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Kasumi Nagi



*Culinary  
Chronicles  
of the Court  
Flower*

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### Shu Shusei

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

### Tama

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

### Setsu Rimi

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

Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower – Character Introductions



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Swirling smoke and the intense smell of medicinal herbs filled the room. Anyone not used to it would have had trouble breathing. In the very back of the room was an old man sitting carelessly on a sofa. His droopy, white skin and cloudy eyes seemed lifeless. He was wearing a scarlet shenyi, and his fingers, decorated with golden false nails double their size, held a tobacco pipe. Adorned with fine silk and gold, he seemed menacing, surrounded by an oppressive air in the room. The smell of herbs emanated from three burners containing herbal extract placed around the sofa. The man was bathing in the evaporated herbal liquid from the burners.

He brought his pipe to his mouth as the person standing in front of him—Sai Hakurei—started speaking.

“Director I, we have received word from the Bureau of Sacrifices,” Hakurei said with his usual beautiful smile that masked his true feelings.

“Is it about the ceremony?” the man—I Bunryo—asked in a hoarse, high-pitched voice.

“Yes. I believe it to be the ceremony that requires the most careful planning of all following the new emperor’s ascension.”

“The tragedy that occurred during the reign of the previous emperor was ultimately a result of this ceremony. Oh, how woeful,” Bunryo said—though his mouth betrayed the fact that he was wryly observing Hakurei’s reaction. Hakurei, already well aware of this old man’s sardonic nature, simply smiled back at him.

I Bunryo was of third rank—the same rank as Hakurei. But unlike Hakurei, who had no official position in the government, Bunryo was the director of the Department of Service. Despite having no power over the outer palace, as the head of the Department of Service, Bunryo could control the workings of the rear palace at will. He had been the director of the Department of Service since before Hakurei was even born—he was at this point akin to an apparition that lurked in the rear palace.

“The quarrel between Noble Consort En and Virtuous Consort Sai stemmed from this ceremony,” Bunryo continued, apparently dissatisfied with Hakurei’s reaction. “Did you know that, Hakurei?”



“Yes, I’m aware,” Hakurei replied calmly.

It was clear as day that Bunryo was trying to agitate him. If he showed so much as a hint of losing his composure, he would have become an object used for the old man’s amusement.

“That is why I will endeavor to ensure that nothing of the sort occurs during the new emperor’s reign. I have a plan in mind if you permit me to carry it out,” Hakurei continued before explaining his scheme.

“Very well,” Bunryo declared after a short silence.

Hearing Bunryo’s reply, Hakurei quickly left the office. He was finally free of the clinging tobacco smoke and the nauseating smell of herbs. Stepping outside the office, he was greeted by the blinding light of the summer sun illuminating the cloister.

“Once the summer is over...it will be time for the Declaration of Stability,” Hakurei muttered to himself as he squinted from the light.

The Declaration of Stability—it was the most vicious ceremony of all, which would rock the newly rebuilt rear palace.



# Chapter 1: The Coming Declaration of Stability

I

“Where is the Quinary Dragon?” Ryu Shohi, the fifth emperor of Konkoku, asked with visible irritation.

It was a sunny summer morning. All the windows and doors in the emperor’s quarters were opened wide, allowing the air that cooled during the night to breeze through the rooms.

Shohi appeared to be in the middle of getting ready for the morning council as he was still not wearing his crown. Despite this appearance, however, he still possessed a striking grace—a youthful beauty reminiscent of the lush verdure of spring.

Kneeling in front of Shohi was Setsu Rimi, who wore a forced smile on her face.

“She’s here, Your Majesty... I promise.”

As a concubine of the rear palace, Rimi would not under normal circumstances be able to enter the outer palace where Shohi resided. However, due to a series of events, a divine dragon that had been in the emperor’s possession for generations, the Quinary Dragon, ended up in Rimi’s hands, and stubbornly refused to leave her side. Thus, she unwillingly became the guardian of the Quinary Dragon and was given the duty of appearing before the emperor every morning to show that the divine dragon was still with her.

“All I can see is you kneeling on the floor before me,” Shohi replied coldly.

“Tama—the Quinary Dragon—is right here...under my skirt...”

Rimi was trembling on the inside at the young emperor’s clear displeasure.

“If I am not mistaken,” Shohi continued, “you claimed that it was hiding under your skirt yesterday, the day before that, and the day before that—every day since you started coming here. Am I just imagining things?”



“No, Your Majesty, you’re quite right. She’s been hiding in my skirt every day.”

Rimi’s candid response caused frown lines to appear on Shohi’s brow.

*Oh no, he’s angry, he’s so angry... Well, what do you expect...?* Showing the Quinary Dragon to Shohi was Rimi’s duty. Being told every day that “you can’t see her because she’s hiding under my skirt” would make anyone angry.

This was already the tenth day since Rimi started visiting Shohi. Having heard the same excuse day in and day out, it was no surprise that Shohi was starting to wonder whether she was toying with him.

*But... But... Tama refuses to come out!* Tama—the Quinary Dragon—was apparently not particularly fond of Shohi. Whenever he came nearby, she would immediately jump into Rimi’s skirt and hide.

You would think that the Quinary Dragon would simply flee from the court of an emperor she detested so much, but divine beasts work in mysterious ways. Despite doing everything to avoid Shohi, she would stubbornly cling to Rimi, one of Shohi’s concubines.

“I have put up with this for ten days,” Shohi complained. “Enough is enough. If it really is there, then pull it out of your skirt and show it to me.”

“I would love to do so, but she’s clinging to my legs for dear life.”

“Then I shall drag it out for you.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I will shove my hand under your skirt and drag the Quinary Dragon out by force.”

Finally having run out of patience, Shohi steadily approached Rimi. Terrified, Rimi curled up into a ball.

“N-N-N-No! Are you a grand creep, Your Majesty?”

Thinking that simply adding “grand” made an expression more respectful, Rimi had attempted to protest as politely as possible. The result, however, was Shohi’s mood growing even more sour.



“A ‘grand creep’?! Are you trying to get your head cut off for real this time? You are the one responsible for refusing to show me the Quinary Dragon these past ten days!” Shohi hollered.

“I am responsible, yes. But I object to grand creep-like acts.”

“You called me a creep again!”

“I added ‘like.’ I made it euphemistic!” Rimi argued.

“There is nothing euphemistic about it! If anything, you made your insult even more direct! Either way, let me see the dragon!”

“Please, calm down, both of you,” a tall man suddenly interrupted, looking at the enraged emperor and his trembling concubine in turn. “Were you sharing a bed it would be a different story. But if you attempt to shove your head under the skirt of a concubine here in broad daylight, it would not be surprising if someone were to call you a creep, Your Majesty.”

The man who had spoken was the cuisinologist Shu Shusei. The finest scholar in Konkoku looked at the emperor with his knowing eyes as he admonished him, which was enough for even Shohi to realize how his behavior appeared to others. Shohi glared back at Shusei with a pout on his face.

“Still, I need to confirm the Quinary Dragon’s well-being somehow,” Shohi replied. “You cannot expect me to be content with this situation continuing for ten whole days.”

“In that case, how about I shove my head in there instead?” Shin Jotetsu suggested with a grin from the window frame. He had removed his broadsword from his hip and placed it against the wall next to him, clearly having let his guard down.

Jotetsu was a junior officer in the imperial guard and was imperially appointed as the emperor’s bodyguard. Although he normally had a rather uncouth appearance, he now had the smile of a good-natured older brother on his lips.

“Jotetsu, don’t make things more complicated,” Shusei quickly scolded him before kneeling next to Rimi. “Rimi, is there any way you could convince the Quinary Dragon to come out? If you don’t at the very least allow His Majesty to

touch it through your skirt to confirm that it's there, he won't give up. It's been ten days now that you haven't shown the dragon to His Majesty. There's only so much I can do."

Rimi's face paled as she imagined Shohi feeling up her legs through her skirt. *There must be something... Please, anything...*

As Rimi instinctively held down the bottom of her skirt, she noticed that the sleeve of her ruqun felt strangely heavy.

"Oh, I know! Master Shusei, I have just the thing! Tama loves kaorizuke!"

Rimi felt around in her sleeve and took out a small paper package. She unwrapped it to reveal some finely cut slices of jade-colored pickled melon. It was kaorizuke, which she had made using the kaoridoko she had brought from her home country of Wakoku. She had brought it with her when leaving the Palace of Small Wings to have along with her tea.

"Give it a go," Shusei encouraged her, and Rimi took one piece of kaorizuke and held it by the bottom of her skirt.

"Tama, Tama! Look, Tama, it's your favorite, kaorizuke! Won't you show us your face, just a little? Please? If you don't show us your face," Rimi pleaded on the verge of tears, "something terrible will happen to me!"

Suddenly, the rustling sound of a creature moving around inside Rimi's skirt could be heard, and a small silver head popped out from under her skirt. The creature was small enough to fit in two hands, and it looked up at Rimi with its big and round blue eyes. Between its ears were two small bumps. It was an adorable, soft, silver-haired divine dragon.





It was the noblest kind of divine beast in Konkoku, a divine dragon, and the most spiritually powerful dragon, the Quinary Dragon, at that. Rimi herself still found it difficult to believe this, but the fact that it was equipped with five claws on its feet—while other divine dragons only had four—was undeniable proof. What's more, small pearl beads were trapped below the claws on its front right foot.

"Quinary Dragon!" Shohi shouted with excitement upon seeing the dragon, but his smile only lasted for a moment. The Quinary Dragon—Tama—quickly nibbled on a piece of kaorizuke before immediately diving back into Rimi's skirt as though she'd had enough. Rimi tensed up, the slightly nibbled kaorizuke still in her hand.

*Tama, do you really hate His Majesty that much?*

Shohi blankly looked at where the dragon had been before lowering the corners of his mouth into a sullen expression.

"Well..." Shusei said sympathetically after a long pause, taking pity on Shohi. "You were at least able to confirm that the Quinary Dragon is there."

Shohi looked away.

"I will pardon you because of this. Just swear to come back again tomorrow to show me that vacant face of yours along with the Quinary Dragon, Setsu Rimi." Shohi was putting up a front, but he still seemed somewhat dejected.

Jotetsu's lips were quivering in an attempt to stifle his laughter while Shusei desperately begged him not to laugh with his gaze.

"Y-Yes, of course," Rimi responded. "I will see you again tomorrow, Your Majesty."

She gave a bow in the direction of Shohi, who had turned his back on her and started walking into his bedroom. The sight of the cruel emperor dispirited from being disliked by a divine beast seemed somewhat childish and almost lovable.

*I can't believe it. His Majesty is actually kind of cute.* Rimi couldn't help but smile softly as she bowed.

Jotetsu followed Shohi into his bedroom. He whispered something into the



emperor's ear, turning Shohi's expression even more sullen. Shusei watched them both walk off with a perplexed look on his face.

"Master Shusei? Is something wrong?" Rimi asked.

"It's nothing, Rimi. It seems His Majesty is satisfied for the moment, so let's be off. We have work to do."

Rimi was overjoyed at the suggestion of doing work together.

"Of course!" Rimi answered with an enthusiastic nod before leaving the emperor's quarters with Shusei.

## II

It was the summer of year 112 of the Konkokuan calendar. Setsu Rimi had been sent as a tribute from Wakoku to join the Konkokuan rear palace as a concubine. She was a Lady of Precious Bevy, sixth rank. This summer, she had taken her first step toward embracing a peculiar post.

"It's my tenth day here, but I'm still not used to seeing this cuisinology hall," Rimi noted.

It was an octagonal building inconspicuously placed alongside the Ministry of Rites' buildings. Every morning that Rimi stepped into this hall, she would gasp in astonishment. The building served as the archive for the Bureau of Sacrifices, which belonged to the Ministry of Rites. To better preserve the texts, the walls were thick and there were few windows. The ceiling was over twice the height of a human being. The stone floor inside the hall was cool even in the middle of summer, and it was a remarkably comfortable place to spend your time as long as you could bear the poor lighting—especially on a day like this, so hot one might think that the sun was throwing a tantrum. Outside, the sound of cicadas echoed across the imperial palace.

The seven faces of the building, aside from the one with the entrance, were occupied by bookshelves from the floor to the ceiling. Shusei curiously watched as Rimi observed the archive's books.

"I'm relieved to see that you seem to enjoy it here," Shusei said.

“This place is wonderful. I love the smell of ink and being surrounded by so many books. It’s always so quiet here,” Rimi said with a smile.

Being inside the cool and calm building was pleasant, and Rimi felt as though she had come closer to understanding the kind cuisinology scholar. She had become Shusei’s assistant as a pretext allowing her to enter the outer palace. Having permission to be here, and to be able to help the scholar with his research, filled her with more joy than she had ever dared to dream of.

Tama, sensing the air of the hall, slid out from under Rimi’s skirt and made her way onto Rimi’s shoulder. Tama’s nose twitched as though she was smelling the books in the hall, and the dust in the air caused her to let out a small sneeze.

“We’re sharing the space with the Bureau of Sacrifices,” Shusei explained. “At the very least, there’s certainly no lack of texts to read.”

In the middle of the hall was a large writing desk on which three candlesticks holding half-used candles were placed alongside paper filled with scribbles, strange bottles and pots, dried plants, fresh fruit, and more.

“I’m sorry about the mess,” Shusei said with an apologetic smile. “I was writing here late into the night yesterday.”

Shusei spent most of his time on the palace grounds, barely ever returning to his own home. He had confessed to spending almost every night sleeping on the sofa in the cuisinology hall.

Ten days prior, when Rimi had first been brought by Shusei to the hall, the writings on the desk, the large archive of texts, and all the other curious objects had seemed like treasures to her. She had picked up item after item to observe them and had asked Shusei what they were, and each time the scholar had carefully explained them to her. Now, that torrent of curiosity was finally starting to calm down, and as of yesterday she had taken to reading through, understanding, and organizing the texts that Shusei had compiled.

Since yesterday, Shusei had fervently been noting down everything he could about the Wakokuan ingredients. Rimi sat by the desk across from Shusei and watched him stack an enormous pile of writings in front of her.

“This is what I wrote last night concerning the Wakokuan ingredients. Give it a

read and mark any sections that need to be corrected or expanded on with red ink.”

“You wrote all this in just one night? And with this much detail?” Rimi asked in amazement.

“Yes, I’m used to it. Research mostly consists of writing, you see,” Shusei matter-of-factly stated as he picked up a brush.

The pile in front of Rimi contained notes concerning the Wakokuan ingredients—umifu and kengyoken—detailing their characteristics and how to prepare them. About one month had passed since Rimi had proven them to be high-grade ingredients. Shusei had wanted to put it all on paper while his memory was still fresh.

Rimi ran her eyes over the notes and started marking a section concerning how to make stock from the ingredients in red. Meanwhile, Tama was curled up on a beam of the archive ceiling so as not to get in the way.

The notes were unbelievably well put together despite having been written in a single night. They were well-organized and easy to read.

“You have very lovely handwriting,” Rimi noted.

“Well, Mrs. Yo did teach it to me very carefully,” Shusei replied.

Sitting on opposite sides of the desk, the two of them chatted intermittently as they steadily sorted through the work in front of them. The kaorizuke was placed on a small plate between the two, and Rimi and Shusei would both reach out to grab a slice from time to time. The vibrant jade color and the sweet flavor were perfect for satisfying the urge to nibble on something.

“Who is Mrs. Yo?” Rimi asked.

“She’s Chancellor Shu’s—my father’s—wife.”

“Oh, Chancellor Shu’s... Wait, doesn’t that make her your mother, Master Shusei?” Rimi asked, confused about Shusei’s strange phrasing.

Shusei’s hand stopped moving.

“She’s my father’s wife, but she’s not my mother,” he explained. “Mrs. Yo doesn’t have any children, so my father decided to adopt one of the children he



had fathered elsewhere as an heir to the Shu house. That's me."

"Oh... I'm sorry, I shouldn't have pried."

"I don't mind. Everyone knows about it already."

*I shouldn't have asked that...* Rimi apologetically hung her head.

Rimi then remembered something she still had inside her sleeve.

"Master Shusei, have this," she said and took out a small paper package, unwrapping it atop the desk. "I tried making some cinnamon candy to go with the kaorizuke. Please have a taste."

On top of the paper were pieces of candy that looked like shattered amber. They were hard candies that contained cinnamon, which gave them a refreshing fragrance. Rimi had made them for particularly hot days when you had no appetite, but cinnamon was a particularly polarizing spice. She had been hesitant to offer it as a tea snack but decided to take the opportunity to ask.

Whenever someone was sad or she had made things awkward with her own careless remarks, Rimi had always struggled to come up with something to say. Trying to cheer the other person up or making excuses had always felt insincere to her. In the end, all she had been able to do was make something tasty for them.

Rimi pushed the paper wrapping with the candy toward Shusei.

"Thank you," Shusei said as he reached for a piece. "What a beautiful color. They remind me of Hakurei's eyes. The fragrance is nice and refreshing too. This is just the thing for a hot summer day."

Shusei's smile made Rimi feel relieved.

*Master Shusei once said that our circumstances were similar, but what did he mean? He must be uncomfortable in his own home.*

Rimi picked up her brush again to get back to work when she suddenly made eye contact with Shusei. She gave him yet another apologetic look, but Shusei simply shook his head as if to tell her not to worry about it.



*Feeding people really is all Rimi knows how to do,* Shusei thought. Whenever

she didn't know what to do, the first thing she tried was feeding someone—she had done the same with both the Quinary Dragon and Shusei. Shusei couldn't help but give a conflicted smile at how simpleminded she was.

After mentioning Mrs. Yo, Shusei realized how long it had been since he had gone home to the Shu house. Yo seemed to be sad over the fact that Shusei was avoiding the house, but Shusei's father Shu Kojin had likely not even noticed that Shusei wasn't coming home. Chancellor Shu had no affection for Shusei—he had only chosen him as his son because of his intelligence.

Realizing that his wife was unable to provide him with children, Chancellor Shu had chosen to have children with several other women instead. The goal was to produce an offspring that was to his liking. Apparently, he had as many as eight children, but until they reached a certain age, Chancellor Shu had brought them up outside the house, then simply handed them a lump of money and cut all ties with them. The only exception was Shusei.

Shusei had possessed intelligence that far exceeded his peers from a young age, and he also had an excellent memory. Thus, he tragically still vividly remembered the poor district he had been raised in as well as his mother, still beautiful and kind even as she wasted away. Shusei also knew that his intellect and capacity to serve the emperor were the only reasons he had a place in the Shu family.

*I suppose serving His Majesty is what gives me a place where I belong, as Rimi would say. And speaking of His Majesty, he sure seemed to be enjoying himself earlier,* Shusei pondered.

Despite having set up a meeting to allow him to inspect the Quinary Dragon, Shohi had been unable to get a proper look at it. Being put in such a situation, the old Shohi would surely have lost his temper.

*And Rimi even went as far as calling him a creep...* Upon hearing that, Shusei's face had become pale, fearful that it was all over for Rimi. However, although he had been enraged, Shohi's hand had never touched his sword. He had complained and looked annoyed, but it was clear to Shusei that Shohi hadn't actually been in a foul mood.

Jotetsu must have also sensed that his master was in high spirits throughout

the entire interaction. That was why he had let down his defenses.

As Shohi had walked off into his bedroom, he had seemed disappointed at being so detested by the Quinary Dragon, but even more so he had seemed somehow satisfied. His good mood had seemed incomprehensible at first, but Shusei quickly realized that the emperor had been happy to speak with Rimi.

Shusei glanced at the small, delicate girl in front of him. Her skin was fair and smooth enough to make Shusei want to touch it, but that was her only remarkable feature. Compared to the other beautiful women of the rear palace, she did not particularly stand out. Despite this, Shohi had a clear interest in this girl, to the extent that he was not even bothered by her repeatedly disrespectful remarks.

*His Majesty has some kind of special feelings for Rimi.* Jotetsu's words still echoed in Shusei's mind.

*If His Majesty really has some kind of special feelings for Rimi, that's all the more reason for me to carefully protect and treasure her,* Shusei thought.

Rimi was an important concubine of the rear palace, and if she were favored by Shohi, it was a retainer's duty to protect her and see to her needs.

*I cannot permit myself to have any improper thoughts about her,* he warned himself. But then a voice leaked out from a small corner of his mind. *Even though she's so close by...*

Shusei raised his eyebrows at this unconscious, almost grumbling whisper in his head. He did not consciously consider himself to possess any improper feelings in particular toward Rimi. She was a valuable assistant in his cuisinology research, who made use of her experience and knowledge of food obtained from having served as an Umashi-no-Miya to further the field of cuisinology. That was all he thought of Rimi, or so he had believed, and it was how he *had* to think of her too. But lately, troubling thoughts were repeatedly floating to the surface of his mind like bubbles, bothering him beyond measure.

Shusei subconsciously reached out for a piece of cinnamon candy, and Rimi followed his example. The beautiful, amber-like candy had a unique, invigorating fragrance, and a subdued sweetness. Shusei found himself having become strangely accustomed to spending his time quietly with Rimi with short



conversations breaking out every so often. Seeing Rimi sitting across from him, he felt as though he could write forever. He found it truly pleasant.



Reading through Shusei's notes, Rimi came across a passage that read, "To make stock out of the Wakokuan ingredients, you need to choose the right water." Rimi spent some time contemplating the text. Perhaps it would be more useful to describe it in more detail—for instance, it might prove useful later to explain where exactly in Konkoku you could find the necessary water.

"Master Shusei, where is sold water drawn?" Rimi asked.

"Generally at the base of tall mountains, but it also depends on the location. There's a text called *A Catalog of River Sources* on that bookshelf over there," Shusei explained, pointing to a book placed on a high shelf. "It contains an index of the river sources of Konkoku and the quality of each river source's water. I believe there are figures as well. You can use that to see where in Konkoku you can find sold water."

"That's just what I need!" Rimi said, excited.

The two ingredients that were given as tributes from Rimi's home country of Wakoku to Konkoku—umifu and kengyoken—required sold water to be able to extract the correct taste. Extrapolating from this, it was clearly important for Rimi to learn about the differences between kinds of water and where certain types of water could be found if she was to continue to cook food in Konkoku.

*This really is an incredible place. It's a treasure trove of valuable knowledge and information,* Rimi thought blissfully.

Rimi walked up to the bookshelf in question and tried to reach for the book in vain. As Rimi stretched her arm as far as she could while standing on her tiptoes, Shusei stood up from his seat and approached her.

"Don't overexert yourself. I'll get it for you," Shusei said.

"No, I've got it! Almost...there!"

The moment she grabbed hold of the book, Rimi lost her balance and staggered. She accidentally stepped on her skirt and started to fall backward.

“Watch out!” Shusei shouted as he caught Rimi just before she was about to hit the back of her head on the floor. “You have a habit of being a bit reckless. You need to be more careful.”

Rimi was startled by Shusei’s kind, pure eyes gazing back at her. *His eyes are always so beautiful. This is the Loveless Scholar... But if he were to fall in love with someone, what would his eyes look like?*

As Rimi imagined an infatuated Shusei, she started to feel as though she was imagining something improper and her cheeks turned red. Seeing this, Shusei gave her a puzzled look.

“What’s the matter? Is it too hot?” he asked.

“No, I’m fine. It’s just that you...”

“Me? What about me?”

“Well... Um...” Rimi trailed off, as she couldn’t very well explain that she was imagining Shusei love-crazed.

“The two of you are suspiciously close, aren’t you? Oh, I’m so jealous!” A somewhat mirthful voice could be heard from the hall entrance.

### III

Rimi and Shusei realized what situation they were in and quickly stepped away from each other before turning their gaze toward the entrance. There they found a eunuch they both knew well with pale hair and eyes and a listless demeanor.

“Master Hakurei?”

The beautiful man—someone who, despite being Emperor Shohi’s older brother, had been forced to live as a eunuch through a series of unfortunate events—gave his usual captivating smile as he stepped into the cuisinology hall.

As a palace attendant, Hakurei served as a link between the emperor and the rear palace, so he would often visit the outer palace. However, he did not usually have any business with the Ministry of Rites, nor was this a place one would simply happen to pass by.

“Is something the matter, Hakurei?” Shusei asked. “I don’t usually see you around here. Are you plotting a scheme related to His Majesty again? If so, do tell me first. I’ll be happy to lend you an ear.”

Shusei was still wary of Hakurei ever since he stole the Quinary Dragon that protected the country. Hakurei gave a dejected smile at Shusei’s overt attempt to rein him in.

“That’s awful of you, Shusei.”

“I’m not faulting you. I’m simply warning you because I’m worried about you.”

“Well, thank you so much for the warning and the worry, then. But right now, I’m busy being a loyal subject to judge how fit His Majesty is to be emperor. While I’m indeed here on a matter concerning His Majesty, it’s nothing for you to be concerned about.”

Hakurei took a piece of cinnamon candy from the desk.

“This morning, the rear palace received word from the Bureau of Sacrifices,” Hakurei continued. “A court priest has divined the day for the Declaration of Stability. The rear palace has been instructed to start preparing accordingly.”

*Declaration of Stability...?* Rimi gave Hakurei a confused look upon hearing this unfamiliar term.

While Rimi looked on in bewilderment, Shusei was frowning.

“Is it already time for that?” Shusei asked. “Well, that spells trouble. I wish we didn’t have to go through this ceremony.”

Shusei gestured at Hakurei to sit down, and Hakurei took a seat on a sofa close to a bookshelf as he observed the light from the windows through the cinnamon candy between his fingers.

“Is this candy?” Hakurei asked.

“It’s cinnamon candy,” Rimi explained. “It’s made by dissolving sugar and cinnamon in water and burning it just slightly before hardening it again. Master Shusei was right, its color really does remind me of your eyes, Master Hakurei.”

His eyes that gazed at the cinnamon candy were the same amber color.

“Really? I can’t say I’m very fond of the idea of sucking on my own eyeballs, so I’ll give this to you instead, Rimi,” Hakurei said with a light chuckle as he swiftly shoved the piece of candy into Rimi’s mouth.

Rimi was surprised at suddenly having a candy flung into her mouth, but as it felt like a waste to spit it out, she let it sit in her mouth.

“But that aside, Master Hakurei, what exactly is that ‘Declaration of Stability’ you mentioned?” Rimi asked.

“You don’t know about it? Why don’t you explain to her, Shusei? You can explain it better than I can,” Hakurei said as he theatrically leaned his cheek against his hand with his elbow on the armrest of the sofa. He must have been loath to explain it.

“Well, I don’t mind,” Shusei agreed with a slightly exasperated expression. “Rimi, do you know about the ceremony called the Prayer for Prosperity?”

“I believe that’s another name for the Konkokuan enthronement ceremony,” Rimi answered.

“That’s how it’s usually described, though more precisely it’s one specific *part* of the ceremony,” Shusei explained. “During the enthronement, the new emperor climbs up Mount Bi, which guards the rear of the imperial palace, and enters the Temple of Heaven where the gods are worshipped. Inside, he announces to the gods that he will become the new emperor, swears loyalty, and prays for the stability of the country. That process is referred to as the Prayer for Prosperity.”

“I see, the emperor announces his ascension and prays for the future prosperity of the country.”

“Exactly. And paired with the Prayer for Prosperity is the Declaration of Stability. It takes place about one year after the Prayer for Prosperity and consists of the emperor proclaiming to the people that his reign will be a stable one. For the current emperor, it will take place this fall.”

In other words, it was a ceremony for assuring the people that the new emperor’s reign was the start of a new, bright chapter in Konkoku’s history.

“On the day of the Declaration of Stability, the people of the capital will



gather in the square in front of the main gate of the palace. His Majesty then stands atop the platform above the gate and assures the people of the country's peace and stability. While he does this, the four consorts of the rear palace will stand next to His Majesty. That is the tricky part."

The four consorts were the four highest-ranked concubines of the rear palace—the Noble Consort, the Pure Consort, the Virtuous Consort, and the Worthy Consort.

"What's the issue with the four consorts standing next to His Majesty?" Rimi asked.

"The issue is the order."

"The order?"

"The Declaration of Stability is one of the most important ceremonies to the emperor along with the Prayer for Prosperity. If there is no empress, then the four consorts will stand next to the emperor in her place, representative of his most favored brides," Shusei explained. "The question is, who of the four consorts will stand to the very right of His Majesty? They will compete for the position, possibly even fracturing the rear palace into four factions in the process. The positions of the four consorts are decided wholly by the rear palace, you see."

"If it's that much trouble, why don't they have a lottery so there are no hard feelings?" Rimi suggested.

"The only one who would have no hard feelings after a lottery is someone with such an adorable way of thinking as you," Hakurei interjected with a lightly mocking tone. "The one who wins the lottery would be delighted over her good fortune, but the other three would be discontent and envy the winner. They might even grow suspicious and claim that there was cheating involved. Their discontent would continue to fester under the surface, and in the worst-case scenario, the three who lost might join forces in an attempt to unseat the winner. Using too simpleminded an approach to decide the order could result in major backlash."

"Could it really cause a dispute that serious?" Rimi asked skeptically.

“Yes, it already has in the past,” Hakurei continued. “The order for the previous emperor’s Declaration of Stability was chosen by lottery. My mother, Virtuous Consort Sai, was blessed by good fortune and chosen to stand next to the emperor.”

Rimi and Shusei both jumped at Hakurei’s dispassionate mention of Virtuous Consort Sai, but Hakurei took no notice of them.

“I hear my mother ended up becoming the previous emperor’s most favored bride as a result, but at the same time, she earned the resentment of the other three consorts. There are rumors that when Noble Consort En accused my mother of adultery, the Worthy Consort and Pure Consort both supported her accusation, going so far as to forge evidence. I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s more to it than simply rumors.”

Hakurei spoke with an unconcerned expression, but Rimi wondered how he truly felt inside. Her chest felt tight as she imagined the amount of hardship he must have had to endure to become able to speak with such a dispassionate facade.

Shusei also had a restrained expression on his face.

“We can’t let anything of the sort happen in the current rear palace,” Shusei remarked. “How is the Department of Service planning on addressing this? Did Director I say anything?”

“We’re going to let the four consorts talk it out amongst themselves. Director I has already agreed to it. The Department of Service will be overseeing the discussions, of course, and we’ll ensure that everyone agrees that it was decided by the four consorts themselves. If the consorts don’t all agree with the decision, it’ll come back to bite us later, you see.”

“But it can’t be that easy. How do you expect to make the consorts themselves decide on an order in a way that they all agree without any bad blood remaining? That would take a miraculous feat.”

“We’ll just have to force them, even if it means starting a fistfight between them,” Hakurei said in an unusually firm tone as a strong resolve flashed in his eyes for a split second.

Just as Shusei feared, it would likely be difficult for the four consorts to decide on an order amongst themselves—but even if it resulted in bad blood and caused them to despise each other, they would still be able to accept the result much easier than with a simple lottery. Hakurei didn't want to take the easy way out and risk creating rifts in the rear palace. He was still haunted by how the luck-based lottery had caused tragedy to befall his mother. As someone who had chosen a life of hardship for himself, perhaps it was only natural to feel that no matter how the future turned out, the most important thing was to choose and accept your future by yourself.

“The four consorts will probably be nervous and emotionally unstable for the duration of the summer,” Hakurei continued. “But while we in the Department of Service oversee their discussions, we need them to be at least somewhat level-headed. That's why I have a favor to ask of you two.”

Rimi and Shusei looked at each other, wondering what Hakurei could possibly want from them. Hakurei smiled as he said something beyond their wildest expectations.

“I want you two to serve as the consorts' cooks until the order for the Declaration of Stability has been decided.”

Rimi's chest skipped a beat with excitement at the mention of the word “cook.” She was reminded of her beloved Saigu sister's smile.

“If you provide them something comforting every day, it should help them calm down a bit, don't you think? Shusei, you would decide what ingredients are best for them from a cuisinologist point of view, while Rimi would use them to make dishes that soothe the girls.”

“Will food really be enough to solve the problem?” Shusei asked doubtfully.

“Well, there's not much you can do about a fundamentally twisted personality,” Hakurei said. “But even the most twisted person would become at least slightly more cooperative if they have something to soothe their irritation, don't you think? And there's something else that I'm expecting from your cooking too.”

Hakurei narrowed his eyes.

“It’s difficult to think that the consorts would obediently sit down and talk just because they’re told to,” he continued. “They’d throw tantrums and refuse to even approach the table. However, if you were to serve them a meal each day in the Palace of Northern Peaks, even the four consorts would come to dine at the same table. As obsessed with beauty and health as they are, there’s no chance that they would miss an opportunity to enjoy Rimi’s cooking. That way, we could provide a natural setting for them to talk.”

“Yes, that may be the case,” Shusei said. “However, even if I’m fine with it, don’t you think letting Rimi come close to the four consorts could spell trouble? We’re talking about the women of the rear palace, after all.”

“Yes, I’m sure it could. But all I need is for Rimi to be up for it, even knowing what might happen.”

“I’ll do it!” Rimi announced without delay, causing Shusei to turn toward her in surprise. “Oh, I’m sorry for deciding it all on my own, but I...”

“It could worsen your position in the rear palace, you know,” Shusei warned.

If Rimi were to come to know all the four consorts of the rear castle, there was no telling what kind of treatment she might be in for if she ever got on their bad side. But even so, as she remembered her beloved Saigu sister’s smile, her urge to cook in the face of a troublesome situation got the better of her.

“But they might smile just like Lady Saigu,” Rimi said.

The Saigu was someone fated to live out her life confined like a bird in a cage. While Rimi’s sister had ostensibly come to terms with that fact, deep down she had always been frustrated with her situation. So the smile that the frustrated Saigu would show whenever she ate something Rimi had cooked was worth more to Rimi than anything.

The four consorts were confined in much the same way as the Saigu, never again allowed to step outside the rear palace. That went for Rimi as well—even as she helped out with Shusei’s culinology research, she was still wearing unseen chains, tethering her to the rear palace. As a bird trapped in a cage herself, Rimi understood the frustration, emptiness, and boredom of confinement.



“Lady Saigu will never again step foot outside her shrine, and just like her, the four consorts are confined to the rear palace. I feel as though it’s my duty to comfort them with my food.”

“Will that duty help you find a place where you belong?” Shusei asked. “You always seem to be looking for a place of your own.”

“Of course, my place here as your assistant in your cuisinology research is also very much somewhere I belong, Master Shusei. I’m quite content getting to be here with you, and... Well...” Rimi trailed off, suddenly becoming very embarrassed, and she started fidgeting. Talking about the bliss she felt working with Shusei felt as though she was proclaiming affection for him.

“Yes, I know quite well how passionate you are about cuisinology,” Shusei replied. “However, you seem somewhat uneasy, what with the way you are always searching for a place to belong.”

“I’m sorry. I think I’m just very greedy.”

