

NIRVANA IN FIRE | 琅琊榜  
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Translators

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# **BOOK ONE**

## **MISTER MEI**

### **CHAPTER 1**

Jinling, royal capital of the great Liang empire.

There, every object was steeped in royal brilliance. Even the city gate was exceptionally solid and majestic. Squeezed between the endless stream of people entering the city was an unexceptional blue-roofed carriage. It swayed and inched forward, finally stopping a few dozen feet before the city gate.

A handsome young man dressed in white lifted the curtains of the carriage and jumped down. He took a few steps, then raised his head to look at the word “Jinling” above the gate.

The two riders in front of the carriage sensed that something was amiss. They looked behind, then turned their horses in unison and trotted back. The two were dressed as nobility, and appeared to be of similar age. The young man in the front called out, “Su, what’s wrong?”

Mei Changsu did not answer. He remained, gazing steadily above the gate. The wind lifted his dark hair and scattered a few strands across his pale face. His figure appeared forlorn, as if weighted by the sorrows of life.

“Are you tired, Su?” The other rider had caught up, and asked Mei Changsu with concern. “We’re almost there. You’ll be able to get a proper rest today.”

“Jingrui, Xie Bi.” A smile flitted across Mei Changsu’s colourless lips. “I want to stand here for a bit longer... So many years have passed, yet Jinling has barely changed. I suppose the capital remains as magnificent as ever past this gate...”

Slightly startled, Xiao Jingrui asked, “So...you have been to Jinling before, Su?”

“Fifteen years ago, I was under the guidance of Mr. Li Cong at Jinling. I have not returned since he was demoted and left the capital.” Mei Changsu sighed faintly and closed his eyes, as if trying to erase the grandiose. “The memories of my teacher make me lament over the past. Like smoke, like dust, they are scattered, never to return.”

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi became inadvertently solemn at the mention of the great Confucian scholar Mr. Li.

Li Cong was a famous Royal Tutor with vast knowledge. He tutored the royal sons by the Emperor’s edict, and yet did not neglect his teachings outside the palace. Both the rich and the poor attended his lectures without distinction, and his good name was unparalleled. However, he angered the Emperor one year for some unknown reason, and was demoted from the great Royal Tutor to a mere commoner. He left the capital with anger and died with anguish, leaving pain in the hearts of all scholars. Through their journey to Jinling together, Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi both thought Su to be a remarkable intellectual. Yet, neither suspected the source of his knowledge to be this great scholar.

“Mr. Li would surely not want you to harm your body with sorrow.” Xiao Jingrui comforted Mei Changsu quietly. “Your body is unwell. Our purpose in inviting you to Jinling was for you to relax and recuperate. We as friends would feel bad if you immerse yourself in grief.”

Mei Changsu was silent. Then, he slowly opened his eyes and said, “Don’t worry. Since I arrived here, it is only natural for me to pay my respects to my late teacher and his tragic circumstances. There is no reason to wallow in sorrow. I am fine. Let’s go in.”

It was nearing dusk. The day market had closed, and the night market had yet to open. After navigating the quiet streets, the three soon arrived before a majestic estate. Hanging high above was striking sign, “Manor of the Marquess of Ning”.

“Oh my! Quick, go notify everyone. The eldest young master and the second young master have returned!” It was the time of the evening when the servants were busy lighting the lanterns around the manor. A sharp-eyed servant had seen the party and cried out, then hurried forward to greet his masters.

The three descended from their respective horses and carriage and entered the manor through the main entrance. A great mural greeted their eyes, with the words “Empire’s Protector and Pillar” by the Emperor’s brush.

“Uncle Qin, where are Father and Mother?” asked Xiao Jingrui to an elderly servant that hurried out.



“The Marquess is in his study, but the Madam is paying respects to Buddha today and will be resting at the Princess’s Manor.”

“Then what about my Mom and Dad? My brother and sister?”

“Master and Madam Zhuo have returned home. Young master Zhuo and our young mistress accompanied them.”

Mei Changsu could not help but chuckle over the conversation. “Such chaos! There’s Father and Mother, then Mom and Dad. On top of that, you don’t share a surname with either of your brothers. Someone uninformed would be so confused by this conversation.”

“They would certainly be confused if they are uninformed, but Jingrui’s background is basically a legend now. There must be very few who are still ignorant of it.”

“Xie Bi, where are your manners? Refer to me with elder brother instead of my name.” Xiao Jingrui put on a stern face, and the three laughed in unison.

But jokes aside, Xie Bi was right. The circumstances of Xiao Jingrui’s birth were extraordinarily bizarre, and involved both the ancient noble family of the Marquess of Ning and the famous martial arts group Heaven’s Spring. There must be no one alive who is still ignorant of the story.

Twenty-four years ago, the Marquess of Ning, Xie Yu was deployed. He left the capital and his pregnant wife—the Emperor’s sister, Princess Liyang—to fight against the southern Xia empire. In the same year, the master of the famous Heaven’s Spring martial artist group, Zhuo Dingfeng, entrusted the care of his pregnant wife to a friend in Jinling while he went to battle with the Demonic Sect. Of course, life never goes as expected. A plague suddenly broke out within the capital and the upper class quickly evacuated to nearby temples for refuge. By coincidence, the two madams of the Xie family and Heaven’s Spring ended up living in separate courtyards of the same temple.

The two women quickly became acquainted in the lonesome mountain. The friendship blossomed, and the two would often be found together. One day, while the two madams were chatting over a game of Go,<sup>1</sup> they were both overcome with labour pains at the same time. It was a day of high wind and thunderstorms. The servants were in a flurry of activity until midnight, when finally, the cries of infants could be heard. Two boys were born almost simultaneously.

Amidst joy and laughter, the midwives carried the two precious little masters to bathe in another room.

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<sup>1</sup> A board game. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go\\_\(game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_(game))

Right then, an accident occurred.

A tree was struck by lightning within the ancient temple. A branch broke and fell on top of the delivery room. In the blink of an eye, tiles scattered, beams shook, and windows broke. Strong gusts of wind blew into the room, snuffing out all the candles. The servants somehow managed to move their madams to safety amidst screams and chaos. The midwives, who fell on the ground in terror, quickly grabbed the two babies from the wooden tub and ran out.

Thankfully, no one was hurt. Everyone relocated to another room, settled in the two mothers, and breathed a long sigh of relief. That was when they realized that there was a huge problem.

The two baby boys were both carried out naked in complete darkness. Both were similarly wrinkled, both cried loudly, and both were of similar weight and features. Which one belonged to the Marchioness, and which one belonged to Madam Zhuo?

During the second day, the problem grew greater, as one baby boy had died.

As the Marchioness was a Princess, this case naturally found its way into the ears of the Emperor, who ordered the two families to bring the baby boy to Court. He first ordered the Royal Physicians to identify the boy by blood.<sup>2</sup> However, the baby's blood would merge with blood from both families, without any observable difference. The Emperor took a better look at the appearances of the two pairs of parents, and knew that the situation would be hard to resolve.

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<sup>2</sup> The test would be administered by placing a drop of blood from two different people in the same cup of water. The theory was that if the two drops of blood merged, they were kin. If they did not merge and stayed separate, then the two people were not related. In modern day, we know that this method is actually inaccurate.

## CHAPTER 2

Xie Yu and Zhuo Dingfeng were both tall, handsome men, and their wives were both beautiful and elegant. Even though the parents did not look the same, it was hard to find clear differences in their features.

It would be difficult to identify the child based on features even after he grew older. The decision of whose family he belonged to must be made soon.

The Emperor held the baby and gazed at him for a long while. Though he could not reach a decision, he quickly grew fond of the little boy and thought of a compromise. “Since it is impossible to figure out who this boy belongs to, then it would not do to have him take on either the surname Xie or Zhuo. I will bestow upon him the royal surname and name him in accordance with the convention<sup>3</sup> for my royal sons. His name will be Jing...Jingrui, since he was born on Mt. Rui. He will live with the Xie family one year and the Zhuo family the next, as a son of two families. How is that?”

As the Emperor made a decision and there was no better idea, everyone was forced to agree.

Just like that, Xiao Jingrui received double identities. He was both the eldest young master of the Xie family, son to the Marquess of Ning, and the second son of the Zhuo family of Heaven’s Spring. Due to Jingrui, the once unacquainted Xie and Zhuo families became close as blood. Two years ago, the eldest son of the Zhuo family married the eldest daughter of the Xie family, bonding the two families closer than ever.

“All right brother, since our Father is in his study, let’s go pay our respects.” Xie Bi turned to look at Mei Changsu and asked, “Will Su come with us?”

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<sup>3</sup> Often, there would be a naming convention for each generation within a family. For example, the current line of the Emperor’s sons are named Xiao Jing\_\_\_. As such, we have Xiao Jingrui, Jingxuan, Jinghuan, etc.

Mei Changsu smiled. "Of course. I should greet the owner of the manor I am imposing upon."

The two brothers guided their guest inside the manor in great spirits. The servants along the way could tell from the scene that an honoured guest had arrived. Yet, with his white robes and modest appearance, they were unable to discern his background.

According to the customs of the nobility, the doors to the main hall are not opened unless it is to receive a royal edict or a person of higher status. So, the two brothers led their guests directly to the Eastern Hall. Although there was still a glimmer of light outside, the hall was already bright with candles. Under the warm yellow glow, a person paced back and forth on the smooth marble floor in deep thought, a book in his hands. Upon hearing people entering, he paused and turned, his long beard fluttering.

This was the man upon whom Emperor relied upon, the so-called "Pillar of the Empire", Marquess of Ning, Xie Yu.

Glorified for his beauty in youth, the man stood before them over half a century old. Nonetheless, his neat features still retained some of the beauties of youth, and his figure was strong and healthy. He was donned in part-worn, casual robes. He wore no luxurious accessories besides a jade belt. In spite of that, one could not ignore the aura of grace he exuded.

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi walked forward and bowed respectfully on the floor. They spoke in unison, "Greetings, Father."

"Rise," said Xie Yu, raising his hand. His gaze fell upon Xiao Jingrui and his voice turned stern. "So you've remembered to come back. I have not seen you for more than two months. You even forgot about the Mid-Autumn Festival, the day of family gatherings. It appears that I have been too lax in your upbringing—"

His lecture just begun, Xie Yu suddenly noticed a fourth person in the hall. He stopped abruptly. "Oh, we have a guest?"

"Yes." Xiao Jingrui bowed, "This is Mr. Su, a friend of mine. I was often under his care during my travels. I invited him to Jinling to relax and recuperate from his illness."

Mei Changsu stepped forward and bowed as customs demanded. He said calmly, "I, commoner Su Zhe, greet the Marquess."

"Mr. Su is too polite. You are our guest, not to mention my son's good friend. There is no need to be so modest." Xie Yu raised his hands and returned a slight bow. The man before him appeared frail and sickly, yet still handsome and elegant. He took another look and said, "Mr. Su appears to be an exceptional man. Please treat my

manor as your own home while you honour us with your stay. There is no need to feel restrained.”

Mei Changsu gave a slight bow and smiled, then stepped back slowly.

With a guest present, Xie Yu was unable to lecture Xiao Jingrui further. He resigned with a final glare and lightened his tone. “Our guest must be weary from his long travels. Why don’t you two arrange for him to rest? Do not sleep in tomorrow, you must go to the Princess’s Manor and escort your mother home. Come to my study after I return from court, as I have tasks for you two.”

“Yes, Father.” The two brothers bowed in unison and backed out of the hall with Mei Changsu. Only after exiting the courtyard door did they relax their posture.

Word had arrived early, and the servants of the manor had the guest courtyard Snow Cottage cleaned and prepared. New decorations were arranged, and hot water and tea were placed. The whole courtyard appeared remarkably cozy, without a hint of its usual uninhabited nature.

They ate an early dinner during their journey, so Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi accompanied Mei Changsu for a late snack at the Snow Cottage. While the congee and desserts were arriving, Xiao Jingrui suddenly remembered something and asked, “Where’s Feiliu? Let’s call him to eat with us.”

Mei Changsu laughed, “He has been here all along.”

Just as he finished speaking, Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi suddenly felt a chill down their spine. They turned to the previous empty corner, where a youth now stood quietly in light blue robes. His features were mesmerizing, yet an air of icy solitude surrounded him, forbidding people from getting close.

“This is not the first time I’ve seen Feiliu, but his skills still give me the jitters.” Xie Bi lowered his voice, “Su, with a guard like him, I feel uneasy even getting close to you. I’m afraid he’ll misunderstand and give me a beating.”

“How can that be? Our Feiliu has a great temper. He’s very well-behaved.” Mei Changsu began to raise his hand, and Feiliu floated over at the next moment. He crouched down and rested his head on Mei Changsu’s knee. “See, he acts spoiled too. It’s just that sometimes he can’t discern real and fake, so simply refrain from play fighting with me when he’s present.”

This exceptionally skilled young guard had hurt his head in the past and suffered from some mental deficiencies. Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi both knew this. However, they held Mei Changsu in great respect as a senior friend, and never planned on rough-housing with him anyway. There was no need to pay much attention to this advice.

Feiliu did not like the congee, so Xie Bi ordered the servants to bring him some noodles. The group ate and chatted. Suddenly, a voice was heard outside the courtyard. A person laughed brightly and entered the room. “You guys are so slow! I almost grew moss waiting for you!”

Xiao Jingrui was delighted. He jumped up and grabbed the person, “Yujin!”

On the contrary, Xie Bi frowned and stuck his chin out. “I say, Yujin, aren’t you a bit too quick on the news? We’ve just returned, and it’s so late. What’re you doing here?”

“I notified your steward to send me notice as soon as you’ve returned.” Yan Yujing walked forward swiftly to greet Mei Changsu. “Su, you look great today. You must’ve been so bored travelling with these two without me, right?”

## CHAPTER 3

Yan Yujin was the eldest son of the Royal Uncle, the Empress's nephew, as well as Xiao Jingrui's best friend. The three noble gentlemen met Mei Changsu during their travels and originally planned to return to Jinling together. However, they chanced upon an elderly couple during their journey and saved them from assassination. They learned that the couple planned on entering the capital to sue the Duke of Qing, Bai Ye. At Bin Prefecture, home to the Duke, his relatives were guilty of pillaging farms, bullying citizens, stealing land, and manslaughter. As the families of the Marquess of Ning and the Duke of Qing have been long time friends, Xie Bi was afraid of being reprimanded by his father for meddling in this matter. On the other hand, the easy-going Yan Yujin answered the call of chivalry and offered to escort this old couple to the capital ahead of the party. He refused to allow Xiao Jingrui to accompany them, instead insisting that he should accompany Mei Changsu, who must travel at a slower pace due to his poor health.

"How are Uncle and Aunt Hu?" Mei Changsu naturally needed to inquire after the elderly pair upon seeing Yan Yujin.

"The complaint has already been submitted to the Royal Investigators, and everything is in order now. The Emperor ordered a special investigator to Bin Prefecture by secret edict. The case won't start before the investigations are finished, so everything is still calm. Xie Bi, you needn't be in such a hurry to be distant with me to avoid problems." Yan Yujin spoke in a humorous tone, but his words were unyielding. "I wanted to come see Jingrui and Su despite it being so late, I didn't come to see you! If you don't like it, you can come bite me!"

"Bah!" scoffed Xie Bi, "Your skin is so thick, who can bite through it?"

"All right all right. Enough with the wisecracks, onto a serious topic now." Yan Yujin pulled a chair over to the table and chugged a cup of tea. "I bet you guys don't even know how great your timing is for your return!"

"Great timing?" Xiao Jingrui blinked, confused. "What are we in time for?"

“Haha!” Yan Yujin smacked his best friend’s shoulder with vigor, “You guys are just in time for a huge event!”

Hearing this, Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi’s eyes both widened with curiosity. The two knew Yan Yujin very well. This nephew of the Empress was the biggest drama lover in the capital. Wherever a spectacle existed, one would certainly see his shadow. Since he had seen so many events, his standards were naturally high. So, whatever it was, if it could be described by him as a “huge” event, it definitely couldn’t be boring.

“Stop torturing us! Spill it, what sort of event will there be? Will the Royal Court host a martial arts tournament?” urged Xie Bi.

“Even better than that,” said Yan Yujin, waving his hand. “Do you guys still remember who we saw outside the little town where we met Su?”

“We saw...” Xie Bi thought for a moment. “Ah, those envoys sent by the Yu empire to Liang! Weren’t they throwing a fit in the restaurant saying how they lost their letter of credence? They were smashing things and searching people. Those barbarians were just itching for a lesson! Have they entered the capital? What are they here for?”

“Hehe,” grinned Yan Yujin, “They’re here to request a political marriage!”

“Oh, is that so...” Xie Bi was rather disappointed. “The Emperor will examine the envoys as usual. It will be interesting, but hardly a huge event.”

“Hey, don’t jump to conclusions.” Yan Yujin gave him a sidelong glance. “Not only will this event involve the Emperor and the Yu envoys, it will also include a third party you’ll never think of! Take a guess!”

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi had only begun to think when Mei Changsu said, “Have the envoys from the northern Yan empire also arrived at Jinling?”

Yan Yujin was slightly taken aback, but quickly regained his excitement. “Su is correct. The party of envoys from Yan is also quite sizeable. The two groups have been competing in Jinling for quite some days. The Emperor couldn’t make a decision, or perhaps he didn’t want to make a decision. So, he declared in an edict for there to be a fair competition in three days, outside the Vermillion Bird Gate!”

“This sounds more interesting.” Xiao Jingrui raised his eyebrows. “We’ve already seen Jindiao Chaiming as part of the Yu envoys. I don’t know if Yan brought Tuoba Hao with them, but their representative couldn’t be any weaker. A competition between these two parties will surely be a sight.”

“A competition between two? There will be three parties!” Yan Yujin laughed, pleased with himself.



“Oh?” The two brothers asked simultaneously, “Who else?”

Yan Yujin was enjoying the suspense. He was just about to tease them some more, when Mei Changsu chuckled and said, “I’m guessing our host. Gentlemen are enamoured by fair ladies. Shouldn’t our own brave warriors of Liang have a chance as well?”

Facing the inquiring gazes from the two brothers, Yan Yujin was forced to confirm. “Su is correct. This is the third interested party.”

Xie Bi was surprised. “His Majesty’s edict is strange. If he does not want a political tie, can’t he simply refuse? If he wants a political marriage, why is he dragging in our own men into the competition?”

“You don’t understand now, do you?” Yan Yujin was in good spirits again. “As I said before, they are here to request a marriage. They’re not simply negotiating for a political tie! Did you think it would be the same as the past, where if the Emperor agrees, a suitable princess would be simply chosen to enter the marriage? That the other party would not care who it is, as long as it’s a noble princess of the great Liang?”

“Are you suggesting that this time, envoys from Yu and Yan have come to ask for a specific princess in marriage?”

“That’s right.” Yan Yujin continued mysteriously, “A specific princess, a princess they’re willing to get beaten black and blue to marry... Do you want to take a guess...?”

Before he finished, Mei Changsu placed down his bowl of porridge and said, “I’m guessing it is Princess Nihuang.”

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi both jumped up in shock, gasping, “What?!”

Yan Yujin glared at Mei Changsu in resentment. He said bitterly, “Su, even though your intelligence is really something to be admired, this bad habit of correctly guessing everything is really tiresome. It makes people feel very unfulfilled!”

“Sorry, I will reflect on it. I won’t be like this anymore,” chuckled Mei Changsu. “Please continue.”

“What is there to continue? I’ve basically told all there is to the story...”

“This is all there is?” cried Xie Bi. “What type of idiotic request is this from Yu and Yan? The Emperor should’ve rejected it from the start, not start some public

tournament! Has none of the court officials said anything? How can Princess Nihuang marry to foreign land?"

A chilly smile appeared at the edges of Mei Changsu's lips, so faint that it was barely discernable.

Indeed, how can Princess Nihuang marry to foreign land? She was not your average noble lady who grew up in some secluded inner palace. Princess Nihuang was a brilliant female general, commanding a hundred thousand cavalry units at the empire's southern border. Ten years ago, Liang's southern enemy Chu raised war. The Prince of Yunnan, Mu Shen was in charge of protecting the southern border, and died in battle. His daughter Nihuang was appointed commander in the crisis. The entire army battled Chu in cloths of mourning and annihilated thirty thousand enemies. After the war, the Emperor decreed Princess Nihuang to defend the southern border in place of her young brother. The whole southern army was under her command. The Princess also once swore to the heavens that she will not marry until her young brother can inherit the heavy duty of Yunnan. She is twenty-seven years old now, and still unmarried.

## CHAPTER 4

Due to Princess Nihuang's important status, the noble young men were taken aback at the Emperor's decision to allow foreigners in this competition for her hand in marriage. Xiao Jingrui was the first to ask, "Didn't the Emperor ask for Princess Nihuang's opinion in this matter?"

Yan Yujin continued slowly, "Of course he did. The Princess agreed, since the heir to the Prince of Yunnan, Mu Qing, came of age last month and inherited the title. But, she did add several conditions. First, the competitor must be the person asking for her hand. Additionally, she'll leave the literary tournament to His Majesty, but the top candidates in the martial arts tournament must compete with her. She will only marry if she loses to them."

The two brothers breathed a sigh of relief after hearing this. Xie Bi said reproachfully, "Stupid Yujin, you were riling us up on purpose! This is much better. Most of the top fighters in Yu and Yan must be married, and thus won't be eligible. I doubt there will be anyone with skills better than our Princess Nihuang in the small pool of unmarried men."

"They don't necessarily need better skills than her," interjected Mei Changsu again. "If the Princess is interested in a candidate, she will naturally lose even if she is stronger."

"I think so too," said Yan Yujin smugly. "You all know that the Princess has always liked me best..."

Xie Bi spat out the tea he was drinking and coughed, "The...the Princess has always liked to yell at you best! A weirdo like you can give up hope. Princess Nihuang has been weathered from many battlefields. She can only like a man who is reliable and responsible."

"Ahh," sighed Yan Yujin. "Xie Bi, you're so cruel, bursting my dreams like that..."

“Stop messing around already.” Xiao Jingrui gave Yan Yujin a shove and said, “But Yu and Yan must have come here with sweet dreams. I mean, they don’t lose much even if they fail, but if they succeed... Think about it, not only will the two empires be tied in marriage, they will also gain a military genius and a boost to their fame.”

Mei Changsu said mildly, “The Royal Courts of Yu and Yan have been shaky lately, no? Each have a few parties battling for the position of Crown Prince. If a Prince manages to marry Princess Nihuang now, it would be the same as securing the position of Crown Prince.”

“Su really got to the root of the matter there. Even though they know we wouldn’t marry Princess Nihuang to foreign land, they must still take this opportunity to compete. If they manage to win by some stroke of luck, it will guarantee victory back home.” Yan Yujin added with admiration, “I wonder who gave them this idea for them to summon their courage and come here.”

Mei Changsu looked at Yan Yujin with great interest and asked, “How are you certain that someone gave them this idea?”

Yan Yujin shrugged, “I don’t really like to analyze things. This is just my intuition speaking. Think about it, the two empires thought of this idea at the same time, and took action at about the same time. Isn’t that too much of a coincidence?”

“Who cares about coincidences, it’s all good as long as Princess Nihuang does not marry a foreigner.” Xie Bi waved his hand, and turned towards Mei Changsu. “Su, who do you think will win in this competition?”

Mei Changsu laughed in spite of himself. “I’m not a fortune-teller. How could I know?”

“You correctly guessed everything Yujin asked just now. I thought you could see the future!” Xie Bi laughed as well.

“All right, I’ll tell you the truth,” chuckled Mei Changsu. “I didn’t actually guess.”

“Didn’t guess?” Yan Yujin immediately became excited. “Does Su actually know the arts of fortune-telling?”

“How can a mere fool such as I untangle the intricacies of fortune?” Mei Changsu took out a roll of text from his sleeves as he spoke, “I did not guess. I actually knew of this matter long before. It says it all right here...”

Yan Yujin took the text with great curiosity. The three gathered around to read it, and cried out in astonishment.

“This is a letter by the hands of the Emperor of Yu, appointing his envoys to request a political marriage!” Xie Bi’s eyes bulged. “Why is it in your hands?”

“Ah, the restaurant in that town... The Yu envoys really lost their letter of credence.” Yan Yujin tilted his head and stared at Mei Changsu. “Su, were you really bored or something? Stealing their letter like that...”

“You’re right, I was really bored.” Mei Changsu still wore his light smile. “The Yu envoys happened to rest in the same inn as me. The owner of the inn told me they kept a long sandalwood box under close guard, which definitely contained treasures. I was curious, so I asked Feiliu to bring it to me. Who knew it was just an official letter? Since it had nothing to do with someone like me, I wasn’t really interested. I was intending to place it back, but they discovered the loss so quickly and made a scene. There was no choice, so I never ended up returning it...”

The three had all been witness to Feiliu’s amazing skills, so none were surprised to hear that he was the culprit. But really, this Mei Changsu is a bit too curious. Isn’t he afraid of getting into trouble by taking the letter of credence from envoys?

“Oh right, are there any requirements or limitations for the competition?” Xiao Jingrui returned the conversation to its original topic.

“Of course. He needs to be from a good family, of similar age, of handsome features, and unmarried...”

“Just that?”

“Just that.”

“Ah!” cried Xie Bi, “Then you can join too, brother!”

“Me?” Xiao Jingrui was startled. “I have great respect for Princess Nihuang, but I’ve never thought of...”

“Nobody’s asking you to be the final victor,” said Xie Bi, tugging on his sleeves. “The more men from Liang to compete, the better, since it will lessen the chance of a victor from Yu or Yan. Since you’re so outstanding, you will definitely eliminate many competitors. You can also filter out unqualified candidates for Princess Nihuang.”

“But...”

“But what? My combat skills are lacking, so it’ll be useless even if I sign up. However, you’re the second son of Heaven’s Spring. Uncle Zhuo taught you martial arts personally, so you qualify as a great fighter at least. Su has gone to such lengths on our way back to give you pointers for your moves. Just think of it as gaining some

battle experience.” Without further ado, Xie Bi turned to Yan Yujin and said, “Yujin, please sign him up tomorrow.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about it, I’ve already signed him up.” Yan Yujin grinned impishly.

“Oy... You two...”

“Don’t be nervous,” said Mei Changsu, suppressing his laughter, “I know your level in martial arts very well. It’ll be impossible to be the final victor, but what’s the harm in competing for a few rounds?”

“Are those words supposed to comfort me?” Xiao Jingrui felt like crying. “Am I fun to bully or something...?”

Xie Bi thought of another question, “The nobility of Jinling can’t be the only ones who know of this event, right? Can talented people from the common class join as well?”

“Of course they can.” Yan Yujin gave him a glance, “News like this can’t be hidden anyway. Besides, the Emperor wants to choose a good husband for the Princess, to reward her hardships on the battlefields. Haven’t you noticed all sorts of brilliant martial artists on your way to the capital?”

The three recalled carefully, and slowly realized that it was just as Yan Yujin had said. Since there always was an endless stream of people entering the capital, they haven’t paid much attention.

“All right, enough chatting with you guys.” Yan Yujin stood up and stretched. “I need to get a good rest so that in three days, I can exhibit my amazing skills, beat down all the brilliant martial artists, and win the maiden heart of Princess Nihuang...”

Xie Bi rolled his eyes. “This guy’s dreaming while he’s still awake...”

“It really is time to leave. Su needs to rest.” Xiao Jingrui added, “Feiliu has been asleep for a long time now.”

Everyone turned. Feiliu was lying on the bed still clothed, with the curtains still up. He was sleeping soundly.

“He still feels like a block of ice even when he’s asleep—” Yan Yujin began to comment when Feiliu’s eyes suddenly opened. Startled, he pointed at Xiao Jingrui. “He said that!”

Feiliu’s eyes stared off in the distance for a bit, then closed again.

“Don’t worry, he already knows your voices,” assured Mei Changsu. “If there was a stranger’s voice, Feiliu would wake up immediately.”

“Phew,” breathed Yan Yujin, patting his chest. “Then we will take our leave. Please rest early, Su.”

Mei Changsu rose to walk the others to the door and watched as the three left. The gong sounded for 9PM, and he stopped to listen. He stared out into the silent darkness of the manor for a long while, before slowly closing the door.

## CHAPTER 5

The city of Jinling was famed for its royal brilliance, with the Royal Palace of the Emperor of Liang at its centre. After exiting the South Victory Gate and following a slanted red brick road, one would find themselves before an exquisite manor, independent yet seemingly one with the palace.

The manor is not extraordinarily large, yet a dire mistake would be made should one deduce the owner of the manor by its size. The main gate of the manor was closed year-round. Above them hung a pure black sign with gold edges. The sign reads, “Manor of Liyang”.

Princess Liyang, the only living sister of the Emperor, the wife of the Marquess of Ning.

Everyone in the capital with some years to their names could clearly remember the grand occasion of the Princess’s marriage that stirred up the city. The couple who gazed upon the commoners atop the Phoenix Building could be accurately described as a hero and a beauty. Twenty-four years flew by, and the couple remains attentive and loving. They reared three sons and one daughter, all of whom are intelligent and respectful. This was the perfect model family in everyone’s eyes.

According to the customs of the royal family, Xie Yu should have relocated to the Princess’s manor after marriage, and be referred to as a “Prince Consort” rather than “Marquess”. The late Empress Dowager<sup>4</sup> did not approve of Princess missing the joys of family life without due to her high status. In accordance with the Princess’s own wishes as well, she moved into the Manor of the Marquess of Ning after their marriage and paid proper respects to her father- and mother-in-laws. The Princess was dignified and virtuous in nature. She ordered servants to refer to her as Madam within the manor, being especially strict in this regard with her own servants. Later, Xie Yu was decorated for his military feats, elevating further within the Royal Court. As the Princess kept a constant low profile, people slowly became accustomed to seeing the

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<sup>4</sup> Emperor’s mother



relationship as “Marquess” and “Marchioness”, rather than what should have been “Princess” and “Prince Consort”.<sup>5</sup>

This Manor of Liyang was constructed when the Princess was fifteen and had been left idle since her marriage. Princess Liyang felt it a pity to leave the manor vacant, so she ordered all types of unique plants and flowers to be nurtured there. The manor was fragrant year-round, and was a top attraction within the capital. Royal Concubines and noble ladies frequently requested to sightsee during flowering seasons. The Princess would rest there for a few days to pay respect to Buddha, or to accompany the visiting Grand Empress Dowager.<sup>6</sup>

Their mother happened to be staying at her manor when Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi returned from their journey,

In the early morning, the two brothers obeyed their father’s command and went to greet the Princess at the Manor of Liyang, then escorted her royal carriage back to the Manor of the Marquess of Ning. As the old Marquess and Marchioness have passed away, there was no need to greet them. Princess Liyang instructed the party to return straight to her usual dwellings in the main building of the inner courtyard.

The party walked along the corridor, passing by the side courtyard. Sweet osmanthus trees were planted along the walls, which had some late blooms and lingering fragrance. Princess Liyang slowed down, apparently enjoying the fragrance in the breeze. Right at that moment, a whisper of guqin<sup>7</sup> travelled over the walls. The music was indistinct as it came from quite some distance, but the tone was clear and spirited, whisking the listeners away to a greater realm.

“Who is playing the guqin? The musician is remarkably talented.”

Xiao Jingrui leaned over for a closer listen. After a moment, he replied, “This is a friend of mine. His name is Su Zhe. Upon my invitation, he came to Jinling to rest and recuperate. He is currently staying at the Snow Cottage.”

“Does Mother wish to meet him?” asked Xie Bi quickly.

Princess Liyang smiled softly. “Since he is Jingrui’s friend, he is naturally under the care of you two. Why would there be a need to meet me?”

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<sup>5</sup> To clear any potential confusion: According to customs, the couple should be viewed as “the Princess and her husband”, with the Princess holding higher status. However, the couple is viewed as “the Marquess and his wife”, with the Marquess holding higher status.

<sup>6</sup> Emperor’s grandmother

<sup>7</sup> A beautiful plucked seven-string instrument. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guqin>

“But it’s hard to hear the music properly here. Why don’t I ask Su to come to the inner courtyard to play for Mother?” suggested Xie Bi.

Princess Liyang frowned slightly, but her voice was still gentle. “Bi, this Mr. Su is a guest here, not some entertainer to summon here and there. If it is meant to be, I will hear him play again. If fate dictates otherwise, then it cannot be forced.”

Xiao Jingrui felt similarly to Princess Liyang at his brother’s suggestion, and was rather upset. However, as their mother has already rejected the idea, he decided to stay silent. Of course, it was not Xie Bi’s intention to be rude. He was accustomed to having people oblige his mother’s wishes due to her high status, and didn’t really think about his suggestion. His face flushed from the resulting rebuke.

They arrived at the main building of the inner courtyard. Princess Liyang sat down on a long couch by the window. She was naturally clever, and her perceptive eyes saw that her sons appeared to have other matters to attend to, and did not keep them for long. After some idle chatter, she sent the two away.

Due to the circumstances of his birth, Xiao Jingrui had long since renounced his right to the Marquess title, insisting the inheritance for Xie Bi instead. As Xie Bi grew older, it became evident that he was better than his brother in political affairs and managing relations. For the past few years, the Marquess of Ning has been delegating the majority of the family affairs to Xie Bi and having him be the representative in many important occasions. Thus, Xie Bi was constantly under a pile of work, and disappeared as soon as he left the inner courtyard. The comparatively idle Xiao Jingrui instead rushed to the Snow Cottage.

Mei Changsu had abandoned the guqin and was reading under a tree. He raised his head and smiled brightly towards the courtyard entrance when he heard hurried footsteps. Spots of sunlight slipped between leaves to dance softly upon his face, making the smile appear exceedingly radiant.

Xiao Jingrui smiled as well, and gave a slight bow in greeting. He asked, “Did Su rest well last night?”

“Were you worried that I won’t be able to sleep well?” Mei Changsu motioned for him to bring a chair over to sit. “I’m not picky with my beds. I only slept in due to staying up late, thinking about the ‘huge event’ Yujin spoke of. Feiliu said that you came here in the morning as well?”

“Mhmm.” Xiao Jingrui looked around, “Where’s Feiliu?”

“Oh, I let him go play outside since it’s his first time in Jinling,” answered Mei Changsu mildly.

Xiao Jingrui broke out in a cold sweat. Although Feiliu was mentally a child, his combat skills were those of a master. What a daring person Mei Changsu was, to allow Feiliu to go play so easily.

“Don’t worry, our Feiliu wouldn’t cause any disturbances.” Mei Changsu smiled, as if reading Xiao Jingrui’s mind. “With his skills, he can disappear in a flash even if he made a mess. People wouldn’t be able to come trouble this manor.”

“You know I’m not concerned about being troubled,” defended Xiao Jingrui with a smile, “Su is attaching false blame on me again.”

Mei Changsu didn’t respond. Instead, he knocked on the table and said, “Since you’re here, why don’t we battle a bit in a game of Go?”

Xiao Jingrui stood up immediately and went indoors to fetch a Go set. He set up the game on a stone table under the tree. Even though Mei Changsu was incredibly talented, he is not perfect, at least not in his skills in Go. Xiao Jingrui had perfect understandings of his capabilities from their trip together. He did require full power to force Mei Changsu to frown in deep thought and slowly contemplate his next move.

Three rounds later, Mei Changsu was in absolute defeat. Xiao Jingrui laughed while clearing the mess of stones, “Su, although you’re not bad at Go, you don’t have an instinct for counting. I can safely boast that you won’t be able to win against me in this lifetime.”

“Don’t get haughty now. Just wait until I teach Feiliu, he’ll be making you cry. Feiliu’s mind is not as bright and complicated as others, but his focus is astonishing. Out of all the people I know, no one can compare with him in that regard.”

Xiao Jingrui ignored his attempt to preserve dignity, and raised his head to look outside. He asked, “Where did you send Feiliu? It’s already noon now, and he hasn’t returned.”

## CHAPTER 6

Speak of the devil. At that moment, clear cries sounded from outside the courtyard, followed by the sound of cloth snapping in the air. A deep and powerful male voice yelled, “Who dares to make mischief in the manor of the Marquess? Freeze!”

“Oh no, this voice belongs to...to...” Xiao Jingrui jumped up, startled. He felt a squeeze on his arm, and turned to find a solemn Mei Changsu gripping his forearm and saying gravely, “Quick, take me there!”

Without further thought, Xiao Jingrui hastily wrapped his arm around Mei Changsu’s waist. He summoned his inner energy, took a few great leaps over buildings, and flew to the scene of the disturbance.

They flitted across a side corridor and rushed into the main courtyard. Two figures were rushing about in intense combat. Not only did Feiliu possess peculiar movement abilities, he was also a fierce swordsman. The point of his sword sent cutting chills into his opponents with their vicious attacks. Yet, his current opponent did not lose even a slight bit of ground, deflecting and striking with his palm technique. His intense inner energy was fiery like the scorching sun. His attacks rendered the Feiliu incapable of escaping from his range, as if exposing all of the youth’s mysterious arts under its rays.

“Feiliu, stop!” shouted Mei Changsu. Xiao Jingrui quickly collected himself and followed suit, calling, “Commander Meng, please stop!”

Feiliu had always obeyed the commands of Mei Changsu without question. He immediately withdrew his sword and took a step back. His opponent did not press on and likewise stopped his attacks, though he remained on guard.

“Jingrui, what’s going on?” questioned an imposing voice. Xiao Jingrui finally realized that his father was present as well. The Marquess was standing in the southeastern corner of the courtyard, as if preventing Feiliu from entering the inner courtyard.

“Please forgive me, Marquess.” Mei Changsu stepped forward slowly and bowed. “This is a guard of mine. He is rather poor of conduct, and tends to go in and out without regard for customs. I am to blame for neglecting his discipline, and am willing to bear any punishment.”

Xiao Jingrui also hurried forward to explain, “This is definitely a misunderstanding. Feiliu always enjoys flying about, but he would never harm anyone as long as he isn’t provoked...”

His face still dark, Xie Yu interrupted his son’s words and spoke to Mei Changsu, “Mr. Su is a guest of ours, and naturally we would never inflict insult upon you. However, I’m afraid that this habit of your attendant must be changed, or a similar misunderstanding will repeat in the future.”

“You are absolutely right, Marquess. I will definitely be stricter in my discipline.”

Xie Yu made a sound of approval, and finally turned towards Feiliu’s opponent. Surprisingly, he gave a slight bow. He said apologetically, “Commander Meng came today as a guest. I did not expect to disturb you in this skirmish. Please accept my apologies.”

Commander Meng was about forty years old, tall with a solid build and firm features. His eyes were bright and piercing, yet refined. When he saw the Marquess of Ning coming over to apologize, he immediately waved his hand and said easily, “I was only surprised by this youth’s peculiar movements. He dared to fly across the manor of a Marquess, all the while remaining undetected by the guards. I thought he was some criminal with evil intents, so I decided to lend you a hand, Marquess. Since it was a misunderstanding, let’s just think of it as sparring.” He eyed Mei Changsu with curiosity, “If I may ask, who are you, sir?”

“My name is Su Zhe. I was acquainted with Mr. Xiao during my travels, and am lucky to be considered a friend. I came the capital for a short stay on his generous hospitality.”

“Su Zhe?” Commander Meng rolled the name over his tongue, and looked towards Feiliu, a youth who seemed so inconspicuous at first glance. He chuckled, “Mr. Su must be an exceptional man to have such a guard.”

“Not at all.” Mei Changsu smiled calmly. “I only happened to save Feiliu once from some misfortunes, and he decided to remain by my side in gratitude. I do not possess any outstanding characteristics to command such a skilled fighter.”

“Is that so?” One could not perceive whether or not he believed the explanation from his unchanging expression, but he did not pursue further. Xie Yu gave Xiao Jingrui a long look, but remained silent as well. He invited Commander Meng to take tea in the main hall, and the two left side by side.

As soon as they left, Xiao Jingrui slapped his forehead. He stomped in frustration and said, “Oh no oh no! My father is suspicious now. He’ll definitely call me over tonight to inquire after your real identity. What should I do?”

In contrast, Mei Changsu remained calm. He answered casually, “Just say I’m a friend you met during travels, and you don’t know anything else.”

“It’s not that simple!” grimaced Xiao Jingrui. “Do you know who that Commander Meng is?”

Mei Changsu’s eyes became slightly more focused. He sighed, “How many Commander Mengs could there be in the capital, who can receive such respect from the Marquess of Ning and possess such great skills in martial arts? He is, of course, the great general who commands the fifty thousand Royal Guards, Commander Meng Zhi.”

“Who is he, besides being the commander of the Royal Guards?”

“He is second in rankings to Xuan Bu of the Yu empire. I suppose he is currently the number one warrior of our empire...”

“Exactly. Think about it, a guard of yours could actually go neck to neck with the greatest warrior of Liang...”

“But Commander Meng didn’t even use his full power...”

“True, he wasn’t going all out. Even so, he’s still the greatest warrior of Liang. It’s astonishing that Feiliu can exchange so many blows with him without defeat. You know what kind of person my father is, there’s no way he’d believe you’re just an ordinary guest. Besides, even if I keep my mouth shut, my father will simply call Xie Bi and the truth will come tumbling out!”

“That’s true.” Mei Changsu tilted his head and thought for a moment. “Forget about it. If your father inquires further, then just tell him the truth. He’s only worried that you brought home someone with a mysterious background. It’ll be fine once it’s cleared up for him. It’s not as if I’m some criminal, I’m only hiding my identity to avoid disturbance. I can’t have you lying and deceiving your father just to conceal me.”

Xiao Jingrui felt very apologetic, and responded with embarrassment, “Su, I’m really sorry. But don’t worry, my father is a discreet man of few words. Even if he learns about your true identity, it’ll only be so that he can understand the situation. He won’t speak about it to others.”

“How could you be blamed? It’s my fault for being too relaxed recently and not thinking things through, thus allowing Feiliu to make a scene...” At those words, Mei Changsu saw Feiliu lower his head with apprehension. He quickly moved to comfort Feiliu, softly patting on the head, and coaxed gently, “No no, it’s not Feiliu’s fault. It’s because of that uncle. He stopped you, so you got into a fight, right?”

Feiliu nodded.

“That’s why, our Feiliu was not wrong at all! It was that uncle’s fault.”

Xiao Jingrui began to sweat again. Who disciplines a child like that?

“But you know, if Feiliu wants to go out in the future, you should walk out through the front door. When you return, you need to walk in through the front door as well. You can’t run around on the walls and rooftops like usual. The people here are very timid, but their eyes are very sharp. If they accidentally see Feiliu, they’ll be very scared... Okay?”

“Kay.”

Xiao Jingrui couldn’t help but think to himself, Feiliu probably wouldn’t mature with this sort of education even if he did not have a head injury.

Mei Changsu did not seem concerned about the commotion. He brought Feiliu back to the Snow Cottage, and passed the time with music and games just as leisurely as before. On the contrary, Xiao Jingrui was anxious all day, thinking about this and that.

Sure enough, Xie Yu called Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi to his study at night. He went straight to the point and asked, “What is the background of that Mr. Su you’ve invited here?”

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi looked at each other. They knew that their father’s suspicions must’ve been raised to question them like that. It would be impossible to conceal the truth. Not to mention, how could they, as sons, defy their father? There was a brief pause, and Xie Bi blurted out the truth, “Su... His real name...is Mei Changsu. I believe Father has heard of him. He is the current chief of the world’s largest clan, the East River Alliance...”

Xie Yu was shocked. He was frozen for a long time. Finally, he replied, “No wonder a mere guard of his is so skilled... So he is the top rank of Langya, Mr. Mei of East River...”

## CHAPTER 7

Top rank of Langya, Mr. Mei of East River.

Xie Yu was descended from an ancient noble family and possessed the high rank of Marquess, but it was impossible for him to be unimpressed by this title.

“He glitters in the distance like ice, like snow. Serenely, a subtle fragrance floats along the winding river. Recognizing all heroes of this world, at the head of East River is Mr. Mei.”<sup>8</sup> This was the poem recited by Chief Shu Qitian of the northern superpower Cliff Dragon Sect when he first met Mei Changsu nine years ago.

At the time, the Gongsun family entered the East River area while fleeing from assassination. Shu Qitian crossed the river in chase. The newly appointed Chief of the East River Alliance, Mei Changsu, arrived in person at the riverside to greet Shu Qitian. The two men, unarmed and without guards, had a private discussion at the summit of Mt. He. After two days, Shu Qitian descended the mountain to return to the north, the Gongsun family was saved, and the River East Alliance’s fame spread throughout the lands.

“The Chief of the River East Alliance has always kept a low profile. Hardly anyone has ever seen him... How did you two become acquainted with him?” asked Xie Yu after pondered for a moment.

“It was my brother...” stammered Xie Bi. Xiao Jingrui took over, “Yes, Father. Last winter, I passed by Mt. Qin in my travels and was resting at a teahouse. Coincidentally, Su was sitting at the next table. He was staring at a branch of plum blossoms<sup>9</sup> I was holding, and seemed as if he really liked it. I gifted the plum blossoms to him without much thought, and we became acquainted. I was often under his care as I was journeying thereafter. Su has a frail body, and is in poor health. The

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<sup>8</sup> The poem is pretty vague. The gist of it is praising Mei Changsu for his beauty and serene air, then naming him as the leader of East River. Poems are hard to translate. :(

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps by design or perhaps by chance, Mei Changsu’s surname “Mei” refers to the plum blossom.



elderly doctor, Dr. Xun Zhen told him that he must leave East River and ignore the affairs within his alliance in order to focus on recovery. So, I took this opportunity to invite him for a short stay in Jinling... As Father knows, Su's fame is too widespread. He decided to use the alias Su Zhe in order to maintain a tranquil lifestyle..."

"So that's how it is..." Xie Yu nodded. "No matter. Mr. Su is an honoured guest. You two must take good care of him."

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi bowed together dutifully, and slowly walked out.

As soon as they left their father's study, Xie Bi grabbed Xiao Jingrui with inquiries. He finally learned about Feiliu's fight with Commander Meng, and tutted in amazement. The two went to the Snow Cottage to inform Mei Changsu about their father learning his real identity. The Chief of the East River Alliance merely smiled faintly, and didn't pay it much mind.

The next day in the early morning, the Empress's nephew Yan Yujin came over finely dressed. He announced, "Su's weariness from his travels should have been rested by now. So today, let's all go out to play." He dragged Xiao Jingrui and Mei Changsu out, and left behind Xie Bi, who was swamped in work with resentful eyes.

The tournament for Princess Nihuang's hand in marriage was nearing, so the capital was blooming with talented young men from all over the lands. All the restaurants and teahouses were bustling with business. Occasionally, there would be some exciting brawls, as if people were taking the first round of eliminations into their own hands. The drama-loving Yan Yujin found all of this highly entertaining, and had been running around to watch shows since the day he returned. When he brought Xiao Jingrui and Mei Changsu out with him, he could already introduce with authority the restaurants with the most duels, and the teahouses with the highest level fighters.

They watched a day's worth of brawls, and hardly saw any skilled fighters. (Of course, the real masters of martial arts would never make a spectacle of themselves by joining this mess.) Yan Yujin was still in high spirits, but Xiao Jingrui has been bored for quite some time. Normally, he would try to hang in there for his good friend's enjoyment, but today they came with Mei Changsu. Once he saw him beginning to show signs of weariness, he immediately rejected Yan Yujin's suggestion to go play in another restaurant.

"Why not? That place is really fun. I went there a few days ago, and saw someone with a morning star fighting another with dual swords. The person didn't strike properly with his morning star, and it ended up flying back. He hit himself on the forehead and fainted. Oh, I had such a great laugh..."

Xiao Jingrui reminded him quietly, "Yujin, Su is tired."

“Eh?” Yan Yujin saw Mei Changsu’s pale face and smacked himself. “I was too thoughtless. Su is sick, of course he would be different from us. Why don’t we rest here then? The food here is pretty good. Should I order some signature dishes for you to try out, Su?”

“We had snacks not more than two hours ago, how would we have room for more food?” Mei Changsu leaned back in his chair. Though he appeared weary, he still had some vigor. “Let’s sit for awhile then each go home. Even though we came out to play, we can’t be too extreme. We should let Jingrui return home to eat dinner with his family.”

“That’s true, Xiao Jingrui is a good child,” said Yan Yujin approvingly. “Unlike me. My father does not care in the least about what time I return home...”

Although he spoke in a light-hearted manner, Mei Changsu still detected a hint of loneliness. He turned to take a deep look at Yan Yujin. Xiao Jingrui didn’t notice, being too familiar with him. Instead, he waved his hand for a server and ordered him to go rent a clean pillowed litter.<sup>10</sup>

A while later, the litter arrived, and the three parted ways in front of the restaurant. Yan Yujin continued to wander around, and Xiao Jingrui accompanied Mei Changsu to return to the Manor of the Marquess of Ning.

While they were exiting the litter in front of the manor, a servant who saw them in the distance ran inside to announce their return. Xie Bi rushed out to greet them immediately after. He called out as soon as he saw the two, “Why were you out for so long? Someone wants to see you. They’ve been waiting for quite awhile now!”

Xiao Jingrui’s response to Xie Bi’s complaints was an immediate inquiry, “Who wants to see us?” On the other hand, Mei Changsu paused his footsteps, and a hint of hesitation flashed between his brows. But, it was only for a brief moment, and he quickly recovered his calm demeanor.

Xie Bi took some measured glances at the two’s outfits and said hurriedly, “It’s passable, you don’t need to change. Hurry up and come in with me. The Empress, Mother, and Princess Nihuang wants to see you.”

Xiao Jingrui was shocked. The three women Xie Bi spoke of could be considered the most noble and powerful women within the Liang empire. The Empress reigned over the Inner Palace,<sup>11</sup> and was the mother of the empire. Princess Liyang was the sister of the Emperor and the wife of the Marquess of Ning. Although Princess Nihuang had a lower status, she commanded the ten thousand cavalry units at the empire’s southern border. It was rare to see even one of the three, not to mention

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<sup>10</sup> A carriage carried by humans.

<sup>11</sup> The location for the Emperor’s harem.

having them especially waiting here together. It's safe to say that nobody has ever been received at such a rare gathering before.

“What are you doing so dazed?” Xie Bi gave his brother a poke, “It's okay if you don't want to go in. They mainly want to meet Su anyway.”

“Just listen to yourself.” Xiao Jingrui glared at Xie Bi unhappily, “Did you pique their curiosity by being too talkative and telling them about the fight between Feiliu and Commander Meng? Did you forget that Su is here to recover from his illness? He is not here to acquaint all the nobles. Will he still be able to relax peacefully if he is placed in the limelight?”

Xie Bi felt rather ashamed after being reprimanded, and apologized with embarrassment, “It was my fault. I accidentally let it slip while entertaining the guests with Mother. Please forgive me, Su.”

“No no,” said Mei Changsu. He spoke with indifference, “I should be thankful that Young Master Xie is introducing me to nobles. Who knows, when I greet them in a little while, the Empress will perhaps reward me with treasures in place of Prince Yu.”

## CHAPTER 8

Xie Bi was shocked by Mei Changsu's words. His heart dropped. He raised his eyes, and saw that while Mei Changsu was wearing a light smile, but his eyes did not show a hint of laughter. Xie Bi knew his little scheme has been seen through by this extraordinarily intelligent Chief of the East River Alliance. He felt thoroughly embarrassed, and thought desperately for a way to explain himself.

Due to Xiao Jingrui's special circumstances, he spent the majority of his life travelling outside of the capital, especially after he came of age. He was never involved in politics. Yet even so, he was still a son of a Marquess, and had some basic knowledge of the major powers in the Royal Court. When he heard the words of Mei Changsu and saw Xie Bi's expression, a bit of contemplation made the situation clear for him. He was furious. Xiao Jingrui marched forward to shield Mei Changsu behind him and told Xie Bi loudly, "Go inform the Empress and Mother, Su is unwell and cannot go greet them."

"What are you doing, brother?" Xie Bi tried to push him aside hastily. "Stop causing trouble. Do you think the people waiting in the main hall are just average guests? You can't simply see them if you want to, and refuse if you don't."

Xiao Jingrui tightened his jaw. He gripped onto Xie Bi's arm and summoned his inner energy, rendering his brother unable to move. He stared right into Xie Bi's eyes and spoke with seriousness, "I believe that Mother and Princess Nihuang are only curious. The one who really wants to meet Su is the Empress, right? So, I will say this again. Please go inform the Empress, Su is unwell and does not wish to lose his bearings in front of Her Majesty, and asks for her forgiveness."

Xie Bi struggled against Xiao Jingrui's grasp with great strength, but was unable to free himself. He flushed with embarrassment and annoyance. Although Xie Bi referred to Xiao Jingrui with "brother", and a close brotherly bond really existed between the two, Xie Bi never truly viewed or respected Xiao Jingrui as a real elder brother. Xiao Jingrui was gentle and modest in nature. He had always been yielding to his siblings, never ordered them around as an elder brother, and always forgave any light bullying he received. He was especially never stern with Xie Bi, the heir. His sudden tough attitude was a surprise to Xie Bi, who was not accustomed to such.

Mei Changsu walked forward and spoke with reluctance, “Nevermind, Jingrui. I will—” He did not finish before Xiao Jingrui retorted without even turning, “No! Absolutely not!”

“Brother!!”

“I don’t care what you were thinking when you invited Su to Jinling. All I know is that I invited him to rest and recuperate. These struggles have nothing to do with him.” Xiao Jingrui’s eyes were firm and unyielding. “Prince Yu or the Crown Prince, whatever stance you wish to take, whomever you wish to side with, that is your business. Father has let you be, and so will I, to an even greater degree. However, Su is not involved in the affairs of the Royal Court. Even if he controls the world’s greatest clan, even if he possesses appointable talent, you cannot invite him on false premises and scheme to involve him in the conflict like this, with no regard for his thoughts. Even if Su was a stranger, your actions are against moral character. Not to mention, you must possess at least some friendly feelings towards him through our travels together, no?”

Xie Bi had never heard such sharp words from Xiao Jingrui before. Besides, he was in the wrong, and so was naturally less imposing. He mumbled a retort, “It’s just to meet the Empress, he doesn’t have to decide anything...”

“Just to meet the Empress?” Xiao Jingrui chuckled coldly, “If it wasn’t for Su’s vast knowledge and his status as the Chief of the East River Alliance, why would the Empress wish to meet him out of the blue? Should the Empress present the honour of recruitment on behalf of Prince Yu during the meeting, how should Su respond? If the Empress bestows some exceptionally expensive gifts, do you want Su to accept or refuse? Without Su’s approval, you’ve unreasonably placed him in a difficult situation. Are your actions befitting that of a friend?”

Xie Bi’s expression began to falter after being so fiercely reprimanded. His expression was full of embarrassment, and veins were appearing on his forehead. Xiao Jingrui softened upon seeing this. He lowered his tone and continued slowly, “Brother, the family has always relied on your care and great efforts. I haven’t provided you with a lot of help, and for that I feel apologetic. I know that everything you do is for the Xie family. Regardless, we cannot treat a friend like this. If Yujin learns of this, he would yell at you too. I am going to accompany Su to the Snow Cottage now. As for the Empress... I believe that with your clever wit, you’ll be able to resolve the situation.” After that, he turned to grab Mei Changsu, and left without so much as a backwards glance.

Xie Bi stood dumbstruck for a bit. Finally, he sighed, and did not dare to follow.

Once they returned to the Snow Cottage, Mei Changsu sat down on the long chair beneath the tree as usual. Xiao Jingrui poured him a cup of hot tea, and brought a stool close by. He sat quietly for a long time. Finally, he said in a low voice, "Sorry..."

Mei Changsu's eyes slowly rested upon the face of Xiao Jingrui. This young man of two families had now regained his usual warmth. His face was gentle and his eyes were clear, completely devoid of the fierceness and determination from before. Yet, as he watched him, Mei Changsu felt a shock that was difficult to articulate.

Mei Changsu originally thought Xiao Jingrui to be a simple and kind child. He never imagined this young man to possess such firm and resolute principles on friendship and moral character.

He did not wish to go meet the Empress currently, but he most likely would've been able to handle the situation if they had to meet. Still, he couldn't help but be touched when Xiao Jingrui stepped forward to block his path, protecting him without any reservations.

If everyone in the world can be like Xiao Jingrui, then the world may become a much better place. Unfortunately, too many people cannot do that, including himself...

"Su, please don't be upset with Xie Bi... He did not actually act in malice. He has always supported Prince Yu, and he truly admires your knowledge." Xiao Jingrui couldn't discern Mei Changsu's expression and felt a bit uneasy. "Your motive for coming to Jinling was to leave behind the disputes of the Alliance, and yet we're making you face such a mess now..."

Mei Changsu gave a slight smile. He reached out and patted Xiao Jingrui on the knee, speaking quietly, "Being upset would be too much... I know that everyone has their own reasons for the actions they take, and Xie Bi is no different. Unfortunately, everyone tends to think too much about themselves. Many annoyances in the world are born this way. This is the same anywhere in the world. The Yan and Yu are spilling blood over their thrones, how could our Liang empire be any different?"

"Before you came to Jinling, you said that you needed to hide your identity." Xiao Jingrui hung his head and looked very disheartened. "I clearly promised you, yet I couldn't fulfill it..."

"How could you be blamed for this? It originated from my mistake. I forgot to tell Feiliu to be careful..."

Xiao Jingrui shook his head and said gravely, "Su, you don't need to pretend to be blind to the truth to spare my feelings. After today's events, we should all understand that even if Feiliu did not fight with Commander Meng yesterday, Xie Bi would still reveal your true identity to Prince Yu..."

“All right then, why don’t we flee the capital under the veil of darkness?” joked Mei Changsu, trying to relax the mood.

“Su!!” Xiao Jingrui cried out, mixed between worry and laughter.

“All right now, stop worrying.” Mei Changsu laughed and leaned back on his chair. “What has happened happened, and everything will turn out fine. Both parties are desperately recruiting talented individuals. Since I unfortunately struck their fancy, I would only bring the troubles back to East River if I run back, and then get scolded by the people there for being a harbinger of disaster. It would be better to stay in the capital and watch the drama unfold. Once they’ve inspected me for a few more days, they’ll discover that I am just a useless scholar. Then, they wouldn’t take me in even if I went to seek them out.”

Xiao Jingrui knew that the situation wasn’t as simple as Mei Changsu claimed, but he was still amused into laughter, and his low spirits were wiped away.

In the end, the refusal did not stir up any trouble. The Empress and Princess Nihuang went off peacefully. It seems that Xie Bi really was rather outstanding in his ways. The dinner scene was very peaceful as well. Neither the Marquess of Ning nor Princess Liyang mentioned anything regarding their guest at the Snow Cottage. Xie Bi was even quieter, and returned to his quarters after a few bites. Xiao Jingrui followed soon after to check up on him. Xie Bi did not get angry with his brother, only requesting Xiao Jingrui to apologize to Su in his stead. Then, he used the excuse of feeling unwell and went to sleep early.

The next day, Yan Yujin came over again for more adventures, and found with surprise that nobody seemed very spirited. He immediately suspected that he missed out on some great event. He went straight to questioning Xiao Jingrui, but was not able to pry out any information after struggling for half a day. Thankfully, he finally remembered that the tournament to choose Princess Nihuang’s husband would begin the next day, and that he must rest and retain his energy to strive for his goal of winning the maiden. He finally stopped tormenting his best friend and returned home wearily.

## CHAPTER 9

Outside the Vermillion Bird Gate of the Jinling palace stood a towering building. It was constructed in the style of the Royal Family with decorated beams and sparkling tiles. This ceremonial building was named “Phoenix”. Since the time of the third Emperor, all celebrations such as marriage and coming-of-age within the royal family of Liang were held there while congratulations were received from thousands of citizens. Even though Princess Nihuang was not directly related to the Emperor, her famous deeds are unmatched, and her prestigious name was well-known. She generally received special honour in the Royal Court higher than that of the Emperor’s daughters. This tournament for her husband was naturally held in the Phoenix Building.

One month ago, the Emperor ordered the Department of Construction to erect a platform in the huge square before the Phoenix Building. Surrounding the platform was a circle of colourful damask tents for the nobility to sit beneath. Normal officials and other significant people were to sit scattered outside the tented area. As for regular citizens, they would of course be blocked outside the guarded premise. They will not be able to attend the grand occasion, and can only wait from afar for hints of news while chatting to relieve boredom.

Although the people who can personally see the tournament in its entirety were few in number, the importance of this event was self-evident. It could even be said that the attentive eyes of the whole world were all directed upon the platform outside the Vermillion Bird Gate, waiting for this most thrilling competition to begin.

The victor would be able to obtain the world’s most difficult to conquer, but also most brilliant woman.

The family of the Marquess of Ning were of course guests under the damask tents with their status. Everyone originally planned to go see this huge event together, but Xiao Jingrui was uncertain about bringing Mei Changsu to such a public occasion due to the increasing complications from the past two days. He was immersed in hesitation. The man in question was rather unconcerned about his dilemma. Mei Changsu did not express an interest in attending, and did not pronounce his plan to stay. Instead, as if watching a show, he looked on as Xiao Jingrui paced back and



forth while frowning in contemplation, and spent his other attentions happily entertaining Feiliu.

“What’re you guys doing? It’s so late and you guys haven’t even left yet!” Following this complaint was of course the Empress’s nephew, Yan Yujin. He wore a new outfit in pale lilac, and adorned his hair with a silver circlet, appearing very handsome. He stood at the entrance of the Snow Cottage and called boldly, “Hurry up! In an hour, even the Emperor will begin to leave from his quarters. What’re you dallying around for?”

Xiao Jingrui sighed, “I was debating about the attendance today.”

“Of course we’re attending! We won’t get our turn on stage today, but we did sign up, so we should at least go observe our future opponents.”

“I’m not talking about me. I’m talking about Su—”

“Su needs to go all the more. If you’re not even going to bring Su to such a huge event, then what entertainments will you take him to in the capital?”

“You don’t understand...” Xiao Jingrui’s expression remained heavy. He roughly explained the troubles of last night and continued, “All the important people will be present in this sort of occasion. Who knows what will happen if Su attends?”

Yan Yujin tilted his head and thought for a moment, then laughed. “If that’s the case, then all the more reason to go. If you make Su stay in the Snow Cottage, you can’t guarantee that the Crown Prince and Prince Yu won’t come visiting later with some excuses. Then, it’ll be a muddled mess of who came first and who came later, who said what and who gifted what. It’s the perfect opportunity today in front of the crowd for Su to meet everyone he needs to meet. He can use this opportunity to express his disinterest in recruitment. This way, nobody would be able to say anything about being the first to reach him. It’ll be more convenient for the future.”

Mei Changsu stopped arranging Feiliu’s headband. He raised his head and gave Yan Yujin a look of admiration. This young master did not like schemes, yet he could always see straight to the heart of the matter. One can’t deny his natural talent.

“What you said makes sense.” Xiao Jingrui did not like to think about these political trickeries either, and only thought about it for a whole morning for Mei Changsu. His head had been aching for awhile, so these words from Yan Yujin convinced him immediately. His whole body felt a lot more relaxed. “Shall we leave after Su finishes any preparations he requires?”

“No need.” Mei Changsu stood up, supported by Feiliu’s hand. “Feiliu and I are not requesting marriage, so what’s the need for dressing up? Let’s go. Xie Bi should be tired of waiting outside as well.”

“Eh? How did you know that Xie Bi was outside? I didn’t mention that just now did I?” Yan Yujin was very surprised.

“I guessed.” Mei Changsu smiled simply, and was the first to leave the Snow Cottage. Xie Bi was indeed waiting under an old willow tree outside the courtyard. He hurried forward to greet the group when he saw them coming out.

“Su, regarding two nights ago, it was my—”

“Why speak more about the matter?” Mei Changsu’s smile was light and gentle, without any hint of anger. “I did not mind. You don’t need to take it to heart either.”

The two met eyes and smiled, and indeed spoke no more about that matter. On one hand, Xiao Jingrui had deep brotherly love for Xie Bi. On the other, he held great respect for Mei Changsu. When he saw that there were no hard feelings between them, he felt as if the dark clouds have parted. He was extraordinarily happy that the atmosphere has returned to the peace he hoped for, and he was full of smiles.

They rode in a horse carriage to the Vermillion Bird Gate, which was already teeming with people when they arrived. Almost all the high officials and nobility in the capital have mingled here. Everyone was busy exchanging greetings and pleasantries with all their family, friends, and colleagues. The place was bustling like a market. The group shielded Mei Changsu between them, and greeted people nonstop all around them. The torrent of greetings relented slightly only when they reached the tented area.

The damask tents for the Yan and Xie families were not located at the same place. However, the Marquess of Ning and Princess Liyang were both accompanying the Emperor upon the Phoenix Building. So, Yan Yujin came to sit with the group, saying the more the merrier. Feiliu was not appearing and disappearing as usual. Instead, he stuck close to Mei Changsu’s side and stared at every person who got close. His icy aura sent chills down the three noble gentlemen close by.

When it was nearing noon, the bell atop the Phoenix Building rang suddenly, sounding nine long and five short rings to announce the Emperor. There was immediate silence below the building, with only the sound of a ceremonial official directing the crowd to bow to the Emperor.

Gazing up from the circle of damask tents, one would see a field of magnificent fans, pearl crowns, and damask robes beyond the railings of the Phoenix Building. Aside from deriving that the Emperor must be sitting outside the main building based on positioning, it was basically impossible to identify anyone by face. The situation was different for the people sitting atop the building, who were able to see everything clearly from high above.

The ceremonial official had led the first fifty competitors up on the stage. They bowed to the Emperor, and each person's name was declared before they descended the stage. They were ordered and paired through ballots. Finally, the competition officially began.

Mei Changsu was not skilled in combat due to his health. However, as the Chief of the world's largest clan, he was very knowledgeable in the various schools of martial arts. He patiently answered all the inquiries from the three young men in the shared tent. Even though the competition upon stage was not yet spectacular, the atmosphere within the tent was very lively.

Just as the first three rounds ended, the first of the many expected visitors arrived.

What astonished everyone was that this particular visitor was someone completely unexpected.

## CHAPTER 10

“Are all my young masters enjoying themselves today?” The person paid no attention to the apparent astonishment of the people within the tents. His body was slightly bowed, and his face was full of smiles. He swung the long brush he was holding and bowed in greeting.

“Ah, you flatter us. Please sit, Eunuch Gao.” Xie Bi was a regular in the Royal Court, and was the first to react. He rushed forward to stop the eunuch in his bow.

“Oh, there’s no need to sit.” Gao Zhan was an old confidant of the Emperor, having personally served His Majesty for more than thirty years. He had long since been promoted to the Head Eunuch of the Royal Palace, yet remained humble in his manners and actions. He did not show any sign of discourtesy to these children who were his junior by decades. He said, smiling, “Please follow me. The Grand Empress Dowager wishes to see you.”

“The Grand Empress Dowager?” Xie Bi was startled. “Her Majesty is here as well?”

“That’s right. The Grand Empress Dowager is upon the Phoenix Building. Her Majesty saw you youngsters enjoying yourselves, and asked you to join her.”

“All of us?”

“Yes. This mister and this young man, all of you.”

Xie Bi turned around, and the group looked at each other. This Grand Empress Dowager was the official grandmother<sup>12</sup> of the Emperor, and was past the venerable age of ninety. She never participated in politics, and enjoyed a long life from the carefree lifestyle. The Empress Dowager had passed away for many years, and she was still leading an enjoyable life. She loved being surrounded by the younger

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<sup>12</sup> She was the official wife of the current Emperor’s grandfather. She is not necessarily related to the Emperor by blood.

generation, so it was not surprising for her to summon them. However, nobody thought that she would still be able to see the people sitting below with her aging eyes.

Astonished or not, not even the Emperor can refuse summons from the Grand Empress Dowager. The group straightened their clothes. They followed Gao Zhan out the tent and entered the Phoenix Building from the side stairs.

The Grand Empress Dowager was not at the main building. Rather, she was sitting in a warm hall that was sheltered from the wind. Upon entering, the group saw a white-haired old lady leaning upon a soft couch. Her face was filled with wrinkles and kindness. Four people sat by her side amidst a group of maids and eunuchs.

Mei Changsu's eyes flickered slightly, and confirmed the identities of these four people.

Upon the main seat sat the official wife of the Emperor, Empress Yan. She was donned in yellow robes and a phoenix crown. There were already wrinkles by her eyes and mouth, and only a hint of her youthful beauty remained. At the right of the Empress was a beautiful well-groomed madam. She was also past forty, but was evidently better maintained with her bright skin. This was the birth mother of the Crown Prince, Noble Consort Yue. At the left of the Empress sat a more dignified middle-aged madam. Her beautiful eyes were a bit familiar. It was, of course, Princess Liyang. The last person was a young lady. Her clothes were simple, and her makeup was light. Although her features were not breathtaking, she possessed a heroic air and bright spirit. None of the noble madams dressed in finery could surpass her in presence. Who else besides Princess Nihuang could possess such a demeanor?

“Are they here?” asked the Grand Empress Dowager. She sat up shakily, happiness spreading across her face. “Quick, call them here. Tell me, who are these children?”

Yan Yujin couldn't resist a smile, and was glared at by Empress Yan.

Due to her old age, the Grand Empress Dowager had become a bit confused within recent years. Even though she enjoyed the company of young ones, she cannot remember who was who. Sometimes she would see someone one day and need to be reintroduced the next.

Gao Zhan led the group forward. Mei Changsu was coaxing Feiliu quietly. “In a bit, let's allow the grandma to hold your hand, okay? Let's smile for the grandma, okay?”

Feiliu's face was cold, revealing an unwilling expression.

The Grand Empress Dowager was already holding the hand of Xiao Jingrui, who was closest to her. Gao Zhan hurriedly introduced from the side, “This is the eldest son of the Marquess of Ning, Xiao Jingrui.”

“Little Rui, have you married yet?” asked the old lady kindly.

“Not yet...”

“Oh. You need to hurry!”

“Yes...”

She patted Xiao Jingrui on the head, then turned to hold Xie Bi’s hand.

“This is the second son of the Marquess of Ning, Xie Bi.”

“Little Bi, have you married yet?”

“No...”

“You need to hurry!”

“Yes...”

Next, the Grand Empress Dowager motioned towards Feiliu. Mei Changsu hastily pushed him forward. The youth’s face was cold. He let the old lady grab his hand reluctantly.

“This young man is named Feiliu...” Gao Zhan introduced after quickly asking Xie Bi.

“Little Fei, have you married yet?”

“No!”

“You need to hurry!”

“N—” Mei Changsu quickly stepped forward and covered his mouth before Feiliu could say “no”. The Grand Empress Dowager’s attention immediately turned to Mei Changsu. She pulled over his hand and looked at him with a smile.

“This is Mr. Su, Su Zhe,” said Gao Zhan.

“Little Shu,” asked the Grand Empress Dowager with a bit of a lisp, “Have you married yet?”

“No.”

“You need to hurry!”

“...”

The last person to be pulled over was Yan Yujin. After being introduced by Gao Zhan, the Grand Empress Dowager asked as usual, “Little Jin, have you married yet?”

Yan Yujin blinked and answered mischievously, “Yes, I’m married.”

The Grand Empress Dowager paused slightly as if still processing the response, but she quickly followed with a new question, “Do you have a child yet?”

Yan Yujin blanked, and murmured, “Not yet...”

“You need to hurry!”

“...”

Empress Yan stepped forward and spoke respectfully, “Grandmother, do you want the children to sit with you for a bit?”

“Yes, yes.” The Grand Empress Dowager was very happy. She waved her hand, “Come sit. Little Shu, sit by great-grandma. Little Rui and little Bi, sit here. Little Jin, don’t stand there. Little Fei is too far...”

Surrounded by young ones, the old lady was very pleased. She ordered plate after plate of exquisite fruits and snacks and divided them between the group as if they were young children. She watched them eat from the side and laughed with delight.

The Grand Empress Dowager was of high age after all. Even though she was feeling joyful, she began to tire soon. Empress Yan and Princess Liyang began to fear for her health. Together, they coaxed and lied, finally convincing the Grand Empress Dowager to return to her palace and rest. The group was thus finally let out.

Mei Changsu thought that this unusual summons thus end smoothly. He relaxed slightly and walked out the warm hall with the rest. However, just as the party reached the stairs, a pleasant female voice behind them called out, “Mr. Su, please wait.”

She only called for “Mr. Su” to wait, but as one could imagine, everyone stopped and turned around in unison.

## CHAPTER 11

Princess Nihuang walked over gracefully, surrounded by an air of power. She walked straight to Mei Changsu and paid no mind to the many pairs of eyes on her. She smiled and said, “The warm hall is too stuffy, it does not suit someone from the battlefields like me. If Mr. Su does not object, would you join me for a walk along the corridor and see how the tournament below is progressing?”

Ignoring the fact that this was the famous Princess Nihuang, there would be no reason to refuse even if she were an average lady. So, Mei Changsu smiled and accepted. He quietly left instructions for Feiliu and accompanied the Princess, strolling towards the long corridor outside the warm hall.

Feiliu stood still with a cold expression, his eyes staring straight off into the distance. It was as if he turned into a statue. The other three gentlemen couldn’t exactly turn into statues like him, and stood conflicted at the stairway. Should they leave? But they were worried about Mei Changsu. Should they stay? But this was not a place where they may simply idle. While they were hesitating, Eunuch had walked over. He said, all smiles, “The Princess has kept him behind as a guest. What are my young masters worried about? Please rest in the tents below. It would be much too restrictive for you to stand here, no?”

His words were tactful, but his meaning was clear. There was no other choice. The three could only walk down the stairs. What surprised them was that even though Gao Zhan had always lived within the depths of the Royal Palace, he appeared to be very clear about Feiliu’s identity. Even though he chased away the three noble young men of high status, he paid no mind to this cold youth and allowed him to stand like a pole at the stairway.

Meanwhile, Mei Changsu had accompanied Princess Nihuang to the outer corridor. The two stood side by side and watched the lively combat upon the stage below.

“Mr. Su.” Light sparkled in Princess Nihuang’s eyes, which rested upon Mei Changsu. She asked, “I awaited your presence at the Manor of the Marquess of Ning



yesterday, only to hear that we were unable to meet you as you were unwell. As I see you today, it seems that you have recovered?”

“Yes, I have recovered.” Mei Changsu answered without care. He did not have a hint of the awkwardness resulting from a false excuse being uncovered.

“I wanted to admire how Mr. Mei of East River would respond to the honour of recruitment from the Empress. A pity.” Princess Nihuang looked at him with greater interest. “Do you know how your predicament came to be?”

“Predicament?” Mei Changsu turned, “Do I have a predicament?”

“I can be certain that when you return to your tent in a little while, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu will go visit you immediately. Do you believe me?”

“I dare not pay disbelief to the words of Your Highness.”

“Don’t you find it strange?” Princess Nihuang’s gaze was like a sword, and her voice was full of pride. “Yes, you command over the world’s largest clan, and the talented name of Mr. Mei of East River is well known. Even so, you still remain a commoner. You should not be able to provide much assistance to the disputes of Court. Yet, why are the Crown Prince and Prince Yu so interested in you?”

Mei Changsu grimaced, “Honestly speaking, I find this very strange indeed. I am very mediocre, and gained some small fame only through the support of my comrades. I do not have any notable accomplishments to deserve such favour from the Princes. Since Your Highness is so insightful, I beg of you to speak with the two Princes. Please tell them that Mei Changsu is too useless to recruit.”

Princess Nihuang laughed brightly. She took a long look at Mei Changsu and followed his eyes into the distance. They gazed at the city resting in mist. After a long moment, she started slowly, “Your predicament...originates from Langya Hall...”

Langya Hall.

It seemed to be the name for a place, or perhaps the name of an organization. From another point of view, it should be more like a store. A store to do business.

The business procedure was as follows. You enter Langya Hall. You ask a question. The Hall Master quotes a price. If you accept this price, then pay. Langya Hall will give you the answer to your question.

There have been people who accused Langya Hall of being a scam, saying “If they cannot answer your question, then Langya Hall will quote an impossible price. Since you can’t pay, they will not need to answer. Isn’t that a scam?”

Even so, carriages lined up like long dragons at Langya Hall, and money flowed into the Hall like rivers. Everyone still believed that whatever you wished to know, you will receive a satisfying answer as long as you bring enough money into Langya Hall.

This authority had never been broken.

“My predicament originates from Langya Hall? What does that mean?” Mei Changsu turned his head and his expression flickered slightly.

“Do you know what comment Langya Hall has for you?”

“Yes,” answered Mei Changsu lightly, “The top rank in the List of Gentlemen. It’s just some fabrication”

“The few annual rankings provided by Langya Hall are free, but they are definitely not fabrications.” Princess Nihuang’s voice was clear. “The world’s ten greatest martial artists, the world’s ten greatest clans, the world’s ten wealthiest people, the world’s ten greatest gentlemen, and the world’s ten most beautiful ladies. Nobody with their name on these major lists is ordinary.”

The corner of Mei Changsu’s lips shifted, but he remained silent.

Nobody doubts these five major lists of rankings due to the mysterious and astonishing ability for Langya Hall to collect information. The East River Alliance sits at the top of the ten great clans, and the Chief is the top rank in the List of Gentlemen. Mei Changsu definitely cannot deny that he has an impressive name.

“However... The East River Alliance has been the top clan for years, and this is not the first year for you to be the top rank in the List of Gentlemen either.” Princess Nihuang chuckled softly, “The reason for the Crown Prince and Prince Yu’s unusual enthusiasm to recruit you recently is due to a new comment by Langya Hall.”

“What have they said now?” asked Mei Changsu with pain.

“The Crown Prince brought heavy rewards with him to Langya Hall, requesting a recommendation for a prodigy to help govern the world.” Princess Nihuang looked at him with sympathy, “You were unfortunately recommended.”

“He who does not hold a particular office should not plan its duties.” Mei Changsu responded coldly. “Governing the world is still the responsibility of the Emperor right now. What are the others thinking to worry about it in advance? Even if I really am a prodigy as Langya Hall states, shouldn’t I only be of use after the new Emperor ascends the throne?”

“Do you really think he wants a prodigy to help the empire? Still, there is no need now to go into what he asked. The answer from Langya Hall is really memorable.” Princess Nihuang spoke slowly, “As far as I know, the answer was thus: ‘Mr. Mei of East River, the qilin<sup>13</sup> prodigy. Obtain him to obtain the world.’”

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<sup>13</sup> A mythical beast, “said to appear with the imminent arrival or passing of a sage or illustrious ruler. It is a good omen thought to occasion prosperity or serenity. It is often depicted with what looks like fire all over its body.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qilin>

## CHAPTER 12

“Qilin?” Mei Changsu laughed. “Take a look at me, Princess. Do you think that I have anything to do with the odd-looking creature?”

“You still have the heart to laugh?” Princess Nihuang looked at him with admiration. “Langya Hall has never been wrong with their comments. Of course one would rather believe it to be true than otherwise. This would be a simple matter if it were merely a Prince amassing talent under his command. If you were to refuse, he would not pursue further. However, your predicament turned messy with the comment of ‘qilin prodigy’. Before obtaining you, both Princes will persist in their efforts. However, once one of them succeeds, then the side that failed will inevitably attempt to destroy you with all their powers. Do you feel nothing else for this situation?”

“Of course I do,” responded Mei Changsu seriously. “I feel that the Langya Hall Master must have a grudge against me.”

Princess Nihuang cracked a smile. She half turned and leaned against the railings. Her eyes were shimmering with light. “After meeting with you, I actually believe that perhaps the Langya Hall Master is right once again...”

“Please, Princess.” Mei Changsu bowed hastily, “Your Highness should not have any grudges against me. I am already on a bed of coal, please do not light the fire.”

“This fire has been burning for quite awhile now. I recommend you to pick a side quickly.”

“And therefore be killed quickly by the other?”

“At least this way, one person will protect you with all his might. Isn’t that better than having both of them giving up and trying to kill you together?” Princess Nihuang’s tone suddenly turned cold, “Who will you pick? The Crown Prince or Prince Yu?”

A look of extreme pride appeared on Mei Changsu’s face. It disappeared in an instance, and he was once again that idle and sickly young man. “A talent must select

his lord to perform deeds. Didn't you come to Jinling to gain achievement?" ask Princess Nihuang slowly.

"How can I think about achievements with this sickly body? I only wanted to rest for a little while."

"You came to the royal capital to rest?" Princess Nihuang's eyes looked into the distance. She spoke mockingly, "Mr. Mei of East River is unusual indeed. You really know how to select a place."

Mei Changsu ignored her ridicule and responded mildly, "Your Highness appears to be unexpectedly concerned about the politics of Court."

Princess Nihuang whipped her head back. Her clear eyes glared fiercely at Mei Changsu. Her strong presence was like a raging flame under which an average person would immediately cower.

Yet Mei Changsu returned her gaze calmly, a smile lingering on his lips.

After awhile, Princess Nihuang finally withdrew the fury she purposefully emitted. She grunted and answered coldly, "The Mu family has been guarding Yunnan for generations. One can say that it and the Royal Court exist in mutual dependence. The future direction of Court has great impacts on our principality. Why shouldn't I be concerned?"

"In my opinion," Mei Changsu bowed, "The changing of the throne had no impact on Yunnan in the past. Regardless of who ascends the throne in the future, the Mu family who guards the southern border would not be touched easily. Why would Your Highness be so concerned with the battle for the throne?"

Princess Nihuang did not answer this question. Instead, she roared with laughter. Although she was a woman, her bright and spirited demeanor was filled with the pride and dignity of a prince, much worthy of admiration. One could imagine how stunning she would be on the battlefield as she heads an attack like a storm of fire. If the young Prince who recently inherited the title possesses half the grace and dignity of his sister, then it would be more than enough to ensure Yunnan to be the most secure principality of the world.

Mei Changsu moved his brows, and understood this female general of the southern border.

True, the Mu family of Yunnan was loyal to the Court, but the Court also needs to be able to appease them. Princess Nihuang was a hero amongst women. How could she bow her head to just any master? How could she not come to see the character of the future Emperor and how he obtains the throne?

Princess Nihuang turned after restoring her composure. “Mr. Su,” she said, “Would you like to do me a favour?”

Mei Changsu replied hurriedly, “If Your Highness has any instructions, I will endeavour to complete them.”

“The Emperor has given an edict that only the top ten candidates from the martial arts tournament will be qualified to take part in the literary tournament. I would like to ask you to be the examiner in the literary tournament and help me rank the people asking for my hand.”

Mei Changsu was very surprised by this request, and his first reaction was to tactfully decline. “The literary tournament is decided by the Emperor. How could I interject?”

“Mr. Su’s talent is so widely known, His Majesty will not oppose it.” Princess Nihuang gazed into the distance, and there was a hint of softness. “Everyone encourages me to marry, saying that I must do so eventually as a woman. It wouldn’t do any harm to select carefully, would it?”

Mei Changsu pondered for a moment and asked, “Is the ranking in the literary tournament used to determine the order in which they compete with Your Highness?”

“Yes. The victor from the literary tournament will have the first opportunity to compete with me. If he wins, then the following nine will not have a chance.”

“What if he loses?”

“Then the next person will step up. If none of the ten can win against me, then I won’t be married off this time.” Princess Nihuang sneered, as if she had long seen the ending she spoke of. “Will you agree?”

Mei Changsu knew that it would be useless to try to be low-key in such conditions. He wasn’t afraid to take the limelight. He nodded slowly and shifted his gaze upon the stage, where flashes of blades never stopped. He sighed, “It would be great if there was a fated one for Your Highness amongst these men...”

Princess Nihuang stepped closer and stood shoulder to shoulder with him. Her eyes remained upon the battles below. As if speaking to herself, she asked quietly, “Why didn’t you join?”

“Me?” Mei Changsu chuckled. “With a body like mine, I’m afraid I would be sent flying in the first round. By that time, I wouldn’t be able to be a qilin. It would be pretty fortunate if I don’t turn into a pancake...”

Princess Nihuang burst with laughter at his descriptions. “Mr. Su is really humourous. I wonder, what is your ailment?”

“It is just a chronic illness, currently not life-threatening,” answered Mei Changsu smoothly. He continued to watch the crowd below. Suddenly, something made his lashes quiver slightly and his gaze wavered. His movements were minute and disappeared without a trace, but a person like Princess Nihuang noticed immediately. She followed his eyes and searched for awhile, but couldn’t determine what he saw.

“The Phoenix Building is ultimately not a place for me to stay long. If Your Highness has no further instructions, it would be best for me to return to the tents below,” said Mei Changsu warmly. “Besides, if the qilin does not return, wouldn’t the Crown Prince and Prince Yu become restless in their wait?”

“That is true. It’s better for you to see them soon,” nodded Princess Nihuang. She smiled, “Then I will not keep you further. Please do as you wish.”

Mei Changsu bowed in departure, and the female general who usually does not pay much mind to nobility actually bowed in return. The two went separate ways. One returned to the Warm Hall, and the other went directly down the stairs. Feiliu naturally followed.

A long corridor connected the side exit of the Phoenix Building and the entrance of the tented area. Guards stood attentive outside the walls, and the passage was extraordinarily quiet. Mei Changsu walked slowly with his head lowered in thought. He only raised his head when Feiliu gasped “Ah!” behind him, and saw the strong build walking towards him.

As the Commander of the Royal Guards, Meng Zhi was in charge of the safety of the Royal Palace. His responsibilities were hefty with the Emperor present, and he needed to patrol the area with extra caution. However, as the commander, he of course knew that Mei Changsu entered the Phoenix Building under summons from the Grand Empress Dowager. So, he did not interrogate Mei Changsu as they met, instead greeted him with a smile.

Mei Changsu gave a soft smile as well, and nodded in greeting. The two men each had their business to attend to. It was as if the two met by coincidence. Neither party appeared to have the intention to stop and make small talk.

Yet, in the brief moment when their two shoulders brushed by each other, Mei Changsu’s lips parted. He emitted a very quiet but very stern phrase:

“Listen, tell those two to go back!”

## CHAPTER 13

While Mei Changsu and Princess Nihuang were having a tête-à-tête on the Phoenix Building, the young people within the tent were feeling rather uneasy. They surrounded Mei Changsu as soon as he returned.

“What did the Princess say to you?” asked Yan Yujin, who rushed to the front with curiosity.

Mei Changsu smiled meaningfully. He blinked and answered, “The Princess praised me. She said I looked like a qilin...”

“Qilin?” Yan Yujin was startled. “Is it that odd looking sacred beast? Are you sure the Princess was praising you?”

“What’re you saying?” Xie Bi gave him a shove. “That’s the Princess praising him for being a qilin prodigy!”

Mei Changsu gave him a side-long look, but remained silent. Xie Bi finally realized that he said something wrong and coloured. However, Yan Yujin did not question further, and instead happily chattered to Mei Changsu about how amusing the recent fights were. Xiao Jingrui, whose expression wavered, pretended not to hear. He turned to instruct servants outside the tent to bring in some hot tea.

A new understanding washed over Mei Changsu. One of them was carefree and honest, the other was pure and kind. Yet, they were both more sensitive than Xie Bi, who was entangled in the schemes of politics. At least they knew when to ignore certain things.

But since Xie Bi knew about the “qilin prodigy” comment, his status with Prince Yu was clearly significant. Whether it’s a Crown Prince or a Prince, they will surely invoke the Emperor’s apprehension and anger if His Majesty hears about them recruiting some qilin. Thus, they would never tell this secret to anyone besides their closest confidants. Mei Changsu was still unable to deduce how Princess Nihuang came upon this news.



“...and then he dodged and dodged. At first, his opponent couldn't do anything about it, but he forgot that he was on a stage. So, just as he was happily dodging, he stepped into thin air and fell down! Hahaha...” Yan Yujin roared with laughter. Suddenly, he stiffened his face and asked angrily, “Su, are you listening to me?”

“I am.”

“Isn't it funny?”

“It is very funny.”

“But you're not laughing!”

“I am laughing...”

Xiao Jingrui came over and punched Yan Yujin. “Su has dignity, and he laughs in a refined manner. You think everyone laughs their head off like you?”

Yan Yujin was just about to retort, but Xi Bi suddenly gave a cough. He said quietly, “The Crown Prince and Prince Yu are coming this way.”

The tent was immediately silent. Mei Changsu stood up slowly and called out, “Feiliu, the people coming here are guests. Don't block them.”

A grumbled “Oh” sounded from outside, and a loud voice announced, “The Crown Prince has arrived! Prince Yu has arrived!”

One can tell at a glance that the two people walking in were brothers. They were both tall and well-built, with deep-set eyes and thin lips. The Crown Prince, Xiao Jingxuan, was thirty-five years old. He had two deep wrinkles by his mouth and a slightly nefarious air. Prince Yu, Xiao Jinghuan, was thirty-two. His features were more relaxed, and he wore a peaceful smile as he walked in.

Everyone in the tent bowed down in greeting, and were of course immediately supported upright.

“Jingrui and Yujin, you two went for a long trip again didn't you? You make me so envious.” Prince Yu had once been in charge of these noble young men while they were studying in the Royal Schoolhouse. Compared to the Crown Prince, he had a closer relationship with the people present. He smiled and patted Xiao Jingrui's shoulder, “I've heard awhile back that you three brought an honoured guest into the capital. Unfortunately, I have been swamped with work and wasn't able to pay a visit.”

The Crown Prince made a slight face. Couldn't find the time? If the two weren't restrained by each other's watchful eyes, Prince Yu would've immediately rushed

over as soon as he heard the news from Xie Bi. Even so, didn't he ask the Empress to go on a recruitment visit the very next day? Word says that he was deftly rejected. Serves him right!

"This must be Mr. Su. You live up to your elegant fame," continued Prince Yu pleasantly. "The fourteen prefectures of East River have enjoyed years of peace and prosperity thanks to the efforts of your honoured alliance. I have been meaning to report this to the Emperor to request commendation for your alliance. I did not dare to act only in fear that your alliance may disdain material prizes with its virtuous spirit."

Mei Changsu replied evenly, "My name is Su Zhe. I came to the capital with friends, and have nothing to do with the East River Alliance. Please do not misunderstand, Prince Yu."

The Crown Prince was overjoyed seeing Prince Yu rendered speechless by the polite retort. He jumped on the opportunity and said, "That's absolutely right. Mr. Su is just Mr. Su, why are you dragging in other things? I have heard that you suffer from poor health, and came to the capital for relaxation and amusement. What sights have you seen?"

"Ah, I gave Su a tour around the capital for a whole day. Qing Music House, Shangxu Market, Fuzi Temple, Xiyuan Pond... We've been to them all!" answered Yan Yujin innocently.

"These are all places you like to visit." The Crown Prince glared at Yan Yujin accusingly, "Mr. Su has sophisticated tastes. How would he be able to enjoy these noisy and artless places? The scenic places of Jinling are mostly located at the outskirts of the city. Unfortunately, most have been absorbed by the Royal Gardens. If Mr. Su is interested, then please accept this jade access token. It is not very useful, but it will aid in clearing your path."

His speech was modest, but everyone knew the importance of the stamped jade token he brought out. Xie Bi raised his eyebrows and glanced at Prince Yu.

The temporarily defeated Prince Yu pursed his lips and waited for Mei Changsu's reactions. The Chief of the East River Alliance took the token casually and gave it a glance. A slight smile appeared on his lips, and he called out, "Feiliu!"

In the blink of an eye, the handsome and frigid youth appeared by Mei Changsu's side. The young gentlemen were used to it, but the two Princes were given quite a fright.

"Here, take this. In the future, you can move however you want when you go out to play. If an uncle catches you again, then show this token to him. Okay?"

"Okay!"

“All right, go play then.”

## CHAPTER 14

The youth vanished before everyone's eyes. The Crown Prince stood dumbstruck, his face a shade darker. On the other hand, Prince Yu was getting cramps from suppressing his laughter.

The jade token was stamped with the Emperor's Royal Seal. Besides the Crown Prince, it was not bestowed to even the other Princes. It was absolutely a symbol of status. The token would humble all officials wherever the bearer goes, and yet he casually handed such a generous gift for his guard to play with. Should one say that he was blind to its value, or that he was simply rude?

"Actually, sightseeing is really taxing on the body." It was Prince Yu's turn again to pull himself together. "Mr. Su should first nurse his health. By chance, I recently received a rare thousand-year knotweed,<sup>14</sup> which is a great supplement. Also, I have a medical spring<sup>15</sup> at the Mt. Ling palace. Bathing in this spring is very invigorating, even Father constantly praises its effects. Why don't I invite Mr. Su to go there for a short stay? I will be able to have a chance to discuss literature and prose with you. I am hoping to absorb some of the elegance and grace of the top rank gentleman."

Even Xiao Jingrui was moved by Prince Yu's suggestion. The thought back to their journey, where Mei Changsu's colour drained and breath shortened with any light exertion. He often coughed for half the night as well. The thousand-year knotweed and the Mt. Lin medical spring were undoubtedly offerings difficult to refuse.

"Aren't you really busy recently? I believe Father gave you a handful of tasks, saying you were very capable." The Crown Prince sneered, "How would you have time to accompany Mr. Su to some Mt. Lin palace?"

"You don't need to worry, brother. I've completed my tasks regarding the Department of Military Affairs and Qi Prefecture. I reported to Father yesterday, and

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<sup>14</sup> A traditional Chinese herbal medicine. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallopia\\_multiflora](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallopia_multiflora).

<sup>15</sup> Think hot springs, but filled with herbal medicine.

was just about to report to you today. As for the case against Duke Qing, the Royal Commissioner has yet to return, so the trial cannot begin for now. There's a perfect opportunity of some idle days right now. Shouldn't you let your brother rest for a little while?" responded Prince Yu, smiling. His attitude was extremely respectful, but the Crown Prince felt great resentment. It looked to him that Prince Yu was simply itching for a beating. He wished that nobody was present so he could give him a few refreshing slaps himself.

"I will gratefully accept your kind intentions," said Mei Changsu. He took a look at these brothers. They had the appearance of perfect respect, yet both hated each other to the core. He bowed slowly in respect and continued, "However, I have been taking medicine especially prepared for me by Dr. Xun. I cannot take unapproved supplements. The thousand-year knotweed is such a treasure, please do not waste it. As for the medical spring at Mt. Lin, I'm afraid I will need to write to Dr. Xun first. If he says that I may bathe in it, then I will go disturb Your Highness."

The Crown Prince felt much better after seeing Mei Changsu refuse Prince Yu as well. He quickly cut in, "That's right. One can never be too careful in nursing an illness. There's no logic in gulping down any expensive medicine you find and jumping in any water you see. If you do not have any doctor better than Dr. Xun, then stop giving random suggestions to Mr. Su."

Prince Yu understood that Mei Changsu would never express which party he prefers in front of the Crown Prince and himself. This meeting was simply an opportunity for everyone to be acquainted and observe each other in close quarters. The real battle will take place later. He shouldn't rush things. Thus, he laughed with the perfect picture of benevolence and said, "That was careless of me. It's a pity that there is no wine here, or I would certainly drink three cups in penance."

The Crown Prince stood up. "Jinghuan, Mr. Su came here today to watch the tournament. Let's not bother him any further. Shall we leave now?"

Prince Yu pondered for a moment. Although the jade token from the Crown Prince was handed off to his guard, the gift was ultimately accepted. How could he allow himself to fall behind? He quickly gave Xie Bi a look.

"That's right, Su," called out Xie Bi with immediate understanding. "Didn't you want to pay tribute to the remnants of Mr. Li Cong's teachings? I believe that he had some manuscripts..."

"Yes yes, they're at my manor." Prince Yu continued the conversation immediately. "I hold great respect for the great Confucian scholar Mr. Li, and thus collected a few of his manuscripts. Could it be that Mr. Su is also...?"

"Mr. Li had students from all walks of life. Su had also listened to his lectures," contributed Xie Bi.

“What a coincidence.” Prince Yu clapped with a smile. “We would have a lot to discuss in the future.”

This really lined up with Mei Changsu’s tastes. His eyes sparkled, and he asked quietly, “Which manuscripts? Is there Absolute Discourse?”

“Yes, yes,” replied Prince Yu with joy. “It’s right in my library. If Mr. Su wishes to read it, please come to my manor whenever you wish to. Nobody would dare to block your path.”

He did not mention gifting the manuscript, instead only inviting Mei Changsu to his manor read it. Clearly, he wanted to use the manuscript as bait to create frequent interactions between them. The Crown Prince did not like where this was going, and was growing uneasy. He interjected hastily, “Jinghuan, aren’t you being too petty? It’s just a few manuscripts. If Mr. Su likes them, then just gift them to him. Don’t create such a hassle for him by making him view them at your manor... If you’re feeling too stingy, then name a price. I’ll buy them as a gift to Mr. Su.”

After receiving such provocation, Prince Yu had no choice but to say, “I was only afraid that Mr. Su would not accept the manuscripts. If you are willing to receive them, I will of course immediately deliver them.”

Mei Changsu replied lightly, “Since Prince Yu cherishes these manuscripts as well, I would not dare to snatch them away.”

“Oh, what are you saying? You are such a talented and knowledgeable individual. If Mr. Li was still alive today, he would definitely see you as his top pupil. These manuscripts should naturally be in your hands.” Prince Yu put on a benevolent façade. He couldn’t resist shooting an attack towards the Crown Prince, and said to him, “At the risk of offending you, my brother, I must say that there’s a problem with what you’ve just said. These manuscripts aren’t worth much in the eyes of an average person, but they are priceless treasures in the eyes of those who hold respect for Mr. Li. So, I’m afraid that you may upset Mr. Su with talk like naming a price...”

The Crown Prince was immediately upset. However, it was true that he did not enjoy reading and couldn’t understand the thoughts of these scholars. He was afraid of saying something wrong and offending Mei Changsu, and was forced to endure the attack.

There was no significant victory or defeat in the two’s skirmish. They saw Mei Changsu’s fatigue and knew that they couldn’t stay long. Each said some more words of concern out of courtesy, and the two left together.

## CHAPTER 15

### *Tingsheng*

Yan Yujin had long since gotten tired of the snide attacks within the tent and had run out alone to watch the tournament. He only returned after seeing the two Princes leave, and saw Mei Changsu coughing nonstop on the chair, with Xiao Jingrui patting his back gently. Yan Yujin asked immediately, “What’s wrong, Su? Are you sick again?”

“It’s nothing much...” Mei Changsu accepted the tea Xiao Jingrui handed him and took a drink. He wiped the corner of his eyes which had teared up from coughing. “The Crown Prince and Prince Yu both had some fragrance... I’m not used to it...”

“Oh, I know, that’s ambergris from the East Sea. It was gifted to them by the Emperor, and only to those two. The fragrance is strong indeed, it’s no wonder that Su is not used to it. But, I’ve heard that it’s the best in keeping one spirited. It’s even said to increase the masculine energy.”

“Is that so...” answered Mei Changsu off-handedly. He glanced at Xie Bi, who was standing at the side and didn’t appear to have heard their conversation.

His dislike for ambergris should reach Prince Yu through Xie Bi by tonight, so Prince Yu will not be wearing the fragrance the next time he meets Mei Changsu. Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin were definitely not the Crown Prince’s men, so there shouldn’t be anyone to give this information to him. Yet, if the Crown Prince also abandons the fragrance during their next meeting, then it would mean that the Crown Prince has spies in Prince Yu’s manor.

If the Crown Prince does not receive the news and continues to wear ambergris before him, then the abilities and control of Prince Yu need to be re-evaluated with a big increase in his favour...

It was finally quiet after the exit of the two Princes. No more outstanding visitors arrived, and the group was able to watch a few rounds of the competition peacefully. There were no exceptional fighters, but the matches were still rather entertaining.

There was a two-hour break at noon. Curtains shimmered atop the Phoenix Building, and one couldn't tell if the Emperor was still present. He probably only arrived to show his presence. It was unlikely that he would watch the competition in its entirety for days on end. Yan Yujin arranged for food and drinks at some point. He began to excitedly discuss the events of the morning while waiting for the afternoon competition to begin. Yan Yujin was probably the only one among them all to put all his heart and mind into watching the competition.

At a little bit past noon, Xie Bi disappeared with some excuse. Xiao Jingrui saw the sluggish Mei Changsu and suggested to return home early. Yan Yujin was unable to retain them and could only bid them farewell. His lonely figure saw his friends off by the tent entrance.

As soon as he was in the carriage, Mei Changsu leaned on the pillows and closed his eyes for a snooze. Xiao Jingrui did not disturb him. He sat quietly by Mei Changsu's side, looking as if he had something on his mind. The carriage shook slowly, and their shoulders brushed every so often. The mood was very tranquil, but also a little stagnant.

After some time had passed, Mei Changsu asked, "When we were just coming out... Jingrui, did you see?"

Xiao Jingrui's heart throbbed. His fingers unconsciously pulled on the curtain's tassels. After a long pause, he finally replied with a "Yeah".

"After seeing that...what do you feel?" Mei Changsu opened his eyes and slowly rested his gaze upon his companion. The latter was turning his gaze as well. His bright eyes showed a hint of something bitter, yet sweet. They looked as if some uncertainty lingered one moment, but then they appeared to be very clear in the next.

"My first thought was...her hairstyle changed. The hair she wore down before... They're all coiled up now.<sup>16</sup> It looks nice. Nicer than before..." Xiao Jingrui squinted his eyes slightly, as if recalling. He continued, "And then I saw the person beside her. They were holding hands... Honestly speaking, I still felt a tiny bit upset at first, but then I felt completely at peace. It was a beautiful scene—she tilting her head to speak and he listening quietly. I didn't feel uncomfortable at all. Especially the way he looked at her with those eyes... It makes me feel that it was worth all the waiting Ms. Yun did for him. I don't think I would be able to have such an expression in my eyes, even when my love for her was at its peak... Su, I don't know why, I just know that I wouldn't be able to as I am right now. I feel like I'm still lacking somewhere, but I can't figure it out..."

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<sup>16</sup> Unmarried girls tend to wear their hair down, and married women tend to coil their hair up.



“Because the people who have walked on the ridge between life and death are those returning from another world. The people who have only lived in one world can never be like them...” Mei Changsu looked at Xiao Jingrui deeply. His eyes were filled with kindness while he spoke, “But why be like them? Isn’t it better to live happily in the simple world?”

Xiao Jingrui raised his eyebrows. “Su, you think that...Ms. Yun’s husband had experienced...”

“The walk near death make love shine brighter.” Mei Changsu sighed. “Regardless of what they’ve experienced, it is reassuring for such infatuation to have a good ending.”

“That’s true,” nodded Xiao Jingrui solemnly. “Such a kind and benevolent person like Ms. Yun deserves a happy ending of a loving husband and blissful life.”

Mei Changsu turned his face slightly and hid the light flickering in the depth of his eyes. He spoke to himself in the quietest voice, “Such a pure and kind person like you should deserve a happy ending as well...”

“What did you say, Su?” Xiao Jingrui leaned in to listen but still couldn’t hear him clearly.

“I said... Such a good person like you will definitely meet the right lady in the future...”

“The future...” Xiao Jingrui sighed. He was lost in thought for awhile. Then, he lifted a curtain and looked out.

He simply wanted to look around, but as soon as he stuck his head out, he saw a crowd of people around the corner. A horse carriage was stopped in the middle, where there was loud cursing.

“Jingrui, stop the carriage and see what’s going on.” Mei Changsu sat up to look outside as well. “I heard the voice of a child.”

“Okay,” answered Xiao Jingrui. He ordered the carriage to stop, then jumped down and walked closer to the scene. The group of people were wearing the same servant uniforms. A lantern with the surname “He” hung from the carriage. The people on the street did not dare to get close and watched the scene from a great distance.

Xiao Jingrui frowned, and roughly figured out the identity of the person flaunting his power in the streets. He squeezed into the centre. Sure enough, he saw He Wenxin, the son of the Minister of Personnel He Jingzhong. He Wenxin was kicking a small, thin boy. He yelled while kicking, “You little bastard, what were you scampering

about for? You startled my horse and almost made me fall from it...” He snatched the horse whip from a servant nearby. He was just about to put his strength into it when his hand was caught by someone.

“Who the fuck dares to—” He Wenxin began to swear angrily, then saw Xiao Jingrui’s face. He quickly swallowed back the rest of his words. Actually, the real nobles within the capital are generally well disciplined. Very few would act so cruelly in the streets like this. Even though there were some people who hold true disdain for commoners, they would refrain from beating and swearing in person out of concern for their status. He Wenxin’s father became a court official through Royal Examinations, and was transferred all around the empire after his appointment. He Wenxin was left under the care of his grandmother, who spoiled him and neglected in his discipline. He was notorious for his atrocity from just the few years he’s been in the capital. He did possess some cleverness and usually never messed with those he cannot afford to mess with. Thanks to that, he has lasted until now without incidents. He did not dare to speak more when he saw that it was Xiao Jingrui interjecting. “Never mind, I don’t want to bother with this,” he said with some embarrassment, and disappeared rapidly with his servants.

Even though Xiao Jingrui was angry, it was not as if he could drag He Wenxin back and give him a beating. So, he resigned with a sigh and crouched down to look at the child. The boy was tiny and thin, appearing to be no older than ten. On his face were a few slightly swollen red handprints. When the boy saw the man beating him leave, he straightened his curled up body a bit and quickly crawled around to pick up some scattered books. He stacked them into a large pile and wrapped them with an old cloth. However, there were many books and little cloth, and he couldn’t make a knot.

“What’s your name?” asked Xiao Jingrui as he helped to gather a few books. He touched the boy’s shoulder, “You probably received quite a few kicks. Are you hurt?”

The boy cowered away from his hand. He lowered his head and remained silent.

“Jingrui,” called Mei Changsu from the carriage, “Bring the child here and let me have a look.”

“Okay.” Xiao Jingrui reached out to grab the boy’s arm. He spoke warmly, “How would you be able to carry this many books? I’ll find someone to help you. Come, let’s go there first.”

“I can carry them...” mumbled the boy quietly. In the end, he did not dare to struggle much. Xiao Jingrui half-dragged, half-carried the boy to the carriage and stuffed him inside.

Mei Changsu’s pressed on the boy’s shoulder with his warm and soft hands. He moved down steadily, checking his whole body gently and attentively. When his palm pressed on the lower ribs, the boy cried out in pain and skirted back.

“He is probably hurt here.” Xiao Jingrui stopped the boy from behind and removed his shirt gently. He sucked in his breath. Besides a new purple bruise at his ribs, old wounds appeared all over his thin body. At a rough glance, there appeared to be wounds from clubs, whips, and even branding irons. The marks were fading, but one could imagine what type of torment the child went through.

“Which family are you from?” asked Xiao Jingrui loudly, unable to contain his shock. On a second thought, he asked again, “Are you a servant of some manor? Who’s the one constantly beating you like this...”

“No...” denied the child immediately. “I haven’t been beaten for many years. This is from before...”

“Even if it’s from before. Tell me, who beat you?”

“Jingrui.” Mei Changsu stopped him quietly, “Don’t question him further. This child’s ribs must be fractured if not broken. Let’s bring him back to the manor first and have a doctor take a look at him. Also, bring those books in. Look, this child is really concerned about his books...”

He was not wrong. The boy looked clearly relieved once he saw all the books brought in. He begged quietly, “I’m fine, please let me down. I can go back by myself...”

“Where are you going back to?” Xiao Jingrui took this opportunity and inquired further.

The boy seemed very sharp. He immediately lowered his head.

“Are you reading all of these books?” asked Mei Changsu warmly, flipping through the pile of books. Perhaps his air of gentle elegance was reassuring. The boy was a little calmer after he raised his head and glanced at Mei Changsu. He answered meekly, “Yes, some... Some others...I can’t understand.”

“How old are you?”

“Eleven.”

“What’s your name?”

The boy paused for a long time, so long that it seemed like he wouldn’t answer. Finally, he said woodenly, “Tingsheng.”

“What is your surname?”

“...I don't have a surname. I am just called Tingsheng...”

Mei Changsu re-examined this child closely. His face was swollen red and his features have yet to mature, but one can still see that he had rather handsome eyes. His words and actions have been very submissive since the beginning, without any apparent struggle against unjust treatment. Yet strangely enough, one could not feel a hint of servitude from him. It was as if he radiated tenacity from his bones, and nobody can make him subservient regardless of how he is bullied.

“Tingsheng, if we let you down now, would someone find a doctor for you when you go back?”

Tingsheng pressed his lips together. Clearly, there was no certain answer, and he did not wish to lie.

“Then we must take you back to our place and have a doctor take a look at you. After he says that you're okay, we'll send you back. Does that sound good?”

Tingsheng hung his head and kept silent, his brows squeezed together.

“Will our goodwill bring you difficulties?”

Tingsheng flinched and bit his lips together tightly.

“Did you come out by yourself?”

“No... There's another person...”

“Where is he?”

“He ran off...”

“If you go home late, will someone beat you?”

A chill flashed in Tingsheng's eyes. He shook his head, “Not anymore... I just won't get food...”

Xiao Jingrui felt his blood surge. He said angrily, “You don't get food? Which family do you belong to? Why would you go back after being treated like this? Tell me, I can help you. You can come to my family too. At least we'll feed you!”

Tingsheng raised his eyes. In his gaze was a sense of calm and maturity beyond his years. “You're taking pity on me and want to take me in, right?”

Xiao Jingrui froze. He tried to explain awkwardly, “No... What I meant was...”

“I don’t have the right to be taken in. I must go back to that place... If I could be taken in, I would’ve been ages ago...”

“Do you have a contract?” guessed Xiao Jingrui. “Who is the owner? Tell me, I can go negotiate.”

Tingsheng lowered his eyes with indifference. “No, you can’t.”

“Do you know who he is?” asked Mei Changsu. He looked into the child’s eyes. “His father is a Marquess and his mother is a Princess. He is a person of high status. Regardless of who you were sold to in Jinling, your old master will let him have his way as long as he goes forward to negotiate. Do you understand?”

Tingsheng’s head remained lowered. He insisted, “No, you can’t.”

Mei Changsu and Xiao Jingrui looked at each other. They were just about to speak again when the driver called out, “Young master, we’ve reached the manor.”

## CHAPTER 16

### *Prince Jing*

“Here, let’s head in first.” Xiao Jingrui jumped down from the carriage and lifted the child down as well. He instructed the servant who came up to greet them, “Go summon a doctor.”

Mei Changsu followed them, stooping out from the carriage. He carried the heavy bag of books, wondering how the little child managed to lift it.

“I’ll hold it,” said Xiao Jingrui, walking over. However, an attentive servant had already seized the bag. He reached out his arm instead and supported Mei Changsu as he jumped down from the carriage.

Tingsheng took a quick glimpse at the “Manor of the Marquess of Ning” sign above the entrance, and his face clouded for a second. Even though he quickly lowered his head again, this slight change in demeanor did not escape Mei Changsu’s eyes.

They brought the child to the Snow Cottage. A doctor soon arrived to treat him, and concluded that his ribs were dislocated. He must rest, eat nutritious food, and must refrain from any more physical labour. If not, then this will inevitably cause other issues for his body in the future.

One could tell that Tingsheng lived in very harsh conditions just by looking at him. If they let him return now, then he probably will not be able to fulfill any one of the doctor’s orders. Yet, regardless of how Xiao Jingrui interrogated him, Tingsheng refused to spill out any details on where he lived.

Compared to him, Mei Changsu was much more patient. He sent for someone to bring exquisite food and drinks to feed Tingsheng, then told him to sleep and rest. When he saw that Tingsheng was much too uneasy to fall asleep, he began to flip through a book to examine the extent of the boy’s knowledge.

“You don’t have a teacher, do you?”

“No.”

“Who taught you to read?”

“My mom.”

Mei Changsu pondered for a moment. Although this child had a desire to learn, his education was clearly shallow and chaotic. The books he bought were haphazard as well, varying in their difficulty. They did not seem to be a list given to him by a scholar, but rather more like what he chose himself based on his own presumptions. Mei Changsu wondered where he got the money to buy books.

“Tingsheng, education doesn’t work like that.” Mei Changsu organized his pile of books patiently. He went to retrieve many more volumes from his room and marked them in order. “You need to read these books first. These are the fundamentals. They are the simplest in content and style, and have clear moral values. Learning is just like building a house—the foundation needs to be solid so that the house above will not be crooked. If you just read at random without understanding their true meaning, you will only mess up your temperament. And these books, they are good books, but you are too young. I doubt you can even recognize all these words, so you wouldn’t understand their contents without someone to explain them to you. Leave these books for now. If you have a chance in the future, then feel free to come and ask me.”

Tingsheng’s eyes lit up, but immediately dimmed again. He intuitively knew that this older brother before him was a learned scholar. However, it was absolutely impossible to frequent this Marquess manor and ask him questions.

“Thank you.” Tingsheng stood up and bowed deeply to the two. “Can I leave now?”

“Geez, you...” Xiao Jingrui looked at him, his head beginning to throb. “You already had a huge pile of books, and now Mr. Su gave you so many more. How can you carry them all?”

Tingsheng looked at the small mountain of books and really did not wish to abandon any. So, he gritted his teeth and said bravely, “I can carry them.”

“Don’t be rash now.” Xiao Jingrui caught him quickly. “You’re hurt. You can’t use brute strength like that. Why don’t I ask someone to send you back?”

Tingsheng shook his head with determination.

Xiao Jingrui was powerless with this child. He looked helplessly towards Mei Changsu.

Mei Changsu pondered for a moment. He was just about to speak when a clear shout sounded from outside the Snow Cottage. It was Feiliu's voice, followed immediately by someone calling, "Little master, you can't hit him... He is..."

"Breaking in. Hit!" answered Feiliu coldly. The sound of cloths snapping in the air grew louder.

"Who are you? How dare you obstruct my..." shouted another person angrily, and the voice cut off. He was probably unable to speak further due to Feiliu's attacks.

"Go out, then no hit!" Feiliu likely received instructions from Mei Changsu and was not lethal in his attacks. However, his voice was like ice, leaving no room for discussion.

Xiao Jingrui was unable to identify the voice of the man being obstructed, but he still ran out immediately. Moments later, his voice sounded as well, "Feiliu, stop fighting. This is a guest. He can come in."

"Didn't say okay! Out!" insisted Feiliu.

Mei Changsu frowned. Besides the few people Feiliu already knew, most guests would be announced by servants. If he wished to see them, then he would first instruct Feiliu to allow them in. This had allowed them to be free from conflicts thus far. This guest had clearly charged in by relying on some kind of status, and not only were the servants afraid to block his way, they did not even have a chance to announce him first. Thus, he ended up provoking Feiliu and was stopped by him.

Normally, Mei Changsu would never see such a rude guest.

He was just about to raise his voice and decline this guest when his gaze fell upon Tingsheng.

The child's face was as white as a sheet. He stared straight forward, mouth agape, and was listening attentively to the noise outside. He wrung his hands together, almost changing their shape.

Mei Changsu suddenly changed his mind. He called out, "Feiliu, let him in!"

The sound of combat immediately stopped, and Xiao Jingrui's voice sounded again. His tone was extremely polite, saying, "I hope you are unhurt? What could have made you charge in like this? Is there an urgent matter? My father is not home right now. Why don't I accompany you to the main hall and wait..."

"I'm not looking for the Marquess," said the man as he charged into the Snow Cottage. His path led him before Mei Changsu, whose calm gaze had a hint of sharpness. The man stopped involuntarily. He swept the room with his eyes, and



finally calmed down when he saw Tingsheng standing there safe and sound. He asked, “Ting, are you all right?”

“Yes,” answered Tingsheng, his voice low and respectful.

“Do you know this child?” asked Xiao Jingrui, who followed the man in.

“Jingrui.” The man turned and spoke solemnly, “I heard that this child accidentally bumped into the carriage of a nobleman, and perhaps he startled your important guest. It’s no wonder that you’re upset. However, he is just a child. Please do me a favour. Can you allow him to apologize to your guest and let him go?”

Xiao Jingrui looked at him, his mind whirling. He stood confused until Mei Changsu let out a laugh, then he followed suit. “I think Your Highness has some misunderstandings. Tingsheng did not bump into my carriage. We met him passing by and decided to bring him home with us to treat his wounds. If you don’t believe me, you can ask Tingsheng.”

The man stood dazed. He turned to glance at Tingsheng’s expression, thought about Xiao Jingrui’s usual conduct, and knew that he spoke the truth. He immediately looked embarrassed.

“I did not know that it was Prince Jing arriving.” Mei Changsu stood up slowly and bowed. “Please forgive Feiliu’s offense just now.”

Xiao Jingrui hurried forward and introduced, “Prince Jing, this is Mr. Su Zhe.”

The Emperor’s seventh son Xiao Jingyan was thirty-one years old, a tall and slender young man. His features were not too different from his brothers, but due to leading the army year-round, he had an extra dash of fortitude in addition to the imperious air of royalty. The skin on his face and hands were also not as delicately preserved as the other Princes. He did not show any unusual expression upon hearing the name of Su Zhe, and returned a bow politely, likely only due to Xiao Jingrui’s ceremonial introduction.

On the other hand, Mei Changsu examined Prince Jing carefully behind his usual expression of calmness.

Xiao Jingrui asked as soon as the guest was seated, “Does Tingsheng belong to Your Highness?”

“...Erm... No...” Prince Jing had a troubled expression, as if he did not know how to answer. “Tingsheng currently...lives in the Secluded Courtyard...”

“The Secluded Courtyard?” Xiao Jingrui did not think of that place. He blurted out, “Isn’t that the place of punishment for the Palace’s servants? He’s so young, what crime could he have committed to be confined there?”

Tingsheng’s lips were pressed into a line, stiff as steel. He did not have any colour on his face.

“He was confined with his mother, and was born there.”<sup>17</sup> Prince Jing knew that even if he did not speak, Xiao Jingrui would be able to investigate easily. So, he spoke quickly and frankly. “If you don’t need anything else, then please let him go back soon. According to regulations, the people in the Secluded Courtyard are not allowed to spend the night outside. His mother is probably very worried right now...”

“You know his mother?” Xiao Jingrui knew that he should not inquire further, but was not able to win against his curiosity. Prince Jing’s official consort had passed away many years ago. Currently, he only has two concubines who were appointed to him, and no others. Compared to other Princes with teeming harems, he was certainly eccentric. Perhaps it was because he fell in love with a convicted Palace maid. Thinking further along those lines, perhaps that child was...

At this point, Xiao Jingrui felt that his imagination was in danger of turning into that of Yan Yujin. He forcefully cut off his train of thought and smiled with some embarrassment.

Prince Jing was his elder by a few years and thus had more life experience. He was also pretty smart, and so he understood from a glance where Xiao Jingrui’s thoughts ran off to. However, he did not intend on clarifying. He learned about Tingsheng’s existence only a few years ago. At the time, the child was tormented beyond belief. For the past few years, he had exercised some of his powers to relieve Tingsheng from beatings, but at the end of the day, he could not protect him perfectly. Prince Jing would inevitably be worried whenever he left the capital to inspect the borders. He returned to the capital just a few days ago and was busy completing some tasks from the Department of Military Affairs. He finally had some free time to check on Tingsheng in the Secluded Courtyard, but heard his friend say that he got into trouble in the streets. Prince Jing quickly looked into the situation and rushed over to save him. Thankfully, nothing major happened.

“It was impertinent of me to trespass into the Marquess’s manor. I will most certainly return with apologies on another day.” Prince Ying did not say much more. He stood up and gave Tingsheng a look. “It is getting late. I will take my leave—”

Before he finished, Mei Changsu suddenly began to cough. At first, it seemed like he was forcefully suppressing it. Then, he began to cough more and more violently, as

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<sup>17</sup> Tingsheng’s name is literally “courtyard-born”, likely named after his birth in the Secluded Courtyard.

if he's about to tear his organs apart. Veins popped all over his forehead, which was covered in large drops of sweat. Xiao Jingrui had never seen him cough like that in all their time together, and was very anxious. He hurried over to pat Mei Changsu's back, but found it useless. He went to wipe his sweat with a handkerchief, but found his forehead to be burning hot while his face was icy cold. He became more agitated and shouted for someone to summon a doctor. Even Feiliu had pounced over. He hugged Mei Changsu's shaking body, and was speechless like a terrified child who was only able to cry out "ah, ah".

After a long struggle, Mei Changsu began to slowly calm down. He raised the handkerchief covering his mouth. A blot of glaring red blood flashed, and was crumpled away. Xiao Jingrui had already seen it and was very distressed, but kept quiet. He simply asked Mei Changsu softly, "Su, do you need to take one of Dr. Xun's pills?"

"No need." Mei Changsu fought to regulate his breathing and smiled at Feiliu. "It is just a cough. Don't be scared, Feiliu. I'll be all right if Feiliu helps me and pat me on the back tonight..."

"Feiliu pat!"

"That's right. With Feiliu patting my back, nothing would happen to me..."

Prince Jing had been watching from aside. He couldn't leave, and couldn't stay. He saw Su Zhe calm down now and hurried forward to inquire politely, "Is Mr. Su ill?"

Mei Changsu slowly turned his gaze, and found Tingsheng staring at him with wide eyes. Mei Changsu smiled softly at him and waved his hand, "Come here, Tingsheng."

Tingsheng looked at Prince Jing. He didn't really know what was going on, but he walked over to the long chair.

"Tingsheng, would you like me to be your teacher?"

Tingsheng was shocked. He did not know how to respond. Prince Jing frowned, "Mr. Su, Tingsheng is from the Secluded Courtyard..."

"I know." Some moisture lingered in Mei Changsu's eyes, probably due to his violent coughs. They made his gaze look more intense as he continued, "I am simply asking. Would you like me to?"

Tingsheng's chest heaved sharply. For some reason, he was suddenly certain that this was an opportunity. So, he squared his jaws, straightened his back, and answered loudly, "Yes!"

“All right.” The smile on Mei Changsu’s pale face widened. He reached out and held the child’s hand in his. “Go back for now. I will definitely find a way to have you by my side.”

## CHAPTER 17

### *Choosing a Master*

As to Mei Changsu's sudden promise, the person who ended up being the most astounded was actually Prince Jing. Compared to Xiao Jingrui, he had a better understanding of the child's status, and he knew exactly how difficult it would be to take him away from the Secluded Courtyard. After all, even the significant efforts of a Prince could not achieve the goal of taking Tingsheng into his manor. This young man was simply a good friend of a Marquess's son. It would probably be futile even with Xiao Jingrui's assistance, and this would merely result in another disappointment for Tingsheng.

"Mr. Su must be a kind person and can't bear to see this child suffer," said Prince Jing evenly. "However, the people within the Secluded Courtyard may only leave with the Emperor's special pardon. It is not an easy task. Does Mr. Su think that it could be resolved with just a word from the Marquess of Ning?"

Xiao Jingrui said hurriedly, "Ah, I can ask Father to go meet the Emperor..."

"Jingrui." Prince Jing cut him off immediately. "Are you requesting the Marquess of Ning to meet the Emperor for the son of a maid in the Secluded Courtyard? Please stop making such jokes."

"But..." Xiao Jingrui was about to continue, but Mei Changsu pressed his arm and said, "Jingrui, Prince Jing is right. Every person in the Secluded Courtyard has criminal charges. It's not such a simple matter as taking pity on someone from the streets and buying them back. You must not say anything about this matter with the Marquess, nor to anyone else, understand?"

"You don't want us to help?" asked Xiao Jingrui incredulously. "Then how do you plan on rescuing him? Are you going to ask the Crown Prince and Prince Yu?"

Prince Jing raised his eyebrows. A light, sharp as a sword, flashed in his eyes. He said coldly, "So Mr. Su...is actually friends with the Crown Prince and Prince Yu. I have not paid you due respect!"

Mei Changsu glanced at him and ignored the comment. He continued his warm speech to Xiao Jingrui. “Jingrui, you must believe in me. I can be more confident about saving Tingsheng only if nobody else knows about this. As the son of a convicted maid, the Emperor’s suspicions will be raised in accordance with the status of the person asking for a special pardon. If not, Prince Jing could’ve saved him long ago. Promise me, pretend that you know nothing about this and do not bring it up again in the future, okay?”

Xiao Jingrui stared bewilderedly at him. Although he did not understand, he still nodded out of trust and respect for Su.

Right then, a person outside the courtyard announced, “Young master, the Marquess has returned.”

An idea struck Mei Changsu. He seized the chance and said, “Run along and go greet the Marquess. You don’t need to keep me company here.”

“But your body...”

“Don’t worry. You know that I cough a lot, it’s not a big deal. How can you not greet the Marquess when he returns to the manor? If you abandon the proper etiquette of a son in order to accompany me, the Marquess will think that I am a horrible friend you shouldn’t associate with. Go.”

Xiao Jingrui complied. He stood up and turned towards Prince Jing, “Then, I will accompany Your Highness out first.”

“Would Your Highness like to stay for a while longer? I have some details I want to ask...about Tingsheng...” said Mei Changsu, smiling.

Prince Jing’s eyes flickered. He couldn’t really figure out who exactly this strange and sickly young man was, and wanted to observe him some more. So, he nodded to Xiao Jingrui and said, “You can go ahead. Since Mr. Su has such good intentions, I want to get to know him better as well.”

“If so, then I will take my leave.” Xiao Jingrui reckoned his father to have passed the second gate by now, and was a bit worried. He hurriedly gave a bow and rushed to the main courtyard.

After the owner left, the two remaining men in the courtyard did not begin to converse immediately. Prince Jing coldly surveyed the man sitting on the long chair beneath the tree, his expression extremely vigilant. On the other hand, Mei Changsu was a lot more relaxed. He quietly instructed Feiliu to go outside the courtyard, then picked out a book and sent Tingsheng to read it in another corner of the courtyard. Finally, he turned his gaze to the Prince and gave him a faint smile.

“Even if Your Highness holds animosity towards me, there’s really no need to express it so clearly,” said Mei Changsu leisurely. “At least you and I have a common goal right now, which is to save Tingsheng.”

“That is what I find curious,” responded Prince Jing, his eyes filled with suspicion. “Why are you putting in so much effort to rescue Tingsheng? Is it only due to sympathy?”

“Of course not.” Mei Changsu took a look at the tiny figure reading in the corner. His eyes were extremely warm. “He has great qualities. I want to take him in as a student.”

Prince Jing snorted. “There are many more children with better qualities than him. With your many friends—the son of the Marquess of Ning, the Crown Prince, and Prince Yu—you can take in any student you want.”

“Then what is the reason for Your Highness to protect Tingsheng so? Your Highness charged into the manor of the influential Marquess of Ning for a little convicted servant. I’m guessing that it was not only due to sympathy?”

Prince Jing answered lightly, “I really like Tingsheng’s mother. I am only caring for the loved one of the person I love...”

“You are caring for the loved one of the person you love indeed, but it is definitely not because of his mother...” Mei Changsu closed his eyes for a bit, and his face was an expressionless mask, “...but his father...”

Prince Jing’s whole body trembled. The muscles on his face twitched involuntarily. His hands formed tight fists by his side, as if struggling to prevent them from colliding with the young man’s face.

“I suppose this is the difference in age between Jingrui and I. I understood immediately, but he couldn’t, because he was still a child at that time. He only knew to study literature and practise martial arts then. That event is too far in the past for him...” Mei Changsu was not looking at Prince Jing at all. A slightly bitter smile surfaced, and he continued, “Tingsheng is eleven, born in the Secluded Courtyard. Whose posthumous child is he? From the timing, the most fitting would be that person... You two were once deployed together, so you should’ve cared for each other a lot...”

Xiao Jingyan’s gaze stabbed at Mei Changsu like icicles. His voice did not hold any warmth as he asked, “Who...are you?”

“Neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu is my friend. They are trying to recruit me.” Mei Changsu laughed mockingly, “Do you know what comment Langya Hall has made for me? ‘Qilin prodigy. Obtain him to obtain the world.’ How could I be

considered a qilin prodigy if I have no knowledge of the major events in the Princes' lives?"

"From what you've said, it sounds like you are deliberately collecting information and secrets of this sort to prepare for your future actions?"

"That's right," answered Mei Changsu quickly. "What's wrong with being a qilin? I will be relied on by the powerful and make contributions to the world. Perhaps in the future, my name may enjoy a space of worship in the Royal Ancestral Temple, and my fame will go down in history."

Prince Jing's eyes were dark. He asked with a voice filled with hostility, "Then, are you planning on choosing the Crown Prince or Prince Yu?"

Mei Changsu lifted his head slightly. His eyes looked at the blue sky beyond the balding branches. He stared and stared. Finally, he slowly pulled his gaze back and set them upon Prince Jing. "I want to choose you, Prince Jing."

"Choose me?" Prince Jing reared back and laughed, but his eyes were sorrowful. "Then you must be blind. My mother is a lowly Concubine, and I do not have any notable relatives on her side. I am thirty-one, and have yet to be decorated as a Royal Prince. I have always kept company solely with rugged military men, and have no contacts within the Royal Court. What can you accomplish by choosing me?"

"Certainly, your situation is not ideal," said Mei Changsu evenly. "Unfortunately, I have no better choice."

"What does that mean? The Crown Prince and Prince Yu both have considerable support. It wouldn't be a surprise if either one snatches the throne..."

"I don't want to choose them precisely because it wouldn't be a surprise if either one obtains the throne. Would it not be a great show of my qilin abilities if I can set a person nobody thought of on the throne, all by myself?"

Prince Jing took a long look at Mei Changsu. He couldn't tell if this person was joking or serious.

"Your Highness, please be honest." Mei Changsu returned his gaze calmly, like a demon luring someone to hell. "Are you really completely uninterested in becoming the Emperor?"

Xiao Jingyan's heart quivered, and he silently clenched his jaw. As the Emperor's son, it would be a lie to say that he had never held any desire for the throne. Yet, it would be untrue to say that he thinks about it constantly, or that seizing the throne is his most important goal in life. However, he was willing to pay any price if he could really prevent the Crown Prince and Prince Yu from claiming the throne.



“If I manage to save Tingsheng, then please consider it as a greeting gift for joining you.” Mei Changsu looked indifferent, but his words made Prince Jing’s blood churn. “The Eldest Prince, your most respected elder brother... Your wish is to have his only remaining blood leave the Secluded Courtyard, right?”

Prince Jing’s eyes quivered slightly. He spoke in staccato, “Can you really do it?”

“I can.”

“However... I do not actually appreciate people who are so calculating like you. Even if I were to ascend the throne with your assistance, you may not receive much merit or status from me. Are you fine with that?”

“Since I have a calculating mind, I will naturally have opportunities to discuss conditions with Your Highness.” Mei Changsu smiled broadly, making him appear sunny and lighthearted, much unlike his somber words. “You wouldn’t happen to be the type who kills accomplished officials, would you? That sounds more like Crown Prince and Prince Yu...”

Prince Jing began to think carefully with his fingers over his lips. This Su Zhe had said such ridiculous things, but he appeared to be very serious. Perhaps he was trying to deceive him, but he really couldn’t think of a motive. Whether it’s the Crown Prince or Prince Yu, neither had ever taken any brother besides each other to be a worthwhile opponent. They wouldn’t bother with sending such a capable person just to probe his thoughts. Then, what is he after? Is he really only choosing someone he wishes to support?

“Your Highness should think it over faster. After all, Tingsheng must return before dark,” urged Mei Changsu serenely.

Finally, Prince Jing gritted his teeth and made a decision. “All right. As long as you can prevent the Crown Prince and Prince Yu from ascending the throne, I can cooperate with you.”

“That’s not enough determination. You must make the throne your absolute goal.” Mei Changsu’s words were like ice. “You know what powers the Crown Prince and Prince Yu hold. If you want them to fail, then someone else must succeed. Who can be this person be but you? Of the living Princes, the Third Prince is crippled, the Fifth Prince is cowardly, and the Ninth Prince is too young... Like I said, your situation is not ideal, but there is no other choice...”

“You’re rather blunt.” Prince Jing’s eyes flashed with interest, “Since you’re interested in joining me, aren’t you afraid to offend me?”

“Do you only like to listen to pleasing words?” From his tone, Mei Changsu appeared very tired. He leaned back in his chair, his eyes half closed. “Please rest assured, Your Highness. In at most ten days after Princess Nihuang’s tournament, I will be able to take Tingsheng away from the palace. Right now... Please forgive me for not seeing you off.”

After he finished, he closed his eyes completely, as if beginning to nap. Xiao Jingyan did not pay much mind to such rude behaviour. He took a look at Mei Changsu, and did not say anything. Then, he stood up, called for Tingsheng, picked up the bag of books, and walked sharply out of the Snow Cottage.

## CHAPTER 18

### *Old Friend*

That night, Xiao Jingrui brought home a Royal Physician for Mei Changsu, but the doctor was afraid to interfere once he learned that the patient was taking medicine from Dr. Xun. He left orders to “rest well and avoid emotional stress”, then left immediately. Mei Changsu sent Xiao Jingrui off with the doctor, using the excuse of wanting to sleep early. He didn’t actually go to bed. Rather, he threw on a coat, opened the windows, and sat quietly beneath the windowsill. He stared at the crescent moon hanging in the sky, as if in deep thought.

Feiliu walked over. He sat on the little rug nearby, plopped his head onto Mei Changsu’s knee, and shook him gently.

Mei Changsu looked down on the black-haired head on his knee. He reached and patted it softly, asking quietly, “What’s wrong with our Feiliu? Feeling lonely?”

Feiliu raised his head and looked at Mei Changsu with eyes clear as daylight. “Don’t be sad!”

Mei Changsu was a bit taken aback. After a while, a warm smile appeared on his face. “I was only caught up in my thoughts. I’m not sad. Don’t worry, Feiliu.”

Feiliu shook his head and insisted, “Don’t be sad!”

That instant, Mei Changsu felt his whole heart melt, as if his emotions were about to burst from his control. Only a flickering breath remained in his chest, supporting his body’s movements and expressions. How easy it would be to not be sad! He only need to seek a secluded scenic location to recuperate, and have a few good friends visit frequently. There would be no intrigue, no conspiracies, and no betrayals. He would be able to recover from his lingering illness. He wouldn’t need to disappoint other’s good intentions. What a delight it would be for his body and soul! Unfortunately, that was ultimately a dream. The things he had placed upon himself, he must grit his teeth and carry them to the end, regardless of how heavy and painful they were.

“Feiliu, why don’t you go back to Lang Prefecture?” suggested Mei Changsu quietly, caressing the youth’s head.

Feiliu’s eyes widened. He dived frantically and latched on to Mei Changsu’s waist. “Don’t want!”

“I can write a letter to Lin Chen and tell him to stop teasing you. Would that be okay?”

“Don’t want!”

“But Feiliu,” said Mei Changsu with a hint of insuppressible sorrow, “If you remain by my side, you will see me turn more and more evil. Eventually...Feiliu will be sad too...”

“Feiliu like this.” Feiliu pressed his face tightly against Mei Changsu’s knee. “Won’t be sad!”

“Is that enough?” Mei Changsu gave a long sigh. “Can you be very happy just by remaining at my side and resting upon my knee?”

“Feiliu happy!”

Mei Changsu gathered Feiliu’s face into his hands gently. He ran his fingers over Feiliu’s forehead, his expression growing more sorrowful. “All right... If that is the case, then at the very least, I should be able to preserve your happiness... Feiliu, you need to remember this. Regardless of what happens in the future, don’t be afraid, because there will always be someone taking care of you. You will always be my...happiest child...”

Feiliu blinked. He couldn’t really understand what was said, but he could feel its warmth and kindness. So, imitating Mei Changsu, he used his fingers to pull a slight smile on his icy face that was still unaccustomed to smiling. His forceful tugging made him look strange, but it was already a rare expression of his emotions.

“Our Feiliu is so cute. When we return to Lang Prefecture, let’s smile for Lin Chen too, okay?”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“He’s bad!”

“You really dislike Lin Chen, don’t you?” chuckled Mei Changsu soundlessly. He gathered Feiliu into his arms and rocked gently. “You’re better than me... It would be great if I can be so carefree...and so happy...”

Feiliu broke away from his arms. He sat up straight and spoke earnestly, “Can!”

Mei Changsu looked at him warmly, “Can I really?”

“Can!” repeated Feiliu. He rose and dragged a tall stool over. He sat on it, then pulled Mei Changsu to sit on the rug. He moved Mei Changsu’s head and placed it on his own knee. “Like Feiliu! Su can too!”

Mei Changsu felt his eyes moisten. He rested his head on Feiliu’s knee, and felt Feiliu’s fingers slipping into his hair and caressing him softly, caressing into him his purest love and reliance.

“Our Feiliu is so smart,” murmured Mei Changsu, shutting his eyes tightly. “So Su can be like this too...”

“Can!” Feiliu made a great effort and tried to smile again. At the same time, he rocked his knee and began to slowly hum a soothing tune.

“Feiliu has learned this song as well?”

“Learned! Feiliu sings!”

Mei Changsu took a deep breath and tried to relax every muscle in his body. Weariness washed over him.

“Sleep!” said Feiliu.

“Feiliu is sleepy and wants to sleep?”

“No! Su sleep! Feiliu fights bad guy!”

Mei Changsu froze, then quickly understood what Feiliu meant. He raised his eyebrows, “Someone came into the Snow Cottage?”

“Yup!” nodded Feiliu, “Outside! Uncle! Feiliu go fight him!”

Mei Changsu breathed a sigh of relief. He pulled on Feiliu’s arm and stood up, calling out the window, “Please come in, Meng.”

Just as his voice faded, a shadow flitted into the room. He clearly had a muscular physique, yet his movements were as quick as a spirit.

“This uncle is Su’s guest. Let’s not fight him, Feiliu. Let’s go sleep, okay?” Mei Changsu coaxed the youth into the inner chamber, Meng Zhi following behind him. The two adults waited until Feiliu laid down on his bed and closed his eyes obediently, then went to sit at the round table at the centre of the room.

“Did those two leave?” asked Mei Changsu as he poured a cup of tea for Meng Zhi.

“I delivered your message, but Wei Zheng looked like he didn’t want to leave...”

“Then what does he want to do?”

“Stay in the capital and help you, of course. He said that this is everyone’s business and that he can’t have you shouldering the burden yourself...”

“Nonsense!” responded Mei Changsu angrily. “He’s different from me. I’m all alone, but he has Ms. Yun. She had been waiting for him for the past twelve years, separated by life and death. She finally waited to see the day of him coming back after surviving, and the two are finally able to be together after enduring all that hardship. Why is he making a commotion again? I don’t need him here. He needs to leave if he wants to, and leave if he doesn’t!”

“You don’t need to get angry,” comforted Meng Zhi. “I know Wei Zheng. Regardless of how he feels, he will obey your orders. I am only worried about you right now. Did you come to the capital like this, unarmed and alone? Didn’t you bring any support?”

“But I brought Feiliu.”

“You mean that child?” Meng Zhi looked towards the bed. “Speaking of which, I’m really sorry about the other day. I didn’t know that this child was yours. I was shocked by his abilities, and fought him out of curiosity. I hope I didn’t cause you any trouble?”

“No,” said Mei Changsu lightly, “I only gained some fame.”

“Why didn’t you notify me first before coming here? How am I supposed to help you right now without any preparations?”

“Are you going to help me?” Mei Changsu smiled with indifference, “Forget about it. You are the Commander of the Royal Guards right now, and in high favour with the Emperor. Why should you endure hardships for me? You are helping me enormously just by pretending not to know me.”

Meng Zhi gritted his teeth and furrowed his brows in anger. “Did you really mean that? What kind of person do you take me for?”

Mei Changsu smiled, so faintly that it was barely noticeable. He grabbed Meng Zhi's elbow and squeezed. He answered quietly, "Meng, how could I not know your feelings? Ignoring the fact that you were war buddies with us, you wouldn't stand idly by just based on your chivalry alone. However, I really do not have an absolute chance of success in what I'm doing. I don't want to drag you in. I fear that some small carelessness will destroy overnight the loyal name of Meng that has existed for generations..."

"Loyalty lies in the heart, not in the name. As long as you do not directly harm the Emperor, you will never be my enemy."

"The Emperor? The Emperor is forever a knife, holding the power to kill and cut." Mei Changsu smiled in understanding, "It seems that you've already guessed my reason for entering the capital."

"Yes, I think I can guess it." Meng Zhi's eyes were filled with concern. "However, while it is simple to break the path of either the Crown Prince or Prince Yu, it will be hard to get rid of both of them. His Majesty will need to keep one no matter what!"

"Not necessarily," chuckled Mei Changsu coldly, "These are not the only two sons of the Emperor."

Meng Zhi had probably never considered the possibility of someone besides the Crown Prince and Prince Yu succeeding the throne. He asked with great astonishment, "You...you want to support Prince Jing?"

"Is there a reason why I should not?"

"I know that you and Prince Jing care for each other a lot, and I don't think lightly of his capabilities either. To be fair, his disadvantages are really trivial. They are only the low status of his mother and general lack of attention from the Emperor. These can all change if he performs well in the future. The crucial point is that Prince Jing is not good with political schemes by nature, and detests struggles for power. Yet, the struggle for the throne is such a dangerous affair. How can someone of his nature defeat the ruthless and powerful Crown Prince and Prince Yu?!"

Mei Changsu fiddled with the lid of his cup. He spoke expressionlessly, "So what if he is bad with political schemes by nature? He has me. I will take on those dark and bloody affairs. In order to take down people of evil, I am willing to stab innocent people in the heart. It would make me sad, but when a person's pain had once surpassed the limit, he can tolerate this level of sadness..."

His words were dark, but contained a bleakness and tragedy that was impossible to disguise. Meng Zhi stared at his face, dazed, and felt a sudden unbearable pain in his chest. Finally, he sighed and asked quietly, "Then...would Prince Jing agree?"

“Why not? His hatred for the Crown Prince and Prince Yu runs as deeply as mine. Not to mention, there is the throne waiting for him at the end. The throne has a special appeal. Not many people can resist it. Not even Jingyan...”

“That’s impossible!” said Meng Zhi, striking the table. “So he detests power struggles, but it’s not like you enjoy them! When did Prince Jing turn so heartless? Doesn’t he care about you?”

“Meng,” smiled Mei Changsu dimly, “You forgot, Jingyan doesn’t know that it’s me... I am already dead. I am already a scar in his heart... The person threatening and luring him to walk upon the path to the throne is simply a stranger named Su Zhe. Why should he care?”

“Ah!” cried Meng Zhi, vexed. “Right, he doesn’t know... But didn’t you meet him today? You didn’t tell him? And he didn’t recognize you?”

“Why would I tell him?” Mei Changsu’s face was pale as snow, but his eyes were very calm. “Regardless of how innocent a friend was once upon a time, people who return from hell turn into demons. Not only was he unable to recognize me, I can’t recognize myself anymore either.”

Meng Zhi clasped his hands together, so tight that his knuckles turned white. He wanted to use this to diminish the pain of his heart tearing apart. He still remembered the eighteen-year-old him, with his brilliant smile and healthy, apple-red cheeks at departure. Twelve years had flown by. Upon looking back, it already felt like a previous lifetime.

“Shu...” The hand he took into his were thin and pale. Meng Zhi could only imagine what hardships and pain he had to overcome to struggle back to the world of the living.

“Promise me, don’t ever tell Jingyan.” Mei Changsu looked out the window, his gaze blurred and distant. “The lively and cute friend he grew up with will never be the same person as the sinister and ruthless tactician. Isn’t it better this way?”

“Shu...”

“You and great-grandma are the only two people in the entire royal capital who knows about Lin Shu’s return. I don’t wish for there to be a third person, Meng. Please.”

“You can rest assured with me, but how did the Grand Empress Dowager find out? She’s been getting a little muddled in the recent years.”



“I don’t know how she recognized me either, as I look entirely different now. But when she looked at me and called me ‘little Shu’, her gaze was so warm. I am sure that she didn’t simply call me by the wrong name... Perhaps her foggy memory of the past allows her to be more at ease. I am only her little Shu. I am supposed to appear at her side. Perhaps that’s why she was so happy, and not at all surprised.”

Meng Zhi was a bit uneasy, “The Grand Empress Dowager wouldn’t say anything, would she?”

