



# Prologue

## The Lotus That Blooms in the Inner Palace



“By imperial decree, I name Fan Renka my queen!”  
At those words, I sensed the many concubines and court ladies in the hall turning to look back towards me as I kept my head lowered. *Oh my, this is why I asked them not to do this.* I let out a light sigh.

“Lady Renka, His Majesty has summoned you,” Linxing, my attendant beside me, said as she took me by the hand and led me before the throne.

“Renka? She’s the lesser-fifth class weaver, isn’t she?”

“She’s beautiful, I’ll admit, but she’s a commoner.”

“I heard His Majesty’s been paying her a few visits lately...”

“And I thought her textiles were the only special thing about her. She played us for fools.”

These insolent comments seemed to come from all over the place. Now, did they think they were whispering quietly enough that I wouldn’t hear, or were they purposefully making themselves heard...

The truth of the matter is that these women were completely in

their anger. The inner palace has its own ranking system starting at greater-first class followed by lesser-first class, going all the way down to lesser-sixth, with twelve divisions in total. As a lesser-fifth class, I was third from the bottom; surely no one had actually expected me to become the empress. I had no prominent noble parents backing me and had entered the inner palace for weaving and nothing else.

Honestly, I'd had no such expectations either.

Linxing said nothing, but her sniffles told me everything I needed to know. I'd caused her nothing but trouble since coming to the inner palace. The bullying towards me had grown worse ever since His Majesty began to visit my room, and my attendant, Linxing, was subject to it as well. In fact, her happiness was perhaps the only benefit I would find in becoming empress.

"Are you all right?" the emperor asked me.

Once I was standing before him, he took my hand, taking over from Linxing. As one might expect, the hall stirred even more loudly at this. The emperor would not usually descend from the throne for the sake of a mere court lady—even one who was to become empress.

"I am very much all right, Your Majesty," I implicitly told him to return to his throne, but he showed no such intentions.

"Do not worry about me," he said. "This is what I want to do."

*Well, it's not what I want...* I thought, but the man went on, undeterred.

"Now, the empress's sash."

The emperor skillfully wrapped the proof of my official status around my waist. It was customary for not only the greater-first class empress but also the lesser-first ladies holding the titles of

Nobility, Virtue, Purity and Wisdom to be graced in similar fashion. Even the greater-second class concubines would have their moment with the emperor wrapping their waist sashes when they assumed their positions.

This particular sash had been woven by none other than myself.

Now, I'm not one to boast, but this was a lavish sash incorporating an incredibly intricate design—and a complete mismatch for my court lady attire, which consisted of unadorned white on top and an unembellished long skirt of blue.

“You look lovely in scarlet, Renka.”

I knelt at his irritating voice, offering a quiet, “Thank you.”

And there, I thought the ceremony would end without incident, but someone in the hall had the bright idea to jeer, “It’s not like she can see it anyway.”

Those were words I'd heard time and time again even before I entered the inner palace. They were simple fact; I had no rebuttal, nor did I feel any anger. The emperor before me, however, hated such comments more than anyone else.

“Who said that?!”

He immediately flared up into a blazing wrath. The anger of a man who was usually so calm and collected caused the hall's earlier clamor to die. The silence spread with such palpable tension I could feel it pricking against my skin.

“Any disrespect towards the empress will be considered a slight towards me. The next time I hear those words, I shall personally sever the head of whomsoever uttered them.”

The rustling of many fabrics that followed told me the twelve hundred concubines and court ladies in the hall had all knelt. The inner palace was where the emperor's word held more

weight.

“Renka, I will treasure you as long as I live,” he whispered.

I stifled a sigh—one of countless I’d had until now—as I nodded.

“Your words are... more than I deserve,” I said.

On that day, for the first time in its millennia-long history, the nation of Ziyu welcomed an empress whose eyes saw no light.



# Chapter 1

## The lesser Fifth-Weaver



To understand how we arrived at this point, we must go back a few years.

That day, my hands worked the loom in front of me as I sat by the window. This was a time I cherished more than anything—I adored feeling the warm morning sun on my face as I listened to the pleasing clacks ringing about the loom.

Yet, on that day, this blissful moment was burst by a shrill screech: “I told you to shut your mouth and make it!”

“You are useless! There’s no point in talking to you!” the voice continued. “Bring out the weaver court lady! The empress is calling for her!”

I was unable to stand the volume of these angry bellows and so I was already on my feet, headed to the door. It wasn’t that I could see the way, but this was a room I knew well enough. I could maneuver around it without anyone leading me by the hand. As soon as she noticed me moving about, my attendant, Linxing, hurried over to me.

“Please return to your seat, Lady Renka,” she said.

“I imagine this visitor won’t be satisfied until she talks to me.”

I couldn’t see the face of our uninvited guest, but I could sense her heightened body temperature from how it strengthened the fragrance of her perfume. Add to this the rustling of the fabric she wore, and I could tell she was incredibly agitated—and a little panicked as well.

“That’s right! You are a mere lesser-fifth, so stop putting on airs! Get out here already!”

As a weaver of the inner palace, my status was not high by any means. In fact, even this attendant of the empress outranked me. Stifling a sigh, I stepped through the doorway.

“You are the empress’s attendant, correct?” I asked.

“H-how did you know?” From her voice, I could tell this had made her falter.

“Why, you just said it to someone along the way. The empress is calling for me, yes?”

“You heard that?”

She was understandably surprised. A normal person would not have been able to pick up on the details of a conversation exchanged at the entrance—not as they sat by the farthest wall.

“Yes, I heard, so I came in a hurry. So what is the empress’s request?”

“You must have this made by tomorrow!”

