

Es. Benefits 561

Chapter 561: Wanyan, Are You Longing for a Man!_1

Great Wu Dynasty.

Li Zheng Palace.

Today, the court was occupied by some figures that were not usually seen.

At the moment, two elderly men clad in armor, with graying hair and beards, stood at weapons in hand at the center of the grand hall.

Although they appeared to be of a particularly old age, their bodies were still very robust, nearly two meters in height, and most importantly, their muscles filled out their armor, exuding a sense of power.

Typically, when ministers attended court, they were not allowed to wear armor or carry weapons, not even military officials, but these two were exceptions due to their special statuses, which allowed them to come to court in armor, bearing arms.

At this moment, on top of the hall, the Martial Emperor spoke, "For the attack on the North Country, I plan to have both Xu and Zhan lead the troops together!"

As soon as these words were spoken, a buzz spread through the grand hall.

Some of the ministers could hardly believe it. Just to attack a feudal state under another dynasty, two Grandmasters were to be deployed.

In the past, no matter how intense a war became, unless one nation reached another's capital, Grandmasters would not be deployed.

A Grandmaster was a trump card, and no dynasty would use it right from the start.

Furthermore, not using Grandmasters was an unspoken agreement among the major dynasties. If one dynasty broke this practice, more and more Grandmasters would appear on the battlefield in the future, making wars even more brutal, with more soldiers dying.

This was the same for all sides.

As long as a Grandmaster joined the battle, regular troops would almost stand no chance, so no dynasty would deploy a Grandmaster in external wars in the past.

It was only during the civil war within the Great Xia that the royal family deployed Grandmasters to exterminate the remaining forces of the South's aristocratic families. Besides that occasion, Grandmasters were rarely seen in action.

At that time, a minister stood up and said, "Your Majesty, the North Country is just a small nation. Why send Generals Xu and Zhan to attack it? If we deploy Grandmasters to the battlefield, I fear that other dynasties will follow suit in their external conflicts."

Once the standard is broken, more and more people will disregard the "rules." If deploying Grandmasters becomes the norm, Great Wu will inevitably face other dynasties' Grandmasters in future external wars, leading to greater casualties, which is not a good thing.

Upon hearing this, Zhan Hong, clearly displeased, said, "What a pedantic person. Once the North Country is eradicated, the next target will be the entire Great Xia Dynasty. Do you really think that when His Majesty launches a war of annihilation against Great Xia, they won't send a Grandmaster to the battlefield?"

Ever since Zhan Hong had become a Grandmaster, he had handed over all military control and sat around idly at the General's office. The Martial Emperor had finally dredged him up, giving this Grandmaster a chance to emerge again. He did not want anyone spoiling this opportunity.

And indeed, his words were not incorrect. Not to mention the military prowess of the North Country, even when it comes time to conquer Great Xia in the future, Great Wu will deploy Grandmasters. Since they would be deployed sooner or later, why continue the old tacit agreement?

The rule that Grandmasters should not enter the battlefield was about time to be abolished.

Moreover, there was another key point: the North Country had once eradicated an army of the Barbarian Tribe with Grandmasters, and the North Country itself also possessed Grandmasters, certainly more than one. How could Great Wu defeat the North Country without deploying Grandmasters?

After Zhan Hong finished speaking, Xu Xingwen added from the side, "The North Country itself has Grandmasters. To defeat them without dispatching our own, are you suggesting that you Civil Officials go and defeat the North Country's Grandmasters?"

At these words from Xu Xingwen, the Civil Officials in the grand hall instantly fell silent, and no one continued the discussion about deploying Grandmasters.

Indeed, they had almost forgotten that their mission was to destroy the North Country, which would use all its power to fight to the death against Great Wu, including deploying its own Grandmasters. If they did not dispatch Grandmasters, how could they possibly defeat the North Country?

Seeing that the Civil Officials had nothing more to say, the Martial Emperor spoke, "To defeat the North Country, we must undoubtedly deploy Grandmasters, but I still have some concerns."

As he said this, the Martial Emperor's gaze fell on Zhan Hong and Xu Xingwen, "Zhan, Xu, are you confident you can defeat Zhuge Zhongguang?"

Upon hearing this, Zhan Hong burst into a big laugh, then said, "Zhuge Zhongguang attained Dao through scholarship, merely a scholar. Even if he has become a Grandmaster, he couldn't possibly possess the true strength of one. Your Majesty can rest assured, Zhuge Zhongguang won't be a match for us."

"In terms of strategy, General Xu and I surely are not Zhuge's equals, but when it comes to martial force, I alone am more than enough to defeat Zhuge Zhongguang."

"Before absolute strength, all strategies are insignificant. I shall annihilate the North Country within four months and present the North Prince's head to Your Majesty."

Hearing Zhan Hong's confident words, the Martial Emperor showed a hint of a smile.

"Seeing General Zhan so confident leaves me assured," he said.

That's when Chai Jiliang stood up and said, "Your Majesty, I've heard that you bypassed the Ministry of War, sending directly three hundred thousand troops northward, without even preparing provisions."

Hearing this, the Martial Emperor said indifferently, "I only worry that the North Country, upon learning that Great Wu intends to attack, might take the initiative to send troops. Thus, I dispatched three hundred thousand troops northward as a precaution. How about it, Chai, do you find this inappropriate?"

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Chai Jiliang immediately asked, "Your Majesty, you're quickly summoning an army of three hundred thousand to head north, but what will this army eat if the logistics can't keep up?"

The Martial Emperor replied, "I have already issued commands to several counties in the north to gather provisions for that army of three hundred thousand, so you need not worry, Chai."

"I'm not a fool; I wouldn't let my soldiers go hungry."

Hearing this, Chai Jiliang frowned.

Chai Jiliang then said, "Your Majesty, the north has suffered a great drought these past two years, and the people are already living in hardship. After paying their agricultural taxes, they barely have any grain left. If we continue to collect provisions from the north at this time, I fear it may cause resentment among the people in those northern counties."

Gathering provisions in the north was, by all accounts, definitely going to involve taking grain from the people, and those Aristocratic Families in the north would certainly not volunteer to donate their grain.

These Aristocratic Families collude with the local officials. They only need to give some benefits to the officials, and then they won't have to contribute any grain. To gather the army's needed provisions, the officials of the counties will surely demand that the people hand over the grain from their homes, inevitably increasing the people's hostility towards the imperial court.

In recent days, Chai Jiliang had been working late into the night to gather provisions for the campaign against the North Country. His greatest worry was that the Martial Emperor would command the army to requisition grain in the north, and just when he hadn't yet completed gathering the supplies, the Martial Emperor dispatched an army of three hundred thousand to head straight north.

After listening to Chai Jiliang, the Martial Emperor was somewhat displeased, but he calmly said, "War thrives on speed, and to conquer the North Country, some price must be paid."

At this moment, Zhan Hong said to Chai Jiliang, "Prime Minister Chai, rest assured, I know what you're concerned about. You're worried that if the people see the army requisitioning grain locally, they will become dissatisfied with His Majesty, right?"

Chai Jiliang did not speak.

This was an obvious concern.

Seeing Chai Jiliang silent, Zhan Hong continued, "The three hundred thousand troops summoned to the north were once under my command. Upon their arrival in the north, they will requisition grain in my name. Rest assured, the people won't blame His Majesty."

"His Majesty is correct. In warfare, speed is essential. How could we possibly wait for you to gather provisions slowly before advancing? By that time, the North Country would have already reacted."