“She wouldn’t,” said Mei Changsu calmly. “Besides, nobody would really pay attention to anything she says now.”

“Ahh...” Meng Zhi gave a long sigh, “That’s true.”

Mei Changsu raised his cup of tea and took a sip. He was silent for a moment, then asked slowly, “Meng, since you are here today, I have a question I want to ask you...”

“Ask away.”

“We’ve secretly contacted each other many times these years. How come you never told me that Jingyu has a posthumous child?”

“What did you say?” Meng Zhi almost jumped up in astonishment. “Prince Qi has a child?!”

## CHAPTER 19

### *The Faded Past*

“What did you say?” Meng Zhi almost jumped up in astonishment. “Prince Qi has a child?!”

“You didn’t know about this either?” Mei Changsu was a bit surprised. “Jingyan really kept a tight lid on the secret, but that’s hardly surprising. If even the slightest bit of news fall into the ears of the Crown Prince or Prince Yu, then Tingsheng’s life is forfeit...”

“Is it true?” asked Meng Zhi incredulously. “All the men in Prince Qi’s household have died. All the women were seized into the Secluded Courtyard, and anyone who had somewhat of a title was forced into the afterlife within a year. How could there possibly be a surviving orphan?”

Mei Changsu’s eyes were heavy. He thought deeply for a moment and answered, “I cannot deduce the details either. However, Jingyu’s Princess was intelligent and wise, and Xiutong was strong and brave. They were both outstanding women who were not at all inferior to men. Besides, everything was in such chaos then. It wouldn’t be impossible for them to have fought to preserve a bit of Jingyu’s blood and have him hidden away within the Secluded Courtyard. Going by the way Jingyan cares for Tingsheng, he had probably confirmed the child’s identity. There should be no mistake.”

“What about his looks? Does he look like Prince Qi?”

“The child had been tormented since birth. He’s yellow and thin, so it’s hard to tell. However, sometimes you’ll see a shadow of Jingyu around his brows and eyes.”

“Since Prince Jing knew that he is Prince Qi’s child, why didn’t he take better care of him? The child went through so much suffering!” Meng Zhi couldn’t hold back his complaints.

“He doesn’t have a choice either. It would inevitably raise suspicions if he looks after a little palace servant out of the blue. If Tingsheng’s identity is revealed by some accident, do you think the Crown Prince and Prince Yu would simply leave it alone?”

“But we can’t just let the child stay in a place like the Secluded Courtyard!” Meng Zhi stood up passionately and began to pace back and forth in the room. Feiliu sat up in his bed and stared at him with icy eyes, fully alert.

“Let’s sleep, Feiliu.” Mei Changsu turned and coaxed Feiliu, then turned to Meng Zhi. “Sit down first, Meng. I know you’re worried, but don’t you think that Jingyan and I are worried as well? We must save Tingsheng. However, the plan must be absolutely foolproof, and we must rescue him without harming a hair on his body.”

“Do you already have a plan?” asked Meng Zhi anxiously.

“I have a rough idea, but I still need to hammer out the details. We can’t rush this. Haste makes waste, right?” Mei Changsu gave a sidelong look at Meng Zhi and raised his eyebrows. “Meng, you’re the greatest warrior of Liang now, and carry the heavy responsibility of protecting the Emperor. I’ve heard people praise you from as far as Lang Prefecture for your calmness and strong will. How come you’re having such trouble containing yourself today?”

Meng Zhi scratched his head and gave a long sigh. “I don’t know what it is either. In any other situation, it wouldn’t be hard for me to maintain my composure even if a mountain blew up. But, speaking to you right now, I feel like I returned to my rash and reckless younger self... Do you still remember the Battle of Gourd Valley? If it were not for Prince Qi’s three personally written orders holding back my reins, I probably would’ve charged straight into the enemy’s trap. If I let Gourd Valley fall, your esteemed father definitely would’ve plucked my head off and give it a great kick.”

“It’s true that Father did not have much trust in you back then, but he also said later that he cannot compare to Prince Qi in regards to identifying talents. Prince Qi could single you out from thousands of soldiers during a single battle practise, even though you were not the most spectacular. My father could not match his great judgment...”

“But who could compare with your esteemed father in terms of his ingenious and formidable command over his troops? Oh, how glorious the Red Flame Army was in those years. Any army would tremble before it.” As he spoke of old memories, Meng Zhi felt a surge of pride that had been submerged for many years. How regretful that there was no wine before them. Instead, Meng Zhi grabbed his teacup and took a big gulp, lamenting, “It’s such a pity that I was forcefully transferred away from the Red Flames before I was there for long. If I were able to hone myself under Prince Qi and your esteemed father, I would be much more capable than I am now.”

Mei Changsu sighed faintly, “Along with any loss comes a gain, I suppose. If you were not transferred away from the Red Flames, putting aside the fact that you wouldn’t have been able to escape the devastation twelve years ago, you would not be

the Commander of the Royal Guards today simply due to your identity as an old member of the Red Flame Army.”

Mei Changsu’s words immediately reminded Meng Zhi of something else. He gritted his teeth and spoke bitterly, “Not necessarily. Isn’t there an old member of the Red Flames standing magnificently in Court right now, surrounded by a halo of light as ‘the Empire’s Pillar’?”

Mei Changsu’s hand on the table shook, then stilled. His fingertips pressed on the red tabletop, as if they were about to leave a few prints.

“It feels so gross, having to put up a false front and pretend to be friendly with him for these years.” Meng Zhi exhaled a long breath, as if trying to release all his melancholy. “And you. Why did you decide to come live in this place?”

“For safety,” answered Mei Changsu lightly.

“What? You think it’s safe here?”

“At least I can be rid of a lot of troubles.” Mei Changsu’s tone was like ice, chilling to the bone. “By taking advantage of those three young men, I am able to quickly come in contact with the important people at Court. This is certainly better than having my hands tied by entering Jinling as an aide due to the Crown Prince or Prince Yu’s summons.”

Meng Zhi thought it over and nodded in approval, but he saw Mei Changsu’s stiff expression and instinctively avoided delving deeper into this topic. He asked about something else instead, “What are your thoughts on this tournament for Princess Nihuang’s husband?”

“The Mu family of Yunnan is the empire’s protective screen of the south. The Princess had toiled away for the empire to the point of setting back her youth for many years. I only hope that she can find someone to love truly from this event. Everything else is unimportant.”

“Did you know that the Crown Prince and Prince Yu had both entered their own men into the tournament? If one of them succeeds, your goal would be much more difficult to achieve.”

“The Princess’s intelligence and zeal far exceeds mine, so there’s no need for me to worry about the tournament for her. However, the Yu and Yan empires still came forward to request a marriage even while knowing the slim chance of success. They must have an ace up their sleeves. You need to be extra cautious.”

“Mhmm!”

“It’s getting pretty late. You should head back. As soon as the plan for rescuing Tingsheng is solidified, I will ask for you to assist me. Regarding Wei Zheng, I would also need to trouble you to watch them leave the capital, and tell them that they must not return again.”

Meng Zhi gave his promises and stood up. He took a step towards the exit, but then stopped, reluctant to leave. He turned and gazed at Mei Changsu. Meng Zhi’s eyes were filled with cherish and concern for Mei Changsu, but he understood that there was a limit as to what he can do. He couldn’t suppress the waves of sadness in his chest. Without much thought, he reached out his arms and gave Mei Changsu a tight hug.

The curtains around the bed fluttered slightly, and Feiliu shot out in a flash. He pointed his palm like a sword, aiming straight for Meng Zhi’s throat. After Meng Zhi avoided the attack by stepping back, Feiliu immediately twisted into a tumble and delivered another chain of lethal attacks.

“Feiliu!” Mei Changsu stopped him hurriedly, “The uncle is saying his farewells to me. He’s not bullying me. Don’t be angry now, Feiliu...”

“Feiliu not allow!” Anger spread on the youth’s icy face.

“Okay okay, it won’t happen again in the future.” Mei Changsu smiled at Meng Zhi apologetically, “Sorry Meng. Our Feiliu has always been like this.”

“No worries. I’m really happy that this child is so protective of you.” Meng Zhi shot a friendly smile towards Feiliu. “You have to protect him well, okay?”

Feiliu ignored him. He remained on guard by his Su’s side, not moving a single step.

“I’ll be leaving, then.” Meng Zhi took another long look at Mei Changsu and spoke quietly, “Shu, you need to take care of your body. You cannot let anything happen to you, you hear?”

Mei Changsu’s eyes grew hot. He hurriedly swallowed down his surge of emotions, and nodded without speaking.

Feiliu glared at Meng Zhi. His face was still expressionless, but his eyes clearly showed his great impatience. As soon as Meng Zhi hopped over the windowsill and vanished, he immediately went to close the window tightly.

“What’s going on? Our Feiliu doesn’t like that uncle?” teased Mei Changsu in a soft tone.

“Doesn’t like!”

“How come?”

“Feiliu can’t win!”

“Don’t worry,” said Mei Changsu, caressing his hair. “Our Feiliu is still young. When you reach the uncle’s age, you will definitely be able to win against him.”

Feiliu’s expression still remained unchanged, but happiness immediately radiated from his eyes. Mei Changsu took his hand and led him to lie down on his bed. He tucked him in and quietly hummed a soft tune, staying by his side until he quietly closed his eyes. Only then did Mei Changsu leave quietly and go to bed himself.

## CHAPTER 20

### *Baili Qi*

Mei Changsu did not go to watch any more matches during the next few days. He stayed behind and rested at the Snow Cottage with the excuse of his poor health. Thankfully, after appraising him the other day, both the Crown Prince and Prince Yu did not think Mei Changsu to be someone who would easily yield to favour or might. As they have yet to come up with a new way to lure him to their side, neither party came forward to pester him. Mei Changsu spent his days reading books and playing the guqin, and focused his entire energy on recovery. As a result, he really began to look much healthier.

Since Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin had signed up, they had to fight in the tournament every day, and could not keep Su company as a result. On the other hand, Xie Bi appeared to have lots of free time. He would find some time every day to come over and chat about this and that with Mei Changsu. Their topics ranged far and wide, but not a word was mentioned about Prince Yu.

However, the Snow Cottage would liven up every day after dusk. Yan Yujin made enough noise for ten people, and would narrate the day's competition to Mei Changsu like a story. He would become especially animated when describing his and Xiao Jingrui's battles, using exceedingly vivid descriptions. It was as if he was describing some momentous, earth-shattering event, or some pivotal battle that will alter the tide of the martial arts world. It was probably more spectacular listening to him than seeing the event in person.

Xie Bi would frequently nudge his brother's arm and criticize, "Aren't you embarrassed by him? Is Yujin really talking about you? It sounds to me more and more like the deity Erlang<sup>18</sup> has descended to earth. All you're missing is a celestial dog at your side."

Xiao Jingrui would usually give a wry grin, but he not once did he stop Yan Yujin or shattered his enthusiasm.

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<sup>18</sup> A famous Chinese warrior deity. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erlang\\_Shen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erlang_Shen).

In contrast, Feiliu would exclaim “Impossible!” from time to time, as he sat and stared at the sky coldly.

Yan Yujin mulled over it for awhile before he finally understood Feiliu’s meaning. From then on, he did not dare to make wild exaggerations as he was describing specific attacks.

Although Yan Yujin was guilty of bragging, he and Xiao Jingrui were undoubtedly first class in their strength. They had subdued their competitors without much effort in the first few rounds. There had been a few scares in the past two days, but they still ended their matches in victories.

The Emperor would appear punctually upon the Phoenix Building every day in order to attach importance to the event. Although everyone knew that he would watch one or two matches at most before leaving, they still felt very honoured by his presence. Marrying Princess Nihuang was not the sole aim for most of the young men who entered the tournament. After all, the position only had one opening, and the difficulty was too great. Most people used this tournament as an opportunity to present their talents, hoping to improve their fame in the martial arts world through battles, or to improve their status by catching the eye of some high authority.

Just like that, the tournament proceeded along merrily, with everything according to plan, and attracted the eyes of the entire world as anticipated. Every day, someone would leave the stage dejectedly, and some rookie would rise to fame with a single battle. The final result represented the combination of fame, fortune, and power. Compared to that, this entire process could not be described as dull. At most, it was not unexpected enough.

However, though the unexpected arrived late, it arrived nonetheless.

At dusk during the seventh day of the tournament, Mei Changsu realized that something astonishing must’ve occurred when he saw the solemn expressions on the faces of Yan Yujin and Xiao Jingrui, who rushed into the Snow Cottage.

“Su! Su!” The one making a racket as soon as he entered was, of course, Yan Yujin. He had run there, giving his cheeks a pinch of redness and his forehead some droplets of sweat. He rushed in, dragged a bamboo stool over, and sat down. He spoke hurriedly before he had a chance to catch his breath, “Oh no, there’s a huge problem!”

“What’s wrong?” Mei Changsu placed down the book in his hands and sat up. “Did you and Jingrui lose?”

“What’s the big deal even if we lost? But Shangzhi lost today!”



“Qin Shangzhi?” Mei Changsu raised his eyebrows nonchalantly. “Even though he is a skilled combatant amongst the young men, he certainly has yet to reach the pinnacle of martial arts. Why should it be so astonishing for him to lose?”

Xiao Jingrui had sat down beside Mei Changsu as well, and replied very seriously, “It’s not astonishing for him to lose, but he was defeated in a single move!”

Mei Changsu was shocked, “How’s that possible? Even if his opponent was Commander Meng himself, he shouldn’t be defeated in a single move.”

“That’s why I said there’s a huge problem!” exclaimed Yan Yujin with a stomp.

“Could it be that the person who defeated him is not a citizen of Liang?”

“We wouldn’t be so worried if he was a citizen of Liang. This person is from the northern Yan empire. His name is pretty weird, called Baili Qi.<sup>19</sup> He was pretending to have a lot of difficulties in the previous rounds, but he suddenly became fierce today, with tomorrow being the last round. It appears that not only is he looking to win, but he also plans on shaking up the remaining competitors during the process.”

Mei Changsu frowned, “Besides Tuoba Hao, the Yan actually have someone of such caliber?”

“This person is practising a sturdy form of martial arts. His looks are coarse, and he’s covered in steel-like muscles. Shangzi took him lightly as a boor, and was rather careless. As a result, Baili Qi received his first attack head-on without even attempting to dodge. Then, before he had a chance to retreat, Baili Qi dislocated his shoulder with one palm strike, which rendered Shangzi unable to move his arm and thus forced to admit defeat.” Xiao Jingrui was just as worried, but his anxiety was not as exposed. He only showed a darkened face, and continued with a rather stable tone, “It’s a bit unfair to say that he was defeated in a single strike, but it’s true that Baili Qi possesses outstanding strength. He may not have much of an advantage if he uses his brute force on someone with a solid foundation and intense inner energy like Commander Meng, but...”

He paused as he reached this part in his speech, as if unwilling to state it clearly. Still, Mei Changsu had already discerned the meaning of his unspoken words.

Princess Nihuang was, after all, a woman. Her nature of combat focused on technique, and was only supplemented with strength. She would be greatly disadvantaged if she faces an opponent who practised a sturdy form of martial arts like Baili Qi. If she happens to make a blunder, then there really will be a huge problem.

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<sup>19</sup> His name is literally “hundred li marvel/oddity”, where 1 li = 500m. Basically, a strange guy.

“Don’t freak out yet,” cut in Xie Bi, who had already been in the Snow Cottage before the two arrived. “This is not necessarily a hopeless case going by the procedure of the tournament. Even if that Baili Qi enters the top ten in the martial arts tournament, the literary arts tournament is still at the discretion of the Emperor. It’ll be fine if His Majesty just ranks him as the last candidate.”

Mei Changsu’s gaze grew a bit more focused. He shook his head, “But this way, there would be no guarantee that the tournament will conclude according to Princess Nihuang’s own wishes. Originally, if she did not like a candidate, she only had to defeat him. If she did not like anyone within the ten candidates, she didn’t have to marry. However, with the appearance of a skilled fighter today who is both someone so difficult to defeat and someone she would never wish to marry, he remains a threat even if he was placed in the last position. To prevent the possibility of losing to him in the end, the Princess will be forced to choose a husband from the nine candidates before him. I’m afraid that it would be an utter humiliation for someone so proud to be forced to face such a situation.”

“The last round will take place tomorrow, and the final ten candidates will be chosen. Why don’t you come take a look as well, Su?” Xiao Jingrui leaned in closer to Mei Changsu and continued quietly, “Your knowledge in martial arts far exceeds ours. Perhaps you would be able to judge the level of danger Baili Qi poses, and figure out how to deal with him.”

“Are you or Yujin going to face him?”

“No,” denied Xiao Jingrui, shaking his head. “Neither Jingrui nor I am in the same group as him. Regardless of our victory or defeat tomorrow, we will not face him. However, if he wins tomorrow, then he will definitely be in the top ten. I hope you would agree to observe him, so as to give Princess Nihuang some helpful suggestions.”

“That’s right, that’s right,” echoed Yan Yujin. “Jingrui’s level in martial arts wasn’t necessarily better than mine before, but he actually shot above me after receiving Su’s advice during their journey.”

Mei Changsu smiled lightly, “The Princess already possesses top rank combat skills, so the suggestions I can make will be limited. She’s different from Jingrui. Jingrui’s skills weren’t as great as hers, so there was more room for improvement.”

“Su,” grimaced Xiao Jingrui, “Can’t you say it a bit more delicately? That stung...”

“However, it really is too dangerous for Princess Nihuang to immediately face off with an unfamiliar yet skilled fighter after just the one round tomorrow.” Mei

Changsu's two neat brows knitted together. "We need to think of something in order to add another barrier in between."

"Do you already have a plan, Su?" pried Yan Yujin impatiently.

"Before the last round tomorrow, the Emperor can issue an edict to add in an additional two days of challenge rounds."

"Challenge rounds?"

"Yes. The reason will be to eliminate any unfairness in the tournament due to the division of groups. The final ten champions tomorrow will be the ones to be challenged. Any of those who were defeated during the past few days can challenge any champion outside of their group at will. If he wins in a battle, then he can replace the original champion's position and become a new person to be challenged. The final ten candidates after two days of battles will be the actual people who can partake in the literary tournament. None of the people with the guts to challenge the champions will be mediocre. Even if they cannot defeat Baili Qi, it will at least create some more experiences for the Princess."

The three noble gentlemen bobbed their heads up and down. "That's a great idea!" praised Yan Yujin.

"However, someone would need to enter the Palace tonight and ask the Emperor to issue an edict immediately," reminded Mei Changsu off-handedly.

Yan Yujin rushed to answer without even thinking, "That's a piece of cake. I'll enter the Palace right away!"

"No need, no need!", said Xie Bi, stopping him quickly. He was a bit embarrassed, but he still begged with a flushed face in the end, "Can we have Prince Yu go to His Majesty?"

Nobody seated was stupid. They immediately understood what he was planning as soon as he spoke. They glanced at him together, and nobody spoke.

The Emperor had probably received a report on Baili Qi by then, and was likely anxious as well. If someone were to raise this suggestion before the Emperor, His Majesty would certainly be delighted. The Princess will naturally be indebted to this person as well. A new opportunity will land in the laps of the defeated candidates, so of course, they would be even happier. Even the ten champions will mind their reputation, and would refrain from strong opposition to maintain their strong front. So, regardless of how you look at it, this suggestion was in everyone's best interest. It's no wonder that Xie Bi was willing to embarrass himself in order to snatch this opportunity for Prince Yu.

“Since Xie Bi wants to offer his legs on this run, then go,” permitted Mei Changsu lightly after awhile.

Xie Bi was overjoyed. He gave his thanks again and again, then stood up swiftly and left without any further delay.

An odd silence descended upon the room after he left. Mei Changsu leaned his head back on the warm pillow and closed his eyes to recharge. Xiao Jingrui had never enjoyed associating with this sort of business. Besides, it was his younger brother, so he could only stay silent. Even though Yan Yujin wasn't aligned with any party, he was still somewhat connected with Prince Yu due to Empress Yan, so he couldn't exactly make any comments either. All of a sudden, the air became rather still.

Quite a bit of time passed before Yan Yujin finally had enough of sitting around in silence. He thought of another question and asked, “Say, isn't it strange? Going by Baili Qi's display yesterday, he should be able to squeeze into the world's top ten no matter what. How come there isn't a hint of him in the Langya Rankings?”

Xiao Jingrui spoke before Mei Changsu had a chance to answer, “You don't know, huh? And you dare to call yourself cosmopolitan. Langya's List of Martial Artists has stated from the start that it only ranks the martial artists based on the skills that they have already displayed. Those who remain obscure and never reveal themselves to the world will not be considered by Langya Hall as long as they do not use their skills, even if they are peerless martial artists. Of course, sometimes the rankings will astonish people, but that is only due to Langya Hall's amazing ability to collect information quickly and thoroughly. They can obtain the results of many covert and private battles, so there will be some discrepancies with the general perceptions. With such attentions he's attracted, Baili Qi will definitely enter the List of Martial Artists next year.”

“Psh, aren't you just relying on the stuff you learned from Su? To think that you're even lecturing me now.” Yan Yujin puffed his cheeks, unwilling to accept the loss. “I'm going to move into the Snow Cottage tomorrow!”

Xiao Jingrui laughed, “You're even noisier than a crow. Even if Su can bear with you, Feiliu would not be willing...”

Before his voice faded away, a chilly voice suddenly sounded from the treetops above, “Feiliu not willing!” It gave Yan Yujin a big fright, and he quickly shuffled closer towards Mei Changsu.

“Feiliu's back.” A smile appeared on Mei Changsu's face. He began to raise his hand, and Feiliu leaned into him in a flash.

“Is it fun outside?”

“Not fun!”

“Feiliu doesn’t like the idea of Yujin coming to live here?”

“Doesn’t like!”

“Why not?”

“Very similar!”

Yan Yujin blinked with curiosity, “Very similar to what?”

Mei Changsu laughed, “He’s saying you feel very similar to Lin Chen of our East River Alliance. He’s a person who Feiliu absolutely cannot stand.” He turned back to Feiliu and teased, “Why do you think they’re similar? Yujin has never teased you, has he?”

Feiliu glared at the Empress’s nephew coldly. His voice was like a block of ice as he answered, “He wants to tease!”

“Oy oy oy,” protested Yan Yujin, waving his hands hastily, “The virtuous doesn’t make a judgment based on imagination. You’ll kill off an innocent person this way...”

“That’s right,” laughed Mei Changsu, gasping for breath, “Don’t mind him, Feiliu. There are snacks left for you inside, all of them your favourites. Go in and eat.”

Feiliu said an “okay”, then glared at Yan Yujin again before disappearing in a flash.

Xiao Jingrui looked at his good friend’s expression and bowled over in laughter. It was a long while before he slowly ceased his laughter, and patted Yan Yujin’s shoulders in consolation.

Yan Yujin put on a gracious air and waved his hand, “You seldom have the opportunity to laugh at me, so I’ll just let you laugh to your heart’s content.” He turned to Mei Changsu again and asked, “Then will you go tomorrow, Su?”

“Since there’s such entertainment, of course.” Mei Changsu smiled gently at him and continued, “However, this idea of a challenge round will create inconveniences for you two. I do apologize.”

“It’s much better this way! Everyone will be relying on their actual abilities,” responded Yan Yujin. He gave a hearty chuckle, “It really didn’t sit right with me, having people taking care of us.”

Xiao Jingrui asked, dumbfounded, “What’s this about being taken care of?”

Yan Yujin gave him a sidelong glance, “You’re this dense, and you still had the gall to laugh at me?”

“Jingrui,” said Mei Changsu in a low voice, patting his hand, “This is a tournament to choose a husband, not a soldier. The Court would naturally take care of young men like you two with good looks, good personality, and good family backgrounds. Don’t you think that the people in your groups are especially weak?”

“Oh?” Because Xiao Jingrui had a kind and gentle nature, he never liked to analyze too deeply into any matter, and really did not realize. He was stunned.

Yan Yujin pounced on this opportunity and spoke darkly by his ear, “You thought you were pretty impressive, didn’t you? Whether it’s in your travels or in the capital, who would believe you if you deny receiving any benefits from your identity?”

“Yujin!” Mei Changsu smiled while frowning, “What kind of best friend are you? Do you want to continue until Jingrui gets upset?”

“Su, you shouldn’t coddle him so much,” said Yan Yujin, shaking his head, “It’s better for him to see certain issues clearly. Jingrui is a bit too honest. That’s not good. He needs to be like me. Even though I’m carefree, I can’t be muddled in the things that must be understood clearly.”

Mei Changsu’s gaze suddenly turned complex. He sighed softly and said, “You certainly are a whimsical and easygoing person. It would be great if Jingrui can be like you...”

Xiao Jingrui looked at one, then at the other. He couldn’t help raising his hand between them, and said with displeasure, “Stop! Stop! What are you guys talking about? It’s not like I’m stupid. Besides, even if I’m a bit naïve, I should at least be better than this heartless person here, right?”

Mei Changsu replied warmly, “You are, of course, an amazing person, and I hope that we can always get along with each other like this. However, you really value relationships by your nature, and this will inevitably hurt you in the future. We are only worrying for you in advance.”

Xiao Jingrui saw that he spoke sincerely. A warm feeling surged into his heart, and he replied immediately, “Please rest assured, Su. Life is full of ups and downs that serve to hone one’s spirit. No matter how feeble I am, it is not to the extent that I would worry my friends by falling into perpetual despondency when I face a problem...” After he finished, his tone suddenly changed. He looked at Yan Yujin from the corners of his eyes and said, “As for you, save it. Stop copying Su and pretending to be profound.”

“Oy oy,” said Yan Yujin, planting his arms on his hips, “You’re moved to bits when Su is worried about you, but when I worry about you, you glare at me? Isn’t the difference a bit too much?”

“What pride could I have to speak of,” said Xiao Jingrui, looking at Yan Yujin from the corners of his eyes still, “If I let a pampered thing like you fret over me? Get away from me.”

“You dare to look down on me? Let’s fight!” Yan Yujin rolled up his sleeves and pounced. The two wrestled together like schoolboys, fighting noisily without using any proper techniques. Even Feiliu was alerted by the clamour and poked his head outside to see the commotion.

Mei Changsu watched them with a faint smile. Yet, there was some unfathomable expression in the depth of his eyes.

## CHAPTER 21

### *Guidepost of Mu*

Mei Changsu arrived before the Phoenix Building the next day as promised. He took a seat within the Marquess of Ning's tent, with Xie Bi accompanying him at his side. Sure enough, before the tournament began, a eunuch in green robes appeared, a Royal Edict in hand, and announced the new addition to the tournament. It was a Royal Edict, and there was sufficient justification, so nobody voiced any opposition. The announcement quickly concluded and did not delay the start of the tournament.

Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin had matches towards the beginning of the tournament and both entered the stage before long. Regardless of how weak the group was, it was impossible for a mediocre man to enter the last round, so their opponents were rather impressive. Xiao Jingrui entered the stage first to compete against a young swordsman in his twenties. The two were of similar age and used the same weapons, and went head-to-head as soon as the match began. They returned speed with agility, and strength with power. Their fight was a dazzling display, but it was completely lacking in ingenuity. However, such a battle would certainly show a swift outcome. Xiao Jingrui was the superior in techniques, so his opponent admitted his defeat briskly and left the stage without further ado. He seemed to be a rather forthright person by his actions and temperament. Mei Changsu saw from a distance that Meng Zhi had ordered someone to summon the young swordsman to him. Presumably, Meng Zhi liked his temper and wanted to gather him under his command.

Once Yan Yujin's opponent entered the stage, it was apparent that he was a worldly martial artist rich in battle experiences. His steps were firm and his gaze was steady. His square face was weathered by the elements, and he had high bloated temples. His two palms were thick with callouses, showing his diligence in training. He was a sharp contrast with the handsome and delicate nephew of the Empress, who was ruffling his fan upon the stage. This was going to be interesting.

“Speaking of which, this is my first time seeing Yujin in combat,” said Mei Changsu. He switched his gaze back and forth between the battle upon the stage and Xiao Jingrui, who had just entered the tent and settled into his seat. “I've always found it a bit strange. You have a background with Heaven's Spring, and your father here possesses military decorations, so it is only natural for you to be skilled in martial arts. However, the Yan family has had civil officials in every generation, and it is a



noble family without any ties to the martial arts world. Yet, you guys have always claimed that his skills are on par with yours in your conversations. I finally figured it out today. So, Yujin is actually a disciple of the Kun Sect. I've underestimated him."

Xiao Jingrui explained hastily, "Yujin has not entered the Kun Sect, nor is he a recognized disciple. Due to a severe illness during his youth, he needed a high-level mantra to protect his body. The Master of the Kun Sect was old friends with his grandpa, the deceased Grand Preceptor Yan, so he accepted Yujin as a disciple in name only. This was never publicized, so we did not especially mention it to you."

Mei Changsu smiled. He did not respond, and instead focused his eyes upon the stage. The martial art style of the Kun Sect was famous for its maneuvers and techniques. The sect was very strict with the aptitude of their disciples, and was less concerned with whether or not they were diligent in their practise. It fitted Yan Yujin's personality perfectly. His robes fluttered as he whisked around the stage, a light breeze flowing from his fan. The degree of his damage was yet to be seen, but his dashing handsomeness was certainly first rate.

"It appears that I was not the only one to underestimate him. The Langya Hall Master had been imprecise in his ranking as well." Mei Changsu gave a clap and laughed. The moment his two palms touched, an attack sent a grey streak flying out from the stage. Yan Yujin pranced gracefully to the middle of the stage in his fine clothes and fragrant fan. He lifted his chin up slightly, his big eyes appearing to sweep every angle below the stage.

"I don't think there's any imprecision," said Xie Bi, tilting his head. "Look at that frivolous air. It's pretty generous to let him be tenth!"

Xiao Jingrui was already used to the ways of his good friend, and he simply pretended to not have noticed. He leaned closer to Mei Changsu and spoke by his ear, "Baili Qi will be in the next match."

Mei Changsu inclined his head slightly and raised his cup to sip some tea. Right then, Yan Yujin sauntered in proudly, and loudly asked if they had paid attention to his awe-inspiring performance upon the stage.

"You call that awe-inspiring?" Xiao Jingrui couldn't resist, and began to tease, "I think your opponent was actually blinded by your fluttering fan and slipped off the stage himself."

"You're just jealous of me," pouted Yan Yujin, and ignored him. He walked straight to Mei Changsu's side and squeezed Xie Bi away. "What do you think, Su? I have better aptitude than Jingrui, right?"

“That’s true,” chuckled Mei Changsu, “But you like to fool around a bit too much. It clearly could’ve ended in fifty moves, but you had to drag it to sixty-three. Was it for me to see your ‘Falling Petals’ technique?”

Yan Yujin froze for a moment, and a hint of admiration flashed in his eyes. “You have sharp eyes, Su. It’s unfortunate that my opponent isn’t some flower-like beauty, or the attack would really make her flutter to the ground like falling petals.”

Xiao Jingrui snorted, “If your opponent was actually some beautiful lady, the one fluttering to the ground would be you!”

“Stop messing around, the next people are out. Is that Baili Qi?” asked Xie Bi, knocking on the table.

Everyone raised their heads. The contestants for the next match were indeed already standing upon the stage. One of them had a pleasing figure with broad shoulders, long limbs, and a narrow waist. He was dressed neatly in a blue outfit, light armor circling his waist. He held a fang lance in his hand. By his weapon, he seemed to be a military man suited for cavalry battles. Clearly, he must be rather exceptional to qualify for the last round. The person he was facing was exceedingly stocky. He had bulging muscles from head to toe, which could be seen from even underneath his clothes. His huge hands were empty. It was, of course, the person who had astounded everybody yesterday through a single battle—Baili Qi.

“Such a boorish and ugly person definitely cannot be a good match for the Princess,” said Xie Bi. It was his first time seeing Baili Qi, and he was more roused than the others. “Besides, he is a foreigner from the Yan empire. We need to think of a way to drive him off, no matter what.”

“Who is that person?”

“Let me check,” said Xie Bi, flipping through the programme in his hands. “He is a Lieutenant General of the Divine Might Battalion. His name is Fang Lance... Eh? He actually has the same name as his weapon...”

“Brother, that’s not what Su’s asking.” Xiao Jingrui gave Xie Bi a shove, and turned to Mei Changsu, “That is the little Prince Mu who had just recently succeeded the title of the Prince of Yunnan. I suppose he heard the news yesterday and is worried about his sister, and decided to sit outside to get a clearer view.”

“Jingrui, that’s not what Su’s asking either,” snickered Yan Yujin. “He’s wearing robes embroidered with silver dragons, and he’s sitting underneath a magnificent tent with the character of Mu. Anybody with eyes can see that he is the little Prince Mu. Su is asking about the person standing behind the little Prince.”

“Do you know who he is?” asked Mei Changsu, tilting his head over.

“I don’t know.”

“If you don’t know, then what’re you blabbering on about?” Xiao Jingrui stood up, “I’ll go ask around.”

Mei Changsu reached out and stopped him. “There’d no need. I only asked out of curiosity as the person possesses an impressive aura about him. I suppose he ought to be some important officer in the Manor of Mu. There’s no need to inquire into the details.”

“He is our manor’s General Zhangsun,” said a sudden voice at the tent’s entrance. Xiao Jingrui shot up immediately to shield everyone behind him.

A middle-aged person appeared. He was dressed in the crimson uniform of officials, and had three strands of whiskers flowing from his chin. He bowed in greeting, “I have been presumptuous in my visit. Please forgive me if I have startled anyone.”

“So it is the esteemed Guidepost of the Manor of Mu.” Even though Xie Bi did not recognize the visitor, he could still guess his identity from his outfit. He stood up and returned the greeting, “To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit, sir?”

Before the visitor had a chance to reply, Yan Yujin shouted suddenly, “Ah! He lost!”

Mei Changsu looked at Baili Qi, who had already defeated his opponent during their idle chatter, and was now standing upon the stage expressionlessly. Mei Changsu shook his head and sighed. Even though the battle today was not decided in a single move, the match was still completely one-sided. There was nothing mysterious to Baili Qi’s techniques. He was simply sturdy and strong. His opponent attempted in vain to battle strength with technique, and was defeated during a slip in his defence.

The middle-aged man in crimson took this opportunity to say, “I am Guidepost Wei Jingan of the Manor of Mu. I came to request an audience with Mr. Su regarding precisely this matter.”

“There’s no need to be so polite. What’s the need for requesting an audience when you’re already here? A visitor is a guest. Sit, sit,” said Yan Yujin with ease, as if he was the master within this tent of the Marquess of Ning. He dragged a chair over.

“Many thanks,” said Wei Jingan. He actually dropped the pleasantries as suggested, and went straight to the point, “Nobody is as anxious about this tournament for Princess Nihuang’s husband as our people in the Manor of Mu. Baili Qi astonished everyone with his performance yesterday. Even though our Princess is as calm as usual, our little Prince is very anxious. Thus, he especially ordered me to come see

Mr. Su and make an inquiry as to whether or not any actions should be placed in motion.”

Once he finished, even Mei Changsu himself couldn't hide his incredulous expression, not to mention the others.

The group gathered in the tent had certainly been discussing the matter of Baili Qi. However, that was only due to a feeling of concern that arose from their respect for Princess Nihuang as a citizen of Liang. Yet, going by the words of Wei Jingan, it sounded like this problem was supposed to be Mei Changsu's responsibility right from the start.

“Guidepost Wei,” said Mei Changsu carefully after some consideration, “Could it be that the little Prince is under the impression that I should take some sort of action?”

“Is there no need for action still?” Wei Jingan raised his brows. “Or could it be that Mr. Su does not believe that Baili Qi could pose a viable threat?”

“I do not dare to make such claims at present. However, what I find odd is...why would the little Prince want to ask me?”

Wei Jingan was a bit shocked as well. His eyes widened, “Didn't Mr. Su already have an agreement with our Princess that this tournament is only held to obey the orders of His Majesty, and that nobody will be chosen in actuality?”

These words were even more mind-blowing than the ones before. The young men were dumbfounded. They all stared stupefied at Mei Changsu.

Since he entered the capital, Mei Changsu had only ever been alone with Princess Nihuang for that little while. Who could've imagined that he moves so swiftly? Even such a promise has been pledged, and he didn't make a peep even when he watched everyone run around in circles for the tournament. He really knew how to keep his calm.

Of course, Mei Changsu himself was also flabbergasted. He was just about to defend himself, but he began to cough from breathing in some cold air. Xiao Jingrui looked on from the side with a long face. However, he still softened after a little bit and came over to pat Mei Changsu's back to ease his coughs.

“Guidepost Wei, I do not know how such claims came to be. However, I must still trouble you to give a reply to the little Prince.” Mei Changsu drank some hot tea to moisten his throat and continued, “The Princess had indeed instructed me to complete a task for her, but the matter is very different than what you spoke of. I'm afraid that the little Prince is probably misunderstanding something.”

“Misunderstanding something?” Wei Jingan froze. “Then what matter did the Princess entrust to you?”

“The Princess was only worried about the Emperor feeling fatigued, and entrusted me to assist with the literary tournament of the top ten candidates and help her arrange their rankings somewhat. There was no mention of anything else.”

He didn't appear to be lying to Wei Jingan. Besides, Mei Changsu did not have any reason to lie to him. Wei Jingan was at a loss for what to do. He did not know what sort of miscommunication occurred between the Princess and the little Prince, but going by the little Prince's instructions today, this Su Zhe should be someone the Princess holds in high trust and great fondness. Mei Changsu appeared graceful when Wei Jingan first laid eyes upon him, but he was sickly and weak, and did not seem to be a good match for his heroic Princess. It works out fine if he denies those claims.

“Please forgive my rashness then, Mr. Su.” Wei Jingan bowed politely. “But even so, the Princess must already view you as a friend to entrust to you a matter of such importance as the literary tournament. May I suppose that you will not stand idle in the matter of Baili Qi either?”

“I dare not do anything but try my hardest. I must urge the little Prince to refrain from being overly troubled as well. The Princess had calmed many storms and settled many predicaments in her days. She would not make a mistake in her marriage. I believe that this matter will be promptly resolved as well.”

“I hope it goes according to your auspicious words.” Wei Jingan was a straightforward person. Once he had finished, there was no need for more courteous exchange. He bowed to everyone in the tent and left.

“Feiliu's not here today?” asked Yan Yujin, watching his disappearing figure. “We didn't notice since there's always people coming and going, but he actually came to straight to our entrance and heard us talk...”

“There's a fair at East Market today, so I let Feiliu go there to play,” answered Mei Changsu, smiling. “However, the Guidepost is a civil office, and yet he possesses such skills in the lightfooted arts. Look at the air of that General Zhangsun serving next to the little Prince as well. The Manor of Mu is truly filled with talents, and Yunnan is certainly worthy of its fame as the world's greatest principality.”

“Also, no one from Yunnan signed up for such a large-scale tournament. One can see that to them, the Princess is truly someone to be worshipped but never touched,” added Xie Bi.

“Jingrui, why are you upset?” asked Mei Changsu, who had found an unusual expression on the young man beside him.

Xiao Jingrui mumbled with a rigid expression, “Why didn’t you tell me that the Princess had asked you to oversee the literary tournament?”

“What, was Su supposed to report it to you?” asked Xie Bi incredulously.

Mei Changsu did not mock him, but rather explained patiently and warmly, “Jingrui, of course I must agree to such a request from the Princess. However, overseeing the literary tournament is such an important matter. It can’t be decided with just the Princess’s invitation, and would require the Emperor’s royal permission. I have not received any Royal Edicts in these days, so I supposed that His Majesty has not given permission. Because of that, I did not mention it to you guys.”

“It’s normal to not have mentioned it. Su is such a responsible person, so he naturally wouldn’t jabber about something still undecided.” Xie Bi laughed out loud. “What I’m finding strange is why you’re so upset, brother.”

Xiao Jingrui also thought that he was being unreasonable after thinking it over a bit, and blushed slightly.

Yan Yujin covered his mouth and laughed for awhile too. He said mockingly, “It’s because Jingrui likes Su, of course. He’s always thinking that since he was the one to invite Su to Jinling, he should be the closest with Su. Now he discovered someone else being close with Su too, who he didn’t know about, of course he’d be jealous.”

“W-Who’s jealous?!”

“My brother has been stingy like this since he was young. He clings on to anything he likes, and wouldn’t let me touch them at all. How come you’re still like this when you’re all grown up?”

“What’re you babbling about, you brat? What did I cling on to and not give you?”

“That chestnut stallion!”

“That horse was too spirited. You fell whenever you tried to ride him, so of course I didn’t dare to let you ride him anymore. What if you were knocked silly?”

“And Lin Shu!” exclaimed Yan Yujin, adding to the chaos. “You were happy as a clam when Lin Shu taught you archery, but then you discovered the next day that he taught me too. You ended up not talking to me for days!”

Mei Changsu felt his heart freeze, as if all the blood in his body gathered and congealed there. His face suddenly turned pale.

“What’s wrong?” Xiao Jingrui rushed over and asked anxiously, “Do you feel unwell again? You’re like this a lot these days. Are Dr. Xun’s pills ineffective?”

“An elixir of life does not exist.” Mei Changsu managed a smile, “I’m already much better than before. There’s only a short pain with an attack, and I would recover soon after.”

“It’s too cold here inside the tent,” said Yan Yujin, bringing over a fur cloak, “I’ll tell them to add another firepit.”

“It’s not even winter yet. There’s no need.” Mei Changsu looked at Yan Yujin and Xie Bi and grinned, “Do you two usually gang up like this to bully Jingrui?”

“That’s right,” answered Yan Yujin happily. “It’s really fun to bully him. Do you want to join, Su?”

“Oy, you...”

Mei Changsu turned and pressed Xiao Jingrui as he spoke quietly, “You’ve been friends with him for so long. Don’t you know him yet? The more riled up you are, the happier he gets. Just ignore him, and he wouldn’t be able to have fun by himself.”

“Hmph. Su really is biased towards Jingrui,” protested Yan Yujin. “But it’s no big deal even if you teach him, since I can always think up a new way to bully him. Are you scared, Jingrui?”

Xiao Jingrui was a smart person and a fast learner. He ignored Yan Yujin this time, and focused on chatting quietly with Mei Changsu. The Empress’s nephew saw that his attack had fallen through, and found it really boring. He circled around in the tent for a bit, then ran outside again to entertain himself with who knows what.

## **BOOK TWO**

### **THE WIND BEGINS TO STIR**

#### **CHAPTER 22**

##### *Emperor of Liang*

That day, Mei Changsu stayed and watched until the very last round before returning home. He barely ate any dinner due to his fatigue, which made Xiao Jingrui and Feiliu very worried. Still, he insisted on watching the challenge rounds in the next two days from beginning to end, saying that he cannot betray the Princess's trust.

The addition of challenge rounds was clearly effective. Three of the final ten contestants were eliminated after being challenged. The final ten champions drank their Royal Wine and received their rewards of golden flowers. They were to enter the Royal Palace for the literary tournament after resting for three days.

“Su, you look like you're not satisfied with any of us within the final ten,” commented Yan Yujin that night, twirling his golden flower. The group was gathered in the Snow Cottage.

“You guys are pretty much the cream of the crop,” sighed Mei Changsu, “But whenever I think of the magnificence and grace of Princess Nihuang, I feel that the candidates are still lacking in some ways.”

“Are Jingrui and I lacking something too?” challenged Yan Yujin, unwilling to accept the judgment. “We're probably the most likable people in the capital, whether it's in terms of character or looks!”

Mei Changsu glanced at the two and refuted with certainty, “You two are too young.”

Yan Yujin rolled his eyes at the response. “How can you hold our age against us? It's not like we wanted to be born a few years after the Princess!”



“Oh, stop messing around,” said Xiao Jingrui, giving him a shove. “We only entered to fill the numbers anyway, so that we could filter out some more unqualified candidates for the Princess.”

“Oy, don’t drag me into this ‘filling the numbers’ business, okay? I’m actually serious!” Yan Yujin put on a solemn expression.

“When have you ever been serious in all your years alive? Even if you are, it’s useless. What lady would like a husband younger than her?”

“Ha!” snickered Yan Yujin. “Look at you lecturing me. Ms. Yun is older than you by six years. Count it out, how many years have you pursued her for?”

Mei Changsu saw Xiao Jingrui freeze from the retort and interjected hurriedly, “Jingrui is a candid person. Regardless of how much he cared for Ms. Yun, he was never forceful or persistent, nor did he pestered her in any way. You should mimic him now and allow the Princess to make her own decision, as a truly carefree and upstanding young man.”

Yan Yujin clasped his hand over his heart and complained bitterly, “You finally found someone to support you, Jingrui. It’s going to be hard to bully you in the future with Su protecting you...”

Everyone cracked up over his dramatic display, and the atmosphere immediately relaxed.

While everyone was happily chattering away, a servant suddenly dashed inside in a panic. He said while panting, “A eunuch from the Royal Palace arrived to announce an edict. The Marquess asked everyone to hurry to the front hall...”

These people were all used to seeing Royal Edicts and were not alarmed. They stood up and began to say their farewells to Mei Changsu.

“N... No...” said the servant hastily, “It’s mainly Mr. Su... Mr. Su needs to receive the edict...”

“Me?” Mei Changsu was startled, but after some thought, he figured that he wouldn’t be able to get any answers from the servant anyway. Hence, he stood and changed his attire, then followed everyone to the front hall.

The eunuch standing before the front hall did not carry a Royal Edict. He waited until everyone bowed to the ground, then flicked his long brush and announced in a high voice, “By the Emperor’s decree, Su Zhe is summoned to appear before His Majesty tomorrow after the Morning Court Session.”

Everyone paid their gritudes and rose. The young men guessed that Princess Nihuang must have made a report to the Emperor, and were not surprised. Princess Liyang was not in the manor that night. Thus, the only person who felt surprised was the Marquess of Ning, Xie Yu. He usually buries himself in politics and pays no attention to other affairs. As such, he did not pay much mind to this guest in the Snow Cottage, and was naturally confused by why the Emperor would wish to summon a commoner. However, it would be rather rude to ask that, so he pondered for a moment and asked politely, "Would Mr. Su happen to know why His Majesty wishes to see you tomorrow in the Palace? It would allow me to assist you in making any necessary preparations."

Mei Changsu understood his intent and replied lightly, "I have no special talents, and only receive some undue admiration for my perception. Two days ago, Princess Nihuang had invited me to help her in overseeing the literary tournament. I am guessing that this is likely the reason behind the Emperor's summons."

Although Xie Yu was shocked, he quickly realized that there was nothing to be bewildered about when he remembered the renowned talent of Mr. Mei of East River. He felt immediate relief, and returned to the back courtyard after giving a slight bow.

The next morning, a carriage from the Manor of Mu arrived for Mr. Su, confirming everyone's conjectures. Although the noble young gentlemen were of high status, the Royal Palace was not exactly the marketplace after all, and they could not accompany Su simply because they wanted to. So, even though the worried was worried and the curious was curious, in the end, Mei Changsu entered the carriage alone. He even tossed a task at Xiao Jingrui along the way—taking care of Feiliu.

The carriage rode to outer walls of the Palace, then it was switched with a litter covered in blue silk. Mei Changsu suddenly felt his emotions swell. He hastily closed his eyes to meditate and restore his calm and clarity. He exited the litter after entering the Righteous Gate. According to the route, he was probably heading to the Hall of Military Eminence. Just as he turned at the corner of the hall, he met another group of people turning out from the side corridor.

The young man amidst them was dressed in a princely robe with embroidered dragons. He was handsome and graceful, and his youthful features did not damper his dignity. Even from a distance, he stared up and down at Mei Changsu with curious eyes. He smiled immediately when he saw Mei Changsu looking back at him. His expression was extremely friendly, just like a younger brother meeting his new brother-in-law for the first time, which drew an amused yet helpless smile from Mei Changsu. Yet, when Mei Changsu saw the Princess grinning mischievously, he knew with certainty that this female general had done it purposefully.

"Mr. Su, you look great today," said Princess Nihuang, strolling over. "Here, let me introduce you—this is my younger brother."

“Greetings, Prince Mu.”

Mu Qing hastily reached out to support him. Usually, people call him the “little Prince Mu” due to his young age. Mei Changsu’s removal of the word “little” had made him very happy. Besides, this was the man his sister was fond of, so it wasn’t as if he dared to be arrogant in front of her. He was already brimming with smiles, “I’ve heard much about you, Mr. Su. You certainly do justice to your famed elegance.”

Mei Changsu gave a pained chuckle and said, “I am but a sickly man who dares not receive such praise.”

“Oh? Prince Jing has arrived too?” said Princess Nihuang suddenly.

Mei Changsu turned around and saw Prince Jing, Xiao Jingyan, striding over. The two men met eyes briefly, then their gaze diverted.

“Thank you for allowing me to take up your precious time, Prince Jing,” said Princess Nihuang with a smile. From her words, Prince Jing appeared to have arrived upon her invitation as well.

Mei Changsu looked at the two people standing shoulder to shoulder. The man was mighty and tall, with a valiant air of a mighty beast. The woman was noble and heroic, and possessed the air of a blazing phoenix. Mei Changsu’s eyes glimmered involuntarily, and he felt his heart quiver.

Prince Jing was a man of few words. He only replied with a polite response, then stood silently.

“Do we need to wait for someone here?” inquired Mei Changsu.

“There’s no need. Look, they’re all here.” Princess Nihuang smiled sweetly, “These two really act as one.”

Mei Changsu knew who she was referring to without even needing to turn his head. Just as expected, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu’s laughter rang in succession a moment later, as if they were competing in who can act more gracious and benevolent. They greeted the group at the corner of the hall pleasantly.

These two were royalty, so everyone stepped forward to greet them with bows. Prince Yu had made the Emperor very pleased by presenting the suggestion of challenge rounds a few days ago, so he was naturally very happy to see Mei Changsu. Although the Crown Prince was displeased, he knew that he could not place blame on Su Zhe for the situation. It was his fault for not having any eyes or ears near him, so of course he had to show that he held no resentment. Mei Changsu made sure not to neglect Princess Nihuang and Mu Qing while chatting with the two Royal Princes. He performed gracefully in the intricate dance of conversation, and engaged all parties

perfectly. Xiao Jingyan stood at the side and stared at the scene coldly, an expression of noticeable disgust in his eyes.

The people grouped up and entered the hall together. Wine and food were already laid out on banquet tables positioned inside the hall. Due to customs, the party could not take their seats as the Emperor had yet to arrive. So, they stood around in groups of two or three and chatted away.

Due to their rivalry, neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu wanted to give the other the chance to be alone with Mei Changsu, so the three were unexpectedly gathered together. Mu Qing had always looked up to Prince Jing's military feats, and also felt that men should discuss topics of might and blood, so he began to consult Xiao Jingyan on military affairs. Princess Nihuang wandered between, listening on this side for a bit and chatting with the other for awhile, ending up as the most relaxed of them all.

About a quarter of an hour later, a golden chime sounded softly outside the hall. A ceremonial official announced loudly, "The Emperor has arrived—"

The hall became silent at once. Everyone stood orderly according to customs, and Mei Changsu backed away into the corner. He waited for the figure in yellow robes to take a seat upon the main seat of the hall, then followed everyone in bowing down to the Emperor.

The Emperor of Liang was over sixty. Strands of white hair scattered at his temples, and his face was wrinkled. However, he still carried himself with a mighty air, without any hint of the frailty of old age. He ordered everyone to rise, then his gaze automatically rested upon the figure furthest away, Mei Changsu.

To the revered Emperor, the Chief of the East River Alliance or the world's biggest sect were all distant affairs for him, far away from the grandeur of the Royal Court. The only reason he was interested in Mei Changsu was because he was under the same misunderstanding as Mu Qing and thought that he must be the one Princess Nihuang had secretly chosen.

With his first look, he found this person to be handsome and elegant, without any hint of nervousness in his actions. It's no wonder that the Princess was partial to him.

With his second look, he found his face to be overly pale and his figure under the fur cloak to be slight and thin. It's unlikely for him to enjoy longevity. He seemed a bit inadequate.

With his third look, he found his two eyes to be very serene. They were sort of clear and yet sort of complex. Even though they were silently downcast, as if meditating, they were full of spirit.

The Emperor of Liang smoothed his grey beard and nodded to himself. He called out, "Su Zhe."

"The commoner is present."

"The Princess has recommended you to me, saying that you are exceptionally talented. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu have also given you much praise. I have here with me three essays. Read them, and point out the superior one for me."

"The commoner obeys Your Majesty's command."

Mei Changsu received the essays from a eunuch and skimmed over it roughly, almost reading ten lines with one glance. He finished quickly and said, "Reporting to Your Majesty, An Essay on Central Governance is the finest."

"Oh? Why so?"

"This essay has the air of a sovereign. How can I dare to criticize it as a mere commoner?"

The Emperor of Liang reared back with laughter. He looked very pleased, and praised Mei Changsu, "You really do have an eye for talent. I will entrust the Princess's literary tournament to you. Although you do not have a position, you should still have the title of a Guest Official since you are working for the Royal Court. There is no need to refer to yourself as a commoner anymore."

Mei Changsu pondered for a slight moment before saying, "The official obeys Your Majesty's command." These words were said in a very cool tone, as if he paid no mind to the Emperor's benevolence and only acted to obey customs.

"Someone, present a seat for Mr. Su next to Princess Nihuang."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Mei Changsu bowed and entered his seat. The Princess shot a smile at him immediately, and an expression of "so that's how it is" appeared on everyone in the hall.

At that time, the Commander of the Royal Guards, Meng Zhi, appeared at the entrance of the hall. He served directly under His Majesty and did require an announcement to enter the hall. He headed straight into the hall and reported, "Reporting to Your Majesty, the two envoys from the Yu and Yan empires as well as the ten final candidates have all arrived at the Royal Palace, and are waiting outside the hall for Your Majesty's instructions."

Mei Changsu had already heard the news that the goal of the banquet was not solely to see him. More importantly, it was held to study the candidates for the position of Prince Consort in advance. However, the news had not been confirmed until now, so he was rather happy for it to be true.

While he was pondering, the Emperor of Liang had already issued a summons. Meng Zhi received the command and turned around. In the brief moment of his gaze turning, he gave a slight nod to Mei Changsu, unnoticed by all.

Mei Changsu relaxed slightly knowing that Meng Zhi had been successful, but his expression gave no hint of change while he sat serenely. A few moments later, a eunuch announced the arrival of Princess Jingning. The Emperor of Liang smiled happily and asked his little daughter as soon as she entered, “Ning, weren’t you whining yesterday about how you wanted to join the banquet? How come you’re late today?”

Princess Jingning’s delicate brows were knitted together, and a dark cloud hung over her face. Her expression was extremely gloomy. After she finished her greeting to the Emperor, she answered sullenly, “I saw a snow-white Persian cat on my way here and chased after it, and was thus delayed.”

“You really love cats, don’t you? Are you unhappy because you did not catch it?”

Princess Jingning pondered silently for a moment, then answered quietly, “No... I was chasing that cat, and accidentally went into the Secluded Courtyard. I saw the people there performing hard labour and looking very miserable, and thus felt a bit sorry...”

Prince Jing’s heart quivered upon hearing her mention the Secluded Courtyard, and threw a quick look at Mei Changsu. However, the latter was very calm, as if he never heard it at all.

The Emperor of Liang’s face darkened slightly. He said reprovingly, “How can you enter a place like that as a Princess? Besides, the people at the Secluded Courtyard have their crimes, and thus deserve the hardships of labour. You need not feel such compassion for them.”

“Yes, Father,” said Princess Jingning, hanging her head. “It’s just that there were also young children there, who were frail and pitiful. I was thinking, what kind of crime could they have committed at such a young age...”

“There’s no need to speak further!” bellowed the Emperor of Liang, cutting her off. “I’ve really spoiled you too much. Why are you bringing up those criminals during an occasion like this? Take your seat now. The envoys will arrive soon. You must always remember your status as a Princess. Look at Princess Nihuang, and how tactful she is with her noble bearing...”

“Your Majesty thinks too highly of me,” laughed Princess Nihuang immediately. “Jingning is a pampered little Princess. Your Majesty wouldn’t be able to bear it if she really were to fight on the battlefields like me.”

The Emperor of Liang’s eyes appeared very affectionate, and said, “I can’t bear to have you endure such hardships either. Now that Qing has inherited the title, I will be at ease after I choose a good husband for you.”

“I am infinitely grateful to Your Majesty’s kindness and benevolence. Even my father in the afterlife must feel the graciousness of Your Majesty and feel deeply indebted.” Princess Nihuang had governed over Yunnan for many years, and certainly did not build her success solely on bravery and might. Even a simple phrase of gratitude was transformed into such sincere and pleasant words by her.

The Emperor of Liang smiled warmly. At that time, the envoys from Yu and Yan had entered the hall. They took their seats after bowing to the Emperor. The ten final candidates entered after them. Each wore unique outfits, and some wore anxious expressions. Clearly, they had been spontaneously summoned early in the morning, and were not prepared in any way.

Compared to them, Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin who were used to entering the Palace were naturally a lot more relaxed. Their eyes searched around as soon as they entered the hall. Even though they did not dare to voice a greeting once they found Mei Changsu, they smiled at him in unison.

## CHAPTER 23

### *Challenge*

Everyone paid their gritudes and took their seats. The Emperor of Liang ordered maids to fill each table with fragrant wine and favoured everyone with three cups. He waited until everyone drank their wine, then said, “This banquet is graced by the presence of gallant warriors and great fighters. Everyone here must be gallant gentlemen to be able to claim final victory. My intention for hosting today’s banquet is to honour your accomplishments and congratulate you. Heroes are great drinkers. Everyone may drink another cup.”

The ten candidates hastily raised their cups and stood up. They drained their cups.

The Emperor of Liang then turned towards the two Head Ambassadors at the guest table and said, “The Yan and Yu empires are truly birthplaces for gallant heroes. These young heroes have travelled from afar, and are all exceptionally skilled. However, I fear that I am not well acquainted with them. I would be glad if you could introduce them to me.”

The two ambassadors hastily stood up and bowed, saying “Yes, Your Majesty!” Yet, just as they straightened up and were about to speak, they discovered a problem. The two empires both have representing candidates in the final champions. However, the Emperor of Liang had only said to “introduce them”, and never specified who should introduce first and who should introduce after. Honestly speaking, who spoke first and who spoke second was not such a big deal, but everyone needed to try to come out on top during such a grand banquet. Besides, the Yan and Yu were not some friendly neighbouring empires. Disputes and quarrels were frequent between them, so neither party wanted to yield ground for no reason.

After a momentary lapse, the two head ambassadors realized that this deadlock needed a solution. Together, they turned their eyes towards the host. They found the old Emperor to be wearing an unkind smile. He clearly wanted them to resolve this issue of sequence amongst themselves.

“There are two warriors from our Yu empire within final candidates...” began the Head Ambassador of Yu immediately, implying that we have two and you guys only have one, so we should speak first.



“It’s unfortunate that these ten candidates do not have an opportunity to compete further amongst themselves. Our warrior Baili is still eager for more,” said the Head Ambassador of Yan, unwilling to concede. His words implied that both of yours together can’t compare with the one of ours, so why should you speak first.

“Actually, there are many other brave warriors within our empire who are able to compete. However, considering that this is to request the Princess’s hand in marriage, the candidate should possess both good looks and talent. Thus, we made a careful selection beforehand.” The eyes of the head ambassador of Yu were filled with disdain, clearly mocking Baili Qi for his ugly looks, which the Princess will definitely find disdainful.

“All that glitters is not gold. It is better to judge people by their character rather than their appearance. Such a remarkable person as the Princess would never give her attention to people who are merely useless ornaments...” retorted the Head Ambassador of Yan, who had an equally sharp tongue.

The Emperor of Liang finally gave a laugh and mediated, “Our three empires are friends today, which should be a joyous affair. Let’s not bury our head in the details. Please take a seat, ambassadors. Let’s have Meng Zhi take over the duty of introductions.”

Meng Zhi shot out immediately. After a “Yes, Your Majesty”, he turned back went next to candidate from the Yu empire first. He indicated the man politely with his palm and said, “This warrior from the Yu empire is named You Guangzhi,<sup>20</sup> age twenty-eight. His father is a Second Rank Official within the Central Records. He had once been engaged with a Ms. Hu, which had been cancelled three months ago.” Following that, he went next to the Yan table and said, “This warrior from the Yan empire is named Baili Qi, age thirty. He is a soldier serving under the Fourth Prince of Yan. Apart from this tournament, he had never left the side of His Highness. He had never been married.” After that, he returned back to the side of Yu and said, “This warrior from the Yu empire is named Zheng Cheng, age twenty-seven. He is the brother-in-law to the Second Prince of Yu. He had once been married to a lady with the surname Zeng,<sup>21</sup> who he expelled half a year ago under the crime of malicious language.”

The Emperor of Liang listened quietly. “Mhmm.”

The Yu ambassador didn’t expect for Liang to actually investigate the backgrounds of these candidates so thoroughly, and was rather unnerved. He rushed to explain, “Your Majesty, these two are both outstanding young men of my empire, in

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<sup>20</sup> Fun fact: His name means “well-travelled”

<sup>21</sup> Fun fact: The character of her surname can also be read as “ceng”, which means means “once”, e.g. “they were married once, but not anymore”.

possession of both good looks and character. Any previous engagements have absolutely been properly resolved. We dare not mistreat the Princess.”

The Yan ambassador chuckled coldly, “They’ve really been resolved in time!”

“It’s still better than your esteemed empire sending over a servant. Don’t you know that this is to request the Princess’s hand in marriage?” retorted the Head Ambassador of Yu angrily.

“The Princess is marrying a person, not his family background. Besides, with the Princess’s honourable status, why would she need to mind something like someone’s family background?”

“There had always been a distinction between the noble and the common since ancient times. How can it be ignored?”

“Our warrior Baili had become sworn brothers with the Fourth Prince prior to leaving. The noble and common change with the tides of time and fate.”

“You...” The Yu ambassador was about to retort, but someone by his side tugged his sleeves discreetly and said quietly, “There is already a process in place for how the Princess will choose her husband. There is no benefit in this quarrel.”

The Head Ambassador of Yu wasn’t dumb either. He comprehended immediately with the slight reminder. Besides, the person who spoke to stop him was his Vice Ambassador, the famous martial artist on the Langya Ranking, Jindiao Chaiming. How could he ignore him? He gave a “Humph!” and sat down.

The Emperor of Liang watched their quarrel with cold eyes. He remained silent until both sides momentarily doused their fire, then said slowly, “Everyone here is exceptional. There is no need for a quarrel. Unfortunately, I have been busy with government affairs and have not been able to see every match. I’m afraid that I’m still rather unfamiliar with these warriors.”

“I have a suggestion, Father.” Prince Yu had a quick wit by nature, and with the addition of his speedy information gathering, he already knew the intention of his royal father’s. He jumped on the opportunity and said, “Why don’t we take advantage of the banquet today and have these ten warriors spar with each other? It would make for a great tale.”

The Emperor of Liang made a soft sound of approval. He brushed his beard and asked, “What is the opinion of everyone else?”

“Father, I believe that this suggestion by Prince Yu is rather lacking in consideration,” responded the Crown Prince hurriedly. “Your Majesty’s royal figure is here. How can we allow knives and swords in the hall? If they somehow...” At that

part in his speech, he suddenly saw something at the corner of his eyes. Mei Changsu had raised his cup and was gazing at it, all the while shaking his head gently. The Crown Prince's heart gave a thump, and he immediately changed his speech, "These are merely some concerns I hold for Father... But now that I think about it, I remember Father's heroics that year while quelling the rebellion. Plus, we have Commander Meng standing guard, so there shouldn't be any major issues. Hence, I have a suggestion, Father. Sparring is fine, but everyone must hold back in their attacks, as it is inauspicious to see blood."

He changed his tone halfway through, which rather showed some quick wit. Prince Yu did not see Mei Changsu's hint, so he didn't understand how this person suddenly wised up. He was a bit disappointed, and gave a cold "Hmph!"

"Both of my sons' suggestions please me greatly," chuckled the Emperor of Liang. "Then, everyone may challenge any other candidates at their will. There is no need to set any rules."

His words clearly exposed that he really did want to see everyone spar. The Crown Prince silently lamented over the danger he avoided, and couldn't help but send a grateful look at Mei Changsu. However, the latter was leaning over and listening to Princess Nihuang's whispers, and didn't see him at all.

Even though everyone was allowed to freely challenge others, everyone there had endured thousands of hardships to earn their positions. Plus, nobody wanted to rashly challenge someone in front of the Princess, in fear of making a fool out of themselves rather than earning prestige. For a time, everyone tried to measure each other out, and there was an awkward stillness.

"I'll go first, then." The person who gave a long laugh and stood up, clothes rustling, was of course the carefree Yan Yujin. He walked to the middle of the hall and bowed to the Emperor, then turned around leisurely and tilted his chin up, "I, Yan Yujin, would like to challenge the young master Mr. Xiao."

Xiao Jingrui looked at him with a pained yet amused smile, but he had no choice but to stand up. Quite a few people in the hall couldn't help but chuckle while they watched the two stand face to face and hug their fists in greeting. These two rascals had scuffled with each other since their childhood, and had left teeth marks on each other's little cheeks before they could even walk. However, nobody had actually seen them in a proper duel.

Just as everyone watched the match begin with eyes filled with expectancy, they couldn't resist an internal "Psh" after a few moves. How was that an important duel? It was clearly a performance competition. Never mind Xiao Jingrui, who was acting properly as usual. However, Yan Yujin was dead set on showing off. He performed all of his coolest and prettiest moves, and fluttered around the hall like a colourful butterfly. Sometimes, when Xiao Jingrui's attack would accidentally block the move

he was about to display, he would even glare at him. During all that hassle, he didn't forget to choose the best angle to give charming smiles at the Princess. It made Princess Nihuang bowl over in laughter. She waved her hand while trying to catch her breath and said, "Little...little Jin... Enough, enough... I know...you've always been the most handsome..."

After that opening, the atmosphere was, as expected, immediately relaxed to the extreme. Soon after, people began to challenge others one after the other. For a time, there was an unending stream of spectacular matches. Everybody was certainly spectacularly skilled, each with their strengths.

About four or five rounds later, the biggest dark horse Baili Qi finally stood up. He hugged his fists at a Liang candidate who had already won one round, but who had also rested for a round as well. During such an occasion, it was impossible to hesitate. The opponent stood up immediately and came forward.

"This person isn't from the capital. Do you know him?" asked Yan Yujin, leaning in his good friend's ear.

"Li Xiao is the most outstanding disciple in the current generation of the Wudang Sect.<sup>22</sup> My Zhuo dad often has high praises for him. His inner energy has is very solid with great foundation. He could actually be considered an opponent for Baili Qi," answered Xiao Jingrui quietly.

While the two were whispering amongst themselves, the duel had already begun. The Wudang Sect had great martial artists from every generation. Its inner energy mantra and combat techniques naturally had their superior aspects. Li Xiao was very appropriate in his attacks and defences against a great fighter like Baili Qi. Every move and every technique was filled with power. In the blink of an eye, dozens of moves have been exchanged, and he actually showed no sign of defeat.

Still, just when everyone was exclaiming over a spectacular move from Li Xiao called "Win Some Lose Some", Princess Nihuang suddenly sucked in her breath. At the same time, Meng Zhi summoned his inner energy and shouted loudly, "No!" Before the remnants of his voice faded away, Li Xiao's body had already flown out. Meng Zhi darted out and caught him, then supported him to sit on the ground. When Meng Zhi looked at Li Xiao again, the young man's forehead was filled with cold sweat, and his face was ashen. Meng Zhi held his limp right arm for an inspection, then his brows locked together. The young man was luckily shielded when Meng Zhi shouted with 10% of his inner energy, which prevented Baili Qi from shattering all of the energy channels in his arm. However, the bone was broken, and the major tendon was severely damaged. The young man had gritted his teeth and did not make any

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<sup>22</sup> A fictional sect with some historical roots, popular in Chinese wuxia stories. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wudang\\_Sect](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wudang_Sect)

sounds. Still, one can see from his sorrowful eyes that he understood that with his injury, it would be almost impossible to advance his martial arts further hereafter.

“This is the Fracture Restoration Balm made by Dr. Xun. Use it for three consecutive days, then refrain from using power for half a month, and you will be able to make a perfect recovery.” Mei Changsu had circled around quietly at some point. He shoved a box of balm into Li Xiao’s pocket and continued softly, “You need to believe in Dr. Xun. Don’t worry and rest well. You will not have any lingering problems.”

Dr. Xun’s Fracture Restoration Balm was an incredible medicine that one can seldom chance upon, and some unfamiliar young man actually gifted a whole box of it to himself. Li Xiao was so startled and thankful that he forgot all about his pain. He stared dumbly at Mei Changsu, unable to speak.

Meng Zhi gave a slight nod to Mei Changsu and summoned servants to carry Li Xiao off. At that time, Baili Qi had already returned to his seat. He looked on with indifference, as if his destructive move just now wasn’t anything much.

“Mr. Ambassador,” started the Crown Prince angrily, “Everyone had decided to spar in goodwill. How could your fighter be so cruel? It’s too much!” He felt really humiliated as he had just suggested for the candidates to hold back in their attacks, and was the first to speak.

The other candidates shot over angry looks as well. The Head Ambassador of Yan stood up and said haughtily, “We did obey the Crown Prince’s orders and did not show blood. Besides, it is impossible to avoid injury in competitions of strength. It is well-known that our empire has always respected the strong. The Princess is a courageous lady of the military and should know that the word “kindness” does not exist on the battlefield. What wrongs has our warrior Baili committed?”

The Emperor of Liang said with apparent displeasure, “The Royal Court is not the battlefield. Your warrior has been rash. It must not be repeated.”

Even though he said that, it was a duel after all. The Emperor of Liang couldn’t exactly get angry and administer punishment, thereby allowing for criticism in the future. Thus, he could reprimand him a little. After the other party respectfully agreed, he let it pass and did not mention it further.

Still, from the subsequent cold smile of the Yan ambassador, everyone discovered that Baili Qi’s objective was nothing using this opportunity to display his combat abilities. He went on to challenge seven opponents, two of which were from Yu. He did not use any more cruel moves like breaking bones, but he still gave his opponents quite a few hidden injuries. In the end, he only left Yan Yujin and Xiao Jingrui alone, ignoring them completely. Who knows if it was because he thought too little of them, or if it was because he thought too highly of them?



## CHAPTER 24

### *Provoking the Enemy Envoy with Wit*

After claiming another victory, Baili Qi returned to his seat and showed no intention of standing up again. Xiao Jingrui took this into his eyes and stood up with a grave expression. He hugged his fists coldly towards Baili Qi and announced, “I, Xiao Jingrui, request a match with the Warrior Baili.”

It was the first time for Baili Qi to be challenged that day. A light flickered in his eyes, and he turned around to look at his empire’s ambassador. When he saw the ambassador shake his head at him, Baili Qi’s expression immediately turned nonchalant. He shook his head in refusal and said, “I’m tired.”

Xiao Jingrui knew that his name would easily make others mistake him for a Prince of Liang, and suspected that to be the reason for Baili Qi to refuse his challenge. He added hurriedly, “I am the son of the Marquess of Ning, Xie Yu, here to seek guidance. If Warrior Baili feels tired, then please instruct me after you have rested for awhile.”

Baili Qi turned around again and saw the ambassador of Yan shaking his head still. “No more fighting today,” said Baili Qi.

Actually, it was widely known that Xiao Jingrui was not a competitive person. For something like a martial arts duel, he always believed that there was no need to make enemies regardless of victory or defeat. However, Baili Qi’s actions that day really went over the line. Sometimes, his opponent would have clearly backed off in defeat, but he still insisted on chasing after them to strike them down completely. It roused the anger of the even-tempered young man, making his blood rush so much as to actually initiate a challenge. Xiao Jingrui had gathered up his courage, resolving to repress the audacity of Baili Qi somewhat even if he had to bear heavy injuries. He never thought that he would be so coolly turned away right from the start. It just so happened that the man did indeed fight in many consecutive rounds as well. With Xiao Jingrui’s kind nature, he was seriously incapable of saying something like “you’re feinting tiredness to avoid fighting”. He was frozen in anger for awhile. Finally, he said, “Then Warrior Baili, please schedule a time with me. Let us battle another day.”

Baili Qi drank some tea and shook his head for the third time. He responded coldly, "Is there any reason to battle in another day? There are so many people here. If you really want to fight, then why don't you pick someone else?"

Seeing him so insistent on refusing Xiao Jingrui, the Emperor of Liang became a bit excited. He turned his head and shot a look at Meng Zhi, and the Commander of the Royal Guards understood his thoughts immediately. He quickly leaned over and spoke by the Emperor's ear, "Please do not misunderstand, Your Majesty. The Yan are not being submissive. They must know that Jingrui and Yujin are of noble status, and the two clearly seemed to be friendly with the Princess just now. The Yan only wish to avoid angering the higher powers of Liang too much. In actuality, Jingrui is not a match for Baili Qi."

The Emperor of Liang's expression remained unchanged upon hearing this, but he was inevitably a bit disappointed. Baili Qi had been so cocky today. As the ruler of Liang, he naturally hoped for a citizen of Liang to win back some honour. Unfortunately, it did not seem like his hopes would come true. Just as he was feeling rather down, he suddenly saw Mei Changsu whispering with the Princess at their table. Nihuang's face was full of astonishment after hearing something. The Emperor couldn't resist and asked, "Nihuang, what are you discussing with Mr. Su?"

Princess Nihuang paused for a moment and forced a smile, "Nothing much..."

The Emperor of Liang dipped his brows slightly with displeasure. He said gravely, "Don't you lie to your liege, now. What were you discussing?"

Princess Nihuang gave a smile, "Of course I dare not. Mr. Su was only giving a few comments on the duel just now. There really was nothing else."

"Oh? What observations do you have, Mr. Su? Please share them with us."

Princess Nihuang glanced at Mei Changsu and saw him looking very reluctant. She had no choice but to stand up and say, "Mr. Su said that Warrior Baili's power is overly hard but brittle, thus more liable to break. His path in martial arts is incorrect. If someone were to identify his flaws, he can be struck down with just a few children."

The muscles on Baili Qi's face twitched upon hearing such a comment, and some anger rose. However, the Yan ambassador took these words merely as the Liang attempting to regain their honour and responded arrogantly, "Those words could be applied to anyone. If you are capable, Mr. Su, why don't you attempt to identify his flaws, then find some children to strike him down?"

Mei Changsu replied hastily with a smile, "I spoke imprudently. Please rest assured. It mustn't have been easy for Warrior Baili to achieve such skills. I would never destroy someone's future prospects so carelessly."



He was evidently apologizing, but his words stung more than a provocation. His words plainly implied, "I can actually put my money where my mouth is, but I don't want to destroy you." The Yan ambassador had been feeling very pleased with their accomplishments and naturally did not take it well. He retorted, "If this gentleman has such abilities, then please try it before His Majesty. Our Warrior Baili is fatigued, but we dare not ruin Mr. Su's good mood and keen interest in boasting."

"Oh, it couldn't be done so quickly," said Mei Changsu, still wearing his warm smile. "Even if I were able to find some children immediately, I still need to train them for a few days at the very least. All right, let's just say that my words were nonsense. Please do not take it to heart..."

To the Yan ambassador, Mei Changsu's words sounded more and more like he was stating a fact. If he were to simply ignore Mei Changsu now, it would seem as if he was afraid of him. How could he leave things be, and allow the honour earned by Baili Qi's fists to be taken away by someone's clever tongue? If the Fourth Prince learns about this in the future, he would surely blame the Head Ambassador for being useless. Of course he had to make a retort. The Yan ambassador chuckled coldly and said, "If Mr. Su needs to train people, then we will wait. Please appoint a day, Your Majesty. We promise to show up whenever we are summoned."

Mei Changsu looked like he was in somewhat of a predicament. He mumbled, "I'm not very familiar with the capital. Where would I be able to find these children..."

Find some children? If he makes a request, every single Liang citizen present would be able to find him a whole crowd immediately. However, nobody could figure out if he was actually speaking the truth or if he simply wanted to upset Baili Qi, so nobody dared to speak up.

Seeing this, the Yan ambassador was even more certain that Mei Changsu was bluffing. He immediately added fuel to the fire, "Where's the difficulty in that? I've heard that there are many young disciples in the martial art studios of your royal capital..."

"The children in the martial art studios are too strong. I'm afraid that Warrior Baili may face a disadvantage. Besides, it would not be fair to have children who had already practised martial arts gang up on him."

This person still insists on boasting even when pushed so far! The Yan ambassador gritted his teeth in anger, "No harm. We do not have any complaints."

"That's no good," said Mei Changsu, shaking his head. "I need to find some weaker ones... Are there any weaker children in the Royal Palace, or in the households of everyone here?"

Everyone was very cautious. They did not dare to answer, fearing they would accidentally do Mei Changsu a disservice. Princess Jingning was the only one who did not really understand the situation. Plus, she had just recently been startled by the desolate circumstances within the Secluded Courtyard, so she answered immediately, “Yes, in the Palace. There are a bunch of little kids in the Secluded Courtyard. They’re all sticks and bones, and so pitiful.”

“The convicted servants within the Secluded Courtyard, huh,” said Mei Changsu quietly to himself. “They are rather more suitable than normal children, but would Your Majesty permit it...?”

The Emperor of Liang saw his gaze turn towards himself. He couldn’t really be certain if Mei Changsu wanted him to allow it or not. Just as he was hesitating, Meng Zhi’s voice whispered in his year, “Please give your permission, Your Majesty.”

The Emperor of Liang had absolute trust in this empire’s greatest warrior on the topics of martial arts. He immediately responded with, “I give my permission. Someone, go to the Secluded Courtyard and pick a few children to bring here.”

“Remember to choose some weaker ones!” added Mei Changsu.

The Yan ambassador was furious. He said fiercely, “The convicted servants are people as well. You must have a heart of steel, Mr. Su, to send these children to their deaths.”

Princess Jingning had become very anxious when she saw the results of her off-handed remark. She jumped in to reply, “That’s right! Isn’t this sending those children to their deaths? Father, this can’t be okay!”

“Please rest assured, Princess. I do have some confidence,” soothed Mei Changsu. “What’s more, as convicted servants, they ought to serve His Majesty even if it ends in their death. Not to mention that if they were to win, His Majesty would bestow them with great rewards.”

Princess Jingning became even more upset hearing that, “They labour in the Palace every day. Regardless of how much money they are bestowed, they have no place to spend it. Their lives are more important, of course!”

“That’s true,” said Mei Changsu. He looked up and pondered for a moment, “These little convicted servants have no hope in their hearts. I suppose they would be rather lazy and hard to train. This was a bad idea, I shouldn’t have chosen them...”

The Yan ambassador was initially rather surprised when he saw them going off to pick people, and immediately calmed again when he saw Mei Changsu showing signs of retreating. He jeered, “You’re really stubborn, Mr. Su, refusing to give up on your

boasting even now. Actually, you only need to make an apology. Our Warrior Baili is a very forgiving person.”

Mei Changsu stared at him with a steady gaze, until the Yan ambassador was beginning to look a bit uncomfortable. Then, he gave a sigh and said, “I have given you a chance to back down again and again, but you’ve refused to do so. If you insist on trying, then I have no choice but to be uncivil towards Warrior Baili.”

The Yan ambassador was furious. He was just about to retort, but the eunuch who was sent to the Secluded Courtyard had returned just then and reported, “Your Majesty, I have brought five children here.”

“Good. Tell them to come forward.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Five little figures followed behind the eunuch, cowering as they walked into the Hall. They curled up into balls as they bowed on the ground.

Prince Jing had already been feeling suspicious. He pretty much understood the situation after seeing Tingsheng in their midst. As he saw everyone’s attentions gathered on the children, he quickly found an opportunity and whispered a few words to his sister Jingning next to him.

“Raise your heads. Report your ages. Which guilty officials are you the descendants of?” asked the Emperor of Liang coldly.

The five children were all scared out of their wits. Urged and threatened by the eunuch, they finally responded one by one, brokenly and with shaking voices. When it was Tingsheng’s turn, he said quietly with a pale face, “I am e-eleven. T-he grandson of...t-the former Grand Secretary of the Hall of...S-Supreme Harmony...who was found g-guilty in...the corruption c-case of the Royal Examinations...”

Mei Changsu suddenly felt his heart clench, and immediately raised his teacup for a drink to cover it up. Thinking back about it now, the women in the household of Prince Qi were really worthy of awe and respect. While they were confined in the Secluded Courtyard, and without any assistance from the outside world, the women managed to cooperate and scheme a fake identity for Tingsheng, the posthumous child born through luck. They protected him and allowed him to escape elimination from the Crown Prince and Prince Yu. Unfortunately, these courageous women had suffered extreme torment, and not many were still among the living.

The five children finished their responses. The Emperor of Liang didn’t really take it to heart. He made a sound of approval, then asked Mei Changsu, “Do you think these children are usable, Mr. Su?”

“Five is too many. We cannot take advantage of Warrior Baili too much. Three is more than enough.” Mei Changsu glanced at the children carelessly and pointed at three people including Tingsheng. “I’m afraid that I would need to take them home with me to train them for two days. Can Your Majesty permit it?”

“I permit it. I will grant great rewards if there is a victory in two days.”

Mei Changsu sighed, “Your Majesty is benevolent, but the Princess was right just now. These children are all convicted servants. They would have no place to use any silver or gold bestowed upon them.”

The Emperor of Liang chuckled and said, “You misunderstand. My intent was to grant great rewards to you.”

“Eh?” Mei Changsu looked confused, “There would be no need to reward me. They are the ones who will be working hard. Please reward them with something they can enjoy instead, Your Majesty.”

“Of course they shall be rewarded as well.” The Emperor of Liang saw the Yan ambassador turning red with anger while listening to this exchange, and was very pleased. “If they win, I will reward them with...err...with...”

He was trying to thinking of what the reward should be when Princess Jingning interrupted and said, “Father, you need to promise a great reward to make them willing to work their hardest, and to make it easier for Mr. Su to train them. In my opinion, the biggest reward to these convicted servants would be to release them from hard labour and allow them to leave the Secluded Courtyard to find another station in life. Even if you were to reward them with a mountain made of gold or silver, Father, it’s not as good as that.”

The Emperor of Liang saw that his little daughter was feeling really sympathetic towards the little convicted servants today. In order to make her happy—plus, those children weren’t really important—he nodded without much thought and agreed. “All right. It will be as you wish. If they achieve a victory, I will permit them to be released from hard labour and have the Royal Household Department find them appropriate stations.”

Princess Jingning was ecstatic. “Thank you, Father! I just know that Father is most gracious and benevolent.”

“Oh you, you’re so soft-hearted. Although, it’s not bad for girls to be soft-hearted.” The Emperor of Liang looked at her lovingly, then turned towards everyone in the Hall. “Let us adjourn for today. Before the Princess’s literary tournament in two days, let us all witness the results of Mr. Su’s training before starting the battle of ink and brushes.”

Everyone stood up immediately and said as one, “Yes, Your Majesty.

## CHAPTER 25

### *Training Children*

The Emperor of Liang rose, supported by the hand of a eunuch, and returned to the Inner Palace. Everybody within the hall stood respectfully until the Emperor was gone, then scattered one by one. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu both rushed over, wanting to inquire after the authenticity of Mei Changsu's startling proclamations. Prince Jing was the only one to leave quietly by himself.

Mei Changsu showed admiration in his eyes. As if he couldn't help it, he praised, "I never imagined that Prince Jing would have such composure. He does not speak nor act more than he should, and I've never seen him lose his calm under any circumstance. He really has the grace of a Royal Prince."

So that's the type the qilin prodigy likes. Hearing his words, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu swallowed back their torrent of questions and greeted Mei Changsu nonchalantly, then walked out with "composure" as well.

A few words from Mei Changsu got rid of two Royal Princes. He turned around and immediately saw Princess Nihuang nodding at him while barely suppressing her laughter, a face full of admiration. He returned a helpless smile.

At that time, Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin walked over, Xiao Jingrui holding the hand of Tingsheng and Yan Yujin holding the hands of the other two children. The Empress's nephew began asking when he was still a few steps away, "Su, are you sure about this? We've confirmed it just now—these three children really don't know any martial arts."

"That's okay, who knows martial arts as soon as they're born? Jingrui, I need to trouble you to notify the Marquess that these three children will be staying at the Snow Cottage as well."

"That won't be a problem." Xiao Jingrui grasped Mei Changsu's arm with concern, "But Su, let me challenge him first in two days. I feel that..."

"All right now," Mei Changsu patted his hand assuringly, "Don't worry. Although I cannot practise martial arts myself, I can still train people."

“If Su says he can do it, then he’ll definitely be able to do it. You should stop frowning so much.” Yan Yujin chuckled, “You’re not as handsome as me normally, and you’re even less handsome when you frown.”

Everyone laughed together, and their mood lightened. Still, the three children hung their heads and cowered back, looking very anxious. Mei Changsu knew that it would be impossible for them to completely relax so quickly, so he did not rush to talk with them. He only made a slight gesture for the three to follow him, and walked with the Princess until they’ve exited the Royal Palace. Nihuang saw that her younger brother, who had left first, was already standing dutifully waiting for her. Mei Changsu was with friends, so he probably wouldn’t need the Mu carriage to send him back. Hence, she did not stay behind, and left after saying her farewells. The carriages of the Marquess of Ning and the Yan households were both driven over just then. Mei Changsu brought the children into the carriage with him. He still did not make any inquiries during their ride, and only lifted the curtains for the children to see the scenery of the streets outside. Xiao Jingrui, who was riding in the same carriage, gazed at Tingsheng’s profile and thought back to when he first met the boy. He gradually began to understand, and turned around involuntarily to give Mei Changsu a look.

Facing this pair of inquiring eyes, the Chief of the East River Alliance gave a light smile and nodded.

Even though Mei Changsu had solemnly promised that he would train these three children in earnest, everyone who came to check on the situation in the next two days discovered that he was actually extremely leisurely and at ease. Besides drawing some strange lines on the ground in the courtyard and instructing the children to practise stepping on them, he lounged on the long chair beneath the tree almost all day long. The person who was working hard, what with demonstrating movements and jumping around, was actually Feiliu.

Even still, all visitors were only allowed to take a few glances at the entrance of the courtyard before they were rushed out due to “necessary confidentiality of secret techniques”. This added a feeling of mystery around the whole training process. Only Xiao Jingrui was a bit special, and was reluctantly allowed to come in to sit for a bit.

Still, as time went on, people began to have some different opinions. The next night, when the young master Mr. Xiao entered the Snow Cottage again to visit and inquire for the others, he found with surprise that the children’s speed had clearly increased exponentially.

“They’ve only really practised for a day and a half since yesterday afternoon, and yet they’ve improved so quickly. I must focus in order to see their movements clearly now!”

“Even though these children are thin and frail, their perseverance, willpower, and concentration surpass regular adults by far. They should not be underestimated.” Mei Changsu used hand signals to direct Feiliu in correcting the trainees’ footwork, and continued casually, “But regardless of how great their aptitudes are, it’s still impossible for them to practise anything substantial within two days.”

“What?” exclaimed Xiao Jingrui, astonished, “Then you mean...”

“Hey, don’t worry,” said Mei Changsu with a slight smile. “Of course it’s rather crazy to rely only on these children to strike down Baili Qi. This set of footwork and the complimenting sword formation are really the only two things that can genuinely produce an outcome.”

“But... But...” Xiao Jingrui became even more anxious, “But regardless of how excellent the teamwork and footwork, it’s impossible to execute its effectiveness without the corresponding physical power! Baili Qi possesses very solid inner energy. Even if he were to stand still and take a few hits, these children would be able to make a scratch on him.”

“Jingrui,” Mei Changsu looked at him with warm eyes, “You’ve practised martial arts for many years. Don’t you know what using your opponent’s power against them is?”

“Using your opponent’s power against them requires hand techniques to guide its intricacies. These children don’t know any combat techniques at all!”

“They won’t be able to master hand techniques right now of course, but you’ll learn about its profundity once you see the synergy of this set of sword techniques. Besides, the stronger and harder Baili Qi is, the more delicate and brittle his weak point will be. I already know where his Achilles’ heel is, else I wouldn’t dare to make such grand statements before the Emperor. What, you don’t believe in me?”

Xiao Jingrui froze for a bit, then said hastily, “Of course I do. I dare not make little of Su’s vast knowledge. I’m only worried that if...”

“Don’t worry. Even though this is fun, I wouldn’t play along if there’s really a risk.” Mei Changsu continued lightly, “If you delay me a little more, my assurance will drop a little too.”

Xiao Jingrui panicked and said immediately, “Continue with your work, Su. I’m leaving right now.” He backed out of the courtyard right after he finished.

Mei Changsu watched his figure disappear into the distance. Only then did a strange expression flash in his eyes. He mumbled to himself, “As expected, it’s hard to deceive an honest child... Is because you are steadfast and avoid shortcuts? You



know that the more embellished and profound a thing appears, the more unreliable it actually is.”

Feiliu heard him speak and immediately shot over. He stared at Mei Changsu with big eyes.

“No no, I wasn’t talking with our Feiliu.” Mei Changsu smiled warmly and smoothed the youth’s hair. “Feiliu has worked hard. They still need to be even more familiar with their training. They need to be able to dazzle everyone’s eyes. Only then will Su be able to fool everyone.”

“Too slow! Fast!” Feiliu nodded firmly.

“That’s right,” encouraged Mei Changsu, “They’re too slow now. They need to be faster.”

Feiliu turned away immediately and focused on his task of training the three children’s movements. Mei Changsu relaxed his waist and leaned back. His gaze was still directed at the courtyard, but his mind had begun to wander off. After some unknown time had passed, he was roused by a word from Feiliu.

“Uncle!” exclaimed Feiliu angrily, standing in the middle of the courtyard. Because of his sudden halt, the three children remained in their places, afraid to move. None of them knew what was going on, and stood frozen.

Mei Changsu had just regained his bearings, and it actually took a while before he understood Feiliu’s meaning. He then quickly said, “You’ve already practised for so long today. It’s rather late. Feiliu, bring your little brothers to the west bedroom to sleep and don’t come out again, okay?”

“Sleep?”

“Yes, sleep. You have to wake up early tomorrow to practise. There’s a good child.”

Feiliu looked at the main room, then tilted his head to ponder for a moment. It seemed that being a good child was more important, so he took his three little disciples into the west bedroom and quickly closed the door and windows.

Mei Changsu stood up slowly and entered the main room where he usually resided. Just as Feiliu had said, Meng Zhi was already sitting at the table. He stood up immediately when he saw Mei Changsu enter.

“I’m a bit tired today. Help me close the window, Meng.” While Mei Changsu ordered the greatest warrior of Liang around, he climbed straight onto his warm bed and covered himself with a thick fur rug.

“Aren’t you relaxed.” Meng Zhi closed the window, then turned back and sat at the edge of the bed. He stared at Mei Changsu with seriousness, “Tell me the truth. What exactly do you want to do?”

“What are you asking about, Meng?”

“Don’t play dumb with me! I’m asking about the task you roped in yesterday. Although I’ve been cooperating with you the whole time, I’ve also observed Baili Qi’s abilities very carefully. It’s no doubt that being overly hard and thus easily breakable is his weakness, but not even you should be able to make three children strike him down.”

“You don’t believe it, Meng?” Mei Changsu gave a distant smile, “Just one more day, and the result will show. See for yourself then.”

Meng Zhi’s gaze bore into Mei Changsu’s face like red-hot coal. Finally, he let out a long breath, and his tense shoulders relaxed. He said in a low voice, “Just as I thought. Baili Qi is your subordinate...”

Mei Changsu rubbed his icy hands together. He raised them to his mouth and breathed on them. “Wrong guess. Baili Qi is not my subordinate. However, the person you see now is not the real Baili Qi, that’s all.”

“What’s going on here?”

“If I want to be tousling the clouds here in the royal capital in order to reach my objective, I need to first become an important person, of course. No matter how highly the Crown Prince and Prince Yu think of me, it can’t be compared to the appreciation of His Majesty the Emperor himself. So, the original intention for laying the groundwork of this plan was to put myself in the limelight and gain fame.” Mei Changsu’s eyes turned towards the west window, as if he wanted to see the little child in the west bedroom beyond the paper window. “Today, the plan is slightly altered for Tingsheng. It actually feels better and more natural. I suppose the heavens are aiding me.”

“From the sounds of it, you guys have already kidnapped the real Baili Qi while the Yan envoys were passing through the East River Alliance’s jurisdiction, and then you replaced him with an imposter?”

“Yes. Actually, regardless of how excellent the disguise, there will inevitably be flaws as time goes by. Only, Baili Qi had always remained within the Prince’s manor and was not seen often by others. He also possesses a rude temperament and an ugly appearance, so none of the envoys want to look at him closely. In addition, the person disguised as him is very detailed and careful, so no flaws have been shown over these days.”

“Then then Yan’s strategy this time to first keep a low profile and then show off...”

“That was the decision they made before they had departed, to first have Baili Qi hide his abilities and then make a sudden show of an astonishing warrior. Our man simply went with the flow and acted in complete accordance with their plan, thus avoiding suspicion.” Mei Changsu continued airily, “I was just talking about using your opponent’s force against them with someone. If the opponent remains completely still, it’ll actually be harder for us to make a move.”

Meng Zhi nodded thoughtfully, already grasping most of the situation. What he had observed was the rudimentary steps in training. In combination with his skills in martial arts, he can, of course, see immediately that the set of footwork and sword technique have rather low damage. Yet at the same time, they have a very apparent ability once they are fully learned—the ability to create errors and chaos in one’s vision. Once someone’s body movements and attack process are unable to be seen clearly, almost everyone will instinctively believe that it must be a style of exceedingly superb martial arts with astonishing damage. What the three children need to do then is to render people incapable of seeing their movements and attacks clearly. That way, when Baili Qi falls down, everyone will think that he had been struck down by the martial arts that was spectacular to the point of unidentifiable.

“It’s still rather dangerous to have the children fight. Jindiao Chaiming and the Princess are top tier fighters. Their observation skills can’t be bad. However, for Tingsheng, I suppose this is the only way.” Meng Zhi sighed, “I’ll come take a look again tomorrow night. It’ll be great if they are well-versed in their movements. If there are still flaws, we’ll need to think of something else.”

“Then I’ll thank you in advance.” Mei Changsu smiled and breathed on his fingers for the second time.

“Are you still cold even with the fur rug?” Meng Zhi took Mei Changsu’s hands into his own, and discovered them to be freezing cold. He massaged them to warm them up, and his heart clenched, “It’s not even winter solstice yet and you’re already like this... You were never afraid of the cold before. I’ve even heard Prince Jing joke about that before, saying the young commander of the Red Flame Army is just like a little fireball. On a snowy night, you could throw on a thin armor, ride alone after the enemy for hundreds of kilometres, and return to camp after their capture with no hint of shivering...and yet look at you now. Your body’s damaged to such a degree...”

“All right,” said Mei Changsu. He retrieved his hands and pulled the fur rug up. His tone was very light, as if they melted in the wind as soon as they left his lips, “That’s why I don’t like meeting with you often. I’m already a completely different person from the past. You’ll only invoke sorrow if you compare us like this all the

time. I don't want to have any weakness in my emotions right now. So please...don't talk about these things if you can avoid it in the future..."

Meng Zhi gazed at his face, which was as pale as snow. The eyes of such a manly person actually began to turn red. He suppressed them again and again, and finally said, "You're right. I was being all mushy like some little girl."

"Who would dare to call the greatest warrior of Liang a little girl?" Mei Changsu gave a smile to relieve his mood. "But take a look at Princess Nihuang. Even though she's a woman, she doesn't lose in any aspect to men."

Meng Zhi gave a hearty laugh as well. He stood up and said, "That's right. We need to be on our toes as well. We can't have the Princess surpassing us."

"Are you leaving, Meng?"

"Yeah. You should rest early as well. I'll come again tomorrow. If there's nothing important, I won't show myself."

Mei Changsu made a sound of approval. He was just about to get up to see Meng Zhi out, but was forcefully pressed back. Mei Changsu wasn't a stickler for customs, so he smiled and did not insist further.

Sure enough, Meng Zhi did not show himself the next day. It seemed like the three children's practise was satisfactory. After dinner, Mei Changsu emphasized a bit on some notable items. He soothed the children and told them not to worry the next day, then sent the children back to their rooms early.

However, the Snow Cottage did not maintain such tranquility. About two hours later, an unexpected visitor arrived late at night.

## CHAPTER 26

### *Late Night Visitor*

Strictly speaking, this person shouldn't be termed a visitor, since the Snow Cottage Mei Changsu currently resides in is actually in her home. Only, she had never come for a visit during all this time.

Mei Changsu did not show his surprise. He gently coaxed Feiliu back into his room, who came out upon the commotion. He then gave a slight smile to Princess Liyang and bowed in greeting.

"The wind had risen. I've heard that you are unwell, Mr. Su. Let's talk inside." Princess Liyang wore a cool expression, but her tone was warm enough. She did not make any modest refusals when she saw Mei Changsu step aside to make way for her, and stepped indoors in the lead. With the warm air colliding into her, she untied the ribbons of her golden cloak.

She came quietly by herself, so there naturally weren't any maids near her. Mei Changsu stepped forward to take the cloak she slipped out of and hung it nearby. He then brought a teapot from the firepit and poured a cup of hot tea for her.

Princess Liyang cupped the tea in her hands, but did not bring it to her mouth. She wrapped her palms around the cup's edge, as if warming her hand. After a long while, she finally said, "Please accept my apologies for visiting at such a late time. It's just that if I were to come earlier, I'm afraid..."

Seeing her choke halfway through her words, Mei Changsu gave a faint smile and took over the other half, "Your Highness is afraid that Jingrui would still be here if you came earlier? In that case, Your Highness have some instructions for me alone?"

Princess Liyang raised her head and looked at him. Su Zhe was a commoner, and a wide gulf existed between the ranks of him and the Emperor's sister. The word "instructions" wasn't spoken only out of politeness. However, the many different lights shone on this man were dazzling, making it impossible for one to determine his proper identity.

The chief of the world's biggest clan, the respected good friend of the finest noble gentlemen in the capital, the master of a guard that can compete with the greatest warrior of Liang, the target of the Crown Prince and Prince Yu's desperate recruitment attempts, a man in high favour and in an ambiguously affectionate relationship with Princess Nihuang... Combining all of these bits and pieces together, it's impossible for even the noble Princess Liyang to see him as a mere commoner.

And yet it is because she knows that he is definitely not a common man, and that he must have unmeasurable powers, that the reclusive princess came to this humble guest lodging, alone and in the depth of night.

"Regardless of what words you have for me, since you are here already, they must be spoken eventually. There is no need to hesitate, Your Highness." Mei Changsu had already gathered up the visitor's expression with a sweep of his eyes and continued slowly, "I will naturally accept Your Highness's instructions if it falls within my range of abilities. If it is something I am incapable of completing, I will not speak more than I should, nor spread gossip. Please rest assured, Your Highness."

Princess Liyang's gaze fixated slightly, as if she had mentally come to a decision. The cup in her palms had unknowingly been placed on the table at some point. She raised her head and looked straight into Mei Changsu's eyes. She said, pausing at each word, "Mr. Su. Please save Nihuang."

Upon hearing such a request, even someone with such a steady mental state as Mei Changsu could not conceal a flash of surprise in his expression. "What do you mean, Your Highness?"

"I've heard that Nihuang thinks highly of you, Mr. Su. I presume there must be affection between you two." Princess Liyang raised her hand to stop Mei Changsu, who looked as if he wanted to clarify the statement, indicating for him to allow her to finish. "Though Nihuang is smart, she spends the majority of her time within her principality after all. She does not understand how deep and murky the waters of the capital are. She counts on the noble and powerful status of Yunnan, as well as herself being a top fighter amongst top fighters, and holds a playful attitude towards this tournament for her husband. She strongly believes that everything is within her control, and is thus rather careless."

"From the sounds of Your Highness's words, could it be that someone would actually dare to conspire against the Princess?"

"In order for the people in the capital to reach their objectives, is there anything they wouldn't dare to do?" Princess Liyang thought of something, and her eyes revealed a hint of pain. "As one single person, Nihuang represents the entire stance of the Manor of the Prince of Yunnan, and represents the military power of the ten thousand cavalries at the southern border. Isn't that importance worth it for someone to risk conspiring for?"

Mei Changsu raised his brows lightly and slowly nodded. Of course he had paid considerable measure to Princess Nihuang's importance. That is why he had always wanted to find a way for her to completely support Prince Jing. Other people wouldn't let go of this chance either, of course. However... Going by Princess Nihuang's current powers and her adamant personality, who would dare to seize her might? And who would really be capable of reaching their objective through plots and conspiracies?

"I know what you are thinking of, Mr. Su." Reading other people's expressions isn't a secret technique unique to East River. The princess who had grown up surrounded by crafty clouds and deceitful winds knows it as well. With one glance, a cool smile showed at the corner of her lips. "Nihuang is very strong indeed. Strong to the point where it seems unnecessary to protect her... But Mr. Su, you don't understand. Regardless of how strong a woman is, she is still just a woman at the end of the day. Some things that are inconsequential to men are enough of a blow to destroy the will of a woman. If Nihuang already has someone she likes, this blow will be even stronger. It'll make her feel that who she marries and what type of life she will lead in the future are all inconsequential..."

As she spoke, Princess Liyang's expression was very calm, and her tone was very cool. However, her slowly reddening eyes and her stiff and colourless fingers atop the table betrayed her boiling emotions.

Mei Changsu turned his head, hiding the sympathy rising in his eyes.

He had no memory of the Princess Liyang of the past, who was bright and lively with a fiery nature, and who would compete with the princes whenever they went hunting. He only had memories of his mother's quiet laments to herself when he complained to her about his Aunt Liyang being too cold and unapproachable.

How exactly the old incident occurred why it occurred were genuinely too secretive and too far in the distant past. Even though he had made deliberate investigations during these years, he was unable to find any valuable information. Perhaps the truth only exists hidden in the hearts of those few people, none of whom will say it out loud.

"Your Highness," said Mei Changsu slowly after pondering deeply for awhile, "I acknowledge the logic of your words, but I still cannot imagine it. What exactly is the method that can create such an effect?"

The corners of Princess Liyang's lips twitched slightly, as if she did not want to explain in details at all. However, she understood clearly that it would be impossible to gain his trust without revealing more details.

“His Majesty is privately very satisfied with two of the final ten candidates, and wish to pair them with the Princess. Do you know who they are?”

Mei Changsu, of course, shook his head immediately.

“Sima Lei, son of the Grand Marshal, and Liao Tingjie, son of the Marquess of Zhongsu.”

“Right.” Mei Changsu was not surprised by the answer. It just so happened that between these two people, the Sima family supports the Crown Prince and the Marquess of Zhongsu supports Prince Yu. It was rather balanced. Who knows if it was purposefully designed by the Emperor, or if it was a coincidence?

“But going by the current rules of the tournament, none of those two have any possibility of winning unless the Princess throw a game and lose deliberately.”

“Right,” nodded Mei Changsu again. Far more than those two. None of the ten could win.

“That’s why, some people are getting worried. The support of Mu family of Yunnan is far too attractive. However, if the matter cannot be finalized during the Princess’s short stay in the capital, it will require twice the effort for half the result when she returns to Yunnan.” Princess Liyang suddenly gave a cold laugh, “At a time like this, Nihuang’s personal wishes have long since been outside these people’s consideration. The people within the Palace are experts in underhanded tactics. Some people who have knowledge of old events will inevitably attempt to imitate the method used by the Empress Dowager in the past...”

At the mention of the Empress Dowager, Mei Changsu’s heart quivered again. That’s right. Thinking about it now, Princess Liyang had rarely visited her mother in his recollections, nor had he ever seen her speak with the Empress Dowager. Only, his life was overflowing with rich and vibrant matters then, and he had thus never paid any attention to this strange situation.

Princess Liyang closed her eyes for a moment, as if needing to calm herself. Because, what she was about to say next was the essential heart of the method.

“There is a type of wine in the Palace called ‘Coils of Passion’. It has the effect of inducing hallucination and sexual desire with just one cup. If a woman drinks it, she will mistake the man next to her as the person she dearly loves and longs for. Urged by the effects of the drug, she will take the initiative and beg to be embraced. She does not know about the existence of such a wine, so even when she sobers afterwards, she will believe that it was her weak will that led to her misconduct while being intoxicated. She furthermore cannot be angry at the man since she was the one who took the initiative. Ashamed and in despair, that feeling really is worse than death. But death had always been the most difficult affair throughout the ages. If she dies then,



she will die without dignity. From then on, no matter how many unspoken words are hidden in her heart, it would be impossible for her to say them. If a trusted person comes forward then to advise her while she is feeling at loss, how could she have any energy to struggle or to refuse? She is only able to have others manipulate her as they wish..." Princess Liyang's tone slowly changed as she reached towards the end of her speech. From her tragic sorrow, even the densest man would be able to see that what she spoke of was her own feelings, carved deep in her heart.

Mei Changsu stood up and walked slowly to the other end of the room. He turned his back towards her and averted his eyes, silently waiting for her to regain her calm.

About ten minutes later, Princess Liyang finally took in a deep breath and said slowly, "Please excuse me, Mr. Su. The woman who was framed in the past is a dear sister of mine, so I became a bit emotional. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not, Your Highness. Something like this really makes one's hair rise. Your Highness will inevitably feel angry and sympathetic even if it wasn't your sister. Only, I do not quite understand. Who was the recipient of Your Highness...'s sister love, that the Empress Dowager would be so opposed to the point of..."

Princess Liyang gazed into the distance, as if crossing through time to fall upon that certain point far away, "He was...a hostage prince...sent to Liang from the Southern Chu empire..."

Mei Changsu's confusions cleared immediately, and he couldn't bear to ask further.

"Although Nihuang is not related to me by blood, her dazzling spirit reminds me of the past. It makes me admire her." Princess Liyang seemed to have finally overcome the peak of her pain, and her expression slowly calmed. "If someone plans to use such underhanded tactics against her, I must prevent it no matter what. I hope you will assist me, Mr. Su."

Mei Changsu's eyes flickered. He paused, then finally ended up asking anyway, "How did Your Highness...came to learn about this conspiracy?"

Even though Princess Liyang knew that he would pose such a question, she still couldn't prevent turning her head to avoid the gaze that was not actually intense. Finally, she answered softly, "Xie Bi, that child. He wants to be involved, but his heart is not hard enough. I saw him ill at ease, and forced the truth out of him after questioning..."

"Ah." Mei Changsu nodded and asked the next question, "With Your Highness's status, there must be many ways to prevent this. Why did you decide to choose me?"

Princess Liyang gave a mocking laugh and responded coldly, “Many ways? I doubt it. The event has not transpired. Should I question the mastermind? They will not admit to it. Should I report it to His Majesty the Emperor? I have no evidence to back my empty words. I would enter the Palace myself to prevent it, but who knows when they will make their move? What can this status of a princess actually achieve during such a time?”

Mei Changsu pondered for a moment. He wanted to ask her why she didn’t ask her own husband for help, but he suddenly realized that this method was the same as the one in the past. Even if Xie Yu was not a co-conspirator then and was simply used by the Empress Dowager, he was still a benefactor at the end of the day. It would be rather awkward to discuss it with him. Besides, one would certainly offend the mastermind if one were to actually help prevent the event from occurring. Xie Yu was not a hot-blooded youth. He wouldn’t necessarily agree to help.

To think about it, the noble princess really had nobody to ask for help. It really does make one sigh in pity. However...

“Your Highness, even if I had the desire to help, I’m afraid that my hands are rather tied as a mere commoner...”

“Don’t you have close ties with Princess Nihuang? Besides, you will see her tomorrow. Please give this information to her then and tell her to be careful when dealing with the ladies in the Palace. That should guarantee her safety.”

“Why don’t you tell her yourself, Your Highness?”

“I have always been cold and reserved. Even though I’ve always admired Nihuang in private, I do not have close ties with her. She may not believe me. More importantly, they already know that I’ve discovered this conspiracy. As soon as I enter the Palace, there will definitely be a lady to accompany me by my side. I won’t have an opportunity to speak in detail with Nihuang privately... Luckily, you reside within this manor, Mr. Su. I still have some powers here. I believe that I can conceal this late night visit from those people. Only, I must trouble you, Mr. Su.”

Mei Changsu looked at her thoughtfully. He spoke meaningfully, “I do not have close ties with Your Highness. It really is my honour to be the recipient of such deep trust.”

The clever Princess Liyang understood. She smiled lightly, “It is rather presumptuous of me to visit so suddenly. But firstly, I really don’t have anyone else to ask for help. Secondly, I know that you have close ties with Nihuang. Thirdly... Jingrui always praises you endlessly before me. This child has a pure heart, so the person he likes and respects should not be a common man. However, I have considered it before coming here. This may implicate you in offending nobility, so it is understandable for you to refuse my request. Please consider it carefully.”

After saying that, Princess Liyang lowered her head and began to drink her tea in silence. Mei Changsu stared at the few inconspicuous strands of white woven in her head of black hair. He suddenly felt a slight pang in his heart, and a feeling of aloofness rose.

“It is late. You should return, Your Highness.” The drums striking the time sounded from outside the window. Mei Changsu retrieved the golden cloak from the hanger and gently draped them over her frail shoulders. He spoke slowly, “The Princess is my friend. I will most certainly put in my fullest efforts. I must ask for Your Highness to enter the Palace as well tomorrow, in order to act accordingly to any change in circumstance.”

Princess Liyang did not speak any further after gaining his promise. She raised the hood of her cloak over her head and quietly exited the little courtyard. She disappeared into the darkness in no short time.

Mei Changsu stood before the steps and saw her out with his eyes. The night wind rushed at him, injecting coldness all over his body. A pair of hands grabbed him from behind and forcefully pulled him inside. He turned around and saw a pair of bright eyes with a hint of anger in them.

“Sorry, sorry, Su forgot to wear his jacket.” He patted the youth’s head to comfort him. “Our Feiliu still hasn’t fallen asleep?”

“She leave. Wake!”

“Ah, she woke you up?” Mei Changsu smiled apologetically. He curled up on the warm bed and gathered the thick cotton blanket around him. “Go back to sleep, then. Don’t you have to go out to play tomorrow?”

“You sleep!”

“Okay, okay, I’ll sleep too.” Mei Changsu closed his eyes obediently. He appeared calm and peaceful, but he recalled old and new information on all aspects of the capital like running water in his head. He used them to determine what exactly was hidden behind the purpose of Princess Liyang’s visit.

Feiliu did not return to his room. Instead, he squeezed next to his Su and snored away, satisfied.

Mei Changsu tucked him in and slowly laid his body flat. Just before he fell into the world of dreams, he was still thinking about a final question: “The Crown Prince’s spy who had concealed himself near Prince Yu... Who exactly is he?”

## CHAPTER 27

### *A Strategy of Swords*

Because he had gone to bed late the previous night, Mei Changsu remained in a dazed sleep late into the morning. Fei Liu stood guard outside his door, refusing to let anyone enter to wake him up. As the time to enter the palace grew nearer, the others grew more and more worried, gathering agitatedly in front of Mei Changsu's door. In the end, it was Yan Yujin who came up with an idea. He shouted through the courtyard's wall, "Wake up, Brother Su!" Fei Liu leapt up in a fury and began chasing him around the courtyard, whereupon Xiao Jingrui took the chance to sneak towards the door. Who knew Fei Liu could move so fast – in the next moment, he had reappeared before Mei Changsu's door to block Xiao Jingrui's entrance. But on the other side, Yan Yujin unabashedly kept shouting, and Fei Liu in a sudden frenzy of frustration flew towards Xiao Jingrui and began fighting him. The poor Xiao Jingrui began fending off Fei Liu's attacks, all the while yelling, "Why are you hitting me? I'm not the one who's shouting!"

Xie Bi, who had hid himself in a far corner, analyzed the situation: "Fei Liu wants to knock you unconscious so he can go after Yujin...."

On hearing this, Yan Yujin shuddered and redoubled his efforts, on the one hand calling loudly for "Brother Su!" and on the other shouting encouragement to his friend, "Hang in there a bit longer!"

In a few minutes, the situation in the courtyard had disintegrated into a complete mess, and no matter how deeply asleep Mei Changsu was inside, he couldn't help being woken by all the noise.

When the servants saw him open the door and tell Fei Liu to release his victims, they hurriedly carried in hot water and breakfast. Yan Yujin opened his mouth as soon as he entered the room, but was stopped by Xiao Jingrui, who waited until Mei Changsu had finished his congee and put down his bowl before gesturing at his friend to proceed.

"Brother Su, this morning there was an order from the palace saying the written test will be delayed until tomorrow." Yan Yujin was fairly bursting with the news.

“Oh, why?”

“Because today you need to take care of this Baili Qi!” Yan Yujin threw open his fan with the ease of practice and had just begun to wave it when he noticed Xiao Jingrui glaring at him. He stared blankly back for a moment before realizing that the wind from his fan was causing Mei Changsu to flinch back, and hurriedly closed it again. But he continued to hit the fan against his palm with a dashing sort of air, almost as if he was the one who would be taking care of Baili Qi.

Xie Bi, seeing that the Young Master Yan was busy trying to look cool and didn't seem about to keep talking, hurriedly seized the opportunity to continue the conversation. He explained, “It's like this. His Highness Prince Yu stated even that if Brother Su's young boys defeat Baili Qi today, Baili Qi's status as a finalist wouldn't change and he would still have to undergo the written test. However, having just been beaten, his emotions would naturally be in a turmoil, which would make the situation unfair. Since this issue of choosing a husband isn't all that urgent, why not postpone the written test by a day, to avoid the Northern Yan from taking this excuse to spread gossip about the situation?”

“This is a well-thought out suggestion. Has His Majesty allowed it?”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” Mei Changsu nodded. “Thank you. The hour is not early, I should get going. I will say goodbye to you all.”

“Say goodbye?” Xiao Jingrui dazedly handed him his coat. “We can leave together.”

Mei Changsu gave them a look. “Where are you going?”

“To see how you're going to defeat Baili Qi!”

Mei Changsu couldn't help laughing. “Wuying Hall an imperial hall, not one of those entertainment halls you usually visit. Last time, you went because you were summoned by His Majesty. Originally, you would have gone with me today because of the written test after the competition. Now that the written test has been cancelled, what reason would you have to go to Wuying Hall? Even though you are well-respected noble sons, you still at least need an imperial decree to enter, no?”

“Ah!” Yan Yujin cried out in frustration, jumping to his feet. “I forgot! And we've wasted so much time! I must go request an invitation. I'd rather die than miss this show!”

Xie Bi didn't seem to care much – he hadn't wanted to go in the first place. But Xiao Jingrui was frozen in indecision, turning on the one hand to follow his friend out, and turning on the other hand towards Mei Changsu.

“Don't worry,” Mei Changsu smilingly gave him a push. “Xie Bi will arrange the horses and carriage for me. Go and request your invitation. You don't want to miss the excitement, do you?”

Xiao Jingrui's face lit up in a smile, and he ran out of the courtyard after an enthusiastic “No!”

Xie Bi watched him leave and sighed, “He's becoming more and more like Yujin. He never used to enjoy excitement like this....”

Mei Changsu didn't want to try to explain the peculiarities of this particular completion to Xie Bi, who wasn't very knowledgeable about martial arts. He fastened his coat against the wind, spoke quietly to Fei Liu, and then led the three children, who had long since been standing ready to one side, out of the courtyard.

The horse and carriage were waiting outside the mansion door. Xie Bi looked around, then said with a smile, “Princess Nihuang didn't send a horse and carriage today. Brother Su, aren't you a bit disappointed?”

Mei Changsu smiled in reply and drew the curtains of the carriage shut. The driver cracked his whip, the sound echoing crisply, and drove towards the palace.

There were far fewer people in Wuying Hall today than the last time. Apart from Baili Qi, none of the other finalists were present, and only a couple representatives of the Da Yu delegation had arrived. Prince Jing was there early, because of Tingsheng, but neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu was anywhere to be seen. They were probably with the Emperor, and would arrive with him later. The Mu siblings had no reason to be early either, and so it was that when Mei Changsu brought the three children into the hall, he received no other greeting aside from a nod from Prince Jing. It was indeed a great contrast to the excitement of the previous few days.

But Mei Changsu actually preferred the peaceful environment. He led his three pupils into a corner, grasped their hands one by one, and smiled and spoke encouragingly to them. Before long, their bulging eyes and terrified gazes had settled into serious nods, as they promised to do their best, and to make use of this opportunity to leave behind their status as criminal slaves.

Around half of a quarter hour later, Princess Nihuang and Mu Qing came in, radiating an aura of health and vigor. Mei Changsu welcomed them, smiling, and privately wondered how these two managed to glow with energy no matter where or when he saw them – such a contrast when compared to the languidly graceful air the

nobility of the capital were used to putting on. Only Prince Jing held a similar sort of presence to these two.

“From Mister Su’s expression, looks like you’ve got a card up your sleeve?” Mu Qing had spoken first. He stepped closer and bent over to the three children. “Tell me, what has Mister Su been teaching you?”

Mei Changsu thought there was nothing wrong with letting the children become familiar with some of the people in the hall, so he didn’t stop Mu Qing, instead indicating with a glance for Princess Nihuang to follow him a few steps away.

“Some secrets to tell me?” The commander of the Southern border smiled.

“I’ve been asked to warn you.” Mei Changsu spoke in a quiet voice. “Since it looks like it will be impossible to marry you, some in the palace are planning to force you to submit. Beware Prince Yu and the Empress.....if they invite you to dinner alone, try to decline if possible.....”

“Force me to submit?” Princess Nihuang looked shocked for a moment, then laughed proudly. “How do they want to force me?”

But there were some things Mei Changsu couldn’t explain in detail, so he only said vaguely, “You must not underestimate the methods of the Inner Palace. Be careful of anything you put in your mouth.....”

He was about to continue, when suddenly footsteps sounded from outdoors and Yan Yujin rushed in dragging Xiao Jingrui after him. “We made it, we made it,” he laughed. “Brother Su, it still hasn’t started?”

Mu Qing, unhappiness written all over his face, blocked his path and frowned. “It hasn’t started. Mister Su was talking to my sister – don’t disturb them!”

However, his vehement protection actually stopped Princess Nihuang from returning to their private conversation. As an unwedded girl of the royal family who had yet to select her husband, such behaviour might not be considered appropriate.

Fortunately, the embarrassing moment passed quickly as just then, the royal carriage was announced.

As everyone had predicted, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu were supporting the Emperor on either side, with Princess Jingning following behind, and Commander Meng standing guard. After the Emperor had been seated, the two princes and Jingning descended the jade steps and led everyone in the hall in the ceremonial bows before separating to take their seats.

“Subject Su,” the Emperor smiled at him. “How are your results?”

“Your servant will not waste words. I pray Your Majesty watch the following events.” Mei Changsu gestured to the three children, who came forward and knelt in a line.

The Emperor eyed the three small figures, and looked again at the heavily-muscled Baili Qi, and, unable to help the stir of uncertainty in his heart, turned to Commander Meng.

“Your Majesty, shall we begin?” Commander Meng, bowing, took the opportunity to obtain the imperial decree.

The arrow has already been strung; it must be fired. The Emperor, eyes filled with worry, nodded his head.

The three children rose, drew out their swords, and stood in a cluster. Their stances were perfectly steady, their solemn concentration a stark contrast to the trembling terror they had displayed two days ago. The spectators were startled.

Baili Qi stepped forward, empty-handed, and eyed his opponents disdainfully before casually striking a starting pose.

“Begin!” As soon as Meng Zhi gave the command, a sudden wind rose up in the hall, as the three children spun like tops, their steps crisscrossing, and their previously crisp silhouettes becoming indistinct. Those less skilled in martial arts saw nothing but blurs of motion.

Jindiao Chaiming<sup>23</sup> of Da Yu was instantly interested. He sat up straight and was about to focus his eyes to examine the fight closely when he suddenly felt a wave of intense hostility hit him from the side. He felt a shiver deep in his heart, and turned his head in confusion, but only saw Da Liang’s first-ranked fighter, Commander General of the Jinling Imperial Guard Meng Zhi glaring at him fiercely. The fury in his expression was equal to the kind of hatred one might feel for someone who had murdered his father or stolen his wife. Chaiming couldn’t help shuddering, and carefully focused on calming his mind as he thought carefully on how he might have offended him.

Princess Nihuang’s martial arts were also known to be splendid, and she was captivated immediately by the blurring silhouettes. She was just leaning forward to watch carefully when a sudden “Aiya!” sounded from the Mei Changsu beside her.

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<sup>23</sup> Jindiao Chaiming (from Da Yu) is ranked number five on the Lang Ya Bang Top Ten List of Martial Art Experts. Meng Zhi is ranked number two. Nihuang is ranked number ten. They are by far the greatest martial arts experts watching the fight, aside from Lin Shu himself. That should be enough for you to understand what was really going on.



She reflexively glanced over, and saw that he had knocked over his teacup and was busily trying to avoid the tea that had spilled all over his table. His clumsy appearance was such a contrast to his normal effortless grace that the Princess couldn't help smiling.

Just as the two experts' attentions were simultaneously diverted, a few stifled groans rose up from the fight, and then with a final thump, the three children sheathed their swords and leapt back. The blur faded, and when the spectators could see again, Baili Qi was half-kneeling on the floor, supporting his weight with his arms, his face filled with fury.

“They've won!”

“They've won!”

Yan Yujin and Princess Jingning cried out together joyfully. Even the Emperor gave a small smile.

Chaiming, who had been focusing on calming his mind and heart against Meng Zhi's wave of fury, suddenly felt his whole body relax. Meng Zhi's expression, which had previously been directed towards him with such irreconcilable hatred, suddenly eased into a sincere, friendly smile. In that instant, he wondered whether he had just woken from a dream.

“Warrior Baili, are you alright?” The Northern Yan messenger shouted in urgent fury.

“The honoured messenger does not need to worry. We would not hurt guests.” Mei Changsu smiled, and then said to the three children, “Shouldn't you thank His Majesty?”

The three small fighters immediately fell to their knees in a bow. The Emperor, greatly pleased, said, “You have worked hard. We will not go back on our words. You will be absolved of your status as criminal slaves, and may be placed into a department, and may receive help from relatives and friends.”

Princess Jingning was overjoyed, and said immediately, “Father Emperor has such integrity and benevolence!”

The Emperor eyed his daughter and had a sudden thought. “Jingning, do you really care about these children so much? Since they have this training, why not have them castrated and sent to wait on you? They will be stronger than your average bodyguards on the one hand, and they will not need to worry about providing for themselves on the other hand, and can live in some comfort....”

As soon as he had spoken, Mei Changsu and Prince Jing both paled, especially Prince Jing, who was about to jump to his feet, and who was only stopped by Mei Changsu's forceful glare.

“Your Majesty, this is inappropriate.” Unexpectedly, the person who objected was Xiao Jingrui, who stood up and bowed, and then continued loudly, “Your Majesty has already bestowed your mercy in allowing them to leave the Secluded Court, and to allow them to be free in the future. The Imperial mouth has spoken; how can it take back its word? And anyway, they are not familiar with the rules of the Inner Palace. And it is not permitted to use weapons when waiting on the Princess, so their training is useless. Thus, Jingrui believes even Princess Jingning herself may not wish for them to be castrated to enter the Inner Palace.”

Princess Jingning hurriedly added, “Yes, that's right. My palace only has eunuchs; what use would these three be? Let my Father Emperor bestow another gift to me.”

The Emperor had always doted on Xiao Jingrui, and was not angered by his blunt words, but rather waved a hand to return him to his seat and didn't raise the subject again. A thin film of cold sweat had already covered Mei Changsu's body.

“Mister Su has shown good teaching methods and exemplary work. Once the written tests are over, we shall bestow other rewards.” The Emperor was in such a good mood that he personally poured out a cup of wine and sent it to Mei Changsu. “We first raise a toast to you, to celebrate this battle.”

Mei Changsu thanked the Emperor and accepted the cup. He drained its contents, and couldn't help coughing. His face flushed red as he used all his strength to suppress the coughs.

The Emperor spoke some superficial words of comfort to Baili Qi and the Northern Yan messenger, and happily left to return to the palace. As soon as he left, Mei Changsu covered his mouth with his sleeve and coughed so violently that he bent doubled over himself. Xiao Jingrui leapt over the tables to his side, holding him upright and patting his back. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu also hurried over.

“It's alright.....the fragrance of His Majesty's wine was too overwhelming.....” After coughing for a good amount of time, Mei Changsu finally uncovered his mouth and, leaning on Xiao Jingrui's shoulder, lifted his head. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu, to show their concern, had stepped quite close. But in contrast to the last time at Wuying Hall, there was not the slightest trace of perfume on their person, which was certainly not a coincidence.

Mei Changsu was once again certain – one of Prince Yu's people had to be spying for the Crown Prince.

“You’re not in a hurry, are you? Would you like to rest before leaving?” Princess Nihuang, who had just been taken aside by a palace servant, had hurried back now.

“No matter,” Mei Changsu smiled faintly. He turned to the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, and said, “Your Highnesses must be very busy with the affairs of the kingdom. I could not bear the consequences if you were delayed on my account.”

It seemed as if the two indeed had other affairs, and in any case did not want to cause too much bother, and so they turned and left after exchanging a few more polite words. Mu Qing pulled Yan Yujin away with one hand, and reached out to push at Xiao Jingrui with his other, but the latter would not budge.

“Brother Su isn’t steady on his feet yet.” Xiao Jingrui understood that Mu Qing wanted him to give his sister and Mei Changsu some privacy, but he steadfastly stood his ground.

Princess Nihuang couldn’t help smiling, and eyed the Young Master Xiao with interest, before leaning down to speak quietly to Mei Changsu. “My Lady the Empress has invited me to dine at her palace. I cannot refuse this; I must go.”

“Princess!” Mei Changsu hurriedly tried to stop her, but found after a few moments of thought that he had nothing else to say, and finally only sighed, “Please take care.”

After Princess Nihuang left, there were not many people remaining in the great hall. Mei Changsu felt very unwell, and as it was not permitted to use paladins or carriages within the Forbidden Garden, he could only sit and rest, with Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin naturally by his side.

Princess Jingning had been talking to Prince Jing, and when the conversation ended, Xiao Jingyan came over to see how he was doing. After they ran out of things to say, Prince Jing took the opportunity to take Tingsheng off to one side for a few words.

Because the Emperor had left straight for the residence of the concubines, Meng Zhi had not followed. And because he was worried about Lin Shu, he had not left, but stayed inside the hall and called the other two children to him to demonstrate their sword dance. Yan Yujin was greatly interested and went over for a closer look, while Xiao Jingrui alone remained by Mei Changsu’s side. Seeing the cold sweat continuously breaking out on Mei Changsu’s forehead, he leaned over and asked quietly, “Was the cup of wine really that strong? Is your illness acting up?”

Mei Changsu fought to suppress his internal pain and anguish. He knew in his heart that the wine had indeed caused the old wounds to flare, and didn’t want to speak, so only sat quietly with his eyes closed. Meng Zhi, after repeatedly glancing in his direction, finally couldn’t stand it any longer and hurried over.

“How is Mister Su?”

“I’m not sure,” Xiao Jingrui was so worried that his voice shook. “He has rested for such a long time, but he doesn’t seem to be getting better.”

“Let me see.” Meng Zhi reached out and grasped his pulse, and instantly his brow furrowed. He gathered his energy, and then thrust a portion of strength into him, helping him subdue the injury.

By now, Yan Yujin, Prince Jing, and Princess Jingning had all realized something wasn’t right, and hurried over together. The three children also gathered around, faces drawn with worry.

Almost an hour later, Meng Zhi let out a long breath, his face clearing up. Mei Changsu withdrew his wrist and thanked him quietly. His voice seemed a bit stronger, his words less broken up than before.

“You really scared me....” Yan Yujin hated this type of somber atmosphere, and let out a loud sigh. “I’m glad that ended well. Brother Su’s health is really too frail; you must rest and let it recuperate. Jingrui, let’s hurry and take Brother Su home. And I guess we won’t be able to make it to our polo match today....”

“Of course not! How can you still have the heart to play polo?” Xiao Jingrui was extremely unhappy.

“I don’t want to play, but we must let Liao Tingjie know; after all, we promised to be there.”

“You go tell him then. I won’t go.”

Mei Changsu listened to the two of them talking, and felt a fleeting sense of strangeness pass over his mind, but he couldn’t catch it in time, and his brow furrowed in thought.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling unwell again?” Xiao Jingrui asked hurriedly.

“No.....you were saying.....you promised to play polo with someone?”

“Liao Tingjie – you wouldn’t know him, he’s the heir of the Marquis of Zhongsu....”

The strange feeling he had been feeling since sometime in the morning suddenly welled up, and like a flash of light passing through, Mei Changsu suddenly understood, and his chest filled with turmoil.

The Princess had been invited into the palace, and by logic the Empress and Prince Yu should have long since made their preparations. So why.....why would Liao Tingjie, the man Prince Yu's camp had designated to become the Princess' husband, have time to arrange to play polo outside the palace?

Everything Grand Princess Liyang had spoken the previous night flew through his mind, and instantly, he grasped the strangest point.

The Grand Princess had said that the reason she knew about the plan was because she had seen Xie Bi's troubled expression and had forced it out of him. But this morning, Xie Bi had seemed cheerful, and had even joked about Princess Nihuang when they were leaving. He had not appeared to have even a shred of discomfort in his heart.

And from another point of view, the risks the Empress and Prince Yu would have to take with this plan were huge, and so only the few people directly involved would know about it, to minimize the risk of others finding out. Xie Bi couldn't possibly contribute to this kind of Inner Palace business, so why would Prince Yu tell him anything?

Therefore, Princess Liyang had lied about this part – a part she had thought wasn't vital to the information itself, but that she had found inconvenient enough to lie about. And because the source of her information couldn't have been Xie Bi, then the source should have come from her husband, the Marquis of Ning, Xie Yu.

All those years ago, only a few people had known about the methods of the then-Empress, but Xie Yu was one of them. If he had been overheard by Grand Princess Liyang this time giving instructions to his servants, then even if the instructions had been curt and coded, she would have understood immediately.

And the most important mistake lay in this final part.

To hide her source, Princess Liyang had named Xie Bi, but Mei Changsu was very clear that Xie Bi was on Prince Yu's side, so naturally, he had believed that the person behind this plan to drug the Princess was the Empress. What he had overlooked was that, actually, the whole thing had nothing to do with Xie Bi, but rather, was the work of his father, Xie Yu.

And as for which side Xie Yu had chosen.....which side Xie Yu had chosen....

Mei Changsu's breathing had become rapid, and he clenched his teeth.

Staying neutral? Keeping himself out of the fight for the crown? Others may not know, but he himself knew most well what kind of person Xie Yu was. Xie Yu was tainted by his history, and knew that he could not remain a simple official, so with the Emperor slowly aging, how could he not plan for the future? Xie Bi was already well-

known to be one of Prince Yu's supporter, so he had long since offended the Crown Prince, and if the Crown Prince succeeds, then the Xie clan would be punished accordingly. Thus, remaining neutral in such circumstances would be completely meaningless. With Xie Yu's intelligence, there was no way he would do something meaningless. But the fact remained that he had played dumb, and had let his son support Prince Yu while he himself seemingly kept himself out of the fight for the crown. That meant he must have some other flawless plan up his sleeve – a plan that would let him emerge victorious no matter who won in the end.

Xie Bi openly supported Prince Yu; Xie Yu secretly supported the Crown Prince. Then he could tell the Crown Prince that Xie Bi was spying on Prince Yu, and occasionally support this claim with some information. He could show that he was fooling Prince Yu, and please the Crown Prince even more.

As long as he could keep up the pretense, the future would be secure: if Prince Yu won, the Xie clan would survive because of Xie Bi. If the Crown Prince won, both father and son would be celebrated, with even better results.

Therefore, underneath it all, Xie Yu must be genuinely supporting the Crown Prince.

At this point, Mei Changsu's forehead was dripping with cold sweat.

The true danger, therefore, was not with the Empress in Zhengyang Palace, but with the Crown Prince's birth mother, Noble Consort Yue, in Zhaoren Palace. If the Princess was only careful with the Empress, would she lower her guard with Noble Consort Yue and walk into the trap laid before her?

Perhaps there was yet time enough to prevent the worst from taking place....

“Your Highness Prince Jing, please enter the palace immediately and ask whether the Princess has entered Noble Consort Yue's Zhaoren Palace. If she has, you must go there immediately, and find her no matter the cost.” Mei Changsu stood up abruptly and gripped Prince Jing's hand tightly, saying fiercely, “Princess Nihuang is in danger right now. I will explain everything to you later, but now you must go! Hurry!”

Although Xiao Jingyan was entirely baffled, when he saw the intensity of his expression, he immediately believed him, and turned and hurried away.

“Princess Jingning, please, you must go right away to Great Grandmo- .....to the Grand Empress Dowager, and ask her to immediately attend Zhaoren Palace. This is also to save Nihuang. You must not waste a second.....” Mei Changsu had turned to Xiao Jingning, his tone still urgent. “Your Highness may remember she still owes me a favour; please repay it now.”

Xiao Jingning took a few steps back, somewhat at a loss, but on hearing that this was to save her Nihuang jiejie,<sup>24</sup> her heart shuddered and without further thought, she immediately sprang into action.

“Commander Meng, please immediately arrange for some of your men to wait in ambush outside of Zhaoren Palace, and to immediately arrest the noble son of Wei, Sima Lei, if he appears, for the crime of trespassing on palace grounds. Can you do that?”

Meng Zhi also didn’t waste time on words, simply patted his shoulder and said, “Don’t worry,” before flying out the door.

In the great hall, only the two noble sons were left, bewilderedly wondering what had just taken place, and staring at Mei Changsu.

“Brother Su...this...what’s happening?” After a while, Yan Yujin managed to speak.

Mei Changsu closed his eyes, looking very tired, and released a somber sigh. He murmured, “It’s my fault...I was mistaken about something...I can only hope now...that the worst has not yet happened....”

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<sup>24</sup> Jiejie = older sister (affectionate), female equivalent of “Gege” as in Fei Liu’s “Su Gege”

## CHAPTER 28

### *Noble Consort Yue*

When the cup of pure, sweet wine arrived before Princess Nihuang, she accepted it without any hesitation, and lifted her head to smile at the one toasting her.

Noble Consort Yue withdrew her hand, meticulously manicured fingers lingering in the air a moment before returning to her side. As she stepped back, her elegant purple phoenix robes swayed gently around her beautiful figure, and a hint of fragrance hovered in the air after her. She too was from Yunnan, had left her native land to enter the palace thirty five years ago, and had not returned home once. As she discussed their home land with Nihuang, her eyes seemed to fill, as if the long years of a young girl's memories had descended upon her again.

Because of the grief of her remembrance, Princess Nihuang relaxed the tight guard she had been keeping up in the Empress' palace.

“The gulls return every year to the Jade Lake, and the scenery has not changed very much, except that willows have been planted along the shore, which has added a gentle beauty. The Jade Pavilion my lady spoke of is still there, but the small resting place was lost in a fire, and has already been reconstructed at another site.” Nihuang lifted the cup to her lips but didn't drink, only slightly wet her lips, before continuing, “As for the high monk of divination my lady mentioned, I have never met him there.”

“They are likely destined meetings. This high monk truly has the gift of divination. Were he here, we would be able to ask about the Princess' marriage prospects.” Noble Consort Yue spoke indifferently, but when she saw the Princess' cup grow still in her hands, she did not continue her persuasion, but smiled sweetly and drained her own cup. In the past, she had been one of the greatest beauties of the radiant Inner Palace, and with her elegant attire and exquisitely made up appearance, her smile had the ability to topple countries and kingdoms. But the faint wrinkles creeping along the corners of her eyes were carved by time itself, and against time, none could hope to win.

“If my lady misses our home land so much, why not ask His Majesty for permission to visit once more?”



“I cannot compare to my lady Empress, whose home is Jinling.<sup>25</sup> The journey from the capital to Yunnan must pass through remote areas, and only if traveled with companions would there be any hope of returning for a visit. If I were to ask for permission to travel alone, I fear it would not be permitted. But as for the future....” At this point, Noble Consort Yue suddenly realized the impropriety of her words and hurriedly closed her mouth.

Princess Nihuang understood, and pretended not to take notice, but let the words pass by unheeded. As a Noble Consort, it would not be possible to leave the Inner Palace to travel over land and water for a visit home, but in the future, if the Crown Prince ascended to the throne, then travelling on an inspection tour as the Empress Dowager would not be difficult to arrange. But such a future was founded on the passing of the old emperor, and was thus certainly not something to be carelessly spoken.

However, even if the words weren’t spoken plainly, as the Crown Prince’s birth mother, she would eventually arrive at such a future, barring any unforeseen circumstances. But the truth was that no one could guess how the winds and fortunes of the royal family would blow, and whether any such unforeseen circumstances would take place was impossible to predict.

At least, the existence of Prince Yu, Xiao Jinghuan, was currently the thorn in the side of this pair of mother and son.

Prince Yu’s birth mother was of lowly ranking and had succumbed to an early death, and his own birth ranking fell after the Crown Prince’s, so by rights he had no right to the fight for the crown. But he was raised in the Empress’ palace, where he was noticed and adopted by the childless Empress. And although the Imperial Uncle<sup>26</sup> had long since adopted the leisurely life of a Daoist monk, the disciples and supporters of Old Master Yan still formed a great portion of the base of the Empress’ power. In addition, Prince Yu was naturally clever with an elegant air, and was highly adept at pleasing the Emperor, gaining much favor, and being obviously superior to the other princes, had emerged as a direct opponent of the Crown Prince.

Having been immersed in the Inner Palace for all these years, this lady who had been made a noble consort by her radiant beauty was perfectly clear: the days of stability, relaxation, and riches were yet far away.

“Nihuang, how long can you stay in the capital this time? I always hope to have people from our home land like you around, to come visit often....”

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<sup>25</sup> the capital

<sup>26</sup> Marquis Yan, being the brother of Empress Yan, holds the title ‘Imperial Uncle’ (where the word uncle refers specifically to the older brother of one’s mother – because the Empress is the ‘Imperial Mother’ of the royal princes)

“Recently, the Southern border has been peaceful, and since Qing di<sup>27</sup> has received the Emperor’s approval, I have been much more at ease. I will probably stay another month or two.”

“Leaving so soon?” Noble Consort Yue looked shocked. “After choosing a husband, the wedding must be planned.”

Nihuang smiled faintly and didn’t protest, only saying, “If one is chosen, then I will think about it.”

“The Princess is no ordinary young lady. The splendors of the capital hold no attraction for you; rather, the grasslands and vast jungles of the South are more suited to your disposition.”

On hearing this, Nihuang couldn’t help smiling. “Although my lady has been in the capital for such a long time, you still have a bit of the temperament of a Yunnan lady.”

“Who has not once possessed the high spirits of youth? But after all these years in the palace, it has all been eroded away.” Noble Consort Yue shook her head and sighed. “Like today – I would like nothing more than to reminisce about our home land with the Princess, but...even if I said that was my only intention, I fear the Princess would not believe me?”

Princess Nihuang stared at her for a long moment, then answered simply, “No.”

“Then I will come to the point.” Noble Consort Yue took on a solemn air, her tone growing serious. “The noble son Sima Lei, one of the finalists of the competition and hand-picked by the Crown Prince, is skilled in both literary and martial pursuits, as well as talented and virtuous. Although his martial arts cannot be compared to the Princess’, you are an expert in this area, so what need have you for a top martial fighter as a husband? I can guarantee, this Sima Lei would be a very good match for you. And anyway you and I share a home land, and the Crown Prince has always greatly respected you. At this time, please do support the Crown Prince, Princess.”

Princess Nihuang waited quietly for her to finish, then said with a smile, “The Crown Prince is the heir apparent. The Mu House of Yunnan will serve the Crown Prince in the future after he takes the throne with as much loyalty as it serves His Majesty now; my lady does not need to worry about this. As for choosing a husband, His Majesty has already set the rules of the competition, and as the noble son Sima Lei is so accomplished, what is there to worry about?”

On hearing this reply, which was neither positive nor negative, Noble Consort Yue only wrinkled her brow, and laughed ruefully. “I knew all along I would receive an

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<sup>27</sup> di means ‘little brother’; referring to Mu Qing

answer of this sort, but I still had to ask. This is really our Yunnan temperament – I suppose it cannot be changed. Alright, as the Princess has answered so candidly, how can I keep forcing the topic? Allow me to lift this cup in a toast of apology. If the Princess will forgive my presumptuousness, then please accept this toast, and in the future when you and I meet again, we will certainly only speak of the scenes of the past, and not bring up these courtly concerns.”

Noble Consort Yue lifted her cup behind her sleeve and drained it. Nihuang couldn't persist in refusing to drink, and although this was still palace grounds, it wasn't the Empress' Zhengyang Palace. She stared at the small cup, then slowly drank it down.

Seeing the wine disappear down her throat, a look of grief unexpectedly flickered across Noble Consort Yue's eyes, but the determination set in her brows did not falter. She delicately sliced the tangerine before her, her movements smooth and steady as she peeled away the skin and offered one to Princess Nihuang.

“Is this a tangerine from our home land?” Nihuang tasted the fruit in astonishment.

“Yes. Tangerines have no legs, yet they are able to travel to the capital. I, on the other hand, have legs, but cannot step into the places of the past...” Noble Consort Yue's expression was mournful, as if she was remembering her home, but also as if she was having other thoughts.

“My lady does not...” Nihuang was about to speak, when a palace servant girl appeared to report, “My lady consort, the Crown Prince and the noble son of Sima request an audience.”

“Oh, what a coincidence,” Noble Consort Yue pressed a hand to her mouth, smiling. “I had forgotten that I had asked him to bring the noble son of Sima over to see me. Since the Princess is here already, you wouldn't mind coming to see him, would you?”

Princess Nihuang felt doubt stirring in her heart, but couldn't think of any way they could act against her, and as she was thinking, the Crown Prince had already entered smiling with a tall, handsome, splendidly-dressed gentleman in tow, and ordered Sima Lei to greet the Princess with a bow.

After these many days of tournament and the banquet in Wuying Hall, this was certainly not the first time Princess Nihuang had seen Sima Lei. But in contrast to the previous meetings, as the man drew near this time and met her eye, she suddenly felt her heart lurch.

She closed her eyes and held her breath, calming her mind, and then Nihuang felt acutely the danger that now lay before her. At first she had been a bit overconfident,

believing that her skills in martial arts protected her against attacks no matter how strong, but she had not realized that the other party did not need strength at all, but rather had only to target and distract her mind and spirit. Because she could not control the consequences of these happenings, without evidence, the entire event would descend into hearsay, and then not even the Emperor might believe that someone could have forced her into acting against her will. Thus, the most important thing now was to leave this place as soon as possible.

“My lady, Nihuang has suddenly remembered an urgent task elsewhere. I will first take my leave.” After this hurried statement, Princess Nihuang turned to leave.

“Princess...” Sima Lei started to reach for her, then halted with his hand half-raised and turned to look at the Crown Prince, who was glaring at him meaningfully. He gritted his teeth, plucked up his courage, and grabbed Princess Nihuang by the arm.

“How dare you!” Nihuang turned and gathered her inner energy, preparing to shove off the hand on her arm, but as their eyes met, her mind once again became distracted and dazed, and the scalding hand on her arm seemed to glow with warmth, the kind of warmth she longed for every time she stood alone on the frozen battlefield, frost and wind whipping all around her.

“Sima, the Princess seems tired. Why don’t you take her away for a rest...” Noble Consort Yue’s voice drifted over from a distance, cool as shade.

The Crown Prince took a few steps back, watching as Sima Lei held the Princess tightly by the waist, watching as a conflicted turmoil of pain and tenderness flitted across the beautiful face. Perhaps his heart was a little disturbed, as he turned his face away.

Suddenly, shouts and sounds of conflict rose up from outside.

