

## Finest 496

### Chapter 496 Fulfilling Your Wish

Understanding the urgency in Lord Lin's words, Xu Zhen hastily shot a signal arrow into the distance. The distant woods immediately rustled with noise as numerous soldiers hidden in the shadows swiftly emerged and retreated.

"Husband, why are we pulling back our troops?" Qin Xian'er inquired, echoing Xu Zhen's own thoughts.

Lin Wanrong wore a solemn expression as he pointed to the billowing smoke in the north, slowly saying, "Xu Zhen, what do you think that is?"

"It should be smoke from gunpowder explosions—" Xu Zhen's face suddenly changed, and he exclaimed, "General Lin, are you suspecting that we also have hidden gunpowder on our side?"

Lin Wanrong nodded without speaking. Cold sweat trickled down Xu Zhen's face. If the enemy had laid gunpowder to the north, there was no reason to ignore the south. The woods, deep and dense, were filled with blind spots hard to search. Should gunpowder really be hidden there, a single spark could spell doom for thousands of their men.

The more he thought, the more fearful he became. His expression grew incredibly grave. Lin Wanrong patted him on the shoulder and comforted, "Xu Zhen, don't be too hard on yourself. We are humans, not gods. Mistakes are inevitable. Learn from them. I only thought of this possibility after seeing the smoke in the north."

Xu Zhen nodded gratefully, his expression quickly returning to normal. A horseman sped into the camp from afar; a messenger dismounted, hastily saluting, "Generals, by orders of Lord Xu, I am to report that a large force of enemy troops has suddenly appeared to the north of the city. They number in the thousands and are extremely fierce."

"Thousands?" Lin Wanrong was also taken aback. "Who are they? Did they come from inside the city?"

The messenger quickly responded, "These individuals are dressed in black and carry no banners. They did not come from within the city but launched an attack from the outskirts of our army. They are fast and ferocious. Over two hundred fearless soldiers strapped with explosives have charged into our ranks. The situation is dire. Lord Xu believes they are most likely enemy suicide troops. They are making a desperate attempt, perhaps aiming to rescue their key figure. Please prepare yourselves, Generals."

Lin Wanrong nodded in silence. A moment later, even more intense explosions erupted from the north, flames shooting sky-high, far surpassing the earlier intensity. Despite the distance, the fierce sounds of battle could still be heard.

"Report!" Another horseman rushed in. The second messenger dismounted, panting, "Generals, there has been a sudden change outside the North Gate!"

"Speak!" Lin Wanrong commanded.

The soldier saluted, "Suddenly, explosives ignited outside the North Gate. By the time we arrived, three to four hundred individuals dressed in black emerged from underground and launched a violent attack on our troops."

"Underground?" Xu Zhen asked, puzzled.

"Yes," the messenger replied, "According to Lord Xu's estimation, these individuals had dug tunnels beneath the city, where they hid gunpowder, lying in wait for several days. Currently, enemy forces inside and outside are desperately trying to converge, likely aiming to facilitate the escape of their key figure."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "When our brothers charged into battle, did anyone see that big fish?"

The messenger hastily shook his head. Lin Wanrong let out a soft "huh" but said nothing more.

From the north, the explosions came wave after wave. The cries of soldiers faintly reached their ears. Judging by the sounds, it seemed the enemy was in a desperate situation. Xu Zhen looked concerned, "General, the situation over there doesn't seem like a feint. Should I send someone to check—" **r**

"No need," Lin Wanrong waved him off with a smile. "The north gate is securely held by Master Xu; nothing will go awry there. It's our side that is a little out of the ordinary."

"Our side?" Xu Zhen asked, puzzled, "General, what do you mean?"

Lin Wanrong sighed, "Xu Zhen, the north is filled with the sounds of gunpowder and cannons, the battle there is fierce. But what about here on our side?"

Xu Zhen furrowed his brows for a moment and nodded, "Our side is somewhat quiet—"

"It's not just quiet—it's eerily quiet!" Lin Wanrong huffed, "As the old saying goes, the dog that bites doesn't bark, and the dog that barks doesn't bite. The louder the noise from that side, the more worried I become! Xu Zhen, pass down the order for our brothers to be highly vigilant and hold their positions. If anything stirs, strike immediately!"

"Yes!" Xu Zhen acknowledged and immediately relayed General Lin's orders.

Qin Xian'er gently massaged his shoulders and softly asked, "Husband, if Prince Cheng really plans to escape from our side, where do you think he will start?"

"As for that, I can't be certain," Lin Wanrong leaned back into his wheelchair, took a deep breath, and smiled bitterly, "The most effective way may just start with me."

The night grew darker, torches blazed throughout the camp, and thousands of soldiers were at their posts, awaiting any unforeseen circumstances. Unfortunately, the situation did not match their expectations. The fighting in the north grew more intense, and emergency reports from Xu Wei came one after another. Yet, the southern gate remained eerily quiet, even the buzzing of mosquitoes could be clearly heard.

Not just Xu Zhen, even Lord Lin's own patience was running thin. Looking at the thick dust swirling beyond the northern gate, his brows lightly furrowed: 'Could it be that I've guessed wrong?'

Suddenly, a crisp sound of galloping hooves came from afar, breaking Lin Wanrong's deep thoughts. He quickly lifted his head and saw a contingent of around two hundred soldiers dressed as government troops approaching. Leading them was a man in red eunuch robes. The eunuch looked frantic, galloping forward with a yellow silk banner held high and shouted, "Imperial decree arrives, Lin San, receive the decree—"

Imperial decree? Lin Wanrong was stunned. At a time like this, what sort of decree could possibly be issued?

The eunuch galloped skillfully, followed by the two hundred government troops like a whirlwind. Lord Lin waved his hand grandly and commanded, "Hold—"

The soldiers in the camp had long been on standby. Upon hearing General Lin's command to halt the approaching troops, over three hundred archers stepped forward. Their repeating crossbows glinted ominously, aimed straight at the incoming cavalry.

"Whoa—" The eunuch shouted, reining in his horse and turning around. His accompanying troops also came to a sudden halt, stopping just thirty or forty paces away from Lin Wanrong's encampment.

Lin Wanrong studied the group of two hundred people closely. Each was clad in armor, their robes noticeably loose, and their waists bulging with some unknown items.

Seeing Xu Zhen's soldiers at the ready, their bows aimed, the red-robed eunuch's face twisted in irritation. "Lord Lin, what is the meaning of this? Do you intend to disobey the imperial decree?"

"What are you talking about? How could an honest man like me dare to disobey an imperial order?" Lin Wanrong chuckled. "By the way, which palace's servant are you? I don't recall having met you before. May I ask your surname?"

Fuming, the eunuch replied, "I serve under Chief Eunuch Gao of the Palace of Heavenly Purity. My name is Duan Qin. I met you when you last visited the palace. Lord Lin, could it be that you doubt my identity?" With that, he shook the golden imperial edict in his hand, his demeanor overtly arrogant.

"It seems authentic," said Xu Zhen, who had keen eyesight. He could clearly read the words "Imperial Edict" written on the silk cloth.

"Authentic?" Lin Wanrong chuckled. "Eunuch Duan, what brings you here with such an entourage to deliver an imperial decree?"

Eunuch Duan snorted, "The city gates are locked and the situation outside is not peaceful. His Majesty instructed me to bring some troops—so Lord Lin, are you accepting this imperial decree or not? If you resist, I will go back and report to His Majesty."

Lin Wanrong grinned, "Of course, I'll accept it. But, Eunuch Duan, let me tell you a secret."

"What secret?" Eunuch Duan tugged on his horse's reins, inching closer to the camp. Xu Zhen raised his hand, and the archers lifted their crossbows slightly higher. The killing intent was palpable, forcing the advancing party to stop.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "The secret is simple. Eunuch Duan, the servant's uniform you're wearing appears to be last year's model. In the palace, all the servants and maids switched to new clothes this spring, custom-made by our Xiao family. Even the floor sweepers have changed their clothes. Didn't you know?"

"Ah, yes, of course, I knew," Duan answered awkwardly. "Today, His Majesty had me rush to deliver the decree, and I didn't have time to change. I will be sure to do so next time. Lord Lin, may I proceed with delivering the imperial edict now?"

"Certainly," Lin Wanrong nodded, bringing a smile to Duan's face. Just as the eunuch was about to move closer, Lin Wanrong waved his hand and said, "However, there's a condition."

"What condition?" Duan asked, anxious.

"The condition is simple," Lin Wanrong suppressed a laugh, "Please strip off your clothes and come alone to deliver the decree."

Realizing his identity had been exposed, Eunuch Duan's face twisted grotesquely. With a sudden swoosh, he ripped open his robe, roaring, "For the Prince! Take Lin San's head, charge—"

He tossed the imperial decree aside, grabbed the reins with his left hand, and held a torch in his right. His steed galloped forward. The two hundred people behind him followed suit. They tore off their robes to reveal thick cloth belts around their waists filled with black powder, and fuses tied to torches, ready to be ignited at any moment.

"Charge!" Over two hundred men seemed to have gone mad. Their eyes were bloodshot as they reversed their swords to stab into the haunches of their own mounts. Pained by the blade, the warhorses surged forward like shooting stars, charging at high speed toward the main camp.

"Gunpowder!" Qin Xian'er shouted in alarm. Xu Zhen heard it and was horrified, immediately yelling, "Fire!"

Over three hundred archers released their crossbows, sending bolts like swarms of locusts, rapidly shooting toward the enemy horsemen.

"Ah—" Several horsemen on the opposing side were hit by the arrows. However, they seemed to feel no pain, gripping their reins tightly to keep from falling off.

"Cunning bastards!" Xu Zhen understood. These horsemen had tied their legs to their horses' bellies. Even if they were shot dead, their bodies would still be carried along by the galloping horses. The gunpowder strapped to them was quickly ignited by their companions.

"For the prince, kill Lin San!" Within a distance of several dozen yards, which could be covered by fast horses in an instant, over two hundred men roared in unison. They ignited the gunpowder strapped to them and charged into Lin San's camp. A deafening explosion resounded, making everyone's eardrums tremble.

Chain crossbows fired continuously. Over half of the two hundred-plus men were dead or wounded in the blink of an eye, but their steeds continued to charge toward the main camp. Boom after boom, the sound of the gunpowder exploding vibrated through the ground. Shooting them now was useless. General Lin, remaining calm in the face of danger, bellowed, "Brothers, aim for the horses' legs!"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than crossbows were fired with a fierce whistle, aimed directly at the legs of the horses. This tactic was indeed effective. The foremost horses tripped and fell, and the horsemen behind were mercilessly trampled over them. Explosions from the gunpowder continued one after another, amidst towering flames, countless pieces of armor scattered, flesh and blood flew. Over two hundred men and horses were engulfed in a sea of fire, bursting one after another like ignited fireworks.