"The people of the northern counties are His Majesty's subjects, and it is their duty to contribute grain to Great Wu. Prime Minister Chai, you need not be too concerned. Let the people endure some hardship, I will take the blame."

Seeing that Zhan Hong had spoken thus, Chai Jiliang did not say more. At this point, nothing he said would matter.

The three hundred thousand troops were already en route to the north, so it was impossible to recall them now. The only option was to hasten and find a way to fill the gaps in logistics and avoid having the three hundred thousand army requisition grain throughout the north.

At this time, the Martial Emperor said, "My beloved ministers, is there anything else for today? If not, let us conclude today's court session."

Seeing no one in the great hall spoke again, the Martial Emperor stood up, waved his sleeve, and said, "Court is dismissed."

"Farewell, Your Majesty!"

...

The Da Yue Dynasty.

Wu Junwan was in the bath, scrubbing the Yue Emperor's body, whose skin was snow-white and smooth.

In the bath, with the mist rising, only the silhouettes of two fair bodies could be vaguely seen.

As Wu Junwan scrubbed the Yue Emperor's back, she said, "Qingrou, are you really not considering forming an alliance with Great Wu?"

The Yue Emperor replied, "Junwan, it's not that I don't want to, it's that the ministers in court won't allow it."

"I also want to help you. After all, the North Country is also a thorn in Da Yue's side, and I too wish to eliminate the North Country. Unfortunately, the people of Da Yue have finally achieved their current standard of living and they no longer wish to experience war."

The Da Yue Dynasty was only recently established, and before that, Da Yue was a place of chaos. The people living there were constantly worried about losing their lives any day. It wasn't until the Yue Emperor's father arrived that the region began to see some order and a semblance of peace.

Thus, the people of Da Yue truly do not wish for war, but while the commoners are commoners, the ministers of Da Yue are well aware of how great a threat the North Country is, and many of them initially agreed with the decision to send troops against the North Country.

Wu Junwan was no fool — she guessed that the Yue Emperor still harbored some wariness towards the North Country, or rather, wanted Great Wu to probe the North Country's strengths first before deciding.

Wu Junwan sighed slightly. Although she and the Yue Emperor were good friends, close as sisters, they were born into different dynasties after all.

The Yue Emperor had her own dynastic interests to consider and could no longer afford to make decisions based on personal feelings; Wu Junwan understood this in her heart.

If she were to become the Empress of Great Wu and Da Yue faced any troubles in the future, she wouldn't simply help Da Yue. At most, she would only intervene if the Yue Emperor's life was in danger.

At that moment, the Yue Emperor in the bath turned around, wrapped an arm around Wu Junwan's voluptuous body, lifted her chin with the other hand, and gazed into her eyes, saying, "Even though Da Yue can't form an alliance with Great Wu for now, I can persuade the ministers to allow Great Wu's troops passage through Da Yue to enter the North Country directly."

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Wu Junwan had guessed such an outcome would occur from the moment she set off, and as expected, it was quite similar to her expectations—the Yue Emperor had only agreed to granting passage.

Just as Wu Junwan was about to say something, the Yue Emperor continued, "Moreover, should the Great Wu army encounter any issues, Great Yue will dispatch a large force eastward at once to intimidate North Country and prevent their soldiers from entering Great Wu."

Upon hearing these words, Wu Junwan's heart skipped a beat.

From the sound of it, did her good sister actually hold little faith in the Great Wu's forces?

The Yue Emperor seemed to sense Wu Junwan's thoughts and lightly smiled before saying, "Junwan, don't overthink it; what I said was merely an 'if'."

Despite her words, Wu Junwan could sense that her good sister truly had little faith in Great Wu; no wonder she refused an alliance, preferring instead to let Great Wu test the waters with North Country.

At that moment, Wu Junwan thought of someone and then asked, "Qingrou, has that maidservant who looks very much like me returned from North Country?"

Li Qingrou replied, "She returned once, but I sent her back to North Country to gather more intelligence."

The Yue Emperor's words almost confirmed Wu Junwan's speculation, the Yue Emperor indeed held little faith in the forces of Great Wu. The Emperor probably saw North Country's power as almost equal to that of an entire dynasty.

The Yue Emperor said nothing more, her delicate hands continuing to gently caress Wu Junwan's body.

After a moment, the Yue Emperor said with a smile, "Junwan, your body becomes all the more enthralling with time. I wonder which man will be fortunate enough to savor your grace."

Upon hearing this, Wu Junwan chuckled and then replied, "I have long resolved never to marry; no man shall have the privilege of touching my body."

Li Qingrou held Wu Junwan close, whispering in her ear, "A vow never to marry doesn't mean you won't have a man."

"If you have no man, where will the child come from? And without a child, how can you control the entire Great Wu dynasty?"

How could Li Qingrou not understand Wu Junwan's mind? As her close sister, she had long noticed that Wu Junwan aspired to become an Empress of a dynasty, just like her.

It was just that the situation in Great Wu was complicated, coupled with the fact that Wu Junwan was not as powerful as she was, making it difficult for Wu Junwan to ascend to that supreme position in Great Wu.

Especially considering that Wu Junwan was a woman, the issue of a successor was significant.

Stunned by Li Qingrou's words, Wu Junwan indeed pondered as Li Qingrou suggested. If she were to become the Empress of Great Wu one day, to whom would she pass the throne if she had no child?

But these were concerns for later. Her father, the emperor, was in his prime, and her ambitions would likely remain unfulfilled for decades.

With this thought, Wu Junwan couldn't help but sigh and then said, "Qingrou, let's not talk about me anymore. Whether I can even take that position is uncertain."

"You're different—you are now the Empress of Great Jue. And with your family's scarce progeny, if you don't find a man soon to bear a child, to whom will you pass your throne?"

The Empress smiled faintly, "I still strive to reach a higher Realm in Martial Arts. I wouldn't dream of having a child at this point. And given my lifespan, ruling over Great Jue for a millennium won't be an issue. So, there's no need to worry about a successor so soon."

"Besides, the number of men who could catch my eye is most likely quite small."

At this point, the Yue Emperor's head rested on Wu Junwan's fragrant neck, taking a deep breath, "No man smells as sweet as my Wanyan. Oh, if only you were a man."

Hearing this, Wu Junwan just smiled. For some reason, as they discussed men, the image of North Prince suddenly surfaced in her mind.

Thinking of the North Prince made Wu Junwan's body grow restless, a warmth spreading through her.

She still remembered the words the North Prince said to her when she left North Country—that one day he would make her his woman, adding also that Great Wu would send her willingly to North Country.

At that thought, Wu Junwan couldn't help but chuckle. To be honest, she quite liked the North Prince's appearance; unfortunately, they were enemies.

It was then that a bold idea formed in Wu Junwan's mind—if Great Wu managed to conquer North Country this time, could she persuade her father to leave North Prince to her to deal with? Maybe she could imprison him for her use?

The North Prince was so powerful; any child of his would surely be strong as well. If she could have a child with the North Prince and then raise the child in secrecy, Great Wu's succession problem would be solved.

With this in mind, Wu Junwan resolved that should they conquer North Country, she would find a way to detain North Prince. If her father refused to hand him over, she would simply take North Prince covertly and find a place to keep him confined.

The more Wu Junwan thought, the hotter her body burned, and as she pressed closely to the Yue Emperor, even she began to notice an unusual warmth radiating from Wu Junwan.

At that moment, the Yue Emperor said with a laugh, "Wanyan, are you thinking of a man? Your body is so warm; come on, tell me, who were you just thinking about?"

