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Chapter 336 Two Consecutive Victories

Seo Jang Geum nodded slightly and said, "Thank you, sir. If that's the case, allow me to demonstrate first." At this point, the two sides were in competition. In order to assist Goryeo in achieving its wish, Palace Lady Seo would naturally be forthright with Master Lin.

She picked up a thick red candle, whittled it down to one-quarter its size, and then drilled a small hole parallel to the wick, threading a silk line through it, then sealed it with the wax. Following this, she cut off the portion of the thread embedded with the candle.

"Young sister, could you give me that Nine-Turn Jade Bead?" Palace Lady Seo turned to Cuiyun with a gentle smile.

The young palace maid handed her the jade bead, and Seo Jang Geum aligned the bead's small hole vertically to the ground, slowly threading the silk into the bead. The interior of the bead was filled with twists and turns, and the first part of the thread, hardened by the wax, struggled to pass through. Carefully, Palace Lady Seo lit the red candle and heated the bead a bit. The wax thread softened from the heat, and it started to slowly make its way into the bead.

What was clever about this technique was that by sealing the thread with wax, which would soften from the heat, the melted wax would flow downwards, leading the thread forward. However, it required precise control; even a moment's delay could cause the wax to block the hole. Seo Jang Geum was exceptionally skillful and patient. She worked with the utmost concentration, a faint bead of sweat appearing on her nose as clear as jade, a sight to behold.

Lin Wanrong chuckled at the ingenious yet cumbersome method. This technique could only be completed by someone patient and determined like Seo Jang Geum; anyone else would have failed. Yet, this was a perfect representation of the Goryeo people's national character, something truly worth learning from.

Navigating the rugged twists and turns inside the Nine-Turn Jade Bead was not an easy task. Seo Jang Geum spent a significant amount of time, having to backtrack several times, before she was able to thread the silk through the small hole, although the inside of the bead had become sealed with wax. Even so, her solution was unprecedented. The onlookers were in awe of her dexterity and determination, breaking into applause in celebration of her successful pass.

Palace Lady Seo responded with a shy smile and bowed to the young palace maid Cuiyun, "I'm sorry. Even though I've threaded it, the thread can't be pulled through. I've caused you trouble."

Cuiyun hurriedly responded, "Sister, since the thread is already through, you have naturally passed."

Palace Lady Seo smiled slightly, turning to Lin Wanrong, "Sir, it's your turn."

Cuiyun had already lit a candle, melting the wax obstruction inside the bead. After it had cooled, she rinsed the bead, and droplets fell from the hole, indicating no further obstructions. She then handed the bead to Lin Wanrong.

From his pocket, Lin Wanrong pulled out a slim bamboo tube, grinning as he said, "The tool I use might be a bit unique. Don't be scared, ladies." He opened the tube to reveal a tiny ant. Cuiyun let out a startled yelp, while Seo Jang Geum's eyes widened in curiosity as she watched him.

Lin Wanrong carefully tied the thread around the ant's leg, and then secured the jade bead with nine holes onto the table. He smeared some honey at the other end of the thread. Seo Jang Geum exclaimed in realization as the plan dawned on her.

When he reckoned that the scent of the honey had diffused sufficiently, Lin Wanrong placed the little ant into the jade bead's hole. With its keen sense of smell, the ant followed the scent of the honey, and in no time, made its way through the bead.

The onlookers blinked in astonishment. Could this actually work? If Seo Jang Geum's method was marked by its randomness and inability to be replicated, then Lin San's method was so simple that even a three-year-old could do it. How did he come up with this?

"Ha ha ha—" The Emperor laughed heartily. "Prince Cheng, you certainly have an eye for talent. Minister Xu, this Lin San is truly a talent."

"Your Majesty, to be frank. The more I interact with Lin San, the more I feel that there seems to be nothing in this world that can stump him," Xu Wei said with a smile.

"Is that so?" The Emperor responded with a deep smile.

"Sir, how did you think of this?" Seo Jang Geum asked Lin Wanrong curiously.

Lin San, with a profound smile, replied, "If you don't complain about me in front of the Emperor next time, I'll tell you." Seo Jang Geum's face flushed, and she found herself at a loss for words.

"The first question was answered by Mr. Lin and the Goryeo prince," the little palace maid Cuiyun announced.

"Lu Dongzan, what should we do? They've already answered one question," Ashile, visibly worried, said to his counselor.

"Don't worry, Ashile, there will always be opportunities, we still have three questions left," Lu Dongzan replied confidently.

"The second question," Cuiyun announced as she tore open another wax-sealed envelope. Suddenly, hundreds of soldiers appeared in the distance, each group of three carrying a log. There were about a hundred logs in total, all of similar thickness.

"For this question, there are one hundred logs of the same thickness present. Please distinguish the root end and the tip end of each log," Cuiyun said sweetly.

Upon hearing this, silence fell over the crowd. All the logs were of the same thickness. How could one tell the root from the tip?

Seo Jang Geum was deep in thought when she heard two voices simultaneously declare, "I can distinguish them."

One voice came from the distance, speaking in accented Chinese—it was Lu Dongzan, the counselor by Ashile's side. The other voice came from Lin Wanrong, who was standing right next to Seo Jang Geum.

Seo Jang Geum asked in disbelief, "Sir, can you really do it?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I might be able to. We'll only know if we give it a try."

Lu Dongzan also stepped forward onto the stage and greeted Lin Wanrong, "I am Lu Dongzan, a counselor under the Turkish Khan. Nice to meet you, Mr. Lin."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Guests are always welcome. Since Brother Lu knows how to tell which end is the root and which is the tip, you should go first."

Lu Dongzan nodded with a slight smile, saying, "To differentiate between the root and the tip of a tree is not so difficult, albeit it might require some destructive measures. Just as people age, trees also have growth rings. The closer to the root of the tree, the deeper and more noticeable these rings are. We only need my Turkic warriors to saw off the tops and bottoms of these hundred logs, distinguish the colors of the rings, and we can then discern the head and tail, root and tip."

The concept of tree rings was a novelty to many in the crowd, who listened with confusion. Only Lin Wanrong nodded gently. It was no wonder the Turks had managed to endure for so many years; they truly possessed talent. While the concept of tree rings was common knowledge in future generations, hearing it from a Turkic person in this era made it all the more extraordinary.

"Minister Xu, is what Lu Dongzan says correct?" The Emperor asked, his brows furrowing.

Xu Wei nodded and replied, "Your Majesty, my daughter Zhishing once studied this. Indeed, it's true that trees have rings and they are more apparent closer to the roots. Lu Dongzan is not an ordinary man. He is the foremost advisor in the court of the Turkic Khan and holds the title of National Master. In this round, I fear he might win."

"What about Lin San? Does he stand a chance?" The Emperor suddenly asked, a glint of hope flashing in his eyes.

"Well, I dare not make a hasty judgment on that. To surpass Lu Dongzan, Lin San would have to come up with an even more ingenious method," Xu Wei said.

As they spoke, Lu Dongzan had already commanded his Turkic warriors to saw off the top and bottom of a log, indeed revealing deep tree rings on one side. Seo Jang Geum nodded as she watched, whispering, "The world is vast and filled with wonders. Today, I have gained new knowledge."

Seeing that Lu Dongzan was about to order another log to be sawn, Lin Wanrong quickly laughed and stopped him, "Brother Lu, as you said, your method is highly destructive. I have a method of verifying the tips and roots of trees as well. Let me do my verification first, then you can choose ten

logs to saw. This way we can verify the accuracy of my method and also conserve resources. Planting trees is hard work, we should protect them and our forests."

Lu Dongzan nodded in approval, "That's an excellent method. How do you plan to verify it?"

Lin Wanrong slowly stepped forward, saluting the hundreds of soldiers carrying the logs, "Brothers, could you help me by rolling these logs into the river?"

Both Seo Jang Geum and Lu Dongzan curiously observed Lin Wanrong's every move. Xu Wei clapped his hands, regretfully saying, "Ah, why didn't I think of this? Congratulations, Your Majesty, we have won this round."

After the logs entered the water, they bobbed a few times before gradually settling down. Then, an unusual phenomenon appeared. Each log, identical in size, showed completely different levels of buoyancy at each end. Lin Wanrong, laughing, said, "Brother Lu, as I see it, the end of a log floating on the water surface is the tip, while the part submerged is the root. What do you think?"

Lu Dongzan gave a thumbs up, saying, "Master Lin, you are indeed learned and versatile. You have thought of such a simple method. I admire you greatly."

Ashile quickly came over and asked, "Lu Dongzan, what is the reason for this? Why is the part floating in the water the tip, and the part sinking the root?"

Lu Dongzan smiled and explained, "Trees reach towards the sun, drawing water from their roots. Therefore, the root is denser, while the tip is slightly lighter. On the surface, they appear the same size, but they are different on the inside. If we randomly select ten, we can confirm this by examining the rings."

Soldiers had already selected ten logs and sawed them open. Just as Lin Wanrong had said, the heavier part was the root and the lighter was the tip. Without a doubt, Lin Wanrong's method was simpler and more practical. Both Lin San and the Turks passed this round, but Lin San had clearly outshone the Turks. This was an indisputable fact, one even Lu Dongzan couldn't deny.

"Master Lin, where did you learn all this knowledge? May I study under you?" Seo Jang Geum couldn't help but ask, filled with admiration.

"Self-taught. Mostly self-taught," Lin Wanrong laughed. "Palace Lady Seo, do you wish to become my student? Oh my, this might not be a good idea. I have always struggled to control myself in the presence of beautiful women. If anything were to happen between us, how could I face the longstanding friendship between our two noble nations? It's better not to."

Palace Lady Seo's cheeks, as delicate as jade, bloomed with a beautiful blush. She lowered her head, not daring to speak for a long while.

Chapter 337 Duped in the Same Trough, Men Are No Match for Horses!

