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Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower

Miri Mikawa
Kasumi Nagi



Shu Shusei

A Konkokuan cuisinologist. Diligent with a passion for his research, but inexperienced when it comes to romance. Known as the “loveless scholar.”

Tama

A creature with a long torso that Rimi found in the kitchen. Attached to Rimi.

Setsu Rimi

A princess who served as the holy Umashi-no-Miya in her home country of Wakoku. Always brimming with curiosity.

Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower – Character Introductions

The Four Consorts of the Rear Palace

- **Noble Consort So:** Still young, but prideful.
- **Pure Consort Yo:** Childish and innocent, adores Rimi.
- **Virtuous Consort Ho:** A noble and perfect beauty.
- **Worthy Consort On:** Modest and reserved.



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The snow blew into the cloister, soaking the ground. As the violent snow suppressed the outside world, Shu Shusei's mind raced.

I can obtain Rimi? How? And through legitimate means, he says? Though Shusei was known as Konkoku's finest scholar, he could not wrap his head around what the old man in front of him had just told him.

Rimi was dearer to him than anything else—but Shusei had resigned himself to giving up on her, a decision marked by a final intimate moment that the two of them had just shared. Despite this, his heart was still unable to face reality. In this moment of weakness, the old man's words had stirred up his feelings, and he was unable to think with his usually clear mind.

"What do you mean by that, Lord Ho?" Shusei asked.

The white-bearded man, Ho Neison, looked at Shusei with an affectionate gaze. Neison was the head of the Ho house, a branch family of the royal Ryu house. Still as cunning as ever, he was a former Minister of Rites, seemingly unaffected by his old age; so Shusei found it difficult to believe that Neison's suggestion was unfounded.

Given Neison's attitude and how he spoke, he must have been looking for Shusei. But why would he be looking for Shusei, whom he had never met before, and how did he know about Rimi?

The Ho house has every right to be upset about the governance of the current emperor. If its head is making contact with me, His Majesty's grand councilor, then he must be planning something. I mustn't take him at face value. But despite Shusei's vigilance, the man's proposition was so appealing that it set Shusei's heart racing.

"Do you wish to know, Shusei?" Neison said.

It was a devil's voice tempting Shusei. He hesitated for a moment, but in the end, he nodded slightly. *Why did you nod?!* his conscience scolded him, but Shusei quickly made excuses for himself.

First I need to figure out what he's planning. In order to do so...

Neison walked a step closer, and his dry hands grabbed Shusei's.

“Shusei, you are—” Neison began when cheerful voices could be heard from the other side of the cloister. Neison frowned as he noticed a group of officials nearing them. “This is no place to talk. I shall send a messenger. We will discuss this elsewhere.”

Neison released his grip on Shusei’s hands, turned around, and started walking away. The officials stepped out of the way and bowed as Neison passed them. Shusei suddenly came to his senses and bowed farewell to Neison as well. He shuddered as he remembered the bark-like sensation of the old man’s dry hands.

Shusei knew that he mustn’t listen to whatever Neison was trying to tell him. The fact that he had, in spite of this, nodded at the man’s suggestion, terrified him.

I mustn’t listen to Lord Ho. And yet...

Days passed. The winter came to an end, and the snow of the imperial palace started to melt. As the frozen pillars thawed, the majestic imperial palace creaked faintly, as though signaling that fate had been set in motion. It was the beginning of the 103rd spring of the Konkoku calendar.

Chapter 1: The Quinary Dragon's Sigh

I

The imperial palace where the Konkokuan emperor lived was enormous. Those who gazed at the roofs with elegantly arching corners from the northern Mount Bi, so distant that the palace walls looked hazy, would gasp at its splendor.

The spring winds were still cold. Below the eaves of the imperial palace buildings, there remained hardened snow that had yet to fully melt. But compared to the winter, the sunlight felt much warmer. Daffodils with small white buds had started poking out of the damp soil.

A palace woman was running down the passageways connecting the buildings near the Ministry of Rites in the northern part of the palace grounds, for some reason sobbing like a child.

“Tama... Tama... Stay with me...” the woman pleaded through strange sobs, startling any officials she ran past. Palace women were a rare sight in the outer palace to begin with, and one running while crying would surprise anyone.

However, this palace woman—a concubine of sixth rank with the title of Lady of Precious Bevy, Setsu Rimi—had other things to worry about than what people thought of her unseemly conduct.

Tama... Why did this happen without any warning?! Everything was normal until just a moment ago...

It all began early that morning. Rimi had woken up with the morning sun, readied her hair and clothes, and then headed to the kitchen of the Palace of Small Wings. Breakfast preparations had just finished. Although the air remained warm and embers still glowed in the stoves, no one was in the kitchen.

“I think I’ll make karukan manju for today’s tea snack,” Rimi mused.

Tama jumped down from her shoulders to a nearby counter while Rimi tied

her sleeves with string, nodding as she looked at the bean paste that she had prepared the day before. The thick and smooth paste had a black luster and looked sweet.

Rimi then grated a yam, after which she poured egg white into a bowl along with sugar, beating it until it was fluffy. She mixed the egg white and the grated yam then added fine rice flour to the mixture. The result was a thick batter. She poured half of the batter into twenty small bowls, added balls of bean paste, and then poured in the remaining batter.

Rimi put a steamer on a stove that she had already lit and placed the bowls inside. Smoke rose from the steamer, filling the air with a sweet smell. As she observed the steam, Rimi's vision slowly blurred.

Empress... He wants me to be his empress... That's far too sudden... What should I do? But...

After preparing a tea snack for the four consorts and Shusei followed by a meeting with the emperor, Rimi would head to the cuisinology hall. There she would do her work, pause to have tea, then go back to her work before returning to the rear palace. She was doing her best to go through her usual routine, but ever since that winter day, whenever she had an idle moment, she would become lost in thought.

Almost two months prior, on a cold winter day, the emperor of Konkoku, Ryu Shohi, had asked Rimi to become his empress. Rimi had only just vowed to cast away her feelings for Shusei, and the sudden request had shocked her to the point that she had wanted to cry. But Shohi had been understanding and told her that she could take her time to decide. Just as promised, he had never once demanded an answer from Rimi—even though she would visit him every morning to show him Tama. He had not even attempted to probe her feelings indirectly. Rimi deeply appreciated Shohi's kindness in waiting so patiently.

I have to go and show Tama to His Majesty as usual today. I'm sure he won't ask me anything today either. But that only makes it all the more painful. For each day that passed, Rimi felt more guilty for not having arrived at an answer.

Master Shusei...

Every time she thought back to the moment when she and Shusei had

decided to bury their feelings despite them being requited, a sadness filled her chest. Her feelings for him still burned deep inside her. She also did not have it in her to disregard the four wise and beautiful consorts by becoming empress in their place.

Oh no, the steamer! Rimi saw the steam coming from the steamer weakening, and she removed the steamer from the stove to the counter. After she let it cool, the karukan manju would be done, turning into a light and soft sweet that melted in one's mouth.

As she waited, Rimi became lost in thought once more.

The right thing to do would have been to turn Shohi down right away. However, there was a reason she couldn't—Shu Kojin, the chancellor, had commanded her to accept his offer. Otherwise, he had said, Shusei's head would be on a spike for being the biggest criminal in the land. The mere thought made Rimi shudder.

What did he mean by that? Rimi let out a deep sigh as she removed the bowls from the steamer. The more she thought, the more confused she became.

Rimi was aware that she had been sighing a lot as of late but that was inevitable. Even Tama let out a high-pitched sigh as she approached Rimi's feet as if catching it from Rimi.

The long creature with silver fur by Rimi's feet had two small bumps between her ears, and her birdlike front right foot clutched small pearl beads. Although she looked like nothing more than a slightly unusual pet, she was a divine dragon, and the most spiritually powerful of all divine dragons at that—the Quinary Dragon. Rimi still couldn't quite grasp the fact that Tama was a dragon, but she did find her blue eyes mystical.

However, Tama's usually energetic round eyes now seemed somehow tired.

"What's wrong, Tama? Are you not feeling well?" Rimi asked as she gently petted Tama's ears with her index finger.

Tama closed her eyes contentedly and squeaked as she curled up into a ball. Then, she put her head on her front right foot and let out another small sigh.

"Tama?"

Tama looked up at Rimi with eyes that seemed to ask, “What is it?”

“You’re acting strange, Tama. Is something wrong?”

Rimi became worried and picked up Tama with both hands. But Tama only moved slightly as she curled up in Rimi’s hands before letting out yet another sigh. There was clearly something strange about her.

“Tama?!” Rimi said with a panicked voice. “Why are you sighing so much? It’s almost like you’ve caught my sighs... Wait, are sighs contagious?! That’s impossible! But you’re a divine dragon, so maybe...”

Tama looked up at Rimi with watery eyes, folding her legs into the hollow of Rimi’s hand. Rimi could feel Tama’s weight and smooth fur. The very thought that this small creature might be suffering from an illness suddenly made her intensely worried.

“O-Oh no! Tama! I have to tell someone!”

Leaving the newly steamed karukan manju behind, Rimi rushed out of the Palace of Small Wings while carrying Tama. There were not many who knew about Tama. The closest person that came to mind was the palace attendant Hakurei, who worked in the rear palace. But upon storming into the Department of Service, she was informed that Hakurei was currently in the outer palace. Her remaining options were Shusei and Shohi, and possibly Jotetsu. Rimi found Shu Kojin too terrifying to ask.

In either case, she had to go to the outer palace. Thus, with tears in her eyes, Rimi rushed out of the rear palace.

Rimi found herself running around the outer palace in tears. Since she couldn’t very well enter the emperor’s chambers without permission, she was heading toward the cuisinology hall.

If Master Shusei is there, I’m sure he will help me. The finest scholar in Konkoku had always been kind and dependable ever since Rimi had first met him. She had developed a habit of immediately seeking his help in times like this.

“Hang in there, Tama!” Rimi said as she ran down a passageway near the Ministry of Rites when she heard a voice call out to her from behind.

“Rimi?!”

Rimi turned around and found Shusei jogging toward her.

“I had a feeling it was you,” Shusei said, slightly out of breath. “Did something happen? I heard from some people at the Ministry of Rites that a palace woman was running around crying, so I decided to come here just in case.”

“Master Shusei!”

As Rimi laid her eyes on Shusei’s face, the tears she had been holding back came rushing out all at once.

“M-Master Shusei...!” she pleaded through her sobs. “Tama... Tama is...in danger...”

“Calm down, Rimi. You’re not a child. I can’t understand you if you cry like that. Wipe your tears with this,” Shusei said, holding out a handkerchief.

Rimi moved Tama over to one of her hands, took Shusei’s handkerchief, and started wiping her tears. Though she was still sobbing, she was finally able to speak properly.

“Master Shusei, Tama is... Tama has one foot in the grave!”

“One foot in the grave?!”

Shusei quickly turned pale and looked down at Rimi’s hand. Tama glanced back up at him as she let out a sigh.

“Quinary Dragon!” Shusei called out in a panic and reached out toward Tama, who growled and attempted to bite him.

As Shusei quickly removed his hand, Tama curled up again as if to say, “Leave me alone.”

“Well, it certainly seems to be in a foul mood... But it doesn’t seem to be dying,” Shusei said.

“Yes, as I said, she has one foot in the grave,” Rimi responded.

“Rimi, ‘one foot in the grave’ means to be on one’s deathbed. Stop using expressions that you don’t understand. I almost had a heart attack, thinking that the Quinary Dragon was on the verge of death,” Shusei said, letting out a

relieved sigh as he put a hand on his chest.

“I’m sorry. But there’s really something strange going on with Tama. All she does is sigh. She may have caught my sighs,” Rimi replied sadly.

“What? Your sighs?”

Rimi nodded fervently, and Shusei gave her an incredulous look.

“Now, now, that’s ridiculous. Surely even divine dragons sigh now and again. I’ve never heard of a sigh being contagious,” Shusei insisted.

“That’s not all. She seems down too,” Rimi explained.

Shusei looked at Tama, who was curled up in Rimi’s arms. Tama reluctantly glanced at Shusei before burying her head in Rimi’s chest.

“Yes, she does seem weaker than usual, but I find it hard to believe that your sighs are the cause. We should see if we can find what the real cause is,” Shusei said. “The ones who know the most about divine dragons are the court priests, but since it’s not publicly known that you’re caring for the Quinary Dragon, we can’t ask them for help.”

“Then what do we do?” Rimi asked.

Shusei thought for a moment before nodding, apparently having made up his mind.

“Let’s visit the cuisinology hall,” Shusei said. “It also serves as the Ministry of Rites’ archive, so there are texts from the Bureau of Sacrifices there as well. I’m certain we’ll find books related to the Quinary Dragon there. We should hurry.”

“Are you sure we will find the cause there?”

“Even court priests refer to the old texts whenever something happens. As long as no special skills such as divination are needed, I should be able to do something.”

That’s right. Master Shusei is not just a cuisinologist, he’s also the wisest person in Konkoku. No one was more well-suited for the task of interpreting the texts than him.

“Come along,” Shusei said, and Rimi followed, reassured by his words.

“Just wait, Tama. Master Shusei will make sure you’re back to normal in no time.”

Carrying Tama in her arms, Rimi gently stroked her, and Tama responded with a sigh. As she started walking, Rimi slowly regained her composure. Suddenly, the fact that the person she loved was walking in front of her hit her, and she felt a pain in her chest.

The day after the two of them had sworn to abandon their feelings for each other, Rimi and Shusei had met as usual in the cuisinology hall. At first, they had looked at each other in silence, but before long they had both smiled and looked away. They had been back to working together every day as cuisinologist and assistant ever since.

Shusei was still as kind as ever, but he kept his distance. He must have fully buried his feelings following that last modest kiss. Rimi was jealous of his control.

Rimi clutched the handkerchief that Shusei had given her a moment ago. Despite having decided to end it with him, unlike the scholar, she was still unable to forget her feelings for him. But as long as Shusei acted with restraint toward her, she was able to keep her feelings from surfacing.

“When did the Quinary Dragon start acting strangely?” Shusei asked, turning around to face Rimi.

“Since this morning. She was fine last night,” Rimi said, speeding up her pace to walk beside Shusei.

“So it happened out of the blue this morning, then. I’ll admit, the Quinary Dragon being weak does have me concerned as well.”

As Shusei continued walking at a fast pace, a letter tucked away in his robes fell out. Rimi reached out to pick it up, but Shusei hurriedly grabbed it before she had a chance to.

“Is that a letter? There was no sender or recipient written on it,” Rimi said.

“It’s nothing important,” Shusei deflected, his eyes staring straight ahead.

Is Master Shusei hiding something? Lately, Shusei had been receiving a

number of letters with no sender written on them. Rimi had even spotted him burning a letter with a candle when he thought he was alone one evening in the cuisinology hall.

Before, Rimi would have been able to ask him if he was hiding something. But now she was so preoccupied with trying to suppress her own emotions that she didn't have it in her to peek into his mind. She knew that doing so would stir up her feelings and ruin her composure. Unable to ask anything important, she simply spoke the first thing that crossed her mind.

"I'll return the handkerchief after washing it," Rimi said.

"You're very welcome to keep it if you'd like," Shusei said with a slight smile.

Shusei's smiles and words were enough to make her ecstatic.

"Thank you," Rimi said as she quietly smelled the handkerchief. It had the same agarwood scent as Shusei's clothes.

It seems Master Shusei has completely erased me from his heart. But I...I'm happy with something as simple as this.

II

It's like I'm walking a never-ending tightrope.

Shusei glanced at Rimi as she followed after him. She wore a worried expression while petting the Quinary Dragon nestled in her arms. Rimi's eyes and ears were bright red from crying like a child, and Shusei found her adorable. She seemed to be solely worried about the Quinary Dragon's health—from the looks of it, the fact that, as the guardian of the dragon, she would be punished if anything happened to it hadn't even crossed her mind.

That's just like her, Shusei thought.

Lately, Shusei had interacted with Rimi as though nothing had happened between them. He projected a sense of composure as he spoke to her and acted kindly while watching all of her different expressions and mannerisms up close. It was nothing short of torture. He was walking a tightrope, always balancing between reason and desire. He had tried to bury his feelings, but they

refused to go away.

As usual, Rimi would come to the cuisinology hall every day, continuing her job as Shusei's assistant. It was as if that moment between them had never happened. Unlike Shusei, it appeared that Rimi had managed to roll up her feelings and bury them deeply in her chest with a soft smile. Shusei had an urge to test if she had truly calmed her feelings that easily, but he knew that was something he could never ask.

If only I could convince myself as easily as her, I wouldn't have to suffer like this. I would have been able to steadfastly refuse to accept these letters.

Shusei felt around to confirm that the letter he had just dropped was firmly tucked away deep within his robes. He breathed a sigh of relief when he felt it.

The letter was from Ho Neison.

The day after Shusei had first met him, Neison had sent him a letter. After giving it much thought, Shusei had in the end decided to ignore it. His reason told him that he mustn't meet with Neison—that he mustn't hear him out. And he had not seen him since.

However, Neison continued to frequently send him letters, all inviting Shusei to talk—sometimes aggressively, and sometimes pleadingly by appealing to his emotions. They all ended the same way: "Act now before Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu slips out of your grasp." Each time he read that sentence, Shusei felt a slight tingle in his chest. For now, his reason was able to hold him back. But there was no telling when it might fail, and the thought terrified him.

You can't let Lord Ho's words tempt you. Focus on your duty. The Quinary Dragon comes first.

The Quinary Dragon was rolled up quietly in Rimi's arms, letting out sigh after sigh. It was the guardian dragon of Konkoku—falling ill would be a terrible omen, and something had to be done immediately.

The two of them entered the cuisinology hall. Shusei quickly picked up the archive index, placed it on his desk, and started poring over it. His eyes raced across the pages before stopping at certain words, which he touched with his index finger as he memorized the names of about twenty different texts. He

then headed straight for the archive of the Bureau of Sacrifices.

The enormous archive was infrequently used, evident by the texts being covered with a light layer of dust.

“Records of Divine Dragons, Legends of the Quinary Dragon in Verse, Scriptures of the Divine Realm, On the Worshipping of Spirits at the Temple of Heaven...” Shusei said as he picked out one book after another.

“Master Shusei, did you memorize all the titles just from that?” Rimi asked in amazement.

“There were only about twenty texts that appeared to be relevant, which isn’t that many,” Shusei explained. “Still, since I memorized them this way, I’ll forget them soon enough. If I want to remember something long term, I need to properly organize it in my mind first.”

There was no time for leisurely reading as Shusei put the pile of documents on his desk and started scanning through them. He focused so intently that he shut out all sound around him. Dumbfounded, Rimi looked on as Shusei turned the pages at an incredible pace.



“I wrote a draft for the letter to send to the emperor of Saisakoku. Look over it. If you approve of it, I will send it,” Shohi declared, placing a letter he had written on his desk and sliding it toward the Minister of Rites, Jin Keiyu.

“Well, I do say,” Keiyu replied, picking up the letter with insincere surprise in his voice.

“What? Do you have a problem, Keiyu?”

“It’s only that you’ve been surprisingly willing to listen to my advice as of late, Your Majesty. Whatever happened?” Keiyu asked. “Did the cuisinologist serve you food that makes you more passionate about your work?”

The Minister of Rites was a slender man with a sweet voice. He was in his thirties, but he had yet to marry, instead having a reputation of being a womanizer. Shohi did not care for his frivolous demeanor. Still, Keiyu was very capable as an official, and he was known as the chancellor Shu Kojin’s right-hand man.

“Keiyu, do not put a damper on His Majesty’s enthusiasm,” a man wearing a black shenyi sternly warned—Shu Kojin himself.

In addition to the desk where Shohi was sitting, there was a round table in the office where Shu Kojin was sitting across from the Minister of Revenue, To Rihan. Rihan watched Keiyu shrug his shoulders, trying to stifle his laughter, before turning to Shohi with a cheerful smile.

“I have to say, Your Majesty, you’ve certainly been acting differently lately,” Rihan said, and Shohi glared back at him.

Although he was the Minister of Revenue, were Rihan to make his way into town, one might have mistaken him for the boss of a group of bandits. He had an old scar below his right eye, which added to his manly appearance. He was slender, yet well built, with vigilant eyes like a tiger. Despite this, his smile seemed oddly friendly.

“What is it? If you have something to say, spit it out,” Shohi demanded.

“I think it’s fantastic,” Rihan said.

Shohi awkwardly averted his gaze at the unreserved compliment. Rihan was also one of Kojin’s most trusted men. Together, Keiyu and Rihan were known as Kojin’s right and left hands respectively. Being complimented by such a capable man made even Shohi feel flattered.

One year had passed since Shohi had taken the throne. While he remembered gritting his teeth many times at officials ridiculing him, he had never received a compliment before. Some months ago, he would have questioned his dignity as an emperor for becoming as giddy as a child at receiving praise. But the fact that he was now genuinely happy surprised even himself.

Keiyu skimmed through the draft before looking up.

“Your Majesty, all that is written in this letter is an expression of gratitude for the recent meeting,” Keiyu said in a concerned tone.

Ten days prior, in a town called Mago on the border between Konkoku and Saisakoku, the Saisakokuan emperor had met with Shohi. One major reason that Konkoku had come one step closer to its long-standing wish to trade with Saisakoku was the help of the emperor’s younger brother, Gulzari Shar. Hearing

about Shar's time in Konkoku, the Saisakokuan emperor had become interested in Shohi and his four consorts. He had agreed to meet, and the meeting had taken place over the course of a single day. It had consisted of the two emperors simply explaining their own countries. The following day, a feast had been held that was attended by the four consorts, which had delighted the Saisakokuan emperor.

It had been the first time the emperors met, so not even the officials of either country had expected discussions concerning establishing diplomatic relations to take place. However, Konkoku had high hopes for what might come from a second or third meeting.

"If you are going out of your way to write a personal letter, would it not be good to include something suggesting a second meeting?" Keiyu suggested.

Shohi stopped to ponder for a moment before answering.

"Keiyu, how much experience do you have with women?" Shohi asked.

"That's awfully sudden. Well, more than the man over there with the scary face, I suppose," Keiyu responded, glancing toward Rihan, who grinned with his teeth showing.

"Then let me ask you this," Shohi replied. "Say you have sent a woman dozens of love letters without receiving a response. But then one day, for whatever reason, she agrees to meet you. As she timidly approaches you, do you take the opportunity to pester her for when you can meet her next right away?"

"Certainly not. Being too aggressive would make her wary of you," Keiyu responded confidently. "If anything, being less friendly would be a better way to make her interested."

"I thought the same. That is why I decided not to do more than express my gratitude in the letter. It is easy to forget that diplomacy is really the interaction between people," Shohi explained. "I decided that this would be the best way to earn the emperor of Saisakoku's trust and get him to open up to me."

Shohi had learned recently that sometimes waiting patiently was the best way to be considerate of someone. He currently knew a woman who he was always yearning to understand better—Setsu Rimi, the palace woman he desired to

have as his empress.

When will she open up to me? All I can do is wait...

When trying to understand how Rimi was feeling, Shohi had realized that the best way to show her consideration was to give her time. That was why he continued to endure. Likening this experience to diplomacy, he understood the value of being respectful, generous, and kind toward Saisakoku.

“You pass, Your Majesty,” Rihan said, and Keiyu grinned.

Shohi frowned, sensing something malicious in their attitudes.

“Keiyu, was your mention of a second meeting an attempt to test me?” Shohi asked.

Rihan chuckled as Keiyu nonchalantly put the letter back on the desk.

“I thought you might have meant to include it but forgot, so I simply wanted to make sure. The letter is perfect,” Keiyu said.

“Your Majesty, I apologize for interrupting the meeting,” a voice suddenly said from the direction of the doorway.

Shohi looked toward the door to find a military officer kneeling. It was Shohi’s bodyguard, Shin Jotetsu. Although he usually had an informal demeanor, with the chancellor and ministers present, he was more careful with how he acted. He approached Shohi.

“Shusei and Rimi are waiting in your room. They have something urgent to discuss with you. It’s about the Quinary Dragon,” Jotetsu whispered.

“Did something happen to it?” Shohi asked.

“It’s weaker than usual,” Jotetsu said grimly.

Shohi was startled by Jotetsu’s report. The Quinary Dragon was the being that bestowed upon the emperor the power to rule Konkoku. It weakening could not be a good sign.

It has only been a little over a year since my ascension. Has a sign that my rule is unstable already appeared?

Shohi’s chest filled with worry. This did not escape Jotetsu, who took the

opportunity to tease him.

“Your Majesty, you look like a lost puppy,” Jotetsu remarked.

“Silence. I do not,” Shohi snapped back quietly while at the same time being angry at himself for letting his emotions show.

My rule shall not falter. I will not let it, he thought, trying to encourage himself. Showing weakness was not appropriate as the emperor.

“Shusei said that we should also ask for Chancellor Shu’s opinion,” Jotetsu continued. “Why don’t we have the two ministers leave? I will bring Rimi and Shusei here.”

“Very well. While you bring Rimi and Shusei, I will chase out the ministers,” Shohi said.

“Understood, Your Majesty,” Jotetsu replied as he left the room.

Shohi turned to Rihan and Keiyu.

“We are mostly done with what I summoned you here to discuss. Rihan and Keiyu, you may leave. Kojin, stay. I still need to speak with you,” Shohi ordered.



“You have his permission. Let’s go, you two,” Jotetsu said as he returned to Shohi’s room, nodding in the direction of the door before taking off.

“Come, then,” Shusei said as he started walking, and Rimi followed him toward Shohi’s office.

With Tama sighing feebly in her arms, Rimi was growing even more worried. Ever since Rimi had come to Konkoku, Tama had been one of her few sources of emotional support. With nothing to rely on other than the pot of kaoridoko she had brought from Wakoku, Tama’s kindness and adorableness were what had gotten Rimi through those hard times.

As tears started welling up in her eyes, Shusei gently cheered Rimi up.

“Don’t worry, we just need His Majesty’s permission and for Chancellor Shu to agree,” Shusei said.

Shusei had read through the text at an unbelievable speed before reaching

some kind of conclusion. However, he had refrained from explaining what he had realized, just insisting that they go to meet with the emperor and the chancellor immediately.

“It’s fine. I know how to restore the Quinary Dragon,” Shusei continued.

Rimi’s chest felt warm upon hearing Shusei’s kind words, but at the same time, she felt a sweet stinging deep inside her. She couldn’t resist looking up at him and their eyes met. They both held their breath for a moment, then quickly averted their gazes at the same time. This was not the first time this had happened since that day.

Has Master Shusei noticed my lingering feelings? Or hasn’t he?

A door that seemed to belong to an office came into view. Two men were exiting through it. One had the physique of a warrior, and the other had a slender figure with a smile on his face. Rimi had seen them before. They had been among the officials present when she was dragged in front of the imperial council.

“They are the Minister of Revenue and the Minister of Rites,” Shusei whispered. “Hide the Quinary Dragon with your sleeve so they can’t see it. If they speak to you, smile and bow.”

Jotetsu and Shusei looked down as the two ministers passed. Rimi tried to follow their example, but then someone grabbed her upper arm from behind. She looked back in surprise to find the Minister of Rites, Jin Keiyu, holding her arm with a smile.

III

Rimi tensed up at the unexpected development. Without delay, Shusei walked up to Keiyu and bowed.

“Minister of Rites, this palace woman is my assistant, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu. Has she done something disrespectful?” Shusei asked.

“No, not at all,” Keiyu replied. “It’s just that I’d heard one of my employees had a female assistant, but I never once had a chance to take a gander at her

face. I assumed this must be her since she was walking with you, so I wanted to get a good look at her.”

Keiyu released Rimi’s arm and ran his eyes across her face.

“Well, aren’t you cute,” Keiyu said. “I’ll stop by the cuisinology hall sometime when this bore isn’t there and show you how to have a good time.”

Shusei made an overtly displeased face at his superior.

“U-U-Um, I...” Rimi stuttered, her eyes darting from side to side.

“That’s mean of you, Shusei, hiding this cute girl from me. You should have introduced me to her,” Keiyu continued.

“It’s not really a case of me trying to be mean or...” Shusei trailed off, failing to come up with a response.

Suddenly, a thick arm grabbed Keiyu around his neck and violently dragged him away from Rimi.

“If he’d introduced her to you, who knows what might have happened to her. Look around. Everyone but you is feeling awkward. Besides, we’ve both met this palace woman before. You were there during the council when we were arguing about the tributes from Wakoku,” the Minister of Revenue, To Rihan, said as he held Keiyu by the neck.

“Oh, yes. Now that you mention it, I recall something like that happening. But the ones who were getting up in arms were the Minister of Personnel and the people he riled up, like Vice Minister Kan. I was just yawning my way through the whole thing, so I don’t remember anything besides when His Majesty ordered me to go get the tributes,” Keiyu said.

“Is there nothing inside that skull of yours? Let’s go already, you womanizer,” Rihan said sternly.

“Hey, that’s uncalled for.”

Keiyu cheerfully waved goodbye to Rimi while Rihan started walking, his arm still around Keiyu’s neck. Rimi and Shusei bowed to them in farewell. As the ministers disappeared from view, Jotetsu suddenly started grinning.

“The Minister of Rites is as easygoing as ever. I can’t believe he’s supposed to

be your boss, Shusei,” Jotetsu scoffed.

“Well it’s no laughing matter,” Shusei said. “He’s an intelligent man, but I can’t understand why he acts like that.”

“In any case, I’m just happy they didn’t notice Tama,” Rimi said, breathing a sigh of relief.

The party entered the office and found Shu Kojin sitting by a table. Clad in a black shenyi, there was an exceedingly somber air about him. He almost came across as though he didn’t possess human emotions. Rimi once again realized how uncomfortable she was around him.

Shohi stood up from his desk and walked up to the three of them, and Rimi kneeled to greet him. Although she met him every morning, Rimi still couldn’t help but feel apologetic whenever she saw Shohi.

“I hear the Quinary Dragon is weaker than usual?” Shohi asked in a concerned tone.

“Yes,” Rimi replied, when she had a sudden realization.

Hold on, isn’t Tama...? Rimi was in shock at the disturbing fact she had just realized.

“What is it, Rimi?” Shohi asked upon seeing Rimi turn pale.

“Tama is a divine beast—a divine dragon—correct? As attached as she is to me, she’s actually a very important being to Konkoku. If she has become weak, doesn’t that mean that I’ve committed a terrible crime as her guardian?!”

It was a fact that had escaped her until now, but Tama was the source of the Konkokuan emperor’s power to rule the land. As Tama’s guardian, it was inevitable that she would be held responsible if Tama were to be afflicted with an illness.

“If something happens to Tama, it will be far beyond what I’m capable of taking responsibility for. I’ll be beheaded or crucified or get some other kind of punishment that strikes His Majesty’s sadistic-like, wonderfully creepy nature’s fancy!” The various horrific forms of capital punishment in Konkoku crossed Rimi’s mind, sending a chill down her spine.

Shohi furrowed his brow.

“I would appreciate it if you did not call me creepy. You are making me sad,” Shohi said. “In any case, you need not worry. I shall not have you take responsibility. If the Quinary Dragon had not hated me, this would not have happened in the first place. Also, you seem to have forgotten, but I want you to...”

Shohi stopped himself, but Rimi could guess what he was about to say—“I want you to be my empress.”

I knew it. His Majesty is still waiting for my response. He just isn't saying that out loud.

Rimi's eyes met Shohi's, but she averted her gaze out of feelings of guilt and embarrassment.

“Is something the matter with Rimi, Your Majesty?” Shusei asked, noticing that something was strange about Shohi's behavior.

“It is nothing. Now, what is ailing the Quinary Dragon? I know you, Shusei. You already have a hypothesis, do you not?” Shohi said as he observed Tama, blatantly changing the topic.

Shusei looked at Shohi with suspicion for a few seconds before continuing.

“Yes. I read through the archive of the Bureau of Sacrifices, and the most likely cause seems to be that the Quinary Dragon has been let out of its cage. Most people think that its cage is to prevent it from fleeing, but it was actually made to protect it,” Shusei clarified.

“Protect it from what, exactly?” Kojin asked dispassionately.

“In *Legends of the Quinary Dragon in Verse*, it said that the Quinary Dragon coming into contact with human emotions causes fatigue. Divine dragons become attached to humans easily, but it is apparently vital to keep it in that silver cage to prevent it from coming into contact with them. That is why the previous emperors never let it interact with other people,” Shusei explained. “Writings from over thirty years ago mentioned that as time passed, that fundamental fact was forgotten, and the court priests at the time never gave it much thought. I would be surprised if most priests today were even aware of it

to begin with.”

If Tama gets tired from being with humans, then maybe it really was my fault that she's grown weaker. I'm the one she's been with the most.

“I’m so sorry, Tama...” Rimi said apologetically, hugging Tama as tears threatened to spill from her eyes. Tama squeaked back at her, rubbing her head against Rimi’s chest as if to say, “Don’t worry about it.”

“The good news is that this is no illness. We only need to let the Quinary Dragon recover from its fatigue,” Shusei said firmly, and Rimi looked at him in surprise. He responded with a reassuring nod.

“It is not an illness?!” Shohi said, leaning forward. “Then the Quinary Dragon becoming weaker is not an ill omen, Shusei?!”

“No, I do not believe so, Your Majesty. After all, there is a guaranteed way to restore it to its former self,” Shusei said. “This is at most something akin to a light cold, which can be healed by bringing it to a place brimming with spiritual energy and waiting for it to recover.”

“I see,” Shohi mumbled, his expression softening. Jotetsu also had a hint of relief in his eyes.

His Majesty was worried that Tama's condition was an ill omen... Rimi had failed to notice Shohi's fears. But perhaps that was to be expected—not letting his emotions show was one part of being the emperor since being visibly upset could cause his subjects to become concerned. As the emperor, he has to endure all manner of things alone. That's why he needs others to support him, and why I need to do everything in my power to serve him.

“Indeed, this is not an ill omen at all,” Shusei repeated to reassure Shohi. It seemed that he shared Rimi’s concern.

“On second thought, given our success in dealing with Saisakoku, everything is heading in a positive direction. There is no sign that disaster would befall the country,” Shohi said, smiling. “Do you not agree, Kojin?”

“Who is to say?” Kojin responded as though alluding to something. “In any case, if Shusei has reached a conclusion, there is no doubting it. No one is better than him at interpreting ancient texts and making informed decisions based on

them. I would trust his judgment over the average court priest.”

Kojin spoke as though he was simply praising a useful tool with no hint of affection in his voice.

“Now, where can that spiritual energy be found, Shusei?” Kojin continued.

“In the old capital of Hanin, at Seika Castle,” Shusei explained.

Rimi was not familiar with that place. It appeared to be a well-known location, however, as Shohi immediately furrowed his brow upon hearing the name.

“The Castle of Phantasms...”

Phantasms? Rimi had never heard that word before.

Chapter 2: At the Bottom of the Well

I

“Look, dearest! And everyone else as well! We’re in Hanin! That over there must be Castle Seika!” Pure Consort Yo, one of the four consorts, said as she poked her head out of the carriage window.

“Pure Consort Yo, that’s dangerous. And you’ll get sunburn too,” the mild-mannered Worthy Consort On said as she attempted to make Yo sit down by pulling on her sleeves.

“Just leave her be, Worthy Consort On. Pure Consort Yo is perfectly free to have her nose cut off or her face scorched if she so wishes,” Noble Consort So said in a carefree voice.