Noble Consort Yue stood up abruptly, and climbed the steps for a clearer view. She was able to see a figure rapidly approaching, shoving aside all who tried to block his path and leaving behind a pitiful mess of entangled limbs. Not only could no one stop him, he actually dodged aside and charged straight for Sima Lei.

Although Prince Jing rarely showed his skills, his martial arts were certainly not as rough as might be imagined by those who had never experienced battle personally. Sima Lei was already feeling guilty, and didn’t quite dare raise a hand against a prince, and anyway his martial arts weren’t very strong in the first place, and so he hurriedly backed away, and was forced to retreat quite a distance.

“Jingyan! You are truly daring! How dare you enter my Zhaoren Palace without permission?” Noble Consort Yue was by now sure that Prince Jing had come alone,

and immediately came forward in a fury. “Injuring people left and right – are you trying to start a rebellion?”

Prince Jing took in the scene at a glance and noticed the Princess’ clouded gaze and swaying figure, and although he did not know what exactly had happened, he understood enough. Thoroughly disgusted with Noble Consort Yue’s actions, he didn’t even want to bother arguing with her, but simply went over to the Princess, pressed hard against several of her vital meridian points,<sup>28</sup> and lifted her over his shoulder.

The Crown Prince, filled with fear and fury, shouted for his men to surround Xiao Jingyan, forming two circles around him, the inner bearing swords and the outer holding bows and arrows.

“Jingyan, you dare to trespass into Mother’s palace to kidnap the Princess! How fortunate that I am here to protect her! Put down the Princess right now, and for the sake of the ties of our blood, I will not report you to Father Emperor...”

Xiao Jingyan gave him a cold look, then ignored him and continued striding forward. The guards surrounding him helplessly moved with him, sending questioning glances at the Crown Prince.

Xiao Jingxuan<sup>29</sup> was trapped between a rock and a hard place. This brother of his was a veteran of many battles, and couldn’t be stopped by normal shows of power like these. But to shoot a prince to death within the Zhaoren palace was also no small sin, not to mention the Princess Nihuang he was carrying on his back – were they to shoot her too? But if they didn’t stop him and let him charge his way out, the situation would become messy all the same. Left without a foolproof solution, he helplessly turned his gaze to his mother.

Noble Consort Yue’s radiant red lips pursed, and she spoke one word through her gritted teeth, “Fire.”

“Mother!”

“Fire!” Noble Consort Yue’s voice was low, her tone severe. “At the very least, the dead cannot speak, and only then would we have the chance to speak!”

The Crown Prince shivered, then stepped forward and cried in a loud voice, “Prince Jing has trespassed into the palace, attempted to assassinate my Mother Consort, and harmed the Princess! Shoot to kill!”

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<sup>28</sup> i.e. acupuncture points

<sup>29</sup> the Crown Prince

The guards hesitated for a moment, but as the Crown Prince was their master, they strung their bows and instantly, the arrows fell like rain.

Prince Jing lunged forward and flipped a guard over as he grabbed the guard's only sword, and then, with the light dancing off his sword like snow, he fended off the first wave of arrows. In the brief interlude that followed, he fought his way to the steps and laid the Princess down on the floor before knocking aside the second wave of arrows. Suddenly, he tumbled through the air, feinting left and right, and scattered the archers' formation. The swordsmen were also not his match, and in the confusion of the fight, only saw a figure flying through the air. The dazed Crown Prince abruptly felt a touch of ice kiss his neck, and found that a cold blade had been pressed against his neck, icy cold against his skin.

"Stop!" Prince Jing's voice was not loud, but the entire hall had frozen in response.

Noble Consort Yue was trembling all over, and spoke through teeth gritted in fury. "Xiao Jingyan, you dare..."

"Killing a commander amongst his soldiers is something I do often.<sup>30</sup>" Prince Jing smiled coldly, his tone like ice. "His Highness the Crown Prince was standing a bit too close to me."

"Jingyan! What are you trying to do?" The Crown Prince's voice was shaking.

"Bring the Princess over to me, then let the two of us leave the palace."

Noble Consort Yue's eyes were cold as frost. She scoffed and said, "And if I say no? Would you really dare to kill the Crown Prince?"

"Is my lady consort using the Crown Prince to gamble with me?" Xiao Jingyan's voice held not a shred of warmth, and the Crown Prince's heart raced, and he couldn't help letting out a cry, "Mother!"

Noble Consort Yue's face was icy to behold, but her chest was heaving, showing that she was in furious thought. Just as her brows furrowed and she opened her mouth to speak, an urgent shout was heard from the palace's outer gates: "Announcing the Grand Empress Dowager!"

Noble Consort Yue's heart froze, and a sense of hopelessness threatened to overwhelm her. But she closed her eyes briefly, and then rapidly came to a decision. Her first words were directed in a rush towards Sima Lei. "Leave the palace by the

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<sup>30</sup> ...Yeah, I don't really get it either. I think it's a reference to his battle experience?

back doors immediately, and remember, you have not stepped half a foot into Zhaoren palace today!”

Sima Lei froze for a second and looked around blankly before shaking himself and rushing away towards the back door.

“Jingyan,” Noble Consort Yue hurriedly descended the stairs, speaking rapidly. “Listen – the Crown Prince didn’t shoot at you today, and you didn’t put a sword to his neck, understood?”

Prince Jing’s eyes were drawn. He didn’t answer.

“Raising your sword against the Crown Prince and shooting at a prince are both things the Emperor would not want to hear about. I do not wish for the two of you to fall to the same end. As for the other things, let us each fend for ourselves, and we will let the Emperor be the judge.” Noble Consort Yue smiled coolly. “You are an intelligent person; you should know that this is an arrangement that benefits you. Why not take it?”

Prince Jing’s face did not change, but the sword in his grip slowly eased away from the Crown Prince’s neck, and dropped lightly to the ground.

The aged figure of the Grand Empress Dowager appeared now at the Moon Door of the palace’s inner gates, and standing beside her was not only a very confused Princess Jingning, but also another woman, dressed in a royal yellow robe with a grand air and beautiful face.

This was the mistress of Zhengyang palace – the current Empress.

## CHAPTER 29

### *Skillful Words and Self-Defense*

“What have you brought me here to see?” The Grand Empress Dowager looked around the courtyard in confusion. “Why are there so many people here?”

Noble Consort Yue hurriedly indicated for the Crown Prince to dismiss the crowd of guards in the courtyard, and then quickly stepped up and knelt on the floor in a bow. “Your servant consort greets the Grand Empress Dowager, my lady Empress. I had not noticed my ladies’ arrival; please forgive my discourtesy...”

Empress Yan didn’t wait for her to finish, but immediately asked coldly, “Is that Nihuang I see sitting over there? What happened to her?”

Noble Consort Yue saw from the corner of her eye that Prince Jing had gone over to Nihuang and gently helped her up. The Princess’ cheeks were flushed, and both her eyes were closed. There was no denying that something had happened, so she was forced to say, “The Princess was invited over to dine today, but I did not expect the wine to be too strong for her. Nihuang is drunk...”

“Princess Nihuang is a valiant hero among women; her wine tolerance is not weak. How could she become drunk so easily?”

“Your servant consort thought it was strange too.” There as a smile on Noble Consort Yue’s face. “Perhaps her mind has been disturbed these last few days over this issue of choosing a husband.”

“Then why was the courtyard full of guards? Are you telling me someone dared to misbehave in Zhaoren palace? Tell me, and I will be the judge of the situation for you.”

“Oh, the guards...” Noble Consort Yue chuckled gently. “The Crown Prince was having them demonstrate some sword training that they had mastered for me, almost like a dance.”

Empress Yan gazed at her steadily, and suddenly sneered, “Noble Consort Yue must be joking. You left a guest as honoured as Princess Nihuang drunk on the steps



while you and your son stood around watching some sword demonstration... You may answer me with this story, but is this how you are going to answer His Majesty?"

"As for how to answer His Majesty, this is my own business; how could I dare to trouble my lady Empress on my account?" Noble Consort Yue gently retorted. Seeing his mother so unperturbed, the Crown Prince, who had been pale with fear, now walked over slowly to greet the Grand Empress Dowager.

The Grand Empress Dowager had been listening to the verbal sparring between the Empress and the noble consort with much interest, and now seeing the Crown Prince bow to her, immediately reached out a loving hand to caress his head. "Xuan'er, who are those two children over there? They are too far away, I can't see clearly...."

"...uhh..." The Crown Prince stammered awkwardly, "That's Jingyan...and Princess Nihuang...."

"Why don't they come over here to Great Grandmother?"

"Don't worry, Grand Empress." Empress Yan's tone was soft, but her words were like ice.<sup>31</sup> "Nihuang is only drunk; she will wake sooner or later. And once she wakes, I will be certain to advise her never again to drink such strong wine ...."

Noble Consort Yue felt something clench in her chest, but she gritted her teeth and kept her face smooth. This was indeed the most difficult part of the whole situation. The attempted murder had been balanced by Prince Jing's taking the Crown Prince hostage, and both parties had basically reached an agreement not to investigate each other further. Sima Lei had also left, and the Empress had not been able to find any evidence of the crime, so no matter what she said before the Emperor, in the end it would only be one set of words against another, and there were ways to deal with words. But the Princess' mouth, now there was something that could not be stifled. Now her only hope was that the Princess' pride would make her unwilling to make public such a disgraceful event, for fear of its damage to her stainless reputation.

Princess Jingning had by now run to Princess Nihuang's side, and, worried by her flushed appearance, said quietly, "What happened? She's in such a drunken state, let's take her to my palace to rest for awhile."

Prince Jing also felt that it would be more convenient for his sister to take care of the Princess, and so he nodded, ordered a soft palanquin to be brought, and with the Empress' permission, left with Jingning to escort Nihuang away.

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<sup>31</sup> fun game: count how many times 'ice' or 'cold' has been mentioned in the last two chapters (I've been translating these phrases literally). It's almost like we're being hit over the head with a certain image here....

The Empress knew that this matter would achieve a greater result if handled by Nihuang rather than by herself, and so didn't press the matter, but simply escorted the Grand Empress Dowager into the main hall of Zhaoren palace, idly chatting and laughing. Noble Consort Yue was forced to keep them company instead of rushing first to the Emperor with her side of the story, and also was left with no chance to further collude with the Crown Prince. Seeing the forced smiles of both mother and son, the Empress felt a deep satisfaction.

Once Princess Nihuang had been carried to Princess Jingning's Yinxiao Pavilion in her palace, Prince Jing immediately summoned a number of imperial physicians. After seeing their patient, they all concluded that the Princess was only suffering from a rapid pulse and shallow breath, with an impaired blood flow,<sup>32</sup> but that there was no serious obstruction and no danger to her life. Prince Jing was thus relieved, and was just gathering his strength to help dissolve the obstructions by pressing her acupuncture points, when the Princess suddenly opened her eyes and shook her head at him, so he stopped, and instructed his sister to look after her well before he left the hall to sit quietly on the long bench in the courtyard, both waiting and standing guard.

Around an hour later, Princess Jingning ran out and panted, "Yan<sup>33</sup> ge, jiejie just opened her eyes and asked for you."

Prince Jing stood up hurriedly and walked quickly into the hall to see Nihuang indeed looking much improved, finally let out a sigh of relief, and came forward to perform acupuncture for her.

The Princess sat up slowly, her eyes cool as frost, seeming to be deep in thought, and then raised her head to look Prince Jing in the eye, saying softly, "Thank you."

Prince Jing only nodded slightly and didn't answer. Instead, it was Princess Jingning who asked with concern, "Nihuang jiejie, how much did you drink to become this drunk? Just now, I shook you for a long time, but you didn't seem to notice me...."

"I'm alright now." Nihuang reached out to brush Jingning's cheek lightly, then put on her shoes and stood up.

"Where is jiejie going?"

"To see His Majesty."

Prince Jing was startled, and asked quietly, "Has the Princess already decided?"

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<sup>32</sup> Chinese medicine terms that I have no idea how to translate

<sup>33</sup> from his given name, Xiao Jingyan

“In truth, this is not anything shameful,” Nihuang’s smile was cold as ice. “Perhaps the noble consort hopes that I will hide my anger and my tongue to cover up such a humiliation. If so, she has judged Nihuang wrongly. To say nothing of the fact that she failed, even if she had succeeded, if she thinks I would submit docilely to her because of that, then she must be dreaming. It is utterly impossible.”

“His Majesty should be in Yangju Hall. Since the Princess has decided, then I will escort you there.” Prince Jing spoke calmly, without adding any other comment.

“There’s no need to trouble yourself. I’m really....”

“This is not Yunnan. It is better to be cautious.”

Nihuang understood his good intentions, and didn’t continue to decline, but nodded in assent. Princess Jingning looked from one to the other and finally couldn’t stand it. “What are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

“I’ll explain later.” Nihuang smiled at her. “I’m not in a good mood right now, and I don’t want to say any more before going to see His Majesty. Jingning, forgive me.”

“Why is jiejie is being so polite...” Jingning was a bit embarrassed. “Then, shall I accompany the two of you?”

“No,” Prince Jing responded immediately. “You should not get involved with this kind of situation. Wait here, and don’t go around listening to nonsense, understand?” Jingning wasn’t so innocent that she truly understood nothing. Seeing their somber expressions, and thinking about everything that she had seen that day, she knew the situation wasn’t anything simple, and didn’t ask any further, only nodding obediently.

After leaving Yinxiao Pavilion, the two walked along in silence, seeming not to see the palace servants bowing on either side, until they reached Yangju Hall, where they stopped to be announced.

On hearing that these two were seeking audience, the Emperor was a little shocked, and hurriedly allowed them to enter. He took in the Princess’ expression at a glance, and a suspicion arose in his heart. As soon as they had made their bows, he immediately asked, “Nihuang, what is it? Who has upset you?”

Nihuang knelt down in a bow, and raised her head to speak. “Pray His Majesty judge for Nihuang.”

“Aiya, rise, quickly rise, tell us what’s wrong....”

Nihuang knelt unmoving, but fixed her eyes on the Emperor and said, “Noble Consort Yue summoned me to Zhaoren palace today under the guise of reminiscing

about our home land, but served tainted wine that disturbed my mind and spirit. The Crown Prince seized the opportunity to bring Sima Lei into the Inner Palace to initiate inappropriate behaviour, in order to force me to wed. I pray His Majesty investigate these events, and give justice to Nihuang.”

Her words were deceptively simple and clear, without any suggestion of argument, and thus were all the more horrifying. The Emperor, shaking with fury, shouted in one breath, “Call for the noble consort and the Crown Prince! Bring them immediately to Yangju Hall!”

This order was carried out remarkably quickly, and soon, not only had those who were suppose to arrive, arrived, some who weren’t supposed to come had also arrived. Aside from the summoned Noble Consort Yue and Crown Prince, the Empress and Prince Yu had also appeared together.

“Consort Yue! Crown Prince! Do you confess to your crime?!” The Emperor shouted out in fury before they had even finished making their bows.

Noble Consort Yue’s face showed amazement, and she said fearfully, “Your servant consort does not know what has angered Your Majesty; pray Your Majesty explain.”

“You still feign ignorance?” The Emperor struck the table with his hand. “What did you do to Nihuang today? Tell us!”

“Princess Nihuang?” Noble Consort Yue’s face showed even more astonishment. “I invited her to dine today, and the Princess couldn’t stand the strength of the wine and slowly became drunk. The Crown Prince and I were just caring for her when the Empress suddenly arrived with the Grand Empress Dowager, and ordered Princess Jingning to take the Princess away to rest.... As for what happened afterwards, your servant does not know. Perhaps the Princess feels neglected because my hospitality was not adequate?”

Seeing her dodge the blame so neatly, Princess Nihuang couldn’t help laughing coldly. “Your wine must be very strong indeed; why, only one cup was enough to render me unconscious. Does such a wine exist? Not to mention as soon as I drank this cup, the Crown Prince brought in Sima Lei. Was that a coincidence too?”

“That wine was the Seven Mile Fragrance gifted by His Majesty. Although it is quite strong, only the Princess has said that drinking it made her unconscious. His Majesty can search your servant’s palace; there is certainly no other wine. And I fear the Princess must have already been drunk, because it was only the Crown Prince who entered. Where did Sima Lei come from? His Majesty has only to find anyone in Zhaoren palace, and ask if there was a second person who saw Sima Lei there.”

Princess Nihuang raised an eyebrow and said furiously, “Everyone in Zhaoren palace is yours. If you deny it, who would dare contradict you?”

Noble Consort Yue didn’t confront her directly, but continued to speak facing the Emperor. “Although everyone in Zhaoren palace is under your servant, everyone under your servant is Your Majesty’s servant. Under an imperial order, who would dare to lie to His Majesty?”

Seeing her deft maneuvering and irrefutable words, the Empress couldn’t contain her anger, and scolded, “You truly have an eloquent tongue. You dare to act but you don’t dare to admit to your actions? But no matter how you dodge, you cannot hide the truth. Are you claiming that the Princess is framing you without reason?”

Noble Consort Yue said calmly, “I also don’t understand why the Princess would make up such a story without any reason, just as I don’t understand why my lady Empress immediately believed the Princess without any evidence, and refuses to believe me....”

Empress Yan felt a chill in her heart, and suddenly understood what she had done wrong.

She should have been a bystander from beginning to end, and not spoken up.

If this was Nihuang’s accusation against the noble consort, the Emperor would not believe that Nihuang had any other motive, or that she would use her reputation to frame the noble consort. But once she herself entered into the conflict to protect Nihuang, then suddenly, it became an argument between the two palaces, which was certain to raise the doubts of the easily suspicious Emperor.

Noble Consort Yue, seeing the Emperor beginning to frown in thought, continued gently, “And I would like to ask my lady Empress to bear witness, after the Princess became drunk, and my lady Empress entered the courtyard of the Zhaoren palace so suddenly with the Grand Empress Dowager, did my lady see anyone mistreating the Princess? And although it would not be proper to disturb the Grand Empress Dowager in her old age, Princess Jingning was there as well. Your Majesty can ask her whether she saw anyone mistreating the Princess.”

Nihuang had not expected this noble consort to be so nimble with her tongue. Rage rose within her and she burst out, “That’s because they came just in time, and you could not carry out the rest of your malicious plan....”

Noble Consort Yue turned and met that blazing glare unflinchingly, saying peacefully, “If the Princess persists in believing that I harbour such malicious intent, then I will not continue arguing. The Princess has chosen my lady Empress and Prince Yu rather than me and the Crown Prince; this must be due to some moral deficit on our part, and we do not dare harbour any resentment towards her. But I

must ask the Princess: if, as you say, you fell into my trap, then have you been harmed? And if I had really laboured to create such a malicious plot, then why would my lady Empress have entered at just the right moment to rescue you?"

The Emperor's brow furrowed, and he glanced at the Empress and Prince Yu out of the corner of his eye, as if shaken by these words.

Princess Nihuang felt her hands grow cold with fury. Thousands of enemy soldiers met on the battlefield could not infuriate her as bitterly as this palace consort. She was just about to curse in rage and leave, when a steady voice spoke from beside her: "Father, your son can bear witness, when I entered Zhaoren palace, Sima Lei was indeed beside the Princess, and was certainly behaving with impropriety."

Noble Consort Yue's whole body trembled as she turned, incredulous, to glare at Xiao Jingyan.

"I saw that the situation was desperate, and had to break courtesy in order to bring out the Princess." Prince Jing ignored her, and continued with composure. "In order to stop me, the noble consort and the Crown Prince actually ordered their guards to fire on us. I had no choice but to take the Crown Prince hostage for protection, in order to preserve my life, and to delay until the Grand Empress Dowager arrived. I know that raising a blade against the Crown Prince is no small crime, but I will not allow the truth to remain hidden from my Father Emperor only to avoid punishment for myself. Pray my Father Emperor consider, if not to hide their guilt and sins, why would the Crown Prince have wanted to silence me by killing me?"

Even the Empress and Prince Yu were not aware of these events, and everyone was shocked for a moment. Noble Consort Yue had never expected Xiao Jingyan to have this kind of boldness, and was stunned into silence, her face pale as snow.

"Consort Yue! Did such a thing happen?" The Emperor's fury was frightening to behold.

Noble Consort Yue bit her lip, raised her head, and said, "Since my lady Empress, the Princess, and Prince Jing have all condemned me by their words, I dare not argue any further, and dare not ask for any evidence. I only pray Your Majesty to judge with his wisdom, and if His Majesty also believes that I have committed this crime, then we, mother and son, will confess, and never dare to harbour any further resentment."

Faced with her show of submission, the Emperor hesitated. If he didn't believe the claim, he would face the accusations of everyone present. But if he believed it, he couldn't help thinking that they were acting too much in unison. As he hesitated, his thoughts warring in his mind, a eunuch's voice called from outside the hall: "Your Majesty, Commander Meng requests an audience."

The Emperor was currently dealing with an issue of this importance; he didn't want to be disturbed, and so waved an arm and said, "We will see him later."

The eunuch bowed and retired, but reappeared a moment later to say, "Your Majesty, Commander Meng has ordered your servant to convey a message. He says he has apprehended an intruder, one Sima Lei, outside the Zhaoren palace, and awaits Your Majesty's further instruction."

## CHAPTER 30

### *Committing Crimes*

When these words were spoken, shock rippled through the hall. But as the initial astonishment faded, different expressions appeared on different faces.

Noble Consort Yue's face was stretched tightly, the Crown Prince's colour was like dust, Prince Jing and the Princess looked thoughtful, the Empress and Prince Yu looked to be hiding their glee, and as for the Emperor high up on his throne, his face was clouded, betraying complex emotions.

After a silence so long it was almost suffocating, the Emperor waved a heavy hand, signalling for the eunuch to leave.

"Consort Yue...do you have anything else to say?" Unlike his previous severe tone, this sentence was spoken with unusual gentleness and fatigue, but to those listening, it was for this reason all the more chilling.

Noble Consort Yue's radiant make up could no longer hide the pallor beneath, and after turning to look at her beloved son, she rushed forward and fell before the throne, grabbing onto the Emperor's leg and crying with a trembling voice, "Wronged!"

"Even now, you insist you were wronged?"

"Your servant knows she was not wronged," Noble Consort Yue raised her head, eyes brimming with tears, her expression touchingly mournful. "But the Crown Prince was wronged!"

"What are you saying?"

"All of this was your servant's plan, all arranged by your servant. The Crown Prince knew nothing...I lied to him saying I wanted to have a look at Sima Lei, so he brought Sima Lei into the palace, but he was only following his mother's orders. Your Majesty knows Xuan'er has always been a filial son, not only towards your servant, but towards Your Majesty as well!"



“If the Crown Prince is truly innocent, then why has he not uttered a word of argument since we summoned you to this hall?”

“What does Your Majesty want Xuan’er to say? Would you ask him to cast all the blame onto his own mother in front of so many people? Xuan’er is filial and pure by nature, he could not do such a thing! It is because he doesn’t know how to protect himself, and always carelessly falls into the traps of others intending to do him harm, that I have done all of this, in order that he might have more people by his side to support him, so that he would not be so easily deceived in the future...”

“Nonsense!” The Emperor was suddenly furious, and knocked Noble Consort Yue to the floor with one strike. “The Crown Prince is the heir to the throne; who would plot against him? As his mother, you were supposed to teach him to act morally, to perform his duty diligently, to share his father’s burdens above him, and to be a model for the people below him – that would truly be for his good! But now look at what you’ve done? You actually dared to use such base, despicable methods? If Nihuang was harmed in any way today, you could not have been redeemed with a hundred deaths! Even the Crown Prince’s honoured position would have been threatened because of you! What incredible stupidity, incredible stupidity!”

This scolding speech was like a thunderclap of imperial power, enough to strike fear into hearts and cause the soul to scatter. But upon hearing this ferocious scolding, Nihuang’s face showed a bitter smile instead, and the Empress and Prince Yu looked disappointed.

Because, no matter how fierce his scolding, in the end, he was only scolding Noble Consort Yue, and his last few words had already shown that he intended to direct the blame away from the Crown Prince. In this kind of situation, whether the Emperor truly believed the Crown Prince to be innocent was not important; what was important was that, with the crimes of ‘plotting and assisting his mother in trapping the Princess, and attempting to silence his brother by murder’ before the Crown Prince, the fitting punishment for crimes of such immorality, injustice, and impiety would likely endanger his honoured position. And the Emperor did not want to depose the Crown Prince because of these events, and risk disturbing the current, relatively peaceful palace environment. So, with Noble Consort Yue’s confession, he had an opportunity he could take advantage of.

After this episode of scolding, the Emperor let out a breath, and didn’t go on to immediately lay out Noble Consort Yue’s punishment, but instead summoned Meng Zhi.

A moment later, Meng Zhi entered the hall and bowed. The Emperor asked him a few questions about how he had captured Sima Lei, and Meng Zhi replied that his soldiers had come across him on their routine patrols, and had only discovered after apprehending him that he was the noble son of Wei, and so, not daring to handle the matter themselves, had brought it before His Majesty for further instruction. The

Emperor did not hear anything unusual in his report, and only reflected that the best laid plans of men could not stand against Heaven's<sup>34</sup> interference, and let out a sigh before asking, "Where is Sima Lei now?"

"He is currently being held in the courtyard where the guards take their rest, watched over by some of my people."

The Emperor made a noise of affirmation, and thinking that this case pertained to the Princess' reputation and should not be handled by the courts, ordered one of the guards to bring the man over so he could personally interrogate him. The guard was gone for a long while, then hurried back fearfully to report, "Sima Lei has been beaten badly; his face is swollen all over and he is currently unconscious. He is not fit to see Your Majesty."

The Emperor raised an eyebrow, and sternly fixed his gaze on Meng Zhi. The Commander of the Imperial Guard looked blank for a moment, then said, "Impossible. My men would not hit prisoners without permission."

"No," the guard hurriedly spoke up. "It wasn't the imperial guards who beat him up, it was...was..."

"Hurry up and say it!"

"It was the little Lord Mu, who somehow heard something and came charging in. The guards couldn't stop him, and he personally punched and kicked Sima Lei, and even broke one of his arms...."

The Emperor let out an "Oh," and glanced over at Nihuang to see her response. In fact, it was a crime for Mu Qing to charge into the courtyard for personal revenge against the accused before he had been convicted. But when the Emperor looked over, the Lady Commander of the Southern Border was still sitting expressionlessly, unmoving, not even standing to say anything in defense of her brother, such as "Pray His Majesty forgive my brother's recklessness". The Emperor was a bit embarrassed, and turned to scold the guard, "If it's broken, then it's broken, don't bother us with unimportant details. Dismissed!" After saying this, he again cast his gaze over, but Princess Nihuang still sat with a cold expression, without any hint of intending to thank His Majesty. This fierce, unyielding nature was rare even in men, and, rather than upsetting the Emperor, instead stirred up admiration in his heart, and he silently praised her strength.

Even if Sima Lei could not be interrogated, he was easily dealt with, and interrogation or no interrogation, it didn't make much of a difference. When the Emperor hurriedly sentenced him to exile for the crime of trespassing into forbidden

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<sup>34</sup> Heaven = the gods of heaven (it's a common feature of Chinese culture / literature to refer to the gods as 'Heaven')

areas, and demoted his father, the noble Sima Wei, in further punishment, no one expressed any sign of protest.

But the matter of Noble Consort Yue was much more difficult. This woman had entered the palace in her youth, and thanks to the Emperor's heavy favour over the years, her status had become second only to the Empress, and moreover, she was the Crown Prince's birth mother. He could not quite bear to punish her too heavily, but if he punished too lightly, the Princess would be bitter. Not to mention with so many looking on, he could not avoid considering the problem of 'fairness'. As he was deliberating, the Crown Prince fell to the floor, crying, "Your son is willing to repay the Princess on behalf of my mother's crimes. Pray Father Emperor consider Mother's many years of loyal service, and deal with her lightly...."

"You evil creature!" The Emperor lifted a leg and kicked the Crown Prince away. "Your mother has resorted to such disgusting methods, why did you not stop her? Where is your filial piety?"

Crying loudly, the Crown Prince crawled forward and wrapped his arms around the Emperor's leg, his face filled with tears.

Lowering his head to look at the person sprawled over his knee, the Emperor's gaze suddenly blurred, and a crushing sensation arose in his chest, pain twisting within him.

A figure he had purposefully chosen to forget for many years drifted now into his mind: that tall, straight posture; that clear face; that arrogant, unyielding expression; and that fierce gaze, eyes burning as if lit by blazing flames.

If that person had been willing to fall prostrate at his knee, crying like Jingxuan was doing now, would the Emperor's heart have softened, and would he have drawn him anew into his embrace?

But time flows like water, and what has gone cannot come again. Perhaps he was becoming soft in his old age, to be suddenly realizing that the harsh punishment he had dealt out so long ago had not only destroyed others, but had also likewise become a hidden wound over his own heart, one that no one else could see.

The Emperor's shaking hand finally came to a rest on the back of the Crown Prince's head. Noble Consort Yue, relieved, supported herself with one arm as she fell gently to one side.

"The lady Yue has behaved immorally, her actions despicable, and violated palace rules. From this day forward, she is stripped of her status as noble consort and degraded to imperial concubine, and is likewise stripped of all noble titles, and will be relocated and confined to Qingli Courtyard, which she may not leave without imperial

permission.” The Emperor pronounced each word slowly, and finally turned his gaze to the Empress. “Does the Empress have anything to say about this arrangement?”

If the Empress had her way, she would of course have preferred to see this woman confined to the Secluded Court. But she was an intelligent person and knew that, as the Crown Prince had been spared, the Emperor could not punish his birth mother too harshly, and so, as nothing she said now would achieve anything, she chose to keep quiet.

Seeing the Empress silently lower her eyes, the Emperor turned his gaze to Nihuang and asked, “Does the Princess have any protest?”

The reason Nihuang had brought this matter to the Emperor was only to obtain justice for herself, and she understood in her heart that the Crown Prince could not be deposed over the events of this day. Now, although the Emperor had covered up some of the details, he had nonetheless punished the Crown Prince’s birth mother, a first-rank noble consort, for her sake, and his effort was sincere. If she still showed dissatisfaction now, then she would be lowering herself to their level, and so she said nothing, and only shook her head.

“As for you,” the Emperor eyed the Crown Prince disdainfully. “You will be confined to the Eastern Palace<sup>35</sup> for three months to study hard and reflect on the morals befitting the heir to the throne. If you are involved in such things again in the future, we will not be so generous again!”

“Your son...obeys His Majesty’s merciful edict....”

“Rise then.” The Emperor’s face cleared, and he raised his head, his piercing gaze sweeping through the hall and coming to a rest on Prince Jing.

“Jingyan...”

“Your son is present.”

“Do you admit your crime?”

Prince Jing swept aside his robe and knelt stoically. “Your son admits his crime.”

The Emperor scoffed coldly, then said, “Tell us, how did you know the Princess was in danger, to enter at just the right moment to rescue her?”

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<sup>35</sup> Eastern Palace: the palace of the Crown Prince; follows the title and not the person (i.e. it is the dwelling place of whoever is Crown Prince, not of Xiao Jingxuan himself)

Prince Jing had been considering his answer to this question the entire time, but now that the moment had arrived, he still had not thought of a suitable answer, and hesitated. He had arrived to rescue the Princess because Mei Changsu had asked him to go, but he himself had no idea how Mei Changsu had known that the Princess was in danger, and so didn't dare to rashly drag him into the mess.

“What is it? You can't answer?” The Emperor had waited long enough, and his tone became severe.

“No...I...it was because....”

“Your Majesty,” a steady voice suddenly rose up. “It was I who asked Prince Jing to go.”

“You?” The Emperor raised an eyebrow. “And how did you come to know about this?”

“It was like this.” Prince Yu stepped forward and continued respectfully, “Your son had entered the palace by the Puqing gate to greet my mother Empress, and was passing by Zhaoren palace when I saw one of the Princess' palace servants running out in fear and begging for help, saying that something was going wrong inside. I knew that this was no small matter, and that even if I ended up accused of wronging a noble consort, I could not let my hesitation cause danger to the Princess. But I knew my martial skills were too poor to enter the palace without being stopped and further delayed. Fortunately, Prince Jing walked by at that moment, and I asked him to enter first to secure the situation, while I went to find the Empress. Prince Jing has an upright heart towards helping others, and instantly agreed, but I never thought that the Noble Consort...no, that the lady Concubine Yue would act in such a deranged manner and actually order a prince to be silenced by murder, and so lead to the resulting events. Although it was not my intention for Prince Jing to take up arms against the Crown Prince, he was nonetheless involved in the situation under my orders. If my father Emperor must punish him, then I am willing to share the punishment.”

He spoke with assurance and composure, as if there was not the slightest flaw in his logic. Of course, Consort Yue and the Crown Prince were well aware that Prince Jing arriving because of a servant girl calling for help was simply impossible given the timing of the events, but neither had any remaining right to speak, not to mention arguing over such details could not change anything, and so they did not open their mouths. The Emperor was sure that Prince Yu's intentions were not as noble as he claimed, and that likely he had been delighted on discovering information he could use against the Crown Prince, but he nonetheless believed this explanation, and nodded. “So that was how it happened. But, for the crime of threatening the Crown Prince's esteemed person, according to the law, Jingyan should be severely punished.”

Princess Nihuang's face discoloured in anger, and the Emperor continued, "But on reflection, the situation was not without provocation, and Prince Yu has expressed his willingness to share in the responsibility, and besides, you have expended no small effort in rescuing the Princess, so we will neither reward nor punish you. Prince Yu was acute and perceptive, and was able to notice these events and halt their progression, which pleases us greatly. We hereby reward him one hundred bolts of brocade, one thousand pieces of gold, and bestow one royal pearl, in reward for his work."

"Your son thanks His Majesty for his great mercy.<sup>36</sup>"

"We are tired. You may all leave."

The Emperor closed his eyes tiredly and leaned wearily back against his cushions. No one in the hall dared to speak further, and all quietly left.

Empress Yan was naturally responsible for the punishment of Consort Yue, and the Crown Prince stood by helplessly as his mother was led away to the Inner Palace, while he himself could only glare hatefully at Prince Yu.

Prince Yu, who had not stepped in until the end, had nonetheless emerged as the greatest victor: he had simply appeared and had received the Emperor's rewards, he had openly defended Prince Jing and so now Prince Jing owed him a great favour, and from claiming the responsibility for the Princess' rescue had now even become the great saviour of the Yunnan Mu clan. The only down side was that he had directed all of the Crown Prince's wrath upon himself, and further deepened the hatred between the two. But he and the Crown Prince had long been at odds, and both harboured a fight-to-the-death kind of attitude, and so this one more offense did not add up to much, and therefore really, he had reaped rich rewards with hardly any loss. His heart was joyful as he silently admired the qilin prodigy's insight. It was fortunate that he had come across him while he was hurrying into the palace at the Empress' notice, and it was fortunate that he had, out of respect for his wisdom, explained the situation and asked for his advice. Otherwise, without his help, he would never have thought to use the opportunity of protecting Prince Jing to take responsibility for all of the work. To be honest, Prince Jing was truly bold and daring; it was just too bad that he was too reckless, prone to acting carelessly, and therefore wasn't a worthy contender. After he had protected him in front of the Emperor this time, he must be feeling grateful. And as for Princess Nihuang, certainly she would be even more...

At this point in his thoughts, Princess Nihuang had already come over to bow and say, smiling, "I am grateful to His Highness Prince Yu for his loyal rescue today. In the future, I will certainly repay you in kind should the opportunity arise."

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<sup>36</sup> Chinese nouns don't implicitly differentiate between singular and plural, so it's impossible to know whether this was said by one person (Prince Yu) or multiple persons (both Prince Yu and Prince Jing). I suspect the latter.

Prince Yu hurriedly returned the bow and said with a broad smile, “The Princess is too polite. The Princess’ rank and status is worthy of any effort I might expend for her person.”

A perfect smile floated across Nihuang’s features, and she was about to exchange a few more polite words when she saw Prince Jing leaving quietly out of the corner of her eye, and though she was impatient to follow, her face betrayed no trace of her emotions, as she said unhurriedly, “My anger towards Lady Yue knows no bounds, but it would not be proper for me to witness her punishment by my lady Empress. Would Your Highness....”

“The Princess does not need to worry. Leave this matter to me. I will enter the Inner Palace to speak with the Empress immediately. I will not let the Princess down.” Prince Yu chuckled for a long moment, then turned and walked swiftly towards the Inner Palace. Princess Nihuang waited until he was a good distance away before running to catch up with Prince Jing.

Hearing Nihuang calling him, Xiao Jingyan stopped and said, “Does the Princess have another matter to discuss?”

“Just now as I was thanking Prince Yu, you really wanted to come over to tell me that it wasn’t anything to do with him, right?” Princess Nihuang smiled knowingly. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Prince Jing lowered his head, and didn’t reply.

“The real reason you came to rescue me was because of Mister Su, wasn’t it?”

Prince Jing jumped at her words. “How do you know that?”

“Because Mister Su warned me earlier to beware of the methods of the Inner Palace. But he spoke vaguely, and I only kept my guard up around the Empress, and wasn’t careful around Noble Consort Yue....”

Prince Jing frowned, and suddenly a great suspicion arose in his heart as he asked slowly, “He didn’t tell you to beware Noble Consort Yue? But when he asked me to enter the palace, he was very certain about Zhaoren palace?”

“Oh, our conversation at that time was cut short, so perhaps he did not have the chance to tell me.” Princess Nihuang didn’t seem to take this to heart, but continued to smile. “But even though he orchestrated my rescue today, I cannot thank him openly. Instead, I can only thank Prince Yu, and not only thank him with words, but prepare to visit him tomorrow with Qing di to thank him again in person.”

Prince Jing didn’t understand. “Why would you do that? You said you know....”

Nihuang laughed faintly and turned her head towards the Eastern Palace. “Although Consort Yue has been convicted, the Crown Prince is still the Crown Prince, and his power is still great. The more I openly thank Prince Yu, the more the Crown Prince will direct his hatred towards him, and naturally will not trouble you instead. Your current situation is not one that can afford making an enemy of the Crown Prince, so isn’t it better to push Prince Yu out into the open instead?”

In fact, it wasn’t that Prince Jing didn’t understand such games of power, but rather that he was unwilling to think about them. With Nihuang’s brief explanation, he instantly understood, and couldn’t help turning away, shaking his head with a sigh. The two walked out of the palace side by side, and did not continue their previous conversation.

They had just walked out of the Shenwu gate when a great cry of “Jiejie!” was heard, and Mu Qing came charging up to them, only stopping directly in front of Princess Nihuang, shouting, “Jiejie, are you alright? You scared me to death!”

“You are of age now, and still so easily excited? Such a small thing to scare you to death. There are far greater things than this under heaven and earth!” Nihuang spoke scoldingly, but her hand was lovingly rearranging the clothes her little brother had disturbed in his frantic run.

“I was afraid jiejie had suffered some harm,” Mu Qing spoke tenderly. “The palace is not a good place; you should not come here often in the future. Although our residence in Jinling is not as large as the one in Yunnan, it should still be enough for jiejie. Let’s go back quickly.”

Princess Nihuang smiled and patted him gently, then turned back to Prince Jing. “Is his Highness also returning to his residence? We can go back together.”

“There’s no need; I won’t be returning right away.” Xiao Jingyan thought for a moment, and finally said firmly, “I must go first to the residence of the Marquis of Ning.”



## CHAPTER 31

### *Misinterpretation*

When Xiao Jingyan entered the door of the Xie residence, it was Xie Bi who came forward to receive him. The first words out of his mouth were, “Your Highness has come personally? Please come in. Brother Su is at Snow Cottage.”

Prince Jing was slightly taken aback, and asked, “What, Mister Su knew I was coming?”

“Oh, it’s not like that,” Xie Bi smiled. “Brother Su just came by to say hello, and said that His Highness Prince Jing was going to take charge of the three children from the Secluded Court to train them to become his personal guards, and so would be sending someone to collect them soon. I just hadn’t expected Your Highness to come personally.”

Prince Jing let out an “Oh,” and then took his cue from Xie Bi and continued, “I am interested in Mister Su’s methods of teaching swordsmanship, and mainly came to ask him about that, but can take the children away with me while I’m here.”

“Your Highness is known for your brilliant military achievements, so naturally you would be interested in those martial techniques. Now as for me, I wasn’t gifted with that talent.” Xie Bi led the way, talking all the while. The two arrived at the door of Snow Cottage and stood waiting to be announced. Fei Liu appeared immediately and looked at them coldly, his gaze like icy needles, which made Xie Bi very uncomfortable.

“Go in!” The youth said stiffly.

Xie Bi forced a smile, then said to Prince Jing, “It’s better for Brother Su to have quiet while he’s ill. I won’t go in to disturb him. Your Highness, please make yourself at home.”

Prince Jing hadn’t wanted anyone else’s company anyway, and so nodded and entered the small courtyard. Mei Changsu was already waiting beside the stairs, and aside from the three children lined up behind him, there was no one else present.

“Your Highness,” Mei Changsu bowed, and Tingsheng and the others followed suit.

“Please rise,” Prince Jing said coolly. “My carriage is at the gate. The three children can wait for me there.”

On hearing this, Mei Changsu immediately understood that Prince Jing had something he wanted to discuss in private, and ordered Fei Liu to call over a servant of the Xie household, who led Tingsheng and the others out, while he invited Prince Jing indoors and served up tea.

“Princess Nihuang’s narrow miss today, do you know about it?” Prince Jing asked coldly, seeming not to see Mei Changsu’s outstretched arm inviting him to sit, but instead remaining standing with his hands behind his back.

“Hasn’t she already been rescued safely?”

“If I had arrived just one step later, the Princess would have already been led deeper into the palace, and then no matter what force I used, I would not have been able to save her. Did you know that?” Prince Jing stepped forward, his tone growing severe.

Since Prince Jing had entered Snow Cottage, Mei Changsu had sensed that he was harbouring some hidden fury, which he had originally thought was leftover anger towards Noble Consort Yue and her son, but now, he was realizing that it was instead being directed towards himself.

“Although there was danger in the process, everything has ended well. Why is Your Highness in such a rage?” Mei Changsu pondered, then suddenly paled. “Unless the Princess became angry after her humiliation...”

“Do you really care about the Princess’ feelings?” Prince Jing laughed coldly. “Warning her in advance to prevent everything from happening would have been a small favour, but it would not have given Noble Consort Yue and the Crown Prince the chance to commit such a crime, so of course you were not satisfied. Now the result is perfect – I fought desperately to save her, the situation was full of excitement, and the Princess is endlessly grateful to me, so that in the future if any conflict arose, the Yunnan Mu clan would undoubtedly choose to support me. This is everything you hoped for, isn’t it?”

Mei Changsu felt palpitations stir in his heart. He turned slowly, and after a long while, said, “Could it be that His Highness believes I purposefully concealed the truth from the Princess, and let everything happen in order to reap the greatest benefit from this plotting?”

“Are you telling me that’s not what happened?” Prince Jing fixed his gaze tightly on him. “You knew the events would take place at the Zhaoren palace, and you had an opportunity to warn the Princess beforehand, so why didn’t you tell her? You had time to tell her to beware the Empress, but didn’t have time to say two more words, ‘Consort Yue’?”

Seeing Prince Jing’s menacing expression, Mei Changsu’s thoughts were scattered. He had honestly never thought Prince Jing would misunderstand him in this way. A person’s thoughts were truly deep beyond all fathoming, and you could never really say that you had grasped the mind of another person. Even the most intimate relationship between a father and son could be eroded by rumours and gossip.<sup>37</sup>

The fire of Prince Jing’s rage was fueled by Mei Changsu’s distracted, indifferent expression, and he took his silence for affirmation of his accusation. When he remembered Princess Nihuang lying fallen on the steps, her face full of pain and shame, he couldn’t suppress the fury that rose up in his chest, and he reached forward and grabbed Mei Changsu by the collar, pulling him close, his other arm gripping his shoulder tightly, as if the heat of his rage could melt the ice-cold skin of the person before him.

“Listen well, Su Zhe,” Xiao Jingyan’s words were spoken through tightly gritted teeth. “I know that you strategists not only act treacherously and shamelessly, but also that not even the most powerful can stand against the cold arrows of your plotting. But I must warn you, since you have accepted me as your liege, you will be clear about my boundaries. Princess Nihuang is not like those who only wallow in power and fight for wealth. She is the commander of a hundred thousand soldiers of the Southern border; she has shouldered the military responsibility of protecting the country. It is the blood she has shed on the battlefield that protects people like you, so that you may scheme and plot safely in this flourishing capital! How could someone like you, who only seeks power and profit, understand the iron blood of a soldier, the hostile smoke of the battlefield? I will not allow you to take people like her as your chess pieces, to use and dispose of as you will. If you do not even know how to respect these veterans who have paid the price on the battlefield with their blood, then I, Xiao Jingyan, will never be associated with you! Do you understand?”

A wave of heat rose in Mei Changsu’s chest, and a hint of a bitter smile lingered at the edges of his mouth. Not understand what it means to be a soldier? Not understand the battlefield? Perhaps, in the snow of that bitter winter twelve years ago, his heart had frozen, and his blood had frozen, but the things that had been burned into his very bones – had they frozen too?

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<sup>37</sup> I don’t get it either. Is it an explicit reference to Prince Qi or is it just an example to emphasize his point? (But then, when had Prince Qi and the Emperor ever had an ‘intimate’ relationship? I thought they’d never understood each other.)

But at this moment, he did not have to think anymore about this, and neither did he have to answer the posed question, because in Mei Changsu's trembling field of vision, Fei Liu's furious face had suddenly appeared.

The youth's palm sliced through the air with murderous intent, trailing cold air in its wake, aimed at Prince Jing's neck like the scythe of the reaper himself.

"Stop!" As he shouted sternly for Fei Liu to stop, Mei Changsu shoved Prince Jing to one side with all of his strength, putting his own body in front of him as a shield.

Fei Liu's ferocious slice was descending when Su gege suddenly appeared in the target area of his attack, and, knowing that he wouldn't be able to take the hit, he was horrified and immediately pulled back with all of his strength, blocking his right arm with his left. But the cold energy of his attack still assaulted Prince Jing's side and Mei Changsu's shoulder.

Prince Jing had been through regular endurance training, and his muscles and bones were strong as iron, so this small piece of much reduced cold energy didn't do much to him, but to Mei Changsu, it felt as if he had been struck with a shower of ice cold needles. There was a sudden sweetness in his throat, and he felt a surge of fresh blood rush into his mouth, which he forced back down doggedly.

"Su gege!" Fei Liu cried loudly.

Mei Changsu ignored the pain in his chest, gathered his composure, and said severely, still standing guard in front of Prince Jing, "Have you forgotten everything I've said to you? Have you forgotten that you promised me to never, ever hurt this person, to never touch even one hair on his head?"

"But he..." Although Fei Liu's face was rigid, his wide eyes were filled with the hurt of a child.

"Don't argue!" Mei Changsu reprimanded sharply. "What is forbidden is forbidden! Apologize to His Highness Prince Jing!"

Fei Liu's whole body trembled. He pressed his lips tightly together, his lovely face stretched taut, and twisted away stubbornly.

Prince Jing had not the slightest shred of antipathy towards Fei Liu, and said with a crease in his brow, "You don't need to force him."

"No," Mei Changsu's face was like ice. "He must remember this. Fei Liu, are you going to apologize or not?"

Fei Liu rarely received this kind of stern, forceful scolding from Mei Changsu. His face was flushed, his breath heavy, his chest heaving, and his teeth were gritted so hard that the muscles of his face were stretched taut and veins were showing in the skin of his neck. If he had not been trained from childhood to show no expression on his face, he would certainly have been close to tears.

Mei Changsu sighed, his heart softening, and he walked forward slowly and wrapped his hands around Fei Liu's face, rubbing gently, and said quietly, "Don't grind your teeth, you'll get a headache..."

Fei Liu's lips pursed, then he rushed forward and fell into Mei Changsu's embrace, wrapping his arms tightly around his waist.

"Alright, alright..." Mei Changsu murmured. "Is Fei Liu going to listen to Su gege?"

"..... listen..."

"Then apologize to His Highness."

Fei Liu thought for a moment, head bowed, then suddenly raised his head and glared at Prince Jing, saying stiffly, "Him first!"

Prince Jing raised an eyebrow in confusion, but Mei Changsu had already instantly understood Fei Liu's meaning.

"Don't speak nonsense. Why would His Highness apologize to you?"

"To you!"

"Not to me neither..."

"He hit you!"

"He did not hit me," Mei Changsu rubbed his shoulder helplessly. "He was only a little angry, and drew a bit close to me while speaking...." "He apologize!" Fei Liu insisted.

"I am not going to apologize." Mei Changsu had not yet answered when Prince Jing unexpectedly spoke up. Xiao Jingyan's expression was serious as he turned to face Fei Liu. He did not take advantage of the boy's intellectual disadvantage to tease or deceive him, but instead continued in a solemn voice, "Everything I have said just now was from the bottom of my heart, not one sentence was false or wrong, and so, I will not apologize. But, Su Zhe, neither will I ask this young brother to apologize to me. He was only fulfilling his responsibilities as a bodyguard, and did not do anything wrong. I think, however, that you owe Princess Nihuang an apology."

Mei Changsu looked at him, deep in thought, and then asked, “Does Princess Nihuang also think I purposefully deceived her?”

Xiao Jingyan was startled. “Actually, no, she thought you were disrupted before you could finish....”

“Then what is the use of apologizing now and frightening her for nothing?” Mei Changsu said indifferently. “The Princess has already suffered much in the capital. Must you add to her grief?”

Prince Jing had not considered this, and stood in a daze.

“I will remember Your Highness’ words well, and I will take care in the future.” Mei Changsu continued, “But I also have a few words for Your Highness. You cannot reject all strategists as one. Against people such as Prince Yu and the Crown Prince, one cannot succeed with only a heart full of passion. Sometimes, we must be ruthless, treacherous, cruel; if we are complacent for even a moment, we will lose everything, with no hope of recovery. You will not fail to understand this point, am I right?”

Xiao Jingyan’s brows were furrowed tightly, but he knew there was truth to these words. He only felt as if his chest were stuffed tightly with something, a disgust and hatred he could not easily express.

Mei Changsu had been watching the changes in his expression closely, and continued in a cold, hard voice, “Your Highness cannot help feeling uncomfortable on occasion, but you must bear it. I know your boundaries, and I will not cross them. But I also have my own methods and ways of handling matters, and I am afraid Your Highness will have to get used to them slowly. You and I share the same goal, and for the sake of this, is it really too much to ask for us to sacrifice some of our personal feelings?”

Prince Jing raised his head and took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment, then slowly opened them again and directed his shining gaze towards Mei Changsu. “This is what you really believe. I understand. I will also share with you this truth: I no longer harbour the slightest trace of brotherly love or affection towards the Crown Prince and Prince Yu. Against them and those who do their will, I do not care what methods you choose to use.”

“Your Highness speaks frankly, to say these words in front of me.”

“Since I am working with you, what is the point of hiding anything? If you truly wanted to do me harm, then simply knowing Tingsheng’s secret would have been enough to tie my hands. Although you work in the shadows with poisonous scheming, you are nonetheless truly talented. If I did not have someone like you by

my side, then what power would I have against the Crown Prince and Prince Yu? But in all of our Da Liang, and in the royal court, there still remain ministers who are pure of heart, and who have not participated in the fight for the crown, and against them..."

"I must still use them." Mei Changsu spoke coldly. "But, to the best of my ability, I will not also harm them."

Prince Jing stared at him steadily, and slowly nodded after a long moment, then said, pronouncing each word carefully, "See that you remember."

Mei Changsu smiled faintly, understanding that this day's discussion had come to an end, and stepped back and bowed. Prince Jing didn't waste any more words, but turned and strode away towards the courtyard. At the door, he stopped suddenly and said, without turning his head, "Thank you, for saving Tingsheng."

"You're welcome." Mei Changsu continued indifferently, "I hope Your Highness will not overindulge him out of pity for his sufferings, but send him into the army for training, that he may learn from an early age the rigors of manhood, and not turn out like me, with a mind filled only with plots and schemes...."

Xiao Jingyan's figure seemed to freeze for a moment, but in the end, he didn't reply, and only walked away into the courtyard.

Fei Liu's furious glare had been fixed on him all along, and even after his shadow had disappeared, he continued to glare in that direction, unwilling to turn away.

"No, Fei Liu." Mei Changsu took the boy's hand, and pulled him forcefully into the middle of the room. "Su gege will say it one more time: you are absolutely forbidden to hurt this person, no matter what, do you understand?"

"Understand...."

"Su gege is very upset about what happened today...."

"He's bad!" Fei Liu sounded hurt. "He hit you."

"He did not hit me. I would never, ever let him hit me...." Mei Changsu rubbed Fei Liu's head and said, "If he had hit me, Su gege would be angry. Look at me, do I look angry?"

Fei Liu looked closely, then shook his head.

"To tell you the truth, Su gege is actually very happy." Mei Changsu smiled and pinched the boy's cheek. "Really, very happy."

"Happy..." Fei Liu cocked his head, looking doubtful.

“Because, he still hasn’t changed.” As Mei Changsu spoke, his eyes gradually became misty. “Although he doesn’t speak or laugh much now, although he is not as cheerful or as bright<sup>38</sup> as before, although his heart has been filled with fury and revenge, still, in his bones, he is still that warmhearted Xiao Jingyan, he is still...that good friend, who sometimes bullies me, and is sometimes bullied by me....”

“Su gege....”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Don’t cry!”

“Alright,” Mei Changsu took a breath, still smiling, and used a finger to lightly brush at the corner of his eye. “I won’t cry. After all, we are very happy.”

“Happy!” Fei Liu suddenly forgot his previous troubles and pointed outside. “Sun! Can play!”

“Alright...let’s go play.”

Despite agreeing to play, Mei Changsu only sat on the long bench under the tree, enjoying the weak warmth of the sunshine of an early winter’s afternoon. Fei Liu sat in the shade, playing joyfully with the shadows of the tree branches, and returning periodically to his Su gege’s side for Mei Changsu to mop his sweating forehead with a gentle handkerchief.

Suddenly, it was as if the flow of time had reversed, and he had returned to the careless days of his youth. He was taming horses, bare-chested, on the grasslands, the yellow earth flying by beneath the wild hooves of his horse. Jingyan, standing outside the fence, tossed him a sack of wine, which he caught and upended over his face in one smooth motion. The wine splashed over his chest, and his father came over, smiling, and rubbed at his forehead with his own handkerchief, gently wiping it clean....

“Su gege....” Fei Liu’s clear eyes were wide as he called his name.

“It’s alright,” Mei Changsu replied gently. “The sun is so warm. I’m falling asleep....”

“Then sleep!” Fei Liu jumped up and brought a blanket over, lightly spreading it over Mei Changsu’s body, then curled up beside him, resting his head on his knee.

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<sup>38</sup> referring to mood, not intelligence



As the day drew to a close, the entire Snow Cottage suddenly became unusually quiet.

But for Mei Changsu, who had already been sucked into the storms of deceit and deception, as time went on, peaceful moments like these would only become rarer and rarer, and shorter and shorter....

## CHAPTER 32

### *Troubles*

About ten miles west of the capital, there was a stretch of rolling grassland, with a clear, winding brook weaving along its side, and a thick forest on the far shore. Because of its beautiful scenery, well-formed terrain, and close proximity to the palace, it has traditionally been the preferred training ground of the noble sons of the royal household<sup>39</sup> – a place where they practised riding and shooting, and simply enjoyed themselves.

Hoof-beats fell like rain as two riders raced along the riverbank, one in front of the other. They were riding gloriously, as if carved into the saddle, their horsemanship complementing each other beautifully, when suddenly the one in front turned his horse and plunged into the river, waves erupting in his wake and soaking his clothing.

“Jingrui! Are you crazy? It’s winter, get out of there!” The person on the shore shouted, pulling hard on his horse’s reins.

The rider in the water didn’t seem to hear him, letting his horse splash deeper into the river, the water already reaching his horse’s flank.

“Fine!” The person on the shore sounded annoyed. “You’re not coming up? Then I’ll come down, and at worst, catch a cold, and become ill again like before....”

Following these words, the person on the shore plunged forward unhesitatingly, and his companion finally reacted, turning his horse and riding over to stop him. The two rode up the small incline side by side, crested a small hill, and then Xiao Jingrui suddenly threw down his reins and jumped down from his horse, ran forward a few steps, and then fell to the ground, burying his face into the thick grass.

Yan Yujin shook his head and also got off his horse, walking over to kick him gently in the stomach. “Hey, you playing dead?”

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<sup>39</sup> referring to not just the Emperor’s sons, but the other related children of his household, eg. Lin Shu, Xiao Jingrui, Yan Yujin (all nephews of the Emperor)

The person on the ground didn't make a sound, his raven-black hair falling around him, shielding his face as effectively as the wild grass all around his head.

"Fine, you win." Yan Yujin sat down beside him, absently plucking a stand of grass and sticking it into his mouth. "Haven't you always given off an air of generosity and magnanimity since you were a child? Who doesn't know that the Young Master Xiao is broad-minded and gentle, a rare, modest gentleman? What's this tantrum about, then? Brother Su didn't say much; what's got you so upset?"

Xiao Jingrui flipped over angrily, his face drawn tightly, eyes fixed straight up at the sky.

"So you've tanned your back, and now you're tanning your belly?" Yan Yujin sprawled down beside him, laughing, and tickled his ear with a piece of grass. "Your socks and shoes must be soaked, right? Take them off and tan your feet too."

"Go away, stop bothering me!" Xiao Jingrui pushed his hand away.

Yan Yujin immediately raised an eyebrow. "Hey! Take a good look, it's me, I'm not your punching bag. You've been offended by some other friend, fine, but don't take it out on me. I've never had the habit of being someone's scapegoat!"

Xiao Jingrui turned over, sat up, and glared at him furiously. "What did you say?"

"Am I supposed to be scared when you glare at me?" Yan Yujin glared back, his voice rising. "You're angry because you got snubbed! Ever since Brother Su said to you, 'Jingrui, don't ask any more, this isn't any of your business', you started feeling uncomfortable in your heart, right?"

"I didn't..."

"Now that it's just me, you can stop pretending." Yan Yujin retorted. "And then, leaving the palace, he didn't want to take the carriage, but said he wanted to walk slowly by himself for a while, to think carefully about some things. You didn't see your expression then.... And then you ran after him, and he rejected you, right? He wasn't being polite, but really rejecting you, clearly saying he didn't want you to follow him, so how can you still not understand?"

"I understand!"

"If you understand, then why are you still angry? At that time, you sounded like such a child: 'Then go by yourself, I'm going to play polo.' What did you want him to say? Did you really expect him to say, 'Jingrui, don't be like that, I'm already ill, and you're going to abandon me to go play?' Come on, how old are you? Brother Su was right when he said you can do whatever you want to do, without telling him first."

That was only the truth; you didn't have to whirl around and leave in such a huff, you know?"

"But we're friends," Xiao Jingrui bit his lip. "Shouldn't friends care about each other?"

Yan Yujin said, frowning, "You still don't get it? Let me tell you, when Brother Su said that to you, he wasn't trying to reject your concern for him, but rather because he really, truly, wanted to walk back by himself! As for why he wanted to walk through the streets alone, I don't know. I was originally going to follow him to see, but you, dummy, turned and left, so I had no choice but to chase you over here."

"You mean...." Xiao Jingrui said dazedly, "Brother Su wanted to walk by himself not only for some time to think, but for some other reason as well?"

Yan Yujin laughed and looked at his friend. "Jingrui, you don't still believe that the reason Brother Su came to Jinling with us was to rest and recuperate, do you?"

"I..." Xiao Jingrui faltered a moment. "Of course I'm not that slow.... But he never seemed to be trying to hide anything from us on purpose, but rather just let everything happen naturally...."

"Brother Su entering the capital and getting sucked into this whole mess must not have been a coincidence. Everything he does has a purpose; it's just that we don't know what he's trying to do."

Xiao Jingrui's thick eyebrows furrowed, his forehead wrinkled, and he let out a long sigh, "I think I know...."

"You know?" Yan Yujin's eyes widened, and he abruptly dropped on top of Xiao Jingrui. "Let's hear it!"

"I found out from Xie Bi that the 'qilin prodigy' he mentioned before actually came from the Master of Langya Hall. And the reason both the Crown Prince and Prince Yu are falling over each other to recruit him also came from there." Xiao Jingrui shoved at the weight on top of him, couldn't budge it, and gave up. "I think, with Brother Su's abilities and the power of Jiangzuo Alliance, there's no way he only found out about this after he came to the capital...."

"Ng,<sup>40</sup>" Yan Yujin nodded. "Makes sense, continue."

"Since Brother Su knew all along that the Crown Prince and Prince Yu were interested in him, then even if he didn't come to the capital, trouble would still come

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<sup>40</sup> a sound of affirmation, pronounced kind of like "Hmm"

knocking at his door. And then, not only would he have to get involved, the whole Jiangzuo Alliance probably would as well.”

“So in order not to bring trouble to Lang province, this great chief decided to come to the capital personally to handle everything?” Yan Yujin shook his head and laughed. “That still makes sense, and it’s an answer someone like you would think of.”

“Of course I’m not that naive!” Xiao Jingrui smacked the head lying somewhere above him a little resentfully. “But Brother Su has been very passive in all of this! The power of the Crown Prince and Prince Yu is not something that can be countered by a jianghu<sup>41</sup> sect, not to mention Brother Su is an incredibly learned and resourceful strategist, well-deserving of the reputation of qilin prodigy. Even if he really came to the capital to choose a lord, there’s nothing wrong with that. What person in this world does not want to build a name for himself, to obtain glory and honour? Besides, you and I can both see how important his Jiangzuo Alliance is to him, and if he succeeds here, that would mean Jiangzuo Alliance would receive the support of the court, so this must count as one of his goals as well....”

“Then what are you going to do?” Yan Yujin watched him closely. “He is a jianghu man, but wants to dive into the fights of the court to make a name for himself. You are the son of a noble house, but want to stay far away from these palace politics. The two of you are running in opposite directions, so why do you care about him so much?”

“They’re two different things! I care about him because he is a person worth befriending, what does that have to do with whether he enters the court in the future?”

“But the path he has chosen isn’t one commonly picked by scholars.” Yan Yujin’s tone took on a certain coolness. “Jingrui, Brother Su is clearly planning to enter into the fight for the throne. Don’t you feel uneasy at all?”

Xiao Jingrui thought for a long while, then sighed quietly. “Yes, I am worried, what if the side he chooses should come to fail....”

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<sup>41</sup> Jianghu = the world of the martial arts fighters, sometimes translated as the ‘pugilist’ society (but I don’t like that word – it gives off the wrong vibe to me); it’s a whole different world or society made up of martial art fighters, kind of like the mafia (but more neutral), with its own ‘laws’ and rules of chivalry and brotherhood; it’s made up of different ‘sects’ with their own styles / traditions / history of martial artistry, and sometimes sects join together in alliances (like Jiangzuo Alliance under Mei Changsu); and in Chinese stories of this genre, it’s a common trope for the jianghu world to be completely separate from the political world, where those with power in the jianghu world are never interested in political power (and hence, never a threat to the throne), and with the Emperor never interfering with the wars and feuds of the jianghu sects.

“That’s not what I meant,” Yan Yujin cut him off immediately. “I may not care which side he chooses, but you? Aren’t you afraid the stance of the Xie household might be the opposite of the one he chooses?”

Xiao Jingrui had honestly never considered this aspect, and he was stunned for a long time, before finally saying, “That shouldn’t be a problem. Although Xie Bi is a bit biased towards Prince Yu, my father is still very neutral....”

“Your father can’t remain neutral forever!” Yan Yujin asserted. “Your father is not like my father. Although my father has the status of a marquis, his position barely has any obligations. But your father is the head of the military officials, the pillar of the court. Recruiting ministers to their side has always been the most important concern of the members of the royal family; how could he so easily remain out of these matters?”

“But...but...” Xiao Jingrui considered carefully and thought of the worst outcome,<sup>42</sup> suddenly feeling goosebumps rising over his arms and cold sweat breaking out over his body.

“Hey, hey,” Yan Yujin hurriedly slapped his pale cheeks. “It’s a fifty-fifty chance, that’s not too bad, you don’t need to scare yourself like this so early, do you?”

Xiao Jingrui pushed his friend aside, his face solemn. “That’s it, I’m going to go convince Brother Su, these palace waters are really too murky, he would do better not to enter them....”

“Psh, you said yourself he is the passive one in all of this. Even if he promised you not to get involved, have the Crown Prince and Prince Yu promised?” Yan Yujin brushed off the bits of grass in his hands, and sat up, crossing his legs. “Jingrui, to tell you the truth, the situation has long progressed beyond something that can be influenced by you or me. I was only reminding you, in the future, it’s hard to say whether he will be a friend or an enemy, so don’t become too attached to him now.”

Xiao Jingrui stood stiffly, shaken because he didn’t understand why Yujin had said such things, or perhaps because he had understood the deeper meaning behind his words. He stared dazedly at Yan Yujin for a long time, not saying a word.

“Ai,” the rarely-serious son of the Imperial Uncle<sup>43</sup> showed a solemn expression now, his hands grasping Xiao Jingrui’s shoulders heavily as he said quietly, “You should understand, Brother Su is not like us. We simply cannot fathom how deep, how

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<sup>42</sup> I think it means, if Xiao Jingrui and MCS end up on opposite sides of the fight (i.e. the ‘worst outcome’, according to Jingrui lol)

<sup>43</sup> Marquis Yan (brother of the Empress, therefore ‘imperial uncle’ to all the sons of the Emperor)

hard his heart is, and what kinds of thoughts are held within. You are different – your heart is too warm, too soft, too practical. So listen to me, keep a bit of a distance and remain casual acquaintances, alright? He is no longer the Brother Su you brought into the capital, the one you promised to look after while he recovered his health. I can guarantee that his mind has not the slightest space left in it to consider you now, and if you continue to warmly treat him as your good friend like you did in the past, then, in the future, the person who will come to grief, the one who will be hurt, will be you, do you understand?”

“Yujin...”

“I am only telling you this as your friend. From now on, you must tell yourself, Su Zhe is just a stranger you met by chance, a friend without any deep connections to you, with whom you came to the capital, and who is now a guest in your home, and that’s it. You cannot keep one-sidedly treating him as an intimate soulmate.<sup>44</sup> How much he cares for you, I don’t know; I only know that in his eyes, you cannot be the same kind of soulmate to him. To be blunt, Brother Su is a person of unfathomable depths, and even if we gained unlimited grandeur or renown, neither you nor I would have the right to become his confidant.”

Xiao Jingrui had almost never seen Yan Yujin speak to him with such seriousness, and couldn’t help being shaken. He lowered his head and thought for a long while, and found nothing wrong in his words. But could the subtle feelings and relationships between people really be so clearly analyzed and explained in a few sentences?

“Alright, I’m done speaking, take your time thinking then.” Yan Yujin jumped up and pulled Xiao Jingrui up by his arm, letting a carefree smile spread over his face again. “Come with me to Miaoyin House<sup>45</sup> to listen to music! I haven’t been in so long, Miss Gongyu must be missing me, and I heard Mister Shisan has composed a new song. And then tonight, we can take a boat to look at the lights along the river, what do you say?”

“What can I say?” Xiao Jingrui gave him a look. “The Young Master orders me to come, dare I refuse?”

“Haha, that’s more like it. I guess you’re not cold even though you’re still wet all over. Come on, you can change when we get to Miaoyin House....”

“Yujin...”

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<sup>44</sup> I’ve never known how to translate this term, 知己. Literally, it means ‘know oneself’, so it refers to the kind of friend who really knows you, the most intimate of friends, a ‘best friend’. (It’s not exactly ‘soulmate’, but there’s no better English term that I can think of.)

<sup>45</sup> literally “miracle/wonderful music house”

“Hm?”

“I think I’ll go home to change...”

“Please, your home is in the middle of the city, Miaoyin House is by the west gate, can’t you tell which is nearer?”

Xiao Jingrui’s gaze fell to the ground as he mumbled, “I want to go back first to see...Brother Su was walking alone...to see if he has arrived home...”

Yan Yujin crossed his arms, his expression exceedingly helpless.

“When I turned around to leave, did you see what his reaction was like?”

“There was no reaction.” Yan Yujin said, looking displeased. “He was really in deep thought at that time, and didn’t even notice you were angry, but just kept walking slowly further and further away.”

“You know his old illness flared up after he drank that cup of wine, and he was walking slowly because he wasn’t feeling well. Even just as a casual friend, as you said, one should still care about this. What if he fainted somewhere? The capital is not Lang province, and Fei Liu didn’t go with him, and he is not familiar with the people or the surroundings here...”

“Fine, fine,” Yan Yujin raised his arms in defeat. “You make it sound like I’m really heartless. So according to you, we’ll look for him, and if we find him unconscious somewhere, we’ll first take him home and then go listen to music, is that what you mean?”

“No matter what I say, why do the words always come out so awkward when you repeat them?”

“Is it my words that are awkward or you?” Yan Yujin made a dismissive noise. “What kind of person is this chief of Jiangzuo Alliance? Since his true purpose in coming to Jinling wasn’t to recover his health, then he certainly could not have only brought a Fei Liu with him. I don’t know anything else, but I bet even just the four jianghu experts who escorted us into the capital haven’t left.”

“I just want to have a look, just in case...”

“I already said we’ll do it your way, what are you being so long-winded for?” Yan Yujin turned and pulled their horses over, then tossed Xiao Jingrui his reins, and , holding onto his own saddle, put his left leg into the stirrup and was just pushing off with his right when he suddenly let out an “Aiya!”

“What is it?” Xiao Jingrui turned his head.



“I slipped on this rock.” Yan Yujin pushed the rock aside with his foot, and then sent it flying with a kick.

The rock landed in a depressed area in the field, and as the grass was thick, it didn’t make much noise as it landed. Instead, the rustling sounds of the grass nearby were heard clearly.

“Who’s there eavesdropping?” Yan Yujin’s brow furrowed as he shouted in a clear voice.

“I arrived before you, so who’s eavesdropping on whom?” A serene voice drifted over. “I already did my best not to disturb you, but when a rock falls out of the sky, you can’t blame me for dodging, can you?”

Following these clear words, a person stood up slowly before the eyes of the two noble sons. He wore simple, pale-coloured robes, his figure tall and thin, his hair half tied back, his eyes hidden with an unreadable expression. Although his face was clearly young, there was a streak of white near his forehead amidst the sea of black, giving him a soft, gentle air.

## CHAPTER 33

### *Xuanjing Officer*

After seeing the person who had appeared before them clearly, Yan Yujin and Xiao Jingrui exchanged a glance, then stepped backwards at the same time and huddled together, discussing in low voices. “Which one is it?”

“I think it’s gege...”

“But just in case...what if it’s jiejie?”

“Jiejie has only just left, how could she return so quickly? Wouldn’t she have to investigate for a while...”

“You have a point, it was so far away...”

The person who had appeared watched them from afar, smiling, and said lightly, “Xiao Jin, I’ve let you two talk while staying this far away, without the slightest sign of pouncing on you, doesn’t that already tell you who I am?”

Yan Yujin’s eyes widened, he debated a moment longer, then finally made up his mind, and a huge smile spread over his face as he bounded over joyfully and threw his arms around the person’s neck, exclaiming, “Xia Qiu gege, you’re back! Was Donghai any fun?”

A wicked grin spread across the person’s face as she slowly raised her arms and trapped Yan Yujin within her embrace.

Xiao Jingrui felt a trembling cold spread from his head to his toes, as the hairs on his back stood up, and he involuntarily backed up a few steps, shouting loudly, “Yujin, run! It’s Xia Dong jiejie!”

But his warning came too late. Yan Yujin’s whole body stiffened and he was about to struggle when his two arms were neatly pinned and twisted behind his back by one of Xia Dong’s hands, and as he gazed helplessly, she lifted her other hand with infinite slowness and rested it on his cheek, caressing gently.

“Jingrui...” Yan Yujin said in a trembling voice. “Don’t you have any ties of brotherhood, hurry and come rescue me...”

“Rescue you?” Xia Dong’s gaze swept away and she asked in a gentle voice, “Xiao Rui, are you going to come rescue him?”

Xiao Jingrui’s head shook like a rattle-drum.<sup>46</sup>

“Xiao Jin, you asked me if Donghai was any fun? Too bad I wouldn’t know, because I’ve never been there.” Xia Dong’s fingers suddenly tightened as she pinched Yan Yujin’s cheek, leaving behind a red mark. Xiao Jingrui, watching, felt his own face twinge in pain. “Do you know where I went? I went to Bin Province, such a poor and desolate place, and for such a bothersome investigation, which required so much effort on my part.... Who brought me such a troublesome task, let me see...<sup>47</sup>.”

“Heeeelp...” Yan Yujin felt his cheek flare in pain, and wailed without the slightest bit of exaggeration, “I didn’t do it on purpose...who knew His Majesty would send you....”

“What’s the use in crying for help?” Xia Dong laughed. “Xia Qiu went to Donghai, Xia Chun went to bring his daughter-in-law to Qingjiang province, I’d like to see who’s going to come to your rescue. You disobedient boy, you bring back problems for me even when you go out to play? Do you think your Xia Dong jiejie is too idle? If I really had nothing else to do, I could still train the two of you, or have you forgotten the pain of the past now that you’re all grown up?”

Hearing the word ‘train’, the two noble sons suddenly felt weak in the knees.

There is a school of thought regarding the training of dogs that says, no matter how fierce or vicious the breed, the reason a dog never dares to fight its master is because, ever since it was very young, it is struck with a wooden stick each time it fights back, and because it was so small, it could never win. As the days went by, a knowledge took root in its mind: fighting against this person is useless, because it can never win. Even after it has grown much bigger and far stronger, and grown out viciously sharp teeth, every time it sees the person who trained it, it will immediately revert to being docile and submissive.

Back in the day, Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin had been two of those young dogs, and Xia Dong, naturally, had been their trainer.

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<sup>46</sup> google it. (They’re common kids’ toys in Chinese society; I had one as a kid.)

<sup>47</sup> Xia Dong went to Bin Province to investigate the land-grabbing case against the Duke of Qing, which was brought to court by a peasant couple whom Yujin, Jingrui, Xie Bi, and MCS met outside the capital, and whom Yujin kindly escorted to the palace back in Chapter 1 (hence Xia Dong’s ire directed at him lol)

In the history of Da Liang, there had long been an investigations institution that answered directly to the Emperor – the Xuanjing Bureau. Its members were known as Xuanjing Officers, and its craft was passed down from master to apprentice, emphasizing an extremely high degree of loyalty to the monarch, and operating directly by imperial decree to investigate the most important, most secretive cases. The current head of the Xuanjing Bureau, Xia Jiang, had trained three apprentices: Xia Qiu and Xia Dong, who were twin siblings, and Xia Chun,<sup>48</sup> who was not related to them by blood. The three had completely different temperaments, but like the previous members of their bureau, had become very close. Originally, the responsibilities of the Xuanjing Bureau did not include ‘dog training’, but seventeen years ago, the Emperor had suddenly felt that the noble sons were pampered and spoiled, and not fit to bring prosperity to his kingdom, and so he had opened a corner of the palace called the Shuren Courtyard and ordered all male children aged five to eleven of third-rank officials or higher to be sent there for physical training by the Xuanjing officers. Xia Chun and Xia Qiu were relatively gentler, and although strict in their training, would at least consider the tolerance level of the young darlings. But the twenty-year-old Xia Dong, then newly made officer and brimming with eagerness to serve the royal family, took the training she had received from her own master and implemented it directly into the training of these tender young puppies, and every day, loud wailing and miserable shrieks were heard from Shuren Courtyard. The poor Yan Yujin had just turned five, a little pearl of a boy in his powdered make up, and though he was originally a proud, flamboyant little sapling, after a few days of training, he had been transformed into a shaking little leaf that spontaneously curled up as if struck by frost whenever he so much as caught a glimpse of Xia Dong jiejie.

“Xia...Xia Dong jiejie...” Because the period of Xiao Jingrui’s suffering had been relatively short, the scars of the past were lighter on him than on Yan Yujin, and he screwed up his courage and said, “Yujin really didn’t do it on purpose, we met the accusers on the road, and we couldn’t just stand by and do nothing....”

Xia Dong made a dismissive sound, the hand wrapped around Yan Yujin’s wrist not lessening in strength, but instead pulling him even closer. In fact, based on outward appearance alone, although Xia Dong was not born with particularly feminine features, she was nonetheless very beautiful, and, because of the rigorous training of her inner strength, appeared significantly younger than her true age. But to Yan Yujin, whose mind was filled only with painful memories, this beautiful face seemed like the mask of the devil, and, as it inched closer and closer to him, this son of the Imperial Uncle only felt his scalp growing numb, and almost let out a sharp yelp.

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<sup>48</sup> Xia Jiang = ‘summer river’; Xia Dong = ‘summer winter’; Xia Qiu = ‘summer autumn’; Xia Chun = ‘summer spring’.....and now please go read the amazing Legend of Xia Xia (but you do need a bit of Chinese to be able to read it...argh maybe I should translate this too...someday)

“Xiao Jin, don’t say anything, help me walk slowly to the road....” The soft words drifted into his ear, and suddenly the body leaning on his grew heavy, and the metallic smell of blood floated into his nose. Yan Yujin’s heart sank, but he quickly straightened his expression, inconspicuously shifting his stance to support Xia Dong, who was beginning to sway unsteadily, and continued to speak in a pleading tone, “Xia Dong jiejie, don’t be angry, once jiejie has returned to the capital and completed her task, you can punish me however you like.” As he spoke, he grasped Xia Dong’s elbow with one hand and turned, throwing Xiao Jingrui a meaningful look.

Xiao Jingrui stared back, and because he’d had some training in the jianghu world, immediately realized something was wrong, and though he kept his original position and expression, he quickly swept a gaze left and right, and then stilled his breath to sense his surroundings, and indeed felt a wave of murderous energy wafting over.

“You little rascal, you’ve always had a sweet tongue,” Xia Dong smiled, suddenly revealing a girlish charm, and continued, “You think you can summon the troops to your rescue? Don’t think you can escape from my grasp. Walk with me!”

“Alright, alright, alright, when have I ever dared to disobey Xia Dong jiejie?” Yan Yujin laughed, then asked in a low voice, “Are you alright? Can you ride?”

Xia Dong smilingly smacked him over the head, and murmured out of the corner of her mouth, “Keep walking like this. As long as I don’t fall over, they won’t dare come out into the open.”

By this time, Xiao Jingrui had also drawn close with the horses, his expression full of concern, but not daring to speak aloud.

“Don’t worry, at this distance, they won’t hear us if we’re quiet.” Xia Dong continued to speak in a low tone. “They don’t want me to enter the city, so maybe they’ll bet everything on one attack....You two be prepared too. There are people in the river, and in the forest on the far shore....”

The two readied their energies; one, still pretending to have his arm trapped, walked in front, supporting Xia Dong, and the other walked behind them with the horses, purposefully falling behind to guard their backs. As the three moved slowly towards the direction of the road, from a distance, it looked as if they were laughing and teasing, without the slightest hint of nervousness.

But Xia Dong’s breathing became more and more erratic, her steps heavier and heavier, betraying the deteriorating situation, and Xiao Jingrui, seeing the bloody footprints left by the two in front, knew in his heart that the situation was not good, and could only purposefully lead the horses over the bloody tracks in the hopes that they would not be noticed by the assassins behind them.

But the tracking abilities of trained assassins are naturally unusually high, and despite the fact that the three had not made any mistakes, a whistle suddenly sounded from the forest across the brook, and with a rustling of leaves, a number of grey silhouettes flew out from the trees. At the same time, the calm surface of the lake suddenly erupted, and about ten assassins dressed in silver water-armor flew from its depths, splitting waves before them with their hands. The two groups met and fanned out, then charged straight for the three travellers.

Without any words or speech, the vicious battle had begun. The assassins' attacks were not elegant or pretty, but effective enough in their simplicity; charge, thrust, hack, chop – each action was neat, and only designed for the purpose of ending a life. Even though Xiao Jingrui had some experience in face-to-face battles from his travels in the jianghu world, he was overwhelmed by the sudden onset of murderous energy, and his actions became sluggish, and as for Yan Yujin, who had only ever experienced fights in competitions, his reaction was even worse. In addition, the two did not have weapons at hand, and faced with the ferocious attacks of numerous assassins empty-handed, the situation was deteriorating quickly. If their opponents had not been so clearly targeting Xia Dong, they might have quickly met their ends.

In comparison, Xia Dong had much more experience as a Xuanjing officer, and she did not give an inch, a shining dagger appearing suddenly in her hands as she met the assassins stroke for stroke, matching their simplicity and speed, making it difficult to for her attackers to draw near. But unfortunately, she had already been wounded, and as time went on, her strength began to falter, and after fending off a few fierce strokes, her legs grew weak, and she swayed before falling to the ground, and though she was still fighting fiercely, her life was clearly in jeopardy.

Fortunately, after the initial attack, Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin had steadied considerably. They knew that any assassin that dared to attack a Xuanjing officer would be unlikely to consider their own noble ranks, and anyway they might not even be aware of their identities, and so as one, they had increased their concentration, and their attacks were becoming much smoother. One was a disciple of Tianquan Manor,<sup>49</sup> and the other was trained in the Qianmen Method,<sup>50</sup> and their martial arts were certainly ranked top amongst the younger generation. In addition, they were faced with a fight to the death, and aside from considering themselves, they naturally also wanted to save their friends, and so they fought with all their strength, holding nothing back. After they had gotten a firm foothold, the two stood guard in front of Xia Dong, shoulder to shoulder, fighting in synchrony, and although they couldn't avoid

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<sup>49</sup> Tianquan Manor (translates to “Heaven Spring Manor”) is one of the jianghu sects, with its own style of martial artistry. Xiao Jingrui learned this style of martial arts under his father from the Zhuo side, Zhuo Dingfeng, who is the current chief of Tianquan Manor, and who is ranked fourth on the Langya List of Martial Arts Experts.

<sup>50</sup> another jianghu sect, I guess; translates to ‘The Way of Heaven’s Gate’

receiving a few cuts and blows, they managed to slowly turn the situation around, finally even managing to obtain two daggers.

Tianquan Manor was famed in the jianghu world for its swordsmanship, the height of its abilities in this aspect almost reaching the heavens. Xiao Jingrui was wielding his dagger like a sword, and although it wasn't very natural, his fighting power had already increased drastically. Add to that Yan Yujin's dazzling movements and Xia Dong's strange moves, and the situation had changed in the blink of an eye, with the two sides suddenly evenly matched.

The assassins were used to carrying out their shady missions in one quick stroke, and to have fallen into this lengthy fight was no laughing matter, not to mention that this was already the outskirts of the city, and the longer the fight went on, the greater the risk of being come across by other travellers. And so, a whistle sounded in the thick forest again, urgent and short, and the three felt the focus of the fight shift, now turning to the masters Xiao and Yan. Xia Dong seized the chance to rest briefly and backed up a few steps away from the fight, catching her breath and trying to stop the bleeding from her wounds.

Although the pressure had increased and they had lost Xia Dong's support, Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin's synchronous attacks had reached a new level, and their confidence was rising. Their daggers flashed steadily, and already a few of the assassins had retreated away staggering, but their enemies were numerous, and more immediately rushed up to take their places.

At this point, the whistle sounded again, this time with a low ending note, and five silver-robed assassins rose up in a formation designed for a suicidal attack. At the same time, the leader of the attack showed himself, feet striking against the water as he flew across the surface of the river, swiftly arriving at the scene of the fight, and led all of the remaining assassins, including those wounded on the ground, into formation surrounding the masters Xiao and Yan, and then diving around them straight for Xia Dong.

"Jiejie, look out!" Yan Yujin screamed, backing up at lightning speed with Xiao Jingrui, fighting to reach Xia Dong's side before the enemy. After suffering such a close attack, how could they give up so easily? Their eyes widened as the grey figures flew past them, trailing icy wind, and flying cruelly straight for Xia Dong.

"Xia Dong jiejie..." Hearing the two's desperate cries, Xia Dong, who had long-since been exhausted and weakened, suddenly lifted her head, a cold light flashing in her eyes, and turned her body in a spin, whirling like a tornado, disappearing into a blur of colour, and the first few figures to reach her were sent flying.

This sudden massive change not only left the two noble sons shocked, even the assassins looked a bit dazed. But as long as everything had not yet ended, Xia Dong's fierce attack did not slow for a moment, but cut through the assassins like a knife,

striking them aside with one blow, and, amidst the lightning-fast strikes of her attacks, she suddenly grabbed one of the assassins by the chest and triumphantly twisted his mouth, dislocating his jaw, then smoothly flipped him onto the ground and held him there with one foot.

The assassins were growing flustered, and seeing that their mission would be impossible to complete, backed up quickly and fled across the brook to the safety of the forest. The masters Xiao and Yan weren't inclined to pursue, and only chased them to the edge of the river before stopping and turning around to stare at Xia Dong.

The beautiful lady officer of the Xuanjing Bureau turned her face to the sky and laughed loudly, then poked her captive with one foot, shook out the long hair over her shoulders, cast a fluid glance around with a flamboyant expression, and then said in a loud, clear voice, "Thank you both for showing up to help, or I wouldn't have been able to capture this coward of a leader alive.... His martial arts aren't much, but his dodging skills are really not bad, he wouldn't come near me on the road at all, and made himself pretty hard to catch.... Hahaha...."



## CHAPTER 34

### *Assassin*

There are some people in this world who, no matter what they do, can't really be argued with. To Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin, Xia Dong was one such person. So, although both had unhappy expressions on their faces, neither dared to actually voice a single word of protest.

"Come on, let's see where you've hidden the poison for your suicide." Xia Dong bent down, pulled the leader of the assassins up, and forcefully grabbed his dislocated jaw, causing both of his legs to jump in pain, his face growing pale as wax. She clicked her tongue. "So it's really still hidden in the teeth, huh? What a lack of creativity, can't you find a new place?"

Although she spoke casually, the masters Xiao and Yan, who were listening nearby, couldn't help shuddering and exchanging a glance.

An assassin who would commit suicide if he failed was among those ranked highest in his field, and were not only difficult to find, but also exceedingly expensive. What kind of result had Xia Dong's investigations in Bin province achieved, to have provoked a reaction of this degree?

"There's no point asking you questions like this, we'll have to take out the poison pouch first." Xia Dong ignored the paling faces of the two nearby and considered how to extract the poison pouch from the teeth of the assassin so she could relocate his jaw for the interrogation. Women were usually inclined towards cleanliness, and though oft-mistaken for a handsome gentleman, Xia Dong was no exception. She gripped his jaw and examined it for a long time, but couldn't think of any way to extract the poison pouch without putting her fingers inside, and, finally growing impatient, delivered a hard punch with her fist against his cheek. With a smothered groan, the assassin spewed forth a spray of fresh blood along with a few teeth and a tiny pouch.

Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin exchanged another glance, their faces turning green. She was still a devil behind that pretty face then, every bit as vicious and merciless as she had been in those years....

Xia Dong nonchalantly wiped the back of her hand on her robes, then relocated the assassin's jaw with a loud crack. She didn't hurriedly start asking questions, but instead took his wrist and twisted hard, immediately breaking the bone, and making him scream out in pain until he could only take loud gasping breaths, like a dying fish, his body spasming uncontrollably, as he turned a poisonous glare on her.

"Still dare look at me like that?" Xia Dong let out a cold laugh, then grabbed his other wrist, squeezing up along his arm as the sounds of breaking bones filled the air, until his arm was limp as clay. The assassin, yelling in pain, fainted, and then was quickly awakened again by the intense pain.

"Xia Dong jiejie!" Although he knew this was an assassin who would not have so much as blinked before murdering them, Xiao Jingrui still couldn't stand it. "Wait, stop, this is too.... And anyway, don't you need to ask him questions? If you torture him to death, that won't do you any good...."

"You're right, I'd almost forgotten." Xia Dong pulled the assassin's head up by the scalp and stared him straight in the eye, her voice dripping with ice, "I prefer beating prisoners up to asking questions. So don't answer me too happily, and deprive me of the chance to use a few of my punishments...."

"Xia Dong jiejie...." Xiao Jingrui was about to continue when he was pulled to one side by Yan Yujin, who urged, "Don't get involved, Xuanjing officers have their own way of doing things, we won't be able to intervene."

"Is this kind of questioning under torture really effective?"

"He's a suicidal assassin, he might not say anything if she isn't ruthless enough. If you're not used to it, then don't look. Not everything on this earth can be done with warmth and kindness, with politeness and modesty." Yan Yujin glanced back, then sighed. "It looks like the case with the Duke of Qing isn't so simple. I wonder how much trouble it's going to cause."

"I find it strange," Xiao Jingrui said, frowning. "Everyone knows it's a bad idea to get on the wrong side of the Xuanjing Bureau. Why bother putting so much effort into attacking Xia Dong jie when they could have stopped the accusers from entering the capital? If they had sent assassins of this capacity to kill Grandfather and Grandmother Hu,<sup>51</sup> they wouldn't have been able to escape into Jiangzuo territory.... Now the case has already been raised, and Xuanjing officers have already received the secret imperial order to start investigating, isn't it much more difficult to try to silence them now?"

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<sup>51</sup> here, grandfather and grandmother are used as titles of respect, not to indicate familial relations; he is referring to the couple they met on the road before they entered the capital with MCS, who were bringing an accusation of 'land seizing' against the Duke of Qing's relatives, and whom Yan Yujin escorted into the capital

“Perhaps the Duke of Qing didn’t know about it in the beginning.” Yan Yujin thought it over. “Maybe the people over in Bin province figured they could handle it themselves, and didn’t send word over, not expecting us to meet the accusers and help them arrive safely into the capital. And only then did those implicated in the case start to get scared....”

Xiao Jingrui shook his head. “If the Duke of Qing didn’t know all the details in the beginning, then at worst, it would only have been a crime of conniving with his relatives, so why would it have come to sending assassins after a Xuanjing officer?”

“Maybe Xia Dong jie found out something else in her investigations in Bin province, maybe these assassins have nothing to do with the Duke of Qing, maybe she made some enemies with that temper of hers,” Yan Yujin raised an eyebrow. “The possibilities are endless. I don’t like mulling over things like this, it’s too bothersome. Let Xia Dong jie do the worrying for herself. Once she’s investigated thoroughly, we can ask her directly, and avoid standing here letting our imaginations run wild.”

“Oh!” Xiao Jingrui suddenly cried out in fear, and Yan Yujin jumped in fright, following his gaze to see Xia Dong dropping the limp body of the assassin onto the ground as if she were throwing down a dead dog, then draw out a silk handkerchief and wipe her hands, her crescent eyebrows furrowed.

“What is it?” Yan Yujin asked.

Xiao Jingrui looked solemn, and slowly ground out two words: “He’s dead.”

“Xiao Rui’s eyesight is pretty good,” Xia Dong threw them a glance. “He is dead indeed. It’s really too bad, wasting all my efforts to capture him. I didn’t know there was more poison hidden under the corner of his lip. He stretched out his tongue, touched it, and died. The strange and nauseating part is, he wasn’t afraid he would touch it accidentally when he wasn’t ready to die....”

“Then did you find out anything?” Yan Yujin stepped closer, glanced at the swollen, green face of the corpse, and hurriedly looked away. “He was the leader, so he must know something.”

“He only said four words,” Xia Dong spoke impassively. “‘It is not over’.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means this hasn’t ended.” Xia Dong’s leg flew up as she kicked the corpse and swore, “Damn it, as if I needed for him to tell me that! They’ve provoked me this far, I wouldn’t let it be over even if they wanted it to be over!”

“Xia Dong jiejie....” Yan Yujin wiped at the cold sweat on his forehead. “You’re a lady, you shouldn’t swear, it’s so inelegant....”

“Oh?” Xia Dong’s voice was sweet as she turned a tender smile towards him, charm lacing the corners of her eyes and mouth. “The young master Yan has grown up and knows what a lady is. Come here and tell jiejie, how should a lady speak to you?”

Yan Yujin stumbled backwards and hid behind Xiao Jingrui, deeply regretting his quick tongue. “Nothing, nothing, our Xia Dong jiejie is beautiful and clever, the most extraordinary lady in Da Liang.”

Xia Dong laughed and said, “How could I be the most extraordinary? But I hear the most extraordinary lady is finally taking a husband? How did that go, has she found one yet?”

Yan Yujin was astonished, and turning to look at Xiao Jingrui, saw that he was equally stunned.

Actually, since leaving Shuren Courtyard, the two had not often had the chance to meet Xia Dong, and so didn’t know how she felt towards Princess Nihuang. But no matter what, Nihuang was a princess, known for her noble behaviour and unsullied morals, and Xia Dong, as a Xuanjing officer, served under the court, so it wasn’t proper for her to speak so teasingly of the Princess.

“What, Xia Dong jie doesn’t like Princess Nihuang?” Xiao Jingrui couldn’t help asking.

“Do I have the right to like or dislike?” Xia Dong’s tone had suddenly grown hard, and somehow, there was a sense of grief in her voice. “She is a remarkable woman, and should have married long ago. I told her ten years ago when I was helping out in her camp, that as soon as she married someone, I would consider her a good friend.”

The more they heard, the more confused they were, and they couldn’t understand what kind of attitude Xia Dong bore towards Princess Nihuang. After being stunned for a long time, Yan Yujin asked quietly, “Xia Dong jie’s meaning is that, as long as the Princess doesn’t marry, you won’t see her as a good friend?”

“That’s right.”

“But why? Unless the friendship between women depend on whether or not they are married?”

Xia Dong's gaze was like ice as she looked at them coldly, saying, "You are too young. There are many things you do not know about. Since it's nothing to do with you, don't ask any further."

"We're too young?" Yan Yujin cried out. "How much older is the Princess compared to us?"

"Everything can change in the blink of an eye, and sometimes, a year can become a lifetime." Xia Dong looked forward steadily, her face a little pale, a few strands of hair drifting around her neck, and though her expression had not changed, her whole person suddenly seemed weaker. "She herself is actually not too clear about the events of that year, but she was involved in the events, and so cannot remain free from them. But you two are different...you are complete outsiders. The events of the past are like a mountain buried deep in thick snow, and those who had nothing to do with it would find it very difficult to enter. Why must you keep trying to find out more just to satisfy your curiosity?"

The masters Xiao and Yan looked at each other, still not comprehending, but as they had already been told to stop asking, they didn't continue pressing the matter. Besides, the person before them was the lady devil of the Shuren Courtyard, so they wouldn't have dared to keep pushing anyway.

"You still haven't answered me, what kind of husband has the Princess chosen?" Xia Dong shook her head and the glaring white patch of hair on her forehead disappeared under thick black strands, as if she had shaken aside the memories that had risen up a moment ago. "Such a large competition, there must have been some good candidates chosen, right?"

"Nothing has been decided yet, the written test is tomorrow." Yan Yujin sighed. "But there's still the one-on-one martial arts competition with Princess Nihuang, and if you lose that, then there's no hope. I think none of those chosen can compete against her, and she doesn't seem to be especially interested in any one of them, so I guess she isn't planning to marry this time."

The corner of Xia Dong's mouth lifted in a smile. "You look a bit disappointed."

"Of course I am." Yan Yujin frowned. "What's wrong with me, that she didn't even give me a moment of serious consideration?"

"There's nothing wrong with you," Xia Dong didn't tease him for once. "But to Nihuang, you are a bit young. She is the sole commander of her army, so she would probably only consider those more mature than herself."

Yan Yujin let out an exaggerated sigh, and said mournfully, "I wasn't born yet when the Princess was born, and when I was born, the Princess has already grown old...."

“Hey,” Xiao Jingrui didn’t know whether to laugh or cry as he kicked him. “Stop talking nonsense. Who are you calling old?”

“Ah ah ah,” Yan Yujin hurriedly covered his mouth. “I misspoke, I misspoke, I should be beaten. But you understand what I mean, I’m only mourning the fact that I wasn’t born a few years earlier.... If I was Brother Su’s age, then the Princess wouldn’t keep treating me like her little brother....”

“Don’t drag Brother Su into this,” Xiao Jingrui glared at him. “How can the difference in Brother Su’s maturity and steadiness compared to yours be measured in years alone?”

“Yes, yes, no one can compare to Brother Su in your eyes. But what he thinks about the Princess, and whether the Princess has any feelings towards him besides admiration, I can’t tell....” Yan Yujin was going to take the chance to exclaim over what had happened in Wuying Hall today, but suddenly remembering that Xia Dong was an officer of the Xuanjing Bureau, and that the matter involved different parties in the palace, and that Mei Changsu had refused to explain more about the matter, only saying that news would certainly be carried out tomorrow for everyone to hear, he thought there was some mysterious element involved, and that it would be better not to say anything at all.

“Don’t indulge in foolish thoughts.” In the end, Xiao Jingrui was still treating Mei Changsu with the love and respect of a younger brother to an older, and he refused to let anyone talk about him behind his back; plus, he was worried that, in his merry chatter, Yan Yujin might let slip the events that had taken place after the Emperor had left and thus bring needless trouble to Mei Changsu, and so he immediately interrupted him and said, “Xia Dong jie has just returned, why don’t you talk about something serious and tell her about the ten finalists?”

“I’m not interested in these finalists,” Xia Dong said indifferently. “But this Brother Su is rather interesting. I heard you two discussing him over and over when I was lying in the grass just now; he seems quite a character. What, so is he one of those with an ounce of talent who came into the capital brimming with ambition, ready to chase after fame and glory?”

“Brother Su isn’t like that!” Xiao Jingrui was extremely unhappy. “Xia Dong jie doesn’t know him, how can you judge him?”

“It looks like you respect him deeply.” Xia Dong’s expression grew cool. “Don’t know him, huh? Then I will go and get to know him. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu are fighting over him, his worth must be placed even higher than Princess Nihuang’s. With someone like him in the capital, how could a Xuanjing Officer such as I not go and get to know him?”

Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin exchanged a few nervous glances, communicated quickly with their eyes, and finally it was the son of the Imperial Uncle who stepped forward and said seriously, “What Xia Dong jie has mentioned, we also need to explain. What you heard just now was largely our own speculation, and some of it was unhappy venting due to disputes between friends. Brother Su is our friend, and has not had any errant behaviour since he entered the capital. We ask Xia Dong jie to please not hold any bias towards him as a result of our careless words....”

“Don’t worry,” Xia Dong looked at the serious expressions of the two young people before her, and couldn’t help smiling. “Naturally I will first investigate the matter. We will not bring only winds and shadows of suspicion before the Emperor, or do you take us Xuanjing Officers for gossips?”

Of course, this answer was not satisfying, but if they kept protesting, it might only increase Xia Dong’s interest towards Mei Changsu, and in any case, she had heard both what she should have and what she should not have, and they had only themselves to blame for not being more alert, and couldn’t blame the listener for drawing her own conclusions.

“Looks like we won’t be having any more unexpected visitors today.” Xia Dong had seen the two’s expression, but acted as if she had not noticed, casually straightening her robes and saying, “Let’s enter the city together. Give me xiao Yan’s<sup>52</sup> horse, you two can ride xiao Rui’s horse.”

“Ah,” Yan Yujin grumbled, “The two of us men on one horse....”

“You can come over and ride with me,” Xia Dong laughed lightly. “Who’s coming?”

The two paled and shook their heads furiously.

“Then I’m afraid I’ll have to trouble you. Xiao Rui, hurry up and bring the horse over.”

Xiao Jingrui obediently led the horse, who was grazing with its head bent, over and handed her the reins, saying quietly, “Xia Dong jie, should we take care of your wound first? It looks like there’s some blood seeping out.”

“In the end, you’re the considerate, attentive one.” Xia Dong smiled slightly. “No matter, we can take care of it after we enter the city.”

“Xia Dong jie really got hurt?” Yan Yujin concernedly stuck his head over. “Where?”

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<sup>52</sup> another way of referring to Yan Yujin, like ‘xiao Jin’

Xia Dong stretched out a hand and flicked his forehead. “Little brat, you only realized now? Those assassins weren’t amateurs, if I didn’t show them some real blood, how could we have so easily gotten that cowardly assassin to show his face?”

Xiao Jingrui glanced over at the corpse and said frowning, “We’re not going to do anything about him?”

“A dead person who can no longer speak is like a broken knife that has been thrown away by its master. What is the use in picking it up?” Xia Dong’s voice was cold. “After we get back, we’ll let the capital guards send someone to bury him. He’d bother people if he’s just left here.”

“I guess that’s the only way. The body of an assassin must be clean, so they probably won’t be able to trace anything. Let’s go.” Yan Yujin vaulted onto the horse, holding onto the saddle, and when Xiao Jingrui had jumped up behind him, he cheerfully pulled on the reins, ignoring everything else.

“Hey, do you have no bones, leaning against me so comfortably?” Xiao Jingrui scolded him, smiling, not really minding much. The sun was setting to the west, and amidst the soft hoof-beats and long shadows, the three rode steadily towards the city gates of the capital.



## CHAPTER 35

### *Xia Dong*

As Mei Changsu had predicted, in the work of a day, the news of Noble Consort Yue's dismissal and the Crown Prince's confinement had spread like wildfire through the palace. Because the announcement had been made with overly vague language, only giving the reason for the punishment as "defied the Emperor, gave disrespectful service", all kinds of strange and creative guesses sprang up over the true reason for the edict, lending proof once again to the fathomless depths of the human imagination.

Some said that the Emperor had a new favourite amongst his imperial concubines, and she had murdered the noble consort; some said the noble consort had offended His Majesty with her constant meddling in the Crown Prince's palace responsibilities; some said the noble consort had been caught performing witchcraft in the Inner Palace by the Empress; some even said that the noble consort had recently adopted a young dog, who had yet to be trained, and had bitten the Emperor's honoured foot....

It was those who had the least idea of what had really happened who speculated the most wildly, whereas those insiders who had some idea of the truth kept quiet in fear, not a single one daring to say a word. Because Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin had witnessed Mei Changsu's arrangements in Wuying hall that day, they could guess that the matter involved Princess Nihuang, but were not clear about the exact details, and because they were both intelligent and tactful, neither tried to find out more.

That day's written test was not postponed or cancelled because of these events, but to both the contestants and the host, this great husband-choosing competition had become somewhat of a farce. Princess Nihuang's true thoughts and intentions were impossible to unravel. If one were to say that she had had no intention from the beginning to choose a husband in this way, then she would not have consented to have such a competition be hosted in her name. But if one were to say that her heart had truly been moved and she was hoping to find a husband from amongst this multitude of young heroes, then her cool attitude didn't betray any such intention. She had not showed any particular interest during either the earlier martial arts contests or after the ten finalists had been chosen, nor had she made any effort to get to know these finalists' characters, and their strengths and weaknesses, or even seemed to care much when others came to talk to her about them. Rather, it was others of the Yunnan Mu

household who had eagerly tracked down every last detail about the finalists, and found out both what they should have and what they should not have.

But to the contestants who had fought until this stage, they of course would not give up so easily, as maybe the Princess was only acting aloof, unwilling to outwardly show her preference, and until the last face-to-face fight, there was no way to know her true thoughts. So, although the number of spectators who had arrived to watch the written test were far fewer than before, most of the contestants themselves, aside from those like Xiao Jingrui whose aim was only to fill the numbers, approached the test very seriously.

Among the crowds, those who had arrived with the greatest hopes and would be leaving with the greatest disappointment were the Northern Yan delegation. They had come with the incredibly skilled martial artist Baili Qi, their pride and joy, who, out of all the finalists, had been the one with the greatest chance of beating the Princess. But who could have guessed that a sickly Mei Changsu would appear out of nowhere and completely defeat the outstanding fighter with who knew what kind of sorcery. Even the losing would not have been a problem, and would only really be losing a bit of face,<sup>53</sup> but for the fact that Baili Qi, for some unfathomable reason, had completely disappeared the second day after his defeat. The Northern Yan officials had searched the whole capital, but had been unable to find half a shadow of the warrior, and had become the laughingstock of Da Liang. They had not only failed to wed the Princess, they had even lost their own candidate, and one could only guess at the humiliation and suffering they would have to endure once they returned to their own country.

Of course, there must be some people who benefit from a competition like this. Some had never intended to really reach the peak to pluck the flower, but had merely used the contest as a platform to show their skills, and as a chance to be make themselves known. And the one who had expended the least effort but reaped the greatest reward was in fact this Su Zhe who had appeared out of nowhere.

Firstly, this mysterious, frail young man had a young bodyguard of incredible fighting skill, and so had gotten to know Commander Meng; then he had trained three children to defeat the first-place warrior of the martial arts contest by some strange methods, showing his own tremendous capabilities; and finally, he had overseen the Princess' written test with refined wisdom, earning His Majesty's praise for his radiant talent. Some said he had even been invited as a commoner by imperial order for a private meeting in the royal study, which had lasted almost four hours, and although no one knew what had been discussed, the rich gifts and the honoured title of 'Guest Minister' which had been bestowed afterwards showed without a doubt that this newcomer was not someone to be taken lightly, and some even claimed that this Su Zhe had certainly been the secretly determined match for the Princess all along, and that everyone else was really just there for show.

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<sup>53</sup> to 'lose face' is a common Chinese expression meaning to be shamed, or disrespected

Such gossip naturally raised waves in its wake. Although most of the contestants had not entered for the sake of the true prize, being used as cannon fodder is no laughing matter, and suddenly, the focus of the whole capital had fallen onto the shoulders of this young talent, and if he had not been residing in the heavily guarded residence of the Marquis of Ning, he might have already been skinned for a closer look. But be that as it may, a steady stream of noble sons with no inconsiderable rank arrived daily at the door of the residence, asking for a closer look at this Su Zhe.

“Has the last person been defeated by the princess today?” Mei Changsu pulled the fur cloak around his shoulders closer, and let out a long sigh. “Such an exciting competition finally ended with no result, it’s really a shame.”

Xiao Jingrui stood before him, brows furrowed. The longer he came to know this person, the more he felt as if he didn’t really understand him. You couldn’t say he was a bad friend, because he was warm and considerate and understood his friends well, but if you said he said he was a good friend, you also could not deny that there seemed to be a glass wall before him that none of his friendships could truly penetrate. When Xiao Jingrui saw him again, he was a little ashamed and embarrassed over his own little tantrum the other day, but he discovered that, just as Yan Yujin had said, Mei Changsu had seemingly not even noticed, without any trace of seeming upset by the previous events.

This kind of lukewarm attitude appeared in other situations as well, like in his behaviour towards the Princess. He had clearly taken the matter to heart, and had taken the initiative to give whatever help he could, to the extent that he had become the talk of the capital over the matter, but on closer examination, he truly did not seem to have any other motives, and his hope that the Princess would be able to find a husband from the competition seemed to be sincere, without the slightest hint of hypocrisy.

At this moment, a strange sound was heard from the other side of the footpath, as if someone had been thrown out roughly. Xiao Jingrui glanced over, shook his head, and sighed. The two were currently not in Snow Cottage, but in a small pavilion located not too far from the residence of the Marquis of Ning, which had several connecting corridors and was surrounded by trees and flowers. Because the number of visitors who had come with one excuse or another had grown drastically in the past few days, even if they were repeatedly turned down, they kept finding new reasons to come back, and so to avoid the trouble, Mei Changsu had simply found this conveniently-located pavilion, and, wrapped in his furs and with a warm brazier nearby, sat here reading idly. Those who wanted to come take a look were led over by Xie Bi, and once they had satisfied their curiosity from a distance, they quickly left, and in this way, they had gotten rid of many of the visitors. But there were always a few who weren’t content to simply gaze from afar, and they found ways to break through Xie Bi’s resistance to come closer for a good look. Unfortunately, Mei Changsu’s bodyguard, who could hold his own against Meng Zhi, was certainly not

just there for decoration, and catching and throwing out those who dared to trespass into the forbidden inner area was Fei Liu's favourite game of the past few days, so long as he remembered not to hurt anyone.

"I think that's all the visitors we're going to get for today. It's too cold here, Brother Su, let's go back to Snow Cottage." Xiao Jingrui watched as Mei Changsu once again drew the collar of his fur cloak closer, and couldn't help himself.

Mei Changsu slowly shook his head and smiled faintly, then spoke of an entirely different matter: "Jingrui, is that child, Tingsheng, doing well?"

"Oh?" Xiao Jingrui said in astonishment. "You only asked me to go see him this morning, how did you know I had already gone?"

"The bottoms of your shoes are covered in red sand, the kind that is only found in Prince Jing's training grounds. If you had not gone, where would you have picked that up?"

Because Mei Changsu often somehow managed to know things no one would expect him to know, Xiao Jingrui was not surprised that he would remember the colour of the sand of Prince Jing's training grounds, and he only lifted his foot for a look, saying, "I was going to tell you tonight, Tingsheng looks very well. There's a huge courtyard in the back of Prince Jing's residence, which has always been used to house the orphans of the soldiers who die in battle. Tingsheng is staying there, and has his own room, has masters to teach him, is eating well and sleeping well, and is not mistreated by anyone, so you don't need to worry."

A look of approval appeared in Mei Changsu's eyes. Prince Jing was intelligent indeed, to not give Tingsheng any special treatment but allow him to disappear into the crowd, and only train him personally in secret – this was indeed the best he could have done with the situation.

"Tingsheng is a child who remembers those who were kind to him, and he purposefully came to ask me about your health, and said that he hopes one day to return to your side to learn from you, and even gave me a gift to bring over to you...." Xiao Jingrui pulled out a small pouch and opened it, revealing an eagle carved from tree roots, and although the handiwork was rough, it was nonetheless an interesting trinket.

Mei Changsu took one glance at the object in Xiao Jingrui's hand and smiled. "He is very thoughtful. Fei Liu is over there on that old cedar, you can give it to him yourself."

"Eh?" Xiao Jingrui was once again surprised. "How did you know this gift was for Fei Liu?"

“You can tell at a glance,” Mei Changsu couldn’t help smiling. “If he had really wanted to give me something, he would not have chosen this. Fei Liu taught the children for two days, and Tingsheng came to like him very much. I often saw them sitting together carving toys just like this.”

“You really don’t miss a thing.” Xiao Jingrui looked at him and smiled. Now that he thought about it, since the day they had met, Mei Changsu’s attitude towards people and his methods of handling different situations had not changed much, and since he had not changed, then his own dissatisfaction was only a single-sided demand, so how could he put the blame for this on Mei Changsu? Yan Yujin was right, he had treated Brother Su as the kindest teacher and greatest friend in the whole world because Brother Su had always had this capacity and status. But on the other hand, if, by now, Xiao Jingrui still had not been able to achieve the same status in Brother Su’s heart, then this was his own problem, and complaining about the other person’s coldness was really too unfair.

After thinking it through, the turmoil in his heart calmed, and he took a deep breath, feeling his chest loosen. Brother Su’s eyes, which held a faint smile, were just as warm as always. Looking towards the old cedar tree that Mei Changsu had just pointed out, Xiao Jingrui wrapped up the little tree root eagle, turned, and strode over, lifting his head to say, “Fei Liu! Come down and see, what’s this?”

Amidst the depths of the old cedar, which had not seemed as if it had a single branch out of place, a handsome face suddenly appeared, and Fei Liu widened his eyes and peered down.

“Oh, it’s a gift from your little friend...” Xiao Jingrui raised his arm and waved it gently.

“What?”

“Come down and see, you’ll know if you come down.” Because Fei Liu had gotten used to him, Xiao Jingrui had started to become a gege to him, seeing past the stony exterior to the innocence of the young child beneath.

“What?” Fei Liu repeated, indignant over the gentle teasing.

“Not coming down? Then I’m taking it away....” Xiao Jingrui put the bag behind his back and made as if to leave.

In the next instant, Fei Liu’s feet struck the ground and he somersaulted over. Xiao Jingrui faltered for a step and then dodged, twisting his body as he flipped away in another direction. In the matter of practicing martial artistry, the skills themselves had to be taught, and expertise and inner strength developed through training, but the movements themselves – well, being chased by a master of masters was undoubtedly the best kind of practice, eliciting hidden potential one might not even know he had.

Mei Changsu watched the chase from afar, seeing Fei Liu catch Xiao Jingrui and grab the small bag, pulling out the little eagle and disappearing again into the tree branches, and felt a sense of peace in his heart, a small smile appearing on his face.

But the smile disappeared quickly. A sense of oppression came drifting over slowly, and he instinctively lifted his head, his gaze falling onto the small bridge on the eastern side of the pavilion.

On the bridge, a long silhouette stood quietly, his features difficult to make out because of the distance. The only thing certain was that this person was studying him closely.

The visitor he had been waiting for all day had finally arrived. Mei Changsu stood up slowly, the snowy white fur around his neck sliding off his shoulders, as the cold wind blew across the skin outside his collar, and though it did not resemble the once-familiar sensation of the sandstorms outside the Great Wall, it was nonetheless sharp like the stabbing of knives.

Seeing Mei Changsu rise, the figure did not continue standing still, but turned and strode down the little bridge, entering into the adjoining pavilion. With each step he took, the figure's appearance became a little clearer to the eyes of the Chief of Jiangzuo Alliance.

Unlike the time in the grasslands to the west of the city, Xia Dong was now dressed in a lady's attire, and although they were still sturdy clothes with narrow sleeves and boots, the embroidery on her collar and the tassels on her waist had successfully tempered some of the mysterious air given off by her masculine features, and instead displayed some of her prettiness and charm. Only her long, smooth hair remained tied back by a ribbon, without any hairpins, and the white amidst the sea of raven-black showed up clearly to the eye.

Under Mei Changsu's quiet gaze, the lady officer of the Xuanjing Bureau strode towards the pavilion, when she suddenly turned gracefully, the dark eyes under her thin brows glancing up, and raised a hand to block the descending strike, which was Fei Liu's silent, swift attack that had sliced down so neatly that it had not disturbed even one unnecessary molecule of air.

Amidst the rapid strikes and attacks, Xia Dong laughed loudly and shouted, "Good moves!" In a fight between top martial artists, breath and endurance are vitally important, and the fact that she had been able to shout out praise amidst Fei Liu's suffocating attack showed her proud temperament, as well as her attempt at provoking her opponent to open his mouth, so that she could seize the opportunity to attack and look for his weak spots.

Unfortunately, Fei Liu was no ordinary opponent. He had learned from an early age to endure silently and remain unyielding and resolute, and to attack ferociously to seek out his opponent's weaknesses. When Xia Dong spoke, the rhythm of her breathing was slightly altered, as if a golden net being attacked by knives had suddenly shown a rip, and Fei Liu broke through the weakness of her defense and forced her back towards the east side of the courtyard. As to the challenging tone in Xia Dong's voice, the youth had not paid even the slightest bit of attention.

By this time, Xiao Jingrui had hurried back to Mei Changsu's side, and seeing the two engaged in fierce combat, he said hurriedly, "Brother Su, tell Fei Liu to stop, quickly, that person is...."

"The martial arts passed down in the Xuanjing Bureau are truly incredible," Mei Changsu smiled faintly, his tone leisurely. "Even after making a mistake, they can retreat without losing. If Langya Hall had not received the imperial order long ago that Xuanjing officers were not to be placed onto their lists, there would undoubtedly always be one or more of them on the top ten list of martial arts experts."

"Xuanjing officers aren't allowed to be ranked on the list?" Xiao Jingrui had never heard of such a thing, and was greatly astonished. "No wonder, I'd always thought it was because their work was shrouded in secrecy, and Langya Hall couldn't obtain any information on their fighting skills."

Mei Changsu smiled and said, "You underestimate Langya Hall. But Xuanjing officers seldom involve themselves in the affairs of the jianghu world, and work in the shadows even in the palace, so not being placed on the lists is a good decision."

"With Fei Liu's skills, why isn't he on the list?"

"Fei Liu never used to leave home much, he will be on the list next year." Mei Changsu sighed and said, "If only there was a way to ask the master of Langya Hall not to place him on the list, Fei Liu is still a child...."

"That would not be easy, here in the capital, Fei Liu has fought against many experts, and I fear he has long since been...oh!" Xiao Jingrui interrupted himself with a cry. "Since Brother Su knows who she is, then hurry and tell Fei Liu to stop! How could I have kept chatting with you so idly...."

But Mei Changsu shook his head and said calmly, "Let them fight, I won't stop them."

"Brother Su...."

"Fei Liu has been instructed long ago not to hurt anyone, what are you afraid of?" Mei Changsu continued indifferently, "The skills and intentions of Xuanjing officers

are difficult to predict. If I tell Fei Liu to stop, he will really stop, and if his opponent suddenly lost her temper, wouldn't that be dangerous for Fei Liu?"

His words caused Xiao Jingrui to hesitate. As he watched, Mei Changsu slowly returned to his long bench and picked up the fur collar that had slipped off when he stood up, his actions leisurely, and knew that he really wouldn't stop them. But he himself couldn't quite bear to do the same, and so he only coughed, and then chased over to where the two were still fighting, and called in a loud voice, "Xia Dong jie, will you stop first then?"

But the competitive nature of Xia Dong, who rarely met a worthy opponent, had been stirred, and she ignored him, but kicked back with one foot and raised a great wind, putting all her strength into the 'River Flow' attack passed down amongst her masters, sweeping her arms in one great circle and sending a great wave of energy spinning towards Fei Liu. The youth's cold expression finally showed a shred of emotion, but that emotion was not fear, but rather even more easiness, as his whole body dodged the whirling gust of unimaginable power, like a falling leaf drifting from a tree branch, and his hands reached into the colourless, shapeless blur of motion, slicing neatly onto Xia Dong's wrists.

Everything ended abruptly, one moment the air was filled with flying silhouettes, and the next, the two had already landed far apart, watching each other warily.

Xia Dong's left hand was clasped over her right wrist, and her expression was calm, although her face was pale, and she was panting almost inaudibly. Fei Liu looked just the same as always, his face cold and hard, his eyes expressionless, as he pointed at Xia Dong's feet and said rigidly, "Can stand here!"

Xiao Jingrui stared from one to the other, completely speechless. If there were a mirror in front of him, he would have seen only one word on his own face – shock!

Although he had known all along that Fei Liu's martial art skills were exceedingly high, although he had known all along that this youth's abilities far exceeded his own, but...but...this was Xia Dong, a Xuanjing officer of more than a decade, a recognized expert in both the palace and jianghu. And this young Fei Liu, this youth who was at heart like a little child, this boy who could often be found snuggled up at his gege's knee, had actually beaten her!

Compared to Xiao Jingrui's expression of utter shock, Xia Dong herself was much calmer. She first gathered her inner energy and dispersed the hurt in her wrist, smoothed her hair which had been disturbed in the fight, and then, with a small smile at the corner of her lips, said, "Mister Su, please forgive Xia Dong's recklessness."

Mei Changsu's voice drifted over leisurely: "Fei Liu, let this jiejie come over."

Fei Liu immediately pointed in Mei Changsu's direction and said, "Go over!"



Those who knew him naturally understood his nature, but in the eyes of those who did not, this kind of curt speech was incredibly impolite, and Xiao Jingrui hurried forward to say, “Xia Dong jie, don’t mind him, Fei Liu has always been short of speech, and doesn’t mean to be discourteous.”

Xia Dong was of course astute, and after a detailed glance following the fight, had understood Fei Liu’s peculiarities and so was not angry, but strode away to the pavilion.

Mei Changsu had risen to greet his guest, and smilingly invited Xia Dong to sit down at the little table in the pavilion, then went over to the brazier placed to one side and lifted the cover of the copper teapot and peered into its depths, then said with a smile, “Seven parts snow, three parts clear dew,<sup>54</sup> the water is freshly boiled, would you care for a cup?”

“Thank you.” Xia Dong answered peacefully.

By this time, Fei Liu had disappeared into who knew which tree to play. Xiao Jingrui was a most considerate and sensitive person, and knowing that Xia Dong wasn’t simply here out of curiosity like the other visitors, but had her own reasons, he made some excuse about having arranged to see some friends and left quickly. And so in the pavilion, there now remained only the two persons.

Mei Changsu warmed the teacups, then measured out an exact amount of tea leaves with his instruments, poured in boiling water, removed the layer of froth, then poured away the first cup of water and steeped a second cup,<sup>55</sup> waited a few moments, and then offered it to his guest with both hands.<sup>56</sup> Xia Dong accepted it with both hands, inhaled the sweet fragrance, and gently took a sip, letting the taste linger in her tongue and throat, and closed her eyes to enjoy the tea, not saying a word, as if she had truly been invited there simply to drink tea.

She did not say anything, and Mei Changsu also did not speak, but smilingly drank his own tea. After the hot tea had been consumed, his originally pale face showed a hint of pink, and he looked refined and elegant. Xia Dong looked at him for a moment, then said with a soft sigh, “I have some blunt words, I hope you will forgive me.”

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<sup>54</sup> I assume he’s commenting on the steam and froth of the boiling water (froth = snow, water = clear dew).... And actually, he said “mei snow”, mei as in ‘Meiling’, or meaning plum / plum flower. Yeah, I don’t get it either. My best guess is he’s being literary lol (someone feel free to explain further)

<sup>55</sup> normal tea steeping rituals

<sup>56</sup> in Chinese culture, when giving or receiving anything from your superiors or elders (or simply to anyone to whom you want to show respect), one should always do so with both hands to show respect

“Officer Xia Dong does not need to be polite,” Mei Changsu addressed her respectfully, his tone pleasant. “Please speak freely.”

“Mister Su is certainly an extraordinary talent, and I cannot see your intentions clearly. But...no matter what kind of person you are, I think there are only two options.”

“Ah,” Mei Changsu smiled, “Please continue.”

“You are either a refined and elegant scholar, or a shrewd and sophisticated strategist, but no matter which, you are not a suitable match for Princess Nihuang.”

Mei Changsu’s smile did not falter, as he said softly, “Could it be that Officer Xia has come today after hearing some rumor about my being the Princess’ chosen future husband, and so wanted some clarification?”

Xia Dong smiled, “That is indeed my intention, but it is not because of some rumors.”

“Oh?”

“I have known Princess Nihuang for many years, and am familiar with her temper and character. Without some special reason, even if you were the apple of His Majesty’s eye, or indeed of the princes’ eyes, she would not have given you such preferential treatment.” At this point, Xia Dong’s eyes suddenly became cold. “But towards the Princess’ special favour, your response has been disappointing, and in fact, one could say you have not returned the favour in any way, which I cannot understand. There are some in the Mu residence who feel the same as I do, that Mister Su has come across rather arrogant, and has not been polite enough.”

A bitter smile floated across Mei Changsu’s face, and he raised his cup and took a sip, then said slowly, “Officer Xia...I will be blunt as well, you are wrong.”

“Wrong?”

“The Princess is exceptional and elegant, with such a graceful manner. I am neither deaf nor blind, how could I remain unaffected? But...I am on the one hand sick and frail, and unlikely to live long, and have no intention to wed because I do not wish such a husband on any young lady, much less the Princess. And on the other hand, even if I had such intentions, I fear the Princess would not have such a wish. As Officer Xia has said, no matter what kind of person I am, I am not suited to the Princess. Officer Xia knows this, so how could the Princess herself not know? A person she could hold in her heart must be a righteous warrior, a proud young man, who can ride with her onto the sands of battle, and fight by her side to defeat the

enemies of our kingdom; how could she consider someone like me, frail and weak, without the slightest hint of a hero's air?"

"But Nihuang...."

"Princess Nihuang has indeed treated me with unusual kindness, but the reason for this is not that which has been guessed by everyone." Mei Changsu put down his tea cup and stretched his hands towards the warmth of the fire. "Officer Xia, as an officer of the Xuanjing Bureau, has unusual methods, and must have thoroughly investigated my background, have you not?"

Xia Dong nodded slowly and said, "That's right. I was shocked to see how young the chief of Jiangzuo Alliance was."

Mei Changsu gazed at the white steam of his own breath and said, "The Princess is also aware of my identity. And the reason she has treated me so favourably is only this, and none other."

Xia Dong raised an eyebrow in confusion. "Although Jiangzuo Alliance is the greatest sect in the world, and has some influence, but, if you don't mind my saying so, it is in the end only a jianghu sect. With the Princess' rank, as the commander of hundred thousand soldiers, could your identity really impress her?"

"When has the Princess been impressed?" Mei Changsu laughed in spite of himself. "I would not dare to think like this. But as I have said, the Princess' preferential treatment towards me is due to my identity as the chief of Jiangzuo Alliance, and that is the truth."

Xia Dong frowned. "The world is not full of people as intelligent as Mister Su. Could you speak more clearly?"

Mei Changsu slowly sat up, took out a few cakes of incense from his sleeve and dropped them into the fire, then picked up the small stove he had been cradling all along, lifted its lid, and placed a few fresh pieces of burning hot coal into it, then wrapped his hands around it again and shifted to a more comfortable position on the long bench, finally saying with a smile, "Although the weather is dismal, with a fragrant stove and good tea at hand, this is quite pleasant. If Officer Xia is not in any rush, would you be willing to sit awhile longer in this pavilion, and listen to a story?"

## CHAPTER 36

### *Wounds of the Past*

Xia Dong's gaze lingered on Mei Changsu's pale complexion, and only lowered after a long moment. Before she had arrived at the residence of the Marquis of Ning today, she had wondered what kind of a person this Su Zhe was, but now that she had finally met him, she realized that he was even deeper and more profound than she had imagined from the rumors.

“Since Mister Su has such leisure, Xia Dong is of course happy to listen.”

Mei Changsu nodded in her direction, then turned his head, turning his gaze away from his only audience and towards the twilight-lit sky outside, and began to speak at a steady pace, neither too quickly nor too slowly. “Once, in a certain kingdom, at a certain time, there was a mighty lord, who guarded the kingdom's border with his army, and who was much favoured by the Emperor, and trusted beyond measure. One year, the daughter of this lord entered the capital, and the little princess<sup>57</sup> stayed at the palace, where she came to know many of the children of the royal family and relations. One of these children was the only son of the great general of the court, who was her elder by two years, a lively and mischievous boy, proud and willful, and the two spent much of their time together. The Grand Empress Dowager saw the two innocent playmates together, and decided to arrange for their marriage. Although there was no deep friendship between the lord and the general, the match was an appropriate one, and neither families objected. Who could have guessed that, a year after the engagement, the great general was involved in a rebellion, and both father and son lost their lives. Although the lord was far away at the border and had had nothing to do with the case, he could not avoid being implicated due to the ties between the two families. The Emperor began to grow suspicious of him, and in all matters whether military or otherwise, no longer treated him as freely as before, and two years of this wearing and tearing began to affect his military strength. It was at this time that the neighboring kingdoms suddenly launched a furious attack on the border, and the lord lost the first battle, and lost his life in the second, leaving behind his orphaned daughter and young son, his army without their general, and a grief of

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<sup>57</sup> as per fandom convention, I have been translating ‘lord's daughter’ as ‘princess’ for Nihuang's title, but it is in fact a different Chinese word to the one used for Jingning, who is a ‘king's daughter’; I'll write a post on it someday...

unfathomable depths in all their hearts. At that time, reinforcements had not yet arrived in the south, and the situation was growing desperate, when the seventeen-year-old little princess rose up and went to battle in her mourning clothes, leading the army in her father's stead, and after a blood-soaked and hard-fought struggle, managed to secure the kingdom's border. Officer Xia, wouldn't you say this little princess is truly an extraordinary lady of our age?"

Xia Dong's eyes were hidden as she sighed without speaking. It was as if she had been transported back to the day she had arrived in the south with the reinforcement troops, and seen on the city wall this young lady, dressed all in white,<sup>58</sup> her face full of unswerving determination. Although she was ten years her senior, although she had ample experience and knowledge of worldly affairs from her years in the Xuanjing Bureau, after going through those days of hardship and perils together, she only had two words to describe her feelings for the strength of this young lady: deepest respect. Were it not for the barrier of blood and betrayal between them, the friendship between Xuanjing Officer Xia Dong and Princess Nihuang would have undoubtedly been every bit as strong as the life-and-death brotherhoods often forged between young men.

Mei Changsu only briefly glanced at her expression, and then went on, "The danger had been averted for the time being, but the situation was far from stable. The princess had established her authority with one battle, and the soldiers of the border army knelt to her without exception. The court could not find anyone better suited to the position, and so allowed her to retain the temporary post of commander of the border army. Over the next ten years, as she faced countless dangers alone, people only saw the brilliant power and influence she commanded from her loyal army, while no one noticed the suffering and pressure she kept within her heart. Most do not even know that, just two years ago, she once again came face to face with a dangerous situation from which there was almost no escape."

At this point, Xia Dong was visibly horrified. "Why have I never heard of such an event?"

Mei Changsu's calm gaze did not waver, as he continued in his steady tone, "The Princess and her generals and troops are skilled in field battles, excelling in both defense and offense, and are bold and powerful masters of the art of warfare, but they have one weakness, and that is battles fought over water."

Xia Dong was fairly familiar with the Yunnan army, and couldn't help nodding in agreement.

"The danger at the time was because a certain master in a neighbouring country had designed a particularly ruthless battle over water. First, they launched a surprise

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<sup>58</sup> white is the traditional colour of mourning in Chinese culture (as you would know from the show)

attack and took control of the mouth of the river, and then, using the largest warship as their base of attack, the smaller warships as their attack force, and the river as the road for their supply chain, their vast navy charged up the river to attack the inland. Although it was a dangerous gamble, it had the desired effect. If the Princess put her whole strength into attacking the mouth of the river, the enemy's navy would be free to wreck havoc on the inland, but if she met the enemy head-on on the water, she would be fighting the enemy's strength with her weakness, and despite the fact that there was no lack of talented generals in her army at the time, none could devise a plan to defeat the enemy. As the sole commander, one can only imagine the worry in the Princess' heart at that time." At this point, he coughed a few times, and stopped to take a sip of tea.

"What happened next?" Xia Dong was listening intently, and seeing him pause, couldn't help herself.

"Just when the situation seemed hopeless, a young man appeared in the camp, claiming to be an expert in water battles, and begged for an audience with the Princess to share his expertise. The Princess is an insightful and perceptive judge of character, and she made an exception for him. It turned out that this person had not exaggerated in the least, and was truly a water battle prodigy. After half a month of careful planning, he entered the battle himself and defeated the enemy in one blow. Afterwards, when she was writing her report to the palace, the Princess wanted to give him the credit and ensure he received the deserved honour and rewards, but for some unknown reason, the person firmly refused to allow the Princess to put down his name on the report."

"Oh?" Xia Dong was surprised. "He wasn't interested in the rewards of his work? That's strange indeed."

"Perhaps this person was not interested in advancing into the court." Mei Changsu said dismissively, and then continued, "For the next half year, this young man stayed in the Princess' camp, and re-designed the training of her navy to compensate for their prior weakness. This person had a bright nature, was handsome and righteous, and was also extremely charming, and the two were of similar age, and so, as the days went by, they naturally developed feelings towards one another, but unfortunately the time was not right, and they did not express their feelings to each other, which was a pity indeed."

At this point, Xia Dong thought a moment, and suddenly became furious. Since they had both developed feelings, then the Princess' open competition for her hand in marriage was the perfect opportunity for the Princess to have her wish granted, but this person had not appeared, how heartless and ungrateful of him! Xia Dong had always been inclined to fight in the face of injustice, and since this matter was about the Princess, how could she not be angry? She immediately stood and said with a tight expression, "Who is this person? Where is he now?"

Mei Changsu did not directly answer her question, but only lowered his head, and continued to tell the story at a steady pace, speaking in a voice that grew lower and lower. “One day, half a year later, the young man suddenly disappeared without a farewell, leaving behind only a letter addressed to the Princess, on which was written: “The Alliance summons me back; I obey and return.” The Princess was furious that he had left in such a way and tore up the letter, giving orders that he was not to be followed. But her brother couldn’t bear it and sent highly-skilled men to follow him all the way back, but after entering Tu province, the young man disappeared without a trace, not leaving behind even the slightest hint of where he had gone.”

Xia Dong, being clever and perceptive, immediately grasped the key point. “Tu province is in Jiangzuo territory, and in the fourteen provinces controlled by Jiangzuo Alliance, when has there ever been another sect?”

Mei Changsu neither confirmed nor denied her words, but kept speaking. “Another year passed, and the Mu household had still not been able to find a single hint of news about this young man. Although the Princess was silent on the matter, everyone in her household felt this person had behaved coldly and unkindly, and couldn’t understand the matter at all. At this time, the Princess’ younger brother came of age and they had returned to the capital for his inheritance ceremonies, when the court decided to have an open competition to choose the Princess’ husband, and asked her opinion on the matter. Everyone thought that, with the Princess’ pride, she would never consent to such a public method, and never expected her to agree after setting a few conditions of her own.”

Xia Dong’s emotions were stirred, and sorrow filled her heart as she let out a sigh, saying with a lonely expression, “Women’s infatuation is stronger than men’s. Although she gave no outward sign of it, in her heart, she must have been hoping that the young man would take this chance to come forward....”

Mei Changsu did not answer, but there was a bleak expression on his face. Up until this point, the story was only half over, but who could know in what direction the rest of it would go?

The clouds at the edge of the sky had sunk lower and lower; the solstice was not far away, and wind and snow were rising with the night. Xia Dong put down her teacup, stood up, and strode to the edge of the pavilion, looking out. Against the sky full of dark shadows, her tall figure appeared tough and vigorous, and there was no expression on her handsome face, which appeared now to be in deep thought, and now to be simply breathing steadily and not thinking at all. But the calm before the storm never lasts for long, and a moment later, she drew in a deep breath, then turned and strode back towards Mei Changsu, a fiery gaze in her eyes as she said in a furious voice, “Since you know this story, then tell me, since they both loved each other, why didn’t he come?!”

“Why didn’t he come?” Mei Changsu gave her a distressed smile, his face pale as snow, then slowly closed his eyes, murmuring as if to himself, “You ask me this...but me...how can I ask him?”

Since they both loved each other, why didn’t he come? Why didn’t he come?

Because another person, who had long since fallen into hell, still walked on this earth, and so, he could only struggle in pain and suffer his torment in silence.

To that young man, the love between man and woman was as beautiful as pure water, but the friendship between brothers, how was that not also as precious as gold or jade? Even the most carefree, innocent person in the world would not betray that brotherhood, nor wish to bring the slightest shame to a friend.

But love has never been something that can be hidden or avoided, and though on the surface, the young man talked and laughed as cheerfully as before, he could not hide the hurt and grief within his heart. Just as, when the Princess first saw himself, the chief of Jiangzuo Alliance, that day at Phoenix Hall, and countless painful questions rose to the tip of her tongue, the strong, calm mask had slipped for a moment, and revealed the turmoil of the emotions beneath.

When he had first sent the young man to help Nihuang, he had indeed not foreseen such an outcome, but now that he was faced with these two hearts as clear and true as snow, how could he let the old wishes and memories of his own heart stand as a barrier between them? Lin Shu’s fate had long since been filled with trouble and misfortune, and for the sake of a marriage agreement made in their youth, he had already brought Nihuang many years of grief; now, with his frail and weak body, his fragile lifespan, and a future full of hardship, he no longer had even the slightest energy left to spare on rekindling a childhood passion....

And therefore, the reason he had waited and prepared for Xia Dong’s arrival today, was for this matter of the heart.

“Officer Xia.” When Mei Changsu opened his eyes again, there was only peace and warmth in his gaze. He gently turned to look at Xia Dong, his voice steady and serene. “I do not know the Princess well, so am not at convenience to say some things, and the reason I have waited for you here today and told you this story is because I would ask you to carry a message for me: although the Princess has hesitated all this time and has not asked me directly, I know the questions in her heart. That young man is indeed in my Jiangzuo Alliance, and previously, I was not clear about the wishes of the Princess, and was afraid to cause a misunderstanding, and so did not question him closely. But now that I have known the Princess for a time, I have come to understand what I must understand. Please ask the Princess not to worry, the wishes of this person’s heart have certainly not faded in the least compared to her own, and it is only that he is currently held under certain responsibilities, and



cannot enter the capital at present. If the Princess trusts me, please allow him a little more time, as a thanks to me.”

After hearing this, Xia Dong did not react immediately, but thought for a long moment, and then asked frowning, “Gentlemen should be more straightforward, if he loves her, he loves her, and if he does not, then he does not. What incredible responsibilities must he have, that he cannot come to Jinling even for a few days?”

Mei Changsu did not explain further, but only said quietly, “The lives of those in Jianghu do not belong to themselves, pray Officer Xia forgive us.”

Xia Dong scoffed, but continued, “Since this matter concerns the Princess, and you have related it all so plainly, it is no trouble for me to pass along your message. But you must also tell that fellow, when I see him in the future, I will not let him go so easily.”

Mei Changsu smiled. “The Princess is fortunate to have such a good friend as Officer Xia.”

At his words, Xia Dong’s face suddenly became like ice, and she replied coldly, “She is not my friend now, only once she marries will I claim her as a friend.”

“Really?” Mei Changsu seemed not to care much about her words, continuing indifferently, “Is it because of her engagement from all those years ago? As long as the Princess does not marry, then she is still of the Lin family.<sup>59</sup> And to Officer Xia, isn’t anyone from the Lin family your sworn enemy under heaven?”

He spoke the words carelessly, but Xia Dong’s whole body stiffened, and her eyelashes trembled violently. She was not surprised that Mei Changsu knew about this, because although this old case had been purposefully diluted by the court over the years, it was nonetheless a matter that had involved tens of thousands of people, and with Jiangzuo Alliance’s power, it could be easily uncovered with some careful searching. What had shocked her were her own feelings upon hearing those words, the flow of uncontrollable emotions that had welled up in her heart.

Despite the fact that more than twelve years had gone by, despite the fact that she no longer woke from nightmares shaking and in tears, all these years of training herself into calmness had not brought about a shred of true closure. This refined scholar had only mentioned these two words – “Lin family” – and the bleeding pain and bone-deep hatred had been rekindled within her heart, like the strip of white in the sea of raven-black hair, forever bright and unable to remain hidden no matter where she went.

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<sup>59</sup> she was only engaged to Lin Shu, but in Chinese tradition, the concept of belonging to your husband’s family after marriage (or, apparently, even after engagement) is a strong one

Mei Changsu turned his gaze away from Xia Dong, as if he couldn't stand to see the fragile expression that had appeared on her face. As a Xuanjing officer, Xia Dong was naturally the strongest among the strong, but when you removed her sturdy mask, she was still one of the thousands of grieving victims who had been left behind by the tragedy.

He remembered Xia Dong as she had been when she was newly-married, fresh with youth and beauty, full of vitality, who had removed her wedding veil and immediately abandoned etiquette, leaving her bridal chamber to find her husband and drink his toasts in his place.<sup>60</sup> The couple stood under the light of the bright red<sup>61</sup> candles, one a general of the Chiyang Army, one a distinguished apprentice of the Xuanjing Bureau, the hall filled with the laughter and blessings of her seniors and the warm congratulations of his brothers in the army. This joy and blessing should have lasted much longer, but seven years of love had turned to ashes overnight. It was as if he could see in the distance the reluctant parting of these two persons, and then turning around, there she stood, a widow of twelve years.

Fortunately, she was Xia Dong, and the responsibilities and steadfast devotion of her position as a Xuanjing officer helped her overcome those days, and she never showed her grief or pain in front of her brothers and seniors in the bureau; unfortunately, she was Xia Dong, and in the confusion of the days that followed, everyone was reassured by her strength, until the day they saw the whiteness on her forehead and the ice in her gaze, and realized the depth of the anger and sorrow in her heart.

Perhaps only Princess Nihuang understood a bit of Xia Dong's emotions. The young girl who had been forced to grow up all at once, who had been the proudest, strongest lady in the world, nonetheless patiently withstood all of Xia Dong's insults and barbed words in the first days of their acquaintance, and after the two had fought shoulder to shoulder and developed a deep friendship, still quietly bore her cold promise: "As long as you do not wed, you are not my friend."

But Mei Changsu knew, if anyone in this world were to mistreat Princess Nihuang, Xia Dong would be the first to step forward. Whether she married or not, whether she was in name the daughter-in-law of the Lin family or not, she was still Xia Dong's closest friend.

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<sup>60</sup> according to the internet, 'drinking someone's toast for him/her' (擋酒) is when you drink the toast meant for another person, in his or her stead; it's done with a kind of 'heroic' air, and is done when someone is trying to get the other person drunk (so I assume there's a teasing component to the whole thing). as always, someone please correct me if I'm wrong.

<sup>61</sup> red is the colour of celebration in Chinese culture

Because friendships forged in the fires of battle are the most enduring, unchanging bonds in the world.

“Mister Su,” Xia Dong had taken her emotions under control again, and continued coldly, “Why did you come to the capital?”

Mei Changsu answered with a smile, “What, Officer Xia has not even found this out?”

Xia Dong made a dismissive noise and said, “I know the saying about the qilin prodigy, and I know you harbour great ambitions and will soon choose your lord. But what I don’t understand is, even if you participate in the fight between the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, you still do not need to investigate the matters of the past so carefully.”

Mei Changsu seemed not to notice her cold attitude, and continued smiling. “Every moment of the present was formed from the events of the past; if one does not investigate and understand the past clearly, how can one know what should be done, and what should not be done? No matter how many years have passed, the seeds that were sown will determine the fruit that is reaped. Haven’t Xuanjing officers always striven for justice and fairness in their actions because of this belief?”

“The events of the past naturally have their significance, but I do not understand what they have to do with you.” Xia Dong’s sharp glance pierced through Mei Changsu. “Could it be that this old case of twelve years past can affect the Crown Prince and Prince Yu’s fights in the palace today?”

“As long as there is a connection, there will be some impact, no matter how small. Unless Officer Xia believes they had nothing to do with the events of that year?” Mei Changsu asked placidly in return.

The lady Xuanjing Officer murmured in reply, “Yes, I admit they added fuel to the fire, and hastened Prince Qi’s demise, but had it not been for Prince Qi’s own wild ambitions and rebellious conspiracies, and had the Chiyan Army not supported him in his tyranny and acted so despicably, there would also not have followed the natural consequences of their crimes.”

Mei Changsu’s face did not change, but his teeth were gritted, and after a long moment, he let out a sigh and said, “I suppose...this is the reason for the animosity between you and Prince Jing?”

Xia Dong stared at him and asked in a low voice, “What do you mean?”

“Officer Xia has never doubted the court’s verdict regarding the case of Prince Qi’s rebellion, but Prince Jing has argued for Prince Qi all along, and were it not for the Emperor’s decree for mercy and the investigation revealing that he only spoke out

of brotherly love and was in no way involved in the rebellion, he would have long since been convicted along with the rest. But even so, he has nonetheless been heavily stifled, and has not been raised to the rank of a Royal Prince<sup>62</sup> despite more than a decade of successful field battles, so that neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu have paid him any mind at all. The two of you hold opposing views, and whenever you see each other, if the matter is carelessly raised, it would be difficult to avoid conflict. So you have both avoided meeting face to face whenever possible.” Mei Changsu met Xia Dong’s gaze. “Have I guessed correctly?”

Xia Dong gazed back at him steadily, now as if examining him closely, now as if she had no other intention, but did not deny it in the end, and answered calmly, “His Highness Prince Jing is a prince, and I will not provoke him if at all possible. He chooses to ignore the truth, and is biased towards traitors, but His Majesty has already decided to be generous, so what can I do?”

Mei Changsu turned and filled her cup with hot tea, saying, “So according to Officer Xia, it must be Prince Jing who is wrong?”

“Of course it is Prince Jing who is wrong.” Xia Dong’s gaze was hard as iron. “Since Mister Su has purposefully investigated this old case, do you know who was responsible for the investigation of Prince Qi’s rebellion?”

Mei Changsu’s mouth tightened imperceptibly, but when he turned his head, his expression was once again serene as a cool breeze, and he said smiling, “Surely everyone knows this, it was the current Head Officer of the Xuanjing Bureau, your teacher-master, Head Officer Xia Jiang.”

