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Chapter 426 A Flower for You, Two Cuckoos in Shu

"Yes, yes, it's him!" Two guards exclaimed hurriedly. "Mr. Bond, do you know the Young Prince too?"

"Oh, yes, of course, I know him. I often walk inside and outside the palace; how could I not know the Young Prince? He and my family's Wangcai (TL: A popular dog's name) have even sworn brotherhood and burned yellow paper together." Lin Wanrong chuckled twice. "Do you know where the Young Prince and Lady Seo have gone sightseeing?"

"I'm not quite sure about that, but I saw their carriage heading towards the North Gate. They might be seeing the spring scenery," one of the guards replied.

'Seeing the spring? Damn it, I think it's more like 'enjoying' spring.' He had the imperial decree to flirt with girls, yet Seo Jang Geum had gone on a date with the Young Prince. Although the young palace lady had no immediate ties with him, the displeasure was certain.

"Brothers," Lin Wanrong said, nodding solemnly, his expression grave, "According to the regulations set by the emperor himself in Chapter Nine, Section One Hundred and Eight, Subsection Ten, Clause Five of our secret spy work code, I have inquired information from you today. To ensure that state secrets are not leaked, you must—" Lin Wanrong's face turned vicious, and he drew his hand menacingly across his neck, sneering coldly, "I assume you've both heard of the ways we secret spies operate. Dismemberment, sky lanterns, human-skin drums; which one do you prefer?"

The two guards shrank back, their faces pale and limp as mud. "Mercy, sir, mercy!"

Lin Wanrong steadied them, his face showing compassion. "However, since we met today, we must have fate. I won't do those ugly things. But if anyone leaks the news of my coming, well, I won't do something as cruel as the sky lanterns, but making a human-skin drum is quite interesting—"

He gave a dry laugh, and the two guards, cold sweat dripping, nodded their heads like pecking chickens. "Rest assured, sir, rest assured. We would rather die than leak a word."

Through deception and intimidation, Lin Wanrong had them well under control. He then rose and headed towards the North Gate. The imperial decree was warm in his pocket, but the girl he was supposed to flirt with had slipped away, a definite inauspicious start.

He thought of the Eldest Miss still "visiting" the old Emperor and that if the matter with Seo Jang Geum wasn't handled well, it would be even more difficult to deal with the old Emperor. He snorted and had a bowl of soy milk and two fried dough sticks at a tea stall under the North Gate. He even had a haircut before leaving the city.

Outside the city, the scenery was startling. Late second month in early spring, a gentle breeze and wildflowers everywhere. Shimmering waves on the water, birds singing, bright colors everywhere, and many people enjoying the spring. The roadside and mountains were filled with bright pink flowers, named and nameless, red, yellow, blue, all charming and fragrant after the spring rain, a beautiful sight to behold.

Young ladies and gentlemen by the roadside were happily picking wildflowers. Some bolder ones had cast aside the barriers between genders, pairing up to challenge each other with poetry and share harmless jokes. Laughter and merry voices were unending, and the atmosphere was lively.

Indeed, spring had arrived; those in heat were in heat, those feeling frisky were feeling frisky. Sadly, the wildflowers by the road couldn't be picked. Lin Wanrong sighed and slowly chanted, "In spring sleep, a slumber so deep, dreaming of garments so few! Night comes with rain and wind, while sons and daughters rejoice and have fun! Good poetry, oh, good poetry!"

"Vulgar!" His voice had barely fallen when a clear and somewhat mocking and gloating male voice sounded from beside him.

Lin Wanrong looked up to see a group of well-dressed men and women not far away. It seemed that everyone had heard the risqué verse he had just recited, the women's faces flushed, and the men stifling laughter.

Among them was a familiar face, and Lin Wanrong joyfully exclaimed, "Oh, isn't this the Young Prince? I haven't seen you in a few days, and you've grown even more handsome, almost catching up to me! What's this, leading so many people out to enjoy the spring?"

"Crude! Can spring be bought?" Before Zhao Kangning could speak, a man beside him interjected. Lin Wanrong glanced at him, noticing a man around forty, with a clean-shaven face and an arrogant look.

"I would gladly spend a million coins, to buy a branch as a symbol of spring," Lin Wanrong laughed, "I'm just such a vulgar person. Brother, do you have an opinion?"

"Don't be angry, Mr. Gu," Zhao Kangning smiled, "This is the famed Lin San, Mr. Lin."

"You are Lin San?" Mr. Gu was astonished, "The one who bombarded the sacred hall?!"

The news of the bombardment had spread throughout the capital in just a day and was making its way through several provinces. Lin Wanrong wasn't surprised and smiled slightly, "Indeed, it is I."

"Sir, what are you doing here?" A gentle female voice sounded, tinged with pleasant surprise. Lin Wanrong glanced over, and standing next to Zhao Kangning was the young palace maid, Seo Jang Geum. Dressed in a light purple robe, her crystal-clear skin gave her a unique charm.

"Oh, Jang Geum Dongsaeng, you're here too." Lin Wanrong waved at her, his face unchanging, "I'm also out to enjoy the spring."

Seo Jang Geum bowed to him respectfully, "I would gladly spend a million coins, to buy a branch as a symbol of spring. Sir, your way of enjoying spring is indeed quite unique."

Lin Wanrong studied her expression, calm and unruffled. Everything seemed normal, and he wondered if he'd guessed wrong.

The Young Prince glanced at him and smirked, "More than just enjoying spring. Lin San's little poem about spring sleep is quite amusing too, unforgettable to the ear." At these words, the men behind him burst into laughter, and the women blushed, including Seo Jang Geum, who lowered her head.

"Oh, I never expected the Young Prince to have such a remarkable memory, even remembering the little poem I just recited. What's so interesting about my little poem?"

Zhao Kangning recited with a smile, "In spring sleep, a slumber so deep, dreaming of garments so few! Night comes with rain and wind, while sons and daughters rejoice and have fun! I never thought our world-famous scholar Master Lin, Vice Minister Lin, would have such refined taste. It seems I must promote you properly!"

Lin Wanrong was shocked and pointed at Zhao Kangning's nose, exclaiming, "What are you reciting, Young Prince? How could you, a royal noble and a descendant of the Founding Emperor, publicly chant such lascivious and licentious words in public? Where is the dignity of the holy ancestor, and the honor of the royal family?"

"What's the matter? Won't you admit it?" Zhao Kangning said coldly with a smile. "The lewd poem was your creation just now, and I heard it with my own ears. Could there be a mistake?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Young Prince, you must have misheard. What I recited earlier was, 'Spring sleep, unaware of the dawn, everywhere I hear chirping birds; during the night, the sound of wind and rain, how many flowers have fallen?' Such a fine poem, how did it turn into a licentious verse in your ears? They say speech reflects the heart. Young Prince, I suggest you spend less time looking at erotic paintings and more time studying the Buddhist scriptures. This will promote the growth of your body and mind."

Everyone was taken aback. They had clearly heard him recite an erotic poem, yet now it had become so refined and appropriate? Whether it was a lewd poem or an exquisite one, Lin San indeed had genuine talent. [The two poems sounded similar]

"What a cunning tongue!" Having been bested by Lord Lin before, Zhao Kangning had learned his lesson. He scoffed, "Young Prince will not argue with you about such useless matters. Today, I am here to enjoy the spring with Miss Seo, and I don't have time to accompany you. Miss Seo, let's go ahead and take a look, please!"

With a gracious gesture, the Palace Lady Seo, nodded her head, walked to Lin Wanrong's side, and suddenly bowed to him, "Sir, would you like to join us?"

Lin Wanrong smiled slightly and shook his head, "I prefer to be alone, so I won't mingle with you. But Miss Jang Geum, when appreciating spring and admiring flowers, one must be in the right mood. I see you're somewhat restless. I'm afraid you're wasting this beautiful scenery."

A strange glimmer flashed in Miss Seo's eyes, and she quickly lowered her head, "Thank you, Sir, for your wise words. Jang Geum will remember them."

"How could you forget?" Lin Wanrong suddenly laughed, "You should call me Wanrong Oppa!"

Seo Jang Geum's face turned red, and she turned her head away, unable to speak. Seeing that the situation was not right, Zhao Kangning hurriedly intervened, "Master Lin, how can you be so

presumptuous? Miss Seo is a diplomat from Goryeo and an honored guest of our Great Hua. If you try to bully her, I will certainly report you to the Emperor!"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "This is indeed strange. I spoke only a few words with Jang Geum DONGSAENG, and the Young Prince wants to report me? Young Prince, with this time, I suggest you do more meaningful things, such as maintaining world peace, upholding justice, and purifying social customs. These tasks are very suitable for you."

Seo Jang Geum burst into a chuckle, then quickly covered her mouth, realizing it was inappropriate. Zhao Kangning was annoyed but knew that Lin San was not easy to provoke. He had to swallow his anger. Seeing the blood-red flowers covering the mountainside, the spring blossoms brilliant, the Young Prince smiled warmly at Seo Jang Geum, gracefully waved his hand, and pointed to the blooming azaleas, "Miss Seo, do you think these flowers are beautiful? How about I pick some for you?"

Seo Jang Geum hurriedly shook her head, "I wouldn't dare trouble the Young Prince with such a task." But Zhao Kangning paid no heed to her words, laughed loudly, and hurried towards the flowers, "Miss Seo, please wait for me. I'll be back soon."

This boy was indeed skilled at picking flowers. Lin Wanrong chuckled lewdly twice, then glanced at Seo Jang Geum. In just two days, how had Seo Jang Geum and this Zhao Kangning boy connected? Something about this was strange.

"Sir, did you truly come out today to enjoy the spring scenery?" Seo Jang Geum looked up at Lin Wanrong and then lowered her head, asking softly. "Why did none of your wives accompany you?"

"I came to court you, believe it or not?" Lin Wanrong laughed. "Speaking of enjoying the spring, that is true. To be precise, I came to pick flowers. Alas, I haven't picked flowers in several years; I wonder if my skills have become rusty?"

The young palace maid looked up at him, smiling charmingly. "Sir, you're really joking. What skill does one need to pick flowers? Besides, why would you be interested in the wildflowers and weeds by the roadside?"

"As the saying goes, homegrown flowers do not have the fragrance of wildflowers. I like these wildflowers and weeds the most," Lin Wanrong said, looking around and noticing the children of the officials who had come with Zhao Kangning were glancing their way. He grinned mysteriously and leaned close to Seo Jang Geum's ear, whispering, "Jang Geum, the art of picking flowers is vast. Just speaking of the positions, there are many types, such as picking from behind, picking

from above, picking from below, and even three people picking together. It's absolutely exciting. We can exchange views sometime."

"Three people picking together?" Seo Jang Geum blinked in surprise, covering her lips with a smile. "Sir, you jest with me. Does picking flowers require two or three people? I think one person is enough!"