“That’s awful of you to say, Noble Consort So!” Yo said as she brought her head back inside, making Virtuous Consort Ho chuckle.

“Look, she withdrew from the window. You better thank Noble Consort So, Pure Consort Yo. Because of her, your nose is safe,” Ho said as she recrossed her long, slender legs.

Rimi giggled at the consorts’ conversation.

Normally, the four consorts would each ride in their own private carriage whenever they left the imperial palace. These four, however, had complained about how boring it would be to ride with handmaids, so they had decided to ride in the same carriage instead. What’s more, they had more or less forced Rimi to ride with them.

Rimi and the four consorts had entered Hanin, the old capital, as part of a long line of carriages. This convoy belonged to the emperor of Konkoku, escorting him from the capital of Annei to the old capital of Hanin.

At the front of the line was a small but fast carriage decorated with gold carrying the emperor, Shohi. Alongside him, Jotetsu was riding on a horse. Following them were three mid-sized black carriages carrying Shusei and other

high-ranking aides as well as palace attendant Hakurei. After that came the large carriage belonging to the consorts. Behind them were five carriages carrying handmaids, cooks, and aides. Escorts on horses flanked the carriages on both sides for protection.

One year had passed since Shohi had ascended to the throne. He had just recently managed to bring Konkoku one step closer to its long-standing wish of trading with Saisakoku, which was a remarkable achievement for such a new emperor. But having devoted himself to his royal duties for so long, he was thoroughly exhausted, and his doctor had instructed him to rest. Thus, he had left Annei for the old capital where he would take some time to recuperate.

That was the official pretext, at least. In reality, they had come to heal Tama. While it would in principle have been enough for Rimi to bring Tama here alone, this was, after all, a matter of transporting the divine dragon that served as the very foundation of the country.

Under normal circumstances, Tama was supposed to be with the emperor at all times. Rimi couldn't very well simply take her out of the imperial palace to a place far removed from him. The solution had been for Shohi to come along, bringing his attendants to Hanin under the pretense of needing rest. With the emperor leaving the capital, he would naturally bring guards along, which was perfect for keeping Tama safe.

Shu Kojin had suggested this solution. With Shohi away, Kojin would also be responsible for any government business along with the ministers, traveling to Hanin as needed. While the distance was inconvenient since Annei and Hanin were located roughly half a day apart, it was not insurmountable.

This would be the first long vacation the emperor had taken since his ascension, so the consorts had accompanied him. This was also a token of Shohi's appreciation for how vital the consorts had been during the negotiations with Saisakoku.

I just hope Tama gets better soon...

Tama was hiding under Rimi's skirt, napping while clinging to Rimi's legs.

Shusei had explained that Tama would recover if they took her to Hanin, which was filled with spiritual energy. With his reassurance, Rimi was in a good

mood, hopeful that Tama would be back to normal soon.

When we arrive, I'll make Tama her favorite food. I should prepare food for the consorts too.

One of the carriages was carrying the Chief of Dining, Yo Koshin, along with a few of his cooks. They would be responsible for all of the food at Castle Seika. As Rimi was acquainted with them already, they would be letting her use the kitchen as she pleased.

And maybe I'll be able to help Master Shusei with the suppers he'll be making for His Majesty? I'd say that's part of my job as his assistant. If everything went well, Rimi would be able to spend more time with Shusei. As long as she didn't make her feelings for him obvious, she would be permitted to be with him. For now, simply being near him was enough.

"In any case, we'll be arriving soon. You should make the best of this vacation that His Majesty allowed you and take it easy once we arrive. If you have anything you would like to eat, just let me know and I'll make it for you," Rimi said.

"It's your fault if I gain weight, you know," So complained, but this somehow made Rimi happy.

The consorts must have been relieved to be able to step outside the cramped inner palace. They seemed more excited than ever. Rimi was also enthusiastic about her first trip outside the capital since she had come to Konkoku.

"Say, once we arrive at Castle Seika, why don't we all hold a test of courage? You too, dearest! Oh, and maybe I'll invite Hakurei. He knows all kinds of things, so maybe he'll be able to share some mysteries about Castle Seika," Yo said eagerly as she bounced back and forth.

"A test of courage? How childish," So said, furrowing her brow. "I doubt Hakurei would go along with something like that."

"I don't think it's a good idea to play around in the Castle of Phantasms like that... I'd prefer if you didn't, Pure Consort Yo," On pleaded timidly.

Phantasms? There's that word again. Rimi remembered Shohi saying something similar when Shusei had first proposed bringing Tama to Hanin.

“What’s a phantasm?” Rimi asked.

“Oh, you haven’t heard?” Ho said, amused. “As Pure Consort Yo said, there are all kinds of mysteries and legends surrounding Castle Seika, like a man-eating monster appearing and being driven off by a beautiful court priest or angels descending upon the castle in numbers so great they covered the sky. It’s said that strange things have happened there ever since the Shoku dynasty. That’s why they call it the Castle of Phantasms.”

I see... Maybe the spiritual energy here is the cause of all these strange events.

Back in Wakoku, Rimi had often heard tales of people wandering into mountains and valleys where they would come across gods that were said to inhabit the land or even demons.

Gods and demons are both mystical beings, Rimi’s Saigu sister would say. We simply call those who bring fortune to us “gods” and those who bring harm “demons.” You should never venture somewhere said to be inhabited by gods unprepared because that is also where you will find demons.

“But isn’t it dangerous for His Majesty to recuperate in a place called the Castle of Phantasms?” Rimi asked with a worried tone.

“I’m sure it will be just fine, dearest,” Yo said confidently. “Castle Seika is where the emperor lived when Konkoku had just been founded. The court priests have also already investigated if it’s safe for His Majesty.”

It appeared that Pure Consort Yo took great delight in stories about strange occurrences like these.

“Yes, I hear twenty court priests spent three days searching for spirits and curses that might harm His Majesty. How very diligent of them,” Ho noted. “Of course, I don’t believe in man-eating monsters, that beautiful court priest, or angels.”

“Come now, Virtuous Consort Ho, don’t you have any imagination?” Yo said with a displeased pout. “Besides, don’t you know that those who say they don’t believe in the supernatural are the most likely to have something happen to them?”

“Virtuous Consort Ho, you’d best take back what you said. Who knows what

might happen otherwise,” So said, grinning. She appeared not to believe in these legends either.

On, however, turned pale as she uttered a distressed “Oh no!” while Ho simply laughed it off. From the still open window, Rimi could see walls consisting of stones stacked so carefully that not even a single sheet of paper could fit between them. As the procession continued forward, the stone walls quickly came closer, looking almost as if they were gradually growing in height. Soon, they turned into castle walls so enormous that it was difficult to see the top even if you threw your head back.

“They’re huge...” Rimi said in amazement upon seeing the open castle gates.

The gate was large enough for the procession to look like a line of ants entering a rabbit’s nest.

We’re about to enter a place filled with spiritual energy. I’ll be careful, Lady Saigu.

The bright spring sun seemed as if it were welcoming the emperor. However, Rimi braced herself as what the Saigu had once told her still echoed in her head.



“Why...?” Shusei muttered. He was beyond confused and outright astonished. “With a castle as enormous as this, how did it end up like this?”

Castle Seika was five times the size of the imperial palace of Annei. However, the northern army was currently stationed in the castle, meaning that there was a limited number of palaces available for the emperor to use.

Even so, isn’t this a bit too limited?! Shusei thought in a panic.

The number of palaces available was only one—the northern Palace of the Beautiful Spring. A building with white marble walls was built around a square garden with a spring in the middle that was visible from any room. The spring was also square and made from white marble. The garden, too, was paved with white marble, making the Palace of the Beautiful Spring look like two enormous boxes of different sizes placed on top of each other. There was an artificial beauty to it.

In the four corners of the garden were plum trees with roughly a third of their

white flowers blooming. The modest plum blossoms imbued the still cold air with a hint of spring.

It was a delicately designed palace with quiet surroundings that made it the ideal place for the emperor to recover. The problem was that not only the emperor's room, but also Shusei's, the consorts', Rimi's, and even Jotetsu's and Hakurei's rooms were all located here. Aside from the handmaids, aides, guardsmen, and cooks, people with any type of rank would be staying in the same palace.

There were rooms to spare, so it would not be cramped. However, it was absolutely unheard of for people of various ranks and posts, including the four consorts, to be staying in the same place like this.

Shusei's room was located on the upper floor of the western side. The corridor outside was decorated with a vermilion railing separating the building from the inner garden. On the opposite side of the spring was the eastern side where the consorts and Rimi were staying. Shusei could see Rimi running about on the upper floor of the eastern side and froze. Rimi similarly took notice of Shusei and smiled softly as she walked over to him.

"Master Shusei, do you need any help for His Majesty's supper today? I would be happy to assist you," Rimi said.

"I'll discuss with Koshin if we can use the kitchen later today. If he says yes, I'll be counting on you," Shusei replied.

"Of course," Rimi said, returning to the east side.

Shusei saw Rimi off while pretending to maintain his composure. But the moment she disappeared into her room, Shusei leaned limply toward the railing.

Our chambers are close. Too close. Are we really sleeping so close to each other? Shusei would have to fully mobilize his restraint starting tonight. *Not to mention, His Majesty is nearby as well. What if he starts visiting Rimi at night again?*

Shusei started to feel restless.

"Well, well, Shusei. Did the shaky journey make you that tired?" a soft voice

said.

Shusei looked up to find the palace attendant, Sai Hakurei, closing in on him. He was sporting his usual beautiful, captivating smile. Sharing the same father as Shohi, he had been placed in charge of the consorts' attendants.

"Hakurei, how did the consorts end up staying in the same palace as us? Didn't you object to it?" Shusei said in an accusatory tone.

"What can we do? The Palace of the Beautiful Spring is the only place in Castle Seika that's well-maintained enough to be fit for nobles. Having the consorts, His Majesty's brides, staying within reach is convenient, don't you think? Or is there someone who happens to be inconvenient for you?" Hakurei said, his eyes laughing.

Shusei froze.

"Now, I must take my leave," Hakurei said as he gave Shusei an elegant bow and started walking off.

Observing Hakurei's back as he left, Shusei recalled what Jotetsu had told him once before.

Hakurei is just a bell, Jotetsu had said. He had also remarked, The bell signaling a final desperate attempt has rung.

If Hakurei was a bell, and that bell had rung, then something must have happened to Hakurei. Jotetsu had also said that Shusei's real fate had been set in motion.

Are Hakurei and I connected somehow? What is my "real fate"? Jotetsu was sure to deflect any attempts to question him.

One thing that bothered Shusei, however, was how Ho Neison had appeared before Shusei with such remarkable timing. He felt that he might learn something by meeting Neison again, but his instincts told him that he mustn't.

I'm His Majesty's retainer.

Shohi's changes as of late had both surprised and delighted Shusei. The emperor had become more proactive when it came to government business, and he had become more tolerant. Shusei understood full well that this was all

thanks to Rimi, so he couldn't help but feel guilty about his own feelings for her. But he was still happy about this development.

Shusei entered Shohi's room and found the emperor by the window with documents spread out in front of him. There was a tranquil air to the room. Shohi had only come along to recuperate as a ruse to allow the Quinary Dragon time to recover. But since he had been so devoted to government affairs lately, Shusei thought that this was a good opportunity for the emperor to rest.

Jotetsu was sitting lazily on the windowsill, but his eyes were as vigilant as ever, observing what was happening on the other side of the window. Having been transported to an unfamiliar location all of a sudden, the bodyguard must have been particularly cautious on this first day.

"Does the area seem well-guarded, Jotetsu?" Shusei asked.

"The Palace of the Beautiful Spring is built to ensure a good view of the surroundings, and there's only one entrance. It'll be easy for the guardsmen to keep a lookout and difficult for any ruffians to find their way in. As long as we don't get a few hundred soldiers trying to force their way in, we should be fine," Jotetsu replied with a smirk.

"You don't have to worry about that. There are over three thousand soldiers stationed in Castle Seika to guard the north," Shusei said. He took a quick look around the room. "Your Majesty, is there anything you need? Do you have enough to entertain you?"

"Nothing in particular," Shohi said, looking up from his documents. "I suppose it is a bit dull here, but I shall seize this opportunity to take it easy."

Shohi had been hot-tempered and cruel since he was a child, but Shusei had always been able to sense the loneliness that was hidden behind his anger. Recently, that loneliness seemed to have subsided.

"That reminds me, Pure Consort Yo was just here. She asked if I would like to join her for a test of courage here at the Castle of Phantasms. Of course, considering Kojin, Keiyu, and Rihan are coming later today, I declined the offer this time. As long as the four consorts are here, I doubt I will have many dull moments," Shohi said with an awkward smile.

“Your Majesty, if you simply told the consorts that you were bored, I’m sure they would be happy to play with you, be it through tests of courage or a game of hide and seek,” Jotetsu said, grinning.

Considering her distaste for men, Pure Consort Yo was likely not treating Shohi as a man. She must have seen him not as a man or a woman but simply as though he was a playmate from the neighborhood.

“A test of courage? That’s certainly adorable—or should I say, just like Pure Consort Yo,” Shusei noted.

“Do not mince your words. You can call her juvenile,” Shohi said.

“The consorts are staying right nearby. Will you use this opportunity to visit them at night?”

“No, I will not,” Shohi replied without delay.

Shusei felt a restless sensation in his chest.

He has no plans on visiting the consorts. Does that mean he is visiting someone else? Rimi?

Shusei averted his gaze from Shohi, but his chest refused to calm down. He was astonished at his inability to control his feelings.

Jotetsu shot him a piercing glance, and Shusei nodded in an attempt to reassure him that he had no reason to worry—that no matter how restless his heart may be, he would never lay a finger on Rimi again.

Deciding to focus on his own work, Shusei excused himself and started making his way toward Koshin. This *was* ostensibly Shohi’s time to rest up, and Shusei had brought the finest culinological ingredients he had to ensure Shohi could make the best of his time here.

However, it appeared that Shusei would not be able to use them that evening as Koshin and his chefs were having difficulties with the unfamiliar kitchen. Thus, he instead decided to spend the rest of the day organizing the ingredients he had brought.

While Shusei was busy with his ingredients, Shu Kojin, the Minister of Revenue, To Rihan, and the Minister of Rites, Jin Keiyu, arrived at the castle. But

they left for Annei before Shusei had a chance to talk to them; they had only stopped by the castle to discuss how to handle governmental affairs while Shohi was away.

By the time Shusei had finished, the sun had started to set. As he returned to his chamber, he was startled by a letter that had been placed on his desk. With no sender written on it, it was clearly one of Ho Neison's letters.

When did it arrive? Who left it here? There was no one nearby other than the four consorts, who could be heard laughing in the garden below.

All letters Shusei had received so far had been placed on his desk in the cuisinology hall without him noticing, but he had simply assumed that there was someone in the imperial palace who had connections to Neison and was instructed to deliver the letters to him. However, the only people who had accompanied Shohi on this trip were the consorts, Rimi, Shusei, Jotetsu, and Hakurei. All handmaids, aides, and cooks were handpicked servants who had spent a lot of time working for Shohi.

Is there someone among even them who is working with Lord Ho and who doesn't think fondly of His Majesty's reign? The eeriness of it sent chills down Shusei's spine. It felt as though the old man's dry hands were reaching all the way to Hanin, refusing to let Shusei go.

II

Sai Hakurei was sighing at how late it was. He had been busy with work ever since the emperor's party had arrived. As he walked toward the room he had been assigned, Virtuous Consort Ho approached him from the opposite direction with a single handmaid in tow.

Usually, the four consorts would be surrounded by multiple handmaids whenever they left their abode, but for this trip, they had been unable to bring too many handmaids. There was also no need to worry as much about appearances given the informal nature of the trip.

As a palace attendant, Hakurei naturally stepped out of the way and bowed. But just as Ho was about to pass him, she seemed to think of something and

stopped in her tracks.

“Hakurei,” Ho called out to him.

Hakurei raised his head to find a pair of anxious eyes looking into his own.

“Hakurei, has anything out of the ordinary happened lately?” Ho asked.

“Nothing comes to mind, I’m afraid,” Hakurei responded with a smile.

“But my grandfather...” Ho trailed off, furrowing her brow before quietly continuing. “Well, it doesn’t matter.”

Ho turned her eyes away, straightened her back, and started walking. Hakurei observed her walking off without breaking his smile.

Has she noticed something about the Ho house?

Ho had always been an intelligent and perceptive woman. Her back was slender and her fair neck was indescribably immaculate and beautiful.

Then, two noisy girls suddenly showed up before the elegant Ho. It was Pure Consort Yo dragging Setsu Rimi along.

“Now then, what is all this commotion about?” Ho asked in an accusatory tone.

“We’re doing something ever so delightful!” Yo responded with a smile before running up to Hakurei.



“Hakurei! I was looking for you! Say, do you know any mysteries surrounding Castle Seika?” Pure Consort Yo asked with bright eyes.

Rimi was panting, her arm still gripped by Yo, breathing too hard to even speak.

Pure Consort Yo certainly has more stamina than she knows what to do with, Rimi thought, impressed.

“Yes, I certainly do,” Hakurei said with a vaguely weary smile. “There is the bleeding magnolia, the well that cries at night, the limestone cavern below the castle, the moving mausoleum, and the stone-paved road where your own shadow chases you. Then there is the invisible ringing bell and the never-

blooming daffodil. Those are all seven mysteries of Castle Seika. Why do you ask?”

“Do you know where I can find them?” Yo asked curiously.

“You’re not planning a test of courage, are you?”

“Of course I am!” Yo said, nodding vigorously at Hakurei’s perceptive question. “Um... Should I not?”

“As long as you bring guardsmen and handmaids, it should be fine. But I’m afraid I’ll have to disappoint you—I only know where the bleeding magnolia and the well that cries at night are.”

“I don’t mind! Where are they?!”

“Please wait here for just a moment.”

Hakurei smiled like a parent looking at a mischievous child, went to his room, and brought back a quickly drawn map that he handed to an extremely pleased Yo.

“Let’s go, dearest!” Yo said, once again grabbing Rimi by her arm.

Yo then immediately attempted to leave the Palace of the Beautiful Spring, which made Rimi nervous.

“Pure Consort Yo, shouldn’t we get the handmaids and guardsmen first?” Rimi urged her.

“Oh, where’s the fun in a test of courage with that many people? This kind of thing should be done alone or in pairs, dearest! That’s what makes it exciting!”

Yo continued dragging Rimi along with the boldness only a city girl could possess despite the palace woman’s objections.

Well, I suppose it should be fine. Based on the map Master Hakurei gave us, it doesn’t seem very far from the palace.

Given how sharp Hakurei was, he had likely realized that Yo would attempt to leave without any guardsmen. That was why he had opted only to tell her about the two closest mysteries. If Hakurei was permitting it, then there was no risk of danger.

First I don't get to cook, now I have to do a test of courage...

After Rimi had arrived at Castle Seika, Tama had immediately curled up on Rimi's bed and gone to sleep. Seeing the little creature sleeping so comfortably and hearing her soft breathing had given Rimi a deep sense of relief—but she had been bored out of her mind. Attempting to alleviate her boredom, she had wanted to make delicious food for Tama and the consorts. But the moment she had shown up in the kitchen, she had been chased out by the menacing Chief of Dining. Koshin and his cooks had been pressed for time as they had still not become acquainted with the new kitchen. From the looks of it, Rimi realized she would not be able to help Shusei with Shohi's supper for the day either. So, she had started wandering around aimlessly when Pure Consort Yo had set her sights on her.

Oh well. It's not like I have anything better to do.

Rimi walked to the location indicated on the map together with Yo. It turned out to be an uninhabited palace, and there were no signs of it having been visited recently. There was still snow that had yet to fully melt under the eaves and in front of the door to the main hall of the palace.

At the edge of the desolate garden stood a single magnolia, still leafless from the winter. In the middle of the garden was an old well.

“This must be the bleeding tree!” Yo said excitedly as she went up to the tree, and Rimi timidly followed her.

The trunk of the tree was thick and impressive, but other than that, it looked like any other magnolia. Looking closely, however, Rimi saw that there seemed to be a number of scratch marks on the trunk. They looked ominous, as though they had once been carved deep into the wood but had then become covered up as the bark had expanded with time. Rimi couldn't help but wonder who would have carved so deeply into the tree and why. She started to shiver and couldn't tell if it was because of the cold or for some other reason.

Rimi was standing in the former imperial palace in the capital of the country that had been destroyed by Konkoku. The continent had been ruled by Shokukoku before Konkoku was founded in its ruins. Hanin was where the capital of Shokukoku had been located, and it had also served as Konkoku's

capital for some years. But the first emperor of Konkoku had taken issue with inheriting the capital of a now-ruined country, so he had relocated to the current capital of Annei.

According to Shusei, Shokukoku had highly valued different kinds of sorcery. The reason Hanin had been made the capital was to make use of the spiritual energy that could be found here.

“This must be the well that cries at night,” Yo said. “Oh, look, dearest! There’s a light at the bottom of the well!”

Brimming with curiosity, Yo had made her way from the magnolia to the well. She was leaning over the well with her hands placed on its walls while looking around the garden.

“Is there some sort of stick somewhere? Oh, over there! That will do!” Yo exclaimed.

In the corner of the garden was a bundle of bamboo poles. Yo went to pick one up and thrust it down the well with both hands. Rimi couldn’t believe her eyes at Yo’s excessively bold actions.

“Pure Consort Yo! You can’t just thrust a bamboo pole into a cursed well like this!” Rimi said in astonishment.

“Well, it’s not crying right now,” Yo calmly replied.

Wow! Does she know no fear?! Rimi couldn’t decide whether Yo was brave or foolish as she observed her, dumbfounded.

“Almost! Just a bit more!” Yo exclaimed as she searched the well with the pole, before letting out a quiet, elated, “I did it!” as she pulled the pole back out. On the tip of the pole hung a copper box. “This is what was shining down there!”

The drenched box was smooth, flat, and undecorated, slightly smaller than a palm. What had gotten caught on the pole was a thin string, which had been wound many times around the box.

What is this? It almost looks like a seal.

The knot had been purposely tied in a peculiar, complicated shape. The

mystical knot sent a shiver down Rimi's spine.

What is it sealing away inside this box?

Yo lifted the box off the bamboo pole and placed it on the ground.

"What could this be?" Yo asked curiously as she crouched and reached out toward the box.

"No, don't, Pure Consort Yo!" Rimi warned sharply. "This is something that mustn't be opened, I'm sure!"

"Why? I'm sure it's fine, dearest. I just have to see what's inside. I have to see it. I have to," Yo said, her eyes somehow different from usual.

"We should talk to someone first. Let's ask Master Shusei. We'll open the box after that. There's no hurry."

"I want to see what's inside now!"

Yo reached out toward the string and quickly undid the knot.

Something is strange about Pure Consort Yo! And how could she undo a knot that complicated so quickly?

Rimi sensed something strange from the box when Yo touched it as if possessed. Yo's hand was already on the lid, about to open it.

"Pure Consort Yo!" Rimi screamed.

Rimi could feel it. If anything lay hidden inside that box, the one who would be most exposed to danger was the one who removed the seal. Desperate to stop her, Rimi tried to push Yo away. Yo immediately bounced back up again and reached for the box once more. She seemed somehow obsessed with opening it. Rimi had no chance of stopping her alone. Even if she tried to stop her by force, Yo was stronger than her.

I can't stop her! But I can't let something happen to her! In that case, I might as well...

Just as Yo was about to remove the lid, Rimi opened the box herself. Immediately, she felt cold air rushing toward her. It was as though something invisible had passed through her. The sensation gave her chills, and she

forcefully closed her eyes.

Yo was standing still, blinking speechlessly at Rimi. She seemed to have come to her senses. Rimi slowly opened her eyes and searched every corner of the garden for anything out of the ordinary, but she came up empty.

What was that just now...?

While Rimi sat still in a daze, Yo affectionately took her arm and stepped closer to her as she looked into the box.



“So you opened it instead of me, dearest,” Yo noted.

“I’m sorry, Pure Consort Yo. That was disrespectful of me. But I just felt like something bad would happen to you if you opened it,” Rimi said.

“Don’t worry about it, dearest. I don’t even understand why I was so obsessed with opening it. My whole body was just telling me that I had to open it...”

Rimi and Yo peeked into the box.

“A mirror?” Rimi said, giving the item inside a confused look.

Inside the box was a hand mirror covered in verdigris. The malevolent sensation from earlier was gone with nothing but the sky visible in the foggy mirror.

III

Rimi brought the mirror from the well that cries at night back to her room. It was a good size, just large enough to see your face when held up with one hand. On the edges of the copper handle were detailed carvings of flowers. There were also characters carved between the flowers, but they were written in classical Konkokuwan, so Rimi was unable to read them. Based on the charming floral pattern, Rimi guessed that the mirror must have belonged to a young woman.

“This doesn’t look dangerous enough to warrant sinking it into a well inside such a sturdily sealed box...”

Although it was covered with verdigris, it was just a normal mirror. Before Rimi had opened the box, she had sensed something frightfully ominous coming from it, but there was nothing strange about the actual item inside.

Did I just imagine it? Rimi thought as she put the mirror on a table and crawled into bed.

Tired from the long journey, Rimi fell asleep immediately. Then, she had a dream.

There was nothing but darkness in sight. However, Rimi was aware that she

was dreaming, and she was not afraid. She carefully took a step forward while feeling around in the darkness, wondering where she was, and her fingers hit something hard. She put her hand on the object, which was smooth and cool. She felt around with both hands to find that the hard and smooth object was blocking her way like a wall. Walking alongside it with her hands stretched out, she realized that she was surrounded by a circular wall.

Am I trapped?

Suddenly, Rimi heard a woman sobbing. She looked around, but it was too dark to see anything. The crying seemed to come from right nearby. She put her back to the wall and strained her ears in an attempt to find the source.

Behind me?!

Rimi noticed that the voice was coming from behind her. She hurriedly stepped away from the wall and looked behind her. Despite there being a wall there, she could see a woman wearing a light pink ruqun. The wall was transparent.

The woman on the other side of the wall was standing alone, crying with her face covered. By her feet were orbs in various colors—pink, white, light green, and blue—shining faintly in the darkness like fireflies.

Is that...candy...?

A few of the orbs were crushed from having been stepped on. They seemed to be candy made by kneading wheat or rice flour and rolling it into small balls.

Looking carefully, Rimi noticed that, among the countless orbs, there was a tree branch the length of an arm lying on the ground. Colorful candy orbs were attached to one end of the branch. It looked as though beautiful and mystical flowers were blooming on it. The fact that the orbs were so vivid and brightly colored made it all the more painful to see it thrown on the ground next to a crying woman.

Rimi took a step forward and placed her hand on the transparent wall. She couldn't walk any further.

"Why are you crying? What's your name?" Rimi asked, unable to bear the sight of the woman crying.

The woman looked up in surprise and fixed her gaze on Rimi. She had an elegant oval face. She gave Rimi a baffled look, tears streaming down her face all the while.

“My name is Rimi. Who are you?” Rimi asked again in a kind voice, trying to comfort the woman.

“Reishun...” the woman answered faintly.



Today's supper had been prepared by the Chief of Dining, Yo Koshin. Shohi was overjoyed to be able to eat something other than Shusei's healthy concoctions, but Shusei looked apologetic.

“I'm sorry that I couldn't prepare today's supper for you, Your Majesty,” Shusei said.

“So we will be back to those concoctions again tomorrow...” Shohi grumbled.

After he had finished his meal and Shusei and Jotetsu had both left, Shohi sat down at his desk, opened a book, and started mumbling to himself.

Shohi would much rather have had his suppers prepared by Rimi. When Rimi cooked, even Shusei's hideous ingredients turned into something edible.

Still, I cannot simply order her to cook for me... Shohi worried that commanding her to do so would put her on guard. She might think that Shohi was trying to press her for an answer to the question of being his empress or that he had other ulterior motives.

Ever since Shohi had told Rimi his feelings, he had carefully avoided any opportunity for the two of them to end up alone together. Rimi also seemed to be avoiding being alone with Shohi. However, Shohi couldn't help but feel a bit sad about that.

Has she not answered me because she actually hates me but is uncomfortable turning me down? Or is there some hope, and she has just not yet made up her mind?

Shohi looked into the candle flame dancing on his desk. The heat of it seemed to him like the intensity of his desire for Rimi, and its flickering was like his own

wavering heart, unable to tell what was in Rimi's.

He sensed someone behind him.

"Who goes there?!" Shohi yelled as he turned around to find a slender figure standing behind the divider placed by the entrance. "Rimi?"

Shohi was dumbfounded, surprised at the unexpected visitor. Their eyes met, and Rimi looked down and blushed. It was such a charming sight that Shohi's heart started beating faster.

"Do you need something?" Shohi asked with a nervous voice.

Rimi stepped out from behind the divider and hesitantly walked toward Shohi.

"Your Majesty," Rimi said in a sad voice as she sat down on the floor next to Shohi's chair, placing her hands pleadingly on his lap.

Shohi's heart skipped a beat.

Rimi looked up at Shohi with large eyes. She took Shohi's hand and rested her cheek on it. Shohi trembled at the soft sensation against the back of his hand.

"Is this...your answer?" Shohi asked hoarsely.

With her cheek still on Shohi's hand, Rimi moved her head ambiguously in a way that could be taken as both nodding and shaking her head.

Which is it?! At this point...it does not matter! Shohi had no idea what was going through Rimi's head, but he had reached his limit.

"This is your fault," Shohi grumbled.

Rimi looked up at him with a confused expression. Shohi stood up from his chair and pulled Rimi to her feet by her arm, only to lift her from the ground. While she stared at him in surprise, Shohi carried her to his bedchamber, parting the curtains hanging by his bed with his shoulder. He placed her on the bed and climbed up on top of her, holding both of her arms down by her wrists.

"This is your fault. You came here despite knowing what I wanted," Shohi said before furrowing his brow and closing his eyes as if trying to restrain himself. "Still, doing this without first hearing you out..."

Perhaps Rimi was putting him to the test, risking her body to see if Shohi truly did care for her. If that was the case, he couldn't force himself upon her.

"Rimi, tell me. Why are you here?" Shohi asked in a voice so sad that he barely recognized it himself.

Rimi simply moved her head ambiguously again.

I cannot take this.

Without thinking, Shohi ran both his hands down Rimi's cheeks, neck, collarbone, and...

"I cannot!" Shohi rebuked himself just before it was too late, removing his hands and jumping off the bed. He turned his back to the bed, pressed his forehead against the wall, and yelled. "Tell me why you are here! If you have no intention of speaking, then leave!"

The room fell quiet. Shohi suppressed his urges as he waited for a response, but none came. After a while, he calmed down and turned back toward the bed while calling out Rimi's name.

But there was no one on the bed.

"Did she leave...? What was she trying to do?" Shohi mumbled.

Suddenly, he felt lethargic, as if something was hanging over him. He staggered toward his bed, slowly lied down, and closed his eyes.

What is happening? I feel so very sluggish...



Shusei was lying on his bed, observing the dark room, unable to sleep.

Will His Majesty visit Rimi's room tonight? Even if he doesn't visit her tonight, with his favorite concubine so close by, it's only a matter of time.

If Rimi had truly succeeded at fully suppressing her feelings for Shusei, she was sure to accept Shohi's proposal. The very thought made Shusei feel like he was suffocating. Then, the door to his bedchamber opened slightly, letting a ray of moonlight into the dark room.

"Who is it?" Shusei asked, sitting up on his bed.

The person standing there, bathed in the moonlight, was Rimi.

“Rimi?! Is something the matter?!” Shusei exclaimed, alarmed that something might have happened to make her visit him unannounced in the middle of the night.

Rimi calmly shook her head as she slowly approached Shusei’s bed. She climbed onto his bed without hesitation, staring into Shusei’s surprised face.

“What are you doing?” Shusei asked.

He could just barely make out her face in the moonlight. Her teary-eyed expression was adorable and her lips glistened. Shusei’s reason was close to giving out.

“I thought our feelings were dead. So you...you can’t...”

Despite knowing how wrong it was, Shusei involuntarily placed his hands on Rimi’s hips. Rimi shivered slightly as though ticklish, which caused Shusei to come to his senses and remove his hands.

“You remember, don’t you, Rimi?” Shusei groaned. “How we both killed our feelings for each other.”

“Yes,” Rimi whispered, all the while leaning her body against Shusei’s chest.

“Rimi...” Shusei said in a strained voice that seemed to come from the bottom of his throat, but he was unable to shove Rimi away. He had an intense urge to embrace the warm, slender, and soft body in front of him. “If you remember, then why...?”

In response, Rimi wrapped her arms around Shusei, placing her hands on his back. Shusei instinctively moved his hands toward her back.

This...mustn’t be! Shusei stopped his arms with sheer willpower, instead grabbing Rimi’s shoulders and pushing her away.

“Rimi, this isn’t right. You can’t do this,” Shusei said.

Suddenly, Jotetsu’s voice called out to him from the living room.

“Shusei, are you awake?” he asked.

Shusei turned pale. The door connecting his bedchamber to the living room

was ajar.

Rimi also seemed surprised as she turned around toward the door. Shusei pressed his index finger to his mouth, signaling for Rimi to stay quiet, as he calmly responded.

“Yes, I am. I’m just getting changed for bed. What is it?” Shusei said.

“I just thought I’d have a drink. Come out and join me,” Jotetsu replied.

“Let me put something on first. I’ll be right there.”

Shusei climbed down from his bed and turned to Rimi, who was still sitting on the bed, seemingly frightened.

“I’ll suggest to Jotetsu to have the drinks in his room. Once we’re gone, head back to your room. Make sure no one sees you,” Shusei instructed.

After seeing Rimi nod in response, Shusei put on a robe and left the room.

Jotetsu was leaning on the door to the living room, and upon seeing Shusei, he held up the bottle he was holding in one hand.

“We don’t often get a break from work like this. We better take the opportunity to kick back,” Jotetsu said with a grin.

“You’re always kicking back, though,” Shusei said with a sigh. “If we’re drinking, let’s do it downstairs, in your room. His Majesty’s and the four consorts’ rooms are on the second floor. We can’t raise our voices here.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Jotetsu said, leaving the room together with Shusei without a hint of suspicion. As they walked, Jotetsu turned to Shusei. “Has anything happened between you and Rimi since then?”

“Of course not,” Shusei answered, shaking his head without letting his startlement show. “We’ve both come to terms with reality.”

“I hope that’s true,” Jotetsu said, though he had a faintly apologetic expression.

Meanwhile, Shusei looked calm, but his thoughts were racing.

Why would Rimi do that? Why?



That was a strange dream... Rimi thought, thinking back to the vision she had just woken up from as she went through her morning routine. She had been surrounded by a transparent wall with an unfamiliar woman crying on the other side of it. She had introduced herself as Reishun right before the dream had been cut short.

As she thought about how strange it was for an unknown woman to show up in her dreams—she had never met her before, nor had she ever heard the name Reishun—Rimi finished her morning preparations.

“Tama, let’s go,” Rimi said to Tama who was lying on Rimi’s bed.

Tama yawned widely as she leaped off the bed and dove under Rimi’s skirt.

“Oh, you’re going there? Not in the mood to see His Majesty today, are we?”

Ever since they had arrived at Castle Seika, Tama had stopped sighing, instead replacing her sighs with yawns.