The Emperor burst into a hearty laugh, saying, "Bravo, Lin San! You have outdone the wily maiden of Goryeo and made the Turk counselor submit. Truly knowledgeable and insightful you are. Minister Xu, you have indeed recommended a significant talent for my Great Hua."

A smile crept onto Xu Wei's face. With such praise from the Emperor, Lin San's rise to prominence was just around the corner, even though the Emperor had already commended him the day before. Su Mubai turned pale and his face grew darker upon hearing this. Upon noticing his reaction, Prince Cheng merely smiled and said nothing.

Half of the questions had been answered. Korea had got the first question right, Tuju had triumphed in the second, and Lin Wanrong had passed both. As long as he got one more question right, he would stand firmly in an unbeatable position. Both Yi Seung-Jae and Ashile were a bit nervous; they hadn't expected that all their strategists combined would still fall short of the diminutive Lin San.

The young palace maid named Cuiyun fetched the envelope containing the third question, scanned it, and read aloud, "The third question is, could you all please turn around--"

Everyone turned around in confusion, only to hear the distant hoofbeats that made the ground tremble. Dozens of cavalries galloped toward them, cracking their whips to urge hundreds of fine horses. These hundred horses, all white with white hooves, seemed as if they were all molded from the same cast, and it was impossible to distinguish their ranks.

But the oddity did not end there. Behind this fleet of white horses came several more cavalries, herding a herd of white foals. The herd of foals, also all white, resembled a flurry of large, fluttering goose feathers in the snow, causing a thrill in the hearts of the spectators. The two groups of white horses arrived in front of everyone. The horses neighed and their voices rose and fell, creating a breathtaking spectacle.

Cuiyun smiled and said, "Now, we have one hundred white mares and one hundred white foals on the field. They are mother and child. The third question proposed by Princess Nishang is for you to help the hundred mother horses find their foals."

Having already answered two questions, Lin Wanrong had a taste of Princess Nishang's tricky and peculiar challenges. Other ladies tested suitors on either their literary or martial prowess during courtship, but she, being a royal princess, enjoyed these non-literary, non-martial things. It was strange indeed. He didn't know how she came up with this game of helping foals find their mothers. Wasn't this intentionally making things difficult?

The Turks were all generations of nomads on the grasslands. They had an innate understanding of horses, and upon hearing Princess Nishang's question, they all showed delight. Who could be more familiar with the nature of horses than them? Princess Nishang was clearly helping them in secret.

Lu Dongzan and Ashile, while whispering to each other, pointed around at the Turkish cavalries, seemingly assigning tasks. In the Korean camp, the Palace Lady Seo and Yi Seung-Jae had a discussion, frowning slightly as if they hadn't figured out a solution yet.

After Lu Dongzan and Ashile finished their discussion, Lu Dongzan stood up joyfully and shouted, "Miss Palace Maid, we the Turks have found a way to differentiate."

Upon hearing this, Yi Seung-Jae was taken aback and hurriedly whispered something to the Palace Lady Seo. Seo Jang Geum looked troubled, and slightly shook her head. Yi Seung-Jae let out an annoyed snort.

Seeing their expressions, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but chuckle. This young prince of Goryeo, aside from relying on women for ideas, really seemed to lack any merits.

Cuiyun nodded and said, "The representative of the Turks, please proceed."

Lu Dongzan declared proudly, "The Turks have always lived on the prairies and grown up on horseback. We have our unique ways of recognizing and distinguishing horses. Even though there are a hundred mares and a hundred foals, there are dozens of Turkic cavalries who are experts at identifying horses. For them, each one to find the mothers for ten foals is not a difficult task. We will use this method."

Lin Wanrong understood. They were planning to use their horse-identifying skills, resorting to brute force to pair up the foals with their mothers. It was indeed a solution, albeit a bit clumsy.

As they were speaking, dozens of Turkic cavalries had already dashed on their horses toward the foals. Each of them picked ten foals and, in the blink of an eye, had divided them into ten groups, each man handling precisely ten foals. The Turks, as people of the horse, had a command and understanding of horses that the soldiers of Great Hua could not match.

"Charge!" Ten Turkic cavalries, each driving a group of foals, plunged into the herd of mares. They were to rely on their eyesight and experience, examining the color, markings, and physique of the horses. In the vast herd of mares, they were to find the mothers of these foals, relying solely on their years of experience with horses, with no shortcuts available.

Li Tai looked at the Turkic cavalries with a deep concern, sighing after a while, "These Turkic people indeed have extraordinary talent. When it comes to horse-riding, no one can compete with them."

As the foremost general of Great Hua, his words carried considerable weight. The Emperor gravely asked, "General Li, in your opinion, do we have a definite chance of victory in our campaign against the nomads?"

Li Tai nodded and said, "Your Majesty, do not worry. Great Hua has infantry, cavalry, and the divine machine unit. If these three branches coordinate effectively, even if the nomads are unmatched in horse-riding, this old servant can still defeat them."

The Emperor seemed relieved and a smile appeared on his face. "Then, tell me, based on the Turkic method, can they really identify all the foals and their mothers? I don't believe it's necessarily so."

"Your Majesty is wise!" Li Tai laughed, "The Turks rely on their eyesight, which is rather unreliable. Experience and perception are important, but the number of horses is vast. If they want to distinguish among them, it's certainly not easy. I guess if they can identify eighty percent of them, it would be quite impressive."

Down below the city, the Goryeo delegation saw the Turks' confidence and grew increasingly anxious. If the Turks won this round, Goryeo would naturally be eliminated. However, they weren't adept at identifying horses and couldn't come up with a clever idea on the spot. Everyone was in a frenzy of anxiety, even the face of Palace Lady Seo was full of worry.

"Sir!" a gentle voice echoed beside Lin Wanrong.

Lin Wanrong, who was amused watching the Turks taming the horses, turned his head upon hearing the voice. He saw Seo Jang Geum, with wide-open eyes and a charming face, standing by his side.

"Oh, Lady Jang Geum, are you looking for me?" Lin Wanrong asked with a smile.

"Sir, aren't you worried?" Palace Lady Seo whispered, her anxiety clear in her eyes.

"Anxious? What good would that do?" Lin Wanrong shook his head. "The Turkic people trust their own judgment, let them proceed. I only trust facts."

From Master Lin's words, it seemed that he doubted the Turks would succeed so smoothly. Lady Jang Geum's eyes lit up. "You mean, the Turkic people aren't fully confident either?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled and looked at her. Jang Geum quickly lowered her gaze, avoiding his.

"Palace Lady Seo," Lin Wanrong smiled, "Did you come here to inquire about the Turkic people or to probe me? You're too honest and can't hide your kindhearted eyes."

Lady Seo lowered her head, blushing. "Master Lin, I'm really sorry. I came here partly to hear your opinion about the Turkic people, and partly to know if you've figured out a solution. This marriage proposal for the prince isn't a simple matrimonial issue for us people of Goryeo. It's a matter of life and death. Even if I had to shatter into pieces, I wouldn't hesitate."

At this, Lin Wanrong felt a stirring in his heart. Lady Jang Geum's words implied that they were under pressure. An alliance between the Turks and Great Hua would not bode well for Goryeo, given their weakness. Goryeo's indecisiveness was suggestive. However, if Prince Yi could marry the princess, it would be like clinging onto Great Hua's thigh; the benefits would be immense.

"Are the Turks pressuring you? Or is it Dongyin?" Lin Wanrong tried to probe, his gaze fixed on Palace Lady Seo's expression.

"I'm sorry for troubling you," she said, her face changing. She bowed deeply and hurriedly turned to leave.

Lin Wanrong shook his head in resignation. This girl was no spy material. "Lady Jang Geum, the Turkic people can discern at most eighty percent correctly," he called out loudly.

"Master Lin, what did you say?" Lady Jang Geum stopped in her tracks, turning to look at him. "Are you that confident?"

"It's not about confidence, it's about science," Lin Wanrong smiled. "The Turkic people choose horses based on experience, which seems reliable, but they cannot escape the laws of statistics. Each rider has ten foals. The first time, he must choose one out of a hundred mares. To ensure he picks correctly, he must compare all hundred mares—that's one hundred comparisons the first time. Let's say he's correct the first time, for the second foal, he must compare ninety-nine times, and so on. Ninety-eight for the third, ninety-seven for the fourth, until ninety-one for the tenth. Ah, is this concept too complicated? Do you understand, Jang Geum?"

Lady Jang Geum contemplated for a moment before nodding. "Master Lin, I understand some of it. You're correct. For each foal, they would have to make at least ninety comparisons."

"That's more like it." Lin Wanrong nodded. "Such frequent comparisons are tedious and mundane. The Turkic people are also human, aren't they? Would they not make mistakes? Just one small mistake by any of them could cause the other foals to be misidentified, leading to a series of errors. And errors are cumulative. If ten people cross-mistake, my goodness, it would be unimaginable."

Lady Jang Geum seemed to half-understand the sequence of analyses, but she knew Master Lin, appearing casual on the surface, was sharper than anyone else deep down. She nodded solemnly. "Master Lin, thank you. I also believe the Turks don't have full certainty. But you, Master Lin, you —" she paused, didn't finish her sentence, and then bowed to Lin Wanrong before hurriedly retreating back to the Goryeo delegation.

Over there, Lu Dongzan, leading dozens of Turkic cavalries, had already started selecting the mares. The Turkic people's sharp eyes reunited five mother-child pairs in a blink. Lin Wanrong smirked inwardly. Those easily discernible were simple; the tricky part would come later.

The young Georyeo Prince Yi Seung-Jae glanced at Lin Wanrong, gave a few instructions to Senior Palace Lady Han, then hurried over. "Master Lin, my respects."

What was he here for just after Palace Lady Seo left? Lin Wanrong chuckled. "Hello, Prince. Why aren't you watching the horse taming? Why come to me?"

