voice was hoarse and only vaguely audible. He felt like he was bursting with things he wanted to say, yet not a word left his lips. Shiki fell to his knees.

Shomei gazed at him and gently shook her head. She looked apprehensive...or rather, she looked *sad*.

Did she come all this way to stop me? Shiki wondered.

Visions of Shomei's face after she had died merged with the version of her that was standing in front of him. The woman had been mercilessly beaten to death. Her thin body was covered in bruises, her cheeks were drained of color, and teardrops had stained her closed eyelids. As his memories of his sister, dead, became clearer and clearer, Shiki fell flat on the ground. The reddish-brown volcanic sediment there was so powdery that it easily disintegrated in his grip. As red powder seeped through his fingers, it almost looked like he was bleeding.

When he looked up, he found that Shomei was giving him a faint smile—just like she used to when she was still alive. It was a slightly troubled, helpless smile. As he gazed up at her, Koshun's words came flooding back.

"Your hatred won't go away if its target isn't around anymore. The buried embers carry on, burning inside your empty heart forever."

The flames had been burning inside Shiki's heart for so long. He wanted to bring Hakurai to his knees, humiliate him, and drench him in blood. That was what those flames of hatred were demanding of him.

Shomei said nothing—she just smiled at Shiki. He lifted himself back up, staggered to his feet, and then began to march in Hakurai's direction.

The sound of his footsteps prompted Hakurai to look around, and looking

distrustful, he stood up. That was when Shiki first noticed that Hakurai was holding a peculiar black sword in one of his hands.

"You're..."

"I'm Reiko Shiki. I am the former moderation vice envoy from Ga Province—but I was born in Reki Province, the home of the True Teachings of the Moon."

Hakurai's face remained unchanged, even at the mention of the religious organization that he used to be part of—and the same one that formed the basis for the Eight True Teachings, the religion Hakurai had gone on to create in Ga Province.

"And?" said Hakurai, his voice devoid of emotion. "What do you want from me?"

"My younger sister was beaten to death with a stick by her fiancé's family, who were all followers of the True Teachings of the Moon. I doubt you remember it, but it was *you* that convinced them to convert to the religion. You convinced them that beating a human who'd been possessed by evil would cure them."

The more Shiki tried to contain his emotions, the more his voice began to tremble.

"I have no recollection of that," Hakurai replied nonchalantly. He didn't seem the slightest bit unsettled.

"I didn't expect you to remember," said Shiki. "If you had, you never would have created the Eight True Teachings."

"I do remember several followers of the True Teachings of the Moon doing stupid things. It wasn't me who claimed beating someone with a stick would cure them—it was someone higher up in the sect. Still, I never thought anyone would be stupid enough to beat a person to death. They must have taken things a step too far."

"Stop with the excuses..."

"I'm simply correcting a misunderstanding," said Hakurai curtly. "There are plenty of reasons for people to resent me, but I'd still rather they distinguish truths from untruths." He then gave Shiki a cold look.

Shiki's face turned hot while the blood drained from his extremities. It hurt to breathe. He was so overwhelmed by fury and hatred that pain broke out in his chest. It was like there were flames inside his body, scorching his insides.

"Someone once told me I was going to lose my life over troubles with a woman," Hakurai began. "I understand what he meant now." He snorted with laughter. "Do you know the Raven Consort?"

Although Shiki felt disconcerted by the sudden question, he nodded.

"Give this to her."

Hakurai abruptly tossed the black sword he was holding at Shiki. Startled, he backed away, letting the sword fall at his feet before he picked it up. Up close, its blade was—unsurprisingly—as black as coal, and the light softly reflected off its surface. It was a peculiar thing to behold.

Shiki looked up at Hakurai. The man was strangely calm. Why—when faced with somebody who clearly loathed him—would Hakurai go out of the way to give them a sword and appear so passive about it all?

Then, things clicked for Shiki. Hakurai had already prepared himself for this situation—for being killed by Shiki.

The area was silent, and Shiki stared at Hakurai, not saying a word. He pressed his hand to his sleeve, taking in a deep breath and letting it out.

"I wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea," Shiki began at last, his voice sounding shockingly composed. "I haven't come here to kill you."

Hakurai flinched.

"If I were to kill you right here, right now, then it'd be nothing more than a murder. That wouldn't avenge my sister's death. It's not what my sister wants," Shiki said. "If that was what she wanted, you'd already be bleeding out. But

since it's not, it'd be nothing more than a way of indulging my own desires."

Shiki knew that entertaining the possibility his sister *might* have wanted such a thing was just another example of his own ugly craving for vengeance. As obnoxious as it was, he could accept that about himself—but he just couldn't bear the thought of sullying his sister's legacy.

"I can't defile Shomei's memory..."

Shiki clutched onto his sleeve. The flames wouldn't go out, and in fact, they were becoming more and more furious. It felt as if they were going to consume him entirely.

It didn't bother him. He didn't mind keeping that remorse and hatred with him for the rest of his life while those flames burned away at his heart.

He now felt ready to accept his fate, just like Senri had advised.

Somebody tugged at his sleeve in a weak and timid manner, and Shiki looked behind him.

Shomei was gone. He'd probably never see her again. Shiki heard a bird flapping its wings. Next, Shomei would reach the palace of the gods that sat far, far away on the other side of the sea, and one day, she'd get the chance to come back down to land as a new life.

When Shiki closed his eyes, he could picture stars twinkling in the night sky. The image of those distant, glittering stars became etched into his mind. Those faint celestial bodies emitted a glow so gentle that it appeared as if they could fade away at any moment. Nevertheless, they remained unmistakably present, shining like small beacons in the night sky.

Shiki opened his eyes again.

"Shiki," called a voice.

It was Jusetsu.

As Jusetsu descended the slope, she felt anxious about Shiki's confrontation with Hakurai. She was suspicious when she realized Hakurai was holding the black sword, and she grew even warier when she saw him give it to Shiki. What in the world was going on?

Hakurai doesn't look like he's going to harm Shiki, but what if he...?

Jusetsu continued to keep an eye on the situation, but her footing was too unsteady for her to keep her eyes glued on the two men. There were rocks peeking out between the reddish-brown volcanic rocks she was using as footholds in her descent.

This mountain really is rocky, she thought to herself.

It seemed to have good drainage, but the inevitable trade-off was that water was likely accumulating underground. Perhaps it was that same water that formed the springs that enriched the land at the base of the mountains.

"I haven't come here to kill you."

Astonished by Shiki's words, Jusetsu froze. She listened to what he was saying as she slowly headed downward.

Shiki doesn't want to kill him?

By the time she reached the plateau where the two men were standing, she could see Shomei behind Shiki. In the next moment, the spirit's figure began to fade, as if it were melting into its surroundings. It ultimately vanished, and then Jusetsu could hear the flutter of a bird's wings.

May nothing impede Shomei's journey to the Secluded Palace.

Jusetsu then walked up to Shiki. He was surprised when he saw her, but at the same time, it almost seemed like he'd been expecting her.

"Raven Consort," he said.

"Shomei has flown away."

Shiki gave her a faint smile. There was a slight hint of sadness to it.

Jusetsu looked over at Hakurai. The man had the same sharp look on his face as usual, and he didn't even try to meet her gaze.

"Hakurai." Jusetsu glanced at the black sword now in Shiki's hand. Unable to discern what Hakurai's ulterior motive might be, she kept her guard up. "Why would you let it go?"

"Don't you want it?" Hakurai asked her back.

"The ao god threatened you, didn't he? He said that if you didn't find the missing half, he'd eat Ayura and Ishiha."

"You really *are* naïve," Hakurai said, his tone of voice half-impressed and half-exasperated. "Why would you trust his word? That's what baffles me."

"Oh..."

After all, there was no guarantee that the ao god would leave Ayura and Ishiha be, even if Hakurai were to present him with the Raven's missing half.

"In that case..."

Just as Jusetsu was about to ask if he was going to help her instead, the voice of a young girl called down from above.

"I always knew Hakurai would get on swimmingly with you, eventually."

Jusetsu looked up to find a young girl looking down at them. She'd seen her face before. It was Injo—or rather, Ayura. The girl's face was expressionless, and her pupils were jet-black and vacant.

"I know who you are," Hakurai tutted. "You're the ao god, aren't you?" "What?" cried Jusetsu, straining her eyes to get a better look at Ayura.

"Why are you here?" Hakurai asked, raising his voice. "The sea is far away and there's no water here." He was displaying a sort of agitation that neither Shiki nor Jusetsu had witnessed from him before.

Ayura, however, just laughed. "You're exactly right. Without water, I can't communicate with this girl. But Hakurai, I know this island well. After all, this is

where I fought one thousand years ago. Back then, the sea god at the Palace of Paradise erupted into fire because it was so angry as well."

Ayura's body looked to have been thoroughly captured by the ao god. He was speaking through her mouth in her voice, but these words weren't Ayura's—they were his.

"Didn't you know? There used to be water in that gorge down there," said the ao god, continuing. "When the sea god erupted with fire, it all dried up."

"If it dried up, then..."

Jusetsu had been so distracted by Hakurai and the ao god's conversation that it took her a moment to notice that Ui had appeared right by her side.

Ui was the ao god's apparatus. He was still wearing the same clothes he wore while he was working as the keeper of the vault as a eunuch.

"U—"

"I must comply with the ao god's wishes."

Before Shiki had the chance to put up a fight, Ui snatched the black sword out of Shiki's grip. Ayura laughed.

Heat began to accumulate inside of Jusetsu.

"Ui!" yelled the Raven.

The Raven was so furious that her power was bursting out of Jusetsu's body—and her target was Ui. However, Ui leapt up like a fluttering feather and dashed nimbly up the cliff. Instead of doing him any harm, the Raven's power caused the crag he'd been standing in front of to shatter into pieces instead. Cracks formed in other nearby rock surfaces as well.

Laughter echoed from above—that of the ao god. Beside him stood Ui, lifting the black sword up in both hands.

The cracks in the rocks were now soaking wet, and water was flowing out of them.

"Niangniang!" Onkei pulled Jusetsu's arm.

"It's the groundwater! It's gushing out!" Tankai shouted.

"That's why I'm going to win!" a voice declared triumphantly.

The crags split apart, and water flowered out of them with great force. It was followed by even more water gushing out of the walls. While Jusetsu was walking down the slope, she'd realized that because the mountain had good drainage, there must be water compressed underneath.

The water that the eruption dried up one thousand years ago is now bursting out because of another eruption.

Onkei pulled Jusetsu by the arm and tried to climb back up the incline, but there was no way they were going to make it in time. A sudden, deafening explosion rang out, and the rock faces crumbled instantaneously.

A deluge of water was unleashed, and just like that, it swallowed Jusetsu up.

While it did snow during the winter in Ga Province, it rarely settled anywhere except for at the tops of the mountains. No sooner did the snow fall did it melt and vanish, so it was really no different from rain.

Here, however, it was a different story. The snow was like silk floss, fluttering gently to the ground. Instead of melting, it piled up, layer by layer. It almost looked like it should have been warm to the touch.

Ko was in the room that the chief of the Yukei tribe prepared for him, but once the sun set, Jo sent a servant to call for him.

"Didn't you want to sleep on it?" Ko said, laughing—but Jo didn't even muster a smile.

Jo wordlessly turned in the direction of his house and Ko followed after him. Their surroundings were shrouded in darkness, but the thick snow still stood out, emitting a faint, white glow. The snowfall showed no signs of stopping, concealing their footprints before their very eyes. A breeze danced through the

air, causing the falling snowflakes to brush against Ko's cheek.

"Let me hear what you have to say."

Jo went inside his workshop and took a seat. Ko sat down on the wooden floor. The wind rattled against the door, but it was plenty warm enough inside as the furnace was still lit. Ko couldn't help but wonder whether Jo made a habit of working at his lathe until late at night.

"It's not *that* difficult," Ko began. "Essentially, you'd have to sneak down the mountain unnoticed and make sure nobody chases after you."

"It is difficult. That's why I'm still here."

"What you need is some chaos. People need to be so preoccupied that they won't have the time to chase after you."

"Chaos...?"