Hearing the name ‘Xia Jiang’, Xia Dong’s gaze became respectful, and her tone took on a new confidence. “Since Teacher began his work in the bureau, he has assisted His Majesty and investigated countless cases under imperial command, and has not made a single mistake to this day. If Mister Su continues to speak of the case with doubt, I will consider it as disrespect towards my teacher.”

“I would not dare.” Mei Changsu spread out his hands with a smile. “Head Officer Xia has operated the Xuanjing Bureau with iron-like justice and is well-respected, how could someone such as I dare to doubt him? It was only that as we spoke, we suddenly mentioned Prince Jing, and came to this point. Pray Officer Xia, forgive me.”

“Mister Su is a scholar by birth, how have you come to be interested in Prince Jing, who has always kept far away from the palace and the court?”

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<sup>62</sup> all the Emperor’s sons are ‘Princes’ from birth (wang zi – literally ‘Emperor’s son’), but must be raised to the honour or rank of ‘Royal Prince’ (qin wang – literally ‘close Prince’) based on merit and achievements (of which military achievements such as those Prince Jing has acquired should definitely count)

Mei Changsu turned his gaze slightly, and he said, “I will not speak in riddles before Officer Xia. Prince Jing is a highly skilled martial fighter, a good military leader, and is a prince with no threat to the crown – he is undoubtedly an asset to anyone who could recruit him, no?”

Xia Dong looked at him for a moment, and suddenly burst into laughter, laughing until tears ran down her face.

“What, have you found my words amusing?”

“Are they not?” Xia Dong gently wiped away the tears in her eyes and sat upright again. “Although you are the qilin prodigy and know everything there is to know under heaven, although you hold the world’s greatest sect in your palm, with countless eyes and ears under your command, you investigate and understand the things of the past, but you have not understood the heart within a person.”

“Was I wrong? Prince Jing has been tightly suppressed by His Majesty, and his consort-mother has no special honour or favour in the palace, so even if he is not interested in glory and riches, for the sake of the future, he should put his skills to good use now and make a decision. If he continues to watch from the sidelines, when the dust has settled, he will be of no use to anyone.”

Xia Dong laughed coldly. “You are a strategist indeed, only caring about merits and drawbacks, and not paying attention to a person’s heart. I do not dare to comment on anything else, but this I will say: no matter whether you end up choosing the Crown Prince or Prince Yu as your lord, you will never be able to recruit Prince Jing into either of their camps.”

“Oh?” Mei Changsu asked with a faint smile. “Officer Xia is so certain? Nothing is certain, the situation is always changing, and the hearts of men naturally change as well; Prince Jing has spent many years defeated and hopeless, perhaps he would not so easily let go of such a golden opportunity?”

The corner of Xia Dong’s mouth turned down and she turned her head, as if unwilling to continue the conversation. Although she was angry at Prince Jing Xiao Jingyan’s stubbornness these many years, at least the love and devotion he bore for his eldest brother Prince Qi and his friend Lin Shu ran true and deep, and the fact that he had never thought to distance himself from them out of fear of being implicated in their crimes had allowed Xia Dong to retain a shred of respect for him, and so she disliked Mei Changsu’s cool analysis, and didn’t answer any further.

But Mei Changsu’s chest warmed when he saw her reaction. Although he had spoken those words in order to mislead the Xuanjing officer, to allow her to believe that all his interactions with Prince Jing in the future would be out of strategic intent and thus not worth her attention, when he saw Xia Dong, who had stood so firmly

against Prince Qi and the Lin family for all these years, refuse to condemn Prince Jing for any of his actions over the years, he couldn't help feeling touched.

Xiao Jingyan had persisted resolutely and hidden his fury for twelve years, and even in the face of increasingly unfair treatment, he had refused to bend, to kneel in repentance for the stance he had taken all those years ago. He was a military general of great prestige, and at his slightest expression of interest, both the Crown Prince and Prince Yu would have been delighted to take him under their wing; he was a grown prince with a formidable list of military merits, and if he were willing to lower his head and yield, the Emperor would not have hardened his heart for so many years and refused to reward him for his achievements. But he had not done any of these seemingly simple things, but had silently accepted one imperial command after another, riding from battlefield to battlefield, and if he had any time to rest, he spent it either in his own manor or in the military camp outside the city, far from the center of imperial power, and the only reason he had never been taken seriously by the court was because of this buried anger and resentment hidden within his heart.

But it was this Prince Jing Jingyan who had been the best friend of the Young Marshal of the Chiyan Army so many years ago, and it was this Prince Jing whom Mei Changsu was preparing to help to the throne today.

The peaceful, solemn gaze of the chief of Jiangzuo Alliance returned to the snowy twilight sky, stopping on the silver lining threading through a thick, dark cloud. For Prince Jing, he had to gather all the power and strength he could find, and as he had already acquired the Yunnan Mu clan, next up was Xuanjing Officer Xia Dong.

The proud, smiling, Vanguard General of the Chiyan Army, Nie Feng, had been sent to his death by the cruel malice of his commander general; his entire troop had been surrounded, and afterwards, not even his bones had remained to be collected. This conclusion was the thorn in the hearts of the surviving members of the Nie family, and was the source of Xia Dong's hatred. She had sent off a handsome young hero, and had received in return his fragmented remains and torn, bloody robes. Although she had the fame of her teacher's name, and the respect due to the status of a Xuanjing officer, how could this compare to the loneliness she felt, when she stood in front of his grave every Qingming,<sup>63</sup> when she looked in a mirror and did not see his shadow beside hers, when she turned and his shoulder was not there for her to lean on? Such heart-rending pain, such bone-deep enmity, how could she not be angry, how could she not hate?

As long as this knot remained unresolved, the Xuanjing Bureau was forever the sworn enemy of the Lin family. But the old case had long been concluded, and although the current Xuanjing Head Officer, Xia Jiang, had retreated to live in seclusion, he was still alive, and it would not be easy to bring up again this bloody matter of the past.

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<sup>63</sup> the Chinese 'ghost day' if you will, or the day one pays respects to the dead

They could only take things one step at a time, and make their plans slowly and patiently.

“I heard Officer Xia was ambushed outside the capital?” Mei Changsu smilingly changed the subject. “Jingrui came back wounded that day, and scared everyone in the Marquis’ residence. The Grand Princess ordered people to bring over doctors and medicine, and raised a great fuss.... Are your own wounds healing well?”

“What’s a few injuries to boys of his age? The Grand Princess spoils her children too much.” Xia Dong said dismissively, “My injuries were light, and healed long ago. Thank you for your concern.”

“But even newly healed wounds will affect mobility. Just now, our Fei Liu behaved without manners, pray forgive us.”

When Fei Liu was mentioned, a fervent gaze passed over Xia Dong’s eyes. “Your bodyguard certainly lives up to his fame. I accept my loss today wholeheartedly. But tell him not to grow complacent, we Xuanjing officers don’t give up so easily, and I will certainly practice harder and return in the future to learn from him again.”

Mei Changsu smiled and did not answer, but was not worried in the slightest. Because Fei Liu was simple by nature, he was single-minded in his pursuits, and trained while he played, and treated training itself as play. In addition, his martial arts skills were the best among the best, and even if others gave twice the effort he gave, they would still find it difficult to keep pace with his efforts.

Xia Dong finished her tea and returned her cup to the table, then stood up, saying, “Thank you for your hospitality. What you have asked me to do, I will certainly accomplish without fail. What you wish to do in the future is your own concern. But I will give you this warning: since you have the world in your hands, please understand the net of the law, and understand the imperial wishes. Otherwise, I fear the Xuanjing Bureau would not be able to tolerate you.”

“I will take Officer Xia’s words to heart.” Mei Changsu rose to see her out, and said with a smile, “Officer Xia has spoken so earnestly, how could I not return the favour? So I, too, will speak a word of warning: the loyal may not be loyal, and the wicked may not be wicked; a person of prestige and ranking in the palace, who yet understands the jianghu world and is able to command high level assassins without leaving a trace – how many such persons can there be?”

Xia Dong’s heart stopped, and she quickly turned her head, but only saw a peaceful expression on the other’s face, his gaze calm, as if his words a moment ago had only been idle chatter. Under her questioning gaze, Mei Changsu did not show any intention of explaining further, but walked ahead to show her out. His light “Officer Xia, take care” was sufficient to convey all the words he did not say.

Xia Dong had become an officer at age twenty, and had faced countless cases both trivial and important in her seventeen years as a Xuanjing officer, and so, just that one sentence had been enough of a hint towards the direction of her subsequent investigation, and to say anymore would have been redundant....

Fei Liu's shadow flitted through the nearby trees and then appeared by Mei Changsu's side, and although his face was expressionless, there was a look in his eyes that said he was glad the visitor was finally leaving. Xia Dong turned, looking at his handsome, innocent face, and suddenly felt a wave of exhaustion overcome her heart.

The great case in her hands had not even been opened yet, and the tides of schemes and plots in the capital were already growing strong, threatening to sweep everything along in their wake, and made one feel not only helpless to resist, but inclined to hide.

Now, more than ever before, Xia Dong needed the steady reassurance of Nie Feng's arm.



## CHAPTER 37

### *Wasted Manor*

Because of the nature of their business, Xuanjing officers kept a low profile, and Xia Dong's return to the capital was no exception. But to those who cared to find out, it was not difficult to keep track of her movements. To those eyes that watched either openly or in secret, Xia Dong did not purposefully hide her actions, but went freely between the palace, the residence of the Marquis of Ning, and the Mu residence, and then afterwards, retreated deep into the residence of the Xuanjing officers and was seldom seen out again.

But what was surprising to both the court and commoners alike was that the expected bombshell of Xia Dong's return to the capital, the 'Land Infringement Case' had not exploded immediately; yet this 'calm before the storm' feeling was difficult to bear, and the old Duke of Qing had long since taken leave from the court and was lying sick at home, and according to the imperial physicians, his illness was no pretense.

Another event that everyone had been expecting also failed to materialize, as, although the reputed chosen husband was still staying as a guest at the Marquis of Ning's residence, and the Emperor had bestowed upon him two pieces of calligraphy and once summoned him into court to play the zither and have tea, there was nonetheless not the slightest whisper of an engagement. Instead, Princess Nihuang, after being visited by Xia Dong, sent someone to deliver a letter to him. No one could understand what these people were up to.

The Crown Prince, who had been confined for reflection, was on his best behaviour, and although he could not publicly apologize to the Princess because the true reason for the prior events had been concealed, whenever the people of the Eastern Palace met their counterparts from the Mu household, they would bow and yield with extreme politeness, rendering the Mu household members, who had been brimming with fury, speechless instead, and so the relations between the two households did not publicly deteriorate. Noble Consort Yue also milked her suffering for all it was worth, and her speedy transformation into a wan, sallow aging woman stirred up pity in the Emperor's heart, and his anger was no longer as great as it had been previously.

It was at this time, when events seemed to have slowed to a stop, that Su Zhe, who had become famous in the capital, leisurely chose a fine, sunny day, and invited several of his young friends to accompany him out.

Mottled white walls and crumbled ledges with the occasional gap in the walls, on which crawled a splendid mess of rose and ivy vines surrounded them. Looking around, wild grass and half-dried lotus ponds filled the view as far as the eye could see, along with collapsed rock gardens and promenades covered in spider webs. Only the outer wall, which was built along the sloping grounds, still stood firmly, surrounding this little manor which had been neglected for far too long. In the middle of the manor, there seemed to be a silhouette of a curved flowerbed, which no longer held any flowers, but was instead overrun by weeds on yellow, withered soil.

It was on this wasted ground that several people stood in splendid clothing, forming quite a contrast to their surroundings, as they looked around, as if in admiration of the desolate view.

“If it were not for the fact that you can see the spire of Chongyin Tower if you look up, I really wouldn’t know where I am....” The speaker was the son of the Imperial Uncle, who stood handsomely with his fan despite the fact that it was winter. “I never thought there was such a desolate place in the city of Jinling. Brother Su, how did you find this place?”

“I did not find it myself,” The young man who replied smiled ruefully. “I only found an estate business and said I was looking to buy a manor in the city, and their boss recommended this place, and said it was very good....”

“Very good....” Xie Bi echoed the two words, looking around dazedly, his gaze stopping at the half-collapsed flowerbed not far away.

“He said it was very good and you believed him? Didn’t you look at the place before you paid? Or is Jiangzuo Alliance really so rich nowadays?” Ya Yujin fired off his questions, expressing his disapproval.

“I...I sent Fei Liu over for a look, he said it was very good too....”

“Very good...” The echo came again, and Fei Liu’s figure flew by and disappeared into the maze of collapsed rock gardens, where he seemed to be playing with keen interest.

Yan Yujin crossed his arms and fixed his gaze on the refined gentleman. Buying a house through an estate business and only sending a child over for a look before paying, this was how the qilin prodigy worked? He really was different from normal people....

“Really, this place isn’t too bad,” Mei Changsu smiled. “At least the location is good, and is overall appropriate, and as it has not been lived in for awhile, it’s no surprise that it has deteriorated to this degree. I have only to have it cleaned up a bit, and it will be quite beautiful, and anyway, Fei Liu likes it too...don’t you think so, Jingrui?”

The person who had not spoken a word until now gave an affirmative “Ng,” as if in agreement.

“What?” Xie Bi came closer. “It’s obvious Brother Su has been tricked into buying this place, so why do you look even more dismayed than he does?”

Yan Yujin glanced over at his friend, and did not join Xie Bi in teasing him as he had so often done before, but continued slowly hitting his closed fan against his palm, and wandered a few steps away, as if to inspect the manor more closely, but he had not gone far when, with a sudden “Oh!”, he disappeared.

Everyone jumped in fright and ran over to the place where he had mysteriously vanished, and Xiao Jingrui’s agility being the best, he naturally arrived first, shouting all the while, “Yujin! Yujin!”

“Here...” A muffled voice drifted up from below ground. “Give me a hand up....”

After Xiao Jingrui had pulled him up by the wrist, the son of the Imperial Uncle’s splendid robes were caked with dark soil and withered grass, and as Xiao Jingrui brushed him off, the air filled with dust.

“It’s a dried up well, looks rather cold and dark....” Xie Bi carefully pulled aside the grass obscuring the mouth of the well and peered down. “The well platform has completely eroded, it’s no wonder you didn’t notice it...”

“It’s a good thing I was quick and caught the edge,” Yan Yujin brushed at the grass stems in his hair, looking unhappy. “What terrible luck!”

Xiao Jingrui said thoughtfully, “It’s good luck that it was you who fell, if it was Brother Su, he definitely wouldn’t have caught hold of anything, and would have fallen straight to the bottom....”

Yan Yujin gritted his teeth and looked at his ungrateful wretch of a best friend, and said angrily, “What do you mean it was good luck that it was me who fell? You heartless....”

Mei Changsu had also come over to help him brush off the dirt, and asked warmly, “Are you injured?”

“No, no, how could an expert like me be so easily injured?” Yan Yujin laughed and waved his arm carelessly.

“That’s true,” Xie Bi nodded his agreement seriously. “He’s very good at hanging off objects in mid-air, you could often find him dangling in the air back in those days in Shuren Court....”

Fei Liu had also appeared at some point, and was staring with wide eyes at Yan Yujin, who was looking quite pitiful indeed.

“It’s difficult to know what dangers there are in a desolate yard like this, we had better walk on the stone path on our way out,” Xiao Jingrui warned, and then turned to look at Mei Changsu. “Brother Su, you should walk in our footsteps.”

“You are being too careful,” Xie Bi said with a smile. “However bad this place is, it still cannot be not full of wells.”

“One cannot be too careful.” Mei Changsu smilingly spoke up for Xiao Jingrui. “Although the wild grass is dense, if Yujin had been more careful, he might not have lost his footing. The ground is uneven here and has been covered by grass, it would indeed be better to return by the main path.”

The words of seniors have their weight, and after his suggestion, everyone returned to the main path, and slowly continued on to the areas they had not yet seen, but no matter where they went, the manor was just as desolate. The courtyard was not large, and they quickly arrived at the back door, which was closed firmly with a thick steel lock. Aside from Fei Liu, no one wanted to walk back through the courtyard, so Xie Bi, who was in front, stretched out a hand to pull the door open, but as soon as he pulled, the entire door came loose.

“Good heavens, it’s deteriorated to such a state, I suppose only those brick buildings are still acceptable.” Yan Yujin shook his head. “There isn’t a single place that doesn’t need fixing....”

“The doors and windows of the buildings also need changing, even if they have not rotted, they are far too filthy.” Xie Bi added, “Brother Su, how could someone like you live in such a crude manor? I hear there’s a good place in the eastern part of the city....”

“Never mind,” Mei Changsu cut him off with a smile. “The money has been paid, what more is there to say? As Yujin said, our Jiangzuo Alliance isn’t wealthy enough to buy a few manors in the capital and have them sit empty.”

Xie Bi added hurriedly, “You would not need to pay for the manor in the eastern part of the city, His Highness said....”

“Xie Bi,” Xiao Jingrui sounded a bit fed up. “Brother Su will handle this himself, why are you saying so much?”

Xie Bi was getting angry too, and was about to retort when Mei Changsu slipped in between the two and said with a playful smile, “Even if this manor isn’t good, I have already bought it, and I must live in it no matter what, or my brothers in the alliance would scold me for spending money recklessly, and you don’t want to see me receive a scolding, do you?” As he spoke, he pondered which ‘Highness’ Xie Bi had meant.

“I’m afraid it will be at least a month before this manor is fit to be lived in.” Yan Yujin smiled. “But Brother Su has said he is in no hurry, and Jingrui doesn’t want you to move out so soon either, look, we’ve only come out to see the place today and he already looks so unhappy.”

Xiao Jingrui bit his lip and did not counter Yan Yujin’s words, but thought for a long moment and then finally asked slowly, “Brother Su, are you really...moving out?”

“I think I will be staying in the capital for awhile, and if I continued to take advantage of your hospitality, I would not feel comfortable.” Mei Changsu’s questioning glance was gentle, but he spoke with his normal courtesy.

“Snow Cottage is our guest cottage and doesn’t affect the main residence, what disturbance would it be?” Xiao Jingrui said with melancholy.

Mei Changsu smiled faintly. “I know the Marquis and the Grand Princess would not mind, but it is still not too convenient....”

Although his words were simple, they hid a deeper meaning. No one present was stupid, and remembering that he would eventually become an important adviser of one of the palaces, they understood what he meant by the inconvenience, and silence fell over the group.

“Moving out is good too, and anyway it’s not far. As for me, coming here to visit Brother Su is even more convenient than going over to the Xie residence.” After a moment, Yan Yujin’s joyful laugh broke the solemn atmosphere. “But although this place isn’t big, it is still a whole manor, how could you and Fei Liu live here alone? You should find some servants and guards.”

“I’ve never liked being waited on, and Fei Liu has always taken care of himself. But we do need some people to take care of the place, and that won’t be difficult to arrange.... As for guards, there’s Fei Liu for one, and for another, I have some friends staying in the capital at the moment, and can invite them here as guests.”

Xiao Jingrui remembered that Yan Yujin had mentioned that the four expert fighters who had escorted them to the capital had not left, and understood, and though he still felt a little upset, he was also greatly relieved.

“It would be good to have a few more people, but...” Who knew what Yan Yujin was thinking, as he grinned mischievously. “Such a forsaken place like this may be full of goblins and witches. Brother Su, you and your friends must be careful in the future, if you ever see a beautiful woman knocking on your window in the middle of the night, you must stand firm, and avoid even opening the window for a closer look, in case your soul is stolen away.”

“Psh,” Xie Bi scoffed, “If you don’t even take a look, how would you know it’s a beautiful woman?”

“If an evil spirit can change its appearance, of course it would choose a pretty one, otherwise if it chose the looks of the Minister of Appointments, Minister Sun, then it might as well just keep its original appearance.”

The whole capital knew of the coarse features of the Minister of Appointments, Minister Sun, and the young masters Xiao and Xie thought of his appearance and couldn’t contain their laughter, though Xie Bi scolded through his smiles, “Judging people by their appearances, how cruel of you! You think you’re so handsome, but what has Minister Sun done to you?”

Yan Yujin huffed and threw open his fan dashingly and gave it a wave, turning to face the wall with a pleased look on his face. “Spirits and goblins, listen well, if you must change your shape, then take on my appearance, and I guarantee you will be praised for being handsome and elegant....”

His words would have been amusing any day, but especially at this moment when, although his face was handsome, his entire body was covered in soil, his hair a tangled mess of grass and roots, and his appearance so far from being handsome and elegant that it should rather have been described as a wind-blown chicken’s nest, his two friends couldn’t help bending over in hysterical laughter, and even Mei Changsu turned his face away, his shoulders shaking gently.

“How could this enthralling manner of yours be learned in such a short time?” Xie Bi had laughed until he choked, and now spoke through his coughs. “You’d better ask Brother Su to clean up one of the cottages just for you, so you can come and stay a few days and let those gobins and spirits have a nice, long look....”

“I won’t keep talking to you,” Yan Yujin turned to Mei Changsu with a very serious expression. “Those two have been bullying me since I was young, I’m used to it.”

“Yes,” Mei Changsu nodded solemnly. “I also feel that they are bullying you.”

“Hurry up and go change your clothes,” Xiao Jingrui punched his friend in the arm, feeling his heart much lightened after this episode of laughter. “It wasn’t easy acquiring the reputation of the capital’s fanciest embroidered pillow, so you’d better hang on to that title.”

“Obviously, I’m beautiful both inside and out, alright? You envious man...” Yan Yujin sighed dramatically and brushed at his soiled clothing, but he had only just begun when his hands suddenly froze.

“What is it?” Mei Changsu immediately knew something was wrong, and asked hurriedly.

“It’s gone....”

“What’s gone?”

“My jade moon chain....”

“Ah?” Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi both knew how precious his jade moon chain was to Yan Yujin, and both stepped forward. “Maybe you didn’t bring it out with you?”

“The jade moon chain was hung on this belt, and the belt was on my waist, so how could I not have brought it out with me? I felt it here before I came to find you guys....” As Yan Yujin spoke, his face grew pale.

Although Mei Changsu didn’t know what he was talking about, seeing the expressions of those present, he understood this was no ordinary object, and said quickly, “It must have fallen. We can retrace the steps you’ve taken today, and probably can still find it.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Xiao Jingrui added, patting his friend’s back comfortingly. “Even if we don’t find it today, don’t worry, with careful searching, we can certainly find it again.”

Yan Yujin’s heart was full of worry, and he didn’t say any more, but turned and jumped over the door that had fallen to the ground, returning to the ruined courtyard and began turning over grass and rocks as he carefully retraced his steps.

After Mei Changsu had quietly inquired after the appearance of the jade moon chain from Xiao Jingrui, the three also bent over the path and began looking closely. Fei Liu hung from a tree branch high up in the air, peering curiously down at this strange scene that he couldn’t make sense of.

The return journey through the desolate manor took almost two hours longer than their arrival, but despite carefully retracing their footsteps and leaving a mess in their wake, there was still no sign of the jade moon chain.

Finally, everyone straightened their aching backs, and their gazes fell as one onto a specific place.

The dried well covered by wild grass and rotting wood.

“It won’t be such a coincidence, would it?” Xie Bi said uneasily, “It would be difficult to search inside the well, even if there’s no longer any water, there’s probably still a thick layer of mud....”

Xiao Jingrui’s brow creased and he gave his younger brother a shove, then turned and patted Yan Yujin’s shoulder with a smile, then said lightly, “What’s so difficult about an old dried well? Let me go down, and I can definitely find it for you!”

“I can go down myself,” Yan Yujin understood his good intentions and returned a faint smile. “My clothes are already dirty anyway, what’s the point of dragging you through the mud as well....”

“Psh,” Xiao Jingrui half-jokingly gave him a punch. “They’re just clothes. It’s dark down there, and my night vision is better than yours, and anyway, isn’t the young master afraid of snakes? In this kind of dark and wet place, there will be plenty of snakes....”

At these words, both his brother and his friend rolled their eyes, and he was a bit confused, when Mei Changsu said quietly from the side, “Jingrui, it’s winter, snakes hibernate in the winter....”

“Never mind,” Xie Bi gave his brother a look. “I’ll go find some rope, no matter who goes down, he should be tied tightly.” As he spoke, he turned to leave, but was stopped by Mei Changsu.

“Fei Liu has already gone to find some, he is rather quick....” He had just finished his explanation when the youth’s shadow descended quickly, his hands clasping a coil of thick rope.

Xiao Jingrui grabbed it and wound one end around his own waist, and as Yan Yujin knew he was blind in the dark, he didn’t protest, but reached out to help him make sure the knots were tied tightly, and only said quietly, “Be careful.”

“Ng,” Xiao Jingrui promised, then turned to see Mei Changsu picking dried grass from the ground, and asked curiously, “Brother Su, what are you doing?”



“Making a small torch from dried grass and wood, so you can bring it down with you.”

“No need, I can see very well in the dark, they all say I’m like an owl.”

Mei Changsu gave a startled laugh, then shook his head. “It’s not to give you light, this well doesn’t look shallow, and the mouth has been covered by wild grass, so the air flow must be poor, and the air down below is probably foul and turbid, if the torch goes out down there, then you cannot stay long, or it will be easy to suffocate.”

The masters Yan and Xie were badly frightened, and hurriedly bent down to help pick wild grass, and the torch was quickly prepared. Mei Changsu took out a small flint stone from Fei Liu’s person and lit the torch, then handed it to Xiao Jingrui, who was slowly lowered into the mouth of the well. Xie Bi and Yan Yujin held onto the rope tightly, letting it slowly down, while Mei Changsu knelt by the mouth of the well, following the descent of the bright light.

Since the jade moon chain was an ornament hung from the waist, it was naturally quite small, and although Xiao Jingrui had gone down for quite some time, he only kept calling for them to let him down further, as if he had not found anything yet.

“Stop, I’ve reached the bottom, the mud is really quite thick.” A while later, Xiao Jingrui’s voice drifted up from the bottom of the well, echoing against the mossy walls and coming out slightly distorted. “It’s difficult to search down here, it might take me awhile, and the torch is just about used up so if you see it go out, don’t worry....”

“But...” Yan Yujin bit his lip, worried, and was about to continue when an arm fell across his shoulder, and he turned to see Mei Changsu’s smiling eyes.

“Don’t worry, the torch has been burning steadily all along, it should be fine.”

Looking into that knowing gaze, Yan Yujin couldn’t help lowering his eyes, saying quietly, “Jingrui...has always loved being clean....”

“It is only the mud of the well, and will easily wash off,” Mei Changsu smiled. “He doesn’t mind, what are you minding for? Is the jade moon chain very important to you?”

“Ng,” Yan Yujin nodded. “It’s an heirloom handed down in my family, my grandfather gave it to me before he died....”

“So,” Mei Changsu was still smiling faintly, “Finding something important to his friend is also very important to Jingrui.”

Yan Yujin looked at him for a moment and suddenly smiled, then crawled to the edge of the well and called down in a loud voice, “Jingrui – since you have this rare chance to do a favour for me, you better look hard down there –”

“Damn you!” The cheerful curse drifted up from below. “Just wait ’til I get out and shower you in mud!”

Mei Changsu couldn’t restrain his smile, and Xie Bi also shook his head with a grin, and the mood lightened considerably. After a long while, there still seemed to be no sign of success.

“Jingrui, if you can’t find it, just come back up, there’s no need to stay down there....” Yan Yujin called.

“A bit longer....” Xiao Jingrui’s voice echoed up, but the sound had not yet faded when suddenly shook, and a surprised “Oh!” sounded from below.

“What is it?” Yan Yujin was terrified, and leaned half his body into the well, shouting loudly, “Jingrui! Jingrui!”

A reply came from somewhere down the well: “I’m alright....”

“Then what did you do that for, you scared me to death!” Yan Yujin couldn’t help scolding, and turned to say to Xie Bi, “Let’s pull him up!”

“Wait,” Xiao Jingrui hurriedly stopped them, “There are still some places I missed, I’ll be done soon....”

Mei Changsu quietly added, “Don’t worry, if there’s anything wrong, Jingrui would tell us. Since he’s gone down, he might as well have a careful look.”

Yan Yujin’s brow furrowed as he sat down again by the mouth of the well, and a few moments passed before he heard the voice call again, “Pull me up!”

Coming up was naturally much easier than going down, and in the blink of an eye, Xiao Jingrui’s head emerged, his body predictably covered in mud, and both arms covered in soil as well.

Yan Yujin silently grasped one of his hands and brushed roughly at the dirt with the inner side of his robes. It was Xie Bi who finally asked, “Did you find it?”

Xiao Jingrui raised his other blackened hand, which had been tightened into a fist, and slowly opened it to reveal a hard, moon-shaped object covered in mud.

“Oh, it really did fall in there.” Xie Bi pulled out a handkerchief from his sleeve and wiped the jade moon chain clean, then returned it to Yan Yujin, who glanced at it before slipping it into his pocket.

“I’m glad you found it, and now you two smelly monsters can go back for a bath!” Xie Bi let out a sigh and slapped them both on the back.

“Brother,” Xiao Jingrui turned his head, his gaze serious. “We will go back and bathe, but I must trouble you to make a run to the Capital Magistrate Office.”

“The Capital Magistrate Office? What for?” Xie Bi didn’t understand.

“To report a case. I saw down in the mud of the well...there were human skeletons....”

“What?” Everyone was shocked. Yan Yujin said in a hush, “When you cried out just then, was that when you found the bones?”

“Ng.”

“Then why didn’t you come up right away?!”

“I saw just then a glint of green in the grass on the other side. The jade moon chain is so small, if I came out then and let others go in to remove the remains, it would be covered and lost, so I wanted to find it first, and luckily, I did.”

“Stupid!” Yan Yujin scolded through gritted teeth. “It must smell so bad, hurry and go bathe.”

“Human remains in a dried well...” Xie Bi’s face had slowly become pale. “Even hearing the words is terrifying. You really have some guts, to stay down there for so long...if it were me, I’d have climbed out right away....”

“Can you compare to Jingrui? After all, he’s half a jianghu man!” Yan Yujin had quickly found a new object of attack.

“Yes, and I’m only a useless man of the court!” Xie Bi replied self-mockingly, then shrugged. “Let’s go, Brother Su.”

Xiao Jingrui looked at him strangely. “Where are you taking Brother Su?”

“To report the case to the Magistrate Office!”

“Can’t you go by yourself?”

Xie Bi raised an eyebrow. “Big brother, this manor has been bought by Brother Su, it would be best if he reported the case in person, no?”

“Xie Bi is right,” Mei Changsu’s gaze drifted over to the well hidden amongst the wild grass. “I should really go myself.”

Xiao Jingrui thought about it and saw the logic, and anyway he was extremely uncomfortable in his current dirty and smelly attire, and didn’t say anymore. The five split into two groups, and each went their own way after leaving the manor.

## CHAPTER 38

### *Qin Banruo*

Perhaps because the backgrounds of those who reporting the findings were not simple, this ‘corpses in the well’ case which had been accidentally discovered by these gentlemen immediately raised even greater waves than usual both inside and outside the capital. In addition, when the Magistrate Office members rushed to the scene for a closer examination, they discovered no fewer than ten sets of human skeletons, all completely decomposed, and which all seemed to be female, based on preliminary investigations. When these shocking details were made known, the entire city was stunned. Capital Magistrate Gao Sheng was ordered by his superiors to take over the case and given a strict deadline, and he was soon up to his earlobes in the investigation.

As the current owner of the manor, Mei Changsu was summoned for questioning more than once, but as he really did not know anything, repeated questioning did not produce any new directions of research, and anyway Gao Sheng did not dare to inconvenience him too much on account of his recent fame, and so turned the focus of his investigation onto the business owner who had acted as middleman instead, and at the same time sent people to carefully seek out the purpose and owner of the manor before it had disintegrated to this degree.

Around seven to eight days later, the results of the investigation were back: the manor had changed hands twice this year, and was originally owned by a man called Zhang Jin, of unknown background, who had once owned numerous houses of entertainment in the capital, and who was low-key, but nonetheless powerful in his wealth and relations. He had died of sickness four years ago, and his businesses too gradually died off, and so this manor had been released for sale.

Gao Sheng immediately sent people to the Zhang family to detain everyone associated with this matter for further questioning. At this time, a man named Shi Douguan suddenly came forward to the Magistrate Office and claimed to have been one of Zhang Jin’s trusted aides before his death, saying that he had received death threats regarding this case and begging for protection from the court. Gao Sheng was delighted, and planned to stay up all night questioning him, but he had only just begun when a servant appeared to say that a message had arrived from the Crown Prince.

Gao Sheng curiously changed his attire and came to the main hall, where a young eunuch was waiting, and after he had bowed, the eunuch said crisply, “An order from the Crown Prince: I have heard about the case of the ‘corpses in the well’ in our royal city, and in such a matter as this, it is not possible for me, as the head of the government, not to inquire further, and therefore I hereby summon Capital Magistrate Gao Sheng to enter the Eastern Palace tomorrow to discuss this matter in person. End order.”

“Your servant Gao Sheng receives the Crown Prince’s order.” Gao Sheng hurriedly bowed.

After the eunuch messenger had left, Gao Sheng turned the matter over in his mind uneasily. To have been made an official in Jinling, a city overflowing with princes and nobility, Gao Sheng naturally had an astute mind and his own smooth set of skills. The Crown Prince suddenly intervening in the case was unlikely to be solely due to his responsibilities of governance, and there were perhaps some hidden details that he had not yet perceived. After some thought, Gao Sheng ordered for Shi Douguan to be brought from the interrogation room and took him into his personal room in his own house, and in the subsequent interrogation, purposefully dismissed all his subordinates and servants from the room.

As Gao Sheng was questioning Shi Douguan late into the night, a lantern also burned in the study of Prince Yu’s residence far into the early hours.

“This Shi Douguan really has a list of names on his person?” Prince Yu Xiao Jinghuan paced back and forth. “Are we certain of this piece of news?”

“Your servant can guarantee it.” A middle-aged person dressed in gray stood before him, and said with assurance, “That manor is called the Lan Manor, and is in name the private residence of Zhang Jin, but in reality, was the secret venue for his business. Some officials of the court didn’t dare to openly enter certain houses of entertainment, and so relied on Zhang Jin’s private arrangements. No matter what request the customer had, he was able to fulfill it. With time, it was not unusual for some of those who enjoyed themselves too much to make a miscalculation, and accidentally kill the girls they had taken for amusement, and the corpses found are part of that group. Five years ago, when Zhang Jin died, those kinds of exchanges were halted, it was just that no one could imagine that he had disposed of those corpses so carelessly, or that he had actually recorded the events in writing.”

A dim light grew in Prince Yu’s gaze. “So, the names on this list....”

“They are all people of renown and repute, and some are even important members of the court....”

“Our side?”

“I think there are people from both sides, but...” The person in gray gave a hidden smile. “His Highness the Crown Prince and his people have much more reason to worry....”

“Why?”

“When your servant found Shi Douguan, he wouldn’t hand over the list, but to gain my trust, he told me a few of the names of those guests who had taken the lives of those girls, and one of them is Lou Zhijing.”

Prince Yu’s eyes shone, and he let out a great laugh. “Lou Zhijing is really on there? Haha, the Crown Prince must be panicking.”

“Lou Zhijing knows what he has done, and your servant believes he will tell the Crown Prince everything and beg for protection, Your Highness, why did you not take Shi Douguan into your residence, but let him go to the Magistrate Office? What if the Crown Prince....”

“Don’t worry,” Prince Yu said coldly. “The Crown Prince still has not yet managed to control the capital. Gao Sheng may not look like much, but he is no ordinary official, and no matter how the Crown Prince pressures him, he will still be able to withstand for two to three days at least.”

“Your Highness’ meaning is....”

“Our intervention must not be too obvious, or my father Emperor will become suspicious.” Prince Yu gazed at the light before the window, his eyebrow raised, and motioned for the person in gray to draw close, whispered a few names in his ear, then said, “I must trouble you further tonight to go in my place to speak to these people in secret, and ask them frankly whether they have had interactions with Zhang Jin in the past, and whether they have killed anyone, and if they are honest, I will naturally find a way to keep them safe, but if they lie, then they will deserve their punishment when they are found out.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“As long as these few are not on the list, I don’t care about anyone else being found out, if we are not willing to sacrifice a few of our people, how could we catch the great wolf?”

The person in gray was accustomed to his careless abandonment of his pieces, and did not comment, only answering, “Yes, Your Highness” before withdrawing.

Prince Yu paced a few more times around the room, deep in thought, appearing uneasy. After a long while, he was heard saying to the lamp on his desk, “Mei Changsu bought the Lan Manor and uncovered this case, perhaps this is no

coincidence? Since he has done this, is he trying to show that he is leaning towards me?”

He was alone in the room, and he appeared at first to be speaking to himself, but not long after he had spoken, the thick velvet curtain on the eastern side of the room trembled gently, and the soft, clear voice of a woman said quietly, “Not necessarily. Perhaps he is only settling a personal grievance, and the matter has nothing to do with Your Highness.”

Following the words of this beautiful voice, a graceful, elegant figure appeared. From her appearance only, her looks could not perhaps topple kingdoms and countries, but paired with her dainty air, she could indeed stir the hearts of any who looked upon her.

Prince Yu turned to her, and although his expression still looked slightly uneasy, he quickly recovered his composure. “Banruo, have you discovered anything?”

Qin Banruo pursed her thin, red lips, paused, and said, “Is His Highness aware that Lou Zhijing once served as the governor of Yi province?”

“This I know.” Prince Yu’s mind turned quickly. “Yi province is within the area controlled by Jiangzuo Alliance, have they had conflicts in the past?”

“Lou Zhijing is a rare talent, and therefore has become a trusted confidante of the Crown Prince, but his uncontrollable lust is not something that can be easily changed. I have found out that when he was in Yi province, he forcibly took a pair of twin sisters into his residence, but their older cousin was a lowly member of Jiangzuo Alliance, and he begged his lord to personally ask Lou Zhijing to return his younger sisters.<sup>64</sup> Lou Zhijing consented, and then returned to his residence and first violently raped the sisters before releasing them from his manor. The two young ladies committed suicide in shame, but Lou Zhijing denied his crime, and Jiangzuo Alliance could not find any proof, and so could only watch him evade the law, and thus were born the seeds of this case. But these events were never made public, and few know about them...”

Prince Yu waited a long while, then saw that the young woman had no intention of continuing, and asked in surprise, “There’s only this bit of enmity?”

“Your Highness feels it is not enough?”

“Of course not,” Prince Yu couldn’t believe it. “Lou Zhijing is the Minister of Revenue and the Crown Prince’s trusted adviser, and Mei Changsu would make an enemy of him just for the sake of the sisters of one lowly member of his alliance?”

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<sup>64</sup> in Chinese familial naming conventions, your cousins born of your father’s brothers are called your brothers and sisters (because you share a surname with them)



Qin Banruo was silent for a moment, then said, “Does Your Highness truly want to recruit Mei Changsu?”

“Why do you even need to ask, of course I do.”

“Then Your Highness should better understand how Mei Changsu works.”

“You mean....”

“To Your Highness, those two sisters may not mean much, but to Mei Changsu, it was a great insult and offense. Jiangzuo Alliance was able to quickly become the greatest sect in the world not only because of their skills in the jianghu world nor because their loyalty and chivalry has captured the hearts of commoners, but most importantly, because they have carefully honed their power and authority over the years. If Jiangzuo Alliance had not appeared to personally request this favour, then they would likely not have cared even if Lou Zhijing had behaved even more cruelly. But it was precisely because Lou Zhijing looked down on this jianghu sect and paid them lip service before enacting this grotesque drama that he committed the great taboo against Jiangzuo Alliance, and so naturally his actions were regarded as provocation.”

Prince Yu was listening closely. “So that means, Mei Changsu was only enacting a personal revenge, and wasn’t trying to favour me at all?”

“I do not dare comment on this. The actions of this person recently are a mystery, and I have not yet been able to interpret them clearly.” Qin Banruo sighed lightly. “The first time Your Highness expressed a desire to recruit him was in the seventh month, correct?”

“Yes.”

“The Crown Prince’s invitation could not have been much earlier than that of Your Highness. From the information I have gathered, when he received the invitation from the capital, Mei Changsu was a jianghu man through and through, and I cannot find any evidence of any interactions or relationships with any persons from the court. But afterwards, Mei Changsu on the one hand declined the offers of the Crown Prince and Your Highness, and on the other hand left the heart of the Jiangzuo Alliance and finally moved into the capital, what is he trying to do?”

“He probably knows that talents that gain the attention of the Crown Prince and myself only have two roads to choose from. As the chief of Jiangzuo Alliance, this top-ranked gentleman of the Langya lists has led a contented life, why would he want to choose a dead end?”

“But the road he is walking now, does Your Highness think it is a way to survive?”

Prince Yu was startled, and stayed silent.

“Right now, is the Duke of Qing the heaviest stone in Your Highness’ heart?”

Xiao Jinghuan’s eyebrows furrowed. “Banruo, why do you ask what you already know?”

“Most of those in the military have remained neutral, and the few military officials that are truly loyal to Your Highness are the Duke of Qing’s people. If he falls, then there will remain in your hand only quills, and no swords....”

“This I know,” Prince Yu sounded impatient. “You don’t need to say anymore.”

“From Mei Changsu’s actions so far, he is very familiar with the power balance in the court, and it is impossible for him not to know how important the Duke of Qing is to Your Highness. Even if Xie Bi was right and they only came across the accusers on the road by accident, if Mei Changsu had the slightest inclination to favour your Highness, he should not have gone out of his way to make sure those two arrived safely in the capital.”

Following her steady words, sweat broke out over Prince Yu’s forehead, but he only silently clenched his fist, and did not say a word.

Qin Banruo lightly wiped away the sweat beading over his hairline, and a sigh escaped again from her cherry red lips. “When he made that choice, he offended Your Highness and seemed to favour the Crown Prince. And so at that time, I confidently told Your Highness that it was very likely that, on entering the capital, Mei Changsu would choose the Crown Prince....”

“But...” Prince Yu spat out the word, but could not continue.

“But his actions now have truly exceeded my expectations.” Banruo lowered her head and arranged the tassels on her sleeve, a white jade bracelet glistening on her wrist, its snowy brightness as mesmerizing as her skin, but out of the beautiful woman’s mouth came only the cold analysis of strategies. “If he has slightly offended Your Highness over the matter of the Duke of Qing, then over the matter of Princess Nihuang, he has greatly offended the Crown Prince....”

Prince Yu’s eyes widened. “What, Banruo, you think that Mei Changsu engineered the matter of the Princess?”

“Does Your Highness truly believe it was coincidence that you came across him on the street walking by himself that day?”

Prince Yu took a step back, sat down on a round chair, and beat his fist hard against his leg twice, his face full of uncertainty. “That is only your deduction. The events of that day involved too many people – Prince Jing, Jingning, the Grand Empress Dowager, the Empress, Meng Zhi, and me... who among this list could be so easily manipulated by Mei Changsu?”

“Then Your Highness’ conclusion is....”

“Perhaps some things were coincidence,” Prince Yu looked to be deep in thought, speaking slowly. “Perhaps he did not arrange anything, and only came across the news, or perhaps he was not attacking the Crown Prince at all, but only wanted to save Nihuang....”

What could not be denied was that, although Prince Yu had underestimated Mei Changsu’s control over the situation, his guesses regarding what had truly happened that day were not far from the truth.

Qin Banruo thought for a moment, and agreeing that it was unlikely that Mei Changsu had been able to single-handedly control the matter of the Princess, nodded her head.

“But now I realize that I have been careless.” Prince Yu smiled coldly. “Contact Duan Jin tomorrow, I have some news the Crown Prince should hear, and make sure she acts as naturally as possible.”

Banruo only stared for a moment before understanding. Prince Yu only knew that Mei Changsu had been involved in the matter of the Princess because the Empress had deceived Jingning, and found out from her that it was Mei Changsu who had asked her to bring the Grand Empress Dowager to Zhiluo palace. None of the others involved had even mentioned this Mister Su. Now, although the Crown Prince and Noble Consort Yu hated Prince Yu, hated the Empress, hated Prince Jing, and even hated Princess Nihuang, it would never occur to them to hate Mei Changsu, because they didn’t even know that Mei Changsu had been involved in the outcome of the event. And therefore, there was great advantage to letting them know what Mei Changsu had done.

Prince Yu took one look at Banruo’s expression and knew she had understood his meaning, and said smiling, “It’s said that Bi Gan<sup>65</sup> has a seven-chambered heart,<sup>66</sup> but I see that Banruo has more than seven.”

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<sup>65</sup> the Chinese god of wealth

<sup>66</sup> it’s part of a legend / folktale, and the meaning is essentially that the person is very wise

Qin Banruo smiled sweetly and looked neither humble nor proud, her beautiful figure shining under the light like jade, and Prince Yu felt his heart stir, but when he reached for her hand, she stepped aside lightly.

“You are still unwilling?” Xiao Jinghuan said with a small frown.

Qin Banruo said indifferently, “Although Banruo has experienced much, I once swore to my shifu<sup>67</sup> that I would not wed in this life, pray Your Highness forgive me.”

Although Prince Yu had fallen for her long ago, he still had some principles and was not willing to force any lady, and also deeply enjoyed Qin Banruo’s wisdom and insight, which helped him collect and analyze much of his information, and so he only controlled his impulse and let out a deep sigh.

Prince Yu’s consort was of high birth, her fathers and brothers were all officials in the court, she had long ago bore children, and she was heavily favoured by the Empress, so even if he himself was captivated by Qin Banruo’s beauty, he had given up the idea of abandoning his wife for her sake, and besides, there was a long future ahead of them, and there was no point to rushing anything now, so he poured a cup of fresh tea for her and said with a smile, “I have been rude.”

Qin Banruo understood everything he had been thinking, and so smiled and continued the previous conversation. “The reason Banruo cannot understand Mei Changsu is because his actions follow no logic. In the matter of the Duke of Qing, he chose to offend Your Highness, but in the matter of the Princess, he chose to offend the Crown Prince, and now with this Lan Manor, the case that has been uncovered implicates both sides. Isn’t it because Your Highness was worried that the name lists would include someone important to us that you sent Gray Hawk to investigate tonight?”

Prince Yu’s brow furrowed, and he absently raised the cup he had poured for Banruo and drained it, saying dazedly, “Could it be...that he is actually...”

“What?” Qin Banruo raised an eyebrow.

“He is testing me and the Crown Prince?”

Qin Banruo’s heart shuddered, and she sank into deep thought.

“And perhaps also to showcase his own abilities....” As Prince Yu thought, he became more and more certain, and hit the table with his hand. “The thoughts and

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<sup>67</sup> you probably know what shifu means lol (if only from Kung Fu Panda) but it basically means ‘master’ in the sense of teacher and apprentice, not owner and slave. Xia Dong/Qiu/Chun all call Xia Jiang “shifu”, and each other “shi-mei” (apprentice-sister) or “shi-ge” (apprentice-brother)

actions of these great talents are always a bit strange, especially when coming across narrow, petty-minded masters. It is not strange that he would first want to test us. And if the Crown Prince, even knowing that Mei Changsu had destroyed his plans for Princess Nihuang, still persists in his respectful attitude towards Mei Changsu, or even gives up Lou Zhijing as a demonstration of his magnanimity, then I fear even if Mei Changsu's heart is hardened, he would not fail to be moved.... And if Mei Changsu decides to work for the Crown Prince, he will certainly act quickly, to make up for the wrongs he has done to him so far and to gain his absolute trust, and then, we will naturally bear the brunt of his attack."

As he spoke, Prince Yu felt more and more uneasy, and finally stood up in a frenzy. "This person's strategies are truly unlike any other, I definitely cannot let the Crown Prince seize him first."

Qin Banruo sat down slowly and said pensively, "Then if Your Highness can take Mei Changsu as your subordinate before the Crown Prince can act, are you willing to trust him unconditionally?"

Prince Yu had only been thinking of how to acquire this chief of Jiangzuo Alliance, and had not put much thought into what to do with him after the fact, and was silent for a moment.

"What would be the benefit in such a talent as this if we do not dare to use him once we have him?" Qin Banruo was exceedingly clever, and after these words, she did not dig deeper but turned away to look at the moon, leaving Prince Yu to his thoughts.

A long while later, the lantern on the desk sputtered, and the smell of burnt oil drifted out. Qin Banruo stood, removed the lantern cover and delicately trimmed the candle, watching Prince Yu out of the corner of her eye.

"If I cannot even tame one Mei Changsu...then what use would it be to talk about grand plans for ruling the kingdom?" Prince Yu seemed not to see her gaze, but his voice rose now. "Banruo, you must watch the Crown Prince's movements for me, I...must have this Mei Changsu."

## CHAPTER 39

### *Spiral Market Street*

After the wings of night had descended over the city, most streets could be described by these two words: ‘dark’ and ‘quiet’; but there are always some places in the world where the situation is the opposite.

In the western part of Jinling, a winding section of the red-light district known as Spiral Market Street stood surrounded on both sides by tall pavilions and splendid buildings, and stayed silent and still in the daytime, but once night fell, the street was lit with wine and song and dance. The meandering road wound through the city, and the grace and charm of this gentle paradise mesmerized all who entered, causing them to linger and forget about returning home.

The entertainment houses of Spiral Market Street each had their own style and attraction, such as the popular music of Miaoyin House,<sup>68</sup> the latest dances from Willow House, the beautiful women of Crimson Sleeve House, the talented artisans of Orchid House.... each had their own unique strength, and although they had their conflicts, they had nonetheless been established for some time and had their own unwritten rules of conduct, and thus, as neighbours, they managed to get along well enough, and sometimes even pitched in to help each other out.

Like tonight....

“Mother Zhu, it’s not that I want to cause you to lose face by refusing to help,” Third Aunt Shen of Miaoyin House pleaded, her face full of remorse. “You and I have known each other for so long, and Willow House and Miaoyin House are like family. You may ask any other lady for help and I will certainly not refuse you, but Miss Gong Yu is not seeing any guests today....”

“Sister Shen, I have no use for any other lady, I need Miss Gong Yu to save us!” Mother Zhu’s face was pale, she was close to tears, and if she were not being held up, she would have long since fallen to her knees.

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<sup>68</sup> literally, ‘miraculous music’ house

“What? What bothersome guests are these, that even Mother Zhu cannot handle them?”

Mother Zhu was about to speak when a young servant boy came running over, crying anxiously before he had even come to a stop, “Mother, mother, it’s terrible, Young Master He is wrecking the place!”

Third Aunt Shen raised an eyebrow, and reached out to support Mother Zhu, who had gone limp, asking, “Young Master He, son of Minister He, the Minister of Appointments?”

“Yes, it’s that brat!” Mother Zhu stamped her foot. “He came in drunk tonight, and insisted on seeing our Xinliu, but Xinliu was keeping company with Master Qiu, son of the Earl of Wen. But he refused to take no for an answer, and refused to see any of our other ladies, and started raising a fuss.”

Third Aunt Shen’s face grew serious. “It’s not his first day out, how can he not know the rules of these places?”

“Isn’t it because he’s used to relying on his power? The Earl of Wen may be a nobleman, but he has no place in the court, whereas Minister He has all the power of the Ministry of Appointments, a real position, and so this young master is used to being waited on hand and foot, and got impatient after a couple of hours.”

Third Aunt Shen sighed. “Such is the way of the world. Hadn’t you better try to convince Master Qiu to let him have his way?”

Mother Zhu let out an “Ai”, and said, “Master Qiu has loved Xinliu for a long time, how could he be willing to let go now? He came first, and as he refuses to leave, I can’t force him to leave against the rules, not to mention our girl Xinliu also can’t stand Young Master He....”

“What about Xinyang?”

“She’s sick, she can’t even get out of bed....”

Third Aunt Shen frowned, deep in thought.

“Sister Shen, I’m begging you. If Miss Gong Yu is willing to just show her face, Young Master He would certainly be delighted, and our business tonight will be saved, and I will do anything for you in the future, I will be forever in your debt....”

“Alright, alright, you don’t need to say things like this.” Third Aunt Shen gripped Mother Zhu’s arm tightly as she was about to kneel. “It is not up to me, which of these popular ladies do not have their pride? I don’t dare give you an answer, I must first ask Yu’er.”

“Sister, take me to her, I will ask Miss Gong Yu myself.”

“Oh...alright...follow me.” Third Aunt Shen took Mother Zhu by the arm, and the two had just turned around when they both halted in surprise.

A lady dressed in a yellow dress and a splendid green outer garment stood before the fence, and said with a small smile, “I have heard everything. I was just about to pay a visit to Sister Xinyang to see how she’s doing, and since Aunt is experiencing some trouble, it is no problem for me to help out.”

Third Aunt Shen went over to her and said quietly, “Can you handle it?”

Gong Yu laughed coldly. “Isn’t it just He Wenxin? I have my ways.”

She was the leading lady of Miaoyin House, and even her own mother could not control her, and so now, hearing her words, Third Aunt Shen didn’t say anymore, but only ordered Old Man Turtle to arrange for a sedan and saw them out herself, watching as servant girls followed after to wait on them.

When they arrived at Willow House, the place was a mess. Fortunately, the rooms reserved for noble guests were situated at the back and divided into many small courtyards, and so, aside from the disturbance to the neighbouring rooms, the people of Willow House had managed to control the situation.

The glamorously-robed youth at the center of the frenzy was the notorious He Wenxin. Although he was not ugly, his arrogant, aggressive nature made it difficult for anyone to like him, and Gong Yu only gave him a glance before a fierce expression crept over her face.

“Miss...” Mother Zhu was nearly in a panic, and cried out softly.

Gong Yu’s eyes skipped over the comical scene, and then, with a small smile playing on her lips, she slowly stepped into the courtyard, and Mother Zhu immediately gestured for everyone who had been fighting He Wenxin to step aside. The young master who had been frenziedly smashing things left and right suddenly felt the opening, and in one motion, grabbed a flowerpot nearby and flung it in Gong Yu’s direction.

Amidst the startled cries of the spectators, Gong Yu twisted and she quickly slid to her left, neatly dodging the flowerpot, all the while crying out weakly and falling to the ground.

“Miss Gong Yu!” Mother Zhu was so frightened she felt as if half her soul had departed, and ran over to help her, asking desperately, “Where are you hurt?”



As soon as He Wenxin heard Gong Yu's name, a light came over his eyes, and he stared for a moment at the beautiful, charming lady of his dreams, whom he had yearned for but only seen a few times. A smile spread across his face and he hurried forward to lend a hand, saying, "How did Miss Gong Yu come here? You must be scared, it's all the fault of these stupid servants...."

Gong Yu was shivering, but she pushed away He Wenxin's hands and said lowly, "I came to the wrong place...."

"No, no," He Wenxin replied quickly, then asked, "Where is my lady going?"

"Oh, I have no business tonight, and was just going to visit Sister Xinliu...."

Mother Zhu hurriedly cut in, "That girl Xinliu is receiving a guest, could Miss wait a bit?"

"Oh, in that case, I will return to Miaoyin House and come another day."

"Aiya," He Wenxin saw that although the heavens had not sent him a pastry, it had dropped a beautiful woman before him,<sup>69</sup> and he was much appeased, and said coaxingly, "Since my lady has nothing planned tonight, I will keep you company, instead of letting you return to spend the night alone...come in, come in quickly...." He was making his eager invitation when he suddenly remembered that this courtyard had just been rendered to egg yolk pulp by himself, and was not a suitable place to host his beautiful guest, so he quickly glared at Mother Zhu and said, "Hurry and prepare your best courtyard for me! I am going to accompany Miss Gong Yu to drink and admire the moonlight."

Mother Zhu looked up at the cloud-filled sky, what moon was there to admire? But of course these words could not be spoken aloud, and since his temper had been controlled, the important thing was to prepare the place quickly, and so she said with a smile, "The Spring Bridge Cottage is still empty, and is the most comfortable and the most elegant of all the cottages, would the young master and lady care to go there?"

"Hurry, hurry and take us there." He Wenxin impatiently grasped Gong Yu by the arm. "Miss Gong Yu, shall we go?"

Gong Yu lowered her head, and once again brushed aside He Wenxin's hand, beckoned one of her serving girls over, and silently walked on ahead. Although the Young Master He was not bright by nature, he understood that this leading lady of Miaoyin House had always been like this, and so suppressed his emotions and followed her out of the courtyard.

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<sup>69</sup> some Chinese idiom lol I don't know exactly what it means either but I think you get the gist

The Spring Bridge Cottage was located a little to the east of Willow House, and to arrive there, one had to first cross a lake and wind through a peach orchid. But with such beautiful company, He Wenxin did not notice the long journey, and was beaming the entire way. Just as they had passed the lake and walked onto the clear stone path, Gong Yu suddenly halted, and said in a low voice, "Pray the young master go ahead, and Gong Yu will follow."

He Wenxin stared blankly, and immediately asked, "Where are you going?"

"When I fell just now, my robes became dirty with mud, I want to go change."

"No worries," He Wenxin said. "I admire beautiful ladies, not what they wear, you don't need to go to the trouble of changing."

Gong Yu's eyelids fluttered, and she said gently, "Since I will be accompanying the young master for a drink, Gong Yu is not willing to harbour any imperfection in her appearance, pray the young master forgive me."

In the face of these words from such a beautiful woman, He Wenxin had nothing to say, and so just smiled. "Alright, alright, alright, but I will not go ahead, I will wait here. Once you change, we can go together."

Gong Yu turned a gentle gaze on him and smiled without speaking, then turned quickly and disappeared into a small building to one side. He Wenxin was attracted by her pretty air and dazedly took a few steps forward, wanting to take another look, when suddenly he felt something beneath his foot, and when he looked down, he saw the bright reflection of a dropped object. He bent down for a closer look, and realized it was a shining chain of pearls, which must have fallen from the beautiful head.

Stooping and picking up the pearl chain, He Wenxin's mind filled with images of the beautiful lady changing, and his heart lurched and he immediately tucked the pearls into his sleeve and strode towards the building Gong Yu had disappeared into, intending to feast his eyes with this excuse. Mother Zhu, who had gone ahead, immediately saw his intent and was about to protest when she was unceremoniously shoved aside by one of the He family servants.

When he arrived at the small building lit with the glow of a small lamp, He Wenxin snuck to the window with a wicked smile, and was just about to peek inside when a voice drifted from within.

"Miss, is Miss Xinliu upstairs in this building with Master Qiu?"

"Yes...Master Qiu is a dashing young hero, and is such a good match for Sister Xinliu, I am truly happy for both of them...."

“How can Miss be happy? Those two are enjoying themselves upstairs while Miss is lowering herself to spend time with that vile He person?<sup>70</sup>”

Gong Yu gave a quiet sigh. “Sisters must help each other out...but that He person is really far too vulgar, if he only had a tenth of the elegance of Master Qiu, I would not be so unhappy....”

Hearing words such as these, any person would find it difficult to withstand, and He Wenxin was not just anybody, and so fury rose in his heart as his courage grew with his anger, and hearing that the fellow, Master Qiu, was just upstairs, he immediately charged towards the stairs, ran up to the second floor and stopped in front of the door to the room, yelling, “You whose name is Qiu, get your ass out here!”

He raised such a racket that everyone on the path outside could hear him, and Mother Zhu hurried over fearfully with some of her people as the He family servants ran up to the second floor.

Besides Xinliu and Master Qiu, there were two other guests on the second floor, and the first two unlucky persons who were kicked out by He Wenxin looked to be around forty, and even if He Wenxin had had even lower intelligence than he already did, he would realize that these weren't the people he was looking for, and he had just arrived at the third door when it suddenly opened, and a handsome youth in his twenties jumped out, shouting loudly, “Who's raising such a racket?”

He Wenxin's vision grew red and he charged forward with a punch. But Master Qiu was also a noble son by birth, and was used to the pleasures of food and drink, not being bullied, and plus, he had drunk a little wine and the beautiful woman he loved was standing behind him, so he was not going to just stand there, but immediately threw a punch in return.

The two had not had much training in martial arts, and normally even if they were involved in fights, they rarely had to get involved personally, so now, their fighting had no skill or style, but resembled a street brawl, and was quite ugly to behold. Mother Zhu, who had hurried over, was almost in tears of panic, and was about to shout for her people to pull them apart when the He family servants rushed over to help their master subdue his opponent. Although Master Qiu also had servants, they had been invited elsewhere for drinks, and had not received the news, and Mother Zhu saw that the situation was deteriorating and hurriedly ordered the guards of Willow House to help. The servants of the He family were accustomed to handling their captives roughly, and fell upon their victim and began beating him furiously, while He Wenxin was even more violent and grabbed a large flower vase and began lowering it with all his strength down onto Master Qiu's head.

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<sup>70</sup> literally, “that person who's surname is He”

“Master, dodge!” A frantic cry rose from the room, and Master Qiu immediately twisted towards the left, but suddenly his right leg grew numb and he lost his balance, and, in a flash, his vision darkened, and he only felt a tremendous pain in his forehead before he toppled to the ground.

The white flower vase, which was half the height of a person, shattered brilliantly on his head, and the sound froze every person in the room, as everyone’s eyes seemed to widen in slow motion, watching as fresh blow sprayed from Master Qiu’s forehead, as his whole body shook for a few moments and then fell onto the glass shard-covered floor, and his head became showered in red. At that moment, even the killer himself was shocked into stillness.

As the initial shock passed, a sharp cry sounded from the room, and everyone began to realize what had happened. With a face pale as clay, Mother Zhu rushed to Master Qiu’s side and grasped his wrist, then her whole body went limp, as if she were about to faint.

“He...it’s his fault he didn’t dodge...he didn’t dodge...” He Wenxin kept repeating, backing up a few steps to lean on the railing. One of the more daring guests stepped forward and examined closely for a moment before lifting his head and saying in a shaking voice, “Dead...he’s dead....”

At his words, Mother Zhu seemed to regain some of her composure, and stood up, her hair a mess, and crying, “Help, help, call the authorities, hurry and call the authorities....”

Although He Wenxin was stunned because he had killed someone by his own hand, one of the guards among his servants hurriedly tried to take control of the situation. “Wait, don’t...don’t report it...let’s talk, let’s first talk about this....”

Hearing this, He Wenxin seemed to wake up, and he hurried forward and grabbed Mother Zhu, saying, “I won’t let you report it, I’ll pay, I’ll pay!”

“What’s the bloody use in paying money now?” Mother Zhu cried loudly. “Master Qiu is also of noble birth, how could the old Earl of Wen let this slide? My Willow House is ruined...ruined....”

“Young Master, hurry, let’s leave, let’s go home and have the old master think of a plan, hurry!” The guard who had spoken up before pulled He Wenxin out the door, but they were blocked by the people of Willow House, and the situation descended into chaos once more.

In direct contrast to the frenzied mess was Gong Yu, who had appeared at some point in the hallway of the second floor. She had changed into a light blue dress, and now slowly walked around the chaos, slipping unnoticed into the room in which everything had happened.

On the ground in the room sat a beautiful young lady, her face stunned and fearful, her eyes dripping with horrified tears, her body shaking so hard that the chattering of her teeth could be clearly heard. She was obviously in shock over the bloody events that had taken place before her eyes.

Gong Yu walked over to her and knelt, gently patting her back, and said, “Sister Xinliu, don’t be afraid, it’s alright...nothing will happen to you....”

Her voice was clear and sweet, and brought a strange comfort with it. Xin Liu shakily lifted her head to meet her eyes, and then fell into her embrace, sobbing loudly.

As the chaos outside the room continued, Gong Yu lightly stroked the long hair of the person in her arms, and as her gaze swept across the bloody corpse by the door, a cold smile slid across her lips before her face became expressionless once more.

## CHAPTER 40

### *He Jingzhong*

Prince Yu's mood was very good these past few days, and ever since he had sent Gray Hawk to confirm that none of his most vital supporters were involved in the 'corpses in the well' case, he was preparing to calmly enjoy the show of the Crown Prince's panic. The Minister of Revenue, Lou Zhijing, was young and vigorous, and managed to acquire vast sums for the Crown Prince through mysterious avenues every year, and was thus a highly valued 'gold mine' of the Crown Prince, so now, watching as this treasure chest was about to be destroyed, Prince Yu was so delighted that he often started from his sleep in joy, his cruel laughter ringing out too many times to count.

What he had not expected was that his laughter would soon turn to ashes, as the same trouble was about to descend upon his own head, and although the situation was not as serious, it was still enough to cause him great distress, so that he was no longer in any mood to laugh.

"Your Highness! Your Highness! I'm begging you...the three generations of my family...only have this one heir..." The purple-robed minister kneeling in the receiving pavilion of Prince Yu's residence, tears flowing freely, was the Minister of Appointments, He Jingzhong, and his son He Wenxin had beaten to death Qiu Zhengping, the son of the Earl of Wen, and afterwards, although he had successfully escaped home under the protection of his servants, he couldn't hide forever, and the next day, the Capital Magistrate Office sent people over to arrest him. He Jingzhong had relied on his status as a minister of the first rank<sup>71</sup> to refuse them entry, but who would have guessed that this little eighth-ranked constable from the government office would be such a character – he wasn't ruffled in the least by the refusal, but calmly stood before the gate of the residence with his warrant of arrest, reciting loudly, "By order of the law, I hereby arrest the criminal He Wenxin for the crime of murder at Willow House yesterday night, open your gates!" He stood there repeating himself over and over, and when he grew tired, someone else took his place, and as the crowd before the gates of the residence grew and grew, for fear that soon half the capital would be gathered at his door – which was not only embarrassing but might also bring

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<sup>71</sup> the ranks of the ministers and officials of the court range from first rank (highest) to at least eighth rank, and probably more.

down imperial attention – He Jingzhong could only submit for now and hand his screaming, crying son over to the officials, fiercely commanding them not to harm his person, and then hurry over to Prince Yu’s residence to plead for help.

The events had taken place at Spiral Market Street, which was where most of Qin Banruo’s subordinates and spies were located, and naturally she was able to quickly gather the details of the case and report them quietly to Prince Yu. As soon as he heard that the murder had taken place in front of numerous witnesses, and there was no shortage of evidence to be produced, Xiao Jinghuan also became distressed, and paced a few times around the room in silence, his brow furrowed and his face full of worry.

“Your Highness,” He Jingzhong saw Prince Yu’s expression and grew even more panicked, and wiped his tears before saying, “Your servant knows I have not taught my son well, and he has indeed brought disaster upon us this time...but pray Your Highness remember your servant’s devotion and loyalty these many years, I am no longer young and only have this one son, who is the pride and joy of my elderly mother, and if anything happened to him, I fear she could not take it...Your Highness, Your Highness.....”

Prince Yu glared at him coldly, wondering if he was worth the trouble, but then, his own interactions with those ministers loyal to himself had always been based on favours and rewards, not to mention that since this He Jingzhong had been made Minister of Appointments, he had guarded his right to appoint and dismiss officials so closely that the Crown Prince had not found any way to intervene, and now seeing him weeping so miserably, it seemed that this worthless son of his was really his weak spot, and Prince Yu couldn’t stand by and do nothing, so he softened his voice and said, “You have truly been too lax in your discipline. In this capital city right under the foot of the Emperor, how can one act so rashly and violently? If he had killed a commoner, so be it, but the victim is the son of an earl, and although he has no place in court at the moment, he still stands in the shadow of his ancestors’ prestige, so the Earl of Wen has the right to take this to court. Even if I tried to protect you then, leaving aside the matter of whether any officials would take my side, the Earl of Wen himself wouldn’t let the matter rest, and if this came before the Emperor himself, no good would come of it for neither you nor me.”

He Jingzhong beat his head on the ground and cried, “Your servant knows I am causing Your Highness great inconvenience, but if it were only a matter of killing a commoner, how would your servant dare to trouble Your Highness? It is because the victim was a member of the Earl of Wen’s household that your servant knows he has no power in this matter and came to beg Your Highness for help. Highness, you know that the Earl of Wen has always been a coward and fears to make trouble, if Your Highness personally appeared to persuade him, I expect he would not dare to refuse....”

“You speak simple words, but is this a simple matter? You love your son, does he not love his? When a man has been incited to such fury, is there anything he will not dare to do?” Prince Yu scolded, and then took a breath. “You need to calm down, they will not sentence him to death the day after his crime, why are you panicking?”

“Your servant is afraid that once the Capital Magistrate Office passes the sentence, the situation will be difficult to recover....”

“The Capital Magistrate Office?” Prince Yu laughed coldly. “You think the Capital Magistrate Office wants to deal with your case? Gao Sheng must be having a terrible headache.”

Prince Yu was not wrong, and if Gao Sheng could hear him now, he would certainly cry out in agreement. First there was the ‘corpses in the well’ case which had so greatly agitated the Crown Prince, and now there was this murder case which implicated one of Prince Yu’s beloved ministers, and if one were to look for the person in the capital with the greatest headache at this moment, it is likely one would have to look no further than this lowly third-ranked official of the Capital Magistrate Office, Gao Sheng.

He Jingzhong wiped his face with his sleeve and took a deep breath. “Your servant was truly too panicked. Perhaps Your Highness does not know, when the capital office sent their men over to make the arrest, they weren’t inclined to give even the slightest bit of face to me or to take any consideration of our feelings, and so I was worried....”

“This is where Gao Sheng is outstanding.” Incredibly, Prince Yu was smiling in admiration. “This case involves you on the one hand and the Earl of Wen on the other, and therefore may be raised to a higher authority at any moment, not to mention that the evidence is clear and obvious without any room for doubt, so he must be decisive and fast in his arrest, because if he delays and you send your son away, the responsibility falls to him, and then how could he answer to the Earl of Wen? Now that he has arrested him, he can take his time and first assess carefully which way the wind is blowing, because if he sentences your son to death, then it doesn’t matter how much he has offended you now, but if he absolves him of all crime, then he has done you a huge favour, and you would no longer care how he offended you when he came to arrest your son. So, don’t think that being a magistrate official in Jinling is any easier than your post of Minister of Appointments.”

He Jingzhong was well-versed in the art of politics, and it was only because he had been so shaken by his son’s arrest that he had failed to make the connection, and now on Prince Yu’s prompting, he immediately understood, and the anger that had arisen as a result of Gao Sheng’s cold actions subsided, and he bowed and said, “Your Highness is truly wise beyond measure, your servant has been foolish.”



“Never mind, you don’t need to try to appease me. Your case is difficult, and at this moment, I cannot think of any solution.” Prince Yu turned and saw that he was about to cry and beg again, and hurriedly waved a hand. “Go pay a visit to Old Master Ji and come up with an idea, and then I will see whether it is feasible.”

He Jingzhong saw that Prince Yu’s tone had softened, and joy rose in his heart as he hurriedly bowed in thanks and then went quickly to the side courtyard, where he found the aforementioned Old Master Ji. As a prince with the ability to compete with the Crown Prince, Xiao Jinghuan naturally had many sources of wisdom and strategy in his possession, and he had mentioned Old Master Ji because this particular gentleman had a background in criminal law and his specialty was dealing with legal matters, so perhaps he might be able to come up with a plan.

After hearing He Jingzhong explain the details of the situation, the two white brows of Old Master Ji furrowed into a woolly spherical shape,<sup>72</sup> and combined with his wrinkled face, his appearance was decidedly comical, but He Jingzhong was in no mood to pay attention to anyone’s appearance at the moment, and only gazed at him anxiously, and the tighter the woolly sphere became, the greater the fear in his heart grew.

After enough time had passed to brew a pot of tea, Old Master Ji let out a long sigh. “This disaster that your son has wrought is truly no small matter....”

“This I know,” He Jingzhong said impatiently. “But even if I were to discipline him, it must wait until this matter has been resolved!”

Old Master Ji stroked his beard and said slowly, “My advice is to let the Capital Magistrate Office first pass their sentence....”

“What?” He Jingzhong immediately leapt to his feet.

“Minister He, please be calm.” Old Master Ji reached out a hand. “First listen to my explanation.”

He Jingzhong calmed himself and said, “Please continue.”

“Firstly, although the Capital Magistrate Office is responsible for the law and order of our royal capital, it is still only a local office, and cannot afford to offend either you or the Earl of Wen. It is true that Gao Sheng would not dare to find your son guilty, but to find him innocent, would Gao Sheng dare to single-handedly bear this responsibility? If he delays in his management of this case because he is afraid to offend either side, then the person who will suffer is your son. So, you must yield the first step and give Gao Sheng a way out of his dilemma – let him conclude the case,

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<sup>72</sup> yes, I’m translating it literally

and do not pressure him to change his verdict, but let him find your son guilty of murder.”

“What?!”

“Minister, do not be afraid, a sentence passed by the Capital Magistrate Office is nothing to fear, what we must fear is a case with an ironclad conclusion. Once you have yielded a step, Gao Sheng must naturally reciprocate, and although the case has been deemed a murder case, the evidence within the case can be muddled a bit, and the witness statements can be made inconsistent, and anyway the Earl of Wen will only know that the Capital Magistrate Office has judged this to be a murder, but not the details of the evidence itself, and so since Gao Sheng can gain your approval on the one hand, and will not offend the Earl of Wen on the other, he will certainly not refuse this.” Old Master Ji gave a sly smile. “Minister, think about it, once the Capital Magistrate Office has passed a sentence of murder, what will happen next?”

“The Ministry of Justice....”

“Correct. He must report it to the Ministry of Justice.” Old Master Ji knocked his fingers against his desk, speaking in utter contentment. “This case cannot be concluded in the hands of the Capital Magistrate Office. Firstly, he would not dare, and secondly, his status is too low and he could not bear the responsibility. But the Ministry of Justice is different, their power is far greater, and most importantly, it is Prince Yu’s backyard, and so would Minister Qi not work even harder than Gao Sheng in this matter?”

He Jingzhong suddenly understood, and struck his thigh with one hand while saying admiringly, “Old Master Ji is wise indeed!”

“Although this case involves people of importance, in the end, only one person died, and it is just an ordinary criminal case, and so no matter how hard Minister Qi works, he still has no reason to raise the case to the Ministry of Justice, and thus he can only wait for the Capital Magistrate Office to report it themselves. If they report a case with an ironclad conclusion with evidence piling up like a mountain, then there would truly be no hope, but if the evidence and witness statements are found to have errors and inconsistencies, then the Ministry of Justice would have more than enough reason to re-open the case, and then our room for maneuvering will have grown drastically, and once your son has been transferred over, he will certainly suffer less as well, don’t you think so?”

He Jingzhong said with deep gratitude, “The old master’s plan is truly miraculous, I will go to His Highness and ask him to speak to Minister Qi. But, as for Gao Sheng....”

“You do not need to worry. Official Gao has long since been completely absorbed by the ‘corpses in the well’ case, and he will definitely be eager to pass your

bombshell to someone else.” Old Master Ji smiled. “His current master is my old friend, it will be no trouble for me to make a visit on your behalf...”

He Jingzhong hurriedly bowed. “I have troubled the Old Master. If all you say comes to pass, I will certainly repay you with rich gratitude.”

“We are all working for His Highness, there’s no need to be polite.” After these words, Old Master Ji rose to see his guest out. Because He Jingzhong was Prince Yu’s beloved confidante, he did not dare to delay, but sorted out a few matters and then ordered for a small litter to be prepared and departed for the Capital Government Office.

## CHAPTER 41

### *Tea with an Old Friend*

“This one!” A large, oval pear drifted into view, looking plump and moist and very tasty.

“Why give me this one?” Mei Changsu smiled at the youth.

“Biggest!”

“The biggest one is for Su gege?”

“Ng!”

Mei Changsu’s gaze skipped to the side and seeing Meng Zhi, who was sitting to one side, raise his cup to his lips, he smiled to himself and asked loudly, “Fei Liu, tell Su gege, what colour is this kind of pear?”

“Dark white!”

Meng Zhi spat out his mouthful of water with a “Phoo!” and stared at Fei Liu, coughing vigorously. “Dark...dark what?”

Fei Liu gave a dismissive “Hmph!” and turned his head away, ignoring him.

“You know, our Fei Liu is very talented at inventing new words.” Mei Changsu’s gaze was full of warmth as he gently ruffled Fei Liu’s hair, and Fei Liu, sensing his affection, leaned over and held out the pear again.

“Fei Liu, these can’t be eaten now,” Mei Changsu said, still smiling. “These are frozen pears.”

“Frozen pears....”

“We freeze them so that they can keep longer, and when we want to eat them, we have to first let them sit for awhile and grow warm again, otherwise we won’t be able to bite into them.”

Fei Liu's eyes widened, and he looked at the pear in his left hand, then at the one in his right, and finally raised the smaller one to his mouth, bit into it, and froze, stunned.

“Can't bite into it, eh?” Meng Zhi had recovered by this time, and came over, saying, “You have to soak them in water to warm them up, so that they grow soft enough to eat.”

Fei Liu processed these words for a few moments, and then suddenly disappeared.

“Actually, that pear isn't the biggest I've seen.” Meng Zhi shook his head. “Isn't the biggest sphere-shaped object in the capital at the moment the head of Capital Magistrate Gao Sheng?”

Mei Changsu couldn't help laughing. “Meng dage certainly has an amusing way with words. Even if Officer Gao had not come across these troublesome matters, wouldn't his head still be larger than a pear?”

Meng Zhi couldn't hold back a laugh either. “You're one to talk, you bring two such difficult cases to him, yet you yourself are keeping idle. Watching you tease Fei Liu, I know you are in a good mood today.”

The two were currently in an elegant little tea house in the southern part of the city, which was near the main streets, but not too noisy, and each tea room was its own single bamboo building, decorated tastefully.

Ever since the ‘corpses in the well’ case had been reported to the court, everyone in Jinling knew two things. One, there were corpses in the well in Lan Manor,<sup>73</sup> and two, the newly famous Su Zhe was looking for a residence.

Lan Manor was an abandoned wasteland, and now had become the scene of a vicious crime, and therefore was certainly no longer fit to live in, so Su Zhe needed to buy a new residence. And so, no matter whether it was because they wanted to take the opportunity to make his acquaintance, or because they genuinely wanted to make a helpful recommendation, or because they simply had a residence for sale, the number of offers pouring in with possible manors for sale were too many to count. But as he was still staying at the Xie residence, most of the inconvenience was shouldered by Xie Bi, and Mei Changsu had only so far visited the ones recommended by the Yunnan Mu family and Xia Dong, and so this was only his third such outing.

“What do you think about the residence I chose?” Meng Zhi asked, leaning closer.

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<sup>73</sup> this seems to be the real name of the ‘wasted manor’ MCS & co visited in chapter 37 (the name is revealed by Gray Hawk in Chapter 38, but I only just realized it now lol). ‘Lan’ (蘭) means orchid.

Mei Changsu glanced back at him. “Is it possible that you are really planning to sell me this place?”

Meng Zhi grinned playfully. “It does kind of seem like I’m rushing to build relations with a new celebrity, but you have really given me a lot of face, being willing to come out personally with me for a tour.”

“What kind of prestige does Commander Meng carry, that I would dare not to give you face? You saw how natural Xie Bi thought it was when I accepted your invitation today; if I had refused you, how shocked do you think he would have been?” Mei Changsu smiled back. “Not to mention, the bit of fame I have acquired in the capital, isn’t it all due to that fight between you and Fei Liu? Although it was not my arrangement, it was nonetheless an unexpected gain.”

“This child Fei Liu is truly a wonder, I haven’t seen him for a few days, and he seems to have improved already. I hear he even defeated Xia Dong recently?”

“Ng,” Mei Changsu made a noise of agreement, as if he didn’t care much. “He is a calm child, and so naturally picks up martial skills quickly and easily. But he is still young, and his inner strength is not yet pure enough, and so when he comes up against such experts such as yourself, it would be difficult for him not to lose.”

“That’s no problem, he still has plenty of time to train.” Meng Zhi picked up his tea cup, and asked a second time, “What do you think about the manor I picked?”

Mei Changsu thought for a moment. “I can tell it was picked by you.”

“You shouldn’t be so mean, even though I don’t know much about estates and aesthetics, I know you, which is why I spent so much effort finding you this place, shouldn’t you be a little grateful?”

“That’s what I meant,” Mei Changsu looked at him kindly. “Meng dage, you are really the one who understands what I want.”

Meng Zhi had originally been feeling quite satisfied with himself and proud of his work, but now, faced with such blunt words of gratitude, he was a bit embarrassed, and he scratched his head, saying, “I do know the scenery of this manor isn’t the best....”

“The scenery will have to be redone, otherwise people will wonder why I managed to pick this manor out of the hundreds and thousands I was given to choose from. But its one advantage is better than ten manors with beautiful scenery. Meng dage, you have truly outdone yourself.”

“I really didn’t put any special effort into it,” Meng Zhi was still a bit embarrassed. “I was only wandering around aimlessly when I discovered it myself, that the back wall of this manor is less than a hundred feet away from the back manor of Prince Jing’s residence, with the intervening space being shaded ground surrounded by thick forest, and in addition, the main doors of these two manors open onto different streets, so the two residences seem to be in different areas of the city entirely, and it is really not easy to realize that they are actually located so close to each other. Xiao Shu, don’t you have people who are skilled at construction? Once you’ve moved in, you can build a secret passage between the back courtyards of your and Prince Jing’s manors, and then even if you do not meet in public, he can come through the hidden passage at night secretly for your private meetings...<sup>74</sup>.”

Mei Changsu looked helplessly at the first-ranked martial arts expert of Da Liang, and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “That is indeed a good suggestion, but can you not pick up Fei Liu’s manner of using words? Private meetings?”

“Close enough...<sup>75</sup>” Meng Zhi thought for a moment, and then asked, “So you don’t intend to make your declaration public? After the matter with the Princess last time, the Crown Prince will realize sooner or later that it was you who destroyed him with one blow. He is not a tolerant person, and will probably try to take revenge on you, so hadn’t you better pretend to join Prince Yu’s side for now, and at least benefit from his protection so you won’t have to suffer both sides as your enemy?”

“Don’t worry, they are both busy at the moment, and don’t have time to deal with me.” A cold smile drifted across Mei Changsu’s face. “It is said that those who only defend will always lose.<sup>76</sup> Since Prince Yu has used the ‘corpses in the well’ case to attack the Minister of Revenue, Lou Zhijing, the Crown Prince must naturally hold on equally tightly to He Wenxin’s case. I think...He Jingzhong will definitely find a way to raise his son’s murder case to the Ministry of Justice for re-sentencing.”

“The Ministry of Justice is Prince Yu’s backyard, can the Crown Prince compete?”

“Prince Yu has the upper hand, it’s true, but He Wenxin’s case is much too black and white, and with the Earl of Wen’s fury roused, it will be difficult for the Ministry of Justice to tamper with the case.”

“You must be happy to see them turning on each other.” Meng Zhi saw Mei Changsu tucking his hands into his sleeve and hurriedly pushed the small brazier closer to him. “But even if the Crown Prince manages to sentence He Wenxin to

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<sup>74</sup> it has a seductive / sexual undertone, like ‘rendez-vous.’ See also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26QO62qkZrM>

<sup>75</sup> LOL that one’s for all those MCS/XJY shippers out there – Meng Zhi’s on your side!

<sup>76</sup> similar meaning to “a good offense is the best defense”

death, in the end, it is still not He Jingzhong himself who must die, and to Prince Yu, there is no great loss.”

Mei Changsu smiled meaningfully and answered lightly, “If he knew how to restrain his subordinates from going too far, then He Wenxin’s case would not do him much harm.... His greatest weakness right now still falls on the head of the old Duke of Qing.”

Meng Zhi hit his fist against his thigh. “That’s right, I wanted to ask you about this. I thought, with Xia Dong’s return to the capital, she would have already gathered most of the evidence, so why has there been no word of the ‘land infringement’ case up until now, what is the Emperor thinking?”

“He is thinking...about who he should appoint to manage this ‘land infringement’ case....”

“Ah?”

Mei Changsu stretched out a hand and wrapped it around the brazier, his face calm, as if he was chatting about some idle matter. “The Emperor has to deal with this ‘land infringement’ case because this custom of powerful court officials taking over whatever land they like has been getting out of hand, and is starting to affect national affairs. But the question of who he should appoint to manage such an important case is a difficult one. I think he has not decided on a suitable person, and that’s why there has been no mention of this case so far.”

As the commander of the imperial guard, Meng Zhi was naturally not unintelligent, and after thinking it over, he nodded, and said, “That’s right, Xuanjing officers only have the right to investigate, but cannot pass judgement, and this case is so important that it can only be handled by the Executive Secretary Bureau, the Imperial Censor Office, and the High Bureau of Justice...<sup>77</sup>but....”

Mei Changsu laughed grimly. “His Majesty the Emperor knows in his heart that the three heads of these departments will judge the case, but without someone of neutral position and a strong will to oversee them, this ‘land infringement’ case will become a cat-fight, and his intention to use this case as an example and a warning against similar future incidents will be wasted.”

Meng Zhi frowned and sighed. “No wonder the Emperor is having trouble deciding, this is really a difficult situation.”

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<sup>77</sup> it’s very complicated but basically, all you need to know is these are official titles from Chinese historical times (a very specific time period corresponding to the time-setting of this novel) referring to certain highly ranked government departments of the court that serve basically directly under the Emperor, something like that.



Mei Changsu looked at him. “So, it must fall to you to lift the Emperor’s burden.”

“Me?” Meng Zhi was taken aback. “What kind of solution could I come up with?”

“Of course there is a solution.” Mei Changsu wrapped his arms around the brazier, picked it up, and leaned back, the corner of his lip twitching. “You can suggest someone to the Emperor.”

“Who?”

“Prince Jing.”

Meng Zhi stood up abruptly. “What did you say?”

“No court official would be able to hold his own against those three heads, it must be someone of royal birth. If the Crown Prince was picked, he would raise such a fuss that this case would never be closed, and if Prince Yu was chosen, he would let it fade into the background and dissolve into nothing. Prince Jing has kept himself far from palace politics for many years, and has always been upright and outspoken, and only if he handled the case would it be able to achieve the purpose the Emperor intends.”

“But wouldn’t Prince Jing offend many people by taking on the case?”

“If he wants to enter into the fray, how can he avoid offending people? The important consideration is whether it is worth it.” Mei Changsu’s tone became light and cold. “This case is perfect: first, he will gain the love of the common people; second, it will raise his power and prestige; and third, it will showcase his ability and competence. Not to mention, if he offends some people, he will naturally gain the support of others. If he keeps standing off to the side, no one will remember he exists....”

Meng Zhi watched him closely for a long time then finally let out a long sigh. “Once you have made up your mind, you are never wrong. Nothing in this world is certain, and I know you have already prepared every step. But what if the Emperor doesn’t agree?”

“He will.”

“You are so sure?”

“He will, because he has no better option.” Mei Changsu tightened his mouth and swallowed the sigh that had slid to the edges of his lips.

Aside from there being no other choice, there was actually another reason. It was because the Emperor did not love Prince Jing very dearly, and so would not think or

care about the difficulties Prince Jing would face in accepting this assignment, and thus, it would be easier for him to make up his mind.

And as for Prince Jing, this would be his first step onto the path of no return.

From this point on, there would be no turning back.

## CHAPTER 42

### *Mister Shisan*

Although there were many things he had left unspoken, Mei Changsu was still exhausted by his conversation with Meng Zhi, and now he leaned weakly over his table, intending to rest for awhile.

When Fei Liu came in and saw him lying there motionless, he was greatly alarmed and was about to rush over for a closer look when Meng Zhi, who didn't want him to wake Mei Changsu, reached out a hand to stop him, immediately raising the ire of the youth. His palm came flying over and Meng Zhi had no choice but to block it, and as the two exchanged several blows as quick as lightning, although the disruption was not great, the frail and lightly slumbering Mei Changsu was nonetheless jolted awake, and so he sat up again slowly.

“Su gege!” Fei Liu instantly forgot about Meng Zhi and leapt over to him, giving the commander of the imperial army a good scare.

Mei Changsu smiled at the youth and reached out a hand to accept the pear he had produced from his sleeve, then raised his gaze to Meng Zhi's blank stare, and couldn't help asking, “Meng dage,<sup>78</sup> what's wrong?”

Meng Zhi looked closely at Fei Liu for a moment, then said, “Although I wasn't using my full strength and wouldn't have hurt him, the fact that he can disappear from the middle of a fight with such smooth grace, without leaving any weakness I could exploit and without any disruption to his breathing pattern, this is something really stunning.”

Mei Changsu gave him a wicked grin. “Stunned, are you? Better watch out, or your rank as the first-ranked martial expert in Da Liang will sooner or later be taken by our Fei Liu.”

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<sup>78</sup> I forgot to say it in the last chapter: dage means literally “older brother”; it's more polite than “gege” but less formal than “xiong” (which is what Jingrui and Yujin call MCS – “Su xiong” which I translate as “Brother Su”)

“It’s a bit early for that,” Meng Zhi laughed loudly with a heroic air. “I don’t dare underestimate this child, but neither will I fear him. It is also a great help to me to know that such a caliber of martial arts still exists in the world. But his fighting style looks strange and sinister, how can he have such a sunny internal disposition?”

“The method he initially trained was overly harmful to the body, and although he gained formidable power from being forced to learn it, it would have decreased his lifespan in the end. That’s why he has switched to practicing this ‘splendid-sun’ style of martial arts, which can help to dissolve the insidious poison of the energy he learned before,” Mei Changsu explained simply.

Although he had spoken casually, Meng Zhi knew that re-learning a whole new set of martial arts was no small matter and required destroying all the knowledge one had previously acquired, and understood that Fei Liu must have suffered a near fatal injury and fought his way back to life, and although he had not personally heard of the ‘splendid-sun’ style of martial arts, from the power of Fei Liu’s training, he could tell that it was a very high level technique, and wondered who had passed it on to Fei Liu. Such a mysterious martial style must be related to some unusual secrets of the jianghu world, but although he had an exceptionally close relationship with Mei Changsu, Meng Zhi did not think for a moment of inquiring any further, only pondering thoughtfully over what he had seen of Fei Liu’s fighting style and inner energy.

“Eat!” Although Fei Liu knew that the two were discussing himself, he showed not the slightest interest, and seeing that Su gege had only taken a bite of his pear and stopped, he shook his sleeve and urged him again.

Mei Changsu gave him a warm smile and lowered his head, slowly taking another bite. Meng Zhi saw him enjoying the pear and grinned at Fei Liu, teasing, “Hey, I’m a guest, won’t you give me one too?”

Fei Liu hesitated for a moment. He actually really did not like this big uncle whom he couldn’t seem to beat, but seeing the way Su gege treated him, he understood that this uncle was one of their own, and after thinking for a moment, he couldn’t see any way out, and so grumpily took out another pear from his sleeve and threw it over.

Meng Zhi sank his teeth into the pear and froze, but seeing Mei Changsu’s smiling gaze turn to him, he proceeded to take a big bite as if nothing had happened.

From one of the neighboring bamboo buildings, the lingering tune of a flute drifted over, sweet and crisp, seeming to cleanse the minds and souls of all who heard it. Hearing the music, Fei Liu vanished out the window like a wingless bird, disappearing into the treetops once more.

“That child, he must have cooked the pears to warm them up.” Meng Zhi held up the core of the pear he had almost finished eating, and shook his head with a sigh.

“The pears weren’t sweet to begin with, and after he cooked them, they’ve become as hard as blocks of wood.”

Mei Changsu didn’t seem to hear him, but leaned back against the bamboo chair, his eyelids drooping gently, as he quietly listened to the clear tune carried over by the gentle breeze. When the song died away, he let out a long sigh and said, “I have come to the capital to enter into the dragons’ wars and the tigers’ battles, to fight for a better kingdom. Uncle Shisan’s<sup>79</sup> song is too sorrowful.”

Meng Zhi raised an eyebrow as a thin, elderly gentleman dressed in green emerged from between two bamboo buildings, giving off an indistinct air as if he were standing far away in a bamboo forest. He came to their building and did not enter, but drew aside his robes and knelt before the door, saying in a deep voice, “Shisan greets the young master. I was thinking of the past and my heart filled with grief, and so unintentionally disturbed the young master’s mood, please punish your wretched servant.”

Mei Changsu looked at him, his gaze betraying a hint of nostalgia, and said in a low voice, “Uncle Shisan truly knows my heart. You do not need to stand on ceremony here, please rise.”

The old gentleman rose solemnly and entered. He looked upon Mei Changsu’s thin, frail figure, and seemed to tremble, moved beyond words.

Meng Zhi was an old member of the Chiyan Army and knew that Lin Shu’s mother had been close friends with an imperial musician, and he had also lived in Jinling for many years and was therefore familiar with the name of the famous composer of Miaoyin House, Mister Shisan, but he had never before put these two persons together, and now, seeing the scene before his eyes, he understood, and was shaken.

Mei Changsu composed himself, and then raised a hand and gestured for Shisan to come closer, at the same time turning to Meng Zhi and saying, “Meng dage, this Mister Shisan is an old member of our Lin household, so from now on, I must ask the great commander to take good care of him here in Jinling.”

Meng Zhi understood his meaning and nodded. “Miaoyin House, right? I will make sure to take care of it.”

“I thank you in advance.” Mei Changsu laughed lightly. “Meng dage has been here for a long time, and what we must now discuss is not entirely within the confines of the law, so perhaps the commander should not stay?”

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<sup>79</sup> “shisan” literally translates to thirteen. So he’s ‘Uncle / Mister Thirteen’. Obviously it’s not his real name, but it’s how he’s called in the story.

Meng Zhi made a dismissive noise. “I want to listen to your secrets, what are you going to do?”

Mei Changsu slowly lowered his head and didn’t speak for a long time, and then finally said, “When it is necessary, I will not hesitate to use your power, but no matter what, I still wish for you only to help me perform certain tasks that are without risk; after all, it was not easy for you to have ascended to the place you hold now....”

Meng Zhi looked at him steadily. “Do you want to hear the truth?”

“Meng dage....”

“I really do value my current position and identity very much, and if you had not returned, I would say that these things could be considered important to me.” Meng Zhi’s gaze was firm and unyielding as iron. “But, xiao Shu, since you have come back now, there is no way that I can remain uninvolved.”

Mei Changsu briefly closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, his expression was once again calm as water, and he did not look at Meng Zhi, but turned to Mister Shisan. “Uncle Shisan, the matters I have asked you to look into, have you investigated them?”

“Yes,” Mister Shisan answered respectfully. “Qin Banruo of Crimson Sleeve House was apprentice to a princess of the Hua tribe, whose nation was exterminated thirty years ago, and she is now one of Prince Yu’s most trusted advisers. I have discovered that fifteen concubines of various court officials are also her subordinates, and as for the list of names...her spy network is deep, but Gong Yu has succeeded in infiltrating her network with some of our people, so as soon as the young master gives the command, I am confident that we will be able to destroy her power.”

Meng Zhi raised an eyebrow. “Controlling the court officials through their concubines? Prince Yu has even more tricks up his sleeve than the Crown Prince.”

“Do you think the Crown Prince has any fewer?” Mei Changsu threw him a glance, and turned away again. “Do not touch Qin Banruo for now, there are some things that I cannot tell Prince Yu myself, so I must trouble her to pass on the messages. I have two pieces of news here, go back and discuss with Gong Yu how you can allow Qin Banruo to discover them.”

“Young master, please continue.”

“First, everyone believes that the persons behind the attempted murder of Xuanjing Officer Xia Dong on her return journey to the capital were under the Duke of Qing’s orders, but it is not so. The assassins were actually employed by Tianquan Manor, and were under the direct orders of the manor’s chief, Zhuo Dingfeng. Second, the elderly couple who came to the capital to make the initial accusation are

aged and frail, but they were still able to avoid assassins sent by a wealthy household, and managed to flee across four provinces to Jiangzuo territory; this was not because they had good fortune and met some righteous protector, but because there were people secretly guarding them.” Mei Changsu stopped for a moment, the corner of his mouth tightening. “And the people who were protecting them from the shadows to ensure that they arrived safely into the capital to make their accusation, were also hired by Tianquan Manor.”

“What?” Meng Zhi, listening off to the side, had broken out in a cold sweat, and although he knew he should not interrupt, he couldn’t help himself. “How could that be?”

“With only these two seemingly unrelated pieces of information, it is easy to become confused.” Mei Changsu smiled. “Let me explain it to you. When I mentioned Tianquan Manor, who among the court did you immediately think of?”

“Of course the Marquis of Ning, Xie Yu. Since the two families came to share a son, their relationship has become incredibly close.”

“Zhuo Dingfeng is a jianghu man, and he must have intervened in this matter at the request of Xie Yu. Think about it, Xie Yu used the Zhuo family to escort a pair of accusers into the capital to make a case against the Duke of Qing, don’t you feel this is very strange?”

Meng Zhi was deep in thought. “It is indeed...although Xie Yu has always maintained a neutral front, his heir, Xie Bi, has openly sided with Prince Yu, so why would the Xie family escort people into the capital to accuse the Duke of Qing, who is one of Prince Yu’s important supporters? Unless...” Meng Zhi gasped, suddenly understanding. “Unless Xie Yu is actually supporting the Crown Prince!”

Mei Changsu gave a small smile. “The land infringement case of Bin province is not difficult, even someone mediocre would have been able to easily investigate the matter. But the Emperor had to send Xia Dong. And so in the end, she not only found out everything about the land infringement case, she even unexpectedly discovered that those who had secretly escorted the elderly couple to the capital were actually sent by Zhuo Dingfeng. Like you, she naturally immediately thought of the Xie family, and also immediately realized that Xie Yu was actually the Crown Prince’s right-hand man. But Xie Yu still very much wants to keep a foot in both boats to preserve his advantage, and so he cannot let Prince Yu discover the role he played in the land infringement case, thus, he could only burn his bridges and try to silence Xia Dong before she entered the city.”

Meng Zhi’s eyebrows furrowed, and he sighed, “Actually, he didn’t need to go so far....”

“Correct, he actually did not need to go so far.” Mei Changsu’s gaze was serious. “Because, Xuanjing officers never involve themselves in court politics, and so even if Xia Dong knew, she would not say anything.... but Xie Yu was blinded by his own involvement and didn’t realize it at the time....”

“So Xia Dong now knows that Xie Yu was the one who tried to kill her?”

“She knows....”

“You found some way to tell her, huh?” Meng Zhi laughed.

“Even without my hint, she would have discovered it herself.”

“How strange, Xia Dong has returned to the capital long ago, and since she knows that Xie Yu tried to silence her, why hasn’t she said anything? This isn’t like her, she’s usually so fierce and quick to react against any insults.”

Mei Changsu sighed lightly and said, “I had hoped that she would speak out, but after I thought about it carefully, I understand why she has not said anything....”

“You know why?”

“That year, when Nie Feng died in battle, the one who brought his bones back to the capital to return them to Xia Dong was Xie Yu...and for this favour, Xia Dong will forgive him once....”

A dull pain arose in Meng Zhi’s chest. Although he knew of the tragic end of those events of the past, he had never been clear on the actual details, and had never dared to ask, and now, seeing Mei Changsu bring up Nie Feng, although his voice was steady and his expression calm, for some reason, Meng Zhi felt as if he was seeing through him into a glimpse of the fiery hell within, but the burning image passed by in a flash, and he didn’t dare look again.

“Since Xia Dong will not say it, then I will.” Mei Changsu continued quietly, as if he had not felt anything unusual. “Xie Yu has had a comfortable time living off of both sides, it is a pity that those days are about to end. Since he has chosen the Crown Prince, then I will let Prince Yu know that among the enemies he must face, he must not overlook this ‘pillar of the court’...”

Meng Zhi nodded heavily. “This Xie Yu’s schemes are truly profound. But, xiao Shu, will Prince Yu understand simply from these two pieces of news?”

“Don’t worry,” Mei Changsu smiled. “Mistress Qin is exceedingly clever, and is especially skilled at drawing accurate conclusions from minimal amounts of information, so these two pieces of news will be enough for her. It is too bad she has



chosen Prince Yu to fulfill her own ambitions, or she would truly be a valuable talent.”

“Well, no matter how smart she is, hasn’t she still fallen into your trap?”

Mei Changsu shook his head. “She is working in the open, and I am in the shadows, so even if I have the upper hand for now, I do not dare underestimate her.” He turned to Mister Shisan, who had been listening quietly, and said, “You must be careful when leaking the information, and consider carefully how much to release and when to do so, Qin Banruo is incredibly smart, you must not act carelessly.”

“Yes,” Mister Shisan bent his head. “I will certainly not let you down.”

“Good.” Mei Changsu rose, looking tired. “If anything happens, you may contact me by the usual methods. Uncle Shisan, you may take your leave.”

Mister Shisan bowed and retreated a few steps, then thought of something and stopped, drew out a lotus flower embroidered pouch and presented it with both hands, saying, “The young master must not be sleeping well since entering the capital, this den of tigers and wolves, this is a sleep fragrance that Gong Yu spent many months blending, and knowing that I would be seeing the young master today, she asked me to bring it over, pray the young master indulge her efforts and burn a piece before you sleep, to bring you good dreams.”

Mei Changsu stood there quietly for a moment, some unknown emotion passing over his pale face, but after some time, he slowly stretched out a hand and accepted the lotus pouch, slipping it into his sleeve without a second glance, and said indifferently, “Alright, please thank Gong Yu for me.”

Mister Shisan bowed again and left the bamboo house, quickly disappearing among the bamboo forest once again.

## CHAPTER 43

### *Luring the Tiger Away from the Mountain*

When they departed the Bamboo Tea House, Meng Zhi and Mei Changsu both left the way they had come, one in a green-cloth palanquin, and one riding a fiesty, tan horse, followed by a few imperial guards and two servants sent by Xie Bi. The entourage avoided the busy main streets, choosing to return by a quieter side street. When they left the small alley and arrived at a crossroad, one of the mounted soldiers of the imperial guard rode over to convey a message that the Emperor had summoned the commander into the palace. Meng Zhi hesitated a moment, but Mei Changsu had already drawn aside the curtain of his little palanquin to say, "I am much indebted to the commander's great kindness, and now since there is this summons from His Majesty, I dare not disturb you any further, but will bid you farewell here, and come to thank you in person another day."

"Mister Su is too modest." Meng Zhi saluted, turned and ordered his imperial guards to carefully escort Su Zhe back to the Xie residence, then bid his farewells and rode away towards the palace.

He had ridden a good distance when Meng Zhi suddenly remembered that the set of uniform he kept in the duty room had lost the jade pendant on its belt, and though it wasn't very obvious, this was a royal summons to see the Emperor and appearances were very important, so he slowed his horse, preparing to order the guard who had passed along the message to go to the commander's residence to bring him a new belt, but when he turned around, he discovered that the messenger was nowhere in sight, and suddenly, a great suspicion rose in his heart. He took in everyone riding beside him at a glance, and they were all indeed his own people, but the messenger had bowed low to the ground when delivering his message and only spoken a few words, and so he had not look at him very closely, and now that he thought about it, it was very likely that it had been someone else masquerading as an imperial messenger.

If this summons to the court was false, it would be discovered as soon as he entered the palace gate, which meant that the objective of the enemy was not any harm aimed at himself, but was merely to lure him away from the main target.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> literally 'lure the tiger away from the mountain'

At this point, Meng Zhi's heart sank, and he hurriedly turned his horse and raced back along the road he had just ridden, whipping and urging his horse faster as he shouted with his inner strength for those in his path to move aside, cursing the fact that he had not been born with wings and hoping that Mei Changsu had not come to any harm.

When he arrived at the crossroad where they had parted, it had long since become deserted, and as there were two different paths leading away to the Xie residence, Meng Zhi halted and turned his horse in several circles, unable to decide which way he should take, and he was just standing there at a loss when, suddenly, muffled shouts drifted from a distance, picked up by his keen hearing. After quickly pinpointing their location and distance, Meng Zhi sprang off his saddle onto the flat roofs of the nearby buildings, and with a few nimble steps, his figure flew through the air like an arrow leaving its bow, and a few moments later, he had arrived at the chaotic scene, and as he glanced around, his heart filled with fear and fury.

Mei Changsu's little palanquin lay on its side on the road, the roof of the palanquin shattered into powder on the pavement, and the porter and attendants lay around it, whether unconscious or dead it was hard to tell, and even the few guards he had personally left behind were no exception. In the center of the street, Fei Liu was exchanging furious blows with a person dressed in yellow, their fighting strokes so ferocious that the guards standing around had no chance to join the fight.

Meng Zhi had no time to look any closer and quickly scanned the road all around him, but found no trace of Mei Changsu, and in a frenzy of worry, he leapt down with a shout, sending out his fiery 'Waterfall of Light' and preparing to join Fei Liu in bring down the enemy. But who could have expected that, although this move made the enemy hurriedly retreat away, Fei Liu was extremely unhappy and immediately turned and raised his wrist to block it.

"It's me!" Meng Zhi knew that if he started fighting with Fei Liu now, it would give the enemy the perfect opportunity to escape, but Fei Liu was simple in nature and often made errors in judgement, so he didn't waste any time with words but quickly flipped over to the other side to block the yellow-robed person's escape route.

Fei Liu saw him go and didn't pursue, but turned again and sent another wave of attacks against the person in yellow. He had switched targets twice in the blink of an eye, but the whole process had been natural and smooth, his breathing showing no sign of disturbance, and the yellow-robed person couldn't help letting out a sound of surprise.

Meng Zhi had already shifted his position, and was about to enter into the fight again when he suddenly heard a faint call off to one side, "Meng dage...." When he turned to look, it was Mei Changsu, standing under the eaves of a building on the adjoining street, beckoning him over, and when he looked a little closer, he realized it was a spot which had been obscured by another building from the view of the rooftop

he had been standing on before, which was why he had not immediately noticed Mei Changsu there.

He bounded over and grabbed Mei Changsu's wrist for a quick inspection, then looked him up and down, and seeing that, though his face was pale as white jade, he didn't seem to have suffered any new injuries, he finally let out a sigh of relief.

"Fei Liu is in no danger at the moment, don't get involved for now," Mei Changsu said lowly, his gaze locked on the two figures flying around the street.

"I'm glad you're alright. With Fei Liu's skills, I'm not worried...." Meng Zhi broke off abruptly. Just now, he had been too anxious, and when the person in yellow retreated so quickly after his appearance, he had not paid much attention to his fighting skill, but now, on closer examination, he was quickly growing alarmed.

With Fei Liu's talent, he could easily be counted among the top ten experts in the world, though where exactly on the list he should be placed it was hard to say, as Xuanjing Officer Xia Dong herself had lost to him, and even he himself, the so-called first-ranked martial arts expert in Da Liang, could not afford to be distracted or careless but had to put in all his energy and strength whenever he fought against the youth. So who could have thought that this ordinary-looking person in yellow could actually hold his own against the full strength of Fei Liu's attacks?

Mei Changsu looked on silently for a few moments, then his brow furrowed as he made up his mind, and he exchanged a glance with Meng Zhi, confirming that they had reached the same conclusion, before stepping forward and saying in a clear voice, "General Tuoba, you have come from afar to be our guest, it's alright to exchange a few moves, but now that Commander Meng Zhi is here, why not stop and let us find a place to talk?"

The person in yellow had been found out, and hearing that the person he had just exchanged blows with was Meng Zhi, he knew that even if he kept fighting and defeated this nameless young expert, it would do him no good, and so he could only step back and retreat from the fight. Fei Liu, hearing Mei Changsu's voice, also did not continue attacking, but stood still, glaring at the yellow-robed person with his fierce, cold gaze.

Knowing that the person before him was the much revered third-ranked martial arts expert of the Langya Lists, Meng Zhi purposefully walked out in front, putting Mei Changsu behind him, and cupped his hand in greeting, saying, "General Tuoba, the emissaries of your honorable nation have left our capital many days ago, how is it that the general has chosen this time to grace us with your presence?"

Tuoba Hao stood there silently, and because he was wearing a mask over his face, his expression could not be seen, but after a brief cold silence, he raised his fist to his chest and bowed. "The embassy of my country returned in defeat from your noble

nation, and Baili Qi, the brave warrior handpicked by our fourth prince, received a hard lesson at the hands of this Mister Su, and is still missing to this day, and I would have no face indeed if I did not come myself for a look around.”

Hearing this, Mei Changsu said with a smile, “Could it be that the general has come this time to teach me a lesson on behalf of Warrior Baili? In that case, you have truly wronged me, at the time, I tried a hundred ways to decline, but I could not defy an imperial order, and the officials of your honorable nation spoke up and aroused the situation, and so I could only reluctantly oblige with a few of my little tricks. I must humbly beg the general’s great forgiveness.”

Tuoba Hao scoffed coldly. “I tested Baili Qi’s martial arts before he left. So before I came, I also said that you had no real martial art skill, but had merely resorted to tricks to gain a victory, but after today’s fight...” He glanced over at Fei Liu. “To have such an expert by your side as a nameless bodyguard, I think you must have some outstanding talent.”

Mei Changsu smiled ruefully. “Fei Liu is still young, how could he be a worthy opponent for General Tuoba? And if I had any outstanding talent, I would not have so shamefully retreated in escape as the roof of my palanquin was shattered by the general...”

Hearing this, Meng Zhi’s face darkened. “General Tuoba came to our Da Liang without invitation and carelessly attacked a guest of our nation, what explanation do you have for this?”

Tuoba Hao choked for a moment, not knowing how to reply. He had relied on his nigh-unbeatable martial artistry to enter secretly into the capital of Da Liang for a look at this Su Zhe who had beaten Baili Qi with a few children, and originally had truly not intended to hurt anyone, only wanting to get a measure of the man before leaving quietly, but who could have guessed that Su Zhe would have an expert like Fei Liu by his side, who had tangled him up in a fight before the first-ranked expert of Da Liang, Meng Zhi himself, had also appeared, and so he had not only been unable to leave, his identity had been revealed as well, and so he had now come to this embarrassing situation which he was finding difficult to explain.

But although he was in the wrong, Tuoba Hao did not want to appear weak, not to mention that he was ranked third on the Langya List of Martial Arts Experts, and Meng Zhi was ranked second, but the two had never fought personally, and he had never understood how the master of Langya Hall had come up with such a ranking, so had always harboured some anger in his heart, and now that he had been caught, why not take the opportunity to have a match and avoid the awkward explanation? He raised his sword to his chest, and declared coldly, “This is Commander Meng Zhi’s territory, what have I left to say? Make your move!”

Mei Changsu wanted to stop him, but then changed his mind, turning and retreating to a distance to watch the fight. Fei Liu followed by his side, and though he remained expressionless, there was a hint of excitement deep in his eyes.

The second- and third-ranked of the Langya List of Martial Arts Experts were currently exchanging blows in an alleyway in the capital of Da Liang – if this news had been spread, half of jianghu would have squeezed in for a look, and the only reason the other half would not have come was because they knew they wouldn't have been able to get anywhere near the scene. It was a pity that everything had happened too abruptly, and there was no time now to spread the news and sell tickets to the event, and so the only ones who had the great honour and privilege of witnessing the fight were Mei Changsu and Fei Liu, standing off to the side.

Long ago, a certain court minister in Northern Yan had grown too powerful and decided to force the Murong imperial family to abdicate in his favour. Lord Tuoba seized his opportunity to strike during the abdication ceremony and killed the scheming court minister. His sword flashed cruel and lonely in the hall filled with soldiers, striking left and right and killing all those who stood in his path, until, with robes soaked in blood, he escorted the Murong family back to their rightful place on the throne. From that day forward, the Tuoba clan was heralded as the greatest swordsmen in Northern Yan, and generation after generation had never failed to produce exceptional masters.

Compared to Tuoba Hao's legendary family history, Meng Zhi's reputation was much more down-to-earth. Both his inner and outer strength had been trained in the Shaolin style of martial arts since he was young, and there was absolutely nothing mysterious about his martial artistry. He had climbed the ranks to his current position by the strength of his hands and feet, nothing more. Unlike the fight between Tuoba Han and Fei Liu just now, which had been built on speed and reflex, Meng Zhi's every move was steady and firm, and it seemed as if Tuoba Han's sword flashed in ten different strokes while he only slowly returned one of his own. But though they fought at different speeds, their strokes met at the same point, and while Tuoba Hao's sword strokes flashed by like streaks of light, Meng Zhi's slow moves seemed to form a thick, impenetrable wall. When the blaze of light met the thick wall, they produced the kind of dazzling shower of sparks that could only be found in fights between two masters of this caliber.

As one of the only first-hand witnesses of this historic fight, Mei Changsu didn't seem to be treasuring his opportunity, as his gaze kept wandering off as if he was distracted, and now and then he would lower his head in deep thought. He plainly was not watching seriously, until the blurred figures suddenly separated and the two each took a few steps back, watching each other carefully, and then he suddenly seemed to remember his responsibilities as an audience member, and hurriedly applauded and cheered.

On the surface, it seemed as if there was no clear victor and they would have to continue for a while longer. But as Mei Changsu came forward, all the while smiling and saying, “Wonderful!”, Meng Zhi did not tell him to step back, but rather gathered up his energy, as if taking the opportunity to end the fight. Tuoba Hao’s expression was hidden beneath his mask, but because the mask was thin, it was clear that he was grinding his teeth, and that his eyes had become red. But finally, he regained his composure and released the sword in his grasp, scoffing coldly.

## CHAPTER 44

### *The Northern Yan Master*

“The famed swordsmanship of Tuoba is truly sharp as the winds of the desert, and powerful as the waves of the sea,” Meng Zhi paid the compliment solemnly, but his tone grew cold again as he said, “But General Tuoba must still answer the question I raised before – why have you come here to the capital of our nation?”

Tuoba Hao’s cold gaze fell onto Mei Changsu, as he replied, “My country’s embassy came with the good intent of a marriage request, but now one of our strongest warriors has gone missing, when has your noble nation given us an explanation?”

“You mean that Baili Qi?” Although Meng Zhi knew the truth behind Baili Qi’s disappearance, his face betrayed no sign of it. “He walks on his own two feet, how could we know where he has gone? If General Tuoba feels he has the right to demand an explanation from our country, why not come with the credentials of a diplomat and ask openly?”

“Hmph, you people of Da Liang have always been skilled orators, no good would come of such questions. I only wanted to come to see what kind of person could make Baili Qi ashamed to return to his own country.”

The corner of Mei Changsu’s mouth curled as he said, “And has General Tuoba’s method of ‘seeing people’ always involved baseless accusations and cracking open the roofs of palanquins?”

Tuoba Hao said proudly, “I never regret the things I have done, and since I have offended Mister Su, say what you want me to do, but say it openly.”

“Of course we...” Meng Zhi was about to say that of course they would first have to arrest him and go from there, but suddenly feeling Mei Changsu pinch his waist, he reacted quickly and continued, “Of course we should let Mister Su, whom you attacked, decide what to do...”

Hearing these strange words, Tuoba Hao couldn’t help being surprised, and his gaze turned again to Mei Changsu. Whether by rank or by age, the person with the



right to make the decisions should have been Meng Zhi, could it be that this Su Zhe's position in Da Liang was so unusual that even the commander of the imperial guard would listen to him?

"The commander has given me another difficult task." Mei Changsu took in Tuoba Hao's expression at a glance and understood why he was surprised, and couldn't help smiling, but continued lightly, "General Tuoba's sword only fractured the roof of the palanquin and did not hurt anyone, and he did his best not to harm the servants and guards, choosing not to use any of his killing strokes, which shows that he had no intention to cause any real trouble. But as for the matter of Baili Qi, I truly know nothing, and if he decided on his own to leave, how could the General have so easily found this out in so short a time?"

Tuoba Hao was not unintelligent, and immediately understood the meaning behind Mei Changsu's words. He had come to find Su Zhe for the sake of Northern Yan's reputation, and not because he wanted to get to the bottom of Baili Qi's disappearance, and so he took his cue from him and replied, "Since Mister Su says he knows nothing, I have no reason not to believe him. Please do not worry, I will immediately leave Jinling, and will be back in my country within ten days, and will not stop anywhere on my way."

"Good!" Meng Zhi said in a deep voice. "I believe General Tuoba is a man of his word. As such, we will part here, and meet again in the future!"

Although Mei Changsu had already expressed his intention to let him go, Tuoba Hao had not expected Meng Zhi to agree so readily, and his preparation to undergo an intense battle in order to leave was in vain, and he stood stunned for a moment. But he knew that, since his identity had been exposed, he could not stay in Jinling a moment longer than necessary, so he quickly regained his composure, clasped his fist in farewell, and did not waste any more words, but turned and disappeared from view.

When he felt from the air that this Northern Yan master had really gone away, Meng Zhi bent to examine the wounded on the ground and discovered that they had only fainted, and had not come to any great harm, and then finally, he turned and pulled Mei Changsu to one side, asking quietly, "Why did you let him go?"

Mei Changsu gave him a look. "Is the commander confident that you could have captured him alive?"

"Well...it would probably have come to a difficult fight...but as he said, this is my territory, and it is not a jianghu duel, so I would not have needed to go against him on my own."

"And after you have captured him, what then?" Mei Changsu spoke indifferently. "Kill him, or imprison him indefinitely?"

Meng Zhi had not thought about how to handle the situation, and hesitated.

“He is one of the great generals of Northern Yan, a beloved minister of the Yan Emperor, and whether you kill him or imprison him, neither the Yan Emperor nor the head of the Tuoba clan would sit by and do nothing. And then, for the sake of one Tuoba Hao, if the two nations came to war and the border comes under threat, who will be sent to defend it?” Mei Changsu sighed. “It wouldn’t be the Crown Prince or Prince Yu, would it?”

“Oh,” Meng Zhi understood. “That’s right, at that time, of course we cannot let Prince Jing be sent away to lead the troops....”

Mei Changsu turned his gaze towards the direction in which Tuoba Hao had disappeared, a faint expression of annoyance drifting across his face, and his brows furrowed as he said coldly, “I have not met him in battle before, and do not know what his military tactics are like. Someday, when such a chance arises, I will take the opportunity to try my hand against him.”

“Not bad,” Meng Zhi smiled. “It would be immensely satisfying to meet such a person in battle. When the time comes, don’t forget to let me lead your vanguard.”

Mei Changsu smiled back at him, the momentary fierceness disappearing as he resumed his customary calm, quiet air, and then he turned his head and asked, “Weren’t you summoned into the palace? Why did you think to come back?”

“That messenger was an impostor, I found out on the road, and realized it was a plot to lure the tiger away from the mountain, and so hurried back, and thankfully you hadn’t come to any harm....”

“An impostor?” Mei Changsu’s long brows furrowed.

“Yes, his acting skills really weren’t bad, even I mistook him for one of my men, and so he fooled me at first. If I had not suddenly thought to ask him to do something for me, I would not have realized the trick until I arrived at the palace gates.”

Mei Changsu took a few steps forward, and pressed the tips of his fingers together, seeming to be in deep thought. A moment later, he turned back and said firmly, “Meng dage, you must enter the palace immediately and report your meeting with Tuoba Hao to the Emperor.”

“Oh? Why? Haven’t we already let him go?”

“It is precisely because we have let him go that you must go to court and report it, and also plead for forgiveness.” Mei Changsu’s eyes were fathomless and dark. “Because, if you do not report it, there will soon be someone arriving before the

Emperor to accuse you of smuggling one of the high ministers of another nation in and out of the capital.”

“How? Would Tuoba Hao be so careless as to be caught on his way out?” Meng Zhi was astonished. “And how would you know?”

“Meng dage, do you think that the person who masqueraded as an imperial messenger was sent by Tuoba Hao to lead you away from me?”

“Was he not?” Meng Zhi thought about it carefully, and gradually understood. If he knew that the Emperor had a habit of summoning people to court without warning, and knew who among the imperial guard was responsible for passing along imperial commands, and could copy that person’s appearance and actions so well that he had fooled even Meng Zhi, then this person had an intimate knowledge of many different aspects of Jinling, and could not be an outsider like Tuoba Hao, who had only been in the capital for a few days. It was already no simple task for Tuoba Hao to have found out that Su Zhe would be going out today and to hide in wait for him on the road he would take on his return journey.

Mei Changsu saw his expression and knew he had understood, and continued, “What I have concluded is this: someone was waiting to attack while I was out, but was afraid of the consequences if you stayed by my side, and so came up with a plan to lure you away. But they did not expect Tuoba Hao to turn up so suddenly and disrupt their plans, and before they had a chance to react, you had discovered the trick and hurried back. And so in the end, these people have not dared to show their faces. But even if they have not drawn near, Tuoba Hao’s swordsmanship is too frightening, and we cannot take the risk that they have not noticed everything that has happened. So you must hurry ahead, and report these things to His Majesty.”

“Ng,” Meng Zhi rubbed the stubble of beard on his chin and nodded. “His Majesty has no ill intent against the Northern Yan at the moment, and as you say, if Tuoba Hao had been publicly arrested, it would have been difficult for the court. Forcing him to leave Jinling quickly actually causes the least amount of trouble, so His Majesty should not punish me for acting of my own accord.”

“This is only if you return immediately and report everything to him. If it seems as if you released him in secret, then no matter what you say, the Emperor would be suspicious.” Mei Changsu pushed at his shoulder. “Stop lingering, go quickly.”

“But the people here....”

“It’s about time for them to wake, Fei Liu and I will wait here a bit and then return ourselves.”

“That’s no good, what if those lying in wait for you have left yet, what then?”

Mei Changsu looked at him, a little amused, and said quietly, "Commander, do you really think you are the only protection I have in Jinling? Don't worry, nothing will happen to me."

Meng Zhi stared blankly for a moment, then laughed, embarrassed. He had never been a person to make a great fuss, and so, after hearing Mei Changsu's words, he didn't delay any longer, but said, "see you later," and flew away.

Mei Changsu took Fei Liu with him as he inspected the people lying on the ground, ordering the youth to press a few of their vital meridian points. Tuoba Hao had not wanted to truly hurt anyone in Da Liang, and he had been careful with his attacks, and so soon, they had all regained consciousness. It was not far to the Xie residence, and so Mei Changsu did not let them bear him again on the palanquin, but leaned on Fei Liu and walked by himself to the gate of the manor, where he turned and dismissed all of Meng Zhi's guards.

It had left in good shape but returned like this, and Xie Bi stared at the roof-less palanquin for a long while in a daze before thinking to ask Mei Changsu what had happened.

As for the people who had lured Meng Zhi away to strike against himself, Mei Changsu did not even need to investigate to know that they were connected with the Crown Prince. After all, since he had arrived in Jinling, the only ones he had truly offended were the Crown Prince's people; since Prince Yu still dreamed of acquiring the qilin prodigy, it was unlikely that he would resort to murder at this point in time. He supposed the Crown Prince had finally discovered his role in the Princess' rescue, and had given up any hope of recruiting him to the Eastern Palace, and so had succumbed to this 'if I can't have him then I'll destroy him' mentality.

And if this was the Crown Prince's brushstroke, then it must be related to Xie Yu, and perhaps the route the palanquin-bearers of the Xie residence had taken had also been planned in advance, or the false imperial messenger would not have so easily found Meng Zhi among the vast, numerous streets of Jinling. But faced with Xie Bi's worried inquiries and seeing his reaction to his own simple explanation, the young man truly seemed to have no idea of the plot and trap behind the day's events. And from his observations of Xie Bi so far, Mei Changsu could be almost certain, given Prince Yu's intelligence, the reason that Prince Yu had never once doubted Xie Bi's loyalty was because this heir of the Marquis of Ning truly believed that his father wanted him to support Prince Yu, and so his speech and his actions were all genuine. In other words, Xie Bi didn't know that his father was using him to keep a foot in both boats in order to secure a good future no matter what the outcome.

Thinking of the depth of Xie Yu's cunning, that he would so callously use even the son he loved most, a chill grew in Mei Changsu's heart, and now, faced with Xie Bi's questions, he grew warm with sympathy.

“Is there really no hint we can pursue to find out who did these things?” Xie Bi could not know the thoughts passing through Brother Su’s mind, but was thinking very seriously. “Not even a single person was caught?”

“When Commander Meng appeared, who dared to linger? Naturally, they were all scared away.” Mei Changsu smiled wearily. “Let him investigate, I won’t bother.”

“But the attack was aimed at you,” Xie Bi continued hurriedly, “How about I go tell His Highness Prince Yu, and ask him....”

“No need.” Mei Changsu’s firm gaze fell onto Xie Bi, stopping him. “A case like this with no lead, no good will come of investigating it, and we will not catch the true masterminds anyway. I will be more careful in the future, that’s all.”

Xie Bi thought dazedly for a long moment, then blurted out, “Could it be....”

Mei Changsu cut him off, and said, closing his eyes, “Xie Bi, I’m a bit tired, and want to rest for awhile. When Jingrui comes back and finds out about this, please help me tell him what happened, I don’t want to repeat it all again.”

Xie Bi looked at his pale skin and withered appearance, and knew that he was not lying about being tired, and so did not bother him any further, but said quietly, “Brother Su, rest well,” and slowly left Snow Cottage.

## BOOK THREE

### WIND AND RAIN

#### CHAPTER 45

#### *Killings in the Night*

That day, Xiao Jingrui had gone out with his mother, Grand Princess Liyang, and it was late by the time he returned, but when he heard from Xie Bi what had happened to Mei Changsu, he still immediately hurried over to Snow Cottage. But when he arrived at the door of the guest cottage, he discovered that it was all dark, and it seemed as if everyone inside had gone to sleep. Before, he might not have cared and might have barged in and woken them anyway, but, for some reason, the closeness of their friendship seemed to be dissipating, and etiquette and courtesy seemed even more important now than in the first few days of their acquaintance. He felt this especially strongly now, as he stood there gazing into the darkness of the courtyard and the shadows of the trees all around, and it was as if this friend who had gained so much of his admiration and respect was truly drifting further and further from him, and was no longer the warm, laughing Brother Su who had walked beside him at the beginning.

Giving a long sigh, Xiao Jingrui turned and followed the stone-paved path towards his own rooms. In the cold, still night, there was a heavy dampness in the air; perhaps it would snow later in the night. The first time they had met was in the snow on Qinling,<sup>81</sup> where they had pledged friendship over wine and laughter, and now things had come to this, and he couldn't help the emotions welling up in his heart, as his footsteps grew slower and slower. Just after he passed the rock garden, there was a sudden coldness on his face, and when he reached up, his fingers brushed against wetness. He lifted his head and gazed intently into the dark sky and couldn't see

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<sup>81</sup> a mountain range in Shaanxi which forms a natural barrier between Guanzhong plain and Han River valley (source: <https://www.mdbg.net/chinese/dictionary?page=worddict&wdrst=1&wdqb=%E7%A7%A6%E5%B6%BA%E9%9B%AA%E4%B8%AD>)

anything, but his skin and nose had detected what his eyes could not, and he realized it had begun to snow lightly.

It was not yet midnight and the snow had already begun to fall, it seemed tomorrow would dawn on a world of crystal and glass. If he had not been so burdened by the woes of the world, he could have met up with two or three friends and admired the snow by a warm brazier with the company of good wine, the joy of the day complemented by the beauty of the scenery. It was a pity....

Letting out another sigh, Xiao Jingrui shook his head, as if shaking loose the weight on his chest, and reached out a hand to wipe away the wetness on his face. As he was about to take another step, he thought he saw a dim shadow flit by out of the corner of his eye, so quickly it seemed half a hallucination, but when he turned his head to look, there was nothing there.

Whether it was from a sense of foreboding or simple vigilance, Xiao Jingrui held still, standing quietly behind the rock garden, watching Snow Cottage from between the peaks of two rocks.

Sure enough, a moment later, another dark shadow flew by. This time, he had concentrated and so saw clearly. The shadow had come from the direction of the eastern wall of Snow Cottage, and after leaping up the walls of the courtyard, it was now lying motionless on the roof of the cottage, and a moment later, a second shadow had appeared from the same place and disappeared onto the roof. This pattern repeated itself until there were about ten people on the roof of Snow Cottage. Xiao Jingrui was just wondering why Fei Liu was being so quiet when a window on the west side of Snow Cottage suddenly trembled, and almost at the same moment, there was a muffled groan from the roof and then a figure was tumbling down into the courtyard, and he could see that a slender shadow, fighting like a demon, had joined the others on the roof, and the rest of the dark figures had been forced back onto the east side of the roof, and seemed to be having some difficulty defending themselves.

Xiao Jingrui was just smiling in admiration of Fei Liu's skill when, in the next instant, his smile froze on his face. This was because another group of invaders had appeared in his field of vision, coming from the southern wall, and had neatly avoided Fei Liu, who was being distracted by the other group of fighters. Without stopping to think, Xiao Jingrui was already flying through the air, shouting in a loud voice, "Who dares to charge into the Xie Residence?"

Because he had no weapons on his person, as he shouted, Xiao Jingrui chose one of the fighters closest to him and struck down with the meat of his palm. His opponents seemed to be familiar with the situation in Snow Cottage and had not realized anyone besides Fei Liu was around, and so were surprised at first, but quickly regained their composure, and one of them made a gesture and two of the others came forward to engage Xiao Jingrui, as the rest charged towards the main building Mei Changsu usually stayed in.

Although this leader of the assassins had made a quick and firm decision, he committed two mistakes.

First, he underestimated Xiao Jingrui's martial arts. The two black-clothed figures who had been ordered to stop Xiao Jingrui lost their swords by the third move, and by the fourth, they had both toppled to the ground, only having managed to slightly slow down this noble son of a Marquis house.

Second, he underestimated Fei Liu's ferocity. Because Mei Changsu had always restrained Fei Liu from hurting anyone, it had given observers the wrong impression that this youth only possessed rather impressive martial arts skills. No one could have known that on this dark night, he would attack like the reaper himself, his every stroke aiming to kill, not leaving the slightest chance for survival, and the speed and cold efficiency with which he was taking care of those around him were frightening to behold.

But at the same time, Xiao Jingrui and Fei Liu had also committed a mistake – they had underestimated the abilities of the leader of the assassins.

After realizing his disadvantage, the leader immediately ordered the rest of his men to engage Fei Liu, as he himself turned to face Xiao Jingrui's rapidly descending sword.

Weapons are one thing, and swordsmanship is another. Because it was a sword seized in battle, it was not the most natural fit, but Xiao Jingrui's skill with a sword was still second to none, and so, no matter how the leader of the assassins dodged and ducked, blocking with the steel in his own hand as sparks leapt from the contact of the metal, Xiao Jingrui's next stroke still fell ruthlessly and unrelentingly.

His palm struck squarely onto the other's chest, and his opponent flew through the air like a kite cut from its string, and it was only then that Xiao Jingrui realized something wasn't right, but it was too late to take it back, as the leader of the assassins had already used the power of his strike to fly through the air like an arrow, breaking open the door and charging into the main building.

As far as Xiao Jingrui knew and for as long as he had known him, within this master building, there only dwelled the thin, frail Mei Changsu, who did not keep even a servant by his side.

“Brother Su!” With a piercing cry, Xiao Jingrui rushed up the steps and leapt over the shattered door into the dark, dim room within. The stench of blood hit him full in the face, but even with his frighteningly accurate night vision, he could only see a figure motionless in the center of the room. Before he could react, a bright light flared as the lamp on the desk was lit, and in the soft glow, he saw Mei Changsu standing



there, draped in a long fur coat, one hand holding onto the table, his clear, pure complexion appearing harsh in the candlelight.

Xiao Jingrui's gaze fell onto the small bow he had casually placed onto the table – a vermilion-red bow with an ink-black bowstring, a knot of white jade, and a pattern as intricate as teardrops.

“‘Draw-in-Vain’<sup>82</sup>?”

“Yes, this is the mighty crossbow made by the Ban family, ‘Draw-in-Vain’,” Mei Changsu answered. “Jinling is truly unlike any other place, to have forced me to use this.”

Xiao Jingrui lowered his head and saw that the body of the leader of the assassins was lying not far from his feet, an elaborate little arrow stuck firmly into the center of his throat. Although his chest was soaked in red blood, it was obviously blood he had spit out from the last hit he had received from Xiao Jingrui's own hand, whereas the wound in his throat had been made with such incredible marksmanship that it had caused his muscles to contract, and not a drop of blood had been spilled. One could only imagine the sharpness of the eyes that had watched and waited in the darkness, and the steadiness of the hands that had fired the arrow.

“It would be best for you not to look.” Seeing that Xiao Jingrui was about to pull away the dark cloth obscuring the assassin's face, Mei Changsu stopped him in a quiet voice. “It is so late, I had not thought you would come.”

“I heard Brother Su met some mishap today out on the road, and was worried. It was only after I rushed over that I realized it was so late.” Xiao Jingrui's fingers were already grasping the corner of the cloth, but a nameless hesitation rose in his heart, and he did not immediately pull it away.

He was not Xie Bi, he had been raised from young in the jianghu world, and knew jianghu well, he had killed with his own hands, and had seen the kind of jianghu battles that ended with a ground full of bodies, and so he was not afraid of corpses, and no matter how gruesome the sight, it would not have frightened the second-ranked gentleman of the Langya Lists, the young master Xiao.

But Brother Su had said...’it would be best for you not to look’....

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<sup>82</sup> from a Chinese idiom: “there are many painters in this world, but none can paint a grieving heart”, and the three words of the name of the bow (畫不成) literally translate to “cannot paint”...but I'm gonna take some artistic licence here, k (something like: there are many painters in this world, but they draw in vain a grieving heart)

The intruder was lying before him, his face covered by the dark cloth, and no matter whether he looked or not, it would remain the same face. Just like certain truths which, no matter whether he understood them or not, would exist forever, regardless of his actions.

Xiao Jingrui clenched his teeth and finally drew aside the thin cloth, which seemed to weigh a thousand pounds.

After a single glance, his gaze faltered. His hand slowly clenched into a fist, the muscles on his face convulsing in distress.

It was a face which seemed both unfamiliar and familiar.

Unfamiliar, because he had never greeted it or spoken with it, and didn't know its owner's name or position.

Familiar, because he saw it often, because it was always by his father's side, following behind him, obeying and executing trivial orders.

If this face had not been enough to answer his questions, the silence all around him would have, seeming to slowly close in on him like a net, tightening around Xiao Jingrui's heart.

The more absolute the quiet, the more sounds he could hear within it. The sound of the wind blowing in the night, the sound of the snow drifting to the ground, the beating of his heart, the rise and fall of his breath...he could hear everything he should not have been able to hear, and yet there was not the slightest hint of the sounds he should have been able to hear.

In this grand, stately residence of the Marquis of Ning, the clashing of swords and the cries of the fighters had rang out into the quiet night sky, but like a pebble tossed into an old well, aside from the small tremors of its ripples, there had been no other response.

Fei Liu had long since taken care of all the enemies outside in the courtyard, but he had not come back in, and Xiao Jingrui did not know what he was doing. The smell of blood was dissipating into the night, becoming almost unnoticeable.

No one had come to help, no one had even come to look, and it seemed as if the entire Xie residence had not heard anything, but was still slumbering quietly, waiting for the dawn of the next day.

"Jingrui," Mei Changsu's steady voice rang out, as if he had not noticed the terrified expression of the young man before him, and he continued calmly, "The manor I went to see today was recommended by Commander Meng, and is near Changji lane. The place is clean and solid, and has all the basic utilities needed for

daily living, and although the scenery of the garden is somewhat lacking, it will be a good opportunity for me to redesign it entirely. And so...it is time for me to move out....”

“Move out...” Xiao Jingrui’s gaze was still fixed dazedly on the corpse before him, and he murmured, “Yes, it is time to move out, this Snow Cottage is not fit to be lived in any longer....”

“Jingrui, listen to me.” Mei Changsu put his hand on the young man’s shoulder, gripping it gently. “Go back to your rooms now, as if you had not come to Snow Cottage tonight, as if everything you have seen was only a bad dream. Tomorrow, go out with Yujin and relax a bit, as if everything is as it always was. You cannot let your imagination run wild, and cause your mother to worry....”

“Can everything...really be as it was?” Xiao Jingrui stood, and looked into Mei Changsu’s eyes. “I do not want to know why my father wants to kill you, I only want to know...why did you have to get swept up into the whirlpool of Jinling? You were the kind of jianghu person I admired the most – carefree and easy, without worry or constraints...”

Mei Changsu gave him a bitter smile, looking into the light of the lamp on the desk. “You are wrong, there has never been anyone carefree in this world, so long as a person has sentiments<sup>83</sup> and hopes, he can never be carefree.”

“But you could have avoided this....”

“Jingrui,” Mei Changsu raised his gaze, his expression becoming just slightly cold. “You are not me, do not judge in my place. Go back now, I will leave early tomorrow. I have received your care and protection these many days in Snow Cottage. Once I have settled into my new manor, if you wish, you are welcome as my guest any time.”

Xiao Jingrui looked at him in a daze and asked, “In the future, I can still come?”

A smile spread across Mei Changsu’s face. “Why not? I only fear you would not wish to come, you never know.”

Xiao Jingrui thought about the chaos of the current situation, and about how he and his father now stood on opposing sides, and felt as if his heart had been tied into tangled knots, and stood there at a loss. He had originally thought that it was only Xie Bi who had gotten involved with palace politics, and had thought nothing much of it, believing that, should anything happen in the future, they could always rely on the respective statuses of the Marquis of Ning and the Grand Princess for protection, but today, he had suddenly discovered that his father was not as neutral as he appeared,

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<sup>83</sup> the word can also be translated as ‘feelings’ or ‘relationships’

and had only now come to understand just how deeply the Xie family had woven itself into the affairs of the court. Even though he had never paid much attention to it, and had always kept an easy, carefree life away from the palace, he was still a part of the Xie family, and so could not completely avoid caring about the matter. Thinking about it now, the words Yan Yujin had spoken to him in the grasslands that day had truly been full of foresight.

“Things have not come to this point yet, what is the use in worrying?” Mei Changsu seemed to know the thoughts of his heart, and said with a gentle smile, “You only have to hold fast to your pure honesty, and there will be nothing you cannot endure. Like the snow falling outside – although it is coming down heavier and heavier, you and I both know, there will be at time when it stops.”

As if in response to his words, a gust of wind and snow blew in through the shattered doorway, bringing in a bout of cold and a human figure. Fei Liu reached out a hand, picked up the body on the ground, and easily pulled it back outside. Xiao Jingrui followed him to the door and saw him give it a casual swing, throwing it over the wall, and when he looked beyond him to the courtyard, he saw that it was empty and neat, clean of the previous mess.

“You’re just going to throw them out like this?” Xiao Jingrui was taken aback.

“It’s fine,” it was Mei Changsu who answered. “Someone will deal with them once they are outside.”

Xiao Jingrui listened to his ice-like tone, which was nothing like the warm Brother Su he had met in those early days, and felt his heart shudder, a shiver running down his back.

Fei Liu had already returned, and now grasped Mei Changsu by the hand. “Together!”

“Alright,” Mei Changsu smiled at him softly, his manner changing swiftly but naturally. “Su gege will return with you to the west building to sleep. Go and see Xiao gege out first, alright?”

Fei Liu turned and fixed the dazed Xiao Jingrui with his gaze. “No!”

“Fei Liu...”

“No need, no need,” Xiao Jingrui seemed to wake up, an indescribable pain rising up in his heart as he answered sadly, “You go rest, I will leave now. For the rest of the night...be careful.”

Mei Changsu laughed lightly and nodded, watching as Xiao Jingrui walked heavily out of the room into the courtyard, the small smile on his face fading into

quiet grief. From the back, the young man's head was lowered, the originally tall and straight figure now seeming slightly crooked, as if something heavy weighed on his forehead, which he must bear, and bear bitterly. What this young man must face in the future, perhaps only Mei Changsu himself knew, and the schemes held in his chest felt like ice and iron as they seemed to whisper to him, even if you know, everything that must happen will still happen according to the path which has already been laid.

“It has only just begun...Jingrui...I hope you can endure all of this...” After this soft murmur, Mei Changsu gathered up the sympathy that had spilled out inadvertently, took Fei Liu by the hand and slowly returned to the west room.

## CHAPTER 46

### *Guests at the New Manor*

The snow fell continuously for three days. In its midst, Mei Changsu quietly moved to his new residence without purposefully notify anyone, but within a few days, everyone who should know had already found out.

The Mu residence and the Yu residence naturally sent over many gifts of good wishes for the new manor, and the palace also bestowed upon him royal gifts of chains of jewels and bolts of cloth, and it was said that Princess Jingning had been involved in their preparation. Xuanjing Officer Xia Dong turned up empty-handed and gave herself a tour around the manor, then dropped a single sentence, “What an ugly courtyard!”, and left. But the other guests who came to visit didn’t dare make any similar comments because everyone knew that this manor had been recommended by Commander Meng, and what could you expect from the tastes of these martial arts experts?

Xiao Jingrui, Yan Yujin, and Xie Bi also naturally came as guests, but the joyful atmosphere of their earlier days was long gone, and only Yan Yujin tried hard to chat about interesting topics, trying to cheer everyone up, but Xiao Jingrui didn’t reply much, and even Xie Bi, for some reason, seemed dazed and half-asleep.

Mei Changsu took the opportunity to persuade the three to leave the capital, and to visit the neighbouring Huqiu<sup>84</sup> hot springs to relax for a few days.

“It is indeed the right season to visit the hot springs,” Yan Yujin seemed interested by his suggestion. “But never mind Jingrui, I can take him with me anytime, only, I’m afraid Xie Bi can’t leave so easily whenever he pleases, he is not like us idlers, he has many things to take care of every day, and going for a visit to the Huqiu hot springs would probably take at least half a month.”

He had just finished speaking when Xie Bi suddenly struck the table and said, “Why can’t I go, come on, let’s go together...”

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<sup>84</sup> Huqiu is a district in the city of Suzhou, in the province of Jiangsu

“Do you have a fever?” Yan Yujin reached out a hand to feel his forehead. “Every day you talk about how busy you are, how are you suddenly not busy?”

Xie Bi looked blank for a moment, and then his expression became sad. “I’m not busy anymore...there isn’t much to do....”

Yan Yujin saw that he was speaking the truth, and was taken aback, but Xiao Jingrui was already reaching out a hand to grip Xie Bi’s shoulder, saying, “Second Brother, don’t think so much, Brother Su is right, the Huqiu hot springs are a good place to relax, I will go with you and put down our worries for awhile...before coming back...”

Mei Changsu’s heart gave a quiet sigh, and he was about to speak when one of the new servants came bounding over to report, “Mister, His Highness Prince Yu has arrived.”

Xie Bi jumped and looked around helplessly. Mei Changsu understood his feelings, and said quietly, “If you don’t mind, you can leave by the side door, is that alright?”

Yan Yujin looked from one to the other, and although he did not understand why Xie Bi was suddenly afraid to see Prince Yu, he knew that there must be a reason, and so didn’t say anything, but followed after the two brothers as they were led away by the servant.

Mei Changsu had just arrived at the outer courtyard when Prince Yu entered in plain clothes and a snow cap, a modest smile on his face, adeptly giving off an air of deep respect for the wisdom before him, and when he saw Mei Changsu bend over in a bow, he hurried forward and reached out a hand to stop him, saying with a smile, “I have taken advantage of the snow to come visit you, and am here only as a friend, please do not stand on ceremony.”

Mei Changsu gave a small smile and straightened. Prince Yu turned and looked around the courtyard, as if preparing to speak some words of praise, but then balked for a long moment, and finally only managed, “This courtyard is open and bright, and its design is austere and interesting....”

Mei Changu did not reply, but only smiled and raised a hand to invite Prince Yu into the study room, which had just been decorated, and ordered for tea to be brought.

“You have just moved into a new residence, I wonder if you have enough servants at hand? I have a few girls, quite beautiful, and very well trained, if you do not mind....”

“I thank Your Highness for your offer,” Mei Changsu half-rose in a bow. “I am a jianghu man, and have not taken a wife, and so am not too used to being served by

young girls. As it happens, I have some old friends in the capital, and they have sent over some people who are quite competent, but if I have any such need in the future, I will come to Your Highness.”

Prince Yu had only made the offer out of politeness and had not really expected him to accept it, and so was not surprised by the refusal, and let his gaze roam around the study until it landed on the desk.

“Is this your work? It is very well-drawn!”

“It is only a rough draft,” Mei Changsu smiled. “Although Your Highness thinks the design of this manor is interesting, my tastes are a bit more conventional. This is the plan of the scenery and decoration of the courtyard, and I am preparing to have the manor renovated according to this design in the spring, after the snow has melted.”

