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2

Rising from Ashes

My Dear Emperor,
You're Putty in My Hands!

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Rising from Ashes: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands! Vol.2

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Rising from Ashes: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands! Vol.2

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First Digital Edition: April 2024

ISBN-13: 979-8-88560-075-0



Seventh Arc: The Wagtail Priestess Reunites with Esteemed Guests from Centoria

Chapter Sixty-Three: The Emperor's True Motive

SUMMER arrived.

There was something I had noticed about the moon in the world of the game. It climbed in an arc from one point of the sky to another, as well as waxed and waned like the one in my previous life.

"Is there a chance that the shape of the planet is the same as well?" I wondered, whispering to myself.

Such thoughts ran through my mind as I stared at the sales report before me. The skin care products I had manufactured under the Sekirei Palace brand had made bigger waves than I expected. More and more women in Orient were purchasing our wares, having heard of our good reputation.

Thanks to that, even though I hadn't actively visited merchants to pitch products, businessmen came to Sekirei Palace at the encouragement of their wives and offered me international sales contracts. A lot of preparation and adjustments were yet needed, but according to them, my skin care items would join the lineup of goods sold by traveling merchants within a month's time.

Suzuiro was packaging soap nearby, and her cheery voice rang out. "It was a really smart move to hand out the samples just before summer started, Lady Sai! That's why things went so smoothly!" Her hands were still moving as she explained, "Summer is the season of love for Oriental maidens! That's why we all want to make ourselves as pretty as possible!"

I tilted my head slightly, intrigued. "Oh... Is that because winter is cold, so no one is in the mood for romance?"

“Not exactly! You see, every summer, there’s a period when we commemorate the dead and our ancestors. All the young and single traveling merchants come home for the Summer Irei Festival! That’s why our festival is very grand! In fact, many couples use it as an opportunity to get engaged!”

“Ah, now that you mention it, I have noticed many single women wearing flower ornaments in their hair since the start of the month.”

I glanced around at all the ladies-in-waiting nearby. As time went on, more and more people accrued at Sekirei Palace. A lot of the new faces were young women around Suzuiro’s age or just a tad older, and many of them sported beautiful floral hairpins. Made with all kinds of materials and techniques, the blooms matched the color of their hair or eyes. I spotted some *mizuhiki* accessories—the flowers were formed by knotting a special kind of thin, twisted paper cord often used on formal or important occasions. Those and papercraft blossoms, as well as ornaments depicting art of flowers, were the three main types.

Though my court ladies all wore the same uniform, different flowers decorated each individual; it was a splendid balance of harmony and individuality. The other women soon noticed my attention, and their hands drifted to their hairpins as they joined the conversation.

“All single women of age wear flowers in their hair during the event,” one woman chirped. “Are you not going to wear any, Lady Sai?”

“Weeell...” I hesitated, somewhat reluctant.

“You really should!” she said, leaning forward excitedly. “What flowers do you like?”

Another woman observed, “You have black hair, Lady Sai, so colorful flowers must look gorgeous on you, like morning glories!”

“But doesn’t the morning glory feel a little too immature? I personally think touch-me-not flowers suit her!”

“Reeeally? She should wear more vibrant ones.”

I felt at peace in the friendly atmosphere—they were all chatting like students in an all-girls school. As I listened, I twirled a lock of my hair with a finger. After

moving to Orient, I started growing out my hair, only occasionally trimming my bangs and the hair around my face. Shorter hair was easier to take care of, but I had caved under the united, gentle insistence of the maids and ladies-in-waiting.

Suzuiro lobbed a question at me. “By the way, how old was your mother when she married, Lady Sai?”

“Let’s see...” I paused in thought. “Sixteen, I believe.”

“How old are you now?!”

I blinked, taken aback. “I’m sixteen.”

Suzuiro squealed. “Then you’re going to get married soon, aren’t you?!”

“Huh? Uh, no, I’m...”

“Congratulations!” She pumped her hand into the air before deflating a bit. “But at the same time... It’s too fast... I’ll miss you.”

“Umm, I still don’t have any—”

I couldn’t finish, because she gasped and said, “You need to grow out your hair quickly! Or else you won’t make it in time! For your wedding!”

I fought the urge to place my palm over my forehead. “Please listen to me...”

In my homeland, Centoria, women cut their hair when they became engaged. We cropped the lengthy hair we’d grown since birth and plied it into a wreath that we then gave our fiancés. That was our custom, and I had followed it dutifully.

Upon thinking the word “fiancé,” I internally winced. *Ah... That brings back horrible memories.* I had thrown away everything that reminded me of Centoria when I left. The food I had on me, the clothes I’d worn, and even the house I used to live in. Yet one unwanted memento of my former fiancé remained—my hair. *I don’t want to think about that man ever again, so I made the right choice in growing it out again.*

I stood from my seat and peered into the wall mirror as I lifted a lock of my hair. My straight, ebony hair was on the verge of reaching my shoulders, and the maids had carefully arranged the top half into a beautiful braid. *Hmm, if I*

were to wear a flower hairpin, I would probably have to stick it into the plait.

“A flower, huh...?” I murmured to myself.

Suddenly, a soft voice called out to me from behind. “My, my, are you searching for a groom, Lady Sai?”

Startled, I emitted a tiny yelp. I turned to see a stunning woman inclining her head slightly in question. She almost looked like the personification of a delicate white lily glistening with morning dew. It was the emperor.

My heart thumping erratically in my chest like a drum, I took a deep breath and greeted her. “H-Hello there, Lady Haruiro...”



The increase in maids and court ladies employed at Sekirei Palace had prompted more frequent appearances of the emperor in his feminine form.

Our policy at Sekirei Palace was one of frugality and simplicity, so all the women working there wore women's *hakama* as part of their uniform, which allowed for better mobility. Back in my previous life, *hakama* had been the default attire of female students during the Meiji era, so as a result, Sekirei Palace felt more akin to a girls' school than a glamorous residence for an erstwhile imperial harem.

The moment the effeminate emperor stepped inside the bounds of the property, however, the atmosphere shifted abruptly. With her every step, it seemed as if a shower of petals trailed after her feet, and her enchanting aura accompanied her everywhere she went. Her ivory hair was braided into an intricate plait, and crimson rouge graced her lips. She was captivating and dazzling and a stark contrast to Lord Yukinari, whose long, black hair reminded me of Princess Kaguya from Japanese folklore.

I vaguely remembered hearing rumors describing the pair as "the goddess of spring and her older brother, the god of winter." And of course, since she was appearing in the palace more often, people were bound to take notice of such a striking woman. Due to her self-introduction as Lord Yukinari's younger sister, courtiers started pestering her "older brother." Once, a deep frown on his face, Lord Yukinari grumbled, "The court officials *insist* that I introduce her to them. They won't stop..."

In his female form, the emperor didn't wear a veil, revealing her exquisite countenance for everyone to admire. Haruiro was slightly shorter than her male counterpart, her face closer to mine when she spoke to me. In the presence of her magnificent beauty, I couldn't help but tense instinctively.

I cast my eyes down, trying to avoid looking at her directly as I replied. "Um... I was unaware of the significance of wearing flowers in my hair."

"Floral hair accessories are a sign that you're on the hunt for potential grooms." The emperor gave me a gentle smile as Haruiro.

Oh, she's right. How could I have missed the connection? Only single maidens wear flowers, so that's the natural conclusion.

Haruiro sighed. “If you wear one when so completely clueless, Lady Sai, many young men might try to woo you, and you would feel utterly lost as they vie for your attention!” In front of the other court ladies, she tended to use politer language than her usually more casual speech.

“I see... Ah, but as the Wagtail Priestess...” I frowned slightly. “Would that be the most suitable action?”

The emperor’s answer was clipped and firm. “No.”

My eyes widened. “N-No...?”

“If you *really* want a groom, I’ll pick one for you. So please don’t wear anything in your hair until then, okay? Am I clear? It’s a big no-no, okay?” Though she wore a smile, I could sense the pressure behind the demand as she took a step forward.

Intimidated, I nodded obediently. “I-I won’t.”

She seemed satisfied by my response, and the edge melted from her grin. She changed the topic. “That aside, may I have a little more of your time, Lady Sai?” she asked, her tone respectful like that of a lady-in-waiting.

“Of course. The only item on my itinerary for the day is making skin care products here at Sekirei Palace.”

She gave me a nod. “You see, my brother just received a message for you from the emperor, and he asked me to pass it on to you, my lady. I believe we will require some privacy, so let us make our way to a room where we can be alone.”



DUE to his status, whenever the emperor wanted to talk to his subjects, he summoned them to an audience in the throne room. If he constantly called the Wagtail Priestess to his side, people might begin to notice, which would be inconvenient according to him. Therefore, when he wished to speak with me in a less formal setting, he visited Sekirei Palace in a feminine guise. The ploy was a recent development as women became more abundant in the imperial complex.

I led Haruiro to the most inconspicuous room available. Lifting the bamboo blinds, she addressed me. “When I’m in this form, you suddenly seem a lot bigger, Sai.” She had returned to her typical friendly tone. “It’s really weird. After all...you’re usually so tiny.”

I looked her over. “Even in your female form, you are quite tall, Your Majesty,” I observed.

“Maybe it just runs in my family.” She hummed in thought. “I hear that my father was even bigger than me.”

“Even *bigger*? He must have seemed like a towering wall, then.”

“A wall?” She chuckled—she appeared to be in a good mood today.

In his original form, the emperor was so tall that I had to crane my neck to look up at him. If I were to compare him to something from my past life, he was probably at least the height of a vending machine.

Meanwhile, my frame was petite even for a woman, so it was difficult for us to meet each other’s eyes when we spoke while standing. *But, well, due to our difference in status, we rarely ever get to talk in such a manner anyway.* In his female form, the emperor was still tall, yet only for a woman—she was around the height of an average man.

While I busied myself with preparing tea, the emperor reverted to his normal physique behind the partitioning screen. Though my back was to him, I could detect his transformation instantly because, as his fluffy wings unfurled, his distinct and lovely aroma permeated the room.

His voice thrummed from behind me—the soft, low-pitched masculine voice that I was most familiar with. “That smells nice. Where did you get those tea leaves from?”

“It is *sencha*, green tea grown in the Otome region. It is not as high-grade as the usual tea you consume... My apologies, I do not have anything better on hand.”

“Well, it would be rather dull if I always drank the same thing, and I could never say ‘no’ to tea you make, Sai.” He emerged and took a seat. He hadn’t bothered to change his clothes and had instead merely shifted the position of

his sash and let down his rolled-up sleeves. *Ah, loose clothes are convenient for occasions like this.*

The emperor took a sip of his tea before he clasped his hands together on the table and got down to business. “Now then...” He paused. “We’re going to invite the Centorian royalty to the Summer Irei Festival this year.”

My breath hitched.

He nodded at me. “I’ve been preparing for it for almost half a year and have finally received confirmation that it’s going to happen, so I wanted to take this opportunity to tell you. You see, we haven’t officially invited the Centorian royal family to this festival since the reign of the emperor from two generations ago, so it required quite a lot of prep time.”

Half a year ago... I was still imprisoned by the Order of Holy Knights then. I recalled that dark, cold room where I couldn’t even glimpse the spring sky. A shiver ran through my body, and I hugged myself reflexively.

The emperor cast his eyes down momentarily in what was likely sympathy before pressing on. “We extended our invitation to these esteemed Centorian guests for a reason. To the commoners, the event is just a joyous, merry festival, but in the imperial court, it’s, well, a bit controversial, to put it simply.”

“By controversial, you mean...?”

“During the reign of the previous emperor, we expanded the scale of the festival, which has put a lot of strain on the imperial budget. A notable fraction of the officials contend that we should cut back on the celebration this year and in the future. But over a decade has passed since the initial decision to upscale the festival, and to downscale it now would be detrimental to the citizens whose livelihoods revolve around the festivities, so if possible...I want to avoid that.”

I inclined my head. “So the Summer Irei Festival is also a public employment program in a sense.”

He nodded. “Winter is lengthy in Orient; we are buried under snow for a significant part of each year. Furthermore, we have less farmland than Occidenia and Centoria. That is precisely why our medicine industry flourished

instead—our wealth of knowledge and expertise are what we trade and profit from. That was how we prospered, and through our festivals, we saw growth in other industries as well. I don't want to see them decline after all the hardship our nation has faced. My opinion is that nurturing these industries will help Orient in the long run."

"I see. You wish to maintain the scale of the festival and to silence the opposition by using it as a diplomatic opportunity."

"Yep. The faction supporting the previous emperor, the faction supporting the current one, the conservative faction, the liberal faction... The commoners versus the feudal lords, the countryside versus the capital—everyone is focused on fighting among themselves in a conquest for power, and I want to do what I can to change that. And to accomplish such a goal, I want to shift their focus to a third party that is an outsider to us all."

He paused, narrowing his eyes slightly. "We mustn't forget what happened during the reign of the emperor two generations ago. As a result of the internal discord in Orient, we ended up providing aid to Centoria under conditions that were unfavorable to us. Isolating Orient as we always have is more dangerous than facing the risks of diplomacy."

Suddenly, an illustration flashed across the back of my mind. A scene that I had seen long, long before. One in which rain poured down upon the plaza like bullets and the emperor breathed his last in the guise of his "body double."

I inhaled. "I share your opinion, Your Majesty. I believe that the citizens of Centoria are far more ignorant about this country than the people here could ever imagine..."

Another memory floated to the surface—the vitriolic words of my former fiancé. He had called Orient an empire ruled by a winged beast. Though relations between Orient and Centoria seemed peaceful, his sentiments as a Centorian man could be the perception of many. Should friction ever arise between the two nations, such an impression might only be the beginning. The mere thought of what that could escalate to made me shudder.

I clenched my hands into fists, collecting myself. "Even now, Centoria is at war with Meridiona. Not only that, due to the lack of offspring between the

Centorian king and queen, domestic infighting will eventually break out as royals battle for their right to the throne. Though that conflict will not happen any time soon, it is clear that things do not bode well for Centoria.”

That was why they had summoned the Saint, Lilly, to save the kingdom from its plight. *That being said, I haven't heard any good news since...*

I closed my eyes briefly before concluding, “Thus, Orient will open its borders and invite the Centorian royal family as guests in a gesture of goodwill. In doing so, we will display our military prowess to a certain degree and nip any unsavory ideas in the bud via intimidation... Is that correct?”

“Maybe not to the degree of intimidation.” He gave me a grin. “But I do hope that by showing them our enthusiasm for investing in our culture, we can pacify their hearts, which must be weary from the war with Meridiona.”

Noticing that his cup was empty, I poured him more tea. The corners of his eyes softened as he gazed at the rising steam. After a sip, he added in a low voice, “I’ve got to take advantage of the internal chaos of the Order and strengthen the faction amicable to Orient before everything settles down again.” His lips wore a thin smile.

My eyes widened, and I had to stifle a gasp. A chill raced down my spine at the coldness in the emperor’s ash-blue eyes. They burned almost like ice against skin.

Faltering, I muttered, “Your Majesty...”

“Hm?”

“Did you perhaps deliberately...”

One question had always unconsciously nagged at me: *Why did the emperor save me?* I felt unworthy of the extensive hospitality he had showered me with since my arrival in Orient. I hadn’t known the reason for his kindness, and although I was grateful, it weighed heavily on my mind like a cloud of unease. And finally I caught a glimpse of the answer I had sought for so long, as if it had been obscured by snow that was melting away into clear water.

Slowly, I managed to assemble the words. “Did you deliberately rescue me in a way that would completely tarnish the honor and reputation of the Order?”

“I wanted to save you, Sai. That’s what I truly thought. That, I can promise.”

The chattering of magpies echoed from outside the windows; the sound a saw gnawing at my mind.

The emperor’s voice was soft as he said, “Sai, I want you to attend the festival as the Wagtail Priestess.”

Soft but unyielding.

Chapter Sixty-Four: This Must Be What It Means to Help Each Other

“...SAI?”

The emperor leaned forward, studying me with concern as my silence stretched on. For a while, neither of us spoke.

Finally, he said, “Are you...” He hesitated. “...Upset, thinking that I used you for my own gain?”

I didn’t know whether to nod or shake my head. Ultimately, I just stated my thoughts as they were: “For a lowly person like me, it is an honor to be useful in the course of your duties, Your Majesty. I am deeply indebted to you, and to know that you consider me an asset is the most blissful feeling in the world. Nothing else can compare.”

He waited, quiet.

“I was just... I am just very surprised that everything was a part of your plan,” I admitted.

The emperor cast his eyes down and brought his teacup to his lips. He drank before letting out a small sigh. Selecting his words carefully, he slowly said, “I can’t allow myself to end up like the previous emperor. But of course, as a person, I have my own selfish desires. And...to accomplish both what I wish to do as an individual and my aims as a sovereign, my only choice was to use your circumstances to my advantage. I must view everything available as a pawn to achieve my goals—myself, my subjects, and even you, Sai.”

“That is only natural, Your Majesty.” I nodded. “From the very beginning, I have wished to be useful to you. If... If I am already such a pawn, I am honored and blessed as your subject.”

“As my subject, huh...?” A shadow fell over his face. He looked as if pain were tearing him apart, and I was taken aback by the sight. *Really, he doesn’t have to beat himself up over it.*

Honestly, at first, I had feared the emperor. Yet at the same time, the feeling had been more than simple trepidation because it had motivated rather than tormented me. He had showered me with kindness and compassion that

seemed too good to be true, making me uneasy.

I was an inconsequential woman who contributed nothing to the table. I lacked the skills of a politician and hardly excelled in social situations. I didn't have the backing of an influential family nor any notable assets to my name. My only redeeming features were my extensive mana pool and the ancient blood that ran in my veins. Could such a person ever do anything to protect the emperor from his cruel fate in the game's plot?

That fear had weighed heavily on my heart for the longest time. Gradually, however, I realized something. The emperor wasn't a character on a screen—I couldn't easily change his destiny with the click of a button or a single choice. He was a person with his own ideals and identity, an independent man who marched with determination along the path of his life. It was disrespectful and presumptuous of me to assume that if I didn't protect him, he would walk the road of doom—to assume that I was the protagonist of his story.

His voice dispelled the silence. "Sai, I—"

The emperor's eyes were wavering, almost like that of a lost child. His visage was a work of art in delicate porcelain, and his mannerisms mellow. But I was certain that beneath the surface lay a bottomless, glacial river that would swallow all his enemies whole.

And he had saved me. *If the woman titled the Wagtail Priestess has the potential to become a useful pawn in his life—if such a woman is a useful pawn to him, that makes me happy.*

For some reason, however, he appeared anguished, frustrated.

He didn't finish his sentence, so I decided to speak up instead. "Please do not be so pained. Personally, I feel more at ease knowing that a nation did not invest time and effort just to rescue me out of goodwill. The knowledge that I can be used for political gain actually brings me relief."

The emperor shook his head profusely. His hands had been clasped loosely on the table, and he tightened his intertwined fingers as though praying. He stared at his fingertips. As if he were confessing his sins to a priest, his words spilled out in a feeble murmur. "To tell you the truth, Sai... You don't remember this, but...you are my precious savior."

The revelation was sudden, *too* sudden. My eyes widened. “Savior...? If you mean that time in the cave—”

He cut me off firmly. “No, that’s not it.” His eyes found mine. “We met once in the past, when I was still in hiding after my abilities as the crown prince awakened. Back then...you wore your long hair in a pretty braid threaded with a white ribbon.”

My mind went blank. “Why do you know that...?”

“Like I said, we really did encounter each other in the past. It was in the Oriental Embassy in Centoria. In the same way you helped me when my mana went berserk in that cave three months back, you saved me a long time ago when I was in a similar condition. And you have been my savior ever since.”

“I...”

Indeed, I used to have long hair, which I plaited into a braid when I was much younger. And yes, I had visited Centoria’s royal palace a few times as well, so it wouldn’t have been strange if I had ended up at the embassy during one of those trips.

What didn’t make sense was that if I had truly met the emperor, it should have been impossible for me to forget his striking appearance. But I couldn’t recall him at all.

My voice came out shaky. “Um, Your Majesty, I... I can’t remember anything...”

“That’s because I erased all your memories of it happening. The awakening period of the crown prince leaves us in an unseemly state, and as a rule, we can’t let even our closest relatives witness that sight.” He faltered. “I... Originally, I planned on taking this knowledge to my grave. I used to think that as long as I had the memory—as long as I remembered my gratitude toward you, Sai—that would be enough.”

His eyes were sincere and solemn as he said, “I’m scared, Sai. I’m scared that you might assume I only rescued you for political gain or because you’re the Wagtail Priestess.”

“Your Majesty...”

He took a breath before looking right into my eyes. “Even if Sai Cutrettola had been just an ordinary girl, I would have saved you. Because you saved me.”

In the wake of that bombshell, I could only gape at him dumbly. Wind carried the distant voices of my attendants to my ears. A breeze swept through the courtyard, rustling the foliage. A bead of sweat rolled down my cheek, my neck, then onto my chest.

The emperor remained still the entire time, hanging his head, his face hidden. His hands, still folded on the desk, caught my eye. My body moved before I could think, and I reached out, placing my hands atop his.

His breath hitched as he tensed. His hands were large, and I could feel his pronounced knuckles. Under the daylight, his fair skin seemed to glow even more when my hand rested against his.

I found his eyes. “I trust you, Your Majesty. I believe in the past you speak of and your true feelings.” Pausing, I lowered my gaze slightly. “I still cannot recall what I did then, but...it must have been significant if you were willing to shoulder the risks of interfering with another nation to repay your debt.”

“...Sai, without you, I wouldn’t be here today as the emperor. I...am grateful to you. Truly. And that has never changed.”

“Thank you. You know, Your Majesty, you are an amazing man.”

His eyes widened a fraction. “Why do you say that?”

“I mean... It may have started as a personal wish to repay someone in kind, but you elevated it to something that will benefit your empire and accomplished both goals perfectly. That was only possible because you worked tirelessly as a sovereign and strove for excellence across a variety of fields. You are really quite commendable.”

Almost instantly I realized my slip of the tongue. By praising him, I had spoken as if I were in a position to evaluate him, which was incredibly rude. Hurriedly, I bowed my head. “My deepest apologies, I overstepped.”

The emperor gently freed his hands from my hold, cradling mine instead. Snow-white, his hands covered my smaller ones completely.

On reflex, I glanced up at his face. He wore a soft smile, and tenderness shone in his eyes. “I’m happy at the praise. Especially if you’re the one praising me, Sai.”

“...You are too benevolent, Your Majesty. I am honored.”

“But phew, I’m glad... I’m elated that you have so much faith in me.”

“You are the person I trust most; nothing can change that fact. And...I am also quite a sly woman myself.”

The emperor gave me an inquisitive look.

“Thanks to you,” I explained, “I was not only able to protect my bloodline but have also gained the opportunity to do much I could not in Centoria. Making skin care products is great fun, and through my craft, I can pass on the techniques I inherited as the Wagtail Priestess to everyone working in Sekirei Palace. I am taking advantage of your backing to experience many enjoyable activities. So please, do not view it as using me for your own gain or anything along those lines.”

“That’s a good point.” He hesitated, looking a little wistful. “Lately you seem to be having the time of your life.”

“I am. And now I am going to attend the festival and overcome the terrible memories that Centoria has left me with.” Then I added, “See? I am going to ‘use’ you as well.”

His eyes lit up and the corners of his eyes softened. “In that case, I suppose I’ll take advantage of your knowledge in turn. Like I said earlier, I’m going to receive the royal family of Centoria as my guests. Alas, I don’t have enough information. Especially...regarding the women among their ranks.”

“Ah, that would make sense. Female royalty usually only attend social events where at least one of the hosts is a woman. That must be difficult for this nation.”

“Yep. That’s why I want your help. Could you please lend your expertise on how I should accommodate them? For example...their dietary preferences, what they’re troubled by, or what they like.”

“Of course.” I nodded. “I was a maid back in Centoria, and my duties included delivering letters within the royal palace. I believe I am quite well-informed about their private hobbies and interests. Oh, and I also remember the royals’ medical prescriptions, since I did the paperwork for such matters.”

“Wait, you even remember their prescriptions?”

“Yes. Just in case, it would be best if we passed those onto the respective staff involved. That would be the Department of Court Physicians. As for food, would it be the Department of Foreign Affairs...?”



AFTER that, we discussed a few plans before the emperor transformed into his female form again. I escorted her to the arch bridge at the entrance to Sekirei Palace and saw her off. As I watched the emperor’s retreating silhouette grow small and distant, I recalled his smile and the warmth of his hands wrapped around mine.

“What in the world did I do for him in the past...?” I mumbled aloud.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t locate the memory. The emperor was a powerful mage, and if he put his mind to erasing someone’s recollection, any attempts to restore it via brain stimulation probably wouldn’t garner results. Besides, more important than knowing what had happened was the fact that the emperor cherished those forgotten moments.

Even then, his warmth still lingered on my hands like the pleasant heat of the sun. My mind felt as if it had been stuffed with cotton—I almost suspected I was feverish. Somewhat dazed, I made my way back to my office.

When I arrived, only Suzuiro was present, tallying the quantity of skin care products we had packaged.

“Ah, Lady Sai!” she greeted me merrily. “Welcome back!”

“Thank you for your hard work, Suzuiro. I’ll take care of the rest, so please take a break.”

“But...”

I knew exactly what to say. “The maids in the dining hall grilled rice cakes for

you as well.” She gasped and whipped her head up immediately, eyes wide like an excited puppy’s. “If you take too long, the coarse red bean paste type that you like might be gone by the time you get there.”

“Oh!” She cupped her cheeks with her hands. “Thank you very much... I shall take you up on your kind offer so please excuse me!” she said in one breath. She gave me a deep bow before departing promptly.

I turned my gaze to the merchandise before me. It was arranged in an orderly manner and packaged perfectly—I couldn’t find even a single lopsided decorative cord.

“Next we’ll have to sort these into groups based on the merchants that will stock them...” I took a swift glance around me. “No one else is around, so magic it is.”

I pressed my hands to either edge of the table and poured mana into each object on the tabletop. Once all of them had begun to shimmer, I closed my eyes and visualized the list of retailers before moving all the items.

There was a deafening explosion.

The next thing I knew, I had fallen over and was collapsed on the ground. The merchandise and workstation hadn’t budged at all, yet my whole body was tingling, completely paralyzed.

O-Oh, I just... I was dumbfounded. I had messed up one of the most fundamental aspects of mana control. Basically, I had released too much mana—more than the capacity of the table and its contents—and the energy had bounced back at me violently. It was similar to sprinting at full speed into a door that only came to your shoulders. As you slammed into the frame, you would rebound, unable to pass through.

Every single part of my body was immobilized—even my tongue and pinky fingers. I couldn’t move. What shocked me most, however, wasn’t the state I was in. It was the fact that I had bungled such a basic step. *Was I...distracted by thoughts of the emperor’s warm hands? No, even if that’s the case, this is...*

For a while after that, I lay motionless on the ground, struggling to endure the hot shame and despair prickling through my body along with the tingling in my

limbs.

Chapter Sixty-Five: Reviving an Ancient Ritual

IN Orient, there was a practice they called *sekka*.

On formal occasions such as festivals or the visit of important dignitaries, the citizens would scatter pieces of paper in the shape of flowers—*sekka*—in blessing and as a purifying ritual.

I had a recent memory of one such instance: when the emperor had made his return from Centoria. His people had crowded along the roadside and tossed *sekka* in a frenzy. It was a rather fitting custom for Orient, which was buried under heavy snow in winter and only experienced vibrant flowers for a very brief portion of the year.

As the Wagtail Priestess, I had been assigned the role of strewing *sekka* during the Summer Irei Festival.

“Does that mean that scattering *sekka* was the job of the Wagtail Priestess to begin with?” I asked.

Lord Raiya answered, “Yeah. That’s why reviving such an old tradition during the festival will be suitable entertainment for the Centorian royalty and the bureaucrats of Orient.”

I was in Lord Raiya’s office located in the depths of the Department of Print. That day, he wore his youthful form and had rolled up his sleeves with sashes as he always did.

He lifted a hand and grunted, “Here. Take a look for yourself.” With a swipe of his fingers, text faded into view from thin air. He gestured at the faintly glowing words. He seemed to have completely mastered “outputting” his memories via magic—he floated the text high into the air and prodded at it with his finger, scrolling it back and forth and fiddling with it. *His genius never fails to astound me.*

Leaning forward, I scanned through his recollection. “Hmm... This is information about the area near the Orient border... Gyokai Prefecture, in other words. The prefecture that neighbors my homeland, the former Sekirei

Prefecture—or the Cutrettola lands, as they’re now known.”

My former demesne was part of Centoria, although many centuries before, it belonged to Orient. As one would expect, many of the customs in my homeland had close ties with Oriental culture. What Lord Raiya was showing me was a record of the traditional festivals in Gyokai Prefecture and verbal accounts from residents about the events.

“In autumn in Gyokai Prefecture, young women wear kimonos with designs inspired by birds. These bird maidens sprinkle cosmos flowers around the entire village, and legend says that gods walk behind them and bless the community.

This festival has two purposes: the first is to thank the divine for a good harvest, and the second is to pray that the youngsters will be blessed with the gift of children. Though its origin is unknown, there is record of such a festival in the year 345, pre-Orient.”

As I read, Lord Raiya raised a single eyebrow and scoffed with derision. “As if. The true intention of this festival is clear. Around the time that agricultural work winds down, they make the young women parade in front of all the villagers. Then the men start picking out the good ones, saying, ‘I like this one’ or ‘I like that one.’ Hah.”

I hummed in thought. “Well, considering the weather over there, people must miss the warmth of human skin during that season. Gaining a new family member must be a delightful thing.”

Silence.

I looked over at Lord Raiya. “Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s just that...I didn’t expect *you* to say that, of all people.”

“Well, my hometown was rather chilly, and in winter, my whole family would gather under one blanket at night. Even our dog would join us... I was reminded of how warm I felt back then.”

He let out a drawn-out sigh.

“After my parents passed away, I was worried that my grandmother might be too cold at night,” I reminisced, “and—”

“Okay, I think that’s enough about that. Anyway...” Lord Raiya steered the conversation back on track. “Many of the villages near your homeland celebrate similar festivals. This is likely the origin of sekka—the shower of blossoms that the citizens welcomed the emperor home with. Nearly none of the records from back when the Wagtail Priestess was still active in Orient has withstood the test of time, so it’s just conjecture, but that’s my theory.”

“I believe your theory is correct.”

“Oh?” He gave me a side-long glance.

“Accounts of the Wagtail Priestess were passed down in my family for generations, and I read all of them. Though they all ended up in ashes along with the estate... But now that I can directly display the contents of my mind and memories, I am sure I can recall those records.”

I copied what Lord Raiya had done, drawing a square in the air with a finger and summoning up a screen, then closed my eyes to navigate my memories. I searched for the keywords “Wagtail Priestess,” “ritual,” and “flower.”

When I opened my eyes, the information from the texts I had remembered appeared in several “windows” floating in the air.

Lord Raiya promptly started to read. “Interesting... There were so many details in your collection. The types of flowers, how to cultivate them, the attire of the Wagtail Priestess, and even the origin story of the tradition itself. I’m intrigued.” He hummed. “If possible, I would love to write all this information down and preserve it as a book here in Orient.”

“Ah, if you can store the knowledge in a safe place, I shall gladly offer my help by jotting it down. But, well... It is a hefty task that could take my entire lifetime, since there is a *lot* to write...”

“Marvelous...” He nodded to himself, content. “Oh. Will you look at that! This is a chronicle of the Myth of Beginning that we have no surviving versions of in Orient. Hmm, this thing might be older than what we currently consider to be the oldest remaining record. I see, so originally people would disburse flowers with aphrodisiac properties throughout the bedchambers of the emperor, which later evolved into the practice of sekka... Huuuh! So that’s why we sprinkle flowers. Interesting.”

“Um... L-Lord Raiya...?”

He continued to mutter, totally absorbed. “And that’s the reason the Wagtail Priestess has such a strong association with the art of medicine. Ahhh, I really want to compare this with medical history in Orient. Oh? So these flowers were delivered from Meridiona? How did they manage *that*? Hmm... I see, Orient and Meridiona have traded since ancient times... Urgh, my eyes can’t keep up. Should I summon a magpie? No, I’ll—”

Lord Raiya was off in his own little world; he couldn’t hear a word I spoke. Due to his youthful appearance, he rather looked like an innocent child thrilled over a new book. *Ah... I think he made the right decision. He’s more suited to being Chief of Books than a political player. After all, he so enjoys reading.*

After reading his fill, Lord Raiya finally returned to the world of the living. He adjusted his glasses before turning to me once again. “Ah, sorry about that. I got too excited.”

“That’s all right; I am glad you had so much fun.”

“Sai, we’ll use the information you have and the records in Orient to revive the ancient sekka culture,” he declared. “We’ll kill two birds with one stone—its revival will help consolidate your status in Orient as well as serve as a good show for Centoria.”

He flashed an audacious grin, his eyes glinting with curiosity and ambition.



A week later, I found myself sitting in a carriage with Lord Raiya, a lady-in-waiting, and a few guards. Our destination was Gyokai Prefecture. Apparently, the citizens there still held the festival every autumn, and although it was yet summer, we had specially requested that they show us their dance in person.

Chapter Sixty-Six: The Wagtail Dance

“**SECONDARY** sources like documents are nothing compared to seeing things with your own eyes,” Lord Raiya said. “And since you, the Wagtail Priestess, are with me, I can ask for government funding for such ventures, which is rather helpful.”

That day, his appearance was closer to his true age—he looked to be in his forties. He seemed to be in high spirits.

“You look different today,” I commented.

“No commoner would believe me if I claimed to be the Chief of Books while looking like that.” He shrugged. “It’s pretty taxing, so I’ll leave most of the work to you all.”

I nodded. “Understood.”

Though I had a few more questions about his current form, we had company, so I tucked them away in the back of my mind. I glanced at the attendant with ash-blue hair beside me who was admiring the scenery.

“Miss Ayameiro, are you feeling all right? Do you feel motion sick at all?”

“No, my lady.” She offered me a reserved smile. “The medicine you gave me seems to be effective.”

Ayameiro was one of the new employees at Sekirei Palace, and her father was a court official who worked at the Department of Print. She was striking, with long, beautiful tresses of gray blue and a high, round forehead, and of a gentle demeanor. Though her abilities in memorization and mental calculation were the best among her siblings, due to her gender, the path of court official was closed to her. Uncertain about what to do with her talents, she had ended up with a position at Sekirei Palace.

At first, I had planned to take Suzuiro with us, yet Lord Raiya, anticipating that, had said, “Please, *please* bring a self-possessed court lady with you to the investigation. I’m begging you.” So I had tasked Suzuiro with a different role. She would prepare the sekka in my stead.

At the moment, Suzuiro was actually the most experienced and capable court lady at Sekirei Palace. Furthermore, she was familiar with Lord Yukinari and the other officials, so she was the best person for the job. I was certain that she would take good care of the Sekirei Palace in my absence.

Soon we arrived at the prefectural office and were met with the warm reception of the local magistrate. Our travel there had taken the whole day, and the sun was already setting, so we rode directly to the magistrate's estate—which served as our inn—and retired for the night.

Dinner that evening consisted of wild vegetable porridge and stewed venison. The food culture of the Cutrettola lands was similar to that of the settlements along the Orient border, and the taste of venison was nostalgic. It had also been a long time since I last ate vegetables harvested from the mountainside.

After the meal and my nightly rituals, I didn't go to bed right away. Instead, I gazed out of the guest room window and up at the towering, pitch-black mountain that was more shadow than stone. *My homeland is just on the other side... I hope everyone is leading a happy and fulfilling life.*



THE next morning, under the lead of the local magistrate, Lord Raiya, Ayameiro, and I headed to a plaza to meet the young women gathered from all over the prefecture.

“You might not know this, but the bird maidens’ costume actually looks pretty similar to the formal attire of the Wagtail Priestess,” the magistrate said. “You are in for a surprise!”

As we surveyed the assembled dancers, Lord Raiya placed a hand on his chin and nodded to himself. “Huh. They really *do* look like Sai.” Turning to me, he asked, “Hey, that priestess garb you wear is a recreation of traditional clothing passed down in the Cutrettola domain, right?”

“Yes. Though the fabric, embroidery, and dye of my current attire are of a higher quality, the design itself is identical.”

I stepped forward so that he could better examine my short coat, similar to a bolero jacket, and my hakama skirt. The women's costumes appeared to have

been inspired by the outfit's silhouette. Yet there were minor differences. Their short coats lacked sleeves, their hakama skirts didn't have gussets—and so were actual, not divided, skirts—and they wore a second, wraparound pleated skirt over their hakama.

"It is not the right season, so I was incapable of procuring the flowers we usually scatter during the sekka," the magistrate explained. "Therefore, they will dance with dried grass instead, which they have tucked away in their sleeves." He addressed one of the young women. "Please show them what I mean."

She obeyed dutifully and pulled some grass from her sleeve.

"So, we usually use soft flowers, and according to the maidens, the grass they are using today is somewhat prickly. If they seem a little distracted, please give them the benefit of the doubt."

At that, the young women all broke into wry smiles.

Suddenly, Ayameiro raised a hand and stammered, "E-Excuse me." Everyone's eyes swiveled to her immediately. Her cheeks flushed cherry red as she gestured to the drawing board she held. "May I make some sketches? If possible, I would like permission to draw your dance and clothing."

The magistrate nodded eagerly. "Of course. It would be an honor to have a record of this in the central government."

"Thank you!" Ayameiro's eyes lit up with anticipation, and she bowed.

One of the reasons I had chosen Ayameiro as my companion was her exceptional artistic skill. She excelled at depicting even the smallest, most delicate details, so she was perfect as our chronicler. I had provided her with a quill and drawing board, to which was clipped a stack of parchment around A4 size. I had altered the quill with magic so she could use it for a longer period before dipping it in more ink, almost like a ballpoint pen. That way, I could minimize interruption to her magnificent work.

Ayameiro sat down on a chair and switched to artist mode, ready to start.

The magistrate took out a flute and looked at us. "Now then, let us start right away," he said. "This is our first performance this year."

At the cue of his flute, the young women abruptly froze in place. Only moments before, they had been like any normal girls you'd see on the street, yet their aura shifted instantly as they assumed formation and held their breaths.

The magistrate played a cheerful tune, and the women began to dance to the beat in a circle around the center of the plaza. They lifted their arms gracefully to trace elegant arcs in the air with their lengthy sleeves, the cloth fluttering like the wings of butterflies. Their legs bent and stretched, and their toes moved about on the ground as if writing something in the soil. With every movement, their long silken hair and decorative ribbons waved gently. *Ah, do those perhaps represent the wagtail's tail feathers?*

The maidens eventually filed into one line and started to parade along the plaza's circumference. With each powerful thrust of their hands, they tossed dried grass from their sleeves. The melody of the flute grew merrier, and the tempo quickened. In turn, the motions of the maidens became increasingly bold and daring.

The dance was energetic and full of the beauty of life. I couldn't help but wonder how lovely the official performance during the bountiful autumn must be, when they scattered flowers against a backdrop of ruby and amber leaves. I dedicated every move to memory. Next to me, I could hear the rustling of quill on paper.

Gradually, the music grew quiet and faded away as though melting into the distant horizon, and the dance reached its finale. I heeded my heart and clapped in admiration. The maidens bowed in unison to their audience. Sweat drenched the magistrate's forehead, and he looked over at us with a sense of accomplishment in his eyes.

Lord Raiya smiled at him and thanked him with a bow. "You have my most sincere gratitude for showing me such a treasure. I am certain that our summer festival this year will be all the more magnificent thanks to your contribution."

"You are too kind. It was no trouble," the man replied. "All of my people are looking forward to the festival."

Lord Raiya turned to me with a sly grin. "Now then... Our great Wagtail

Priestess is going to use the rest of the day to learn the dance, so please do not be lenient with her.”

“Ohhh!” the magistrate exclaimed. “Does our Lady Priestess plan to succeed and pass on the tradition of the bird maidens?!”

I didn't hear anything about this! I thought, stunned. But if I wanted to revive the sekka dance during the festival... *I...really do need some intensive training...*

Chapter Sixty-Seven: Late at Night with Lord Raiya

IT was evening. I'd soothed my aching body in the hot spring at the magistrate's house and was walking in the inner courtyard to cool down after the bath. The plump full moon hung high in the sky, so luminous that it was almost blinding. The trees and shrubs were trimmed meticulously, making the location a perfect place to relax. The space's ventilation and the arrangement of water features had been calculated methodically as well, so the designer of the courtyard had likely been a mage.

As I strolled, I steadily recalled the footwork that had been drilled into me earlier that day. "As I thought, this is..." I mumbled to myself.

Out of the blue, a voice called out to me from behind. "Now what is this young lady doing here in the middle of the night?"

I yelped in surprise and turned to see Lord Raiya, who stalked over with a mischievous smirk on his lips. Placing a hand to my chest to calm my startled heart, I greeted him. "I thought it was safe because this is the residence of the local magistrate..."

"Well, I mean, yeah, it's probably safe." As he spoke, he glanced downward. "Were you drawing something with your feet?"

"Ah, yes..." I hesitated. "While learning the bird maiden dance today, I noticed something. I suspected that they were 'writing' ancient script on the ground with their steps, so I tested it out a little."

"Huh. So? What are your findings?"

"My suspicions were correct." I nodded. "Although nothing happens when ordinary people without mana do the dance, I believe there will be some kind of effect if someone traces these characters while releasing mana. That being said, the text itself seems to be a love poem, so it shouldn't be too dangerous."

"Well, I'll watch over you, so try it." He gestured. "You've got me intrigued."

“Understood. Well then...”

I poured mana into my toes and slowly performed the bird maiden dance. My feet left shimmering trails in their wake, and symbols began to manifest in the night courtyard. When I finished the first verse, flowers of light bloomed inside the gleaming tracks, and petals fluttered into the air like silvery snow. I kept moving, my eyes wide with surprise. Lord Raiya mirrored my expression.

Wow... I see, so the true origin of the modern sekka dance is actually a reenactment of this! They scatter real flower petals in place of these magical petals formed with mana.

Completely entranced, I continued the dance. Gradually, my thoughts grew hazy, and I felt as if my body had developed a mind of its own. The scene before me blurred and faded away.

But then something tugged sharply on my arm. I snapped out of my trance, and as my vision refocused, I saw a frantic Lord Raiya grabbing both of my arms.

“Wait,” he commanded. “Stop right there.”

“H-Huh...?” I blinked at him.

He immediately released his hold on me as if burned, then returned to his youthful form. His shoulders moved up and down as he heaved—he appeared uncomfortable.

Worriedly, I said, “If I remember correctly, you are not supposed to assume that form here, right?”

He glared at me. “Priorities, much? Haven’t you noticed that this dance has the effect of spurring carnal desires?!”

“Kernel...?” For a moment, I struggled to process his words. I mulled over them a few times before it finally clicked. “Carnal desires!”

“Yeah, that. Get rid of all those flowers and make it quick unless you want the magistrate’s house to start a debaucherous party. And we need to hurry back to our rooms. This is an emergency.”

“Y-Yes sir!”

We scrambled to stamp out the patterns beneath our feet and disperse the

lingering mana. When I breathed in some of the drifting petals that flew in my direction, my head grew dizzy.

“You’re right...” I muttered. “It makes my head go blank... So this is the effect of the dance...”

He sighed. “Sheesh, I’m glad you practiced it beforehand. If you’d done this on the big day, our Summer Irei Festival would transform into an international scandal.”

“Eep...”

Without warning, Ayameiro’s voice rang out from behind us. “Lady Sai! I finally found you!” I heard the pitter-patter of her feet as she rushed over at a slight jog.

I felt the color drain from my face. “M-Miss Ayameiro, stop! You’re downwind over there!”

“Huh?” She halted, puzzled, and the wind chose that moment to blow petals right into her face. Her eyes widened and she gasped. Her body convulsed as she wobbled unsteadily on her feet, about to topple over at any second.

Hard stone paved the ground behind her. If she hit her head, she could be gravely injured.

Lord Raiya was a step ahead of me as he shifted back into an adult and broke into a sprint to catch the woman before she fell.

“Haaah...” He breathed a long sigh of relief as she fainted in his arms.

All tension left my body, and I slowly slumped to the ground, my knees weak. “Phew...”

“Seriously, do I have a quota for the number of times I need to catch swooning women?” Lord Raiya said, exasperated. His voice sounded younger than it usually did in his adult form. Moonlight splashed his features, revealing a visage that was also distinctly different.

I paused. “Lord Raiya, I have never seen that form before.”

“Oh, this? Well, I was kind of in a rush to transform back, so I ended up with an incomplete transformation.”

His long, slender limbs and lithe body were the same as always, but his large eyes and lengthy lashes made him look much younger. Studying his profile, I could have believed him around the same age as Emperor Haruka. Coupled with the moonglow on his face, he exuded an ethereal, wistful kind of beauty.

I could kind of understand why people envied him so much in the past—when such a stunning man received the recognition of the emperor and had a firm grip on the political affairs of a nation, he was bound to attract both awe and contempt. At times, being too physically attractive had its drawbacks.

“Follow me. I’ll carry her back,” said Lord Raiya. “Ah, I guess I should stay in this form then.” He lifted Ayameiro effortlessly and set off toward her allocated bedroom.

“My apologies, it was my fault for doing something so thoughtless...” I said.

“I was the one who asked for a demonstration, so the responsibility lies with me,” he said firmly. “So shush and follow me. If you don’t accompany us, people might think that I have unsavory intentions, and I really want to avoid that, thanks.”

“Yes, sir...” As I gazed up at Lord Raiya’s novel appearance, I voiced the question occupying my mind. “Why do you not use this form more often? It must be more physically capable compared to your younger one. If I were in your shoes, I would do that.”

“Oh, you were wondering about that?” Before he answered, he jerked his chin at the door, ordering me to open it.

I did as I was told. We entered the room, and he laid Ayameiro down on the fluffy bed. She sank into the comfortable mattress like a sleeping beauty.

Finally, he replied, “The spell that the previous emperor cast on me reverted me to my thirteen-year-old body, which is what you usually see. My actual age, though, is fifty-four. I feel the most comfortable in my thirteen-year-old form, and if I suppress that spell, I naturally return to my rightful age. The problem is, I’d be in deep trouble if people witnessed me in my true form.”

“Ah, good point...”

“That’s why I’m usually a young boy. And as you can see, I take *this* form

wherever physical strength would come in handy.”

I hesitated. “That means...you can never truly return to your actual age...”

“Yeah.” He paused and looked away. “Well, I lived the happiest years of my life in this slightly older form, so it’s especially easy to transform into.”

“...Happiest?”

“Don’t dig into it any further. Let’s go.”

Having deposited Ayameiro in her room, we exited, and Lord Raiya shrank to the younger version of himself. He rolled his shoulders as he turned to me, grinning roguishly. “Not to mention that it would be really troublesome for a man like me to look like a young, single adult,” he said. “Okay then, good night. Never do that dance in public again.”

I bid farewell to Lord Raiya before walking back to my assigned room and sprawling on the bed. “I’m absolutely spent...”

Due to the unusual heat in my body, the haziness of my mind, and my exhaustion from training, an almost pleasant sluggishness weighed down my limbs. The warmth of the hot spring still lingered at my core, beckoning me into the world of dreams. I fell into a deep, deep slumber in the blink of an eye.



IT’S warm, I thought. I blinked open my eyes and saw the emperor gazing at me.

“Huh? Your Majesty... Why are you...here?”

The last thing I remembered was falling asleep in a guest bedroom in Gyokai Prefecture. The bed I was lying on, however, was a modern western-style bed that I vaguely recalled observing in TV dramas in my previous life. The mattress was thick and luxuriously soft. The pillows, the blanket, and even the bedsheets were the perfect ratio of squishy to firm, as if I were reclining on a cloud. I took a quick glance around the room—the bed and furnishings belonged in the image I had of a hotel’s royal suite.

The emperor’s honeyed, tender voice caressed my ears. “Sai,” he breathed as he smiled at me. He was lying next to me in the same bed, and his hand reached

out to gently stroke my hair.

What? “U-Um... Umm...” I stammered. What’s going on? What in the world is happening?

But the warmth of the emperor’s hand against my head was so comfortable that all of my questions were brushed away with a touch. All I could do was accept the invitation of his arms as I snuggled into his chest to sleep for a little while longer.

His embrace was kind and encompassing. His skin pressed against mine. Surrounded by his warmth and sweet aroma, I was in bliss.

“Emperor Haruka...” I whispered, content.

The sound of magpies filtered through the window. Their jabbering grated somewhat on my ears. The noise always woke me every morning at Sekirei Palace.

Wait... Magpies?

“Magpies! Do *not* belong in a royal suite!”

I opened my eyes with a start, my body jerking forward into a sitting position. I had fallen asleep with the windows wide open, and a mated pair of magpies were perched on the frame. They stared at me curiously.

Morning had arrived.

“Huh...? What...did I dream about again...?” I mumbled in a daze.

I had the feeling that I had just roused from an outrageous dream. But I couldn’t remember anything. I cupped my cheeks with my hands, frozen like a statue on the bed. The magpies were still watching, and they chattered almost teasingly.

Chapter Sixty-Eight: The Day of the Festival

TWO weeks passed in the blink of an eye, and finally, the big day arrived—that of the opening ceremony of the Summer Irei Festival.

The order of eastbound Centorian guests was as follows: first came Centoria's ministers, then the Holy Knight Chancellor followed by the queen and her sisters, and lastly, the ministers' daughters and relatives. They traveled by carriage along the same route I had once traversed. Once they reached the capital, they continued straight up the main thoroughfare toward the imperial palace on its hill.