Eventually, six or seven horses managed to cross the fiery battlefield and enter the camp. Amidst the intense explosions, dozens of archers lost their lives.

"Charge!" The battle here had not yet ended when, several miles from the main camp, a piercing horn sounded, followed by the rhythmic beating of hooves, thumping in everyone's ears.

A scout rushed into the camp to report, "General, ten miles from our army, a large number of troops have suddenly appeared, numbering over two thousand!"

"Really?" Xu Zhen was visibly shaken. He looked at Lin Wanrong with admiration. "General, as you expected, the big fish is moving south! Over two thousand troops, that's not a small number. This must be his last card."

Lin Wanrong nodded and sighed, "Perhaps the fiercest is yet to come. Xu Zhen, instruct our men to be extra vigilant. Prince Cheng is not so easily dealt with."

"Understood!" Xu Zhen clenched his fist and turned to the scout, "Quickly pass on the orders: set up the formation, with the Divine Machine Unit archers at the front, cavalry and infantry to follow the formation. The entire army is allowed to advance, but retreating is forbidden. Offenders will be dealt with according to military law!"

"As you command!" The scouts hurried away. Xu Zhen's face flushed with excitement. Qin Xian'er suddenly spoke, "Husband, how did you recognize that the eunuch earlier was an imposter?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head and chuckled, "The absurdity lies in this young eunuch's arrogance. For someone who seldom steps out of his own gates, his horse-riding skill surprisingly surpasses mine. Can you believe it? Is there any justice in the world?"

Xu Zhen burst into hearty laughter. "I never thought of it that way. A mere eunuch should count himself lucky to ride a donkey, let alone a horse."

Qin Xian'er was full of admiration. Her husband might seem jovial on the surface, but in reality, he was knowledgeable, quick-witted, and deeply insightful. His real brilliance lay in noticing the minute details that others overlooked. It was an accumulation of life's experiences, his genuine skill. As the saying goes, understanding a person's heart through the smallest details ensured he would never fail.

"My husband, you are the most brilliant person in the world. I am utterly smitten with you," Miss Qin said, embracing him tightly and looking deeply into his eyes.

"General, should we advance to the front?" The sound of distant artillery rolled in, making the ground quiver beneath them. Realizing they were now within the enemy's artillery range, Xu Zhen grew restless and eagerly asked Lin Wanrong for instructions.

"Don't panic," Lin Wanrong calmly gestured, "All that noise outside is a diversion, meant to draw our attention. If the big fish doesn't show itself, then all our efforts would be in vain."

Xu Zhen was half-enlightened, "General, there's something I still don't understand. If all the city gates are closed tightly, how can the big fish escape?"

Lin Wanrong nodded with a smile, "At first, I was puzzled too, but Prince Cheng's escape route from Grand Prime Minister Temple gave me a clue. If I'm not mistaken, after years of operating in the capital, he must have prepared an escape route. There's a large lake in his royal mansion, beneath which lies the so-called Dragon Palace. That must be his base, and it certainly connects to a tunnel leading out of the city. This is his final escape route."

Xian'er laughed, "I see, you asked Gao Qiu to spread rumors that a Dragon Palace was discovered in the royal mansion and had him blow open its entrance. You want to force the tiger from the mountain, make it imperative for him to flee."

"Smart!" Lin Wanrong praised with a smile.

"But General, there's still something I don't understand," Xu Zhen furrowed his brows, "Why not just blast open the bottom of the lake and seize him directly?"

Lin Wanrong turned serious, "There are two reasons. Firstly, we're unfamiliar with the terrain in his Dragon Palace, and if he's planted explosives, we might all be blown to pieces, causing a huge disaster. Secondly, Prince Cheng has been operating for many years and has a solid foundation in the capital. Forcing him to flee will expose his true supporters and we'll know clearly who is loyal and who is not. Only by cutting off the roots can we eliminate future troubles."

Qin Xian'er had an epiphany. All her previous doubts had been cleared up. She took Lin Wanrong's hand and said, "My husband, it's only now that I understand why Li Tai was so desperate to have you accompany him northward. No one in the Great Hua can match your intellect and bravery."

"My dear, don't flatter me too much. I might become shy," Lin Wanrong joked, lacking any sense of seriousness.



"You're incorrigible," Miss Qin giggled, tapping him lightly on the forehead. Her eyes twinkled as she said, "My husband, when you return from the North, I'll fulfill one of your wishes. Do you agree?"

## Chapter 497 Who is the Most Ruthless?

"What, what wish?" Lord Lin's heart thumped wildly, a cascade of fear overtaking him.

Qin Xian'er was about to speak when she suddenly felt the ground tremble. Not far from the camp, thickets of lush trees suddenly burst into intense flames. Fanned by the wind, the fire rapidly spread toward the camp from both sides of the official road.

Remembering the prior arrangements, Xu Zhen broke into a cold sweat. 'Had General Lin not awakened me with his words, we might have suffered untold casualties today,' he thought.

The fire blazed intensely. Tents on the camp's periphery caught fire within moments. Over a hundred soldiers hurriedly pulled out water hoses to douse the flames.

"What should we do now, General?" Xu Zhen asked.

"Wait—" Lin Wanrong clenched his teeth. "The more dangerous the moment, the more crucial it is. Given their activities, I dare say this place must be a key route for Prince Cheng's escape. Xu Zhen, have our brothers form up. If enemies appear, attack immediately. Also, send a signal arrow to Mr. Xu; there are enemy movements to the south."

In the distance, the Divine Machine Unit's cannons roared, and countless crossbows launched a volley, blocking the more than two thousand black-clothed men attempting to infiltrate. The fire on both sides of the road intensified, sending thick smoke billowing into the sky and enveloping Lin Wanrong's camp. Within the glow of the fire, soldiers either fought the flames or rescued comrades, showing no signs of panic.

"General, look!" Xu Zhen cried out.

A clear trumpet call sounded. From one side of the road, amid the roaring flames, over a hundred men clad in black emerged. Their faces were covered with black cloth, and they held curved blades in their hands. Like agile wolves, they charged toward the camp.

Lin Wanrong hummed and emotionlessly waved his hand. A rain of arrows hissed through the air, directed at the black-clad figures. Amidst the piercing screams, dozens fell and rolled on the ground. Those following stepped over the fallen bodies to advance. As both sides came closer, another shrill whistle sounded from among the black-clothed men, and dozens of archers suddenly appeared from behind them. Without even aiming, they fired burning arrows indiscriminately.

"Husband, be careful!" Qin Xian'er shouted, waving her hand to deflect an incoming arrow, positioning herself in front of Lin Wanrong.

"It's fine; they're still far from me," Lin Wanrong smiled, nodding at Xu Zhen.

Xu Zhen bellowed, "Rocketeers!" As he shouted, the frontline crossbowmen stepped back, and the rear fire archers, who had been prepared for some time, unleashed a salvo of fire arrows. These fire arrows overpowered the few that the enemy had launched. Numerous black-clothed men were either struck by arrows or caught fire. Explosions and blood-curdling screams filled the air.

These black-clad men were incredibly tough. Despite being pierced by multiple arrows, they still managed to light the explosives strapped to their bodies and charged forward. They didn't get far before the fuses burned out, exploding them into chunks of flesh and bone. The heat from the explosions scorched the faces of the soldiers.

Qin Xian'er, known as a witch who had killed countless people, was also taken aback by the scene before her. Shaking her head, she sighed, "How did he train so many suicide soldiers?"

Lin Wanrong spread his hands and gave a wry smile, "I don't know, all I know is that I'm very afraid of dying."

Miss Qin looked at him, her eyes twinkling with admiration. "Husband, fortunately you thought of drawing the snake out of its hole. If we had let these suicide soldiers stay hidden within the city, who knows what calamity they would have unleashed."

These death-bound soldiers had launched three waves of attacks in the blink of an eye, leaving more than a hundred corpses behind without any sign of stopping. Xu Zhen, puzzled, stared at the swarming heads and asked, "What are they doing? Why are they rushing forward even when they know they're marching to their deaths?"

Lin Wanrong had also noticed this peculiar behavior. The two thousand men in the outer ring, along with several hundred suicide soldiers inside, surged forward like a tide. It didn't look like the government troops were suppressing bandits; instead, it seemed like the bandits were besieging the government forces.

"Forget it," Lin Wanrong said, raising his arm high. Seeing that their opponents were visibly fatigued and their morale waning, he commanded, "Xu Zhen, charge!"

"At your command!" Xu Zhen mounted his horse, brandishing his long saber, "Brothers, it's time to capture the enemy and earn merits. Follow me—charge!"

The troops, like a flood unleashed, roared out of their positions and dashed toward the enemy lines, each eager to outdo the others. Xu Zhen took the lead, his saber swinging and decapitating two black-clad men in an instant. Government troops, previously concealed in the surroundings, followed Xu Zhen's signal and swarmed out. The landscape was filled with soldiers, surrounding the remaining black-clad men, leaving them with no way to escape.

As Xu Zhen gave the order to charge, government troops also launched an all-out attack on the outer ring. The battlefield was filled with battle cries that shook the heavens, and soldiers were everywhere.

"Husband, why hasn't their leader appeared yet?" Qin Xian'er asked, anxious amid the chaos of the battlefield filled with gunpowder smoke.

Lin Wanrong didn't answer. His eyes were as sharp as lightning, scanning the enemy camp. Unfortunately, these suicide soldiers had their faces covered with black veils, making it impossible to discern their features. However, given Prince Cheng's status, he would never be among these troops. What was he aiming to achieve by surrounding them with such a large force?

The government troops, gathering like a tidal wave, had already left the remaining black-clad men in disarray. A little more time and they would be completely annihilated. Just as Xu Zhen was enjoying the slaughter, he heard Lin Wanrong yell, "Sound the retreat!"

"Retreat?" Qin Xian'er looked puzzled. "Husband, why are we not continuing the fight?"

Lin Wanrong grinned, "If we don't fight now, we can fight later. Have you ever gone fishing, Xian'er? Let me catch a big fish for you. Xu Zhen, listen to my command!"

"Your subordinate is here!" Xu Zhen, who had already rushed back on horseback, listened attentively.