Startled by the Yue Emperor's words, Wu Junwan regained her composure and retorted, "Qingrou, what nonsense are you talking about? The water is hot; soaking for a while naturally warms the body."

"I too strive for a higher Martial Arts Realm, how could I possibly be thinking of men."

The Yue Emperor laughed and said, "Wanyan, if you truly find a man you like in the future, you must tell me about him, and I'll help you check him out."

Feeling guilty, Wu Junwan gave a noncommittal "Hmm" and stayed quiet after.

She calmed her emotions and made an effort not to dwell on that young man any longer. If her thoughts lingered, her body might react in even stranger ways, creating more abnormalities for her good sister to notice, which would be undesirable.

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The North Country had basically entered a state of total war, and now, the merchant caravans from North Country had become increasingly scarce, as those merchants had sensed that Great Wu was about to move against North Country.

Merchants are always the most sensitive to warfare, and although some contemplated profiting from the war in North Country, considering the military strength of the Great Wu Dynasty, most merchants believed North Country was no match for them and thus hurried to leave North Country to avoid being caught up in the conflict should the two states go to war.

Yan County was no longer as prosperous as it used to be, and even though there were still quite a few horse-drawn carriages on the main street, the number of merchant caravans had decreased by at least two-thirds compared to before.

The merchant caravans still willing to come to North Country were mostly from within the boundaries of Great Sum, as well as merchants from within North Country itself.

The necessary deployments had been essentially completed in North Country, with fifty thousand heavy cavalry stationed outside Yongan County, and Lu Chen had also mobilized Mu Changtian's led two hundred thousand North Country troops to Yongan County.

Of course, Lu Chen did not believe that Great Wu's forces had to engage in a decisive battle with North Country's army in Yongan County, so he had the two hundred thousand troops from the polar regions guard the border area adjacent to Great Jue and North Country.

The two hundred thousand troops from the polar regions were not yet familiar with the use of firearms, so it was only fitting for them to defend the North Country's homeland.

As for the two hundred thousand strong army led by Mu Changtian, they would likely take the initiative to counterattack Great Wu when the time came.

One feeds the troops for a thousand days to use them for one moment, and after the firearms were equipped, North Country's troops trained almost every day, and it was about time for them to show their effectiveness.

In the afternoon, Lu Chen was reviewing the latest intelligence on Great Wu sent by the Brocade Guard in his study, when suddenly a Jinyiwei Guard at the door said, "Prince, a merchant caravan from Black Dragon Country has requested to see you."

Upon hearing this, Lu Chen paused for a moment. Had they come so quickly?

He immediately responded, "Bring their leader straight to the study."

"Yes, Prince."

Great Jue was not likely to get involved in the conflict between Great Wu and North Country, but should North Country defeat Great Wu's army, it was possible that Great Jue would intervene to prevent North Country's counteroffensive. Thus, Lu Chen needed Black Dragon Country to restrain Great Jue.

At that time, Black Dragon Country would not need to do much, only to transfer their troops to the border area adjacent to Great Jue and take a stroll, with Black Dragon Country's constraint, it wouldn't be easy for Great Jue to directly send troops to stop North Country's counterattack against Great Wu.

Before long, the Jinyiwei Guard brought the envoy sent by Black Dragon Country to the study.

The visitor was dressed in a long green robe, tall and thin, and seemed quite frail.

Lu Chen quickly glanced over the information about this individual.

[Name: Liu Yu]

[Identity: Son of Liu Zhengchu, the ruler of Black Dragon Country, and a subject of North Prince.]

[Strength: Ninth Grade]

[Loyalty: 100]

Upon seeing Lu Chen, Liu Yu immediately performed a ritual salute and said, "Your subject, Liu Yu, pays his respects to the Great King! Long live the Great King!"

Lu Chen smiled and responded, "Rise, and besides, I am but a Seignior of Great Sum. Refrain from using the word 'ten thousand' in front of others in the future."

Hearing Lu Chen's words, Liu Yu quickly caught on and said hastily, "Your subject acknowledges his error, please punish me, Great King."

Lu Chen replied indifferently, "This is your first visit to North Country; it's a minor matter. Now, hurry and tell me about the current situation in Black Dragon Country."

Liu Yu then said, "Thank you, Great King."

After that, Liu Yu stood up and laid out a map he had prepared in advance on Lu Chen's desk, "Great King, this is the territory currently controlled by Black Dragon Country."

Upon receiving the map, Lu Chen scrutinized it closely, and Liu Yu then reported on the current situation in Black Dragon Country.

After understanding the state of Black Dragon Country, Lu Chen swiftly wrote a letter for Liu Yu to deliver to Liu Zhengchu.

After Liu Yu left the North Prince Mansion, he had the pigeon that they had brought with them immediately released to send a Pigeon Letter, instructing his father to prepare the troops for an advance to the east.

Subsequently, Black Dragon Country also established a residence in North Country, though of course, this residence would not be made public.

After all, Black Dragon Country belonged to Lu Chen, and it was only a matter of time before it would become part of North Country's territory. There was no need for Black Dragon Country to establish a residence; setting one up now was merely to deceive others and prevent anyone from discerning the truth.

Once Liu Yu had departed, Lu Chen's official duties for the day were nearly finished.

Now that everything was ready, all that remained was for Great Wu to send out their troops.

At this moment, Lu Chen rose from his chair, stretched lazily, and then rotated his neck.

Even as a Grandmaster, sitting for too long still led to a sense of mental fatigue. Considering the current amount of government affairs in North Country, Lu Chen couldn't imagine what lay ahead.

Just as Lu Chen was about to return to the inner court, the voice of a maid came from the doorway, "Prince, General Xuanyuan requests an audience."

Lu Chen said, "Let him in."

As soon as the words were spoken, Xuanyuan Chen entered the study and bowed, "Greetings, Prince!"

Lu Chen nodded, "Mhm, what's the matter?"

Xuanyuan Chen rarely sought him out lately, as he was commanding fifty thousand heavy cavalry stationed in Yan County, certainly with not much of significant concern.

After hearing Lu Chen's question, Xuanyuan Chen hesitated for a moment, seemingly with something difficult to express.

Lu Chen asked in puzzlement, "What is it?"

Xuanyuan Chen had never been so hesitant before.

Xuanyuan Chen swiftly said, "Your... Prince, am I not going to the front lines?"

Realizing what was being implied, Lu Chen understood that, more or less, every North Country general had some task or another, leaving only Xuanyuan Chen leading the heavy cavalry to remain in Yan County, making him restless.

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Lu Chen smiled and asked, "General Xuanyuan, don't tell me you want to go to the frontline?"

Xuanyuan Chen quickly replied, "Your subordinate was just asking."

Lu Chen said, "General Xuanyuan, you don't think that because I've left you to guard Yan County with fifty thousand Heavy Cavalry, you should do nothing, do you?"

"Your task is of great importance. Great Wu sending troops to attack North Country is unlikely to concentrate its main forces in Yongan County; it is very possible they will pass through Great Jue to enter North Country."

"If by any chance the troops of Great Wu manage to bypass our defensive line and directly assault Yan County, you all would be the crucial force protecting me."

Or do you not wish to protect me?"

Xuanyuan Chen quickly said, "Prince, forgive me, I had no such intention. It is my honor to protect you, Prince."

"The reason I thought of going to the frontline is mainly because of my sister. She said that there's no chance for her to engage in battle in Yan County, and she wants to go to the frontline. So I thought I'd inquire and see if there's a chance for me to go."