Oriental citizens lined both sides of the road and offered their warm welcome by throwing sekka at the Centorian carriages. Paper flowers carpeted the whole street. The sight reminded me of the showers of blossoms I experienced when I first arrived in Orient.

"Woow!" exclaimed Suzuiro. "Look at the design of their carriages and clothes! Amazing! I've never seen such designs before!"

I smiled wryly. "Careful, don't fall from the railing."

I was standing with Suzuiro on the balcony of a lofty watchtower along the fortress walls that surrounded the imperial complex. The complex was located on elevated ground, so I had a good view of the procession that slowly advanced in our direction. At times, the breeze caught the paper blooms below and ferried them toward us like an invisible hand.

Somewhere in that crowd are people from Centoria, I thought, feeling conflicted. I had slipped out during preparations and scaled the overlook because I wanted to glimpse the visitors before the festival began.

"Um, you don't have to be present for their meeting with the emperor, right?" Suzuiro asked.

"Yes. At the end of the day, I'm merely a priestess who happens to answer directly to the emperor, so I'm not required to appear for official audiences. My

role is to scatter sekka before the prayer dance at the pavilion and to..." I hesitated. "...participate in the banquet after that."

Suzuiro hummed and nodded to herself. "In that case, my role is to support you by preparing the sekka and to attend to you during the banquet, right?"

"Exactly. If you're with me, I'm sure I'll be able to do my absolute best to the end. I'm counting on you."

"Please leave it to me!"

At that precise instant, I noticed the guards at the gate below tensing. Only moments before, our Centorian guests had transferred to palanquins provided by Orient. Officials slowly carried them up the stairs with utmost caution, and gradually their palanquins passed under the fortress wall. Next to me, Suzuiro clamped a hand over her mouth as she stared at the visitors with eyes as wide as saucers.

Strands of dazzling gold glimmered in the daylight and framed features that were distinctly different from the standard traits of Oriental citizens. A thick cape wrapped around the large build of a minister, and his mustache had been carefully styled into a symmetrical trim. Exquisite dresses with open collars adorned the women, revealing the fair skin of their bosoms, while their skirts were so long that the trains all but spilled out of their palanquins.

But their flair didn't concern me. As I watched them, I almost had the delusion that the frosty air of my cell was slithering up my feet and winding around my entire body. I remembered the winter nights I had spent locked up in that cold prison. My interrogation had seemed to last forever as I was pelted with shouts and scathing words. I remembered those days when all I owned had been trampled on and torn into shreds—my identity, my efforts, my possessions... They had snatched *everything* from me. I remembered the trial where gazes had stabbed into my frame from every angle possible, daggers crafted from ridicule and scorn.

I had been utterly alone in the world, everyone stopping to kick me while I was down.

But then I recalled the day when the emperor soared down from the heavens. Angel-like, he'd crashed into my reality and changed everything. His large wings

had enveloped me, a shield to protect me from the malice outside—

I inhaled, snapping out of my memories.

The distant sounds of the environment sharpened. Sweat rolled down my forehead. When I took a deep breath, the sweet scent of fingered citron, fresh like bergamot, tickled my nose—I had perfumed my shawl with it.

I spotted Suzuiro. Her large silvery eyes grew even larger, and she placed a hand over her chest as if to suppress something. *Oh... That's right. She must be even more anxious and nervous than I am.*

It was neither the time nor place for me to be lost in sentiment. Chastising myself, I gave Suzuiro an encouraging pat on the back. She yelped in surprise, and I stroked her hair. “Are you nervous?” I asked.

She whimpered. “Y-Yes...”

“It’s okay. As long as you wear your smile like always, it’ll work out somehow.”

“L-Lady Saaai!” She stared at me with her puppy-dog eyes. “Understood! I’ll work hard!” She puffed out her cheeks and balled her hands into fists of determination. The guards standing watch nearby tried to fight their grins.

Suzuiro had that kind of magic to her—she spread joy wherever she went. *She’s such a good girl.*

I took another deep breath. *Everything’s fine. This time...I’m not alone. There’s nothing to be afraid of.* “All right then, Miss Suzuiro, I believe we should get going. We need to check on the flowers that were picked this morning and touch up our makeup a little.”

Together, we descended the watchtower, climbed onto the rickshaw, and headed off to resume our preparations. Once we finished the adjustments to our attire and appearance, we progressed to the waiting room next to the dance pavilion, which palace staff had specially arranged for the members of Sekirei Palace. There, my ladies-in-waiting were busy readying an assortment of colorful blooms.

Sekka usually comprised paper flowers, but on special occasions such as

official rites, real plants were used. The flowers I would distribute were freshly harvested and had been sprinkled with a mixture of various aromatic oils to enhance their fragrance.

A youthful Lord Raiya was present, dishing out one instruction after another. “Are the flowers placed in the right order of colors? Ah, hey, shift that thing slightly to the right. It’s going to get in the way. Okay, do we have all the talismans? Good, chuck them on the desk over there.”

I hurried over to him and bowed gratefully. “Thank you very much for your help. It seems that our preparations will conclude without issue.”

“Yeah. But you don’t have to thank me or anything, I’m just lending a hand because I’m curious, that’s all. For the first time in a millennium, the Wagtail Priestess is going to perform the sekka dance.” He flashed a grin at me. “I can’t wait.” Then he leaned in toward my ear. “Sai, drill this into your head. No matter what you do, don’t release any of your mana.”

“Y-Yes, sir...” Heat gathered in my cheeks at the memory of a certain night. Thinking back, I had been a mere step away from causing an unsalvageable incident.

On that topic, Ayameiro had recently mentioned an advent of recurring dreams about a “beautiful man with fox-like hair and a delicate, fragile aura.” Enamored, she had started to read a genre she had never indulged in before—romance novels.

I fell silent as I scrutinized the boy in front of me.

He blinked. “What? Something on my face?”

I shook my head. “No, I just had the thought that you are quite the heartbreaker...” Lord Raiya’s large, striking eyes and slender limbs were charming. No matter his body’s age, teens or fifties, his allure turned heads. I nodded to myself. “I can see why you stood out so much in the imperial court.”

At those words, he lightly smacked my forehead before saying, “Do your best.” He then promptly vacated the area.

“I will,” I muttered.

Lord Raiya would not be partaking in the festival. The Chief of Books couldn't attend as a civil official, and even for events when his participation was required, the Deputy Chief of Books went in his stead. *So he can't appear in formal ceremonies at all.*

Careful to not mess up my makeup, I slapped my cheeks and psyched myself up. The day was an important one to the women of Sekirei Palace: it was their official debut in the public eye.

We weren't alone in our prep; young male dancers and the musicians from the Department of Court Music assembled nearby, occupied with their own tasks. A thrill of exhilaration made my heart race. Soon, the performance would begin.

The next group to arrive was the Centorian guests—their audience was over—and the influential figures of Orient. They settled into the seats reserved for them in front of the dance pavilion. I glanced at the visitors from Centoria before my gaze drifted to the emperor.

He unfurled his wings as he sat on his special seat, his garments of white silk rolling down the frame of his chair in soft curves while his ivory hair shimmered under the sun. He was radiant, in danger of melting into light at any moment. Two men flanked him, as unmoving as statues of Niō, a pair of wrathful guardian gods who guarded the entrances of Buddhist temples. One was Lord Yukinari, clad in an elegant robe. Gold thread sparkled against the dark navy cloth. The other man was dressed in fiery crimson silk decorated with golden embroidery as well.

Ah. He must be the General of the Right Wing, who has been away on an expedition to Meridiona.

It was the first time I had ever seen both halves of the Twin Wings in one place. They formed a stark contrast with each other. Lord Yukinari's long black hair fluttered in the wind while the Right Wing's hair had been cropped to a length common in my previous life. Most of the people around the Right Wing had fair skin, including the emperor, Lord Yukinari, and the other bureaucrats. His complexion, however, was somewhat bronze in comparison. *Maybe he got a tan in Meridiona*, I guessed.

Finally, all the pieces were in place. A tense atmosphere of anticipation shrouded the area around the pavilion. Many eyes trained on me as I bowed, then walked onto the stage with my court ladies at my side.

Chapter Sixty-Nine: The Centorian Queen

I performed the motions I had practiced countless times. Stretching out my feet, I danced and drew with my toes as I left the wings and moved across the stage. With every step, I threw petals into the air. The musicians played a melody on their flutes, matching the rhythm of my movements. My dance would purify the pavilion for the acts to come.

Everyone's eyes were on me, and their gazes felt like hot coals against my skin. But by the third step, my body grew lighter and lighter as I concentrated solely on my performance. The only thing in my head was the dance, and my limbs moved as if they had a mind of their own.

Once I finished the ritual onstage, I progressed into the audience and began to hand out fresh flowers to each spectator.

The Centorian guests watched me with intent, their eyes wide. I felt awkward; their stares were terrifying. But I danced without faltering, as though someone else had taken over my body, and even managed to pull my lips into a smile at the dumbfounded Deputy Minister whose eyes bored into me.

I pressed on, starting to present flowers to the Oriental elite. I reached the emperor's seat, kneeled, and gave him a deep bow. From beside me, Suzuiro held out a gardenia branch. I grasped it and offered it to the emperor.

With a shuffle of crimson cloth, the General of the Right Wing accepted it in his stead. Our eyes met for a fraction of a second. The general's determined, dominant gaze pierced my very soul. He acknowledged me with a nod before relaying the branch to the emperor.

I lowered my head again before exiting the venue. With quiet steps, I made my way back to the waiting area with my attendants. Inside the building, I paused.

We're done, I thought in a daze. At once, sweat poured from my body in buckets. Next to me, Suzuiro slumped to the ground. The court ladies exchanged looks with one other and breathed sighs of relief.

Yet my fatigue ceded to the sense of accomplishment thrumming in my heart. *I...I did it. I performed until the very end in front of those people from Centoria. I even smiled at them.*

After regaining my composure, I turned to face my fellow performers. “Thank you, all of you. I only managed to complete the sekka without incident because of all of your hard work. Our job isn’t done, however. Please rest in the lounge and replenish your energy before our next task. There is water, tea, and sweets ready, so help yourselves. During your break, please use the restroom, fix your makeup, and adjust your clothes accordingly.”

“Yes, my lady!” everyone said in chorus.

The court ladies filtered into our allocated waiting room. As for me, I was peering over at the dance pavilion. The next dance had already begun. Youthful boys—the young apprentices who usually worked as servants around the imperial court—were tumbling to the tune of the musicians. Unlike our dance, theirs wasn’t a ritual but a form of entertainment and art. It depicted the creation of the continent, the story one that Centorians were familiar with as well—the Myth of Beginning:

A long, long time past, the mountain range that towered between Centoria and Orient erupted. Earthquakes shook the ground, and calamity spread to every corner of the land. It was then that Amawashi swooped down onto our continent from a place far across the northern ocean and offered his aid to combat the crisis that our ancestors faced. The humans’ king joined forces with Amawashi and the twelve priestesses who imparted their wisdom to the two entities. At long last, humanity overcame the disaster, and peace returned.

The king went on to establish the landlocked Centoria at the center of the continent, making it the core of the human government. The pyroclastic flow from the volcanoes had nurtured fertile lands, and thus Occidenia was born. The scholars who upheld the order and discipline of the ancient humans traveled to the very edge of the sea, where they settled to create Septentrion. And finally...Amawashi ended his journey in Orient to help the humans who struggled for survival in a land encased in snow.

Even someone from Centoria would have heard the tale countless times as a

child. Their version, however, was a little more biased toward the king. Amawashi was often portrayed as his subordinate rather than an equal. The Saint also played a much bigger role, although she didn't appear in that day's dance rendition. The overall story was the same, but the narrative differed quite a bit depending on the nation.

I shook myself out of my reverie. "Though I'd love to keep watching, I have more important things to do right now," I told myself.

I rushed over to the kitchen. The chefs were readying the meal that would be served after the current performance. Before the dance ended, I had to garnish the food for the Centorian guests with a small charm.

The head chef spotted me and hurried over. "Lady Priestess!" He bowed. "Thank you for all the information you provided about our guests a while ago. I have carefully prepared the dishes according to all the details you gave me."

"Thank you for your hard work. May I do a final check just in case?"

"But of course. Please take a look."

After examining the list of ingredients used, I shifted my gaze to the waiting feast. I nodded to myself. "You have done a fantastic job. You have put in even more care and consideration than what I recommended in my notes. I should not have expected anything but the best from the imperial kitchen of Orient. You excel at the art of hospitality and have an eye for detail that an amateur cannot compete with."

"Oh, you are too kind, Lady Priestess...!"

I had only suggested points to be aware of, whereas the chefs had skillfully concocted a perfect menu around such conditions. I was the one who wanted to thank them for being so patient. They had taken the time to attend to the troublesome details proposed by a mere girl.

"I shall purify the tableware," I said. "Could you please spread the settings out on the table?"

"Yes, my lady!"

With the gorgeous table settings before me, I grabbed the brand-new

dishcloth I had prepared in advance. I cleared my mind and focused. The first person on the list was the Deputy Minister.

“The Deputy Minister’s liver function is impaired due to his lack of exercise and taking part in consecutive official meals for several days at a time,” I muttered under my breath. “He also has mild obesity...”

I placed the dishcloth over his tableware and suffused it with my mana. There was a crackle of magic before the utensils shone even brighter.

“As for Lady Mariabertha, she suffers from cold intolerance, and her fireplace blazes at all times. Due to that, she has dry skin and menstrual irregularities...” I repeated the process with the next set.

“Lady Roselia has many sources of stress due to the discord in her family and is the type to bottle things up to begin with. For her, I’ll enchant her plate with a charm that will bring peace to her heart.”

A crackle.

“Now then, the aftereffects of Lady Talithlia’s bone fracture continue to plague her, and some investigation has revealed that she seems to have ingested some potent painkillers today, as per usual. This spell will help her relax so she doesn’t agitate her stomach or work herself too hard under the effects of her medication.”

Another crackle.

“Lady Suclat has trouble reigning in her temper and is weighed down by her low self-esteem. Most of this stems from concerns over her appearance and her status among the other women, so I’ll help her skin turn young and supple.”

Yet another crackle.

I enchanted one place setting after another as I recalled the numerous clinical records I had read at the Department of Medicine as well as knowledge of Centoria’s internal affairs, which I had acquired during my career as a maid in the royal palace.

Magic could only provide a brief respite compared to natural healing and medicine. Even with my incredible mana levels, a single meal eaten off

enchanted dishes would only be effective for around three days. But the point wasn't to cure their ailments. *I want them to feel refreshed in both body and mind after their meals in Orient and to remember this experience.*

Finally, I stood before the set of tableware designated for the queen.

I chewed on my lip. "Your Majesty..."

Truthfully, I didn't hold anything against the Centorian queen. Quite the opposite, in fact. Even then, my heart went out to her—life didn't treat her well.

Chapter Seventy: A Conversation About My Late Parents

FOR many years, the queen had been distressed about her inability to bear a child. Even with my memories of my previous life, even if I recalled her clinical records from Centoria, I couldn't make a difference when it came to her infertility. I felt as if a sharp talon were squeezing my heart.

I remembered the queen as a brilliant intellectual who had blazed trails in a variety of fields. She organized projects to preserve cultural assets, planned government exhibitions to support artists, arranged relief efforts for those who lived in poverty...and the list went on. Once, and only once, had I had the chance to speak with her in a private setting. She was a shrewd woman who cared about the king and her people, yet the domestic aristocrats placed an unreasonable amount of pressure on her solely because she had yet to be blessed with children.

That's not fair, because in the case of infertility, it could actually be a problem on the king's side. I guess it might be a good idea for him to have concubines to test that out, but he's determined to have only one woman in his life. I respect and admire his sincere feelings for the queen and his wish to respect her, but at the same time...they blind him to the fact that his actions are ultimately causing her more suffering than happiness.

According to the values of my current world, no matter how capable a ruler the queen was, her inability to bear a successor warranted ridicule and criticism. In my perspective, that was very tragic and saddening. Back in Centoria, I had been a lowly maid, yet even as an Oriental priestess, I had no right to interfere. *Still... No one can reproach me if I quietly support her in my heart.*

"Your Majesty... I hope that your visit to Orient lifts your spirits." I closed my eyes briefly and decided on her blessing. As I channeled my mana, I prayed that my charm helped her physical condition as much as possible.



MY itinerary was filled to the brim. After enchanting the tableware in the kitchen, I half jogged back to the waiting room. With Suzuiro's help, I fixed my makeup before we walked over to the banquet hall together.

I arrived just in time to witness the Twin Wings extending their formal welcome to the Centorian queen. Her eyes met mine.

When I spotted a suitable opening, I approached her and greeted her with a Centorian curtsy. Next to me, Suzuiro awkwardly followed my movements.

The corners of the queen's eyes softened ever so marginally.

"Please pardon me for interrupting your meal," I said. "Your Majesty, thank you very much for taking the time to pay a visit to the Orient Empire. I am Sai, the former governor of the Cutrettola lands, a fiefdom in your country."

"Sai. It is heartening to see that you are in good health. Although we never had many opportunities to meet in person, I hear that you were involved with the production of my medicine."

I bowed humbly. "I did not play a major role. In truth, my contribution was rather insignificant. I merely helped with the formula and participated in but a small part of its manufacture."

"A little while after you moved to Orient, the efficacy of my medicine plummeted abruptly." She cast her eyes down. "It was then that I realized... Before your imprisonment, you must have made a whole year's worth of medicine for all the patients under your care."

I hesitated. "I believe I left behind tips and a record of the specific techniques for the prescriptions in the Department of Medicine, but...my apologies."

"Please don't apologize for something you weren't responsible for, Sai." She paused and shrugged. Her shoulders seemed even frailer than they had been the last time I saw her. "The Order of Holy Knights is undergoing a thorough personnel reform, so...the Department of Medicine must be shorthanded at the moment." The queen chose her words carefully to avoid censuring anyone in particular.

“If that is the case... How is your health after the change?” I inquired.

“Not great, but it hasn’t gotten any worse either.” She gave me a slightly strained smile. “But I feel comfortable today. My heart is at peace after having the pleasure of watching the wonderful dance at the pavilion.”

“Please allow me to deliver some medicine to you later on. I shall adjust the formula according to your current condition.”

“Thank you. That would be a great help.”

As I talked with the queen, I felt sharp gazes stabbing into my back like needles—the attention of the other women among our esteemed guests. I was obligated to greet them next, and a heavy reluctance dragged at my feet.

“Now, I was wondering. How is life in Orient going for you?” asked the queen.

“Everything is going well, Your Majesty. I take part in the festivals and rites of this nation as a priestess serving Sekirei Palace, an institution under the emperor’s direct command.”

A shadow fell over her expression. “As a...*priestess*, I see.”

I knew the reason behind her reaction. To her, the word “priestess” had few positive connotations.

I had a good grasp of Centoria’s situation regarding the Saint from the information I had heard from court officials—apparently, Saint Lilly possessed a type of magic that allowed her to influence human hearts and minds. No one understood how exactly her spells worked, but one thing was clear: the royal palace was in utter discord as a result.

As for the Order of Holy Knights that was tasked with supervising her, the turmoil stemming from the false accusation of the Wagtail Priestess had brought their internal rift to light. The organization was, simply put, out of commission. It was in such shambles that Centoria had been forced to suspend their war against Meridiona. Naturally, they lacked the people and time necessary to keep a single woman in check.

Lilly, meanwhile, seemed to be entertaining herself by sequestering the former Holy Knight Commander in the chaotic palace like a pet nightingale. The

Saint was supposed to be the savior of Centoria, but it wasn't an exaggeration to say that the woman was deliberately leading the country to ruin. No one could speak ill of the "Saint" that the king had summoned, however, nor did they have any method of chasing her back to wherever she'd come from. The royal palace could only skirt around her cautiously as if she were a disease. Consequently, tensions were high.

The queen changed the topic by asking, "You have inherited the title of Wagtail Priestess from your ancestors, yes?"

"Yes. The eldest daughter of House Cutrettola has succeeded the position of family head for generations."

She sighed. "As Centoria's queen, I have brought disgrace to my name by failing to keep such an admirable priestess within our borders."

"That is not true at all!" I shook my head profusely.

Genuine sorrow wiped the smile from her face as she said, "I heard about your parents from the Order. I...hear that they passed away for the sake of our nation in our conflict with Meridiona."

My breathing hitched. I felt as though a hand were digging into my abdomen and tearing out my organs.

"Your mother was the Wagtail Priestess as well, correct?" she continued gently.

"...Yes. My mother, Sae Cutrettola, was...the previous Wagtail Priestess."

"Sae, I see. What about your father?"

I had to squeeze my words past my throat. "His name was...Dyth. He was a doctor..."

She nodded. "Dyth and Sae, hm? All right. As a gesture of gratitude to their noble spirits and to you, I shall read their names at the memorial services from now on."

"You have my most sincere thanks for such a great honor. It is...regrettable that my parents cannot receive your kindness directly."

Every year, Centoria held the Holy Knight Memorial Service, during which the

kingdom's royalty recited the names of all the members of the Order who had been killed in the line of duty. Never before had they read the names of civilians. The queen's decision was the grandest gesture of condolence and compassion she could grant me, a foreign priestess of Orient.

My mother and father had been ordinary people. Driven by their responsibilities as the Wagtail Priestess and a medical worker, they had been forced to fight on the front lines of the war against Meridiona.

And they had never come back. Not even in the form of a memento.



MY memories were foggy after that. I couldn't remember how I ended my conversation with the queen. Later on, after finishing innocuous chats with the Deputy Minister and noblewomen, I left the banquet hall; due to my status, I couldn't officially attend the banquet. I had only stopped by to greet guests.

"Lady Sai, Lady Sai!"

Suzuiro's voice grounded me back in reality. I glanced around. *Oh. I'm in the hallway near the waiting room.* I had finally calmed down enough to register her calls.

"Are you all right?" She looked at me with concern. "Your face is so pale..."

"Ah, sorry for worrying you." Such behavior was unbecoming of the mistress of Sekirei Palace—I couldn't believe I had acted in such a way in front of Suzuiro. I shook my head to clear out the distracting thoughts, refocusing on her face.

And...I couldn't suppress the sudden emotion that welled up in my chest. I threw my arms around her.

"Hwah?!" she yelped. "L-Lady Sai?!"

She was warm and petite enough to fit snugly in my arms. The mild fragrance of makeup and aromatic oils surrounded her. I tightened my hold, my mind completely empty as I buried my face into her hair. I closed my eyes. My heart, ragged from the events of the day, was slowly soothed by her presence.

Eventually, I found my voice. Still embracing her, I caressed her head and

whispered, “Sorry. I also get a little nervous. And you’re so cute that I couldn’t stop myself.”

“If it helps you, hug me as much as you want!” she chirped brightly. “Please think of me as a little sister, Lady Sai!” Her voice was a chime that dispelled the miasma in my heart.

I smiled, loosened my hold on her, then squeezed her tight once again.

It was then that my other ladies-in-waiting noticed us. “Ah! You’re back, Lady Sai!”

“Wait, is this a hugging party to celebrate our success?”

Another woman perked up. “Wooow! Can I join too?!”

“Count me in!”

They flocked over like a bunch of cheerful students at an all-girls school, eagerly transforming our group into a plump ball of people in the corridor. Everyone sported big grins from the bottom of their hearts, and I couldn’t help but smile in turn.

“You girls!” Lord Raiya stomped out of the waiting room. Strict and professorial, he chided us. “What in the world are you doing?! Wait, even you, Sai?!”

A court lady spun toward him. “Oh hey, young servant over there! Come join the pile!”

“I-I’m not a servant!” he protested. “Hey, don’t cling to me! No, don’t drag me into the middle of the hug circle!! Ugh, you’re a bunch of toddlers!”

I wiped my joyful tears and raised my voice. “Everyone, good work out there today! You fulfilled your roles as priestesses perfectly!”

Chapter Seventy-One: Sai, Do You Know of Any Methods to Eliminate the Saint?

OUR Centorian guests stayed for two weeks after the festival. I had already participated in all the official events for which my presence was required, so all that remained was to wait for the visitors to embark on their return journey.

The morning of their departure, I was organizing cleanup and post-event administrative matters at Sekirei Palace when I was interrupted by a Centorian maid.

“Her Majesty would like to speak with you,” she said.

Our guests resided in an imperial guesthouse on the palace grounds. I followed the maid to the queen’s room, where I found the queen unwinding on an elevated balcony as she gazed down at the streets of the capital.

I bowed. “Greetings, Your Majesty. It is Sai.”

“Ah, you came.” She smiled. “You know, I forgot that skywatching can be so pleasant.” Some color had returned to her cheeks, a contrast to the paleness of her complexion on her first morning in Orient.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Oh, the food here is an absolute delight.” She let out a content sigh. “I can’t remember the last time I ate until my belly was full.”

“I am very glad to hear that. The kitchen staff were also elated when they saw your empty platters.”

“I see. Please pass on a message to them. Tell them that they did me a great favor by tailoring the menu to suit my palate perfectly.”

Placing my hand on my chest, I promised, “I will make sure to convey your praise to the chefs.”

“My, my. Sai, I’m also praising you.”

I blinked at her in surprise.

She narrowed her eyes slightly. I couldn't decipher the meaning behind her words, so I chose to wait for her to elaborate.

"Sai," she said, "all the dishes prepared for me were delectable, but one stood out among the rest—the fresh white fish. How did you know that I like fish? As far as I can remember, I scarcely ever indulged in it back in the royal capital."

I shook my head. "The chefs were the ones who planned your meals. I did not do anything."

"But it is generally assumed that Centorian citizens are unfamiliar with seafood, even the aristocrats. None of the other guests were served fish, likely to avoid discomfiting them. Strange, isn't it, that I, the queen, was the exception? Furthermore, the fish wasn't a mere side dish and wasn't prepared in a way that made its appearance more acceptable to my culture—anyone could tell that it was *fish*."

I was quiet. I couldn't come up with a reply to that.

She inclined her head. "Was this a decision by the chefs as well, I wonder?"

After much hesitation, I carefully said, "Well, I assumed that you often ate seafood in your hometown, Your Majesty."

At the further narrowing of her eyes and silent prompt of her gaze, I explained, "You grew up in the Riviera lands, a fiefdom that has an excellent water transportation system centered around the large river there. Centoria is a landlocked nation, yet I have heard that the Riviera territory receives bountiful seafood from Occidenia, which is located at the mouth of the river. Quite an extensive distance separates the Riviera lands and the royal capital, however, so a fresh sea catch is a rare sight in the capital. With that in mind, I hoped that the seafood of Orient might bring you joy, which is why I made such a decision."

The queen's eyes widened. A moment later, she began to chuckle. "I was totally convinced that you ordered someone to investigate me, but my, we have a detective here."

"Please pardon my insolence."

“The seafood we get in the Riviera lands is lovely.” She paused, casting her eyes down. “As queen, I haven’t had the chance to eat fresh fish in a long, long time, so...I was overjoyed. Perhaps that’s why my body feels so light today.”

That time, it was my eyes that grew wide. “That is wonderful news.”

Although her cheekbones were still too pronounced to be healthy, her smile had regained its cheer, and I breathed an internal sigh of relief. The enchantment on her specialized tableware had helped stabilize her mind and increased her appetite. In truth, most of the medicine the queen took wasn’t necessary for her recovery. What she needed was a tranquil environment where she could relax and have peace of mind.

Wind pulled at locks of her hair, and she closed her eyes briefly at the pleasant sensation. Sounding more as though she were uttering her thoughts aloud, she said, “I confined myself to the royal palace and the chapel for the longest time, focusing only on duty and prayer, but...you made me realize something. Obstinance doesn’t guarantee that the heavens will fulfill my wishes. I’m very grateful that my king suggested I attend the festival here. I experienced the atmosphere of Orient, I got to dine on fish, and I even relaxed in the hot spring... My trip was full of invaluable experiences.”

Then weariness dulled the light in her eyes as she murmured, “Say, can you keep this between the two of us?”

“Yes, of course.”

She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “After the advent of that...*Saint*, I admit, I was a little tired. For better or for worse, she is a free spirit—nothing binds her, not even morals. Incited by her lack of restraint, everyone in the castle has started to lose their rationality as well. At one point, I even thought that it might be best for my king to take a romantic interest in her and sire an heir, but, well...”

I gasped. “Your Majesty...”

“But in the end, my king still desires offspring only between the two of us.” She paused. “Perhaps after we have one child, he may be more open-minded to other possibilities, but who knows? I feared that this anguish would haunt me until I turned old and feeble. I just couldn’t control myself anymore, so I ended

up locking myself away.”

The queen abruptly stopped talking, the pain in her expression evident. I could tell that she dreaded her return to Centoria. She clasped her pallid, skinny hands together, squeezing her fingers hard. In a voice that was barely a whisper, she asked, “Hey, Sai. Do you...know of any methods to eliminate the Saint?”

My mind stuttered. “To...*eliminate* the Saint?”

“Throughout Centoria’s history, there are countless records of saint summons by the royal family. But alarmingly, there are no accounts of what happened to the Saints after they performed their miracles. Not of their lives or deaths, not of their marriage—absolutely nothing.”

The queen was planning to eliminate the Saint. The very thought of it stole my words from me and made all my hair stand on end. The saint summons was a sacred ritual integral to Centoria’s national identity and prestige, and they had staked their honor on summoning Saint Lilly. It must have required a lot of courage for the queen to speak ill of such a holy tradition.

Her eyes bored into mine. “Sai, I hear that as the Wagtail Priestess, you used to safekeep records that date back to the age of the Myth of Beginning. But all of those documents were burned, is that correct?”

“...Yes.” The memory floated to the surface of my mind. I could still vividly picture the pillar of flame that had reduced them all to ashes—that had destroyed my estate and everything I had inherited as the Wagtail Priestess.

“What if the Saint did that on purpose?”

I whipped my head up and stared at her face. She appeared entirely serious.

“Right now, I have a suspicion: the Saint realized that the Wagtail Priestess possessed records of what people did after they summoned the Saints, which is why she wanted to erase all of that—along with you.”

“Your Majesty.” I chewed on my lip nervously. “It is best that you pursue this topic no further.”

“No, please allow me to continue. After all, it is the reason I came all this

way.” She reached out to hold my hands in a firm grip. Her fingertips were cold, but her palms were sweaty from the stir in her heart. “Sai, now that everything has been reduced to ashes, even you might not know all the information the Wagtail Priestesses once had. But please lend me your knowledge.”

She took a deep breath. “Think about it. If there truly is a way to send that Saint back to her world...I am certain that the only ones who know it is the clan of the Wagtail Priestess—your family, who have hidden yourselves away from the eye of the ruling classes and passed the secrets of your blood from one generation to the next.”

“Your Majesty...”

“We summoned the Saint, yet my country couldn’t stop her when she started causing more harm than good. At this rate...our conflict with Meridiona will also —” She broke off at the sudden sound of heels clicking against hard ground.

With a start, the queen schooled her expression into one more befitting a queen.

I deliberately adopted a cheery air as I smiled and said, “Please come to Orient again, Your Majesty. You are very welcome here. Sekirei Palace would be thrilled to have you as our guest. We hope to be a place where you can relax and enjoy a leisurely stay.”

“...Thank you. I come from a kingdom that has left you only bitter memories, and you are nonetheless very kind to me.” Once again, she held my hands. Though her skin felt cold against mine, her fingers were long and beautiful. “As the Wagtail Priestess, you are also burdened with the responsibility to have a successor. Let us pray that we both carve out a happy future for ourselves.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

She was silent for a moment as if searching for the right words. Finally, she said, “I hope to have a longer chat with you next time.”

The Centorian maid arrived at the door. That was the cue for the queen’s departure.



AFTER our conversation, the Centorian guests left for their homeland just past noon. They received a warm send-off from the citizens that was identical to the welcome at their arrival.

I watched the carriages depart before I returned to Sekirei Palace. Usually, the palace was as lively and filled with chatter as a dormitory at an all-girls school, but despite the brilliant daylight outside, complete silence reigned.

A maid walked out and greeted me. “Welcome back, my lady.”

“Thank you for taking care of the palace in my absence. Has everyone gone off to enjoy the festival?”

“Yes, and they were very enthusiastic about it.”

“That’s great.”

I gazed down at the capital from the balcony. Crimson hanging lanterns dotted the streets like red orchids, brightening the cityscape with vibrant color visible even during the day.

Commoners also celebrated the summer festival. It was especially significant to the young maidens with flowers in their hair—for them, it was the season of romance.

I had given permission to those interested to return to their households for a short holiday. I’d heard that the festival period was one when families reunited as traveling merchants and migrant workers made their way home, and I wanted my staff to indulge in and savor such opportunities. And when they came back, I hoped they would bring me stories about all kinds of places in Orient.

A melodious voice suddenly called out to me from behind. “Hey Sai, are you not going to the festival?”

Startled, I let out a high-pitched yelp.

I didn’t have to turn around to know who my surprise visitor was—only one woman would refer to me without my title.

Chapter Seventy-Two: Discovering the Bud in My Heart

“YOUR M—” I cut myself off, remembering it was a court lady who stood before me. “Lady Haruiro.”

“Let’s go to the festival!” the emperor said in a honeyed voice. She was in her female form, and a cute flower pattern decorated her clothing. “Do I look good in this?”

I slowly blinked at her.

She pursed her lips slightly. “Wait, do you think this is ugly? Does it not suit me?”

“This is just a guess, but...do you enjoy being a woman?”

“Ahaha, nah, that’s not the case. Ideally, I would go around the festival with you in my real form.”

“That is, um... I am very honored.”

“But, well, I’ve seen you having so much fun with your court ladies recently, and I thought, ‘Ah, that seems nice.’”

Does that mean he wants a taste of the girls’ dormitory vibe? I didn’t really understand where he was coming from, but I quickly schooled my thoughts.

“Your M— Lady Haruiro,” I began, “although I am very happy about your invitation, I am not capable enough to protect you by myself, so I am afraid...”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. My wonderful older brother is going to come along as our guard!” She gave me a brilliant grin.

I peered behind her and saw Lord Yukinari, his face sour and arms folded. Pity overtook my heart. “Thank you for all your hard work...”

“If this were merely a self-indulgent wish, I would not have gone along with her,” he said in a clipped voice. “However, showing you around the festival is a respectable plan.”

“Lord Yukinari...” I gave him a grateful look. “In that case, please allow me to join the two of you.”



I changed from my priestess attire into an outdoor outfit, then climbed onto a palanquin intended for court ladies with the emperor and Lord Yukinari. Officials carried us all the way down into the streets before we alighted.

The sun had sunk halfway into the horizon, and the sky was a stunning gradient of purple. The glowing hanging lanterns were enchanting against the backdrop. The lively chatter of the crowd, ambient music, and kaleidoscopic array of colorful clothing—the atmosphere was almost identical to the summer festivals of my previous life. Especially the red lanterns and giant, richly hued paper-mâché ornaments, as well as the stalls...

“It’s just like the Nagasaki Lantern Festival...” I whispered.

“Something bothering you?” asked the emperor.

“Ah, sorry, please ignore me.”

“Hey, Sai, look! Let’s try some *dango*! This is the time of year when we start receiving imported sugar, so the desserts during the summer festival are the sweetest in the entire year!”

The emperor proceeded to buy white dango with red bean filling. A few were skewered on a twig, the treats slightly heavy when I accepted them. They seemed to be freshly grilled—both sides were a tantalizing golden brown. I bit into one. It didn’t just taste of plain sugar. The rice flour had a natural, layered sweetness to it, and the mild flavors melted on my tongue. *Delicious*.

The emperor smiled softly at my expression. “Sai, do you remember our chat in the carriage when you came to Orient?”

“Oh, now that you mention it...”

“*This* is what I meant back then. I really like it.” The beautiful woman in front of me opened her mouth wide and took a big bite out of her dessert without hesitation. Watching her, you wouldn’t think she was the dignified emperor of a nation.

I chewed on my lip. “Is it really all right for you to eat street food like this, Lady Haruiro?”

“Totally. Don’t underestimate the power of the god of Orient.”

Lord Yukinari helped himself to some of the emperor’s dango and joined the conversation. “Poison will not harm him, though his feathers fall out when he ingests some. That evidently has a detoxifying effect. Once, someone poisoned his food in doubt of his divinity, and for a few days...I could not bear to even look at the sorry state of his wings.”

The emperor’s face flushed bright red as she snapped back in her high-pitched voice, “Come on, don’t expose me! I want to maintain my image of a flawless deity, okay?!”

“Therefore, Lady Sai, please carefully observe for any growing bald patches on his wings,” the general continued, his expression impassive.

“You’re insufferable!” the emperor groaned.

I chuckled. “You two get along very well, I see.”

“Well, she is my younger ‘sister.’” Lord Yukinari shrugged. He appeared to be in high spirits since his most pressing official duties had concluded when the Centorian guests left.

“Ugh!” Pure frustration colored the emperor’s face, and she chomped another big bite of dango.

But Lord Yukinari was looking into the distance, his eyes wide with surprise. A woman with two children approached us from the other end of the street. “Masō!” he exclaimed.

The children, a girl and a boy, seemed to be twins around five or six years old, and they rushed over to cling to Lord Yukinari’s legs.

“Faaather!”

The adult woman followed them with unhurried footsteps. Her features were youthful, and her ivory hair was like the finest silk. I recognized her—she had supervised the priestesses during the Houshoku Festival, when citizens had dedicated textiles to the emperor.

She bowed in greeting. “It is an honor to see you again, Lady Priestess. And it has been a while since we last met, Lady Haruiro. I am Masōiro.”

I returned her bow. “Greetings, Lady Masōiro. Thank you very much for your help during the Houshoku Festival.”

While we exchanged pleasantries, Lord Yukinari lifted a child in each arm, then addressed his wife. “Did you come alone?”

“No, I was lounging with all our relatives in the teahouse over there.” She gestured. “These two saw you by chance and ran out without another word, and I ended up following them.”

The couple conversed comfortably, and just the sight of them was a feast for the eyes—they were a beautiful pair and harmonious match. Meanwhile, the children were adhered to their father like affectionate puppies.

Lady Masōiro crouched down to face them. “Now, you two, be polite and greet the others.”

The boy had a firm grip on his father’s clothes and was using Lord Yukinari as a climbing post. “Hi, Lady Priestess and pretty lady! I’m Hatsuyuki!”

The girl wore a big smile as she fiddled with her father’s long hair. “Hello, I’m Benihiro.”

Though both of them were glued to their father as they introduced themselves, they acted carefree and didn’t seem shy at all. *They must be used to interacting with people.*

I leaned down to look them in the eye. “Hello there, I am Sai. Nice to meet you.” Then I gasped as something occurred to me. “Lord Yukinari, are you possibly putting your family time aside just to guard us?!”

“It is no issue. I went around the festival yesterday. And my holiday also begins tomorrow.”

“O-Oh, I am so glad to hear that...” He had such a gorgeous wife and cute, small children. It would be a travesty if he couldn’t enjoy the festival with them.

Next to me, the emperor seemed to have recalled something. “Oh, right. Hey, how about you go chat with your family for a bit? We’ll stay around this area.”

Lord Yukinari creased his brows. "But..."

The emperor switched tactics. "Hey, Hatsuyuki, little Beni, your dad just said that he's going to play with you."

The twins' eyes lit up at her irresistible words. It appeared that even Lord Yukinari had a weakness when he surrendered under their hopeful gazes.

"I will not take too long," he said finally. He walked over to the rest of his family, a note of reluctance on his face.

Sporting an enormous grin, the emperor waved goodbye at his retreating back before turning to meet my eyes. "It's just the two of us now."

"...Yes, it is. We need to keep a low profile."

Though more vulnerable groups such as women and children could freely wander the festival at night, I was uneasy about the emperor's safety. I had my guard up, and when the emperor noticed the tension in my shoulders, he chuckled. "Don't worry. If something happens, I'll protect you."

"No, as your subject, it is my duty to protect *you*."

She pouted. "Ugh, I've had enough of this form. I want to hang out with you as a man."

"In my opinion, you are equally beautiful no matter what your gender is, Your Majesty."

"That's not what I'm talking about... Ah, that reminds me." The emperor collected himself and changed the topic. "You wanted a hair accessory, right?"

Ah. I did say something like that before the festival. I glanced around us; all the young women wore charming floral hairpins. Single women apparently donned the accessories to indicate that they were searching for potential partners.

I hesitated. "Um... I think such adornments are too early for me."

"Really? Your hair has gotten a lot longer though. You'll probably be able to tie it up soon."

"Oh, the length is not what I am worried about. I just... At the moment, I

would prefer..." My mouth was moving faster than I could think, and I realized what I was about to blurt out. Instantly, I covered my mouth with my hand.

"What's wrong?" The emperor studied my face.

I felt as if the heavens were crashing down on me. I couldn't believe the outrageous words that had nearly made it past my lips. Frantically, I shook my head at his question.

She shrugged. "Well, I suppose there's no point giving you something that you don't need... Oh, how about earrings then?"

"Earrings?"

"Yeah. There's a stall over there. Let's take a look." In the middle of her sentence, she started to walk forward at a brisk pace.

"Ah, please wait...!"

The emperor stilled in front of a booth illuminated by vibrant lanterns. She appraised the wares and said, "I see, this shop makes accessories with thread and cloth left over from divine rituals. I've heard of the craftsman as well. Let's shop here."

"Um! Y-You really do not have to! You have already arranged all my daily necessities, so it would be a waste to buy something new."

She turned around with a small smile. Even as a woman, the emperor's charm was lethal, and the surrounds seemed to fade away before her beauty.

"This is a gift to thank you for your efforts during the festival," she said. "You must have been nervous whenever you had to interact with the Centorian guests."

I was speechless.

"I couldn't stay by your side during the festival, but...I saw how hard you worked, Sai."

"Your M— Lady Haruiro..."

"Come over. Pick out something you fancy."

Feeling the emperor's warm gaze on me, my cheeks grew hot. To distract

myself from my lightheadedness, I perused the exhibit of colorful accessories.

I chewed on my lip. “Something I fancy... I...” I had never thought about dressing myself up, so I didn’t really know what I liked. In the past, I used to wear a silk ribbon that my mother had selected for me, but it was no longer in my possession. *Oh, actually...* I recalled the color of the ribbon.

Slowly, I replied, “I would like something white.”

“White, got it. Can I choose it for you?”

“That would be great.” I nodded.

Upon my answer, she began to inspect one item after another, muttering, “This looks nice. Oh, but that one isn’t bad either.” Eventually, she settled on a pair of earrings with dangling *mizuhiki* ornaments. The shopkeeper’s face wrinkled into a large smile as he explained that the earrings were fashioned from remainder scraps of mizuhiki crafts that had been dedicated to the imperial court.

“How does this look?” inquired the emperor. “It’s not a flower, so it doesn’t count as an ‘I’m interested’ sign.”

“Thank you...”

After purchasing the earrings, the emperor led me away from the crowd and toward a shrine dedicated to a dragon god. In the alley beside it, she deposited the jewelry into my palms.

I stated my gratitude once again before promising, “I will cherish them and wear them when I can.”

She sighed. “Sorry. The gift for the great Wagtail Priestess is just a pair of normal earrings from a stall on the street.”

“Oh, not at all! They are beautiful, and quite light, so they will not pull too hard on my earlobes. More than anything...they are a gift from you. Nothing makes me happier.”

A faint smile flashed on her lips, and she stared into my eyes. “Hey, Sai.” Her voice was solemn.

“Yes?”

“Did meeting the people from Centoria make you miss that country?”

“I, well...”

“I’m thankful that you are adapting so well in Orient as the Wagtail Priestess. But...if you ever think that no, your heart belongs to Centoria, I...”

I shook my head. “Thank you for your kindness, but...” Seeing her earnest gaze, I disclosed my thoughts without restraint. “The queen was very compassionate, and the other guests were amicable toward me as well, making sure to greet me with smiles at all times. It is hard to believe that they are willing to take such an attitude toward a woman who was nearly executed on false charges.”

She was silent, waiting for me to continue.

I placed a hand over my chest. “But my place is by your side. You trusted in my innocence and risked your life and honor to save me. I want to use my second chance at life for your sake. I still feel this way.”

As I stitched my sentiments together, I carefully filtered out one aspect of my true feelings and swallowed the words I had almost blurted out earlier. I wondered whether I had managed to maintain an honest, sincere expression in front of the emperor. Like a thief under scrutiny, I wondered whether I had successfully hidden the true reason for my racing heart.

“...Thank you, Sai.” She gave me a gentle smile as beautiful as the first blooms of spring, and in the back of my mind, I thought, *Ah. I want to see this smile on her true face.*



WE regrouped with Lord Yukinari a short while afterward and left the festival grounds before the sun could fully set. Yet by the time I arrived at Sekirei Palace, daylight had lost its patience, and a dark night sky hung above the arch bridge. As though someone had plucked out the stars to decorate the scene, the hanging lanterns in the vicinity twinkled.

I bowed gratefully. “Thank you for taking care of me today, Lord Yukinari.”

“Allow me to express my gratitude as well. Though we invited you on short

notice, you took time out of your day to indulge us.” He paused. “My spouse was also elated at the opportunity to see you once again. We will eventually invite you to another outing, I believe.”

“I will happily take you up on that offer.” I smiled.

Once we parted ways, I turned to see a maid waiting for me with a lantern in hand. I followed her, and the chilly evening breeze caressed my cheeks, sapping the lively warmth of the festival. But stuck to my body like tar was guilt over the outrageous words I had swallowed.

It would be utterly unbecoming of the Wagtail Priestess to make such a willful statement. To even *think* that—

“At the moment, I would prefer to have as few encounters as possible with other men of marriageable age.”

If I had finished my sentence back then... I shuddered at the implications. My duty was to marry a man in Orient and bear a successor. The emperor had to desire the same. Yet... In the heat of the moment, I had wanted to postpone the inevitable. *Why am I acting like this? What am I thinking...?*

I couldn’t work up any motivation to find a man to marry. I was scared—I didn’t want to investigate the reason behind that reluctance. I had the feeling that a forbidden desire was budding in my chest...a wish that someone of my position should not dare to even consider.

A chaotic mess of sensation attacked my mind and body: fatigue from the Centorians’ visit, the heat of the festival, my regrets... Conflicting thoughts and emotions used my heart as the rope in a game of tug of war.

I had trouble sleeping that night.

Eighth Arc: What Relationship Does the Wagtail Priestess Want with the Golden Eagle Emperor?

Chapter Seventy-Three: Turning a Blind Eye

AFTER the summer festival, Sekirei Palace was swamped with work. We fulfilled our duties in ceremonies on the current emperor's Accession Day and the previous emperor's Remembrance Day, but that wasn't all: we also had to manufacture the skin care products that traveling merchants had ordered in preparation for their journeys to other nations. And as if that weren't enough, we still had to attend to our more menial, routine assignments such as housekeeping and administration, and so on.

The court ladies immediately delved into the mountain of tasks upon returning from their holiday. They tackled their jobs enthusiastically, and none of them ever voiced even a single complaint about the workload.

One afternoon, a maid approached me. "Lady Sai, it is time to head to the imperial court."

I nodded. "The business meeting, right? I'll get ready."

I passed on the message to the lady-in-waiting in charge of the matter and to the guard who would accompany us, a subordinate of Lord Yukinari. Then I left a step ahead of them on a rickshaw. I preferred the vehicle over the palanquin since it was faster and more mobile, and required only one runner to pull me around.

Such transportation hadn't originally existed in the imperial palace, and once, in a hurry, I had crafted one by magically combining a wagon, chair, and umbrella lying around in the garden. It had begun as a hasty stopgap whipped up on the spot. Later, I adjusted the design based on information from my previous life, and furniture makers had since further upgraded it to the final version. It came in very handy whenever I wanted to zoom across the palace complex.

As I rattled aboard the rickshaw, I placed my hand over the earrings vibrating at my throat—I had pinned the gift onto the collar of my clothes the night before. I had accepted the earrings without a second thought, and after a better look at them, I had realized that they were the type that required pierced

earlobes. Most adult men and women had ear piercings in Orient, including the emperor. He must have assumed that I did too.

When I reached the room we had prepared for the discussion, I saw Suzuiro inside. She had arrived long before me and neatly arranged the items our clients had ordered as well as a display of select sample products. Suzuiro had an excellent eye for beauty, and whenever I left setup to her, she transformed our wares into an elegant exhibit of colors and shapes. She was an invaluable assistant.

“Ah!” She perked up. “Lady Sai, everything is ready!”

“Thank you. The merchant and the supervising court lady haven’t arrived yet, so shall we take a small break?” As we spoke, the maid that had been assisting Suzuiro promptly prepared refreshment.

I noticed Suzuiro’s gaze on me while we enjoyed our chilled, refreshing cups of tea. She was staring hard at my collar. *Ah. I figured she would notice immediately.*

“Hey, my lady, if I’m not mistaken... Did you get those from a certain accessory shop?” She told me the shop’s name, and indeed, it was the right place. As the daughter of a wealthy merchant, she had a vault of knowledge about such matters.

I nodded. “I’m surprised you recognize it.”

“The main branch’s primary work is actually making mizuhiki and silk embroidery dedicated to clergy, but on the side, the craftsmen occasionally sell their stuff in an accessory booth at festivals. All the accessories are one of a kind, so they’re super popular.”

“I see...” I glanced down at the earrings. “That makes sense, since their wares are gorgeous and of excellent quality.”

“Why are they pinned to your collar?”

“Well, you see...” I pinched my earlobes for emphasis. “I don’t have pierced ears.”

“Ohhh!” Suzuiro nodded to herself. “Huh, you really don’t have any! I’m

surprised!”

“Does everyone have pierced ears in Orient?”

“Pretty much, yes! Some people pierce their ears after their coming-of-age ceremony; some people do it when they get their first job... Every family has a different tradition, but most people get it done during an important rite of passage!”