While listening to Tama yawn repeatedly under her skirt, Rimi walked toward Shohi’s room. Even though they had left the imperial castle, her duty of showing Tama to Shohi every morning remained. Shohi’s room was on the upper floor of the north side of the building with aides stationed on both sides outside his door at all times. Rimi asked them for an audience with Shohi.

When Rimi stepped into Shohi’s room, the emperor was in the middle of having his breakfast. Shusei and Jotetsu were standing to the side.

“Good morning, Your Majesty, Master Shusei, and Master Jotetsu. I’ve brought Tam—I mean, the Quinary Dragon. She seems to be tired today, and she is dozing under my skirt,” Rimi greeted Shohi as usual.

Shohi and Shusei both gave her quizzical looks.

Huh? Is it just me or are His Majesty and Master Shusei looking at me strangely?

Shohi looked down for a moment to think before suddenly placing his chopsticks on the table.

“Shusei, Jotetsu, leave the room. I need to speak to Rimi alone,” Shohi ordered.

“Let’s go,” Jotetsu said, tapping Shusei on the shoulder.

Shusei seemed hesitant, but he soon followed Jotetsu out of the room with a hint of resignation on his face.

Is he finally going to ask me about being his empress? Rimi steeled herself, still undecided on how to answer.

Then she noticed that Shohi looked awfully pale. He had barely eaten from the now cold congee on the table.

“Your Majesty, you don’t look so well. Do you not have an appetite? Are you feeling ill?” Rimi couldn’t stop herself from asking.

“I feel slightly sluggish,” Shohi said, furrowing his brow. “Ever since what happened during your visit last night...”

Rimi couldn’t understand what Shohi was talking about, but she also couldn’t disregard him feeling unwell.

“I can’t very well look past you feeling unwell this early in the morning. You need to talk to Master Shusei and have him make you something healthy,” Rimi said.

“I can worry about that later. What I need to ask you is, what was that last night?” Shohi asked.

Rimi gave Shohi a puzzled look. Shohi didn’t seem to want to ask her about becoming the empress, but she had no idea what he was referring to.

“I’m sorry? What happened last night?” Rimi asked.

“You cannot pretend that you have forgotten. When you visited me last night, what were you trying to do?”

“Huh?” Rimi said, baffled. “I have not seen you once until this morning since arriving at Castle Seika, Your Majesty.”

“Do not feign ignorance!” Shohi yelled as he stood up from his chair, grabbed Rimi’s wrist, and pushed her against the wall. “Last night, you visited my room and made advances toward me!”

I made advances toward His Majesty?!

Chapter 3: The Strange Illness

I

Having no idea what Shohi was talking about, Rimi's eyes were filled with shock and panic.

"I've done no such thing! Yesterday, I went to bed early and slept soundly until morning!" Rimi protested.

"Then how do you explain what you did last night?!" Shohi roared.

"I swear, I don't remember doing anything like that!" Rimi replied, her voice trembling from fear at Shohi's agitated yelling.

Just as tears were starting to well up in Rimi's eyes, Tama popped her head out from Rimi's skirt. She ran up her skirt and onto Rimi's shoulders, raised her tail, and hissed at Shohi, baring her fangs. Seeing this, Shohi finally snapped out of his rage.

"Do you truly have no recollection?" Shohi asked.

"I have no idea whatsoever what you are referring to, Your Majesty," Rimi explained.

"But that cannot be... No, upon second thought, you did act somewhat strangely... Were you still half asleep...?"

Shohi stared into thin air with a puzzled expression before giving a dejected shrug. He let go of Rimi's hand, returned to his chair, and looked down. He put his hand to his forehead.

"Enough. You may leave, Rimi. I have already verified that the Quinary Dragon is well. Even if it was through it threatening me..." Shohi said in exasperation.

"Um... Your Majesty, was it truly me who did all that yesterday?" Rimi asked, anxious from seeing Shohi so dejected.

"There is no mistaking it. I touched you with these very hands," Shohi replied.

Rimi suddenly became flustered. Although she had no recollection of it

happening, according to Shohi, she had made advances on him, and he had touched her.

“But I...I really don’t remember anything like that,” Rimi pleaded.

“Yes, I can tell as much,” Shohi spat bitterly.

Rimi once again became worried about how unwell he seemed when she saw how Shohi sank limply into his chair, discouraged. It was as though he had used up the last of his energy yelling at her.

“Your Majesty, are you really feeling well?” Rimi asked, concerned.

“There is no cause for concern. The unfamiliar environment must have worn me out slightly,” Shohi said. “In any case, Rimi, leave the room. Please.”

Realizing that her presence was only adding to Shohi’s distress, Rimi quickly excused herself.

I visited His Majesty last night? That can’t be... But His Majesty said there’s no mistaking it. Not to mention that something seemed off about him. He looked unwell and said that he was feeling sluggish. But he seemed perfectly fine yesterday. Is it because of what I did last night? But I don’t remember it at all...
Rimi pondered as she walked toward her room on the eastern side.

“What’s going on? I was sleeping with you last night, Tama, wasn’t I?”

Tama responded with an unsure squeak. She seemed unaware of what had transpired as she had been sleeping too.

As though fleeing from Shohi’s room, Rimi was walking at a fast pace when she heard a voice calling her name from an unoccupied room at the corner where the northern and eastern sides of the building met. But before she could realize who the voice belonged to, she was pulled into the room by her wrist.

Rimi stumbled past the doorway and turned around to find Shusei closing the door behind her. All she could do was blink vacantly in confusion.

“Master Shusei? What in the world is the matter?” Rimi said in bewilderment.

“Rimi, why did you visit me last night?” Shusei asked.

Rimi couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

I visited not only His Majesty but Master Shusei too?!

Even Tama on her shoulder seemed surprised, looking on with wide eyes. She looked at Rimi with eyes that seemed to ask, “Did you actually do that?” Rimi shook her head as hard as she could.

“I didn’t! I never saw you last night, Master Shusei!” Rimi said.

“Please don’t play dumb,” Shusei said.

“I mean it! I don’t remember that happening!”

Rimi was teary-eyed from being falsely accused for the second time in one day. Her panic seemed to come across to Shusei as he looked at her with confusion.

“What...? Really? Do you really not remember?” Shusei asked.

“I went to bed early yesterday and slept until morning!”

Shusei seemed significantly calmer than Shohi, and he furrowed his brow upon hearing Rimi’s explanation.

“Then, how do you explain what you did last night...?” Shusei muttered. “Sleepwalking, perhaps? Now that I think about it, I can’t imagine that you would ever do something like that consciously. You might have been walking around while still asleep. If so, things could have ended rather poorly. Not to mention, you inflicted a good amount of psychological damage on me.”

“I’m sorry. But I swear, I don’t remember it happening.”

Shusei sighed and paused to think for a moment.

“We should think of a way to prevent this,” Shusei said. “I will be preparing His Majesty’s suppers starting today. I will prepare some ingredients to help you sleep better while I’m at it. Be sure to eat it.”

“Thank you,” Rimi responded, hanging her head out of both gratitude and remorse. Then, she was reminded of Shohi’s condition just now. “By the way, Master Shusei, His Majesty didn’t seem to be feeling well. He also said that he was feeling sluggish. Did you notice?”

“Well, I did note that he didn’t seem to have much of an appetite. Did he tell

you himself that he was feeling sluggish?”

“Yes. Considering how he looked, I think it would be best to serve him your meal as soon as possible.”

“Was it that bad? That’s cause for concern. I will visit His Majesty once more to see how he is doing.”

With a serious look on his face, Shusei placed his hand on Rimi’s back to signal for her to exit the room. As they left together, Shusei gave Rimi a kind smile.

“I’m very thankful that you told me about His Majesty when I hadn’t noticed myself,” Shusei continued. “But keep in mind that you may also be at risk with your sleepwalking. Be careful. Why don’t we place a bell by your bed to be on the safe side? If you start to walk around unconscious and the bell rings, I’ll come to stop you.”

“What? But then you’ll be in my bedchamber.”

Shusei’s cheeks turned red.

“I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m simply worried about you.”

Master Shusei is worried about me? Rimi’s chest trembled with a numbing pain. Shusei may have discarded his feelings for Rimi, but he still possessed compassion for her. However, this kindness was also why Rimi was unable to give up on him.

Their eyes met, and for a moment Rimi wondered if maybe they were both feeling the same thing for each other.

“Thank you, Master Shusei,” Rimi said.

“You are my assistant, and your point of view is indispensable when it comes to cuisinology. You also notice things about His Majesty that I don’t. That is all.”

They exited into the hallway, and Shusei bid Rimi farewell and walked off. Rimi watched his back as it grew smaller, and a warm feeling of happiness lit up in her chest at having experienced Shusei’s compassion for the first time in a while—but at the same time, she was beside herself with worry.

His Majesty said that I made advances on him, and Master Shusei implied something similar. Did I do something indecent?

Rimi imagined what she might have done and turned pale. Neither of them would say anything concrete, so Rimi wondered if it might have been something wildly improper. She was afraid to find out what had actually happened.

If I was really walking around and doing indecent things in my sleep, then what do I do? I've caused so much trouble for both of them.

Rimi covered her face from a combination of embarrassment and dread.

I can't sleep tonight. I refuse to, Rimi vowed to herself.

She spent that evening on her sofa, texts spread out across her legs, fighting to stay awake. But sometime after the clock had struck midnight, she must have dozed off.

When Rimi came to, she was in the darkness from her dream the night before. Realizing this, she started to panic.

I have to wake up! I can't sleep!

She did her best to wake up, but with no idea how to end a dream, all she could do was look around frantically. Then she noticed the faint outline of a pink ruqun. It was the woman from her dream last night.

Reishun?! It's just the same as before.

Rimi couldn't believe that she was having the same dream two nights in a row. Reishun was staring at a fixed point in the air on the other side of the transparent wall, seemingly not noticing Rimi. Small candies were scattered around on the ground again, along with the colorful branch on which candy was growing. Tears were flowing endlessly from her eyes. Rimi's heart ached at how the woman was crying, pitifully and silently.

She's crying again. She's always crying. Why is she so sad?

"Reishun, why are you crying?" Rimi asked, completely forgetting that she had to wake up.

Reishun blinked and turned her gaze to Rimi.

"You are...Rimi, was it?"

Rimi found it strange that Reishun also had recollections of having met Rimi

the night before, despite being part of her dream.

I recall Lady Saigu saying that there are two types of dreams. One type was the incoherent type of dream that you created in your own mind; the other was the spirit dream, where gods, spirits, souls, and other beings that were normally invisible wandered into your dream.

The Saigu had explained that you could tell the difference between normal dreams and spirit dreams “by the touch.” The dream Rimi was having felt different from her usual dreams.

This might be a spirit dream. And whatever the case, the sight of Reishun crying was so unbearable that Rimi wanted to do whatever she could to make her stop.

“Would you mind telling me why you’re crying? Is there anything I can do?” Rimi asked.

Reishun hesitantly bit her lower lip a few times.

“There is nothing anyone can do,” Reishun mumbled. “I’m parting with the person I love.”

“Why do you have to part? If you tell me why, someone might be able to help you, even if I can’t,” Rimi said.

“No, you can’t, because I don’t want you to help.”

“Why not?!”

“Because I want to part with him.”

Rimi couldn’t grasp what Reishun was saying. Her words stuck in her throat as the woman continued to cry.

“I’m parting with him willingly. I wish to part with him. So I don’t need anyone’s help,” Reishun continued.

“But you love him, don’t you?” Rimi asked.

“I do. I love him beyond words.”

Reishun’s lips trembled. Rimi wanted to understand why she was crying when she was wishing to part with the man in question.

“Then, why?”

Just as Rimi asked Reishun to clarify, she woke up. She felt the morning sunlight on her face, noticed the texts that had fallen from her lap to the floor, and sprung up.

“I fell asleep!”

The sun was already up. Worried that she might have done something during the night, Rimi hurried to Shusei’s room, only to run into him in the hallway outside. He looked at her with a troubled expression.

“You came by again last night,” Shusei said.

Rimi had no idea whether to blush or turn pale.

Not just once but twice... I wish the ground would swallow me up...

“I’m sorry. What did I do, exactly?” Rimi wondered.

“You...tried to climb into my bed again.”

“‘Again’?! You mean I tried to do that the first time too?!”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. But I knew that you were half asleep, so I told you to go back to your room. Thankfully you did so without a fuss.”

Rimi’s cheeks were so hot that she felt as though steam would start to rise from her head. She started to feel dizzy.

“I’m sorry... I’ll...try to figure something out,” Rimi apologized and hung her head.

Shusei let out a sigh that sounded thoroughly exhausted.

“Yes, please do. If you don’t, I’m not sure what I’ll do,” Shusei said.

I’m causing trouble for Master Shusei by approaching him unconsciously even though he’s already rid himself of any feelings for me. Rimi felt a pain in her nose, and she did her best not to cry.

“I will try to be more careful. I’ll do my best not to cause you any more trouble, Master Shusei,” Rimi said.

“I would appreciate it if you did,” Shusei said, still speaking kindly even as he

was rejecting Rimi.

“Of course,” Rimi nodded.

Then, as if to signal the end of the conversation, Shusei changed his expression.

“Now, let’s go and show the Quinary Dragon to His Majesty,” Shusei suggested.

Rimi went back to her room, picked up Tama, and walked to Shohi’s room together with Shusei.

“By the way, how was His Majesty, Master Shusei?” Rimi asked while petting Tama, who was continuing to yawn repeatedly.

“There is no need to worry,” Shusei assured her. “He looked somewhat unwell and said he was feeling sluggish. So, I had him drink some Kon root juice to restore his vitality and stamina. He should be back to normal today.”

The emperor began his days early. Normally, Shohi would have already finished his morning routine by now and be ready to receive any subjects. Now, however, his door—featuring a carving of birds playing in a valley—was still closed. No sound could be heard from the other side.

“This is strange...” Shusei said.

Shusei had just walked up to the door to call out to Shohi when the door opened. Jotetsu showed up from inside.

“Oh!” Jotetsu exclaimed with a surprised look. “Hey there, you two. Up early, are we?”

“Is something the matter, Jotetsu? The door wasn’t open,” Shusei said in a worried tone, but Jotetsu simply shook his head nonchalantly.

“His Majesty’s just feeling a bit ill. He hasn’t got a fever or any strange symptoms. He just doesn’t have an appetite and he’s feeling too sluggish to get up. He’s still lying in his bed,” Jotetsu said.

“He can’t get out of bed?” Shusei said, his expression growing even more worried. “Why is he feeling worse than yesterday? He didn’t have any such signs when I last saw him.”

He doesn't have a fever, yet he's feeling too sluggish to get up? It would have been normal to feel lethargic from having a fever but not being able to get out of bed with a regular temperature was strange.

"I assume you've already talked to the doctor, Jotetsu. What did he say?" Shusei asked.

"He said there are no signs of an illness, so it's got to be something emotional. In other words, unless you've got something urgent, you won't be able to see His Majesty today," Jotetsu explained. "Although he did say he at least wanted to have a look at the Quinary Dragon. Rimi, come in alone."

Though she couldn't decline Shohi's request, Rimi felt hesitant about entering his bedchamber alone. The emperor's bedchamber was not a place for a mere palace woman. She looked at Shusei to ask for his opinion.

"Go in. This is your duty," he said to her encouragingly.

"Very well," Rimi said with a nod and entered the room.

The living room was dark with the outline of the door leading to the bedchamber barely visible. Rimi walked up to it and announced herself.

"Your Majesty, it is Setsu Rimi. I have brought the Quinary Dragon."

"Enter," a voice said from inside.

Rimi carefully opened the door. Straight ahead, at the back of the room, was a canopy bed. The thick embroidered outer curtains made from silk damask were open, but the inner curtains of thin silk were hanging halfway down. It was already bright outside, yet a candle was lit next to the bed. Illuminated by the fickle flame of the candle, Shohi was sitting in the bed.

"Your Majesty?!" Rimi gasped.

II

Shohi was as pale as paper, and he was so lifeless that he was reminiscent of a beautiful doll. The shadows of his eyelashes fell on his cheeks, captivating enough to give one chills, and they added to the allure of his doll-like appearance. To Rimi, however, who knew the normal Shohi, this was a terrifying sight. She ran up to the bed, and Tama also stretched her neck to look

at Shohi with her blue eyes wide in surprise.

“What is the matter, Your Majesty? I was told that you were feeling unwell,” Rimi said.

“It is nothing. I simply feel somewhat sluggish. I will feel better after some rest.” Shohi turned his eyes to Tama and gave a dejected smile. “What is it, Quinary Dragon? Is it so strange for you to see me lying in my bed?”

Tama responded by tilting her head with a troubled expression.

He has no fever, and the doctor said it wasn't an illness. But he is clearly not in good health. This isn't normal. Rimi started panicking, feeling that something had to be done.

“If you are feeling sluggish, then please have some of Master Shusei's food again today. I'm certain he will find you the ingredients you need. If you don't care for the taste, I will assist him in cooking the meal. That way—” Rimi said, but she was interrupted by Shohi raising his hand.

“Never mind that. I have more important matters to discuss,” Shohi said. “You need to stop visiting my room. You came here half asleep last night again.”

Rimi was speechless. It appeared that she had visited not only Shusei last night, but Shohi as well. The embarrassment of her inexplicable behavior was unbearable. Her ears turned red.

“I-I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I...well...I don't remember...”

“Yes, I suppose so. Still, you need to stop already. Next time you do it, I shall take you without mercy,” Shohi threatened with a deep voice, and Rimi hung her head.

“I will do something to prevent my sleepwalking,” Rimi said. “But in any case, your health still worries me, Your Majesty. Is there nothing I can do? For the time being, I will discuss your food with Master Shusei, assist him in cooking it, and then bring it here. Will you eat it?”

“I would be happy to eat food cooked by you,” Shohi said somewhat bashfully.



Rimi was relieved to hear Shohi accept her offer, and she raised her head.

“Very well. I shall start preparations right away,” Rimi said and left the bedchamber.

Rimi exited the living room into the hallway where Shusei and Jotetsu were waiting with concerned faces.

“How was His Majesty, Rimi?” Shusei asked.

“He claimed that he was feeling well, but he seemed very weak,” Rimi reported. “I assured him that I would make him something together with you, Master Shusei, hoping that it might help restore his health. How long has His Majesty been like this, Master Jotetsu?”

“He said he was feeling sluggish yesterday too, but other than that he was fine the whole day. I thought he’d feel better after a good night’s sleep, but this morning when I came to wake him up, he said he couldn’t get up. It’s as if he got worse by sleeping,” Jotetsu explained.

“Yet the doctor says that he is not ill?” Shusei asked, frowning.

The three of them exchanged glances and worry started to fill their chests.

What in the world could have happened to His Majesty?

Jotetsu furrowed his brow, but he quickly gave a forced smile, as though he disliked the idea of putting on a grave expression.

“Well, in any case, you two should go make something for His Majesty’s breakfast. Maybe he’ll be able to get out of bed once he’s had something to eat,” Jotetsu remarked.

Shusei started grating the bumpy Kon root, which was reminiscent of thick grass roots and had the effect of improving vitality and strength. It appeared he planned to extract the juice from it to serve to Shohi.

“Have a taste,” Shusei said as he poured the Kon root juice into a cup and handed it to Rimi.

Rimi took the cup and gave it a whiff.

That’s a very intense smell. But it’s not unpleasant. It’s refreshing.

The moment it entered her mouth, however, she turned pale. Shusei looked at her inquisitively.

“His Majesty will need to drink this daily. How is the taste?” Shusei asked.

Rimi used all her willpower to force herself to drink it up before letting out a groan. Her tongue was tingling from the pungent and bitter taste.

“I don’t shink it’sh vewy good,” Rimi said, her tongue numb to the point that she couldn’t speak clearly. She was amazed that Shohi had managed to drink this. Still, it was likely that Shohi having meals developed from a cuisinological point of view was the only reason he was still even conscious.

“Well...that fact hasn’t escaped me. His Majesty always asks me if I’m trying to kill him whenever I serve him this.”

“But His Majesty needs the ingredients you pick. I think we can find a way to make this taste better,” Rimi said, the numbness finally wearing off.

“Will you help me, Rimi?” Shusei asked. “I think it would be best for His Majesty if all three of his meals were made using cuisinologically chosen ingredients, so once I’ve picked out the ingredients, I would like you to cook them. For his breakfast today, this Kon root is enough.”

“Of course,” Rimi said with a nod.

“I appreciate it,” Shusei said, turning around to leave.

“Huh?” Rimi inadvertently exclaimed. She had assumed that they would cook the food together.

“Do you need something?” Shusei asked, stopping to turn around.

“N-No, not really. I just thought that we would be cooking together.”

“I will leave it all to you. I’ll pick the ingredients, and you’ll cook them. I think that’s the best way to split the work. I’ll estimate how long it might take and stop by again when you’re done.”

After showing a final, slight smile, Shusei quickly left the kitchen.

Master Shusei is avoiding me...

It appeared that Rimi was visiting Shusei every night, despite him having

completely buried his feelings for her. It was surely bothering Shusei. Perhaps this was his way of indirectly telling her to give up already.

No, stop thinking about that. I need to focus on cooking so His Majesty will recover. Cooking is the only reason that I'm able to be near Master Shusei as his assistant, and the only reason I can serve as His Majesty's retainer. I have to prove myself useful, Rimi thought in order to distract herself from her gloomy feelings.

Rimi grabbed some Kon root and gently chopped it into smaller pieces to find that it was strangely satisfying to cut through. Perhaps the texture might be nice as well.

"It doesn't smell bad, and the texture is good. But it's too intense. We just need something to make it milder... Egg? And what's easiest to eat when you're tired in the morning? Tang? Congee?" Rimi mused as she suddenly had an idea and broke into a smile. "Kon root-flavored egg congee!"

The refreshing fragrance would help to energize Shohi, while the egg would make it less intense.

As Rimi pondered the dish, she felt how even her toes and feet were starting to get warmer from just the little Kon root juice she had just drank.

Warm congee and Kon root might just enhance each other's effects!

Since Shohi's affliction had taken a turn for the worse, Rimi had been cooking three meals for him daily. Shusei would select ingredients that Shohi needed such as Kon root. He would then explain to Rimi what they did before leaving her alone in the kitchen to prepare the meal. By the time Rimi was done, Shusei would return and judge whether the meal was fit to serve to Shohi.

Shusei had just left Rimi behind in the kitchen to prepare today's breakfast. After finishing the preparations, Rimi sent for Shusei again, and he soon showed up to sample the soft rice cake she had made with Kon root and sweet soybean paste with walnuts.

Am I still bothering Master Shusei with my sleepwalking? Shusei still seemed to be actively avoiding Rimi. It had to be because of her sleepwalking.

At night, Rimi would tie a bell to her feet, ask Tama to keep an eye on her,

and even tie a thread to her bedchamber door so that it would snap if she opened it, causing a bell to ring—all to prevent her from sleepwalking. When she woke up in the morning, the thread would still be intact, and the bell would show no sign of having rung. It seemed impossible for her to have left her bed.

Despite this, Shusei continued to keep his distance from her. The only explanation Rimi could think of was that she was still sleepwalking. Perhaps she was somehow leaving her bedroom in an acrobatic manner so that the thread wouldn't snap and the bell wouldn't ring. Of course, it seemed unlikely that she would be able to do that in her sleep—but you never knew what humans might do.

And I'm having the same dream over and over. Ever since the night she had arrived at Castle Seika, Rimi had dreamt about the woman named Reishun on the other side of the transparent wall. Three days earlier, Reishun had said in her dream that it had been her choice to part with her lover. Rimi had continued to ask why each night, but all Reishun would do was cry as she said, "I wished for it."

Could I really be walking around while having a dream like that at the same time?

As she ruminated on her nightly adventures, Rimi observed Shusei. He returned her gaze with a suspicious look.

"Is something the matter, Rimi?" Shusei asked.

"Master Shusei, I'm still troubling you at night, aren't I? I just know it," Rimi said.

"You don't need to worry. I know that you're not doing it on purpose, and I won't let anything happen."

I knew it. It's still going on.

Shusei knew that Rimi was attempting whatever she could to remedy the situation, and he was simply avoiding placing the blame on her out of kindness.

"I'm sorry... I'm doing whatever I can think of," Rimi said.

"It's quite all right. Now, we need to serve His Majesty breakfast before it gets

cold.”

Rimi felt a sad tingling in her chest as Shusei changed the subject, but this was also part of her job.

“Yes,” Rimi said as she put the rice cakes in a bowl and picked them up.

Lately, whenever Rimi arrived in Shohi’s room, she would find him on top of his sofa. He would smile happily upon noticing Rimi, but he was growing weaker by the day.

I’m worried about His Majesty...

It almost seemed as if Shohi’s shadow was fading away, and Rimi was becoming scared.



Days had passed. Shohi had yet to recover, spending most of his time on his bed. The four consorts had grown concerned and had visited him, but Shohi had been too tired to even talk to others, quickly ending the audience.

The sight of this had Shusei exceedingly worried. He had suggested sending word of Shohi’s condition to the capital, and depending on the circumstances, even returning home. Shohi, however, had insisted that simply feeling sluggish was too trifling a matter to send someone to Annei for. He had also claimed that he had no interest in returning to the imperial palace—they had come to Hanin to let the Quinary Dragon recover, and until they had succeeded in doing so, he would not be leaving.

Shohi sought a sense of security from the Quinary Dragon. Legends said that the Quinary Dragon belonged with the emperor and gave him the power to rule, so it was unsurprising that Shohi would be unwilling to leave its side. He had spent a whole year anxious about the Quinary Dragon having been separated from him soon after his ascension due to Hakurei’s plot, and he never wanted to experience that again. He wanted the Quinary Dragon close to him as proof that his rule would be a stable one.

Still, his inexplicably poor condition had him worried—and that was not the only thing weighing on his mind right now.

Why must Rimi start sleepwalking so peculiarly just as I start feeling unwell?

While filled with worry, Shohi was also having to fight desperately to control his urges. *I've been tormented each night ever since she started coming to me half asleep.*

Shohi had lost count of how many nights Rimi had shown up in his room. Each time, she would try to make advances on him, and it took all the willpower he could muster to tell her to stay away and command her to return to her room.

Rimi would diligently make breakfast, lunch, and supper for Shohi every day, and seeing her work so hard, Shohi felt too bad to tell her that she was still visiting him at night. Although he had once threatened to take her without mercy unless she stopped, he was unable to do that either. All he could do was order her to leave.

But what is the cause of this lethargy? As each day passed, Shohi felt as if more of his inner strength was escaping his body.

During the day, Shusei would open the doors and windows and force Shohi into the living room, saying that staying in a dark room all day would make Shohi dispirited. He would cover the sofa with a quilt or something similar to make it more comfortable and order Shohi to spend some time there. Since Shohi had, even if unwillingly, made it a habit to do as Shusei said, he would wear a shenyi over his night robes and spend his day on the sofa. He couldn't help but admit that it was indeed nicer than staying in his bedroom.

After finishing his breakfast, Shohi moved to his usual spot on the sofa, feeling the cool spring air against his cheek. Then Jotetsu came to inform him of Shu Kojin's arrival. It was Kojin's first time coming by to visit since their first day at Castle Seika.

"Did Kojin announce that he was coming, Jotetsu?" Shohi asked warily.

Officials had their schedules put together in advance, and Kojin already had a day set aside for when he would next visit—namely, two days from now. Shohi had planned to ensure that he was well-dressed for the occasion, regardless of how sluggish he was feeling. But with such a sudden visit, he had no time to hide his condition.

"He has come in secret. He says he has something he needs to tell you, and only you, Your Majesty," Jotetsu explained.

“In secret? Why?”

“I can’t say. He wouldn’t tell me anything. What will you do?” Jotetsu asked—though he was actually asking whether Shohi could let Kojin see him in this state.

Were Kojin to be made aware of Shohi’s condition, he too might start suggesting that he return to the capital.

“I have no choice. If I do not meet him, it will only make him more suspicious,” Shohi said. “Show him in.”

All Shohi could do was steel himself for an audience with Kojin in which he would display his unwillingness to leave Hanin. Though he remained on the sofa, he straightened his back and adjusted his robes.

Still, Shohi found it unlikely that Kojin would have anything particularly noteworthy to report. The Declaration of Stability had concluded without incident, the rear palace was stable, and there were indications that Konkoku would be able to establish diplomatic relations with Saisakoku. Shohi could not imagine that there were currently any issues to speak of concerning the imperial court.

After a little while, Jotetsu showed up again together with Kojin, who was clad in black. Kojin greeted Shohi with a bow.

“Forgive me for my sudden visit, Your Majesty,” Kojin said before raising his head again and faintly furrowing his brow upon seeing Shohi. “Are you not feeling well, Your Majesty?”

“I am only a bit sluggish. I have no fever, and the doctor says I am not ill. I am simply resting to be on the safe side. There is no cause for worry,” Shohi explained. “Now, what brings you here unannounced, Kojin?”

“You’re not ill, Your Highness? That’s strange. You certainly look like it to me.”

“We can talk about me later. State your business.”

Kojin narrowed his eyes as if seeing right through Shohi, but he complied with his command.

“Very well, so I shall. I have come to share a report with you privately,” Kojin

said.

“In private? What is it?”

“The bell has rung,” Kojin said after a moment’s pause.

“What?” Shohi asked, frowning in confusion.

Jotetsu was for some reason shooting Kojin a criticizing glare, but he remained silent.

“Someone who does not think highly of your rule is trying to put a new emperor on the throne,” Kojin explained.

III

Kojin’s words felt like a punch right in Shohi’s gut.

“A new...emperor?” Shohi said. “That cannot be. Why? It has only been a year since I took the throne. I have done nothing to worsen the finances or the public order of the country. Not much could even change in a single year!”

“This is something that does not relate to you personally, Your Majesty—it is a dispute that has continued since the reign of the previous emperor,” Kojin explained.

Shohi was clenching his fist tightly in his lap, trembling faintly with rage. He was of a mind to explode with anger and start yelling, but he suppressed his feelings as he glared at Kojin.

“What are you saying? What is this dispute?” Shohi asked.

“You are aware that the emperor from three reigns ago had a twin brother, yes? While your great grandfather became the emperor, his brother took on the Ho name and went on to found the Ho house,” Kojin said candidly. “Each time the emperor passed away, the Ryu house and the Ho house would quarrel to decide who should inherit the throne. Candidates would be put forth from both houses. But ultimately, the Ryu house has kept hold of the throne for four generations—the reason being that the imperial court saw little difference in which house took the throne. This meant that the safest decision was to choose someone who directly descended from the previous emperor. However, the

situation was slightly different when it was time for your father to ascend to the throne.”

“Different in what way?”

“Because the Ho house had a man the same age as your father, the legitimate child of Ho Neison named Seishu. At the time, Neison was well-regarded and trusted by the officials as the Minister of Rites,” Kojin explained. “His son Seishu was also of good character, magnanimous, and spectacularly wise. If you will excuse me saying so, Your Majesty, your father was the very opposite.”

“How dare you speak of him in that way?!” Shohi barked, slamming his fist into the armrest.

“Can you claim otherwise, Your Majesty?” Kojin asked, unfazed—or perhaps even with a slight smirk.

Shohi bit his lower lip in frustration. Kojin was correct. The previous emperor had failed to see Noble Consort En for who she was, taking her slander at face value, thereby causing Hakurei’s mother, Virtuous Consort Sai, to take her life after accusing her of infidelity. Only after the Virtuous Consort’s death had he realized his mistake, sparing Hakurei’s life in an attempt to make amends. Even so, he had been afraid of letting Hakurei succeed to the throne, making him a eunuch instead. That incident was enough to understand how unqualified the previous emperor had been.

“But you served my father, did you not?” Shohi said accusingly.

“Yes, indeed. I chose your father over Seishu,” Kojin said.

“Why did Seishu lose the fight for the throne?”

“There never was a fight. As soon as he realized that some wanted to put him on the throne, he fled. He has been missing ever since,” Kojin said, pausing for a moment before continuing. “Seishu’s disappearance was supposed to have been the end of it. However, Ho Neison has still not given up on the idea of the Ho house taking the throne. Because of Seishu, there had been an increase in the number of officials who thought that the throne should belong to the Ho house, and Neison has been biding his time since then.”

“You mean that Neison is still vying for the throne after all this time, at his

age?”

“Not at all. No one would agree to allow someone his age to take the throne. Instead, I have long believed that he would plan to put someone who descends from the Ho house and can be kept under his control on the throne. That is why I prepared a bell to warn us whenever Neison attempted something. That bell has now rung.”

“A bell?”

“Someone who descends from the Ho house and is close to the throne. Someone who has been wronged and has the motive to point his sword at you. If Neison would ever try to make him the emperor, he would attempt contact with him. I took measures so that he would serve as a bell, and I have kept him under close watch since.”

“And who is that person?”

“Hakurei, Your Majesty.”

“Hakurei is a eunuch. He cannot become emperor.”

“Your Majesty,” Kojin said, shooting Shohi a sharp glance. “Have you not long heard strange rumors regarding him?”

Is he referring to the absurd old rumor that Hakurei is still a man? Rumors of this kind were common in the imperial court, and Shohi had never paid it much heed. But wait. If Neison believed that rumor...then...

Shohi felt a chill run down his spine at his sudden realization. The chancellor in front of him seemed almost like an incomprehensible creature to him.

“Are you saying that you purposely spread that rumor to turn Hakurei into a bell?” Shohi asked.

Kojin only smiled faintly, neither affirming nor denying Shohi’s accusation.

Is that why he was present for Hakurei’s punishment eleven years ago? Under normal circumstances, someone from the Ministry of Personnel would serve as the witness when someone was made into a eunuch, but for Hakurei, Kojin had been there instead—for reasons unknown to Shohi, who had still been a child at the time. He had never even given it much thought.

Kojin had ensured that Hakurei had undergone the procedure properly, only to spread the rumor that he had been spared and remained a man. The fact that Kojin had declined to deny the rumor had only made it appear more credible. And if Hakurei was still a man, he would have been invaluable to the Ho family. They would undoubtedly make contact with him.

In other words, Hakurei had already been turned into a bell eleven years ago, without him knowing. Shohi could barely believe it.

“Neison has made contact with Hakurei,” Kojin declared.

“You mean...Hakurei is planning to betray me?”

“Have no fear. Hakurei is, without doubt, a eunuch. I witnessed it myself. He also refused Neison’s proposal. Even so, Neison has not given up. He is trying to find a new pawn.”

“Do you mean...the man who disappeared many years ago, Seishu?”

“No, not him. He won’t be found.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because he is, in all likelihood, dead.”

“How do you know?”

“Call it a hunch, as someone who grew up alongside Seishu and your father,” Kojin said with a dejected expression. “However, though he may be dead, if he had a child, that child would be your worst enemy, and the Ho house’s greatest pawn.”

“Does such a child exist?”

“I will make no claims either way. But please be careful. There are many officials loyal to Neison. If need be, please show them no mercy.”

The fact that Kojin was being so indirect was proof that Seishu’s child truly did exist. Shohi was dumbfounded.

So some do not agree with my reign, regardless of any achievements or aptitude of my own. Fear and anger raged chaotically within Shohi’s chest.