Upon hearing this, Lu Chen was taken aback.

Ever since he had brought Xuanyuan Yunqi to Yan County, he had placed her with Xuanyuan Chen's Black Cavalry and had her learn about firearms and various battle tactics.

The original intention of Lu Chen was to take Xuanyuan Yunqi for himself; he was quite fond of such a valiant and beautiful woman.

But there were already many women in the Prince's Mansion, and Lu Chen had no inclination to deliberately increase his harem, so he simply kept letting Xuanyuan Yunqi learn in Xuanyuan Chen's army, never having her come to his side.

He hadn't expected Xuanyuan Yunqi to become restless so quickly.

Lu Chen fell into deep thought.

After a long while, Lu Chen finally spoke up and asked, "General Xuanyuan, how do you think General Yunqi is doing in her military studies?"

Xuanyuan Chen answered, "She has learned what she needs to learn; the only thing lacking is real combat experience."

Lu Chen said, "Go back and tell her that if she truly wants to go to the frontline, have her come to the Prince's Mansion to see me tomorrow. I want to see how determined she is."

Xuanyuan Chen was stunned for a moment, then asked, "Prince, do you really intend to send her to the frontline?"

Xuanyuan Chen could clearly see the Prince's intentions. Their Prince obviously lusted after his sister's body and had long coveted her, otherwise, the Prince wouldn't have lured her to Yan County.

Since it was a matter of coveting her body, how could he possibly send her to such a dangerous place?

Lu Chen smiled and said, "It depends on her determination. If she's truly set on going to the frontline, I will arrange for her to go to Yong'an County immediately."

Xuanyuan Chen said, "Your subordinate understands. I will go back and tell her right away."

"Your subordinate asks to be excused."

Lu Chen nodded his head without saying anything more.

Following that, Xuanyuan Chen turned and left the Prince's Mansion, heading straight for the place where Xuanyuan Yunqi was staying.

Having nothing else to attend to, Lu Chen got up from behind his desk, preparing to head back to his private quarters for dinner. Just as he reached the doorway, the voice of a maid was heard from outside.

"Prince, Miss Murong requests an audience."

Without responding, Lu Chen walked directly to the door to see Murong Xue'er dressed in plain black and white garments standing in the courtyard.

Seeing Lu Chen come out, Murong Xue'er was momentarily taken aback, then quickly said, "Have I disturbed the Prince with my visit?"

Lu Chen smiled and asked, "Miss Murong, coming to the Prince's Mansion so late, do you have something important to discuss?"

Murong Xue'er was slightly startled. Although she came to gather information, showing up at the Prince's Mansion at such a late hour indeed seemed inappropriate. It was already dinner time, and after that, it would be time for bed.

Had she come to the North Prince Mansion at this time with the intention of surrendering her body?

Not that she had intended to come so late, but she had just passed by the North Prince Mansion and suddenly thought that since Great Wu was about to wage war against North Country, she should seek out the North Prince to pry some information about the military deployments of North Country. Without thinking, she had come directly to the North Prince.

Murong Xue'er felt her mind had become muddled. How could she have approached the North Prince at such a time, especially when she hadn't even prepared an excuse to see him? Approaching the North Prince at this time would make it immediately obvious to him why she was there.

Just then, a moment of inspiration struck Murong Xue'er, and quickly, she concocted an excuse. With a smile and a calm voice, she said, "Do I need to have a matter to come and see you, Prince?"

The corners of Lu Chen's mouth also lifted slightly, and then he walked straight up to Murong Xue'er. With no heed to the presence of the maids and servants in the courtyard, he gently whispered in Murong Xue'er's ear, "Of course, you can come to see me anytime."

"You've come at just the right time, as I am about to have dinner. Come with me."

Hearing these words, Murong Xue'er's heart skipped a beat.

Dinner?

Was it the dinner she understood, or was she the dinner?

She didn't know why, but ever since that man had taken her virginity, unclean thoughts always seemed to find their way into her mind. She was, after all, a talented lady; how could she entertain such thoughts?

At that moment, Lu Chen, with his arm around Murong Xue'er's slender waist, walked towards the Wind Cloud Court.

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Murong Xue'er then asked, "Aren't you worried about being seen by your wives and concubines, Prince?"

Lu Chen said with a smile, "My wives and concubines are very tolerant towards me, plus they already know you're my woman. Even if they saw us, they wouldn't mind."

Chapter 566: But you must also pay a price_3

Murong Xue'er continued to ask, "Isn't the Prince curious about what I came here to do?"

Lu Chen replied, "Didn't I just say, you can come to the Prince's Mansion anytime, you can even consider the Prince's Mansion as your own home and stay here without any problems."

Hearing Lu Chen's words, Murong Xue'er felt somewhat uneasy inside. The less he seemed to care, the more uneasy she felt. She said directly, "This time, my visit to the Prince's Mansion is mainly because the Empress gave me an order to find out what weapons the North Country has."

This was the excuse Murong Xue'er had just thought of. Since she didn't have a good excuse, she might as well make up something that seemed reasonable. After all, she and Lu Chen had already crossed the line. Her body had been played with by this man so many times. If she pretended to defect and to have feelings for him, he probably wouldn't see through it, right?

Hearing Murong Xue'er's lie, Lu Chen just smiled.

When he saw Murong Xue'er earlier, he had already glanced at the system update regarding Murong Xue'er's profile, which clearly stated that Murong Xue'er had come this time to inquire about the North Country's defense plans and then hand them over to Great Wu to coordinate an attack on the North Country.

But Lu Chen wasn't too concerned about Murong Xue'er's lies. He wanted this woman to personally admit her purpose for coming to the North Prince Mansion in bed later. For now, he pretended to believe what Murong Xue'er had said.

At this moment, Lu Chen said with a smile, "So that's why, Miss Murong isn't planning to become my woman, so why are you now actively passing information to me?"

Hearing Lu Chen's teasing, Murong Xue'er's face flushed slightly.

Murong Xue'er then said, "Prince, don't flatter yourself. I am merely cooperating with you and have not agreed to truly become your woman."

"I can no longer return to Great Jue, and the only way to obtain more intelligence in the North Country and earn some merits is like this. Only by doing so will I have the hope of returning to Great Jue and be reused by the Empress."

Lu Chen replied, "I see."

"So, Miss Murong has no feelings for me whatsoever?"

Murong Xue'er said expressionlessly, "Does the Prince really think that after sleeping with him a few times, I would develop feelings for him?"

"Isn't the Prince underestimating me a bit too much?"

Lu Chen said, "Alright then, it seems I've been overthinking it. Since that's the case, let's only talk about transactions and not about feelings."

"I can provide you with some intelligence to help you achieve merits, to help you return to Great Jue, to return to the Empress's side."

"However, you must also pay a price."

Murong Xue'er frowned slightly, "What price?"

Lu Chen stopped in his tracks, stretched out his hand, and lifted Murong Xue'er's delicate chin, looking at her beautiful face as he said, "The price is your body; whenever I want you to serve in my bed, you must come to the Prince's Mansion immediately."

Hearing this, Murong Xue'er was not angry; on the contrary, she was quite happy inside.

Of course, Murong Xue'er was not happy because her body was going to be played with by Lu Chen—it was because she now had a legitimate reason to frequently interact with the North Prince and come to the North Prince Mansion regularly, and it was the North Prince who had brought it up.

