

Finest 421

Chapter 421 The Standing Copper Coin

The name “Princess Chuyun” sounded familiar. Upon careful reflection, Lin Wanrong suddenly remembered that Xu Wei had once mentioned it when introducing the Great Hua royal family. The current Emperor had three princesses. The eldest princess was of age and had been married off to the South in Yunnan, and hadn't returned home for years. The second princess held the title of “Chuyun,” and little was known about her since childhood. The youngest princess was Nishang, who later turned out to be Qin Xian'er. Could Xiao Qingxuan really be the legendary Princess Chuyun? If so, wouldn't she and Xian'er be real sisters?

Xiao Qingxuan's long sleeves brushed lightly as she spoke calmly, “Which palace's servant are you? How do you recognize me?”

Miss Xiao's words were tantamount to admitting her identity. Gao Ping was so excited that he hurriedly kowtowed, “You truly are Princess Chuyun, Princess, I'm Gao Ping! Don't you remember me?”

“Gao Ping?” Xiao Qingxuan murmured, her brows slightly furrowed, as if trying to recall when she had heard that name.

Gao Ping kowtowed on the ground like pounding garlic, his voice trembling with excitement, “I, Gao Ping, have served the Emperor since he was in the Qian Mansion. I was there with Chief Wei when you, little princess, were just a month old, and I even held you in my arms.”

Lin Wanrong felt dizzy listening. ‘You old eunuch, my wife saw you when she was still in swaddling clothes; how could she recognize you now, especially when she's grown into a fairy?’

Hearing that this eunuch was an old servant in the palace, Xiao Qingxuan's eyes filled with tears as she nodded, “So you're an old acquaintance of my father and mother. You may rise and speak.”

Gao Ping kowtowed again, respectfully got up, and carefully examined Xiao Qingxuan, exclaiming, “The Empress was benevolent and virtuous, respected by all. She was especially kind to me. Princess, you resemble her exactly. I knew at once that you must be the Emperor's Princess Chuyun.”

“My mother has been gone for many years; it’s touching that you still remember her,” Xiao Qingxuan said, a tear glinting in her eye, her heart filled with sorrow. Gao Ping was also moved and wiped away a few tears.

So Qingxuan was the princess borne by the Empress herself. No wonder she had the Empress's waist token. Thinking back to Qingxuan's appearance and behavior when they first met in Jinling, Lin Wanrong suddenly understood why she cared so much about the northern nomads and state affairs. This was her family's business! Lin Wanrong was struck with realization, overjoyed, thinking that he now had two out of the Emperor's three princesses. How could he not prosper now?

“Sister, are you really a princess?” Qiaoqiao excitedly grabbed Xiao Qingxuan's arm and asked.

Luo Ning, coming from a prominent family and knowing the etiquette, quickly curtsied and said softly, “Commoner Luo Ning pays respects to the Princess!”

Xiao Qingxuan took both their hands and smiled, “We're all sisters here; there's no need for such formality. Ning'er, don't be so ceremonious. I've been out of the royal family for years, now just an ordinary woman. You mustn't be so restrained.”

“Yes, yes, don't be so formal,” Lin Wanrong chuckled, “We're all family here; let's not speak like strangers.”

Gao Ping pulled him aside and whispered, “Mr. Lin, when the Emperor sent me to reward you this morning, I thought it was a bit strange. Seeing Princess Chuyun now, I understand. I suppose you also know the Emperor's intentions, don't you?”

Lin Wanrong nodded and thought to himself, ‘I assumed the old Emperor was worried about his son-in-law, but it turns out he was concerned for his daughter. All the gifts of gold and silver, and the attentive care of sending a wet nurse; he truly served her more considerately than anyone else.’

"Sir, you must take good care of Princess Chuyun," the old servant warned. "If I may be so bold to say, among the three princesses of Great Hua, the Emperor dotes on this one the most. You must be very, very careful not to make a mistake."

A princess was considered royal, and according to Great Hua's customs, even after marriage, the prince consort must still observe the ceremonies of a subject, bowing to the princess morning and evening. Lin Wanrong sneered at this tradition. Kneel to his wife every day? Was that something a

man would do? Fortunately, his beloved Chuyun was gentle and unassuming, not at all like those superficial princesses.

Lin Wanrong nodded and laughed, "Eunuch Gao, rest assured, how could I not cherish my own wife? Go back and tell the Emperor that Lin San thanks him for his grace. From now on, Chuyun will eat well, drink well, play well, and be happy in our home. I guarantee she won't suffer any grievances."

Gao Ping knew the character of this Lord Lin, and these few words were enough for him. After placing the gold and silver down and giving detailed instructions to the maid and wet nurse, he hurried back to fulfill his duty, not daring to slacken in the slightest.

Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning had never dreamed that their big brother's heartthrob was the most honorable princess of Great Hua. Seeing that they were now sisters with the princess, their joy was beyond words. The three women's laughter rang through the mansion.

During their conversation, Xiao Qingxuan glanced at Lin Wanrong, noticing his expression of vague amusement, and wondered what he was thinking. She took his hand and asked softly, "My Husband Lin, are you upset that I hid my true identity from you?"

Considering Chuyun's demeanor, Lord Lin had long suspected her of being rich or noble but never imagined she was the Emperor's beloved Princess Chuyun. Lin Wanrong felt a moment of puzzlement but then smiled and sighed, "I don't blame you. Everyone has their reasons for doing things. Since you hid your identity, you must have had your difficulties. Why would I blame you?"

Zhao Chuyun hummed in acknowledgment, a tear falling as she sighed, "My lord understands me. Many things in this world are done out of necessity. Although I was born into the royal family, my fate is pitiable, even worse than that of common women." She held Lin Wanrong's hand tightly, smiling through her tears, "Now that I belong to you, I will hide nothing. My family name is Zhao, and my given name is Qingxuan. I am the second daughter of the current Emperor of Great Hua, bestowed with the title Chuyun."

Zhao Qingxuan, Xiao Qingxuan; Lin Wanrong suddenly clapped his hands and exclaimed, "Why didn't I think of this before? Your name 'Xiao' is taken from the half part of the character 'Zhao.' Such a simple association, and it baffled me for a long time."

Xiao Qingxuan shook her head and smiled, "It's not just that. My mother's maiden name was Xiao Feng'er, and taking 'Xiao' as a surname also serves to remember her. Moreover, these years wandering the world, I have been called Xiao Qingxuan and have grown accustomed to it."

It turned out that his mother-in-law's surname was Xiao, and Qingxuan was indeed filled with filial piety. Whether she was Xiao Qingxuan or Zhao Qingxuan, she was always his dear wife, without a doubt. Seeing Qingxuan's pretty face as radiant as a flower, and recalling her charm in bed that morning, Lin Wanrong's heart was itching with excitement. What did it matter if she was a princess? Wasn't she still the same, needing a man's affection? Stealthily pinching her palm, he chuckled to himself.

Miss Xiao seemed to understand his thoughts, and seeing his lecherous smile, she knew what was on his mind. Thinking of the ridiculous things that had happened that morning, her face turned red, and she pinched his mischievous hand hard, lowering her head in embarrassment.

Luo Ning didn't realize the secret exchange between the two and asked doubtfully, "Sister, since you are such a noble princess of our great Great Hua Empire, how did you end up in the Jade Virtue Immortal Hall as the successor of that place? Didn't they know your true identity?"

Xiao Qingxuan looked downcast and shook her head with a faint sigh, "Being part of the royal family means one does not control one's own destiny. Though I was born noble, I was less free and happy than ordinary women. My fate was determined at birth."

Seeing her looking so downcast, Luo Ning and Qiaoqiao quickly and obediently held her hands. Xiao Qingxuan gave a grateful smile, gently stroked her hair, and said calmly, "Since you two sisters are married to My Dear Lin, you're no longer outsiders. Our Lin family is united and loving, and we keep no secrets from each other. I will tell you everything, but I trust you two to keep it confidential and not share it with others."

Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning quickly nodded. Lin Wanrong, having had many interactions with the old Emperor, understood some of the secrets involved. Seeing Qingxuan's expression, he knew it had something to do with his father-in-law.

"Surely you two sisters know something about the dispute between my father and Prince Cheng for the throne," Xiao Qingxuan sighed slightly, expressing her feelings. As a princess, she had an elegant manner. Even speaking of something usually taboo, she did so sincerely, without evoking any displeasure, earning Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning's admiration.

The struggle between the two princes was known to everyone in Great Hua, and Luo Ning and Qiaoqiao, both well-educated women, were no strangers to it. Seeing them nod, Xiao Qingxuan whispered, "I must tell you, sisters, that our late Emperor actually favored Prince Cheng more. At that time, Prince Cheng controlled the Ministry of Personnel, and no one could surpass his

influence. Taking the throne seemed a foregone conclusion. However, he was suspicious by nature, and despite his advantage, he never felt secure. He repeatedly plotted against my father and even had my two older brothers assassinated. My mother died from grief and exhaustion three years after I was born. I was not even three, and never got to see what my mother looked like."

Miss Xiao's face turned pale, tears flowing down. Her two brothers and mother had died because of Prince Cheng. Such a family tragedy, happening to the ethereal princess of Great Hua, was truly heartbreaking.

Luo Ning and Qiaoqiao were shocked by the tale of fratricide, a thing highly tabooed in every dynasty. Coming from Princess Chuyun, there was no doubting its truth. No wonder their sister had entrusted them with keeping the secret. The two hurriedly took Xiao Qingxuan's hands, offering words of comfort and reassurance.

Though this matter was already known, hearing it from Xiao Qingxuan's lips lent it a greater emotional impact. Lin Wanrong heaved a sigh, his heart aching for Qingxuan. At the same time, he found a new level of respect for his imperial father-in-law. The loss of a wife and child, a shattered family – these were burdens too great for most to bear. Yet the Emperor had endured them, showing a strength Lin Wanrong knew he himself lacked. Had it been him, Prince Cheng would have been destroyed hundreds of times over.

Comforted by the two young women, Xiao Qingxuan's grief lessened considerably. Wiping her tears, she continued, "My father was resolute and patient, but the pain was more than he could bear. Prince Cheng was so aggressive and domineering that my father, with his limited power, had no choice but to seek an alternative plan. At that time, the highly reputable Jade Virtue Immortal Hall happened to be selecting its next heir, specifying a noble-born female infant. And my mother had just given birth to me—"

Xiao Qingxuan tightly grasped Lin Wanrong's hand, tears falling like broken pearls. Lin Wanrong felt his heart ache and quickly embraced her, wiping the tears from her face and softly saying, "It's alright, I'm here, no one can bully you."

"So, the Emperor sent you to the Jade Virtue Immortal Hall to become the heir? This has ruined your life; how could he do such a thing?" Qiaoqiao, innocent and pure, felt her sister's pain as if it were her own, tears streaming down her face as she cried out in distress.

Her words were a grave taboo. Luo Ning, shocked, hurriedly pulled her aside and said, "Don't speak nonsense. The Emperor is her biological father; how could he not love her?"

"You two must not misunderstand," Xiao Qingxuan shook her head, determination in her eyes. "Concerning this matter, I have never blamed my father. On the contrary, I am grateful to him."

Grateful? Not only Luo Ning and Qiaoqiao, but even Lin Wanrong found this strange. You were still in swaddling clothes, and your father gave you away; how could you be grateful? What kind of logic was this?

Xiao Qingxuan smiled gently and said softly, "My Dear, if I had to choose between you and our child, I would definitely choose you."

Moved beyond words, Luo Ning's tears began to flow as she said, "Sister, I understand what you mean. A child is a piece of your flesh, but for the sake of big brother, you would willingly give up your child. Your love for big brother surpasses everything."

Xiao Qingxuan nodded slightly, sighing, "Only after becoming a mother did I truly understand my father's feelings back then. Sending one person away to gain absolute power, to protect my mother, and to keep the family safe—my father had no other choice. There's not a parent in the world who doesn't love their child, but my father's decision not only forced him to endure the pain of separation but also to bear a thousand curses. His pain is beyond the understanding of ordinary people. He took all the curses upon himself, protecting my mother and my family. If he hadn't made that difficult decision, who knows what persecution my mother and father might have faced? Though this choice forced me to endure loneliness and pain, it also allowed me to honor my parents and family with filial piety. Tell me, should I hate him or respect him?"

Several people listened, dumbfounded. Xiao Qingxuan was indeed a phoenix among humans, and her way of thinking, though vastly contrary to common logic, was on point in every word and sentence. The old Emperor was human too, possessing all the feelings and desires, but he had a determination and means unlike ordinary people. He sent Xiao Qingxuan, who was still in swaddling clothes, to the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall to become a successor, sacrificing her entire life. It was indeed unfair to Qingxuan, but it was fair to other family members.

"So how did you learn about your origin later on?" Luo Ning asked concernedly. "When the people of the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall found out you were a princess, did they dare to make things difficult for you?"

"The situation is not as unbearable as you imagine. To avoid attention, my identity within the sacred hall was kept a strict secret, known only to the master of the hall and my Master." Xiao Qingxuan smiled gracefully, "My father is not a heartless person. When he sent me away, he made an agreement with the sacred hall. Until I reached the age of twenty and inherited the sacred hall, I

could visit my parents every year to perform filial duties. I would stay in the palace for a month every year, reuniting with my parents, and the Emperor would have the best scholars teach me. If it weren't for this condition, my mother could not have survived until I was three. I fear she would have died of grief the moment I was sent away. Unfortunately, she passed away due to lingering illness when I was three, which remains my lifelong regret."

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong understood. The old Emperor had employed a delaying tactic, using Qingxuan to stabilize the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall while keeping her close to the royal family. With twenty years' time, he could find a solution. No wonder the mention of the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall turned the old Emperor's face so sour; he had been planning to eliminate it, not only for the sake of the Empire but also for Qingxuan's sake. Such patience, such tactics were truly profound and pitiable.