She shoved a piece of paper into my hand, which I felt the front and back of before letting out a slight sigh. Why would she tell such an easily discernable lie?

“This is not a request from the empress,” I said.

“Wh-what makes you say that?! It’s not as though you can even see it!”

Her already-loud voice rose even louder in protest. I'd evidently hit the mark.

"I'm sure you are aware of this, but I am the weaver of the department of ceremonies. I only take requests for sashes from the emperor, the empress, and the Minister of Rites."

Another agency—the department of uniforms—existed to supply clothing to the inner palace. If she wanted a sash, she would naturally go there—not come to me.

"Y-yes, so this comes from the empress..."

"If it was a request from the empress, she would not have used paper like this. No, the problem is even more fundamental; she would not simply hand me a drawing and tell me to weave it. She would have a specialized craftsman draft a detailed pattern on grid-lined paper."

The patterns I normally received had a texture I could make out with just my fingertips to discern the design. I could feel the texture of brushstrokes on the paper this court lady had handed me, but it was certainly not pattern paper.

"Was she perhaps in such a hurry she had no time to spare for the formalities?" I offered.

It would be simple to drive her further into a corner—to have her admit her sins, but if she really was the empress's attendant (that was one thing I had no way to confirm), then I would be making an enemy of the most influential force in the inner palace. I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

"Th-that's right. It is a very urgent matter! The empress says she needs it by tomorrow..."

*Do you honestly expect a sash to be completed overnight?* I tiredly thought to myself. But to the court lady, I offered a bit of

sympathy: “That is quite the predicament.” Then, I waited a bit and pretended to recall something. “Linxing, could you bring me the sash in the second drawer of the dresser in the back?”

“But Lady Renka! That sash is...”

“It’s fine. Could you?”

Linxing’s feet slapped somewhat heavily against the ground in her irritation, but when I sent her a smile, she hurried to the back of the room.

“As you’ve come on such short notice, it will differ from the design you’ve handed me, but it is still a sash nonetheless.”

“W-well, there’s no helping it then. I’ll have to make do. Now hurry up with it!”

She must have thought her ploy had been successful; her voice brightened up a bit.

“I have it, milady,” Linxing said, full of displeasure. She roughly grabbed me by the wrist and placed my hand on top of the sash.

I offered her a “Thank you” as I swiftly let my palm trail over it. From the unevenness, I confirmed this was the sash that depicted an array of lilies and butterflies.

“It was made with the empress’s elegant beauty in mind. I had it ready in the hopes it would be of use someday.”

“You’re well prepared. I’m sure she will be delighted with this!”

The sash was practically ripped away from Linxing’s grasp, after which the court lady left without a word of thanks. I heard a loud clack in her step as she made off.

Once the storm had died down, Linxing dropped all pretenses. She returned to the room ahead of me, her frustration on full

display.

“Lady Renka, you’re beautiful, so it really is such a shame that you’re like this.”

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?” I almost doubted my own ears at that comment.

“The empress would know that a sash can’t be made overnight.”

I did receive some requests directly from the esteemed empress, but these took into account the regular jobs handed to me. I was usually on a well-planned schedule.

“She intends to use that to get His Majesty to fall for her,” Linxing informed me.

Some thousand two hundred women lived in the inner palace, and they were generally categorized into two groups: court ladies and concubines. The ones who made *contact* with His Majesty were concubines, and those who worked for the sake of the inner palace were the court ladies.

Despite these divisions, we all belonged to the emperor, and it was possible for His Majesty to have relations with the court ladies as well. Those who earned His Majesty’s affection would be promoted to concubines, as it would be unacceptable if the ruler of the next generation was but the son of a mere court lady. It was incredibly unlikely for a child of such a union to be named the emperor’s successor, but this measure was put in place for that remote possibility nonetheless.

That said, His Majesty had apparently never had any relations with his court ladies even after taking the throne. He seemed to be a methodical man who carefully planned out his nightly visits: the first night of his routine, he would have his way with the

empress and then would work his way down the list in order each successive night after that, stopping at the greater-second concubines. He never paid a visit to any of the concubines of lesser-second status or below.

For the first few years of his reign, plenty of court ladies dreamed of catching the emperor's eye. But slowly, the realization set in that this was an impossible task, and they began to sound as though they had given up on life.

"Is becoming a concubine really such a good thing?" I voiced a question that had been on my mind for a long time now. "Even if you do become one, you're banished to the cold palace if you fail to conceive a child by thirty."

Concubines sent to the cold palace would spend the rest of their days there. Yes, the inner palace seemed like a vibrant place at first glance, but the entire production existed for the sole purpose of creating the emperor's heir. Any concubine who failed to do this would be mercilessly dragged off the stage.

"But not her! Considering that court lady's brazenness, I'm sure she'll use any means at her disposal to have his child!" Linxing replied, skirting my question.

I gave up on any further explanation and returned to my loom.

"Still, milady. Why did you decide to throw some coins to that thief?"

"Was that what I did?"

I was honestly a bit surprised that Linxing was still talking about her.

"You most certainly did! Now that she's gotten a taste of your generosity, she might come around again!"

Indeed, when I had first been summoned to the inner palace,

this room was flooded with other court ladies carrying out requests from the concubines they served. It wasn't that the concubines were broke. If they wanted, they could buy as many sashes as they desired.

The reason they went out of their way to come to me—well, that was simply because my sashes were the ones required for important ceremonies. The threads and designs were different from the ones sold at the market. Evidently, the patterns I wove into the fabric were also somewhat notable, as they made my garments look like they had been embroidered.

Only a select few in the inner palace were capable of the technique.