Murong Xue'er said with an indifferent face, "Aren't the many women in the Prince's Mansion enough for the Prince to play with?"

Lu Chen replied, "I've recently taken a liking to calligraphy, so I wanted you to come to the Prince's Mansion to practice writing with me."

Murong Xue'er replied, "I understand. If the Prince wants to practice calligraphy in the future, you may send someone to my residence to fetch me anytime."

Lu Chen said, "Alright, enough of that, the meal should be ready by now."

With that, Lu Chen wrapped his arm around Murong Xue'er's waist and continued walking towards Wind Cloud Court.

Soon, they arrived at the entrance of Wind Cloud Palace. When Lu Chen appeared at the doorway with his arm around Murong Xue'er's slender waist, the numerous wives and concubines inside Wind Cloud Palace were taken aback for a moment, as was Murong Xue'er herself.

She had thought that dinner meant a bedchamber feast and hadn't expected that Lu Chen's invitation to dinner was actually about eating a meal, and moreover, a meal with all his wives and concubines.

This confused her—could it be that meals in the Prince's Mansion always involved the whole household dining together?

Ordinarily, in a grand prince's household like this, at meal times, each person would eat separately; they wouldn't gather together to dine like this.

After a brief pause, Mu Zixuan quickly regained her composure, stepped forward briskly, and said with a smile, "Prince, is she our new sister? If I'm not mistaken, this should be Miss Murong, right?"

At this moment, Lu Chen spoke, "My beloved consort mustn't speak carelessly. I was just discussing matters with Miss Murong in the study, and it happened to be mealtime, so I invited her to join us for a meal."

Hearing this, all the women smiled.

As if they would believe Lu Chen's words.

They knew very well who Lu Chen was. How could he let someone like Murong Xue'er, a cold and talented beauty, slip by, especially since the two of them had already done those things in the study.

However, they didn't make it explicit, as if to spare Murong Xue'er some dignity to prevent her from feeling embarrassed later.

No matter what, Murong Xue'er was an envoy sent by Great Jue; an envoy from Great Jue becoming the North Prince's woman—such a rumor could potentially impact Murong Xue'er's reputation.

Mu Zixuan then said, "I see, my mistake; I shouldn't have spoken carelessly."

On saying this, Mu Zixuan turned to Murong Xue'er and said, "Miss Murong, I'm truly sorry, I misunderstood you; I apologize to you."

Murong Xue'er then said, "There's no need, Consort; it's normal for you to misunderstand given my presence in the inner court."

At this point, Mu Zixuan stepped in front of Murong Xue'er, took her hand, and said, "Enough about that; dinner is ready. Miss Murong, please take your seat."

Chapter 567: Murong Xue'er's Complete Compromise_1

Pulled to the dining table by Mu Zixuan, Murong Xue'er felt strangely out of place, as she had never faced such a scene before.

From childhood, she had never encountered a situation where so many people sat together for a meal.

When in the Imperial Palace, she would eat alone, a simple meal, followed by work or practicing the Cultivation Techniques imparted by the Empress.

At this moment, Mu Zixuan and others fussed over Murong Xue'er, as if she truly became a member of the Prince's Mansion, as if she had become one of Lu Chen's consorts.

Murong Xue'er quickly realized something was amiss. She wasn't one of Lu Chen's consorts, so why was she chatting with them as if they were sisters?

Indeed, all of this was a plot of the North Prince, who intended to make her familiar with the people of the Prince's Mansion in advance, subtly shaping her into his woman.

Unfortunately for him, she had already seen through his little tricks; there was no way she would fall for them.

During dinner, Murong Xue'er noticed another issue: the women of the Prince's Mansion seemed to be somewhat disrespectful in front of Lu Chen.

A few women even drank wine on their own, appearing to disregard the Prince completely.

Although these women belonged to Lu Chen, he was still a Prince. They should have paid some attention to their conduct, but these women did not seem to take it seriously.

From this, it was evident how indulgent Lu Chen was with his women. Murong Xue'er, amidst this harmonious setting, faintly felt as though she had become a part of it.

Just then, Mu Zixuan's voice rang in Murong Xue'er's ears, "Prince, should Miss Murong stay over tonight? Your concubine will immediately arrange a room for her."

Upon hearing Mu Zixuan's voice, Murong Xue'er suddenly snapped back to reality, stopping herself from slipping further into fanciful thoughts.

She was here on a mission; how could she allow the environment to affect her? She couldn't be bewitched by the scene before her; everything between her and the North Prince was fake, all for the sake of completing her mission.

It was then that Lu Chen, to the side, said, "No need, Miss Murong and I have matters to discuss in the study tonight, and it may go on until dawn."

Hearing this, Wang Qingci gave Lu Chen a white look. He still enjoyed committing his misdeeds in the study room, clearly having plenty of empty rooms in the Prince's Mansion but opting to go to the study for mischief.

Mu Zixuan said with a smile, "I understand."

Then, Mu Zixuan turned to Murong Xue'er and asked, "Miss Murong, did the meal suit your taste tonight?"

Murong Xue'er replied, "Yes, the meals at the Prince's Mansion are quite delectable."

Mu Zixuan responded, "I'm relieved you liked them."

Afterward, the women chatted with Murong Xue'er about mundane matters, such as the dietary and cultural customs of the Great Jue and the North Country.

After dinner, a maid brought Lu Chen hot water. He quickly washed his face and wiped his mouth, then said to Murong Xue'er, "Miss Murong, let's head to the study now."

Hearing Lu Chen's voice, Murong Xue'er came back to her senses and promptly stood up, saying, "Alright."

At this time, with a smile, Mu Zixuan said to Murong Xue'er, "Miss Murong, feel free to visit the Prince's Mansion whenever you have time."

Murong Xue'er responded nonchalantly, "Hmm."

Following that, Murong Xue'er followed Lu Chen to the study, and as they walked away, Wang Qingci chuckled softly and then addressed Chu Yuqin, "Madam Chu, you always said that I bothered the Prince in his study, hindering him from handling state affairs. Now that Murong Xue'er will be spending the whole night in the study with the Prince, why don't you say something about her?"

Chu Yuqin huffed, then retorted, "You are you, she is her; she doesn't come to the Prince's Mansion every day."

"Besides, it is nighttime, the time for rest; unlike you, this bitch, who runs to bother Chen'er in broad daylight."

With that, Chu Yuqin stood up and left the Wind Cloud Palace, unwilling to continue bickering with Wang Qingci, that seductive bitch.

Soon afterward, Lu Chen and Murong Xue'er arrived at the study.

Upon entering the study, Lu Chen did not rush to do anything to Murong Xue'er. Both entered the resting room, where Lu Chen first brewed a pot of Dragon and Phoenix Tea, then poured Murong Xue'er a cup, "Miss Murong, let's chat while we sip tea."

Hearing this, Murong Xue'er looked at him with a hint of bewilderment; he had always been direct in his approach before, so why had he suddenly become so well-behaved today?

Murong Xue'er didn't dwell on it, sitting down at the table and then taking a light sip from a cup of Dragon and Phoenix Tea.

Murong Xue'er inquired, "What would the Prince like to discuss?"

Smiling, Lu Chen countered, "Do you know why the Yue Emperor didn't choose anyone else but specifically picked you to come to the North Country and even instructed you to use your beauty to get close to me?"

Hearing this question, Murong Xue'er was momentarily taken aback.

She had never given much thought to this question because, in her view, the Yue Emperor was the Emperor, the ruler of a nation. Whatever he wished to do, he did, and if he wanted her to get close to the North Prince, then she was not in a position to refuse or to be skeptical.

