

Finest 331

Chapter 331 The Rescue

Lin Wanrong's stay in the imperial prison was unexpectedly comfortable, replete with delicious food and devoted attendants. Such luxury seemed an unusual paradox in a prison setting. As time drew late, he prepared to lay down his head to sleep, but a sudden realization shot through his mind, covering him in a cold sweat.

Tomorrow at dawn marked the public selection of a suitor by Princess Nishang. If Qingxuan was indeed the princess, then his situation was dire indeed. The Turkish envoy and the young prince of Goryeo were both avid suitors, fiercely vying to marry Princess Nishang. Yet here he was, confined to the imperial prison and unable to intervene. If anything were to happen to Qingxuan, he would regret it for the rest of his life.

The more he thought about it, the more alarmed he became. His mind was akin to being clawed by countless cats, unbearable in its torment. He paced restlessly within the confines of his cell, yet he could not come up with any solution.

Would he really have to compromise with the old Emperor and reveal Sister An's whereabouts? Even if he were to give in, how would he know where An Biru was? Damn it, the situation had grown immensely complicated. He had always known that dealing with the Emperor would never be straightforward.

Like an ant on a hot pan, he paced back and forth within his cell. As time passed, every ticking second felt like a piercing stab, yet he could not think of a single solution. By this time, the moon hung high in the sky, all was silent, and the prison was desolate. Save for the faint snoring of the two guards slumped over their table, no sound was heard.

Just as Lin Wanrong was wallowing in anxiety, he heard a faint sound. Looking up, he saw a slender figure in black, a veil masking her face, stealthily approaching his cell.

The eyes that peeked out from behind the veil were bright and captivating, as if covered by a thin layer of dew. Upon spotting Lin Wanrong, her eyes sparkled with delight. She hurriedly raised a slender finger to her lips, gesturing for him to remain silent.

Lin Wanrong's heart pounded in his chest. Who was she? How did she manage to get into the prison? Was she here to rescue him?

The slender figure in black glanced around cautiously, then with a nimble leap, she reached the two sleeping guards. With a light press of her hands, the two guards collapsed, not even managing to let out a grunt.

"Who are you?" Lin Wanrong hurriedly whispered.

The figure shook her head and removed the keys from the unconscious guard. She leaped over to his cell door, and with a quick turn of the key, the lock fell open. Just as Lin Wanrong was about to speak, she pulled down her veil, revealing a beautiful and radiant face.

"Sister An?!!" Lin Wanrong gasped, surprised by the appearance of the one he had just been thinking about. "You, how did you get into the prison?!!"

An Biru's eyes glistened as she looked at him with indescribable tranquility. A gentle smile spread across her face as she replied, "If you can be here, why can't I?"

"It's not the same!" Lin Wanrong protested. "My presence here is not dangerous, but for you, it's incredibly risky! The Emperor is after you!"

An Biru gave a bitter smile, "No danger? Who told you there's no danger? The Emperor issued a proclamation overnight stating that you have colluded with the White Lotus Holy Mother. You are to be beheaded in public at the market square tomorrow afternoon. Didn't you know?"

Lin Wanrong furrowed his brow in confusion. This couldn't be right. If the Emperor wanted to execute him, why wait until tomorrow? He could have done it today. He asked her solemnly, "Master Sister, where did you get this information?"

"Posters covered the entire street, everyone in the capital knew about it. Although it didn't specify who it was, I knew it was you as soon as I saw it. There's no time for further discussion, this place is dangerous, you must come with me!" An Biru said, seizing his hand and dashing outward.

Lin Wanrong sighed, "Master Sister, you're really naive. This is obviously a trap set by the Emperor, the purpose of which is to lure you in. How could you not see that? The entrance must already be a tightly knit net of soldiers, how can you possibly escape?"

An Biru chuckled, her eyes misty and full of affection, "Silly little brother, you are the naive one. If the Emperor wants you to confess and you name me, what then? They can't catch me! I'm just a lowly Miao girl, not worth your sacrifice."

"Miao girl, what's wrong with being a Miao girl?" Lin Wanrong laughed, "The most sentimental women are the Miao, and that's what I like."

On hearing this, An Biru laughed lightly, her voice sparkling like a silver bell, "For me, you're willing to risk your life. Though I, An Biru, am a humble woman, I understand the virtues of benevolence and righteousness. We Miao girls are known for repaying kindness. My dear brother, do you like your sister?"

Indeed, Miao girls are refreshingly honest. Despite the imminent danger, Lin Wanrong, a man of inherently lascivious nature, was captivated by the sight of An Biru's fair skin, red lips, and peach blossom flushed face, her eyes soft and tender, and her ample bosom heaving rhythmically. She was unspeakably enticing. "Master Sister, how can you ask such an embarrassing question? I'll blush." Lin Wanrong giggled.

An Biru's lips parted slightly, she murmured, "In the past, I would resist every time you tried to take advantage. Today, I'll submit to you."

A blush spread across her face, her eyes were cloudy like nebulae, showing boundless shyness. Her small mouth slightly agape, she pushed out her chest and slowly moved closer to him, whispering, "Do you want to feel if your sister's are bigger than your Eldest Miss's? Dear brother, no man has ever touched me!"

Lin Wanrong was so stimulated that his blood boiled. To call her a fox spirit would be an understatement. Despite the imminent danger, she was still seducing him.

'To let an opportunity pass is a disgrace. No matter where we are, I, Master Lin, will seize the chance.' He solemnly declared, "Sister An, my intuition tells me if I take advantage of you, I'm a beast. If I don't, I'm worse than a beast. So, I might as well be the beast."

Just as he was about to behave like a beast, An Biru's eyes clouded over, her face alternating between shyness and tenderness. As his hands moved towards her chest, she swiftly pressed her bosom into his hands. Before Lin San could even savor the feeling, Sister An quickly retracted her bountiful chest, her face aflame. She fell against his shoulder, wiped her teary eyes, and when she raised her head, her face was filled with resolve, "Dear brother, even at the cost of my life, I'll protect you. We will return to the Miao village and live our fairy-tale life. Let's go-"

She took Lin Wanrong and strode out. Just a few steps forward, the sharp whistling of numerous feathered arrows, like a storm of locusts, began to fly toward them.

"Fall back!" An Biru urgently shouted, her long sword quickly swishing through the air, its silver light flashing. In an instant, she had constructed a wall of blades. A flurry of light sounds followed, and a shower of arrows landed on the ground.

"Rise!" Sister An softly cried out, her foot lightly tapped the ground, and the long sword in her hand quivered. She bolted outwards like a swift swallow spreading its wings.

From outside the gate, a furious yell came, "Remnants of the White Lotus, deceiving the public and causing chaos in my realm. You are deserving of death! Command my forces to kill them instantly, no mistakes must be made!"

Lin Wanrong heard it clearly. The voice was clear, with a slight hoarseness, unmistakably from the Emperor. This old Emperor had stayed awake all night, meticulously planning to use Lin Wanrong as bait to lure An Biru, trapping her in this Heavenly Prison. His goal was to completely eliminate the last spark of the White Lotus, reflecting his intense hatred for the sect.

Numerous guards stood watch at the entrance of the Heavenly Prison, each holding a strong crossbow and sharp arrows, all improved by Xu Zhiqing's ingenious redesign. Seeing An Biru's rapid advance, hundreds of guards fired their repeating crossbows simultaneously, with dense arrows pouring down like a sudden spring rain, far denser than before.