Prince Yi sighed. "Master Lin, how could I have the mood to watch horses? Honestly, I'm here on my father's orders, committed to marrying Princess Nishang and taking her back to my country."

However, the current situation is particularly unfavorable for Goryeo. Master Lin—" He looked at Lin Wanrong, hesitating to continue.

Here it comes, the lad was up to something. Lin Wanrong purposely furrowed his brows. "The King of Goryeo has high expectations for the young Prince; it's your duty to strive. Princess Nishang is yet to be married, you still have plenty of opportunities."

Prince Yi gave a bitter smile. "Our Goryeo nation is weak, and talents are scarce. It's hard for us to compete with the talents of Great Hua and the fierce warriors of the Turkic people. In today's Princess's marriage proposal meeting, we barely managed to answer one question; we have no confidence in what's coming next. And Princess Nishang is of utmost importance to Goryeo. Therefore, I would like to ask for your help—"

"Help? Prince, you jest." Master Lin's lips curved into a smile, his expression full of implied meaning. "You're of noble status, how could I help?"

"I can be helped, indeed I can," Prince Yi insisted. "Before coming to your esteemed country, I had heard that Master Lin is the first scholar of Great Hua, renowned far and wide. Having spent these few days with you, I find your knowledge extensive and your learning extraordinary. You are indeed the most promising young official of Great Hua."

A cold sweat broke out on Lin Wanrong's forehead. When did he become Great Hua's first scholar? Wouldn't Old Xu want to fight him if he heard this? Moreover, when he was in Jinling, how did Prince Yi, being in Goryeo, hear his name? This Goryeo man's flattery was simply too cheap, not even as moving as Lady Jang Geum's smile.

"All I ask is for you, Master Lin, to secretly convey to me the answers for the upcoming challenges. I would be willing to offer a thousand gold pieces, a thousand rolls of silk, a hundred pieces of agate, and personally deliver them to your residence." Circling around the matter, Yi Seung-Jae finally revealed his offer - a thousand taels of gold, a thousand rolls of silk, a hundred pieces of agate. The proposal was almost comparable to the dowry prepared for Princess Nishang. Indeed, for the hand of the princess, Goryeo was sparing no expense.

‘Just to placate me with such trifles, does he take me for a rustic bumpkin? I, Master Lin, am selling knowledge and ideas, irreplaceable even by a fortune.’ Master Lin pretended to ponder, "Well, Prince, you honor me too much. Truth be told, I am but a low-ranking official, as insignificant as a sesame seed. My knowledge and wisdom are shallow, even less than that of Mount Kumgang. Even if you were to offer me ten thousand taels of gold, I could not accept it. Lady Seo has already

instructed me, and the Emperor has been exceedingly gracious to me, how could I take your offering? No, no, it's impossible! Besides, my family is in business, so I have no shortage of silver."

'Does he think I'm unaware of his background? What kind of business does his family do? He's nothing but a small servant in the rich household of Xiao in Jinling, deceitful and wicked. It's just by good fortune that he has somehow caught the Emperor's favor and donned the skin of a man. His claim to have a share in the Xiao family's fortune is nothing but a farce.' Yi Seung-Jae silently scoffed at the man's audacity, left with nothing but admiration for his shamelessness.

"Master Lin, I see you and Lady Seo converse joyously, seemingly getting along quite well," Yi Seung-Jae subtly shifted the topic away from wealth, somehow steering the conversation toward Seo Jang Geum.

Lin Wanrong was momentarily stunned, then nodded graciously, "Indeed, indeed. I heard of Jang Geum quite some time ago. Meeting her felt like reuniting with an old friend."

Yi Seung-Jae nodded, "Palace Lady Seo is a remarkable woman from my country, Goryeo. She is sincere, kind, and full of love. Her medical skills are superb, she has broad knowledge, and she is known for her exceptional intelligence. Not only is she loved by the people, but she is also favored by my parents, the King and Queen. Despite her young age, she has become the chief physician in the palace. In both the palace and among the public, she holds high prestige."

What was this prince up to? As Yi Seung-Jae persistently shifted the conversation toward Lady Seo, Lin Wanrong grew more puzzled.

"Lord Lin," Yi Seung-Jae's eyes flashed, "You have a deep relationship with Palace Lady Seo. If you like, I can inform my father and offer Seo Jang Geum to you. What do you think?"

Lin Wanrong could hear the rapid beating of his own heart. Offering Jang Geum to him? Was he mistaken? The legendary woman of the peninsula, the idol of the Korean people, offered to him, to soothe him daily with her silver needles and foot massages? What a luxurious indulgence! This was a temptation! An absolutely irresistible temptation! This Yi Seung-Jae truly was willing to gamble everything.

Lin Wanrong glanced at Palace Lady Seo in the distance. She was discussing something with the Senior Palace Lady Han. Her furrowed brows, her snowy complexion, her delicate cheeks, her tempting lips, full of charm, were truly heart-stirring.

‘All the while, you toil and strain, little realizing your master has already sold you. What a pity.’ Lin Wanrong slowly shook his head. If not for the fact that this journey concerned Qingxuan, Lord Lin might seriously consider Yi Seung-Jae's tantalizing offer.

"Young Prince, I'm afraid this won't work. My relationship with Lady Seo is merely a friendship, without any romantic intentions. I believe you've misunderstood," Lin Wanrong said flatly, feeling an unspeakable aversion towards Yi Seung-Jae, "As for the matter of marriage, I'm a citizen of Great Hua, and Princess Nishang is the angel of Great Hua. I cannot do anything that would betray Great Hua. Please, return to your place."

Yi Seung-Jae was stunned. How had Lord Lin's demeanor changed so drastically? From a corrupt official indulging in bribery to a profound patriot. He shook his head in frustration and left with disappointment.

‘Palace Lady Seo, I helped you once, but I won't be able to help you a second time. I hope your master won't send you off to Dongying next time, that would be tragic indeed,’ Lin Wanrong sighed heavily. Even an exceptional woman couldn't escape a grim fate.

The Turks moved swiftly. In the time they spoke, more than forty pairs of horses had been prepared. The majority of spectators in the square were from Great Hua, and they marveled at the sight of the Turks handling the horses so skillfully. No wonder the nomadic tribes were so fierce, no one could rival their horse-riding skills.

As the pairing continued, Lin Wanrong's theory of statistics became increasingly evident. One hundred identical white horses, one hundred identical foals. Identifying lineage with the naked eye, without making a single mistake, was nearly impossible. As soon as one person made a mistake with one horse, a series of effects would follow. When they reached the sixtieth pair, the Turkish cavalries visibly slowed down, and both Lu Dongzan and Ashile started to show signs of tension. The remaining horses were difficult to distinguish, often requiring a group of ten to deliberate before a match was made.

Indeed, as Master Lin expected, the Turks ran into trouble. Seo Jang Geum let out a small sigh, and stole a glance at Lin Wanrong. Master Lin was staring at the hundreds of white horses, lost in thought.

"Master Lu!" Lin Wanrong approached the busy Lu Dongzan. "Is it becoming more challenging as we progress?"

Lu Dongzan, being a sage of the Turkic Khanate, had an open mind. He laughed in response, "Yes, it's getting harder to distinguish the horses, which takes more time."

Lin Wanrong smiled, "You don't need to work so hard, I've thought of a simple method. Sister palace maid, may I try?"

Lu Dongzan looked at Lin Wanrong in surprise. He had witnessed Master Lin triumph twice before. If he cracked this round too, then Master Lin would be a true genius.

The palace maid, Cuiyun, replied, "Of course, you may. Master Lu, you've paired sixty-five couples within one hour. If Master Lin can pair more within the same period, then he wins. What do you think?"

Lu Dongzan nodded, "That sounds fair. Master Lin, it's your turn."

Cuiyun waved her hand, and the successfully paired sixty-plus mares and foals were led away. Then, another sixty or so identical white horses and foals were brought in to mingle with the rest. The whole body of snow-white steeds and foals neighed together, creating a thunderous sound that vibrated the eardrums.

Lin Wanrong walked into the herd of foals, gently stroking the soft mane of one. He turned to a cavalry feeding the horses nearby, "Brother, it must take a lot of effort to take care of these purebred white horses," he commented.

The knight nodded, "These are purebred Dawan horses, large and fast. They require careful feeding. Every hour, they must be given high-quality feed, each horse to its own trough, and never two to the same. The nearly two hundred horses here have been waiting for nearly two hours, and the foals are so hungry that they're crying out."

"Just as I expected," Lin Wanrong gave a small smile, then raised his voice to address everyone present, "Brothers, let's bring the feed up first and give these mothers a good meal."

The cavalries, who were also the grooms of the white horses, approved of Master Lin's suggestion. Immediately, they brought up over a hundred troughs, each filled with high-quality feed. The mares lowered their heads and began to eat.

The foals had been hungry for a while and seeing food served yet not being able to eat, they started to cause a commotion, kicking their hooves and bounding about.

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Brothers, please put muzzles on the foals."

Muzzles were cages made of bamboo that fit over a horse's mouth, designed to prevent horses from stealing food. It was the first time anyone had heard of putting muzzles on purebred Dawan white horses, but since Lin Wanrong said it, the cavalries did as told.

Muzzled, the foals became even more agitated, a few broke free and started to run around chaotically. Everyone watched Lin Wanrong's actions with curiosity, wondering what he was planning.

"Brothers, you must do exactly as I say next, no matter how hard it is," Lin Wanrong said earnestly. "Hold the mares so they stay in place. And then, take your whips and drive the foals away, the further, the better."

"This—" A few of the cavalries were taken aback. These foals were ones they had personally raised and even delivered; they naturally hesitated to be harsh with them.

Lin Wanrong smiled, "If you really can't bring yourselves to do it, just pretend. But you must make it convincing. You must make the foals afraid, understand?"

"Understood!" Several cavalries whipped the air fiercely, causing loud cracking sounds. The agitated foals were immediately frightened and ran off, whinnying in fear.

