

Finest 321

Chapter 321 Sudden Anger

"Who... who summoned me?" Lin Wanrong could hardly believe his own ears and asked again with wide eyes.

"The Emperor, the Emperor has summoned you," said Xu Wei, trailing behind a carriage. The elder Xu grabbed his hand and hurriedly led him toward the carriage, "This is a great honour, young man. You should come with me."

The Emperor's summons? A mixture of surprise and delight rose within Lin Wanrong. He had just been contemplating how to curry favor with Xu Wei, hoping that he might recommend him to meet the Emperor. But now, the Emperor had taken the initiative to summon him to the palace. The situation made him feel rather hesitant.

"Master Xu, does the Emperor know me? Do you know why he is summoning me?" Lin Wanrong asked cautiously.

"We will discuss this on the way," Xu Wei responded. He signaled to the coachman, and the two of them pulled Lin San onto the carriage. The elder Xu climbed in after him. The carriage was spacious and well-lit, with a table and a bed adorned with a silver-threaded jade quilt. There was also a teapot and teacups on the table, all exquisite to the sight, making it clear they were no ordinary items.

"Set off, quickly!" Xu Wei seemed to fear that Lin San would change his mind and hastily ordered the coachman. The horse hooves clattered as the carriage began to roll towards the city.

Seeing that everything was settled, Xu Wei finally let out a long sigh of relief. He sat down on the seat, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and laughed, "Good. I have fulfilled my duty. I have brought you to the palace."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Mr. Xu, you exaggerate. Do I really have such influence? One word from you, and here I am."

Xu Wei had previously invited him to join in suppressing the White Lotus in Jinling, an invitation he had tactfully declined. Not too long ago, Li Tai had invited him to join the army, but he had bluntly refused, irritating Li Tai and giving him a clearer understanding of Lin Wanrong's unconventional nature. Lin San had once expressed his intention to explore the palace, but who knew if he had changed his mind after so many days. Seeing him willingly get onto the carriage, Xu Wei finally felt at ease and laughed, "Little brother Lin, do you remember what I said to you a few days ago? If you were to enter the palace on your own, you would be risking your head. But now, the Emperor himself has summoned you, that's a different matter."

Indeed. If he had known that the old Emperor wanted to see him, he wouldn't have wasted his money buying that "Ghost Drawing Charm". Even though he feared neither heaven nor earth, the Emperor was the ruler of the nation. He knew nothing about the palace, which naturally made him a bit hesitant. Now that he had this old fox Xu Wei here, he was definitely going to make good use of him.

"Mr. Xu, now that you have tricked me onto this carriage, you should stop hiding things. Please tell me, why is the Emperor summoning me? He's not inviting me for dinner, is he? We are not even acquainted!" Lin Wanrong said.

Xu Wei burst into laughter, "Listening to you, young man, I feel like I could live a few more decades. The Emperor's intentions are inscrutable. As a minister, how dare I make wild guesses? But you demonstrated remarkable courage at yesterday's martial arts exhibition and were instrumental in crushing the White Lotus. I believe the Emperor won't mistreat you."

Lin Wanrong nodded. 'That makes sense,' he conceded. 'Let's set aside the fact that the Emperor might very well be my father-in-law. Considering that I helped him suppress the White Lotus rebellion, he ought to reward me with a mountain of gold.'

Xu Wei lifted the carriage curtain, cautiously glanced around, and then spoke in a mysterious tone. "Little brother, right now it's just the two of us. Be honest with this old man, do you recognize—" He halted abruptly. Lin Wanrong, noticing that Xu Wei had stopped mid-sentence, couldn't help but ask, "Mr. Xu, recognize who? Hurry up and finish your sentence!"

"Do you recognize the Second Princess?" Xu Wei asked gently, a smile flickering across his face.

"The Second Princess?" Lin Wanrong's heart pounded. Could he be talking about Qingxuan? Damn it, hadn't he previously claimed he didn't know Qingxuan? Had this old man been deceiving him?

Seeing Lin San's discomfort, Xu Wei, presuming his hesitation to speak, responded with a slight smile, "Little brother, there's no need to be shy. The Emperor has already told me."

"The Emperor told you—what did he say?" Lin Wanrong asked, surprised. Had Qingxuan told her father about their relationship? Did this mean he was on the verge of becoming a prince consort? His heart pounded in anticipation as he looked expectantly at the elder Xu.

Xu Wei chuckled, "Little brother, you've kept this old man in the dark. No wonder you flatly rejected my recommendation to the Emperor. So it seems the Little Princess has taken a liking to you—"

"Oh, come on, Mr. Xu, stop being so cryptic. Just tell me what's going on!" Lin Wanrong grew anxious, staring at Xu Wei, who was playing coy. He felt like prying open the old man's mouth to dig out the truth.

Xu Wei stroked his beard and chuckled, "Yesterday, the Emperor summoned me to the palace. The original purpose was to discuss official matters, but towards the end, he revealed to me some great news." He wiped away a spit fleck from the corner of his mouth, "The Emperor said, the Little Princess, after years of wandering outside, has recently returned to the palace. Isn't this wonderful news?"

She's back at the palace? Lin Wanrong, feeling a rush of excitement, quickly retrieved a portrait of Qingxuan from his pocket and thrust it into Xu Wei's hands, "Brother Xu, quickly tell me, what does the Little Princess look like? Is she, is she the woman in this painting?"

Xu Wei glanced at the portrait and gave a bitter smile, "Little brother, I only learned this news yesterday and haven't met the Little Princess myself, so how could I recognize her? But I am certain that the Little Princess knows you—"

"Knows me? Mr. Xu, how would you know that?" Lin Wanrong asked, shocked, as he gazed at the portrait of Qingxuan.

"The Emperor mentioned yesterday that upon the Little Princess's return, she had recommended you in his presence. Yesterday, he personally saw your gallant demeanor, which has added to his favorable impression of you. Combined with my timely advice, this delighted the Emperor, and hence he urgently summoned you to the palace. Little brother, even the princess is speaking up for you, your good days—are here!" Xu Wei winked at him, flashing a knowing smile that any man would understand. Damn it, this old lecher, he must have assumed everyone was like him—Su Qinglian, the famous courtesan of the West Lake, must have known many tricks to have kept him in such a state of debauchery.

“Qingxuan, it must be Qingxuan—” Lin San stood up abruptly, his face marked by intense emotion. The compartment barely cleared his height and his head nearly pierced the roof. Xu Wei laughed and pulled him back down, his expression growing ever more secretive: “Whether she’s the Miss Qingxuan you speak of, I cannot confirm. However, today you’re to enter the palace. If you please the Emperor sufficiently, you may well be granted an audience with the Princess. It’s not impossible.”

Seeing the crafty grin on his face, Lin Wanrong became somewhat more collected. Something wasn’t right about this. The hour was still early. Judging by the time, the morning court session should’ve just concluded. Even if the Emperor was eager, Lin San was not some grand hero of the nation and people for him to rush Lin San into the palace so urgently.

Old Xu had a track record of trickery. Lin Wanrong mulled it over carefully in his mind before he grinned, “Minister Xu, is there anything more to this summoning by the Emperor? If not, let’s take our time. The carriage can move at a leisurely pace; we have plenty of time.”

Xu Wei quickly said, “That won’t do. The Emperor summons us, as his subjects, we cannot show such neglect.” Seeing Lin San’s half-smiling expression, he chuckled, “Little brother Lin is indeed clever, I won’t hide anything from you. What I said earlier was all true, I did not deceive you, but not all the news is good.”

“So, there is bad news?” Lin Wanrong raised an eyebrow, his voice casual. He’d known from the start that this old man wasn’t that easy to deal with. The Emperor’s chief counselor wouldn’t personally undertake a small errand like fetching him. Even considering Qingxuan’s identity, Xu Wei, the Minister of Revenue, wouldn’t need to curry favor with him to this extent. There must be more to this.

“Bad news? Yes, a few pieces, and they all concern you,” Xu Wei said with an awkward smile.

Something to do with him? Could there be a problem with Ning Yuxi’s side? He felt a surge of doubt but heard Xu Wei continue: “Little brother Lin, it’s the start of spring, a time when our tributary states traditionally come to offer their respects. This year is no exception.”

What Xu Wei said seemed unrelated to Fairy Ning’s matter, but rather something about tributary states offering respects. How was that bad news, and what did it have to do with him? Could it be some princess from a small country took a liking to him and wanted to force him into marriage? He let out a wry smile, pretending to be shocked: “Tributes from tributary states? That’s good news! Accepting annual tributes and displaying our grandeur, how could this be seen as bad news, Minister Xu!”

Xu Wei glanced outside the carriage. The rumbling noise indicated the carriage was speeding along. He pulled down the curtain, sighed lightly, and said: "Little brother Lin, not being in the court, you're naturally unaware of these matters. Our great nation is vast and populous, the leading state among our neighboring countries. In our glorious past, we had over a hundred tributary states, each paying respect and tribute annually. It was an impressive sight."