Even with An Biru's advanced martial arts, facing this terrifying rain of arrows, she couldn't exert her full strength. An arrow grazed past her ear, startling a bead of cold sweat on her. She quickly pivoted and retreated back to Lin Wanrong's side.

Lin Wanrong took her hand and gave a wry smile, "Sister An, the Emperor himself is presiding over the situation outside. I'm afraid we might not escape this time. Does your White Lotus really have such a deep grudge with him? He's been fixated on annihilating you, hasn't he?"

Holding his hand, An Biru blushed slightly and softly shook her head, "What he hates is not the White Lotus Sect, but someone else. It's just that, in the past, our White Lotus Sect had cooperated with that person to assassinate him. Since he can't take action against that person easily, all his hatred naturally transfers to us, the White Lotus."

"Are you talking about Prince Cheng?" Lin Wanrong asked in shock.

An Biru nodded gently, whispering, "The two brothers have been at odds for over twenty years, just like the disputes between my senior sister and me. The entanglements and twists in between can't be explained in a few words."

"But the Emperor has been reigning for over twenty years, can't he do anything to Prince Cheng? He can't be that weak!" Lin Wanrong expressed his doubt.

An Biru looked at him with a faint smile, saying softly, "Are you saying that you've been living outside Great Hua for the last twenty years, not knowing these things?"

Embarrassed, Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I've never been too concerned about court affairs, I apologize for the lack of knowledge, Sister An."

"Here we are trapped, likely to be pierced by countless arrows in a moment, and I don't know how you can still laugh," An Biru helplessly said. "During the old days, during the two princes' fight for succession, everyone favored the third, now known as Prince Cheng. He was kind to others, had three thousand followers, and held the Ministry of Personnel. His power was like the sun at midday. The current Emperor, then the second prince, was mediocre, but he was patient, keeping his ambitions hidden. When the old Emperor was gravely ill, Prince Cheng was busy making preparations for his ascension. Only the second prince stayed by the old Emperor's side, faithfully serving him, embodying loyalty and kindness."

Lin Wanrong nodded, the reigning Emperor indeed was a man of great strategy and patience. Knowing well that his strength did not match Prince Cheng, he nonetheless identified his target and clung to it relentlessly, eventually reaching greatness. From this perspective, his ascension to the throne was not mistaken.

Just as An Biru was about to continue, suddenly, a clamor of shouting came from outside, followed by the clashing sounds of weapons, the frenzy of battle. A guard shouted loudly, "Assassins! Quickly, protect the Emperor!"

Chapter 332 What Are We To Do?

The two exchanged glances, unable to speak. Assassins? The biggest assassin was already here, so who could be approaching from outside? Lin Wanrong clasped her petite hand and asked, "Sister, you came to save me, did you bring others as well?"

An Biru shot him a glare and retorted, "What are you saying? My White Lotus sect has already been eradicated by you. Where else could I find people to rescue you? Should I go beg for help from Prince Cheng? Prince Cheng..." Her expression changed abruptly, realization dawned, she exclaimed, "Could it be Prince Cheng?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head, signaling his confusion. The capital was teeming with factions, including not only Prince Cheng, but also the Turks and Koreans, all of whom had a reason to assassinate the Emperor.

Outside, shouts and clanging of swords echoed, interspersed with screams of the wounded and the occasional thud of a body hitting the ground. The conflict was fierce. Ironically, this left fewer guards at the entrance of the heavenly prison.

"We must hurry!" An Biru decided, regardless of who was outside. She covered her face with a veil, and the two of them dashed towards the entrance.

The new wave of assassins was strikingly forceful. Most of the guards that had been defending the heavenly prison had been drawn away to confront them. A determined glint flashed in An Biru's eyes as her sword moved like a striking serpent, swiftly dispatching several guards. Lin Wanrong followed closely behind, a pistol in one hand and the bee needle in the other. Every move was a matter of life and death.

As they broke free from the prison, they looked into the courtyard, taken aback. A countless number of palace guards were encircling a hundred assassins dressed in black. A dragon chair was situated in the distance with the Emperor sitting emotionless, closely guarded by hundreds of his men.

On the contrary, the black-clad figures, their bodies marred with wounds and arrows, did not falter but seemed to fight even more fiercely. With every strike of their swords, they slew more than a dozen guards, leaving gruesome scenes behind. In the blink of an eye, they had opened a large breach in the guard's defense line.

"Death warriors!" An Biru exclaimed.

"Dead bodies? What dead bodies?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

An Biru shot him a look full of mixed emotions and corrected, "Not dead bodies, death warriors! These people have been given stimulants, cultivated over a long period to have exponentially increased potential while losing all sense of self-preservation. No wonder we escaped so easily.

With these hundred death warriors, who are each a match for thousands of palace experts, who would bother with us?"

Damn, it turned out they were hopped up on stimulants and some kind of drug, no wonder they were so violent. The guards protecting the Emperor saw the onslaught of the black-clad warriors and immediately began shouting, "Protect the Emperor! Protect the Emperor!"

A guard who seemed to be in charge fell to his knees, "Your Majesty, the assassins are extremely tough death warriors who have lost all senses. This place is in peril. Please, Your Majesty, move to the Palace of Heavenly Purity immediately."

The Emperor, furious, slammed his hand on the dragon chair and stood up, "Insolence! This is the foot of the Emperor, within the heavenly prison, how could I retreat? I want to see who dares to assassinate me! Gao Ping, Gao Ping—"

Eunuch Gao rushed forward, his voice trembling, "Your servant is here!"

"Send an order, for each guard who falls in battle tonight, their family will be compensated a thousand taels, and they will be exempt from taxes forever!" the Emperor commanded loudly.

"By your command!" Eunuch Gao promptly accepted the imperial decree and left in a hurry.

The guards had already fought fiercely, their eyes bloodshot. Upon hearing the Emperor's generous rewards, their excitement heightened even further, everyone battling fiercely, engaging in a fierce fight with over a hundred enemy warriors. The guards formed human walls before the Emperor, with more rushing to join their ranks intermittently. For a moment, the courtyard was filled with chaotic scenes of flesh and blood flying and continuous screams of pain.

Lin Wanrong was stunned by the spectacle. Wasn't it just that he, Lord Lin, had been thrown into the dungeon? Was such a grand scene necessary? There was the rescue by Sister An, the presence of the Emperor, piles of dead warriors, and rivers of blood.

In the face of such a golden opportunity, how could An Biru miss it? She took Lin Wanrong's hand and whispered, "We should leave quickly—" She was about to flee towards the outer wall when she saw Lin Wanrong's furrowed brows, he didn't move an inch.

"What's wrong?" An Biru turned around anxiously and asked.

"Sister An, you should leave first." Lin Wanrong sighed lightly, pointing at the Emperor, "I can't leave yet."

"Why?" An Biru didn't understand.

Although there were many guards around the Emperor, they were crowded together. The real fighting force was only over a hundred. The number of black-clad warriors was only one-tenth of theirs, yet they were fiercely brave. Despite having lost half of their number, they were slowly approaching the Emperor. Eunuch Gao was already scared pale, but the Emperor, with his tiger-like eyes, appeared even more majestic, showing not a trace of fear.

"Because, he is my father-in-law!" Lin Wanrong confessed with a helpless bitter smile.