“I see. So it isn’t done on one specific occasion, huh?”

“Yep! I haven’t gotten my ears pierced yet either!”

I blinked. “Is there a reason for that?” Suzuiro’s face abruptly turned cherry red. I had never seen such an expression on her before. “Miss Suzuiro...?”

“I-It’s nothing! It’s still too early for me!”

“I...see?” *Maybe she doesn’t want to talk about it.* I decided to leave the topic at that.

“By the way,” she asked, “were those a present from someone?”

Suddenly I was the one flustered. “Huh?!” My voice shook. “Ah, um...” I couldn’t meet her eyes. “Does it...look like a present?”

“Hee-hee-hee...” She cackled triumphantly. “That’s a ‘yes’! I guessed right!” She puffed out her chest and made a “V” with her fingers.

My mind resorted to escapism. *The peace sign... I did it once without thinking, and somehow it became the hottest trend among the court ladies.*

My thoughts were a jumble as I put a hand to my forehead. *Someone help me.* “How did you figure that out?”

“Well, you sometimes wear jewelry that other people give you, and most of it is either promotional items from merchants or priestess ornaments that you received from the clergy, right?”

“Yes, pretty much...”

“I can recognize accessories that don’t fit those categories with one look!”

“H-How?”

“Because I’m a daughter of a merchant family! My eyes are instantly drawn to new or unfamiliar things! And also because I know everything about you, Lady Sai!”

“That...means I can’t hide anything from you...”

“Exactly!” She nodded proudly. “Now then, my lady...” Almost hawklike, her eyes glinted with curiosity as she edged closer to me. “Please! Tell me! Who did you get them from?!”

“U-Um... Weeell...”

“Ah!” she gasped. “That reaction means it was definitely a man...!”

“Uhhh... I, um...” I had enough common sense to know that I couldn’t tell her the truth—that the emperor had visited a street stall and bought a one-of-a-kind accessory specially for me. I inched backward, and Suzuiro nudged forward.

“Teeell me...” she whined.

“Um...”

“Pleeease?”

“Ummm...”

She was relentless. Eventually, my back was against the wall. Her eyes were shining as she exclaimed, “Come on! Please tell me! Who is this mystery man?!”

“Weeell... I received it from, um...a certain man...”

“A! Certain! Man!”

“Um, I don’t want to cause him any trouble... Sorry, I’ll have to keep his name a secret...”

Suzuiro let out a loud squeal.

Panicking, I hushed her. “P-Please keep it down!”

“Yes, of course!” She thumped her chest with her fist in a “you can trust me” gesture, but her voice was still deafening. “I swear I’ll never tell another soul about the existence of a man who’s intimate enough with you to give you presents in private!”

“Y-Your voice is, um, echoing...”

“You like him back, right?”

“Huh?” I croaked out.

She froze. “Huh?”

Suzuiro hadn’t even hesitated before making that assumption, whereas I was reduced to a stuttering mess. She was blinking her large eyes at me in consternation.

“Does that mean...you don’t like him...?” She sounded as if she was asking a perfectly normal question.

I was at a loss. “‘Like’ is...well... I mean, he is a special person to me, but my affection for him is more out of respect and reverence...”

“That’s wonderful! He’s someone you both admire and love!” she gushed, completely oblivious. She flashed me an innocent smile as she offered me her blessing. “After all, only a man with a good personality is worthy of you! If the person you end up with doesn’t treat you well, my lady, I would drown in tears!”

She was ecstatic. Knowing her, I suspected she was fantasizing about an amorous man wooing an infatuated woman. Yet whatever love story she was cooking up in her head, I was certain that she was totally off mark.

“Please tell me his name one day!” she begged.

I need to end this conversation before I let something slip. I could only grant her a feeble nod and a promise. “I...will...”



THE business meeting went smoothly, the merchant indicating interest in our new products and the prospect of another bulk order the following year. *If everything continues to be smooth sailing, Sekirei Palace will earn enough to independently sustain itself by next year.*

I had returned to Sekirei Palace and was sorting through documents when I sighed. “Should I not have worn them? Would hiding them be wiser?”

I removed the earrings from my collar and weighed them in the center of my palm. I admired them for a while, then, after a moment of indecision, I pinned them at my neck once again. “But...I don’t want the gift to go to waste.”

The emperor had chosen an accessory from a street vendor—not anything fancy or sacred—so he probably wanted me to wear them often. He knew that I avoided donning expensive articles whenever I could.

That being said... Suzuiro wasn’t going to be the only one who came to such conclusions. Others might gossip as well upon spotting them. And though Suzuiro was a tight-lipped girl, unfortunately, she had a rather loud voice. *Sorry for thinking that.* Even if she didn’t intend it, I was willing to bet that everyone would soon hear that I had accepted a gift from a mysterious man.

“Maybe I should put them away until I pierce my ears. I should try to stop the rumors, at least.”

Contrary to my words, I didn’t have it in me to tuck the earrings into a drawer. I stared at the window. A while back, the emperor had visited me as I worked, and we had sat down together to eat steamed red bean buns.

The chair was still there. The emperor wasn’t.

I hadn’t seen him at all since the summer festival. We hadn’t met for probably over two weeks. In the absence of any summons to be his nightly companion, he had suddenly become a distant person out of my reach. Technically, I had audiences with him in an official capacity as the Wagtail Priestess, yet those occasions allowed only for his fleeting presence. He presided on his faraway throne, the bamboo blinds in front of him like an insurmountable wall between our worlds.

No. This distance is how it should have been in the first place. It’s abnormal for a mere priestess like me to be permitted to enter the bedchambers of the divine descendant of Amawashi. It’s unthinkable that we should lean in and talk so closely that I feel his warmth and his breath on my skin. Comparatively, our past relationship seems far more absurd than how things stand now.

Yet. The longer we were apart, the more I missed his gentle, husky voice, his ash-blue eyes framed by long lashes...

“Will I...ever have the chance to talk to him again?”

I cast my gaze in the direction of Kita Palace, the emperor’s residence. The day counter was still going—I hadn’t received his summons that day either.

Chapter Seventy-Four: Hiaki Gou, the General of the Right Wing

I vacated other people from the area, turned on the “switch” in my brain and started to process information. The first step was to fill my head with the necessary data for my work: the documents the court ladies had prepared, the discussions I had with each merchant, and my list of suppliers. I memorized the texts word for word.

Next, I applied the information to each task and looked for the best solutions and methods of execution. My job was to understand the situation in each department and parcel out directions almost like a mission control would have in my previous life. Without assistance, someone like me wasn’t cut out for the position of manager, but since I had increased my brain’s calculative capacity with magic, I could assess scenarios in consideration of all the details available.

After I finished parsing most of the information and generating instructions for everyone, I rose, brewed a cup of tea, and turned off my mental switch.

“Phew...”

I relaxed my mind, pushing work to its outskirts. When I worked, I concentrated hard. When I relaxed, I unwound completely. That minimized my mana expenditure—some advice I had received from Lord Raiya.

As I helped myself to the tea, I glanced out the window on a whim. A silhouette caught my eye, that of a very conspicuous person dressed in crimson. Outside, a tall, straight-backed, good-looking man with short black hair was carrying containers of raw materials alongside servants.

Startled, I stood up from my seat. “Is that the General of the Right Wing?!”

He seemed to have noticed my sudden movement, because he raised one hand outside the window with a smile before approaching the entrance to my workshop. Frantically, I opened the door and greeted him with a bow. He grinned and bowed to me in return.

Nervously, I said, "I did not expect to see you toting our goods, General."

"I happened to pass by." He shrugged. "Didn't have anything better to do at the moment, so I helped out. And some of your ingredients are imported from Meridiona, right? I wanted to take a quick look at those." His voice was cheerful and well-projected, crisp even from a distance though he didn't up his volume like Suzuiro. "Also, don't call me 'General'; that makes me sound like an old geezer. Just call me Hiaki."

"Thank you, Lord Hiaki."

"Mm-hmm. Looks like you were hard at work too, huh? Get some rest while you can."

"Thank you."

Unlike the other men I knew—the emperor, Lord Yukinari, Lord Raiya—the General of the Right Wing, Lord Hiaki, was the picture of traditional masculine beauty. He was tall and muscular, and although his smile softened his features, the gaze of his copper eyes was the piercing stare of a lion. He had been stationed in Meridiona for a significant amount of time, and the country was engaged in constant conflict with Centoria. *Do all military officers on the front lines have such a dominating aura?*

For a moment, I recalled the commanding presence of my former fiancé.

"So, what were you doing?" He studied me curiously. "Oh, you were having tea. Can I have a sip?" Immediately upon asking, he nimbly plucked the lidded teacup out of my hands and downed it all in one big gulp.

"Ah!" I gasped in surprise. "Sorry, I drank a little from that. I shall make a fresh pot."

"Nah, it's fine, I just wanted to get some good tea in my stomach. Drinking roasted tea makes me feel like 'Ah, I'm home!' You know what I mean? In Meridiona, all the men swig spirits and liquor on the job, in broad daylight. I

can't overstate my relief when I come across someone sober over there."

"Wow..."

I hastily summoned a maid and asked her to prepare tea. Lord Hiaki, meanwhile, observed my every move.

"Hey, Sai, just wondering," he said. "What was your original name again? Back in Centoria, I mean."

"I was Sai Cutrettola."

"Ahhh, so that's why you're called Sai Sekireimiya now, 'Sai of the Wagtail Palace.'" He put a hand to his chin. "It's practically a literal translation. You've never thought about changing it up a bit more?"

"The emperor respected my original name and so bestowed this sacred name upon me, so I wish to keep it."

He sighed. "What a shame. You should have gotten him to give you a cuter name. 'Sai...' That sounds like 'vibrant' in our language, so maybe Ayairo, 'vibrant color'?"

His suggestion spurred me to voice a question that I had been wondering for a while. "On that topic, women's names in this nation usually end with *-iro*, or 'color,' right?"

"Yeah."

"Is there a reason for that?"

"Who knows? Not a clue, though I've heard theories in passing. You know how Orient is covered in snow in winter, and it's boring white everywhere, right? It doesn't help that our hair and eyes are all shades of Orient Mist, so you only see similarly dull blacks or grayish colors on us. People wanted girls at least to have some sort of brilliant color in their life, so they started a tradition of ending girls' names with *-iro*. That's a pretty widespread story."

Ah, that makes sense. As someone brought up in Centoria, I found the natural complexions of Orient citizens refined and elegant, but people who actually grew up amid those hues likely had a different impression. I had noticed that many of the buildings were coated in crimson paint, perhaps so they would

stand out from the all-encompassing white snow.

He shrugged and added, “Some people say it’s for a different reason though.”

“What might their theories be?”

“The survival rate for women used to be appallingly low, so people decided the color of their burial clothes from the get-go and named the babies those colors. Or that parents didn’t put much thought into the names and simply named their child after whatever color caught their eye.”

“O-Oh... I see...”

We shared a wry smile. A maid deposited tea and sweet *kinako* mochi onto the table between us, and Lord Hiaki gave her a friendly smile as well, thanking her. *Hm. That’s an unusual attitude for a person of high rank.*

“That aside, if I remember correctly, the Oriental character for ‘Sai’ is...” He paused. “His Majesty chose it, right?”

“Yes.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “‘Someone who serves and belongs to god,’ hm?”

“...Huh?”

“Should I call him devious? Or maybe possessive’s more accurate.” He wore a meaningful smile, gazing at me while he drank his tea.

Did he possibly come here because he has business with me? I guessed.

Without warning, he stood up. I followed his example, and he stepped toward me. And leaned forward.

My eyes widened. “Wha—”

He was close, *too* close. Instinctively, I backed away, only to feel the wall press against me. He edged forward as if to cage me with his body and, with a thud, placed his elbow on the wall and looked down at my face.

“Um, Lord Hiaki...?” I asked uncertainly.

“Hey, Sai. I want to ask you something, and I’m serious.” Although his smile was soft, his eyes glinted like a hawk’s.

I shuddered. I couldn't escape.

In a low voice, he asked, "Will you be my wife?"

"Huh?!" I didn't even have time to comprehend his words. His fingers brushed my cheek, and...his lips inched closer...

There was a loud slam.

At the last instant, something flew through the air between us and struck the wall—a dagger. Blood seeped from his neck and drew a trail as it trickled down.

Its scarlet hue snapped me out of my panic. "Lord Hiaki! You are injured!"

"Oho? So this is Sekirei Palace's chastity apparatus, hm? Well, well, if it had been anyone else, they'd be missing a head right now." He grinned to himself as he rubbed his neck, then walked over and pulled the knife from the wall. He inspected its engraved signature. "Hmm, this was crafted by the swordsmith favored by the Kiriya clan. The Left Wing is quite the capable man."

"Oh..." I remembered what Lord Yukinari had told me the day he first showed me around Sekirei Palace:

"Every location inside the former Inner Palace is within a web of magic. If anything happens, the invader's neck will immediately part from their body, so please rest assured."

The security system he had mentioned back then must have activated.

I looked at Lord Hiaki worriedly. "Are you all right? I shall attend to your wounds at once!"

"No, I'm perfectly fine. This is nothing; it's barely a scratch. More importantly..." He cackled to himself as if he had discovered something humorous. He lifted his fingers to his mouth to lick off the blood as he asked, "Sai, is that really the first thing you should worry about after someone tries to kiss you?"

A chill ran down my spine, and I froze. For a moment, I had convinced myself it was a misunderstanding. After all, why would any man want to kiss *me*?

But he had confirmed his intent with his own words. He had tried to kiss me.

“General... Why? Why would you do that to someone like me...?” I stammered.

“Because I want you to be my wife.” He reached out and gripped my chin, forcing my head up.



I saw my frightened expression reflected in his copper stare, his eyes rather resembling a blazing inferno. I was pitifully powerless before him.

“I’m not joking,” he pressed. “I want to marry the Wagtail Priestess.”

“That is not something I can decide. I...will obey the emperor’s decision for marriage partner of the Wagtail Priestess.”

“Huh.” He released his hold on me.

My knees jellied, and I couldn’t stop myself from sliding to the ground.

Lord Hiaki stroked my head. The motion itself was gentle, as if he were trying to soothe a spooked animal. “I’ll come to talk to you about this again. For now, well... Remember me, will you?”

The sound of his footsteps grew distant.

For a long while after that, I couldn’t even climb to my feet.

Chapter Seventy-Five: The Emperor and Hiaki

THE General of the Right Wing, Hiaki Gou, stood before the emperor as he reported on the Meridionan military and the results of his investigations into the current state of affairs. When he finished, the emperor cleared all the other people from the throne room. The powerful officials in attendance all filtered out, leaving only the emperor and Hiaki behind.

From his throne, the emperor addressed his vassal. “We hear that you visited Sekirei Palace.”

Hiaki lowered his head. “Yes. My apologies for going there without proper clearance. I returned from Meridiona only recently, which caused my ignorance. I beg your pardon for my insolence.” As he spoke, he touched the thorny, spikelike line etched into his neck.

The graze from the dagger hadn’t healed. Instead, a jagged pattern had been magically seared into his skin. If anyone dared to step out of line within Sekirei Palace, a curse activated, and it would not spare its target until the creator of the security spell, the emperor, personally lifted it.

“Currently, only We and the Left Wing are aware of your transgression. Before We determine your penalty, We shall grant you an opportunity to argue your case. You must have your reasons for trespassing without prior request and committing such an atrocious act. Speak.”

The emperor had given Hiaki a chance to defend himself away from prying eyes. If it were any other person in Hiaki’s place, immediate punishment would be the natural course of action. But the emperor couldn’t make a hasty judgment when it came to the heir of the Gou clan. After all, the Gou clan had contributed much to the establishment of Sekirei Palace.

“I wish to welcome the Wagtail Priestess into the Gou clan as my wife, and I went to greet her. These excuses, however, do not change the fact that I trespassed on property that is under your command, Your Majesty.”

“...Is that so.” The emperor recrossed his legs, switching the limb on top. “You

must know that the choice of the Wagtail Priestess's spouse remains undecided. Our plan is to carefully evaluate her abilities and wait for her status to stabilize before We issue her an imperial mandate." A beat. "Are you saying that you have objections?"

Silence.

Finally, the emperor said, "You are Our Right Wing, and We trust that someone of your capabilities would not act so thoughtlessly. There must be more, yes?" There was a gentle, coaxing note to his tone. "You may speak your mind. We permit you."

Hiaki cast his eyes down. "Please pardon me for my impertinence, Your Majesty, but I think that you should make a decision as soon as possible."

"...Oh?"

"I hear that the Wagtail Priestess is sixteen this year. If we account for the eventual exhaustion of her reproductive faculties and her safety during pregnancy, the viable number of children is five by the age of thirty: her first childbirth at eighteen, then at least a one-year gap between each of her subsequent children, so her second at twenty, third at twenty-two, fourth at twenty-five, and fifth at twenty-seven. Considering the possibility of stillborn infants, she will need to bear at least this many to secure her bloodline.

"Unlike men," he continued matter-of-factly, "women must nurture their children in their wombs for some time. There is a chance that her arcane abilities and title will still prove useful after she has offspring, so I believe that it is better if she marries and has children as soon as she can."

"We have already weighed the concern you raise, Right Wing." After a sigh, the emperor's voice echoed down from the throne. "The Wagtail Priestess has only just arrived here in Orient, and her position is yet unstable. Many challenges still face the newly established Sekirei Palace. Not to mention that she is the sole possessor of knowledge about the Wagtail Priestess that might otherwise be lost to time. The actual records have all been burnt and disposed of, so we can rely only on her memory."

"...No matter how many times I hear about that incident, I still doubt my ears. How can that nation set fire to the historical and cultural heritage of a land that

our empire gifted them out of goodwill?”

Hiaki had a good grasp of the Wagtail Priestess’s history in Centoria. Presently, their neighbor’s most pressing issue was its conflict with Meridiona, so the Wagtail Priestess and her close ties to Orient had likely been of very low importance to the Centorian government—they simply hadn’t cared.

In addition, until recently, the Order had been growing increasingly influential in Centoria, and they had supported the movement to conquer Meridiona. Their political clout had tipped the scales in favor of invasion, the other country proving to be a convenient scapegoat to distract from the Order’s internal corruption.

But immolating the Wagtail Priestess as a human sacrifice to appease the masses was the most foolish move one could make. At least, that was the opinion of an Oriental warrior such as Hiaki. Maybe the Centorian aristocrats had good reason to attempt what they had. *Maybe*, he emphasized in his mind.

The emperor’s voice was steady as he said, “Her blood is not her only value—the knowledge that her clan passed down over the generations is just as important. Most pressing is for her to impart her expertise and history to suitable personnel in Sekirei Palace and the clergy before her memories lose clarity. This is vital for the training of the next Wagtail Priestess, whom she will one day birth.

“And We think We must use utmost caution in selecting a man of suitable status, for his family background will affect the future of the Wagtail Priestess’s descendants.”

“Understood, Your Majesty... My limited knowledge caused me to make such an impudent suggestion, and I am deeply ashamed of my ignorance.”

“That is fine.” The emperor paused. “It is, after all, evidence that you care a lot about the Wagtail Priestess’s situation. Do continue to voice any opinion you have in the future.” He lifted a finger and slowly thrust his hand forward. He drew a line in the air in a purifying rite.

Almost immediately, Hiaki’s throat grew hot. The thorny pattern on his neck vaporized into black mist and faded away. Silence descended on the throne room.

The emperor's voice cut into the stillness. "We will overlook your transgression this time. We ask that you continue to support Us with the Left Wing as Our Twin Wings."

"You have my deepest gratitude for your benevolent verdict."

"It is not every day that We have the chance to speak with you in private. Is there anything else you would like to inform Us of?"

"Thank you for granting me such an honor, Your Majesty. There is." Hiaki bowed once again before saying, "The Gou clan has already made all the necessary preparations to welcome the Wagtail Priestess as my spouse. Ever since your decision to offer her asylum within the borders of your empire, Your Majesty, my clan has done everything we can to realize your wish. As part of those efforts, we have naturally considered taking her under our wing and are willing to protect her as one of our own."

"You have Our gratitude, Right Wing. We are aware of and grateful for the contribution your clan has made to Our empire."

"It is our honor."

"...But We hope you understand that even when presented with such an offer, We must thoroughly ponder the subject of the Wagtail Priestess. We will eventually ask for the aid of the Gou clan and that of you, Our Right Wing. We will be relying on you then."

"Understood." *His Majesty has no intention of handing the Wagtail Priestess to my clan*, he concluded silently. Hiaki was regarded as the most eligible candidate for groom but had been abruptly dispatched to Meridiona only days before the Wagtail Priestess's planned arrival. And upon his return, the Wagtail Priestess's circumstances had changed completely. But as the Gou clan's heir, Hiaki could not just sit down and allow the situation to snatch the reins from him. His status would not let him.

He persisted. "Your Majesty. I believe that there is no bloodline more suitable than the Gou clan for a union with the Wagtail Priestess."

"A bold statement." Slight amusement colored the emperor's voice.

"The Wagtail Priestess is also the pride of the Gou clan. In the distant past,

when Sekirei Prefecture was still a part of Orient...” Hiaki trailed off. “The blood of the Wagtail Priestess’s male lineage runs in our veins. I do hear rumors that... you plan to make her your empress, Your Majesty, but...”

The emperor chuckled. “You have started to heed baseless word of mouth of all things? Are you still under the influence of Meridiona’s liquor?”

“Unfortunately, these rumors have spread so far and wide that I hear them even when my mind is clear. No matter your decision in the end, Your Majesty... As a member of the Gou clan, I will do everything within my power to prevent a second coming of the Wicked Fox of Septentrion.”

“The maiden is not a fox but a bird.” The emperor sighed. “But We understand your concern. For convenience’s sake, We shall arrange more opportunities for you to interact with the priestess. If you are not familiar with her, you will be rather troubled if she does end up your wife one day, yes?”



ONCE the audience was done, Hiaki returned to his office, rushing through the corridors with large strides—not because of the earlier conversation but due to his tight schedule. He was going to take a short nap until his servant came to wake him.

There was a bed installed in his office. He threw himself onto it and let out a long sigh. “I’m exhausted. Ugh, being tactful and playing word games really isn’t the thing for me... The best I can do is copy what my old man does.”

Hiaki’s father, the current Gou head, was the Right Legate—one of the most, if not *the* most, important ministers in Orient. However, due to his rank, he didn’t openly voice any advice or opinion with regard to the emperor’s decisions. As the Right Legate who rued the political mess that the Wicked Fox had caused during the reign of the previous emperor, he assumed the most prudent stance possible.

In truth, Hiaki’s father was very enthusiastic about the Wagtail Priestess joining his clan. The current emperor had been borne by a Kiriya woman and was intimate with the Left Wing as well. Furthermore, the Left Wing’s younger sister also made relatively frequent appearances at Sekirei Palace. In his mind, since the emperor had Kiriya blood, Gou possession of the Wagtail Priestess

would be the ideal outcome.

Hiaki placed a hand on his forehead. “Who knows how this is gonna turn out? Personally, I’ve had enough of single life. I just want to settle down with someone and start a family...”

Chapter Seventy-Six: Heading to the Island of Sinners

I was on a ship.

The sun of late summer shone down on us, making the foamy water sparkle like stars against the light-drenched ship. It was a dazzling summer day, yet the sea wind that blew against my skin was so chilly that I had to suppress a shudder.

My destination was a small island to the north of Orient. Some descendants of rebels who had been involved with an assassination attempt on the previous emperor lived in banishment there. Of course, the mastermind and their close kin were all long dead. The aristocracy placed heavy emphasis on blood ties, however, so nearly everyone was related to each other in some way, and it was impossible to put to death all the members of a clan. Thus, at times, exile provided more political stability than execution. I was once a puny governor myself, so I understood why the court had made such a choice. It had been a brilliant maneuver.

I was there under the imperial mandate of Emperor Haruka. As the Wagtail Priestess, I would attend the local Irei Festival organized by the residents of the island.

I marveled at the ocean. “So much water... I never knew the sea was so vast...” It was my first time on a ship; I hailed from the mountains of a landlocked nation, and everything maritime was novel to me. Though I had memories of a previous life, I seemed to have grown up in an inland area then too. Excitement welled in my heart, growing as if without limit.

But I didn’t have it in me to bask in that joy. One reason for my anxiety was the fact that I was heading to an island of outcasts. As for the other...

“Yo.” My traveling companion, Lord Hiaki, patted me on the shoulder. “Are you feeling seasick at all, Sai?” So that his words wouldn’t be lost in the strong wind, he leaned down to talk into my ear.

“I am all right. I ingested medicine beforehand.”

Lord Hiaki let out a deep, throaty laugh at my reply. “Oh, come on, don’t look so guarded. I’m not going to try to suddenly smooch you again.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “U-Um...!”

“Or do you want me to continue where we left off last time? I’m sure that Kiriya’s blades won’t fly in my direction in a place like this.”

“I...am unworthy of your attention, Lord Hiaki. That aside...” I stretched my arm out to point at the island I glimpsed in the distance. “Is that truly our destination? It is surrounded by steep cliffs, and there does not appear to be anywhere we can moor our ship. Not to mention...” I turned to look at the mainland. “For an island of exile, it seems too close to the opposite shore. Good swimmers could easily cross this channel.”

“The people on that island have a special, magical insignia on their skin that constantly sucks mana out of them. But, well, folks with mana are kind of scarce over there, so...”

I chewed on my lip. “In the case of an ordinary person, they would literally dry up...”

“But there’s a jewel on the island that provides mana to all the residents. Within the area of its effect, they can live safely. So yeah, that’s how we keep them on the island.”

Lord Hiaki opened his mouth as if he wasn’t done, but he was interrupted by the approach of his subordinate, a military officer. He left with the other man, and I breathed a sigh of relief. The second damper on my happiness at witnessing the ocean was that Lord Hiaki had been assigned as my escort despite the recent incident.

The emperor knows what happened. Lord Yukinari may have installed the security system, but he doesn’t have mana, so the emperor is the one powering it. He must have sensed its activation. My opinions aside, Lord Hiaki tried to initiate overly intimate contact with the emperor’s possession inside an institution directly under the emperor’s command. That has to be significant. But Lord Hiaki was still chosen as my guard, and that means...

The emperor was up to something. I gently caressed the earrings pinned to my collar. “Your Majesty... I want to see you again...”



THE ship had departed in the early morning and arrived at the island before sunset. My impression of the island didn’t change with a closer view. Precipitous bluffs lined its circumference, and I spied no docks.

I watched the sailors secure the ship amid the rocky coastline and asked Lord Hiaki, “Um, how are we going to get ashore?”

He jerked his chin. I followed his gaze and saw residents tying a rope ladder to an outcrop of stone. They threw the other end down at us.

“U-Using that thing?” I stammered.

“Yep, *that* thing. There’s also technically a path across the rocks.”

Stakes had been driven into the earth, and they did resemble a path of sorts. *But still!* Color drained from my face.

While I stood there like a statue, court officials climbed up the cliff one after another with the aid of the rope ladder.

“Oh, what do I do...?” I whispered to myself. “I guess I’ll have to use magic...”

“Nah, you don’t have to. Here, I’ll help you.” Lord Hiaki lifted me effortlessly.

“Huh?!”

He held me with one arm as he hopped nimbly up the craggy palisade.

“Okay, you can open your eyes now,” he said.

It took everything I had to fight the weakness in my knees. “Thank you,” I managed to say.

He grinned at me, flashing his white teeth. “You’re lucky that your priestess attire includes a divided skirt.”



AFTER the dreadful “getting ashore” stage, the rest of the journey was pleasant and peaceful. The residents had prepared palanquins and ox-drawn

carriages in advance, which carried my group to the estate of the island chief. The facilities were much more varied than I expected, and although I spotted signs of erosion on the houses, I could also see the care the people had put into maintaining them.

Inside the chief's manse, which also served as the island's town hall, he welcomed us. "We have been expecting you, Wagtail Priestess."

I bowed. "I am honored to be a part of an important event, the Irei Festival, on your island. Thank you for your invitation. I am in your capable hands."

Though exiles, the villagers seemed calm and nonthreatening. They wore commoners' clothing, their dress far more frugal than that of the people in the imperial court, and their mannerisms were dignified, hinting at their original upbringing.

We were immediately served dinner and even entertained with court music during our meal.

One of the dishes on the menu was a delightful homemade seafood udon. A resident explained, "Unlike the mainland, this island is not very suitable for rice crops, so noodles are our staple instead."

Another resident nodded. "During the early years of our banishment, just trying to procure food was a struggle, but we could not be complacent and give up in the face of adversity."

I was moved. "All of you have made many efforts to improve your lives on the island, slowly transforming it to a bountiful one. I admire your determination and diligence."

The villagers' reaction was greater than I anticipated. Their eyes lit up over big smiles. "Thank you very much! When we heard from Lord Hiaki that the Wagtail Priestess herself was going to offer prayers to our ancestors, we were very surprised. To think that you are truly a compassionate priestess who would talk even to outcasts like us without discrimination..." Their elation was extreme, hinting at all the hardship they had faced in their exile.

The chief stood and joined the ongoing performance. His skills as a musician were impressive.

Anyway... I glanced at Lord Hiaki, who was drinking from a sake cup next to me. The residents appeared to have an amicable relationship with him. *Ah, so that's why they were merely banished and not executed. They likely have ties with the Gou clan, Lord Hiaki's family. Probably distant relatives.*

The most significant member of the Gou clan is the Right Legate, Lord Hiaki's father, and Lord Hiaki is the emperor's Right Wing. Their clan must have been highly influential during the reign of the previous emperor as well. It's not surprising, then, that some of the rebels' kin was spared.

As such thoughts ran through my mind, I brought some udon to my lips. The chief finished his performance and bowed to me. "Lady Priestess, those who shared our blood once dared to oppose the previous Amawashi. Our lineage is tainted, and we no longer have the right to pray at the altar." He sucked in a deep breath. "We can beseech only our ancestors and you, the great Wagtail Priestess."

My heart sank. They could likely never again set foot on the soil of their homeland. In Orient's religion, the emperor was the supreme deity, Amawashi. The islanders were sinners who would receive no forgiveness from their god in the afterlife, and they had to live with that knowledge.

However... In the Myth of Beginning, the priestesses weren't considered goddesses and were instead humans who mediated the relationship between the human king and Amawashi. Though I wasn't the villagers' god, as one such priestess I could still offer my prayers to soothe their souls.

Chapter Seventy-Seven: The Significance of the Wagtail Priestess Visiting the Island of Sinners

THE next day, Lord Hiaki and I, accompanied by guards, attended the island's ceremony. I purified my body under a waterfall on holy ground before sunrise and changed into my formal priestess attire. The sky was still dark that early in the morning and twinkled with stars. Below, red glowing prayer lanterns hung from the eaves of the village houses.

The residents were dressed in white robes, the color a stark contrast against the darkness. They silently formed a line and, with lowered heads, advanced in a solemn march, almost like a trail of disciplined ants. I led the procession, scattering sekka. Instead of fresh flowers, I used papercut petals that the residents had prepared.

Our soundless parade walked into the vast forest north of the village toward the highest ground on the island, where the mausoleum dedicated to their ancestors was located.

I was struggling to navigate the unfamiliar mountain path in the gloom. Lord Hiaki followed close behind, and noticing my difficulties, he quietly drew level with me. "Hey, Sai," he whispered, "how about I carry you the rest of the way?"

I staggered on, replying, "Thank you for your kind offer, but this is my duty. I will go as far as I can with my own feet."

He flashed me a wry smile. "If you say so. Well, do your best then so you don't cause congestion at the back of the line." He ducked in front of me—he was going to take the lead and show me the best places to step.

"Thank you," I whispered in a low voice. He responded with a big toothy grin before offering me his hand. It was large and sturdy, just as one would expect of a military officer. I took it, and he gave me a squeeze—his grip was firm and warm.

Whenever I came across an obstacle, he hoisted me up effortlessly. He was a

very reliable companion. Perhaps I should have accepted his offer to carry me to begin with, since that would have saved him the trouble. But the trek was a sacred prayer ritual, so unless I was truly stuck, I wanted to walk on my own.

My hand was in Lord Hiaki's hold, yet for some reason, it was the emperor's face that appeared in my mind. *Oh... Thinking back, the emperor has never touched me like this. I mean, we did have physical contact when he saved me as my house burned down and when he's steadied me on occasion. But...he never voluntarily initiates contact with me otherwise.*

Lord Yukinari treated me with utmost respect as a priestess and nothing more. Lord Raiya sometimes ruffled my hair or patted my shoulders, but my impression was that he saw himself as a mentor or father to me.

I'd had many opportunities to be alone with Emperor Haruka. Whenever he summoned me to serve as his nightly companion, my hands pressed against his skin. Yet the emperor never touched me unless absolutely necessary—not even the barest brush of a fingertip.

A hushed voice shook me out of my thoughts. "...Sai. Sai." Lord Hiaki anchored one foot on a boulder as he held out his other hand to me. "We're nearly there. You can do this."

"Thank you." I grasped his hand firmly and scaled the rocky terrain with his help. I raised my face.

The forest had given way to a boundless morning sky that was growing brighter and bluer by the minute. I saw a large clearing before me, the mausoleum right in the middle of the open area. We seemed to have arrived on time—before daybreak.

Once again, I expressed my gratitude to Lord Hiaki for his assistance: "I cannot thank you enough."

One after another, the residents climbed onto the stony plaza behind us and wordlessly began to ready the memorial service portion of the Irei Festival.

Since the mausoleum was situated on elevated ground, I could survey the native forest and steep cliffs of the island below us, as well as the vast surrounding ocean. The farthest patch of eastern sky was already awash with

light. The sun would rise at any moment.

I passed the metaphorical baton to the residents. The island chief, his wife, and a handful of representatives stood in front of the mausoleum and recited scripture as the chilly sea wind lashed at them. Their litany was, naturally, different from the Buddhist sutras of my past life, their words uniquely threaded together to pay tribute to the souls of their ancestors.

I had learned the scripture the previous night, and I recited it with them. Lord Hiaki stared at me from his position beside me. For a moment, I thought that perhaps I had messed up somehow, yet after combing through my recollection once more, I was certain that I had memorized every word perfectly. *I'll ask him about it later.*

Putting such thoughts aside, I strewed sekka, cleansing the impurities from their prayer to their ancestors. White paper petals fluttered in the sea breeze like butterflies taking flight. The sun crested the horizon.

When we were done chanting, we picked up the paper bags that had been placed at the mausoleum as offerings and distributed them among ourselves. And that was the end—the ceremony had concluded in the blink of an eye.



A merry feast followed the solemn service. We traveled a gentler path back to the village, and I discovered that the people who had stayed behind had already finished preparing for the festivities. They had laid out mats on the plaza to piece together a giant carpet studded with low tables. A scrumptious selection of food crowded every surface, coupled with plenty of liquor.

The start of the feast was like the flip of a switch—the subdued residents immediately began to sing and dance, erupting into commotion with flushed faces. Since they had been exiled during the era of the previous emperor, the average age on the island was quite high. Yet despite the wear and tear of time, they were filled with energy.

Lord Hiaki was sitting cross-legged beside me and tipping alcohol into his mouth. “This is the only time of year when they get to party without a care in the world,” he explained. “They’re the survivors of the clans who rebelled against Amawashi, and today is the sole day they are permitted to let

themselves loose.”

“I see...”

“Aren’t you gonna have any booze, Sai?”

I shook my head. “I have never ingested alcohol, not even sacred sake for religious reasons. In Centoria, eighteen is the minimum legal age to drink.”

“Oh, really? Well then, how about you try some out with me?” He held out his sake cup to me.

I waved my hand to decline. “I shall refrain for now.” I hesitated. “There is a chance that things might get out of hand.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Hm? Do you think I’ll get drunk and start sweet-talking you or something?”

“Th-That is not what I mean!”

He chuckled heartily, seemingly entertained by my reaction. “You’re adorable. This is fun.”

As I returned to sipping my tea, the men of the village gathered before me. They kneeled, bowing deeply toward us.

“You have our most sincere gratitude, Lady Priestess,” one said. “I am sure that the spirits of our ancestors are elated at your participation.”

“Honorable priestess,” another man pressed, “we beg that you continue to show us your compassion in the future.”

I was a little taken aback. “Thank you, but please raise your heads. I really did not do anything that significant...”

“No, no, not at all!” As the man spoke, his speech started to slur somewhat. “That the Wagtail Priestess...is willing to come here! I can’t even overstate how! ...Important that is...!”

“Bring on the drinks!” someone else shouted. “We gotta serve the priestess the finest liquor!”

They were clearly drunk, their faces ruddy with inebriation as they closed in on me and tried to convince me to accept a sake cup.

“U-Um,” I stammered, “I am afraid I cannot drink alcohol...”

“Just a tiny sip is enough!” one man ushered. “Yes!”

Panic crept into my heart. “Umm...!”

I didn’t want to escalate the situation by rejecting their goodwill or pour cold water over the celebration. But at the same time, mages had to be cautious about alcohol consumption. If we lost control and accidentally activated our magic, we could end up causing a far more disastrous incident than any drunken hijinks of those without mana.

Since childhood, my parents and grandmother repeatedly drilled into me that the power of the Wagtail Priestess was potent. After all, we could control people with mere magical intonation. *Never drink alcohol*, they had said. *The only alcohol you can drink is the sake you will share with your husband to seal your bond on your wedding day.*

“U-Uh...” My mind was in overdrive trying to come up with a way out of my dilemma.

“Oh, please have some! It’s our way of thanking you! Please, my lady!”

My initial impression of the islanders was that they were demure and gentle mannered, but at the moment they were acting spirited and wanton. I didn’t know what to do.

Next to me, Lord Hiaki barked out a loud laugh. “Ha ha ha, you’re so popular, Sai!” He wound his arm around my shoulder and snatched the proffered sake cup. Throwing his head back, he swallowed it all in one big gulp. “Don’t force alcohol on our great priestess, y’all. If it’s good booze, I’ll have it.” Warning was clear in his tone.

The residents immediately quieted in the intimidating presence of the Right Wing.

“Good booze is always better enjoyed by people who like the stuff, don’t you think? Hey, gimme more of this sweet one,” he ordered.

“Y-Yes, my lord! Right away!”

Lord Hiaki turned to me with a wink. He patted me gently on the head before

releasing my shoulder.

He really saved me there... As I breathed a sigh of relief, a new group walked up with hesitant steps. It was the island's women. They didn't appear drunk, and my anxiety melted away.

"Um, Lady Priestess..." a woman began, "if it is not too much to ask, may we pray to you?"

Chapter Seventy-Eight: Distant Ties of Blood

THE women kneeled before me and clasped their hands in supplication.

“Great Wagtail Priestess, I pray that I can at least see my faraway homeland in my dreams...”

“Great Wagtail Priestess, I pray that the pain in my feet will fade away...”

“Great Wagtail Priestess...”

“I pray...”

Piously, they dedicated their prayers to me and confessed the distress of their day-to-day. They spoke of the hardships of life on a barren island and the ache that weighed on their body with age.

I couldn't do anything—could merely listen patiently to what they had to say while ruing my inability to help them... I was prohibited from healing the residents with my mana as the Wagtail Priestess. One of the reasons was that it would be detrimental if they worshipped me too much, yet the biggest was the possibility that my interference could influence the magical binds on their bodies. The only way I could offer solace was to take each individual's hand and give them my blessings.

“Ahhh, Lady Priestess...”

I held a pair of hands that were wrinkled from countless years of adversity and pressed them against my forehead. Closing my eyes, I prayed silently. I wasn't a deity who could answer the pleas of my believers, but I hoped that at least their futures would have as much peace as possible. *Please...*

Suddenly I realized something. *Wait. I can't use magic, but...I can help in ways that don't require magic, right?*

When the prayers started to taper off, I saw that as an opportunity to speak up. “Um, everyone here. Due to restrictions, I cannot grant all of the wishes you have made. But if there is anything that does not require magic, I want to aid you in any way I can.”

They stared at me in a stupor. “That...does not require magic?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “Well, I have to admit that I do not have much to offer. I can only do menial work and basic medical treatment, but I hope that I can help to alleviate your suffering as much as I can. I have experience working as a maid, so I believe I can provide some assistance with chores.”

I stood up, securing my sleeves with a cord. I located Lord Hiaki, who was enjoying himself at the banquet. “Lord Hiaki, may I help with minor tasks like this?”

The general was chugging directly from a sake jar. He paused, appraising me with a half-fond, half-exasperated smile. “Well, if you stay here, you’ll have to deal with all these pesky drunkards, so yeah, go ahead. It’ll help me breathe a sigh of relief.”

“Thank you.” I turned back to the group of women. They were still kneeling statue-like on the ground, their eyes wide. “Okay then, shall we start by adjusting the stove in the communal kitchen? You mentioned you were having trouble with lighting the fire recently. Please show me the way.”



I had never been more grateful that my priestess attire included a divided hakama skirt. It offered great mobility, and since the hem only reached my ankles, I could run in it as well.

“What shall I do next?” I asked. “Ah, right, I will dust the top of that shelf for you.”

I was flitting around the village, tackling one small chore after another. The village lacked young, fit adults, so no matter how diligent the islanders were, there were some tasks that they had trouble completing. Adjusting the kitchen facilities, repairing high-up shelves... Then there were more minor details that people often missed, like rearranging the layout of rooms or the height of furniture. Such changes might seem redundant but they could help lessen the resident’s lower back pain and increase efficiency when cleaning.

After a while, the military officers assigned as my guards offered their assistance. “Lady Priestess, if there is any manual labor, we can help as well.”

“Oh, are you sure? Thank you! In that case, could you help me move this bed? I want to clear out the mold.”

Some of the people in our group had gotten bored of the drinking party and came over from time to time to give me a hand. Attending the banquet was a part of their duties, however, and although I tried to persuade them to prioritize that, I didn't have much luck.

As we continued our odd-jobbing, more and more intoxicated people sprawled onto the mats to sleep. As for the drunkards still awake, they were fooling around, roughhousing with each other like sumo wrestlers and laughing uproariously. I put away the empty sake cups and tableware before circling around to lay blankets on the people on the ground.

While I was doing the dishes in the washing area, a woman scrubbing beside me gave me a big smile. “Thank you very much for your help today. You even assisted with cleanup. It would not have gone this quickly without you.”

I gave her a small nod. “I'm glad I could help. Well, it's always us women that seem to be the most exhausted after events such as these...” I sighed.

Once I finished the dishes, I proceeded to roll up mats that we didn't need.

Lord Hiaki wandered over. “Hard at work, huh?”

“Yes. It kind of reminds me of my life back in my homeland—when I used to live in the Cutrettola demesne.”

He blinked in surprise. “Wait, you still did chores all the time even when you were the privileged daughter of a governor?”

“Our domain was the opposite of wealthy, so no one received special treatment. That is why I know the hardships of villages like this, those without young, fit adults, very well... I just could not stop myself from lending a hand. I apologize if I stepped out of line.”

“Doesn't appear to be a problem to me.” He shrugged. “But, well, the people on this island might start worshipping you even more.” He gulped down the last drop of liquor from the sake jar, his tongue darting across his lips. The man had quaffed quite a significant amount of liquor, yet not the slightest flush reddened his face.

“You are a heavy drinker,” I noted.

“Most of the men of the Gou clan can chug booze as if it’s water.” He grinned. “Unfortunately, that’s why they sent me to a place like Meridiona, so it’s not always a good thing. Over there, unless there’s booze on the table, they won’t even listen to a word you say...” He sighed.

“Ah, on that topic... This is just a guess, but are Orient’s citizens mostly lightweights?”

I’d had opportunities to attend or make a brief appearance at banquets, and overall, alcohol consumption seemed to progress at a slower pace compared to in Centoria. The kingdom didn’t have many wells with good water quality, so even aristocrats habitually drank beer as a replacement, whereas in Orient, people seemed to prefer tea to liquor.

“Oh, you noticed? Yep, you’re completely right. Orient’s filled with cheap drunks. There are folks who like to drink, yeah, but not binge.”

“I see...”

“People say that my family can hold our liquor because of the blood of the Wagtail Priestess, but...” He shrugged. “What about your parents?”

I hummed in thought. “My father was a lightweight. My grandmother would sometimes drink alcohol when she used magic, so I think she likely had a high tolerance. As for my mother...that’s a good question.”

But I didn’t get a chance to elaborate.

“Ahhh! There you are, Lady Sai!”

Loud, frantic footsteps approached us—the wasted men started sprinting at the sight of me. Even from a distance, they reeked of liquor. Their faces were bright red as they charged toward me like boars.

“Lady Sai! Please, I beg you, stay a little longer!”

“Please, Lady Priestess, we wish to tell you more about the situation on our island!”

“Lady Sai!”

“My lady!”

Lord Hiaki grimaced. “Urk, we’ve got a troublesome lot here.” As he spoke, he strode forward, standing like a shield in front of me. “Sorry, gentlemen, but I’m gonna chat with the priestess for a while. Save it for another time.” He slung an arm around my shoulders and steered me toward the forest outside the settlement.

“Ah, hey...!” I yelped.

“C’mon, let’s go. Leave those mats on the ground.”

He walked at a brisk pace across the carpet of fallen leaves, gait steady—he was clearly sober. After a while, we arrived at the end of the path, its destination a cliff top where we could overlook the forest. The distant sea breeze dashed between the gaps in the trees and whirled up at my body. It was strong enough to ruffle my bangs.

I bowed to Lord Hiaki, who released my shoulder. “Thank you. You did that to get me out of that situation, right?”

“Well, you’re my future bride, so I can’t just let all those people swarm you,” he said with a straight face.

I furrowed my brows slightly in bafflement. “Um... Are you serious about taking me as your wife?”

“Of course.” He nodded firmly at my question as if such an answer was obvious. His ruby eyes bored into mine—he hadn’t blurted the answer out under the influence of the alcohol.

Wind stirred the air, making his red robes flutter around him like butterfly wings of fire. He was a robust man with rugged good looks, and I was sure that anyone would feel like they were in the safest place in the world beside him. The Gou clan had to be one of the most prestigious families in Orient as well.

And that was why I couldn’t believe he wanted to marry a person like *me*.
Why?

For a while, we stood in silence.

He spoke up first. “I told His Majesty too. I said that I want you as my wife, the

wife of the Gou heir.”

“But...why would you choose someone like me?”

“Oh, I thought I told you already. My family’s actually descended from one of the Wagtail Priestesses. Didn’t the emperor tell you?”

“Huh?” I froze.

He narrowed his eyes, and I could tell that he wasn’t joking. ““The man who inherits the blood of the Wagtail Priestess must remain and aid the administration of the empire as one of the wings of Amawashi. His clan shall go by the name Gou, “homeland,” preserving his bloodline as a feudal lord.”” he recited. “Well, you were raised in Centoria, so I guess it’s only natural that you don’t know about it.”

Chapter Seventy-Nine: A Bolt from the Blue

MY eyes were as round as saucers. I stared blankly at him in shock.

“Unlike our emperor, the Amawashi, the Wagtail Priestess doesn’t only give birth to daughters, right?” explained Lord Hiaki.

“Y-Yes...”

The Wagtail Priestess was only a title and power passed from mother to daughter. We weren’t restricted to having one child. If the Wagtail Priestess died before she could have offspring, a fertile woman with the next most pure blood would forcibly awaken as the subsequent priestess, or at least that was what I had heard. No one had ever tested it out, of course, so it was mere conjecture.

“The Gou clan, my family, originated from either the younger or older brother of a Wagtail Priestess, who then went on to serve the emperor.”

“I see...”

“That’s why my clan has appealed countless times to the government for decades that we should reclaim Sekirei Prefecture from Centoria. This time, we invested quite a lot of effort into bringing you here under the lead of Emperor Haruka.”

I gasped. “My deepest apologies. In my ignorance, I have acted extremely rude to my savior...” I bowed to him.

He loosed a carefree chuckle. “You weren’t rude at all. I’d actually be at my wits’ end if you tried to butter me up after learning that fact.”

“I cannot thank you enough for your kind words.”

“Anyway, that’s how things are. If the emperor gives you permission, you’ll agree to be my wife, right?” His gaze turned as sharp as a hawk’s.

“I...”

Of course, a voice in the back of my mind said. If the emperor orders me to wed into the Gou clan, I will obey dutifully. The Gou clan was the ideal family for the Wagtail Priestess to marry into—it was almost too good to be true. *I’m sure my children would grow up happily in his family. Even if I have children that don’t inherit my title, the Gou clan will still guarantee them a peaceful life.*

But...why does my chest hurt so much, then?

I felt as if someone had pierced my chest with an awl. *It hurts.* I couldn’t even nod or say anything in response.

Lord Hiaki was a cheerful, kind, and charming man. And yet, I couldn’t say “yes.”

I was disgusted with myself. I wasn’t in a position to choose; I had no right to be picky. But my throat wouldn’t make a sound. I didn’t know what was wrong with me.

The man before me wore a faint smile as he waited for my reply. He was watching my face, and I wondered what was on his mind. *It’s extremely rude to keep him waiting. I need to say something. I need to...* “Um—”

A yell stopped me in my tracks. “Lady Priestess!” A group of drunk people were approaching us, the middle-aged men from earlier. Judging by their staggering gaits, they were even more inebriated than before. “Lady Priestess, please stay on this island forever. It’s so awful—we can’t leave here even after we die!”

I glanced at them. *They found me even in a place like this?*

Instantly, my eyes widened. The men held bows in their hands.

“Watch out!” roared Lord Hiaki as he lunged forward to shield me from the barrage of arrows flying at us.

I reacted immediately, tossing my shawl in front of us. *Now!* I poured in mana, and the shawl unfurled and expanded, catching the projectiles in midair. But I stumbled after throwing the shawl at full force, and—

“Sai!”