"Oh, is this year different?" Lin Wanrong asked.

Xu Wei shook his head, "To be exact, things haven't been the same for many years. In recent years, our Great Hua has been fighting non-stop against the nomadic tribes, dealing with the White Lotus rebellion, and grappling with traitors within the court who are determined to wreak havoc. We have been fighting on multiple fronts, both domestically and internationally. Our national strength is no longer what it used to be. As for our tributary states, each has its own agenda. They show fealty on the surface, but they all harbor malicious intentions. Their tributes have been decreasing year after year, with recent years merely going through the motions."

Lin Wanrong nodded. It was only natural. There were no friends between nations, only interests. If the Great Hua was in decline, it would be strange if anyone still paid attention.

"Look, Mr. Xu, I'm clueless about state affairs. You're playing the lute to a cow by talking to me about this." Lin Wanrong chuckled. "Just tell me, what does this have to do with me?"

Xu Wei said, "You'll know if it concerns you or not once I finish. In the past few years, the tributary states have come to pay homage at different times. The tribute, while not abundant, was at least passable. But this year is truly odd! The countries of Dongyin [Japan], Goryeo [Korea], and other tributaries, it's as if they've agreed beforehand, arrived almost simultaneously, with only a few days apart."

"Isn't it better if everyone comes together to celebrate the new year? It saves several meals!" Lin Wanrong joked. "Our Great Hua is like the leading gangster of the underworld, and the others are our underlings. It's understandable for the underlings to visit their boss together."

Seeing his attitude, Xu Wei didn't know what he was thinking. He forced a laugh and said, "Little brother Lin, your analogy is quite unique. If it was just them coming together, it wouldn't matter. But the strange thing is that they seem to have agreed this year to reduce their tribute by more than half compared to previous years. Not only that, but the northern nomads also sent envoys, precisely at this time. Currently, the capital is filled with representatives from all these countries. Brother Lin, do you think there's no connection here?"

The northern nomads were here too? This matter wasn't simple. Lin Wanrong furrowed his brows. He knew better than anyone what kind of characters the people of Goryeo and Dongyin were, typically the types to bully the weak and fear the strong. The other tributaries were likely the same. They all coincidentally arrived with the northern nomads; could they all have sided with the northern nomads?

He had thoughts in his mind, but his face revealed nothing. This Xu Wei was an old fox. Speaking about these matters to him was no accident; he surely had a motive. He wasn't asking him to deal with them, was he?

"Oh, they all came to our capital for a meeting. That's quite good! Everyone can sit down, have tea, chat, and foster friendship." Lin Wanrong played dumb, "But, this still seems to have nothing to do with me!"

Xu Wei was not irritated. He lightly smiled and said, "If they were only coming together and reducing the annual tribute, that would be tolerable. But there is something even more infuriating. These small tributary states, I don't know how they found out about the return of our little princess. Those toads want to eat swan meat and have actually proposed-"

"Proposed what?" Lin Wanrong interrupted angrily.

"Dongyin and Goryeo have simultaneously proposed marriage to the Emperor, requesting that the little princess, who is most beloved by the Emperor of our Great Hua, be wed to their respective princes-"

With a crash, the teapot was shattered by Lin San. Lin Wanrong clenched his fist and roared, "Damn those Koreans and Japanese, they dare to covet my wife! I'll annihilate them."

Xu Wei sighed, "Not only that, but the northern nomads are even more arrogant. As conditions for a ceasefire, in addition to demanding our Great Hua to cede territory and pay reparations, they even insulted the little princess. They want her to travel thousands of miles to become the wife of the Khan. Brother Lin, this is a blatant insult to our Great Hua-" As Xu Wei continued to fan the flames, he surreptitiously studied Lin San's expression. Seeing Lin San's clenched teeth and his face as dark as coal, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Damn it!" Lin Wanrong clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. "Mr. Xu, there's no need to intentionally provoke me. Don't worry, I, Lin San, won't neglect anything that needs to be done. If anyone dares to covet my wife, I'll make sure they won't know how they died!"

It had taken Xu Wei half a day of persuasion, and these were precisely the words he'd been waiting for. Overjoyed, he seized Lin Wanrong's hand and said, "Little brother Lin, my visit today hasn't been in vain. The Emperor is currently in the palace receiving envoys from various countries. We should hurry over now. Let's rush to the palace as quickly as possible."

Chapter 322 Fist Fight

Lin Wanrong sighed. Ever since he came to this world, he had intended to stay away from the court and its disputes. However, life was unpredictable, and the plans of yesterday couldn't catch up with the changes of today. For Qingxuan, he had no choice but to enter the palace. Although his goal was simple - purely to help his wife - the court was a tumultuous place, with the Emperor's thoughts even more elusive. With this entrance into the palace, many things were bound to change. Perhaps it would be better to stay honestly in the Xiao household, living a carefree life as a humble servant.

Lin Wanrong was filled with melancholy. Seeing his silence, Xu Wei seemed to understand his thoughts and didn't disturb him, speaking very little along the way. The carriage raced forward, through streets and lanes, deepening their journey. Gradually, the security tightened and in no time, they arrived at the front gate of the palace.

As he looked at the high, firm palace walls, the bright weapons of the imperial guards, and their strict vigilance, Lin Wanrong's mind unconsciously drifted back to the day he first met Fairy Ning. Alone, he had wandered by the city moat. It was the Eldest Miss who had arranged for Sister Song to pave the way for him, enabling him to proceed undisturbed. Initially, he thought it would be difficult to break into the palace, but today, Xu Wei brought him here with an imperial decree. Compared to that day, it was a world of difference.

Lost in thought, they had already reached the edge of the palace wall. The carriage halted, and the two of them proceeded on foot. Two squads of neatly dressed soldiers, their eyes keen, stood imposingly on both sides. The palace's grandeur was indeed extraordinary. This was just the entrance to the outer courtyard, and it was already on such high alert. What would the inner courtyard of the palace look like?

Lin Wanrong chuckled and said to Xu Wei, "Mr. Xu, does the palace always assign so many guards every day? It must waste a lot of silver!"

Xu Wei shook his head, "Normally, the palace is well-guarded, but not to this extent. A decade or so ago, the Emperor encountered an assassin in the palace. At that time, there were guards at every three steps and a sentry post at every five. Even a cockroach would be interrogated eighteen times. Today's show is far less than back then. I guess it's because of the visiting envoys from the tributary states and foreign countries today. The Emperor has likely added more manpower to put on a show for these foreigners."

Upon reaching the guard post, the guards hurriedly bowed and saluted, "We greet Master Xu!"

Xu Wei waved his hand and said, "Thank you all. I bring the Emperor's verbal order to bring this Little brother Lin into the palace to see His Majesty. This is the imperial golden badge." Xu Wei flashed the badge in his hand, and everyone hastily knelt down.

Lin Wanrong took a careful look. The imperial golden badge in Xu Wei's hand was very different from his. This one was engraved with a five-clawed golden dragon on the front and four flamboyantly styled characters on the back that read "As if attended by the Emperor himself". The status of Xu Wei was indeed different. This high-grade token in his hand was an unbeatable sword, slaying anyone it met. No wonder he could forcefully rectify the officialdom when he was in Jinling.

Having this invincible golden token, the guards no longer dared to question them, bowing to let the two pass. Lin Wanrong and Xu Wei walked, crossing the moat, passing through layers of guards, through the Upright Gate, Meridian Gate, across the Goldfish Bridge, heading straight to the Hall of Supreme Harmony. On both sides of the path, red walls and yellow tiles, painted beams and carved pillars, magnificent halls and terraces, all splendidly arrayed in an imposing sight. The ground was covered with golden bricks, and the walls on both sides were carved from white jade, adorned with intricately carved balustrades, unrivaled in grandeur.

This palace indeed spared no expense on extravagance, Lin Wanrong looked around, secretly clicking his tongue, 'Damn, this is a classic vanity project. The money spent on building this palace, if used for river defense, for national defense, why worry about floods or foreign invasions? No wonder outsiders could humiliate our great nation when all the national tax revenue was spent on building buildings.'

As he was fuming, they had already reached the stairs leading to the main hall. These stairs leading to the Golden Hall had a total of ninety-nine steps, symbolizing the supreme power of the Emperor.

A eunuch with a clean-shaven face and standing guard at the stairs saw Xu Wei approaching and hurriedly came over, bowing, "Greetings, Minister Xu."

Xu Wei returned the greeting with a smile, "You've been waiting here for a long time, Master Gao. This here is Lin San, the one His Majesty personally summoned. Little brother Lin, this is Master Gao, a favorite of His Majesty's. You may wish to get to know him well in the future."