"Starting the fire is the easy part, but that alone wouldn't be impactful enough. If we get the authorities to intervene, then the chiefs will be forced to get involved. Bringing out troops would be even more effective. The more of an uproar there is, the more furiously people will be rushing around and vindicating themselves in an attempt to get things back on track. By the time things have settled down again, you'll already have made your escape..."

"It'd have to be a serious situation for the authorities to get involved."

"It will be."

Jo frowned skeptically at him. "That's impossible!" he exclaimed. "There's nothing that could spark such a commotion in a place like this."

"There is," replied Ko with a chuckle. "There's me."

"What?"

"My name is Saname Ko," he began. "Did you know that two of His Majesty's consorts are pregnant?"

"Huh? Oh, right... That does ring a bell. I remember some of the elder folk

around here were thrilled about it—saying how two of them were with child at the same time."

"That's right. And one of those two consorts is my younger sister."

Jo's eyes widened. This was the first time Ko had seen him look stunned.

"Caught you unawares, didn't I?" Ko said with a laugh. "Well, it's not like I have any way to prove it to you. I have my identity pass, but I doubt you know the consort's family name, right? Still, I don't mind whether you believe me or not. It's not you who's going to establish my identity, but the authorities."

"I'm failing to see your point."

"Let's say that somebody stabbed me during the fire and I suffered significant injuries. Someone from the tribe would go to the foot of the mountain to call for a doctor or another person who could help. Then, they'll rush to the province council and say an imperial consort's brother had gotten himself embroiled in an uprising and was stabbed. A public functionary would come check that this was the case, would they? I would have to convince him that there was no uprising, and it was just your run-of-the-mill injury—but it'd still cause confusion until the facts became clear."

If there were no grounds for a rebellion to occur, then there was no need for Ko to trigger one.

As long as some sort of commotion *resembling* a revolt took place, it'd spur the authorities into action and lead them to check what was going on. The parts about Ko being the brother of a consort and that he'd been stabbed would both be true. What would happen if he were to assert that a rebellion *was* in fact happening? Even if the truth would eventually come out, the first notice would be issued to the imperial capital—and it'd get there right away. Would the imperial court really be easygoing enough to let the remaining Ran descendant live until the facts became clear? Killing her would undoubtedly be the safest option for them.

Jo crossed his arms and thought to himself for a moment. "Are you suggesting

that I should be the one to burst into the province council with the news?"

Ko nodded. "You can escape as soon as that job is done. Easy, don't you think?"

"I can't imagine things would go that smoothly..."

"Well, putting the details aside for a moment, both a fire and me being stabbed would be major incidents. I'm just suggesting that you take advantage of them in order to flee."

Jo cocked his head at that. "Are you really going to get stabbed? Or will you just *pretend* to have been?"

"A fake stabbing won't be serious enough an incident. Please, stab me."

"I have to do it?"

"Do I have any other options? If you can't bring yourself to do it, then I'll just have to stab myself."

Ko snickered, but Jo had an odd look on his face.

"Have you got cold feet?" Ko asked him.

"No—I just can't see what you'd get out of this."

A serious look came over Ko's face. "You're right... For me, it's all cons and no pros."

"So, why would you go through with it?"

"I don't have any other choice."

Ko turned his face away, and a *rat-a-tat-tat* sound echoed from the doorway. Ko assumed it was the snowstorm outside, but he was soon proven wrong.

Jo, instead, sprung to his feet. There was somebody knocking at the door.

Before Jo had the chance to open it, the door moved. Jikei's snow-topped head squeezed through the gap between the door and frame, and he didn't look happy.

Ko found himself rising to his feet at the sight. Jikei brushed the snow from his head and cast a sharp glance at Ko, and then at Jo.

"You're that salt merchant..." said Jo with a frown, seemingly unable to grasp what was happening.

Jikei looked at him. "Jo," he began, "your younger sister informed Seki that something strange appeared to be going on between you and the visiting merchant. She was worried."

Jo awkwardly averted his gaze.

Ko clicked his tongue in annoyance. *That timid-looking girl ratted me out,* he thought to himself. Leaving her to do her own thing had been a big mistake.

"Enough of this lunacy!" Jikei shouted at Ko. "You can't entangle somebody in your foolish schemes when they don't truly understand the situation!"

"I'm not entangling him in anything," countered Ko. "I'm just lending him a hand."

"I said that's enough. Just come with me."

Jikei grabbed Ko by the collar and dragged him out of the workshop. Ko was astounded to find that Jikei was able to pull him along almost effortlessly—which was saying something, considering Ko possessed a rather impressive physique himself. Ko had assumed that Jikei's strength could be put down to brute force and immense effort, but it seemed like there was more substance to it than he'd expected.

Are all salt merchants like this? Ko found himself wondering. Surely not.

"Let go of me," Ko protested, snowflakes flying into his open mouth.

There was a violent snowstorm outside. Ko thrashed about in agitation. Then, there was a thwacking sound. Jikei loosened his grip, and Ko heard the man groan—his fist must have hit Jikei's face. Ko took advantage of this moment to step away from the man and step back toward the workshop.

Jikei just stood there, rubbing his nose.

"Jikei, I..."

"Do you remember what I told you?"

"I can't let you die. No matter what plans you come up with, I'm going to put a stop to them."

Ko heard Jikei's words replay in his mind.

"I came here to do just that—to stop you," Jikei declared, looking straight at him.

Ko grimaced.

Why would he do such a thing?

He felt a rush of emotion surge inside of him, making him bite his lip.

The light seeping out from the doorway subtly illuminated the surrounding area. Seki and Jo's younger sister were beside the main house, standing close together.

"Go inside," Jikei called out to them.

The pair nodded and turned in the direction of the main building—before abruptly coming to a halt and looking toward the entrance to the workshop. Their eyes were wide in astonishment.

"Jo!" Seki shouted, but his voice was almost drowned out by the young girl shrieking beside him.

When Ko turned around, he noticed a peculiar glow coming from inside the workshop—it was on fire.

Firewood had been pulled out of the furnace, and the flames had spread to woodchips scattered across the floor. The spinning wheel was burning, and so was all the yarn that had been spun. *Everything* in the workshop was highly flammable. With the flames raging on behind him, Jo gathered his woodworking planes together and wrapped them in cloth.

It was clear he was the one who started the fire.

The young girl sank to her knees in the snow, and Seki tried to hold her up. With one plane in hand, Jo slowly made his way out of the workshop. The flames lit up the plane's blade, making it gleam in the darkness of the night.

Jo began running toward Ko while clutching the plane with both hands, holding it near his waist. Understanding what Jo's goal was, Ko stood stock still.

Ko intended to make sure the other man went through the plan, even if it meant forcing his hand. Had Jo believed that *now* was his only opportunity to flee the mountains?

Ko had egged him on. Rationally speaking, the man from the Saname clan was ready to accept his fate—and yet his heart was screaming for him to run.

But he couldn't bring himself to move.

"You idiot!" Jikei bellowed.

Ko felt himself being shoved out of the way. The blade of the plane that Jo was holding glistened in the snow.

Fresh blood scattered on the ground—the blade had pierced Jikei's side. The older man fell to his knees, clutching his wound.

Ko went to scream out his name, but no sound would leave his lips. Gasping for breath, Ko crouched down next to him.

"Mmmh," moaned Jikei. It almost sounded as if he was responding to someone's question.

Jo moved out of the way and disappeared into the snow. Seki and the girl embraced each other as they sunk to the ground. Their faces were pale, and their mouths hung open in shock. Ko quickly regained his composure. He couldn't afford to be flustered.

"I'll carry him to a nearby house. Give me a hand, won't you?" Ko asked Seki as he slung Jikei's arm over his shoulder.

Seki was still pale, but he nodded repeatedly and staggered to his feet. The girl still covered her face, crying.

"Wait... Don't worry about me," said Jikei in something of a groan, waving his hand dismissively. "He just grazed my side... I might be bleeding, but it's nothing serious. It's the fire you need to worry about. Get some people together to put it out. I'm sure they'll come over anyway, but still..."

Ko could make out some hurried-looking people dashing over from the surrounding houses, just as Jikei predicted.

"Seki, go and tell the chief about the fire. We can just let that woodworker go on his way—not that he'd be able to get very far in this blizzard, anyway."

"O-of course!" Seki then scampered away, almost tripping over his own feet as he went.

"Jikei," said Ko. He was convinced that he was underplaying his injury.

"I'm not staying here," asserted Jikei. "I hate to put this on you, but could you give me a hand? I want to get back to the Yusoku tribe..."

"You can't—not in this snow, and not with that injury."

Unsurprisingly, Jikei's wound truly was severe—so severe that he needed help walking.

"I can't just stay here. If word gets out that a member of the Yukei tribe has injured me, it'll cause a fuss."

Ko said nothing to that. He *encouraged* the woodworker to cause a nuisance —but in the end, it was Jikei who took the hit to defend him.

"Go down that slope over there, then around to the entrance of the settlement. Near there is the house of the old man you met when you first arrived. He'll be able to take care of things for us."

Ko bit his lip, then lifted Jikei up and began to walk ahead. However, maneuvering through snowy paths with a well-built man in tow during a blizzard wasn't easy. Their destination wasn't actually that far away, but it may as well have been over the mountain pass.

The old man had noticed the ruckus surrounding the fire, and was already outside, looking concerned. He panicked when he spotted Jikei and Ko, but when Jikei asked him not to make a scene, he nodded understandingly and quietly invited the pair inside.

The room was warm inside, which came as a relief. The old man got Jikei to undress and checked his stab wound.

"I see. If it hadn't been for your fur coat and woolen clothing, you may well have lost your life. You're pretty sturdy, so I doubt you've sustained any injuries to your bowel either. That gash hurts, I'm sure, but you don't have much to worry about."

The old man knew a lot about anatomy, likely because he was a hunter. He took a small bottle off a shelf with some sort of clear oil inside of it—horse oil, he explained. The old man applied it to Jikei's wound, wrapped a bleached cotton cloth around it, and then had him lie down on the bed. He began brewing a decoction in the pot over the stove, and the distinctive scent of medicine started to drift through the air.

"You're strong, Yozetsu. I'm sure you'll manage to walk back tomorrow," he said.

"Yeah..."

Would he really? Ko sat down at Jikei's bedside and took a look at him. His face was pale—perhaps due to the blood he'd lost—and he seemed irrefutably incapacitated.

"Selling salt can be a risky business. Sometimes, people try to steal your stock. An injury like this is nothing compared to some of the things that can happen," Jikei said slowly, his eyes shut.

Ko hung his head. "Why... Why did you have to cover for me? He was just doing what I encouraged him to do—what I wanted him to do."

"Never in a million years could you convince me that was what you wanted,"

said Jikei. His voice was quiet enough to suggest that his wound was causing him even more pain. He let out an aggrieved sigh.

"I'm sorry. Don't push yourself to talk," said Ko, but Jikei carried on.

"That wasn't what you wanted," he said, essentially repeating himself.

Ko pressed his hand against his forehead.

"You wanted to escape. The entire time, you looked overcome by the urge to run away."

"That's not true..."

"It is. You *can* escape, you know. You've worked hard. You can leave. Come and stay with me—I have no heir, after all."

Ko covered his face with his hands and pressed his forehead against the mattress. His palms were wet, and his tears seeped into the fabric. Jikei patted his head with his large hand. Ko suddenly remembered that his father had never really touched him, let alone patted his head like this.

Jikei stroked Ko's back, and although the young man was still face-down against the mattress, he could feel the comforting warmth of Jikei's big hand through his clothing.

The workshop burned to the ground, leaving no trace behind. Jo was quickly caught during the blizzard, and the chief of the Yukei tribe decided to banish him from the mountain.

Just like the old man had said, Jikei made such a speedy recovery that he was able to walk unaided the following day, and a few days later, he and Ko were able to leave the mountains together.

And rather than return home, Ko made his way to Kai Province—and never stepped foot in Ga Province again.

Shin stepped onto the port of Ga Province—the place he'd promised himself never to return to, and certainly not so soon. This time, he was certain, would be the last time he ever did.

He headed straight for the Saname residence. He had nowhere he wanted to stop by on the way anymore.

As he walked through the large gate, a manservant rushed over to him in a fluster.

"No need to pay any mind to me," Shin told him. "I have something urgent to attend to."

"Do you need your father?" he asked.