"You, you already know?" An Biru was taken aback, but then saw Lin Wanrong darting into the crowd.

One of the black-clad warriors shattered a guard's neck with a punch and was about to step toward the Emperor. The Emperor had a cold smile on his lips and a flicker in his eyes but showed no signs of concern, as if he had something to rely on.

Seeing that there was no one around the Emperor, the warrior was about to approach. Lin Wanrong was extremely anxious. 'Damn it, Qingxuan's father, you must not die!'

In his anxiety, he moved like lightning. In a flash, he stood before the Emperor, his bee needle and musket both firing at once. With a loud bang, the warrior was hit by the musket just as he was about to reach Lin Wanrong. He was sent flying back, a large hole in his chest, horrifying to behold.

Lin Wanrong panted heavily, his heart pounding in fright. Sweat dripped down his forehead. Had the musket fired a moment later, he would have been the one to sacrifice his life protecting the Emperor. He wondered whether this old Emperor would give him a posthumous reward of a thousand taels.

The Emperor swept his tiger-like eyes across and noticed that the man shielding him was none other than Lin Wanrong who had just escaped from the prison. A chuckle escaped from his lips, and he slowly said, "Lin San, why didn't you seize this opportunity to escape, and instead risked your life to save me?"

"Do you think I wanted to save you? If it weren't for the fact that we have some connections, I wouldn't bother with you!" Lin Wanrong retorted unhappily.

Hearing this, the Emperor burst out laughing and grasped Lin Wanrong's hand. "I know you have grievances, but you can't blame me for this. Who told you to collude with the Holy Mother of the White Lotus? Look at how you treat her with affection and loyalty, and she reciprocates. Perhaps there's something more between you two. Haha, that's interesting. Lin San, I promise you, if you take the Holy Mother of the White Lotus into your house, I will no longer pursue her crimes."

"This... is quite a challenge," Lin Wanrong furrowed his brows, "Old man, you don't know, my relationship with her apprentice—"

"Say no more. Be careful or I might change my mind, then you'll have only regrets," the Emperor's affable expression shifted to a stern tone. Indeed, the heart of an Emperor was difficult to fathom. Lin Wanrong shook his head with a wry smile.

From afar, An Biru noticed Lin Wanrong chatting amiably with the Emperor. She remembered Lin Wanrong's words before he rushed into the crowd, "He is my father-in-law," and a sourness arose in her heart. Indeed, they were father and son-in-law, they could squabble as they wished. What was her role in all of this?

The Emperor gripped Lin Wanrong's arm and noticed his face and hands smudged with gunpowder after firing the musket. He nodded and laughed, "With that firearm in your hand, why didn't you fire at me when I ordered you beheaded?"

'You think I didn't want to? If it weren't for your relationship with Qingxuan, even if there were ten of you, I would still take you down.' Lin Wanrong didn't respond, merely offering a bitter smile. The Emperor chuckled lightly and sighed, "You, this child..." His words halted abruptly, his gaze returning to its usual calm depth as if the earlier statement hadn't come from him.

The elite imperial guards finally arrived, the rocket launcher unit unleashed a volley, incinerating the hundred death warriors in a fiery blast.

Lin Wanrong noticed An Biru looking at the fire in a daze. He walked over to her and gently asked, "Sister, do you still stand by what you said earlier?"

"What words?" An Biru playfully brushed a lock of hair from her face, a beautiful smile gracing her features.

"You said once you saved me, we'd return to the Miao Village and live like immortals." Lin Wanrong chuckled, "How did you forget something you just said?"

"Such wishful thinking," An Biru lightly tapped his forehead, her flirtatious demeanor returning, "I was only joking with you. There have been at least a thousand, if not eight hundred men who've heard that from me. Only you took it seriously." She finished speaking, glanced deeply at him, avoiding his gaze, and with a tip of her toes, disappeared like a faintly flying wild goose.

Stunned, Lin Wanrong mused that of the words An Biru spoke, eight out of ten were likely false, but which two were the truth?

"Lin Wanrong, did you remember my words?" The Emperor sauntered to his side, looking at An Biru's retreating figure with a smile, "If you want to save her, you must do as I said. I will not let an enemy live in this world."

"Old man, might as well send me back to the imperial prison," Lin Wanrong said with a worried look and a bitter smile, "To marry An Biru, it's even harder than getting me out of the imperial prison!"

"Rubbish! How dare you negotiate with me?" The Emperor huffed, "Have you grown fond of the imperial prison? So it's settled then! Gao Ping, arrange for our return to the palace—"

"Hey, old man, what about me? What should I do? I don't want to go back to the imperial prison." Lin Wanrong called out urgently.

The Emperor's carriage had already departed. Lin Wanrong could only shake his head in resignation. Eunuch Gao quietly approached him, looked at him with a flash of fear on his face, and reported, "Master Lin, His Majesty orders, having worked hard all day, you are allowed to rest in the palace tonight—"

Rest in the palace? Lin Wanrong jumped up at once. The inner palace was the Emperor's home, who would dare to stay there if they weren't of royal blood? What on earth was the old man up to?

The side hall where Mister Lin was resting was called the Pavilion of Literary Profundity, situated next to the Palace of Heavenly Purity. Eunuch Gao led him in. The interior of the room was adorned with brocade clothes and jade covers, carved rails and stone walls, furnished opulently. Four beautiful palace maids were serving cautiously on the side, their heads bowed, not daring to look at him.

After a night spent in both the Palace of Heavenly Purity and the Heavenly Prison, and nearly becoming a human porcupine, Master Lin, though as resilient as iron, was utterly exhausted. Upon seeing the four young maids, his eyes lit up. Could it be, they even had attractive waitresses here?

"Master Lin, please let me know if you need anything else. I will arrange it for you right away," Eunuch Gao bowed and said.

What's the point of arranging anything at this hour? By the time he returns, it would already be dawn. Having these young girls give him a massage would be the right thing. Lin Wanrong laughed and said, "Eunuch Gao, there's no need to be polite. Thanks to His Majesty's grace, this place is excellent, and I'm very satisfied." Recalling that when he left home this morning, his Eldest Miss had disappeared somewhere, and he had not returned until now, he wondered what sort of state she was in. He turned to Eunuch Gao, "Eunuch Gao, could I trouble you with a favor?"

Eunuch Gao hurriedly said, "Master Lin, you are too courteous. What is it that you need? Please feel free to instruct."

Lin Wanrong smiled and said, "The thing is, I'm spending the night in the palace tonight, but my family isn't aware of it. To tell you the truth, I have a wife who is prone to jealousy. If I don't inform her, she's bound to suspect that I'm holed up with some favorite courtesan somewhere. Can you arrange for someone to send a message to her, letting her know I won't be returning home tonight because I'm staying in the palace?"

Eunuch Gao hesitated, troubled, and said, "Master Lin, His Majesty has instructed that you are to stay in the palace tonight and not to go anywhere else. Furthermore, this information should not be leaked, or it would mean execution and extermination of nine generations. I dare not send anyone to your home, I hope you can understand."

To just stay one night in the palace, the old Emperor made it sound so secretive, as if it was a taboo to be seen. But because of An Biru's situation, it was understandable that the old Emperor didn't fully trust him. Knowing the consequences of suggesting leaving the palace now, he wisely shut his mouth.