“Being greedy is a sign of always having lacked something as a child. But very well. If you want to do it, I shall endeavor to assist you,” Shusei said with an almost resigned but cheerful smile.

“Are you sure, Master Shusei?”

“Either way, it’s a request from the Department of Service. If they request my assistance as a cuisinologist, I can’t turn them down. And since it’s Hakurei who’s asking, I’m sure he already has His Majesty’s permission. Don’t you, Hakurei?”

“Of course,” Hakurei answered. “I asked His Majesty about it only a moment ago. ‘I cannot stand seeing the rear palace waste time on foolish conflicts. You are free to use whoever and whatever you need to calm them down,’ he said. I take it you’re both on board, then?”

Hakurei elegantly straightened his shenyi as he walked to the entrance of the hall, gesturing at the two to come along.

“Where are we going?” Rimi asked quizzically.

“To the rear palace, where else? You see, I wasn’t planning on letting you say

no to begin with, so I've already invited the four consorts to the Palace of Northern Peaks tonight. You have to start preparing right away."

"Master Hakurei, that's too forceful," Rimi grumbled. "And tonight? That's so sudden!"

"Have a look outside, Rimi. It's still before noon. You have more than enough time to prepare an evening meal."

"Even putting the matter of preparation time aside, the Palace of Northern Peaks is in the very back of the rear palace," Shusei said. "I'm not even allowed to enter the rear palace."

As Shusei presented his very valid concern, Hakurei stopped walking and looked back at Shusei with a confident smile.

"Over the summer, you two will be providing the four consorts with food at the Palace of Northern Peaks. During that time, you'll both be staying in that palace yourselves. His Majesty and the director of the Department of Service both agreed on the condition that you don't step outside the palace, Shusei. The Palace of Northern Peaks doesn't have a master right now, so it's empty. It's the perfect opportunity."

Hakurei pulled out a document he had kept near his chest. The document was signed by both Emperor Shohi and the director of the Department of Service, I Bunryo. Hakurei had come well-prepared.

"Me, staying in the rear palace?" Shusei said hesitantly. "That's a strange feeling."

The women of the rear palace, who normally only laid their eyes on eunuchs, would likely be thrilled at the sight of a man like Shusei. Had the emperor at least visited the rear palace frequently, the women would probably not have overtly made a fuss or compared the two—however, the emperor had yet to visit any of his brides.

*If someone like Master Shusei were to enter the rear palace at a time like this, what would become of him?*

If Shusei became separated from Hakurei, handmaids might gang up on him, drag him behind a building, and prey on him. Someone kind like Shusei would

never be able to shove a woman aside. All sorts of unspeakable things might happen while he vacantly left himself to fate.

*Oh no, what a terrible thought! Master Shusei might...!* As Rimi's strange fantasies continued to evolve, she suddenly became anxious and tugged on Shusei's sleeve.

"What's wrong? Why the serious face?" Shusei asked.

"Whatever you do, Master Shusei, don't leave Master Hakurei's side. If you do, you'll be attacked."

"Huh? Why would I? And in a place full of women?"

"The fact that there are only women there is just what makes it so terrifying!"

Shusei looked back at Rimi's earnest gaze with a bewildered look.

"Well, the rear palace is a lair of she-devils, after all," Hakurei said and let out a soft chuckle.

# Chapter 2: The Four Consorts of the Rear Palace

I

Having suddenly been ordered to prepare an evening meal for the four consorts, Rimi and Shusei put their heads together in the kitchen of the Palace of Northern Peaks. The kitchen occupied an entire building. Ten stoves were lined up against the walls, and the stone pantry in the back of the kitchen was three times larger than that of the Palace of Small Wings. It was a kitchen befitting the large feasts that would be held in the Palace of Northern Peaks.

“Food to bring the four consorts together every evening... It’s almost like fishing bait,” Shusei sighed.

“Indeed, and we have some big fish to catch,” Rimi added.

“I just realized my figure of speech was rather rude—but yours was even more so.”

“Was calling them ‘big’ rude?”

“I’m talking about treating the consorts like fish to catch. And on that note, the way you call the divine beast that serves as the very foundation of Konkoku ‘Tama’ is probably rather rude as well.”

“It’s fine. Tama doesn’t seem to mind.”

“Yes, inexplicably... Well, it is a divine beast after all.”

Tama had returned to the rear palace together with Rimi. But the moment they had passed through the inner gate, she had jumped down from Rimi’s shoulder, given her a glance as if to say, “I’ll be taking a nap in the bedroom,” and then quickly hopped off toward Rimi’s abode in the Palace of Small Wings.

In the very north of the enormous, wall-enclosed rear palace was the palace belonging to the empress—the Palace of Northern Peaks. It had been a few hours since Rimi and Shusei were brought to the currently unoccupied palace



by Hakurei.

The large palace was surrounded by sturdy-looking, roofed walls, and there were around ten different buildings on the grounds, all connected with cloisters. Passing through the gate to the palace, the first thing you were greeted by was a garden featuring a pond in the center, over which arched a vermilion bridge. Lotus flowers floated on the surface of the pond, and large lotus buds could be seen here and there—pure white, but with slightly pink tips. This flower was called empress lotus and was apparently a rare sight even in Konkoku. Just as the symbol of the emperor was a silver dragon, the empress lotus was the symbol of the empress. They were also referred to as empress flowers.

Below the flowers, several large fish with silver and vermilion scales wriggled as they swam around in the water.

To the right of the pond was a two-story stage. The beams featured colorful, vibrant carvings that depicted scenes from classical plays, and copper decorations dangled from the arched corners of the roof.

In contrast to the beautiful south side of the palace, the east side featured residences belonging to handmaids as well as the kitchen.

“Master Hakurei’s order was to make food that would make the consorts want to come here and eat every day, right?” Rimi asked, feeling both pressured and excited at the difficult task ahead of her.

“Let’s focus on today first,” Shusei answered. “Hakurei wanted us to calm the consorts down, so we’ll need to find ingredients that have the desired effect.”

“What would you recommend as a cuisinology scholar?”

“The brined fish eyes that I presented to His Majesty once before also had the effect of reducing irritation. What do you think about making a dish based on fish eyes?”

“That’s a rather...eccentric suggestion.” Rimi envisioned a plate filled with fish eyeballs and shuddered at the thought.

“Now that you mention it, His Majesty did throw it off the balcony,” Shusei said with a blank smile as he remembered the events of the Palace of the Water

Spirit.

“Exactly how effective is that ingredient?”

“Consuming it regularly leads to a clearer mind and reduced irritation. The only immediate effect would be the improved luster of your skin.”

Although it was something that had spurred Shohi to throw it away, fish eyes were unmistakably an ingredient whose effects had been proved by the cuisinology scholar Shusei—and the effects achieved by consuming it were evidently considerable indeed.

“If the ingredient is that effective, then it would be a waste not to use it,” Rimi noted. “Isn’t there some way to make it taste good?”

“Is that a rhetorical question? I’m not very suited to researching how to make food taste better.”

“Well, I don’t possess the kind of knowledge that you do, Master Shusei, but I do know how to cook.”

With that settled, Shusei sent for the brined fish eyes. As they were normally stored in the kitchen used to prepare meals for Shohi, he had eunuchs bring them to the Palace of Northern Peaks.

Two large pots arrived at the palace. The eunuchs placed them on the stone floor. Shusei removed their lids and gestured at Rimi to come closer. The pots were filled with a thick blue-black liquid.

“These are the brined fish eyes,” Shusei declared.

The appearance was grotesque enough for Rimi to sympathize with Shohi’s reaction. It looked anything but tasty. Rimi observed it with a saddened expression as Shusei scooped some of the liquid up with a spoon and brought it to Rimi’s mouth.

“Here, have a taste.”

Rimi wondered for a second whether this was some simple form of torture, but Shusei was nonchalantly asking her to have a taste from the spoon he was holding.

“Um... Master Shusei?” Rimi asked hesitantly.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Shusei said confidently.

Rimi blushed slightly at the prospect of having a man feed her, but Shusei must have taken it differently as he remained unfazed and reassured her of the safety of the food. Figuring that she was perhaps being too self-conscious, Rimi—still hesitant for more than one reason—timidly approached the spoon with her mouth.

Rimi’s mouth was filled with the smooth and salty matter. She shuddered for a moment but forced herself to swallow it. It smelled strongly of fish and was not a pleasant taste. Even after swallowing, the fishy taste refused to leave her mouth for some time. However...

*Huh?* Hiding beneath the overpowering fishy taste was a rich, savory flavor.

“Did it taste bad?” Shusei asked.

“It tasted bad...and good,” Rimi replied, looking at Shusei with bright eyes. Shusei returned her gaze with a puzzled look.

“It’s bad...and good?”

Rimi was so happy that she started to smile. Getting to experiment with how to bring the best flavor out of this new ingredient was more than she could ever ask for and more enjoyable than any game.

She remembered the days she had spent trying to satisfy the temperamental Saigu.

*Lady Saigu, if I’m able to satisfy the four consorts during the summer together with Master Shusei...I might be able to distract myself a bit from my sadness of being separated from you.* It broke Rimi’s heart not to be able to cook for her Saigu sister this summer. To the Saigu, no summer was complete without Rimi’s sweet pickled cucumbers. Working by Shusei’s side as his assistant was the best place Rimi could ask for—but she still couldn’t forget about the ten blissful years she spent doing everything to satisfy her sister with food.

The sun had set. The crimson twilight had disappeared beyond the imperial castle, and a light purple was spilling forth from the eastern horizon. The overbearing heat and the cries of the cicadas had faded, replaced instead with a warm evening wind that gently blew past the palace. The clear sound of a

northern bell rang across the dark rear palace.

The bell of the Palace of Northern Peaks served to signal the start of the feast. The Department of Service had already informed the four consorts of this during the day, and the consorts were set to appear at the palace upon hearing the sound of the bell.

Straight ahead from the pond of the palace was a building meant for audiences. The building contained a single large hall and at the back were thrones for the emperor and empress. The black stone flooring was finely polished, reflecting the light. A round table had been placed in the hall with four seats surrounding it.

Rimi and Shusei were standing in the hall's preparation area. Hakurei was standing in the hall, observing several eunuchs who were busy preparing the table. After a while, the eunuchs started approaching Hakurei one by one to report that their work had been completed. Hakurei thanked them for their work, upon which they placed one hand over the other, gave a deep bow, and exited the hall.

Normally it would have been the job of the director of the Department of Service to oversee the preparations, but the director was currently ill, and Hakurei had been chosen as his proxy. Though Hakurei had no formal position, he had the highest rank a eunuch could have, a rank normally only afforded to those of an important post. This spoke to his awkward position in the imperial court.

The eunuchs left, leaving only Hakurei behind in the hall. Rimi and Shusei waited, slightly nervous, in darkness. Soon, the four consorts would arrive.

The consorts were all first rank—they all had the same status. Now, these women, all of varying ages and backgrounds, would gather around the same table to fight for their place next to the emperor. Possessing the highest rank afforded to any noblewoman in the country except for the empress, even the carefree Rimi could imagine how prideful they must be.

The mild breeze of a summer evening blew past the beautifully arranged table from the open doors and windows. Suddenly, the sound of insects from the garden shrubberies stopped. The four consorts had arrived at the Palace of

Northern Peaks.

Rimi and Shusei observed the consorts' arrival through the fretwork divider that separated the hall. Each consort had brought with her six handmaids and walked under a large umbrella held by two handmaids that featured elaborate embroidery. They advanced through the palace atop the shadows of the umbrellas.

This was the formal procedure for whenever a high-ranked noblewoman left her own palace. As they were visiting the palace that normally belonged to the empress, they were ostensibly and cautiously respecting formalities.

The consorts quietly entered the garden as their handmaids waited upon them. They were the very image of graceful noblewomen—quiet, yet possessing an impressive presence.

The first consort to enter the garden was So Reiki—Noble Consort So. A small and charming girl, she was wearing an ornament featuring a peony in her hair, and her ruqun was a vivid pink. She wore a haughty, aloof expression. Rimi knew her as a girl who was honest about her feelings and desires. As someone who had been brought up to serve as a bride to the emperor, she seemed to be filled to the brim with arrogance and egotism. The way So never made any attempts to hide her desires—making her, in a way, open and frank—amused Rimi.

The air was so quiet and tense that you could hear the sound of feet on gravel. Rimi found it strange how, despite her already knowing So well, the Noble Consort seemed like an entirely different person when walking next to the other consorts.

As for the other three consorts—the Pure Consort, the Virtuous Consort, and the Worthy Consort—Rimi had, at most, seen them from behind during the emperor's visit to the rear palace. Essentially, they were strangers.

Next to appear after So was the Pure Consort.

II

"That is Pure Consort Yo. Her given name is Enrin," Shusei whispered from



next to Rimi as he gestured with his eyes at the Pure Consort.

Pure Consort Yo—Yo Enrin—was roughly as young as Noble Consort So. She wore a ruqun abundantly decorated with vibrant floral patterns and the buyao in her hair featured gemstones of various colors. “Charming” would have been a better description than “beautiful.” Her expression was tense, but she had the soft and smooth cheeks of a child. Her eyes had a hint of curiosity in them, moving as restlessly as a bird’s.

*How absolutely adorable this Pure Consort is,* Rimi thought. The consort’s demeanor seemed so innocent and childlike that one could not help but smile at the sight.

“The tall consort is Virtuous Consort Ho, given name Hekishu,” Shusei continued.

Just as Shusei had said, the next consort to appear in the garden was a full head taller than Pure Consort Yo—Virtuous Consort Ho. Her hip was far off the ground, and she had an elegant and slender body. A strong resolve gleamed in her almond eyes. Her back was straight, and her eyes were fixed directly ahead of her. She wore a ruqun the dark blue color of the deep sea. Due to the way the silk was folded, depending on the angle, the ruqun would reflect light in a dizzying sequence of smooth dark blue, purple, and green. A thin chain featuring small blue gemstones was wrapped intricately around her styled hair. Her appearance was brilliant yet elegant.

*What a refined and beautiful woman...* Rimi thought.

Virtuous Consort Ho was the oldest of the four consorts at eighteen years of age. With an impeccable beauty, she looked as though she had escaped from a drawing of the most elegant noblewoman the painter could imagine.

The last consort to pass the gate was looking down at the ground. Her ruqun was modestly embroidered with small flowers, and she seemed somewhat quieter compared to the other consorts. A buyao featuring transparent gems rattled in her hair—this one was modest too. Her handmaids were also dressed with comparatively dull colors, perhaps to avoid standing out more than their master.

“The last one is Worthy Consort On—On Meiho,” Shusei explained.

Her reserved dress matched her modest demeanor. Though pretty, she did not possess an eye-catching beauty.

*She seems kind.*

Overall, the Worthy Consort seemed to make no attempt to overwhelm the others. She seemed close in age to Rimi, making her appear all that more approachable.

The handmaids gave their masters a bow before disappearing to a separate building to stand by, and the four consorts entered the hall alone. Hakurei stepped forward and kneeled to greet the consorts.

“I am grateful that you have decided to honor us with your visit,” Hakurei said. “Please, have a seat.”



The consorts seemed unsure where to sit for a moment. However, Ho Hekishu—Virtuous Consort Ho—soon gave a confident smile and started walking.

“Aha, so that’s why the table is round. This way, we’re all equal no matter where we sit,” Ho spoke in a relaxed tone and sat down in a seat close by without hesitation.

Seemingly relieved hearing the Virtuous Consort’s words, the other consorts also quickly took their seats. Even during a private gathering, unaccompanied by handmaids, it seemed the consorts were still concerned about their hierarchy.

Sitting around the table, the consorts seemed cold toward each other. Although they wore polite smiles as they exchanged greetings at first, they avoided eye contact after that. The table seemed somewhat tense.

*It’s starting.* The sight of the four consorts on the other side of the divider filled Rimi with nervousness and joy.

“As of today, the Department of Service shall prepare supper each evening for the four consorts at the Palace of Northern Peaks. My name is Sai Hakurei, and I am the palace attendant in charge of these evening meals. Pure Consort Yo, Virtuous Consort Ho, and Worthy Consort On, I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Seemingly surprised at the beauty of Hakurei as he looked up, Pure Consort Yo let out a small squeal, before she curiously observed him. Similarly, Worthy Consort On’s eyes widened in surprise. But in contrast to Yo, On looked down timidly. Meanwhile, Virtuous Consort Ho was giving Hakurei an apathetic glance, as though she was tired of looking at him.

“Say, Hakurei,” Noble Consort So, who was already familiar with Hakurei, spoke in an adorable voice, “why did the Department of Service decide to make us supper? That’s awfully sudden.”

“The Department of Service arranged it in accordance with His Majesty’s will,” Hakurei answered.

The consorts jumped at the mention of the emperor. It was hard to guess

what they thought of him, for he had just visited the rear palace once, only to show no interest in his brides after that—not to mention that the cruel nature he had displayed during his visit had been enough to make the consorts and concubines shake in fear.

“His Majesty wishes for the four consorts to remain healthy until the day of the Declaration of Stability,” Hakurei explained. “Thus, we have arranged for the cuisinology scholar Shu Shusei, along with his assistant, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu, to prepare a meal for you each evening.”

The director of the Department of Service had already sent a letter to the four consorts during the day, detailing the process of the Declaration of Stability, along with instructions pertaining to attire and the like. The consorts must have realized already that this evening meal was related to the Declaration of Stability—yet hearing that it was the will of the emperor had left them confounded.

“My! How absolutely thoughtful!” Noble Consort So alone replied with gleaming eyes, but the other three maintained their dubious gazes.

“We will shortly serve the meal—but first, there is something I would like for you to see,” Hakurei said as he abruptly walked up to the thrones.

Between the two thrones was a colored cabinet. The cabinet was mostly made of stone except for the doors, which were made of copper. Hakurei opened the double doors to reveal iron bar doors within, on which a large lock was hanging. Hakurei moved out of the way, allowing the consorts to see inside.

“Please, have a look,” he said.

Still sitting down, the four consorts leaned forward, and all of their expressions became surprised. Behind the bars in the dark cabinet, placed on purple velvet, was a transparent lotus too large to fit in two palms.

*How beautiful...* Rimi thought, captivated by the flower. Next to her, Shusei sighed in amazement.

It was an astonishingly clear crystal that had been delicately cut into the shape of a lotus flower. The magnificent, multilayered petals were colored at the tips—not because it was painted, but because the crystal itself had changed

color. Crystals that had gained such a beautiful, clear tint must have been rather valuable. Such a precious crystal had been shaped by an artisan to look like a lotus that had only just opened from the morning dew.

“It’s like a flower from the heavens,” Worthy Consort On—having raised her eyes, looking straight at the treasure—spoke in a dreamy voice.

“It’s Empress Yoka’s treasure!” Pure Consort Yo exclaimed, flabbergasted.

“Quite right,” Hakurei confirmed. “This is the Scattering Lotus, known from legend as Empress Yoka’s treasure.”

There were many legends of gods, divine beasts, and immortals in Konkoku. Although Rimi had never heard of it, apparently this treasure was featured in one such legend.

*It’s incredible what can be found in the imperial court of Konkoku—first divine beasts and now legendary treasures...* Rimi thought, amazed at what she was seeing.

“This treasure is modeled after the empress lotus,” Hakurei continued. “Normally it would be safeguarded by the empress, but as there is none at present, the key to the cabinet lock is in the hands of the Department of Service. However, during the Declaration of Stability, the consort to the very right of His Majesty will be holding it.”

Hakurei closed the cabinet doors and returned to the table.

“So?” Virtuous Consort Ho said with a sardonic smile. “Who’s the Department of Service planning on handing it to?”

“That is what we will be deciding before the end of the summer,” Hakurei explained.

“How?” Pure Consort Yo asked, and Ho gave a slight mocking laugh at the Pure Consort’s ignorance.

“Through a lottery, what else? That’s how it was decided for the previous emperor’s Declaration of Stability.”

“But that makes no sense, Virtuous Consort Ho,” Noble Consort So said arrogantly as she gave Hakurei a dissatisfied look. “When His Majesty graced us



with his presence, I was the one who represented the rear palace. Who else could be fit to stand next to His Majesty?”

“That was a custom based on the order that you joined the rear palace. Things won’t be as easy for the Declaration of Stability,” Hakurei warned.

“Why not?” So said in a flirtatious voice. “Please, Hakurei, I don’t want to draw lots. Surely we can decide this some other way?”

“Dear me, it seems we have a spoiled child in our midst,” Virtuous Consort Ho said mockingly. “If you so insist, I’m perfectly happy to leave you out of the lottery. I, the Pure Consort, and the Worthy Consort will draw lots to decide between the three of us.”

Though Ho’s voice was cheerful and facetious, she gazed with contempt at So. “You spoiled brat,” she seemed to say with her eyes.

Noble Consort So gave Ho a piercing glare in return.

“And why would I have to do that?” So asked.

“You said that you don’t want to draw lots, didn’t you? Then you could simply decline to participate. Problem solved,” Ho said with a faint smile as So gritted her teeth angrily.

“Say, Worthy Consort On, do you also wish to stand next to His Majesty?” asked Pure Consort Yo with a cheerful voice unbefitting the tense mood of the table as she turned to the Worthy Consort who was sitting next to her.

“Huh?!” On exclaimed as she quickly turned her head toward Yo. “I... I don’t... That’s far too great a responsibility...”

“Great, that makes two of us,” Yo replied. “I don’t care about the order either. Why don’t we simply leave the lottery to Noble Consort So and Virtuous Consort Ho, then?”

The Noble Consort gave Yo a displeased gaze.

“You don’t care, do you? Pure Consort Yo, have you no respect for His Majesty?” So said in a threatening tone.

“Of... Of course I do,” Yo cautiously replied.

“But you just made fun of me and Noble Consort So, didn’t you, Pure Consort Yo?” Virtuous Consort Ho scoffed.

Yo returned the two consorts’ verbal attacks with a sulky pout while Worthy Consort On simply watched on anxiously.

“We won’t be deciding the order by lot,” Hakurei declared, and the four consorts gave him confused glances. “Nothing has been decided yet regarding the order. We would like for you to deliberate it amongst yourselves, along with the Department of Service. But before that, we shall now begin the meal so thoughtfully arranged by His Majesty. Please enjoy.”

Hakurei gave a vague, enchanting smile, as if to erase the consorts’ confusion. It was a terribly mean-spirited smile. He seemed to think that, instead of coming up with schemes behind the scenes, it was better for the consorts to fight it out here.

As there was no one else present, Hakurei waited on the consorts himself. He placed a small wine cup in front of each of them.

“He’s asking them to eat when the mood is like this? Master Hakurei really is nasty. He’s also a sadist-like person, though in a different way from His Majesty,” Rimi whispered from the preparation area as she observed the consorts through the fretwork divider.

“Well, Hakurei is a complicated person,” Shusei responded. “But your idea to serve drinks first might have been a good one, Rimi. If they had started with the food while staying that tense, they wouldn’t have been able to taste it.”

“But with things this awkward, won’t they decline to come back tomorrow, regardless of how good the food is?”

Rimi had used Shusei’s ingredients to prepare the supper. She was confident about the result. However, she was worried that the food might not be enough to lure the consorts here each evening.

“Yes, that’s true...” Shusei replied. “We might need to give them one more push. Allow me to impart some additional meaning to this supper.”

“Meaning?”

“Indeed. Please allow me some time before you serve your meal.”

### III

Shusei waited for Hakurei to finish placing the cups before signaling with his eyes for Rimi to come with him. Rimi quietly nodded and followed Shusei out from behind the screen, toward the consorts’ table. Hakurei quickly withdrew to the side as Shusei took his place and gave the consorts a graceful bow.

“I am honored to be graced by your presence. I am Shu Shusei, a cuisinologist at the Bureau of Sacrifices. By the wishes of His Majesty and the Department of Service, I shall be serving you supper during this summer.”

His mannerisms and smile were refined. The consorts adjusted their postures at the sight of the graceful cuisinologist.

“I’m also honored to be able to enjoy a meal prepared by a cuisinology scholar,” Noble Consort So—seemingly happy about Shohi’s apparent thoughtfulness—replied gleefully. The Noble Consort was on her best behavior.

“I appreciate the thought,” Shusei replied. “However, the food that I will be serving was not prepared by me, but by Lady Setsu. My role is to select the required ingredients and ensure a balanced meal.”

Rimi, who had been standing behind Shusei, hurriedly took a step forward at the sudden introduction and gave the consorts a bow.

“I am Setsu, Lady of Precious Bevy.”

It seemed that not only the Noble Consort, but the other consorts as well, had heard the rumors about the effect of Rimi’s cooking on your skin. “So that’s the Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu everyone is talking about,” their glances seemed to say.

Shusei turned to Rimi and glanced toward the cups on the table. He seemed to want Rimi to explain them.

“The cups in front of you contain red wine made from hawthorn berries,” Rimi explained. “Hawthorn berries have been consumed since ancient times by immortals as an elixir that grants you perpetual youth and longevity. Please

have a taste.”

Rimi, having predicted that the consorts were unlikely to open up to each other that easily, had suggested having them drink a bit of wine first. The use of dried hawthorn for the wine had been Shusei’s suggestion. Hawthorn berries were a high-grade ingredient that was good for the body. The strong, sour taste also helped make the flavor of the wine more mellow. “This is the one thing His Majesty will have without complaining,” Shusei had noted with a laugh.

“Supper is the most important meal of the day,” Shusei calmly explained after the consorts had taken a sip of the hawthorn wine. “Breakfast and lunch give you the energy to move during the day. But supper gives you the energy needed for sleep, and you should take care to consume food that will be good for your body while you rest. People spend one-third of their life asleep, so there will naturally be a marked difference between those who make the best of their sleep and those who don’t.”

Traditionally in Konkoku, breakfast and lunch were viewed as the main meals of the day, while supper was generally lighter.

“What happens if you don’t make the best of your sleep?” Pure Consort Yo asked Shusei. She was directing a harsh gaze at the cuisinologist, seemingly not fond of him.

“If you eat the same kind of food for supper as for breakfast and lunch, you will gain weight.”

“Then you could just not have supper at all,” Virtuous Consort Ho chimed in, her cheeks slightly red from the hawthorn wine.

“That will also make you gain weight. If you skip your supper, your body will sense danger, causing it to crave more nutrition than it needs, and desperately take whatever it can from just breakfast and lunch. That makes it easier to gain weight,” Shusei explained. “Supper should be eaten at an appropriate time with the appropriate food and quantities. That is the secret to staying healthy and beautiful. Conversely, for breakfast and lunch, you don’t need to be as careful. Thus, the only meal I prepare for His Majesty is his supper.”

Rimi had never given much thought to how supper was traditionally perceived. But Shusei had turned his attention to, investigated, and

contemplated what she had dismissed as just a habit. By scrutinizing what others carried out without a second thought and paying attention to the ingredients, amounts, and time, you could make people even healthier with food. That was what cuisinology was all about. It was a perspective that Rimi, who had only sought to make her food taste as good as possible, had lacked.

“However, managing the time and quantities for your supper can be harder than it sounds,” Shusei continued. “Figuring out what kind of supper any given person needs is even more difficult. And lastly, even if you were to find the right ingredients, there is the problem of making a tasty dish out of them.”

Shusei then gave the consorts a gentle smile.

“And that’s what I and Lady Setsu are here to assist you with. Please enjoy our food this summer and see for yourselves what kind of changes you experience. Of course, I cannot force you—and it would be interesting in and of itself to see the difference between those who come here when the evening bell strikes and those who don’t.”

The four consorts seemed contemplative at the cuisinologist’s knowledge-based reasoning.

*Is this what he meant by imparting additional meaning?* Rimi pondered.

Simply the promise of good food was not enough to ensure that the four consorts would show up every evening. Thus, Shusei had attempted to convince the consorts that the supper would be beneficial to them. While one consort was missing out on supper, her competitors would be here, becoming more beautiful and more healthy in the process. As women, they wouldn’t want to lose out to the others, and they would do everything they could to make it for each supper—the more competitive they were, the more desperate they would be.

Shusei had spoken in a kind voice the entire time, and he had not said anything but the truth—yet if you read between the lines, you would see a vicious threat hidden behind his words, further egging on the women’s competitiveness. Even if he did it unconsciously, the fact that he had even thought to say something like this showed that there was more to Shusei than just his kind side. If he so wished, he could come up with the most wicked of

schemes. It was terrifying to even imagine what might happen if he were ever to have evil intentions.

“Now then, Rimi, please start preparing this evening’s supper,” Shusei directed Rimi.

Rimi headed to the preparation area along with Hakurei. As she picked up the bowls of food waiting there, Hakurei smiled at her and whispered.

“Like father, like son. He really is the son of Chancellor Shu. You must have felt so too,” he said to Rimi.

“Not at all,” Rimi said, shaking her head.

Rimi felt silly for even considering the idea of that kind cuisinologist plotting an evil scheme. Shusei was the kind of person who would extend a helping hand to a lonely foreign concubine. She straightened her posture and started walking back toward the consorts, blocking any silly thoughts from her mind.

“What’s this, Lady Setsu?” Noble Consort So asked, staring at the bowl in front of her in bafflement. The other three consorts looked similarly perplexed.

The bowls were made of rare, blue glass. The cold-looking bowls contained cooled rice—rice that had been cooked, then fried together with sesame oil, and finally mixed with thin strips of spring onion. Thin strips of ginger that had been soaked in water decorated the rice.

“It’s just rice...” Pure Consort Yo muttered in a disappointed voice. Rimi replied with a smile.

“This is not all. Please wait just a moment,” Rimi said.

She returned to the preparation area, only to come back with a large porcelain pot featuring drawings of summer grass. She put the pot on the table, and it gave off a chilly air. Curious about the cold pot, the consorts looked inside and expressed their astonishment. The pot contained ice that had been brought from the ice room and broken into smaller pieces, and on top of the ice stood a smaller pot. The smaller point contained a thick, cold, translucent liquid. Rimi and Hakurei poured the liquid into the blue glass bowls placed in front of the consorts. The soaked rice took on a glossy sheen, and the sesame oil floated up to the surface, creating a faint rainbow ring as the liquid reflected the light.

“I named it yutang lengfan,” Rimi explained—fish soup with cold rice. “It combines ingredients carefully selected by the cuisinologist with ingredients from Wakoku. Please have a taste.”

Hearing about this combination of Shusei’s and Rimi’s ingredients, the four consorts picked up their spoons with great interest and gave it one taste, then another. The women started smiling.

“This is delicious, Lady Setsu. It’s light, yet there’s a richness to it. I love the fragrance,” Worthy Consort On said. Rimi was happy to see the usually downturned Worthy Consort being the first to look up.

“It’s definitely nice, cool, and easy to eat,” Virtuous Consort Ho added, satisfied.

“I could eat a lot of this!” Pure Consort Yo nodded in agreement.

“What’s this thick soup?” Noble Consort So asked as she curiously observed the glittering liquid in her spoon.

“It’s fish tang, made from an ingredient chosen by the cuisinologist,” Rimi answered.

The reason the fish eyes were disgusting was that they were surrounded by a thick, gelatinous substance. However, this fish part had a subtle richness to it, and it was essential to achieving the desired effect. Rimi had decided to let them simmer in kengyoken stock, which usually went well with fish. She had removed the cartilage and the hard lenses, then let a large number of fish eyes simmer together with wine and spring onion to remove the fishy taste. The result had been a thick, rich fish tang. As it was the middle of summer, Rimi had then cooled the tang down to make it more pleasant to eat.

In order to ensure that they were given a proper quantity of food for supper, Rimi had also served rice along with the tang. She had added sesame oil to further improve the fragrance and make its flavor rich enough for even the young consorts to enjoy.

Pure Consort Yo let out a light chuckle, seemingly very satisfied by the food.

“Being in the rear palace isn’t all that bad,” Yo said. “Here I get to enjoy food made by such a lovely young lady.”



Noble Consort So frowned at the sound of Yo's laugh. While it was rude to laugh while eating together with someone of a high social status, those seated at the table all had the same rank, so this was not a problem. Rimi failed to understand why So seemed very displeased. Did she perhaps consider herself somehow better than the other consorts?

"Yes, I do suppose so," So said with a malicious grin, talking as though she was speaking to herself. "After all, you're not someone who would normally belong in a place like this."

"Excuse me? What do you mean by that, Noble Consort So?" Yo said, glaring at So.

Shusei threw Hakurei a concerned glance at how the conversation was unfolding, but Hakurei remained silent as he observed the consorts, expressionless.

"Oh dear, did you hear that?" So mocked. "I'm so very sorry. I'm honest by nature, and I just can't help but speak what's on my mind. But I just can't understand what someone who claims she doesn't care about her position during the Declaration of Stability is even doing here. Someone who doesn't care has no need for the food made by the cuisinologist and Lady Setsu, does she? It just seems so strange. Well, I suppose you at least understand your place."

"My place? I'm a member of the Yo house—one of the Five Houses, just like the So house," Yo declared.

"My, is that right? I had no idea, Pure Consort Ma. Do tell me, how is Ma Ijun doing?"

The Pure Consort's face turned red.

*"Pure Consort Ma?"* What did Noble Consort So mean by that? Rimi wondered. But before Rimi could even process the situation, Pure Consort Yo violently put her spoon on the table.

"Why, yes! He's doing quite fine, thank you! He's patiently waiting for you to become my mother!" Yo exclaimed.

The moment these words exited the Pure Consort's lips, So twitched. Rimi

had no idea what Yo was talking about either. Shusei sharply whispered Hakurei's name to urge him to do something about the situation, but Hakurei remained unresponsive.

"Please, won't you calm down? The good food will go to waste," Worthy Consort On timidly pleaded.

"Oh, just let them do as they please," Virtuous Consort Ho laughed. "And what are you doing, looking as if you've got nothing to do with this? You'll be competing for the spot as His Majesty's favored consort like the rest of us."

"I... I'm not... I couldn't hope to be placed as His Majesty's favorite..."

"You still insist on that, do you? I've heard about you, Worthy Consort On. If you incur His Majesty's wrath and are chased out of the rear palace, you won't have a home to return to. Am I right?" Noble Consort So said harshly, as though she was taking out her anger on On, as On looked down at the table. "And you, Virtuous Consort Ho, are you sure you want to be here?"

"I'm here because I should be."

"My, is that so? And here I thought you were only here because you wanted to see that eunuch."

In response to So's remark, Ho sent her a piercing, murderous gaze.

"Do you realize that there are some things you should not say, Noble Consort So?" Ho said in a sharp tone.

*At this rate, the supper will be ruined. We have to calm them down somehow,* Rimi thought anxiously as she noticed Shusei's stern expression, which seemed to indicate he'd had enough of this.

As Shusei was about to move his hands and gaze, Rimi immediately realized what he was about to do.