Lin Wanrong's expression turned solemn, "Order all troops to cease their attacks immediately. Everyone must stay at a distance, and no one is allowed to act without orders. Violators will be executed!"

"Yes!" Xu Zhen quickly relayed the order. All the attacking troops, whether standing, lying down, or running, immediately tightened their formation and stayed put at a distance. The sounds of burning fire and exploding gunpowder continued to reverberate, but not a single person from either side dared to move. Weapons were held tightly, war horses remained silent, and the once noisy battlefield seemed to freeze in an instant. Faces looked at each other in bewilderment, as everyone wondered what Lin Wanrong was planning to do next.

Summoning Xu Zhen, Lin Wanrong lowered his voice and said, "Little Xu, do you know all the officers under your command?"

Xu Zhen quickly nodded. "Of course. What are your orders, General?"

Lin Wanrong's expression grew serious. "Send out a message to all the officers. Have them immediately tally the number of troops and pay close attention to any unfamiliar faces and squads in their vicinity. Report back at once if they find anything."

Xu Zhen hesitated for a moment before exclaiming in surprise, "General, are you suspecting that someone has infiltrated our ranks to seize an opportunity?"

"To seize an opportunity? I doubt they have the guts for that," Lin Wanrong snorted. "Your question was a good one, little Xu. These men knew they couldn't win, so why would they throw their lives away?"

Xu Zhen shook his head. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "It's simple. They want to divert our attention and create an opportunity for their master. Think about it, with so many soldiers mobilized, if someone dons our uniform and slips away during the chaos, would you notice?"

It made sense. Xu Zhen's eyes sparkled as he responded, "So, General Lin, you mean that the big fish is hiding among us right now?"

"Most likely," Lin Wanrong said calmly. "Otherwise, wouldn't the sacrifices of his elite troops be in vain?"

Elated, Xu Zhen exclaimed, "Excellent, I will see to it immediately!" He summoned several messengers and gave them precise instructions. They dispersed swiftly.

The army on the field remained stationary. Neither attacking nor retreating, no one knew what Lin Wanrong was planning. The officers under Xu Zhen, who had received the message, secretly began inspecting their troops, while also watching their surroundings. Some brief commotion was heard, but it soon quieted down.

After waiting for a bit, the messengers began to return one by one. The last one came back to report that nothing unusual was found.

'How strange. Could I have guessed wrong?' Lin Wanrong pondered silently in his wheelchair, with Qin Xian'er and Xu Zhen not daring to disturb him.

"Xu Zhen, are you sure all the squads have been checked?" Lin Wanrong suddenly looked up, his expression resolute.

Just as Xu Zhen was about to nod, his face changed. "Damn, we haven't checked the main camp—"

'The main camp? That's right where I am,' Lin Wanrong thought, his hair standing on end. "Quickly, search the camp! Hurry—"

Before he could finish, a resounding laughter echoed from a distance. "Ah, Lin San, what a splendid tactic of 'controlling motion with stillness'! I must say, I've fallen into your trap!"

Prince Cheng? Everyone was shocked and quickly turned to look. Standing at the entrance of the main camp was a man wearing a golden helmet, dressed in a white armor robe, and sporting cloud-patterned battle boots. His eyebrows were elongated, his face square, and he looked dignified. Who else could it be but Prince Cheng? Behind him stood two to three hundred soldiers, all disguised as their troops, closely surrounding him.

A throng of officers and soldiers surged forward, encircling these few hundred men along with Prince Cheng. They only waited for the general's command to seize him.

Upon seeing Zhao Mingcheng's calm demeanor, Lin Wanrong was filled with emotions. Regardless of how cunning Prince Cheng was, when it came to strategy, he was truly versatile and unpredictable. Had Lin San not been extra cautious, he would have been caught off guard today.

"Your Highness, I must say I am quite impressed by your courage," Lin Wanrong respectfully clenched his fists, his admiration genuine. "Had I not discovered something amiss while relieving myself just now, you would have certainly succeeded today."

Prince Cheng burst into hearty laughter, giving Lin San a thumbs-up. "Lin San, you remain as witty as ever. I appreciate clever people like you. Alas, fate has decreed that we cannot be friends, which is truly a pity."

Indeed, Prince Cheng was a formidable figure; even when he realized that his scheme had been exposed and he was surrounded, he boldly revealed his identity. Few could match such boldness.

Lin Wanrong nodded and smiled. "Your Highness, since we are both clever people, let's not waste words. I won't make things difficult for you; I merely ask that you return to the palace and explain everything to the Emperor. All will be well then. I will be happy to treat you to a meat and wine feast at that time."

"Return to the palace?" Prince Cheng smiled. "The most difficult place to enter in this world is the imperial palace, yet countless people yearn for it. If I were to go back with you, would the brothers behind me agree?"

"Sworn to live and die with Your Highness!" Over three hundred men behind Prince Cheng shouted in unison. They tore open their clothes, revealing a melancholic demeanor. Strapped to their waists were explosives, wrapped layer upon layer. A mere spark could set them ablaze, a scenario one could easily imagine. Those who remained by Prince Cheng's side at this moment were unquestionably loyal to the death.

Lin Wanrong's expression grew solemn, and he sighed in resignation. "Your Highness, why has it come to this? Even ants cherish life; how much more should human beings? You and the Emperor are brothers; can't these issues be resolved through dialogue?"

As he spoke, Xu Zhen had already secretly directed his men to connect a water hose, aiming at Prince Cheng, ready for any sudden changes.

Prince Cheng gave a gallant smile. "Matters of royalty are not for outsiders to understand. Lin San, if one day you find yourself in my position, you will understand my feelings."

"Tsk, tsk," Qin Xian'er hurriedly scoffed. "How can my husband be compared to a treacherous minister like you? His injuries are all thanks to you."

Prince Cheng glanced at her and sighed. "The Emperor indeed has his ways, hiding his own daughter within the White Lotus Sect, all while keeping his patience. My late father once told me that those in power must forsake emotions and desires. Unfortunately, I understood this too late, failing to emulate your father and ending up in this situation. It is both sad and lamentable."

His expression was one of immense sorrow, his long sigh full of regret. Lin Wanrong chuckled. "Your Highness, these words should be directed to the Emperor, not us. They serve no purpose here. Xu Zhen, hurry and assist His Highness into the sedan."

"Understood!" At Xu Zhen's signal, the soldiers behind him moved to close in. But the hundreds of loyal followers behind Prince Cheng raised their torches high, their eyes ablaze as they shouted in unison, "Who dares to lay a hand on our lord?"

The torches in their hands could easily ignite the fuses at any moment. The combined force of so many human bombs was not to be taken lightly.

Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, saying reluctantly, "Why go to such lengths, Your Highness? Such a large amount of exploding gunpowder would be excruciating! If it were me, I wouldn't be able to bear it. You should reconsider."

Prince Cheng's eyes narrowed slightly. "This is the will of my brothers; I cannot stop them."

"In that case, there's nothing more I can do." Lin Wanrong spread his hands, his face full of regret. "I've said all that can be said, and done all that can be done. If Your Highness insists on acting against all advice, what more can I do? Xu Zhen, call our men to retreat and give His Highness some privacy."

The imperial troops slowly pulled back, leaving a vast buffer zone between the two sides. Prince Cheng and his 300 warriors seemed like an isolated island in the middle of a vast sea.

Seeing that the imperial troops had no intention of capturing him alive, Prince Cheng's expression became gloomy and changeable.

Xu Zhen sidled up to Lin Wanrong, watching Prince Cheng intently, and whispered, "General, what happened to Zhao Kangning?"

Lin Wanrong had already noticed this and nodded. "Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Prince Cheng is cunning; I underestimated him. Zhao Kangning is probably heading north."

"You mean they split their forces? Oh no—" Xu Zhen slapped his hand in frustration. "What if Zhao Kangning disguises himself in imperial army clothing and mingles with the crowd? Lord Xu won't see it coming. I'll alert him immediately—"

"It's too late!" Lin Wanrong grimaced. "Zhao Kangning has already escaped!"

Qin Xian'er grew anxious. "How can you be so sure, Husband?"

Lin Wanrong nodded. "To be empty when you seem full, and full when you seem empty—that's Prince Cheng's brilliance. Think about it, Xian'er. After a long battle in the north, the men find out that the person they're looking for is in the south. If you were them, what would you do?"

"I would become complacent," Qin Xian'er admitted.

"This psychological complacency is something even Master Xu cannot control. Zhao Kangning is not like Prince Cheng; he's young and fit. He doesn't need any followers—just a sturdy horse to blend into the crowd and make his getaway. Who would notice?"

Upon hearing his analysis, Qin Xian'er was rendered speechless. After a long pause, she sighed softly, "It's a pity he got away. Prince Cheng truly is cunning."

While it was unfortunate that Zhao Kangning had escaped, capturing Prince Cheng was already a significant accomplishment. Lin Wanrong smiled and patted Xian'er's shoulder. "Nothing is perfect



in this world. Don't worry; this Zhao Kangning is far inferior to his father. Capturing him won't be difficult."

Reassured by her lover's words, Qin Xian'er smiled sweetly and said no more.

A crescent moon slowly climbed into the night sky, casting its gentle light over the roads, the forests, and the camp. Trees continued to burn fiercely, their flames dancing in the cold moonlight—a breathtaking sight. A few dim stars flickered on the horizon, rendering the battlefield even more chillingly beautiful.

At the moment when all cards were laid on the table, the combat between both sides had long ceased. On the battlefield filled with the scent of gunpowder, a strange calm suddenly settled. Faced with this peculiar scene, every soldier and officer felt an indescribable awe. Across from them was a royal noble of the Great Hua Dynasty, Prince Cheng, who once held great prestige. Now he found himself surrounded by a massive army, on the brink of self-destruction. Who could have imagined such an outcome in days past? Yet, here it was, unfolding before their eyes.

Prince Cheng remained silent, not uttering a word for a long time. Behind him, a general with tears in his eyes and a flushed face spoke loudly, "Your Highness, please give your command. I, Zhao Wu, swear to die serving you."

Prince Cheng's beard quivered slightly; he was at a loss for words. After a long pause, he nodded, "Although I am trapped today, to receive such loyalty from all of you is enough for me to die without regret. However—" His eyes flickered as he glanced at the troops across the field. "Judging from Lin San's actions today, my hasty death may be exactly what the Emperor desires—it would let him off too easily."

Upon hearing this, several people felt he had a point. The Emperor had orchestrated this situation, aiming for this very outcome. At this critical juncture, it required greater courage to live than to die.