“Aiya, is it only a draft? It is already so charming – look at this matching of the foliage, the layout of the paths, all arranged so elegantly in this irregular pattern, if the artist did not hold the whole picture in his mind, he certainly would not be able to produce such a detailed design.” Prince Yu had already paid his manor several undeserved compliments, so now that there was something actually worthy of praise, of course he seized the opportunity with both hands. “If this manor is really redesigned according to this plan, it will definitely become the most beautiful manor in Jinling. I say, that would be a manor worthy of Mister Mei of Jiangzuo Alliance!”

“Your Highness gives me too much praise. It was really Commander Meng who chose well, the first time I came, I found that the location and setting of this manor was suitable, and the price was so reasonable that I decided to buy it. Fortunately, my luck was good this time, and I did not come across another situation like that of Lan Manor, and now that I have stayed here for a few days, I find it very comfortable.”

Hearing him bring up Lan Manor, Prince Yu was delighted, and left the desk to return to sit beside him, saying, “That strange case of the corpses in the well of Lan Manor must have given Mister Su a fright. I hear the case has had a preliminary ruling in the Capital Magistrate Office, did you know?”

“How could a commoner such as I know about the great cases of the court....” Mei Changsu laughed.

Prince Yu thought, you were the one who uncovered this old case as revenge against Lou Zhijing, do you expect me to believe you are not following every step of its sentencing? But he showed no sign of these thoughts on his face, and instead gave a warm smile, saying with a laugh, “This case really is strange, it is just an ordinary criminal case, but it involves a number of court officials. And so, because of this, Capital Magistrate Gao Sheng went to the Ministry of Justice and said that, since ministers of the second rank or higher had been found to be involved in the case, the Capital Magistrate Office no longer had the power to remain the principal



investigating office, and then he immediately handed over all the evidence and witnesses, he really does do things properly.”

Mei Changsu looked at the pleased expression on Prince Yu’s face and smiled in his heart. Although Gao Sheng did not belong to either party, he still did not dare to tamper with case evidence just because of a little pressure from the Crown Prince, and so he was originally in distress over how to handle the dilemma, but coincidentally, his old master had made a suggestion regarding He Wenxin’s murder case, advising him to hastily hand the whole thing over to his superiors, and had suddenly inadvertently reminded him of this option for the Lan manor case as well, and so he had immediately gone to question Shi Douguan through the night, and as soon as he hit upon the name “Lou Zhijing”, he instantly stopped and did not ask even a single additional detail, but took the whole case to the Ministry of Justice on the premise of ‘involvement of ministers of the second-rank and above’, and so in a single day, he had gotten rid of two difficult cases that could have offended important and powerful people, and so that night, he finally went to sleep with a light heart. After all this, he could only say that, though his luck had been truly bad this year, at least he had managed to preserve his life and those of his wife and children, and if he could be transferred to another post in the future, then he would count it an unexpected blessing.

Gao Sheng’s cautious evasion had played right into Prince Yu’s wishes, as now these two cases, one to his disadvantage, and one to his very great advantage, had both fallen into the hands of the Ministry of Justice, whose head, Qi Min, was quick and clever as well as his faithful subordinate for many years, and so Prince Yu couldn’t help being in an extremely good mood. Remembering that Lou Zhijing was an enemy of Jiangzuo Alliance and that the ‘corpses in the well’ case had been uncovered by Mei Changsu’s own hand, of course he had to come over to deliver his personal gratitude.

“I hear...the Lan manor case has involved Minister Lou of the Ministry of Appointments?” It seemed this Mei Changsu was truly clever, and as soon as he heard that the case had been reported to the Ministry of Justice, his expression grew troubled. “I wonder if the Ministry of Justice has the right to investigate ministers of the same rank as itself?”

“You are probably not familiar with the rules of the court, investigation by a single department is naturally not possible, but as long as the evidence and witnesses are intact, they can report it to His Majesty and request for the head of the High Bureau of Justice to join the investigation, and so two departments will investigate one, and then they will no longer be restricted by the problem of the same rank.”

“I see.” Understanding spread across Mei Changsu’s expression. “But because the case had been investigated in the Ministry of Justice up until now, the head of the High Bureau of Justice will not be familiar with the details, and so the whole process will still be mainly overseen by the Minister of Justice, is that correct?”

“Naturally. Lou Zhijing is a despicable, immoral person, preying on the weak and innocent, and the Ministry of Justice will certainly not handle him lightly, don’t worry.”

Su Zhe had only reported the case, and was not the original victim, so telling him not to worry seemed out of place, but after hearing this, Mei Changsu only nodded in silence and did not express any words of protest, as if he was tacitly acknowledging his personal enmity with Lou Zhijing, and this made Prince Yu even more confident that he was leaning towards himself. He felt almost as if they were fellow strategists plotting together, and as he grew more and more joyful, a question that he had planned to raise later now came pouring forth.

“Is Mister Su aware of the ‘Bin province land infringement case’?”

Mei Changsu lowered his head to take a sip of tea, and nodded indifferently. “Yes, on the road to Jinling, we came across the couple who made the accusation.”

Prince Yu suddenly got up and clasped his hands in a formal greeting, saying, “This case is causing me great distress, pray Mister Su give me his advice.”

Mei Changsu gazed at him for a long moment, then said quietly, “His Majesty has finally decided to open this case?”

“Yes, Father Emperor summoned me and the Crown Prince into the palace today to ask our views regarding this land infringement case, and finally...he decided to hand the case over to Prince Jing to investigate, with the help of the heads of the three departments....”

Mei Changsu’s expression did not change, as he asked, “How did Your Highness and the Crown Prince respond to His Majesty’s decision?”

“Neither of us objected....” Prince Yu sighed. “The Crown Prince did not protest because he knew that Father would never agree to give the case to him, so as long as it did not fall into my hands, he was already very satisfied, not to mention Prince Jing has always been upright and just.”

“And Your Highness?”

“I did not dare protest, for fear Father would grow suspicious. Mister Su should be aware that I have a close relationship with the Duke of Qing....” Prince Yu looked worried. “That the case did not fall into the hands of the Crown Prince is already a great fortune, but I am worried that, with Jingyan’s rigid nature, it will not be easy to interfere.”

“Didn’t Your Highness protect Prince Jing in front of His Majesty over the matter of the Princess not long ago? That would count as a favour, no?”

Prince Yu smiled bitterly. “It is indeed a favour, but it will not be enough to persuade Prince Jing to listen to me. Perhaps Mister Su does not know what kind of person Jingyan is, to tell the truth, I have never met anyone so stubborn and unyielding, and even Father sometimes cannot handle him....”

“Then Your Highness wants me to find a way to restrain Prince Jing, so that he will handle this land infringement case according to Your Highness’ wishes?”

“If you have any ideas, I would be endlessly grateful.”

“Then dare I ask Your Highness, how would you wish this land infringement case handled?”

“It would be best if it could be proven to be just a false claim by foolish commoners. If that is not possible, then the main goal is to suppress the whole thing.”

Mei Changsu gave him a long look and then suddenly laughed grimly. “Your Highness, are you still dwelling in the dreams of last night’s sleep? Do you think the evidence the Xuanjing Bureau has brought back is just for show?”

Prince Yu coughed, but because he had been putting up this benevolent front for so long, he had grown accustomed to giving a show of magnanimity, and so not only did he not get angry, he actually looked a bit embarrassed as he replied, “This...is a bit difficult, and so it is more important than ever to have Prince Jing’s protection, because no matter what, as long as the Duke of Qing is found to be ignorant of the whole matter, it doesn’t matter how the rest of the case is sentenced.”

Mei Changsu’s lip curled, and he gazed deeply at Prince Yu for a long time, until Prince Yu grew a bit uneasy, and finally said coolly, “If Your Highness truly harbours such intentions, then I must ask bluntly, since there are a thousand paths to choose from, why choose one that leads to a dead end?”

Prince Yu looked taken aback. “What is the meaning of these words?”

“Your Highness is a wise and renowned royal prince, heavily favoured by His Majesty and popular among the court ministers, so that you can even compete with the Crown Prince. But Your Highness has forgotten, no matter how powerful Your Highness becomes, in all of Da Liang, there is one person Your Highness can never, ever make your enemy.” There was a hint of a smile as cold as ice at the corner of Mei Changsu’s mouth, and his every word cut like a knife. “That person is our Emperor, your father.”

Prince Yu quickly got up, protesting, “When have I ever thought to make an enemy of Father Emperor?”

“Then who does Your Highness think is behind the opening of this case? The Crown Prince? Prince Jing? No, it is His Majesty! His Majesty spent so much effort finding someone like Prince Jing to lead the investigation, why? Isn’t it because he wants to use this case as an example to put a stop to the current trend of land infringement crimes? When you and the Crown Prince fight, what the two of you care about is the throne, but to His Majesty the Emperor, he still has to govern the nation, and so he will tolerate your quarrels, but he would never allow them to interfere with the management of national affairs. When His Majesty sent a Xuanjing Officer to investigate this case, when he decided to hand it over to Prince Jing for sentencing, it shows that His Majesty already has a predetermined conclusion for this matter in his mind, and if his plan is disrupted because of Your Highness’ own meddling, then who is the person you will most anger? In order to protect one Duke of Qing, you will lose all of His Majesty’s favour, have you weighed this balance?”

Hearing this, a cold sweat was breaking out on Prince Yu’s forehead, and he sat there in a daze, reaching out a hand to grasp at his tea cup and then draining its contents in one swallow.

“Your Highness,” Mei Changsu continued relentlessly, a shred of coldness seeping into his voice. “You lost the Duke of Qing long ago, you must understand this.”

## CHAPTER 47

### *Relinquished Pawn*

He had lost the Duke of Qing long ago.... Mei Changsu was not the first to arrive at this conclusion, as many of the strategists of Prince Yu's residence had mentioned this at their meeting, but at the time, everyone had focused on the unyielding character of the principal investigator, Prince Jing, and the evidence collected in person by the Xuanjing Bureau, and about how it would be almost impossible to overturn this case, and so the conversation had dwelt on the practicalities of the issue, leaving Prince Yu with a shred of hope in his heart. But today, Mei Changsu had wasted no time in addressing the heart of the matter, and had bluntly pointed out that he had lost the Duke of Qing, not because it would be difficult to protect him, but because he simply could not be protected.

Unlike the Crown Prince, Prince Yu possessed a good sense of judgement himself, and as soon as Mei Changsu raised this point, he knew that it was the truth, and his keen attention suddenly vanished, his heart sinking. In truth, he had no personal sentiment towards the Duke of Qing, but he was the only minister on the military side to publicly support Prince Yu, and by the power of his seniority, he could easily raise the support of a number of his disciples and old friends, and so for this reason was all the more valuable. If it were only a few days ago, he could have accepted this loss, heavy as it was, but ever since Qin Banruo had informed him secretly that Xie Yu was actually supporting the Crown Prince, he had become more and more aware of the Duke of Qing's importance.

According to the court system of Da Liang, there was a strict divide between civil and military positions, where civil officials could not be granted the title of 'Marquis', military officials could not participate in politics, and no minister below the first rank could hold both civil and military titles. Civil ministers could rely on reviews of their work as well as the favour of their superiors and the Emperor for promotions in rank, but the elevation of the ranks of military officials had to rely on their military deeds, and not only the favour of the Emperor. It was because of this tradition that the majority of military officials remained uninterested in matters unrelated to the army, such as the fight for the crown, because even if they took the great risk of choosing a side, they could not gain any real reward or elevation in rank without actual military accomplishments, so since it was not a gamble worth the price, why not just enjoy the show from the sidelines? Only those military officials who had already earned a first-

rank status by their military service and had been granted the rank of ‘Marquis’ or ‘Commander’ were not restrained by this limitation, and could receive any titles granted by the Emperor, as well as salaries exceeding those of their rank and gifts and rewards to their families and inheritance. Of the military officials in all of Da Liang, there were only about five of such a rank.

And so, the choices of these five represented in large part the preferences of most of the military officials, although, of these five, aside from the Duke of Qing, who openly supported Prince Yu, and the Marquis of Ning, who secretly supported the Crown Prince, the rest seemed to be keeping out of the conflict.

Of course, when deciding who would inherit the throne, eight parts of the Emperor’s decision would be based on the Crown Prince and Prince Yu’s performance in the tasks for which they were responsible and their ability to gain power amidst the six departments of the court, but the remaining two parts would also take into consideration the preferences of the military.

Although Prince Yu was confident that he had the upper hand in the first eight parts, he knew he had not managed to widen the gap by much, and so the remaining two parts still had great importance to the overall outcome.

Not to mention, the attitudes of the military officials had always been difficult to determine, because most of them took no chances, and never betrayed any hint of bias, shaking their heads tight-lipped if anyone tried to ask, and only at the very last moment when the Emperor asked them personally would they lean close to the imperial ear to softly whisper a name, not letting the sound carry to even a single bystander. Although this would not gain them any great favour from the newly chosen Emperor, it also avoided any great mishaps, and was the preferred method of those without much ambition.

And so from this it can be seen how rare and valuable the public support of a first-ranked military official was to Prince Yu.

“Mister Su does not know,” Prince Yu let out a sigh, and confided, “I had always believed that I had the advantage over the Crown Prince in recruiting the support of the military officials, because I had the Duke of Qing, as well as Xie Bi, and never had to worry about the military side of things. But in the end, after all my planning, I still never could have thought that the Marquis of Ning was actually playing both sides, and when he did not openly object to Xie Bi being taken under my wing, I thought he was leaning towards me, but he had actually been secretly supporting the Crown Prince all along, and single-handedly raised up this ‘land infringement’ case to remove the Duke of Qing...and now, I have no way to know the preferences of the military, and I fear that when the moment comes, I will fall because of this weakness....”

Mei Changsu listened quietly to Prince Yu's laments, and aside from nodding slightly, did not show any other expression. Prince Yu's gaze seemed to flicker at this response, but his expression was controlled, and he closed his eyes briefly, then gave a bitter smile and said ruefully, "Aiya, it is my own recklessness. I have forgotten that Mister Su has a very good relationship with the two noble sons of the Marquis of Ning.... I have made things difficult for you with these words...."

Mei Changsu's expression did not change, and he did not deny it, only lowering his head slightly.

"But to my knowledge, although Mister Su is good friends with Jingrui and Xie Bi, you are also intimate friends with Princess Nihuang, and have even dared to anger the Crown Prince for her sake...." Prince Yu gazed at Mei Changsu and continued, "Perhaps that was not your original intention, but as the deed has been done, it cannot be taken back now. If I have guessed correctly, there has also been some ulterior motive to your leaving Snow Cottage amidst the snowstorm in such a hurry?"

"Where have Your Highness' thoughts gone to?" There was a hint of something forced about Mei Changsu's light smile. "I am only a jianghu man, without worries or cares, and wasn't used to the Marquis' grand residence, and so moved out as soon as possible. As for the Crown Prince's misunderstanding towards me, if there is an opportunity, I will be able to explain it clearly to him."

Hearing the hidden rejection in this reply, Prince Yu's eye twitched and his brow furrowed in anger, but only for a short moment, before he immediately suppressed his fury again.

At this moment, it was even more important not to appear as narrow-minded and petty as the Crown Prince, or he would lose the opportunity to obtain what he wanted...this was what Prince Yu was telling himself.

Since Mei Changsu had left Lang province to enter Jinling, it must mean that he had understood in his heart that he could not avoid the fate laid on him by the words of Langya Hall, and so had prepared himself to choose a master. In these forced circumstances, he would choose whoever seemed the most generous, and whoever made him feel safest. And once he had made up his mind and chosen a side, this qilin prodigy would certainly not hold back.

This was because Mei Changsu really valued his Jiangzuo Alliance too much. If the side he chose should come to lose the fight for the throne, Jiangzuo Alliance would undoubtedly suffer from the losses of their chief, and no matter what, Mei Changsu would not let this happen. So as long as Prince Yu could gain his loyalty and ensure that he had no further contact with the enemy, he could tie his own fate with that of Mei Changsu and Jiangzuo Alliance, and from then on, he could make full use of his talent and abilities without worry.

This was the plan Prince Yu had devised after Qin Banruo had asked him that day, “Then if Your Highness can take Mei Changsu as your subordinate before the Crown Prince can act, are you willing to trust him unconditionally?” And it was a plan he was confident would be able to trap the abilities of this qilin prodigy and use them to their fullest.

But first, of course, he had to catch him in his net.

“Mister Su was willing to advise me on the matter of the land infringement case today, and for this I am endlessly grateful. As for the future, I do not dare to force anything.” With his warm smile and humble temperament, Prince Yu had perfectly captured the air of a gentle, kindly prince. “With your great talent, you will naturally grasp the situation with your singular insight, and what more could I add? I only wish to say, no matter how you choose in the future, no matter where fate leads us, so long as you are willing to look on me with favour, the gate of the imperial Yu residence will forever be open to you.”

These words were truly dignified and well-spoken, and Mei Changsu felt the quietly touched expression he had pasted on his face become a little more natural, and Prince Yu, who was watching his face closely, was delighted.

“I have disturbed you long enough today, and have detained you from your rest, so I will take my leave now.” Prince Yu knew that some things could no be rushed, and seeing that Mei Changsu seemed moved, he chose to retreat instead, and smilingly rose in farewell, forcing down the distress he felt over the Duke of Qing, and thus showed himself to be quite a character indeed.

Mei Changsu also rose and bent forward in a bow. “Your Highness braved the cold to come personally to my humble residence, how could it be called a disturbance? The day is late, and by courtesy I should invite Your Highness to stay for a meal, but Your Highness has a thousand responsibilities and little time for leisure, and so I do not dare make this offer. I have only offered tea today, and my hospitality is most lacking, pray Your Highness forgive me.” After saying this, he lifted a hand, as if intending to accompany his guest out.

Of course, Prince Yu would have been delighted to stay, but Mei Changsu’s words seemed to be asking him to stay and leave at the same time, and he could not grasp his true intention, and if he made an error in judgement, he feared it would show that he had no mutual understanding with the qilin prodigy, and many thoughts flew across his mind but he could not decide on any one of them, so he only slowed his footsteps, hoping Mei Changsu would speak again.

Fortunately, the heavens smiled on him, and as the two left the study side by side, walking along the corridors to the pavilion at their center, Mei Changsu lifted his gaze to the clouds at the hazy horizon, and said quietly, “Your Highness Prince Yu does not



need to be overly concerned. Even if the Duke of Qing survived this round, he is no match for Xie Yu, and so it is no great loss....”

“That may be so,” Prince Yu frowned. “But he has some weight in the court, and it is certainly better to have him than not.”

Mei Changsu smiled indifferently. “In my humble opinion, I think Your Highness should completely cast aside the Duke of Qing, and throw your support behind Prince Jing.”

“Support Prince Jing?” Prince Yu was really a little shocked. “He is a prince, and has the imperial edict to carry out his investigation, who would dare to stop him? Why would he need my support?”

“He would not, if it were only a matter of the Bin province case.” Mei Changsu had halted, and continued quietly. “But Your Highness knows that this case is only the beginning, and once it has been judged, there will immediately be an influx of a large number of similar cases making accusations against many more noble houses. Prince Jing has no experience in handling complicated matters of this nature. If at this time, Your Highness is willing to intervene, and help him quickly calm the waves of protest raised by these noble houses, and maintain the stability of His Majesty’s national affairs, how could Prince Jing not be grateful to Your Highness?”

Prince Yu’s breathing slowed, and he suddenly seemed to see a whole new direction that he had not noticed before, and a light was growing slowly in his mind. “You mean....”

Mei Changsu continued coolly, “What does the Duke of Qing has that he is worth Your Highness’ lament, could even two Dukes of Qing compare with half of a Prince Jing?”

Prince Yu’s expression jumped, and his face was flushed as he paced in a quick circle. “If I could acquire Prince Jing, then of course...but with Prince Jing’s character...I fear I would not be able to handle him....”

Mei Changsu’s gaze was like snow, piercing through Prince Yu like the blade of a knife. “Even if he cannot be handled, you must handle him. The Marquis of Ning has already chosen the Crown Prince, and besides Prince Jing, who among the military could compete against him?”

Prince Yu knew these words were not empty, and his brow had furrowed into a single line. “It is true that no one else could openly match Xie Yu. But Jingyan is stubborn, and I fear when I need to use him, he would not obey my orders and deploy his soldiers...”

Mei Changsu turned and met Prince Yu's eyes, saying very slowly, "Why does Your Highness want to control the military? Are you preparing to force the Emperor to abdicate or to start a rebellion?"

Prince Yu's heart stopped in fear, and he glanced around him quickly before saying furiously, "What is the meaning of these words? If I harboured any such intentions, the heavens would not tolerate me!"

"So since you are intending neither to force an abdication or start rebellion, where did the words "deploy his soldiers" come from?" Mei Changsu's tone was like ice. "Prince Jing's function is only to intimidate. Even if the Crown Prince has Xie Yu, or even a few other first-ranked Marquis, it would not mean anything, as long as Your Highness has Prince Jing and Princess Nihuang, and in His Majesty's eyes, the influence you and the Crown Prince hold over the military is at least equal, so that you do not lose to him in this respect. So long as you never intend to step onto the path of treason, all of this is only a bargaining chip, and is only to put on a show for His Majesty, and will never actually need to be used."

All of Prince Yu's strategists often analyzed palace politics in front of him, but no one had ever come up with such a novel perspective, and he felt as if a new path was opening before him, and the turmoil in his mind was slowly beginning to brighten.

It was true, the military was not like court officials, and there was no need to gain complete control over them, because with the Emperor's personal Yulin army in Jinling, and Meng Zhi's strict vigilance over the city, there was no possibility of seizing the throne by force, and so, since he only needed the appearance of military power, so what was the use of total obedience?

Seeing Prince Yu's changing expression, Mei Changsu knew that he had been moved in his heart, and the corner of his lip turned up as he casually added, "Even if we speculate wildly and say the Crown Prince chose to act rashly, once His Majesty is endangered, do you really think that Prince Jing, with his rigid and upright character, would need your orders to act?"

## CHAPTER 48

### *Fei Liu's Present*

It took two whole hours for Mei Changsu to see his guest out. Before climbing onto his palanquin, Prince Yu purposefully pulled him out from under the cover of the doorway, and grasped his shoulder warmly as he urged, “Your health is not good, don’t linger here in the wind.”

Mei Changsu looked at him and thought, I was in the shelter when you pulled me out, why do you bother putting on this caring facade? But he only smiled and replied, “It is truly cold out here, Your Highness, hurry and enter your palanquin, and forgive me for not seeing you out.”

Prince Yu had fulfilled his intention of giving this show of generosity and kindness on the street outside the manor and was deeply satisfied, and as the snow and wind was blowing against his face uncomfortably, he gave up any further pretense and turned to climb into the palanquin.

As soon as the palanquin was lifted, Mei Changsu turned and reentered the manor, then walked quickly to the shadows beside the walls and vomited a few times, as if he were trying to expel some foulness from within himself.

“Su gege...”

He turned his head to see Fei Liu standing there, head cocked and eyes wide, his expression full of concern.

“It’s alright,” his lip turned up involuntarily as he took the youth’s hand. “I was just playing with a poisonous snake, and afterwards, became a little nauseous...”

“Poison snake?!” Fei Liu was instantly on the alert, looking sharply all around him, trying to find this poisonous snake.

“It’s already crawled out,” Mei Changsu couldn’t help smiling. “No matter, Su gege has known this poisonous snake for a long time, and knows where its poison is hidden, and so won’t be bitten.”

“Cannot bite!”

“That’s right, with our Fei Liu here, who would dare to bite me?” Mei Changsu stroked the youth’s head, his voice growing quieter. “And anyway...Su gege himself...has now become a poisonous snake too....”

Fei Liu’s delicate eyebrows furrowed, and though he did not understand the meaning of Mei Changsu’s words, he felt the sorrow behind them, and immediately leaned against him, shaking his head vigorously. “Not!”

“Not a poisonous snake? Then what am I?” Mei Changsu knew that his emotions had affected Fei Liu and he hurriedly composed himself, then said with a smile, “A poisonous spider? A poisonous lizard? Or a scorpion?”

Fei Liu was growing upset, his handsome face drawn tight as he shouted, “None of them!”

Mei Changsu laughed as he patted the youth’s back comfortingly. “Alright, alright, none of them... let us go back to the house, tomorrow, Fei Liu has to go out with Su gege, alright?”

Fei Liu nodded. “Ng! Hot spring!”

“No, not to the hot springs.” Mei Changsu did not wonder how Fei Liu had heard about the hot springs, but smiled as he brushed at the flakes of snow on his forehead. “Have you lost your little wooden eagle yet? Tomorrow, we’re going to go see Tingsheng.”

As soon as he heard that they would be going to see Tingsheng, Fei Liu stopped his half-play half-training activities for the day, and started searching earnestly through every room in the manor. Like all young boys, Fei Liu did not like to clean up after himself, and even a particularly beloved and interesting toy would somehow disappear after a day or two of play. From past experience, it was no use looking for toys that had been lost, because they would usually miraculously turn up from some strange place after awhile. But this time was different, and although Fei Liu had some mental deficits, he still knew that they had only just moved in and so there was virtually no chance of the little eagle turning up by itself in this new manor, and so he thought it would be better to look for it himself.

“Fei Liu, it’s time to eat.”

“No!”

“Fei Liu, if it’s lost, it’s lost, and you still have to eat. Tingsheng won’t ask you about your little eagle tomorrow, and even if he asks, you don’t have to really tell him

you've lost it. Have you forgotten what Lin Chen gege taught you? Children who cannot lie are not good children...."

Fei Liu flew into a humiliated rage. "Still cannot!"

"Still haven't learned to lie?" Mei Changsu bit back a laugh and continued in a soothing voice, "Never mind, take your time. Our Fei Liu is so smart, he can learn such difficult martial arts, how could he not learn how to lie? Don't worry, if Lin Chen gege laughs at you, Su gege will hit him for you."

If Xiao Jingrui were here, he would certainly protest against Jiangzuo Alliance's child-rearing methods, but unfortunately, he was not, and so Fei Liu did not realize there was any problem with the way he was being taught, and only thought of Lin Chen gege's teasing expression, and screwed up his face unhappily.

"Come on, come and eat," Mei Changsu went over and pulled the youth into the room. "There's yellow chicken bought especially for you, see, have these two drumsticks. How about this, tomorrow, you can bring a present to Tingsheng too, then everything will be fair, right?"

Fei Liu's eyes brightened as he looked up, his mouth full of chicken. "What?"

"What present? Let me think..." Mei Changsu rubbed his chin. "It should be something you like most...."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Su gege!"

"You like Su gege most? Well, we certainly can't give him that...." Mei Changsu laughed. "Then how about that gold-silk vest?"

"No!"

"Why not this time?"

"Don't like."

"You don't like that gold-silk vest?" Mei Changsu tightened his lip against the smile threatening to burst forth. "But Fei Liu, you don't like that vest because your martial arts are good, so you don't need to wear it for protection, and that's why it's always lain forgotten at the bottom of your clothes chest. But Tingsheng is different, he is young, and his martial arts are poor, and if he were to be bullied, as long he wore

that vest, he wouldn't get hurt even if someone hit him, so he would certainly like this gift."

Fei Liu's eyes widened as he thought seriously for a moment, but he had always believed Mei Changsu's words without a doubt, and so soon he was nodding.

"That vest is in the box under your bed, take it out before you go to sleep tonight, and don't forget to bring it with you tomorrow."

"Ng!"

With the problem of the present solved, Fei Liu's worries disappeared, and with his usual ravenous appetite, he devoured seven- or eight-tenths of the dishes laid out on the table, so that by the time he set down his bowl, Mei Changsu had long since retreated off to one side and had finished several pages of his book.

The brazier in the house was burning merrily and Fei Liu's cheeks were red, so he took off his outer coat, padding over in his undershirt, and lay down with his head resting on Mei Changsu's knee, idly playing with the fur on his fur coat.

This was one of Fei Liu's favourite ways to relax.

But he had not relaxed for long when he lifted his head and turned a questioning gaze towards Mei Changsu.

"Go then." Mei Changsu said the words indifferently, and did not add his usual warning of "but don't hurt anyone."

Fei Liu's slender but firm figure disappeared into the night, and soon, sounds of disturbance were heard from the roof, but they were not very intense, and did not last long. Less than an hour later, the youth had returned to the room, his whole body still impeccably clean from head to toe, carrying only a faint reek of blood in his wake.

For the sake of peace and quiet in the future, there must be a strict and violent beginning. No matter who it was this time, they must still receive a warning in blood – Su Zhe's manor was even deadlier than the Marquis of Ning's residence, and those who came in such a way must be willing to pay the price with their lives.

"In a few days, the traps in the courtyard will be set, and Uncle Li<sup>85</sup> and the rest will move in." Mei Changsu peeled a tangerine, and fed a piece to Fei Liu. "And then, there won't be many people who will dare to come in without permission, how about that?"

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<sup>85</sup> he's using the title Fei Liu would use; he means Li Gang

Hearing that no one would trespass in the future, Fei Liu chewed at the tangerine in his mouth, his gaze full of disappointment.

“No more trespassers is also a good thing, Fei Liu can paint in peace and quiet, don't you also love to paint?”

“Also love.”

“How about this, since you love painting but also love excitement, Su gege will find a chance for you to fight Uncle Meng, do you want that?”

“Want!” Fei Liu's eyes glowed as he opened his mouth for the next piece of tangerine.

“Alright, the fruit is done, it's time to go to bed.” Mei Changsu smilingly pushed Fei Liu upright. “Go, and on your way, tell Aunt Zhang to bring me some hot water.”

Fei Liu obediently got up, reached out an arm to hug Mei Changsu, then went to the side building and called for Aunt Zhang to bring the water. He carried a full basin into his own room and washed his face and his feet, and had just jumped into bed when he thought of something, and dragged out a large chest from under his bed. He ruffled in it for a few moments and pulled out a gold-thread vest, then his fingers brushed against something hard, and he felt for it curiously and found that it was the little wooden eagle Tingsheng had sent him.

With one hand clutching the vest and the other around the little eagle, he fell back into bed, his eyes wide with bewilderment, perhaps wondering how the little eagle could have fallen into the bottom of the chest. He turned over twice in his pillow, but before he could turn a third time, he had already slipped into the sweet world of dreams.

The next day, Mei Changsu got up early but did not leave immediately, instead staying in his room burning incense and playing his zither, and after he had delayed for some time, enough time for Prince Jing to have finished his morning exercises and dealt with his routine military affairs, he finally ordered for his palanquin to be brought and called over to Fei Liu, “let's go.”

Although the back walls of the Su Manor and Prince Jing's residence were not far apart, if one were to travel by the main doors, he would have to leave the manor, turn left, walk down a long road, turn right, walk down another long road, turn left again, and walk down yet another long road before seeing the plain but imposing gates of the imperial Jing residence.

Mei Changsu got off his palanquin at the gates of the manor and handed over his notice of visit, and after waiting a little while, a military-looking man came out to lead him inside. Prince Jing had not personally come out to receive him, but was waiting

inside at Huying hall. Because the notice had mentioned visiting Tingsheng, the child had also been summoned and was standing off to one side. Having not seen him for some time, Mei Changsu saw that Tingsheng had grown quite a bit taller, his demeanor no longer as frightened or cowed as it had been, and he was dressed in clean cotton robes which, although not luxurious, looked soft and warm. He did not look very like his father, Prince Qi, but when he smiled, he gave one a feeling of seeing someone familiar.

As soon as Mei Changsu and Fei Liu appeared, Tingsheng started to smile, but he had always been quiet, and had recently begun to receive rather strict training, and so did not behave as excitably as children usually did, but stood there quietly and waited for Prince Jing and Mei Changsu to finish their polite greetings before stepping forward to bow. “Tingsheng greets Mister, and Fei Liu gege.”

Prince Jing frowned, as if he did not like to see Tingsheng kneeling to Su Zhe, but remembering that he had been Tingsheng’s benefactor, he did not say anything.

Fei Liu had always been the youngest in Jiangzuo Alliance, and so was delighted to be called gege, and immediately pulled out the gold-threaded vest and pushed it into Tingsheng’s hands. “For you!”

Tingsheng only felt something smooth and soft thrust into his hands, and when he held it out, he realized it was a vest, but did not recognize the material it had been made with. However, because it was from Fei Liu, he was very happy, and thanked him with a broad smile.

But although Tingsheng did not know the material, Prince Jing took one look and recognized it for the treasure it was – a prized jianghu gold-threaded vest, which would withstand water and flame, not to mention swords and knives. His brow immediately furrowed and he said to Mei Changsu, “Gold-threaded garments are very rare, this gift is too precious, Tingsheng cannot accept it.”

“Why are you telling me?” Mei Changsu gave him an incredulous look in return. “Fei Liu gave it to him, Your Highness must speak to Fei Liu.”

Prince Jing balked, looking at Fei Liu’s cold expression, and knowing it would be impossible to explain the matter to the youth, he could only keep silent as he waved Mei Changsu into the hall.



## CHAPTER 49

### *Confidant*

When Mei Changsu left his residence, he had calculated that Prince Jing would have just about finished dealing with his military matters by the time he arrived, but when he entered Huying hall, he saw that it was filled with Prince Jing's most capable subordinates, most of them familiar faces, although there were a few he did not recognize, and all of them renowned and accomplished veterans of his army. When Prince Jing entered, they all immediately clasped their hands in a salute.

"This is Su Zhe, Mister Su." Prince Jing introduced him simply, then seemed to think for a moment before adding, "He is my friend...I ask you all to look after him in the future...."

"Yes sir!" Everyone answered together.

Mei Changsu smiled and bowed slightly in reply. Friend? Well, he could only say he was a friend, it was not as if he could announce to his subordinates, "He is my strategist."

"Zhanying, I leave you in charge of the rest of the meeting," Prince Jing said to the general standing closest to him, before turning slowly back to Mei Changsu. "There is a meeting going on, I will accompany Mister Su to the study to talk."

Mei Changsu nodded and the two walked out of the hall side by side onto the green-bricked main path. For some reason, they both remained silent as they walked, neither inclined to raise some topic to lighten the mood.

Actually, one did not have to pass by Huying hall to reach the study, and Mei Changsu knew that there was another path. But from the scene in Huying hall, it appeared as if his visitation request had arrived in the middle of their meeting and everyone present had been curious to have a look at this recently famous Su Zhe, and so Prince Jing had obliged by bringing him over on his arrival.

He wondered what impression his sickly appearance had given this group of fierce generals, as most people in the military tended to look down on those too delicate and weak to withstand physical hardship. That year, when Uncle Nie had first joined the

Chiyan Army, hadn't he too been dismissed by himself and Jingyan, until he had won several hard victories in a row for the army?

His gifted strategies had led to numerous victories against their enemies. This wise soul of the Chiyan Army always seemed to come up with strange and wondrous ways of using their troops, but the last words he had spoken in this world had been uncharacteristically simple.

"Xiao Shu, you must live...." He had said this as he thrust Lin Shu into the snow pit with all of his strength, a charred column of flame pressing down onto his thin shoulders. That pair of bright, clear eyes had held only hope, no hatred. Because, he had only wanted Lin Shu to live, and as for what he would do after he survived, Nie Zhen had held no demands.

But although the dead make no demands, the living cannot forget.

"Is Mister Su feeling unwell?" Prince Jing's voice drifted over from one side. "You look very pale."

"It's nothing, it is only that I feel it is even colder today than it was yesterday."

"Of course, today is the winter solstice." Prince Jing looked as if he had thought of something, and waved a hand to summon a soldier standing guard a good distance away, ordering, "Bring a brazier to my study."

The soldier bowed and left, and Mei Changsu said with a small smile, "Thank you."

"I usually do not keep braziers in my study, and forgot that you become easily cold, and so overlooked this." Prince Jing's voice was calm. "I hear you moved into a new residence recently, please accept my congratulations and my apologies for not coming in person to wish you well."

"Did Princess Nihuang mention this to Your Highness?"

"No, it was Jingning."

"Oh," Mei Changsu nodded, as if in sudden understanding. "No wonder I saw him in Huying hall just now."

Prince Jing quickly turned his head and looked at him. "What did you say?"

"I mean Guan Zhen, is he now under your command?"

Prince Jing's eyes shone as he stared at Mei Changsu for a long moment, before he let out a breath. "You even know about this...."

“It was incredibly clever of Princess Jingning to bring Guan Zhen into your command. Neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu’s power is guaranteed, so she could not take the risk. Not to mention, Guan Zhen is not someone gifted at flattery and politics, and would not be of much use to either of them. Only here under Your Highness could prestige and honour be gained by strength alone. But...even if Your Highness took especial care of him, the distance between Guan Zhen and the Princess is too great, and Jingning is already seventeen, and cannot delay for much longer...”

“In a few days, I will send Guan Zhen to the northern mountains to eliminate the bandits and robbers in the area, and he can make his way up the ranks slowly.” Prince Jing gazed steadily ahead of him. “Guan Zhen also has a stubborn temper, and with this infatuation, he will not give up until the very last moment. Who can say whether it was fortunate or unfortunate for Jingning to have come across him?”

Prince Jing’s words were a lament rather than a question, and so Mei Changsu did no reply. After turning a corner, the study came into view, and the brazier had already been brought over, but it had clearly not been there for long and the coldness of the air within the room had not completely dissipated, so Mei Changsu found the chair nearest the brazier and sat down, but when he raised his head, he caught a glimpse of Prince Jing, whose gaze had just flitted across the old chair by the southern window, and a pain rose in his heart.

That was the place he had always used to sit in, but though objects did not change with time, people did, and even if he wanted to sit there now, he feared Jingyan would not allow it.

Once tea had been served and the customary courtesies observed, the conversation immediately turned to the topic at hand.

“Prince Yu hinted that I should find a way to indicate to you, in the matter of the ‘land infringement case’, you can act freely, and do not need to worry about him.”

Prince Jing replied coldly, “I was not planning to worry about him.”

“You received the imperial edict yesterday?” Mei Changsu continued unconcernedly, his tone still peaceful. “It has been a day, have you had any thoughts?”

“The evidence the Xuanjing Bureau has brought back is sufficient, and the case is not difficult to judge.” Prince Jing’s voice was cold and stern. “The Duke of Qing did not only indulge the practice, he is the main culprit.”

“But he is a first-ranked military official, and has the right to request for pardon.”

“The case involves the murder of three people, he will not be pardoned.”

“He has always been in the capital, and was not personally involved in the murders.”

“The village of the Zhu family, Tu village, have submitted his secret letter as evidence.”

“The secret letter was not in his own handwriting, but rather that of one of the old masters of his household.”

“I invited the old master over last night, and he had already confessed today, he wasn’t very stubborn.”

“Did you really invite him over so politely?” There was a look of approval in Mei Changsu’s eyes. “Your Highness was able to ascertain that this old master was the missing piece of the Xuanjing Officer’s evidence, and acted so swiftly and decisively to seize the opportunity – I stand in admiration.”

There was no trace of satisfaction in Prince Jing’s expression. “It is because the Duke of Qing thought that his secret letter had already been destroyed and did not know it had fallen into the hands of Xia Dong, or he would have long since killed the old master to silence him.”

“But has Your Highness considered that if the Duke of Qing’s case is dealt with severely, in many other areas in which blood has been shed, there will be numerous cases reported in imitation of this one? Previously, the provincial offices would refuse such cases, but now they would not dare, and do you have confidence in handling the great headache that will arise afterwards?”

“We counter soldiers with arms, and water with earth,<sup>86</sup> is there anything that cannot be handled?”

Mei Changsu had come to visit today originally to encourage Prince Jing not to fear the difficulties ahead, but the way the conversation was going, it seemed that this person still retained his flaw of regarding dangerous terrain as if it were level ground, and so did not need his encouragement.

“Your Highness’ self-confidence is praiseworthy, but there are some aspects worth considering in dealing with the practical matters at hand,” Mei Changsu urged seriously. “The great noble houses have always kept apart, and had their own ways of handling matters, but that is because they have never come across a force against which they needed to unite. If Your Highness could show some subtle variation in the way you handle these different cases as they arise, and seem to favour some with a lighter sentence while punishing others with a heavier one, then the benefit will be

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<sup>86</sup> an idiom that means adopting measures appropriate to the specific situation

distributed unevenly among the noble houses, and as no clear pattern can be found, they will not be able to form an alliance. You will be able to halt this trend of land infringement without inciting any great united resistance from the noble houses, and stabilize the peasants' discontent while reducing the number of refugees, and so when everything concludes according to His Majesty's wishes, then he will certainly take notice of your achievement."

Hearing this, Xiao Jingyan looked shaken, and he was silent for a long moment before he said lowly, "Your words are truly inspired. I had only thought to treat everyone the same, and so perhaps would have not been able to achieve the desired results."

Mei Changsu smiled, and then added, "Since Prince Yu wants to lend you a hand, don't be too aloof, and when you come across claims against his people, you may choose one or two for a lighter sentence, as a show of gratitude."

Prince Jing's thick brow furrowed, and he said wonderingly, "He should be using all of his power to protect the Duke of Qing, why would he take this treasure of his and use it as a gesture of magnanimity to such a piece of rock as me?"

"Because he knows, this time, he cannot change His Majesty's will." Mei Changsu reached out his hands to the fire on the coals, a faint light shining in his eyes. "Without the Duke of Qing, and now knowing that Xie Yu has chosen the enemy's camp, he cannot help feeling afraid. Right now, to him, you are very important."

"In order to showcase my importance, you have gone to such lengths to remove the Duke of Qing and to expose Xie Yu." Prince Yu scoffed. "I must really thank you."

"What, Your Highness is not willing to count this service of mine?"

"It is only...I do not want people to think I am with Prince Yu...I do not want to stand beside the Crown Prince or Prince Yu...."

"Though I must cause you this grievance, I guarantee there will not be anything overly unacceptable for you to do. Besides, you have been suppressed for so many years, people should be able to understand...."

"I do not care about the opinions of people in this world," Prince Jing gritted his teeth slightly, his gaze a little unsteady. "But the dead still have their noble spirits, and I do not want them to see something like this...."

A rush of fiery heat rose up in Mei Changsu's chest, and it was a long time before he was able to speak again. "The souls of the departed do not look only at what is on the surface, they will know your heart, not to mention, these are only means to achieve an end."

“To be honest, I understand. It is my own choice, and not about feeling wronged or causing grievance.” Prince Jing took a deep breath. “I will act according to your arrangements, do not worry.”

Mei Changsu smiled, reassured, and turned to a new topic. “His Majesty’s will is for Your Highness to choose officials from the Three Departments to aid in the investigation?”

Prince Jing nodded.

“Has Your Highness made your selection?”

“Please advise me,” Prince Jing answered bluntly.

Mei Changsu took out a folded sheet of paper and handed it to Prince Jing. Xiao Jingyan opened it and studied its contents for a long while, in deep thought.

“What does Your Highness think about these choices?” Mei Changsu asked slowly after letting him think quietly for a period of time.

“Very good.” Prince Jing appraised concisely.

“These people are all worth getting to know well.” Mei Changsu laughed, “But in the future, they will certainly not become Your Highness’ wingmen.”

Hearing this, Prince Jing did not show any surprise, but rather seemed to agree, indicating that he had already understood the meaning behind Mei Changsu’s words.

“In terms of strategists, Your Highness has me, and that is sufficient; we do not need to worry about the military; in the palace,<sup>87</sup> there is Princess Jingning, and she is not very noticeable and so is an especially strong source of support. As for the court...I believe Your Highness does not need supporters, because the earlier you gather supporters, the earlier you will be discovered by the Crown Prince and Prince Yu. What Your Highness needs is nothing more than pure, steadfast ministers.” Mei Changsu’s tone was low, but his every word was clear. “The more such ministers there are, the fewer plots and schemes there will be in the court, and the more space Your Highness will have to uphold your true temperament. Besides, interacting with the people on this list will not make you feel uncomfortable.”

“But these people...it is difficult for any of them to rise in status....”

“Under the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, it may be so, but I hope Your Highness will be able to change these circumstances. These people do not lack for ability or

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<sup>87</sup> I think he means the Inner Palace

intelligence, only opportunity. By their natures, although they would not be willing to attach themselves to any camp or side in the future, they will nonetheless remember kindnesses done to their person. Your Highness only has to interact with them naturally and genuinely, and if there are any plans we must involve them in, I will handle it.”

“You...” Prince Jing looked at him dazedly for a long while. “Is there such a need for you to do something like that?”

Mei Changsu gave a small smile. “This has always been the role of a strategist. I would not rest easy if Your Highness had to deal with such matters yourself.”

“I understand...” Prince Jing seemed to think of something, and said in a low voice, “That day, when you sent a letter asking me to go to Jiyun Tower and sit for half a day, it was because of this...”

“That’s right,” Mei Changsu smiled. “You two have met already?”

“Yes. I sat there for a long time, and he was very conspicuous.” Prince Jing shifted in his chair into a more comfortable position and continued. “Everyone goes to Jiyun Tower to eat, but he called over the host and asked about the price of every item they sold – wood, rice, oil, salt, meat, vegetables and eggs. I could hardly fail to notice him.”

“The Ministry of Revenue oversees the national treasury and taxes, which affects people’s livelihood and welfare. But it has become a giant cesspool under Lou Zhijing, and this person is the only one left who truly cares to investigate the prices of daily necessities, and works solidly and reliably in the department. If he were not the son of the Duchess of Qinghe, and of high birth, he would have been transferred away long ago.” Mei Changsu sighed. “After you met each other that day, did you have an enjoyable conversation?”

“We seemed well-suited to each other.” Prince Jing looked at him closely. “Lou Zhijing has been implicated in the murder case, and is unlikely to last much longer as the Minister of Revenue, do you have something planned?”

“What does Your Highness think?”

“Shen Zhui is currently a third-ranked assistant minister, and it would not be impossible for him to be raised by one rank and inherit the title of Minister of Revenue, but he is neither the Crown Prince’s man nor Prince Yu’s, you want to push him into this position, is it possible?”

“It is because he is not biased towards either side that this opportunity can fall onto his head.” Mei Changsu’s smile was confident. “Of course, there are many things still that must be done, but there the outcome is relatively sure. Prince Yu has been

waiting for this chance for many years, and he will certainly prevent the Crown Prince from appointing another one of his own people. As for the Crown Prince, the loss of Lou Zhijing is already a mighty blow, how could he let Prince Yu take this chance to raise someone of his own into the post? And while these two fight over the seat, the fisherman will reap the benefit.<sup>88</sup>

“Yes, the situation seems to be as such, and with your help in the matter, Shen Zhui is certainly fortunate.” Prince Jing looked up and laughed. “You truly have unusual methods, and live up to your name of qilin prodigy.”

A hint of bitterness arose in Mei Changsu’s expression, and he lowered his gaze but made no reply. Talent? He was in truth no better than anyone else, it was only that he had put all his thought and effort into this for so many years that he naturally had a much more thorough grasp of the situation.

“But Shen Zhui is truly a breath of fresh air, and it is my wish as well to raise him to this position.” Prince Jing turned his gaze to him and cupped his hands in a courtesy. “I am grateful for your consideration of my situation.”

Mei Changsu bowed in return, and said, “Shen Zhui is only the first step, in the coming days, there will be openings also in the Ministries of Appointment and Justice, and those I favour are all on the name list I have given to Your Highness. I ask Your Highness to take this chance while investigating the case together to make acquaintances of and observe these individuals, and to give them opportunities to showcase their efforts, so that the Emperor will form a good impression of them. They are all intelligent, and will understand that Your Highness is allocating them this work as an opportunity for promotion in rank without your mentioning it explicitly.”

“Shen Zhui’s opportunity is already rare, how could the Ministry of Appointment and the Ministry of Justice also have openings?” Prince Jing had just asked this when he suddenly remembered that the source of the Minister of Revenue Lou Zhijing’s topple from power had emerged from the manor that this Su Zhe had so casually bought, and he suddenly understood.

“Nothing will happen in the near future, Your Highness can first take care of the ‘land infringement case’ without worry.” There was a hint of fierceness in Mei Changsu’s gaze. “After the new year arrives, I will invite He Jingzhong and Qi Min,<sup>89</sup> as well as their master, to join the game....”

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<sup>88</sup> from a Chinese idiom about a bird and an oyster on a beach, where the bird tried to eat the oyster and the oyster closed its shell around the beak of the bird, so the two were stuck in stalemate, when a fisherman walked by and snared both of them. (i.e. “when two parties fight, the third party always benefits”)

<sup>89</sup> the previously mentioned “Minister Qi”, the Minister of Justice (Prince Yu’s man)



## CHAPTER 50

### *Dilemma*

Such a simple sentence, but because it had come from the mouth of Mei Changsu, it carried a terrifying weight, and was not easily doubted. Prince Jing gazed at the refined scholar before him, thinking of all the ripples he had caused both openly and secretly since he had entered the capital, and couldn't help letting out a heartfelt sigh. He wondered why one of the greatest talents in the world, this Mister Mei of Jiangzuo, had chosen himself so resolutely? Was it really only because of the prestige and respect he could gain from raising a prince currently out of favour to the throne, as he had said before?

“Did Your Highness have a particularly heavy load of military duties today?” Mei Changsu did not seem to know what he had been thinking, but was drawing his hand into his sleeve as he asked idly. “It was not early when I came today, but your meeting had not yet finished.”

“The routine matters are easily dealt with, but the meeting took longer today because a rather difficult issue has arisen, and Magistrate Gao of the Capital Magistrate Office came to request my help.”

“Another difficult problem? Magistrate Gao's luck this year is really something,” Mei Changsu couldn't help smiling. “But this time, it is not a problem that I have given him, so what has happened?”

“It is not anything that requires careful planning, but rather brute force,” Prince Jing replied. “A beast has appeared in the mountainous areas of the eastern outskirts, and the villagers were frightened and reported it to the Capital Magistrate Office, but they do not have enough military resources and were not able to capture it, and so came here to me to borrow soldiers. It is not anything particularly complicated, but we wanted to discuss whether it would be possible to capture the beast alive, to see what kind of a thing it is.”

“It may be the outskirts, but this is still the royal capital, how could there be a beast? How strange, once Your Highness captures it, don't forget to let me learn something new as well.”

Prince Jing raised an eyebrow. "I had not thought Mister Su would have such an inquiring spirit...."

"Could it be that, to Your Highness, I only harbour a mind full of dark, dim schemes?" Mei Changsu teased self-mockingly, and then, feeling his legs growing stiff, he got up and took a few steps to the western window, absently reaching out a hand towards the vermilion iron bow hanging on the wall beside the window.

"Don't touch!" Prince Jing immediately shouted, and Mei Changsu froze, murmuring to himself for a moment, then slowly lowered his arm and said lowly, without turning his head, "My apologies."

Prince Jing also felt that he had been discourteous, and explained, a little embarrassed, "That belonged to a late friend, and when he was still living...he did not like strangers touching his belongings...."

Mei Changsu nodded indifferently and did not answer, standing in front of the window for a long moment before saying abruptly that he would be taking his leave.

Prince Jing thought that he had been angered because he would not let him touch the iron bow, and felt a little apologetic. But it was not possible to apologize, not to mention that Lin Shu's iron bow was not something he could let others touch casually, and so he said nothing, and rose to see him out.

The two walked out of the study side by side, and the atmosphere seemed slightly awkward, with Mei Changsu seemingly not wanting to speak, and Prince Jing not accustomed to creating idle chatter to lighten the mood, and so they walked in silence until they halted together before the arms drilling ground.

In fact, there was another more direct path to the front gates, which was on the other side. But the two had chosen to walk in the opposite direction with such unspoken agreement because they had both guessed that Fei Liu would certainly be found here.

Prince Jing was a military man, and his imperial residence was different from those of the other princes, its inner courtyard was small and located far to the back, whereas his outer courtyard took up most of the residence, and aside from several arms drilling grounds for the training of soldiers, there was also a training ground for horse riding.

At the moment, the situation in the central training ground could be described as "exciting". Although Fei Liu was only a bodyguard, his fame in Jinling was equal to that of Mei Changsu, and to some of the military generals, the refined but frail scholar had not aroused their interest nearly as much as this martial arts master with his intriguing skills and tendency to win all his fights.

And so, Tingsheng, who had originally been given the responsibility of hosting Fei Liu, had long since been relegated outside of the small circle that had formed around Fei Liu, which was entirely made up of Prince Jing's generals.

From Fei Liu's expressionless but glowing eyes, he was having quite a lot of fun today. Back in Jiangzuo Alliance, everyone was always busy, and seldom had there been so many people willing to train with him, not to mention that the martial arts skills of these people were really not bad, and they were all very serious, not teasing him at all!

When Prince Jing arrived, those with sharp eyes had already opened a path through the crowd, and were bowing in greeting. Prince Jing saw that Mei Changsu did not show any intention of interfering, and so waved a hand and said, "Continue as you were."

Fei Liu's next set of opponents was a pair of twin brothers wielding pikes, not over twenty five or twenty six years of age, who seemed to be military officers by their apparel, and who were both tall and strong. Their martial dance began fierce and radiant, like the movements of two tigers, and they moved in perfect chemistry with one another. If they had been on the battlefield, they would surely have made formidable enemies, but unfortunately, against martial arts masters, this set of skills were not enough, and Fei Liu was not someone who would treat one opponent lightly and not another, and so in no time, he had sent one brother flying one way and the second brother another, and his face seemed to draw taut for a moment, likely thinking that this round of opponents had been too weak and not much fun at all.

"Don't step up if you're going to be like those two, let's show His Highness something good!" After this course shout, a tall, broad figure appeared before Fei Liu, a long-handled curved blade in each hand, giving off an intimidating and formidable air before he had even begun to attack.

"General Qi! General Qi!" The crowd immediately began to chant.

Fourth-ranked military official General Qi Meng was one of Prince Jing's loyal subordinates who had followed him for many years, and was well-respected in his army, so as soon as he appeared, the atmosphere became even more excited, so that even Fei Liu felt that this was no ordinary opponent, and a hint of joy rose in his eyes.

Amidst the loud cries of encouragement, Prince Jing stood steadily with his hands behind his back, his expression indifferent.

This was because he knew that Qi Meng simply was not Fei Liu's match.

Indeed, at the beginning, because Fei Liu was very interested in those two strange curved blades, he went easy on the first few moves, but after he had gotten a good look, his movements suddenly became much fiercer, and though the foundation of Qi

Meng's martial skills were deep and strong, he was simply no match against this kind of natural prodigious strength. He took a few steps back, then suddenly twisted the back of his blade, and a bolt shot out from the weapon, flying like a comet straight for Fei Liu. This move was Qi Meng's trump card, he had defeated many enemies with it, and it had given him outstanding service. But Fei Liu didn't even look alarmed as he stretched out a hand and sent the bolt flying into the trunk of a nearby tree. Qi Meng's eyes widened in shock and he shouted in surprise before the back of his blade twisted again, and another bolt shot out.

Mei Changsu's expression did not change, but the dark pupils contracted forcefully for a moment.

This was because, this time, the bolt was flying straight for his throat.

If it had been Lin Shu, one flying bolt would not have meant anything, but now, with his entire body weakened to such a state, he would not have been able to beat even the most ordinary of fighters, and so dodging a bolt like this was simply impossible.

Since it was impossible to dodge, then why bother dodging, and so Mei Changsu stood in his original position, unmoving.

Fei Liu's figure had already become like an arrow himself, speeding towards him, but the distance between him and the bolt was too great, and he could not reach it in time.

The razor-sharp bolt was finally caught in the hand of Prince Jing, its edge less than four finger-breadths away from Mei Changsu's neck, but its direction had already changed subtly, and even if Prince Jing had not reacted, it would probably still have only grazed the skin.

Mei Changsu lightly gestured to Fei Liu, and though no one understood what it meant, they saw Fei Liu stop and stand still.

Qi Meng scratched his head and laughed. "I miscalculated, I miscalculated, you scholarly types aren't used to seeing knives and weapons, eh, did I scare you?"

Mei Changsu's expression was like frost, his gaze falling like ice needles onto Qi Meng's face.

This kind of scene was not rare in armies, and shows of strength were common against newcomers, against outsiders who had been transferred into the army, or simply against a person you didn't like, and if they performed well in the test, they could gain the beginnings of respect and acknowledgement.

Lin Shu had come across a similar episode before too. That year, Father had taken a weak, frail scholar in his forties who had been serving in the Ministry of War without any real power, and brought him into the Chiyan Army into an important position, and the young and hot-blooded Young Marshal had purposefully shattered his sword, letting a fragment fly towards that thin figure in order to test his courage.

That time, the rod of Father's punishment had fallen especially heavily, and he had been beaten so badly he could hardly rise out of bed for three days afterwards.

Mei Changsu knew that Prince Jing remembered the incident, and remembered too the words his father had spoken to him in rebuke.

At the scene of the punishment, the target himself, Nie Zhen, had not stepped forward to plead for mercy on his behalf, because he knew that the reason for Lin Shu's harsh punishment was not that he had sought to provoke Nie Zhen, but because, when he had let the fragments of his sword fly at Nie Zhen, His Highness Prince Qi had been standing beside Nie Zhen.

Just as, when the bolt had come flying towards him just now, Prince Jing had been standing beside him.

Although Qi Meng had not harboured any malicious intent, although his target had certainly not been Prince Jing, he had nevertheless turned the blade of his weapon in the direction of his own lord.

If Prince Jing only sought to maintain his current position, if he were to become merely a great military general in the future, then the scene could end in laughter.

But now, the situation was changing. Once his heart and ambition turned towards the most respected and honoured seat in Da Liang, he must begin to purposefully nurture the kind of air befitting a sovereign, and it must be an air that could never be ignored or offended in any way.

Seeing the iron-like expression on Prince Jing's face, the laughing Qi Meng felt more and more uneasy, and as fear began to grow in his heart, his gaze turned inadvertently towards his left.

All of Prince Jing's generals of relatively high rank stood gathered there, and their expressions were nervous, one of them gesturing for Qi Meng to kneel.

"I was impulsive and reckless, and have offended the gentleman, pray overlook my coarse manners." Qi Meng thought that Prince Jing was angry because he had acted discourteously against his favoured Su Zhe, and so immediately bowed and apologized to Mei Changsu.

“You do not need to apologize to me,” Mei Changsu smiled coldly, his words falling like poisoned arrows. “In any case, it is Prince Jing who has lost face here, not I.”

He did not pay any notice to the ripples his words had raised, but turned his cool gaze from Qi Meng to Prince Jing. “I have always admired Prince Jing’s elegant and graceful governing of his army, and never could have thought that I would be so disappointed upon seeing them for myself today. A mob with no respect for the law and order of their lord – it is small wonder that they have not gained the favour of His Majesty. Daring to fire weapons at Your Highness Prince Jing – what kind of rules are in place here? I can only imagine that the respect and obedience Your Highness commands from your subordinates still cannot compare to a mere jianghu chief like myself. My eyes have truly been opened today.....I will take my leave now, farewell!”

Before he had even finished half of his speech, a cold sweat had broken out over Qi Meng’s forehead, and he fell forward in a kneel. Prince Jing looked at him coldly, not saying a word, his face dark, and everyone around him kept silent in fear, slowly all dropping to their knees as well, and even Tingsheng, who did not really understand what was going on, was frightened by the solemn atmosphere and followed their example. And so, when Mei Changsu led Fei Liu out of the manor amidst the terrified silence, no one dared to stop him.

This was because everyone knew, although Su Zhe’s words had been harsh, not a single word had been false.

Although in terms of comparing martial ability, this kind of testing of outsiders was commonplace, whether Prince Jing was present or not made all the difference.

“Your Highness,” in the end, it was the young general Lie Zhanying, the highest ranked of Prince Jing’s army, who spoke up lowly. “Your subordinates know we have done wrong, pray Your Highness have mercy, we will accept our punishment.”

Qi Meng thrust his head down in a bow and said in a trembling voice, “Pray Your Highness name my punishment.”

Prince Jing’s gaze swept coldly over the kneeling soldiers, all of whom had lowered their heads to avoid his gaze, and finally returned to Qi Meng.

Mei Changsu had used the sharpest words to leave him this formidable task: the strengthening of the interior of the imperial Jing household.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> ‘household’ is technically the wrong word here because it doesn’t seem to include his army (the direct translation is simply “interior”), and he means more the entire Jing manor (everyone who works for Prince Jing), but saying “the interior of the imperial Jing manor” makes it sound like MCS wants him to redecorate or something

Since he had chosen to embark on the quest for the throne, there were more changes that could occur at a moment's notice than anyone could imagine, and while he used the 'land infringement' case to capitalize on other advantages, at the same time, he would have to find a way to reforge the entire imperial Jing household into a piece of solid iron.

For the first time, Prince Jing felt the heaviness of the weight on his shoulders, but because of it, he also stood straighter.

“Qi Meng behaved rashly, without the manners and courtesy due to his superiors, and is sentenced to two hundred strokes of the rod and demoted to the rank of centurion. Zhanying, you will oversee the punishment.”

With these words, Prince Jing turned and strode away, leaving behind the crowd standing at a loss on the training grounds.

## CHAPTER 51

### *Land Infringement Case*

With the passing of the winter solstice, the year was drawing to an end. It should have been a time of casting aside the old and welcoming the new, a time of joy and excitement, but the atmosphere in the capital had become unexpectedly tense as a result of one of the Emperor's imperial edicts.

“By royal decree, the investigation of the Bin province land infringement case will now begin, led by Prince Jing Xiao Jingyan as principal investigator, and aided by the Three Departments. You are hereby ordered to investigate and sentence all involved without prejudice or personal bias.”

The day after he had personally received the bright yellow silk scroll of the imperial decree from the hands of the imperial eunuch, Xiao Jingyan announced the name list of the officials of the Three Departments who would be aiding in the investigation, which immediately shook the already shaken court.

If Prince Jing being named the principal investigator in this case had reduced the Duke of Qing's chances of escaping blame in this case to an infinitesimal amount, then this name list of the assisting officials had decidedly thrust him into hell.

Although, among the officials of the court, some stood on the sidelines, some had their own biases, and some tried to please both sides, anyone who had been able to rise up in the ranks of the court had some measure of intelligence, and everyone had a good idea of whom those Prince Jing had chosen claimed as their lord.

It quickly became agreed among the court that the Duke of Qing would not be able to avoid calamity this time. Not only did his close friends and relatives not even dare try to help him, even the person who had publicly acknowledge him as a pillar of support, Prince Yu Xiao Jinghuan, was behaving very strangely.

The Ministry of Justice was Prince Yu's territory, and the majority of Prince Jing's investigation would be taking place there, and so everyone thought he would certainly come across some difficulties, and did not expect Prince Yu to accommodate him so amiably, without the slightest sign of intending to make any trouble at all, even sternly rebuking anyone who accidentally delayed in responding to his requests.



So the already precarious position of the Duke of Qing was thus confirmed, and the only uncertainty now lay in whether the Emperor would spare his life, and as for his glorious first-ranked military official position, that was lost for certain.

After ten days, the land infringement case had still yet to be concluded, but news was starting to spread. Similar cases started flooding into the capital, and some of the implicated noble houses had begun quietly returning land to their peasant owners with compensation, even occasionally coercing them to keep quiet. In the handling of the subsequent matters, Prince Jing showed a heretofore unseen level of capability, with a nimble flexibility in addition to his steady, unwavering determination, and worked beautifully in cooperation with the officials assisting in the investigation. And so, because of the Emperor's support, Prince Yu's accommodation, and the reliability of his assistants, a case that could have caused uproar and chaos was handled so cleanly under Prince Jing's direction that he won the praise of everyone who heard about it.

Less than a month later, the case had been essentially concluded, and the number of the convicted among the Duke of Qing and his relatives and close friends came to seventeen in total, and they were sentenced to imprisonment pending execution, with all their property seized, the males of their households sent away to serve penal sentences, and the females sent to service in the palace.

After he had sealed the final scroll, Prince Jing led the rest of the investigating officials into the palace to see the Emperor.

The Emperor immediately summoned them into Xianan hall. After entering the doors of the hall, Prince Jing discovered that Prince Yu was already before the Emperor, and did not seem to have just arrived.

"Yan'er, you have completed your task." The Emperor inquired.

"Your son has obeyed my father's will, and has completed the sentencing of the Duke of Qing and his relatives for the crime of land infringement, and of one murder. Here is the scroll, for Father's reference."

The Emperor took the scroll the eunuch passed up and read it once from beginning to end, gave an indifferent "Ng" before passing the scroll to Prince Yu, then turned his gaze to the figures gathered before the throne and asked, "Who was responsible for the writing of the case?"

Prince Jing replied, "Cai Quan, senior minister of the Ministry of Justice," and gestured for Cai Quan to step forward.

"It was well-written. The structure was clearly organized, and the words carried good substance." The Emperor looked over Cai Quan, then turned his gaze back to

Prince Jing and was silent for a while before he said, “Your work was not bad as well, you must handle the final matters properly, and continue to stabilize the situation.”

“Yes, Father.”

Prince Yu cut in with a smile, “This case was indeed handled beautifully, and Father has truly chosen the right person for the job. Such an important case, it was fortunate that Jingyan was in charge, if it was someone else, I fear they would still be running in circles.”

The Emperor looked at him warmly and a smile spread across his face. “You have behaved very well this time as well, and lightened a great deal of our burden. Among all our princes, you are the most earnest with the best grasp of the bigger picture. We hear you even voluntarily helped Jingyan take care of certain matters, is this true?”

“I feared that Jingyan might not be too familiar with the Ministry of Justice, since he seldom has cause to come there, and so lent him a hand.” Prince Yu smiled and waved a hand dismissively.

“That was very considerate, we are pleased. Here....” The Emperor raised a hand slightly and beckoned a servant over. “Bring a gold chain and four bolts of satin, and bestow them upon Prince Yu.”

“Your son thanks my father for his great favour.”

Prince Jing had investigated the case so diligently and had concluded it so quickly and beautifully, and only received a few lukewarm phrases of praise, while Prince Yu had only held back from causing trouble, but received such generous gifts. The officials of the Three Departments who had accompanied Prince Jing saw all of this, and though they said nothing, they felt great indignation rising in their hearts.

Before the Emperor’s bias and Prince Yu’s self-satisfied sympathy, Prince Jing himself felt nothing. He had long ago grown used to receiving unfair treatment and being wronged, and the Emperor’s blind favouritism no longer caused the slightest dismay in him, but rather further ignited the flame of his fighting spirit.

After retreating from Xianan hall, Prince Jing and the other officials went their own way, but Prince Yu rushed out from the hall and called after them, “Jingyan, wait.”

Before, he would have pretended not to hear and kept walking, but to Xiao Jingyan now, his own likes and dislikes no longer meant anything to him, and so he halted and calmly turned around.

Prince Yu hurried towards him, a friendly smile on his face, and gripped Prince Jing’s hand as he explained, “Don’t be angry, Father is really very pleased with the

way you have handled the case, and he is planning to wait until you have concluded everything before bestowing rewards... I have reaped rewards without doing any work today, and have stolen your glory, and if you don't mind, I will have the gold chain and the bolts of satin sent to your manor....”

“My royal brother is too courteous. I am a military man, and have no use for such things.”

“It is not for you, it is most appropriate for your wives....”

Prince Jing raised an eyebrow and said indifferently, “My royal brother is not aware that I only have an imperial concubine? By the rules of the palace, she is not entitled to the use of such things, but I thank you for the kindness.”

Prince Yu looked taken aback, and though he was usually the most adept at pretty words and empty compliments, he could find nothing to say at this moment. According to proper etiquette, Prince Jing was only a prince, not a royal prince, and so the rank of his imperial concubine was too low to wear gold jewelry or imperial satin. But these rules were not strictly enforced, and to say nothing of imperial concubines, even the wives of marquis sometimes wore gold jewelry before the Emperor, and the Emperor pretended not to notice, and never pressed the matter. It was only Prince Jing's rigid temperament that led to him keeping to this rule, but he could not say he was wrong, and so could only laugh in embarrassment and say, “I overlooked the matter. But by your abilities, it is only a matter of time before you are raised to Royal Prince, there's nothing hindering you... that's right, the new year is coming soon, I will be having a banquet on the fifth day of the new year, Jingyan, you must come, you never came before...”

Prince Jing thought, you never invited me before. But of course, he understood that Prince Yu's invitation was to show everyone the friendly relations that had developed between the two, and so did not make things difficult for him, but nodded slightly and replied, “I should come to bring my good wishes to my royal brother and sister-in-law.”

Prince Yu saw that, though his expression was still cool, he had seemed to give a favourable reply, and it seemed that his recent efforts had made some progress, and so joy arose in his heart and he was about to speak again when one of the female servants of the Empress came to summon him immediately to Zhengyang palace, and so he could only say briefly, “Don't hesitate to find me if you encounter any difficulties” before leaving hurriedly.

Xiao Jingyan had remained rather cold towards all of Prince Yu's warm efforts, and had not seemed to reply very enthusiastically, giving off only a slight hint of leaning towards him. But because he normally gave off such a cold, rigid impression, this slight hint of bias was enough to create all kinds of speculation. The Crown Prince saw that, after he had so easily gotten rid of the Duke of Qing, an even more

powerful Prince Jing had appeared, and was growing extremely frustrated. But Xie Yu kept his composure, and though he received several pointed barbs from Prince Yu in the court, he did not rise to the bait.

Besides the 'land infringement case', the other two great cases that had commanded the attention of the court also had their own developments.

These two cases had been delivered to the Ministry of Justice from the Capital Magistrate Office virtually on the same day, but the Ministry of Justice had used different methods in handling them. The corpses in the well case had been dealt with in the fiercest manner, and no stone was left unturned in the investigation as evidence was collected, witnesses interrogated, and the case sentenced. Permission to pass sentence on a minister of the same rank was obtained, and though Lou Zhijing refused to admit his guilt, the weight of the evidence was against him and he was stripped of his position and imprisoned, and as soon as the Emperor issued the edict, this once mighty Minister of Revenue would become a concern of the past. As for He Wenxin's murder case, although the evidence was clear, it was left to stagnate, and whenever the Earl of Wen came to complain, Qi Min would bring out a long list of doubts and hesitations, and reply that the investigation was still pending, and gradually seemed to be edging towards a sentence of manslaughter, which incensed the Earl of Wen so much that he could no longer rise from his bed.

In any case, the winds of fate seemed to be blowing in favour of Prince Yu as the year drew to a close, and he was beside himself with joy.

And the person who woke him from his pleasant daydreams like a bucket of cold water thrown over his head was the talent of Crimson Sleeve House, Qin Banruo.

## CHAPTER 52

### *Witness*

Of the three pleasures houses on Spiral Market Street, Miaoyin House and Willow House had longer histories, but the fame and reputation of the newer Crimson Sleeve House was spreading quickly.

This was because the music of Miaoyin House and the dances of Willow House appealed to those with specific tastes, but Crimson Sleeve House's selling point – beauty – was of a rather more universal appeal.

In this world, there may be men who do not appreciate music or dance, but there are none who do not appreciate beautiful women.

The ladies of Crimson Sleeve House had always been famed for their beauty, and if you grabbed one at random, even if she could not sing or dance or recite poetry or draw or debate or converse with particular intelligence, at the very least, she would certainly be beautiful.

Beautiful, gentle, and never putting on airs – these were the characteristics of the ladies of Crimson Sleeve House. If Miaoyin House's Miss Gong Yu had shut the door in your face, or if you didn't want to wait in line at Willow House for the privilege of a day in the company of the ladies Xinyang and Xinliu, then you could come to Crimson Sleeve House for consolation.

The ladies here did not put on strange, arrogant airs, and never put any guest out of their door, so long as you could pay, of course.

Beautiful ladies are naturally expensive – and the more beautiful, the more expensive. But Jinling has never lacked for those with more money than they knew how to spend.

The mysterious and beautiful Qin Banruo, one of the most trusted and reliable members of Prince Yu's household, was the owner of Crimson Sleeve House. But she herself was not involved in the affairs that went on in Crimson Sleeve House, and only served as its owner.

Although she too had beauty enough to break any man's heart, Qin Banruo had never openly shown her face at Crimson Sleeve House, and no more than three people in Jinling knew that she was in fact the true owner of this entertainment house.

Aside from the money that rolled in, the Crimson Sleeve House brought Qin Banruo another rich source of income – intelligence.

People were always at their most relaxed when enjoying entertainments of this sort, and their tongues were naturally loose as well, and so with a little bit of skill, many things could be learned in these moments.

The ladies of Crimson House had all been specially trained, and had been taught how to coax their guests into sharing all manners of secrets, which they then wrote out from memory and reported once a day.

The majority of Qin Banruo's time was spent in going through these unfiltered reports, over a hundred each day, and sifting out those of use and then focusing on them for further investigation.

But this was not Qin Banruo's only source of information. Aside from those working in the entertainment industry, Qin Banruo had also specially trained a group of clever young girls and found ways to wed them into the households of court officials, as a source of fresh intelligence regarding persons in the court.

To Prince Yu, the importance of this gorgeous, cunning lady was not inferior to that of any one of the strategists of his household, and of course, he wished in his heart that, in the not too distant future, this beautiful lady could become more than just his strategist.

This time, Qin Banruo had discovered the problem from one of her routine reports.

One of the guests had been teasing one of the ladies when he said casually, "The purpose of coming out to places like this is to enjoy oneself, and if one lady is occupied, then we can find another, there is no need to become so fixed on one apple on the tree. Look at that He Wenxin, getting into a fight over a girl, what is he pretending at? Even Miss Xinliu is not worth the price of his life, and he actually thought he could escape a death sentence because of his father, what arrogance...."

Qin Banruo had instantly been alerted by his words and so had immediately sent someone to investigate this guest, and had found out that he was a senior historian from the household of the Emperor's imperial brother, Prince Ji, and was well-known for his lecherous ways; he had been at Willow House on the day of the crime, though he had not been at the actual scene.

Qin Banruo's suspicions had not been put to rest by this, and so she had sent more people over to inquire, and had ended up discovering a frightening fact.

From the information that she had gathered, Qin Banruo realized the gravity of the situation and so immediately went to see Prince Yu.

“You say the Earl of Wen has an important witness within his grasp, and has not used him yet only because he is waiting to see how the Ministry of Justice will proceed?” After hearing only a few words, Prince Yu had raised an eyebrow. “How has he resisted for so long?”

“Because the Earl of Wen has lost all faith in the Ministry of Justice.” Qin Banruo spoke confidently. “From the current situation, the case does not lack for witnesses, and if the Ministry of Justice had even the slightest intention to judge the case fairly, it does not need one more witness to pass the sentence, but if the Ministry of Justice wants to acquit He Wenxin, then even if the Earl of Wen revealed this one witness, it would not change anything, but would rather allow the Ministry of Justice time to prepare a defense.”

Prince Yu nodded slowly. “I see, your meaning is, the Earl of Wen is waiting for the Ministry of Justice to conclude the case, and then, if the outcome is not to his satisfaction, he will bring this witness directly to the Emperor and claim the case was handled wrongly?”

“Yes.”

“Would the Emperor believe it?” Prince Yu laughed coldly. “The Earl of Wen thinks the situation is simple, why have you let him convince you as well? The Ministry of Justice’s conclusion will not overlook any detail, so what would be the use of the Earl of Wen dragging one more person before the Emperor?”

Qin Banruo’s delicate brows furrowed. “If it were anyone else, it would be of no use. But the Emperor will listen to this witness.”

Prince Yu saw her solemn expression, and couldn’t help being startled into silence.

“Please forgive Banruo for neglecting her duty, the situation on that day was chaotic, and the witnesses were many, and though I put all my efforts into the investigation, I have overlooked the fact that the Capital Magistrate Office omitted one person when summoning all the eyewitnesses for questioning....” Qin Banruo’s mouth twisted, a small dimple appearing in her cheek, lending her serious expression a hint of charm. “Afterwards, one of the senior historians of Prince Ji’s household was overheard at Crimson Sleeve House making suspicious comments, and so I investigated the matter anew, and discovered that it was not that Capital Magistrate Gao Sheng had made an error and overlooked this person, but that he simply could not summon this person....”

“You keep speaking in circles, who is this witness?”

“Prince Ji.”

Prince Yu jumped in fear. “Uncle Prince Ji?”

“Yes, there were two guests in the building where the crime took place, and one of them was Prince Ji. He probably...saw the events unfold with his own eyes....”

“Aiya, that makes things difficult!” Dark clouds seemed to be forming over Prince Yu’s head. “Although Prince Ji stays away from palace affairs, only caring about poetry and music and the like, he has an honest character, and if the Earl of Wen asks, he will certainly speak the truth before the Emperor....”

“That’s right. Perhaps he felt there were already many witnesses and he would not need to step up himself, and so for this reason took his wives with him away to his manor near the hot springs the day after the crime took place. He does not know about the situation with the handling of the case, and has not raised any fuss, and therefore led to our failing to realize that he has been one of the witnesses all along.”

“Ai...” Prince Yu leaned over the table, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers, his expression troubled. “Uncle Prince Ji is no easy enemy, and I cannot come to conflict with him over a court official’s son. If the Earl of Wen has truly convinced him to speak to the Emperor, nothing good will come out of it for the Ministry of Justice. It seems...He Wenxin cannot be saved....”

“I have come to the same conclusion, no matter what, we cannot save a little to lose much more.” Because she did not harbour any good feelings towards the spoiled, malicious He Wenxin, Qin Banruo did not feel that this was any great loss. “Even if Minister He is useful, this is merely something his own son has brought upon himself, he cannot expect Your Highness to save him at any cost. If he collapses over the death of a son, then he is not worth the regard Your Highness has given him.”

Prince Yu looked at her and sighed. “I understand what you mean, but He Jingzhong is really still of some use, and this son of his is his pride and joy – it is his only son, what family would not be the same? Of course, you are right as well, what cannot be protected must be sacrificed. I will speak to Qi Min, and tell him to subtly sound out Prince Ji, and if Uncle’s attitude is firm, then he should not force the matter. Since there is no way out, then we must pay for a life with a life.”

“Your Highness is wise.” A smile spread across Qin Banruo’s delicate features.

Prince Yu reached out and grasped the beautiful arm, saying softly, “I am fortunate to have you, nothing escapes your wise gaze. Not long ago, you discovered Xie Yu’s true allegiance, and today, you have stopped the Ministry of Justice from falling into this trap, how shall I reward you for such outstanding work?”



Qin Banruo's brow flickered and she gently took a step back, drawing her jade-like arm out from Prince Yu's hand, and then let her fingertips trail across his chest gently, seeming both intentional and casual at once, and replied with a proud smile, "Banruo is a woman, but has always been interested in the romance and wonders of the rise and fall of rulers and lords; however, as I was born a girl, my talent and position are limited, and I cannot enter the picture myself in this lifetime. Now, under Your Highness' grace and kindness, I can do my part for the future ruler of our kingdom, so my wish has already been fulfilled, and I dare not ask for any more reward."

"If I ascend to the throne in the future, you will be my most senior minister, and even half of the royal bed can be yours, there is nothing I will not give you." A hint of teasing crept into Prince Yu's tone. "I only fear that you would not like it, who can tell?"

Qin Banruo gave a small smile, and was not angered, but also did not continue the conversation, instead bowed and said quietly, "Regarding the matter of Prince Ji, it would be best if Your Highness spoke to Minister Qi soon. Banruo has matters still to deal with back at the house, so I will take my leave."

The way she kept him at a distance increased the itch in Prince Yu's heart, and he longed for her tender affection, but he also truly treasured this girl, and so did not want to act rashly, so he only coughed, forcefully suppressing the wild desire in his heart as he watched her leave with glowing eyes.

Very quickly, the Minister of Justice, Qi Min, received the news from the imperial Yu residence. Originally, he had been discussing with his assistants how best to bribe the witnesses, reword their oral confessions, and alter the appearance of the corpse.... Their work had been almost completed when it was suddenly halted as if a pot of cold water had been thrown over them.

As soon as he heard that Prince Ji was an eyewitness, Qi Min's head seemed to double in size. Although Prince Yu had meant for him to first try to explore Prince Ji's stance, Qi Min knew what the stance would be whether he explored it or not. Prince Ji's frank and straightforward manner was well-known, and even if he wasn't so straightforward, he still could not perjure himself for the sake of a murderer. Even if the Earl of Wen did not ask anything of him, once the Emperor questioned him, he must speak the truth.

But since Prince Yu had ordered him to explore, then it would not be good for him to not even make an attempt, and so Qi Min took two days of leave and prepared to make a personal visit to Prince Ji's hillside manor near the hot springs.

Even before he left, Qi Min had already prepared himself for the possibility that he would be making this trip in vain. But he had never thought that this conclusion would be made so early and so quickly.

The reason for the Minister of Justice's fruitless return was not Prince Ji's stubborn words; to tell the truth, at the moment Qi Min knew that he had made the journey in vain, he had not even seen Prince Ji yet.

The situation was not complicated, but was quite coincidental.

Huqiu was the holy land of hot springs, and was located deep in the forests of the mountain, and among them, Prince Ji's courtyard was the largest and the most comfortable. Anyone who was friendly with Prince Ji would choose to stay at his courtyard when they came to Huqiu.

Such as Yan Yujin, who had forged a long and deep friendship with Prince Ji due to their shared appreciation for the romantic and tendency to lead carefree lifestyles.

When the cheerful young master of the Imperial Uncle's household, the rather depressed first young master of the imperial Ning residence, and the somewhat dismayed second young master of the imperial Ning residence gathered outside his courtyard requesting to visit, Prince Ji immediately and joyfully invited them in.

Though they were of different generations and there was a large gap in their ages, Prince Ji, a born romantic, had kept the confident ease of his youth and so maintained a pleasant relationship with the younger generation, and it was as if there was no distance at all between them.

With the arrival of such vibrant guests, one of them being his favourite little Yujin, Prince Ji was delighted, and entertained his guests with wine and laughter, and when everyone was high in spirits from the drink, naturally there was nothing they did not talk about.

The first topic of conversation fell to the fragrant, powdered faces of the opposite sex. When it came to judging the beauties of the capital, Prince Ji's insight was on par with that of the master of Langya Hall, and he became increasingly animated as the conversation went on. Yan Yujin also harboured a deep appreciation for the fairer sex, and the lady he admired most was Gong Yu of Miaoyin House, and so as the two talked happily, the conversation turned gradually from Miaoyin House, to Willow House, and then to the murder that had taken place at the latter.

Prince Ji slurred, "I know, I was...was...there...."

Yan Yujin's eyes widened. "You...you were there? What...what happened?"

Although Prince Ji's tongue was slurring, his mind was still clear, and not only clear, but aroused, and so when Yan Yujin asked, he immediately began vividly recounting the entire story from beginning to end.

The other two members of his audience didn't make much difference, but Yan Yujin was a person who made friends easily and loved to gossip, and so the next day, when he went out to visit the other noble courtyards of Huqiu, he inadvertently began spreading Prince Ji's eyewitness account of the murder case.

And so, when Qi Min arrived at Huqiu, practically all the nobles who had come there for a respite from the capital knew that He Wenxin had committed murder and that Prince Ji had seen the whole thing with his own eyes.

Under these circumstances, further exploring Prince Ji's stance had become completely meaningless, and the Minister of Justice could only sigh in his heart: Oh Minister He, it is not that I have not tried my best to help you, it is only that your son...has truly terrible luck....

## CHAPTER 53

### *Sacrificial Rites*

According to the laws of Da Liang, criminals on death row were only executed at spring and autumn of each year, known as the ‘Spring Execution’ and the ‘Autumn Execution’ respectively. Once He Jingzhong realized that his son could not hope to escape from blame and would undoubtedly be sentenced to death, he switched to pleading for Qi Min to delay the passing of the sentence to after the Spring Execution, to buy more time for his son in the hopes that some opportunity might arise in the future.

Unfortunately, the Earl of Wen saw right through him, and with a powerful witness in his grasp and the mood of the capital on his side, his attitude hardened, and he lingered in the Ministry of Justice day and night, demanding for the case to be sentenced. The Crown Prince had just lost the Ministry of Revenue, Lou Zhijing, and so he was definitely going to make the most of this opportunity for revenge, and began prompting his subordinates to accuse Qi Min of misconduct and neglecting his duty, claiming that he was purposefully refusing to investigate this case. After a few days of this, the Ministry of Justice was finding the situation difficult to handle, and as Prince Yu also felt that, since the death penalty was unavoidable, dying half a year earlier or later didn’t make much difference, he quietly signaled Qi Min, and within a few days, the case was opened, witnesses and evidence were gathered, and He Wenxin was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death by beheading.

The day after the case was sentenced, He Jingzhong collapsed ill in bed, and the imperial physician diagnosed him with disturbed consciousness and discord of the vital energy, and advised him rest and quiet.

It was now the end of the year, and the time had come for the Ministry of Appointments to arrange for the evaluation of all court officials to determine the following year’s promotions and demotions. Officials also tended to send new year gifts to the court, and even reserve officials were allowed to move about openly during this time, and so took advantage of the holiday to forge new relationships or strengthen old ones, in the name of bringing new years’ wishes to one another.<sup>91</sup> So

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<sup>91</sup> there is a Chinese term / tradition known as bai nian (拜年), for which I can think of no equivalent Western or English translation. Basically, it’s something we do

no matter how you looked at it, this was the busiest time of year for the Ministry of Appointments, and He Jingzhong's sudden illness was leading to confusion and chaos.

Just as much of the Crown Prince's secret income had come from the Ministry of Revenue, most of Prince Yu's extra profit came from the Ministry of Appointment's power over promotions and dismissals, and the flow of money that always came pouring in at this time of year could not afford to be disrupted because of the Minister of Appointment's sickness.

But some things couldn't be hurried, and He Jingzhong had indeed been severely shaken by his son's sentencing and was not faking his illness, and so neither pleading nor scolding would be of any use in getting him out of bed. Prince Yu saw that the situation was becoming more and more desperate, and was forced to call a meeting of his most cunning strategists to discuss how to solve this problem.

Two days later, Prince Yu personally visited He Jingzhong's residence, dismissed everyone from his presence, and spent some time warmly comforting this subordinate of his.

How exactly he comforted him, no one knew. They only knew that, a few days later, He Jingzhong seemed to have recovered and had returned anew to his court duties, easily resolving the confusion and chaos that had arisen in his absence, and busied himself every day handling the yearly evaluations and seeing external officials, often working late into the night, as if he was giving his life to the service of his lord, as if his grief was giving him energy. The Crown Prince, looking on from the side, couldn't understand what was going on.

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during the new year which involves going to the home of the person you want to bring good wishes to and giving them gifts and wishing them well for the new year. It's not exactly as simple as going to someone's house for Christmas, because it's more ceremonial for one thing (there's a lot of bowing and politeness and well-wishing\*), and also because you may go to several houses in a day to bai nian. It's especially important for family and relatives, and there's a general practice of the younger / more junior-in-rank acting as the visitors and bringing good wishes to the homes of the older / more senior-in-rank. (And this is also something definitely still done to this day.)

\*the "well-wishing" part of this is a whole other kettle of fish. There are a million and one phrases of "new year's wishes" (or good wishes in general, though they are traditionally spoken at new year), all made of four-character phrases. The most common ones are: 新年快樂 xin nian kuai le (happy new year), 身體健康 shen ti jian kang (good health), 恭喜發財 gong xi fa cai (I wish you prosperity) [you may know this one from the Cantonese: "gung hey fat choi"] and etc.

But the Crown Prince wasn't really in the mood to pay much attention to He Jingzhong just then, because all his time was being spent on another matter, which was also a matter that was currently troubling the Ministry of Rites.

At the end of the year, the most important task for the royal family were the sacrificial rites – sacrifices to the ancestors, sacrifices to the nation, and sacrifices to the gods. To the court and to the imperial family, whether the rites were performed correctly determined whether the following year would bring fortune or calamity, and so not even the slightest mistake could be made in the ceremony.

It was then that Xie Yu keenly recognized that an opportunity of great benefit to the Crown Prince had arisen.

According to the rites of Da Liang, those of the Inner Palace below the rank of consort<sup>92</sup> could not participate in the rites, and could only kneel in a circle outside the ceremony. But according to those same rites, after the Crown Prince had sprinkled the ceremonial wine, he had to kneel and touch the robes of his father and mother, to express filial piety.

Here lay the contradiction. The lady Yue had been demoted to concubine, but she was also the Crown Prince's birth mother; on the one hand, her rank was very low, but on the other hand, it was also very honourable, and this dilemma was making the Ministry of Rites' job very difficult.

Xie Yu secretly suggested for the Crown Prince to take advantage of this opportunity to weep and repent before the Emperor and beg him to restore his mother's rank, so that even if she couldn't be restored to Noble Consort all at once, at least she could resume a prominent position in the palace, and regain the right to her own residence as well as the honour of keeping the Emperor company through the night, and then she could slowly begin to regain the Emperor's favour.

The Crown Prince was delighted with this idea and, after some careful preparation, ran to kneel before the Emperor and wept for two whole hours, trying his best to show himself as obedient and pious.

The Emperor was finding the situation difficult. Lady Yue had always been his favourite in the Inner Palace, and it was not that he did not want to take this chance to pardon her. But she had only been punished a few months ago, and if he pardoned her so soon, he was afraid Princess Nihuang would be bitterly disappointed.

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<sup>92</sup> it's a little confusing, but from the words used in the text, this is what I understand from the ranks of the Inner Palace (someone please correct me if I'm wrong): Noble Consort [貴妃] > Consort [妃] > Concubine [嬪]

(There are probably a bunch of titles below 'concubine' as well, but they haven't been mentioned yet.)

“Father, I will apologize to the Princess personally, and compensate her well.” The Crown Prince had been carefully instructed and so knew why the Emperor was hesitating, and immediately wrapped his arms around his leg, saying, “The Princess is dutiful and principled, she will definitely understand that this is all for the year end’s ceremonies. I am willing to be punished before the Princess, to atone for my mother’s sins.”

The Emperor’s heart was stirred by his weeping, and he sent a summons to the Minister of Rites, Chen Yuancheng. This Old Minister Chen had been in the court since the reign of the previous Emperor, and was known for never listening to or relying on anyone else, only trusting in the rites, and even the greatest of quarrels between the Crown Prince and Prince Yu could not shake his resolve by an inch. It was because the Ministry of Rites was under the iron thumb of this old minister that it had succeeded in becoming the only one of the six departments that had not succumbed to either camp, and still maintained a strictly neutral position.

Old Minister Chen did not know why Consort Yue had been dismissed, and from the edict, he had believed it related to some internal conflicts of the Inner Palace. He had just been troubling over how to arrange the sacrificial rites, and so when the Emperor inquired as to whether he thought Lady Yue’s rank ought to be restored, he of course did not object.

But although the Ministry of Rites had not objected and had actually agreed enthusiastically, the Emperor still hesitated. At this moment, Xie Yu coincidentally arrived to request an audience, in order to submit a report on the troops in the north-west. The Emperor did not know about the relationship between Xie Yu and the Crown Prince, and thinking that he was a neutral military official, he summoned him into the hall and asked his opinion on whether Lady Yue ought to be restored to her original rank.

Xie Yu thought it over for a moment, then answered, “Your servant believes the Crown Prince is virtuous, and the lady Yue diligent in her service to the palace, serving Your Majesty loyally in the Inner Palace for these many years without ever neglecting her duty, and so demoting her from a first-ranked noble consort to concubine for the reason of “giving disrespectful service” was too harsh of a punishment. I had some reservations at the time, but as this was a matter of Your Majesty’s imperial household, no one dared to comment. Now, since Your Majesty’s honoured heart has changed and is inclined to show mercy, then it is simply a matter of issuing the imperial decree, what difficulty remains?”

“Ai, you do not know.” The Emperor seemed slightly embarrassed. “The lady Yue’s punishment was for another reason....for the sake of the Crown Prince, she behaved immorally towards Nihuang in the palace itself, and we fear that if she is so lightly pardoned, it would offend the hearts of the soldiers of the Southern border...”

Xie Yu lowered his head and looked to be in deep thought, then slowly walked forward and said in a low voice, “If this is the reason, then your servant believes...there is even more reason to issue the pardon....”

The Emperor was taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“Pray the Emperor consider carefully, the lady Yue was an imperial Noble Consort, and the birth mother of the Crown Prince, so she is the lord; Princess Nihuang is the daughter of a lord and a military official of the court, so she is the servant.<sup>93</sup> If the servant harbours anger in her heart over the momentary confusion of her betters, then she has violated the morality and principles<sup>94</sup> due to her position as servant. Although the Princess is a skilled fighter and has received heavy imperial favour, Your Majesty has already openly demoted an imperial consort and punished the Crown Prince for her sake, and this already counts as an act of exceedingly great mercy. If the Princess were an earnest servant, she should have pleaded for mercy on behalf of the lady Yue at that time. Of course...young ladies have this kind of temper, and are sometimes thoughtless and inconsiderate, so we will not say any more. But the year end’s rituals are important ceremonies with national implications, and restoring the lady Yue’s rank is an act of maintaining the tranquility of the kingdom and the happiness of the common people, so the balance between the two sides of consideration is very clear. We have only to dispatch a messenger to the imperial Mu residence to give a simple explanation. Besides, too much imperial favour may encourage arrogance.” Xie Yu gave a meaningful smile. “Your servant is a military man, and so naturally knows that, when dealing with those among the military who rely on the glory of their achievements to defy their lord, it is best for Your Majesty to purposefully suppress them a little from time to time.”

The Emperor’s brow wrinkled, but he did not seem to catch the hint, and only scoffed, “Nihuang is not this kind of person, you have thought too much.”

Xie Yu hurriedly and fearfully apologized, saying, “Your servant is of course not referring to Princess Nihuang. I only meant to remind Your Majesty – back then, when the Chiyan Army grew to such a degree of arrogance and defiance, was it not because they were not controlled earlier?”

A muscle on the Emperor’s face twitched and his hand clenched involuntarily on the arm of his throne, and after a moment of silence, he said coldly, “Summon the imperial herald.”

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<sup>93</sup> the relationship of royalty to those who serve them is often described as “\_\_\_ is lord and \_\_\_ is servant” [ \_\_\_是君, \_\_\_是臣] → where the word ‘lord’ is not masculine but simply refers to royalty. The phrase carries a slightly similar feeling to MCS’s famous line: “He [Prince Jing]’s the lord, you [Meng Zhi] are his general, and I am his strategist.”

<sup>94</sup> literally, the dao of the servant (referring to Confucian beliefs)



Summoning the imperial herald naturally meant he had decided to issue an imperial decree. An ecstatic smile spread across the Crown Prince's face, but Xie Yu glared at him and he hurriedly composed himself.

"The items your servant has come to report today are not urgent," Xie Yu bowed. "Since Your Majesty has internal matters to handle, your servant will take his leave."

"Ng," the Emperor raised a hand and dismissed him, and then reclined back tiredly, one hand under his head. The Crown Prince hurriedly ordered for soft pillows and silk blankets to be brought and personally laid them over the Emperor.

"You do not need to stay here. We will issue the imperial edict today...go set your mother's mind at rest..." The Emperor let out a sigh.

"Your son thanks my father for his great mercy." The Crown Prince knelt and bowed three times, his forehead to the ground, then continued, "Do not worry Father, I will go to the imperial Mu residence tonight..."

"No," The Emperor raised a hand to stop him, his expression thunderous. "How can you still not remember, you are the Crown Prince, the Eastern Palace's heir to the throne! You do not need to go to the imperial Mu residence, we will send someone."

"Yes, Father." The Crown Prince did not dare object, and hurriedly bowed once more before getting up and leaving quietly.

The cold wind was blowing harshly outside the hall, and the Crown Prince walked towards the outer part of the palace, wrapped tightly in the fur coat the eunuch had passed to him. In fact, as the lord of the Eastern Palace, he had the unique privilege of riding a carriage inside the palace, but as a show of respect, the carriages of the Eastern Palace usually stopped at the doors of the outer gates, and the servants, waiting there amidst the wind and snow, hurried forward when they saw their master walking out.

"To the inner palace!" With this simple command, the Crown Prince jumped into his yellow-roofed carriage, his actions hurried, as if he was afraid of the cold.

However, when the gold-silk curtains of the carriage drew shut, shutting out the outside world, the calm expression of the Crown Prince of the Eastern Palace abruptly shifted, his teeth gritting and a look of hatred passing over his face, as if he was finally letting the poorly-contained fury in his heart show.

The heir to the throne? Am I the heir to the throne? Father, if you really think of me as the heir, then why did you favour Prince Yu so much that you have raised him to become my competition?

## CHAPTER 54

### *Loophole*

“You useless thing, get out of my sight! All of you, get out!” The furious shout sounded from Prince Yu’s study, and two servant girls came stumbling out, one of them with her skirt half soaked in tea, and the other holding several fragments of a shattered tea cup in her hand, both pale and trembling in fear, with even their hair in a mess after their frenzied escape.

“What has happened to the Prince?” The two servant girls raised their heads when they heard the gentle voice, and then hurriedly fell forward in a kneel.

“Princess Consort,<sup>95</sup> the Prince said the tea was too hot...it is your servants’ fault for not preparing it well enough....”

Princess Consort Yu’s brow raised and she hurried to the study, pushed open the closed door, and entered.

“Who is that? I told you all to get out, get out!”

“Prince....” Princess Consort Yu said quietly, “Anger hurts the body, pray the Prince take care of your honoured self.”

Prince Yu balked and turned around, forced down his anger, and said, “Oh, it’s you. Is anything wrong?”

“The new year is approaching, I have prepared the list of new year’s gifts for Father Emperor and Mother Empress, and came to have the Prince look over it.”

Prince Yu reached out a hand to receive the yellow piece of paper his wife handed him and quickly scanned it before returning it to her. “You have always been the best at pleasing Mother, and make her happy every year, so let the gifts this year be arranged according to your will.”

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<sup>95</sup> another word meaning Princess! I think I will translate it as ‘Princess Consort’ to avoid even more confusion lol, unless anyone has a better suggestion?

“I understand.” Princess Consort Yu tucked the piece of paper back into her sleeve, then said slowly, “These servants of our manor have been poorly taught, it is my fault, please don’t be angry at them.”

“What does it have to do with you? It is their clumsiness and stupidity....”

Princess Consort Yu put a delicate hand on her husband’s arm, and asked gently, “What is the Prince upset about? Perhaps you can tell me, and let me share the burden.”

“It is not anything... they are external matters, you would not understand even if I told you....” Prince Yu patted her hand and said warmly, “Do not worry. You must be tired too, go rest.”

Princess Consort Yu delicately bit her crimson lip, and said lowly, “If it is because of Miss Banruo....”

“Where have your thoughts got to?” Prince Yu raised an eyebrow. “I am troubled over the concerns of the kingdom, you do not need to bring marital affairs into this.”

“Actually... I can go speak with Miss Banruo, although it is the rank of imperial consort,<sup>96</sup>as long as it pleases the Prince, I would never cause her any trouble. Even if the Prince were to raise her position in the future, I would also....”

“Speaking nonsense again!” Prince Yu glared at her angrily, but, seeing her grow pale, he wrapped an arm around her and drew her into his embrace. “Alright, I have said this many times, you are you, and Banruo is Banruo, and you will always be my only Princess Consort, so stop finding things to worry about. I am still relying on you to please the Empress in the palace, and if you are unhappy yourself, how can you go and show respect and piety on my behalf?”

“I’m sorry....” Princess Consort Yu wrapped her arms around her husband’s waist, leaning close against his chest. “You are so good to me, I wish I could be smarter and more capable, and could share more of your burdens....”

“You’re always thinking about this kind of nonsense, this is not good.” Prince Yu gently pushed her away and stroked her hair. “Go then, and let me think in peace.”

Princess Consort Yu nodded and curtsied, then slowly turned and left. She had just walked to the well outside of the study when she came across Mister Tang, the best of the strategists of Prince Yu’s residence, and halted in her steps.

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<sup>96</sup> she uses the term ce fei [側妃], which google tells me is one rank below wang fei [王妃] i.e. Princess Consort. I don’t know. The Inner Palace ranks are confusing. Anyone made a study of this?

“Princess Consort Yu.” Mister Tang bent forward in a bow.

“Please rise. I was just looking for you.” Princess Consort Yu raised a jade-like hand. “The Prince is in a bad mood, do you think we should ask Miss Qin to come to consult on the situation?”

Mister Tang shook his head. “This time, the problem lies in the palace, and Miss Banruo cannot help.”

“The palace? What has happened in the palace?”

“The Princess Consort does not know? The Emperor has decreed that the newly demoted Concubine Yue will be restored to Consort, and ordered her to participate in the sacrificial rites.”

Princess Consort Yue was taken aback. “The lady Yue is pardoned...what did the Empress say?”

“The imperial edict was issued directly from the imperial herald, without any warning, and the Empress did not know anything, so what could she say?”

“So that’s how it happened...the lady Yue has served in the palace for over a decade, the Emperor is likely acting out of old affection....”

Mister Tang knew that the Princess Consort Yu was pure and innocent of heart, and so did not explain any further, but simply smiled.

“Well then, I must trouble Mister to urge the Prince, since everything has already been decided, there is no use in being troubled over the situation.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“And ask him not to worry about the Inner Palace, I will be going directly to the palace to visit the Empress.”

Mister Tang said with a smile, “The Prince is fortunate to have such a capable helper in the Princess Consort.”

“You flatter me,” Princess Consort Yu replied modestly, before continuing on her way. Mister Tang hurried to the side of the road and bowed until she had disappeared into the distance. Then, he narrowed his eyes and murmured to himself, “Consort Yue has been restored to her position, I wonder if that qilin prodigy who was responsible for pulling her down from her rank of noble consort is as angry as the Prince?”

In contrast to Mister Tang's expectations, after hearing the news of Consort Yue's pardon, Mei Changsu did not give any particular reaction, but stayed huddled beside his brazier, turning the pages of the report from Miaoyin House, and feeding each page into the fire as he finished reading. Fei Liu squatted beside him, watching the flames rise and fall, and seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

The heavy cotton curtain was drawn aside, the roaring flames dying down a little from the cold wind that blew into the room, and Fei Liu turned his furious gaze onto the intruder.

Meng Zhi did not seem to notice Fei Liu's hostile expression, but strode towards Mei Changsu, saying, "You're looking pretty idle...."

"There is cold air lingering around you, don't come too close to me. Go and roast a bit first, and come back when you're well cooked."

Meng Zhi didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Have you still not heard the news? Guess where I've just come from."

"The imperial Mu residence."

He had guessed correctly on the first try, and Meng Zhi couldn't help raising an eyebrow, and came forward to pinch Mei Changsu's cheek, saying, "Xiao Shu, you've become more and more like a devil since your return, are you sure you are still living?"

Fei Liu's palm came flying over. "Let go!"

"You've found me out," Mei Changsu answered, laughing. "I'm a ghost, are you scared?"

"If everyone could return, even as a ghost, I would still be happy," Meng Zhi sighed. "You guessed right, I have just come from the imperial Mu residence. The little Lord Mu is so angry, he'll be leaving teeth marks on his cedar chair soon."

"Good to chew!" Fei Liu suddenly spoke up, and Meng Zhi eyed him uncomprehendingly.

"Our Fei Liu is right, cedar wood is soft, and good for chewing, you wouldn't need to bite very hard to leave teeth marks in it...." Mei Changsu patted the youth's head in approval.

"Oi, you two...." Meng Zhi looked at them helplessly. "I'm being serious!"

"Fei Liu, Uncle Meng says you're not being serious...." Mei Changsu prodded.

Fei Liu widened his eyes in confusion.

“Not being serious means being like Lin Chen gege. Don’t you remember how the uncles in the alliance were always scolding Lin Chen gege for not being serious?”

When Fei Liu heard that this uncle had dared to compare him to Lin Chen, he leaped to his feet in fury, flinging his palm out in a powerful strike. Although Meng Zhi was not afraid, he still had to use considerable effort to fend him off, and in the blink of an eye, the two were exchanging blows across the room.

“Xiao Shu, tell him to stop, I have serious things to discuss with you!” Meng Zhi yelled angrily.

Mei Changsu sat smiling, wrapped in his fur coat, and called out encouragingly, “Go on, Fei Liu, it’s not often you get the chance to train with Uncle Meng...”

Meng Zhi saw that his playfulness had been aroused, and couldn’t help feeling a hidden joy well up in his heart, because no matter what, it meant there was still a shadow of Lin Shu in him, and that was a relief, not to mention that exchanging blows with Fei Liu was always an immensely enjoyable task, and so he took a breath and settled himself for a proper fight.

Fei Liu’s martial arts had always been strange and difficult to grasp, and against people like Xia Dong and Tuoba Hao who practiced a more predictable and conventional style, he naturally held the advantage, but once he came up against Meng Zhi’s circular and grounded style of martial arts, he was blocked at every stroke, not to mention that in terms of inner strength, Fei Liu, who was young in age and had been severely injured before, was still far from Meng Zhi, who had been solidly trained in the traditional Shaolin style.

But it was because he was obviously not Meng Zhi’s match that Fei Liu’s fighting spirit burned all the more fiercely, and there was no other thought in his mind except a wholly focused determination on the fight before him, and after a while, Meng Zhi realized something astounding.

Fei Liu could remember his opponent’s strength and the characteristic features of his qi in the middle of the fight, and then immediately adjust his moves accordingly.

In other words, once you had used a certain move against him once, you could forget the idea of using it again, unless you increased its strength or changed the direction of the flow of its qi, otherwise, Fei Liu would block your attack and force you to use another quickly to save yourself.

It was hard to believe that such an astounding learning ability could be found in a youth with mental deficits. But perhaps it was because his intelligence was restricted in some areas that his astonishing and prodigious martial arts had been aroused.

“Panicking yet?” There was laughter in Mei Changsu’s voice. “Meng dage, it looks like you’ll have to be even stronger.”

Meng Zhi laughed and replied, “There’s no use trying to help him, when have I been so easy to distract? It’s early yet if he thinks he can beat me!” Although he had stopped to speak, his breath had not been disturbed in the slightest, and the Shaolin energy around him intensified as he brought his palms together into a circular position and headed towards Fei Liu. The youth’s forehead trembled and his figure suddenly blurred, disappearing from its original position and reappearing behind Meng Zhi. But although he had moved quickly, he was somehow a beat behind the slowly turning Meng Zhi, and as back suddenly became front, Fei Liu’s palms were caught by Meng Zhi, who gave a powerful thrust and sent him flying backwards, and though Fei Liu flipped through the air a few times to regain his balance, he still landed somewhat unsteadily on his feet.

“Never mind, never mind,” Mei Changsu beckoned to the youth. “If you can’t beat him this time, we will try again next time.”

Meng Zhi made a face at him. “Xiao Shu, are you using me to provoke this child?”

“So what if I am?” A bright smile lit Mei Changsu’s face. “You are not so easily insulted, so isn’t it fun to train a bit with our Fei Liu? Look at how cute our Fei Liu is....”

Meng Zhi choked. Beautiful, certainly, but cute...?? But in truth, he really liked this exceedingly talented youth, and did not mind exchanging a few blows now and then, so he smiled broadly and walked over to sit down beside Mei Changsu, saying, “You don’t look surprised at all that Consort Yue’s position has been restored.”

“What is there to be surprised about?” Mei Changsu said indifferently. “Even if Consort Yue had committed an even greater crime, it was still not against the Emperor himself, and this Emperor has never cared much about other people’s suffering. Do you still not know this?”

“Do you really have to talk about His Majesty like that?” Meng Zhi looked a bit awkward. “No matter what, His Majesty is still His Majesty, and anyway, there are the year end’s sacrificial rites to consider.”

“What do the year end’s sacrificial rites have to do with anything?” Mei Changu laughed coldly. “Does the Crown Prince not have an imperial mother?<sup>97</sup> After sprinkling the ceremonial wine, he should kneel and touch the robes of the Emperor and the Empress, that would be true filial piety. Where is the difficulty in that?”

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<sup>97</sup> the Empress

“Ah?” Meng Zhi stared blankly. “Then, all these years....”

“In the sacrificial rites of the previous years, it was because Consort Yue was a first-ranked noble consort, with a nine-pearl phoenix crown as well, and stood with the Empress beside the Emperor, and so when the Crown Prince knelt to touch her robe, everyone thought it natural. Even the Ministry of Rituals, which is supposed to be the most sensitive to these ceremonies, did not correct the Crown Prince’s actions, and so of course no one else even noticed that anything was amiss.”

“What you say seems to make sense...” Meng Zhi scratched his head. “There are so many rules of the rituals, the Ministry of Rites should be most familiar with how each of them should be interpreted, so why has Old Minister Chen never said anything....”

“Chen Yuancheng?” Mei Changsu’s smile became even colder. “The supposedly neutral Ministry of Rites, the Old Minister who ‘only trusts in the rites’...haha...this is the funniest part....”

Meng Zhi stared at Mei Changsu. “Xiao Shu, you mean....”

“Ever since Chen Yuancheng’s only grandson deserted on the front lines, and Xie Yu hid his capital offense and protected him, this old minister has become a dog of the Marquis of Ning... Ai, and no wonder, after all, who can avoid the debts owed for the sake of sons and grandsons? He Jingzhong is no exception, and neither is Chen Yuancheng.”

Meng Zhi’s mouth had fallen open in shock, and he stared dazedly for a long moment.

“Chen Yuancheng knows that, according to the rules of the rituals, as long as the Empress is present, Consort Yue is not important, but he does not dare say this. Firstly, he has received Xie Yue’s orders, and secondly, he knows the Emperor is only finding an excuse to pardon Consort Yue....” Mei Changsu gave a derisive, cold laugh. “Both of these so-called honest and loyal old ministers of two dynasties are, in the end, only a pair of old foxes.”



## CHAPTER 55

### *Deploying the Troops*

These words that Mei Changsu had spoken so casually caused Meng Zhi to sit in stunned silence for a long while, and the more he thought about it, the more he felt how heart-chilling these partisan politics really were, and when he looked at Lin Shu, sitting there with his pale forehead slightly lowered, he couldn't help the complex feelings rising up in his heart.

Could the rare and prodigious talents of the shining Chiyan Young Marshal of those days now only be spent on things like this?

“Meng dage, you do not need to worry about me.” Mei Changsu gently raised his head, as if looking through the roof into the dark void beyond. “They are all watching me from above, I must continue down this path.”

“I understand.” Meng Zhi nodded heavily. “But you must remember, in all things, you must place your safety first, and if there is anything I can help with, you must tell me.”

Mei Changsu couldn't help smiling. “When have I ever been polite with you?”

“That's difficult to say, your thoughts are so serious now, no one knows what you're really thinking.” Meng Zhi looked at him, unconvinced. “Last time when you went to the imperial Jing residence, why didn't you take me with you?”

“Did you want to hold me upright and teach that bunch of hotheads a lesson for me?” Mei Changsu laughed out loud. “You're right, they are all hardened soldiers who only respect heroes and warriors, if even Commander Meng seemed to admire me, none of them would dare look down on me again.”

“That's what I mean! But you went alone without a word, and made yourself some enemies. The imperial Jing residence is where you will be settling down to do your work in the future, how could you offend them on your first visit?”

“Don't worry, the more intelligent among them will only thank me, and will not hold a grudge. The ones who are feeling insulted have brawn but no brains, and I

don't want to care about people like that for now, one day they will be in my hands, and I will mold them then. You forget, managing rough, wild generals like these is my specialty."

Meng Zhi thought for a moment and couldn't help smiling. "You do have a point."

"...That's right, I've been meaning to ask you, in the imperial Mu residence, aside from the little Lord Mu leaving teeth marks all over the place, how did the others react?"

"Of course they were all furious. His Majesty only sent an internal messenger to pass on a verbal message, telling the Princess not to be oversensitive, and seemed to mean that if she harboured any dissatisfaction over the edict, she would be doubting her lord in her role as his subject.<sup>98</sup>" Meng Zhi looked uneasy. "Whose slander has His Majesty been listening to, that he's treating such a loyal, outstanding minister so haughtily?"

"How was the Princess?"

"The Princess was actually very calm, and didn't betray any sign of anger at all."

Mei Changsu sighed lightly. "Nihuang has been commander for so many years, I think she has seen through the situation. For those who hold military power, if they do not accomplish anything, they are scolded for being useless, but once they achieve great deeds, they are feared for their power and influence. No matter what a military general does, he cannot avoid the endless checks and balances his lord will impose upon him. Now that the Southern border is relatively quiet, if the Emperor doesn't remind her of his imperial power and control now, when would he have the chance?"

"But the little Lord Mu cannot seem to control himself, and is talking about requesting for permission to return to Yunnan."

"The Emperor would not give it." Mei Changsu shook his head. "Besides, the new year is near, if they leave in a hurry now, it will appear as if they are angry at the Emperor, and it will only raise suspicion and rumor. Go and convince Mu Qing, even if he wants to leave, he must at least wait until after Qingming,<sup>99</sup> and offer the ceremonial sacrifices in the capital before going."

"When has that boy ever been willing to listen to me? Besides, if anyone is to be convinced, shouldn't it be Princess Nihuang?"

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<sup>98</sup> remember the idiom we talked about last chapter? similar language.

<sup>99</sup> the Chinese holiday for remembering / paying respects to the dead and one's ancestors; takes place somewhere in the 4th-6th month of the Chinese lunar calendar

Mei Changsu's gaze stilled, the expression in his eyes fathomless as he nodded slowly, and answered in a low voice, "You're right. Then I will write a letter, and will trouble you to bring it to Nihuang. She is wise and astute, and will understand immediately."

As he spoke, he turned and patted Fei Liu on the shoulder. "Su gege needs to write, Fei Liu can grind the ink,<sup>100</sup> alright?"

"Yes!" Fei Liu jumped up and bounded over to the desk, grabbed the stick of ink, put it up to his mouth and breathed on it, and then began grinding furiously. He was putting all his strength into the task, and his grinding motions were fast, and soon, the whole table was covered in ink flakes.

"That's enough, that's enough," Mei Changsu turned a warm smile on him. "When Su gege finishes writing, you can paint, alright?"

"Yes!"

Mei Changsu drew two sheets of snowy white letter paper from the pile of books on the desk, dipped his brush in the ink, and murmured to himself for a moment before filling two pages with writing, then lifted the sheets and blew them dry gently before folding them into an envelope, but did not seal it before holding it out to Meng Zhi.

"Aren't you afraid I'll read it?" Meng Zhi did not take it, but said with a smile, "You didn't write anything I'm not supposed to read, did you?"

Mei Changsu lowered his head and said expressionlessly, "Meng dage, you must not make such jokes again. The Princess is like a sister to me, nothing more."

Meng Zhi was taken aback. "Why do you say that? I know there are any difficulties ahead and many things you must do, and so you do not want to tell her who you are for now, but in the future...you must tell her one day..."

"Who knows how far away that day may be?" Mei Changsu lifted the brush again and absently drew a dozen lines on the sheet in front of him, but before he had finished, he had already picked it up and crumpled it into a ball before tossing it into the brazier beside him, closing his eyes, "It is impossible to live in the past...there are some things in this world whose coming cannot be predicted, and cannot be controlled, all I can do is to try to bring them to a good end, even if it is an end in which I have no part..."

"Xiao Shu," Meng Zhi grasped his arm, "you mean..."

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<sup>100</sup> in case you are unfamiliar with brush-and-ink writing, you have to rub or grind a stick of ink against an ink stone and mix it with water to make ink

“Meng dage, you must also consider Nihuang’s position, I have hindered her for so many years, I cannot continue to do so. If I had once thought to try hard to return to her side, then ever since two years ago, I have abandoned all such intentions.” Mei Changsu gripped Meng Zhi’s hand tightly, a thin but incredibly sincere smile on his face. “My existence has not brought her joy in the past, but at least, it will not become her grief in the future. If I can achieve this, I will be very happy....”

“But....” Meng Zhi’s face crumpled. “This is too unfair to you!”

“When has there ever been anything absolutely fair in this world? If you say it is unfair, then it is a problem of fate, a misalignment of the stars, and no matter what, it is not Nihuang’s responsibility.”

Meng Zhi looked at him for a long time, and then stamped his foot and sighed. “I cannot interfere in your personal affairs, let it be as you say then.”

Mei Changsu smiled and pushed the letter into his hand. “Alright, deliver this letter for me, and don’t say another word, if you keep spouting nonsense, I will be angry.”

“Yes, Young Marshal. I’ll be like Fei Liu, and speak two words at a time!”

“Cannot!” Fei Liu said loudly.

“Look, Fei Liu says you can’t.” Mei Changsu ruffled the youth’s hair with a smile. “Well-said, we won’t let him copy you!”

“Oh you,” Meng Zhi let out a sigh. “How can you still laugh?”

“If not laugh, then what? Do you want to see me cry?” Mei Changsu looked at him, then drew out another sheet of paper and wrote quickly.

“What are you doing? Didn’t you finish?”

“The ink is still wet, I’m writing to Prince Yu.”

“Ah?!”

“You don’t have to be this surprised, do you?” Mei Changsu straightened and cocked his head at him. “Don’t you know I am, to some extent, leaning towards Prince Yu?”

“I know you have already offended the Crown Prince for Nihuang’s sake, and so of course you must pretend to support Prince Yu...but what are you writing?”

“I think it is time for old Minister Chen to take a break from his duties, and so am preparing to hand this job over to Prince Yu.”

Meng Zhi’s eyes widened. “Does Prince Yu listen to whatever you say now? You can order him to do anything you like?”

“It’s not like that,” Mei Changsu didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “This is not an order, only a piece of advice.”

“Advice?”

“That’s right, Prince Yu is fuming over Consort Yue’s restored position and wants to retaliate, but doesn’t know how. It would be good for me to point out Chen Yuanchen’s weakness to him, so he can vent out some of his anger.” A hint of coldness flitted across Mei Changsu’s bland expression, and as he spoke, his hand kept writing. “The Empress has no trueborn son, and so has fallen out of favour, while Noble Consort Yue has always been highly honoured, and the two are almost always held at an equal position in many matters of the Inner Palace, and so it seems that everyone has forgotten the difference between imperial wife and concubine. Besides, the regulations of the sacrificial rites are complicated, it is difficult to even know how the Empress and Prince Yu’s relationship should be interpreted, and there have never been any references to consult. So, Prince Yu can invite several learned scholars and authorities into the palace for a court debate, and as their words have weight, once they have clearly determined the precedence of the imperial wife over the concubine in the sacrificial rites, the serious mistake committed by the Ministry of Rites these past few years will be revealed, and Chen Yuancheng will have no choice but to resign. With all this, Xie Yu will lose another one of his helpers, Noble Consort Yue’s restored power will be greatly limited, the Empress’ position will be even more respected, and the Crown Prince’s recently restored arrogance can be suppressed a little....”

“Then isn’t all this...going to benefit Prince Yu? Are you really putting all this effort into helping him?”

Mei Changsu gave a cold laugh. “Are there any trades in this world with only gains and no losses? Prince Yu’s losses are in a place that is not easily seen or understood.”

Meng Zhi tried to think about this, but gave up after awhile. “What place is this?”

“The heart of His Majesty, the Emperor.”

“Huh?”

“The one who began this practice of raising an imperial concubine to a rank equal to the imperial wife is His Majesty. It is because he favoured Consort Yue so heavily

and did not give the Empress enough respect in the Inner Palace that everyone has the mistaken impression that, because Consort Yue has the Crown Prince for a son, she is as honoured as the Empress. When Prince Yu brings up this issue, he will not only be revealing the Ministry of Rites' error, he will also uncover His Majesty's fault, but his position will be well-grounded and so His Majesty will not say anything against him, and may even bestow a few words of praise. But deep in his heart, His Majesty will not be happy, and may even behave even more coldly towards the Empress for this defiance. I will not mention this loss for now, and see if Prince Yu notices it himself."

Meng Xhi said thoughtfully, "There are many talented people by Prince Yu's side, perhaps one of them will see it."

"Even if they see it, it doesn't matter, Prince Yu will still do this."

"Why?"

"Because the gains greatly outweigh the losses." Mei Changsu had finished the letter, and was blowing on it lightly. "He will only lose His Majesty's favour, which can be slowly regained. But if he wins the debate, he will greatly increase the Empress' honour and lower Consort Yue's, and more importantly, Prince Yu can use this opportunity to emphasize something the court has forgotten: the Crown Prince, too, was born of a concubine, and in this respect, he is no different from Prince Yu. The position and honour he holds now is because he has received the title of the Eastern Palace, and not because of his birth. If His Majesty the Emperor were to take this title away in the future and give it to another, there is no need to raise a fuss, because the Crown Prince is not the trueborn son of the imperial wife, and so there is nothing untouchable about him."

"But then, it is still Prince Yu who reaps the benefit...."

"Is it only Prince Yu?" Mei Changsu turned his head, his eyes bright. "Is Prince Jing not the same? Since they are all sons of concubines, no one can accuse anyone else of low birth. The Crown Prince, Prince Yu, Prince Jing, and the other princes are all more or less equal in birth ranking, and even if there is some small difference, it is not at all the same kind of distance found between the sons of imperial wives and concubines, and so isn't even worth mentioning."

"That's right!" Meng Zhi clapped his hands. "How did I not realize, when Prince Yu pulls the Crown Prince down to his level, he is at the same time pulling Prince Jing up, because he wants to emphasize that, while birthright may be an unbreachable gap between the sons of imperial wives and those of concubines, between the sons of concubines themselves, it is no longer the most important consideration, and though this reminder benefits himself, it applies just as well to Prince Jing!"

"I'm glad you understand." Mei Changsu smiled, and this time, firmly sealed the envelope. "Fei Liu, go out with Uncle Li and deliver this letter, alright?"

Meng Zhi glanced at Fei Liu. “You’re letting them deliver it?”

“Li Gang is a gifted speaker, and there is Fei Liu for security, going out to deliver a letter like this is a waste of their talents.” Mei Changsu nonchalantly placed the letter in Fei Liu’s hand, his gaze passing over him leisurely. “The rest is up to Prince Yu....”

## CHAPTER 56

### *Zhou Xuanqing*

With the new year's arrival, Xiao Jingrui, Yan Yujin and Xie Bi finally returned to the capital from the Huqiu hot springs. They had just been back for a day when, to their shock, they realized that, although they had only been away one month, the situation in the capital had changed rapidly, and was now even more excited and chaotic than it had been when they left.

The fight between the Crown Prince and Prince Yu had largely reached a stalemate in recent years due to the balance of their power, and everything seemed peaceful on the surface, with neither side causing any great ripples. Who could have thought that such a great storm had been building beneath the surface, which had only needed the slightest push before erupting into open war. Consort Yue's demotion, Lou Zhijing's fall from grace, the Duke of Qing's collapse, He Wenxin's death sentence...wave after wave broke over the capital so rapidly that one couldn't seem to catch a breath in their midst.

Now, Consort Yue's position had just been restored, and imperial officials were already lining up to accuse the Ministry of Rites of improper handling of the sacrificial rites, and Prince Yu took advantage of the situation to invite many famous and renowned scholars into the palace for a court debate to discuss the special treatment Consort Yue had received for so many years, as well as the lack of respect the Crown Prince had shown towards the Empress in the ceremony.

Everything aside, even just the ten or so old gentleman Prince Yu had invited were men of great renown and honour, and it was clear that the effort he had put into courting these scholars over the years had not been in vain, and he had managed to accumulate quite a following. One of these was the elderly Mister Zhou Xuanqing, who resided in Lingyin<sup>101</sup> Temple to the west of the capital, and who was truly one of the most prestigious and well-respected scholars of this age. Normally, he refused all visitors, royal or common, and so it was a shock when he consented to come personally to Jinling this time, and his arrival prompted many people to regard Prince Yu with a whole new level of respect.

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<sup>101</sup> literally: Hidden Spirit Temple



But strangely, after entering the capital, this old Mister Zhou did not stay in the residence Prince Yu had set aside for the visiting scholars, Liuhe<sup>102</sup> Courtyard, but at the imperial Mu residence instead.

And, according to rumor, Mister Zhou had been personally escorted to the capital from Lingyin Temple by the little Lord Mu, and once he entered the Mu residence, he had not received a single visitor, and even Prince Yu was no exception.

But the most important part was not who had really invited old Mister Zhou Xuanqing or whom he had received, but rather the prestige and honour of his reputation, which made even the Emperor defer to him in court, and with his thorough learning and extensive knowledge, not many people could stand up to him in the debate.

And so, the Ministry of Rites could not avoid disaster this time, and even Yan Yujin, who usually paid little attention to courtesy and etiquette, was able to predict the Crown Prince's imminent defeat.

The debate finally ended after three days and arrived at the following conclusion: Although Consort Yue's position had been restored, she should not stand beside the Emperor and Empress on the sacrificial platform during the ceremony, and after the Crown Prince had sprinkled the ceremonial wine, he should kneel and touch the robes of the Emperor and Empress. The Ministry of Rites had been neglectful of its duties, and Chen Yuancheng was to be relieved of his position, but because of his age, he would be allowed to retire from the court without further investigation. The Crown Prince, whose identity as a concubine's son had been emphasized by Prince Yu repeatedly during the debate, couldn't control his fury and actually slapped Prince Yu across the face, which earned him a severe scolding by the Emperor in front of the entire court. In all the chaos, only Prince Jing stood quietly, watching coolly from the sidelines, and with his tranquil expression and unflappable nature, he left a very good impression in the minds of many court ministers who had not noticed him before.

And so, not long after the Ministry of Revenue had changed hands, the Ministry of Rites became the second department to receive a new head.

When Chen Yuancheng reached out with trembling hands to remove the minister's cap he had worn for almost twenty years from his aged white head, it was as if Prince Jing could see the pale hands gently stirring in the background, and the clear face with the calm expression which never seemed to change.

And yet, most people had no idea that Su Zhe, who had gradually faded away from public perception, had played a role at all in this event.

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<sup>102</sup> literally: Crane Courtyard

Two days of sunshine did nothing to raise the temperature, and the cloudless sunrise dawned colder than ever. The city gates had just been opened when the guards and soldiers saw an extremely luxurious carriage approaching, escorted by almost a hundred mounted guards.

Even if they did not recognize the sign of the imperial Mu residence on the front of the carriage, they would still have known that this was no ordinary guest, and so the leader of the guards hurriedly ordered his men to clear the road, and then bowed the large group out of the city.

Because the weather was so cold, those escorting the carriage blew out white steam with every breath, but the curtains of the carriage were thick, and with a warm stove inside, the interior of the carriage was not very cold.

There were two passengers in the carriage, one very elderly in age, one still in his youth, one in simple cotton robes and shoes, one dressed in embroidery and pearls. The elderly gentleman had closed his eyes to rest, but the young man seemed impatient with the journey, and was squirming about restlessly.

“Grandfather Zhou, would you like some tea?”

The old man, without opening his eyes, shook his head.

After a while: “Grandfather Zhou, would you like some pastries?”

The old man once again refused it silently.

After another while: “Grandfather Zhou, would you like to try this candy?”

Old Mister Zhou Xuanqing finally peeled open his eyelids and looked at him. There was an innocent smile on Mu Qing’s face as he held out the piece of candy. “This is very tasty.”

The little Lord Mu seemed completely unaware of and unaffected by the solemn and strict air that this old Mister Zhou had cultivated over many years. From the beginning, he had treated this old gentleman as just a regular old grandfather, and even after Zhou Xuanqing had rendered all his opponents speechless in the court debate and succeeded in landing the blow for his sister, at the most, he had altered his perception of the gentleman to “a very capable regular old grandfather,” and so in their daily interactions, he treated him casually, like a family member, and did not uphold strict courtesy or keep any formal distance.

The little Lord Mu was a charming and intelligent young man, with a lively and cheerful disposition, and did not harbour the slightest sign of arrogance as a result of his noble rank, and so Zhou Xuanqing was very fond of this adorable member of the younger generation, and it was only that his solemn air gave off a rather severe

impression, as he shook his head in refusal expressionlessly in response to the sweet inquires of the young man.

“This kind doesn’t stick in the teeth.” Mu Qing explained. “Try one?”

“The little lord should eat them himself.” Zhou Xuanqing answered, his narrowed gaze turning towards the tassels on the roof of the carriage, and after a few moments, he suddenly asked, “Little lord, that token, could I see it once more?”

“Oh,” Mu Qing hurriedly swallowed his mouthful of candy and wiped his fingers with a handkerchief before taking out a small cloth bag from his person and handing it to Zhou Xuanqing.

The bag was opened and upended, and an intricately carved jade cicada tumbled out, its surface exceptionally bright, clearly made of an extremely expensive type of precious jade.

But for Zhou Xuanqing, the worth of this jade cicada did not lie in its monetary value.

“Little lord, you said that the person who asked you to bring this jade cicada to me is waiting outside the city?”

Mu Qing nodded. “That’s what he said in his letter. He said he would meet you once on your journey back to Lingyin Temple from the capital.”

Zhou Xuanqing gave a “Ng,” tightened his hand around the jade cicada, and closed his eyes again.

About an hour later, the carriage suddenly drew to a stop. Mu Qing glanced out the curtain, and then turned around and said, “Grandfather Zhou, the person you want to see is here.”

Zhou Xuanqing’s brow furrowed, and he grasped Mu Qing’s arm for support as he tottered off the carriage. He was just looking around when a middle-aged man came forward and said reverently, “Old<sup>103</sup> Mister Zhou, my master is waiting over there, please come with me.” As he spoke, he took Mu Qing’s place and supported the old gentleman by the arm, carefully helping him over to an inconspicuous nook by the side of the road which was also out of the wind, where Mei Changsu waited with a smile, his black hair dark against the white fur of his coat as he bowed gently in greeting.

Zhou Xuanqing narrowed his eyes, carefully appraising him, and then held up the jade cicada and asked, “This jade cicada, is it yours?”

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<sup>103</sup> in Chinese, the word is used to denote respect (i.e. seniority and age)

“It is.”

“How did you come to have it?”

“It was given to me by Li Chong, Mister Li.”

“Who was Li Chong to you?”

“I once had the honour of being taught by old Mister Li.”

Zhou Xuanqing frowned. “In those years, although Brother Li was the royal tutor, he did not reject commoners as his pupils, and his teaching extended far beyond the walls of the palace. His students number in the thousands if not millions, and naturally may be found all over the kingdom. But in the end, there were not many who truly made him proud, and as his good friend, I know them all, but you...I do not recognize....”

Mei Changsu smiled faintly. “I was not a proficient pupil and brought no honour to my teacher’s name, and did not spend much time under his teaching, so it is only natural that you do not know me.”

Zhou Xuanqing looked at him doubtfully for a long moment, then sighed. “No matter, you have Brother Li’s token, so of course I will help you, I just never would have thought that I would see my old friend’s jade cicada again after so many years for the sake of matters of the court.... Back then, when Brother Li was stripped of his position, he left the capital full of anger and bitterness, and I only wonder whether he would have approved of my coming to the court this time....”

Mei Changsu’s gaze was calm as he said quietly, “That year, the crime of my teacher lay in his blunt words, which became his downfall. Although he knew his words would offend the imperial countenance, he persisted in speaking his mind and expressed his views without regret, acting in accordance with the conduct of great scholars. Therefore, it is my belief that there is dao to be followed in everything in this world. There is dao in the hidden places of mountains and forests, and there is dao in the lofty palaces and courts. As long as one’s heart is pure, and one does not betray his convictions or speak contrary to his beliefs, what does it matter where one stands?”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> I just want you to know that MCS is using INCREDIBLY BEAUTIFUL CHINESE when he talks to Zhou Xuanqing, especially in the paragraphs when he talks about Li Cong, and I CAN’T TRANSLATE IT AHHHHHH. Sorry ☐ Just imagine it being the most beautiful literary phrases you can imagine. He’s literally speaking in perfect formal language, and I can barely understand it, much less do it any semblance of justice.

Zhou Xuanqing raised an eyebrow, a light shining in his aged gaze as he nodded and said, “Although you were not his student for long, you understand him to the bone, and I see that he was wise to bestow this jade cicada upon you. Do you know why Brother Li used to wear this cicada on his belt?”

Mei Changsu’s hands twisted slowly, his chin furrowing as he murmured, “The dew of the night dampens their wings, the wind softens their cries; no one believes my noble conduct, who will reveal to me his heart?”<sup>105</sup>

Zhou Xuanqing closed his eyes lightly, as if silently settling his thoughts for a long moment, while Mei Changsu gazed calmly into the horizon. The two stood quietly in the crisp winter air, without the slightest trace of awkwardness, as if they had only met to reminisce upon certain years of the past.

“To be able to meet again one of the distinguished pupils of Brother Li in my old age is truly beyond what I could have hoped for.” Zhou Xuanqing slowly placed the jade cicada into Mei Changsu’s hand and said lowly, “I do not know which way the wind is blowing in the capital, but I only hope that you will not forget the pure and honest reputation of your teacher, and take good care of yourself.”

Mei Changsu bowed, his face filled with respect. “I will remember your valuable advice. You have braved the snow and cold to answer the call of old friendship, I am truly grateful beyond words.”

Zhou Xuanqing waved a hand. “For this jade cicada, a trip to the city is nothing, even journeying to the distant lands would not be too much to ask. Now as your requests have been fulfilled, it is time for me to return to the temple. We will part here.”

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<sup>105</sup> oh my God I did not sign up for translating ancient Chinese poetry LOL. okay, so MCS is quoting the last two lines of a four-line poem titled ‘Cicadas Singing in Prison’ [在獄詠蟬], which I will TRYYYYYYY to translate below (oh God):

‘Cicadas Singing in Prison’ by Luo Binwang (駱賓王) of the Tang Dynasty

The cicadas’ songs drift from the west, my longing for home is deep  
 In their black hair and black beards, they sing to my whitened head  
 The dew of the night dampens their wings, the wind softens their cries  
 No one believes my noble conduct, who will reveal to me his heart?

(Reference: [http://mulberrypoems.blogspot.hk/2010/09/blog-post\\_15.html](http://mulberrypoems.blogspot.hk/2010/09/blog-post_15.html))

Don’t even ask me what it means. Or why Li Cong chose the cicada as his symbol because of this poem. Clearly, I am not of the same intellectual capacity as MCS. (Someone please help me out in the comments XD)

Mei Changsu hurriedly raised a hand and beckoned to the guards waiting to the side, gesturing for them to support the old gentleman, as he himself bowed and said, "Please take care."

Zhou Xuanqing gave a "Ng," and took a few steps forward, supported by the guards, and then suddenly stopped and turned around. "In those years, Brother Li had a most beloved disciple, who, despite being the high-spirited son of a military general, was also unusually intelligent and an avid scholar, and if you had been present then, perhaps the two of you would have made a formidable pair."

Mei Changsu's face was pale as snow, and a brittle smile drifted over his lips as he said quietly, "The old Mister is too kind. It is my misfortune, that fate has not allowed me to admire this person with my own eyes."

"Yes, this person...will never be seen again...." Grief clouded Zhou Xuanqing's gaze as he turned and walked away without looking back.

## CHAPTER 57

### *My Longing Heart*

The imperial Mu residence's carriage disappeared into the distance, leaving behind only a trail of dust, which dissipated gradually in the cold, harsh air.

As he stepped out from the nook in the side of the road, strong gusts of cold wind immediately swept around Mei Changsu, blowing his dark hair into disarray.

The middle-aged guard who had been waiting to one side hurried over, reaching out to rearrange the disheveled head, but was gently pushed aside by that pair of ice-cold hands. There was a mild slope before them, the grass long since covered in snow, the few trees bare and stripped of their leaves, looking exceptionally bleak. Mei Changsu looked at the corner of the robe which could just be seen over the peak of the hill, reached out a hand to brush at the hair which had been blown all over his face, then walked quickly to the slope and strode all the way to the top before slowing his steps.

Under the falling snow, Princess Nihuang stood, her jade-coloured cape flapping in the wind, showing that the female commander of the southern border was truly unafraid of the cold.

Mei Changsu had not thought that the Princess would come, but now that she was here, he did not think of avoiding her.

She had once been his little girl, and so no matter how brilliant and impressive she was now, no matter where her love had turned, it could not change that purest, sincerest friendship of the past, nor could it change the guilt and tenderness he felt for her in his heart.

Hearing Mei Changsu's footsteps, Princess Nihuang turned her beautiful face and smiled warmly at him.

Since they had parted that day in Wuying Hall, the two had not met since. But what had to be said had been passed along by Xia Dong, and with Nihuang's proud temperament, no matter whether she had decided to sever all ties with that young man

or to wait patiently for him, she would not react like other girls, and harbour suspicious misgivings or nag incessantly for answers.

And so, Mei Changsu did not know why Nihuang had taken this opportunity to meet him outside the city.

“Mister Su, it has been awhile, have you been well?” Her first words were always courteous pleasantries, etiquette designed to increase the distance between two people.

“I thank the Princess, everything has been well. Soon after I moved into my new manor, I received the abundant favour and gifts from your esteemed residence, and have not yet come in person to deliver my thanks, please forgive me.”

“You are too polite.” Nihuang took a step closer, radiating health and vigor, as if the troubles of the capital had not left half a mark on her person.

Mei Changsu couldn't help smiling. “The Princess gives off such a grand air, with a manner as clear as moonlight.”

“How could I compare to your own manner, which is as deep as the sea?” Nihuang laughed. “Even Old Mister Zhou answers your call, the power of Jiangzuo Alliance is truly immeasurable.”

“It is only that fate brought together a few jianghu warriors down on their luck, and so the Alliance was formed.” Mei Changsu glanced at the Princess, and not wanting her to bring up the subject herself, decided to speak first. “My Alliance values justice above all else, and we are not overly strict with our members, and so...the reason he cannot come to the capital is not because he was forbidden, but because there is truly another reason....”

“That is not what I wanted to ask,” Nihuang met his gaze calmly, her gaze shining like stars. “I know why he cannot come.”

“You know?” Mei Changsu was a bit surprised. “You mean....”

“When he came such a great distance to Yunnan to help me that year, and turned disaster into victory, the entire Southern border sang his praises, and so although we knew that he was wearing a disguise, no one even attempted to see his true face.”

Mei Changsu lowered his gaze. He already knew what she was going to say.

“...Later, we built up a close friendship, but he still avoided and refused to address the issue, I asked him many times but he still would not say anything, until finally, he could no longer withstand the questioning and finally showed me his true appearance.”



“Ng...” Mei Changsu’s expression was still as he drew his hands into his sleeve. “And after you saw it?”

“At first, I only thought he looked familiar, and it was only after I studied him a few more times and then thought for a long while that I remembered who he was....” Although a small smile remained on Princess Nihuang’s face, there was pain in her eyes. “He is in your Jiangzuo Alliance, you should know his true name too, right?”

Mei Changsu nodded impassively. “Yes, I know it.”

“Then you say it.”

“Nie Duo, one of the generals of the traitorous Chiyan Army, if anyone knew of his survival, he would be a criminal of the court.”

“Then,” Nihuang gazed at him fiercely, “have you drawn such a person into your Jiangzuo Alliance truly to shelter and protect him, or because you are preparing to use him in the future?”

Mei Changsu took a few slow steps forward and leaned on a barren, half-withered tree trunk, smiling ruefully. “Certainly I will use him. I fear Jiangzuo Alliance has not taken such a great risk in sheltering a criminal simply for the sake of accumulating merit and virtue.”

Princess Nihuang’s brow furrowed and a ferocious expression flashed across her powdered face. “Is that the truth?”

Mei Changsu turned his head, his dark pupils shining like opals as his gaze lifted slowly to the Princess’ face. “And what if it is?”

“If it is, then I must take Nie Duo away, and even if I must use all the power of the imperial Mu household, I will ensure his safety. This is not only for the sake of the regard I bear for him, but more importantly to repay him for stabilizing the situation at the Southern border and saving thousands of my soldiers.”

A smile drifted over Mei Changsu’s lips, somehow conveying grief, emotion, gratitude, and wistfulness all at once, as he met Nihuang’s gaze and gently shook his head. “You are a Princess, he is a traitorous general, how can the two of you join together openly and properly? His Majesty the Emperor would never allow you to marry a jianghu man of unknown origin. Besides, since you recognized him, then naturally others may recognize him as well, so would you really ask him to remain in disguise all his life in order to stay by your side?”

Nihuang bit her lip hard and turned her face away, stubbornly refusing to let anyone see her in weakness. “What other choice is there? Ever since I realized he was Nie Duo, I knew my future would not be easy. I once hoped that he would enter

the marriage competition under a false identity and fight his way to me step by step, but in the end, he did not appear.... There were so many times when I wanted to ask you what he really thought, but I feared he had hidden his true identity even from Jiangzuo Alliance, and you might not know who he really was. It was only when you sent Xia Dong to me with your letter that I was certain that you too know his identity, because he had even told you everything between us, and so that meant he has hidden nothing from you.”

“You are correct,” Mei Changsu’s voice was perfectly steady, and seemed to carry a soothing power. “Nie Duo trusts me very much, he has no secrets from me, nor I from him. I hope that now, you can trust me in the same way. I will do everything in my power to ensure that the two of you will be able to one day stand in dignity side by side, holding your wedding ceremony in Phoenix Hall without masks or disguise, under your true names, and openly receiving the blessing of anyone who wants to wish you well....”

“How is that possible?” Nihuang widened her eyes in disbelief. “Unless the Chiyan Army is acquitted, all of this is only an impossible dream.”

“Where there is a will, there is a way,” Mei Changsu said coolly. “Unless you believe the Chiyan Army really were traitors?”

Nihuang took a few steps back, her shoulders trembling slightly. “I do not know...I was very young then...I only know that the few people I knew would never have rebelled against their lord and betrayed their country...but what is the use of discussing this now? The case has an ironclad conclusion, and neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu would ever restore the name of the Chiyan Army, because this old case was their greatest masterpiece!”

“Yes, neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu would overturn the Chiyan Army’s case.” Mei Changsu gazed steadily ahead of him, a coldness creeping along his skin. “But no one has ever looked to them. ...To achieve this goal, there is only one path that can be taken.”

Nihuang’s lip trembled suddenly, her face paling and then abruptly flushing again, as what had previously been clouded in fog suddenly came into sharp relief, showing her the clear conclusion.

“Prince Jing...you...you want to support Prince Jing....”

Faced with Mei Changsu’s silence, Nihuang’s mind was blank. But this commander and veteran of countless battles only took a few deep breaths and quickly gathered her composure, steadying herself.

“You are right, only Prince Jing could do it...” Princess Nihuang bit her lip and paced a few steps. “But it is too difficult... it is truly too difficult, one misstep and you will have carved your own doom, with no hope of turning back.”

“Whoever thought of turning back?” Mei Changsu said indifferently. “In the future, you may ask Nie Duo as well, when has he ever thought of turning back?”

“Nie Duo is different, he is a Chiyan veteran, he must redeem the injustice done to him, but you...” Nihuang halted, as if suddenly realizing something. “You...who are you? Why would you take such a great risk for the sake of this old case of the Chiyan Army?”

## CHAPTER 58

### *No Scars of the Past*

When Su Zhe first appeared in the capital, many people asked, “Who is this person?” The answer was quickly discovered – Su Zhe was Mei Changsu, the chief of Jiangzuo Alliance, the world’s number one sect. This answer brought everyone great satisfaction and seemed to explain many things, and so not a single person continued to ask, “Then Mei Changsu...who is he?”

Mei Changsu had not thought that the first person to ask this question would be Princess Nihuang. Now, her sharp gaze bore through him like a sword, fixed on his face, watching for the slightest shift in expression as she waited for his reply.

Should he dodge the question and refuse to answer, or deceive her even further? It was a difficult choice.

There was a weariness in Mei Changsu’s expression as he slowly turned his head, as if to avoid the Princess’ question, and said lowly, “A veteran. Like Nie Duo, a veteran who survived.”

Nihuang’s gaze was like crystal as she continued to stare at him. “If you are a Chiyan veteran, why don’t I recognize you?”

“The soldiers of the Chiyan Army were countless in number, how could you remember them all?”

“But you are now chief of the Alliance, and even Nie Duo serves willingly under you, obeying your orders. If you say you were only a nameless soldier back then, I do not believe you.”