"One person is enough?" Lin Wanrong pondered for a moment, then nodded seriously. "Jang Geum, you are indeed well-versed and talented. Solo play does indeed have a unique taste. Jang Geum, forgive my boldness in asking, but when you eat bananas, do you hold them with your left hand or your right hand?"

Seo Jang Geum looked at him in confusion and asked curiously, "Sir, what does solo play mean? And what does it have to do with eating bananas? When I eat bananas, I like to hold them with both hands—"

Lin Wanrong's face showed shock as he retreated two steps. "Both hands together? My goodness, such a thick banana! It must take you several bites to eat it! Goryeo truly produces talent. Jang Geum, you must come to my house to eat bananas sometime. I have a big one."

Seo Jang Geum's expression darkened, and a faint sorrow appeared in her eyes. "Jang Geum wishes to visit your home, Sir, and interact more with you and your wives. But Goryeo's situation is dire, facing imminent destruction. I don't know if I'll have this blessing."

Lin Wanrong responded with a casual "Oh," and chuckled. "Goryeo is in danger, so you've set your sights on Prince Cheng, hoping that he and his friend might be able to help you, right?"

Seo Jang Geum's face changed slightly, tears welling in her eyes. She cried out sadly, "No, Sir, please don't misunderstand. I—"

Lin Wanrong waved his hand, smiling. "Let's not talk about state affairs. I came today to pick flowers, and speaking of these matters would ruin the mood. Once the situation in Goryeo is resolved, I'll invite you to my house to play."

Over there, Zhao Kangning had picked a large bunch of dew-kissed azaleas, his eyebrows dancing with excitement as he gleefully dashed down, his movements utterly suave. After descending a few steps, he saw Lin San and Seo Jang Geum whispering to each other. Lady Seo's expression was both coy and aggrieved, utterly charming. Zhao Kangning's face darkened, and he gritted his teeth,

humming softly. He sprinted a few steps to position himself between the two, handing the azaleas he had picked to Seo Jang Geum's hand. "Miss Seo, do you find these flowers beautiful? I picked them myself as a token of my feelings. I hope you like them."

Seo Jang Geum stole a glance at Lord Lin, noticing his indifferent expression, his hands busily picking flowers, seemingly unaware of the Young Prince's words. The young palace lady bowed her head sadly, forcing a smile: "Thank you, Young Prince. Such beautiful fresh flowers, I am truly unworthy!"

Zhao Kangning earnestly said, "Miss Seo is too modest. You are the pearl of Goryeo, a hundred times more beautiful than these flowers. To be able to offer you this blooming bouquet is an honor in my three lives! Please accept it quickly!"

‘This young lad has quite the thick skin. With such meager skills in wooing women, he dares to show off in front of me?’ Lin Wanrong found it amusing, plucking a fiery red azalea to sniff, its subtle fragrance refreshing and invigorating.

The Young Prince's earnestness was overwhelming. If Seo Jang Geum refused the flower, it would be a slight to his face. She wore a distressed expression and lowered her head in silence.

Seeing everyone's eyes on her, Zhao Kangning grew annoyed, raising his voice: "Miss Seo, I genuinely want to be friends with you. Surely you won't refuse even this small gesture. Our Great Hua and Goryeo have been friendly neighbors for generations."

He emphasized the words "friendly neighbors for generations" heavily. Seo Jang Geum's expression darkened. Just as she was about to reach out, she heard laughter nearby: "Young Prince, your way of expressing yourself is quite unique. What does being friendly neighbors for generations have to do with offering flowers to a young lady?"

Upon hearing this voice, Seo Jang Geum felt a sudden relief, exhaling a long breath. She glanced gratefully at Lin Wanrong, only to find him casually swinging a bright red flower, its petals reflecting his smile, appearing completely relaxed and at ease.

Frustrated that his good intentions were disrupted, Zhao Kangning's anger surfaced: "Lin San, what do you mean by this? I sincerely offer flowers to Miss Seo. What business is it of yours?"

‘No business with me? What a joke! I'm here by imperial command to woo her, and you obstruct me. I've spared you a beating by the imperial guards, and that's already a favor!’ Lin Wanrong

stepped forward, shaking the flower branch with a grin: "How can it have nothing to do with me? Miss Seo is my 'Jang Geum Dongsaeng,' after all!"

Seo Jang Geum's face turned red with embarrassment, and she lowered her head, not daring to speak. Zhao Kangning snapped, "What Jang Geum Dongsaeng? How could Miss Seo associate with you, a shameless scoundrel trying to take advantage?"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily: "The one trying to take advantage should be you, Young Prince. As the saying goes, 'When you see injustice on the road, everyone should trample it.' I just couldn't stand it and spoke up for my Jang Geum Dongsaeng."

"Lin San, how dare you slander me!" Zhao Kangning was furious. "I treat Eldest Miss Seo with the utmost sincerity. What about this do you find unacceptable? Don't think that just because you can speak a few words in front of the Emperor, I can't do anything to you. This land of Great Hua bears the Zhao family name!"

"It does bear the name Zhao," Lin Wanrong sneered. "But one Zhao is not necessarily the same as another, Young Prince. You claim to treat 'Jang Geum Dongsaeng' with utter sincerity, even presenting her with beautiful flowers. Let me ask you then, do you even know the name of the flower in your hand?"

What is the name of this flower? Zhao Kangning was taken aback. Born with a golden spoon in his mouth, he had never had to know the difference between the five grains and had always been idle. He had picked this wildflower from the mountainside on a whim, seeing how beautifully it bloomed, intending to give it to Seo Jang Geum. How could he recognize the name of this wildflower?

Seeing Seo Jang Geum looking at him, the Young Prince's heart raced. He hastily signaled to his companions behind him.

"Chrysanthemum—"

"Peony—"

"Cockscomb—"

"Foxtail grass—"

Guesses rang out from all around, each one offered by the sons of wealthy officials. They could name all manner of expensive flowers but none recognized this wild mountain blossom.

Seo Jang Geum couldn't help but chuckle and sneak a glance at Lin Wanrong before quickly lowering her head.

"I've been careless, careless!" Zhao Kangning lamented, his face turning red with anger. He glared at Lin San, who was smirking. "So, you know it, do you? If you're so clever, tell me what it's called."

Lin Wanrong smiled and nodded, lightly smelling the flower before slowly pacing a few steps. "Naming this flower isn't anything extraordinary. In Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism, it's called Gesang; in Goryeo, it's called Jindallae!"

Hearing this, Seo Jang Geum became ecstatic, grabbing his hand, tears shimmering in her eyes. "That's right, it's called Jindallae, the flower of my homeland. Every spring, Mount Geumgang is covered in these red and purple Jindallae. It's beautiful. Wanrong Oppa, how do you know about Jindallae? You must have been to our Goryeo."

Hearing Seo Jang Geum call Lin Wanrong "Wanrong Oppa," Zhao Kangning turned pale with anger and snapped, "I asked for its name in Great Hua language. What's all this about Tibetan or Goryeo?"

"Don't be impatient, let me explain slowly," Lin Wanrong said with a leisurely smile. "This beautiful little flower, in our Great Hua language, is called the Azalea, also known as Rhododendron. There's a legend from the ancient Shu kingdom about an Emperor named Du Yu, who loved his empress dearly. After he was tragically murdered, his soul became a cuckoo, crying daily in the Empress's garden. Its tears were drops of red blood, staining the beautiful flowers there, thus people named it Azalea."

"The Empress, hearing the cuckoo's mournful cries and seeing the crimson blood, realized it was her husband's soul. Grieving, she wailed 'Come back, come back,' day and night until she passed away in sorrow. Her soul turned into fiery red azaleas that covered the mountains, living together with the cuckoo. So, this Azalea is also called Rhododendron, and this is the story of 'the cuckoo cries tears of blood, its offspring mournfully cry upon return.' 'Once heard in Shu, the cry of the cuckoo, still seen in Xuancheng, the Azalea flower,' this tale of undying love between bird and flower is an immortal legend in our world. Young Prince, do you understand now?"

Unexpectedly, this little wildflower had such a tragic and beautiful origin. It was laughable that after giving Miss Seo the flower, he couldn't even call its name, let alone narrate such an enticing story. Zhao Kangning's face turned red and pale, looking extremely unsightly.

"The cuckoo cries tears of blood, its offspring mournfully cry upon return," Seo Jang Geum listened with a misty chill in her eyes, tears welling up: "So this Jindallae has such a beautiful story. Sir, thank you for your teaching. Is there really such devotion, such unyielding emotion in the world?"

"In spring's blush fades, yet autumn's hue returns,

From a vanished realm, to Chu's palace it yearns.

Surely it's Shu's grievances that never cease to cry,

Relying on its colors to lament to the western sky.

Emotion is the essence of humanity, the love that grows stronger with age; there are countless examples in the human world. Miss Seo, you must have faith in others, as well as in yourself," Lin Wanrong said with a slight smile, flicking the flower stem in his hand and slowly handing it to Seo Jang Geum: "One flower for you, two cuckoos in Shu!"

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"A flower for you, two cuckoos in Shu?!" Seo Jang Geum muttered softly, her face flushed with clouds of red, her small hand trembling slightly. She was eager to take the flower branch but hesitated inexplicably.

How could he not have thought of this? It was both a flower and a poem; what woman could resist? Zhao Kangning was secretly distressed. Although he had always despised Lin San's actions, seeing Lin San's performance today, even he, who considered himself suave, unrivaled, and elegant, had to admit that when it came to courting women, he and Lin San were simply not on the same level.

"Sir, Sir," Seo Jang Geum's face turned a deep red, biting her cherry lips, her snow-white hands opening and closing, surging like tides of thought, "Is what you said true? This Jindallae, are you really giving it to me?"

"Oh, it was just a momentary exclamation," Lin Wanrong sighed lightly and smiled, "I could have given you this azalea, but this little poem is not for you. To avoid misunderstanding, I better take it back." As if unintentionally, he lightly brushed the fiery red azalea against Seo Jang Geum's small hand and indeed took it back.

Zhao Kangning watched with great joy; this Lin San seemed to be showing off, with no real interest in Seo Jang Geum. He hurriedly said, "Exactly, exactly, you have several wives at home, don't give flowers to other people's young ladies, it will ruin their reputation."

Seo Jang Geum lowered her head, tears welling in her eyes. She turned her head away, not allowing others to see, and spoke softly, "Thank you, sir, for telling me the story of the cuckoo in Shu. I know I am like a weak willow, incomparable to the beautiful Jindallae. But the legend of the weeping cuckoo, I will remember forever. Thank you!" She bent down deeply, expressing a reverence and devotion beyond words.

"Not at all, not at all," Lin Wanrong smiled and helped her up, "Life is like floating dust; thirty years in the east and thirty in the west. If there is an azalea in your heart, there is grace in life. Don't belittle yourself."

Zhao Kangning listened on the side, blood boiling. This Lin San was just reciting some off-tune lewd poems; how could he suddenly speak with such Zen wisdom? How could anyone be so shameless?