That was why the concubines used their court ladies to order better sashes to adorn their waists. They wanted to raise their chances with the emperor, if only by a slight margin; they wanted to be blessed with his affection.

“But no one ever comes here twice.”

“P-point taken, but...”

“I mean, no one would dare wear a sash that shares the same pattern as the empress's favorite one. Not in the inner palace, at least.”

Whenever those brazen visitors came around, I would always hand them a sash with lilies and butterflies. Whenever I described the sashes as having “elegant beauty,” no one refuted it, nor did they seem to suspect a word of what I said.

However, this was the same pattern I had given the empress soon after I'd entered the inner palace. She had taken a liking to it and would often be seen wearing that sash. Before long, most of the concubines would realize the sash I'd given them was

unusable.

I imagined that rude court lady from before letting out an exasperated cry once she realized that—my lips curled into a grin.

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On a night when the muggy air still lingered slightly, I was enjoying my time weaving sashes as usual when I heard the approach of a hasty set of feet.

Linxing burst into the room. “Lady Renka! Please save me!”

I let out a light sigh as I heard her teary voice.

Linxing was the daughter of an affluent merchant, and before she entered the inner palace, I’m sure she was living a better life than me. Usually she would not be the sort of person who would serve as my attendant, but when she first entered the inner court, I was a lesser-fifth class, and she was a greater-sixth, making me her superior.

She was the youngest of her family, and the only daughter as well. Thus, she was doted upon and brought up like a princess. To put it kindly, she was sincere and—not so kindly—impulsive. Her nature was one that brought her much trouble in the inner court, where she lived alongside twelve hundred other women, so she would often come to me in tears.

“What’s wrong?” I took on a gentle tone as I heard out her concerns. I didn’t want to tell her—as she would become cocky—but these petty quarrels she brought me were just the brief reprieve from work a weaver needed.

“At midday, I borrowed a book from the library, but I forgot to

return it.”

The inner palace was home to several libraries, and we were free to borrow from them. The library Linxing brought up was most likely the one frequented by most of the court ladies. It wasn't that this library housed any special collections of books, but no shortage of ladies rushed to it in the hopes of being the first to read the latest popular romance stories.

“I borrowed a popular work, so if I don't return it today, they won't let me borrow the next one when it releases.”

It was a bit of an underhanded tactic, but the library worked on an enticing honor system. If you were accepted into the inner circle and kept all your promises, you would be granted early access to the new releases.

“Why don't you just return it then?”

I was a bit let down to know it wasn't nearly as large of a problem as I'd hoped for. The inner palace had no concept of sleep. It was nighttime, yes, but the library was still open. By “today,” Linxing simply meant before sunrise. She had plenty of time left.

“Return it?! It's already midnight! I'll have to pass in front of the forbidden chamber to get there!”

“Oh, *that*...”

I inadvertently burst into laughter at her reasoning.

“Please don't laugh at me! She really does appear by the forbidden chamber!”

“You mean Madame Yougi's ghost?”

The forbidden chamber was where Madame Yougi, the empress of the previous emperor, had once been confined—and where she had allegedly committed suicide. However, her death

was so sudden that rumor had it she'd been assassinated. If the legends were to be believed, her ghost still haunted this "forbidden chamber."

It was still nothing more than a rumor. I was surprised to find out Linxing believed in these childish fairy tales.

These past few years, there had been talk of infidelity between the court ladies and eunuchs, and so the nightly security measures had been increased. All this talk of ghosts was no doubt meant to keep people from walking the halls after dark.

"Why, the story has gotten so big even you know about it, Lady Renka! Madame Yougi tried to assassinate the crown prince simply because she couldn't have a child of her own!"

The crown prince had survived the assassination attempt and was now the presiding emperor. No doubt Madame Yougi would have many lingering regrets over her failure, Linxing claimed. In fact, she insisted it would be more difficult to believe that the madame *hadn't* come back as a foul spirit to haunt the place.

"I guess," I conceded, purposely offering no rebuttal.

"When night comes, Madame Yougi's ghost wanders, sobbing, 'Your Majesty, Your Majesty.' A friend of a friend even saw her!"

It was quite curious how scared she was when Linxing hadn't even witnessed it herself.

"Say, Linxing, don't you find that strange?" I said.

"Which part?"

"I mean, Madame Yougi was confined, wasn't she? But if she was witnessed, she must have been outside the room. Why would she be there?"

"Because she's a ghost!" Linxing declared, her tone

reprimanding as if to scold me for asking questions with obvious answers.

I tilted my head in curiosity. “If she can leave the room, why would she linger around the forbidden chamber?”

There was a time she quite literally couldn’t leave. But now that she was a ghost, nothing prevented her from heading straight to her beloved. It would make more sense to find her wandering spirit headed for the emperor.

“Th-that’s because she doesn’t know the previous emperor has passed.”

“Ah, yes. It has been twenty years since she perished after all.”

In the aftermath of the assassination attempt, the crown prince had to leave the inner palace and was in hiding for a time. He had only returned seven years ago, when his father succumbed to an illness. A year later, the old emperor was dead, and the crown prince had taken the throne at barely over twenty years of age.

“Well, Linxing, why don’t we head there right now?”

Linxing groaned as my curiosity took hold.

As only our footfalls resounded down the corridor, Linxing led me by the hand in silence. Despite everything she’d said, Linxing still seemed to enjoy seeing how everything changed once day turned to night. It was the thrill of walking around these sights, familiar yet altered.

“But what are we going to do if a ghost does show up?” she asked.

“We’re not going to do anything. Even if we wanted to clear her grudges and send her to heaven, the emperor she’s looking for is dead.”