Kojin hurriedly left the Palace of the Beautiful Spring unnoticed together with Jotetsu, who had been ordered to see him off. As they approached Kojin's black carriage waiting by the west gate of Castle Seika, Kojin stopped and turned around to face Jotetsu.

"Thank you, Jotetsu. I will go alone from here," Kojin said. "But before that, let me ask you—how bad is His Majesty's condition?"

"There's no symptom of any particular illness, but I have to say he's much weaker than I've ever seen him before," Jotetsu replied.

"I see. We will have to do something about his poor health. I shall discuss it with the doctors and decide on a course of action. In the meantime, stay vigilant near His Majesty, and be on the lookout for anything suspicious," Kojin ordered.

Jotetsu fell silent.

"Jotetsu," Kojin said sternly.

"Did you really need to tell His Majesty about Neison?" Jotetsu asked stiffly. "You've already stayed quiet until now. Couldn't you simply take care of everything behind the scenes? All this does is upset His Majesty."

"Why do you think I told him? Naturally, it was to make him upset," Kojin said with a faint grin before lowering his voice. "I served the previous mediocre emperor and protected his reign. And I'll continue to protect the reign of the son born from that average man and callous woman. To that end, I can't have His Majesty remain ignorant with no skill while proudly asserting his authority. This is a good opportunity to make him understand the importance of his subjects and how they support him—the fact that the stability of the country depends on us protecting it."

Jotetsu's mouth contorted into a disappointed smile.

That's right. This is how this man is.

Until now, Jotetsu had been too tired of it all to say anything back. Today, however, he had an urge to express his disapproval—perhaps because he had seen Shohi's eyes and clenched fist tremble in shock from hearing about Neison.

“But you are the one who put the previous emperor on the throne, which means that in a way, you’re also responsible for His Majesty becoming emperor,” Jotetsu said. “Should you really speak that way about someone you yourself put on the throne?”

“Did His Majesty not wish for the throne since he was young?”

But if His Majesty’s father hadn’t become emperor to begin with... Then Shohi would never even have been born as a prince. In a sense, Kojin was the one who had caused Shohi’s birth and ascension to the throne.

“Do you enjoy this? Manipulating the fate of others for your own desires?” Jotetsu couldn’t stop himself from asking.

Kojin widened his eyes faintly in surprise, but his expression quickly turned into a slight grin.

“That’s an unusually sentimental way of speaking from you, Jotetsu. What’s the matter?” Kojin said.

“Nothing in particular. I just felt a bit bad for His Majesty, as well as your dear son.”

“You of all people would call him my ‘dear son’? Now that’s a comical thing to say,” Kojin said, his expression unchanged.

“Yes, I suppose it is rather comical,” Jotetsu said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Perform your duty without fail,” Kojin said before boarding his carriage.

Jotetsu watched the black carriage leave.

“‘Dear son,’ eh? What am I even saying?” Jotetsu mumbled to himself.

Jotetsu had served as Shohi’s bodyguard for roughly a decade. Publicly, he took orders from Shohi—but his true master was that callous, cunning chancellor.

But it’s been ten years. Having spent ten years together, he had grown more attached to Shohi than he could ever have imagined initially. Conflict had erupted within him.



Hakurei is hiding something. I know it. Is there something between him and Grandfather? Virtuous Consort Ho thought to herself as she sat alone in her room.

The sun had set. The Palace of the Beautiful Spring was ruled by darkness and silence. It was quiet enough that you could even occasionally hear bubbles rising to the surface of the spring in the center of the garden.

Ho was sitting on her bed with a book on her lap. But her eyes had only been on the words for a little while, after which she had been lost in thought. She was thinking back to when the Saisakokuan delegation had left Konkoku. On that cold winter day, Virtuous Consort Ho's grandfather, Ho Neison, had come to the imperial palace. Ho had happened upon her grandfather, surprised to find him there, but his interaction with Hakurei still stuck in Ho's mind. Neison had spoken as though he knew Hakurei, and Hakurei similarly seemed to know Neison—yet they claimed that they had never met before.

Ho hoped that no harm would come to Hakurei—a wish that stemmed from her feelings for him that still lingered from when she was a child. Even after becoming an adult, Hakurei was still beautiful and captivating with a soft demeanor that made Ho recall the kindness he had shown her all those years ago. Although Hakurei had been degraded to a eunuch, Ho was still unable to shed herself of a hope that if they had met in a place where ranks did not matter, he would speak to her again with the same kind and gentle smile as he had when they were young.

“How foolish. This is why he called you a little girl incapable of comprehending the ways of the world,” Ho muttered to herself.

But perhaps that too was only because they were in the rear palace. It was impossible to know what Hakurei was hiding behind that smile of his. He had always been difficult to read. Still, a part of Ho understood how foolish she was for even thinking this.

Ho decided to go to sleep, closed her book, and looked up when she was startled by a figure standing in the doorway.

“What are you doing in here? That's impertinent, Hakurei,” Ho said to the figure.

Palace attendants were not allowed to enter a consort's bedchamber without permission—and certainly not in the middle of the night. The fact that she had just been thinking about him had her all the more shaken. But as a well brought up noble girl, she was able to quickly quell her shock and cover the chest area of her night attire as she reproached him.

Hakurei gave Ho his usual ambiguous smile as he approached her bed without a word and touched her on her cheek. He brought his face close enough for Ho to feel his breath on her skin.

“Hakurei?!” Ho exclaimed with widened eyes.



“My, is Virtuous Consort Ho missing?” So wondered, pulling Rimi back to reality.

Every afternoon, the four consorts would gather in one of their rooms for tea. Rimi would bring snacks, prepare the tea, and wait on them as she participated in their conversations. Today's snacks were kaorizuke and dried plums that had been simmered in syrup until they were soft. The simmered plums were especially delicious when enjoyed together with fragrant fermented tea, and Virtuous Consort Ho in particular was very fond of them.

Rimi would always bring one of the consort's favorite sweets, and today was Ho's day—yet the only people sitting at the table were Noble Consort So, Pure Consort Yo, and Worthy Consort On.

“Lady Setsu? You were in a daze. Were you worrying about something?” On gently asked Rimi.

The reason for Rimi's absentmindedness was her thinking about the dream that she was having every night where a woman called Reishun would cry unceasingly. Whenever Rimi asked her why, Reishun would only explain that she would be parting with her loved one willingly, without elaborating. Rimi would tell her that if she was sad enough to cry over parting with her lover, then she could simply not part with him—but Reishun would reply that she wished to part with him. This incomprehensible back and forth was never-ending.

It might be a spirit dream, but this is no time to worry about Reishun. I have enough things to worry about in reality.

There was no sign of Shohi getting better, and Rimi was becoming more worried each day. To make matters worse, it appeared that Rimi was still sleepwalking and Shusei was acting as cold as ever, making Rimi even more disheartened whenever she saw him.

Rimi tried to clear her mind and forced a smile.

“Thank you for worrying about me, Worthy Consort On. I’m fine, I promise,” Rimi said as she waited on the consorts. “The more important question here is, what happened to Virtuous Consort Ho?”

“I visited her to invite her for tea, but she said that she was feeling sluggish, and declined the invitation,” On replied. “Perhaps she has come down with a cold?”

“His Majesty has been feeling unwell lately, and now Virtuous Consort Ho too?” So said, furrowing her brow. “Lady Setsu, how is His Majesty doing?”

“He’s not doing very well,” Rimi said. “Although the doctor claims that there is no sign of an illness.”

“I feel bad for Virtuous Consort Ho,” Yo said apologetically, turning her eyes to the sweets on the table. “Today we’re having her favorite sweets.”

“Speaking of sweets, have you ever heard of small, round, colorful sweets made from wheat or rice flour that are attached to a thin branch?” Rimi asked the three consorts, remembering the sweets that had been scattered around Reishun’s feet in Rimi’s dreams. She had been wondering what they were, as they had not seemed like sweets for eating but rather like some kind of decoration.

“That would be flower candy, which is used for decoration when celebrating a betrothal. Of course, that is not something that will ever concern us as concubines of the rear palace. When two people are betrothed, there is usually a celebration held where both houses meet. The flower candies are used there,” On explained with a smile.

“I’ve participated in a banquet to celebrate my stepsister’s betrothal,” Yo

added. “They’re soft rice cakes made from rice flour. They smell good, taste delicious and slightly sweet, and are small enough to eat in one bite. But dearest, where did you come across that candy?”

“I’ve been seeing them in my dreams lately,” Rimi said.

“My, you really have nothing on your mind but food, even in your dreams. Meanwhile, Virtuous Consort Ho is feeling ill and can’t even join us for tea. Why don’t you share some of your appetite with her?” So teased.

“Yes, I wish I could. But even if I can’t share my appetite with her, these sweets are easy to eat even when you’re feeling unwell, so I will bring some to her later.”

“Why later? Go bring her some now, Lady Setsu. That way she will feel less lonely,” So commanded with an aloof expression as she sipped her tea. Her voice was cold, yet her words were brimming with compassion, creating a strange dissonance.

“Very well,” Rimi said as she moved some of the plums to a different bowl and made for Ho’s room.

When Rimi arrived outside the Virtuous Consort’s room, she announced that she had brought sweets. A handmaid came out to greet her. Rimi was then shown to where Ho was resting. Her room was immaculately orderly. Amidst the refreshing smell of incense, Ho was sitting on her bed, wearing a robe over her nightgown.

“Virtuous Consort Ho, how are you feeling?” Rimi asked. “I’ve brought you syrup-simmered plums.”

Rimi placed the sweets on the table and Ho stood up and walked up to her. Despite not being dressed up, Ho’s tall, slender figure reminded Rimi of an elegant water bird. She was breathtakingly beautiful.

“Thank you. It seems I’ve made you worried. But I’m not ill. It’s just...” Ho trailed off, a troubled expression appearing on her face.

“Virtuous Consort Ho? Is something the matter?” Rimi asked.

Ho stayed quiet for a moment before hesitantly opening her mouth.

“Lady Setsu, you’re aware about...my and Hakurei’s past...that we knew each other, correct?” Ho said.

“Did something happen to Master Hakurei?” Rimi asked.

“It’s not that something happened to him, it’s that he...”

Ho’s face turned red. Rimi was taken aback. She had never seen Ho act embarrassed like this before.

“Hakurei...came to my room yesterday,” Ho said, and Rimi looked on in disbelief as even Ho’s ears turned red.

“Well, it’s Master Hakurei’s duty to look after the consorts, so I wouldn’t be surprised to hear that he would visit your room,” Rimi noted.

“That’s not what I mean! He came into my bedchamber, at night!” Ho bellowed in response to Rimi’s absentminded comment, only to immediately turn even redder as she looked down.

“Oh, I see, your bedchamber... Wait, huh? What?!”

Ho hurriedly covered Rimi’s mouth to prevent her from letting out a shriek.

“Don’t yell! There’s a handmaid in the other room!” Ho whispered.

Rimi nodded fervently, and Ho finally removed her hand.

“Um...so...what exactly... You don’t mean you...well...grappled with each other...?” Rimi asked anxiously.

“Don’t speak so graphically!” Ho roared.

“W-Was that the wrong word? Um...uh...what was it again...? Oh, right, adultery! Adultery... But Master Hakurei is a eunuch... Oh, but...there are rumors that he’s still a man...”

“There’s no adultery involved! All Hakurei did was touch me, whisper into my ear, and leave!”

Master Hakurei did something that bold?! Rimi wondered, dumbfounded.

“I’m...afraid that someone will find out that Hakurei did that,” Ho said nervously. “I’m too worried to be able to enjoy tea right now.”

Ho's fears were not unfounded. Even if no adultery had taken place, it was unacceptable for a palace attendant to make his way into a consort's bedroom. If worse came to worst, they might both be punished heavily.

"So, Lady Setsu, I have a favor to ask you," Ho continued. "Will you ask Hakurei why he would do something like that? And tell him never to do something like it again."

"Y-You want *me* to ask him? I couldn't dare do that!" Rimi replied.

"Please! I could never ask him myself," Ho said in a trembling voice as she looked down.

My word, this Virtuous Consort! How can she be so adorable?! The way Ho tried to hide her embarrassment made Rimi's heart skip a beat. The contrast with her normal dignified demeanor only added to her charm.

"All right, I will ask Master Hakurei!" Rimi exclaimed reflexively, blinded by Ho's adorableness.

With her newfound sense of duty, Rimi left Ho's room and eagerly walked toward Hakurei's room. The door to his room was open. Rimi spotted Hakurei at the desk by the right-hand window, his back to her. He appeared to be writing something.

"Excuse me," Rimi said and resolutely stepped into the room.

"Well, well," Hakurei said with surprise on his face as he turned around, but he quickly welcomed her with his usual captivating smile.

Hakurei's light brown eyes were beautiful—so beautiful that Rimi flinched.

"Rimi, what are you doing here by yourself? Do you need something from me?" Hakurei asked.

Oh no... I came here in the heat of the moment, but how am I supposed to accuse this pretty face of making nighttime visits?!

Rimi squirmed awkwardly as Hakurei put down his brush and rested his chin in his hand, patiently waiting for Rimi to speak.

"Um...well...last night...what were you doing in Virtuous Consort Ho's..." Rimi finally began, and Hakurei furrowed his brow.

“Did Virtuous Consort Ho send you here?”

“Yes, she was wondering what you were trying to do, and why.”

“I’d like to ask her the very same thing,” Hakurei said sternly as he brushed a few strands of hair away from his face. “Why would she attempt something like that? Well, I don’t particularly care about the reason, but will you tell her never to do that again, Rimi?”

Rimi frowned at Hakurei’s odd demand.

“But you’re the one who acted strangely last night, Master Hakurei, aren’t you? Virtuous Consort Ho told *me* to ask *you* never to do it again.”

“I maintained proper conduct to the best of my ability. As a palace attendant, of course I would reject Virtuous Consort Ho’s advances, don’t you think?”

Something was strange. The two accounts did not match. Rimi realized this was going nowhere.

“Master Hakurei, please excuse my disrespect in asking you this,” Rimi said, giving up on any attempt to be indirect. “Last night, you visited Virtuous Consort Ho’s bedchamber, did you not? Virtuous Consort Ho has been troubled ever since.”

“Hold it there, Rimi,” Hakurei said, looking more surprised than Rimi had ever seen him before. “You seem to be under a false impression. It’s Virtuous Consort Ho that came to *my* room last night. Just ask her yourself. I explained that she shouldn’t be coming to my room alone at night, and told her to return to her own room.”

“What...? Virtuous Consort Ho did...?”

“Yes,” Hakurei said, nodding. “She came to my room. There’s no mistaking it.”

Chapter 4: The Battle in Darkness

I

Rimi was bewildered.

What does this mean? Who is lying? But both of them seemed to be telling the truth... Something strange is happening here, Rimi thought. But unable to decide on the right course of action, she had left Hakurei's room, dispirited. She was now trying to decide what to tell Virtuous Consort Ho the next day.

"Oh, Tama, what's going on? I don't understand!"

That night, Rimi was playing with Tama on the bed, rubbing her belly while letting out the occasional sigh.

"Speaking of things I don't understand, the same goes for why His Majesty has grown weaker. What do you think, Tama?" Rimi asked in dismay.

Tama tilted her head as if to say, "No idea," before curling up at the edge of the bed. Lately, she had stopped sighing and yawning. Instead, she was sleeping for extended periods. Since she would go to bed as soon as it became dark, Rimi was often left with nothing to do.

I feel so lonely, Rimi's heart whispered.

Today, once again, Shusei seemed to be avoiding Rimi. He must have been fed up with her lingering feelings toward him—while he was wishing for her to discard her feelings already, Rimi was bothering him with unconscious nightly visits. As kind as he was, Shusei would never fiercely criticize Rimi. But he was still softly rejecting her, and each time Rimi experienced it and realized how tired Shusei must be of her, she wanted to cry. Perhaps even Rimi feeling lonely was a nuisance to Shusei.

Rimi rolled around in her bed to look at the ceiling when she was suddenly reminded of Reishun crying in her dreams. Even though she only existed in her dreams, after seeing her every night, Rimi had come to think of Reishun as something akin to a friend. She couldn't help but worry about her.

I become that sad when I think about Master Shusei. With how much Reishun is crying, she must have someone she loves just as much. Why would she want to part with someone like that? Was there something that forced her hand? But if that was true, it would have been strange to speak as Reishun had. She had claimed in no uncertain terms that she had wished to part with him. But if she's crying that much, then maybe those aren't her true feelings? Is someone else making her say that?

If Reishun was not only being forced to part with the person she loved but also to say that it was something she wished for, then Rimi could not even begin to imagine how miserable she must have been feeling. Knowing what it was like to love someone only made Rimi's desire to help Reishun grow stronger.

These dreams about Reishun have to be spirit dreams. But why am I having them? Lady Saigu said that you have spirit dreams when gods or other invisible beings enter your dreams. Does that mean that Reishun has entered my dreams somehow?

Rimi pondered who Reishun could be—human, god, ghost, or perhaps even a demon.

Tama, who had been curled up on Rimi's bed, suddenly looked up, her ears twitching. At the same time, Rimi saw a figure standing near the doorway of her bedchamber. She sprang up into a sitting position to find the one she loved standing there in the darkness, lit up by the candlelight. Rimi's heart raced.

"Master Shusei?!" Rimi exclaimed.

Tama fearfully swung her long tail. Rimi hurriedly straightened out her clothes. Embarrassed to be seen in her nightwear, she pulled her blanket closer.

"Master Shusei, what are you doing here so late?" Rimi asked.

Shusei smiled at Rimi. The smiles he had shown her lately always had a hint of hesitation, but the smile he was giving Rimi now was the same kind smile that he used to show her. With her chest having ached from Shusei avoiding her as of late, just seeing his smile made her so happy that she could hardly breathe.

"Master Shusei," Rimi said and returned his smile.

Then, Shusei started coming closer, still maintaining the smile on his face.

Without a hint of hesitation, he walked up to Rimi and sat down on the bed, facing her.



“Huh? What?” Rimi exclaimed with wide eyes.

Shusei put his hands on Rimi’s cheeks, and her heart skipped a beat.

“Master Shusei? What are you...” Rimi asked with a trembling voice.

Shusei’s lips approached Rimi’s. Her heart started beating even faster.

Could it be that Master Shusei...?

Rimi clenched her blanket even tighter. She could feel Shusei’s breath on her lips.

“Rimi...” Shusei whispered.

Could it be that he still has feelings for me? Is he just like me?

Joy started welling up in Rimi’s chest, but at the same time, she became immensely scared.

“No, we can’t! Master Shusei!” Rimi said, suddenly pushing Shusei away from her.

If we do this, I won’t be able to hide my feelings anymore!

What Kojin had once told her crossed Rimi’s mind. “If you love Shusei, all the more reason to become empress,” he had said, and also that Shusei’s “head will end up on a spike as the greatest criminal in the land.”

Shusei gave Rimi a sad glance. Then, as Rimi’s heart skipped a beat at the sight of his eyes, he grabbed her wrists and pushed her down onto the bed. Rimi tensed up from shock and had difficulty breathing.

“I guess you hate me now,” Shusei lamented with a heavy, hot breath, while he buried his face in Rimi’s neck.

Then, Shusei let go of Rimi, climbed off the bed, and left the room.

“No! Master Shusei, I don’t!” Rimi yelled, jumping off the bed and chasing after Shusei with bare feet.

Tama also jumped down from the bed, ran up to Rimi, and climbed up her clothes to her shoulder. She let out a small but sharp squeal. She seemed to be trying to tell Rimi something, but Rimi was too preoccupied with chasing after

Shusei to notice.

“Please wait! You have it all wrong! I don’t hate you at all!”

Regardless of what had been going through Shusei’s head as he decided to visit her, Rimi didn’t want him to think that she hated him. She felt as though she would lose her mind from sadness if he did. Even if they had decided to kill their feelings for each other, she could never come to hate him, and she wanted Shusei to understand that.

Rimi entered the hallway outside to find Shusei already about to disappear beyond the corner of the building. He walked with quick, seemingly angry steps, ignoring Rimi’s pleading. Rimi ran toward the corner. Her eyes filled up with tears at the thought of having made him angry.

I’ll never hate you, Master Shusei! You have to understand that!

The feelings Rimi had tried to suppress welled up all at once.



Seeing the letter placed on his desk, Shusei steeled himself, expecting it to be from Ho Neison. However, the name on the letter was Yo Eika.

“It’s from Mrs. Yo...” Shusei said, his expression softening.

Yo Eika was the wife of Shu Kojin who had raised Shusei. They were not related by blood, but being the kind and gentle woman that she was, Mrs. Yo had raised Shusei with love.

In the letter, Mrs. Yo explained that she missed Shusei and wished that he had stopped by the Shu mansion before going to Hanin. She also said that she would be visiting Hanin shortly and would be sending a messenger in the hopes that Shusei would come to see her in town.

Shusei sighed at his neglect of the woman who had brought him up. He decided to draft a letter to have delivered to Annei first thing in the morning and left his room to find the person in charge of communications with the capital.

“Master Shusei!” a voice called out to him just as he entered the dim hallway, which was decorated by candles here and there. Shusei turned to face the

source of the voice and saw Rimi running down the hallway wearing nothing but her nightwear, the Quinary Dragon riding on her shoulder.

“What’s the matter, Rimi? Did something happen?” Shusei asked.

“Master Shusei!” Rimi exclaimed through her panting as she ran up to Shusei before he even had time to react. “I could never hate you! I respect you greatly! I just need you to understand that. So please, don’t be angry. I beg you. Don’t be angry.”

Rimi’s eyes were wet with tears. She covered her face, her shoulders trembling as she sobbed.

“Rimi, don’t cry. What happened?” Shusei asked, unable to grasp why she was crying or why she would say something like that. He had a sudden urge to embrace and comfort her with all his strength.

I can’t touch her.

These past few days, Shusei had been working with Rimi to prepare Shohi’s meals. During that time, he had done his best to avoid being in her presence, fearing that he would be unable to hold his feelings back if he spent too much time with her. He had endured this long. He couldn’t give in now.

But although he was well aware of this fact, Rimi was now crying right in front of him, and his desire to console her got the better of him.

This is not out of love! Shusei told himself as he embraced Rimi.

The feeling of Rimi’s warm and slender body filled Shusei with happiness. The Quinary Dragon on Rimi’s shoulder gave him a perplexed look.

Quinary Dragon, I’m only trying to comfort her. I haven’t broken our promise. I just want to make her stop crying. This isn’t love. So please, overlook this. Shusei justified himself to the Quinary Dragon in his mind.

“What’s the matter, Rimi? Calm down. What happened? Talk to me. I’m not angry with you at all.”



Rimi quivered, shedding tears of happiness as she felt the warmth of Shusei’s embrace and joy spread through her body.

Master Shusei is so kind... He's really not angry with me...

Rimi had assumed that Shusei was fed up with her—yet here he was, comforting her as she was crying. Maybe Shusei wasn't bothered by her at all.

Even if this isn't an expression of love, I'm still happy.

Her tears had turned into tears of happiness, and her chest was warm with joy. Shusei held Rimi's head and stroked her hair as she sobbed in his arms.

"Don't cry, Rimi," Shusei said.

Shusei then wrapped his arm around Rimi's shoulder and guided her into his room to avoid being seen. As they entered, Tama jumped down from Rimi and placed herself on the windowsill.

With his arm still around Rimi, Shusei sat down next to her on his sofa. They fell silent. Rimi felt a sense of relief as joy filled her body from Shusei's warmth. Still, both of them knew that what they were doing was wrong.

After a while, Rimi stopped sobbing, and Shusei started speaking.

"We really shouldn't be doing this," he said. "You realize that, don't you, Rimi? This...could be misconstrued. Why did you come here?"

"Well that's...because you came to my room, Master Shusei," Rimi responded, confused.

"I did? When?"

"Just now. When you left my room, I went chasing after you."

"I've been sitting in my room writing a letter the whole evening. I was just about to go and deliver it to an aide when you came running."

The two of them exchanged puzzled gazes.

"But I know for a fact that you were in my room," Rimi asserted. "You asked me if I'd come to hate you."

"That wasn't me," Shusei said.

The person who had come to Rimi's room had unmistakably been Shusei. There was no one else it could have been. Yet Shusei himself claimed otherwise. Rimi had no idea what to think.

That was Master Shusei. His voice, his figure, even his beautiful long fingers, all of it. But Master Shusei says it wasn't him.

"Do you really think I would go to your room and ask you what you think about me?" Shusei asked gently as though noticing Rimi's confusion.

Rimi shook her head. On second thought, that seemed preposterous.

"But I promise, it was someone identical to you, both in voice and appearance," Rimi said.

"Something strange certainly seems to be happening... A lookalike of mine appears to be walking around..."

Shusei became lost in thought for a moment before his eyes suddenly widened.

"Hold on a minute!" Shusei exclaimed. "A lookalike? Then could it be that the person who started appearing in my bedchamber the other day isn't you walking in your sleep but a lookalike of yours?"

Thinking that she was sleepwalking, Rimi had attempted to take preventative measures each night. But despite all evidence pointing to her not having left her room, she had apparently still visited both Shohi and Shusei. Rimi had assumed that she was somehow avoiding her contraptions in her sleep, but perhaps not.

What if there is someone who looks just like me who has been appearing in their rooms? Rimi thought.

"Oh!" Rimi exclaimed, grabbing Shusei's sleeve. "Now that I think about it, Virtuous Consort Ho and Master Hakurei both claimed that the other had visited their room. Yet neither of them had any recollection of doing so. And His Majesty has also said that I've visited his bedchamber several times. Could it be that all of them were lookalikes?"

"In that case, this is something supernatural. Perhaps a demon or a vengeful wraith is causing it. Still..." Shusei said, furrowing his brow. "I've been told that the court priests investigated Castle Seika thoroughly as soon as it was decided that His Majesty would recuperate here. I can't imagine that they would overlook signs foretelling something of this scale."

After Shohi had announced that he would be traveling to Castle Seika, an investigation had been launched to ensure the safety of the palace—in terms of not just security but also assurance that there were no curses or anything similar that could cause harm. The court priests had claimed that it was completely safe for the emperor to use.

But now there was clearly something beyond the power of humans afoot. The only explanation was that something supernatural had entered Castle Seika after Shohi had arrived.

Something that happened after His Majesty's arrival...

“Master Shusei!” Rimi said after having a sudden realization. “The day we arrived at Castle Seika, Pure Consort Yo and I visited the well that cries at night. There we found a box in the well that was tightly sealed, which contained a hand mirror.”

Rimi explained how Yo had wanted to go on a test of courage to see the mysteries of Castle Seika, how Hakurei had told them about the well that cries at night, and everything that had happened there.

“I felt something strange the moment I opened the box,” Rimi said. “Could it be...?”

The box they had retrieved from the bottom of the well had been sealed with what had looked like some kind of sorcery, and Rimi had ended up opening it. If that was the cause of all this, then perhaps they could find a solution.

“Do you still have that mirror?” Shusei asked, his eyes shining eagerly. “If so, could you show it to me, along with the box it was in?”

“Of course,” Rimi said with a nod.

Rimi hastily returned to her room and quickly put on a ruqun. She had no time to do her hair, but she did not dare go back to Shusei wearing only her night attire.

She returned to Shusei's room, mirror and box in hand, and put the items on a table. Shusei lit a few candles and began inspecting them while Rimi observed him. The mirror was still as foggy as usual, but she still didn't sense anything ominous coming from it nor the box.

I thought this might be the source of what's happening, but I can't sense anything from this mirror.

Shusei spent a long time inspecting the box. Then he flipped the mirror over and ran his eyes across its frame. Finally, he placed a finger on one piece of the frame's carving.

"I can't tell much from this mirror or box. To me they just look like normal old objects," Shusei explained. "However, the box and the mirror were made roughly a hundred years apart. The box is probably about a hundred years old, made during the Kon dynasty. It wasn't until around the founding of Konkoku that we discovered the technology to make copper this smooth, you see."

Rimi immediately became discouraged.

I guess they really are just old antiques...

"The design of the mirror frame appears to be from the middle of the Shoku dynasty, from about two hundred years ago. And the name of a woman who appears to have been the owner of the mirror is carved into the frame. It's almost illegible, but you can see it here," Shusei continued matter-of-factly as he pointed at the mirror.

Rimi focused on where he was pointing.

"It's a woman's name. I assume it's the person the mirror belonged to. It reads... 'Reishun,'" Shusei declared.

'Reishun'?! Rimi was taken by surprise.

"The name of the owner of that mirror was Reishun?!" Rimi exclaimed.

"Have you heard that name before?" Shusei asked.

"Every night since I arrived here, I've been having dreams about a woman I've never seen before. She is always crying, and when I asked for her name, she said it was Reishun." Rimi's legs were starting to shake.

"That's..." Shusei mumbled, furrowing his brow.

If a mirror belonging to Reishun had been sealed in the box, then it was likely that Reishun's ghost had been sealed along with it. The reason Reishun had started visiting Rimi in her dreams was that she had removed the seal from the

box. With the ghost having fled the box, it and the mirror had gone back to being nothing but normal antiques.

Have I accidentally released something terribly dangerous?

Rimi's trembling was spreading from her legs to her whole body.

"Was Reishun's ghost sealed away inside the box?" Rimi asked.

"Yes, I assume that is the case. The box is a century old. A hundred years ago, someone must have sealed away the ghost of a woman who had lived a century before that. However, under normal circumstances, there's no reason to seal away someone's ghost at the bottom of a well. Most ghosts can be exorcised by court priests. If they couldn't exorcise her and instead decided to seal her away..." Shusei trailed off.

"...she must have turned into a wraith so dangerous that they had no other option," Rimi completed his sentence.

II

In Rimi's dreams, Reishun would do nothing but cry. It was hard to think that she was a wraith, but there was no other way to explain the impostors that had been appearing.

"This is probably related to His Majesty's condition," Rimi asked with a trembling voice, "isn't it, Master Shusei?"

Reishun must have been behind it all. It was unlikely that multiple wraiths had been released right after the court priests had declared Castle Seika safe.

Shusei stayed quiet for a moment before nodding solemnly.

"Yes, I believe so," he said.

It's all my fault...

Rimi could deal with having strange dreams. And while she felt bad for the people upset by the impostors walking around, what bothered her most of all was the fact that she had caused the emperor—the very person she was supposed to serve—to fall ill. The shock from the realization caused her vision

to blur, and her legs became unsteady.

“Rimi!” Shusei said, holding Rimi to prevent her from collapsing.



Rimi hasn't noticed, Shusei thought as he did his best to hide his alarm.

Rimi was shocked at having released the ghost that had caused Shohi's health to decline—but she was also having frequent dreams about Reishun herself. Everything suggested that Rimi was being possessed by a wraith as well. Though it was not as drastic as what was happening to Shohi, she was being drained of life force too and would gradually start to grow weaker.

Rimi must have been affected by the ghost when she released it. As someone who can be likened to an immortal because she served something akin to holy communion, Rimi's power must have been tempting, Shusei realized. *The reason His Majesty has fallen so ill is that the ghost has grown stronger from absorbing Rimi's strength.*

Shusei knew he had to keep his realization from Rimi lest he frighten her even more. Fear strips people of their courage to stand up to something. He had to somehow inspire Rimi to fearlessly confront Reishun. She was, after all, the person who had removed the seal.

Shusei was knowledgeable enough to be called the finest scholar of Konkoku. He was also employed by the Bureau of Sacrifices, which was part of the Ministry of Rites. Therefore, he possessed most of the knowledge that would be shared by a court priest.

There is a reason that people warn against removing seals. It was not merely a word of caution to stay away from danger. *The only one who can reactivate the seal is the person who originally removed it.*

A seal was something akin to installing a lock to keep what you wanted to seal inside—but it was a lock without a key as it was made with the assumption that it would never be opened. If someone still tried to force the seal open, a new key was created to go with the lock: the very person who opened it. It was impossible to remove an already installed lock, so the only way to activate the seal again was to lock it using the key—in other words, for the person who had

removed the seal to perform the act of resealing. However, there were a myriad of different kinds of seals, so it was common that whoever had become the key would not know how to reseal it.

Rimi had removed the seal. Thus, she was the only one who could lock away Reishun's ghost now. But she likely had no idea what she needed to do to activate the seal once more.



"Master Shusei... I can't believe I'm the one who caused His Majesty to..." Rimi trailed off.

"It's not only your fault. Pure Consort Yo's curiosity is the only reason this happened at all. You only opened the box to protect her. Now, stand up," Shusei said gently as he put his hands on Rimi's shoulders and helped her stand straight.

Rimi continued looking down at the floor, dejected, so Shusei bent his knees slightly and looked up at her face.

"If I was in your position, I'm sure I would be filled with guilt just as you are. However, you won't be of any use to His Majesty as his retainer like that," Shusei said. "What would you say if you saw me do nothing but despair when I had to do everything I could for His Majesty? What advice would you give me?"

"I..." Rimi trailed off and fell silent as Shusei waited for her to continue. For the sake of the kind scholar who was patiently waiting, Rimi started her train of thought once more. "I would tell you to go and do what you should for His Majesty."

"Yes, I'm sure you would. Then you understand very well what you need to do right now, don't you?"

"I need to go and do what I should for His Majesty."

"And what is that exactly?"

Rimi finally raised her head and looked Shusei in the eye.

"To help His Majesty get better again," Rimi said.

Shusei gave Rimi a reassuring nod.

I see. Master Shusei is right.

Shusei had neither awkwardly tried to cheer her up nor scolded Rimi. He had simply sympathized with her before guiding her thoughts in the right direction. With his help, Rimi now saw what she had to do.

“I have to remove what is troubling His Majesty. I will quell the wraith,” Rimi declared.

Shusei gave Rimi a smile that seemed to say, “Very well done.”

“We know the cause. Now we just need to find a way to solve it,” Shusei said.

“But how...?”

“Every castle has an archive where a great deal of records can be found. We’ll start by researching texts concerning the founding of Konkoku and the sealing of ghosts,” Shusei explained. “We also need to search for Reishun’s name in the records from the middle of the Shoku dynasty. If we have all that, we should be able to find some clues. Now, let’s hurry.”

Rimi nodded, encouraged by Shusei’s gentle determination. As she followed after him, she felt drawn to his back in admiration and sensed that maybe she could become kinder and stronger like him.

Tama, who was still sitting on the windowsill, observed Rimi walking away with somewhat tense eyes. But before long, she seemed to steel herself, jumped down, and ran up Rimi’s clothes to her shoulder.

“Are you coming along, Tama?” Rimi asked as she looked into Tama’s blue eyes. Tama squeaked in response.

The hand mirror on the table caught Rimi’s eye. She felt that it would be bad to simply leave it behind, so she picked it up, put it away inside her robes, and left the room with Shusei.

The building that served as Castle Seika’s archive was located to the west. As Rimi and Shusei left the Palace of the Beautiful Spring lit up by lanterns, the castle grounds were pitch black. The moon was hidden behind the clouds. There was no one else around, and the only noise that could be heard sounded like the howling of wolves carried from the other side of the castle walls by the cold

wind.

Not much time had passed since the sun had set, but the enormous castle had gone to sleep with it. Since they had arrived at Castle Seika, the consorts, Shohi, and Rimi had started going to bed earlier. The three thousand soldiers that were apparently stationed here also seemed to be inside, enjoying a quiet moment. The only light to guide them was the candle that Shusei was holding, and even its flame was flickering.