"You're back much earlier than expected," said another man's voice. It was Choyo, having appeared from inside the hall at the back.

"I've heard that the underwater volcano in the sea surrounding Je Island had erupted..." Choyo continued.

There had been no change whatsoever in his father's attitude. Shin found this unsurprising and yet disappointing at the same time.

"There's a huge commotion at the port. The news has already reached His Majesty, and the provincial governor has been spurred into action, but I doubt any boats will be able to leave for quite some time."

"Nobody knows what's really going on Je Island, then. If people aren't able to make use of that island, trade will take a massive hit..."

"Yes, but it didn't look like the eruption had done any significant damage to the island itself—not yet, at least."

"Is that so?" Choyo said with a nod, before ushering Shin inside the large hall with his gaze.

He cut across the paved courtyard and entered the hall through the front. The spacious hall, which had bluish-gray tiles on the floor, was the largest room in the entire residence. Everything, from its flooring to its dark brown lattice

doors, fit with the Saname brand. More precisely, nothing was simple. The décor wasn't showy but still ornate and of the finest quality. The Saname family's appreciation for such furnishings was one thing the whole clan could agree on.

Choyo sat down on a taboret, and Shin seated himself opposite him.

"So, what's this 'urgent' mission you are here to complete?" said Choyo, immediately jumping to the chase. He hated wasting his breath on small talk.

Shin stared straight ahead at him. It might have been the first time he'd ever looked his father full in the face. His tough-looking visage had a touch of melancholy to it—a tired sort of sadness.

Choyo glowered. "Shin?" he went on, demanding an answer.

"...I have come to pass on an order from His Majesty."

"From His Majesty?" repeated Choyo, a clear hint of skepticism in his voice. "What are you talking about? When did you receive this order?"

"When I was at the port in Ko Province," Shin told him. "Father...His Majesty has demanded that you retire and go into house arrest."

Choyo blinked in surprise. Shin noticed the man's eyes light up and then descend into darkness, making it impossible to interpret how he really felt.

"Oh," he said simply, before narrowing his eyes at his son, as if attempting to discern whether he was lying or not.

"His Majesty says that as long as you follow that command, the Saname clan will not be charged with any crime," Shin said.

"...I see."

Choyo looked up at the ceiling. Shin still couldn't work out what he was thinking.

"Father, His Majesty is doing this out of the kindness of his heart. Banka's pregnancy may have influenced his decision, yes, but he's treating us with great

magnanimity nonetheless. His Majesty is..."

Shin stopped there because Choyo was laughing—laughing so hard, in fact, that it was making his whole body shake.

"Father?"

"You still don't understand, do you, Shin?" said Choyo.

Shin was silent for a moment. "Understand what?"

"You're intelligent, but you're too square—just like Yo was."

Yo was Choyo's younger sister, and also Shin's birth mother. Shin felt his throat begin to burn with emotion, but his chest felt icy cold. He couldn't even be sure of what he was feeling.

"If you plan on continuing to work for His Majesty, you'll need to develop a little more of an edge. He appreciates such qualities."

"What are you talking about? How disrespectful."

"Perhaps hardheaded would be a good word to describe him. Clever and hardheaded. Make sure you keep that in mind."

Shin glared at his father. "Are you going to obey his command or not? Which is it?"

Choyo gave him an indistinct smile. "I'll obey him. Let him know."

Shin let out a little sigh of relief, though he was surprised at how readily his father had backed down.

"You're planning on becoming my successor, aren't you?" Choyo then asked, bringing Shin's momentary relief to a quick halt.

The question was so abrupt and unexpected that it left him stumped for words. He steadied his breathing, then looked Choyo straight in the face.

"...I am planning to leave the Saname clan in Ko or Ryo's hands."

"Are you now?" Choyo said simply, showing no resistance to this idea—

something that Shin found suspicious.

"Maybe this was our destiny all along," he then muttered. "The Saname clan... is going to collapse."

"What are you talking about?" said Shin, eyes wide. "Isn't His Majesty getting you to retire in order to *stop* that happening?"

"It'll still collapse eventually," Choyo explained.

Shin said nothing.

"If that's our destiny, then there's nothing we can do about it."

To Shin, Choyo seemed suspiciously calm. Wasn't keeping the clan safe his father's duty and desire?

"Father... Am I the reason you sent Banka to the inner palace and began a closer relationship with His Majesty?" asked Shin.

Choyo gave Shin a puzzled look.

"Were you trying to make me successful in the imperial capital...because I'm your sister's child?" he continued.

"Did His Majesty tell you that?"

"No."

The thought had just come to him when he was in the boat. If he wanted to secure the Saname clan's safety, then staying as far away from central government as possible could have been the cleverest option.

"I see," said Choyo, sounding fairly detached from the whole thing. "That wasn't really what I was thinking. I just thought that it'd work out in our clan's favor. But..."

Choyo let out a puff of laughter. "Now I can see what an error of judgment that was. I'm the one who's causing the Saname clan's downfall."

The smile on his father's face sent a trickle of cold sweat down Shin's spine.

"Father... Was that your true intention? Did you want to destroy this clan?" Choyo wiped the grin off his face. He blinked, then silently rose to his feet. "Fa—"

"Go to the imperial capital," Choyo said, cutting him off. "You have to report back to His Majesty, don't you? Your business here is done."

The man's tone of voice made it clear he wasn't going to accept any ifs or buts. He headed over to the room next door—his own, private room.

"...Understood," said Shin. "Goodbye, then."

Shin watched his father walk away, then stood up himself. He left the hall, and then put the Saname clan residence behind him. He hurried down the road that led to the port, not looking over his shoulder once.

Choyo stepped into his room, took a small box out of his cabinet, and sat it down on the table. It was a black, lacquer-coated box with no decorations of any kind on it. He lifted the lid to reveal several different-sized ceramic containers. He picked one of them up and put it in his breast pocket.

He then left the hall and headed for the kitchen. He called out to his manservants who were busily working away and lit a candle on the stove. Choyo left through the rear of the residence and began making his way toward the mulberry forest in the back part of the property. It was in this forest that the detached house where Yo had stayed until she gave birth to Shin was located. No one lived there anymore, but it was still kept in good condition, and was just as clean as it had been at the time.

Choyo went through the gate, cut through the courtyard, and went to the hall of the residence. It was similar in structure to the main house, but there were fewer rooms here, and it was more gaudily decorated. He stepped on the flower-patterned tiles and looked up at the painted ceiling—there were flowers there too. Yo had been fond of them. When spring arrived in Ga Province, the

fields and mountains would be covered in a riotous profusion of flowers, and going to pick them was her favorite thing to do. Choyo would always accompany her and watch her as she gathered them.

Holding the candle, he slowly looked around the room. It almost felt as if Yo's floral scent was still lingering in the air.

She'd been a priceless, beautiful treasure—more valuable than anything else he'd ever come across.

If only that Raven Consort had been around...

If Jusetsu had been around when he and Yo were still young, would she have destroyed that ominous divine treasure? Would Yo still have been alive today?

He knew it was pointless, but he couldn't help but dream. And that was the precise reason he hated her so much.

Choyo let out a slight laugh, then stood up. He tilted his candle to one side, bringing the flame closer to the curtain. It quickly caught fire. The flames crept across the fabric, destroying it as they went. Choyo watched the curtain burn, then left the room. He did the same thing in the next room, and the room next to that one. When he eventually reached the bedroom, he sat down on the bed. The bedding was all still in place, just like it had been all those years ago. Choyo put his candlestick down and stroked the floral embroidery.

He could hear the fire raging on elsewhere in the building, and the smell of burning wood hurtled through the air. The smoke was beginning to spread throughout the house—and the flames were making quick work of it too.

Choyo took the container out of his pocket and opened the lid. Inside was a pill that resembled a black seed. This was that same poisonous drug the Saname clan had brought across to Sho when they'd arrived from Kakami.

When the emperor had ordered him to retire and go into house arrest, he'd been effectively suggesting that he end his life.

The emperor had likely gotten Shin to pass on the command so that Choyo

would have little choice but to accept it. He'd assumed that Choyo would oblige if it meant protecting Shin from harm. This gave Choyo a sense of how hardheaded Koshun truly was at his core. It was a trait Choyo respected in him, but that didn't make it any easier.

The smoke began to rise. Choyo set the mattress alight. The flowery embroidery caught flame and continued to burn. What were these flowers called again? Choyo wondered to himself. What was the name of the flowers on the ceiling, and the flowers on the tiles...?

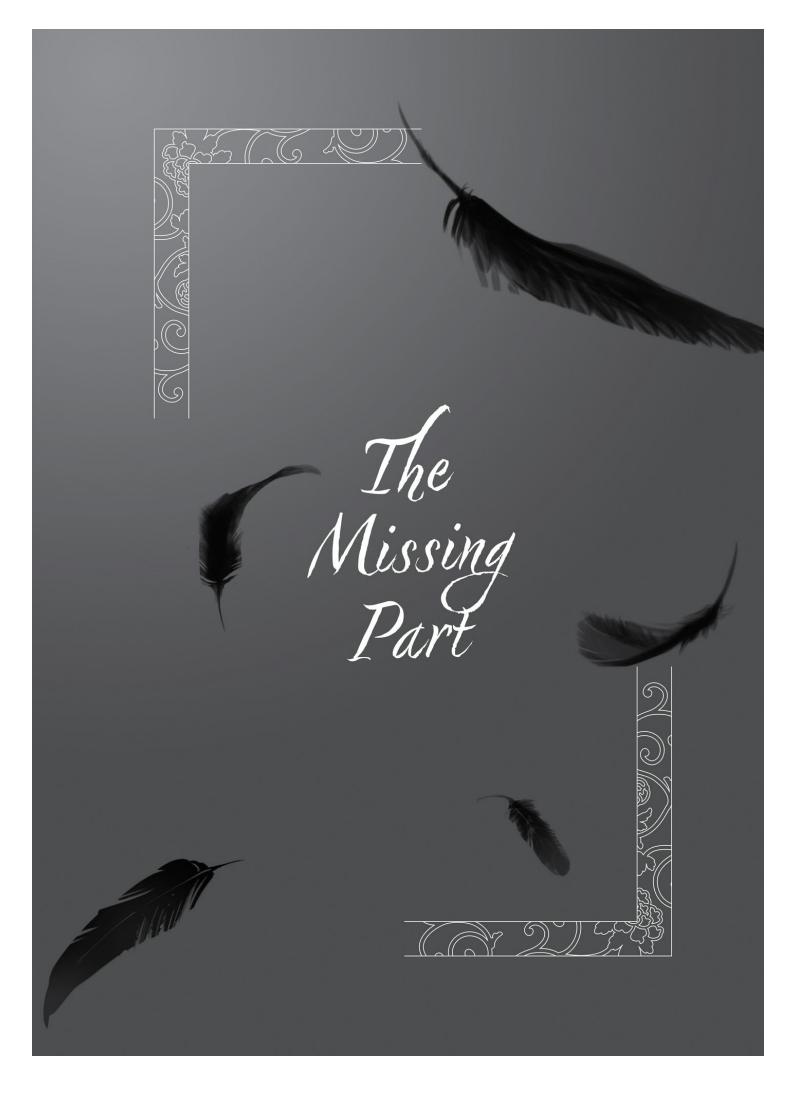
"Yo."

Choyo softly called out his younger sister's name, then placed the poison pill in his mouth.

Shortly thereafter, the flames engulfed the bed.

Once Shin reached the port, he looked back in the direction of the Saname residence. *This'll probably be the last time I ever see it,* he thought to himself.

He could see a single wisp of smoke rising up from the hill at the back of the property—but the faint trail soon dissolved into the expanse of the sky, fluttering like a shawl cascading gracefully from somebody's shoulders as they turned away and left.



THE WATER WAS SO FIERCE that Jusetsu couldn't even open her eyes, let alone move her limbs. She couldn't even tell for certain whether it *was* water that was sweeping her away or something else. The whole thing came as such a shock that she didn't even register how cold it was, nor how breathless she was feeling.

Where am I being taken? Where is everybody else?

As her consciousness faded away, she couldn't help but wonder what had happened to Onkei and the others—and if they were safe or not.

"Jusetsu... Jusetsu."

She could hear a voice. It was the Raven.