“Perhaps it is because...the matters we deal with now have no relation to the battlefield...” A self-mocking smile lingered at the corner of Mei Changsu’s lip. “Nie Duo is not talented in this way, and besides he is known by too many people, so it would not be convenient.”

Nihuang looked at him steadily for a long while, and asked suddenly, “Do you know Lin Shu?”

Meo Changsu lowered his eyes. How could a Chiyan veteran not know Lin Shu? And so he could only reply, “I know him.”

“Did he really die on the battlefield?”

“Yes.”

“Where did he die?”

“Meiling.”

“His body and his bones – where were they buried?”

“To those seventy thousand soldiers, the sky was their tomb, and the earth, their graves.”

“Not even his bones were gathered?” Nihuang shut her eyes tightly, her fingers clenching around her robes. “Not even a single piece of his remains were found?”

“Such is the bitter reality of the battlefield, where corpses stack as high as mountains. Who could have known which among them was Lin Shu?”

“Yes....” Nihuang nodded dazedly. “I know what the battlefield is like. In all the battles of history, how many have returned with their bodies wrapped properly in shrouds?”

Mei Changsu’s gaze fell warmly onto her. “If the Princess wishes to offer sacrifices in his memory, there is no place his noble spirit would not accept your offerings.<sup>106</sup>”

“You are right, he would not have minded this.” Nihuang murmured to herself, then suddenly looked up, a fierce expression in her eyes. “But if you are a Chiyan veteran, you should have referred to him as Young Marshal, why did you call him by his name, Lin Shu?”

Mei Changsu’s gaze seemed to tremble slightly, his already pale lips whitening even further. Whether it was because he could not longer hide it, or because he could not bear to hide it any longer, he did not answer her question, but turned his face away.

“Whenever Nie Duo mentions his chief, his loyalty and devotion are immediately apparent, and it does not appear to be a simple matter of division of labour, as you

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<sup>106</sup> in Chinese tradition, you offer sacrifices to the dead by burning incense (among other things) at their graves (eg. Xia Dong’s visits to Nie Feng’s grave)

claim.” Nihuang stubbornly turned to face him, staring at him insistently. “I have never understood the depth of Nie Duo’s pain, even if I were the betrothed of his comrade who died in battle, it is still not reason enough for this kind of struggle and despair, unless...unless he knows...”

“Nihuang,” Mei Changsu stopped her impassively. “Nie Duo has only dug himself into a corner. He will get better slowly, you do not need to be overly suspicious.”

Nihuang stared at him, a terrible sorrow on her face, and as she breathed out hard in the cold air, the white fog seemed to blur her vision. Taking a deep breath, she suddenly grabbed Mei Changsu’s right arm, pulled open the tassel binding his sleeve and forcefully pushed back his thick fur robes, all the way up to the elbow.

Mei Changsu let her manipulate him and did not push her away or cover his arm, but a mournful bleakness had appeared in his dark gaze.

Nihuang grasped his arm and turned it a few times, inspecting it carefully, but the skin was clean, without any scars or marks.

She released his arm in bewilderment and was silent for a long moment, but Nihuang was still unconvinced, and so she reached out a hand to pull at Mei Changsu’s collar, closely inspecting the area around his neck.

....the skin was still clean, unmarked and unscarred.

The young girl’s tears finally fell, trailing down her face continuously, as if the teardrops would freeze in the bitter wind and crystallize into mermaids’ pearls.

Mei Changsu looked at her gently, unable to come closer, unable to offer any comfort. The icy wind crept along his opened sleeve and collar, burrowing deep into his skin, seeming to chill him straight to the bone, as if it might at any moment penetrate into his heart and force it to a stop.

“Are you very afraid of the cold?” Nihuang asked softly, watching as he tightened the fur robe around himself.

“Yes...I cannot stand the cold...”

“He never used to fear the cold before, everyone called him ‘the little fireball,’” Nihuang’s face was pale, her eyes still brimming with tears. “What cruelty is this, that can remove the very scars from a person’s skin, and turn such a robust young man into someone so afraid of the cold...”

“Nihuang...” Mei Changsu’s expression was still tranquil, his voice low. “What you have seen is already enough, do not imagine any more. If you let your

imagination run wild, you will create much pain for yourself – pain that is not yours to face or bear. Lin Shu is dead, it is enough for you to believe this....”

“But a woman’s intuition has always been this irrational,” Nihuang gazed into his face, her tears falling thick and fast. “Even if there aren’t any scars or marks, we can still know... perhaps, the fewer marks there were, the more certain I became.... Lin Shu gege, I’m sorry, I won’t leave you again, I will never, ever leave you again....”

“Silly child.” The corners of Mei Changsu’s eyes trembled as he drew his little girl into his embrace. “I know you miss Lin Shu gege, but that is not the same... time that has gone by, and a heart that was once stirred – they are like the waters of a river that has passed away, which can never reverse its flow. I have been tired for twelve years, and I don’t want to see the people important to me suffer any more for my sake, so, this way, my burden is greatly lightened as well, don’t you agree?”

Nihuang wrapped her arms tightly around his waist, her tears soaking into the front of his robes. For the past ten years, she had been the source of support and the pillar of strength for everyone else. Before her little brother and the army of the Southern border, she had always stood firm and unwavering. Even Nie Duo could not make her lower her barriers completely.

Only this person, only this embrace, could return her to the gentle innocence of her youth, as she gave in to her tears and allowed herself this one indulgence. She felt no burning passion or surge of desire, but only the soft warmth of trust, like sunlight in winter, as if she could close her eyes and become again that forever-innocent little girl, whom he had once borne on his back and carried, everywhere they went....

Putting aside their respective identities, putting aside the betrothal that had been decided by the grown ups, Lin Shu gege was still Lin Shu gege. No matter how many years pass, no matter how the world changes, even if, one day, they each fall in love and marry someone else, and even when their children have grown up and their own heads have grown white with age, Lin Shu gege will still be her Lin Shu gege.

“Nihuang, listen to me,” Mei Changsu held her quietly, gently stroking her hair. “Don’t ask me what happened all those years ago, one day, I will have Nie Duo tell you everything, but for now..... can you listen to me, and go back to the imperial Mu residence, and not tell anyone about our meeting today, not even Xia Dong or Prince Jing? If we meet again, I am still Su Zhe, and you are still the Princess, and no one can notice anything unusual, can you do that?”

Nihuang wiped her face with her sleeve and gathered her composure, then nodded. “I know, the things you must do now are very difficult, I will not make this harder for you.”

Mei Changsu gave a small smile and reached out a hand to smooth down her tousled hair, saying softly, “After Qingming, go back to Yunnan, I will have Nie Duo go there as well, and the two of you can wait there quietly for my news, alright?”

“No,” Princess Nihuang’s brow trembled. “Your strength in the capital is limited, at least I must stay to help you....”

“There are things you can do in Yunnan too,” Mei Changsu coaxed gently. “When I need your help, I will definitely call for you, because you are not an outsider, so we must work together.”

Nihuang was silent for a long moment, then she nodded slowly. “Alright... if I return to Yunnan, I can take control of the situation there, and perhaps be of more use than if I stayed in the capital. And after I leave, all the power the imperial Mu residence holds in the capital is at your disposal.”

Mei Changsu gazed at her smilingly and praised, “You have truly gained much experience in these years. You have become perceptive and clear-minded, with a very accurate grasp of the situation in the court. With you in the South, much of my burden in the capital will be lightened.”

Nihuang looked at his pale, wan complexion and peaceful smile, and felt a rush of grief well up in her heart, but she did not want to upset him any further and so she forced it down and said, in a voice that trembled only a little, “Lin Shu gege, please take care....”

Mei Changsu patted her arm comfortingly, then pulled out a handkerchief, brushed aside the top layer of snow on the ground beside him, and wrapped some of the clean snow underneath in the handkerchief, making a cold pouch, which he then pressed against Nihuang’s eyes, saying gently, “You are the fearsome lady commander of the army, you cannot return like this with your eyes all swollen...<sup>107</sup>.”

Nihuang smiled shakily and took the cold pouch from him, holding it against her eyes, the grief that had welled up subsiding somewhat. She watched as Mei Changsu drew the hand that had touched the snow back into his sleeve, his lips growing pale, and couldn’t help saying worriedly, “Lin Shu gege, you must be very cold, go back to your carriage and return to the city first. I will wait here awhile, and by the time xiao

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<sup>107</sup> I can’t not comment on this: there’s a Chinese word “哦” which is used at the end of sentences in an affectionate way, and which is entirely impossible to translate into English because there simply isn’t an equivalent. (There are lots of words like this actually, and they’re used to give context and a specific tone to the rest of the sentence. I don’t know how to explain it better than that.) Anyway, MCS so far has only used this when talking to Fei Liu. And now he’s using it with Nihuang.  
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Qing comes back from escorting Old Mister Zhou, my eyes will have recovered. Don't worry, he won't notice anything."

"If even Mu Qing could notice it, then that would be really something," Mei Changsu joked lightly. He really was starting to feel very cold indeed, and so spoke a few more words to Nihuang and then turned to walk back down the hill.

The guard who had been waiting at a distance immediately came forward, and, seeing his signal, understood and ran to shout for the driver to bring the carriage over. When it arrived, he lowered the foot stool, and helped Mei Changsu up into it.

Mei Changsu leaned against the side of the carriage, turning his head back to look at the hill, and when he saw Nihuang lift a hand to wave to him, still holding the cold pouch, he hurriedly raised his own arm in reply.

The carriage swayed gently and then lurched forward, and the heavy curtain was drawn, shutting out the hillside scenery as well as Princess Nihuang's gaze.

Mei Changsu only felt icy needles of pain pressing on his chest, and, unable to hold back any longer, he lifted his sleeve and coughed into it violently. When he finally managed to stop with much difficulty, the snowy white fabric of his sleeve was stained deep red.

"Chief!" The guard cried out, coming over to support his body.

"It's alright," Mei Changsu smiled faintly. "The weather is too cold, after we get back, boil some hot water for me, and I will be fine after I warm up...."

## CHAPTER 59

### *Gifts of Gratitude*

After his victory over the Crown Prince in the court debate, all of Prince Yu's worries over Consort Yue's restored position vanished. In his excitement, this prince who was known for his great generosity naturally had to hand out gifts and rewards to his hardworking subordinates, especially Mei Changsu, who had worked quietly in the background without any recognition, and who had generated all of this success with only a single letter to the imperial Yu residence.

At first, Prince Yu sent some of his men over with boxes of gold and silver and bolts of silk and brocade, but these gifts did not even make it past the door of the Su residence before they were politely refused, the given explanation stating that there was no place to put them.

Prince Yu knew he had been foolish, this was a noble and virtuous scholar, so of course he would not accept such gaudy, tasteless gifts, so the next day, he personally selected a variety of pearls and treasures made by famous jewelers, each piece a unique and priceless work of art. But not long after he sent them over, these too were returned, the Su servants claiming once again that there was no place to put them.

Seeing that jewelry was not this man's cup of tea, he decided that scholars must favour the elegant, and immediately chose several of his most treasured ancient scrolls of painting from his extensive collection, and though he felt a pang of regret in parting with them, he ordered his men to deliver them over for a third time. To his dismay, the speed with which these were returned was no less than that of the two previous rounds of gifts, and he was told that, this time, the polite decline had claimed that there was no place to hang them.

When Prince Yu was told about the refusal of the third set of gifts, Qin Banruo happened to be by his side, and she covered her face with her sleeve and laughed quietly. Prince Yu glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and immediately asked, "Why are you laughing?"

Qin Banruo's eyes were shining as she sighed, "Your Highness is truly not as talented as the Princess Consort when it comes to choosing gifts. You have tried so

many times, but the gifts have still not gotten past the front doors. Does Your Highness not know that gifts must be adapted to their recipients?"

"But this person is unfathomably deep, how am I suppose to know what he likes? It's not as if I have boxes and boxes of Li Chong's manuscripts lying around my manor.....what, by your expression, do you know what he likes?"

Qin Banruo smiled sweetly and said, "Even for the most unfathomable of persons, one only has to analyze carefully their speech and manner in order to find some things they will like. Let me prepare the gifts, and I guarantee that they will get past the door this time."

Prince Yu knew that Qin Banruo was perceptive and wise, and so gave the matter over to her. The next day, Qin Banruo prepared a box of new and curious toys, including a duck that could walk, a cat that could spin and other such novelties, all interesting in design and well-crafted, as well as impossible to find in the public markets, and had it sent over.

Sure enough, this time, the gifts passed through the front doors, the box was opened, and the toys were given to Fei Liu. The youth began playing with them delightedly in the back courtyard while Mei Changsu personally wrote a reply, and though it was not long, it was still a formal letter of thanks.

After Prince Yu received it, he was amazed, and couldn't help heaping words of praise onto Banruo.

Qin Banruo only smiled modestly and said, "This is only another way to please a person. If you truly do not know what he likes, then you only have to pay attention to the person most important to him. This youth by Su Zhe's side may be a bodyguard in name, but is in reality treated more like a beloved younger brother, and pleasing this child is naturally much simpler than trying to discern the thoughts of Su Zhe's heart."

Prince Yu smiled. "Leave it to women to handle matters of the heart. No one else in this manor would have been able to come up with an idea like yours."

Qin Banruo sighed, "But about Su Zhe himself, we truly know too little. If we cannot understand what he is really trying to do, how can Your Highness harness him in the future?"

"That is precisely what I am worried about. This Su Zhe is such a talent, I am finding him more and more valuable every day, but his thoughts are truly too deep to discern, and gives me a feeling that...although he is aiding me with his strategies at the moment, I do not think he is truly loyal to me...."

“But if he was the type of person to come as soon as he is called, and strive for glory and riches under Your Highness’ favour, then he would not be the qilin prodigy.” Qin Banruo smiled sweetly. “Acquiring and using people is Your Highness’ specialty, Banruo will not comment further.”

“But obtaining intelligence and information for my reference is your specialty.” Prince Yu leaned slightly into the fragrance, and said lowly into her ear, “Pay close attention to everything about Mei Changsu, no matter how distant or insignificant, I want to know about it.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Qin Banruo bowed, and seeing Prince Yu rise and put on his cloak, asked hurriedly, “Is His Highness going out?”

“I am going to the Su residence.”

Qin Banruo was taken aback, and sat in silence for a moment.

“Although your gift was very good,” Prince Yu looked closely at this talented lady and smiled, “it is still not enough. It may bring a smile to his face, but it will not be remembered in his heart.”

Understanding dawned in Qin Banruo’s gaze, and she bowed, saying, “Your Highness is indeed thoughtful, Banruo is ashamed of her unworthiness.”

Prince Yu reached out a hand to her and said warmly, “You do not need to say that. I am going over personally not only to give my gratitude. From the report of those who went to the Su residence, Su Zhe seems to have caught a chill, and is unwell. I am going to visit him.”

“Take care, Your Highness, Banruo will leave as well.”

“Then let us leave together,” Prince Yu said teasingly. “It’s always a pleasure to spend more time in the company of beautiful ladies.”

Qin Banruo smiled but did not reply, and stood to drape a heavy robe around herself. The two strode out of the study side by side, and were walking along chatting with great pleasure when suddenly, as they were passing through the orchid garden, they happened to come across Princess Consort Yu.

“My lord.” Princess Consort Yue handed the flowers she was holding to the serving girl beside her, and came forward to bow.

“What are you doing here?” Prince Yu put a hand on her arm and raised her from her bow, looking around.

“Tea made from the melted ice water of orchid flowers is my lord’s favourite. Yesterday, there was fresh snowfall, and so this morning, I thought to hurry to the snowdrifts to gather some of the flowers and the snow, to save them for my lord,” Princess Consort Yue replied gently, smiling and nodding at Qin Banruo, who had knelt in greeting.

Prince Yu saw that her beautiful hands had turned red with cold from the time spent gathering orchid blossoms in the snow, and felt something stir in his heart. He quickly grasped her hand in both of his and said softly, “Leave these matters to the servants, you do not need to come yourself.”

“The servants are not careful enough, I fear they would spoil the taste of the tea, and make my lord unhappy.” A gentle smile played around the lips of Princess Consort Yu, and, seeing that Prince Yu was dressed for going out, she hurriedly asked, “My lord and Miss Qin have some business to attend to outside? Then do not linger here, I have already gathered several blossoms, and have nearly finished.”

“I am going out to visit a friend who is sick, Miss Qin was just returning to her house.” Prince Yu didn’t know why he was explaining this to her. “The wind is cold here, return quickly to your rooms. The new year is approaching, and it would not do for you to fall sick.”

“Yes, my lord.” Princess Consort Yu turned obediently and ordered her serving girl to gather up the blossoms, and then reached out a hand to neaten the ties of Prince Yu’s cloak as she said quietly, “Then I will return to my rooms. My lord, Miss Qin, take care.”

“Ng,” Prince Yu answered uncomfortably, watching as she turned and left, and as he continued on with Qin Banruo, for some reason, he did not feel much like speaking.

At the door of the manor, they each went their own way. Qin Banruo, who had walked a few steps behind him since they had met Princess Consort Yu, looked calm as she came forward to see Prince Yu off in his carriage. She had just turned to step onto her own palanquin and was about to leave when a serving girl suddenly ran out from the gate of the manor, a vase of flower blossoms clutched in her hand, shouting, “Miss Qin, please wait!”

Qin Banruo hurriedly stopped the palanquin and pulled aside the curtain, leaning out. “What is it?”

“My lady the Princess Consort invites Miss to taste this year’s fresh snow.”

Qin Banruo was surprised, but the clear, beautiful face showed no sign of disturbance as she smiled and said, “This is snow from orchid blossoms picked by the Princess Consort’s own hand, how could I dare refuse? Please tell the Princess

Consort, Banruo is honoured to receive her gift, and will return another day to bring my gratitude to her properly.”

The serving girl widened her eyes, and who knew if she would really remember to convey the message, but she handed over the vase before running back into the manor.

Qin Banruo held the small vase, her finger tracing along its icy pattern idly, her face expressionless, staring for a moment before she lowered the curtain and ordered the palanquin to leave.

When Prince Yu arrived at the Su residence, Mei Changsu had just awoken from a nap, and was looking frail and weak. His hospitality towards this honoured guest was also not as generous as it had been previously, and he only exchanged a few polite words before drinking his tea silently. Since Prince Yu had come to visit him out of concern for his health, and had known he was ill, he of course did not find it strange, but inquired after his well-being warmly and offered to bring a physician over to treat him.

“It is only a little sore throat and stuffed nose, it will be better with some herbal medicine, there is no need to trouble the imperial physician.” Mei Changsu leaned on his chair, which was filled with soft pillows, his eyes half-closed as he said, “Your Highness has come personally to visit me, I must apologize for the trouble I have caused you.”

“You are really too courteous. I have gained much recently as a result of your wise advice, but have not been able to meet your tastes with my gifts of gratitude, and though I have been wanting to convey my thanks to you, I have not been able to express them adequately,” Prince Yu said modestly. “The weather is turning cold, and one cannot be too careful in this season. Your health is not good, you should have a physician staying in your residence to look after your health.”

Mei Changsu turned to him and smiled. “I thank Your Highness for your concern. Your Highness is astute indeed, the elders of our Alliance sent over Physician Yan just yesterday, and though he is not young, he is much more robust than I. He is also long-winded, and enjoys ordering people around, does Your Highness not see that I have been confined here today by his command?”

Prince Yu looked at him, so firmly wrapped in so many layers of clothing, and couldn't help smiling. “The esteemed physician is truly concerned for you.”

Mei Changsu smiled and did not reply, his gaze drifting over to the window. Prince Yu followed his gaze to where Fei Liu was leaping about in the snow of the empty courtyard, once in a while extending a foot to nudge a wooden toy duck, which was waddling around aimlessly. In the corridor behind him, the other servants of the manor were bustling about busily. Prince Yu thought back to the renovated courtyard he had seen when he entered. People had been walking around hanging up lanterns

and decorations, and in one corner, a cart was delivering vegetables and fish and other products to the manor, and he felt a slight sense of bafflement arising in his heart.

Was this Su residence really looking as if it meant to stay in the capital for some time?

He was just about to speak when Fei Liu's figure suddenly flashed by, and in the next moment, he was pinning a manservant, who looked to be about twenty years old, down onto the ground in the snow.

"Fei Liu, let him go, that person has come looking for His Highness Prince Yu...." A middle-aged man shouted, hurrying over from one side.

It was then that Prince Yu recognized the servant from his own manor, and he raised an eyebrow, a sense of foreboding welling up in his heart.

What urgent matter had arisen that he had come to this place looking for him?

In the next instant, the person was scrambling up from the snow and running towards him, plunging to the floor in a bow as he tried to catch his breath.

"Steady yourself, why are you in such a panic?" Prince Yu eyed Mei Changsu, feeling as if he had lost some face before him, and said, "Who sent you here?"

"The Princess...Princess Consort...."

"The Princess Consort?" Prince Yu knew very well that his wife had always paid much attention to propriety and etiquette, and did not easily overreact, and so immediately stood up and asked, "What has happened in the palace?"

"The Princess Consort sent this one to find my lord," the servant swallowed hard. "She begs my lord to enter the palace immediately, the lady Empress...the lady Empress has fallen ill!"

Prince Yu shuddered, terror rising up within him, and he swayed for a moment before grabbing the servant, meaning to ask him more questions, but realized that he would not get much information out of him and so threw him aside before hurriedly turning to Mei Changsu to say quickly, "Please take care, I must first take my leave!" He did not even wait for a reply before rushing out into the courtyard, his servant following behind him, hastily settling his heavy cloak around his shoulders as they walked.

"The Empress is ill? At a time like this...." Mei Changsu's brows furrowed gently, looking a bit surprised, and he sank into deep thought for a long while before calling out loudly, "Is Li dage outside?"

“Chief,” the middle-aged guard appeared at the door. “Do you have orders for me?”

“Has that Tong Lu from Mister Shisan’s place arrived?”

“He arrived with the vegetable cart and has been here awhile, but because Prince Yu came, he has been waiting in the outer courtyard.”

“Please bring him in.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mei Changsu leaned back against the soft pillows and closed his eyes, his thoughts troubled.

The news Tong Lu was bringing should not be anything unexpected, but as for the palace...he had not expected more trouble to arise. He wondered whether the Empress was truly ill, or whether she had some hidden plans in mind. If she was truly sick, could she recover within five days? And if the Empress could not recover in time, then who would replace her in the sacrificial rites?

He did not have enough information, and Mei Changsu only felt his head ache and his cheeks burn, and he raised a hand to feel his forehead, but found that it was not very hot. He was only a little dizzy, and his thoughts a little blurry.

His own bout of illness had arrived at an inconvenient time as well....



## CHAPTER 60

### *Tong Lu*

A few minutes later, Li Gang returned with a robust young man in his twenties, dressed in coarse hemp clothing, who came and bowed to Mei Changsu, saying, “Tong Lu greets the Chief.”

Tong Lu came from a farming background, but because his younger sister had caught the eye of a tyrant, their whole family had fallen into calamity, and had only been saved by the fortuitous intervention of Jiangzuo Alliance. Now, his mother and younger sister were in Lang province, but as he himself was quick and capable as well as tenacious in character, Mei Changsu had noticed his abilities a few years ago and sent him to Jinling. Mister Shisan was well-known in the entertainment industry and so could not move about easily, and so the clever and reliable Tong Lu became messenger in his place, and came to the Su residence bringing his vegetables almost every other day.

“You’ve worked hard, sit down and let us talk.” Mei Changsu waved a hand. “Have there been new developments in the prison?”

“Yes, sir.” Tong Lu spoke quickly and clearly. “They have already found a suitable person. Everything was arranged by Qi Min’s most loyal subordinate, a man called Wu Xiaoyi. The person is now being held at Wu Xiaoyi’s home, and really does resemble He Wenxin in seven to eight parts, and is only a bit too thin, and so is currently being stuffed with wine and good food. He Wenxin has also suffered a bit in the prison, and so doesn’t look as white and plump as he used to, and so when the time comes and his head strikes the ground, I fear they will be able to pull off the trick. The Earl of Wen could never have guessed they could have something like this up their sleeve, and besides he has never been very familiar with He Wenxin, and even if he came to the execution in person, he would not be able to see through the deception.”

“Ng,” Mei Changsu murmured. “Keep a very close eye on that Wu Xiaoyi, the family of the substitute, and the guards in the jail, but make sure we are not noticed. After He Wenxin has been rescued from the prison, he will be immediately escorted out of the capital. When that happens, you must not lose his trail under any circumstances, no matter what.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Previous cases of the Ministry of Justice secretly substituting prisoners on death sentence before their execution – how many have you found?”

“We have found seven cases with witnesses and evidence.”

“Keep working hard, we must obtain the most crucial witnesses.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell Gong Yu to pay attention to Qin Banruo. Do not let her realize that we are investigating these old cases.”

“Yes, sir.”

After saying all this, Mei Changsu felt his gaze darken, and hurriedly closed his eyes for a brief rest. He would let the Ministry of Appointments and the Ministry of Justice enjoy their new year, and when the Spring Execution came around, the show would really begin. He only hoped that this uncooperative body of his would not let him down when the time came.

“Chief...” Tong Lu saw that he had turned pale, and was extremely worried, and asked in a small voice, “Should I call for Physician Yan?”

“No need... Physician Yan would only give me more medicine.” Mei Changsu smiled, “It’s alright. Does Mister Shisan have anything else to tell me?”

“Yes. There is news from the Green Helms of the Canals and the Walkers Sect.<sup>108</sup> In the past few months, gunpowder has been making its way into the capital smuggled amidst other goods, delivered through various routes and by different businesses. Although the amount is small each time, put together, there is already around two hundred jin.<sup>109</sup> The brothers of the Walkers sect are pretending not to have noticed anything, and have only reported it in secret to Mister Shisan, and Mister Shisan is now investigating whether there is any relationship between these businesses. He will report any new developments to you.”

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<sup>108</sup> These are names of sects that are a part of Jiangzuo Alliance. They will be introduced a little more in a couple of chapters from now. I’m going to translate them into English so they at least mean something to you haha.

<sup>109</sup> measuring unit of ancient China (斤), 1 jin = 0.6 kg (according to google)

“A large quantity of gunpowder?” Mei Changsu’s eyebrows rose. “Is there any connection to the Jiangnan Thunderbolt Office?<sup>110</sup>”

“We have not discovered any connection yet.”

“Where is this gunpowder being stored after it enters the capital?”

Tong Lu lowered his head, looking ashamed. “The people in charge of the delivery were too cautious and very cunning, and after the packages changed hands a few times, we actually lost the trail....”

Mei Changsu abruptly straightened in his chair. “You mean, we do not know where this gunpowder is now?”

“Yes... in this matter of the gunpowder, it looked to be some Jianghu conflict at first, and not anything related to us, and so Mister Shisan initially did not want to alarm you. But now that the location of the gunpowder is unknown, and its purpose also unknown, and Chief, you are always moving about the city, we are afraid....”

“The capital is so large, would my luck really be that bad?” Mei Changsu couldn’t help smiling. “Be vigilant in your investigation, but do not be overly worried either.”

“Yes, sir,” Tong Lu answered. He rummaged in the folds of his clothing for a long while, and finally produced a little sable the size of a palm. The little sable wagged its tail, then turned its head and, seeing Mei Changsu, jumped into his lap.

“Why have you brought this little sable?”

“Oh... Miss Gong Yu said this little sable should follow the Chief for the next few days,” Tong Lu, his head lowered. “It is very sensitive towards gunpowder, and if it smells any, it will start squirming restlessly, so if the Chief brings it with him wherever he goes, Miss Gong Yu would not worry so much.”

Mei Changsu shook his head and couldn’t help laughing, but he knew they all meant well, and seeing Tong Lu’s expression, he knew he had probably been scolded severely by Gong Yu for losing the gunpowder’s trail, and didn’t to make any more trouble for him, so he nodded and replied, “Alright, the little sable is very obedient, it can stay for a few days.”

Tong Lu’s face lit up in a smile, and he clasped his fist in a bow. “Thank you, Chief!”

“What are you thanking me for?” Mei Changsu waved a hand smilingly. “Alright, you can go back and tell Mister Shisan.....and Miss Gong Yu, I have

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<sup>110</sup> will be explained in Chapter 63

almost fully recovered, they can stop reporting back to Lang province about my health....”

“Ah...” Tong Lu’s face was pale. “We didn’t....”

Mei Changsu didn’t listen, and closed his eyes to rest, and so Tong Lu didn’t dare continue, but retreated quietly, making a face to himself.

The little sable crawled up to Mei Changsu’s shoulder and kneaded his ear with its tiny claws, but there was no response, and so it crawled back down into the folds of his robes and promptly fell asleep.

Two fingers suddenly reached over and plucked up the little sable by its ear, dangling it in mid-air, and the little animal twisted furiously, its stubby little legs flailing as it squeaked in protest.

Mei Changsu opened his eyes, and said warmly, “Fei Liu, what’s the matter?”

“Those three!”

“Oh,” Mei Changsu rubbed his temples for a moment, then gathered himself and said, “Bring them in.”

“Alright!” Fei Liu let go, and the little sable fell into Mei Changsu’s lap, and although it was not hurt, it was nonetheless quite frightened and curled into a ball, shivering and squeaking.

“There, there, don’t be scared, Fei Liu likes you....” Mei Changsu patted it with a smile, then tucked it into the folds of his sleeve once more. “Tonight, you can sleep with Fei Liu, how about that?”

It was a good thing the little sable could not understand him, as it continued to stare at him with its black, beady eyes, or it would have fainted away in fear.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor, varied in their strength and rhythm, just like the characters of their owners.

“Brother Su, are you feeling better?” Yan Yujin was of course the first to speak. “I brought back several baskets of the freshest citrus fruits from Lingnan, they can help to soothe the bitter taste you get in your mouth when you get sick.”

“Stop making so much noise,” Xiao Jingrui shoved at him, frowning. He looked at Mei Changsu’s pale complexion and said worriedly, “Brother Su, you don’t need to get up, just stay seated. Getting sick at this time of year is no small matter, has the physician’s medicine helped?”

“I am almost recovered, I’m sorry to have bothered you three to have come all this way to visit me.” Mei Changsu gave a small smile. “Come and sit, I haven’t had a chance to talk to you in such a long time.”

The three came forward and sat down in nearby chairs. Suddenly, the little sable began squirming around in the folds of Mei Changsu’s robes, its little claws raking around furiously, and Mei Changsu felt his heart leap.

“The hot springs were really so comfortable, Brother Su, you should go give them a try, they would be very beneficial for your health.” As Yan Yujin spoke, he took out several tangerines from his sleeve and placed them on the table. “The other baskets have been brought around to the back, I just took a few for you to try. The skin is thin and easy to peel, and the fruit is juicy and sweet, Brother Su, I’m sure you will like it. I’m planning to plant a few of their trees in my own courtyard....”

“Citrus fruits only grow in the south, in the north, they will grow nothing more than thorns,” Xie Bi rolled his eyes. “Have you studied anything? If you tried to plant any at your home, you might end up harvesting bitter melons instead....”

Xiao Jingrui and Mei Changsu both laughed, the latter reaching out a hand to take a tangerine. He held it in front of his nose and sniffed gently. Beneath the crisp sweetness, there was the faintest whiff of sulfur, detectable only with very careful examination.

Mei Changsu thought he knew the reason for this.

“These tangerines are very fresh, have they really come all the way from Lingnan? They must have come by boat, then?”

“That’s right, they came directly from Lingnan by official vessels via the Fu river, and do not have to stop along the way for inspections, and so naturally travel much faster than ordinary transport vessels. Many of the imperial households in the capital like this kind of tangerine, and ten whole vessels of the fruit were divided up so quickly, it was a good thing my dad ordered some in advance, or we wouldn’t have been able to grab any.”

“So that’s how it is...then I must really thank your great kindness.” Mei Changsu spoke politely while his mind worked quickly. So besides the Green Helms and the Walkers, even the official vessels were secretly smuggling gunpowder into the city. An ordinary jianghu quarrel shouldn’t be able to do something like this....

The little sable moved about restlessly in his robes, and Mei Changsu reached up and patted it comfortingly, and, probably because the smell of gunpowder was very faint, it settled down finally and went back to sleep.

“Brother Su, are your hands cold? Do you want me to help you peel it?” Xiao Jingrui asked concernedly, looking at Mei Changsu, who was holding the tangerine very still in his hand.

“.....Oh, no need, Yujin is right, this skin is very easy to peel.” Mei Changsu quickly peeled the golden yellow skin and put a slice of the fruit into his mouth. As he bit, the cool juice filled his mouth, a perfect mix of sweet and sour.

“Is it good?” Yan Yujin asked with his mouth full. “It feels so great to sit here by the fire, all warm, and eating these tangerines.”

“Look at you, Brother Su has only eaten one bite, and you’re already on your second tangerine.” Xie Bi teased, “Are you planning to finish that basket before you go back?”

“They’re good!” Yan Yujin ignored his teasing and turned to Mei Changsu. “If Brother Su likes them, I can send a few more baskets over.”

“These will be enough, we don’t have many people, and most of them only like eating meat anyway. But tangerines are Fei Liu’s favourite, so I will thank you for him first.”

Yan Yujin looked around. “Fei Liu was just here, where did he go?”

“Probably to the back courtyard to play.” Mei Changsu looked at this son of the Imperial Uncle and suddenly thought of something, and said nonchalantly, as if casually continuing the conversation, “How did you have the time to come visit me today? With the lady Empress ill, shouldn’t you be visiting her in the palace?”

“The lady Empress is ill?” The shock on Yan Yujin’s face looked genuine. “No way, I was in the palace just yesterday, she looked fine then, how could she be sick today?”

“Perhaps she has caught a cold from the weather,” Mei Changsu smiled faintly. “The weather is so cold, if one is not careful, it is easy to catch a chill in the night. But there are so many people in the palace to look after her, the Empress will surely recover quickly.”

“Oh.....” Yan Yujin looked up at the sky. “It is too late now, I will go visit her tomorrow. If she is indeed badly ill, I will have to send a message to Dad and ask him to come back for a visit.”

“Oh? The Imperial Uncle is not in the city?”

“He has gone to the Daoist temples outside the city to offer sacrifices. My dad doesn’t pay any attention to palace affairs these days, and only cares about his Daoist

rituals. If he didn't have me around as a son, he would definitely have turned our home into a Daoist temple as well," Yan Yujin grumbled helplessly. "But I guess the good thing is that no one's around to pay attention to me, so I can do anything I please. Aside from a brief spell earlier when my dad suddenly wanted to shove me into Forbidden Dragon Army to serve as a messenger, he's never paid much attention to my future."

"For the son of a noble family like you, the future has never been anything worth worrying about," Xie Bi said. "But your dad is really becoming more and more distant, this whole year, he hasn't even entered the palace more than once or twice, and this time, does he not even know about the Empress?"

"I don't know...." Yan Yujin scratched his head. "You now as well as I do the two of them were never close, my dad likes quiet and meditation, and if it were not for the fact that our ancestral shrines are in the capital, he would probably want to move to the mountains."

Xiao Jingrui added, "If the two of you didn't look so alike, who could tell you were father and son? Uncle Yan is mild and peaceful, like a crane leisurely surfing the wind above an open field, whereas you, you run towards excitement and trouble, to say nothing of the manner of a crane, you are more like a stray cat!"

"Yes, the young master Xiao has a noble manner," Yan Yujin said with a shrug. "I am a stray cat, and you are the well-behaved domestic cat, happy?"

Mei Changsu couldn't hold back a laugh. "It's been so long since I heard the two of you bickering like this, what a familiar feeling."

## CHAPTER 61

### *Wine in the Morning*

As they talked and laughed, it was as if they had returned to the early days of their friendship, when there had been no walls raised between their hearts. The time passed quickly, and before they knew it, it was getting dark. Mei Changsu brought out wine and invited them to stay, and the three did not decline, so the room filled with pleasant chatter as they talked about everything under the sun, except for politics and court affairs.

The wine was a strong brew from the north, and scorched its way down the throat. Yan Yujin cried out, "This is wine fit for a man to drink!" and downed a large cup in one go before choking and gasping with pain. Comparatively, the two brothers of the Xie family behaved in a much more civilized manner, and although he had a great taste and an impressive tolerance for wine, Xie Bi only sipped from a small cup slowly. At some point in time, Fei Liu had appeared in the room, and he was now peering curiously at the liquid on the table.

"Xiao Fei Liu..." Yan Yujin was a little drunk, and did not mind the cold air around Fei Liu, but held up a cup of wine and beckoned to him. "Have you tried this before? It's very good..."

"Don't play around with him," Mei Changsu, who had been drinking soup because of his illness, laughed and stopped him hurriedly. "Our Fei Liu is still young."

"I started drinking wine when I was fourteen, what are you afraid of? Fei Liu is a boy, and if he doesn't learn to drink, he will never become a man." Yan Yujin carelessly waved him over. "Come come come, come try a cup."

Fei Liu looked at Su gege, and seeing that he was smiling and did not seem inclined to stop him, he came forward, accepted the cup, and took a sip. His mouth filled with the prickling of tiny needles, and smoke seemed to rise up from his head.

"Tastes bad!" Fei Liu, feeling that he had been tricked, flung the cup down and hurled himself towards Yan Yujin fist-first. The son of the Imperial Uncle shoved the table aside and jumped up to dodge his attack, and the two began flying around the



room in a frenzy. At first, Xiao Jingrui was worried, but when he saw that Fei Liu was only chasing him around to let out his fury, and had no intention of really hurting him, he finally relaxed.

“Ever since I came to Jinling, Fei Liu has not had much opportunity to play like this,” Mei Changsu was smiling. “So every time you come over, he is really very happy.”

Xiao Jingrui had never felt that Fei Liu was happy to see them, but it was true that this residence seemed a bit empty and quiet, and so he couldn't help asking, “Brother Su, will you only have these few in your household around for the new year?”

“For new year's eve, yes, this is about it. But on the third or fourth day of the new year, I will invite some guests over, you will come too, right?”

“I will come anytime,” Xiao Jingrui looked at Fei Liu, then looked at Mei Changsu, and said sadly, “But if there is only the two of you here for new year's eve, that would really be too lonely. Come to my home for the new year, my Zhuo dad and his family will be in the capital too, and it will be very lively.”

“Thank you,” Mei Changsu smiled at him warmly. “But whoever said it would only be the two of us around? Didn't you see when you came in, there were at least twenty people in the courtyard?”

“But those people...aren't family....”

“Are you saying the people in your esteemed manor are my family?” Mei Changsu had inadvertently spoken a little too sharply, but he realized that he had overreacted and softened his tone. “New year's eve is a time for family to gather, your entire family will be there, what place would I have? Besides, the head of the imperial Ning household is your father, it wouldn't be appropriate for you to invite an outsider into your family gathering without his approval.”

Xiao Jingrui had spoken on impulse without much thought, and on hearing this, he knew he had been rude, and so he lowered his head and said, “Brother Su is right.”

“What silly things have you said now that Brother Su had to teach you a lesson?” Yan Yujin had returned to his seat after his exercise around the room, and had caught the last sentence.

“Jingrui means well, and was worried that Fei Liu and I would be lonely during new year's eve.” Mei Changsu smiled faintly, as if wanting to let the topic pass by unheeded.

“You didn’t invite Brother Su to your home for new year’s, did you?” Yan Yujin had shot the arrow through the bulls’ eye on the first try, and he leaned over and knocked his fist against Xiao Jingrui’s forehead. “Do you have any brains?”

“Older Brother just forgot to consider all the different aspects.” Xie Bi had always gotten along well with Xiao Jingrui, and after he had discovered the truth behind their father’s deception of him, he had relied totally on his older brother’s comfort and support, and so of course he leapt to his defense now. “You may have brains, but don’t you waste them all on food and pleasure anyway?”

Yan Yujin shook his head. “Brother Su has never liked excitement, and anyway, there is Fei Liu to keep him company, if you’re going to feel bad for anyone, feel bad for me, every year, as soon as the bows to the ancestors have been completed, I’ll be left at home all alone....”

Mei Changsu asked curiously, “And your father?”

“He goes back to his room to meditate.”

Mei Changsu was taken aback. Old Master Yan<sup>111</sup> and Yan Yujin’s mother had both passed away, and he did not have any brothers or sisters, so if his father really left him to go meditate in his room, this child who so loved excitement must be left feeling lonely indeed....

“Why are you fishing for sympathy?” Xie Bi scolded him with a smile. “You’ve always been a carefree little playboy, aren’t you happier without your dad around telling you what to do? You spend your time in fragrant parlours surrounded by crowds of beautiful ladies, how could you be lonely?”

Mei Changsu lifted his tea cup, breathing in its clean fragrance, and sighed in his heart. Xie Bi was, in the end, a child who had grown up under the sheltered wings of his family, and had never experienced true loneliness his whole life. How could the clamour and excitement of romantic parlours compare to the warmth and love of a home and family?

Yan Yujin did not refute Xie Bi’s words, his ever-present smile still lingering on his lips, as if he took nothing to heart. “Brother Su, do you want to come with me to the entertainment houses of Spiral Market Street this year? Look, Fei Liu is almost grown up....”

To his surprise, Mei Changsu raised an eyebrow and answered, “Alright, I cannot go as I am still recovering, but you may bring Fei Liu with you.”

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<sup>111</sup> I think he means Yan Yujin’s grandfather

“Bring him all by myself?” Yan Yujin jumped in fright. “That won’t do. What if he gets angry when the ladies touch him, who would be able to hold him back?”

“He wouldn’t, our Fei Liu has a very good temper,” Mei Changsu smiled. “After you have offered the sacrifices to your ancestors, come over here to my place and we can have some wine together, and afterwards, you can take Fei Liu out to play. This year, we are not in Lang province, and I have just gotten sick, so Fei Liu must be feeling a little out of sorts.”

“Tingsheng!” Fei Liu suddenly shouted.

“You want to bring Tingsheng out to play?” Mei Changsu stroked the youth’s hair.

“Ng!”

“Tingsheng...this name is very familiar, where have I heard it before...” Yan Yujin scratched his head.

“He is one of the three children who defeated Baili Qi,” Xiao Jingrui remembered very clearly. “After he was released from the Secluded Court, he was taken in by Prince Jing to be his bodyguard, right?”

“That’s right, all three of the children are at the imperial Jing residence now.” Mei Changsu nodded. “They should be able to come out if they ask for a holiday from their commanding officer, right?”

“I think it should be alright,” Yan Yujin said loyally. “They were saved by you, after all, and when the time comes, I will go to pick them up in your place, and see if anyone dares to refuse to let them out.”

“Thank you,” Mei Changsu turned back to Fei Liu. “Is there anyone else you want to invite?”

Fei Liu thought seriously for a moment. “Big Uncle!”

“The big uncle can’t come, the big uncle has his own family, he has to stay with them for the new year.”

“Which big uncle?” Xie Bi asked.

“The first person in this city who defeated Fei Liu in a fight.”

“Commander Meng?!”

The three young men were shocked. Yan Yujin looked at Fei Liu and shook his head. "From a little criminal slave to the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, I think you are the only one in the whole world with such a strange guest list."

"In Fei Liu's eyes, there is only like and dislike, what does he care about distinctions in rank and identity?" Mei Changsu said. "Isn't it more simple like this?"

"It's too bad there aren't many who can see the world like this..." Xiao Jingrui sighed lightly. "Identity is like a person's second skin, and if it is torn, I fear he would be changed beyond all recognition...."

Mei Changsu's brow furrowed, as if some thought had arisen from these words, and his face was a bit pale, as his unfathomably deep gaze turned towards Xiao Jingrui.

"Alright!" Yan Yujin stretched lazily and jumped up. "Good wine should satisfy the spirit, but it should not bring too much joy, or everything that comes afterwards will seem bland by comparison. I see that you've all grown a bit melancholy after a few drinks, and if we keep drinking, are you going to start weeping and singing sad ballads? Brother Su looks tired, it's time for us to go back."

"You're right." Xiao Jingrui stood up as well. "Brother Su is still ill, so you should rest more to recover. We have disturbed you for so long, it is time for us to leave."

Because he was indeed a bit tired, and because of the nameless grief and melancholy that had arisen as a result of Xiao Jingrui's words, Mei Changsu felt his emotions had been aroused and that he needed some time alone to settle them, and so he did not ask them to stay, but quietly invited them to visit again another time, and prepared to rise to see them out.

"The wind is strong and it seems to be snowing again, Brother Su, you don't need to come out." Xiao Jingrui hurriedly helped him into a chair. "You don't need to be polite with the three of us, we are all friends here. Take good care, Brother Su, and we will come see you again soon."

Mei Changsu smiled and did not insist, but called Fei Liu over to see them out instead, then leaned back against his pillows, preparing to close his eyes for a rest. Perhaps it was because this day had been too tiring, soon, his mind grew muddled and confused, as he drifted in and out of a restless sleep, his whole body burning with heat one moment and then seeming to be soaked in ice water down to the bone in the next, as he tossed and turned for what seemed like an endless amount of time before he felt a sudden pain twist around his heart, and his whole body jumped as he awoke abruptly, opening his eyes to see three faces peering down at him from above.

“What are you all doing here?” Mei Changsu looked around and discovered that he was lying on his bed, already dressed in his sleeping robes and wrapped in a soft blanket.

“You fainted and have been unconscious the whole night, don’t you know?” Physician Yan stroked his white beard furiously. “Look out the window, the sun is already up, are you trying to scare us all to death?”

“.....ah? .....I didn’t feel anything much, and I feel quite alright now.....” Mei Changsu tried to sit up from the pillows, but Fei Liu wrapped his arms around him, and so he could only fall back onto the bed, as he patted the youth’s back comfortingly. “Fei Liu, don’t be scared, Su gege was just sleeping, help me up, alright?”

“You still want to get up?” Physician Yan thundered. “If I let you get up from your bed before three days has passed, my name is not Yan!”

“Physician Yan, that won’t do, these few days are very busy, there are many things that must be done....”

“I don’t care, I made a bet when I came to take over your care, and if you keep acting like this, I’m going to lose!”

Mei Changsu was going to tell him that he had special pills made by Doctor Xun Zhen that would prevent any great problems from arising if he took them regularly, but he was afraid there might be some disagreements between doctors, and that he would only make things worse if he brought it up, so he didn’t say any more, but lay down again under the fire of the elderly gentleman’s wrath, turning his head to Fei Liu to say, “Can you recognize Uncle Meng’s home?”

“Recognize!”

“Go ask Uncle Meng to come over for a visit, will you? And go secretly, don’t let anyone see you, alright?”

“Alright!” Fei Liu saw that he was awake and looked as he always did, and so his simple heart was immediately reassured, unlike Physician Yan and Li Gang, who were standing to one side. Having received his orders, he immediately flew out the door.

“Li dage, I must trouble you to send a message to Mister Shisan for me, and ask him to investigate all the official vessels which have docked at the harbour recently to see whether they have any connection to the gunpowder smuggling.”

“Yes, sir!” Li Gang was his subordinate in Jiangzuo Alliance and did not dare to defy him the way Physician Yan was doing, so although he was also extremely worried, he too did not say any more, but immediately left to carry out his orders.

“Are you done making noise?” Physician Yan grabbed his wrist roughly and began feeling his pulse, frowning for a long moment, then took his other wrist and felt it again, then peered under his eyelids and looked at his tongue. He did not say anything about the course of his illness, only lecturing scoldingly about young people these days who didn’t know how to take care of their bodies, and how a person’s health was the most important thing, and how he had to keep his mind and spirit calm and avoid any excitement.... Mei Changsu watched him quietly, not saying half a word of protest, and from his expression, looked to be listening very seriously indeed.

But even Physician Yan himself knew in his heart that the mind of this diligent young patient of his had long since turned to other matters....

## CHAPTER 62

### *Doubts and Suspicions in the Palace*

When Meng Zhi finished his shift in the palace and returned to the commander's residence, he felt something wrong as soon as he entered his room, and although he continued casually changing out of his palace uniform and into normal clothes, his whole body was stiff with tension, like a cheetah on the alert, preparing to defend against an attack at any moment.

But he quickly understood that the reason he had so quickly identified the presence of his uninvited guest was because that person had not bothered hiding from him.

“Very slow!” The youth who drifted down from the beams of the roof had an unhappy look on his face.

“What very slow?” Meng Zhi was not Mei Changsu, and couldn't understand Fei Liu's patterns of thought. “I was very slow to return, or very slow in changing?”

“Both!”

Meng Zhi laughed loudly, and swiftly tied on his belt. “Xiao Fei Liu, did you come by yourself?”

“Ng!”

“To do what? To practice martial arts with me?”

“Call you!”

“Call me?” Meng Zhi thought for a moment. “You mean, your Su gege is calling me over?”

“Ng!”

Meng Zhi was suddenly worried. A few days ago, he had heard that Su Zhe had fallen ill, and had been just about to go over for a visit when Mei Changsu sent a messenger over to say that it was nothing serious, and that he should not visit so

frequently, and so he had restrained himself. Now that Fei Liu had been sent purposefully just to call him over, he was afraid that the illness might have taken a turn for the worse, and asked hurriedly, "How is your Su gege doing?"

"Sick!"

"I know he is sick, but how is he doing?"

"Sick!" Fei Liu repeated himself unhappily, finding this uncle really a bit slow, since he had already answered the question once.

Meng Zhi shook his head helplessly, and knew in his heart that Fei Liu wouldn't be of much help, and so quickly gathered his things and hurried out the door, jumping into his saddle and riding swiftly away towards the Su residence.

As soon as he entered the front gates, someone came forward to take his horse, and Meng Zhi strode directly into the inner courtyard, rushing straight into Mei Changsu's room. The room's owner sat on a heated brick bed, wrapped snugly in his furs, holding a bowl of steaming medicinal soup in his hands as he sipped it slowly, and though his face was a bit pale, he looked otherwise rather well.

"Xiao Shu, are you alright?"

Mei Changsu half-rose out of his chair, gesturing with an arm. "Meng dage, please sit, I'm alright, I only caught a chill, and the physician wants me to sweat it out."

"You really gave me a fright." Meng Zhi finally let out a sigh of relief. "I thought you called me over so urgently because something had happened to you. What's the matter then?"

Mei Changsu placed his empty bowl onto the table beside him, then accepted the cup of tea Meng Zhi handed to him and took a swallow to rinse his mouth, before asking, "I hear the Empress is unwell?"

Meng Zhi stared at him. "News certainly travels to you quickly. She just fell sick yesterday, and apparently it came on very suddenly. But I cannot enter the Inner Palace unless I am guarding the Emperor, and so I am not too clear about the details. I only spoke to the imperial physician briefly when he came out, and he said it isn't anything serious."

Mei Changsu's brow furrowed, as if there was something he didn't understand. "When they brought the news to Prince Yu, he was with me here, and if it was really only a trivial illness, they should not have been in such a panic...."



“It’s probably because it came on so suddenly, and so it appeared to be serious at first glance, and everyone made a bit of a fuss.” Meng Zhi thought for a moment. “According to the imperial physician, it is not life-threatening.”

“Why she fell sick, and how long it will take her to recover – did you ask about these?”

“Oh....” Meng Zhi scratched his head, embarrassed. “I didn’t know you would want to know about these, and so didn’t ask especially....”

Mei Changsu murmured to himself, then said, “How about this, Meng dage, you can use the excuse of paying a visit to Princess Nihuang to enter the palace and investigate a bit more, and find a way to bring me a copy of the imperial physician’s prescription. You might also be able to glean some news from Princess Jingning.....as for Prince Yu, don’t worry about him, I will remind him to pay careful attention to the Empress’ food and drink....”

“Are you suspecting that the Empress’ illness is man-made?”

Mei Changsu nodded. “It is too much of a coincidence, I cannot rest until I investigate the matter thoroughly.”

“If anyone wanted to poison the Empress, Consort Yue and the Crown Prince should be at the top of that list....”

“You are not wrong, but there are still several ways in which this conclusion does not make sense.” Mei Changsu wrinkled his brow. “First, it is precisely because they are the most likely suspects that they are the least likely to succeed. In all these years that the Empress has been in the palace, her most important task has been to compete with Consort Yue, and so she is always extremely alert and careful around her, and if Consort Yue could not accomplish something like this at the height of her power, then it would be simply impossible for her to succeed now. Besides, the Empress’ illness this time is not life-threatening, and if this were really the work of the Crown Prince and Consort Yue, surely they would not have acted so half-heartedly, if they had the chance to poison her, they would definitely have poisoned her to death, what would be the point in simply making her sick for a few days?”

“Perhaps their goal is simply to prevent the Empress from participating in the sacrificial rites, so that Consort Yue can take her place....”

“What good could come of that? There is no practical gain to be had, only a soothing of their anger from losing the debate. If they had the chance to make the Empress sick, why not kill her outright and reap the benefits in the long run? Not to mention, don’t forget that Consort Yue has only been restored to consort, but not imperial Noble Consort, and currently in the palace, Gracious Consort Xu and Moral

Consort Chan<sup>112</sup> both rank above her, and although these two ladies have only birthed princesses and so have never dared to compete for power in the palace, they currently outrank Consort Yue in both name and years, and so who is to say Consort Yue would be the one to replace the Empress in the sacrificial rites?”

“Then.....you mean to say, the Crown Prince and Consort Yue are innocent this time?”

Mei Changsu sighed quietly. “It is too early to draw any conclusions now. Perhaps there is some benefit to replacing the Empress in this year’s sacrificial rites that I have not thought of.....or perhaps the Empress has truly just happened to fall ill.....there are too many possibilities, and therefore I require more information.”

“But there are only a few days left until the year end’s sacrificial rites....”

“So we must make the most of this opportunity....” Mei Changsu’s expression was serious as he pressed his fingers against his temples. “I have a feeling that there is some secret going on behind all of this...”

Meng Zhi immediately stood up. “I will go and investigate for you right away.”

“Thank you, Meng dage.” Mei Changsu raised his head and smiled at him. “Let me know immediately if there is any news.”

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<sup>112</sup> I have chosen to translate “陳” as ‘Chan’ even though it should be spelled ‘Chen’ in order to distinguish her from Consort Chen i.e. Lin Yueyao

Also, I am going to quote directly from this amazing explanation (in the appendix) by ofsevensas:

“Inner Palace Rankings:

Empress (official wife, highest in status unless there are dowager empresses living, but officially given control over the inner palace)

Imperial consorts (four places, primary first rank)

Consorts (nine places, primary second rank)

Imperial Concubines (twenty seven places)

Concubines (eighty one places)

Imperial consorts (夫人), comprising of 贵妃 (guifei/noble consort), 淑妃 (shufei/’ladylike’ consort), 德妃 (defei/’moral’ consort), 贤妃 (xianfei/’virtuous’ consort).”

I have used her suggested translations, except for changing ‘ladylike’ to ‘gracious’.

Meng Zhi had always been a man of action, and so he only answered, "Right," before turning to leave.

Mei Changsu let out a long sigh and leaned back against his pillows, falling into deep thought again. He felt an exhaustion in his mind and spirit, as he began to grow light-headed and a little dizzy, and so to preserve his energy for later, he forced himself to stop thinking, to let go of the complex thoughts in his mind and enter into sleep instead. However, he could not sleep very deeply, and only drifted dazedly in and out of consciousness, as the time passed by unheeded, and when he finally opened his eyes again, it was noon.

He could not sleep any more even if he wanted to, and so Mei Changsu wrapped his furs around himself and sat up, ate a bowl of the congee Physician Yan had prescribed, and picked up again his book of Confucian scriptures and began reading slowly. Fei Liu sat beside him peeling tangerines, and quiet fell around them as the sound of the wind blew through the room.

There was no news from either Mister Shisan or Meng Zhi.

This was not surprising, since he had given his orders only a few hours ago, and some things were not so easily uncovered.

But for some reason, Mei Changsu still felt dimly that something outside of his expectation and control had occurred quietly, but when he concentrated and tried to understand what it was, it seemed to slip from between his fingers, neatly avoiding his grasp.

He was deep in thought when Li Gang's voice drifted in from the outer courtyard. "Please, follow me this way."

Mei Changsu's brows leapt lightly. Although someone had arrived, it could not be Meng Zhi, for whom he was waiting, and it was clearly not Tong Lu either.

That was because, if it had been either one of these two, Li Gang would not be leading the way for him with such courtesy and politeness.

"Fei Liu, go and bring that chair over here to Su gege's bed, alright?"

Fei Liu took the tangerines in his hands and crammed them all into his mouth, then obediently got up and moved the chair into the indicated position. Just as he finished, the door to the room was pushed open, and Li Gang called from outside the door, "Chief, His Highness Prince Jing has come to ask after your health."

"Your Highness, please enter." Mei Changsu said loudly.

Following his words, Xiao Jingyan strode into the room, but Li Gang did not enter, and had probably already retreated away.

“Mister Su, don’t worry, no one saw me coming in here.” These were the first words out of Prince Jing’s mouth. “How is your health? You have been ill.”

“It is nothing. It is only because I have been instructed to undergo this sweating treatment, and so cannot get up, pray Your Highness forgive my discourtesy.” Mei Changsu stretched out his hand and indicated the chair beside his bed. “Your Highness, please sit.”

“Don’t worry about courtesy and discourtesy.” Prince Jing took off his cloak and sat, and then immediately got to the point, saying, “You are investigating the matter of the Empress’ illness, is that right?”

Mei Changsu gave a small smile. “How did Your Highness know?”

“By your calculating nature, I do not think you would let a single unexpected event slip by uninvestigated....”

“Does Your Highness also think the Empress’ illness this time is not an ordinary sickness?”

“I do not think, I know.” Prince Jing’s thin lip curled. “That’s what I have come to tell you, the Empress has been poisoned by ruan hui grass.”

Mei Changsu was mildly surprised. “Ruan hui grass? The ruan hui grass that makes a person weak in the limbs and diminishes one’s appetite, but whose effect wears off in six or seven days?”

“Correct.”

“Why is Your Highness so certain?”

Prince Jing looked calm, and his voice was steady as he said, “I entered the palace to visit Mother today, and she was the one who told me. When the Empress fell ill, she was at Zhengyang palace with the other concubines and consorts on one of their routine visits, and she was standing not far from the Empress, and so saw the whole thing clearly.”

Mei Changsu’s gaze flashed, but he asked softly, “How did Concubine Jing realize that it was ruan hui grass?”

“Before Mother entered the palace, she often saw this type of herb and is familiar with its smell, as well as the symptoms it causes when ingested.” Prince Jing looked

at Mei Changsu's expression. "Perhaps you do not know that my mother was once a physician. She will not be wrong."

"Your Highness is mistaken, it is not that I do not trust Concubine Jing's judgement, I was only thinking.....who would dare poison the Empress, and yet only use this kind of weak herb to do so?" Mei Changsu frowned in quiet thought, a thin layer of sweat breaking out over his forehead, and in his worry, he had unconsciously begun rubbing a corner of the blanket between his fingers, so that the tips of his fingers were turning red with the exertion.

"It is not anything serious, why so troubled?" Prince Jing frowned at Mei Changsu's expression, as if he couldn't bear his worry. "And it is not only you and I who are investigating. Although Prince Yu does not know the reason for the Empress' sickness, he has begun investigating this matter in the palace, and perhaps it will not be long before he finds the person responsible for the poisoning."

Mei Changsu closed his eyes and smiled faintly. "Your Highness is correct, the worst that can happen is that the Empress will not be able to attend the sacrificial ceremony, and that is indeed not anything very serious in the long run, so it does not matter if we do not fully understand everything...."

"When you are thinking, do you often rub your fingers like this without knowing?"

Mei Changsu's heart seemed to stop, but his face showed no sign of disturbance as he smiled. "Yes, this happens often, and even when I am not thinking about anything in particular, my fingers often move. I think many people have this habit, no?"

"Yes...." A nostalgic look passed over Prince Jing's gaze. "I know a few people who do this as well...."

Mei Changsu drew both of his hands into his sleeve, then changed the subject. "I have neglected my courtesy, how has Your Highness been recently?"

Prince Jing looked at him closely for a moment. "I have been busy with the things you left for me to do, of course. My household and army have been undergoing reorganization and training, and as for external matters, I have been making friends with the people on your list.... You certainly have a keen eye, everyone you have chosen is a steadfast official with a heart for serving his country, and I have enjoyed my interactions with them. That's right, a few days ago, I was at the Zhenshan temple, and happened to save the granddaughter of Liu Cheng, the Head Secretariat,<sup>113</sup> was this also planned by you?"

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<sup>113</sup> the Head Secretariat [中書令] is head of the Executive Secretary Bureau, one of the three strange departments I translated a few chapters back. If you want to know why this dude is important (and if you, like me, don't remember from the drama), you

Mei Changsu stared at him for a long moment, then suddenly smiled. “Does Your Highness really take me for the devil?”

“Ah....” Prince Jing had guessed wrong, and now looked a bit uncomfortable. “I have been too suspicious....”

“But Your Highness has reminded me, it would be good to plan carefully and identify a few important people to target, and improve your relationship with them.”

Prince Jing smiled grimly, as if he did not quite agree. “If there is no truth in a relationship, what good is it? It would not do to use too much cunning when associating with honest officials like these. As long as I treat them with respect and sincerity, how can I complain if they do not develop a good impression of me? Take more time to rest, and do not waste your efforts worrying about this.”

“It is said that this is the weakness of a gentleman – that he has only sincerity, and no cunning.” Mei Changsu looked at the glimpse of ice in Prince Jing’s gaze, and answered him in a tone even colder than his had been. “In matters like the fight for the throne, if it were only a question of sincerity and goodwill, then why are the scrolls of history soaked crimson with blood? Your Highness has only begun to show your abilities, and may yet remain hidden for a while longer, but as soon as the Crown Prince or Prince Yu notices you, all tender feelings will be a thing of the past.”

Prince Jing sat in thought, his face hard, and after a long while, he said slowly, “I understand your meaning. Since I have already stepped onto this path, I am of course not this naive. I spoke as I did just now only because there are many types of people in this world, and for some, the more effort you put into it, the less likely you will be able to befriend them.”

An almost imperceptible smile hovered around Mei Changsu’s lips as he said quietly, “There has never been a universal rule when it comes to dealing with people. I have my ways, and Your Highness has your strategies. I measure talent, Your Highness judges virtue; sometimes talent takes precedence, sometimes virtue is of greater importance. It all depends on where Your Highness chooses to use someone, and when.”

Prince Jing’s brow furrowed as he lowered his head and pondered these words. He had always been gifted at perception and comprehension, and soon, he understood the meaning behind Mei Changsu’s words. He lifted his gaze and admitted defeat, saying, “Mister’s knowledge and experience are truly superior to Jingyan’s, please continue to teach and advise me in the days to come.”

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can check the glossary for spoilers! Otherwise, just remember his name ☐ It will come up again in.....maybe a hundred chapters or so XD

Mei Changsu smiled, and was about to speak a few soothing words when suddenly, he saw Tong Lu through a crack in the window, pacing back and forth in the courtyard, which meant that he had something to report, but knew that there was a guest in the house and so didn't dare to enter.

## CHAPTER 63

### *Gunpowder*

“Would Your Highness mind if one of my subordinates came in to make a report?” Mei Changsu asked with a small smile. He had not intended to see Tong Lu for now, but then abruptly changed his mind.

Prince Jing was a tactful person and he immediately stood and said, “Mister Su must be busy, I will take my leave.”

“Your Highness, please stay a little while longer, I think it would be good for you to hear the things he has to say.” Mei Changsu did not wait for Prince Jing’s response, but rose and called loudly, “Tong Lu, come in.”

Tong Lu, suddenly hearing his voice, jumped in surprise, but immediately steadied himself, then strode quickly up the stairs and pushed open the door. He was just about to clasp his hands in a salute when Mei Changsu looked at him meaningfully and said, “Greet His Highness Prince Jing.”

“Tong Lu greets His Highness!” The young man was exceedingly clever, and so as soon as he heard the identity of his guest, he immediately pushed aside his robes and knelt, bending over to touch his head to the floor in a bow.

“Please rise.” Prince Jing waved a hand, then said to Mei Changsu, “Is this a member of your honourable Alliance? He certainly has a heroic air.”

“Your Highness is too kind,” Mei Changsu replied politely, then turned to Tong Lu and asked, “Have you come to see me to report on the matter of the gunpowder?”

“Yes, sir,” Tong Lu stood up.

“His Highness does not know much about this, tell it once again from the beginning.”

“Yes, sir.” Although he was face to face with a prince, Tong Lu still spoke naturally and confidently, without cowering or flinching. “It all started when our brothers in the Green Helms of the Canal and the Walkers Sect discovered that



someone was smuggling a few hundred jin of gunpowder into the capital, a little bit at a time, mixed in with various different types of deliveries....”

After his first sentence, Prince Jing was already looking a little perplexed, and Mei Changsu smiled, and explained considerately, “Your Highness is seldom involved in jianghu matters and so likely does not know, the Green Helms of the Canals and the Walkers Sect are jianghu sects formed from our labouring brothers who work on ships or in goods delivery; one operates on water, the other on land, and they have a very good relationship with one another. Although their position is low and humble, they are extremely loyal, and their leader is an honest and straightforward man.”

Prince Jing nodded, eyeing Mei Changsu as he did. Although he had long since known that this scholar was the chief of the world’s greatest alliance, because he carried such a scholarly air, and looked so delicate and frail, people often forget his jianghu identity, and now that the topic had been raised, an understanding arose in his heart as he began to realize the extent of the influence this man held.

“Because it was such a great quantity of gunpowder, it would have great destructive power if it was used, and so, to ensure the chief’s safety, we traced the delivery of the gunpowder.” Tong Lu glanced at Mei Changsu, and continued at his signal. “But in the end, we gained no information from our searching. Later, by the chief’s orders, we specially investigated the official vessels that have been recently involved in goods delivery, and found that there were indeed traces of gunpowder delivered on them recently as well. The goods this batch of official vessels were delivering included fresh fruits, perfume, Southern silk, and other similar products used by noble families in the new year, and many residences have places orders for them, so it is almost impossible to trace their deliveries, and thus we have not yet been able to identify a single household as the primary suspect.

“But if they were able to make use of the official vessels, then they cannot be of simple jianghu background, and must have some relation to a noble house.” Prince Jing said, frowning. “Are you sure it is not related to the two official transport channels?”

Everyone present understood what Prince Jing meant by the two official transport channels. According to Da Liang law, the court upheld very strict regulations regarding gunpowder, and aside from the Jiangnan Thunderbolt Office of the Ministry of War, which was in charge of official firearms, and the fireworks factory under the Ministry of Revenue, which produced fireworks and firecrackers, no one else was allowed to come into contact with gunpowder, and so the so-called official transport channels referred to transport vessels which bore the sign of either the Thunderbolt Office or the fireworks factory, with anything else counting as a violation of the law.

“Definitely not, this batch of gunpowder does not even exist in the records of the official vessels.” Tong Lu said with certainty. “The goods delivered by the official vessels are spread throughout the city, and it is a very complicated matter to try to

trace their paths, and at first, we found it difficult to know where to begin, but without coincidences, there would be no story to tell, and by chance, we happened to come across...”

“Tong Lu, perhaps you can skip to the conclusion,” Mei Changsu said gently. “His Highness is not here to listen to your stories.”

“Yes, sir,” Tong Lu scratched his head, his cheeks red. “We discovered that this batch of gunpowder was finally delivered to a large courtyard enclosed by a tall fence in the northern part of the city, where there was an illegal fireworks factory....”

“Illegal fireworks?”

“Perhaps Your Highness does not know, near the end of the year, the price of fireworks skyrockets, and so there is great profit to be made in selling fireworks. But all the income of the official fireworks factory is recorded and stored, and cannot stay in the Ministry of Revenue, so the previous Minister of Revenue, Lou Zhijing, secretly opened this illegal fireworks factory and smuggled gunpowder into it, and as for the profit from this factory... he took a little for himself, and most of it went to the Crown Prince....”

“You mean the Crown Prince and the Ministry of Revenue conspired to open this illegal fireworks factory for their own profit?” Prince Jing stood up in his fury. “What kind of a thing is this!”

“Why is Your Highness so angry?” Mei Changsu spoke impassively. “Lou Zhijing has already been toppled from his position, and once Shen Zhui assumes his post, he will certainly investigate everything carefully, and so this illegal fireworks factory will not be around for much longer.”

Prince Jing was silent for a moment, then said, “I know there is no point in getting angry, and I have never harboured much expectation towards the Crown Prince, it was only that I could not control my fury for a moment. Has Mister Su asked me to stay to hear this so that I could understand better what kind of a person the Crown Prince is?”

“It is not like that,” Mei Changsu was taken aback for a moment, and then laughed in spite of himself. “Before Tong Lu came in, I did not know that they had managed to uncover this. I only wanted Your Highness to know that there was a batch of gunpowder loose in the capital, so that you would know to be careful when you go out into the city, and also I wanted to give you the little sable....”

“The little sable?”

“Yes, a sable, which will wriggle and squirm in warning if it smells gunpowder. I originally thought to have it accompany Your Highness around while we did not know where the gunpowder is being held.....I had not thought they would uncover the truth

so quickly, they have truly exceeded my expectations.” As Mei Changsu spoke, he drew a chubby little sable from the folds of his robe and passed it to Tong Lu. “Return it to its previous owner, I have no need of it anymore, and no time to look after it.”

Prince Jing’s expression changes as he asked, “The little sable does not belong to you?”

“No, it belongs to a lady of our Alliance.”

Prince Jing’s lips quirked, but he did not say anything. Mei Changsu gestured for Tong Lu to retreat, then turned to look at Prince Jing, asking in a low voice, “Does Your Highness think I have acted a bit too coldly?”

Prince Jing’s gaze turned to him, and he answered, “That lady brought you the sable because she was worried you would be injured by the gunpowder, yet you so casually decided to give the little sable to me, aren’t you letting down the care she has shown for you? But I understand your consideration for my sake, and anyway this is not something on which I should be passing judgement. It is only that you asked, and so I spoke my thoughts plainly.”

Mei Changsu bowed his head silently, and did not reply. In truth, it was not that he did not understand these principles of getting along with other people, it was only that he had a goal in his heart he must achieve even with his dying breath, and so everything else had grown dim by comparison. Since he had chosen Prince Jing as his lord, naturally he must put him first in everything he did, and so he did not have any energy left over to consider Gong Yu’s feelings.

“Your Highness,” Mei Changsu turned his face away slightly, changing the subject. “Have you said something to my lady Concubine Jing?”

Prince Jing stared for a moment, and then nodded. “I must tell Mother about the path I have chosen, so she may make certain preparations. But do not worry, she will definitely not try to dissuade me.”

“I know,” Mei Changsu murmured to himself in a voice too low to be heard. Then he raised his head and said, “Your Highness, please tell my lady, her power in the palace is too fragile, she must not attempt to help Your Highness in any way under any circumstances. There are some things she can only see and remember, she must not ask any questions or attempt to investigate any further. I should still have some power in the palace, and in a little while, I will find a way to transfer them over to Concubine Jing’s side to protect her, do not worry.”

“You have people in the palace?” Prince Jing did not even attempt to hide his shock. “I have truly underestimated the strength of Mister Su’s power.”

“Your Highness does not need to be so surprised,” Mei Changsu turned his gaze back to him calmly. “The unfortunate can be found anywhere one thinks to look, and it is a simple matter to buy their loyalty with a few favours. For example, Tong Lu, whom you just saw, was taken in by Jiangzuo Alliance at a time when he was desperate and out of options, and ever since then, he has served me with fierce and fearless loyalty.”

“Is that why you trust him so much that you let him meet with me directly?”

“I trust him, but of course I am not only trusting in his character.” A sliver of coldness arose in Mei Changsu’s gaze. “Tong Lu’s mother and sister currently live in Lang province, under the care of Jiangzuo Alliance.”

Prince Jig studied him for a moment, then suddenly understood, and couldn’t help feeling his eyebrows twitch.

“I am open with Tong Lu, and am never doubtful or suspicious towards him – this is my sincerity. Keeping his mother and sister in my grasp, as a precaution – this is my cunning,” Mei Changsu said coldly. “I do not have to go to such lengths with everyone, but for those closest to me who will come into contact with crucial information, I cannot omit either sincerity or cunning. This is the point I was making in my discussion with Your Highness just now.”

Prince Jing shook his head and sighed. “Must you speak of everything you do in such a ruthless light?”

“I have always been this kind of person,” Mei Changsu said expressionlessly. “A person can only be betrayed by his friends, his enemies will never have the opportunity to ‘betray’ or ‘forsake’ him. Even for friendships woven into one’s very flesh and bones, even for friends as close as blood-brothers, there is no way to truly know the heart beneath the shell of his skin.”

Prince Jing’s gaze faltered, as events of the past flashed through his mind, and an ache rose up in his heart as he said through gritted teeth, “I admit, what you have said is true, but others will do to you as you do to them, do you not understand this logic?”

“I understand, but I do not care.” Mei Changsu gazed into the crimson flames trembling in the brazier, as the light it cast danced across his face. “Your Highness may use any method you like to test me, to try me, I do not mind, because I know where my loyalty lies, and I have never once thought of betraying it.”

His tone was light, but the meaning behind his words were fierce. Prince Jing felt a complicated mix of emotions rising in his heart, and he did not know how to reply. Silence fell over the room as the two sat, face to face, now seeming as if to be deep in thought, now seeming to be just sitting idly, with not much on their minds.

They sat there for the time it took to brew a pot of tea, and then Prince Jing stood and said slowly, "Please take care, I will take my leave."

Mei Changsu nodded and sat up slightly, one hand bracing himself on the side of the bed, as he said, "Take care, Your Highness, my apologies for not seeing you out."

Prince Jing had just disappeared when Fei Liu appeared by the side of the bed, a tangerine still clutched in his hand, as he cocked his head and inspected Mei Changsu's face for a long moment before he peeled the tangerine and held a slice up to Mei Changsu's mouth.

"It is too cold, Su gege will not eat it now, Fei Liu can have it himself." Mei Changsu gave him a small smile. "Go and open a couple of windows and air out the room."

Fei Liu ran to the windows and cleverly opened the ones on the west side of the house, through which the sun was shining, and gradually, the air began to stir in the room.

"Chief, it will be too cold." Li Gang, who had been standing guard in the courtyard, ran in, looking worried.

"It's alright, it's only for a little while." Mei Changsu listened for a moment. "Who's shouting in the courtyard?"

"Uncle Ji and Aunt Ji," Li Gang couldn't help laughing. "Aunt Ji has hidden Uncle Ji's wine gourds again, and Uncle Ji went looking for them secretly and got himself scolded by Aunt Ji, who asked him how he could expect to find them so easily when she has been hiding his things for so many years now...."

Mei Changsu's hand slipped, and the cup of tea Fei Liu had handed him fell to the ground, shattering into powder.

"Chief, what's wrong?" Li Gang was pale with fear. "Fei Liu, hold onto him, I'll go find Physician Yan...."

"No need," Mei Changsu raised a hand to stop him, and then lay back down onto the soft pillows, rubbing his head in deep thought, as a thin sheen of sweat broke out over his forehead.

By the same logic, this was not the first year the illegal fireworks factory had started smuggling gunpowder, and so why had they remained undiscovered in previous years, but were so easily found out by the Green Helms and the Walkers this year? Was it because Lou Zhijing had been toppled from his position, and some of the controls over the operation had become complacent?

No, it couldn't be.... The illegal fireworks factory had been operating for so many years, they must have established their own means of delivery, and would not need to resort to the mass transport channels like those of the Green Helms and the Walkers. Even smuggling through the official vessels would make more sense....the Ministry of Revenue transported huge amounts of goods every year by the official vessels anyway, and they were completely under its control, and so no matter how you looked at it, it made no sense for them to take the risk of using civil transport over water or land, therefore....

...whoever was behind the smuggling of gunpowder via the Green Helms and the Walkers Sect was not affiliated with the illegal fireworks factory of the Ministry of Revenue!

Let's say.....that person knew all along the secret of the Ministry of Revenue's illegal fireworks factory, then naturally, he would use it to his advantage. Ideally, his smuggling of gunpowder into the capital would not be discovered, but if it was, he could easily divert the trail to the illegal fireworks factory, and so obscure the truth, because the illegal fireworks factory really was smuggling gunpowder into the capital, and so most people would stop their investigations here, believing that they had uncovered the truth, and would not realize that there was another batch of gunpowder, with a different purpose and destination, that had quietly entered the city....

Who was this person? What was his goal? If the gunpowder wasn't being used to produce fireworks, then it was intended to cause an explosion somewhere. He had put so much effort into this operation, and had even managed to use the Ministry of Revenue as both his shield and his smokescreen, and so that meant he could not be just a simple jianghu man..... and if this wasn't related to jianghu grudges, then it could only be related to the court, so was he trying to kill someone, or was he trying to destroy something? What kind of important occasion was there in the capital recently that could have become this person's target?

At this point, four words flashed across Mei Changsu's mind like a bolt of lightning.

The year end's sacrificial rites.....the most important yearly ceremony of Da Liang.....

Mei Changsu's face was pale as snow, but his eyes shone, as if burning with some hidden fire.

He thought of something he had heard. At the time, he had only felt a faint sense of unease, but had not paid it much attention. Now, it rose up suddenly in his mind like the key to a locked door.

Amidst the dense fog of confusion, Mei Changsu leapt past every facade and caught hold of the faint light shining from deep within its midst.

## CHAPTER 64

### *Pushing Aside the Fog*

When Physician Yan arrived hurriedly, Mei Changsu had already taken one of the pills specially made for him by Doctor Xun Zhen and was standing fully dressed in the middle of the room, waiting for Fei Liu to add coal to his little portable brazier. When he saw the old physician widen his eyes and puff out his beard in surprise, the great chief smiled apologetically and said, “Physician Yan, I must go out personally today, but don’t worry, I have put on many layers, and Fei Liu and Li Gang will be with me, and the wind and snow have already stopped, so there should not be much danger....”

“Whether there is danger or not is for me to decide!” Physician Yan stood guard in front of the door, blocking it with his body.

“I know what you are thinking, but don’t think that Zhen fellow’s heart protection pills are some kind of magic drug, they will get you through a crisis but they won’t save your life. You may have only caught a chill, but your body is not the same as other people’s, and now you still refuse to take care of it, and say you want to run around outside in the cold? What happens if they bring you back lying on a stretcher? Are you trying to mar my good name?”

“Physician Yan, let me go out today, I promise I will return in good shape, and from now on, I will listen to everything you say....” Mei Changsu spoke gently, smiling as he made a gesture to Fei Liu. “Fei Liu, open the door.”

“Hey....” White clouds of steam were blowing from the mouth of the frustrated Physician Yan, but in the end, he was not a martial arts master, and so Fei Liu swiftly lifted him over his shoulder and moved him to one side, as Mei Changsu took advantage of the distraction to sneak out the door, hurrying onto the palanquin Li Gang had already prepared, and, with a quiet word to the palanquin bearers, he was lifted and borne away from the exasperated cries of the old physician behind him.

Perhaps it was the effect of the drug, or the warmth and comfort of the palanquin, but Mei Changsu felt quite well, his mind was clear, and his hands and feet were not as weak as they had been yesterday, and as for the situation he was about to face, he had already made adequate preparations.

The palanquin bearers were walking quickly, but they could still only walk, and so it would take some time for them to arrive at their destination. Mei Changsu closed his eyes, on the one hand conserving his energy, and on the other, going through his thoughts once again.

If it were only a matter of stopping him, there would be nothing challenging about what he was about to do. The difficulty lay in controlling the deeper currents without destroying the peaceful facade on the surface.

About two hours later, the palanquin stopped at the door of a graceful and elegant manor. Li Gang knocked on the gates, and not long after his name card had been handed into the residence, its owner came hurrying out.

“Brother Su, why have you come so suddenly? Quick, come in.”

Mei Changsu emerged from the palanquin, supported by Fei Liu, and looked at the young man standing before him. “You’re dressed very smartly.”

“We were playing polo and it got hot, so we took off some of our outer layers, and now we’re stinking of sweat, Brother Su, you mustn’t laugh at me.” Yan Yujin smiled as he accompanied Mei Changsu into the manor. They walked through two doors, and a vast field lay before them, on which several young people were practising their batting skills. “Brother Su, why have you suddenly come here?” Xiao Jingrui ran over, astonishment written all over his face, his question identical to Yan Yujin’s just a moment ago.

“There hasn’t been much going on lately, and I wanted to come out for a stroll.” Mei Changsu looked at the two inseparable friends standing before him, and gave a small smile. “I have been in the city for so long, and still have not come to pay my visits to Yujin’s residence, my manners have been lacking. Yujin, is your esteemed father here?”

“He has not come back yet.” Yan Yujin shrugged, his voice light. “My father’s attention has been completely absorbed by those Daoist priests, and he always leaves early and returns late, but I think he will be back soon.”

“You go and have fun then, there’s no need to take care of me. I’ll just watch from the side, and learn a thing or two.”

“Why joke around, Brother Su? Why don’t you come play with us?” Yan Yujin suggested, excited.

“You’re the one joking, not me. Look at me, if I came with you, would I be hitting the ball or would the ball be hitting me?” Mei Changsu laughed and shook his head.



“Then let Fei Liu come and play, he would certainly enjoy it.” Yan Yujin’s eyes shone. “Come on, what colour horse does xiao Fei Liu like, tell Yan gege.”

“Red!”

Yan Yujin darted away, busying himself finding a horse and harness for Fei Liu. But Xiao Jingrui stayed by Mei Changsu’s side, asking concernedly, “Brother Su, are you feeling any better? There are some seats over there, let’s go over and sit.”

Mei Changsu nodded and asked, smiling, “Where’s Xie Bi? Didn’t he come over with you?”

“Second Brother has never liked playing polo, and anyway, there are things in the manor he must take care of now that the new year is approaching, and these few days are always the busiest in the whole year.” Mei Changsu saw that Xiao Jingrui was putting on his fur coat as he spoke, and said hurriedly, “You don’t need to keep me company, go and play with them.”

“I’ve just about finished anyway.” There was a warm smile on Xiao Jingrui’s face. “I think it will be interesting to watch Fei Liu play.”

“Don’t look down on our Fei Liu.” Mei Changsu sat and waved at his little body guard on the grounds. “He is a very good rider, and once he remembers the rules, you may find him a difficult opponent.”

As the two spoke, Fei Liu had already leaped onto one of the red horses, and Yan Yujin stood by his side, showing him how to swing the bat. The youth tried it a few times, but he had not yet mastered the skill, and so as he swung, he sent grass and soil flying, but could not manage to hit the ball. Everyone else had stopped playing, and were crowding around to watch curiously, and Fei Liu, enraged by the attention, suddenly sent the ball flying high into the air, over the tall walls surrounding the manor, and a moment later, there was a loud cry from outside, “Who, who hit us with this ball?”

“It looks like we hit someone, let me go look.” Xiao Jingrui stood and went out the door with Yan Yujin, and no one knew how they handled the situation, but it was a long while before they returned. Meanwhile, Fei Liu continued to play on the field, running after the ball, and it was not long before he had broken his bat into two pieces.

Soon, the other players saw that it was growing late, and one by one took their leave, leaving Fei Liu alone on the grounds, riding back and forth. Yan Yujin went to give him a new bat, but he didn’t want it, and continued chasing the ball happily around the field.

“This is the first time I’ve seen polo played like this,” Yan Yujin was laughing as he came over and punched Xiao Jingrui playfully in the arm. “But Fei Liu’s riding

skills are really no worse than yours, and someday, I will train him well, and then you won't be able to walk around with your nose in the air thinking you're the best at polo."

"When have I ever done that?" Xiao Jingrui was embarrassed, but couldn't help laughing. "You're just jealous."

Mei Changsu broke in to ask, "Who did he hit outside the wall? Was it serious?"

"It didn't hit anyone directly, it was a diplomat group sent over from Yeqin to bring the new year's greetings, and the ball hit one of their wooden boxes. From what I could see, Yeqin sent over quite a lot of people this year, but the head diplomat looks like a bit of a coward, and doesn't have the bearing of an emissary at all. Although Yeqin is only one of the vassal states of our Da Liang, they are still the masters of their region, why didn't they send someone a little more presentable?"

A distant memory stirred in Mei Changsu's mind at his words, and there was a faraway look in his gaze as he said, "Then, according to the young master Yan, what kind of a person would be worthy of representing a country as its envoy?"

"In my opinion, the kind of person with that kind of presence would be someone like Lin Xiang,<sup>114</sup>" Yan Yujin said passionately. "He was sent as an envoy to the most fearsome countries, but he never showed any fear himself. His speeches could sway an entire court, his courage could intimidate any tyrant, and he always returned unharmed,<sup>115</sup> and never brought dishonour to his lord or his country. He was the very embodiment of wisdom and courage."

"You do not need to envy the ancients," there was a hint of a smile at the corner of Mei Changsu's lips. "An ambassador like this has once appeared in our Da Liang as well."

The two young men leaned forward curiously. "Really, who? What was he like?"

"That year, Da Yu, Northern Yan, and Northern Zhou formed an alliance, intending to conquer Da Liang and divide it between them. There was a great disparity between their military power and ours, we were outnumbered five to one, and soon, their army had breached our borders and invaded into our land. This envoy was twenty years old at the time, and with the imperial rod in his hand and only a hundred men by his side, he crossed into the enemy camps, dressed in his raw silk robes and cap, his hatchet hanging at his waist. The Emperor of Da Yu marveled at his courage and commanded for him to be brought into the royal presence. Before the

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<sup>114</sup> this Lin [蘭] is not the same Lin [林] as Lin Shu (it is actually the same Lin as Lin Chen)

<sup>115</sup> he uses this idiom, which is also about an envoy:  
<https://www.thestandard.com.hk/images/characters/20170328222337idoms.pdf>

court, he debated the lords of Da Yu into silence, his tongue sharp as a knife. These kinds of alliances are always precarious to begin with, and at his stirring, it fell apart completely and tore itself to shreds. Our generals seized the chance to launch a counterattack, and so delivered the country from danger. So, an envoy like this is no less impressive than Lin Xiang, wouldn't you agree?"

"Wow, is there really a person like this in our Da Liang? Why have I never heard of him?" Yan Yujin's face was full of admiration.

"These events took place more than thirty years ago, and they are seldom mentioned anymore nowadays. You are both young, it is not surprising that you have not heard of this."

"Then how did you come to know about it?"

"I am quite a few years older than you, I heard them mentioned by my elders."

"Then is this envoy still alive? If he is, I would love to meet him, and witness such elegance and grace in person."

Mei Changsu gazed deeply into Yan Yujin's eyes, his expression somber, as he said slowly but clearly, "Of course he is.....Yujin, he is your father."

The smile on Yan Yujin's face froze for a moment, and his lips began to tremble slightly. "What.....what did you say?"

"Marquis Yan, Marquis Yan," Mei Changsu said coldly. "Did you think this Marquis' rank was given to him because he was the son of Imperial Tutor Yan, or because of his identity as the Imperial Uncle?"

"But, but...." Yan Yujin was so shocked that he couldn't sit still, and had to steady himself by holding tightly to the arms of his chair. "My dad now.....now he is...."

Mei Changsu sighed quietly and lowered his eyes, shaking his head as he recited quietly, "The grass grows wildly on the shores of the ancient capital, I gaze towards the long river, which still winds around the lonely city. I think of the black-robed youth, noble and handsome, his soldiers behind him, his spear splitting the clouds ahead. He looked out over the arrogant army rushing up from the South, like a wave cresting over them, and then he looked to the East, and turned his attention to the task before him.<sup>116</sup>" His voice trailed off, his gaze full of sorrow.

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<sup>116</sup> OH GOD ANOTHER POEM T\_\_\_\_\_T I didn't bother translating the whole thing this time, although Mei Changsu has already recited half of it. This poem is called 'Eight Voices of Ganzhou – The Shouyang Tower of Bagongshan' (八聲甘州·壽陽樓八公山作) and was written by Ye Mengde (葉夢得) in the Song

For those who had dwelt in the eternal spring of youth, the blood of heroes running hot in their veins – who among them had not once laughed at the storms to come, and scoffed at the passing of time?

But nothing lasts forever, time flows on like water, and, like a flash of light streaking before the eyes, the youth of yesteryear has passed away and cannot be recovered.

Still, no matter the depth of Mei Changsu's sorrow, it could not compare to the shock Yan Yujin was feeling. This was because, in recent years, he had been the one closest to the lethargic old man who now only spent his days with his sticks of perfumed incense. That apathetic face, that whitened head, those lowered eyes that never seemed to care about anything that went on in the world.....he had never imagined that they had once experienced such a glorious youth.

Xiao Jingrui put his hand on Yan Yujin's back and patted him gently, opening his mouth to lighten the atmosphere, but found that he did not know where to begin.

Mei Changsu did not look at the two young men again, but stood, his gaze turned towards the main gate, and said lowly, "He has returned."

Just as he had said, a green and vermillion palanquin was carried through the doors, and after the bearers laid down the palanquin and drew open its thick curtain, a tall but slightly stooped older gentleman, dressed in a gold-lined robe, stepped down with the support of a male servant, but although his head was white with age and his face lined with wrinkles, he did not look very old, his appearance still consistent with his age in the early fifties.

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Dynasty. The original text as well as extensive explanation (in Chinese) can be found here: <http://www.poemjoy.com/show-157-664-1.html> (I have to plug the whole explanation into my Chinese-English dictionary to even begin to understand the poem lol.)

I did manage to understand that the poem is about a vanguard commander, Xie Xuan, who defeated the massive and formidable Fujian army in the Battle of Fei River (he's the "youth" in the poem). The first half (which MCS quotes) talks about his wisdom and courage as he stands facing this immense army as it bears down on him and his soldiers. The second half, which I do not have the time / energy / Chinese to translate, is something about how a thousand years later, nothing is left of the heroism and labour of the past, as the lonely music of a zither drifts through the empty mountain halls. Sorry, it's much more beautiful than that! And probably way deeper too lol. But at least, you get an idea of why MCS is reciting it here, and how it relates to Yan Que.

Mei Changsu looked at him for a moment, and then quickly walked over, and it was Yan Yujin instead who stood there in a daze, unmoving.

“Marquis Yan is returning to his residence so late, you must be working very hard.” Mei Changsu came forward, greeting him directly.

Yan Que was the Imperial Uncle before he was made Marquis, and so although the rank of Marquis was higher, everyone had grown accustomed to calling him the Imperial Uncle, and so most continued to do so, only addressing him as Marquis when speaking to him face to face, as he himself clearly preferred the latter.

“I beg your pardon, you are....”

“I am Su Zhe.”

“Oh...” This name was currently very popular in the city, and even if Yan Que truly did not pay much attention to the affairs of the world around him, he would still have known it, and so he smiled politely. “It is an honour to meet you at last. I have often heard my son praising you as a giant among men, and truly, your graceful manner is remarkable to behold.”

Mei Changsu smiled, and did not waste time in courtesies, but came immediately to the point. “Pray Marquis Yan set aside some time, I have something of vital importance to discuss with you alone.”

“To discuss with me?” Marquis Yan couldn’t help laughing. “Your fame has been spreading through the city, and I am in the dusk of my years, and no longer pay any attention to the affairs of the world, how could you have anything important to discuss with me?”

“Pray Marquis Yan stop wasting time,” Mei Changsu’s expression was like ice, his voice cold as snow. “If there is no place quiet indoors, then we will have to talk here. But it is really too cold outside, may I borrow a little gunpowder from you to warm my hands?”

## CHAPTER 65

### *Yan Que*

Mei Changsu's voice was very low as he spoke into Yan Que's ear, his gaze locked onto his face, taking note of his every expression.

But surprisingly, Yan Que's face was still, as if those abrupt words had not disturbed him in the slightest, and his calm was so absolute that Mei Changsu almost believed that he had come to the wrong conclusion entirely.

But this feeling passed quickly, and he soon knew he had been correct, because Yan Que had lifted his head to look him in the eye.

Those permanently lowered eyes which concealed all thoughts were not as calm as the rest of his expression, and in those clear pupils, an unusually complicated mix of emotions was stirring. There was shock, despair, resentment, grief; the only thing not present was fear.

But Yan Que should have been afraid. No matter how you looked at it, what he had planned counted as treason worthy of a death sentence up to the ninth generation, and evidently, this great crime of his now lay within the grasp of the refined scholar standing before him.

And yet, he was not afraid as he continued to stare at Mei Changsu, but though his face was expressionless, his eyes were filled with fatigue, sorrow, and a deep, unquenchable resentment.

In that expression, it was as if he was climbing a mountain, having braved countless dangers and unfathomable suffering, and just as he was finally nearing its peak, he suddenly came across a wide chasm impossible to breach, which said to him coldly, "Turn back, you cannot cross over."

Mei Changsu stood before him now, informing him of his failure. In this moment, he could not spare any attention to the consequences of this failure, because there was only one thought in his mind.

I could not kill him. And if I could not kill that man this time, then I will not have another chance in the future.

By this time, Yan Yujin and Xiao Jingrui had run over, and were looking curiously at the two of them.

“Yujin, is there some place quiet, I have some things to discuss with your esteemed father, and I do not wish to be disturbed by anyone.” Mei Changsu asked quietly.

“Yes...the Painting Building at the back...” Yan Yujin was extremely intelligent, and simply from their expressions, he knew something was wrong. “Brother Su, please follow me...”

Mei Changsu nodded, and turned to Yan Que. “Marquis, after you.”

Yan Que smiled ruefully, then lifted his head and took a deep breath, saying, “Please, after you.”

The row of people walked silently, and even Xiao Jingrui tactfully kept quiet. When they arrived at the Painting Building, Mei Changsu entered with Yan Que, indicating with a glance for the two young men to wait outside. The innermost room of the Painting Building was a small, plain Painting Room, adorned with simple furniture, and aside from a wall filled with bookshelves, there was only a table, two chairs, and a long couch by the window.

“Marquis,” Mei Changsu came straight to the point once the two were seated on the chairs. “Have you hidden the gunpowder in the sacrificial altar?”

The muscles in Yan Que’s face jumped, but he did not answer.

“Of course, you may deny it, but it is not difficult to prove, I have only to let Meng Zhi know, and he will conduct a thorough search of the entire sacrificial altar.” Mei Changsu pressed on relentlessly. “I think the reason you have spent so much time meditating at the Daoist temples is to divert attention away from your interactions with the master in charge of the rites, is that right? And these masters are naturally your accomplices as well, or perhaps I should say, you have helped all your accomplices to become masters, am I correct?”

Yan Que looked at him and said coldly, “It is said that the wise die young, Mister Su possesses such intelligence, are you not afraid of shortening your lifespan?”

“The span of one’s life is determined by the heavens, why should I worry?” Mei Changsu returned his gaze carelessly. “As for the Marquis.....did you really believe you could succeed?”

“At least before you appeared, everything was going very smoothly. My masters have already hidden the gunpowder without anyone noticing, under the guise of rehearsing for the ceremony, and the fuse has been placed in the furnace. As soon as the Emperor lights the incense to worship the heavens, he will ignite the fuse hidden in the furnace, and the entire altar will explode.”

“It is indeed as I thought,” Mei Changsu sighed. “When the Emperor lights the incense, although the princes and ministers will be kneeling at the base of the altar, nine feet away, and will thus escape the explosion, the Empress must stand on the altar as well.....and even though the two of you have been estranged for so many years, you still retain some brotherly love for her, and so you found a way to prevent her from attending the ceremony, right?”

“That’s right,” Yan Que answered plainly. “Although she has committed many sins, in the end, she is still my younger sister, and I cannot condemn her to such a cruel fate..... Did Mister Su begin to suspect me because you thought her illness too strange?”

“Not entirely. Besides the Empress’ illness, Yujin also said something which aroused my suspicion.”

“Yujin?”

“One night, he sent me a few baskets of Lingnan tangerines, and said that they had been delivered via official vessels and so were very popular, and it was only because you had pre-ordered some that the Yan residence managed to acquire any at all.” Mei Changsu glanced over, his gaze sharp as the edge of a knife. “You claim to be devoted to the temples and the gods and to have given up worldly affairs, and do not even spend New Year’s Eve with your family, so why would you purposefully order fresh fruits to celebrate the new year? You were only using this as an excuse to confirm the arrival date of the official vessels, so you could arrange for your gunpowder to enter the city at the same time as the Ministry of Revenue’s smuggled gunpowder, so that if anyone noticed anything strange, you could neatly divert the trail to the illegal fireworks factory, because as long as the timing was right, it would be very difficult for anyone to see through the deception.”

“Unfortunately, you still saw through it,” Yan Que said ironically. “Mister Su is truly a great talent, it is small wonder that everyone is trying to acquire you for his own.”

Mei Changsu paid no attention to his mocking, but continued quietly, “The Marquis has taken such a great risk to assassinate the Emperor, for what purpose?”

Yan Que stared at him for a moment, and then suddenly laughed out loud. “I have no other motive, I only want him to die. Assassinating the Emperor is my only goal.



This is because he should die, I care nothing for treason or heavenly mandate, as long as he is killed, there is nothing I will not do.”

Mei Changsu gazed into the distance, his voice low. “Is it because of Consort Chen?”

Yan Que’s entire body trembled as he stopped laughing suddenly and turned his head towards him. “You.....you know about Consort Chen?”

“It was not so long ago, is it so surprising that I know? In that year, the eldest son of the Emperor, Prince Qi, was sentenced to death, and his birth mother Consort Chen committed suicide in the palace. Although no one mentions them now, it was still only twelve years ago....”

“Twelve years...” Yan Que’s smile was full of sorrow, his eyes burning with unshed tears, “It is long enough. Besides me, who is there left to remember her now....”

Mei Changsu was quiet for a moment before he said, “Since you harboured such deep feelings for her, why did you stand by and watch as she entered the palace back then?”

“Why?” Yan Que gritted his teeth. “Because that person was the Emperor. The Emperor we had all once protected with our lives, whom we had helped onto the throne. We had been friends since we first began studying together as children, as we learned martial arts together, and later as we saved Da Liang from danger together, but once he became Emperor, there was only lord and servant. The three of us.....we had sworn so many times to walk together in sorrow and in joy, to support each other all our lives, to remain loyal unto death, but in the end, he did not keep a single one of his pledges. The second year after he ascended the throne, he stole Yueyao from me, and although he knew we were in love, he did not even hesitate. Lin dage counselled me to be patient and endure, and so I could only endure, and when Jingyu was born, and Yueyao was raised to the title of Consort Chen, I even thought I could let go of her entirely, so long as he treated her well.....and in the end? Jingyu dead, Yueyao dead, even Lin dage..... he ruthlessly struck them down, one by one. If I had not fled in despair from all worldly affairs, he would not have so much as blinked before taking my life as well.....such a cold, despicable Emperor, do you not think he deserves to die?”

“And so you plotted for so many years, simply in order to kill him.” Mei Changsu looked into Yan Que’s aged gaze. “And after you have killed him, then what? When the Emperor has been blasted into smoke and dust on the altar, leaving chaos in his wake, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu fighting viciously, raising confusion in the court and instability on our borders, in the end, who will suffer, and who will reap the reward? The tainted names of the ones you love will still rest on their shoulders, without any hope of redemption. Prince Qi will still be guilty of treason, the Lin

family still guilty of rebellion, and Consort Chen's soul will still wander alone, without a plaque to her name or a place to rest on this earth! You will have overturned heaven and earth and doomed our nation, all for the sake of killing one person!"

Mei Changsu had come today in spite of his own illness, firstly because of the urgency of the situation, and secondly in order to save the Marquis. Now, his voice was raised with fury, his cheeks flushed and his heart stirring with passion. "Marquis Yan, do you think this is revenge? No, this is not true revenge, you are only venting your anger and personal spite, all for the sake of soothing your hurt feelings, and heedlessly destroying countless lives in the process. Was the Xuanjing Bureau established just for show? If the Emperor is assassinated, will they not pour everything they have into the investigation? And if I can trace the source back to you before anything has even happened, you can be sure they will be able to do so afterwards! You may not care whether you live or die, but why should Yujin have to bear the consequences of your crime? Even if he was not borne of the woman you loved, he is still your own son, and to say nothing of the fact that he has not grown up with your love and affection, can you really bear to sentence him to the heavy crime of treason and the cruel death of beheading at such a young age? You accuse the Emperor of being cold and despicable, then tell me, are you truly any better than he?"

His harsh words seemed to pierce right through the skin, and the corner of Yan Que's mouth trembled as he raised a hand to cover his eyes, murmuring softly, "I know Yujin does not deserve this.....it was his misfortune in this life to be my son.....perhaps it is his fate then...."

Mei Changsu laughed coldly. "You have no hope of success now, so if you have even the slightest remorse for Yujin's sake, why not turn back while you still can?"

"Turn back?" Yan Que smiled bitterly. "The arrow has been strung. How can I turn back?"

"The sacrificial ceremony has not yet begun, the Emperor's incense stick has not yet fallen into the sacrificial furnace, why can you not turn back?" Mei Changsu's gaze was deep, his expression solemn. "However you planted the gunpowder, remove it by the same method, and then deliver it to a location near the illegal fireworks factory, and I will send someone to take care of it from there."

Yan Que lifted his head, his gaze full of astonishment. "What do you mean? Why would you involve yourself in waters as muddied as these?"

"Because I am working for Prince Yu, and if you commit this treason, it would be difficult for the Empress to escape blame as well. Taking care of the matter at its root is the best option," Mei Changsu said indifferently. "If I had not intended to give you a way out, would I have come all this way to talk to you in secret? Wouldn't it have been easier for me to go directly to the Xuanjing Bureau?"

“You.....” Yan Que’s gaze shimmered as he looked at the frail scholar sitting before him for a long moment, as if in deep thought, before he seemed to grow distant once more. “Of course it would be good if you were to let me go, but I must tell you honestly, even if you behave leniently towards me today, even if you hold me in your grasp, I will never work for your lord.”

Mei Changsu smiled. “I had not thought of asking you to work for Prince Yu, it is enough for you to continue visiting your temples in peace. As for the affairs of the court, I only ask that you observe them carefully in the days to come.”

Yan Que looked at him incredulously, shaking his head as he said, “In this world, there is no kindness without a cost, you are letting me go without asking for anything in return, what are your true intentions?”

Mei Changsu’s gaze was unreadable as a bleak smile played around his lips. “The Marquis has not forgotten Consort Chen, for the sake of love and passion, and has not forgotten Commander Lin, for the sake of friendship and righteousness. There are too few left in this world who still hold love and friendship in their hearts, so if I can save just one, then it is still worthwhile to me..... I only ask the Marquis to remember my words today, and not act hastily again.”

Yan Que looked at him deeply for a long moment, then took a deep breath and smiled broadly. “Good! Since Mister Su has already acquired such a nobility of spirit in your young age, then I will not persist in my absurd conjectures. I will find a way to remove the gunpowder beneath the sacrificial altar, but the day of the ceremony is drawing near, and the guard around the altar grows stricter by the day, and if I am so unfortunate as to be caught in the act, I ask you to remember your friendship with my son, and save his life.”

Mei Changsu smiled. “Marquis Yan, you are old friends with Commander Meng, and in these festive days, he will not be looking very seriously to catch anyone, so as long as you are cautious, there should be no problem.”

“Let us hope it will be as you say then.” Yan Que cupped his hands and bowed, smiling, having completely regained his composure. He had just received such a great fright and held a conversation that would determine his life or death, and which had neatly put an end to years and years of careful planning, and yet he had managed to steady his emotions so completely and in such a short period of time. Mei Changsu couldn’t help smiling in admiration at the extraordinary courage of the man before him.

The conversation was finished, and any further words would be superfluous. The two rose together without speaking and strode out of the Painting Building. As soon as the door opened, Yan Yujin rushed over, calling, “Dad, Brother Su, you....” He suddenly faltered, not knowing how to continue.

“I’ve already talked with your esteemed father, and the two of you will greet the new year together this new year’s eve.” Mei Changsu gave a small smile. “As for Fei Liu, I must trouble you to bring him out to play another time.”

Yan Yujin looked first at the one, and then at the other, and knew in his heart that the secrets they had discussed inside the room were certainly not as simple as this, but he was wise and insightful beneath his cheery exterior, and so he only stared for a moment before he shook aside his questions, and then smiled brightly, nodding his head enthusiastically. “That’s great!”

Mei Changsu smiled back, and then looked around. “Where is Jingrui?”

“His Zhuo dad and mum are arriving tonight, he has to go welcome them, so I sent him home.”

“Zhuo Dingfeng has arrived....” Mei Changsu’s eyebrows trembled. “Do they come every year?”

“Once every two years. Sometimes, they will come two years in a row, because Uncle Xie is busy in the court and cannot always leave the capital, and so the Zhuo family has to come here more often.”

“Oh,” Mei Changsu nodded slightly, feeling Yan Que gazing at him searchingly, but ignored him, and lifted his head to look up at the sky.

The sun was setting in all its splendour, and this long day was finally nearing its end. He wondered whether tomorrow would bring any unexpected new waves.

“Yujin, go and bring Mister Su’s palanquin in past the doors. The wind is rising, he should not step outside,” Yan Que calmly instructed his son, and waited for him to turn and leave before turning his gaze back to Mei Changsu, and asking in a low voice, “I have just thought of something else, it is not Prince Yu who has asked you to conceal my crime today, is it?”

“Prince Yu does not even know about this,” Mei Changsu replied honestly. “Actually, before I came to see the Marquis, even I was not entirely confident.”

Yan Que closed his eyes tightly and sighed. “Who is Prince Yu and what has he done to deserve a talent such as you? I only fear that the world of the future already belongs to him....”

Mei Changsu glanced at him. “The Marquis and the Empress are brother and sister, what is wrong with Prince Yu ruling the world?”

“What is wrong?” Yan Que’s eyes flashed, and it was as if a layer of frost had been painted over his clear features. “They are all the same, cold and unfeeling, using harsh and cutthroat methods to achieve their goals. I am no longer young, and have lost all those close to me, and though I have striven to live until now, I still have no way to redeem their names and overturn the injustices done to them. And so, since there is nothing left for me now, why should I care who rules the world?”

A dim light glowed in Mei Changsu’s gaze as he asked, “The Marquis knows that I am Prince Yu’s man, are you not afraid of the repercussions of these words?”

“Prince Yu has always known how I felt, but he also knows I do not involve myself in court affairs, and the Empress has ordered him to ignore me, so he has done nothing to me, nor I to him.” Yan Que laughed coldly, “With your talent and intellect, it would be a simple matter to destroy me, but do not think you will be able to control me or use me for Prince Yu’s sake.”

“The Marquis is mistaken, it was only an idle question, nothing more.” Mei Changsu’s face was calm, his expression peaceful. “As long as the Marquis does not act hastily again in the future, I will not mention today’s events again. As for Prince Yu, I have never held out any hope for the Marquis’ assistance in any way.”

Yan Que stood, a distant look in his eyes, not knowing whether he should believe Mei Changsu’s promise or not. But until Yan Yujin returned with Su Zhe’s palanquin, he did not say a single word, only looking silently towards the snow-covered steps in the courtyard.

Only as the palanquin rose to leave did Mei Changsu hear the long, heavy sigh let out by this heroic figure of days gone by.

The sound of his sigh drifted into the distance, as if it could carry his memories and regrets backwards in time.

## CHAPTER 66

### *New Year's Feast*

When he arrived back at his own manor, Mei Changsu was shaking all over, breathless and weak, but he hung on grimly as he gave instructions for Yan Que to be closely monitored before finally relaxing and lying dizzily back down onto his bed, apologizing to Physician Yan all the while.

Physician Yan completely ignored his apologies, his face still dark as he performed acupuncture on his patient, and Li Gang, watching from the side, worried that in his anger, he would stick his needles into places they should not go.

After resting like this for three days, Mei Changsu appeared to have recovered a little of his energy. Perhaps it was because his subordinates were afraid to disturb him, or perhaps it was really that nothing of much significance happened during this time, but the capital seemed quiet over these three days, the only news being an edict from the Emperor stating that the Empress had taken ill, and so would be replaced by Gracious Consort Xu in the year's end ceremonies.

According to rumour, the Emperor had wanted Consort Yue to take the Empress' place, but Consort Yue had personally written to him saying that her rank was low and her titles insufficient, and suggested that, by due of her superiority in both rank and years in the palace, Gracious Consort Xu should take over the ceremony.

This letter was written with reason and passion, as well as an ostentatiously grand manner, and the Emperor, greatly impressed, personally bestowed upon her a new pearl hairpin as a reward. When the news spread to him, Prince Yu was livid.

But despite his anger, these kinds of plays were not uncommon in the fight for the throne, and in any case, it was no great victory and there was not any substantial loss, and as the end of the year was near, both sides were too busy to continue the fight for now.

The Su manor was also preparing busily for the new year, but this was not something that required Mei Changsu's attention, as Li Gang was more than capable of handling these kinds of internal affairs, and on Mister Shisan's end, there was Gong Yu to order several carts of goods for the new year, including most of the newest and

most interesting toys on the market, and soon, Fei Liu was playing frantically from dawn to dusk.

The imperial Mu residence, imperial Yu residence, Yan residence, Xie residence, and the Commander General's residence also sent over new year's gifts, and even Prince Jing sent over one of the senior members of his residence to bring over new year's greetings and several tokens of appreciation.

For most of the gifts he received, Mei Changsu only glanced over the gift list before letting Li Gang deal with them. He even let him handle the sending of gifts in return, and did not seem interested at all in the details.

But amongst all the gifts, Fei Liu's special favourites were the seven boxes of fireworks sent over by the imperial Mu residence, each stick as thick as a young child's arm, which gave off bright and colourful displays when set off, and Fei Liu spent at least an hour every night setting them off, so that before new year's eve had arrived, he had already used them all, and when Li Gang sent someone out to buy more, they discovered that the imperial Mu residence had sent over special imperial fireworks, which could not be found in the markets.

And so, to placate Fei Liu, the first letter the barely recovered qilin prodigy wrote when he finally rose from his bed was to Nihuang, asking her to buy ten more boxes of fireworks on his behalf.

The day after he sent out the letter, the carriage bearing the fireworks arrived at the back door of the Su manor. Fei Liu was delighted, and Mei Changsu too was pleased.

This was because, after he had written to Nihuang, it was really only the imperial Mu residence who sent over fireworks, and neither Prince Yu nor any other residences tried to curry favour by doing the same, which demonstrated how strictly Nihuang governed her household, as evidently, gossip and information did not spread easily without her knowledge and consent.

New Year's Eve finally arrived. That long-awaited sacrificial ceremony, which had stirred up so much conflict both open and hidden in the preceding days, proceeded smoothly and without the slightest complication, and aside from the Empress' absence and Consort Yue's demotion, did not vary greatly from the previous year's ceremony.

After the ceremony, the Emperor returned to the palace and began the process of bestowing the new year's gifts, as the princes, the imperial household, and the court ministers all knelt outside Yinan gate to receive his favour. In accordance with the usual conventions, the Crown Prince would receive the highest level of honour, followed by Prince Yu, and then followed by the other princes, with the remaining members of the imperial household and the court ministers receiving gifts befitting their respecting ranks. This year was no exception, except for the fact that, in addition to receiving the same gifts as the other princes, Prince Jing was also gifted with a

silver suit of armour. But his recent performance had been very good, and this additional honour still did not bring him anywhere near the level of Prince Yu's prestige, and so this did not end up attracting much attention.

The new year's feast that night was laid out in Xianan Hall, and the Emperor went first to Cian Palace to pay his respects to the Grand Empress Dowager before returning to the hall to celebrate the new year with his concubines, consorts, princes, and imperial household. He also made arrangements to send a portion of the dishes to the manors of some of his most important ministers. To receive the gift of a dish from the Emperor's table on New Year's Eve was a sign of supreme imperial favour, and only the noblest and wisest of the officials could hope for such an honour.

No one could have known that this 'dish-giving' ritual would lead to so much trouble.

Confetti littered the ground and fireworks lit the sky over the capital city on this new year's eve, as families gathered in celebration, and the glow of lamp-light filled every window. It was certainly lively, but the atmosphere was very different from the night of the lantern festival, as this time, everyone gathered with his family at home, and aside from a few children lighting firecrackers outside the doors of their homes, there was no one out on the street.

The guards in charge of delivering the gifted dishes were dressed in yellow and departed the palace in groups of five, riding through the deserted streets and spreading out as they headed towards their destinations – the manors that had been selected for this great honour.

Besides the guard holding the case of food in the center, the four guards around him carried bright, coloured lanterns that were specially made in the palace, and huge red lanterns also lit the sides of the main streets. But compared to the dazzling sunlight of the day, the light of these lanterns still could not illuminate every dark corner, and the tall palace walls cast looming shadows over the paths on which they rode.

The danger came from this darkness, and the whirling shadows were so quick that even its victims could not see where that fatal flash of a blade had come from, nor where it disappeared to.

The bodies fell heavily to the ground, but the horses kept riding forwards, and the blood was left to cool in the cold winter's night, the weak cries drowned out in the noise of the firecrackers, unheard and unnoticed.

The dazzling fireworks spiraled into the sky. It was nearing midnight, the point at which the old and new years met, and even the guards of the palace night watch slowed their steps and turned their gazes to the blossoming flowers opening up all



over the night sky, as the racket of firecrackers in the city neared the height of its frenzy.

Mei Changsu took hold of a long stick of incense and personally lit the largest firework, which Fei Liu had saved especially for him, and a streak of light flew across the night, burrowing deep into the darkness before erupting into glorious colour, lighting up half the sky in its splendour.

“Happy new year! Happy new year!” The cries rang out in the Su manor, and even the normally composed Li Gang produced a horn from somewhere and blew on it loudly, as a few of the younger guards began beating on drums and gongs.

“How appropriate, this is indeed the time for horns and drums, if I were to pick up the zither now, it would ruin the atmosphere,” Mei Changsu said, smiling as he returned to his chair on the porch and picked up a few chestnuts, peeling them idly as he gazed into the sky lit with fireworks.

As the midnight bell finally ceased its tolling, everyone gathered in the courtyard, and even Aunt Ji came hurrying out from the kitchen with a big ladle in her hand, as they all lined up behind Li Gang and took their turns coming before their Chief to make their new year’s bows, receiving a red packet in return. Most of them were Mei Changsu’s close bodyguards and had accompanied him for many years, but there were a few who had been in the capital all along and so had never received anything in person from the Chief himself, and afterwards, they wandered around speechless with excitement, earning themselves a fond head-rub and a teasing by their seniors, as everyone gathered around, laughing and joking.

From his time in Lang province, Fei Liu had grown accustomed to being the last in line (because he was the youngest), and now he came forward, kicked aside the cushion on the ground, and knelt directly onto the green-bricked ground, calling loudly, “Happy new year!”

“Be good this year!” Mei Changsu smiled, and placed a red packet into his hands. Although Fei Liu did not understand what this red-wrapped package was for, he knew that everyone was happy when they received it every year, and so obligingly gave a big smile in response.

After receiving their new year’s greetings, Mei Changsu rose and went over to Physician Yan to pay his own respects. The old physician looked as if he was still angry at him, and his face tightened at first, but even he was not immune to the joy of the new year, and finally, he puffed on his beard and smiled, patting Mei Changsu’s shoulder. “You’re one to talk, you have to be good this year too!”

“Yes,” Mei Changsu held back a smile, and when he turned back to the courtyard, he discovered that it had dissolved into a chaos of mutual bowing and shouts of new year’s greetings.

“Time for dumplings! All you young lads, come and help carry them!” Aunt Ji called from the doorway, and immediately, the crowd flowed towards her. Mei Changsu took Physician Yan by the arm, and the two of them went inside first with Fei Liu, where several large tables had been set up, on which jugs of wine and dishes heaped high with food had been laid out. Steaming plates of dumplings were carried over to the tables, their fragrance filling the room.

Aunt Ji had prepared small plates filled with green onion and vinegar for everyone to put their dumplings in, but the young men pushed aside the little plates and picked up large bowls instead, and Fei Liu, eyes wide, copied them and exchanged his plate for a bowl.

“It looks like only the two of us old men have any manners,” Mei Changsu murmured jokingly to Physician Yan, laughing when he was poked in the side by a sharp finger. He lifted his chopsticks and dipped them in the plate, and at this signal, the crowd leapt forward and quickly demolished the first round of dumplings.

“Why the rush, eh?” Although Aunt Ji’s tone was scolding, she was smiling broadly, happy that her dumplings were in such great demand, and brought out the second round of dumplings straight from the pot, pouring them out onto the empty plates. She carried the two feet wide iron pot, filled to the brim with boiling water and dumplings, without any difficulty, and in any other situation, this feat would have caused jaws to drop in shock, but today, everyone only had eyes for the dumplings themselves, and some even began wielding their chopsticks as swords as they fought over the dwindling pile.

“At least they still know how to take care of their elders.” Physician Yan watched this pack of wolves and tigers, laughing as he shook his head. There was a plate of dumplings before him and Mei Changsu, so they did not need to join in the battle. But as they sat back and watched, it did rather seem like the plates of dumplings on the other tables smelled even better.

“Come, Fei Liu, have this one.” Mei Changsu took a dumpling at random from the plate before him and slid it into Fei Liu’s bowl. Although the youth was second to none when he went to grab for the dumplings, he was afraid to eat them when they were too hot, and so ate very slowly, and after two rounds, he had still only had about ten, and now as they waited for the third round, he could only stare glumly at the empty plates, as everyone around him tried to suppress their smiles.

“The ones on the Chief’s plate aren’t hot any more, Fei Liu, you can eat them in one bite!” Uncle Ji urged.

Fei Liu lifted his bowl obediently and swept the dumpling into his mouth, but he had just bitten down when his eyes widened, his mouth working furiously for a few

moments before he spat out a shining copper coin, which dropped onto the table with a loud plink.

The room erupted into cheerful laughter as many hands suddenly reached towards Fei Liu, their owners crying, "Touch for luck, touch for luck!"

The youth didn't know what was happening and so his instincts took over, and he flew up onto the rafters, immediately prompting a hectic chase, which could not be halted even with the appearance of the third round of Aunt Ji's dumplings. But in the narrow house, although there were many people flying about, not a single ornament was destroyed, and no one succeeded in so much as grasping a corner of Fei Liu's robes. Finally, Mei Changsu stretched out a hand and beckoned the youth over to his side, and held his hand out for everyone to touch.

"Have to touch?" Fei Liu looked as if he was learning a whole new rule, his face full of astonishment.

"That's right, our Fei Liu found the copper coin, which means he is the luckiest person this year, and so everyone wants to touch you for luck."

Fei Liu cocked his head in thought, and suddenly said, "Didn't!"

In the entire house, only Mei Changsu understood what he meant, and he laughed before answering, "Last year, when Lin Chen gege spat out the copper coin, you didn't touch him, is that right?"

"Right!"

"Then it was Lin Chen gege's fault, and next time we see him, our Fei Liu can go and touch him to get it back!" Mei Changsu suggested seriously, and everyone in the room who knew Lin Chen was already clutching their bellies and rolling on the floor in laughter.

Fei Lou thought about it seriously for a moment and couldn't help shuddering, and shook his head, saying, "Don't want it!"

"Hurry and finish the dumplings, they're getting cold!" Aunt Ji swatted at a few of the young men beside her, shooing them all back to the table, and exchanged Mei Changsu's plate with a set of hot dumplings, urging, "Chief, have a few more."

"That's about enough," Physician Yan stopped her. "Aunt Ji, bring in the congee, Master Su can have a bowl before he retires, although it is the new year, you must not stay up too late."

Mei Changsu was indeed a bit tired, and so smiled in agreement, slowly finished his bowl of hot congee, and returned to his room to sleep. It was entering the early

hours of the morning, but the clamor in the city had not died down, and in the excitement, no one noticed the delicate flakes of snow that had begun drifting down from the cold night sky.

## BOOK FOUR

### THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

#### CHAPTER 67

##### *New Year's Greetings*

On the morning of the first day of the new year, the cheerful atmosphere still lingered in the air, and after he got up, Mei Changsu personally selected a lotus-coloured new robe for Fei Liu to wear, and matched it to a light yellow hair tie, a white fox-fur scarf, and a yellow jade belt, dressing up the youth beautifully.

“Fei Liu, Su gege’s going to take you out to pay some new year’s visits, alright?”

“Alright!”

Li Gang came in from the courtyard. “Chief, the palanquin is ready, are we leaving now?”

Mei Changsu looked at him. “Li dage, you will stay in the manor today, you don’t need to go out with me.”

“Chief...” Li Gang stared blankly at him.

“I am keeping you here because I have things for you to do. I don’t usually go out, so most people will think I have stayed home, and come here to pay their new year’s visits. All others aside, if Prince Yu came knocking at our door, you are the only one I trust to receive him on my behalf. I leave this in your hands.”

“I will follow your orders.” Li Gang hurriedly bowed. “Is there some particular reason for Chief going out on purpose to avoid Prince Yu? Please instruct me so I may make adequate preparations.”

“There is no particular reason,” Mei Changsu said indifferently. “I just don’t want to see him on a day like this. Drinking poison is uncomfortable at the best of times, and this is the new year, I want to be in a good mood.”

“Yes, sir....” A flash of sadness passed over Li Gang’s gaze. “I understand. Don’t worry, Chief, I will take good care of the manor in your absence.” Mei Changsu stretched out a hand and patted his sturdy shoulder gently, then turned, a light smile on his lips as he said, “Fei Liu, let’s go.”

“Alright!”

On the morning of the first day of the new year, the streets were scattered with the torn fragments of ceremonial burning paper. Although many people were out on the streets, there was not a peddler in sight, and most of the shops were barred shut, except for a few stalls selling candles. Mei Changsu’s little palanquin wound through the crowds inconspicuously, finally arriving at a manor half a city away from his own.

Compared to their imperial commander’s residence in Yunnan, the imperial Mu residence in the capital was a little smaller, but because it had been built by imperial order in one of the earlier dynasties, it was still very grand. The guards in front of the manor wore the uniform of the cavalry, standing rigidly up to attention, staring straight ahead with stiff alertness.

When Mei Changsu’s visiting card was delivered into the manor, although it was not ignored because of its plain appearance, it nonetheless disappeared quickly amongst the pile of cards from high-ranking officials who had come to pay their respects on the first day of the new year, and was slipped in between two similar cards in the stack handed to the little lord, who invited each person in one by one, offering him tea and chatting with him for a little while before sending him away. This went on for almost an hour before he finally came to the card bearing the name “Su Zhe”.

At first, Mu Qing stared at the card, turning it this way and that, but he finally decided that there was really only one person in this world who would send him a card with the words “Su Zhe” written on it, without any other title or explanation of identity.

“Little lord?” The steward looked uneasily at the changing expressions passing over his master’s face. “You do not want to see this one?”

Mu Qing lifted his head dazedly and glanced at him, then his lips twitched and he suddenly leapt to his feet, shouting “Jiejie!” loudly as he ran towards the inner courtyard.

Moments later, the herald of the Mu residence, Wei Jingan came out and brought all the other guests into a side hall where he took over the task of entertaining them,

and Princess Nihuang and Mu Qing personally came to the outer gates to receive Mei Changsu, who was falling asleep on his palanquin.

“Mister Su, my deepest apologies, I didn’t....” Nihuang began apologetically, but was stopped by Su Zhe’s smile.

“It was only a little wait, no matter, and anyway I have much time at leisure today.” Mei Changsu said reassuringly as he walked into the little parlour, side by side with Nihuang, and sat down in the guest seat. Mu Qing saw Fei Liu standing beside Mei Changsu and hurriedly ordered for a chair to be brought for him, but Fei Liu was not willing to sit, and after standing there for a little while, disappeared to who knew where.

“Fei Liu finds this place new, so he will run around to look and play,” Mei Changsu explained when he saw Mu Qing look around him in surprise, guessing what he was thinking. He added, “Would that be any trouble?”

“No, no, let him go wherever he likes.” Because Mu Qing was similar in age to Fei Liu, he had always been curious about this young bodyguard. “He is so quick, I couldn’t even see how he left.”

“So now you’re envious of other people? Why didn’t you listen when I told you to go practice your martial arts? I told you you were being lazy,” Nihuang scolded.

“Jiejie,” Mu Qing wheedled, “I’m not lazy, I’m just a slow learner....”

“It is said that diligence is the cure for clumsiness, since you know your weakness, all the more reason to work harder to compensate for it.”

Mu Qing scowled. “Jiejie, it’s the new year and there’s a guest here, don’t scold me....”

Mei Changsu looked at his little Nihuang, who had grown up into such a fierce older sister, and who was now even teaching her younger brother, and a mix of grief and amusement rose in his heart as he broke in to say, “The Southern border is peaceful at present, so Lord Mu does not need to go out to battle, and you can take your time refining your martial arts, it is more important to study military command and strategy as well as the ruling of the South.”

“Did you hear that? Remember well Mister Su’s words. If you keep acting like you haven’t grown up, how can I hand Yunnan over to you in the future?”

“The Princess does not need to worry,” Mei Changsu said soothingly. “Lord Mu only lacks training, he already possesses the air of a general. Why not take advantage of the peace at the borders and gradually transition some of the ruling duties to him, and in time, I am sure he will be an outstanding lord.”

“Jiejie has already given me many things to do. Like the guests who came today – I was the one who met them all, that’s why you were accidentally overlooked.” Mu Qing laughed, then turned to Nihuang. “Jiejie, you spent so long back there, have you finished making them?”

Mei Changsu couldn’t help asking curiously, “Making what?”

“Jiejie is personally making new year’s cakes for us to eat.” Mu Qing answered. “She never used to enter the kitchens, but I guess she sees that I’ve grown up, so these past two years, jiejie has started learning to cook.”

Mei Changsu smiled. He knew very well why the mighty lady commander of the Southern border had begun trying her hand at the culinary arts, and although things were still slightly awkward between them at the moment, his happiness for her was completely sincere.

“In that case, I have come just in time, how could I miss the opportunity to taste the Princess’ handiwork?” He turned to Nihuang and lowered his voice. “Don’t worry, I know his tastes, I can give you some suggestions.”

Nihuang lowered her eyes, a complicated mix of feelings clouding her gaze, but she knew this was not the time to argue about certain matters, so she only smiled and rose, saying, “Then I must go, there is still one more step, I will go finish. Xiao Qing, take good care of Mister Su.”

“Alright.” Mu Qing waited for his sister to leave, then waved all the servants away before shifting to a seat beside Su Zhe to say quietly, “I always thought that person was you? Is it really not you?”

Mei Changsu was taken aback. “What? The lord has never seen that person?”

“No, when they went off to war, they said I was too young, and left me behind to look after our home, and it was only afterwards when I heard Zhangsun talking that I found out jiejie had been in such great danger, and that such a person had appeared. Although he has saved our Southern border army, he actually dared to run from a goddess like my sister, so he can’t amount to much.”

“The lord’s words are too harsh. Each person has his own difficulties, who is anyone else to judge? He is one of my closest friends, I know him very well.....the lord does not need to worry, he is a kind and honest man, loyal, righteous, and brave, as well as a rare prodigy of a marines officer. He has a bright nature, and a dignified and handsome appearance. He is certainly worth the Princess’ regard and admiration.”



“But why did he run?” Mu Qing was still pouting. “He’s your subordinate, isn’t he? Tell him to come to the capital....”

“Lord Mu, this is your sister’s private matter, she will know how to handle it, you only have to support her decision, and as for the rest.....do not interfere too much.”

Mu Qing scratched his head. “I know all this, but I can’t help caring about it.....actually, there are plenty of admirable men in our manor, why doesn’t jiejie like one of them, like Zhangsun....”

“Don’t say anymore,” Mei Changsu reminded him softly. “The Princess is coming.”

Mu Qing jumped up in fright. “Jie.....jie, jiejie!”

“Are you saying bad things about me? Why do you look so scared?” Nihuang, leading two servant girls bearing boxes of food towards them, eyed her younger brother suspiciously.

“No.....how would I dare.....”

Mei Changsu couldn’t help silently praising Nihuang’s deft and thoughtful handling of the situation. If the Princess’ handmade new year cakes were only offered to Su Zhe, it could easily lead to gossip and speculation, but now as she invited all the other generals of the imperial Mu residence over to join them, it became just another new year’s celebration.

In a little while, the five generals and two historians of the Southern border army who had entered the capital with their commander followed Mu Qing over to pay their greetings, and the little parlour rapidly grew crowded. But although there were many people, Nihuang had made two full boxes of the cakes, and so there was certainly enough to go around.

“Mister Su, please.”

Mei Changsu smiled as he took a piece, then turned his head and called, “Fei Liu, come try some.”

“Fei Liu’s here?” Mu Qing quickly raised his head, looking around, but a blur flew past him and then the handsome youth was already seated by Mei Changsu’s side, reaching out to take a piece of cake from the box and placing it into his mouth.

“Everyone, please, help yourselves.” Nihuang smiled, “How do they taste?”

By this time, everyone had tried a piece, and the compliments came trickling in: “The Princess is a great cook....”

“Very good....”

“The taste is exquisite...”

“Truly sweet but not too rich....”

“Crisp and delicious....”

Amongst the words of praise, Fei Liu suddenly interjected coldly, “Tastes bad!”

The entire room froze, and even Mu Qing began sweating, not knowing what to say to lighten the mood, afraid to lift their heads to look at the Princess’ expression.

But this awkward state did not last for long, as Mei Changsu snorted and began to laugh, one hand covering his mouth, until he started coughing. Following closely behind him was Princess Nihuang herself, who laughed so hard she bent over double, and everyone else exchanged a glance before following suit, so that soon, the room was filled with their laughter, the earlier embarrassment having dissipated completely.

“Finally, someone speaks the truth,” Nihuang wiped at the tears in her eyes. “I tried some myself before we came out, and I was just thinking, if you all kept raining down compliments like that, then I’ll make them for you every day!”

“It’s really not so bad, there was only a little too much sugar, they look very nice anyway,” Mei Changsu said encouragingly. “You will find the right amount with a bit more practice.”

Mu Qing was about to chime in when he suddenly saw Wei Jingan hurrying towards them, his face very serious, and was taken aback, asking, “Old Wei, what’s wrong?”

“Princess, little lord,” Wei Jingan cupped his hands and bowed, then continued lowly, “I have just discovered that something happened last night just outside the walls of the palace.”

## CHAPTER 68

### *Murder on New Year's Eve*

“Last night? But last night was New Year’s Eve, what could possibly happen?” Mu Qing asked, jumping to his feet.

“Does the little lord know about His Majesty the Emperor’s custom of bestowing twelve new year’s dishes to different houses?”

“Yes, we received a bowl of pigeon’s eggs.....couldn’t the Emperor have sent us something better.....”

“Xiao Qing!” Nihuang said reprovingly. “You’re always fooling around and making jokes, let Herald Wei finish.”

Mu Qing shrank back, not daring to say another word.

“The new year’s dishes are delivered by internal guards, five to a group,” Wei Jingan continued. “Last night, naturally twelve such groups were sent out. But by sunrise, only eleven had returned. When they received the news, the Imperial Guard and the Capital Patrol set out together, and discovered five bodies just outside the palace walls.”

“Bodies? They were killed?” Nihuang raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, the assassins were extremely skilled, and killed them with one stroke, so that the expressions of the dead looked peaceful, their clothes clean and undisturbed, with no sign of a struggle, as if their lives had been extinguished in mid-air.”

“This kind of skill must be the work of jianghu experts.” Nihuang thought for a moment, then asked, “Is there any direction of inquiry? Was there no clue or sign left behind at the scene?”

As soon as these questions left her lips, she saw Mei Changsu solemnly hold up a hand to stop her.

“Mister Su....”

“We may leave the matter of the assassins to a later time,” Mei Changsu’s gaze fell onto Wei Jingan’s face. “Tell me first about Commander General Meng, how is he?”

Wei Jingan saw that Su Zhe had immediately grasped the reason he had hurried over to give this report, and a look of admiration appeared over his face. “Commander General Meng is not doing so well. The incident took place on the eve of the new year, just outside the palace, virtually at the feet of the Emperor, and the murdered were imperial messengers and internal guards, so it is indeed a severe provocation of the imperial might and power, and His Majesty was livid when he heard the news. Because the events took place on the near shore of the river, just outside the palace wall, it was still within the territory guarded by the Imperial Guard, so Commander Meng must bear the responsibility for the incident. His Majesty accused him of neglecting his duty and failing to provide sufficient guards and protection, leading to such an inauspicious murder on the eve of the New Year, and sentenced him to twenty lashes by the rod on the spot...”

“Lashes by the rod?” Mei Changsu’s eyebrows furrowed. “Still as ruthless as ever.....what happened after that?”

“He ordered Commander Meng to solve the case and capture the persons responsible within thirty days, or else.....there would be further punishment.”

“What is the Emperor thinking?” Mu Qing had leapt to his feet again, unable to help himself. “Commander Meng is loyal and devoted, his work in guarding the palace all these years has not gone unnoticed, and even if he is to blame for these events, the Emperor cannot vent all his anger onto him, how can he be so unfair...”

“Xiao Qing!” Nihuang’s voice was stern. “You presume to doubt your lord, do you think before you speak?”

“There are no outsiders here....” Mu Qing mumbled, and then swallowed the rest of his words.

Nihuang concentrated for a moment, then turned to look at Mei Changsu, who was sitting quietly in deep thought, rubbing his forehead, and didn’t dare disturb him, but turned again and said in a low voice, “Herald Wei, please continue to investigate this matter, and if there are any new developments, come report them immediately.”

“Understood.”

“Generals, please feel free to take your leave, this news will spread soon enough, but I do not want to hear anyone in the imperial Mu residence gossiping or discussing these events. I must depend on you all to restrain your subordinates.”

“We will follow your orders!”

“Xiao Qing, go back to your room right now and face the walls and meditate for four hours. How many times do I have to scold you before you change that reckless, impatient temper of yours?”

“Jiejie....”

“Go!”

“Yes....”

In the blink of an eye, the crowd in the room had receded away like the tide, and finally, Nihuang walked slowly back to Mei Changsu’s side and knelt down in front of him, asking in a low voice, “Lin Shu gege, you and Commander Meng are very close, is that right?”

Mei Changsu raised his eyes and nodded lightly, “Yes.”

“Do you want Nihuang to go into the palace to beg for mercy on his behalf?”

Mei Changsu sighed lightly and shook his head. “This is not necessary for now. I am not worried about his current condition, but for how these events will play out in the future....”

“In the future?”

“Although the imperial power is difficult to fathom, the Emperor is not a foolish man, and he will not remove Meng Zhi from his post over the Imperial Guard and his power over the palace’s protection because of this one case alone. He may scold him and sentence him to a lashing, but he is only venting his rage, and Commander Meng is able to endure this. Unfortunately, this beating is not the end, and if he does not solve the case within thirty days, or, if new cases continue to occur in the future, then the Emperor’s regard for Meng Zhi will become lower and lower, and therein lies the true danger....”

“New cases?” Nihuang was astonished. “You’re saying there will be more....”

“This is only my feeling.” Mei Changsu reached out a hand and pulled Nihuang up to sit by his side, explaining, “Think about it, there must be a motive behind any murder, so why would anyone want to kill five internal guards? A crime of passion is certainly impossible, and as for revenge? What kind of great enmity could an ordinary internal guard create, that would get him killed so publicly just outside the palace walls? Robbery? They would not have much money or any valuables on their persons, and their clothes were not disturbed..... After eliminating the most common motives for murder, there is one more reason for killing in the world of jianghu, and

that is the fight between experts, where each tries to elevate his name and reputation, but these five internal guards were outsiders without any reputation, and did not have any martial art skills to speak of..... so in the end, the reason they were killed cannot be related to their persons, but rather to their positions.”

Nihuang nodded as she listened. “That is to say, the assassins only wanted to murder internal guards sent out of the palace by the Emperor, but didn’t care which guard they killed.”

“That should be the case.” Mei Changsu was thinking aloud. “But why did they want to kill imperial messengers? To infuriate the Emperor, as a show of force against him? To test the power of the Imperial Guard, as a preparation for further action? Or...was it all along a direct blow towards Meng dage, to shake the Emperor’s trust in him..... no matter which of these was the true goal, they will not stop at killing these five guards.”

“But...just from the information we have at present, there is no way to predict the true motive of the assassins?”

“Nihuang, you must remember, if you do not know in which direction your enemy is going to fire his arrow, you must first protect that which is most crucial to yourself. As long as you do not die by the first stroke, there will be time to take care of other matters, and to rectify them slowly.” Mei Changsu smiled faintly. “Like now, we must first protect Meng dage, and once we have more information, we can consider how to retaliate. Besides, as long as Meng dage still commands the Imperial Guard, nothing worse than this can happen in the palace.”

Nihuang thought it over, and gradually, her eyes brightened. “I understand. We first presume that their target is Commander Meng, in order to verify what our next step should be.”

“Very good,” Mei Changsu smiled in praise. “From the current situation, the murder of these five guards does not really affect the safety of the palace, so their most likely goal is to weaken the Emperor’s trust in the Imperial Guard, and the goal behind weakening the Imperial Guard is of course to control the palace. So if we extrapolate one step further, the people who want to control the palace must naturally be those closest to the center of power.”

“The Crown Prince and Prince Yu....” Nihuang murmured.

“Yes, one of the two. But Prince Yu does not have anyone in the military, so even if he brings down Meng Zhi, he would not be able to find anyone he trusts to take over the position. As for the Crown Prince....” Mei Changsu glanced meaningfully at Nihuang. “He does have someone....”

“The Marquis of Ning, Xie Yu!” Nihuang’s palms came together as she suddenly understood. “Xie Yu is a first-ranked military marquis, is beloved of the Emperor, holds the Capital Patrol in his hands, and has plenty of people in his command, so if the Imperial Guard is suppressed, or if Commander Meng loses his position, he is the only one who can take over....”

“This is the logical conclusion. But.....the Emperor is not so confused yet, he has an exceedingly great amount of trust in Meng Zhi, and no matter how much he shouts and rages, he is still far from stripping him of his position....” Mei Changsu’s brow wrinkled. “And so I think, if this is truly Xie Yu’s work, he will definitely have other plans in store....”

“Would it be as you said just now, creating an incessant downpour of new cases, murders every day, so that the Emperor will lose his trust in the Imperial Guard’s abilities?”

“From this day forward, Meng Zhi will certainly reorganize his troops and tighten his control, so another murder will be difficult to accomplish....”

“But in such a large palace, there are always neglected places, and sometimes, it is simply impossible to defend against people as malicious as Xie Yu.”

“You have a point....” Mei Changsu closed his eyes, resting his head on the back of his chair as he murmured, “But if I were Xie Yu, I would not stop at something as simple as murder.....if I were to remove the Emperor’s faith in Meng Zhi, then I must target the Emperor’s weakness....”

Mei Changsu’s eyes flew open, his dark pupils staring for a moment before he suddenly rose from his chair.

“Lin Shu gege?”

“The Emperor’s weakness is his suspicion!” Mei Changsu took a deep breath and then spoke quickly. “The reason he trusts Meng Zhi so much is because he is certain that Meng Zhi has always been completely loyal to him, and has never had private relations with those two little masters. But if, at this crucial moment, Xie Yu tricks Prince Yu into going before the Emperor to plead for Meng Zhi, then the situation will deteriorate.”

“Would Prince Yu fall into his trap so easily?”

“Prince Yu is too desperate for a sword. Ever since the Duke of Qing fell, he does not have a single shred of military power in his grasp. Even if everyone knows he is on good terms with Prince Jing now, it is still only a symbolic support, but if he could attain the support of the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, he would be laughing in his sleep.” Mei Changsu’s brows were furrowing tighter and tighter. “To

trick him into doing this is not difficult at all, you only have to find a way to get the news to him, saying that Commander Meng was scolded and beaten by the Emperor because this murder case took place within the palace boundaries, and that His Highness the Crown Prince hurried over in secret to protest against the unfairness of the treatment, and then do you think Prince Yu would be content to sit aside and let the Crown Prince steal away this precious means of support? He would definitely rush into the palace to defend Meng Zhi before the Emperor, so that, even if he cannot obtain the Commander General's gratitude, at least he will not let him be seized by the Crown Prince...."

As Nihuang listened, her face gradually paled. "With His Majesty's suspicious nature, and with the way the wind is blowing, as soon as he sees Prince Yu defending Commander Meng so fiercely, he will immediately suspect that there is some deep relationship between them. And if the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, who is responsible for protecting the palace, has any kind of relationship with a prince who is fighting for the throne, then this is something the Emperor would definitely not tolerate."

"This is a ruthless game of chess, and the target of the pieces is the Emperor's heart." Mei Changsu gritted his teeth. "Xie Yu is actually capable of such a move.....Nihuang, keep an eye on the situation, I must go immediately to the imperial Yu residence."

"Yes." Nihuang knew of Mei Changsu's eloquence, and knew that stopping Prince Yu from falling into this trap without leaving a trace of his own involvement would not be a difficult task for him, and so did not ask any further, but accompanied him to the main gates, watching as he hurried onto his palanquin before turning to return to the study, summoning Wei Jingan over to discuss how best to conduct the next steps of their investigation.

But neither Nihuang nor Mei Changsu could have predicted that, although they had already received the news very quickly, and had analyzed the situation and predicted the actions of everyone involved with perfect accuracy, they were still one step too slow.

One hour before Mei Changsu arrived at his manor, Prince Yu had already left for the palace.



## CHAPTER 69

### *Gaining Trust*

Mei Changsu had initially planned to first persuade Prince Yu not to plead for Meng Zhi, and then to make a trip to the Xuanjing Bureau to ask Xia Dong whether the Emperor intended to have the Xuanjing Bureau assist in the investigation. But now that he had arrived a step too late, and Prince Yu had likely already reached the palace, he feared any move he made would be seen as acting on Prince Yu's behalf, so the best option was to hold still for now and watch how things developed.

On the road back to the Su manor, Mei Changsu sat with his eyes closed on his palanquin, re-examining the current situation from every angle. Prince Yu entering the palace to defend Meng Zhi would certainly raise the Emperor's suspicions towards the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, and although he would not express this sentiment in his actions for now, at the very least, the Emperor would not allow Meng Zhi to continue the investigation of the murder of the internal guards alone, and would definitely send the Xuanjing Officers to investigate the case simultaneously. Since Xie Yu had made his move knowing full well that the Xuanjing Officers would become involved sooner or later, that meant he was very confident that he had not left any evidence behind at the scene of the crime. As a first-ranked military official, even if Xia Dong suspected him, she could not report him to the Emperor without proof or evidence. Besides, in the current delicate atmosphere of the fight for the throne, any accusation without proof or evidence would be called out by the opposite side as "purposeful framing", and would not only fail to attain its goal, it would even have the opposite effect.

So now, the most crucial step was to find evidence, but this was extremely difficult. The assassins' work had been swift and clean, without leaving behind any hint of their identities, and naturally no proof could be found there, not to mention that the murder had taken place on New Year's Eve, and the roads surrounding the palace walls had been empty, and so there had been no witnesses. Aside from assuming that Xie Yu was behind it all and by extension carefully investigating Zhuo Dingfeng, there were practically no leads to be followed.

Mei Changsu let out a deep sigh, and feeling that the palanquin was a little stuffy, he reached out a hand to draw aside the curtain, intending to let in some fresh air.

It was near noon, and there were many people out on the streets, most of them hurrying about dressed in new clothes for the new year, gifts in their hands and bright smiles on their faces, as if all worries and troubles had been put aside because it was the first day of the new year.

Mei Changsu smiled ruefully and was just about to lower the curtain when he suddenly caught sight of a grey-robed youth.

The youth, around twelve to thirteen years old, was average in height and dressed plainly, and would ordinarily not have caught Mei Changsu's attention. But what made him stand out from the crowd was that, as soon as he caught sight of the little green palanquin, he immediately stood off to the side of the road, lifting his arms and bending over to bow respectfully in the palanquin's direction.

"Stop." Mei Changsu hurriedly ordered the two guards who were serving as his palanquin bearers to stop at the side of the road, and then pulled open the curtain and leaned out to wave at the youth.

The youth was taken aback for a moment, then immediately hurried over at a half-run and knelt and pressed his head to the ground, bowing to Mei Changsu as he said lowly, "I bring New Year's greetings to Mister Su, and wish him great fortune and good health in the coming year."