*No, Master Shusei, not you!*

Rimi's body moved instinctively. She reached out and knocked a bottle of wine off the table. The bottle broke in two and a loud crashing sound echoed through the hall.

Shusei widened his eyes in astonishment. All gazes fell on Rimi.

“Please excuse my carelessness.” Rimi knelt to apologize.

“It seems the bottle was poorly placed,” Shusei quickly stepped in to defend her. “I should have been more attentive. I shall have it cleaned up immediately.”

The consorts seemed to have realized their unseemly behavior during the moments of silence that followed as they all fell quiet. After noting that they had calmed down, Shusei sent Hakurei a piercing glare, as if to ask why he didn’t step in to stop the consorts’ conversation. Hakurei replied with a smile.

Eunuchs soon came to clean up the broken bottle.

*The consorts already considered each other to be enemies and rivals from the very start,* Rimi realized.

The consorts quietly started eating. Occasionally, Shusei would talk to them, and the consorts responded with a smile. It was unbelievably peaceful, as though the hostile scene that had broken out only moments ago had never happened. It was clear from how skilled they were at keeping up appearances that they had been trained from a young age.

Rimi waited on the consorts together with Hakurei, fearful of what lay ahead. The consorts had already investigated each other in an attempt to find their weaknesses—that much was clear from the earlier conversation. It seemed they all had things they would prefer went unmentioned or undisclosed.

# Chapter 3: The Unaware Emperor and the Bewildered Cuisinology Scholar

I

After the consorts' supper had ended, Rimi and Shusei enjoyed their own late supper. Starting today and for the duration of the summer, Rimi would be staying in the Palace of Northern Peaks together with Shusei. Because of that, her old handmaid had brought Rimi's belongings from the Palace of Small Wings.

For a while, Rimi's handmaid had been dancing with elation, having misunderstood that the emperor had claimed Rimi for himself, and she had gone around boasting to her handmaid friends. When it had then come to light that Rimi had simply become the culinology scholar's assistant, the handmaid had been visibly dejected. The reason for her reaction was simple—if a concubine that worked in the outer palace were to carry a child, there would have been no way of guaranteeing whose child it was. In other words, Rimi having been assigned to a post in the outer palace was the same as the emperor declaring that he had no interest in her.

After realizing that her master was not only not the emperor's favorite concubine, but someone the emperor had no plans to even touch, the handmaid's elation turned to gloom, and she seemed to have aged at least five years in the process.

Now, however, that very handmaid was pouring Shusei a drink while wearing a bright smile. Her cheeks were reddened in a way unbecoming of her old age.

"My, I can't believe I have the pleasure of entertaining Konkoku's finest scholar! It's as if I'm dreaming!" the handmaid exclaimed.

On the western premises of the Palace of Northern Peaks was a detached building for visitors, which was where Rimi and Shusei would be living for the duration of the summer. It was a large building featuring multiple bedrooms. The living room faced a small garden where a bamboo grove was growing. The

evening wind carried in the sound of rustling bamboo leaves through the open doorway.

The Palace of Northern Peaks was currently unoccupied, so the handmaid, who would otherwise be standing quietly off to the side, was able to speak unreservedly with no one but Rimi and Shusei present.

“You don’t need to worry about us, ma’am. Feel free to go and rest,” Shusei said with the smile of a grandson concerned about his grandmother.

*She seems to be in high spirits for a change. What a relief,* Rimi thought.

As the understanding that Rimi was out of the running for the emperor’s favor spread throughout the rear palace, it served to make Rimi’s life easier. Now there was no reason for anyone to be jealous of her. Everyone had actually started to take pity on her, thinking that she would never attract the interest of the emperor.

While it had been a weight off Rimi’s shoulders, she had still felt bad for her disheartened handmaid. Seeing the handmaid smile again for the first time in a while as she merrily waited on them made Rimi happy.

Jade-colored kaorizuke was placed on the table as a side dish. The main dish was a salted, thick jitang, alongside chicken fried in garlic and mixed with vegetables. It was a light yet rich-tasting meal that went well with red wine. There were also agar sweets made from cow’s milk and sweet-scented spices. This was a Konkokuan summer sweet, which was eaten together with wine-flavored syrup. Rimi had made it all in the kitchen of the Palace of Northern Peaks—she had started taking an interest in Konkokuan dishes lately.

Konkokuan food was made by skillfully balancing spices and fragrant vegetables in order to achieve the right taste. There were an infinite number of possible ways to combine ingredients. Even if the ingredients remained the same, changing your method ever so slightly could result in an appetizing dish with an exquisite fragrance. Being from Wakoku, this was all new and fascinating to Rimi.

“Say, Master Shusei, you wouldn’t happen to have a fiancée?” the old handmaid casually asked Shusei, apparently in a good mood from spending time with the kind scholar.

The handmaid's question took Rimi aback. As the son of a distinguished family, it wouldn't have been surprising if Shusei had been engaged since he was young.

"No, I'm not engaged," Shusei replied. "Right now, the only thing I'm worried about is serving His Majesty. After all, not even a year has passed since he took the throne, and he's still awfully young."

"What an absolutely wonderful stance," the handmaid said while on the verge of tears.

Rimi, however, gave Shusei a perplexed look. It seemed somehow strange to her that someone of Shusei's status, who was already past the age of twenty, still didn't have a fiancée. A thought suddenly came to her, and she was unsure how to react.

"Master Shusei, if you are that attached to His Majesty, could it be that you have no interest in women? Are you perhaps in love with—" Rimi started to say but was interrupted by a high-pitched, elated shriek from the old handmaid. Shusei frowned disapprovingly.

"Just what are you thinking, Rimi? When did I ever—"

"I-I-I'm sorry if I happened to guess the right thing! Please, spare me any confessions like you becoming aroused whenever you think of His Majesty. I won't pry. You *are* the Loveless Scholar, after all."

Shusei put his hand on his forehead as though he had suddenly come down with a severe headache.

"Rimi... You say you won't pry, but you already said it all out loud. And while I'm glad that you're generally quick off the mark, here you've missed the mark entirely. Please pick up your arrow and try again."

"What? You mean you don't have any such interest?"

"I've never had any such strange desires for His Majesty. I would much prefer a woman as the object of my affection."

"Are you sure?"

"Why would I lie?"

Rimi let out a sigh of relief while her handmaid seemed disappointed as she muttered, “Oh, is that so...”

Rimi pondered for a moment whether Shusei’s interest in women meant he might even become interested in her one day, but she quickly abandoned any such foolish thoughts. She was a concubine of the rear palace—she could never be Shusei’s lover, nor could she imagine Shusei being romantically interested in her.

*I may be the assistant of a cuisinology scholar now, but my place in the palace is still the same.* She was still firmly chained to the cage that was the rear palace.

Once they finished their supper, the handmaid withdrew to another building while Rimi and Shusei retreated to their own bedrooms. Rimi’s chest of clothes and her kaoridoko pot had been brought to her bedroom, and Tama was lying on top of Rimi’s bed. Tama jumped happily upon seeing Rimi enter the room.

“I’m sorry for leaving you alone, Tama,” Rimi said.

Rimi got under the duvet on her bed and Tama followed suit. Rimi played with the dragon, tickling her soft belly, and found it adorable how Tama would playfully bite at Rimi’s fingers.

Once she was satisfied with the attention, Tama curled up on the side of the bed and went to sleep. Rimi closed her eyes as well but had trouble falling asleep, partly due to the heat.

*Master Shusei’s lover...*

Rimi thought back to the supper conversation. Shusei was the son of a distinguished family and had a promising future. It was unimaginable that he wouldn’t marry at some point—and considering his age, it might come sooner rather than later.

*What kind of woman might become Master Shusei’s lover? I’m sure she will be pretty, clever, and kind...*

As her mind raced, her chest started feeling somewhat tight. She felt silly for imagining a woman that didn’t yet exist, but she couldn’t stop.



*Oh...no... Why does my own imagination feel so painful?*

After a little while of tossing and turning, Rimi finally gave up on sleeping and exited her bed. She put an extra layer on top of her night clothing and lit a candle. A broken bottle placed on a table in her room came into view. It was the bottle that she had knocked down from the table during the supper. It was a thick, expensive porcelain bottle, so it had not broken into multiple pieces. Instead, it split in two at the neck, making it look as though it could still be used in the kitchen if one simply glued the two pieces back together. So Rimi had brought it back to her room.

Rimi absentmindedly reached out for the bottle. She aligned the two pieces, and they fit cleanly together. Unless you strained your eyes, it looked as though there was no crack at all, and it would probably come out fine after repairs.

She removed her hand, and the smaller piece maintained its balance on top of the bottle. It looked as though it had never been broken to begin with.

“Wow,” Rimi exclaimed reflexively at the high quality of the porcelain. Seemingly in response to her voice, the neck of the bottle started to slide down, and Rimi frantically caught it in the air and put the bottle back on the table.

*Konkokuan handicraft sure is high quality.* That went for both the bottle as well as that treasure she had seen earlier. Though only a bit more than one hundred years had passed since Konkoku came to be, new countries had been founded and destroyed on the continent for thousands of years before being united as part of Konkoku. During those thousands of years, the arts and sciences had advanced to a degree incomparable to that of Wakoku.

Meanwhile, Wakoku had been blessed with a bountiful nature, and its civilization had advanced at a relatively slow speed ever since ancient times. To a Konkokuan, Wakoku must have seemed like a country that only recently left its primitive stages.

A cool breeze blew outside, and Rimi walked out into the bamboo garden. The garden was lit by the moon, and the bamboo cast long, thin shadows on the ground. Rimi found the rustling of leaves and the sight of the sharp shadows calming.

After the four consorts' supper, Rimi had felt as though her energy had been

spent all at once. She had come fully prepared for the first supper to be awkward—but it had exceeded all her expectations. She would never have thought that she would have to witness such a quarrel from the very start. The consorts all had their own issues and complicated backgrounds. Even Noble Consort So, who Rimi had already gotten to know through previous encounters, had seemed to be hiding something.

*What kind of food should I be giving consorts like that? Something that would make them want to continue to come to the Palace of Northern Peaks to eat. Otherwise, they won't be able to conduct any discussions like Master Hakurei wishes.* Rimi remembered her duty and pulled herself together. She felt thankful for the fact that she had been given a duty.

Rimi was strolling absently around the garden when she noticed a figure being illuminated by the moon. It was Shusei. He was wearing only a shenyi on top of his night attire as he vacantly stared at the moon. Rimi was afraid that talking to him would cause her strange fantasies to return, but simply fleeing would have been rude, so she decided to walk up to him.

“Rimi, what’s the matter? Are you having trouble sleeping?” Shusei asked.

“You too, Master Shusei?” Rimi said as she nodded.

“I was lost in thought and became unable to sleep. When the four consorts started arguing during supper, Hakurei did nothing to stop them. I asked him why afterward, and he just replied that it was necessary... But I thought the only reason we were preparing their meals was to reduce the quarreling as much as possible, so his attitude makes me frustrated.”

As kind as he was, Shusei must have hated to see people arguing in that way. Hakurei, however, acted indifferent and would accept things like quarrels as a necessary evil.

“By the way,” Shusei continued, “do you mind if I ask you something, Rimi? Earlier, when the consorts were arguing, you noticed that I was planning to knock the wine bottle off the table, didn’t you?”

Rimi had indeed noticed. Shusei was a respected scholar, and even if it was to de-escalate the situation, making a careless mistake in front of the four consorts could damage his reputation. Rimi, however, could get away with it, as

it would be seen merely as a mistake made by a palace woman. She had been unable to stand idly by as Shusei did something so dangerous and had instinctively stepped in.

“You did it in my stead, didn’t you?” Shusei said. “Thank you. I knew that it was something someone of my status shouldn’t do, but I was unable to bear their quarrel. You really saved me there.”

“Not at all. It was just a careless mistake on my part,” Rimi answered.

Rimi didn’t want Shusei to feel indebted to her over something so trivial. She gave him a soft smile, and he looked back with a sorrowful gaze. His eyes were beautiful. He must have understood that Rimi was telling a white lie.

“You’re too kind, Rimi,” Shusei whispered.

Rimi suddenly became embarrassed and frantically tried to change the subject. “Either way, we need to do something to stop the consorts from fighting.”

“Yes, of course. If I have to endure *that* every day, I’ll break before the summer is over.”

The only weapon Rimi had at her disposal to quell the consorts’ anger was her cooking. All she could do was provide food that they wished to eat and hope that it would calm them down.

“I’m planning to take some time tomorrow to go and visit each of the consorts,” Rimi said. “I’ll do it in the morning before we start preparing for supper. Is that all right?”

“Of course, I don’t mind,” Shusei replied. “But why?”

“If I learn more about what they desire, I think I’ll be able to get a better picture of what food to serve.”

“I study the effects of different foods, but I don’t know anything about the effects of how the food is served. I will have to rely on you for that part.”

The thought of Shusei relying on her—the fact that she was of help to him as his assistant—made Rimi happy. Her place by his side was where she was the most comfortable now.

Shusei gave Rimi his usual kind smile.

“I appreciate your help,” Shusei continued. “You joining me as my assistant has been of great value to both me and the field of cuisinology.”

“Value to you, Master Shusei?” Rimi’s heart skipped a beat at Shusei’s phrasing.

Shusei seemed surprised himself, as though the words had inadvertently passed his lips.

“Oh, by that I mean...” He opened his mouth in an attempt to explain it, but trailed off, seemingly unable to find the right words. The two of them looked into each others’ bewildered eyes in silence and both their cheeks turned slightly red.

Just as Shusei was about to open his mouth again in an attempt to say something, there was a sound from the bamboo grove. The two of them turned their gaze in the direction of the sound and found a beautiful young face looking back at them from between the bamboo.

“Your Majesty?!” they both exclaimed in surprise.

The emperor, as beautiful as fresh leaves bathing in the moonlight, was frowning. He parted the bamboo with his hands, stepped over the roots, and exited the grove into the garden, brushing off a bamboo leaf from his shoulder.

“The entrance to this place needs to be more obvious. Why must I fight my way through a bamboo grove?” Shohi grumbled.

“Why didn’t you have Jotetsu guide you? And what are you doing here to begin with, Your Majesty?” Shusei asked with an exasperated expression.

“I am here for the Quinary Dragon. Hakurei informed me that you and Rimi will be staying at the Palace of Northern Peaks over the summer. There is a secret passageway that connects the eastern pear garden and the Palace of Northern Peaks, so this makes things easier for me,” Shohi explained. “Instead of waiting for that airheaded woman to visit me with the Quinary Dragon in her skirt each morning, coming here unexpected gives me a much higher chance of seeing the dragon.”

Rather than be upset at Shohi calling her airheaded, Rimi instead took pity on him for being so desperate to see Tama.

“Your Majesty, how splendid you are for stubbornly refusing to back down despite how much Tama hates you,” she said.

“Do you really think you are speaking politely?” Shohi said as he glared at Rimi.

Shusei hurriedly stepped between them. “So you mean to say that you passed through the secret passageways all by yourself, Your Majesty, without informing the Department of Service? And without any attendants?”

“I brought Jotetsu with me, but I ordered him to wait by the passageway entrance. I have no plans to exit the Palace of Northern Peaks anyway.”

“But, Your Majesty, now that you’ve already come all the way to the rear palace, why don’t you take the opportunity to visit one of your concubines?”

“I have no such intentions. I am only here to see the Quinary Dragon.”

“*Just* the Quinary Dragon?” Shusei’s expression gradually became darker as he probed Shohi for his intentions. Shusei looked as though he had realized something he’d rather not have.

“That is right,” Shohi said as he turned to Rimi, unaware of Shusei’s troubled state of mind. “So, Rimi, where is the Quinary Dragon?”

“She is sleeping in my bedroom,” Rimi replied.

“Show me there,” Shohi demanded.

Rimi glanced toward Shusei to plead for his advice, and Shusei gave her a small nod as if to instruct her to follow the emperor’s order.

“Very well. Please follow me, Your Majesty,” Rimi said.

Rimi started guiding Shohi to her bedroom, yet Shusei remained where he was.

## II

“Master Shusei? We need to show His Majesty to my room,” Rimi said.

“You can show him there by yourself, Rimi. I’ll wait here in the meantime. The Palace of Northern Peaks is safe, so I doubt you need me to accompany you. Please, go ahead,” Shusei replied with a soft smile, but it seemed somehow more awkward than usual.

Although she sensed something off about Shusei’s demeanor, Rimi showed Shohi to her bedroom.

“Um, Your Majesty...” Rimi said. “Please stay quiet. Tama is sleeping, and if she wakes up, she will probably...”

“Yes, I realize,” Shohi responded. “You mean to say that it might run away.”

The door to Rimi’s bedroom featured a carving of a long-tailed chicken. Rimi opened the door carefully so as not to make a sound. A ray of moonlight shone into the room and reached the bed. The adorable divine dragon could be seen sleeping, curled up, on the edge of the bed.

“The Quinary Dragon,” Shohi whispered with what sounded like a sigh of relief. A satisfied smile then appeared on his lips. Seeing his almost childlike smile, Rimi started smiling softly too.

“Tama is doing quite well. There is no need to worry, Your Majesty,” Rimi reassured Shohi.

“So it appears,” Shohi replied. “It is a relief to be able to see it resting peacefully. I have seen what I came for.”

Having only taken a glance at the dragon, Shohi stepped out of the doorway. Rimi had expected him to step into the room more greedily, so his behavior surprised her.

“Are you sure, Your Majesty?” Rimi asked.

“I am. Just getting a glance at the Quinary Dragon is enough.”

Shohi turned his gaze to Rimi. His piercing, yet shining eyes contained an allure that he himself seemed unaware of.

“You seem to be protecting the Quinary Dragon quite carefully,” Shohi continued.

“Well, she is just too adorable, so of course I take good care of her,” Rimi

replied.

“‘Adorable,’ eh? Always the carefree one, aren’t you?” As Shohi finished speaking, he gave Rimi a gentle smile.

*Huh? Did His Majesty just smile at me?* It was the first time Shohi had ever shown her an expression like that, and it had taken her off guard.



Rimi had disappeared around the corner of a building together with Shohi. Shusei was left behind all alone in the garden. He found the rustling of bamboo leaves awfully grating.

Shohi had claimed to come here to inspect the Quinary Dragon—but if that was all, he could have simply waited for Rimi to show up in the outer palace as usual. But he had been unwilling to wait.

*His Majesty must have become anxious after hearing from Hakurei that Rimi and I would be staying together in the Palace of Northern Peaks. He probably came here without even realizing the cause of his anxiety.*

Shohi himself believed that he had only come to see the Quinary Dragon—but he hadn’t.

*Shohi has Rimi on his mind...* Shusei took a deep breath. *This is for the best. His Majesty needs to show more interest in women.*

This thinking is why Shusei had chosen to stay behind. He wanted to give Rimi and Shohi some time alone. Yet when Shusei thought back to the warm moment he and Rimi had spent looking into each others’ eyes, he felt a pain in his chest. It was as though he had inhaled a large gulp of air that had become stuck in his chest.

Suddenly, Shusei heard a voice from behind him.

“Hey there, Shusei.”

Shusei turned around to find Jotetsu, who had soundlessly approached him from the back. He was leaning against a wall, boldly crossing his arms with a bamboo stick in his mouth.

“I thought you were waiting by the passageway entrance, Jotetsu,” Shusei



said.

Jotetsu smirked as he removed the stick from his mouth and walked up to Shusei.

“He ordered me to wait,” Jotetsu said, “but since it’s taking this long, I don’t feel like waiting in that dark place the entire time. I thought I’d join you for a cup of tea instead.”

“I don’t think it will take much longer. His Majesty is here to have a look at the Quinary Dragon, that’s all.”

“Yes, if that really *is* all.”

“What else would he be here for?”

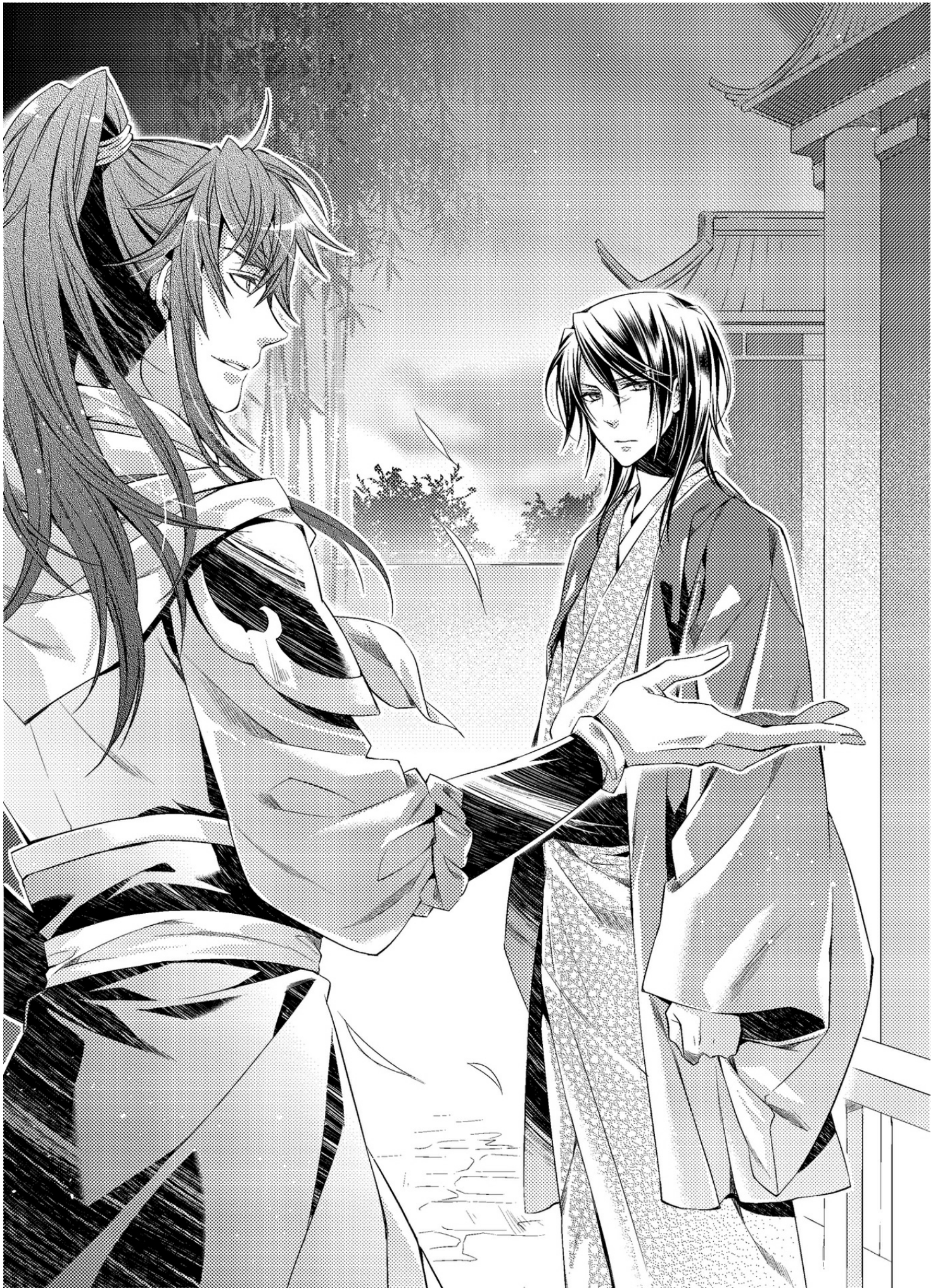
“You do realize that His Majesty went off to a concubine’s bedroom, right?”

Shusei was taken aback by Jotetsu’s suggestion. This must have shown on his face as Jotetsu started to laugh quietly. Shusei clenched his fist.

“What’s so funny, Jotetsu?” Shusei asked in a stern voice, attempting to remain composed.

“Well, you know... I didn’t expect the Loveless Scholar to make an expression like that.”

With no way of arguing back, Shusei fell quiet.



Then, Shohi and Rimi returned from around the corner of a building.

“What are you doing here, Jotetsu?” Shohi asked dubiously.

“I came to meet you, Your Majesty,” Jotetsu replied nonchalantly.

Shusei was relieved to see Rimi as composed as before. *Nothing happened between them...*

At the same time, however, something akin to feelings of guilt toward Shohi tormented him. He scolded himself, telling himself to remember his place and his duty. Rimi was the first concubine that Shohi had ever shown an interest in. His duty as a retainer was to guide his emperor to frequent the bedroom of his favorite concubine—no matter who the concubine in question was.



Shohi had announced that he would be making surprise visits to the Palace of Northern Peaks to ensure that Tama was well. Although Rimi would have preferred not to have him suddenly show up when she wasn't prepared, it was at least better than visiting Shohi and trying to convince Tama to come out from under her skirt every morning.

Morning came.

Rimi had asked Shusei to write letters saying, “To prepare for the suppers served by the cuisinologist and Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu, we would like to speak to the four consorts. We therefore ask permission for Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu to visit the palaces of the four consorts.” They had then sent the letters to the consorts' palaces. They quickly received responses allowing Rimi to visit.

Wanting to waste no time, Rimi immediately set out for the four consorts' palaces. She had wanted Shusei to come with her. However, this was the rear palace, and Shusei was unable to easily leave the Palace of Northern Peaks. Instead, he had talked about the consorts' families and given Rimi other important information.

*I want to make something that will satisfy the consorts.* That was all Rimi had on her mind. She wanted to satisfy them, if only a little, and calm them down.

To the south of the Palace of Northern Peaks were the four consorts' palaces—the Noble Consort's Palace of Great Beauty, the Pure Consort's Palace of Great Light, the Virtuous Consort's Palace of Great Purity, and the Worthy Consort's Palace of Great Heights.

Rimi's first stop was Worthy Consort On's Palace of Great Heights. Rimi thought On seemed like a gentle and kind girl, so visiting her had seemed like a good way to start the day.

The four consorts' palaces were all the same size, but their families were responsible for the furniture and decorations. The garden of the Palace of Great Heights was modest and calming with great attention paid to how the natural plants and trees were arranged. In the middle of the garden was a white stone gazebo. The dark brown color of the wooden table and chairs placed in the gazebo were well-matched with the surroundings. The furniture had a polished, glossy finish, with subtle, meticulous designs carved into the legs—they were unassuming yet elegant valuables.

According to Shusei, the On house was—much like the So and Yo houses—a prestigious house with a long history. Although the On house was not quite as wealthy as the So house, it was still one of the five most prestigious noble houses of Konkoku, which were collectively known as the Five Houses.

Rimi was guided to the gazebo and sat down on a chair when Worthy Consort On appeared, swiftly walking by herself toward Rimi. Rimi was surprised to see that she was unaccompanied by handmaids. On looked graceful, wearing a ruqun with a subdued light green color.

Rimi prepared to stand up to greet her when On smiled and told her, "Please, remain as you are," and then started to prepare tea using a porcelain tea set brought by a handmaid. A refreshing fragrance reminiscent of cut leaves emanated from the porcelain. It was a tea befitting a summer day, a selection marked by the meticulous attention to detail of an enthusiast.

"I'm so sorry for having you prepare tea for me, Worthy Consort On," Rimi said.

"Don't worry about it. I like making tea," On replied.

The Worthy Consort finished pouring tea into the cups before sitting down

across from Rimi. On looked down as though she was slightly embarrassed.

“I’m sure you must be appalled to see someone as unremarkable as me as one of the four consorts, Lady Setsu,” On said.

“What? Of course not!” Rimi exclaimed at the unexpectedly timid remark.

“I grew up being told that if anyone were to enter the rear palace from the On house, it should be me, simply based on my age. I became a consort based on nothing but my age and my family,” On explained. “Under normal circumstances, someone as plain-looking as me would never have been able to become one of the four consorts. I’m so ashamed. The other consorts look radiantly beautiful in comparison.”

“Did you not want to join the rear palace yourself?”

“Well,” On said with a light chuckle, “that’s not necessarily the case. There’s no noble girl who doesn’t dream about becoming His Majesty’s favored bride. I dreamed of it too... But at the same time, I felt hesitant. Even though I received a fortune foretelling that I would join the rear palace during my seventh birthday, it seemed far beyond my reach.”

*Someone this modest and reserved must be exhausted both physically and mentally by the quarrels that occur in the rear palace... Rimi thought. I had no idea that there are those who join the rear palace with such a negative mentality.*

The day before, Virtuous Consort Ho had claimed that, if On were to incur the emperor’s wrath and be chased out of the rear palace, she would have no home to return to. On had not even tried to defend herself. She had simply lowered her head.

*Does that mean if Worthy Consort On had not joined the rear palace, she wouldn’t have had any place where she belonged?* Rimi saw part of her past self in On and felt a sense of affinity with her. And On was not the kind of absentminded person Rimi was. On seemed as though she could get her feelings hurt easily. Rimi wanted to at least be able to serve her a meal that could give her some sense of relief.

“Is there anything you like to eat? Or is there anything you happen to be

struggling with?" Rimi asked.

"I can eat anything, I'm not picky. However, my stomach gets upset easily, so there are many times I can't eat something even though I want to. Especially when it's hot outside like this."

On let out a sigh as though to signal how exhausted she was from the heat before smiling at Rimi.

"You came to the rear palace from Wakoku, didn't you? That wasn't of your own choosing, was it?" On asked.

"Well...I suppose not." The question made her remember her sadness of not being by the Saigu's side, and the pain made her voice turn ever so slightly darker.

The Worthy Consort gently touched Rimi's hand, which was holding a teacup.

"You see, I don't have any friends," On said. "If you wouldn't mind, I would be delighted if you could come and have tea with me like this every now and again."

Rimi smiled back as she felt herself becoming even more fond of the consort. She was a lovely girl, Rimi thought.

However, Rimi could not very well spend the entire day with Worthy Consort On, and she soon excused herself and left the Palace of Great Heights.

Rimi strolled around the rear palace wondering who to visit next when an awfully cheerful voice called out her name.

"Lady Setsu!"

Rimi turned around to find Pure Consort Yo walking under a parasol held by a handmaid. After seeing Rimi stop walking, Yo suddenly ran out from the shadow of the parasol toward Rimi.

"Pure Consort!" the handmaids called out as they frantically ran after her, but they failed to keep up.

Rimi was astonished to see the Pure Consort kicking her skirt as she ran toward her. Stunned, she could do nothing but blink as she observed the spectacle.

“I’ve been looking forward to seeing you ever since I received your letter this morning! I became so restless that I had to go out for a walk, and I absolutely made the right decision! I’m so happy to see you so soon!” Yo exclaimed.

Rimi instinctively looked around, wondering who in the world the Pure Consort could be speaking to, but there was no one else around.

“Um, do you...mean me?” Rimi asked.

“Who else is there but you, Lady Setsu?”

With cheeks as smooth as a child’s, Pure Consort Yo gazed intently at Rimi. The handmaids gasped as they caught up to Yo and held up the parasol again, casting a shadow over her.

“Say, you’re visiting the Palace of Great Light, aren’t you? Aren’t you?” Yo asked insistently.

“Oh, no, I’m quite happy to talk to you here instead,” Rimi answered.

“What? That’s no fun. I want to take my time talking to you. I’ve wanted to meet you ever since I first heard the rumors about you. I’ve been wondering this whole time how lovely this exotic princess from Wakoku might be.”

Pure Consort Yo’s house was also one of the Five Houses of Konkoku, along with the So and On houses. However, the Yo house had fallen from grace and owed a massive debt to the wealthy capital merchant Ma Ijun. Pure Consort Yo was actually Ma Ijun’s daughter, Enrin. The Yo house had adopted Enrin on Ma Ijun’s wishes and sent her to the rear palace. Shusei had explained how Noble Consort So referring to Yo as Noble Consort Ma must have been because she had been aware of these circumstances. He had also said that Ma Ijun’s primary goals were likely prestige and benefiting his own business.

The reason Yo seemed livelier than the other consorts and concubines was that, although she was the daughter of a wealthy merchant, she had been raised as a city girl and allowed a lot of freedom. She was fundamentally different from noble daughters who were never allowed to take even one step out of their estate.

Yo’s cheerful demeanor and friendliness appealed to Rimi. Even so, she couldn’t help but be surprised when Yo suddenly took her arm affectionately.



“Say, Lady Setsu,” Yo asked, “would you mind if I were to call you ‘dearest’?”

“‘D-D-Dearest’...?” Rimi was at a loss for words, and Yo’s handmaids threw her apologetic glances. “Pure Consort Yo...for now...could I just ask if there is any food you like? Do you have any favorite dishes or anything about your health that concerns you?”

“I want to eat lots of tasty food! That’s all I need. You’re the one making it for us, aren’t you, dearest?”

Yo’s innocent smile made Rimi worry that the Pure Consort hadn’t understood what Rimi was trying to get at.

“But wouldn’t you prefer food that adds to your beauty so you can more easily attract His Majesty’s attention?” Rimi asked.

“I don’t care about that. I can’t stand men.”

In response to Yo’s sudden confession, her handmaids groaned despairingly, though it was unclear whether Yo herself noticed as she continued talking.

“Men are savage, greedy, smelly, and immature. I absolutely abhor them. I would much prefer someone as lovely as you, dearest.”

Rimi observed the handmaids’ exhausted expressions. They were smiling faintly, which must have been the only thing they could do at this point.

*She hates men...?* That explained why she had looked so disgruntled upon seeing Shusei. It wasn’t that she disliked Shusei in particular but that she disliked men as a whole. *It looks like the rear palace has got someone quite special on its hands...*

“I need to visit the next palace,” Rimi excused herself and distanced herself from Yo’s hand.

Rimi departed for the Palace of Great Purity, all the while feeling as though half of her energy had been sucked out of her. The next person she was meeting was Virtuous Consort Ho. She was someone who was not afraid of saying what was on her mind and had some cynical tendencies, but she was, at a glance, the very image of a consort, which was not unsurprising—the Ho house was a branch of the royal family. It descended from the twin brother of

the emperor that ruled the country fifty years ago.

However, Rimi barely had time to exchange greetings with Ho after being shown to her room in the Palace of Great Purity when the consort made an outrageous suggestion.

“Say, you wouldn’t be able to make something that could cause the cheeky Noble Consort So to get an upset stomach and become skinny and weak, would you?” the beautiful Virtuous Consort asked.

Rimi’s smile froze.

### III

“If anything, I’d call that poison, not food...” Rimi trailed off.

Virtuous Consort Ho’s room was graceful and calming, arranged with ebony furniture and smelling of mosquito-repelling incense. The decorations were all a dark color, which only served to make the room seem even more tasteful and elegant.

Ho sat on a sofa with her slender legs crossed. Her beauty was on another level.

“All right, then how about food that gives her so much acne that she’s too horrifying to even look at?” Ho suggested.