Qiaoqiao wiped her tears and smiled brightly, "Now everything is fine. Without the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall, sister has reunited with big brother and has a little baby. From now on, our family will live happily together, and no one can separate us."

Xiao Qingxuan nodded, her pretty face full of tenderness, looking at Lin Wanrong and murmuring to herself, "Since the day I understood the world, I knew that happiness was forever estranged from me. Yet, during the trip to Jinling, I met My Dear, the inscrutable enigma of my life, unfathomable and indecipherable. In life after life, I'm lost within it. Once I left my master, I became a mere mortal woman, not seeking to become an immortal or a Buddha, only wishing to grow old with My Dear, to be the joyous, carefree pair of mandarin ducks in this world, inseparable—even in death."

Though these words were spoken casually by Miss Xiao, they were deeply heartfelt and touching. Luo Ning and Qiaoqiao, being sincere and passionate, were moved to tears. They wondered what kind of fortune their big brother had accumulated to have met such a fairy-like figure as Sister Xiao.

Lin Wanrong was overwhelmingly moved, fiercely wiping his eyes, thinking, 'Goodness, if this continues, I'll be completely conquered by Qingxuan. This is not a good sign; a man losing himself becomes infatuated.'

"Hahaha," he laughed hastily three times, "Let's not talk about these unhappy things anymore. Since my imperial father-in-law misses his daughter so much, Qingxuan, I think you should pick a time to return to the palace and visit him. While you're at it, see if there are any unused gold and silver treasures at your father's house. Bring them back with you; it will earn some milk money for our baby. Ah, today's as good a day as any, the outside is bright and sunny, and the peach blossoms are blooming; it's the perfect time to visit."

The three women, caught up in the emotion of the moment, had their mood completely spoiled by his vulgar interruption. Luo Ning and Qingxuan both gave him a disdainful look. Qiaoqiao laughed and said, "What nonsense is big brother talking about? The rain has been falling since yesterday and hasn't stopped yet. Where's the spring sunshine?"

Xiao Qingxuan shook her head and said, "Though there's no spring light outside, I fear his heart is already filled with spring. My Dear, Mr. Xu Wei admires you, treats you kindly, and takes good care of you. I'm going to visit him later; will you come?"

Lin Wanrong was startled and waved his hands quickly, "No, no, absolutely not."

Luo Ning giggled, looked at him coquettishly, and said, "Big brother, what are you afraid of? If you go with Sister, can someone really eat you?"

"I don't know who wants to eat me, but I'll definitely eat you, you little vixen." Lin Wanrong slapped Luo Ning's hip, which was plump and firm, and then whispered threateningly in her ear.

Luo Ning let out a sound, her cheeks blushing, and she quickly hid behind Miss Xiao. Her lips slightly parted, and her eyes instantly filled with endless affection.

"If you won't go, then I will," Xiao Qingxuan said with a slight smile. "Today I'll visit the Xu family, and tomorrow I'll go to the Xiao family to see Eldest Miss Xiao, Second Miss Xiao, and the Madam. When I was in Jinling, I heard they took good care of you. I must thank them for their kindness."

Lin Wanrong looked at Xiao Qingxuan's calm expression and felt like a mouse being stepped on. He let out a laugh and hastily escaped.

Luo Ning was both annoyed and amused, "Sister, did he go to the Xiao family to tip them off? When you go tomorrow, you definitely won't see Xiao Yuruo. Eldest Miss Xiao's treatment of big brother has always been quite arrogant."

"Even better if I don't see her," Xiao Qingxuan replied, beautiful as a flower and unperturbed. "As long as she doesn't come to my Lin family's doorstep, it doesn't matter to me whether I see her or not."

Lin Wanrong went out and looked around. On the left, Xu Wei's residence was eerily quiet. However, the main door was slightly ajar, leaving a small gap, seemingly left on purpose for someone.

‘That old Xu, really, what's he doing moving next to my house? Even a rabbit doesn't eat grass beside its burrow; isn't this making it difficult for Miss Xu?’ He looked around, noticing no one was paying attention, and felt a sudden itch in his heart. ‘Rabbits don't eat grass beside their burrows, but I'm not a rabbit. Miss Xu kindly invited me to her house. Although she had some improper intentions, it's not that severe. If I don't go, wouldn't it be rude? I've always been a very polite person.’

He was in extreme difficulty, torn between conflicting emotions. On one hand, he felt guilty about Xiao Qingxuan, thinking that meeting with another woman right under her nose was the act of a beast. On the other hand, he thought of Miss Xu, who had a tough life; the only way to help her move beyond her humble existence was for him to lend a hand.

After thinking for a long time and unable to make up his mind, he gritted his teeth and pulled out a copper coin from his bosom. He chuckled and said, "This toss will decide the outcome. If it lands heads, I'll walk to Xu's residence. If it lands tails, I'll take a sedan chair to Xu's residence. If the coin stands upright—damn, if that happens, I'll strip naked and run ten laps around the street."

Leaving his fate to the copper coin, everything was the decision of the heavens, and he had nothing to do with it. Shifting all responsibility, he felt his mind at ease. With a flick of his thumb, the copper coin jingled and clanged, rolling around on the ground for several circles, running far away before it gradually came to a stop. Astonishingly, it had—stood upright!

Chapter 422 Heated Debate in the Court

Lin Wanrong's eyes stared intently at the bronze coin. Impossible, could something like this really happen? This must be a joke! Seeing no one around, he thought to himself, ‘It must be because the wind is too strong. It blew the coin and made it stand upright. It's an accident; it doesn't count. Let me try again.’

Ignoring the coin that had landed, he took out a brand-new bronze coin from his pocket, blew on it with a magical breath, flicked it with his thumb, and threw it casually. The coin clinked and rolled a distance, and Lin Wanrong watched closely. To his surprise, the coin similarly stood upright, stable as a rock.

What was happening? Could he really be this unlucky? Lin Wanrong's eyes nearly popped out of his head. He stared in disbelief for a moment before hurrying forward to examine the coin, only to find himself both laughing and crying. The coin had embedded itself in a soft patch of mud, standing perfectly straight without even a wobble. Looking back at the other coin, he saw the exact same situation.

"What on earth is this?" he muttered, thinking about the unfortunate situation he was in. He chuckled and said, "A deal is a deal. Tonight, when it's quiet, I'll streak naked ten times around Ning'er's room. Heh, heh."

Shaking his head helplessly, he was about to bend down and pick up the two coins when he suddenly heard a faint whooshing sound coming towards his backside. Startled, he dodged quickly, only to hear a soft splatter as a clump of mud flew past him, hitting the wall with a light smack, sticking tightly.

Lin Wanrong immediately understood, and yelled angrily, "Who's there? Who shot at me?"

"What if I did shoot you?" A young girl's voice replied. "For a heartless and faithless playboy like you, it's already a favor that I didn't prick you with a needle."

A girl of about thirteen or fourteen years old, dressed in green, pretty, and holding a sword, walked out from around the corner, smirking.

"So, it's you, little junior sister," Lin Wanrong laughed, then said seriously, "Little junior sister, I must tell you, some things are very valuable. You shouldn't waste them by shooting them at the wall."

Li Xiangjun snorted, "Mud? I have plenty of that. If you want it, I'll give it all to you." She finished speaking, and with a flick of her right hand, mud shot out like a shower of stars, steady and precise.

Lin Wanrong leaped several steps, quickly shielding his face with his sleeves. Dodging, he angrily said, "Little girl, I'm warning you, don't mess with me. I'm quite fierce. I can handle three at a time and carry one on my back. I can perform any difficult task."

Seeing his clothes covered in mud, Li Xiangjun clapped her hands and giggled, "What difficult tasks? I can do many. Just because you bullied my senior sister, I'm not afraid of you. Whatever you've got, just bring it on. Senior sister may pity you, but I don't have time for that."

'This little brat is truly outrageous!' Lin Wanrong thought, wiping a clump of mud from his forehead. Furious, he said, "Little girl, haven't you heard the rule 'don't hit the face'? How do you survive out there? I rely on this face to make a living. If you dare, don't go anywhere. I'm going back to call a big meeting, chop off a chicken's head, and drink blood wine. I'll gather all the rabble from the nine villages and eighteen hamlets to denounce you."

Li Xiangjun couldn't help but laugh coquettishly: "When dealing with a stinking man like you, one must slap you in the face. This is the rule I follow as I wander the world. Those leaders of the Nine Towns and Eighteen Villages, are they just as weak as you? That's good. I'll strike down anyone who comes my way." She snorted and added, "I despise white-faced men like you who live off women. You're a complete waste of a man. What can you do besides bully my senior sister?"

"Call me a white-faced man? You're the first! How can such a great and glorious title fall upon me?" Seeing Li Xiangjun approach him with a satisfied smile, Lin Wanrong's anger arose, and his evil intentions took hold. He suddenly reached out, twisted her wrist, and chuckled: "Besides bullying your senior sister, I'll bully you, too, ouch—"

Li Xiangjun was Fairy Ning's direct disciple, Xiao Qingxuan's junior sister, so she wouldn't be easily caught. With a graceful twist, she reversed his grip and locked his arm. Lin Wanrong was quite skilled in fighting, especially against women, with various tactics at hand. No matter if you're a young maiden or a wife, he'd charge! He was strong and bullish, heaving and pressing directly onto Li Xiangjun.

"Stinking man!" Seeing him use a shameless technique, Li Xiangjun's face turned pale with anger, and she quickly let go of his wrist, jumping back. Though young, she had already developed the potential of a shrew and couldn't be underestimated. Lin Wanrong, unyielding, used all sorts of dirty tricks in fighting with women. No matter how skilled you were, he'd make you go crazy within a few moves.

Although Li Xiangjun was skilled in martial arts, her young age and her opponent's utter shamelessness, with no regard for decency, left her unable to use her skills. Lin Wanrong, an unrefined expert, could handle various moves. The two of them fought, neither gaining the upper hand.

"Fighting to a draw with Fairy Ning's direct disciple without firearms or poison, my skills are truly extraordinary!" Lin Wanrong said triumphantly, chuckling, "Little sister, I told you before, I'm very capable. You should not have provoked me; it's too late to regret it now! I strike—Dragon Claw Hand—"

Seeing his shamelessness, Li Xiangjun was furious. She gritted her teeth, focused on his attacking wrists, and forcefully slapped them down.

"Ouch, are you playing for real?!" Lin Wanrong felt a sharp pain in his wrists and quickly withdrew the "Dragon Claw Hand," only to find them bruised, clearly outplayed by the young girl.

Li Xiangjun coldly laughed, "Did your tactics seem like a game to me?"

With a sharp pain in his wrists, Lin Wanrong hadn't suffered like this before. Damn it, he couldn't let the little girl get the better of him! With a ferocious look, he charged forward like a hungry tiger. His rush was fierce, and Li Xiangjun's small body was enveloped in his arms, a mismatch as extreme as a tiger and a chick. To an unknowing observer, it looked as if he were committing an indecent act. Li Xiangjun stood in place, a mysterious smile on her face, her eyes filled with a triumphant look of victory.

Seeing the little girl standing motionless, looking as if she was waiting for death, Lin Wanrong hesitated for a moment. Without giving it much thought, he was about to deal with the young girl, when he suddenly heard a soft cry from behind: "My Dear, you must not—"

With a booming sound, Lin Wanrong immediately realized that something was terribly wrong. He had been fooled by this young girl. 'Damn it,' he thought, 'Has my intelligence declined recently, or what? How is it that I can't even outwit this little girl, who's barely in her teens?'

"Sister—" Li Xiangjun's tears fell like broken beads, and she cried out and flew into Xiao Qingxuan's arms, like a baby swallow returning to its nest. 'Women are born actresses,' Lin Wanrong sighed helplessly, feeling a chill down his spine.

Seeing her junior sister weeping pitifully, Xiao Qingxuan hurriedly patted her shoulder, speaking softly, "Don't cry, don't cry. My Dear is kind-hearted and good-natured; he's only joking with you."

Li Xiangjun nodded, sobbing, "I know he's joking with me. Big Brother Lin said that I ruined your good time last night, but he won't hold it against me; a few light slaps will suffice to vent his anger." Hearing her mention the previous night, Xiao Qingxuan's cheeks turned red, and she lightly spat, casting a glance at her husband.

The onlookers, Luo Ning and Qiaoqiao, secretly stuck out their tongues. Their big brother had looked like a ferocious wolf just now, far from being gentle. 'Sister Xiangjun is so kind-hearted and compassionate, still speaking in favor of Big Brother at this time,' they thought.

Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth with hatred. "Pretending to be pitiful in front of my wife to frame me, this little girl's mind is far from ordinary. I've got all kinds of weapons ready for you, little girl, don't fall into my hands."

"Big Brother," Luo Ning grabbed his hand, blushing, "Sister Xiangjun is not even fourteen. Aren't you too impatient? Meat raised in a pot can't fly away. I think she will grow up to be a beauty that will ruin a country! Instead of letting her harm others, better let her harm you. Train her well, and in a few years, she will be as soft as mud, just as you want her to be. Why are you so eager now?"

Lin Wanrong was covered in cold sweat, "Ning'er, this girl, really dares to do and think anything. Heaven have mercy, is my character really so bad that I would harm a young girl not yet grown? I'm not interested in raising games."

Xiao Qingxuan looked at him with a half-smile, "My Dear, such a trivial matter, how can you be so petty with little junior sister? She's only this age."

‘Small in age, but not in strength,’ Lin Wanrong thought, moving his hands, feeling more heartache than physical pain.

Li Xiangjun spoke timidly, "Sister, don't blame Big Brother Lin for last night. I was wrong too. I've lived with you since I was young, and I don't want to be separated from you. Don't blame Big Brother Lin; he acted out of love for you." Such an understanding child. The three ladies nodded in praise, casting scornful glances at Lin Wanrong.

‘Justice Bao, where are you when I need you?’ Lin Wanrong felt uncomfortable all over, realizing that this was not a place to stay for long. With all his wives around, he certainly couldn't go to the Xu family now. ‘Miss Xu, you can give up your hopes.’