'No way, he wants me to get closer to the eunuchs? I don't have that kind of preference.' Being a witty man, he chuckled and stuffed a silver note worth fifty taels into Master Gao's hand, offering his respect, "So this is Master Gao? I've heard so much about you, and today's meeting does not disappoint. Master, you look so kind and affable, surely because you are blessed by His Majesty's royal grace, imbued with celestial aura, so ethereal and detached from the mortal world. I am in utmost admiration and respect for you."

A few compliments wouldn't hurt. Since he had to find Qingxuan in the palace, it was inevitable that he would have to put some effort into dealing with these eunuchs. There's an old saying, "Better to offend a gentleman than a petty man", these eunuchs may seem insignificant but could create significant trouble.

Master Gao's face lit up, and without a change in his expression, he discreetly pocketed the silver note, giggled a few times in his effeminate voice, "Young Master Lin is too polite. His Majesty holds you in high esteem and has specifically instructed me to wait for you here. Your rise to prominence is just around the corner, and I hope to be carried along with your good fortune."

Xu Wei nodded with a smile, quite satisfied with Lin Wanrong's performance. Although Lin San was not in official circles, he was more knowledgeable about its workings than many seasoned politicians. He wondered how Lin San had managed to learn so much. He asked in a low voice, "Master Gao, is His Majesty still in the Royal Study?"

Master Gao shook his head, "His Majesty just moved to the Hall of Nurturing Harmony and is listening to a Taoist priest recite scriptures. I heard that the Taoist priest just completed a batch of elixir yesterday, and His Majesty wants to take it."

A monk? Elixir? What was all this about? What did the Emperor want with such a thing? It sounded so mysterious.

Xu Wei showed no surprise, as if accustomed to this situation. Seeing the surprise in Lin Wanrong's eyes but no trace of it on his face, he couldn't help but nod to himself. Lin San was indeed no ordinary man, being able to remain so composed upon his first entry into the palace.

"And the envoys from other countries? Has His Majesty not summoned them yet?" Xu Wei asked softly.

Eunuch Gao cast a glance in all directions, then drew closer to Master Xu, whispering, "The Emperor has left them waiting in the Hall of Literary Brilliance. It serves to take them down a notch. Our Emperor of Great Hua is the true dragon, the destined sovereign by Heaven's decree. These foreign barbarians can't simply expect an audience at their will. Recall when our late Emperor was in power, Great Hua's influence was pervasive. The foreign kings queued from the start of the year to the end, and yet they could not secure an audience with our Emperor. If they're granted an audience now, it's their good fortune. If not, they're simply not blessed enough."

Xu Wei nodded in agreement, the eunuch's words rang true. One mustn't show leniency or concession to these tributary states.

Eunuch Gao continued, "The Emperor recently gave an oral decree. Upon your arrival, both of you are to wait directly in the Hall of Literary Brilliance. The newly appointed Zhuangyuan, Mr. Su Mubai, is already there."

Su Mubai? Lin Wanrong blinked in surprise. This guy ran off as soon as the battle ended yesterday. He assumed he was simply a coward, but it turned out he hurried off to curry favor with the Emperor.

Master Xu thanked Eunuch Gao and proceeded toward the Hall of Literary Brilliance with Lin San. After a few steps, Lin Wanrong, unable to hold back his curiosity, asked, "Master Xu, there's something I don't understand..."

Xu Wei stopped and replied with a smile, "Feel free to ask, Little brother Lin. As long as I'm capable, I'll provide a satisfactory answer."

Lin Wanrong nodded and asked, "Master Xu, the eunuch mentioned earlier that the Emperor worships Taoist priests and practices alchemy. Could this be true?"

"Little brother Lin, do you think this is a lie?" Xu Wei asked, smiling.

"I wouldn't dare to say whether it's true or false," Lin Wanrong shook his head, "But this matter seems too abstract and elusive. Not many people can be certain about it. There have been instances in history where such superstitions have led to chaos."

Xu Wei quickly glanced around and lowered his voice, "Little brother Lin, don't talk recklessly about this, you could lose your head."

"I'm aware, but you're an upright person, candid and close to me, almost like a teacher and friend. It's because of our deep relationship that I'm speaking honestly. If it were anyone else, I wouldn't bother bringing it up," Lin Wanrong said, buttering up Xu Wei with a laugh.

"Little brother Lin, stop flattering me. I might not be able to handle it," Xu Wei laughed, then sighed with a touch of sadness in his expression, "The practice of worshipping Taoist priests and pursuing immortality is generally known to be a deception. But who dares to speak out? The Emperor showed little interest in these practices during his time in the manor. But since ascending the throne, his interest in magic and immortality has surged, and he's been indulging in it for over a decade now. Fortunately, our Emperor is naturally gifted and has not neglected his duties. Although there have been occasional remonstrations from the court, nothing has changed."

'Not neglected his duties?' Lin thought, 'The northern nomads are about to invade, and even Japan and Korea are threatening Great Hua. And you say he hasn't neglected his duties? By that logic, my nine-to-five at the Xiao's makes me a model worker.'

After bypassing several auxiliary halls, they saw a magnificent and grand hall, glittering and resplendent in the distance. Hanging high above the main gate was a signboard with the words "Hall of Literary Brilliance" shimmering brilliantly.

As they approached the "Hall of Literary Brilliance," they could hear a clamor from within. A harsh voice echoed, "Mr. Su, when will the Emperor of Great Hua grant us an audience? My time is precious and cannot be wasted here. If your Emperor refuses to agree to my terms, I shall inform my Great Khan. Once the order is given, my hundred thousand soldiers will march south, trample through the Central Plains. Then, the lands of Great Hua will be ours."

Mr. Su? Lin Wanrong pondered, not knowing what this was about. From the harsh voice, he deduced that the speaker must be the foreign envoy. Despite their imperfect pronunciation of the Great Hua language, they dared to act as diplomats. 'When our ancestors were strategizing diplomatically,' he thought, 'Your ancestors were still in the stone age.'

No matter how fallen Great Hua was, it was still his home. He would not tolerate insults from outsiders. Lin Wanrong despised this foreign envoy.

A voice rang out from the hall, "Please calm down, Mr. Ashile. His Majesty, the Emperor of Great Hua, is busy handling important national affairs and will soon personally receive you all."

Ashile? His parents must have been creative, Lin Wanrong mused, to come up with such a name. The voice that responded must have been Su Mubai, since "Mr. Su" was how Ashile addressed him.

Another voice chimed in, "Yes, Mr. Su, I have journeyed across the ocean from Dongyin to meet the Emperor of Great Hua, and to personally present him with precious pearls from Hokkaido. But since yesterday, I have been kept waiting. Why has the Emperor not granted me an audience? Do I, Tsugumi Takeshita, a descendant of the oldest royal lineage in Dongyin and known worldwide for our Bushido, not merit a meeting?"

Su Mubai quickly replied, "Prince Takeshita, please quell your anger. The Emperor is currently occupied with state affairs and will meet you all later. Please enjoy some tea in the meantime. This is our renowned West Lake Dragon Well tea [Longjin, Xian'er's hometown], it's rather sweet. Please do have a taste."

Prince Takeshita scoffed, "Tea? You people of Great Hua excel at indulgence, topping the world in that regard. But when it comes to martial prowess, you are a nation of weaklings. Our Dongyin warriors can fight ten of you, leaving you scrambling for your teeth!"

These final words infuriated Lin Wanrong. His anger flared, and he was about to barge in when Xu Wei quickly held him back, "Little brother Lin, you can't. This is the Hall of Literary Brilliance."

'Hall of Literary Brilliance or not,' Lin Wanrong thought, 'I won't stand this disrespect from this Japanese.' Grinning, he said, "Mr. Xu, don't worry. We're civilized people dealing with beasts. I have my ways."

Xu Wei knew his temperament well - Lin Wanrong was usually easy-going, but once his obstinacy kicked in, even the Emperor couldn't hold him back. As Lin Wanrong cheerfully entered, Xu Wei sighed in resignation. 'Tsugumi Takeshita, you've brought this on yourself. Your nemesis is here.' With a heavy heart, Xu Wei followed Lin San into the grand hall.

The Hall of Literary Brilliance was resplendently decorated. The beams and pillars were intricately carved with lifelike golden dragons, each brandishing five claws. Golden bricks lined the floor, their dazzling glimmer casting a soft glow around the room. Several sets of rosewood tables and chairs were arranged throughout the hall, emanating an air of antiquity and grandeur.

The hall was bustling with people, grouped into three clusters. In the center sat a strapping man, broad and strong, with a high nose, slightly curled hair, deep-set eyes, and a somber countenance.

He clearly wasn't of the Great Hua race; this must be the foreign emissary Ashile. Two individuals who bore similar features to Ashile flanked him, their collective presence overwhelming as they loudly berated Su Mubai, exuding arrogance.

To the left was a group led by a man with fair skin and a small mustache, his eyes flashing a predatory gleam as he surveyed his surroundings, his face radiating greed. This had to be that man, Tsugumi Takeshita.