“That’s also poison. Um... That’s not really what I’m here for, Virtuous Consort Ho. I’m wondering if you have anything you would like to eat, any favorite dishes, or anything about your health that concerns you? If you do, I can make a dish that could alleviate your issues.”

“Why would I need that? All I care about is standing to the very right of His Majesty. I’ll take anything I can get that helps me achieve that. As far as I can tell, I don’t need to worry about the Pure Consort or the Worthy Consort, so the only problem is Noble Consort So. I need something to compete with her. I don’t care at all about what I would like to eat or what my body or mind needs.”

Ho’s handmaids remained emotionless, even after hearing their master’s curt and dispassionate remarks. The handmaids of the Palace of Great Purity

appeared to be much more disciplined than those of the other palaces. They were like dolls.

“But don’t you want to improve your appearance to earn His Majesty’s favor? I could assist with wishes like that,” Rimi said.

“You think an emperor who threatens to slice the tongue of a consort even views us as humans? Do you think he’ll notice us for our beauty? We are mere decorations for His Majesty, and I doubt that he cares in the least about who stands next to him. That’s why the rear palace is deciding the order. In other words, the only thing we need to worry about is ensuring that we’re ahead of the others when the rear palace decides on the order,” Ho said. “His Majesty will take note of whoever happens to stand next to him. After all, Virtuous Consort Sai was the first to attract the last emperor’s attention after standing next to him during the Declaration of Stability. Standing next to His Majesty means earning his affection. That’s all that matters.”

Ho stood up and walked up to Rimi, who was standing in front of her. Before Rimi could back away in surprise, Ho ran her finger across Rimi’s chin. She then whispered so quietly that only Rimi could hear her words.

“I can’t become passionate about a merciless child like him. However, it’s my duty to bear his child and continue the bloodline. That’s why I came to the rear palace, and if you want to help me, then assist me in doing so.”

Their eyes met and a chill ran down Rimi’s spine.

*Virtuous Consort Ho has no hopes or dreams here in the rear palace.* Rimi couldn’t understand how she could be so dispassionate and callous after spending such a short amount of time in the rear palace. Ho seemed to sense Rimi’s bewilderment, as well as a hint of fear, as she sat back down on the sofa and gave Rimi a composed smile.

“Well, I won’t force you, Lady Setsu—nor the cuisinologist, for that matter. However, I will stand next to His Majesty, no matter what it takes. I will be the one to hold that treasure. I *will* make it mine. So if you’re wise, you’ll side with me. That’s all I’m saying.”

“In that case...if you don’t have any interest in the food, does that mean you won’t be attending the suppers?”

“I’ll be there. Though that eunuch wouldn’t give a straight answer...” Ho’s expression changed for just a moment.

*Eunuch?* Rimi was reminded of what So had claimed the evening before—that Ho had come to the rear palace to see a eunuch.

“In the end, the Department of Service is probably planning on deciding the order during these suppers,” Ho continued. “If I’m not there, I will lose my opportunity to compete with the other consorts, so of course I’ll be there. I will compete and come out on top.”

Rimi was ordered to leave the room, so she left the Palace of Great Purity.

*The Worthy Consort, the Pure Consort, the Virtuous Consort... I never realized that they had such diverse motives...* Rimi had naively believed that only those who wish to be loved by the emperor joined the rear palace as consorts. But although the Worthy Consort wished to earn the emperor’s favor, she had a negative attitude and seemed to have already given up. The Pure Consort likely had no interest in the emperor whatsoever—she was only here to enjoy her own paradise of women. The Virtuous Consort was thoroughly dispassionate, feeling no love or attraction toward the emperor, yet proclaimed it to be her duty to carry his heir.

In the end, Rimi mused in her head as she strolled toward the Palace of Great Beauty, perhaps Noble Consort So, the only consort genuinely and selfishly fighting for the emperor’s attention, was the most consort-like out of all the four consorts.

Rimi had known Noble Consort So from before, so she already had an idea of what the consort might demand from her and Shusei. However, not visiting her simply because she knew what the answer was likely to be would lead to So complaining about Rimi visiting everyone except for her. Rimi decided to play it safe.

Rimi was shown through the Palace of Great Beauty and to So’s bedchamber. The room was decorated with arranged flowers and carried a fragrance so intense Rimi felt as though she would choke. It was a gaudy, girly room, reminiscent of a flower garden.

The Noble Consort was sitting barefoot on her bed with a handmaid working

on the nails of her hands and feet.

“Lady Setsu, come have a look. Aren’t they pretty?” So said the moment she saw Rimi enter the room, showing off her nails. They had been carefully filed by her handmaid and colored a vivid vermilion.

Thanks to Rimi’s kaorizuke, So’s skin had improved remarkably recently. Rimi was happy to see that her acne was all but gone.

“Wow, they’re very beautiful,” Rimi responded.

“Aren’t they just? They’re painted with medicinal polish that I had delivered from the west. But I must say, you sure took your time to come here. Were you visiting the other three?”

“Yes, I went to speak with them.”

“You don’t even need to ask them to know what they want, do you? They’re all just like me—they want to become beautiful to attract His Majesty’s attention. What else could they ask for?”

The other consorts were not as simple as So was, but the Noble Consort was unable to even imagine this fact. However, just like the other consorts, there seemed to be more to her. When Pure Consort Yo had countered her during yesterday’s supper, So had grown pale.

“Noble Consort So, do you happen to have some kind of relationship with the merchant Ma Ijun?” Rimi asked.

So did not so much as look up as a frown line appeared near the top of her nose.

“Heavens, no,” So replied. “Why would I have anything to do with a merchant? Did you come here only to ask me that silly question? Don’t force me to remember what happened yesterday.”

Rimi became anxious at So’s sudden display of animosity.

“Could it be that you don’t plan on attending tonight’s supper, Noble Consort So?”

“What are you talking about? Of course I’ll be there. I couldn’t believe just how soft and smooth my skin was when I woke up this morning,” So said as she

put a hand on her cheek and gave a satisfied smile. “I was amazed at how effective that cuisinologist’s food was. And it tasted great too.”

If So had noticed such a drastic change, the other three consorts must have also noticed some kind of effect too. Rimi was relieved at the fact that everyone seemed to plan to attend the supper.

“So of course I’ll be there this evening too,” So continued. “I was already the prettiest of the consorts to begin with. Even if we all eat the same food, it only stands to reason that I will end up the most beautiful of us all. So, Lady Setsu, I want you and the cuisinologist to prepare food that will preserve and enhance my beauty so that His Majesty will notice and cherish me over everyone else.”

“Um... Noble Consort So, you like His Majesty, don’t you?”

“Yes, I love him dearly. Why, he’s too beautiful for words.”

Rimi would admit that Shohi was beautiful too—but he was also the same man who had threatened to cut off the Noble Consort’s tongue the first time they met. Rimi questioned if you could really love a man like that, no matter how beautiful he was.

“You do realize what His Majesty is like, don’t you? And you still love him?” Rimi questioned So.

“What he’s like?” So asked, perplexed.

“Um... What’s the right word...”

Rimi tried to think of a way to phrase it that would not be disrespectful. There was a simple word for people who acted like the emperor right on the tip of her tongue. She flipped through her internal word list.

“His Majesty is a tremendously rotten bastard toward you, don’t you think?”

The moment these words exited Rimi’s lips, the handmaid dropped her nail file, and it bounced off the floor with a loud noise. Her face was pale.

So gave Rimi a confused look.

“What does ‘rotten bastard’ mean?” she asked.

“It refers to the type of person who acts like His Majesty did when he first met

you.”

“Oh, I see,” So said with a satisfied look as her handmaid frantically picked up the file and whispered to her.

“Noble Consort, that is slang used by commoners. It’s *slang*,” the handmaid said insistently, but her words did not seem to reach So’s ears.

“That’s right,” Rimi continued. “Do you still love him?”

“I don’t mind if he’s a bit violent. That beauty of his is a miracle in and of itself, don’t you think? Presented with such a miracle, I don’t care about anything else. He’s the emperor, after all.”

He was the emperor, and he possessed an unparalleled beauty. That was enough for Noble Consort So to become obsessed with him. If only for his status and appearance, So was the only one who truly adored him.

*Even so... Just for his status and looks...?*

Being the emperor must have been a sad fate. The chances of the emperor ever meeting a woman who truly loved him for who he was must have been vanishingly small.

Rimi left Noble Consort So’s palace at close to noon. She briskly walked toward the Palace of Northern Peaks as she needed to start preparing today’s supper. She wondered what the four consorts, all so different and coming from diverse backgrounds, might discuss—or fail to discuss—as they sat around the table that evening.

*Still, what is this feeling? It’s as though, despite how different the consorts are, there is something that connects them.* If she could only find what that was, then she might be able to serve them food that would completely calm their minds. However, she still did not know what it was.

Rimi passed the gate of the Palace of Northern Peaks when she was met by an unfamiliar smell.

*Is this the smell of medicinal herbs?*

It was an intense smell that irritated her nose. Looking in front of her, Rimi saw a eunuch wearing a scarlet shenyi proceeding slowly through the garden.

The eunuch was old and supported on both sides by young eunuchs. The intense smell of medicinal herbs came from him. Feeling somehow intimidated by the sight of the old eunuch, Rimi stopped—but, as though he had sensed Rimi's presence, the eunuch slowly stopped as well and slowly turned around to face her.

The old eunuch had loose white skin and cloudy eyes. He wore a three-pearl necklace and golden false nails. His appearance was distinctly different from other eunuchs. He was staring at Rimi, probing her with his eyes, when suddenly, Hakurei appeared from the east side of the garden.

"Director I," Hakurei said as he approached them. He seemed slightly frantic.

That was when Rimi realized who the eunuch was. He was the most powerful person in the rear palace, I Bunryo, the director of the Department of Service.

"What are you doing here, Director? I never expected to see you here in person." Hakurei gently took Bunryo's hand, and Bunryo turned his gaze from Rimi to Hakurei.

"Is that the concubine from Wakoku?" Bunryo asked with a hoarse, high-pitched voice. Hakurei seemed to only then realize that Rimi was present as well.

"Rimi? Yes, that is Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu—Setsu Rimi."

"Take that Lady of Precious Bevy with us, Hakurei."

"Where exactly are you headed?"

"To the treasure," Bunryo replied curtly before starting to walk again.

Hakurei gave Rimi a confused look.

"Did you do something?" he asked.

"No, I only just returned to the palace. I haven't done anything," Rimi replied.

"Well, in either case, come with me. Director I wants you to follow."

Rimi followed Hakurei, who in turn walked behind Bunryo, and they entered the building at the front of the garden—the same building where the four consorts had enjoyed their supper the day before and the location of the



emperor and empress's thrones. Shusei happened to be present already, looking at some documents spread out across a table. As Bunryo, Hakurei, and Rimi entered the hall, Shusei gave them a surprised look.

"What in the world is the matter?" Shusei asked.

Bunryo smiled only with his mouth as he greeted Shusei with a bow.

"You are the cuisinologist, I presume?" Bunryo said. "It is a pleasure and an honor to meet you. I am I Bunryo, the director of the Department of Service."

"I am well aware, Director I. I am Shu Shusei. I must ask, what brings you here?" Shusei asked with suspicion as he returned Bunryo's bow.

"I am here to verify something," Bunryo declared in a quiet voice as he slowly walked up to the stone cabinet located between the two thrones. "This morning, we found a letter that had been thrown into the Department of Service. It said that the Scattering Lotus has been stolen."

"Was the key to the cabinet stolen?"

"No, Cuisinologist Shusei. The key is still on my person and has been the entire time."

"Then it could not have been stolen," Hakurei said with a smile. The treasure was safeguarded with iron bars, meaning it would have been impossible to remove it.

However, the moment Bunryo opened the cabinet doors, Hakurei fell speechless. Shusei widened his eyes, and Rimi suppressed a flabbergasted yelp. On the other side of the doors were the same iron bars as always. However, beyond those bars and spread over the pedestal was purple velvet, nothing else—the treasure was gone.

Bunryo remained still and expressionless, as though he was processing the fact that the treasure was gone.

*That can't be!* Rimi thought. It should have been impossible for anyone to steal the treasure—yet it was gone. Even faced with the reality of the treasure having been taken, the belief that it couldn't possibly have been stolen was so overpowering that Rimi's brain refused to accept it.

Everyone was frozen in place.

“How could someone possibly have...” Shusei finally muttered after a few moments. In reaction, Bunryo’s eyes lit up, and he looked around at everyone present.

“Yes, excellent question,” Bunryo said. “No normal person would have been able to steal the treasure from this cabinet. Only someone who wields strange magic would have been capable of this. But please remember, my good cuisinologist—there is one person who learned of the treasure’s existence yesterday and wields foreign magic.”

Rimi realized that Bunryo’s cloudy eyes were looking straight at her.

*He couldn’t mean...* Rimi turned pale. She understood what Bunryo was trying to say.

“You use strange magic from Wakoku that turns wood scraps into food, don’t you? Tell me where the treasure is, Setsu Rimi.”

## Chapter 4: The Vanished Treasure

I

“What...? Why...? What proof do you...?” Rimi was unable to form her sentences properly due to the shock of being suspected. The chirps of the cicadas outside echoed through the hall and the room was unpleasantly hot, yet Rimi’s fingers felt ice cold.

“I keep the key hanging from my neck. It would be impossible to steal it without killing me first,” Bunryo explained. “So the only person who could have stolen the treasure from the locked cabinet is someone who wields some form of magic. I hear you are a wielder of Wakokuan magic and can turn scraps of wood into food. Furthermore, you arrived at the Palace of Northern Peaks just yesterday, where you learned of the treasure’s existence and location, and the treasure disappeared immediately after that. Who else could it have been?”

Rimi was completely dumbfounded at the wild reasoning, unable to think of anything to say. Hakurei was frowning, but given his position, he was unable to say anything.

“Where did you put the treasure?” Bunryo asked accusingly in his hoarse voice.

“No, I... I didn’t...” Rimi took a few steps backward in fear.

“Tell me, how did you do it?!” Bunryo demanded.

Suddenly, being unable to stay quiet any longer, Shusei stepped in front of Rimi and raised his voice. “She is not a wielder of magic, Director !! I cannot believe that the director of the Department of Service would accuse a palace woman based on such groundless speculation!”

“But I already explained my grounds, Cuisinologist Shusei. The treasure was gone the very day after that woman came to the Palace of Northern Peaks and learned of its location.”

“Then you could say the same for me, as well as Rimi’s handmaid. Not just

that—the four consorts also visited the Palace of Northern Peaks yesterday and learned about the treasure from Hakurei,” Shusei retorted. “Based on your logic, I, the handmaid, and even the consorts should be suspected.”

“You are forgetting something, my cuisinologist. That woman is from Wakoku.”

Rimi felt as though she had been punched in the face with a harsh reality she had forgotten about. Bunryo fully and truly believed that she had stolen the treasure simply because she was from Wakoku. Wakoku was subservient to Konkoku, and Rimi knew that Konkokuans had a tendency to look down on Wakokuans—but being accused in this way, she felt her chest being pierced by humiliation and sorrow unlike anything she had felt since coming here. She had always been able to turn the other cheek in the face of any kind of snide remark. But being accused of being a robber simply because she was from Wakoku was fundamentally different from all the snide remarks and harassment she had come across before.

She had changed her name. She had done her best never to speak a word of Wakokuan. She enjoyed Konkokuan food and was actively studying it. But in the end, she was no Konkokuan.

*Lady Saigu... Lady Saigu...* Rimi cried out for help in her mind. She wished she could simply return to her Saigu sister with a hop, skip, and a jump. She wanted to cry into her sister’s lap. “Don’t cry over what you already know. How frail you are, my Umashi-no-Miya,” the Saigu would likely say—but she would still gently stroke Rimi’s head. Rimi knew she shouldn’t cry, but she was unable to keep her tears from flowing as she covered her mouth with both hands.

“Ridiculous!” Shusei shouted.

He turned around, pulled Rimi close to him, and held her in a way to fully shield her as he glared at Bunryo. His eyes were filled with rage.

“You are not sane, I Bunryo!” he continued. “Where does the bigoted notion that a Wakokuan must be a robber even come from?! It’s nothing short of ridiculous!”

*Master Shusei...*

Tears ran down Rimi's cheeks as she desperately clung to Shusei's sleeve. Given his status and position in the imperial court, it was unthinkable of Shusei to speak so rudely to Bunryo.

"No, Master Shusei... You can't... Not to the director..." Rimi pleaded.

"Stay quiet, Rimi," Shusei ordered, before turning back to Bunryo. "I won't stand for someone being accused without evidence, no matter who it is. All you're doing by accusing her so soon after the treasure has been stolen is wasting time. Your first order of business should be to inspect the belongings of all those who were present to search for the treasure."

Bunryo quickly glanced behind himself at Hakurei, who immediately grasped the director's intent.

"We shall immediately inspect the palaces and belongings of the cuisinologist, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu and her handmaid, and the four consorts," Hakurei said before walking away.

"However," Bunryo continued, "the rear palace has the natural right to investigate that palace woman. If the treasure still isn't found, we shall bring her to the Department of Service and press her body for answers."

"I won't let you do something so barbaric," Shusei resolutely refused. "If you can't find the treasure, then I shall find it in your stead. I assure you I will find it before the day of the Declaration of Stability."

"Oh? In that case, how will you take responsibility if you still cannot find it?"

"I will leave the judgment to His Majesty. You may suggest to His Majesty whatever measure you deem appropriate—I shall abide by it."

"Well then...how about I welcome you into the rear palace, my good cuisinologist?"

Realizing that Bunryo was suggesting to make Shusei a eunuch, Rimi turned pale and started trembling. She forcefully pulled on Shusei's sleeve, but he paid her no heed as he nodded fearlessly.

"Very well," he said.

"Then we have an agreement." Bunryo turned around and slowly left the

palace, supported by young eunuchs on both sides.

“Master Shusei...how could you promise that...?” Rimi desperately asked as she trembled and cried from her feelings of both guilt and grief. “I’m sorry, Master Shusei... I’m so sorry... Why did it have to come to this...? I’m so sorry...”

“Don’t apologize, Rimi. It’ll be fine. Don’t worry. I swear that I will find the treasure. So please, don’t cry.” Shusei embraced Rimi as he gently wiped the tears off her cheeks. “Don’t cry. I’m here for you.”

The eunuchs searched through the building where Rimi and Shusei were staying, the old handmaid’s room, as well as the four consorts’ palaces. The treasure was too large to fit in two hands, so the eunuchs thoroughly searched any place that could fit something of that size. They even searched the kitchen wells with rods and dug up any soft spots in the palace gardens. Still, the treasure was nowhere to be found.

Even so, as evening fell upon the Palace of Northern Peaks, the bell rang out again to announce today’s supper. Rimi and Shusei were both in shock, but that was no excuse not to fulfill their duties.

The consorts were all gathered around the supper table. They were all in a foul mood from having had their palaces searched. More than that, however, they seemed baffled at the disappearance of the treasure and were not very talkative. The only exception was Pure Consort Yo, who seemed indifferent, being more concerned with her own palace than the treasure.

“I can’t believe the way they ravaged my room! Why do I have to go through this?” Yo grumbled to herself.

Shusei was standing off to the side while Rimi and Hakurei waited on the consorts. The consorts had just finished their hawthorn wine, and Rimi had brought out the main dish together with Hakurei when Pure Consort Yo threw her a concerned gaze.

“I hear they accused you of stealing the treasure, dearest. I’m so sorry about that,” she said.

“Yes, honestly, what a sad turn of events... It truly pained me to hear about it,” Worthy Consort On chimed in with an apologetic expression. She looked as

though she was trying to say something more, but was unable to find the right words as she lowered her gaze as usual.

Rimi smiled back at the girls, all the while worrying that they would notice that her eyes were swollen from crying.

“Thank you for your concern, Pure Consort Yo and Worthy Consort On,” Rimi said.

Today’s supper consisted of long-clawed freshwater shrimps. Their shells were soft and the meat rich in taste. According to Shusei, these long-clawed shrimps helped with fatigue, and they also enhanced the child-bearing functions of the body. Eating the shell as well reduced irritation. Furthermore, eating these shrimps for supper posed a much lower risk of gaining weight than if you were to eat red meat or poultry.

Rimi had deep-fried the shrimps whole in oil, making them fragrant and soft. She had then stir-fried them together with several colorful vegetables before adding a sweet and sour sauce favored by Konkokuans. Despite her feelings of guilt and sadness, as well as the shock of the treasure having disappeared, by fulfilling her duty like this, she was able to calm down somewhat.

“Are you sure it wasn’t you?” Noble Consort So said with a mean look. Yo and On sighed in disbelief at the suggestion.

“No, Noble Consort So,” Rimi replied. “I swear to the gods that I didn’t do it.”

“Still, how could it have disappeared from behind iron bars? It truly seems like the feat of a sorcerer. Not to mention the letter sent to Director I to notify him of the missing treasure—who could have sent that?” Virtuous Consort Ho said with a frown. “And if the treasure is not found, the person who stands next to His Majesty for the Declaration of Stability will have nothing to hold. This can be seen as a slight to us consorts, claiming that none of us have the right to hold the treasure. That none of us deserve to stand next to His Majesty.”

The table fell quiet. Rimi unconsciously tightened her grip on the porcelain bottle she was holding.

*We have to find the treasure.* If they couldn’t, Shusei was in danger. Were Shusei to be punished as a result of protecting her, Rimi would be unable to live

on, tormented by guilt and grief.

Hakurei, who was waiting on the table alongside Rimi, was maintaining his usual smile—but even he seemed to have a slight hint of anxiety on his face. He wished to conclude the contentious issue of the Declaration of Stability order in as amicable a manner as possible. However, the order was the least of their concerns now. Even the consorts had all but forgotten about their hostile attitudes toward one another.

*How can we find it?* Rimi was unable to think properly due to her shock and fatigue as her anxiety continued to grow in her chest.

## II

After the four consorts' supper had ended, Rimi had her own meal. The shock of having been accused of theft still clung to her, and she seemed terribly exhausted.

"I can't believe they would accuse Lady Rimi," the old handmaid mumbled, flustered.

Given the state she was in, Rimi would probably be unable to think properly for the rest of the evening, and Shusei encouraged her to go to bed early. Rimi apologized profusely and thanked him as she left the room for her own chamber. Shusei remained behind in the living room, drinking by himself as he observed the bamboo in the garden.

*How could the treasure have disappeared?* Shusei pondered. I Bunryo always carried the cabinet key on his person. It would have been impossible to steal the key, and without it, the iron bars would not open.

Shusei had gone to inspect the cabinet himself after Bunryo had left. There were no cracks in the stone cabinet, and the iron bars were firmly secured with no way to remove them. There was just enough room between the bars for a flat palm to fit, but the treasure was larger than could fit in two hands. It would have been impossible to remove it through the bars.

*And what was the purpose of taking the treasure? Is this to slight the consorts, as Virtuous Consort Ho suggested?*



Shusei had promised to find the treasure before the Declaration of Stability, but without knowing how it was stolen or what the motive was, the chances of finding the culprit were slim. Still, he'd had no choice but to make that promise. He couldn't have let them hurt Rimi without any evidence.

*We have to find it, no matter what it takes,* Shusei reaffirmed his resolve when he noticed someone behind him. He turned around to find Jotetsu, who had snuck in at some point without Shusei noticing.

"Jotetsu? What are you doing here?" Shusei asked.

"I'm here to get a look at the man who might soon be working for Hakurei."

Jotetsu's reply made it clear that he was already aware of the entire situation. The disappearance of the treasure would have been reported to Shohi immediately, and Shohi must have ordered Jotetsu to use any means at his disposal to gather information about it.

Shusei furrowed his brow. Jotetsu sat down in a chair across from him, a faint smirk on his lips. He then took Shusei's cup and emptied it in one gulp.

"Did you just come to make fun of me?" Shusei asked.

"Do I look like I have nothing better to do than that? I'm here with His Majesty," Jotetsu replied.

"His Majesty? Where is he?" Shusei looked around, but Shohi was nowhere to be seen.

"He went straight to Rimi's bedroom," Jotetsu said indifferently as he poured himself another drink from Shusei's bottle and chugged it down. "He heard about what happened earlier today. He was worried about how the Quinary Dragon would fare with its guardian in despair. Though I do wonder, who is His Majesty actually worried about? He told me to come and meet him at dawn."

*He went directly to Rimi's bedroom. And if he told Jotetsu to come and get him at dawn that means he's planning on staying there the whole night.*

Shusei felt strangely uneasy and his pulse was accelerating. He couldn't get his mind off what might be going on in Rimi's bedroom right now and was unwittingly clenching his fist. The feelings making their way up from his chest

terrified him, and he desperately tried to suppress them.

“Shusei,” Jotetsu suddenly said, leaning forward with a serious expression on his face. “I’ll investigate the treasure for you. Is there anything I can do?”

“Huh? Where did this come from? It is not like you to offer your assistance.”

“The Scattering Lotus is one of the court’s prized treasures. His Majesty is very concerned about it. He’s also afraid that something might happen to you or Rimi if the treasure isn’t found. Those damn officials will probably pester him to make Rimi take responsibility for being present when it was stolen along with you for standing up for her. His Majesty can’t exactly get out of it with nothing but his own feelings to argue with. And I doubt Chancellor Shu would so much as attempt to defend you.”

Shusei was reminded of just how cruel the reality of the situation was and could do nothing but let out a chuckle in despair. He was already aware of his position in life and had come to terms with it long ago. However, if the treasure was not found, Shusei and Rimi would both be in danger.

“Will you do it, Jotetsu?” Shusei asked.

It was clear that getting Jotetsu’s help was the smart thing to do. If Jotetsu felt so much as a sliver of friendship toward Shusei after all their years of serving Shohi together, then betting on that was the best path forward.

“What do I need to do?” Jotetsu inquired.

“Can you get ahold of the letter that was sent to Director I?”

“Piece of cake.”

“I’m counting on you.”

Jotetsu immediately left the room. Shusei, once again alone, let out a deep sigh.

“The treasure. The treasure comes first,” he muttered to himself.

Unable to fully suppress his uneasiness thinking about what might be happening in Rimi’s bedroom, Shusei gulped down his drink.



The moonlight guiding his path, Shohi made his way past the door to Rimi's bedroom and found Rimi sleeping on her bed. He quietly crept closer to her to get a look at her face. The corners of her eyes were slightly red. She must have been crying terribly earlier that day.

*Why would anyone think to suspect such an airheaded woman?*

The situation irritated—even angered—Shohi, but having grown up as a prince of the imperial court, he understood how this could have happened. Anyone aware of Rimi's nature would know that she could never have done it, but it wasn't that simple in the rear palace and the imperial court. Here, most things were decided based only on the circumstances and the status of the person in question. No consideration was made for their nature.

*She must have cried a lot.* It had been enough for even Rimi, who always smiled so carefreely, to cry.

Shohi leaned forward and felt her warm, soft breath.

*Poor thing,* Shohi thought, though he did not realize himself that these words had entered his mind.

He felt an urge to do something for Rimi, and he gently put his hand on her cheek. Rimi let out a small, pained groan in her sleep, before becoming quiet again. There was no sign of her waking up.

"Rimi..." Shohi whispered.

Shohi approached Rimi's lips with his own but stopped himself the moment before they touched. She was currently asleep. Shohi wondered what she might think if she were to learn that he had touched her like this while she was unaware. However, Shohi was the emperor, and Rimi was his concubine. She belonged to him, and there was no reason for him to be hesitant about touching her—even if, perhaps, Rimi would hate him for it.



Even so, he didn't want to do something she would dislike.

Shohi sat down next to the bed and sighed. He had instructed Jotetsu to come and meet him at dawn. He finally realized that he must have, unconsciously, come to visit Rimi's bedroom prepared for something to happen.

However, he couldn't bring himself to do anything.

"How ridiculous. What emperor is unable to take the initiative with his own concubine?"

He looked up with a frustrated expression when he saw an adorable, silver-haired divine beast standing in a ray of moonlight on the floor.

"Quinary Dragon?"

Its silver fur glittering, the divine beast slowly followed the thin ray of moonlight toward the emperor. Just as it was an arm's length away from Shohi, it stopped and looked up at him with round, blue eyes.

"What is the matter, Quinary Dragon? Will you not flee upon seeing me this time?"

The Quinary Dragon did not move, only tilting its head slightly at Shohi.



Having been woken up by the bright morning sun, Rimi was dumbfounded. *What exactly is happening here?*

Shohi was sleeping, sitting on the floor with his back against the bed. And a few steps away, Tama was sleeping, curled up on the floor.

Rimi could not understand what Shohi was doing here to begin with, nor why the emperor of all people was sleeping on the floor. She also couldn't believe that Tama was showing herself despite Shohi being present. Rimi felt as though she was drowning in a deluge of confusion.

"Um... Your Majesty?" she carefully called out, and Shohi finally woke up.

"Is it morning?" Shohi muttered as he looked around the room before standing up.

Tama woke up at the same time, let out a happy squeal, and climbed up on

Rimi's shoulder.

"Your Majesty? When did you come here? And why?" Rimi asked.

"I only came to see the Quinary Dragon. I am leaving," Shohi replied curtly before starting to walk toward the door.

Rimi quickly jumped off the bed, threw a robe atop her night attire, and followed Shohi outside. They found Shusei and Jotetsu in the living room, looking contemplatively down at a table where what appeared to be letters were laid out. As Shohi and Rimi entered the room, they looked up from the table.

"Are you leaving, Your Majesty?" Shusei asked, and Shohi responded with a firm nod as he started walking away.

"I'm off," Jotetsu announced to Shusei, who quietly nodded back before giving Shohi a bow as he walked past. Rimi hurriedly followed Shusei's example as she watched Shohi walk off.

After Shohi and Jotetsu had left, it felt as quiet as if a storm had just passed, and Rimi was left with a vacant look on her face. *What just happened? Why was His Majesty there?*

"Is everything well with your body, Rimi?" Shusei asked gently.

"Huh? Yes, my body is quite fine. Why my body...?"

Rimi's face turned red as she had a sudden realization. Shohi must have been in her bedroom the entire night. Even though he for some reason had been sleeping on the floor, under normal circumstances, if an emperor visited the bedroom of a concubine at night, there was only one conceivable reason. Shusei must have thought the same.

"Nothing happened, Master Shusei! Absolutely nothing!" Rimi exclaimed. "Nothing that could possibly affect my body!"

"Nothing happened at all? What I'm asking is if His Majesty did anything—"

"He did nothing!" Rimi interrupted Shusei. "When I woke up this morning, he was sleeping, sitting on the floor!"

While Rimi desperately denied the allegations, Shusei made a concerned

expression.

“On the floor...?” Shusei muttered.

Upon seeing Shusei’s expression, Rimi felt a stinging pain in her chest. *Could it be that Master Shusei wanted something to happen?*

Shusei wished for Shohi to act in a manner befitting an emperor, and he was also concerned about him having an heir. He had in the past complained about Shohi not visiting any of his consorts or concubines in the rear palace. Above all, he seemed to wish for Shohi to take an interest in women. Thus, hearing that Shohi would, for whatever reason, spend the night in a concubine’s bedroom, Shusei must have gotten his hopes up. He must have wished for something to happen between Shohi and Rimi.

*Master Shusei cares about His Majesty above all else. I’m sure he wishes for me to be a good opportunity for His Majesty to become interested in women. To Master Shusei, I’m...no one special.* This is something she had already known—yet she felt as though she was about to cry. Perhaps her tear ducts had become weaker after yesterday’s shocking events.

“What are those letters on the table, Master Shusei?” Rimi quickly changed the subject to distract herself.

“This is the anonymous tip that was delivered to Director I,” Shusei said as he picked up a piece of paper from the table and showed Rimi. “Jotetsu got a hold of it last night.”

The letter featured excellent penmanship. It claimed that the Scattering Lotus of the Palace of Northern Peaks had been stolen and instructed the director to investigate it immediately.

“And these are letters and notes from everyone who entered the Palace of Northern Peaks, including the four consorts and their handmaids,” Shusei continued. “Jotetsu collected everything he could get his hands on overnight. We were just investigating if the handwriting of any of these matches the anonymous tip. Knowing who wrote the anonymous tip might give us a lead as to who stole the treasure.”

Rimi was impressed that Shusei had managed to do this much in just one

night. But at the same time, it highlighted in her mind how she had done nothing but worry.

“Did you manage to find out who wrote the tip, then?” Rimi asked.

“Yes, we did,” Shusei said. “Unfortunately...it appears to have been written by Noble Consort So.”

“Noble Consort So?”

“We will have to question her, but we can’t very well summon her here. We’ll need to visit the Palace of Great Beauty, but I can’t leave the Palace of Northern Peaks.”

“I will go. I will talk to her,” Rimi offered enthusiastically.

“Can I count on you, then?” Shusei said with a concerned look. “However, I’m worried about having you go there by yourself. Let’s inform Hakurei of the situation and have him join us.”

They contacted Hakurei and explained the situation, and he immediately made arrangements to visit the Palace of Great Beauty. Rimi and Hakurei left the Palace of Northern Peaks and arrived at the Palace of Great Beauty as the Noble Consort was enjoying a late breakfast. They were shown to So’s room, where she was sitting in front of her breakfast, and they had only just finished greeting each other when Hakurei cut to the chase.

“Noble Consort So, we would like to speak to you alone,” Hakurei said while wearing his usual smile, but with a firm tone that wouldn’t accept no for an answer.

### III

“What’s the matter? You both look dreadfully serious,” So said as she brought her neatly trimmed eyebrows together into a frown.

“We have something we must ask you, Noble Consort,” Rimi said. “It’s...about the treasure.”

So’s eyes jerked ever so slightly upon hearing the word “treasure.” Even so, she maintained the dignified attitude of a master as she ordered her handmaids



to leave the room. She took a sip of her fragrant jasmine tea before turning her gaze to Hakurei and Rimi.

“Well? What did you want to ask me?” So said.

“It’s about this,” Rimi answered.

So looked down at the letter Rimi had taken out and scoffed. “What about it? That’s the anonymous tip that was sent to Director I, yes?”

“You wrote this, didn’t you, Noble Consort So? It matches your handwriting.”

“I did not,” So denied.

“Shu Shusei says there’s no mistaking it,” Hakurei insisted. “The scholar hailed as the finest in Konkoku is convinced of it. If you continue denying it, we will be forced to suspect that you are trying to hide something. His Majesty will trust what Shusei has to say, so if Shusei reports that he suspects you, I doubt you will have an easy time.”

“What an awful thing to say. I thought you were on my side, Hakurei,” So said.

“Oh, *of course* I’m on your side.” Hakurei’s eyes narrowed into a sneer.

“You’re lying. No matter how much I look after you, you’ll always prefer Virtuous Consort Ho to me.”

