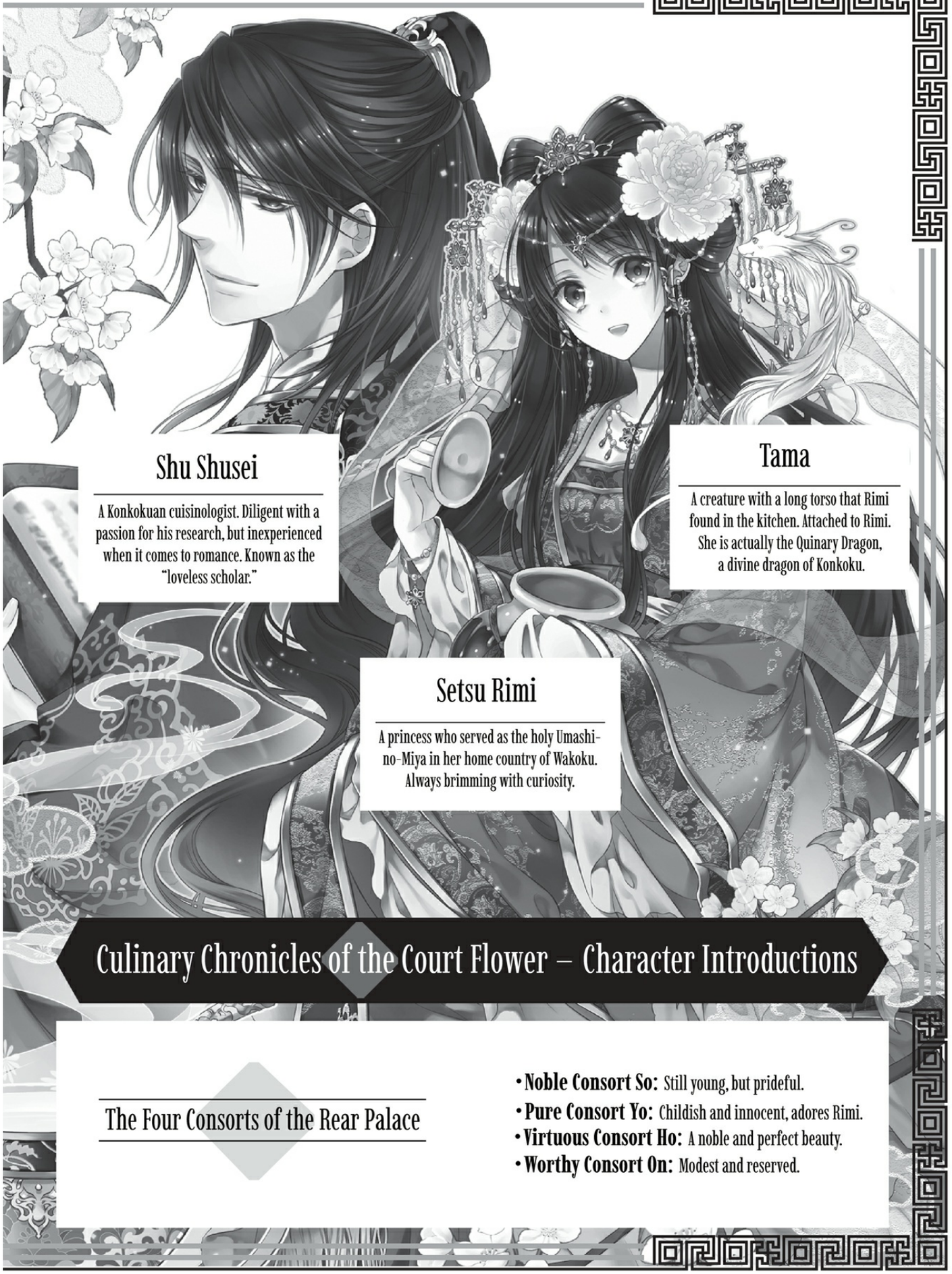
Miri Mikawa
Kasumi Nagi

5



Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower


Miri Mikawa
Kasumi Nagi
5
Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower



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. She is actually the Quinary Dragon, a divine dragon of Konkoku.

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.



Shin Jotetsu

A military officer who serves as Shohi's bodyguard.



Sai Hakurei

An enchantingly beautiful eunuch. Serves Shohi directly.



Ryu Shohi

The emperor of the great empire of Konkoku. Cruel and heartless.

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A single ray of moonlight stretched across the smooth stone floor of the Hall of New Harmony. The chancellor of Konkoku, Shu Kojin, slipped through a slightly ajar door alongside the light. The soft moonlight was not enough to illuminate the ceiling, which was three times the height of a human, nor the elevated throne. It was almost pitch black. All that could be seen in the darkness were the colorful, but indistinct, carvings in the pillars near the door.

“Jotetsu,” Kojin called out.

Silently from the darkness emerged the imperially appointed junior military officer of the imperial guard, Shin Jotetsu. With his ever-vigilant eyes, he looked like someone who had been born from the darkness.

“May I ask why you’ve summoned me on such short notice?” Jotetsu asked.

“You have something you should be reporting to me, do you not?” Kojin said in an annoyed tone.

“Do I? Nothing comes to mind,” Jotetsu replied nonchalantly.

“I have heard from the aides that Shusei has been disappearing from time to time lately. Where is he going?”

“Is he? As far as I’ve been able to tell, he’s been acting like his usual self.”

“You must truly be slacking not to notice something so frequent that even an aide would remark on it. Extend your surveillance to figure out where he is going, and report back to me without delay.”

Kojin’s voice carried a hint of irritation. Hearing this, Jotetsu was unable to keep his mouth from forming a faint smile.

He’s always been like this when it comes to Shusei.

“You look like you want to tell me something,” Kojin noted.

“I was just observing how much Shusei seems to be on your mind. It’s almost like you’re afraid of him.”

“I can hardly imagine that he would attempt something that I would not predict. Still, I mustn’t let my guard down. If he does something even remotely unexpected, I must deal with it immediately.”

Kojin smirked slightly.

“Setsu Rimi is set to become the empress, and Shusei gave up on her as a result of his wise judgment. I can’t say how painful it must have been for him, but his prudence keeps him from approaching the woman he loves,” Kojin continued. “Still, this is what is best for Shusei. If he were to find out who his real father was while he still had a relationship with Rimi, not only would his position be in danger, but also his life.”

Despite claiming to be concerned with what was best for Shusei, Kojin seemed to somehow be enjoying witnessing his suffering. Kojin had never had a habit of doing anything to endanger Shusei’s position or life, but he still appeared to take pleasure in hurting him or putting him through distressing situations.

“Shusei is acting according to my plans, and I need him to continue doing so. That is why I am keeping him under close watch. I do not fear him,” Kojin said.

“I feel sorry for your dear son.”

“That’s rich of you to say, Jotetsu, when you are just as involved as I am.”

“That’s true. You have a point.”

After saying that he was waiting for Jotetsu’s next report, Kojin left the hall by sliding through the opening in the door. Jotetsu smirked daringly as he watched him leave.

“Yes, Your Excellency—or so I’d like to say, but I’m afraid I won’t be doing anything of the sort,” Jotetsu muttered to himself.

Jotetsu had been ordered by Kojin to keep Shusei under close watch. However, he was currently neglecting his duties, and he had therefore not known that Shusei would sometimes disappear, nor did he have any interest in investigating where he might be going. He had told Shusei to enjoy his fate, and he wanted to let him do as he pleased. If Shusei had discovered a way to enjoy himself, then that was fine by Jotetsu.

Jotetsu had no plans to do anything, nor did he have anything he wanted to do. He had simply stopped being able to follow Kojin’s orders.

“Now then, where will I go from here?”

Jotetsu laughed silently as he walked through the darkness. It was too dark to see even one step ahead, but that just made it all the more thrilling. Perhaps he was feeling a sense of liberation. Not being able to see what lay ahead was fun.

Chapter 1: A New Wind Blows in the Rear Palace

I

A warm spring breeze was blowing. The garden of the Palace of Small Wings, located on the outskirts of the rear palace, was lively with the chirping of birds. Trees and flowers were budding, and someone's pet cat was sleeping curled up on the stone paving, warmed by the sun.

It was the height of spring in the 113th year of the Konkokuan calendar.

"Of course, I knew from the start that you would climb up to a high-ranking position one day, Lady Rimi. You're somehow different from other palace women, after all," the old handmaid said as she happily served Rimi tea.

The handmaid was currently visiting the dwelling belonging to Setsu Rimi, a palace woman of the Konkokuan rear palace and a Lady of Precious Bevy of sixth rank. It was located in the corner of the Palace of Small Wings. With the doors to the living room open, you could see into the garden from the table, which made for a pleasant view.

"Oh, yes..." Rimi replied vacantly as she rested her head on her hand. "It's only been a year, but it feels like it's been forever. Ever since I joined the rear palace, you've treated me differently from other palace women—saying that a foreign girl like me was not fit for the status of Lady of Precious Bevy."

"M-My, Lady Rimi! Do you still remember a joke such as that?"

"Yeah... Pretty vividly too... Every little painful comment..."

Hearing Rimi's distant response, the handmaid's face froze. The celadon teapot in her hand started clattering as it trembled.

"Um... You're not planning on taking revenge after all this time, are you?" the handmaid asked timidly.

One year had passed since Rimi had first joined the rear palace. Back then she would never even have imagined that she, a foreign palace woman, would be

chosen as the empress—and that she would accept the offer.

I've barely had any time to cook since I returned from Castle Seika...

Until now, Rimi had always visited the kitchen of the Palace of Small Wings carefreely, making sweets for the four consorts and snacks to eat with Shusei at tea time almost every day. This had been possible thanks to those around her—especially her handmaid—letting her do more or less whatever she wanted. Now, however, things were not as simple. Everyone would be paying attention to every single move Rimi made.

Everyone is watching me, so Tama is too scared to come out of my bedroom. Instead, she's started to go outside at night when no one's around to see her.

Having recovered her energy, Tama was currently cooped up in the other room. During the day, she would crawl into Rimi's bed and sleep, only to suddenly turn energetic at night when she would go outside to play.

The day of Rimi's enthronement ceremony had yet to be decided, but everyone in the imperial palace was already aware that she had been chosen.

A Lady of Precious Bevy becoming empress out of nowhere was unheard of. The rear palace had turned lively with both people cheering her on and those making their disapproval apparent, and the women of the rear palace had yet to calm down. No matter where Rimi went, she would be followed by gazes of envy and disgust.

Lady Saigu, it seems fate had something absolutely ridiculous in store for me.

Rimi was the one who had decided to accept the proposal. Still, the fact that she would become the empress hadn't sunk in.

"Talk about not knowing one's place..." Rimi muttered.

Hearing Rimi's remark, the old handmaid appeared to have misunderstood something as she froze in place and her face turned pale.

"I-I-I'm terribly sorry! I don't know what I was thinking back then! You're right, I really didn't know my place!" The handmaid apologized profusely, but it failed to reach Rimi's ears.

"If someone was angry enough, turning to dust might be the only way out..."

“Forgive me! Please don’t order me to turn to dust! That’s absolutely frightening! Spare me!” the handmaid shrieked as she started groveling on the floor.

Rimi finally noticed what the handmaid was doing.

“Huh? What are you doing? What happened? Did you see a ghost?” Rimi asked as she observed the old woman trembling on the floor.

“Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu, are you disciplining your handmaid?” an amused voice asked from the garden, and Rimi turned toward the source.

“Noble Consort So! And Pure Consort Yo, Virtuous Consort Ho, and Worthy Consort On too! What are you all doing here?” Rimi asked, surprised.

The consorts had just entered the garden outside followed by their handmaids, forming a large group of people. Surprised to see the consorts here, the palace women of the Palace of Small Wings hurriedly got on their knees to greet them.

It was certainly an odd sight for the four consorts to visit a palace in the outskirts of the rear palace like this. It was not unlike angels descending upon a run-down house in the countryside.

Rimi exited her living room and was just about to kneel to greet the consorts as usual when Virtuous Consort Ho spoke to her in an amused tone.

“Oh? Remind me, are you of a standing where you should be kneeling before us, Lady Setsu?” Ho asked.

Rimi froze in response, and Pure Consort Yo ran up to her and grabbed her arm.

“My, dearest, how silly you are,” Yo said.

“I’m sorry, I’m just so used to it,” Rimi explained.

Still, Rimi felt awkward greeting the consorts without kneeling. Noticing this, Worthy Consort On smiled at her.

“I’m sure it’s not easy to get used to this so quickly. Let’s take it slow, Lady Setsu,” On said.

“Thank you, consorts,” Rimi said. “But what are you all doing here?”

These were the four women who Rimi could trust and liked more than anyone in the rear palace—and they had also confessed to liking her back. The mere sight of them caused a relieved smile to show on Rimi’s face.

“We are here to invite you along with us,” So said aloofly. “We figured that it would be best to go and inspect the Palace of Northern Peaks together.”

The Palace of Northern Peaks, located in the northern part of the rear palace, served as the residence of the empress. Although a date had yet to be set for the enthronement ceremony, preparations had already begun for Rimi to move in.

“You should express your preference when it comes to the placement of the furnishings, the arrangement of the garden, and the decorations,” Ho explained. “It’s going to be your home in the future, so you need to make sure that it’s to your liking. We can give you advice if you need it.”

Hearing Ho’s words, the handmaid who had been groveling just a moment ago looked up at Rimi with stars in her eyes.

“My, you get to furnish the Palace of Northern Peaks to your liking! How wonderful!” the handmaid exclaimed. “Lady Rimi, let’s be on our way!”

It seemed the handmaid had forgotten all about her fear at the prospect of getting to rearrange the most prestigious palace in the rear palace freely.

As far as Rimi was concerned, all she needed from a home was a roof over her head. Still, as an empress, if her palace was run-down or in poor taste, it could reflect poorly on the emperor.

I need to ensure that the Palace of Northern Peaks is prepared properly for His Majesty’s sake, Rimi thought as she appreciated how important her duty was.

“Thank you, consorts. Let’s be off. I’d love for you to accompany me,” Rimi said.

The fact that the consorts had come to invite her meant that this was an important part of the preparations. They were doing their best to educate Rimi, who was ignorant of Konkokuan traditions.

Yo took Rimi's arm and skipped merrily next to her as they left the Palace of Small Wings.

Rimi appreciated the consorts' thoughtfulness, and she was beside herself with joy that they seemed to be enjoying preparing for the enthronement ceremony despite her being the key figure in the ceremony instead of them.

As they walked toward the Palace of Northern Peaks, a breeze carrying the scent of pear blossoms blew past her, causing her skirt to flutter. Suddenly, a feeling she had been suppressing deep inside reared its head.

Master Shusei...

Rimi recalled the events of one year prior when she had first spoken to Shusei alone in the pear garden at night. Lately, she had not even had a chance to speak properly to Shusei. Rimi still had a duty to show Tama to Shohi each morning, and as Shusei was always present, she would exchange a few words with him. But ever since Rimi had been officially chosen as the next empress, the palace attendant Sai Hakurei would accompany her any time she left the rear palace. She had become unable to continue her job of assisting Shusei in his cuisinology research.

Under normal circumstances, the prospective empress would not be allowed to leave the rear palace. The fact that she was still allowed to do so was a result of Shohi's benevolence. He appeared to be reluctant to imprison her in the rear palace without warning.

His Majesty has become a far more compassionate person than before. I know that he will rule the country as a marvelous emperor. It is my duty as his subject to do everything in my power to support him. I will work together with Master Shusei toward the same goal.

Rimi's feelings for Shusei had not yet disappeared, and she would still feel an aching pain in her chest at times like this. But those very feelings were what drove her to protect the place where Shusei belonged. Her resolve would not fade. She knew what her place was and what she had to protect.

Followed by her handmaid, Rimi walked toward the Palace of Northern Peaks, shielded from the sun by an umbrella that the consorts' handmaids held. As she did, Hakurei approached the party from the opposite direction. As he gracefully

rocked from side to side with each step, looking as captivating as always, Hakurei's pale brown hair and eyes appeared beautiful under the spring sun. He was currently in charge of getting the Palace of Northern Peaks ready.

"Hakurei, thank you for your hard work," So, On, and Yo said as they approached him. Ho, however, looked the other way, as if to avoid looking at something filthy.

Virtuous Consort Ho... She really does hate Master Hakurei now...

Ever since the events of Castle Seika, Ho had refused to even meet Hakurei's gaze. Knowing what Hakurei truly felt, Rimi's heart ached at the sight. Hakurei himself, however, seemed to not even notice, greeting the consorts with an elegant bow.

"I am happy to see that you are doing well, consorts," Hakurei said. "Rimi, perfect timing. I was just about to come and get you. We've had a bit of trouble. I was instructed to take you to His Majesty. Come with me. We're leaving for the outer palace."

"Trouble? What happened, Hakurei? Is it about the enthronement ceremony?" Yo asked, and Hakurei nodded meekly.

"In a sense, although it's not so much about the ceremony as Rimi's enthronement itself."

"Her enthronement?" On asked with a puzzled expression. "What do you mean exactly?"

"A document protesting making Rimi empress was sent to His Majesty by a number of people, spearheaded by the Minister of Personnel," Hakurei explained calmly, making all four consorts stare back at him with wide eyes.

"That's ridiculous. How dare a subject object to the emperor's choice? How disrespectful," So barked in a loud voice.

Ho had a disapproving look on her face.

"I've never heard of something like that happening before," On mumbled in surprise.

"Noble Consort So, Worthy Consort On, as you say, it is the emperor's right to

choose his empress. No one can overrule his choice," Hakurei said as he frowned uncharacteristically. "As far as I'm concerned, subjects voicing their disapproval of the emperor's choice of empress is a highly unusual situation."

The officials are even voicing their opinions on decisions that should be entirely up to the emperor. They're obviously not respecting him as they should. During the events surrounding the Saisakokuan delegation, Rimi had noticed how the officials were disrespecting Shohi. She wondered how the prideful emperor must have felt about it. *I'm sure he's pretending to be unfazed, putting up a brave front. But at the same time, he must be growing irritated and feeling pathetic for being unable to rein in his officials. I need to at least be by his side so I can comfort him.*

"Why would some officials object to my dearest becoming empress, Hakurei? What's wrong with that?" Yo asked with a puzzled voice.

"They cite her being from Wakoku originally as the reason," Hakurei explained.

"But that's not something she can help. What is she supposed to do about that?" Yo replied in exasperation.

"Actually, it seems there's a plan to make sure that Rimi can become the empress. Shusei and the Minister of Rites came up with it," Hakurei said.

Rimi looked at Hakurei in confusion.

"A plan?"

II

Ryu Shohi, the emperor of Konkoku, was sitting motionless, his fist digging into the armrest of his chair. Having served him since he was young, it was evident to the cuisinologist, Shu Shusei, that Shohi was trying to suppress his rage.

His Majesty has every right to be upset with the officials even interfering in his choice of an empress. They would never have done anything like this if they actually respected him. But the fact that he's holding back his anger is a sign of how much he's grown.

A letter had reached Shohi's desk yesterday afternoon. It was signed by several influential officials, spearheaded by the Minister of Personnel, and claimed that the concubine Shohi had chosen was unfit to be the empress of Konkoku. Their reasons for objecting were included. First, the officials feared that making a Wakokuan empress would result in Wakoku—which was currently having to accept unfair trade deals due to its status as a subject of Konkoku—manipulating this fact to demand fairer trade terms. Second, they worried that the empress would convince Shohi to accept agreements advantageous to Wakoku. The letter ended with an expression of hope that the emperor would rescind his offer.

Although the officials had claimed that they "hoped" that Shohi would take their advice, based on how it was written, the letter was a blatant attempt to exert pressure on him. It wasn't hard to guess that, were he to ignore their request, Shohi would face significant hardships when tending to the official business of the country in the future.

Shohi had naturally become furious, but he had not been satisfied with simply yelling in a frenzy. He had summoned the Minister of Rites, Jin Keiyu, along with Shusei, who were in charge of the arrangements for the enthronement ceremony. After showing them the letter, he had then asked them for their advice.

"Well, well, this is quite something," Keiyu said nonchalantly as he read the letter.

Shusei had predicted that there would be some amount of pushback as Shohi announced his choice of empress. However, Shusei had never expected something of this scale, so he was utterly taken aback.

"So, what do we do about this?" Keiyu asked, glancing toward Shusei.

"I think the two of us should mull this over for a day," Shusei said as he excused himself and left Shohi's room.

The plan Shusei had thought of was dependent on Keiyu's assistance. His backing would completely change the effectiveness of his plan.

Shusei had worried whether the frivolous womanizer that was the Minister of Rites would be willing to give the issue some serious thought with him. But

Keiyu was surprisingly enthusiastic as he discussed what the best path forward would be.

As morning came, Keiyu and Shusei had requested an audience with Shohi where they wished to discuss the plan along with Setsu Rimi.

Inside Shohi's office, the windows and doors were wide open, and the wind was wafting the scent of fresh buds through them. Shohi was sitting by an ebony desk, flanked by Shusei and Jotetsu. Keiyu was sitting by a table in the middle of the room, yawning. Still a bachelor in his thirties who spent his nights fooling around in town, he was the very face of frivolousness. Yet when it came to his job, he was shrewd and resourceful. Keiyu was even known as the chancellor Shu Kojin's right hand.

He may be a womanizer, but there's no doubting his skill as Minister of Rites. That much had been apparent to Shusei during their discussion the day before.

The rustling of clothes could be heard from the hallway leading straight to the office when Hakurei appeared by the entrance.

"I have brought Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu, Your Majesty," Hakurei said as he bowed before stepping away to the side of the door. Rimi showed up next.

"I believe you summoned me, Your Majesty?" Rimi said as she also greeted Shohi with a bow.

Rimi looked around the room with her eyes as large and round as usual, an adorable, innocent expression on her face. Her eyes quivered hesitantly as they fell on Shusei, but he simply grinned warmly at her. Rimi gave him a relieved smile in return.

Ever since the day Rimi had accepted Shohi's proposal, Shusei had actually felt more relaxed around her—perhaps because he now had a clear understanding of what he needed and wanted to do. Still, his feelings of affection toward her remained unchanged.

Jotetsu seemed to be studying Shusei's expression, but it didn't bother him.

You're the one who encouraged me in the first place, Jotetsu.

Shusei was rarely able to get a read on Jotetsu, but he didn't care what was

going through his mind. All Shusei was worried about was what he needed to achieve. He was making use of all the wisdom and knowledge he possessed to find a path to his desired future. If he used his brain for only his own sake, he was confident that his wish would come true.

First I need to secure Rimi's position so that she will be untouchable in case something were to happen in the future.



Rimi would always be startled at the sight of Shusei.

Shusei was giving her a calm smile. Rimi had only seen him a handful of times since she had accepted the offer to become the empress. But each time she saw him, he would give her the same kind smile that he always had. The fact that he could look at her with such a composed expression was a result of the fact that they had both realized where they belonged and given up on each other without reservations.

Rimi's feelings for Shusei continued to live on, deep in her chest. However, she knew that they would never again be allowed to best her. The perilous tightrope walk that had been taking place between Rimi and Shusei was over. They had willingly stepped down from the rope and now had their feet firmly planted on the ground. All that remained was a slight pain in Rimi's chest. As long as she could ignore that, she could engage with Shusei in the same carefree way that she had as his assistant.

"I'm sorry for calling you here on such short notice, Rimi. Did Hakurei tell you what this is about?" Shusei asked.

"I was told that some people are objecting to my being chosen as the empress," Rimi said with a nod. "Apparently they don't like that I'm from Wakoku."

"Forgive me, Rimi. If only I had been more competent, they would never have been able to act so disrespectfully," Shohi said, frowning as though his body ached somewhere.

"It's not your fault, Your Majesty. The problem is that I'm from Wakoku," Rimi reassured Shohi. "Still...it's not as if I can change the fact that I'm Wakokuan.

What should we do?”

“Keiyu and Shusei had a suggestion regarding that. A plan to make the officials keep quiet.”

“If you have a plan, why don’t you simply execute it?”

“Are you sure you should be saying that so lightly? The plan would mean you ceasing to be who you are now,” Keiyu said, looking up at Rimi from his chair with a smirk.

“What do you mean?”

“Minister, I would appreciate it if you would stop teasing her,” Shusei scolded Keiyu with a stern voice upon seeing Rimi’s worried expression. “Are you aware that you are speaking to the next empress?”

“The *next* empress. In other words, she’s not the empress yet, correct?”

“Keiyu, give it a rest. Explain the plan instead of teasing her,” Shohi demanded.

Keiyu shrugged his shoulders and looked toward Shusei as if to say, “You do it.” In response, Shusei walked up to the table, pulled a book that was lying there toward him, and put a finger on a page.

“I’ll explain,” Shusei said. “This is a record of subjects that the Ministry of Rites keeps to manage foreigners serving at the court of Konkoku. And this...”

Shusei pulled a scroll lying on the center of the table toward him and opened it carefully.

“...is a book of women kept by the Department of Service since His Majesty took the throne to keep track of the women of the rear palace,” Shusei continued. “You are listed as a Wakokuan in both records. It’s forbidden to alter something that has already been added as it would mean distorting the record. As long as you are recorded here as a Wakokuan, you’ll forever be a Wakokuan,” he explained. “But what if you were removed from the record of subjects and were instead recorded as a Konkokuan in the book of women? Then you would cease to be a Wakokuan.”

“But I’m already recorded as a Wakokuan, and you said that it’s forbidden to

change it,” Rimi noted quizzically.

“Yes, but there is a way to record your name as a Konkokuan without altering the record,” Shusei replied.

“What do you mean?” Rimi said, growing more confused by the second.

“First, we’ll have you leave the rear palace. Then both records will be updated with a note saying, ‘The Wakokuan Setsu Rimi withdrew from the imperial court.’ That would be the end of you as a Wakokuan. Afterward, you would enter the rear palace again as a distant relative of some Konkokuan noble. Then you would be recorded in the book of women as ‘Setsu Rimi, noblewoman related to Lord So-and-so.’”

“In other words, I would rejoin the rear palace while pretending to be a Konkokuan who just happened to have the same name?”

“That’s correct. However, doing so would mean completely removing your connection to Wakoku. If someone from your home country came to visit you, they would be told that the Wakokuan princess in question has left the imperial palace, her whereabouts unknown. You wouldn’t be able to meet anyone from Wakoku.”

It was a very minor thing in theory. All that would happen was that Rimi’s nationality would change from Wakokuan to Konkokuan on paper. But that minor change would have major consequences. As Shusei said, if Rimi was removed from the record as a Wakokuan, she would lose her connection to her home country.

What the opposing officials feared most was that Wakoku would end up in an advantageous position due to the empress being Wakokuan. If Rimi was Konkokuan on paper, that would no longer be the case, and Wakoku would lose any advantage that they might have had. It would also be proof that the emperor refused to recognize the empress as Wakokuan, and that she would not be able to convince him to instate policies that would be advantageous to Wakoku.

Although simple, the plan that Shusei and Keiyu had proposed was nothing short of ingenious. Even so...

Lady Saigu...

Rimi's thoughts immediately turned to her sister. Were Rimi to become Konkokuan and her connection to Wakoku lost, she would likely be unable to even write letters to her—and were she to exchange letters with her in secret and this came to light, the officials would accuse her of having conspired with Wakoku after all. That would defeat the very purpose of making her Konkokuan on paper. For the plan to work, Rimi would have to actively cease contact with Wakoku.

Becoming Konkokuan on paper means that the Wakokuan Rimi will be gone. I won't be able to write to Lady Saigu, and letters from her won't reach me either.

Part of Rimi had a strong desire to stay connected to her home country. Her pot of kaorizuke was still one of her most important belongings, and her mind would often turn to her sister. She took pride in having served as an Umashi-no-Miya. Her memories of the first place she had ever belonged were dear to her, and she wanted to stay connected to them in at least some form.

Lady Saigu... I miss you... Thinking about everything that connected her to Wakoku disappearing made her want to cry.

"Does it pain you?" Shohi asked in a worried tone, and Rimi looked at him in surprise. "If you are at all hesitant to sever your connection to Wakoku, I want you to say so."

"Of course, if you want to make Rimi your empress, there's no other choice. Are you planning on rescinding your offer, Your Majesty?" Keiyu said flippantly.

"Quiet, Keiyu," Shohi barked before turning back to Rimi. "You need not hold back. Tell me how you feel."

Hearing Shohi's words of compassion, Rimi realized what he was thinking.

His Majesty is planning on taking back his offer if I'm not agreeable to going through with the plan.

Rescinding the offer to make Rimi the empress would give the officials the impression that they had managed to make the young emperor admit defeat, and as a result, they might start acting even more boldly. But despite this, Shohi was still trying to put Rimi's feelings first. She couldn't let that happen.

Rimi glanced at Shusei, who gave her a faint nod of encouragement. She recalled how, at Castle Seika, she had struggled so much before finally coming to terms with what she had to do.

I joined the rear palace fully prepared never to be able to go back to Wakoku, didn't I? This is where I belong now. I decided that for myself. I want to value what I have. Realizing this, Rimi smiled softly.

"I'm fine. I will become Konkokuan," Rimi declared.

Rimi wondered what her Saigu sister might have said if she told her that she was planning to abandon her identity as Wakokuan to become Konkokuan instead. Perhaps she would be astonished, perhaps she would be angry, or perhaps she would even encourage her, telling her to live her life as she saw fit. Being so far away in a distant land, Rimi had no way of knowing. Maybe even her sister's voice that echoed in her head occasionally would fade away with time. After all, the Saigu served Kunimamori-no-Ōkami, the protector god of Wakoku. Would the voice of a sacred priestess who embodied Wakoku itself reach someone who had cast away her identity as Wakokuan?

Maybe I really will stop hearing her... Even so, accepting this plan was the right thing to do.

"Are you sure you are fine with that, Rimi?" Shohi asked with a stunned expression.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Rimi said without a hint of hesitation.



Keiyu left the office, taking Shusei along with him. Rimi was similarly brought back to the rear palace by Hakurei, so Shohi returned to his private chamber together with Jotetsu. Spring flowers decorated the flower stands in his room. On his table waited a tea set with daffodils depicted in silver.

“Rimi sure is determined, isn’t she?” Jotetsu said as he carelessly poured tea into the cups that an aide had prepared. He handed one to Shohi.

“I was surprised as well, but perhaps she truly is fine with this decision. It *is* that airheaded woman that we are talking about, after all.”

Rimi would always smile carefreely and seemed to accept most things without much care. That was part of what Shohi liked about her.

Jotetsu gave Shohi a knowing smirk.

“Yet it’s written all over your face that you are crazy about that very airheaded woman. Have you tried kissing her yet?” Jotetsu teased.

Shohi choked on his tea as his face turned red.

“Are you mad?!” Shohi yelled.

“So no, from the looks of it. You’re surprisingly innocent, aren’t you?”

As Shohi attempted to argue back, he noticed Hakurei’s figure by the door.

“Excuse me,” Hakurei said.

“What is the matter, Hakurei?” Shohi asked.

“There is something that I thought you needed to hear, Your Majesty.”

Fed up with Jotetsu’s teasing, Shohi silently thanked Hakurei from the bottom of his heart as he invited him into the room.

Ever since the incident with the Quinary Dragon, Hakurei had appeared to be serving Shohi earnestly. However, he had claimed to be evaluating whether Shohi was fit to be emperor, so if Shohi were to do anything to disappoint him, there was no telling what might happen. Still, Hakurei showed no indication of planning anything. Shohi even felt as though he was slowly growing closer to him.

“And what is that?” Shohi asked.

“I understand that you are planning to have Rimi leave the rear palace temporarily to pass her off as Konkokuan,” Hakurei said.

“Yes, Keiyu and Shusei are working to that end. Is something the matter?”

“If you’re having Rimi leave the rear palace, you need to be sure to have a trustworthy bodyguard accompany her. Someone might attempt to assassinate her.”

III

“What are you talking about?” Shohi said, furrowing his brow while Jotetsu glanced toward Hakurei with his head turned down as if to carefully study him.

“Do you not find it unnatural that the Minister of Personnel would express his disapproval of Rimi becoming empress so publicly? Wakoku is a vassal state of Konkoku. I don’t see why them possibly securing slightly better terms of trade would be such a cause for concern,” Hakurei explained.

Unnatural. That word got Shohi thinking.

Even if we suffered a loss in our relationship with Wakoku, the ones that would be directly affected are the Ministries of Rites and Revenue who are responsible for diplomacy and finances. It would have nothing to do with the Ministry of Personnel. I cannot imagine that the Minister of Personnel is so loyal that he would consider what the good of the court as a whole is and then intentionally send me such a disrespectful letter.

Shohi’s eyes met Hakurei’s, and Hakurei nodded as if to affirm Shohi’s suspicion.

“Then why would the Minister of Personnel express his disapproval like that?” Shohi asked.

“He is likely colluding with a certain influential person who dislikes Wakokuans. There are rumors that the Minister of Personnel is heavily indebted to that person and is forced to do his bidding. That person dislikes Wakokuans, and the mere thought of a Wakokuan being placed at the top of the rear palace’s hierarchy must disgust him,” Hakurei explained.

Hearing this, Shohi finally realized who was behind this.

“The Director of the Department of Service, I Bunryo...” Shohi mumbled.

I Bunryo had been in charge of the rear palace since before Shohi and Hakurei were born. He was said to have amassed a fortune over the years by making use of his position. The rear palace was full of daughters of wealthy noble houses and merchants, meaning that making special accommodations for them was a surefire way to become rich.

Bunryo was a fierce chauvinist who considered even low-born Konkokuans vile. It would have been a surprise if he saw Wakokuans as people at all. He had made that clear during his confrontation with the four consorts before the Declaration of Stability.

“Even if Rimi was made Konkokuan on paper, as far as Director I is concerned, she will forever be Wakokuan. He will do anything in his power to ensure that she does not rise to the rank of empress. He can be frighteningly fixated,” Hakurei said as a shadow passed over his eyes. “I’ve experienced it first hand.”

The sight of Hakurei’s momentary somber expression made Shohi’s chest ache.

Just what has Hakurei been through over these past eleven years? Hakurei’s graceful and beautiful appearance made the thought all the more painful. Shohi wanted to ask if it had been difficult, but a combination of embarrassment and a reluctance to make Hakurei reflect on his brutal experiences made him fall silent.

“Thus, I am here to suggest having a skilled and trustworthy bodyguard protect her,” Hakurei continued. “Her leaving the rear palace would be the perfect time to strike.”

“I will not let him hurt her. Rimi belongs to me,” Shohi declared.

Even more so than being disrespected, the idea of looking down on others for no reason made Shohi infuriated. He did not know how I Bunryo had treated Hakurei over the years, but from how Hakurei was speaking, the experience had clearly not been pleasant.

Hakurei...and now Rimi...

The absolute ridiculousness of Rimi's life being in danger made even Shohi feel something that almost bordered on hatred. However, he was the emperor and therefore was unable to stay by Rimi's side at all times. He was unable to even protect her alone. Shohi cursed how restrictive being the emperor was.

If I cannot protect her, I need to appoint the most trusted bodyguard I can think of. That was all he could do.

"Jotetsu," Shohi said as he suppressed his rage.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Jotetsu replied in a low voice.

"Will you protect Rimi?"