The cavalries yelled and threatened, chasing the foals away. The mares, originally calmly eating, became uneasy at the sight of their fleeing foals. They neighed in distress, their eyes full of sadness.

"I understand, I understand now." Up on the city tower, Li Tai shouted out in excitement.

The Emperor looked at him in surprise, "General Li, what do you understand?"

"Your Majesty, this Lin San is a man of great wisdom. He has quite a strategy!" Li Tai declared excitedly.

At the same time, Lu Dongzan's face changed in the field, staring at Lin San who stood there smiling silently. After a moment of stunned silence, he muttered, "The existence of such a man in Great Hua is as good as a hundred thousand strong soldiers."

Ashile was surprised, "As good as a hundred thousand soldiers? Are you talking about Lin San? Lu Dongzan, how is this possible? This man is greedy and lustful, how could he be so powerful?"

Lu Dongzan gave a bitter smile, "I also wish not to believe it. I only hope that when our two nations meet in battle, I won't encounter him on the battlefield."

"They're back, they're back!" A cry of surprise rose from the crowd as hundreds of foals came galloping back, chased by cavalries. Frightened, the foals ran straight into the herd of mares. The hundreds of mares let out unified cries of distress that shook the sky.

Once they reached the herd, the hundred foals quickly located their mothers, constantly neighing, their eyes still reflecting their fear, seeking comfort. A hundred mares, a hundred foals, quickly paired off.

Desperately, the mares nudged at the muzzles of their foals, trying to free them from their bonds. Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, "The bond between mother and child, who can separate it? Deceive each other in the same trough? Humans are inferior to horses. Brothers, remove their muzzles."

The cavalries freed the foals, and as they opened their hooves, they revealed the numbers written there, each one corresponding perfectly to its mother.

Seo Jang Geum stared, transfixed. Hearing Lin Wanrong's words, she was left with a complex feeling. She murmured with her mouth slightly agape, "Deceive each other in the same trough, humans are inferior to horses! Master Lin, you're absolutely right. Just what kind of person are you?"

Cheers thundered from the crowd. This young Lord Lin had solved three riddles in the blink of an eye, defeating not only Goryeo but also the arrogant nomads. It was truly unbelievable. With such a statesman in Great Hua, why worry about the nomadic invaders?

"Lin San, oh Lin San! What should I do with you?" The Emperor muttered under his breath, his eyes flickering between excitement and indecision.

Chapter 338 The Number One Talent Under Heaven

"This question has been answered correctly by Lord Lin. Lord Ashile, do you have any objections?" Ashile shook his head in defeat, and the young palace maid Cuiyun smiled and said again, "Lord Lin has answered three questions in succession, the Goryeo prince and the Turkic envoy have each answered one. Without comparing the last question, we already know who the winner is."

"We must compare, we must compare," loudly declared Lu Dongzan. "Lord Lin's talent is unparalleled. We all want to see how he solves the four riddles posed by Princess Nishang. This last one will make us wholeheartedly accept the result. Lord Lin, what do you say?"

This Lu Dongzan, being a Turk, possessed a hearty and candid disposition. Had the two nations not been at odds, becoming friends with him might have been pleasant. Lin Wanrong laughed and said, "Brother Lu, you flatter me. The riddles posed by the Princess are something I just stumbled upon and answered. They are not deserving of true praise."

"Lord Lin, I implore you to answer the last riddle as well," said Palace Lady Seo with a sad expression. "Witnessing the remarkable deeds of a remarkable person is something we all eagerly await."

Seeing so many people looking at him with excitement, Lin Wanrong knew that he had no choice but to answer. He smiled bitterly and looked at Cuiyun, saying, "Sister Palace Maid, please pose the last riddle."

Cuiyun smiled and said, "During this Princess's selection for a consort, the first three riddles were all predetermined. Only the last one was personally devised by the Princess. And the Princess will not pose this riddle arbitrarily; only if she is satisfied with the talented young man who has answered correctly, will she present another riddle. Currently, there has been no decree from the Princess, and I do not know if there will be this fourth riddle. Please wait patiently for a moment."

So that was the case! Lin Wanrong was suddenly covered in sweat. It turned out that the riddles were not casually posed, and even if you wanted to answer these strange questions, you might not have the opportunity. You must catch the eye of the Princess, only then will she grant you the favor of posing a riddle.

Whispers spread through the crowd. If the Princess posed a riddle, it would mean that she was satisfied with Lord Lin, and he was sure to become the Prince Consort of Great Hua, his value

greatly increased. But would the Princess pose a question? What would it be? Everyone was waiting for that moment to come.

The Goryeo prince and the Turkic envoy had already lost their chance, and both sides were disheartened and despondent. Out of jealousy, they naturally did not wish Lord Lin to become the Prince Consort. Seeing the curtain on the embroidered tower hanging still for a long time, both sides became hopeful again. If the Princess was dissatisfied with Lord Lin, did that mean they still had a chance?

Time ticked by, and Lin Wanrong, who had been calm and confident, became increasingly restless. Was Qingxuan really behind all this? If it was truly her, she must have already known of his presence, so why was she still so calm and composed? 'Oh God, don't toy with me!'

Everyone waited for a while, seeing no one emerge, and they all thought that Princess Nishang was dissatisfied with Lord Lin. Sighs of regret filled the air, as they lamented for this rising talent of Great Hua.

Amid the whispers, suddenly the hanging curtain was lifted. A pretty little maid rushed out, handing Cuiyun a small note and whispering something in her ear, before turning and retreating.

Cuiyun smiled faintly, her voice soft and delicate, "I apologize for the long wait. The princess has set the question—"

"Good!" A wave of excitement swept through the crowd. At last, Princess Nishang had shown her discerning eye. Where else could they find such an exceptional talent like Lord Lin? If not him for a Prince Consort, then who else could it be?

Lin Wanrong wiped a bead of cold sweat. This princess was indeed one to torment others, playing such a hand at the last moment. 'If it truly is Qingxuan,' he thought, 'I will definitely spank her little bottom.'

"Lord Lin, the last question from Princess Nishang is specially designed for you. Please listen carefully." Cuiyun's words once again whetted everyone's appetite. Everyone, including Lin Wanrong, focused intently on the question the princess had crafted just for him, curious about what strange novelty it could be.

Cuiyun slowly unfolded the slip of paper, reading it aloud in a gentle voice, "Lord Lin, may I ask, during your time in the hideout of the White Lotus Cult in Dangtu County, you were captured by bandits and then rescued by others. Who is the person you find most unforgettable?"

What kind of question was this? The sudden and seemingly disconnected statement left everyone puzzled. It was entirely different from the previous three questions, which had been a battle of wits. It seemed to be a question exclusively designed for Lord Lin, based on his past. It appeared much simpler than an intellectual duel, and it was thought that Lord Lin would surely answer correctly, becoming the beloved Prince Consort of the Great Huá Emperor without a hitch.

Yet, Lin Wanrong was unable to conceal his astonishment and excitement, leaping up and shouting, "Qingxuan, Qingxuan, is it you?"

Silence reigned in the upstairs chamber, with no one answering his question. The incident of being captured and rescued by the White Lotus Cult was known to only a few; who else but Qingxuan could be so familiar with him to ask such a question? Qingxuan was indeed Princess Nishang; he thought triumphantly, 'I've made it!'

"My lord, have you thought it over?" Cuiyun asked, smiling at Lord Lin's sudden outburst.

"Two people saved me in that time of danger, but the most unforgettable one is naturally Qingxuan—" Lin Wanrong answered confidently.

The crowd was left in a state of confusion, and silence fell once again in the chamber above. Suddenly, a soft snort was heard, "If you miss her so much, go find her then, and don't seek me. Cuiyun, back to the palace—"

That voice? Lin Wanrong was so startled that he jumped a yard high. It didn't sound like Qingxuan; it seemed somewhat like Xian'er?

"Xian'er, Xian'er, is it you?" Lin Wanrong yelled.

Standing on the elevated platform, the maid Cuiyun gave a bitter smile before retreating behind the curtains. From above, there was the sound of angry footsteps, and the guards before the princess's palanquin began to move slowly toward the palace gate.

"It's not me; go find your Qingxuan, hmph!" A familiar slender figure emerged from the building, stepping into the palanquin, her voice filled with hurt and bitterness.

Lord Lin's mind short-circuited. Princess Nishang—Princess Nishang!! It was his darling Xian'er!! How could this be? No wonder Sister An said Xian'er had gone on a secret mission and that there would be a big surprise. It truly was a huge surprise! It nearly took his life to admit before so many people that Qingxuan was the most unforgettable, every word falling into the ears of his jealous young wife. She was now the princess of Great Huá; it would be strange if she didn't flare up.

By the time Lin Wanrong had come to his senses, Princess Nishang's carriage had already traveled quite a distance, with one foot of the small palanquin almost stepping into the palace gate. In a desperate hurry, Lin Wanrong chased after, shouting loudly, "Xian'er, Xian'er, don't go!"

With a tremendous bang, the enormous palace gate closed, almost smashing Lin Wanrong's nose as he rushed toward it.

He touched his nose resentfully, pounding on the door ring, cursing under his breath, "What in the world is happening? In seeking one wife, I've offended another. If anyone's to talk about bad luck, who in the world can compare to me? And this girl Xian'er, she could have been a princess but chose to become a popular courtesan, and she loves being jealous so much. Ah, now I'm in trouble."

The situation in the field had suddenly changed. Originally, the princess had already posed a question, and it was an extremely simple and unrelated one. How had Lin Wanrong managed to annoy the princess, causing her to leave in a huff? It seemed that he would not be able to become prince consort after all. What a classic example of failing at the last step! Those present were all sighing and shaking their heads, except for the previously disappointed Yi Seung-Jae and the Turkic envoy, who were secretly pleased. If the princess was unhappy with Lin Wanrong, they might still have a chance. The scene was truly filled with unexpected twists and dramatic changes!