On the right was another group, led by a refined young man. A congenial smile graced his face, but his eyes flickered with a calculating cunning. Behind him stood an array of attendants, mostly women. Two women stood at the forefront, one older, dressed in a moss-green traditional Korean hanbok with a grey hem. The younger one, with a pretty face, wore a pink hanbok with a blue hem. Their classic Korean attire was a clear indication that these were the emissaries from Korea. Ashile and Tsugumi Takeshita had already expressed their discontent. The Korean delegation, however, had remained silent, their motives unknown.

Looking at the situation at hand, it seemed that Xu Wei was right; these people had seemingly come prepared to stir up trouble.

Su Mubai, alone, was struggling to manage the multitude of emissaries when he saw Xu Wei and Lin Wanrong enter. He first blinked in surprise, then smiled with relief. Hurrying over, he greeted, "Greetings to Master Xu. I am glad you're here. And Brother Lin, you're here too?"

Xu Wei nodded, "No need for formalities, Top Scholar Su. His Majesty asked me to bring Little brother Lin to the Hall of Literary Brilliance. Little brother Lin, Little brother..." Before he finished speaking, Lin Wanrong was already striding toward the insolent Tsugumi Takeshita.

Seeing a dark-skinned, handsome man approaching him, Tsugumi Takeshita was taken aback for a moment before bellowing, "Who are you, and what do you want?"

With a grin, Lin Wanrong replied, "I am a pig slaughter. Moshi, moshi. Are you the prince I've heard about, Mr. Leather?" Tsugumi Takeshita, unaware that "leather"

was a play on the English word for pig, replied haughtily, "I am the second son of the Emperor of Japan, an invincible samurai of Yamato."

"How brave, indeed!" Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Your Highness, do you have a sister?"

Taken aback, Tsugumi Takeshita demanded, "Where did you get that information?"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Not only do I know you have a sister, but I also know your father is called Old Tsugumi, and your mother is Kawa. You all seem very close."

"Our entire family, you know them?" Tsugumi Takeshita was astonished, "Have you been to Japan? However, my mother's name is not Kawa—"

"Not named Kawa, could it be Takahashi or Ozawa?" Lin Wanrong chuckled. "The East? I've been, I've been. That Edo (Tokyo), Chūkyō (Nagoya), Namba (Osaka), I've studied them all. The last time I was in Hokkaido, I even heard a legend about your bravery, Prince. Oh, what's your name?"

Prince Tsugumi Takeshita frowned, thinking this man was quite arrogant to not even know his name. Such disrespect. He huffed, "I am Tsugumi Takeshita of Dongyin!"

Lin Wanrong nodded and laughed, "So your surname is Tsugumi—"

"I am Tsugumi Takeshita from Dongyin!" Tsugumi Takeshita retorted angrily.

"Yeah, I'm calling you Tsugumi, that's not wrong! Why don't you respond?" Lin Wanrong said with a grin. It wasn't Lin Wanrong's fault for making a mistake. The Emperor of Dongyin was deemed the descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu by the people of Dongyin, who believed the Emperor was divine, not human, and thus was highly revered. Therefore, the Emperor didn't have a surname; instead, the royal family used palace names and given names to address the royal members. For example, this "Tsugumi Takeshita Oji", "Tsugumi" was the palace name "Takeshita" was the given name, and "Oji" (Prince) was the title. Lin Wanrong had made a hilarious blunder, treating Tsugumi as Takeshita's surname. But how could you blame him? Even in his past life, how many people would know about the naming system of the Japanese Emperor?

"I am the second son of the Emperor of Japan. Tsugumi is my palace name. Do you understand?" Tsugumi Takeshita asked, voice full of fury.

"I understand, I understand. Like an old rooster, young rooster. I have lots of those at home," Lin Wanrong laughed, "Ah, all these things you Dongyin people do are so complicated. If they were all like your AV, stripped bare and fighting with gusto, shouting 'Yamete'—'Yamete', that would be exciting! Oh, I've gone off on a tangent. What were we talking about—"

His erratic way of thinking left others struggling to keep up. Tsugumi Takeshita had no idea what he was talking about until he returned to the original topic. "We were talking about my unmatched bravery—"

"Right, we were talking about you," Lin Wanrong interjected mysteriously, "You, in the hearts of the common people of Dongyin, are a hero beyond the three realms, admired and respected by countless people."

"This is natural," Tsugumi Takeshita replied proudly, "I, Tsugumi Takeshita, am the true warrior of Yamato. Who wouldn't respect me? How do they speak of me?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "This was something I heard from your sister. One night, you two were chatting. Your sister, panting, said, 'Oh, brother, you're fantastic, so much better than father!' Do you know what you said?"

Tsugumi Takeshita, not catching on immediately, asked, "What did I say?"

With a mischievous smile, Lin Wanrong mimicked his tone, "Yo, mom says the same thing!"

In the hall, Xu Wei and Su Mubai were among the first to catch the implication. This Lin San was too much. The two men had to hold back their laughter. The palace guards and eunuchs understood as well, with a few unable to restrain themselves, turning their heads to laugh.

Tsugumi Takeshita, understanding limited Mandarin, was slow to catch on. He spent an eternity in deep thought but remained completely lost, while everyone else was already on the verge of dying from laughter. One of his attendants, seeing the dire situation, quickly approached him and whispered in his ear.

Upon hearing the explanation, Takeshita's expression underwent a dramatic shift. His eyes filled with a deadly glare, and his hands instinctively reached for the short sword at his waist. "Baka, you're...dead!" His fingers found nothing. In meeting with the Emperor, he had already relinquished his weapon, and now his attempt to draw his sword came up empty.

"Curse your own mother!" Lin Wanrong had already lost his patience. Verbal taunting was one thing, but nothing compared to the satisfaction of beating someone up physically. In the face of this type of person, he was a man of violence. He roared and landed a heavy punch on Tsugumi Takeshita's face.

His strength was equivalent to the amount of milk he'd consumed - in other words, it was formidable. With one powerful blow, Takeshita staggered backward, blood covering his face. His nose was bleeding, and for a moment, his face was a disgusting mixture of red and white.

Seeing Takeshita's pitiful state, Su Mubai turned pale and quickly cried out, "Brother Lin, no!"

But how could Lin Wanrong listen to him? As his fist landed on Takeshita, he felt as invigorated as one might feel eating ice cream on a sweltering June day. His sudden attack took everyone by surprise. Takeshita had brought only two attendants with him to the palace, and seeing their master being beaten, they rushed forward to counterattack Lin Wanrong.

Seizing the chaos, Lin Wanrong lashed out at them. He was a firm believer in the rule of taking advantage of an opponent's disorder to attack. His fists flew like arrows, pummeling Takeshita's face while his feet kicked at his body. He laughed sinisterly, "Didn't you call me a sick and cowardly man? Didn't you boast of your ability to fight ten men single-handedly? Now, it's just you and me. Why don't you stand up and fight, knock out my teeth? What about your 'Baka'? Baka your damn mother."

Seeing his wild behavior, Su Mubai shouted anxiously, "Help, someone, quickly pull Lin San back, quick, quick——" The palace guards, who had long been incensed by Takeshita's arrogance, found themselves delighted by Lin San's audacious retaliation. Although somewhat rowdy, it was a sweet taste of justice for them. Why would they stop him? They banged their weapons on the ground and shouted in unison, "Stop fighting, hey, stop——" But their calls were slow and ineffectual. No one stepped forward, and the rhythm of their cries was oddly in sync with Lin Wanrong's fists.

Su Mubai turned to Xu Wei and pleaded, "Master Xu, this man is a prince from Dongyin. We must not be disrespectful. The Emperor has entrusted me with the responsibility of hosting these diplomats. With this chaos now, I'm deeply guilty. I implore you to stop Lin San."

Xu Wei glanced at the battered Tsugumi Takeshita, who had already passed out from the beating, and finally, some guards pulled Lin Wanrong back. He shook his head and chuckled bitterly, "Stop him? How? Lin San has already dealt the blows, do you think this Dongyin prince will let it go if I intervene? Since it's come to this, let him be."

"But the Emperor's decree——" Su Mubai said in terror.

Xu Wei interrupted him, "Top Scholar Su, think about it. You were sent to host these ambassadors, that was the Emperor's decree. But isn't Lin San's presence here also under the Emperor's decree?"

Top Scholar Su cast a glance at Lin Wanrong, a hint of elusive sentiment flashing in his eyes, and nodded. "Since both are imperial commands, then we'll have to proceed as such. I will report the truth to His Majesty when the time comes."

Xu Wei took a look at him and said, "Top Scholar Su, you've been guided by renowned teachers since your youth and were personally chosen as the top scholar by the Emperor himself. His imperial grace is indeed magnificent. However, fortune and misfortune are hard to predict by the Emperor's side. The Emperor's majesty is unpredictable as well. As his servants, we only need to maintain loyalty to the Emperor. To harbor any other presumptions is indicative of harboring ulterior motives."