Seeing Rimi tremble in the darkness, Shusei took her hand.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. I’m right here with you,” Shusei reassured Rimi.

“I’m sorry. It’s just so very dark,” Rimi said, her voice quivering.

“As long as we hold hands, we won’t get separated. No one will be able to snatch you away,” Shusei replied.

Shusei continued holding Rimi’s hand as they walked off. The path was dark except by their feet. Even their hands faded into the darkness, but Shusei’s warmth gave Rimi courage. Touching each other in the darkness was perhaps a fitting representation of their secret relationship.

I wish this darkness would continue forever... Rimi thought to herself when she felt Shusei grip her hand ever so slightly harder. Rimi looked up at his face, but it was too dark to make out his expression. Still, his warmth and firm hand made Rimi wonder if perhaps he was wishing for the darkness to continue forever as well.

“We’re here. This must be it,” Shusei said. “It doesn’t appear to be locked.”

The candle illuminated the doors, which were decorated with iron nails. It was impossible to tell what the building looked like just from the candlelight.

They opened the doors that were secured with a crossbar. Damp air that smelled like mold came pouring out. The archive was long and narrow inside. Bookshelves that reached up to the ceiling lined both sides of the room and had shelves that were packed with wooden scrolls.

They stepped inside, and Shusei started walking down the archive while

holding his candle up to illuminate the scrolls.

“These are from when Konkoku was founded. And further back... Here we go. These are from the middle of the Shoku dynasty,” Shusei said.

Shusei picked out several scrolls and started running his eyes across them. Choosing about thirty scrolls, he unrolled them on the floor before turning to Rimi.

“Rimi, read through the records from the founding of Konkoku. They’re not written in the old script, so you should be able to understand them,” Shusei said. “It’s easy to tell what period we are interested in given the design of the box, so there’s not much to go through.”

Then, Shusei narrowed it down to three of the many scrolls regarding the castle’s records, which provided accounts of things that had happened in the castle’s past.

“Meanwhile, I will go through the records from the middle of the Shoku dynasty as well as anything mentioning the Department of Service,” Shusei continued. “As Reishun was a woman, it’s likely that she is mentioned in texts about the rear palace.”

“Very well,” Rimi replied.

Rimi and Shusei sat down next to each other and started unrolling scrolls. They placed the candle in between themselves as they quietly read through the scrolls in the candlelight. Seemingly not wanting to get in the way, Tama jumped from Rimi’s shoulder onto one of the shelves, observing the two people reading below her.

Occasionally glancing to the side, Rimi could see Shusei’s handsome face shimmering in the candlelight. He was running his finger over characters that were impossible for Rimi to decode as he read through the documents at a frightening speed. Observing him, Rimi became even more determined to focus on her part, returning to gaze at the scrolls in front of her. Reading on, she came across a section that caught her attention.

“Master Shusei, it says here that in the first year of the Kon calendar, court priests subdued a wraith that had possessed the emperor on the grounds of the

Ministry of Personnel,” Rimi pointed out. “It also says that in the second year, they exterminated monsters that had appeared in the rear palace,” Rimi added.

“The record from year one certainly seems suspicious,” Shusei said as he leaned toward Rimi and skimmed her scroll. “It’s very likely that the wraith in question was Reishun.”

“Why do you think that?” Rimi questioned.

“Court priests are employed by the Ministry of Rites. They normally have nothing to do with the Ministry of Personnel. The fact that the Ministry of Personnel is mentioned explicitly means that the court priests must have done something there,” Shusei explained. “The well that cries at night is located where the Ministry of Personnel used to be. They likely needed a well that could be used to seal away the wraith and had to request permission to use the one at the Ministry of Personnel, which is why it is mentioned here. Let’s have a look at the Ministry of Rites’ records from the same year. They should explain why exactly they ended up using the Ministry of Personnel’s grounds.”

Shusei stood up and took down a few scrolls from the shelves. He laid them out in front of Rimi, who started reading them. She quickly found the relevant record.

“Master Shusei, I found it!” Rimi exclaimed, handing the scroll to Shusei.

“This is it,” Shusei said. “It says that as soon as they moved into Castle Seika following the war with Shokukoku, several subjects were visited by impostors of people close to them. The emperor became frequently bedridden and showed no signs of recovering. To put a stop to these mysterious occurrences, the court priests searched the castle and found a wraith that had remained from Shokukoku. The wraith appeared from a hand mirror that had been thrown into a well on the grounds of the Ministry of Personnel. They pulled up the mirror, sealed it inside a box, and then returned it to the well... Wait, what?” Shusei tilted his head in confusion.

“They found the mirror in the well? So Reishun’s ghost was already in the well?” Rimi asked.

“It would appear so, yes. We will have to peruse the texts from two centuries ago to discover how that came to be. I’ve already found a seemingly related

section as the name Reishun is in the archives of the Department of Service. She was called Lady of Bright Department Go, given name Tei, and received the additional courtesy name of Reishun in her adulthood. She had the rank of imperial concubine,” Shusei explained. “Apparently, her father was the vice minister of the Ministry of Personnel. Based on the number of times she is recorded to have been summoned to his bedchamber, she must have been extremely well-liked by the emperor. Reishun was summoned there on the very day that she entered the rear palace, meaning that the emperor himself must have wished to have her brought there.”

Shusei stood up, looked through the bookshelves, and picked out a record that seemed to relate to the Ministry of Personnel.

“There was a vice minister of the Ministry of Personnel called Go Kason,” Shusei continued, scanning the scroll. “It seems he was made vice minister because his daughter entered the rear palace. The text is written rather cynically. Whoever wrote this must not have felt very fondly about his promotion. It was written by...Tan Soken. If we can find any other texts by Tan, we might find more references to Vice Minister Go. Perhaps a journal or something similar?”

Shusei chased one lead after another, skimming through the records at a blazing speed.

“Here, I found a journal written by Tan. He is criticizing Vice Minister Go as well as the emperor of Shokukoku. Quite cruelly at that,” Shusei remarked. His expression grew sterner as he continued reading. “Tan writes that he pities Lady of Bright Department Go because she claimed that ‘As a subject of this country, it is my duty to sacrifice even my soul for it,’” Shusei said.

“In other words, Reishun said that she would sacrifice everything, even her soul, for the sake of the emperor? That’s a beautiful sentiment, isn’t it? Why would he pity her for that?” Rimi asked.

Suddenly, a loud noise came from the doors, and they started swinging. The air from the vibration caused the candle to go out. As Rimi let out a small shriek, the mirror she had tucked away fell from her robes onto the floor with a high-pitched clang.

“Oh no,” Shusei whispered sharply.

Rimi froze in fear, unable to see anything in the darkness.

“Master Shusei! What just happened?!” Rimi exclaimed.

“That was the sound of the crossbar coming down! We’re trapped inside!” Shusei replied.

III

“I’ll light the candle right away,” Shusei said as he felt around in the darkness. The candle was soon burning once more.

Shusei held the candle as he walked up to the doors with Rimi, but they refused to budge. The two of them tried banging on the doors and shouting, but there was no sign of people outside. Shusei let out a despairing sigh while Rimi turned pale.

“Why is the crossbar down?” Rimi asked.

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone around. Someone had to have done it intentionally, but I can’t imagine who,” Shusei said.

This isn’t good. The candle won’t last much longer, Shusei thought as he looked down at the candle in his hand and almost clicked his tongue.

If Rimi and Shusei were nowhere to be found come morning, Jotetsu would be the first to notice. With his perceptiveness, he would be able to gather information from the guardsmen and the aides to find out where they had gone. But there was no telling how long that might take.

“Someone is bound to notice at some point. All we can do is wait until then,” Shusei said.

Rimi gave Shusei a sad nod. That meant there was no point in simply standing around, so they both sat down next to the doors with their backs to the wall. The candle that was lit in front of them was quickly melting, growing shorter.

“The candle!” Rimi said in a worried tone when the candle had melted enough that it was running down the holder.

Just as the candle seemed ready to go out at any moment, Shusei suddenly took Rimi's left hand with his right.

"It will become dark soon, but don't worry. I will be right here," Shusei reassured Rimi in an attempt to make her relax a little.

Then, everything turned pitch black. Shusei couldn't tell if his eyes were open or closed.

"Are you all right, Rimi?" Shusei asked.

"Yes," Rimi's voice replied, and Shusei felt a soft palm take his free left hand.

Shusei turned his gaze to the left in surprise. Despite the darkness, he could make out Rimi's figure. She looked worried but was still smiling slightly as she gripped Shusei's hand even harder. She then snuggled up to him, her head on his shoulder. Joy started bubbling up inside of Shusei for a moment before he caught himself.

This doesn't make sense, the composed part of him said. My right hand is holding Rimi's hand. I grabbed it myself to help ease her worries.

Shusei squeezed his right hand harder, and Rimi responded in kind with her left hand.

This is the real Rimi.

Shusei couldn't sense Rimi's presence to his right. It was as though the appearance of the second Rimi to his left had caused an invisible wall to appear on his right. He couldn't even hear her breathing. But even as he had become isolated from the real Rimi, his right hand remained connected to her.

Shusei shook off the hand belonging to the Rimi on his left. She looked at him with a sad gaze as if to ask why.

"Was the crossbar also your doing, Reishun?" Shusei asked coldly.



Just before the light had gone out, Shusei had taken Rimi's hand. As Rimi trembled in the darkness from fear, the warmth of his hand gave her courage.

"Thank you, Master Shusei," Rimi said bashfully.

Rimi then felt a large hand gently take her free right hand.

Huh?

She looked to the right in surprise to find Shusei smiling at her—despite the darkness, she could for some reason make out Shusei’s figure.

“Aren’t you scared?” Shusei asked as he gazed into Rimi’s eyes.

Rimi immediately shook off the hand holding her right hand, instead gripping the hand belonging to the real Shusei on her left even tighter.

What I’m seeing isn’t the real Master Shusei!

The real Shusei was on her left. However, she could barely sense him or hear his voice. It was as though the space to the left of her had disappeared. If anything, the Shusei on her right seemed more real. But she still felt Shusei’s warmth in her left hand. There was no mistaking it. The Shusei to her right was an impostor.

“Stop it, Reishun!” Rimi yelled. She understood what was happening.

The smiling Shusei disappeared. But at the same time that Rimi started to feel Shusei’s presence more keenly to her left, a woman appeared a few steps in front of her, glowing faintly in the darkness. She had an elegant oval face and wore a beautiful pink ruqun. It was Reishun.

Reishun was expressionless. She was nothing like the pitiful woman Rimi had seen in her dreams, instead only staring at Rimi with cold eyes—the eyes of a wraith. In her fright, Rimi clung to Shusei, still holding his hand.

“Master Shusei! Master Shusei!” Rimi cried in Shusei’s chest.

Shusei embraced her in kind.



“Was the crossbar also your doing, Reishun?” Shusei said.

Immediately, the Rimi on Shusei’s left side disappeared. Instead, the space a few steps in front of him became brighter, and the figure of a woman appeared.

Is that Reishun?!

Just as Shusei understood the identity of the woman before him, Rimi—

whose presence he had been unable to sense until now, save for the warmth of her hand—clung to him in fear.

“Master Shusei! Master Shusei!” Rimi called out.

Realizing that the strange wall that had separated them was gone, Shusei embraced Rimi to comfort her as he glared at Reishun. Given how Rimi was quivering, she must have been able to see Reishun as well.

“Calm down, Rimi. It’s all right. I’m right here with you,” Shusei said softly.

Reishun’s vacant eyes were fixed on Rimi.

“I want that girl,” Reishun said. Her voice was like the sound of the wind passing through a tree hollow in the darkness.

Rimi grabbed onto Shusei even harder.

This wraith wants Rimi.

The ghost must have known that she could only be resealed by the one who had removed her seal to begin with. Rimi was also similar to a priestess with the aptitude to become an immortal tasked with serving holy communion. Reishun must have desired her power.

She appeared in Rimi’s dreams in order to gradually rob her of her life force. Now that she’s been found out, she’s planning to take Rimi’s power all at once. That way she would both have Rimi’s power and get rid of the key to her seal.

But even though he realized this, Shusei still decided to question Reishun.

“Why are you doing this?” Shusei asked.

“I want power,” the ghost responded, as wraiths would gain power from the life force of humans.

Shusei gritted his teeth. He did not possess any special ability to exorcise demons or wraiths. Even if he did, it was unlikely that an average priest would be a match for her. The court priests from a century ago had chosen to seal Reishun rather than exorcise her. That is to say, she had been too powerful to exorcise, and they had been left with no other option.

But I have to protect Rimi. With my life, if I have to.

Shusei searched his brain for any knowledge he possessed that might help them. Perhaps he could somehow combine what he knew to find a way to protect Rimi.

Oh, yes. I could do that.

The solution Shusei had come up with came at far too great a risk. But if he did nothing, Rimi would soon be food for a wraith. He had no choice.

But I certainly never thought that a wraith would force me to steel myself for this... Shusei lamented, but his mind was made up. He was not turning back.

“I will not give her to you. Leave this place!” Shusei commanded. The first step when dealing with demons and wraiths was to reject them firmly, lest they prey on the weakness in your heart.

“That girl does not belong to you,” Reishun responded.

That’s it! Shusei thought. Reishun had once been a human. As long as she was not too far gone to hold a conversation, he would be able to negotiate with her.

“Indeed, she does not belong to me. But I’ve decided to protect her,” Shusei said.

“Why?”

“Because she matters to me.”

Upon saying this, Shusei felt Rimi twitch in his arms. He searched for her lips in the darkness and gently covered her mouth with his hand. It was a signal for her not to speak.

“Therefore, in place of her, I offer myself. I beg you not to harm her,” Shusei said.

Shocked, Rimi attempted to stop Shusei, but he prevented her from moving both her limbs and mouth.

“I don’t have the power of an immortal as she does. However, I have as much life force as any other person. Even just the life force I possess would be a tremendous amount of power to you, would it not?” Shusei asked. “After having spent a century sealed away, I’m sure you’re hungry for any power you can get your hands on. And I’m offering mine to you, guaranteed.”

Reishun fell silent and stared at Shusei.

“You said you wanted Rimi, but you don’t know her true name. She is a princess of Wakoku, and she has not used the name given to her at birth since coming to Konkoku,” Shusei continued as the dubious wraith observed him. “That name still protects her. There is no guarantee that you will be able to drain her of as much life force as you desire.”

There was power in a name. While Shusei was unaware of how things worked in Wakoku, in Konkoku, a child was first given a name by their mother. That name was never to be known by anyone besides the mother, the father, and the child. It would become the true name of that person’s soul, serving to protect it. Knowing someone’s true name meant having control over their soul.

Even if Wakokuans had no concept of a true name, Rimi still had her Wakokuan name. That would serve the same purpose as a true name. As long as Rimi did not disclose her Wakokuan name, however much life force a wraith tried to rob her of, her soul would be protected, if barely, and it would not prove fatal.

Still, Shusei could not let her lose so much life force that she became an empty husk. Even if her soul lived on by a hair, Shusei would have failed to protect her.

“I’ll tell you my true name instead. That way you’ll be able to take all the life force you desire from me. Let me introduce myself,” Shusei said, not giving Reishun the chance to think. “My family name is Shu. My given name is Sen. My courtesy name is Shusei. And my true name...”

Rimi struggled violently in an attempt to stop him, but Shusei only tightened his embrace.

“...is Yu.”



No, Master Shusei!

Rimi shrieked and struggled in an attempt to stop Shusei, but he held her firmly, refusing to remove the hand covering her mouth. Rimi understood that Shusei was attempting to tell Reishun his true name. Wakoku also had a

tradition of giving children true names, a custom they had imported from the mainland.

While holding back Rimi's desperate attempts to free herself, Shusei continued.

"My true name is Yu," he declared.

The moment Rimi heard this, a sense of despair washed over her.

He did it. He gave a wraith his true name. Just to protect me!

After stating his name, Shusei released his hold on Rimi.

"Master Shusei!" Rimi exclaimed, finally free, and she wrapped her arms around Shusei's neck. Tears started rushing down her cheeks and she began shrieking. "No, Master Shusei! This can't be!"

"Calm down, it's fine. Reishun doesn't know your true name," Shusei said.

"No! That's not what I'm worried about at all!"

Shusei's life was about to be taken by Reishun. The mere thought made Rimi panic. Her mind went blank and her head felt like it was boiling. Still clinging to Shusei's neck, she lost control of herself as she turned to Reishun.

"Don't you dare so much as lay a finger on him! I won't let you touch his body, soul, or dreams! I won't let you!" Rimi yelled through her wailing.



Reishun observed Rimi quietly.

“I have learned that person’s true name. If I so wish, I can take him away easily,” Reishun said in a low voice.

“I won’t let you!” Rimi yelled even louder, clinging more firmly to Shusei. “If you take him away, I will stop at nothing to erase your soul without a trace, no matter what god or demon I need to plead to! I swear it!”

Faced with a wraith that threatened the one she loved, Rimi was exploding with a fury fiercer than anything she had ever experienced. If Shusei was killed, Rimi knew that she would lose herself to her rage and become a wraith powerful enough to devour Reishun.

Even if I turn into a wraith, I will never forgive her! I’d even happily turn into one right now and kill her before she can harm Master Shusei! Rimi’s eyes were wide open and seething with rage.

“Rimi!” Shusei said in an alarmed voice, seemingly sensing something dangerous from her.

Shusei wrapped his arms around her hips in an embrace, but Rimi’s rage showed no signs of calming. She violently shook her head in protest.

“Rimi, I knew what I was doing when I gave her my name. It’s fine,” Shusei tried to calm her.

“No! I won’t let her touch you!” Rimi shrieked with a piercing voice, burying her head in Shusei’s shoulder.

Rimi refused to let go of Shusei’s hand. She resolved to fight back with everything she had if Reishun even attempted to come closer. Even though she had no idea how to actually go about fighting a wraith, resolve was boiling over in her chest.

“If it means I can protect Master Shusei, I will pray to all the demons in Konkoku to make me into a wraith, right here and now!” Rimi yelled.

Panic seeping into her mind, Rimi desperately started praying toward something, with no idea what she was actually praying to.

Don’t let anyone touch Master Shusei!

“Rimi, don’t!” Shusei yelled, alarmed as he sensed something changing about Rimi. “You can’t pray to demons in a place with strong spiritual energy! You’ll really turn into a wraith!”

Suddenly, a piercing voice rang out in the darkness. It was crystal clear and seemed to cut right through the stagnated darkness like a blade. Rimi jumped, and Shusei gasped.

“That’s...” Shusei whispered as he looked in the direction of the voice.

Rimi turned her gaze in the same direction. Through her tears, she could make out the blurry contour of a shelf. Atop the shelf was a creature radiating a silver light. With its tail standing up threateningly, it cried out in a voice that cut the darkness in two.

Chapter 5: The Truth Revealed, the Thinking Sword

I

Tama?

Tama's whole body was shaking as she suddenly opened her small mouth and let out a cry. Her voice seemed far too loud and piercing to have come from such a tiny body, and it shook the darkness.

What...was I...?

Hearing Tama's cry, Rimi recovered her senses and realized what she had just been doing. Attempting to protect Shusei, she had started praying without caring about who she was praying to. That was a perilous thing to do in a place filled with spiritual energy. Had she continued to pray in a frenzy, she really might have turned into a wraith even though she was still alive.

Tama jumped down from the shelf and stood in front of Rimi and Shusei. She cried out again at Reishun, who looked on with surprise and fear in her eyes. Then, something on the floor started to glow faintly. It was the hand mirror that Rimi had dropped. The light radiating from the mirror's surface was gradually growing stronger. Reishun was drawn into the mirror and disappeared.

The light from the mirror slowly dissipated, turning the room dark once more.

Reishun was sucked into the mirror!

All that was visible in the darkness was Tama, shining silver. Illuminated by her glow, Rimi and Shusei were able to vaguely make out each other's faces.

"The Quinary Dragon protected you," Shusei mumbled in disbelief. "This is unimaginable. The Quinary Dragon is only meant to provide the emperor with the power to rule the country. It would not save even him unless the situation were dire."

"Tama...!" Rimi exclaimed as gratitude and joy filled her chest. "Thank you,

Tama... Thank you..."

Rimi's eyes teared up, and she wanted to run and hug Tama. But her legs were trembling so badly that she couldn't move—and even if she had been able to, Tama's radiance was so divine that it felt wrong to approach her.

While Rimi and Shusei looked on in astonishment, Tama turned around, leisurely walked over to the scrolls unrolled on the floor, and put her nose to one of the texts.

"'Three'?" Rimi asked, reading the word Tama's nose was touching.

Tama then lifted her head and moved her nose to a different word—"days."

"'Three days'?"

Tama looked at Rimi with her round, blue eyes, as if asking her to keep going.

"Tama, are you trying to tell us something?" Rimi asked.

Tama touched one word after another with her nose. She was clearly trying to convey something, and Rimi knew she had to figure out what.

"Three," "days," "trapped," "inside," "mirror," "only," "you," "able," "seal," "again," "within," "three," "days." Rimi read the words Tama was pointing at one after another in her head and connected them.

"'I've trapped her inside the mirror for three days. Only you can seal her again. Within three days...'" Rimi trailed off without thinking about what it meant.

Tama nodded heavily in response. Then, as though she was letting out a sigh of relief, the light quickly disappeared from around Tama. It was pitch black again.

"Tama?!" Rimi exclaimed frantically.

Tama responded with a squeak, the same that she would let out before going to bed. She seemed to be saying, "I'm really tired so I'm going to sleep."

"So the Quinary Dragon has trapped the wraith inside the mirror for three days..." Shusei said. "I still can't believe that it would save someone who isn't even the emperor. But this must have been all it was capable of doing while still

recovering. In any case, it seems we've made it out in one piece."

Shusei let out a sigh of relief. Meanwhile, Rimi was slowly understanding the significance of what Tama had told them.

"But only for three days... If we don't seal Reishun within three days, you will..." Rimi trailed off. "And Tama said that I'm the only one who can seal her again. That's..."

"That part is true," Shusei said apologetically. "I should have told you earlier, but I didn't want to cause you to panic. I'd planned to tell you when things had calmed down a little."

Shusei let out a chuckle.

"Well, that certainly was a mistake. Before I got a chance to tell you, I almost became a wraith's dinner," Shusei continued. "I'm sorry. I should have explained as soon as I realized. But all I could think of at the time was how to get through this predicament."

Even though he only mentioned it as an aside, Shusei had offered himself to the wraith in place of Rimi to protect her. Her body was burning with joy at his courage, kindness, and compassion.

Rimi still had her arms wrapped around Shusei's neck. She knew that she needed to let go of him, but the events that had just transpired had been so overwhelming that she could barely move. Even her arms were petrified. Despite how embarrassed she felt sitting on Shusei's lap, there was nothing she could do.

Shusei had his arms, which also remained motionless, around Rimi's waist.

How could I ever give up on someone who is this kind? I can't kill my feelings when I love him so much. I love him. I love him. I can't...

The two of them sat silently in the darkness, still processing what had just happened. But despite not uttering a word to each other, Rimi felt as though they could both sense their hidden feelings. Perhaps she was only imagining it, but just as Rimi still loved Shusei, it seemed as though Shusei cared for her in turn.

Tama has given us three days. I have to seal Reishun within those three days and protect Master Shusei. I have to.

Surrounded by darkness, the two of them remained motionless, holding each other.



I adore her.

His arms wrapped around Rimi's slim waist, Shusei was unable to move. He knew that this wasn't right, but their encounter with the wraith had been so shocking that neither his mind nor his body were functioning properly. Most of all, the courage the delicate girl before him had shown in trying to protect him had both surprised and delighted him. Now, he was reluctant to let go.

I won't say it out loud, nor will I let it show. But just for now, I want to hold her in the darkness.

They sat motionless and silent, only feeling each other's warmth and breaths. After some time, they heard voices on the other side of the doors. Rimi jumped in response.

"It seems someone has finally come for us," Shusei whispered. "We should stand up, lest they get the wrong idea."

"All right," Rimi said, removing her arms from Shusei's neck and lifting herself out of his lap.

Shusei searched for Rimi's hand in the darkness, took it, and helped her to her feet.

"Master Shusei," Rimi said with a determined voice. "I swear to seal Reishun before the three days are up. For your sake and His Majesty's."

"I will help you. Let's do this together," Shusei responded with a smile.

Tama ran up to the two of them from the back of the archive and climbed up to Rimi's shoulder, rubbing her cheek against Rimi's.

"Thank you, Tama. Did you sleep well?" Rimi asked, and Tama replied with a small, pleased squeak.

They could hear the sound of the crossbar being removed and the heavy

doors opening outward. As a bright beam of morning sunlight shone through the doors, stretching to Rimi and Shusei's feet, the two of them let go of each other's hands.

Before stepping outside, Rimi picked up the mirror in which Reishun would be trapped for three days.



As the morning sun shone into his bedroom, Shohi was woken up by Jotetsu. The emperor walked into his living room, sat down on the sofa, and stared listlessly at the ceiling. It was still too early for breakfast, and Rimi would not be showing up for some time.

Jotetsu opened the windows and the front door before leaving, saying he had business to attend to. Shohi was left alone in the room.

Is what I am feeling now a desire to cry? Shohi pondered. Kojin's revelation that someone was trying to dethrone him had hit Shohi harder than expected, leaving him feeling as though he was being completely rejected. At first, he had been quivering with rage, but after sleeping on it, all that remained in his chest was a hollow sadness. Perhaps it would be freeing to cry and lament his fate, but as he had not cried in years, he seemed to have forgotten how.

An early spring breeze blew in through the window, carrying with it a faint scent of white plum blossoms. The plum blossom was the first flower to bloom in the year. Despite it still being cold enough for snow to be seen in various places, it would cheer up the people with its promise of spring.

I used to like plum blossoms, Shohi reminisced before ordering an aide to bring him a plum tree branch.

The aide soon returned with a blossom, and as Shohi observed the admirably blooming flower, he felt as though he had been transported back in time to when he was young.

Even since I was young, I have never obtained what I truly desired.

As a child, Shohi had wanted the warmth and kindness of his mother. He had followed her around only to be ignored or treated cruelly. Around the time he had realized that his mother would never give him either warmth or kindness,

Hakurei had approached him instead. Shohi had started to believe that perhaps his kind brother would give him what he wanted instead—but Hakurei had been horrifically removed from his life, and Shohi had lost what love he still had for his mother as a result. He had stopped wishing for both warmth and kindness. He had stopped liking the plum blossom, which spoke of hope amidst the cold.

Instead, Shohi had started to desire power. But just as he had reached the ultimate rank, he had been met with officials who had looked down on the young emperor. Now, someone was trying to depose him and place a different emperor on the throne.

With the number of officials that are already refusing to take me seriously, if I were to sentence Ho Neison without evidence, they would start to see me as entirely unfit for the throne. Is there nothing I can do? Not to mention the most troublesome person involved... Shohi bit his lip. *Ho Seishu had a child? Why must someone like that appear like a ghost after all these years?*

“Your Majesty!” someone called out to Shohi, snapping him back to reality.

Shohi turned his gaze toward the entrance to find Shusei entering with a worried expression. Seeing Shusei, Shohi started to consider asking him for advice. However, Kojin had given him little information, and Shusei was likely to dismiss it as pure conjecture. Shohi regretted not pressing Kojin for more information, but at the time, he had been too upset to think clearly.

I can simply request more information from Kojin and speak to Shusei afterward.

“You do not seem to be feeling very well. Are you all right? Shall I have the tang I invented made and brought to you?” Shusei suggested.

“No need. Drinking your tang would only make me feel worse,” Shohi replied.

“What do you mean, Your Majesty?” Shusei asked in a puzzled tone, causing Shohi to start laughing.

Shusei smiled in relief at the sight of Shohi laughing, and he turned his eyes to the plum blossom placed on the table.

“How lovely. You’ve always been fond of plum blossoms, haven’t you, Your

Majesty?” Shusei said.

“You still remember something like that?” Shohi asked.

“Of course. Why?”

Seeing Shusei nod matter-of-factly, Shohi felt an indescribable affection for him. Although he only displayed a demeanor appropriate for a subject, Shusei had remained the same his entire life, devoting himself to serving Shohi. Even Shohi himself had forgotten that he liked plum blossoms, yet Shusei had remembered.

The feeling of solitude that Shohi had felt softened. He felt safe knowing that at least Shusei would never betray him.

Should I express my gratitude? But simply saying “thank you” would seem strange. “I am glad you are here for me,” perhaps? Or even “Stay by my side forever”...? No, that is even stranger! It sounds as if I am proclaiming my love for him!

“Incidentally, Your Majesty,” Shusei continued before Shohi had a chance to sort out his thoughts. “I have something I need to report.”

“Wh-What is it? Out with it,” Shohi said in his usual tone, having missed his opportunity to thank Shusei.

“A wraith has been released in Castle Seika. Your poor condition has likely also been caused by that wraith.”

“A wraith? That cannot be. The court priests have already ensured that Castle Seika would be safe for my visit.”

“The wraith was released after we arrived in Castle Seika. Pure Consort Yo and Rimi happened to find it sealed at the bottom of a well and accidentally released it.”

Shusei explained how Hakurei had told Yo about the mysteries of Castle Seika, and how she and Rimi had found Reishun’s hand mirror.

“After going through old records, we found that this same wraith haunted the first emperor of Konkoku and caused a number of his subjects to come across impostors of people close to them, creating great confusion,” Shusei continued.

“Impostors?” Shohi said, surprised.

Impostors?! Then the Rimi that has been coming to my bedchamber every night...

Shohi had thought it strange. What had been happening had been difficult to explain as simple sleepwalking, but Shusei’s suggestion made it all make sense.

“I see... So that is what was happening... The Rimi that has visited me repeatedly at night was... No wonder,” Shohi mumbled as he hung his head and let out a dejected laugh. It seemed that what he truly desired still escaped his grasp.

Ever since I asked her to be my empress, Rimi has been reluctant to be left alone with me. She has been avoiding me. She seems to find it awkward to see me. Even in her sleep, it is unthinkable that she would come to visit me.

A voice seemed to whisper, “How disappointing...” in his head, but he convinced himself that it didn’t belong to him.

“Your Majesty, are you all right?” Shusei asked, kneeling in front of the sofa to get a better look at Shohi’s face.

After a while, Shohi lifted his face when something suddenly crossed his mind.

“Did you come across a Rimi impostor?” Shohi asked.

The false Rimi had made advances on Shohi each time she had shown up. Shohi hated the idea that something similar could have happened to Shusei. The mere thought made him want to punch Shusei in the face.

“I...did not,” Shusei responded—though Shohi sensed some hesitation in his reply.



I lied to His Majesty.

When asked about whether he had met a Rimi impostor, Shusei had said no. If Shohi learned that Shusei actually had met her, he might have questioned Shusei’s relationship with Rimi. Shusei’s feelings of guilt had overwhelmed him. He was beside himself with shame.

Rimi was a palace woman and belonged to Shohi, and Shusei knew full well

that she was also the object of Shohi's affection. Shusei couldn't believe what he had done the night before.

"In any case, the wraith will be locked away for three days. There should be no impostors during that time either," Shusei explained.

"Locked away? How?" Shohi asked.

"The Quinary Dragon realized that Rimi was in danger and subdued the wraith. Under normal circumstances, I'm sure the Quinary Dragon would have enough power to completely erase a wraith. But as you know, it is currently recovering. Three days appears to be the best that it could do," Shusei explained. "We need to reseal it during this time, and the only one who can do that is Rimi since she is the one who removed the seal. She is currently looking after the Quinary Dragon in her room as well as getting changed into more suitable attire for meeting with you, Your Majesty. Once she is done, she will come here to ask your permission to attempt to seal the wraith."

"What happens if you fail to seal it within three days?"

"Rimi will continue to attempt sealing it while we have the court priests research a way to exorcise the wraith in the event that she is unsuccessful. Now that the wraith has been released, it is likely to follow you back to Annei, so we need to take care of it here. But have no fear," Shusei said to reassure Shohi, "there is little chance of the wraith taking your life as it has grown weak after being sealed away for a century. Still, we'll need to do something, or you'll remain bedridden."

"But you said that we need to seal it within three days. From what you just explained, it does not sound like letting three days pass will change anything."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I couldn't help myself," Shusei said, smiling awkwardly. "The reason I mentioned that is because there's a good possibility that I will lose my life once those three days are up. And the wraith may grow slightly stronger as a result. That is all."

"I see, is that all... Wait, what did you say?!"

Shohi reflexively leaned forward, grabbed Shusei by his collar, and pulled him closer.

“Are you saying you are going to die?! Why has it come to that?!” Shohi roared.

“I had to protect Rimi. There was no other choice. She is the only one who can reseal the wraith, after all,” Shusei explained.

“How can you be so calm?! You fool!”

“Panicking won’t achieve anything.”

“It would not hurt you to panic at least a little! Get the Quinary Dragon to recover as quickly as possible and have it exorcise the wraith before the three days are up!” Shohi commanded.

“The Quinary Dragon is a divine dragon, Your Majesty. It wouldn’t go out of its way to defeat a wraith just because we ask it to, and certainly not to protect me. The fact that it saved Rimi this time is nothing short of a miracle. It seems to be rather attached to her. Either way, we have no choice but to rely on Rimi here,” Shusei calmly explained.

“Then call Rimi here right this minute! I do not care how she is dressed! Get her here immediately! If she needs permission to seal the wraith, I will give it right away!”

Chased out of the room by an enraged Shohi, Shusei headed off toward Rimi’s room. On his way, he was stopped by an aide who informed him that he had a letter for him. Shusei was taken aback at the sight of the letter.

Is it from Lord Ho? Why now, of all times?

However, the sender of the letter was clearly written on the back—it was from Yo Eika. Shusei opened the letter, and it read: “I am staying in Hanin. Come and see me.” The name of the teahouse where she was staying was also included.

“So Mrs. Yo is in Hanin right now...”

This was no time to be drinking tea leisurely, but Shusei was not so coldhearted as to simply ignore Mrs. Yo after she had come all this way.

Besides, I might lose my life in three days. I owe her a lot. I should see her at least once.

His chances of dying were far from negligible. He did not regret it as he had chosen it himself, but he would still be leaving behind a lot. He especially lamented the thought of leaving his cuisinology research unfinished. Even so, if it meant he could save Rimi, he was determined to quietly accept his fate. His resolve would not waver. And Rimi had sworn to seal the wraith. He wanted to believe in her.

I suppose I will give her a quick visit and then leave as quickly as I can.

Shusei left the aide with a message for Rimi, telling her to make for Shohi's room at once and that he would be leaving the castle for a short while to meet with his mother. He then promptly left Castle Seika for the town of Hanin.

II

The moment Rimi returned to her room, Tama jumped onto the bed and dozed off.

"Thank you so much, Tama," Rimi whispered.

After getting changed, Rimi gently stroked the sleeping dragon's small head and back. Tama let out a delighted squeak in her sleep before returning to her relaxed breathing.

I have to seal Reishun within three days... Rimi thought as she looked down at the hand mirror placed on the table. All she saw was her own reflection, but she could sense an ominous presence that hadn't been there before.

Rimi was supposed to visit Shohi now, but she decided to stop by Virtuous Consort Ho's and Hakurei's rooms first. She had to inform them about the two-hundred-year-old wraith that had roamed the castle, causing confusion by stealing other people's appearances.