"It's fine. Just let yourself drift away. I'll keep you safe." The Raven's voice called to her gently inside Jusetsu's chest. As loud as the tremendous water currents were, it was impossible for them to drown it out. "You'll be just fine."

Suddenly, Jusetsu felt something warm and soft—like her entire body was being wrapped in feathers.

The Raven.

The Raven's voice became fainter and fainter. Enveloped in her warmth, Jusetsu finally lost consciousness.

"Niangniang. Niangniang."

Jusetsu awoke to Onkei calling out to her. A hoarse groan escaped her lips.

"Does anything hurt, niangniang?"

"No..."

Jusetsu blinked a few times, waiting for her vision to clear. Onkei had a concerned look on his face. A drop of water trickled from his chin. His face—no, his entire body—was drenched. Jusetsu figured that the same was true for her.

"Where am I?"

Onkei was holding Jusetsu in his arms. She took a look around to discover that she was on a familiar beach, and she could even see the boat that they'd sailed there on. They were back at the island's port.

Jusetsu lifted herself up and looked behind her. Tankai was sitting upright, with Shiki collapsed on the ground behind him. Further back, she could see Hakurai as well. He was already awake, sitting down on one knee.

"Ishiha woke me up," said Onkei.

"Ishiha?" repeated Jusetsu, looking around. The boy eunuch was at the corner of the beach with Shinshin at his feet. "Is Shiki all right?" she then asked.

"He's breathing. I'm sure he'll be all right."

Jusetsu got Onkei to help her up slowly.

"Did we get washed all the way here from that mountain?" Jusetsu asked as Tankai walked over to her.

"The spring water must have merged with the river and washed us down to the river's mouth," Onkei speculated as he surveyed his surroundings.

"I'm surprised we survived," said Tankai.

"The Raven..." Jusetsu put her hand on her chest. "The Raven saved us."

The Raven had protected them all and carried them here.

"It is astoundingly foolish to waste your power like that," said Ayura. It sounded like she was smiling.

Startled, Jusetsu turned around. Ayura was walking along the shore with Ui following her from behind. Ui was holding the black sword up in the air, gripping it with both hands.

"You hadn't even taken back your missing half, and yet you exhausted your powers without considering the consequences. Now, you have nothing left. How do you plan on battling me?"

Jusetsu couldn't hear the Raven's voice anymore. Was it because she was drained of her strength, like the ao god was saying? Jusetsu glared at Ayura, poised to defend herself. The ao god used Ayura's face to give her a contemptuous smile.

What am I supposed to do? Jusetsu thought. Do I need to get away?

As tempting as the idea was, Jusetsu couldn't imagine the ao god letting her escape.

That very moment, somebody slinked past her. It was Hakurai. He began walking over to Ayura in a leisurely manner. The ao god wiped the smile off Ayura's face and shot him a disdainful look.

"What is it, Hakurai? Are you coming to bow your head and grovel? You..."

Without a word, Hakurai took a small bottle out of his breast pocket and hurled its contents toward the ao god. It was the same cursed substance he'd once used on Jusetsu. The black liquid adopted the form of a snake and attacked the ao god. The ao god scrunched up his face slightly and kicked away the waves that were rolling in at his feet. The water whirled around, then surged up into the air. It bent like a whip and struck down on the snake.

"Did you really think something like that would work on me?"

The water transformed into a blade-like object and thrashed against Hakurai's shoulders. As blood began to spout from the tops of his shoulders, he tried to grab hold of his wounds, but the overflowing blood ran down through the gaps between his fingers. His clothes turned bright red.

The ao god was right.

Such tactics weren't going to work against a god. Hakurai must have been fully aware of that too—so why had he even tried?

"Next, you're going to lose your head," said the ao god, raising a hand. The waves stretched up into the air as they continued to whirl around at his feet.

Just as the water blade appeared to launch toward Hakurai, somebody yelled

out Ayura's name.

Ayura's body froze.

It was Ishiha. His face was pale with fear and his lips were trembling.

"Ayura, pull yourself together..." he began—but Jusetsu was unable to comprehend the words that followed. He must have been speaking to her in the language of the Hatan clan.

Ishiha had turned toward her and was desperately trying to argue his point. Ayura made a wry face at him.

"You troublesome Hatan scoundrel..." the ao god groaned through her lips.

The water blade dissolved and fell back into the sea, and Ayura's body staggered forward.

Now, it was Hakurai's turn to make his move. He used one of the hands he'd been clutching onto his shoulder with to take a swipe at Ayura's face. The deluge of blood got into Ayura's eyes. The ao god tutted in annoyance and covered his face with his hands. Hakurai subsequently flung the contents of the small bottle he was holding toward Ui instead. The black snake intertwined with Ui and struck at him. Hakurai used this opening to snatch away the black sword and hack off Ui's head.

Ui's head tumbled down, and in the blink of an eye, both his head and his body had turned to what looked like bluish ash that was now scattered across the ground.

"Hakurai!!!"

With his eye still covered with blood, the ao god howled and shot the water blade toward the man. As Hakurai was about to retaliate with the black sword, the blade pierced his leg. A cry of agony left Hakurai's lips, making the ao god cackle. The ao god, however, hadn't actually been able to *see* what Hakurai was doing. Just as Hakurai had been about to fight back, he'd flung the black sword behind him. The black sword soared through the air, then began careening

toward Jusetsu. She reached out her hand—or rather, the Raven made her do so.

Jusetsu felt like the handle of the black sword was sucked into her grip. The next moment, the sword burst—or rather it was changing form, turning into a black feather.

Countless black feathers began falling down onto Jusetsu. Every time a feather brushed against her skin, it'd dissipate, almost as if it'd melted. One after another, the feathers touched her skin, then disappeared into thin air.

They're returning.

They were going back inside of the Raven.

Jusetsu held out her palms as the downpour of feathers persisted. She looked toward the sky and watched as more of them descended from above. Jusetsu shut her eyes, sensing the unmistakable presence of the missing half of the Raven gradually returning to her being.

As one of the feathers caressed her cheek, Jusetsu heard the Raven calling out to her.

"Thank you, Jusetsu. I'm myself again now," she told her, her voice earnest and cheerful. "I appreciate all you've done for me."

Jusetsu felt like she could hear waves splashing deep inside her heart. No, it wasn't waves—it was the sound of wings flapping.

The Raven was flying away.

Jusetsu could feel some of the heat leave her body as the presence glided away. She felt like she could see large, black wings traveling through the air.

"Damn you, Raven...!" heaved the ao god. He struck down at the water's surface in frustration, having just rinsed the blood off his face.

Ayura's body began to stumble forward, but Hakurai caught her in his arms just before she fell. Ishiha rushed over to them.

A deep, heavy drone echoed through the air, as if the entire sea was groaning. The wind caressed the water, creating small yet fierce ripples on its surface.

Jusetsu could hear waves breaking. Far out across the water, the waves surged high into the air and whirlpools formed on the sea's surface. Everyone could hear the wind howl.

"Look at the sky!" exclaimed Onkei, his voice tense.

Gray clouds quickly gathered, surging like waves. Before they knew it, the entire sky was concealed by clouds, and the area was so dark that it felt like dusk had arrived early.

The clouds were black now. A flash of lightning soon followed. Just as the bolt appeared to slither down into the sea, a deafening roar rumbled through the air. It was as if the very ground beneath them was being torn apart. Lightning flashed all over, followed by rolls of thunder. The waves in the sea grew more violent, appearing to thrash around and making the whirlpools even more aggressive in the process.

What's happening?

The wind blew against the sand, and sea spray showered down on Jusetsu and those around her. It almost felt like it was raining.

"Niangniang, stay back," commanded Onkei, standing protectively in front of her and slowly edging backward.

"The battle has begun, then," Jusetsu muttered. "The battle between the Raven and the ao god."

Having regained her missing half, the Raven had been set free. Now, the liberated Raven was doing battle with the ao god.

Jusetsu couldn't see her with her own eyes. She could, however, see the waves raging out at sea before breaking apart and disappearing into nothing. These were traces of the battle that was being carried out in front of them, and she felt as if she could see the Raven's flapping wings and the White Turtle's

legs kicking up the waves.

While the gods continued to brawl, Jusetsu found herself anxiously staring in the direction of the underwater volcano.

Won't it anger the sea god once again to see them wreaking havoc in such a spectacular way?

The Owl had brought the eruption under control for now, but there must have been a limit to what he could do.

As if it had sensed Jusetsu's misgivings, the water began to rise. Before she knew it, a black pillar of water was soaring high up into the air.

Whatever the sky was doing, it wasn't normal.

Senri had been laid up in bed inside the Jo family residence, but when he caught a glimpse of the sky through the window, he heaved himself up in astonishment.

The surrounding area had suddenly become dark, and thick clouds had covered every remaining inch of the sky above. To make matters worse, it had even started to thunder. This was no ordinary weather.

Now was not the time to dawdle. Senri dashed outside, not even taking the time to tidy his hair or put on a change of clothes. The lightning seemed to be getting closer and closer to the sea. Senri ran to the headland from where he'd be able to get a better view of the water. As weak as his body still was, he managed to make it there.

As swift as he was at climbing up to the headland, someone else had beat him to it—Cho. He was standing on the headland, looking out to sea.

"Cho, what's happening...?" Senri asked him.

"The gods are scuffling," he replied.

There was another flash of lightning, illuminating Cho's face from the side. A

drop of water fell on Senri's cheek. For a moment, he wondered if it was a raindrop—but he then realized that a splash of seawater had made it all the way up to where the two men stood. A big wave had crashed violently against the rocks and dispersed, sending spray flying in all directions. This stormy sea was no laughing matter.

"I don't know which gods are brawling, but I can tell you one thing—the sea god won't be happy about this," Cho murmured, but his voice was drowned out by a peal of thunder.

Senri's eyes widened, his gaze fixed on the raging waters. The wind blew fiercely, and sea spray struck his face. A lightning bolt shot down toward the sea, illuminating the skies above.

A scuffle between the gods... Does that mean that Uren Niangniang and the ao god have gone into battle? Senri pondered to himself.

Had Uren Niangniang retrieved her missing half? Where had Jusetsu gone? Senri was perplexed, but no amount of worrying was going to help anything. This wasn't the sort of issue that a human could meddle in. At least, that was the sense that Senri got.

A remarkably fierce wave crashed and broke against the rocks, and that was when it happened. A deafening roar echoed through the air and familiar-looking black clouds surged up into the air.

"Argh..."

Senri gulped. Another eruption?

From the depths, pitch-black water surged and erupted into the air, scattering small rocks across the water. The sight of the black water spouting out in every direction reminded Senri of both the wings of a butterfly and the tail of a chicken at the same time.

"This is just a thought, but..." Cho began, his voice soft—but the thunder and the eruption made it hard for Senri to hear him.

"What did you say?" said Senri, but since Cho's eyes were directed straight ahead, he couldn't see his lips moving.

"I can't wrap my head around why the sea god wouldn't have taken my life," Cho continued. "The waters were rough. I, being the seafaring mourner, was meant to have been killed and chucked into the sea. I dived in before they got their hands on me, but the sea god still could have killed me if they so wished. What did the sea god want from me? I've tried racking my brains for answers, but I still don't have a clue."

Finally, Cho turned toward Senri.

"Nowadays, I get the feeling that the sea god is calling out for me. Maybe that's just because I've gotten older—kids and the elderly are closer to god, after all. At the end of the day, I'm still a seafaring mourner too."

"Cho..."

"I don't know whether it'll work, but I'm going to request the sea god put a stop to this." Cho then chuckled and positioned himself at the edge of the headland.

"Cho!" Senri yelled.

"I'm sure I'll wash up on the shore if the sea god decides there's no use for me again."

Senri threw his hands into the air as Cho jumped and began to fall down toward the sea.

The sound of him plunging into the water was drowned out by a roar of thunder, rendering it inaudible.

Before long, the surging pillar of water transformed into black spray. Jusetsu was powerless to do anything but gaze at it in blank amazement, but she suddenly noticed that the spray was getting weaker.

While the spray had been stretching high up into the sky, it had now begun to

lose its upward momentum, dispersing while turning an ashy gray color. This gray substance also gradually faded, and eventually turned into some sort of haze. The murky seawater in the vicinity also began to revert to its original color.