After dismissing Eunuch Gao, Master Lin was deep in thought, and the four young palace maids exchanged a glance. Finally, one of the older-looking maids spoke up, "Ma... Master. My name is Qinghong, may I assist you with your bath--"

"Oh, oh, a bath?" Lin Wanrong looked up at the maids, who were all around sixteen or seventeen, blossoming beautifully with mature figures, gazing at him with expectant eyes.

"Alright, a bath," Lin Wanrong agreed with a laugh. The maids, delighted, immediately swarmed around him, unbuttoning his buttons, unbuckling his belt, deft and swift, about to strip him bare within moments.

"Hey, hey, what are you doing? It's improper for men and women to touch--" His heart tickled as eight little hands rubbed and kneaded his body, he called out in a flustered manner.

Maid Qinghong gently replied, "Master, we are here to assist you with your bath--"

With a sudden realization, Mr. Lin understood that serving him during his bath not only involved helping him undress but also scrubbing his back and washing his feet. When he was in a good mood, even a bit of indulgence was a trivial matter, especially when it was done by a few unspoiled, charming young maids. This was not merely serving a bath; it was clearly akin to keeping company. Damn it, he must resist this decadent and degenerate lifestyle — a simple chest massage would suffice, he could save the indulgence for next time, he chuckled to himself.

A few young maids, half shy and half delighted, helped him undress, revealing his robust physique, and then led him towards the nearby bath.

The bath was carved from white jade, filled with crystal clear water, devoid of any impurities. The rare and exceptional healing medicine that Xu Zhiqing had found for him had worked wonders. In just two days, the wounds on his back had scabbed over. As he lay in the bath, the warm water made him feel completely relaxed, as if his bones had become lighter.

"Eh, why aren't you undressing? Do I need to call Mama San?" he teased, seeing the four blushing young palace maids standing awkwardly to one side, their small hands clutching their clothes, wanting to undress but feeling incredibly shy. Mr. Lin, a regular in the world of pleasure, laughed at the sight.

"Sir, what is Mama San?" the leading young palace maid asked, her face flushed.

"Oh, Mama San is a kind-hearted old lady who is very gentle and kind to all her daughters. The daughters are all willing to support her financially," Mr. Lin patiently explained.

"Isn't that like my own mother? Sir, is my mother the Mama San you're talking about?" another young palace maid asked.

'Well, that's not really comparable,' Mr. Lin chuckled, "There are some subtle differences, very subtle, you wouldn't understand even if I explained. Eh, undress, everyone, undress quickly so we can bathe."

The young palace maids blushed deeply. They had heard from their sisters about serving the gentlemen who came to the palace for a rest, but all of them were strictly respectful and would never dare to touch them inappropriately. They hadn't expected that when it was their turn, they would encounter such a shameless gentleman who treated undressing as casually as cutting tofu, and kept urging them to undress without considering where they were. It was truly audacious and arrogant.

At a signal from the leading palace maid, the four young maids blushed, their jade hands gently undid their outer clothes, and in no time, they were only in their undergarments, revealing their smooth and delicate skin and legs. The four of them were of similar height, and their chests were quite developed, swaying with every step they took.

The four of them slowly stepped into the water, their cheeks burning like fire, and slowly approached Lin Wanrong, their voices trembling as they said, "Sir, we are here to serve your bath."

Looking at the four slightly immature but infinitely tempting bodies slowly pressing against his own, Lin Wanrong's heart pounded. Damn it, the taste of young girls was indeed different.

Four pairs of small hands gently pressed against his neck, waist, and legs, gently massaging him. Smelling the faint fragrance emanating from the four girls, Mr. Lin let out a comfortable sigh and laughed, "Little sisters, move your hands a bit lower. Oh, a bit lower, right there, hold it, don't stop!"

The petite palace maid named Qinghong felt a tremor in her heart and blushed at his touch. She pinched his ankle and said, "Sir, you are so naughty, just grabbing my ankle—"

Lin Wanrong, with a playful smile, had been startled several times today. He needed to regain some ground, and teasing the young maid while taking a bath was indeed delightful.

"Little sister, let me teach you a novel trick. It has a pleasant name, called 'chest push'. When there's a chance, I'll teach you about 'ice and fire'—", Lin San, the lewd man, laughed.

The young palace maids, who had been bathing in the palace for many years, were precocious. Hearing the name 'chest push', they knew it was not something decent. They all lightly spat in unison, and Lin Wanrong laughed and lay in the water, too lazy to move, allowing the girls to gently rub and knead.

Today's events, despite his usual self-proclaimed toughness, had him at a disadvantage in his contest with the old emperor. He was led by the nose, and in just one day, he experienced several ups and downs, more than most people would in a lifetime. After letting Sister An go, the old emperor forcibly kept him in the palace and sent these well-qualified palace maids to serve him. The mystery of this was hard to understand. He thought for a while, yawned a few times, and unknowingly, fell into a deep sleep.

He slept in a daze in the palace, and when he woke up, it was already late. The four little palace maids who served him were still guarding his side. Lin Wanrong grabbed the leading palace maid and said, "Qinghong, what time is it now?"

"Sir, it's past Chen Shi (7-9 am)," the little palace maid respectfully said.

"Oh, Chen Shi!" Lin yawned, then exclaimed, "What? Chen Shi? Why didn't anyone wake me up?"

Qinghong looked at him, covered her mouth and laughed, "Sir, you are really different from others. Other people who come to the palace to rest are always on edge, waking up several times every quarter of an hour. As soon as the early morning passes, they thank the Emperor for his grace and leave the palace, more punctual than the eunuch who reports the time. Only you, sir, don't care at all. The morning court has passed, and you haven't woken up. Eunuch Gao instructed us last night that if you don't wake up, we are not allowed to disturb you. That's why I didn't dare to wake you up."

'Sweat, damn it, I didn't know there were so many rules. I've always been the type to count money until my hands cramp and sleep until I naturally wake up.' He grumbled and got up from the bed, randomly put on his clothes, and hurriedly asked, "Nishang, Princess Nishang, North Gate, where is the North Gate?"

When he arrived at the North Gate of the Forbidden City, he saw the North Gate fluttering with banners, bustling with noise. From a distance, he saw the emperor's chariot standing high above the city gate, with ministers and guards standing on both sides, very lively.

Directly opposite the North Gate was a wide moat. In front of the river was a wide open space, in the middle of which stood a newly built three-story building. The building was decorated with large red ribbons, pulled down from the four corners of the roof. The ribbons fluttered with small flags, red and yellow, very eye-catching and beautiful. A narrow red carpet was laid on the ground leading to the main door of the small building. Numerous bright spears and guards stood along the flags, majestic and noble.

Beneath the walls stood three groups of people. The first group was composed of men with curled hair and hawk-like noses, tall in stature, with curved swords hanging from their waists. The warhorses they rode were majestic and extraordinary. Without a doubt, this must be the marriage delegation of the Turkic emissary, Ashile.

The second group was the entourage of the young prince of Goryeo, Yi Seung-Jae. They were all palace attendants and female officials, interspersed with a few horsemen and warriors. Their grandeur and prestige were far less than that of the Turkic emissary. However, the Goryeo people had their own methods. Dozens of attractive young palace maidens held up a wide painting. The painting depicted the scene of the young prince of Goryeo proposing to the Emperor of Great Hua. It was simple and straightforward, yet vivid and lifelike.