Seeing Lin Wanrong's dejected appearance, the Emperor was not worried but pleased, laughing heartily, "Today has indeed been interesting, Gaoping, summon Lin San, the Goryeo, and Turkic envoys to the hall."

Lin Wanrong fretted for a moment but soon saw Eunuch Gao coming hurriedly, respectfully saying, "Lord Lin, His Majesty has summoned you. Come quickly!"

Putting aside his doubts about Xian'er's identity, he followed Gaoping into the golden hall, where he saw Yi Seung-Jae and Ashile and others had already arrived. Xu Wei's eyes were smiling, and he was nodding slightly at Lord Lin, looking very satisfied.

Lin Wanrong knew his situation well. He had made a complete mess of the princess's marriage proposal, failing at the last step. He didn't know how the jealous little Xian'er would torment him. Old Xu knew nothing of the situation, still thinking Lord Lin had gained a significant advantage.

"Today's Princess Nishang's marriage proposal has concluded, with both Goryeo and Turk showing great restraint and dignity," the Emperor said with a smile.

Yi Seung-Jae hurriedly bowed, "Your Majesty is too kind. It was our lack of preparation that caused us to miss the opportunity with the princess. I feel a great regret. However, since Princess Nishang has not chosen a consort, I believe there is still a chance."

"That's exactly right," the Turkic envoy Ashile added. "The princess has not chosen a consort, so we Turk also have a chance."

The Emperor laughed loudly, "You are both mistaken. Princess Nishang personally posed the test questions, and it was fair and just. Both of your countries answered only one question correctly and have no chance to participate in further testing. Even if the princess has not chosen a consort, she will not choose between you two. If everyone asked for a second chance like you, would not Princess Nishang never be married, and the marriage proposal event go on every day?"

Yi Seung-Jae and Ashile were left speechless. As the Emperor said, the opportunity was equal; they just had not grasped it. They could blame no one else.

"Where is Lin San?" The Emperor suddenly thundered with authority.

"Your humble servant is here." Lin Wanrong lazily replied with a fist salute, his mood clearly not very elevated.

The Emperor laughed and said, "Do not be overly concerned with temporary gains and losses. From what I have seen of your performance today, it was unexpected, both brave and strategic. You were able to compete with the two envoys from Goryeo and the Turkic Khaganate, showing the demeanor of a national scholar. I am very pleased."

What was this "compete with the two envoys from Goryeo and the Turkic Khaganate?" Everyone understood that the Emperor was saying this purely to save face for Yi Seung-Jae and Ashile in the Golden Hall.

"Lin San is widely learned, outstandingly talented, and has won honor for our Great Hua. We have all witnessed it. Previously, he had commanded troops in Shandong for Xu Wei, personally capturing the rebel king Lu Kanli, bombarding the White Lotus Holy Mother, and occupying Jining City. His merits are immense. How can such a statesman be wasted among the common people? Where is Ye Shuqing, the Minister of Personnel?" The Emperor's voice boomed loudly.

"Your humble servant is here!" An old man with a flushed face quickly stepped forward.

"Minister Ye, you manage the Ministry of Personnel. Now, look for me, are there any vacancies recently? Lin San is a scholar of our Great Hua and must be put to good use." The Emperor smiled.

Prince Cheng's eyes flashed sharply, and he gave Ye Shuqing a look. Ye Shuqing understood immediately and hastily saluted, saying, "Your Majesty, the positions arranged by the Ministry of Personnel are almost full. However, there are still idle positions in various localities."

The Emperor chuckled and said, "He came from Jinling and once commanded troops in Shandong. He is from the localities. Why would you send him back there? Oh, I remember now, the former Vice Minister of Personnel, Tong Yuan, has retired, leaving a vacancy in the Ministry — Lin San, I hereby promote you to be a Scholar of the Hall of Literary Brilliance and hold the title of Vice Minister of Personnel. Do you accept?"

"Your Majesty!" Ye Shuqing exclaimed in alarm. "The responsibilities of the Ministry of Personnel are significant, and the Vice Minister directly assists me. Although Mr. Lin is widely learned and talented, he is still young and has never had any experience in office. Even the newly crowned top scholar, Mr. Su Mubai, has not yet entered the departmental examination. Promoting Mr. Lin too high all at once may cause resentment. Please, Your Majesty, think it over!"

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, Minister Ye brought up Top Scholar Su, using Su Mubai as an example to prevent the Emperor from promoting Lin San. Top Scholar Su, though holding an honorary position, had not yet entered any of the Six Ministries. Seeing the Emperor favoring Lin San so much, he went pale and lowered his head, saying nothing.

"There are always exceptions to everything. I have spoken of Lin San's merits; who in the court can deny them? Su Mubai earned his top scholar status through true talent, so I promoted him to the Pavilion of the Source of Literature. Lin San's triumph over Goryeo and the Turkic Khaganate is no false achievement. Advancing him to Hall of Literary Brilliance is what everyone expects. Moreover, he has made tremendous contributions in Shandong. Who would resent him becoming Vice Minister of Personnel? As for his being young, my dear ministers, have you forgotten that when the late Emperor was alive, my brother Prince Cheng took charge of the Ministry in his early

twenties? What is wrong with that?" The Emperor's eyes flashed, and his words struck like heavy hammers, resounding in the hearts of all.

Prince Cheng was a divine scion, a son and grandson of Emperors, who had taken over the Ministry of Personnel at a little over twenty years old. No one dared to utter a word of dissent. But now, the Emperor was equating Lin San, who was presently in servitude to the Xiao family as a mere household servant, with Prince Cheng. What did this all mean? Don't forget, Lin San had no qualifications to be compared with Prince Cheng.

"Master Xu, what does this Vice Minister of Personnel do?" Seeing that Ye Shuqing's face had turned pale, looking as though he was at death's door, Lin Wanrong pulled Xu Wei aside and asked quietly.

"The Ministry of Personnel is in charge of the examination, promotion, and transfer of all officials in the country. It is a critical part of the imperial court. The Vice Minister assists the Minister, holding a high rank with even greater authority. The former Vice Minister, Tong Yuan, has retired, so although you are a deputy, you will actually be holding a principal position. Little brother Lin, you have ascended to the heavens in a single step," Xu Wei said with a gentle smile.

So this was equivalent to being the Deputy Director of Human Resources, a position of real power! Lin Wanrong couldn't help but think: 'The Emperor has bestowed such a great gift upon me, should I accept it or not?'

"A mere Vice Minister of Personnel, why has it made this Mr. Ye look as if he's lost his own mother? His face has even changed color," Lin Wanrong replied.

'Little brother Lin still lacks understanding of the bureaucratic world,' Xu Wei thought, holding back his laughter. He said, "Little brother Lin, although there is a three-grade difference between you and Mr. Ye, in reality, you are only one level apart. And since you were personally promoted by the Emperor, whose grace is as boundless as the sky, who knows when he might replace Mr. Ye with you? How could Mr. Ye not consider his own position? Even more importantly, the Ministry of Personnel has always been held by Prince Cheng's confidants. Now the Emperor has forcibly inserted you. Just think, how would you feel if someone drove a nail right into the center of your heart?"

Cold sweat! So there were so many underlying factors. The Emperor wanted Lin San to be a pawn in his battle against Prince Cheng. Could Lin San really be so foolish?

Before Ye Shuqing could say anything further, the Emperor's expression changed, and he snorted, "My mind is made up, Minister Ye, say no more. Come, draft the decree—"

"Wait, wait a moment." Lin Wanrong cheerfully stepped forward, bowing his fist, "Your Majesty, thank you for your profound favor. But I too think that Mr. Ye makes sense. I am merely a lowly servant in the Xiao family, utterly ignorant of state affairs and politics. Your Majesty's esteem for me truly makes me ashamed. I have been living well and happily with the Xiao family. Please, Your Majesty, allow me to return to the Xiao household and continue to be a content little servant. I will be perfectly satisfied."

Xu Wei's eyes nearly rolled back into his head. Had this boy's wits been addled by the duel of intellects, abandoning the post of Vice Minister of Personnel within his grasp to return to the Xiao family as a mere servant? What enchanting potion had the Eldest Miss of the Xiao family given him?

"Lord Lin's noble character is like that of a great general; the Emperor's discerning eye recognizes the gold within. This servant admires it greatly," Prince Cheng, his eyes gleaming, suddenly interjected.

The Emperor glanced at Prince Cheng, a trace of a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "What Prince Cheng says is not wrong; Lin San is indeed extraordinary. Since he wishes to remain with the Xiao family, then he shall continue to do so. However, possessing such talent and not using it for the nation would be a grave mistake, a waste, to put it bluntly. Lin San, you may return to the Xiao family, but you must also handle the affairs of the Ministry of Personnel. Since you hold such a light regard for fame and fortune, there's no need for you to enter the Hall of Literary Brilliance. Lin San, heed my decree—"

"Your Majesty, your humble subject is listening!" Lin Wanrong hastily responded, bowing his fist.

"You have achieved great military success and brought glory to the nation; I hereby promote you to Vice Minister of Personnel and bestow upon you a residence. Considering you have duties to attend to in the Xiao family, I specially permit you to be excused from attending morning court," the Emperor said, suppressing a smile.

The officials were taken aback, their hearts filled with apprehension. What duties could Lin San, a mere household servant in the Xiao family, possibly have that could compare to affairs of state? The Emperor's treatment of him was filled with deep affection and loyalty.

A position as Vice Minister of Personnel was of little interest to Lin Wanrong; it was the bestowed residence that was truly advantageous.

"Furthermore, to facilitate your future actions, I will bestow upon you a few more characters," the Emperor said, smiling at Lin San, as Gao Ping quickly brought forward the brush, ink, paper, and inkstone.