And if she’d simply wanted to complain that emperor’s ears off

she would have done that twenty years ago, when she passed. Rumors of the ghost sightings had only begun recently, however.

“You’re lucky you can’t see...”

“I can still hear.”

Linxing’s tongue would often slip—it was a bad habit of hers. Certainly, I could not take in the scenery before my eyes, but I could imagine it. From time to time, I could “see” things that people with eyes could not. At times, I could read the inner workings of their hearts. Take now, for instance.

From the sound of our footsteps, I knew the floor was marble. I knew pillars towered over us at regular intervals. A hint of mold lingered in the air. Then there was the rustling of three sets of clothing...

I hurriedly pushed Linxing into the shadow of a large pillar, hiding beside her.

I’d heard the rustle of one more garment than there should have been.

“I-is she here?”

“If ghosts make sounds when they walk, then maybe.”

Linxing peeked her head out for a brief moment before snapping back.

“I-i-i-it’s...” She was ready to scream at any second, so I hurriedly pressed a hand to her mouth. Under my palm, she quietly reported, “Madame Yougi...”

“Quiet. That is not the madame.”

“B-but... she’s wearing the empress’s sash...”

“It certainly sounds like the empress’s sash, but that style of robe did not exist twenty years ago.”

The rustle of fabric could generally inform me of what sort of

clothing it was. What I heard from down the corridor was the rustling of layer upon layer of silk, and it sounded like a set that the current empress—Madame Biyu—would wear. If someone saw her in the dark from a distance, I could understand why they would think she was Madame Yougi’s ghost.

Shortly after, I heard the quiet click of a metal door shutting. That was my cue to release my hand from Linxing’s mouth.

“You’re aware that the current emperor’s birthmother was of the nomadic tribes, yes?”

“Yes, we were at war with the nomads thirty years ago, and she married to establish peace.”

“Ever since he took the throne, nomadic culture has seen more acceptance, and it has influenced our style of dress as well—even the clothes we are wearing at this moment. However, that wasn’t the case twenty years ago.”

Two decades prior, they did not drape a thin cloth over the shoulders as we do now. Additionally, the position of the sash was a bit lower and the hems would spread less. When walking, the sound of the hems’ rustling would be slightly quieter.

“An empress she may be, but if she resembles anyone, it would be the current one.”

This was not Madame Yougi’s ghost—it was merely someone pretending she was.

“Wh-wh-what do we do, then?”

Knowing it wasn’t a ghost seemed to have given way to an entirely new fear for Linxing. Her voice quivered, as per usual. Not that I disagreed. I personally found living humans far more frightening than ghosts.

“Yes, well...We have several options,” I told her.

“Such as?”

“One, we pretend we saw nothing and head to the library. Two, we make her fully aware we are allowing her to get away with it—making her indebted to us. Three, we hand her over to the guards.”

As long as we didn’t know who we were dealing it, it was impossible to know which option would be most beneficial to us.

“Well, why don’t you summon the guards?” I said with a smile. “If we are on our own, we won’t even be able to catch her.”

Linxing nodded. “Then, Lady Renka, please wait here, and don’t do anything rash,” she said.

I listened until I could no longer hear her footsteps before I rose. I walked with one hand creeping along the wall until I could feel the cold chill of metal. This was presumably the door to the forbidden chamber.

I felt no dust on any of the door’s ornamentation, and this was a sign that someone had been using the room frequently. *Should I wait for Linxing...* I considered it, but in the best interest of whoever was currently inhabiting the room, I slowly pushed the door open.

Once I entered, I was struck with such a strong stench of sweat that I grimaced. Hidden within the sour smell was the faint scent of perfume. It was likely pitch-black in the room, but the location of its resident was no secret to me. I simply had to follow the intense smell.

The odor led me deeper and deeper in until my fingertips made contact with a wooden door. The smell was coming from within, and it was likely a wardrobe just large enough to hide two adults. From inside, I could faintly hear someone gripping at cloth.

My suspicions turned to conviction.

“The guards will be here soon. Please put your clothes on.”

My quiet words caused a sudden jerk inside.

“The so-called empress’s attendant, and a eunuch, I presume.”

Supposedly, when a eunuch performed sexual deeds without the necessary organs, they tended to work up quite a sweat. That seemed to explain the smell in the room, and the rough footsteps I’d heard as I entered undoubtedly belonged to the court lady who’d dropped by earlier in the day.

“P-please, overlook this,” said lady begged over the sound of her frantic dressing.

“As long as you tell me the truth, I’ll ensure I did not see anything.”

“The truth...?”

At this word, the court lady timidly poked her head out. She had a familiar voice and a familiar perfume—this was indeed the same court lady.

“You are not the empress’s attendant.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You know far too little to be a court lady assigned to the empress.”

I didn’t say it aloud, but her behavior also lacked any hint of grace. Court ladies who served the empress were often of high birth. Thus, they naturally conducted themselves in an elegant manner.

“I-it’s all my fault,” the man said as he leapt out of the dresser. “I couldn’t contain my feelings for her—” His apology was accompanied by the stomping of a dozen or so sets of feet.

“There’s no more time. The guards are here.”

“You’ll really overlook this?” the court lady held me by the arm. I smiled as I shook her hand off.

“Why, I never could see anything from the start,” I said.

“You...”

My words seemed to move her to tears, but she had misunderstood. Infidelity with a eunuch was a serious crime in the inner palace, yet catching such insignificant people would not benefit me in any way. I stood to lose more by making myself stand out.

“Now hurry.”

I let the two of them flee from the forbidden chamber. As their footsteps faded into the distance, I sat on the ground where I stood. The countless other footsteps gradually approached me from behind, yet once they were a certain distance from me, a certain set of lighter feet broke away and sprinted over.