Three women were gently consoling the youngest sister, and Li Xiangjun's face beamed with joy and satisfaction. Lin Wanrong looked around impatiently, hoping to escape this place of strife as soon as possible. Just as his impatience grew, he suddenly heard the faint sound of horses' hooves from ahead. A carriage sped towards them, and a gray-haired head peered out from inside. It was none other than Lord Xu Wei.

‘Old Xu, you truly are my savior!’ Lin Wanrong exclaimed with grateful tears, jumping up and waving his arms. "Master Xu, Master Xu, I'm here! Have you come to discuss matters with me? I'll come with you right away."

Turning to the others, Lin Wanrong's face displayed difficulty. "Qiaoqiao, Qingxuan, you see, Lord Xu has come in his carriage specifically to invite me to discuss matters. I must go; it's a matter of face, is it not?"

Luo Ning laughed and said, "Mr. Xu's home is just next door; he must have just finished his morning audience at court."

Being exposed by Ning'er's words, as if needles were pricking his back, Lin Wanrong's heart was filled with annoyance. 'You wench, why do you have to be so clever? Originally, I was planning to run ten naked laps in your room tonight, but since you're not taking care of your husband, I'll cut the number in half to just five.'

"You should go," Xiao Qingxuan nodded and said, "National affairs must come first, and not be hindered by domestic matters."

'Qingxuan truly understands,' Lin Wanrong thought with gratitude. He glared at his youngest sister-in-law, gesturing rudely with his middle finger, and then sprinted towards Xu Wei's carriage.

Upon hearing his cries, Xu Wei's carriage had already stopped. Lin Wanrong leaped onto the carriage in a single stride and pulled back the curtain, smiling, "Brother Xu, you truly are like the compassionate Bodhisattva Guanyin, rescuing me from trouble. I must bow to you."

Sitting in the carriage, Xu Wei looked worried. Upon Lin Wanrong's entrance, he smiled and said, "Little brother Lin, are you some kind of fortune teller, to know I was coming to find you?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, thinking, 'How could this be a coincidence? The commotion I made yesterday even brought Prince Cheng to my door. How could you not know?' Seeing Lin Wanrong's laughter, Xu Wei couldn't maintain his pretense and awkwardly laughed twice, saying, "Little brother Lin, this must be the Miss Xiao you've been seeking, right? Truly a beauty of the realm, graceful and elegant. No wonder you even disregarded Jade Virtue Fairy Hall."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "I was somewhat afraid of Jade Virtue Fairy Hall, but they dared to force my wife, and that I could not bear. Who doesn't have something they're protective of these days?"

Xu Wei gave a thumbs-up, praising him, "Little brother, you love and hate openly, act with courage, and handle matters with great satisfaction. However," he frowned, sighing with emotion, "this affair has both praised and criticized you. It has clearly divided the world into two factions."

"Divided into two factions? Which two?" Lin Wanrong asked, intrigued by this new perspective he had not heard before.

Xu Wei gave a bitter smile and said, "On one side, they praise you for being passionate and righteous, daring to act, and being a person of utmost sincerity. These are mainly young ladies and gentlemen who admire your strong and fearless love with Miss Xiao, and are even drawn to you. On the other side, led by renowned scholars, they berate you for attacking the sacred place and insulting the scholars of the world. They've even presented a petition with hundreds of signatures, demanding that the Emperor punishes you for your grave crimes."

'Punish me for grave crimes? I'm now the Imperial Son-in-Law, carrying the weight of great responsibility. Will my father-in-law really strike against his own family?' Lin Wanrong snorted and waved his hand, saying, "Let them fuss. Our Great Hua has been stagnant for too long, like a dead pool lacking vitality. Taking this opportunity to stir up the people's fervor might not be a bad thing."

Xu Wei nodded and said, "It's rare to find someone as open-minded as you, little brother. I admire you greatly, but this matter concerns your life and property, and you mustn't be careless."

"Concerns my life and property?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed. "Mr. Xu, what do you mean by that?"

"That's precisely why I came to find you in haste," Xu Wei sighed, looking helpless. "This morning, during the court session, Prince Cheng suddenly made accusations, joining forces with two high-ranking officials and over a hundred scholars, all accusing you. They blamed you for attacking the sacred place, insulting the scholars, and even claimed that you conspired with the White Lotus cult to rebel, demanding your execution. Li Tai and I argued fiercely in your defense, and the court was in an uproar. It hasn't settled even now. I asked for the Emperor's permission to have you come and confront the charges. Little brother, you must come with me to the palace quickly."

'Prince Cheng is really determined to have me punished!' Lin Wanrong snickered, "Brother Xu, with the court in such an uproar, what did the Emperor say?"

"I really couldn't say," Xu Wei shook his head. "Both sides were arguing, and the Emperor has not yet spoken. I don't know who he leans toward. Right now, with Goryeo in danger, the people of Dongyin stirring, and our Great Hua deploying a large army, the situation is extremely critical and

sensitive. This widely known incident may be a blessing or a curse for our nation. That's why I asked for your presence at the Golden Hall to make everything clear."

Xu Wei's concerns were not unfounded. The current situation was like a small boat on a vast ocean, where any significant wave could cause turmoil. The incident of attacking the sacred place had caused a public outcry, and the Emperor had to act cautiously.

As the carriage sped towards the Imperial Palace, Lin Wanrong chuckled dryly a few times and suddenly asked, "Brother Xu, where is Miss Xu? Today, I walked around your front door a few times but didn't seem to see her."

Hearing Lin Wanrong mention Xu Zhiqing, Xu Wei laughed, "If you're looking for Zhiqing, you'll have to come inside. She's not a patrol guard. What were you doing loitering around the door? Ah, what do you need her for?"

"Oh, I just have some profound questions to discuss with her. You know, I'm a person who loves learning," Lin Wanrong said with a shy smile.

Seeing his mysterious demeanor, Xu Wei chuckled with a meaningful smile, "You went to the mountain to find Miss Xiao yesterday, and Zhiqing went with you, didn't she? Sigh, that girl, she's a bit stubborn. I hope she didn't cause you too much trouble."

Miss Xu indeed had caused some trouble, leaving him strictly monitored at home. Lord Lin had bitterness in his heart that he couldn't express, and he could only respond with a forced laugh. Xu Wei sighed and said, "The affairs of you young people are beyond my control. She's been staying in the embroidery room since returning home yesterday, and I have no idea what she's up to. If you need to discuss something with Zhiqing, go find her directly."

When Xu Wei and Lin San arrived at the Hall of Literary Brilliance, the morning court session had not yet dispersed. They were led to the entrance of the grand hall by a junior eunuch, and from inside, a wave of argumentative voices could be heard. Someone spoke loudly, "Your Majesty, Lin San has shown contempt for laws and regulations, shelling the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall, insulting all scholars across the land. Now, over a hundred eminent scholars have submitted a petition, demanding severe punishment for Lin San, rebuilding the sacred place, and giving justice back to the scholars. This matter has provoked public outrage and is related to our Great Hua Dynasty's foundation of a hundred years. As our Great Hua is about to engage in a decisive battle with the nomads, this issue must not be neglected. I, your humble brother, advise that Lin San be dealt with swiftly and severely to appease the public."

The voice was familiar, and it was none other than Prince Cheng, who had confronted him the day before. As Prince Cheng spoke, the crowd immediately began to whisper, and those ministers who had intercepted Lin San with Prince Cheng yesterday started to concur.

Within the grand hall, another powerful voice responded, "What Prince Cheng says, this old servant cannot agree with. As far as I know, Lin San's shelling of Jade Virtue Fairy Hall had a reason. In private, Lin San's wife was detained by the sacred place, and he acted out of anger to save her, a commendable action that the world applauds. In public, Jade Virtue Fairy Hall had committed the great crime of deceiving the Emperor, altering the ancestral inscription from 'Equal to Man' to 'Equal to Heaven', oppressing the populace, and flouting national law. Both privately and publicly, Lin San's actions were justified. He should not be reprimanded but praised for his timely action to eradicate this evil. Your Majesty, please examine the matter closely."

The speaker was General Li Tai, a highly respected figure in the great Hua's army. Hearing him defend Lin San, those who supported Xu Wei and Li Tai immediately aligned themselves. The Jade Virtue Fairy Hall was esteemed among the gentry but had little connection to the poor. Those scholars of this faction, many of whom had come from poverty and earned their titles through years of hard study, felt a surge of satisfaction at Lin San's attack on the haughty Jade Virtue Fairy Hall. With the military support of Li Tai, their alignment with Lin San was natural.

The two sides argued incessantly, but the Emperor's face remained calm, neither verbally supporting nor opposing. An attendant whispered a few words to the Emperor, and the old monarch spoke, "Prince Cheng and the Old General need not argue further. Lin San is outside the hall. Let's hear what he has to say before making a judgment."

Hearing that Lin San had arrived, Prince Cheng's face flickered between light and shadow, while Li Tai loudly praised, "Your Majesty is wise. This is exactly what should be done."

The Old Emperor waved his hand, and a junior eunuch announced, "Vice Minister of Ministry of Personnel and Commander-in-Chief of the Loyal and Brave Army, Lin San, enter the hall!"

Xu Wei, walking in front, bowed to the Emperor, saying, "Your Majesty, this old servant has brought Lord Lin."

"Dear Minister Xu has worked hard," the Emperor nodded faintly, glancing at Lin Wanrong beside him, smiling, "Dear Minister Lin, did you sleep well last night?"

‘The old man must know,’ he thought. ‘Last night I was his son-in-law, loving and cherishing time with Qingxuan; how could I not sleep well?’ Lin Wanrong chuckled, bowing his fist, "Your Majesty, this commoner slept peacefully."

The Emperor's face changed, and he snorted angrily, "You bombarded the century-honored Jade Virtue Fairy Hall, drawing condemnation from scholars everywhere. Even Prince Cheng advocates harsh punishment against you, and you still sleep peacefully? I see your audacity has reached the heavens."

The officials were inwardly startled at the Emperor's stern expression. As soon as Lin San arrived at the court, the Emperor sought to humble him. What did this mean? Did he really intend to punish him?

‘I am the Emperor's son-in-law; what do I have to fear?’ Lin Wanrong smirked, "Your Majesty, indeed I bombarded the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall. However, the phrase 'enjoying a hundred years of fame,' I cannot agree with. If there's any reputation, it is only in deceiving the world and stealing fame."

"How dare you, Lin San!" Prince Cheng angrily rebuked, "In the Golden Hall, you still dare to disrespect the Sacred Hall! The Sacred Hall has flourished for a century, honored throughout Great Hua, nurturing countless talents. Almost half of the distinguished men in this Golden Hall come from the Sacred Hall, and you dare to say that it deceives and steals fame? By showing such contempt for the scholars of the world, Your Majesty, I boldly request that you order Lin San to be slapped in the face to punish his disrespectful words."

The Old Emperor also snorted, his face stern, "Lin San, quickly explain yourself, or I will follow my brother's words and slap you eighty times."

"Prince, you say I disrespect the Sacred Hall," Lin Wanrong stepped towards Prince Cheng, smiling, "Allow me to boldly ask, do you respect me?"

"How audacious!" Su Mubai, behind Prince Cheng, roared angrily, "The Prince is of royal blood, a dragon seed of the nation, and you dare to speak to him like this?"

Lin Wanrong pointed at his nose, angrily saying, "Silence! In this Golden Hall, the Emperor permits me to speak but hasn't allowed you. You interrupt so rudely, disregarding even the etiquette between ruler and subject; what is your intention?"

Xu Wei stroked his beard, laughing softly. Lin Wanrong's sharp gaze almost made it a fatal blow. Not everyone could speak in the Golden Hall. Su Mubai had overstepped the etiquette between ruler and subject, a great disrespect. Su Mubai, who had never had his way with Lin San, saw the Emperor's cold face and dared not speak again.

"Prince, please answer me, do you respect me?" Lin Wanrong said with a smile. His one sentence had silenced Su Mubai, and no one dared to oppose his momentum.

Prince Cheng disdainfully laughed, "I am the descendent of the sacred ancestor, with a distinguished status. You and I have neither kinship nor friendship, and you've never given me any benefits. Why should I respect you?"

"Prince, you are right," Lin Wanrong shrugged nonchalantly, smiling, "Since you and I are neither kin nor friends, and I've never given you any benefits, you naturally don't need to respect me. Similarly, the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall did not raise me or teach me, nor has it given me any benefit. Why should I respect it? I, Lin San, respect Heaven, Earth, my parents, the Emperor, and the sage Confucius, but I never come to respect the Sacred Hall. So, Prince, if you want to punish me for disrespecting the Sacred Hall, I'm afraid you've chosen the wrong place."

What a sharp tongue! Prince Cheng sneered, saying, "You are being charged with irreverence because of your insolent words. Claiming that the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall deceives the world and fishes for fame, we all have heard it with our own ears, and the Emperor witnessed it. How can you deny it?"

"Indeed, I said those words 'deceiving the world and fishing for fame,' and I stand by them," Lin Wanrong said coldly. "Prince, you mentioned that this Jade Virtue Fairy Hall has been respected for half a year and is celebrated throughout the land. Allow me to boldly ask, was this reputation earned by itself, or was it bestowed by the Founding Emperor?"

When the Founding Emperor had seized the land, he had only mutually used the "Jade Virtue Fairy Hall." Prince Cheng knew this in his heart, but denying his ancestor's achievements was something he absolutely couldn't do. After pondering for a moment, he replied, "Though the Hall had some reputation in the past, it was never as prosperous as today. If it were not for our ancestors' personal endorsement, the Hall would not have such a status. This reputation was largely bestowed by the ancestor."