"If you so command. Still, would someone really try to assassinate her just for being from Wakoku? Even if you didn't care for her, what would there be to gain?" Jotetsu asked. As an experienced military officer and secret agent, the thought of killing someone for no concrete gain must have seemed like pure nonsense.

"Prejudice and loathing can't be reasoned with by using logic. That's what makes it especially dangerous," Hakurei explained.

"Are you sure your suspicion isn't just an unfounded fear grounded in your own prejudice and loathing?" Jotetsu suggested as he gave Hakurei a skeptical smile.

"No, Jotetsu. I suspect Hakurei's misgiving is correct," Shohi said. As someone who had grown up in the rear palace, he knew full well the nature of I Bunryo. The man had greedily ruled over the place together with Shohi's mother, Noble Consort En. "I believe he is right to fear what might happen. That is why I command you to protect her."

"By all means then, if you're that worried, I'll do it," Jotetsu replied lethargically.

Jotetsu's listless demeanor was heartening. As far as Shohi was concerned, he was the best bodyguard one could ask for.

Even though Jotetsu was Shohi's bodyguard, he would at times act on Shu Kojin's orders. As Kojin was the one who had appointed him as Shohi's

bodyguard, it was not difficult to imagine that the two of them must have been connected in some way. But Shohi had no interest in restricting him and telling him to be loyal to only him as if he were a possessive woman. He was confident that no matter whose orders Jotetsu acted on, he would never do something disadvantageous to Shohi. This was the result of a sense of trust that had slowly grown over the course of spending almost ten years together. Something that grows slowly spreads its roots wide and will not be fazed by trivial matters.



Three days later, Rimi was informed that the date for the enthronement ceremony had been decided. It would take place on the first day of the third cycle of the moon of the dragon. Apparently, the court priests had divined that this was the optimal date for the ceremony. The date was at the start of summer, roughly sixty days off.

The moment Rimi received the news, things suddenly became busy for her. Arrangements were made for her to leave the rear palace. It was decided that she would move to the Palace of the Water Spirit. No particular ceremony was held upon her leaving, and she left using a small carriage parked by the side gate. Her old handmaid saw her off in tears as she repeated, “Do come back as soon as you can!”

The carriage passed by the carriages belonging to merchants delivering food supplies and daily necessities as it quietly exited through the gate. Rimi looked back at the tiled roofs of the rear palace through the carriage’s window as she felt a tingling sadness at leaving it behind. She could guess how women who had been dismissed from the rear palace must have felt a combination of liberation and emptiness as they left, burdened by worry for what lay ahead and something akin to a sense of defeat.

Now, the Umashi-no-Miya from Wakoku, Ayako—Setsu Rimi—has gone missing forever.

Rimi stroked the terracotta pot of kaorizuke in her lap. Shusei guaranteed that she would at least be allowed to keep it. His reason was that it could be explained as an unusual foreign food that had been presented as a tribute.

However, as far as the letters that Rimi’s Saigu sister had given her upon

leaving Wakoku were concerned, Rimi had been given no choice but to burn them in the candle flame as she left the Palace of Small Wings. She had also burned the glossary of slang that the Wakokuan interpreter had given her—although she was worried that she would have a hard time in the future whenever she would have to sit in on a slang-filled Konkokuan conversation.

On the one hand, the loss of the glossary was something she could handle well enough. She could shrug it off, joking that she would probably struggle in the future. Burning her sister's letters, on the other hand, had felt like the Saigu's very heart had been burning in front of her, and she had been overcome with a sense of emptiness. Now, she felt sadness welling up inside of her instead as the realization dawned on her that the girl called Ayako who had come from Wakoku was now completely gone.

Lady Saigu, I'm becoming Konkokuan. I won't be able to read your letters anymore nor send any.

As Rimi turned her face down, tears started streaming from her eyes. Tama popped out from under Rimi's skirt and looked at her with her beautiful blue eyes. She swiftly ran up to Rimi's shoulder and rubbed her tiny nose against Rimi's cheek.

"Thank you, Tama," Rimi said softly. The small dragon's sympathy made her happy.

I'll let this sadness last until I reach the Palace of the Water Spirit. Tama is here in Konkoku with me, as is His Majesty, Master Shusei, and the consorts. I have nothing to be sad about. Nothing to cry about.

Rimi hugged Tama, hung her head, and cried silently, not letting anyone see her.

The Palace of the Water Spirit served as the emperor's summer retreat, and it was also where Rimi had been confined briefly during the spring of the previous year. Arrangements had been made for Rimi to rejoin the rear palace as a relative of Shu Kojin, so she would be put in Kojin's care for the duration of her stay at the Palace of the Water Spirit.

"U-Um..." Rimi stammered as she stood frozen in the abode she had been

given in the Palace of the Water Spirit.

The source of Rimi's current bewilderment was resting on the sofa, lying with his head on his arms as he waved nonchalantly at her.

"What's wrong, Rimi? Don't mind me. Go ahead and unpack or remove your ruqun belt or whatever," Jotetsu said with an expression like that of a laughing wolf.

The buildings of the Palace of the Water Spirit were connected by a passageway that ran alongside the bank of Jade Spring, a spring filled with deep green water. Part of the cloisters extended slightly past the bank and over the water, making it so that even when walking between buildings, you could feel the wind that traveled over the water surface with your whole body. There was also a passageway that seemed to pierce the spring through the middle. Walking on it truly felt like you were walking on water. The corridor expanded into a circle in the center, on which a small gazebo was placed.

Rimi had been given a spacious abode in the palace containing four rooms—a living room, a bedroom, a room for handmaids to stand by and wait for her orders, and a spare room. It had a balcony that extended over the spring, from which a refreshing wind was blowing. Rimi imagined how nice it would be to relax on the balcony in the summer, shaded by an umbrella.

Rimi was visiting the Palace of the Water Spirit under the guise of being a relative of Shu Kojin's. Therefore she had to temporarily part with her own handmaid. The servants and handmaids currently working at the Palace of the Water Spirit were employed by the Shu house. Rimi had thought that she had been left without anyone she recognized there with her—only to find Jotetsu waiting in her own room. Tama let out a surprised squeal from Rimi's shoulder and quickly dove into her skirt.

"Before I unpack, I have something I'd like to ask," Rimi said.

"Is it how to remove your belt? In that case, I'd be happy to teach you, slowly and carefully."

Rimi's gaze quickly turned cold as she stared at Jotetsu.

"Master Jotetsu, I can't believe I would hear that from someone who has

spent so many years together with Master Shusei, the very embodiment of refinement," Rimi said.

"You think? Shusei makes up for whatever refinement I'm lacking, while I make up for the vulgarity Shusei is lacking. Pretty good relationship if I do say so myself," Jotetsu said. "Shusei's so innocent, and he always takes my advice at face value. One time I told him how to comfort a noblewoman, and he just stood there and nodded."

"How to comfort a noblewoman... Wait, you're the one who taught him that, Master Jotetsu?!"

Rimi recalled what had happened the last time she had stayed at the Palace of the Water Spirit, one year prior, when Shusei had claimed that he had been taught the right way to console a noblewoman, only to innocently attempt to perform an act that had appeared to be everything but that.

"He tried it out on you? Way to go, Shusei." Jotetsu laughed.

"You told Master Shusei that as a joke, didn't you? I just know it!"

"That's what friendship is like. Back then he didn't seem to have the slightest interest in women, so I was a bit worried for him, one man to another. But never mind that. What did you want to ask me?"

"Oh, right. My question. I was wondering what in the world you are doing resting in my room. You're His Majesty's bodyguard, aren't you? Should you really be away from him?"

"I'm here on orders from that very same emperor," Jotetsu said as he sat up and gave Rimi a sharp glance. "There's a high possibility that someone's trying to kill you. I'm here to protect you on His Majesty's orders."

"Kill me? Who? And why me, of all people?"

"There's a person who refuses to let a Wakokuan take the throne. I Bunryo. He's probably the same person who convinced the Minister of Personnel to express his disapproval. Shusei and the Minister of Rites came up with this plan in response. Even if it's just a question of semantics, once this is over, you'll formally be a Konkokuan, and we'll be able to shut the people opposing you up. Bunryo has probably realized this and will likely do anything to kill you before

that happens.”

The name I Bunryo sent chills down Rimi’s spine. He had accused Rimi of theft based solely on the fact that she was from Wakoku. He seemed to have nothing but contempt for her, and since that contempt was unfounded and based on nothing but his personal hatred, it was the kind of disdain that was impossible to change. He would never stand idly by as a Wakokuan threatened to rise to the highest position in the very same rear palace that he had ruled over for so long.

“Would Director I really go that far?” Rimi asked.

“That’s what Hakurei claims. The man who has spent eleven years serving Director I while suffering his abuse says that he would not be above doing that. So His Majesty took Hakurei’s advice. And that’s why I’m here,” Jotetsu explained nonchalantly.

“It appears that Master Hakurei is serving His Majesty faithfully, then,” Rimi noted. The thought of the two unfortunate brothers helping each other—if somewhat awkwardly—was heartwarming.

“I haven’t let go of my skepticism just yet. I can’t help but wonder what was going through that pretty face of his as he gave His Majesty that advice,” Jotetsu replied.

“My, what a harsh thing to say. I can’t believe you would doubt my pure intentions,” someone suddenly said from the doorway. Rimi turned around to find Hakurei standing there, smiling.

“Master Hakurei! What are you doing here?” Rimi asked.

“The four consorts will be staying at the Palace of the Water Spirit starting tomorrow. I’m here to prepare,” Hakurei explained.

“The consorts are coming here?!” Rimi exclaimed, jumping from surprise and joy.

“They asked His Majesty themselves for permission to stay here to help you with your education, and His Majesty said yes. It seems they wanted to surprise you.”

The consorts coming to visit her was incredibly reassuring for Rimi.

Hakurei listlessly leaned against the doorframe as he looked around the room.

“I don’t see Shusei. What happened to him? Did His Majesty give him some kind of special order?” Hakurei asked.

“Beats me,” Jotetsu said, brushing the question off.

Meanwhile, Rimi answered Hakurei’s question earnestly.

“I’m sure Master Shusei is staying away because he shouldn’t be near me—I mean, near the Palace of the Water Spirit. That’s the right decision, given his background,” Rimi said.

“Shusei is the heir to the Shu house. Right now both you and this palace are in the hands of the Shu house, so if anything, shouldn’t he be here? Or is he planning something?” Hakurei asked.

Rimi could do nothing but smile awkwardly in response to Hakurei’s sound argument. Jotetsu studied Rimi’s expression suspiciously for a moment, but he quickly changed the subject.

“What about you? What are you planning, warning His Majesty like that, Hakurei?” Jotetsu asked. “Do you want me to strip that sheep’s clothing off you by force?”

“You needn’t be so impatient. When the time is right, I’ll remove my sheep’s clothing myself,” Hakurei said. “Oh?”

Hakurei turned his gaze to the corridor outside before quickly correcting his posture, moving out of the doorway, and kneeling on the floor. Walking gallantly toward the room was the emperor of Konkoku, Shohi, wearing formal robes colored a purple so dark it could be mistaken for black.

Rimi and Jotetsu started to kneel as well, but Shohi quickly held up his hand.

“There is no need for that. I am only here to see how Rimi is doing. I do not have much time,” Shohi declared as he entered the room. “I received word that you had been moved from the rear palace to the Palace of the Water Spirit today. I neglected to inform you that I have assigned Jotetsu as your bodyguard, so I thought that I should come and tell you. And I was also curious to see how

you were faring.”

Telling Rimi about Jotetsu was likely only a pretext—in truth, he had been beside himself with worry about Rimi, and had taken whatever time he had managed to find amidst his official duties to come and see her. Rimi found it cute how awkwardly he was attempting to hide this.

“Thank you for your concern, Your Majesty. I’m perfectly fine,” Rimi assured Shohi.

Before Rimi knew it, Jotetsu and Hakurei had disappeared from the room. The aides who had been accompanying Shohi were similarly gone from sight.

Huh? Where did everyone go?

“Shusei has told me that you will only be staying here until the Nocturnal Liturgy, and then you will return to the rear palace after that. I will not be able to visit the Palace of the Water Spirit regularly during that time. Will you be all right?” Shohi asked.

“I’ll be absolutely, perfectly fine!” Rimi said with a soft smile so as to not worry Shohi. “I won’t be lonely one bit!”

Shohi made a troubled expression.

“Well, I am relieved to hear it. However, I am not sure what to think of being told that you will not be the least bit lonely without me...” Shohi said.

“Did I say that incorrectly? I won’t be lonely one bite? No, that’s wrong... I won’t be lonely one hair? Is that right?” Rimi said in a panic.

“No. There are those who are so attached to their hair that they would feel like it was the end of the world if they didn’t have it. ‘One bit’ is right. I am simply wondering if being away from me is a breath of fresh air for you,” Shohi said with a bitter smile.

“That is not the case. It pains me to be here when I’m supposed to be by your side and serving you. So I at least want to make sure that I don’t worry you,” Rimi replied.

“I do not mind if you make me worried.”

Shohi took a swift step forward, wrapped his arms around Rimi’s waist, and

pulled her closer. He gazed into her eyes, their faces almost close enough for their noses to touch. Rimi's face tensed as her heart started beating rapidly.

"Your Majesty?!" Rimi exclaimed.

Rimi finally realized why Jotetsu and Hakurei had vanished without notice.

S-S-So that's why! They're all being considerate of His Majesty! He's come all this way to visit his future empress, so it's only natural to assume that he had some particular goal in mind—something that would be inappropriate for others to witness. That's it, isn't it?!

Of course, Rimi had been prepared for something like this to happen. But she originally hadn't thought that anything would happen until after the enthronement ceremony. On second thought, however, the empress was generally someone who had already been a concubine of the rear palace, and it was to be expected that the emperor had already had his way with her. If anything, Rimi was the odd one out. So, there was no telling when something might happen. Agreeing to become the empress meant that Rimi had already agreed to devote everything to Shohi.

It was still bright outside—but perhaps the time of day was of no concern to the emperor. Cold sweat cooled Rimi's back. Under her skirt, Tama was wagging her tail back and forth, perhaps noticing how tense Rimi was. The soft tail was repeatedly stroking Rimi's knee.

"You belong to me. It is my responsibility to take care of my belongings. You do not have to hold back around me," Shohi said.

An intense allure emanated from Shohi's eyes, decorated by long and thick eyelashes. Rimi wondered how an emperor could be this beautiful—and compassionate, at that. Any woman would have been overjoyed at being told that she didn't have to hold back while being embraced by him.

The only problem was the feelings that still lingered in her heart and refused to fade.

"Can I kiss you?" Shohi asked, and a feeling not unlike fear welled up inside Rimi.

Master Shusei... Rimi called out in her mind, but she did not notice this

herself. All she could tell was that she was struggling to breathe and afraid of what was about to happen.

This was bound to happen one day, and Rimi had to be prepared for it. Knowing this, she responded “yes,” as she closed her eyes, her body quivering faintly.

Master Shusei. Master Shusei. Master Shusei. Rimi felt like her chest was screaming, but she pretended not to hear its voice. She knew she couldn’t let herself listen.

Rimi was pulled even closer as she felt Shohi’s breath on her lips.

Chapter 2: I Wish I Could Be a Stray Dog Tonight

I

Here it comes!

Rimi squeezed her eyes closed even tighter as her body was frozen in place. But even after waiting for a while, she couldn't feel anything touch her lips.

Huh?

Rimi timidly opened her eyes to find Shohi looking at her, dispirited.

"Your Majesty? What happened to the, um, kiss?" Rimi asked.

"I lost interest," Shohi said curtly.

"Really? How come? Could it be that you're... Um... What was the name of that symptom again... Dysfunctional, Your Majesty?" Rimi stammered as she grasped for the proper words.

"Do not speak so frankly," Shohi replied.

"But I even used your title," Rimi pointed out.

"That does not make it polite. I lost interest because you were making an expression as if you were suffering from a toothache."

Rimi put her hands on her cheeks, surprised to hear that she had been making such a strange face.

"My expression?! I'm sorry, Your Majesty! I was just a bit nervous. Don't worry, I'm fine. I will make a better expression right away," Rimi said.

"Never mind. Do not force yourself." Shohi said as he maintained his dispirited expression and removed his hands from Rimi's waist. He patted her head like a child. Despite being a year younger than Rimi, Shohi was still taller than her, and being patted on her head like this made Rimi almost feel like she was the younger one. She felt as though Shohi seemed a bit more mature than

when they had first met.

“I realize that you are inexperienced. I will wait until the Nocturnal Liturgy. Have the four consorts teach you what you need to know in the meantime. I am leaving,” Shohi declared as he turned around and swiftly exited the room.

Rimi ran after Shohi into the hallway and gave him a deep bow as she watched him walk away. Part of her was relieved. Although she knew that it would happen sooner or later, she still was not emotionally prepared.

I really do feel bad for His Majesty. I have to hurry up. I can’t let this drag on forever.

Tama swiftly slid out from under Rimi’s skirt and climbed up on her shoulder. She sent her a concerned glance as if to say, “Are you okay?” Rimi stroked the creature’s soft fur.

“I’m all right, Tama. I need to learn everything I can from the consorts to make sure I don’t upset His Majesty any more than I already have.”

Then a question suddenly surfaced in Rimi’s mind.

“But what’s that Nocturnal Liturgy that His Majesty was talking about?”



“Shusei,” a voice called out from behind the scholar on his way to the cuisinology hall. It was Shu Kojin.

“What are you doing here at the Ministry of Rites, Father?” Shusei asked.

Shusei had been told that Kojin would be spending the whole day at the Ministry of Revenue debating taxation. He should not have had any business with the Ministry of Rites.

“I am here because I heard that you had not left for the Palace of the Water Spirit. Why are you still here? You are the one who came up with this plan alongside Keiyu, are you not?” Kojin asked.

“Is there a reason for me to be present? As long as everyone understands the plan, I shouldn’t be needed at the Palace of the Water Spirit. I figured it was better to spend the time furthering my cuisinology research,” Shusei answered.

“If we are to succeed with this, we should aim for perfection. Setsu Rimi

needs a tutor to educate her on how to be a Konkokuan."

"The four consorts have volunteered to take up that role."

"The consorts are women of the rear palace. Only someone who works in the outer palace can teach her what an empress needs to know, such as the state of the outer palace, governing, and how to interact with subjects."

"I have already asked Vice Minister En of the Ministry of Rites to—"

"There is none more suited for the role than you," Kojin asserted, cutting off Shusei. "As far as I am concerned, you are the best tutor an empress could ask for. You are known as the foremost scholar of Konkoku, are you not? Not to mention, she has been entrusted to the Shu house. You are the man for the job."

Hearing the faintly ridiculing tone toward the end of Kojin's remark, Shusei hid his clenched fist inside his sleeve.

This man...

Shusei had been utterly puzzled ever since he had found out that Kojin was not his real father—why would he choose to raise the offspring of Seishu, someone who could very well become his political enemy, as his own son? But with each day that passed, one thing became clearer—Kojin had not adopted him out of mere pity or love.

In the past, Shusei had sometimes wondered if Kojin despised him. He had assumed that this was just his weak heart overreacting, but now he knew that was not the case—Kojin truly did hate him, just as he had hated Shusei's father. And because Kojin hated him, he had put Shusei somewhere close where he could deride and manipulate him for fun. That was the only explanation Shusei could think of.

This time was no different. Kojin had no doubt heard from Jotetsu that Shusei and Rimi had feelings for each other, and he was still attempting to make Shusei become Rimi's tutor. He wanted to make Shusei educate the person he loved so that she could become another man's woman.

This man wants to torment me.

“You are well aware that Setsu Rimi requires comprehensive education, are you not?” Kojin continued.

Kojin did have a point. Shusei was the best candidate to ensure that Rimi would receive careful and thorough education. As he knew how familiar Rimi already was with Konkoku, having Shusei as her tutor would make it easier for Rimi as well.

“Very well. I will go to the Palace of the Water Spirit,” Shusei agreed after a brief pause.

Kojin gave Shusei a satisfied nod.

“I will inform His Majesty and the Minister of Rites that you have been assigned as Rimi’s tutor. I am sure His Majesty will be pleased to hear that someone he trusts so much will take up the role,” Kojin said.

“Thank you,” Shusei said before entering the cuisinology hall to gather supplies to prepare for tutoring Rimi at the Palace of the Water Spirit.

The inside of the cuisinology hall, its air permeated by the smell of ink, felt more dreary than Shusei could ever have imagined when Rimi had still been there. The floor was cold. If Jotetsu were to see him gathering supplies as commanded by Kojin, perhaps he would again accuse him of living according to Shu Kojin’s schemes.

But if that’s how it comes across, I’m doing it right. It’s all the better if I’m called a coward, Shusei thought as he smiled faintly.

The feelings clinging to his chest refused to leave him. That’s why he was now quietly making preparations.

Rimi has erased me from her heart while I still care for her. But it doesn’t matter.

Shusei swiftly gathered his supplies before setting off for the Palace of the Water Spirit.



Rimi quickly unpacked. After all, since she had originally arrived in Konkoku with barely anything to her name, she had very few possessions. All she had

brought with her was a chest of clothes and her pot of kaorizuke—and her outfits she had been given after arriving in Konkoku, meaning she was not particularly attached to them. The only thing in her possession that she had a connection with was her terracotta pot.

She put the pot on the table and inspected its contents before closing the lid once more and stroking it. Jotetsu looked on with a bemused expression, after which he left the room, saying that he was going to inspect the security of the palace.

I really want to cook... I want to eat something nice with the consorts when they arrive. But if I give them something that I cooked, they'll probably be angry with me, saying that the future empress shouldn't be cooking. But I don't want to live the rest of my life unable to cook... Maybe if I do it in secret... The big question was how much would she be able to hide in order to cook after becoming empress.

As she tirelessly stroked the pot of kaorizuke and tried to come up with various plans, a handmaid from the Shu house came to see her. She informed Rimi that it was time for her education and asked her to come to the gazebo by Jade Spring.

"Oh, yes, I did hear that someone from the Ministry of Rites called Vice Minister En would come to tutor me," Rimi noted.

This was something Rimi needed to put effort into. She had been told that she would be learning about how Konkoku was governed, so there was sure to be a vast amount of information to understand and memorize.

"I'll have to study hard. I'll be back soon, Tama," Rimi said.

Tama took a break from snuggling up against the pot of kaorizuke to see Rimi off.

The roofed passageway that ran across Jade Spring's water was supported by pillars that extended into the water. Peaceful ripples traveled across the surface of the water on both sides. A breeze blew through the passageway carrying a faint scent of spring, which combined with the beautiful scenery felt as though it was tempting you toward the extensive waters.

The passageway expanded at the center of the spring where a gazebo was located. Elegant tables and chairs made from rosewood were placed under the gazebo.

Seeing the person standing under it, Rimi let out a quiet yelp in surprise.

“Master Shusei?” Rimi exclaimed.

The shawl wrapped around Rimi’s arms fluttered in the wind while her coral buyao chimed quietly. Next to the railing, Shusei shifted his gaze from the water to Rimi. Their eyes met, and Shusei gave Rimi a gentle smile.

“Why are you here, Master Shusei? I was told that Vice Minister En would be my tutor,” Rimi said.

“I was asked to take his place on short notice,” Shusei explained.

“Is that so...” Rimi said as she smiled awkwardly at Shusei. The cuisinologist teaching her felt as though he was ordering her to become the empress. After hearing about Rimi’s decision, he must have rid himself of whatever lingering feelings he still had.

Of course, that was the right choice—but inside Rimi’s chest, her feelings for Shusei still refused to fade. Having him effectively order her to become another man’s woman through his tutoring made her chest ache a little.

But I swore to live with this pain.

Rimi cleared her mind before sitting at the table as instructed by Shusei. A dizzyingly large number of texts were piled on the table.

“I need to learn all of this?” Rimi asked timidly.

“Oh, no,” Shusei said, but just as Rimi was about to let out a sigh of relief, he continued. “This is only one-third of the entire curriculum.”

Rimi felt like lying down. Although she didn’t particularly dislike studying, the sheer quantity of texts to go through caused her to lose all her motivation.

Shusei took the text on the top and laid it out in front of Rimi.

“I won’t ask you to understand and memorize it all at once. However, I do need you to learn half of it by the Executive Audience, and to at least

understand it all by the Celestial Request, even if you haven't memorized it all."

Rimi looked at Shusei quizzically.

"What are the Executive Audience and Celestial Request?" she asked.

"You haven't been taught that yet either? You really do have a lot to learn, don't you?" Shusei said with a sigh as he sat down on the other side of the table. "The empress's enthronement ceremony is divided into three parts—the Executive Audience, the Nocturnal Liturgy, and the Celestial Request."

The term "Nocturnal Liturgy" caught Rimi's attention. Shohi had also mentioned it earlier.

"The date that the court priests divined refers to the day of the Celestial Request. This is the ceremony that is colloquially referred to as the enthronement ceremony," Shusei continued. "It's a major celebration where the emperor and empress climb to the Temple of Heaven to ask the gods for permission. A long procession is placed leading up to the altar with flags fluttering everywhere, making it look like a colorful dragon is climbing the mountain."

Shusei spelled the words "Celestial Request" in the air with his finger. Next, he spelled "Executive Audience."

"But before that, there is the Executive Audience. It is held by the future empress and high-ranking officials. The point of the ceremony is for the empress to have the officials recognize her. Essentially, it consists of several standard questions for the empress from the officials," Shusei explained. "Finally, the Nocturnal Liturgy is the day when you are to return to the rear palace."

Shusei spelled "Nocturnal Liturgy" in the air.

"The Nocturnal Liturgy is held between the emperor and the prospective empress. It's the night where they first share a bed as emperor and empress. Of course, most empresses were originally women of the rear palace, so it's generally not really the first time. In practice, it's more akin to an extravagant night feast, but..." Shusei trailed off.

During the moment in which Shusei was hesitating to continue, Rimi realized

the true meaning of the Nocturnal Liturgy and what Shohi had meant when he had said that he would wait until then.

That is the night when I will truly offer everything to His Majesty.

Shusei was looking down at his hands, avoiding meeting Rimi's gaze.

"I will mentor you to ensure that both the Executive Audience and the Celestial Request succeed without issues. As far as the Nocturnal Liturgy is concerned, you should ask the four consorts for advice," Shusei said.

"All right..." Rimi answered quietly with an anxious tone.

After a moment of silence, Shusei looked up and smiled at Rimi, seemingly back to his usual self. He pushed the text toward Rimi.

"Now, let's begin. There is much that you need to learn. First, just focus on the Executive Audience. This is a very important ritual. If you embarrass yourself in front of the officials, that will also reflect on His Majesty. Is that clear?" Shusei said firmly.

Upon hearing this, Rimi pulled herself together.

"Yes," Rimi said resolutely.

Shusei looked back at Rimi with a smile that seemed to say, "Good girl."

As Shusei handed the text to Rimi, a handmaid suddenly showed up at the gazebo.

"I have brought tea," the handmaid said and placed a tea set on the table.

"Thank you," Shusei said, however, his expression soon turned suspicious. "Excuse me, but I don't think I've ever seen you at the Shu house."

"I was just hired ten days ago," the handmaid replied with a perfect smile before picking up the tray she had carried the tea set with and returning to the passageway.

Just as Rimi reached for a cup of fragrant herbal tea, Shusei suddenly slapped her hand. The cup fell from Rimi's hand onto the floor and broke. Shusei picked up the tea set placed on the table, leaned out from the gazebo, and threw it into Jade Spring. The tea set fell into the water with a splash, and between the

ripples, silver bellies of fish could be seen floating to the surface. Rimi covered her mouth in shock when Shusei yelled out.

“Jotetsu!” he screamed.

Jotetsu dashed toward them from the side of the passageway at full speed. The handmaid clicked her tongue and turned around again. In her hand, a small silver blade gleamed. With movements like a small whirlwind, she quickly closed in on Rimi and held her weapon aloft. As she brought the blade down, it grazed the very tip of Rimi’s nose. Rimi jumped up from her chair and tried to back away, but she stepped on her skirt and fell backward. The handmaid stared at her with wide, unblinking eyes as she thrust her blade again.

“Rimi!” Shusei exclaimed as he grabbed Rimi and rolled on the floor to evade the blade, which grazed his arm. His sleeve was ripped open, and he groaned in pain.

“Master Shusei!” Rimi shouted.

As the handmaid brandished the blade again, a muscular arm wrapped itself around her neck from behind. The handmaid struggled to get free, while Jotetsu yelled at Rimi.

“Rimi! Tie something around Shusei’s upper arm! The blade is probably poisoned!”

Rimi ran up to Shusei, who was on the floor.

“Master Shusei!” Rimi exclaimed.

“Rimi, are you hurt?” Shusei asked.

“I’m fine. I’m more worried about you, Master Shusei. Excuse me!”

Rimi rolled up Shusei’s sleeve and found a wound on his upper arm. The area around the wound was turning purple. Recognizing the danger, Rimi tore up her shawl and tied it around Shusei’s arm.

“Please don’t move,” Rimi said as she put her mouth to the wound.



“Rimi?!”

Shusei twitched as he looked at Rimi with red cheeks, flabbergasted, but Rimi continued to hold down his arm while she pressed her mouth to it. She sucked the blood from the wound and spit it out.

Back in Wakoku, Rimi had sometimes gone to gather edible plants with mountain rangers. At one point, she had witnessed one of them being bitten by a poisonous snake and had learned how to act in such a situation. Poison enters the body through the digestive system or openings in the skin. Given that this poison had been coated on a blade so that it could pierce the skin, this was clearly the type of poison to enter through wounds, where it would pass through the bloodstream to destroy the body. So, the most effective way to prevent the poison from spreading was to tie something around the arm to stop the blood flow and suck out the infected blood. As long as Rimi had no wound inside her mouth, it would work.

While Rimi continued sucking out Shusei’s blood, Jotetsu was still grappling with the handmaid. He yelled at the handmaid to calm down, but her blade grazed his skin. Jotetsu put even more force into his grip. Rimi could hear a horrible breaking sound, and the handmaid stopped struggling. Jotetsu clicked his tongue and released his grip, and the woman’s body fell flatly onto the ground. Jotetsu stepped over the body and approached Rimi.

“Good thinking, Rimi,” Jotetsu said.

Rimi removed her mouth from Shusei’s skin and looked at Jotetsu, then at the handmaid on the floor.

“What happened to her?” Rimi asked.

“She’s dead. How’s Shusei?”

“Don’t worry, it’s just a scratch. Thank you, Rimi. I’ll be fine now,” Shusei insisted as he gently removed Rimi’s hands and pulled down his sleeve.

“How did you know that she was an assassin, Shusei? I saw her carrying the tea, but I couldn’t tell at all,” Jotetsu noted.

“I’d never seen her around the Shu house, and her hands were rough. In the

Shu house, we never let handmaids with rough hands serve guests. And we certainly would not let a handmaid who has only been there for ten days wait on—” Shusei said before he cut himself short by groaning in pain and clutching his chest.

“Master Shusei?!” Rimi exclaimed.

Shusei started leaning to the side and fell into Rimi’s chest.

“Oh no! The poison is too potent!” Jotetsu yelled.

II

Shusei was quickly carried to a bed, and a doctor soon arrived. The doctor seemed to have an idea of what poison might have been used as he issued instructions to have Shusei drink a concoction made by brewing several herbs that served as antidotes. According to the doctor, there was no danger to Shusei’s life. But Shusei’s body was hot, his breathing pained, and he struggled to stay conscious. Now and then he would mutter incoherently. Apparently, this might last for a full day.

Rimi was sitting beside Shusei’s bed, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a damp cloth. The sun had set, and the candlelight was dancing inside the room. Jotetsu watched Shusei while leaning against the wall and let out a small sigh.

“Rimi, go back to your room. I’ll get a handmaid to look after Shusei,” Jotetsu said.

“I refuse. Master Shusei ended up like this because he protected me. I can’t leave him alone,” Rimi replied.

“Fine, I’ll take care of him, then.”

“You’re lying. His Majesty has appointed you as my bodyguard, so you wouldn’t take your eyes off me, would you? As soon as I return to my room, you will go somewhere that allows you to keep an eye on me. You won’t look after Master Shusei like I am,” Rimi exclaimed, on the verge of tears. In response, Jotetsu shrugged his shoulders as if giving in.

“You’re smarter than you look.”

Rimi turned her gaze back to Shusei, who was grimacing in pain, and wiped off his sweat again.

I never thought someone would actually try to kill me. Rimi was finally realizing the importance of the duty she was about to take on. *I'm so sorry, Master Shusei.*

"It's too dreary in here," Jotetsu said with a sigh and announced that he would keep watch outside instead.



Without letting up, Rimi continued to wipe off Shusei's sweat, only stopping occasionally to support his head as she poured the medicine issued by the doctor into his mouth. Shusei would sometimes groan in pain, his lips quivering. His hand grasped the air as if trying to search for something, and Rimi took it.

After a while, Shusei seemed to calm down, but his temperature was still high. By midnight, his breathing became more regular. Relieved at seeing this, Rimi came close to dozing off, still holding Shusei's hand.

The candle flame grew smaller before disappearing with a fizzling sound. The sound jolted Rimi awake, and then she suddenly heard Shusei's voice.

"Is that...?" Shusei mumbled quietly.

"Master Shusei! You're awake!" Rimi exclaimed.

Rimi grasped Shusei's hand even harder when she was suddenly pulled toward him.



Shusei was struggling to maintain consciousness. His forehead and ears felt as though they were on fire, yet inside he felt cold as ice. While shivering from this discomforting sensation, he was also fighting to breathe, his chest feeling as if it was constrained by something. Shusei seemed to hear someone calling out for him, but he struggled to remember the person's face and name.

Master Shusei...

Shusei tried to recall who that adorable voice belonged to. His consciousness faded, only to be dragged back again, just below the surface. Gradually, he

started to remember.

Of course... It's her. That's Rimi's voice.

As he recalled Rimi's name, Shusei's chest became filled with feelings of affection. He fought to pull his consciousness up from the depths and wake up as he attempted to ask, "Is that Rimi?" However, his voice was weak, and he trailed off partway into the question. Then, he once again heard Rimi call his name. Shusei realized that Rimi's small hands were holding his. He appeared to be lying on a bed in a dark room, but he had no idea why he was lying down, nor why Rimi was holding his hand.

She's adorable. The thought filled Shusei's chest with warmth. He reflexively pulled Rimi close to him.

"Master Shusei!" Rimi exclaimed with a trembling voice. The sound of it was so amusing that Shusei felt like chuckling, but his body felt too heavy, and he couldn't move his mouth. He slowly stroked Rimi's shoulder and hair.

"I love you... I want to embrace you like this forever... I'll bring you back to my house, keep you warm, and take care of you, not letting anyone come near you, for the rest of my life..." Shusei said, letting his thoughts out unfiltered as his consciousness continued to fade in and out, all the while stroking Rimi's head.

Rimi seemed to fidget hesitantly in the darkness, but she made no attempt to resist. Pleased with this, Shusei's consciousness drifted off again.



Master Shusei is being tormented by his fever. He isn't thinking straight. That much was clear to Rimi. Otherwise, Shusei would never have said something like that directly to her. There was no chance that he still had lingering feelings for her after all this time. He was probably simply dreaming about taking in a stray cat or dog. *If Master Shusei took in a puppy, I'm sure he would pet it just like this. He'd do everything to take good care of it.*

The sensation of Shusei gently stroking her hair made Rimi so happy that she started wishing that she could be a stray dog instead. Now that she had agreed to become the empress, it wasn't right for her to be caressed by Shusei like this. But perhaps she could get away with it if she was just a stray dog that Shusei

was having a fever dream about.