“Lady Renka! You said you would wait for me!” Linxing sounded as though she was about to cry as she helped me up. I offered her an unspoken apology.

“When I opened the door, someone ran out...” I made it sound as though they’d bumped into me as they escaped.

“There was someone in there?! Did you get a good look at their face?” one of the guards asked as he approached me.

“I’m sorry. You see, my eyes...”

“P-pardon me.”

I hadn’t lied. The embarrassed guard withdrew and ordered his subordinates to start a search. However, it was already too late for that. The court lady and the eunuch were long gone. I felt relieved.

However, just before I could resume my journey to the library

with Linxing, I heard a soldier cry out from somewhere still rather close by.

“I found them! A court lady dressed like the empress and a eunuch!”

*Are they fools?* I couldn’t help but retort in my head.

The apprehended court lady and the eunuch were flanked on all sides by the guards.

Before them sat the emperor and Empress Biyu, as well as the court ladies and eunuchs who served them watching at a distance. This was the development I desired least, and it was unfolding right before me.

“These two were having a secret rendezvous then,” Madame Biyu elegantly said, but I could feel the slightest irritation in her words. Understandably so—it was rare enough for the emperor to pay her a visit, and these two troublemakers just had to get in the way of that.

She had been married His Majesty even before he’d taken the throne, and I hadn’t heard any rumors of their relationship being particularly good or bad. Many people saw it as a political marriage, with the couple only together in form alone.

“How long have you two been seeing one another?”

At His Majesty’s words, the eunuch replied in a nearly inaudible voice, “For half a year...”

The emperor let out a short burst of laughter. “Half a year! What are my guards doing?”

“Thanks to the rumors of ghosts in the forbidden chamber, even the guards started to avoid that room during the night.”

So chimed in Eunuch Yousei, who stood to the side of

His Majesty. He was the emperor's right-hand man, but owing to the large scar on his face, he was well-known for never being seen without his mask. Despite his covered face, the air of refinement he exuded had garnered him a bit of popularity among the court ladies.

“And that's why you stole my robes—to put on this charade...”

The empress's rage was concentrated on that point as well. To ensure no one noticed her theft, the court lady had filled the empty space on the empress's shelf with similar-looking replacements. However, the sash—the most conspicuous part of the ensemble—could not be switched out so easily. That was why she had come to me.

Presumably, she never noticed that I'd handed her the same sash that the empress favored because she'd never actually worn it herself. It was only meant to fill space in the empress's closet.

“Your Majesty, I believe this deserves death,” the empress matter-of-factly stated.

This earned her some subdued shrieks from the bound duo.

“Do you have anything to say for yourselves?” the emperor inquired, his tone making it clear that words would not move him.

But the bound eunuch still cried out, “If you'll only give me a chance!” and the guards flanking him pinned him to the ground.

“We were raised in the same village,” the eunuch said. “We promised our futures to one another.”

Usually, the eunuch would not have been permitted to speak, but His Majesty let out an amused, “Oh?” He seemed keen on hearing this story.

Once the eunuch's outburst was permitted, the words began to

flow from him like water.

“When we turned fifteen, I brought this talk of marriage to her parents, but they told me she had been summoned to the inner palace, and that I would never see her again. I could never forget about her, so I infiltrated this place by becoming a eunuch.”

*He became a eunuch to chase after his lover? That's some obsession.* Had I been in that woman's position, I would have been repulsed more than anything... But this court lady treated it as an emotional reunion. She quietly wept by her man's side.

“I am fully to blame. I am the one who incited her to steal Madame Biyu's robes. Please, I beg you to spare her.”

“Enough! I stole those robes of my own volition! I am the one who seduced him! Please, take anything but his life...”

Such a forced, theatrical plea for mercy nearly made me yawn, but of course I held it in. Surprisingly, this hackneyed performance managed to reach the emperor's heart.

“Very well. You will both be banished.”

This decision caused quite a stir. Banishment sounded far too soft—the tryst alone was already a heavy sin, and on top of this, they had stolen from Madame Biyu. By all rights, they should have been executed just as she had suggested.

“Your Majesty, you're being far too lenient!”

“Our recruitment of court ladies was what tore them apart. Exile the both of them to the same island.”

Rejecting Madame Biyu's rebuttal, the emperor signaled for the guards to take them away. I heard the sound of the two sinners being dragged from the room, all the while feeling relieved that I could finally return to my normal affairs.

However, it seemed things would not end so easily.

“And so—” His Majesty tapped a folded fan against his shoulder as he spoke in a slow, drawn-out way. “These two are the ones who contributed to resolving this incident?”

“Yes. It seems they noticed the errant couple entering the forbidden chamber and contacted the guards.”

This explanation came from the court lady who presided over the department of ceremonies that I worked for, Lady Xiaofang.

“You did well to confront them despite all this talk of ghosts. Were you not afraid?” the emperor asked.

“Renka, His Majesty has addressed you,” Xiaofang told me, and therein I finally gained the right to speak. The emperor was not a man I could simply speak to under normal circumstances. Even now, I had both my knees on the floor, my hands held out, and my forehead planted down.

“I fully believed the previous empress would never become a ghost. I was certain someone had simply drummed up this commotion.”

“Hmm...” His Majesty sounded a bit amused. “She is the woman who failed to kill me... And you say she would not resent her confinement?”

“A woman who became an empress could never be so petty. I presume she repented for her sins as she passed away.”

“Is that the nature of an empress?” he asked.

Madame Biyu happily spoke up, “It most certainly is. There is no empress who could ever hate you. Not now, not ever.”