Rimi looked confused in response to So’s sulky statement. She failed to grasp why So had suddenly mentioned the Virtuous Consort.

“Say, Lady Rimi, you’re on my side, aren’t you?” So pleaded.

“Yes, of course,” Rimi responded. “However, if you don’t answer us honestly about the letter, we won’t be able to protect you. Please, Noble Consort, answer us.”

“Oh, would you stop being so annoying! It’s not that big of a deal! I just couldn’t be bothered to talk about it!” So said angrily as she looked away from the two.

“You couldn’t be bothered?”

“Yes, that’s right!”

Irritated, So stood up, walked up to a nearby shelf, and opened a sewing box

coated with golden lacquer. She took out a piece of round cloth, smaller than a palm. On it, the word “consort” was embroidered four times along the edge of the cloth. This design was the symbol of the four consorts, and it could be found sewed onto many of their belongings.

“That evening when I first saw the treasure, I just had to get another glimpse of it. That’s why I returned to the Palace of Northern Peaks in secret that night, bringing only a single handmaid,” So explained.

In conjunction with the suppers, the otherwise locked gate to the Palace of Northern Peaks had been opened up. During the night, the gate was closed, but not locked. It would have been easy to sneak in if you so desired.

“I just wanted a quick glimpse of it,” So continued. “But then I found this on the floor near the cabinet, and the treasure itself was gone.”

So shoved the embroidered cloth into Rimi’s hands, sat down, and took another sip of her jasmine tea.

“If someone learned that I’d entered the Palace of Northern Peaks in secret, I’d get scolded, and the other consorts would have the upper hand when discussing the order for the Declaration of Stability. But my handmaid was in a panic saying we had to inform someone that the treasure was gone, so I sent that letter to Director I,” So explained. “Considering I found that symbol on the floor, the culprit must have been one of the other consorts, either Virtuous Consort Ho, Pure Consort Yo, or Worthy Consort On. But if I was the one to initially make a fuss about it being gone, and I mentioned finding that thing on the floor, they’d suspect me first. That’s why I didn’t tell anyone.”

Hakurei and Rimi exchanged glances.

*She doesn’t seem to be lying at least, but...* The Noble Consort was a frank and prideful girl who had grown up being told she would one day be the emperor’s bride. Why would someone like her risk going to see the treasure at night, knowing that she would get scolded for it? That was the one thing that Rimi couldn’t understand.

“You were aware that you would get scolded if anyone were to find out. Why did you go to have a look at the treasure anyway?” Rimi asked.

“What, don’t you know the legend of the Scattering Lotus? It belonged to the wife of the first emperor of Konkoku, Empress Yoka. Legends say that when she was a young girl, it fell from the heavens into a pond, and she retrieved it from the pond by herself. The emperor fell in love with Empress Yoka after she obtained the treasure. It’s a beautiful tale,” So said wistfully. “Everyone, nobles and commoners alike, have heard it, and there’s no girl who doesn’t dream of finding the treasure herself at least once. What’s wrong with wanting to see such a legendary treasure up close? Any girl would have wanted to do the same.”

So spoke brazenly and defiantly. While shaking her head at the Noble Consort’s very in character attitude, Rimi was also surprised that she would go so far to gain the emperor’s affection. She hadn’t expected the consort to have such a girly side to her.

“After obtaining the treasure, Empress Yoka was loved by the emperor from the bottom of his heart,” So continued. “The treasure also signified her willingness to sacrifice herself for the emperor, even if that meant tearing herself apart like the scattered petals of a flower. That’s why the treasure is called the Scattering Lotus.”

So looked down at her hands.

“I drew ‘Flower Winner’ as my seventh-year fortune. That treasure belongs to me,” she muttered as if trying to encourage herself before suddenly looking up again. “Now, I’ve been honest and told you what happened, so make sure you find that treasure. I know it will become mine.”

Noble Consort So had nothing further to add, so Rimi left the Palace of Great Beauty together with Hakurei. As they walked in the direction of the Palace of Northern Peaks, cicadas making noise overhead, Rimi observed the symbol of the consorts that So had shoved into her hands.

“Does this make Noble Consort So the first person on the scene? If what she said is true, then wouldn’t that narrow down the perpetrator to be either Pure Consort Yo, Virtuous Consort Ho, or Worthy Consort On?” Rimi asked.

“It seems unlikely that someone as simple and true to herself as Noble Consort So would lie. Though it’s certainly cute how she talks about something

so childish as her seventh-year fortune despite her spiteful attitude. Well, maybe it's that very childish side to her that makes her so spiteful," Hakurei said, nonchalantly insulting the consort.

"What's a seventh-year fortune?"

"Girls celebrate their seventh birthday by eating a type of baked treat known as a seventh-year fortune. It's a sweet baked treat made from a thin layer of wheat dough wrapped around porcelain beads with various phrases written on them. It's said that the phrase you draw foretells your future."

Rimi remembered that Worthy Consort On had also mentioned that she had been prophesied on her seventh birthday that she would be joining the rear palace. She must have been talking about her seventh-year fortune.

"The 'Flower Winner' that Noble Consort So mentioned refers to the legend of the Scattering Lotus," Hakurei continued with his usual captivating smile. "It means to marry a good husband. Among nobles, it's usually interpreted as joining the rear palace and becoming the emperor's most favored bride. Drawing it is a joyous occasion for both the girl herself and her family."

"And Noble Consort So managed to draw that fortune on her seventh birthday..." Rimi mused.

So must have been jumping for joy when she learned that she might become the emperor's favorite bride. She had always believed without a doubt that she would be the one to stand next to the emperor.

*Then it's only natural that she doesn't want to give up the spot next to His Majesty—not to anyone,* Rimi thought.

Rimi pondered what fortunes the consorts suspected of having stolen the treasure—the Pure Consort, the Virtuous Consort, and the Worthy Consort—might have drawn for their seventh-year fortunes. As she did, she remembered that So had been upset about something odd.

"Um... Master Hakurei?" Rimi asked. "Noble Consort So said something along the lines of you being on Virtuous Consort Ho's side. What did she mean by that?"

"It's just a matter of family relations," Hakurei explained. "My mother,

Virtuous Consort Sai, and Virtuous Consort Ho's mother were cousins. The Noble Consort must have speculated based on just that."

"I thought you were only here because you wanted to see that eunuch," So had said to Ho during the first supper. Rimi had failed to grasp what she meant then, but now she realized the eunuch in question must have been Hakurei. So had made a snide remark based on nothing but the fact that they were related.

*I do feel like there's more to it, though... Maybe I'm just imagining it...*

Rimi glanced at Hakurei walking next to her. His expression was as beautiful and indecipherable as always.



Hakurei parted with Rimi after they had walked some distance as he was headed to see Shohi in the outer palace. He wanted to report the fact that it was likely one of three consorts, the Pure Consort, the Virtuous Consort, or the Worthy Consort, who had stolen the treasure.

Shohi was awfully concerned about Rimi and Shusei being in an awkward position. Hakurei also felt sorry for Rimi as it was his request that had indirectly led to her being labeled a criminal just as she was finally starting to settle into the rear palace. He also didn't wish to see Shusei joining the rear palace in the same way that he had.

As he passed by the gate to the Palace of Great Purity, he heard someone call his name.

"Hakurei."

Hiding behind the gate under the shadow of a thick tree branch was a slender woman.

"My, if it isn't Virtuous Consort Ho. How may I help you?" Hakurei replied with a bow as he gave the vague, captivating smile that he was so accustomed to giving.

Ho stepped in front of the gate, leaned against the wall, and crossed her arms as she observed Hakurei with a composed expression. Her gaze threatened to make memories of the past well up from inside Hakurei. However, Hakurei knew what to do in times like this—all he had to do was calmly suppress the

feelings inside him.

“Did you find the treasure?” Ho asked.

“No, I’m afraid it has yet to be found. But I trust it is only a matter of time,” Hakurei replied.

The possibility of Ho having stolen the treasure remained, but Hakurei failed to see what her motive could have been. The moment he thought that, however, he let out a dejected sigh in his mind. Though he thought himself to know the Virtuous Consort, eleven years had already passed since he’d last seen her. By now, they were little more than strangers.

“I wanted to have a chance to talk to you alone,” Ho said after a moment’s silence. “I’d heard that you’d joined the rear palace, but I never thought I’d meet you like this. However, you didn’t seem surprised to see me, Hakurei.”

“I always knew that you would grace the rear palace with your presence one day. I had no doubt that I would have the honor of laying my eyes upon you again,” Hakurei said impersonally.

“Oh, stop it.”

“Stop what, Virtuous Consort?”

“I can’t stand it when you use that kind of stuffy language with me.”

A hint of malice flashed in Hakurei’s eyes for a split second. Though he had suppressed his feelings, it was not as though they had disappeared. He found himself agitated by Ho, who was unwittingly bringing those feelings to the surface.

“Surely you are no little girl incapable of comprehending the ways of the world?” Hakurei spat, his words as sharp as a blade. Ho was taken aback, but her eyes quickly became enraged, seemingly insulted from having been called a little girl.

“You don’t need to tell me. I’m only here to earn His Majesty’s affection. I didn’t come here to speak to some eunuch,” Ho spat back.

“I’m relieved that you understand. Now, someone as important as the Virtuous Consort cannot very well be seen alone outside her palace gates with

no handmaids to escort her. Please, hurry back inside.”

Ho gave Hakurei a disgruntled look in response to the abrupt end to the conversation before disappearing through the gates to her palace.

Hakurei let out a small sigh. He could tell himself that he must have looked pale. Were he to return to the Palace of Northern Peaks, Rimi would have been sure to give him soup to eat at the very least. Whenever he looked unhealthy, Rimi would insist on feeding him. Hakurei had a sudden urge to eat a warm, tasty soup.

He had absolutely no desire to speak to Virtuous Consort Ho alone.



Rimi held her breath, pressed behind the corner of a wall, as she watched Hakurei walk off. She had just parted from him, but she had quickly realized that it would be better if Hakurei was with her when she reported Noble Consort So’s statement to Shusei, so she had turned back to go and fetch him.

Just as Hakurei, walking as elegant as ever, had come in sight and she had been about to run up to him, Virtuous Consort Ho had appeared from the gate to the Palace of Great Purity and stopped him. Having lost her chance to call out to him, Rimi had ended up listening in on the pair’s conversation. She had felt guilty for eavesdropping, but that had been the least of her concerns, as what she had been able to make out about their relationship from the conversation had left her astonished.

*But they didn’t act like they knew each other in the least... Based on how they were talking, they must have been very close when they were younger.*

If Ho also had some kind of secret, then Rimi had to find out what it was, or she might make some kind of terrible mistake. Right now, Rimi had to know everything she could about the four consorts—both to find the treasure and to be able to serve the consorts the food that they needed.

*But how...? Master Hakurei would probably not answer if I asked...*

As Rimi stepped out from behind the wall and passed the gate to the Palace of Great Purity, someone violently grabbed her upper arm all of a sudden. With no time to even react, she was dragged through the gate and pushed against

the trunk of a lily magnolia.

“Virtuous Consort Ho?” Rimi asked the person who was holding both her shoulders tightly pressed against the tree trunk.

“Were you listening, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu?” Ho asked menacingly as she looked down at Rimi without so much as blinking, emotionless.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. But I swear, I won’t tell any—”

“There is nothing suspicious between the two of us!” Ho snapped as she strengthened her grip on Rimi’s shoulders, and Rimi grimaced from the pain. Rimi found it unbelievable how such slender arms could possess so much strength, and she was unable to move. Even so, she continued to look directly into the consort’s eyes.

“But Virtuous Consort Ho, you did have some kind of relationship with Master Hakurei in the past, didn’t you? Won’t you tell me about it? I need to know as much as I can about the four consorts right now.”

“Why must I tell *you*?”

“If you truly believe that there is nothing suspicious between the two of you, then please, tell me. It’s my duty to serve the four consorts—including you, Virtuous Consort Ho—the food you need. Fulfilling that duty is a way for me to find a place where I belong.”

“You have a way with words. But what need do you, someone with both the title of palace woman and a dwelling of your own, have for a place you belong? Surely even without a duty, you still have a place for yourself in the rear palace.”

“Regardless of my position, and even if I have my own abode, if I’m not needed by anyone nor accepted by anyone, then that is not a place where I belong. My duty is what gave me a place where I belong, and I don’t want to lose it now.”

“Is that because you’re a Wakokuan?” Ho’s eyes trembled for a moment.

“Even in Wakoku, I had no place where I belonged as a child. However, after being granted a duty, I finally found a place I could call my own. But coming to



Konkoku meant losing that place, and I started to look for somewhere else that I could belong,” Rimi said. “It’s only now that I’ve been given a duty and finally found a new place for myself.”

“Having a duty means having a place you belong?” Ho scoffed as though deriding herself as she released her grip on Rimi, averted her gaze, and straightened her back. “Being a palace woman isn’t all roses, huh?”

“Virtuous Consort Ho, I believe you when you say there is nothing suspicious between you two. So please tell me how you know each other,” Rimi implored.

“You’re a stubborn one, aren’t you?” Ho sighed before continuing dispassionately. “My mother and Hakurei’s late mother were cousins. They were both daughters of the Sai house, which is related to the Ho house, and my mother married into the Ho house. That is all.”

“So you knew Master Hakurei from before?”

“Weren’t you listening? Of course I did. Do you know anything about the Ho house?”

“I heard from Master Shusei that the Ho house was founded by the twin brother of the emperor who ruled fifty years ago. I was told that it’s the second most prestigious house after the royal Ryu house.”

“Calling it the second most prestigious does make it sound fancy, but in the end it was founded by the twin who lost the struggle for the throne and had to become a subject, taking the Ho name in the process,” the Virtuous Consort explained. “The Ho family has a tendency to believe ourselves to be the rightful heirs to the throne. That’s why we’d always get involved whenever it was time for a new emperor to take the throne. But now that all the direct descendants are gone, things aren’t quite as simple.”

“Gone?”

“The only son of the previous head of the house—my uncle, in other words—abandoned the house, and we lost our direct line of descendants. Now we have lost any say in the dispute over the throne,” Ho said. “So instead, the family wanted to have a woman related to the family join the rear palace and have her birth the emperor’s heir so that, in the end, someone with Ho blood would sit

on the throne, albeit in a roundabout way. The woman in question was Hakurei's mother, Virtuous Consort Sai."

If Hakurei's mother was related to the Ho family, then Ho blood must have run in Hakurei's veins as well.

"But in the end," Ho continued, "Virtuous Consort Sai took her own life, and Hakurei lost the right to the throne. In a final desperate attempt, the Ho house sent me to the rear palace instead. But you see..."

Ho looked to the side with a sudden motion and sunlight fell on her beautiful, fair cheek through the gaps between the vividly green leaves of the magnolia tree.

"Back when Hakurei was still a prince, my mother would often take me to meet him and his mother, Virtuous Consort Sai. On the surface, it was nothing more than two close cousins joining each other for tea parties. But in reality, they were scheming, intending to bring me together with Hakurei, who they assumed was going to take the throne one day," Ho explained. "They thought an emperor with Ho blood and an empress from the Ho house would have been the perfect combination. Ever since they first brought me to meet Hakurei, I was told that I would become his future bride."

The chirping of the cicadas overhead seemed to grow ever louder.

"I was still young, so I didn't think twice about it, the fool that I was. Hakurei treated me kindly, and I quickly grew attached to him. I believed with all my heart that we would one day be together," Ho said.

Though it was nothing more than the plotting of adults, the young consort-to-be had readily accepted it. Ho and Hakurei were friendly to each other, and perhaps they even grew to love each other to some degree.

"But then *that* happened to Hakurei," Ho said in disgust. "However, the Ho house didn't care if the emperor was Hakurei or not—as long as a woman of the Ho family became His Majesty's favored consort, his heir would still have Ho blood in him. That is why I joined the rear palace. Nothing more."

*She's like a piece on a game board. If one strategy doesn't work, she's moved somewhere else with no say of her own in the matter.*

Reuniting with the person that they had once thought they would be with must have been painful for both Hakurei and Ho. But outwardly they acted as though they didn't know each other in an attempt to protect each other.

*But Virtuous Consort Ho must still...* The Virtuous Consort had taken the opportunity to speak with Hakurei while no one else was around. Though she knew that nothing could be done, her desire to speak to him had been too strong. And despite still possessing those feelings deep in her heart, she had nevertheless accepted her duty to obtain the Scattering Lotus and was determined to fulfill that duty above all else. *How strong she is...and how tragic her resolve is.*

"I was surprised to hear that Noble Consort So had managed to get wind of all of this. I suppose she must have heard it from Director I," Ho said. "Despite how she might look, that little brat is surprisingly clever. She seems to actively approach all those with influence or who might be useful to her and brings them to her side."

Ho suddenly gave Rimi a composed smile.

"Well?" Ho asked confrontationally. "Is that enough for you? That's all there is to Master Hakurei and me. Now we're nothing more than a Virtuous Consort and a palace attendant. There is nothing between the two of us. I just didn't want to invite undue speculation, which is why I didn't want to talk about it."

"Yes, I understand now," Rimi replied honestly. "There is nothing suspicious between you two."

"You may leave now," Ho ordered as she turned around and started walking.

Seeing her shawl dance beautifully in the wind, Rimi felt a sharp pain in her chest, and couldn't help but call out for the consort.

"Virtuous Consort Ho!"

The consort stopped walking and turned around. Rimi wanted to apologize to her from the bottom of her heart. It pained her that she had forced Ho to talk about something she hadn't wanted to discuss, all the while putting on a brave front. Still, no matter how much she apologized, it felt to Rimi as though her words would just seem empty and transparent. Instead, she took out a small

package from her sleeve.

“Please have this,” she offered Ho.

Ho opened the wrapping paper to find cinnamon candy shining like amber in the sun.

“What is this?” Ho asked, furrowing her brow.

“It’s cinnamon candy. The cuisinologist said that it’s refreshing and perfect for a hot summer day. The fragrance helps you calm down.”

“Candy, huh? Do you take me for a child?” Ho said with a sardonic smile. Even so, she picked up one piece of candy and held it up against the sunlight. It shone with a beautiful color, almost like the color of Hakurei’s eyes. “I suppose I’ll have just one.”

Ho gallantly put the piece of candy in her mouth before once again turning her back to Rimi. Rimi put the package back in her sleeve, put her hands on top of each other, and gave Ho a deep bow as she watched her walk off.

*Near the end, she called him “Master Hakurei,” just once.* She had probably done it unconsciously. After finishing her story, and seeing that Rimi had seemed to understand, Ho accidentally let it slip—she must have been used to referring to Hakurei as “Master Hakurei.” It was unlike her to make such a mistake. Still, it was proof of just how close the two had once been.

When Rimi had first visited the Palace of Great Purity, Ho had acted high and mighty, almost threatening. Rimi thought it might have been the result of the resolve with which the consort bound herself to her own duty—and the pain that came with it. Just by seeing Hakurei, the Virtuous Consort’s heart must have ached. Rimi had offered her the cinnamon candy, reminiscent of Hakurei’s eyes, in the hopes that it might comfort her, if only slightly—but something like that would not be enough to give her peace of mind.

*What does Virtuous Consort Ho need? What does she want?* Rimi was drowning in a flood of thoughts. *If Virtuous Consort Ho is the one who stole the treasure, then what could her motive have been? Could it have been that very resolve of hers that compelled her to take it? Or is she not involved at all?*

Rimi was more unsure than ever.

# Chapter 5: The True Meaning of the Name

I

Pure Consort Yo, Virtuous Consort Ho, and Worthy Consort On were the most suspicious out of the four consorts—yet despite a thorough search through each of their palaces soon after the disappearance of the treasure, nothing had been found. Furthermore, if one of them truly was the culprit, the motive was still unclear, and it was a complete mystery how they could have stolen the treasure from behind the iron bars of the cabinet. It was an awkward situation—since the Department of Service hadn’t found anything when searching through their palaces, it would be difficult to further investigate the three publicly.

“We just need to find it before the Declaration of Stability,” Shusei had said as if trying to encourage himself upon hearing that Yo, Ho, and On were suspected. “The summer is still far from over, and we’ll be spending every evening together with them. We can take our time investigating them to gather information. We will find it.” Everything would be fine as long as they found the treasure before the ceremony.

It was up to Rimi and Shusei to serve the four consorts supper every evening, and while doing so they could investigate the three suspected consorts for clues about who could have stolen the treasure. But despite their best attempts, fifteen days passed without any new information surfacing.

Naturally, they had done everything in their power to find the treasure. Shusei had asked Jotetsu to once again search every nook and cranny of the three consorts’ palaces. Rimi had put her old handmaid’s network to use to gather information from the consorts’ handmaids to see if anything out of the ordinary had happened recently. Nevertheless, Jotetsu had failed to find anything, and the handmaids had not had any useful information to share.

Despite this, Rimi would unrelentingly visit the four consorts’ palaces regularly in the hopes of coming across anything that might lead her to the treasure.

Noble Consort So had continued to act disagreeably ever since Rimi and Hakurei questioned her, and Virtuous Consort Ho still maintained her usual haughty demeanor. Only Pure Consort Yo and Worthy Consort On would invite Rimi into their palaces with open arms—though this only made her feel all the more guilty for having to suspect the two.

Today Rimi was visiting Pure Consort Yo, who had happily showed her to her bedroom in the Palace of Great Light. Yo had dragged Rimi onto the bed and invited her to play a game of cards, and proceeded to immediately win eight consecutive rounds against Rimi.

“My, dearest! You’re absolutely awful at this, aren’t you?” Yo exclaimed cheerfully.

“But why...? I don’t understand why I can’t beat you, Pure Consort Yo,” Rimi answered dejectedly.

“Oh, you haven’t noticed, dearest?” Yo said as she placed a card down and shifted closer to Rimi with a mischievous smile. “Whenever you draw the ogre card, your nose starts to twitch.”

“What?!” Rimi exclaimed as Yo tapped her on the tip of her nose. Laughing, Yo fell backward on the bed, then put her head on Rimi’s lap.

“Your lap is so nice, dearest.”

“I-I-Is th-that so...?” Rimi said with an awkward smile. This was her first time experiencing anything like this.

*What is this strange feeling, as though I’m being loved...? Still, even this innocent-looking Pure Consort could be the one who stole the treasure...* Rimi was perpetually anxious inside, wanting to find the treasure as quickly as possible.

The four consorts had appeared for supper each evening without fail. Serving the consorts food like this was the closest to a respite that Rimi got, the one thing she had to look forward to every day. Preparing their supper was the only time that she could get her mind off the stolen treasure, if only for a little while. The Pure Consort would always compliment Rimi’s cooking with a cheerful smile.

*Pure Consort Yo seems to be satisfied with the food every evening. The other three also show up every day, so they must be enjoying it too. Still...they're all very different from how His Majesty and Master Hakurei acted.* Rimi thought back to when she had served Shohi and Hakurei the xiantang as well as her time serving her Saigu sister. The expression of someone who was truly satisfied from the bottom of their heart was somehow different from the consorts' expressions. They were satisfied on the surface but something was still lacking within them—and they probably didn't even know themselves what they were lacking. Rimi was still somehow unsatisfied with the meals she had served.

"U-Um... Pure Consort?" Rimi said carefully as Yo had kept her head on her lap for so long that Rimi's legs had gone numb.

"Just a bit more," Yo said in a sweet voice while burying her face in Rimi's lap.

*She's certainly adorable... But considering her desires, wouldn't she have tried to resist joining the rear palace, where everything revolves around attracting His Majesty's attention?* Rimi couldn't understand it.

"Pure Consort Yo, you mentioned before that you don't like men. Have you always disliked them?" Rimi asked.

"Yes, I suppose so..." Yo replied, turning her face upward with eyes that seemed to reminisce. "No, not quite. Long ago, I thought that there were virtuous, kind, and beautiful men in the world, and it was my dream to marry one. I was told from a young age that men like that existed, even if they might be out of reach. His Majesty, for instance. I drew 'Flower Winner' as my seventh-year fortune, and I was actually happy when I did. I thought I'd get to encounter a wonderful man one day."

The Pure Consort fell silent for a moment before continuing quietly.

"If a flower like that truly existed...then maybe this world wouldn't be so bad."

The "flower" Yo spoke of must have been the virtuous and beautiful man she had once dreamt of. Despite how she complained about men, some part of her still seemed to want for such a man to exist.

Rimi suddenly remembered that the "Flower Winner" Yo had mentioned was

the same seventh-year fortune that So had drawn.

“How many kinds of seventh-year fortunes are there?” Rimi asked.

“Commoners usually choose from one hundred and fifty, while I believe nobles choose from six hundred,” Yo explained. “Of course, my father wanted to show off, so he picked the version with six hundred fortunes.”

*Six hundred...?* Something felt strange about that number.

“But before long, I realized that as men grow older, they become savage, greedy, smelly, and immature,” Yo continued. “They’re just awful.”

“That’s a terribly extreme opinion,” Rimi noted.

“You can thank my father. He’s savage, greedy, smelly, immature, and awful. I absolutely hate him. People call him the finest merchant in the capital, but he’s nothing more than a greedy little goblin. When I saw him, I felt like I was observing the true nature of all men.” Yo grimaced.

“Oh, and you won’t believe this,” Yo said with a mischievous look in her eyes. She seemed to be trying to have her fun, but the corners of her mouth couldn’t hide her intense feelings of hatred. “My father wanted to marry Noble Consort So, even though she’s almost the same age as me. He offered the head of the So house money in exchange for his daughter. Of course, he was turned down. But you see...”

Yo paused, and her eyes grew cold.

“The head of the So house responded: ‘If Reiki can’t gain His Majesty’s favor, she’ll disgrace the entire So house. If she still hasn’t borne his child after some years, we’ll request for her to be removed from the rear palace. If she’ll only serve to look inferior to the other consorts, we might as well give her to Ma Ijun instead.’”

“What...?” Rimi responded, astonished.

“That’s right. It’s not just my father. The head of the So house is the same way. That’s how all men are. That’s why I hate them. I hate them so much,” the otherwise so innocent and spirited Pure Consort spat. It was as though she was vomiting out a solid ball of hatred from deep within her chest. “I was adopted



by the Yo house and was ordered to join the rear palace and become His Majesty's favored consort. Can you believe how forceful they were? His Majesty is a man just like the rest, and I have absolutely no interest in being his consort. But I loved the idea of getting to go somewhere without any men. That's why I joined the rear palace without a second thought. I wanted to meet someone lovely like you, my dearest, and enjoy my life here."

Rimi was surprised to hear that even someone as prideful and arrogant as So was in such a weak position. If a girl like her, who adored the beautiful emperor so passionately, was instructed to become the bride of a man as old as her father, her hatred would surely be immeasurable.

Pure Consort Yo, on the other hand, was indeed a very pure girl—so much so that she couldn't forgive the existence of anything filthy.

"I don't want to exit the rear palace. I don't want His Majesty to set his sights on me, but I still want to remain here," Yo continued. "Say, dearest, what should I do? If the other consorts have to leave the palace, then perhaps I could stay, at least? Is there anything I can do to make His Majesty hate them while I remain unnoticed by him, like a pebble on the ground?"

"I can't agree with doing anything that would trouble the other consorts," Rimi remarked.

"Yes, I'm sure you wouldn't." Yo playfully stuck out her tongue.

*Even though she says some mischievous things, she's still a very pure and adorable girl.*

Rimi gently stroked Yo's hair that rested on her forehead, and the consort smiled from the ticklish sensation.

Noble Consort So, despite acting high and mighty, would be deemed an embarrassment if she couldn't attract the emperor's attention. Pure Consort Yo couldn't stand men. Worthy Consort On, who was delicate and timid, had reluctantly joined the rear palace. And Virtuous Consort Ho had a past with Hakurei.

*The four consorts all have backgrounds of their own, Rimi thought as she remembered how unsatisfying the suppers had felt so far. The suppers can't*

*continue aimlessly like this. There must be something that the consorts need.*

Rimi had a strange feeling that there was something that connected all four of them, despite their disparate backgrounds.

*Something that connects them... Something that they need...* She felt as though if she could only figure out what it was, it could also lead to a solution to the problem of the Declaration of Stability. But the answer remained hidden.

Rimi still didn't have the faintest of clues as to the location of the treasure. She was in the middle of a deep tunnel, unable to proceed ahead, as she frantically tried to grab at the stone wall that blocked her path, stuck at a complete standstill.

*I have to hurry.*



Even Shusei was becoming increasingly anxious, and his disappointment was growing bigger each day. Today, once again, he had served the four consorts supper before returning to his own building.

He sat in the living room, feeling the wind as it was carried away from the bamboo grove. The flame of the lone candle that was lighting the table danced unsteadily in the wind.

*Eleven days until the Declaration of Stability...* Shusei thought as he counted the days on his fingers, growing more melancholic with each one.

Once again, this evening's supper had finished without incident. The consorts had so far been satisfied with both the effects and the taste of the food, which prompted them to attend the supper every day. Hakurei would wait on them while subtly trying to steer the conversation toward the Declaration of Stability, but the topic would inevitably shift to the missing treasure.

It would be beyond unsightly if, during the Declaration of Stability, there was no treasure for the chosen consort to hold up next to Shohi. Some members of the Bureau of Sacrifices had even started suggesting that the consorts should not attend the Declaration of Stability at all—something even more disgraceful than simply not being chosen to stand next to the emperor.

*I might just end up working for Hakurei after all...* Shusei despaired.

Shusei had to take responsibility for being present when the treasure disappeared, even though he was the son of the chancellor, the emperor's grand councilor, and a cuisinology scholar. Becoming a eunuch was, if anything, a small punishment in light of what had happened. He wasn't worried about himself; he had chosen to accept these terms. Rimi was the more unfortunate of the two. She might suffer an even worse fate than him. She was a Wakokuan, and just as I Bunryo looked down on her, so would the officials of the court, meaning they would show her no mercy.

*But there's one way to protect her,* Shusei thought as he felt a sharp pain in his chest. He hadn't wanted to think about it but time was running out. He had to tell Rimi of this option and convince her to take it.

"Oh, Master Shusei," Rimi exclaimed as she entered the room with carefree steps, startling Shusei. Her hair was wet—she must have just returned from a bath. The scent of her warm skin reached Shusei's nose, and he was unable to look straight at her.

"You must be tired, Rimi," Shusei said. "You should hurry to bed."

"I was planning to, but something bothered me about the consorts' suppers," Rimi said as she stood in the doorway as if to enjoy the breeze with a contemplative look.

"The consorts say that they like the food, and they seem happy with its effects as well. So, what bothers you about it?" Shusei asked.

"It feels like something is missing, as if they aren't fully enjoying their meals."

Shusei gave Rimi an awkward smile. Whenever Rimi was seriously worrying about something, it always came down to food.

"We have eleven days until the Declaration of Stability," Shusei said. "You are quite blasé to be worrying about whether the consorts are enjoying their meals while the treasure remains unfound."

"I'm sorry," Rimi apologized. "You're quite right. If we don't find the treasure soon, you will..."

"Don't apologize. And it's not just me who is in danger. If anything, I'm more worried about you."

“What... What if we don’t find the treasure...?”

Rimi’s words seemed to reflect her anxiousness. But despite her worry, she still gave each supper her all every evening. When all was said and done, she must have been rather mentally strong—or perhaps she was simply distracting herself from the hopeless situation.

*I have to protect her*, Shusei thought with every fiber of his being. He knew a way to protect her. He had to tell her and make her take the safest option.

“Has His Majesty already visited you today?” Shusei asked.

Ever since the treasure was stolen, Shohi had been visiting Rimi every single day. He still stubbornly claimed to be visiting only to get a look at the Quinary Dragon, but he would spend each visit sneaking into Rimi’s bedroom, briefly chatting with her if she was awake or just catching a glimpse of her sleeping face before quietly leaving.

“No, not yet,” Rimi replied. “He usually shows up around midnight.”

“Rimi,” Shusei said as he made up his mind, stood up, and gazed straight into Rimi’s eyes. “As I said before, I’m worried about what might happen to you if the treasure isn’t found.”

“I’m more concerned about you, Master—”

“Don’t worry about me. You’re the one in more danger here,” Shusei interrupted her, before finally getting to the point. “When His Majesty visits your bedroom tonight, plead to him to make you his favorite concubine. I’m certain His Majesty won’t say no.”

## II

“Huh...?!” Rimi exclaimed, dumbfounded.

The one way to ensure Rimi’s safety was to make her Shohi’s favorite concubine. That was the conclusion Shusei had reached. It would be even better for her to bear the emperor’s child. They couldn’t very well threaten a concubine pregnant with the emperor’s child, even if she happened to be a Wakokuan who had been involved in the disappearance of the treasure.

“If you become his favored concubine, you’ll be fine, regardless of whether the treasure is found or not,” Shusei explained.

“What are you talking about? That’s... Well...you may be right, but why in the world would I, a Lady of Precious Bevy, become his favorite concubine, and not one of the four consorts?”

“You are much closer to His Majesty than the consorts.”

“But His Majesty doesn’t think of me as anything more than Tama’s wet nurse,” Rimi argued.

“That’s not true. His Majesty does have an interest in you. Even if the Quinary Dragon wasn’t in the picture, he would be worried about you,” Shusei tried to assure her. “If you ask for his favor, he will surely say yes. That I can assure you as someone who’s spent many years by His Majesty’s side. So go and become his favored concubine. Even if you don’t truly want to, it’s what you need to do.”

Rimi remained wide-eyed, silently looking up at Shusei.

*I’m asking something cruel of her*, Shusei realized. Rimi was not romantically interested in Shohi—if anything, as innocent as she was, she had likely never fallen in love with anyone. And now Shusei was telling her to become the favorite concubine of a man she didn’t even love.

“Is that...what you want...Master Shusei...?” Rimi said with a quivering voice as her large eyes slowly started to tremble and tears ran down her cheeks.

*You think I would wish for that?!* Shusei almost shouted, but as he desperately fought to suppress his voice, he acted instinctively. He embraced the girl in front of him.



“Master Shusei...?” Rimi’s voice was trembling in confusion. But that was only natural since the moment after Shusei had told her to ask to become Shohi’s favorite concubine, he had suddenly embraced her. No one could fault her for not understanding what Shusei was thinking or what he was trying to do. But the same was true of Shusei himself—he was bewildered, unable to understand his own actions. Despite thinking that Rimi should become Shohi’s favorite concubine, he had embraced her.

“I... Rimi...” Shusei said in a raspy voice.

Seemingly realizing something from Shusei’s powerful embrace, Rimi carefully touched his shoulder.

“Master Shusei, I... I can’t become His Majesty’s favorite concubine, even if you ask me to,” Rimi said. “If we can’t find the treasure, I’ll prepare myself for whatever may come. I can’t let you face punishment alone.”