Lord Hiaki jumped off the cliff after me, catching me in his arms as we hurtled

downward.



WE tumbled to the bottom of a ravine. At the last moment, I thought to use my magic to enlarge my hakama skirt, transforming it into a cushion as we crashed into a tree. My hakama were shredded, but thanks to their sacrifice, Lord Hiaki and I emerged with only grazes and scratches.

The general looked up at the cliff top and clicked his tongue in frustration. “They’ve never gone crazy like this before. Sorry.”

I shook my head. “No, please do not apologize. I am their first hope in a long time, and they must have gotten overly excited, maybe even thinking that their doomed future might change. I...can’t completely blame them.”

Lord Hiaki scowled. “Why are you sympathizing with them after they did *this* to you?”

“Maybe it is because they remind me of myself.” I gazed up at the sky wistfully. “The only thing they ever did wrong was be born in the wrong family, be born the relatives of rebels, and that’s out of their control. Their lives were practically snatched away from them just because of the circumstances of their birth... Even good people can’t stop themselves from feeling bitter and anguished. If I were in their place, perhaps I would have turned out the same way.”

The general sighed. “You’re the type to suffer more than you have to because you care too much, huh?” He plopped down cross-legged on some dry grass. “Guess the only thing we can do for now is wait for help. Even if the others are drunk, they’ll definitely notice two people missing.”

I chewed on my lip. “I agree.”

“Ah, before I forget.” He studied me before breaking into a smile that softened his features. “You saved me twice today. Thanks.”

“It was nothing.” I shook my head again. “You were dragged into this because of me to begin with...” I magically repaired my hakama and sat down next to him.

“Huh, magic’s pretty handy,” he commented. “Can you heal wounds with that stuff too?”

“Technically, yes, but using mana directly on a person does not yield effects in proportion to its expenditure. In other words, it is very inefficient. Potions are a different matter, because mana stimulates the medical ingredients, which increases their efficacy in the human body.”

I paused before adding, “Well, in an emergency, magic can be used to stop bleeding and relieve pain, but to heal our minor wounds would not be worth it. It would only exhaust me.”

“Interesting. So magic isn’t a cure-all...”

“Indeed. For example, I repaired my hakama, but the fabric is now worn down as a result. There are specialized mages who can repair threadbare fabric, yet it is such a difficult skill that you have to study specifically for that purpose.”

Magic was an everyday commodity in Centoria, so to be asked about it was quite novel and interesting. As I explained, he stared at my hakama with intrigue.

Within the forest, the sound of rustling leaves was so loud that it grated on my ears. In the shade beneath the tree canopy, it was dark and almost freezing despite the summer season. I started to shiver and hugged myself reflexively.

Noticing, Lord Hiaki said, “You’re cold, aren’t you? Here, you can sit on my lap.”

“But...”

“Oh? Do you think I’m going to do something?” He reached out and ghosted a finger under my chin. His lips were pulled into a devilish smile.

I flinched, recalling how he had almost kissed me in Sekirei Palace, and tensed.

“Aw, I was joking. I wouldn’t do anything to you in a situation like this. After all, you just saved me, Sai. I could never forcefully kiss my savior. ...Though if you want one, I will,” he quipped after a beat.

I narrowed my eyes and stared at him warily.

He chuckled. "I swear to the heavens that I won't cross any lines here. Relax." His mouth twisted into a sardonic smile as he finished his sentence. "The heavens, huh... I guess saying that on this island is kind of pointless. After all, it's a place forsaken by Amawashi," he muttered.

He didn't wait for an answer before catching my arm and tugging me into his lap. I regretted inconveniencing him, yet I had to admit that it was a lot warmer. "Thank you..."

"Hey, just wondering," he asked, "can't you warm yourself up with magic?"

"I can, though I think I should conserve mana given our predicament." I paused. "But oh, you make a good point..." I picked up a twig, suffused it with mana, and gave it a light swing. Fallen branches and brush converged around us into a makeshift shack. "I can do this much, at least. It will leak if it rains, but it should provide us shelter from the wind."

"...Mages are so unfair."

"Not to that extent. Once my mana runs out, this structure will fall apart. In the past, even something like this would have dried up my mana reserves after a short while."

"Oh? So it's different now?"

"Yes. After I came to Orient, my mana levels increased." With the emperor's every touch, my mana pool grew. I suddenly recalled the emperor's captivating scent and felt heat gather in my cheeks.

Lord Hiaki raised an eyebrow. "Hm? Why's your face red? Is increasing your mana levels something that warrants such a reaction?"

"No, please ignore me... I-I just thought that, well, I was being too pompous about the fact that I can use magic, and..."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're bad at lying?"

I hung my head, mute.

"Looks like someone did." He sounded amused. "I'm not surprised."

Our conversation lapsed. We waited for rescue in silence.

As we sat, the sky rumbled. Concerned, I ducked out of the shack and looked up to see dark skies. “Is it going to rain...?”

Lord Hiaki frowned. “That’s bad news. They won’t be able to find us in the rain.”

“Ah...” *What do we do?* I scanned the sky worriedly.

What Lord Hiaki said next took me utterly by surprise. “The emperor’s likely going to make you his empress.”

I whipped my head around to gawk at his face. He, meanwhile, was gazing up at the sky, his crimson eyes solemn.

I was flabbergasted. “That is... That was unexpected. Why did you say that?”

“It’s something I can say only at a time like this. Please listen.”

“That is ridiculous,” I said, shaking my head.

“Whether you believe it or not, that’s how it is. You’ve been building a reputation for yourself just as the emperor hoped.”

“I...”

My mind was in shambles. *Hoped? Reputation?* The emperor rarely ever asked anything of me other than his treatment and my participation in divine rites. The emperor that Lord Hiaki described seemed to be different from the person I knew.

Yet I saw the conviction in his eyes when he glanced down at me, piercing into my very soul. “You must have noticed how the people here received you—with a warm welcome. Even those who resent the emperor support you, and that’s a reputation you earned for yourself through hard work. But.”

“But...?”

“But once you become the empress, you likely won’t be able to offer your prayers and blessings to the residents here or to outcasts like them.”

I fell quiet.

“Marry me, Sai,” he said. “If you choose me, you can save all the people who fall through the gaps in the emperor’s authority. I don’t know for sure, but if

you voluntarily request our union...he will likely grant you permission.” He paused. “That’s what I think. How does it sound?”

I cast my eyes down. I didn’t know what to say.

“Well, you don’t need to give me an answer right away,” he said. “But please remember what I just said.” He had finished saying his piece. He returned to the far side of the shack, sat down cross-legged, and offered no more words.

I couldn’t squeeze a single syllable out of my throat. I stood at the shack entrance in a daze.

...Our rescue was still nowhere in sight.

Chapter Eighty: Two Descendants of the Wagtail Priestess

THERE was still no sign of a rescue team.

It had gotten so dark that we couldn't even discern each other's faces, so I decided to light a magical fire on my palm.

The rules of magic dictated that nothing could come out of nothing, so I couldn't just manifest one out of thin air. I struck rocks against each other and amplified the sparks, which I used to burn my handkerchief, transforming it into a small bird of fire. The flame wagtail flickered in the air before flapping its wings and soaring upward to light the whole space.

As I gazed at the wagtail, in a voice that was almost a whisper, I murmured, "It does not add up."

"Hm?" Lord Hiaki raised his head. The bright crimson of the flames danced in his large red eyes like fireworks.

"I am talking about what you said earlier. You are a man of noble upbringing. If I marry you, my child will belong to the Gou clan."

"Yeah."

"Currently, I am merely the Wagtail Priestess without any additional titles, which is why even the residents of this island received me with hospitality. But if I marry into the Gou clan, I will—no, the Wagtail Priestess will be affiliated with your family, an influential household in Orient."

He stared at me, listening attentively.

"If I marry you, you claim that I can offer my prayers and blessings to assuage those forsaken by the emperor, but that isn't entirely correct, is it? No matter whom I eventually marry, I will likely lose that right due to my new status."

Lord Hiaki was silent—and his silence said "Yes."

I clasped my hands together. “The emperor is aware of that fact, which is exactly why he chose to send me to this island now. As the deity of this empire, he cannot absolve the sins of their blood. Instead, he would grant them the forgiveness of the Wagtail Priestess.”

He inclined his head slightly and waited for me to go on.

“That is why your claim earlier does not add up,” I concluded. “Hypothetically speaking, no matter whom I marry between the two of you, I will no longer be able to pacify the spirits—both living and dead—on this island.”

I fixed my eyes on him. “Furthermore, Lord Hiaki. This is just a guess, but you have other marriage candidates, do you not?”

“Oh?” He raised an eyebrow, eyes gleaming as if he had found a new toy. “Who might it be, then? Tell me.”

“Someone from Meridiona.”

He stilled. Although he continued to smile, he looked as if he’d been caught totally off guard. “What...led you to that conclusion?”

“During the period when the emperor escorted the Wagtail Priestess from Centoria, you were sent on an expedition to Meridiona—you, who also has the blood of the Wagtail Priestess in your veins. It was almost like a declaration that Orient cannot leave the priestess in Centoria’s hands but trusts Meridiona to take good care of our kind.” In other words, the Orient Empire had used the lineage of the Wagtail Priestess as a tool to accomplish two aims: one was to form an amicable relationship with Meridiona and the other was to rein in Centoria.

Lord Hiaki was silent once again.

I persisted with that train of thought, assuming that my theory was mostly correct. “At first glance, the union of two descendants of the Wagtail Priestess appears to be the most fitting choice for the sake of our bloodline. To Orient, however, the existence of the Wagtail Priestess is a political trump card. Using both of us in the same place seems far from ideal, at least in my opinion.”

“The Gou clan’s influence would increase, though,” he reminded me.

“That is meaningless.” I shook my head. “Within Orient’s borders, the authority of the Gou clan is so absolute that there is no need to increase it further—there are better things to invest your efforts in. Moreover, if you truly wished to select a spouse from Orient, you would not choose someone without political backing like me. It would be wiser to marry a member of another powerful noble family. After all, you already possess my most valuable asset—the blood of the priestess.”

“Good point.”

“My knowledge about Meridiona is limited, I admit, yet as far as I know, its current sovereign, King Kuze Ikinoka, is a young monarch who ascended to the throne only a few years ago. In addition, I hear that he does not hail from any of the ancient and prestigious clans in Meridiona but was actually once a commoner who accumulated riches through maritime trade,” I said, recalling what I remembered about the nation. “In that case, he would wish for a union with an established bloodline to legitimize his authority as king to both domestic and international parties.”

And if he’s seeking ancient blood, the best candidate is... I nodded to myself. “For example, the marriage of a woman from the Ikinoka family and a member of the Gou clan who has inherited the blood of the Wagtail Priestess—an entity whom Orient holds in high regard—would be well worth celebrating.”

“Sai.” Lord Hiaki finally cut into my long-winded speculation. The friendly smile that he reserved for women and children had been wiped from his face. “There’s a vital piece missing from your theory. What’s in it for us? What will I, the Gou clan, or Orient gain from closer ties with Meridiona?”

“Plenty.” I folded my fingers down as I listed the benefits I could think of. “To begin with, Meridionan merchants export precious raw ingredients used in medicine. The medicine industry is Orient’s main source of income, and those ships are your lifelines. To the Gou clan, gaining such connections is vital.”

“What’s the second?”

“If Orient establishes a good relationship with Meridiona...Centoria, which is situated between the two countries, will be deterred from mobilizing their military against Orient.” I paused. “During the reign of the emperor from two

generations ago, there was tension between Centoria and Orient, correct? To relieve that tension, Orient provided generous humanitarian aid and lost Sekirei Prefecture in the process. If we want to avoid a repeat of history, a political marriage with Meridiona is the best solution.”

I had spoken too much; my throat felt parched. Lord Hiaki remained quiet as I stopped to catch my breath

I inhaled. “You do not agree with such a marriage or perhaps even want to go against it. But...” I trailed off. My imagination and deduction had reached their limits. “What I do not know is why. That is all—”

He interrupted me. “How much *do* you know?”

“I do not know anything,” I confessed. “This is all conjecture.”

His eyes widened and he gaped at me in surprise. Then he shook his head with an ironic smile as if to say, “Oh well.”

“It’s my loss,” he conceded.

“That means...”

“You’re completely right. Some people are trying to set me up with a princess of Meridiona. The king over there’s obsessed with the blood of the Wagtail Priestess. And...do you know why?”

“...I have to admit, that is what I do not understand.” I voiced my doubts honestly: “It makes sense for them to set their sights on a bloodline important to Orient. But if they specifically asked for the Wagtail Priestess... I am having a hard time trying to deduce the reason.”

I knew why Orient placed so much importance on the Wagtail Priestess. Meridiona, however, was a faraway land with a different culture and language. Why would their king be so obsessed, then?

He chuckled at the puzzlement on my face. “Sai, you probably don’t know this, but the Wagtail Priestess is respected and loved in Meridiona. That’s why their attitude is much milder toward me—just because I’m descended from the Wagtail Priestess.”

“Why...?”

“I’m sure you’ll arrive at the answer once you give it a bit more thought.” He paused. “What were your parents like? Where and how did they pass away?”

Chapter Eighty-One: Thunderclap

I was speechless.

“Your parents died in the conflict between Meridiona and Centoria, right? While there, they saved the lives of many Meridionan people with their skills as a priestess and a doctor.”

“Ah...”

“The man who sits at the top of the political ladder there, Kuze Ikinoka, apparently owes a debt of gratitude to your parents.”

“I... That’s...”

The conversation had started with the topic of our marriage and derailed due to a revelation that made my world spin for a different reason. I still remembered the day I watched my parents disappear into the distance never to come back again.

He shrugged. “I’ll be honest, I personally don’t have anything against a union with Meridiona. But my relatives are all convinced that you, the Wagtail Priestess, should and will marry me. So basically, I’m the rope in a game of tug-of-war.”

“In other words... You constantly say that you wish to marry me because you wish to be considerate to them?”

“Pretty much.”

All of his actions suddenly made sense. His political marriage with Meridiona was already in the works, yet to keep up appearances, he had to display an intent to wed me. I nodded to myself. “If you truly wanted to marry me, my impression is that you are the sort of man who would go through more formal avenues and take things step by step. That clears up a lot of my doubts. In interacting with me, you were testing the emperor’s reaction, since he has the final say about my marriage, as well as gauging my attitude... Through this, you wanted to figure out whether I would end up a candidate for your wife.”

“You have most of it down, yeah. But some parts are a little different.” Lord Hiaki knelt on one knee and reached for the wagtail lamp. The magical fire fluttered and curled around his fingertips, dodging his touch. “Like I thought... you won’t perch on me.”

With a wry smile, he waved his hand and chased the bird away. The movement originated a small breeze, and the wagtail flame flickered. For a moment, the room turned dark. By the time the light returned, he was right in front of me. “I think that being together with you wouldn’t be bad at all, Sai. I’m serious about that.”

I chewed my lip, looking down.

“What about you, Sai?” he asked. “Am I good enough to be your groom?” His hand touched mine.

I took a deep breath. “This is just my personal opinion, and I mean no offense by it,” I said carefully.

“Okay, go on.” He nodded.

“My parents died as civilians. If they had been members of the Order, they would have received wages, but they declined because if the Wagtail Priestess joined the military in an official capacity, we would become weapons of the state. My parents went along as civilians because they wanted to help those suffering, and...they died there.”

“So...that’s why you never officially joined the Order even when you did work for them.”

I nodded. “It is the last teaching they left me, and I must not go against it.”

He cast his eyes down. “In Meridiona, your parents are hailed as heroes. Even their king becomes emotional when your parents are brought up.”

“Glory will not bring them back to life.”

“...Sorry.”

“If the emperor ever commands me to marry someone, including you, or asks that I contribute to the military campaigns of Orient, I will gladly do as he says. If he wishes for the Wagtail Priestess to become a weapon, I will obey.” I placed

a hand over my chest, over my heart. The emperor had saved me that day, and my life was his. “But if I have the freedom to choose...” I faltered. “If possible, I do not want to be the wife of a military officer. My mother defended her beliefs as the Wagtail Priestess to the end, and...I do not want to be the one who destroys that.”

“In other words, you won’t voluntarily agree to be my wife, is that right?” His tone was both subdued and gentle.

“If you truly intend to marry me, I shall leave the decision in the emperor’s hands. I will happily become your wife if that is his wish.”

“...But that would be going against *your* wishes. Are you sure?”

“As I just said, I wish to avoid marrying a military officer if *possible*,” I stressed. “But to me, fulfilling the emperor’s command is a much dearer wish than my own.”

That was what I truly, unreservedly thought. I was willing to become anything the emperor desired. Of course, I was only human, so I did feel uncertain at times, but... I clenched my hand. *To me, the happiest thing in the world is the sight of his smile.*

I bowed. “I was being impudent... My deepest apologies.”

After a pause, he said, “I see,” and his voice sounded like a sigh. But what he said next made me doubt my own ears: “Do you want to be the emperor’s spouse because you like him?”

“Wha...”

“Remember what I said earlier? I think he’s going to make you his empress. If you turn me down, that’s what’s going to happen. Are you okay with that?”

“That is...only your theory, my lord, and...”

“Okay, let me ask this then. If the emperor were to ask for your hand, what would you do?”

“Ah...” My mind was blank. “He would never...choose someone like me. At the end of the day, I am an outsider from Centoria, a woman with no background who is only marginally useful.”

“Ha ha. Well, even if you think that, what if he still chooses you? Will you resist him the way you resisted me?”

“I...”

I thought of all the times when the emperor jokingly mentioned that the seat of his empress was still vacant. I had assumed he had said everything in jest; that had to be the case. *But in the unlikely scenario that...he truly comes to me and says that he wants me as his life partner, I...*

My words came out in a stammer. “I-I am the Wagtail Priestess; I am not worthy... But if the emperor does... No, he could *never*...”

There was a hearty peal of laughter. Lord Hiaki, who had been staring at me intently, finally guffawed out loud as though he couldn’t bear it anymore.

I blinked. “Um...?”

“Oh, Sai, do you even know what your face looks like when you talk about the emperor?”

Numbly, I touched my cheek, but that didn’t reveal anything.

He laughed even harder. “Ahhh, I’m so jealous of the emperor right now.” His grin slowly transformed into a reckless smile.

Abruptly, he leaned forward and gathered me into his arms.

“Ah?!” I yelped. *Why did he react like that?* I stiffened in shock, wary, and he merely hugged me tighter.

“Don’t burden yourself by overthinking tedious stuff like that,” he whispered into my ear. “It makes my heart break when I look at girls like you.”

I recoiled. “Um, L-Lord Hiaki...!” I protested. No matter how hard I struggled, he wouldn’t budge. His skin felt scalding hot against mine as his body pressed into me. It was agonizing...and scary.

“Be mine,” he said in a low voice, leaning back to gaze into my eyes. “You don’t have to contribute anything to the army. Just hide your abilities however you want and become a mundane, peaceful housewife.”

His lips drew closer, closer... His hold was so tight that I couldn’t fight back.

No daggers enchanted with the emperor's magic would materialize out of thin air and fly at him in such a place. My heart leaped into my throat.

But then.

A roar of thunder reverberated, rattling our eardrums as lightning pierced the heavens.

Chapter Eighty-Two: The Thunder That Saved Me Once Upon a Time

IT was as if a thunderstorm had manifested in an instant. Rain poured down like a waterfall.

Lord Hiaki's eyes grew wide, and he backed away from me with a sardonic smile. "I swear, the emperor must be watching us or something."

The emperor, whose name literally evoked "the fruits of spring," was often associated with thunderstorms, which signaled the start of the season. Even as Lord Hiaki grumbled to himself, rain hailed down noisily on the makeshift hut. My magic deflated under the assault of the booming thunder and relentless rain, and the roof started to leak. Frantically, I attended to it right away.

Lord Hiaki stood up to shield me from the water. I thanked him for his kindness before manipulating my mana to make repairs as quickly as I could.

Observing the force of the torrential rain, Lord Hiaki muttered out aloud, "Looks like our rescue team is going to have trouble finding us..."

I nodded, and we both glanced up at the sky through the entrance. It was pitch-dark outside, the rain so dense that it looked more like a sandstorm. The thunder, crashing trees, and raging waves clashed in a chaotic symphony—it was as though the world were trying to hide us away from the people searching for us.

I chewed on my lip. "This is worrying... Will they manage to find us?"

The murky, wet forest night gobbled up sound, light, and even heat. If I used magic to create a flare or a loud noise, it would instantly dissipate amid the rain, meaningless.

With my current mana levels, I could try to generate a blinding light at full power and maintain it until the others found us. But I had to be in perfect health and a suitable environment for that to work on a good day, and with

every passing second, the rain sapped the energy from my body. Such a plan was too reckless.

On top of that...this incident won't be resolved that easily. “Lord Hiaki.”

“Mm?”

“If this becomes a major incident, the island’s residents might face punishment.”

“It’s probably already causing a big stir.” He paused. “After all, the very fact that we survived that fall and are still alive at the bottom of the cliff is unthinkable.”

“Then...” I felt a pang in my chest.

I recalled all those who had prayed to me, to the Wagtail Priestess, with all their heart. A single mistake by a small group would lead to misfortune for everyone. My own heart ached. They had first been banished to the island because of others’ misdeeds, and once again...

An earsplitting rumble shook the heavens and earth as lightning tore the sky in two. The flow of my mana was interrupted, and the shack buckled for a second before I was able to resurrect it. That single second was enough for muddy rain to drench me from head to toe.

But for some reason, I found myself smiling. In the instant I was showered with rain and surrounded by thunder, a vivid memory flashed across my mind like the lightning across the sky outside. I had experienced such a storm before.

“...Ha ha.”

Lord Hiaki’s puzzled voice sounded distant. “Oi, you okay there, Sai?”

When I turned to him, his eyes widened. I seemed to have shocked all the words out of his mouth—I had to be an eerie sight as I smiled in the veil of rain. But his opinion of me was the last thing on my mind.

My chest was hot, my heart thrumming with an exhilaration I had never felt in my entire life. *I...have experienced this weather before. I know it.*

It was the day the emperor had saved me. Still in my homeland, we had waited for rescue in a cave, isolated from the rest of the world. It was the

thunderstorm the emperor had called forth in place of a smoke signal.

Yes. The emperor summoned a thunderstorm back then, I remember. With a tremendous mana pool comparable to a god's, a person could bend even the heavens to their will for a short time.

"Lord Hiaki," I called out.

"Yeah?"

"It is likely I will collapse soon."

"Wha..."

"When the rescue team arrives, please let my attendant court lady take care of me."

"Wait. Sai, what in the world are you planning?"

"I will change the weather."

"Huh?!"

I gripped the earrings pinned to my collar as I walked out of the hut. The moment I was exposed to elements, rain pelted down at me with enough force to cause pain. As water deluged every inch of me, I looked up at the sky.

"Your Majesty..." I whispered, the words almost like a prayer. Shutting my eyes, I recalled how the emperor had manipulated his mana on the day he first saved me. I focused on the area deep within my navel, drawing out mana to fill every part of my body, willing it to churn under my skin like hot magma.

I sucked in a breath.

Craning my neck, I gazed up at the dazzling exhibition of light. Lightning was a sacred occurrence that blessed spring with life and bountiful fruit. It was the perfect representation of the emperor's noble name. *Your Majesty... Emperor Haruka. Please allow me to call you by your name. Oh, Emperor Haruka, please lend me your power.*

The chant flowed from my lips. *"I am the Wagtail Priestess, and in accordance with my name, Sai, I am she who serves the Amawashi that reigns supreme over the seas of the east. Your Majesty, everything in this land, you possess—the*

winds, the rain, the lightning... In his place, I entreat you, o heavens, grant me clear skies for but a while." I hesitated, then pleaded sincerely, *"Please help me!"*

My mana dried up in an instant. The sky sucked it out of me vigorously, siphoning it up into the boundless ceiling of nature. No matter how much mana I pumped out, even the utmost bottom of my reserves was reduced to a parched desert.

I gritted my teeth, suppressing any noises of pain I might make. My hand squeezed the gift from the emperor. I inhaled, then whipped up my head, determination burning in my chest as I screamed, *"I beseech you, please bestow upon this island your compassion and bless it with cloudless skies!"*

The stream of mana transformed into a shining, golden pillar of light that pierced the firmament like a bolt. The air shimmered with tiny sparkles like a shower of gold leaves, and soon, the sky brightened.

"Sai!"

Lord Hiaki was shouting something. But before I could reply, my world faded into black as I fell unconscious...

"Sai! You with me, Sai?!"

...Or at least, that was what I had thought.

"Huh...?" I mumbled in a daze. I had fainted for only a split second.

"Hey, are you okay?!"

Though my head was spinning, I managed to cling to awareness in Lord Hiaki's arms—he had caught me before I toppled over. "I...am surprisingly in good condition, yes."

The rain stopped abruptly and the clouds ebbed away. *I hope the search team saw the pillar of light.*

"That aside..." I looked down at my palms. "My mana levels are... How strong *am* I right now...?" Considering how my magic had surged earlier in the summer and what I had just accomplished, I appeared to have become much stronger than I had ever expected.

I heard someone's voice echoing in the distance. "Lady Sai! Lord Hiaki! Are you there?!"

More people shouted our names, accompanied by the rustling of leaves as brush was pushed away. *Ah. Our rescue is here.* I breathed a sigh of relief.

A deeper, much longer sigh issued from above my head. "Woow... You mages are a scary lot. You look like a petite, delicate girl, but look at what you managed." He let out a dry laugh. "I gotta think thrice before I try to make a move on you."

I felt warmth on my back. *Oh. Oh!* I had the delayed realization that I was still leaning my full weight on him. With a gasp, I hurriedly stood up and distanced myself. "I am so sorry!"

He flashed me a toothy grin. "Don't sweat it. It's my duty to protect you, our noble Wagtail Priestess." He reached out to pat my head but then stopped midway. Casting his eyes down, he instead took my right hand. When he looked up again, resolve glinted in his earnest, red eyes.

"Hey, Sai," he said in a low voice, staring right into my soul.

"...Yes?"

"In Centoria, people kiss the hand of the ladies they swear fealty to, right?"

"That is a custom the Holy Knights often practice, yes..."

"Which side? The back? The palm?"

"The back."

"Huh. Does it mean anything?"

"A kiss on the back of one's hand shows loyalty, and...if I remember correctly, the palm means desire, I think."

"Huhhh... That's kind of racy." He grinned. Then he pressed his lips lightly against the back of my hand.

My breath hitched.

When he opened his mouth to speak, it was in a solemn tone I had never heard from him before. "I, the General of the Right Wing, Hiaki Gou, am in your

debt. You have saved me twice this day, and I pledge my undying loyalty to you until the day I breathe my last. No matter what happens, whether you end up as my wife or otherwise, I shall be wings that you can fall back on whenever you need me, Wagtail Priestess—my lady Sai.”

Chapter Eighty-Three: The Respective Duties of the Gou Clan and the Wagtail Priestess

A few days had passed.

After we left the island and returned to the imperial complex, Lord Hiaki escorted me to Sekirei Palace. As we stood on the arch bridge at its entrance, he fixed his eyes on me and said, “I’ll give up for now.”

I tilted my head quizzically.

“Don’t make that ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about’ face,” he said, eyes narrowing. “I’ll *pounce* on you.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin and stared at him warily.

He ruffled his hair with his hand. “I’m talking about wooing you, making you my bride.” The man spoke almost nonchalantly and looked as if a weight had lifted from his shoulders. “Asking for the hand of a woman who’s saved my life multiple times without doing anything to repay her first is, well, not what we warriors do.”

“*That* is what is deterring you?” I couldn’t say that I understood him.

“It’s the pride of a soldier—well, more like the pride of a man, you know what I mean?”

I *didn’t* know what he meant, but it seemed to be important to him.

“Well, the key phrase is ‘for now,’” he amended. “I’ll consider it if you say, ‘I can’t marry anyone but you, Lord Hiaki!’”

A breeze rustled past us. A mated pair of magpies circled nearby, flapping their wings noisily. Lord Hiaki reached out to catch them, and the birds soared away, their chattering like laughter.

“Hey, Sai...” He gazed after the magpies. In a tone that sounded more like he was talking to himself, he murmured, “The Gou clan’s duty is to keep the

emperor in check. Our status is special—we can do what even the Kiriya clan, the emperor’s maternal family, cannot, much less the other smaller factions.”

As the magpies grew smaller in the distance, he remarked, “During the reign of the previous emperor, our nation was thrown into disarray by the Wicked Fox of Septentrion.”

That’s Lord Raiya. My thoughts went to the man who continued to support the empire from the shadows, forced to remain in the form of a child. It sounded like Lord Hiaki wasn’t aware of those efforts.

He cracked a wry smile. “That being said, his policies themselves weren’t bad at all, and though it’s humiliating to admit, we still have to rely on the wisdom that the Wicked Fox left behind for some situations. But logic isn’t what human hearts operate on. Humans always judge based on their emotions, to a paradoxically heartless degree.”

“Lord Hiaki...”

“By now, I can tell that the emperor dotes on you very much, Sai. At the moment, both the populace and the imperial government support and view the two of you in a positive light. But their support is fragile. It stands on a brittle sheet of ice.”

He was concerned about me, was warning me—so that I didn’t become the Wicked Wagtail Witch.

“My lord...” I whispered.

His expression softened, and he patted me on the head. “If the priestess born in Centoria had been a dummy, the Gou clan, who lent its aid to take back such a dumb priestess, would be just as dumb. But you know what? I’m glad we helped you here.”

“I am happy that you think this. Truly.”

The wind stirred. The military officers waiting for him started to drift forward. We didn’t have much time left to talk.

Lord Hiaki looked down at me sternly. “The emperor is likely sharper than you assume. He excels at manipulating people with that smile of his, and it’s how he

managed to win over all these important vassals despite his youth. Maintain your course—continue to be the Wagtail Priestess who can support his wit.”

I bowed. “Thank you for your counsel.”

“Okay then, later.” He turned on his heel to walk away.

But before he could leave, I called out to him. “Um, Lord Hiaki...”

“Mm? What is it?”

“At the moment, I still do not have many connections with the aristocrats of this nation. I want to know more about Orient.”

“What exactly?”

“...I am afraid that one sentence will not be enough.” I shrugged before smiling. “Though I have spent a lot of time with you recently, I am ashamed to admit that I knew very little about you beforehand. If possible, I want to learn more about you, my lord. About your clan, about the other nobles... If it is not too much to ask, would you teach me when you have the time?”

He grinned. “But of course. We’re family who finally got to meet each other. I’ll introduce you to the ladies of our clan. I’m sure you’ll get on like a house on fire.”

Chapter Eighty-Four: The Emperor and Hiaki, an Epilogue

HIAKI Gou stood before the emperor with his subordinates and the Wagtail Priestess as he reported on the events of the island’s Irei Festival. When he glanced down at Sai’s petite head lowered in a humble bow next to him, she almost looked like an ordinary lady-in-waiting.

Kneeling, she spoke in a melodious voice that reminded him of chimes. “The Wagtail Priestess has nothing to add to the Right Wing’s report about the damages caused by the assault or how we dealt with the aftermath. As for the inspection of the arcane devices located across the island, I was able to finish

that with the clergy without incident. I have already compiled the details in a document that I have passed on to the appropriate priests. I was granted time to recuperate, and my mana levels have been restored without issue.”

Then she appealed to the emperor. She asked that the imperial government refrain from forcing the uninvolved residents to take collective responsibility when determining a fitting penalty.

She said, “The responsibility lies with me, who thoughtlessly chose to overly involve myself in their lives. I understand that they will be punished, but I beg that you be lenient when you make the final verdict.”

She got shot at by arrows and fell off a cliff, and she’s still so kind, huh? thought Hiaki with an internal sigh. *A woman like her will suffer in life.*

Like she had claimed, her personality truly wasn’t suitable for a wife of a military officer. If she were dispatched to a battlefield as the Wagtail Priestess, she would only achieve the pointless loss of her life.

Her abilities as a supervisor, however, were remarkable, and although she looked like a meek, obedient woman, she had nerves of steel. Her skills would shine best in a peaceful environment, so she should be left to thrive in the place that suited her. The right person in the right place, as the saying went. The woman would do a respectable job of helping the nation flourish from somewhere far from bloodshed.

When she looked up at the emperor, her gaze was soft, filled with adoration and respect. Her expression was clearly different from when she looked at Hiaki, the servants, or the island dwellers.

I might not look it, but I’m also quite the catch, you know, Hiaki thought in the back of his mind.



THE emperor cleared all the people from the room with the exception of Hiaki, the Wagtail Priestess among the procession of people that filtered out. On the throne, the emperor leisurely shook his unfurled wings as he sat with crossed legs. Soon only Emperor Haruka and Hiaki were left behind.

He looked down at Hiaki. “Right Wing,” the emperor began, “We wish to

converse in private, so there is no need for formalities. You may speak your mind.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“You have met the Wagtail Priestess. How was it?”

Upon hearing the words bestowed upon him through the emperor’s veil, Hiaki lowered his head with a knowing smile. *Well, well, what do you mean by that?*

“Pardon me, Your Majesty, you are granting me permission to be direct with my opinion?”

The reply was a casual “Yeah” that possessed not a hint of propriety, and the tension in Hiaki’s shoulders released.

He decided to answer bluntly. “She is not compatible with the life of a warrior’s wife. She has too little reservation with regard to self-sacrifice. Yet, at the same time, she easily wins over the hearts and loyalties of those around her... Given her character, if you marry her off to a military man, I would not be surprised if she threw herself before the troops on a battlefield to raise morale. If you wish for her to survive, the best way to handle her is to”—Hiaki placed meaningful emphasis on his next words—“keep her in a safe bird cage somewhere and let her sing as she pleases.”

“Hm? That is high praise coming from you, Right Wing.” A chuckle. “Did her chirping win your heart?”

“Oh, I could never.”

It was almost as if the emperor was boasting about his cute little “bird,” and as a single man, Hiaki felt a—*ugh, how do I put it*—strong sense of...*annoyance* in his chest. *Yes yes, I know, I know.* He suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. *I know that you reeeally cherish your precious Wagtail Priestess.*

To back off without retaliating in some way, however, would grate on his conscience. So, casually, he commented, “On that topic, though.” He stole a fleeting glance up at the emperor. “She recently visited our estate for fun. She seems to get along especially well with the women of the Gou clan.”

“For...*fun*?” The emperor’s wings appeared to jerk a little.

Noting that, Hiaki professed, “Yes. She does not have many friends or family here in Orient, so I am doing what I can to help her feel at home in the Gou clan. After all, she is someone with the ancient blood of the Wagtail Priestess, just like us.”

“I see... That will be beneficial to her.”

“The women, my mother included, were delighted. They fussed over her as if she were their little sister, giving her clothes and recipes—they were so zealous that I almost thought they could have been receiving my bride. My clan has indeed prepared for the case that she marries into our family, but...” He sighed.

“You were the one who said that she is not suited to a clan of warriors, Right Wing.”

“Indeed, I did. Though it is extremely regrettable.”

The emperor was feigning nonchalance, yet he couldn’t fully hide the slight trembling at the tips of his wings. *Looks like a thunderstorm will be on the forecast today*, thought Hiaki.

“My younger sister, in fact, holds a profound admiration for the priestess and has declared that she wishes to serve at Sekirei Palace,” he said, pressing on. “My father and I are both eager to support her, but may I request your opinion, Your Majesty?”

“...That is good news. We hope that your sister teaches the Wagtail Priestess about your clan.”

“In that case, I shall continue to be *involved* with the Wagtail Priestess as her family.”

The emperor didn’t offer a reply. In a secret corner of his mind, Hiaki laughed in triumph.

Interlude: A Foolish Man Named Alexei

TO put it plainly, Alexei had lost everything. He had borne the blame for the false accusation of Sai Cutrettola, former governor of the Cutrettola territory and Wagtail Priestess, and that felony knocked him from the post of Holy Knight Commander. After a period of detention, he was given the role of Saint Guard Commander. The title itself sounded grand, but in truth, he was merely a chaperone intended to keep an eye on the Saint.

Of late, Saint Lilly had been secluding herself in the newly established sanctuary built specifically for her, where she indulged in a slovenly life. That day, like any other day, she lay half naked in bed as she attended to a boy—a young priest she had abducted from somewhere—then transformed him into an unseemly sight unbearable to look at before tossing the boy to Alexei like trash.

“I’m tired of this one. Give me a new one.”

“...Lilly. Stop it already. All the boys you force here are the children or brothers of aristocrats. You need to realize the significant implications of your debauchery.”

“What’s with you? You learned the taste of that word through me, but you’re going to preach to me now?”

The only covering Lilly wore was her strawberry blonde hair as she approached Alexei, her bare feet tapping on the ground. She leaned forward to intertwine their bodies until there was no space to speak of between the pair.

Whenever he looked at her ruby eyes and dazzling smile, Alexei’s heart and mind surrendered even though he knew it was wrong. He didn’t even have the heart to shake her off. All he could do was obey the woman’s every whim.

He draped clothes over the young priest, who was sitting with vacant eyes on the ground, before chasing the boy out.

The sun was still high in the sky outside, and an autumn breeze ruffled

Alexei's golden hair. Alexei watched the boy scramble to get away from the sanctuary until he was no longer in sight. He sighed.

It was already common knowledge among a select group of influential people that Saint Lilly could bend the will of others to her whim and destroy their rationality. But no one could stop her because she was the legendary Saint upon which Centoria had staked its honor to summon. To criticize her was, by extension, to criticize the royal family, parliament, judiciary, and church combined.

It was already a sensitive period—the public was growing increasingly doubtful of the government due to the lengthening conflict with Meridiona, and if they ever found out that the fabled Saint was a wicked, thoughtless woman who cared only about fulfilling her desires of the flesh, Centoria might collapse entirely.

The nation was indeed that fragile. And unbeknownst to Alexei, the Orient Empire, reputed since ancient times to be a barren, impoverished country, had amassed a wealth of foreign currency due to its medicine industry. And by undertaking agrarian reforms that didn't rely on magic, the empire was growing increasingly powerful.

Occidenia, an agricultural country that enjoyed far more temperate weather than Centoria, was an ally of the latter. But if they ever chose to turn their hostility on Centoria, the kingdom would not survive unscathed.

Lastly, Meridiona had been assumed to be an undeveloped land dotted with small tribes, but in recent years, a man who proclaimed himself the Meridionan king had become a guiding star for the tribes' unification, creating the foundation of a cohesive nation. And so, the war only dragged on.

The Saint's role was significant, and for good reason. In a country of mages, the woman's immense mana pool could solve many problems. Yet she hadn't bothered to learn the techniques to control her magic and instead invested all her time into tempting others to tragedy. At first, everyone had been oblivious to her power, but people were bound to notice after several months of an alarming rise in the number of members of the royal court who self-destructed.

As Alexei had. Afterward, he was interrogated by the Order, by the people he

knew, by his family. They asked, “Is it Lilly’s fault that you treated your fiancée Sai Cutrettola so horribly and wrongly accused her of those crimes?”

Alas.



“WELCOME back, Alexei.”

The woman imprisoned in the “sanctuary” was still barely clothed as she smiled at the man who entered. Alexei’s chest felt tight as he sprinted toward her. He pounced on her, pushed her onto the bed, buried his face in her chest.

The woman giggled. “Hee-hee, what’s wrong, Alexei?”

If only, he thought numbly, if only this emotion in my heart was the result of her witchcraft.

“...I love you, Lilly,” he whispered.

He loved her soft, ample breasts, the sweetness of her skin, her strawberry blonde hair, her delicate fingertips, her—

“Aw, are you sure you can say such words to me?”

Alexei had abandoned everything for his love—his family, his pride, his future—and Lilly simply laughed without a care, transforming his sentiment into seafoam as she wound her arms around him.

Alexei had embraced her, confessed to her hundreds, thousands of times, yet never once had it reached Lilly’s heart.

Ninth Arc: The Golden Eagle Emperor Who Loved the Wagtail Priestess All His Life

Chapter Eighty-Five: A Night Slightly Different from All the Others

SOME time had passed since my encounter with General Hiaki Gou and our official expedition to the island for purification rites. It was autumn, and my hair, which I had trimmed short in Centoria, had grown long enough to reach my shoulders when I let it down. That day, it was tied with a silk ribbon. The ends gently brushed against my neck with the movement of the palanquin.

I was returning from the birthday banquet for the youngest daughter of the Gou clan. By the time I arrived back to Sekirei Palace, it was early afternoon.

And it was on that afternoon that I received the first summons to the emperor's bedchambers in a long time.

"It feels like eons ago..." I muttered to myself.

I was somewhat tense for the rest of the day. After dinner and a bath, I did up my hair with the help of a maid and fixed my makeup. Then I waited for the arrival of Lord Yukinari, who would escort me to my destination.

The man appeared with a lantern in one hand, his posture as dignified as always. His hair wafted behind him like an ethereal veil.

He wasn't one to mince his words. "Has the Right Wing done anything to you since last time?"

I couldn't suppress a wry smile at his forwardness. "I hardly ever come across Lord Hiaki within the premises of the imperial palace. And when I am a guest of the Gou clan, he talks to me only when other women, like his mother or sister, are around so that I can feel at ease."

"I see," he said slowly.

"My apologies for all the worry I caused. It is I who should be a little more conscious of such things as the Wagtail Priestess."

"Sekirei Palace is your estate, my lady. You were the victim of an assault by a trespasser, and to blame you for that would be ridiculous. You have done nothing wrong."

"...Thank you."

Under the pale moonlight, the white cobblestone gleamed in the darkness. As I followed Lord Yukinari, I moved from one block to the next as if tracing a line across them. We soon arrived at Kita Palace, where the emperor awaited. At the entrance to his bedchambers, a servant gave me a tray. On it was a tea set, the cold green tea previously chilled with running water.

"Please deliver this to His Majesty," said the servant.

"I shall." I nodded.

I lifted the curtains and stepped into the room. As I approached, a nostalgic, gentle voice welcomed me. "Ah, you're finally here. It's been too long."

"...It has been a while, Your Majesty."

Emperor Haruka was lying on a settee in comfortable nightwear with a shawl around his shoulders. His wings stretched out behind him, and the corners of his eyes softened as I entered his vision. He smiled before taking the tray from me.

"Ah." I blinked in surprise.

"Thanks for bringing this in. I performed a *misogiharae* on a village and they gave me tea leaves as an offering. We can drink it together."

"O-Oh... Together as in...you and me?"

He chuckled. "Sai, do you see anyone else around?" He shook his head fondly. "You don't have to treat me tonight. I called you here because I want to talk to you."

"Talk...?"

“Yep. We haven’t gotten to see each other lately, after all. Come over.” He indicated the chair near the window, and I tottered toward it with stilted steps.

Facing each other, we both took a sip of tea. For some reason, speech was slipping away from me. *That’s strange... I had so many things I wanted to share with him when we met in private again, but I just can’t...*

Much had happened while we were apart—much that I had wanted to talk to him about. I wanted to tell him about my interactions with the Gou clan. About what the court ladies of Sekirei Palace were doing, about the rumors spreading in the streets. There was also the reception of my new wares to discuss, as well as my roadmap for the future. I wanted to talk about how beautiful the moon was, how rare flowers had bloomed in my garden, how I had borrowed a poem anthology from Lord Raiya and was reading through it bit by bit.

Yet.

At the sight of the emperor’s pale cheeks glowing under the moonlight like fresh snow, my chest tightened, and my words withered in my throat. My eyes flitted from one place to another—his fingertips as delicate as porcelain around the teacup, his shoulders draped in white silk that spilled down his frame like milk, his wings seemingly even fluffier as winter neared at an unhurried pace. But no matter where I looked, I couldn’t speak.

So I stared into the gloom that filled the corners of the room, yet the rustling of his clothes and his faint scent in the air proved to be distracting, and I felt even more restless.

“It’s no good.”

It was the emperor who broke the silence.

My heart skipped a beat. I looked at him, and his gaze was also cast elsewhere—out the window.

“By ‘no good,’ you mean...” *Is it because I’m not talking?* My mind went blank with anxiety.

His voice snapped me out of my mental static. “You know, like you, I had so many things I wanted to tell you when I saw you tonight. But...when you’re right in front of me like this, Sai, words seem so cheap and empty, and I can’t say

anything.” He shrugged before flashing me a somewhat shy smile. I thought I glimpsed a hint of redness on his cheeks, though perhaps it was a trick of the light. His eyes finally settled on my collar. “Oh, you’re wearing them there...?”

He was referring to the earrings he had given me at the summer festival. My breath hitched as I placed a hand over the accessories.

He inclined his head. “Why not your ears? Ah... You don’t have piercings, I see.”

“My apologies. In Centoria, our earrings are mostly the clip-on type, and it completely slipped my mind when you gave them to me.”

“No, it’s my fault for assuming.” He paused. “Looks like I didn’t look at you properly enough, Sai.” He leaned in a little and touched my hair.

I froze.

He gently stroked it, lifting the strands up slightly to expose my ear to the moonlight. His gaze was scalding, searing hot trails across my ear, my cheek... “Your...Majesty...”

“Your ear is beautiful.” He let out a small chuckle. “Say... Can you accompany me tomorrow? I want some time off with you, Sai.”

Chapter Eighty-Six: The Ocean Was Absent from My Previous Life

THIN wisps of clouds decorated the sky with a blanket of haze.

“You never saw the sea in the past, right?”

“Yes. I lived in the mountains all my life.”

“That means your trip with my Right Wing was your first time.”

“Yes.”

He paused. “I’ll be honest. I wanted to be the first one to bring you to the sea, Sai, but, well...”

I blinked. “Are you...sulking, Your Majesty?”

“Not. At. All.”

Once we left the confines of the capital, the scenery changed completely. Everywhere around us, luscious green carpeted the ground as tall rice plants swayed in the breeze. Water wheels spun round and round at the river’s edge, and mated pairs of magpies soared in the air.

I was riding with the emperor on his horse, bound for the sea. The night before, he had asked, “Can you come along with me?” Our present trip had turned out to be what he was referring to. Behind us, military officers—guards—and maids followed, but for the most part, we were alone.

A dragonfly dashed past us.

I wasn’t wearing my priestess attire that day, instead dressed in an outfit that reminded me of the waist-high *ruqun* the emperor had prepared for me in the past. My gray sleeves fluttered in the wind like petals in spring. I had to hold down my hair, or else it would be mussed by the breeze tugging at it mischievously.

“It’ll start to feel suffocating if you always stay in the same city, right? Plus, I haven’t gotten to go out alone with you since the beginning of summer.”

So the emperor had said earlier when helping me onto the horse currently trotting down the road. His arms were around my waist as he handled the reins, my back pressed against his chest. Frankly, I felt shy. Quite a while back, I had cross-dressed and attended one of the emperor’s misogiharae as a standin for a court official. I had traveled on horseback then as well, on Lord Yukinari’s horse. I regretted the extra trouble I was causing due to my lack of riding skills.

I chewed on my lip. “I should learn how to ride.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’ll keep inconveniencing you on journeys like this otherwise. The horse must be tired with the extra weight too.”

“So...you’re being reserved because of that?” The emperor tilted his head toward me as the animal trotted on. With his arms around me, his face was right next to mine, his body firm against mine, and I didn’t know what position I should settle into.

He chuckled as he sensed the tension in my shoulders. “You’re so bold when you treat me, but look at you now.”

“Those are...two completely different things...”

Though the emperor wore his crown, he had brushed aside his veil and tucked it behind his ear. He had vanished his wings with magic, probably to reduce wind resistance. His parted veil was one of the reasons the servants lagged at a rather long distance—so that they wouldn’t glimpse his face.

With his face was exposed, the emperor appeared totally at ease. Not only was his expression soft, but also his every movement and the tone of his voice. Furthermore, his garb comprised not the usual white silk but was a pastel color tinged with gray. He likely donned it only on private occasions. The artwork on the clothing was magnificent—the faint pattern recalled crafts made with *yūzen*, a resist dyeing technique.

“You’re featherlight, Sai, so it’s fine. And...more than anything, I’m happier when I ride on the same horse as you.”

“It...makes you happier?”

“It makes me happier.” He paused. “You’re a person who can accomplish practically anything, so whenever I come across something you struggle with, I find it cute.”

I glanced up at him and immediately fell into his ash-gray eyes that matched the cloudy sky. A tender smile played on his lips. I didn’t know why, but the sight, combined with the heat of his body against my back, prompted me to tense for no apparent reason.

He must have noticed, because he muttered, “Hm? Something bothering you?”

“N-No, please ignore me...”

I was embarrassed by his closeness. That I hadn’t managed to decline when he instructed me to climb up onto the horse with him was another source of chagrin.

“Look over there, I can see the ocean.” The emperor perked up. “The waves

are rather calm today.”

“The wind is incredible though... This counts as calm?”

“Yeah, of course. Winters in Orient are freezing cold, you know.”

Even when I didn’t look directly at his face, I knew he was right beside me as his voice tickled my ears and his body produced a gentle pressure on mine. During rites, the emperor was dignified and divinely beautiful, yet I liked this side of the emperor—when he was wholly relaxed and mellow. I hoped he was able to spend much of his time as himself and not the emperor everyone expected of him.

The emperor changed the topic. “You say that you can’t do anything, Sai, but... Raiya showed you his true form, right?”

“True form... Which one, may I ask?”

“Wait, you’ve seen *that* many variations?!” He laughed, sounding as carefree as dandelions drifting on the wind.

“I have seen his usual youthful form as a boy and...his young adult form that seems slightly older than you are currently.”

“Ah, that’s the period when he had the most influence in the imperial court.”

“At that age? My goodness.”