“I see. I see.”

The couple shared a laugh, telling me I had gotten full marks for my answer.

“Then allow me to reward you. Is there anything you desire?”

“A reward?” I repeated. “Simply speaking to you is far more than I deserve.”

I had returned another perfect answer. *With this, I disappear from his memory... That is my heartfelt desire.*

I don’t mean to brag, but apparently, I have the sort of face that makes me stand out in a bad way. To ensure he did not notice this, I made sure to keep my head behind my hands even as I spoke to him.

“Hmm, you seek nothing? Then what about the one beside you?”

I heard the faint sound of a gulp from Linxing. This gesture—as though she had resolved herself to *do something*—gave me a terrible premonition of what was to come. Hurriedly, I broke out of my bow; I was ready to pounce on her if I had to, but by the time I reached out my hands, it was already too late.

She cried out, “Would you honor Lady Renka with a nighttime visit?”

*Why are the people around me so intent on destroying my peace?*

“Renka, was it? Raise your head.”

I’d quickly covered my face with my sleeve, but I could not refuse the emperor. Reluctantly, slowly, I lifted my face. I could nearly feel his eyes piercing straight through me.

“It would certainly be a pity for such a beautiful woman to remain a court lady. However, your reward is for Renka to be a concubine? Not yourself? Is there a reason for that?”

I couldn’t see his expression as he said this, but he sounded like he was enjoying this quite thoroughly. I let out a light sigh

as I saw all my efforts go up in smoke.

“Lady Renka cannot see, and many use this as a reason to harass her. If she had ties to Your Majesty, perhaps this situation would—”

“Y-Your Majesty... why not make her a lesser-third class?!” Before Linxing was finished, she was interrupted by a shout from Lord Yousei. “Please forgive me for speaking out of turn. However, we do have a lesser-third class concubine seat open, so why not assign it to her?”

“It’s rare to hear something like that from you.”

Lord Yousei was always by the emperor’s side, but it seemed he rarely offered advice on matters of personnel within the inner palace. The emperor’s voice had raised in pitch, and it was clear he was quite startled. On the other hand, Lord Yousei’s words had definitely moved him.

“In that case,” he said. Suddenly it seemed like my position as a concubine was already decided. I felt a cold bead of sweat trailing down my back.

My promotion from lesser-fifth to lesser-third came as a complete surprise. At this rate, I would no longer be able to weave. That was the one thing I wanted to avoid, but I was put on the spot—I could not find the right words I’d be permitted to say. Time passed in vain and I could feel my throat drying out.

“Your Majesty, if I may speak up, Renka is a weaver who has been taught our nation’s secret weaving skills that have been passed down through the ages.”

It was Xiaofang who questioned these dreadful plans in my stead. She went on, “She is the one who weaves the sashes for important occasions—including when you took the throne, and

when the empress assumed her post. Won't you give us some time to find a suitable successor?"

"To think she had such an important position... No wonder I've never seen her despite her beautiful face. If it is difficult to make a concubine of her, why don't I stop by her room tomorrow? Regardless of her station, if she has connections to me, the harassment should decrease."

"We are honored to receive such benevolence," Linxing said as she pressed her head into the floor.

Meanwhile, I was beside her, forced to give a "thank you" of my own.

"Could you *not* act on your own like that?" I abruptly shouted as soon as I was back in my room alone with Linxing.

"Why is that? You'll live a far better life than you would weaving your days away here. Even if you do become a concubine, there are hundreds of them—you'll just have to see His Majesty once, and then you can live your life as you please. I've always been looking for the opportunity."

"That's not the problem!"

My anger was not getting across to her. As a matter of fact, she seemed to think she'd done a wonderful thing, and this only made me more irate.

"I have devoted my life to weaving. I trained since I was a child—I deciphered the designs on my own. I have lived my life just to weave. If you take that away from me..."

"That is not going to happen."

Suddenly, I heard a voice from behind me, and hurriedly turned around. It was Lady Xiaofang.

"I told His Majesty I would search for a successor, but no one

could possibly replace you,” she said.

When I had first become a court lady, a number of tests were conducted at my village. Many young girls tried their hand at them, but I was the only one who had perfectly acquired the secret arts. Of course the country was investing resources into rearing the next weaver of ceremonies, but that would take a few decades.

“If only His Majesty would be more considerate of the people of your village...” Lady Xiaofang said as she gently stroked my hair like a mother.

From the moment I’d entered the inner palace, Lady Xiaofang had sympathized with my upbringing; outside of work, she would treat me as kindly as if I was her daughter.

“If you did not possess this face, I’m sure Linxing would not have done something so foolish.”

“Well, sure the court ladies are all beauties, but they’re nothing compared to Lady Renka. If she just becomes a concubine, I think she could aim for greater-second class,” said Linxing. She was not repenting in the slightest.

I shared a sigh with Lady Xiaofang.

“Linxing, as punishment, you shall clean the clothes storage.”

“Huh? Right now?! It’s the middle of the night!”

“It wouldn’t be a punishment if I sent you to clean at the regular time. Now go.”

Linxing left, dragged away by Lady Xiaofang. Finally, I could sit on the nearby bench and catch my breath.

“This is a disaster,” I muttered, stretching out my hands. And in that moment, I felt the touch of a book. The cover and pages had yet to wear, so it was quite new. Presumably, this was the book

that Linxing had forgotten to return.

“I guess it’s up to me...”

I stood with the book in hand and headed off to the library. This was the same path I’d walked partway with Linxing, but now I had to go alone.

As planned, I arrived at the hall in front of the forbidden chamber without issue. *Just a little more...* I urged myself on. As I passed the chamber, I picked up the scent of sandalwood. Perhaps someone had gone to clean and cover up the scandal. Despite this, I heard no rustling of fabric, and no footsteps.