Moreover, Murong Xue'er was aware of her own beauty, perhaps in the Emperor's eyes; she was attractive and matched the North Prince's preferences, and that might be why she was sent to the North Country.

Chapter 568: Murong Xue'er's Complete Compromise_2

Having come to her senses, Murong Xue'er said expressionlessly, "This is the Emperor's decision. As Her Majesty's maidservant, I only need to obey her command, without contemplating the whys."

Lu Chen snorted with laughter, then also picked up his teacup and took a sip. "You really are a handy tool for the Yue Emperor, not thinking about anything."

Murong Xue'er then asked, "In your view, Prince, why would the Emperor send me to the North Country?"

No sooner had Murong Xue'er finished speaking than Lu Chen put down his teacup, raised his hand, and, pinching Murong Xue'er's chin, gazed at her cold, stunningly beautiful face.

"The reason the Yue Emperor sent you is because you are beautiful enough to pique my interest, and beyond that, there's another very important reason."

Murong Xue'er asked, "What reason?"

Lu Chen smiled, then let go of Murong Xue'er's chin and stood up, walking over to the bed. Arriving at the bedside, Lu Chen sat on the edge of the bed.

Seeing this scene, Murong Xue'er paused for a moment, thinking Lu Chen would continue their conversation. She hadn't expected him to just drink some tea before his thoughts turned to such matters.

Lu Chen then patted the bed beside him. "Miss Murong, come sit here. Let me tell you why the Yue Emperor sent you instead of someone else."

Without overthinking, Murong Xue'er slowly got up and sat down beside Lu Chen. As soon as she did, Lu Chen's large hand encircled her slender waist, his fingers sliding under her clothes, caressing her lower abdomen as he spoke, "The most important reason the Yue Emperor sent you lies in that Virgin Mark on your stomach."

Hearing this, Murong Xue'er was taken aback and, out of curiosity, she asked, "The Virgin Mark? What does this have to do with the Virgin Mark?"

Lu Chen didn't answer Murong Xue'er's question. Instead, he turned his head and kissed Murong Xue'er's red lips, then gently laid her down on the bed, her hairpin falling out, freeing her hair to spread out over the bed.

Seeing Lu Chen take action, Murong Xue'er set aside his earlier words. She thought to herself that she should first take good care of Lu Chen before finding a way to obtain the military deployment maps of the North Country from him.

As their clothes became fewer and fewer between them, they finally bared themselves to each other. At that moment, however, Lu Chen did not proceed further. He propped himself up and gently caressed the Virgin Mark on Murong Xue'er's lower abdomen, "This Virgin Mark of yours is not an ordinary one."

By then, Murong Xue'er's eyes were brimming with spring, hardly able to focus on Lu Chen's words as she writhed softly on the bed. "Prince, my Virgin Mark has long been broken. What's the point in talking about it now? Please, don't let the important matters wait."

As she spoke, Murong Xue'er's hand reached up, seemingly trying to grab Lu Chen's arm to pull him back down to her.

Seeing Murong Xue'er's comportment, Lu Chen chuckled and continued, "Your Virgin Mark is in fact a Curse Pattern. Once a man breaks your virginity, the Curse Pattern will affect him. He will then fall in love with you forever, unable to leave you, obeying your commands, even allowing you to manipulate him as you wish."

Hearing Lu Chen's words, Murong Xue'er, who had been in a daze, instantly sobered up, looking at Lu Chen with disbelief.

If it were true as Lu Chen said, since he was the one who broke her virginity, didn't that mean he was now affected by the Curse Pattern, essentially becoming her slave?

Regaining her wits, Murong Xue'er looked into Lu Chen's eyes and said, "Prince, please don't joke like this. It's just a common Virgin Mark, after all. If it really possessed the ability you mentioned, wouldn't you be completely in love with me by now, at my beck and call?"

"But as far as I can see, Prince, you only seem to like my body, and don't seem to be cursed at all."

As he caressed Murong Xue'er's Virgin Mark, Lu Chen said, "The reason I am unaffected by this Curse Pattern is because my body is special."

"As for whether I have fallen in love with you, even without a Curse Pattern, I would still fall for you, and I'd still abduct you to the North Prince Mansion to make you mine."

Hearing Lu Chen's words, Murong Xue'er fell into silence, just lying quietly on the bed, looking up into Lu Chen's eyes, searching for any sign that he was toying with her.

But Lu Chen's gaze was especially firm, not suggestive of a lie. He continued, "You are a maidservant close to the Yue Emperor, whom she trusts and values greatly. To her, you are a very useful tool. Have you not considered that such a useful tool, why would she just discard it so easily?"

Murong Xue'er still did not speak.

Lu Chen went on, "It is precisely because you are the tool she values most that she wants to use you to control me, to make me one of her chess pieces, too. Unfortunately for her, she didn't anticipate that I wouldn't be affected by the Virgin Mark."

Hearing this, Murong Xue'er almost believed Lu Chen's words, thinking to herself how the Yue Emperor could send her to the North Country.

The Da Yue Dynasty was not small. There were certainly many beautiful women who could appeal to Lu Chen, yet the Yue Emperor had specifically chosen her.

Being one of the Yue Emperor's capable maidservants, her presence certainly made it less arduous for the Emperor to handle state affairs.

Chapter 569: Murong Xue'er's Complete Compromise_3

The North Prince was right; she was such a useful tool that the Yue Emperor shouldn't have sent her out unless he found her more useful in the North Country than remaining in Great Yue.

The North Prince was an ambitious and capable man. If he could use her to control the North Prince, he could be very useful in the future.

But then again, even if that were true, it wouldn't matter anymore.

Lu Chen had already seen through the Yue Emperor's conspiracy and knew the purpose of the Virgin Mark. Most importantly, the Virgin Mark was useless to Lu Chen, which meant the Yue Emperor's plan had failed.

At that moment, Lu Chen said with a smile, "Originally, the Yue Emperor planned to use you to control me, but now you've lost your innocence, and the Virgin Mark didn't work on me. If the Yue Emperor knew the Virgin Mark had no effect, do you think he would still trust you?"

"It's simple logic. You haven't controlled me, but instead, I took your virginity. The end result might be that you are controlled by me. Once the Yue Emperor finds out the Virgin Mark is ineffective, you'll be useless to him."

Murong Xue'er was slightly dazed. No wonder the Yue Emperor hadn't told her about the Virgin Mark in the beginning. If it were ineffective, she would definitely worry about becoming useless to the Yue Emperor and might betray him.

At this time, Murong Xue'er said, "What's your purpose in telling me all this?"

Lu Chen spoke indifferently, "To make you completely devoted to me and become my true woman."

With that, Lu Chen leaned in and kissed Murong Xue'er's red lips again.

"Mmm..."

After a futile resistance, Murong Xue'er had no choice but to cooperate with Lu Chen's mischief.

Thinking about what Lu Chen had said, anxiety took hold within Murong Xue'er. The physical sensations and her restlessness made her want to forget all her worries completely.

After who knows how long, Murong Xue'er suddenly felt a cool breeze on her back. Her consciousness clearing slightly, she turned her head and saw Lu Chen, the scoundrel, actually holding a brush and writing on her back.

At this moment, Murong Xue'er was burning hot, barely able to endure it. Lying there in front of Lu Chen, he was not attending to the matter at hand but writing on her back with a brush instead.