'Bestowing characters? How trivial! Gold would be more proper,' thought Lin San, the newly appointed Vice Minister, somewhat naïvely. A character bestowed by the Emperor was a grace beyond measure, worth more than ten thousand taels of gold. With the Emperor's inscription, what riches could not be obtained?

Seeing Lin San's nonchalant attitude, Xu Wei couldn't help but pull him aside, whispering, "Little brother Lin, the Emperor is truly sparing no effort for you, even outdoing the Top Scholar Su."

'Nonsense! Before, I might not have known, but now I understand. Xian'er is my wife, and also the Emperor's daughter. My relationship with him is that of a genuine son-in-law and father-in-law. If he's not good to me, would he rather be good to that pretty boy Su Mubai?'

Silence filled the grand hall. The Eunuch Gao prepared the paper, and the Emperor dipped his golden brush into the cinnabar ink. After a moment of contemplation, the brush flew across the paper, leaving behind a splendid inscription.

"Lin San, though you are but a humble household servant, you must not belittle yourself because of your status. Remember, the founder Emperor of the Great Hua Dynasty, in former years, was also a cowherd. Yet, he became a heroic figure praised by all for his talents and strategies," the Emperor said, looking gravely at Lin San.

'Of all you've said, this sentence sounds the best.' Lin Wanrong sincerely replied, "Your Majesty, thank you."

With a wave of the Emperor's hand, Eunuch Gao gently folded the imperial edict with the Emperor's personal cinnabar inscription and handed it to Lin Wanrong. Lord Lin took it with both hands, and the Emperor looked at him, smiling, "Hang these characters on the gate of your residence, and from now on, I dare assure you, no one will dare to bully the Xiao family again, nor will anyone dare to bully you."

Was he bragging? What was so powerful about a few characters? Lin Wanrong took the jade plate with both hands, calculating inwardly.

"Little brother Lin, little brother Lin." Xu Wei caught hold of him, kindly reminding, "Upon receiving the Emperor's inscription, you must open it on the spot to share with others, as a way to express gratitude for the Emperor's vast grace."

Rules were indeed plentiful. Lin Wanrong quickly held the Emperor's calligraphy in his hands, unfolded the scroll, and swept it lightly with his eyes. Suddenly, his eyes flashed with golden light, his mouth gaping open, unable to close, as he was struck dumb.

The Emperor smiled in silence, deeply satisfied with the effect that had so astonished this fearless and audacious fellow. Seeing Lord Lin's reaction, Xu Wei hurriedly rushed over with Gao Ping, each taking an end to help Lin San slowly unfold the calligraphy.

Everyone looked up and, with just one glance, was stunned along with Lin San!

There on the paper, shimmering with golden light, were five characters written in the style of dragons flying and phoenixes dancing— "The First Talent Under Heaven!"

Chapter 339 Three Invitations

"The First Talent Under Heaven?" Not only were the masses dumbstruck, even Xu Wei, who had seen much and known many, was stunned. No wonder the Emperor had declared that from now on, no one would dare bully the Xiao family or Lin San. With the four characters "First Talent Under Heaven," personally written by the Emperor and hung at the gate, even civil officials had to dismount their sedan chairs and military generals their horses. Who would dare to slacken? Bully Lin San? Ridiculous! If Lord Lin did not bully others, then one might as well recite prayers to Buddha.

"Thank you, Your Majesty!" Lin Wanrong quickly smiled and bowed. This was a great honor, not to be dismissed lightly. His father-in-law was really considerate; if he needed help in the future, he might be able to lend a hand.

All the officials in the hall were astute men. In just a few days, this unknown and unheard-of Lord Lin, who had seemingly emerged out of nowhere, had replaced the new Top Scholar Su Mubai, becoming the Emperor's new favorite. From a nameless pawn to "The First Talent Under Heaven," his rise was unprecedentedly swift. Being crafty themselves, everyone quickly paid their respects

and flattered him, showering him with endless compliments, praising him as unmatched and rare in the land.

The Turkic national teacher, Lu Dongzan, slowly walked up to Lin Wanrong: "Lord Lin's talent, Lu Dongzan greatly admires. If one day we meet on the battlefield, even if Lu Dongzan dies, he will have no regrets."

"Easy, easy now, Brother Lu," Lin Wanrong laughed. "As long as you Turks do not disturb the people of our Great Hua, I assure you that you will live to a ripe old age."

Lu Dongzan gave Lin Wanrong a big thumbs-up, and the two smiled together, though their thoughts were quite different.

"Ha ha ha ha—" After leaving the court, sitting in the carriage and looking at the five golden, gleaming characters "The First Talent Under Heaven," Lord Lin grinned and laughed triumphantly, his upstart demeanor on full display.

Xu Wei sat beside him, amused by his appearance. Suddenly, he remembered something and couldn't help but sigh: "Little brother Lin, today's events could have been perfect. If you had answered Princess Nishang's final question correctly, you could have become the Prince Consort of Great Hua. It's just—alas, you were lacking some luck!"

'What lack of luck? I'd say I'm too lucky, meeting Xian'er out of nowhere, marrying her, and then finding out she is a princess of noble status. Although she seems angry now, with her temperament, she'll change her mind in a few days. This time, I've truly struck it big.'

"Mr. Xu, there's something I don't understand. Please enlighten me!" Lin Wanrong carefully stored the Emperor's gift and frowned: "How many princesses does our current Emperor have?"

Xu Wei nodded: "That's a good question, Little brother. Originally, there were two princesses, but now there are three."

"What do you mean two became three? Mr. Xu, don't beat around the bush; tell me quickly." Lin Wanrong, concerned about Xian'er's identity, asked eagerly.

Xu Wei sighed: "Little brother, what you don't know is that the Emperor had originally bestowed titles upon two princesses. The elder princess is called Princess Xinxia, the Emperor's first daughter. After the Emperor ascended the throne years ago, in response to the rebellion of the Yi tribe in Yunnan, he married her off to the eldest son of the Yunnan Duke to stabilize the border. Princess Xinxia has lived in a remote area ever since. Now nearly forty, she last visited the capital to see her family five years ago."

This Princess Xinxia was Xian'er's elder sister. She was older and certainly wouldn't be Qingxuan. Lin Wanrong was anxious and said, "What about the second princess who was granted a title? Could it be Xian'er—ah, I mean, Princess Nishang?"

Xu Wei smiled and shook his head, "No, no, the second princess is named Chuyun."

"Princess Chuyun?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, a mix of joy and concern, "Not Princess Nishang?"

Xu Wei nodded, "As to the Emperor's sons and daughters, it's a long and complicated tale. After Princess Xinxia, the Emperor had two princes. The first was born of the Empress, but tragically died at the age of ten when he fell from a horse and broke his neck."

"Broke his neck falling from a horse?" Lin Wanrong was shocked at this strange reason, especially for the Emperor's eldest son. Xu Wei seemed to see through his thoughts and shook his head, "The affairs of the royal family are best left unclear. If the late Emperor said he died from falling from a horse, then that's what happened."

"I see. From what you're saying, the Emperor had a second son?" Lin Wanrong asked.

"The second son's story is even more regrettable," Xu Wei sighed. "Just before the late Emperor's passing, the Emperor attended him personally. His filial piety and righteousness were admired by all, but someone sent an assassin. The second prince died under the assassin's blade while protecting the Emperor. The Emperor, then nearing forty, was devastated. He fainted right there by the late Emperor's bedside."

The fact that both of the Emperor's sons died unexpectedly was indeed shocking. Xu Wei cleared his throat and continued, "Later, during the succession at the late Emperor's deathbed, the Emperor took the throne but only had three princesses left. Princess Chuyun was fourth in the line of siblings, the Empress's own child, and incomparably noble. She was more than twenty years younger than Princess Xinxia. At the time of her birth, the Emperor's foundation was not yet stable, and with the help of a remarkable person, he sent Princess Chuyun to be this person's disciple."

Twenty years have passed, and this old man has only seen her once, at the age of six when she was granted the title of Chuyun."

Was Princess Chuyun Qingxuan? Lin Wanrong's heart skipped a beat. What about Xian'er, then? How had she become Princess Nishang? Had the old Emperor adopted her as a false daughter to deceive Goryeo and the Turks?

"Princess Nishang is the Emperor's youngest daughter," Xu Wei sighed softly. "In those years in the palace, the Emperor's favorites were Princess Chuyun and Princess Nishang. When Chuyun was granted her title, the Emperor jokingly said he planned to name his youngest daughter Nishang. Unfortunately, before Princess Nishang was granted her title, things changed. Her birth mother, Concubine Qin, died protecting the Emperor, and Princess Nishang's whereabouts became unknown. A few days ago, when the Emperor mentioned Princess Nishang's return, this old man was incredulous, but it turned out to be true."

Concubine Qin? Qin Xian'er! Lin Wanrong suddenly understood, clapping his hands together. Xian'er was the Emperor's biological daughter; her mother's surname was Qin, so she was called Qin Xian'er. This girl had tricked him so cruelly; he would have to spank her when he got home.

"Little brother, do you understand now?" Xu Wei asked with a smile.

"I understand, I understand!" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. "Thank you, Mr. Xu, for your guidance. Once I move into my new house in a few days, I'll invite you over for tea, and maybe collect some red envelopes!"

Xu Wei laughed loudly, glancing at him and saying, "Little brother Lin, you are no longer an ordinary person, so don't mention anything about receiving red envelopes. If outsiders were to hear about it, I fear those bringing you gift money would crowd your doorstep."

Xu Wei's words were not an exaggeration. Lin Wanrong had become a highly favored figure in front of the Emperor, and there were many who wanted to curry favor with him. It wasn't just about red envelopes; even if he wanted a mountain of gold, there would surely be someone willing to deliver it to him.

"There's one more thing." Xu Wei looked at him and smiled, "Little brother Lin, have you had a falling out with Miss Xiao of your family?"