Seo Jang Geum wiped the tears from the corner of her eyes, nodded lightly, and her eyes fell on the flower branch in his hand, falling into a moment of melancholy again.

Zhao Kangning hastily handed her a large bunch of rhododendrons: "Miss Seo, Lin San is very unscrupulous, don't mind him. The story of the Shu Emperor and Empress also touched me. Look, these azaleas, all picked for you. Do you like them? Miss Seo, Miss Seo—"

Seo Jang Geum's mind seemed elsewhere, and only when she heard him call her a few times did she come back to her senses, a hint of apology on her face: "Young Prince, what did you say?"

It was all Lin San's fault, making Miss Seo so dazed. Zhao Kangning's heart was full of unspeakable irritation, but he pretended not to care and smiled casually, "Young Prince said, these beautiful azaleas were specially picked for you, Miss. Do you like them?"

Seo Jang Geum hummed in response, her eyes furtively glancing at Lin Wanrong. Her face turned rosy yet somewhat melancholic as she softly said, "Thank you, Young Prince, for your kind

intentions. The azaleas are beautiful, but just like flowers, one can only truly favor a single blossom." As her words fell, she saw that Master Lin had already walked far away, as if he hadn't even heard her heartfelt words.

Twice his offer of flowers had been rejected, and Zhao Kangning's face alternated between red and white. He was unable to vent his frustration and could only secretly snort, awkwardly withdrawing the beautiful, fire-like azaleas. Seeing that Lin San had walked far away, disappearing around a corner, Seo Jang Geum clenched her teeth, staring blankly. The vibrant spring scenery around her lost all beauty in her eyes.

Zhao Kangning suddenly waved his hand with joy, pointing to a pond ahead and said, "Miss Seo, look quickly, up ahead is the famous Spring Pond in the capital. The pond is best known for its willow trees. Every year in February and March, willows on both banks sprout tender buds, competing to herald spring, offering a spectacular sight. Shall we go appreciate the willows together?"

Seo Jang Geum had already lost her interest and lightly shook her head, speaking softly, "Young Prince, the situation in Goryeo is urgent. I can't afford to linger here any longer. What do you think about the matter I spoke to you about yesterday? Have you reported it to Prince Cheng?"

"Well, this," Zhao Kangning's face showed difficulty as he shook his head, "Miss Seo, you may not know, but Goryeo and our Great Hua are linked like flesh and blood, so it's only natural for Great Hua to send troops to assist Goryeo. My father has also spoken favorably of Goryeo before the Emperor. However, someone is deliberately obstructing us from dispatching troops to Goryeo. This person is also greatly favored by the Emperor, so I'm unable to help you at the moment!"

"Young Prince, who is this person you speak of?" Seo Jang Geum's eyebrows furrowed slightly, her big eyes blinking as she asked.

Zhao Kangning sneered coldly, "Speaking of this person, you are no stranger to him. It's none other than Master Lin San, who was just reciting lewd poetry and showing off his cleverness. He proposed some theory of 'one country, two systems,' deliberately hindering the friendship between our two nations. It's utterly despicable. Although my father and I have actively mediated, Lin San is eloquent and favored by the Emperor, so we can't think of a solution for now!"

Seo Jang Geum sighed, expressing her difficulty, "Is there no other more flexible solution? The conditions of 'one country, two systems' are too harsh; the King will find it hard to agree."

"Miss Seo, don't worry," Zhao Kangning said with a carefree smile, patting her shoulder, "You and I are such close friends. How could I refuse to help you?"

Hearing him emphasize the word "close," Seo Jang Geum bit her lip, without responding. Standing closer to this young palace maid, he became infatuated with her translucent, milk-like skin, and reached out to grab her hand, "Miss Seo, the scenery up ahead is wonderful. Let's go and explore together."

Seo Jang Geum was taken aback and hurriedly stepped back two paces, avoiding his grasp, and said with her head lowered, "Goryeo is in imminent peril; I really have no interest in sightseeing. I hope Young Prince will understand."

"Goryeo is in imminent peril?" Seeing her repeated refusals, even a clay Buddha would grow impatient. Zhao Kangning's face reddened in annoyance, and he lightly snorted, "Miss Seo, at least you still remember this matter. In the whole world, the only ones who can speak up for you are my father and I. But you are so uncooperative. How can I help you?"

"Cooperate? How should I cooperate?" Seo Jang Geum asked in surprise, "Please make it clear, Prince. What must I do for you to help our Goryeo?"

"This, actually, is not difficult," Zhao Kangning smirked, reaching out again to grab her hand. "Miss Seo, with your extraordinary beauty, if our two nations were to form an alliance as close as that of Qin and Jin, wouldn't that solve everything? My feelings for you are nothing but sincere, clearer to you than anyone else."

Seo Jang Geum's face turned red, and she quickly took two steps back, bowing her head and saying respectfully, "Your Highness, you flatter me too much. I'm merely a lowly palace maid in Goryeo, how could I possibly be worthy of someone of your royal lineage?"

"A lowly palace maid?" Zhao Kangning coldly laughed a few times. "Miss Seo, do you really need to be so modest in front of me? A mere palace maid who can stay in our Great Hua for so long, acting as a mediator between Great Hua and Goryeo? Your true identity—do you think I don't know it?"

There was a rustling noise. Something was startled in the nearby bushes. Zhao Kangning snapped, "Who's there?"

The bushes were silent for a moment before two wild ducks quacked and leaped out from the woods, heading straight for the spring pond ahead. Zhao Kangning let out a long sigh, then continued, "Miss Seo, if you say you're a palace maid, then I, the prince, am taken with such a maid. If you agree to me, Goryeo and our Great Hua will become family, and we'll work on assisting with military forces. I assure you, Goryeo will be safe for generations."

Seo Jang Geum's face turned pale, her small hand gripping tightly, her bright red lips almost biting until they bled. Zhao Kangning felt a surge of satisfaction, as though he'd regained his pride from Lin Wanrong. He chuckled twice, "Miss Seo, I believe you can understand my sincere feelings for you. I've said all I can. What you do next is up to you. But let me remind you, Goryeo might not hold out much longer. With every moment you delay, your people suffer more casualties. I'll be at the mansion, waiting for your good news."

Zhao Kangning left, laughing heartily, full of satisfaction. Seo Jang Geum's lips were dry, her heart cold, tears trickling down as she slowly walked forward. By the spring pond's edge, a gentle breeze blew, green waves rippled, countless willows sprouting fresh buds, their tender green tips delighting the eye.

Seo Jang Geum stood by the spring pond's edge, looking into the distance at the hazy mountains and spring rain like smoke. Her heart ached. She stamped her small foot and reached out as if to jump forward.

"No, no, don't do it!" A figure suddenly rushed out from the diagonal, tightly embracing her delicate body, with both large hands intentionally or unintentionally resting on her chest. "Miss Seo, we can talk this over. How could you be so rash? Ah, you are carrying two large buns on you!"

"Let go of me!" Seo Jang Geum trembled, quickly twisting her body. "Sir, let go of me, please let go of me quickly!"

"Why jump into the river, and what's with the buns if you're going to jump?" Lin Wanrong tightly hugged her, giving a gentle squeeze. Seo Jang Geum let out a whimper, her face flushed with embarrassment, and hurriedly said, "Sir, I'm not going to jump into the river. You misunderstood, misunderstood."

"A misunderstanding?" Lin Wanrong looked at her in confusion, "No way! Clearly, two steamed buns were about to cause a bloody scene, and judging by my countless experiences in saving people, you must have had the impulse to jump into the river. Otherwise, why would you cling to me like this?"

Seo Jang Geum's face was as red as fire, and she was filled with embarrassment. It was clearly Master Lin who had clung to her, so why was he blaming her now? "Sir, I just wanted to pluck a willow branch, not jump into the river!" Seo Jang Geum said, blushing and lowering her voice, "Please let me go quickly!"

"Pluck willow branches?" Lin Wanrong laughed awkwardly and rubbed the steamed buns, then reluctantly withdrew his hands, saying, "All this fuss about flowers and willows, Miss Seo, you need to be careful. This kind of illness is hard to cure."

Hearing his blatant teasing, the young palace maid could hardly bear it and whimpered, quickly turning her head. She reached out with her slender hand, plucked a freshly sprouted willow branch, and gently sniffed it before lowering her head, softly asking, "Sir, what are you doing here?"

"I came to pick flowers, of course." Lin Wanrong shook the flower branch in his hand, smiling, "I'm not satisfied yet; how can I return empty-handed?"

Seo Jang Geum looked at the flower in his hand and suddenly chuckled lightly, "Sir, you truly are a diligent flower picker. Such a beautiful azalea has been tortured into this shape by you."

"Oh," Lin Wanrong glanced at the azalea in his hand, only to see that the petals had long scattered, and the branch was covered in grass and mud, hardly recognizable as the bright red flower it had once been. "Oh, the azalea's husband called her, so she left home. It's understandable, understandable." He laughed twice, speaking nonsense.

Seo Jang Geum shook her head and laughed softly. Seeing him covered in mud and grass, she wondered where he had rolled around. Thinking of how he had been reciting poetry earlier, her heart felt both warm and touched. She gently brushed off the grass and mud from his body and said softly, "Sir, what happened to you? Your clothes are in such a state."

Lin Wanrong waved his hand, smiling nonchalantly, "Oh, it's nothing. I was just catching ducks in the bushes earlier. Eh, where's the Young Prince? Aren't you two usually together, enjoying the sights? How could he leave you behind like this? That's not right, not right!"

Seo Jang Geum looked at him, her teeth clenched, and shook her head, slowly stepping to the edge of the lake. Looking at her beautiful reflection in the water, tears welled up in her eyes, and she found herself at a loss for words. The spring breeze rustled her long hair and elegant skirt, and in the slight chill, this foreign palace maid seemed as fragile as a delicate willow, pitiable and forlorn.

"Sir, do you think I'm very pitiful?" Seo Jang Geum's eyes were like spring water, misty, as she looked at him, her voice soft and distant.

Lin Wanrong was taken aback; this question was indeed difficult to answer. In terms of appearance, Seo Jang Geum was not the most breathtakingly beautiful, but she won people over with the traditional Goryeo grace and gentleness. A young girl, alone in a foreign land, seeking help – the taste of that was truly unbearable.

"How could that be?" Lin Wanrong laughed, "You're beautiful, knowledgeable, and you can even cook medicinal meals. Where's the pity in that?"

Seo Jang Geum shook her head slightly, her eyes fixed on him: "Sir, even if what you say is false, Jang Geum is still very grateful. They all say that you are deceitful, cunning, fierce, and greedy, but I feel that you are more upright than everyone else, because you are a real villain. You bully me openly and bravely, which is ten times, a hundred times stronger than those hypocrites who talk about benevolence and morality. I hate others' hypocrisy, but I like your courage." Seo Jang Geum's eyes were beautifully dewy, and her gaze made one's heart tremble.