When Rimi arrived in Ho's room, the Virtuous Consort had just woken up. Rimi told her about the wraith and how it had turned into Hakurei. As she listened, Ho stared vacantly into the distance.

"Virtuous Consort Ho?" Rimi asked, worried by Ho's countenance.

Ho appeared to snap out of her daze and turned to Rimi with a dejected

expression.

“So then, he was an impostor,” Ho said before lowering her voice to a whisper. “But it still hurts...”

Coming into such close contact with the false Master Hakurei must have reawoken the lingering feelings Virtuous Consort Ho had hidden away deep inside... Even I was unable to suppress my feelings when the false Master Shusei appeared, to the point that I ran after him.

Rimi was concerned about Ho’s dispirited demeanor.

Hakurei, on the other hand, acted indifferently. When Rimi informed him about the wraith and her plans to seal it away again, he gave her an exasperated look.

“I have enough to worry about without impostors walking about,” Hakurei said and left it at that. He appeared to be more concerned about Shohi’s condition. When asking Rimi how confident she was when it came to sealing the wraith, he stressed the importance of ensuring Shohi’s immediate recovery.

Hakurei’s remarks made Rimi all the more eager to succeed.

If I can’t seal Reishun within three days, Master Shusei will be in danger, and His Majesty won’t recover. A simple “sorry” won’t be enough if I fail.

Rimi’s duty weighed heavily on her. No one could accomplish it except her. Incapable of running away, she had no choice but to do it.

Rimi excused herself from Hakurei’s room and exited into the hallway where she came across an aide who delivered Shusei’s message to her. She immediately set off for Shohi’s room.

Shohi was waiting for Rimi on the sofa in his living room with an irritated expression in greeting.

“Your Majesty, I am sure Master Shusei has already informed you of what has happened,” Rimi said as she bowed. “I am here to—”

“I allow it,” Shohi interrupted Rimi, too impatient to hear her explanation. “You are here about the sealing of the wraith, are you not? I allow it. Commence the work immediately. Use anything you need, be it people, places,

or even jewels. You cannot let it take Shusei's life."

Shohi was sitting up straight and dignified, but he was as pale as ever. Just leaning forward from the back of the sofa must have been painful for him, but he was doing his best to put on a brave front. However, his eyes betrayed the worry he felt for Shusei.

Rimi gave Shohi a deep bow.

"Thank you for the permission, Your Majesty," Rimi said. "However, I must apologize for what I have done. Your poor condition and Master Shusei being in danger are because I released the wraith from its seal. It is all my fault. Once I have successfully resealed the wraith, I will accept any punishment you deem fit."

"This is not only your fault. The court priests are also to blame for not knowing about the existence of such a dangerous well, not to mention Pure Consort Yo for letting her curiosity get the better of her. You could even say I am to blame for keeping such an eccentric woman as my consort. Hakurei is responsible for teaching that woman about the well. And of course, some of the blame lies with you for undoing the seal. It is not the fault of any one person," Shohi reasoned. "And if everyone is to blame, then everyone simply needs to do what they can to remedy the situation. You simply happened to have been given a more significant role than the others. If anything, I must apologize for putting so much pressure on you. Still, I ask you to go through with it."

Rimi blinked silently in surprise as she looked at Shohi. Slowly, happiness started to fill her chest.

What a magnanimous comment.

Shohi looked at Rimi, his eyes wavering with worry.

"Do you think you will be able to reseal the wraith within three days?" Shohi asked.

Rimi could only weakly shake her head.

"I don't know. However, in Wakoku I used to be in charge of serving meals to a god. Food has the power to quell the anger of gods. That is the only skill I possess, and I believe that I have no choice but to use it to attempt to seal the

wraith,” Rimi said.

Rimi was no priest. This was her only means of combating a wraith.

If it can quell the anger of a god, then perhaps...

Rimi thought about how she had served holy communion back in Wakoku. She couldn't let her fears overwhelm her. She had to rely on her ten years of experience serving as the Umashi-no-Miya.

“There is a possibility that I will be able to seal it,” Rimi said. “Please let me borrow one of the kitchens in Castle Seika. I will use that to prepare holy communion and see what will happen if I serve that to the wraith.”

“Very well,” Shohi responded.

Shohi then summoned an aide who he ordered to find an available kitchen and ready it for Rimi to use. The aide responded that it should be set up before the evening.

“Is that all? Is there anything else you need?” Shohi asked.

“No, there is not. However, I am planning on asking Master Shusei for his assistance. Is that all right?”

“I do not mind. I am sure Shusei already plans to help. He is not someone who would be comfortable leaving it all to one person. He is always worrying about others...” Shohi trailed off as he furrowed his brow. “Do not let Shusei die, Rimi. If Shusei left my side, I...would miss him.”

Rimi could hardly believe her ears. When she had first met him, Shohi had seemed like someone who didn't understand the idea of attachment or missing someone—yet now, he understood that he would miss Shusei if he were to disappear.

He's like a small boy.

Shohi looked like a lost boy who was standing paralyzed, not knowing what to do.

Is there nothing I could say to console him? Something to encourage him?

Shohi bit his tongue, perhaps realizing that it was a bad idea to air his worries.

Meanwhile, unsure of what to say, Rimi turned her eyes to the vase next to the sofa, which held a white plum blossom.

“Do you like plum blossoms, Your Majesty?” Rimi asked.

Shohi seemed relieved at the sudden change in topic.

“Yes, I suppose so. I used to like them—no, perhaps I still do. I am not quite sure,” Shohi said.

The room fell silent once more. After a few moments, Rimi finally found the words that she needed to tell Shohi.

“Your Majesty, I won’t let Master Shusei die,” Rimi declared firmly. “I will use all of the power and knowledge that I possess to seal the wraith, both for the sake of Master Shusei himself and for you who cares so much about him.”

Shohi looked at Rimi in surprise, as if she had said something he had never heard before. He continued to look at her in silence for a while before dropping his gaze to his hands. His long eyelashes cast a shadow on his cheeks while the cold spring light passed through the plum blossoms, emphasizing his beautiful face. He looked as if he was about to cry.

“Your Majesty? Are you not feeling well?” Rimi asked.

“No, I am fine,” Shohi said before lowering his gaze further. He closed his eyes firmly and bit his lower lip.

Rimi gasped at the sight of something glistening in the corner of Shohi’s eyes.



Why does she say that it is for my sake?

Shohi was astonished at the feelings that had suddenly welled up within him. His chest felt tight. He couldn’t understand what was causing all this pain. The only thing he knew was that these inexplicable feelings had appeared after Rimi had explained that she would do everything within her power for his sake.

Inside Shohi’s head was a voice that said that everyone hated him—that he was so detested that someone was trying to kick him off the throne only one year after his crowning. That those he truly longed for would never so much as glance at him. So why was Rimi being so kind to him while refusing to become

his? Normally, she seemed unable to even look at him because of her awkwardness. Yet now she was worried about his safety.

As a child, no one had paid him any attention no matter how much he had cried. The handmaids had only glanced at him before hurrying back to their duties. His mother had barely visited him at all. At some point, he had realized that no matter how much he cried, no one would be there to comfort him. Before long, he had stopped crying entirely, convincing himself that he didn't need anyone to console him. Crying was something reserved for weaklings who wanted others to comfort them. Only those fortunate enough to have someone to console them were allowed to cry.

Shusei had often told Shohi for some time after they first met, "You don't cry at all despite your young age, Your Majesty. You must be very strong." However, that was not a sign of his strength. He had simply given up on the idea of anyone consoling him.

It was a mystery to Shohi why, when he had already abandoned the thought of being consoled by others, there was now someone who was this kind to him. Rimi possessed a soft, feminine warmth, different from Shusei's clumsy compassion. It was the warmth Shohi had once desired but failed to obtain. Sensing this, his chest started to hurt, and something that he had suppressed welled up from deep within.

When Shusei had told him that his life was at stake, Shohi had become furious that Shusei could say something so important with such indifference. With each moment that passed, however, Shohi's fear of losing Shusei steadily grew, like shadows stretching as the sun set. If Shusei disappeared, Shohi would lose the only person who had stayed with him since he was a child, the only person he could trust. As if seeing right through his worries, Rimi had tried to cheer him up, saying that she would do everything she could to help both him and Shusei.

Why are you so kind, Rimi? Why? You refuse to become mine, yet...why?

Shohi was hated by everyone. Even as emperor, there were those who thought him unfit for the throne. Still, Rimi continued to stay by his side.



Is His Majesty crying?!

Rimi hesitated for a brief moment before timidly taking a step closer to the sofa. She knelt on the floor and took Shohi's hand. It was warm.

"Your Majesty, why are you crying?" Rimi asked.

"It is your fault for being so kind to me. I know that you feel uncomfortable seeing me. And still, you..." Shohi said, his voice turning into an almost inaudible whisper. "You act so kindly toward me."

"Your Majesty..." Rimi said softly.

Suddenly, Shohi embraced Rimi, as if clinging to her. Rimi jumped in surprise and fell speechless, but she couldn't shake him off—in part because of how strong his arm was and also because she could feel him trembling faintly as he stifled his voice.

Shohi was acting strangely, and not just due to his condition or his fear of losing Shusei. Rimi instinctively felt that he was being plagued by something much more fundamental, which was why his feelings were so unstable.

"There is something besides your condition and Master Shusei, isn't there, Your Majesty? What is the matter? I will do anything I can to help you," Rimi said.

Shohi remained silent. He seemed to be fighting desperately to prevent his emotions from surging any further.

Rimi sat still, waiting for Shohi to calm down. After a while, he breathed out heavily before slowly releasing her.

"Forgive me. I did something you are not comfortable with," Shohi said. His voice was firm, but his eyes were reddened and wet.

"It's fine, Your Majesty. I don't mind. But won't you tell me what happened?" Rimi asked.

"Do not worry about it. There is nothing you can do."

"But if you don't, I'll be so worried and restless," Rimi pleaded desperately.

"It seems I have wronged you," Shohi said as he gave Rimi an awkward smile. "You should be focusing on your task to seal the wraith, yet I have caused you to worry about me... I suppose I have no choice but to explain. However, it is a

trivial matter. It is simply that some fools are attempting to depose me and put a new emperor on the throne. That is all.”

Rimi was taken aback by the heaviness of the subject matter. Shohi claimed that it was a trivial matter and even forced a smile to hide his feelings, but the traces of tears in his eyes spoke volumes about his level of distress.

“Depose you, Your Majesty? Is there really someone who is planning something so frightening?” Rimi asked.

“Kojin informed me. The head of the Ho house, Ho Neison, wants to eliminate me and replace me with someone else.”

Ho Neison? That lost old man? That's Virtuous Consort Ho's grandfather. Rimi remembered the old man who had found himself in the cuisinology hall at one point.

“Apparently, he wants to put the child of his son Seishu on the throne in place of me,” Shohi continued before taking a deep breath and fixing his gaze on a single point in space. His eyes, while still showing traces of his tears, burned with a strong resolve. “I will not let that happen. I am the emperor.”

Shohi corrected his posture as he started speaking with his usual, arrogant tone.

“This was not something I should have told you under normal circumstances. You are to tell no one of this,” Shohi commanded.

Rimi found it painful to watch how Shohi spoke as though he had no weakness to hide whatsoever.

After leaving Shohi's room, Rimi leaned against the railing as she looked up at the early spring sky. It was a slightly hazy blue.

Right now, sealing the wraith comes first. But is there nothing I can do to support His Majesty at the same time?

Rimi was still unable to accept Shohi's offer to become his empress, but she nonetheless wanted to be useful to him.



Shusei walked through the town of Hanin in search of a certain teahouse.

Until just a moment ago, the sky had been a beautiful light blue. But now the weather had taken a quick turn with gray clouds moving swiftly toward the town. It seemed as though it would start to rain at any moment.

The streets of Hanin were wide. The town was sparse and quiet compared to Annei, and more orderly too. Places such as teahouses, pubs, and brothels were located in specific parts of the town, so it didn't take Shusei long to find the teahouse he was looking for.

As he entered the teahouse, an elderly man—perhaps the owner of the establishment—approached Shusei.

"I believe a lady by the name of Yo Eika is staying here," Shusei said.

"Oh, yes," the man replied quietly. "Right this way."

The old man led Shusei to the back of the teahouse where there was a garden with doors to dwellings lining the perimeter. The man walked up to one of those doors and knocked on it with a strange rhythm. There was no response, but the man still said, "Please enter."

If Mrs. Yo was staying in Hanin, then she would have brought handmaids to take care of her. They would always have fun chatting together. Oddly enough, however, Shusei heard nothing of the sort coming from the room. Instead, he was greeted by the strong smell of fermented tea as he cautiously entered.

"We finally meet again, Shusei," a man said, smiling as he sat at the table in the room.

"Lord Ho?!" Shusei exclaimed, seeing who the man was.

Shusei realized that he had been tricked. Sensing danger, he immediately turned around to leave—but his path was blocked by two large men standing in front of the door.

"Please, take a seat," one of the men said.

Given their build, demeanor, and the swords on their hips... Are they guardsmen? And captains at that. Shusei couldn't believe that guardsmen who appeared to be employed by the court had sided with Neison.

"They will not harm you, Shusei. Sit down," Neison said from behind.

Shusei steeled himself and turned around. He walked slowly toward the table and sat down across from Neison.

“The letter I received was unmistakably in Mrs. Yo’s handwriting. How did you get your hands on something like that?” Shusei asked.

“Mrs. Yo is the finest calligrapher in the capital, is she not? I hear you have rather good handwriting as well. Many noble children have received samples of her handwriting to learn from. I simply had to ask an artisan to copy it,” Neison explained.

“Why would you go to such lengths just to see me?”

“I promised to talk to you in more detail.”

“I am not interested in that anymore. I’ll be frank with you—I have no intention of listening to what you have to say. I will be taking my leave now.”

As Shusei tried to stand up, Neison grabbed his wrist.

“Please let me go,” Shusei demanded.

“Shusei. You are my grandson.”

III

Unable to process what he was hearing, Shusei froze. He looked at Neison with a confused expression, and Neison looked straight into his eyes.

“You are the child of my son, Ho Seishu,” Neison said.

“I don’t understand what you are saying,” Shusei replied. The claim had come so out of nowhere that he wondered if it was some kind of figure of speech.

“I mean exactly what I said. You are the son of Seishu and my grandson. There is nothing more to it.”

“My father is Shu Kojin.”

“Yes, I hear that is what he claims, but there is no mistaking it—you are Seishu’s child. I have also found evidence to support it.”

“Evidence?”

Unable to handle the shock, Shusei sat back down again.

“I found this in a temple in Kannan, where you grew up,” Neison said as he placed a sheet of sheep’s hide—used by commoners in place of paper—on the table.

On the hide was the name “Ho Seishu”, and to the side—accompanied by the text “Seishu’s first-born, Shusei”—were small handprints and footprints. When a child turned three, it was a custom among commoners to take prints of both hands and feet and present them to the gods in a temple. It was a prayer for the child to grow up with healthy hands and feet as one’s own body was a commoner’s most vital asset.

“After all these years, I finally managed to find where Seishu had disappeared to by researching your background. Searching the location where you were born, I came across someone who must undoubtedly have been Seishu,” Neison continued. “He had used a false name and changed his appearance to ensure that he would go undetected. Yet he still used his real name when presenting this at the temple. It appears not even Seishu could lie to the gods.”

“You...you can’t say for sure that it was actually Master Seishu who wrote this. And ‘Shusei’ here could just be someone with the same name as me,” Shusei argued, but he was visibly upset and his voice was weak.

“I have confirmed that this handwriting matches the writings Seishu left behind at the Ho estate. There is indeed no proof that the name ‘Shusei’ here refers to you, but there is a handprint here. You can clearly see the fingerprints. Fingerprints are unique and immutable. We only need to compare your fingerprints to this handprint to see whether it belongs to you.”

Neison firmly brought Shusei’s hand toward the sheep’s hide.

“What say we take your handprint right here and compare, Shusei?”

Shusei was suddenly overcome with fear. The thought that Neison might have been speaking the truth terrified him.

I am Master Seishu’s child? But then why would my father—Shu Kojin—raise me as his own? No, he would never do that. This is some kind of plot.

Neison’s son, Seishu, had been a candidate for the throne along with the

previous emperor. Kojin had served the previous emperor and continued to serve Shohi now. Seishu would have been Kojin's political enemy, and his child would have been a potential source of trouble. It was hard to imagine that Kojin would raise such a child as his own son. It would have made more sense to secretly assassinate him.

"I'm leaving," Shusei declared.

Shusei was too confused to be able to think straight. All he knew as he stood up from his chair was that he had to get out of there.

"Do you not want to compare fingerprints?" Neison asked.

Shusei did not respond as he briskly walked toward the door.

Then, Neison took out another sheet of sheep's hide. He glanced at it before calling out to Shusei in a sharp voice.

"Wait, Yu," Neison said.

Shusei stopped as though he'd been struck by lightning.

"Yu"? Did he just call me *"Yu"*?! Shusei gasped.

"I found another sheet at the temple where your true name was written in Seishu's handwriting. 'Yu,' it says. A true name is only known to one's parents and the gods. This is your name, is it not?"

Shusei had learned his true name from his birth mother. He had never revealed it to even Mrs. Yo or Shu Kojin. His whole body started to tremble. His mind went blank, and his voice quivered.

"I'm leaving," Shusei repeated.

All Shusei could think about was fleeing this situation. When he walked up to the door, the two men blocked his path once again.

"Stand aside!" Shusei snapped, enraged.

The men took a step backward in surprise.

"Let him pass," Neison said from behind, and the two men obeyed his command.

Shusei opened the door and stepped outside. With each step he took, he felt

as though the ground would disappear from underneath him.

Who am I?

If everything he had believed in was a lie, he didn't know what there was left to trust. He became terrified, as though his outline was melting, turning him into an indistinct shape.

Drop by drop, rain started to color the dry sand black. In the blink of an eye, it was pouring down, and the smell of damp earth reached Shusei's nose.



Jotetsu was sitting on a foldable chair by a food stall from which he could see the teahouse entrance, sipping from his cup. He was one among many customers sitting by the stall, from which there emanated the smell of dried meat being grilled and the stinging smell of foul alcohol.

Sand clouds danced on the streets of the town. However, as dark clouds covered the sky, the sand clouds were soon replaced by heavy rain. It rapidly grew colder, and Jotetsu was hit by a chilly wind.

Then, he saw Shusei exit the teahouse with quick steps. As he walked in the rain with a distressed expression and no umbrella, Jotetsu realized what had happened.

I guess he finally found out.

The question now was how Shusei would react. A year ago, Jotetsu would have been confident that Shusei would not attempt anything stupid. But now, there was Rimi. Jotetsu knew full well just how much Shusei cared for Rimi, which was why it was impossible to tell what he might do.

As he ruminated on Shusei, Jotetsu put on a hood to protect himself from the rain, left a few coins on his table, and exited from under the roof of the food stall. But just as he was about to step into the street, he was caught off guard and froze.

"Shusei?"

The man who he had just seen walk away from the teahouse was now standing behind the food stall, looking Jotetsu's way. He was standing under the

roof, but his shoulders and hair were drenched. He must have noticed Jotetsu the moment he left the teahouse. After entering a blind spot, he had hidden and made his way closer. He looked uncharacteristically expressionless, staring at Jotetsu with cold eyes.

As Shusei refused to say anything, Jotetsu put on a teasing smile and approached him.

“Hey there, Shusei. What’re you doing in a place like this? I guess even a bore like you goes out for a drink every now and—”

Suddenly, Shusei grabbed him by the collar of his hood. Jotetsu’s hood fell to the ground, exposing his head to the rain. Seeming to not care about getting drenched, Shusei drew closer to Jotetsu’s face.

“What are you doing here? This is no coincidence, is it, Jotetsu?” Shusei barked in a low voice.

“What are you talking about? I’m just here to have a—”

Before Jotetsu could finish, Shusei forcefully pushed Jotetsu against the wall behind him with the arm that was holding his collar. Jotetsu, who had let his guard down, suffered a heavy blow to his back.



“You told me not to pick the most dangerous flower, referring to Rimi. I finally understand what you meant,” Shusei growled. “If I were to have an affair with her, knowing that His Majesty wanted her, that would be an unquestionable act of betrayal. But if I were Seishu’s child, it would go far beyond that. I would become His Majesty’s enemy. You knew this, which is why you gave me that warning.”

Rain streamed down Shusei’s forehead and cheeks. He stopped to catch his breath before continuing.

“Ho Neison only found out about me recently. In other words, you must have learned it from someone who has known about my background for much longer. And there is only one person it could be—my father, Shu Kojin. You have been following his orders for years—likely even before you started serving His Majesty. Am I wrong?”

If I said, “Well deduced!” would he hit me? He’s normally so kind that I completely forgot that he can get angry.

Jotetsu had given up. He couldn’t hide it any longer.

“You already knew that I’ve always followed Chancellor Shu’s orders, didn’t you?” Jotetsu said.

“I did not realize just how deeply connected you two are since you at least appeared to be loyal to His Majesty,” Shusei responded.

“I certainly am loyal to him. But you see, I am Chancellor Shu’s sword—one that was simply ordered to serve His Majesty. I may be a sword used by His Majesty, but my real owner is Chancellor Shu. That’s all. A sword doesn’t intentionally harm its user.”

“You’re loyal? Give me a break.”

Shusei let go of Jotetsu and took a few steps backward.

“It’s true that I’ve hidden a lot from you two,” Jotetsu said. “But you know, Shusei, after ten years of serving him, both you and His Majesty are—”

“I’ve heard enough from you! There is nothing you could tell me that I would believe either way!” Shusei interrupted Jotetsu before turning around and

walking off into the rain.

“Shusei!” Jotetsu yelled, unusually alarmed, but Shusei did not turn around. Jotetsu was flabbergasted at Shusei’s utter rejection.

I’ve...

Shusei was a kindhearted man who would never cast aside someone else. No matter how nasty Jotetsu had been to him, he had only furrowed his brow and criticized him, never outright rejecting him as a person—until now.

...lost Shusei.

Whatever had connected Jotetsu to Shusei had snapped. Realizing that he had lost him, Jotetsu felt as though his normally soft and warm bed had suddenly turned to ash.

“You knew this would happen once he learned the truth...” Jotetsu muttered unwittingly.

The image of the remnants of a poor house set on fire crossed his mind. The smell of something burning. It had been a warm home just the day before, but it was now just a horrific pile of ashes. What he had felt that day was similar to what he was feeling now.

Spurred on by this feeling, the part of his mind that he had suppressed after becoming a sword suddenly came back to life.

I am Shu Kojin’s sword. Swords don’t think. I only do what I’m ordered to. No matter what I know, I can do nothing but quietly observe. No matter how much a schemer played with other people’s lives, Jotetsu would only watch. That, he had thought, was his duty.

However, looking in the direction that Shusei had walked off, he was surprised at the sense of loss that was quickly filling his chest. This was the result of playing a part in changing people’s fates at the behest of a schemer.

The wheels of fate are interconnected in complicated ways. A schemer moves them about carefully while those who are moved are none the wiser. Is there anything more pitiful that could happen to a person? Although Jotetsu was just as pitiful himself. If all he could do was watch with no ability to steer someone’s

fate in the right direction, then he might as well not exist. *What if I spilled all of that schemer's plans and secrets? How much confusion would occur? Who would be hurt, who would laugh, and who would cry? But isn't that still much better and more human than crying and laughing according to the calculations of a schemer?*

Jotetsu imagined what would happen if that schemer's calculations went wrong.

Wouldn't everyone be able to lead a more human life by having control of their own destiny? Shusei, who is despondent after learning the truth of his birth; Shohi, who lives in fear of his enemies; Rimi, who doesn't know what to do; and Hakurei, who has met a sad fate. No matter how sad or painful it was, wouldn't that still be a more fulfilling life?

The sword had started to think.

Jotetsu was drenched, head to toe. The early spring rain was frigid, and his fingers had gone numb from the cold.



Master Shusei still hasn't come back.

The wraith, Reishun, would wake up in three days. If Rimi couldn't seal her away before then, Shusei's life would be at risk. Shusei must have known that better than anyone, and he had said that he would help Rimi. Despite that, he had yet to return to the Palace of the Beautiful Spring, even as the sun had set. Something must have happened, but there was little hope of seeing him by just haphazardly searching the town. It was a better idea for Rimi to do whatever she could alone while she waited for Shusei to return.

With Shohi's permission, a kitchen located in the northern part of Castle Seika had been prepared for Rimi. It belonged to what once had been the rear palace, and it saw little use nowadays. The paint was chipping away from the pillars, and the well in the garden outside was surrounded by withered grass. But at least the kitchen itself had been thoroughly cleaned for Rimi to use.

Fuel, water jugs, cooking utensils, and ingredients had been brought into the kitchen. Additionally, a thin string had been placed along the walls with piles of

salt in each corner. Salt had also been scattered outside to consecrate the area, marking it as holy ground. It was a Wakokuan method, but Rimi could still sense the air rapidly purifying.

Just in case, she had placed the mirror and the box that Pure Consort Yo had found on a counter in the kitchen.

Rimi had finished the preparations, but there was still no sign of Shusei's return. However, there was not enough time to sit idly by waiting for him.

I need to figure out what I can serve the wraith to quell its anger.

Rimi's first order of business was research. She needed to know why Reishun had turned into a wraith, why she had cursed Shohi, and why she was creating strange impostors. If she could answer those questions, then she should be able to figure out what to serve.

Rimi stopped by the archive and returned with her arms full of the scrolls that Shusei had picked out the night before. On her way back to the Palace of the Beautiful Spring, she started thinking.

If Reishun became a wraith because she was unhappy in life, she should have turned into one as soon as she died. But she didn't turn into a wraith until Shokukoku had perished. Maybe there's a reason it only happened a century after her death?

Rimi hoped that the scrolls she was carrying would contain hints as to why Reishun had turned into a wraith. Unfortunately, she was unable to read the scrolls written with old characters. Since Shusei was still not back, the only person she could think of who could help her decipher the scrolls was Hakurei. She had no choice but to ask him.

Leaving the scrolls in her room, Rimi headed toward Hakurei's dwelling. She noticed that it had started to rain, and the corridor had been enveloped in cold air. As she passed by Virtuous Consort Ho's room, she noticed that her door was slightly ajar. She could see Hakurei's figure on the other side.

Oh! It's Master Hakurei!

Rimi stopped and peeked into the room through the crack in the door. The only people in the room were Hakurei and Ho. The handmaids seemed to be

out on errands as there were none in sight.

“That is the request from the Department of Service. I have already informed Noble Consort So, Pure Consort Yo, and Worthy Consort On. Do you have any questions, Virtuous Consort Ho?” Hakurei said matter-of-factly as he placed a document on the table. It appeared he had just come to convey a message from the Department of Service to the four consorts.

Virtuous Consort Ho was sitting on a sofa with her legs to the side, her skirt elegantly hanging from them. She carefully looked at Hakurei.

“Virtuous Consort Ho? Do you understand?” Hakurei asked, seemingly worried about Ho’s lack of reaction.

“Yes, fine,” Ho replied.

“Then I will leave the document with you so you can go over it.”

Hakurei rolled the document up and held it out, but Ho remained motionless, making no effort to take it.

“I will leave it here, then,” Hakurei said as he gave a dejected smile, placing the document on the flower stand next to the sofa.

“Master Hakurei...” Ho suddenly said softly, almost as if mumbling to herself.

Hakurei furrowed his brow for a moment, but he soon erased his frown and turned to Ho as though he hadn’t heard anything.

“I will take my leave now,” Hakurei announced.

“You came to my room,” Ho said unprompted just as Hakurei had turned around.

Hakurei froze and smiled awkwardly. The sound of the rain was growing louder.

“I heard from Rimi. That was a wraith’s doing. Are you trying to accuse me? That was something beyond my control, and I would appreciate it if you did not blame me for it,” Hakurei replied.

“I don’t mean to blame you. It’s just that when confronted with you...I couldn’t resist you,” Ho said.

Hakurei's expression remained unchanged. Ho seemed to be on the verge of tears as she averted her gaze from Hakurei. Still, she seemed unable to stop herself from continuing.

"I still don't know what to do with these feelings inside me," Ho said with a quivering voice. "Even knowing that what visited me at night was a wraith, the feelings it awakened remain. I still..."

"Are you so desperate for intimacy that you would try to seduce a eunuch, Virtuous Consort Ho?" Hakurei interrupted Ho coldly.

Chapter 6: Rimi and Rimi

I

Hakurei gave Virtuous Consort Ho a scornful glare.

“How disgraceful, coming from a Virtuous Consort of all people,” Hakurei spat.

Rimi was startled by how Hakurei was speaking to Ho.

Ho turned pale, but then her face quickly became red. However, uncaring of Ho’s fluster, Hakurei suddenly approached the sofa, put both hands on its back, and looked down at her.

“Although, I can’t say that I mind that disgracefulness of yours,” Hakurei whispered in a seductive voice.

“Wh-What...are you...” Ho stammered, her lips quivering at Hakurei’s faint smile.

“Would you like me to comfort you? I may be a eunuch, but I can still show you a good time. I can do it right now if you’d like. Should I make sure no one disturbs us?”

Instantly, Ho’s expression turned cold as her hand slapped Hakurei’s cheek.

“You’re disgusting!” Ho exclaimed.

“But you are the one who attempted to seduce that disgusting eunuch,” Hakurei said, entirely unfazed from the smack.

“I can’t believe you!” Ho yelled. “You’re not the Master Hakurei I know! When did you turn into this?!”

“We eunuchs need something to entertain us too. I am simply doing what I can with my life. I’m not sure what you expect me to say when you’re the one who brought up something from so long ago.”

“What...what a foolish dream I’ve been having.”

Ho clenched her fist so hard that it turned white and started to shake.

“I’m disgusted with my foolishness,” Ho said in a deep voice, seething with rage. “I can’t believe that I ever thought that someone like you could be the same person as my Master Hakurei. Now I see what you’re really like. You’re a vulgar person. I never knew a person could fall so far.”

“Was I just imagining that you attempted to seduce me, then?”

“Are you still on about that?! Of course you imagined it! Get away from me, Hakurei! Get out of my room!”

Hakurei gave a strangely satisfied smile.

“I see,” he said.

Hakurei removed his hands from the sofa and straightened his back before giving Ho a graceful bow.

“Excuse me,” Hakurei said as he nonchalantly turned around.

While fighting to endure her humiliation and rage, Ho glared bitterly at Hakurei as he left the room.

Hakurei exited through the door and ran into Rimi, who was lost in thought. He seemed surprised for a moment, but he quickly gave her his usual smile before walking off down the hallway. Rimi turned her gaze from Hakurei to Ho, who was still sitting in her room and clearly shaken by what had just happened, and she felt anger bubbling up inside.

I had no idea Master Hakurei was like this!

Rimi couldn’t believe how that man had treated Ho, who had adored him since they were children. She was shocked by just how twisted and rotten to the core Hakurei was—but even more so, she couldn’t forgive what he had done to Ho. She ran after Hakurei.

“Master Hakurei!” Rimi yelled as she caught up to him at the corner of the hallway.

Hakurei listlessly stopped walking and turned to face Rimi.

“How could you be so disrespectful?!” Rimi said.

“Disrespectful? Me? I only do what’s desired of me,” Hakurei replied.

“Virtuous Consort Ho did not wish that of you!”

The rain grew more intense as it started to blow onto the hallway floor.

“Yes, it would appear so. It seems I just imagined it,” Hakurei said.

“I had no idea that you were like this, Master Hakurei...”

Suddenly, Hakurei surprised Rimi by grabbing her jaw and turning her head upward.

“What do you suppose you know about me, Rimi?” Hakurei said sweetly. “Just think about it. How would the other palace attendants and officials treat a prince-turned-eunuch? I was treated like an amusing toy in both the inner and outer palaces. Noble Consort En lived on for a long time after that, you see. She had her fun with me in an assortment of creative ways. What do you think happens to someone who has lived through that? Who wouldn’t turn out vulgar? You and Virtuous Consort Ho should not get your hopes up so easily. Nothing is ever as beautiful as it was when we were young.”

Hakurei released Rimi’s jaw and gave her a final captivating smile before walking off.

Master Hakurei...

Rimi stood frozen in shock. All she could hear was the sound of the rain.



Shusei was drenched. He had no idea what path he had taken, but by the time he came to his senses, it was already dark, and he was back at the Palace of the Beautiful Spring. He was standing in the marble garden, surrounded by the white building.

He turned his gaze to the second floor of the eastern wing and noticed Rimi through the rain. She seemed petrified, as though taken aback by something.

That’s right. We have three days. Once today is over, there will only be two days left until the wraith awakens to take my life, Shusei recalled as he gradually regained his senses. *This is no time to be shocked by my background. My lineage won’t matter if I lose my life. Besides, if we can’t seal the wraith, His*

Majesty won't recover.

Observing Rimi helped Shusei calm down. His strong urge to protect her forced him to put his brain to use.

Regardless of my lineage, I'm still His Majesty's retainer. My purpose is to serve him. I belong by his side. Therefore...

Rimi's expression steadily grew more befuddled. Just as she was about to start walking, she happened to see Shusei in the corner of her eye. She jumped as her eyes widened.

"Master Shusei!" Rimi exclaimed and ran down to the garden. "You're absolutely drenched! Hurry up and get inside! What in the world happened?!"

"It's nothing. I simply forgot to bring something to protect me from the rain," Shusei replied. "In any case, have you received permission from His Majesty to perform the sealing of the wraith? How is everything coming along?"

Rimi pulled Shusei by the hand as she rushed up the stone stairs into the building. Once they were sheltered from the rain, Rimi responded with a relieved expression.

"I have his permission," Rimi said. "I also received a place to prepare holy communion, but I still need to think about what must be offered to seal the wraith. I've brought scrolls from the archive to my room for guidance, but I can't read them."

"Let's go to your room immediately. I will read them for you," Shusei said.

"Before that, we need to get you changed into something dry. Otherwise, you'll catch a cold."

"I'm not that frail. It makes no difference if I get changed after I'm done reading. It would be worse to waste what little time we have. We need to get started as soon as possible."

Shusei managed to persuade Rimi, and they both headed to her room. Inside, the Quinary Dragon was making excited noises as it jostled with Rimi's shawl on the sofa. Shusei was relieved to see that it was recovering well, which was, after all, the reason they had come to this castle in the first place. It appeared that

their goal was in sight.

Now all we need to do is seal the wraith.

Rimi lit a brazier to heat the room and handed a dry piece of cloth to Shusei. She was doing everything that she could to care for him.

When they had emerged from the darkness of the archive, the two of them had sworn to seal the wraith within three days. Shusei recalled the resolve he had felt back then while unrolling the scrolls Rimi had brought.

Focusing as hard as he could, Shusei read through the scrolls at a rapid pace. As he did, he came across Reishun's name—Lady of Bright Department Go. A document from the Bureau of Sacrifices, part of the Ministry of Rites, had contained an entry titled *Sealing of Lady of Bright Department Go*.

Why the Ministry of Rites?

The Ministry of Rites was responsible for diplomacy and ceremonies. The Bureau of Sacrifices focused on rituals and sorcery, employing the priests of the court. A century prior, court priests had sealed Reishun's wraith inside a well on the ground belonging to the Ministry of Personnel.