"Oh, it's Shuhong, have you come out by yourself?"

"Yes."

Shuhong was one of the two criminal slaves who had been rescued from the Secluded Court along with Tingsheng. At the time, when the three were being taught the martial arts steps they needed to fight Baili Qi, Fei Liu was the one who had taken over the majority of the training, and Mei Changsu had spent most of his energy on Tingsheng, and had not paid much attention to the other two children. In addition, Shuhong had a quiet character and did not speak much, and since he had entered the imperial Jing residence with its structured but comfortable lifestyle, where he was provided with abundant food and clothing, he had grown tall and strong, and so Mei Changsu had not immediately recognized him.

"I hear Tingsheng is ill, is he feeling better?"

"The doctor said the cold energy has already dissipated, and he will be able to leave his bed after two more doses of medicine."

Mei Changsu nodded. He had initially planned to have the three children over to the Su residence on New Year's Eve, but the plans had been cancelled because Tingsheng had fallen sick and couldn't get out of bed. But he knew very well that Prince Jing would take good care of Tingsheng, and so had not been worried, and now

that he heard what Shuhong had to say, he knew it was likely just an ordinary bout of illness.

“Did you come out to buy medicine for Tingsheng?” Mei Changsu asked, looking at the medicine bag in Shuhong’s hands.

“Yes.”

“The three of you went through difficult times together in the palace, so you must take care of each other, and support each other.” Mei Changsu reached out to pat Shuhong’s head, saying gently, “You are two years older than both of them, so you must bear the responsibility of a dage.”

“Ng!” Shuhong nodded firmly, his gaze filled with admiration. “Mister Su, I have been studying and training hard, and in the future, whether on the battlefield or in the scholarly arts, I will not let you down.”

“Very good, boys should have ambitions and heroic spirits, in the future, it will be up to you to serve our Emperor and our country,” Mei Changsu said encouragingly. “It’s cold, hurry and go back. Remember to take good care of Tingsheng.”

“Yes!” Shuhong answered as he retreated to one side, then stood still at attention. Mei Changsu saw how serious this child was about etiquette and courtesy, and knew that he would not leave if he himself did not leave first, and so smiled at him and then ordered the guards to continue on their way.

When the palanquin stopped in the inner courtyard of the Su manor, Li Gang came forward to support him, asking, “Chief, why have you come back so early? Prince Yu has not come yet....”

“I know, he will not come today.” Mei Changsu hurried indoors, pulling off his cloak as he walked. Although the house was empty, the brazier burned brightly, spreading warmth through the room in preparation for the return of its master. Mei Changsu sat down onto the soft chair, and Li Gang was already ordering people to bring in hot towels and freshly-boiled soup.

“Has Tong Lu come today?”

“Yes. He wanted to wait for the Chief, but I didn’t know you would be back so soon, so I sent him away.....does the Chief wish to see him?”

“No matter. Tell the Heaven’s Secret sect of our alliance to find out, as soon as possible, which martial arts experts Zhuo Dingfeng has had contact with recently and which among them have entered the capital, and tell Mister Shisan to closely monitor all of the swords-masters in the capital, no matter what sects they belong to. And put

a surveillance around the Xie manor, I want Zhuo Dingfeng and his eldest son Zhuo Qingyao's every move reported back to me immediately. Understand?"

"I understand." Li Gang had an exceptional memory, and he fluidly repeated the instructions once before immediately leaving to carry them out.

Mei Chang leaned back in his chair, picking up the visiting cards on the little table beside him and flipping through them absently. They likely belonged to some of the officials in Prince Yu's camp who had sent people over to pay the required respects. Likely, Li Gang had felt it unnecessary to report these, and so had placed them to one side for Mei Changsu to peruse at his leisure.

Fei Liu appeared noiselessly into the room, a snowy white messenger pigeon on his arm, his handsome little face pulled tight as he came to Mei Changsu's side and handed the pigeon to him before dropping to the ground beside him and burying his face into Su gege's leg.

Mei Changsu smiled as he stroked the youth's neck, then he took out a roll of paper from a tube on the pigeon's foot and unfurled it. A gleam of light flashed across his eyes, but in the next instant, he resumed his deep, calm gaze as he casually tossed the paper into the brazier.

The little pigeon was startled by the flame, and cocked its head as it cried out, "Gu, gu." Mei Changsu patted its little head with his fingertips as he said, "Don't cry, Fei Liu has been unhappy ever since he saw you, if you keep crying, he will pluck out your feathers."

"Don't any more!" Fei Liu protested, raising his head suddenly.

"But our Fei Liu wants to pluck them very much, it is only that he does not dare." Mei Changsu pinched his cheek. "Last time you were locked in the dark room, wasn't that because you hid one of Lin Chen gege's messenger pigeons?"

"Won't any more!" Fei Liu's cheeks were puffed in anger.

"I know you will not do so again," Mei Changsu praised him with a smile. "You were very good today, even though you were unhappy, you still brought it in to see me, and didn't hide it like last time...."

"Very good!"

"Yes, very good. Go and bring Su gege a piece of paper, and then dip the smallest quill in ink, alright?"

"Alright!"

Fei Liu jumped up, and very quickly, paper and quill were brought over. Mei Changsu wrote a few small words onto the edge of the paper, tore out the strip, rolled it up and placed it into the tube, then gave the pigeon back to Fei Liu.

“Fei Liu can go and release it, alright?”

Fei Liu got up slowly, a little unwillingly, but when he saw Mei Changsu smiling at him, he obediently took the pigeon out into the courtyard and threw it up into the air, watching as it flew a few circles around the yard before disappearing into the distance.

As the snowy white pigeon flew further and further away, becoming nothing more than a tiny dot in the distance, Fei Liu still watched, his face lifted towards the sky. Li Gang, a gold visiting card in his hand, was coming in from the outer yard, and seeing Fei Liu standing there in this posture, he couldn't help laughing. “Fei Liu, are you waiting for a fairy to drop out of the sky?”

“No!” Fei Liu's tone was a little angry.

“Alright, alright, alright, you take your time waiting.”

“No!” Very angry.

Li Gang grinned as he dodged Fei Liu's punch, but once he passed the doors of the house, he immediately grew serious.

“Chief, Master Yan has come to visit.”

Mei Changsu eyed the visiting card doubtfully and laughed in spite of himself. “He has always come straight in laughing and shouting, when has he learned such courtesy? I fear he has something to say, ask him to come in then.”

“Yes.” Not long after Li Gang retreated, Yan Yujin strode in quickly, dressed in a bright red cloak, giving off his usual elegant and radiant air, so that if you did not look closely, you would not have found anything unusual about his expression.

“Yujin has arrived, please sit.” Mei Changsu's glance passed casually over the faintly pink eyelids of the son of the Imperial Uncle, and he ordered Li Gang to have refreshments sent up.

“Brother Su, you do not have to be polite.” Yan Yujin half-rose out of his chair to accept his tea, but when Li Gang and the rest of the servants left, he put down the tea cup and rose immediately, clapping his hands towards Mei Changsu in a bow.

“I don't dare, I don't dare,” Mei Changsu smilingly rose to lift him up. “You and I are of the same generation, this is not the correct bow.”

“Brother Su, you know very well Yujin’s bow is not for the new year,” Yujin said with rare seriousness. “It is to thank Brother Su for saving the lives of the entire Yan clan.”

Mei Changsu patted his arm, indicating for him to sit, and said slowly, “Marquis Yan has already....”

“Last night, Father told me everything,” Yan Yujin lowered his head, his face pale. “If I say that Father has neglected me in the past, then as his son, I have never known the suffering in his heart, and I cannot claim to be a filial son....”

“That the two of you have been able to come to a mutual understanding is indeed a cause for joy and celebration,” Mei Changsu smiled warmly. “As for the matter for which I saved your esteemed father, you do not need to hold it in your heart. The affairs of the palace are changing rapidly, and the unrest is becoming unmanageable, so it was only that I did not want your esteemed father’s actions to cause any further disturbance and lead to uncontrollable chaos, that’s all.”

Yan Yujin looked at him closely. “I do not want to look closely into the reason behind Brother Su’s decision, but I believe there is friendship in it. To tell the truth, even now, my father does not regret the plans he made and the actions he took, but he is still grateful that you stopped him. Although this sounds contradictory, a person’s feelings are often this complicated, and it is not a matter that can be easily divided into black and white, nor neatly cut into two halves by a knife. But, no matter what, the peace of the Yan clan has been kept, and I have only to remember Brother Su’s goodwill. As for any other, more complicated reasons, what do they have to do with me?”

Mei Changsu looked at him for a long moment, and then suddenly laughed in spite of himself. “You are indeed even smarter than I imagined. Although you may appear a bit frivolous, you are a dependable pillar of support to those you count as your friends.”

“Brother Su is too kind,” Yan Yujin smiled back. “No one can predict the fate of our clan, or what we will face in the future. The only thing in our grasp is this heart, and nothing more.”

“Well-said, that deserves a toast.” Mei Changsu nodded, smiling. “Unfortunately, I am still taking medicine, and cannot accompany you.”

“I will drink for Brother Su.” Yan Yujin said brightly, and he rose and went to the courtyard to find Li Gang, asking him bring them a casket of wine and two cups, and so, with a cup in his left hand and one in his right, he lightly knocked them together and drained them both.

“You and Jingrui are such good friends, but you have very different temperaments,” Mei Changsu couldn’t help sighing ruefully. “But he is also working hard, he must be taking care of four parents at home these days.”

“He never comes out on the first day of the new year, he has to keep them happy,” Yan Yujin said with a smile. “Even if I want to find him, I have to wait until the second day of the new year.”

Mei Changsu glanced at him and said casually, “Then bring him over here tomorrow. You see how quiet it is here, I don’t have many other friends.”

“Of course, I only fear Xie Bi will want to come as well. That’s right, Xie Xu has come back from his academy for the new year, have you met him yet?”

“The third son of the Xie family?”

“That’s right, although he is the youngest, he is the best at classics and history, and Uncle Xie hopes he will achieve top ranks in the imperial examinations, so he sent him to study at Songshan Academy. He only comes back for the new year, and it’s always Qingyao dage who goes to pick him up.”

“I’ve heard it said that after Zhuo Qingyao married the eldest Xie daughter, Xie Bi will also be marrying the daughter of the Zhuo family?”

“Ng, I think Jingrui has said there is such an arrangement.”

“The Xie and Zhuo families have married their children, and there is Jingrui, so they have really become like one family.”

“That’s right. Although they once fought over Jingrui, now they have become as close as a family, it’s a classic example of good coming out of bad.”

Mei Changsu smiled indifferently and did not continue the topic, but casually turned the conversation to another subject. Not long afterwards, Physician Yan came in with a bowl brimming full of medicine, and Yan Yujin, worried about disturbing Mei Changsu’s rest, got up and took his leave.

After drinking the medicine, Mei Changsu leaned back onto the soft couch and slept for four hours, and after he woke up, he received a few trivial guests before going back to his book.

As night fell and the lamps were lit, Fei Liu started setting off fireworks in the courtyard again. Mei Changsu, smiling, watched from the room until he finished, and then lightly waved him over.

“Want to play?”

“No, Su gege doesn’t want to play,” Mei Changsu smiled as he leaned close to his ear. “Fei Liu, let’s go secretly visit Uncle Meng, alright?”



## CHAPTER 70

### *Night Visit to Meng Manor*

As the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, Meng Zhi often had night duty in the palace, and even on the days he was not on duty, he mostly stayed at the Commander's Bureau taking care of business, and it was only when he had two or more days off in a row that he would return to his own private manor.

Although its master had an illustrious reputation in the capital, the Meng residence was plain in appearance, with only around ten to twenty servants, and the household was not run very strictly. But Meng Zhi was the first-ranked martial arts expert of Da Liang, and he was not a jianghu man, so there were basically never any visitors who came to the manor looking for trouble, and so the residence had always been peaceful and had never seen any great commotion.

Meng Zhi's first wife had been chosen for him when he was young by his father and mother, and although she came from a very poor upbringing, she was a person of exceeding virtue and integrity. That year, when Meng Zhi left to join the military, she was the one who stayed behind to take care of both their parents. She had miscarried once and had never conceived a child again, but Meng Zhi did not take a concubine because of this, adopting one of his nephews as his heir instead, and the two loved and respected one another, and had a very good relationship.

This time, when Meng Zhi returned to the manor after receiving his punishment, the entire household was in a panic, and it was only Mistress Meng who remained calm, bringing doctors into the manor and instructing the guards to turn away all other guests at the door, stabilizing the overall situation. Meng Zhi did not mention the reason for the beating, and she did not ask, only concerning herself with his health and waiting on him attentively, and it was only after her husband fell asleep in the evening that she too lay down to sleep, still fully dressed.

As she was falling asleep, there was a tap on the window and she started awake again, but before she could speak, her husband's hand was on her shoulder.

"Who is it?" Meng Zhi asked in a deep voice.

"Us!" A bright, clear voice answered.

A smile broke out over Meng Zhi's face, and he said quietly to his wife, "They are my guests, you can open the door."

Mistress Meng hurriedly threw on a cloak and lit the lamp on the table before opening the door to the room, looking out to see a young scholar in dark robes and a light fur cloak standing outside, a handsome youth with a cold face behind him.

"I am sorry to disturb the mistress," the scholar apologized gently.

"Since you are my husband's friends, please put aside the courtesies, quick, come in." Mistress Meng stood aside to let the two enter, then went over to the brazier to pick up the teapot which had been placed beside it and served tea for her guests. She also filled two dishes with candies and brought them over, then said in a low voice, "My husband, I will go to the next room."

"You must be tired today too, go to sleep there," Meng Zhi said hurriedly.

Mistress Meng smiled but did not reply, and then left the room, thoughtfully closing the door after herself.

"To have a wife such as this is Meng Zhi's good fortune," Mei Changsu praised, before he asked concernedly, "Is your injury severe?"

"I practice a hard and stiff style of martial arts, what are a few sticks of bamboo to me? It was only to sooth His Majesty's anger, and to let him see a bit of blood, that's all."

Mei Changsu knew he was loyal and devoted to his monarch, and so did not comment, only asking, "You work so hard day and night, but as soon as a case like this appears, the Emperor turns hostile against you, are you disappointed?"

Meng Zhi waved a hand and said, "The Emperor has always been like this, and as the servant, how could I hope for my lord to change his nature for my sake? Besides, the case did take place in the territory under the control of the Imperial Guard, so the blame should fall on my shoulders, the Emperor has not treated me unjustly."

A cold smile turned up the corner of Mei Changsu's lip as he turned towards the lamp, his gaze flickering faintly, as he asked again, "Did Prince Yu enter the palace to plead for you?"

"I was wondering about that too, we've never had much interaction in the past, yet he was kind enough to come and plead on my behalf this time, it's too bad that perhaps he said something wrong, after he left, I saw the Emperor looking even more furious than before."

“.....do you know why the Emperor became even angrier? Was it really because Prince Yu doesn't know how to speak?”

Meng Zhi was taken aback. “I hadn't thought about it, could it be.....there was something wrong with what Prince Yu did?”

“You are the Commander General who holds a hundred thousand imperial guards in the palm of your hand, to put it bluntly, the life of the Emperor lies within your grasp. Now, as soon as the slightest bit of trouble arises, a prince appears immediately to intercede for you, and not just any prince, but Prince Yu, who just happens to have certain intentions towards the throne, so, with the understanding you have developed for the Emperor over these years, what do you think his first instinct will be?”

At his words, Meng Zhi immediately broke out in a cold sweat, his body trembling. “But.....but.....I.....if the Emperor suspects me of something like that, then he would truly be accusing me unjustly.....”

“Unjust?” Mei Changsu couldn't hold back his bitter smile. “You want to cry ‘unjust’ before this master, is this your first day meeting him?”

Meng Zhi's hands slowly clenched into fists, his brow furrowed. “The Emperor has commanded me to solve the case within one month, this is not my area of strength and there are no leads to follow, and now Prince Yu has come up with something like this....”

“Prince Yu did not intend to harm you, he only wanted to take the opportunity to win you over to his side,” Mei Changsu smiled. “But this case truly cannot be solved.”

Meng Zhi stared at him, dumbfounded. He knew his own investigation skills were not strong, and feared he would not be able to unravel this mess, but from the beginning, he had taken it for granted that Mei Changsu would investigate the matter for him, and so had never worried, but now, hearing this conclusion, he was too shocked to react.

“When a month has passed, you can go before the Emperor to beg forgiveness, saying that you were powerless and could not capture the culprits, and beg him to relieve you of your position as Commander General as a warning to others.” Mei Changsu smiled as he leaned closer. “So what about it, Commander General, can you bear to give up this position?”

Meng Zhi laughed loudly. “Giving up power and position has never been a difficulty of mine. But once I have returned to being a civilian, what power will I have to help you?”

“As long as you yourself are alright, that will be a help to me.” Mei Changsu picked up a pair of silver scissors lying on the table and trimmed the fraying candlewick as he said slowly, “I am almost certain that Xie Yu was behind the murder of the internal guards.....in the whole capital, there is no one else with the motive and capacity.”

“Then isn’t the case.....”

“Knowing that it was Xie Yu does not solve the case.” Mei Changsu’s expression was peaceful. “Especially you, you’ve just aroused the Emperor’s suspicions over your relationship with Prince Yu, if you accuse Xie Yu now without proof or evidence, wouldn’t it seem even more as if you were participating in the fight for the crown?”

“Then find evidence!”

“What kind of a crime is the assassination of imperial messengers? What kind of a person is Xie Yu? If he commits a crime like this, would he leave behind the slightest shred of evidence?” A smile as cold as ice drifted across the edge of Mei Changsu’s mouth. “Putting aside the fact that you cannot find evidence, even if you did find something, this case cannot be solved by you.”

Meng Zhi was a bit confused, and burst out, “Why?”

“The current Emperor has ascended the throne for so many years, I will not comment on other aspects, but no matter what, he is not a dispassionate person. This case infringes on the dignity and face of the royal family, so even if he still had complete faith in you, he still would not hand this case only to the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, who has limited experience in criminal investigations. Therefore.....the Xuanjing Bureau will certainly receive the imperial edict to investigate this case simultaneously, it is only that they will conduct their own investigation, and will not work with you.”

“That’s true,” Meng Zhi nodded absently. “This has always been a case the Xuanjing Bureau should be involved in.”

“Correct, and so if this was always a case that would likely bring in the Xuanjing Bureau, then when Xie Yu committed this crime, he had to first consider how to handle those conducting the investigation, which is not an amateur like you, but the Xuanjing officers. In other words, even if he could not guarantee that he himself would not be identified as a suspect by the Xuanjing officers, at the very least, he was sure that no evidence would be found. And if there is no evidence, the Xuanjing Bureau would not dare to report to the Emperor that they have solved the crime.” Mei Changsu knocked his fingertips against the table lightly, a faint smile on his face. “Meng dage, if a case that even the Xuanjing Bureau cannot solve is solved by you, the Emperor would not only be astonished, he would be terrified.”

“Ah.....” Meng Zhi stared at him blankly for a long moment before regaining his composure. “Xiao Shu, how can you so clearly see so many different aspects that I’ve never even thought about?”

“If you are to serve this kind of lord, you must learn to think thoroughly, or it will be you who comes to grief.” Mei Changsu lowered his head, a faint look of pain passing over his face. “He has already become suspicious towards you, if you suddenly appear so capable and seem to vault easily over every difficulty, he will become more and more certain that he has misjudged you in the past, and that he has not succeeded in completely controlling you, and you will only end up bringing countless misfortunes upon yourself. So, the only option left is to appear weak, to let him see you in a precarious position, helpless in the face of hardship and unable to defend against any of the accusations piling upon your head, so that you seem to be completely dependent on his mercy. This way, he will believe that he is able to hold you in his grasp, and does not need to worry that you will become a danger to him.”

Meng Zhi’s face was taut with fury, but there was a shred of grief in his expression too, as he said through gritted teeth, “What you say makes sense, but how can the relationship between a lord and his servant amount to something like this? So long as I serve with a heart of zeal and loyalty, what can his suspicions, even suspicions greater than these, ever do to harm me?”

“Have you not seen how they end up, those with hearts of zeal and loyalty?” Mei Changsu had not thought that Meng Zhi would say something like this now, and couldn’t help becoming a little angry. “If you do not value your own life, can you at least value sister-in-law’s<sup>117</sup> tears? Naive words like these may be spoken, but if you really act them out, then it will not be sacrifice, only stupidity!”

“I.....” Meng Zhi lowered his head regretfully. “I know you are saying this for my good, but for some reason, it is still difficult to bear in my heart....”

Mei Changsu looked at him steadily, his face like snow, and felt a sharp pain in his chest followed by a sense of nausea, and he couldn’t help raising his sleeve to his mouth and coughing hard. Meng Zhi rushed over and patted his back, sending in some of his vital energy. He thought about the words he had just spoken, realizing that they had indeed been inappropriate, and a wordless guilt overwhelmed him. He opened his mouth to explain, but was afraid of worsening the situation and causing him even more grief, and he was struggling to decide when Fei Liu suddenly flew into the room and gripped Mei Changsu by the arm, turning a furious glare onto Meng Zhi.

After coughing for a long while, Mei Changsu gradually caught his breath, and first patted Fei Liu’s hand comfortingly, and then gave a faint smile and said quietly, “Forgive me, the smoke of the lamp is strong, and made me choke....”

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<sup>117</sup> He means Mistress Meng.

“Xiao Shu.....”

“Alright, Meng dage, I know this causes you grief, but with things the way they are now, I fear you will have to listen to me anyway....”

“I understand,” Meng Zhi’s heart grew hot as he gripped his hand. “Xiao Shu, I will do whatever you say. I will not investigate anything this month, and when the time is up, I will go to the Emperor and beg for forgiveness.”

“Not quite,” Mei Changsu laughed faintly. “This month, you should investigate whatever you are supposed to investigate, and appear as anxious as you should be when you are unable to uncover any evidence, it is only that your efforts will certainly be futile from the start. As for whether the Emperor will permit your resignation, although he has grown suspicious towards you, there is still foundation for trust. Even with the court full of civil and military officials alike, how can he find anyone more trustworthy than you to immediately fill the position of Commander General of the Imperial Guard? It is only unfortunate that someone will have to suffer for this.”

“Who?”

“Your vice commander.”

“Zhu Shouchun? He has worked for me for seven or eight years....”

“And that is why he will be removed. I think the Emperor’s most likely move will not be to relieve you of your position, but to choose a few people who have no connection with you entirely to be your assistants, and so balance the distribution of power.”

Meng Zhi laughed coldly. “I have a clear conscience, he may send in whoever he likes. But I must find a good place for my brothers who will be relieved of their positions.”

“I fear Xie Yu would not dare take them into the city guard. Take this opportunity to give them to Prince Jing, he will not mistreat your brothers.”

“Ai,” Meng Zhi let out a long sigh. “Although my heart is still a little unhappy, with you to handle matters for me, I am much more at ease. That’s everything taken care of, then.”

“We cannot let down our guard so quickly,” Mei Changsu shook his head. “You will not be idle this month, and Xie Yu will certainly not either. He has raised such a fuss, he will not back down after just one attack. So your Imperial Guard must guard the palace very carefully, there cannot be another incident to deteriorate the situation.”

“I am confident that we will be able to secure the palace like an iron bucket. But Xie Yu has Zhuo Dingfeng, and ordinary soldiers will find it difficult to defend against martial arts experts.”

“Leave this to me. Zhuo Dingfeng can only act in the open, so it is not difficult to handle him. I have my ways to monitor him, his son, and the experts he has befriended. If they are clever and realize that they are being watched, then they will not dare to act in circumstances where they cannot be sure they will be able to escape. If they are a bit slow and do not realize they are under surveillance, then they will fall neatly into my hands, and as soon as they make a move, I will have my evidence, and then I can deliver them to Xia Dong, and see whether she will let Xie Yu off so lightly this time around.” A frosty haughtiness seemed to drift over Mei Changsu. “Xie Yu only had the advantage in striking first on New Year’s Eve, otherwise, if we debate jianghu skill alone, would Jiangzuo Alliance lose to Tianquan Manor?”

“Exactly,” Meng Zhi couldn’t help smiling. “If Zhuo Dingfeng really believes your power does not extend across fourteen provinces of jianghu, then it is truly his loss.”

Mei Changsu sighed a little regretfully. “Whether for fame, for fortune, or for friendship, Zhuo Dingfeng has already been pulled by Xie Yu onto the same boat. In the end, he is still a renowned hero of jianghu, and cannot be underestimated. It is only that the turmoil of the capital is not a battlefield with which he is familiar, and now that their children have been joined in marriage, they cannot be but one family, so if he wishes to escape from this intact in the future, it will not be so easy.”

Meng Zhi answered with a hint of coldness in his voice, “In the end, this was his own choice, so whatever the result, he can only swallow it himself. But as for Xiao Jingrui, this young man.....I have always admired his warmth and generosity, it is too bad he will be brought to grief by his fathers in the future.”

On hearing these words, Mei Changsu’s brow knitted in distress, and he turned away to stare at the light of the lamp, murmuring dazedly, “As for Jingrui.....it will be more than a pity.....”

## CHAPTER 71

### *A Cloudful of Visitors*

Today, Prince Yu came early to the Su manor, and asked Mei Changsu why he had come to the imperial Yu residence the day before. Since it was all now water under the bridge, Mei Changsu only answered that he had gone to pay his new year's greetings, and did not mention any other reason, waiting until Prince Yu himself brought up the murder case before lightly and casually reminding him not to intercede for Meng Zhi again.

Because he had returned very late from Meng manor the previous night, had been unable to fall asleep for a long time after he had gone to bed, and had also gotten up early today to receive his guest, Mei Changsu was very tired and was finding it difficult to sustain his attention. Prince Yu saw that he was looking poorly and so did not stay long, only chatting for an hour before rising to take his leave.

Since it was still early, although he had invited Yan Yujin to bring the Xie brothers over today, Mei Changsu figured they would probably not arrive until the afternoon, and so he left some instructions for Li Gang and then returned to his room to sleep.

Li Gang had been worried ever since Mei Changsu had gotten up that morning looking so unwell, and with this nap, he immediately panicked and forbade anyone from making noise anywhere near the room, and even Fei Liu was coaxed and tricked into playing in the outer courtyard.

So Mei Changsu did not know that, on this morning, a girl with her face covered in a light gauze veil came quietly to the side door asking to see him.

“My apologies, Miss Gong Yu, but the Chief is asleep and cannot be disturbed at the moment.” Li Gang was finding it difficult to stop her. “Do you have something important to report?”

“I.....wanted to come to bring the Chief my new year's greetings in person.....”

“If it is only this, then I fear it is not possible.....you know as well as I that the Chief has always been in poor health, and the physician says he needs his rest. He left instructions that he had matters to deal with this afternoon, and asked us to wake him



at noon. So you see, he only has these few hours to sleep, and it would really not be proper to disturb him only for new year's greetings from one of our own.....how about waiting in the outer courtyard and going in to see the Chief after he wakes up?"

Beneath the thin veil, only the girl's snow-white skin and bright eyes were visible, and her expression could not be seen. After a few moments of silence, a light sigh sounded. "Never mind, I did not tell Mister Shisan I was coming here, so I cannot wait long. Please, Li dage, do not tell the Chief that I came...."

"Ah?" Li Gang was a bit confused. "Didn't Miss come to see the Chief?"

"I thought, if I could only see the Chief, then I wouldn't mind being scolded by him, but now that I cannot see him, then why anger him for no reason? The Chief ordered us before not to come to this place without his permission...."

Li Gang still didn't quite understand, but he at least knew that a young girl's heart was difficult to fathom so he did not question her any further, only smiling and escorting her out.

Gong Yu had just left when another round of guests appeared from different manors bringing new year's greetings. Li Gang hurried over to receive them, and as he busied himself over the daily affairs of the manor, Gong Yu's visit was quickly put aside.

After the noon hour, Mei Changsu woke without being called and got up to clean his face and arrange his hair, then changed into a brightly-coloured robe, and his whole person appeared so much healthier that when Physician Yan came over for a look, he seemed reasonably satisfied. Of course, he did not know that Mei Changsu had snuck out the previous night, or he would certainly have spent another hour scolding him.

The young friends he had invited indeed arrived in the afternoon, and aside from the three familiar faces, they had an eighteen or nineteen-year-old young man with them, who could only be the third young master of the Xie family, Xie Xu.

Perhaps it was because he had been spoiled as the youngest son, or because his youth made him arrogant, or because he had not traveled the jianghu like his oldest brother or been involved in matters of the court like his second brother, but whatever the reason, the third son of the Xie family appeared even more like the typical child of a rich and powerful noble family. He was conceited and contemptuous, looking down on everyone around him, and the look in his eyes betrayed his impatience at being dragged to see this title-less, sickly commoner by his older brothers, as if he wanted to say, "If there is anything impressive about you, show it to me now, or I will consider you a fraudulent show-off with nothing but an undeserved reputation and unwarranted fame."

But Mei Changsu seemed uninterested in appeasing this young noble, and aside from the initial courteous greetings, he did not pay much mind to Xie Xu, spending most of his time talking warmly and affectionately to Xiao Jingrui instead.

“There are so many people in your Xie and Zhuo families, it must have been very lively on New Year’s Eve.”

“It was lively indeed, but the rituals also become a headache to follow with so many people, and it was almost midnight by the time we finished going around paying each other our New Year’s greetings according to age and seniority.” Xiao Jingrui saw that Mei Changsu was in a good mood, and he was delighted in turn, and so began telling him about the new year celebrations at his home. Although he was not as naturally talkative as Yan Yujin, he was actually quite an eloquent speaker, and as he sketched out the vivid scene, it was almost as if his audience were experiencing the events as he spoke.

“What’s there to talk about? What noble household does not celebrate the new year according to these kinds of rituals?” Xie Xu was feeling indignant because he had been ignored, and so now broke in to say mockingly, “Has Mister Su never celebrated the new year like this before?”

“Third Brother!” Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi reprimanded in unison.

“Oh, sorry,” Xie Xu immediately assumed an abashed expression. “I forgot, Mister Su comes from a different background, and so passes the New Year carefree and leisurely, unlike us, constrained by all these rules we have to follow....”

Xiao Jingrui’s face darkened and he looked as if he was about to explode, but Mei Changsu raised a hand lightly to stop him, saying blandly, “Extravagant households indeed have many rules and rituals to follow for the new year, it must be tough for the Third Young Master to have to learn them all at such a young age.” He then changed the subject, casually asking Yan Yujin when he would be taking Fei Liu out to play.

Since Mei Changsu had been so magnanimous and generous, Xiao Jingrui couldn’t very well discipline his little brother while they were guests at someone else’s home, and seeing that Xie Bi had already forcefully pulled Xie Xu over to sit by him, he did not say anything more.

“Brother Su really trusts me to take Fei Liu out?” Yan Yujin grinned. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll bring a Fei Liu out with me, and return with a feng liu?<sup>118</sup>”

Xie Bi laughed at this. “Would you only return with a feng liu? I’d be impressed if you didn’t return with a xia liu.<sup>119</sup>”

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<sup>118</sup> someone promiscuous, basically a playboy

<sup>119</sup> it means like vulgar or obscene (...they’re just...making puns...)

“Bullying me again I see, if you’re so skeptical, come with me to Miaoyin House, and we’ll see who Miss Gong Yu pays more attention to.” Yan Yujin waggled his eyebrows. “But you’re already taken, so I guess you’ll have to exercise a little restraint.”

“What, does Xie Bi have a happy announcement to make?” Mei Changsu picked up the cue, smiling at Yan Yujin.

“Don’t listen to Yujin’s nonsense.....there’s still half a year until.....” Xie Bi flushed.

“And whose family does the lovely lady belong to?”

Xiao Jingrui thought he really did not know, and said hurriedly, “She’s the daughter of my Zhuo dad, so she caught the eye of Second Brother a long time ago.”

“Dage!”

Mei Changsu smiled warmly. “Since there is feeling between the two of you, it will grow into loving affection after marriage. But Jingrui, you are the older brother, how could you let Xie Bi climb ahead of you?”

“I.....” Xiao Jingrui lowered his head, his cheeks growing a little pale. “I’m not in a rush....”

“Don’t mind him, his standards are too high.” Yan Yujin lightly changed the subject. “Now that Brother Su has recovered, why don’t we find a day to go to Spiral Market Street? Even without considering all the other houses, the music of Miaoyin House is truly out of this world, and Brother Su is such an expert, you must come and listen.”

Mei Changsu smiled and was about to answer when Li Gang appeared outside the door with a stack of cards in his hand. “Chief, these are the greetings card that have just arrived by mail, will you look at them now?”

“Put them over there,” Mei Changsu glanced at a bookshelf at the side of the room. “I’ll answer them later.”

Li Gang came in respectfully, arranged the cards carefully on the shelf and then retreated out of the room.

Yan Yujin was sitting nearest the bookshelf and so he looked over curiously, and when he saw the signature on the pale envelope at the top of the pile, his eyes widened. “That...that...that is a greeting card handwritten by Mister Moshan....”

“Oh, is it?” Mei Changsu glanced over. “It’s arrived so soon? I thought, since I’m in the capital this year, it would not arrive until the fifth day of the new year at least.”

“Mister Moshan sends you a greeting card every year?” Yan Yujin moved over for a closer look. “He signed the card, ‘Elder Brother Moshan’, he addresses you as his equal....”

“Brother Moshan treats me so kindly, it would be impolite of me to refuse the honour. In truth, we simply exchange a few letters every year, and it is only a correspondence between gentlemen, nothing more.”

“How many people in this world could correspond with Mister Moshan?” Yan Yujin let out a sigh and gave Xie Xu, who was sitting to one side looking as stunned as a wooden chicken,<sup>120</sup> a meaningful look. “And Mister Moshan’s Songshan Academy only accepts the most outstanding and talented young men.....that’s right, Xie Xu, aren’t you studying at Songshan Academy? It looks like you’re Brother Su’s junior by rank then....”

Mei Changsu looked at Xie Xu’s reddening face, and thinking that he was still young and not wanting to make things difficult for him, he only said lightly, “There is no relation between us, why argue over rank?” He did not look at Xie Xu again, but turned to smile warmly at Xiao Jingrui, saying, “I haven’t seen Jingrui’s sword dance in such a long time, since we happen to have some time today, care to show Brother<sup>121</sup> how you’ve improved?”

Although Xiao Jingrui had been furious over Xie Xu’s rudeness, he couldn’t bear to see his younger brother embarrassed now, and hearing Mei Changsu’s words, he knew he was lightening the atmosphere on purpose, so he got up hurriedly and cupped his hands with a grin, saying, “It has truly been a long time since I benefited from Brother Su’s instruction, shall we go out to the courtyard?”

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<sup>120</sup> this was too good not to translate literally

<sup>121</sup> he uses the same word they normally use to call him i.e. the formal word for ‘older brother’ (兄)

## CHAPTER 72

### *Birthday*

The southern side of the courtyard of Mei Changsu's manor was the manor's main gate, and the other three sides were fenced in by large, spacious houses, leaving a square of green-bricked empty space at its center. This plain and unadorned design without even a hint of greenery was indeed at odds with Mei Changsu's gracious, scholarly air, and he kept talking about renovating, but as it was still the middle of winter, there was no way to begin construction, and so the manor was kept in its original appearance for now, and although there was not much scenery to boast of, it made a naturally perfect ground for swords training.

Since there was to be a sword dance, naturally there must be a sword. But the First Young Master Xiao was not a traditional jianghu man, and he was not about to bring a sword with him while he went around paying new year's visits, so Mei Changsu ordered Li Gang to find one at random for him in the manor .

Soon, this casually-found sword was placed into the hand of the sword-dancer. The sword was gracefully swept from its shark-skin sheath and balanced delicately in his hand. It felt a little heavy at first, but as he gently plucked the sword to test its edge, it seemed to move lightly in his grasp, and when he inspected the blade more closely, he saw its watery green luster and finely honed edge and recognized it for the excellent weapon it was, it was only a pity that it had no master.

“Jingrui, you think you look so cool standing there staring straight ahead with your sword held out like that, don't you?” Yan Yujin scolded laughingly. “You've held that position for so long without moving, we're falling asleep over here.”

Xiao Jingrui laughed and returned the blade to its sheath, his left hand undoing his belt as he spun quickly, his clothes flying, and in the next moment, he had taken off his long outer gown and handed it to Li Gang, who was standing off to the side, revealing a brand new silver-embroidered under-robe. He had always been a handsome young man, and this kind of narrow-sleeved, tight-fitting attire naturally showed off his pleasing figure, so even before he could pick up the sword again, Yan Yujin was already clapping his hands, cheering, “Wonderful! Wonderful! Come with me to Spiral Market Street looking just like that, and we'll see whether you ever make it back out again!”

“Looks like someone’s getting jealous....” Xie Bi deadpanned, and Mei Changsu felt the corner of his lips twitch in a suppressed smile. Sunlight flashed off metal in the courtyard as the sword began slicing through the air.

The style of swordsmanship Xiao Jingrui practiced was naturally the Tianquan method passed down in Tianquan Manor. At the peak of the Zhuo clan’s glory, they had not only dominated the martial arts world in the south, they had even produced two first-ranked military generals, and their renown and power were second to none. Later, although they retired from the court, they kept their place in the jianghu, and everyone knew the name of the current Chief, Zhuo Dingfeng, who had made the Langya Lists of Martial Arts Experts for the past ten years in a row. He was currently ranked fourth on the list, and in Da Liang, he was second only to Meng Zhi.

Although Xiao Jingrui would certainly not be Tianquan Manor’s successor, firstly because of his personal history and secondly because he was not the eldest son, Zhuo Dingfeng had never held back because of this in teaching him swordsmanship. So with the meticulous guidance of such a great master, and with Jingrui’s own natural talent, he had by now achieved the full potential of this set of skills, and though perhaps he could be a little more adaptable when he was truly fighting against an opponent, it was difficult to find any obvious faults in his regular training dances.

It was a festive day, so Mei Changsu had asked Xiao Jingrui to show off his skills mainly to lighten the atmosphere, and did not really intend to discuss swordsmanship with him, and so he only bestowed a few words of praise, commending him for not neglecting his training and admiring how much he had improved. Among the other spectators, Yan Yujin was less experienced, Xie Bi knew nothing about martial arts, and although Xie Xu received both scholarly and military training, like most sons of noble houses, he mainly practiced archery and riding, and so the three could only stand in admiration, unable to offer any substantial comments. Instead, it was Fei Liu, sitting on a corner of the roof, who studied the display carefully from beginning to end, his fingers moving restlessly as he dissected each move.

When the sword dance ended, Aunt Ji brought out a plate of freshly-cooked sesame dumplings and everyone returned to the warm room, laughing and talking as they ate. Xie Xu, bored, only ate a few before finding an excuse to leave. Everyone saw that he was not quite fitting in and so did not make him stay, but Xiao Jingrui still got up and went to the door, instructing their servants to carefully escort him home before letting him go.

“Jingrui is such a good older brother, I suppose your older Zhuo brother must also be a prudent and cautious man. I wonder what his swordsmanship is like?” Mei Changsu prodded the white sesame dumpling in his bowl with a long spoon, inhaling its sweet fragrance as he spoke casually.

“Qingyao dage’s martial arts are much better than mine,” Xiao Jingrui said admiringly. “Like in that move, ‘the bird flies out of the forest’, I can only strike seven blows with my sword, but he can strike nine.”

“You are younger, so it is no surprise that you lag a little behind. But your Zhuo dage’s name is already quite well-known in jianghu, I heard it often when I was in Lang province.” Mei Changsu looked as if he had suddenly thought of something, and asked, “What do you usually call him? Do you call him dage, or brother-in-law?”

“I hear him call him dage,” Yan Yujin laughed. “But he is both your dage and your brother-in-law, someone outside the family would never understand what’s going on.”

“Jingrui’s story is a household tale by now, how could there be anyone who doesn’t know it?” Mei Changsu blew on his sesame dumpling and slowly took a bite, the white steam rising before him, his expression a little confused. “.....Will they return to Fenzuo after the first month of the New Year passes?”

“There’s no rush, Fenzuo is less than ten days’ travel from the capital, so they usually stay until the middle of April before leaving. But this year, only my Zhuo dad is going back, Mum and Qingyao dage are staying to keep Qi mei<sup>122</sup> company.....” As Xiao Jingrui spoke, a happy smile appeared on his face. “My Qi mei is having a baby, she’s due to give birth in May, so I will be a shushu.....ng.....and also a jiujiu...<sup>123</sup>...”

“Congratulations,” Mei Changsu smiled at the two brothers of the Xie family. “Her Highness the Grand Princess must be worried about the young lady, to have her stay with her maiden family to give birth.”

“That’s right. My Zhuo dad is a jianghu man, and my Xie dad is a military man, so they don’t care about those customs about not allowing girls to give birth in their maiden homes. Besides, girls are always most comfortable with their own mothers by their sides, and my Zhuo mother will stay too, so Qi mei will be very well taken care of.”

“Jingrui,” Yan Yujin widened his eyes. “Why don’t you tell Brother Su why your Zhuo parents always stay until the middle of April before leaving?”

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<sup>122</sup> mei = younger sister (equivalent of jie, ge, di)

<sup>123</sup> shushu and jiujiu both mean uncle, but that’s only because English is lazy □ You are probably aware of the crazy intricate Chinese naming system for all the different familial relations. So shushu is the younger brother of your father, and jiujiu is the older brother of your mother.

“They, they want to, to spend more time together,” Xiao Jingrui’s cheeks were red, and he glared at Yan Yujin. “I think it’s great for our two families to live together for a little while.”

Mei Changsu was an intelligent person, and there was laughter in his eyes as he said, “Could it be that there is some important event that takes place in April?”

“Have a guess, Brother Su,” Xie Bi joined in the teasing.

“Jingrui’s birthday?” Mei Changsu’s brow furrowed lightly. “So which day in the middle of April is it then, hm?”

“April twelfth,” Yan Yujin beat the others to the answer. “But that was too easy, look at Jingrui’s expression, it’s obviously saying to Brother Su, ‘That date has something to do with me! Something to do with me!’”

“Shut up!” Xiao Jingrui laughed as he aimed a kick at him. “When have you ever seen an expression speak?”

“Hunh, it’s not just expressions, sometimes eyebrows, the corner of mouths, fingers, and even hair can speak, and even if you don’t smile or scowl, even if you don’t look at me, I can still tell what they are saying.”

“Are you talking about your precious beauties?” Xiao Jingrui’s lip twitched. “Don’t get too cocky, one of these days, someone will come along who can keep you under her thumb, and then I’ll come to watch the show.”

“Don’t hold your breath.” Yan Yujin purposefully adopted a lofty air. “We’ll see who’s laughing at whom.”

Mei Changsu watched quietly as the two bantered, and though it was a familiar scene, a strange sadness arose in his heart. The bowl of hot dumplings in his hand had already grown cool, though he had only eaten two.

“Brother Su, are you feeling unwell?” Xie Bi leaned over in concern. “Or are you tired?”

“It’s nothing, I’m always like this in the winter.” Mei Changsu smiled and placed his bowl on the table, turning his warm gaze onto Xiao Jingrui. “How do you usually celebrate your birthday?”

“Oh, I’m of the younger generation, so it’s not worth much celebration....” Xiao Jingrui had just begun when Xie Bi cut him off.

“Oh, come on, if your birthday isn’t considered a celebration, then Xie Xu and I might as well just cry our way through our birthdays!”



“That’s right, Jingrui’s birthday is always a bigger deal than those of the other Xie brothers. It can’t be helped, he has two sets of parents, so everything has to be doubled.” Yan Yujin was clearly familiar with the situation. “Besides the huge pile of gifts, there’s always a banquet every year, with all the friends he wants to invite, and after dinner, when the elders have retired, we can go as crazy as we like. It’s the only day of the year you can really do whatever you want, isn’t it?”

“In that case, Jingrui’s birthday must be the happiest day of the year.” Mei Changsu looked at Xiao Jingrui’s expression and knew that Yan Yujin had spoken truly. And this year he would be turning twenty-five, an important age, and so the celebration could only be even more lively.

“Of course I’m happy to spend time with my friends, doing whatever we like,” Xiao Jingrui looked at Mei Changsu, his face sobering slightly. “If Brother Su could come too this year, that would be nice....”

“Are you crazy?” Yan Yujin smacked his shoulder. “Brother Su will certainly be in the city in April, so of course he must come. You tried to invite him to your home for New Year’s Eve but you’re not going to invite him for your own birthday?”

Xiao Jingrui was about to reply, but then hesitated, his gaze faltering. Although Yan Yujin was intelligent, there were some things he did not know. When he had invited Mei Changsu to his manor for New Year’s Eve, aside from the consideration of the appropriateness of the time and situation, he had neglected another important aspect, which were the respective positions Su Zhe and the Xie manor had taken in the fight for the throne. When he remembered the events that had taken place in Snow Cottage on Mei Changsu’s last night at their residence, he could not be sure whether this Brother Su whom he respected so deeply would even consent to pass through the gates of the Xie manor again.

But in contrast to Xiao Jingrui’s complicated emotions, Mei Changsu appeared rather at ease as he said, still smiling, “I find Jingrui’s words strange as well.....Jingrui, are you really not going to invite me?”

Xiao Jingrui was stunned for a moment before he asked doubtfully, “Brother Su would consent to come?”

“We are friends, and are living in the same city, what reason would I have not to come? It’s only that I’m a little more advanced in my years, and can’t join in when it gets too exciting, so don’t mind me if I seem a little like a wet blanket, that’s all.”

Xiao Jingrui was delighted, and said hurriedly, “It’s a deal, I will definitely be waiting to receive Brother Su.”

“Hmph, you’ve reaped a profit this time, Brother Su definitely won’t come empty-handed, and he’ll have something good for you for sure.” Yan Yujin kicked lightly at his friend, and then turned to say, “Brother Su, my birthday is on the seventh of July, don’t forget!”

Mei Changsu couldn’t help laughing, and then began coughing into his sleeve. “Alright.....I will remember.....”

“With such a coincidental birthday,<sup>124</sup> Brother Su couldn’t forget even if he wanted to,” Xie Bi teased. “If you were born just a few days later, on the fifteenth of July,<sup>125</sup> that would be even better.”

“Boys born on the seventh of July are known for valuing friendship and affection,” Mei Changsu defended Yan Yujin. “I think Yujin lives up to this description.”

“Ng,” Xie Bi nodded, his expression solemn. “He is certainly affectionate towards beautiful ladies....”

“I’m not listening,” Yan Yujin stuck his tongue out in his direction and then scooted over to Mei Changsu, saying quietly in his ear, “Brother Su, when you’ve thought of what you’re going to give Jingrui, you have to tell me first, so we don’t give him the same present.”

Although he spoke in a low voice, it was not low enough to escape the hearing of those beside them, and Xiao Jingrui pushed him, scolding laughingly, “You think Brother Su is like you, always coming up with weird things as gifts? Anyway, it’s the thought that counts, I’ll be happy with anything you give me.”

“The present is indeed not the most important thing.....regardless, I have a feeling that, this year, Jingrui will truly have a birthday he will never forget....”

Mei Changsu spoke warmly and with a light smile on his face, and the three young men laughed with him, unaware of the conflicting emotions in his hooded gaze, which flitted between sympathy, regret, and grim determination.

“Chief,” Li Gang appeared again at the door of the room. “Prince Yu sent people over with an invitation to a banquet at his manor on the fifth, the messengers are waiting for a reply, I apologize for the interruption....”

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<sup>124</sup> it’s sort of like Chinese Valentine’s day? here, wiki it: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qixi\\_Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qixi_Festival)

<sup>125</sup> Chinese ‘Ghost Day’ (yeah just wiki it: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost\\_Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_Festival)), so I think Xie Bi is teasing Yujin for being like a ghost lol

The red invitation card was delivered to the table, and the joyful atmosphere in the room immediately dissipated. Yan Yujin bit his lip, Xiao Jingrui lowered his eyes, and Xie Bi's face paled.

It seemed their delicate friendship could never escape the looming shadow of reality for long.

“Send a reply to Prince Yu saying that the banquet on the fifth is a gathering of noble guests, and as I have other engagements on that day, I will not disrupt them with my presence.” Mei Changsu's gaze passed lightly over the three young men as he answered indifferently.

## CHAPTER 73

### *Memorial*

Outside the city of Jinling, the western, southern, and northern borders were largely flat plains with the occasional rolling hill, but the eastern side was covered by a mountain range, which, although not very tall, extended well into the distance.

Gushan<sup>126</sup> was the mountain closest to the capital, and from the eastern Dongyang gates of the capital, it was less than an hour's ride on a fast horse to its foot. In the fall, the mountain came alive with red and gold leaves, but as it was now deep winter, the trees stood in the snow with their barren trunks, lending a bleak and desolate atmosphere to the scenery surrounding the winding mountain road. Beyond a flight of stairs in a quiet corner of the mountain's peak, there was a simple pavilion, lined by a fence of twisting vines. About a hundred steps south of the pavilion, there was a gentle slope, slanting towards a cliff, and on the slope, there was a grave built out of stone. Before the grave sat two baskets of fresh fruits and three lit sticks of incense, the spark of their flames shining like stars as thin lines of smoke spiraled up into the sky.

This year, the new year had arrived late,<sup>127</sup> and so the weather was already warming a little. But on the peak of Gushan, the mountain winds were strong, and the cold seemed to pierce into one's very bones.

Xia Dong stood silently before the grave, dressed in a long robe of raw silk and plain cotton, the black skirt of her robe fluttering in the wind. The long hair that normally rested on her shoulders was piled high on her head, the streak of white still clearly visible, which, along with the slight wrinkles around the corners of her eyes, betrayed the passing of her youth.

Paper ash filled the air. The fragrance of the incense was dissipating, and the wine that had been poured into the earth had long since sunk deep into the dirt. Only the

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<sup>126</sup> Gushan (孤山) = Solitary or Lonely Mountain

<sup>127</sup> the lunar calendar obviously does not follow the solar year, and therefore shifts a little every year. Like, for example, Chinese New Year can be anywhere from mid/late January to mid-February.

name on the grave stone still gleamed a blinding red, although it had already been traced a thousand times by those pale fingers.

She had been standing there since the sky slowly lit at dawn, burning paper and talking softly, and now the sunlight penetrated through the branches of the trees above onto her head, its brightness almost dizzying. The mist in the valleys below had disappeared, and the outline of the city beyond was gradually becoming visible, its silhouette emerging slowly from the misty landscape.

“Nie Feng, another year has passed....”

Ever since he had departed, each day felt as long as three seasons. Nevertheless, a year had slowly gone by.

As she stood before his grave, letting him watch as, year by year, she succumbed a little more to the passing of time and age, she wondered whose tears burned more fiercely, and whose heart ached more keenly – the person lying within the grave, or the one standing without?

Perhaps, when you can cry no longer, tears turn into blood, and when you can feel no more, pain turns into anesthesia.

She let out a long breath. Seeing him again had become her most luxurious wish on this earth.

Xia Dong’s finger traced the familiar lines once more, her ice-cold fingertips brushing against the coarse surface of the stone, and with every stroke, she felt a spasm in her chest, as if her heart was throbbing.

The wind whistled by her ear, but beneath the sound, she heard faint voices drifting over from the direction of the mountain road.

Xia Dong’s long thin brows furrowed, a frown appearing over her face.

Few people ventured onto Gushan in the winter as it was, and this was an especially remote part of the mountain, and further more, it was still only the fifth day of the new year. In all the years she had come to burn her sacrifices, this was the first time she had been disturbed.

“Chief, there is only a little path in that direction, the main peak is this way, look, you can already see it....”

“Never mind, I want to walk on the little paths, the trees are thicker here, and the shadows are dancing in the sunlight, isn’t it more interesting?”

“Yes.....be careful, there is snow on the ground, it is easy to slip and fall.”

“With you holding on to me like this, even if I slip, I won’t be able to fall.....”

The light voices drifted over clearly in the quiet. Xia Dong took a deep breath and turned slowly, her face expressionless.

“Officer Xia....” The newcomer looked surprised. “What a coincidence....”

“Mister Su must be in good spirits to have come climbing a mountain in the dead of winter.” Xia Dong’s voice was peaceful as she spoke. “But I seem to remember there was a banquet today....”

“It was because I wanted to avoid the excitement that I came out here to hide from the city. If I stayed in my manor, I wouldn’t be able to turn down the invitations,” Mei Changsu said bluntly, not bothering to hide his intentions. “Besides, I have recently recovered from illness, and my physician advised me to walk in the mountains to regain my strength slowly, as a form of treatment. Gushan is closest to the city, so I decided to come here. Have I disturbed you?”

“Gushan does not belong to me, of course anyone can come,” Xia Dong said coolly. “This is my husband’s grave, and people seldom wander to these parts, so it is only a little unexpected.”

“This is where General Nie’s bones are buried, then?” Mei Changsu took a step forward. His voice was steady, but his long lashes lowered, hiding the expression in his eyes. “He was truly a glorious general of his generation, and I have always admired his might and honour. Since fortune has brought me here today, would you allow me to make an offering, to show my respect?”

Xia Dong was taken aback, but reflected that, as he had arrived here now, and with the friendship they had developed talking in the snow that day, it would be lacking in manners for him not to pay his respects at the grave of her departed husband. As for his reverent words, it was not worth wondering whether they were genuine or not, so she nodded and said, “I am indebted to Mister’s kindness, please go ahead.”

Mei Changsu nodded to her, then walked slowly to the grave and knelt. He scattered herbs of incense onto the ground, then clasped his hands and bowed deeply three times. He turned his face slightly and asked in a low voice, “Li Gang, I remember you carry a flask of wine by your side?”

“Yes.”

“Lend it to me.”

“Yes.” Li Gang reverently removed the silver flask from his waist belt and bowed as he held it out.

Mei Changsu took the silver flask and removed the stopper. Then, holding it in both hands, he cried out in a clear voice, “The general of a hundred battles has fallen in defeat. At the river, he turns his head towards his kingdom, a thousand miles away, and bids his old friend farewell. The water flows desolate, the wind blows cold, as the white-shrouded figures line the shore. The song of mourning for the warrior hero will never come to an end. If songbirds knew of such grief and sorrow, they would weep rivers of crimson blood. Who is left to drink with me now under the radiant moon?”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> oh God, I can’t even get mad at him this time because it’s NIE FENG’S GRAVE.

Right, so this poem is called ‘Congratulating the Bridegroom’ by Xin Qiji (賀新郎 (辛棄疾)). Don’t ask me why. And MCS recites the second half of the poem. The full text (and analysis) can be found here: [http://baeshi.blogspot.hk/2011/06/blog-post\\_22.html](http://baeshi.blogspot.hk/2011/06/blog-post_22.html)

For the sake of completeness, the first half is something about the mournful cries of the birds in the trees and the withering of all the flowers, and how none of that can compare to the pain and grief of the parting of death. And it goes on to describe this beautiful concubine who plays her pipa (Chinese lute) as she rides into the barren wilderness, and an empress sadly leaving the palace, as someone (the Emperor?) who is staying behind to defend the country watches them go. (I assume, from the context of the second half, that there’s war or something coming.)

Here’s the part that MCS recites:

將軍百戰身名裂。  
 向河梁、回頭萬里，  
 故人長絕。  
 易水蕭蕭西風冷，  
 滿座衣冠似雪。  
 正壯士、悲歌未徹。  
 啼鳥還知如許恨，  
 料不啼清溪長啼血。  
 誰共我，醉明月？

The general of a hundred battles has fallen in defeat.  
 At the river, he turns his head towards his kingdom, a thousand miles away,  
 and bids his old friend farewell.  
 The water flows desolate, the wind blows cold,

.....The general's heroic spirit is here, and if his soul is willing to receive my own, please accept this wine!"

As he spoke, he poured wine onto the ground, then lifted his head and swallowed a large mouthful. He coughed once lightly and suppressed the rest of the coughs fiercely as he wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. His gaze trembled a little as an uncontrollable surge of grief welled up in his chest, and he let out a light sigh in spite of himself.

Xia Dong was standing behind him, and though she could not see the expression of the person kneeling before the grave, she was moved by his sincerity and lost her composure for a moment, turning to lean against a nearby tree, her tears turning to ice as they fell.

"Mistress Nie, I am sorry for your loss." A moment later, the gentle voice sounded by her ear, and the pain in her heart only deepened when she heard the change in the way he addressed her. But Xia Dong was not a dainty widow, and her pride would not allow her to show weakness before anyone she did not know well. She took a deep breath to control her erratic breathing, raised a hand to wipe at the tears on her face, and slowly calmed herself.

"I thank you for your great kindness. Please accept this bow in return."

Mei Changsu bowed back, replying, "Sacrificial offerings are only to show the affections of the heart, I see Mistress Nie is dressed lightly and has no cloak, please allow me to escort you back down the mountain. General Nie's soul in heaven would not want to see the mistress bring suffering to herself."

Xia Dong had already finished her sacrifices and was preparing to leave anyway, and so did not refuse, and the two turned slowly and walked along the stone-paved path side by side. As they walked, they did not speak, and the only sound came from the wind howling through the falling snow.

As they neared the foot of the mountain, a straw tea-hut came into view with a horse tied in front of it, and Xia Dong asked, "Is mister returning to the city?"

Mei Changsu smiled. "It is early yet, still before noon, and too early to return. I hear there is a beautiful stone carving in an old town nearby, I wanted to take the opportunity to visit."

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as the white-shrouded figures line the shore.

The song of mourning for the warrior hero will never come to an end.

If songbirds knew of such grief and sorrow,  
they would weep rivers of crimson blood.

Who is left to drink with me now under the radiant moon?



“The stone carving of Chixia town? It is indeed worth a visit.” Xia Dong halted. “I have matters to deal with back in the capital, and so cannot accompany you.”

“Officer Xia, please do not trouble yourself on my account.” With the change in environment, Mei Changsu had automatically switched back to his former manner of address. “The case of the murdered guards is indeed a difficult one, and with the hard work ahead, you must take good care of your health.”

Xia Dong’s gaze swept over, sharp as a knife. “What does Mister Su mean by this?”

“What? Has the case not been given to the Xuanjing Bureau?”

Xia Dong’s face grew colder. The case had been openly handed over to the manor of the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, and the imperial edict she had received had been sent in secret. But since she had already begun the investigation, it was only a matter of time until the news was out. But still, this Su Zhe had really found out a little too early.

“This is indeed a strange case, perhaps the Xuanjing Bureau will develop an interest in it later,” Xia Dong replied, neither confirming nor denying his guess. She went on to ask, “But with such a clean murder, the assassins must have been jianghu experts, does Mister Su have any wise opinions on this?”

“The people of jianghu are so vast and varied that even Langya Hall must renew its lists every year, so how could I dare to comment? Besides, when has the Xuanjing Bureau ever bowed to Jiangzuo Alliance when it comes to knowledge of the masters of jianghu? Surely, Officer Xia knows better than I which martial arts experts are currently residing in the capital?”

Xia Dong’s icy gaze turned away, her expression guarded. Xuanjing Officers served directly under the Emperor, and so naturally took no part in the fight for the throne, and were not allowed to harbour any bias. This Su Zhe could basically be counted as part of Prince Yu’s camp by now, and so she had to be extremely careful if she was to continue this discussion with him.

The corner of Mei Changsu’s lip curled in a smile, and he turned his gaze away slowly. He of course knew what Xia Dong was thinking. In the whole of the capital, aside from those who understood his true goals, everyone else had changed their attitudes towards him ever since they discovered that he had joined the fight for the throne, and even Yan Yujin and Xie Bi were no exception. The only one who had continued to treat him with the same earnest sincerity was Xiao Jingrui.

To everyone else, he was first Su Zhe, the qilin prodigy. But to Xiao Jingrui, he was only Mei Changsu, no more and no less.

No matter how much of his skill he displayed, no matter how great the ripples he raised in the capital, the friendship this young man had forged with him from the very beginning did not seem to change in the slightest.

Xiao Jingrui had looked upon this game of thrones all along with mild distress, though he had never forgotten his place. He did not think his father had chosen falsely, and also did not think Brother Su had picked the wrong side, he only grieved that the two could not stand together, and refused to give up his friendship with Mei Changsu because of this. He persisted in his frank and trusting attitude, and no matter what Mei Changsu asked, he always answered truthfully, never stopping to wonder about the meaning and intention behind Brother Su's question. This was not because he was not able to think in this way, but because he chose not to.

And in his invitation to his birthday banquet, Mei Changsu could clearly see the pure intentions of this young man: You are my friend, and as long as you are willing to come, I will guarantee your safety.

Xiao Jingrui did not want to defy his father, but neither did he want to change Mei Changsu, he only wanted to make his own friends in his own way.

The clear wind blows under the clouded moon. It was only a pity that such a person had been born into the Xie manor.

Mei Changsu shook his head and sighed, forcing his thoughts to a halt. The wheels of fate were drawing near, and there was no point to any more thinking, because there was not a single person in this world who could reverse the fruits of time.

Xia Dong had not noticed his silence. Her gaze had fallen onto a winding path in the distance, as she let out a light "Oh?"

Mei Changsu looked in the direction of her gaze and raised his eyebrows in surprise. About a hundred soldiers were gradually emerging from the depths of the dense forest, some with swords in their hands, some holding spears, and some carrying coils of rope on their back. From the snow and mud on their clothes and boots, it was evident that this group had been traversing through the forest for some time.

"Have you found it?" A tall, broad-shouldered officer emerged from the back of the group, his clear voice echoing in the quiet. From the insignia on his clothing, he looked to be a centurion.

"No....."

"We saw nothing....."

His subordinates looked disappointed.

“Didn’t the villagers say they saw it here before? Damn it! Missed it again!” The centurion cursed loudly, and as he lifted his head, his gaze fell onto the two in the distance, and he looked taken aback.

A bright smile spread across Mei Changsu’s face as he nodded in greeting.

It was truly a small world when, whether by intention or coincidence, it was so easy to run into people you knew....

## CHAPTER 74

### *Night of the Lantern Festival*

“What, does Mister Su know this person? Xia Dong asked, looking at Mei Changsu’s expression.

“Not know, precisely, but we have met before. He is from the imperial Jing residence, and though I have only visited Prince Jing once, I have developed quite an impression of this dear brother.”

Xia Dong looked a bit surprised. “A centurion left an impression on Mister Su? He must have some remarkable traits, then?”

Mei Changsu nodded. “I wonder whether he has rectified those remarkable traits yet...”

At these strange words, Xia Dong raised her eyebrows and was about to inquire further, but the centurion had already strode over and, ignoring Mei Changsu, cupped his fists and bowed to Xia Dong, saying, “Your servant is Qi Meng, a centurion of Prince Jing’s army, may I ask if Officer Xia has just descended from the mountain?”

Xia Dong eyed him up and down as she answered, “Correct.”

“Did the two of you see a beast on the mountain?”

“A beast?” Xia Dong frowned. “This area is still within the jurisdiction of the capital, how could there be a beast?”

“There is, it is a beast covered in long fur that has been disturbing the villagers living on the mountain, which is why we received the order to come and capture it.”

Mei Changsu broke in to say, “I remember you have been working on this for some time already, have you still not been able to catch it?”

Qi Meng had originally been a military general of the fourth rank, but the title he had achieved by the blood and sweat of the battlefield had been reduced to centurion with a few cold words from Mei Changsu, so it would be a lie to say he felt nothing

towards this man, but at least three of the wise members of the imperial Jing residence had come to him the day he had been demoted, explaining and analyzing the whole event, and he had ended up blushing in shame, with no words left to justify his behaviour. Now, faced with Mei Changsu again, although there was still some discomfort in his heart and he was not willing to acknowledge him at first, since he had now spoken up, there was no reason for him to shame himself further by refusing to answer.

“These mountains are thick with forest, and the beast is very cunning, and we cannot stand guard here all day every day, we only come when the villagers report another sighting, but when we arrive, there is no sign of so much as the shadow of a beast, I don’t know if the villagers really saw anything....”

Mei Changsu looked around, thinking that these mountainous regions were indeed so dense with overgrown forest and covered such a tremendous area that trying to catch a beast in these parts was like trying to find a needle in an ocean, and so it was small wonder that their efforts had borne no fruit.

“Shouldn’t the Capital Magistrate Office be responsible for the villagers’ reports?” Xia Dong asked.

“The beast is so fierce that, though fifty people from the Capital Magistrate Office managed to surround it once, half of them ended up injured and they couldn’t capture it in the end, so Magistrate Gao had no choice but to come to my lord. My lord is the only one who will take up these kinds of lowly tasks that bring no glory or prestige.”

Xia Dong knew in her heart that this centurion spoke the truth, but she bore her own grudge towards Prince Jing and so she was not willing to comment, and only scoffed before turning to Mei Changsu to say, “I will return to the city now. Until we meet again.”

“Officer Xia, please take care.” Mei Changsu bent forward in a bow, watching as Xia Dong retrieved her horse and rode away, then turned slowly and gave Qi Meng a look.

“What now?” Qi Meng, frightened by the look, began frantically turning over the last few minutes in his mind, trying to figure out if he had said anything wrong.

Seeing his anxious appearance, Mei Changsu laughed in spite of himself. “Not bad, not bad, it has only been a few days since I saw you, and you have already learned self-reflection. It appears His Highness Prince Jing has really been working with his subordinates. There wasn’t anything improper about what you said to Xia Dong just now, but in the future, avoid saying such things if you can. His Highness Prince Jing needs to work more and speak less for the time being. He understands this, and as his subordinates, you should understand even better.”

Mei Changsu was only a commoner, not a strategist of Prince Jing's household, and had previously had a bit of conflict with Qi Meng, so no matter how you looked at it, he should not have had any right to lecture him. But for some reason, his gentle scholarly air nonetheless carried its own kind of weight, and Qi Meng found himself nodding and saying, "I understand."

By this time, Li Gang had ordered for the carriage to be brought over, and now he lowered the footstool and helped Mei Changsu up. Just as the carriage was about to move, Mei Changsu suddenly drew aside the curtain and leaned out to say to Qi Meng, "Find out from the villagers what this beast likes to eat, and build a trap for it."

Before Qi Meng could respond, the curtain was lowered and the carriage slowly moved away.

When Mei Changsu returned to his manor, he was told that Prince Yu had actually come in person to extend his invitation, and, refusing to believe that he was really not at home, had insisted on entering into the inner courtyard to look around, but in the end, because he had many noble guests arriving at his own manor, he could not stay long and so had finally hurried away, disgruntled.

When the tenth day of the new year had passed, lanterns began gradually appearing all over the city, in preparation for the Lantern Festival<sup>1</sup>. The palace was no exception, and from the Empress' palace to the residence of the lowliest concubine, all the manors were decorated in their own unique fashion with the newest styles of lanterns, in the hopes of attracting the Emperor's attention and admiration on the night of the Lantern Festival.

But to some, the joyful atmosphere lingered only on the surface. Commander General of the Imperial Guard Meng Zhi was carefully investigating the case of the murdered guards, and at the same time, he greatly increased the protection of the palace, organizing additional shifts to maximize surveillance, and the fruits of his efforts were immediately felt, as they managed to stop two incidents in a row of arson by eunuchs in the palace. Unfortunately, the captured criminals committed suicide on the spot and no confession could be obtained, but from a study of their identities, they appeared to be eunuchs in charge of internal palace affairs, and not outsiders who had infiltrated the palace. Because of these incidents, Empress Yan was publicly reprimanded by the Emperor, and had been forced to confess her guilt and beg for forgiveness. She understood that, as the Mistress of the Inner Palace, anything that went wrong in the palace was her responsibility, not that of the other consorts and concubines, and Consort Yue of course also escaped any hint of blame, so she could only be more careful in the future, and even more strictly monitor the comings and goings of everyone in the palace. The Empress was the daughter of the previous dynasty's Imperial Tutor, and at sixteen, she had been married to the current Emperor, who had been still a Prince then, as his official wife, and then made Empress when he ascended to the throne, and she had managed the Six Palaces from that day forward. Although their love had faded early on and the Emperor had turned his affection and

favour elsewhere, and though she had never borne him a son, she had not worn the title of ‘Mistress of the Inner Palace’ all these years for show, and she had her own methods for managing the palace and everyone in it. And so, if Madam Yue had not been able to cause any great disturbance even when she had been receiving the heavy grace and favour of the Emperor back then, it was even less likely that anyone would manage to upset the peace of the palace now, if she tightened the reins of her control.

Compared to the turmoil in the palace, Mei Changsu appeared much more idle. After he had identified the few jianghu experts in the capital who had connections with Zhuo Dingfeng, this Chief of Jiangzuo Alliance quietly issued an urgent summons for an unknown swordsman, who arrived in the capital and proceeded to challenge each of the experts, one by one, according to the rules of jianghu, beating them so badly that they could not rise out of bed for half a month, neatly taking care of the problem. And after causing all this chaos, this nameless swordsman disappeared again as abruptly as he had appeared, leaving all kinds of wild rumours in his wake as everyone tried to guess where he had come from, and whether his name would be on the Langya Lists next year....

Stripped of his assistants, Zhuo Dingfeng was beginning to notice the eyes on him, but the surveillance was so skilled that, though he felt that he was being observed, he could find no proof. Under these circumstances, he could only refrain from acting for now, forced into a stalemate against his enemy. Xie Yu was a cautious man, and ensured that he never left any sign of his presence in any of his plots, and so, worried that the Xuanjing Officers had picked up his trail, he too did not dare order Zhuo Dingfeng to act, and as the stalemate dragged on, naturally the city was at peace.

It was traditional on New Year’s Eve to stay up late to welcome the new year, and likewise, it was traditional to go out with friends and family to admire the lanterns on the night of the Lantern Festival. Although surveillance had been increased both inside and outside the palace, to Mei Changsu, who was running the show behind the scenes, this was no reason to miss out on any of the appropriate entertainment, especially since Fei Liu had put on a beautiful new robe and tied on a bright new hair tie before the sun had even set, waiting eagerly to go out to see the lanterns.

Because there was no curfew tonight, there was bound to be a huge crowd in the streets, and Li Gang was making very anxious preparations, arranging for guards to surround the group from every direction, and even specially instructing Fei Liu to hold on very tightly to Su gege’s hand, and not to get lost.

“Won’t get lost!” Fei Liu was feeling rather insulted by Uncle Li’s order.

“You’ll understand when you walk out the doors, people have been crushed to death in the crowds on Lantern Festival before, so you can imagine how easy it is to get lost, Fei Liu, you have to be careful.”

“Won’t get lost!” Fei insisted angrily.

Mei Changsu held back a smile as he patted the youth on the head, saying gently, “You misunderstood, Uncle Li means that Su gege will get lost, not that our Fei Liu will get lost.”

Fei Liu was taken aback, and he thought about it seriously for a moment before suddenly gripping Mei Changsu’s hand tightly and saying loudly, “Won’t lose!”

Li Gang finally let out a sigh of relief and mopped at the sweat on his forehead.

When the clocks had sounded the ninth hour, the procession left the gates of the manor and entered the vibrantly decorated streets, immediately becoming surrounded by the crowd, which bore down on them shoulder-to-shoulder. Brightly-lit fish and dragons danced alike among the houses, their brilliant light spilling out into the sky above the tides of people winding through the streets, who were shouting and laughing with joy and delight. This was the day in Da Liang in which ranks and titles mattered the least, and there was no marked difference today between the nobles and the commoners who traversed the city admiring the lanterns. Some members of prestigious houses had even turned the playful tradition of dressing in white and wearing masks while going out to see the lanterns into a fashion of sorts, and while some of the upper-class women and well-bred young ladies used certain styles of cloth to denote their status, many others dressed up as commoners on purpose, their faces half-hidden under large hats as they moved about freely in the city. It was for this reason that the Lantern Festival was known as the best time for lovers to meet in secret.

Like all children, Fei Liu especially loved bright, glowing objects, and no matter whether they were rabbit lanterns, or goldfish lanterns, or horse lanterns, or fairy lanterns, or pumpkin lanterns, or butterfly lanterns.....he gazed in awe at every one, and each time Mei Changsu asked him, “Buy or not?”, he would answer firmly, “Yes!”, so that, before they had even gone down half a street, there were two or three lanterns in everyone’s hands.

“Chief, this is not the way to pamper children....” Li Gang couldn’t help saying apologetically. “At this rate, Fei Liu is going to move this whole street into our home....”

“Good!” The youth agreed immediately, delighted.

“Never mind, after we meet up with them later, have two of our people bring these lanterns back, we have a large courtyard anyway, and we can hang them up along the eaves of the roofs and let Fei Liu enjoy himself for a few days.” Mei Changsu smilingly placated Li Gang, and then turned to Fei Liu to say, “Fei Liu, according to the rules, these lanterns can only be hung up in the first month of the new year, so after the first month passes, we will have to take them down, understand?”



“Understand!”

Li Gang smiled ruefully, unable to add anything else, and so he craned his long neck and peered into the distance, saying, “There are so many people, how can we find them?”

“Look for the peach lanterns, we said we would meet them there....”

As soon as Mei Changsu spoke, one of the guards shouted, “Look there!”

Everyone turned to look in the direction he was pointing in, and about fifty paces away, there was a giant peach lantern glowing pink and yellow, eye-catching even amidst the thousands of lanterns hung up in the streets.

“It’s so big, we couldn’t miss it if we tried.” Mei Changsu smiled as he led them over to the lantern, and though it was only a short distance away, it was almost an hour before they managed to make their way over to it.

“Xiao Fei Liu, this peach lantern is for you, do you like it?” Yan Yujin grinned as he waved the long handle of the lantern.

“Ng!”

“Say thank you to Yan gege,” Mei Changsu reminded him.

“Thank you!”

“There are so many people, it will be dawn before we make it to your Miaoyin House....” Mei Changsu looked at the massive crowd and sighed. “I regret promising to come....”

“Don’t worry,” Xiao Jingrui said. “It is only the main streets that are so busy, if we take the small alleys, we can go straight to the back door of Miaoyin House. Yujin knows the way best, he takes it almost every other day....”

Yan Yujin rolled his eyes. “So what if I know it well? That’s nothing to be ashamed of. The frankness of true heroes and the honesty of great scholars belies their outstanding natures...”

“Alright, hold on to the outstanding nature, we’d better go now, or the place you’ve booked will be cancelled by the time we arrive.... It’s rare to see Miss Gong Yu in the main hall, and they say she will be performing a new piece today too.” Xie Bi cut in, and the group began shoving their way through the crowd, only letting out a sigh of relief when they finally arrived at the entrance to the small alley.

## CHAPTER 75

### *Gong Yu*

Although the small alleys made for a less direct route compared to the main streets, in the end, the overall journey proved several times shorter. Striding along the moonlit paths of green-paved stone while the cacophony of human voices drifted over from a distance gave one the feeling of walking between lands of fire and ice. Spiral Market Street, when they finally arrived, was the picture of colourful luxury.

Yan Yujin enjoyed the pleasures of entertainment and was a regular guest at Miaoyin House, and the people he had brought with him were of no ordinary background, so as soon as the group entered the door, they were given an extremely warm welcome and escorted to their booked location by two pretty ladies in red robes.

The main performance hall of Miaoyin House was wide and spacious with high windows and a curved roof, making very good acoustic effects. By this time, the tables in the hall were almost full, but because there was a restriction on the number of guests, the hall was not crowded. Although many nobles of wealthy and powerful backgrounds had arrived a step too late and were not able to enter the hall, no one raised a fuss. This was partly because Miaoyin House had arranged entertainment in other halls, and partly because sons of noble houses were generally careful about their reputations, as very few of them were as lacking in class as He Wenxin, and so even if they were upset, they were not about to start a fight in an entertainment house and subject themselves to ridicule and gossip. Most of those who had managed to book places in advance were friends who frequented the entertainment houses together, and as Gong Yu had not appeared yet, everyone took the opportunity to walk around paying New Year's greetings to one another, and even Mei Changsu, who was sitting quietly at his place, received quite a few "Greetings, Mister Su", although he did not seem to recognize the well-wishers.

The frenzy went on for some time, and though Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi both completed the appropriate social etiquettes and returned to their seats, Yan Yujin was still nowhere to be found, as it seemed as if he knew every single person in the hall, and so would not be returning to his place until the very last second.

"What is it, is Brother Su starting to regret coming out with us again?" Xie Bi asked with a smile, picking up the teapot to refill their cups.

Mei Changsu looked around and said with a sigh, “What music can be enjoyed in chaos like this?”

“That’s not true,” Xiao Jingrui was disagreeing with Brother Su for once. “Miss Gong Yu always captivates the entire hall with her beautiful music, so once she arrives, the disorder will turn into peace and quiet, don’t worry, Brother Su.”

As he spoke, two beats of a clapper suddenly sounded, and though the sound was not loud, it penetrated through the noisy chatter of the room, as if falling into place between the beats of a person’s heart, calming the soul and steadying the mind.

Mei Changsu raised an eyebrow, and when he turned to look, Yan Yujin had already flown back into his seat, his speed for once rivaling that of Fei Liu. Two long-haired children stepped out onto the stage set at the southern side of the hall and drew the red velvet curtain aside, revealing a zither and a stool, nothing more.

The audience’s gaze turned to the entrance at the left side of the stage, because that was where Gong Yu made her appearance those rare times she performed in the main performance hall. Sure enough, a moment later, a pink skirt appeared at the edge of the curtain, and an embroidered shoe with yellow pompoms hovered at the corner for a long moment before stepping forward, bringing the entire figure of its owner into the view of the audience.

“Aww……” A murmur of disappointment spread throughout the hall.

“Everyone here is a frequent guest and old friend of Miaoyin House, so try and give this mother a little face, will you?” The mother in charge of the household of Miaoyin House, Third Aunt Shen, waved her handkerchief and smiled. “Miss Gong Yu will be here in a few moments, you don’t need to look at me like that.”

Although Third Aunt Shen was middle-aged, she had aged well and was still quite attractive, and as she wandered through the hall joking and teasing, she left joyful laughter in her wake. Everyone was distracted by her entertaining, and when they turned their attention back to the stage, they realized that Miss Gong Yu was already sitting before the zither, having appeared without anyone’s notice.

As the leading lady of Miaoyin House, Gong Yu, who sold her art rather than her body, was undoubtedly the most exclusive lady on Spiral Market Street, and although she was not famous for her appearance, this was only because her musical talent was truly dazzling. In fact, Gong Yu was very beautiful, with her slender brows, her almond-shaped eyes, and her skin like snowy-jade, and she carried an air of concentration about her, without the slightest sign of weakness and frailty, so that even if she wore only a long robe of raw white silk, she gave off an appearance of an ethereal fairy of sorts.

Although she had never been named to the Langya Lists, no one could deny that Gong Yu was a beauty.

Seeing that everyone had noticed Gong Yu's appearance, Third Aunt Shen quietly slipped off to one side and seated herself on a chair in the corridor, silently observing the situation in the hall.

In contrast to Third Aunt Shen's teasing banter, Gong Yu did not say anything, only tuned her zither and smiled before raising a gentle hand to begin playing.

The first three songs were ancient melodies everyone was familiar with – The Three Passages of Yangguan, Wild Geese over Sand, and A Conversation between Fishermen. But it was because the songs were so familiar that they even more noticeably demonstrated the skill and art of the musician. And with a musician like Gong Yu, mistakes were virtually non-existent, and her music drifted gently into the hearts of all who listened, seeming to wash over their very souls as it painted vivid images of the stories woven into its tune.

When these three songs ended, one of the children brought her a lute. As the music went on to illustrate the bitterness and frustration of The Autumn Moon over Han Palace, and then the bright clear elegance of A Moonlit Night on the Spring River, everyone seemed half-dazed by the winding melodies, stunned into silence.

Yan Yujin, his mind still intoxicated by the beautiful music, gripped the jade hairpin in his hand tightly as he recited, “The spring river rises high as the sea, the bright moon waxes with the tide. Its light shines the length of the river, illuminating its waves for a thousand miles. The river winds around a fragrant island, its flowers bright as snow in the moonlight glow. The frost in the air is concealed in its beam, the white sand of the beach all but invisible. No dust mars the perfect river scene, in the clear glow of the lonely wheel in the sky. Who first looked up to admire the moon? When did the moon first shine upon man? Life passes by and generations come and go, but the riverside moon changes not with time. We know not for whom the riverside moon waits, we only see the ceaseless river flow.<sup>129</sup>”

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<sup>129</sup> Sigh, lol. This poem is ‘A Moonlit Night on the Spring River’ by Zhang Ruoxu (Tang Dynasty), which as you may notice, is the name of the fifth piece Gong Yu plays (the one she plays right before Yujin starts reciting). That piece is based on the original poem, of which Yan Yujin only recites about half. The excerpt of my translation with the original Chinese is below. (If you want to read the rest of it, there's an English translation here: <https://chinablog.cc/2009/08/a-moonlit-night-on-the-spring-river-music-is-poetry/> My translation is also based on the one from the link. Thank goodness lol.)

A Moonlit Night on the Spring River by Zhang Ruoxu (Tang Dynasty)  
The spring river rises high as the sea, the bright moon waxes with the tide.  
Its light shines the length of the river, illuminating its waves for a thousand miles.

As he spoke, Gong Yu's gaze passed over him lightly, and then one jade finger plucked at her bowstring, accompanying his poetry with song and his verses with music, and the two continued in such perfect harmony that it was as if they had practiced many times before. When the recitation was over and the music ended, the hall was quiet. Gong Yu raised her narrow eyebrows and called for wine, and one of the children immediately brought forward a gold bottle and a jade cup. She filled a cup and drank, then returned her hand to her lute, and suddenly, a sound like wind and thunder filled the room.

“Mister Shisan's new composition, Wandering with Wine, please enjoy.”

Just this simple sentence, with no superfluous detail. When the music began, it invoked sounds of spears on glaciers, and though it was filled with unrestrained despair, the tone was not overpowering, now bringing to mind a wild drunkenness, now singing of great strength and lofty ambitions. All of these contrasting pictures

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The river winds around a fragrant island, its flowers bright as snow in the moonlight glow.

The frost in the air is concealed in its beam, the white sand of the beach all but invisible.

No dust mars the perfect river scene, in the clear glow of the lonely wheel in the sky.

Who first looked up to admire the moon? When did the moon first shine upon man?

Life passes by and generations come and go, but the riverside moon changes not with time.

We know not for whom the riverside moon waits, we only see the ceaseless river flow.

《春江花月夜》張若虛（唐詩）

春江潮水連海平，海上明月共潮生。  
滌滌隨波千萬里，何處春江無月明。  
江流宛轉遶芳甸，月照花林皆似霰。  
空里流霜不覺飛，汀上白沙看不見。  
江天一色無纖塵，皎皎空中孤月輪。  
江畔何人初見月，江月何年初照人。  
人生代代無窮已，江月年年望相似。  
不知江月待何人，但見長江送流水。

(P.S. are you noticing a theme in Chinese poetry?? yeah we like the moon a lot.)

were meticulously woven into the fabric of the ancient music, filling the dazed audience with a nameless passion, and many of them couldn't help lifting their wine cups in a toast and then draining their contents.

When the song ended, Gong Yu rose slowly and curtsied, and after a moment of astonished silence, the hall broke out into rapturous applause.

"If we had only heard the last song this entire evening, I would still be perfectly satisfied." Xiao Jingrui, who had unknowingly finished two cups of wine, now sighed. "This composition of Mister Shisan's has such a wild melody, even men playing drums would find it difficult to express the power and strength of its music. Who could have guessed that Miss Gong Yu's gentle fingers could hold such wind and thunder in their grasp? It makes me ashamed of myself."

"Your musical tastes are fine indeed if you can have such an understanding of the piece." Mei Changsu raised his cup to his lips and sipped lightly, then turned his gaze to Gong Yu on the stage, meeting her eyes momentarily.

Their gazes met only for a brief moment, but a faint blush was already spreading over Gong Yu's cheeks, the light colour making her appear even more beautiful. She stood and curtsied again in response to the applause, and then slowly took a few steps forward and said lightly with a sweet smile, "Please, I ask for silence."

The gentle words should have disappeared into the noise of the hall without much effect, but at the same moment, the clapper sounded again, seeming to penetrate straight into the hearts of everyone present, and the hall immediately settled into silence.

"Tonight is the Lantern Festival, and it is my honour and privilege to have such distinguished guests attend my Miaoyin House," Gong Yu was smiling, her voice clear as a silver bell, and her audience leaned closer, listening attentively. "Gong Yu has devised a little game for everyone's entertainment, I wonder if anyone would be interested?"

As soon as they heard that there were more activities in store, all of the guests were delighted and immediately began shouting, "Yes! Yes!"

"This game is called 'Discerning the Instrument from its Sound'. As there are many of you, to avoid confusion, let each table form a team according to the current seating arrangement. I will play music behind the curtain, and you will discern the instrument from the nature of its sound. Gong Yu will have a grand prize for the team with the greatest number of correct answers."

Everyone present had certain standards of musical taste and knowledge, so this would not be any difficult task, and they all called out their agreement. Gong Yu

smiled again and disappeared, and the two children came forward to close the curtains. The hall slowly quieted, each person listening intently.

After a moment, the first sound carried out from behind the curtain. Because almost everyone present was a frequent guest of the establishment, playing an entire piece would make the game too simple, so she only played the first note.

After a moment of silence, someone stood up from a table near the eastern window and called out loudly, “Huqin!<sup>130</sup>”

A little girl ran over and presented him with a peony made of silk, and he sat down again delightedly.

The second sound was heard. Xiao Jingrui immediately waved his hand and said, smiling, “Hujia!”

The little girl rushed over and handed him a peony. Yan Yujin huffed and complained that his friend’s “mouth is too quick”, and Xie Bi laughed, shoving him as he scolded, “We’re on the same team!”

The third sound was heard. Yan Yujin shot to his feet, shouting, “Luguan!” And so they acquired another peony.

The fourth sound was heard. The son of the Imperial Uncle and a person from another table cried out, “Konghou” nearly simultaneously. The little girl looked back and forth between them, perplexed, and then probably decided that this table already had two flowers and chose to favour the underdog in handing out the next flower.

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<sup>130</sup> Instruments:

huqin – any two-stringed, bowed instrument (eg. erhu)

hujia – reed flute

luguan – reed pipe

konghou – an ancient plucked string instrument

tongjiao – a horn or bugle

guxun – an egg-shaped, holed wind instrument

hengdi – bamboo flute

banggu – clapper drum

xiqin – uhh I think it’s similar to a zither (guqin)

tongse – a plucked string instrument

shiqing – stone bell

fangxiang – no idea lol

paixiao – pan pipe

wooden fish – a wooden percussion instrument made from a wooden block, used by Buddhist priests to beat time in their chants

The fifth sound was heard. In the silence that followed, Mei Changsu said something quietly in Xie Bi's ear, and Xie Bi immediately raised his hand and said, "Tongjiao!"

"What's a tongjiao?" Yan Yujin asked, dumbfounded, looking at the peony in Xie Bi's hand.

"It is often found in military fortresses on the borders, is used in ceremonial and military music, and is usually made from the horns of different animals. You young men from the capital seldom have the chance to encounter it." Mei Changsu had just finished explaining when the sixth sound was heard. Because his table had been listening to him speak, they were distracted, and someone from the table beside them was already shouting, "Guxun!"

Afterwards, the hengdi, banggu, xiqin, tongse, shiqing, fangxiang, and paixiao were all played one by one. With Mei Changsu's musical ability and Yan Yujin's quick reflexes, this strong team naturally seized the victory.

At the end, the curtain fluttered lightly as a crisp sound carried out from its depths.

The hall was silent for a long moment, and a few people stood up, only to sit down again without speaking. Yan Yujin frowned in deep thought for a long time, and finally gave up and asked, "Brother Su, do you know what that was?"

Mei Changsu held back a smile and whispered two words in his ear. Yan Yujin's eyes widened and he blurted out, "Wooden fish?!"

As soon as he spoke, the little girl ran over, and at the same moment, the curtain opened, and Gong Yu cast her gaze lightly around the hall, smiling when she saw the pile of peonies on their table.

"Grand prize! Grand prize!" Yan Yujin waved delightedly at Gong Yu. "What grand prize is Miss Gong Yu going to give us?"

Gong Yu's eyes shone, a sweet smile on her powdered face as she said calmly, "Although Gong Yu is a performer, she seldom ventures to display her skills outside of Miaoyin House, but as a gift to the winners, if any of you are hosting a dinner or a banquet soon, Gong Yu will come and entertain for a day."

Everyone gasped in wonder. Gong Yu was not an ordinary musician who answered to the summons of manors and residences, and with her proud nature, not even the sons of nobles or imperial families had ever been able to convince her to step out of Spiral Market Street, so an offer to play at a private banquet was completely unheard of, and everyone in the hall was both astonished and envious. Yan Yujin was smiling so widely his eyes had almost disappeared. "If Miss Gong Yu is willing to attend, I will arrange a banquet no matter what!"



Mei Changsu cocked his head slightly and lowered his voice to ask, “Is there a time limit to Miss Gong Yu’s promise? Must it be within these few days, or can it be delayed a bit, for example to April....”

His words immediately reminded Yan Yujin, who hurriedly asked, “That’s right, what about mid-April?”

Gong Yu smiled. “I will answer your summons anytime within this year.”

“Wonderful!” Yan Yujin thumped Xiao Jingrui on the back. “This is a gift worthy of your birthday banquet!”

Xiao Jingrui knew his good intention and so spoke no word of protest. He had always been allowed to do whatever he wished at his birthday banquet, and once, a friend had even carried in a beautiful lady wrapped in a fine gauze sack and had bumped into his father on the way, and his father had only shook his head and laughed. So a renowned musician like Gong Yu would be no problem indeed, and besides, Grand Princess Liyang loved music, but it was not proper for her to visit Miaoyin House herself, so this opportunity to have Gong Yu play for his mother was truly a rare stroke of fortune.

“Then it’s settled, April twelfth, Miss Gong Yu is invited to the imperial Ning residence.” Yan Yujin said decisively, clapping his hands together.

Xie Bi began teasing his older brother, pretending to be jealous that he always seemed to receive the best fruits of their labour, while other people came by to offer their congratulations. Yan Yujin was chatting animatedly with everyone around him, and even Gong Yu was smiling faintly as she fiddled with the hair falling around her face. In all the chaos, only Mei Changsu sat quietly with his eyes lowered, gazing at the wine in the jade cup before him. A moment later, he lifted the cup and upended it, swallowing down along with his wine the silent sigh that had risen to his lips.

## CHAPTER 76

### *Illegal Fireworks Factory*

After the new year, the tension in the city seemed to be loosening slowly, at least on the surface. In the palace, Consort Yue was focusing on giving a weak and fragile appearance, while the Empress was putting all her energy into taking care of the Six Palaces, and so the two had not had any major disputes in some time. In the court, although the Crown Prince and Prince Yu still disagreed on many aspects, because there had been no new triggers or inciting factors, they seemed to be clashing less often, and they had not had an open fight since the Emperor resumed court, and everyone was finding the atmosphere almost a little too peaceful.

Sure enough, the tranquil and idle days couldn't last. On the twenty-first of the first month of the year, an enormous crash shook half of the capital.

Mei Changsu, who had been sitting by the window enjoying the warm winter sun, felt an almost imperceptible tremor, and about an hour later, he found out that the tremor had not been an illusion.

“The gunpowder stored in the illegal fireworks factory exploded by accident?” When he heard the news Li Gang immediately brought over, Mei Changsu closed his eyes and murmured to himself, “Prince Yu is indeed even crueller than I.....that he could actually escalate the situation to such a degree....”

“They say it is because there has been no snow recently and the weather dry, and also because of the inauspicious position of Mars. The entire illegal fireworks factory was leveled to the ground, and by initial estimates, more than ninety households nearby have been affected, most of them by the great fire that arose in the wake of the explosion, which burned down half the street and left behind heavy casualties. Because not all of the bodies have been found, it is difficult to determine how many are dead, but there were a few dozen inside the illegal fireworks factory alone, and including the commoners who have been affected, there must be at least a hundred or more....”

“The wounded?”

“Nearly a hundred and fifty, with about thirty seriously wounded.”

“What about the fire?”

“Fortunately there is no wind today, so it has not spread to the next street, and it has largely been contained. But the blaze was very large initially, and there were only a few people from the Capital Magistrate Office there at the beginning, and even with the combined efforts of the commoners who came to help, they could not control it at all. The neighbouring houses were all rushing to save their valuables, while some of the worse crowds were making a rush for the goods in the houses, and when the Capital Patrol arrived, they spent half the time suppressing the crowds and the other half taking whatever profits from the situation they could, and the situation was really very chaotic until His Highness Prince Jing’s personal troops arrived and took control of the situation. Later, His Highness Prince Jing provided some of the army’s tents for temporary use by the injured and those who lost their homes. The physicians and medicines of the Imperial Hospital are officially regulated and so could not be sent over immediately, so His Highness provided funds for the use of resources in the community. I have already dispatched our Medicine Sect brothers in the capital to go over and provide what aid they can.”

“Well done,” Mei Changsu praised, adding, “Burns are difficult to treat, the Yun household of Xunyang district has a good salve for this purpose. Send someone with a fast horse to go and bring back a batch for Prince Jing.”

“Yes.”

Mei Changsu’s gaze shimmered as he said, “The first month is almost over, and the time of greatest danger should have passed, but then a tragic accident happens at a time like this, the timing is a little too coincidental.....pass on my orders to focus the investigation on Prince Yu, and to search out any possible evidence of his involvement in this accident. So many lives, we cannot just let them disappear without trace or sound..... if there are any developments, inform me in secret immediately.”

“Yes.”

After Li Gang bowed and left, Mei Changsu got up slowly and walked over to his desk, took out a snowy white sheet of paper, and began drawing with brush and ink, wanting to settle his mind and emotions. Fei Liu came in and picked up a brush too, sprawling beside him silently as he drew, quietly keeping him company. As the shadows lengthened outside the window, Mei Changsu’s mind slowly calmed. He finished one piece, and as he stood, he felt a slight aching at his waist, and the youth beside him raised his head, his beautiful eyes wide with concern.

“Fei Liu, go out and play?”

“No!” The youth shook his head.

“Then.....go out for a walk with Su gege?”

“Alright!”

Mei Changsu took down a fur-collared cloak from a hanger nearby, put it on, and then walked out the door. When the guards in the courtyard saw him dressed to go out, they hurried to prepare his palanquin. The row of people left by the main gates and then followed Mei Changsu's direction down a small alley, arriving at a street filled with smoke.

Although a proper blockade had not been set up, the men of the Capital Magistrate Office had formed groups of twos and threes and were working to prevent people from entering the area, and from a distance, it looked as if half the street was a ruin of crumbled walls and bricks, the smell of smoke still lingering heavily in the air, and the glow of fire could still be seen occasionally as the soldiers of the Capital Patrol threw water over the burning areas. Mei Changsu got off his palanquin and walked into the street, and the guards, seeing his commoner's attire, did not know where he had come from and so came over to inquire, though they seemed amiable in nature.

“I am.....” Mei Changsu was just considering what would be most appropriate when he suddenly saw Lie Zhanying of the imperial Jing residence, and he lifted his head and waved in greeting.

Lie Zhanying had not actually spoken with Mei Changsu before, but he had developed a deep impression of this Mister Su who had led to so much reorganizing and retraining of the interior of the imperial Jing household, and so he immediately answered his greeting with a polite reply.

The guards looked at the two exchanging greetings and thought he was a member of the imperial Jing residence, and so they quickly retreated to one side. Mei Changsu hurried over and asked, “Where is His Highness Prince Jing?”

“Inside.....” Lie Zhanying gestured, and then finding the situation a little unusual, asked, “Did His Highness arrange to meet Mister here?”

Mei Changsu turned to look at him and said purposefully, “No, His Highness has been hiding and refusing to see me, so when I heard he was here today, I came out to find him.”

“Ah?” Lie Zhanying was taken aback, but Mei Changsu had already strode on ahead, and by the time he caught up, Prince Jing was just appearing from the center with his personal guard, and the three met in the middle.

“Mister Su?” Prince Jing looked a bit surprised, but seemed to understand instantly. “Nothing that happens in the capital escapes the eye of Mister.”

Mei Changsu looked around. Although cries of mournful weeping could be heard, there were no survivors left homeless on the streets. Tents were set up on both sides of the road, and soldiers were carrying steaming plates of hot food between them. The herbal scent of medicine drifted over from another part of the street, and a stretcher draped in white cloth was carried past them.

“If this was a battlefield, it would be nothing remarkable, but such a scene in the flourishing capital of Da Liang is really too tragic,” Mei Changsu sighed. “Your Highness has worked hard.”

“They are all hardworking commoners, who had no way of knowing that there was a fireworks factory right beside their homes.” Prince Jing sighed as well, and signaled Lie Zhanying to retreat. “The timing is truly unfortunately, if only one more day could have gone by without incident....”

Mei Changsu raised an eyebrow. “Your Highness’ meaning is?”

“Shen Zhui was very excited when he told me yesterday that he had finally acquired enough evidence to prove that the Crown Prince had conspired with Lou Zhijing of the Ministry of Revenue in setting up this illegal fireworks factory for private profit, and it was only that he did not have the power to seize it immediately, so he reported it to the Emperor, asking for permission to have the Capital Magistrate Office assist in seizing this fireworks factory, confiscating all illegal goods and arresting the suspects. At the time, he told me very confidently that permission would be given within one or two days. Who could have thought.....the report had only been handed over for a day when this tragic accident occurred, and a hundred human lives were incinerated into smoke and ashes.....to most of those involved, this was an entirely absurd calamity.”

Mei Changsu looked at him deeply. “Your Highness believes this was an accident?”

Prince Jing’s gaze froze, and he slowly turned his head to Mei Changsu, his tone dripping with ice, “What is Mister Su implying?”

“As a successor accusing his predecessor of misconduct, even if Shen Zhui gathered piles of witnesses and evidence and raised this case to the heavens, in the end, it would only be a case of corruption and negligence. The Crown Prince is the Crown Prince, and so no matter how His Majesty chooses to deal with him, the punishment will not be anything significant. But now, with the explosion, the whole situation has become public knowledge, and when all is said and done, a hundred human lives have been lost, and so the passion and anger of the people will slowly grow into a rage of discontent. I fear the Crown Prince’s punishment will be much more severe than it would have been before. Your Highness, think carefully, this case

implicates the Crown Prince, and the Crown Prince must take the fall, so who will benefit?"

"So Prince Yu has treated all these human lives as his playthings, only to increase the blow to the Crown Prince?" Prince Jing's face was thunderous, his skin drawn tight over his rapidly darkening expression, lines like iron spreading out from the corner of his lips. After these furious words, he suddenly turned his glare onto Mei Changsu. "Is this the brilliant plan Mister Su has concocted for Prince Yu?"

At first Mei Changsu thought he had misheard, but when he turned his head and met Prince Jing's eyes, he gradually realized that he had indeed said what he thought he had heard. Although it was a misunderstanding, and although, in the present circumstances, it was not really anything worth getting angry about, for some reason, Mei Changsu felt a sense of fury rising in his chest, and he controlled it forcefully for a long moment before answering coldly, "No. These are all conclusions I drew after the events took place, based on investigation and analysis."

Prince Jing saw his expression and heard the coldness in his tone, and knew he had spoken wrongly, and he hurried to say apologetically, "It was my misunderstanding, please do not take it to heart."

Mei Changsu turned his head indifferently, looking over at the rooftops darkened by soot and ash from the smoke, and did not reply. Prince Jing had always been proud and aloof, and was not given to apologizing a second time if the other person did not accept his first apology, and so a cold silence settled between the two of them.

At this moment, one of the historians of the imperial Jing residence ran over to report, "My lord, your servant has already completed the investigation by your orders, and aside from the supplies from the residence, two hundred tents from the military supplies were also used, as well as four hundred and fifty cotton quilts. These are all military supplies, should I make a report to the Ministry of War?"

"It is good that you reminded me, or I would have forgotten. Although this is not anything major, it would be better to report their use to the Ministry of War."

"Yes, sir." The historian was about to leave when Mei Changsu suddenly said something in a low voice, and he spoke so quietly that even Prince Jing, who was standing only a step beside him, was not sure whether he had heard correctly, but when he turned to look at him, he found that the other stood with his gaze lowered, his demeanor calm, showing no intention of repeating himself, and, feeling something stir in his heart, he turned back to his historian and said, "You have many things to deal with at present, carry on as if I had forgotten, and you forgot as well, and do not make your report to the Ministry of War for now."

The historian could not think of a reason behind this strange order and stared at him open-mouthed for a long moment until Prince Jing raised an eyebrow, and he hurriedly answered, “Yes, sir,” before rushing away.

When he was a good distance away, Prince Jing said slowly, “Mister is aware that, although these military supplies have been distributed to me, if I use them for the care of the victims of this disaster, then I am using them for purposes other than those for which they were originally supplied to me, and thus, according to the rules I should notify the Ministry of War, so why did Mister ask me not to make the report?”

“Are we currently at war?”

“No.”

“Is this a very large amount of military supplies?”

“It is an almost negligible amount.”

“Can tents and cotton quilts not be reused?”

“Certainly they can be reused.”

“Since this is not wartime, and the tents and cotton quilts lent out can be retrieved, then why such a great fuss?”

“Although it is a small matter, according to the regulations, I should still let them know....”

“What happens if you do not?”

A hint of doubt appeared in Prince Jing’s gaze. “Mister should know that the Ministry of War is the Crown Prince’s territory, and although this fault is small, once it has been seized by the Ministry of War, I fear they would use it against me.”

“I want them to use it against you.” Mei Changsu turned slightly, facing Prince Jing. “Your Highness cares about the public and has treated the victims with such kindness and generosity, is this a bad thing?”

“Of course not...”

“Your Highness has done a good thing, and has committed only a tiny fault that is not even worth mentioning, so the Ministry of War should look generously on your momentary carelessness, but instead, they will seize on it and refuse to let it go. Once it reaches the court, will the officials think that it is Your Highness’ crime that cannot be forgiven, or that the Crown Prince is using the Ministry of War against you?” An icy smile lingered at the corner of Mei Changsu’s lips. “The court is yet far from

belonging to the Crown Prince entirely, and even if the Ministry of War attacks you, you have only to confess that you had a momentary lapse of memory in the urgency and complications of the situation, and then, even if Prince Yu does not speak up for you, there will naturally be upright officials who will see the injustice and come to argue on your behalf, so what is there to worry about?"

Prince Jing answered proudly, "I am not afraid of what the Ministry of War will do to me, and even if Father Emperor punishes me strictly, I do not care about a little accusation such as this, it is only that this mistake could have been prevented entirely, so why must I make such a great deal out of it?"

Mei Changsu's smile grew even colder. "Why should we not? The eyes of the court officials are still fixed on the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, so how many of them notice the things Your Highness is doing? Although you must work more and speak less, even if you yourself don't speak, others may speak for you. Once the Ministry of War raises the issue, the Emperor and all the ministers of the court will see, while the Crown Prince and Prince Yu were busy quarreling, who was the one controlling the situation? Who was the one reassuring the hearts of the people? Who was the one working quietly without complaint or conflict, but who is now being attacked instead? Everyone has a scale in his heart to measure right and wrong, and to balance justice and injustice. On the other hand, if your Highness reports this now to the Ministry of War, although the regulations would be followed flawlessly, it would achieve the opposite effect, and end up burying Your Highness' good deeds, and no one would come to know of them."

Prince Jing's thick brows furrowed. "I am not doing these things for others to see."

Mei Changsu laughed coldly. "If, before you acted, you thought only of doing these things for others to see, then that would be a fault of Your Highness' moral character. But if, after you have done these good deeds, no one knows about them, then that would be the fault of your strategist.... Even if only for my sake, pray Your Highness suffer this grievance."

Prince Jing heard the mocking in his tone and the sharpness of his words, and knew that he was not entirely placated from the previous misunderstanding, and so he was not angry, and only answered indifferently, "Mister is only doing this for my sake, how could I speak of grievance? This is Mister's thorough consideration, I am ashamed of my ineptitude. Let it all be done as you say."



## CHAPTER 77

### *Shen Zhui*

If anyone had been watching from the sidelines, they would have found the interaction between these two very strange. The lord had no intention of speaking coaxing words, and the subordinate was equally unwilling to yield gently to his will, and now and again they seemed to exchange cold retorts and sharp words. But you could not say there was truly any enmity between them, as they laid everything out plainly before the other, and did not hide behind suspicions and doubts.

Fortunately, both of them found their current method of communication rather satisfactory, and had no complaints.

“Your Highness, how has Tingsheng been recently?” Mei Changsu asked mildly, clasping his hands behind his back.

“Very good, his studies and martial arts have both improved, his spirit is growing steadier by the day, and everyone in the manor is very fond of him.” Prince Jing glanced at him, and he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “I’ve been meaning to ask you, you care about Tingsheng so much, did you know my eldest royal brother in the past?”

“I care about Tingsheng in order to gain Your Highness’ favour, of course.”

Prince Jing was a little angered by Mei Changsu’s indifferent tone, and his voice was tight as he said, “I am asking you seriously!”

“Hm, His Highness Prince Qi.....” Mei Changsu’s gaze skipped lightly to the black smoke billowing into the sky in the distance. “I have always admired him, and once thought of striving for great ambitions under his command, it is a pity.....” He suddenly halted, looked meaningfully at Prince Jing, and then turned and walked away quickly.

Prince Jing stared after him, then turned and looked in the direction Mei Changsu had indicated and saw a figure emerging from the tents. The thirty-eight year old official made his way over to Prince Jing laboriously, waving in greeting.

“Greet, greetings, Your Highness.....” Because he was a little plump, by the time the official arrived before him, he was slightly out of breath. He cupped his hands in greeting and said, “Such a great tragedy, it is fortunate that Your Highness has arrived to take control of the situation, I was out in the city today so I only just arrived, but the Ministry of Revenue can take over the follow-up work from here, Your Highness does not need to worry.”

“It all concerns the people, there is no need to draw such lines of division.” Prince Jing smiled faintly, glancing in the direction in which Mei Changsu had disappeared. ....Had he left because he saw Shen Zhui coming? Did he not want this loyal and upright official Prince Jing was currently befriending to realize the connection between the two of them?

“Just now, it looked like Your Highness was talking with someone, did he leave? Who was it?” Shen Zhui himself had distant relations to the imperial family, and plus he had a certain chemistry with Prince Jing, so the interactions between the two were rather casual, and he often asked whatever came to mind without first considering whether it was strictly appropriate.

Prince Jing hesitated for a moment, but answered finally, “That was Su Zhe, you must have heard of his name, it has gathered some renown in the city recently.”

“Oh?” Shen Zhui rose to his tiptoes and peered into the distance, but of course he did not see anything. “So that was the famous qilin prodigy? It is too bad I couldn’t get a clear look. I hear he has recently been working for Prince Yu, how come Your Highness also knows him?”

“I don’t just know him, he has been to my residence as well,” Prince Jing said indifferently. “This person certainly lives up to his name, and is superior to most in both knowledge and conduct. You have always valued talent, if you have the chance to meet him in the future, you will certainly come to admire him.”

“Talent is well and good, but how is his heart?” Shen Zhui urged solemnly, “It is said that most of this person’s talent lies in the shifting of power and strategy, Your Highness should employ extra caution when dealing with people like him.”

“Ng, I will take care.” Prince Jing nodded and did not elaborate.

“But what is he doing here in circumstances like these?” Shen Zhui looked around. “Unless he is here to sound out the situation for His Highness Prince Yu?”

“You don’t know, this Mister Su has always had a thorough grasp of everything that happens in the capital, so it is not surprising that he would come to look around after such a great disturbance occurred.” Prince Jing’s expression grew more serious. “Don’t be so curious about him. This whole situation will reach the Emperor’s ear by tomorrow, have you thought about how to handle it?”

Shen Zhui sobered as well, as he answered, “There isn’t much to think about, I can only report what has occurred. I have collected Lou Zhijing’s records over the years, and even have in my hands the secret ledger recording the division of profit over the years between him and the Crown Prince. To tell you the truth, assassins came to my manor just yesterday.”

Prince Jing was a little shaken, and grasped him by the shoulder. “Are you injured?”

Shen Zhui, touched, laughed as he answered hurriedly, “I was born lucky, and have always been favoured by fortune. But that assassin really was vicious, and all the guards of my manor, those three-legged cats, were not his match. Fortunately, a martial arts expert appeared out of nowhere to help us, but he disappeared as soon as he had scared away the assassin and did not even leave behind a name, and so I still do not know who it was that saved my life.”

“Did you see his face?”

“He wore a mask, but his eyes were large and bright, and he looked very young.”

“Then the secret ledger.....”

“I handed it over to the Xuanjing Bureau long ago, and asked them to deliver it directly to the Emperor. At least the evidence is safe, so killing me will not accomplish anything.” Shen Zhui laughed happily. “That’s why I still dare to walk around in the open like this.”

“Don’t be too careless, even if they cannot kill you to silence you, revenge is still a terrible thing.” Prince Jing spoke seriously. “The Ministry of Revenue fell to ruin under Lou Zhijing and it is up to you to restore it, so this is a matter of national importance, with great implication for the people. If anything happened to you, who could pick up the reins of such a great responsibility?”

“I am endlessly grateful for Your Highness’ great kindness.” Shen Zhui sighed. “As a loyal servant of the kingdom, I am not afraid of difficulty, and I will not lightly hand this duty over to another. It is a pity that those with true power in the court only pay attention to the games of strategy and the forming of camps, and leave the ones who are truly working hard for their country with no way up the ladder, there is only Your Highness.....”

“Alright,” Prince Jing cut him off. “We have said before that we will not discuss these things. Investigating this case is a great work of labour for you, and may also be the beginning of calamity, I am not satisfied with the guards in your manor, but it would not be appropriate for me to directly transfer some of my people to your

residence, so would you mind if I brought in a few people from outside? Don't worry, they will all be trustworthy and capable men."

"What is Your Highness saying, do you think I cannot recognize worthy men when I see them?" Shen Zhui thanked him gratefully and the two parted after a few more words, both having many things to take care of, and Prince Jing returned to his manor while Shen Zhui took a few of his men with him to take care of matters at the scene of the explosion.

The echoing ripples of the great explosion of the illegal fireworks factory were frightening to behold. Although there were attempts to play down its ties to the Crown Prince, the facts were the facts. The Emperor, in a thundering rage, ordered the Crown Prince to move to Gujia Palace and confined him there for self-reflection, forbidding him from so much as hearing news of anything that happened in the court. Because almost thirty officials were implicated in the case, Shen Zhui was officially raised to the position of Minister of Revenue, and aside from his normal responsibilities, received the imperial order to revise the revenue system in order to prevent future oversights.

This whole case had only lasted five days from explosion to conclusion, but because the evidence was iron-clad, even the Crown Prince himself found it difficult to dispute, and naturally the other ministers could find no opening to argue for him. Aside from Consort Yue's wailing in the Inner Palace, no one dared to openly intercede for the Crown Prince. But in the whole proceedings, one person's attitude caught everyone's attention, and that was the Crown Prince's arch-enemy, Prince Yu. By all logic, he was the person most delighted with the Crown Prince's massive fall, and it was completely unlike him not to add insult to injury at every possibly opportunity, but the shocking thing was, this time, he must have received some mysterious advice, as he was acting completely opposite to his normal temperament, and not only refrained from commenting on the case from start to finish, he even restrained his own officials so that the court did not disintegrate into a frenzy of attacks against the Crown Prince. The genius of this approach was that, on the surface, it made this case appear completely unrelated to the fight for the throne, and it seemed only to concern the corrupted values and stained morals of the Crown Prince's person, and as the Emperor had no reason to suspect that Prince Yu had played any part in the case, he turned the full force of his wrath onto the Crown Prince alone.

One could only guess who had taught him such a brilliant move, and very few knew that, on the day the Crown Prince relocated to his new dwelling, Prince Yu joyfully hand-picked a selection of new gifts and had them sent over to Su Zhe's manor, although they were not received in the end.

This repulsive case infuriated the Emperor, but at the same time, it also made this old man who had passed the prime of his years very tired, so that when Meng Zhi came before him at the end of the month to confess his guilt, claiming that he had not been able to complete the investigation of the murder of the internal guards before the

deadline, he felt no great emotion, and after fining him three months' worth of his salary and replacing the two Vice Commander Generals of the Imperial Guard, he let the matter pass and did not speak of it again.

Prince Jing did indeed receive a notice from the Ministry of War accusing him of misusing military supplies without notifying the ministry, and the day after he confessed to his crime in court, the new Minister of Revenue Shen Zhui made a passionate speech, mounting a furious defense on Prince Jing's behalf. Although Xiao Jingyan was willful and stubborn by nature, he had always been low-key, and recently his performance had been very good, and the number of those in court who were developing a good impression of him were growing by the day, and even the Emperor's dislike for him was lessening gradually, as the old dispute had not been raised between them for many years. In this current matter, the Emperor did not think Prince Jing had committed any great fault and so did not punish him, instead even bestowing a few words of praise for "dealing with the situation in a decisive and timely matter, and lightening the burdens of the court," and ordered him to write up an official report of the events. So the Ministry of War had not only failed to strike a blow, they had accidentally showcased the accomplishments of their opponent, and the Crown Prince's camp was only digging themselves into an even greater hole.

With the passing of the Spring Equinox, the days were growing warmer, and spring was in the air, as flowers began blooming and grass appeared on the ground once more. Some people began impatiently shedding the thick layers of their winter garments, running out of the city to enjoy the weather. Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin came a few times to visit, but Mei Changsu still couldn't stand the cold and was not very willing to leave his manor, and so the two could only go out by themselves.

Jinling was very beautiful, with plenty of natural scenery nearby perfectly suited to springtime viewing – there were the weeping willow-covered shores of Fuxian Lake, the pear blossom slopes of Manyu Hill, and the peach blossom valleys of Haishen Town. All three of these scenic areas were to the south of the city, and as a result, the road leading out of the southern Nanyue Gate was very busy, with temporary marketplaces set up to both sides of the road selling snacks, tea, crafts and toys, and business was doing very well.

On the road back to the city, Xiao Jingrui saw a group of plump little dolls made out of glazed clay, and, finding their expressions rather cute, decided to buy them for his little sister, who was becoming a little low-spirited in her pregnancy. The stall owner carefully wrapped each in paper and placed them into a small box, and Yan Yujin, who was feeling thirsty, went ahead first to a tea stall for some tea.

A few minutes later, Xiao Jingrui came over with the small box, carefully setting it down on the table before sitting down and picking up his own cup of tea. Yan Yujin eyed the box and propped his chin on his hands, smiling. "Will Qi jie like it?"

"These dolls are so cute, even I like them, so xiao Qi will certainly like them."

“You’re such a good brother, thinking of your little sister even on an outing like this. Xie Xu is going back to the academy tomorrow, why don’t you buy something for him to bring back?”

“He likes jade, I already picked out a piece for him at the jade shop and had it sent directly to our home, it’s probably reached his hands by now.”

Yan Yujin clicked his tongue. “There’s just no fault to be found with you. Actually, don’t you want Xie Xu to stay past your birthday before leaving?”

“It’s right for third brother to value his studies, and it’s only for these few years.” Xiao Jingrui looked at Yan Yujin, teasing, “You’re the one who wants him to stay, so you can keep bullying him around, isn’t that right?”

“He’s going crazy from all that studying, what with that sour air of his, always looking down his nose at everyone around him. If I don’t bully him from time to time, he’ll turn into a little fool. If he turns out to have even half of your warmth, that would be something.”

“All three of us brothers have different temperaments, it would be a strange thing indeed if we were all alike.” Xiao Jingrui picked up the teapot and refilled Yan Yujin’s cup. “Aren’t we drinking tea? So drink then, he’s not your brother, why are you so worried?”

Yan Yujin thumped his friend’s shoulder vigorously. “He’s not my brother, you are! If he turns out to be good for nothing in the future, the one who will be most worried will definitely be you, this dage!”

“Xie Xu, good for nothing?” Xiao Jingrui laughed in spite of himself. “He’s the one with the best prospects. Amongst the three of us brothers, I am the most unremarkable, without talent or accomplishment in the scholarly or martial arts, and with no plans for an official career. I’ve passed most of my life in such an idle manner, I won’t bring much glory to the Xie clan.”

“Why is the runner-up of the Gentlemen’s List suddenly being so humble? Are you fishing for compliments?” Yan Yujin pursed his lips.

“Before, I did have the heart to strive for a name and reputation for myself in jianghu. But now, I only want peace and quiet, and I have lost much of that passion, so the Gentlemen’s List will certainly not have my name on it next year.”

“It doesn’t matter if it has you or not, so long as it still has me, I rather like having such a reputation, it’s so cool.....”

Xiao Jingrui couldn't hold back his laughter and was about to retort when the guest at the table beside him got up, the large bag on his back swinging around and almost knocking the box of clay dolls onto the ground. Fortunately, Xiao Jingrui's hands were as quick as his eyes, and he grabbed them just in time, murmuring to himself, "Lucky catch, lucky catch."

"They're only clay dolls, and the stall is just over there, if they break, you can just go buy another set, why are you so worked up?"

"This was the last set, if they break, where would I find another?" Xiao Jingrui carefully placed the box aside. "Xiao Qi has been unhappy for some time, I want her to see these dolls and be happy for awhile."

"Unhappy for some time?" Yan Yujin's pupils seemed to darken slightly. "Is it because of...Brother Qingyao's illness?"

"Yes," Xiao Jingrui let out a sigh. "Ever since Qingyao dage suddenly fell ill last month, it has taken him until now to show some improvement, and though we all persuaded her to relax, and that everything would turn out alright, it is still difficult for xiao Qi not to worry."

"Just what...illness does Brother Qingyao really have? I remember he looked fine one day, and then the next day, I heard he was seriously ill."

"The physician said it was a stagnation of the blood, and that he would recover with careful rest."

Yan Yujin looked at him deeply, and spat out three words. "You believe that?"

Xiao Jingrui stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"A stagnation of the blood..." Yan Yujin smiled to himself. "I have also visited Brother Qingyao a few times, and to tell the truth, you are the only one who hasn't gotten suspicious....."

"He is my own brother, what is there to be suspicious about? Should I suspect Qingyao dage of faking his illness?"

Yan Yujin looked at him impatiently and went straight to the point, saying crisply, "Jingrui, that's not an illness, it's an injury!"

## CHAPTER 78

### *Brothers*

“Injury?” Xiao Jingrui was shocked. “How did Qingyao dage get an injury?”

“You ask me, who am I supposed to ask?”

“Weren’t you just acting like you knew everything?”

“How could I know everything, if there were really people on this earth who knew everything, that would be the Master of Langya Hall and that Brother Su of ours.....” Yan Yujin rolled his eyes, “Ai, let’s go ask Brother Su, perhaps he really will know how Brother Qingyao got injured.....”

“Tsk,” Xiao Jingrui rolled his eyes. “What proof do you have that Qingyao dage is injured? He is a jianghu man, there’s no shame in being injured, so why would he pretend to be sick and lie to everyone?”

“Not necessarily.....what if he was doing something he shouldn’t have been doing when he got injured?”

“Yujin!” Xiao Jingrui’s face darkened. “What do you mean by that? My Qingyao dage is chivalrous and heroic, what shameful thing could he be a part of?”

“Why are you so angry?” Yan Yujin glared at him. “When I was young, I teased a girl once and you said I’d done something terribly shameful, and you’ve kept saying that all these years, but have I ever gotten angry?”

“You...I.....” Xiao Jingrui didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “I was just joking!”

“Then how do you know I’m not joking?”

Xiao Jingrui gave up dealing with this person and only shrugged, softening his tone as he said, “Yujin, never joke about my dage like that again.....”



“Alright, alright,” Yan Yujin waved a hand and knocked over the cups on the table, and was just about to say something when a call was suddenly heard from the direction of the main road.

“Boss, two cups of tea, please.”

“Right-o!” The owner of the tea house filled two cups and brought them over to a plain-looking carriage stopped at the side of the road. A hand reached out from the window and drew the curtain aside slightly to accept the tea, then a moment later, the empty cups and some money were handed back through the curtain and the carriage immediately departed, heading in the direction of the city.

Yan Yujin clutched his cup, forgetting to drink as he gazed dazedly after the carriage.

“What it is?” Xiao Jingrui took the cup from his hands and set it down, worried he would spill it over himself. “Was there something strange about that carriage?”

“Just now.....just now, when the curtain was drawn aside, I saw that behind the person who wanted the tea...there sat another person.....”

If Xie Bi had been sitting there, he would have immediately retorted, “What’s so strange about people sitting in a carriage? Did you expect to see dogs inside instead?” But it was Xiao Jingrui sitting there beside him, and so there was only a gentle inquiry, “Who was it?”

“I don’t know if my eyes were mistaken.....” Yan Yujin grasped his friend by the arm. “It was He Wenxin!”

“How is that possible?” Xiao Jingrui stared back at him. “He Wenxin is about to be executed in the Spring Execution, he should be in the prisons, how could he be going in and out of the city?”

“That’s why I thought I was wrong.....could it be someone who looks like him?”

“Maybe, there are so many people in this world, there must be some who look similar.”

“Never mind, perhaps it really was just a trick of the light.....” Yan Yujin stood and shook out his sleeves. “We’ve rested long enough, let’s go.”

Xiao Jingrui paid for their tea and picked up his little box, and the two joined the crowds heading for the city, appearing relaxed and at ease, and as they passed by a stall selling fruits and candies, Xiao Jingrui casually picked up a potful, and no one knew why he was buying so many of these ordinary snacks. As they neared the gates of the city, there was a larger crowd, likely because of the routine inspections at the

gates, but the flow of people still managed to enter the city in a reasonably calm manner. The guards at the city gates belonged to the Capital Patrol, and the Capital Patrol was controlled by the Marquis of Ning, and when they saw the First Young Master of their Marquis' household, they all bowed in greeting. Xiao Jingrui had never carried arrogant airs, and he only smiled and nodded, handing over the food in his hands to their leader and instructing him to "share these snacks with your brothers after the shift is over" before passing through the gates with Yan Yujin.

"So it turns out you bought those for them...." The son of the Imperial Uncle laughed and nudged his friend with his elbow. "People who don't know you will say you know how to suck up to people, but in fact, you just have a kind heart."

"You forget, when we left the city this morning, it was already these seven uncles standing there at the gates, and he mentioned that the fruits and candies outside the city are very good and told us to try some. I just brought him some since we were passing by anyway, what does that have to do with a kind heart?"

"I did forget." Yan Yujin gave an exaggerated sigh. "Oh Jingrui, you are so considerate, whoever marries you in the future will certainly be lucky indeed."

"Shut up," Xiao Jingrui laughed as he shoved him. As they tussled, a pair of riders suddenly thundered down the road, and the two friends hurried to one side, looking after the horses with a frown. "Why is the Ministry of Justice in such a hurry?"

"The day after tomorrow is the Spring Execution, the platform for the execution was built yesterday outside the market at the eastern part of the city, and a guard was set up around the area yesterday. Those two must have been hurrying over for the change in shift." Yan Yujin looked at the smoke in the distance. "I guess.....the Earl of Wen will come to watch the execution...."

"His son was murdered, it's natural for him to be so involved." Xiao Jingrui shook his head and sighed, "If that He Wenxin wasn't so arrogant all the time, he would not have committed a crime like this murder.....but no matter what, he deserves the punishment he has been given."

Yan Yujin narrowed his eyes, seeming to be in deep thought, but did not say anything else. The two split up at the door to the Yan manor, and when Xiao Jingrui arrived home, he only stopped in his rooms to change before going over to the western courtyard where the Zhuo family was staying.

Zhuo Dingfeng was not there, and in the courtyard, Mistress Zhuo and the heavily pregnant Xie Qi were sitting under the cherry blossoms amidst a pile of needlework, but when she saw Xiao Jingrui come in, Mistress Zhuo immediately put down the embroidery in her hands and beckoned her son over to her side.

“Mum, how are you today?” Xiao Jingrui greeted her, straightening immediately. Compared to the reserved and cooler Grand Princess Liyang, the mistress of the Zhuo family was even more motherly, and had always doted on Jingrui even more than Qingyao, and now she took his hand and asked gently, “Did you have fun today? Are you hungry? Do you want some pastries?”

“Rui ge really is Mum’s favourite,” Xie Qi couldn’t hold back her smile. “You are the eldest son of the Xie family, but the youngest son of Mum here. Go ahead and act as spoiled as you like then, just pretend your sister-in-law<sup>131</sup> isn’t sitting over here.”

Xiao Jingrui couldn’t help laughing too. “To tell you the truth, although you have been married for a few years now, I still see you as my little sister, not as my older sister-in-law. Here, I brought you these, see if you like them.”

Xie Qi tore open the wrapping and took out the group of twelve little clay dolls, arranging them on the table, an expression of delight on her face. “They are so cute, thank you, Rui ge.”

“In the future, Qi mei will have this many adorable little babies too....”

“Rui ge, please, there are twelve here, if I give birth to so many, I’ll become like those.....” Although Xie Qi was a bright and lively girl, she couldn’t help trailing off and blushing as she giggled.

“That’s right, where’s Qingyi mei?”

“She went out.”

“Oh?”

“What, only you’re allowed to have outings, other people can’t go out? Bi ge went with her, don’t worry.”

“But when I tried to invite Second Brother this morning, he said he had something to do, and couldn’t come with me?”

Xie Qi laughed. “He just didn’t want to go with you, pay attention, will you?”

“Rui’er is honest, why are you laughing at him?” Mistress Zhuo hurriedly intervened, and brushed Xiao Jingrui’s forehead as she continued, “When are you going to bring back a pretty little girl for your mum, then, eh?”

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<sup>131</sup> Xie Qi is Jingrui’s younger sister (on the Xie side), but she is also his older sister-in-law because she’s married to Zhuo Qingyao (Jingrui’s older brother on the Zhuo side).

“Mum.....” Xiao Jingrui cast about frantically for a change of topic. “How is Qingyao dage’s illness today? Qi mei looks so relaxed, I guess he must be doing better?”

“Much better. He had some medicine at noon and went back to sleep, he’ll probably be awake by now, you can go and see.”

Xiao Jingrui seized the opportunity and escaped to the house, the sound of Xie Qi’s laughter drifting after him.

Zhuo Qingyao and his wife lived in the eastern cottage, which held a bedroom and a living room, and the fragrance of herbal medicine still lingered in the air. Because the windows were all shut, it was a little dim, but this was no difficulty for Xiao Jingrui, who had exceedingly good vision, and as soon as he walked in, he saw that the patient on the bed was sitting up, his eyes open.

“Dage, you’re awake?” Xiao Jingrui hurried over to help him sit, putting a cushion behind him for support.

“You were all laughing so happily outside, I woke up a while ago.” Zhuo Qingyao’s smile was a little weak, but he was looking much better, and Xiao Jingrui went over and opened a few of the windows, letting in some air, then returned to sit by the side of the bed, asking concernedly, “Dage, are you feeling better?”

“I can already get up and move about, but Mum and xiao Qi are making me stay in bed.”

“They’re just worried about you.” Xiao Jingrui saw that Zhuo Qingyao seemed to be favouring his waist as he moved, and as Yan Yujin’s words flashed across his mind, his face fell a little.

“What is it?” Zhuo Qingyao put a hand on his shoulder and asked in a low voice, “Did something bad happen when you were out?”

“No.....” Xiao Jingrui forced a smile and was quiet for a moment, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Dage, have you fought with anyone since you came to the capital?”

“No,” Although Zhuo Qingyao answered immediately, something seemed to flash across his gaze. “Why do you ask?”

“Then.....” Xiao Jingrui hesitated for a moment, then suddenly gritted his teeth and said, “then how were you injured?”

His question was so blunt that Zhuo Qingyao was taken aback, and after a long moment, he sighed and said, “You’ve realized I’m injured? Well, don’t tell Mum or xiao Qi, I’ll be fine with a little rest.”

“Did my dad ask you to do something?” Xiao Jingrui asked, gripping Zhuo Qingyao’s hand tightly.

“Jingrui, don’t worry so much, Father-in-law is doing all of this for the country and for the people.....”

Xiao Jingrui stared dazedly at his dage, feeling a chill in his heart. Just what kind of a thing was this fight for the throne, that it could drive people so crazy and suck the family and friends he cared so much about so far into its depths? His father, Xie Bi, Brother Su, dage.....and after all this fighting, what would they obtain in the end?

Qi mei was about to give birth, but his father had sent his own son-in-law out into danger, and when he came back injured, he hadn’t even dared tell his own family the truth, so how could it have been anything honourable? For the country and for the people – could such sober words really be used to describe the current situation?

“Jingrui, are you letting your thoughts get carried away again?” Zhuo Qingyao gently patted his little brother on the cheek. “It is because you have always been kind and generous of heart, and because Mum and Mother-in-law always favoured you, that Father-in-law has never thought to discuss the great things he has planned with you. Prince Yu, in his confusion, is coveting the highest position, and as the Pillar of the Court, how could Father-in-law stand aside and not share the burdens of his lord? You have grown up, and your scholarly and martial abilities are both outstanding, so sometimes, you will have to take the initiative to give Father-in-law a little help.”

Xiao Jingrui’s mouth tightened, his gaze growing unusually guarded. He was kind and generous, it was true, but he was not totally unaware of his father’s intentions and the situation in the court. Hearing Qingyao’s words, he knew that he, and even his Zhuo dad, had already been completely taken in by his Xie dad, and that it would be useless to try to convince him otherwise. The only thing he did not know was what it was that Qingyao dage had taken such a great risk to accomplish.....

“Dage, your Tianquan swordsmanship is far superior to mine, and few in jianghu are your match, so what kind of a person was it who managed to injure you so badly?”

Zhuo Qingyao sighed. “I’m ashamed to say, although I lost to him, I didn’t even get a good look at his face....”

“Then where was it that dage received this injury?”

Zhuo Qingyao's brows furrowed and he shook his head. "Father-in-law ordered me not to tell you certain things.....I hear you are close with that Chief Mei of Jiangzuo?"

Xiao Jingrui muttered to himself and nodded, "Yes."

"That Chief Mei is truly a remarkable talent, Father-in-law originally thought that he could become a strong support for the Crown Prince, but who could have predicted that this person would be such a poor judge of character, and actually choose Prince Yu instead.....Jingrui, I know he has taken care of you in the past, and you are a person who remembers kindnesses done to you, so of course you have a close relationship with him now, but you must also remember and keep in your heart the righteousness and justice of the court."

Xiao Jingrui couldn't stop himself. "Dage, do you really agree with the things the Crown Prince is doing...."

"Do not speak nonsense, servants do not discuss the actions of their lords. Father-in-law has already told me, in the matter of the illegal fireworks factory, the Crown Prince was framed."

Xiao Jingrui knew that his dage valued traditional ideas of chivalry and loyalty, and that it would be exceedingly difficult to change his mind once he had made his decision. As he was still injured, he did not want to anger him, and so he only lowered his head and answered quietly, "Yes."

## CHAPTER 79

### *A Situation at the Gallows*

As the two brothers talked, the door to the outer courtyard opened and Xie Qi came in slowly, so they immediately changed the topic, turning the conversation lightly to idle matters instead. When it was time for dinner, Mistress Zhuo came and led Xiao Jingrui away to the dining room, while Zhuo Qingyao and his wife stayed in their own rooms to eat, because it was still difficult for him to move about.

By this time, Xie Bi and Zhuo Qingyi had arrived home, but Xie Yu and Zhuo Dingfeng were still not back, though no one knew why, and they had only sent word saying not to wait for them, and so at dinner, the only elders in the room were the two mothers, and the atmosphere was even more casual than usual.

Xiao Jingrui was the child most doted on by both mothers, and this became obvious at the dinner table, especially with Mistress Zhuo, who always made sure to keep his bowl filled with his favourite foods. Xie Bi, sitting to one side, grumbled teasingly, “Xie Xu and I are here too, can anyone see us?”

Grand Princess Liyang, always reserved, only looked at him and smiled, but Mistress Zhuo swiftly dropped a chicken leg into his bowl, smiling as she said, “Alright, here’s yours, eat up then. Don’t you young people usually eat like wolves?”

Xiao Jingrui considerately put some food into the bowl of his Third Brother, who had lowered his head and was eating silently, as he turned with a smile to Xie Bi and said, “You are going to be my mum’s son-in-law, so you will soon be much more precious than I – fathers and mothers always favour their sons-in-law over their own sons, just like how Mother always favours Qingyao dage over me.”

For purposes of differentiation, when everyone was together, Xiao Jingrui always called Mistress Zhuo “mum”, and Grand Princess Liyang “mother”, and at his words, Grand Princess Liyang laughed in spite of herself and said, “Qingyao has always been more sensible than you, of course I must favour him more.”

Xie Bi was about to speak, but was kicked subtly by a blushing Zhuo Qingyi, and so he changed the topic, talking about the things they had seen on their outing today, and the room filled with warmth and happiness as the conversation went on.

The quietest person at dinner was Xie Xu, his cool and haughty manner taking after his mother, Grand Princess Liyang. He was meticulous and attentive to detail in everything he did, and even at meals, he concentrated on eating and never spoke much. After dinner, he sat quietly keeping them company for a while, and then bowed to his elders and bade his older siblings a good evening before returning to his room to study, so that even the normally steady and unexcitable Xiao Jingrui wanted to call Yan Yujin over and bring him into Xie Xu's rooms to stir up a bit of trouble.

"Xu'er is so young, and already keeps such orderly habits," Mistress Zhuo praised to Grand Princess Liyang, "he will certainly be a great talent in the future."

The Grand Princess smiled, but there was a hint of sadness in her gaze as she said quietly, "Xu'er loves his studies, but he has always thought too highly of himself, and has not yet realized that there are many people in this world more talented than he, so I fear he will have a hard lesson to learn one day."

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi both thought of the little lesson Xie Xu had already received at the Su manor, and their eyes met, but both silently agreed not to mention it. They sat there talking until the second watch of the night, but Marquis Xie and Zhuo Dingfeng had still not returned to the manor. Xiao Jingrui, worried, escorted his mothers back to their rooms and then immediately ordered for a horse, instructing Xie Bi to wait at home while he prepared to go out to look for them. Just as he was about to ride out the main door, his two fathers returned.

"Why are you wearing your cloak? Are you going out at this time of night?" Xie Yu asked with his eyebrows raised, his tone a little stern.

Xie Bi, who had come to see Xiao Jingrui out, hurriedly explained, "Dage was worried because Father and Uncle Zhuo still hadn't come back, and wanted to go out to look for you....."

"What's there to look for? Even if something had really happened to us, what could a child like you do to help?"

"Jingrui is a filial son, Brother Xie, don't be too harsh on him." Compared to Xie Yu's sternness, Zhuo Dingfeng always treated the children with affection, and he patted Xiao Jingrui on the shoulder and said warmly, "Thank you for worrying. It's late, go to bed."

Xie Yu appeared to be in a good mood tonight, and he actually smiled as he said, "Brother Zhuo, you always spoil the children."

Ever since the Crown Prince's troubles recently, Xie Yu practically never smiled at home anymore, so Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi were both astonished, wondering what



had happened to make him so happy but not daring to ask, and so they could only make silent guesses as they bowed and left quietly.

Early the next morning, the Third Young Master Xie Xu left to return to Songshan Academy. In the afternoon, Grand Princess Liyang decided to return to her Princess' residence<sup>132</sup> to attend to her greenhouses, and all the women in the manor aside from Xie Qi went along with her. Xie Bi was detained by his work in the manor, and so there was only Xiao Jingrui to accompany them as escort. The greenhouses were bursting with spring flowers – winter daphnes, white Yulan magnolias, jaspers, cherry blossoms, lilacs, azaleas, Chinese redbuds, and cherry-apples all in full bloom. Everyone felt that one day was not enough to admire the beauty of all the spring flora, and so they stayed the night in the Princess' residence, and spent a second day enjoying the scenery, so that it was almost evening by the time they returned to the manor on the second day.

Because they had spent two entire days amusing themselves, the women were all tired, and Xiao Jingrui only escorted them to the door of the inner courtyard before retiring himself. He went first to the western courtyard to visit Zhuo Qingyao, and then returned to his own rooms, preparing to spend the evening reading quietly.

Who could have predicted that, after only a couple of pages, a familiar voice drifted in from the courtyard, calling his name, sounding very excited.

Xiao Jingrui smiled ruefully and put down his book, then went to the door and invited his friend in, asking, "What's the news? Come in and sit down before you speak."

Yan Yujin couldn't wait to sit, grabbing Xiao Jingrui by the arm and blurting out, "I wasn't mistaken!"

"Wasn't mistaken about what?"

"The day before yesterday, when we saw that carriage outside the city, the person inside was He Wenxin, I wasn't mistaken!"

"Oh?" Xiao Jingrui stared at him. "That means he escaped from prison? .....But wait, if he escaped from prison, why would he be heading back towards the capital?"

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<sup>132</sup> I remember there was an explanation about this somewhere but I don't remember translating it, so it's probably somewhere from Chapters 1-26 on Levy's site (I think it's really early on, because Xiao Jingrui goes to pick her up from this residence the day after he gets back to the capital with MCS). The gist of it is that Liyang has her own residence as a princess, but after she married Xie Yu, she moved in with him to the Marquis' residence, and her own residence is kept as a kind of private flower garden with greenhouses and everything, and it's become a popular attraction in the capital for noble ladies.

“He did escape, but he escaped before the new year, so that day when we saw him, he had been caught and was being taken back to the city!”

“Escaped before the new year? But we never heard any news, and the Ministry of Justice didn’t put out any notices for capture....”

“The Ministry of Justice let him out themselves, of course they didn’t send out notices!” Yan Yujin picked up Xiao Jingrui’s cup of tea and drained it. “Let me tell you, He Wenxin’s father, He Jingzhong, conspired with Qi Min of the Ministry of Justice, and found a substitute who looked like He Wenxin and exchanged him for the real He Wenxin, and then hid him far away. Once the Spring Execution arrived, the substitute was to be killed and buried, and all evidence buried with him, and that rascal was going to live out his life under a new identity far away from the capital!”

“That’s not possible, is it?” Xiao Jingrui’s eyes were wide with shock. “That.....that is too treacherous.....”

“It does sound extremely reckless, but that Ministry of Justice really did it, and now that you mention it, this Qi Min is really something, I wonder whether he came up with this idea all by himself....”

Xiao Jingrui was puzzling over something, and he crossed his arms as he asked, “Yujin.....this all sounds like a very well-hidden secret, how do you know about it?”

“It’s not just me, the whole city knows about this by now!” Yan Yujin gave him a look. “The Spring Execution today unfolded like a play, but you always hide away at home so of course you don’t know anything.”

“You went to the market to watch the Spring Execution?”

“I.....I didn’t go either.....what’s there to see about people being killed.....” Yan Yujin scratched his head, embarrassed. “But my friend went, and he saw the entire thing from start to finish so he told me the whole story.....do you want to hear it or not?”

“Yes, something as important as this, of course I do.”

Yan Yujin’s spirits immediately lifted, his smile widening with delight as he said excitedly, “They say that there was a massive crowd at the market, and the Ministry of Justice had deployed every man under its command. The supervising official was Qi Min, of course, and he sat on the lookout tower facing the platform, handing down the

red-inked names<sup>133</sup> one by one, and every time a sheet of paper with a name fell to the ground, a criminal's head struck the ground as well. So they kept cutting and cutting, and then it was He Wenxin's turn, and after they verified his identity, Qi Min was about to hand over the blood signature when your dad suddenly shouted, 'Hold!'

"Who did you say?" Xiao Jingrui jumped in shock. "My dad?"

"Yes, your dad, Marquis Xie. He was also on the lookout tower, and after he shouted for the executor to stop, he asked Qi Min, 'Minister Qi, human life is beyond value, are you sure beyond a doubt that this person is the criminal?'" Yan Yujin imitated Xie Yu's manner, copying him with about seven to eight parts accuracy. "As soon as he asked this, Qi Min's face paled, but the arrow had been strung and he had no way to turn back, so he could only grit his teeth and declare that he was certain there was no mistake, and shout for the executor to hurry and do his job. Your dad then shouted out, 'Hold your sword,' and at that moment, a carriage was escorted to the side of the platform by the Capital Patrol, and several of the soldiers dragged out a person from the carriage, can you guess who it was?"

Xiao Jingrui said, "He Wenxin."

"That's right! It was the real He Wenxin. But his father and Qi Min both refused to admit it was him, and insisted that this one was the fake. Your dad just laughed and brought out three more people – the head jailer, the middleman for the substitute, and a woman. The woman started to scream and cry, and then the fake He Wenxin on the platform couldn't stand it any more and suddenly screamed out that he was not the convicted criminal, and that he didn't want to die..... Imagine it, the place was filled to bursting with spectators, and all of a sudden, the scene was descending into chaos, and Qi Min looking like he was about to faint. The Earl of Wen also came to watch the execution, and when he saw what the Ministry of Justice had done, he was nearly jumping up and down in fury. He grabbed onto He Jingzhong and Qi Min and refused to let them go, shouting about taking them to see the Emperor. In the end, it was your dad who sent in the Capital Patrol to take control of the scene and prevented it from deteriorating. Later, all the ministers went into the palace, and they're probably waiting outside Taihe Hall to see the Emperor right now."

This was truly a tale he had never heard before, and Xiao Jingrui sat in a daze for a few long moments before asking, "Do you really think Minister He and the Ministry of Justice came up with this plot to substitute a criminal on death row?"

"I think it's true." Yan Yujin lowered his voice. "Your dad is such a cautious person, without iron-clad evidence, the most he would do would be to present this to the Emperor in confidence, he would not have acted so publicly before such an

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<sup>133</sup> it is a Chinese custom to never write names in red, because you only write names in red-ink when you sentence someone to die (something like that); also called a 'blood signature'

audience. For the Ministry of Appointments, probably only He Jingzhong will lose his position, but the Ministry of Justice is another story.....”

“That’s true, if other similar cases are discovered in the ensuing investigation, Minister Qi’s crime and sentence will be even heavier,” Xiao Jingrui murmured. Suddenly, he remembered how happy his father had been two nights ago. Looking back now, that must have been because they had caught He Wenxin.....the Ministries of Appointments and Justice supported Prince Yu, and so this prince who had had so much success recently had received two heavy blows with this one case, and it would likely take him a while to recover.....

“These heads of departments are really so despicable,” Yan Yujin shook his head and sighed. “When did the ministers of the court descend so low? With people like this helping the lords rule the kingdom, can the kingdom really be ruled well?”

Xiao Jingrui lowered his head in deep thought, then suddenly said, “Can you blame the court officials? The root of the problem lies in the lords – if the source is pure, the waters will flow clear, but if the source is corrupted, then the waters will be turbid. In this court, anyone who treats others with sincerity is called naive, and anyone who doesn’t play the game of strategy is seen as childish. With an atmosphere like this, what else can they do?”

At his words, Yan Yujin gaped at him open-mouthed, before finally replying, “You’re full of surprises. I always thought you never paid attention to court politics, but then you come out with something like that. Let me offer you a bow to show my respect and admiration.”

“Quit teasing me,” Xiao Jingrui glared at him. “Those words were not said by me, it is only that I keep thinking.....he was right.....”

“Who?” Yan Yujin thought for a moment, then asked hesitatingly, “Brother Su?”

“Ng. We travelled thousands of miles together, there was nothing we did not discuss on the road. This is something he said to me late one night by candlelight, after Xie Bi had gone to sleep.....I just don’t understand, if Brother Su has such values and principles, why did he choose Prince Yu?”

“He probably didn’t have much choice?” Yan Yujin shrugged. “Is there much difference between Prince Yu and the Crown Prince?”

Xiao Jingrui nodded, looking a little helpless. “Brother Su once said, when you establish a monarch, you establish a set of morals, and virtuous monarchs and upright ministers are the blessing and fortune of a kingdom. Treat your people with kindness and your ministers with courtesy. Monarchs who are always jealous and suspicious, and who act harshly and mercilessly to their subordinates will never be remembered

as worthy rulers by the generations to come. I think Brother Su's struggle lies in not being able to support a lord with values and morals he can respect.....”