The moment Rimi had been told to ask for Shohi’s favor, it had felt as though an arrow had pierced her chest. But as Shusei embraced her, apparently confused himself, Rimi realized how kind he was. How warm he was.

*Master Shusei was only trying to protect me.* Shusei must have felt sorry about asking her to do something she didn’t want to do. That’s why he had embraced her, grieving together with her.

“I can’t ask you to sacrifice yourself alongside me,” Shusei said.

Hearing Shusei’s words, Rimi was convinced. He was far too kind. She gave him a soft smile.

“You remind me of Tama, Master Shusei. You’re both very kind,” Rimi said.

Rimi had never met a god or an immortal. She only knew Tama, a divine being close to the gods. Tama was very kind, and Shusei was just about as kind as Tama.

Rimi was suddenly reminded of the legend of the Scattering Lotus that Noble Consort So had told her about. The treasure had fallen from the heavens to instruct the empress to be prepared to sacrifice herself for the emperor she

loved.

*But that makes no sense, Rimi thought as she felt the kindness in Shusei's embrace. Would the heavens ask something so cruel of her? Would beings as kind as Tama and Shusei really say something like that? I don't believe it.*

Shusei would never have asked something like that of her. To tear oneself apart like the scattered petals of a flower was far too cruel a fate. Rimi was convinced that the legend was false; the Scattering Lotus couldn't have been named after something so cruel.

*"Scattering"... What could it mean? And was the treasure really made by the heavens? I don't think so. That the heavens made it is just part of the legend. In reality, it was made by a skilled artisan. Even if it somehow was imbued with the will of the heavens, it was created and named by humans.*

Rimi then remembered the broken porcelain bottle.

"Ah!" Rimi exclaimed as she felt a sensation like that of lightning passing through her body. "Master Shusei!"

Shusei looked down at Rimi, surprised.

"What's the matter, Rimi?" he asked.

"I figured out how the treasure was stolen!"

"What?!" Shusei said, his eyes wide from the sudden announcement.

The first night of the consorts' supper, Rimi had touched the broken porcelain bottle. She thought back to what had crossed her mind back then. There was a much simpler way to understand the name of the Scattering Lotus.

"If I'm right, then they'll never find the treasure no matter how much they search! It's been hiding in plain sight! I know how to find it!" Rimi exclaimed, excited.

"What are you talking about?" Shusei asked, baffled.

"Master Shusei, can you ask Master Jotetsu to lend you his assistance again? I want him to search through the consorts' palaces one more time."

Rimi quickly explained the realization that had just come to her.



“It’s possible,” Shusei said with a firm nod the moment she finished explaining, and he immediately sent for Jotetsu.

Despite being summoned on such short notice, Jotetsu happily accepted the request and snuck into the four consorts’ palaces the very same night. He returned surprisingly quickly before daybreak. In his hand was a small, transparent fragment.

“It was easy as soon as I knew where to look. I found it in no time,” Jotetsu grinned.

After taking a look at the object Jotetsu had brought with him, Rimi and Shusei looked at each other and nodded. Next, they summoned Hakurei before the sun rose, informing him that the treasure had been found.

That morning, Rimi brought Shusei and Hakurei with her to visit the palace of one of the four consorts.

Early in the morning, before breakfast had even commenced, Worthy Consort On cheerfully welcomed Rimi, Shusei, and Hakurei into her palace. She wore a conservative, light green ruqun outfit that she had apparently scrambled to put together as she greeted the trio with a kind and happy, if bewildered, expression.

They had asked to speak alone with the consort, and only the four of them were now present in the room. Of course, the Palace of Great Heights had far fewer handmaids than the other palaces, and the few that did work there knew not to bother their master more than necessary.

“What brings you here so early, Lady Setsu, Cuisinologist Shusei, and even Master Hakurei?” On asked. “Not that I’m ungrateful to have you here. It’s always so quiet in this palace.”

The consort smiled as she personally prepared a summer tea for her guests. A nice and cool morning breeze passed through the room. Rimi sat by a table together with Shusei and Hakurei as she realized that the warmest days of the summer had passed. It was only ten days until the Declaration of Stability. Autumn had started to make its presence felt during the mornings and evenings.

“We are here to ask you to return something,” Shusei explained. On looked back at him with a perplexed expression as she placed a cup of tea in front of Rimi.

“Did I borrow something from you, Cuisinologist Shusei?” On asked.

“We want you to return the Scattering Lotus,” Rimi said. As soon as she did, On dropped the cup she was about to place in front of Hakurei, and the light green tea spilled across the table.

On opened her mouth, seemingly trying to apologize, but no words managed to pass her lips.

Rimi reached into her sleeve, took something out, and put it on the table. It was the object that Jotetsu had brought back from the Palace of Great Heights the night before—a flower petal made of crystal that could fit entirely in one palm. The crystal was so pure and transparent that it could have been mistaken for solid water, yet it turned a faint pink toward the tip of the petal. It was a petal that had been part of the Scattering Lotus that had disappeared from the stone cabinet.

Hakurei silently stood up from his seat and walked up to a medicine box placed alongside a wall. On was trembling, and upon seeing Hakurei place his hands on the box, she let out a distraught “Ah!” as she reached out with her hands as if trying to stop him.

However, Hakurei opened the box. He then took out a crystal petal similar to the one that was currently lying on the table.

Jotetsu had already found the locations of the petals the night before, after which he had taken a single one with him to ensure that they had irrefutable evidence.

“You can’t explain your way out of this, Worthy Consort On,” Hakurei said with a smile as he held up the crystal petal.

Suddenly, as if something had snapped inside of her, the Worthy Consort limply sat down on the floor.

“Worthy Consort!” Rimi exclaimed as she rushed to her side and moved her to the chair she had been sitting in.

Shusei stood up.

“Why did you steal the treasure, Worthy Consort On?” he said in a quiet but determined tone.

“I... I... I didn’t steal...” the consort spoke in a weak, trembling voice.

“Then how do you explain this?” Shusei demanded.

“I broke... I broke it...by accident...”

On’s words confirmed Rimi’s theory.

“Worthy Consort On, you went to have a look at the treasure in secret that night, didn’t you?” Rimi asked in a kind voice, and On nodded. “To tell you the truth, Noble Consort So also went to look at it the same night. She said that any girl would want to see that legendary flower up close. After seeing it up close, did you have a sudden urge to make it your own?”

“No, that’s not... I... I know better than to think myself worthy of that. I just thought if I touched it...maybe I could earn His Majesty’s favor, just like Empress Yoka. And if not, maybe I could at least attract his attention just a little bit with the power of the treasure.”

She had just wanted to touch it, nothing more. That was why she had reached inside the cabinet, past the iron bars.

“Virtuous Consort Ho was right. I’m not as lucky as the other consorts. If His Majesty comes to hate me and chases me out of the rear palace, I’ll have nowhere to go,” On explained.

If a concubine with the status of consort failed to attract the emperor’s attention for many years, she would eventually be demoted. If that happened, the disgrace and shame of having been demoted would force her to leave the rear palace. While the emperor’s permission would be needed to leave the rear palace, it was unlikely that he would make an effort to stop a concubine he wasn’t even interested in.

“My father’s new wife detests me,” On continued. “She told me never to come back. She even said that she was happy to be free of me the day I joined the rear palace. If I can’t attract His Majesty’s attention, I’ll... That’s why I...”

Rimi remembered her own childhood. She had always felt ashamed and uneasy because she had lacked a place to call her own. At last, Rimi had been sent to serve the Saigu, but the Worthy Consort had not been as lucky. Even now, she was unable to relax inside the rear palace. Without the affection of the emperor, she could be forced to leave the rear palace at some point—but at the same time, she did not have the confidence to fight the other consorts and concubines for her place as the emperor's most beloved bride.

*All she had left was praying to the treasure,* Rimi thought. Her motives for seeing the treasure again had not been as innocent as Noble Consort So's.

"But it broke when you touched it, correct?" Hakurei asked as he lightly stroked the petal in his hand, and On nodded. Teardrops fell on the table, and On covered her face.

That night, On must have reached through the iron bars and desperately touched the treasure in an awkward position, causing one of the petals to fall out. She then frantically tried to put it back and even more petals fell out, and the treasure came apart. In a panic, she had removed the petals from the cabinet one by one and taken them to her palace in an attempt to hide what she had done.

This explains why they could never find the treasure no matter how much they searched—everyone was looking for it in places large enough to fit the entire Scattering Lotus. But in reality, it had come apart and been scattered with some pieces hiding in small gaps, others in a medicine box, and so on.

The treasure hadn't been removed from the cabinet with magic. As long as you knew the trick, it was simple.

*Worthy Consort On had no evil intentions whatsoever. All she wanted was to attract His Majesty's affection, not out of pride or for the sake of appearances, but simply to be able to live quietly in the rear palace.* Even though the consort's actions had led to Rimi being suspected and Shusei being threatened for defending her, Rimi still couldn't help but feel sorry for her.

When Bunryo had accused Rimi, On had said "It truly pained me to hear about it" during the supper the same night, looking as though she had done something wrong. At the time Rimi had just assumed that she was being

sympathetic, but that had actually been her feelings of guilt toward Rimi and Shusei, while at the same time not having the courage to confess what had happened.

Shusei was also observing On with sad eyes as she hid her face.

“You have all the pieces of the treasure, do you not, Worthy Consort On?” Hakurei asked with an expression that disguised what he was thinking while rubbing the petal in his hand with his thumb.

The Worthy Consort nodded silently and started pointing at various locations in the room. Hakurei and Shusei searched the indicated locations to find petals of the treasure that had been hidden there—in gaps by the doors, inside vases, and in the sleeve of a ruqun hanging on a clothing rack. They placed all the petals they had found on the table. None seemed to be missing.

Rimi gently stroked On’s back as she turned her gaze to Shusei and Hakurei.

“Master Shusei, Master Hakurei,” Rimi said. “All Worthy Consort On did was touch the treasure. She thought she had broken it and was too scared to tell the truth. We have nothing to gain by charging her for what she did. Can’t we return the treasure in secret and overlook what happened?”

“Well, you and Shusei are the real victims here,” Hakurei said. “If you’re fine with it, I don’t mind turning a blind eye.”

“I don’t particularly care to charge Worthy Consort On either,” Shusei added.

Rimi was about to break into a smile upon hearing Hakurei and Shusei’s responses when On looked up.

“No. No, this is enough,” On said fervently as tears streamed down her cheeks. “What I’ve done has come to light. I broke the treasure. I’ve done something unforgivable. I’m a coward who couldn’t even reveal the truth when Lady Setsu and the cuisinologist were being accused. I have to atone for what I’ve done. I was already prepared to...to not be able to live on once my crime was discovered.”

Rimi smiled at On in an attempt to calm her down.

“Don’t worry, Worthy Consort On. Your only crime was taking the treasure

without permission,” Rimi said.

“No, I...”

“You see, the treasure isn’t actually broken.”

### III

“What are you talking about?” On asked. “Just look, it’s all in pieces!”

“This treasure was made to come apart to begin with,” Rimi explained.

“Huh...?” On blinked vacantly, and Rimi gave her a sympathetic smile.

“Would you mind, Shusei?” Hakurei suggested. “This should be a piece of cake for the foremost scholar of Konkoku.”

Shusei reached out toward the petals and touched each of them one by one. He then gave a small nod before picking up two petals and slowly bringing them together. A clear clicking sound could be heard, and Shusei removed his hands from the petals. The petals were locked together at the base.

The Worthy Consort looked on in amazement.

“The treasure is formed by putting together the petals like this to make one single flower,” Shusei explained as he added one petal after another. Rimi smiled happily at the sight of Shusei making the crystal lotus bloom.

“I was told that the Scattering Lotus was named to command the bearer to sacrifice herself for the emperor,” Rimi said. “But that is probably just a convenient reinterpretation by later generations made to emphasize the authority of the emperor. The name actually refers to a property of the treasure itself—the fact that it comes apart. That its petals can be scattered.”

Rimi had once attempted to put together the broken porcelain bottle. By fitting the two pieces together, it had looked as though it had never been broken to begin with. Remembering that, she’d had an epiphany. The Scattering Lotus was so named because the crystal flower could literally be scattered—in other words, the treasure was made to come apart while being carefully crafted to look like one single flower.

Shusei retracted his hands and what remained on the table was a large crystal lotus. Worthy Consort On let out a sigh that sounded like a combination of relief, sadness, and amazement, before she suddenly started to sob loudly and buried her face on the table.

The trio retrieved the treasure from Worthy Consort On and brought it to the Palace of Northern Peaks. They took it apart again and inserted the pieces one at a time through the bars of the cabinet. Now all they had to do was put it together again, just as Shusei had.

As only the hands of a slender woman would fit between the iron bars, Rimi was tasked with putting the treasure together. Meanwhile, Shusei guarded the palace gate to ensure that no one would catch her in the act.

Hakurei left for the Department of Service, saying that he would make it so a third party would discover the treasure once it was back. He would arrange for the palace to be cleaned to ensure that one of the eunuchs would happen across it.

*Noble Consort So and Worthy Consort On had both desired to see this treasure. Even Virtuous Consort Ho had been worried about it, saying that its theft was an insult to the four consorts. And while Pure Consort Yo didn't care for the treasure itself, she did talk about drawing "Flower Winner" for her seventh-year fortune.*

Rimi carefully put together the cool crystal petals, one by one. As she did, she felt as though she could understand the consorts' feelings toward the treasure.

*When Pure Consort Yo talked about drawing "Flower Winner," she spoke as if she was remembering a beautiful dream that she had given up on. Even she must have once dreamt about loving the beautiful man of her fantasies—just like what this treasure symbolizes.*

The flower slowly bloomed at Rimi's fingertips. It was a beautiful, breathtakingly clear flower, which turned a faint, translucent pink at the very tips of the petals.

*The treasure and the seventh-year fortunes... The legend of the Scattering Lotus seemed to relate to the four consorts in many different ways. But why do the four consorts have to suffer so much alone when they exist for the sake of*

*His Majesty? It's not fair,* Rimi lamented.

A final click could be heard as Rimi put the last petal in place. As she did, she felt a slight tingle in her fingertip. She hurriedly removed her hands from the cabinet and looked at the treasure inside. It looked unbelievably clear inside the dark cabinet. It was as though the treasure itself was shining.

*This is the flower that fell from the heavens... There is nothing the consorts desire more than this. And there is only one thing that is gained through this flower... His Majesty's love?* But that wasn't quite right either, something inside Rimi whispered.

Rimi still felt the weight of the flower in her hands as she appreciated the true value of the treasure.

*Making itself known... Showing the world that it exists, beautifully...* Rimi was dumbfounded at a sudden realization. *Beautifully?!*

For just a moment, the treasure seemed to strengthen its brilliance, as if to support Rimi's realization.

*I know what the consorts need!*

Rimi immediately closed the doors to the cabinet and started running. *Yes, of course!* she thought, amazed at how she hadn't realized it until now.

*You're not stupid. You're just foolish,* the Saigu had always told her with an astonished look.

*You're right, Lady Saigu. I am foolish.* Rimi had known from the very start why she had felt like it was her duty to comfort the consorts.

"Master Shusei!" she shouted as she ran toward Shusei, who was pretending to be on a walk in the garden while keeping an eye on the gate. "Master Shusei, I know what the consorts really need for their supper! If we just serve them that, I'm certain that we'll be able to resolve the matter of the Declaration of Stability too!"

"Hold on, Rimi," Shusei replied quietly. "First of all, is the treasure back where it should be?"

"Yes, it's right where it belongs!" Rimi exclaimed. "That's when I realized what



we need to serve the consorts for supper!”

“Supper...?”

“That’s right, supper!”

Rimi looked at Shusei with sparkling eyes, and he looked back with a confused expression. But before long, all the tension seemed to disappear from his face, and he gave her a resigned look before he burst out laughing. Seemingly unable to contain his laughter, Shusei looked up at Rimi for a moment, but then quickly looked down again and continued laughing.

“Huh? Master Shusei? What’s the matter? Did something happen?” Rimi asked.

“No, no, I’m just relieved,” Shusei responded through his laughter. “I just found it funny. We were worrying so much about the treasure, yet the moment it’s over, you forget all about it and start thinking about food instead.”

“I-I’m sorry, I just...” Rimi became embarrassed at Shusei pointing out her tendency to easily forget about anything and her cheeks turned red.

Shusei’s laughing fit finally started to calm down, and he wiped his tears from the corners of his eyes as he looked at Rimi with his usual kind smile.

“Don’t apologize, Rimi,” he said. “You really are an immortal tasked with serving holy communion. Gods may be omnipotent, but immortals only have a single skill. They’re limited in what they can do but that is also what makes them worthy of being immortals.”

Rimi had several leaves in her hair as she’d run straight past the trees in the garden to Shusei. Shusei gently removed one leaf at a time as he gave Rimi an inquisitive look.

“Now then, what exactly did you realize, Rimi? Please tell me.”

“I want to start preparing for tomorrow’s supper. I know what the consorts need. If we serve it to them, they’ll be able to come up with an answer to the question of the Declaration of Stability. But we’ll need time to prepare it.”

“What did you find, Rimi?”

“Women want more than just good taste and health benefits from their food.

Women use not just their tongue but also their eyes, ears, and the mood of the table when tasting food. Besides, I think His Majesty has been having it a bit too easy,” Rimi declared.



The sun was setting. A number of young eunuchs had been ordered to clean the Palace of Northern Peaks. One of the eunuchs was dusting the palace hall when he touched the doors to the stone cabinet. The doors, which had been left slightly ajar, opened. He frantically went to close the doors when he noticed the transparent crystal lotus shining on the other side of the iron bars, and he fell backward in surprise.

The rear palace was in an uproar, and Shohi was quickly informed of the discovery. The four consorts were all relieved, each for their own reasons. Now they would be able to participate in the Declaration of Stability.

Shohi was told that no one understood how the treasure had returned, but he simply exclaimed, “As long as it is back,” and seemed relieved himself. He issued no instructions to further pursue the matter. The Minister of Rites who had come to inform Shohi looked surprised at the emperor’s generosity. However, it escaped his notice that the imperially appointed military officer next to Shohi, Shin Jotetsu, was smirking faintly.



Evening had come, and Shohi had taken Jotetsu along for a secret visit to the guest house of the Palace of Northern Peaks.

Shohi had been surprised upon hearing that the treasure was back, but he had chosen not to give the Minister of Rites any further instructions. Had the treasure not been found, he had been worried that Rimi and Shusei would be made to take responsibility for it, so he had ordered Jotetsu to do whatever he could to help them. As a result, the treasure had returned, so Shohi surmised that it was thanks to Rimi and Shusei. But whenever he tried to ask Jotetsu about it, he would simply reply “I’m afraid I can’t say anything. Please ask Rimi or Shusei about it,” with a playful demeanor, one step away from sticking his tongue out at Shohi.

Thus, Shohi had decided to ask Rimi and Shusei what had happened

personally. He marched to the living room that faced the bamboo grove, where he found Rimi, Shusei, and Hakurei gathered around a table, busy performing some kind of intricate task. They were frantically writing words onto small, white porcelain beads, no larger than a fingertip.

“What is happening here?” Shohi asked.

Shusei, Hakurei, and Rimi began to stand up, but Shohi gestured with his hand to tell them to stay sitting.

“What is this? What are you all working on together?”

“We’re preparing for the four consorts’ supper,” Rimi replied confidently.

“This does not look like food to me. Are you telling me the consorts eat this? Are they monsters?” Shohi replied, furrowing his brow at Rimi’s boasting tone.

“Your Majesty, you mean to say that you don’t know what this is?” Rimi asked, surprised, and Shohi couldn’t help but feel insulted at the idea of knowing less than she did. “We’ll be using these to liven up tomorrow’s supper. Now that the treasure is back, I’d like to celebrate with a party in the garden.”

“Is there nothing in that head of yours but food?” Shohi said. “You are the one who brought that treasure back, are you not? Who stole it? How did you find it?”

“We’ll explain it all tomorrow during the party,” Shusei calmly explained.

Shusei’s calm demeanor annoyed Shohi. Ever since Shohi was young, Shusei had ordered him to eat this or that, and with time he had developed a feeling that he had to do as the cuisinologist said—but thinking about it, he had no idea why he acted so obediently toward Shusei.

“Tell me now, Shusei,” Shohi said in an attempt to act rebellious, but Shusei only shook his head with his usual composed expression.

“You don’t need to be so impatient, Your Majesty. The treasure is back, safe and sound, after all,” Shusei said. “Incidentally, I’m very happy that you let us borrow Jotetsu. Thank you very much.”

Shusei’s warm smile was even harder for Shohi to deal with than being admonished, and he started frowning again.

“I did not do it for your sake. I simply needed to save the court the shame of having lost a national treasure.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Shusei replied with a gaze that seemed to see right through Shohi, and the emperor made a grumpy face.

“Oh, yes, Your Majesty, Master Hakurei, do you enjoy being publicly exposed?”

Shusei immediately lost his composure and turned pale at hearing Rimi’s ridiculous question.

“My, that’s a bold thing to ask,” Jotetsu said with a smirk.

Hakurei gave Rimi a confused look.

“Do you mean like being stripped one garment at a time for all to see? Or perhaps having old love letters read out loud? One would have to be quite the deviant to enjoy something like that,” Hakurei said.

“The only reason I, the emperor, can stay calm upon being asked if I enjoy being publicly exposed, is because I am fully aware of just how airheaded a woman you are,” Shohi remarked—naturally, with a few more frown lines appearing on his brow.

“When I say publicly exposed, I mean, um...like standing on a stage and doing something to make the people watching happy,” Rimi explained.

“That’s not being publicly exposed, that’s a performance, Rimi,” Shusei informed her.

“Yes, that’s it! A performance!” Rimi quickly corrected herself.

“I have never even thought about performing something,” Shohi said.

“Oh, is that so?” Hakurei responded, raising an eyebrow. “You are quite skilled at sword dancing, Your Majesty.”

“I only know as much as any nobleman would. You know sword dancing too, do you not? I know you are rather adept at it.”

“Sword dancing! Yes, that’s a wonderful idea!” Rimi exclaimed, clapping her hands together, before giving Shohi a serious look. “Your Majesty, will you be

going to have a look at Tama? She is sleeping in my bedroom.”

“Naturally. That is why I am here,” Shohi said.

“Then let me show you there. I have a request I need to make.”

“A request?” Shohi’s heart started beating more rapidly. Rimi had never asked him for something before.

Shohi ordered Jotetsu to wait while he followed Rimi into her bedroom. He watched her hair bounce on her slender back as she walked and a small hope took root inside of him. Shohi had been taught that there was only one thing a concubine might ask the emperor to do in her bedroom.

*Could... Could Rimi really be...?*

They entered the dark bedroom.

“Huh? Tama? She was sleeping here just a moment ago...” Rimi muttered.

It was bright enough from the moonlight to faintly make out shapes in the room. The Quinary Dragon was not sleeping on top of the bed, and Rimi ran up and flipped over the duvet.

“That’s strange... She was sleeping right here... Tama? Tama?” Rimi called out.

“Enough. We can worry about the Quinary Dragon later,” Shohi said, grabbing the hand Rimi was holding the duvet with.

“Are you sure?” Rimi asked with surprised eyes, and Shohi grew even more impatient.

“Yes, like I told you, enough. First, tell me, what is it you wish to ask of me?” Shohi asked expectantly, his voice becoming raspy.

Rimi let go of the duvet and turned her gaze toward Shohi, her wrist still in his hand.

“Your Majesty, I have a favor to ask,” Rimi said with a soft smile.

What Rimi went on to ask of Shohi was not what he had been hoping for.



*She sure has a thing for coming up with elaborate ideas,* Shusei thought to himself as he continued working on his task.

Rimi apparently meant to settle everything the following evening. She had explained her plan to Shusei and Hakurei, asked for their help, and neither had voiced any objections—if anything, they had both agreed that it was the right thing to do.

The problem, however, was that Shusei and Hakurei alone were not enough to bring everything to a close tomorrow. The key figure in all of this would be the emperor himself, Shohi. Additionally, the dispositions of the consorts themselves would play an important role.

*If the four consorts turn out not to be the kind of women that Rimi hopes, we won't be able to settle this tomorrow. Tragedy might befall the rear palace, just like during the previous emperor's reign.* They were planning on putting the consorts to the test, so in the end, the entire ordeal might end up being one large act of disrespect.

Speaking of disrespect, what Rimi was planning to ask Shohi in her bedroom was also an entirely unheard-of show of disrespect. Disrespect was Rimi's specialty.

Jotetsu appeared to be concerned about what was happening in Rimi's bedroom, but after a few moments of nothing happening, he shrugged his shoulders and sat down in his chair.

"Hey, you two. What's Rimi asking His Majesty?" Jotetsu asked. "Based on how she was acting, I doubt it's anything erotic."

"Well, it's something that we would never dare to ask him," Shusei replied.

Jotetsu picked up one of the small porcelain beads and gave the two a curious look.

"Hey, this can't be right, can it?" he asked.

"No, everything is perfectly in order, Jotetsu," Hakurei answered with a captivating smile.

"Oh yeah? I wonder about that. You're up to something again, aren't you?" Jotetsu probed.

"We're just trying to bring this summer to a close," Shusei answered. "I'm

certain that this is in His Majesty's best interests as well."

## Chapter 6: The Seventh-Year Fortune Game

I

It was evening, and the bell of the Palace of Northern Peaks rang out to signal that the four consorts' supper was ready. By the time the supper had begun, the sky had taken on a ripe red color and was accompanied by a breeze carrying the heat of the day.

Autumn drew near. The sun sped up its descent, a dark purple started to seep into the sky, and the wind cooled. New insects were taking over, and their energetic singing reverberated throughout the rear palace.

The four consorts were greeted by Hakurei at the front gate of the Palace of Northern Peaks.

"To celebrate the return of the Scattering Lotus, Setsu Rimi and the cuisinologist suggested a change of pace from your usual suppers," Hakurei explained with a bright smile as he instructed the attending handmaids to wait in the consorts' palaces, and only the consorts were allowed entry.

As they passed through the gate, the arrangement in the garden caught the consorts' attention.

"My, how wonderful," Pure Consort Yo said in amazement.

Noble Consort So's eyes were shining, and Virtuous Consort Ho let out a stunned gasp at the sight. A faint smile could be seen on Worthy Consort On's face for a moment, but she quickly looked down as if she had no right to smile.

By the bushes, around the pond, and on the bridge, the garden was decorated with octagonal lanterns. Placed irregularly, they looked like lingering drops of light that had fallen from the sun, brightening the darkness. The candle flames that burned inside the lanterns caused the shadows of the surrounding vegetation to dance dizzily and beautifully.

The consorts were led to the bridge with a flat, round area at the very top on which a table was placed. It was surrounded by the usual four chairs. The



consorts sat down at the table and observed the white empress lotuses and the green leaves floating on the silver surface of the pond below. The scales of the fish swimming in the pond intermittently glittered below the lotus leaves.

“This is incredible,” So exclaimed as she looked around.

The two-level stage to the right of the pond was lit up. Windssocks in five colors fluttered in the four corners of the stage, making the garden seem even more extravagant. Copper decorations, which sang with a clear chime, hung from the curved corners of the vermilion roof. It was a quiet, magnificent setting for a feast.

“I wonder what’s about to happen,” Ho said with an expectant tone. Yo was restless, while On seemed anxious.

*They’re here.* Rimi looked on from the shadows of the stage and grew increasingly nervous.

“Master Shusei,” Rimi said, looking at the cuisinologist behind her, “if the four consorts won’t accept the truth, they won’t be able to come up with an answer. If that happens...”

“If that happens, we’ll just have to think of something else,” Shusei said, nodding as if to reassure Rimi. “Maybe we’ll just have to gather the consorts in an arena and have them fight it out for real.”

Rimi felt her nerves calming down a little in response to Shusei’s joking tone, and she smiled softly.

“Now, it’s time to go,” Shusei said.

“Yes,” Rimi responded.

She closed her eyes for a moment and whispered in her head to her Saigu sister beyond the sea.

*Lady Saigu, I may be foolish, but I will do everything I can.*

As she did, it felt as though she could hear her sister respond.

*You must be prepared to fight to force the god to admit satisfaction, my Umashi-no-Miya.*

Rimi exhaled, then inhaled. The consorts had so far been satisfied with the effects and the taste of the food—but this was only because they did not know what they truly needed. Tonight, Rimi would serve them just that.

*Yes, Lady Saigu. I will.*



Shusei saw Rimi's back straighten, and the air about her seemed different.

*The immortal who serves the gods is here.*

He felt a chill run down his spine. This was the second time Shusei had seen Rimi change like this, and he found this change beautiful. He could only see her back, yet her appearance seemed to turn even more radiant.

"You are the one who put this space together. Now go rule over it," Shusei whispered. Rimi turned to him and nodded. She began to make her way out into the garden.

A bold, yet quiet, holy communion was about to begin.



Rimi stepped into the garden, and Hakurei gave the four consorts a bow before leaving their side. Rimi briskly walked up onto the bridge, put one arm atop the other, and gave a deep, beautiful bow.

"Thank you for coming here this evening," Rimi opened. "Tonight, I would like to serve you with some entertainment."

As soon as Rimi stopped speaking, Shusei and Hakurei carried out a large, vermilion tray together. They placed it on the table, and the four consorts all started speaking at once.

"This is a seventh-year fortune, isn't it, dearest?" Yo said, excited.

"Oh? Now what prompted this?" Ho said.

"This takes me back..." On said.

"My, how childish. But I don't mind, I suppose," So said.

The consorts all reacted in their own ways, but it was clear that it wasn't their first seventh-year fortune.

Six hundred small, white, baked treats were placed on the tray. They had been made by kneading wheat and sugar into a thin dough. Before being baked, the dough was separated and wrapped like small balloons around porcelain fortunes. It was a plain yet sweet treat that melted in your mouth.

Hakurei and Shusei stepped away, and Rimi smiled at the consorts.

“We have also prepared a dance for you to enjoy this evening,” Rimi explained. “Master Hakurei and one more gentleman will soon perform a sword dance on that stage. I would like for you to enjoy these fortunes while you watch the performance.”

Rimi signaled with her eyes at Shusei, who walked onto the stage, placed down a zither, and then started to play it. He strummed it so quietly that the consorts’ conversation could be heard from the stage.

As if drawn in by the sound of the zither, Hakurei and one other person appeared from opposite sides of the stage. They both wore ceremonial military attires for sword dancing with their firmly tied hair hanging down their backs. Their attire was gorgeous and captivating with gold and silver threads woven into the fabric. The decorative silk attached to their shoulders and hips fluttered like windsocks as they moved around. The motion of the silk was beautiful and gallant.

In their hands were glaives with wide, curved blades. The mismatch between Hakurei’s captivating beauty and the military attire further accentuated his charm. The other dancer wore a mask that covered the top half of his face, hanging down to his nose. He had a slender build reminiscent of a eunuch. The allure of his military dress was emphasized by his covered face.

The two danced in perfect synchrony. Their glaives bent and their attire swayed in the air. It was obvious at a glance that they were skilled dancers, taking even the movements of their sleeves and silk adornments into account in their mesmerizing choreography. They danced softly, thrusting their blades at each other with sharp motions, which they dodged by a hair’s breadth.

The consorts all clapped their hands together in delight.

“Consorts, each of you, please choose a fortune,” Rimi said the moment she noticed the mood lightening.

The decisive Virtuous Consort Ho was the first to reach out toward the fortunes.

“I drew ‘Flower Winner’ when I was seven,” Ho said, “and I’m sure I’ll be drawing it again tonight.”

Hearing this, Rimi turned slightly sad, and at the same time, she became convinced that her theory was correct.

*Please, let the consorts accept the truth for what it is,* Rimi prayed to herself. If they were able to do that, it would make them all freer and happier.

“Is that so? Well, I also drew ‘Flower Winner.’ That fortune is mine for sure,” So said as she reached out for a fortune, and Pure Consort Yo widened her eyes in surprise.

“But I also drew ‘Flower Winner,’” Yo said.

The three of them exchanged glances before turning to Worthy Consort On.

“What about you, Worthy Consort On? What did you get on your seventh birthday?” Ho asked.

“I drew ‘Flower Winner,’” On answered timidly.

“My, what an unbelievable coincidence,” So said in a surprised tone. “The seventh-year fortune really must predict one’s fate accurately. The fact that the four consorts all drew ‘Flower Winner’ is proof enough.”

“In that case, why don’t we say that whoever draws ‘Flower Winner’ here is who the treasure truly belongs to?” Ho suggested with an observant gaze.

“Dearest, are you saying that we’re deciding on the order by drawing lots after all?” Yo asked, throwing Rimi a quizzical look.

“That is not why we prepared this,” Rimi answered. “We just want you all to know.”

“‘Know’...?” On asked with a worried look.

“But we four consorts have already proven that the seventh-year fortune predicts your future. In other words, whoever draws ‘Flower Winner’ here is overwhelmingly favored by fate. Now, let’s open our fortunes, if you dare,” Ho

provoked.

“Certainly. I know for sure that fate will pick me,” So replied. “I have nothing to fear.”

“Shall we open them then?” Yo said reluctantly.

“Are you ready?” So asked On, who nodded hesitantly.

The four consorts each picked one out of the six hundred fortunes. Shusei continued playing the zither, and the two dancers continued their soft yet sharp performance, while the consorts opened their treats and took out the fortunes inside at nearly the same time.

“I got ‘Flower Winner’!” Ho exclaimed, but So started speaking at almost the same time.

“See, what did I tell you? I drew the ‘Flower Winner,’” So said.

Ho and So exchanged dumbfounded glances.

Yo showed the other consorts the fortune in her hand.

“I also drew ‘Flower Winner,’” Yo said.

“I...also got ‘Flower Winner,’” On declared with a troubled expression.

The consorts looked at each other, unable to understand what was happening.

## II

The consorts remained motionless for a moment, but before long they reached out for even more fortunes, opening one after another. They all said “Flower Winner.”

“What is happening here, Lady Setsu?!” So lashed out, standing up from her chair. Ho clenched her fist and glared at Rimi. Yo looked at Rimi with a dumbfounded look, tilting her head in confusion like a bird. On’s gaze begged for an explanation.

“As you have correctly guessed, all six hundred fortunes here say ‘Flower Winner,’” Rimi explained.

“Explain yourself. I’ve never drawn such a ridiculous fortune in my life,” Ho growled, and the pain in Rimi’s chest grew even more intense.

*I can’t believe not even Virtuous Consort Ho realized...* Perhaps people had a tendency not to doubt what was instilled in them as children.

“But...are you sure that the seventh-year fortunes you had on your seventh birthdays weren’t the same as these?” Rimi suggested.

The consorts turned pale.