Even if someone were simply sleeping there, I would be able to hear their breathing. Since there was none of that, this meant they were perhaps simply burning incense to rid the place of the smell. It had been an intense odor, after all.

With that in mind, I went off on my way...

*“Thank you for preserving my honor,”* a voice said.

A warm gust of wind caressed my shoulders, and the scent of sandalwood disappeared. The next instant, I had dropped the book and let out what was close to a scream.

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“Isn’t it a bit cramped in here?” Linxing happily complained, as my room felt much smaller than usual.

*“That’s your fault,”* I wanted to refute. But regardless of what I said to her, I highly doubted she was going to listen. It was the day the emperor would pay a visit, and since the early morning, she had been in such high spirits one might believe she was the one being visited. Generally, lesser-fifth class court ladies were

not bestowed their own private quarters. In my case, it was also my workspace, so I was an exception. That did not mean my status was high, and I did not have multiple attendants like the concubines. I only had Linxing to look after me.

There *were* court ladies who assisted with the weaving, however. Including me, usually somewhere between three to five people occupied the room, yet now the space was overflowing with guests. Since the emperor was coming to “reward” me, his attendants and guards were stationed here. It was rather unpleasant, as it felt like they had suddenly intruded upon what I considered my personal space.

Soon someone said, “The emperor has arrived,” and I felt myself stiffening up at the footsteps that followed. They were not the footsteps of the emperor that I’d heard the night before.

“This is surprisingly spacious for the room of a court lady.”

The voice only strengthened my unease. It certainly resembled the emperor’s, but was it truly him?

Those around seemed to treat him as such, but by the way he walked, the way his clothing shifted, this was clearly not the same person I’d encountered only yesterday. Well, with that said, this man was not a complete stranger—if I wasn’t mistaken, this was his eunuch, Lord Yousei.

“Um... err...”

“Oh, that’s right. Everyone, withdraw.”

He seemed to take my confusion as nervousness. On his word, he was the only presence that remained, but he really was entirely different from last night’s “emperor.”

“Are you His Majesty?”

As we were left alone, I did not hesitate to confirm the truth.

“I don’t... understand the question.”

Even now, he was still trying to cover it up, which inadvertently set me into a rage.

“Are you simply here to tease me, perhaps? I may not be able to see, but I can at least tell that the man standing here before me is not the same emperor I saw last night.”

I’d had to deal with this sort of harassment several times before. If it ended with me as a laughingstock, so be it. This time, however, the joke had simply gone too far.

“You can tell?” he said as he took my hand.

The sensation informed me my conjecture was correct.

“You have the gait of someone well-versed in the martial arts. Perhaps it is because you often carry a sword—but your center of gravity is concentrated on your left side as well, and your hand also has calluses from that sword.”

“Are we really that different?”

“Yes.”

My exchange with him gave me even further evidence. At the very least, the man before me was flustered. He gave a hint that I had seen through his lie.

“Amazing. You’re the first.”

I cocked my head curiously. The two of them were so different it did not make sense that anyone could mistake one for the other.

“So your face must bear some resemblance to his. Are you the emperor’s brother then, Lord Yousei?”

“So you noticed I was Yousei too. Incredible... We were born as twins and raised as one. Until this point, no one noticed. Lately, not even our mother can tell us apart.”

*I see. If they’re twins, I can understand why the people around*

*them have trouble distinguishing them.*

“Then, Lord Yousei, you serve not only as an advisor but as the emperor’s body double as well?”

“Well... yes... something along those lines.”

It was common for an emperor to have a body double; this was not particularly shocking. In fact, it was strangely convincing once I realized that the body double had been sent to the chambers of a mere court lady for her “reward.”

“This must be difficult for you.”

“Pardon?”

“To have to come to a court lady like me on the whims of the emperor.”

“No, you have it wrong. I’m the one who asked.”

He had in fact been the one who insisted I be made a concubine. Presumably, he had come to my room to take responsibility for his statement.

“You really do have it hard,” I repeated.

I passed him some tea that Linxing had prepared, and I could hear him vigorously downing the cup. Despite everything, he was nervous himself.

“But with this, the harassment from the court ladies should decrease,” I told him.

“Will it really change so much?”

“My attendant, Linxing, was the one who planned this, so I question how effective it really will be... The plan is, ahem, to do our best to enjoy this visit. However, the emperor will pay no further visits, and I will not be promoted to concubine. Thus, the other court ladies should come to sympathize with me.”

The plan seemed riddled with holes, but it would be easier

to live as a pitied court lady than as one receiving favorable treatment.

“You weren’t looking forward to this?”

“I and the other court ladies, we all belong to the emperor. It would be presumptuous of me to *look forward* to this.”

“I was sure that everyone wanted to become a concubine.”

Perhaps Linxing and the other young court ladies dreamed of the day they would be promoted to concubines. Honestly, it was irrelevant to me. I was fine as long as I had a loom to work with.

“Even so, I... No, His Majesty wishes to make a concubine of you... Are you against the idea?”

His apologetic tone made me choose my next words carefully. He was a body double, but he was also the emperor’s close aide. Any rash statements would be the end of me.

“No, perish the thought. But it is my wish... to take the feelings I have for my first love to the grave. I do not want to erase them.”

“Your first love?”

This was an excuse I’d spent half a day thinking about—on the off chance it ever came to this.

“Yes, when I was a child, there was a boy who, for a time, would play with me in the village’s silkworm hut. Over the course of my harsh training, the time I spent with him was my sole reprieve.”