"Woof," Rimi whispered, and Shusei smirked faintly in response.

Soon, Shusei's hand stopped moving, and he started breathing peacefully. Rimi remained still for a while, feeling Shusei's warmth in the darkness.



Jotetsu pondered where he had let his guard down as he looked up at the night sky with a furrowed brow while a cool breeze blew through the passageway.

It was true that, despite having been warned that I Bunryo might attack Rimi, he had not been as alert as he was when guarding Shohi. He had assumed that no one would be so upset about a girl becoming empress that they would go after her life this obsessively.

But I Bunryo is serious. He's ridiculously persistent. I guess it's just like Hakurei feared.

It was only thanks to Shusei that they had just barely made it out of danger despite Jotetsu's mistake. He had risked his life to protect Rimi. Always serving Shohi alongside Jotetsu, it was not unheard of for Shusei to sometimes have to clean up after Jotetsu. While Jotetsu felt bad about it, he sometimes couldn't help himself from taking advantage of how reliable Shusei was. If Shohi was an axle, Jotetsu and Shusei were the wheels supporting him.

It was the night of a new moon. Countless stars were glittering high above.

Jotetsu leaned backward against the door as he stared up at the sky. He then heard Shusei mutter something deliriously. He spoke as if gently comforting a lover.

Shusei... Do you really love Rimi that much? Jotetsu couldn't get his mind off the sight of Rimi taking care of Shusei with tears in her eyes. *And Rimi also...*

Both of them had given up any hopes of their love ever bearing fruit. But even so, their feelings for each other were not gone. They had given up despite caring for each other more than anything.

Jotetsu had never taken the time to consider others' feelings, nor had he

cared to, until now. As he thought about Rimi and Shusei's feelings, he felt something stirring inside of him.

What should I do?

Before, Jotetsu had always followed Shu Kojin's every order without a thought, even if it had amounted to betraying Shohi or Shusei. That had been his duty as a sword. Now, however, he had grown unsure of what he wanted to do and what he should do. He was even enjoying his uncertainty, in a way.

Jotetsu didn't want to do anything that went against Shusei's and Shohi's wishes. The problem was that both of them now loved the same person. If he worked to Shusei's advantage, Shohi would suffer, and Shusei would similarly be sad if he worked to Shohi's advantage. It all depended on what Shusei would do next. Jotetsu found it hard to believe that he would obediently act as Shu Kojin expected him to. Shusei was kind, but he was no coward. If he noticed that the path in front of him was one laid out by Kojin, he would not walk it without a fight.

Shusei must be searching for a way to enjoy his fate the best he can. The question was what that was. Perhaps it was related to how Shusei would sometimes disappear without notice. *And what will you do, Shin Jotetsu, after hearing their voices?*



"Rimi?" Shusei said weakly.

Rimi opened her eyes. The sun was shining on her cheek through the window. It was morning. Apparently, she had fallen asleep in her chair with her head on Shusei's bed. She rubbed her eyes and looked up to find Shusei sitting in his bed.

"Good morning, Master Shusei. How are you feeling?" Rimi asked.

"My head feels a bit heavy. Just what happened? I was attacked at the gazebo, and then..."

"You lost consciousness because of the poison. Master Jotetsu carried you here. A doctor came by to look at you, but you were fighting the poison the whole night," Rimi explained.

“Have you been looking after me the entire night?”

“All I did was give you the medicine. I didn’t do anything more than that,” Rimi said as she smiled bashfully.

“It appears I’ve caused you trouble, then. I’m sorry. And thank you,” Shusei said.

“I’m still alive because you shielded me. Being here isn’t anything in comparison to—” Rimi began when memories of Shusei whispering to her in the darkness flashed across her mind, and she started blushing.

“What’s the matter?”

“N-Nothing. You had a dream where you took in a dog or a cat, didn’t you, Master Shusei?”

“Did I?” Shusei asked, puzzled.

Just as Rimi felt relief wash over her at Shusei seemingly not remembering what had happened, she heard heavy footsteps approaching quickly from the hallway.

“Shusei! Are you still alive?!” Shohi yelled frantically as he opened the door to the room.

Rimi’s jaw dropped at the extraordinary sight of the emperor having rushed to a palace this far away so early in the morning.

“Your Majesty? What are you doing here?” Rimi asked.

Seemingly embarrassed to be seen in nothing but his night attire, Shusei made a worried expression.

“What are you doing in a place like this, at a time like this, Your Majesty?” Shusei asked.

“Do you have a problem with me being here? Why do you look as if you want me gone? I came because I heard you had fallen ill from poison!” Shohi proclaimed.

Jotetsu must have reported that Rimi had been attacked and that Shusei had fallen ill soon after the incident.

As Shohi briskly approached the bed, Shusei gave him a stern gaze.

“Your Majesty, I don’t believe it is appropriate for the emperor to come here himself just because his grand councilor has fallen ill,” Shusei noted.

“Why must you always be so critical?! This is my choice! Are you unable to give me an honest ‘thank you’ even when bedridden?!” Shohi yelled.

“Your Majesty...”

Shohi looked down at Shusei’s disapproving face, his shoulders shaking with rage. Gradually, however, he started to calm down, before letting out a small sigh.

“I see you are well. I am glad,” Shohi said.

Jotetsu entered the bedroom, trying his best not to laugh.

“Spare him the lecture for today, would you, Shusei? You have no idea how worried His Majesty was. Be glad he had enough restraint not to take off from the imperial palace in the middle of the night!” Jotetsu joked.

Shohi’s face showed a combination of the relief of a lost child who finally found their mother in a crowd, embarrassment, and anger, making him look much younger than he really was. Rimi found it endearing. Shusei, apparently also noticing Shohi’s expression, gave a strained smile.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Shusei said.

“Right... Well, do not worry about it,” Shohi said aloofly, trying to preserve what dignity he still had left.

Shusei and Jotetsu exchanged glances and started laughing.

“What is so funny?!” Shohi barked.

Rimi also started chuckling as she stood up and left the room. She didn’t want to intrude on the pleasant, cheerful mood that the three of them had built up between themselves over the years.

Master Shusei is well again, and His Majesty is here. This is the perfect time to serve them some food.

III

Rimi stopped by her dwelling on the way to the kitchen and found that Tama had just returned from her night out.

“I’m off to the kitchen,” Rimi said, and Tama responded with a large yawn before wagging her tail slightly as if to say goodbye. She then curled up on the bed.

I hope Tama is okay, going off every night like this. Is she meeting someone? Maybe a lover?

Rimi started pondering whether divine dragons had sexes as she entered the kitchen.

Oh, I remember this place... It was the same kitchen that she had used with Shusei one year ago.

It appeared that breakfast had already been made, and there was not a cook in sight. Faintly glowing embers remained in the stoves, and the air was slightly warm.

“Give me a break, Rimi. Don’t just walk off like that. You scared me there,” a voice said from behind her. Jotetsu entered the kitchen with a disgruntled smirk.

“I’m sorry, Master Jotetsu. Well done finding me here,” Rimi said.

“I’m your bodyguard. I’m always watching you from a distance, whether you know it or not. You better be careful. I’ll end up seeing that tiny chest of yours even though I don’t care to.”

“My chest...? Don’t tell me you’ve even been watching me undress?!”

“I could if I wanted to, but I won’t, so relax. I’m not interested, anyway.”

“But you just said that my chest was...”

Jotetsu had spoken as if he knew that Rimi’s chest was of a terribly modest size. While you could claim that it was plain as day from a glance at the chest area of her ruqun, Rimi did make small attempts to have it appear to be a little more respectable—but she had been found out.

“I caught a glance of it about a year ago when I went to take that pot from you,” Jotetsu explained. “I was watching you and happened to see you undress. Back then I felt sorry for you, thinking that you’d never catch His Majesty’s attention with a chest like that. But you never know how things’ll turn out, huh? Well, I guess the part I actually don’t get is His Majesty’s taste.”

“It doesn’t matter if it was a year ago or a second ago, you still looked—”

“I told you, I just happened to see it. Don’t worry, I felt bad and looked away.”

“So I’ll just have to trust you not to look?!”

“Yup. That’s one of the downsides of being a noble. You’ll just have to put up with it. It’s better than losing your life, right?”

Rimi recalled the events of the day before and a chill ran down her spine. Had Jotetsu not been there, not only would Rimi have been dead by now—Shusei would likely have died along with her. She hadn’t seen Jotetsu nearby at the time, but he had been just out of sight, keeping an eye on her the entire time.

I need to be thankful to Master Jotetsu. That reminds me, I still haven’t thanked him. I was too panicked over Master Shusei falling ill.

Jotetsu was an imperially appointed military officer of the imperial guard responsible for protecting Shohi. Rimi had heard that he had served Shohi alongside Shusei since the emperor was a child, but that was all she knew about him. She had no idea if he had a lover, where he came from, or how he ended up joining the imperial guard. Shohi and Shusei had never told Rimi any details about him, but that was probably because they didn’t know either. If they had, that kind of information would have come up occasionally in conversations.

“Thank you for saving us yesterday, Master Jotetsu. If you hadn’t been there, we would have been dead,” Rimi said.

“Well, that’s what His Majesty ordered me to do. If you died, His Majesty would slaughter me,” Jotetsu said with a smirk.

Rimi took a good look at Jotetsu. Although he was friendly and happy to partake in banter, Jotetsu seemed to work hard to hide who he really was and never let his true feelings show.

“What’s up, Rimi? Why the weird face?” Jotetsu asked.

“It’s nothing. Anyway, Master Jotetsu...do you have a favorite food?”

“Food? Why?”

“I have this urge to feed someone. I was thinking of cooking for you, His Majesty, and Master Shusei today. I’d like to make your favorite as thanks for yesterday.”

“Thanking a bodyguard? Aren’t you the odd one. I wouldn’t be surprised if you continued to cook even once you become the empress.”

“I’m actually in the middle of trying to figure out how I could do that,” Rimi replied earnestly.

Jotetsu burst out laughing.

Rimi was curious to know just what Jotetsu was trying to hide from everyone. But there was no need to try to force it out of him. There were other things she could learn about him to get to know him better, even without knowing anything about his family or origin—for example, what books he liked to read, what his favorite flower was, what kind of women he liked, and of course, what his favorite food was.

“Master Jotetsu, please tell me. What food do you like?” Rimi asked once more.

Jotetsu crossed his arms and looked up at the beams that ran across the ceiling.

“There’s really only one thing that comes to mind...” Jotetsu said. “Lijiumian.”

“Is that some kind of really rare dish?” Rimi asked.

“Nah. You’d eat it as a light supper or for breakfast. I had it just the other day.”

“Hold on just a minute!” Rimi said as she turned around to return to her dwelling, but Jotetsu grabbed her arm and poked her head with his finger.

“I told you, don’t run around on your own like this.”

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to have a look at my notes,” Rimi explained.

“All right, fine,” Jotetsu replied in an annoyed tone as he followed Rimi to her room.

Once they arrived, Rimi started going through her chest of clothing.

“Here it is!” Rimi exclaimed as she pulled out some notes that the head of the court cooks, the Chief of Dining Yo Koshin, had given her a while back. It contained information on the basics of Konkokuan cooking as well as recipes for common dishes.

Under the heading of basic noodle dishes, the notes listed xiaohailaomian, caiyoumian, jijiangmian, and lijiumian—shrimp noodles, vegetable oil noodles, chicken sauce noodles, and wine-steamed clam noodles, respectively. According to the notes, lijiumian was made by steaming clams with rice wine and then adding it along with the steaming liquid to a stock made from dried scallops and shrimp. Then, noodles as thin as thread would be put into the resulting tang. Finally, a few drops of spring onion oil would be added to the meal. It was a meal eaten by commoners for breakfast and supper.

Clams are in season, so there might be some in the kitchen.

With the notes in hand, Rimi returned to the kitchen with Jotetsu and peeked into the stone pantry. There, she found clams sitting in saltwater in a barrel wrapped in a straw mat, in the process of being cleaned of sand. They were large, high-quality clams.

I can cook! I can feed people!

Rimi tied down her sleeves with string. She was elated to be back inside a kitchen. Her heart was racing.

She lit a fire in one of the stoves. While watching the flame grow larger out of the corner of her eye, she started making the noodles. Back in Wakoku, she would sometimes eat a type of very thin noodle called somen, which was made by mixing salt, water, wheat flour, and a small amount of oil from vegetables, then stretching the dough out into thin threads, followed by drying and fermenting it. There was also soba, which was created from buckwheat flour.

Konkokuan noodles used wheat flour, water, and salt, just like somen did, but they additionally used eggs. This would add extra elasticity to the noodles,

making the texture smoother after boiling them. Mixing wheat flour, saltwater, and eggs produced a dry and unappetizing dough at first, but through steady kneading, it would slowly turn smooth and yellowish.

“You’re good at this, huh. Is this how you make noodles?” Jotetsu remarked, having walked up next to Rimi completely soundlessly without her noticing. Rimi found it remarkable that he could move so silently despite being so tall and covered in muscle. Jotetsu curiously studied Rimi as she cooked.

“You don’t cook, do you, Master Jotetsu? Master Shusei will sometimes cook cuisinological food for himself.”

“Can you really call that food? I’ve been wondering for a while if that isn’t an attempt at some kind of harassment.”

Suddenly, Jotetsu’s expression tensed, and he put his mouth next to Rimi’s ear.

“You know Shusei’s secret, don’t you?” Jotetsu whispered sternly.

Rimi’s hands froze. Her tiny frame was quivering.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Rimi said.

“I mean his background,” Jotetsu clarified.

Rimi tried to stop herself from going pale. She wouldn’t be able to hide it if she was so blatantly shaken. She wanted to smile and say, “I’m not sure what you’re referring to,” but her mouth was stiff.

“I’m sure you know what I mean. When you spoke to Hakurei yesterday, you said ‘That’s the right decision, given his background,’ when talking about Shusei. Now, what could you have meant by ‘background’?” Jotetsu continued, not letting up. “You know, don’t you?”

There was no hiding it. Jotetsu’s voice made it clear that he was already certain. Rimi relaxed and hung her head.

“I...do,” Rimi confessed.

“When did you learn about it? And how?” Jotetsu asked.

“I happened to listen in on your conversation with Master Shusei the night

that I quelled the wraith at Castle Seika."

"That explains it... I did feel like someone was standing outside, but I didn't notice you. I guess I was pretty shaken at the time too."

"I haven't told anyone, and I never will, for the sake of Master Shusei."

"Yeah, I know. That's why you decided to become the empress, isn't it? I was wondering why you accepted His Majesty's offer out of nowhere like that."

"That's not the only reason. I did it because I believed it was the best choice I could make."

Jotetsu let out a small sigh.

"Sorry about this," he said.

"Don't be. No one is at fault. This was my decision," Rimi said with a smile.

Rimi resumed her work. She was thankful to be able to cook like this. By repeatedly evaluating nature, she was able to calm herself down.

After kneading the dough, Rimi wrapped it in cloth and let it rest while she got started on the tang. First came the dried shrimp and scallops. She would need to cook the two dried ingredients until soft and use that to form the base of the tang.

Oh right, if I have dried shrimp and scallops... Rimi had a realization and decided to put her own spin on the recipe. When she had rummaged through the pantry earlier, she had noticed that the umifu that had been given as a tribute from Wakoku was still there. She added one slice of umifu to the shrimp and scallop tang. The umifu's aroma seeping into the tang would add an extra level of depth to the flavor.

Jotetsu watched Rimi run around the kitchen with an amused expression.

Next, Rimi added clams and rice wine to a large iron pot, quickly steaming the clams before adding both the clams and the liquid to the tang base. The combination of the rich and savory shrimp, scallops, and clam tang with the wine resulted in a wonderful fragrance.

Rimi then went back to the noodle dough, flattened it with a rolling pin, folded it, and sliced it into thin strips. She brought a large pan of water to boil

and put in the noodles, which were quickly ready to eat. She strained the noodles, divided them into bowls, and added the heated tang. Finally, she poured spring onion oil over the noodles. The result was four bowls of thin noodles swimming in a clear tang with spring onion oil glimmering on the surface. With Jotetsu's help, she carried the bowls to Shusei's room.

Shusei sat upright in his bed, chopsticks in hand, while Shohi, Jotetsu, and Rimi sat around a table. They had removed the divider separating the table and the bed, allowing the four of them to enjoy breakfast together.

"This brings me back..." Shusei said, smiling as he looked at the lijiumian.

Shohi, apparently hungry, had already started bringing the noodles toward his mouth, but his hands stopped in response to Shusei's musing.

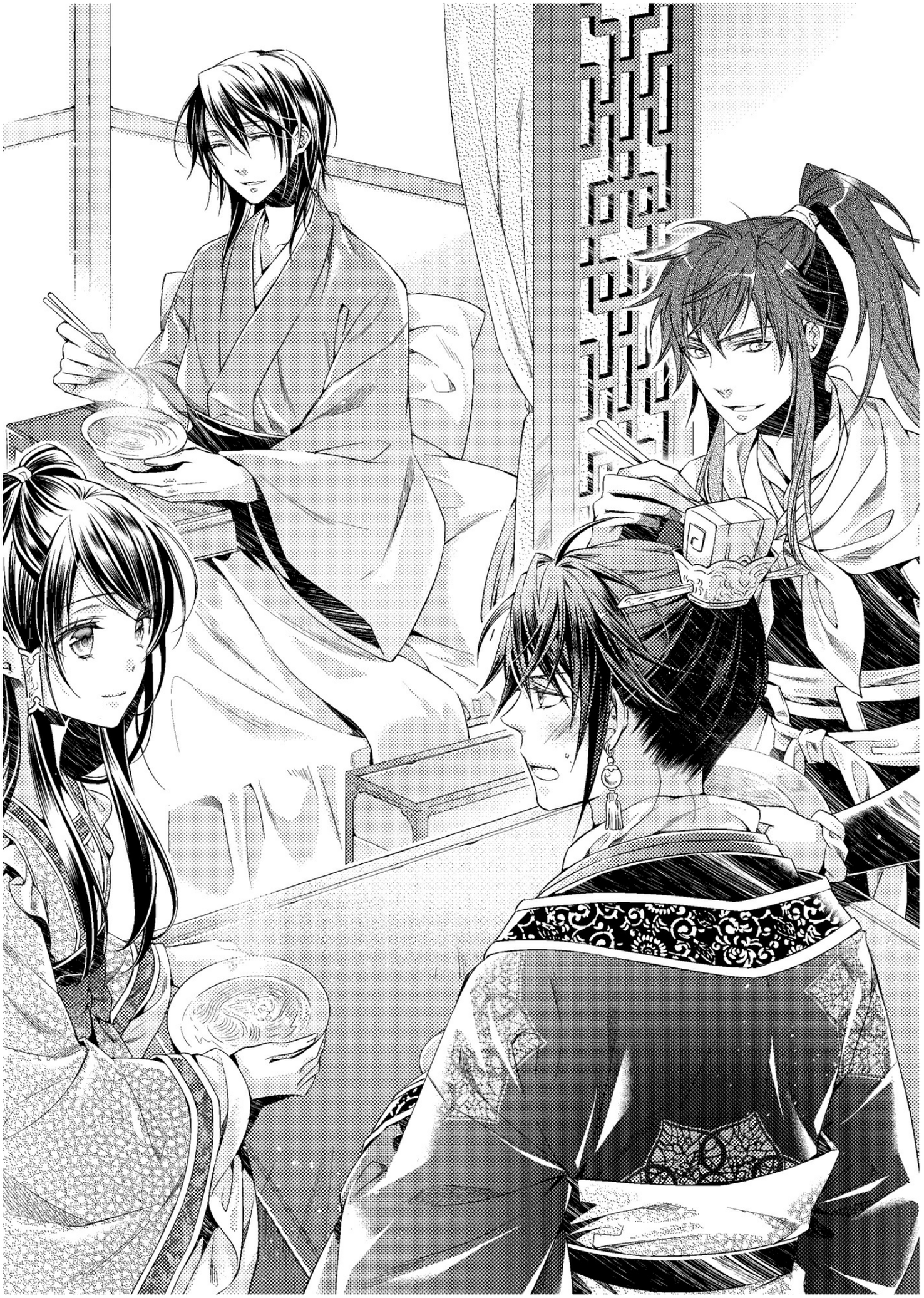
"Brings you back? Why?" Shohi asked.

"Don't you remember, Your Majesty? When you were five or six, you didn't eat very much, and you were a picky eater too, so you would always have this for supper," Shusei explained.

"No, I do not."

"Really? You were a light eater, picky, temperamental, physically delicate... Truly a model prince," Jotetsu jested.

"Do not bring up irrelevant details from so long ago!" Shohi barked, his cheeks turning red.



Seemingly amused by Shohi's pouting, Shusei and Jotetsu were grinning. Guessing that Shohi was uncomfortable talking about his childhood in front of her, Rimi attempted to change the subject.

"Is my lijiumian to your liking, Your Majesty?" she asked.

"Indeed, it has a pleasant taste," Shohi replied with a relieved smile.

Shusei handled his chopsticks elegantly, while Jotetsu brought the bowl to his mouth to slurp on the noodles. Jotetsu's carefree and crude way of eating was comforting in a way. He had a healthy appetite, and compared to Shohi and Shusei, he ate faster and took larger bites. Perhaps that was his nature as a military officer. Rimi found it interesting how something as simple as someone's way of eating could give you a glimpse of how they had grown up and their occupation.

"This is pretty good. It might even be better than the lijiumian I usually eat. Is this thanks to your skill as a cook?" Jotetsu asked cheerfully.

"No, I wouldn't say it's a question of skill. I simply added my own little twist on the recipe," Rimi explained.

Rimi was overjoyed to hear that her idea had born fruit. But the biggest reason for Jotetsu's cheerful demeanor was likely not the taste, but the calm and gentle mood of the room. It was clear how comfortable Shohi, Shusei, and Jotetsu were with each other after having spent so many years together.

It's not just the taste that determines how satisfying a meal is. Who you're eating with is at least as important.

Rimi's food went down easily as she basked in the mood.

After he had finished his breakfast, Shohi immediately returned to the imperial palace. At the same time, as if taking his place, the four consorts entered the Palace of the Water Spirit, accompanied by Hakurei. Their handmaids were carrying a shocking amount of luggage. Rimi looked on in awe as she went out to meet the consorts. Upon seeing Rimi, Noble Consort So looked right at her and straightened her back.

“We will make you a woman worthy of the title of empress, so prepare yourself,” So declared.

Chapter 3: He Believes in Me

I

The four consorts demanded to be shown to Rimi's room, and she invited them in. Hakurei, who was responsible for attending to the consorts, followed. He pretended not to notice Rimi giving him concerned glances, always looking away from her gaze.

"My, dearest. Your room is as dreary as ever. It looks like bandits came in and stole every last belonging of yours," Pure Consort Yo said in amazement the moment she entered, looking around the room.

"Now, now, what's the harm? That just makes it all the more spacious and easy for us to use," Virtuous Consort Ho said, elegantly crossing her long legs as she sat down on a chair.

"That's true. There's more than enough space to hang what we need," Worthy Consort On noted gently, but Rimi jumped at the suggestion.

"Hang?! Don't tell me you're planning to commit some form of torture?!" Rimi asked, clearly in distress.

"Well aren't you silly as always. It's clothes that we'll be hanging," Noble Consort So said with an incredulous look.

So then glanced toward Hakurei, who signaled toward the hallway outside. Suddenly, a group of palace women poured in and stood aside. Next, three large chests of clothes were carried in, and the women opened them.

"Have a look at this," So said, picking up a roll of gauze.

"Look at this! And this! And this too!" Yo exclaimed as she ran up to a chest and rolls of patterned silk, velvet, and sheer started rolling across the floor.

Rimi then realized that the palace women were from the Wardrobe Service.

"We need three sets of outfits for the enthronement ceremony. One for the

Executive Audience, one for the Nocturnal Liturgy, and one for the Celestial Request. We will dress you up beautifully," Ho declared with a confident smile.

"Attire is key to the enthronement ceremony," So said, nodding. "As long as you wear a splendid outfit, you can make any mistake you want, and they'll generally turn a blind eye."

On smiled awkwardly in response.

"I think Noble Consort So's suggestion is a bit extreme, but appearances *are* important. It's the first time that the empress will be in the public eye. No one will know what the empress is like. Appearance will be the only aspect that they can judge about you," On explained.

"For the Executive Audience, a modest but high-quality patterned fabric is a good choice, since you'll be meeting with your future subjects," Ho said. "For the Nocturnal Liturgy, you should wear something feminine that is seductively soft in color and to the touch. You'll need to make full use of your feminine charms to appeal to His Majesty. Finally, the Celestial Request requires something extravagant with gold and silver embroidery. You'll need to display your overwhelming dignity as someone second only to His Majesty."

"I can't wait to see what you will wear for the Nocturnal Liturgy, dearest," Yo said, her cheeks turning red for some reason. "Of course, I hate the thought of you spending it with His Majesty so much that I almost want to barge in and stop you. Especially since the outfit you'll be wearing for the Nocturnal Liturgy is so beautiful and seductive."

"Seductive? In what way?" Rimi asked.

"You wear a shenyi on top, but below is a ruqun made from fabric so thin that your legs and chest show through. It's also decorated with floral patterns, making it very beautiful," Ho explained.

"Wow, you sure know a lot," Rimi said, impressed, before she finally processed what Ho had just said. "What?! They show through?! My legs and chest?! The fabric is see-through?!"

"It's not see-through. They're just barely visible."

"But I can't put something so meager on full display..."

“They won’t be on full display.”

Seeing how pale-faced Rimi was, On looked at her worriedly.

“I’ve been wondering this for a while, but are you aware of how lovemaking is performed?” she asked.

“Yes...vaguely.”

Rimi knew that embracing and kissing were involved. As for what happened after that, all she could imagine was lying next to each other and somehow grappling together.

As if expecting this response, So let out a heavy sigh and used Yo to explain in graphic detail exactly what would happen. At the end of the explanation, Rimi was quivering in fear.

“I can’t do that! Are you out of your mind?!” Rimi exclaimed.

“Excuse me?! This is something any girl needs to go through sooner or later! You silly girl,” So barked.

Rimi was on the verge of tears from being yelled at by a girl two years younger than her.

Despite Rimi’s worries, the preparations for the enthronement ceremony progressed steadily after that. Rimi was happy to leave the selection of outfits to the consorts, who were all excited to help out. If anything, they wouldn’t let her get a word in edgewise. What Rimi was more concerned about was learning as much as she could from Shusei to ensure that she had the knowledge needed for the ceremony. The first hurdle in her way was the Executive Audience. It seemed that this would actually be the most intense ceremony of them all, one where she could not afford to fail.

After having fallen ill from the poison, Shusei was bedridden for a few days. However, he could not afford to delay Rimi’s education because of this. Being from Wakoku, Rimi lacked much of the knowledge that would be common sense to any Konkokuan. Shusei estimated that twenty days would be barely enough time to make up for the gaps in Rimi’s knowledge while also preparing her for the Executive Audience. Thus, he ended up lecturing Rimi from his bed

for a few days.

“Since ancient times, the court has been divided into three departments and six ministries,” Shusei explained, sitting on his bed while Rimi listened intently.

The shadows of the furniture were growing longer, and the sunlight shining through the window contained a hint of vermilion. The sun would set soon. Despite having been present for Shusei’s lecture since morning, Rimi had not uttered a single complaint.

“The three departments are the Secretariat, the Chancellery, and the Department of State Affairs. Each department has two heads, making for a total of six,” Shusei continued. “The emperor and the six heads will make decisions during conferences together, and then the relevant ministry—the Ministry of Rites, the Ministry of Personnel, the Ministry of Revenue, the Ministry of War, the Ministry of Justice, or the Ministry of Works—will be ordered to implement the decisions.”

“But I’ve never come across those six heads before,” Rimi remarked.

“That’s because the first emperor of Konkoku abolished the three departments and replaced them with a single chancellor instead, who is now responsible for the duties of all six department heads. Thus, the chancellor has considerable say. One might fear that this could lead to an abuse of power, but the emperor at the time prioritized rapid decision-making. Hence the current system.”

Rimi nodded along with great interest.

“I’m called the grand councilor as His Majesty’s advisor, but that title originally belonged to the heads of the Chancellery. I’m simply borrowing the title for convenience as someone who advises His Majesty now that it’s not used anymore,” Shusei explained. “Now, here’s the important part. For the Executive Audience, almost a hundred royals and officials will gather in the Hall of New Harmony, including, of course, the chancellor and the six ministers. They will ask you questions to see whether you are worthy of the title of empress, which you will have to answer. Once the questioning is over, the officials will recognize you as worthy, and that’s the end of the Executive Audience.”

“I won’t survive being questioned by important people like them! They’ll beat me black and blue!” Rimi exclaimed.

“Don’t worry. The Executive Audience is a ritual. The questions are set—all you need to do is memorize the answers,” Shusei explained calmly. “I could never ask something so cruel of the woman set to become the empress as to have a real debate with the ministers.”

Shusei turned to the pile of texts stacked on his pillow, picked out three collections of questions for the Executive Audience, and placed them on Rimi’s lap. The chancellor and ministers would pick questions from these texts, so the only thing Rimi had to do was memorize them. Even so, there was a staggering number of questions to choose from, and Rimi’s face seemed to lose all color the moment she laid her eyes on the texts.

“I have to memorize...all of this?” Rimi asked, stunned.

“That’s right, all of this. Although I’d say it’s time we wrapped up for today,” Shusei replied.

“Thank you for today,” Rimi said as she bowed while forcing a smile.

Even so, Rimi picked up the three texts and brought them back to her room. Shusei was happy to see how ardent she was.

I feel sorry for her, but this is something she needs to overcome.

The Nocturnal Liturgy would be held in a closed room with only the emperor and future empress present. All Rimi would have to worry about was avoiding upsetting Shohi. The Celestial Request was a large and extravagant event, but the empress simply needed to ride to the Temple of Heaven in a palanquin and pray. During the Executive Audience, however, she would be questioned by the officials, albeit using set questions. A poor performance here would reflect badly on not just Rimi, but the emperor as well.

Amidst his research, Shusei discovered that during the Shoku dynasty, there had apparently been a prospective empress who had been so nervous that she had forgotten every single answer on the day of the Executive Audience. A few days after the enthronement ceremony had concluded, she had died from a mysterious illness. According to a record Shusei had come across, the “illness”

had been a result of damaging the emperor's dignity—the emperor had been so enraged over her performance that he had ordered her to drink poison.

Since Shusei was feeling much better, he planned to resume the lectures at the gazebo of Jade Spring the following day. The open gazebo would provide a much more stimulating environment for Rimi to study than Shusei's stuffy room.

I haven't shown my face there since I fell ill... I guess I better go and visit, Shusei thought as he stood up from his bed and got dressed. The handmaids had yet to bring him supper, so he left a note on the table saying that he wouldn't need any before leaving the room.

As he exited into the cloister, Shusei noticed a small creature sitting on the railing in front of him. Its fur shone silver, it had a long tail, and its eyes were blue and beautiful.

"Quinary Dragon?" he said.

The Quinary Dragon wiggled its fine whiskers as it gave Shusei a puzzled look.

"What's the matter, Quinary Dragon? Rimi isn't in my room. She's already left for her own dwelling."

The Quinary Dragon let out a squeal as it tilted its head. Its expression seemed to say that it was already fully aware of this and had come to ask something else.

I feel like I've been seeing the Quinary Dragon alone like this a lot lately. Perhaps since we left Castle Seika?

"I would be glad if you wouldn't leave Rimi's side too much, Quinary Dragon. You'll make her worried," Shusei said.

Then, Shusei left the Palace of the Water Spirit alone, without informing anyone.

After Rimi had left the rear palace to stay at the Palace of the Water Spirit with Jotetsu and Shusei joining her as her bodyguard and tutor respectively, Shohi had not seen any of them since the day after Rimi had left when he

visited the Palace of the Water Spirit in person. With all of them having disappeared at the same time, he felt a strange sense of loneliness without them. It was as though he had been left alone in the middle of the desert, and each day felt somehow disheartening and dreary. He lamented his own weakness as he found himself even missing the concoctions that Shusei would serve him every evening.

Sitting by the desk in his office, Shohi was subconsciously counting the days until Rimi would return to the rear palace.

The next time I will see Rimi, it will be the day of the Executive Audience. But she will not formally return to the rear palace until the Nocturnal Liturgy.

"Your Majesty, are you literally counting the days on your fingers while you wait for Rimi to come back?" a laughing voice called out, bringing Shohi out of his daze and making him correct his posture. The usual members had arrived—the chancellor, Shu Kojin, the Minister of Revenue, To Rihan, and lastly, the person who had spoken, the Minister of Rites, Jin Keiyu.

Embarrassed to have been seen counting on his fingers, Shohi tried to force a composed expression while he addressed them.

"No, that is not what I was counting," Shohi said.

"Are you sure?" Keiyu asked, sitting down at the round center table, smirking as if seeing right through Shohi.

Kojin also sat down at the table, and Rihan followed suit. Rihan shot the smirking Keiyu a cold glare.

"I have heard rumors that you've come up with a plan for the enthronement ceremony that borders on playing semantics, Keiyu," Rihan said accusingly.

"You mean turning Rimi into a Konkokuan? I won't deny the fact that it's most assuredly playing semantics. But it's all according to His Majesty's wishes," Keiyu replied.

"Is it really worth going through all of this trouble just to make that Lady of Precious Bevy empress, Your Majesty?" Rihan asked as he frowned, distorting the scar below his right eye.

“Rihan, this is the best course of action,” Kojin replied emotionlessly before Shohi had a chance to speak. “Not being from Konkoku originally, her lack of fear of His Majesty means that she is able to express her opinions more candidly. Her lack of political backing makes her easy to manage. In addition—”

“No,” Shohi said, cutting Kojin off. “I chose her because I wanted her by my side. There is nothing more to it than that. I would have chosen her regardless of if she was from Wakoku, Konkoku, or even Saisakoku, and no matter whether she has political backing or not. That is why I ordered Keiyu to devise a plan to make her my empress. Are you also unhappy with the decision, like the Minister of Personnel?”

Shohi gave Rihan a defiant glare. In response, Rihan started smiling, baring his teeth.

“I see. You made the decision not as the emperor, but as a man. In that case, I have nothing more to say. I won’t oppose you like a certain minister or eunuch,” Rihan said.

“So it truly is Director I who is controlling the Minister of Personnel?” Shohi asked, lightly furrowing his brow.

“I have no proof yet, but there’s no doubt about it. It appears that the Minister of Personnel owes Director I enough money that he couldn’t repay him even if he sold off all his land twice.”

Coming from the Minister of Revenue, who oversaw the taxation and finances of the country, there was no doubting this information.

“Director I will likely make his move during the Executive Audience,” Keiyu noted calmly.

“You mean he will attempt to interfere?” Kojin asked, shooting Keiyu a sharp glance.

“We are taking great care to protect Rimi, so there’s nothing to worry about, Your Excellency.”

“There are too many people in the imperial palace,” Shohi said, groaning faintly. “There is no telling who might be controlled by I Bunryo. Keep an eye out for anyone who is acting suspiciously.”