“I hear from others that Raiya wasn’t just a sharp mind. Back then, he understood my father’s vision better than anyone else and came up with one policy after another to realize those ideals. ...He was a vital, irreplaceable man to my father. And he himself also burned with ambition—ambition to save the declining empire. But, well, unfortunately, ideals and dreams and wits aren’t enough to move a nation. In more ways than one.”

The emperor gave me a squeeze with the arm that was around my waist. “The fact that he showed you any of his other forms is proof that you earned his trust. Most people haven’t a clue.”

“Is that because...he does not wish for the people around him to be wary of him?”

“Yep. The imperial court *has* to rely on his wisdom—that’s a given—but at the

same time, he can never appear before the public. He voluntarily chose to seclude himself in the depths of the Department of Print and alter his name and appearance so that he does not repeat history.”

“Why did he not leave the imperial court?”

“He can’t.” The emperor’s tone took on a heavy note of sorrow. As if freeing thoughts he typically kept locked in his mind, he spoke almost to himself. “He... thinks that he needs to shoulder the blame for all the things that happened in the government when he was a part of it. He had the option to resign and bid an eternal farewell to the political world, and he couldn’t because his crushing regret won’t let him. He’s torn up with guilt about the fact that he once caused political strife in this nation.”

“Lord Raiya...”

“Above all else, he desperately instilled all his knowledge in me so that I would not inherit the resentment toward the previous emperor, and he still protects me from the shadows to this day.”

“So that is what happened...”

“I never got much time with my father, and to me, Raiya is a second father.” Respect and admiration softened his voice. “I...truly can never thank him enough for everything he has done for me.”

The ocean wind grew in force and speed. We were approaching the beach, and I felt the horse’s pace quicken just a tad.



“**THIS** is my first time ever on a beach.” I looked down at the sand.

“Oh, it is?”

I turned to look at the emperor. He was standing barefoot, pushing down his hair as he smiled merrily at me. Likely because of the powerful wind, his wings were still tucked away. In their stead, the many intricate layers of cloth that wrapped around his body streamed around him, rippling like the wings of an angel.

If he unfurled his wings in such a place, the gusts would definitely send him

flying.

Raising an eyebrow, he said, "You just thought about something kind of funny, didn't you?"

"No, not at all."

"Let me guess. You thought that I'd zoom off like a piece of paper if I stretched out my wings?"

"...Ah. You read me like a book."

"Ha ha ha!" He kicked up waves of sand as he laughed without a care in the world. "Yeah, the wind's pushing at us like a wall here, you're right. I have to plant my feet so it doesn't knock me over. Hey, Sai, take off your shoes and join me."

He reached out his hand. It was fair as snow, and his fingers long and slender. It was the hand that had trapped me in his embrace until only moments before.

I must have been staring at it in a daze, because he asked, "Is something bothering you?"

I shook my head. "I shall do so right away," I replied. I held my flailing hair while I removed my shoes. When I took a step forward toward the emperor, my feet sank into the sand. "Wh-Whoa...!"

The fine grains tickled my skin as it squeezed between my toes. I put more weight on that foot and wondered at the rough, gritty texture. Shrinking into myself, I nervously took one careful step after another.

The emperor materialized beside me and grasped my hands in his.

"Ah..." I gasped a little.

It was an odd but wondrous sensation. His hands were somewhat cool, firm, and much larger than mine. He guided me gently, and the flowing sand prickled my feet with every step. Both were too much for me, my senses on the brink of overload.

"Th-This is ticklish..." I stammered.

"Careful, don't cut your feet on the shells."

Chuckling, the emperor tugged me forward. He looked like a carefree boy as he grinned from ear to ear, and as I gazed into his eyes, I was once again reminded of the sky. Wanting to see whether they were the same beautiful ashen blue, I glanced up. Seagulls cried as they passed overhead.

“Hey,” the emperor said, “try putting your feet in the water.”

“...Won’t I fall in?”

“No, you won’t. It’s okay.”

I slowly placed my feet into the waves that came and went. The sand rustled beneath the water, and a chilly wave brushed against my ankles in greeting before ebbing away.

“Wow...” I stared down with widened eyes. Even though the waves only reached my ankles, whenever they crashed against the shore, they shoved me backward. When they pulled away, I felt as if they were dragging me with them. My feet sank deeper and deeper into the sand.

The waves were a transparent, emerald green. I could see everything under the water—shells and even the tips of the emperor’s bare toes. On instinct, I looked up. The emperor was watching me with a soft smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

He looks...so content. I was the one having fun with the waves, yet the emperor’s gaze was warm as he focused on me. Light reflected in his eyes, making them seem as clear and brilliant as the water below.

“Um... Is it interesting to watch my reaction?” I asked.

“Very. Yeah...” He nodded to himself before wistfully whispering, “If only I could arrange for more outings like this.”

Our joined hands felt hot. That heat, that warmth was entirely different from the many times Lord Hiaki had held my hands or the few times he had hugged me. It was a strange cocktail of sensation. The day was slightly cold, but as our hands pressed together longer, my palm gradually grew warm, as though someone had captured the light of the sun and tucked it between us. The emperor studied me intently as if to gauge my reaction— he was treating me like the most delicate glass sculpture.

“This is...this is embarrassing, Your Majesty...” My voice grew smaller toward the end of my sentence.

“Ha ha.” He chuckled at my honest admission, then turned to gaze at the horizon. Several ships winked in the distance. The emperor straightened his back as his eyes marked each one. “They’re fishing again. Ah, since I’m here... I guess I’ll bless them a little.”

“Bless them?”

“Yep. Can I let go of one of your hands?” After checking with me, he gently withdrew his right hand. He twirled it in the air, manifesting his staff in a shower of light.

He took a deep breath and intoned a verse. His melodious voice resounded along the beach, crystal clear like the water before us. He wasn’t shouting or straining his throat; in fact, the elegant chant seemed as effortless as breathing to him as he projected it out over the waves. The ocean shimmered, and light dashed across the surface of the water to the ships almost like the trail of a shooting star.

The poem he was reciting was a prayer for a good catch and in a mixture of both ancient and modern Orient. It celebrated and expressed respect toward those who lived on the ocean and their ancestors.

As I listened, I could feel fishermen’s pride oozing out of every line—an occupational dignity that was moving and compelling. My hand that remained in the emperor’s continued to warm as our heat melted together.

The emperor fixed his eyes on the ships as he chanted, giving my hand a mild squeeze. My head felt light. By the time I came to my senses, the blessing was over.

I couldn’t clap, so instead, I told him honestly, “That was lovely.”

“Thanks.”

“I am feeling a little lightheaded... Is that an effect of your mana as well?”

“You are? Hmm, I’m pretty sure I didn’t use my mana in a way that’d cause dizziness...” He started to tread back to dry sand, water splashing around his

feet with every step. “You know, I learned all these poems and the art of crafting them from my father.”

He was walking in front of me, so I couldn’t see his expression. “My father was forced to step down from the throne in ignominy,” he said. “As for me, I was hidden away from the imperial court until my wings sprouted, so...even though I was the crown prince, I barely had any opportunity to receive the necessary education of an Amawashi directly from my father. It was only after my father’s abdication was officially announced that I first got to spend time with him. And...he taught me so many things, until the day he breathed his last.”

His chant had been powerful and vigorous, but his words about his father were like subdued waves on a windless day.

We climbed back up to the rocky area, where we cleansed our feet with cloths provided by servants before putting on our shoes.

Once again, the emperor took my hand gingerly. “Sai, there’s an imperial villa near here. Let’s take a short break.” Almost casually, he added, “It’s where my father lived before his passing.”

Chapter Eighty-Seven: I Want You to Recall What Happened

NIRE Palace, perched on a cliff overlooking the ocean, was where the previous emperor had spent the last years of his life. In size, it was approximately identical to Sekirei Palace. After passing through the guard-flanked gate, we were met with silence—there wasn’t another living soul in sight. Although the estate was well-maintained, it was a solitary place.

Beautiful perennials filled the garden; perhaps someone had planted them to mourn the late master of the palace. Balloon flowers were in full bloom, and the striking violet-blue petals pieced together an enchanting tapestry. A gardener was attending to the plants furtively as if to avoid drawing attention to himself. I silently nodded in greeting.

The emperor navigated the corridors without hesitation, and we soon stepped into the bedchamber in the innermost part of the palace. The room was a rather interesting shape, almost like that of a shrine or a temple, and pristine. It was also void of people.

Light filtered down from above, lending an ethereal glow to the emperor's ivory hair. I looked up to find glass panels in the ceiling forming a skylight.

"I told them in advance that I was coming today, so it's already clean. There aren't any servants around." As he spoke, he removed his coat then lay chest down on the bed. Spreading his wings wide, he flipped over to recline on his back.

The sound of the sea was so loud that I could have been walking along the coast. Between the rhythmical splashes howled powerful gusts of wind.

The emperor remained supine as he beckoned me with his hand. "Come over."

"But..."

He chuckled lightly. "No one else's around, and we're always together in my bedchamber, remember?" Sitting up, he watched me with a spark of mischief in his eyes. "Or...do you think I'm going to do something to you?"

"By that, you mean...?"

"For example..."

My heart skipped a beat when he grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward him. *I...didn't expect that.* My breath hitched—I couldn't even put up a struggle as I fell face-down beside him on the fluffy bed. I landed with a muffled thud. "Your Majesty...!" I protested.

I turned and tried to rise, but the emperor trapped me beneath him as he placed his hands on either side of my face. He stared intently at me, and I couldn't stop the smile worming onto my lips. I giggled.

His mouth pursed. "...Why're you laughing?"

"I never knew you were such a prankster, Your Majesty."

"An adult man is pushing you down on a bed, and that's your first reaction?"

His soft wings moved up and down in a gesture akin to a shrug. He rolled away and flopped down next to me. “Oh well, whatever. I think I got a little too excited.”

The emperor appeared to be admiring the ceiling. Following his example, I glanced up as well. “Ah... The ceiling is a work of art.”

Glass panels were embedded into its center, held in place by an intricate frame decorated with the *raden* technique. The thin inlaid layers of mother of pearl were dazzling, the craftsmanship meticulously detailed. On all four sides of the frame was artwork of what seemed to be divine beasts. For a moment, I thought them similar to the Four Symbols in the legends from my previous life, such as the Vermillion Bird or Black Tortoise, but after inspecting them, I realized they were all birds: Amawashi from the Myth of Beginning and the twelve priestess birds that had aided him.

I was still absolutely captivated by their artistry when I heard the emperor’s subdued voice from beside me. “Sai.”

“Yes.”

His eyes were still fixed on the ceiling, his expression the picture of peace. “By now you must have heard many things about the previous emperor—about Emperor Harunire, right?”

I hesitated. “I am not that knowledgeable about the topic, but...I have heard the basics, yes.”

He smiled. “If you want a general opinion of him, you can ask everyone you know and Raiya before making a final verdict. I’m sure that they’ll be a lot more talkative than I could ever be.” He closed his eyes briefly. “I’ll be honest, I’m not in a position to say much about my father’s reign. I lived with my mother’s family, the Kiriya clan, from the moment I was born. Even after I left, I was tucked away inside the embassy in Centoria so that our government wouldn’t drag me into the turmoil and cause things to spiral further out of control.”

“You must have had a hard time...”

“I felt lonely back then,” he admitted. “At first, I didn’t even know I was the crown prince—I thought I was Yukinari’s younger brother. Raiya was just an

ordinary tutor, and..." He took a deep breath. "When I learned that my real parents were elsewhere and that my father was the foolish emperor scorned by the entire empire, I... It was tough."

"Your Majesty..."

The emperor turned to me, his face close to mine. He almost looked like a lost child as he stared into my eyes. He reached toward me—then retracted his hand and instead lifted it to the ceiling.

"And learning that the teacher I respected and revered was called the 'Wicked Fox' outside the estate didn't help at all. He was a patient and earnest man who imparted so much knowledge to us; it didn't make sense to me. Even after he was banished from the imperial court, he still worked so hard for the empire's future..." A sigh. "All the people I look up to are looked down on by everyone else."

"Is that why you aim to be a wise emperor? So that you can repay your dear father and Lord Raiya?"

"Yeah. I can't let people give me that label as well. By gaining the approval of everyone, I want to prove that the people precious to me were never mistaken."

He sat up and gazed down at me with a small smile. His large wings cast a shadow on the bed as light spilled onto him from the ceiling. I couldn't tear my eyes off him. I saw my reflection in his ash-blue eyes.

"It was all too sudden. I suddenly started sprouting wings that only an emperor is supposed to have, my brother was suddenly bowing to me like an attendant, and even my strict teacher stopped spanking me from that day on. The people I assumed were my parents weren't my parents; my real parents were the Foolish Emperor and a woman under house arrest. The mentor that I admired so much was the Wicked Fox, and..."

The emperor rambled on and on. Alone in the palace where his father had passed away, far from the imperial court, we sat secluded by the sound of the waves. I listened as he peeled off every layer of his identity and bared them to me.

It was improper for me to know too much about the emperor's vulnerability, his fragility, as a mere vassal. *But...his every sentence is like a treasure to me.*

"Then I realized that..." He swallowed. "The adults around me wanted me to be emperor in name only. They wanted a puppet deity to replace the current Amawashi. But I hadn't even known I was the crown prince. When they told me to become the god in place of my "stupid" father, I didn't understand a word at the time, and it was all quite painful and stressful."

"That...is the normal reaction."

In a way, I was similar to the emperor in the sense that I had inherited the title of Wagtail Priestess. But it had been entrusted to me by the woman who raised me, my beloved and wonderful mother, while the emperor had been abruptly told that everything was a lie, his family included, then forced to shoulder the responsibility for his "foolish" father. The weight of his wings was heavy—much heavier than I could ever imagine.

"Every day, my back felt like it was tearing in two. I didn't have anyone to rely on; I was separated from the people of the Kiriya clan, whom I thought were my family... I was so lonely, so heartbroken that...I wanted someone to save me."

I sat up. As he spoke, I almost had the delusion that the person before me was the young crown prince going through his darkest days. "Your Majesty..." I broke off and shook my head. "Emperor...Haruka."

"Mm."

"You worked really hard, Emperor Haruka." My body moved before I could think, and suddenly I was hugging him tight.

His breathing faltered. Tentatively, his wings folded around me.

I pressed my forehead to his chest and whispered, "That must have been awful. I cannot even imagine the pain you went through... Yet in spite of all that, you have fulfilled your role splendidly as the emperor so far... You are a strong man, and I admire that part of you."

"...Hey, do you know the reason I managed to stay standing despite all the things that tried to crush me?"

I looked up, and the emperor's face was only inches away as he smiled down at me. His striking eyes of ashen blue were calm and kind—but also suffused with solitude. In that moment, they reminded me more of the desolate skies of barren winter. I had the delayed realization that his body completely enveloped mine, his wings sequestering me from the outside world.

“Sai,” he whispered. Solemnly, as though cradling a precious bird, his hands wrapped around mine. “When the crown prince grows his wings, he is an utterly unseemly sight. Every day, he groans in pain. Worse, he screams and writhes around on the ground as if he's gone mad. And of course, we can't let other humans see a god in that state, right?”

“Ah, yes, that would be the natural conclusion...”

“That's why there's a rule—we have to erase the memories of all those who witness us during molting.” The emperor gazed into my eyes. I could see my widened eyes in his. When Lord Hiaki's face had been so near to mine, I had felt scared, panicked. Yet I couldn't tear my eyes away from the emperor.

“How did you lose your memories of our encounter, you've asked. It's because I cast that spell on you. I erased your memories so that you wouldn't remember my most pathetic moments.”

He leaned down, and his face got closer, closer... His eyes were half-lidded, his long lashes hiding the emotions swirling inside them. A slight turn of his head, and I caught a whiff of his sweet fragrance. Warmth approached the part of my cheek adjacent to my lips.

“Ah...”

My mind went blank.

Chapter Eighty-Eight: Flashback to a Girl Named Sai Cutrettola

I blinked open my eyes. *This is...the sky above Centoria?*

The next thing I knew, my body was drawn like a magnet toward a carriage. Inside were two people who set off a whirlwind of nostalgic emotion in my

heart. *Father... Mother...!* Next to them sat a small girl in a black dress.

The moment I realized the child was me, Sai Cutrettola, I was sucked into the scenery of the past.



THE Cutrettola lands located near the border of the Orient Empire were a remote backwater far from the royal capital. Thus, the journey between the two places was lengthy—the Cutrettola family had already endured four days in the carriage after receiving the summons from the Order demanding their presence in the capital. Yet Sai, the couple’s only daughter, displayed not even a shred of exhaustion on her face as she stared out the window for the entire trip.

Sae Cutrettola was a woman with raven eyes and long black hair swept into an updo. “What should we do with our girl...?” she wondered in an undertone.

Dyth Cutrettola, on the other hand, had umber eyes and ruffled brown hair with a slight curl. “Well, Sai has nothing to do with the summons,” he said, “but I brought her along because it’ll be a good opportunity for her to experience the royal capital.”

They were Sai’s parents and the governors of the Cutrettola demesne—though the latter designation was more decorative.

“There’s a library, right?” Sai asked. “While you do adult talk, I want to go to the library!”

The parents glanced at each other.

Dyth was the first to speak up. “Sai, I know that you can already read difficult books for adults, but... Will the library staff believe that such a young child is already that literate?” he questioned his wife.

Sae thinned her lips. “That might be a struggle.”

“Boooooks!” Sai insisted.

“Okay, okay.” Dyth smiled. “How about this? We can go read together later on.”

Sae nodded. “In that case, I’ll give you some homework. Listen well.”

“What might it be?” Sai said in a stern voice as she straightened her back like a soldier. The two adults traded grins.

Sae retied her daughter’s crooked ribbon as she relayed her task. “Inside the fort walls that surround the royal palace, there are a lot of places. Embassies, libraries, the barracks for the Order of Holy Knights, the courthouse, dining halls, and so on.”

Sai blinked her big innocent eyes. “Lots of places...”

“Today, I want you to go around and greet the gate guards in all kinds of places. Then, memorize what kinds of buildings there are and tell us when we come back. Look at the clothes that people are wearing, and at the work they are doing too, but don’t disturb them. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes.”

Hearing the “homework” his wife assigned their child, Dyth inclined his head somewhat. “Is that really okay? Couldn’t she get lost or be seen as suspicious if she does that by herself? That won’t happen...right?”

“Oh, our girl is fine. She knows to introduce herself as the Wagtail Priestess and can even use her magic to produce a deafening sound like a keychain alarm. Within the fort walls at least, she should be safe. I’ll also keep an eye on her mana signature so that she doesn’t get too far away.”

“Keychain...alarm?” Dyth raised an eyebrow. “I swear, sometimes you come up with the weirdest words in the world.”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee.” Sae laughed, glossing over the matter.

The carriage gradually slowed to a stop.

Sae nodded to her child. “Okay then, have fun!”

“I will! Father, Mother, take care!” Sai sprinted off alone.

For a while, the couple gazed after her from behind. Then the softness faded from the faces of the peaceful parents, replaced by grim determination.

“For the sake of her smile...we can’t join the Order no matter what happens,” Sae whispered.

“Let’s resist to the end, Sae.” Dyth hugged his wife’s slender shoulders.

Sae closed her eyes in silence before pressing her cheek against his chest.
“Yes...let’s do everything we can.”



IT was Sai’s first time in the capital.

Trimmed grass was everywhere. She saw knights in incomparably shiny armor. Maids clutched their skirts as they bustled about to complete their work. Countless carriages came and went through the streets. She noted noblewomen with entourages of attendants and watched gentlemen wearing vibrant clothing the likes of which she had never seen.

As a girl from the countryside, Sai found it all marvelous. The varied range of attitudes passerby had toward her as she walked around was also intriguing. Some frowned in disapproval, others appeared bewildered, and many smiled. Unlike in her hometown, however, no one spoke to her. In the village, she probably would have been swarmed by curious people in seconds.

She spotted a dark alley lined with many small buildings. The street was in a blind spot from the main thoroughfare. She turned onto it. The first place she stopped was a washhouse. In the corner of the establishment, she noticed an elderly washerwoman massaging her fingers.

Sai ran over, her tiny feet tapping lightly on the ground. She halted abruptly, and before the woman could meet her eyes, she straightened her back and curtsied.

“Oh my, who do we have here? A young noble girl?” the woman asked.

“My name is Sai Cutrettola,” the girl reported. “Good day, madam. Does your hand hurt?”

“...Your father and mother will scold you for coming to a place like this. You should go back.”

“It is okay! They will not get mad. They told me to go around and greet people.” Sai beamed at the woman.

The woman looked taken aback. “That’s... I really don’t think they mean

people of my status...”

“More importantly. Madam, may I touch your hands? They look like they hurt, and I was worried.”

“Are...you sure? My hands are dirty.”

Sai tilted her head quizzically. She understood the washerwoman’s individual words but not their meaning. Although the daughter of a governor, she had still been raised in a rural village, not to mention the fact that she was the current Wagtail Priestess. She often got muddy because of farmwork and even sometimes helped clean medicine containers with wet rags. To her, a washerwoman was essentially a clean and tidy grandma.

With her small hands, Sai gently lifted the washerwoman’s bigger ones. Decades of work had worn down the woman’s aching joints. *Even medicine can’t cure this... It’s a pain that will hurt forever*, she thought.

Sai recalled all the knowledge her mother had taught her and started to think. She looked up at the stunned washerwoman. “Madam, I am Sai. Sorry for the sudden request, but may I know your name?”

The woman blinked. “S..ai, you said? That’s quite an unusual name... I’m Aria.”

“Madam Aria, okay...” Sai took a deep breath. *“Madam Aria, your hands are so warm, so nice, as if a heated towel is wrapped around them, and the pain flies away.”*

A warm light enveloped the woman’s hands, and color returned to her pale fingertips. Her perplexed expression morphed into shock. “Wow, that was amazing! You know how to use magic, young miss?”

“Yep! Ah, no, I mean... Yes, madam!”

“Thank you very much.” The woman paused. “If you are this good at magic, you might end up marrying a Holy Knight one day.”

“I will not marry a Holy Knight. I want to marry a doctor like my father!” chirped Sai merrily.

The washerwoman’s eyes widened in realization. As if nothing had happened,

she softly kneaded the young girl's hands with a kind smile. "Ah, I see. In that case, you need to hide your powers carefully so that you don't end up marrying a Holy Knight."

"I will!" Sai nodded obediently before bidding farewell to Aria and returning to her exploration.

In truth, Sai knew that she shouldn't heal people. Her mother was stricter than anyone else about Sai's magic usage, and she would give her daughter an earful.

But Sai didn't understand. What was so wrong about helping someone in pain? If possible, Sai thought it best that no one suffer. At the same time, she didn't want to make her mother mad. Therefore, she had decided to heal people in secret where her mother couldn't see her.

Sai cast her eyes down and muttered, "I need to live properly as the Wagtail Priestess. I need to, or else I..."

A chill ran down her spine. Ever since her abilities as the Wagtail Priestess had awoken, Sai's nights had been plagued by nightmares.

Chapter Eighty-Nine: Flashback to Screams of Pain That Went Unheard

SAI shivered. She recalled the nightmares that had haunted her ever since the awakening of her powers at age nine. In the dreams, she was grown-up and all alone. Everyone around her hated her. Her precious home was ablaze, and she was hung on a rope. She was terrified, and she cried and screamed, yet no one would save her.

As the nightmares continued to torment her, Sai gradually began to believe that they were her future. "If I become a bad girl... If I become a bad Wagtail Priestess, my home will burn down. I can't let that happen. I'll be careful and be a good girl."

Her self-sacrificial tendencies and dedication to other people had already been significant to begin with since she was the Wagtail Priestess, and due to

the dreams, her will to be “a good girl” escalated into an unhealthy obsession.

She was walking toward the main street when a small black cat nimbly jumped out in front of her. “Ah, kitty.” The cat seemed to be limping. Sai crouched down and tried to pat it, and the cat backed away, watching her warily.

“It’s okay,” she coaxed. “I’m not scary. Come over...”

The cat approached tentatively, then gently licked her fingertips. On its collar was what appeared to be a name in foreign script.

“Um... Those’re Oriental characters, right...?” She squinted. “Uh... Yoru...iro? Is that right?” Sai reached out and positioned her palm over the cat’s body. *“Yoruiro. Cute black kitty. Let your leg pain fly, fly away.”*

“Meow...?” Yoruiro looked blissful for a moment before its body tensed. It started to scamper about joyfully. “Meooow!”

Sai giggled. “Feeling better? I’m glad!”

Yoruiro darted off on tiny paws before stopping and turning around. It meowed as if demanding that Sai follow.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Yoruiro?” Sai picked up the cat and hugged it, glancing in the direction it indicated.

“It hurts, it hurts, it hurts so much... Someone help me, it hurts, it’s so painful...!”

Sai’s body seized up in shock.

The moment she’d turned her head, she had heard a faint “scream” of magic so quiet that normal people wouldn’t have noticed it. The screamer was likely contained somewhere secluded so the magic didn’t leak out. Sai stared into Yoruiro’s eyes, and the cat stared back.

“Can you hear that voice, Yoruiro?”

“Meow.”

She nodded. “You can, huh...”

Still holding the cat, Sai ran to the source of the noise, her feet tapping

erratically on the ground. The fierce wails, which sounded as if the owner of the voice was being torn apart, were issuing from the depths of a certain building.

Sai had never seen any building like it before—it was an extravagant structure with grayish-blue plaster walls. The shape of the roof, the color of the walls, and even the knight standing guard were completely novel to her. The maids walking out wore long dresses with many layers, their clothes also foreign to her.

“It’s...coming from inside here...”

“Meooow.”

Nervously, Sai walked up to the scary-faced military officer standing at attention. “It is nice to meet you. Um...I am Sai Cutrettola.”

The officer looked down. He crouched to meet Sai’s eyes and answered with an intonation different from what she was used to hearing in Centoria. “Hmm, may I help you?” He gave her a surprisingly friendly and toothy grin. When he caught sight of the cat, his smile widened and he rubbed the bottom of the cat’s chin. “Ah, you helped Yoruiro find the way back?”

Yoruiro began to purr happily. *Ah. This kitty belongs to this mansion*, she thought. “U-Um...”

“Hm? Can I help you in any way, young miss?”

“Um, inside there...”

“Inside the embassy building?”

“Yes, inside the emba...ssy,” Sai faltered. “Um... Is there someone shouting...‘It hurts, it hurts’?”

The officer appeared dumbfounded. He turned to face the building. “Sorry, I can’t hear a thing.”

“Ah, I see. Hmm...”

“What’s wrong? Hey, where are your parents? Are you alone?”

“U-Uh... The Order called for my parents and they are doing adult talk.”

“Wait, are you a young noble from a prestigious household? Oops, sorry

about before—please forgive my rudeness.”

“House...hold...” At that word, Sai remembered with a start what her mother had said: *“If you ever come across trouble, it might help if you tell them that you’re the Wagtail Priestess.”*

Hurriedly, she introduced herself once again. “I-I am, Sai, the Wagtail Priestess!”

“Wagtail Priestess? Why does that sound vaguely familiar...?”

“Um, the priestess of the Cutrettola lands! A priestess with old blood! My mom is that priestess!” Sai’s face flushed crimson red as she repeated the word in an attempt to explain.

The officer tilted his head and wracked his brain. Finally, realization dawned on his face. “Ah, I know. You’re the daughter of the governor of Sekirei Prefecture.”

“Seki... No, we are the Cutrettola lands.”

“In the Oriental tongue, we call it Sekirei Prefecture. A long time ago, the Cutrettola lands were a part of Orient, and Centoria took them away from us. I see, so that’s why you have black hair, young miss.” His grin broadened. “Well, well! Looks like I’ve found a friend! Centoria’s filled with blonds everywhere, so it’s a relief to finally see a familiar color!”

“O-Oh...”

The officer patted her head. While he was at it, he patted the cat’s head too, seemingly a cat person. “Okay then, I know who you are now, but what are you doing in a place like this, young miss? Are you going to come back to our empire along with your domain?” The man snickered.

From behind him, once again, a shout pierced Sai’s ears like the ambulance sirens in her memories of another world.

“He...lp me. Ah, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it’s tearing me apart, I’m so alone... Someone, please!”

Sai gasped and the color drained from her face at the excruciating scream. “Um! Mister! Uh... Inside there! There’s someone! They sound like they’re in a

lot of pain! The voice is...a boy! A boy is in a lot of pain! I can hear it! It's so loud!" Unable to bear it any longer, she tried to dash in.

The officer frantically grabbed her by the scruff of her neck. "Hey, no can do. You might be our young lady from Sekirei, but you can't go inside without permission."

The desperation of the voice was spreading to Sai, and her eyes were moist as she insisted, "Someone's screaming inside there!"

The officer, however, could only scratch his head in confusion. "That's what you say, but...I can't hear a thing."

"It's someone with magic! Isn't there someone with magic inside who's saying they're in pain?!"

"We don't have mages in Orient."

"...Huh?" All emotion washed from Sai's face. She stared up at the officer in a stupor as he gently placed her back on the ground. "But..."

"Look, I really wanna believe you, but the thing is... Centoria snatched away nearly all our mages a while back, so we barely have any. Only the Department of Divinities does. None of them are paying a visit today, so there shouldn't be any mages around."

"That can't be..."

"I guess a while ago, a fox with powerful magic snuck into the imperial court, but—" He broke off. "Oops, you're still a little young to hear about stuff like that, ha ha."

Sai turned to gaze at the embassy. She could still hear the wretched cries inside. "I'm sure of it, there should be..."

"A boy can't be in a place like this. You won't fool me with your little joke."

"I'm not joking!"

"Okay, I'm sorry. Then let's put it this way: In any case, there isn't a mage boy who's in trouble and crying inside. Maybe you heard wrong, or...maybe you're hearing a child who's crying elsewhere. It's one of those."

“Is...that so...?”

Sai studied the officer, who leaned down to ruffle her hair, and she suddenly realized that he looked very troubled. *As the Wagtail Priestess, I want to save people. But if I cause him trouble because I keep talking to him here...I'll be a very bad child.*

The only thing Sai could do was back down.

Chapter Ninety: Flashback to Caterpillar Fungus

“MEOOOOW.”

Sai trudged away from the embassy building. “Sorry, Yoruiro...” she muttered. “You brought me all the way here, but I’m so powerless...”

As if to console her, the cat licked her cheek. When she turned a corner, Yoruiro leaped out of her arms in one smooth motion. It turned to look at her once more before darting away.

“Ah, wait up!” Sai’s dress, covered with cat fur, flapped in the wind as she chased Yoruiro. The cat circled around the embassy building, then dove through a fence.

“Oh!” One section of the wall surrounding the embassy was broken. The cat ducked its head back out again. “So this is your little door...”

Sai followed the cat. She climbed through the small opening onto the embassy grounds. As she crawled, the screams were gradually growing feebler.

She chewed on her lip. “He must be tired and hurting...” A large bead of sweat rolled down her cheek. She needed to hurry—the boy was too pitiful to ignore.

She snuck into the garden and, like a cat, tiptoed with her body crouched low to the earth. She wandered, searching for the room where the screams were coming from. Luckily, she located it right away. She could sense a powerful mana signature from a room on the second floor that faced the fence she had infiltrated.

Taking the cat into her arms, she hugged it tight. “I’ll go now, Yoruiro. Thank you.” After bidding it farewell, Sai scaled the tree closest to the room’s window. For a country girl, climbing trees came as easily as breathing. If she couldn’t manage that much, she wouldn’t be able to help clear snow from the roofs in winter.

When she hopped onto a branch that reached toward the window, it bent and creaked ominously. Before it could snap, Sai poured mana into her shoes—and lunged! Somehow, she managed to catch hold of the window frame. Sai let

out a sigh of relief. Luckily for her, there were protrusions on the wall that she could use as footing, so she wouldn't fall off.

"He should be inside here..." Sai peered into the room through the gap between the closed curtains. What she saw inside almost made her doubt her eyes.

"Mn... Ahh... Urgh... Hah..."

A messy bed. Sheets wrinkled and scrunched. And on top, a slender boy writhing in agony. He looked to be around five or six years older than her. His hair, the color of milk tea, seemed soft and fluffy. He was curling into himself, revealing his arched back, which had huge bumps that were utterly different from human shoulder blades. The lumps were squirming, changing their shape.

An unintelligible scream tore from the boy's throat.

Then wings appeared on his back with a loud rustling. The powerful, dark brown wings were so large that they almost seemed to swallow him whole. The boy looked so thin, so frail, that he might snap in two at any second, the mighty wings completely at odds with the rest of him.

Sai recalled a certain medicine her mother had once taught her about. It was an herb that germinated on the back of small worms—a slightly unfortunate fungus.

"It's called caterpillar fungus," her mother had said. "The Oriental name for it literally translates to 'winter worm, summer herb.' It's a medicinal mushroom that sucks the nutrients from the little larva and sprouts during summer."

The wings were like caterpillar fungi—seemingly swelling larger and larger by sucking out the essence of the boy's delicate body.

"Guh... Ah..." He moaned and twisted in pain.

And his face just so happened to turn in the direction of the window.

His eyes grew wide as he stared at his lone observer. His pale lips moved, mouthing, *How?* His exposed pale face was gentle and elegant like a doll's, and sticky with sweat. His big eyes were the color of the sky.

"Why is there a...girl in a place...like this...?"

The moment those words left his lips, he rushed to the window as if someone were chasing him. The boy pulled Sai inside.

Chapter Ninety-One: Flashback to a Boy Named Haruka

SAI tumbled onto the floor with the boy. In a hoarse voice, he asked, “Who... are you?”

The boy didn’t have curves on his chest, and the bones in his shoulders and arms were pronounced, so she knew that he was a boy right away. If she considered only his face, however, he looked like the most beautiful girl she had ever seen or could imagine.

The boy, pretty like a doll, had a firm grip on her wrists. “Who are you?” he repeated. Disbelief clouded his face, as if he was still struggling to come to terms with the existence of the girl he had tugged from the window.

Sai stood up, pinched the skirt of her dress, and curtsied. “My name is Sai Cutrettola.”

He tried to greet her in return, but pain distorted his expression and he collapsed in a heap on the ground. Frantically, Sai ran to him and stroked his back. She spoke in a hushed voice so that no one would overhear. “Are you...all right?”

“Thanks,” he said briefly in gratitude before staggering back to his bed. A groan of pain slipped past his gritted teeth. The wings on his back were moving noisily as if they had a mind of their own.

Sai climbed onto the big bed with him and held the older boy’s hands.

His eyes widened. “What are...you...”

But before he could reproach her, Sai sucked in a deep breath and prepared to release her mana. The most critical concern right then was to render first aid.

“I am Sai Cutrettola. The Wagtail Priestess under the protection of the Wagtail.” She hesitated as though searching for the right words. “Umm, what next... *I, Sai, shall share my mana with the big brother in front of me. Something hot flows out from inside my stomach, and this mana goes through my hands...*

and into him."

Sai shut her eyes and pictured herself sharing mana with him. Technically, that method wasn't possible unless she knew his name, but she wanted to relieve his pain as much as she could immediately. Sai aimed the force of her magical intonation at herself and started by gathering mana in her abdomen. She imagined it flowing through her chest, her arms, and their connected palms into the boy. She could only pour in half of what she could have achieved with the proper technique, but gradually...the tension left his body.

The boy closed his eyes and let out a long exhale. As he accepted Sai's mana, his expression grew peaceful and pleasant as though a weight had lifted from his shoulders. After taking several deep breaths in and out, the boy finally opened his ash-blue eyes to look at Sai.

"Your magic is so strong... I see, your innate mana is already powerful, and then you've also been training it properly for a long time. That's why you noticed mine going on a rampage over here and came to help me."

Sai nodded. His speech had an unfamiliar inflection, and she could tell that it was the same accent as the officer that she had met at the gate earlier. His accent, however, was much more subdued and smoother than the guard's, so it was easier to understand him.

"Thank you," he whispered. "But if someone finds out, you'll be charged with a serious crime. Don't ever...do something so dangerous again."

"I am the Wagtail Priestess. I cannot ignore someone who is suffering."

"...You're very kind."

"But you are right, big brother. I am very sorry. I will never come here again."

He nodded. "Yeah. That's for the best."

"So..." Sai clasped his hands and met his eyes with determination. "Please let me heal you more today."

"Huh?" He looked startled. "Did you hear a word of what I said?"

"I can heal you. I am the Wagtail Priestess. Let me heal you."

Silence.

Sai looked up at him, pleading. "Please...?"

"I'm grateful that you think that way, but..." He lowered his jewellike eyes. "You'll be in deep trouble if someone finds out, and—"

"I am already in deep trouble. I came in without permission and talked to a secret person who grew wings. I am already a big..." She hunted for the word. "...Criminal."

His eyes widened again. Then he glanced up at the big wings extruding from his back. A wry smile found his face, and to Sai he seemed very sad and lonely. "Yeah, you're right... You've already seen my wings, so I can't hide anything from you."

Sai squeezed the boy's hands. "If being found out after healing you is just as bad as being found out after not healing you, please let me. Please. It will be over really fast. It won't hurt either. I can make it go away for a while. I swear."

"What a reliable little doctor we have here." For the first time, though it was feeble, the boy smiled. It was like watching a flower bloom, and Sai's heart thumped loudly in her chest.

"When was the last time I got to talk to anyone?" he wondered. "When was the last time someone talked to me while looking me in the eyes...?"

"Eyes...?"

"You see, because my magic is strong, if it isn't someone like you...people go blind the moment they look into my eyes. Bet you didn't know that." Sai gasped and covered her eyes without thinking. The older boy laughed as if her reaction was the funniest thing in the world. "It's already too late. Aha ha, are you a smart one or a silly one? I can't tell."

Sai was a little taken aback at his friendly laugh. It belonged to a carefree, ordinary boy, not the delicate doll before her. Suddenly, her new brother seemed more like a normal human—a boy she would come across on the street.

"You were rather careless," he said, "but I was too. Ha ha, we're two peas in a pod. I guess I can't blame you for what happened today."

“Big brother, can you tell me your name? The Wagtail Priestess can use the most mana when we know someone’s name.”

With an impish smile, he placed his index finger on his shapely lips. “You won’t tell anyone else?”

“I won’t.”

“I’m...Haruka.”

“Lord...Haruka?”

“Yeah. In the Orient, it means ‘fruit borne in spring.’” He paused. “Apparently I was named that in the hopes that I would bring spring and fruits to my nation.”

“It is a wonderful name. Lord Haruka... I will remember it.” Sai repeated his name several times before she grasped Haruka’s hands.

“Lord Haruka,” she chanted. The instant she said it, she felt power rushing into every part of her body, evidence that she’d managed to form the connection correctly using his true name. *Okay, it should be fine now.*

She intertwined her hands with Haruka’s, pressed her forehead against his, and shut her eyes. *“Lord Haruka. Soon a warmth flows into your hands and shoulders, and your whole body feels nice.”*

His breathing hitched.

Sai whispered, *“Please relax, Lord Haruka...”*

Through their connected foreheads and entwined fingers, she could feel both of their bodies heating up. The sensation was completely different from earlier.

“Lord Haruka.” Sai faltered and thought, *Umm, what should I say for something like this?* She recalled how her father slowly and carefully mixed ointment that had hardened in the cold, kneading it in his palm to soften it. *Ah, that’s right. I’m doing the same.*

She finally decided on *“You are putty in my hands, Lord Haruka. Let your body relax...”* Sai envisioned pouring all of the surging heat within her into the boy on the bed.

Haruka had to stifle the scream threatening to leave his throat.

Chapter Ninety-Two: Flashback to a Nightmare That Never Faded and a Sweet Dreamlike Day That Disappeared

A while later, Haruka finally stopped sweating, and color returned to his face. He looked so much healthier that it was hard to imagine he was the same boy.

“Will it not be painful anymore when I move them...?” Haruka gingerly spread his wings. Each glossy feather on the large, encompassing wings glimmered like jewels.

“Pretty...” Sai was totally mesmerized, and the older boy grinned faintly at her.

“Thanks. The pain’s completely gone too.” He paused and repeated solemnly, “Thank you, Sai.”

“I am very glad to hear that!” Sai was over the moon. Then she remembered where she was. She was an illegal trespasser. “I shall go back now. Goodbye.”

“W-Wait.”

Sai tilted her head in question.

“Ah...” Haruka placed a hand over his mouth, looking conflicted as he gazed at Sai. He seemed to be feeling a mixture of regret and surprise at the fact that he had stopped her on reflex. He sunk into silence, and his eyes swam for a few seconds.

Then he folded his wings as small as he could and whispered, “Hey, Sai... Can we talk for a little longer? Um, I... Recently, I haven’t really had the chance to talk to other people.” His cheeks were slightly flushed as if he was embarrassed.

“Understood. May I sit here?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Sai plopped down next to Haruka on the bed. A smile lit up his eyes and face

as she approached him. Up close, his hair looked fine and soft, and his skin was so white that he almost seemed to glow. Again, Sai found herself thinking that he was pretty, almost doll-like.

“It’s been too long since I last talked with someone who would meet my eyes...” he murmured. “I’m really happy.”

“Have you stayed here all alone for a long time?”

“Yeah. Because...I can’t let people see me like this.” He cast his eyes down, and his long lashes fluttered like butterflies as he fiddled with the tip of a wing. “Right now I’m in the process of ‘molting,’ as they call it. I only just grew my wings, and they’re still unstable. That’s why I’m in such pain and agony all the time...and I’m not supposed to let people see me in such an ugly state.”

Sai blinked. “But I saw.”

“...You’re okay. It’s, well, too late. We can’t change the past.”

For a long time after that, the boy and Sai chatted about all kinds of trifling topics. Sai shared her background and the reason she was in the Centorian capital that day. The boy told her about his life before he grew wings—about the things he used to like.

“Ah, so you were not living with your real mom and dad, I see.”

“Never lived with them and never even got to see their faces, in fact.”

“Didn’t you feel lonely...?”

“Not about that, at least. I used to think that the people who raised me and the person I thought was my brother were my real family.” He paused. “But then they pick now, after all that time, to say that my parents are different people. That my life is going to change. How am I supposed to cope with that?” He sighed. “Well, I don’t have the time to complain and whine. I need to become strong, and fast.”

“You are admirable. I need to work hard too.”

“You’re already working hard though, aren’t you? Way too hard.”

“No, not nearly enough.” Sai looked at the sky outside the windows. It was a rich blue without a single cloud in sight. Even in her nightmares, she had stared

up at the blue sky countless times. “I have nightmares. I am trying very, very hard so that the nightmares don’t become real.”

“Nightmare...?”

“Scary nightmares.”

“If you’re feeling up to it, you can tell me. They say that if you describe your nightmares to someone else, they won’t come true.”

“Really?”

Sai had never told anyone about her dreams; she didn’t want to worry her parents. But for some reason, she felt like she could confide in the boy whom she’d only known for a day.

She slowly told Haruka about her dreams in bits and pieces. About how she would be all alone as an evil priestess, have her house burned down, and then be executed. About how she was trying her very best so that those events wouldn’t become reality. At first, she worried that he might laugh her off as silly for taking a dream so seriously, but Haruka listened solemnly and attentively to her anxieties to the very end.

When she was done, he asked, “Aren’t you scared? What if it’s a fate you can’t change no matter how hard you struggle?”

Sai nodded honestly. “I am scared. But sitting down and crying while scared is different from being scared after doing anything and everything I can. Even if it does turn out to be real one day, I want to be a good girl for a really long time so that I won’t embarrass Mom, Dad, Grandma, the people in our domain, or... you, Lord Haruka. Even if I have to die, I want to be a girl worthy of the title of Wagtail Priestess so that I can puff out my chest and say, ‘I am me!’”

“...You’re dazzling,” Haruka whispered before ruffling Sai’s dark hair so vigorously that her head swung left to right.

“My hair is black. I am not dazzling at all,” she objected.

“Ha ha, I’m not referring to that.”

“The dazzling one is you, Lord Haruka. You are almost like an angel.”

“Angel?” He tilted his head. “What’s an angel?”

“Huh? Now that you mention it, what *is* it? Huh...?”

At that time, Sai’s memories of both timelines were a chaotic jumble. She didn’t know whether it was knowledge she had learned as Sai Cutrettola or during her previous life, but she spoke aloud the impression she had of Haruka. “Someone with wings, with fluffy hair, and very mysterious. And very pretty,” she replied.

“I...see. So that’s how I look in your eyes, huh?”

But neither of them could say more, because two knocks sounded on the door. Both of them jolted in surprise.

“Lord Haruka,” said a woman’s voice, “I am here to deliver your meal.”

“Leave it there. Also, fetch a towel and a change of clothes.”

“Understood.” The maid promptly left. It seemed that he had been telling the truth when he said he barely saw anyone of late.

Sai quietly hopped off the bed. “I shall get going then.”

“Mm. I’ll miss you, but I hope to see you again one day.”

“I will also do my very best so that I don’t become an evil priestess and get executed.”

“Oh, it’s just a nightmare; you don’t have to be so worried. Knowing you, you’ll be fine.”



AFTER that, Sai lost her parents to the war, entered a betrothal with the Holy Knight Alexei Streltsy, and moved to the capital. She balanced jobs as a maid and an irregular office worker at the Department of Medicine while swearing to herself that she would lead an honorable life that wouldn’t disgrace her title—just like the oath she had made to Haruka. She strove toward that goal without rest.

And until the day the recently ascended Emperor Haruka of Orient, on a trip to observe the Department of Medicine, erased her memories, her brief meeting with “big brother Haruka” had been one of the most brilliant jewels in her lonely life. It was a memory that had always helped her climb back to her

feet when she was knocked down.

Chapter Ninety-Three: The Foolish Emperor, a Beautiful Angel Who Would Ruin His Empire, Saved Me Once

“**SAI**, wake up.” I heard the warm, quiet voice of the emperor. “The dream is over.”

As I regained my awareness, the first thing I saw was the emperor’s face right in front of me, his eyes closed. Our foreheads were touching. My mind was slowly dragged back to reality as my senses came into focus: the sound of his steady breathing, the faint scent of aromatic oils from his wings, and the large, warm hands cradling my cheeks.

In a daze, I mumbled, “Your Majesty... Um...”

He drew back a little and opened his eyes. The face I had just seen in the “dream” seemed to overlap perfectly with the reality before me. The delicate, heartbreaking older boy was the emperor, who smiled gently at me.

“Do you remember now, Sai?”

Though his voice had changed, the softness of his tone and his habit of inclining his head somewhat had persisted. My heart felt full, emotion threatening to burst out of my chest. “Your Majesty, you... Back...then, your wings...”

“Yeah, you saved me back then. You’re the only person who outstretched a hand to me when I was on the brink of madness.”

“You’ve grown up into...such an amazing man...”

“That’s my line. You grew up into such a reliable and beautiful young woman.” Holding my hands, he gently leaned in, our foreheads touching. “I respected you from the bottom of my heart, and I still do.”

Warmth welled up in my chest, in danger of spilling over. *He watched over me. He remembered me. Always.*

“When you saved me, you opened my eyes. I had been born with a great

power, and I needed to use it properly. I watched you, who lived life to the fullest even when a cruel fate awaited you, and...for the first time, I thought from the bottom of my heart that I should become a great emperor. I thought that I should lead my life responsibly and protect what is important to me in my own way. That I should take over what my father and Raiya couldn't achieve. That I should use my life to prove that the choices of those precious to me were correct—so their lives weren't spent in vain.”

“Your Majesty...”

“I wanted to meet you again with pride in my heart—as the Emperor of Orient and the Wagtail Priestess of Centoria.”

“It is a shame that...I ended up as the evil priestess and nearly got executed.”

“But it was a destiny completely out of your control, right? I think you're admirable for resisting to the very end.” He smiled. “You never begged them to spare your life, nor have you ever uttered words of resentment toward them. You watched your home as it burned, then straightened your back and lowered your head to your fiancé. That was beautiful—I will never forget that scene. The little girl whom I'd cherished in my memories for the longest time grew up into a person so stunning that I found myself reeling.”

“You praise me too much,” I protested. “I...remember myself as someone filthy and pathetic back then.” I felt embarrassed as I recalled the memory. When he had lifted me in his arms, I had been tattered and unsightly. *Yet...* “I... can never thank you enough for saving me that day.”

“Once again, that's my line. Thanks to you, I didn't end up a foolish emperor.”

When I heard those words, I felt as if I had been struck by lightning. Once again, I recalled memories from my previous world that I had completely set to the side. An image floated to the surface of my mind—the illustration I had skipped without a second thought during my countless braindead playthroughs of a game in my past life. The cutscene in which he lay lifelessly on the ground as the Foolish Emperor.

A destroyed plaza in Orient. Lightning. Torrential rain. White silk sullied with mud. Deathly pale skin and disheveled ivory hair. That was the Foolish Emperor who had been spat upon for causing the demise of his empire as he fled the

imperial court, abandoning his body-double to the wolves.

If I, Sai Cutrettola, hadn't attempted to save the young Haruka that day... If I had shrunk into my shell out of fear of my nightmares, perhaps the plot would have happened as planned. The hands of fate would have led the emperor, as well as Orient, to ruin.

"Ah... I changed your destiny without even realizing it..."

"You really did. Because I met you that day, I avoided becoming a self-destructive, lonely, and insignificant emperor."

I had altered his doomed fate earlier than I had ever suspected. I was suddenly sure that he would never be called foolish—not in the past, not in the future.

"Hey..." the emperor said in a slightly husky voice.

I felt a pleasant tingle spread throughout my body, although I didn't know why. I shuddered. "Yes."

"...Can I hug you?"

"You do not even have to ask."

"I don't want that. I don't want you to let me because your emperor is ordering you or because that's your emperor's wish."

I realized that his voice was trembling. His fair cheeks were bright red, rose petals falling on fresh snow, and he looked anxious—so much so that I feared he might cry depending on my answer.