What happened? Jusetsu asked herself. Did the Owl suppress the eruption for us?

"It's the seafaring mourner's doing."

Jusetsu could hear the voice of a young girl. When she turned in the direction it was coming from, she realized that Ayura had—unbeknownst to her—awoken and gotten to her feet. The young girl was gazing out to sea, the waves reflecting in her sparkling, beautiful dark eyes.

"A seafaring mourner has placated the sea god," Ayura claimed.

"A seafaring mourner?"

"That's what the Raven is saying."

Jusetsu's eyes opened wide in surprise. "You can hear the Raven's voice?"

She clutched her chest. Jusetsu couldn't hear the Raven, and she probably never would again. Was that because she'd been set free?

"I can hear her..."

The Hatan clan—the clan which both Ayura and Ishiha had been born into—had been the Raven's first oracles. Was that why Ayura was able to hear her?

"What's happened to the ao god?"

After a brief pause, Ayura slowly shook her head. "He's far away now. The Raven is closer."

Jusetsu tried to work out what this meant. Ayura probably worded things awkwardly because she was originally from the Hatan clan. She struggled to get across exactly what she was trying to say. Ishiha used to have the same problem.

"Are you telling me that the Raven is stronger?" Jusetsu asked.

Ayura nodded. "She always was. That's why that other god had to use his wisdom to his advantage. But at this point, he's no match for her. The Raven is very strong."

The Raven is very strong.

With these words echoing in her mind, Jusetsu looked back out to sea. There was another flash of lightning and a roar of thunder. Fierce gusts of wind conjured up violent waves and sent splatters of water flying through the air. Jusetsu didn't know *how* the gods were fighting, nor which was dominating the other.

The several whirlpools that had formed on the water's surface began to dissipate one at a time. Having lost their momentum, they took turns dissipating and dissolving into the waves. There was another peal of thunder, and yet another bolt of lightning zigzagged down toward the water.

"The Raven is winning," asserted Ayura, just as more sea spray struck against Jusetsu's face.

Suddenly, the surface of the water began to bubble. Without warning, water began to surge into the air again. It undulated, writhing like a snake as it soared toward the shore with a tip as sharp as that of a blade.

"Niangniang, stay down," commanded Onkei, getting Jusetsu to squat down and shielding her with his body. Tankai was already standing in front of him.

The water blade, however, was not aiming for Jusetsu. Instead, it was heading toward Ayura and Ishiha.

For the Raven and her fellow gods, their greatest fear was their oracles being murdered. Jusetsu had heard as much from Koshun. The ao god's own oracle had been killed by the Hatan clan.

The ao god!

"Run...!" Jusetsu yelled out, but that very second, the water blade lunged at

the youths.

Jusetsu had no way of stopping such an attack anymore. She clenched her fist in the sand. She could see Hakurai trying to get to his feet in spite of his injuries —but it was too late.

There was a glimmer of golden light. This time, however, it wasn't a lightning strike. It almost looked as if a star had burst.

Shinshin flapped its wings and jumped in front of the water blade.

This drove the water blade away, and it vanished into thin air—but at that very moment, Jusetsu noticed feathers scattering down onto the beach. In reality, they weren't just feathers—it was Shinshin's entire body. A golden light had burst open and scattered across the ground, and the Shinshin that Jusetsu knew and recognized was gone. All that was left of Shinshin was light and light alone, fluttering weightlessly through the air, sparkling like gold dust.

"Shinshin!"

Jusetsu ran over and reached out toward the light, but it didn't feel like anything. It had no warmth nor coldness to it—it was just there, shining brightly. Jusetsu held onto it tight.

"Why did this happen...?" whimpered Ishiha, looking on the brink of tears as he gazed into the light.

"Because we're oracles," said Ayura. "The Hatan people were the Raven's first oracles... We're very important to her... Harara knows that, so that's why..."

Ishiha sunk his teeth deep into his bottom lip, his expression revealing that he was desperately trying not to cry. "Was that why Shinshin always stayed by my side?"

The light was fading now, and the fine, sand-like particles glistened as it quietly dissipated.

"As for the Raven..." Ayura turned toward the sea. "She's mad. Really mad."

The wind surged and the thunder roared in the distance. The sea was astir

with small, choppy waves.

All of a sudden, light poured down from the gray sky above. In the next instant, Jusetsu and the others could hear a tremendous roar. It sounded like the entire world was tearing apart. Although it wasn't immediately obvious, the sea had been struck by lightning.

The sea had been split. There was no other way to explain it. The waves had retreated to the left and right, leaving the seabed exposed. A tall, blue wall came into view—one that began at the shore where Jusetsu and the others stood, and it extended all the way to the distant port of Ko Province.

Silence fell. Both the sea and the wind went quiet and still, like children on their best behavior. The sound of thunder had also disappeared without a trace.

Jusetsu couldn't tell how long things stayed that way. Eventually, the wall of water slowly began to sink, gradually covering the seabed with water. Once the bottom of the sea was no longer visible, the parted waters returned to their original state. The sound of the tide echoed through the air while the gentle wind gracefully skimmed the water's surface, forming ripples in the sea.

The clouds that had been covering the sky drifted away in the wind and disappeared out of sight. Sunlight poured down, making the water gleam and glisten. The sea looked so calm that it was hard to imagine the eruption and the thunderstorm had happened at all.

"The White Turtle is no more—that's what the Raven is telling me," Ayura muttered. The dazzling sunlight reflecting on the water was making her squint.

Jusetsu shielded her eyes and gazed out at the water too. The sea was tranquil—so tranquil that it felt like the uproar that had been playing out mere moments earlier had all been in her imagination.

"Does that mean that the ao god is dead?" Jusetsu asked. She found herself doubting whether gods could ever really die—but then again, the story about the land of Sho having been formed from a god's dead body sprung to her mind.

"The White Turtle has crossed the sea to the Secluded Palace. He will drift about in the passage of stars, doze off, and eventually come back down to land, taking the form of a new life..."

"Just like a human, then."

Jusetsu gazed at the glistening waters and thought about the Secluded Palace that lay way off in the distance. She recalled the passage of stars and the glow of the lights that had wafted about inside it. One day, she—and everybody else she knew—would end up there too.

"Is it over?" she then asked, overwhelmed by feelings somewhere in between exhaustion and relief. Visions of Reijo's face came to mind.

I'm free, Reijo. The Raven Consort is free.

"No, niangniang," said Tankai, turning around. "For you, this is only the beginning."

Jusetsu stared intently into his eyes, before moving to stare into Onkei's. Onkei smiled and nodded back at her. He was thinking the same thing.

As a result of the Raven and the ao god's battle, the pumice stones that had been covering the water's surface either shattered or were swept away, allowing boats to leave Je Island and Ko Province's shores safely once again. The ceaseless flow of sea merchant boats swiftly resumed its rhythm.

Shiki had been tasked with making sure things in both Ko Province and Je Island were back in order and had his hands full with repairing boats and the parts of the port that had been damaged during the eruption. Both the foreign trade director and Ko Province's provincial governor seemed busy too.

Senri was still not back to full health, so he was being taken care of in the Jo family residence until he made a complete recovery and was able to return to the imperial capital.

Cho, who'd jumped into the sea in an attempt to placate the sea god, had

washed up on the shore alive.

"The sea god doesn't seem very keen on me," he'd said, straining a smile.

"Far from it. I think the sea god loves you dearly," Senri had replied, pleased that Cho had made it back unscathed.

Senri also expressed a wish to take Ishiha and Ayura into the Winter Ministry's care.

"Ishiha and Ayura...? How come?" Jusetsu asked him.

"Somebody asked if I could do so..." he admitted.

"Who?"

"Hakurai."

When did that happen? Jusetsu wondered. Now that she thought about it, she hadn't seen Hakurai since the day of the battle—which was strange, considering how severely injured he'd been.

"Where is Hakurai? He was badly hurt, was he not?"

"I believe he is with the sea swallows. They've been treating his injuries, at least."

"Is that so ...?"

Hakurai had started out as a sea swallow himself. His own tribe may have been wiped out, but his intention appeared to be to settle down with another sea swallow community, even if it was not the one that he'd grown up in.

Knowing him, he'll be wandering from street corner to street corner as a fortune teller before too long... Jusetsu thought to herself.

"Hakurai has asked me to bring Ayura up—to teach her what I know. He'd heard that I'd spent some time with her before, albeit only briefly."

"Oh, I remember that now."

When Hakurai had declared that he was going to help Jusetsu break Kosho's

barrier and Koshun had locked him away in a room inside the Winter Ministry, Senri had looked after Ayura for a little while.

"He's figured out how good you are with children," Jusetsu said. "But why Ishiha too?"

"That was my own idea," Senri explained. "He has some potential as an oracle. I don't know if it's just because he's from the Hatan clan, but I can see him making a great subordinate at the Winter Ministry one day. He could even become the Winter Minister in the future. Ayura, on the other hand, would be the ritual coordinator."

"Really?"

"Only if she so wished, of course." Senri laughed. "She isn't stupid. Learning is interesting to her. If she were taught properly, she'd pick up a lot of things."

Jusetsu felt somewhat relieved. The girl would be in safe hands with Senri. For her age, she'd been pushed around a lot for the convenience of the adults around her, so Jusetsu just hoped she'd get the chance to choose her own fate now.

"What are you going to do now, Raven Consort? Can you go back to the imperial capital?" asked Senri.

Jusetsu beamed at him. "I'm not the Raven Consort anymore. In fact, there is no Raven Consort anymore."

"That's true." The smile that came to Senri's face had a hint of sadness to it. "Let me correct myself, then—what are you planning to do next, Jusetsu?"

"I've already decided. I'm going to go back to the imperial capital one more time."

Senri stared at Jusetsu in silence for a moment. The look in his eyes hinted he was reluctant to let her go.

"I will always keep you in my prayers, wishing that your future will be full of happiness and prosperity," Senri said.

The look in his eyes was so gentle, it was almost as if he was looking affectionately at a young child.

Then, he smiled.

Once Jusetsu left the Jo family residence, she noticed a star raven perched on the branch of one of the nearby pine trees.

"Owl. Is the Raven well?"

The star raven blinked at her with its dark eyes. After defeating the ao god, the Owl had returned safe and sound. Jusetsu was no longer able to hear the Raven's voice, and consequently couldn't know what the Raven was saying either.

Both the Raven and the Owl were to be worshipped at the Seiu Shrine. A depiction of the Owl would likely be added to the mural on the shrine's wall.

The star raven spread its wings and took flight. Jusetsu watched it go, then started walking again.

Jusetsu descended the slope and began making her way toward the beach. The boat was moored on the sandbank. As it was an inland area, the water was calm and tranquil there. The sunlight sparkled beautifully as it reflected off the ripples on its surface. The vast expanse of water stretching out into the beyond had a deep blue color. Seafowl were chasing after shoals of fish, and the sails of foreign ships fluttered in the wind.

Jusetsu found herself losing track of time as she took in the stunning spectacle before her.

Jusetsu climbed aboard the boat at the harbor of Je Island and sailed back to Ko Province. It was Chitoku's boat, the same one that had taken her there. Jiujiu was waiting impatiently for the boat's arrival at Ko Province. When she saw that Jusetsu was aboard, she began weeping profusely, and she wrapped her arms

around her as soon as she disembarked. Jusetsu decided to let her sob until she'd gotten it out of her system. Taken aback by the sight, Tankai forced a wry smile. Onkei, on the other hand, stood there beaming fondly at the pair.

Chitoku was planning on heading to the imperial capital, so he allowed Jusetsu and her companions to travel with him. The nearer to the imperial capital they got, the colder the wind became. Undeterred by the chill, Jusetsu didn't retreat inside the cabin but instead stayed on deck, relishing the scent of the sea breeze.

Koshun was sitting in the Koshi Palace—which was located inside the inner court—listening to Shin's news. All of the doors were shut to keep out the chilly outdoor air, and the sole source of light was the dim winter sunlight that shone through the lattice windows. The area in which the imperial palace lay only saw snow a handful of times each winter, and the snow very rarely settled. Compared to the northern extremities of the country, people had it remarkably easy here, with heavy snowfall only arriving once every few years—if that. Even so, for those who were born and raised in the area and had never lived elsewhere, this was what a cold winter felt like.