The words were somewhat cryptic, seemingly hinting at something. A glint of sharpness flashed in Top Scholar Su's eyes, and he bowed deeply, "I appreciate the sage advice from Grand Scholar Xu."

The two attendants of Tsugumi Takeshita frantically tried to resuscitate their master. After what seemed like a long while, Takeshita finally let out a weak groan. Xu Wei feigned astonishment, rushing forward and ordered, "What happened here? Hurry, bring the medicinal salve for Prince Takeshita."

The Korean envoy looked at Lin Wanrong, his eyes flashing with surprise. A brawl in the hall with the emissary, when had the Great Hua birthed such a ruffian, yet so valiant and fierce? The two women behind him also looked at Lin Wanrong with astonishment, their eyes flashing with curiosity as they whispered to each other.

The northern nomads' envoy, Ashile, was gaping at the scene, which was entirely different from the ceremonious nation of Great Hua he knew. Could it be that Great Hua had changed its style? He feared that if things continued this way, the absorption of his people by Great Hua would be imminent.

'Damn it, I even broke a finger, that was tiring,' Lin Wanrong thought. "Next time I bash someone, I should bring more minions." He made a cracking sound with his wrists and slowly walked over to the northern nomads' envoy. He flexed his fists and sighed, "This kid is too weak and can't take a beating, I didn't get enough of a fight today. Envoy, I see you're quite sturdy, I guess you could take a few hits from me. Ah, I guess I'll have to make do. These days, it's really hard to find someone who can withstand a few punches and kicks from me!"

"You, what are you going to do?" the northern nomads' envoy, Ashile, asked in horror, "During a war between two armies, the envoys are not to be killed. This is something you, the people of Great Hua, have said."

"Engage in war?" 'Damn it, I'm not a part of that love tribe, I'm not interested,' Lin Wanrong burst into laughter, patting Ashile on the shoulder, "Don't worry, brother A, I'm just joking with you. You're much more decent than him, how could I hit you? If I had to, I'd wait until after you've had your moment of arrogance!"

The crowd fell silent upon hearing Lin Wanrong's words. It was one thing to manhandle this small prince from Dongyin, but the nomadic people were not the same as the Dongyin people. They were a strong military force, and after years of conflict with Great Hua, their victories outnumbered their losses. Each year required territorial concessions and compensation. By treating the nomadic envoy in such a manner, didn't he fear triggering an extreme reaction? However, looking at it from another perspective, a man as fearsome as Lin San had not been seen in Great Hua for many years, and the sight left the crowd both anxious and thrilled.

Those who could enter the Hall of Literary Brilliance were not nameless individuals. Ashile noted Lin Wanrong's plain attire and decisive actions, his demeanor one of veiled amusement. It was difficult to gauge his true status. Ashile's mind raced, and he quickly reined in his arrogance. Looking at Lin Wanrong, he said, "Sir, please understand, the incident with Tsugumi Takeshita had nothing to do with me. My purpose here is to discuss bilateral issues in a friendly manner with your nation. The earlier incident was a mere misunderstanding."

Indeed, it took a villain to handle a villain. Seeing the northern nomads' envoy surrender, Xu Wei had an epiphany. The Emperor's summoning of Lin San into the palace, placing him in the Hall of Literary Brilliance instead of seeing him directly—could this be intentional? It must be so. The more Xu Wei thought about it, the more enlightened he felt. It truly was a brilliant move!

As soon as Lin Wanrong appeared, he created chaos in the hall, yet he also achieved an unexpected effect. The three envoys in the hall—the beaten, the frightened, the silent—all fell quiet. It was a moment of extreme tranquility.

"His—Majesty—has—arrived," a shrill cry jolted everyone present back to reality.

Chapter 323 Diplomatic Etiquette

"The Emperor is here?" Lin Wanrong was taken aback. The old man could have chosen any time to arrive, but he had to come at this particular moment. There must be something more to it.

"Long live the Emperor!" Everyone in the great hall fell to their knees. The emissary from Goryeo got up and bowed deeply, refraining from kneeling in greeting. The nomad people's emissary, Ashile, arrogantly tilted his nose skyward, grunting in response. Tsugumi Takeshita remained lying on the ground, unable to greet the Emperor.

The man who entered appeared to be in his fifties, of average build, his face reddish yet subtly tinged with an underlying pallor unnoticed by most. A faint smile lingered on his lips, while his eyes flashed with sharp radiance. Dressed in a robe adorned with a clustered dragon pattern, his slow yet dignified steps exuded authority. His gaze was intimidating, and no one dared to meet it. His imposing aura pressed down on the crowd without him uttering a word.

Though several months had passed, Lin Wanrong recognized him instantly. The man before him was indeed the Emperor of Great Hua, the one who had given him the golden badge outside Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou. It was indeed him, no wonder he purposely didn't summon him during the military review. He was an old acquaintance after all. Lin Wanrong was relieved. Now that this old acquaintance had become his father-in-law, he should not oppose his affair with Qingxuan, right?

"Rise!" The Emperor commanded, taking his seat on the dragon throne and lifting his hands in an imposing manner.

"Thank you, your Majesty!" Everyone rose, lining up on either side. The Emperor's gaze swept across the three large chairs in the hall, then he smiled and said, "Oh, are these the emissaries from various countries?"

Ashile arrogantly grunted in response. A cold gleam flashed in the Emperor's eyes, but he quickly returned to his normal expression. Pointing at Ashile, he asked, "This man, whose appearance greatly differs from our Great Hua, from which country's embassy does he come?"

Su Mubai, quick-witted as he was, sensed the tension and quickly stepped forward, "Your Majesty, this is the emissary from the Turkic Khanate, Lord Ashile."

'Turkic Khanate?' Lin Wanrong was startled. 'Didn't they first submit to the Tang Empire and then got wiped out by the Khitans? How do they still exist now?'

Xu Wei, standing next to him, noticed his confusion and couldn't help but explain, "I presume Little brother Lin, you're not familiar with the Turkic Khanate? The Turks were originally a branch of the Tiele people. It is said that their ancestor intermingled with a she-wolf, and bore ten sons. When

these sons grew up, they each married and started their own families, thus establishing various surnames. The Turks later became subordinate to the Rouran Khaganate, and were forced to settle at the southern foot of Mount Jin (today's Altai Mountains). Eventually, the Turks exterminated Rouran, and moved east, defeating the Khitan and Xi, consolidating power to the north, and becoming increasingly powerful. Their territory stretched vast and wide, from Liao River in the east to the Caspian Sea in the west, reaching as far south as the Amu River and north to Lake Baikal. Their Khanate was located on the mountain of Dujin (today's northern mountains of the E'rhun River)."

"What's this mother river? What lake? What Mount Jin?" Lin Wanrong's head spun trying to comprehend Xu Wei's explanation.

Xu Wei said, "These place names come from the travel notes of monks from the previous dynasty, and I'm not quite clear about the specifics, but they're likely located in the northern desert. These northern nomads grew from subjugated tribes, possessing robust bodies and unmatched ferocity. They have waged war against our Great Hua for many years, winning more often than not, and have occupied a large portion of our northern land, which we have yet to reclaim."

Of course, Lin Wanrong knew what the Turks were up to. Their influence extended throughout Central Asia, Xinjiang, and even as far as Turkey. During the Sui Dynasty, they had already split into Eastern Turks and Western Turks. Historically, the Turks had frequently submitted to the Tang Dynasty and had just as often revolted. They had been conquered by the Tang Dynasty and were eventually extinguished by the Khitan

Naturally, all this was history from his previous life, but in this world, the Turks had stubbornly survived and were still a threat to Great Hua even today.

"The Turkic Bilge Khagan sends his regards to the Emperor of Great Hua," Ashile said, nodding with a brusque tone, without a trace of respect. His disdain was plain to see.

The Emperor's expression remained unchanged. He gave a slight nod in response and then turned towards an empty chair. His brow furrowed as he asked, "Where is Prince Tsugumi Takeshita of Dongying?"

Before Su Mubai could answer, Tsugumi Takeshita stirred slightly, still somewhat dazed. His two guards loudly proclaimed, "Our prince has been grievously injured by your Great Hua minister. We will certainly report this to our emperor and send troops to attack Great Hua—"

"How dare you!" Xu Wei, in the palace, roared, "This is the court of our Great Hua, no place for you barbarians to run wild!" He clenched his fists and bowed, saying, "Your Majesty, I request these two men be punished severely, as a warning to others."