Then Murong Xue'er said, "Prince...Prince, there's plenty of...time to practice...writing during the long night. Can't we finish the main business first?"

Seeing Murong Xue'er in such a seductive state, Lu Chen stopped his writing. "You want me to attend to the main business, then tell me the true reason you came to the Prince's Mansion tonight."

Murong Xue'er's heart skipped a beat.

Her lies had been seen through by the North Prince.

No, it was more accurate to say that the North Prince had never believed her.

Struggling against the discomfort in her body, Murong Xue'er said, "Prince, haven't I already told you... I came because of the Emperor... "

Lu Chen cut her off, "If you're unwilling to reveal your true purpose, then don't speak. I'm going to continue practicing my writing."

Murong Xue'er bit her lip in frustration. This bastard was toying with her, using harsh methods to extract information!

Having no other choice, Murong Xue'er finally said, "The Emperor... asked me to extract the military deployment map of the North Country."

No sooner had Murong Xue'er finished speaking than Lu Chen threw the brush aside and leaned down to kiss her red lips once again.

...

At dawn.

When Lu Chen woke up, he felt refreshed. Murong Xue'er had already gotten up, standing by the bed and looking toward her waist. Her clothes only covered half of her body, giving off an alluring, hazy charm.

Seeing Lu Chen wake up, Murong Xue'er had a complex look in her eyes. Last night, under Lu Chen's intense interrogation, she revealed the purpose of her visit to the North Prince Mansion.

Now she was in trouble. She couldn't fulfill the Empress's mission. Lu Chen already knew she came to get the military deployment map, so he certainly wouldn't tell her the actual military deployment, nor would he show her the real map.

It didn't matter anyway. This was just to assist Great Wu in testing the North Country. Even if she hadn't obtained the deployment map, the Yue Emperor probably wouldn't blame her.

With that thought, Murong Xue'er continued to dress, not saying a word to Lu Chen throughout.

Watching Murong Xue'er quietly get dressed, Lu Chen lay in bed, observing her perfect figure, and asked, "Why aren't you speaking?"

With an expressionless face, Murong Xue'er replied, "In front of the Prince, my words are not my own. I don't want to speak."

Lu Chen chuckled; Murong Xue'er's so-called "words are not my own" probably referred to last night. In his room, Murong Xue'er indeed had no choice but to obey him.

Then Lu Chen said, "I will give you a part of the North Country's military deployment map, so you can report back to the Yue Emperor."

Murong Xue'er replied indifferently, "The Prince intends to use a false military deployment map to deceive Great Wu's army, right?"

The military deployment map was critical in war, a military secret. No one would hand it over so easily, unless someone planned to set a trap for the enemy with a fake map.

Murong Xue'er didn't believe that Lu Chen would give her the real map.

Lu Chen said, "I do plan to hand over the military deployment map to Great Wu through you, but part of this map is real."

With that, Lu Chen waved his hand, and a Map Scroll from his study flew into the room, hovering in front of Murong Xue'er.

Looking at the floating map in front of her, Murong Xue'er ultimately couldn't resist, took the map, and glanced over the military deployment on it.

This map indeed depicted the North Country's military deployment, but it lacked specific troop numbers, significantly reducing the intelligence's value.

Whether a military stronghold was defended by a hundred soldiers or a hundred thousand, the enemy would face drastically different challenges in trying to capture it.

Laughing, Lu Chen asked, "How is it? I've been quite generous to you, haven't I?"

"Are you satisfied with this transaction?"

Murong Xue'er turned to look at Lu Chen, who lay on the bed openly meeting her gaze, and said faintly, "Thank you, Prince."

"I shall leave today. If the Prince needs me again, you can send for me."

Murong Xue'er had surrendered in her heart. After all that had happened, there was nothing she could do about this man.

Chapter 570: The Impeachment Storm in Great Wu_1

Murong Xue'er donned her clothes and left the Prince's Mansion, leaving behind the place that had brought about her downfall.

Upon returning to her residence, Murong Xue'er immediately ordered Great Jue's men to send the military deployment maps to Great Jue, regardless of whether those maps were real or fake; she had to send them out.

If Great Jue showed no initiative at all, the Yue Emperor might start to become suspicious of her.

After finishing the official business, Murong Xue'er returned to her room, ordered her maids to bring hot water, and bathed in the tub filled with hot water.

Seeing the words on her body, Murong Xue'er thought of the events from the previous night and then remembered the words Lu Chen had spoken.

Murong Xue'er felt an unparalleled chaos in her heart. If the matter of the Virgin Mark were true, once the Yue Emperor learned that the North Prince had deflowered her without being held accountable, he probably wouldn't trust her anymore.

Someone like her, once fallen out of the emperor's favor, would be targeted by countless people trying to get rid of her. Her survival thus far had been due to the attention the Yue Emperor had paid her.

Was she really going to betray the Yue Emperor?

The word "betrayal" pierced her heart painfully. She had never before contemplated betraying the Yue Emperor, even when he often punished her and made her do all kinds of things, she always believed it was justified and never harbored any resentment towards him.

At this moment, Murong Xue'er raised her arm, splashed the water in the tub, and let the sound of the water stop her from continuing to think wildly.

If she kept thinking, her body would start feeling strange again.

Murong Xue'er sighed softly, lifted her jade legs, and looked at the words written on her legs. Talking to herself, she said, "Sigh, that bastard is really my nemesis."

...

Afternoon.

Lu Chen was in his study examining the improved designs for firearms when he heard the voice of a maid, "Prince, Miss Xuanyuan wishes to see you."

Lu Chen said indifferently, "Let her in."

The next moment, Xuanyuan Yunqi entered the study. Lu Chen's gaze remained on the blueprints on the table, not shifting to look at Xuanyuan Yunqi.

Xuanyuan Yunqi then asked, "Prince, did you summon me for a matter?"

Although Xuanyuan Yunqi appeared very calm on the surface, her heart was throbbing with excitement. Her brother had told her the previous night that if she performed well today and answered the Prince's questions earnestly, he might agree to let her go to the front line.

Going into battle was something she had always dreamed of.

Upon hearing Xuanyuan Yunqi's words, Lu Chen still didn't look up. He shuffled through the firearm blueprints on the table and in a low voice while looking asked, "Yunqi, I've heard from your brother that you wish to go to the front line?"

Xuanyuan Yunqi answered, "Yes, Prince, I've learned almost everything I should learn. What I lack now is practical combat experience."

Lu Chen said indifferently, "The battlefield is a place where people die; it's not as simple as you think. Are you truly prepared?"

Xuanyuan Yunqi replied without hesitation, "I have long been ready to join the battlefield, please rest assured, Prince."

At that moment, Lu Chen looked up at Xuanyuan Yunqi.

Xuanyuan Yunqi was clad in black and red armor, which fully enclosed her curvaceous figure. She wore a high ponytail, exposing her fair, smooth forehead. She looked spirited and vibrant, full of energy and vitality.

Lu Chen spoke directly, "I can let you go to the front line, but I have one condition."

Xuanyuan Yunqi said, "Please state it, Prince."

"After the war, you will return to the Prince's Mansion to be my personal guard."

This...

Xuanyuan Yunqi was momentarily stunned and then she said, "I agree to the Prince's condition."

For Xuanyuan Yunqi, this was hardly a concern. When she first came from Great Yu City to Yan County, she had agreed to be Lu Chen's guard and learn by his side, but was then assigned to the military corps led by his brother.

Thinking to herself, Xuanyuan Yunqi figured the Prince would probably do the same as before and assign her to a military corps once she returned to Yan County.