Prince Cheng snorted, "He once swore in front of my late father that he would never harm me. My death would only please him."

"You speak the truth, Your Highness," said a strategist who looked like a learned advisor. "In my humble opinion, if the Emperor truly wishes to harm you, he would risk divine punishment and public resentment. It would not be an easy task. As the saying goes, 'while there are green hills, there will be wood to burn.' Our army will head north soon, and neither the nomads to the north nor the invaders from the south are to be underestimated. Who knows who will win in the end? Even if the Emperor suffers a defeat, you can still rally support easily. Besides, we have the young prince

outside to coordinate. Your Highness, it would not be wise to act impulsively at this moment. Why not endure for a few more days? As long as we live, there will be a chance for a comeback."

Prince Cheng closed his eyes in deep thought. The soldiers on both sides dared not even cough; the silence was unbearable.

The endless waiting made everyone anxious. Among those in the standoff, Xu Zhen also grew impatient. "General, do you think he will really choose death? That would make things much easier for us."

Indeed, it would simplify many things. From the perspective of his superiors, there couldn't be a better outcome. However, afterward, as the scapegoat, he would inevitably face criticisms from hundreds of censors. Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, "I don't know what he will do. The reason why great men are great is that their thoughts are beyond the grasp of ordinary people. Let's just wait."

Although they were pitted against Prince Cheng in a battle of wits and courage, it was merely internal strife within the Great Hua. There was nothing to be proud of. Even if they could capture Prince Cheng, would the nomads retreat? Would the invaders retract their claws? They would only laugh at them. Lin Wanrong shook his head, a bitter smile crossing his lips.

Qin Xian'er, standing beside him, sensed her husband's heavy heart. She quickly tightened her grip on his hand, "Don't worry, Husband. I'm here with you."

"I'm not afraid," Lin Wanrong said softly, gripping his wife's delicate hand. "After this battle, we'll be heading north. What kind of era of blood and fire will that be? How many such moments does one have in a lifetime? Xian'er, it feels like I'm dreaming."

His deep sentiment left Qin Xian'er speechless. She remembered their last boat trip on Weishan Lake, where his emotional words had completely captivated her. Miss Qin nestled beside him, softly calling him "Husband," her eyes filling with tears, unable to speak any further.

"My brothers," Prince Cheng finally spoke, "you've been with me through life and death for over twenty years. In these difficult times, you have stayed by my side, and for that, I am grateful."

He bowed deeply, his eyes frighteningly cold. "I have considered carefully. You all have families and responsibilities. I cannot let my actions lead to the annihilation of your clans. Enduring humiliation now is the only way to hope for a better future—"

"My Lord—" Zhao Wu, who was right behind Prince Cheng, began to sob loudly.

Prince Cheng gave a bitter smile. "If you truly care for me, then don't cry. Know that for me to live at this moment requires even more courage than to die." He waved his hand dismissively, "Disperse, all of you, disperse—"

"My Lord—" His followers behind him all knelt down, bursting into tears.

Meanwhile, Xu Zhen looked overjoyed. "General Lin, look, they've surrendered, they've surrendered!"

Prince Cheng stood alone at the forefront, his face devoid of color. The soldiers behind him were kneeling, wailing loudly, and began untying the gunpowder bound to their bodies, throwing it aside.

"Great cunning usually comes with great wisdom," seeing Prince Cheng choosing the most difficult path, Lin Wanrong felt some respect for him, while also growing concerned for his father-in-law. The ball was now in the old man's court; given his past vows, this Prince could neither be killed nor kept. A misstep could lead to a lasting stigma of fratricide—what a dilemma!

Prince Cheng's warriors behind him threw down their weapons and unfastened their gunpowder, embracing each other and sobbing uncontrollably. Old Prince Cheng sighed, his eyes brimming with tears, but his face was resolute.

"Go!" Lin Wanrong waved his hand, and Xu Zhen's soldiers surged forward, eager to capture Prince Cheng.

Just then, an unexpected turn of events occurred. Zhao Wu, who had been following behind Prince Cheng, suddenly leapt forward, tightly hugging him. A torch in his hand was dangerously close to the gunpowder fuse on his body. He wailed, "My Lord, we can't! A soldier may be killed, but not humiliated! With your noble lineage, how could you kneel and surrender? Though I, Zhao Wu, am unworthy, I am willing to face calamity with you!"

The crowd behind Prince Cheng erupted in shock, glaring furiously at each other. The first to charge forward was Qi Yue, the strategist from earlier. "Zhao Wu, what are you doing? Let go of the Prince at once!"

"Don't anyone come closer," Zhao Wu's expression was filled with tragic fury, his gunpowder fuse at any moment could be ignited. He pointed at the crowd and yelled, "You curs, all of you always claimed you would go through fire and water for the Prince. Why are you encouraging him to surrender at this critical moment? Qi Yue, you scum, why are you entrapping our King in this injustice? My Lord, everyone else may surrender, but you, you must not!"

A sudden turn of events left not just Xu Zhen in a daze, but also Lin Wanrong. The Prince Cheng was actually being held hostage by his own guard? Strange things happen every year, but this year is especially odd!

Xu Zhen retreated to Lin Wanrong's side and whispered, "General, what should we do?"

"There's likely more drama to unfold. Tell the men to take a breather for now," Lin Wanrong said calmly.

Prince Cheng shouted in anger, "Zhao Wu, have you gone mad? Release me at once! How dare you interfere with my affairs!"

Zhao Wu let out a mournful howl, "Your Highness, don't let others deceive you! Once you surrender, you'll be shamed for a thousand years. Please reconsider!" His grip on the torch tightened, ready to ignite the explosives on his body at any moment.

Prince Cheng stopped struggling, looked deeply into Zhao Wu's eyes, and suddenly burst into laughter. Tears flowed like rain as he said, "I understand now, I understand. Zhao Wu, you are truly cunning—"

Confusion reigned, but Lin Wanrong seemed to have sensed something. He couldn't help but glance toward the palace, feeling a chill run down his spine.

Zhao Wu looked panicked and quickly avoided Prince Cheng's gaze. "Your Highness, what are you talking about? I've been loyal to you, as heaven is my witness."

"Such loyalty, such witness! For twenty years! So I've been in a trap for twenty years. Your Majesty, I'm not your match, I'm not!" Prince Cheng laughed and cried hysterically. "Zhao Wu, you traitor —"

"Your Highness, you forced me to this!" Zhao Wu interrupted Prince Cheng, his eyes red with fury. He lit the fuse and tightly hugged Prince Cheng.

"You dare, villain!" Qi Yue, the strategist, who had been truly loyal, miraculously summoned the strength to tackle Zhao Wu. All three men fell to the ground, and with a loud explosion, Zhao Wu and Qi Yue were torn to shreds. Prince Cheng was protected by Qi Yue's body, bloodied but still alive.

"Attack!" Seizing this golden opportunity, Xu Zhen commanded his troops to charge. Caught off guard by the sudden twist, Prince Cheng's men hardly had the strength to resist. Two who dared to draw their swords were quickly pierced by the soldiers.

Never had Lin Wanrong expected events to unfold in such a way. Zhao Wu and Qi Yue had fully embodied the meaning of loyalty and brotherhood.

Who truly was the most ruthless? Prince Cheng just didn't measure up. Lin Wanrong deeply sighed, realizing that his little tricks were meaningless in the grand scheme of things.

"General, look—" Xu Zhen called out. Following his gaze, they saw Prince Cheng lying in the grass, covered in blood. Both of his legs were blown off below the knees. His eyes were wide open, filled with deep-rooted hatred; sweat poured down his forehead, but he gritted his teeth, not uttering a sound.

'I might have faked a limp, but he's genuinely crippled now,' Lin Wanrong thought, feeling a tinge of pity and forcing himself to look away.

"First, get him medical attention," Lin Wanrong waved his hand, visibly drained. "Then, hand him over to His Majesty."

Prince Cheng had become a cripple, perhaps precisely the outcome the old mastermind had intended. All the difficult problems, in front of him, turned out to be no problems at all!

Seeing that Lord Lin's face was pale, Qin Xian'er asked anxiously, "Husband, what's wrong? Are you not feeling well?"

Looking at Miss Qin's charming cheeks, Lin Wanrong couldn't quite describe his feelings. He mumbled, "Xian'er, will you become like your father one day?"

"What about my father?" Confused by his cryptic remark, Miss Qin couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"Never mind. I'm just a bit tired. Xian'er, could you hold me—"

Qin Xian'er hurriedly embraced him. When she looked down, she saw that Lin Wanrong's breath was gentle and steady. He had actually fallen asleep.

## Chapter 498 A Message from Goryeo

The defeat was as crushing as a mountain collapsing. Upon seeing Prince Cheng captured, the morale of the two thousand peripheral troops who had been fighting fiercely plummeted. They turned to retreat, only to be decimated by the unified cannon fire of the Divine Machine Unit. The morale of the government troops soared as they vigorously pursued the retreating forces for ten miles, scattering and largely annihilating them.

"General, Prince Cheng has been taken to the palace," Lin Wanrong sat in a wheelchair on an elevated vantage point, staring blankly at the smoke in the distance. Xu Zhen observed his somber mood and lowered her voice considerably as he reported.

Taken to the palace, a place where words would be as sharp as swords and tongues as piercing as daggers. Lin Wanrong merely hummed in response. The exhaustion visible on his face even took Xu Zhen aback.

"Have all the remaining forces been eradicated?" he asked.

Xu Zhen answered cautiously, "Sixty percent have been killed, and the other forty percent have been captured alive. Among the sixty percent who were killed, there were two hundred Dongyin people. They offered the fiercest resistance our army encountered."

Lin Wanrong had already anticipated Dongyin's involvement. Prince Cheng's elite soldiers often betrayed the influence of Dongyin warriors. He was not surprised, and simply nodded.

With the battle over and nothing urgent in the southern part of the city, he instructed Xu Zhen to clean up the battlefield meticulously before being carried back to the city in a palanquin.

"Husband, what's the matter?" Qin Xian'er sensed that something was off. Lin Wanrong had been silent the whole way, his palm cold to the touch. Ever since Prince Cheng had been captured, Lin Wanrong's expression had been grave and he had been speaking much less. This was unlike his usually cheerful demeanor.

Lin Wanrong let out a long sigh, his expression solemn. "Xian'er, if there comes a day when you must choose between your father and me, who would you choose?"