Lin Wanrong laughed dryly a couple of times. 'My goodness, I'll take it as a compliment from Jang Geum Dongsang. To be thanked for bullying her, the world really is crazy.' "This world is very complex," Lin Wanrong sighed, shaking his head: "In many cases, except that lies are true, everything else is false. You shouldn't trust me too much."

"Except for lies being true, everything else is false," Seo Jang Geum murmured, her face flushing slightly, tears welling in her eyes. Suddenly she respectfully wept, "Wanrong Oppa, I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I can't talk to you anymore because I'm afraid if I say one more word to you, I'll never want to go back to Goryeo again."

"You're going back to Goryeo?" Lin Wanrong was surprised, his mind racing. Was Jang Geum leaving? Had Prince Cheng promised her something?

Seo Jang Geum wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and smiled faintly: "I'm not originally from Great Hua. Going back to my homeland is just a matter of time. My heart longs for the cuckoo, but I don't know where life will drift me to."

"You mean Goryeo is really going to fight to the death with Dongyin? This is a dead-end." Lin Wanrong shook his head. If that Goryeo King was really hell-bent, it would not be easy to deal with.

"If we don't fight to the death, what else can we do?" Seo Jang Geum's face showed sadness. "The Dongyin people are fierce and brutal, and Great Hua is unwilling to help. We in Goryeo can only choose to die rather than let the Dongyin succeed."

Lin Wanrong sighed lightly: "Miss Seo, I told you the reasons before. If it's between the two of us, I would naturally be responsible and save you even at the cost of my life. But between nations, there's only interest, no sentiment. If the lives of Great Hua's people can't get any return, even if I'm willing, the people of the world won't agree. Isn't that the way it is?"

The young palace maid nodded slightly, plucked the willow branch, and gently shook it, staring at it in a trance, her cheeks flushed: "Wanrong Oppa, you're right, this is not your fault. I have never blamed you. On the contrary, I respect you and admire you from my heart because you are an upright and honest person."

Lin Wanrong chuckled: "Miss Seo, I didn't want to ask originally, but since you brought it up, let me add a word. Is Goryeo now negotiating terms with Dongyin?"

Seo Jang Geum's face changed rapidly: "My lord, how... how do you know?"

‘Negotiating peace with Dongyin? Negotiating with a tiger for its skin!’ Lin Wanrong sneered coldly: "Miss Seo, don't worry about how I know. Let me ask you one more question. If you were a Dongyin person, what terms would Goryeo have to offer for you to withdraw your troops?"

"This," Seo Jang Geum hesitated for a moment, slowly shook her head, and sighed helplessly, "Unless we cede Goryeo, I will not withdraw the troops. But besides that, Wanrong Oppa, what other options do we have?"

Lin Wanrong's face was serious, and he perceived that Jang Geum's thoughts were not simple. She had avoided mentioning seeking aid from Great Hua even at this point, which indicated her hesitation.

"Yes, there's no way out," Lin Wanrong said with a faint smile. "This morning, the Emperor summoned me to the palace to discuss a matter. He plans to move the newly formed army in the Northeast directly to the area near the Altai Mountains in the North, to assist Li Tai in fighting against the Turks—"

"What?" Seo Jang Geum was taken aback, tightly grasping his hand, and urgently asked, "How could this be? The Northeastern new army was supposed to assist Goryeo in resisting the Dongyin. If they are moved to Altai, what will become of Goryeo?"

Lin Wanrong sighed, "You shouldn't be asking me this. You should be asking your King. Great Hua has suffered greatly at the hands of the northern nomads, and we left a fresh force to help Goryeo resist the invasion. However, your King has been indecisive and hesitant. Great Hua's military is stretched thin, and having waited long for news from you without reply, we had no choice but to move this army to the North! As for Goryeo, alas, we really can't concern ourselves with it anymore!"

"Sir, this cannot be!" The young palace girl was truly anxious. "The King is not indecisive; it's just —"

"Just what?" Lin Wanrong sighed faintly, "What are you still hesitating about at this critical juncture? Who else in the world can protect the Goryeo people except Great Hua?"

Seo Jang Geum suddenly covered her face and wept, "Wanrong Oppa, you are forcing me! I cannot become Goryeo's eternal sinner!" Her shoulders shook violently, her chest heaved, and tears rolled down, a picture of utter misery.

He must not soften his heart! Lin Wanrong turned his head and reluctantly said, "Standing in this position, you must do what you have to do, and there's no escape. Who the eternal sinner is might only become clear when Goryeo is destroyed, and those stubborn elders will understand! Ah, such a heavy burden, how could it be placed on a young girl like you? You've lingered in Great Hua, endured all kinds of disdain, and it must have been hard on you!"

Seeing his sincere face, Seo Jang Geum wept like rain, shaking her head, "Sir, don't blame others. I chose to stay here voluntarily. Because, because—"

"Because of what?" Lin Wanrong shook his head and smiled, "It couldn't be because of me, could it?!"

Seo Jang Geum continued to weep, shaking her head frantically and choking out, "Sir, can you grant Jang Geum a small request! I'm sorry, please, you must agree!"

Seeing Seo Jang Geum's small face flushed like a rain-kissed peach blossom, full of expectation as she looked at him, Lin Wanrong cautiously said, "What request? Don't ask for anything improper; I'm always very chaste!"

Seo Jang Geum wiped the tears from her face, her ears turning red as she lowered her head, her voice almost inaudible, "Sir, can you... can you hug Jang Geum?"

Lin Wanrong was greatly shocked, stepping back, "Miss Seo, I am a chaste and loyal man, I would never do anything against my nature—Hey, hey, what are you doing, don't hug so tightly, assault is a criminal offense, don't touch my chest—"

Seo Jang Geum held him tightly, tears pouring down like rain, soaking the front of his clothes, "Sir, I'm sorry, Jang Geum can't stop herself from liking you, I've caused you trouble!"

Chapter 428 Hard to Guard Against

Lin Wanrong heard and broke into a sweat; his original intention was to flirt with girls, but somehow, he ended up being flirted with. It seemed that next time he faced such a task, he would have to be mentally prepared for this possibility.

"This, Jang Geum Dongsaeng," he shook his head and sighed, modestly saying, "let's not proceed, you know, I am already married. With my honest and upright nature, it's challenging for me to be unfaithful; engaging in an affair a few times has already reached the limit."

Seo Jang Geum embraced him, her cheek against his chest, gently shaking her head: "My Lord, please say no more; I understand everything. You, for your wife's sake, would offend the world. Your true feelings are evident, and Jang Geum wouldn't dare harbor any wild thoughts. I only hope you can hold me, give me some courage, so I can speak my mind, Jang Geum doesn't want to live with lifelong regret."

This request was truly hard to refuse; Lin Wanrong was pleased inside, holding her in his arms, slowly caressing her smooth, jade-like skin, feeling a tingling sensation inside, and sighing, "Alas, Jang Geum Dongsaeng values me so much, I am indeed fortunate. At this moment of parting, my heart aches, and I truly wish to cry out to the heavens."

Taking advantage of Seo Jang Geum's distraction, he covertly pinched his nose, blinked hard, and forced out some tears, sighing deeply, "Returning the precious pearl, with twin tears falling, lamenting we didn't meet before marriage. Jang Geum Dongsaeng, I only regret that we met too

late, missing the opportunity. The greatest regret in life is no greater than this; how can we make up for it?"

Seeing Lin Wanrong's eyes slightly red and misty, Seo Jang Geum's heart was torn between joy and sorrow, and tears rolled down her cheeks. Shaking her head forcefully, she said, "My Lord, with these words from you, Jang Geum would have no regrets, even in death."

"Ah, living takes even greater courage than dying," Lord Lin's face was full of melancholy, "So, don't speak so lightly of life and death. At this moment of parting, I have much to tell you. How about this, we find an inn, rent a room, and sit down together for tea, chatting, and heart-to-heart talk. Don't worry, I'm a very upright person; I won't do anything outrageous."

Seo Jang Geum's face turned slightly red, and she held him tightly without saying a word.

'You're not speaking, so I'll take it as agreement,' Lin Wanrong thought, chuckling. His big hand gently caressed her smooth back; the young palace maid's skin was warm and smooth like jade, feeling like a piece of fine silk, just incredible.

"My Lord!" His big hand slid inside her robe, moving slowly towards her chest. Seo Jang Geum's face turned crimson, and she quickly raised her head from his embrace, shyly glancing at him, "You cannot do this, Jang Geum is not a casual person."

"I understand, I understand, I'm not very casual either," Lin Wanrong laughed, "Actually, I just wanted to verify a question about the reaction speed of the human hand and brain. After careful exploration, I've proven a truth — sometimes, the human hand is not controlled by the brain."

Seo Jang Geum gave a sound of acknowledgment, her face flushing, "Speaking my mind has made me feel much lighter. My Lord, thank you for your generosity, and sorry for the trouble."

Dealing with the Goryeo girl was truly troublesome; constantly apologizing and expressing trouble. Lin Wanrong felt an itch in his heart but generously laughed, saying, "It's alright, it's alright. I'm not afraid of trouble. Miss Seo, are you really going to return to Goryeo?"

The young palace maid shed tears like rain, "Yes, sir, Jang Geum will soon be returning to Goryeo. I fear that there will be no chance to see you again."

Lin Wanrong simply replied, sighing, "If you must go, then go. It's far better than staying here like a rootless duckweed. Jang Geum Dongsang, you've been sincere with me, but I must remind you of

something. There's no such thing as a free lunch in this world. Although Zhao Kangning is of high status, with his ability, he cannot change Goryeo's fate. If you place your bets on him, you may end up greatly mistaken."

Tears floated in Seo Jang Geum's eyes as she softly said, "Wanrong Oppa, thank you. Jang Geum knows the character of Prince Cheng and his son; I will never let them take advantage." She glanced at Lin Wanrong and suddenly sighed softly, "Wanrong Oppa, did you come out to pick flowers today?"

Before Lin Wanrong could speak, she shook her head, a firm look appearing on her face, "Actually, the moment you appeared beside me, I knew why you came."

Seo Jang Geum's gaze became distant as she softly continued, "Between you and Prince Cheng, Jang Geum truly doesn't know how to choose. Although I know Prince Cheng is deceitful, I'd rather face Zhao Kangning than come to you, sir. Because, whenever I see you, all words fail me. In your presence, Jang Geum loses herself. As a daughter of Goryeo, this is a betrayal of the Goryeo people."

She choked softly, tears slowly falling from her beautiful face, lingering on her cheeks for a long time before silently dropping, looking so desolate in the slightly cold spring wind.

‘Ah, being an outstanding man brings many troubles indeed.’ Lin Wanrong dryly grinned, hiding his embarrassment, "Jang Geum, making the right choice at the right time, that's a true wise person. I believe the Goryeo people will eventually understand your hardship."

"Sir, are you free tonight?" Seo Jang Geum wiped her tears, sighed, and her expression turned strong, "I would like to discuss our King's thoughts with you."