"No!" Su Mubai stepped forward urgently, "Your Majesty, Lord Xu, today the Prince of Dongying came to pay his respects to our Emperor of Great Hua, and he has done nothing wrong. We, Great Hua, are a heavenly nation, a land of rites, how can we punish an envoy? The severe injury of Prince Tsugumi Takeshita is the result of Lin San's impulsive action. To strike an envoy from another country in the sacred and solemn Hall of Literary Brilliance, this matter is not trivial, it not only harms our Great Hua's reputation but also undermines our national dignity. I hope Your Majesty will investigate this matter."

The Emperor's gaze was as sharp as lightning. With one glance at the two guards, how could they withstand his stare? Their legs trembled, and they fell to their knees.

Seeing Su Mubai pointing his accusation at Lin San, Xu Wei then said, "Your Majesty, there is more to the story. Prince Tsugumi Takeshita insulted our Great Hua first, which is why Lin San was provoked to act."

"Where is Lin San?" the Emperor grumbled.

"I am here, I am here," Lin Wanrong replied cheerfully as he stepped forward, raising his fist in greeting. "How have you been, Your Majesty? It has been quite some time since we last met." Xu Wei was startled, his body breaking into a cold sweat. This young man, did he not care for his life, speaking to the Emperor in such a way?

The Emperor responded with a faint smile, "Indeed, it has been quite a while. Now, tell me why you had a conflict with Prince Tsugumi Takeshita?"

Lin Wanrong was startled and said, "Conflict? Where does this accusation come from? It was Prince Tsugumi Takeshita of Dongying who declared that all my countrymen are weak and cowardly. I merely intended to disprove his false words by letting him have a taste of our might. How could this be classified as a conflict? Master Su, wouldn't you agree with me?"

Su Mubai hesitated before responding, "Even if Prince Tsugumi Takeshita spoke disrespectfully, you shouldn't have resorted to violence. He is a diplomatic envoy from another country. While the physical harm you inflicted is a minor issue, you have damaged the reputation of our Great Hua, triggering a diplomatic dispute. If other countries send their envoys in the future, who would dare to interact with us?"

"No, no," Lin Wanrong shook his head, "How can this be a diplomatic dispute? Master Su, one can eat casually, but words should never be spoken recklessly."

Su Mubai retorted, "What reckless words have I uttered? I beseech His Majesty's discernment!"

With a smile, Lin Wanrong asked, "Earlier, Master Su said that Prince Tsugumi Takeshita is a diplomatic envoy, and this issue is a diplomatic dispute. Is this correct?"

"That is indeed so!" Su Mubai affirmed in a grave tone.

Breaking into hearty laughter, Lin Wanrong responded, "You are wrong, utterly wrong. May I ask, Top Scholar Su, is Dongying not a tributary state of our Great Hua?"

Su Mubai paused to ponder before Xu Wei interjected, "Indeed, there is truth in that. At the founding of our dynasty, Dongying sent an envoy, presenting a national letter to acknowledge their status as a tributary to our Great Hua. The report is still well-preserved for reference. Lin San's words are not unfounded."

The corner of the Emperor's mouth curled into a subtle smile. This young man always managed to surprise him.

Lin Wanrong gave a thumbs-up to Xu Wei, "Master Su, as expected, you are knowledgeable and have a remarkable memory. I am indeed impressed. With this clarified, there should be no further doubts. Since Dongying is a tributary state of Great Hua, it is subject to us. Although I, Lin San, am but an average man, I am also a citizen of Great Hua. So, Master Su, how does a quarrel between two citizens amount to a diplomatic dispute? Are you planning to sever Dongying's relationship with us? This is simply not feasible. Even if you are willing, Dongying could never agree. They did, after all, submit their report."

His explanation was a far stretch, but Su Mubai, being an intelligent man, realized Lin San's words were a carefully crafted trap. To agree or disagree with him would put Su Mubai in a difficult position.

"Alas, if there is something I did wrong," Lin Wanrong sighed regretfully, "it was fighting in the Hall of Literary Brilliance. This indeed tarnishes our national dignity, and I am to blame. However, this prince from Dongying insulted millions of our citizens first, and I was impulsively provoked to

hit him. All things considered, his transgression was even graver. Both of us are at fault. Your Majesty, I hereby submit my resignation."

Holding back his laughter, the Emperor asked in surprise, "You're resigning? Resigning from what?"

Lin Wanrong loudly declared, "I, a mere citizen, fought with another citizen in the Golden Palace. Both of us made mistakes. Overwhelmed with guilt, I request His Majesty to dismiss us both from our official positions. Oh, I don't want the garden at the Grand Prime Minister's Temple anymore, and I refuse to accept any merit for fighting in the war. However, the Emperor of Dongying is also at fault. I kindly ask His Majesty to dismiss him as well."

Upon hearing these words, the room was filled with astonishment. Even though Dongying was technically a tributary state, it was merely a formality. Who had ever seriously regarded it as part of Great Hua's domain? Lin San's audacity was truly astonishing!

The Emperor huffed and said, "Both of you are indeed guilty. Let me consider how to handle this matter."

"Your Majesty is wise!" Lin Wanrong grinned cheekily.

Xu Wei wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. Lin San's words were as potent as an army of a hundred thousand.

Frantically, Su Mubai stated, "Your Majesty, we must not rush this matter. There are no trivial matters in diplomacy. If we punish Prince Tsugumi Takeshita and disregard etiquette, what country would dare interact with our Great Hua in the future?"

The Emperor pondered for a while before turning to Lin Wanrong, "Lin San, what are your thoughts on this?"

'Etiquette, my foot! When did the Americans ever bother about etiquette? Yet, people flock to them! This is just self-deception!' Lin Wanrong shook his head, "I disagree with Master Su's view. What is diplomacy? In his eyes, is diplomacy synonymous with etiquette? That's a gross misconception. Weak nations have no say in diplomacy. Diplomacy relies on power. Why did Prince Tsugumi Takeshita dare to act so arrogantly on our land? Because he believes our Great Hua is weak, and he can bully us at will. If we endure his insults silently, is that still etiquette? Think about it, if

Dongying's power were to surpass Great Hua one day, what would that look like? Would they, like us, continue to uphold diplomatic etiquette?"

His words caused everyone to fall into deep thought. Great Hua had always prided itself as a country of etiquette, treating all countries, big or small, with respect. But what had they received in return?

Chapter 324 The IOU

A tiger-like glint flashed in the Emperor's eyes as he glanced at Su Mubai and then Lin San, a faint smile lingering on his lips, his thoughts unfathomable.

Su Mubai, who studied the books of saints and sages, had nothing but contempt for Lin Wanrong's peculiar theories. "Our Great Hua is a country of courtesy and rites, how could we possibly adopt the profit-seeking ways of foreigners?" He was about to retort again when the Emperor waved his hand, "Enough of your debates. Let's put this matter to rest. Minister Xu, you draft an imperial edict to be sent to the King of Dongying, instructing him to strictly manage his subjects and princes. Should they dare to insult my Great Hua subjects again, I will hold him accountable."

"Your humble servant obeys your command," Xu Wei quickly bowed and responded.

"Lin San, your disregard for order in this Golden Hall, assaulting others, is a grievous offense. However, considering this is your first time attending the court and you're unfamiliar with the rules, I will forgive you once. I will take back your reward, the imperial garden will be returned to the court, and your merits in Shandong will be erased. Are you satisfied?" the Emperor said with a stern face.

"Satisfied, satisfied," Lin Wanrong chuckled. He thought, this old Emperor, although mediocre in ruling, wasn't a fool. How could he indulge in elixir affairs and let the Great Hua descend into chaos?

The Emperor's verdict seemed fair on the surface, but in reality, Lin San had suffered no loss, despite Prince Tsugumi Takeshita being beaten. This time, the Emperor had clearly favored Lin San. Su Mubai's face flickered, feeling increasingly gloomy as the Emperor's gaze lingered more and more on Lin San.

After settling the matter of Prince Tsugumi Takeshita, the Emperor was evidently in high spirits. He looked at the Goryeo envoy and asked, "So, you are Yi Seung-Jae, the eldest son of the King of Goryeo?"

The Goryeo prince nodded and bowed, "Indeed, I am Yi Seung-Jae. I am here on my father's orders to visit the Emperor of Great Hua and to personally present ten pieces of thousand-year-old ginseng. I wish the Emperor of Great Hua eternal youth and a long, boundless life."

Despite his humble demeanor, Yi Seung-Jae's words were all filled with wit. Goryeo had always been a tributary state to Great Hua, and when a subject pays respect to the Emperor, they should kneel. But not only did Yi Seung-Jae not kneel, he also equated his meeting with the Emperor to a visit, placing both parties on equal grounds. His gifts were also pitifully scarce, revealing his intentions without a word spoken.

Lin Wanrong, who was standing on the side, heard everything clearly. 'Thousand-year-old Goryeo ginseng? Does your Goryeo even have a thousand years of history? You're a better con artist than me.' He could understand the Goryeo people's unwillingness to remain subservient. But they sought protection from Great Hua when they were in trouble, and yet stabbed Great Hua in the back when it was in difficulty. They had betrayed Great Hua's trust more than once or twice. He had no fondness for them.