"That settles it then," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "The Founding Emperor's inscription, which you saw yesterday and General Li mentioned earlier, clearly says 'Equal to Man,' but was deliberately misinterpreted as 'Equal to Heaven.' A single wrong character led to a thousand miles of error. May

I ask you, Prince, where's the glory in these words 'Equal to Man'? Clearly, it was a call for them to learn from the common people and strive to reach their heights. What glory does the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall have in that? If anyone deserves credit, it's the great people of the land, and the Hall has nothing to do with it. The Hall's reputation doesn't even exist, so when I say they're fishing for fame and deceiving the world, where am I wrong, Prince?"

"You, you're just arguing sophistry!" Prince Cheng said, infuriated. "How could something respected for a hundred years by scholars all over the world be wrong?"

"Prince," Lin Wanrong said with a cold smile, "if what scholars respect is not wrong, then did the Founding Emperor write wrongly? Should this so-called Jade Virtue Fairy Hall stand aloof and be equal to heaven?"

"This, this—" Prince Cheng knew he was trapped the moment he uttered those words. Debating with Lin San was treacherous; a slight slip would lead to an irredeemable situation.

Lin Wanrong turned, bowed, and said seriously, "Your Majesty, yesterday I retrieved the Founding Emperor's genuine inscription from the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall, and I intend to present it to you!"

"Summon it, summon it quickly!" The Emperor hastily rose from his dragon throne, straightened his clothing, and led his ministers to receive it reverently.

The inscription from the Founding Emperor was carried by two young eunuchs, passing through the main gate and central hall, heading straight to the main hall. The Old Emperor and his ministers went forward and knelt, bowing their heads in devout worship. Lin Wanrong chuckled slyly to himself, thinking, 'My ancestral grandfather's inscription sure comes in handy everywhere; it never fails.'

After the kowtowing, the Emperor respectfully took the Founding Emperor's genuine handwriting, returned to the Golden Hall, and examined it carefully. Filled with emotion, he sighed, "The Founding Emperor's genuine handwriting, returned to the hands of his unfilial descendants after hundreds of years, fills my heart with shame."

Xu Wei proposed, "The return of the Founding Emperor's genuine handwriting is a great omen. Whether Lin San's words are true or false, only Your Majesty needs to discern it with a glance, and the truth will be revealed."

The Emperor looked at the calligraphy once more, and suddenly, with a fierce strike on the table, he roared in anger, "How preposterous, how preposterous! It really says 'Equal to Man!'! The sagacious Great Ancestor, hundreds of years ago, already imparted this admonition, yet Jade Virtue Fairy Hall dared to forge the decree for a hundred years, deceiving me and the world, attempting to subvert our Great Hua Dynasty, equating themselves with Heaven. Such crimes are heinous, deserving a myriad of deaths. Come here—"

Gao Ping quickly stepped forward, bowing in respect. The Emperor continued furiously, "Make ten thousand copies of the Founding Emperor's authentic writing, distribute them to the scholars across the land. Let them see how this Jade Virtue Fairy Hall, which claims to be on par with Heaven, has acted audaciously and deceived their superiors. Anyone who dares to plead for Jade Virtue Fairy Hall will be considered an accomplice, and will not be spared."

The Emperor's face was livid with anger. No one in the hall dared to defy him, and all fell into silence. Even the intelligent Xu Wei realized early on that this was a drama performed by the Emperor and Lin San, and that the downfall of Jade Virtue Fairy Hall was inevitable, whether by Lin San's hand or another's. It was only a matter of time.

"Your Majesty," Lin Wanrong said earnestly, "Although Jade Virtue Fairy Hall has committed grave sins, their disciples were merely deceived for a moment, unintentionally falling into their trap. I suggest, Your Majesty, to punish the wicked but spare those disciples who have truly repented. This act would not only manifest Your Majesty's benevolent heart but also encourage those who were deceived to strive and contribute to our Great Hua."

Xu Wei and Li Tai both voiced their agreement, "We concur with Little Brother Lin's proposal. We should treat the disciples of the Fairy Hall with leniency to demonstrate our Emperor's magnanimity."

Lin Wanrong then repeated his proposal to reorganize Jade Virtue Fairy Hall, open forums, establish schools, and promote engineering and other subjects. The old Emperor waved his hand grandly and declared, "Approved! Grant ten thousand taels of silver. Establish the school, attract talent from across the world, scholars and artisans alike. Lin San, you will be the Grand Master of the school, fostering talents for our Great Hua, sustaining our land for millennia."

Lin Wanrong was taken aback. No wonder Qingxuan told him not to worry about the money; with her status, both official and private funds were endless. With a word from the Emperor, he had become the principal. With the strong support of his father-in-law, becoming the best in the world was within reach. Then, he would have disciples all over the world, welcomed wherever he went. However, he soon grew worried, realizing that apart from his thirty-six scattered hands, he didn't have much to teach.

Prince Cheng was astonished. Lin San already had Li Tai's support, and now, if he established a school and gathered talents, his power would be immense, unmatched by anyone. Unable to consider anything else, he gritted his teeth and stepped forward, "Your Majesty, this cannot be."

"Prince Cheng, what's wrong with this?" the Emperor asked calmly, "Are you still defending that insidious Jade Virtue Fairy Hall? We have the Founding Emperor's handwriting as proof."

Prince Cheng stubbornly replied, "Lin San is in collusion with the White Lotus Holy Mother; his intentions are unfathomable and unpredictable. If he is put in charge of establishing the school, I fear the people will not have faith in him."

Lin Wanrong chuckled inwardly. If anyone had unfathomable intentions, it was the old Emperor, who knew even more about Sister An's affairs than Prince Cheng did.

"Is this true?" the old Emperor asked calmly.

"This matter is absolutely true; members of my own household witnessed it with their own eyes. Additionally, the newly-crowned top scholar, Sir Su Mubai, also witnessed it," Prince Cheng said, giving Su Mubai a knowing glance.

Su Mubai caught the cold smile at the corner of Lin San's mouth and felt an ominous sensation, but at this point, he had no choice but to proceed. Steeling himself, he said, "Your Majesty, I personally witnessed this event. I saw Lin San meeting secretly with the White Lotus Holy Mother in an inn ____"

At these words, the entire room was filled with shock. Su Mubai's identity was no small matter. His personal testimony had set Lin San against him, and no matter if the story was true or false, one of the two was destined for destruction.

Seeing Su Mubai come forward, a fleeting look of disappointment passed through the Emperor's eyes, "My Minister Su, this matter is of great importance. You should think it through carefully before speaking."

Su Mubai's words were already out, and there was no taking them back. Though fear crept into his heart, he forced a determined look onto his face, "I witnessed it with my own eyes, and I would not deceive."

The Emperor sighed lightly, then turned to Lin Wanrong and asked, "Lin San, do you have anything to say?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, walking over to Su Mubai, and with a smile said, "Top Scholar, you claim to have seen me meeting secretly with the White Lotus Holy Mother. May I ask how you recognized her, having never met her before?"

Su Mubai gritted his teeth, resentfully replying, "I have been reading history since childhood and despise those traitorous ministers who have brought ruin to the nation. From the age of ten, I studied the portraits of the White Lotus Holy Mother and resolved to contribute to my country by eradicating this scourge, hence I recognized her."

"So you recognized her through a portrait," Lin Wanrong laughed. "Top Scholar, you have had such great ambitions since childhood. I admire that greatly. I too despise the White Lotus Holy Mother. Could you lend me that portrait to see?"

"Of course." Su Mubai had prepared for this and with a wave of his hand, a servant presented an old scroll. The scroll was aged and had seen some years. Upon unrolling it, a bewitching woman's image appeared, stunningly beautiful and voluptuous, with a mysterious smile on her face. It was indeed the likeness of Sister An.

'You sly vixen, you nearly killed me,' Lin Wanrong thought, feeling his heart stir. The fox spirit seemed to come to life before him, her delicate little finger beckoning and her laughter saying, "Little brother, I trust you are well?"

"Little, little brother Lin," noticing Lin San's distraction, Xu Wei urgently nudged him. Lin Wanrong snapped out of his reverie and quickly picked up the scroll again, examining it closely. The scroll was old and coarse, the ink dry, appearing quite ancient.

Lin Wanrong inspected the painting up and down, then suddenly began to laugh, "Top Scholar, is this truly the painting you have been studying since you were ten?"

Both men knew what the other was thinking. Su Mubai snorted, "Exactly so. What, do you doubt its authenticity?"

Lin Wanrong handed the scroll to Xu Wei, smiling, "Mr. Xu, no one surpasses you in the art of poetry and painting. Please, take a look at this painting."

Xu Wei bowed to the Emperor, who nodded, saying, "Granted! This matter is of great importance, my beloved minister Xu, you must appraise it carefully."

"I will surely fulfill my mission," Xu Wei bowed, taking the scroll and examining it carefully. This was a high-stakes gamble, and victory or defeat hung entirely on Xu Wei's shoulders.

Xu Wei appraised the painting for a while, and the smile on his face grew thicker and thicker. Lin Wanrong relaxed, looking at Su Mubai and laughing heartily. The top scholar Su had something to hide, and cold sweat poured down his forehead. Were it not for Prince Cheng's stern words, he would have already collapsed.

"Top Scholar Su, is this really the portrait you saw when you were ten years old?" Xu Wei asked, his eyes cold, looking at Su Mubai.

Su Mubai's body was soaked in cold sweat, but he stubbornly admitted, "Indeed, it is what I saw ten years ago."

"So it follows that this painting should be at least ten years old, shouldn't it?" Xu Wei's smile grew broader, and he spoke slowly.

"Yes, yes—" Su Mubai stammered.

Lin Wanrong and Xu Wei exchanged smiles and shouted in unison, "You lie, this painting cannot be more than a year old."

Chapter 423 Detecting Forgery

Su Mubai retreated a few steps, his face deathly pale. "I, I did not lie!"

Xu Wei shook his head and sighed, "Top Scholar Su, I have spent my lifetime with poetry and painting. I can tell who painted what, and when, with just a glance. Nine times out of ten, I am right. This portrait of the White Lotus Holy Mother is neat in brushwork and delicate in strokes, and the

artist has quite a level. It's a pity that like people have lifespan, trees have growth rings, paintings also have their years, and forgeries can't be hidden."

Xu Wei was a master, and everyone listened to his words, suddenly quite interested. Even the Old Emperor couldn't help but speak, "Minister Xu, you said this painting is not more than a year old. How did you see it?"

Xu Wei nodded and smiled, "To judge the age of a painting, in addition to examining the clothing, expression, and background of the characters, the canvas, scroll, and the degree of dryness and finesse of the ink and brush are also decisive. The latter points are difficult to forge and are the most important for identifying fake paintings."

Xu Wei smiled slightly and fell silent. The crowd listened to him tantalizingly and couldn't help themselves. Even Li Tai spoke, "Brother Xu, don't keep us in suspense, quickly explain it to us."

Xu Wei glanced at Su Mubai and laughed coldly, "Top Scholar Su, you ranked first in the special examination, aren't you well-learned? Haven't you heard these principles?"

"I do not know," Su Mubai's legs were weak, and he rallied his spirits.

Xu Wei laughed, "Then let this old man teach you a trick on how to identify a painting, so that you don't make the same mistake again. The characters' clothing, expressions, and background of this painting are all extremely well-matched, with no flaws to be seen. The problem lies in the ink and canvas."

Ink and canvas? Everyone looked again at the painting. The ink was natural, the canvas ancient, nothing seemed wrong.

Xu Wei took a few steps and declared loudly, "All good paintings have good ink; this is an unbreakable truth. This painting is no exception. The ink used here is of great value. It should be Huizhou ink from the Xiu Ning School in Anhui's Jixi, called Dragon Fragrance. This ink is known for its lacquer-like touch on paper, lustrous black color that doesn't fade, soft and smooth texture, remaining supple for a thousand years. Generally, particles and stripes wouldn't appear for less than three hundred years."

Xu Wei's words were a wake-up call, and some of the clever ones guessed what he meant. They looked at the strokes of the painting, but the brushwork was smooth, with no apparent problems.

Xu Wei smiled, "Good ink is good ink. Even if there are particles and stripes, they aren't easily seen. You must touch them to feel them. Please, Your Majesty, evaluate it!"

The eunuch presented the portrait, and the Old Emperor touched the texture of the clothing. He nodded, "Indeed there are grainy sensations, and it's uneven."

"Your old servant dares to ask, please touch the authentic relic of the Founding Emperor, which used the same Huizhou ink. Please, Your Majesty, discern the difference."

The Emperor lightly touched the sacred relic and exclaimed joyfully, "The ink of the Founding Emperor, though a hundred years old, has no dull sensation, still smooth as before. Minister Xu, the same ink, but different effects, what is this all about?"

"This is precisely the characteristic of good ink," Xu Wei said with a faint smile. "The calligraphy and artistic conception of famous people's characters and paintings can be imitated exquisitely, but not everyone can afford to use such excellent ink. As I have said before, the top-quality Huizhou ink will not show any granulation or striping for less than three hundred years. If the White Lotus Holy Mother was born three hundred years ago, not only would this old man find it unbelievable, but I suspect that even Top Scholar Su himself would not believe it."

The Emperor's interest was piqued, and he laughed, "Then how do you explain this granulation and striping?"

"That is the key to identifying the age of a painting," Xu Wei nodded. "Every new painting that wants to be passed off as an ancient fake must be artificially dried and baked to create an illusion of age. We all know that ink is derived from pine wood, and this excellent Huizhou ink will not granulate easily within three hundred years. Only after baking, due to uneven heating, will granules and stripes protrude irregularly. This is what the Emperor felt just now. From the distribution and texture of the granules on this painting, the ink appears aged, but the bumpy grain still feels new. It should have been completed and baked within the past year."

Everyone exhaled a long breath. Xu Wei was a master in painting, and his words were a thousand times more credible than those of Su Mubai.

"Truly knowledgeable indeed!" the old Emperor nodded and sighed. "How did you determine this from the canvas?"

"Let Little Brother Lin explain that part," Xu Wei said, smiling. "I see he seems to be an expert too."