Lin Wanrong hurriedly replied, "I'm free, I'm free. Miss Seo, you don't need me to explain the situation in Goryeo; delaying even a moment is dangerous. Can you really make this decision?"

The young palace maid nodded slightly, as if transformed, gentle yet firm, "Please rest assured, sir, the King has authorized me. Just ask your Emperor to obtain the edict. If tonight's discussion goes well, the two countries can directly conclude a treaty."

So it was, Lin Wanrong rejoiced, patting his chest loudly, "Jang Geum Dongsaeng, rest assured, the Emperor has already authorized me to negotiate with Goryeo. Where shall we meet tonight?"

"Sir, do you remember the tavern from a few days ago?" Seo Jang Geum's tone was melancholic, "I'll wait for you in that room tonight. Be there, Wanrong Oppa. Jang Geum takes her leave!" With those words, she gave Lin Wanrong a deep look, turned, and quickly left, disappearing from sight in a blink of an eye.

Seo Jang Geum's expression seemed somewhat unusual, but Lin Wanrong didn't have the luxury to pay too much attention to that. As long as she didn't go to Zhao Kangning, everything would be fine. The Emperor's authorized edict had long been concealed within his clothing; now he was simply waiting to hear what conditions Seo Jang Geum would propose that night.

The day had passed and it was already afternoon. Feeling too lazy to go home, Lin Wanrong decided to wander outside the city and enjoy the beautiful mountains and waters. He picked some wildflowers and weeds, and for a time, his mood was quite pleasant. He didn't return to the city until dusk. As he entered the city gate, he heard the chaotic clattering of hooves behind him, and dozens of fast horses galloped past. The cavalries on horseback brandished their whips and yelled, "Make way, make way, all of you move aside quickly."

'Who's this? They're even more arrogant than I am!' he thought, barely stepping aside in time. Several fast horses whipped up a whirlwind as they flew past, splattering him with mud and water.

'My battle robe! This is the result of several days' hard work by Qiaoqiao!' Lin Wanrong's heart ached. He was about to curse angrily when he felt a light tug on his sleeve. Someone had grabbed his battle robe.

"Who dares—" he growled, turning his head, but his expression changed instantly and he smiled obsequiously. "I was wondering who would dare to challenge me; turns out it's my wives arriving. Qingxuan, Qiaoqiao, Ning'er, how come you're here?"

Xiao Qingxuan was dressed in a light yellow skirt, overlaid with a white jacket. Her beauty was ethereal and elegant, smiling softly at him. Qiaoqiao was charming and pretty, leaning against Miss Xiao, and Luo Ning, wearing a pink jacket, was voluptuously graceful, looking at him with a flirtatious smile. These three women, whether charming, delicate, or vivacious, all possessed heavenly beauty. Standing side by side, they were like three blooming lotus flowers, dazzling and captivating.

Qiaoqiao giggled, covering her mouth: "Big Brother, what are you doing? Staring at us like this every day, haven't you seen enough?"

"Big Brother is looking at Sister, not us, Qiaoqiao. Don't get it wrong," Luo Ning winked and smiled mischievously.

"You two, always so frivolous!" Xiao Qingxuan blushed, her face turning red, and she glanced reproachfully at her husband before shyly lowering her head.

Lin Wanrong turned around, grabbing Miss Xiao, and laughed heartily: "Qingxuan, what are you doing here? Thankfully you stopped me, or those wild horsemen would have been in serious trouble."

"Why act so rashly?" Xiao Qingxuan smiled at him and gently took his hand, saying softly, "Those are people from Prince Cheng's mansion. I don't know what urgent matter they are attending to. Why would you bother with them?"

"No wonder they were more arrogant than me; they were Zhao Kangning's men," Lin Wanrong chuckled. In the capital, whether it was a duke or a minor prince, they all had to dismount and respectfully call him "Brother San." His triumph was evident in his sinister smile, which caused Luo Ning to twist his arm: "Big Brother, why are you grinning so wickedly? Have you set your eyes on some young lady again?"

"Of course not," Lin Wanrong laughed, "I'm not that kind of person. I wouldn't normally fancy any young lady. Ning'er, why did you all come out?"

Luo Ning replied seriously: "You left home in the morning and didn't return by noon. Sister was worried, so she wanted to come out and look for you. Qiaoqiao and I were concerned about Sister, so we all came out together and also went shopping!"

Lin Wanrong listened, breaking into a sweat. "If you want to go shopping, just say so. Why make up so many reasons? Qingxuan, you're in a delicate condition now. How can you run around? I'm a full-grown man, what could possibly go wrong if I walk around on my own? Could I possibly get lost?" His heart ached, and he casually placed his hand on Miss Xiao's belly, gently caressing it.

Seeing him act so brazenly, regardless of the situation or place, Miss Xiao's face turned red with embarrassment. Fortunately, Qiaoqiao and Ning'er were clever, and since it was almost evening and the street was not crowded, no one could see their faces. The two girls leaned forward to hide the couple's activities. The four of them huddled together, and nobody could make out what was happening inside the circle.

"You utter rascal!" Miss Xiao scolded angrily, her face aflame. Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning also blushed, having never experienced anything so stimulating.

Lin Wanrong's expression didn't change, and he shamelessly chuckled, "Heh heh, this is a warning, telling you not to run around with my son. If you slip and fall in the mud, what then? You and our child are the most precious things to me. If even a hair were to be harmed, I wouldn't sleep for three years."

Xiao Qingxuan shot him a glance, laughing helplessly, "You always find some reason or another. Just yesterday, you said you would accompany us today. What happened? Did you run into Xu Wei, and then you disappeared?"

"I was busy! Xu Wei dragged me away, and I was gone for hours. I was so tired, dizzy and weak. Ning'Er, find a place to massage me later. I promise I won't take advantage of you," Lin Wanrong said, his eyes roving over Luo Ning's voluptuous figure, leering lasciviously. He wondered whether he should show the imperial edict to Qingxuan or not. It wouldn't make sense to show it without her catching him red-handed.

Luo Ning shook her head, giggling, "Big Brother, you can't fool us. This morning we visited Xu Mansion, and Master Xu was at home. He said you left after discussing politics with the Emperor. We don't know where you went."

Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth, cursing Xu Wei's lack of loyalty. He had promised to vouch for him but instead exposed him.

"Ah, ha ha, actually, this is what happened. Today, after discussing politics with the Emperor, he gave me a secret decree to handle an urgent matter. This affair concerns our great nation's honor for a century. Being a citizen of honor, and the princess's husband, I naturally had to handle it perfectly to report back to the Emperor." His words were a mix of truth and fabrication, grandiose but vague. Miss Luo was already suspicious of him and wrinkled her nose, asking Xiao Qingxuan, "Sister, do you believe what Big Brother is saying?"

Xiao Qingxuan shook her head slightly, smiling but not quite smiling, "In theory, he's my husband, and I should believe him, but—"

Lin Wanrong was taken aback, sensing something off in Qingxuan's words. Fortunately, Qiaoqiao, who cared for Big Brother the most, whispered, "Big Brother, when we went to Xu Mansion today, a maid told us Miss Xu had gone out, and along with you disappearing so early, Sister Ning jokingly said you must have planned this, so we—"

Lin Wanrong was sweating profusely. It turned out that his eldest wife had come with his younger wives to catch him in the act. Unexpectedly, a wrong hit had turned out right. He did have a date today, but they had mistaken Miss Seo for Miss Xu. He had actually arranged to meet with Miss Seo, not Xu Zhiqing. With this reminder, Lin Wanrong suddenly remembered that Xu Zhiqing had arranged for him to visit her mansion today. However, after fondling Jang Geum Dongsaeng's chest twice, he had become so entranced that he had forgotten all about it. Shameful, truly shameful!

"Big Brother," seeing him lower his head, lost in thought, Luo Ning exclaimed with a surprised smile, "Could it be that you really are with Sister Zhiqing?"

Xiao Qingxuan glanced at him indifferently, neither speaking nor smiling. Lin Wanrong hurriedly said, "You must not misunderstand. I have no entanglement with Xu Zhiqing. I really was sent out on imperial orders today. Look at my clothes; do they look like I'm dressed for a date?"

His clothes were covered in mud and grass, and he seemed to have been fooling around somewhere. It indeed did not look like he was dressed for a date. Miss Xiao looked at him with a mixture of amusement and concern, snuggling up to him and carefully wiping his clothes clean, softly saying, "Where did you fall into a mud pit? You're a father now, yet you don't take care of yourself. How can people not worry when they see you like this?"

Qiaoqiao nodded gently, shaking her head tenderly, "Big Brother, your clothes must be uncomfortable. Let's go home quickly, and I'll wash them for you."

"Not now," Lin Wanrong shook his head, his expression resolute, "I still have a very important official matter to deal with. I can't go back yet."

Luo Ning, however, had a keen nose and sniffed him a few times, looking at him with doubt, "It smells like the fragrance of powdered water, Big Brother, you—"

"Oh, I picked some wildflowers while I was out on official business, so there's some scent of pollen. It's nothing strange, nothing strange." Lin Wanrong felt a chill in his heart, glancing at Luo Ning, only to see the fox-like girl smiling mysteriously and seductively, as if she had discovered something. This little vixen really had a way about her. He thought to himself, 'I'll see how I deal with you tonight,' and he couldn't help but leer at Ning'er. Luo Ning hugged her chest, softly and timidly saying, "Husband, don't torture Ning'er. I can't bear it."

Qiaoqiao covered her lips and chuckled, her eyes flushed. She had heard this secret language between husband and wife countless times from Sister Ning, and each time it had a different meaning. Lin Wanrong's heart was aflame. 'Little vixen, if I don't make you clutch the railing and tear the sheets tonight, I'll take my son's surname.'

He rambled on for a bit, unsure if Miss Xiao believed him. Just as he was feeling uneasy, he heard Qingxuan laugh, "Don't randomly pick flowers and branches. Our garden is already full of blooming flowers and can't accommodate any more."

Lin Wanrong wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and quickly nodded in agreement. Miss Xiao took Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning's hands, softly saying, "Since we've found My Dear, and our worries are eased, let's go back quickly and not delay his work."

Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning both looked up to her and obediently agreed. "Don't delay too long. Come back early. The child and I are waiting for you." Miss Xiao glanced at her husband with a myriad of emotions, her face flushed.

"Very well, very well." Lin Wanrong's heart was filled with joy. After carefully instructing them, he watched as the three of them went farther away, gradually disappearing from sight. Only then did he relax and head straight for the Goryeo tavern where he was to meet with Seo Jang Geum.

The place wasn't far from where he was, and he saw it after just a few steps. It was the time for business, but strangely, the tavern was brightly lit, yet there wasn't a single guest inside. Two bright red lanterns were hung at the entrance, standing out in the silence, radiating a charming warmth, and giving off a peculiar ambiance.

"Why light those lanterns today? It's neither New Year's Eve nor the fifteenth of the month. It's as if they're looking for a son-in-law!" Lin Wanrong stepped into the shop, looking around, and almost bumped into someone.