And I thought, *Ah. He is so endearing.*

"I don't want to do anything that you don't like," he said. "I don't want to do the things that you'll only let me do because I'm the *emperor*."

"But I want you to hug me, Emperor Haruka." I hesitated. "If you are all right with hugging me, that is." Before I could go on, however, he pulled my body to him and locked me in a tight embrace. "Mmph—..."

"Sai."

His soft hair was ticklish against my face. His hot breath brushed my neck. I

could *feel* him more vividly than ever before—he was a living person right in front of me, and really hugging me. Through his soft silk garments, I could feel his sturdy arms. Hidden further inside was his gentle warmth.

“Your Majesty...”

Though hesitant, he slowly nuzzled his cheek against mine. As if in reaction, his wings quietly stretched to their fullest extent.

And all I knew was the emperor as he enveloped my entire body in his embrace. The emperor—no, Emperor Haruka—was warm. It was a warmth that reached even the most secret crevices of my heart.

Chapter Ninety-Four: Spring Lightning Pierces the Wagtail

PERHAPS we were both tired, because we fell asleep in each other’s arms.

When I woke, the emperor sluggishly sat up on the bed and murmured, “That was a good nap...” He seemed to be in a slight daze. “We fell...completely *asleep*...”

“We must have both been fatigued,” I commented.

“No, shouldn’t we... Like, you know... Isn’t there more...stuff you’d do in times like these...?”

“Your Majesty? Is something wrong?”

I didn’t really understand what was going on, but the emperor seemed to be engaged in a soliloquy. He looked as if he was in shock over messing up something critical. *Did something happen?* I sifted through my memories.

Finally, I said, “Your wings are very warm, and I felt comfortable sleeping in them.”

“Uh, that’s not what I mean... Ahhh, releasing a seal on memories is *this* taxing on my mana... I never knew...”

“I...see?”

"I can't believe I just...dozed off..."

He seemed to have wanted to do something else. *I wouldn't be surprised. I also have a lot of things I want to talk about, like the memories I forgot.*

"You'll have another chance in the future," I reassured him.

"...Yeah. I hope so..."

"I should actually apologize, Your Majesty. I was so impudent as to fall asleep in your arms..."

"Oh, isn't it a little too late for that?" The emperor gave me a warm, groggy smile. He reached out and stroked my hair. "You have a case of bed head going on."

I stilled. "I shall go fix it right away."

"Stay here, will you? Just a while longer."

"Understood."

The emperor wound his arms around me from behind and buried his face into my shoulder. His wings bobbed lightly, and his ivory hair was ticklish on my cheek. His body and arms were larger than mine, yet he clung to me like a needy child. It felt a little peculiar. *He must have been exhausted.*

"Your Majesty," I said.

"Hm?"

"As someone of your status... You probably do not have many people you can be yourself around like this. If you wish it, I shall always be by your side. Please do not hesitate to tell me whenever you need me."

His head shook, still pressed into my shoulder. He appeared to laugh for a moment. "Sai, are you pretending to be oblivious to my feelings? Or are you saying that while being completely aware?"

"Your...feelings?" *Am I missing something?* With the emperor's pleasant weight against my frame, I started to lay out events in my mind. The emperor had remembered me all that time. The emperor had dozed off with me. And currently, the emperor was acting like a spoiled child who wanted me to fawn

over him.

“Feelings...” I sank deeper into my thoughts.

The silence stretched on.

It was almost as if there was a blockage somewhere in my psyche—I was drawing a blank. I had the feeling that even if I turned on the switch to stimulate my brain, the additional processing power wouldn’t help. My brain was entirely useless.

Eventually, I admitted, “My deepest apologies. The only theories I have are that you are very tired and...that you have times when you want to hug and lean on someone...”

“Not just anyone.”

“I understand.” I paused. “After all, very few people can look directly at your noble face.”

“That’s not what I mean...” As he spoke, he tugged hard on me. I nearly toppled over, resting my whole weight on him. Panicking, I looked up at his face, which softened with a smile. “This is enough for now. After all...the longer I get to spend with you, Sai, the happier I am.”

“Your Majesty...?”

What does he mean? I was a little puzzled by his wording.

He chuckled slightly as he watched me. “Hey, Sai.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve wanted to come here with you for the longest time.” Something seemed to catch his eyes—my collar.

Is there something on my clothes?

Reaching out a hand, he gently touched my collar with a finger. “These earrings.”

“Ah.”

“You’ve worn them there ever since you received them, hm?”

“Apologies. I do not have pierced ears, so this was the best alternative I could think of.”

“Shall I ask a craftsman to remake them into a clip-on type?”

“No, if possible, I want to treasure them in the state that I received them...”

“...Huh.” Suddenly a serious glint shone in his eyes as he held the collar of my clothes.

“Your Majesty...?”

His hand slipped under the cloth. I felt his fingertips ghosting across my throat as they moved beneath the fabric.

I froze and sucked in a sharp breath.

The emperor took the back off one of the pinned earrings, then withdrew his hand, securing the earring between his fingertips. “I just had a brilliant idea,” he said. His eyes narrowed. His gaze was as sharp as a hawk’s, the expression one I had occasionally seen on him before. “I’ll help you pierce your ears.”

“Huh?”

He pulled his thin lips into a wide smile, flashing his canines. The next moment, there was a crackle as a small spark manifested in his hand that gripped the earring. The tiny strike of spring lightning had sharpened the post’s tip. Some smoke was rising from it.

“Here, I sterilized it,” he said nonchalantly.

“St-Sterilized...” His features were sophisticated, yet his method rather violent. I sat up to face him. “Are you possibly going to, um, pierce my ears with that right now?”

He was fiddling with the earring as he gazed up at me. “I won’t if you don’t want me to.”

I closed my mouth and stared at him, quiet.

He reached for me—but his gesture wasn’t forceful. If I wanted to resist, I could easily slip away. Yet when I saw the emotions swirling in his clear, jewellike eyes, I could only raise the white flag of surrender.

I felt his hot fingertip touch my ear. Then something just as warm but much harder rested against my earlobe, and I inhaled sharply. *He's going to pierce it.* I squeezed my eyes shut and braced myself for the pain.

Silence. We sat there in a standstill.

At last the emperor asked, "Are you just going to let me?" He sounded as though he was unsure as well.

"If that is your wish."

"...But if I don't wish it, you wouldn't want to?"

I opened my eyes to see the emperor's face right in front of mine. He was looking at me with concern. Our breath mingled together, and our gazes were locked into one.

It's probably a concern that only someone like him would have—because he's a person who can obtain anything he wants.

"I..." My voice was hoarse. Heat gathered in my cheeks; I felt shy under his attention. *No, I can't let blood rush to my head. That might make the pain worse.* It wasn't something I could control, however. "I pinned it to my collar because I wanted to wear it. If someone has to pierce me, I want it to be you." I crafted a smile for my face. I wondered whether I had managed it successfully.

There was a tiny ripping sound. The sound was more painful than the pinch itself.

I released my held breath. Then came throbbing pain almost as if lightning was lashing at me.

"Okay, I'll do the other one." The emperor reached for the other earring on my collar. But then he knit his eyebrows together just a tad and halted. "Never mind. Let's stop here."

"Huh? But..."

"In exchange, can I have this?"



I let out a startled yelp as his fingers hooked the underside of my collar once more. As I waited, breathless, he unpinned the other earring before removing one of his own. With practiced ease, he put the other half of my pair onto his right ear. He brushed his hair back with his fingers and showed it to me.

“See?” He smiled. “We match now.”

“Y-Yes...”

His skin was pale like the moonlight and his silky hair the elegant hue of ivory. The white plaited cord hanging from his earlobe seemed flimsy and out of place on a masterpiece like him.

I chewed on my lip. “I am sorry that it was already used.”

“Why apologize? I’m happy about it.” The corners of his eyes softened. He let go of his hair, hiding his ear. “I want it to be my little secret, so I won’t wear it that often. In exchange, I’ll give you this one.” Almost whimsically, he placed the earring he had taken off onto my palm.

I panicked. “Huh?!” It was embedded with amber and, although surprisingly light, literally worth its weight in gold or perhaps more. It was a precious gift and from the emperor himself. “Th-This must be a treasure though!” I protested.

He chuckled. “My father actually gave that to me when I became emperor. It’s a private article that isn’t listed in the national inventory, so don’t worry.”

“St-Still!” My fingers were trembling under the metaphorical heft of the item on my palm. “A-Are you sure you want to give it to me...?”

“Yeah. If you ask Yukinari, I’m sure he’ll help you get it adapted into a collar pin at a respectable store.”

“I can modify it?!”

“Do it. And wear it, please.”

“But...”

The emperor didn’t offer another word. Instead, he gave me a big smile, his hand covering mine and the earring on it. He wasn’t going to take no for an

answer, and so I could only acquiesce.

I swallowed. “Yes, I will...”

He was indirectly telling me to show his present to Lord Yukinari. My head and heart were a mess; I had no idea what was going on. *Why in the world did he give this to me? To someone unworthy like me...?*

The emperor hummed to himself. “It’s going to get dark soon. Let’s head back.” He stretched before standing up from the bed.

I tried to get up with him, but my knees were weak, and I fell back, deflating like a pancake.

He blinked. “Sai?”

“I am afraid I...cannot muster any energy in my limbs...”

His eyes widened, then he chuckled again. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“No, I really cannot...” For some reason, my legs were paralyzed. I tried to stagger to my feet.

There was a hint of exasperation on his face as he laughed. “Ha ha. You’re acting as if I did something to you.”

“My apologies...”

“Well, I guess I did.” His smile broadened as he offered a hand to me. “Here, I’ll help you up.”

I grasped his hand. Touching it, strangely, felt natural, right. I squeezed and leaned some of my weight onto him. The emperor squeezed back—firm, but also tender.

Tenth Arc: A Letter from Meridiona As the Seasons March On

Chapter Ninety-Five: Affection and Responsibility

RAIYA noted the moonlight spilling into his room and turned off his “switch.” He took off his glasses, pinched the bridge of his nose, and stretched his body with a groan. The magical work process that the Wagtail Priestess, Sai, had invented was extremely efficient.

Two magpies flapped noisily over to Raiya when he finally stopped working. They perched on his shoulders as though asking for attention.

“Okay, okay. I know.” Raiya stroked the enchanted birds, then transformed into the child form that he used in public. He rolled up his baggy sleeves. “All right then, let’s go.”

He used a finger to push his glasses into place as he walked in the shadows of the moonlit path. He was hiding his presence with magic, so none of the guards noticed him on his way to his destination—Kita Palace, where he had been summoned.

When he looked up at the building, he spotted a silhouette admiring the moon on the balcony. It was the person who had called for Raiya, Emperor Haruka, glowing under the moonlight. Next to him seemed to be a bottle of liquor. Judging by the look of it, the alcohol was from Meridiona.

“Your Majesty.” Raiya bowed.

The other man lifted his veil and smiled before beckoning Raiya up. Transforming into a magpie, Raiya took flight and soared onto the balcony before landing with a fluttering of cloth. “A rare sight for a lightweight like you,” Raiya commented.

“Well, we’re going to have guests from there soon, so I need to build *some* tolerance at least.”

The emperor didn’t handle alcohol well. And it was evident that he was simply forcing the liquid down his throat like he would any other day.

“Meridiona’s liquor is potent, so please be careful.” Raiya untied the white silk ribbon securing hair and returned to his adult form.

As if witnessing something dazzling and special, the emperor gazed at him. “You’re using that form, huh?”

“To serve as your drinking companion this late at night in the body of a child is a little too improper.”

For a while, the two sipped liquor in silence. The moon was bright, and the emperor’s glossy wings shimmered like a galaxy. His expression, however, was dark.

“Why...?” the emperor muttered. He sounded more like he was talking to himself than to Raiya. There was a vulnerable, almost fragile look on his face, reminding Raiya of when the man used to be his young pupil. “Why did I end up wanting more? I swear, I only thought of Sai as the girl to whom I owed a lifetime debt. Nothing more.”

“I’m aware.” Raiya paused. “Humans are creatures of greed. Everyone’s like that.”

“Yeah, but I’m a god though.”

“Indeed. But Your Majesty, indulging in alcohol doesn’t mean you can run away from making a decision.”

The beautiful man extended his wings and hugged his knees. He shrouded himself within his feathers as if he was trying to hide from the world. “I can’t marry Sai. If she becomes the empress, then...she’ll be sad.”

“But you gave her special treatment despite knowing that from the very start. You need to take responsibility for your change of heart during that process...” Raiya paused again. “...And for the girl’s heart as well.”

Emperor Haruka let out a dry laugh. He lifted the envelope lying nearby and opened it with a rustle of paper. Inside was a letter from the distant Meridiona.

“From Meridionan King Kuze Ikinoka concerning the priestess’s marriage,” it read.

Chapter Ninety-Six: Ear

MIDAUTUMN arrived. The sky suddenly felt higher, and the weather had grown colder lately as well. Though the sun still dragged out the persistent heat of summer, the changing season had overtaken everything else. The wind, the color of the sunlight, the swelling buds of autumn flowers...

"It's not time for the harvest festival yet, but it's already so chilly..." I muttered to myself. I finished tending to some medicinal herbs and extracting the essence of a select few, then went into the garden where I came across Suzuiro and other ladies-in-waiting. They were laying plants out to dry, and when they saw me, they waved.

"Shall we have some tea?" I suggested.

One court lady perked up immediately. "Lady Sai! My family sent me tea from my hometown. Are you interested in trying some?"

"Your hometown is in Nosan Prefecture, right? Is it fig leaf tea, then?"

Her eyes widened. "You're very knowledgeable. I thought my hometown was only famous for our rice."

"Fig leaf tea has the benefit of improving circulation, but I hear that the skin also becomes overly sensitive to light. But in Nosan, you store them overnight in special caves where spirits live, so the tea leaves you produce are good quality and good for skin even during the day... Is that correct?"

"You know so much about a remote place like ours! Aw, that makes me so happy." A dusting of pink colored her cheeks.

I always made an effort to remember as much as possible about the hometowns of my attendants. Information was vital for coming up with new ideas. Seemingly unrelated knowledge might connect when I had more pieces, and that could lead to inspiration for novel discoveries.

More than anything... I want to know more about them because fate brought us all together at Sekirei Palace, and I don't want to waste these special ties. Maybe there will be something I can help them with eventually.

We carried the tea into the gazebo in the inner courtyard to enjoy while we chatted. Our conversation spanned a variety of topics: We talked about the development of the herb garden, as well as the plants we were planning to introduce. Soon we were going to purchase a field on the outskirts of the capital, and we discussed what medicinal herbs we needed to prepare and seed. We also gossiped about the latest trends and rumors among the young women of the capital, and so on.

The court ladies were helping themselves to warm roasted green tea and kinako mochi as they passed around a document about our sales. They began to engage in a lively debate about our next products.

“What should we plant next?”

“Weeell... During this period, the refreshing and lightweight toners were the most popular. I think we should consider making toners that are more hydrating.”

“But if they’re picking lightweight products, their skin must be hydrated enough already, right?”

“Skin only gets oily because it’s lacking moisture and then produces more oil to make up for it. If we advertise that fact and tell people to use more moisturizing products since we’re heading into a dry season, I’m sure that our reputation will increase too.”

“I see, I see.”

I talked about our wares mostly with merchants, yet whenever I was thinking about expanding our product lineup or looking for points to improve on, in the end it was much better to glean feedback from the court ladies. They were young and sensitive to what was in vogue, so what I gained from their candid conversations was always the latest information.

My target client base was mostly in Centoria, not Orient, so the merchants, by all rights, should have known the prevailing trends there better than all of us. Yet even the products they doubted and questioned the profitability of, once they tried out a sample, they would often scramble to restock it, proving that the court ladies were truly a vital source of marketing research.

One woman said, “Surprisingly, in the aroma category, the unscented products were the most popular. Maybe they prefer unscented since it doesn’t clash with the perfume and skin care products they already have over there.”

I mulled over all I’d heard. “Shall we expand our herb garden and plant more perennials? We’ll test out a few species, and we can request a proper farm to cultivate the popular ones in large quantities or—” I broke off abruptly.

A realization suddenly dawned on me. I was assuming that I would live in Sekirei Palace forever, as if that was the natural conclusion. *That’s right. I’ll live here, celebrate the emperor’s wedding, then protect his wife and child...*

A lady-in-waiting looked at me worriedly. “Um, Lady Sai?”

“Ah. Sorry...”

For some unknown reason, I felt as though I had been splashed with ice water. I fidgeted with one ear.

One court lady noticed. “Oh! When did you get your ears pierced, my lady? I’m surprised.”

I let out a small chuckle. “Ha ha, I did it on the spur of the moment. You know...” I mimed what the emperor had done on that day and made a pricking motion.

The women all gasped and started to cheer. None present had pierced their ears yet, it seemed.

“Did it hurt?” one asked.

I faltered. “Ye...s. It did...hurt.”

“It did? How did you do it?”

All of them were looking at me with curiosity. I didn’t know how to diffuse the situation when everyone was so worked up. At the end of the day, they were all young women around my age, so stopping them once they were intent on something was admittedly a challenge.

I selected my words carefully, hastily omitting the details as I went. “Um, well, I...sharpened the tip of an earring, sterilized it, and...pushed it through.”

“Waaah! That’s so scary!” gasped one attendant.

“You did it by yourself, my lady?!” another exclaimed. “Weren’t you scared?”

“I-I was, but...” I stammered. “Well, um, I knew that it had to happen one day, so...”

“How do you feel now? Do you feel different?”

“Uh, um...” I couldn’t meet their eyes.

It was strange—as I kept talking, my cheeks grew hotter, and I was increasingly at a loss for words.

I hadn’t told anyone about what had happened on that day. Sometimes I dreamed of it and woke with a start. Recalling even just a small part to explain to the court ladies was messing with my head. Whenever I remembered the emperor’s warm breath and the pain I had felt, my mind blanked, and I could focus only on clearing my thoughts until my pulse slowed again.

On nights when I simply couldn’t sleep, my heart jumping around in my chest like a baby deer, I climbed onto the balcony. Gazing up at the moon, I drank cool water and waited for the heat to subside.

“Do you feel different?” the court lady had asked.

If I were to give her an honest answer, the truth was, nothing had really changed other than the fact that I experienced those strange symptoms more often. But my “sickness” wasn’t due to the piercing—it was mostly caused by the events that had led *up* to the piercing.

Finally, I mumbled, “I’m not sure... The piercing itself wasn’t really, well... Um, what happened during the piercing was more... I don’t know how to explain it, but my body’s been acting weird...”

“Lady Sai?”

“It sounds strange, right...? My mind just...doesn’t think sometimes, and...I end up in a daze...”

“...Lady Sai?”

It took me a long time to realize what I was rambling. “Oh...” *What am I*

even... Color drained from my face as I glanced around me.

The court ladies were drilling fiery gazes into me.

“Hold up, hold on just a second... I smell something fishy about that reaction,” one crowed.

“Wait, give me a minute to calm down... No way, Lady Sai?!”

A woman leaned forward excitedly. “Is it who I think it is?! Is it Lord Hiaki?!”

“N-No!” I exclaimed frantically, denying the accusation with everything I had. “It wasn’t him!”

But that only fanned the flames.

“Guys, you hear that?! She said it wasn’t *him*!”

“Which means someone *else* definitely did the piercing, right?!”

“Waaah! Wow, this is crazy, ahhh! What do we do?!”

They were like a bunch of excited students clinging to a juicy morsel of gossip in an all-girls school.

“U-Um, I, uh...” I stuttered, but my mind was static.

They continued to hound me until I fell completely silent, face as red as an apple.

Chapter Ninety-Seven: Intruder

AFTER what was supposed to have been a business meeting, I had planned to leave Sekirei Palace to discuss something with Lord Raiya. Though the Department of Print was somewhat distant, I wanted to walk there to get some exercise.

When I entered my private quarters to retrieve my coat, movement caught my eye—a mirror.

“It’s still a little red...” I muttered as I looked at the reflection of my right ear and the earring dangling from it. I had arranged my hair into a half-up, half-down hairstyle that day, exposing my piercing for the whole world to see.

The slight redness of my earlobe practically told everyone that I had only just pierced my ear, and out of embarrassment, I covered it with a hand. I could feel the weight of the earring sway with the motion, and my ears grew even hotter.

I chewed my lip. “I hope it subsides soon...”

Intending to cool down by getting on with the rest of the day, I straightened my back, picked up my bag, and made my way to the arch bridge. I had just reached the other side when a commotion drew my attention. A remarkably large man was pushing people aside as he strutted in my direction.

“Wh-Who is that...?!” My eyes widened in alarm.

The design of his robes was completely foreign to me—vibrant, colorful patterns decorated the maroon fabric. Around the top of his head was wound a long cloth. His skin was tanned, rather rare in Orient, where most of the citizens were fair-skinned and slender.

Military officers and servants appeared to be chasing him.

“Please wait!”

“That is Sekirei Palace!”

With a wave of one arm, he swept them all away. There were several loud shouts as the people behind him fell into the moat one after another: “Waaah!”

“Oopsies!”

But something about the scene seemed staged. The fallen people splashed noisily in the moat, screaming at me with shrill voices. “Great Wagtail Priestess! Please run away!”

The large man stopped and let out a gruff “Hoh?” as he appraised me. “This girl’s the Wagtail Priestess?”

His skin was a sun-kissed bronze, and his yellow hair was spectacular—its hue as vivid as egg yolk. A fragrance that I didn’t recognize at first hung over his entire body. He glared down at me with eyes that were like fragments of the sun.

But then...

“Get away from Lady Sai, you thug!” A small body wedged between the two of us. Wielding a broom in self-defense, Suzuiro assumed a dignified stance.

“Miss Suzuiro!” I gasped.

The man scowled. “What?”

“I won’t let anyone lay a hand on my lady!” She swung down the pole valiantly. “Hurgh! Yaaah!”

The thug narrowed his eyes and used one hand to pick her up by the scruff of her neck.

“Ahhh!” she screamed.

He frowned. “What’s with you, you mousy court lady?”

“M-Miss Suzuiro!” I yelled in horror.

“Lady Sai! I’m fine, so please run!”

I clung to the man’s arm and raised my voice. “Please stop. Suzuiro is my cherished attendant, and her family entrusted me with her care. Please put her down at once. I am the mistress of Sekirei Palace, and if you have any business with us, I shall negotiate with you.”

“My lady...” whimpered Suzuiro. She sounded like she was going to cry at any moment.

He released her surprisingly readily, tossing her to one side before prowling toward me and backing me into the wall of Sekirei Palace. He slammed his foot onto the wall right next to my face.



I held my breath. I couldn't show any weakness in front of him. My ladies-in-waiting were watching us nervously, and I furtively gave them a "don't approach" signal with my palm.

I needed to deal with him.

"So. You're the Wagtail Priestess?" He stared down at me with his eyes of shining, molten gold.

I stared back defiantly. "Yes, I am."

He scrutinized me from head to toe, his gaze grazing over every inch of my skin. "Hah," he scoffed. "You're tiny. Or maybe that's cuz you're a wagtail." He spoke with a slight accent.

"May I ask for your name? Who might you be, sir?"

"Oh? What're ya gonna do with my name, hm? Control me with words of power?"

My entire body seized up.

His eyes narrowed. "Did you really think you're the only one who knows about that? No way in hell."

How does he know about something that only Wagtail Priestesses should know?! Panic welled in my heart, but I controlled myself and loosed a long exhale before offering him a big smile. *I can't act intimidated. I can't lose here.*

"Since you are unwilling to share your name, may I have a guess?" I asked.

"Oh? Sure, go ahead. But I'll only give you one chance. If you guess wrong, you can forget about all the herbs Sekirei is trying to import. The ships'll all be called off."

I knew it. He was from Meridiona. He wasn't even trying to hide it; he knew, or at least assumed, that I could easily figure out that much. "Why is that? I believe it is good business for your nation, is it not?"

He raised an eyebrow. "The sea's been rough lately. We can't keep trading at the price you're offering us."

"...Understood. If I am mistaken, I shall accept that as the consequence."

He was a young Meridionan man. Hot-blooded, confident, and he could traverse the imperial grounds as he pleased. Even when he had intruded upon Sekirei Palace, a property of the emperor, guards and military officers chased after him merely to keep up appearances.

I looked up into his eyes and stated a name I had heard a few times in Centoria. “You must be the king of Meridiona, King Kuze Ikinoka, yes?”

He wore a grin that was all teeth as he narrowed his eyes further at me.

I was correct.

Chapter Ninety-Eight: Kuze Ikinoka

“**WHAT** made you come to that conclusion?”

“First, I could tell that you are from Meridiona due to your distinctive attire. As for the scent clinging to your clothes, it is the smell of the tobacco that sailors are fond of, though it is very high quality. It is predominantly bitter, yet there is an undertone of a sweet, almost refreshing scent like citrus. Most of the tobacco on our continent comes from Occidenia, but the one you use or are surrounded by is imported from another continent across the ocean.”

“How can you be so sure from such a small detail? I was serious when I said I’m gonna stop all your imports.”

“I am sure.” I stared right into his eyes. “The fact that you seemed pleased when you heard the word ‘king’ is the best possible evidence, Lord Kuze.”

His eye twitched.

“Originally, Meridiona wasn’t a nation but a name assigned to that geographical area for convenience. Unlike in Orient or Centoria, numerous tribal chiefs of equal status ruled over their own piece of territory. Until you, Lord Kuze, aimed to unite the entire region of Meridiona under one flag. A few years ago, you seized control of the Toyonomatsuri tribe, the most powerful faction in Meridiona, and named yourself king. The other countries on the continent have yet to ratify your title. That must be the reason you were pleased.”

He remained quiet.

I wasn’t quite done yet. “Furthermore, your appearance is identical to that of the person described by the Centorian knights and royalty—the one they referred to as the ‘chief of the southern barbarians.’ Yolk-yellow hair, bronze skin, and bright eyes that look like the sun itself. Tall, with wings tattooed on your exposed skin.” I paused. “On top of that, the accent you tried to hide is distinctive to the Iki, a tribe located along the border between Meridiona and Centoria, yes? I also remember that there was minor tribe situated next to the Iki’s territory, the Ka. You must be Lord Kuze *Ikinoka*, who is descended from

both.”

Silence.

Finally, I said, “That is my theory. Please tell me the answer, my lord.”

His eyes glinted like a hawk’s. “You’re tiny, but you’re still a Wagtail Priestess, huh?” He grinned savagely, revealing his teeth.

I sucked in a sharp breath, bracing myself.

That was when Suzuiro’s broom slammed right into his face. She screeched out a battle cry. “Heyaaah!”

Lord Kuze shrugged, exasperated. “Well well, you sure have a well-trained attendant here.” He was letting Suzuiro whack him with her broom. And of course, he wasn’t budging at all. “Hey, do something about this munchkin.”

“My apologies, but for her to react in such a way means that you have committed an act worthy of such treatment.” I turned to Suzuiro. “That’s enough, Miss Suzuiro. Using brute force against a man like this is futile. I’ll teach you some countermeasures another time.”

“Countermeasures?!” Lord Kuze was startled. “Sheesh. You took all the fun outta this.” He removed his foot from the wall before slowly raising both hands in a gesture of surrender. As if they had been waiting for that very moment, the guards let out exaggerated yells and seized him. He didn’t put up a struggle, putting his hands behind his head as he allowed them to tie him up with rope.

Suzuiro blinked, dumbfounded. “Huh? That...was easier than I thought...”

“You must have been frightened. Don’t worry, it’s over,” I reassured her.

As for the instigator of the chaos, Lord Kuze gazed down at me with a sour face. He seemed like he might spit in resentment at any second. “Yeah right. If you think me frightening, at least try to look scared, lady. You looked as if you couldn’t care less the entire time!”

“Apologies if I caused you any discomfort. I am afraid this is the face I grew up with.”

“Heh. Can’t let my guard down for even a second around you. But, well, that’s what I expected from a Wagtail Priestess. You’ve caught my interest.”

Chapter Ninety-Nine: Exquisite Meridionan Cuisine

LORD Kuze was arrested as a “Meridionan thug” and escorted away for his interrogation. Or to be more accurate, an audience with the emperor.

When the hubbub finally settled down, Lord Yukinari came to Sekirei Palace with an explanation. “Orient cannot acknowledge Lord Kuze as the official Meridionan king, at least not yet. Until we go through such procedures, he cannot have a true audience with the emperor.”

“I understand. Acknowledging him as king is essentially declaring war on Centoria, which is in conflict with Meridiona.”

Not to mention the fact that although Lord Kuze had united Meridiona, he didn’t have a powerful political background. His authority was built on a shaky foundation, helped in no way by the derogatory title Centoria had given him. But in Orient, the Meridionan king played a vital role in the import of medicinal ingredients, so he was one of the most important guests imaginable.

I nodded to myself. “Unofficial diplomatic relations with them are the farthest we can go, correct?”

“Yes. This also means we can keep one card close to our chest and use our approval of him as king as leverage during negotiations.”

In the end, Lord Kuze ended up staying in the imperial guesthouse as a “nameless Meridionan merchant who was clueless about court policy.” For the past few days, the entire imperial court had used every effort to show him hospitality.

After I parted ways with Lord Yukinari, I struck up a conversation with a magpie playing about the railing. “Looks like every nation has it rough due to their own unique circumstances,” I remarked.

The magpie chattered almost as if in reply, and I felt my tension ease slightly.

Sekirei Palace was just as busy as other departments during the king’s visit. Everyone was in a race against the clock—court ladies, maids, and even the government officials from the Department of Divinities who came over to give

us a hand. I didn't have the luxury of wasting time talking to birds.

I slapped my cheeks lightly. As supervisor, I had a mountain of things to do: delegating tasks, managing our schedule, determining areas that needed assistance, and checking for supplies we lacked. At noon that day was a banquet featuring Meridionan cuisine. And the head chef was going to be Lord Kuze.

"What is he going to cook, I wonder?"

Sekirei Palace was equipped with several kitchens. There was the one we utilized most often and also a few others that we used for the development of new products and when entertaining merchants and their families. After all, the building was the former Inner Palace, home to the erstwhile imperial harem—each consort's chamber had featured a dedicated kitchen. The original structure remained; the only difference was that we usually used the spaces for other purposes.

The strong fragrance of spices transported by merchant ships permeated the entire palace. As for the court ladies who got a whiff of it...

"That smell is really strong."

"It's almost like medicine."

...They all seemed to be filled with trepidation.

My pulse was racing as well, but for a different reason. To me, it smelled delicious, and I was certain that my impression was due to memories from my previous life. "Maybe, just maybe, he might be making what I'm thinking..." I mumbled to myself.

I visited the kitchen where Lord Kuze was busy cooking. The man had rolled up his sleeves and donned an apron and was efficiently mobilizing the servants he had brought from Meridiona. His rolled-up sleeves revealed thick, muscular arms—a warrior's arms. I took a step inside and found myself surrounded by heat and the unique odor of spices.

"Well well, if it isn't the great Wagtail Priestess. What brings you here?" asked Lord Kuze.

I glanced at the pot he was stirring and had to employ all my willpower to stop my mouth from watering. “I stopped by just in case you were missing anything. That smells delightful.”

A big smile lit up his rugged features. “You’re fine with this scent? Huh, pretty rare for a young noblewoman of Centoria.”

“Well, yes...”

The stir-fried onions were a gorgeous golden brown. The colorful, sizzling vegetables beside them looked just as appetizing. I spotted numerous bottles filled with expensive spices, as well as a thick, yellowish-brown sauce nearby. I felt my patience whittle away. *Yes. I knew it. This is exactly what I was thinking about!*

I gulped. “You have used quite a lot of seasoning. Eating it...will be like biting into a jewel.”

“If the grub made by the king of Meridiona’s stingy, I’ll never be able to hold my head high in front of Orient’s emperor ever again. I’m the only person on this entire continent who’s able to make a feast like this.” He grinned.

“Indeed.”

In my previous life, the particular dish was easily enjoyed by everyone, almost like fast food. In my current lifetime, however, it was a dish so expensive that I didn’t even dare to imagine the cost—all the spices used were raw medicinal ingredients as well. What he was throwing lavishly into a pot and boiling down into a thick sauce to pour over rice probably cost as much as the annual budget of a respectable small domain.

Dazed, I murmured, “I can’t believe I have the chance to eat curry rice in this world as well...”

“Cur-ee rice? Whuzzat?”

I hesitated. “It is an ancient term referring to sublime cuisine.”

“Heh, thanks for the praise. I used to call it Meridionan gravy rice, but, well...if that’s what you call it, Honorable Priestess, I guess I could make a name change.” He added in a low voice, “Huh. Maybe all Wagtail Priestesses like this

dish.”



SOON thereafter we held a curry exhibition—I mean, a banquet—in Sekirei Palace. The influential figures of Orient and Meridiona sat in an orderly manner around the tables, before them a display of delightful golden cuisine. The spread was rather disorienting to me because the food presented was curry rice served with salad and lassis.

I had informed everyone about the menu beforehand, so the emperor was dressed in a robe he could easily wash instead of his typical garments of delicate white silk. To dig into curry while wearing white clothes almost impossible to safely wash was out of the question.

The banquet began, and I nervously took a bite of the curry. The high-grade rice was warm and fluffy, and the smooth sauce the perfect blend of spicy and sweet. The vegetables served alongside it had been fried in oil, locking all their juices inside a wonderful coating. They were sweet and crunchy, and I couldn’t get enough of them. I had the feeling that if Lord Kuze were somehow transported to the world of my past life, he might be able to earn a fortune with his delicious curry recipe. Ingredients in that world were much cheaper, too.

The Oriental citizens tentatively tasted the curry as well, and they sighed and gasped in awe at the marvelous flavor and the extravagant ingredients. Once the sampling session was over, desserts replaced the platters on the tables. That was when the emperor finally spoke.

“We are in Sekirei Palace, an informal setting away from the imperial court,” he said, surveying all present. “What We are about to say will stay in this room.”

Hearing his solemn voice, I straightened. Everyone bowed their head slightly as they listened in silence.

“Before the arrival of winter, Orient will serve as mediator for Meridiona and Centoria during the formation of their peace treaty.” He glanced at me. Even through his veil I could feel his gaze piercing into my very soul. A chill ran down my spine at the sharpness in his regard. “Wagtail Priestess Sai. You must be aware that the Saint is wreaking havoc in Centoria.”

My breathing hitched.

In a steady voice, he said, “Centoria has delivered to Orient a request for aid bearing the signatures of its king and queen. They ask for our help in eliminating the Saint.”

Chapter One Hundred: A Proposal Both Joyous and Cruel

I could feel the tension rising around me. Yet the most politically powerful figure in Orient, the Right Legate, as well as Lord Kuze of Meridiona, didn’t even bat an eye. It seemed that the emperor had already discussed the matter to a certain extent with them.

The emperor’s voice echoed in deafening silence. “Centoria is undergoing a national crisis due to the lack of a royal heir, poor weather that results in worse harvests, and an increase in the number of withered—those whose mana pools have dried up. Quite some time has passed since they summoned the tenth Saint, Lilly, to save them from their plight. But Lilly has not fulfilled her duties as the Saint and has instead brought on calamity by bewitching others with her magic. We hear that the Order of the Holy Knights is currently near the brink of utter destruction.”

I recalled the knights’ order of my birth land. The Order was the lynchpin in Centoria’s national defense, and depending on the circumstances, the organization held the second-most authority after the king and queen. I had long known that the Order was corrupt but never expected that it was so fragile that the Saint alone had been enough to cause its downfall.

“For many years,” the emperor continued, “Centoria has relentlessly contested the territory near the Iki tribe’s lands along the border between the two nations. Yet We believe that it is only with the help of Meridiona and the noble Kuze Ikinoka of the Iki tribe that Our medicine industry has flourished to this extent. In exchange for providing aid, We requested that Centoria cease all attacks on Meridiona and form a peace treaty as well as officially acknowledge the Meridionan king as legitimate. Centoria agreed.”

My chest grew hot. Not because of the spices I had consumed, but the fact that the war that had stolen my parents' lives was ending at last.

“Wagtail Priestess Sai.”

I snapped out of my relief at the emperor's address. “Yes, Your Majesty,” I replied immediately. It wasn't yet the time to shed tears.

The emperor's voice was steady and dignified. He spoke to me as the deity of Orient. “There is something We have not revealed to you until this moment for We lacked evidence.”

I noticed Lord Kuze's gaze on me. He narrowed his fierce eyes and smiled—almost as if telling me that the emperor was going to give me good news.

“King Kuze Ikinoka has been granting refuge to two Centorian civilians at his estate for several years as esteemed guests. Due to the wounds they sustained when they were dragged into the conflict, they spent the first year in critical condition, but they recovered thereafter and have established a clinic on the monarch's estate. There they have been offering their aid to Meridionan citizens injured as a result of the war.”

The entire world suddenly became deathly still. I could only register the emperor's voice and a ringing in my ears, and my chest was so hot that I felt as if someone had poured magma into my heart. My hands trembled.

“Your parents, the previous Wagtail Priestess, Sae Cutrettola, and Doctor Dyth Cutrettola, are alive. Once the peace treaty is ratified between the two nations, if you wish, it will be possible for you to reunite with them.”

My mind was completely blank. I almost didn't know where I was. I still remembered my last moments with them—how they had hugged me tight, the design of the carriage that I watched until it disappeared into the distance, the clip of horse hooves I listened to with my ears pressed against the soil until there was no trace of the sound left. My dear, dear parents, whom I thought I would never see again in my entire life.

“Sai. We ask that you lend your aid to eliminating the Saint for a peaceful future between Centoria and Meridiona.”

The moment the emperor finished his sentence, Lord Kuze looked at him. The

Meridionan stood up from his seat, then kneeled on the ground, bowing formally. “Your Majesty Emperor Haruka of Orient. Pardon my interruption, but may I speak to the Wagtail Priestess as well?”

“You may.”

“You have my gratitude.” Lord Kuze turned. His gleaming, fiery eyes fixated on me. “As a symbol of the alliance between Orient and Meridiona, I have made preparations to take the Wagtail Priestess as my spouse. If you are willing to wed into my country, Lady Sai, I swear that we shall offer our protection to the Wagtail Priestess for eternity and guarantee that you will live with your parents.”

My first instinct was to look at the emperor. I couldn’t see his expression through his veil.

In a low, dignified voice, the emperor gently said, “If you wish for a life with your parents and to have offspring who will inherit your blood, We grant you permission to marry him. You may choose the path you desire.”

Chapter One Hundred One: Your Heart Already Belongs to Someone, Doesn’t It?

*“**YOU** may choose the path you desire.”*

That one sentence was enough to crush any semblance of rationality left in me. I hadn’t expected that I would react so strongly.

My memories of the rest of the afternoon were vague. The day ended, and another few passed by. Eventually, Lord Kuze made a private visit to Sekirei Palace and gave me a more detailed explanation of his offer.

“My country, Meridiona, has a culture of polygamy. Apparently, this practice started when men in seats of power, like the chief, offered their protection to the women of a tribe. We have more women than men cuz of all the fighting, so yeah. Well, our marriage culture is probably one of the reasons Centoria treats us like barbarians since they practice monogamy and worship their female Saints. But we have our reasons, just as they have theirs.”

When Lord Kuze had arrived at Sekirei Palace that morning, Suzuiro had immediately attacked him. He dodged the charging girl with a grin and promised her, “I’m not gonna do anything. Really.” And so we were sitting in the gazebo of the inner courtyard and conversing while drinking tea.

During his first “visit,” he had seemed like a stereotypical ruffian, yet as we talked quietly face-to-face, he didn’t just feel fierce—he also had the majestic aura of a king.

Cosmos flowers rustled and waved in the wind. He lifted a finger, letting a dragonfly rest on its journey. As he admired it, he said steadily, “I already have eight wives. All of them are from different tribes, and my marriage with them is their tribe’s way of acknowledging me as their king. I also already have a lawful consort.” He paused. “That consort is my actual life partner, but—well, my consort can’t get pregnant, so I’m leaving that to the other women.”

“There is no conflict between them?”

In Centoria, the lack of children between the queen and king was a big issue. Due to religious reasons, the current king refused to take any concubines, and he had even summoned the Saint to solve the problem. In every world and place and at every point in history, the battles between consorts and their children were always causes of contention.

“Well, my lawful consort’s a very capable one.” His eyes lost their focus, and he smiled before letting the dragonfly dart away. His gaze trailed after it. “My lawful consort started off as my most trusted warrior and was my right hand on the battlefield. Both parties, my wives and my consort, have come to terms with the fact that they have different roles in my life. Ya know, when I told them that I might marry you, all of them actually got way too excited. I mean, this is Lady Sae’s daughter we’re talking about.”

When Lord Kuze mentioned my mother’s name, his stern features softened a tad. It was a little surreal to hear the name of a person I had assumed dead from the mouth of the foreign sovereign of Meridiona.

He shrugged. “They were all celebrating that they’re gonna have a younger sister in the family.”

“U-Um, apologies, but I am afraid I have yet to say, um, anything about

marrying you, Lord Kuze.”

“That’s what I told ’em too. All I said was ‘Say, if Lady Sae’s daughter marries into our family, what’re y’all gonna do?’ That’s it. But then they’re suddenly partying for an entire week. So I say, ‘I told you so many times that it’s not a given yet!’ You know what they did then? All of them turned on me and got mad, yelling, ‘You liar!’” He sighed. “Sheesh, those guys never listen to a word I say.”

“They are on very good terms with each other,” I commented.

“Yeah. Well, if the members of my harem ever deem me unfit to be king of Meridiona, my status will become brittle in an instant. They’re my wives, true, but they also serve as spies from each of the tribes, so... Anyway. They’re all nice people.”

He surveyed the bed of flowers outside the gazebo. He was probably recalling his wives—my instincts told me that he was likely a good husband.

“Ah, right. I haven’t talked about Lady Sai and Doctor Cutrettola yet, have I?”

I froze.

He nodded to himself. “Sure, I’ll tell you about them. It’s a bit of a long story, so bear with me.”



IT took many refills of tea before Lord Kuze finished his recounting of the past. During the war with Centoria, the Order had attacked the village of Lord Kuze’s tribe. After the Holy Knights set fire to the settlement, which was at that point occupied only by civilians, my parents apparently rebelled and defected from the Order.

To convince the Meridionans of their good will, my parents entered the village unarmed. They treated the injured, starting with the children, before asking for permission to protect the village. My mother used her vast pool of mana as the former Wagtail Priestess to safeguard the settlement and its women, children, and elderly as well as their assets. My father, a doctor, rendered first aid to the soldiers who fought on the front lines, providing appropriate medical and magical emergency care.

Later on, though Lord Kuze's village successfully repelled the attack on its borders, my father had sustained grave injuries during its defense. The village sheltered both my parents while he recovered, and so they had stayed behind.

"If not for those two, I would've died as well." Lord Kuze took off his haori to reveal his sturdy arms. A large, jagged scar coiled around one arm like a snake, many smaller scars branching off it like shredded paper. "Doctor Cutrettola performed first aid and sewed it together while Lady Sae frantically used her mana to link my nerves. She treated me regularly so my arm didn't rot before my natural healing ability could kick in. Thanks to them, although I have scars, I can move my arm as if nothing happened, even the tip of my pinky."

As he spoke, he wriggled his fingers and waved his arm. Judging from the scars, his arm had probably been hacked off then trampled by a horse into a bloody mess. Yet despite the scale of the injury, the only lasting effects were superficial.

With a frown, he muttered, "When I learned that the Order of Holy Knights had wanted to use them as disposable civilians on the battlefield... To do something like that to people so kind and capable... I was shocked."

His was a heroic tale of my parents to which I had been completely oblivious. "Um... Lord Kuze, may I touch your arm for a moment?"

"Sure."

I gingerly placed my fingers around his scarred arm. I could sense the hint of my mother's mana through my fingertips. From the almost grotesque stitches, I could feel my father's determination to heal his patient.



“Mom... Dad...” I whispered as I gently caressed his arm. Lord Kuze watched me in silence. A while later, I released him. I gave him a deep bow. “Thank you.”

“Hey, Wagtail Priestess.” His amber eyes were almost like sharp daggers digging into me. “I’m not the only one. There are countless people in Meridiona who were or are being saved by them. In my country, they’re like our gods. And everyone knows that they left their daughter behind in Centoria. Meridiona’s dearest wish is for your family to reunite.”

“To...reunite...”

“Sai, daughter of the Cutrettolas, if you become my wife, my entire kingdom will do everything in our power to give you a happy future. I won’t let you face any hardship, and I’ll take responsibility for all your family. I’ll help you nurture and raise as many children as you want in the future. I swear that I’ll treat you with the utmost respect and care.”

“I...”

“What do you want to do?”

Lord Kuze’s proposal was earnest, sincere, kind. To marry him and move to Meridiona was the ideal solution. Our union would connect Meridiona and Orient, and I could live in the same country as my parents. He was also a reliable man whom I could comfortably trust with my daughter, thus fulfilling my duty as the Wagtail Priestess as well. The most rational decision would be to...nod and accept...

But when that thought skimmed across my mind, large golden eagle wings brushed against my heart. My mind was drawn to the image of a man’s long, soft lashes framing ash-blue eyes. “Sai,” he would say in his warm voice.

The ear he had pierced, the body he had pierced, the *heart* he had pierced grew hot. I remembered the warmth of his embrace. I remembered his heat on my skin and in my soul when our cheeks had touched.

There was a small chuckle. “Well well. If that isn’t the face of a love-struck maiden I see.” With a start, I whipped up my head. He was smiling at me with a fond expression. “Your heart already belongs to someone, doesn’t it?”

“Ah...”

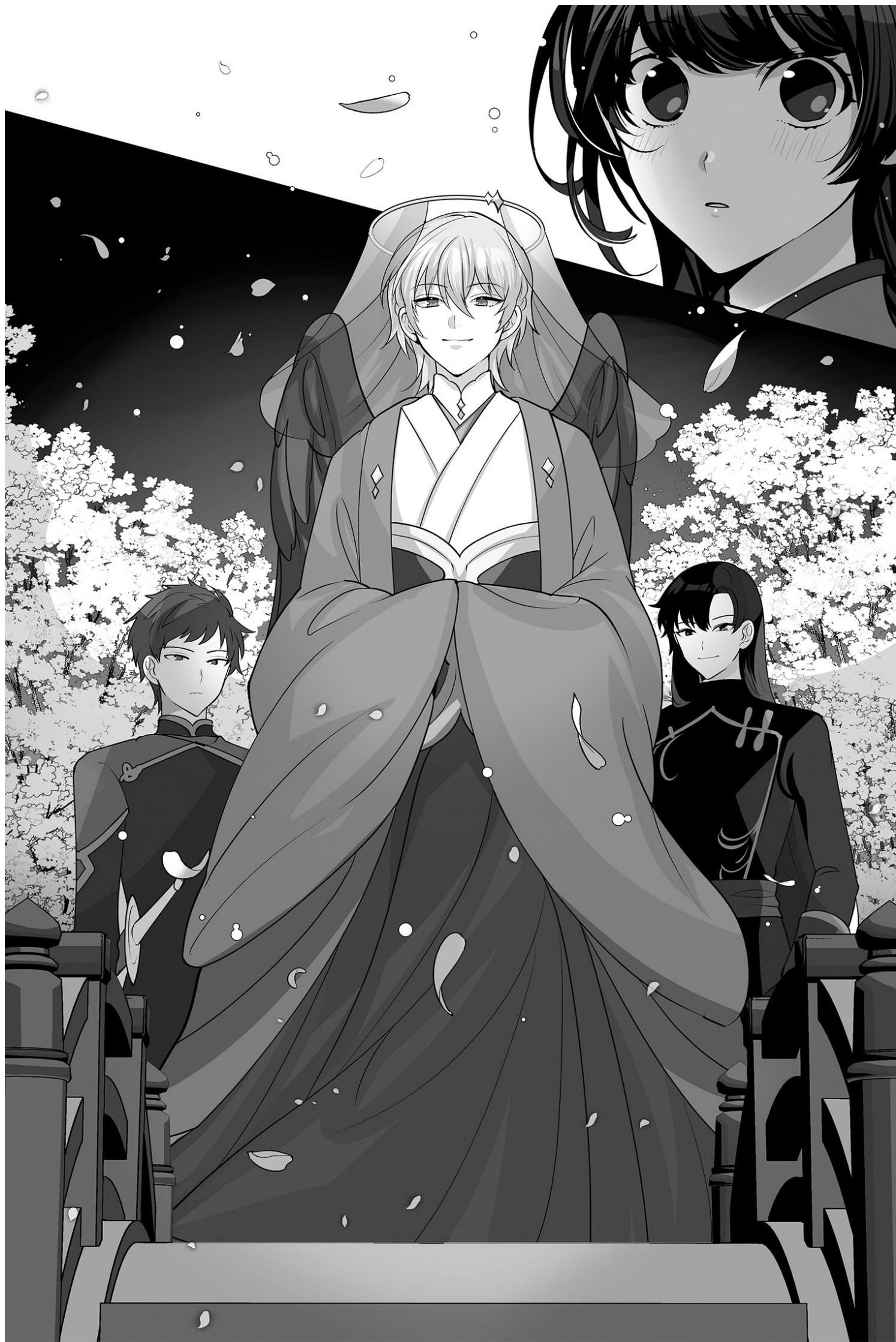
“Even someone like me can figure out that much. My wives always say that I’m completely clueless when it comes to the heart of a woman, but I’m not *that* obtuse.” He stood up from the chair. “There’s nothing wrong with that. If you want to stay in this nation, prioritize that. I’m sure that...Lady Sae and the doctor will agree that it’s best for their daughter to be with the person she loves.”