‘An expert my foot,’ Lin Wanrong thought, breaking into a sweat. Although he had some knowledge of ink and writing, how could he compare to a master like Xu Wei? When everyone's eyes fell on him, Lin Wanrong let out a dry laugh. "Mr. Xu flatters me. I know nothing about Huizhou ink. I looked at this painting by examining the canvas. We have all painted before, so we know that the smoothness of silk canvas is essential; otherwise, it is easy for the brush to go astray."

This was easy to understand, and everyone nodded in agreement. Lin Wanrong continued, "You all know what I do, right? Currently, I'm working as a servant for the Xiao family in Jinling. I get food, accommodation, and entertainment, with an annual salary of several hundred taels. As for the Xiao family, you probably know that they sell cloth. Speaking of cloth, I've learned some simple principles from Eldest Miss, so I'll share them with you. Gentlemen, please feel the canvas, isn't there a slightly curled and fluffy feeling? Prince, you also feel it, something you've wanted to feel but haven't been able to!"

Prince Cheng's face turned ashen, and he snorted without responding. Everyone else felt the canvas and found that it was indeed as Lin San had said - the silk was curled and fluffy. If they were to paint on such a canvas, even Xu Wei could not guarantee that the brush would not stray.

"Logically speaking, the White Lotus Holy Mother is a great figure; the canvas she uses must be top-notch, and the painter she hires should not be too bad. So how could such a basic mistake occur? With the White Lotus Holy Mother's celestial beauty, why wasn't there a stray brushstroke?" Lin Wanrong paced slowly around the hall, talking to himself, seemingly asking others, but also questioning himself.

Li Tai was dissatisfied and said, "Lin San, have you also learned this trick from Brother Xu? Always keeping us in suspense." The Emperor smiled without speaking, listening intently.

"Actually, the principle was already explained by Mr. Xu earlier; it's all the work of baking. Most things in the world expand with heat and contract with cold, and this canvas is no exception. This painting was baked after completion, causing the canvas to curl and puff up. To conceal the evidence, the forger of this imitation tried to straighten the canvas again. Regrettably, destruction is easy while restoration is difficult, and defying physical laws is not so easily undone. With just a bit more touching and kneading, the true nature will reveal itself. Even the best painter would have made a mistake on this canvas now," Lin Wanrong explained.

Everyone nodded in agreement. Listening to Xu Wei and Lin San's explanation, it seemed easy to discern, and they wondered why they hadn't thought of it themselves.

"Little Brother Lin, how did you discern that this painting was completed within a year?" Among the crowd, only Xu Wei was clear-headed. Lin San had talked for a while, only able to judge it as a fire-baked forgery; the specific age was difficult to determine, so he asked.

"Well, that's actually a secret. Can I not say?" Lin Wanrong looked somewhat embarrassed, saying shyly.

The officials were deeply engrossed in his educational discourse and wouldn't let him off so easily, all gazing at him with expectant eyes. The Emperor smiled and said, "Lin San, do you have a secret that you even want to keep from Us?"

Seeing that he had no choice but to tell, Lin Wanrong smiled wryly and began, "Actually, this is a trade mark known only to Eldest Miss Xiao and myself. Once disclosed today, it will become a public secret."

"Trade mark? What's a trade mark?" Even Xu Wei was surprised.

"Simply put, it's a unique symbol exclusive to a particular brand; any imitation will be prosecuted. Look here—" Lin Wanrong turned over the top corner of the canvas to show everyone. Li Tai was closest and saw some tiny characters barely visible to the naked eye. He read softly, "Yi You, Winter, the fifteenth, Hai, Gold. There's also a circle with the character Xiao inside, what does this mean?"

"That's the factory trademark and the production batch number. Alas, originally intended to prevent counterfeiting by others, I didn't expect to be forced to reveal it today," Lin Wanrong sighed.

"Simply put, this piece of canvas was produced by our Xiao family—"

Prince Cheng's face turned the color of liver; he had orchestrated this, but had never expected such a blunder.

"You see this circle with the character Xiao? That's our Xiao family's trademark. Look at the characters 'Yi You, Winter, the fifteenth, Hai, Gold'; this is the production date and number, meaning this piece of fabric was completed during the Hai hour of the fifteenth day of winter in the Yi You year, in the Jinling factory. Oh, that means it left the factory on that day last winter. So, I not only know this painting was completed within a year but also within half a year. Alas, this huge

secret has now been made public. Your Majesty, could I apply for some silver taels as compensation for the Xiao family?"

It was an extraordinary story; everyone wondered how Lin San's mind had worked. They looked at each other and couldn't help but smile. This top scholar had made such a blunder, using genuine materials for a counterfeit product, even marked with a production date, without knowing it. This was indeed the most bizarre and amusing case of framing in history; it was simply incredible. Li Tai and Xu Wei suppressed their laughter, their necks turning red.

Having spent much time with Lin San, the old Emperor had grown accustomed to his unconventional tactics. But this time, it was too bizarre, too amusing. Even though he tried to restrain himself, he couldn't help but laugh till his face turned red and his neck thick. He quickly turned his head aside to avoid losing his dignity.

"Little Brother Lin, I must admit, I'm completely impressed by you. This really could work! Your wisdom is truly unparalleled in history," Xu Zhiqing laughed, his face twitching with admiration, as if bowing in all directions.

"Third in the entire nation!" Lin Wanrong chuckled in response.

With a fierce slam on the table, the Emperor shouted angrily, "Su Mubai, you have plotted treachery and framed a good minister. What more have you to say?"

Su Mubai's knees gave way, and he collapsed to the ground, desperately kowtowing and pleading, "Your Majesty, spare me! I was momentarily confused, influenced by Prince Cheng--"

"Su Mubai, how dare you!" Prince Cheng roared, delivering a ruthless kick to Su Mubai's face. Su Mubai tumbled, blood pouring from his mouth, teeth falling out, unable to speak. "To think that I trusted you so much, and you conspired to plot against me. Your crimes are unforgivable. Your Majesty, we must not keep such a deceiving traitor. I propose we imprison him immediately and execute him in due time."

The Emperor's face darkened as he glanced at Su Mubai, who was on the ground, kowtowing as if pounding garlic. He shook his head and sighed, "Su Mubai, I raised you with my own hands, and you became the top scholar through your own merit. I had no favoritism. I wanted to nurture you into a pillar of our great nation. But your actions... they have truly disappointed me."

Su Mubai, his face covered in blood and twisted in agony, was whimpering and kowtowing, blood streaming from his forehead. No one could make out what he was saying. Lin Wanrong found it hard to bear. After all, he and Su Mubai had no deep-seated hatred, just a senseless jealousy.

Xu Wei shook his head and softly sighed, "The word 'jealousy' can be a person's downfall."

"Take him away," the Emperor commanded, looking tired and aged. "Hand him over to the Ministry of Justice for punishment. Report back on the chosen date." The palace guards dragged Su Mubai away as he struggled and stammered, tears mixing with blood, his agony unspeakable.

The Emperor's face was stern as he swept his eyes over the assembly and coldly said, "I'll say this once more: In my great dynasty, only the capable are employed. Those who are jealous of talent, who frame others, will be punished severely. Do you all understand?"

"Thank you for Your Majesty's grace!" The ministers hurriedly bowed in gratitude. Today's affair ended in a way that no one could have expected. Su Mubai, once a brilliant talent, had fallen. It was both tragic and regrettable. It also fully demonstrated one principle: Better to provoke the King of Hell than to provoke Lin San.

Prince Cheng, ever cunning and seeing the unfavorable situation, quickly turned to Lin Wanrong. His face was sincere, and he squeezed a few tears from his eyes, "Lin San, I mistakenly believed slanderous words. I have wronged you, and I formally apologize to you. Please accept my bow."

He actually bowed deeply. After he had finished, Lin Wanrong pulled him up, feigning modesty, "Oh, Your Highness, such a grand gesture. I am unworthy. It was a small matter, all a misunderstanding. Once cleared up, it's nothing at all. There's no need for such formality."

"Indeed, indeed, only thus can I express my remorse," Prince Cheng sincerely said.

The old Emperor slightly nodded, then coldly shouted, "Where is the Minister of the Ministry of Personnel?"

Minister Ye was exceptionally obedient that day. Hearing the Emperor's stern shout, he trembled all over, quickly stepping forward and kneeling on the ground, not daring to say a word.

"Minister Ye, were you the one who was disrespectful to the Empress yesterday?" The Emperor asked, his eyes slightly closed, pondering.

"I deserve to die, I deserve to die. I did not know that was Her Majesty's phoenix carriage, disturbing Her Majesty. I deserve to die a thousand deaths!" Minister Ye was trembling all over, desperately kowtowing.

The Emperor said indifferently, "You have been an old servant for many years, and speaking disrespectfully is a crime worthy of death by law. Considering your years of service, without much merit but hard work, I will not make it difficult for you. Write a petition, and retire."

"Thank you for your grace, Your Majesty, thank you for your grace." Minister Ye was tearfully grateful, his head even breaking from the kowtowing.

The Emperor's eyes swept across the room, sternly saying, "The Three Chambers and Six Ministries cannot be without someone in charge even for a day. As for the choice of Minister of the Ministry of Personnel—" He glanced at everyone in the hall, Lin Wanrong's heart skipped a beat, thinking, 'Don't choose me, I won't do this kind of nine-to-five job, that's my good time sleeping with Qingxuan, not even thunder can wake me up.'

Seeing Lin San shrinking his head back, the Emperor slightly shook his head, smiling bitterly, "Minister Xu, you will have to suffer a bit, temporarily taking charge of the Ministry of Personnel. You'll handle the Ministry of Revenue's affairs as well, until a suitable candidate is recommended to me."

Xu Wei reluctantly agreed, knowing that at his level, fame was soaring, and official position was no longer important. This move would only increase his burden, and he felt helpless towards Lin San, who was shirking his responsibilities.

Prince Cheng suddenly stepped forward, earnestly saying, "Your Majesty, Minister Ye made a mistake, and I heard it was due to the matter of the Empress. There has been no news of Her Majesty in the palace for several decades, and rumors are rife. Now that Her Majesty has returned, it should be announced to the public as soon as possible, to prevent malicious gossip that might tarnish Your Majesty's reputation."

'My mother-in-law has been dead for more than a decade, don't you, old boy, know that? Acting all righteous, I despise you,' Lin Wanrong thought, contemptuously glancing at Prince Cheng.

The Emperor's eyes were moist, his fingers trembling slightly. After a long while, he managed to calm his excited emotions and loudly said, "Brother Wang, your words make sense. I have been

waiting for this day for twenty years. The rumors outside are not false. My virtuous Empress passed away due to illness seventeen years ago!"

"Her Majesty—," a series of mournful cries rang out, and the ministers, maids, and eunuchs in the hall all knelt down.

'She was my mother-in-law; I must kneel too.' Lin Wanrong sighed, kneeling down genuinely and sincerely.

The Emperor's eyes were red, and he said loudly, "For seventeen years, I have kept this news hidden and never announced it to the world. It was because the Empress had a dying wish, that if my Princess Chuyun did not return, she would not be buried, and the news would not be announced. For this day, I have waited for seventeen years, finally waited, ahem, ahem—"

"Your Majesty!" Gao Ping exclaimed in alarm, hastily handing over a few medicinal pills. Glancing at the brownish bloodstains on the yellow silk handkerchief, the Old Emperor wiped the corner of his mouth, his expression unchanged, and swallowed the pills. His complexion recovered significantly. He closed his eyes and rested for a moment before saying, "My princess, away from me for twenty years, has finally returned to my side, fulfilling the Empress's greatest wish. Tomorrow, I will announce to the world, expressing mourning throughout the land, and bid farewell to my virtuous Empress."

"Your orders will be obeyed," the ministers stopped crying and respectfully responded.

"Your Majesty, in that case, the one who returned yesterday must be Princess Chuyun," Xu Wei whispered, casting a meaningful glance at Lin Wanrong.

"Indeed!" the Emperor proudly declared, "She is the one and only Princess Chuyun of our great nation. She has grown up. After the Empress's funeral, I will announce to the world and hold a grand wedding for her."

Lin Wanrong's heart skipped a beat. A grand wedding, something he had not considered. He felt somewhat ashamed. Qiaoqiao, Ning'er, and Qingxuan had followed him just like that, especially Qingxuan. She was already pregnant, yet there hadn't even been an official ceremony. He was indeed ashamed.

Today, the great nation experienced both sorrow and joy, and the ministers didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The Old Emperor also seemed quite worn out. He waved his hand and said, "Let's end the discussion here for today, and adjourn the court."

"Long live the Emperor. Long live, long, long live," everyone bowed deeply and made their way out of the hall. Lin Wanrong was about to leave when Li Tai slapped him on the shoulder, "Lin San, you borrowed my troops and cannons yesterday; you must make good on this favor."

Lin Wanrong chuckled dryly, "Old General, please don't make things difficult for me. It's not that I, Lin San, am unwilling to serve the country. It's just that my knowledge is too limited. If I delay your frontline military affairs, I would be deserving of death."

Xu Wei, standing beside them, overheard and laughed, "Old General, don't believe his words. Before I invited him to lead troops in Shandong, he said the same thing, but what was the result? Didn't the White Lotus Sect fall at his hands?"

Li Tai sighed, "Lin San, your status is not insignificant now, and I can't do anything about you. But our great nation lacks good generals, and I am getting old. If one day I pass away, what will become of our country? With threats from the north and south, who will lead our soldiers? You can't be too selfish. If you have the ability, you must show it, not hide it. That's not what a man should do."

This old man, using both hard and soft tactics, moved him emotionally. And to be honest, Lin Wanrong was somewhat swayed. Seeing Li Tai's gray hair and wrinkled face, Lin Wanrong's heart softened, and he was about to agree impulsively. Fortunately, noticing Xu Wei's sinister smile, he stopped himself just in time, not letting the word "yes" escape his lips.

"Let's discuss this matter in a few days," Lin Wanrong sighed. "Before the army departs, I will surely give the old general an explanation."