"My lord, you've arrived!" A gentle voice rang out, filled with endless charm...

"Seo Jang Geum?!" From far upstairs, Qiaoqiao and Luoning exclaimed together.

Miss Xiao sat on a stool, her heart both bitter and astringent, muttering to herself, "Hard to guard against, truly hard to guard against!"

Chapter 429 Beguiled

Glancing up, Seo Jang Geum was seen dressed in traditional Goryeo attire, a beautiful, vibrant pink blouse complemented by a light blue wide-bordered long skirt that gently unfolded, blooming like a spinning petal. The young palace maid had lightly applied makeup; her large eyes faintly adorned with a layer of grey eyeshadow, and her face flushed with patches of red, looking stunningly attractive.

Looking at Seo Jang Geum in this state, it didn't seem like she was here to negotiate, but rather to talk about love. Lin Wanrong smirked and said, "Miss Seo, you look truly beautiful today, even more radiant than the fairies in heaven by threefold."

"Thank you for the compliment, My Lord." Seo Jang Geum bowed her head respectfully, her face reflecting both joy and a hint of sorrow. She quickly guided him to a chair nearby and spoke softly, "Please have a seat."

Lin Wanrong was puzzled. Was the negotiation concerning the life and death of Goryeo to take place in this hall? Seo Jang Geum was being too careless. While hesitating, he heard her gently say, "—I will assist you in changing your shoes."

Seo Jang Geum crouched down, an indescribable shyness in her eyes, as she removed his mud-soaked boots and replaced them with a brand-new pair of cloth slippers, gently slipping them onto his feet.

He had enjoyed this sensation before, but tonight was different. There was something odd in Seo Jang Geum's expression, a mixture of shyness and pain, quite intriguing.

Not bothering to dwell on it, Lin Wanrong enjoyed being served by the young palace maid and contentedly sighed, laughing, "Miss Seo, you are too courteous; I could have done this myself. But speaking of which, you Goryeos are quite particular, taking off shoes before entering a room, much like how we in Great Hua undress before bed."

Seo Jang Geum gave a slight smile without replying, leading him by the sleeve upstairs. He had been to this place before, and the negotiation room seemed to be on the top floor.

The young palace maid walked ahead, looking fresh from a bath, her long hair tied up with a delicate scarf, appearing natural and intimate. Her skin, like crystal, shimmered under the dim light, exuding mysterious hues. Her full bosom moved slightly with her steps, giving hints of her enticing

figure, letting the imagination wander. The long skirt brushed the floor, smooth and soft, and a faint fragrance wafted into the nostrils, melodious and lingering, precisely the exquisite rose perfume exclusively sold by the Xiao family.

Women were born to be admired by men. Holding onto this grand notion, Lin Wanrong's gaze naturally fell on the young palace maid, scanning her chest a few times, internally lamenting how rare it was for Goryeo to produce such a naturally beautiful girl. No wonder their descendants were impatient and resorted to surgery to create beauty.

“My Lord, do you remember what you said last time?” Reaching a higher level, just about to step onto the platform, Seo Jang Geum turned back, her cheeks faintly flushed, and asked softly.

“What I said last time?” Lin Wanrong shook his head in confusion, “Miss Seo, I've said more words than the meals I've eaten; which sentence are you referring to?”

Seo Jang Geum lowered her head, “When you came last time, you said that our Goryeo rooms are private, and only relatives may enter.”

It seemed to be so, and Lin Wanrong nodded with a smile, “That's what I've heard, but you also told me that honorable guests could enter as well. I remember correctly, don't I?”

Seo Jang Geum hummed in agreement, sighed, and slid open the door, bowing respectfully, “My Lord, please come in!”

It was the same room as last time, but its appearance was somewhat changed. Inside, the floor heating was warm, red candles burned brightly, and a red silk handkerchief was folded on the low table beside a tall vase filled with bright red azalea flowers. The dewdrops on the petals were crystal clear, and they were in full bloom, their faint fragrance permeating the room and refreshing the mind. The entire room, dominated by red, radiated a joyful atmosphere.

Lin Wanrong was surprised and exclaimed, “So Miss Seo is the true master of flower arrangement! My apologies, I had no idea!”

Seo Jang Geum slightly bowed her head and softly said, “Jang Geum has been detained in Great Hua for a long time and has grown quite fond of the people and things here. But as a daughter of Goryeo, I cannot be greedy for the riches of another place. When it's time to leave, I only wish to take this bunch of bright red Jindallae back to Goryeo to cherish forever, as a token of gratitude for your teachings, My Lord.”

Seo Jang Geum's gesture was indeed unusual; coming to Great Hua without bringing silk or tea, but only a few Azaleas that would wither in days, revealed a certain noble taste. Lin Wanrong laughed, "No need for such formality; they are just a few small flowers and not worth much money. If you like them, I'll have someone pick a cartful for you tomorrow. You can take them back to Goryeo and have fun spreading flowers every day."

Seo Jang Geum chuckled, leading him in. Once he was comfortably seated at the table, she sat opposite him. The little palace maid clapped lightly, and a Goryeo woman entered from outside the door, serving wine, food, and fragrant tea, before respectfully withdrawing.

Seo Jang Geum gracefully lifted her long sleeve, revealing her fair wrist and delicate fingers. She picked up the small pot, filled the wine cups, and presented one to Lin Wanrong with both hands, a look of both shyness and melancholy in her eyes, "Wanrong Oppa, this is Soju I brewed myself; please taste it!"

Lin Wanrong had tasted it before and found it water-like. He laughed, "Today, we're here on official business. It wouldn't be good to get drunk and make a mistake, so let's pass on it."

"You must not trust Jang Geum," the little palace maid said, her face downcast, her eyes filled with tears, as she almost began to cry. "Please be assured, even if I lose my life, Jang Geum will not harm you." She brought the wine cup to her lips, tilted her head back, and drained the liquid in one gulp, choking and lightly coughing, tears shimmering in her eyes.

Lin Wanrong hurriedly stopped her, "Miss Seo, what are you talking about? This is Great Hua's territory, how could I worry about you harming me? What would you gain from harming me?"

Seo Jang Geum gritted her teeth, nodding, refilled the cup she had just drunk from, and gently said, "My Lord, Jang Geum toasts you!"

The rouge and powder from her lips still marked the cup, and a faint pink color floated on the clear wine. This girl was indeed stubborn. Lin Wanrong shook his head and smiled, accepting the cup of Soju and drinking it all in one gulp. It was cool to the taste, slightly spicy but with a hint of sourness, quite unique.

"Thank you, My Lord," Seo Jang Geum nodded slightly, her expression suddenly becoming extremely serious, "My Lord, regarding the negotiations between our two countries, let us begin! To demonstrate our country's sincerity, please allow Jang Geum to read our King's authorization letter first."

Lin Wanrong broke into a sweat, realizing that even the authorization letter had to be read. This Miss Jang Geum was really meticulous, not willing to overlook the smallest detail. Seo Jang Geum pulled out the prepared document from the pocket of her long robe, placed it in front of Lin Wanrong, and read it aloud, her voice crisp, "... Green hills and clear waters, with flowers as the matchmaker, I, the King of Goryeo, Yi Seong-Cheol, hereby authorize Seo Jang Geum to represent me fully and negotiate friendly relations between our two nations with the esteemed representative of the Heavenly Dynasty..."

The royal decree of the King of Goryeo was, of course, written in the Goryeo script. Lin Wanrong wondered how Seo Jang Geum had translated it, as it seemed to resonate somewhat with the Emperor's tone. Perhaps she had imitated the style of the Great Hua. Seo Jang Geum calmly finished reading, and said softly, "Sir, it's your turn!"

"Oh, right, I have an imperial edict too." Lin Wanrong pulled out the four-word edict from his bosom, held it up high, and read aloud, "The great land of Great Hua, bestowing equal blessings. A magical handsome man, named Lin San. His achievements are great, with strength to move mountains. He is granted the duty of a statesman, a heavy responsibility to bear. To negotiate with Goryeo, of utmost concern. Success will bring peace, failure war. Thus, it is decreed!"

He spoke with flair and invention, shaking his head and wagging his tail. Seo Jang Geum could only see the large characters "Imperial Edict" on the back, and assumed he was not lying, unaware that the edict contained hidden meanings. Hearing the strong words from the Emperor of Great Hua, the young palace maid frowned and sighed in concern.

"Our Emperor is truly eloquent. Miss Seo, we can begin now, can't we?" Lin Wanrong put the edict away, took a sip of tea from the cup beside him, and said leisurely.

"Yes!" Seo Jang Geum replied, bowing, her face exceedingly solemn, "Mr. Lin, regarding your country's proposal to assist my country conditionally, the King of Goryeo has been informed and has consulted with his ministers. The conditions your country has set are indeed too harsh, and not only the King but even the royal family finds it difficult."

Lin Wanrong nodded. Seo Jang Geum spoke wisely, opening with a statement that neither agreed nor refused, maintaining an ambiguous stance. Since they were representing their respective interests, Lin Wanrong didn't feel the need to be polite and laughed, "Miss Seo, you are right. The conditions set by Great Hua are somewhat harsh. But as you said, they are only somewhat harsh. Compared to Dongyin's invading and committing atrocities, Great Hua's demands, which neither harm people nor seize cities, protect the people of Goryeo and preserve the royal family, all at a

great cost to ourselves, are truly compassionate. Miss Seo, in today's world, there is no other country as loving in its harshness as Great Hua."

Seo Jang Geum knew she was no match for him in a debate. Not bothered by his rebuttal, she spoke gently, "Sir, what the one country, two systems proposal means to Goryeo, I believe both our countries are very clear about. Even if the Dongyin invaders are driven out, Goryeo will fall into Great Hua's grasp. Our nation will lose its sovereignty, and the beloved royal family will become a mere ornament. How can the King explain this to his subjects?"

Lin Wanrong sipped his tea, smiling slightly, "Miss Seo, whoever has the responsibility must bear it. In other words, Great Hua helps Goryeo, preserves your homeland, and how you explain it to your subjects is Goryeo's royal family's business. Great Hua has neither the responsibility nor the obligation to intervene. To put it bluntly, in the dealings between nations, we can only look at the results, not the process. No one is a philanthropist. Miss Seo, since you are sitting here, you should have this realization."

Negotiating with Lord Lin was genuinely not something that the young palace maid desired to do. Hearing his stern refusal, a mixture of bitterness and sweetness surged within her heart. She lowered her head and said, "My Lord, is there no other way to resolve this? You are so clever; you must be able to think of something."

"I am clever, but at this moment, I'd rather be a bit foolish." Lin Wanrong shook his head, casually saying, "Miss Seo, I presume you already have an idea in mind. Instead of waiting for my great Great Hua to make a concession and waste time, why not share your thoughts?"