"I understand," said Koshun. "Thank you for your hard work. You were burdened with a difficult task. I apologize for that."

"Don't worry, it wasn't... I deeply appreciate your thoughtfulness."

Shin looked undeniably exhausted—and unsurprisingly so. Koshun instructed him to get some good rest, then let him go.

Koshun leaned all the way back in his seat. Every time he had to punish someone—like he'd had to do with Choyo—it left him feeling heavy-hearted, as if there was something weighty in his chest dragging him down.

"Sei, could you open the door slightly? It's stuffy in here."

"Of course, my lord," Eisei immediately responded, opening one of the doors

to the side of the palace building.

The wind blew in, and the banners hanging from the ceiling gently rustled against one another. The room was brighter now. Koshun let out a small sigh.

Shogetsu had already told him what had happened on Je Island. First of all, he was simply relieved to hear that nothing disastrous had happened—particularly that no islands had sunk in the fallout. The Ikahi Island incident had been hanging in the back of his mind, and he had mentally prepared himself for the worst-case scenario—that history would repeat itself.

The Raven had gotten her missing half back, and Jusetsu had been freed. There was nothing holding Jusetsu back anymore.

She could go wherever she liked. She could spread her wings and travel anywhere she so wished.

Koshun had a feeling he knew which path she was going to take.

He closed his eyes and smelled the breeze. I wonder if some of this air drifted here from the sea, he thought to himself.

Kajo's lamp flickered in the darkness of the night, prompting her to lift her gaze abruptly. There was a scroll open on the desk—one she'd borrowed from the Koto Institute. Her plan had been to finish reading it that night. Since it was the early hours of the morning, Kajo was the only person in the room. Her ladies-in-waiting had long been dismissed.

Kajo rose to her feet and opened the door. The hanging lanterns were lit, ensuring that the surroundings remained fairly illuminated even in the dark of night. Realizing that there was a figure standing at the bottom of the palace building's stairs, Kajo gasped, momentarily taken aback—but she soon let out a sigh of relief. A surge of elation soon followed.

"Amei! You're back!"

It was Jusetsu. She was dressed in her men's robes and her hair had been

roughly gathered in a ponytail, but it was still—without a shadow of a doubt—her. Onkei was kneeling down beneath a nearby tree, keeping watch.

"Only a few moments ago," said Jusetsu, a slight smile appearing on her face.

Kajo hurried down the steps and took Jusetsu's hand. It was extremely cold, but this was hardly surprising—it was very chilly outside.

"Please, do come in. You must be freezing out here."

"It's all right," said Jusetsu. "I'm fine."

Jusetsu placed her other hand on top of Kajo's, sending a flood of emotion searing through Kajo's veins.

"Amei..."

"Thank you for taking care of Kogyo and Keishi for me. Have they settled in well?"

"Yes... Don't worry, they have. They're both hard workers, so everybody's become quite fond of them."

"I'm glad. You'll have to excuse my impertinence, but do you think you'd be able to continue to make use of them?"

Kajo stared into Jusetsu's eyes. The younger woman's gaze was noticeably calm.

"O-of course..." Kajo replied with a nod, stumbling over her words slightly. "Is it all over now? Are you free, amei?"

"Yes," Jusetsu replied.

"I see. You're leaving then, I assume."

Jusetsu simply smiled.

"What about your role as the ritual coordinator?" Kajo then asked.

"I'm never going to be able to hear any god's voice ever again, so I'm not fit for such a post. Someday, somebody will develop the abilities required for the role—don't worry."

She'd said that somebody would *develop* the skills needed, not that somebody would one day appear. This implied to Kajo that "somebody" was already around.

"Right..."

Kajo didn't know how to verbalize what she wanted to express. All she knew was that she didn't want to let go just yet.

As if she knew what Kajo was thinking, Jusetsu said in an easygoing tone of voice, "I'm thinking of becoming a sea merchant, Kajo."

"What?!" Kajo explained. "Well, well..."

She was surprised, but she didn't find the idea *that* outlandish. It was easy to imagine Jusetsu traveling freely over the wide-open sea, journeying from one place to another.

"That'll suit you perfectly, I'm sure. But why a sea merchant, of all things?"

"It started when I met your father, I suppose..." Jusetsu began. "He was such a great help to us. If he hadn't gotten his boat out for us, we never would have made it to Je Island. I'm so grateful."

"My father?" Her father's face appeared in Kajo's mind's eye. It was hard for her to imagine him carrying out an act of charity.

"He did it because he knew I was friends with you. It's thanks to you that I was saved." Jusetsu suddenly smiled, as if she just remembered something. "Chitoku takes *your* shoes with him as a lucky charm when he's out at sea. A pair of shoes that you used to wear as a little girl."

Kajo's eyes opened wide with astonishment. She couldn't believe that her father would do such a thing.

She'd convinced herself that her father had long forgotten about her existence. After all, he never sent any letters. Kajo herself only ever wrote to his right-hand man, thinking that if she were to write to her father directly, he

wouldn't even bother reading it.

Stunned by the realization that she was in fact on her father's mind, Kajo muttered, "I see..." and then promptly clammed up.

"Your father is going to teach me all there is to know about being a sea merchant. One day, you may find me delivering a gift or two to your palace."

"Perhaps."

Sea merchants arrived bearing gifts for Kajo almost every day, after all.

"I'll be looking forward to that." Kajo squeezed Jusetsu's hand tight. She never wanted to forget her warmth.

"Have you met with His Majesty?" she eventually asked.

"I'm heading there next."

"I take it I'm the first person you've visited, then. I'll make sure His Majesty never hears the end of that," Kajo replied with a giggle.

Jusetsu smiled back at her. "I'm so grateful for everything you've done for me, I really am," she said. "Keep well, won't you...aje?"

With that, Jusetsu turned back the way she'd come. Kajo followed after her for one or two paces, then brought herself to a halt.

"Amei...!"

No matter how much she'd begged, Jusetsu had not once called Kajo "aje"—not until now, during their final encounter.

Kajo stood frozen to the spot as she watched Jusetsu disappear into the distance. Her vision blurred as her eyes filled with tears.

Before making her way to the inner court, Jusetsu began walking in the direction of the Yamei Palace. Now uninhabited, the structure blended inconspicuously into the darkness of the night.

Jusetsu opened its doors and went inside, holding aloft a candle Onkei had offered her. She opened the cabinet in the corner of the room and lifted up the candle to help her see its contents.

An amber model fish. A rose carved out of wood. An ivory comb created in the shape of a bird and embellished with billowing waves. An opal glass fish with a faint red tint. A wooden model fish...

Jusetsu placed the candle on top of the cabinet and picked up each of these items to gaze at them. She tied the model fish to her waist first, then wrapped the comb and the wooden rose in a handkerchief. She stuffed the parcel in her breast pocket, closed the cabinet, and retreated back to the entrance.

"Thank you for waiting," she said to Onkei, and the two of them left the palace building together.

Jusetsu had sent Tankai in advance to inform Koshun of her imminent visit. By the time Jusetsu arrived at Koshun's private room in the Gyoko Palace, he had already dismissed the eunuchs who usually acted as guides for his guests. Eisei, however, was standing behind him, having already prepared some tea. Its invigorating scent filled the room, making Jusetsu close her eyes for a few moments to enjoy the aroma.

"Come over here," instructed Koshun, gesturing toward the space beside him on the divan.

Jusetsu walked over and sat herself down. Eisei placed two cups of tea in front of the pair and left the room, Onkei following him. Koshun picked up his cup and brought it to his lips. Jusetsu did the same and took a sip.

For a short while, the two of them were simply quiet. They both knew the reason why. Engaging in conversation would inevitably lead to them having to share parting words, something they both wanted to avoid.

That said, it wasn't as if they could stay silent forever. Daybreak would

eventually arrive.

Koshun put down his teacup.

"First of all...I'm glad that you're unharmed." His voice was just as calm as it always was. Tranquil, yet gentle and warm. "The Owl stopped talking at one point, so I was worried."

"Oh... Right. He was quelling the eruption for us."

"I heard about that. He's not afraid to take risks, is he?"

"What has become of Shogetsu?" Jusetsu asked.

"He's still a valuable asset when it comes to communicating with Je Island. Over there, Ayura is able to speak with the Raven."

"I see. I'm glad to hear that."

Silence descended between the pair once again. Jusetsu didn't know what she was supposed to talk about anymore.

"Kajo's father let you ride on his boat, I hear," Koshun eventually piped up.

Jusetsu nodded. "Chitoku really went out of his way for us. In fact, he's going to *continue* to be a big help."

Koshun turned toward Jusetsu, and she turned her face toward his.

"I'm going to become a sea merchant. Chitoku is going to teach me everything I need to know."

"A sea merchant..." he repeated.

"Before traveling by boat, I never knew just how vast and terrifyingly liberating the sea really was. I want to try sailing those waters for myself. I want to see what lies beyond them. Hearing other people's stories isn't enough—I want to see those things with my own eyes."

Koshun stared Jusetsu hard in the face.

"I see," he then said, shifting his gaze toward his feet. "I must admit, such a

profession does seem like it'd suit you."

"Kajo told me the same thing."

"You've already seen her?"

"Yes," replied Jusetsu. "She's done so much for me—but in the end, I wasn't able to repay her in any way. I'll have to give her a gift once I've become a proper a sea merchant."

Koshun let out a small laugh. "As long as you're healthy, that's all Kajo could ever wish for."

"But a gift from me would prove that I was well."

"I understand." Koshun laughed again, albeit in a befittingly gentle and quiet manner.

"Now that I think about it, you've told me plenty of stories about sea merchants in the past," Jusetsu said. "Perhaps that was what got me interested in what lay across the sea."

"That's true," Koshun responded. "You won't only be able to visit Ake, but Kada, Karoku, Uka, even Shamon. You'll get to travel wherever you please."

Koshun didn't possess such freedoms. It was strange—Jusetsu, someone who was supposed to remain a prisoner of the inner palace for the rest of her life, was now free to sail the open seas. Now, Koshun would be stuck inside the imperial capital. It was he who was truly deprived of the ability to choose his own path in life.

"Koshun... You really did keep your promise."

He had saved her, just like he'd vowed to.

Jusetsu went quiet and blinked. Nothing she could say would be able to convey the feelings inside of her accurately.

When Koshun had admitted that he saw her as an inextricable part of himself, it had given her peace of mind. She didn't need to say anything else. Neither of

them did.

"Thank you..." Jusetsu eventually managed to utter.

Koshun stared into her eyes, narrowing his own in a friendly manner. His gaze reminded Jusetsu of the sea as she'd seen it from Je Island. That vast expanse of water had struck her as so calm, profound, and open. Jusetsu couldn't help but feel that description fit Koshun perfectly too.

She was sure that she'd be reminded of him every time she gazed out at those waters.

"Jusetsu."

Koshun stood up and went over to the corner of the room. A table stood against the wall with a Go board laid out on top of it. He picked up one of the black stones and offered it to her.

"Play with me," he said.

Jusetsu obliged, placing the stone where she saw fit. Koshun then picked up a white stone and made his own move.

"That's enough for today," he then announced, looking down at Jusetsu.

Jusetsu met his gaze. The two of them exchanged glances—albeit only for a fleeting moment.

Koshun smiled. Looking into his eyes, Jusetsu smiled too. She then shifted her focus back to the Go board and gave it a small nod.

Without another word, Jusetsu left. Koshun didn't say anything either.

When she came out of the room, Onkei—who'd been waiting beside the doorway—quietly followed after her. Eisei was a few steps ahead of them, and Jusetsu stopped in her tracks when she reached him. Eisei was trying to give her something from his breast pocket—a handkerchief.

"What's this?" Jusetsu asked.

"The handkerchief that you kindly allowed me to borrow. Regretfully, I hadn't had the opportunity to return it until now."

"Oh... I must've already forgotten about it." Jusetsu took a quick glance at him. "I'm not a consort anymore, you know. You don't need to be so formal."

Eisei paused and gave her a slightly contemplative look. "It's not as if we're ever going to meet again. There's no point changing things now."

"Well, do as you like," responded Jusetsu. "And you can keep that handkerchief. Could I have yours in exchange?"