“If we’re talking about people acting suspiciously, then how about the chancellor’s son, the cuisinology scholar Shu Shusei? Haven’t you noticed anything strange about him lately?” Rihan asked.

“Shusei of all people would never attempt anything. Ridiculous,” Shohi replied, giving Rihan a critical glance.

Rihan had asked Kojin, but Shohi had replied reflexively. Rihan glanced silently at Kojin, but Shohi did not notice.

II

With Shusei back to normal, the lectures continued day in and day out. They would start immediately after breakfast and end by the time the sun was setting. While learning the knowledge expected from an empress, Rimi was also memorizing the questions for the Executive Audience, with a workload reminiscent of students preparing to take the imperial examination.

The Executive Audience, the Nocturnal Liturgy, the Celestial Request...

Shusei’s class had finished for the day, and Rimi had returned to her dwelling where she headed straight for her bedchamber and collapsed onto the bed. The contents of today’s lecture were swirling around in her head.

I can’t fail the Executive Audience. If I do, I’ll embarrass His Majesty. The responsibility weighed heavily on Rimi’s shoulders.

The biggest hurdle to Rimi was after the Executive Audience—the Nocturnal Liturgy. While studying for the Executive Audience was so much work that Rimi felt as though her brain would start boiling, the Nocturnal Liturgy required her to prepare emotionally.

“What should I do? How do you prepare for something emotionally?”

To make matters worse, her tutor was Shusei—the very person that her chest was aching for. Spending every day with him just made it harder for her to steel herself. Shusei’s gaze, words, and smile were still as kind as ever. His long fingers were beautiful as they flipped through the texts. Unable to stop herself from noticing all these little details, Rimi didn’t know what to do with herself. She recalled how she had wished to become a stray dog for Shusei to take in,

and even though days had passed since then, she now couldn't help but feel pathetic and embarrassed by her thoughts as she rubbed her face against her duvet.

Dummy. Dummy. What are you doing when Master Shusei is working so hard to ensure that you become the empress—someone who belongs to His Majesty?

She wrapped the duvet around her body and rolled back and forth on the bed, but after a little while, she abruptly stopped herself and sat up.

"No! I can't let my mind wander like this. I need to study."

Rimi placed the texts she had borrowed from Shusei on the table and started reading in silence. She took a break to have supper, but she soon resumed her reading by the candlelight. Then Tama returned and curled up on top of Rimi's lap. Tama's weight and warmth were comforting, and Rimi stroked her back as she continued to read through the night.

After a while, Rimi came across a few sentences that she didn't understand. Figuring that resolving a question as soon as you have one was the best way to learn, she considered seeing if Shusei was still available to help her when a considerate handmaid brought her tea. Rimi asked whether Shusei was still awake, and the handmaid explained that he seemed to be out at the moment.

Out? It seemed strange to Rimi that Shusei would leave the palace so late, but she didn't pay much attention to it at that time.

The next day, however, it was once again time for Shusei's lecture. But when Rimi approached the Jade Spring gazebo, Shusei was nowhere in sight. The only one there was Jotetsu, leisurely walking down the passageway crossing the spring.

"Hey, Rimi. How about a game of shijong?" Jotetsu asked as he pulled a chair closer to her, sat down, and started fiddling with wooden tiles with both hands.

"I need to study with Master Shusei," Rimi replied.

"He left the palace late last night. He returned at sunrise, but I'm pretty sure he'll be late this morning."

"He was out until sunrise? What was he doing out that late?"

“Who’s to say? I don’t know what Shusei is thinking or where he’s going. All I know is that he’s apparently been disappearing now and then like this.”

“Aren’t you curious about what he’s doing?”

“Oh, yeah, there’s nothing more in the world I’d like to know,” Jotetsu replied sarcastically.

“You’ve known each other for years, haven’t you? Aren’t you worried about Master Shusei?” Rimi asked, slightly irritated.

“He’s welcome to do whatever he likes as far as I’m concerned. He’s no child. I’m sure he’s just trying to find a way to enjoy his fate. Who knows, maybe he’s stopping by a brothel?”

Rimi felt like she’d just been slapped across the face.

A brothel... Of course... That’s a possibility. Even Master Shusei might want to speak to someone, touch someone... Rimi felt her motivation leave her body.

Rimi held back her tears. She had no right to cry. Regardless of what Shusei was thinking or what he was doing, Rimi was not in a position to involve herself with him. Deep down, she knew that.

“Come on, don’t look like that. Let’s play some shijong,” Jotetsu said as he began to shuffle the tiles when he suddenly lifted his gaze in surprise. “Oh, that’s earlier than I expected.”

Rimi followed his gaze to find Shusei walking toward the gazebo, carrying texts.

“Good morning, Rimi. I’m sorry. Did I keep you waiting?” Shusei said before turning to speak to Jotetsu with a glare. “Don’t get in the way, all right?”

Jotetsu hung his head like a mischievous child who had been found out as he retreated from the gazebo.

“I see Jotetsu is being a poor influence as always, both toward you and His Majesty. What will I do with him?” Shusei said as he placed the texts on the table.

Shusei’s robes were emanating an unfamiliar scent of incense. It was a refreshing, fruity scent. Rimi couldn’t stop herself from opening her mouth.

“Where did you go, Master Shusei?” she asked.

“I’m sorry? I’m not sure what you’re referring to,” Shusei responded with a puzzled look.

“Oh... No, it’s nothing.”

But you did go somewhere, didn’t you? This isn’t the fragrance you usually use, Rimi wanted to ask, but she held her tongue and shifted her eyes to the texts.

The unfamiliar scent coming from Shusei’s clothes made Rimi feel dejected, and she felt miserable for reacting in this way.

I swore to become the empress to support His Majesty. I am not going back on that. I made the decision knowing that my heart ached when I thought about Master Shusei. I knew that this would happen. I can’t let this pain affect me. This is pathetic. I need to focus on the Executive Audience and prepare myself for the Nocturnal Liturgy.

As Rimi looked down and ran her eyes across the writing, Shusei looked up at her from the other side of the table, perhaps noticing something in her expression.

I don’t want him to look at me, Rimi thought as she unconsciously turned her face the other way.

“What’s the matter, Rimi? You’re acting strange,” Shusei remarked.

“I just...feel pathetic,” Rimi said.

The purpose of the Executive Audience was to see if the prospective empress was fit for the task. Rimi would effectively be standing in front of almost a hundred officials and asserting that she would be the next empress. Thinking about it, it seemed absolutely preposterous.

When Rimi had only just arrived in Konkoku, there had been some commotion regarding tributes that had been sent from Wakoku, and Rimi had been dragged in front of the imperial council. She still remembered how traumatic that experience had been, and the thought of having to face those very same officials terrified her.

Rimi also wondered if it was really appropriate for her to publicly state her intention to become the empress when she was neither remarkably clever nor beautiful—and if it was right for her to become Shohi's empress when she was being distracted by a pain that she had already accounted for. The anxiety she had always felt deep inside was rapidly amplifying.

"Is it really right for someone like me to become the empress? Is this really what's best for His Majesty?" Rimi vocalized her fears.

After a moment's silence, Shusei responded.

"Rimi, look at me," he said.

Rimi timidly turned her gaze toward the other side of the table. Shusei was smiling.

"Rimi, at this stage, no one can tell whether you becoming the empress is good or bad. Not even the gods know," Shusei said. "Only when you have lived out your life as empress will it be possible to say. However, I personally want you to become the empress," Shusei said.

Rimi felt a stinging pain at Shusei's encouraging gaze. He had stated beyond a doubt that he wished for Rimi to become the empress.

"Why do you think I should become the empress?" Rimi asked.

"Because I believe in you. I think you will be able to support His Majesty," Shusei said firmly, casting a small light on Rimi's aching heart.

He...believes in me?

Rimi stared at Shusei vacantly, and Shusei responded with a nod.

Oh... That makes me so happy...

More than anything else, Shusei took pride in serving Shohi. Rimi being of use to Shohi also meant she was being of use to Shusei. This meant that Shusei trusted her.

The two of them had affirmed their feelings for each other, then mutually agreed to end their relationship. When Rimi resolved to become the empress at Castle Seika, all hope of them being together had been extinguished. Ever since then, Rimi had felt a tingling sense of sadness somewhere in her chest. The

reason was that she had been afraid that completely abandoning her feelings of love would also destroy any emotional connection she had with Shusei, including his trust in her. But she had been wrong. What she had thought had been destroyed was still there. Shusei's words, "I believe in you," told her that.

"Will I really be able to do that?" Rimi asked.

"Of course you will. I will make you an excellent, proud empress," Shusei said confidently.

Rimi felt like Shusei was taking her hand, subsequently encouraging her and telling her to support Shohi with him. Perhaps not even one ounce of romantic feelings remained there. Instead, Shusei was trying to forge a connection with her as someone fighting for the same purpose.

Shusei was not like Rimi. He had already come to terms with his futile love and had now shifted his gaze to something else.

Master Shusei really is so much stronger and wiser than I am.

"But before that, you have to get through the Executive Audience. We now have more than enough time to prepare," Shusei said.

"Yes," Rimi replied firmly.

Shusei had always been there to help Rimi—both before and after they had realized their feelings for each other, and even now, after having agreed to erase their feelings.

He is very important to me.

Rimi felt strength welling up inside of her, along with a resolve to overcome the Executive Audience. The Nocturnal Liturgy and the Celestial Request still awaited her after that, but now was not the time to worry about them.



Impressive. Rimi has memorized all the answers perfectly. Shusei was agape at how fervently Rimi had been practicing for the Executive Audience. She had rapidly learned one question after another, and it only took a few days before she was able to recite them almost perfectly from memory, despite the overwhelming number of potential questions.

The Executive Audience would commence by the Minister of Rites uttering, “State your name, you who seek to stand next to the ruler of the empire,” to which the prospective empress would reply, “It is I; so-and-so is my name.” That signaled the start of the questioning. The officials would then ask a question for the prospective empress to answer, and this process would repeat twice more. After answering the final question, the prospective empress would ask, “Have I your approval?” to which the officials would reply, “Aye.” That was the end of the ceremony.

Today was the day of the Executive Audience. It would take place at noon in the Hall of New Harmony. Rimi and Shusei had rehearsed the questions since dawn, and Rimi’s answers had been flawless.

After the rehearsal, the four consorts had run off with Rimi, saying they needed to make some final adjustments to her outfit for the Executive Audience. With no one around to teach, Shusei was left with nothing but time on his hands, which he was spending at the gazebo flipping through the questions for the ceremony while resting his head on his hand. Because Rimi would be introduced as a noblewoman related to the Shu family, Shusei would be present as her attendant, so he was preparing too.

I haven’t noticed any signs of an assassin sent by Director I. I can’t imagine anything would happen in the middle of the Executive Audience, but you can never be too careful.

I Bunryo had yet to make a move since the initial attack. This had only put Shusei all the more on edge.

The greatest danger will be present when traveling from the Palace of the Water Spirit to the imperial palace. I’d better tell Jotetsu not to let Rimi out of his sight.

A strong wind blew past, sending one sheet of notes up in the air and into Jade Spring. While observing the sheet floating on the surface, Shusei thought about how remarkably he had endured during his stay here. He was relieved that he had been able to keep his composure despite being in Rimi’s presence for extended periods of time each day.

This is all because I now know exactly what I want.

The area surrounding Rimi's residence started becoming busier as handmaids ran up and down the cloisters. It was almost time for her to set off. Shusei took a deep breath, cleared his head, and stood up. As he approached the gate, he found Jotetsu, who was maintaining his distance from the group of women. He quickly walked up to him.

"Jotetsu, whatever you do, other than during the Executive Audience, don't take your eyes off Rimi for even a second," Shusei said quietly.

"I won't take my eyes off her during the Executive Audience either," Jotetsu said, smirking with his mouth but not his eyes as he carefully observed the women. "We've already seen what happens if we let our guard down. I Bunryo is serious."

"Thank you."

"Leave it to me. But never mind that, have a look over there. Not bad, huh?"

Shusei looked in the direction Jotetsu was nodding, and Rimi came into view. Shusei gasped at the sight of her.

III

Shohi, having woken up before the morning sun had shown itself, was unable to contain his joy. Today, Rimi would be visiting the imperial palace for the Executive Audience. He praised himself for how patient he had been.

Ever since his visit to the Palace of the Water Spirit when Shusei had fallen ill from poison, Shohi had resisted the urge to go and see Rimi. She was still nervous about becoming empress, and Shohi didn't want to provoke her. He wanted to give her time to rest, calm down, and ready herself for what lay ahead.

Shohi would be present for the Executive Audience. His outfit for the event was a ceremonial black color. Pitch black dragons were embroidered into the fabric, and in a dark place, the outfit looked like it was made from plain, if expensive, black silk. In even just a little light, however, the dragons turned silver, decorating his robes from his shoulder to his sleeve. Around his neck hung a necklace adorned with five large pearls. Twenty-four fringes of jewels

made from polished obsidian decorated the crown atop his head.

The sun was high up in the sky. Just as the last adjustments had finally been made to Shohi's attire, an aide informed him of Rimi's arrival.

She's here!

Unable to hide how happy he was, Shohi jumped up from the sofa. The first person to enter the room was Shusei, who kneeled to greet Shohi.

"I have brought a relative of the Shu family from where the Shu house originates, Koto. May I present her to you, Your Majesty?" Shusei asked.

The ancestors to the Shu house had lived far north of Annei, in an area called Koto. It appeared that they had decided to claim that Rimi was a noblewoman from that area who descended from the Shu house. As this was on paper the first time Shohi would meet Rimi, Shusei was giving her a formal introduction. Shohi, however, was barely listening.

"I permit it. Show her to me," Shohi said, his voice breaking from how happy he was to see Rimi again.

Shusei called out toward the hallway, and a woman entered the room. Her ruqun looked completely black at first glance, but as she started walking, the deep crimson inside became visible. The crimson fabric was decorated with vines. Her shawl, which was wrapped around her arms, was a faintly transparent white. The buyao in her hair featured coral sculpted into detailed flowers.

As the woman looked up, the faint crimson around her eyes became visible. Her lips were also lustrous and red. Standing in front of Shohi was a mature woman so bewitching that she took your breath away.

This is...

After the woman finished bowing to Shohi, who was observing her, stunned, she gave him a soft smile.

"Your Majesty, I am pleased to meet you. My name is Setsu Rimi," Rimi said, greeting Shohi as she had been instructed.

Her voice and smile made it clear that she was Rimi, but had she given a more

dignified smile instead, Shohi wondered if he would even have recognized her. That was how mature and beautiful she looked. It made it all the more clear how careless she was when it came to her usual appearance. Dressed up and wearing makeup, her smooth skin seemed almost translucent, her hair shone, and her expression was warm. She was enchantingly beautiful.

Hakurei was standing behind Rimi. He had been ordered by the four consorts to attend the ceremony and report back to them. He appeared to be pleased by Shohi's surprised expression. The consorts must have worked hard to dress Rimi up.

"Um... Your Majesty?" Rimi said, curious about Shohi's lack of reaction.

"Beautiful..." Shohi said without thinking.

In response, Rimi's eyes widened in surprise and she looked around the room. She then seemed to have some kind of realization as she nodded slightly and looked back at Shohi with a bright smile.

"Yes, of course. Master Hakurei is as beautiful as ever," she said.

"Not him! I am referring to you!" Shohi barked.

"Huh?" Rimi said, bewildered, as Shusei leaned in toward her.

"He is talking about you, Rimi. You are very beautiful today," Shusei whispered.

Only then did Rimi understand what Shohi had meant as she bashfully fidgeted with her shawl.

"Um, that's, uh... Thank you, Your Majesty," Rimi said.

Seeing Rimi act the same as ever despite her appearance only intensified Shohi's infatuation with her.

"It is time for the Executive Audience. Come with me," Shohi said.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Rimi replied, following Shohi.

Shohi was overjoyed to have Rimi so close to him. Walking with her in tow, he felt himself becoming more confident.

I will show those disrespecting officials who my empress is, Shohi thought.

There was no room for them to complain about Rimi's beauty today. Not to mention, she was now a relative of the Shu family—a Konkokuan. *No one will be able to protest.*



Officials were filling the Hall of New Harmony for the Executive Audience. A particularly tall and well-built man, the Minister of Revenue, To Rihan, stood out from the crowd. A slimmer minister approached him from behind.

"Rihan, you're early. Are you that excited for the Executive Audience?" the Minister of Rites, Jin Keiyu, jested as he stopped next to Rihan.

The scar below Rihan's right eye warped as he glared at Keiyu.

"Should the Minister of Rites, who oversees ceremonies, really be entering the Hall of New Harmony at his own pace along with everyone else?" Rihan said.

"It's fine. Vice Minister En arrived early to make sure that everything was all set. What's wrong? Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"I came across some notable information."

"What is it?"

"I will inform Chancellor Shu after the Executive Audience."

Rihan ignored Keiyu's "Hmph," as the two of them entered the Hall of New Harmony.



As Rimi chased after Shohi, Shusei was following diagonally behind her like a shadow.

"It's a ceremony with a fixed format. Relax. But do stay focused," Shusei whispered.

"All right," Rimi replied.

Upon leaving the Palace of the Water Spirit, the consorts had encouraged her, saying "Keep it together."

If only Tama could have been with me... Rimi started having nervous thoughts

as she grew more worried about what was going to happen.

Tama had followed Rimi to the imperial palace, but on the way to Shohi's room, she had stroked Rimi's neck with her tail as if to say, "I'm going off to play. Good luck," before scurrying away on a walk. Rimi was worried about where Tama might have gone, but she assumed that the dragon would be back by the time the Executive Audience was over.

Rimi followed Shohi, who was being guided by aides, inside the Hall of New Harmony through the rear. The enormous building, standing on a cold stone floor, was silent. Then, a gong rang out. In response, a flute could be heard, and music featuring fiddles started playing. The aides parted the curtains, and Shohi walked out toward the throne. Rimi similarly stepped out from behind the curtains and toward the chair one step below the throne where she would be sitting. She followed after Shohi when she suddenly shuddered and stopped dead in her tracks.

That's...!

A staggering number of officials wearing formal robes were kneeling, covering the floor. At the front, representing the royal Ho house, was Ho Neison. Filling the second row were the chancellor, the six ministers, and the general of the imperial guards. Behind them were the remaining officials, spearheaded by the vice ministers of each ministry. All officials present were of vice rank nine or above. Rimi felt overwhelmed by the solemn atmosphere.

Shohi walked up to the throne and sat down leisurely. Meanwhile, Rimi, who was not used to being revered like this, felt a sense of terror and an urge to flee.

"Rimi," Shusei said from behind.

Rimi turned her head around to find Shusei smiling at her as if he was trying to comfort her.

"You'll be fine," Shusei continued. "I will be right here on the other side of the curtains behind the throne. You'll be able to hear me. Calm down. I'm here for you."

Shusei's words were immensely reassuring. Rimi nodded in response, raised her head, and started walking again.

The throne was placed atop blocks of marble stacked on top of each other. The top level was reserved for Shohi's throne, decorated with gold, while the second level was normally empty. Today, however, a single chair had been placed there. The back of the chair was three heads taller than Rimi, and the armrests and legs featured floral carvings. The extravagant chair was decorated with black lacquer and gold leaves.

After stepping away from the curtains, Rimi sat down in the chair. She clasped her hands together on top of her lap as she looked down at the kneeling officials. Her body felt stiff, and her mouth was dry.

The music was still playing but suddenly stopped as the gong rang out once more.

"Officials, hear me," Shohi called out. "A woman worthy to be my empress will now present herself. I wish for you to welcome her. Raise your heads."

The officials all looked up in unison, and the gong rang out again. The chancellor and the six ministers stood up. Standing at one end of the row, the Minister of Rites, Jin Keiyu, took a deep bow.

"State your name, you who seek to stand next to the ruler of the empire," Keiyu said as he raised his head. It was the start of the Executive Audience.

"It is I; Setsu Rimi is my name, related to the Shu house whose ancestors stem from the land of Koto," Rimi said, putting as much force into her belly as she could while speaking. She managed to reply as she had been instructed, but her voice was weak. It took all she had just to keep herself from trembling.

"Has she your approval?" Shohi asked.

"Please wait, Your Majesty," Keiyu replied.

"Very well," Shohi declared. It was time for the questions.

The chancellor, Shu Kojin, shifted his gaze toward Rimi and bowed.

"May I ask your age?" Kojin said.

"I am seventeen years of age," Rimi replied, relieved to be asked such an innocuous question.

"Are you prepared to become the empress?" Keiyu asked in turn.

It was another simple question. It seemed they were trying to get Rimi used to the format and relieve her stress.

“Yes,” Rimi declared.

Next, the Minister of Revenue, To Rihan, shot Rimi a sharp glance.

“Are you aware of the obligations of the empress?” he asked.

“To serve and be of use to His Majesty, to oversee the rear palace and ensure it is free from incident, and to carry His Majesty’s child to preserve his bloodline for a millennium,” Rimi replied.

This was another standard question, listed under the category of the empress’s duties. There were nearly eight hundred questions like these, divided into the categories of duties, knowledge, culture, politics, and current affairs, but Rimi was confident that she had memorized them all perfectly. She breathed a sigh of relief at having been able to answer correctly.

Next, a bearded man with the physique of a bear, the Minister of Works, spoke.

“Do you know the number of prefectures and townships of Konkoku?” he asked.

“There are five prefectures and seventy-two townships under the supervision of the Ministry of Works. I know not of other lands, as these are not His Majesty’s subjects,” Rimi replied.

Shohi gave a satisfied nod behind Rimi.

If I can keep this up, I will be able to get through this safely without embarrassing His Majesty. As long as I can—

But just as Rimi was starting to feel more at ease, the terribly slender Minister of Personnel started speaking.

“State the names of your parents and your grandparents,” he said.

The hall, which until now had been so quiet that even clearing your throat would have caught the whole hall’s attention, turned restless.

What?!

The question was not from the collection Rimi had been given. Shohi furrowed his brow, while Kojin, Keiyu, and Rihan side-eyed the Minister of Personnel. The Minister of Works looked dumbfounded, staring directly at the Minister of Personnel, but the Ministers of War and Justice looked straight ahead as if nothing had happened.

The Minister of Personnel... That's the man who submitted the letter opposing my becoming empress.

As the noise died down again, the air of the hall turned tense once more, but in a different way from before. Officials who had assumed that this would be a run-of-the-mill ceremony like any other were now waiting with bated breath to see how Rimi would handle this unprecedented turn of events. Rimi's fingers were cold and drops of sweat ran down her neck.

By convention, standard questions were asked during the Executive Audience, but there was no explicit rule against questions not listed in the collection. However, tradition, and common sense, said that doing so was out of the question. Thus, the Minister of Personnel clearly had a reason for intentionally breaking with tradition.

He is trying to embarrass me, criticize me, and then declare to His Majesty that he won't recognize me as the empress.

If the officials did not reply "Aye," the Executive Audience could not end. But by disrupting what was otherwise supposed to be a solemn, routine ceremony, the Minister of Personnel had thrust the hall into a state of confusion, preventing the ceremony from proceeding as planned. If it did not continue, they would never reach that "Aye," and the Executive Audience would break down. This was his attempt to stop Rimi from becoming empress. Embarrassing her would in turn reflect poorly on Shohi with critics complaining about how foolish this young emperor was. He was trying to reenact the dreadful Executive Audience that had once taken place during the Shoku dynasty.

I can't believe he would try to stop the Executive Audience itself. It was more proof of just how little they respected Shohi.

Rimi tried to sneak a glance at Shohi out of the corner of her eye, and he looked shocked. The emperor had no say here. It would have been unseemly to

attempt to defend the prospective empress that he had chosen himself. Shohi's hands were gripping his armrests with so much force that the tips of his fingers had turned white.

I can't let them get away with attempting to ridicule His Majesty like this. But what should I do?

The Minister of Personnel's question was a simple one. Under normal circumstances, there would be no need to even think, but Rimi's identity had been hastily put together. The minister had used this fact to his advantage.

What should I do...?

Chapter 4: Have They Your Approval?

I

While Rimi's hands were firmly clasped together, she heard a quiet voice from behind her.

"My father is Setsu Yoko, and my mother is Shu Enka. My grandfather on my father's side is Setsu Gunki, and my grandmother is Shu Keimei." It was Shusei's voice.

Rimi almost looked back in surprise, but Shusei quickly stopped her.

"You mustn't look this way," he said sternly. "Just repeat what I said. I'll say it again. Listen carefully. 'My father is Setsu Yoko, and my mother is Shu Enka. My grandfather on my father's side is Setsu Gunki, and my grandmother is Shu Keimei. The Setsu house has been joined with the Shu house for two generations.' Shu Enka and Shu Keimei both exist, and we have falsified records of Setsu Yoko and Setsu Gunki in Koto."

Rimi tried to suppress her panic, desperately recalled what Shusei had just told her, and looked at the Minister of Personnel. His eyes were narrow, and he wore a ridiculing expression on his face.

"M-My father is Setsu Yoko, and my mother is Shu Enka. My grandfather on my father's side is Setsu Gunki, and my grandmother is Shu Keimei. The Setsu house has been joined with the Shu house for two generations," Rimi said.

She just barely managed to repeat the answer correctly. The Minister of Personnel seemed to mutter something resentfully before glancing toward the Minister of War next to him.

The Minister of War and the Minister of Justice are probably just like the Minister of Personnel. From how the ministers had acted earlier, it seemed that the Ministers of War and Justice had been aware of the Minister of Personnel's plan from the start—and they had not objected. Rimi could feel what was

coming next.

"If a subservient country attempted to separate from Konkoku, its suzerain, what would you do? Take Wakoku, as an example," the Minister of War, a white-haired man who seemed to be the oldest of all the ministers, asked. As Rimi had feared, this question was also not from the collection.

"Say, 'That is a matter of policy, which is for the officials to propose and His Majesty to decide on. It is not a matter for me to interfere with,'" Shusei said without pause.

"That is a matter of policy, which is for the officials to propose and His Majesty to decide on. I am not in a position to comment on that," Rimi paraphrased.

Relieved and impressed voices could be heard throughout the hall.

Master Shusei is such a fast thinker. The question makes it sound like it's trying to force me to state the correct way to deal with the problem diplomatically, but the real answer is not to answer at all. He's testing me to see if I understand my position.

Rimi glanced toward the Minister of Justice. He had a small build with a face akin to a child's, but his eyes revealed his cynical demeanor.

"If I were to let a bird out of its cage right here in front of you, what would happen to the bird? Please answer objectively," the Minister of Justice said.

Rimi was lost for words at the strange questions. The officials started whispering among themselves.

What is he talking about?! The bird will flee. What else would it do?!

As she panicked, Rimi could hear Shusei whisper from behind.

"Say, 'It will likely fly for a while but then rest if it becomes tired,'" Shusei said.

Of course! Hearing Shusei's answer, Rimi realized what the Minister of Justice's question was meant to test.

"The bird will fly and rest when it becomes tired," Rimi said.

The Minister of Justice narrowed his eyes while a few officials mumbled as if impressed. However, most officials were looking on vacantly with no idea what was happening.

I can't say that the bird would flee or disappear. He explicitly said to answer objectively. He is testing if I can maintain my composure and properly grasp the nuance of what he is saying.

The bird fleeing or flying away would only be the case as seen from a human's perspective. But the bird would not flee nor would it disappear. The correct answer was simply that it would fly after being released. That was the objective point of view.

That was the end of the first round, and the second round began. Shu Kojin opened his mouth again.



While Kojin, Keiyu, Rihan, and the Minister of Works asked their second questions, Shusei took a breath behind the curtains, still on one knee. Their questions were all in the collection, and Rimi would be able to answer them perfectly. As expected, Rimi was handling the second round well so far.

"They prepared a trap for her, huh? And quite a bold one at that," Hakurei whispered, kneeling next to Shusei.

"Hakurei, are the Ministers of Personnel, War, and Justice all connected to Director I?" Shusei asked.

"Only the Minister of Personnel is being blackmailed by Director I. The other two seem to be doubting His Majesty's capabilities as emperor, so they decided to go along with the Minister of Personnel's plans," Jotetsu explained.

"In other words, if Rimi can get through the Executive Audience in one piece, there's a chance that the Ministers of War and Justice will change their view of her," Shusei reasoned.

"How confident are you?"

"It doesn't matter how confident I am. We have to do this."

Shusei heightened his senses as he focused on the voices coming from the

other side of the curtains. The Minister of Personnel had just started asking his question.



The Minister of Personnel's question was also not from the collection. Shusei promptly whispered an answer, and Rimi repeated his response. The Ministers of War and Justice followed with nonstandard questions, and Shusei told Rimi the answers. As she repeated Shusei's replies, Rimi slowly started to understand how they worked.

There's a basic strategy to answering the questions. You have to listen carefully to the wording of the questions and answer appropriately. Under no circumstances can you disrespect the emperor's authority or speak out of line. You have to be aware of the empress's position as well as understand and swear your heart to devote your life to fulfilling the duties of the empress. Then it would be possible to avoid your answer being met with a cold reception regardless of the question. Rimi had mindlessly memorized every answer to the standard questions, but on closer inspection, they were all carefully constructed to follow these fundamental principles. *Still, I can't believe how disrespectful they are of His Majesty.*

As the second round concluded, and Kojin started asking his final question, Rimi was slowly becoming increasingly angry. She couldn't forgive them for disrespecting the emperor publicly simply because they didn't agree with him choosing a Wakokuan as his empress.

Rimi answered the Minister of Works' question. The Minister of Personnel was next.

"Please name the three rivers that surround the land of Koto," the Minister of Personnel requested. His questions had all been intended to prove that Rimi did not come from Koto.

The Executive Audience is meant to test whether the prospective empress is worthy of the position. He is completely disregarding this, asking questions with the intent of making me fail rather than testing me. Rimi couldn't believe that this attitude was coming from someone who was supposed to be serving the emperor.

“Say, ‘Only two rivers, the Flat River and Leaf River, flow on each side of Koto. The southern Red Waters is a wetland, and thus not a river,’” Shusei whispered.

“Only two rivers, the Flat River and Leaf River, flow on each side of Koto. The Red Waters in the south is a wetland, so it is not a river,” Rimi repeated.

The Minister of Personnel frowned before glancing at the Minister of War as if leaving the rest to him. The Minister of War nodded faintly.

“Say that Konkoku was invaded by another country, the rear palace surrounded, and the women there were separated from the rest of the world. What would you do?” he asked.

Is he asking about my resolve? Or if I have a plan in mind? What’s the right answer?

“Smile while saying that something like that would never happen,” Shusei said.

Of course. He’s asking how much faith I have in the soldiers of Konkoku and His Majesty.

“There is no chance of that ever happening,” Rimi said while attempting a smile.

The Minister of War showed a frustrated expression while some officials chuckled, finding it humorous how Rimi had seen through the question and gallantly countered it.

One more person. One more question.

The Minister of War glanced at the Minister of Justice, but the Minister of Justice did not react as he kept his gaze fixed on Rimi. He asked his question slowly, in a low voice.

“If you saw someone disrespect His Majesty in front of you, what would you do?” he asked.

Rimi couldn’t believe what she was hearing. A murmur broke out among the kneeling officials, and Kojin, Keiyu, and even Rihan furrowed their brows.

I can’t believe he would ask such a shameless question!

Shohi bit his lip.

In any other situation, the Minister of Justice's question would have been a very unremarkable one. But with an attempt to thwart the Executive Audience unfolding right before Shohi's very eyes, it was obvious to anyone that the emperor was being disrespected. Choosing now to ask this question was nothing short of provocation. He might as well have said, "Your emperor's being disrespected right in front of you. What are you going to do about it?" while nonchalantly sticking out his tongue.

This was a ceremony. They had to follow the proper procedure. If Shohi were to suddenly stand up and yell, the Executive Audience would be interrupted. The Minister of Personnel and his accomplices would be sure to say, "The Minister of Justice didn't mean to do anything of the sort. He just asked a novel question since only keeping to standard questions isn't very interesting, yet His Majesty suddenly became angry for no reason. I've never heard of an emperor or an Executive Audience like this before."

What do I do...? Master Shusei...!



What a question to ask. Does that Minister of Justice have no shame?

Shusei was not the only one in disbelief over what he had just heard, as made apparent when Hakurei whispered, "He'd go that far?" next to him. Guessing that Rimi was in shock as well, Shusei opened his mouth to give her an appropriate answer right away, when Hakurei suddenly stood up.

"Director I," Hakurei said.

Shusei hurriedly turned around in response to Hakurei's exclamation. There was I Bunryo, supported by young eunuchs on both sides. He wore a luxurious scarlet robe and a necklace decorated with three black pearls. An intense smell of herbal medicine followed him. The loose skin by his mouth formed a spiteful smile.

"Hakurei," Bunryo said in his hoarse voice, smirking. "What are you doing there? And Cuisinologist, it has been a while."

Hakurei greeted Bunryo with a bow, and Shusei had no choice but to follow

suit—Bunryo had the higher rank.

I need to give Rimi instructions.

While Shusei panicked, Bunryo carefully studied him as he approached him dreadfully slowly before gently taking his hand. Bunryo's cold, long nails swiped across the back of Shusei's hand.

"I actually had something I needed to speak to you about, Cuisinologist. I heard that you were here, so I decided to stop by. How about it? Won't you use your expertise in cuisinology to help this old man?" Bunryo asked.

"Director I, I will show the cuisinologist to your office later, when—" Hakurei began.

"Quiet, Hakurei," Bunryo spat spitefully, interrupting him.

Shusei was convinced that Bunryo had come to assist the Minister of Personnel in interfering with the ceremony. As Bunryo looked up at him, Shusei could see a light of mad obsession in his eyes—he would never allow a Wakokuan to become the empress.

His hand trapped in Bunryo's, cold sweat started running down Shusei's back.

I can't give her instructions! Rimi!

II

No matter how long Rimi waited, Shusei did not give her an answer.

Something is wrong. Master Shusei, what happened?!

Rimi felt the burning stares of the Minister of Justice and a hundred officials as if they were urging her to hurry up with their eyes. Everyone was waiting impatiently to see what would happen in response to the preposterous question that had just been uttered—whether the emperor would become enraged, the prospective empress would start to cry, or perhaps something entirely different would occur. In any case, the air grew tenser by the second as everyone there expected a commotion to break out.

Rimi's throat was twitching from tension and dread. She wanted to cry. But

she had to hold back her tears, or she would be doing just what her opponent wanted her to. At the same time, she couldn't stay silent forever. She had to say something, no matter how stupid the answer.

This is for His Majesty's sake. That sole thought was racing through Rimi's otherwise blank mind.

"It appears you didn't hear me. Let me repeat the question. If you saw someone disrespect His Majesty in front of you, what would you do?" the Minister of Justice said.

What would you do? What would you do? his voice echoed in Rimi's mind. It grew in volume inside her head until she involuntarily said it out loud in a weak, quivering voice.

"What would...*you* do?" Rimi asked.

Confusion spread among the officials like a wave, and for good reason—Rimi had just answered a question with another question.

The Minister of Personnel shot Keiyu a critical gaze.

"Minister of Rites," he said sternly. The Minister of Personnel was asking whether this was really allowed during the ceremony.

Keiyu glanced back at the Vice Minister of Rites behind him, who started flipping through notes in which the format of the Executive Audience was outlined, before whispering to Keiyu.