Li Tai nodded, and Gao Ping came over, saying, "Master Lin, Master Xu, General Li, His Majesty invites the three of you to the study."

Upon entering the palace, there were indeed many matters to attend to. Lin Wanrong helplessly shook his head, following behind Xu and Li. When they reached the entrance to the study, the three stopped, and Gao Ping went in to inquire. He came out and said, "Master Lin, His Majesty asks you to enter first."

‘Could it be to discuss the matter of the grand wedding? Alas, in my two lifetimes as a human, I have never been married!’ He stepped into the study, where the scent of sandalwood filled the air and papers and memorials were piled high. The Old Emperor was standing with his back to him, gazing at the calligraphy of the ancestors on the wall, silent.

"Old man, you wanted to see me?" The atmosphere was a bit stifling, and Lin Wanrong hurriedly spoke.

The Emperor nodded slightly and said gravely, "Are you very close to Eldest Miss Xiao?"

Lin Wanrong was puzzled by this sudden question, but knowing that he couldn't hide the truth, he honestly nodded, "Somewhat close!"

"Somewhat close?" The Emperor said with a cold smile, "No need for that anymore, I'll kill her!"

Chapter 424 A Timeless Stratagem

"Kill, kill, kill her?" Lin Wanrong's mind thundered, and his face drained of all color, stammering, "Old man, what do you mean by this? She is Madame Xiao's own daughter. How could you lay a hand on her?!"

The Emperor spoke calmly, "It's true that she's Miss Guo's daughter, but what of it? When I want to kill someone, do I need to ask whose daughter she is? Lin San, why are you so naive?"

Seeing the Emperor so tyrannical, and thinking of the Eldest Miss's beautiful face, Lin Wanrong's blood boiled, his eyes glowing red, "Naive? So what? I don't kill indiscriminately, especially the descendants of old friends. Eldest Miss Xiao is beautiful, virtuous, gentle, and kind. What crime has she committed that you would draw your butcher's knife?"

The Old Emperor laughed heartily, "Beautiful, virtuous, gentle, and kind? If anyone else said that, I would believe it! But coming from your mouth, it's the biggest joke in the world! You and Miss Xiao bicker constantly, like sworn enemies. Who doesn't know that?" His expression turned cold, he sneered, "Moreover, how do you know she hasn't committed a crime? In my opinion, her biggest mistake is consorting with you, Lin San! Be honest with me. Besides the two women in your house and the two from the Xiao family, who else is close to you? I'll kill them one by one!"

Lin Wanrong's back was dripping with cold sweat. 'What did this old fellow mean? He wants to kill all my loved ones?' Thinking of the Eldest Miss, his eyes turned red, and he said coldly, "If you want to kill, then kill. All the women in this world are my loved ones."

The Old Emperor smirked, "Don't think I don't know with whom you are intimate. I know everything, Lin San. It's not that I'm cruel, but you are simply too greedy, and this disaster all falls upon you."

"Me?" Lin Wanrong pointed to his nose, "Are you mistaken? It's clearly you who want to kill, so how is it my fault?"

The Emperor slammed the table, angrily shouting, "In my presence, you still dare to talk back? You are the most shameless in the world. Let me ask you, do you know who Qin Xian'er is to me?"

'You know the answer, you old man.' Lin Wanrong snorted, "She's your Princess Nishang, so what? She's also my wife!"

"You know she's my princess!" The Emperor sneered, "Let me ask you again, what is Qingxuan to me?"

'The Eldest Miss is gone; I fear nothing,' thought Lin Wanrong, slapping the table filled with petitions, and yelled, "She's Princess Chuyun, my main wife! Both of them are my wives, so what? I specifically marry princesses!"

The Old Emperor was taken aback; in a thousand years, no one had dared to slap a table in his presence. Only Lin San, this obstinate fellow, feared neither heaven nor earth.

"You dare to act so recklessly in my study? Are you not afraid I'll exterminate your entire clan?" The Emperor's eyebrows knitted together as he laughed coldly.

'Intimidate me? If you can find my nine clans, you can execute them as you wish!' Lin Wanrong chuckled slyly, "Old Man, take a good look. The Lin San standing in front of you is not one to be cowed. I respect you, not because you're the Emperor, but because you're the father of Xian'er and Qingxuan, my father-in-law. As for the rest, even if you were the Jade Emperor himself, it has nothing to do with me."

"How generous of you to remember Xian'er and Qingxuan's identities. Nishang and Chuyun are my most beloved daughters, the unparalleled princesses of the Great Hua. With extraordinary beauty

and noble status, any man who obtains one is considered the dragon among men. You have both my daughters, yet you're still not content. Flitting around, consorting with women everywhere; what do you take my Nishang and Chuyun for? Vegetables in your pot to be steamed and boiled at will?! If people find out that you have my two princesses but are still gallivanting about, where will the dignity of my royal family stand? How will Nishang and Chuyun face the gossip of the world?" The Emperor's eyebrows flickered as he pointed at Lin Wanrong, furious, "I tell you, for my children, I can endure for years, never allowing anyone to bully them. Since Nishang and Chuyun are devoted to you, that's your good fortune. They may bully you, but you may not bully them. Those common women you're entangled with, thinking to be on par with my princesses, are just deluded. If you want to marry, you can only marry the two princesses! Miss Guo's daughter, what about her? If anyone threatens my princesses, I'll kill them, no mercy! Think it through!"

The Emperor spoke sternly, his momentum irresistible, as though even the heavens would tremble.

‘How many wives I marry is none of your business, you old man. You consider yourself of noble blood and reject common women, but do you dare tell your daughters not to marry me? Let's see who dies first!’ Lin Wanrong's forehead was beaded with cold sweat as he gritted his teeth, "Think what? Eldest Miss has been harmed by you. What's the use of thinking clearly? If you have the guts, kill me too! Let Qingxuan's child in her belly have no father, and his son have no grandfather! Let him know that it's not his father who failed his grandfather, but his grandfather who killed his father!"

His mouth was sharp, and this tongue-twisting statement left the Emperor somewhat dizzy and almost amused. Fearing that Lin San would detect something amiss, he quickly hid his smile and snorted, "I am not heartless either. If you promise never to see them again, I might consider sparing your various insignificant loves, including your Eldest Miss—"

"Wh-Wh-What do you mean?" Lin Wanrong stammered again, but this time it was with incredulous joy, his words tripping over themselves, "You didn't kill, kill her?"

"I said I would kill her," the Emperor smiled, "but did I say she was dead?"

‘This old man, playing word games with me?’ Learning that Eldest Miss was still alive, Lin Wanrong's mind became much more agile, his thoughts whirring as he grinned, "Old Man, I knew you wouldn't kill Eldest Miss. She's Miss Guo's own daughter, after all; you can kill anyone, but not her!"

"Stop wasting words with me!" Seeing Lin Wanrong's habitual mischievous smile, the old Emperor's face became stern: "Just because I'm not killing Miss Xiao now, doesn't mean I won't in

the future. I'll give you three days to think carefully. Do you want my princesses, or those common wildflowers of yours? As for Miss Xiao, I have invited her to be a guest at a certain place. After three days, if I do not hear the answer I wish for, think about the consequences yourself!"

"What, you've kidnapped Eldest Miss?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed in shock. "Old man, as the law's maker, you should uphold its dignity. How can you knowingly break the law?"

"Knowingly break the law?" The Emperor laughed loudly. "Within the Great Hua, my word is the ultimate law. There is no violation of that. Don't jest. The fate of your beloved ones depends solely on you. Consider your choices well!"

For all of Lin Wanrong's wit and agility, he was at a loss in this situation, and he could only shake his head and sigh. The Emperor observed him with a faint smile, his eyes revealing a trace of satisfaction. Suddenly, he asked, "Is Qingxuan doing well in your house?"

Lin Wanrong didn't even look up, responding grumpily, "Thanks for asking. She's doing much more comfortably than I am."

"That's good!" The Emperor nodded slightly, sighing, "What you did yesterday was reckless. Did you think that by bringing cannons to the mountain and blasting the archway, you would have complete control? Foolish, truly foolish!"

"Foolish?" Lin Wanrong chuckled repeatedly, his face full of disdain. This old man's words were unreasonable. Had he not arrived in time yesterday, Qingxuan would have already become a nun.

"Do you disagree?" The Emperor read his expression and knew his thoughts, saying helplessly, "You underestimate the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall. Standing for a hundred years, it's not something you can destroy with a few shots. Their students are spread all over, and they are all from scholarly families. If you provoke them, one call could drown you in a sea of condemnation. Not even I could save you!"

Lin Wanrong smirked, "Is it that serious? Aren't I standing here just fine?"

"That's because you were lucky, coincidentally finding a flaw in the sacred relic," the Emperor paced back and forth, smiling wryly, "That was the only right thing you did in your foolishness yesterday, undermining their foundation and leaving the scholars speechless. I could then exert my influence. You're truly lawless, daring even to tamper with sacred relics. Those scholars lost because they don't have your shameless tactics. But your move was extremely risky. Without proper

preparation or understanding of the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall, you dared to rush up the mountain to rescue someone on mere passion. When I call you foolish, am I wrong?"

The Emperor's earnest advice seemed reasonable, but Lin Wanrong did not agree, "Old man, planning before action is an ideal notion. If I had plotted like you yesterday, Qingxuan would probably have already become a nun. Strategy is important, but time waits for no one. When it's time to act, you must act, holding to the words steady, accurate, and ruthless, to ensure no great loss."

Hearing Lin San's logical explanation, the Old Emperor pondered for a moment, looked at him, and nodded, saying, "A fine understanding of stability, accuracy, and ruthlessness you have there, you indeed have mastered the essence of these three qualities."

'What's so fine about it? You even want to interfere with me marrying a few wives,' Lin Wanrong snorted, not responding to him. The Emperor gave a faint smile, patting his shoulder, and said, "Every effect has a cause; the world may not be as superficial as you see it. Think about it more deeply." Seeing Lin Wanrong's bewildered look, a gentle light flashed across the Emperor's face, disappearing in an instant, his expression returning to normal. He asked indifferently, "Lin San, how old are you this year?"

"Eighteen!" Lin Wanrong lied without blinking an eye.

The old Emperor burst into laughter at this, saying, "You mischievous boy, daring to deceive me! Judging by your conduct, I'm afraid you are more like twenty-eight."

Lin Wanrong gave a forced laugh, "To maintain my youthful mindset, I always consider myself eighteen. Old man, why do you ask? You're not trying to match our horoscopes, are you?"

"I'll take you for eighteen then." The old emperor smiled for a moment, his face gradually darkening, "Twenty years is but a brief moment. When I think back to the years I spent learning statecraft with my father, it seems like yesterday. In the blink of an eye, I am at this age, with little time left."

Lin Wanrong felt a sudden jolt in his heart. The old man was so fickle; one moment he was threatening and beating him, the next he was sentimental. What was he up to?

"Death does not frighten me. But there are two things that have always been stuck in my heart, causing me sleepless nights. Even in death, I would feel shame before my ancestors. Do you know what they are?" The Emperor said, glancing at him.

"I don't know," Lin Wanrong hurriedly waved his hands, "This matter has nothing to do with me."

The Emperor gave a dark smile, "You have married two of my princesses, and no one in the world can match your wealth and glory. How can you say this has nothing to do with you? The two things I worry about most after my death are, firstly, the fate of the two princesses. Since they are both fond of you, I have nothing to say. The second is the lack of a successor to my vast empire. This is the greatest regret of my life."

Lin Wanrong's heart thumped, the old man brought the topic back here, what did he mean? He chuckled a few times, saying insincerely, "Well, there's still Prince Cheng. He has a son, after all. We're all family, so you can just choose one to adopt—"

"Prince Cheng?!" The Emperor sneered, his teeth clenched, "He must be dreaming of this, but he doesn't know that my lack of heirs is his doing. How can I entrust this vast land to the hands of a wolf?"

"Well, that's going to be a problem then," Lin Wanrong spread his hands, helplessly saying, "Not everyone can be an Emperor. You can't just pick someone off the street."

This topic was indeed somewhat disrespectful. Lin Wanrong, being fearless due to his ignorance, and the Emperor deliberately luring him, paused slightly and said, "Being an Emperor may not be as bad as you imagine. All under heaven is the Emperor's land, and all within its borders are the Emperor's subjects. When all the people in the world bow at your feet, and life and death are within your control, what kind of feeling is that? Have you ever thought about it?"

Lin Wanrong gave a dry laugh, thinking to himself, 'I have too many wives; I'm so busy with the things I love to do every day, who has the time to think about what it feels like to be an Emperor!'

Seeing that he seemed unmoved, the Emperor mysteriously smiled and said nonchalantly, "Of course, that's just one aspect. As for the other benefits, I won't list them all—for example, an Emperor can have three palaces, six courtyards, and seventy-two concubines. Whoever you want to marry as a wife, no one dares to oppose!"

Lin Wanrong's heart skipped a beat. The Emperor, his father-in-law, really knew his mind. After all that talk, only this part attracted him. He narrowed his eyes and whispered, "Then Eldest Miss wouldn't be—"

Speaking of women really energized him. This youngster truly had the potential to be a foolish ruler. The Emperor snorted and angrily said, "My two princesses are national beauties. Are they not enough to tie you down? If you dare to associate with Eldest Miss Xiao or some Palace Lady Seo, I will—" He lightly brushed his long sleeve, making a gesture of beheading. Lin Wanrong quickly swallowed the words on the tip of his tongue.

"Summon Li Tai, Xu Wei!" the Emperor called towards the door.

Waiting outside, Gao Ping quickly sang, "Summon Li Tai, Xu Wei!"

Seeing that the Emperor had summoned others, Lin Wanrong was about to leave, but he heard the emperor say, "You stay here; I have important matters to discuss with you all. These political matters are tedious, and patience is needed. You should learn well."

Lin Wanrong had no interest in learning about politics; he was only thinking that Eldest Miss was still in his father-in-law's hands. If he were not careful, and she were killed, everything would be over. He could only laugh awkwardly and stay.