“You were already more or less set to join the rear palace long before your seventh birthday based on factors such as when you were born, your houses, and your families’ wishes,” Rimi continued. “Your families then tampered with your seventh-year fortunes to make you believe that you were destined to join the rear palace. Doesn’t that seem more likely than all four of you drawing ‘Flower Winner’ out of six hundred fortunes?”

Rimi had found it strange when So had mentioned her drawing “Flower Winner” as a child. It would have been incredibly unlikely for two people to draw the same fortune out of six hundred. But even if you explained it as a simple coincidence, On had mentioned that it was foretold she would join the rear palace on her seventh birthday—alluding to the fact that she too had drawn “Flower Winner.” Three out of the four consorts drawing the same fortune smelled like an obvious fraud to Rimi. She had conjectured that there was a secret practice among nobles to trick girls into believing that they were destined to join the rear palace by having them draw “Flower Winner” on their seventh birthdays when in truth it had already been planned since their births. Her conjecture appeared to have been correct.

The adults would never admit to it, and if asked about it, they would claim that their daughters had drawn “Flower Winner” by luck. In reality, however, everyone did it.

*The girls believe it thanks to their young age, become happy, and trust that it’s their fate. This way, they come to believe that they have to accept their fate, never realizing that it’s all really the scheming of adults.* They couldn’t very well run the risk of having their daughters refuse to join the rear palace—thus, they would plant the idea of it being their fate. The more innocent the girls were and

the more strongly they believed in their fate, the more likely they would be to willingly join the rear palace.

“No... That can’t be... I know that I drew ‘Flower Winner’... I was destined to come here...” Noble Consort So muttered as she fell back into her chair, dumbfounded.



Worthy Consort On shot the fortune in her hand a sad gaze and laughed.

“The fact that I had drawn ‘Flower Winner’ for my seventh-year fortune is what made me come to terms with having to join the rear palace. I thought the fortune had proven that even someone like me deserved a place here,” On bemoaned. She felt ashamed for having joined the rear palace despite not being worthy.

It was wrong to look for a place for herself in the rear palace just because she didn’t have one at home. As a result, she had made an utterly shameful mistake that had caused trouble for Rimi and Shusei.

“If I hadn’t drawn ‘Flower Winner,’ I would never have agreed to join the rear palace...and I never would have done something so stupid...” On said.

If she hadn’t thought it to be her fate, On would have searched desperately for another path forward. In the end, she had been tricked to abide by the wishes of her family.

*However, she thought as she observed the other consorts with a sad expression, the same must be true of the others as well.*



Virtuous Consort Ho could feel herself turn pale and her lips were trembling faintly.

“I see. Now that you mention it, I’m sure you’re right,” Ho said. “Still...what difference does that make? My duty remains the same. It doesn’t matter if my ‘Flower Winner’ fortune was false...”

Although she put on a brave face, internally, Ho was thinking something entirely different. She was astonished that she hadn’t realized it until now.

Ho thought back to when she had turned seven. She had been missing Hakurei as they hadn't seen each other for a while, and she had pleaded with her mother to let her visit the rear palace to see him. That same evening, her mother and father had summoned her, informed her that she would be marrying a different prince, and ordered her to forget about Hakurei. Ho had locked herself up in her room and had cried for three days straight.

She had loved Hakurei's beauty and kindness and had been unable to imagine a future besides becoming his bride. But no matter how much she complained, her parents refused to listen. Soon after, her seventh birthday celebration had been held, where she had drawn "Flower Winner." Her parents had been elated.

"You are destined to become the emperor's bride. Originally, Hakurei was set to become the emperor, but now another prince will be taking the throne. It's your fate that you can't be Hakurei's bride," they had said.

Ho had been disappointed but had accepted her fate as an inevitability. It was Hakurei's fate that had changed, not her own. All she could do was to trust in the fate that the heavens had bestowed upon her. There was no defying fate.

*But in the end, it wasn't my fate at all.*

Ho felt as though she was freezing. Everything started to seem laughable to her.

*How ridiculous. It's all ridiculous.* It was absurd how she and the other three consorts were so on edge.



"I should have known. That's just how adults are," Yo said, resigned upon learning the truth. It seemed like something her scheming father would do.

The reason her father had chosen the version with six hundred fortunes that nobles used must have been to prepare for her to join the rear palace when she was old enough. Yo was upset for ever having smiled at drawing "Flower Winner" as a child. She couldn't believe that she had dreamed of marrying the kind of virtuous, beautiful man that only existed in fairy tales.

*There is no beautiful flower in reality.* Part of her had already realized it, but



now Rimi had exposed that truth and shoved it in her face. Yo realized that somewhere deep inside she had been longing to find such a beautiful flower, and she hated herself for it.

“Liars!” Noble Consort So suddenly shouted as she started to cackle. “My mother is a liar! And my father too! ‘You drew “Flower Winner,” so you’re sure to become His Majesty’s first consort,’ they said! And if I didn’t, it would be my fault for being abandoned by fate, and I’d be forced to marry Ma Ijun! But they were lying! I wasn’t chosen by fate at all, and there was no way of knowing if I would attract His Majesty’s affection! And they both knew that too!”

So bit her lower lip and turned her gaze down. Her shoulders were trembling.

*Oh, right... She had believed in it too. She had been a fool, just like me,* Yo thought.

Yo felt sorry for the Noble Consort. Having been told she might become the wife of a man like that, it was no wonder that she would want to make a snide remark or two toward his daughter. Now she had realized that even her mother and father had betrayed her. Yo understood her pain.

*She’s the same as me...*

Without thinking, Yo stood up from her chair and touched So in an attempt to put her arm around her shoulder to comfort her.

“Noble Consort So...”

“How dare you touch me when you’re Ma Ijun’s daughter!” So exclaimed.

The Noble Consort violently shook her off, but Yo was not upset.

“Yes, I’m Ma Ijun’s daughter,” Yo said softly, “but I’m just like you.”

“Excuse me? I’m nothing like you!” So snapped, giving Yo a spiteful gaze as tears streamed down her face.

“No, we’re the same. I hate Ma Ijun just as much as you do. I’m appalled that his blood runs in my veins,” Yo spat violently.

So widened her eyes in astonishment upon hearing the Pure Consort’s vicious words.



*What is she saying? She's his daughter!*

So looked straight into Yo's eyes for the first time. She wondered if they had always been this pure.

"Ma Ijun is immature, cruel, selfish, smelly, and greedy. I hate him and how he always chases after young women," Yo said. "I loathe him so much that I came to hate all men. That's why I decided to join the rear palace, where there are no men. I understand your feelings of hatred toward Ma Ijun well."

Yo spoke of Ma Ijun the same way that So had always cursed him in her mind.

"But you're his daughter..." So grumbled.

"It's *because* I am his daughter that I'm so appalled and loathe him so much. I abhor my own father, Ma Ijun."

So covered her face with her hands.

*I was never chosen by fate... Why...? Why do I have to listen to this woman trying to comfort me?* So was disgruntled and felt pathetic at the same time, but when Yo carefully touched her shoulder once more, she did not feel disgusted. It felt as though she was being embraced by her own shadow, as if her disparaging words toward Ma Ijun had taken shape in the form of Pure Consort Yo.

So quietly sobbed without attempting to shake Yo off.



*I've told them something cruel.* Rimi may have already been prepared for it, but her heart still ached. What they had been told as children had unwittingly supported them all these years. Rimi had destroyed one of their most important supporting pillars. *But in the end, it was only an illusion. There are things you cannot see as long as it remains.*

"I suppose I was never destined for anything, then," Virtuous Consort Ho said and let out a deep sigh. "All I have is my duty. What I'd thought was my fate was just the scheming of others. I guess we were all tricked into coming here. How pitiful we are. You felt sorry for us too, didn't you, Lady Setsu? That's why you revealed this to us."

Rimi nodded hesitantly, and Ho showed a self-derisive sneer before looking at So, Yo, and On in turn.

“As I’m sure Noble Consort So is already aware, as a child I was originally told that I would marry a different prince,” Ho spoke as if to mock her own shameful past. “That is what I grew up believing, but once I turned seven I was told that I would marry someone else instead. I was upset, but I forced myself to accept it after drawing ‘Flower Winner.’ How foolish I was.”

“That prince is the man from earlier, isn’t it? Did you love him?” Worthy Consort On asked timidly.

Ho gave her a quick smile before turning her gaze to the stage where Hakurei was dancing gracefully.

“Now that I think about it, maybe that was just another one of their schemes. But as a young girl, I readily fell for it. Yes, I loved him. So what? You’re all the same, aren’t you? We’ve all been treated like pawns by others,” Ho replied bitterly. “What difference does it make if we happen to get the wrong idea or love someone in the process? Worthy Consort On and Pure Consort Yo were both unable to defy the expectations of their families. Noble Consort So and I were elated to have been chosen by fate when in reality that supposed fate was just a plot.”

The consorts had come to the rear palace, having believed it to be their fate to contend for the emperor’s affection, but in truth, they were only here to fulfill a role as orchestrated by others. Rimi could tell that the consorts now realized that they were all the same. As the faint sound of the zither played in the background, they must have all seemed like mirrored images of each other. One sobbed, one looked annoyed, one bit her lip in agony, and one looked on with a worried gaze—and they all saw part of themselves in the others.

They had all accepted the truth. Rimi felt a sense of both relief and awe.

*The seventh-year fortune doesn’t matter. But maybe His Majesty possesses some kind of disposition as a ruler, one that attracts happenstances. All four consorts of the rear palace just happened to be wise enough to accept a harsh reality. That is not something you can plan for.*

Faced with an uncomfortable reality, people tend to instinctively reject it.

They fool themselves, choosing not to believe it simply because they don't want to. Accepting something you would rather not believe in requires rationality. You need to be able to calmly reflect on reality, accepting it as truth no matter how painful it might be. It requires courage and wisdom.

Worthy Consort On looked down and wiped the corners of her eyes. Noble Consort So's shoulders still trembled. Pure Consort Yo nodded faintly in response to Virtuous Consort Ho while giving Rimi a confused look.

"Dearest, what was the point of this seventh-year fortune? Is this the entertainment you mentioned?" Yo asked.

"That's awful. Is this what counts as entertainment to you, Lady Setsu?" So said, throwing Rimi a scornful, tearful gaze.

"I didn't want to do this if I could have avoided it," Rimi explained, "but this was necessary for the true supper that I'm about to serve you."

The zither had stopped playing at some point, and both Shusei and the two dancers were gone from the stage.

"There's no need for you to compete, and you don't need a convenient excuse like 'fate.' That's what I wanted you to understand," Rimi said.

They may have been nothing but pawns as far as the scheming adults were concerned—but the consorts had now realized this. They had chosen not to avert their gaze, and they were rational and wise enough to accept the truth of the seventh-year fortunes. This was an exceptional and fortunate outcome.

"You are all wise and beautiful, befitting the four consorts. You all have the right to the flower," Rimi declared.

Rimi had been unable to dislike any of the consorts. She had never stopped wishing to serve them what they needed. The reason for this must have been that she had sensed from the start that they were all worthy of the title of consort.

The consorts all needed the same thing. There was but one thing they desired—that which the flower symbolized, something even they were unaware of. Their desire to stand next to the emperor and to hold the treasure must not be taken at face value. Even Pure Consort Yo, who wanted nothing less than the

emperor's affection, still desired the same thing as the others.

The consorts seemed dumbfounded at the sight of Rimi's cheerful smile. They observed her vacantly, seemingly forgetting to question what she was saying. Their hearts were disturbed as their feelings had been violently shaken, only to then be told that they were wise and beautiful. That remark had thrown them into confusion, preventing them from understanding what was happening.

But that was fine by Rimi. By coming to know each other and emptying their minds, the consorts could find something genuine.

"Tonight, I will serve what you truly desire."

### III

That was the signal for Shusei to appear, and he was carrying a tray with four porcelain plates. On top of each plate was a white cloth that covered a large, round object.

"Please, have a seat," Shusei said as he placed the tray on the table.

Shusei's appearance seemed to have taken the consorts off guard. They slowly made their way back to their seats and looked at the tray with plates before them. Although the consorts still seemed somewhat distant, their postures were graceful, clearly demonstrating that they were all educated noblewomen.

A multitude of emotions must have been swirling inside their blank minds.

*Effects and taste are both important to food. However, to women as adorable and ladylike as these consorts, there is something even more important.*

Rimi had realized something after coming into contact with the treasure and putting it back into its original, beautiful form—all girls loved beautiful things. The same was true of women. While men were attracted to strength and bravery, women were drawn to beauty even more. That was human nature.

Shusei moved the plates in front of the consorts, and Rimi took a deep breath.

"This is tonight's main dish. Please enjoy your meal," Rimi announced.

Shusei removed the cloth covering the consorts' dishes in rapid succession,

and the consorts' previously vacant gazes turned to focus on what had been revealed from beneath the cloth. Each of them gasped in amazement. Empress lotuses were blooming on the porcelain plates.

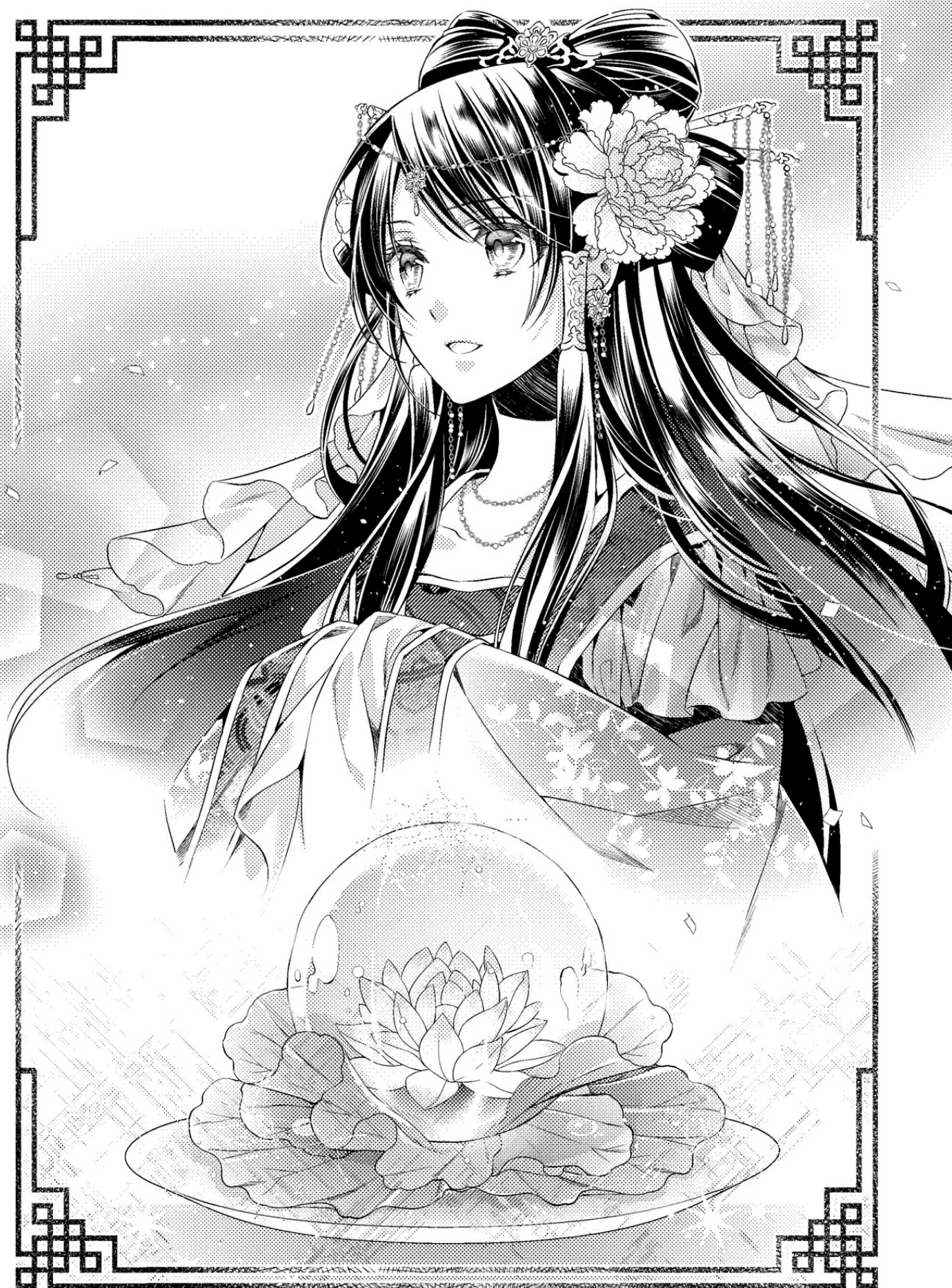
It was a large, round, and transparent agar jelly dish. An empress lotus had been trapped inside with its vivid colors still intact. The sight of the empress lotus blooming inside the transparent agar almost looked like the legendary treasure trapped inside a crystal ball.

The bright green leaves of the lotus were placed on top of the plate, gently supporting and decorating the crystal-like empress lotus. On top of the agar sphere was a sugar sculpture made with thin threads, similar to a basket with large holes. This sugar sculpture was what had made it possible to cover the sphere under a cloth without breaking it.

Rimi and Shusei walked behind the consorts and shattered the sugar sculptures with their hands, scattering them across the spheres. The vividly colored lotuses were trapped in transparent spheres that sparkled like stars from the sugar dust.

“Beautiful...” Virtuous Consort Ho unwittingly exclaimed.

Ho was not alone—So, Yo, and On were also observing the dish with sparkling eyes.



“I’ve named this dish ‘zhen baozhu.’ There is no dish more fitting for the four consorts,” Rimi said with a smile.



The consorts picked up the spoons next to their plates and very carefully pushed them into the translucent spheres, as if afraid to ruin the beautiful dish. The sphere was made from agar with syrup flavored with a few drops of red wine. The empress lotus inside was a real lotus plucked from the pond below. To preserve the vivid color of the flower, it had first been quickly dipped in hot water before being candied with sugar for an entire day, making it possible to eat the flower petals. Then the candied flower had been submerged in agar.

The consorts timidly scooped up a spoonful of agar and brought it to their mouths. Delighted at the sweet taste, their once-vacant expressions were replaced with smiles.

*I can't believe their faces,* Shusei thought. The consorts, who usually wore their hostility on their sleeves to the point of agitating even him, were wearing childlike smiles. *Only a woman could have figured out how to make them smile like this.*

Rimi had told Shusei that women desired more from food than just beneficial effects and tastiness. While those were both important, there was something even more vital—beauty. The first time he had heard this, Shusei had been dubious. He wondered why someone would desire beauty from food, but Rimi had insisted that this was just what the consorts had been needing.

Rimi had further claimed that providing a tranquil and beautiful environment was also part of serving a meal. Apparently, Wakokuans would talk about “eating with your eyes.” When Shusei had heard this expression, he had imagined a monster that chewed on food with its eyes, but it turned out to mean that the more beautiful a dish was, the better it tasted. According to Rimi, Wakokuans would eat even the appearance of a dish and the atmosphere of their environment.

Konkoku had no such culture. They had spent over a millennium fighting and ruling over the vast lands of the continent. To them, food was a way to regain strength and improve your body. Thus, the most important factors were the



taste and the amount, followed by its effects. Shusei had never even considered the effects of *how* the food was consumed until he met Rimi. He had never spared a thought for the beauty of the food, and even less so the environment it was eaten in.

As a Konkokuan, Shusei was unable to understand the Wakokuan way of dining, which emphasized appearance, nor could he understand what a woman might desire from her food. However, Rimi was someone who approached food from a different perspective than Shusei, and the way she had comforted Shohi and Hakurei was proof of this. Shusei had decided to trust her and help arrange this intricate meal.

“There’s something inside the lotus!” Yo exclaimed as she scooped something up from the flower. Sugar-steamed lotus seeds were buried inside it.

*Lotus seeds have a calming effect.* Rimi had used Shusei’s knowledge to add another twist to the dish by including potent lotus seeds inside what would otherwise have been a simple agar dessert. She had steamed the seeds for a short time, then coated them with a mix of steamed glutinous rice and plenty of brown sugar. Finally, she had steamed the coated seeds again, allowing them to absorb the taste of the coating, before hiding them like treasures inside the lotus.

Rimi had then named the dessert zhen baozhu—“the true treasure.” This was what the four consorts had truly desired, she had said.



The lanterns lit up the darkness, and occasionally, the splash of a fish jumping could be heard from below. The calming sound of insects reverberated in the otherwise quiet and solemn garden where the consorts were sitting, facing one another. The sweet dessert slid down their throats effortlessly, and it was beautiful enough that simply putting it in their mouths made them happy. They delighted in swallowing its beauty.

The beautiful flower and the decorated garden were so enchanting that the consorts felt as though they were the most special beings in existence.



Rimi observed the consorts as their cheeks turned faintly red while they

indulged in the beautiful dessert. She was satisfied. It was the quietest and most pleased the consorts had ever seemed during a supper.

Hakurei stepped out from behind the stage without his military attire and walked up to the four consorts.

“Are you enjoying the meal?” Hakurei asked with a charming smile, and the consorts nodded.

The consorts swallowed one lotus petal after another and put the lotus seeds in their mouths along with the transparent agar. They had almost finished the dessert. They all looked happy, but, perhaps because of the seeds, they also appeared to be calm. It was so quiet that it seemed as though the seventh-year fortune had never happened.

“If possible, I would like for you to reach a consensus on the order for the Declaration of Stability tonight,” Hakurei said.

The consorts exchanged glances. The disappearance of the Scattering Lotus had diverted their attention, and along with the shock of the seventh-year fortune, they had forgotten all about the Declaration of Stability.

They looked away from one another. It seemed that they felt too awkward to look anyone in the eye after having learned about one another’s circumstances. They had realized that they were in a similar position and all had something in common—their shared feelings that Rimi had sensed. Bringing about this realization was the very reason Rimi had prepared the seventh-year fortunes.

“And how do you expect us to do that, Hakurei?” So grumbled, at a loss.

“Why don’t you leave it to His Majesty?” Hakurei responded calmly.

The consorts looked up with puzzled expressions.

“It’s tradition to have the rear palace decide on an order for the Declaration of Stability. This time, however, we will have His Majesty decide instead,” Hakurei suggested. “Would that not be to your liking?”

“His Majesty would never go along with something that ridiculous. He’s far too busy governing to care about what goes on in the rear palace,” Ho said.

“His Majesty has already accepted the proposal,” Hakurei responded with a

smile. “He has said that he is willing to choose who will stand next to him himself.”

“Really?” On said, covering her mouth in surprise.

“How is His Majesty planning on choosing?” Yo asked, wide-eyed. “I’d be surprised if he could even put our names and faces together. Having him choose on a whim would be even worse than drawing lots.”

“His Majesty does know your names and faces, and he also understands what you are going through,” Hakurei declared.

“Is that really possible?” Ho said dubiously. “We’ve only ever seen His Majesty once.”

“His Majesty has the blessing of the divine dragon,” Hakurei answered, confidently but with an air of mystery.

Having learned about one another and concluding that they were all the same, the consorts had no idea where to go from here. They would be unable to decide on an order by themselves. At the same time, the idea of leaving it all up to the emperor must have also been distressful. They all had the same fear—a fear that stemmed from the feelings that they all shared.

“The moment that whoever is chosen holds the treasure during the Declaration of Stability will happen in the blink of an eye,” Rimi quietly explained. “Virtuous Consort Sai of the previous emperor’s rear palace is proof that obtaining the treasure doesn’t necessarily mean you will become happy. I believe the reason that the past consorts fought over the treasure is simply that they were scared—scared for their own futures.”

The consorts turned to Rimi, and she slowly returned each of their gazes with a smile.

“But you four have no reason to worry about that,” Rimi declared, and the consorts looked at her in confusion, asking for clarification with their eyes. “You are all exceptionally deserving of the consort title. Even compared to the four consorts of ages past, you are special. All of you are wise and beautiful, and you each have the same right to the treasure as the others. That is why we have served you the zhen baozhu.”

Realizing the significance of the name, the consorts moved their hands over their chests, bellies, and mouths.

Zhen baozhu—the true treasure. There was power in a name, and the act of naming something imbued the object with that same power.

“Even past empresses would very rarely have a chance to hold the treasure, instead only observing its luster inside the stone cabinet. But now, the true treasure exists within all of you. It is part of you and allows you to stay noble and beautiful,” Rimi continued.

She wanted the consorts to understand that the flower inside them was the real treasure—that as long as they remained noble, beautiful, and proud, they had nothing to fear. Their worries would disappear once they understood this.

“It doesn’t particularly matter who happens to hold the treasure during the Declaration of Stability. You will still be here, as noble, beautiful, and proud as ever. So cry out with confidence that no one is worthy of being the four consorts but you,” Rimi spoke like a shrine maiden conveying the words of the gods. “I know that His Majesty will treat you with respect. You will, without a doubt, be able to remain here as the four consorts. The rear palace is where you belong. As long as you remain proud, you have nothing to fear.”

The consorts looked at Rimi, who had known from the very beginning why she had felt it to be her duty to comfort them. They desired the same thing that she did—a place where they belonged.

Besides the empress, the four consorts were the noblest women of Konkoku. But despite this—or perhaps *because* of this—they were always tormented by the fear that they would one day lose their place here.

If Noble Consort So lost her place as a consort, she would have to marry a man as old as her father. Pure Consort Yo wanted nothing more than to remain in the rear palace as it was devoid of men. Were she to return home, all that awaited her was a loathsome, scheming father. Virtuous Consort Ho carried the pride of the entire Ho house on her shoulders. If she could not fulfill her duty, she would lose her purpose in life. Worthy Consort On had no home to return to.

The consorts all desired the emperor’s affection—or, perhaps, wished to rid

the rear palace of the other consorts—to ensure that they would still have a place here. But they were all the same. They all had the same fate forced upon them, burdened by the expectations of others and coerced to shoulder the same duty. They had spent their whole lives preparing to become the emperor’s bride. Rimi had trusted that someone who had grown up in such a manner had to be noble and beautiful deep inside. She had wanted to erase their fears and make them notice something important—their own beauty.



The masked dancer stood in the darkness at the side of the stage and sighed before removing his mask. The face it had concealed was strikingly beautiful; it belonged to Shohi.

“What a thing to show me...” Shohi moaned.

The night before in Rimi’s bedroom, Rimi had asked Shohi to decide on the consorts’ order for the Declaration of Stability. Shohi had fallen speechless, his expectations defied in the most unforeseen of ways. But Rimi had continued by proposing that he participate in the supper as a dancer, saying that it would help him make a decision. She had been planning to attempt something during the supper and had wanted Shohi to observe from the stage and listen to the consorts’ conversation. Shusei had played his zither as quietly as possible to ensure that their voices could be heard.

Shohi had been utterly disinterested in the four consorts. He had failed to see the point in listening to what they had to say and had almost become angry at the very suggestion. However, Rimi had given him an unusually stern look.

“The consorts are the same as me,” Rimi had said.

The consorts all had different circumstances and desires, but they were all alike in that they yearned for a place where they belonged, just as Rimi had always wished.

Shohi had argued that they already had their places as consorts, but Rimi had claimed differently, saying that it was a place Shohi could easily take away from them on a whim. That is what had caused them to compete, become frustrated, and fight.

The consorts existed for the sake of the emperor and quarreled for his sake as well. The emperor himself could not simply escape responsibility by claiming that it did not concern him. Rimi had bluntly complained that he was being neglectful and spoiled.

Disrespecting the consorts, who Rimi claimed were the same as her, would be the same as disrespecting Rimi herself. Despite that, Shohi had spent a long time arguing with Rimi before finally giving up and accepting her suggestion. All he had to do was spend a single evening dancing. Then he could simply decide on the order for the Declaration of Stability arbitrarily on the day of the ceremony.

But Rimi had not been about to let him take the easy way out. After Shohi had agreed to participate, Rimi had spent the entire night teaching him about the consorts. Shohi had simply listened while sitting in her bedroom. And now, he had heard the consorts' thoughts from their own mouths.

Noble Consort So, who he had taken for a simpleton, had rejoiced from the bottom of her heart upon drawing "Flower Winner" on her seventh birthday. Yet her father had taken advantage of her innocence and had threatened to marry her off to a merchant if she could not win Shohi's affection, using the very same fortune as assurance.

*She is still a simpleton, but she is pure.*

Pure Consort Yo was a strange woman who boldly proclaimed her hatred for men—but this hatred was caused by the presence of her father, who she had loathed as a result of her own sense of righteousness.

*She is a strange one, but she is virtuous.*

Before Shohi took to the stage, Hakurei had explained that it was Worthy Consort On who had taken the treasure by accident. She had no home to return to and lived in fear of not being able to win Shohi's affection, which had spurred her to touch the treasure.

*She is a weak woman, but she is modest and honest.*

After having admitted to taking the treasure, On had apparently wished to be punished. Even Shohi had felt sorry for her, observing her demeanor.

Finally, Virtuous Consort Ho had spent the performance watching Hakurei.

*She still has lingering feelings for Hakurei, but she was strong enough to suppress her own feelings for the sake of her duty.*

After exiting the stage, Shohi had asked Hakurei what he thought of Ho.

“She is a fantastic Virtuous Consort,” Hakurei had responded with a vague smile as he took off his dancing outfit.

Shohi had considered the consorts to be nothing more than dolls, but after listening in on their conversation, he instead found himself at a loss, unable to decide who to choose. It had been much easier when he still thought of them as dolls. Then he could simply have chosen whatever doll was closest to stand next to him, and if necessary, sleep with her to make the Department of Service stop bothering him. Had he remained detached, it would have been a simple task—but Rimi would not allow this.

*She is one impudent woman. How does she expect me to choose?*

He felt something nearby and turned his eyes toward the darkness. There a silver-haired divine dragon was sitting, quietly observing Shohi; it was the Quinary Dragon.

“Your guardian sure is impudent, Quinary Dragon,” Shohi grumbled, and the Quinary Dragon responded with a squeak.

The dragon darted its adorable blue eyes around before suddenly standing up, raising its long tail straight up into the air and wagging its body intimidatingly.

“What is it?” Shohi asked, but the very next moment he heard Rimi scream.

Shohi looked out from behind the stage to find guardsmen holding Rimi by her arms. The four consorts had stood up from their seats, flabbergasted, and Shusei and Hakurei were frozen in place. The person instructing the guardsmen was supported by young eunuchs on both sides, and behind him were several other eunuchs under his command—it was the director of the Department of Service, I Bunryo. They had appeared out of nowhere and apprehended Rimi.

*What is happening?!*

Shohi was stepping away from the stage in an attempt to rush to Rimi's side when he noticed Hakurei was looking his way, sternly shaking his head. He was ordering him not to come out. Shohi had once again entered the rear palace without going through the Department of Service. If this came to light, his dignity as an emperor would be called into question. Were unfavorable rumors to spread throughout the court, the officials' opinion of the young emperor would suffer. Shohi begrudgingly clenched his teeth, realizing that he had to remain hidden.

"How can an emperor be so confined...?" Shohi sighed.



## Chapter 7: The Four Lotuses

I

Moments after Rimi had declared that the four consorts belonged in the rear palace, a large number of guardsmen and eunuchs suddenly poured in from the gate to the Palace of Northern Peaks. Two guardsmen grabbed Rimi's arms from behind and started forcefully dragging her away.

The consorts stood up from their chairs in shock, and Shusei and Hakurei angrily asked for an explanation, but the guardsmen ignored them as they pulled Rimi down from the bridge. As they reached the edge of the pond, they held her arm behind her back with such force that she was unable to even move.

*What's happening?!* Rimi was trembling with fear and confusion.

I Bunryo then passed through the gate, accompanied by guardsmen. He was approaching Rimi when a person walking behind him suddenly ran up to her and threw herself on the ground apologetically.

"Please forgive me, Lady Rimi!" the woman—Rimi's old handmaid—shouted. She was sobbing uncontrollably and a blue bruise was visible on her cheek.

"What happened to you?!" Rimi asked, distressed.

"I... I... I couldn't withstand the director's questioning and ended up telling him!"

"What? What did you tell him?"

Bunryo walked up to Rimi, shoving the handmaid aside. The intense smell of medicine stung Rimi's nose.

"The treasure suddenly appeared again out of the blue. It is clearly the doing of this Wakokuan and her strange magic," Bunryo explained. "So I interrogated this handmaid, and she confessed that she had seen you do something by the stone cabinet on the day that the treasure returned."

Shusei had guarded the entrance to the palace to ensure that no one could

see them put the treasure back—but they had been too preoccupied with preventing people from entering from the outside to realize that the handmaid had already been inside. As she hadn't seen her, Rimi had assumed that the handmaid had left the palace, but she had actually been there the whole time, watching Rimi.

Shusei and Hakurei turned pale. They had no hope of talking their way out of this since a witness was present.

“You made the treasure disappear and then reappear, did you not?” Bunryo said sternly.

Rimi wondered what might happen if she told them the truth. Worthy Consort On would probably admit to her crime, but the fact that Rimi had been involved remained. They might even realize that Shusei and Hakurei had been part of it too.

If she did nothing, Rimi would be punished—but admitting to the truth would only result in more people being sentenced.

*What do I do...?* Rimi thought as she hung her head when she felt a sharp pain on her right cheek. Bunryo had scratched her with his golden false nails and blood was slowly pouring out from the shallow wound on Rimi's cheek.

“Director I!” Shusei screamed, unable to watch any longer. He tried to rush to Rimi's side, but a guardsman blocked his path.



*They'll frame Lady Setsu at this rate!* Worthy Consort On was trembling. She couldn't stand steady and her teeth were shaking, so frightening was the scene unfolding before her eyes.

On had to do something, or Rimi would lose her head. But if she admitted to her crime, she would simply be punished in the same way.

*I don't want to die...*

Worthy Consort On was terrified. When Bunryo hit Rimi's cheek, she almost let out a scream, but she forced it down. That was when she noticed the sweet fragrance of a lotus coming from within herself.

*Now, the true treasure exists within all of you. It is part of you and allows you to stay noble and beautiful.* Rimi's words echoed in On's head so powerfully that they shook her. The treasure inside her jolted her heart.

*I have a treasure inside me. Lady Setsu served it to me so I could be noble and beautiful.*

On hated herself, but she had still been served the treasure. She had a right to it. This was the true treasure.

Tears of fear streamed down her cheeks, but the nobleness inside On spurred her on. She turned around to face the Noble Consort, Pure Consort, and Virtuous Consort, who were standing still, dumbfounded.

"Ladies, I am the one who took the treasure," she whispered so only they could hear.

The consorts looked at each other with confused expressions.

"I'm sorry," On continued, trembling. "I just wanted to touch it, but when I did, I thought that I had accidentally broken it, so I decided to hide it. But Lady Setsu put it back together and returned it, and she was kind enough not to tell anyone about my involvement. All Lady Setsu did was bring back the treasure in my stead. I...am going to confess. Please, will you help me plead with Director I not to punish Lady Setsu?"