Shocked by his question, Qin Xian'er broke down in tears. "Why would you ask such a thing? Don't you know my feelings for you? Has my father wronged you? I'll confront him—"

She was about to jump out of the palanquin, but Lin Wanrong, touched, quickly stopped her. He chuckled, "Silly girl, I know you care for me. But the world is complicated; matters often can't be easily judged as right or wrong."

He spoke with a smile, but the fatigue and desolation in his eyes were clear. It was even more intense than when he had been injured at Weishan Lake.

"Husband," Qin Xian'er muttered through her tears, "I don't understand what you're saying, but I love hearing you speak."

"Right," Lin Wanrong wiped away her tears and burst into hearty laughter. "Do you remember our time in Hangzhou? You took me to your mother's former residence. I promised you that one day we'd build a grand house by West Lake and listen to wind chimes every day. You remember, don't you?"

Qin Xian'er nodded joyfully. "You still remember?"

"Of course, it's also my dream," Lin Wanrong smiled and nodded. "Once I return from the north, I'll take you all back to Weishan Lake and Jinling. We'll build that house by West Lake. We'll go boating, swimming, singing, and dancing, living like joyful immortals. Let all the schemes and bloodshed go to hell!"

Qin Xian'er let out a joyful hum, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Husband, I know you want to leave the capital. You're tired, aren't you? Then let's go back to Jinling, back to West Lake. Xian'er will be by your side forever and always."

Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter. Miss Qin tightly clutched his hand and gently nestled into his arms.

By the time their palanquin arrived at Prince Cheng's mansion, Gao Qiu was already there, eagerly waiting, a broad grin on his face. Standing next to him was the pale-faced Lord Chen.

"Congratulations, Master Lin! I've heard that the rebels have been captured and their remaining forces have been eradicated. You've performed a great service for our nation," Gao Qiu said, beaming from ear to ear.

Gao Qiu was a straightforward man, concerned only with rewards and recognition. He couldn't possibly understand Lin Wanrong's current state of mind. But simplicity had its blessings, and Lin Wanrong found himself envying Gao Qiu's carefree attitude. Smiling, he glanced at Lord Chen. "Lord Chen, what's the matter?"

"Lord Lin—" Chen Biqing bowed deeply, his lips quivering as if he couldn't find the words.

Lin Wanrong glanced at Gao Qiu, who proudly said, "Brother Lin, you've made great accomplishments today. Thanks to your efforts, I've also gained some minor merits. Come with me; I have something to show you."

Seeing Gao Qiu's excitement, Lin Wanrong didn't have the heart to dampen his spirits. He followed him through the front courtyard, all the way to the back of the mansion. What he saw astonished him: the lakeside had collapsed, revealing a gaping, dark pit. The hole was about fifty to sixty feet deep, with numerous soldiers digging through the soil with pickaxes and shovels.

Carefully lowering Lin Wanrong into the pit, Gao Qiu stood in front of him, torch in hand, and excitedly gestured, "Brother Lin, look—"

Before them was a collapsed section of earth. Upon excavation, they found a pathway paved with gold bricks, shimmering in the torchlight. Lin Wanrong sighed, "So it really is an underground dragon palace!"

"Brother Lin, you are truly unparalleled in wisdom," Gao Qiu admired, giving him a thumbs-up. They continued down the golden pathway, growing more astounded with each step. The underground labyrinth was intricate and unfathomable. Floors were paved with gold bricks, walls were made of jade. Every few steps, there was a jade lamp; every five steps, a dazzling pearl. The extravagance was breathtaking.



"This is the Palace of Heavenly Purity, this is the Pavilion of the Source of Literature, this is the Hall of Extended Years, this is the Imperial Study. Oh, and the Palace of Benevolent Peace—" Gao Qiu identified each section for him. The underground fortress was a miniature replica of the imperial palace.

"This is the Golden Hall—look," Gao Qiu halted and whispered.

A throne, about a yard wide, stood in the center, made entirely of gold and radiating brilliant light. The throne was intricately carved with various lifelike golden dragons, their bodies majestic, enveloped in clouds and mist. Behind the throne was an exquisitely carved jade screen, adorned with countless golden pearls, the epitome of opulence. Below the throne were three golden steps; to the sides were places where ministers would kneel. The hall contained eighteen pearls the size of hen's eggs, illuminating the area and casting a radiant glow on Xian'er's pretty face.

It seemed that his tactic of framing Prince Cheng was not unfounded. Lin Wanrong bitterly chuckled. The splendor of this underground palace before him had undoubtedly cost a fortune. The sum would be equivalent to a decade of war expenses between Great Hua and the nomads.

What was the point of all this? Could sleeping in a golden palace each night truly add flesh to one's bones? The image of Prince Cheng's bloody legs came to mind, and Lin Wanrong sighed deeply.

Although Gao Qiu had been here several times, he couldn't help but exclaim, "Brother Lin, I've lived my entire life and only today have my eyes been truly opened." He glared at Chen Biqing who trailed behind them, "Imperial Censor Chen, Lord Chen, you've seen this too. Can we say that we've wronged Prince Cheng?"

Chen Biqing was pale, his former authoritative air as an imperial censor entirely gone. He sneakily glanced at Lin San but dared not speak.

Lin Wanrong let out a long sigh, "Throughout history, many legends have been lost to time and elements. Compared to history, humans are but grains of sand in a river, ultimately swallowed by the waves. The prince still can't let go, huh?"

Gao Qiu was a simple man but even he could understand the sentiment behind Lin Wanrong's words. He quickly nodded, showing his agreement.

Though the underground labyrinth was large, Lin Wanrong had lost interest in exploring further. The group retreated, and someone approached them with a lantern.

"Master Lin," Gao Ping, dressed in a crimson robe and bearing a solemn expression, spoke, "The Emperor invites you to the palace."

‘Seems like no matter where I go, the Emperor can find me quite quickly.’ Lin Wanrong sighed in resignation. Qin Xian'er quickly stepped in front of her husband, "The culprit has been caught. Can't Father Emperor give my husband some rest? It's already late. Eunuch Gao, go back and tell Father that my husband will rest tonight and see him tomorrow."

Only Princess Nishang would dare to speak to the Emperor like that, Gao Ping thought ruefully. "Princess, do you wish for my demise? How could I bear the crime of deceiving the Emperor? Many nobles and officials are in the Hall of Literary Brilliance, waiting to discuss this urgent matter. The Emperor has especially sent me to invite Master Lin."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Has the Emperor seen Prince Cheng yet?"

"Not yet," Gao Qiu lowered his voice, "The news spread like wildfire. The man was just put in the Heavenly Prison, and already numerous petitions for mercy have flooded in. Even old Master Gu has come in person."

‘Asking for mercy now is useless; Prince Cheng is already a spent force.’ Lin Wanrong sighed, once more admiring the Emperor's cunning and tactics.

"Xian'er," Lin Wanrong held his wife's hand, "It's sufficient that Brother Gao accompanies me to the palace. You go back and assure everyone that I'm fine. Once the discussion is over, I'll return. Have Qiaoqiao prepare some late-night snacks for me. I'm hungry."

Knowing he was trying to comfort her, Qin Xian'er softly nodded. She took a few steps, then abruptly turned back, gripping his hand tightly with tearful eyes, "My husband, when you enter the palace, don't argue with Father Emperor. Once you return from the north, everything will be alright."

No one could understand the unspoken words between the couple. Lin Wanrong pinched her tender fingers and smiled warmly.

The night was tranquil as ever in the capital. Little lights twinkled on the main streets, and the occasional bark of a dog echoed in the dark corners of the alleys. People were mostly asleep, blissfully unaware that their world had been turned upside down just miles away from them.

Lin Wanrong, nursing injuries and having exerted himself physically and mentally for two days straight, was too worn out to collapse just yet. With the army set to march the next day, and with border fires and camel bells at the frontier intertwining with conflict and bloodshed, where else could he find such a peaceful night?

He lowered the sedan curtain and had barely closed his eyes when he heard Gao Qiu whisper from outside, "Brother Lin, we've arrived."

He'd been to the Hall of Literary Brilliance many times before, but each time seemed to involve something less than fortunate. As Gao Qiu wheeled him down from the sedan, Lin Wanrong looked up at the glittering golden characters on the hall and couldn't help but shake his head, finding it somewhat amusing.

"Announcing the arrival of Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Personnel and Commander of the Loyal and Brave Army of Great Hua, Lin San," Gao Qiu announced loudly, immediately silencing the chatter in the hall.

"Let him in," the Emperor coughed faintly, his voice indifferent.

Gao Qiu wheeled him into the golden hall. As he entered, the assembled ministers, who had previously been whispering among themselves, all turned their eyes to him. Unlike his previous appearances in court, where he was scrutinized and criticized, this time everyone looked at this "fake cripple" with nothing less than admiration and even a hint of fear. After all, Lin San had toppled and captured Prince Cheng, earning himself a reputation that no one dared to trivialize.

"Greetings, Your Majesty," Lin Wanrong gave a fist-and-palm salute and glanced at the Emperor. The old Emperor sat solemnly on his throne, his face full of concern and not a trace of a smile.

"Never mind that," the old man waved his hand dismissively. "Lin San, come and meet Master Gu."

To the left of the Emperor's throne sat an old scholar in his seventies, with white hair and a white beard, wearing a faded gray robe. Simple and unassuming.

‘Is this Master Gu Shunzhang, the Emperor's teacher?’ Lin Wanrong took a surreptitious glance. The old man had delicate eyebrows, a soft expression, and eyes that were squinted, giving off an ethereal elegance. This was nothing like his son, Gu Bingyan; truly, the teacher of an Emperor was no ordinary person.

Lin Wanrong quickly bowed, "Young Lin San pays his respects to Master Gu."

"So you're Lin San?" Master Gu looked him up and down, his eyes flickering in a way that Lin Wanrong couldn't read.

‘Why is he scrutinizing me as if I were his prospective son-in-law?’ Lin Wanrong felt uncomfortable under Master Gu's gaze. Was he seeking revenge for his son?

"Lin San, have you ever been to Goryeo?" Master Gu finally spoke, but his question had nothing to do with the matters at hand.

"Been—ah, no, never been there," Lin Wanrong was puzzled. What was the old man getting at?

Master Gu smiled gently and said, "Lin San, do you know why I have come here today?"

"I've heard, Master Gu, that you've returned from Shandong," Lin Wanrong said softly, testing the waters. He couldn't help but marvel at the influence of the imperial tutor. Even in the solemnity of the imperial court, discussing unrelated matters, not even the Emperor dared to interrupt him.

Gu Shunzhang nodded with a smile, "It's true that I've come back from Shandong, but before that, I was traveling in Goryeo."