The Emperor glanced at Yi Seung-Jae and said indifferently, "The King of Goryeo is thoughtful. But I am in good health, without any sickness or ailment, waiting for him to come and pay his respects in person. You go back and tell your father that when he personally comes to Great Hua to visit the Son of Heaven, I will reward him with a hundred eastern pearls and a thousand bolts of silk, guaranteeing his lifetime peace."

The underlying message in these words was clear to everyone present. Goryeo was geographically close to Great Hua, without natural defenses to rely on. Throughout the dynasties, attempts to conquer Goryeo had seldom ended in failure. The people of Goryeo knew this too. Therefore, among the envoys from the three countries, his mentality was the most difficult to fathom.

Yi Seung-Jae bowed and said, "I will certainly convey Your Majesty's will to my father. In addition to paying my respects to the Emperor of Great Hua, I have two requests to ask of you, and I hope Your Majesty will grant them."

Lin Wanrong's mind stirred. He had heard from Xu Wei that the princes of Dongying and Goryeo, and the Khan of the Turkic people, were all seeking the Princess's hand in marriage. At this point, it seemed that the prince of Dongying, Tsugumi Takeshita, had already been eliminated. Could it be that Yi Seung-Jae from Goryeo was seizing this opportunity to act first?

While he was deep in thought, the Emperor had already responded, "Oh? What are these two matters? Please tell."

Yi Seung-Jae respectfully acknowledged, then turned to the attractive woman behind him, clad in pink palace clothes, "Palace Lady Seo, for the first matter, I would like you to present it to His Majesty personally."

"Yes!" Palace Lady Seo, with her hands hanging down, respectfully assented. Her command of the Great Hua language was very fluent. She approached the throne, speaking softly, "Your Majesty, Emperor of Great Hua, I wish to request some medical, agricultural, and metallurgy books from the palace. Goryeo is located in a remote area where the people suffer. I wish to borrow these books to study them thoroughly and hope that Your Majesty will grant this request."

Realizing the nature of the request, everyone felt a sense of relief. Even Xu Wei shook his head; this was such a minor issue, hardly worth personally asking the Emperor.

Others didn't understand the subtleties involved in this matter, only Lin Wanrong, who was looking at the pretty palace girl, was slightly frowning. This wasn't to be taken lightly. Giving all these valuable resources to Goryeo might bring huge trouble to the future generations if not handled carefully.

The Emperor smiled, "Oh, what do you want these for?"

Palace Lady Seo gave a slight smile, revealing a set of neat, white teeth, "To inform your Majesty, I deeply admire the achievements of Great Hua in medicine and agriculture. I wish to study these books and contribute towards the eradication of diseases in Goryeo, aid in their food and clothing, and make a contribution to the prosperity of Goryeo."

The girl's modest elegance, refreshing charm, confident speech, and attractive appearance all endeared her to the crowd. The Emperor too found her agreeable, and he smiled, "Great Hua's knowledge is vast and profound. Which books do you need?"

Palace Lady Seo was prepared, and began listing, "The Four Books and Five Classics, Wind-Cold Discourse, Treatise on Cold Damage Disorders, Collected Records of Acupuncture and Moxibustion, The Medical Skills of Guiguzi, Commentary on the Water Classic, Exploitation of the Works of Nature..."

She spoke effortlessly, with no signs of difficulty, as if she had a thorough understanding of Great Hua's civilization. She listed more than a hundred subjects. At first, they were general and understandable, but later, they included many obscure books that Lin Wanrong hadn't heard of. However, seeing the astonished look on Xu Wei's face, he knew the books Palace Lady Seo mentioned must be incredibly obscure.

When Palace Lady Seo finished, Xu Wei asked, "Miss, where did you learn about these titles? As far as I know, many of them are unique copies held within the palace, encompassing medicine, agriculture, architecture, and metallurgy, and they are all the essence of Great Hua's thousands of years of accumulation. Seeing you speak so fluently, I know you must have done some research."

Palace Lady Seo replied respectfully, "I learned about these from various books. The predecessors held them in high esteem, and I just wrote them down one by one, hoping that one day I could come to Great Hua and have a look. Today, I have finally realized this wish."

Xu Wei sighed, "Your diligence in learning is truly commendable, Miss. I must confess that among the multitude of scholars in my great Hua, there are few who can readily discuss various disciplines as you do, let alone delve deeply into them."

A hint of shyness crossed the palace lady's face, making her all the more adorable. The Emperor, pleased, stated, "To have the knowledge of my Great Hua shared with Goryeo is indeed a great deed. Books on medicine, agriculture, and metallurgy are all crucial for the welfare of the country and the people, and can also promote interaction between Goryeo and my Great Hua. Given Palace Lady Seo's dedication, I hereby approve—"

"Your Majesty!" Lin Wanrong, who had been silent for a long while, suddenly shouted.

Everyone in the hall was immersed in their admiration of this Palace Lady Seo. Lin Wanrong's outcry, much like a thunderclap in a clear sky, shook everyone.

The Emperor's brow furrowed slightly, he queried softly, "Lin San, what is it that you wish to report?"

'To report? To report my foot! I am nearly driven to my death by your generosity. These treasures of our Great Hua civilization, passed down for thousands of years, you are so readily giving away just because you find a girl pretty. Do you know how much trouble your "hospitality" could bring to future generations?'

The crowd glared at Lin Wanrong unfavorably. While they had supported him when he beat up the Prince of Dongying, they couldn't comprehend why he opposed this beneficial exchange of culture between Great Hua and Goryeo. Even Xu Wei, the most knowledgeable man in the world, looked at Lin Wanrong, utterly puzzled.

Lin Wanrong was alone in his stance, but he knew if he did not act, no one else would. Under everyone's burning gazes, he braced himself, "Your Majesty, this young lady is both knowledgeable and adorable, deserving of our admiration, however—"

"However what?" Palace Lady Seo gave him a curious look, her lips slightly parted, and her beautiful eyes wide open.

Lin Wanrong sighed, "However, it is truly extraordinary that you want to take so many valuable aspects of our Great Hua culture all at once. Even if you were well-prepared, it would be impossible to thoroughly study all of these within a short lifespan."

Palace Lady Seo nodded and smiled, "Of course, I alone couldn't possibly study all of this, but we have future generations. They will continue our mission. Sir, what is it that you worry about?"

'My worry is precisely your future generations,' Lin Wanrong thought, then pled, "Your Majesty, I have a request. If the essence of our Great Hua civilization is given to them for the public good, that's fine. But I hope this young lady and Prince Yi Seung-Jae could sign a document clearly stating that on a certain date, they borrowed certain books from Great Hua for certain uses. Any disciplines derived from this in the future must credit their origins. For instance, Goryeo medicine originated from Great Hua medicine, not a Goryeo creation. Also, please indicate that traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival, Lantern Festival, Tomb Sweeping Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Double Seventh Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Double-Ninth Festival and the twenty-four solar terms all originated from Great Hua. These traditions are adopted by other countries and cannot be claimed as cultural heritage. Please mark the borders of Great Hua and Goryeo in proportion, and both of you sign your names as witnesses. Don't stare at me, that's all I can think of for now."

As soon as his words fell, a light laughter broke out among all present, from the Emperor to the guards. Even Xu Wei couldn't help but shake his head. Lin San's remarks were ludicrous, the epitome of needless worry. Sharing their culture with Goryeo was hardly akin to having it stolen.

The room was filled with laughter, but Lin Wanrong's heart was filled with a chill. Being the only sober one in a room full of drunken people was indeed an uncomfortable feeling. He broke into a forced grin, which appeared more bitter than a cry.

The palace lady looked at Lin Wanrong with surprise, and gave him a gentle smile.

"Mr. Xu, I must ask a favor of you. Please plead on my behalf to the Emperor," Lin Wanrong beseeched Xu Wei, sighing, "I am not against spreading civilization to all corners of the world. I only hope that as they enjoy the fruits of civilization, they do not forget who dug the wells for them. We must sign this document; otherwise, we'll be mocked by future generations."

Lin San looked more solemn than ever before. Given his nature, asking for help was akin to a wild tale. Xu Wei did not know the circumstances, but judging from Lin San's demeanor, he had a gut feeling that Lin San was right. He nodded and said, "Lin San, you can rest assured. I support you. It's just a matter of signing a document, it won't be much trouble."

Xu Wei respectfully said to the Emperor, "Your Majesty, Lin San's concerns are not unfounded. It's akin to signing a document when borrowing something. This time, Goryeo wants to take away the essence of our great Chinese civilization, which is the crystallization of our ancestors' hard work. It's not excessive to ask them to attest to its origin."