Eleventh Arc: Two Birds Bound by Red Thread Who Soar Defiantly against a Destiny Dictated by Gods and Fate Chapter One Hundred Two: The End of the Wagtail

Priestess IT was night when the emperor visited Sekirei Palace. For once, he wasn't in his female form but his true form. The court ladies hurried to finish preparations. As for his Twin Wings, who had followed him on his left and right, they bowed at the arch bridge and left.

"Sai."

Under the light of the full moon, the emperor looked as if he had walked out of a painting.





I led him to my room. We sat across from each other, and the emperor took a sip of the tea prepared by a maid. The silvery moonlight and dim lamps illuminated the room. Sitting in silence, I waited for him to speak.

“I heard you rejected Kuze’s offer.”

“Yes.”

“May I ask why?”

I stood up from the chair and threw my sleeves behind me, then knelt before the emperor. I leaned forward and bowed so deeply that my forehead almost pressed against the ground. “On the day you saved my life, I swore to dedicate everything I have, from the top of my head to the tip of my toes, for your sake, Your Majesty. It is...my duty to be by your side.”

He seemed to be gazing down at me yet didn’t say anything. A long period of silence stretched on before he finally told me to raise my head.

His expression was a mix of agony and profound grief. “I have no plans of marrying you to any of my subjects. If you stay in this empire, I’ll choose you as my wife.” Before I could open my mouth, he added, “But if I become your life partner, you won’t be able to give birth to a Wagtail Priestess.”

I cast my eyes down.

“You know that, right?”

“...I am aware.”

“The woman who unites with me in marriage and body can only sire the next emperor. Even the Wagtail Priestess isn’t an exception. I tried looking through ancient texts for one, but...”

“The wife of a god can only be a mother of a god, I see.”

I had known. That was why I had always believed in the back of my mind that the emperor would never choose me as his empress. Why my chest always ached. I had wanted to avoid thinking about the reason for my pain. I had wanted to stay ignorant of the forbidden desire growing in my heart with each

passing day.

Whenever I touched him, whenever I heard his voice, I thought, *Ah. I want to be by his side.* That wish stemmed from my gratitude and respectful admiration for him. But that wasn't all.

I simply wanted the man, Haruka, who had stolen my heart.

"I want to be your other half, Sai..." The emperor kneeled and took my hands in his. We had to look silly—an emperor and a priestess holding hands and crouched on the ground, their chairs forgotten. But we stared into each other's eyes earnestly, as if that didn't matter at all.

The emperor moved my hand to cup his cheek. "I don't want to marry anyone other than you," he whispered. "You're dear to me; your name is etched into my heart. But to wed you is to snatch away your life as the Wagtail Priestess."

"Emperor Haruka, I..."

"Sai, I like you." He closed his eyes briefly as if tasting each word. "*I...like* you." The moonlight splashed onto his pale, shimmering hair. He had uttered his love for me aloud, casting aside appearances, status, and pride as though it was the only emotion he knew. He looked helpless, desperate.

His eyes wavered. "I like every part of you. Your noble spirit, how stubborn you are once you make up your mind, how desperately you live life to the fullest with that petite body, the brilliance of your mind, your black hair, your dainty head, the shape of your palms, your nails... Everything."

"Emperor Haruka..."

"I used to simply think of you as an admirable girl. But...after I saw you again, saw your beauty, your valor... Every single day, I...liked you more and more and more." His hands squeezed tighter as he whispered, "But..." He faltered. "If I allow my feelings to bloom further...it's the same as transforming you into a womb for the next emperor."

"...Yes."

"I want a child with you. I want an emperor with your blood. But...I can't bear the thought of you giving up on the future you want."

“Your Majesty, I...”

“Those are my feelings for you. I have said everything.” Emperor Haruka released my hands. He patted my head before standing up, then offered me a hand and pulled me to my feet. “Sai, if you marry the Meridionan king, I will forever support you as the Emperor of Orient.”

I stared at him.

“So don’t worry,” he whispered. “You can choose the path you want.”

“Why, Your Majesty?”

My voice was shaking, more sob than question. His jewellike eyes opened wide before my vision grew too blurry to make out anything else. I closed my eyes. I buried my face in my hands. My palms were wet.

“Sai...”

My pierced ear hurt. My chest hurt. My body, graced with his touch, hurt. My heart hurt. “Emperor Haruka.” I had to force the words from my throat. “Why? If you were going to push me away like this from the beginning, why did you do this to me? You left your mark in the deepest part of my heart, on my ear, on my everything. Because of you, I am filled with such sweet pain.”

Hot tears rolled down my cheeks. “Thinking about you keeps me up at night. The smell of snow on the wind, flowers blossoming in the garden, lightning on a stormy night, the howl of gales all make me think about you. I like you, Emperor Haruka... How can I ever leave your side after knowing this pain?”

“Sai...”

“I cannot be so impudent as to assume or to even dare think about becoming your bride. But...but you have already filled every part of me, every crevice, and I am yours, completely. So please, at least...let me serve at your side for the rest of my life.”

The emperor hugged me as I wept uncontrollably. Gently he guided me onto a chair. “I’m sorry. I...didn’t consider your feelings at all.”

He held me in his arms until my tears finally dried up. Once I’d calmed down, he knelt in front of me once more. Startled, I tried to rise, and he shook his

head and stopped me.

“Sai.” He reached for my right foot. After sliding off my shoe, he lifted my foot with both hands, cradling it almost like a pious devotee. He was illumined in molten silver moonlight, as was my pale foot that almost never saw the sun.

The emperor’s forehead pressed against the top of my foot. “Wagtail Priestess Sai. Please marry me.” His lips brushed over my toe, and I felt a gentle pressure as he slipped it into his mouth. He was proposing in the traditional Oriental style.

“I will be together with you, my emperor,” I whispered. “Forever...and ever.”

Chapter One Hundred Three: I Figured This Was Going to Happen Eventually

BEFORE the sun could rise, the emperor climbed off the bed and prepared to return to Kita Palace.

“I can’t miss my morning audiences,” he explained. He still seemed drowsy as he stretched his back and wings.

I helped a maid style the emperor’s hair and assisted him into his robes. The emperor kept his eyes shut so he wouldn’t burn the maid’s, but from time to time, he stole glances at me through the gaps in his veil, sneaking a smile. I had to fight the heat climbing onto my cheeks and pretended to be unaffected as I helped him dress.

As we readied him, he asked the maid, “Who’s waiting at the arch bridge?”

“The Right Wing, Your Majesty,” she replied humbly.

“Ah. Hiaki, hm?” He grinned, appearing somewhat delighted. Before he left, he turned to me. “Oh, right... Sai.”

I was bowing in front of him when he pulled one of the thin decorative sashes from his robes of white silk. He handed it to me and said, “Here. It’s a token of my feelings for you.”

Taking the silk sash into my hands, I blinked. “Feelings...” The sash was

delicate—so thin that it was translucent. It seemed almost fleeting, as if the craftsperson had weaved morning mist into fabric. “Are you sure? This is such a precious item...”

“Aw, we spent an entire night together, and you won’t accept it?” He pouted like a mischievous child. Then he smiled broadly at the flushed maid. “Hey, miss. From now on, whenever you do the Wagtail Priestess’s hair, weave that sash into it like a ribbon.”

“Understood.”

“Heh heh.” The emperor grinned, smug, before caressing my cheek with his fingertips in satisfaction. He tucked my hair behind my ear and started to fiddle with the earring he had given me. A tingle spread throughout my body, and I grew restless—it felt as if he was tickling the tiny hairs on my earlobe.

His smile grew even wider at my reaction. “Your earring is mine too, and I just gave you that ribbon, so... You’re mine now, Sai, and I won’t let anyone else have you.”

I was surprised to hear such bold and possessive words from the emperor. Alongside the surprise came a bigger wave of happiness that filled my chest—I had the opportunity to see yet another side of the emperor I had never known existed.



LATER that morning, I visited Lord Raiya to discuss religious rites. At first, he acted perfectly normal, but when he noticed my ribbon shimmering under the sunlight, documents slipped out of his hands with a loud rustle.

“Wha—”

“Are you all right?!” I exclaimed.

“How... You... Sai, you...” His complexion was shifting through various shades of red and pale like splotches on an artist’s palette, and he slowly backed away. I tilted my head, confused.

After taking ample time to calm down, he inhaled a deep breath. “Well, yeah... I see... Okay... I mean, I figured this was going to happen eventually.” He

shrugged. Then his expression fierced. “But it’s too early!” His large eyes bored into mine. “Do you understand the implications? As the Wagtail Priestess, to become his empress is...”

“I am aware.”

“On top of that, being the Orient emperor means he will...”

Magpies soared away with a noisy flapping of wings. The scenery outside the office window in the Department of Print was bright and dazzling, the crimson leaves of fall waving like flickering flames. It was the height of autumn.

He didn’t have to finish his sentence. I knew.

Chapter One Hundred Four: My Time in Orient, Somehow Both Short and Long

LORD Kuze would return to his country in four days, and it was early afternoon when he suddenly sent a message to Sekirei Palace inviting me to join him on a stroll through the city.

I had no reason to decline, so I agreed to go with him the next day. The following morning, Lord Kuze and his guards came to Sekirei Palace—and tagging along with them as if it were only natural for her to accompany us was Lady Haruiro. Our party ballooned in size with Lord Kuze’s and Lady Haruiro’s respective escorts; we looked like and essentially were a respectable tour group from Meridiona.

“I haven’t had the chance to walk around town with you since the summer festival!” chirped Lady Haruiro happily as we formed a line outside the palace.

“I’m a little surprised you came in this form,” I said in a hushed voice.

“Well, yeah. I mean, Kuze is still classified as a mysterious intruder from Meridiona in the official records, so...”

Lord Kuze approached as we were talking. “Hm? Who’s this lady? She’s gorgeous.”

“Hee-hee-hee, hello there.” The emperor aimed a bewitching smile at the

man.

Hmm. I don't know why, but somehow she seems to be...warning him in some way? The emperor waved his long sleeve in a dainty and graceful manner as she greeted him. "I am Haruiro, the younger sister of Yukinari Kiriya, the General of the Left Wing. The emperor has ordered me to attend to the Wagtail Priestess today."

"O-Oh." Though Lord Kuze flinched a little, he greeted her in return. "Nice to meet you...?"



IN Orient, autumn was both a generous season that blessed the people with bountiful fruits and harvest and at time of busy preparation for the harsh winter soon to follow. The city's shopping district bustled as merchants sold tools and wares for winter and the new year. On the main thoroughfare, government officials from the Department of Divinities were constructing large dolls from straw and performing rites to infuse them with mana. Apparently, the effigies were magical golems they could temporarily activate to clear away snow.

I was sitting in an ox-drawn carriage, and as I observed the city industriously readying for snowfall, I felt the changing season. Everywhere, citizens were placing straw mats and wooden planks against buildings to prevent damage from heavy snow and wind. The practice reminded me of my homeland, the Cutrettola demesne, which was also buried under snow each winter.

My vision grew unfocused as I was pulled into a memory. Around the same time the previous year, I had been locked in a cell in Centoria, cowering in fear of the coming winter. When it arrived, it was so cold that my every joint grew stiff, yet I had been provided with no proper clothes to speak of. I spent the winter in agony, delirious with fever the entire time, unable to fall asleep.

As I recalled the dread that had seized my heart as winter loomed like the breath of death, I couldn't suppress a shiver. The emperor must have noticed, because she patted my head. Although her fingertips were softer than usual, almost petal-like, their warmth and kindness remained. The tension in my body ebbed slightly.

I turned to the scenery outside once again and murmured, "It will be winter

soon.”

Lord Kuze, sitting across from us, nodded. “Yeah. That’s why I came here when I did. Once the snow starts building up, I can’t exactly arrange a meeting with the emperor.”

Next to me, Lady Haruiro smiled in silence.

Our little group then proceeded to engage in lively chatter about what we were going to buy.

“I came out today cuz I wanna buy some souvenirs for my wives. For some reason, whenever I do the choosing, their reception is always awful,” admitted Lord Kuze.

“I see, that is why you wanted the opinion of a woman.”

“Yep, exactly.”

The emperor asked, “May I ask what kind of souvenirs you usually select?”

“The stuff everyone likes. You know, like the snake sake from Orient that boosts vitality or rare swords made of spirit metal.” His eyes were shining as he spoke.

The emperor and I exchanged glances before sighing in tandem. “As presents for your wives, that is rather...” I paused. “I can see why their reception might not be so positive.”

We alighted the carriage upon entering the shopping district and, under the guidance of the emperor, browsed a variety of shops targeted at women: clothing and textile stores, hair accessory boutiques, and so on. One after another, the emperor selected Orient-made products she thought foreign women might like, such as sweets with a long shelf life, skin care items, and books.

I was a woman as well and yet clueless as a baby when it came to the merchandise available in Oriental shopping districts. We gratefully relied completely on Lady Haruiro’s knowledge and speedily picked out the best souvenirs for Lord Kuze’s wives. In the end, after determining their individual hobbies and preferences, we managed to find a different present for each of

them. And to preempt any quarreling, each gift was in the same price range and a unique representation of Orient's culture.

Confronted with my and the emperor's diligence, Lord Kuze, who was oblivious to the intricacies of a woman's heart, had fallen into a stupor. He merely took out his wallet whenever we asked. Since he put full, compliant faith in our advice, shopping was a smooth affair.

He shook his head. "Wow. Just wow. I could *never* shop while putting in so much consideration. Phew, you guys did me a big favor."

Lady Haruiro was in high spirits. "Hee-hee. You could include a note that the Wagtail Priestess and Lady Haruiro chose all of these." She seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed shopping as a woman.

At midday, around the time I started to feel some fatigue, Lord Kuze left all the packages in the hands of retainers and brought us to a tea hall to treat us to sweets.

As I studied the building, I mumbled, "This tea hall is..."

The emperor turned around. "Have you been here before?"

"Yes. I came here just after Sekirei Palace was established."

Her eyes widened in realization. She offered me an alluring smile and whispered, "It all started from here, huh?" The hall was where I had once used Suzuiro's connections to invite lady merchants to a tea party.

We were led through the establishment, then into the smaller annex detached from the main building. Inside the familiar room, I helped myself to tea while basking in nostalgia. *I've really come a long way.*

Chapter One Hundred Five: Molting

ON my first visit to the tea hall, lush new greens had cast a shadow upon the garden and pond, but that day, they were dyed a fiery crimson. The passing wind was chilly, and the soft carpet sunk pleasantly with every step. The proprietor of the establishment had lit the furnace, and the warmth was so gently effusive that it reached even the deepest parts of my body.

We enjoyed tea and sweets, a short, leisurely break. Then I chose to ask, “How are my parents doing right now?”

Lord Kuze was putting on several layers of coats he had borrowed from the owner—apparently, the tea hall was cold to a person from Meridiona. His amber eyes grew soft as he readily answered, “The doctor has trouble walking, but he still takes patients sitting down. As for Lady Sae... How should I put this? She’s one of the strongest people I know.” He stared down at his loosely clasped fingers and smiled. He must have been picturing them in his mind as he spoke. “Lady Sae’s so diligent; she works from morning to night. She manages an herb farm, does rounds in the clinic, makes medicine, and even deals with administrative tasks. After doing all that, once the sun sets, she promptly goes to bed saying that it’s better for her health.”

“I see that my mother is the same as always.” I flipped through my memories of her in my mind. For a time, recalling her had been excruciatingly painful, as if I were drowning on land, and I couldn’t bear to remember her face or anything about her. But as he described her, my recollection of her was suddenly as vivid as though I had only parted with her the day before. Her voice, the scent of medicine that always lingered on her, her silhouette, the pleasant ruffling of cloth whenever she rolled up her sleeves...

“Doctor Cutrettola’s more mild mannered and subdued than Lady Sae. But his nerves of steel could give her a run for her money. Even if the youngsters of our village barge in yelling at him, he doesn’t retreat at all. And you know what? The people who look down on him at first due to his demeanor always, without fail, bow to him in respect in the end.”

As a female governor, my mother had often been cursorily dismissed, yet my father had always stood beside her with a quiet smile. He was a doctor and the son of a noble household, and when people heard that he was going to marry into the provincial Cutrettola family and assume her surname, he became an object of ridicule in the Centorian aristocracy.

I had learned that only after separating from my parents. My father had chosen to trust in my mother's strong will instead of the shallow comments of those around him and stubbornly worked by her side all his life. I was over the moon that they were treated with respect and care in Meridiona.

From across the table, the emperor watched my face with a faint smile. *And now I also have gained someone who cares about me and supports me. I'm so fortunate.*

"They are concerned about you as well, Sai, whom they left behind," said Lord Kuze. "Their biggest wish is for their daughter to achieve happiness in her life."

I cast my eyes down. "I am such a disgrace though. I caused the ruin of our home..."

"They said that your safety and happiness are more important than the family estate any day. They actually breathed a sigh of relief when they heard that you had left the Cutrettola lands."

If that's what they think... As a former governor who had lost her domain, I felt as if a crushing weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

Abruptly, Lord Kuze lowered his voice. "Hey, Wagtail Priestess. You're gonna be the emperor's woman, right?" Lady Haruiro stilled, a stern look on her face. Lord Kuze glanced sidelong at her and grinned. "What's wrong, miss?"

There was a pause before the emperor chuckled. "No, nothing at all."

"If you say so. Okay then, Sai. What's your answer?" His amber eyes drilled into mine.

I tipped the whole cup of tea into my mouth and downed it in one gulp. "Yes." I paused. "I am going to be the emperor's wife."

"...I see." He began to fidget with the lidded teacup next to his hand. As

though choosing his words carefully, he slowly asked, “Do you know what that means for you?”

“Yes. I have heard everything from the emperor.”

I recalled the secret that the emperor had confessed to me that day.

“I...will likely die a few years after my heir molts.”

Chapter One Hundred Six: A Shocking Revelation

WE had been snuggled up in the same blanket when the morning sun greeted us that day. In the emperor’s arms, I had listened to the inevitable fate of divine emperors of Orient.

The emperor was the incarnation of the deity Amawashi. And only one such god could exist at a time. I had known that Emperor Harunire had died a few years after Emperor Haruka became the crown prince. I learned that morning that his death had been preordained.

“There can only be one Amawashi. Only one person in the world is allowed to have these wings. That’s why, traditionally, the emperor and crown prince live together from the moment of the prince’s birth like a parent bird and chick. From the father the son inherits knowledge, customs, his destiny. But I lived with my father for only a very brief period.”

“The last few years you had with him must have been a meaningful and special experience for you.”

“Yeah...” He nodded meekly like a child.

I recalled the day he had bestowed the single earring upon me. He had led me to Nire Palace, where the previous emperor had lived the last years of his life after relinquishing his title. There he had told me his past. To him, Nire Palace must be very special indeed. I felt my heart swell at the fact that he had chosen such a place to restore my memories and pierce my ears.

His warm arms gathered me close to his chest, and he held me tight. “Sai. I’ll be a burden to you in many ways.”

I placed my ear against his chest and heard the steady beating of his heart. I closed my eyes, etching the moment into my very soul—a moment when he was still alive by my side.

Stroking my hair, he whispered, “If you become my empress, you will have to give birth to my child while you still can. Personally, I want to be alone in our own little world forever, but that’s unforgivable for someone of my status. In that case... Even if I’m being generous, I will have to leave you behind after thirty years.”

His eyes wavered, filled with sorrow as though he were leaving me right that second. He caressed my cheek and kissed it. He looked like he was on the brink of tears as he revealed, “Even worse, Orient is a nation of winter. I will soon have to fall asleep and use all my mana to protect this empire from the heavy snows, and I won’t wake until spring. This is the reason why we emperors all have the character ‘spring’ in our name. We dedicate our short lifespans to bring spring to our people. I...won’t be able to see you, talk to you, for a quarter of each year.”

“My lord...”

“So that remaining thirty years will feel even shorter than it sounds. The question is whether you will view it as long or brief.” He appeared even more heartbroken than I was. As if hugging me wasn’t enough, he shrouded me with his wings before pulling me closer. Our skin pressed against each other’s, and I felt as though I was going to melt in our combined heat. I closed my eyes again and wrapped my arms around him.

I felt pained, sad, anguished. Not because he was going to eventually leave me behind, but because Emperor Haruka, the lonely, endearing man, was devastated for my sake.

“Marrying me would mean giving up on your own heir,” he murmured, “and moreover, you might not get to see your mom again if you become empress. It’s a very long journey by ship. I...love you. That’s why I don’t want you to feel alone.”

“Your Majesty...”



AS I recalled our conversation, I drank more tea in silence.

Lord Kuze let out a long sigh. His eyes were pained as he gazed at me. “Huh, you already know. I see...” He was turning out to be quite a compassionate man.

I glanced over at Lady Haruiro. With a slightly troubled expression, she shook her head and smiled as if to say, “That’s life.”

“In that case, it’s better to at least have all your family in one place for your wedding, right?” said Lord Kuze in a cheerful voice, perhaps attempting to clear the heavy atmosphere. “There’s also your younger sister’s wedding too.”

“Wha—” I gaped at him. *Younger...sister?*

“Yeah, your sister. Didn’t you know already? She’s called Sakura, daughter of Lady Sae and Doctor Cutrettola, second in the line of succession for the title of Wagtail Priestess.”

Chapter One Hundred Seven: Didn’t I Tell You a While Ago That I Was Gonna Marry a Girl from Meridiona?

“DIDN’T I tell you a while ago that I was gonna marry a girl from Meridiona?”

A few days after Lord Kuze embarked on his return journey to his country, I asked Lord Hiaki about my sister. We had ended up working as a pair during a purification ritual of Kita Palace, and that was the answer he gave me along with a wide grin.

“You did, but...” I shook my head. “I had no idea it was my sister, of all people.”

Even the emperor had been unaware of my sister’s existence, and naturally, the conversation had erupted into pandemonium when Lord Kuze dropped that bombshell on us.

“Ah, I see, you didn’t know, huh!” Lord Kuze had laughed heartily as he gave us the good news. Meanwhile, those of us receiving the news all had an internal breakdown—me, the emperor, and the entire imperial court. The only person in

Orient who had known about the existence of Sakura Cutrettola was Lord Hiaki.

We were scattering purification salt together, and Lord Hiaki shrugged without a hint of guilt. "I mean, I haven't asked her permission to tell everyone, and more than anything, my family wants you to be my wife, so I had to chase you until the last possible moment. So yeah, because of all those complicated circumstances, I couldn't exactly tell the emperor upfront, either."

I let out a long sigh.

He raised an eyebrow. "But hey, congrats. You must be happy to hear that you have a sister now."

"Well yes, I am, but..."

"By the way, you got that ribbon in your hair from the emperor, right? Wooow, you're wearing it for the entire world to see, huh?" he said in a teasing tone.

He was referring to the sash I had received on that special morning. Apparently, to wear it meant that I was someone dear to the emperor. *Oh, that reminds me.* Lord Raiya, who was rumored to have had the favor of the previous emperor, also tied his hair with a silk ribbon, though his was worn down with time.

Lord Hiaki gazed at me with the warm and gentle eyes of an experienced, older man. "Makes sense, because you're already his, right?"

"....."

"Ah, I've never seen such a face on you before!"

I glared at him. "A reminder that my trust in you has plummeted to an all-time low. If you knew, you could have at least told me or mentioned in passing that I have a younger sister."

He shrugged, appearing completely unaffected by my hostility. "Seriously, I couldn't tell you because I wasn't sure whether she'd marry me, and I can't disclose confidential information before our diplomatic relations with Meridiona become official. I'm sure you understand."

"Well...I guess..." I muttered begrudgingly.

“You’ve learned how to express anger, Sai, and it’s adorable.” He grinned wide. “But you know, I have you to thank for the fact that my betrothal to Sakura progressed so smoothly. It’s because you dutifully fulfilled your role as Wagtail Priestess, increasing your title’s reputation and status here in Orient.”

“I have never done anything that grand...”

“You have,” he declared. “I mean, even when the emperor said he’s gonna take you as his empress, no one spoke out against it, remember? Well, I guess that was partly due to his ridiculously thorough scheming, but still.” He barked out a merry laugh as if he’d remembered something funny. “Anyway, now the Gou clan will have a Wagtail Priestess bride too. Everyone’s celebrating.”

It was the best outcome possible. *Or...is it?* A nasty thought flashed across the back of my mind, and I stilled.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Lord Hiaki, does this mean...I will be forcing the responsibility of the Wagtail Priestess onto my sister...?”

My sister had been born after me, so she wasn’t supposed to be the successor of the title. But because I was marrying the emperor, she had to shoulder the duty of the Wagtail Priestess and continue our bloodline by marrying into an Oriental family. *That...might be a tragedy for her.*

Lord Hiaki, who seemed to have read my mind through my expression, reassured me. “It’s okay, she doesn’t mind.” He grinned slightly. “In fact, she actually seems eager. She was the one who proposed to me at first sight.”

“...Huh?”

“Okay, you gotta listen to this. She was raised in Meridiona, where everyone’s hot-blooded. She looks really similar to you, but she’s so feisty that I got a little fed up with her.”

“R-Really...?”

“I’m the type who doesn’t like people taking the reins from me. That’s why I thought I’d prefer you, since you’re a more mild-mannered girl, but...” He sighed.

“Stop right there, Lord Hiaki.” I stared daggers at him. “You must not have such an attitude toward my sister as the one who will be her life partner.”

“Ha ha, I’m joking, I swear! She’s really cute when she smiles, so it feels like I’m going to have a new little sister. I can’t wait.”

In the end, Lord Hiaki was also going to fulfill his goal of having a Wagtail Priestess in his clan. Fate worked in the strangest ways—we had both come out happy.

“Personally though? I don’t recommend the emperor as a husband,” he added.

“Why is that?”

“It’ll be hard to sleep in the same bed with those wings of his.”

I fell silent as I recalled the night we had shared a bed. *Was it really?* “That was not the impression I had.”

“Oh? Does that mean you were so...*busy* that you didn’t even have the time for such thoughts?”

“Huh...?”

“Tell me, what kind of sweet nothings do you and the emperor say to each other normally? We’re relatives, so don’t be so stingy.”

But before either of us could reply further, cold air literally drifted from behind us. With a start, I turned to see the emperor, who stood with his wings outstretched to their fullest and his arms crossed.

“My Right Wing!” he said in a sickly-sweet voice.

“Y-Your Majesty,” stammered Lord Hiaki.

“Now... What. Were. You. Talking. About. Without. Me?” He paused between each word for emphasis as he extended his wings in a gesture of intimidation. There was a wide smile on his lips. Even through his veil, I could tell that his expression was as dark as thunderclouds.

We hurriedly kneeled and greeted him.

The emperor’s tone was cold. “Keep your mouth in check around my wife.

Even if Sai is related to the Gou clan, you are not permitted to disgrace her.”

“Yes, Your Majesty... My most sincere apologies.”

“Sai, raise your head,” he said in a sharp voice. The emperor met my eyes and lifted his veil. His mist-colored eyes lit up, and he gave me a gentle smile. “I’ll come over tonight as well. Wait for me.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

But for some reason, he wasn’t satisfied with that response. His smile still wide on his face, he tilted his head. “Call me Haruka, will you?”

“Um, but we are in public...”

“Call my name.” His tone was sticky like honey.

“E-Emperor Haruka...” I stuttered.

“Thanks,” he purred, triumphant. Silk rustled as he walked away.

When the sound finally faded into the distance, Lord Hiaki, who was still bowing, groaned, “Please don’t threaten your vassals outright like that...”



THE emperor had started visiting Sekirei Palace at night blatantly as if he wanted everyone to notice. It was evidence that I was no longer his “nightly companion” but his lawful wife to be.

The tradition in Orient was to hold the official induction ceremony in spring. I would see my parents again and meet my sister for the first time then.

“You look like you’re in a good mood, Sai,” the emperor noted.

“I never thought that I might have a younger sister—and one who was given an even more thorough education as the Wagtail Priestess than myself, no less... I can’t begin to express my joy.”

The moonlight was almost blinding in the bedroom. Like every other night of late, we had each other to ourselves, snug under a blanket. The emperor’s wings were wrapped around me, and I felt incredibly warm and safe.

Talking about my sister reminded me of a day that seemed decades past—the date of my execution in Centoria. In little intervals between my daily work in

Orient, I had slowly but surely transcribed the archive of knowledge that had burned along with my house back then. I wanted to hand all my efforts to my sister—to help her in any way I could. I was so happy.

The emperor's tender voice whispered into my ears. "Sai, come closer."

I was trembling as I tucked myself into his embrace. He threw his arms around me, then shifted his wings. In the blink of an eye, I was enveloped in a warm, fluffy world. It was so warm that I almost couldn't believe it was midautumn. Soaking in his pleasant body heat, I thought I might doze off at any time.

In a sleepy voice, I mumbled, "Earlier, Lord Hiaki said something along the lines of, um, it might be hard to sleep with you in the same bed."

"...Oh?"

"But you're very warm. The blanket is big too, so we don't have to worry about chilly air sneaking through the gaps either."

There was no reply. He hugged me suffocatingly tight in his arms, and all my drowsiness disappeared in an instant. "Emperor Haruka?" I whispered.

He held me so tight that it was almost painful. He lightly pushed my head into the crook of his neck, and his hair brushed against my skin, his fragrance tickling my nostrils. "You know, finally, after all this time, I understand what my father was thinking and why he did what he did. Ugh, I hate this."

"You mean...establishing the harem?"

"No. I just realized what it means when people say that the more precious someone is to you, the more you want to hide them away from the prying eyes of others."

"Please don't worry; I will never leave you."

"...I'm not worried about that."

Then what are you worried about? I wondered. His voice had shaken slightly, sounding almost mournful as he embraced me. His nightwear had come loose, and my cheek pressed against his bare chest. His sweet scent and soothing warmth were a siren's song stealing my thoughts away.

He kissed my forehead, and the tiny sound made by his lips was like a melody

tugging at my heart. To me, those quiet moments together were happiness.

Such sweet, wonderful days passed by.

Until finally...it was time to deliver on our promise to aid Centoria in the dispossession of their Saint.

The clock was ticking. Winter was just around the corner.

Chapter One Hundred Eight: Sekirei Palace, the Fox, and the First Court Lady

A month went by in the blink of an eye. The first snow arrived.

“It’s finally winter,” Emperor Haruka murmured.

“...Yes.”

We were alone in Sekirei Palace, gazing up at a sky heavy with clouds. I shivered at the cold, and without turning to look at me, the emperor enveloped me in his large wings. I leaned into him and closed my eyes, basking in his warmth.

To stay beside that tender note of spring was my reason for existence. But before that, I had a mission to complete.



DURING the banquet with Lord Kuze, the emperor had informed us of the ceasefire and peace treaty between Meridiona and Centoria to be mediated by Orient. Preparations had continued behind closed doors, and at last, Centoria and Orient were to hold a highly confidential meeting to make final adjustments.

Beforehand, the imperial court convened for countless assemblies as well, which I attended as the Wagtail Priestess. Sitting among the distinguished bureaucrats and influential members of the empire made me feel humbled and somewhat unworthy, yet that hadn’t been the end of it: for some reason, I was assigned the second-most preeminent seat in the room—right next to the emperor himself.

I had felt so out of place that I feared I wouldn't be able to say anything, and the emperor had said with a thin smile, "This also serves the purpose of showing them that you're my empress."

During one such conference, Emperor Haruka dictated the venue for the final, secret meeting. "It will be held in the Cutrettola lands," he said. "We select Sekirei Prefecture, a land that used to be Ours."

I whipped my head around with a start, studying his face through his veil. Heat welled up in my chest. The emotions washing over me almost knocked off my feet.

The Cutrettola lands. My beloved homeland, a place of destruction and despair, and...the place where I had reunited with Emperor Haruka, my savior. My heart was jumbled, messy, alternately warmed by nostalgia then chilled by the recollection of a frosty year of agony. The sorrow of witnessing my house in flames and the relief and joy when Emperor Haruka hugged me to him in our escape. As my memories surfaced, my powerful feelings for Emperor Haruka poured into my heart and filled it to the brim. I couldn't even put the sensation into words.

The Cutrettola demesne was currently under the direct jurisdiction of the royal family. Apparently, they had built a new government complex somewhere near the site of my family's destroyed estate. The confidential meeting would be held in that facility.



"I'll take care of Sekirei Palace while you're away, so rest assured."

"Thank you very much, Lord Raiya."

Before my departure, I asked Lord Raiya to manage Sekirei Palace in my absence. He couldn't show his face in public as "Raiya" for political reasons, but his presence wouldn't be a problem if Lord Yukinari was the official standing on record and Lord Raiya only acted as the servant boy the Wagtail Priestess had selected. In fact, his entry into Sekirei Palace would cause much less controversy compared to that of a grown man like Lord Yukinari.

He shrugged. "Well, I'm used to managing places filled with women."

“Ah, right. You were in charge of the harem’s Inner Palace during the rule of the previous emperor...”

“Who would’ve thought that I’d end up coming back here in broad daylight one day?” He wore a wry smile as he looked up at the building, which retained almost none of the features of the Inner Palace.

Like everywhere else in the capital, Sekirei Palace was prepared for snow. Straw mats surrounded the main structure and bamboo poles were installed around the scattered tall trees for extra support. The red leaves of autumn had completely overtaken the green of the garden.

“Thanks, Sai,” he suddenly said.

“Huh...?”

“This used to be a place that brought me only bitterness. But to be able to return with my head held high makes me happy, no matter my status.” A smile softened his face, and he caught the tip of his white silk ribbon fluttering in the wind.

As I stared at the scrap of fabric, my thoughts went to Emperor Harunire, who had bequeathed it to the boy before me. “Lord Raiya...”

“Mm?”

“Please...watch over me so that I can support Emperor Haruka properly. Please watch over me in the stead of the previous emperor.”

“You sure you’re asking the right person? I’m the Wicked Fox, you know.”

“And I am the Witch of Centoria.”

“Pfft!” He burst into laughter. “Great point. Sheesh, the emperors of this empire keep dragging people with the most absurd titles into their imperial courts. Haaah...” Though he shrugged in exasperation, a hand on his hip, he seemed somewhat happy. “Hey, Sai.”

“...Yes.”

“You’re already a vital person to this nation. To me, you’re also my precious pupil.” His solemn gaze drilled into me. I straightened and listened attentively as he warned, “Don’t mess up in Centoria. Achieve success and make sure to

come back in perfect health. Do that for the girls in Sekirei Palace, for Orient, and...for that lonely man on our throne.”

A howling, chilly wind blew between us. The gale tugged mischievously at the ribbon that tied his hair, making it curl around his head as it was flung in all directions.

Loneliness and sorrow aged his face as he smiled and said, “Being left behind, after all, is the most painful thing in the world.”



AFTER discussing plans with Lord Raiya, the head maid, and head lady-in-waiting, I was alone in my room when Suzuiro came in. She was going to accompany me to the secret summit in Centoria.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Lady Sai, um...” Her large eyes were wide, and she cast them down, fidgeting with her fingers.

The evening sun shone bright on her silvery hair, the strands the color of tin, just like her name. I contemplated the sunset then turned to Suzuiro. A very nostalgic scene materialized in my mind. “Ah, that reminds me...”

She blinked. “Yes?”

“I met you during a beautiful sunset just like today’s, didn’t I? You said that you were scared of ghosts and greeted me in a very loud voice... It feels like years ago.”

“You’re right...” As Suzuiro looked at me, she must have recalled the moment as well, because she turned to gaze at the setting sun too. “Back then, I never imagined that I would spend so much time and do so much work with the Wagtail Priestess I admire.”

“Thank you, Suzuiro. Because you were there with me, I always knew someone had my back in Orient.”

Her eyes grew wide and wet. Large, hot tears welled and slid down her cheeks.

“If it’s all right with you,” I suggested, “how about we bathe together, just like

on that first day?”

“Yes! Of course!”

We headed to the baths. Back then, the palace had been entirely foreign to us both and had boasted only a handful of maids and a single court lady. That day, as we walked, however, we encountered multiple maids who inquired whether we needed any help, while court ladies bowed to us in the distance.

Passing by the entrance to the medicine storage rooms, we inhaled the strong stench of unguents. The garden had been neatly pruned in preparation for the snowy season. The furniture and ornaments throughout the building and grounds were polished and shiny. Indeed—Sekirei Palace had become a beautiful place we could take pride in.

“Lady Sai!” chirped Suzuiro merrily. She had skipped ahead of me. “We came at a good time! The baths are ready! Let’s go!” She turned around and startled, asking me, “Lady Sai, are you...crying?”

“Hu...h?” I touched my cheek, and my fingertips came away moist.

“Are you hurt anywhere?!” exclaimed Suzuiro. “Um, or maybe, are you scared of going back to Centoria?!” She looked anxious and restless as she ran to me.

She wasn’t the only one. The kitchen maids, the court ladies nearby, and even the attendant who had informed Suzuiro about the baths hurtled toward me from every corner out of concern.

“Lady Sai, are you all right?”

“My lady...”

“Lady Sai!”

In Centoria, after I lost my parents, I had felt as if I was all alone in the world. No one stopped to pay attention to the witch with creepy black hair; merely surviving every day had taken everything out of me. When I was down with a cold, when I was crushed by sorrow, everyone had ignored me: my fiancé, his family, and the members of the Order.

But someone like me had gained the support of so many people in Orient, and with their help, I had found my happiness. *Now...I’m the most fortunate person*

in the world.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m just so...so *happy*... Sorry, I’ll stop soon...” Yet my tears kept flowing.

Suzuiro gave me a big hug. The energetic, talkative girl was quiet as she offered me comfort—she simply wrapped her arms around me tight. I had the sense that she had grown a little taller, and her hair had lengthened significantly as well. Emotion overwhelmed my heart. The girl I had once thought I needed to help and watch over had transformed into a splendid court lady.

“Lady Sai, we’re here for you,” Suzuiro said with a big, reliable smile. “Let’s deal with all this troublesome business so that you can come back and find happiness with His Majesty.”



Chapter One Hundred Nine: A Kiss in the Sky

OVER half a year had passed since Emperor Haruka saved me and brought me to Orient. It had been the very beginning of summer then, and currently it was late autumn, a chilly hint of snow threading through the breeze. I was departing the Orient Empire that day to travel by carriage to my homeland in Centoria.

A shower of papercut flowers, sekka, rained on us in blessing as our carriage pressed on. From the window, I could see the mountains were dyed crimson with the final autumnal coat of the year. The higher altitudes were already dusted with a layer of white snow.

I was wearing several thick layers of clothing, and Emperor Haruka wrapped his wings around me. “Are you cold?” he asked in a tender voice as he stroked my hair.

“I’m all right... Your wings are warm.”

His lips found the earlobe he had pierced. Ticklish, I squirmed a little, and he let out a small, throaty laugh. “This brings me back. It reminds me of when we traveled this highway into Orient.”

“It makes me nostalgic too. Back then...we were in the same carriage, and I was nervous the entire time.”

I had felt utterly overwhelmed—by the sudden fortune that had fallen into my lap, by my memories of the plot that dictated Emperor Haruka’s doomed future, and by his stunning looks. By the people of Orient who had been very kind to me, who had always been scorned or ignored in Centoria. By the friendly maids. By the delightful food I had been served at an inn. By the happiness of sharing a meal and laughter with people around the same table.

What I had suddenly experienced was a kind of bliss that I used to think I would never feel again after my parents passed away. *Yes, that’s right...* After their “deaths,” I had felt helpless, pained. Since I’d learned that they were alive and in good health, I instead felt restless whenever I thought of them. *I want to see them soon. I want to see their faces again. I want to meet my younger sister.*

I wonder what she looks like.

Emperor Haruka pulled me to him once again, adjusting my position in his arms. He held me firm against his warm chest, and I could feel the thumping of his heart.

“Sai. Your pulse must be racing this time as well, right?”

“Yes, but it’s for a different reason... I... Whenever I feel you, touch you, I...”

“Ha ha. Me too.”

Emperor Haruka squeezed me tight and covered me with his wings. He refused to let go of me even for a second. It was as if he wanted to spend every instant remaining of his life on me—he was always patting me, whispering to me, kissing me on my forehead.

“I love you, Sai,” he murmured, as he so often did lately. “My beloved little wagtail.”

Although we were on our way to eliminate the Saint of Centoria, Emperor Haruka wasn’t acting any differently. That was out of kindness to me. Moments alone with him were precious. He knew that his remaining time was limited, flowing away like sand in an hourglass, and wanted to give me as many seconds of happiness as he could. One by one, he etched them into my mind and soul, each a prayer that I would feel like I was glad to have been born.

“Emperor Haruka, I’m happy...” I pressed my cheek against his chest and closed my eyes. Although our wedding was still far off, spring was already by my side.



AFTER four nights, our carriage finally arrived in the Cutrettola territory. My entire body was restless and antsy. The place was my homeland—the mountain ranges, the humid forest air, the soil I could feel through the movements of the carriage wheels...

Large flower wreaths decorated the village entrance, woven of special blossoms we used only during celebrations and festivals. The residents who came to greet us kneeled before our carriage and bowed in the most respectful

manner in Oriental culture.

I fell silent. I couldn't stop a certain memory from replaying in my mind—the nightmarish day when I was nearly executed. I placed a hand on my chest and balled it into a fist.

Emperor Haruka lifted his head and gave me a kiss. “Sai, it's okay. You have me.”

“...Yes.”

When I alighted the carriage, I saw my former people shedding tears as they continued to bow. They welcomed us warmly as we headed toward the Cutrettola Civic Building that the Centorian government had established.



ALL the key political figures of both nations were present at the meeting.

On Orient's side was Emperor Haruka and his Twin Wings. The Deputy Right Legate had come in place of the Right Legate, who remained behind to direct the government, and the Left Legate was there as well. Last but not least was the Chief Priest, who managed government affairs relating to magic.

Representing Centoria were the king and queen, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and a handful of cardinals from the Holy Curia, which was the supervisory division of the Order of Holy Knights.

It was almost surreal to see all those influential people gathered in a remote, small domain like the Cutrettola lands. When the queen spotted me, she didn't offer any words, instead giving me a faint smile. Her complexion was even paler than when I had met her in Orient, and I glimpsed her ribs below her collarbones. The king's countenance was just as alarming. It was clear that Centoria had its back against the wall.

After an initial exchange of greetings between guests from both sides, the king looked directly at me and cut right to the heart of the matter. “We are planning to banish the saint we have summoned, Saint Lilly, to her original world. Lady Sai, the Wagtail Priestess, Sage of Cutrettola, and the Amawashi's empress...we ask that you banish her with your powers. Please.”

Centoria was going to sacrifice much over the course of the negotiations.

First, they were going to dissolve the Order and organize a new national army under the supervision of both Orient and Meridiona.

Second, they were to return a parcel of land along their border to Orient: Sekirei Prefecture.

Third, they had to cease all conflict with Meridiona and acknowledge Meridiona's king as legitimate. They also had to annul the treaties they had previously formed with unfair conditions.

Fourth, Centoria would remove many of the restrictions on the medicine merchants of Orient. The import tax would be abolished. They would also grant permission to descendants of Oriental mages who had been forced to immigrate to return freely to Orient whenever they wished.

That wasn't the end of the long list of stipulations, and they were so desperate for my aid that they accepted each one. I was willing to bet that no one had ever expected that the powerful nation, once the most prosperous on the continent, would fall to such lows.

The answer I gave the king had been decided before our arrival.

"Understood," I said.

Underneath the table, Emperor Haruka held my shaking hands.



THE next day, when Emperor Haruka came to fetch me, he wore such a bright smile that for a moment, I almost thought that the meeting the day before had been a dream.

The man who stood before me with a gentle curl on his lips and large golden eagle wings was the familiar sight I woke to every morning. But the bed and the design of the manor was in the Centorian style. Outside the window was a familiar, vast mountain forest, and the smell of the air was also unique to my once home. Everything seemed mismatched as though someone had tried to put together a puzzle with jumbled pieces from different sets.

Emperor Haruka flipped down his veil and put on a mischievous grin. "Hey,

Sai. Would you mind giving me a tour of your hometown?"

"A...tour?"

"Yeah."

I hesitated. "There's not much of anything around here. Only the residents' houses, farms, and a big forest."

"But this is where you grew up as Sai Cutrettola." He took my hand and, smiling at the maids, led me out of the manor, light on his feet.

Maybe he wants to wander around with me here since he doesn't have the freedom to do so in Orient. In contrast to the previous evening, that morning he was open with his affection, his large hands gently encompassing mine as daylight streamed around us. My chest warmed at his firm grip.

When we emerged outside, the first to greet us was a wistful autumn breeze. My emotions were a chaotic mess—my heart aching from the fact that I had been away for so long but also thrumming with joy since I could walk my former lands with the man I loved. Yet even that sense of conflicting emotion in my chest was dear to me.

"Please don't get your hopes up, okay?" I cautioned him.

"If I'm with you, Sai, no matter where I am, I won't feel bored." He smiled at me through his veil. Nearby bystanders watched us with warm gazes as well.

Ah... How could there be such happiness in this world?

The Cutrettola village was tiny and easily traversed by foot from one end to the other. At first, I had suggested using a horse, but Emperor Haruka declined, saying, "You used to walk here when you were a child, didn't you?" Then he changed into more convenient shoes to follow me around in.

As we meandered through the settlement that chilly fall morning, we came across countless, diligent people busy at work. They hurriedly moved to bow to us in respectful greeting, and our accompanying servants passed on our message that such formalities were unnecessary.

"This place really is quite small," Emperor Haruka noted.

"It's exactly how I described it."

“You’re almost like a big family. Do you know everyone who lives here, Sai?”

“Of course. Though...” I faltered. “I *have* been away for a while, so some things and people might have changed.” I gazed at the nostalgic Centorian houses, all characterized by their stark white plaster walls, as I recalled memories of each one.

A petite hunting dog puppy staggered out of a home from across the path. With a soft smile, Emperor Haruka lifted it into his arms and gingerly placed it back inside the garden.

“A very kind grandma used to live in that house,” I said. “She was a wonderful storyteller and told many old tales to the children of this village.”

“Ah, did you learn some of the bedtime stories you tell me occasionally from her?”

“Yes.” I paused, reminiscing. “The tale of an Oriental soldier and a veteran Centorian soldier who regretted their parting many years ago when they were still best friends. The scary legend of the monster in the woods that dines only on sweet and beautiful children. And...” I broke off.

Emperor Haruka inclined his head in question. “What’s wrong?”

“I...just remembered that one of my favorite stories was...one about the Golden Eagle Emperor Haruka of Orient...”

His eyes widened in surprise before he chuckled. “You knew about me but never realized I was the crown prince when you met me in the past?”

Heat collected in my cheeks. “I mean... I never thought I would actually meet someone like that, and...I was a child.”

“Is that how it works? That’s pretty interesting.” He intertwined our fingers and beamed at me as though suddenly even happier. “Sai, tell me more. About your childhood with your parents, about all kinds of things about you.”

“Of course.” I returned his smile and nodded.

My painful memories of my parents’ death, my solitary life after my betrothal, and my execution had been like ice that froze everything else around it. And Emperor Haruka was thawing them one by one.

We walked on. “This is a forest I often gathered fruit in,” I said. “I used to come here every day, and gradually, I even started to memorize the faces of the squirrels.”

“That’s something you can memorize? Huh.”



“**OVER** here is where all the residents pile their vegetables and store them in soil. We used the location every year, and because of that, the natural field of mana was disrupted over time. To deal with that, I... Ah, it’s still here. The enchanted stone I made to erect a barrier around the area is still in use.”

“How old were you when you crafted it?”

“I think I was...around five?”

“Your parents must have been proud of your talent.”



“**THE** two people riding on the cart over there are my childhood friends.” I paused. “Pardon me, may I head over to greet them?”

“Can I go with you? We’ll catch up in no time if I fly there.”

“I...hope they’re not too shocked.”



ALL my old memories of my homeland were slowly overwritten with new ones with Emperor Haruka. The scenery, the scent, the wind, the sounds...

The ribbon that was securing my hair had nearly come undone, and Emperor Haruka helped retie it into a bow.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Your hair has gotten longer.” He touched the strands falling past my neck and a soft smile lit his eyes.

His gaze reminded me of the heat that pressed against me every night, and my chest tightened. If we weren’t the Wagtail Priestess and the emperor, I wondered whether we would have been able to walk shoulder to shoulder or lean into each other like a normal couple.

“Hey, Sai,” he said, “how does flying again sound?”

“Huh...?”

“I haven’t gotten to fly at all recently, so...”

Without warning, his wings stretched out as if to cover the sky, and he hugged me tight.

“Wai— Ah!” I gasped.

A deafening whoosh of wind lashed at me, a hurricane that threatened to raze the world to dust, and I closed my eyes. The next thing I knew, my feet were no longer on the ground.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw the Cutrettola lands far below us, filling my vision. Instantly, I clung to his arm.

He inclined his head to kiss my ear before moving me into a more stable position. “Don’t worry. There’s no way I’d ever let you fall.”

“Emperor Haruka... Thank you. Thank you for saving me over and over again.”

“Over and over again? It was just the once, right?”

I shook my head. “Like all the other times, you saved me today. You transformed my painful memories of my homeland into happy ones. I’m sure that...I will no longer wake up in the middle of the night thinking of Centoria or be forced to remember the blue flames that swallowed my house whole.”

The smile vanished from his face as he looked at me with earnest eyes. They were a few shades lighter than the sky, and in them I saw my reflection. When I closed my own, a tender kiss fell onto my lips—so gentle that I almost forgot to count. His hands were occupied supporting me, so his lips, soft like petals, brushed my cheeks and eyelids in their place.

Feeling the heat of his mouth and breath against my skin, I couldn’t resist the call of my heart, and I begged him to kiss me one more time.