"Mine? Whyever would you want that?" Eisei asked, a dubious look on his face.

"It'll act as a good luck charm when I'm at sea," Jusetsu explained. "I've heard using something that belonged to a relative is most auspicious."

Eisei went quiet for a moment, but slowly pulled another handkerchief out of his breast pocket and passed it Jusetsu.

"Thank you," said Jusetsu, but Eisei just stood there awkwardly.

Jusetsu laughed slightly, then continued to stride ahead. Eisei turned around and called her name. Jusetsu thought she had to be imagining it, but she stopped nonetheless and turned back around.

"Jusetsu..." he said. "Be well."

The look on Eisei's face was as cold as always, but there was a glimpse of sorrow, and even a slight hint of affection in it.

This display of mixed emotions brought a smile to Jusetsu's face.

"Should I call you my 'big brother'?" she said. "Or is that not fancy enough for your liking? My 'honorable big brother,' perhaps?"

Eisei instantly scowled, making Jusetsu chuckle again.

[&]quot;Niangniang. Niangniang," Tankai called out.

Jusetsu turned around. As the ship swayed back and forth on the waves, she placed her hand on the edge of the boat.

"I've told you to stop calling me that," she complained.

"I'm too used to it," he argued back. "Nothing else sticks."

The sails billowed in the tailwind as the boat's bow glided over the waves. It was smooth sailing. The sea breeze caressed Jusetsu's cheeks and ruffled her silver hair, tied in a bundle at the back of her head. She was wearing black robes, and the sunlight made her silver hair sparkle.

It had been a little over a year since Jusetsu had left Sho. After Chitoku's boat had moored in Ake, they'd made their way to Kada. Now, they were on their way back to Sho once again. Traveling back and forth from country to country was indeed a sea merchant's life.

"What've you been looking at? All I can see out there is the sea and the sky."

"I've just been looking at the water," Jusetsu said.

"You really do love it, don't you?" said Tankai, letting out a snicker of disbelief. "What do you think about for all that time?"

"Good question... Go moves, I suppose."

"Come up with any good strategies?"

"I'm not so sure about that," Jusetsu said with a laugh. The sunlight reflecting off the waves was so bright that she had to squint to see anything.

"Niangniang," Onkei called out to her. He had just stepped up onto the deck.

Both he and Tankai were refusing to call her anything else—and Jiujiu was no exception either.

"Jiujiu wants you to have some rice cakes," he said.

"All right."

"Shall I bring them out to you?"

"No, it's fine," she replied. "I wouldn't want a seabird to steal them like last time."

Onkei chuckled at that, then went back inside.

"Speak of the devil..."

Tankai shielded his eyes with his hand and looked up at the sky. Jusetsu turned around to see that, true enough, a bird was flying their way.

"It's strange that there's only one—oh, I knew it," Tankai said.

"What is it, Sumaru?"

The bird that had flown over to them was, in fact, the star raven. The bird soared directly toward Jusetsu's boat and perched on the gunnel.

Jusetsu pulled a small, folded slip of paper out from beneath her belt. She placed it in the tube attached to the star raven's leg, as if she'd done it a million times before.

This star raven was the *real* Sumaru, rather than the Owl inhabiting the star raven's worldly form. The star raven had reverted to its original role as the Raven's apparatus and was now being used to transport letters to their rightful recipients—in this case, Koshun. That said, Jusetsu's letters tended to contain coordinates for Go moves more often than any kind of meaningful message.

"I'm quite confident in my move this time," Jusetsu declared.

"You think you'll finally be able to beat him?"

"I have beaten him once before, you know."

"How many wins to how many losses?" asked Tankai.

Jusetsu didn't answer him.

The star raven took flight, and Jusetsu watched as the bird glided further and further away.

"Niangniang!" Jiujiu shouted, urging her to come below deck.

"Coming!" Jusetsu replied—but she gave into the urge to stay and stare out to sea for a few moments longer.

The Magpie Consort gave birth to a baby girl while the Crane Consort had a baby boy. Both mothers and their children were healthy, prompting celebrations to be held throughout the nation that same year.

The year the Crane Consort's—Banka's—son turned ten, he was adopted by Kajo. When Kajo was given the title of empress, he in turn became the crown prince.

When Shiki entered one of the stack rooms in the Koto Institute, he noticed a familiar figure there, searching for something.

"Gaku?" he called out to him.

It was indeed Gaku Shomei, the vice minister of the financial affairs department.

"Reiko," Shomei replied.

With his towering build, wiry features, and dignified demeanor, Shomei could easily pass for a military man. While he bore a certain gloominess in his eyes, it was clear from the way he carried himself that he was a man with a good upbringing.

"Are you looking for something?" Reiko asked.

"The Ran record of law..." he explained. "I wanted to check a passage about taxes, so I thought I'd have a look for it. It wasn't in any of the imperial library's stack rooms, so I figured it must be here."

"If it's that you're looking for..." Shiki whizzed through the shelves and picked up a scroll.

His eyes wide in amazement, Shomei reverently accepted it. "Thank you very

much. I should have known you'd be able to help."

"No problem at all," said Shiki, laughing.

Receiving praise from someone as diligent as Shomei made him feel quite embarrassed.

"I'm meeting with somebody later on, so I really appreciate it," Shomei said. "My family would be furious if I were late."

"Do you have a brother here in the imperial capital?" Shiki asked.

"Yes—two younger ones. We haven't gotten together under one roof in a long time, so I thought we could share some celebratory drinks..."

"How wonderful!" exclaimed Shiki.

They must be celebrating their nephew's investiture as the crown prince, Shiki thought. Just as he was about to ask whether this was the case, he bit his tongue. Gaku Shomei was formerly known by the name Saname Shin and was the eldest son of the Saname family. His new name had been bequeathed to him by Koshun, and he had used it ever since. There was hardly anyone in the imperial court who was aware of his family background, and Shomei didn't talk about it either. Shiki only knew his true identity because he recognized his face from his time working as the observation vice envoy in Ga Province.

All but the primary members of the imperial court were oblivious to Saname Choyo's quiet passing—and all the scheming that had led to it.

The Saname family had become difficult to deal with in light of the incident with Choyo. It was hardly surprising that there was no push for Banka to become empress, despite the fact that she had given birth to an heir and had originated from a wealthy family from a province with very few meddling supporters.

"Was it your youngest brother who took over the family?"

"Yes," answered Shomei. "The older of the two is in Kai Province."

"Oh, with Yozetsu..."

The Saname family's second son had been adopted by Yozetsu Jikei and had inherited his salt merchant business. He'd probably married the Yozetsu family girl who'd been working as Jikei's lady-in-waiting.

At this point, Jikei had retired from his post as salt and iron envoy around five years earlier due to old age—leaving none other but Shiki to take over the role.

"It's fantastic that the three of you get on so well," Shiki said, beaming.

Shomei smiled back at him. While the young man's steadfastness was his most noticeable trait, he also had a certain tenderness to him—perhaps as a result of all the trials and tribulations he'd been through. This tenderness was accompanied by a vague gloom, which—besides his obvious aptitude—was likely one of the aspects of his character that Koshun had been drawn toward. Koshun wasn't the sort of person to let his personal biases come to the surface, but having spent many years working in close proximity to the emperor, Shiki often had a good idea of what he may have been thinking.

"I hope you enjoy yourselves," he said.

"Thank you very much," Shomei replied before bowing and leaving the room.

For Shiki, it was almost impossible to imagine how such a diligent man would act when drinking with his younger brothers.

A little girl who was soon to turn three was playing on the beach, bursting with laughter. Just as Ko had been leaving his home to head to the port, his wife had come out to the gate to see him off, and the two of them had decided to head to the beach together. There, they found their daughter and her wet nurse's children enjoying a game of tag on the sandy shore. Their daughter's wet nurse and ladies-in-waiting, along with Jikei, were standing nearby, watching over them.

"Are you still going to make the boat?" Jikei asked. He'd more than settled into his life as a retired grandfather and had a particularly soft spot for his

granddaughter.

"I'm heading there now," Ko answered. "Don't spoil our daughter too much while we're gone, all right?" he then warned.

Jikei just laughed.

"All right, all right," he had said, and left it at that. Ko, however, found his leniency to be a real point of contention.

Having noticed her father, the little girl dashed straight over to Ko, still covered in sand. She hugged him, getting sand and snot all over his traveling attire. His wife wiped their daughter's nose with a handkerchief. Having initially worked as a lady-in-waiting for Jikei, the idea of her entering the inner palace had been thrown about for a time, but it had never amounted to anything. The notion of her entering the inner palace—and the abandonment of that very idea—both had something to do with the remaining descendant of the previous imperial dynasty, but Ko never pressed her on the topic. She was an intelligent and forthright woman—as was to be expected from someone Jikei had chosen to act as his lady-in-waiting. In all honesty, Ko had liked her from the moment he met her, but he'd never admitted it, not even when Jikei suggested her as a potential wife. That said, he got the feeling that both she and Jikei had worked that one out for themselves.

Ko stroked his daughter's head. "Make sure to listen carefully to what your mother tells you, okay?" he asked.

"I will!" she responded energetically, but everyone knew she was unlikely to do so.

Ko's daughter was one to never sit still. She swiftly hurried back over to her wet nurse's children and started frolicking around with them. Jikei affectionately narrowed his eyes as he watched her play. The sea shone brightly in the sunlight, and he could hear the sound of the calm waves over the top of the children's happy voices. Jikei suddenly found himself having to dry his eyes.

"Did you get some sand in your eyes?" asked Ko, offering him his

handkerchief.

Jikei shook his head. "No... When you get older, it just gets harder to hold back the tears."

Ko said nothing and slipped the handkerchief back inside his breast pocket. He knew that Jikei's own daughter had suffered a cruel death at a young age as his wife had told him as such.

He placed a hand on Jikei's back—just like Jikei had once done with him. "Take good care of her while I'm off, Dad," he said, then started to make his way to the port.

"I just knew this color would suit you better."

"Anything's fine by me. Just make it quick," said Ryo. His wife was helping him get dressed, but he was urging her to hurry up.

She had a tendency to do things at a leisurely pace, which meant that Ryo was often forced to speed her along. The time that Ryo had to leave the port was fast approaching, so seeing her dilly-dally over which color he should wear made him feel uneasy. No matter how much he swore he was indifferent, she would never listen.

In the end, she settled on a light blue robe, a color that Ryo often wore. He was skeptical about whether so much contemplation had really been necessary, but voicing his doubts would only result in his wife countering him with an excuse that he wouldn't really be able to understand. He decided to keep quiet instead.

"Perhaps a belt made of white fabric would have looked nicer," she mumbled to herself—but Ryo couldn't take it a moment longer.

"All right, I'm leaving," he snapped, turning toward the doorway in a fluster. He couldn't bear the thought of trying on another garment.

"I'll come to the port and see you off," said his wife.

"There's no need for that," Ryo asserted. "I'll just say goodbye now."

Just as he'd placed his hand on the door, Ryo suddenly looked back over his shoulder.

"Do you have any messages you'd like to pass on to my older brothers?"

"What?" His wife was taken aback. "A message for your brothers? Well, I'd appreciate it if you could thank them for the congratulatory gifts they offered to our youngest child."

Ryo and his wife had received numerous gifts from his elder brothers when their son and daughter were born.

"That goes without saying," said Ryo. "Don't you have anything else you want to say?"

"Umm... Not especially."

His wife was baffled. Why would she have anything significant to say to her brothers-in-law? Ryo found himself relieved by his wife's reaction, but soon became annoyed at himself for feeling such a way. He'd only asked her that question so he could feel reassured.

"That's good, then."

With that, Ryo left the room. His wife, Kitsu Tojo, was originally supposed to have married Shin—but Ryo had ended up becoming the new head of the Saname clan after Shin declined the opportunity and Ko was adopted into the Yozetsu family.

Ryo couldn't help but wonder if Shin had spared a thought for Kitsu Tojo's future when he'd jilted the Saname family, or whether she'd crossed his father's mind when he'd chosen to die. They probably hadn't. The two of them were similar in that respect—although Shin would never admit it himself.

When Ryo had ended up as the head of the clan, it was decided she would marry him instead. By the sound of it, the plan had never been to marry Shin specifically—it had been for her to marry the head of the Saname clan.