There was nothing unusual about the Ministry of Rites sealing a wraith. However, the document Shusei was reading was two centuries old. That was before Reishun had turned into a wraith, while she was still alive—and serving as a Lady of Bright Department of the rear palace at that. It was strange to see her mentioned in documents belonging to the Ministry of Rites—especially ones that spoke of sealing.

This is...

Shusei continued reading, and his face grew darker. Noticing this, Rimi glanced down at his scroll.

"What does it say?" Rimi asked.

"Reishun was apparently betrothed before she entered the rear palace."



"Betrothed?" Rimi repeated.

"Yes," Shusei confirmed, turning his eyes to Rimi. "They desired her for the

rear palace despite her having a fiancé. It appears she decided to accept it out of respect for her father's position. The emperor then ordered her to give up her feelings for her former fiancé and had the Ministry of Personnel perform a ritual to that effect. Rituals involving sorcery are normally performed by the Ministry of Rites, but as this was done as a form of punishment, it was spearheaded by the Ministry of Personnel, albeit with the assistance of the court priests of the Ministry of Rites."

"You mean Reishun received punishment?"

"Yes, although a very mild one, as a formality," Shusei explained. "They saw her love as a wrongdoing and held the ritual on the grounds of the Ministry of Personnel with the help of the Ministry of Rites. It says her wicked feelings were thrown into the well at the Ministry of Personnel."

"Them throwing her feelings into a well must be referring to the hand mirror. Did they imbue the mirror with her feelings before sinking it into the well?"

In Rimi's dreams, Reishun had said that she was willingly parting with the person she loved. But the reason she was crying must have been because she was mourning having to leave her fiancé's side. The claim that she was doing it willingly was a lie. Deep down, she wished for the very opposite.

A document Shusei had found in the archive had claimed that Reishun had said that it was her duty to sacrifice both her body and soul for the emperor as his subject—but that was likely also something she had been forced to say. Reishun never would have been crying that much if she had truly believed what she was saying. Rimi couldn't even imagine how painful it must have been to lie about her feelings like that.

In my dreams, there were flower candies scattered on the ground around Reishun.

Worthy Consort On had told Rimi that flower candy was used as decoration when celebrating someone's betrothal. They were a remnant of when Reishun had still been happy. Reishun would do nothing but cry while she was surrounded by the flower candy, never attempting to pick it up.

"Reishun was made to imbue the mirror with her feelings of both love and hurt, only to have them thrown away. But those feelings were still part of her

soul...” Rimi mused. “After her death, her soul must have been drawn to the part of her in her mirror, and over time, she turned into a wraith. Isn’t that right, Master Shusei?”

“I believe so, yes. After Shokukoku failed and the first emperor of Konkoku moved into Castle Seika, the wraith made its move. Noticing this, the court priests retrieved the mirror from the well, put it in a box, carefully sealed it away, and then sank it into the well once more.”

Lit by the unsteady flame of the candle, Rimi and Shusei’s shadows twisted and turned on the walls.

Reishun was crying.

Reishun was a wraith. Even so, as Rimi remembered the sight of Reishun crying in her dreams, she couldn’t help but feel infuriated at the treatment she had received two centuries prior.

“Still, a wrongdoing? When it was the emperor who wanted her for the rear palace despite her betrothal?” Rimi asked.

“I suppose the emperor must have wanted to own both her body and heart,” Shusei said. At a court, it was not out of the ordinary for feelings of love to be considered wrong.

Shusei turned his gaze back to the scroll.

“The wraith taking the form of others might be caused by the feelings that had been trapped in the mirror. They became one of the principal factors guiding her behavior,” Shusei said.

Principal factors? Then the reason she took the form of others was...

Having been ordered to rid herself of her feelings, Reishun had entrusted her feelings of love to the mirror. But those feelings had continued to yearn for the one she loved.

Is that why?! A sudden realization washed over Rimi. Then, what he said...

After being stupefied for a few moments, feelings of regret started welling up inside.

“Master Shusei! I have someone I need to go apologize to!” Rimi exclaimed.

“Apologize? To whom?” Shusei asked.

“I will be right back!” Rimi said as she rushed out of the room.

II

“It’s Rimi,” Rimi said as she knocked on the door.

“Come in,” a calm voice replied.

Rimi entered the room, which was lit by a single candle. He was standing by an open window in the darkness, staring outside without a care for the rain blowing in.

“Master Hakurei,” Rimi said.

“What’s the matter; Rimi? Are you here to accuse me of something else?” Hakurei replied with his usual captivating, ambiguous smile.

Rimi shook her head as she walked up to Hakurei, giving him a smile after catching her breath.

“No, I am here to apologize,” Rimi said. “I made a terrible mistake earlier. I understand now.”

“Now that’s awfully sudden. Why are you apologizing? What do you understand?” Hakurei said with a teasing smile.

“I understand now,” Rimi repeated solemnly, looking straight into Hakurei’s eyes. “Master Hakurei, you secretly care for Virtuous Consort Ho.”

Hakurei’s expression remained unchanged, but an invisible flame seemed to appear in his eyes, as though he was preparing for a fight—one he couldn’t afford to lose.

“I have no idea what you’re referring to,” Hakurei said.

“The wraith that has been haunting Castle Seika has been taking the forms of certain people. I finally understand how it chose who to appear as,” Rimi explained.

Hakurei narrowed his eyes.

“The wraith was born out of forbidden feelings of love that were sealed away two hundred years ago. That’s why it appeared before people who secretly yearn for someone out of their reach, taking the form of those they desire. It was drawn to feelings similar to its own.”

Rimi took a breath before continuing.

“Master Hakurei, you were visited by a false Virtuous Consort Ho. That can only mean one thing—you have feelings for her,” Rimi declared. “So why do something that would only make her despise you? I understand that now too.”

“She despises me? Is that what it looked like to you?” Hakurei interrupted.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Rimi replied solemnly. “I’m sure she now despises you from the bottom of her heart.”

Hakurei’s captivating but ambiguous smile disappeared from his face and was instead replaced by a true, gentle smile.

“I see. What a relief,” Hakurei whispered in a delighted voice.

“Is that really okay with you?!” Rimi said as she pulled on Hakurei’s sleeve.

The moment Rimi had understood why the wraith had taken the form of others, she had also realized why Hakurei had acted as he had. It was all on purpose. He was intentionally trying to make Ho harbor feelings of disdain toward him. And it was all for Ho’s own sake.

“Are you really okay with being despised by Virtuous Consort Ho? Even though you love—”

Hakurei put a finger on Rimi’s mouth, forbidding her from saying anything more.

“You shouldn’t even need to ask that. Why don’t you think about it with that cute head of yours?” Hakurei said as if talking to a child throwing a tantrum. “I am far from beautiful in body and spirit. And I am but a palace attendant. If she concerns herself with someone like me, her reputation will suffer. Her loyalty for His Majesty will waver. This is a matter of her dignity.”

“But Virtuous Consort Ho still—”

“What are you talking about, Rimi? That was just something I imagined,

remember? I simply misinterpreted what Virtuous Consort Ho said in a vulgar way.”

Rimi was speechless. Hakurei had cruelly interrupted Ho as she was confessing her feelings for him. After that, he had asked if he had simply imagined that Ho had attempted to seduce him. Ho had naturally answered yes, to which Hakurei had given her a satisfied smile.

Ho had been unable to stand hiding her feelings any longer—but that was something she should not have said somewhere handmaids might have been listening. Hakurei had interrupted her and skillfully manipulated her to claim that what she had said could only have been mistaken as words of affection by someone with a vulgar mind.

Even if someone had been listening in on Ho’s confession, by making her say that it had been Hakurei’s misunderstanding, and by conceding that he had been mistaken himself, Hakurei would have convinced the person listening that they too had been mistaken. He had protected Ho’s dignity in every respect. That was why he had smiled when Ho had asserted that he had misinterpreted what she had said.

Rimi stared at Hakurei in astonishment, still holding onto his sleeve. Her vision blurred. She was overcome with sadness and tears started streaming down her cheeks.

“But what about your feelings, Master Hakurei? Virtuous Consort Ho still despises you,” Rimi said.

“My feelings don’t matter. But perhaps I also need to seal away my feelings. Maybe I’ll be like a certain someone from two hundred years ago and get a mirror to throw into a well. Perhaps then someone will be able to free my feelings in a few centuries.”

Hakurei smiled faintly as he stepped away from Rimi and put his hand on the window frame. He turned his gaze to the dark void outside, from which the only sound that could be heard was the heavy rain.

“This is something that no one can know about. But you’re also someone that probably needs to sink their feelings into a well, which is why I’m telling you and only you,” Hakurei said.

Rimi felt like the words “only you” had pierced her chest. Hakurei seemed to have sensed something.

“This is a secret between us, Rimi,” Hakurei whispered almost like an incantation.

Rimi observed Hakurei’s profile, expressionless as he tried to suppress his sadness and grief. She had always thought him beautiful, but he was more beautiful now than she had ever seen him before.

“Now, be on your way,” Hakurei said, and Rimi left the room.

Master Hakurei seemed sad. But even more so, he also seemed happy. He was able to protect someone he cares about.

When Hakurei had expressed his relief, he had smiled from the bottom of his heart. It was the first time Rimi had seen him smile like that.

Various thoughts swirled in Rimi’s head like a storm, and her chest was restless. Shusei and Rimi were just like Hakurei and Ho. Despite having affection for each other, they were forbidden from ever being joined.

Master Hakurei knows what it truly means to love someone. But what about me?

When Rimi and Shusei had touched each other in the darkness of the archive, Rimi’s chest had grown hot upon realizing that she could never give him up. But now a sharp blade had been thrust into her burning heart, asking how much she really loved Shusei, and in what way she loved him.

I don’t want my love for Master Shusei to be nothing but a source of despair.

Perhaps it was time to find the answer that she had always hesitated to search for.

If I could protect someone dear to me and smile like Master Hakurei, then my love won’t have been for naught.

She felt the revelation fill her chest, spurred on by how beautiful and complete Hakurei had seemed, despite his sadness.

If I want to protect Master Shusei’s place as well as mine, my only choice is to end it completely so that it never flares up again—whatever shape that may

take.

However, if she could rid herself of her feelings so easily, then the two of them wouldn't be experiencing so much pain to begin with. Despite having agreed to kill their feelings for each other, those feelings continued to smolder deep inside. Even now they were desperately trying to suppress them, despite fearing that they might rear their heads when they least expected it.

A thin strip of lightning flashed across the cloudy night sky. As the roar of thunder reached her ears belatedly, Rimi had yet another realization.

Of course! Reishun must be the same! Reishun said that she was willingly parting with the person she loved and that it was her duty to serve the emperor. I thought that was because she had been forced into a sad situation where she had no choice but to say so and that her sadness and regret were what had turned her into a wraith. However... That was not the only possibility.

Reishun's spirit had slept for a hundred years without turning into a wraith. But someone who had died while in despair would have become a wraith soon after their death to exact vengeance on the world. There had to have been something more to it.

What if Reishun wasn't miserable? Perhaps over one hundred years, Reishun's spirit forgot something, making her think that she had been miserable, which turned her into a wraith? If I can make her recall her true self, then I could calm her down again.

Rimi gradually increased her pace.

Rather than sealing her, I can pacify her instead. I'll speak to her and make her remember. If Rimi was able to do that, she could save Shusei's life, and Shohi would recover. I need to start right away. I have to find what Reishun has forgotten!

The sound of the rain hit Rimi's ears.

Reishun and I are similar. Rimi reflected on how strange it was that they had been brought together. This will help me confront my feelings as well. I can't hope to convince Reishun by saying something I can't accept myself. If I can't work out my feelings, I will never be able to pacify her.

With the help of Tama, the wraith that had been Reishun was now sleeping inside the mirror. Rimi would have to turn to the mirror on the holy ground that the kitchen now served as and speak to her. She would have to prepare a holy communion that would make Reishun recall what she had forgotten.

What I'm about to do, I should probably do without Master Shusei's help. With Shusei nearby, her feelings of love would weigh her down. Then I wouldn't be able to speak as confidently to Reishun.

Rimi pondered what she should say to Shusei before entering the holy ground. Perhaps it was best not to say anything at all.

As she approached her room, she heard voices coming from inside. She stopped in front of the door and noticed that there was a voice belonging to someone other than Shusei.

Is that Master Jotetsu?



Rimi had run off suddenly, and Shusei had been left with nothing to do but wait.

Where did she disappear to? She still isn't back.

Shusei's fatigue caught up with him and he had just sat down on a chair to rest when he noticed a figure standing in the doorway. It was Jotetsu. Having calmed down since they last met, Shusei threw him a half-smile. He assumed Jotetsu had come to make fun of his emotional state, but Shusei did not have the energy to argue with him or even speak to him. He turned his gaze away and decided to ignore him.

Jotetsu entered the room silently and walked up to Shusei. He suddenly opened his mouth.

"If you were able to escape the fate prepared for you by Shu Kojin, would you be happy with whatever that might lead to?" he asked.

Shusei glanced Jotetsu's way and saw that his expression was cold and serious.

What is he thinking? Jotetsu's question gave Shusei pause. He had no idea

what Jotetsu was planning, but first and foremost, he had to ensure that nothing would happen to Shohi.

“Does His Majesty know that I’m the son of Ho Seishu?” Shusei asked.

“Not yet. Shu Kojin ordered me not to tell him. Would you like me to?” Jotetsu suggested.

“Don’t!” Shusei yelled, grabbing the armrests on his chair as he leaned forward.

“Are you scared, Shusei? For him to know who you really are? I can’t blame you. There’s no telling what might happen. So, will you continue to entrust yourself to whatever Shu Kojin has in store for you?”

“If His Majesty learned who I am, he wouldn’t know what to do. He doesn’t have many he can trust, and one of his closest retainers turning out to be the child of Seishu would cause him great pain. That’s why.”

Shusei belonged by Shohi’s side and that was where he wished to be. But if Shusei’s lineage came to light, Shohi might start to doubt his allegiance. With how few people Shohi was able to speak openly to already, he would be thrust into ever greater loneliness. Shusei didn’t want him to suffer that.

“So you’ll live in accordance with Shu Kojin’s wishes, then,” Jotetsu said.

“I don’t care for that either. I will think about what I should do. I’ll uncover Father’s—Shu Kojin’s—plots.”

“Do you want me to tell you what he’s planning?”

“Why would you do that? You’re just a sword, aren’t you?”

Jotetsu smiled awkwardly.

“Good question. I’m not really sure,” Jotetsu said.

Out of nowhere, Jotetsu quickly threw his gaze toward the entrance, then turned around and opened the door.

“What’s the matter?” Shusei asked.

Jotetsu looked around outside the door before shaking his head.

“It’s nothing. Just my imagination.”



Ho Seishu! That's the person His Majesty mentioned!

Rimi had eavesdropped on the two men's conversation. Jotetsu had sensed her presence, but by the time he opened the door, she was already gone.

Shohi had explained that Ho Neison wished to remove him from the throne and make the child of his own son Seishu become the emperor instead. Thus, this child—the person Neison was attempting to replace Shohi with—was Shohi's greatest enemy.

That child is Master Shusei?!

What Kojin had told her the day Shohi asked her to be his empress echoed in Rimi's head.

If there was something between the two of you, then Shusei would be too dangerous to let live, he had said. His head will end up on a spike as the greatest criminal in the land.

Rimi finally understood what he had meant.

Master Shusei would become His Majesty's enemy!

Because Kojin had, for whatever reason, raised him as his own son, Shusei remained a loyal servant. But there was no telling what would happen if Shusei's secret reached Shohi's ears.

Shusei had no control over his family history, and simply learning about his father would not affect his loyalty. Neison approaching him could be waved aside by explaining that he had done it against Shusei's wishes. As long as it didn't go beyond that, Shohi and those around him might continue to treat Shusei as the loyal retainer he had always been.

But if Shusei and Rimi's relationship came to light, things would be different. Having feelings toward Shohi's favorite palace woman would be deemed an act of betrayal, no matter how loyal Shusei claimed to be. If the son of Seishu betrayed the emperor, he would lose all trust, regardless of whatever he may have once pledged.

Rimi's body grew colder with each step she took.

My presence means that Master Shusei might be deemed an enemy to His Majesty and a criminal. If Rimi hadn't existed, Shusei would have been able to keep his place by Shohi's side. But her mere presence meant he might lose everything and be killed as the emperor's enemy—based on nothing but the speculation of what he might do.

Shu Kojin had already noticed Ho Neison making his move and was making plans to counter it. The question was how that cruel chancellor might deal with Shusei. That Rimi couldn't tell what Kojin was trying to do made her all the more scared.

I want to protect Master Shusei.

Perhaps it would be best to simply distance Shusei from the court. If Rimi made use of her contacts back in Wakoku, it was not beyond the realm of possibility that she could help him flee from Konkoku to Wakoku, where he would come to be seen as unimportant to pursue, even if he was regarded as an enemy of the state. But this was not something Shusei wished for. He belonged with Shohi. Rimi could never ask him to give up that place.

In the end, there's just one thing we can do to protect ourselves and our places here.

It was the final push she needed. When all was said and done, the only path forward was for both Rimi and Shusei to completely erase their feelings for each other without a trace.

The reason Shusei had seemed strange after returning from Hanin must have been that he had just discovered his secret past—but despite this, he had suppressed how distressed he must have been in order to help Rimi, both for Rimi's sake and for Shohi's. Shusei always concerned himself with Shohi and racked his brain for ways to be of use to him. That was the role Shusei wished to serve.

I shouldn't tell Master Shusei. I'll begin the preparations alone.

As the violent rain continued, Rimi went to the kitchen where she had made her holy ground. After entering, she lit the candles that were placed along the wall. The air of the consecrated building was clear.

Rimi looked at the mirror lying on the counter in the center to find her reflection looking back. Inside, Reishun was sleeping.

Master Shusei is Master Seishu's child... Rimi had to stay on her toes lest she be weighed down by unwanted thoughts. She firmly shook her head. *Regardless of Master Shusei's background, I have other things I need to focus on right now. I have to do everything in my power to protect Master Shusei and to ensure that His Majesty recovers. I promised Master Shusei.*

Rimi needed to make Reishun recall what she had forgotten. Although she had the holy ground needed to prepare holy communion, she still didn't know what to serve Reishun. All she knew was that she had to speak to Reishun from her heart to make her remember.

I have to figure out what to serve as I talk to her. Rimi would need to improvise on the spot based on the desires of the other party.

Rimi took a deep breath and started talking to the hand mirror.

"Reishun. Remember what you've forgotten," Rimi said softly. "You said that two hundred years ago, you willingly parted with your lover and saw it as your duty to serve the emperor. At first, I thought that you were saying that because you were forced to by others, but I was wrong. You meant what you said."

A stream of air made a low, growling sound as it rushed past, and the frame of the mirror started vibrating with a metallic sound. Suddenly, Rimi's reflection started protruding from the mirror's surface. Rimi took a few steps backward in surprise as a figure identical to her slowly rose into the air in front of her.

"You claim that I would truly wish to part with the person I loved to belong to an emperor I had no feelings for?" the figure spoke with Rimi's voice.

Just like when Rimi had seen Reishun at the archive, the figure was glowing faintly as it stood before her.

"The fact that your spirit slept in peace for a hundred years after your death is proof. If you had died in misery and despair, you would have become a wraith immediately. The fact that you didn't means that you had accepted your fate. But in those hundred long years, you forgot something important."

"I loved him more than I could ever express. I was torn from him and ordered

to rid myself of my feelings for him. Are you saying that I would wish for that?” the other Rimi said in Rimi’s voice.

Though it was of course Reishun borrowing Rimi’s form, it felt like Rimi was being questioned by herself. Perhaps that was Reishun’s intention—to show that Rimi was only able to say this because she was speaking to Reishun and that she should try putting herself in Reishun’s shoes.

She loved him beyond words...

Reishun’s plan had succeeded. Hearing this spoken with her own words made her heart ache so much that she closed her eyes. Half of her heart had grown weak and wanted to give up, saying that she couldn’t possibly abandon her feelings for Shusei. But her pride from having served as an Umashi-no-Miya scolded herself for her weakness.

I am the Umashi-no-Miya who once served Lady Saigu. This isn’t a difficult task. If I want Reishun to accept what I say, I first need to accept it myself. After all, how can I call myself an Umashi-no-Miya if I can’t even convince myself?

As she spoke to herself, she heard the Saigu’s voice in her head.

You must be prepared to fight to force the god to admit satisfaction, my Umashi-no-Miya, the voice said.

Yes, Lady Saigu. I am, Rimi responded in her mind as she opened her eyes. Something inside of her had woken up.

III

“I loved him more than my words could ever express. We were torn apart and I was ordered to rid myself of my feelings for him. Are you saying that I would wish for that?” Reishun asked.

“Yes,” Rimi said, nodding. “That’s what you wished for, from the bottom of your heart.”

“How can you know that? You fully understand the feeling of loving someone beyond words. So how can you say that?”

“Yes, I love Master Shusei very much. I’ve loved him ever since I first stepped

foot in Konkoku and he saved me when I was about to lose my kaoridoko.”

Of course, Rimi thought. This holy communion isn't for Reishun; it's for me to convince myself. It will indirectly become a holy communion that I can serve Reishun if it can lend power to my true words.

The holy communion would first and foremost be dedicated to Rimi's own heart, providing her words with the power she needed to convey them to Reishun.

So the first dish will be...

Rimi picked up the small pot that had been sitting under the counter. She placed it on the counter. Removing the lid, she felt around inside before taking out a jade-colored melon. She swiftly cut it into thin slices and put them on a porcelain plate, which she placed in front of the other Rimi.

“This is kaorizuke. Master Shusei helped me protect this. This is what made me fall in love with him,” Rimi said.

“‘Fall in love’...” the other Rimi whispered as she placed a finger on the white plate. She appeared to be recalling something. The look on her face must have been the same as when she first realized she was in love with her fiancé.

“Thanks to Master Shusei, I was able to keep this. That made me so happy. Then I became his assistant and started helping him with his cuisinology research, and I fell deeper in love with him. I even learned Konkokuan cooking by making supper for the four consorts together with Master Shusei at the Palace of Northern Peaks. It was so much fun. I'm sure you have memories of doing something fun such as that.”

The wraith appeared to nod faintly.

The days Rimi had spent with Shusei in the Palace of Northern Peaks already seemed like a long time ago. Although a lot had happened during that time, she had been able to spend many moments with Shusei—even eating alone with him—and it had been a very fulfilling experience.

What did I eat with Master Shusei? I'll try making whatever I can remember.

Rimi lit a fire in a stove and carefully poked the coals as if she was putting her

feelings in order. She turned around to face the ingredients. Her gaze fell on some rapeseed shoots and butterbur sprouts, which were perfect for the season, as well as some garden peas, fresh turnips, radishes, dried abalone, cod, and shark fins. There were even dried edible bird's nests sitting in a wooden box provided to her. It was an impressive selection of ingredients—which was unsurprising, considering they came from the kitchen used to prepare the emperor's meals.

In terms of meat, there were several whole chickens, and every possible kind of pork, beef, and mutton. The only fruits available, however, were a few citrus fruits and dried persimmons. The Konkokuan sauce jiang was available in all flavors from sweet to spicy, and many Saisakokuan spices had been prepared. There were also beans, goat's and cow's milk, seaweed, and many other ingredients, too numerous to count.

It was still summer back then, and the green vegetables were beautiful. I really enjoyed the taste and color of the fresh vegetables. Master Shusei also said that they were beautiful as he ate them.

Rimi put a pot on the stove and boiled water then added a pinch of salt and some rapeseed sprouts. While the sprouts cooled after being lightly boiled, she mixed some jiangs and added ground sesame seeds to create a dressing. She strained the cooled rapeseed sprouts, cut them into bite-sized pieces, and added the dressing. She then arranged it on a plate, which she, in turn, put on a table.

"This dish brings back a lot of memories for me. It's called cailu, and we frequently made it at the Palace of Northern Peaks," Rimi explained. "I'm sure you also often talked with your fiancé as you felt the joy of love two hundred years ago."

This time, the other Rimi gave a firm nod.

"It was fun. I loved him," the other Rimi said.

"But the emperor wanted you for the rear palace and ordered you to seal away your feelings."

The wraith Rimi's expression turned stern.

“Yes. He ordered me to discard my love,” she said.

When she was first commanded to do so, Reishun must have been surprised and sad, crying that she could never do that. In the end, however, she had willingly agreed to do so through her tears and joined the rear palace. She believed that to be her duty.

Next, I'll make the main dish. I'll recreate something I made at the Palace of Northern Peaks.

Rimi turned her back to Reishun, whose eyes were burning with rage, and continued to cook again. She put a pot on the stove and added a whole chicken, which she simmered along with ginger and spring onion to remove any bitter taste. The chicken fat rose to the surface, and the smell of garlic and spring onion spread through the kitchen. The chicken would simmer until it was soft, after which it would be torn into pieces of varying sizes and eaten together with boiled peas and a sweet and sour sesame sauce. Shusei had eaten a lot of it, saying that it went well with red wine.

Suddenly, Rimi felt an urge to make another dish based on the Saisakokuan cooking she had learned recently.

It was when Shuri and Prince Gulzari Shar were visiting that Master Shusei and I realized our feelings for each other.

Rimi wanted to make a Saisakoku-style stew by simmering mutton and beans together with spices. She brought some lightly salted water to a boil on the stove while she cut up the mutton, prepared the vegetables, and washed the beans.

With Rimi having become quiet as she focused on her cooking, the other Rimi finally opened her mouth.

“What are you doing?” the wraith asked.

“I need to convince myself before I can speak to you. That’s why I’m cooking,” Rimi explained.

As she continued with her cooking, Rimi slowly started to calm down. She couldn’t help but let out a chuckle at what she was doing.

“Now that I think about it, maybe I’m always making food for my own sake,” Rimi said.

Even when Rimi made food for someone else, in the end, it was still for herself. She made food for others because she wanted a place of her own. Cooking was how she had earned a place for herself before.

Rimi added peas to the boiling water, after which she put oil in a separate iron pot, heated it on another stove, and put in garlic and ginger, creating a pleasant fragrance. She then put in the mutton, which produced a violent sound as it fried. She fried both sides of the meat before adding the beans. After frying it lightly and covering it with oil, she added water and spices. Rimi then let it simmer for a little while. The Saisakokuan fragrance reminded her of how delightful the summer had been.

Meanwhile, the peas had finished boiling on the first stove. She removed the pot from the stove and emptied it into a bamboo draining basket. Then, she scooped up the chicken from the jitang and sliced it at the joints with a knife. The meat was so tender that it almost fell from the bones. Rimi pulled the ginger and spring onion-smelling meat apart as steam rose from it.

Rimi chopped the boiled peas and laid them on a plate with the leg meat from the chicken. She then made a sweet and sour sesame sauce using ganjiang as a base with ground sesame seeds and several spices.

“Were you unhappy after letting go of your love?” Rimi asked as she poured the sauce on the plate with the chicken and peas and placed it in front of the Reishun.

“Do you think I was happy? It pained me to let him go,” the other Rimi answered.

Receiving a question in reply, Rimi recalled Hakurei’s smile. Her chest was as calm as the surface of a peaceful lake. Not even the smallest wave could be seen.

“Yes, I don’t think you were unhappy at all,” Rimi said.

“How can you know?” the wraith asked with wide eyes.

Rimi approached the fragrant, loudly simmering pot. The mutton had become

nice and tender. She removed the pot from the stove and poured the contents into a bowl, finishing it off with black pepper. It was a spicy, tender meat stew. Putting it in your mouth and crunching on the pepper would add another facet to the spiciness, blending with the taste of the other spices and the meat and making for a taste that you would never grow tired of.

Cooking like this, I can see what the right thing to do is. I can understand it. I know what I need to do, and it's simply a matter of doing it.

Rimi placed the Saisakokuan dish on the table.

“Because Master Hakurei was happy and smiled when he had managed to protect Virtuous Consort Ho’s position and dignity. You also wanted to serve your country well, so you abandoned your love. You believed that was your duty, so you had no regrets. Your wish to protect your country was so strong that even now you seek to harm the current emperor,” Rimi said.

Even if you were forced to rid yourself of your feelings of love, if you were able to protect something important to you in the process, you would gladly do it. Both Hakurei and Reishun rose above their love, having taken into consideration their own roles and what was best for those they loved before they made a move.

Rimi wondered what she wanted to protect, what her role in life was. Right now, she wanted to protect Shusei. As long as he was safe, happy, and could remain where he belonged, Rimi would do anything for him. She wanted to protect his very being.

Rimi’s current role was to protect and support Shohi and his rule by serving as his retainer. That was her place in life, having been given a duty as a concubine in the rear palace.

Given this, the question was what she needed to do now. Part of her had already figured out the answer a long time ago, but another part of her loved Shusei so much that she couldn’t control herself. “I love him. I love him,” that part would whisper inside her. That’s why she had failed to make up her mind until now—her heart had been in turmoil.

“I love Master Shusei. That’s why I want to protect him. I want to protect the place where he belongs. At the same time, I want to serve as His Majesty’s

subject,” Rimi said before stopping herself. The next part was all too painful to say.

Rimi spurred herself on before continuing.

“That’s why I...” she said, trailing off again. But she forced herself to continue. “I will do as His Majesty wishes. I will accept his proposal.”

That was the best path forward. Rimi had known from the start that she could never become Shusei’s lover. Even so, there was still the option of neither of them finding another partner and living their lives secretly caring for each other while maintaining their distance. Now, however, the circumstances were different. Shusei was Ho Seishu’s child. If he was to continue serving by Shohi’s side, there could not be room for even the slightest suspicion when it came to his loyalty. The best way to ensure this was to accept Shohi’s feelings. That way, Shusei would never have to waver again. It would be a definite end to their relationship.

“You would never be able to do that. Not when you love him so much,” the other Rimi said.

“Yes, I can,” Rimi barked back.

“You’ll live a life of misery.”

“No, I won’t.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

“You’re lying. You’re lying. You’re lying!” the other Rimi shrieked.

“I love Master Shusei. It pains me to give up on him. Do you think this feeling is a lie?”

The wraith fell silent.

I’ve told her what I needed to. Now I just need something to restore Reishun’s memories. Rimi needed one final push. She searched her mind for what she could serve Reishun. Oh right, I know. The thing that was always there in my dreams.

Rimi went back to her cooking. She exited the kitchen and entered the rainy garden. She broke an elegant branch of a tree she didn't recognize. While waiting for the water to boil, she took out rice flour, mixed it with water and sugar, and started kneading it. She added food coloring made from safflower, turmeric, and mugwort before rolling the dough into small balls and placing them in a steamer. Once the colorful balls had finished steaming, she stuck them to the branch. She had made flower candies.

They were only about half the size of the ones Rimi had seen on the ground in her dreams, but they were still unmistakably the beautiful, colorful sweets used to celebrate a betrothal. In her dreams, Reishun was crying while surrounded by these flower candies, which brimmed with the hopes and expectations young women had for a happy future.

Rimi presented the lovely branch to Reishun.

"You've held this once before, haven't you? Take it," Rimi said, holding out the flower candy that Reishun herself had subconsciously shown Rimi in her dreams. She was convinced that this would make her remember something important.

Reishun took a step backward as if frightened.

"No..." Reishun said.

"It's only flower candy. Take it," Rimi repeated.

"No... Don't... No..."

No matter how insistent Rimi was, Reishun refused to accept the branch.

"Are you scared? You're afraid you'll remember something, aren't you?" Rimi said.

Even when she appeared to Rimi as a wraith in her dreams where she had full control, Reishun would leave the flower candy on the ground, untouched. It must have meant something special for her to make it appear. Even so, she subconsciously refused to pick it up—perhaps because of a faint memory that was making her hesitate to do so.

"You're afraid because you're close to remembering. You won't be able to

take this branch. You swore to yourself that you would never touch it again,” Rimi said.

“You’re lying. You’re a liar!”

“I’m not. I haven’t told a single lie,” Rimi continued. “I want to protect everything Master Shusei has. I want to support His Majesty. You can tell those aren’t lies, can’t you? There’s not a hint of deception in my words. I won’t tell you anything that isn’t true.”

The other Rimi, her eyes wide open, started tearing up.

“That’s why I will accept His Majesty’s proposal, and put an end to my feelings for Master Shusei,” Rimi said.

Tears welled up from the other Rimi’s eyes and streamed down her cheeks. Watching her made Rimi feel like she was crying herself.

“These are my true feelings. They’re not lies. You understand that this doesn’t mean I’m miserable, don’t you? After all, two hundred years ago, you made the same choice. You held this branch once but then threw it onto the ground below you,” Rimi said.

The other Rimi suddenly covered her face. Her delicate shoulders were trembling. She was crying.

“Did you finally remember the decision you made all those years ago?” Rimi asked.

“No... Why...? How could anyone make a decision like that? How could you, or I two hundred years ago...?”

“I thought long and hard about what matters to me. I want to protect the people I care about. I want to fulfill my duty. I know that decision won’t make me unhappy—because it’s me deciding where I want to be.”

If Rimi cared about Shusei, then she needed to detach herself from him. That was the only thing she could do to protect him. Calming and putting her struggling heart to sleep was the best way she could express her love for Shusei.

Even though Rimi had known that this was the right choice, her heart had been unable to accept it—but now it could. She understood that abandoning

her love was not the same as becoming miserable.

Water on a stove will soon start to boil. Pushing a knife into food will cut it. Adding sugar makes something sweet, and salt makes food taste salty. That is how the world works. Water exposed to heat won't stay cold, food could never win against a knife, sugar will never be anything but sweet, and salt will never taste anything but salty. Trying to change the nature of the world is a fool's errand, and no matter how hard you try, you won't be able to cook food like that. You have to accept the existing conditions of nature and make the most of what's given to you to create a satisfying dish.

That was all Rimi could do—pick the best items and put them together while following the laws of nature.

“Lady Saigu once told me that cooking is to evaluate nature. It's one appraisal after another, culminating in a single dish. By cooking while talking to you, I was able to evaluate my own heart and Master Shusei. What I need to do right now is make the best decision in accordance with the laws of nature.”

The dishes on the table formed the holy communion that Rimi would offer to her own heart—and through her, to Reishun. What was important here was the very act of making holy communion. In order to convince Reishun, Rimi first needed to understand her feelings and convince herself as someone in the same position. Otherwise, nothing would get through to her. By making holy communion, Rimi was able to pacify her own feelings. This series of appraisals was a ritual in and of itself.

Rimi had one final trump card. Finding herself unable to touch the flower candy, Reishun was forced to explore her feelings, past, and memories.

“I don't want to remember finding that kind of resolve,” Reishun said in a quivering voice.

Ayako. Rimi recalled the first time the Saigu had said her name. She had given Rimi a beautiful smile after uttering it. *Your name means “child of nature.” If you are here as my Umashi-no-Miya, then make sure to live up to your name. Evaluate nature, choose the best option, and make satisfying meals.*

Yes, *Lady Saigu*, Rimi had responded, nodding with shining eyes as her cheeks turned red.

And by pure chance, the name I was given in Konkoku means “beautiful nature.”

“You have to evaluate nature and make the best decision,” Rimi said softly to the other Rimi, who was still covering her face. “I’ve made my decision. And long ago, you made yours. You need to face reality.”



For each sentence Rimi uttered, the wraith trembled as if hit by her words.

“My name is Rimi.”

The other Rimi desperately shook her head back and forth.