“...You’re quite bold when we’re up here in the sky,” he murmured.

“It might be because no one is watching us.”

“That doesn’t seem to be the case though.”

“...Huh?”

I couldn't bear to recall what happened after that for fear of exploding in shame. That night, Emperor Haruka teased me—who was as red and mute as an apple—about it at every opportunity until I dozed off.

Chapter One Hundred Ten: Resignation, Realization, Hope

FINALLY, the day arrived.

I was led to the tower where Saint Lilly was imprisoned. It was located on the outskirts of the royal capital, a site under the management of the Holy Curia.

The sky was a light gray that reminded me of Emperor Haruka's eyes, and the parched, crumbling stone tower stood tall and thin almost like a spear piercing the heavens. Around the tower were Oriental military officers in formation, ready to face whatever monstrosity that might emerge. In the distance, a handful of guards escorted the royal couple of Centoria.

By the time we arrived in the capital, the Order of Holy Knights had already ceased to function. When the Centorian public had learned that the Order had imprisoned the empress of Orient for a whole winter on false charges, burned her house down, and even tried to execute her, they attacked the Order out of trepidation—they feared Orient's retribution, and the riot escalated out of control, or so I had heard.

What was left of the Order had evidently tried to assemble the remaining few members to serve as my guards, but Emperor Haruka had hissed in a low voice, “Are you so depraved that you wish for Holy Knights to enter Our empress's sight, reminding her of those wretched days?” His statement had sounded the death knell for the institution.

I couldn't argue that. Even after months in safety, whenever I saw people whom I associated with the Order, my pulse quickened and sweat slicked my palms. If not for Emperor Haruka's consideration, I probably wouldn't have been so calm.

Side by side, he and I looked up the tower. Strangely, all I felt in my heart was stillness.

“Sai, are you okay?”

“Yes. Thanks to you and everyone around us, I am ready to take on anything.” I gave him a wide smile.

He furrowed his eyebrows in worry, appearing far more pained than I was as he muttered, “Sorry. You probably hate the idea of being forced into Centoria’s battles, of fighting for its sake...”

“Not at all.” I shook my head. “As your wife, it is my duty to make every effort for the success of our allied nation, Meridiona. It is an honorable task that only the Wagtail Priestess and empress can accomplish. So please, don’t look so torn.”

“Give me a kiss before you go.”

“...In a place like this?”

Without a sound, the emperor’s wings concealed me from the world. In the improvised darkness, the emperor hugged me as if he couldn’t bear to let me go. He kissed me, stroked my cheek, then placed his lips on mine once again.

“Sai... I can’t live without you. I can’t shoulder the weight of emperor without you by my side.” He sounded almost like a lost child as he whispered to me.

“Emperor Haruka...” It was the first time his emotions had gotten the better of him in public. He clung to me, kissed me, without regard for his status and the eyes of those assembled around the tower.

My eyes were wide as I allowed him to shower me with his kisses. Somewhere in my head, a rational voice murmured, *Perhaps he already knows what I’m planning.*

“Emperor Haruka,” I repeated, giving him the most brilliant smile I could muster. With a finger, I wiped away the lipstick that had transferred to his lips, then rose on tiptoe to kiss the corners of his eyes, which seemed to be welling with tears.

I removed the white silk ribbon tying my hair and placed it into his hand. His

eyes widened. “I shall be off then, my dearest emperor.”

I turned away and walked to the tower. Soon, enough distance separated us that even his wings stretched to their fullest extent couldn’t reach me.

And he couldn’t chase me any further.



I was deep in thought as I climbed the spiral stairs step by step. For the longest time, a question had burned in the back of my mind—why did all the descendants of the bird priestesses in the creation myth vanish one after another into the gaps of history? If the title of Wagtail Priestess passed from mother to daughter, our powers activating each generation in the woman with the purest blood, in theory, the priestesses shouldn’t have disappeared even if the primary family died out. So why were there so pitifully few of us on the continent?

And an even bigger question: why did I have memories of a previous life in the first place? I wasn’t born with them. In fact, I only started to recall them roughly around the time I experienced my awakening as the Wagtail Priestess. I had no way to ask her right then, but I suspected that my mother also remembered a past life. Throughout my childhood, she sometimes mentioned nonsensical words or concepts, and occasionally solved problems with innovative solutions that no one else could have conceived.

What if, through those memories, she had known the preordained destiny of her daughter, Sai Cutrettola? She had tried to drill as much knowledge into me as she could when I was a child, teaching me various ways to make a livelihood. What if that was because she wanted me to have the means to survive no matter my destiny?

If my suspicions were correct, all priestesses possessed memories of a previous life. But for some unknown reason, despite the automatic inheritance to the woman with the least diluted bloodline, those priestesses disappeared.

Then there were the Saints, summoned from another world. Regardless of where one searched, no records or documents of their lives after they performed their miracles could be found.

“The priestesses exist to return the Saint to her original world,” I whispered to myself. By speaking out loud, I was telling myself to accept my fate. “This world...uses priestesses to send the Saint, a foreign entity, back to her own. Only the priestesses know that the Saint isn’t holy or sacred... Because the priestesses are aware that the Saint is merely a player assuming the role of the game’s protagonist...”

If I was right, then I knew the method to return the player to her original world. The bad ending of the game was a “Sent Home” result wherein the protagonist fails to accomplish her mission as the Saint. In my previous life, the cutscene illustration of that ending had appeared to be just a fancy pattern across the screen, but I’d since realized exactly what it was.

It was an ancient technique that cost powerful mana and the caster’s life in order to connect two different planes of existence—a spell that the modern mages of my current world couldn’t cast because the ancient religion that was its source had morphed from its initial state, the magic lost to time.

But I could replicate it. I could construct the pattern using my memories of my previous life, and my mana pool was that of the powerful and legendary Wagtail Priestess. So many past priestesses must have sacrificed their bloodlines and, indeed, their very lives, to bridge the two worlds. And I would do the same.

With every step up the winding stair, I reminisced about all the happiness I had experienced. My simple and blissful childhood in Centoria. My painful but determined existence after parting with my parents, forging onward with a small light of hope in my chest. The people I had met in Orient and the joy I had found there.

“I’m sorry, Emperor Haruka.” Alone, I whispered a selfish and egoistic apology to him. “If I don’t do this, the Saint will eventually destroy this world. From my memories of my previous life, I know what calamity she can wreak if she is not stopped. I need to do this because I want to protect everyone...and you.”

He’s going to be furious, I thought. I wondered whether he would be able to pick himself up again after I was gone. But he was a dignified emperor who had always accepted all his responsibilities with a resolute smile. *Even I’m not*

around...I'm sure he'll be fine.

I was scared to leave him behind and all alone,. Yet I was even more frightened that he would suffer misfortune if I didn't fulfill my destiny.

"I love you, Emperor Haruka. I fell in love with you at first sight, from the moment I saw you in my previous life."

Words poured out of my mouth like raindrops. Oddly, I felt very...happy. Content. As I scaled higher and higher, my resolve strengthened.

"Your silky, ivory hair, your ash-blue eyes the color of the distant sky, your skin as fair as your snowy empire, your pristine white silk clothing that flutters elegantly like queen of the night flowers... Your majestic golden eagle wings, your—"

The sensation of your soft lips on mine, the heat of your palms...

My entire body sang its affection for him. My love overflowed, sweet like the nectar of a flower in full bloom.

"I like it all—your warmth, the scent of your skin, the slightly painful prick of your canines. Your talent in making tea, how your tone is identical to Lord Raiya's when you're speaking solemnly, how you like it when I touch the base of your wings, how you..." I swallowed. "...How you're a little more emotional than rational, and how when you're not careful, you reflexively change the weather... I never told you, but I loved you, every single part of you."

Where no one was present to hear me, I voiced my love so desperately that I almost felt as if I were shouting my throat hoarse. My words didn't echo, instead melting into the stone walls.

"I loved you, Your Majesty, Emperor Haruka. Thank you for choosing me."

When I disappeared, my younger sister would become the next Wagtail Priestess. I was sure that as the wife of the Gou heir, she would protect Emperor Haruka. *See? There are plenty of people who can replace m—*

Re...place?

I stilled. "Wait."

I felt as though I had been struck by lightning, petrified.

“I have a younger sister... And my mother likely knew the true duty of the Wagtail Priestess from...her memories of her previous life...” Everything suddenly clicked into place, and I was reeling in shock, my mind blank.

“Ah... I see, so that’s how it is, Mom...”

My feet felt light, as if the weight of my body had abruptly halved. I gripped my skirts and ran up the stairs.

My mother likely had memories of a previous life. And she knew that the priestess was a human sacrifice for the elimination of the Saint. That was why she had gone to Meridiona, feigned her death, and birthed my younger sister in absolute secrecy. Because she wanted there to be as many women with the blood and powers of the Wagtail Priestess as possible.

Through Lord Kuze, she would know that I was going to banish the Saint to another world. *In that case...maybe I can bet on the slim chance that I can come back to this world one day.*

“Your Majesty...”

Facing the door at the very top of the stairs, I caressed the earring I had received from the emperor.

“...I love you.”



THE door opened to reveal Saint Lilly, who looked over at me with a smile. Even then, maids probably still attended to her—she wore a beautiful white dress as she sat on a canopy bed. Her vivid neon pink hair flowed freely down her back, draping to the sheets like silk.

“Took you long enough, Wagtail Priestess.”

Chapter One Hundred Eleven: A Toy Box, a Girl Who Played Make-Believe, and a Girl Who Turned Puppet

LILLY had been imprisoned, so she had to know my reason for coming. As always, she wore a smile on her face as she studied me with a bewitching gaze.

But unlike before, she no longer kept up the act of mild-mannered, superficial politeness that hid a tongue sharper than knives—instead, she openly expressed her ardent desire and hostility. Such was her true self.

“So? What’re you gonna do with me? Feel free to take revenge for how I stole your fiancé.”

“...Ah, now that you mention it, there was such a person.”

“Wow, you’re awful. Alexei Streltsy’s the name. At least make the effort to remember that much.”

My life in Orient had been like a dream come true, and furthermore, my body and heart and even status all belonged to Emperor Haruka. Though my former fiancé had endlessly abused me and had caused me nothing but suffering, the sound of his name stirred not a single emotion in my heart. Perhaps it was an innate defense mechanism at work—which prevented me from being dragged back into the pathetic girl I had once been, gloomy and miserable.

Lilly sized me up during my silence, then scoffed. “Well well, your complexion’s much healthier and your clothes are lavish too. Looks like you’re living the life. Good for you.”

“You have stopped speaking so politely,” I noted.

“Yep! Other people didn’t notice at all, but you did!” Lilly was surprisingly amicable. Her voice was cheery and she leaned forward excitedly. “You know, at first, I was like, oh, I guess I’ll try to put on a Saintish attitude at least, but nah. Someone low class like me couldn’t never keep it up. Never in a thousand years.”

She was growing increasingly animated and chatty, and she gave me a friendly smile. “Could you stop being so stiff too? Even if you’re all polite to me, it’s not like you’re gonna get anything outta it.”

I shook my head. “I am not polite because I am looking for something in return.”

“What a goody-two-shoes we have here.” She shrugged, looking exasperated. “That’s why you always end up the toy of those bastards in power.” She scowled, squinting one eye in resentment. Her glower seemed to be directed

not at me but at my position as someone who had become a disposable “toy” at the whim of fate. “You have strong priestess powers too, don’tcha? Why didn’t you do as you pleased like I did?”

“Unlike you, I was not summoned here from another world. I was born here and inherited the blood and obligation of my family. I am someone who survives with my two feet planted on the ground, not an outsider tethered to somewhere else.” I paused. “Indulging in self-destruction will not gain me anything.”

“Oh? You say that, but living earnestly only got your house burned down, remember?” She cackled.

I sighed. “We will get nowhere with this conversation. The responsibilities and burdens on our shoulders are different, and so are our attitudes toward that weight.”

“Yeah, guess you’re right.”

I hesitated. “You...”

“Hm?”

“You had every opportunity to reach a happy future as the Saint if you acted responsibly in this world. But even with that knowledge, you still chose this end. Am I correct?” I stared into her eyes with conviction. My intuition told me that I was right.

She didn’t show much of a reaction. “Sure, people fawn over me and worship me cuz I’m the Saint or something, but so what? I just want to break everything. I mean, think about it. A woman who’s born in a lame-ass bland world to a lame-ass bland family, and she’s thrown around and used like a freakin’ rag doll, worn out and tattered, and suddenly she’s *summoned* to another world! As the oh-so great lady saint with the best looks and status and power possible!”

She stroked her hair and skin in rapture as though she truly did love her appearance. “A bunch of papercut people who only existed in data before walk around as they please, as if followin’ some sort of ‘I’m a human’ script, and they suck up to me, callin’ me Lady Saint this, Lady Saint that. When I try to play with them a little bit, they start heading to their doom or die or get horny. Hah.

What a bunch of idiots.”

“I disagree.” I shook my head firmly. “Even if they are characters from a story, they still live every second of their lives as desperately as normal humans. We have no right to toy with their lives as we please.”

“Rich coming from the gal who changed said story to protect the man she loves.”

I sucked in a sharp breath.

Upon seeing my reaction, Lilly must have felt that she had found a critical foothold. She grinned wide with rose-red lips. “I’m a hundred percent sure now. Wagtail Priestess—you played that game too, didn’t you?”

“...Yes.”

“Ah, you mentioned you were reincarnated, so maybe you don’t know.”

“Huh...?”

Unexpectedly patient, she explained, “Okay, listen up. There was actually an official one-shot manga spinoff featuring a route where the Oriental emperor survives and Sai Cutrettola’s the heroine.”

“There...was?”

“What I don’t know is whether that one-shot manga was created ’cuz you changed the plot, or if you were only able to save him ’cuz there was already such a spinoff.” She shrugged.

Relief washed over my heart. But at the same time, her admission bothered me. She could have chosen to hide the existence of the spinoff route and used her knowledge to verbally disarm me and drive me into a corner before finding an opening to attack me with her magic.

But she didn’t. Why had she told me something that would reassure me instead?

I was distracted for a moment by my confusion, and when I focused again, I saw her sitting on the ledge of the room’s window. The tower was so tall that I could only see endless sky behind her. The pitiful amount of mana she had left was granting her some immunity to magic, yet there was only one outcome if

she fell.

“Lilly.”

“Ye-e-es, Sai?”

“You...wanted to die in this world, right? From the very beginning.”

“Yeah.” She paused. “Ugh, damn it, this is so frustrating.” Abruptly she covered her face with her hands and started to laugh. “Ha ha ha! Hee-hee... Looks like you’re actually the person who understands me better than anyone. I wish we could’ve chatted more.”

Wind tugged at her hair, and she put a hand to the strands as she laughed. Sunlight illuminated her from behind; she was so beautiful that she could have been a painting.

“You know,” she began, “I killed myself before I was summoned here.”

My eyes widened. “You...”

“I died, I came to a new world, and then I was told I had to work hard again in this new place as the Saint. But I was already totally fed up with livin’ for the sake of other people.” Her face darkened slightly.

I was speechless.

“So yeah, I messed everything up, almost like flippin’ a toy box upside down. I even experienced love, and it was fun. Before I was summoned here, I was used by a scumbag of a guy to fork in cash, and that was the end of it.”

I realized that for a single word, her voice had been tender, soft. *Perhaps...she loved my former fiancé from the bottom of her heart.*

“Lilly. You ruined a country, rampaging until you were imprisoned. You wanted to force the Wagtail Priestess’s hand with your misdeeds...to force the priestess to put an end to the Saint—to you.”

“Pretty much.”

“But I will not let you die. Never.”

Lilly stilled on the window, staring at me.

I took a step forward. “No matter how painful your life was in your original

world, it is not a valid excuse for you to trample on the humans of another. If what you seek is death, then I cannot use my powers for that purpose.”

“It’s not like you have to. Jumping from here will do the trick instantly.” She shrugged. “I arranged for you to come during my final moments not because I want you to kill me, but because I wanted a last chat.”

“Wha...”

“Because my intuition was telling me that you’re my little buddy, someone who knows about my original world. That’s why I wanted to talk.”

“Why would you...” I shook my head in disbelief. “We could have simply become friends like normal people do.”

“That’s ’cuz I didn’t want to remember my original world until I was on death’s door. I wanted you to be the last person I spoke to. Nothing more.”

“I cannot say I understand your way of thinking...”

“Well, ask yourself this instead. Have you ever understood any of my feelings to begin with?” With an alluring smile, she leaned backward. There was no hesitation as she kicked against the wall to give herself a boost.

At the last moment, she smiled at me again, a pure, enchanting smile as carefree as a child. “Bye.”

Then.

“Lilly!” rang a familiar voice from behind me. Someone rushed past me, wind in their wake, to chase the woman beyond the window. It was Alexei who leaped into the void, hugging Lilly’s body to his own. Alexei, stripped of the shining silver armor he had taken such pride in and reduced to a mere, ordinary man.

Lilly’s eyes widened. “Alex...ei?!”

The pair hurtled headfirst down the tower. There wasn’t time to think.

I cast the spell.

Chapter One Hundred Twelve: To Part the Heavens Like Lightning

WHEN I came to, I realized I had fallen on something soft. That something let out a strangled toadlike croak as I sat up.

I was astonished.

The sound of cars. The crowds of pedestrians coming and going along the crosswalk. Towering buildings climbing into the sky. Shining traffic lights.

“This is...Shibuya...?” I mumbled in a daze.

I looked down at myself. I was dressed in a black school uniform with a red scarf—a typical high schooler’s outfit.

Memories crashed into my mind like an avalanche. I had been wearing the same uniform when my previous life ended.

The passersby gave us bizarre looks, yet they walked on with brisk strides, swerving around us in an almost artistic motion. The humans of Tokyo were used to the unexpected, and three strange youngsters lying in the middle of the street weren’t anything worthy of pointing their cameras at or even a second of their attention.

“No way... No way, how—how could this...” The woman lying below me was squirming against the asphalt as hysteria crept into her voice. “Tell me I’m dreaming...! No way, why—how— I never wanted to come back to a world like this, why, *why*?!”

It was Lilly. Next to her, Alexei, identical to his form in the other world, was sitting on the ground in a daze. “What in the world happened to us...?”

The traffic lights began to flash.

I frowned. “We need to move.” Relying on the memories of my past life that had suddenly surged back with clarity, I grabbed their hands and stood up, then somehow managed to tow everyone to safety from Shibuya Crossing.

The other two caught their breath as they sat on the sidewalk. The pair looked like a couple that was still feeling the effects of alcohol they had ingested the night before, which wasn’t too uncommon on the streets of Shibuya. Far more out of place was the high school girl who was dragging such a

couple around in broad daylight, and I noticed people staring at me.

“Why... Why did you do this...? How could you do this to me?!” Lilly grabbed me by the collar as she screamed. She had lost her neon pink hair. It had been replaced with a disheveled blonde, and her features were that of a Japanese woman.

I saw my reflection in her eyes—for some reason, I still looked like Sai Cutrettola. I had died and reincarnated, so perhaps I didn’t have a body left in the world of my past life.

“I did this to protect my world, Lilly,” I said in a firm voice.

She spat before yelling her throat hoarse. “I had to come back here for a reason like that?! This is a nightmare!”

I could understand her despair. She had been fed up with every aspect of her life and sought relief; she’d believed herself free of her burdens in the foreign world she had escaped to. And then she had been forced to come back. It must feel like hell.

But I thought it a good outcome. She had to pay for all the things and people she had destroyed during her rampage in the other world, and a voluntary death as the Saint wasn’t a fitting punishment.

She tore at her hair and shrieked, “I’ll die right now! Watch me, I’ll die right here!” And she ran.

“Lilly!” Alexei chased her. He seemed to recognize her despite her new appearance.

I called out to him. “Alexei.”

He nearly stumbled as he stopped, whipping his head around. “What?!”

“You are willing to follow her, I see.”

“Isn’t that obvious?! I don’t know what’s going on, but that’s my woman!”

He sprinted at full speed toward the delirious Lilly. His running form was that of a knight who had drilled himself thoroughly, and an indescribable emotion suffused my heart.

He had been cold and indifferent to me—I would never forget the pain caused by his fists and my sorrow when he hadn't believed my innocence. But initially, he had been a diligent man who'd climbed to the post of Holy Knight Commander with his sweat, blood, and tears. And even after forfeiting that post, he had likely never ceased his training.

"May you...find happiness in this world as well," I whispered.

I watched them until they disappeared into the crowd. Once they were gone, I found myself at a loss. "Oh, what do I do...?"

I stood there in my uniform feeling utterly adrift. I turned to stare at my reflection in a display window. Sai Cutrettola looked different from who I had been in my previous life, yet with my black hair and eyes, I wouldn't attract attention in twenty-first-century Japan. *I certainly look like I belong here, but...* I glanced at my palms then up at the sky. I came to a realization:

"As a lone high school girl without a name and absent from the civil register... what do I do now?"

The gravity of my situation slowly sank into me. *I might be in major trouble.* I had used up all my abilities as the Wagtail Priestess; in Japan, I was a powerless girl with no magic.

Then, abruptly—

"Sai!"

—the sky tore in two above my head.

An angel soared toward me from the other side of the opening. He'd hurtled through a "sky" made of glass, and the sharp fragments pierced his body as he stretched his wings wide and swooped down.

I reached my arms out toward the angel and screamed, "Emperor Haruka! Here!"

He found me in the crowd and his eyes widened. Bleeding gashes littered his body, and his white silk robes were shredded. He flew to me and gathered me into his arms—then ascended back up to the gap in the "sky" that had nearly finished mending itself.

Chapter One Hundred Thirteen: Everything is Meaningless Without You

EMPEROR Haruka held me in his arms as he dove into the tear. What seemed like glass shards rained down on us as we soared in a straight line through the void.

A myriad of images flew at us in a large, jumbled swirl. We went from darkness to light, mist to rain, bustling crowds to open sky. Information pushed itself forcefully into my brain.



I had fallen unconscious.

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was the familiar white silk of Emperor Haruka's robes. The sky above us was light gray, and the grass below a verdant green. From a distance, military officers and a whole throng of people were watching us in shock.

I was lying on the ground, and Emperor Haruka was hugging me. Craning my neck, I located the tower window from which I had jumped down after Lilly and Alexei.

The latter two were nowhere in sight. Emperor Haruka and I were sitting right below where I would have fallen.

Something hot splashed onto my skin.

"Emperor...Haruka...?"

Another steaming drop. And another.

Blood trailed down his shredded wings, stained his white robes. It wouldn't stop. His ivory hair was a tangled mess, and through it, I glimpsed his ash-blue eyes. Tears were flowing down his cheeks. He had suffered grave injury just to bring me back.

"Didn't you promise me...that you would never leave me...?" He sounded as if he was squeezing every word past his throat. Though crimson blood tainted his

fair skin and robes, he stubbornly clung to me.

My mind was blank. I tried to untangle myself from him. “Emperor Haruka... You’re injured, you can’t—”

“Who cares about my wounds?!” he shouted as he reached out and pulled me back toward him.

Anger was an emotion I had never seen on him before. I flinched. Blood gushed out of his injured wings as he moved.

“Your wings... Emperor Haruka...!”

“I don’t need them. I don’t need wings. If the alternative is living in a world without you, I don’t need anything!” He hugged me suffocatingly tight.

I wrapped my arms around him, desperate. I had to tend to his wounds. “*Emperor Haruka, I shall heal you. Please re...lax...*” As I chanted, I focused on my abdomen, but for some reason, my mana didn’t respond at all.

His arms went limp. His body went limp. He leaned into me.



“Wait... Huh...? Why... Why is it...” My voice was shaking. I supported the weight of Emperor Haruka’s increasingly heavy body and concentrated, straining to summon my magic. No matter how many times I tried, however, nothing happened. I couldn’t stop his bleeding.

“No... Why... Please, don’t...” The patch of red was spreading further on his robes of white silk. My clothes were stained scarlet. “Please, stop bleeding, I’m begging you... No way, why can’t I...”

Earlier, I’d vaguely registered the sound of the clergy hurriedly preparing to attend to his injuries. The doctors on site were starting to treat him as well. But it was far from enough.

Only moments before, he had hugged me hard enough to seemingly meld our bodies into one. He lay there, his lips slightly parted, entirely unmoving. He was so quiet. It was as though he had never shouted to begin with.

“H-Hurry up, I need to hurry, Emperor Haruka will... I can’t...”

What happened next snapped me out of my growing hysteria.

A horse charged between the gaps in the military officers and doctors, careening toward us.

“Oi! Is the emperor still alive?!”

The voice was rough and coarse—it was Lord Kuze, accompanied by two women on the same horse. The towering man leaped down with one woman under each arm and ran over as the crowd parted for him. Behind him, a servant pushed a man in a wheelchair.

“Sai! You still alive?!” Lord Kuze yelled.

“I am! But...!”

“That’s what I wanted to hear!” His amber eyes gleamed over a daring grin. “I’ll leave things in your hands, you two!”

The two women he had carried darted to Emperor Haruka in the blink of an eye and tugged him off me. One of them was still young, a tanned girl with black hair in Meridionan clothing.

In a shrill, compelling voice, she addressed Emperor Haruka. "Sorry for the rudeness, Your Majesty, but I shall save introductions for later! I shall heal you right away! Ah, Sis, out of the way, please!" Without hesitation, she placed her palms on his back.

The other woman was also dressed in Meridionan garb, and there were strands of gray mixed in with her black hair. Her dignified, powerful gaze pierced my very soul. "Sai, step aside. As Emperor Haruka's wife, you need to get a grip in his stead," she chided me in a strict but kindly voice.

I recognized it. "Mom! And..."

The two smiled as if acknowledging their identities then immediately deluged Emperor Haruka with magic.

My mother said, "Even if we don't have the abilities of the Wagtail Priestess, together we can heal these wounds. Sakura, prepare yourself."

"Yes!"

Dazzling light flowed out of their hands. The glow of the purest and highest-grade mana illuminated our surroundings, brighter than the sun itself and bringing relief to all who saw it. The medical team was dumbfounded, and the pair ignored them as they gave Emperor Haruka the appropriate treatment. They poured mana into him in perfect coordination.

The severe bleeding, which we had been so powerless against, halted instantly. Life and color returned to Emperor Haruka's ghastly pale skin. The pair exchanged a look, wiped away their sweat, then nodded to the gallery. Sighs of relief echoed out everywhere.

The creaking of a wheelchair approached me from behind. A warm hand gently clasped mine, grounding me and soothing my anxiety. I turned to see a skinny, seated man.

"You're also wounded," he said. "Let's treat those right away. You're going to be a bride, so we can't let any trace remain."

He was a mild man who had always sported a kind smile. I recognized him even though he wore Meridionan clothes. "Dad..."

“You’ve grown up into a beautiful woman, my girl.”



AND then.

A few months passed, tumultuous like a hurricane, and spring arrived.

Twelfth Arc: Never Will They Be Chained Down Again

Chapter One Hundred Fourteen: A Future Beyond the Plot

SPRING arrived at Sekirei Palace.

My mother, Sae, and sister, Sakura, had already grown used to living there, and the three of us were having a tea party in the gazebo. Though some snow still lingered on the ground, budding spring flowers peeked out from every corner of the garden, and the temperature had risen enough for us to enjoy a good cup of tea outside as long as we sat around a magical furnace.

“Sis, you can count on me during the Empress Induction Ceremony tomorrow.” Sakura narrowed her unyielding eyes and puffed out her chest. “Your Wagtail Priestess will definitely make sure you have only sunny skies.”

Initially, my younger sister had often dressed in Meridionan clothing, but after settling in Orient, she started to wear an Oriental ruqun instead. The fabric was paler than the uniform of my ladies-in-waiting—a cherry blossom pink that was almost white.

I shook my head and declined her generous offer. “Your mana isn’t stable yet, so don’t push yourself too hard.”

“Sis, listen. To me, it’s also the first occasion when I can stand side by side with Lord Hiaki in public, so I want clear skies.”

“You mustn’t abuse the priestess’s powers for your own selfish gain,” our mother said in a disapproving tone.

“I-It’s not selfish!” protested Sakura.

Our mother was also attired in the Oriental style, although hers was the plain ruqun of the other court ladies, and she had layered a white coat on top of it.

Since I was to become empress, our mother had taken over management of Sekirei Palace.

“That aside, Sis.” Sakura propped up her chin with a hand. “You had such powerful arcane ability. I’m surprised you didn’t let it go to your head.”

I had banished the Saint to another world, and the heavens had taken my magic from me in exchange. And so my sister had inherited the powers of the Wagtail Priestess. She grew stronger by the day, and she was giddy, almost a little too excited about it.

“That’s only natural,” our mother said. “I instilled in her the resolve and noble mentality of the Wagtail Priestess from the day she was born. Sakura, from now on, you too will—”

“Yees, Mom. I know. That’s why I’m diligently learning the fundamentals of magic from Master Raiya.”

Mother kneaded her forehead. “Ugh, I can feel a headache coming on. Sai was dutiful and earnest. Why is teaching my other girl so...”

“Huh?! How can you be so mean?!” exclaimed Sakura. “Hey, Sis, back me up here!”

I chuckled. “Mom, it’s okay. Lord Raiya is a responsible and strict teacher, so I’m sure she’ll learn many things as his pupil.”

Our mother sighed. “I have the feeling that she’s a little unworthy of the emperor’s mentor...”

“Mooom!” Sakura groaned. “Have a little more faith in me, will you?!”

We could talk forever when we sat down with sweets and tea. *This is so fun.* I was certain that Sakura had always encouraged my parents with her energy and vigor, shining in their darkest days like a dazzling sun. Her light was something I wasn’t capable of. I was very happy to have met my lively and reliable little sister.

We were slowly but surely making up for all the time we had been apart—until it was almost as if we had never been separated in the first place.

“What are you going to do this afternoon, Sakura?” I asked.

“I’m heading to the Gou estate with Lord Hiaki to do some final checks for my outfit tomorrow. It’s red like roses, shiny, and super cute! Take a good look at me tomorrow, okay, Sis?”

“Sakura.” Our mother cut in. “Your sister’s the star of the show tomorrow. Don’t forget that.”

“Yees, I know. That’s why I gotta stand right next to Sis in front of everyone in Orient and let them all know that *ta-da!* I’m the new Wagtail Priestess!”

I smiled wryly. “Mom, my sister is a very valiant one indeed.”

“She really is.” Our mother sighed. “Our life has been pretty bumpy up until now, yet for some wild reason, she still ended up like *this*.”

“Hey! What do you mean by that?!”

Obviously, my sister’s engagement with Lord Hiaki was proceeding smoothly as well. Orient had the custom of holding wedding ceremonies all at once after the snow melted in spring. During each of the thirty days they called the Matrimonial Period, all around the empire, sekka would be scattered into the air, celebrating the newlyweds.

Preparation for my ceremony to become the empress was already finished. As Emperor Haruka recovered from the wounds he had sustained on that fateful day, we completed the procedures step by step through the winter.

The spring breeze rifled through the garden. In the distance, I spotted Suzuiro waving at me. That was my cue, and I stood. “I shall be off, then.” The other two watched me depart with a smile.

I approached Suzuiro, who had matured in leaps and bounds since the day I met her, and together we walked to Kita Palace, where Emperor Haruka was resting.

Magpies flitted across the sky.

As we walked, I thought back on the past few months.



BEFORE I banished the Saint, I had found hope of returning to the world of the game: I thought that if three women with high-purity priestess blood—my

mother, my sister, and myself—activated our magic at once, there was a chance I could survive the transition to the other world.

Until then, throughout history, priestesses and their bloodlines had vanished around the same time as the banishment of the Saints. But if those disappearances were due to the tremendous amount of energy needed to remove the Saint, then... If three powerful women of the Wagtail Priestess line were to release their mana at the same time, the burden on one person would lessen significantly, or so I had thought.

Of course, it had been more a pipe dream than anything—it would be as miraculous as catching a god off guard. I hadn't discussed it with my mother and sister in advance, nor had I known that they had since traveled to Centoria. But a part of me had been utterly convinced that my plan would succeed, even though I had no evidence to that effect.

My mother and sister were under the protection of Lord Kuze. He must have told my mother that I had been tasked with the Saint's elimination. And if my mother also had memories of a previous life, she must have arrived at the same conclusion concerning the banishment of the Saint and the missing priestesses. I had trusted in her knowledge of my role and that she would pray around the same time as my confrontation with Lilly, hoping for the same outcome as me.

I had guessed correctly. Sometime after the incident, my sister told me what happened on that day. "Under the instruction of Lord Kuze, we were standing by in Centoria, and when messengers informed us that you had gone to the tower, Mom suddenly yelled, 'Start praying!' I was totally taken aback because it was so sudden and all, but—well, I would pray for your sake any day. Then, without warning, a whole lot of my mana was sucked out of me... Yeah, I can't even begin to describe how shocked I was."

She let out an exasperated sigh, then added, "But I'm glad. Thanks to Mom's quick thinking, we managed to save two super important people in Orient! Heh heh, I turned into a hero overnight!" My sister was still treating Emperor Haruka, who was recuperating in Kita Palace.

"Thank you so, so much..."

"Aww, don't say that, Sis. I'll surpass your and Mom's achievements in the

future, just you watch! I also get to marry that beautiful hunk of a man, hee-hee-hee.”

“I’m sure you will.” I smiled.

I could tell that Sakura had deliberately affected a joking manner, and I repeatedly and profusely thanked her. Since she had awakened as a Wagtail Priestess, she was likely going to remember a previous life as well.

In the end, the blood of the Wagtail Priestess remained intact, and my sister had inherited my lost magic. Only the heavens could know the significance of such events. Perhaps our line would continue to thrive into the far future when the next Saint was summoned.



ON our way to Kita Palace, we spotted my father in his wheelchair and Lord Raiya.

Suzuiro greeted them cheerfully. “Hello, Lord Raiya, Doctor Cutrettola. Were you visiting Kita Palace?”

“Yeah.” Lord Raiya nodded. “If we don’t go out of our way to come here, that emperor of ours will immediately start walking around recklessly.” He shrugged shoulders that were delicate for a man and shook his head with a sigh. Beside him, my father wore a wry smile.

“I see that you have chosen this form once again,” I noted.

“Mm.” Lord Raiya twirled the white ribbon tying his hair. “Was thinking that it’s about time I graduate from my child form.” Recently, he had started to spend more time in his young adult body.

Emperor Haruka had brought Lord Raiya’s accomplishments and contributions to light before the imperial parliament. Finally, he’d managed to dispel Lord Raiya’s past infamy as the Wicked Fox. If one carefully reviewed the reforms Lord Raiya had been involved in and what had happened in the years thereafter, it was clear that his policies about disaster response and establishment of a bureaucratic exam that allowed commoners to become government officials were both of great merit.

Above all else, the fact that his pupil, Emperor Haruka, had implemented many changes that profited the empire was one of the main reasons Lord Raiya was able to regain his political status. After all, the emperor had reclaimed Oriental territory, successfully established an alliance with Meridiona, and even returned the clan of the Wagtail Priestess to Orient. Although officially Lord Raiya still belonged to the Department of Print, he seemed rather busy as departments throughout the imperial court pursued his opinion.

“Where are you two heading now?” I asked.

“Naturally, I have to prepare for the wedding of my beloved daughter.” My father winked and smiled. “That aside, I can’t believe it’s not just Sai who’s getting married. Sakura’s going to wed soon too...”

“Okay, I think that’s enough, Doctor Cutrettola.” Lord Raiya sighed. “Grumbling in front of the bride is unseemly, so let’s go to the Department of Print.”

The two looked like old friends as they traipsed across the imperial grounds. Lord Raiya had been eagerly asking my father about Meridiona and Centoria of late. My father, meanwhile, apparently enjoyed learning about Orient, and he cherished his chats with Lord Raiya in between his work as a physician.

“Let’s go, Suzuiro,” I said.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” She nodded maturely. She had changed a lot in the past year. The loud-voiced girl frightened of ghosts had become one of my most reliable court ladies.



IN front of Kita Palace, Suzuiro kneeled and bid me farewell. When I entered, I found Lord Yukinari. It had been a long time since I had last seen him and his long, calf-length hair.

“Your Majesty,” he said in greeting. “The emperor is waiting for you inside.”

“It has been a while.” I paused. “Have your wife and...young Haruiro been faring well?”

“Yes. My wife’s delivery was in winter, and it was rather hectic, but the pair

have recently been wandering in the gardens more often compared to before.”

“I am very glad to hear that.”

Lord Yukinari’s voice was soft with fatherly compassion, and tenderness shone in his eyes as he murmured, “I do hope she grows up into an energetic girl just like the other Haruiro we know.”

The general was referring to Emperor Haruka’s alias when he assumed his female form, and I had to stop myself from giggling. Emperor Haruka could no longer transform into a woman.

“It is a little regrettable that we can never spend time with Lady Haruiro again,” I admitted.

“I have had enough of having a younger sister. I cannot even count the number of love letters I had to deal with.”

After parting ways with Lord Yukinari, I pressed on alone toward the emperor’s suite. The guard at the door acknowledged me with a bow, and I stepped into the room through the many layers of curtains hanging from the ceiling. When I finally pushed past the last one, I emerged into the spacious bedchamber. All the storm shutters were open and the windows ajar; beyond the railing of the balcony, I could glimpse the distant sky and sea.

A gentle breeze snuck inside, shifting the curtains. On the far side of the room, I saw Emperor Haruka.

Chapter One Hundred Fifteen: Blessing the Birds Bound by Red Thread

“**EMPEROR** Haruka.”

“...Sai.”

His hair had grown slightly longer since that day. It fluttered as he turned to me with a soft gaze. He beckoned me with his free, right hand, and I walked forward until I stood next to him. His lone wing wrapped around my shoulders like a hug, enveloping me in his gentle warmth.



Only a single wing remained, yet it had already recovered to its beautiful state. Due to the weight imbalance of his body, Emperor Haruka usually supported himself with a staff, as he was doing right then.

“The sea’s beautiful,” he murmured.

“...It is.”

And the conversation guttered out there. Seeing that I had fallen silent, Emperor Haruka caressed my cheek. “You don’t look very happy.”

“I...I am the person who made you lose your other wing. Is it really all right for me to appear before your people as empress?”

“This again?” He raised an eyebrow in exasperation. “Sai, you put your life on the line to fulfill your duty. As for me, it was only because of my wings and magic that I managed to bring you back from the other world. I mean... True, I can’t do as many things since my mana pool has decreased drastically, but...I think that’s for the best.”

He stroked my hair. During our return from the other world, my hair had reverted to its length a year before, when my house had been torched. It had only recently grown long enough for me to wear ornamental combs and hairpins.

“Thanks to my smaller mana pool, I can appear before my people without hiding my face. And after I lost my wing, the curse of Amawashi was lifted. It was a miracle—including the fact that you avoided losing your life. And of course, all miracles demand payment. If a sole wing will suffice, I will happily offer it.”

“Emperor Haruka...”

“Some god or gods determined convention and destiny according to their own desires without our knowledge or consent, and we don’t need them anymore. We can live beyond the myths, beyond our predestined ends.”

He touched my ear before inclining his forehead to mine. I wrapped my arms around him to support his body, and joy softened his features. After he lost the wing, I felt that he was even more divine and majestic than before—even more

beautiful. It was almost as if he had thrown away his doubts and grief along with that wing.

“And there’s one more good thing about losing my wing,” he whispered.

“A good thing...?”

“Yeah.” His gaze was tender as he leaned in further to press his lips against mine. He clasped my hand in a firm grip. “Now you will always have a reason to accompany me during my duties instead of my staff, right? I can brazenly be with you wherever I go.”

“...I will never leave your side again.”

“Do that for me. Never leave me.”

He squeezed me tighter. I straightened and leaned fully into him, and when I looked at the sky, I felt as though we were flying together again, just like before.

And although he had forfeited a wing, we had much more freedom and happiness than when they had been whole.

The emperor had also lost his abilities as the Amawashi, so a major reform of Orient’s system of government was vital. And while the power of the Wagtail Priestess hadn’t vanished with the banishment of the Saint and had instead been inherited by my sister, that could influence our future as well. Centoria, which had almost ceased to function as a country, would eventually dissolve.

There was much to consider and no end to my anxiety and unease. But for the rest of our lives, we would support each other as husband and wife, and for some reason, that fact alone gave me the strength to look forward and press on without doubt. I wondered why.

A stronger sea breeze than all the ones before rushed into the room with a howl. What appeared to be a white powder drifted in its wake like dandelion seeds. Snow, the last memory of winter, lamenting the forgone season.

“It almost looks like sekka,” I marveled.

“Yeah... It’s almost like we’re receiving a blessing.”

“From whom, I wonder?”

“Who knows?” He shrugged. “But honestly, it doesn’t matter whether we have the blessing of the heavens or not, because I’ll reach a happy future either way. Definitely.” He cast his eyes down at the snow before smiling at me. “Let’s live long, fulfilling lives, Sai. We’ll free ourselves from our curses, our pasts, and even our destinies as we march toward the brightest, happiest future possible.”

I saw my reflection in his eyes the color of the hazy spring sky. “Yes, Emperor Haruka.” I leaned forward.

So that no deity or anyone else could overhear, I whispered my words of love directly onto the lips of my beloved golden eagle emperor.

Bonus Short Story

IT was a fine spring day. Sekka strewn by the citizens filled the air like snow, drifting lazily on a whimsical wind. A straight, main street connected the imperial grounds to the city gates, and I waited with Emperor Haruka at the top of the slope before the palace. We both sat in the Amawashi's crimson-painted palanquin.

Bureaucrats formed a long procession in front of us, and lining the thoroughfare were the people of Orient. Everyone was waiting with bated breath for the arrival of the Oriental emperor...and his wife, Sai.

I heard the Left and Right Wings, Lord Yukinari and Lord Hiaki, making a long speech about something. Their voices were clear in my ears, but for some reason, as if I were dreaming, my mind couldn't string their sentences together.

It really does seem like a dream come true. I...am going to marry Emperor Haruka.

"...Sai? Are you okay?" He gently clasped my hand, and my shoulders jolted in surprise.

As the groom, Emperor Haruka wore a robe of white silk even more lavishly ornate than his usual attire. Ornamental cords tipped with precious stones hung from the eaves of our palanquin, and they swayed, the prisms casting a spectacular display of light on the emperor.

Compared to the inner walls of the vibrant palanquin, which boasted artwork of the deity Amawashi, Emperor Haruka's pale coloring seemed as transient a dream. I glanced at his ivory hair, his fair skin that glowed like moonlight, and his ash-blue eyes lighter than haze. The cloudless sky above was a striking azure, and the palanquin decorated to a luxurious degree, their vividness contributing to my impression that Emperor Haruka might suddenly melt away like morning mist.

"It's almost like a dream..." I whispered.

After a moment, a smile tugged at the corners of his lips. “Yeah. I think so too.”

No veil obscured his face. Instead, on his head lay a refined gold crown of remarkable workmanship, and from its back cascaded a layer of thin silk like a bride’s wedding train, blending into his clothes and shrouding his frame. He had lost most of his mana, so he could appear before his people without covering his face—the powerful magic in his eyes would no longer sear the eyes of others.

I looked down at my hand in his and the ensemble I wore. In contrast to Emperor Haruka, who appeared so ethereal that he would vanish into light, I was dressed in a black wedding garment. White robes comprised its base, and many layers of translucent black fabric had been draped over it, creating an elegant gradient. Several jeweled chains wound around the sash at my waist. And on my shawl was embroidered a large wagtail.

I was black, and the emperor pure white. I wondered what the people around us thought of the choice.

Ornamental mirrors adorned the palanquin, and my reflection wore red-accented makeup designed to draw the eye. Carefully crafted gold hair ornaments tied my hair. I almost looked like a doll.

Secretly, under our sleeves, Emperor Haruka intertwined his fingers with mine. “You’re stunning, Sai.”

We had spent the previous night in the same bed and greeted the morning light together. Although the emperor was clad in the most beautiful and intricate attire, I knew the heat of his chest beneath all that cloth. I knew the sensation of his breath against my skin. I knew everything there was to know about him. The thought was surreal. *Because when I sit next to him like this, it’s almost as if...the man who cherished me last night is truly the same person as the emperor so gorgeous that he looks too good to be true.*

“Emperor Haruka...” I whispered.

“Hm?”

“Is it...really all right for me to be by your side?”

“You’re saying that at a time like this?” He raised an eyebrow, his eyes shining with mirth. He wore light makeup as well, and the corner of his eyes, subtly enhanced with pigment, softened. He turned his gaze to the street before us.

A band was playing solemnly as it marched down the road. Dancers twisted in its wake, livening up the ceremony as they dedicated their art to the emperor and empress soon to appear. When our palanquin started to move, the citizens would likely shower us with more sekka.

“Hey, Sai,” Emperor Haruka began, “there’s a legend of a certain married couple in a distant world.”

“A...legend of a couple?”

“Yeah. No matter how many times they reincarnate, they can’t accompany each other to the end of their days. The husband is always swept away by an untimely demise, and the wife condemned for his disgraceful death. Her heart is trampled to pieces under the pressure, and she finally perishes as well. The pair marry each other every lifetime, and in each one, the husband dies and the wife’s heart is torn apart.”

I cast my eyes down. “Is there any salvation in this tale?”

“You see, as the story spread across the world, people took pity on the couple and started weaving different fates for them. For example, altering the story so that the husband isn’t destined to die or that after all their hardship, the divine leads them to a blissful paradise, and so on.”

“Ah... The determination of those who wish for their happiness is what changed the story, I see.”

“Yeah.” He looked at me, and a smile bloomed on his face. “Sai. In that other world, you saw a different fate for me, right?”

I hesitated before I nodded. “Yes.”

After the incident with Lilly and Alexei, I had spilled everything about my previous life to Emperor Haruka. He was aware that, to me, he had once been a foolish emperor who came to a shameful end in a work of fiction.

“Sai... You used your very life to carve out a path of happiness for me, huh?”

“Emperor Haruka...”

It was then that the music stopped. The palanquin shifted, and we experienced a moment of weightlessness as we were lifted into the air. Everyone in the capital fixed their eyes on the palanquin, where the Amawashi—where Emperor Haruka—sat. I felt as if the sound of my gulp would echo so loudly that it reached the heavens.

“Sai.” The emperor studied me, his smile wide. “Even if I have but a single wing, even if I lose all my magic... No matter how I end up, will you still stay by my side?”

“Of course.” I placed my hand over his—almost as if to hold him still while I bound him into a happy story. I nodded, smiling at him from the bottom of my heart. “I am your other wing. When we fly, we fly together. If we fall, we fall together. I will be with you forever and ever.”



PAPERCUT flowers fluttered in the blue sky. Surrounded by the deafening cheers of blessings from their people, the palanquin carried the emperor and his wagtail wife forward.

The horizon was forever clear, and their hands forever entwined.

At last, after all of fate’s cruel trials, Sai and Haruka were heading to their happy future.

Afterword

HELLO and thank you very much for picking up volume 2. Makino Maebaru here!

I still remember the day that Charis from Cross Infinite World contacted me about the translation of this work—it was spring, ten months after I tied up the series on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, a Japanese web novel site. By then, I was completely under the impression that no publisher would ever take interest in it, and I remember being both over the moon and utterly taken by surprise.

Coming back to this work after all that time was nostalgic. I recalled how I poured my heart and soul into every word I typed. For the published editions, I have written two new chapters, and I was overjoyed that I got to meet Sai and Haruka again! Fate hasn't treated these two well—quite the opposite, in fact—but now they can finally reach their never-ending happily-ever-after.

When the protagonist of this story, Sai, learns that her savior is a character that will walk the path of ruin, she desperately tries to change his destiny. At the same time, when Haruka learns that the girl who once gave him a goal to live for will be executed, he frantically does everything he possibly can to change *her* destiny.

What drives them is their determination to save the person they love from the malicious clutches of fate. This is a story of two people shedding blood, sweat, and tears to make each other happy.

When we delve into a story as readers, we sometimes think, “I want this character to experience more happiness in their life!” or “I want a spin-off work where this character can have a happy ending!” Unfortunately, readers are, in the end, readers—we're powerless against the flow of the plot.

But a writer can lead their beloved characters to the best future possible. As one such writer, I want to continue writing stories where the characters I wish happiness for *will* become happy. And as you can see, that's where Sai and

Haruka ended up. Oh, what kind of characters shall I lead to an ideal future next? What kind of story should I weave? Just thinking about it makes my heart race.

If I have the opportunity, I want to write about the futures of the strong-willed priestess Sakura and the poor general Hiaki who always gets the short end of the stick. I want to write about the king of Meridiona, Kuze, as well.

Last but not least, I would like to express my profound gratitude to everyone who was involved in the publication of this book—all the readers who cheered me on during the serialization of the web novel, Charis from Cross Infinite World, the person in charge of contacting me, the artist, the designers, the translator, and everyone else.

I would also like to thank my friend Ms. Bon and a person I respect very much, Mr. T from Maebaru. And finally, I want to thank my beloved grandmother, my biggest and longtime supporter who has always encouraged my decision to be a writer. Thank you, truly. Please live a long life.

Well then, my dear reader, I will be elated if we get to see each other again someday. Thank you for reading to the very end.

Makino Maebaru – 05.26.2022



Too Strong to Belong! Banished to Another World!

By Kazuki Karasawa Illustration Akane Rica

Still Too Strong in Another World!

Sakurako longs to fall in love. Unfortunately, her super-strength scares everybody off! If only she were normal... But then she would have died long ago.



The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor

By Sarasa Nagase Illustration Mitsuya Fuji

A young woman with overpowered magic gets sent back 6 years after being killed. She takes this second chance at life to get with her greatest enemy, the dragon emperor!



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By Kiri Komori Illustration Yamigo

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



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