"Traveling in Goryeo?" Lin Wanrong was taken aback. Why was the old man bringing this up out of the blue?

"Yes, traveling in Goryeo," Gu Shunzhang said with a slight smile. "There, I met a young lady who asked me to deliver a letter to a certain Mr. Lin of the Great Hua Dynasty."

Chapter 499 The Marriage Alliance

Gu Shunzhang spoke, his hand reaching into his robe to retrieve an envelope sealed with crimson wax, still carrying a faint scent of ink. He handed it to Lin Wanrong.

"A letter from Goryeo? And it's from a woman? An international friend?" Lin Wanrong was somewhat baffled. He hastily opened the letter and read a few lines. His expression changed dramatically, a complicated mixture of joy and sorrow appearing on his face.

"Lin San, have I made a mistake? This letter is for you, isn't it?" Gu Shunzhang stroked his beard and chuckled.

"You've made no mistake; the letter is indeed for me." Lin Wanrong sighed, carefully folding the letter and tucking it into his robe. "Mr. Gu, may I be so bold as to ask, when you met this woman, was she faring well?"

Gu Shunzhang shook his head, "The armies of Dongyin are pressing the borders; Goryeo is on the brink of disaster. In times like these, who can save themselves?"

'Indeed. War rages in Goryeo; no one could be living comfortably. And here I was, foolishly hoping that Goryeo could hold out a little longer.' Lin Wanrong awkwardly chuckled, then lowered his voice and asked, "Mr. Gu, based on your observations, is she mobile? Does she have—?" He gestured at his waist and puffed out his belly, looking rather ridiculous.

"What are you trying to indicate?" Gu Shunzhang chuckled, stroking his beard. "I didn't notice anything amiss. The young lady seemed quite agile."

Lin Wanrong nodded, counting days on his fingers. He couldn't help but chuckle; it was too soon for any symptoms to show.

"Thank you, Mr. Gu, for bringing me this news. Lin San is eternally grateful." Lin Wanrong bowed deeply to Gu Shunzhang. Despite the awkwardness—just last night he had captured Gu Shunzhang's only son—the Emperor's tutor had returned from Shandong bearing important news. How could he ever repay this kindness?

"It was a trivial matter, no need for thanks," Gu Shunzhang dismissed, turning to the Emperor. "Your Majesty, my apologies for discussing personal matters with Lin San during the court meeting. Please forgive us."

Facing his mentor, even the Emperor, the sovereign of the nation, was humble. He hurriedly replied, "Master Gu, you speak too harshly. Who in this world is not aware of your character? Even if we discuss personal matters in this golden palace, they are matters concerning the state. I am only afraid that my incompetence may fail to meet your teachings."

Even the Emperor was so respectful before Gu Shunzhang, repeatedly referring to him as his teacher. Lin Wanrong marveled at what kind of man could command such respect. Could Gu Shunzhang truly be an extraordinary individual?

Gu Shunzhang nodded with a smile, "Your Majesty is wise and discerning, truly a great ruler. The matter concerning Goryeo that Lin San and I were discussing is not only of personal interest but also closely related to our great Empire."

The Emperor's face lit up, "Master Gu, please share your insights. Your pupil is all ears."

Gu Shunzhang nodded slightly, rose to his feet, and paced a few steps before saying seriously, "The large-scale invasion of Goryeo by Dongyin is an overt act of aggression that everyone knows about. Only our Emperor has the foresight and wit to respond brilliantly. By allying Goryeo with our Great Hua, we have integrated as one entity. By raising armies locally and providing immediate support, we not only leave Dongyin in a state of dilemma, but we also expand our own territories, achieving unparalleled feats. It's truly turning crisis into opportunity, benefiting in every way."

Hearing such high praise from his imperial tutor, the old Emperor couldn't help but be overjoyed. "Master Gu, you flatter me. This idea came from Lin San; I merely acted according to the circumstances."

How could Gu Shunzhang not know that it was Lin San's idea? He chuckled with his fist cupped in his other hand, "Your Majesty, the strategy of one country two systems is unprecedented and extraordinary. Even an old man like me, who claims to have read thousands of volumes, could not have thought of such an idea. The young Lin San possesses such insight and boldness; it's truly awe-inspiring."

The imperial tutor began by lavishly praising Lin San, yet he made no mention of capturing the prince. Not only were the others puzzled, even Lin Wanrong found it confusing.

"Lin San, Master Gu holds you in high regard; you should quickly express your gratitude," the Emperor commanded sternly, though the smile in his eyes was evident to all.

Seeing Gu Shunzhang smiling at him, Lin Wanrong had no choice but to muster the courage to cup his fist in his other hand. "Master Gu, you're too kind. I merely stumbled upon this strategy; it's nothing about having any particular insight or boldness. I'm ashamed."

Gu Shunzhang chuckled and patted him on the shoulder. "Young man, it's good to be ambitious and willing to take responsibility. Being too modest would only appear disingenuous. Besides, I'm not praising you entirely—your strategy of one country two systems is good, but it does have its flaws. It needs further refinement to be considered perfect."

Lin Wanrong blinked, finally catching on. So, after all the talk, this last statement was the most important! Gu Shunzhang had artfully offered praise to please everyone first, before subtly pointing out areas for improvement, ensuring the mood wasn't spoiled. This was truly an art of speech, and Master Gu was deeply proficient in it.

The Emperor quickly asked, "How can this plan be improved? Please, Master Gu, enlighten us."

Gu Shunzhang smiled and nodded. "The ultimate goal of this strategy is to integrate Goryeo into the territory of Great Hua; this is beyond question. However, Your Majesty, do you wish for Goryeo to willingly submit, or to keep up appearances while maintaining distance?"

The Emperor responded, "Master Gu jests. My intention for expanding Great Hua is to genuinely have Goryeo submit."

"In that case, there's no question," Gu Shunzhang paced a few steps in the golden hall before speaking seriously. "This strategy is well-planned, stationing Great Hua's troops, reducing Goryeo's military, relocating the populace, and establishing schools; each step aims at the heart of the matter. However, have you considered that in the eyes of the people of Goryeo, these moves are oppressive? The people of Goryeo, though considered barbarians, are not so easily subdued. To quickly win their hearts will likely be very difficult."

Truly deserving of the title 'imperial tutor,' his analysis was sharp and incisive, prompting everyone to nod silently in agreement. The Emperor joyously said, "Master Gu has hit the nail on the head. Using force is not a lasting solution, but does Master Gu have any better suggestions?"

Gu Shunzhang cast a glance at Lin Wanrong and smiled. "Lin San, what do you think?"

"I understand what you mean, Mr. Gu," Lin Wanrong replied, nodding slightly. "Suppressing the opposition is only a temporary solution; reconciliation is the true path. However, I'm not particularly skilled in the art of pacification."

"This art of pacification," Gu Shunzhang picked up the conversation, "our ancestors have taught us many methods." He smiled mysteriously and continued, "Besides granting rewards and incentives, there's something even more effective—"

"Something more effective?" Lin Wanrong felt uneasy under Gu's scrutinizing gaze and couldn't help but ask.

With a solemn face, Gu Shunzhang enunciated each word: "A—Marriage—Alliance!"

"I object!" As soon as the words left the imperial tutor's mouth, Lin Wanrong's face turned pale, and he shouted in disagreement.

Gu Shunzhang looked at him in astonishment. "Lin San, a marriage alliance is the best means of pacification and reconciliation. What are you objecting to?"

‘This old man must be pretending to be clueless,’ Lin Wanrong thought. ‘Everyone knows that my father-in-law has only two princesses, and both are now part of the Lin family. Do you expect one of my wives to marry into another family? Dream on!’

He merely grunted a few times without saying anything. The Emperor understood his thoughts and frowned. "Master Gu, I'm afraid the marriage alliance is not feasible. Some time ago, the Prince of Goryeo personally came to ask for the princess's hand in marriage but was defeated in the trials. This is public knowledge; how can I possibly marry off the princess again?"

"Exactly," Lin Wanrong quickly agreed. "That Prince of Goryeo is lacking in character and knowledge. I've seen it with my own eyes; he is not worthy of our Great Hua's princess."

Everyone knew what was on his mind, but no one chose to point it out. Gu Shunzhang laughed heartily, "Your Majesty, you misunderstand me. To have our princess marry into a foreign nation in exchange for national stability is a sign of weakness. Why should Great Hua resort to such a feeble strategy?"



Hearing that the plan didn't involve marrying off either of the princesses, Lin Wanrong breathed a sigh of relief. 'As long as it's not Xian'er or Qingxuan, I don't care what you do.'

The Emperor, puzzled, asked, "Master Gu, if it's not our princess getting married off, then how does this marriage alliance work?"

The imperial tutor smiled and bowed slightly, "It's not our princess who will marry into Goryeo, but rather a princess from Goryeo who will marry into Great Hua! Your Majesty, during my recent trip, I learned that Goryeo has experienced a change. The King of Goryeo personally promised to send his most cherished princess to marry a young talent of our empire. If this marriage alliance succeeds, Great Hua and Goryeo will be as one family. Advancing our alliance strategy will then be twice as effective!"

So, it's a princess from Goryeo who would be married into Great Hua. What a good idea; we certainly won't be at a disadvantage. Overjoyed, the Emperor stepped down from his throne and looked around before laughing out loud. "Goryeo wishes to send a princess for a marriage alliance. What do you all think? Should our Empire accept?"

'The old man has really pulled a fast one. The princess can't be married to you anyway.' Lin Wanrong thought, suppressing a laugh.

Seeing that the proposal came from their trusted adviser and would bring only benefits to Great Hua, everyone naturally nodded in agreement, following the line of Master Gu's thinking.

Seeing no objections, the old Emperor nodded solemnly. "Since the King of Goryeo is so sincere, we should not mistreat their princess. Following Master Gu's advice, let us choose the most outstanding young man from our Great Hua Dynasty to marry the Goryeo princess. This will demonstrate the care and love of our dynasty, uniting our two nations as one family for generations to come. My ministers, do help me think where we could find such a young man."

It's just a Goryeo princess; any strong man from their Great Hua would suffice. Watching the ministers begin to brainstorm earnestly, Lin Wanrong found it amusing.

Today's agenda was supposed to discuss matters regarding Prince Cheng. Who knew that Gu Shunzhang would divert the topic to selecting a suitable groom for the Goryeo princess? The ministers were taking the matter so seriously that the atmosphere in the golden hall became indescribably strange. Only Gu Shunzhang, who initiated this situation, looked calm and smiling, as if it had nothing to do with him.