“It means ‘beautiful reason,’” Rimi declared.

It served as a decisive spell. Names had meanings that imbued them with power. Perhaps Rimi had been given her name not by chance, but by fate.

“I was destined to be given this name. And you had a fate of your own,” Rimi said with the utmost compassion she could muster. “So don’t cry. I don’t want to cry either. I want to live up to my name.”

The other Rimi started to lose her form. Although she had seemed entirely real just a moment ago, she was now suddenly fading away, and Rimi could see right through her. The wraith, still covering her face, rapidly changed back and forth between Rimi and Reishun, who was wearing her pink ruqun as she slowly vanished.

“I remember,” Reishun whispered. “I remember my love and my resolve.”

Then, just as if a candle had suddenly gone out, Reishun disappeared. All that was left in front of Rimi were the dishes laid out on the table. Faint steam rose from the plates.

She disappeared...

Reishun was gone. Rimi let out a relieved sigh and sat on the floor. The flower candy in her hand fell onto the cold ground.

“Master Shusei...is safe... His Majesty will recover...”

At that moment, Rimi had ended her love.

Chapter 7: The Lie

I

For a while, Rimi was unable to get back on her feet. She sat on the kitchen floor as the fire in the stoves burned bright red, absentmindedly staring into space.

The wraith is gone... It's back to just being Reishun's spirit...

Rimi took a quiet breath and closed her eyes.

A major source of the confusion that Reishun had caused was Rimi's inability to make up her mind. Now that she had managed to silence her feelings, it was time to immediately take action. She stood up, carefully wiped the dirt off her skirt, straightened her posture, and walked toward the door.

I have to go. First, I should visit the four consorts.

As she opened the door, the eastern sky was bright. It had stopped raining. The plants that covered the garden were shining, dressed in raindrops.

Rimi smiled softly, illuminated by the sun. She was relieved at having succeeded in returning Reishun's spirit to its original state and felt an inner peace at having decided on her path forward.

As long as Master Shusei remains happy where he belongs, that's all I need. Rimi's affection for Shusei had not disappeared—but she knew what needed to be done, and she had no regrets. That was why she could muster a smile.

Hakurei had suggested sealing his feelings inside a well, and Rimi understood now why he had said that. Even though her mind was made up, her heart still ached because of her remaining feelings of affection. Hakurei must have wanted to ease that pain, but Rimi felt differently. She put her hand on her chest.

Master Hakurei, I will live with this pain. That was Rimi's punishment for choosing Shohi despite her feelings for Shusei. She was fully aware that choosing Shohi for the sake of Shusei was disrespectful toward Shohi—but she

was prepared to do everything necessary in order to serve her master and relieve him of any feelings of emptiness and loneliness. Still, doing so while she held onto her feelings for Shusei was something that she deserved to be punished for. This punishment would only end when she was able to love Shohi from the bottom of her heart and forget about her love for Shusei.

Rimi wondered if such a day would ever come.

As she walked down a passageway protected by earthen walls on both sides toward the Palace of the Beautiful Spring, Shusei approached her from the opposite direction. The moment he saw her, he made a face that seemed both relieved and angry as he ran up to her.



“I’ve been looking for you everywhere! I waited until dawn for you to come back, but you never did. I was out of my mind with worry,” Shusei said.

After Jotetsu had left, Shusei had waited the whole night for Rimi. No matter how long he waited, there had been no sign of her returning—but he had been afraid to leave and search for her, lest they missed each other. However, as the rain let up and the morning sun started to rise in the eastern sky, he had lost his patience. First searching the Palace of the Beautiful Spring, Shusei had finally headed toward the kitchen Rimi had been using on the off chance that she might have been there. He hadn’t imagined that Rimi might have started attempting to seal the wraith without telling him anything—yet now, Rimi was approaching him from the opposite direction. She had clearly been inside the holy ground.

As Shusei came closer, Rimi bowed apologetically.

“I’m sorry, Master Shusei. However, I’ve managed to quell Reishun’s spirit,” Rimi said.

“You quelled her? Alone?” Shusei said, his eyes wide from surprise. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought that I needed to do it by myself. But I’m really sorry for worrying you.”

Shusei made an angry expression, but he soon sighed as though he was tired

of being upset.

“It’s fine. I was just worried about you,” Shusei said.

“Thank you for the concern,” Rimi responded.

“I’m the one who should be thanking you for pacifying the wraith as you promised. I’m impressed,” Shusei said as he gently patted Rimi on her head. She gave him a slightly embarrassed smile in return.

She really is dear to me.

The thought of Rimi having spent the whole night by herself, fighting in the kitchen, made Shusei want to comfort her with a hug.

But if I’m Seishu’s child, I need to start being even more careful with how I act around her. Shusei’s reason held him back.

“First we need to report to His Majesty. Let’s be on our way,” Shusei said.

“Master Shusei, before we visit His Majesty, I need to visit the four consorts. I will report to him after that. I would appreciate it if you could go to His Majesty before me and let him know.”

“The consorts? Now?”

“It has to be now.”

Although Rimi spoke firmly and calmly, smiling with no hint of being upset, she seemed somehow sad at the same time. She had entered the holy ground alone without letting Shusei know. Now, she seemed more distant than usual.

“Rimi, did something happen?” Shusei asked.

“No, not at all. I’m quite fine. I promise.”

Despite her hint of sadness, Rimi gave Shusei an unaffected smile. He didn’t know what to think.

“Very well, I will go to His Majesty and inform him,” Shusei said.

As he walked toward Shohi’s room after parting with Rimi, Shusei felt unrest in his chest.



“I’m sorry for disturbing you during your breakfast,” Rimi said, announcing her arrival.

The consorts always started their day early, waking up at daybreak to get dressed while they waited for breakfast. And since Rimi knew that they always gathered together in one place for their breakfasts, she had requested permission to see them.

Upon seeing Rimi, Pure Consort Yo jumped with joy.

“Dearest, have you come to have breakfast with us?!” she asked.

Rimi, however, gave the consorts a deep bow. Noble Consort So frowned at how formally she was acting.

“I have come to urgently ask for your permission,” Rimi said.

“Why are you being so formal?” So asked warily while Yo looked on in confusion. Virtuous Consort Ho’s expression stiffened while Worthy Consort On watched Rimi anxiously.

How can I push aside these girls to... Rimi almost wavered, but she quickly scolded herself. You’ve already made up your mind, haven’t you? Why are you hesitating when you’ve already come this far?

Rimi steeled herself.

“His Majesty has asked me to be his empress. Under normal circumstances, that is too great of an honor for someone of my standing, and I would have declined. However, after a lot of thinking...I have decided to accept his offer,” Rimi said.

The consorts’ jaws dropped. Rimi lowered her gaze before kneeling on the floor.

“I wish to ask for your permission,” she said. A long silence followed.

Although Rimi had decided to accept Shohi’s proposition, this was something she needed to do first. The consorts were the most noble, wise, and beautiful out of all of the emperor’s concubines. They considered Shohi their master and had sworn to serve him. Had the circumstances been different, Rimi would never even have considered becoming empress in their place. If she was going

to accept Shohi's offer, the very least she could do was ask for the consorts' permission. Her biggest worry, however, was whether these prideful women would actually allow her to become empress.

As expected, the consorts were frozen in shock at the startling revelation that Rimi might become empress. The first one to stand up was Noble Consort So, who walked up to Rimi.

"Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu," So said in a stern voice.

"Yes," Rimi responded, still looking at the floor.

Just as Rimi steeled herself to be slapped across the face, she sensed something being presented to her. She hesitantly looked up to find So holding out her hand with beautifully manicured nails.

"Stand up," So continued. "What is a woman who might become empress doing kneeling on the floor? Come now."

Wide-eyed, Rimi took So's hand and stood up. Suddenly, Yo put her head face down on the table and started sobbing.

"No! Why?! I can't believe my dearest is going to become His Majesty's!" Yo cried.

I don't think that's the part she should be upset about...

"We don't have any right to give or withhold permission. And even if we did, I'd allow it," Ho said, smiling awkwardly at the sight of Yo crying.

"What a relief," On said with a warm smile. "This is much better than someone we don't even know becoming the empress."

"But...but...how can you all just allow this so easily?" Rimi asked.

"We aren't as absentminded as you are," So said with an annoyed expression. "We could tell that you were important to His Majesty. You're the one who invited His Majesty to the feast at the Palace of Northern Peaks to hear our voices, aren't you?"

"You knew?!" Rimi exclaimed in shock.

"No, we didn't," Ho said, waving her hand. "We just guessed that was the

case. It appears we were right.”

Rimi placed her hands on her mouth, realizing what she had just said.

“You convinced His Majesty to come and listen to what we had to say. That made us very happy,” On said, smiling. “And thanks to you, His Majesty has turned from the cruel person he was to someone so considerate he almost seems like a different person. You have been a good influence on him.”

“We are His Majesty’s retainers. How could we ever say no to someone who has had such a positive influence on him?” So said. “Of course, if you had been a temptress, we would have overthrown you and chased you out of the rear palace ourselves.”

Rimi was stunned for a moment, and then she hung her head.

The consorts really are the wisest and most noble people of Konkoku. They possessed vast knowledge and contemplated every situation rationally before reaching a decision. They were truly worthy of their position as the emperor’s most trusted retainers.

“Lady Setsu,” Ho said with a grave expression. “If you become empress, you will never be able to marry another man. You understand what that means, don’t you? You will be dedicating your entire life to His Majesty. Being the empress also comes with great responsibilities. You will have to face all kinds of hardships. You might even be dragged into the court’s power struggle that until now had nothing to do with you. Are you prepared for that?”

“I am.”

Rimi had made her decision, well aware of what it meant. She had imagined every possible difficulty she might face, but despite being very scared of what lay in store for her, she couldn’t back down.

Seeing Rimi’s tense expression, On gently touched her hand.

“But you still have us,” On said.

“Huh?” Rimi said as she gave On a confused look.

So let out a resigned sigh before smiling at Rimi.

“We have received more than enough of the education needed to become

empress. Our knowledge will be useful to you. We'll be there to help you," So said.

"Don't forget," Ho said, nodding. "We like you."

Lady Saigu... Rimi called out to her dear sister in her head. *Lady Saigu, I think I'm going to cry... They said they like me...*

When Rimi had first entered the rear palace, she had been entirely alone in the world. But now, she was surrounded by people who cared this much about her.

"Thank you so much, consorts," Rimi said.

Just as Rimi bowed deeply in gratitude, Yo started wailing even louder.

"But I still won't accept this! I won't let you belong to some man!" she cried.

"You silly girl," Ho said, putting a hand on Yo's shoulder. She was unable to watch her cry any longer. "Just think about it. As a Lady of Precious Bevy, she might one day be thrown out of the rear palace. But as the empress, she will live out the rest of her life there. You'll be able to spend your whole life together with Lady Setsu."

"Oh, that's true," Yo said, looking up in surprise. "Still, I'm so jealous!"

You're jealous?! everyone there yelled in their minds. Then, they all—including Rimi—burst out laughing.

"I can't believe you would laugh at my broken heart! How mean!" Yo said, stomping the ground.

On put her arm around Yo, and Ho did the same with an amused smile. Despite her pouting, Yo seemed quite content to be consoled by the two of them.

Seeing that the time was right, So pushed Rimi's back.

"Now, be on your way," So said. "Knowing you, you were planning on going to His Majesty as soon as you had our permission, weren't you? But the proper thing to do is to give His Majesty your reply immediately, silly. Don't keep him waiting. Go tell him right away."

“Yes. I will do so,” Rimi said, giving the consorts a final bow before heading toward Shohi’s room.

Rimi climbed up the stairs to the second floor and informed the aide on duty of her business. The aide ran to confirm before letting her pass. Rimi continued down the hallway toward the emperor’s room. With each step she took, her heart twinged. She stopped in front of the door to catch her breath.

Once I’ve given my reply, there will be no going back.

Rimi made up her mind and looked straight ahead.

“Your Majesty, it’s Setsu Rimi. I’m here to request an audience.”

II

At the same time, three carriages passed through the western gate of Castle Seika, as if pushed by the morning sun. Once they had stopped at the stable by the gate, one person emerged from each of the three carriages—the chancellor, Shu Kojin; the Minister of Revenue, To Rihan; and the Minister of Rites, Jin Keiyu. Today, they were scheduled to meet with Shohi in place of their usual council. As such, several aides were waiting at the stable, along with the imperially appointed military officer Shin Jotetsu.

Jotetsu greeted the three of them by kneeling, but he quickly stood up again and bowed.

“Take us there,” Kojin commanded the aides, and they started walking.

With Kojin at the lead, Rihan and Keiyu followed, each with an aide walking in front of them at an appropriate distance. Jotetsu nonchalantly walked up next to Kojin and whispered into his ear.

“Shusei has made contact with Neison,” Jotetsu said. “He had been refusing to answer Neison’s requests to meet, but it appears he was tricked into seeing him.”

“How was he? Did he seem shocked?”

“No, he was only there for a moment. From the looks of it, he must have fled before Neison had a chance to tell him anything. He is still unaware of the details of his birth.”

“Shusei is more stubborn than I thought,” Kojin said with a grin. “He is the best pawn one could ask for. Neison won’t give up on getting his hands on him. Continue to keep a close watch. In the meantime, I will smoke out anyone in the imperial palace affiliated with the Ho house. Once Neison starts making more aggressive moves, the other members of the Ho faction will start to give themselves away.”

Kojin closed his mouth and continued walking, keeping his gaze fixed straight ahead.

Without a pawn, the Ho faction is nothing but a bow without an arrow. I need to discover them before they have a chance to nock one. It all depends on how long we can count on Shusei to decline Neison’s invitations. The longer he lasts, the more time I can buy. Kojin unconsciously let out a chuckle. *He’s grown up to be a fine pawn. He’s proving himself useful.*

If Shusei continued to avoid Neison and Setsu Rimi became empress, the ideal scenario that Kojin had dreamed up would come to pass. Then he would be able to keep Shusei alive. He could simply hunt down the people of the Ho faction one by one as they grew impatient.

Perhaps it was thanks to Kojin having let Mrs. Yo be in charge of raising Shusei that he grew up to be so useful—or perhaps Shusei possessed something innate that made him predisposed to become such an ideal pawn.

He reminds me of... Kojin recalled the man who had always said his name so innocently as if the idea that he should distrust him never crossed his mind.



Jotetsu expressionlessly glared at the man clad in black in front of him.

It seems he trusts me more than I thought. This dear chancellor didn’t show a hint of doubting my report. Jotetsu laughed in his mind. *It’s not a big lie. But it’ll be fun to see how much this throws off his calculations.*

Ever since he had seen Shusei’s despairing face, Jotetsu had felt an urge to put a pebble below the feet of the man who believed that he was in full control of the destiny of others. Jotetsu had become fed up with living as the chancellor calculated and being used as a pawn to play with people’s lives. But it was

nothing more than him acting up—or so his pride wanted to believe. If he had any ill feelings toward the chancellor inside him, it was to the extent that he was being taken for granted.

Not thinking was the duty of a sword, or so Shu Kojin had once told Jotetsu.

I won't think. I just told a small lie on a whim. I don't care what comes of it.

It was the first time that Jotetsu had disregarded Kojin's calculations. He started wondering what might happen were he to continue to feel an urge to defy his plans. Jotetsu had no idea where he might end up, having lived almost his entire life within the chancellor's schemes.

Jotetsu had spent over a decade together with Shohi and Shusei, and even though they had started to realize that he was more or less deceiving them, they continued to be friendly toward him. It seemed this had awoken some form of attachment to them inside him, which was the cause of his current confusion. He had lost sight of what he should do and what he shouldn't do.

Jotetsu looked down at the ground and grinned.

It's pretty fun not to know what might happen, huh? Shusei, why don't you give enjoying your own fate a try? Jotetsu spoke to his stubborn friend in his mind. Shusei was always being tied down by reason, and it wouldn't hurt him to let loose once in a while.

Jotetsu was surprised to find himself thinking this.

The morning sun illuminated the area. The only shadow in sight was on Jotetsu's downcast face.



"Enter," Shohi said cheerfully from inside the room.

As Rimi entered, Shohi greeted her with a relieved smile. He was properly dressed and sitting casually on the sofa. He seemed slightly tired as though he hadn't slept the night before, but his appearance made his recovery evident.

Perhaps out on patrol, Jotetsu was nowhere to be seen.

He looks so much better even though I only just defeated the wraith. The thought of what might have happened had she failed sent shivers down her

spine.

“Are you feeling well, Your Majesty?” Rimi asked.

“I have been feeling better since dawn. Shusei told me that you managed to quell the wraith. Well done. Thanks to you, I feel much better,” Shohi replied.

Shusei was standing next to the sofa, nodding along with Shohi. It appeared he had informed Shohi what he knew of what had happened.

“You must be tired since you did not sleep. You can tell me the details another day. For now, get some rest,” Shohi said.

Rimi was delighted by Shohi’s kind words, and she was further convinced that he was a master worth serving, both to her and Shusei. She imagined that Shusei also took pride in his duty as Shohi’s subject.

I have to protect Master Shusei’s place here, Rimi keenly felt as she took a step forward toward Shohi.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. However, before I sleep, I have something I must tell you,” Rimi said.

“That is an unusually timid expression you have there. Very well. Speak,” Shohi said jokingly. He must have assumed that Rimi had nothing too important to say.

Rimi knelt in front of Shohi. Both Shohi and Shusei’s eyes were wide in surprise at the unexpected act.

“Rimi?” Shusei asked with a worried voice.

Rimi bowed.

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting for so long, Your Majesty. I will now provide my answer,” she continued.

“Your answer? Wait, do you mean...” Shohi held his breath, while Shusei cast his eyes back and forth between Shohi and Rimi.

“I accept your offer,” Rimi declared.

“You mean...you are...you are willing to become my empress?”

Shusei seemed startled at Shohi’s surprised confirmation.

“Empress?” he mumbled as if he had just heard something unfathomable.

Rimi looked up, gazed straight into Shohi’s eyes, and nodded.

“Yes,” Rimi said.

A suffocating silence followed. Through the open door drifted damp, chilly air, along with the soft rays of the morning sun, which stretched to Rimi’s feet.

“Shusei...” Shohi finally broke the silence. “I am sorry, Shusei, but can I ask you to leave me alone with Rimi?”

Shusei stood frozen, pale-faced, failing to react.

“Shusei,” Shohi repeated, and Shusei finally woke up from his daze, blinking repeatedly.

“Yes, understood,” Shusei responded.

Rimi was the only one who noticed the hint of shock in Shusei’s voice.

Shusei turned and left the room.

Rimi looked at Shohi with watery eyes, intentionally avoiding looking at Shusei. She didn’t know why her vision was blurring. Perhaps it was the relief of finally finding an answer, sadness over this decisive end to her relationship with Shusei, or maybe simply the blinding morning sun. She couldn’t tell.

Shohi stood up, took Rimi’s hand, and pulled her to her feet.

“Are you really sure that you want to be my empress?” Shohi asked.

“Yes,” Rimi responded resolutely.

“And you will not regret it?”

“No.”

There was not an ounce of doubt in Rimi’s mind.

Seeing Rimi firmly shake her head, Shohi was overcome with emotion and embraced her.

“You belong to me,” he whispered into Rimi’s ear.

“Yes,” Rimi said softly.

From now on, I will offer His Majesty both my body and my heart as his loyal retainer. I will give him everything that I have.

There truly was no doubt in Rimi's mind about accepting Shohi's offer. She was also certain that she would not come to regret it. She was simply sad over the hand she had been dealt in life.



She belongs to me!

Shohi had always thought that he would never obtain the things he wanted most in life. He had even wondered if perhaps he had been cursed by the gods themselves. As a result, he had always been lacking in confidence. Even after taking the throne, he had been hit with the revelation that some sought to threaten his rule.

Now, however, the person Shohi had wished to have from the bottom of his heart was saying that she would become his. Rimi was looking straight into his eyes with no hint of hesitation. He was overjoyed.

Of course, Shohi was under no delusion that Rimi had suddenly fallen in love with him. Still, she appeared to at least feel some kind of affection for him, to the extent that she was willing to accept his offer. If that was the case, perhaps feelings of love might one day awaken inside her.

If I am kind, care for her, and protect her, then one day...

Shohi was beside himself with joy at the mere prospect of Rimi looking at him with a loving gaze. Now that she was officially his, there would be no fear of anyone coming between them before Rimi could develop feelings toward him.

The sensation of Rimi's warmth and delicate frame made Shohi euphoric. Exhilarated, he picked up some of the hair on Rimi's shoulder and pressed it to his lips.



III

Shusei's head hurt from the events that had just unfolded out of nowhere.

What is going on? Rimi is becoming the empress?! When did that happen?! When did His Majesty discuss that with her? Neither His Majesty nor Rimi has shown any such signs. Since when...since when...

He walked quickly into the central garden and leaned his back against a plum tree.

They never told me anything.

His mind blank, Shusei looked up at the white plum blossom. It was blooming in full, like mist floating in the air.

How charming and beautiful...

As he stood there, looking upward vacantly, he noticed several people entering the palace. He turned his gaze toward the gate to find Kojin entering the garden, guided by aides. After him came Jotetsu, who was followed by Rihan and Keiyu.

Shusei, his fist clenched, stepped away from the tree and stared at Kojin. Shusei was not foolish enough to lash out at him here. However, inside his chest, feelings of distrust and rage were seething violently.

I have to question him on why he raised me as his own. But not now. There are too many people.

Shusei desperately tried to calm himself, greeting the company with a bow as they walked by. But when Kojin passed by Shusei, he stopped and turned to Rihan and Keiyu.

"I have something I need to discuss with Shusei. Go ahead without me. I will meet you inside in a little while," Kojin said.

Rihan and Keiyu walked off, and Kojin turned to Shusei next.

"I hear Ho Neison has been sending you letters," Kojin said coldly.

"That's..."

Should I tell him now? Shusei thought, but the moment he attempted to open his mouth, Kojin interrupted him as though to prevent him from talking too much.

“I am aware. No matter how many times he tries to contact you, do as you have up to now and refuse to listen. That is for the best,” Kojin said.

Shusei was stunned.

Does Father not know that I have heard the truth from Neison? Why not? I can't imagine that Jotetsu wouldn't have...

Jotetsu remained expressionless behind Kojin—but deep in his eyes was a hint of amusement. After all their years together, Shusei could tell. It was subtle but unmistakable.

Did he intentionally choose not to tell Father? Why?

Jotetsu signaled to Shusei with his eyes. It appeared that the best course of action was to play along for now.

“Understood,” Shusei said, feigning composure.

Seemingly content with Shusei's reply, Kojin resumed his stride. Jotetsu followed, but just as he passed Shusei, he whispered to him in a voice so quiet that no one else could hear.

“Enjoy your fate,” he said.

“‘Enjoy,’ huh?” Shusei mumbled as he gazed at Jotetsu's back. He chuckled, wondering what in the world there was to enjoy. But then he had a realization.

Father is not someone who would raise the son of his political enemy for no reason. He must be manipulating me as part of one of his schemes. But there must be more to my fate than simply being toyed with. I am a full person with my own thoughts and motives.

If there was a way for Shusei to enjoy his situation, perhaps it was to exploit it, turning the future he wished for into a reality. The question was how best to achieve his wishes. The finest mind of Konkoku had unconsciously started plotting.



“Rimi.”

Shohi looked at Rimi with an intense gaze as he put his hand on her cheek. His lips closed in on hers, and Rimi closed her eyes as her body tensed up.

“Your Majesty, Chancellor Shu Kojin, Minister of Revenue To Rihan, and Minister of Rites Jin Keiyu have arrived,” Jotetsu suddenly announced from the doorway where he was kneeling.

Shohi quickly released Rimi.

“Ah, yes. I forgot that they were scheduled to arrive today,” Shohi said with a frown, though his cheeks were faintly red.

“Now then, if you will excuse me,” Rimi said. Although this was the emperor’s private chamber, it was inappropriate for a palace woman to be present in the same room as the chancellor and ministers. But just as she bowed and turned to leave, Shohi grabbed her wrist.

“Wait. I need you here for the start of the meeting,” Shohi said.

“But the chancellor and ministers are—”

“That is exactly why. I am informing Kojin of your decision. Although I can choose my empress at my own discretion, I will ensure that I have Kojin’s approval to be on the safe side,” Shohi explained. “We also need to plan a ceremony if you are to become empress. The rear palace is overseen by the Department of Service, but as the empress can leave the rear palace with the emperor, the enthronement of the empress is overseen by the Ministry of Rites. As the Minister of Rites will be coming, this is a good time to let them know.”

Enthronement... Rimi thought about the kind of responsibility that would come with her new duty. *I have to keep myself together. I can’t be an empress that embarrasses His Majesty.*

As Rimi stood nervously behind Shohi, Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu entered the room. Upon seeing her, the three of them looked surprised, wondering what a palace woman was doing there. But they still exchanged formal greetings with the emperor.

“I thank you for your hard work,” Shohi said, giving them a satisfied nod. “You

must be hungry. I shall have breakfast prepared. But before that, I have something important to inform you of.”

Shohi turned his eyes to Rimi, who walked up next to him and bowed.

“I have decided to make this Lady of Precious Bevy my empress,” Shohi declared.

Keiyu looked astonished, while Rihan said “Oh?” in an amused voice, and Kojin smirked faintly.

“I command you to arrange for Setsu Rimi to move into the Palace of Northern Peaks as the prospective empress as soon as the Department of Service has been informed and you have returned to Annei. Minister of Rites, order the Bureau of Sacrifices to prepare a date for the enthronement of the empress,” Shohi spoke in a resolute voice, not letting anyone else get a word in.

In response, Kojin gave a slow, exaggerated bow.

“I extend my sincere congratulations, Your Majesty and Setsu Rimi,” he said.

Rihan and Keiyu followed suit. Once all three had finished bowing, Kojin turned to Keiyu.

“Minister of Rites, you heard His Majesty. Contact the Department of Service and see to it that a date is arranged for the enthronement ceremony,” Kojin said.

“Yes, Your Excellency. I will take care of it,” Keiyu replied as he gave Rimi a sociable smile.

Meanwhile, Rihan probed Rimi with his eyes. It was only natural for someone to be suspicious when told that a mere Lady of Precious Bevy of sixth rank was to be empress.

Kojin grinned as he looked at Rimi as though he saw right through her to her innermost feelings. He must have been happy that everything was going according to his plans.

Rimi looked down, feeling awkward as the three men stared at her. Shohi seemed to notice as he gently put his hand on her back.

“You may leave now, Rimi. You must be tired. Go and get some rest,” Shohi

said.

Rimi thanked Shohi for his kindness and left the room. Once outside, she put both hands on the railing and let out a deep sigh. Then, she heard the sound of light footsteps coming from down the hallway. She turned around to find Tama happily sprinting toward her. Judging from how early in the morning Tama was up and so full of energy, it was clear that she had fully recovered.

“Tama! Are you all back to normal now?!” Rimi exclaimed.

Rimi hugged Tama as she ran up her skirt and rubbed her cheek against hers. Tama let out a happy squeak and rubbed her nose against Rimi’s cheek.

“I’m so relieved, Tama.”

As Rimi embraced the warm, soft, and kind creature, she felt a pain in her chest. It was as if Tama’s kindness was washing over Rimi’s wounded heart. She felt a sudden urge to cry when Tama let out another squeak and turned a puzzled look toward the garden. Rimi followed her gaze and noticed Shusei standing there.

Master Shusei...

Shusei had seemed stunned upon hearing about Rimi becoming empress. But that was understandable. Rimi needed to have a proper talk with him.

“Tama, would you mind going on a little walk? I need to talk to Master Shusei.”

If coming into contact with human emotions caused Tama to grow weaker, then she needed to stay away from Rimi’s conversation with Shusei, which was sure to stir Rimi’s feelings.

“I’m sorry,” Rimi said, and Tama gave her a small nod as if to say, “It’s fine,” jumped down from her arms, and swiftly climbed up a pillar. She must have gone for a walk on the roof.

After Tama had disappeared, Rimi took the stairs to the lower level. Shusei was standing by a plum tree, vacantly staring into space.

“Master Shusei,” Rimi called out.

Shusei turned his eyes toward Rimi, who walked up to him, catching her

breath before continuing.

“Um...” Rimi began but quickly trailed off as she had no idea what to say.

Shusei looked at Rimi as she tried to find the right words. After a short silence, he gave her a listless smile.

“When did it happen?” Shusei asked with his usual, kind tone of voice.

Rimi gave Shusei a puzzled look.

“When did His Majesty ask you to be his empress?” Shusei repeated.

“That’s, well... Right after we swore to kill our feelings for each other,” Rimi explained.

“So that’s why he suddenly showed up at the cuisinology hall. I hadn’t realized at all,” Shusei said, letting out a small sigh. “I’m happy for you. It seems you’ve managed to...kill your feelings, just as we promised.”

“I’m certain that they will never again resurrect.”

Rimi felt like her heart was splitting in two. She worried what Shusei might think of her saying this. He had to have been tremendously sad, feeling like he was being betrayed. Perhaps he even considered her to be an easy or bothersome woman who had done nothing but seduce him for no reason.

“But I definitely haven’t grown to dislike you, Master Shusei. Ever since I met you, you’ve been kind and wise... Even now, I deeply respect you,” Rimi continued. “Respect” was the strongest word that Rimi could muster.

“Thank you, Rimi. I’m happy to hear it,” Shusei said.

“I want to support His Majesty to the fullest extent that I can. Serving as the empress is the best place for me that I have been allowed.”

“Now that you mention it, my place was also by His Majesty’s side, wasn’t it?”

Shusei’s place was by Shohi’s side. That was where he could live his happiest existence. Rimi made her decision so that Shusei could keep the place where he belonged.

“I will do everything I can to fulfill my duty of supporting His Majesty together with you, Master Shusei,” Rimi said.

Shusei responded with a faint smile.

Then, several voices could be heard, and Shohi, Kojin, Rihan, Keiyu, and Jotetsu entered the garden. Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu quickly exited the Palace of the Beautiful Spring together with Jotetsu, but Shohi walked over to Shusei and Rimi. Shusei gave Shohi a deep bow.

“Congratulations on finding an empress, Your Majesty,” Shusei said.

“Quite,” Shohi said, nodding as his cheeks were colored faintly red. He awkwardly turned his gaze from side to side as he cleared his throat. “But raise your head, Shusei.”



Shusei did as told.

“I have chosen an empress,” Shohi continued. “I believe it was the best choice I could have made in order to turn into an even better emperor. Now that my wish has come to pass, I swear to endeavor to become the best emperor I can be. So...will you...um...”

“Your Majesty?”

Shusei gave Shohi a puzzled look at his inability to form a proper sentence. In response, Shohi raised his voice, as if opening the floodgates.

“What I am trying to say is, I am grateful to have you! So I hope that you will continue to stay by my side!” Shohi exclaimed with a tone so menacing that he almost seemed angry at first, leaving both Rimi and Shusei stunned. But they quickly realized that he had just thanked Shusei and asked him to stay with him, and they burst out laughing at the same time.

Shohi turned bright red as the two of them continued to giggle.

“What is so funny?!” he barked.

Seeing how cross Shohi was, Shusei stifled his laughter.

“I will stay by your side,” Shusei said with a warm smile that seemed to come from the bottom of his heart. “I will stay by your side forever, Your Majesty.”

Shohi made an even more embarrassed face and bashfully averted his gaze.

“I am returning to my chamber,” Shohi said and walked off at a rapid pace.

Shusei tapped Rimi on her back.

“You should go too, Rimi,” he said. “You should see him to his room. Then, you should take some time to rest.”

“But I can’t just leave you alone!” Rimi pleaded. The thought of Shusei remaining behind all alone made Rimi too sad.

Shusei shook his head.

“I don’t mind. I’m going to stay here and look at the blossoms for a while. I’d like some time to think,” Shusei said. “Now, be on your way.”

“All right.”

Rimi followed after Shohi. As she did, she once again felt a pain in her chest and an urge to cry, but she held it back and faced straight ahead.

This was the right choice. I’m sure of it, Rimi told herself. I will support His Majesty with all that I have with Master Shusei.



Rimi caught up to Shohi and started walking next to him, and Shusei saw her off with a smile. As soon as they had disappeared into the building, however, his smile vanished.

I lied to His Majesty again...

Shusei looked up at the white blossoms.

Rimi hadn’t noticed how, during their conversation, he had said, “My place was also by His Majesty’s side.” Shusei’s saving grace had been that Rimi was from Wakoku, so she hadn’t noticed the more subtle nuance of the phrasing. He had said that his place “was”—not “is”—by Shohi’s side. When Rimi had said “I will do everything I can to fulfill my duty of supporting His Majesty,” Shusei had refrained from nodding, only smiling faintly in response.

Since that conversation, a resolve had slowly started forming inside Shusei. When Shohi had asked him to stay by his side, Shusei had said yes—but that had been a lie.

“Your Majesty... I can’t stay by your side forever,” Shusei muttered to himself.

Not when His Majesty has obtained what’s most important to me.

Shusei’s resolve had taken shape.

The white blossoms were nearing the end of their blooming season, and flowers had started to fall, casting shadows on Shusei’s cheek. Suddenly, Shusei noticed the Quinary Dragon standing at the base of the tree. It looked at Shusei curiously with its clear, blue eyes, as if it was seeing him for the first time.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. It's Miri Mikawa.

This story takes place during early spring as the snow has started to melt, but this book will be in stores in July, with summer break coming up. In this volume, Rimi and the others have also ended up going on a break. Looking at the draft, however, with the love triangle still unfolding, and various important characters causing trouble, it seems not a single one actually got a chance to rest. I really feel bad for them, but I'm sure happiness is waiting for them at the end of all their suffering!

I've talked about the love triangle in both of the previous afterwords, and now more than ever I can really appreciate how difficult a love triangle is to write. I do have the outcome more or less laid out in my head, and as long as no one starts going wild without warning, things should work out according to plan. Of course, it's not unheard of for characters in this story to go astray and create plot points that weren't there before, so I can't let my guard down. I'd be very happy if you followed along with me to see how things turn out.

I'd like to thank the editor who's helped me to create stories out of nothing. You've helped me ever since I debuted at Beans Bunko, even in ways I'm not aware of myself, and I can't thank you enough. I've secretly taken the liberty of calling you an "angel" in my head. Time and time again, you've made me think that maybe angels really do exist. Thank you so, so much.

Now, to my new editor—I'm sorry for sending you panicked responses right off the bat, and I really hope that I haven't made you worry about me. In my opinion, input from others is critical to writing a proper story. I'm sure I'll be causing you lots of trouble going forward too, but I look forward to working with you.

I'd like to extend my gratitude again to Kasumi Nagi for drawing the illustrations for the book. I loved how adorable Tama was on the cover of the last volume, snuggling up to Rimi. I'm also entranced by how lustrous Shohi is in his first appearance in color. The scene where Shohi made a move on Rimi had my heart skipping a beat. Thank you so much for all of your beautiful

illustrations. I'm looking forward to seeing them in this volume too!

Finally, to my readers: Thank you for reading this book. As I wrote earlier, Rimi's love triangle is steadily becoming even more complicated, but I hope you'll watch over the three of them. And if you were able to enjoy this story for even a moment, there's nothing more I could ask for. If you're so inclined, I hope to see you in the next volume too.



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Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower: Volume 4

by Miri Mikawa

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