With so many women already in Lu Chen's harem, he wouldn't likely be interested in her. The current Xuanyuan Yunqi had abandoned her former wild thoughts, but her feelings for the North Prince had grown deeper.

Seeing Xuanyuan Yunqi agree, Lu Chen said, "Good, in a few days, someone will transport provisions to Yongan County. You will accompany the supply convoy. I will write a letter to General Mu to have him find a position for you."

Xuanyuan Yunqi knelt halfway in excitement and said, "Thank you, Prince!"

Lu Chen said, "Alright, rise. Go prepare yourself."

"Yes, Prince, this subordinate takes her leave!"

As the words fell, Xuanyuan Yunqi left the study cheerfully. Lu Chen felt a hint of reluctance in his heart as he watched her retreat.

However, seeing Xuanyuan Yunqi in that armor, Lu Chen still felt that the battlefield was where this woman belonged. Forcing her to stay at the North Prince Mansion was not suitable; it would crush her individuality.

...

Half a month later, Wu Junwan returned to Great Wu. As soon as she arrived, she faced the censure of many ministers in the court, which caught Wu Junwan's attention.

Her inability to persuade the Yue Emperor to form an alliance with Great Wu could be a sign of her insufficient capabilities, but she shouldn't have been subjected to this level of censure.

With her power growing, those ministers, despite their private grievances, would not have dared to boldly unite and impeach Wu Junwan.

Wu Junwan suspected that someone was pulling strings behind the scenes, so she immediately used her power to investigate what had happened in Great Wu recently, wondering how such a significant shift in the court's attitudes could have taken place while she was away. Who exactly was behind this, manipulating the winds to target her?

Inside the Green Cloud Palace, the voice of a female guard echoed throughout the hall, as Wu Junwan reclined on a luxurious couch, quietly listening to the guard's report.

After a while, the female guard finished reporting all the major events that had occurred during Wu Junwan's absence from Great Wu.

No sooner had the guard finished speaking than Wu Junwan let out a cold snort, "Someone fetch Mr. Chai for me."

Just as Wu Junwan finished speaking, Chai Jiliang's voice was heard from outside the hall, "Princess, there's no need for summoning, I am already here."

After entering the hall, Chai Jiliang, separated by a red curtain, bowed to Wu Junwan and said, "Your subordinate pays respects to the Princess."

At this moment, Wu Junwan spoke, "Mr. Chai, you seem to have been quite busy recently."

Chai Jiliang replied, "His Majesty plans to dispatch troops against the North Country, naturally, I have had many matters to attend to."

Wu Junwan said, "Mr. Chai should be aware that many ministers in the court have been slandering me recently."

Chai Jiliang replied, "Your Highness, please quell your anger. The recent turn of events is indeed unfavorable for you, but it is clear that someone is instigating this behind the scenes, and it shouldn't cause you too much trouble."

Wu Junwan asked, "Who does Mr. Chai think is most likely the instigator behind this?"

"Is it one of my brothers, or could it be 'him'?"

Wu Junwan didn't specify, but Chai Jiliang understood that by "him," she was referring to someone in particular.

It was obvious she meant the Martial Emperor – it was quite possible that he had started to distrust her and wanted to suppress her influence to prevent her power from expanding further. Her failure to form an alliance with Great Jue was indeed a prime opportunity.

At this point, Chai Jiliang said, "In my view, it's likely that the Princess's brothers can no longer sit still and see this as an opportunity to impeach you."

Wu Junwan let out a cold huff, "I have been running around for the good of Great Wu, and yet they are colluding to slander me."

At this moment, neither Chai Jiliang nor Wu Junwan had any inkling of who might be the instigator behind the scenes.

Now was a critical time for the war between Great Wu and the North Country, and it never crossed their minds that the North Prince would have any reason to coax Great Wu's ministers to impeach her, a princess of an enemy nation.

After all, it was the Martial Emperor who initiated the war, not Princess Junwan. Even if the impeachment was effective, which was in question, the loss of her Princess title would not affect the conflict between Great Wu and the North Country.

Wu Junwan and Chai Jiliang could only consider where the interests lay to determine who was causing trouble behind the scenes.

Whoever benefited from the impeachment was likely the one stirring things up.

Clearly, if she were suppressed, it would be extremely advantageous for her brothers. Therefore, Wu Junwan and Chai Jiliang's first thought was those useless Princes must have conspired with the ministers.

Just then, Wu Junwan suddenly thought of something, furrowing her brows she said, "I feel this matter is not so simple. Even if it truly was my brothers, with my father's abilities, he could completely prevent them from continuing their foolishness."

Wu Junwan felt a strong sense of crisis, sensing that her father might have started to distance himself from her; otherwise, how could he possibly allow those ministers to defame her?

With her father's abilities, stopping those ministers from speaking out of turn was not an issue at all. His lack of action indicated that he might also be thinking of suppressing her, which is why the trend of impeaching her could have persisted for so long in the court.

After hearing Wu Junwan's words, Chai Jiliang was silent for a moment before speaking, "Your Highness, it's best not to think too much about it."

Chai Jiliang, being as astute as he was, could not have failed to grasp the Martial Emperor's thoughts. Princess Junwan had indeed been rather active over the past year, which had significantly threatened the positions of the Princes. So much so that these Princes had become increasingly less noticeable in Great Wu.

Nowadays, the common people of Great Wu only knew of the Princess of Great Wu and had almost no impression of the Princes of Great Wu.

Wu Junwan thought to herself that it seemed she had elicited her father's displeasure, and that she would need to keep a lower profile from now on.

...

At the very same moment,

The household of Great Wu's Imperial Censor received a particular visitor today.

In the main hall, sitting opposite the Imperial Censor Zhang Yuanbai was a middle-aged man who was fat, dressed in silk robes, with a thick gold chain around his neck, radiating an aura of wealth.

Zhang Yuanbai spoke with a smile, "Qian Xingchang, you have made the right choice. I could never have imagined that you would offer your allegiance to Prince Wu Ming."

Qian Xingchang replied with a smile, "The Princess is just a woman, and no matter how capable she is, she has no chance of inheriting the throne. Following her leads nowhere."

Zhang Yuanbai inquired, "Aren't you afraid that Princess Junwan will find out you've already given your loyalty to Prince Wu Ming?"

"The Princess does not tolerate sand in her eyes," noted Qian Xingchang with a smile. "As long as you, Sir Zhang, don't reveal it, how could the Princess possibly know that I've already sided with Prince Wu Ming?"

As he said this, Qian Xingchang produced a stack of banknotes from his sleeve, placing them in front of Zhang Yuanbai, "Sir Zhang, this is a token of my sincerity; please accept it with a smile."

Zhang Yuanbai glanced briefly at the stack of banknotes beside him, his eyes gleaming, but he quickly concealed the shine, stroking his beard and responding with a beaming smile, "Of course, of course, I will certainly speak well of you to Prince Wu Ming."

At that moment, Qian Xingchang took another stack of papers from his sleeve, saying with a grin, "Sir Zhang, these documents contain some of the shady dealings that Princess Junwan had people carry out over the years. I believe they will prove extremely useful to Prince Wu Ming."

Upon hearing this, Zhang Yuanbai's heart skipped, hurriedly taking the papers from Qian Xingchang's hands, glancing over them briefly before storing them away as prized possessions.

"The Prince will surely reward you for these."

Qian Xingchang said obsequiously, "It's what I ought to do."