"The Executive Audience is a dialog where the person presenting themselves answers our questions. As it only says that the person must be able to answer the question, there is no decree that each question must be replied to with a single answer," Keiyu explained. "Thus, repeating the question back does not break with the format of the ceremony," Keiyu declared, his voice echoing throughout the hall.

In response, the officials grew lively, seemingly enjoying the spectacle. The Minister of Justice remained unfazed, as if to say that he was not particularly concerned, his gaze still fixed on Rimi.

"You seem to desire a discussion, so I will oblige," the Minister of Justice said.

“If someone disrespected His Majesty in front of me, I would first attempt to assess the intention behind the act. After all, there might be a worthy cause that is driving them to do so. There, I have answered the question. Now it’s your turn!”

Hearing this, the anger that had been smoldering inside Rimi suddenly flared up into a blaze.

Assess their intention?!

Rimi’s blank mind became filled with nothing but rage. The Minister of Justice was speaking as if the person disrespecting the emperor had justice on their side. Rimi couldn’t let that go unchallenged.

“I... I don’t agree!” Rimi said in a quivering voice, but one loud enough to reverberate in the air. All she could think about was standing up for Shohi, who was silently enduring the humiliation behind her. “No matter how worthy the cause, there are countless ways to work toward it. There is no need to go out of your way to disrespect the emperor of Konkoku in public. If someone does, it is because the act of disrespect itself is their goal.”

Hearing her own voice dominate the hall, Rimi was growing even more heated. Words started flowing out of her mouth like a chain reaction. Right now, she had to answer the question, no matter how silly her answer was.

“Someone who can’t think of a course of action other than disrespecting His Majesty is nothing but a fool. If they can’t devise a better plan on their own, they should seek advice from a sage. And if they can’t even think to ask a sage for guidance, they’re a fool beyond saving,” Rimi declared.

The officials held their breaths. Rimi had just indirectly called the Minister of Personnel, along with the Ministers of War and Justice, fools beyond saving. However, these three would never themselves admit to having disrespected the emperor. In other words, everyone present understood that Rimi had called them fools, but they had no way of defending themselves. She had used their strategy against them.

“Impressive...” someone in the crowd whispered.

But Rimi had not done so on purpose. She had simply expelled her rage out of

her desire to protect Shohi's dignity.

"Please answer me, Minister of Justice—are you a fool?" Rimi asked.

"I am no fool," the minister replied.

Liar!

Rimi couldn't understand how he could reply while remaining unfazed. She couldn't let him get away with staying so unconcerned after having embarrassed Shohi in front of so many people.

"In that case, there is no one here who has disrespected His Majesty. But if there was, I would condemn them, no matter what punishment I might face," Rimi said. She then slowly pointed, one by one, at the Minister of Personnel, the Minister of War, and the Minister of Justice.

Him, him, and him. They're the ones who disrespected His Majesty here.

It was a blatant act of condemnation. Rimi's finger was trembling. She had no idea if this would go unpunished. But at this point, she had no other option.

"This is my answer to the Minister of Justice's question. Are my answers and means..." Rimi cut herself short and took a breath before slowly continuing. "Are they acceptable?" Rimi said. She had no confidence in her answer, and she couldn't stop herself from seeking reassurance from the audience.

The hall went dead quiet. Rimi had just asked the question—whether her answers were acceptable. Whether she had their approval.

After a moment of silence, a voice could be heard from the very back of the hall—"Aye." Then, like a contagion, one "aye" after another started rushing from the crowd as the officials bowed down. The voices grew and echoed through the hall, until Kojin, Keiyu, Rihan, and the Minister of Works at the front row also gave a deep bows and said, "Aye." The Minister of Personnel and his accomplices had frustrated looks on their faces, but they too lowered their heads and said, "Aye."



Rimi watched the scene unfold in a daze, not processing what was happening, before she finally realized her mistake.

Oh no, I did it wrong.

At the end of the third round of the Executive Audience, the prospective empress was to ask, “Have I your approval?”—“Am I acceptable as the empress?”—but Rimi had instead asked, “Are they acceptable?”—“Have *they* your approval?”

Still, the officials had answered. They had said “aye” in response to Rimi’s question, thus expressing their approval of her.

As Rimi vacantly looked out at the bowing officials, she felt a hand gently tapping her on the shoulder.

“Rimi, come,” Shohi said, having descended from the throne and walked up to her. His eyes were happy. “You did well. Now, we only need to make our exit. Come with me.”

Rimi tried to stand up and walk, but her knees were shaking so much that it took all her strength just to stand up from the chair.

“You sure are a handful,” Shohi said softly with a smile before lifting her.

“Your Majesty?! You can’t!” Rimi exclaimed in shock.

“Can you walk, then?” Shohi asked with a teasing smile.

“W-Well... No...”

“Then do not complain.”



She made it through. Well done, Rimi, Shusei thought as he breathed a sigh of relief.

I Bunryo’s eyes had grown cold in the shadow of the curtains. His hands became limp, and Shusei was able to remove his hand from the man’s grasp.

“Excuse me, Director I,” Shusei said with a bow. “A distant relative of mine that I am tutoring is just about to return. I need to accompany her.”

“I have tasks given to me by the four consorts that I need to carry out, so I

also need to excuse myself," Hakurei said, bowing similarly.

Hakurei attempted to leave alongside Shusei when Bunryo grasped his shoulder.

"Wait, Hakurei! Why are you leaving?!" Bunryo yelled.

"I have work to attend to," Hakurei explained.

"You cannot leave. You must escort me to the rear palace. Once there, I have a task for you."

Bunryo's shock was plain as day. He had plotted to ensure Rimi's failure during the Executive Audience, but his plan had failed spectacularly. Now he was panicking, trying to think of his next move.

"I'm sorry, Director, but I have received instructions directly from His Majesty. So, I'm unable to assist you at the moment," Hakurei said.

"You'd pander to the very people responsible for your current lowly state? Have you lost all sense of pride?" Bunryo said with bloodshot eyes as he desperately tried to bargain with Hakurei.

Shusei shuddered slightly at how forceful Bunryo was being. But Hakurei, his shoulder still in Bunryo's grasp, simply gave his usual beautiful and captivating smile.

"Pride? My, what a thing to bring up after all this time. Have you forgotten that you are the one who ripped me of my pride long ago, along with my dignity?" Hakurei said.

Bunryo widened his eyes. He looked as if he had been scratched by a pretty cat, realizing for the first time that it had claws.

"You...are not of a position where you can speak to me that way. You cannot..." Bunryo trailed off.

"Yes, until now, that was true. But when Setsu Rimi becomes empress, she will be the new ruler of the rear palace. I don't imagine she will care much for you, but she and I, on the other hand, are on good terms," Hakurei explained.

Bunryo's lips trembled. Hakurei brushed off Bunryo's hand and walked a few steps before turning around to the young eunuchs supporting Bunryo and

smiling.

“It would be in your best interests to determine where the wind is blowing next. It won’t blow in the same direction forever,” he observed, causing the eunuchs to exchange glances. He started walking away, and Shusei caught up with him.

“Are you sure you should have spoken like that to Director I, Hakurei?” Shusei asked.

“Yes, it’s fine. If anything, I hope it makes him panic even more. The more he panics, the sooner he will reveal his true colors,” Hakurei explained.

“But Rimi will be in even greater danger as a result,” Shusei replied worriedly.

“Now that she’s made it through the Executive Audience, it’s inevitable that she’ll be in danger. It won’t make any difference if I make Director I panic,” Hakurei said.

“But...”

“A new wind is blowing in the rear palace thanks to Rimi. I have waited eleven years for this. I’m not going to let this chance escape me.”

There was something cold about Hakurei’s eyes. They did not have the passion of someone who desired power. It was as if he was being driven by a deep-seated hatred that had slowly amassed inside him like fallen snow.

Rimi becoming empress meant that the power structure of the rear palace would surely change. It had once been ruled by Noble Consort En after the death of Virtuous Consort Sai, and although the concubines of the rear palace had been replaced once Shohi took to the throne, the eunuch palace attendants had remained. The young women had neither the power to control the old and cunning palace attendants nor the knowledge to outwit them. But with the enthronement of a new empress, any palace attendants who won her favor would be able to overthrow the old ruling faction using the influence of the woman most favored by the emperor.

I Bunryo was desperate, and the three ministers who had been embarrassed in front of the other officials were unlikely to stay quiet.

Rimi will be in more danger than ever before.

Shusei was growing more anxious. His first order of business, however, was to comfort her after what she had just been through.



Among the officials leaving the Hall of New Harmony after the Executive Audience were Shu Kojin, Jin Keiyu, and To Rihan. Walking behind Kojin, Keiyu and Rihan wore expressions that were the very opposites of each other.

“That was a fun Executive Audience, don’t you think, Rihan?” Keiyu said in an exceedingly cheerful tone.

“Are you sure the head of the ministry that oversees ceremonies should be enjoying such a nonstandard ceremony?” Rihan replied bitterly.

“Oh, don’t be such a killjoy, Rihan. It may have been nonstandard, but it didn’t break any rules, did it? Everyone’s happy to have gotten to see something so entertaining.”

“You find enjoyment in everything. I don’t know what to do with you.”

“Well aren’t you in a sour mood today. That reminds me, you said something strangely disconcerting before the ceremony. What’s that notable information you talked about?” Keiyu asked, which prompted Rihan to stop walking.

“Chancellor Shu,” Rihan called out in a stern voice. “Right before the Executive Audience, I received a strange report from my subordinates. I didn’t have time to inform you.”

“Strange? In what way?” Kojin replied.

“Evidently, your son, the cuisinologist Shu Shusei, has been frequenting Ho Neison’s mansion as of late. Were you aware of this, Chancellor?”

Kojin stopped dead in his tracks.

“With Neison apparently planning something, could it be that the cuisinologist, His Majesty’s grand councilor, is making contact with him on your orders?” Rihan continued.

“I know nothing about it. He must be doing it on his own initiative. I will ask him when the time is right,” Kojin immediately replied before resuming his

stride.



Despite his calm reply and composed appearance, Kojin's mind was in turmoil.

Shusei is meeting with Neison? Why? Jotetsu claimed that he does not know of the circumstances of his birth, Kojin thought as his irritation grew. *Does this mean that Shusei has already known about it for some time? Has Jotetsu been hiding it? No, perhaps Jotetsu is being fooled as well? Is that even possible? I cannot imagine anything would escape him while keeping a careful watch. I have already stressed how important it is for Jotetsu to keep an eye on him. What is he doing?*

III

Rimi left the Hall of New Harmony, carried by Shohi. But as she was thoroughly exhausted to the point where she was unable to even stand properly, arrangements had been made for her to return to the Palace of the Water Spirit to rest. Meanwhile, Shusei and Hakurei were ordered by Shohi to accompany him to the emperor's quarters. Shohi was likely planning on discussing what to do about the Minister of Personnel's behavior during the Executive Audience.

Rimi was lying in a bed in the main building of the Palace of Twin Dragons, which also served as a guest house for visitors. The handmaid who had followed her from the Palace of the Water Spirit had withdrawn to another room to leave Rimi alone, meaning that the room was quiet.

It's over...

Rimi looked up at the canopy vacantly, unable to think about anything, when Jotetsu, having waited for Rimi to be left alone, entered the room.

"Hey," Jotetsu said nonchalantly.

"Master Shusei and Master Hakurei left with His Majesty. Shouldn't you follow them?" Rimi asked.

"I'm your bodyguard. I can't very well let you sleep with no one watching, can

I? But I gotta say, that Executive Audience had me scared. Nice job pulling through."

"You were watching?"

"Even if you can't see me, I'm always somewhere I can see you. Anyway, well done."

Jotetsu opened a window, letting the wind in, and sat down on the windowsill. The strong scent carried by the spring wind drew Rimi's attention to outside the window, where the branches of the magnolia trees in the garden were covered with dark purple flowers.

"The magnolias really smell nice, don't they?" Rimi said.

"I can't stand them," Jotetsu replied.

"How come?"

The corners of Jotetsu's mouth turned down.

"Couldn't say. I've forgotten," he said.

Perhaps not to disturb Rimi's rest, Jotetsu ended the conversation there and silently turned his gaze outside. His presence was comforting, almost like an intelligent and loyal wolf was sleeping in the corner of the room, protecting Rimi.

That reminds me, Tama still isn't back... When I've had some rest, I should ask Master Jotetsu to accompany me for a walk around the imperial palace to search for Tama and tell her that we're leaving...

Lost in thought, Rimi started dozing off. But after a little while, she was awoken by Jotetsu quietly making some kind of movement. Not much time seemed to have passed as the sun shining on the magnolias was still in nearly the same position as before she had gone to sleep. Jotetsu was just in the process of attempting to leave the room without being noticed.

Good timing. I'll ask him to look for Tama with me. Wherever Jotetsu was headed, if Rimi simply followed along, she would probably be able to walk around the area and call out for Tama. This was what she was thinking when she quickly jumped from her bed and chased after Jotetsu.

Jotetsu left the main building and headed for the tower, slightly opening the closed door and sliding inside. The door closed again quietly. Something seemed strange about how he was acting. It was as if he was trying to avoid anyone noticing him.

Master Jotetsu? What is he doing?

Rimi approached the tower and peeked through a crack in the door.

The top of the tower was a viewing platform with railings on all sides, but the lower level was surrounded by walls. With the windows shut, it was dark inside. The only light was a beam of sunlight coming from the upper level, which caused dust to glitter in the darkness as it danced in the air.

Jotetsu was standing as if to avoid the light, his back facing the door. The man he was speaking to, who was facing Rimi, was wearing a black shenyi. It was the chancellor, Shu Kojin.

“Why did you summon me here out of the blue in the middle of the day? It’s difficult to avoid being seen like this, Chancellor,” Jotetsu said.

“That does not matter right now. I need to speak to you about Shusei. What have you been doing, Jotetsu? I ordered you to keep an eye on him and discern where he has been going, did I not?” Kojin replied calmly.

“As far as I’ve seen, Shusei hasn’t been doing anything suspicious.”

“Is that so?”

Kojin walked one step closer to Jotetsu.

“In Hanin, you claimed that Shusei still had not learned about his lineage. Are you sure about that?” Kojin asked.

“Yes, I am. What about it?” Jotetsu said.

“I see...”

Kojin took another step toward Jotetsu before suddenly reaching to take the sword hanging from Jotetsu’s hip, sheath and all.

“What are you doing?” Jotetsu exclaimed.

“Don’t move!” Kojin ordered sharply as he took Jotetsu’s sword.

Jotetsu did as ordered, allowing Kojin to take his sword, but he remained composed, giving Kojin a puzzled look. Kojin unsheathed the sword and held it in his left hand, with the sheath readied to strike in his right.

“What is it, Chancellor? Have you been practicing with the sword lately, or what?” Jotetsu jested, but his voice was slightly tense.

“Shusei does not know the circumstances of his birth. He does not seem to be going anywhere suspicious. Is that what you are telling me?” Kojin asked.

“Yes, I believe I have been telling you so the entire time.”

“Then what do I make of To Rihan’s report? Apparently, he has been informed that Shusei has been visiting Ho Neison’s mansion in secret.”

Master Shusei has been going to the Ho mansion?

Rimi recalled how Shusei had once left the Palace of the Water Spirit in the middle of the night, not returning until dawn. She had assumed that he had visited a brothel or the like, but perhaps he had actually been to see Neison. The question “Why?” popped into Rimi’s head, followed by a wave of anxiety. Shusei knew who his real father was. He was aware that his lineage meant he could become Shohi’s rival for the throne. So then why would he spend time with Neison, who was in the very process of attempting to dethrone Shohi?

Don’t tell me Master Shusei has sided with Lord Ho? That can’t be. Not Master Shusei, of all people.

Jotetsu’s back shook as though he was laughing.

“Oh? That’s the first I’ve heard of it. I guess he’s found something to enjoy,” Jotetsu said.

“Are you telling me that you lied to me?!” Kojin yelled.

Rimi jumped at Kojin’s angry voice, coming from a man who rarely showed his emotions. Kojin then lowered the sheath in his right hand and hit Jotetsu in the side with it. Jotetsu, who had been caught by surprise, groaned in a low voice as he staggered. Kojin repeated the blow in the same location. Jotetsu fell to the wooden floor.

Master Jotetsu!

Rimi suppressed a scream, holding her hands to her mouth. As Jotetsu attempted to sit up, Kojin hit him again with the sheath on the side of his face. Jotetsu fell again, his face against the floor. He appeared to have wounded his lip as tiny spheres of blood were scattered across the floor.

“Why did you lie to me?” Kojin asked coldly, in stark contrast to the fury he had displayed just a second ago.

“I didn’t lie to you,” Jotetsu answered, his tone still faintly flippant despite how much pain he was clearly in. “I told you that I didn’t know.”

“There is no chance that it would have passed you by if you were seriously investigating him. The very reason I took you in as my sword is because of your skill at covert investigations.”

“Why, thank you for the compliment.”

“Why do you lie to me?”

“I told you, I’m not—”

Before Jotetsu could finish his sentence, Kojin swung his sheath once more, hitting him in the back, the shoulder, his arms, and his waist. Jotetsu curled up, making no attempt to oppose Kojin, as the sheath hit the arm shielding his head. After a few more blows, Kojin lowered his hand, panting.

“I’ll give you one last chance. Capture Shusei tonight and make him confess to what he is speaking to Neison about. Use force if you must. You have to make him speak,” Kojin said.

Still curled up on the floor, Jotetsu chuckled.

“I don’t think so,” he replied.

“Why?”

“I’m sick of it all.”

“Fool,” Kojin spat, before swinging down the sheath again.

Blow after blow, Kojin’s cold, merciless attacks continued. Rimi trembled in fear as she watched.

Master Jotetsu will die at this rate! Rimi couldn’t sit idly by any longer.

“Please stop!” Rimi yelled as she opened the door and charged in. She jumped down to cover Jotetsu’s body, staring at the sheath in Kojin’s hand. “What are you doing, Chancellor Shu?! Master Jotetsu is an officer of the imperial guard and His Majesty’s imperially appointed bodyguard! He’s also responsible for my safety right now! You may be the chancellor, but you can’t do this to a ranked military officer!”

“Setsu Rimi. How much did you hear?” Kojin asked.

“All of it, from the very start!” Rimi replied, staring furiously at Kojin.

Kojin listlessly threw the sword and sheath to the ground.

“I see. So you’ve learned about Shusei. Nevertheless, that is not a significant miscalculation,” Kojin said dispassionately. “I am more concerned about the fact that this sword has turned useless. I have no use for a dull sword. I will speak to the general of the imperial guard and have you stripped of your rank. Leave the imperial palace. I will advise His Majesty to appoint a new bodyguard to protect Rimi, so disappear at once.”

Kojin turned to leave.

“Chancellor Shu! Please wait! Do you really think you can get away with—” Rimi began, rising to her feet to condemn Kojin when Jotetsu grabbed her arm.

“Don’t even try,” Jotetsu said. “Nothing good will come of trying to go against him.”

“But the chancellor said he’ll strip you of your rank. We can’t let him do that. I know, let’s go and ask His Majesty to—”

“And tell him what? That I’ve looked the other way while Shusei has been hanging with the Ho family who are plotting to overthrow him, making the chancellor furious with me? That Shusei is Ho Seishu’s child?”

“Oh...”

That was out of the question. If they told Shohi, who had remained ignorant until now, Shusei’s standing would be at risk. Rimi didn’t even know what reason Shusei had for making contact with the Ho family. A wrong move would put not only Jotetsu, but also Shusei, in danger.

“Ouch... He sure had his fun with me,” Jotetsu said, grimacing as he sat up.

Rimi offered to help Jotetsu up, but he ignored Rimi’s hand and rose to his feet on his own.

“He did a rib in,” Jotetsu said, clicking his tongue as he held a hand to his side.

“We have to get your injuries treated!” Rimi exclaimed.

“No need. You should worry about Shusei, not me. Judging by the chancellor’s attitude, I’ll be stripped of my status before the end of the day. Don’t worry, though, you’ll probably get another imperially appointed military officer to replace me as your bodyguard. The bigger issue here is Shusei. The fact that he’s been visiting the Ho mansion, and that the chancellor knows about it, spells trouble.”

Jotetsu took several deep breaths, seemingly struggling to breathe.

“If the chancellor judges Shusei to be even remotely dangerous, he’ll use whatever reason he can find to capture him. Worst case, he might even have him executed,” Jotetsu continued.

“Even if the chancellor isn’t Shusei’s real father, he’s still raised him as his son. Would he really capture and kill him so readily?” Rimi asked uncertainly.

“I doubt he’s ever considered Shusei his son. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s despised him the whole time. Apparently, he detested Ho Seishu from the bottom of his heart.”

“Then why would he raise him as his own?”

“He was probably having his fun by taming his enemy’s son and tormenting him.”

“That can’t...” Rimi fell speechless at the horrific suggestion.

“Stay put in the Palace of Twin Dragons until the new bodyguard comes. I’ll be leaving the imperial palace right away.”

Jotetsu picked up the sword and sheath on the floor and reattached it to his hip. But just as he was about to exit the tower, Rimi grabbed him by his sleeve.

“Please wait. If you leave, His Majesty, Master Shusei, and I won’t know what

to do," Rimi said.

"I've got no choice but to disappear. If Chancellor Shu so decides, I'll be nothing but a thug with no status to my name in a few hours. If a thug is found in the imperial palace, and near the prospective empress to boot, that's enough reason to have me captured. If anything, telling me to leave immediately was a final act of kindness. If I'd stayed with you, not knowing what was about to happen, the new bodyguard would appear and lock me up."

Jotetsu gently tapped the back of Rimi's hand.

"Take care of Shusei. I'm counting on you," Jotetsu stressed.

"Master Jotetsu!"

Jotetsu shook off Rimi's hand and darted out of the tower. Rimi collapsed lifelessly onto the floor.

Master Jotetsu disappeared. And Master Shusei... Why are you meeting with Ho Neison?

Chapter 5: Assault and Schemes

I

After leaving Rimi to rest in the Palace of Twin Dragons, Shohi returned to his chamber along with Shusei and Hakurei.

“It is I Bunryo who is controlling the Minister of Personnel, correct? I heard he even showed his face at the Hall of New Harmony during the Executive Audience!” Shohi shouted in irritation as he paced around the room.

“Director I undoubtedly came to disrupt the Executive Audience. He deliberately interrupted me while I was helping Rimi,” Shusei replied.

Shusei appeared to be serene, sitting down at the table next to Hakurei, seemingly relieved at having managed to get through the ordeal in one piece. Shohi, however, was seething with rage, unable to calm down.

“I cannot allow them to get away with how they acted during the Executive Audience. But if I attempt to reprimand them, they will claim that they were simply assessing the aptitude of the prospective empress. Alternatively, if I Bunryo is the one controlling them, I can reprimand him instead. What say you?” Shohi proposed.

During the Executive Audience, Shohi had desperately prevented the anger inside him from boiling over as he watched the ministers back Rimi into a corner. Even now, his body was hot from the rage that he had been unable to vent.

“Director I is clearly the one behind it. But we don’t have the evidence needed to reprimand him,” Hakurei said without pause. He turned his beautiful light brown eyes to Shohi while Shusei nodded in agreement.

“The assassin that Director I must have snuck into the Palace of the Water Spirit is dead, meaning that we can’t make her confess who sent her,” Shusei explained.

“Is there nothing we can do?!” Shohi yelled when a young military officer appeared by the doorway and kneeled.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty. I have been sent by the imperial guard,” the man said.

Shohi clicked his tongue, forced to end his explosion of rage early.

“What is it? Speak,” Shohi demanded.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the man replied. “I have a report concerning junior officer Shin Jotetsu. It has been discovered that he has committed a serious crime. After a discussion with Chancellor Shu, the general has decided to discharge him from the guard. Another person has been appointed as Your Majesty’s bodyguard in his place.”

“Jotetsu has been discharged?!” Shohi exclaimed, unable to fathom what he was hearing.

“Why?” Shusei mumbled while Hakurei furrowed his brow.

“What crime has Jotetsu committed?” Shohi asked impatiently.

“He lied about his background. There is no record of a man named Shin Jotetsu in the location he named as his birthplace. Lying about one’s background means that he has something to hide,” the military officer explained. “The general deemed him unfit for both the positions of Your Majesty’s bodyguard and junior officer of the royal guard.”

“Kojin and the former emperor are the ones who assigned Jotetsu to the royal guard. Had they not vouched for his character, he would not have been able to assume such a post. How could they not have found this out before?” Shohi questioned.

“Chancellor Shu is the one who reported Jotetsu to the general,” the guard replied.

“Kojin? Why?”

Jotetsu may have been serving as Shohi’s bodyguard, but he had also appeared to be following Kojin’s orders loyally. Jotetsu was, in a sense, Kojin’s pawn. Shohi failed to grasp why Kojin would discard him.

“Shusei, what is Kojin thinking? Should I question him to find out what he is planning?” Shohi asked.

“This is Chancellor Shu we’re talking about. Even if you ask him, he will just avoid the subject. It would be better to ask Jotetsu directly,” Shusei said. “You there, what is your name?”

“Excuse me,” the military officer said before raising his head. “Forgive the late introduction. My name is Kyo Kunki. I am the one who has been appointed as Your Majesty’s new bodyguard.”

The man seemed to be not much older than Shohi. His face was smooth like a boiled egg, revealing how wealthy his family must have been.

“Good timing, then. Could you search for Jotetsu and bring him here? He is serving as Setsu Rimi’s bodyguard at the moment, so he should be at the Palace of Twin Dragons,” Shusei requested.

“Yes, sir,” Kunki replied and left obediently. However, he shortly returned alone and reported that Jotetsu appeared to have already left the imperial palace.

“So he left without warning,” Shohi said, dumbfounded. He did not know what had happened, but Jotetsu had left without saying so much as a word to either Shohi or Shusei.

Shusei seemed similarly upset, but he remained calm. He approached Shohi, who had collapsed into a chair.

“Your Majesty,” Shusei said, trying to cheer Shohi up. “We can take our time to gather information about Jotetsu and act on it. The more pressing question is what to do about Rimi’s bodyguard.”

Shohi snapped out of his rage at the mention of Rimi’s name, only to immediately furrow his brow. The easiest course of action would be to simply let Kyo Kunki take Jotetsu’s place as Rimi’s bodyguard. If Kojin had appointed Kunki to protect Shohi, then he must be trustworthy. Still, he did not appear to have the kind of experience that Jotetsu did.

“What do you think of having Kyo Kunki protect Rimi, Shusei? If he has been imperially appointed as my bodyguard at his age, he must have skills to match,”

Shohi suggested.

“Yes, perhaps... We do need to ensure that Rimi gets safely from the imperial palace to the Palace of the Water Spirit. I suppose our only option is to ask Kyo Kunki to do it for the time being,” Shusei replied.

“Um...” Kunki said hesitantly, having quietly watched the discussion unfold until now.

“What is it?” Shohi said.

“I was appointed as Your Majesty’s bodyguard, but from how you’re speaking, it sounds as though I’m expected to serve as the prospective empress Lady Setsu Rimi’s bodyguard instead?”

“That is correct. Protecting the woman who will be my empress is a worthy task as well. Do you not agree?”

“I see... Very well,” Kunki replied, seemingly slightly disappointed.

Being imperially appointed as the emperor’s bodyguard was a great honor. Kunki must have been very enthusiastic after being entrusted with such an honorable task at such a young age, only to then immediately be told to serve as the prospective empress’s bodyguard instead. It was perhaps only natural for him to feel slightly let down.

“Kyo Kunki, Setsu Rimi has already been attacked by an assassin once at the Palace of the Water Spirit. She needs a bodyguard that we can trust,” Shusei remarked in an attempt to motivate the man.

“Really? I had no idea,” Kunki said as his expression quickly turned stern.

From how genuine and dutiful he acted, Kunki not only appeared to have come from a prestigious family, but he also must have been raised by very loving parents.

“That is right,” Shohi said. “Kyo Kunki, I hereby order you to serve as Setsu Rimi’s bodyguard. If something happens at the Palace of the Water Spirit, then look to the palace attendant over there, Sai Hakurei, for help.”

Shohi pointed at Hakurei, who gave Kunki his usual captivating smile, which Kunki responded to with a proper bow.

But Jotetsu, why...?

Although Shohi hadn't yet fully processed the fact that Jotetsu was gone, he was still in shock. Jotetsu had been with him since he was young, and he had always acted like a close, if uncouth, friend. But even though Shohi and Shusei had always been aware that Jotetsu was hiding much from them, they had still trusted him after having spent so much time together. These ten years had been a long enough time for Jotetsu's playful smile and teasing yet affectionate tone as he spoke to Shohi to erase any misgivings they had about whatever he was hiding.

"It is almost time for Rimi to return to the Palace of the Water Spirit, Your Majesty," Hakurei announced. "You will be seeing her off, won't you? Let us be on our way."

Shohi and Shusei both stood up, and Shusei gave Shohi a bow.

"I must excuse myself. I won't be going to the Palace of the Water Spirit today as I have business at the Shu house. Please leave Jotetsu to me. I will do what I can to find out where he is and ask him what happened," Shusei said.

"I see. Rimi worked hard today, but without you, we would not have been able to get through the Executive Audience. You did well. I...am grateful," Shohi said, slightly embarrassed to express his gratitude.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Shusei replied, smiling as if fully aware of Shohi's awkwardness.

As Shohi nodded and started walking away, he could see Shusei giving him a deep bow in the corner of his eye. As he walked, escorted by Hakurei and accompanied by his newly appointed bodyguard Kunki, he still couldn't get his mind off Jotetsu.

How can you disappear so easily without saying anything to me or Shusei, Jotetsu? I thought you would continue to be by my side, just like Shusei.

Suddenly, a terrible thought crossed Shohi's mind—a worry that perhaps Shusei might one day leave him just as Jotetsu had.



A military officer named Kyo Kunki had offered to escort Rimi on her way

from the imperial palace to the Palace of the Water Spirit. Shohi and Hakurei had explained that he was here to replace Jotetsu, who had been suddenly discharged for unknown reasons.

Rimi knew why Jotetsu had been discharged, but she was unable to reveal the reason. If she did, she would have no choice but to also explain the circumstances of Shusei's birth.

Tama had returned to Rimi just before it was time to set off. Rimi was now hugging her while trying to calm down. Tama was looking at Rimi with her blue eyes as if to ask, "What's wrong?"

Master Jotetsu disappeared, and Master Shusei...is making contact with Lord Ho. Why?

Shusei would not be returning at the same time as Rimi, having said that he needed to stop by the Shu mansion.

As Rimi arrived at her room in the Palace of the Water Spirit, she sat down at the table, on which tea and cakes had been prepared. Becoming lost in thought, she heard Jotetsu's voice from when he had left echo in her mind—"Take care of Shusei."

I need to ask Master Shusei what he is thinking. If I don't, there's nothing I can do.

Rimi let out a small sigh.

"But before that...is there nothing I can do about this man?" Rimi grumbled.

"What are you saying, Lady Rimi?" the young military officer who had been newly appointed as Rimi's bodyguard, Kyo Kunki, said enthusiastically.

Ever since he had been introduced to Rimi, Kunki had been trailing after her. Even now, back in Rimi's room, he was standing upright near the wall behind her, diligently keeping watch.

"I can't calm down when you stand behind me without moving like that. Won't you come have tea with me instead?" Rimi pleaded.

"No, I'm afraid I can't accept the offer. I'm your bodyguard. Please pretend that I'm not even here," Kunki stubbornly refused, holding up his hand.

Pretending that someone as conspicuous as this man wasn't there was a tall order. His cheeks were smooth, and if he smiled, he would have had a charm appropriate for his age, but his expression was simply too stern.

His face is charming and smooth like a boiled egg... I guess he's hard-boiled...

Rimi continued enjoying her tea with Kunki standing conspicuously behind her when the man called out to her.

"Um..." he said.

"What's the matter?" Rimi said, turning around. As she did, she almost dropped her tea.

T-T-T-Tama?!

Tama had nonchalantly exited the bedchamber, sat down in front of Kunki, and was looking up at him intently.

"What in the world is this creature?" Kunki asked.

Kunki, not knowing what the Quinary Dragon looked like, observed Tama dubiously. Rimi, meanwhile, started to sweat nervously.

"Th-That's, um...Tama... Yes, she's called Tama, and she's...a m-mouse! My pet mouse!" Rimi stammered.

"What an odd mouse," Kunki remarked.

Tama turned away as if to say, "My, how rude," before jumping onto Rimi's lap.

"Tama, why did you come out? Did you think someone else was here?" Rimi asked quietly.

Tama seemed to nod in response. She then climbed onto the table and put her head atop the stack of texts there. They were texts that Shusei had brought with notes in his handwriting inserted between the pages.

She must have thought that Master Shusei was here. I suppose Master Kunki does seem to be from an affluent background like Master Shusei.

Looking at Shusei's writing, Rimi felt anxiety wash over her. She couldn't stop wondering why he was seeing Neison and whether something bad might

happen to him.

Master Jotetsu entrusted Master Shusei to me.

The only way to remove her fears was to ask Shusei directly. Kojin was terribly angry. Considering that he had discharged Jotetsu within the span of a few hours, it would not be out of the question for something terrible to befall Shusei that very night. Kojin had ordered Jotetsu to capture Shusei and get an answer out of him, by force if needed. It was too dangerous not to let Shusei know what was happening.

I have to let Master Shusei know. That will also give me a chance to ask him what he is thinking.

Rimi had two options if she wanted to speak to Shusei as soon as possible. She could either send for him, or she could visit him herself. Between sending a messenger to summon Shusei and personally going to the Shu mansion, the latter option was clearly faster. The problem was that she had already been attacked by an assassin once, and she couldn't move around freely.

"Master Kunki, I need to see Master Shusei as soon as possible. What should I do?" Rimi asked, figuring that her new bodyguard was the best person to ask.

"Then why not visit the Shu house?" Kunki suggested as though it was a nonissue.

"Can I really? Won't that make things difficult for you?" Rimi asked, surprised.

"My duty is to follow you wherever you go and protect you. I will leave the decision to you."

"If possible, I would like to visit the chancellor's mansion. Will you accompany me there? Won't it be dangerous?"

"His Majesty told me that an assassin was sent to the Palace of the Water Spirit, and I've heard the details from the Head of Security. The assassin attempted to fight back at first, but she ultimately ended her own life by using poison. Based on that, it seems as if the enemy is trying to make your death look like an accident or an illness. They won't try anything too blatant," Kunki explained. "If you were reported as having been killed by someone, it would spark a search for the perpetrator, which is what they seem to want to avoid.

The Shu manor is located in the middle of Annei, and I doubt they would attempt something as extreme as attacking your carriage in the middle of the town. It would cause a huge incident."

Rimi thought back to what Bunryo had attempted so far. He did indeed seem to be avoiding anything violent. Although he had sent an assassin after her, he had attempted to kill her with poison, perhaps to make it look like death from illness. His next move had been to interfere with the Executive Audience using the Minister of Personnel. Bunryo was trying to stay in the shadows to avoid being discovered—at least for as long as he didn't become desperate enough to do whatever it took.

"Still, we mustn't let our guard down. You can count on me," Kunki assured Rimi with a smile.

Kunki then went to speak to Hakurei, who was responsible for Rimi's safety. However, as Hakurei was out at the moment, he instead spoke to the Head of Security, who handled the safety of the four consorts and the Palace of the Water Spirit. In Hakurei's stead, the Head of Security gave Rimi permission to leave.