Xu Wei and Li Tai entered the room and were about to bow, but the Emperor raised his hand, "No need for formalities, Minister Xu and General Li. Come, have a seat!"

A young eunuch brought over cushioned stools, and Xu Wei and Li Tai sat down, thanking the Emperor. The Emperor handed Xu Wei a letter, "Minister Xu, look at this; it's the news transmitted from Goryeo by carrier pigeon!"

Goryeo? Lin Wanrong was also startled, calculating the time, from the meeting with Seo Jang Geum until now, it was only three days. Goryeo's response was indeed fast.

Xu Wei took the letter and read it closely, exclaiming, "The King of Goryeo rejected Lord Lin's proposal?"

"What, what?" Lin Wanrong couldn't hold back and snatched the letter from Xu Wei's hands, "Let me see, let me see!"

It was a confidential letter, and Xu Wei's expression was troubled, uncertain if he should let him see. The Emperor waved his hand, "Let Lin San see it. The situation in Goryeo is probably not as simple as we imagine!"

Lin Wanrong glanced at the letter, ignoring the plethora of formal language; the general meaning was clear enough. It was the King of Goryeo's decision to fight the Dongyin to the end, and once again requested assistance from Great Hua to save their ally. As for the great idea proposed by Lin Wanrong, it was not mentioned at all.

Li Tai snorted, "This King of Goryeo is indeed insincere, only wanting Great Hua to contribute money and effort. Lord Lin's proposal of 'one country, two systems' is not mentioned at all. To have my sons risk their lives for him—where in the world could he find such a bargain?"

Xu Wei thought for a moment, frowning, "The Dongyin threat is imminent, yet Goryeo refuses our proposal at this time. Is there some change in circumstances? Or have they reached some agreement with the Dongyin? If that's the case, it's very bad indeed! Lord Lin, what do you think?"

The proposal was Lin Wanrong's idea, and at the time, he spoke eloquently in court, mesmerizing everyone present. Now, it had been rejected outright, and embarrassment was inevitable. Lin Wanrong laughed it off and asked, "Your Majesty, is the delegation from Goryeo still in the capital?"

"The Dongyin are invading. Yi Seung-Jae has already been ordered to return to Goryeo, leaving behind only a few maids and servants," the Emperor said indifferently.

"Let's not talk about Yi Seung-Jae." Lin Wanrong waved his hand dismissively. "What I want to ask about is someone else. A little palace maid, named Seo Jang Geum!"

"Seo Jang Geum?" Xu Wei exclaimed, surprised. "Little brother Lin, how did you come to ask about her? From the sound of it, this little palace maid seems to be more important than Yi Seung-Jae?"

Lin Wanrong nodded and smiled, "Mr. Xu is correct. Yi Seung-Jae is merely a facade put up by the Goryeo delegation, utterly useless. The real key player should be this little palace maid. As long as she remains in the capital, things might not be as bad as we imagine!"

“The key player is Seo Jang Geum? Little brother Lin, how do you know? Why would Goryeo send a little palace maid to take charge?” Xu Wei asked, puzzled.

‘I am her ‘Wanrong Oppa,’ of course, I know.’ Thinking of Seo Jang Geum's soft and jade-like skin, Lin Wanrong felt a little itch in his heart, and lewdly laughed, “This little palace maid is delicate and elegant, and her figure is not bad either. We’ve had some intercourse, ah, no, I mean, exchanges. From her speech and demeanor, I can tell that Yi Seung-Jae is nothing but a puppet. The real decision-maker is Miss Jang Geum. As for her specific identity, I don’t know yet, but she must be extraordinary.”

Xu Wei and Li Tai looked at each other, puzzled by how certain Little brother Lin was. They wondered to what extent he and Miss Jang Geum had “exchanged.”

Lin San's prowess with women was such that even a princess had fallen for him, so the Emperor naturally didn't doubt his words. He nodded and said, “Seo Jang Geum is still in the capital, and she even visited the Grand Prime Minister Temple for sightseeing yesterday.”

The Emperor's craftiness was unquestionable, and Seo Jang Geum's every move would not escape his eyes. That Jang Geum was touring around was puzzling to Lin Wanrong.

“Sightseeing?” Xu Wei shook his head. “With the Dongyin so close, if she holds an extraordinary position in Goryeo, how could she be so carefree? It doesn’t make sense, it doesn’t make sense!”

Lin Wanrong suddenly clapped his hands, his face lighting up with joy. “It does make sense, it does make sense, the more relaxed she is, the more it makes sense.”

“What do you mean?” Li Tai asked.

Lin Wanrong laughed a few times and said, “Your Majesty, since you received this letter, Seo Jang Geum must know about it too, right?”

The Emperor nodded and said calmly, “Two carrier pigeons flew into the Goryeo delegation's residence last night, so she probably knows about this news as well. Lin San, just say what you have to say, don’t beat around the bush.”

Even the Emperor had grown impatient, so Lin Wanrong laughed and said, “There’s no hurry. As long as Seo Jang Geum is in the capital, it means that Goryeo hasn't refused our Great Hua’s proposal. On the contrary, they are likely in painful struggle—”

“How can you tell?” Li Tai waved the letter in his hand. “The King of Goryeo didn’t mention our Great Hua's proposal at all!”

“Not mentioning it is true,” Lin Wanrong said with an easy smile, “But they haven't refused either. This is the time to test endurance. As long as Goryeo can hold on, so can our Great Hua.”

Li Tai shook his head, “If it is as you predict, that's well and good, but if Goryeo has indeed reached an agreement with the Dongyin, and at the same time our Great Hua is on the brink of war with the nomads, a single misstep could put us in a significant disadvantage. It's a risk we cannot take!”

“The old general speaks wisely,” Lin Wanrong nodded, his face becoming unusually solemn. “For the safety of Great Hua, for the happiness of tens of thousands of our compatriots, I've decided to use a once-in-a-millennium strategy on Seo Jang Geum!”

“What once-in-a-millennium strategy?” the Emperor asked with a smile.

“The—Handsome—Man—Scheme!” Lin Wanrong declared, his face filled with tragic determination.

Chapter 425 Obeying the Imperial Decree to Woo a Beauty

The handsome man scheme? Xu Wei and Li Tai looked Lin San up and down. A man indeed, but to say he was handsome seemed to be lacking something. The two men exchanged a glance and forcibly suppressed their laughter. Xu Wei cautiously said, "If we must employ a handsome man's plot, it's not impossible. But can we find someone else? That way, our chances would be greater!"

Lin Wanrong listened and flew into a rage, glaring at him, "Mr. Xu, what do you mean by that? Speak with your conscience! Is there anyone in this world more handsome than me? Let me tell you, you won't find a second handsome man like me, skilled in both literary and martial arts, in the whole world."

Xu Wei shook his head with a smile, his face full of apologies, "Little brother, you've misunderstood my meaning. I'm only worried about you taking such a risk. If anything goes wrong,

that would be very bad indeed. A top talent like you is what our great country needs most. How could we let you risk this personally? I suggest finding someone else. I'm really thinking of you, thinking of the state. Please, don't misunderstand."

"There's no way around the danger. Who told me I was born with a laborious fate? Wooing the most dangerous beauties, doing the safest things; I've long been used to it. As Buddha said, 'If I don't go to hell, who will?' For the people of Great Hua, for the state, I'm willing to take this great risk! Your Majesty—" Lin Wanrong turned, looking sincerely at the Emperor, his words earnest, "I volunteer! Please allow me to kill the enemy for the nation!"

The old Emperor sneered, fully understanding his intentions, "Minister Lin, your patriotic heart is greatly appreciated! But is Seo Jang Geum, a frail woman, aware of Goryeo's important affairs? Even if she knows, how can I let someone like you, the pillar of Great Hua, risk this? In my view, Minister Xu's suggestion makes sense. Let's send someone else—"

"Send someone else? Your Majesty, you must be joking! Is there anyone in this world more suitable than me?" Lin Wanrong said, smiling, his eyes full of confidence. "Furthermore, I'm certain that Seo Jang Geum definitely knows the details. Mr. Xu just said that the Goryeo might be betraying our Great Hua, reaching some agreement with the Dongyin people. This possibility is not zero, but in my view, it's minimal. Think about it: the Dongyin forces are all deployed, determined to take Goryeo. What price would Goryeo have to pay for the Dongyin to give up? If they really negotiate, I'm sure that the terms set by the Dongyin would be ten or a hundred times more stringent than Great Hua's, making it even more unacceptable for Goryeo. Your Majesty, Mr. Xu, General, isn't that the case?"

Everyone thought he was proposing the handsome man's plot because he was lustful, trying to take advantage of Seo Jang Geum. Little did they know that he had already formed an opinion. His words were indeed insightful, hitting the nail on the head. The Dongyin were not good people; they would not give up unless they obtained satisfactory bargaining chips with their entire national power deployed at sea, and the army besieging the city.

Xu Wei and Li Tai nodded slightly, and the Emperor pondered for a while before slowly saying, "Continue speaking, go on."

"The cruelty of the Dongyin is well-known throughout the world. They have long resided on a narrow and elongated island, and their national character has determined their impulsiveness and greed. When they have the opportunity to annex Goryeo and acquire land to expand their living area, they will never give up on this enormous interest. Therefore, I say that their demands will be ten or a hundred times more severe, making it difficult for the Goryeo royal family to accept. By comparison, our great concept of 'one country, two systems' is gentle in its approach. It preserves

the Goryeo royal family, allowing them to thrive and reproduce for generations, and shelters them under the powerful arm of Great Hua, protecting them from the wind and rain. With our long history of interaction between Great Hua and Goryeo, it is more acceptable to the people of both nations. The comparison shows clearly which is superior and which is inferior. Your Majesty, may I be bold enough to ask, if you were the king of Goryeo and had to choose between the two, what would be your choice?" Lin Wanrong spoke eloquently, his rhetorical question leaving everyone in deep thought.

The Emperor remained silent for a long while before saying indifferently, "According to what you say, there seems to be some truth. The king of Goryeo should indeed choose to cooperate with our Great Hua. However, they currently refuse to discuss joining Great Hua. What can I do about it? Goryeo is in peril, and our Great Hua is about to go to war with the nomads. Continuing like this will only lead to a situation where both sides suffer."

"Your Majesty is wise, that is exactly the case," Lin Wanrong nodded. "The king of Goryeo's silence is based on our current anxious state in Great Hua. He's trying to outlast us, hoping to negotiate better terms, gain greater benefits. Therefore, it is especially important to probe their bottom line at this time."

"Do you intend to ascertain Goryeo's bottom line through Miss Seo Jang Geum?" Li Tai frowned as he spoke. "But can such a young girl really be involved in matters of state?"

"Old General, do not underestimate this Seo Jang Geum. Think about it, if the king of Goryeo wants to probe Great Hua's attitude, he must have arranged someone in our capital. This young palace girl is undoubtedly their main person in charge. However, they cannot reveal their anxious state, so Seo Jang Geum is visiting temples and worshipping Buddha under our very eyes, displaying a calm demeanor, deliberately allowing us to see, in order to make us feel urgent. If we think about it, if Goryeo has truly reached an agreement with the Dongyin, what is Seo Jang Geum still doing in Great Hua? She should be rushing back to Goryeo."

Xu Wei nodded, not taking Lin San's usual playful demeanor lightly. When analyzing significant matters, Lin San was thorough and orderly, demonstrating great wisdom. "Little brother, according to you, this Miss Seo is waiting for our Great Hua to make the first concession before reporting to the king of Goryeo for disposal?"

Lin Wanrong's eyes flashed, and he shook his head, smiling, "Not so, not so. Goryeo is thousands of miles away from our capital, and even if they communicate by carrier pigeon, it would take several days. The Dongyin warships are probably about to reach Goryeo's water city, and the situation can change in an instant. Such a delay of several days cannot be afforded by the king of Goryeo. If I am not mistaken, the king of Goryeo's final bottom line has already been conveyed to Seo Jang Geum."

"What?" This audacious conjecture, not only astonished Xu Wei and Li Tai but even the Emperor seemed a bit moved. If Lin San's reasoning was true, wouldn't it mean that the grand opportunity to expand the Empire's territory was within reach? If they could persuade Seo Jang Geum, they would already have Goryeo in their hands by half! Xu Wei and Li Tai's faces showed excitement, and as they listened to Lin Wanrong's words, the situation seemed to become clearer. The key rested on Seo Jang Geum. Were they really going to use a handsome man plot to accomplish this? The two looked at Lin Wanrong with strange expressions on their faces.

To expand the territory at the end of one's life, surpassing one's ancestors, was indeed a great honor. Even the old Emperor, as steady as he was, could not suppress a surge of excitement within himself. His face turned flush as he hastily controlled his emotions, speaking calmly, "Lin San, you say Seo Jang Geum has control over Goryeo's bottom line. How certain are you of this?"

Lin Wanrong spread his hands, smiling, "Not certain at all, Your Majesty. As you know, what I just said is deduction. The actual truth is only known to Seo Jang Geum herself. Ah, this young girl, stubborn and inflexible as you and Minister Xu have witnessed, even if a knife were held to her throat, she wouldn't say anything. Quite a thorny issue."

The old Emperor clenched his teeth, thinking that this young man spoke so much only to find an excuse to pursue a woman. What a bad idea! His own daughters were far better than this little palace girl from Goryeo. After pondering for a while, he found himself helpless against Lin San. The way Goryeo acted was disgraceful, sending a young girl in charge, naturally attracting Lin San like a fly. In dealing with young girls, Lin San was second to none.

The Emperor exhaled deeply, his face darkening, "Lin San, if I were to send you to handle Seo Jang Geum, what odds do you give yourself?"

Lin Wanrong grinned slyly, his face showing confidence, "Well, that depends on how it's handled. Depending on the degree of engagement, the effect will vary."

"Whatever the degree, whatever the effect, just tell me, and I will consider it carefully." The Emperor's words had a hidden meaning, understood only by Lin San, while Li Tai and Xu Wei were left puzzled.