"My ministers, do we have a suitable candidate?" After a moment passed like the time it takes to drink a cup of tea, the Emperor's gaze swept over the assembled officials.

After brief consideration, a scholar from the Hall of Literary Brilliance stepped forward and respectfully said, "Your Majesty, our Great Hua has a long history and under your wise rule, our Empire is full of capable people. Finding a young man fit for the Goryeo princess will not be difficult. Given a few hours, if not ten thousand, we could at least find eight thousand suitable candidates."

Hearing this, the Emperor burst into laughter, and Lin Wanrong shuddered at the thought of the young man's bright future. "When did our Empire produce such a sycophantic talent? How have I not noticed?"

"However," the scholar continued, "given Your Majesty's kindness and generosity toward foreign countries, the chosen candidate should be the most outstanding young man in our Empire. After discussion, we find that the most fitting young man in terms of appearance, achievement, and reputation is—"

He paused and discreetly glanced at Lin Wanrong.

All eyes in the hall turned towards Lin Wanrong, and the atmosphere grew peculiarly quiet.

"Uh, sir, you're not talking about me, are you?" Lin Wanrong pointed to his own nose, laughing in surprise.

The Hall of Literary Brilliance scholar nodded solemnly, "Throughout the history of our dynasty, no one has surpassed you, Lord Lin! You should take it upon yourself. Your Majesty, we believe Lord Lin is the most suitable for this marriage!"

As if prearranged, all the officials bowed and chorused, "We believe Lord Lin is the most suitable!"

It was too unexpected; the age-old practice of diplomatic marriage had actually fallen upon him. Lin Wanrong's mouth gaped open, wide enough to stuff two eggs.

"Lin San, what are your thoughts?" The Emperor grunted through his nose.

Cold sweat trickled down Lin Wanrong's back, and he raised his right hand hastily. "Your Majesty, I swear, my intentions toward the princess are serious—more genuine than gold and silver!"

"The princess? Do you mean the Goryeo princess?" The Hall of Literary Brilliance scholar eagerly bowed, "Your Majesty, you heard it yourself. Lord Lin's solemn oath is a deep expression of love towards the Goryeo princess. Given his character and integrity, I believe this marriage is assured."

‘Have your ears grown on your buttocks? My confession was intended for Princess of Great Hua, not the Goryeo princess!’ Lin Wanrong's irritation was beyond words.

The Emperor's face turned exceedingly grim, and he snorted angrily, "Lin San, you've changed rather quickly!"

"This is a complete misunderstanding," Lin Wanrong said with a wry smile. "Your Majesty, please do not readily believe in rumors. My vows were made to Qingxuan and Xian'er. As for sending me for a marriage alliance and having me marry a Goryeo woman—Your Majesty, you might as well send me to the battlefield!"

The old Emperor's expression lightened slightly. He turned to Gu Shunzhang and asked, "Master Gu, do you have any suitable candidates?"

Gu Shunzhang's gaze fixated on Lin Wanrong, his face full of mysterious smiles. Lin Wanrong felt his hairs stand on end and prayed silently, ‘Master Gu, please don't harm me. The Emperor is known for his partiality, and I have a house full of jealous women already.’

The imperial tutor pondered for a moment before quietly asking, "Lin San, do you already have a wife at home?"

"Yes, yes, quite a few, in fact," Lin Wanrong hastily nodded.

Gu Shunzhang let out an "Oh" and smiled, "Well then, one more wouldn't make much difference. Lin San, would you mind taking another wife?"

The old man gave him a cold smirk, and Lin Wanrong, terrified out of his wits, quickly waved his hands, "I do mind, I very much mind! I have little money and even less space at home; I can't afford to support another."

"Rest assured," Gu Shunzhang grinned. "The dowry from the Goryeo King would suffice to support your entire family for a lifetime. What harm would one more do? Even if you run out of money, all of Great Hua would support you with a single call from you! Oh, I forgot to mention, this Goryeo princess is beautiful, dignified, and scholarly. She is a perfect match for you; you should consider it!"

'Stop kidding, my perfect match is Qingxuan. When did it become the Goryeo princess?' Lin Wanrong shook his head firmly, his face solemn. "Master Gu, I deeply love my wives and cannot accommodate—" He counted on his fingers and then resolutely said, "Cannot accommodate a ninth woman! Please tell the Goryeo princess that I am a man already committed. Thank you!"

Who would have thought, Lin Wanrong is such a faithful man. Those present couldn't help but admire him.

Gu Shunzhang looked at him earnestly, "Lin San, won't you reconsider? You were the one who proposed this alliance strategy. The enduring peace between the two lands hinges on this decision. To be honest, across the entire Great Hua, there isn't a second person more suited for this young lady than you."

The imperial tutor was truly persuasive, but Lin Wanrong shook his head like a rattle drum, refusing to yield.

Master Gu sighed deeply and resignedly said, "In that case, it seems you and her are not meant to be. Lin San, this is a choice you're making. Should you regret it later, don't come seeking me!"

"Regret?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, brimming with confidence. "Master Gu, rest assured. It's better to rely on oneself than to rely on others; I learned this truth twenty years ago."

The old man Emperor seemed quite pleased with his attitude. However, the matter of this marriage alliance was of great national significance. If it truly required sacrificing Lin San's fidelity, then it wasn't entirely off the table. It would just mean Qingxuan and Xian'er would have to suffer some grievances.

"Master Gu, is Lin San truly the only option?" The Emperor pondered for a long time before speaking.

"I've said all that needs to be said. He has given up a good marriage prospect of his own accord. There will be a day when he will regret it!" Gu Shunzhang shook his head, "Your Majesty, let us find another suitable match for the Goryeo princess, then!"

## Chapter 500 The Disposal

"Indeed, there is no other way." The Emperor nodded solemnly. "We shall select ten young men of good moral character within our great Hua Empire and present them to the Goryeo princess. She may choose among them, and I shall grant titles and rewards accordingly. What does Master Gu think of this?"

The plan was sensible, and Gu Shunzhang had no objections. He nodded with a smile, and thus the matter of the marriage alliance was settled. Many in the palace felt regret for Lin San, especially those who knew of his relationship with the princess. However, they also admired his wisdom. When it came to weighing the significance of the Goryeo princess against the Great Hua princess, Lin San had clearly made the right choice.

Though he had refused a woman for seemingly no reason, Lin Wanrong's feelings of regret were lessened when he thought of the sincere affection he shared with Qingxuan and Xian'er.

Once everyone had composed themselves, the old Emperor scanned the room with piercing eyes, his voice suddenly grave. "The reason I have convened all of you for this royal council meeting is that something of great importance has occurred within our court—"

The room fell silent at his words, like a clap of thunder reverberating in their ears. In this sensitive and uneasy moment, the expressions of the officials were solemn, and no one dared even to cough.

The Emperor sighed, his eyes sharp as he locked onto Chen Biqing. "Minister Chen, you are the imperial censor, and you have been investigating this case with Lin San. What exactly has happened? Speak quickly."

Chen Biqing's face turned pale, and he had an inkling of why the Emperor had chosen him and Lin San to conduct the investigation.

"Your Majesty, honored officials, under the Emperor's orders, Lin San and I have been investigating the arson at the royal mansion and the disappearance of Prince Cheng," he reported, his voice quivering, his forehead slick with sweat. "Lin San, with his keen intellect, discovered a secret underground chamber in the lake behind the royal mansion during our investigation—"

Though it was early spring, sweat soaked Chen Biqing's back. The matter was extremely sensitive, and one false move could cost many their lives. He chose his words carefully, not daring to misspeak.

"A secret chamber? What kind of chamber?" The Emperor's eyes flashed dangerously, his face turning ashen. "Minister Chen, what's inside? Speak!"

Under the intense gaze of everyone present, the pressure on Chen Biqing was palpable. He hurriedly knelt and exclaimed in terror, "I dare not say, Your Majesty."

The Emperor sneered. "You are the imperial censor, what could you possibly be afraid to say? Speak the truth, and you shall be pardoned."

"Thank you, Your Majesty!" With cold sweat trickling down his forehead, Chen Biqing remained kneeling. "This secret chamber, buried deep under the lake, has an inscription at its entrance that reads 'Dragon Palace.' It closely resembles the layout of our own imperial palace, even sharing many of the same names for its halls. It is decorated with gold bricks, colored glaze, jade, and emeralds. Within the palace is a counterfeit Golden Hall, a throne made entirely of gold, a jade screen, a sham imperial study, and several side halls. Additionally, according to an incomplete tally conducted before today's council meeting, we found more than 1,200 eastern pearls, over 2,000 pounds of gold leaf, 500,000 taels of silver, and more than 200 crates of jade, pottery, calligraphy, and paintings—"

"How dare you!" The old Emperor's face darkened. In his rage, he swept aside the inkstone and brushes on the table in front of him. With a crash, the jade stand that had been on the table fell to the floor and shattered into pieces, scattering in all directions.

"Your Majesty, please calm your anger!" Chen Biqing kowtowed as if crushing garlic, his face devoid of color.

The ministers quickly fell to their knees, shouting in unison, "Your Majesty, please quell your anger! Consider the well-being of the nation and protect your royal health!"

Lin Wanrong, being disabled, naturally didn't need to kneel. The old man's face was as dark as the clouds on the horizon. Even Lin Wanrong couldn't tell if he was truly angry or just putting on an act.

The Emperor snorted and didn't instruct everyone to rise. He spoke solemnly, "Minister Chen, are you speaking the truth? Were these things truly discovered in my brother's residence?"

Chen Biqing hastily kowtowed again, "How dare your humble servant deceive you? The unearthed Dragon Palace still lies in the backyard of the prince's mansion, and Lord Lin can bear witness."

"So it's all true then?" The Emperor shook his head in anguish and slumped back into his throne.

If this information had come from Lin San, everyone would have had some reservations. But this time, it was personally witnessed by Chen Biqing, the Imperial Censor. Lin San hadn't said a word. Given these circumstances, the matter was irrefutably true. As they watched the Emperor's face fluctuate between flushed and pale, no one dared to speak out of turn.

"You may all rise," said the Emperor after a long silence, waving his hand wearily.

"Thank you, Your Majesty!" The ministers cautiously got to their feet, moving so gently that not a whisper of wind stirred their robes, lest they disturb the furious Emperor.