II

It was already dusk by the time a carriage was prepared and Rimi left the Palace of the Water Spirit. The gray tiled roofs that covered the town of Annei were fading into the light of the setting spring sun.

It was a discreet one-horse carriage, selected to avoid attention. Kunki was riding on a horse next to it.

As soon as we arrive at the Shu mansion, we'll bring Master Shusei back with us to the Palace of the Water Spirit. Then he should be safe.

As the four consorts were also staying at the Palace of the Water Spirit, there were palace women and guardsmen in addition to the servants employed by the Shu house there. No matter how angry Kojin was, he would be unable to attempt anything drastic while the consorts were present, meaning it was the perfect place to keep Shusei safe for the time being.

While sensing the rhythmic vibrations of the carriage, Rimi started to feel as if she was suffocating, so she opened a small window. The light of dusk and the dusty wind of the town entered the carriage.

Most buildings in Annei had stone walls with roofs covered in gray tiles. The merchant buildings looked extravagant in comparison. Their walls, which faced the main streets, were covered in plaster with vermilion pillars. A seemingly popular restaurant had several chairs and tables outside and steam pouring out of the wide-open windows. The voices of people walking around carrying poles on their shoulders selling vegetables and salted meat echoed musically across the streets. Each crossing sported street stalls with roofs made from straw, which sold dried seafood, vegetables, old clothes, and other assorted goods.

Any other time and I would've had fun walking in the town with Tama... Rimi thought, her mind turning to Tama at the sight of the intriguing, bustling streets.

Rimi had left Tama behind at the Palace of the Water Spirit since there was no telling what emotions might surface once she questioned Shusei about why he was frequenting the Ho house. As a divine dragon, Tama would be weakened by strong human emotions. She had looked disappointed when Rimi had asked her to stay behind. But despite that, Tama had curled up on the bed obediently, seeing Rimi off with an encouraging gaze.

"Lady Rimi," Kunki said through the window, approaching the carriage on his horse. "Five or six men have been following the carriage for a little while."

"Are they planning on attacking us?" Rimi asked warily.

"They're on foot. By leaving the main street for more deserted roads, we can start riding faster and attempt to shake them off. But the carriage will move a lot, so please be ready."

"All right."

Rimi closed the window, sat down, and planted her feet firmly on the floor. Soon, the carriage started to vibrate up and down. The vibrations steadily grew even more violent. They had taken off. After a while, the vibrations were so strong that Rimi was unable to stay in her seat, even as she braced herself with both hands against the wall.

What is happening?

Rimi could hear the horse panting as well as light galloping close by, so Kunki must have been right next to the carriage.

“That’s it! We lost them!” Kunki yelled to the coachman.

Suddenly, the coachman screamed. The horse neighed and the carriage violently tilted sideways. Rimi was sent flying off her seat.

It fell over?!

Rimi reflexively covered her head with her arms and curled up. She gasped as her back hit against the corner of the ceiling.

The carriage slid sideways before hitting something and coming to a stop. Rimi could feel the impact with her whole body and the sound of the wheels spinning in the air rang in her ears.

Suddenly, it became brighter.

“Lady Rimi!” Kunki shouted in distress as he opened the door of the carriage and looked down at Rimi. “Pardon me!”

Without even asking if she was injured, Kunki grabbed Rimi’s upper arms and forcefully dragged her outside of the carriage. Having been hit in all manner of places as she tumbled around in the carriage, Rimi grimaced at the pain, but Kunki neither apologized nor asked for permission as he dragged her onto her feet outside. He drew his sword and stepped forward.

Still fighting the pain, Rimi looked around. It was immediately obvious why Kunki had forced her out with barely a word. As she had suspected, the carriage had fallen over and collided with a wall surrounding someone’s manor. On the ground, the horse was struggling while the coachman sat curled up with his back against the manor’s wall. Kunki was standing with his sword readied, his back to Rimi, facing three men on horseback. Their faces were covered, gripping swords narrower than those used by military officers.

“Master Kunki...” Rimi said with a quivering voice.

“I’m sorry, Lady Rimi,” Kunki replied with a remorseful tone. “We did manage to shake off the men on foot, but it appears there were men following us on

horseback too. They went around and waited for us, scared the horses, and then the carriage...”

Kunki’s horse was wandering about behind the attackers.

“Who are you?!” Kunki harshly shouted.

The three men seemed to chuckle silently. Despite having their swords drawn and surrounding Rimi and Kunki, they kept their distance, as if they were waiting for something.

“There they are,” one of them mumbled after a while, in a voice that was unusually high for a man.

The three men started closing in. As evening fell, the light reflected off their narrow swords shone brightly. At the same time, several men stepped out from behind a building. They seemed to be local, uncouth ruffians. Some held swords, others sticks. The men on horseback must have been waiting for them.

“You can kill them,” one of the people on horseback told the men.

“It’d be a shame to kill the woman,” one of the men responded with a vulgar smirk.

“If you make sure to kill her in the end, I do not mind what you do with her beforehand.”

The man’s ruthless words sent chills down Rimi’s spine. Kunki furrowed his brow.

“Please stay close to me,” Kunki said to Rimi.

Immediately after, the men started shouting and rushed toward the two of them. Rimi curled up against the bottom of the fallen carriage, suppressing a scream. Kunki responded to the attacking men with a sideways swing of his sword. Most of the attackers scattered in every direction to avoid the blow, but a few who were late to react received light cuts to their arms and stomachs. Still, the men did not give up, shouting and running toward Kunki again.

Kunki continued swinging his sword, but at most it still only made light contact with a few of the men. They charged at him tirelessly. It was all Kunki could do to keep them at bay, unable to fell a single one. Their number was too

overwhelming. The enemy was waiting for Kunki to become tired and let his guard down.

There are too many of them.

The three men on horses were looking on from above with faint, callous smirks, as if enjoying the spectacle.

Suddenly, a shadow fell on Rimi's face. She looked up to see a man giving her a savage grin. She let out a shriek, only for the man to grab her arm from above, dragging her on top of the tumbled carriage.

"Lady Rimi!" Kunki yelled as he quickly turned toward Rimi, but the men continued to attack, giving him no choice but to turn around and fend them off.

"Hey, look! I got the woman!" the man attacking Rimi exclaimed proudly while she struggled to get free.

Then, a sharp sound like something cutting through the air passed by Rimi's head. The man loosened his grip on Rimi's arm.

Turning around, Rimi saw that an arrow had been lodged into his throat. He fell backward, his grin still plastered across his face, and rolled off the carriage.

Everyone turned toward where the arrow had come from. A figure was wielding a bow and arrow atop the wall that the carriage had crashed into, the last rays of the setting sun illuminating him from behind. He fired another arrow, and one of the horse riders collapsed to the ground. The fallen man's horse became agitated, and the men started backing away in fear.

Putting the bow on his back, the figure jumped down from the wall, walked up to Rimi, and suddenly put his arm around her waist.

"Master Jotetsu?!" Rimi exclaimed, wide-eyed in surprise.

"Heya, Rimi," the man, who was supposed to have disappeared, replied. He winked as he smirked like a wolf.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was wondering who your new bodyguard was, and it turned out to be some spoiled kid. I got worried and kept watch."

“Are you...Jotetsu?” Kunki asked, dumbfounded.

“Incoming! Don’t take your eyes off the enemy!” Jotetsu yelled as he drew his sword.

Kunki quickly turned back around and found an opening to cut down two of the men. Jotetsu jumped off the carriage, still holding Rimi.

“We’re taking the horses,” Jotetsu said curtly.

“We’ll never get past all these people with just the two of us!” Kunki said, visibly panicked. “They’ll cut all of us to shreds!”

“If we try to take on this many men while protecting Rimi, we’ll be out of strength by the time the sun is down. Either way, we’ll be minced meat. This is our only choice.” Jotetsu replied with a smirk. “So, Rimi, I’ll be attempting something slightly reckless. Make sure you hang onto me tight, like a little monkey.”

While Jotetsu still had his arm around her, Rimi quickly latched onto him, wrapping her arms around his neck. She tried to press herself as close against him as possible while avoiding getting in his way.

“Let’s go, kid,” Jotetsu said.

“My name is Kyo Kunki. I’ve already given you my name on a few occasions,” Kunki said.

“You think I can bother to remember a man’s name? Come on, kid!”

“Well, please do!”

Jotetsu and Kunki started running toward the men. Sticks and swords rained down upon them from all sides, but they evaded the attacks and parried those that couldn’t be dodged. Unable to repel one attack, Kunki suffered a blow to his shoulder. He let out a groan as he turned on the man who had attacked him and cut him down in the same motion.

As everyone ran around the area chaotically, their feet kicked up dirt into the air, further obstructing the already dim view. Three men with their swords at the ready launched toward Jotetsu at the same time. Jotetsu bent over to avoid two of the men’s blades, deflecting the third with his sword, while

simultaneously cutting through the attacker's torso. As he did, however, the other two men took the opportunity to strike his back.

"Master Jotetsu!" Rimi screamed as blood danced in the air on the other side of Jotetsu. A metallic smell spread through the air.

Jotetsu appeared unfazed by the blow, turning around and cutting the assailants down in two consecutive diagonal strikes. While Rimi tried her best not to scream, Jotetsu readjusted his grip on her waist, as if making sure she was still there. He continued running forward, evading and deflecting blows, never slowing down despite his injury.

Jotetsu approached the horse belonging to the man he had shot down and threw Rimi up onto the saddle. Rimi held onto the saddle for dear life while Jotetsu jumped up behind her and took the reins.

"Kyo Kunki!" Jotetsu yelled.

"I'm ready to go!" Kunki replied, having just reached his own horse and mounted it.

"We're splitting up!" Jotetsu said as he gave the horse a forceful kick to its belly. The horse neighed as it set off.

Kunki departed in a different direction.

"After them!" a voice yelled from behind.

"Get more horses!"

One of the people on horseback gave chase. Rimi tried to make herself as small as possible as if attempting to hide in Jotetsu's arms while she desperately clung onto the saddle.

Kyo Kunki was riding his horse as fast as he could. His target destination, the Shu house, was close to the west gate of the imperial palace. So he entered the west gate along with his horse, where he ran out of strength and fell to the ground. He had just barely managed to get away, but his shoulder and back were injured, and he had shallow cuts on his arm. The blows weren't fatal, but he was starting to lose consciousness from his extensive blood loss. This was

the natural result of having taken on so many people at once—but Kunki was just one person, while Jotetsu had brought Rimi with him. Jotetsu was bound to be even more injured than Kunki.

I have to hurry... I need to help Jotetsu...

The guardsmen at the gate were shocked to see Kunki, a well-known officer of the imperial guard, enter the gate covered in injuries. They came running up to him.

“The prospective empress, Lady Rimi, was attacked. She ran off together with Shin Jotetsu. Hurry up and chase after them!” Kunki told the guardsmen with the last of his strength before falling unconscious.

The guardsmen ran to report the incident. But at the same time that the guardsmen were reporting to their superiors, the Department of Service received another report: that a palace attendant on an errand in town had happened to witness the prospective empress Setsu Rimi being attacked and taken away—and that the one who had attacked her was the discharged junior officer Shin Jotetsu.

Before falling unconscious, Kunki had mentioned that Rimi was fleeing with Jotetsu. Combined with the report from the Department of Service, the people of the court quickly concluded that Shin Jotetsu must have attacked Rimi after his dismissal. The imperial guard put together a unit of their finest guardsmen and ordered them to pursue Jotetsu and recover Rimi. The emperor Shohi was also informed of what had happened. Upon hearing this, the emperor sent messengers to summon the palace attendant Hakurei and the cuisinologist Shusei.

III

Shohi collapsed on his sofa with his hand to his forehead and his eyes closed. Anxious, he suffered from the regret of not having been able to protect Rimi despite knowing that she was in danger. He felt useless because he was unable to search for her himself. He had just been informed that a unit formed to pursue Jotetsu had already set off. As both the guardsmen and the Department of Service claimed that Jotetsu had taken Rimi, it was the obvious course of

action for the general to order his pursuit.

But Jotetsu would never kidnap Rimi and flee. It is impossible, Shohi thought. He trusted that Jotetsu would never run off with the girl that he loved. As they had spent over a decade together, his trust in Jotetsu was unwavering.

Still, Shohi had no idea how this situation could have possibly arisen. It had him beside himself with worry.

Could it be that something dreadful is happening without my knowledge? Jotetsu... Rimi... I hope that they are all right.

The sun had already set, the darkness amplifying Shohi's fears. As he sat and waited, his feelings on edge, Shusei ran into the room, pale-faced.

"Your Majesty! I heard that Rimi has been kidnapped! And by Jotetsu at that!" Shusei said.

"That is correct. A unit has been put together to track him down," Shohi explained.

"Has the unit already left?!" Shusei asked frantically.

"Yes," Shohi said, biting his lip.

"Why? Jotetsu would never do such a thing. At this rate, the unit might end up killing Jotetsu without question if they find him!"

"I am aware! But both the guardsmen and the Department of Service claim that Jotetsu did it. The general made his decision in light of that information, and I cannot as the emperor simply call it off without good reason. All we can do is let them chase after him! Ultimately, it is true that Rimi has disappeared!" Shohi screamed, standing up from the sofa. His fear of losing Rimi and not knowing what was happening were twisting and turning inside him, making Shohi take his anger out on Shusei. "I do not know what is happening either! But we have to recover Rimi, no matter what!"

"Your Majesty, please, calm down," Shusei said, walking up to Shohi and looking him right in the eye.

Shohi looked away from Shusei's wise eyes and growled in frustration.

"Where did the report that Jotetsu has kidnapped Rimi come from?" Shusei

asked.

“One is based on the testimony of Rimi’s current bodyguard, Kyo Kunki. The other is a report from the Department of Service,” Shohi replied.

“I heard that a group attacked Rimi. Were the attackers sent by Director I?”

“I do not know.”

“But I do,” someone suddenly said from the doorway. “It is all but certain that Director I’s men attacked Rimi.”

Hakurei entered the room with quick steps. He also appeared anxious.

“The person who witnessed the attack claimed that the people on horses were passing orders to a group of ruffians and that the people on horseback had high voices and narrow swords. Given this, the three of them must have been palace attendants,” Hakurei continued.

Hakurei then bowed to greet Shohi, kneeled, and hung his head.

“I am sorry, Your Majesty. While I was away, the Head of Security at the Palace of the Water Spirit gave Rimi permission to leave the palace. I had already warned them, but I should have been more firm,” Hakurei said.

Seeing Hakurei kneel before him, Shohi started feeling even more pathetic. He couldn’t believe that he had even let a palace attendant like Hakurei, who was supposed to be divorced from such violent matters, bear part of the responsibility.

“No,” Shohi said after a short silence. “This is no one’s fault but mine.”

This never would have happened if Shohi had employed more people whom he could have trusted with Rimi. As it stood, the only ones who he shared any kind of bond with were Shusei and Jotetsu.

The first emperor of Konkoku, hailed as a hero, was said to have had thirty retainers who he could trust with his life. If there had been thirty people like Jotetsu and Shusei in Shohi’s vicinity, he could have counted on one of them to handle the situation. While Kyo Kunki seemed open and honest, Shohi never would have appointed him as Rimi’s bodyguard as he also appeared somewhat undependable and hadn’t even known about the plotting happening behind the

scenes.

Hakurei looked up at Shohi.

“Some people that I employ personally informed me straight away that Rimi had left the palace,” Hakurei explained. “I had them chase after her carriage immediately, but they only made it in time to witness the attackers dispersing. However, as mentioned, we were able to confirm that the attackers were sent by Director I.”

“You are employing people personally?” Shohi asked.

“With the Executive Audience having concluded, it was obvious that Director I would start to panic and attempt even more drastic moves, so I employed them to be on the safe side,” Hakurei explained. “Their only incentive is money, but that also means that as long as I pay them well, I can trust them. This incident was so sudden, however, that we failed to respond in time.”

Shohi was astonished to hear about Hakurei’s actions. The fact that Hakurei had acted in accordance with Shohi’s wishes, and even carefully planned ahead, made Shohi both grateful and remorseful.

Despite his unfortunate circumstances, he’s doing everything that he can, Shohi thought as he averted his gaze.

“Stand,” Shohi ordered, still avoiding looking directly at him, before quietly continuing. “Hakurei... I appreciate all that you have done.”

Shohi was embarrassed to say it, but he forced himself, feeling that he couldn’t let the opportunity escape him. Hakurei, who was in the process of standing up, looked surprised, but his expression gradually changed into a smile.

“Thank you for your kind words, Your Majesty,” Hakurei responded in a kind but slightly teasing voice.

It was an awkward exchange between two brothers who had been forced into a warped relationship.

“If the attackers were sent by Director I, it’s easy to see what happened. Hakurei’s thoroughness proved useful this time around. Jotetsu must have

appeared to save Rimi and then fled the scene. The idea that Jotetsu kidnapped Rimi is likely Director I's attempt to distort the facts," Shusei said.

In response, Shohi felt the tension leaving his body, and he sank into the sofa once again.

"But how do you explain Kunki's testimony? He's part of the reason Jotetsu is believed to have kidnapped Rimi," Hakurei asked.

"It's possible that Jotetsu may have looked like an assailant as he ran off with Rimi, given that Kunki was unaware of the situation. Alternatively, perhaps Kunki's testimony wasn't correctly passed on, or maybe his intended message was misconstrued," Shusei said.

Shohi had wanted someone to explain to him how to interpret this baffling report. Shusei's conjecture answered every question that had been bothering him.

I see... So Jotetsu... Jotetsu had saved Rimi, which was the reason for this strange report.

No matter what had happened, Jotetsu had been discharged. Shu Kojin must have abandoned him. He had every right to live as he pleased, saying that the affairs of the court no longer concerned him.

And yet, he saved Rimi. Shohi was overwhelmed with joy at the fact that Jotetsu had saved Rimi despite his newfound freedom. To Shohi, it appeared to prove that Jotetsu had not abandoned the bond between them.

"If Jotetsu is protecting Rimi, does that mean we can relax for the time being?" Shohi asked.

"No, this is no time to relax. Given the evidence so far, the obvious conclusion remains that Jotetsu kidnapped Rimi, and we don't have any concrete evidence to disprove that interpretation. If we don't do something, the unit pursuing Jotetsu will likely consider him the perpetrator and kill him on sight. Not to mention, that unit..." Shusei trailed off.

"What about it?"

"No, it's nothing, Your Majesty. Anyway, we need to find Jotetsu and Rimi

before the unit pursuing them does," Shusei replied.

It would have been possible for Shohi to summon the general of the imperial guard and order him to abort the pursuit of Jotetsu. However, with two reports suggesting that Jotetsu had kidnapped the prospective empress, Shohi could not simply claim otherwise without proof. The imperial guard might even ignore him, considering it a gibberish demand from a child emperor with no power. Even if they went along with his command, they would be left disgruntled.

I cannot simply tell them to call off the pursuit because I trust the man in question. My influence is not enough to make them listen. I want to become a true emperor, not a jester of an emperor who shivers in fear of the darkness lurking in the court, unable to even hand down a simple order.

But simply despairing over the state of things would not change anything. Shohi swallowed his frustration.

"If Jotetsu is protecting Rimi, you would think that he would bring her straight to me, where it is safe," Shohi noted.

"There must be a reason he can't. Perhaps Director I has sent so many pursuers that he's unable to make a move," Shusei suggested.

"There's definitely a good chance that he's hiding out somewhere," Hakurei said. "Your Majesty, Shusei, are there any places you can think of where he could be? I would assume that he's hiding in a place he's familiar with, maybe somewhere he has relatives, such as where he grew up."

A feeling of despair welled up inside Shohi upon hearing Hakurei's question.

"Both I and Shusei have known Jotetsu for years, but neither of us knows where he hails from. I do not even know if Shin Jotetsu is his real name," Shohi said.

"Then let us ask," Shusei said resolutely. "Chancellor Shu must know the particulars of his background. I will make him tell me."



The attackers pursued Rimi and Jotetsu without any sign of giving up. Unable to run at full speed while carrying two people, their horse was overtaken by new attackers that had joined the pursuit on horseback.

To compensate for the lack of speed, Jotetsu attempted to shake off the pursuers by repeatedly turning into alleyways, but there were too many attackers. Several times he almost collided with pursuers when turning a corner, so he had a change of plan. He directed the horse toward the outside of the town.

They ran through bamboo groves, jumped over streams, and zigzagged through thickets before the sound of galloping finally disappeared from behind them. By the time they slowed down, it was already night, but the light of the moon made the horse cast a shadow on the countryside vegetation.

“Where are we?” Rimi asked.

They didn’t seem to be that far from the capital. In the distance, Rimi could see a low mountain range. Peach orchards surrounded them on both sides of the wide gravel path they were traveling along with budding shrubs planted at regular distances.

“This is Roko, An Prefecture...though I guess that doesn’t mean much to you. An is the prefecture where Annei is located, and Roko is the neighboring township. Over there is Shohei, which is the central village of the township,” Jotetsu explained with a somewhat pained voice, which Rimi reacted to.

“Master Jotetsu, are you all right? How are your wounds?” Rimi asked, looking up at Jotetsu’s face.

“I’m fine. Look over there. That’s Shohei.”

Rimi looked in the direction Jotetsu was pointing. A long way down the road was a low mud wall. It surrounded a number of stone houses with modest lights flickering inside of them.

Jotetsu rode the horse down a branch road, past the peach orchard and onto a forest path leading through a thicket. After a while, they arrived at a more open area. There were two or three abandoned houses overgrown with vines. Purple flowers were growing beneath the night sky on large magnolias surrounding the buildings. Rimi could distinctly smell the flowers.

“This should be far enough. We can rest here,” Jotetsu said, dismounting the horse and helping Rimi to the ground. “Let’s go. We’ll hide the horse inside the

houses, and we'll also—"

Just as Jotetsu grabbed onto the horse's bit and was about to start walking, he suddenly fell to his knees.

"Master Jotetsu?!" Rimi exclaimed, almost shrieking at the sight of Jotetsu's back. He had a deep wound spanning from his left shoulder to his hip, and dark red flesh could be seen through the tears in his clothes. His back was stained black from blood. His wound must have been from when they first escaped the enemy encirclement.

Stunned to see how severely wounded Jotetsu was, both remorse and gratitude filled Rimi as she thought of how he had endured this pain for so long just to bring her to safety.

"Master Jotetsu, please don't move," Rimi said.

Jotetsu was at his limit. He had used up almost all of his strength while fighting his pain to come here. Rimi didn't want to push him any further. He would not have been able to exert himself any further even if he had tried to.

Rimi led the horse by its bit into one of the abandoned houses and tied it to a pillar. She then walked back to Jotetsu, knelt down, and put his arm around her shoulders. Jotetsu grimaced and covered his side with his hand.

That's right, Chancellor Shu injured Master Jotetsu's ribs...

Jotetsu was bruised all over, and his ribs were broken. Despite this, he had made it past such a large number of foes in order to save Rimi. Had he been in better shape, perhaps he wouldn't have had to suffer these wounds, making it out with mere scratches instead.

"Can you walk for just a short distance? We should enter the building. Somewhere with no night dew," Rimi said, forcing herself to stand as she brought Jotetsu to his feet.

Jotetsu groaned slightly as he rose and started walking.

Why did Master Jotetsu come to save me? Rimi thought. She had been wondering about it ever since he had appeared.

"I get to be all alone with a cute palace woman. If only things were different.

We could have enjoyed an intimate moment together," Jotetsu said, but the sound of his hoarse voice as he tried to mask his pain only made Rimi want to cry instead. Even now he was trying his best not to worry her.

"His Majesty will be angry with you."

"He won't know if you don't tell him."

"I'm glad to see that you're feeling fine."

The house had no door, and rays of moonlight poured through several holes in the roof. Rimi headed for the back where the roof was still mostly intact and helped Jotetsu sit down. He leaned against the wall with the right side of his body to avoid the painful-looking wounds on his back.

I have to treat his wounds.

Rimi left Jotetsu to rest and went outside to search for medicinal plants. She had experience searching for wild plants as part of her work as an Umashi-no-Miya. The rangers who had accompanied her had taught her what plants could be used as medicine. With the help of the moonlight, she managed to find spring mugwort, which could be used to disinfect and prevent inflammations. These had also grown in Wakoku where spring mugwort imported from Konkoku had established itself in the wild.

Rimi started rubbing the spring mugwort in her hand, and it colored her fingers green while producing a refreshing smell. After some more meticulous rubbing, she smeared the result over the wounds on Jotetsu's back.

"It hurts," Jotetsu complained.

"Deal with it," Rimi fired back.

Rimi then ripped her skirt open and tore it into long, narrow strips of cloth, which she wrapped around the mugwort-covered wounds. It was only a temporary solution, but it was still far better than leaving the wounds untreated.

Having finished attending to Jotetsu's injuries, Rimi sat down next to him. That was when she noticed that the bottom of her skirt was stained pitch black.

"What's this?" she said in surprise, and Jotetsu let out a slight chuckle

reminiscent of a cough.

“Don’t worry, it’s just soot,” Jotetsu explained. “There was a fire here a long time ago. I’m sure there’s stuff turned to charcoal still left all over the place. Even the live magnolias caught on fire.”

“A fire? How did you know? Are you familiar with this village?”

“I was born here. I lived here until I was thirteen.”

The wind picked up, rustling the leaves of the magnolias. The scent of the flowers grew stronger.

Jotetsu was a terribly secretive man. It was likely that not even Shohi and Shusei knew that he had grown up here.

“Why did you save me, Master Jotetsu? You don’t have any responsibility to protect me anymore. Why did you continue to keep an eye on me?” Rimi asked.

“Good question,” Jotetsu said, smiling awkwardly. “I’m not really sure myself. I just felt like it.”

He grimaced, holding back against the pain. His fingertips were trembling.

He’s losing too much blood. Rimi could tell that if she did nothing, Jotetsu would surely die. She considered going to Shohei for help, but Jotetsu must have had a reason for avoiding the village and coming here instead. Asking for help might just bring their enemies right to them.

“Master Jotetsu, if we don’t get your wounds treated soon, you’ll be in danger. Is there anything I can...” Rimi began.

“Don’t do a thing,” Jotetsu interrupted her. “Don’t make a move. Stay here until Shusei finds us.”

“Master Shusei? But he doesn’t know that we’re here.”

“I know he’ll find us. Trust him.”

Jotetsu was trembling as if freezing. Rimi couldn’t bear watching it. She nestled up to him, avoiding his wounds, in an attempt to warm him up.

“Hey, now,” Jotetsu said weakly, but he soon closed his eyes, his trembling still not letting up.

Master Shusei. Master Shusei. Please come soon. Rimi could do nothing but pray.

Chapter 6: The Day the Magnolias Burned

I

Shusei was riding his horse as quickly as he possibly could toward the Shu mansion. He had been searching for Kojin at the imperial palace when an aide had informed him that the chancellor had already gone home. They had apparently just missed each other as Shusei left the mansion.

Despite it being midnight, the gate to the mansion was open. Shusei darted through the gate on his horse, stunning the guard who was just in the process of closing it.

“Master Shusei, I thought you left on a carriage. Why are you on a horse? What happened to the carriage?” the guard asked, confused to see the young master of the house as he rarely came home, never leaving or entering the mansion so frequently.

“Father is home, yes?” Shusei asked impatiently as he handed the horse’s reins to the guard.

“Yes, he just returned. He is in the house by the garden.”

There was a smaller house by the garden at the back of the main building, which served as Kojin’s personal quarters. Kojin tended to confine himself there whenever he was home.

Shusei passed through the main building into the garden. The round windows of the garden house came into view between the moonlight trees. He could see Kojin, with his cap removed, moving on the other side of the window. He crossed the garden and walked up to the front door of the building.

“Father!” Shusei called out, lowering his voice so as not to wake up Mrs. Yo.

The door quickly opened. Kojin greeted Shusei with a cold gaze.

“Well, well, you’ve spared me the time to go search for you,” Kojin said. “I thought you had fled, but it appears not.”

Shusei was unsure what Kojin was talking about, but he had no time to question him.

“I have something I need to ask you, Father,” Shusei said. “Jotetsu’s birthplace, where he grew up, the location of his parents, whatever you happen to know. I need you to tell me about every place that is important to him. You’re the one who brought him to the imperial palace as His Majesty’s bodyguard. That makes you the only person who would know.”

“What happened?”

“Rimi was attacked by men sent by Director I, and it appears that Jotetsu saved her and they fled together. We need to find them before Director I does and safeguard them. Their lives are at stake.”

Kojin calmly scratched his chin as he studied Shusei’s panicked expression.

“I see. But it is no concern of mine what happens to Jotetsu,” Kojin explained. “And even though Rimi would be a good choice for the empress, she is not the only candidate. If she is unobtainable, we can simply provide His Majesty with a new one—a Konkokuan woman from a prestigious house that even I Bunryo would take a liking to.”

“You can’t be serious!” Shusei barked angrily.

“I only spoke the truth,” Kojin replied, chuckling coldly. “That is all Jotetsu and Rimi mean to me. However, it appears they mean more to you.”

Shusei clenched his teeth and suppressed the rage welling up inside of him.

“That’s correct. What about it?” he asked.

“If you tell me the truth, then I would be willing to tell you about Jotetsu,” Kojin said.

“The truth about what?”

“I know that you have been visiting Ho Neison’s mansion frequently as of late. What are you doing there? You have learned about the circumstances of your birth, have you not?”

Taken by surprise, Shusei was at a loss.

He knows everything. That's why he became furious with Jotetsu and discharged him.

Kojin must have realized that Jotetsu had not reported the fact that Shusei had learned who his father was, earning Jotetsu his wrath. Jotetsu must have also neglected to report that Shusei had been visiting Neison. He had never shown any signs of keeping an eye on Shusei at all, apparently completely ignoring Kojin's orders to monitor him.

Jotetsu had called himself Kojin's sword. Shusei couldn't fathom why that sword would go against its master, or what Jotetsu had been thinking when telling Shusei to enjoy his fate.

But regardless of what was going through Jotetsu's mind, the fact remains that he's currently protecting Rimi. I have to find them as soon as possible. To do that, I need information from Father. I have no choice but to admit to seeing Neison.

Whenever he had visited Neison's mansion, Shusei had done his utmost not to be noticed. Still, he had been fully aware that he would be found out eventually if anyone were to pay close enough attention to his behavior. His actions being brought to light was not a problem per se.

I only hoped that it would take a little longer for him to find out.

"If I tell you the truth, will you tell me about Jotetsu?" Shusei asked, looking Kojin right in the eye.

"Certainly," Kojin replied with a composed nod. "So? Have you learned about yourself?"

Shusei took a short breath before responding.

"Yes, I have," Shusei answered. "I am Ho Seishu's son. Ho Neison told me about it. It's also true that I've been frequenting the Ho house to meet with him. However, while I may be Seishu's child, it does not change the fact that I am His Majesty's loyal subject."

Kojin narrowed his eyes, looking at Shusei dubiously.

"Neison appears to want to make His Majesty abdicate and put a new

emperor that he can more easily control on the throne in his place. He sought me out for that very purpose. If I pretend to go along with his plans, I can collect information on those who are attempting to rebel against His Majesty. To that end, I have been visiting the Ho house to earn Neison's trust," Shusei continued.

"And you expect me to believe that?" Kojin asked.

"That is all I can ask you to do."

The two of them stared at each other for a while. Kojin was the first to break the silence.

"Get in," he said, nodding toward the inside of the house.

Shusei did as asked and stepped into the room, which was illuminated by thin candles.

Kojin's desk was littered with texts, figures, and scrolls. His shelves were similarly packed with texts and documents. Countless cloaks were carelessly thrown aside on the sofa located by the wall. It was like the room of a student who devoted himself to studies.

Kojin placed one piece of paper on the table. The thin sheet was of a high quality. Its smooth surface was watermarked with a pattern illustrating where the gods resided.

"Is this a divine contract?" Shusei asked.

This type of paper was forged by oracles. Most commoners would never have a chance to lay their eyes on one. On it, one would write one's most unwavering oath to the gods before offering it at the Temple of Heaven. Only the emperor, the imperial family, and those that served them had access to the Temple of Heaven. But it was still unusual for even the emperor to hold one.

Divine contracts were oaths offered at the place closest to the gods. If you broke the oath, the gods would punish you, destroying not only your body but also your very soul. According to legend, Shokukoku had fallen due to the last emperor breaking his divine contract. His corpse had been feasted on by golden eagles that had descended from the heavens until nothing remained. To someone raised on the mainland under the protection of the gods, touching a

divine contract was something to be avoided. They were even considered to be something akin to a taboo.

“If you are not lying, then you should be able to forge a divine contract,” Kojin said.

“You want me to write a divine contract? Is this some kind of punishment?” Shusei asked.

It was said that the second emperor of Konkoku had pressured an official to write a divine contract, doubting his loyalty, and the official had declined. In response, the emperor had deemed him to be disloyal and ordered his beheading. The official must have known what was waiting for him were he to refuse but breaking a divine contract would have meant that the gods would have destroyed even his soul. Given those options, he had chosen to die a normal death instead.

“Are you afraid?” Kojin smirked, as though seeing through Shusei, but Shusei shook his head.

“No,” Shusei replied and immediately picked up the brush on the table and started writing without hesitation.

“Are you sure about this, Shusei?”

“You’re the one who told me to write it. If it’s required of me, I will do it. I don’t have anything to fear,” Shusei said while he continued to write before a question that had bothered him for so long slipped out. “Father, why did you raise me as your own son?”

“Ponder that yourself.”

So he won’t say.

Noticing his own disappointment, Shusei sighed internally. He had thought that, with the truth now out in the open, Kojin might finally be willing to divulge his true thoughts—and subconsciously, Shusei had hoped that he would, thinking that it might have been a sign of some kind of compassion toward him.

Despite knowing that he’s not my true father, it seems that, after having viewed him as my father for so many years, whatever feelings of love I still have

for him won't disappear so easily. Just as he had as a child, Shusei was hoping for Kojin to express his love for him. It was nothing more than a conditioned reflex.

I hereby profess my loyalty to the Fifth Emperor of Konkoku, Ryu Shohi, and swear to protect his rule even if it costs my life, Shusei wrote plainly before signing the document. As he put down the brush, he stroked the edge of the paper as he secretly smiled to himself.

"I've written the divine contract. Now please tell me everything about Jotetsu—his place of birth, where he grew up, where his relatives are, and any other place he has a relation to," Shusei said.

Seemingly surprised to see Shusei sign the contract so willingly, Kojin took a moment to respond.

"Very well," Kojin said. "Jotetsu is an orphan with no relatives left in the world. He was born in the village of Shohei in the township of Roko, An Prefecture. He lived there until he was thirteen. After that, he spent a year in Ryukan's mansion in the eastern part of Annei. There he learned the skills he needed for his work before being moved to the imperial palace."

Shohei is ruled by the Shu house. Ryukan is a spy who has long served said house. It appeared that Jotetsu was more involved with the Shu house than Shusei had thought. However, he had no time to pry deeper—saving Jotetsu and Rimi came first.

"Thank you. I need to hurry now. Excuse me," Shusei said, sprinting out of the house and mounting the horse that he had entrusted to the guard.