"You're the one who took it?" Pure Consort Yo said, astonished at hearing something so utterly unexpected—but at the same time, she respected the Worthy Consort for admitting to what she had done despite her timid nature.

Yo felt sorry for On and how desperate she had been to touch the treasure. All On had wanted was to earn a place for herself. Yo felt even more sorry for On and her timid nature.

*What a foolish person,* Yo thought when she suddenly felt a pain in her chest from the fragrance of the lotus in her mouth. The scent was a purity that Rimi had given her. The purity and nobleness inside her told Yo that while she may be astonished by someone timid and desperate, she must never be cruel and mock them. Yo was fond of pure and beautiful things. She would rather have

died than become as filthy as the father she loathed.

“If you admit what you did, you’ll most assuredly be punished, Worthy Consort On. Are you sure about this?” Yo asked.

“I’m the one who did it,” On replied, nodding as she trembled with fear. “I’m sure. I’m more worried about Lady Setsu.”

“You being punished won’t solve anything.”

“But if we don’t do anything, Lady Setsu will—”

“All that will happen is that both of you will get punished instead of just my dearest.”

“Then what do we do?!”

Suddenly, Virtuous Consort Ho started speaking.

“Worthy Consort On, you don’t need to confess,” Ho whispered.



“But...!” Worthy Consort On tried to argue back, but Ho raised a hand to interrupt her.

“Director I hates people from Wakoku, and Lady Setsu is a Wakokuan. As long as she was involved, even if only a little, he will still find a way to punish her. Your confession will just backfire. You would just confirm what Lady Setsu did,” Ho said.

“Then are you saying we should just stand by and do nothing as my dearest gets punished?!” Yo said angrily and furrowed her brow, but Ho shook her head.

“No, I’m not. I’m just saying that Worthy Consort On admitting what she did is not the best solution here.”

Ho clenched her teeth. She wanted to help Rimi. Rimi had told Ho that she’d never had a place where she belonged as a child. It must have been a miserable experience, and perhaps Rimi still felt miserable as she desperately tried to protect her current place. Even so, she had told Ho about it as if it was nothing, and that was why Ho had responded by telling Rimi about her and Hakurei—while pretending that it meant nothing to her too.

Rimi had probably understood the pain that had come with Ho's confession, which is why she had given her that childish candy in a small attempt to cheer her up. Ho had thought it silly, but she had still been a bit happy. The candy had been a beautiful amber color, the same as Hakurei's eyes, and its fragrance and biting taste had felt like Hakurei talking to her, which helped calm her down.

Rimi was always worried about the consorts. She wanted to be loyal to her duty. She reminded Ho of herself, weighed down by the duty forced on her by the Ho house. And tonight, Rimi had served her beauty.

Even as she tried to fulfill her duty, Ho was still unable to completely suppress her feelings for the one she had loved as a child, and she felt wretched for it—but the faint lotus scent that came from within her seemed to say that even she was beautiful. It was as if it had taken her lost heart and placed it down with a thump, saying "It belongs here."

"What can we do...?" Ho grumbled when Noble Consort So suddenly straightened her back and started speaking.

"My, how silly you all are. Did you forget that we are the four consorts?" So said.



"There is no one in the rear palace with a higher rank than us," So explained. "Even Director I is only of third rank. The only ones who can defy us are the empress and His Majesty himself. This is the rear palace, and if we claimed that black was white, then it would become the truth."

The three other consorts widened their eyes in surprise. In her mind, So rolled her eyes at how the others hadn't even realized how important they were.

Noble Consort So had always been self-confident. She had been convinced that no one was better than her. However, somewhere deep inside, she was just a little uneasy, which led to her throwing tantrums, feeling irritated, and being mean to others. So realized now that her uneasiness must have come from how she clung to a false fate to reassure herself. But now Rimi had put a true treasure inside of her. It had a sweet smell, and its beautiful appearance was burned into her memory. Having become part of her, it felt as though unwavering confidence had taken root inside of her.

Even if her fate was false, and even if her parents had planned it all, So was still as noble and beautiful as ever. The treasure inside her told So as much. With a treasure that would never disappear inside her, she was the noblest and most beautiful of all. But this was only natural for one of the four consorts, and she found it laughable that the others hadn't realized this. She wished the other three would be more self-aware.

This was an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the power of the four consorts.

*And I suppose we'd better help Lady Setsu too.*

So smiled as the fragrance of the lotus wafted up from inside her.

*Besides, I need her to make me something sweet and tasty again, and something that's good for my skin. I'm sure Lady Setsu will make me even more beautiful.*

She turned her gaze straight ahead.

"Let's be off, ladies," So said as she started walking.



*I don't know what to do...* Rimi was at a complete loss, and she had a blank expression on her face.

If solely Rimi was punished as an evil sorcerer from Wakoku, then that would probably be the end of it. This seemed like the best solution to her.

"Rimi!" Shusei shouted from behind the guardsman. Hakurei was similarly pale. They looked as though they were frantically racking their brains for ways to handle the situation.

Rimi wanted to scream about how unfair this was, but if she did, she would only add to the number of people being punished. *If that's my only other option, I might as well just...*

"Bring that Wakokuan to the Department of Service!" I Bunryo exclaimed triumphantly. He turned to leave when Noble Consort So's dignified voice rang out from behind Rimi.

"Not so fast, I Bunryo," So said.

Rimi looked behind her to find the four consorts walking toward her. Shusei and Hakurei looked on, dumbfounded, failing to grasp what was happening. But the consorts simply continued walking confidently, signaling the guardsmen and eunuchs to step aside.

The consorts reached Rimi, and Ho threw the guardsmen a piercing gaze.

“Release Lady Setsu’s arms,” Ho ordered.

“But...” one of the bewildered guardsmen complained.

“Release her!” Ho roared.

The guardsmen were taken aback and instinctively pushed Rimi away. She staggered from the sudden push, but On caught her. Rimi looked into On’s eyes, and the Worthy Consort gave her an apologetic look while also nodding to reassure her.

“We won’t let you treat our favorite palace woman as a criminal without evidence,” So said.

“Noble Consort So, with all due respect, this handmaid has testified that the palace woman did it,” Bunryo replied, narrowing his eyes.

“Did you really see her do it?” Yo asked the old handmaid as she widened her eyes mischievously.

The handmaid looked up from the ground into Yo’s bright eyes and seemed to realize something as she let out a quiet “ah!”

“Oh, n-no, I’m afraid my poor eyes have grown weak over the years.” The handmaid spoke frantically. “I thought I saw Lady Setsu, but perhaps it was only a shawl fluttering in the wind.”

“Do you take me for a fool?!” Bunryo shouted with his high-pitched, raspy voice. The handmaid threw herself before him.

“Please forgive me. Both my eyesight and my hearing have declined in my old age. That is the extent of what I saw,” the old handmaid said apologetically.

Noble Consort So let out a triumphant chuckle.

“Director I, not only I, but Virtuous Consort Ho, Pure Consort Yo, and Worthy

Consort On all believe that Lady Setsu is innocent. No one in the rear palace knows this palace woman better than we do. And remind me, are you really important enough to defy all four consorts?" So said confrontationally.

"My honored consorts, do you understand what purpose I serve in the rear palace?" Bunryo said.

"Why, of course we do. But no matter how important you are, you are still lower in rank than us. And we are the four consorts. If you continue with your tyranny, we can report to His Majesty together and ask him to make you leave the rear palace."

Bunryo gave So a startled look.

"If only one of us asked His Majesty, she might not be given the time of day. But I don't think he could very well ignore the unanimous opinion of all four consorts. Do you?" Ho asked with a frightening smile.

"Director I, please take your leave," On demanded forcefully despite her anxiousness.

Yo gave the eunuchs and guardsmen a threatening glare.

"Get out, all of you," Yo commanded.

Bunryo clenched his teeth and his clouded eyes were filled with rage. His gaze clashed with the consorts', and they fought with their eyes to make the other party yield.





The staring contest continued, but in the end, the first to avert their gaze was Bunryo, who was unable to withstand the determination and pressure of the four consorts. He let out a groan from the back of his throat.

“Very well, consorts,” Bunryo said in a strained voice. He then gave them a bow and turned around.

Bunryo ordered the eunuchs and guardsmen to leave, and they similarly gave the consorts a bow and walked off toward the gate.

*Is it over...?* As soon as the realization sank in, Rimi’s knees gave way.

“Ah! Lady Setsu!” On exclaimed as Rimi slid down out of her arms and onto the ground next to her.

“Can’t even stand up, huh?” Ho remarked.

“My, how unseemly,” So said.

“Are you all right, dearest?” Yo asked with a concerned look.

The consorts sat down around Rimi, who looked back at them vacantly. Despite the situation, she found herself captivated by them.

So was brimming with even more confidence and pride than ever, to the point of arrogance. Yo’s bright eyes were as pure as a child’s. Ho had an air of impeccable and overwhelming nobleness. On seemed as soft and kind as flowers dancing in the wind.

*Oh, how beautiful they are...* The consorts appeared indescribably enchanting. Rimi’s heart trembled the same way it had when the Saigu had first called her “Umashi-no-Miya.”

“You are all beautiful,” Rimi said unwittingly, and the consorts gave her smiles reminiscent of a flower blooming.

Shusei and Hakurei ran up to them, and Shusei lifted Rimi up.



“Remarkable, consorts,” Shohi unconsciously whispered from the dark wing of the stage. He had almost started to laugh, wondering who was really being tyrannical here. But in the end, it had been a brilliant display of their confidence

as the four consorts.

Shohi let out a sigh of relief and became lost in thought.

*Who of those four consorts should I choose to stand next to me?*

## II

“O-Ow.”

That night, Rimi was sitting in the living room of the Palace of Northern Peaks’ guest house, where Shusei was disinfecting the wound on her cheek. Sitting in a chair opposite Rimi, Shusei soaked a clean cloth with herbal medicine and gently patted her wound as he let out a deep sigh.

“I’m just glad you didn’t have to suffer anything worse than this wound. I shiver thinking about what might have happened had you been captured by Director I,” Shusei said.

“It’s all thanks to the consorts,” Rimi replied.

“Indeed. I never expected them to rush to your side like that. And what’s more, they even agreed to have His Majesty decide the order for the Declaration of Stability.”

After the events in the garden, the consorts had agreed with Hakurei’s suggestion. The seventh-year fortune had helped them realize that they had all been forced into the rear palace by others using fate as a pretext. They now thought of one another as reflections of themselves. This had made them understand how pointless it was to fight amongst one another.

*This is all thanks to the four consorts being so wise purely by chance.* That was why they had understood the meaning of the true treasure that Rimi had served. It was all a result of the nature of the consorts who had been assembled for the current emperor’s rear palace.

“I seem to be pretty lucky,” Rimi said. She gave a soft smile, truly impressed with her good fortune.

“It wasn’t just luck,” Shusei remarked. “What you served, and how you served it, helped bring out that good luck. That’s why...I’m really happy to have you as

my assistant. As long as I have you, I'm sure cuisinology will develop in a myriad of ways."

"I'm so happy to hear that. I would love nothing more than to continue being your assistant. But we're saying goodbye to the Palace of Northern Peaks tomorrow."

The consorts had reached a consensus on the Declaration of Stability, which combined with the events earlier that day had resulted in the consorts' suppers coming to an end. Shusei would have to leave the rear palace come daybreak, and Rimi would need to return to the Palace of Small Wings. Rimi would then go back to her days of visiting Shohi with Tama and helping Shusei at the cuisinology hall.

It was a relief to be able to go back to life as usual, but at the same time, Rimi believed that her days would feel empty without getting to make food for the consorts. She would also miss being able to spend so much time with Shusei. The quiet nights that they would enjoy together were coming to an end.

"I guess this is the last night we will be together like this, Master Shusei," Rimi said, her sadness unwittingly leaving her mouth. Shusei, still holding the soaked cloth, seemed momentarily stunned. He put the cloth down on the table and gave Rimi a nervous look.

"Will you miss this, Rimi?" Shusei asked.

"Yes, I will miss you..." Rimi replied, but she quickly became embarrassed and her face turned red. Saying that she would miss spending time with Shusei felt as though she was admitting her feelings for him. "U-Um, by missing you, I mean..."

"I was just thinking about how I will miss you too, Rimi."

Shusei touched Rimi's cheek, gently stroking it near the wound as if soothing the injury.

"I was scared to death back there when I thought you would get punished," Shusei continued. "I can't express how happy I am to be able to touch you like this. I feel as if I finally understand my own feelings."

"Your feelings?"

“Yes. I know that they’re inappropriate, but I can’t help myself.” Shusei lowered his voice to a sad whisper. “You are dear to me.”

Shusei slid his finger from Rimi’s cheek down to the side of her neck, then to her chin. He reached out to touch her neck with his other hand. Rimi’s ears burned red from Shusei’s gentle, inviting hands. Shusei’s eyes were as clear and beautiful as ever, but they seemed to hide a fiery light.

“Why aren’t you resisting, Rimi? You understand what I’m about to do, don’t you?”

“N-No...I don’t...”

Their gazes intertwined. Rimi was frozen in place.

“Do you want me to explain? But if I do, it might be too late,” Shusei said.

“Too late? Do you mean I might be infected with some sort of incurable illness?” Rimi asked.

“I feel like you just said something terribly rude. I haven’t contracted any strange disease like that.”

“Then are you saying some other kind of outrageous phenomenon might happen?”

Shusei suddenly burst into laughter.

“Oh, I can’t do this,” Shusei said. “Listening to your blithe responses, I feel ridiculous for being as overwrought as I am.”

He removed his hands and then briskly put away the herbal medicine.

“Um... You’re not ill, are you, Master Shusei?” Rimi asked, concerned. The way his words had seemed to imply something had worried Rimi. Shusei, however, just shook his head and gave her a dejected smile.

“Well, I suppose in a way you could say I’m ill. Nonetheless, you needn’t worry. It may be incurable, but it’s not terminal. It also does not easily infect others—especially not you.”

*In other words, it’s a local disease that only infects Konkokuans?*

Rimi looked at him vacantly while Shusei picked up the medicine box, stood

up, and directed his usual kind smile at her.

“Now all that’s left to do is wait for the Declaration of Stability and see what decision His Majesty makes.”



*I almost made a foolish mistake*, Shusei thought as he carried the medicine box to his bedroom, scoffing with a smile at his actions. He had said what he must not say, but he had stopped himself from doing what he must not do at the very last minute.

Shusei felt a belated sense of relief at the fact that he had managed to control himself. Had he continued, both he and Rimi would have ended up in an awkward position. He had been close to forcing Rimi into another difficult situation when she had only just escaped the last one with the help of the four consorts.

The moment he entered the dark bedroom, Shusei heard a voice coming from his bed.

“I’m surprised you’ve got that much self-restraint,” Jotetsu said.

Annoyed that Jotetsu had entered the room without permission, Shusei put down the medicine box and lit a candle.

“What are you talking about?” Shusei said indignantly.

“You can’t fool me. Giving up your title of the Loveless Scholar sounds good to me. Of course, you need to get better at picking your targets,” Jotetsu teased.

Jotetsu was lying brazenly on Shusei’s bed, looking at Shusei while his head rested on his arms.

“I’d lecture you for your lack of manners, but you *did* help us out this time around. If not for you, we might not have found the treasure. I’m grateful for what you did,” Shusei said.

“Well, His Majesty did order me to help you out. Besides...” Jotetsu sat up and smirked at Shusei. “Chancellor Shu is concerned about what you’re up to.”

“My father would never worry about his son.”

“Well, you’re not wrong, but you’re also not right.”

“What do you mean?” Shusei knew that whenever Jotetsu said something vague like that, there was more to it.

“We’ve known each other for a long time, so I’ll give you some advice. Be more careful about who you fall in love with.”

“Who has said anything about falling in—”

“Just shut up and listen. I’m saying that being His Majesty’s bodyguard isn’t the only reason I’m always by his side serving him. Hakurei is just a bell. The one who would normally be wearing a bell around their neck doesn’t have one, so this bell is set to make noise instead.”

“What is that supposed to mean...?”

“As I said, be more careful about who you fall for.”

Jotetsu climbed down from the bed, patted Shusei on the shoulder, and left the room.

*Is someone close to His Majesty plotting something again?* Jotetsu would never say something like that as a joke. It was clear that he had said something important, but Shusei had been unable to understand what. However, if he was talking about something urgent, he wouldn’t have used such vague language. Jotetsu had likely simply sensed trouble on the horizon, but it was still unclear what it was.

Still, Shusei decided to take the warning to heart. Jotetsu had warned him multiple times about choosing who to fall for more wisely. He had clearly been referring to Rimi. *But is that simply because His Majesty has his eye on her? Or is there something else about Rimi?*

Nine days later, the day of the Declaration of Stability arrived.



The square in front of the imperial palace’s main gate was surrounded on three sides by walls so enormous that your neck hurt from looking up at them. The main gate was located at the front of the square and consisted of two stone doors so enormous that opening just one required the power of one hundred men. Thus, the gate was very rarely opened and mainly served to symbolize that this was the abode of the emperor.



Carved into the doors was a giant dragon that looked down on the people who had gathered in the square with its stone eyes. Imperial guards wearing formal military attire were standing on the walls at both sides of the gate, intimidating the people.

Over two thousand capital residents had gathered in the square. It wasn't often that they had a chance to see the emperor. On top of the gate was a stone watchtower where the emperor would make his appearance alongside the four consorts.

As the noon gong rang out, four women stepped out onto the platform above the wall. The people below erupted into cheers. Noble Consort So, Pure Consort Yo, Virtuous Consort Ho, and Worthy Consort On stood next to each other. They all looked equally graceful and dignified.



Meanwhile, Rimi was staring far-off at the sky from her own residence in the Palace of Small Wings. The roars of the square did not reach the rear palace, and it was just as quiet as usual.

The consorts had left the rear palace for the Declaration of Stability, and Shusei and Hakurei were both participating as Shohi's attendants. As a mere palace woman, Rimi was in no position to attend the ceremony.

*I wonder who His Majesty is planning to have stand next to him...*

The consorts had become aware of how noble they were, and they had understood that it made no difference who was picked. Still, it was inevitable that others would gossip about who was and wasn't chosen. Rimi didn't want the gossip surrounding them to cause a rift between the consorts just as they had come to terms with everything.

As Rimi observed the pale blue fall sky, she suddenly realized that Tama was nowhere to be seen.

"Huh? Where did she go...?"



Shohi's formal attire was a purple so dark that it could have been mistaken for black. A silver dragon was embroidered from the right shoulder and ran across the back to the left sleeve. The attire made the young emperor look all the more beautiful and divine.

Shohi climbed the stairs leading to the top of the walls where officials were lined up and waiting for him. The chancellor, Shu Kojin, was there as well. The moment Shohi came into view, they fell to their knees to greet him.

Shohi continued toward the stairs leading to the watchtower when Shusei called out to him from behind.

"Your Majesty," Shusei said in an anxious tone.

Shohi turned around to find Shusei furrowing his brow with a concerned look. Shusei had asked Shohi multiple times on the way here whether he had chosen who should stand next to him yet, but Shohi had not answered.

Shusei had served as a cook for the four consorts over the summer together with Rimi, and it appeared he had grown attached to them. He seemed beside himself with worry over who would be chosen and what consequences there might be.

*Being too kind only leads to suffering.* Shusei always seemed to struggle more than necessary as a result of his kindness.

This time around, however, Shohi had also been forced to spend the past nine days in agony.

"Do not worry, Shusei," Shohi replied curtly.

This was as far as Shusei could follow. Only the emperor and the four consorts were allowed onto the watchtower above.

Hakurei was kneeling next to the stairs. He held up the Scattering Lotus, which rested on purple velvet, and presented it to Shohi. Shohi picked it up with both hands and slowly made his way up the stairs. Once he reached the platform, he was expected to hand it to one of the four consorts and have her stand on his right side.

The consorts turned around to face Shohi and prostrated themselves before

him. Shohi observed the women, took a breath, and then called out to them.

“Noble Consort So.”

“Your Majesty,” So replied and looked up at Shohi. She seemed different to Shohi compared to when he had first met her. Though she was brimming with confidence as always, her mind no longer seemed preoccupied with plotting vicious schemes.

“I must apologize for how I treated you when we first met.”

So looked back at him with astonished eyes.

“You are proud and confident. You are a fine Noble Consort.” Shohi then turned to the next consort. “Pure Consort Yo.”

“Your Majesty,” Yo said and looked up, showing her smooth cheeks.

“You are a strange one, but you are virtuous. If you prefer women, then so be it. Enjoy your time in the rear palace. I shall not fault you. You must teach me how to please women some time.”

Yo was dumbfounded, but Shohi paid her no mind as he turned away.

“Now, Virtuous Consort Ho,” Shohi continued, and Ho quietly raised her head. “I often saw you in the rear palace when you were young. The fact that your heart remains the same as it was then is proof of how sincere you are as a person. You should not let it weigh on your mind.”

Ho looked startled, but Shohi ignored her as he called out for Worthy Consort On next. Seeing On timidly raise her head, Shohi gave her a slight nod.

“Do not fret. I do not consider what you did a crime, and I shall let you remain in the rear palace for as long as you please. I have vowed not to part with any of my four consorts.”

The consorts all at once let out surprised gasps.

“I shall not part with any of my consorts, and I will treat you all equally. Thus, I command you: consider me your master and serve by my side. Then I shall let you remain as the most powerful women of the rear palace and treat you with respect.”

The consorts all wore blank expressions, unable to process what was happening.

“You are my brides. But merely being my brides cannot be enough to satisfy you. I shall treat you as my most trusted retainers. While your foremost duty is to bear my heir, there may be those who do not wish to do so, in which case you may perform another duty for me. To those who wish to bear my heir, I shall grant you equal opportunities. However, I will not give preferential treatment to whoever does bear my heir. My heir is to be considered the child of all the consorts, and you are to raise him together.”

Shohi paused for a moment before issuing his next order.

“Stand up and face the people. Assure them of this country’s bright future together with me. Promise them the stability of the country as my most trusted retainers.”

The consorts stood up and turned to face the square. Shohi passed by the consorts and stood at the front, holding up the treasure himself.

Loud cheers could be heard from the people as the emperor stepped out. The consorts vacantly observed his back. Gradually, however, they realized the significance of what he was doing, and their expressions turned cheerful and radiant.

Shohi hadn’t chosen anyone. He had stood at the front with the consorts behind him as his retainers, all equal. Despite them being women, he had ordered them not to merely be his brides, but to become one of the emperor’s supporting pillars. That was even bolder and more respectful than simply giving one of them his affection.



“What is His Majesty doing?!”

The officials of the Bureau of Sacrifices were frantically running toward the stairs leading to the watchtower, but Shusei kept them back.

“You mustn’t go up to the watchtower. If you do, you will get in the way of the ceremony,” Shusei warned.

“But His Majesty is holding the treasure! According to tradition, one of the

consorts has to hold it!”

“That is what His Majesty has decided. He has already appeared before the people.”

“What is His Majesty thinking...?” the dumbfounded officials bemoaned, but Shusei was barely able to contain his laughter.

*He decided to break tradition for the Declaration of Stability? He must have been so apprehensive that he’d rather ruin an important ceremony.*

But the answer Shohi had chosen made Shusei happy. It was something the old Shohi would never have done.

*You made a wise decision, Your Majesty.*



*His Majesty apologized to me...* That was enough for Noble Consort So to be on the verge of tears. Shohi had spoken to her almost as if he knew her and had called her a fine Noble Consort.

So adored his divinely beautiful figure—but it was not the same worrisome adoration as before. She felt as though she was adoring a beautiful mirage, as though she loved something out of reach with all her heart. She felt without a doubt that he was her master.



*The strange one here is His Majesty. “Enjoy your time in the rear palace...” I can’t believe it.*

Pure Consort Yo was smiling. Never in her wildest dreams had she expected Shohi to give her his blessing. He seemed to be very familiar with her, and Yo couldn’t help but wonder how that information had reached his ears.

*Is it really thanks to the blessing of the divine dragon? Is His Majesty not human, perhaps? If so, I suppose he’s not a man either. That would explain how beautiful he is.*

If any other man had commanded her to serve him, Yo would have become nauseous with disgust—yet for some strange reason, she felt nothing of the sort. Yo was willing to serve this beautiful emperor who had the blessing of the

divine dragon. He seemed like a being that had transcended the concepts of manhood and womanhood.



*His Majesty remembered me?*

When Virtuous Consort Ho visited Hakurei as a child, she would sometimes catch a glimpse of the younger prince. Shohi had always looked as if he was afraid of something, and Ho had felt sorry for him. That child had not only seen through Ho to the feelings she had hidden deep inside—he had also approved of them. Ho already considered it her duty to serve the emperor, and she had no intention of defying his order to do so. But what had made her truly happy was that the very same emperor had called her inner feelings proof of her sincerity. Most would disapprove of their concubine harboring such feelings, but Shohi had reassured her that she had nothing to worry about.

He was a generous emperor. Ho felt that he might be a good master to serve.



*I do not consider what you did a crime... Shohi must have been aware of what Worthy Consort On did; otherwise, he wouldn't have said something like that. He must have also known that she had no home to go back to, which is why he had told her that she was free to stay in the rear palace. Despite knowing what I did, he still says that I'm welcome in the rear palace? And even to serve by his side?*

On's chest was filled with gratitude over being forgiven. She was willing to risk her life to serve the emperor.

*Because he both forgave me and gave me a place where I belong...*

That meant protecting and serving the emperor no matter what perils Shohi might face. She felt that was her duty.



Shohi held up the treasure and addressed the people.

"I guarantee a bright future for the empire of Konkoku!"

Cheers loud enough to rock the imperial palace erupted. So fervent were the roars of the people that history books would later claim that the large stone

doors had been shaking, and the eyes of the dragon carving had moved. The four consorts looked at the people with smiles that showed that they understood their duty and took pride in it, and the cheers grew even more intense.



In that instance, some of the onlookers had noticed a small silver creature situated on the roof of the watchtower. It had sat still right above where the emperor was standing, and no one knew what the creature had been.

The consorts who had stood together with the emperor that day would go on to spend the rest of their lives as the four consorts of the rear palace. Referred to as the Four Lotuses, they worked together to save the emperor and the empress from peril. They went down in history as legendary consorts—but that is a story for another time.



*Who would have thought the Declaration of Stability would end like this?*

Hakurei looked up at the platform as the cheers of the people washed over him. He had hoped for as little animosity as possible to remain between the consorts, but he never expected to see something like this. Given what happened during Virtuous Consort Sai's time in the rear palace, this was nothing short of a miracle. Shohi had understood and accepted his responsibility, and he had come up with the best possible solution. As Hakurei beheld this sight, he felt as if something inside of him could finally rest.

"Those fellows from Sacrifices sure look pale," Jotetsu said, standing next to Hakurei. He was also wearing formal attire for the occasion.

"They would probably never even have considered changing the ceremony. I'm sure His Majesty can expect to get an earful from the Minister of Rites after this. Still, I think this was a good outcome," Hakurei noted.

"For once, it looks like we agree. I wonder if the reason he did this is that there's a woman he's fallen for. A woman His Majesty needs." There was a smirk on Jotetsu's lips, and Hakurei smiled faintly. Hakurei's eyes were on the cuisinologist who was looking at Shohi's back with a satisfied look on his face.

"My, Jotetsu, what a surprise. We agree again. I feel sorry for Shusei...but we must give His Majesty what he needs."



Rimi was sitting alone, staring vacantly at the sky. A banquet would be held today to celebrate the Declaration of Stability, so the consorts would be eating



in the outer palace. Shusei and Jotetsu were also invited to the banquet, and Hakurei would be there as a palace attendant in service of Shohi and the four consorts. But the consorts would surely return to the rear palace exhausted, so Rimi was considering visiting their palaces in the morning to serve them something easy on their stomachs. Shusei and Hakurei, who had both worked hard during the summer, would also be done with the bigger part of their work, and Rimi wanted to feed them something to celebrate.

*That would be the perfect end to my summer duty.* So much had happened during her stay at the Palace of Northern Peaks with Shusei, some of which Rimi would rather forget. But she was still happy to have been able to spend time with Shusei.

*You are dear to me.* Rimi remembered the words Shusei had whispered to her and blushed. She still did not understand what he had meant. While it seemed like something that would get her hopes up, afterward Shusei had acted no differently than usual. Rimi figured that it must have been the Loveless Scholar once again saying something strange, thinking that they were words to cheer a woman up or thank her for her hard work.

Regardless, Rimi's primary concern right now was what to serve the four consorts, Shusei, and Hakurei.

*They will already have had plenty to eat and drink, so something light and watery would be good for breakfast. Should it be hot or cold? I think Master Shusei said that hot food was good the day after you had eaten too much.* Rimi's heart raced as she pondered possible dishes. *How about congee made with kengyoken and umifu stock? It could be served with a Konkokuan sauce made from ganjiang so you can adjust the taste to suit your palate.*

Rimi left her residence and started walking down a cloister when she heard light footsteps behind her. She turned around to find Tama hopping toward her. The adorable silver divine dragon let out a squeal, then climbed up Rimi's skirt and onto her shoulder as usual.

"Where were you, Tama?" Rimi asked as she tickled Tama's throat, and Tama closed her eyes, content.

The sun had grown weaker, and a cool breeze passed through the inner

palace. Rimi felt the soft presence of autumn in the dry air as she once again made her way toward the kitchen, hoping that she would be able to satisfy someone with her food.

The next morning, Rimi was making congee in the kitchen of the Palace of Small Wings when she received an invitation from each of the four consorts. As Rimi struggled to decide what to do with the simultaneous invitations, Hakurei conveniently showed up. He offered to prepare a table in the western peach garden and invite the consorts there.

Rimi carried the congee from the kitchen to the garden. As she was preparing breakfast on the round table in the shade, the consorts arrived.

“Good morning, consorts,” Rimi said and greeted them with a bow, and the consorts answered her with well-mannered smiles before taking their seats by the table. But the moment their handmaids had left the garden, Virtuous Consort Ho let out a sigh, seemingly not caring about appearances anymore.

“I can’t believe how exhausting yesterday was. Oh, yes, there was something I forgot to mention. Noble Consort So, I think your outfit yesterday was a bit too showy. You’d do well to pick more mature colors,” Ho said.

Noble Consort So threw Ho an annoyed look.

“Why, you should reflect on your own behavior, Virtuous Consort Ho. You were far too aloof toward the officials during the banquet. And if you want to discuss outfits, then the problem is with Worthy Consort On, not me. Her dress was too plain,” So retorted.

“I don’t need anything more than that,” On replied somewhat timidly before turning to look at Pure Consort Yo, who was sitting next to her. “Um, Pure Consort Yo, I think you should pay a little more attention to how you walk. I could see your ankles.”

“What? When did that happen? Even if you did, you can’t have seen much,” Yo said indifferently.

“Even a little is too much, Pure Consort Yo,” Ho chided her.

Rimi struggled to contain her laughter as she listened to the consorts exchanging petty complaints while she poured congee into bowls, which she

placed in front of them.

“Are you laughing, dearest?” Yo asked.

“My, how rude,” So said with an astonished tone. “What is so funny, Lady Setsu?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing. You all just seemed to be enjoying yourselves so much,” Rimi said.

“Well I certainly am not,” Ho said and furrowed her brow. On gave an embarrassed smile.

“We may not be enjoying ourselves, but we’re a bit relieved, Lady Setsu,” On said.

“Relieved?” Rimi asked, and So gave her a confident look.

“Oh, haven’t you heard?” So said. “During the Declaration of Stability, His Majesty didn’t have anyone stand next to him. Instead, he stood alone in front of the consorts. He also said that he would let us remain as the most powerful women of the rear palace and treat us with respect.”

“What...? He didn’t choose anyone...?” Rimi’s eyes were wide from surprise.

“And he even said that he would consider us his most trusted retainers!” Yo added enthusiastically. “Can you believe that His Majesty said something like that to us, even though we’re women?”

The consorts exchanged glances and smiled faintly. As Rimi stood dumbfounded, the consorts said “Let’s begin,” picked up their spoons, and started eating.

*The consorts are smiling the day after the Declaration of Stability...* The consorts seemed just as calm and content as Rimi was surprised and amazed.

Rimi decided that she would go through with her plan to bring some congee to Shusei and Hakurei later. It was in no small part thanks to them that the consorts were able to spend this morning so peacefully.

*And I never expected His Majesty to make a decision like that...* She wanted to treat Shohi to some congee too. The decision that the consorts had told her about went far above and beyond anything Rimi had dared to hope. She had to

thank him.

“Oh, this is lovely,” So said as if slowly exhaling from deep within her chest.

“This salty-sweet ganjiang sauce is wonderful! I love how it changes the taste!” Yo said cheerfully.

“It’s the perfect congee the day after you’ve drunk too much,” Ho added with a nod.

“I could eat this every day,” On smiled. “It’s so light and easy to eat.”

“Have as much as you’d like,” Rimi said with a soft smile, and So giggled.

“You always look so carefree with that face of yours, like a cat about to sneeze, don’t you, Lady Setsu?” So teased.

“A cat? Thank you so much!” Rimi was happy to be compared to a cute animal, but Yo frowned.

“Don’t be happy, dearest! She’s not complimenting you! Noble Consort So, you meanie!” Yo said.

“What? Really? But cats are so cute, even if they’re sneezing or yawning,” Rimi responded cheerfully. So looked at her blankly, and the other consorts followed suit. The four of them then burst out laughing.

The Declaration of Stability had ended, and the height of autumn was drawing near. The consorts’ laughs danced in the gentle fall breeze.

# Afterword

Hello, everyone, it's Miri Mikawa. Thanks to all of you, I've been able to write another volume of *Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower*.

In the last volume, Rimi was leading a solitary, pickling life only to be transported to a palace away from the capital, so it was a bit lacking in extravagant rear palace drama. So for this volume, I decided to add the four consorts into the mix for a bit of extra rear palace flair. And if you want extravagance, you can't very well do without romance (yes, I'm simple), so I've also let the love triangle develop(?) gradually. I'm excited to see what Shusei and Shohi do next, myself, but first and foremost I just want to write something that will be fun to read.

To the editor: I'm sorry for all the trouble I'm always causing you. I'll do my best to write something worthy of your hard work, so I hope you'll continue to bear with me.

To Kasumi Nagi, who drew the illustrations: Thank you so much. I can't believe how adorable your illustrations of Rimi and Tama are! And the men are gorgeous too! I'm enchanted by them every time I see them. I'm so, so glad to have you drawing for me. Thank you again.

Lastly, to all my readers: Thank you for buying this book. I hope you enjoyed even a little bit of your time reading it.





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Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower: Volume 2



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