Lin San's words alone would have been a laughing stock, but Xu Wei's support made a world of difference. The Emperor contemplated for a moment and said, "Prince Yi, we will grant you what you wish to borrow. However, you must sign the document as Lin San just mentioned. Are you willing?"

Prince Yi consulted with the Palace Lady Seo, who didn't raise any objections, and nodded in agreement. Thus, a unique agreement to borrow civilization was born.

Lin Wanrong heaved a sigh of relief. 'I've done all I could. If future generations still claim that the Dragon Boat Festival originated from them, I would be truly helpless.'

The Palace Lady Seo quietly walked over and said, "Sir, what are you worried about? Could you tell me?"

Upon close inspection, she had rosy lips, pearly teeth, and skin as clear and translucent as a washed egg white. Her eyes were bright and lively, and her demeanor was quietly elegant. It was impossible to be angry at her.

'At this time, Korea should not yet have popularized artificial beauties, right?' This should be a natural beauty, her skin was excellent. Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "I'm worried that you'll be robbed on the road with all these treasures, and forced to be the wife of a bandit leader. That would be terrible."

A flush crossed the Palace Lady Seo's face, as if a layer of blush was applied. She replied softly, "Sir, you jest. I always believe that culture does not recognize national boundaries. It belongs to all of us, and if one's selfishness impedes the spread of civilization, that would be inappropriate."

"You're right. I didn't prevent its spread, but merely made the path of civilization's dissemination clearer. Does the Palace Lady Seo think that asking you to sign the document was improper in any way?"

"No, no, thank you for your care." Palace Lady Seo quickly shook her head, her face flushing with embarrassment.

"---Geum, Come over here," said the older woman sitting next to Yi Seung-Jae. She called so quickly, Lin Wanrong wasn't paying much attention, and he didn't catch the name of the Palace Lady Seo. He only heard one word: "Geum."

"Senior Palace Lady Han is calling for me. Please excuse me," Palace Lady Seo hastily bowed to Lin Wanrong.

While they were speaking, Yi Seung-Jae was already making his second request to the Emperor, "Your Majesty, it is said that your youngest princess is of divine beauty and virtuous character. Although I have not yet had the honor of meeting her, I long for her day and night. I humbly ask that you grant her hand in marriage to Goryeo, forming an everlasting alliance between our two nations. Goryeo is willing to offer a thousand ginseng and ten thousand bolts of brocade as a betrothal gift to welcome the princess's arrival."

Lin Wanrong was so angry his nostrils flared. Did Yi Seung-Jae think he could trade his wife for a few roots of ginseng? He could dream on!

The envoy from the Turkic people, Ashile, who had been neglected for a long time, cried out, "Great Emperor of Great Hua, my Khan is willing to trade a thousand fine horses and a year-long ceasefire for the hand of your youngest princess."

The Emperor snorted, "The princesses of Great Hua are precious gems, not so easily married off. Even if you had a thousand war horses, even if you had ten thousand, or a hundred thousand, what is it to me, the Emperor of Great Hua? As for war and peace, when has Great Hua ever been afraid?"

As a Turkic envoy, Ashile was no fool. Seeing the Emperor's anger and remembering the recent example of the Dongyin envoy, Tsugumi Takeshita, who lost his opportunity due to his insults to Great Hua, Ashile feared he would also meet an unjust death. He toned down his arrogance and asked, "So, Your Majesty, what conditions must be met for a princess of your esteemed nation to be wed?"

"The conditions? Those will be determined by the princess herself," the Emperor replied. "Upon receiving marriage proposals from various nations, I informed the princess."

Ashile and Yi Seung-Jae simultaneously perked up, "What did the princess say?"

The Emperor glanced at the two men, then, seemingly with deliberate nonchalance, at Lin Wanrong, before smiling, "Apart from Tsugumi Takeshita of Japan, who lost his opportunity by insulting Great Hua, the rest of you have equal chances. If any of you can pass my princess's examination, I will grant her hand in marriage."

Yi Seung-Jae had come to Great Hua primarily to win the hand of a Great Hua princess. Upon hearing this, he eagerly asked, "What kind of examination? Your Majesty, please enlighten us."

The Emperor nodded at a eunuch nearby, who announced in a high-pitched voice, "Tomorrow morning, our Princess Nishang of Great Hua will hold a public groom selection outside the North Gate. Whoever passes her examination will become the prince consort."

Ashile and Yi Seung-Jae both showed joy on their faces. A public groom selection meant that they still had a chance. They had many wise counselors at their disposal; passing the examination should not be an issue.

Upon hearing the name Princess Nishang, Xu Wei frowned, seemingly puzzled. Lin Wanrong, however, was too concerned about the news. Princess Nishang - that had to be Qingxuan. He was anxious. What was Qingxuan playing at? She had her legitimate husband right here, yet she wanted to hold a public groom selection. Was she intentionally making things difficult for him?

"Lin San, Lin San," noticing Lin Wanrong's worried look, Xu Wei hurriedly pulled him aside and whispered, "Little brother Lin, Little brother Lin, the Emperor is calling for you!"

Lin Wanrong lifted his head to see the Emperor looking at him with a hint of a smile. "Lin San," the Emperor addressed him, "Did you hear clearly what I just said?" Both Ashile and Yi Seung-Jae curiously inspected him. The Palace Lady Seo, offered him a small smile, but only Su Mubai looked uncertain, a grimace pulling at his features.

"Oh, Your Majesty, were you calling me? I'm standing a bit far away and couldn't hear clearly," Lin Wanrong responded.

The Emperor chuckled heartily. "You, you're very good. You can say something like that, but it's quite honest. You must keep it up. I have asked you to accompany these two envoys on a tour around the capital. Did you take note of that?"

'Eh? Wasn't it Su Mubai's task to accompany the envoys? Why was it handed over to me? No wonder that Su guy is looking at me like I stole his wife.' Seeing his clueless reaction, Xu Wei, standing next to him, anxiously pulled at his sleeve. "Little brother Lin, what are you hesitating for? Express your gratitude, hurry!"

Lin Wanrong nodded. "Thank you, Your Majesty. However, I'm a bit confused about one thing. Regarding today's excursion with these two envoys, who should I seek reimbursement from for the public expenses?"

At his words, everyone was left speechless. The Emperor suppressed a laugh and said, "The man next to you is Minister Xu from the Ministry of Revenue. Let him and the Ministry of Rites handle the expenses. Remember, treat these two envoys well and don't disgrace our Great Hua nation. You currently hold no official position and may face difficulties in carrying out your duties. Hence, I am giving you this gold medallion that I always carry with me. If you lose it again, I will not spare you."

As he was speaking, the eunuch Gao was already bringing the gold medallion on a tray. Lin Wanrong took it and saw that it was the same one Ning Yuxi had stolen that night. After a roundabout journey, it was back in his hands. He wondered what sort of agreement existed between Ning Yuxi and the Emperor. How did Ning Yuxi end up returning the gold medallion?

After the court session, Ashile and Yi Seung-Jae, each leading a large group of attendants, approached Lin Wanrong, asking, "Mr. Lin, where will you take us for sightseeing today?"

Lin Wanrong frowned, 'I still have a backache, what sightseeing? If only there were footbath cities and sauna baths in this era. I'd take these two around for a spin, and I guarantee they would be worn out.'

He quickly whispered something into Xu Wei's ear. Xu Wei laughed, "Little brother Lin, I've lived half my life, but when it comes to scheming, I'm really not your match."

Lin Wanrong cheerfully clasped his hands in a salute, "Minister Xu, are you complimenting me or yourself? Please, go and greet Brother Hu quickly, I believe the two envoys will be there shortly."

Laughing, Xu Wei hurried off. As Yi Seung-Jae and Ashile rushed to Lin Wanrong's side, they saw him standing there with a mysterious smile. They both paused before asking, "Mr. Lin, where are you planning to take us?"

Seeing Palace Lady Seo and her entourage following Yi Seung-Jae, Lin Wanrong put on a mysterious smile and said, "Well, where we're going is certainly a good place. However, it might be a bit inconvenient if we take a lady along, Prince Yi, what do you think..."

With Princess Nishang's upcoming marriage selection, even if Yi Seung-Jae were given ten times the courage, he would not dare to let his thoughts wander along Lin San's suggestion. Who knew if Mr. Lin was a spy sent by the princess to investigate everyone's habits? He quickly waved his hands, "Sir, that won't work. My father has disciplined me strictly, absolutely forbidding any involvement in places of amusement. I'm afraid I will disappoint you."

'Still playing innocent in front of me, I wonder where you were last night, up to who knows what.' Lin Wanrong said with a 'deep regret', "If that's the case, then we better not go. Ah, I haven't been to the Eight Alleys (Great Eight Alleys/Hutongs) in a long time. I have eighteen sweethearts there, I'm not lying, really, eighteen..."

Ashile laughed heartily at this. Yi Seung-Jae couldn't help but chuckle, and the Palace Lady Seo turned red in the face from embarrassment.