Lin Wanrong chuckled lasciviously, "We're all friends here, so I won't boast. Handling Miss Seo depends on the level. If it's just ordinary tea and conversation, I can probably probe about ten percent; if we go further, holding hands, perhaps thirty percent; a kiss on the cheek, I should have at least fifty percent confidence; if we proceed to matrimonial rituals, well, I don't have to say it, you can all guess."

Xu Wei and Li Tai broke into a cold sweat as they listened, realizing the extent and effect he was referring to. And this he called 'not boasting'? How could anyone be so shameless?

As for what Lin San meant by matrimonial rituals, why had he become so pedantic? He could have just said he'd sully the girl's reputation. The Emperor found it amusing but trusted Lin San's words completely, most notably demonstrated by his own daughters.

"Minister Xu, General Li, what do you think of this plan?" The Emperor's face was peculiar, his expression somewhere between a smile and a frown, as he sought Xu Wei and Li Tai's opinions.

Xu Wei and Li Tai were civil and military officials of Great Hua, advisers and strategists in thousands of councils. Yet openly discussing this sordid "handsome man" strategy with the Emperor, especially when it was to be carried out by a "handsome man" like Lin San, was beyond awkward.

"This..." The two exchanged courteous refusals for a while, but in the end, Xu Wei had to speak, "If there's no other way, we must resort to this once-in-a-millennium stratagem. Time waits for no one! There are nomads in the north who want to fight, and new troops in the northeast to command, all of which are urgent matters."

The Emperor nodded, pacing slowly in the room. After a long pause, he seemed to have made up his mind and was about to speak when Lin Wanrong interrupted, "Ah, Mr. Xu, what did you just say? Are you saying that this plan requires someone else to execute? I've thought it over from left to right, and I think you're right. Although I'm more beautiful than a handsome man, I have a family and children. I am not suitable for this highly dangerous task, and I'm not good at deceiving young girls. My conscience would bother me! Change of plans, change of plans, this suggestion is good!"

The three people in the room were stunned. At this crucial moment, how had Lin San changed his mind? Xu Wei quickly said, "Little brother Lin, only a young and dashing, wise and cunning hero like you can complete this difficult task. How can anyone else do it? If you are worried about scolding from your wives, I will make excuses for you. I believe they will grant me some favor."

Lin Wanrong looked sad, his head shaking, almost weeping, "Mr. Xu, don't mention my wives. I'll tell you the truth. I will be forced to abandon them due to unavoidable reasons. Under these circumstances, how can I have the mood to carry out such a tremendous task? I have failed Great Hua, failed the people of Great Hua!"

Li Tai exclaimed, "Abandon your wives? How is this possible? Who is so bold as to force you to be unfaithful? Tell me, and I will settle the score with him!"

The Emperor's face was dark as ink, Lin Wanrong almost laughed but managed to hold it back, sorrowfully shaking his head, "Let's not talk about it. I'm in a terrible mood and unable to complete the task. In any case, it's my fault, Lin San. I'm sorry for the Emperor's nurturing, sorry for Mr. Xu and the old general's trust."

After much persuasion from the two, Lin San stubbornly shook his head. The Emperor looked at him coldly, pretending to play along, and finally understood. This young man had been going around in circles, and his real goal was not Seo Jang Geum. He was trying to coerce the Emperor into protecting his wives, truly a painstaking effort!

"Is that so? Tell me, who forced you to abandon your wives?" Seeing Lin San's self-importance, the Emperor could not bear it any longer and coldly hummed.

"This... I dare not say." Hearing the Emperor speak, Lin Wanrong took a long sigh of relief. He was not afraid of the Emperor speaking but afraid of him remaining silent.

"You dare not speak? Is there something in this world you dare not say?" The Emperor's face turned furious, and he slapped his dragon chair heavily, "I see you are presumptuous and unwilling to contribute to my Great Hua. You want to resist my command—"

How could they stand being accused in such a manner? Seeing the Emperor enraged, Xu Wei and Li Tai quickly knelt down, pleading, "Your Majesty, please calm down! Lin San is just in turmoil due to family issues. We beg your forgiveness! We will certainly advise him properly!"

The Emperor's majestic anger was indeed formidable, but Lin Wanrong wasn't much afraid by now. After all, it wasn't the first time he had angered the Emperor, and he had grown used to it.

Seeing Lin San's obstinate demeanor and realizing that the happiness of his two daughters depended entirely on this man, the Emperor felt a wave of helplessness wash over him. He couldn't beat or kill Lin San, so what could he do with such a strange creature?

"Rise, all of you, rise." The Emperor weakly gestured for Xu Wei and Li Tai to stand, then shot a glance at Lin Wanrong, snorting, "I promise you, Miss Dong and Miss Luo in your residence will not be driven away. You should be satisfied with that, shouldn't you?"

That was exactly what Lin Wanrong had been waiting for. Beaming with joy, he hurriedly said, "Qiaoqiao and Ning'er are just two of my wives. There are also Eldest Miss, Second Miss, Sister An, etc. None of them can be driven away, otherwise, I'll be in a bad mood and might fail in the mission. If it jeopardizes the affairs of the state, it would be disastrous."

The Emperor was furious at Lord Lin's audacity, snapping, "Enough of this talk! Do you think this is a marketplace where you can haggle with me?"

Xu Wei and Li Tai both fell silent, listening to the conversation between the Emperor and Lin San. It seemed that the person who wanted to separate Lin San and his wives was the Emperor himself. Cold sweat trickled down Li Tai's forehead.

"How could dare I haggle with the Emperor? I'm merely stating a fact. To avoid any delays in the state's affairs because of me, Your Majesty, please find someone else for this handsome-man scheme. You can pick anyone off the street."

Xu Wei was aghast; Lin San was indeed bold and daring, to talk back to the Emperor.

The Emperor, though initially incensed by Lord Lin's defiance, seemed to have grown accustomed to it. His anger eventually subsided, and he coldly chuckled, "I'll make a note of your request concerning Eldest Miss Xiao and Second Miss. If you accomplish the task, I will consider it. If you say another word, I'd rather forsake Goryeo than tolerate you."

Lin Wanrong pondered, careful not to push the Emperor too hard. As long as Eldest Miss was still within reach, he would find a way eventually. He forced a few dry laughs and said, "Since Your Majesty values me so much, I will use my charm to completely conquer the Goryeo palace maid and learn her secrets. However—"

Both Xu Wei and Li Tai sighed in relief as Lin Wanrong relented, only for their hearts to leap again as he added more to his statement. This Lin San was truly trying to kill them!

"But what?" the Emperor asked, unimpressed.

"Your Majesty, what I am doing, in a polite way, is called the handsome-man scheme, but bluntly, it's deceiving young girls and toying with innocent maidens. I, Lin San, am honest and upright, and such an act would greatly damage my reputation."

"Ha, you have a reputation?" The other three in the room simultaneously spat in contempt.

"To prove my innocence and explain myself to my wives, Your Majesty, I boldly request a royal decree from you."

So, it was a royal decree he wanted; that was a small matter. Li Tai and Xu Wei relaxed. The Emperor's face softened slightly, and he nodded, "What decree do you need? Speak truthfully, and I will write it for you!"

Lin Wanrong walked up to the Emperor, whispered something in his ear, and the Emperor was momentarily stunned before angrily shouting, "Nonsense! How can I issue such a decree to you? It would make historians laugh their heads off!"

"What's so funny about that?" Lin Wanrong replied, puzzled. "If Your Majesty conquers Goryeo, this decree will become a timeless anecdote, even highlighting your distinctiveness and greatness!"

The Emperor seemed tempted but quickly waved his hand, "No, I will definitely not write this decree! You just go and do your job, and I'll see who dares mess with you."

Lin Wanrong tried to speak again, but the Emperor shook his head, "Just do as we discussed earlier; we will end the discussion here for today. I'm a bit tired. All of you may leave."

A mere decree, why was it so troublesome? Xu Wei and Li Tai looked puzzled, but since the Emperor was dismissing them, they could only drag Lin Wanrong out the door. Before leaving, Lin Wanrong sighed, "Family troubles hinder state affairs; getting things done is not easy. Your Majesty, please understand me. Otherwise, if this matter fails, Great Hua will suffer."

The door creaked shut, and the Emperor shook his head with a bitter smile. Where did Lin San come up with so many whimsical ideas? He always managed to think of a way to save himself at critical moments, which was infuriating. Thinking about the decree that Lin San requested, he paced back and forth in his study, picking up and putting down his vermilion pen several times. Finally, he gritted his teeth, "I will draft this decree, and if you fail, see how I will deal with you."

He wrote quickly, and in a moment it was done. Looking at the absurd content of the decree, he couldn't help but find it amusing. He stamped it with a large red seal and instructed Gao Ping, "Send this decree to Lin San! Remember, this is a top-secret order, and only he can see it."

“Little brother Lin, what decree did you request from the Emperor, making it so difficult?” Xu Wei dared to ask only after they had left the palace gate.

Lin Wanrong laughed, “Minister Xu, you know I have many jealous women at home. I asked the Emperor to write a decree to prove my innocence. Who knew His Majesty would be so stingy, refusing to write even a few words!”

A decree to prove innocence? This was indeed a rare event in history! Xu Wei knew Lin Wanrong was cunning and couldn’t guess what scheme he was planning that troubled the Emperor so much.

As they had just stepped out of the palace gate, a shout came from behind, “Master Lin, wait! Master Lin, wait!”

Lin Wanrong turned around and saw a red-robed steward, Gao Ping, running toward him, panting.

“Master Lin, this is the decree that the Emperor has bestowed upon you!” Gao Ping carefully handed the decree to him, reminding, “His Majesty said that only you may read this decree.”

Lin Wanrong was delighted and laughed, “Understood, understood. Please convey my thanks to His Majesty for his grace!”

As Gao Ping hurriedly turned and left, Lin Wanrong opened the decree, glanced at it, and immediately beamed with joy.

Xu Wei recalled Gao Ping’s instruction that only Lin San could read the decree, so he turned away, but his curiosity got the better of him. Glancing back, his eyes caught four bright red characters on the decree, vivid and clear, boldly stating—“(By) Imperial Order, Seduce Women!”

Certainly, this was the most absurd imperial edict in history, and only Lin Wanrong could have come up with such an idea. Xu Wei had to suppress his laughter desperately, his face turning bright red as he hastily clasped his hands, “Oh, little brother, I suddenly remember, an old friend is visiting my home today. I must leave immediately. Excuse me, excuse me!” With that, Xu Wei hurried away, his shoulders trembling with suppressed laughter. When he reached the corner and could no longer see Lin San, he finally pounded his chest and burst into uproarious laughter.

"This is indeed a treasure!" Lin Wanrong carefully stowed the edict away, his heart filled with joy. "I have been commanded to woo women for the country; I'm faithfully serving the nation. If Qingxuan blames me, I have an answer for her. Now, who should I woo first? Miss Seo or Sister An? It's a tough choice!"

The Goryeo delegation had been staying in the capital city for several days, and their inn was near West Straight Street. Carrying the 'wooing' edict, Lin Wanrong quickened his pace. As he reached the inn's entrance, he stopped abruptly. Meeting by chance was always better than planning a visit, and if he rashly barged in to find Seo Jang Geum, it would surely arouse her suspicions. It was best to proceed with caution.

The inn was secluded, and aside from two guards at the entrance, there were few passersby. Lin Wanrong loitered around the entrance for a few turns, and the guards soon took notice. The one on the right barked, "Hey, who are you? What are you doing wandering around here? This is an inn for foreign guests, and loiterers are not allowed!"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily and approached the guards, "Two brothers, I'm not an outsider. Have you heard of the current Minister of Revenue, Xu Wei? His younger uncle's sister's daughter is my beloved."

The two guards exchanged glances. The younger uncle's sister's daughter of Minister Xu? What kind of relationship was that with Minister Xu? Lin Wanrong maintained his composure, taking out some loose silver from his sleeve and stuffing it into the guards' hands, smiling, "Actually, I came here today to inquire about something from you two honorable brothers!"

Upon seeing the silver, the guards' faces lightened, and they stealthily pocketed the money, maintaining a serious expression, "We, as law enforcement officers, never accept bribes. Don't underestimate us. Speak quickly and tell us what you need; it is our duty to assist you."

"You two brothers are upright and honorable. I admire you," Lin Wanrong gave a thumbs-up, looking around before lowering his voice, "Since you two are so cooperative, I won't hide anything from you. Actually, I am a top-secret agent dispatched by the Emperor, agent 007, code-named Bond, James Bond! Look here—"

He glanced around cautiously, opened his coat to reveal the 'wooing' edict, then quickly closed it again. The two guards only caught a glimpse of the words "Imperial Edict" on the cover and were so frightened that they trembled and were about to kneel. Lin Wanrong caught them, "Please, brothers, no need to be so formal. I always keep a low profile and never reveal my identity. Actually, I came here today to carry out a top-secret mission—"

"Please speak, Mr. Bond, please speak," the two guards hurriedly nodded and bowed.

The low-profile Mr. Bond slowly nodded, "Is the little palace maid Seo Jang Geum, who came from Goryeo, staying here?"

"Yes, yes she is. But, sir, you are not lucky; Miss Seo just went out."

"She's gone out? So early in the morning?" Lin Wanrong asked in surprise, "Did she go alone?"

The two guards looked at each other, their lips hesitating for a moment, seemingly afraid to speak. Lin Wanrong snorted, "What's this? Are you daring to withhold information from a secret agent like me?"

The two men quickly waved their hands, "No, no. We were initially intimidated by someone and dared not speak, but since Mr. Bond is a secret agent, how could we lie to you, sir? Miss Seo was invited out early this morning for a leisure outing. Accompanying her was the young prince from Prince Cheng's mansion!"

"Prince Cheng's young prince, you mean—Zhao Kangning?!" Lin Wanrong's eyes widened in shock.