"A falling out? Not at all!" Lin Wanrong said in surprise. "I was whipped at the training ground a few days ago, and she graciously applied medicine for me. How could there be any discord?"

"That's good to hear. These past two days, Miss Xiao has been inseparable from my girl Zhiqing. I saw her looking worried and thought you might have some grievances with her!"

Miss Xiao inseparable from Xu Zhiqing? Lin Wanrong had been out since early yesterday morning and had spent the night in the palace. Adding it up, he hadn't seen Miss Xiao for over two days, and he did indeed miss her somewhat.

After bidding farewell to Xu Wei at the door, Lin San entered the shop and saw Sister Song busily working, with the maid Huan'er also helping. Seeing him return, she joyfully exclaimed, "Brother San, you're back just in time! Come and help us!"

"Help with what?" Lin Wanrong laughed. "Where's Miss Xiao? Why don't I see her?"

"A new shipment of perfume is arriving from Jinling today. We're keeping the news under wraps for now. If the ladies knew about it, they would tear our shop apart. Brother San, you don't know, but our perfume is selling like crazy. Ten bottles were just put on the shelves yesterday, and in no time, hundreds of people were lined up outside. Once the ten bottles were sold, the rest became unruly, causing a fuss all day. It wasn't until Sister Song promised to notify them as soon as the shipment arrived that they finally dispersed." Huan'er said cheerfully.

Lin Wanrong, no longer surprised by such events, playfully patted the young maid's head and said, "I wasn't asking about the perfume. I was asking about Miss Xiao. Why don't I see her?"

"Miss Xiao? She said she went out painting with Miss Xu and, just like you, didn't come back all last night," Huan answered sheepishly.

Painting? The two girls seemed to be living a life of leisure. Lin Wanrong wondered when Miss Xiao had become so relaxed, even able to put aside the shop's business.

"Oh, right, Brother San, someone brought an invitation for you earlier, inviting you to a banquet at their residence!" Huan'er suddenly exclaimed in a delicate voice.

"An invitation? For a banquet?" Lin Wanrong asked in surprise. "Who sent it? What banquet?"

Huan'er shook her head, "I don't know. The servant was dressed very elegantly but was very polite to me. He left the invitation and left, insisting that his master was asking you to honor them with your presence."

Lin Wanrong took the invitation card in his hands and noticed the exquisite golden thread bordering the edges of the beautifully packaged card. Opening it, he saw a line of small golden characters that read: "Tomorrow at dusk, a banquet will be held at Prince's Mansion. Sincerely inviting the Vice Minister of Personnel, Mr. Lin San. Respectfully from Prince Zhao Mingcheng!"

A banquet hosted by Prince Cheng? After the unpleasant incident at the Grand Prime Minister Temple, what could he want with him? Having just been promoted, his invitation arrived so quickly. The deceit and hypocrisy in officialdom were far less satisfying than when he was a servant in the Xiao family. Lin Wanrong casually tossed the invitation aside, laughing, "I'll go rest for a while. If the Eldest Miss comes back, Huan'er, call me!"

Huan'er nodded in agreement, and as Lin Wanrong was about to step into his room, he suddenly heard a stiff voice speaking in Great Hua language from outside, "May I ask if Lord Lin San, Master Lin, lives here?"

Lin Wanrong lifted his head, only to see a high-nosed, deep-eyed Turk standing at the door, asking a question. Judging by his appearance, he seemed to be one of Ashile's subordinates.

"Yes, yes, that's me. May I ask who you are?" Lin Wanrong walked forward, examining the man.

"I am here on the orders of Lord Ashile to deliver two of the finest Blood-Sweat Treasure Horses to Lord Lin. Please accept them," the Turk bowed and said.

Lin Wanrong exclaimed in delight, having completely forgotten about this matter. Ashile had bribed him with two Blood-Sweat Treasure Horses, but it was exposed by Seo Jang Geum before the Emperor, who simply awarded the jewels and horses to him. Now, this Turk was here specifically to deliver the treasure horses.

Having lived so long, he had only heard of the name Blood-Sweat Treasure Horse, never having seen one with his own eyes. Lin Wanrong eagerly grabbed the Turk, saying, "Where are the horses? Quickly, take me to see them!"

Stepping outside, he saw two tall and magnificent horses standing in front of the hall, their whole bodies a soft, brownish-yellow like satin, without a single impurity. The mane between their backs faintly gleamed gold in the sunlight, truly eye-catching. Both Blood-Sweat Treasure Horses had a ring of white mane around their hooves, utterly charming.

"My Lord, these are the most divine and spirited Blood-Sweat Treasure Horses of my Turkic people. When they run fiercely, beads of sweat as bright as blood cover their bodies, hence they are named Blood-Sweat Treasure Horses. These two, which are presented to you, are the kings among treasure horses. My Lord, please observe; their hooves are like jade, as if trotting on white snow, as if coming from the heavens. In our Turk, these horses are hailed as heavenly horses," the Turkic envoy introduced slowly.

Lin Wanrong was delighted in his heart but couldn't show it on his face. He nodded slightly, saying, "Indeed, the fame of the Blood-Sweat Treasure Horse is well-deserved. It can even be compared to our Great Hua's Dian Horse."

The envoy disdainfully curled his lip, thinking how could the ugly, thin, and small Dian Horse be compared to the Turkic treasure horse? This Lord Lin truly had no eye for quality.

"Thank you, envoy," Lin Wanrong smiled, taking the reins. Huan'er on the side looked at the large horses with a mixture of joy and fear, but heard her Brother San say, "Huan'er, take these two beasts out for a walk, and see if they can be used for plowing or milling."

The Turkic envoy's nose was nearly crooked with anger, but Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, saying, "If these treasure horses can't do work, then we'll leave one for the Eldest Miss to ride. Ah, beasts that can't work can only be ridden by people. Hey, Mr. Envoy, why are you still here?"

The Turkic envoy forcefully suppressed his anger, pulling an invitation from his breast, and handed it to Lin Wanrong, saying, "Sir, this is an invitation from Master Ashile. He invites you to attend a bonfire banquet outside the city tomorrow evening!"

'A bonfire banquet? Ashile is quite romantic, isn't he? He wouldn't be using this opportunity to send me two Turkic beauties, would he?' Lin Wanrong chuckled, about to casually accept the invitation, when he suddenly recalled Prince Cheng's invitation from earlier. Wasn't that also an invitation to dine at his mansion tomorrow evening?

Seeing that Lin Wanrong had taken the invitation, the Turkic envoy assumed he had accepted and hastily bowed and left. The longer he stayed here, witnessing Lin Wanrong's insult to the treasured horses, the more he felt the urge to punch him.

Lin Wanrong was still deep in thought when Huan'er came over joyfully, saying, "Big brother, Big brother, are you really an official now?"

"Just a minor official, fooling around," Lin Wanrong laughed.

"Not at all." Huan'er pouted, "Big brother, you're fooling me again. That man who just came, with the high nose and sunken eyes, isn't he a barbarian from beyond the frontier?"

"Huan'er, you're indeed wise and knowledgeable!" Lin Wanrong nodded and teased, "Those are the Turkic people, oh, the ones who have fought many wars with our Great Hua."

"Big brother, even the barbarians are so obsequious and flattering to you, and you still say you're a minor official? You only deceive us," Huan'er complained.

Seeing the young girl's eyes turning red, Lin Wanrong could only laugh and say, "Alright then, it's a big position, a sky-high position, happy now?"

Huan'er broke into a smile and nodded vigorously, "I knew it, Big brother is the most capable person in the world." Suddenly, her expression dimmed again, "Big brother, now that you're a high official, will you leave us?"

"What, is Huan'er worried that Big brother won't recognize you in the future?" Lin Wanrong joked, "Don't worry, when I need a maid in my room, I'll definitely call for you."

Huan'er's face turned red, and she quickly shook her head, "Big brother, I'm not worried about myself, I'm worried about—"

"Worried about what?" Lin Wanrong wondered.

Huan'er lowered her head and sighed, "What I'm worried about is the Eldest Miss. Big brother, even though she has never spoken of it, we can all see that she really likes you. It's just that her character is stubborn and she doesn't like to express herself. Big brother, I beg you, please don't let her down —"

As Huan'er spoke, her eyes reddened, and tears were about to fall. Lin Wanrong smiled helplessly, "All I've become is a minor official. Why make it seem like I'm some betrayer? Don't forget, the Emperor himself titled me 'The First Servant Under Heaven.' My position as a servant is well-earned and legitimate."

Just as he was about to speak, a woman's voice came from outside: "Excuse me for the intrusion. May I ask if Master Lin resides here?"

The voice sounded familiar. Huan'er glanced outside and saw a woman in palace attire standing at the gate, her eyes dark as pitch, skin as if washed with milk, pink cheeks, and a sweet smile as she was bowing to her. The woman's calm and serene demeanor was such that no amount of anger could erupt against her.

"Big brother, someone's looking for you," said Huan'er, clearly irritated. Having just pleaded for the Eldest Miss, now a beautiful, exotic woman had come to call, and she couldn't help but huff.

"Lady Jang Geum, what brings you here? Please come in and sit!" Lin Wanrong smiled as he walked over.

Seo Jang Geum's face lit up, and she bowed deeply, "Master Lin, so you really do live here. I thought I had the wrong place."

"No mistake, no mistake, this is indeed my home. Please come in and sit." Master Lin chuckled, then turned and called out, "Huan'er, prepare some tea!"

"Big brother, I'm sorry, but the tea leaves ran out yesterday," said Huan'er, her big eyes warily watching the palace lady. Big brother was a success now and not like before; any woman who came looking for him was an enemy of the Eldest Miss.

Lin Wanrong gave a wry smile. The thoughts of the young girl were truly hard to deal with.

Seo Jang Geum took an invitation from her person and shook her head with a smile, "Master Lin, there's no need. I came especially to deliver this invitation to you. Tomorrow evening, Prince Yi Seung-Jae will host a banquet on the Mirror Lake pleasure boat. We would be honored by your presence!"