Seo Jang Geum was silent for a moment, not speaking, the candlelight crackling softly as if striking her heart. The bright red festive colors that filled the room were strikingly at odds with the current atmosphere. Lin Wanrong gave the young palace maid a casual glance. She was biting her lip, her snow-white skin under the lamp radiating a crystal-like transparency, and her slightly upturned mouth forming a beautiful curve, revealing her determination.

"My Lord," Seo Jang Geum finally began, "After painful consideration, our King has finally come up with a compromise. If Great Hua is willing to send troops to assist, our Goryeo will cover all of Great Hua's military expenses and compensation. We will pay tribute to Great Hua annually with no less than one hundred thousand taels, and the King of Goryeo will personally come to the capital to pay homage. Additionally, to express Goryeo's sincerity, if Great Hua is willing, our King is prepared to send the Crown Prince as a hostage to reside in Great Hua permanently. He will not return to Goryeo without the Emperor's permission."

The matter of sending a hostage had always been considered a great disgrace throughout history. The fact that the King of Goryeo was willing to send his heir apparent as a pledge to Great Hua was an extreme concession. Lin Wanrong, however, was unimpressed. He chuckled and shook his head, saying, "Miss Seo, I advise you not to play these tricks. A hostage is but a person. In this world, people can be the most valuable and the most worthless. The Crown Prince is of value to Goryeo, but in the eyes of Great Hua, he may not even be worth a blade of grass. If one Crown Prince is lost, ten or a hundred can be raised. As for the annual tribute of one hundred thousand taels, to Great Hua's power, that is but a drop in the ocean. To speak bluntly, we are at your mercy, and you are at our disposal. Goryeo has yet to recognize its position, which deeply disappoints me. Continuing in this manner, even if we talk until tomorrow, there will be no result. I really worry for what will happen to Goryeo tomorrow!"

He sighed with sympathy and pity, playing with the cooling tea cup, and then fell silent.

Seo Jang Geum's small hand clenched tightly, her lips turning pale, and her face darkening in waves as she pondered for a long while. The room was as silent as death.

With a soft "clink," Lin Wanrong tapped the lid of the teacup and stood up. Seo Jang Geum was jolted from her thoughts by his movement. She jumped up and grabbed his sleeve, her voice tinged with a hint of tears, "Wanrong Oppa, where are you going? You can't leave!"

"Who said I'm leaving?" Lin Wanrong smiled, "The tea has gone cold; I'm calling for some fresh tea." He paused for a moment, his expression serious, "However, Miss Seo, you really must hurry. The time being wasted now is yours. With every passing moment, who knows how many Goryeo people will perish in the flames of war?"

"Sir," Seo Jang Geum's lips were bitten through, and wisps of fresh blood seeped out, "your idea of 'one country, two systems'—we in Goryeo can accept, but about the matter of stationing troops—"

"The matter of stationing troops is non-negotiable!" Lin Wanrong heavily pressed the tea cup on the table with a clang, startling Seo Jang Geum so much that her whole body trembled. Seeing his determined expression, grand and imposing like an insurmountable mountain, the young palace maid looked up at him with a mixture of admiration and heartache, tears gathering in her eyes, but she desperately held them back.

Lin Wanrong turned his head away, refusing to look at Seo Jang Geum's face, for fear that his soft heart would ruin the grand plan. With a determined wave of his hand, he declared, "One country, two systems; what does 'one country' mean? The stationing of troops signifies sovereignty; it's the sovereignty of our Great Hua and Goryeo as one entity. If even the military can't be stationed, and

judicial and administrative powers are all in your hands, may I ask, where is this 'one country' of Great Hua and Goryeo?"

His voice resonated like a tolling bell, filled with overwhelming momentum. At this critical juncture, Seo Jang Geum also seemed to gather much strength, firmly saying, "Sir, stationing troops is acceptable, but Goryeo must also have its own army; this is our bottom line. Beyond this step, Goryeo would rather shatter like jade than remain whole like tiles."

'So, you've finally spoken the truth.' Seeing Seo Jang Geum's teardrops fall, but turning her head away, stubbornly refusing to let him see them, Lin Wanrong felt amused yet also somewhat respectful. At such a critical moment, she, a young girl, disregarded personal pride and shame and stubbornly defended her country's interests. From her standpoint, there was no fault.

"Don't lightly speak of shattering like jade or remaining whole like tiles," Lin Wanrong shook his head, leisurely saying, "Miss Seo, I understand and even agree with your desire to retain armed forces!"

"Wanrong Oppa, is what you're saying true?!" Seo Jang Geum seemed not to believe her ears, looking up at him, two lines of beautiful tears rolling down her cheeks, poignant and touching.

"Do you need me to repeat myself?" Lin Wanrong's face was adorned with a mysterious smile.

"Yes, yes, I heard you," the young palace maid exclaimed joyfully, seizing his hand with a sweet smile, "Wanrong Oppa, you are so kind!"

'I hope you maintain the same opinion after hearing my full thoughts,' Lin Wanrong chuckled twice, "Miss Seo, are you sure you really heard me clearly?"

Seo Jang Geum joyfully nodded vigorously, "Of course, you said you would allow Goryeo to retain arms—" She stopped abruptly, astonished, "Sir, the arms you mentioned are—"

This young palace maid finally understands. Lin Wanrong spoke calmly, "Miss Seo, you guessed correctly. Great Hua can permit Goryeo to retain some armed forces. But these arms are only for maintaining regular law and order, assisting in handling crimes, similar to our catchpoles and constables in Great Hua. Their training will be the responsibility of Great Hua, and their weapons will be provided by Great Hua in proportion to basic security needs, without private manufacturing or imitation. As for other security matters, they needn't trouble themselves with those."

Seo Jang Geum's heart plummeted from elation to icy despair. What Lin Wanrong said sounded nice, about preserving some arms for Goryeo. But what use could these controlled catchpoles and constables be? Great Hua merely saw them as tools, maintaining Goryeo's security; only Goryeo's people could carry it out.

All the words had been spoken, and Lin Wanrong sat quietly, waiting for Seo Jang Geum's decision. He could say for certain that the King of Goryeo had already anticipated the final outcome. Authorizing Seo Jang Geum to negotiate with the Great Hua was merely to gain more benefits. Whatever the results, they would not exceed their expectations!

"You already knew our bottom line, didn't you?" The distant voice seemed to come from the horizon.

"There's no such thing as a bottom line at this point," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "At this stage, your greatest bottom line is that there's no bottom line!"

"Sir, meeting you has been the greatest mistake of my life!" Seo Jang Geum bowed her head, tears falling.

"Jang Geum, you might not believe it, but I'm forced to do all these things. With my temperament, I would have been carefree in the Xiao family. Why would I come here and upset you? Life is full of ups and downs, and no one can foresee what will happen tomorrow." Lin Wanrong spread his hands, looking somewhat helpless.

The young palace lady sighed deeply and gently clapped her hands. A Goryeo maid entered the room, holding a tray with writing implements. Seo Jang Geum picked up the brush, but before she could put it to paper, tears dropped onto it.

Lin Wanrong took her hand, and after a moment of closed-eyed contemplation, Seo Jang Geum's pen flew across the paper, recording the matters discussed between the two nations. The King of Goryeo's seal had already been affixed, showing his trust in Seo Jang Geum.

Seeing no objection, Lin Wanrong, to emphasize the seriousness, clumsily signed his name with a brush. Thus, the first territorial agreement of Great Hua in a hundred years was born in his hands.

Seo Jang Geum stared at the words she had personally written, standing dumbfounded for a long time, then suddenly threw herself into his arms, sobbing uncontrollably. "Wanrong Oppa, your heart is so cruel!"

"These matters are not something a girl like you can bear," Lin Wanrong sighed, comforting her by patting her shoulder. "In such a weak position, anyone would have failed. Your performance today has been excellent, even better than I imagined. If you want to blame me, I'll accept it!"

"I don't blame you; this is my fate. Wanrong Oppa, hold me tight! Sir, hold me tight!" Seo Jang Geum's tears fell like rain, as she clung to him, soaking his chest.

Sigh, this girl's requests always put one in an awkward position, Lin Wanrong thought, holding her voluptuous body, feeling helpless.

"Wanrong Oppa, do you think I'm beautiful?" Seo Jang Geum gradually stopped crying, lifting her head from his embrace, her face flushed with a bright red tint. Her teardrops made her jade-like skin even more delicate and lovely.

'She is indeed a bit beautiful,' Lin Wanrong thought, feeling his eyelids growing heavy, looking at the little palace lady's face. It became blurry, and he toppled over, fainting.

"Wanrong Oppa, please forgive me! Meeting you, Jang Geum has been very happy!" Seo Jang Geum slowly rose to her feet, gazing at his slumbering figure, tears falling in strings. She gently pulled at her clothes, and with a rustling sound, they fell away, revealing her exquisite, flawless body, lying under bright red azalea flowers, endlessly tempting...

In his dreams, Lin Wanrong felt like he was in a small boat, caught in a vast sea of waves, sometimes reaching the peak, then falling to the depths, feeling as refreshing as if he'd had a sauna.

With a cry, he suddenly opened his eyes. Seo Jang Geum, along with the room full of azaleas, had vanished, leaving him lying in the negotiation room, his clothes scattered about, beneath him a small blooming flower, its red color dazzling.

He had been drugged! A thunderous noise exploded in his head, and his entire body went numb.

A sliver of rosy glow seeped in through the window, heralding the break of dawn. A glance around the room revealed it was neat and tidy, spotlessly clean. The crimson candle on the table was about to burn out, and the rhododendrons that had bloomed the night before were taken away. The place was deserted and left without a trace.

No wonder yesterday's wine tasted strange; it had been laced with a sedative by the Goryeo woman. So much for being a hunter; the hunter was blinded by the prey. Lin Wanrong rubbed his slightly aching forehead, struggling to rise. His eyes caught the bright little flower on the bed, and he stared, momentarily stunned.

Being seduced by a young girl, he must be the first in history. To think that the Goryeo woman had such courage, usually so soft and weak, yet so fierce at the critical moment. Sadly, in the haze of sleep, he had not appreciated her good figure and smooth skin. A great pity indeed.

He shook his head, tidying up the room with patience. The Goryeo woman had come quietly and left resolutely, without leaving a word or even a note. Reflecting on the mood and her expression the previous night, a sudden understanding dawned on him, albeit too late.

He put the document signed last night into his bosom and reluctantly went downstairs. All around was desolate, without a trace of anyone. The Goryeo woman's determination was clear. Thinking back on everything, it was like a spring dream. Looking back at the quiet little building, unable to cry or laugh, a myriad of indescribable feelings welled in his heart.

The people of Great Hua were early risers. Although it was before dawn, the streets were already filled with early pedestrians. Suddenly remembering that he hadn't returned the previous night, he wondered how he would explain himself if asked by Qingxuan and others. The Goryeo woman had truly put him in a terrible spot. His heart filled with silent complaints, he quickened his steps, hurrying home.