The third group puzzled Lin Wanrong. These people neither carried swords nor held knives. They were all scholars of Great Hua, some even dressed in official robes. They gathered together, chattering away, their purpose unclear. Could they be a civilian marriage delegation?

Seeing the scene before him, it was clear that Princess Nishang was indeed holding a marriage selection. Lin Wanrong snorted, "So many people want to steal my wife? No way!" What angered him the most was that Gao Ping hadn't woken him up in time, and he had almost missed the opportunity.

He searched below the city tower for a while, but he didn't find Ashile among the Turks' team, nor did he see Yi Seung-Jae in the Goryeo delegation. He didn't even see the young Palace Lady Seo Jang Geum and the Senior Palace Lady, presumably they had been summoned by the Emperor to the tower.

Lin Wanrong, appointed by the Emperor, was to receive the special envoy of the Turks and the prince of Goryeo. But now, both Ashile and Yi Seung-Jae had gone directly to the tower, and he hadn't arrived yet, which was a significant dereliction of duty.

He hurried towards the tower, but was stopped by the imperial guard who shouted, "Who dares to trespass on forbidden ground?"

As the Emperor's new favorite, the imperial guards hadn't had time to familiarize themselves with Lin Wanrong, so naturally, they wouldn't let him go up the tower. Just as he was about to speak, he saw a man rushing down from the tower, saying anxiously, "Little brother Lin, why are you only arriving now? The Turks and the young prince of Goryeo have already arrived. Your absence as the host is making us the laughingstock of the court!"

Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile and said, "Brother Xu, I overslept!"

Xu Wei was taken aback. This man was truly audacious. Even when serving the Emperor, he could oversleep. Xu Wei shouted at the guards, "Open your eyes wide! This is Lin San, the envoy appointed by the Emperor to receive the Turkic emissary. Don't make a fool of yourselves again!"

Anyone who could receive a Turkic special envoy was no ordinary person. The guards were startled and quickly saluted Lin Wanrong.

Xu Wei hurriedly pulled Lin San up the tower, saying, "Little brother Lin, the Emperor has appointed you. You are now a person of status. Even if you don't have an official position and don't need to attend court, you must not be negligent. How could you make such a joke as oversleeping? Didn't Miss Xiao wake you up? She's not a negligent person!"

If only there was a Miss Xiao by his side, Lin Wanrong thought, giving a bitter smile. Eunuch Gao had instructed him yesterday that he must not leak the matter of staying overnight in the palace. Lin Wanrong could only smile bitterly and say, "Mr. Xu, it's a long story. Let's talk about it when we have time. Has the princess's marriage selection started?"

"It hasn't started yet. The Emperor has just arrived and is currently speaking with the envoys of the two nations. He may not have noticed your absence yet, and hasn't shown any signs of anger. I was about to send someone to find you when I saw you coming up. Little brother, you must never make such a mistake again," Xu Wei earnestly advised. Lin San was someone he had recommended to the Emperor, and after Lin San had been summoned to the Palace of Heavenly Purity yesterday, Xu Wei had been quite proud. He held high hopes for Lin San.

When the two of them reached the top of the city tower, the Emperor was speaking with the officials, a smile on his face, seemingly unaware of Lin San's tardiness.

However, Lin Wanrong didn't see it that way. After spending a day with the emperor yesterday, he was nothing but astounded. Just as the Emperor had been able to defeat Prince Cheng and ascend the throne, anyone who thought him a fool was gravely mistaken. The Emperor had specifically kept him in the palace to rest overnight, and Gao Ping had specifically instructed the young palace maids not to wake him up. There must be a connection between these events.

The princess's marriage was a major event, and naturally, all the civil and military officials had to be present. Especially since the Emperor had no sons, the princess's marriage attracted even more attention. Even Prince Cheng was present in person, and Li Tai was standing in the front row. All the civil and military officials were standing in front of the hall without exception. Although Lin Wanrong was favored by the Emperor, he didn't even have an official position. He could barely be considered a reception envoy, without rank or level, and naturally, there was no place for him in the court.

Fortunately, he enjoyed playing the role of a wolf in sheep's clothing. So, he stood honestly at the very end of the line of officials, even below the steps, deliberately lowering his head so the Emperor couldn't see him.

"Master Lin, you're here?" A soft, elegant voice sounded in his ear.

"I'm here. Oh, it's you, Palace Lady Seo, Dae Jang Geum." Lin Wanrong looked up to see Seo Jang Geum standing in front of him, smiling and greeting him.

"Master Lin, my name is Seo Jang Geum, not Dae Jang Geum. If you call me that, it could lead to misunderstandings. Please correct it, I beg you." Palace Lady Seo bowed deeply, her face sincere.

Master Lin laughed, "Sooner or later, you will become Dae Jang Geum. I have faith in you. Jang Geum, did you sleep well last night? Did you miss me? I'll tell you a secret, I dreamt of you last night."

Seo Jang Geum was taken aback. Weren't the people of Great Hua supposed to be humble, polite, and elegant? Why was Master Lin repeatedly making such frivolous remarks? "Master Lin, I didn't miss you. I was thinking about my patients in Goryeo. When I think of their suffering from illness day and night, I, as a medical woman, feel uneasy," Seo Jang Geum answered honestly.

"You didn't miss me? That's okay, in a few days you will start to miss me. All my wives went through the same process. You're still in the early stages, keep up the good work, and fight on!" Master Lin said, squinting his eyes.

Palace Lady Seo was completely speechless. After a long silence, she shook her head and said, "Master Lin, you said you dreamt of me last night. May I ask what you dreamt about?"

"I forgot!" Master Lin answered succinctly.

Palace Lady Seo was taken aback. She took a deep breath, bowed deeply, and said, "Master Lin, thank you for your honesty."

Lin Wanrong sighed, patting her fragrant shoulder, "Jang Geum, although you haven't left a deep impression on me yet, I believe that with your talent and diligence, as long as you put in a little effort, you will definitely have the chance to move me. I'm easily moved, so keep trying!"

Palace Lady Seo's captivating eyes flickered, and she shook her head slightly, "Master Lin, I find your jokes with Jang Geum very endearing."

This girl had an unusually good temperament. Not only was she not angry, but she also deflected his teasing with a light comment. This Seo Jang Geum was full of spirit, clearly not a simple character. Women like her, with such firm determination, once they made up their minds, they would not be swayed by others.

Should he try to seduce her? A legendary woman like her, with such firm beliefs and ideals, conquering her should be quite interesting. Lin Wanrong looked at her face, as clear as jade, and pondered.

Seeing Master Lin's gaze fixed on her, his mouth sometimes sighing, sometimes smiling, Palace Lady Seo didn't know what he was thinking. She softly said, "Master Lin, are you ready? I'm about to start!"

"Ready for what?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, then understanding dawned on him from the message conveyed in her sparkling eyes. This girl was going to accuse him of taking bribes to the Emperor. Ah, this stubborn temperament, he wasn't sure whether to hate it or love it.

"Ashile, you said that the Great Khan of the Turks suddenly wanted to increase the bride price, preparing to use a hundred blood-sweat horses to propose to my Great Hua, is that true?" While Lin Wanrong was thinking about Seo Jang Geum, he heard the Emperor of Great Hua ask.