If hiding in Ryukan's mansion was an option, Jotetsu might as well have fled to the imperial palace. If that wasn't possible, he must have left Annei. Shohei is close enough to reach by horse. There are bamboo groves, thickets, and rivers that are good for shaking off pursuers. It's the perfect place to hide if you're familiar with the terrain. Shohei it is!

The unit pursuing Jotetsu and Rimi was undoubtedly skilled. They would be gathering information in the town and neighboring villages, steadily closing in on their location. There was no telling whether Shusei would be able to outrun the unit if he headed to Shohei now.

As he was about to leave, Shusei saw someone waiting in front of the gate.

“Hakurei? What are you doing here?” Shusei asked in surprise, looking down as the beautiful palace attendant approached his horse.

“His Majesty is terribly worried about the situation, and I couldn’t stay put,” Hakurei said in a stressed tone. “Did you find a clue as to where Jotetsu may have run off to?”

“You showed up at just the right time. There’s a good chance that Jotetsu fled to the village of Shohei. I’m going to make my way there as quickly as possible, but I’m worried about going alone. Could you ask His Majesty to send a few men to Shohei who are aware of the situation? Skilled fighters who can be trusted?” Shusei asked. His expression then turned sterner. “I didn’t tell His Majesty as I didn’t want to cause him more worry than needed, but if the pursuit unit finds Jotetsu and Rimi before us, their lives are in danger. Don’t you agree, Hakurei?”

“That’s true,” Hakurei said, nodding as though he had already realized this. “Hurry to their side to prevent this. Leave the rest to me.”

“Thank you.”

Shusei kicked his horse in the belly.

I have to hurry, Shusei thought as he set off once again into the night.



With Shusei gone, the garden house had become peaceful once more. Illuminated by the dancing candlelight, Kojin was observing Shusei’s skilled handwriting, the ink still wet.

“I never thought he would write a divine contract so easily,” Kojin mumbled.

Divine contracts inspired fear. Even Kojin would hesitate to write one if commanded. Seeing Shusei agree so readily, Kojin theorized that despite having learned of his birth, his loyalty for Shohi remained unwavering. The reason he was visiting the Ho mansion must have been, as he claimed, to gather information on the enemy.

“He is earnest to a fault.”

Considering Shusei's nature, it seemed plausible.

Just how much must he take after Seishu?



"It's cold, huh?" Jotetsu muttered.

Rimi cuddled up closer to Jotetsu. As night fell, the temperature dropped, and the air became more humid. The damp, cool air was descending on the area around the deserted house.

"I'll make something warm for you when we're back in Annei. What would you like to eat?" Rimi asked.

"Lijiumian," Jotetsu instantly replied.

"You must like that a lot."

"I've been eating it forever, ever since I was a kid. Usually alone."

Jotetsu's voice was frail, as if his energy was slowly dispersing into the chilling night air. The thought terrified Rimi. As Jotetsu closed his eyes, she felt like he would never open them again. She attempted to keep him awake by speaking to him.

"You ate alone? What about your family?" she asked.

"It was just me and Ma. Ma often wouldn't come home for days because of work. Whenever that happened, I'd bring coins down to the village and eat at a food stand. Everyone was afraid of me, so I didn't have any friends. That's why I ate alone," Jotetsu explained, his eyes still closed.

"They were afraid of you? Why?"

"There was a rumor that Ma was a spy working for some noble. And apparently, that was actually true."

Jotetsu slowly opened his eyes.

"She must have gotten on someone's bad side due to her work. Someone burned down the house with her in it while I was fishing by the river. It was right around this season. The magnolias burned too. She loved magnolias," he continued dispassionately, and Rimi widened her eyes in shock.

“That’s awful! I’m so sorry!” Rimi exclaimed.

“Don’t pull a face like that. It happened over ten years ago,” Jotetsu replied.

Suddenly, Jotetsu became quiet. The sound of galloping drawing near could be heard from outside.

“Did they find us?” Jotetsu whispered.

A faint light returned to Jotetsu’s eyes. He moved Rimi aside and groaned as he stood up.

“No, Master Jotetsu! You mustn’t move!” Rimi said.

“I’ll die if I go to sleep anyway. Can you ride a horse? I’ll keep the pursuers busy for as long as I can. Return to Annei in the meantime. If Shusei is smart about what he’s doing, there’s a chance you’ll make it.”

Rimi clung to Jotetsu as he exited the house, leaning against the wall.

“Please, get on the horse with me! Let’s run away together!” Rimi said.

“I’m already done for. You have to go.”

The sound of hooves was coming closer. Jotetsu pushed Rimi forward.

“But...” Rimi said.

A rider could be seen down the road, illuminated by the moon from the back. The figure was approaching them quickly.

“Go!” Jotetsu shouted.

Despairing at the thought of being cornered, Rimi’s knees were quivering.

What can I do?!

But then...

II

“Jotetsu! Rimi!” the horse rider shouted.

Rimi gasped at the sound of the very voice that she had wanted to hear. Jotetsu relaxed.

The rider pulled on the reins to bring his horse to a stop in front of them. It was Shusei.

“Master Shusei!” Rimi exclaimed, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks.

He really came! Shusei looking at them worriedly from atop his horse was the biggest relief Rimi could have hoped to see.

“Are you hurt, Rimi?!” Shusei asked.

“I’m fine, but Master Jotetsu...”

Shusei jumped down from his horse to support the staggering Jotetsu.

“Did they cut you?” he asked.

“Oh, please. It’s just a scratch,” Jotetsu said, attempting to smirk, but he ended up grimacing instead. Shusei’s expression turned sterner as he must have realized the severity of Jotetsu’s injuries.

“That’s some scratch.”

“What’s the situation?”

“The people at the imperial palace think that you kidnapped Rimi. They sent a unit to capture you.”

Shocked at the misunderstanding that was afoot, Rimi was unable to stay silent.

“I will explain to them what really happened!” she said.

“You can testify all you want, but it won’t help,” Shusei explained. “They’re the military. Orders are absolute to them. They will assume that Jotetsu is the perpetrator as they were told and apprehend him, no matter what.”

“If that happens, we can have His Majesty convince them to clear Master Jotetsu of any suspicions!”

“Sure, assuming I arrive there in one piece,” Jotetsu remarked sarcastically.

“In one piece? What do you mean?” Rimi asked.

“If I were I Bunryo, I’d make sure to sneak someone loyal to me into the pursuit unit. What do you think, Shusei?”

“Yes, both Hakurei and I were particularly worried about that scenario. That’s why I had to find you before they did,” Shusei said.

Hearing this, Rimi finally realized what was happening.

To Director I, that would be the fastest and most reliable method.

If people loyal to I Bunryo were part of the unit, after capturing Jotetsu and safeguarding Rimi, they would ensure that both of them were killed while they were on the way back to the imperial palace. They would plan some kind of commotion and kill them when the rest of the unit was distracted. There was no chance that Bunryo wouldn’t attempt it.

The unit contains assassins sent by I Bunryo. That’s almost guaranteed. Meaning the unit finding us would be just the same as I Bunryo finding us. That was why Shusei had been so desperate to find the two of them before the pursuers did.

“We have to hurry, Rimi, Jotetsu. Once we’re back at the imperial palace, His Majesty will ensure your safety,” Shusei said to encourage them as he walked toward his horse. “And before traveling here, I asked Hakurei to give His Majesty a message. He should be sending people we can trust to Shohei. If we meet up with them, we should be able to get to...”

Shusei suddenly fell quiet, looked up, and groaned. Jotetsu frowned.

“Looks like they’re here, Shusei,” Jotetsu said.

The sound of multiple horses could be heard from down the road, hidden from view by a thicket. Rimi walked up to Jotetsu and helped Shusei support him.

“Hurry to the horse, Master Jotetsu,” Rimi said.

“There’s no point, Rimi. It’s too late,” Shusei murmured in despair.

Around twenty pairs of horses and riders came into view. The person riding at the front raised his hand, and the rest of the unit slowed down. They spread out and surrounded the three of them. Once there was nowhere to escape, they dismounted their horses and readied their swords.

“We follow the command of the general of the imperial guard, working on

orders from His Majesty. You are Shin Jotetsu, correct? And that must be Lady Setsu Rimi. We have been instructed to apprehend Shin Jotetsu on suspicion of kidnapping. Hand over Lady Setsu Rimi and come with us. Do not resist," the military officer spearheading the group declared.

"Take care of Jotetsu," Shusei whispered to Rimi before releasing Jotetsu and taking a step toward the leader of the unit and raising his voice. "I am Shu Shusei, an imperially appointed member of the Department of Rites and cuisinologist. I serve His Majesty directly as his grand councilor."

The leader furrowed his brow, still holding his sword raised.

"The cuisinologist? What is the grand councilor doing here?" the man said dubiously. Though he may have recognized Shusei's name, it seemed he didn't know what he looked like.

"I had reasons for searching for Shin Jotetsu and Setsu Rimi myself. The claim that Shin Jotetsu kidnapped Rimi is false. He took her here to protect her from attackers. See for yourselves. Does it look like Rimi was brought here by force? Can't you see Jotetsu's injuries? He can barely stand," Shusei explained.

"There is no way of ascertaining here whether you truly are the cuisinologist."

"Forget about my identity—what do you see before you? Rimi is supporting a wounded Jotetsu. Can you still claim that Jotetsu kidnapped her after seeing this?"

"Regardless of the circumstances, we have been given orders to apprehend Shin Jotetsu and safeguard Lady Setsu Rimi, and that is what we will do. You can investigate whether Jotetsu is guilty once we reach the imperial palace."

The leader was exceedingly stubborn as he intently studied the three of them. Shusei seemed to be doing his best to find a way out, intimidating the man with his gaze while racking his brain for a solution.

If Master Jotetsu and I end up in the hands of the pursuit unit, we won't survive the trip to the imperial palace.

"Would you mind waiting a little while, at least?" Shusei suggested. He was hoping for help to arrive before departing.

“Are you plotting something?” the man said, raising an eyebrow.

The area was filled with the strong scent of magnolia blossoms. The deep purple flower trees watched Rimi, Shusei, and Jotetsu from above. The ominously dark flowers were beautiful, lit up by the moonlight.

“I only wish to ensure the safety of Jotetsu and Rimi,” Shusei explained.

“We are here on the orders of the imperial guard’s general. Are you saying you cannot trust us?!” the leader snapped.

“It is not you that I don’t trust!”

As the back and forth between Shusei and the military officer continued, Shusei tirelessly looked around the area. He was desperately attempting to buy enough time for help to arrive.

“Then what are you worried about?” the man asked.

“The fact that you are a makeshift unit,” Shusei answered. “The men under your command consist of whoever happened to be available at the time. Any permanent unit would have its own duties that cannot simply be neglected. For such a sudden order, there would be no other option than to form a new unit on the spot.”

“They are all guardsmen of the imperial court.”

“Can you prove it? Is there really no one you do not recognize among them?”

Stumped, the man readjusted his grip on his sword. He was steadily growing more irritated.

As Rimi watched the situation unfold, holding her breath at the tense air between Shusei and the leader of the unit, she heard someone stepping on the grass behind her. Frightened, she looked behind her. Two guardsmen had snuck up on her and Jotetsu, raising narrow swords only a few steps behind them. Noticing Rimi looking at them, they instantly moved in. Seeing what was happening, the other guardsmen let out surprised interjections, but they did not know how to react, unaware of what was about to occur.

There was no time to run. Rimi shoved Jotetsu away, and he fell onto the grass. He turned to look up at Rimi from the ground.

“Rimi!” Jotetsu and Shusei exclaimed at the same time.

Rimi was frozen in place. She looked up at the swords raining down on her as they reflected the light of the moon. Her mind went blank with fear.

Suddenly, someone dashed past the guardsmen and leaped at the attackers, cutting them across their backs in one swing of his narrow blade. The attackers cried out in pain as their swords trembled. With no time to think, Rimi jumped to the side, but she tripped over her legs and fell to the ground. Shusei rushed to her side and helped her sit up.

“Rimi!” Shusei exclaimed, his arm around Rimi’s shoulder.

“Master Shusei!” Rimi said as she jumped and clung onto Shusei’s chest.

The attackers received a second blow, this time to the back of their knees, and they fell limply to the ground.

Rimi was dumbfounded. Standing in front of her, having cut down the assailants, was someone she had never expected. The surrounding guardsmen and their leader were similarly staring at him with wide eyes. While taking shallow breaths, Jotetsu narrowed his eyes as if finding the situation humorous.

With his expensive shenyi and white cheeks splattered with blood, the man with the sword was giving his usual captivating smile.

“Master Hakurei!” Rimi exclaimed.

Standing before Rimi, the moon to his back, was Hakurei. He searched around the inside of his robes and took out a letter. He opened it and held it up.



“This is an imperial order from His Majesty the Emperor! Shin Jotetsu will be taken into custody by the person holding this letter, as will Setsu Rimi!” Hakurei roared.

“Who the hell are you?! How dare you attack guardsmen!” the leader barked, having come to his senses.

Hakurei gave him a sideways glance.

“I am Sai Hakurei, a palace attendant,” Hakurei said.

“A palace attendant?! What is a palace attendant doing here?” the leader asked.

“I received word that some of my fellow palace attendants had managed to infiltrate this unit, so I came to pick them up. However...”

Hakurei kicked away the helmets of the men writhing in pain on the ground. Their faces were white, and they had no facial hair. They were clearly eunuchs.

The military officer looked on in shock. Hakurei widened his smile.

“It appears that they have taken their pranks a bit far, so I had to pursue some more forceful measures,” Hakurei explained. “Though I did make sure to leave them able to speak, so we should know with time who told them to come here and cause mischief. I will take responsibility for seeing Shin Jotetsu, Setsu Rimi, and the cuisinologist too, while I’m at it, back to His Majesty. I’d appreciate it if you left them alone.”

“But we were sent here by the imperial guard’s general himself!” the leader said.

“I have an imperial order in writing here,” Hakurei said, holding up the letter again. “And I have also brought some men I can trust.”

In response, ten men clad in black appeared silently behind the guardsmen.

“I employ these men personally, so there is no need to doubt their motives,” Hakurei continued.

“Are you saying that we cannot be trusted?”

“Oh? You’re asking me to trust you after seeing this?” Hakurei asked as he

mercilessly stepped on the two men's hands.

The leader frowned at the sound of the men's screams. He had lost all means of arguing back.

"Hakurei. I never thought you'd come here personally," Shusei said.

"Well you see, His Majesty praised me despite the fact that I was too late with my plan," Hakurei replied as he sheathed his sword. "I decided that in order to live up to his praise, I had to make it this time."

Jotetsu was still looking up from the ground, but he soon put his head down against the grass in relief.

"Who would've thought? Even you get happy sometimes," Jotetsu said, smirking faintly with his eyes closed. "I guess...beneath that wolf's clothing of yours...you're actually pretty fond of His Majesty."

Then, Jotetsu's voice trailed off.

"Master Jotetsu?!"

"Jotetsu!"

Rimi and Shusei called out to Jotetsu at the same time and rushed to his side. His breathing was shallow. He had fallen unconscious.

"Ready a carriage! Bring him to the imperial palace! Now!" Hakurei yelled in distress.

III

The magnolias were burning. Ever since he was a child, Jotetsu had feared that this day would come.

His mother was a slim and beautiful woman, but her bones seemed constricted by the muscles that accented her arms, legs, and stomach. Her expression would occasionally turn stern, her eyes eternally vigilant. Even so, when the two of them were alone in their house, she would show Jotetsu a soft smile. Whenever he fell and cried, she would let out a hearty laugh and poke his head, saying, "Come on, it's not that bad." She always cared for him in a way

that made his pain seem like nothing.

She had been fond of magnolia trees, planting a number of them around their home.

“Look,” she would say, pointing at the budding branches in winter, her breath visible in the cold, “the magnolias start budding in the winter, waiting to bloom in the spring. Admirable, don’t you think?” It seemed unlikely that Jotetsu’s mother, who always planned for the future, would entrust the coming spring—her hopes and dreams—to the magnolias. Perhaps those words had been meant for Jotetsu rather than herself.

“That woman is a spy,” the villagers of Shohei would whisper, fearing the inhabitants of the house at the edge of the village. That was probably the truth. Jotetsu’s mother would often set aside money for him before leaving the house and going away for days at a time. He would take that money and exchange it for lijiumian at a food stand in Shohei. The villagers treated him as though he wasn’t even there—although the fact that no one would approach him did mean that no one would harass him either. But as a result, Jotetsu closed his heart off like the magnolia buds in winter, avoiding interacting with those around him.

Jotetsu had once asked his mother who his father was and whether he was alive or dead.

“That man is still alive. When the time is right, you’ll meet him too,” his mother had responded. The way she had talked about Jotetsu’s father had seemed somehow distant.

Then one day, at the height of Jotetsu’s thirteenth spring, he had noticed a strange smell while fishing by the river. He had turned toward his house to see black smoke billowing up into the air. He had immediately rushed home and found his house enveloped in flames. It appeared that someone had poured oil over the place as the fire had spread to the dark purple blossoms of the magnolias, setting the trees ablaze. With the air boiling from the flames, Jotetsu had no chance of getting close to his home.

After having burned through the house, the flames subsided. Jotetsu found his mother’s body in the ruins and buried her in the forest. Her body had nearly

turned to charcoal. Shocked by how light and frail she was, Jotetsu had been incapable of even crying. The scent of the magnolias mingled with the burnt smell of the house. Only ashes remained of what yesterday had been his warm home. Overwhelmed by his newfound sense of loss, Jotetsu's mind turned blank.

Much like that day, Jotetsu was now standing vacantly somewhere bright.

Where am I? What was I doing? Ma's not here. I don't have a single friend. How boring.

Jotetsu wanted to stop thinking and dissipate into the bright light. He closed his eyes.

This place is nice. No smell of magnolias. No smell at all. Nothing's here. I don't need to think about anything. It's the perfect place for me.

He felt as though he was forgetting something important and that he had to think. But after so many years of keeping himself from thinking, it was too much effort to recall what he was forgetting. It was more comfortable to avoid thinking about anything at all. It was boring, but it was easier than letting his chest be in turmoil.

Jotetsu unconsciously shut out any outside sensations. If he heard nothing, felt nothing, and saw nothing, he wouldn't need to think. Just like the magnolias, no matter how fire resistant something seems, if it burns, it burns.



"Rimi!" Shohi exclaimed as Rimi entered his room, accompanied by Hakurei. Without even giving Rimi time to greet him, he rushed up to her and embraced her forcefully.

"Your Majesty, I'm sorry for worrying you," Rimi said, remorse filling her chest. The force of Shohi's embrace showed just how anxious he had been. With Jotetsu gone and Rimi kidnapped, it was only reasonable that he would be distressed.

"It is fine. You are back, so it is all fine. You are not hurt, are you?"

"No, Your Majesty. Master Jotetsu protected me, and Master Shusei and Master Hakurei came to save me."

Shohi finally released his embrace and turned to Hakurei, who was still standing in the doorway.

“I see you made it in time, Hakurei. What did you find?” Shohi asked.

“Director I had sent assassins along with the unit pursuing Jotetsu and Rimi, but we managed to take them alive,” Hakurei explained. “He must be panicking as he seemed to have picked some particularly skilled palace attendants. They received the order directly from Director I. I expect that they will admit to everything that Director I has done. With this much evidence, he will have no place to run. We will be able to capture him. And once we interrogate him, he is sure to admit his relationship to the Minister of Personnel. He is apathetic to the pain of others, but he is unable to endure even the slightest pain to himself.”

Hakurei grinned faintly.

“I’m sure Director I is very busy preparing for his flight right about now,” he added.

The assassins would serve as evidence for who was behind the assassination attempts toward the prospective empress as well as the events at the Executive Audience. I Bunryo’s indictment was inevitable.

“I will leave the matter of Director I to Kojin. It will involve the Minister of Personnel, so it is best for Kojin to work on my orders directly, though I will speak with Shusei first,” Shohi said. Then, when he took a look around the room, he finally realized that only Hakurei and Rimi were present. “Where is Shusei? I do not see Jotetsu either. They came back safely, did they not?”

“Master Shusei accompanied Master Jotetsu to the cuisinology hall. Master Jotetsu is...” Rimi bit her lip. “Master Jotetsu was hurt while protecting me. He’s unconscious.”

“What did you say?” Shohi said as his eyes widened. But his expression quickly turned stern, and his voice was almost angry. “Jotetsu is in the cuisinology hall, then, correct?”

Shohi stormed off toward the cuisinology hall with Rimi and Hakurei chasing after him. The black roof tiles of the hall glistened white as they reflected the

bright moonlight. The door was open and candlelight leaked out in the shape of the doorway onto the gravel of the garden. Toward the back of the hall, surrounded by texts, was a large sofa that Jotetsu was lying on. Shusei was sitting on his knees next to him.

Having been discharged from the imperial guard, Jotetsu had neither title nor rank, and he no longer had a home in the imperial palace. There were few places where he could be brought, so in the end, they were forced to take him to the cuisinology hall, which Shusei was effectively the master of.

As Shohi stepped into the hall, Shusei greeted him with a bow.

“Shusei. How is Jotetsu?” Shohi asked as he swiftly approached the sofa, speaking stiffly as to not let his voice betray his shock at seeing Jotetsu lying there with his eyes closed.

“He has a deep wound on his back. We’ve stopped the bleeding, but the doctor says that he has lost too much blood. He also has a high fever from the wound. All we can do is bet on his strength and willpower. If he regains consciousness, then there is a chance he will make it,” Shusei explained.

“Jotetsu,” Shohi said, kneeling next to the sofa, an act that was unheard of for an emperor to commit in front of a subject.

“Your Majesty!” Shusei said in surprise, trying to stop Shohi.

“It is fine,” Shohi responded curtly as he followed Shusei’s example and studied Jotetsu up close. “Jotetsu... Thank you for protecting Rimi. I...am glad.”

Shusei looked at Shohi with a kind gaze before turning back to Jotetsu. It was as if he was praising the emperor with his eyes for managing to express his feelings.

They have a bond. Rimi could see the connection that Shohi, Shusei, and Jotetsu had developed over the years. She then realized why Jotetsu had come to save her. *It was for His Majesty and Master Shusei.*

When Rimi had asked Jotetsu why he had saved her, he had responded that he didn’t know himself. It was possible that Jotetsu truly didn’t understand why he had done it, but Rimi did.

I am the prospective empress. His Majesty desires me. And Master Jotetsu knows that Master Shusei and I have had feelings for each other, if only for a short time. That's why. That's why he saved me. Both Shohi and Shusei cared for Rimi, and Jotetsu had saved her for their sake. As long as they desired something, he would risk his life to protect it, be it Rimi or even a scarecrow for that matter. Jotetsu valued his bond with the two of them more than he realized.

Rimi was touched by the warm connection between the three of them, but her chest also ached at the possibility that one part of that connection might disappear.

Master Jotetsu...

Jotetsu had risked his life to save her. Rimi had to do something to repay him. Tears started pouring down her cheeks.

I wish there was something I could do, Lady Saigu. I'm powerless. Rimi unconsciously pleaded to her beautiful Saigu sister, who had been in her heart since she was young, and who she would turn to whenever she was sad or in need of help. But then she remembered how she had burned her letters from the Saigu in order to become a Konkokuan. *That's right... I'm not a Wakokuan anymore... I'm not Lady Saigu's little sister...*

But then, she heard a voice.

You really hate being alone, don't you, my Umashi-no-Miya? You're always looking for some kind of proof. But you don't need any. Even without proof, you are still you. You are my little sister. Don't you think that's good enough?

The voice belonged to the Saigu. Surprised, Rimi looked around the room, but her sister was nowhere in sight. The voice had echoed inside her head.

Lady Saigu?!

Having given up her identity as a Wakokuan, Rimi had assumed that she would no longer be able to hear the voice of the Saigu who served Kunimamori-no-Ōkami, the protector god of Wakoku. But she had. Rimi couldn't understand why. She had thought that she had discarded any bond to her old home, but perhaps one remained.

You're powerless? Not at all, the voice continued. *You're the Umashi-no-Miya, remember? Now show me what an Umashi-no-Miya can do.*

Rimi's eyes widened. It was the same thing that the Saigu had told her once long ago.

Can I really do something, Lady Saigu?

The doctor had said that Jotetsu needed his strength and willpower to survive. He had more than enough strength, so what he needed was willpower. Rimi racked her brain to figure out what might stimulate his willpower. Jotetsu unconsciously valued his bond with Shohi and Shusei more than anything, yet despite both of them being by his side, he showed no sign of waking up. It was as if he didn't notice that they were even there. Perhaps his wound was so deep that it had severed his connection with the outside world. If that was the case, Rimi had to do something, because by remaining in his own world, Jotetsu would never regain his willpower and might drift off, never to wake up again.

I have to pull Master Jotetsu back to His Majesty and Master Shusei.

As Rimi looked at the three men with tears in her eyes, she recalled the events of the Palace of the Water Spirit. The three of them had happily discussed their past over bowls of lijiumian. Shusei had mentioned that he had fond memories of eating it. When she had asked what food he liked and then what he wanted to eat, Jotetsu had answered lijiumian both times. It could be that to Jotetsu, lijiumian represented the happy times he had spent with Shohi and Shusei.

That's right, I'm an Umashi-no-Miya. Which meant there was only one thing she could do. *In order to bring Master Jotetsu back, I just need to make a dish that means a lot to him.*

It had to be something that would make Jotetsu want to eat it, even when unconscious. Be it the smell or a few drops of the soup—she needed to make something that would bring his senses back to the real world. Then he would be able to notice how much Shohi and Shusei would mourn his passing.

"Master Hakurei, I am going to the kitchen," Rimi whispered to Hakurei by the wall so as not to disturb Shohi and Shusei.

Hakurei looked slightly perplexed, but he offered to accompany her, so the two of them left the cuisinology hall. Walking beside Hakurei, Rimi recalled the breathtaking moves he had used to take down the assassins. Those had been the moves of an experienced warrior, and his wrist and fingers had seemed firm as he gripped his sword. As his arms were usually hidden by the long sleeves of his robes, Rimi had assumed that they were slender. But if he had enough strength to cut down two people in a single strike, his arms must have been much more muscular than his shenyi would lead one to believe.

There is more to Master Hakurei than I know.

As Rimi studied Hakurei's hand curiously, Hakurei seemed to take notice and gave her a puzzled look.

"What is it?" Hakurei asked.

"Oh, um... It's nothing. I was just thinking about how surprised I was to see you wield a sword like that back in Shohei," Rimi replied.

"It's not just me. The palace attendants who attempted to kill you also wielded swords, remember? Palace attendants are prone to losing muscle, but with regular practice, you can improve your skill with the sword. However, as we are weaker, we tend to use swords that are more narrow than usual," Hakurei explained. "But never mind that. Why are you going to the kitchen?"

"I'm going to cook. I promised Master Jotetsu back in Shohei that when we return to Annei I would cook him lijiumian."

"Jotetsu still hasn't woken up, you know."

"Exactly."

"I don't think his sleep is so shallow that he would become hungry and wake up just from smelling food," Hakurei said with a sorrowful smile.

"Yes, you may be right. But this is the only thing I can do right now."

As it was already the middle of the night, when Rimi arrived at the kitchen, the fire was gone from the stoves, and the air was cold, so she lit the stoves. Rimi then started picking out ingredients from the stone pantry while waiting for the fire to settle, placing them on the counter. She found clams cleaned of

sand, dried scallops, dried shrimp, umifu, wheat, and eggs. The kitchen had almost anything one could wish for—and no wonder, as it was used to prepare the emperor's meals.

Rimi poured a jar of cold water into a pot and put it on a stove. She then kneaded wheat and eggs together to make the noodles. She followed the same process that she had used in the Palace of the Water Spirit as closely as she could remember. After making a tang from the dried scallops and shrimp, she added a bit of umifu. She then steamed the clams with rice wine and mixed them into the base tang. The noodles, which she had let rest while preparing the tang, were now ready. She boiled a large pot of water and added in the thin noodles. After cooking them quickly, she transferred them to a bowl into which she poured the clear tang. The faintly golden noodles floated gracefully in the liquid.

To finish it off, she created spring onion oil by combining spring onion with heated oil. Once the oil had absorbed the fragrance of the onion, she poured one spoonful onto the tang. On the surface of the tang, the oil glittered.

This might not work.

Just like Hakurei had suggested, it seemed unlikely that this would be enough to bring Jotetsu back. But Rimi figured that the best way to activate one's mind was to first activate one's body—one's senses. Stimulating the body could stimulate the mind. There were countless such examples.

"I have brought supper," Rimi said as she carried five bowls of lijiumian into the cuisinology hall—one bowl for each person there.

Rimi and Jotetsu had for natural reasons gone without supper, but Rimi guessed that the same was true of Shusei, Hakurei, and Shohi. Seeing the bowls on the table, Shohi and Shusei seemed to realize how hungry they were and stood up. They sat down at the table and picked up their chopsticks.

"Please join us, Master Hakurei," Rimi suggested, but Hakurei took one step backward.

"I'm a palace attendant. Palace attendants aren't allowed to eat at the same table as His Majesty," Hakurei explained.

Still holding his chopsticks, Shohi shot Hakurei a displeased stare.

“You are a bit late for that, Hakurei. We already let Rimi trick us into eating facing each other one year ago, did we not? If it has already happened, it does not matter if it happens two or three times. Come,” Shohi demanded.

Hakurei looked at Shohi hesitantly.

“Come,” Shohi repeated forcefully.

“Very well,” Hakurei yielded. Rimi thought he appeared slightly happy as he sat quietly at the table.

Rimi picked up a bowl, walked up to the sofa, kneeled, and looked at Jotetsu.

“Master Jotetsu, I’ve brought the lijiumian I promised you,” she said, hoping that the fragrance of the dried shrimp, scallops, and steamed clams would reach him.

There was no response. Shohi and Hakurei paused from eating and looked toward Rimi. It was as if they wanted to question the point of what she was doing, but out of respect for Rimi’s feelings, they refrained from voicing their thoughts.

Won’t you have some, Master Jotetsu? Please... Rimi wanted to say out loud, but she knew that she would start crying if she did.

Shusei stood up and kneeled next to Rimi.

“Rimi, put a spoonful of tang in Jotetsu’s mouth,” Shusei suggested. If Jotetsu had shut his senses off from the outside world, he wouldn’t be able to smell the food. But perhaps the taste could reach him—after all, the mouth is inside the body.

Rimi did as Shusei proposed, scooping a spoonful of tang from the bowl and pouring it into Jotetsu’s slightly open mouth. A few drops fell between his lips and into his mouth.



Something was making Jotetsu’s lips wet, but it sparked no emotional response. His mind was steadily becoming emptier, making him feel more at peace in the process. He wouldn’t mind simply disappearing like this.

Everyone's gaze was fixed on Jotetsu, but there was no reaction. Hakurei let out a small, resigned sigh and looked away while Shohi lowered his gaze. Shusei bit his lip.

"Enough. Stop, Rimi, Shusei," Shohi muttered as if unable to bear watching any longer, placing his chopsticks on the table. "I am not here because I have my hopes up. I am simply loath to leave his side."

Rimi wanted to tell Shohi not to give up, but she did not have the power to instill enough hope to do so.

Hakurei stared at the surface of the clear tang.

"Is this Jotetsu's favorite food?" Hakurei asked.

"Perhaps, though he never told me," Shohi said before smiling faintly. "I am sure he would have been happy to get to eat this once more. At first, he would always mention how much he liked it when eating it."

At first? Shohi's words caught Rimi's attention.

"Yes, that's true. Though I'm sure he's tired of eating this lijiumian," Shusei noted.

It felt as though Shohi and Shusei's words had impaled Rimi. "At first." "Tired." "*This* lijiumian." In other words, there must have been something else.

"I'm wrong!" Rimi exclaimed.

Ignoring everyone turning to her with surprised eyes, Rimi put the bowl she was holding down on the table and ran off down the hall. Shusei chased after her and grabbed her arm just before she could enter the kitchen.

"Wait, Rimi. What's the matter? What are you wrong about?" Shusei asked.

"I...I was wrong."

There was still one possibility left. This realization made Rimi ecstatic, but she was still worried. Regardless, she had to try.

"I was wrong about what to make for Master Jotetsu!"

Chapter 7: What They Gave

I

"You were wrong?" Shusei asked, bewildered.

"Yes. I need to make the lijiumian again. Replicating a taste someone loves means more than just making it as delicious as possible. Of course, the result may stay the same anyway. But this is all I can do, and I have to do everything that I can," Rimi said.

Shusei released his grip on Rimi's arm and smiled softly.

"I don't know exactly what you've realized... But yes, give it a try. All I can do for Jotetsu right now is ask for your help," Shusei said. It was not just Rimi who was desperately hoping for Jotetsu to recover—Shusei and Shohi were too.

Rimi entered the kitchen, took a few seconds to catch her breath, and closed her eyes.

I want to save him. I want to bring him back to His Majesty and Master Shusei. The strong desire inside Rimi gave her strength.

You must be prepared to fight to force the god to admit satisfaction, my Umashi-no-Miya. Rimi's Saigu sister's voice echoed in her head.

I can hear her. The voice Rimi would always hear when preparing holy communion still resounded, clearly and unwaveringly, in her head. It was proof that even though she was no longer Wakokuan, there was still something within her that hadn't disappeared. *It doesn't matter if I'm Wakokuan or Konkokuan. Deep inside, I still have a pillar that supports who I am.*

Upset by the prospect of losing her identity as a Wakokuan, Rimi had completely forgotten that no matter where or who she was, what supported her remained—food. As long as she had that, Rimi had nothing to fear. For even if she lost her connection to Wakoku, she would never be alone. The pillar inside her connected her heart to her sister.

Yes, Lady Saigu. I am, Rimi thought solemnly.

Jotetsu was straddling the line between life and death but being led toward the netherworld. Rimi needed to show him the right way, the one leading back to this world.

Rimi opened her eyes and started repeating the same steps as before—albeit fixing one specific mistake.



An immortal has appeared to prepare holy communion.

Shusei was standing in the doorway, observing Rimi as she got to work. She had clearly become an immortal now, making holy communion as she carried the weight of her wish as well as that of Shohi's and Shusei's desires on her shoulders. Shusei prayed silently.

If she can revive Jotetsu with her holy communion...



Rimi formed the egg and wheat flour mixture into noodles and prepared the base tang using dried scallops and shrimp again. She steamed the clams, then mixed them into the tang along with the steaming liquid before giving it a taste.

This is it, she thought, nodding to herself.

Rimi boiled the thin noodles in a large pot, transferred them to a bowl, and poured the tang over them. With a finishing touch, she added a spoonful of spring onion oil to the meal.

Confused, Shusei looked at the result: a bowl of lijiumian that looked identical to the previous attempt.

"Isn't this the same lijiumian as before?" Shusei asked.

"No, it's not," Rimi said, smiling softly as she picked up the bowl and walked back to the cuisinology hall.

Shohi and Hakurei looked puzzled as Rimi entered with a bowl of noodles visually indistinguishable from the last. Bowl still in hand, she kneeled next to the sofa where Jotetsu was sleeping.

"Master Jotetsu," she said softly. "I'm sorry. I didn't make what you wished

for. But I understand now. I finally have what you wanted to eat. I hope you'll enjoy it."

Rimi scooped up one spoonful of tang and carried it to Jotetsu's lips. A few drops of the clear liquid fell into his mouth.

Master Jotetsu... Please... Please...