Upon reaching the Lin residence, he found the main gate tightly closed, silent and peaceful, presumably Qingxuan and the others were still asleep. His anxiety eased slightly. He knew better than to knock at this hour, and after a stealthy look around, he saw that the sky was still dim with no one in sight. His heart rejoiced, and he fetched a few large stones to step on. With great effort, he found a hollowed-out windowsill on the wall and clenched his teeth as he climbed up.

"Woof, woof!" "Woof, woof!" Suddenly, a sharp bark came from someone's yard. Lord Lin, who was holding onto the wall, nearly fell. He held his breath and inhaled deeply, not daring to move an inch.

The barking seemed to come from the neighboring yard and gradually faded. Cold sweat trickled down Lin Wanrong's back. He was angry and irritated. 'Tomorrow I'll petition the Emperor to issue a ban on keeping large dogs, and put an end to these arrogant beasts.'

With a resentful spit, he climbed his own high wall, crossing his legs and panting heavily on the wall. The house was quiet, and from a distance, he could see a lamp still burning in a small building. He didn't know who was keeping vigil by the lamp. Lin Wanrong wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, feeling helpless. 'A man making a small mistake in conduct is not a big deal. A man like me, consciously climbing the wall to return home, is already rare.'

"Who?!" A delicate cry from a woman suddenly came from the neighboring courtyard, followed by a bout of frenzied barking. A lantern loomed in the distance, and two big black-tailed dogs swiftly rushed toward the wall.

Lin Wanrong let out a cry, hurriedly lifting his legs as both dogs leaped simultaneously. Their teeth scraped his clothes, whooshing past with the wind, leaving him in a cold sweat.

"You, what are you doing on the wall of my house?" The lantern came closer, and a graceful figure entered his sight, her face tinged with a faint blush as she softly spoke: "Can't you do something proper?"

"Miss Xu, could you, first, call your two guard dogs away from me?" Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth in frustration, "I've always been allergic to dogs."

Seeing him perched on the wall, looking quite displeased, Xu Zhiqing covered her lips to hide a smile and said sweetly: "Lin San, Lin Si, come back; don't frighten him." As her words fell, the two ferocious dogs obediently returned to Xu Zhiqing's side, sitting and gently lolling their tongues.

"What did you call them?" The wall was too high, and fearing the names, Lin Wanrong asked, recognizing them faintly.

"I won't tell you," Xu Zhiqing laughed lightly, a blush creeping up her cheeks. "You, what are you doing on the wall of my house? If someone sees you, what will become of it?"

"Your house wall?" Lin Wanrong's eyes widened. "Miss, please be clear, this is my house wall! Whether I'm on the wall or climbing to the rooftop to plant a flag, it's my freedom."

The wall stood between the two families, and it was unclear whether it belonged to the Lin or Xu family. Miss Xu spat, looked around, and softly said: "You really have no sense. You didn't come when invited, and now you sneak over the wall at dawn; you're shameless. What am I to you, born to be trifled with? What are you doing up there? Come down quickly, or my father might see you and break your legs!"

Lin Wanrong was drenched in sweat, realizing that Miss Xu thought he'd come over the wall to meet her secretly. Where could he go to declare his innocence?

Seeing Lin San lost in thought, thinking he was still hesitating, Miss Xu bit her lip, clearly annoyed: "Are you so afraid of your wife? Today she visited my house, and I deliberately hid. I want her to see that I, Xu Zhiqing, am a capable woman—what are you still doing up there?"

Lin Wanrong's heart pounded. He'd already made a mistake in Seo Jang Geum's affair; if he now climbed over the wall to meet with Xu Zhiqing and Qingxuan found out, his life would be over. He forced a laugh, looking to the sky, and feigned: "Miss Xu, you misunderstand; I came here to look at the stars, as standing higher allows seeing farther. This vast starry sky requires my deep eyes to find my constellation."

"You, you're really not coming down?" Seeing his evasions, Xu Zhiqing's small hand clenched, tears welling in her eyes.

He couldn't come down, even if it killed him. Lin Wanrong helplessly sighed: "Miss Xu, you should go back and rest. Once I spot Mars, I'll come to find you."

Xu Zhiqing's sorrow rose from the bottom of her heart, and she waved her small hand, exclaiming urgently, "Lin San, Lin Si, attack! Tear this treacherous and ungrateful thing apart!"

The two ferocious dogs barked madly, charging towards the wall. Lin Wanrong yelped twice, his balance atop the wall wavering, almost falling down. Xu Zhiqing's eyes widened in concern, but upon seeing him unharmed, she swallowed the words on the tip of her tongue. Tears welled in her eyes as she said coldly, "You have deceived me so today, Zhiqing will remember it in her heart. From this day on, I will no longer acknowledge Lin San. Lin San, Lin Si, let's go, let him look for Mars."

Miss Xu hurriedly left with Lin San and Lin Si, her departure resolute. Lin Wanrong was caught between a rock and a hard place, not knowing whether to call out to her or not. He suddenly felt that the most difficult thing in life was this very moment.

"From this day on, I will no longer acknowledge Lin San!" Miss Xu's decisive words echoed in his ears. He thought back to the unique and warm experiences of getting to know Xu Zhiqing. Unfortunately, Miss Xu had chosen the wrong day for romance.

He sighed helplessly, jumped over the wall into his own yard, and crept along, stopping now and then, fearful of being seen. Once inside the house, he found Ning'er and Qingxuan's rooms silent, with only Qiaoqiao's room showing some light. He thought for a moment. Among his three wives, Qiaoqiao was the most obedient and always supported him. He decided to seek her cooperation first, hoping to keep this incident under wraps.

He tiptoed up the stairs to Qiaoqiao's quiet room, wondering if the young girl was awake. After glancing around to make sure no one had seen him, he tapped lightly on the door, whispering, "Qiaoqiao, little sweetheart, are you up?"

"Big brother?" Qiaoqiao's joyful voice came from inside the room. "You're back?"

Lin Wanrong felt warmth in his heart and said, "Yes, big brother is back, especially to see you. Hurry and open the door, I have some intimate words to share with you."

Qiaoqiao hummed in response, seeming somewhat shy, and there was a long wait before the door opened. Lin Wanrong, growing impatient, was about to knock again when he heard a light rustling sound. Qiaoqiao's door had opened. He rushed in, exclaiming, "Little sweetheart, what are you—oh, Ning'er, you're here too. Little darling, you seem to have grown bigger since last night."

Luo Ning winked at him and pouted. Lin Wanrong's eyes swept over, and he immediately broke out in a cold sweat. Miss Xiao was sitting upright at the table, her eyes gazing at him calmly, a mysterious smile playing on her lips.

A chill ran down Lin Wanrong's spine. He was doomed; his three wives must have foreseen that he would come to Qiaoqiao first. By the looks of it, they had been lying in wait for him for quite some time.

"Ah, Qingxuan, why did you get up so early? Why not sleep a bit more? A lack of sleep gives women dark circles under their eyes. That won't do; I must go out and buy some ginseng, bird's nest, bear paw, and shark fin to nourish you. Wait here for me; I'll be back shortly."

With trepidation in his heart, he dared not linger. Quickly, he shrank his head and turned to leave. Xiao Qingxuan stood up, her face lighting up with a sweet smile. She took a few quick steps, gently grabbing his hand and softly saying, "My Dear, don't worry, this trivial matter is no obstacle. You've been working tirelessly for the country, and after a sleepless night, you must be very exhausted. It's time for you to rest."

Miss Xiao's voice was melodious, and her smile was radiant. Lin Wanrong's heart warmed, but then he felt something was wrong. Apart from Qiaoqiao, neither Ning'er nor Qingxuan were simple characters. Would they really let him off without asking any questions?

"Qingxuan, I—" he began to speak, but a delicate jade hand covered his lips. "My Dear, don't say anything. I'm your wife, as close to you as your own hands and feet. Whatever you do, I support you!"

Was this for real? Lin Wanrong's mouth fell open. The situation was far removed from the storm he had anticipated. It was so unbelievable that although he was prepared to face hardship, he found no place to use his prepared defenses.

Miss Xiao's eyes were filled with deep affection, her face flushed. Taking his large hand, she placed it on her small belly, speaking with unparalleled gentleness, "This is our bloodline. A husband and wife are one, and there can be no mutual suspicion. Whatever you need to do, you don't need to tell me. Just go ahead and do it. Qiaoqiao, Ning'er, and I will wholeheartedly support you."

"This," Lin Wanrong began, overcome with emotion. He grabbed Miss Xiao's small hand, tears brimming in his eyes, "Qingxuan, you treat me too well. Actually, last night, I—"

"My husband, please sit down," Xiao Qingxuan placed both hands on his shoulders, gently pushing him into a chair. Her small hands softly massaged his shoulders, "You've been working hard outside. When you come home, just rest. You don't need to worry about anything in this house; my younger sisters and I will handle everything."

Miss Xiao's skill was unparalleled, her gentle touch causing Lin Wanrong's entire body to go limp with relaxation. He placed his hand back on her shoulder, tenderly stroking her small hand, "Qingxuan, having you as a wife is the greatest accomplishment of my life. But yesterday, I carelessly—"

Seeing the indescribable fatigue in his expression, Xiao Qingxuan genuinely felt for him and pressed him down onto Qiaoqiao's bed, "My Dear, take some rest now. Whatever you have to say

can wait. There's no rush." She sat beside the bed, gently covering him with a blanket and softly patting his shoulder, "Rest well, my husband. I and our child will be here with you."

Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning exchanged glances. Their sister's gentle treatment of their big brother, without any interrogation, left them wondering what she intended to do.

The emotions in Lin Wanrong's heart were beyond words. Compared to his behavior the night before, he felt like nothing but a beast. He firmly grasped Miss Xiao's hand, agitatedly saying, "No, Qingxuan, if I don't talk about this, I won't be able to eat or sleep. I'll feel cold, and my heart will be unsettled."

Xiao Qingxuan stroked his cheek, smiling tenderly, "Why are you acting like a child, unable to sleep soundly? I won't allow you to speak. Just rest quietly for a while."

'Damn it, I can't take this anymore. Qingxuan is truly my nemesis!' Lin Wanrong suddenly threw off the blanket and sat up, his face resolute, "Qingxuan, I must confess! Last night, something unbelievable happened. I lost something very important!"

Xiao Qingxuan's brow furrowed slightly as she tightly grasped his hand. "My Dear, what has happened? What have you lost again?"

"To tell you, you might not believe it," Lin Wanrong shook his head in sorrow, "I can hardly believe it myself. Last night, I was negotiating with a female official from Goryeo. Afterward, we had some rice wine, and in my befuddled state, I felt a woman trying to undress me. I struggled fiercely, fighting and defending my chastity. But—" Lord Lin's eyes filled with tears, "As the saying goes, 'two fists cannot defeat two bosoms,' and 'a brave man struggles in vain against a grinding mill.' Despite my desperate struggle, I was overcome and ended up losing some incredibly precious seeds!"