"Indeed." Ashile was dressed in a brand-new outfit today, with a pair of Turkic cloud boots on his feet, ready to compete at any time to win Princess Nishang for the Great Khan of the Turks. His attitude was much better than when they first met yesterday, and he spoke to the Emperor of Great Hua with some respect. "Our Great Khan has long heard of the unparalleled beauty of Princess Nishang and is extremely fond of her. Yesterday, he sent a special person to bring a hundred blood-sweat horses to express his sincerity. I ask the Emperor to agree."

‘Sincerity? What sincerity? Without my bombardment yesterday, your eyes would probably still be hanging in the sky.’

It was undeniable that the temptation of a hundred blood-sweat horses was great, and the Emperor seemed somewhat moved. His eyes closed slightly, and he pondered for a moment. Before he could speak, the young prince of Goryeo, Yi Seung-Jae, couldn't hold back any longer. He quickly stepped forward and said, "Your Majesty, Seung-Jae is deeply in love with Princess Nishang and will never change. To be able to marry the princess, Goryeo is willing to offer a hundred rare agates, a thousand bolts of brocade, and ten thousand taels of gold."

Lin Wanrong snorted, "Is my wife so cheap? When the old Emperor passes away, half of Great Hua will be hers. What does she need your small change for?"

The conditions offered by both sides were extremely generous, and the Emperor seemed a bit hesitant. Seeing Lin Wanrong muttering something at the farthest end, he smiled slightly and said, "Oh, Lin San, you're here too? You are the reception envoy for both countries, so why don't you share your opinion?"

‘My opinion? You want to marry off my wife to someone else, and you have the audacity to ask for my opinion?’ Lin Wanrong snorted, "Your Majesty, in my humble opinion, both the Turkic envoy and the Prince of Goryeo have offered extremely generous terms. However, Goryeo is a tributary of our Great Hua, and marrying the princess off to them might be a slight to her. On the other hand, the Turks are powerful and on par with our Great Hua—"

Yi Seung-Jae was taken aback. It seemed that Lord Lin was speaking in favor of the Turks. This was unacceptable. Was he going to take his agates for nothing?

Seo Jang Geum furrowed her brows and gently spoke up, "Your Majesty, I have something to report."

Seeing that it was the highly learned young Palace Lady from Goryeo who was speaking, the Emperor immediately became interested and smiled, "Oh, it's you, Palace Lady Seo. What do you have to say?"

Seo Jang Geum respectfully bowed, glanced at Lin Wanrong, then resolutely turned her head and said, "Your Majesty, I wish to accuse Lord Lin. He has accepted a bribe from Lord Ashile."

Chapter 334 You Cannot Go

The young prince of Goryeo, Yi Seung-Jae, seemed to have not anticipated that Seo Jang Geum would suddenly confront Master Lin. Master Lin was the envoy for both countries, not only had he accepted bribes from Ashile, but he had also received an agate personally delivered by Yi Seung-Jae. If this were to be exposed, Master Lin would be in trouble, and Goryeo would not benefit either.

The young prince urgently signaled Seo Jang Geum, but the Palace Lady shook her head resolutely. She bowed her head respectfully and said in a low voice, "Your Highness, please forgive me. Although Jang Geum is just a humble palace maid, she cannot tolerate bribery happening right under her nose. Regardless, I must report the truth to the Emperor of Great Hua."

The Emperor smiled faintly, cast a meaningful glance at Lin Wanrong, and asked Seo Jang Geum, "Palace Lady Seo, is everything you said true? Do you have any solid evidence?"

"Your Majesty, when Lord Ashile was bribing Lord Lin, I was present and saw it with my own eyes. Lord Ashile, in order to inspect the power of the Great Hua army, gave Lord Lin two night pearls and two blood-sweat horses on the spot. Lord Lin not only accepted the bribe but also led Lord Ashile to watch the military cannon drill. The Khanate of the Turks and Great Hua are currently in a standoff. Lord Lin, for his personal gain, leaked national secrets, which could lead to countless casualties among soldiers and civilians. Although I am a Goryeo person, Goryeo and Great Hua are neighboring countries with generations of friendship. I cannot bear to see the people of Great Hua suffer, so I reported Lord Lin to Your Majesty, hoping he can mend his ways." Seo Jang Geum, who cared about the people and was upright and selfless, insisted on her point of view in front of the Emperor, without any fear.

Lin Wanrong looked at the Palace Lady Seo with a smile, admiring her snow-white skin, jade neck, willow eyebrows, and cherry lips, which was indeed a pleasure. The young prince of Goryeo looked

embarrassed. If the Emperor really wanted to investigate, the matter of him giving the agate to Lord Lin would certainly not be concealed. Seo Jang Geum's stubbornness and integrity were well-known in Goryeo, and it was unexpected that she remained the same in Great Hua.

After the Palace Lady Seo finished speaking, the civil and military officials were secretly shocked. This girl was really out of touch with the situation. The fact that the envoy accepted bribes was an open secret in Great Hua, and the Emperor turned a blind eye to it. Now she had brought it to the table, and this envoy Lin was appointed by the Emperor himself, wouldn't this embarrass the Emperor?

The Emperor nodded and beckoned to Gao Ping. The eunuch Gao then brought out a jade plate, removed the red cloth covering it, and revealed two thumb-sized night pearls in the plate, their brilliance dazzling and shimmering.

"Palace Lady Seo, come and see, are these the two night pearls that Ashile gave to Lin San?" The Emperor asked with a smile, showing great affection for Palace Lady Seo.

Seo Jang Geum stepped forward, carefully examined them, and then nodded, "These are indeed the two. Your Majesty, how did these end up with you?"

The Emperor laughed heartily, "Since they are indeed these two, then there is no problem. Everything Lord Lin has done was under my instruction. Our Great Hua army is strong, and our cannons are formidable, we fear no one's observation. Lord Ashile's generous gifts to Lord Lin, the two night pearls, and the two blood-sweat horses, I was aware of. In recognition of Lord Lin's meritorious service in reception, I have already rewarded these gifts to him and instructed him to reciprocate with a painting for Lord Ashile. Palace Lady Seo, your integrity, kindness, and fearlessness of power are admirable. I hope you will maintain this spirit in the future."

No wonder Lord Lin was so carefree. It turned out that all of this was the Emperor's idea, and this man had managed to keep it a secret, even pretending in front of her. Seo Jang Geum glanced at Lin Wanrong, seeing him grinning from ear to ear, looking extremely pleased. She couldn't help but smile and shake her head. Lord Lin's character was truly unpredictable, it was best to avoid getting involved with him.

"Thank you for your praise, Your Majesty. Jang Geum only wishes to seek welfare for the people of Goryeo and Great Hua. I desire nothing else," said Palace Lady Seo, in a calm and elegant manner.

The Emperor nodded and smiled, looking very pleased, "Now that this matter is clarified, it's even better. Lord Lin, you just said that the Turks are powerful and on par with Great Hua, could it be that you agree—"

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "Your Majesty, my point is, Great Hua and the Turks have been in a standoff for many years, and there has never been a clear winner. Lord Ashile's sudden proposal of marriage, although sincere, is somewhat abrupt. Goryeo and the Turks, in terms of the princess, each has its strengths and weaknesses. I still suggest that the princess make the decision herself. Perhaps the princess already has her own ideas, who knows?"

The officials understood, this young Lin San was quite a slick one. After all the talking, he didn't support either side, and kicked the ball to the princess.