Lin Wanrong, now the Emperor's top favorite, was not surprised to receive invitations from three factions at once. What truly troubled him was deciding which banquet to attend the next day.

Having sent Seo Jang Geum away, Huan'er grabbed him and said, "Brother San, who is that pretty Eldest Miss you know? Does the Eldest Miss know about her? She seems rather special to you, the way I see it."

Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "You needn't worry. Seo Jang Geum and I have no personal attachment. She is a palace lady from the Goryeo royal family, here accompanying the Goryeo prince on a marriage proposal to the Great Hua."

"I don't believe it!" Huan'er muttered, "Miss Seo may look modest, but the joy in her eyes when she saw you, and the way she looked at you, was not like others. I must report this to the Eldest Miss."

Encountering such a diligent and responsible maid, Lin Wanrong could only smile. He placed the three invitations side by side and began to ponder. Prince Cheng was a noble of heaven, related to the Emperor; logically, he should attend his banquet. But Lin Wanrong had fought openly and secretly with him several times. His sudden invitation likely concealed ill intentions.

The Goryeo people were much more straightforward. Their marriage proposal had failed, and now under others' coercion, they needed to be on good terms with Great Hua. Gaining favor with Minister Lin would be a brilliant move, especially with the presence of Seo Jang Geum, who was not a small temptation.

The Turkic people's bonfire banquet was an interesting idea, quite unique. But Lin Wanrong was no easy mark. He knew very well what these high-nosed foreigners were up to. With war between the two nations imminent, they desperately needed useful information from Lord Lin, the Emperor's close minister.

"Why aren't the lights lit? It's nighttime," a gentle voice rang in his ears, tinged with a touch of joy.

Lin Wanrong looked up and saw the Eldest Miss in a long purple gown, standing beside him like a blooming purple lily. Her slender figure, her voluptuous chest and hips, were like a faint fragrance in the dark night, penetrating his heart and soul. Though only two days had passed, it felt like years. He was entranced by her, soft and delicate as jade.

Noticing his fixed stare, Xiao Yuruo's charming face, a mixture of joy and annoyance, flushed with a thin red, radiating an extraordinary beauty in the evening dusk.

"What's the matter? Haven't you seen me before?" The Eldest Miss lowered her head and softly said, her flushed face as enchanting as the mist stirred by a March spring rain.

"Indeed, I have not," Lin Wanrong teased with a laugh, "I have never seen you so gentle and charming. Eldest Miss, if you speak to me like this every day, I'd willingly go to the temples in the capital and thank all the Bodhisattvas."

"Silly talk!" Xiao Yuruo said, lightly striking the flint to light the oil lamp. The room was instantly filled with soft yellow light, very cozy.

Lin Wanrong noticed a painting easel on her back, her face radiant with a faint smile, and he asked in surprise, "Eldest Miss, you didn't really go out painting, did you?"

"Why not?" she replied, smiling as she took off the painting case. "You're allowed to wander about outside, and I'm not permitted to paint?"

Something was amiss. Upon seeing Miss Xiao's demeanor, gentle as water, Lin Wanrong was both pleasantly surprised and imbued with a sense of unreality. The Miss Xiao of the past was like a tigress, and he had become accustomed to her daily scoldings by his side. Suddenly, she had transformed into a little oriole; this feeling was strange. What magic had Xu Zhiqing worked upon her?

"Eldest Miss, are you alright?" Lin Wanrong carefully asked, "Did something disturb you outside?"

"You're the one who was disturbed!" Miss Xiao hummed, her beautiful eyes glancing at him. She softly said, "I've changed like this; don't you like it?"

"Like—like—like it!" Master Lin stammered. This was suspicious; Miss Xiao had either taken the wrong medicine today or been brainwashed!

"Foolish look!" Xiao Yuruo's face turned a slight red, and she lowered her head, softly saying, "You're truly born to be reckless, Lin San. Is it not good for me to be this way? Do you wish me to scold you as I did before?"

Miss Xiao was right; he really was a lowly man. When she was a tigress, he longed for her to be gentle, and now that she was gentle and charming, he missed the old tigress!

"Why don't you speak?" Seeing Lin San's face astonished and speechless, Miss Xiao couldn't help but stamp her small foot, her face turning red with embarrassment as she hurriedly said. In that state, she looked nothing like the commanding woman of the marketplace but resembled a coquettish fifteen or sixteen-year-old girl—fresh and tender!

"Say, say, say what?" Master Lin felt his brain wasn't catching up. On the martial field, he could easily maneuver against Goryeo and the Turks, but back home, facing this rejuvenated Miss Xiao, he suddenly felt his mind was not enough. The past image of Miss Xiao, tough and resolute, was deeply ingrained in his heart. Suddenly seeing a gentle and loving Xiao Yuruo made it hard for him to adapt.

"Say—" Miss Xiao's face was as red as autumn maple; she lowered her head, her voice as faint as a mosquito's, "Say, do you like me as I was before or as I am now?"

"Both!" Master Lin answered without hesitation; this question was too simple. Any intelligent man would know how to respond!

"No!!" Miss Xiao looked up at him and snorted, "You dead man, always trying to deceive people. I won't let you get away with it. Which one do you really like?"

Sweat! After just a couple of sentences, she had already revealed her true nature. Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "The way you were before suits the way I was before, and the way you are now suits the way I am now. That's enough for me; I'm not picky, and my demands are very low."

Miss Xiao frowned slightly, chewing over his words. She thought for a long time but still did not understand which way he preferred. During her moment of distraction, the drawing case fell on the table, revealing the corner of a scroll. Lin Wanrong laughed, "Miss Xiao, what paintings did you make today? May I see them?"

Xiao Yuruo was deep in thought and subconsciously answered "Yes." She then realized her mistake and quickly protested, "No—"

But Master Lin didn't give her a chance to change her mind; he had already unrolled the scroll with a swish. The scroll rolled open, revealing a continuous series of paintings, containing four images.

In the first painting, a young man with a mischievous smile on his face was shown holding a small ant, guiding it through a jade hole, a fine silk thread tied to the ant's hind legs. In the second, several robust, high-nosed foreign men were depicted, sweat pouring down as they sawed wood, while another man stood at ease, directing soldiers to push logs into the water, one end sinking, the other floating, the distinction clear and immediate. The third painting depicted a hundred horses galloping, a mare and foal nestled together, a man standing in front of the horses, his eyes filled with joy yet tinged with melancholy. The fourth painting illustrated a princess's palanquin returning to the palace, a man running beside it, his expression a mix of surprise, delight, and helplessness.

These four paintings, though depicting the same person, captured various expressions and moods: joy or sorrow, cunning, wisdom, and arrogance, remarkably showcasing different personalities on the same face. The Eldest Miss's artistic touch was delicate, rendering the individual's expression with vivid detail, seemingly effortlessly, and with great intimacy.

"Don't look, don't look!" The Eldest Miss exclaimed in a charming voice, hastily snatching back the scroll, rolling it up and hiding it behind her back.

"I was wondering why you suddenly wanted to go out painting, Miss," Lin Wanrong chuckled slyly. "So, the interest was not in the wine but something else! You've done a great job with these paintings. Were they specifically made to be gifted to me?"

"Gifted to you?" The Eldest Miss huffed. "These paintings are for Sister Zhiqing. You, who aspire to be a prince consort, where would you appreciate such crude scrolls?"

This Eldest Miss has seen and remembered everything scene by scene, Lin Wanrong thought, ignoring her struggles, seizing her small hand, and whispering into her ear: "Whether I become a prince consort or not is secondary, but my daughter will definitely grow up on your milk—"

"You're going to die—" The Eldest Miss's face turned red as a beet. "What grow up on my milk— You scoundrel, you'll be the death of me with shame!"

Xiao Yuruo's face was flushed, her head lowered, no longer daring to look up, the corners of her mouth adorned with a faint smile. Her bashful yet gentle manner was like a spring breeze in March, caressing one's cheeks.

Lin Wanrong's heart itched at the sight, pulling her into his embrace, gently stroking her delicate waist, saying, "Miss, let me write a letter to Madam."

"Mm, what letter?" the Eldest Miss whispered, enveloped in his arms, recalling his wicked demeanor, her heart filled with both shame and sweetness.

"Just say, 'Miss has been deceived by me, please come to the capital to uphold justice.'"

The Eldest Miss lifted her head from his embrace, giving him a reproving glance, retorting, "You dare to say that! If my mother learns of our affairs, she'll surely skin you alive!"

"Don't worry, don't worry, I've done my fair share of skinning!" Lin Wanrong chuckled with a sly grin.

The Eldest Miss glanced at him, speaking with a touch of sourness, "Indeed, you've even done it all the way in Goryeo. That Goryeo girl, Palace Lady Seo, with brows and eyes like paintings, skin as smooth as jade, bright eyes full of wisdom, gentle and agreeable, not only skilled in medicine but also knowledgeable in farming and all kinds of subjects—when will you 'skin' her?"

"Miss, you must believe me, my relationship with Palace Lady Seo is truly a pure friendship. Of course, if she covets my masculine charm, beyond maintaining my personal integrity, there's nothing else I can do," Master Lin said with an earnest vow.

The Eldest Miss, both angry and amused, gave his arm a hard twist, "You think I'll just believe what you say? Qiaoqiao, Qin Xian'er, Luo Ning, didn't each one start with 'pure friendship'? Detestable!"

"Alas, since Miss detests my purity, I suppose I must be impure then," Master Lin chuckled, blowing softly into the Eldest Miss's ear. Xiao Yuruo's face instantly flushed, her heart pounding, and she nearly lost her balance.

Lin Wanrong, embracing her slender waist and about to continue his explorations, was interrupted by a joyful voice from outside, "Brother San, Miss, someone from Jinling has arrived!"