The old Emperor looked utterly dejected, as if he had aged a decade in an instant. A tear gleamed in the corner of his eye. "Since my father passed the throne to me, over two decades have gone by. I have governed the nation well, waged wars in the north, pacified barbarians in the south. I've exhausted myself physically and mentally, and never had a peaceful night. Even if I am not the wisest of rulers, I certainly am not a tyrant. Why then do some, even my own brothers, make life difficult for me?" He wiped away the tear and sighed, "My esteemed ministers, tell me, why is this happening?"

The Emperor's tear-filled eyes scanned the assembly. The ministers quickly recoiled their necks; none dared to pick up his line of thought.

Imperial Tutor Gu Shunzhang slowly rose and said, "For the sake of the nation, Your Majesty must take care of your health and not be overly distressed. Prince Cheng has rebelled; what's done is done. Further discussion is fruitless. We must act quickly to reassure the court and allow our soldiers on the frontlines to fight without worry against the Turks, thereby demonstrating the might of our great empire."

"Thank you, Master Gu, for the reminder. I shall keep it in mind," said the old Emperor, hurriedly wiping away his tears. His expression slowly settled into calmness. He sighed and turned to Lin Wanrong, "Lin San, where is Prince Cheng now?"

Lin Wanrong began, "Your Majesty, I received intelligence tonight about a disturbance planned in the southern part of the city. At first, I thought it was just a handful of petty criminals and didn't pay it much attention. However, as time passed, the number of these criminals began to swell, reaching a force of nearly five thousand, all well-armed and trained. They attacked our soldiers in large groups and were extremely aggressive." Lin Wanrong spoke as if every word was true, "In such a situation, to maintain the peace in the capital, our brothers in the city defense department counterattacked. Not only did they defeat the attackers, but they also stumbled upon something unexpected—"

"What unexpected discovery?" interjected the Emperor.

"It was truly unexpected—I actually saw Prince Cheng among those people. Suspecting that His Highness might have been kidnapped by bandits, I ordered the city's defensive forces to rescue him at all costs. We sacrificed five hundred of our brothers, and just as we were about to succeed, something unexpected happened—"

This young man was naturally a smooth talker. What should have been a matter treated with gravity and caution, he made it sound like a story full of ups and downs. And at the most crucial moment, he swallowed half his words, leaving the gathered officials perplexed and annoyed. Gu Shunzhang frowned and said, "Lin San, His Majesty has a multitude of affairs to deal with. Focus on what is important and stop speaking in riddles."

"Yes, yes, I understand my mistake." Lin Wanrong knew better than to underestimate the enigmatic old man, Gu Shunzhang. He hastily continued, "Just when we were about to rescue Prince Cheng, a man suddenly appeared from behind him. He was five feet tall, with a waist of one yard, bushy black beard and thick eyebrows—quite a menacing figure. Later, we learned that this man was a warrior serving Prince Cheng, surnamed Zhao, first name Wu. He was strapped with explosives and was holding Prince Cheng hostage. He was saying things we couldn't understand—" At this point, Lin Wanrong paused and looked at the Emperor.

The Emperor, with his eyelids lowered, coldly said, "What couldn't you understand? If you continue to speak in riddles, you might end up not even being able to sit in a wheelchair!"



Lin Wanrong chuckled nervously, "Zhao Wu said—'Your Highness, you cannot surrender. A soldier may be killed, but not humiliated. With your noble lineage, how can you kneel and submit? I, Zhao Wu, am willing to face great danger with you! Qi Yue, you scoundrel, why are you leading His Highness to infamy? Your Highness, everyone else can surrender, but you cannot!'—Ah, I really can't understand what these words mean!"

The assembly exchanged glances. Clearly, Zhao Wu was urging Prince Cheng not to surrender to the official army. How could Lin Wanrong possibly not understand? Everyone knew what he meant and knew he was lying, but who would dare to expose him at this moment?

"And what happened next?" Gu Shunzhang asked. In this golden hall, beside the Emperor, he was the only one who had the right to speak.

"Because His Highness was taken hostage, we dared not act rashly. But then, Zhao Wu, as if possessed, lit the explosives strapped to him. At the crucial moment, a strategist named Qi Yue under Prince Cheng saved him. However, both of His Highness's legs—"

"What happened to my brother's legs?!" The Emperor stood up abruptly, anxiety etched clearly on his face.

Lin Wanrong sighed and shook his head, "Water and fire are merciless. When the explosives went off, both of His Highness's legs were blown off below the knees—"

"Brother!" The Emperor let out a sorrowful cry, his body quivering as if about to fall. Fortunately, Gao Ping, standing beside him, steadied him in time. "Your Majesty, you must restrain your grief. Your health is of utmost importance!"

Despite Prince Cheng's great crimes, the Emperor still cared for him so deeply, a kindness that moved many of the officials in the hall. Lin Wanrong, keen-eyed, noticed a fleeting glint of cruelty and satisfaction in the Emperor's tear-brimmed eyes. It was momentary but didn't escape his vigilant gaze.

"Brother! My dear brother!" The Emperor's old eyes filled with tears as he struggled to his feet, gripping Gao Ping's hand. "Lin San, where is my brother now? I must go see him! Summon the imperial physician, we must heal his leg—"

The Emperor had been extraordinarily kind and just toward Prince Cheng. Everyone was moved by his affection, but none understood it as clearly as Lin Wanrong. "Your Majesty," Lin Wanrong said, his tone neutral, "the imperial physician is already treating the Prince."

"Good. I shall go to him at once—" Not caring that they were in the middle of a discussion, the Emperor started to leave, not even bothering to adjourn the court. However, he was stopped by the imperial tutor, Gu Shunzhang, who stepped forward with a bow. "Your Majesty," Gu Shunzhang said, his expression calm, "according to what was just described, it would not be appropriate for you to see Prince Cheng right now."

"Master Gu, why is that? Can't I even see my own brother?" Although the Emperor had lost his composure, he dared not be disrespectful to his advisor.

Gu Shunzhang nodded slightly. "Your Majesty is a wise and enlightened ruler. You must surely understand the principle of 'ruler before brother.'"

"'Ruler before brother?'" The Emperor murmured. "Master Gu, are you suggesting that I must first punish my brother for his wrongdoings before expressing fraternal love?"

With a solemn expression, Gu Shunzhang replied: "Your Majesty, this is not my opinion, but the law of our great empire. As the saying goes, if a prince commits a crime, he is subject to the same laws as a commoner. If Prince Cheng is truly guilty of treason, and if he goes unpunished, what becomes of the law? What becomes of justice? How will you face your subjects?"

Lin Wanrong found this strange. Gu Shunzhang was an ally of Prince Cheng; why was he urging the Emperor to punish the Prince? Was he not afraid that his own son would be implicated?

Heeding his tutor's caution, the Emperor finally regained his composure. Closing his eyes and folding his hands behind his back, he stood in silence for a long while. Who would dare continue this topic? The other officials nervously withdrew, afraid they might be singled out by the Emperor.

"Xu Wei, you speak!" Frustrated that no one dared offer advice, the Emperor pointed to Xu Wei, who was in the first row to his right.

Xu Wei had been silent for most of the night, particularly since Gu Shunzhang was present. Stepping forward with a bow, he said: "Your Majesty, if a prince commits a crime, he is no different from a commoner. What Master Gu said just now forms the basis of good governance. I concur."

The crime of treason could only be punished by death. Xu Wei's words were succinct, but their weight was immense. Given his long-standing enmity with Prince Cheng, nobody was surprised by his stance.

The Emperor snorted angrily. "My brother is like my own hands and feet. How can one willingly sever one's own limbs? Yu Wenzheng, what do you have to say?"

The man called Yu Wenzheng was the scholar who had earlier recommended Lin San for a marital alliance. His ability to flatter was so great that even Lin Wanrong had to admire him. Standing behind Chen Biqing, it was clear his rank was not low.

"In my humble opinion, Your Majesty's wisdom is beyond our comprehension," Yu Wenzheng said, his voice ringing out so loudly it made Lin Wanrong's eardrums buzz. "Whatever Your Majesty decides will undoubtedly be brilliant. All we must do is understand deeply, observe carefully; even if we studied it for a lifetime, we would hardly grasp even a fraction of it."

The Emperor nodded and smiled, "Minister Yu, please feel free to express your opinions. I will not take offense."

"Certainly. In my humble opinion, if Your Majesty imposes severe punishment on the prince, it would demonstrate the sacrifice of personal relations for the greater good. It would serve as an example to the common people, further increasing their respect for you. On the other hand, if leniency is granted, it would show Your Majesty's benevolence and kindness, and would serve as an ideal for the people, earning their gratitude. Either way, it is a win-win situation."

Minister Yu spoke at length, heaping praises, yet effectively saying nothing. Lin Wanrong, listening to this, felt he had much to learn.

The Emperor then called upon Chen Biqing. The imperial censor carefully considered his response. "Considering the crimes committed by Prince Cheng, even execution would not be excessive. However, I recognize Your Majesty's compassion and reluctance for fratricide. I suggest we strip him of his title and send him to live in exile under military surveillance, banning him from ever returning to the capital. This would both punish his transgressions and highlight Your Majesty's kindness."

"I object!" Xu Wei interjected immediately. "Minister Chen, this is too lenient! If Prince Cheng is not severely punished, how can we answer to the people?"

"Minister Xu, punishment doesn't always have to be death. Exile and stripping of titles are also severe penalties. Being lenient toward a disabled man would display the Emperor's wisdom and kindness," Chen argued.

The two ministers clashed verbally, on the brink of a heated argument. The Emperor, growing frustrated, slammed his palm onto the armrest of his throne. "Enough! Both of you, be silent."

Xu Wei and Chen Biqing hastily quieted down, daring not to speak further. The Emperor hummed and continued, "I understand your concerns for the Empire. Prince Cheng is my blood brother, and there are only the two of us left. How can I be ruthless toward him? I vowed to my father that I would never harm my brother in my lifetime. You may forget, but I cannot. I will never commit fratricide! Let's follow Minister Chen's advice: strip him of his title and send him to exile in the far north, under military surveillance, never to return to the capital."

Before Xu Wei could object further, a furious glare from the Emperor silenced him.

'Sending him to exile? Is this not the same as setting a tiger free?' thought Lin Wanrong, barely containing his urge to jump up.

"Master Gu, what do you think of my decision?" The Emperor looked earnestly toward Gu Shunzhang, clearly seeking his approval.

"Excellent, excellent," Gu Shunzhang nodded approvingly, a mysterious smile on his face. "Your Majesty's skillful management and appropriate measures truly exhibit the demeanor of a great Emperor!"