Shohi seemed to be trying his best to suppress his fear as he approached the sofa and looked down at the unmoving Jotetsu. Shusei walked up next to him as if to comfort him.

Master Jotetsu... Rimi called Jotetsu's name in her mind, praying from the bottom of her heart.

But there was no response. It was hard to tell if his shallow breathing was even continuing. Anxiety and dread filled Rimi's chest.

"Jotetsu!" Shohi suddenly roared. "Open your eyes! This is an order! An order!"

Shusei hurriedly put his hands on Shohi's shoulders to restrain him.

"Please calm down, Your Majesty. An absurd command like that won't do any good," Shusei said.

Jotetsu's eyes remained closed.

"It is an order!" Shohi continued.



Jotetsu's lips felt wet. He noticed a taste and scent that was familiar to him, which had managed to slip its way past his dulled senses.

Lijiumian... I've been wanting to eat this. The string of words entered Jotetsu's otherwise blank mind. It was not developed enough to be called a proper thought, more akin to an instinctive urge. Still, the appearance of these words gave shape to his self, which was on the verge of evaporating into the air like dust.

Lijiumian had a simple taste. There were countless tastier dishes out there. Even Jotetsu could easily name ten or even twenty dishes that tasted better off the top of his head. But he liked lijiumian. When asked what he wanted to eat,

he would generally respond lijiumian, and if asked what his favorite food was, his reply would be the same.

Why do I like it? Jotetsu's thoughts were still jumbled, but fragments of his memories appeared in his mind. How the lijiumian that he had eaten in Shohei as a child had tasted. How everyone would avoid looking at and speaking to him. How he had felt like he was invisible. Back then, he had never been that fond of lijiumian. Jotetsu wondered when he had come to like it.

Why is he standing there? Jotetsu recalled someone saying. It was a cute boy, five or six years old, with large eyes and long eyelashes like a girl. He had looked like a doll, yet he was always annoyed, with an irksome way of speaking.

He is your bodyguard, Prince Shohi, so it's his job to always be by your side, an intelligent-looking boy about ten years old had replied, doing his best to pacify the young prince who was glaring at Jotetsu.

That's not what I meant. I don't like how he's just standing there.

Jotetsu had simply looked on as the boy threw a tantrum, wishing he could be somewhere else. The intelligent-looking boy had patiently dealt with the younger boy.

If you don't want him to stand, what are you going to do about it? Do you want to order him to sit? the intelligent-looking boy had asked.

Oh, yes. That's right. Sit down, the younger boy had demanded.

Ah, I see, the older boy had said, turning around to look at Jotetsu with an awkward expression. *I'm sorry, but Prince Shohi wants you to come over here and sit. Would you mind obliging him, Jotetsu?*

If Jotetsu's memory served him correctly, this had taken him off guard.

Me? You want me to sit at the same table as a prince? Am I allowed to do that? he had asked.

If you wouldn't mind, though we only have lijiumian for supper. Prince Shohi doesn't eat much. Lately, this is the only thing he will eat, the older boy had explained.

Jotetsu had hesitantly followed the order to sit down. He had then eaten

lijiumian with the young prince and the boy who apparently helped the prince with his studies. The taste itself had seemed no different from the lijiumian he had eaten in Shohei, yet for some reason, Jotetsu had found it delicious.

Jotetsu's mother had tended to leave him by himself at home, so he had few memories of eating with someone else. In Shohei, he had been treated as if he didn't exist. But Shohi had noticed him and told him to sit down. In response, Shusei had invited him to sit at the table. The two of them had treated Jotetsu like he actually existed—and had even invited him to eat with them.

I guess that actually made me a bit happy.

The mood at that table had felt oddly warm. Jotetsu had been used to everyone treating him distantly and coldly for as long as he could remember, so he had always shielded himself like the buds of a magnolia in winter. But those hard buds had suddenly been gently stroked by something warm.

Ever since then, Jotetsu had started claiming lijiumian as his favorite food. For a few years, he had honestly thought that there was no better food out there.

Spurred on by these fragmented memories, Jotetsu's brain slowly started working again.

I'd always eat supper with His Majesty and Shusei.

At some point, Shusei had started bringing them bizarre dishes to eat, making both Jotetsu and Shohi despair. Even so, their meals together had been comforting.

Though Jotetsu had served Shohi, Kojin had always been his true master. But after spending a decade with them, he had felt more at home next to Shohi and Shusei than Kojin. In return, Shohi and Shusei had started to take Jotetsu for granted; they even seemed relieved by his presence. Feeling needed comforted Jotetsu. He had immersed himself in that feeling, reminiscent of the gentle air of spring.

I see, Rimi. I'm just like you.

The princess from Wakoku suddenly crossed Jotetsu's mind. She was a strange girl, only ever concerned with food. She had fought to secure a place for herself. Jotetsu had watched on, half impressed and half bewildered—but

funnily enough, it seemed that he was just like her. He wanted to protect the place where he belonged, which was next to Shohi and Shusei.

Then where am I now? Where are His Majesty and Shusei?

Suddenly, Jotetsu felt strongly impelled to return to where Shohi and Shusei were. He started struggling inside the blank space he was in, reaching out with his hands. He opened his eyes.



"I order you, open your eyes!" Shohi yelled on the verge of screaming before biting his lip and looking down while clenching his fist. His voice became weak, sounding like he could cry at any moment. "Open them already..."

Then, Jotetsu's eyelids quivered faintly. Rimi gasped, stood up, and backed away a few steps, the bowl still in her hands.

Could it be?

"Are you saying you will not obey my orders?" Shohi said in a trembling voice.

Shusei stroked Shohi's back to comfort him.

A tiny chuckle could be heard in the room.

Rimi looked on in a daze. Shohi looked up, and Shusei froze. Hakurei smiled.

"Do you really expect a man on the verge of dying...to listen to your orders, Your Majesty?" a strained voice said.

The moment everyone realized who was speaking, Jotetsu opened his eyes. He then faintly raised the corners of his mouth into a smile.

"Jotetsu!" Shohi shouted, kneeling next to the sofa.

Rimi sank to the floor. With the warm pot in her arms, tears started to stream down her cheeks.

Thank goodness. I was right.

Rimi had made a mistake initially. The first dish she had made hadn't been what Jotetsu had wanted to eat. When cooking, it is easy to think that the

better something tastes, the happier the person eating it will become. But that is not always the case—especially when the taste you seek is one you have fond memories of.

For her first batch of lijiumian, Rimi had used umifu in an attempt to make it taste better. All she had thought about was how good it would taste. While the result may have been something with more depth to its taste, it was not the taste that Jotetsu liked.

When watching Shohi, Shusei, and Jotetsu eat lijiumian together, Rimi had realized that what made Jotetsu happy was not the taste of the lijiumian itself but rather the mood of the table as he ate with Shohi and Shusei. What Jotetsu longed for was his place next to the other two. The simple taste he was used to that reminded him of the times he had eaten with Shohi and Shusei. That was the only thing that could reach deep into his consciousness.

A good taste isn't the only thing that makes a meal delicious, and something being delicious isn't all someone might want from a meal. The taste, one's memories, and one's feelings are brought together to create a combined experience.

"It would not have been a problem if you had not been such a dullard!" Shohi yelled before looking down, as though he wanted to hide his face.

"Well, sorry about that," Jotetsu apologized, still unable to move, but Shohi shook his head.

"I...I do not have many people I can trust. I am still inexperienced as an emperor. However..." Shohi trailed off timidly, his voice weak.

After a short silence, Shohi looked up again. His eyes were teary, but they displayed a firm resolve.

"However, that is exactly why I need you. If you are no longer Kojin's sword, then I want you to serve as mine instead—for real this time," Shohi continued, his eyes fixed on Jotetsu's.

Jotetsu blinked a few times in surprise, but his expression slowly turned into a smile.

"I will be your sword, Your Majesty. For real this time," Jotetsu assured Shohi.

“I am counting on you,” Shohi replied. His voice trembled faintly, as though he was on the verge of crying.



“You’ve done great. Thank you,” Shusei said to Jotetsu as he sat down next to Shohi. Jotetsu responded with a satisfied smile.

Hakurei turned his gaze outside of the cuisinology hall with a gentle expression on his face. Rimi could read a deep sense of relief from his beautiful profile.

Rimi was still sitting on the floor, tears of joy streaming down her face. She was so happy to have successfully brought Jotetsu back to Shohi and Shusei. Seeing them together was the best reward she could have asked for.

Outside the door, the sky had turned a light purple. Crows were cawing, signaling the arrival of dawn.

II

Thanks to Chancellor Shu Kojin’s swift response, I Bunryo was immediately arrested. As news of the arrest spread throughout the imperial palace, the Minister of Personnel also vanished. Upon realizing that he would inevitably be dismissed if his actions taken under the orders of Bunny came to light, he decided to flee. Shohi made no attempt to chase after him, content with the minister’s disappearance.

The Ministers of War and Justice, who had disturbed the Executive Audience along with the Minister of Personnel, only received stern warnings. It seemed that they truly had simply been worried about the prospective empress’s aptitude and had thus merely taken the opportunity to follow the Minister of Personnel’s lead.

Rimi was having tea with the four consorts at the gazebo by Jade Spring at the Palace of the Water Spirit, her eyes widening in surprise as Noble Consort So spoke.

“I hear Hakurei will be appointed as the new director of the Department of Service,” So said.

“Really? Director? That’s quite the promotion,” Rimi replied.

“Hakurei *is* of third rank, just like Director I was. It’s not a surprising choice,”

Worthy Consort On explained.

“Regardless, I’d much rather Hakurei be the director. He’s much more beautiful than that old ghost of a director,” Pure Consort Yo said happily.

Virtuous Consort Ho remained quiet as she took a sip of her tea. Seeing her unamused expression, Rimi felt a pain in her chest.

“But I have to say, thank goodness you’re safe, Lady Setsu,” Ho said, changing the topic with a smile.

Hearing that Rimi had gone missing, the four consorts had been beside themselves with worry, to the point where they had even taken it out on their handmaids. After returning to the Palace of the Water Spirit, Rimi had been forced to hear handmaids complaining about how awful it had been.

“I’m terribly sorry for causing you distress,” Rimi said, lowering her head in apology.

“My, there you go again, lowering your head. You just can’t rid yourself of that servant spirit, can you?” So said.

“Yes, I suppose so,” Rimi said with a smile, happy to even be able to hear So’s ruthless complaints. “At this point, I’ve just accepted that there’s nothing I can do about it, and I’m planning on frequenting the kitchen to make food for all of you even after the enthronement ceremony. I’ll change the name of the Palace of Northern Peaks to the Empress’s Restaurant.”

The consorts laughed in unison.

“Now that the Executive Audience is over, all that’s left is the Nocturnal Liturgy and the Celestial Request. We’ll have to make sure your attire for the Nocturnal Liturgy is ready in time,” Yo said with sparkling eyes.

Upon being reminded of the Nocturnal Liturgy, worry filled Rimi’s chest, but she quickly drove those feelings away. There was another concern that she needed to take care of first.

With I Bunryo’s assassination attempts, the matter of Shusei had been cast off to the side. Rimi had to ask him why he had been frequenting Ho Neison’s mansion. Given how loyally he was serving Shohi, it seemed unlikely that he

was doing anything to endanger the emperor—but she still had to make sure.

Shusei was currently staying at the Palace of the Water Spirit. Around this time, he was likely paying a visit to Jotetsu, who had been moved there to undergo treatment for his wounds.

Once the tea party was over, Rimi decided to stop by Jotetsu's room, both to look for Shusei and to see how Jotetsu was doing.

The wind traveling along the green surface of Jade Spring carried with it the warmth of the season and caused Rimi's skirt to sway pleasantly in the breeze.



"I can't say being visited by a man cheers me up much," Jotetsu grumbled. He was still too hurt to get out of bed, but his mouth was in working order.

"Well, sorry about that," Shusei said, having come to visit Jotetsu, sitting down in a chair by the bed.

"Will His Majesty be all right while I'm out of action?"

"Kyo Kunki has enthusiastically taken your place as his bodyguard. From the looks of things, he'll probably cry and beg to keep that position even after you've returned."

Jotetsu had been dismissed from the imperial guard, but Shohi had opted to employ him directly as his bodyguard. Kojin had not seemed pleased, but he had abided, unable to voice his objections when faced with Shohi's ironclad will.

"What brings you here, Shusei?" Jotetsu asked abruptly with a serious voice. "Have you forgiven me for staying quiet about your father?"

"This isn't about forgiving you. You saved Rimi, and I'm here to thank you for it. That's all," Shusei said.

"But you've been visiting the Ho house, haven't you? What are you planning?"

"I still don't trust you enough to tell you."

Jotetsu sighed.

"See, you're still angry," Jotetsu said. "What do I need to do to make you

forgive me and earn your trust?”

“I’m not angry. But this isn’t something I can tell someone when I don’t understand what’s going on in their head.”

“What don’t you understand about me?”

“Why you suddenly decided to ignore Shu Kojin’s orders, and why you’d say something to encourage me.”

“If I tell you that, will you trust me?”

Jotetsu’s room was located on the west side of the palace. Just like the other chambers there, its entrance faced Jade Spring. Jotetsu steeled himself as his gaze turned to the surface of the water, which sparkled as the ripples reflected the sunlight. Ever since he had given up on being Shu Kojin’s sword, he had gradually come to reflect on his own feelings.

Now I understand what Ma meant when she said that she liked magnolias, and why she shared that with me.

Jotetsu’s mother had never been sentimental enough to pin her hopes on a spring that may never come. Perhaps the reason she had loved magnolias, as they waited for the arrival of spring, had been her son. Even if she had never lived to see her own spring, Jotetsu might one day see the arrival of his. It had been a display of her motherly, self-sacrificing strength, entrusting her child with her hopes. She had wanted him to walk a different path in life than hers.

Jotetsu did not like magnolias. It was impossible as they reminded him of how his mother had been taken from him, never getting to experience the spring the magnolias had promised her. But he understood his mother’s wishes as she had talked about her love for them. She had been telling him that he might one day find a warm place for himself.

Jotetsu had closed himself off, just like the magnolias in the winter. But then he had met Shohi and Shusei. Their presence had tempted his buds to open, but his coldhearted self-perception as Shu Kojin’s sword had kept them shut. However, the place he desired had a warmth and a reason for his buds to open —the promise of the spring magnolias his mother had told him about.

“I’m honestly not really sure why I tried to encourage you. I...I think I saw part

of myself in you. We're the same, both of us struggling inside the web spun by Chancellor Shu." Jotetsu paused for a moment before continuing. "Shu Kojin is my father."

A breeze passed through the room, making the floral paper decorations that hung in a corner rattle as they hit the wall.

"I see," Shusei replied, unaffected.

"I thought you'd be more surprised," Jotetsu said.

"When I went to look for you and Rimi, I heard from Father that you grew up in Shohei. The fact that you grew up on Shu territory caught my attention," Shusei explained. "And before I came to the deserted house where you were hiding, I heard about your mother from some seniors in Shohei. Apparently, she was a spy. It's not hard to guess that she must have been employed by Father. There are also rumors that he has had children with multiple women outside the Shu house so he could use them."

Shusei's gaze penetrated Jotetsu.

"The fact that Father decided to welcome me into the Shu house as his heir implies that he doesn't care about his heritage," Shusei continued. "In other words, the children he had elsewhere were nothing more than tools to him. The child of a spy would be raised as a spy as well. The blood connection makes it less likely that they would betray him. It all makes perfect sense."

Hidden behind Shusei's dispassionate tone was rage. He was an honest man who detested Kojin's methods. Jotetsu, however, was not.

"When I learned that Chancellor Shu was my father and that he had made my mother give birth to me just to make me one of his tools, all I thought was, 'Huh, really?' Maybe it was because I'd been raised by a spy, but it seemed plausible to me," Jotetsu said. That was why, after his mother's death, he had undergone training to follow in his mother's footsteps, serving Shohi as Kojin's sword.

"If you didn't take issue with Kojin's methods, why did you ignore his orders?" Shusei asked.

"I was scared. Your rejection scared me. I think I unconsciously considered

myself to be at home when I was next to you and His Majesty. I was scared of losing part of that home."

By emptying his mind and devoting himself to being Kojin's sword, Jotetsu had nearly lost a connection that was invaluable to him. Panicking resulted in him finally becoming fed up with Kojin's way of doing things. After he had never even considered disobeying Kojin despite being unable to think of him as his father, Jotetsu had found enjoyment in ignoring Kojin's orders, setting himself free.

Jotetsu had no personal grudge or hatred toward Kojin, but perhaps part of him had resented how he could treat Jotetsu the way he did despite being his father. Coming close to losing his home had exposed those feelings inside of him.

"I didn't want to lose my home, so I decided to abandon my position as Chancellor Shu's sword. Then again, I was a blunt sword anyway. At least according to him," Jotetsu said. In exchange, he had come to understand his mother's feelings and her love for the magnolias, making him realize where he wanted to be.



Listening to Jotetsu, Shusei could see his earnestness.

He really told me the truth.

Shusei felt a sense of relief. He was convinced that Jotetsu was worthy of his trust.

"All right, I understand how you feel now," Shusei said.

Jotetsu smirked.

"Great, so will you tell me why you've been visiting the Ho house now?" Jotetsu asked.

Upon learning that Kojin had found out about his visits to the Ho house earlier than expected, Shusei had discerned that he needed to accelerate his plans in order to achieve his goal. Presently, Jotetsu had managed to escape with his life intact, I Bunryo had been captured, and Rimi was safe. With the recent events nearing their conclusion, Shusei needed to start putting his plan into motion.

“I have a wish. One single wish. I want to enjoy my fate, just as you suggested,” Shusei began softly. “I...”

Shusei told Jotetsu of his plan. As he spoke, he could tell that Jotetsu was turning pale, but he trusted him. By the time Shusei finished, Jotetsu was stunned. A silence followed, but after a while, Jotetsu finally opened his mouth.

“Stop it. When I told you to enjoy your fate, this is not what I meant,” Jotetsu growled.

“I’ve already made up my mind,” Shusei said, shaking his head. “I would have preferred to wait until after the Nocturnal Liturgy and the Celestial Request, but now that Father has found out, I don’t have a choice. I’ll have to make my move either today or tomorrow.”

Shusei stood up and turned around.

“Don’t, Shusei!” Jotetsu yelled desperately.

Shusei left Jotetsu, who was still unable to move from his bed, trapped in his room as his voice struck him harmlessly from behind. He exited through the passageway outside, gazing at the ripples of the spring, when he noticed Rimi approaching him from the opposite direction. Rimi noticed him and started jogging toward him. Walking outside alone without a single handmaid accompanying her, Rimi clearly had yet to grasp her position as prospective empress. Shusei could do nothing but respond with a disheartened smile.

“Master Shusei!” Rimi exclaimed.

She really has remained the same, even after becoming the prospective empress. She acts as if she’s just another palace woman.

“What’s the matter, Rimi?” Shusei asked.

“There’s something I need to ask you. I’d prefer if no one overheard us.”

From her demeanor, Shusei could tell that Rimi was worried about something concerning him. She must have heard about his suspicious behavior as of late. Shusei thought about the best course of action for a moment, but he quickly came to a decision.

“Yes, let’s see... Why don’t we go to the Cave of the Water Spirit, then?”

Shusei suggested.

“What’s that?”

“There’s a natural underground cave here where a water spirit is worshiped. In fact, the Palace of the Water Spirit was built around a shrine dedicated to said spirit. The emperor just happens to use it as his summer palace. No one will overhear us there. Come with me,” Shusei said. As an afterthought, he added, “Incidentally, the cave was once called the Luminous Blossom Cave. It’s worth visiting it at least once regardless.”

The Palace of the Water Spirit was built around the shores of Jade Spring. The main gate was to the south while the north was the innermost part of the palace. In that very innermost part, by the edge of Jade Spring, was a building extremely similar to the cuisinology hall. The main difference was the size—it was a small building, roughly one-fifth the size of the cuisinology hall. Additionally, while the cuisinology hall had walls of white plaster and black roof tiles that prioritized functionality over appearance, the building here had walls decorated with grass patterns and roof tiles colored a glossy, deep green.

The building was connected to the passageway that circled Jade Spring, so Rimi must have passed by it numerous times without realizing. But while it was easy to assume that it was some kind of storage space with its doors always closed, it was actually the entrance to the Cave of the Water Spirit.

The crossbar was lowered. Shusei removed it and pulled on the doors, which opened easily. Cold, moist air poured out from the darkness inside. Behind the doors was a large space with wooden flooring. There was a circular hole in the center lined with stone stairs leading straight down into the dark depths.

Shusei and Rimi descended the stairs leading into the darkness. It was too dark to see anything, forcing them to feel their way forward by using their hands.

“Master Shusei,” Rimi called out anxiously.

“We’ll be fine once we make it to the bottom,” Shusei replied, continuing his steady advance.

The sound of droplets falling onto stone echoed endlessly in the darkness.

Once they reached the end of the staircase, the flooring turned into coarsely cut stone. As Shusei stepped off the stairs and onto the floor, it started glowing faintly around his feet, like the light of a firefly.

Rimi gasped behind Shusei. She had taken one step off the stairs, and the floor around the foot touching the ground was similarly glowing but with a pattern reminiscent of a peony. She raised her foot off the floor, and the light disappeared. She then slowly put her foot down again, starting with her toes, causing the floor to glow around them in the shape of a peony once more. She put her whole foot down, and the light grew stronger for a moment. After a little while, however, it faded again before fizzling out completely.

“The rock in the Cave of the Water Spirit glows when disturbed,” Shusei explained. This mysterious tunnel was the reason it had once been called the Luminous Blossom Cave.

Shusei took another step, and the floor glowed again. Each step lit up the surrounding area. Rimi used the light emitted by the rock to navigate her way through the darkness.

The large tunnel extended straight ahead, maintaining a certain width. The stone shrine where the water spirit was worshiped was located at the end of the tunnel, but there was no need to go that far.

Shusei took one step after another. Each time, a white flower bloomed at his feet. After having walked a certain distance, he stopped and turned around to face Rimi.

“This should be good enough. No one will hear us here. Now, what did you want to talk to me about?” he asked.

Flowers of light were pulsating at Rimi’s feet. The rock seemed to be reacting to the slight changes in weight as she walked. Having never seen such an extraordinary sight before, Rimi looked back and forth in wonder, but as Shusei spoke to her, she remembered her reason for coming here in the first place.

Rimi had been on her way to Jotetsu’s room to ask Shusei what he was planning, but as luck would have it, she had happened to come across him even

before reaching her destination. The discussion they were about to have could affect Shusei's position, so they had to go somewhere that they couldn't be overheard. This cave seemed like an appropriate choice. As the rock reacted to people stepping on it, there would be no fear of anyone listening in on their conversation in secret.

"Well...I heard that you have been visiting Lord Ho Neison's mansion lately. I also heard that Lord Ho is trying to force His Majesty off the throne in order to introduce a new emperor. What are you doing visiting someone like that? I just can't help but wonder," Rimi explained.

"Yes, I'm sure. After all, His Majesty is now the person you love and care for more than anyone," Shusei said.

Hearing Shusei say this, Rimi felt a pain in her chest, as if someone was trying to crush her. She wanted to say "no," but under no circumstances could she do so. All she could do was look down and say "yes" in a weak voice.

"But...so...what exactly are you doing at Lord Ho's mansion, Master Shusei?" Rimi repeated her question, her eyes fixed on her feet, as the glow around her slowly faded.

Just before they were enveloped in total darkness, the cave was lit up again by Shusei walking up to her.

"Rimi," Shusei said before suddenly embracing her.



Shocked, Rimi immediately tried to break free. But Shusei was too strong and refused to release her. As they struggled with their legs, the ground was flashing rapidly enough to be disorienting.

“No, Master Shusei! We can’t!” Rimi exclaimed in what was neither quite joy nor fear.

“I know,” Shusei replied with a kind voice. “But this is the last time. I—the cuisinologist known as Shu Shusei, will vanish from your side.”

III

“What do you mean?!” Rimi asked.

“Please don’t move. This will be my last crime. Forgive me,” Shusei said pleadingly, and Rimi stopped. “Thank you,” he whispered into her ear.

For each moment Shusei embraced her, Rimi was growing more distressed, and her heart was throbbing. Enveloped in the warmth and scent of agarwood that she had longed for so much, she spoke with a raspy voice.

“Your last? Vanish? What do you mean, Master Shusei?” Rimi asked.

“You’ll understand very soon. You’ll also understand why I was visiting Ho Neison. Just wait for me,” Shusei said, tightening his embrace as white flowers continued to bloom underfoot. “I don’t think I will ever be able to forget about you. You are too dear to me.”

Rimi wanted to cry. She felt the same as him, but she couldn’t admit it. Her mind was in a state of turmoil, not knowing what to think, nor understanding what Shusei was saying.

“Thank you, Rimi,” Shusei said after a while before releasing his embrace and taking a few steps back. The ground glimmered around his feet.

“What in the world happened, Master Shusei?” Rimi asked, grabbing Shusei’s sleeve. The way he was acting was so strange that she had to know. “Please, Master Shusei, tell me. What happened? What are you thinking? Are you planning on doing something? I refuse to let go until you’ve explained yourself. I’m too worried about you.”

Shusei gave her a slight smile.

“Well, we can’t have that now, can we?” Shusei said.

“Please, tell me,” Rimi repeated.

After a few moments of silence, Shusei nodded.

“Very well, I’ll tell you,” he said. “First, let go of my sleeve, close your eyes, and then slowly count to one hundred. Open your eyes when you’ve finished counting, and you’ll understand everything.”

“To one hundred?”

“Correct.”

Rimi closed her eyes as instructed and slowly started counting.

One, two, three...

She was utterly puzzled with no idea what Shusei would show her once she opened her eyes, but she continued counting.

Forty-three, forty-four, forty-five...

The sound of water falling to the ground continued without interruption. She breathed in time with the sound while counting.

Seventy-eight, seventy-nine...

One hundred was a larger number than she had thought, making her grow anxious.

Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred!

Rimi finally finished counting, but upon opening her eyes, she was met with pure darkness. Unable to tell if her eyes were even open or closed, she was startled and stumbled. The rock started shining in response, the faint white light illuminating her surroundings.

Shusei was nowhere to be seen.

“Master Shusei?”

There was no response. She couldn’t even sense the presence of anyone nearby. There was no light anywhere other than around Rimi. Her voice was

swallowed up by the darkness.

"Master Shusei!" she yelled again, and her voice echoed depressingly in the cave.

While Rimi had foolishly counted numbers, Shusei had disappeared. She couldn't understand why he would do this, especially when he had said that he would tell Rimi something once she had finished counting.

He lied. Rimi was shocked at the idea that Shusei had lied to her. *Something is wrong. Something is definitely wrong.*

A sense of uneasiness filled Rimi's chest, and she started running. She exited the Cave of the Water Spirit in search of Shusei. But he was nowhere to be found in the Palace of the Water Spirit.

As of that day—as of that moment—Shusei had vanished.

"Have you still not found his whereabouts?" Shohi asked irritably.

"It is like he disappeared into thin air like smoke," Shu Kojin explained expressionlessly. "Well, he is an adult man. I doubt we need to worry about him as if he were a missing woman or child. He might simply have gone on a trip by himself."

"Shusei of all people would never do something so irresponsible," Shohi asserted.

Shohi was right. Rimi was watching from the side of the room while holding Tama, feeling like she was being crushed by her anxiety, which was growing with each passing day.

Eleven days had passed since Shusei had gone into hiding. The Nocturnal Liturgy was scheduled to take place in three days, and the four consorts were enthusiastically preparing for it at the Palace of the Water Spirit. Rimi, however, was too concerned about Shusei to even think about the Nocturnal Liturgy.

Shohi, worried about Shusei, had ordered Kojin to search for him. Rimi had traveled to the imperial palace to see Shohi every day, hoping to receive word

of Shusei.

Jotetsu had recovered enough to walk. As of yesterday, he had taken up his role as Shohi's bodyguard again. He claimed to be worried about Shusei, but his demeanor said otherwise. If anything, he seemed to be waiting restlessly for something to happen. Rimi found it baffling.

"Just as Jotetsu comes back safe and sound, now it's Shusei's turn..." Shohi mumbled wearily.

Kojin shot Jotetsu a burning glare, as if asking what he was doing there, but Jotetsu remained unfazed.

"Excuse me," an aide who had just appeared at the doorway said as he bowed. "Your Majesty, the head of the Ho house has requested an audience. What shall I tell him?"

Shohi and Kojin both furrowed their brows. Jotetsu's expression turned stiff.

The head of the Ho house... Lord Ho Neison? What is he doing here? Rimi found it difficult to understand why someone who was attempting to chase Shohi off the throne would be here to see him. It wasn't hard to guess that Shohi and Kojin would be similarly suspicious.

"I cannot say I am in the mood to see him at a time like this," Shohi growled.

"Refusing to see the head of the Ho house is not a wise idea," Kojin said sternly. "No matter what he is planning, we need to at least maintain an amicable relationship superficially. If it comes to light that there is a dispute between the royal families, it will cause turmoil in the court."

"Very well. Let him in."

The aide disappeared, and before long, the sound of footsteps and robes brushing against the floor could be heard.

Shohi sat down on the sofa at the back of the room, opposite the entrance, and crossed his legs imposingly. Jotetsu stood behind him. Kojin casually made his way to a position where he had a good view of the whole room. Rimi was undecided on what to do at first but eventually chose to retreat behind a nearby divider to avoid being in the way. Tama leaned forward from Rimi's

arms and looked around restlessly.

“Tama, could you hide under my skirt?” Rimi urged Tama. “The head of the Ho house is coming. If he sees you...”

Tama looked up at Rimi and defiantly shook her head. Even though she would usually always try to avoid being seen, for whatever reason, she was refusing to hide.

Oh no... Will he realize that Tama is a divine dragon? I’ll see if I can convince him that she’s a mouse, Rimi decided as she couldn’t very well forcefully stuff Tama under her skirt.

The head of the Ho house appeared at the doorway looking down. He greeted Shohi with a bow. Since the sun was behind him, it was difficult to get a good look at his face, but it was not an old man. It was someone much younger.

“I cannot see your face. Enter the room. I was told that the head of the Ho house was coming to meet me. Who are you?” Shohi asked irritably.

The man stepped into the room before looking up.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty. I am the new head of the Ho house,” the man said.

“What?!” Shohi exclaimed, rising to his feet.

Jotetsu grimaced as though he was in pain. Kojin growled. Tama leaned forward and squeaked happily as she looked at the man with big, shining eyes.

Rimi was stunned. Her mind turned blank.

“As of a few days ago, I have taken the place of Ho Neison as the head of the house. My name is Ho Shusei,” the man—Shusei—said with a gentle smile.



Kojin couldn't believe his eyes. Shusei becoming the head of the Ho house was nothing short of a betrayal toward Shohi if not outright treason.

Shusei signed a divine contract vowing to serve His Majesty. How is he able to do something like this so fearlessly? It was a stunt that would have been impossible for the Shusei that Kojin knew to pull off. But here he was, introducing himself as Ho Shusei.

Kojin had considered Shusei to be a foolishly honest man. The man who was standing in front of him seemed like an entirely different person.

Jotetsu turned his gaze down in despair.

Shusei... You actually went and did it.

Jotetsu had done all he could to stop Shusei, but it was all for naught. He had known it since the moment Shusei had told him about his plan. His resolve was unyielding and would not waver no matter what Jotetsu said.

This was Shusei's way of enjoying his fate.

With Shohi still dumbfounded, Shusei maintained his smile as he continued speaking.

"I am here today to introduce myself. I am the legitimate son of Seishu, the son of Ho Neison who went missing over twenty years ago," he explained.

"What kind of nonsense is that?! Kojin, Shusei is your son!" Shohi yelled.

As Shohi turned toward Kojin, he was met with a sterner expression than he had ever seen from the chancellor. His face was white as paper. He was shocked, the sight of which shocked Shohi in turn.

"That cannot be. Kojin, is he telling the truth? Is Shusei really the son of Seishu?" Shohi asked.

Ho Seishu's son. No one could pose a bigger threat to Shohi than him.

"Yes, it's true, Your Majesty. Chancellor Shu knows everything. I would

suggest speaking to him later,” Shusei said cheerfully.

“Shusei, why? Why would you join the Ho house?” Shohi asked, almost scared by the tone in Shusei’s voice.

Shusei’s smile vanished, and he looked at Shohi with a piercing gaze.

“It’s to fulfill my wish,” he said.

Shohi backed a few steps away.

Is this really Shusei?!

As Shohi’s shock receded, he felt something hot boiling inside him. It was rage. Shohi had trusted Shusei completely and that was now reflected in the extent of his rage. He didn’t care why Shusei had betrayed him—regardless, nothing could change the fact that he had.

Was everything until now a lie, Shusei? Your kindness, your concern...was all of it just a lie?!



Rimi may not have known much about governance, but even she could tell that the imperial court was about to turn unruly. As there were still many officials who thought poorly of Shohi, there was no telling what would happen as a result of the appearance of Seishu’s son, the child of a man who had once been a candidate for the throne. Intelligent enough to be known as the foremost scholar of Konkoku, Shusei had also been important to the emperor. It was almost as though they were attempting to relive the dispute of the previous emperor.

“Why...?” Rimi muttered, and Shusei looked her way.

“Remember what I told you, Rimi? That you’d understand soon,” Shusei said.

“What are you planning? Don’t tell me you’re aiming for the throne?!” Rimi exclaimed.

“I said that I want to fulfill a wish I have. I will do whatever I must to obtain what I desire, Rimi,” Shusei replied. “I want you.”

Shohi’s eyes were burning hot with fury.

“Since when? When did you start having such improper feelings for Rimi?” Shohi asked.

“For a long, long time. I’ve probably wanted Rimi for even longer than you have, Your Majesty.”

Rimi was petrified, unable to even breathe properly.

Shohi and Shusei’s gazes were fixed on each other’s eyes. Shohi was glaring at Shusei with rage in his eyes, but Shusei met his glare with a smile.

A strong wind entered the room, throwing the stacks of documents on Shohi’s desk into the air. Rimi couldn’t smell the scent of fresh buds carried by the spring wind nor feel its warmth. Her skirt and hair ornaments shook in the wind.

Shusei gave a refreshing smile, as though he had been set free. He was the only one that seemed to enjoy the events unfolding.

Afterword

Hi everyone, Miri Mikawa here. As announced on the book band around the last volume, *Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower* will be adapted into a manga published by Hakusensha! Saki Matsubara will be handling the art. I've had the pleasure of reading the storyboards and rough sketches, and I can tell you it's at least twice as much fun to read it as compared to the novel. Both my editor and I were amazed. I hope you'll take the opportunity to read it.

To my editor: Thank you again for all your help. I know I'm always causing trouble for you, but I enjoy our conversations so much. I'm sure I'll continue being a pain for you, but I hope you'll stick it out with me.

To the illustrator, Kasumi Nagi: Thank you for all your lovely drawings. My heart skipped a beat when I saw Shohi's happy expression near the end of volume four. I thank my lucky stars that I get to have you as my illustrator every time I see the cover of a volume.

Finally, to my readers: At first, it seemed like this volume would focus on the enthronement ceremony, but then there was a slight...or rather, quite a twist. I'm praying that you'll watch how it all unfolds together with me. I hope to see you again in the next volume!

Miri Mikawa



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Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower: Volume 5

by Miri Mikawa

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