The Emperor laughed heartily, "Lord Lin is right. Since both countries are sincerely seeking marriage, and there are countless young men in Great Hua who admire the princess, I will simply hold this marriage selection event. Let Goryeo, the Turks, and the men of Great Hua participate, compete fairly, and let Princess Nishang assess them. Whoever the princess favors, whether it's Goryeo, the Turks, or our Great Hua men, they will all be the son-in-law of Great Hua and the princess's consort. What do you think, my ministers?"

"Your Majesty is wise!" Prince Cheng, who had been silent for a long time, was the first to respond with respect.

Seeing that the Emperor had made up his mind, all the ministers dared not oppose and unanimously agreed.

A grand princess of Great Hua, actually holding a marriage selection event, isn't this too childish? Lin Wanrong snorted quietly, and Xu Wei in the distance also looked worried, deeply concerned.

"Today, for the princess's selection of a consort, I will not interfere. Everything will be decided by the princess," the Emperor laughed, "In addition to the Goryeo and Turkic delegations, there are countless young men from Great Hua competing. To ensure fairness, all assessments will be personally set by the princess. Lord Ashile, Prince Yi, do you have any objections?"

"Your Majesty is wise," the two men nodded in unison, each with their own calculations. Although Great Hua had a larger population, the local suitors were all acting independently. Goryeo and the Turks each had a large group of strategists, increasing their chances of winning. In the end, this kind of competition was more advantageous for them.

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The Emperor gave a slight nod to Gao Ping, who stepped forward and announced loudly, "Please welcome Princess Nishang—"

The drums and gongs resounded, and the ceremonial cannons fired lightly. The tall palace doors slowly opened, and two groups of colorfully dressed palace maids walked out, each holding a red embroidered ball. These balls were connected by a yellow silk ribbon, extending backward and tied to the handle of a small yellow palanquin in the center.

The yellow palanquin, carried by eight people, was extravagantly decorated. On top of it was a large red embroidered ball. Eight beautiful palace maids surrounded it, escorting it. The long procession slowly moved along the red carpet in the center of the field, heading straight for the small building. The curtains of the palanquin were low, and no one could see the person inside.

A cheer erupted from the crowd. Although they couldn't see her face, there was no doubt that the person coming out from the inner court of the palace was the Emperor's most beloved little princess.

The civil and military officials standing on both sides of the Emperor also couldn't help but whisper to each other. The Emperor's little princess had not been seen for many years, and they were curious about how she had grown.

The Goryeo and Turkic delegations seeking marriage were also excited. Yi Seung-Jae looked at Princess Nishang's palanquin, murmuring something, it was unclear what he was saying. Seo Jang Geum and the Korean Palace Ladies were whispering, seemingly discussing the upcoming competition.

Next to Ashile stood a Turk who looked similar to him. Although his face was ordinary, his eyes were full of wisdom, clearly not an easy opponent.

'Princess Nishang? Is this Qingxuan?' Lin Wanrong looked at the palanquin, wishing he could fly over and lift the curtains to see the true face of the person inside.

"Mr. Xu, Mr. Xu—" Lin Wanrong squeezed to Xu Wei's side and called softly.

"Little brother Lin, what is it?" Xu Wei's brow was furrowed, as if he was pondering something.

"Well, are there any conditions for participating in the consort selection? Can I sign up?" Lin Wanrong asked hopefully.

Xu Wei looked at him and laughed, "Little brother, do you suspect that Princess Nishang is Miss Qingxuan?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, "There's a high possibility. Mr. Xu, I should be able to sign up. Even if there's only a one in ten thousand chance, I want to try."

Xu Wei sighed, "As long as you are a man between the ages of twenty and thirty and have never been married, you can participate. You should be eligible. The sudden appearance of a Princess Nishang, the Emperor's actions are indeed profound and unpredictable. I can't understand it anymore."

Xu Wei always spoke half and swallowed half, Lin Wanrong didn't understand but had no time to think further. The palanquin of Princess Nishang had already reached the front of the building and entered the building. She was about to ascend the small building soon.

Lin Wanrong's heart pounded a few times. Just as he was about to go downstairs to join the line of competitors, he saw the Emperor's gaze shift and land on him, "Lord Lin, come here!"

'He can see me even when I'm hiding behind old Xu? This old man, the Emperor, is indeed not a figurehead.' He walked forward with a smile, and the Emperor said with a faint smile, "Lord Lin, did you sleep well last night?"

"Very well, thank you for your hospitality, Your Majesty," Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I almost overslept this morning."

The Emperor nodded, "Lord Lin, I entrust you with the role of the marriage envoy for today's marriage selection, responsible for supervision—"

Lin Wanrong hurriedly waved his hands, "No, no, Your Majesty, I also want to participate in the—"

"How dare you!" The Emperor's expression turned angry, "If I ask you to be the marriage envoy, then you will be the marriage envoy. When did I say you could participate in the marriage selection? Everyone in the world can go, but you, you cannot."

"Why, Your Majesty?" Lin Wanrong was startled. The words came as a bolt from the blue, leaving him breathless for a good while.

"There is no 'why.' If I say it's not allowed, then it's not allowed." The Emperor's face was gloomy, his gaze upon Lin Wanrong as heavy as a ten-thousand-pound hammer. His imposing aura was as sharp as a knife's edge, intimidating.

But Lin Wanrong was not easily frightened. He looked fearlessly back at the Emperor. "Your Majesty, people must act reasonably. The princess is unmarried, as am I. Why can others attend, but I cannot? To be frank, I came to the capital for this very day. Even if you were to behead me, I will go. I take my leave."

He had been patiently enduring for Qingxuan for many days. Just as he was at the end of his tether, the Emperor put a wrench in his plans. How could he not be enraged? Regardless of whether it was the Emperor or his father-in-law, he had no time for either now. His wife mattered the most.

Seeing his resolute demeanor, the Emperor's face fluctuated. Despite the threats and scolding of the previous day, he hadn't managed to break Lin Wanrong's spirit. This Lin San was somewhat stubborn; it seemed force might not work. After a long moment of contemplation, the Emperor sighed. "Come back, I have something to say to you."

Lin Wanrong halted. The Emperor approached him, asking, "Do you truly wish to become the prince consort?"

‘What kind of question is this? I want to be my wife's husband, not your damn prince consort.’ Seeing Lin Wanrong's silence, a gleam sparked in the Emperor's eyes. "Being a prince consort does indeed bring prestige, but there are greater honors in this world. If you choose not to become the prince consort, there will be opportunities for greater glory in the future."

"Glory? What glory?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

"Glory that surpasses that of the prince consort tenfold, a hundredfold. As long as you remember what I told you last night, act more ruthlessly, more cunningly, you will have more than a half chance," the Emperor said solemnly, his face grave.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Old man, you're tempting me. But how can I give away my own wife? How about this, let me be the prince consort, and also grant me that glory you speak of. Isn't that a win-win, straightforward and delightful?"

The Emperor was taken aback by his proposition, then burst into laughter. "Well done, Lin San! Such audacious words, I doubt anyone else in the world could outdo you in shamelessness."

Seeing the Emperor's previously stern face finally soften, Lin Wanrong breathed a sigh of relief. This old man was indeed not easy to please. "Your Majesty, I will take my leave now, and we will carry on as we just agreed," he said cheekily.