Ryo didn't know how Tojo felt about marrying him instead of Shin. In fact, he was too scared to find out, and avoided asking for that very reason.

Tojo had a coy smile and looked just as shy today as she did on the day the pair had gotten married. No matter how much time passed, she'd always retained that same, girlish air.

As Ryo was walking down the road to the port, feeling rather low, his attendant called out to him.

"Sir," he said. "Your wife is chasing after you."

Ryo stopped in his tracks and turned around. Tojo ran up to him, looking rattled.

"You forgot something," she said, huffing and puffing. Her cheeks were flushed, and her forehead was covered in sweat.

"Can't you at least tell me what it is?" he asked.

"I can't..."

Tojo passed him the object she'd been clutching tightly in her hand. It was an ivory hanging ornament that was shaped like two birds. She tied it to his belt, then let out a contented sigh.

"Take care of my husband for me, won't you?" she then said to his attendant. "I'll see you both when you get back."

With that, Tojo smiled, bowed, and turned back the way she'd come.

Once they'd started walking again, Ryo noticed that his attendant had a halfsmile on his face.

"What's so funny?" he asked him.

This particular attendant was young, which made him easier to talk to than many of his seniors. That being the case, Ryo always chose him to accompany him on his outings.

"Nothing, really... I was just thinking about how scary your wife is."

"Scary?" Ryo was shocked. To him, his wife was anything but scary.

"Your intuition might serve you well in most situations, but when it comes to your own wife, you seem to be a bit slow to pick up on things," said his attendant. "That belt decoration—those two birds—symbolizes that you're married. It acts as a deterrent."

"A deterrent? For what?"

"For any women who may try to approach you."

Ryo stared at his attendant full in the face. "I'm sure you're just overthinking this," he then said.

Ryo's attendant looked annoyed. "There are a lot of sophisticated, beautiful women in the imperial capital. When she told me to 'take care' of you, she was *really* asking me to make sure you won't cheat. She instructed me to do so before we left—saying how outraged she'd be if you were to drop by the prostitution district. She's quite possessive, you know. You really should be careful."

Unsure what to say, Ryo carried on walking in silence.

"Oh... I forgot," Ryo said once the two men were further down the road.

"What's wrong?" his attendant asked.

"I forgot to ask my wife what she wanted for a souvenir."

"How come you're in such a better mood now?"

The adorable pair of birds hanging from Ryo's belt swayed in the breeze.

The Samon Palace was a detached palace inside the imperial estate. It was the same place Ryo had stayed when he'd visited the imperial capital before. By the time he got there, his two brothers had already arrived.

"Long time no see," said Shin, getting up from his seat to welcome him. "How are the kids?"

Ko leaned back further in his seat as he sipped his tea. Light refreshments, like filled buns and rice wrapped in bamboo leaves, were spread out on the table.

"They're well. Thank you very much for the congratulatory gifts that you both sent."

Ko's face broke into a broad smile. "Our Ryo knows how to communicate like an adult now, I see," he said.

"What are you talking about? I'm almost thirty," Ryo snapped back. "I wasn't going to be your baby brother forever."

Ko was much easier to talk to than he'd been in the past. At one point, it had been impossible to tell what he was thinking, and he had never smiled like he was doing now.

Shin had a grin on his face too. The eldest of the three, he gave off a much more gentle aura than he used to and was even able to show when he felt sad.

What about me? Ryo wondered, but he couldn't help but feel like he hadn't changed that much at all.

"Banka should be here soon," announced Shin.

He went by another name now, but to Ryo, the name Shin felt much more familiar. In a way, Ryo could understand why he'd left the Saname clan behind him—but at the same time, it was hard to fully comprehend. He knew that Shin had been on bad terms with their father, but there had to be more to it than that. He'd tried to interrogate him about it before, but he hadn't managed to obtain any clear answers. Shin would probably never reveal his reasons for as long as he lived, and Ryo couldn't bring himself to press him any further.

A short while later, the three men heard footsteps—a woman's, in particular. "She's here," said Ko.

Ryo and Shin leapt to their feet, ready to welcome her. With a flutter of her pale red shawl, Banka gracefully sauntered into the room. She was plumper than she was when she was a young girl, and her appearance was more refined

now.

"It's so lovely to see you all," she said.

"How many years has it been now?" said Ko, narrowing his eyes as he looked at her. "I expect you see Shin from time to time, though."

"Less often than you'd think," Banka replied. "He's busy—aren't you, Shin?"

Banka shot him a petulant look, making him smile awkwardly back at her.

"Of *course* he's busy. He's the vice minister of the financial affairs department, after all," argued Ko.

"Unlike somebody we know," commented Ryo snidely.

"Hey," Banka countered, glowering at him. "I'll have you know I'm plenty busy too."

"People who *really* have their hands full don't go around insisting that's the case."

"Well, everybody's different," snapped Banka. "It's interesting to see that you haven't changed a bit, Ryo."

She was visibly aggravated, but the fact that she'd gotten so ruffled over such a silly comment just proved how little she'd changed herself.

"How's your wife? Kitsu Rokujo's daughter. I wonder if she looks like her mother. I'd like to get the chance to meet her one day. Hey, do you think you could bring her to the imperial capital? You can bring the children too. Am I right in thinking the oldest is a boy and the younger one is a girl?"

Taken aback by this rapid onslaught of questions, Ryo offered his sister some tea.

"Calm down," said Ryo. "I'll bring the children when they're older. Oh yes, that reminds me. What do you think would make a good souvenir from the imperial capital?" He figured that Banka would be the right person to ask.

"For the children?" said his sister.

"No, for Tojo."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, eyes widening in surprise. "Well, how about a comb or a hairpin with a pearl inlay, imported from Kada? Things from Kada are very fashionable at the moment," she explained politely.

"I'll tell you which shops to visit," chimed in Shin. "There's a lot of variation when it comes to merchants that sell imported goods—some are true connoisseurs, while others are just scam artists."

"I should go and buy a comb too. It would have slipped my mind if you hadn't mentioned it." Ko laughed. "If you're heading to the marketplace, Ryo, I'll join you. You can pick out some fabric for me. My daughter's been begging me to buy some."

"Is Yozetsu Jikei doing well?" Shin asked, as if he'd just been reminded about him. "His Majesty has been wondering how he's doing."

"Very well. Even better than me, in fact. He's utterly spoiling my daughter. He actually asked if I could bring him some drinks back from the imperial capital."

"Is that right? Well, I'm pleased to hear he's in good health."

Shin gave him a wide smile as he nodded calmly in acknowledgment.

"Speaking of His Majesty... *Gaku*," said Banka, sounding like she was about to laugh as she called Shin by his new name. "Have you heard? He wants you to supervise the crown prince's studies."

"He did tell me, but I turned down his request."

"Oh, how come?"

"He already has an excellent grand master teaching him. There's no need for His Majesty to come and ask *me* for help," said Shin.

Banka got the impression that Ryo and her other older brothers felt obliged to keep their distance from their nephew.

"He just doesn't want his knowledge to get too skewed in one particular

direction. You're an imperial scholar, Shin—and I think His Majesty really cares about you."

"His Majesty cares about Shin?" said Ko, surprised.

Ryo, on the other hand, didn't find this so hard to believe. His Majesty did have a tendency to fuss over other people.

"He knows that all of us get on well as siblings, so he probably just wants to give you a chance to meet with your nephew. He's doing it out of the kindness of his heart."

Shin held his tongue as he gazed out through the window, looking torn. "I'll have another think about it," he eventually uttered.

"Promise me you will, won't you?" said Banka. "He's a smart boy, just like his father. I'm sure you'd like him—fortunately, he hasn't inherited so much from me." She laughed.

Banka may have allowed her son to be adopted, but it was merely a formality so the Mandarin Duck Consort could assume the role of empress. It wasn't as if she'd severed tied with the boy completely. Word had it, however, that the empress had actually grown very fond of the crown prince.

When asked about that, Banka nodded.

"Kajo's always been a kind and intelligent person, but that's especially the case when it comes to children. She's always doting on him and showing him good books to read."

Banka sounded quite relaxed about the subject. She must have really trusted the empress.

The topic then shifted from the crown prince to Ko and Ryo's children, causing the room to fill with ceaseless conversation and laughter. Shin smiled delightedly as he watched his brothers and sister chatter away. Ryo wasn't the only one who was feeling somewhat relieved. Everyone there knew that Shin stubbornly refused to take a wife, had no mistress, and was never going to have

children, but they were taking care not to broach the subject. If he'd chosen to stay single out of choice, nobody would be bothered, but that wasn't the case. Shin was struggling—and the reason for that probably had to do with his father. For Shin, the wounds that man had left were too deep, and Ryo understood that.

Once Banka had returned to the inner palace in time for sunset, Ryo and his brothers went to Shin's residence to continue their conversations They had alcohol, but there was no music or female entertainment to liven the mood. It was to be a quiet night of drinking.

Can't anybody do something about your suffering? Ryo wanted to ask Shin, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. Even if he did, he probably would've gotten nothing more than a sad smile in return.

Shin's younger brothers stayed at his house for about ten days and returned home with piles of souvenirs. They'd all seemed well, which gave Shin some peace of mind. In fact, he suspected that they might have been the ones who were more concerned about *him*.

As the brothers were making their way to the port, Ko piped up first.

"Our stupid father put a curse on you, didn't he?"

By "stupid father," Ko meant Saname Choyo.

"A curse...?"

"Indeed. He placed a curse on him, and then went and kicked the bucket."

Shin didn't say a word.

"Jikei was the one who reversed my curse for me," said Ko. "I can't claim I know everything about your situation, but I pray that someone will be able to release you from your curse too."

With that, Ko walked away.

Nobody is ever going to be able to free me, Shin thought to himself. After all, he was held back by chains of blood.

Shin headed back to the Koto Institute. He felt comfortable there, surrounded by the smell of old ink and wood. As he walked through the scroll-packed shelves, he heard light footsteps rushing about behind him. Moments later, a small figure burst out and bumped into him.

"Argh..."

Anticipating that the impact was going to knock the other person over, he grabbed hold of their shoulders. It was a child—a young boy, in fact. Startled, Shin fell to his knees. There was only one young boy who was allowed to run about as he liked in a place like this—the crown prince.

"You're not hurt, are you, Your Highness?" said Shin.

"No... I'm sorry," the young boy apologized, rubbing his sore nose. He had hit it in the collision.

Shin felt slightly impressed. This boy was the emperor's only son and all of the adults around him likely waited on him hand and foot. Despite that, there was nothing imperious about his attitude—in fact, he seemed rather humble and respectful.

I see what Banka means now, Shin thought to himself. He really does remind me of Koshun.

The boy's features and demeanor were almost identical to Koshun's, who was quiet and never overbearing toward anybody.

"Don't you have somebody accompanying you?" Shin asked.

"I sneaked away."

"Sneaked away...? Why?"

"Nobody will show me the books I want to see," the boy complained, "because there are some that I'm not allowed to read."

Shin smiled awkwardly at the pouting boy. He could definitely tell he was Banka's son now.

"Some of the texts here in the Koto Institute's stack rooms are very precious, and others are old and easily damaged," Shin explained.

The boy went quiet and gazed intently at Shin, looking contemplative.

"If one such text was to get damaged, the person looking after you would get punished...as would I."

"I'm sorry for running around," the boy apologized again, a meek look on his face.

At that moment, Shin felt a gush of emotion burning in his chest. He was shaken—overwhelmed with love for his sweet, intelligent nephew who was standing before him.

No, he thought to himself. These blood connections that bind aren't chains—they can't be.

Feeling the warmth of the blood flowing through his veins, Shin closed his eyes and hung his head.

While also being a close aide of Koshun's, Gaku Shomei acted as the crown prince's tutor. After Koshun abdicated the position due to old age, Shomei's nephew ascended the throne. Shomei stayed by his side to support him too.

After Koshun stepped down from his role as emperor, he moved to a separate palace outside the imperial estate where he was to see out the rest of his days.

However, every now and then, a certain old woman would pay the palace a visit.

Rumor had it that this old woman—whose long, thick hair was a mix of silver and gray—was invited there especially to play Go with him.

The End





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