“Silkworm hut...” he repeated, a somewhat sad hint to his voice. Was he pitying me for the environment in which I grew up? For the silkworm hut being my entertainment? Well, that was certainly not a place where a crown prince would play.

“But only a few years later, he moved away. Even now, I think back to the days I spent with him. If possible, would you be able

to pass this message to His Majesty?”

The emperor had lent an ear to a eunuch’s pleas, and I was sure the factors that tugged at his heartstrings were most certainly the childhood friend and first love parts of the story. Thus, I was going to take full advantage of this. I wasn’t sure if Lord Yousei would pass along the message or not, but there was little else I could do.

“Would you notice if you met him again?”

“I’m not so sure... it has already been more than a decade. But if I did have the chance to see him again, I would most certainly be enthusiastic to have the opportunity.”

I’d met the emperor and Lord Yousei over consecutive days, so I could immediately tell who they were. Honestly, discerning the identity of a boy I met ten years ago would be difficult.

Yes, he was indeed my first love, but it wasn’t as if I’d held on to those feelings for this long. If I had to say, I wanted to offer him my gratitude, but becoming lovers wasn’t exactly what I was hoping for.

“Then shall we make a wager?” Lord Yousei said with the tone of a young boy about to pull a mischievous prank.

“A bet?”

“It’s a simple one. I will try to find this first love of yours. If you are able to tell who he is when I bring him, then you are free to do as you please. You can leave the inner palace with him, or you could stay here and continue weaving. The emperor will have no say in your decision. However, if you fail to notice him, you will become a concubine.”

This unprecedented proposal put me at a loss for words.

“Lord Yousei...the odds are quite stacked against me.”

Although it would be over if he simply could not find my first love.

“Well, wagers are always set up to favor the house.”

That day, I heard his mirthful laugh for the first time in my life, and it was only at that moment that I realized things weren’t proceeding anywhere close to how I had hoped.

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“Can you tell who I am?”

Once the emperor’s “visit” in form alone was over, I thought I would be left in peace. Yet for some reason, the very next day, it was His Majesty who stopped by my room. He delightedly asked the question as soon as we were alone.

“You are not Lord Yousei. You are His Majesty.”

“Amazing!”

My weary response had him raise both his arms in delight—as if he was watching some amusing sideshow. Even their mother could not tell the twins apart. I guess it really was that exciting when someone could recognize them individually.

“Then please call me Eikou. You may refer to the individual you met last night as Yousei.”

“Could I not simply call you Your Majesty?”

I could easily tell them apart, but it felt irreverent to refer to him in any other way.

“If you do that, I’ll have to ask if you know who I am every time we meet.”

I certainly would be a bit offended if I was treated as a spectacle every time we met.

“Very well, disrespectful as it may be, I shall henceforth call you Lord Eikou.”

“It would please me if you did.”

“But if you visit me so frequently, I will feel sorry for all the concubines.”

This was my tacit way of telling him to not come again, but Lord Eikou paid it no mind, instead offering a jolly laugh. Comparing him to two days prior, his tone and mien were entirely different. Perhaps this was because I could make him out from his brother.

Lord Yousei had told me they were “twins raised as one.” It would usually be Lord Yousei’s job as a body double to take after every aspect of Lord Eikou. However, the fact they were this different led me to believe they were both simply playing the part of the “emperor.” In other words, their imperial facade differed from both their true natures.

“You don’t have to worry about that. Currently, the empress and all the greater-second class concubines are pregnant with my children.”

“Yes, I heard. Congratulations for that.”

It had been five years since he took the throne and he already had three princes and two princesses. Additionally, it was said he had impregnated ten concubines just recently.

“Well, my job involves being a breeding horse. It seems I’m allowed to go wherever I please until the children are born.”

“I could never call you a breeding horse...”

There were many women in the inner palace who sought the emperor’s love, but ultimately, the most important thing was for the emperor to have children. His Majesty was compelled to visit

a concubine's room every night, but with political relationships in mind, he made sure to keep his visits uniformly distributed among the top class.

“Yes, I doubt anyone else would say it. Honestly, I envy you and that court lady from two days ago—that you can have such sincere feelings.”

Evidently, Lord Yousei had told him about my story. I was right—the terms “first love” and “childhood friend” had resonated with him.

“In that case, there is even more reason for you to use this period to search for your own love.”

Once again, I tried to implicitly tell him to go away, but for some reason, these words had the opposite effect. As I sat on the bench, Lord Eikou rested his head on my lap. I was surprised that the distance between us had closed so suddenly.

“That’s why I’m here, is it not?” he said with utter delight. I realized I’d dug my own grave. “But don’t worry. I came to a decision with Yousei. We will treat your ‘first love’ very well.”

He’d heard about my bet as well, apparently.

“I already sent someone out to find him. It shouldn’t be that difficult.”

“But he might already have a family...”

Eighteen was around the age that people started to marry, and I was twenty-three. That boy had been two or three years older than me, so it was safe to say he was twenty-five and most likely married. Perhaps it would be a different story if we’d exchanged promises—as that court lady from before had done—but I had not conveyed my feelings. At this point, bringing up our history would only inconvenience him.

“Perhaps he does... But if it were me, even if I had a wife and children, I would be happy to hear you confess your feelings.”

I expected nothing less of the master of the inner palace. He really was flippant when it came to these things, but it was his nonchalance that allowed him to treat so many concubines equally, ensuring no large quarrels broke out between them. I was impressed, even.

With no warning, he gripped my hand. “Don’t worry, Renka. Even if you’re rejected, I’ll make you a concubine.”

I could not shake the feeling I served to gain far too little from this wager. I could not contain my sigh.