"Hmph, you wish. To take my daughter, and then expect—," the Emperor huffed, "if you become the prince consort, you will certainly regret it someday."

"If I don't go now and my wife becomes someone else's, then that would be real regret." With the Prince of Goryeo and Ashile ready on the other side, Lin Wanrong felt a rush of urgency and darted off.

"Enough, enough, I will make an exception for you," the Emperor sighed, "You can compete for the prince consort today, but you must not make it public. Whether you will be a prince consort in the future or choose something else, that's up to you. I have been as kind and just as possible to you, take good care of yourself." After saying these words, the Emperor, with a sweep of his sleeve, departed without even turning his head.

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Lin Wanrong, in a rush, darted down the stairs, only to find the square bustling with lively noise and vibrant excitement. The cause of this joyous uproar was the arrival of Princess Nishang, who had ascended to the tower.

Lin Wanrong felt a thrill of excitement. He hurriedly looked up towards the highest point of the tower, where he saw a thick pearl curtain hanging, and a vague silhouette seated behind it. The figure's features were obscured, and he couldn't tell if it was Qingxuan.

It didn't matter. He thought, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.' First, he would do his best and try to win the position of the prince consort. If the lady behind the curtain was not Qingxuan, there were other paths, as the Emperor had suggested. With this thought, he felt calmer and glanced a few more times at the embroidered tower.

"There she is, someone's coming out!" A commotion arose from the crowd. A charming little palace maid emerged from behind the curtain on the tower, her face adorned with a gentle smile and two cute dimples that were truly endearing.

"I am Cuiyun, a humble servant," she announced in a crisp voice, "I bring the esteemed order of Princess Nishang to announce today's marriage proposal rules. The princess herself has devised four intriguing questions. Anyone who meets the criteria, regardless of geographical origin or age, may participate in answering. Whoever answers the most questions correctly will be granted a personal audience with the princess. If she approves, he may be selected as the prince consort. Has everyone understood?"

"We have," the crowd replied in unison. Prince Yi Seung-Jae of Korea, Seo Jang Geum, and Senior Palace Lady Han quickly gathered together to discuss the matter. Ashile also leaned towards a man, who seemed to be a counselor, to whisper in his ear. The atmosphere was fraught with tension.

Both the Goryeo and Turkic delegations had brought along many wise strategists, while Lin Wanrong was at a disadvantage as he was alone. He wondered whether he should ask Old Xu for help. As he was mulling it over, the maid asked, "Is everyone ready? The princess is about to give the questions."

Princess Nishang was indeed impatient. Everyone perked up their ears, eager to listen.

Cuiyun, with a soft smile, took out a yellow satin envelope sealed with wax, proof that it hadn't been tampered with. She opened the envelope to reveal a small jade bead, sparkling and translucent under the sunlight. The jade bead was small, with a tiny hole drilled through the center, but it was not transparent, making its purpose unknown.

Cuiyun said in a sweet voice, "The first question is called threading the needle. This is a jade bead from the Eastern Sea with nine twisted holes. As the name suggests, it has nine twists inside, so even though there is a hole, you cannot see straight through it. The princess said, if anyone can thread this fine silk through the nine holes, without damaging the jade bead, they will have answered the first question correctly."

'Oh, heavens! Who came up with such a difficult question?' Lin Wanrong, initially brimming with confidence, found himself stumped by the first question proposed by Princess Nishang. He racked his brain, yet no solutions seemed to come to mind. Over at the Goryeo section, Yi Seung-Jae, needless to say, was struggling. Seo Jang Geum was doing her utmost to assist the prince in winning the princess of Great Hua, but even she was taken aback by this conundrum, unable to find an

answer right away. The Turkic envoy, Ashile, whispered back and forth with the adviser at his side. Several suggestions were proposed, only to be swiftly dismissed one by one.

The maidservant, Cuiyun, placed the jade bead with nine curved holes onto a jade plate. Its hole was positioned to face the audience. A wave of discussions broke out amongst the crowd as everyone racked their brains for a solution.

"Minister Xu, can you figure out a solution to Princess Nishang's riddle?" The Emperor, seated upon his throne, inquired with a smile. Several high-ranking officials stood by his side.

Xu Wei shook his head, replying, "The princess is very clever, Your Majesty. I can't find a way to solve her puzzle."

"What about you, Su Mubai?" the Emperor then turned to ask Su Mubai. Since the loss of his role as a reception envoy the previous day, Su Mubai had been notably quieter. Hearing the Emperor's question, he promptly responded with a bow, "Your Majesty, I haven't found a solution yet either."

The Emperor gave a bitter laugh, "Nishang has not shown me a pleasant face since she returned. The difficulty of this first question she posed for this marriage proposal... If nobody can answer it, isn't she intentionally embarrassing me? Making Goryeo and the Turks laugh at Great Hua for its lack of capable men. Brother Cheng, you have countless talents in your service. Find someone to solve this question."

A sharp look flashed through Prince Cheng's eyes. As he bowed his head in respect, he concealed his intense gaze, "Your Majesty, those under my command are merely idle men of no use, not fit for the public eye. However, if we are to truly solve Princess Nishang's puzzle, I am willing to recommend someone."

"Oh, who might that be?" The Emperor asked with interest.

"Your Majesty, according to common folk tales, Lin San, the reception envoy, is a clever and quick-witted individual. He has performed feats such as 'sprouting beans to lift a Buddha statue', 'washing hands in boiling oil', and 'burning copper coins'. He is a master in these crafty tricks. If there is anyone in Great Hua capable of solving this, it must be Lin San," Prince Cheng replied with a smile, throwing an intentional or unintentional glance at Su Mubai. Su Mubai kept his eyes down, remaining silent.

"Is that so?" the Emperor asked, intrigued, "Lin San possesses such abilities? Why have I not heard of this? Minister Xu, is this true?"

"Your Majesty, it is indeed true. My daughter, Zhiqing, has verified the three feats mentioned by the Prince. They encapsulate the principles of all things. This Lin San is clever and well-educated. We don't know if he could come up with an ingenious solution this time," Xu Wei explained.

"Interesting indeed," the Emperor's eyes gleamed with amusement. He murmured, "Let's hope Lin San can surprise us all."

As Lin Wanrong wracked his brain, feeling rather vexed, he was unaware that he had become the target of everyone's attention. His gaze happened upon several ants crawling on the ground at a slow pace, their tiny legs suddenly sparked a light bulb in his mind.

Meanwhile, in the Goryeo camp, Seo Jang Geum pondered for a moment before her eyes lit up with an idea. She quickly relayed her thoughts to Senior Palace Lady Han, and Yi Seung-Jae, overhearing the conversation, was visibly thrilled. The trio engaged in a detailed discussion, eventually reaching a consensus.

"I've got it—!" Two voices rang out in unison, one crisp and the other solid, startling the deep-in-thought crowd back to awareness.

Seo Jang Geum, standing up at the same time as Lin Wanrong, smiled over at him, "Sir, have you also found a solution?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled lightly, "Of course, if you have one, how could I not?"

Upon seeing the two voices raise simultaneously, the maidservant Cuiyun interjected, "Is this young lady speaking on behalf of her prince? If so, please come forward. And you, young master, whom do you represent?"

Stepping onto the stage, Lin Wanrong replied with a smile, "I don't represent anyone. I only represent myself. Miss Jang Geum, what solution have you come up with? Why don't you go first?"