Yan Yujin's gaze flashed and he looked as if he was about to speak, but in the end, he only tapped his fingers against the cover of the teapot on the table, fiddling with it idly, and then suddenly stood up, throwing their previous conversation to the winds as he said abruptly, “Jingrui, the moon is beautiful tonight, come with me to Miaoyin House?”

## CHAPTER 80

### *Touring the Manor*

The Emperor's edict regarding the case of the 'switched convicts' was officially released ten days later. The Minister of Appointments, He Jingzhong, was relieved of his position, and, for the plots he had conceived for his son's sake, would be demoted to a minor government post in Yue province, while He Wenxin would be executed according to the law. The Minister of Justice, Qi Min, had acted with total disregard for the lives of the people, failing in his duty and circumventing the law, and so would be imprisoned and sentenced to exile. Other officials of the Ministry of Justice, both high ranked and low, were likewise found guilty of the same crime. Although Prince Yu was not implicated, these were the only two among the Six Departments of the court which he held comfortably in the palm of his hand, and which accomplished whatever he asked of them, and with this one case, he had lost both Ministers all at once, and so, besides feeling regret and sorrow, his hatred for Xie Yu burned even hotter, seeming to sink into his very bones.

Someone analyzed the respective losses of the two camps in the fight for the crown in the past half year, and realized that, although it seemed as if the Crown Prince had suffered repeated blows recently while Prince Yu wandered around in high spirits, with this last case, there was, in the end, not much difference between the losses experienced by each side.

On the Crown Prince's side, his mother consort had been demoted, he had lost the court debate, he had been stripped of the Minister of Rites and the Minister of Revenue, and he himself had been confined to Guijia Palace. On Prince Yu's side, the land infringement case had toppled the Duke of Qing, the Empress was receiving the cold shoulder in the palace, and now, he had lost the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Appointments. Everyone said it was normal to win some and lose some, but the strange thing was, these two fought like wildfire, attacking each other endlessly, but no one could see what they had gained, and at most, you could only say Prince Yu had improved his relationship a little with the imperial Mu residence and with Prince Jing.

But at the moment, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu did not have time to sit down and count their gains and losses. They were currently investing all their energy into one single matter, and that was how to place their own people into the vacancies in the

Ministries of Justice and Appointments, as neither could afford to allow the other to place his own people into the open positions.

The Crown Prince was currently confined in Gujia palace for reflection and did not dare interfere directly in this matter, so he could only act through other people, and inevitably, he was only at about seventy percent of his usual strength. Prince Yu, on the other hand, had hand-picked the two previous Ministers who had just been dismissed, and so the Emperor was currently rather unimpressed with his judgement, and naturally, Prince Yu was not in a position to receive anything he asked for, as he had done in the past. And so, although the two struggled day and night, no conclusion could be reached.

The Ministry of Appointments had only lost a minister, and the operations of the ministry itself were not disrupted, but the Ministry of Justice had lost half its people all at once, and if a head was not appointed soon, the situation would disintegrate into chaos. The Emperor was greatly troubled over this problem, and at his age, headaches and dizziness naturally accompanied stresses of the mind and heart, and soon, all the princes and princesses were arriving at the palace to inquire about his health. Prince Jing and Princess Jingning came together, and when the matter which was causing the Emperor so much trouble was brought up, Prince Jing casually mentioned the official from the Ministry of Justice he had worked with while handling the land infringement case, Cai Quan. At this reminder, the Emperor suddenly remembered this person had been in charge of writing the report for the case, and had left a very good impression on him, and after a hurried investigation, it was confirmed that he had not been implicated in the case of the exchanged convicts, and so the Emperor immediately summoned him to court. After interviewing him for an hour, he saw that Cai Quan possessed clarity of thought and a thorough knowledge of criminal law, displaying good insight while answering his questions, and was indeed a rare talent. It was only that he did not have much qualifications or experience, and did not come from any notable background, and so he had never risen in the ranks. The Emperor had found his solution. The next day, Cai Quan was raised to a third-ranked official and appointed temporary Minister, and was ordered to take charge of all necessary efforts to resume the normal operations of the Ministry of Justice within a month, and to clear up the backlog of work that had accumulated in the meantime. The bickering Crown Prince and Prince Yu had no idea where this Cai Quan had come from, and both initially thought he was from the other's camp, and could not believe their ears when their investigations revealed that this person truly did not belong to any party, and had remained neutral.

After stabilizing the Ministry of Justice, the Emperor turned his attention to the choice of the new Minister of Appointments, and after many days of consideration, he finally accepted the suggestion of Head Secretariat Liu Cheng and transferred former Imperial Censor Shi Yuanqing into the post, whose mourning period for a parent had ended half a year ago, but who had not been able to return to his former position yet. Shi Yuanqing was an observant and meticulous man, and was known for being honest and upright, and so he had butted heads with both the Crown Prince and Prince Yu in

the past, and had even contradicted the Emperor before, and so the Emperor was not very fond of him. No one knew what Head Secretariat Liu Cheng had said to convince the Emperor this time, to make him put aside his personal preference in appointing this important office.

But the frenzy of the court did not disturb the peace and quiet of Mei Changsu's manor. Although he was now publicly recognized as Prince Yu's strategist, the losses Prince Yu had experienced in the case of the 'switched convicts' was entirely due to his own carelessness and underestimation of his enemy, and as he had not mentioned the matter to the qilin prodigy beforehand, naturally, he could not hold him responsible after the fact. As for the fight to seize the two Ministers' positions, Prince Yu had actually come to seek Mei Changsu's advice, but in the end, he was from the jianghu world, and did not have people in the court he could use, and so he could only analyze and suggest a few appropriate choices, and could give no practical help this time. Fortunately, Prince Yu had not placed high expectations on him in this matter, and so after listening to his views, he returned hurriedly to his palace to continue working.

As a result, in these warming spring days, Mei Changsu turned all his attention onto one task, which was to bring in artisans and smiths to renovate the Su manor's gardens.

The blueprint of the new gardens had been designed by Mei Changsu's own hand, and the landscape was covered with plants matched in height and size, complemented with fountains and stone gardens, a new large lily pond, a bridge, and even a small pavilion, and there were to be a dozen huge, ancient trees brought in, as well as flowers according to every season. The progress of the reconstruction was exceedingly quick, and the entire process took only a month from start to finish.

On the second day after Su Manor completed its renovations, Mei Changsu good-naturedly invited some guests from the capital with whom he had had previous relations to see the new gardens, and at his special invitation, the two Xie brothers attended with Zhuo Qingyao and Zhuo Qingyi, the Mu siblings came with a few high-ranking generals of their own manor, Meng Zhi brought his wife, and Xia Dong even dragged along Xia Chun, who had only just returned to the capital. Although Yan Yujin did not bring anyone with him, he brought an exquisite little canoe, and Fei Liu spent the entire day in it, floating rapturously on the lily pond.

With the host's warm reception, the atmosphere quickly became joyful and lively. All the guests were of no ordinary background, and more importantly, there was a whole chaotic mess of different positions and views, and everyone had some relationship with everyone else, and so, on the contrary, they all veered away from court topics and found casual subjects to chat about instead, and as a result, there was a rare ease and comfort to the whole environment. Among this crowd, Yan Yujin was the first to create excitement, and Mu Qing was of a similar temperament, and the two were matched like peas in a pod. As for the others, Zhuo Qingyao was famed for his



jianghu reputation, the Xuanjing officers were experienced in the ways of the world, Princess Nihuang was a legend in her own right, and host Mei Changsu was an even greater mystery.....no one could have thought that there could be so much joy and delight in such a strange combination of people.

After touring the gardens, lunch was laid out on a half-open terrace. The dishes were simple and light, but the most curious part was that each dish was accompanied by a different type of wine, and wine and dish together combined to give a most distinctive flavour. Amongst the guests, only Xie Bi, who was fond of tasting wine, could name most of the vintages present, while the others only knew one or two at most.

After the meal, Mei Changsu ordered for tea to be brought and personally brewed a pot, and after everyone had received a cup, he said with a gentle smile, "It is dull to sit around like this, I thought of a game last night, I wonder if anyone would be interested?"

No one would turn down the chance to hear about a game thought up by Mister Mei of Jiangzuo, even if he or she did not want to play, and Yan Yujin was the first to reply, "Good, good, Brother Su, tell us about it."

"I once had the good fortune to acquire a bamboo scroll of zither music, and after studying it for a long time, I was able to ascertain that it was a score of the long-lost 'The Scattering of Guangling'. Last night, I hid this score in a certain place in this manor, and I will give this score as a gift to whoever finds it first." As Mei Changsu spoke, he rolled the cup in his hand, gently dissipating its fragrance. "As for those guests who have no interest in the treasure hunt, let me keep you company here with tea and conversation, and we will wait to see who will claim the prize today."

As soon as he heard the words, 'The Scattering of Guangling', Yan Yujin's eyes lit up, the little Lord Mu was young and liked to play, and so he looked excited as well, and although Xie Bi was not interested in the music score, he thought going off on a treasure hunt would be more fun than sitting around drinking tea, and so these three were the first to stand. Xiao Jingrui originally didn't have much preference either way, but as he hesitated, Yan Yujin suddenly turned a glare towards him, and he knew his friend figured adding another person to the team would increase their chances of winning, so he smiled and put down his teacup, then got to his feet, pulling Zhuo Qingyao up with him. Zhuo Qingyi looked interested, but as a well-bred young noble lady, she was embarrassed to join in the excitement, and so sat unmoving at her place, blushing and glancing furtively at Princess Nihuang.

The Princess, exceptionally observant as always, took one look at her and knew what she was thinking, and so she smiled and stood, saying, "Miss Zhuo, would you care to accompany me?"

Zhuo Qingyi struggled to contain the joy on her face as she hurriedly stood and curtsied, saying, “It would be my honour to accept the Princess’ invitation.”

Seeing the Princess and little lord walking away, the generals of the imperial Mu residence stopped trying to contain their own eagerness, and immediately got up and followed. And so, with only this bit of effort, the terrace was almost cleared.

Mei Changsu spun his tea cup with the tip of his fingers and smiled, “It looks like the only ones willing to sit around with me drinking tea are Meng dage, Meng dasau,<sup>134</sup> and Officer Xia Dong....”

“How can that be, there’s still Officer Xia Chun...” Meng Zhi turned towards the eastern part of the terrace as he spoke, and stopped, taken aback. “Where’s Officer Xia Chun?”

“He left a long time ago,” Xia Dong couldn’t help laughing. “Brother Chun is obsessed with music, so as soon as he heard there was an ancient zither score, how could he sit around? Before Mister Su had even finished speaking, he had disappeared like a gust of wind.....poof....”

“Right, right, right,” Meng Zhi smacked his head with his hand. “I forgot, last time, Officer Xia Chun even got into an argument with His Majesty over a piece of ancient music.”

“Officer Xia Chun is an expert in the arts of divination, and possesses such ingenuity and skill, he will see through my little camouflaging at a glance, so it looks like Yujin is going to be disappointed today,” Mei Changsu smiled.

“It’s difficult to say, Mister Su’s manor is not small, and whether one starts out in the right direction really depends on luck.” Xia Dong raised an eyebrow, a gleam in her eyes as she laughed evilly, “Yujin that little rascal dragged along so many helpers that, if anyone besides Brother Chun finds the ancient score, he’ll find a way to weasel it out of them in the end. So if you look at it like this, his chance of success is not low.”

Mei Changsu smiled but did no reply, lowering his head to tend the teapot and refilling everyone’s cups with fresh tea, idly turning the conversation to the popular sights and scenery of the area. Around two or three hours later, Xia Chun returned, his face as bright as the spring wind, befitting his name,<sup>135</sup> and holding a small, red wooden box in his hands. He strode up to Mei Changsu and clasped his hands in a bow, saying, “Mister Su, I am flattered by your generous gift.”

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<sup>134</sup> dasau = sister-in-law / wife of older brother / respectful address for an older married woman

<sup>135</sup> in case you’ve forgotten, Xia Chun translates literally to ‘summer spring’

Mei Changsu laughed brightly, and said, “Officer Xia has found it yourself, what does this have to do with me? What about the others? They’re not still looking, are they?”

“Yes,” Xia Chun’s smile was a little mischievous, “I came back quietly.”

“I had not expected Officer Xia Chun to have such a playful spirit,” Mei Changsu smiled in spite of himself, then turned his head to look towards the left side of the terrace.

Li Gang had been standing there waiting for some time, and seeing the Chief’s gaze turn towards him, he silently raised his right eyebrow, and then bent forward in a bow.

Mei Changsu’s heart steadied, and he said aloud, “Go and ask the Princess and the rest of them to return, even if they keep looking, there won’t be a second scroll.”

“Yes.” Not long after Li Gang received the order and retreated, the other treasure-hunters came trailing back. When Yan Yujin saw the zither music score in Xia Chun’s hands, although he was disappointed, he also knew that this person’s fanatic love of music surpassed even his own, and so he only sighed a few times and quickly put the matter aside.

The sun was setting, and both host and guests had exhausted their pleasure. The guests took their leaves one by one. Meng Zhi was the last to go, and though he usually rode, he stepped into a carriage this time, probably because he was escorting his wife, and they left that way.

Mei Changsu stood at the door of his manor, seeing his guests out, and then strode slowly to the back of his manor towards his private rooms, and as soon as he entered the door of his house, he said smiling, “Meng dage, you returned quickly.”

“I didn’t go far,” Meng Zhi came over and helped him close the door, then turned and raised an eyebrow. “Did you forget Xia Chun was here when you played that game today? You really scared me just now, I was sweating all over, he’s an expert at mechanics and traps, and you actually dared to let him roam around freely in your manor.....”

“This game was designed for Xia Chun.” As he spoke, a hint of a smile drifted across Mei Changsu’s lips. “A secret tunnel that even Xia Chun couldn’t find – that is truly a secret tunnel.....and besides, I redesigned the entrance to the secret tunnel myself, so even if Xia Chun had discovered it, he would only see it as a hidden room. And anyway, if I didn’t have seven parts confidence of beating him, I would not have taken this risk.”

“You’re right,” Meng Zhi let out a long breath. “In everything you do, when have you ever failed to be thorough?”

Mei Changsu smiled and took his arm, saying lowly, “Today is the first time, Meng dage, would you care to accompany me to the imperial Jing residence for a stroll?”

## CHAPTER 81

### *A Pure and Innocent Heart*

Mei Changsu smiled and took his arm, saying lowly, “Today is the first time, Meng dage, would you care to accompany me to the imperial Jing residence for a stroll?”

“Good,” Meng Zhi replied without hesitation, then turned and took down the fur-lined cloak from its hanger, draping it over Mei Changsu’s shoulders. “It will be damp in the tunnel, put this on.”

“Are you really going to go with me?” Something flashed across Mei Changsu’s gaze. “Then, when Prince Jing asks why you’re with me, how will you answer?”

Meng Zhi had not thought up to this point, and stared blankly as he said, “I thought he knew....”

“He knows you and I have interacted before, and he also knows you appreciate me, and are partial towards me....” Mei Changsu gazed fixedly at this Commander of the Imperial Guard. “But he does not know the truth of the relationship between you and me. If you emerge with me out of the most secret tunnel in the entire capital, then this will reveal to him that the relationship between us is ten times closer than he had previously thought, and how could he not be stunned? How could he not inquire further until he reached the truth?”

“Then....” Meng Zhi furrowed his brow and thought for awhile. “Let’s say that you’ve saved my life in the past, and I am repaying this debt, or say that you have some information you can use against me, so I have no choice but to....”

Mei Changsu laughed in spite of himself as he shook his head. “Jingyan is not so easy to fool. What kind of a rank is the Commander General? If you were really only repaying a debt, or only under a threat, then at the most I could only use you a little. If you were not in my absolute confidence, if you were not someone I trust as much as I would my own hand or foot, how would I have told you about this secret tunnel, which itself holds the key to my life or death, to my success or failure?”

“Xiao Shu,” Meng Zhi suddenly grabbed his hand, “tell him everything, tell him the truth about our relationship, and tell him the truth about your....”

Mei Changsu’s gaze suddenly grew cold, and the gentle expression in his eyes suddenly frosted over like ice, freezing all emotion beneath its surface, and even his tone of voice grew a little cold.

“Meng dage, what I am most afraid of, is that you will not be able to hold yourself back in this....” Mei Changsu gripped Meng Zhi’s hand tightly, the tips of his fingers digging into his skin. “In the future, you and Jingyan will have more and more chances to interact, but you must remember, above all else, no matter what, you must grit your teeth and never tell him who I am, not even one word!”

“But why?! Why must you bear this weight alone? If Prince Jing knew the truth, he would surely....”

“On the contrary, that would ruin everything.” Mei Changsu cut him off coolly. “Prince Jing’s resolve to strive for the throne is currently quite steady, he has listened to all of my advice regardless of how he feels, and he has cooperated with all of my plans and actions, and has never protested, do you know why?”

“Because....” Meng Zhi stammered, unable to finish his sentence.

“Because his heart is free from distraction, and to him, the throne is currently the most important consideration. Everything I do for him, he has only to consider whether it is beneficial towards this goal, and that is all. As for what consequences all of this will have for Mei Changsu himself, he simply does not need to care.” Mei Changsu’s tone was cold, but as he smiled, a hint of grief drifted across his gaze in spite of himself. “But once he knows that I am Lin Shu, the sequence of priorities will reverse, he will not be able to help himself in wanting to protect me, to leaving a way out for me, and that would tie both of our hands, and we would become a hindrance to one another in the end....”

Meng Zhi knew Prince Jing’s nature and character well, and so knew that he had spoken truly, and he could find no way to refute his words, only feeling a grief well up in his heart, a pain that was difficult to suppress.

“Actually, on the other hand, not telling him will lighten my burden as well.” Mei Changsu drew a deep breath and forced a smile. “Jingyan and I are too close as friends, if I stand before him as Mei Changsu, then no matter what I plot or scheme, I do not feel much of anything, but as soon as I turn back into Lin Shu, then it would be difficult to avoid feeling sad and hurt, and there will be an inexplicable restlessness in my heart. If I gave in to such emotions, never mind the throne, many human lives would also be implicated in such a fall....”

“Don’t say any more....” At this moment, even iron-warrior Meng Zhi’s eyes were rimmed with red. “I promise you, no matter what, I will never reveal even half a word.... And it doesn’t matter if Prince Jing doesn’t know, there’s still me, xiao Shu, from now on, Meng dage will look after you, I will die before I let anyone wrong you again....”

Mei Changsu held back the surge of emotions in his chest and lightly patted him on the shoulder, saying soothingly, “Don’t worry, Jingyan is not one of those heartless types who get rid of people as soon as they stop being useful, and who are willing to share in suffering but not in reward, so I will not come to much grief in the future.”

“That’s true,” Meng Zhi sighed. “Bad at trickery and tactics, bad at adapting to change, and valuing friendship and loyalty too highly – these have always been Prince Jing’s faults. You have your work cut out for you, helping him to the throne.”

Mei Changsu turned his head slightly towards the window, his face as clear as pure snow, an icy smile playing lightly at the corner of his lips as he said coldly, “In our Da Liang, do we still lack for harsh and suspicious emperors who only know how to play in the schemes and feuds of the court? Helping Jingyan to the throne will be a bit difficult, but once we succeed, then, by his unswerving determination and unyielding will, by his keen observations and honest discernment, by his orderly style of work and just conduct, would he not make a good Emperor? As long as internal friction is decreased, a ruler and his ministers can work as one to repair and build up a benevolent government. In these recent years, you’ve seen as well, in the court, the ministers do not think about politics, and the military does not think about war, they are occupied only with guessing at how to please their superiors, and with how to secure and guard their own power and positions. It is fortunate that Da Liang’s power is still strong and solid, and its political system robust and sound, and so it is just about holding up under this empty frame, but if the next dynasty is like this as well, I fear our nation’s power would continue to crumble, and if we do not work to pull ourselves together now, in the future, when tigers and wolves come from every side to tear us apart, how will we defend our country and protect our people?”

His voice was deep and low, and his tone was not passionate, but as Meng Zhi listened, he felt as if the blood in his veins all over his body had suddenly sped up, and it was as if a scalding iron had been placed on his chest. Restoring the dignity of the imperial court by reviving law and discipline, and draining away the tainted pools and replacing them with fresh water – this had always been the long-cherished wish of the Emperor’s eldest son, Prince Qi. Back in those years when Meng Zhi had been in the Chiyuan Army, he too had once heard this wise prince describe his vision of an ideal court. But after his death, the crowd of shining talent that had gathered in his manor was scattered to the winds, some were implicated in his crime and died as well, some disappeared into hiding, some changed their aspirations with time, and some had been oppressed all along and could not rise in the ranks, and all that was left in the court was a horde of yes-men, sinking in a heavy, lethargic fog. The Emperor’s pleasure and anger became the standard by which everything was measured, and all anyone thought

about was how to acquire power, how to curry favour, and how to choose the correct stance to secure the best future. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu certainly never seemed to tire of this game, and had practically written the art of toying with others' will into the guiding texts of how to rule a country. If there was anyone left in the entire palace of Da Liang who still bore a little of Prince Qi's ideals about governing a nation, then, in truth, there only remained Prince Jing, who had grown up by Xiao Jingyu's side, receiving his teachings from a young age.

"Meng dage," Mei Changsu smiled faintly, as if he had read his thoughts from the expression in his eyes, and said lightly, "Do you understand now? There are many things I cannot let Jingyan take responsibility for, alongside me. If we must journey into hell, and become demons with hearts full of poison, then let me be the one to do so, Jingyan's pure and innocent heart must be preserved. Although there are some things he must understand, and some naive ideas he must alter, I will do my best to preserve his principles and his standards, he must not become too tainted in the process of the fight for the throne. If the person I help to the throne in the future is an Emperor of the same temperament as the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, then Jingyu gege and the Chiyuan Army will truly have died in vain...."

Meng Zhi's heart was a turmoil of emotions, and he could only nod heavily, unable to speak for a long time. Although he had promised Mei Changsu many times not to reveal the truth, it was only in this moment that he truly yielded, and carved his sworn word into his heart.

Mei Changsu's gaze had resumed its peaceful and gentle expression, and he leaned against his desk as he said, "Meng dage, when I asked you to accompany me today to the imperial Jing manor, I was joking. In order not to raise Jingyan's suspicions, I'm afraid you must come to me from his side."

Meng Zhi didn't understand immediately, and blurted out, "Come to you from his side? How?"

Mei Changsu was feeling a bit tired, and he sat down in a wooden chair nearby, gesturing for Meng Zhi to sit as well as he said slowly, "Recently, because of the case of the murdered eunuchs, the Emperor has grown suspicious towards you without any good reason, and your two vice commanders have been transferred away as well, everyone has seen this, and naturally, Prince Jing also knows that you have been wronged. I will find an opportunity to advise Prince Jing, he can take this chance to interact with you more, and take in your men into his manor. As for you, do your best to subtly make him understand your distaste for the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, and your reminiscence of Prince Qi. Your relationship has been good all along, and once it is a little closer, you can pretend to accidentally discover the entrance to the tunnel in his bedroom, and force him to tell you the truth. When that happens, you can take him into your confidence entirely, and express to him that although you yourself would never forsake the Emperor, in the matter of the succession, you can support him. Prince Jing has always known of your loyalty, and understands your inclinations, so



he will certainly believe you beyond a doubt. Since the tunnel has already been discovered by you, he cannot hide it even if he wishes to, and then, it should be you accompanying him, and arriving here to give me a fright....”

“Oh you....” Meng Zhi couldn’t help laughing. “Let me see how big that brain of yours is, well in that case, I will logically end up as both of your confidants, it is only that Prince Jing must first receive a good scare....”

“If it were not essential for Prince Jing to know that you are on our side, in order to facilitate events in the future, why would I come up with something like this? Afterwards, we will both be fellow-workers serving the same lord, and there are no conflicts between us, so even if our friendship seems to deepen, Prince Jing would not think it strange, so isn’t this better than any kind of excuse of repaying a debt?”

“You’re right, let’s do it your way. It’s just that, tonight, I cannot accompany you on this first time.”

“You have kept me company as my guest this whole day, I am tired as well, and there is nothing urgent, so I had not planned to go over anyway. It is not early, you should return to your residence, or Sister-in-law will be worried about you.”

Meng Zhi examined his complexion closely, then said frowning, “You do look a bit pale, you must really have worked too hard today. The tunnel is here, and if you do not go today, it will not disappear, it’s more important to rest and take care of your health. I’ll stop bothering you, go in and sleep.”

Mei Changsu was indeed very tired, and he did not need to keep up courtesy around Meng Zhi, and so he only nodded and then went straight into his room, lay down on his bed, and went to sleep. Fei Liu, who was in a little bed in the room, lifted his head, and seeing that it was him, only blinked twice before closing his eyes again, and it was difficult to tell whether he had truly woken or not.

At this adorable display, Meng Zhi felt a smile spread across his face, but he made no sound, and only carefully closed the windows and doors and blew out the candle on the desk before quietly taking his leave.

## CHAPTER 82

### *Secret Chamber*

It seemed to be a quiet night. There was no wind, no rain, and the clear light of the gentle moon was filtered through a thin layer of clouds, so that the moonlight did not pierce through the window and dazzle the eye. Mei Changsu slept very peacefully, without coughing, and without needing to rise in the middle of the night to sit up for awhile because of the pain in his chest. This kind of warm spring season was suited to rest, and the brazier in the room had been taken away just the day before, so the air was unusually fresh, and even outside the room, there was not the usual summer cacophony of crickets to disturb the quiet. In such perfect calm, it would be a beautiful thing indeed to sleep dreamless through the night until dawn.

“Su gege!”

Unless he was drifting in and out of consciousness, Mei Changsu had otherwise always been a light sleeper, and with a few gentle shakes, he had awoken, and now he peered through half-lidded eyes, reaching out a hand to touch the forehead of the person before him as he asked, his voice still a little hoarse, “What is it, Fei Liu?”

“Knocking!”

Although Mei Changsu had always had the uncanny ability to perfectly understand Fei Liu’s meaning from his simple expressions, at this moment, he couldn’t help being a little taken aback, and he had to sit up and clear his mind for a few moments before suddenly realizing what he meant.

He hurriedly dressed and tied back his hair, threw on a sable fur-lined cloak, and accepted the warm cup of tea from Fei Liu, drinking it quickly to warm his throat. Then he picked up a cotton washcloth and wiped his face before walking rapidly to the bookshelf and tapping with his foot at several places on the clean, shining floorboards. The wall opened to reveal a narrow passageway, just wide enough for a single person to pass through. Fei Liu was about to go in first, but Mei Changsu grabbed him and said lowly, “Today, you will not come, wait for Su gege outside, alright?”

The youth looked at him unhappily, but submitted obediently, pressing to one side as Mei Changsu slipped into the entrance, and then, with some hidden maneuvers from inside the tunnel, the entire wall returned to its original appearance. Fei Liu dragged over a chair and sat, his dark pupils fixed intently on the wall, keeping watch gravely.

After Mei Changsu entered the passage, he drew out a glowing pearl from his robes and operated the machinery again to lower himself several feet, arriving at the entrance to a long tunnel. He walked along it a little way, and then opened a stone door to reveal a room, with tables and chairs and some simple decorations. The lamp on the wall had already been lit, and under its yellow glow, Prince Jing stood in plain clothes, turning towards Mei Changsu as he entered slowly, and nodded to him in greeting.

“Mister Su, I have caused you alarm.”

Mei Changsu bowed. “It is my duty to answer Your Highness’ summons, there is no need to speak of alarm. It is only that I got up in a hurry, and my appearance is untidy, pray Your Highness forgive me.”

Prince Jing evidently had something on his mind, but he still managed to smile slightly, and gestured for Mei Changsu to sit.

He had come in the middle of the night, so he must have some difficult matter at hand, but he adhered to the courtesies and was polite as usual, so evidently, it was not anything urgent or desperate, so Mei Changsu obliged and sat down before asking gently, “What has Your Highness come to see me about?”

Prince Jing furrowed his brow and muttered to himself for a while before saying, “Actually.....this originally should not be a matter over which Mister Su should trouble himself, in fact, it has no relation to the things we are planning. It is only.....I truly have no one with whom to discuss this, and so came to seek Mister’s wisdom.”

“Since I have chosen to serve Your Highness, anything that concerns Your Highness concerns me, there is no need to consider whether it has relation or not. Pray Your Highness explain the matter, and if there is anything I can do, I will certainly do my best.”

Prince Jing seemed to have anticipated his response, and he immediately smiled back at him and said, “Then I will speak plainly. This afternoon, I went into the palace to greet my mother, and Jingning meimei<sup>136</sup> came to find me. As soon as she

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<sup>136</sup> little sister

saw me, she began crying and begging me to save her, saying that.....Da Chu<sup>137</sup> is sending ambassadors to ask for a marriage agreement, they will arrive in the capital next month, and if Father Emperor agrees, then she is the only princess of a suitable age....”

“A marriage agreement with Da Chu?” Mei Changsu looked intent as he pondered. “With Princess<sup>138</sup> Nihuang overseeing the Southern border, Liang and Chu have been at a deadlock, and have not fought in recent years. With this marriage pact, Da Chu must be intending to secure peace, but we in Da Liang can also take this opportunity to restore the military and economical deficits we have accumulated in these past two years, so this is not a bad option. But if we are to establish a relationship based on marriage, then naturally it must be reciprocal, if we send a princess over to be married, then they should also send a princess to us, or else it would not be an even agreement. If Da Chu has only come to request a princess for marriage, then His Majesty may not agree, but if they too suggest sending a princess over to us to be married, then there is eight parts likelihood that His Majesty would agree.”

Prince Jing looked helplessly at the person before him, who had so immediately entered into his strategist’s mode, and sighed. “Mister Su, I do not want to know how likely it is that my Father Emperor will agree, I want to ask, if Father Emperor agrees to the marriage agreement, whether there is any way Jingning can avoid being married. You know as well as I, she already has someone in her heart....”

Mei Changsu gazed at a shadow beyond his own fingertips for a long time before slowly lifting his gaze to Prince Jing’s face. “Your Highness, at present, what Princesses are there of a marrying age?”

Prince Jing looked at him blankly, and then gritted his teeth, “There is only Jingning....”

“The daughters of royal princes, unmarried and of a suitable age, who can be raised to the rank of Princess, how many are there?”

“.....among Father Emperor’s brothers, some scattered when he succeeded to the throne, so there only remains my three royal uncles, Prince Ji, Prince Qian, and Prince Li, and of their daughters who are grown and unmarried, there are probably three or four.....”

“Duchess Mingzhu has consumption, Duchess Mingchen has a crippled left leg, Duchess Mingrui left her home six months ago and shaved her head to become a nun,

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<sup>137</sup> ‘Chu’ i.e. sometimes called the Southern Chu (‘da’ just means ‘great’, as in Da Liang.)

<sup>138</sup> remember that I translate Nihuang’s title as ‘princess’ when it’s really not the same as the ‘princess’ of Princess Jingning (more on this in the notes below)

and Duchess Mingying is said to be mad. Since this marriage pact is to repair relations, who among these do you think His Majesty could raise in rank?"

Prince Jing was not too familiar with the situation of the women of the royal clan, but since Mei Changsu had explained it thus, naturally he would not be wrong, and he felt his spirits sink, but after thinking for a long while, he suddenly remembered another person, and said hurriedly, "I vaguely remember, there is a Duchess Mingjue in Uncle Prince Li's family, of the same age as Jingning...."

Mei Changsu laughed coldly, "Princess Mingjue is in love with a young man from the family of the previous dynasty's governor of Nangong, and it was only because his mother passed away just before they were about to be engaged that marriage has been temporarily postponed. Everyone in the capital knows about this, but Your Highness was away with your army at the time, and so did not hear about this at the time."

Prince Jing listened dazedly, a muscle jumping in his jaw. "So, according to Mister's meaning, once Father Emperor agrees, Jingning will have no way out?"

Mei Changsu's expression was indifferent and when he spoke his voice was cold, but there was a hint of pity deep in his gaze. "Jingning is a princess, even if she was not wedded to a foreigner, her marriage will inevitably be arranged for her, has she still not come to terms with this reality?"

"Though the words are true, the emotions are difficult to bear. Guan Zhen has spent some time with me now, and he is indeed an impressive young man. I, too, do not have the heart to see them torn apart in this way."

"No matter how impressive Guan Zhen is, his birth is too lowly, and he has no brilliant achievements or outstanding deeds that can be praised to the skies, so in the end, the lord's position cannot fall to him. Princess Jingning was born to the imperial family, and should know well, what love can be hoped for within these palace walls? If she clings to this reason in her heart, she will not only fail to convince His Majesty, she will sully her pure reputation, and bring calamity onto Guan Zhen's entire clan. So, in this matter, Your Highness, you cannot help her. Ask my lady Concubine Jing to speak to her, and convince her. Putting aside princesses, how many girls of common families can truly choose their husbands as they wish?"

Prince Jing let out a long sigh. "Everything you have said, I have already known. But seeing Jingning crying like that, I truly pitied her, and thought perhaps Mister might have some strange and wondrous ideas, and so came to discuss the matter."

Mei Changsu glanced at him, and said suddenly, "Since you mentioned this, Your Highness, have you only thought about Princess Jingning?"

Prince Jing looked at him blankly, not understanding what he meant.

“If Da Chu sends a princess over to be married, she must be married to a prince, and not as a concubine either. Your Highness, think about it, who will be the one chosen to receive her?”

“Ah?!” Prince Jing immediately understood the meaning behind his words, and unconsciously pressed hard against the table. “Mister is saying....”

Mei Changsu looked serious as he answered, “Da Chu is still an enemy nation, and there has never been any news of a Chu princess of particular fame or reputation like Nihuang. His Majesty is suspicious by nature, and since Your Highness has decided to pursue the throne, taking the princess of an enemy nation as your wife would not be a good thing. I will have to find a way to help Your Highness dodge this particular bout of fate.”

Prince Jing looked shaken. “Then, since Mister has a way for me to avoid marriage, for Jingning....”

“Isn’t the situation different? Among the princesses, only Jingning is suited for marriage, but among the princes, Your Highness is not the only choice. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu have wives, and His Majesty would never consider allowing those two to wed princesses of enemy nations anyway, so we can put them aside. As for those who remain, although His Highness the emperor’s third son has a slight handicap, and although His Highness the emperor’s fifth son only cares about studying and ignores politics, they are still genuine princes and sons of the Emperor, and are still unmarried. The princes who look furthest from the throne are the ones most suitable to be wedded in this arrangement. So once His Majesty agrees to the pact, he will certainly choose one of the three of you. Before the engagement is set, the fortunes of your birth dates must first be told.<sup>139</sup> Princess Jingning’s birth date will be sent to Da Chu for the matching, so there is nothing we can do, but the Da Chu princess’ birth date will be sent here for our ritual masters to perform the matching. I can find a way to arrange for the result of this matching to turn out according to our will. It doesn’t matter who ends up marrying her, we have only to ensure that Your Highness’ birth date does not make a fortuitous match with the Da Chu princess’.”

“What, even the ritual masters obey your command?”

“I cannot say they obey, but.....there are some things that can be done.”

Prince Jing turned and fixed his deep gaze onto Mei Changsu. “When Mister Su first entered the capital, you gave the impression that you had been pressed by the Crown Prince and Prince Yu to come, as a result of your qilin prodigy’s reputation.

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<sup>139</sup> part of the matchmaking process, to ensure that the bride and groom are suited to each other / fated to be together, by seeing if the dates of their birth match in some mysterious fortune-telling way

But now, I can see that your preparations have been extensive indeed, as if you have been anticipating this for some time....”

Mei Changsu smiled carelessly, and answered, his voice calm, “With a talent such as mine, I was never content to stay hidden in the jianghu world, quietly letting the world pass by. It is said that the ambition of every man is to serve his country and to make a name for himself, like smoke rising into the sky. If I did not have confidence in the preparation I had made, how would I have dared to turn down the easy roads offered by the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, and instead decide to serve Your Highness as my lord, with all my heart and my will?”

Prince Jing turned over these words in his heart, but could not tell whether they were true or false, and did not want to examine them too closely. Mei Changsu truly desired with all his heart to help him to the throne, Xiao Jingyan had never doubted this point, but as for the true reason why Mei Changsu had chosen him, he still had many questions in his heart. But at this moment, Prince Jing was not inclined to search too deeply for the answer, as at present there were still many difficulties ahead, and many important matters that took priority for his consideration. To him, this mysterious strategist was the sharpest sword in his hand, and it was enough to use him well. As for how this sword had been forged, and why its blade had been unsheathed, at this moment, he simply did not care too much.

The secret chamber was no tea house, and as the conversation was over, there was no reason to continue sitting around chatting. Although the reason for his coming had not been met, Prince Jing understood all along that there had not been much hope in Jingning avoiding this fate, and although he was a bit disappointed, he was not dismayed. The two bade each other farewell, and then returned separately along the secret tunnel to their own rooms.

## CHAPTER 83

### *Concubine Jing*

Although Xiao Jingyan had established his own official residence and even had his own army, he was still only a prince born of a concubine, who barely had a duke's rank, and was not like Prince Yu, who enjoyed many special privileges. Therefore, except for special days like the first day of each lunar month, public holidays, his birthday, his mother's birthday, or days of sacrifice, he could not enter the Inner Palace without imperial permission. After Xiao Jingning had pleaded for his help, she did not see so much as the shadow of her Seventh Brother for many days, and she grew so anxious that she broke palace rules and sent one of her serving maids to Prince Jing's residence, to deliver a hand-written letter to Guan Zhen. Before the maid had even made it out of Dingan Gate, she was caught by imperial guards. Meng Zhi heard of the situation and rushed over, confiscating the letter and releasing the maid back into the Inner Palace before severely forbidding his subordinates from speaking of this matter to anyone, quietly covering it up. That night, he paid a secret visit to the imperial Jing manor and showed Xiao Jingyan the letter, urging him to send Guan Zhen away from the capital as soon as possible.

Prince Jing knew that, ever since eunuchs had been murdered in the palace, Meng Zhi's hold over the imperial guard was not as tight or solid as it had been once, and although it would be good if this matter could really be covered up, if it leaked somehow to the Emperor or the Empress, Guan Zhen's life would be forfeit, and so he could only send Guan Zhen far away to the border, hiding him away to save his life. Sure enough, two or three days later, the Emperor heard about the Princess smuggling her maid out of the palace. He had always doted on this young daughter of his, and so naturally his fury was terrible to behold, and he ordered for Meng Zhi to be summoned, and began questioning him in a thundering rage.

Meng Zhi came well-prepared, and after waiting for the Emperor to finish venting his anger, he bowed and answered slowly, "If His Majesty finds any fault with me, your servant should of course die a thousand deaths as payment for my crimes. But, since time immemorial, the reputation of the ladies of the palace has always been the most important consideration, and though your servant holds this position of Commander of the Imperial Guard by your Majesty's great mercy, your servant is nonetheless only an outer official. That maid was the Princess' personal attendant, and the letter was sealed. Your servant firstly had no right to question anyone from



the inner palace, and secondly could not open a confidential correspondence. Without questioning or reading, your servant could not know its authenticity. Without knowing its authenticity, how could your servant dare to report this matter to Your Majesty? And so, your servant could only escort the maid back into the inner palace, command my subordinates to keep silent, and burn the letter. Only in this way could this matter remain concealed, so that it would not harm the Princess' sacred virtue. Your servant's knowledge is crude and shallow, and if your servant has acted improperly in any way, pray Your Majesty name my punishment."

After hearing his explanation, the Emperor thought it sounded very logical. It was best to let this kind of private matter of the inner palace disappear quietly if at all possible, as if it was thoroughly investigated, the results would only bring shame upon himself and make him lose face. As soon as he thought about it like this, his anger dissipated, and he ordered Meng Zhi to rise and said a few words to placate him, then recalled the internal messenger he had sent to the Princess' palace to investigate, instead issuing a secret command to the Empress to increase her surveillance over Jingning, and then quietly let the matter pass.

Meng Zhi and Prince Jing's relationship had been good all along, and this time, when he made a purposeful effort to protect him by not letting anyone realize that the Princess' love interest had been taken in by Prince Jing's residence, it was clearly a great show of goodwill towards him. Prince Jing had already received a quiet urging from Mei Changsu to befriend Meng Zhi, and after receiving this favour, the interactions between the two gradually increased, and although it had still not risen to a degree to be easily noticed by others, the confidence and trust between the two had deepened significantly.

At the same time, Meng Zhi also followed Mei Changsu's plan and appeared especially eager and helpful. One day, when he was at the imperial Jing manor participating in a riding and archery competition Prince Jing had organized, he took the chance, and using the excuse of wanting to see the double-edged sword Prince Jing had seized from the Northern Di<sup>140</sup> king, he was shown into Prince Jing's bedroom, where the sword was kept, where he very coincidentally stumbled upon the entrance to the hidden tunnel.

And so, in this way, Meng Zhi successfully became the first court official to know of the lord and servant relationship between Prince Jing and Mei Changsu, and he took the opportunity to express to Prince Jing that, so long as doing so would not defy the Emperor's command, he would certainly support him in the fight for the throne.

By this time, it was April.

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<sup>140</sup> generic term for the Northern ethnic minorities during the Qin and Han dynasties

The Da Chu ambassadors arrived outside of Jinling bearing impressive gifts, and as the Chu Emperor had sent his own nephew Prince Ling, Yuwen Xuan, as lead ambassador, the Liang Emperor naturally had to return the courtesy by arranging a member of his own royal family to meet them, and so Prince Yu received the imperial command and went to the city gates to welcome the party, arranging for them to stay at one of the outer residences of the imperial family, Baocheng Palace.

From the seriousness expressed by the Da Chu side and the courtesy shown by the Da Liang side, it seemed that this marriage pact was already seven or eight parts decided, and the meeting was only to facilitate the discussion of certain details.

A marriage pact between these two countries was no small matter. Although it had not yet been set in stone, preparations were already beginning in the palace and the court. On the fifth day after lead ambassador Yuwen Xuan's audience with His Majesty, two imperial edicts were passed, the first raising Princess Jingning to a nine-pearl Princess, and the second bestowing unto the fifth-born Prince Huai his own official residence and seat. This seemed to reveal that the preliminary candidates for the marriage pact had already been chosen.

She had cried, and fought, and even attempted a hunger strike in protest, but in the end, Xiao Jingning finally yielded. As a Princess of Da Liang, she had understood from the beginning the shackles of responsibility that she could not shed, and her defiance against her father was only because she was unwilling to give up the happiness she had chosen for herself, and in the end, this defiance met only unfeeling imperial will. The Empress sent her most trusted serving girls to watch over the Princess night and day, and concubines and consorts from different palaces took their turns persuading and urging her in a hundred different ways. And so, in the Inner Palace, where the will of their lord Emperor was treated as law, Jingning did not receive any open support. This was because, to most of the cool eyes observing the scene, Jingning's fate was no different from that of other princesses through the ages, and although she had not been more fortunate than most despite the Emperor's dotting on her, neither was she any less fortunate.

Every time Prince Jing entered the palace, he would go to visit this little sister of his, and as he saw that she was slowly accepting the reality of the situation, his worry began to lessen. When Xiao Jingning begged him to look after Guan Zhen in the future, he did not even have to think before giving her his word.

Recently, the Crown Prince was under punishment and could not participate in politics, and Prince Yu was even more active than usual in the court, participating enthusiastically in every debate that arose, regardless of the topic. The court was yet far from pledging him its complete loyalty, but in the face of his current triumph, unless he committed some grave mistake, most of the officials would not obstruct his rise. And, for some reason, in the last month, even the officials of the Crown Prince's camp were being unusually respectful, and did not face off hotly against Prince Yu as they had done in the past. This prince was not only known for his virtuous

appearance, his ability was not mediocre either, and his manor was full of talent as well, so it was rare indeed that he ever made truly unforgivable mistakes in important matters, and so, more and more, it began to look as if he was gaining the support of the court. No one knew what the Emperor thought about this, but on the surface, it did seem as if his favour towards Prince Yu was only increasing, as every time he encountered a difficult situation, he would discuss it first with him, and ask for his opinion. Word began to spread that His Highness Prince Yu would soon become His Highness the Crown Prince.

This kind of rumour naturally made its way to the Emperor's ear, and when he questioned Meng Zhi, who was standing watch beside him as usual, Meng Zhi claimed to have never heard any such rumour. Although the Emperor admired his commitment to staying out of affairs unrelated to his work, he was still uneasy in his heart. Restless, he dismissed his carriage, and instead walked slowly back to the Inner Palace, accompanied only by his personal guards.

"Your Majesty, you will be going this evening to...." Gao Zhan, the head eunuch of the Six Palaces, listened attentively, waiting to notify the chosen palace so they could make preparations to receive the Emperor.

The Emperor's steps slowed. The Empress had always been solemn and averse to pleasure. Recently, Consort Yue only spent her days crying for the Crown Prince, so he did not wish to see her either. The younger beauties were charming and gaudy, but he was not in that kind of mood today. And so, in the end, he only frowned, and ignored Gao Zhan.

Eunuch Gao, who had almost perfected the art of interpreting facial expressions, refrained from asking further, and only bowed as he followed behind the Emperor.

Lanterns lit the road ahead. Candlelight flickered from behind windows, glowing softly in the hazy dusk. But the Emperor turned towards the darkest paths, as if purposefully seeking out a kind of quiet calm.

He walked and walked, and suddenly, the scent of medicinal herbs drifted past. He raised his head and saw a small courtyard before him, simple and plain, as if he had left behind the glorious splendour of the imperial palace and entered into an elegant little herbal garden.

"What is this place?"

Gao Zhan hurriedly replied, "Your Majesty, this is the residence of my lady the Concubine Jing."

"Concubine Jing...." The Emperor closed his eyes, as if in reminiscence. ....That's right, Concubine Jing, Jingyan's mother.....he saw her often, when the ladies of the palace came to pay their respects on festivals and holidays, and she

always stood quietly and inconspicuously near the back, never speaking unless spoken to, just as she had done since she first entered the palace.

“Gao Zhan, it’s been nearly thirty years since Concubine Jing entered the palace, hm?”

A sheen of cold sweat broke out on Gao Zhan’s back. He didn’t dare answer anything more than a quiet, “Yes.”

“After Yueyao gave birth to Jingyu, she was always sick, and didn’t seem to improve even after many years, so the Lin family was worried, and sent a female physician into the palace to care for her.....we remember, Yueyao always treated her like a sister....”

Consort Chen Lin Yueyao, the Emperor’s eldest son Xiao Jingyu, these were all forbidden and taboo topics one could not bring up casually around the Emperor. Gao Zhan’s underclothes were half soaked in sweat, and he forced himself to slow his breathing as he bowed even lower.

The Emperor eyed him coldly, “You do not need to look so scared.....go, send in my command, and have Concubine Jing prepare to receive me.”

“Yes.”

Shortly after, the herbal-scented Zhiluo Palace lit up with lanterns and candles, and Concubine Jing and her serving girls emerged in formal dress, kneeling at the door to receive the Emperor.

The Emperor did not look at her closely, and only said, “Rise,” before striding into the main rooms. Concubine Jing hurriedly got up and followed, helping him remove his outer robes, and after glancing quietly at his face, she said gracefully, “Your Majesty looks fatigued, perhaps a herbal bath would be desirable?”

The Emperor knew she had been a physician and was naturally familiar with herbal remedies, and besides he was indeed tired, so he nodded his permission. Concubine Jing ordered for hot water and a bathing tub to be brought in, and prepared the herbs herself. Soon, the preparations were complete and she helped the Emperor into the tub, lit a stick of herbal incense, and then began to massage his head and shoulders. Although Concubine Jing was not young, and had never been a stunning beauty, her heart was tranquil, and her appearance well-maintained. Her hair was still dark, and her hands were smooth and strong, so her massage was very comfortable indeed.

It had been a long time since the Emperor had felt so peaceful and relaxed.

“Your Majesty, herbal baths dry the mouth, perhaps some herbal tea?” Concubine Jing asked quietly, lifting the slender cup to his lips. The Emperor did not even open his eyes as he drank slowly from the cup in her hands. The tea was crisp and fresh, with none of the bitterness of medicine, and suddenly, in his mind, blurred figures seemed to arise vaguely in the distance.

“Concubine Jing....we have neglected you in these years....” The Emperor raised his head and said with a sigh, holding her hand.

Hearing this, Concubine Jing did not seize the opportunity to air her grievances, but neither did she express humble thanks for these beautiful words. She only smiled, as if she had not taken his words to heart, and continued to gently massage the Emperor’s aching neck and shoulders.

“So many years have gone by in the blink of an eye, and we are growing old....” The Emperor knew well her quiet and contented nature, and so did not seem to mind her silence. “There is not much we can do to make up for it, but Jingyan is filial, and he will be a blessing to you.”

“Your Majesty speaks truly, with Jingyan here, your servant is content. This child values filial piety, and has a loyal<sup>141</sup> heart, and whenever he is in the capital, he will always come to pay his greetings. As long as I can see him, your servant is happy, no matter what.”

The Emperor glanced at her, but her clear, gentle gaze was only full of motherly affection, and his heart softened. “Jingyan is a good and loyal child, how could we not know that? It is only that he is a little stubborn.....some of his talents have been suppressed, and we have not given him many opportunities. But do not worry, we will take care of him, the battlefield is deadly and dangerous, and in the future, we will send him out as little as possible....”

“If it is the need of the court, he ought to go if he should go,” Concubine Jing said tranquilly. “Your servant is not familiar with matters outside the palace, but as a prince, it is the duty of his birth to protect the country. Although this child is not ostentatious, he holds Your Majesty in his heart, and Da Liang as well. If Your Majesty protects him out of love, and allows him to remain in the capital in ease and comfort, he would feel even more wronged.”

The Emperor couldn’t help smiling. “You are right. Jingyan has an honest heart, and even when he is wronged, he will not come to us to protest. Although it is true

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<sup>141</sup> the word used here (and by the Emperor in the next lines) is actually *qing yi*, which I never know how to translate. It means valuing friendship and being loyal to your friends, it means affection and brotherhood, it means love. It’s the ‘brotherhood’ part of the title of the last book, ‘Brotherhood Eternal’. So anyway, it’s more than loyalty.

that we are lord and servant before father and son, sometimes he is a little too distant. In this way, he is rather like you.”

“The dragon has nine sons,<sup>142</sup> and each is unique. Your Majesty’s own princes are naturally distinct in their personalities as well.”

The Emperor’s brow jumped, and he thought again of the fight between the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, and a wave of melancholy arose in his heart.

To the emperors of dynasties past and present, having a unanimously beloved heir with both talent and integrity by their sides was not necessarily a comfortable situation. And so, although he had declared a Crown Prince, he nonetheless heaped favour onto Prince Yu in order to weaken the Eastern Palace’s influence, so that it would not acquire enough power to threaten the throne. But Crown Prince Xiao Jingxuan’s birth mother was a highly-favoured consort, and he himself had never committed any major errors, so you could not say that the Emperor had planned all along to remove his title. It was only this past half year, when his reputation had been sullied time and again, that the Emperor was truly angered, and began considering replacing his position, and so confined him to Gujia Palace and forbade him to participate in politics. Originally, Prince Yu was the most likely candidate for the Eastern Palace, and it would have been the natural conclusion for him to replace the Crown Prince’s position, but....

“Concubine Jing, what do you think about Prince Yu?” No one could deny that the Inner Palace had long established their own camps. But who could have thought that it was in the presence of this low-ranking concubine, who had stood aloof from worldly affairs for the past thirty years, that he could ask this question without doubt or hesitation?

“Your servant thinks Prince Yu has a handsome countenance and a noble manner, and is a very lordly prince.”

“We were not asking about his appearance....”

“I beg Your Majesty’s forgiveness, apart from his appearance and manner, your servant has very little knowledge about Prince Yu. I have heard the ladies of the palace discussing him on occasion, and saying that he is a wise prince.”

“Hmph,” the Emperor scoffed. “What do women of the palace know about wisdom? This kind of saying must have been passed along from somewhere else! These days, whenever the court discusses anything, all the ministers look to him first and follow his word blindly, he must be wise indeed!”

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<sup>142</sup> an idiom meaning ‘it takes all sorts to make a world’ (I don’t think it means this Emperor literally has nine sons)

“This too must be because of Your Majesty’s heavy favour,” Concubine Jing answered indifferently. “Before, when the Crown Prince was in the court, was it not also like this?”

Her seemingly offhand comments struck the Emperor hard.

Even the Crown Prince, lord of the Eastern Palace and governing by imperial will, had not experienced such wholehearted support in the court. Prince Yu was yet only a Royal Prince, and he already commanded such respect and influence, if he was crowned as heir, he feared....

“Your Majesty, the water has cooled, please rise.” Concubine Jing did not seem to notice that the Emperor was deep in thought, and helped him up as she called for towels to be brought, helping him dry himself and change into soft robes, and then guided him over to the bed to sleep, kneeling down beside him to massage his feet.

“You must be tired as well,” the Emperor sat up and held onto Concubine Jing’s hands, which had been kneading busily. “....sleep.”

Concubine Jing turned her face to him serenely, the soft glow of the lamp erasing the lines of age on her face, making her appear even more gentle than usual. She gave him an unusually sweet smile, and answered lightly, “Yes, your Majesty....”

## CHAPTER 84

### *Envoy from Da Chu*

Three days later, the court released three imperial edicts all at once.

The Crown Prince was permitted to return to the Eastern Palace, where he would continue his confinement.

Consort Yue was restored to her position as Noble Consort, as reward for her repentance and regret.

Concubine Jing was raised to Consort Jing.

Both court and commoners were thrown into a frenzy, as everyone tried to guess what their unfathomable Emperor meant by issuing these edicts.

Compared to the blinding spotlight of Consort Yue's restoration to Noble Consort, Concubine Jing's elevation in rank did not attract much attention. After all, she had lived in the palace for more than thirty years and had never brought any shame on herself, and furthermore, her son was a grown prince who had his own imperial residence, so in truth she ought to have been made consort long ago, and it was only that she had been neglected for many years. The ladies of the Inner Palace came to pay their respects and congratulations, but after completing this courtesy, most of the crowd rushed away towards the Noble Consort Yue's Zhaoren palace. Only a very few of the most astute were able to put together Prince Jing's additional new year's gift with Concubine Jing's promotion and come forward eagerly to curry favour, recognizing that a new power was emerging.

But both Consort Jing and Prince Jing seemed nonchalant, appearing polite but distant, and Consort Jing in particular only received her guests with her usual courtesy, and refused all congratulatory rites and bows. Aside from the change in her position in the arrangement the ladies adopted for their visits to the Empress, it was difficult to tell what practical advantage she derived from this elevation in rank. Some even postulated that the Emperor had only carelessly bestowed this promotion onto her in order to make Noble Consort Yue's restoration seem less conspicuous.



Prince Jing had a somewhat different approach. He knew well that his understanding of the court ministers was insufficient, and he had complete trust in Mei Changsu's analysis and strategy, so he adhered strictly to Mei Changsu's list as he went about making friends. He displayed the same courtesies to everyone he encountered, but hidden within the courtesies were slight variations of familiarity and distance.

Mei Changsu knew that Prince Jing's approach to gaining support would require more time, but he also knew that it would rest on a stronger foundation.

A few months ago, after Qingming, Princess Nihuang and Mu Qing had requested to return to Yunnan, but the Emperor had refused, holding them in the capital until now. But a few days after the Chu ambassadors entered the capital, he abruptly approved their request and gave his permission for Nihuang to return to guard the Southern Border, but commanded Mu Qing to stay, with the official reason being that he had just come of age and the Grand Empress Dowager couldn't bear to part with him yet, and wanted him to stay awhile longer.

This transparent attempt at holding a hostage in the palace stirred up great waves in the imperial Mu residence, as every general of the Southern Border who had accompanied the two into the capital felt their hearts stir with rage and fury. It was Nihuang who remained calm and subdued her household, ensuring that no inappropriate words were spread beyond the gates of the manor. She then chose a few trusted confidants to stay in the capital with her younger brother, to whom she gave careful and thorough instructions, and it was only after all of these matters had been taken care of that she began to make plans for her own return to Yunnan.

Before her departure, she went around the capital bidding her friends farewell, and finally, she arrived at Su manor.

The warm spring sunshine spilled into the newly renovated gardens of the Su manor. The cherry apple trees had shed their fruit, the peaches and pears had fallen from their branches, and a sense of grief hung in the air amidst the springtime flourish.

A single glance was enough to convey the trust between the two, the kind of intimate faith that endured beyond the borders of life and death. A small smile was enough to communicate the depth of feeling they shared, the warmth and affection that overflowed from their hearts. Today, Nihuang was not heavily made up, but was dressed in a wide-sleeved gown with a white jade pendant hanging from her belt. There was a plain camellia tucked into her hair, the simple adornment emphasizing her grace and natural beauty. Only the faint expression in her beautiful face revealed the thousand-tonne weight on her shoulders and the heavy burdens in her heart.

"Lin Shu gege, when Nihuang leaves this time, we will not see each other again for some time. Our Yunnan Mu clan still has some connections in the capital, this yellow jade pendant was handed down to me by my father's father, and even Mu Qing

is bound to follow the commands of he who holds this pendant. Today, I am entrusting it to you, please, I beg of you, do not refuse it.”

After these earnest words, Nihuang fell forward onto her knees, a gleaming jade pendant cupped in both hands. The character ‘Mu’ was carved into its surface over a shimmering pattern of ripples and waves.

Mei Changsu’s gaze was solemn as he looked down slowly at the pendant. He understood that the girl before him, who shouldered the Yunnan Mu clan alone, was not only entrusting to him this jade pendant, but also the safety of her beloved younger brother in the capital. If he accepted it, a heavy responsibility would fall onto his shoulders. But the moment did not allow for hesitation, and he had never thought of hesitating in the first place, so his only response was to quietly accept the pendant and raise Nihuang to her feet.

“Don’t worry, the Emperor is only trying to restrain your power, he does not harbour any suspicions. Mu Qing may not have much experience, but he is a bright and agile child, and as long as I am in the capital, he will not come to any harm.”

A soft dimple appeared in Nihuang’s cheeks, but her gaze, as bright as moonlight, held the shine of tears. “Lin Shu gege, you.....must take care too....”

Mei Changsu smiled gently at her. There was nothing more to be said, and even Nie Duo did not need to be discussed. As long as they both understood the other’s worry,<sup>143</sup> and knew, too, the purest and softest parts of each other’s hearts – that was enough.

On the tenth of April, Princess Nihuang departed the capital at dawn, accompanied by an envoy from the palace as a sign of the Emperor’s favour. Aside from these ministers who had come for ceremonial purposes, people like Xiao Jingrui, Yan Yujin, and Xia Dong had also naturally shown up, but there was no sign of Mei Changsu’s shadow amongst the crowd that had gathered to see the Princess off. Instead, they encountered another person, who seemed at first unexpected, but on second thought, perhaps should have come as no surprise.

The head ambassador of Da Chu, Yuwen Xuan, had the typical build of the Southern Chu – thin eyebrows over almond-shaped eyes, a tall stature, and narrow shoulders, giving him a somewhat lanky appearance, but once he started moving, the strength beneath the wiry frame became apparent.

The royalty of Da Chu did not lead their own armies, and so Yuwen Xuan had never fought directly against Princess Nihuang, but everyone knew of the centuries-long enmity between Da Chu and the Mu clan, who had guarded the Southern Border

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<sup>143</sup> can’t translate this word right, but it’s literally like ‘hanging’, as in hanging on someone’s heart (so worry = worry about each other)

for generations, not to mention the late Lord Mu had died fighting the Chu army, and Princess Nihuang herself had undergone many difficult experiences on the battlefield.

And so this Prince Ling of Da Chu had some guts indeed, daring to show up at the gates of the capital of Da Liang to see off the lady general of the Southern Border who had been his nation's enemy for many years.

As soon as he saw the Chu attire of the new arrivals and the Chu-styled decorations on their carriages, Mu Qing's expression darkened, but in contrast, a faint smile drifted over Princess Nihuang's face.

"Greetings, Princess Nihuang." Yuwen Xuan got down off his carriage and hurried forward in a bow.

"Your Highness, Prince Ling." Nihuang returned the courtesy. "Are you leaving the city?"

"Oh no, I came especially to see the Princess off, in order to express my thanks to the Princess." The corner of Yuwen Xuan's eyes crinkled in a smile.

His words were unexpected, and Nihuang couldn't help raising an eyebrow. "Thank me for what?"

"It is said that when countries go to war, the ones who suffer are the common people. I have always striven for peace between our two nations, that each might not invade nor disturb the other. However, the monarch of my humble country has always envied the glory of Jinling, and is forever striving northward. If not for the Princess' formidable strength in suppressing our invasions, I fear far more turmoil and chaos would have fallen upon us by now, and so, I must convey my deepest gratitude to the Princess."

The logic of his words seemed correct, but spoken from the mouth of a member of the imperial family of Da Chu, they came out strangely, and made one uncomfortable. He seemed to be expressing genuine goodwill towards Nihuang, but there also seemed to be a hidden mocking beneath his speech, and yet if one were to try to refute him, there was nowhere to begin.

"Alright, His Highness Prince Ling has spoken his courteous words, pray take your leave now, there is still much we have to discuss with jiejie." Mu Qing could not be impolite because of the other's status as ambassador, but neither could he muster up any sort of amiable appearance.

"This is..." Yuwen Xuan eyed him dubiously, clearly not recognizing him, and it was not until an assistant came over and whispered in his ear that he seemed to light up with understanding. "Ah, so it is the little lord Mu. Please forgive my carelessness, you know, we Chu have always only heard of Princess Nihuang, and did not know

about this lord Mu. Jiejie has fought all your wars for you, the little lord is fortunate indeed, what does he like to do in his spare time? Embroidery? It is a pity my younger sister did not come, embroidery is her favourite....”

Even the most sophisticated might not have been able to withstand this deliberate baiting, and so the young hot-blooded Mu Qing didn't stand a chance, and he flushed with fury and jumped to his feet. His sister held him back.

“Your Highness Prince Ling is also unfamiliar to me,” Princess Nihuang said coolly. “Nihuang has never encountered so much as His Highness' shadow on the battlefield, and if he does not go to war, perhaps he too spends his days amusing himself with embroidery?”

Yuwen Xuan laughed carelessly. “I have always been a pampered prince who spends his days idling about, so I do not go to war – what of it? But the little lord Mu is a lord who guards the border, and yet he has never appeared on the battlefield to fight under the banner of his king, if this is not fortune, what is? I must say, I do envy him....”

Mu Qing couldn't contain his fury. He shoved off his sister's hand and rushed forward, drawing his sword and pointing it straight at Yuwen Xuan's throat as he shouted, “You listen to me, when I succeed to my father's place, of course I won't let my sister bear the burden for me. If you are a man, then prove yourself to have more than just a sharp tongue, and let us meet on the battlefield!”

“Hahaha,” Yuwen Xuan jeered, “So easily angered? Our two nations are currently arranging a wedding union, what cause for battle is there left? Even if we are so unfortunate as to enter into open war again in the future, I have already said that I myself will not be found on the battlefield, so we will let Lord Mu have his fierce words. As for whether I am a man...haha, I fear a little boy such as Lord Mu would not be able to tell....”

Princess Nihuang's brow furrowed. This Yuwen Xuan had a quick tongue, and was obviously trying to rile Mu Qing up, but aside from being designed to anger, there was nothing else offensive about his words. The best way to deal with people like him was to simply remain indifferent and ignore him, but Qing'er was young, and how could he be expected to keep his calm in the face of such ridicule? If she let this go on, she would find herself in a difficult bind – if she stopped Mu Qing, she would be encouraging the Chu's influence and extinguishing her brother's spirits; if she protected him, that would give this person yet another reason to tease Qing di for hiding under his sister's wing; yet, if she did nothing, she knew Qing di was not this person's match when it came to this game of words....

As she stood there deliberating, Xiao Jingrui stepped forward and said, smiling coldly, “Your Highness Prince Ling, since you already know that the two of you will have no opportunity to meet on the battlefield, then why waste time on these useless

words? The little lord Mu has only just come of age and inherited his father's position, and in the future, he is sure to be found under the royal flag in his own right. If you truly envy his place as general and commander of such a formidable army in the future, while you can only content yourself with embroidery, you have only to say so. I believe the little lord Mu would not deprive you of the chance to engage with him in person, I only do not know whether Your Highness Prince Ling would dare to accept such an invitation?"

Mu Qing gritted his teeth and added, "That's right, keep your nonsense to yourself, what honour is there in provoking others with backhanded insults? You and I can fight, right here, right now, and if you don't have the guts to fight me, call any of your men, call more than one if you like!"

Yan Yujin saw that Yuwen Xuan was slender in build and walked with a floating step, and it was evident that his martial arts training was far inferior to Mu Qing, who had been raised in a military household, and he understood that Xiao Jingrui meant to end this battle of wits where they were at a disadvantage, and neatly move the battleground to a physical fight, and so he jumped in to help. "We in Da Liang are of a different breed compared to those from your esteemed nation. We like to talk with our fists, and dislike empty words, the men in particular. Your Highness Prince Ling, you are in our country now, and ought to follow our customs, so perhaps you could spend less time spouting flowers from your lips, and put your money where your mouth is?"

## CHAPTER 85

### *Nian Nian*

Yuwen Xuan's gaze fell onto the two young people, and he looked them up and down for a moment before suddenly bursting into laughter, saying, "You people of Da Liang are real characters, you two look like elegant gentlemen of noble birth, where did you pick up the tempers of the Northern Yan – resorting to fists when words are not to your liking? I beg your pardon, you two are...."

His assistant immediately bent and whispered in his ear.

"Oh, so it is the Young Masters Xiao and Yan, what an honour, what an honour."

Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin were both on the Langya Lists, and so it was natural that Yuwen Xuan should know their names, but for some reason, the words "what an honour" coming from his mouth coupled with the expression on his face carried with it an undeniable sense of mocking.

"Do you dare fight me or not? If not, say so and be quick about it, no one likes listening to you sharpening your teeth,<sup>144</sup>" Mu Qing said angrily.

"Of course I dare, whyever would I not?" Yuwen Xuan's gaze turned suddenly cold, as he reached out a hand to stroke the pendant dangling from his cap. "But we are gathered here today to see the Princess off, and should this disintegrate into a fistfight, that would be disrespectful to the Princess. Everyone in my humble nation knows that I would dare to do anything, except offend a beautiful lady. And so, for today... even if the ladies and gentlemen present were to carve me into eight pieces, I would not lift a hand."

"If you don't dare face me, then say you don't dare, why be so long-winded about it?" Mu Qing glowered as he turned to pull at his sister. "Let's go up to the pavilion and ignore this person with a mouth but no guts."

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<sup>144</sup> one of those things where I couldn't think of the English idiom so I just translated it literally (lol I'm out of practice)

“I have not finished speaking, why is the little lord Mu in such a hurry to leave? Is he afraid that, if he is not careful, I might accept the invitation?” Strangely, there was a wide smile on Yuwen Xuan’s face, and stranger yet, there was no hint of a smile in his steady gaze.

“Hunh,” Mu Qing glared at him. “You are really only a little skilled at provoking people with words, I’ve gotten used to it by now, so if you have no new moves to show, then I fear I will not linger long to keep your company.”

Seeing how quickly Mu Qing had controlled his emotions and stopped letting Yuwen Xuan rile him up as he pleased, the corner of Princess Nihuang’s lips lifted, and Xia Dong, who had stood by observing silently also nodded in approval. The masters Xiao and Yan were not by nature driven by their emotions, and they had only spoken up just now in Mu Qing’s place to lend a hand, and seeing that he had calmed down, they saw no reason to continue this pointless argument, and so turned away. Yuwen Xuan looked at one, then at another, and suddenly burst into laughter again. “Fascinating, how fascinating, do you all truly believe I cannot put my words into action? Although I will certainly not lift a hand today....” As he spoke, he turned his gaze onto Xiao Jingrui and smiled. “I have a friend who has long since admired the name of Master Xiao and would cherish this opportunity to learn from him, I wonder whether he would do us the honour?”

His attention had shifted so suddenly that everyone was a little taken aback. Yan Yujin cocked his head and stared at his friend. “When did you become so famous? Xia Dong jiejie is standing right here, but they didn’t challenge her, and chose to challenge you instead? Even if they win against you, what prestige could they gain?”

“You don’t get it,” Xia Dong glanced over and put a hand on Yan Yujin’s shoulder, saying with a smile, “Xiao Rui may not be on the Langya List of Martial Artists, but regardless he is still a master of the first tier, so naturally there will be jianghu visitors of the second tier who are seeking to make a name for themselves by defeating him, what is so strange about that?”

“Oh...” Yan Yujin widened his eyes in understanding as he nodded. “Jianghu visitors of the second tier...that makes sense, it makes a lot of sense....”

As the challenged, Xiao Jingrui took this much more seriously than the other two, and he stepped forward slowly and said, his face solemn, “I am at your service.”

Yuwen Xuan gazed at him steadily for a moment, his smile disappearing abruptly, and his tone grew solemn as he answered, “Our thanks to Master Xiao. ....Nian Nian, Master Xiao has already accepted, come on out.”

There were eight others in total who had accompanied Prince Ling of Da Chu to the city gates, and from their attire, two were carriage drivers and five were guards. The last was dressed in a blue-green archer’s robe, a slender figure with a golden hoop

in his hair and no other accessories except an exquisitely embroidered tassel around the waist, and from attire alone, it was impossible to guess at this person's identity.

At first glance, this person appeared to have average features and a rather wooden expression, but as he stepped closer, Nihuang and Xia Dong, who had their share of jianghu experience, saw quickly that he wore a face mask of real human skin that hid his true features. Xiao Jingrui's eyes narrowed, as if he too had noticed the abnormality.

With regards to human skin masks, no matter how intricately they were made, the material was still dead skin and could not replicate the delicate and subtle changes of a living person's face, therefore it was very difficult to fool the truly observant. For this reason, since the creation of these masks, jianghu persons seldom used them, and when they did so, it was only as a sort of face veil that was particularly difficult for enemies to remove, as if to say, "I don't care that you can tell I'm wearing a mask, as long as you cannot see my true face."

"Master Xiao, please."

"Please."

The two turned to face each other, unsheathed their swords, and took up a starting position as they bowed. Yan Yujin couldn't help laughing. "Jingrui has always been one for manners, who could have guessed this Nian Nian would be just as concerned about etiquette?"

But Xia Dong and Nihuang exchanged a glance, their expressions serious.

Although it was only the simplest of positions, the two lady masters had already seen enough to guess at what kind of a person this challenger was.

After a moment of silence, a cacophony of clashes rang out as the two swords flashed in dazzling symphony, the two swordsmen exchanging blows so quickly that their figures grew blurred.

The swords flew through their air, their strength undeniable, each stroke brimming with qi, the weapons wielded so smoothly they seemed to be extensions of the swordsmen's bodies, as if the swords themselves had spirits that had been awoken by this dance. The meeting of these spirits was not vicious in the least, but it stirred up an energy like a great wind sweeping through the observing crowd, and they felt their hairs stand up on end.

This was truly a competition, not a duel, not a fight to the death, but merely a contest between two schools of swordsmanship. The two competitors seemed to have a silent understanding, as neither made any moves with truly hostile intent, and yet both fought with every ounce of their ability. Every move was received with another



in a dance so intricate it could have been choreographed, and neither had the clear upper-hand. As the fight went on, even the observers couldn't help being drawn in, their expressions growing serious as they studied the leaping figures carefully.

Just as the climax of the fight had come abruptly, its end arrived just as swiftly. Xiao Jingrui's sword suddenly slowed, and he twisted his arm and turned, his brow furrowing, as his sword first flicked upwards in the 'Sky maneuver' and then erupted forward in the 'Fountain maneuver', and he descended upon his opponent like a celestial flood. His opponent faced the the attack boldly, not to be outdone, and he grasped his sword in both hands as he redoubled his attack. To the onlooker's eye, just as the two swords flashed in the dazzling sunlight, the two blurred figures suddenly halted, like a song that had swelled to its climax only to stop abruptly. When the dust settled, it was Nian Nian who bowed first, and Xiao Jingrui immediately returned the bow, saying, "My thanks, you permitted me to win."<sup>145</sup>

Nian Nian did not say anything for a long time, and although it was impossible to see his expression under his mask, his gaze was dazed, as if he was stunned. Yuwen Xuan hurried over, his face concerned, and put a hand on his back, asking lowly, "Nian Nian, are you hurt?"

Nian Nian shook his head gently and straightened to look at Xiao Jingrui for a long moment. When he finally spoke, his voice was as calm and pleasant as always. "Master Xiao is well-versed in the Tianquan method, and my training in the Eyun method is insufficient, so for today's battle, it is I who have lost to Master Xiao, and not the Eyun method that has proven inferior to Tianquan's. Please pass a message to your esteemed father – he must not forget his prior agreement. My master has arrived in Jinling, and will soon be at your door to pay a visit." When he finished speaking, he turned and walked away, his departure as clean as his arrival.

"May the Princess have a smooth journey, I will not tarry here any longer, farewell!" Yuwen Xuan bowed, then gestured to his subordinates and followed after Nian Nian.

Xiao Jingrui gazed doubtfully after the shadows of the retreating figures, his expression sober. Yan Yujin scratched his head and mused thoughtfully, "The Eyun method? Could it be that this Nian Nian's master is..."

"Yue Xiuze, one of the heads of the Chu emperor's palace, and sixth-ranked on the Langya List of Martial Artists, or, I should say, now fifth-ranked..." Xia Dong tossed her head, dislodging the hair that had fallen over her face, her gaze grim.

"Isn't Jindiao Chaiming of Da Yu ranked fifth?" Yan Yujin asked.

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<sup>145</sup> it is literally impossible to translate this – it's part of the jianghu / dueling etiquette, and it's what you say to be polite after you win. It's not that you actually think the other person let you win, if you see what I mean.

“I received the news a few days ago – about a month ago, Yue Xiuze dueled Chaiming and defeated him on the 79th move.....looks like he’s made quite a bit of progress in this short year.”

“He’s already beaten Chaiming, does that mean he’s going to go looking for Uncle Zhuo next?” Yan Yujin turned to look at his friend. “Jingrui, from what that person said, it sounds like Uncle Zhuo has some kind of old agreement with Yue Xiuze?”

Xiao Jingrui nodded. “My Zhuo dad has fought with Yue Xiuze twice before, and beaten him both times, but it’s not unlikely that they made some agreement to duel again in the future.”

Princess Nihuang murmured, “Yue Xiuze is a high-ranking official of Da Chu, but he did not show his identity this time when he entered the capital with the rest of the envoy, so it seems his purpose is truly detached from any official business, and he only seeks to challenge those martial arts experts who are ranked higher than he.”

Yan Yujin saw Xiao Jingrui’s somber expression and hit his arm, saying with a smile, “Uncle Zhuo has traveled jianghu for so many years, and he always received a dozen challenges in one year alone. This is our home ground, what can Yue Xiuze do to him? As long as it’s a fair fight, and the winner is determined by skill alone, there will be pride in victory, but no shame in loss either, so what are you so worried about?”

Xiao Jingrui smiled warmly at him. “I’m not worried, the Eyun method is not Tianquan Manor’s match, our swordsmanship is always improving, and my Zhuo dad has not been sitting idle this year, so what do I have to be worried about? I was only thinking, if it’s Yue Xiuze who is preparing to challenge my Zhuo dad, then why was that Master Nian Nian so eager to try his hand against me?”

“What’s so strange about that?” Yan Yujin scoffed. “He is an heir of the Eyun method, and you are an heir of Tianquan Manor, and since his master is preparing to challenge your father, it’s only natural that he was curious and wanted to test out the mettle of the Tianquan method for himself.”

“I understand that, but if he wanted to try himself against the Tianquan method, why find me? By all rights, he should be looking for Qingyao dage, no?”

Yan Yujin looked confused, but Xia Dong, watching from one side, smiled and shook her head. “He was right to find you. I examined him carefully just now, and although that Nian Nian covered his true face, his bones have not yet grown fully, and his swordsmanship is still a little immature, he must be twenty years old at the most. I suppose he knew his own skill was not sufficient to challenge Zhuo Qingyao, and since our Master Jingrui is widely known not only for his reputable swordsmanship but also for his generous nature, who else could he find, if not you?”

Nihuang sighed slowly. “But although this Miss Nian Nian is young, her skill is undeniable, and it looks as if Yue Xiuze has trained her well. It is too bad I must leave today, and cannot witness for myself the duel between Tianquan and Eyun. I can only entreat you all to write to me with the results.”

Xia Dong grinned. “Of course.” Her gaze flickered to the side. “Hey, what are you youngsters gaping at? Didn’t you hear the Princess’ orders?”

Yan Yujin took several deep breaths and said, his eyes nearly bulging out of his sockets, “What did the Princess say just now? Miss.....Nian Nian?<sup>146</sup>”

“That’s right,” Xia Dong cocked her head. “Didn’t you notice?”

Yan Yujin turned to Xiao Jingrui, dumbfounded. “Jingrui, did you notice?”

Although Xiao Jingrui did not give off a stupefied appearance, he was just as shocked as Yan Yujin, and at his question, he shook his head numbly. “I...I wasn’t paying attention....”

“Nevermind,” Mu Qing said consolingly. “I didn’t notice either.”

Yan Yujin eyed the little lord, clearly thinking, “of course you didn’t notice,” but as they weren’t too close, he swallowed these words and didn’t speak them out loud.

“Alright, the hour is late, the Princess ought to be leaving. It is said that one can escort a king a thousand miles, but in the end, he must still depart. Let us part ways here.” Xia Dong reached out and pinched Yan Yujin’s cheek out of habit, and then turned finally to Nihuang, saying lowly, “Princess, take care on the road.”

Xiao Jingrui heard her words and said apologetically, “We came to see the Princess off, and instead this turned into a pointless fight, and delayed the Princess’ journey, I’m so sorry.”

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<sup>146</sup> in Chinese, ‘he’ and ‘she’ sound the same when spoken aloud. They’re (slightly) different characters when written down, but they’re pronounced the same. I followed the text and had them using the male pronoun until Nihuang used the title ‘Miss’, but that’s the text being deliberately tricky. (The original text also didn’t use any gendered pronouns when first describing Nian Nian because in Chinese you can say things like “the hair” instead of “his/her hair” without it being weird.) Anyway, my point is, the text uses male pronouns for so long because XJR and YYJ think Nian Nian is a boy, and the text wants the reader to think so as well. But Xia Dong and Nihuang knew all along she was a girl.

Princess Nihuang laughed brightly. “I am not in such a hurry that a little bit of time like this would make any difference, what is there to apologize about? Besides, the excitement of that fight makes for a good start to my journey.”

“Jiejie,” Mu Qing looked reluctant to let her go. “Since you want to see the duel between Tianquan and Eyun, why not stay a few more days before leaving?”

“What nonsense.” Although Princess Nihuang’s words were scolding, her gaze was warm as she reached out to caress her brother’s head. “I have reported my departure to His Majesty, how can I change it on a whim? Since I cannot watch myself, you will have to watch it for me, and that will be just as good.”

Yan Yujin laughed and pulled Mu Qing over to him, purposefully lightening the atmosphere as he said, “Then we will have to gang up on Jingrui! The fight between Yue Xiuze and Uncle Zhuo will be a private one, and if we don’t have Jingrui reporting back to us, who knows where or when it will happen!”

Xiao Jingrui answered seriously, “Only if my Zhuo dad gives his permission.”

Yan Yujin turned to him. “Never mind, I know you well, although Uncle Xie has always been strict with you, Uncle Zhuo treats you like a treasured jewel, so as long as you beg a little and throw a tantrum, I know he’ll agree to anything.”

During this distraction, Mu Qing had managed to get his emotions under control, and in order not to cause his sister worry or grief, he bravely gathered his spirits and smiled sweetly, “That’s true. I think it won’t be long before the Emperor lets me return to the South, so jiejie doesn’t need to worry.”

Nihuang smiled and patted her little brother on the shoulder, then gently brushed back the hair that had blown into his face. The iron will of the lady general held back the turmoil of emotions just beneath the surface, and she took a few steps back, and then turned and jumped onto her horse, a faint smile lingering at the edges of her lips.

“Yunnan is not the end of the world, until we meet again.”

And with a light echo of horse hooves, the caravan officially departed for Yunnan. Princess Nihuang turned for a last look at the capital, then turned her horse and nudged it gently into a trot, following the yellow road away from the city.

## CHAPTER 86

### *Fei Liu*

Mei Changsu sat in his gardens under the branches of a banyan tree heavy with greenery, playing a guessing game with Fei Liu as he listened to Tong Lu's report on the events that had occurred that day during the Princess' send-off. Aside from the mention of Yuwen Xuan's unexpected appearance, during which Mei Changsu appeared to be listening intently, he did not seem particularly interested in the rest of the report. As for Xiao Jingrui's competition with the Eyun disciple Nian Nian, he didn't even raise an eyebrow, only giving an absent "Ng" in answer.

Though on careful reflection, his attitude was not really that unusual. Neither Xiao Jingrui, nor that disciple of Yue Xiuze had much status in martial arts circles, and it was natural that competitions at this level would not be of much interest to Mister Mei of Jiangzuo, the chief of the world's greatest sect, who must have seen countless contests of this nature by now. If it were not for the fact that Xiao Jingrui was his friend, he probably would not even be interested in the result of the fight.

"Left!" Fei Liu shouted loudly, as he uncovered his eyes. Mei Changsu smiled and opened his left fist, which was empty. The youth's face screwed up immediately, and even Tong Lu, standing to the side, couldn't help laughing.

"Alright, you've lost three times, there must be a punishment. Go and help Aunt Ji cut the melons, Su gege wants to have a piece."

"Melons!" Fei Liu loved fruits, and as the season for tangerines had passed, he had moved on to melons. Mei Changsu often teased that he could finish a whole field of them in a day, and to prevent him from getting sick, he had to pose a limit on the number of melons the youth was allowed to have each day.

Fei Liu darted away, and Mei Changsu's smile disappeared. His tone was cool when he spoke again: "Inform Mister Shisan, it is time to make a move against the Crimson Sleeves. He may initiate the first step, and it must be done cleanly."

"Yes." Tong Lu bowed hurriedly. "Does the Chief have any other orders?"

Mei Changsu leaned down and rested his head on the pillow, closing his eyes. “You do not need to come tomorrow....”

Tong Lu paled abruptly and fell to the floor in a bow, saying in a trembling voice, “Has Tong Lu.....disappointed the Chief in some way?”

Mei Changsu, startled by his reaction, turned his head to look at him. “I was just going to let you take a day off, where have your thoughts got to?”

“Ah? ....” Tong Lu let out a sigh of relief and sat up, scratching his head. “I thought the Chief was telling me not to come again in the future.....it wasn’t easy earning this opportunity to work directly for the Chief, and Tong Lu would be sad to see it go....”

“Silly child,” Mei Changsu couldn’t help smiling as he patted his head. “Actually, it is I who needs a good day’s rest, without anything to think or worry about.... I want to put aside all troubles and spend a day in serenity and peace, and gather my strength for the days ahead....”

Tong Lu didn’t understand the importance of the days to come, but he was not overly curious by nature and knew when to hold his tongue, so he did not ask further, and only continued to gaze reverently at his chief, waiting quietly for his orders.

“Tell Gong Yu, she must rest well tomorrow too....”

“Yes.”

“There’s nothing else, you may leave.”

Tong Lu bowed deeply, and then got up and left. Li Gang entered in his wake, holding a large platter with a lid tied shut with red cloth.

“Chief, it’s arrived, here it is for your inspection.”

Mei Changsu sat up and untied the red cloth. On the platter stood a small bottle carved out of dark green jade. At first glance, it did not catch the eye, but on closer inspection, there were running horses carved into the surface of the jade, racing with carefree abandon along the natural pattern of the jade itself. The design was so intricate and the handiwork so delicate and refined that the overall piece was astonishing to behold.

And yet, no matter how beautiful the jade bottle itself appeared, its greatest value lay inside.

“How many?”

“Chief, there are ten.”

Mei Changsu picked up the jade bottle and removed its cork stopper, then lifted it to his nose and sniffed it lightly before replacing the cork and turning the bottle over in his hands gently.

Li Gang’s gaze shifted, as if he was trying to decide whether to speak or not.

“Li dage, if you have anything to say, please say it freely.” Mei Changsu had not even lifted his head, and it was impossible to know how he had seen Li Gang’s expression.

“Chief, would this gift be a little too much?” Li Gang spoke softly. “A jade bottle hand-carved by Great Master Huo, heart protection pills that can save a person’s life – either one of these gifts would be enough to astound any audience, why put the two together?”

Mei Changsu was quiet for awhile, and there was grief and compassion in his gaze when he finally answered, “After this birthday, I fear that even gifts more precious than these would not hold any meaning for Jingrui....”

Li Gang lowered his head, biting his lip.

“But you are correct, if we send him a gift like this, it would indeed be a little too ostentatious. I have been thoughtless in my consideration.” Mei Changsu’s finger traced the surface of the jade as he sighed lightly. “Put the pills into a plain bottle.”

“Yes.”

The jade bottle was replaced onto the platter, but Mei Changsu’s gaze still lingered on the carving of the sprinting horses. Finally, he looked away, and then closed his eyes. When he first chose this jade bottle, it was because of this carving, because he knew that Jingrui had loved horses since he was a boy and so would like the design, and thus he had forgotten all along its staggering cost.

It would appear that his heart, which he had thought as calm as a still pond, was not immune to slight ripples in its surface, especially as that day drew closer and closer.

“Li dage, bring me my zither....”

“Yes.”

Li Gang, who had been watching Mei Changsu’s every expression with concern, retreated quickly with the platter and returned almost immediately carrying wooden zither, which he placed carefully on a small table under the window.

The table was low, and there was no chair before it, only a thin mat. Mei Changsu sat down cross-legged and tuned the instrument. Then his finger tips skipped lightly over the strings, and a soft melody drifted through the air, gentle as water flowing down a stream – ‘The Joy of Peace and Tranquility’.

The music soothed the hearts of all who listened, even of the musician himself. The tune sang of winding brooks in sunlit forests, and open valleys filled with wildflowers. It cleansed the soul of grief, and wiped the brow of sorrow. When the music stopped, there was no trace of disturbance left on his face, and his eyes were as peaceful as a lake on a windless day, his gaze clear and steady.

The decision had been made long ago, and there was no use in wavering now. His sympathy and regret for Xiao Jingrui could not change the plans that had been laid, and so any sorrow that remained was meaningless, even hypocritical, and it held no practical purpose, whether for himself or for that young man.

Mei Changsu lifted his face and took a deep breath. The warm spring sunshine fell onto his face, but he felt no warmth, only a sort of distant coolness.

He lifted a hand and placed it in the sunlight. A little pale, almost transparent. And weak, without any strength.

These hands had once tamed horses and wielded swords, had once bent a bow to shoot down great birds of prey. And now, they had abandoned the reins, and relinquished the bows, and could only sit in this dim inferno, stirring the winds.

“Li dage,” Mei Changsu turned his head and looked at Li Gang, standing silently by the door. “I am sorry, I have caused you worry....”

Li Gang felt a sudden painful warmth well up in his chest, and he could barely control the tremor in his voice as he answered, “Chief....”

“Go and tell Fei Liu to come, how can cutting a melon take so long....” Mei Changsu did not appear to have noticed his loss of composure, and only cocked his head, smiling faintly.

Almost before he had finished speaking, Fei Liu’s slender figure bounded into the courtyard and he streaked into the room, a small white dish in one hand as he said loudly, “Flower!”

Mei Changsu turned and looked. Five flowers carved out of melon rested in the dish, and though the petals were uneven and the handiwork a bit shoddy, the shape was unmistakable, and was really quite pretty.

“Did Fei Liu carve this?”



“Ng!” Fei Liu’s eyes were wide and he looked delighted. “Best!”

“You picked the five best flowers to bring here?” Mei Changsu’s gaze was fond as he twisted the youth’s ear gently. “Did Aunt Ji teach you?”

“Ng!” Fei Liu nodded emphatically.

“Can I eat them?”

“Eat!” Fei Liu grabbed the largest flower and brought it to Mei Changsu’s lips.

Li Gang couldn’t help laughing. “Hey Fei Liu, since they’re going to be eaten anyway, why did you bother carving them into flowers?”

“Su gege eat!” Fei Liu said firmly, glaring at him.

“Our Fei Liu is so good, he wanted to make them beautiful because they were for Su gege to eat, is that right?” Mei Changsu bit off a petal, and reached out with his handkerchief to wipe at the youth’s mouth. “How much did you eat? There’s melon juice all over your chin....”

“Carved badly!” Fei Liu said defensively.

“You only ate the ones you carved badly? That’s alright then. But you must remember not to eat too many all at once, or your stomach will hurt.”

“Ng!”

Mei Changsu finished the first flower, and then shook his head at Fei Liu. The youth remembered that eating too much would make one’s stomach hurt, and so did not try to feed him a second piece. He stared blankly at the plate for a moment, and then seemed to make up his mind, and brought the remaining four flowers to Li Gang.

“For me?” Li Gang laughed loudly. “What favour, I’m so honoured, so honoured indeed!”

Fei Liu didn’t understand half of what he said, but he understood the first question and nodded his answer. But when Li Gang picked up a piece of melon, his eyes, the only part of him that showed any emotion, looked longingly at the melon, as if he was unwilling to part with it.

“You eat as well, we can have half each.” The innocent child’s feelings were written all over his face, and Li Gang held back a smile as he pushed two of the flowers back towards Fei Liu.

Fei Liu turned his head to look at Mei Changsu.

“Just now in the kitchen, how many melons did you carve badly?”

“Three!”

“Did you eat them all?!”

“With Aunt Ji!”

Mei Changsu looked at Fei Liu, his expression stern. “Didn’t you promise Su gege to only eat one a day?”

“Carved badly!” Fei Liu’s mouth turned down, his expression clearly wronged.

“Hm...” Mei Changsu thought seriously for a moment. “Then we cannot blame our Fei Liu, it was Su gege who was not clear enough. From now on, no matter whether it was carved badly or cut wrongly, as long as it is melon, then Fei Liu can only eat one per day. Understood?”

Fei Liu’s handsome face still did not show any strong emotion, but his tone clearly conveyed his unhappiness. “So little!”

“Su gege is afraid Fei Liu will get sick.” Mei Changsu glanced at him, his smile a little wicked. “How about we call Lin Chen gege to come over?”

Fei Liu jumped in fear and buried his head in Mei Changsu’s chest, his arms going tightly around his waist, and refused to let go. Li Gang, who had already been shaking with suppressed laughter, completely gave up at this display and retreated outdoors, clutching his side helplessly.

“You haven’t answered me.” Mei Changsu showed remarkable restraint as he extracted the youth’s head from his embrace, and repeated sternly, “One?”

Fei Liu was visibly torn between Lin Chen gege on the one hand and melons on the other, and finally, he lowered his head meekly. “One....”

Mei Changsu ruffled Fei Liu’s hair, his gaze and smile as warm as always.

Li Gang had disappeared from the courtyard. The earnest and devoted assistant had probably gone to find a suitable bottle to hold the pills which were to be a gift. Just now, the grief had been lifted by the adorable youth’s appearance, but a few ripples still remained nevertheless, a faint pain underneath that resurfaced on occasion. In the space between breaths, he pushed the pain away firmly, burying it deep down.

In another day's time, it would be Xiao Jingrui's twenty-fifth birthday.

Mei Changsu knew very well that, for this young nobleman, it would be the most unforgettable day of his life....

## **BOOK FIVE**

### **GRUDGES AND GRIEVANCES**

#### **CHAPTER 87**

##### *Arriving Guests*

To most people, the first hour of dusk marked the end of a hard day's work. But to the inhabitants of the normally bustling and brightly-lit Spiral Market Street, dusk was only the beginning – a time to rouse oneself from a lethargic slumber and begin to clean and prepare the halls to receive the first guests of the evening. The entire street was quiet, and every window and door was still barred shut, its silence so complete that it was almost impossible to associate this place with the frantic energy and gaudy celebrations that took place here after dark.

It was through these deserted streets that a small carriage with a jeweled canopy made its way quietly, pulled by a beautiful white horse, on which sat a handsome young nobleman dressed in fine splendor, smiling brightly. From his expression, you could never have guessed that he was riding through empty streets. He looked instead as if he was sitting in Crimson Sleeve House on one of its busiest evenings.

The crisp hoof-beats rang through the air, and the small carriage and the handsome young man passed many extravagantly decorated gates before halting at the side-door of Miaoyin House. The carriage driver jumped down and knocked three times on the door, and a moment later, a serving girl answered. She took in the visitors at a glance and then disappeared again without a word. The carriage driver and the nobleman waited patiently. A short while later, the door opened again, and a young lady, covered head to toe in a veil of light gauze, came forward slowly on the arm of the serving girl. Although her features were blurred by the veil, it was obvious from her graceful figure and delicate steps that this was a beauty to stir the hearts of anyone who looked upon her.

The splendidly-dressed young man had already leaped down from his horse and was coming forward in a bow, as he said with a bright smile, "Miss Gong Yu is truly a

lady of her word. To have Miss as a guest at Jingrui's birthday banquet, we will be the envy of the city!"

"Master Yan is too kind." Gong Yu's voice was gentle. "The young master has come personally, I am not worthy of the honour."

"A chance to escort such a beautiful lady, naturally I fought for the privilege," Yan Yujin answered, delighted. "Jingrui is the birthday boy, so of course he couldn't get away, and Xie Bi has to help receive guests and manage the household staff, so even if he wanted to come, he wouldn't dare voice the thought. As for anyone else, Miss Gong Yu would not know him well, so who could win against my claim?"

Gong Yu lifted a hand to cover her smile. "Master Yan is as witty as always...."

Yan Yujin smiled back and turned towards the road. "The carriage is prepared, is Miss ready to leave?"

Gong Yu spoke lowly to the serving girl, and then stepped forward and entered the carriage. The serving girl bowed and returned indoors.

"She's not going?"

"I am attending Master Xiao's birthday banquet, what need have I to bring her?"

Yan Yujin thought for a moment and then nodded. "That's true, once we arrive at the Xie residence, there will be no shortage of girls to serve you. ....If Miss is seated, we will prepare to depart. Although there is more than an hour before the banquet is to start, there will be elders present, so it is best for us to arrive early."

"Yes, we may depart."

At this soft reply, the carriage driver cracked his whip, and under the accompaniment of the elegantly-dressed young man, the carriage began to move forward.

At the same time, the Xie residence of the Marquis of Ning was busy preparing for the birthday banquet of their First Young Master.

Because Xiao Jingrui was the son of two families, his birthday celebration undoubtedly held a certain significance that had nothing to do with him personally. And thus, neither Zhuo Dingfeng, who had always doted on him, nor the usually stern Xie Yu had ever commented on the special treatment Xiao Jingrui received every year on his birthday.

The guest list had been prepared long ago, and when it was first presented to Xie Yu, his gaze had stopped momentarily at the words 'Su Zhe', but he did not say

anything. Although they served different masters, Xie Yu did not intend to obstruct the relationship between his son and this strategist of Prince Yu's. This was because he knew very well that the information Xiao Jingrui possessed was very limited, and even if it was all seized by Su Zhe, it would still not matter much. Besides, Xiao Jingrui's friendship with Su Zhe might one day be put to good use, and even if it was not, it did not do much harm.

And so, his only response to this list, which included an enemy's strategist as well as a lady from a pleasure house, was, "Let your mother have a look."

As Xie Yu had not expressed disapproval, the quiet and composed Grand Princess Liyang, who kept a low profile, naturally did not express any opinion either, and so the invitations were sent out without any issue.

Xiao Jingrui had a number of rowdy but good-natured friends, and last year, after the elders had retired, the crowd had gathered together amusing itself late into the night, making good use of this excuse for entertainment. But this year, Mei Changsu was coming, and Gong Yu, who never left her House to perform, would also be there, and so Xiao Jingrui was planning this year's banquet much more carefully than he had in the past, so that it would not dissolve into the kind of cacophonous, unrestrained partying that it had become in previous years. But if he suddenly stopped inviting friends he had been inviting for the past few years, that would undoubtedly cause offense, and the dilemma occupied him for many days. Yan Yujin saw his predicament and thought of a solution. He could say that his parents had instructed him to make this year's banquet elegant in nature, and that the evening would be filled with reciting poetry and listening to the zither. As he feared this would dampen everyone's mood, he would instead reserve the largest and best restaurant in the capital for the day before his birthday, and invite a dozen of the most beautiful ladies to entertain his friends for a day. This crowd of young noblemen were indeed satisfied by this day of amusement, and voluntarily declined to attend the following evening's "elegant and refined" banquet, and so Xiao Jingrui's dilemma was neatly resolved.

Thus, on the evening of the twelfth of April, there were not too many guests attending Xiao Jingrui's birthday banquet. Originally, the invited included only Mei Changsu, Xia Dong, Yan Yujin, and Gong Yu, not including family. But when he had gone to deliver his invitation to the Su Manor, Meng Zhi happened to be there, and the Commander had teased, "Jingrui, why aren't you inviting me?" and so the Young Master Xiao of course immediately produced a second invitation for this esteemed guest.

Although there were not many people, there was still much to prepare. The women were preoccupied with the decoration of the dining hall and managing the servants, and had left the arrangement of goods and supplies to Xie Bi, and so as soon as the Second Master Xie had a moment's respite, he went to his dage to complain,

“Why am I working myself to death over here while you sit around idly on your birthday? No fair, you’ve got to give me half your presents in exchange!”

“You’re my flesh-and-blood brother, why talk about exchange? If you like anything of mine, it’s yours.” Young Master Xiao’s calm reply took all the wind from Xie Bi’s sails, and he even added casually, “Mum and Mother are looking for you, something about the banquet menu. You take your time with all the work, don’t let me delay you....”

As the birthday boy ducked out the door, Xie Bi could only stand there kicking at the ground sullenly, before he gave up and returned to his work.

That night, the first to arrive were of course Yan Yujin and Gong Yu. As soon as he saw Xiao Jingrui hurrying out to receive them, the son of the Imperial Uncle bent his head and whispered in the beautiful lady’s ear, “I am borrowing your spotlight today, usually when I come to the Xie manor, Jingrui never comes out to receive me, and I have to go and find him all by myself....”

Just as he had predicted, the first words out of Xiao Jingrui’s mouth were: “Miss Gong Yu has graced us with her arrival, forgive Jingrui for not coming out to meet you. Please, come in.”

“Hey,” Yan Yujin eyed him coldly, “can you see me?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Xiao Jingrui said soothingly, “Master Yan, please come in as well.”

“You haven’t said ‘forgive me for not coming out to meet you’....”

“Ah yes, forgive me for not coming out to meet Master Yan as well. Should your humble servant carry Your Honour in on his back?”

“No need. Just give me your arm.”

Gong Yu couldn’t help laughing, and she said with a shake of her head, “You two.....are truly a pair of good friends....”

“That’s because I let him have his way. Otherwise, we would have come to blows long ago,” Yan Yujin said with a straight face. “If anyone wants to see a paragon of patience and tolerance, tell them to come to me....”

“Either come in or get lost!” Xiao Jingrui scolded with a smile. “Or do you want Miss Gong Yu to keep standing here while you let your mouth run?”

Yan Yujin hurriedly bowed to her and said in a singsong voice, “Aiya, it is this humble one’s fault, pray enter, Miss, and enter quickly....”

“Sober up, the show hasn’t even started, and you’re already singing.” Xiao Jingrui rolled his eyes and led Gong Yu into the reception pavilion. He served her some tea, and after a little while, suggested that he bring her in to meet the women of the household.

By this time, Gong Yu had removed her veil, revealing brilliant yellow robes. Her face was not powdered or made up, but this only served to emphasize a certain lovely grace in her appearance. At Xiao Jingrui’s invitation, she solemnly knelt in a bow and said quietly, “Although Gong Yu has had the honour of being invited tonight, I am nonetheless only an entertainer, here to provide music for the noble gentleman at his esteemed residence. How could Gong Yu dare to meet such respectable persons as Her Highness the Grand Princess?”

Yan Yujin’s brow furrowed and he was about to speak when Xiao Jingrui beat him to it, saying warmly, “This is a private gathering, and Miss does not need to be too concerned. Besides, my mum and Qingyi mei are of jianghu background, and so are not very formal, and Xie Qi meimei is also open-minded by nature. Although my mother is a little aloof, she has never been arrogant, and besides, she loves music, and has known Miss Gong Yu’s name for some time. She asked me long ago to bring you to meet her as soon as you arrived.”

At his earnest words, Gong Yu could not refuse any longer, and so she thanked him and followed as he led the way further into the manor. Yan Yujin had no excuse to follow them, and so he could only stay in the reception pavilion, wandering around idly. Fortunately, Xiao Jingrui returned to find him soon after with Gong Yu nowhere in sight – clearly she had been invited to stay in the inner courtyard.

After chatting for a few minutes, Yan Yujin saw that the time was drawing near, and he was just about to ask when he saw Xie Bi hurrying over, shouting as he came, “Dage, come quick, Commander Meng is here.”

The two rose quickly and hurried outside. Because Meng Zhi was one of Xie Yu’s colleagues in the court, with an important position, the servants had first gone to notify the Old Master, and so by the time Xiao Jingrui arrived, Xie Yu and Zhuo Dingfeng were already there welcoming Meng Zhi in the entrance hall.

Xiao Jingrui didn’t dare disturb his elders so he stood quietly to one side, and, seeing a pause in the conversation, he was about to go forward to pay his greetings when another cry came from outside the gates: “Su Zhe, Mister Su, has arrived....”

The people in the entrance hall turned, and Xiao Jingrui was about to walk outside when Mei Changsu, a faint smile on his lips, appeared before him. Tonight, he was dressed in a snowy white cloak over sky-blue robes, and by his complexion, he looked very well indeed. It was difficult to imagine from his refined, scholarly appearance



that so many of the ripples and waves experienced by the capital this past year could trace their origins to his hand.

With one calm glance, Mei Changsu had already taken in the situation in the entrance hall. In keeping with custom, he first bowed to Xie Yu, saying, "I greet the Marquis."

"The presence of the gentleman brings light to my humble dwelling, it is our honour to have you attending our son's little celebration," Xie Yu answered courteously. He gestured to the man beside him, "This is Zhuo Dingfeng, Chief Zhuo."

Mei Changsu smiled. "Chief Zhuo and I have met a few times before, but have not had the opportunity to converse. What fortune to meet again on this joyous occasion."

"Chief Mei is too kind. I have admired you for a long time, it is an honour to meet you at last." Zhuo Dingfeng clasped his fists to his chest and bowed, returning the appropriate greeting for someone of equal rank. The two young persons standing beside them felt their pulses speed up, as they suddenly realized that, in their familiarity with Brother Su, they had gradually begun to forget his formidable position in the jianghu world.

Mei Changsu and Meng Zhi exchanged greetings as well, and the small crowd stood there exchanging pleasantries for some time. Yan Yujin was growing impatient, but as these were all elders, he didn't dare leave, and could only stand to one side, thinking to himself that he should not have followed Xiao Jingrui out, and that Xie Bi had been much smarter about all of this....

Fortunately, the pleasantries soon came to an end. Xie Yu, as host, and Zhuo Dingfeng, as half a host, escorted the two esteemed guests to the main hall for tea, and naturally Xiao Jingrui followed closely. But Yan Yujin seized the opportunity and, like Fei Liu who had only appeared at the gates for an instant, soon disappeared off to who knew where.

## CHAPTER 88

### *A Test of Swords*

The Xie manor was both the residence of a first-ranked marquis as well as the imperial residence of the Emperor's brother-in-law, and so it was even grander than the manors of other officials of similar ranking. Aside from the usual facilities such as the meeting hall, the guest hall, the reception pavilion, and the side hall, there was also a pavilion beside the lake separating the inner and outer courtyards, called the Rain-Chime Hall. The number of guests arriving today was neither too large nor too small, but fit its size perfectly, and so Grand Princess Liyang had purposely chosen to hold Xiao Jingrui's birthday banquet in this hall.

When the last guest, Xia Dong, had arrived, Xie Yu sent messengers to inform the women in the inner courtyard and led his guests to Rain-Chime Hall. Almost everyone there knew each other from regular encounters, and it was only Mistress Zhuo who was not familiar with many of the guests, and so the time spent on greetings did not last long, and soon, everyone was standing at his or her place.

Because it was a private banquet, the seating arrangement was not too formal. The Xie couple took the host's position, with Zhuo Dingfeng and his wife beside them. Xia Dong and Meng Zhi spent a long time politely declining the right-most guest's seat until Meng Zhi, who was senior in age, finally took the honoured position, with Xia Dong across from him. On Meng Zhi's right was Mei Changsu, and on Xia Dong's right was Yan Yujin. In order to avoid Xia Dong jiejie's habit of pinching his cheek, Yan Yujin carefully moved his seat backwards by about a foot. The rest of the young people took their places according to their respective ranks and seniority, although Gong Yu insisted on taking the last seat, and no one could convince her otherwise. Zhuo Qingyi, who liked this jiejie very much, took the seat beside her at the same table. Xiao Jingrui looked around for Fei Liu, meaning to find a place for him, but there was no shadow of the youth anywhere in sight. Mei Changsu smilingly told him not to bother.

Today, the birthday boy was wearing a brand new robe handmade by Mistress Zhuo. Although the craftsmanship of a jianghu woman warrior could not compare to that of a true seamstress, the care and love she had put into her work was evident. The collar and sleeves were traced with delicate circular patterns, the hem was lined in gold thread, and the waist was decorated with jade pendants and pearls. It was

fortunate that Xiao Jingrui naturally had a bright and scholarly air, and so even in all this finery, he still managed not to look like the typical spoiled son of a rich noble family. Still, the first time Yan Yujin saw him trying on the robe, he commented tactfully, “Jingrui, when I see you willingly putting on something like this, I know you are truly a filial son.”

Before the banquet began, the presents were brought forward. His elders gifted him with clothing and shoes, Zhuo Qingyao and his wife gave him a jade flute, Xie Bi’s gift was a high-quality ink stone, and Zhuo Qingyi had handmade a new tassel for his sword. Yan Yujin gave him an exquisite new harness, Xia Dong and Meng Zhi both brought elegant new playthings, and Gong Yu’s gift was an elaborately embroidered standing screen.

Slipped in with this set of gifts, Mei Changsu’s heart-protection pills did not draw much attention initially, and if Yan Yujin had not peered over curiously and then exclaimed loudly in astonishment, the others likely would not have noticed what a precious gift he had brought.

“No fair, no fair, Brother Su is too biased, such a wonderful gift is wasted on Jingrui! You’ve never given me anything like this, and you clearly like me better!”

As Yan Yujin protested laughingly, a jade hand reached over from the side and unerringly grasped the thickest part of his cheek, giving it an expert twist, and his face flushed immediately.

“What are you fussing about? It’s not the middle of July yet, is it? Who’s to say Mister Su won’t give you something good when the time comes?” Xia Dong laughed.

The son of the Imperial Uncle clutched his face as he said resentfully, “My birthday isn’t the middle of July, it’s the seventh of July, Xia Dong jiejie, don’t get it wrong!”

“Oh, the Double Seventh...<sup>147</sup>” Xia Dong glanced over at him. “Well, it’s not that different from the middle of July,<sup>148</sup> what are you getting all worked up for?”

Yan Yujin glared at her balefully. Please, dajie, the Double Seventh and the middle of July are vastly different not only in date, but also in meaning....

“Alright, alright,” Xie Bi intervened with a smile. “You really will fight about anything. Heart protection pills may be rare, but they’re not meant to be taken every

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<sup>147</sup> July 7: the ‘Double Seventh’ festival: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qixi\\_Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qixi_Festival)

<sup>148</sup> July 15: the ‘Ghost festival’ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost\\_Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_Festival) – yeah lol, agree with Yujin, totally different....

day. One day if you find yourself spitting up blood or running out of breath, I'm sure dage will give you a pill...."

Yan Yujin immediately turned his furious gaze onto the Xie second brother. You'll be the one spitting up blood and running out of breath!

With this little quarrel between the younger ones, the reserved atmosphere of the banquet finally loosened up a little, and even Grand Princess Liyang was smiling as she said, "Yujin used to come crying to me saying you two were bullying him, and I didn't believe him, but from today, it really seems as if you do like to bully him...."

"Alright," Xie Yu was smiling as well. "How can you treat guests like this, Rui'er, come and pour wine for everyone."

Xiao Jingrui stood and picked up a silver and black flask, pouring from it until everyone's wine cups were filled. Xie Yu lifted his cup, bowed to everyone, and said, "We have troubled you all to attend our son's humble little celebration, it is an honour. I lift this cup as a tribute to you, please accept this offer of my respect." He raised the cup to his lips and drained it in one go. Everyone followed his example, but Mei Changsu only touched the cup to his lips before putting it down. Xiao Jingrui knew his health was poor and so did not insist, and instead quietly ordered a servant to bring hot tea.

"Come, come, this is a private banquet, there is no need to stand on courtesy. I have never been a very capable host, so please feel free to consider yourselves at home, and do as you please." Xie Yu laughed, then gestured to a servant to begin bringing in the dishes as he sat down at his place.

After a few rounds of wine, Xia Dong brushed her hair back behind her ears, propped her chin on one hand and turned slightly misty eyes towards her host, as she said, "Marquis Xie said we should consider ourselves at home, was this a true statement?"

"Certainly, it was the truth. What does Officer Xia mean by this question?"

"I only wanted to be sure." There was a sweet but impish smile on Xia Dong's face as she said lightly, "In my home, I am often willful and impetuous, I trust the Marquis will not take offense at any rude impulses of mine?"

Xie Yu laughed loudly as he answered, "Xia Dong has always had the temperament of a boy, how could I take any offense?"

"Good." The corner of Xia Dong's mouth curled as she nodded slowly, her mischievous smile suddenly turning cold as ice as her gaze swept past Xie Yu and halted on Zhuo Dingfeng sitting beside him. Her voice rang out in the hall as she said,

“Xia Dong has long admired Chief Zhuo’s martial skill, it is our fortune to meet today, and I request an opportunity to learn from him.”

As the cold words left her lips, Xia Dong leapt into the air, a chopstick held in her hand like a sword, and plummeted straight for Zhuo Dingfeng’s throat.

This abrupt change of mood left everyone staring blankly, and before they could react, the two were already exchanging blows. Although they were only using chopsticks as swords, each stroke was dealt ferociously, and the wind that had whipped up in their wake stole the breath of the spectators.

By this time, more than ten strokes had been dealt. Xia Dong threw herself back and ended the fight as suddenly as it had begun. She lifted a hand to smooth the hair at her forehead until it lay flat again, and her robes settled down around her once more.

To most of the spectators, Xia Dong looked no different from her usual appearance, and only a very few present saw the hint of confusion that flashed across her eyes.

A cold smile drifted across the lips of Xie Yu, the Marquis of Ning.

Xia Dong was truly a person of dedication. The case of the murdered guards had already cooled, but she herself had not given up the investigation. But of course, since he had dared to invite her here today, he had certainly made the necessary preparations, and if this lady Xuanjing Officer wanted to compare Zhuo Dingfeng’s martial arts with the wounds inflicted on the dead guards, he feared it would not be so easy.

“How exciting!” Meng Zhi was the first to break the silence. “Although only a dozen strokes were exchanged, the moves were exquisite to behold, and the inner strength and swordsmanship of each competitor was obvious, it is truly my fortune to witness this today.”

Xia Dong smiled. “Fighting before Commander Meng, this must look like child’s play to you.”

Zhuo Dingfeng added modestly, “Officer Xia was too kind, in another few strokes, she would have had me begging for mercy.”

“Where experts cross swords, wine must follow, come, let us drink another round.” Xie Yu took up the flask and filled a cup himself, then brought it to Xia Dong, seemingly wanting to put an end to the action that had begun so abruptly. Xia Dong stared at him unmoving for a long moment, and then slowly lifted a hand and accepted the cup, lifting her head and draining it in one go.

Zhuo Qingyao came over with his wife and raised his fists in a salute. “Officer Xia is truly formidable. Let me take this opportunity to raise a cup to you, and if we meet again in jianghu, I pray you will do me the honour.”

Xia Dong smiled but didn’t say anything as she accepted the cup. Xie Bi and Zhuo Qingyi, under the subtle urging of their elders, also came over to lift their cups in respect, and even Mistress Zhuo accompanied her husband forward as they raised a second cup in toast. Yan Yujin, who was talking quietly with Xiao Jingrui in a corner, thought this was a bit strange, and asked him in a quiet voice, “What are they doing? Are they trying to get her drunk?”

Xiao Jingrui answered in a voice just as low, “I rarely see Xia Dong jiejie drinking, how is her tolerance? Should I go and drink a few in her place?”

“I seldom see her drinking too...look, her face is all red, you had better go and take a few for her, I’m afraid she’ll come torture me when she’s drunk...”

Meng Zhi, who was walking past them, couldn’t help smiling when he overheard these words and turned his head to reassure them. “Don’t worry, Xia Dong’s face gets red like this after a single cup, but even after a thousand cups, she will still only suffer from a red face.....what were you two discussing just now?”

“Not discussing, I was just reminding Jingrui, this is the perfect time to ask Miss Gong Yu to serenade us with her music.” As Yan Yujin spoke, he turned his gaze towards Gong Yu, who was sitting quietly to the side, and when she lifted her head to return his gaze, his face immediately broke out in a huge grin.

Xiao Jingrui laughed as he kicked him gently with one foot. “Alright, wipe the drool off your face, I’ll go and ask Mother.” Just as he was about to get up, he saw the Grand Princess’ personal attendant hurrying over to Xie Yu’s side and whispering something in his ear. Xie Yu nodded and then turned to the crowd and said in a loud, clear voice, “There can be no feast without music, and as we have Miss Gong Yu of Miaoyin House here with us today, shall we not invite her to play for us, and cleanse away our worries and burdens with her elegant music?”

His suggestion was met with enthusiastic agreement. Gong Yu stood up slowly and bowed, then said in a gentle voice, “The Marquis is too kind. Gong Yu has no talent, but she will do her best.”

A serving girl hurried over and set down a zither and a stool. Xiao Jingrui glanced over and recognized it for a particularly treasured instrument of his mother’s, which even her children were not allowed to use normally. If she was willing to bring it out today for a stranger to use, that showed that she admired Gong Yu’s skill very much indeed.

As a gifted musician, although Gong Yu could not have known that this was the Grand Princess Liyang's most treasured instrument, she was of course even more astute than Xiao Jingrui when it came to appreciating the worth of this zither, and after she had sat down and examined it for a few moments, she stood up again and knelt down in a bow to the Grand Princess.

Grand Princess Liyang's expression was as cool as always, but from her slight bow back, one could see the extraordinary courtesy this sister of the Emperor was showing to Gong Yu, and even Xie Yu, who knew his wife's nature very well, was astounded.

After she had sat down once more, Gong Yu lifted one hand slowly and tested a few notes. The pitch was perfect, and the notes rich and golden in the cool evening air. The jade fingers fluttered delicately, and the winding melody of the famous composition, 'Phoenix Seeking Phoenix', drifted through the room. Usually, musicians strove to match their performances with the mood of their environment, but for talents like Gong Yu, no one cared about such trivialities. And therefore, no one seemed surprised that she had chosen such a passionate piece for a birthday banquet. As the song rose into the night, it painted the picture of a golden phoenix soaring over the ocean, questing over the seas for its companion, its wings spread wide as it glided over the wind. It stirred up a fierce sense of longing in its audience, and before the song was over, many were staring silently, caught up in its trance.

Although Xie Yu was an educated man, he knew little about music, and at most thought the song was beautiful and pleasant to the ear, but did not understand the mystery of its appeal. But when he turned and saw the look in his wife's face, and the shine of tears in her eyes, an unhappiness stirred in his heart. When the song was over, he coughed lightly and said, "Miss Gong Yu's talent is truly unparalleled. But this is a joyous occasion, pray favour us with a happier selection."

Gong Yu murmured, "Yes," and began playing once more. A bright, quick tune emerged this time, the well-known 'Fisherman's Song'. The melody was light and the notes playful, and it seemed to its audience as if they stood in the warm glow of the setting sun as fishing boats docked after a hard day's work, the fishermen singing cheerfully together as they drew in their nets. Even to someone who could not appreciate the finer nuances of music, the joy within the music was unmistakable. But Xie Yu was not paying attention to this. Instead he sat listening quietly, keeping one eye on Princess Liyang's face. Only when he saw the furrow in her brow relax and a small smile spread across her lips did he finally let out a sigh of relief.

Applause and shouts of praise broke out when the song finished. Yan Yujin waved the cup in his hand as he urged loudly for a third song. Gong Yu smiled, but before she could reply, one of the man-servants of the Xie residence suddenly ran into the hall and fell onto the ground in a bow before Xie Yu, his expression panicked as he said, gasping for breath, "For...forgive me, Marquis...there are, are guests outside...."

Xie Yu frowned. “What guests? Didn’t I order you all to close the gates and turn away all guests for tonight?”

“Your servant couldn’t stop them, they have, have already entered....”

Xie Yu raised an eyebrow as a cold voice sounded from outside the hall. “We made an agreement long ago, so why is Brother Zhuo turning away his guest? Could it be that he is staying in the residence of the Marquis of Ning in order to hide from this challenge of mine?”



## CHAPTER 89

### *A Warrior's Broken Wrist*

Following this cold challenge, which was nonetheless delivered in a calm manner, several figures appeared outside the gates of Rain-Chime Hall. The first was dressed in light gray robes, his hair rolled up in a bun in the Chu fashion, his face narrow. His gaze was directed at the main seats in the hall, his entire person wound up like a sword that had been bent, fierce but foreign.

This was Yue Xiuze, the fifth-ranked of Langya's List of Martial Arts Experts, one of the heads of the palace of Da Chu, and renowned over the world for his skill in the Eyun method of swordsmanship.

Xie Yu rose, fury on his face, as he said in a thundering voice, "Mister Yue, you are trespassing in my private residence, how dare you act with such discourtesy? Is this the kind of etiquette that is taught in the courts of Da Chu?"

"Unjust, unjust." Almost before Xie Yu had finished, Yuwen Xuan appeared behind Yue Xiuze, smiling cheerfully as he continued, "Yue Xiuze retired from his court position half a month ago, and is now only a common jianghu man. Whatever dissatisfaction Marquis Xie bears towards his person is his own, but kindly refrain from lightly invoking the reputation of the courts of Da Chu."

Xie Yu's expression shifted, and he turned his ice cold gaze onto Yuwen Xuan. "Then His Highness Prince Ling at least can be considered part of the court of Da Chu, can he not? What excuse do you have for forcing your way in like this?"

"I did not force my way in." Yuwen Xuan widened his eyes in shock, his expression exaggeratedly wounded. "Let us make this clear, we are not affiliated with Yue Xiuze, I came here today because I heard that it was Young Master Xiao's birthday, and thought that, as we had met previously, it was only appropriate that I bring a gift in person to show my regard. While I was here, I thought I might take the opportunity to greet Marquis Xie. But when we arrived, servants of your esteemed manor were busy trying to prevent Yue Xiuze from entering, but no one was stopping us, so how was I to know we were not supposed to enter? If the Marquis does not believe me, he has only to ask his own servants."

His ridiculous words were nonetheless twisted into such skillful banter that he actually rendered Xie Yu speechless. In truth, the other person had only entered his manor, and had not actually done anything, and had even brought a gift for his son's birthday. If he took action against this ambassador sent to forge a marriage alliance between their two countries, and had this prince of Da Chu roughly thrown out, it would be a great loss of composure on his part, and so he could only force down his anger and turn his attention to Yue Xiuze. "Our manor does not welcome guests like Brother Yue, but if he is willing to leave now, we will let the matter pass. Otherwise.....do not blame us for any discourteous actions."

The entire hall was quiet, and he had not spoken softly, and so Yue Xiuze should have heard him very clearly, but from the latter's expression, it was as if he had not heard his words at all. Yue Xiuze turned his clear gaze onto Zhuo Dingfeng and spoke in the same indifferent tone he had used previously. "This challenge is made according to the rules of jianghu, and for its sake I have even renounced my position in the court. If Brother Zhuo means to refuse, he ought to at least speak for himself. The Brother Zhuo I know does not hide under the wings of another, or could it be that, since Brother Zhuo has forged familial ties with Marquis Xie, he is no longer a man of jianghu?"

Zhuo Dingfeng's face shifted, and he pressed one hand to the table as he stood, but Xie Yu put a hand on his shoulder.

Jianghu challenges were a common form of competition and interaction in the martial world, and were completely different from fights related to revenge or emotion. It was well known that in the context of challenges, it was considered very bad form to do your opponent real harm and injury, as this was looked upon as poor sportsmanship and bad manners, particularly when it came to experts like Yue Xiuze and Zhuo Dingfeng, since they could easily determine the winner before either resorted to injuring the other. And so, aside from the fact that the setting was not the most appropriate, it was not very risky for Zhuo Dingfeng to accept this challenge. At worse, he would lose, and lose a little of his reputation and ranking, but as a man of jianghu, refusing an honest challenge like this would lose him far more respect.

And so, most of those present could not understand why Xie Yu was so insistent on stopping him. Was Yue Xiuze's manner of entering the manor really so discourteous?

The Marquis of Ning felt the wondering gazes of his guests on him, and found it a little difficult to speak. To tell the truth, everyone knew of Yue Xiuze's affinity for issuing challenges to martial arts experts, and as for his trespassing, the best way to handle the situation would be to smile and forgive him graciously, and so demonstrate the generosity and nobility fitting for a gentleman of his ranking. Unfortunately, he simply could not do that today.

This was because Xia Dong and Meng Zhi were present. And because Yue Xiuze was a martial arts master.

When Xia Dong had abruptly attacked Zhuo Dingfeng just now, her purpose had been to examine his fighting style in order to try to match his attack strokes with the injuries and marks on the bodies of the guards murdered on New Year's Eve. Xie Yu had predicted this, and so had warned Zhuo Dingfeng in advance. They had anticipated that Xia Dong was only exploring a possibility and would not dare to fight too aggressively, and so Zhuo Dingfeng had casually intercepted her attacks and changed the ends of each stroke slightly, just enough not to rouse the suspicions of the lady officer of the Xuanjing Bureau.

But they could not employ the same tricks against Yue Xiuze. Firstly, he had fought against Zhuo Dingfeng in the past and knew his moves, and secondly, he had come to issue a challenge, and although he would not be fighting to injure, he would certainly not hold back either. It is said that in a competition between true masters, the difference between victory and defeat was measured in centimeters. And so it was not only risking a terrible loss for Zhuo Dingfeng to hide any part of his skill or fighting style in a contest like this, it was a question of whether it would be possible at all....

But if Zhuo Dingfeng used his full strength and ability in a competition against Yue Xiuze, then even if by some great fortune Xia Dong did not pick up on the patterns, there was still no chance that Meng Zhi, the greatest martial arts master in Da Liang, would be fooled as well. And, on the surface at least, the principle investigator of the case of the murdered guests was precisely this Commander of the Imperial Guard.

A thin sheen of sweat was breaking out over Xie Yu's forehead, and he was starting to regret not having both Zhuo father and son removed from the capital long before this. But then again, who could have guessed that a Yue Xiuze would appear from Da Chu out of nowhere, and challenge Zhuo Dingfeng to a fight on a night when both Xia Dong and Meng Zhi were present?

"Brother Yue, it is my youngest son's birthday tonight, can we not delay to another day?" Zhuo Dingfeng asked gently.

"No."

"And why not?"

"I have taken only half a year's leave from the court, and it is only during this time that I may travel freely in search of competition."

"Then how about tomorrow? You should not be in such a hurry as that, should you?"

“Tomorrow....” Yue Xiuze’s gaze clouded over with grief, though no one looking understood why. “The night is long and the dreams are many, who is to say what will happen on this night? Who can know whether tomorrow will ever come? Since we have met, why not settle it now? There is no crime in competition, and perhaps it will even liven up your son’s birthday banquet.”

“Brother Yue’s meaning is to settle it tonight, here and now?”

“Correct.”

“Impudence!” Xie Yu gritted his teeth, his tone furious. “Tonight is our son’s birthday banquet, and there are esteemed guests present! How dare you trespass and cause a ruckus! Guards! Take him away immediately!”

Yue Xiuze’s expression did not change as he said slowly, “Brother Zhuo, you know very well whether I have come to issue a challenge or to cause a ruckus. Give me a straight answer.”

A dozen guards had already rushed forward and were surrounding Yue Xiuze, their spears pointed at him in a circle, and seemed about to charge when Zhuo Dingfeng suddenly cried out, “Halt!”

Xie Yu’s eyebrows lifted and his hand tightened on Zhuo Dingfeng’s shoulder, but before he could speak, the Chief of Tianquan Manor turned his earnest gaze to him and said lowly, “Brother Xie, forgive me, I.....am a jianghu man after all.....but please do not worry, I will take care of this matter thoroughly....”

Xie Yu looked at him and seemed to understand what he was saying, and he was about to protest when he stopped, thought for a moment, and then hardened his resolve and slowly released his grip on Zhuo Dingfeng’s shoulder, his own voice warm as he said, “I have never doubted Brother Zhuo’s judgement.”

Zhuo Dingfeng smiled faintly and stood, his expression calm, as he turned to face Yue Xiuze and said, “Please.”

By this time, Gong Yu had already taken the zither to a corner, and a large empty space opened up in the middle of the hall, a natural competition ground. Although they had not yet drawn their swords, the confidence and strength emanating from the two masters facing each other already far surpassed that of their young disciples who had fought two days ago.

To show their respect for this competition, everyone aside from the Grand Princess had stood up, and even Xie Qi, her hands folded over her swollen belly, was standing with the help of her husband.

Because Yuwen Xuan and his people were standing just outside the hall, its doors were kept open. A gentle breeze drifted in from the cool evening air, making the candles flutter and their shadows dance along the walls. In the space between the flicker of a flame, two swords were swept from their sheaths, clashing together like lightning.

Both Tianquan and Eyun were renowned for their swordsmanship, and both sects had been formed around a hundred years ago, and were evenly matched in their victories and losses against each other through the history of their competition. In the jianghu world, aside from Northern Yan Tuoba Hao's 'Seasword Method', which might be able to best them both, none of the other sects founded on swordsmanship was anywhere near their match. Zhou Dingfeng had fought and won his first match against Yue Xiuze at the age of twenty seven, and at thirty-five, he had fought him again and bested him once more. He should have had the advantage based on this record, but from the solemn expression on his face, one could see that no matter how many times he had won, this was still a competitor he could not take lightly.

And so it was that the two met for their third match in this hall, but after close to a hundred strokes, the match was still nowhere near its climax, and at first glance, the fight seemed even less interesting than the one between Xiao Jingrui and Nie Nie.

In fact, the two competitions could hardly be compared, and this truth was understood by no one better than Xia Dong, who had been a witness at both.

Her gaze shone, and she seemed to be completely absorbed in the fight, forgetting to pay attention to anything else. Each stroke of the sword was the epitome of precision and elegance, its angle and strength and speed a wonder to behold. It was as if the spirit of the sword itself was driving every motion, making the same moves the younger fighters had demonstrated a few days ago seem amateurish and awkward by comparison.

Zhuo Qingyao and Xiao Jingrui appreciated this aspect even more, as the two stood in the most brightly-lit part of the hall, their gazes unwavering as they scrutinized each move. A meeting of two martial arts masters such as this could teach them more than a year's worth of formal training.

But, in contrast to the majority of the audience, there were three people in the hall who did not appear particularly interested in the ongoing fight. Grand Princess Liyang had her eyes closed and was leaning against the armrest of her couch, in direct contrast to the anxious expressions of Xie Yu and Mistress Zhuo beside her. Mei Changsu was looking in the right direction, but from his blank expression and dazed stare, it was evident that he was thinking about something else entirely. And in the corner, Gong Yu sat cradling the zither, examining its carved wooden patterns carefully, her long hair falling around her face as she never even lifted her head to the excitement before her.

All three were waiting for the match to end, Princess Liyang because she simply didn't care, but the other two, the other two were waiting because they knew the true climax was yet to come....

Meng Zhi's finger, which had been resting on the desk beside him, suddenly stiffened, and his hand tightened into a fist. Mei Changsu, startled by the sudden movement, turned his attention back to the match. The two figures were still in motion, the balance of the fight seemingly unchanged, but the true experts in the audience had already noted the difference, and knew that the moment of victory was at hand.

By some strange coincidence, the final stroke of this duel was the same as the last stroke in the match between Xiao Jingrui and Nie Nie two days ago.

The Tianquan sword spun through the air, but when Yue Xiuze lifted his sword to block it, what rose up in its wake was not a net of light like the one his disciple had summoned, but a wall of light instead.

A sudden mist of water droplets arose, and his opponent's sword broke through the wall of light. Yue Xiuze turned and side-stepped the lunge, but the sword had already torn a long opening into his robes, though it had not drawn blood. He drew breath evenly, his movements calm as he swiftly twisted his hand upwards to block the following attack.

Despite this, he knew in his heart that though he had only suffered the slightest loss, it was nonetheless a defeat. In the moves that followed, he could only seek to restrict this loss as much as possible, in a fight that was already finished.

A small smile had appeared on Zhuo Dingfeng's face, but there was grief, as well as determination, in that smile.

His last stroke had been caught by Yue Xiuze's defense, and he had only to use the moment when Yue Xiuze was raising his sword again to leap aside, and the battle would be over.

Everyone following the fight could predict this result, and they all seemed to relax, anticipating the conclusion. Only Xie Yu continued to stare, his gaze fixed on the center of the hall.

Mei Changsu let out a long, light sigh. Before the sigh had ended, Yue Xiuze raised his sword and its tip sank into Zhuo Dingfeng's wrist, which should have moved aside moments ago. Blood sprayed through the air as the Tianquan sword clattered to the ground.

“Dad!”

“My lord!”

The cries of his wife and children rang out in the hall. Xiao Jingrui and Zhuo Qingyao raced to his side and helped Zhuo Dingfeng to his feet, turning murderous glares onto Yue Xiuze as they did so. “This was only a competition, how could you....”

Yue Xiuze seemed no less shocked than the two of them, and he stared at Zhuo Dingfeng as he stammered, “Brother Zhuo, you, you....”

“It was not Brother Yue’s fault....” Zhuo Dingfeng was working hard to steady his voice. “Just then, at the last moment, I lost my focus....”

Xiao Jingrui and Zhuo Qingyao were not amateurs, and they had spoken only out of anxiety. In truth, they understood that Yue Xiuze was not at fault, but while Xiao Jingrui felt confusion warring with the shock in his mind, a glimpse of understanding stirred in Zhuo Qingyao’s heart.

“Quick, bring the doctor, quick!” Xie Yu hurried over and took Zhuo Dingfeng’s wrist in his own hands. When he saw the severity of the injury to the tendons and understood that the chance of full recovery was slim, a complicated series of emotions passed over his face.

“This is only an external injury, there is no need to call the doctor. Have Qingyao bring the jinchuang medicine and bind up the wound, and that will be enough.” Zhuo Dingfeng avoided Xie Yu’s gaze as he spoke quietly.

Xia Dong and Meng Zhi, who had been observing the chaos with wondering expressions, now exchanged a glance.

Although what could be observed had already been seen, Zhou Dingfeng’s injury scattered everything to the winds once more, and the only solid connection between Xie Yu and the murdered guards had now vanished for good.

Zhuo Dingfeng had been unwilling to turn down the challenge and betray jianghu etiquette, but he had also refused to allow himself to be caught and thus implicate Xie Yu as well, and so no matter whether he had been right to do what he had done, one could not help respecting his courage. It was a pity that Zhuo Qingyao’s skill was still lacking, and so it would be many years before the name of Tianquan could appear on the Langya Lists again.

“I am the one who lost this match.” Yue Xiuze looked at Zhuo Dingfeng’s pale face and said firmly, “We of the Eyun Method will await the challenge of the heirs of Tianquan in the future.” He cupped his fists and bowed.

“Thank you, Brother Yue.” Zhuo Dingfeng’s wrist was being wrapped, and so he could not salute, but he bowed back before turning to Xie Yu and saying, “I have indeed given Brother Yue my word in the past to answer his challenge at any time and in any place, so I beg you to forgive his intrusion into the manor tonight.”

Xie Yu smiled. “What are you saying? Jianghu has its own rules, this I know well, and I will not hold this against Brother Yue, do not worry. Come, come away and rest now, alright?”

Although the injury to his body had not been severe, the wound to his heart had been significant, and Zhuo Dingfeng did want to retire to his own rooms for some rest, and so he nodded, and was turning to leave under the support of his two sons when suddenly a clear high voice said, “Please wait!”



## CHAPTER 90

### *Past Endurance*

The call came so abruptly that everyone was taken aback. The owner of the voice came forward clapping his hands in a bow of the Da Liang custom, smiling apologetically, "I am sorry for startling everyone...."

"Your Highness Prince Ling, what is it you want this time?" Xie Yu's impatience was palpable, his temper nearly fraying.

Yuwen Xuan glanced at him, but did not reply, turning instead to Yue Xiuze and saying quietly, "Uncle Yue, I have kept my promise and allowed you to have your challenge, now it should be time for me to make my move, should it not?"

"Hey," Zhuo Qingyao sounded furious. "My dad has just been injured, are you trying to take advantage of his weakness? If you want a fight, fight me!"

"Aiya, misunderstanding, misunderstanding," Yuwen Xuan waved his hands. "I was not speaking of a martial competition, who among those present could I possibly defeat? I only meant, it would be better for Chief Zhuo to stay for the next part of the evening."

Xie Yu scoffed coldly. "What nonsense, Brother Zhuo, don't mind him, your health is most important."

Mei Changsu said suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, "Jingrui, give your dad one of the heart-protection pills I gave you."

"Ah?" Xiao Jingrui stared blankly. It was an external injury of the wrist, what good would heart-protection pills do?

Mei Changsu met Zhuo Dingfeng's gaze and sighed, "The pain of losing of an art honed over a lifetime is felt in the heart, not in the hand. Chief Zhuo must be feeling this loss, and it must be having an ill effect on his health. The night is not over, Chief Zhuo must take care."

The first sentence was barely out before Xiao Jingrui was rushing towards the table holding his gifts to retrieve the pills, and so he did not hear the second half, as he busied himself handing over medicine and water to his father.

Yuwen Xuan stood to one side, watching quietly until the the fuss was over before he pulled at someone standing beside him, steering her forward with a hand on her back and saying gently, “Nian Nian, didn’t you come just for him? Go, don’t worry, I’ll be here.”

From the beginning, Nian Nian had clung to Yuwen Xuan’s side silently, dressed in a Chu style long robe and wearing a lady’s muslin cap. Now, as she was pushed before Xiao Jingrui, the girl was still silent, but from the angle of her head, it was evident that this Miss Nian Nian was staring at Xiao Jingrui.

The atmosphere suddenly grew still and solemn, and even the fun-loving Yan Yujin felt his heart speed up for some reason, and didn’t dare say anything to try to lighten the mood.

Xiao Jingrui was exceedingly uncomfortable under her gaze, and he racked his brain but couldn’t think of any connection between himself and this Miss Nian Nian aside from the fight two days ago. He waited for a long time, but she did not speak, and so finally he cleared his throat and asked, “Miss.....Nian Nian, do you.....have something to say to me?”

Nian Nian did not reply, but she slowly lifted a hand and undid the ribbons under her chin that were tying her cap to her head. Her fingers trembled, and it took a long time.

Mei Changsu closed his eyes and turned his head away, as if he couldn’t bear to watch.

The cap was finally untied, and dropped lightly to the ground. The candlelight in the room illuminated the features of the young girl, and it felt suddenly as if the air was sucked out of the room, although no one made a sound.

One glance, only a single glance, and Xiao Jingrui felt as if his heart had been struck by a thick peg, stopping all blood flow. His face was pale as parchment, and he stood as if frozen in place.

The two stood like this, staring at one another. To everyone looking on, it was as if two copies had been made of the same face, one sharper and more heroic, given to the boy, and one sweeter and gentler, given to the girl.

But the brows, the eyes, the arch of the nose, they were all identical.....of course, there were many people in this world without familial relations who had similar

features, but Yuwen Xuan's next words broke the silence and shattered any remaining doubts.

"This is your sister, the Refined<sup>149</sup> Princess Yuwen Nian, the daughter of my uncle Prince Sheng Yuwen Lin...."

There was a muffled crash from the direction of the main seats, and when everyone turned to look, Grand Princess Liyang had fainted, her eyes shut and her complexion waxen, her serving girl crying as she held onto her.

Yuwen Xuan's voice continued cruelly, as if there had been no interruption. "Twenty years ago, when my uncle was held hostage in your esteemed country, he was under the care of the Grand Princess, and so my sister<sup>150</sup> is here today to pay thanks to the Grand Princess on behalf of her father. Nian Nian, go and bow to the Grand Princess."

Yuwen Nian's eyes were brimming with tears as she stepped forward slowly, knelt down before the Grand Princess and touched her head to the ground three times. When she was finished, she stood and turned back towards Xiao Jingrui, her gaze filled with hope and expectation.

But at this moment, Xiao Jingrui's vision was only a blur. He could not see her, and could not see his family of more than twenty years standing in the hall. He could not see anything, and it was as if he floated alone in a dark void, feeling nothing except soul-wrenching pain and a crippling sense of loss.

When he was young, he had once wanted very much to know whether he was the child of the Zhuo family or the child of the Xie family. But later, as he grew older, he had gradually begun to accept that he was both a child of the Zhuo family and a child of the Xie family. His two sets of parents and his brothers and sisters were the most important family to him, and he loved them, and was loved by them, and so not even in his worst nightmares could he have imagined that one day, the heavens would coldly inform him that everything he had called his own for the past twenty years would turn out to be nothing but dust and ashes....

Grand Princess Liyang woke slowly, her brow soaked in cold sweat, her hair falling down around her face, her cheeks pale as snow, looking as if she had suddenly aged ten years. Her serving girl lifted a cup of hot tea to her lips but she pushed it aside and sat up, visibly shaking, and stretched out a hand as she cried out in a hoarse voice, "Rui'er, Rui'er, come here to Mother, come here...."

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<sup>149</sup> here used as part of her title, like the 'Noble' of Noble Consort Yue

<sup>150</sup> she's technically his cousin (daughter of his uncle) but the term used is something like my "residence-sister", like someone you grew up with; and also Chinese terms for sister/brother are generally loose anyway

Xiao Jingrui turned towards her slowly, his eyes dazed as he took in her wan complexion, but it was as if his feet had been nailed to the ground.

“Rui’er! Rui’er!” Grand Princess Liyang’s voice was desperate, and she fought to stand, but her knees would not support her, and so she could only crawl in starts and fits, supported by her serving girl and her momo,<sup>151</sup> towards the dais, murmuring as she went, “Don’t be afraid, there is still Mother, Mother is here....”

The first to recover was Zhuo Dingfeng. Over the past twenty years, he had been prepared for the possibility that Jingrui was not his flesh-and-blood son, and the part of the revelation that was most shocking and difficult to accept lay with Xiao Jingrui and Xie Yu, and so, in contrast, he was actually able to gain control over his emotions more quickly than the others.

And so, it was he who was the first to take Xiao Jingrui by the shoulder and gently steer him towards Grand Princess Liyang.

Mei Changsu glanced at Gong Yu out of the corner of his eye. This glance was a message, and an order. Of course, in the stunned silence of the hall, no one noticed this glance of ice-cold determination and iron-hard resolve.

Except Gong Yu.

Gong Yu carefully set down the zither in her arms, took a few steps forward into the candlelight and lifted her head, suddenly letting out a laugh as clear as bells.

The sound of her laughter was like someone drawing a knife across a tightly-pulled bowstring. Everyone jumped, turning their astonished gazes onto her.

“Miss Gong Yu, you....” Yan Yujin stared at her, shocked into stillness.

This was because the Gong Yu before him was no longer the sweet, gentle lady he had come to know. Although her slim figure and snowy complexion were the same, the fierceness and fury radiating off her were entirely unfamiliar, a sort of murderous rage that might be harboured by a demon of revenge, and which made one tremble to look upon her.

“Marquis Xie,” Gong Yu’s icy gaze pierced straight through the master of this residence. Her every word was crisp when she spoke again. “I now finally understand why you had to kill my father. It was because my late father was remiss in his assignment, he had received orders to kill the illegitimate child of your own wife, but killed instead the child of the Zhuo family, and so failed to complete the mission you gave to him....”

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<sup>151</sup> a momo is a kind of elderly servant that goes with a girl to her husband’s family after she’s married, like a wet nurse

Her words fell like a ton of explosives, rippling through everyone in the hall. Xie Yu's face turned red and then white, and with a furious shout, he grabbed the Tianquan sword which had been dropped to the ground and charged straight at Gong Yu.

Xie Yu was a martial arts master as well, and he came charging towards her like clap of thunder, but the delicate Gong Yu only twisted slightly, like an ethereal spirit hovering in the air, and neatly dodged the attack.

Xia Dong's voice was hoarse as she asked, "The killer who came that night, the night of the storm.....who was he to you?"

"That was my late father." Before Gong Yu had even finished replying, Xie Yu was shouting in a fury, "Guards!"

Following this command, a figure came spinning out of the darkness towards Gong Yu. He sent three daggers flying at her as he drew out a thin bone-handled blade, its edge gleaming with the shine of poison, and barreled towards her.

Gong Yu took the attack in stride, deflecting the daggers, and was preparing to intercept the poisoned blade when an arm out flew in front of her, sending the blade flying, and its owner dropped stoically in front of her, guarding her against further attacks. It was Mistress Zhuo.

"Go on, keep talking, who killed my child?" Mistress Zhuo's eyes were almost glowing red, and her voice was fierce, with none of her usual gentle elegance.

"Wife, please calm down," Zhuo Dingfeng said soothingly as he turned to face Xie Yu. "Brother Xie, please allow Miss Gong to finish, if she is speaking nonsense, I will be the first to condemn her!"

"If you want to know whether I am speaking nonsense or not, you have only to look at Master Xiao's face." Gong Yu's words seemed to pierce right to the heart. "Can anyone here deny that Marquis Xie had the motivation to kill that infant? At the time, the infant died without a wound or scar on his body, only a little redness between his eyebrows, am I correct? Marquis Xie was young at the time, and was not as thorough as he is now, so the leader of that assassin group still lives, and if Chief Zhuo were to meet him, I fear he would be able to learn yet more details of the event. Or perhaps.....we can ask Her Highness the Grand Princess. Your Highness knew from the beginning that your husband was planning to murder your son, but you could not confront him directly, and the turmoil you faced must have been great indeed. But fortunately, although the sisters you confided in were no longer around, you at least had your devoted momo by your side...."

Grand Princess Liyang felt as if her heart had been pierced by a sword, and she moaned as she covered her face, finally collapsing under the weight of this onslaught, this terrible storm that had arisen so abruptly. Her momo was standing beside her, her face wet with tears.

“What a stream of nonsense!” Xie Yu’s brows were trembling with rage as he lifted a hand and shouted, “Guards! Take this woman and kill her on the spot!”

At his command, the guards of the Xie manor immediately surged forward towards Gong Yu. Zhou Dingfeng stood in a dazed stupor, and it was Mistress Zhuo who gritted her teeth and cried out, “Yao’er! Yi’er!”

Zhuo Qingyi bolted straight for her mother, but Zhuo Qingyao hesitated, and carefully carried his stunned wife to a pillar in a corner of the hall before flying back to his parents’ side. Yan Yujin looked at Gong Yu, and then took Xiao Jingrui by the arm and dragged his unmoving friend to Mei Changsu’s side before taking up his own position in front of Gong Yu.

Xie Yu’s face was thunderous, his gaze murderous as he looked down at the crowd.

From his perspective, there was no choice but to kill Gong Yu, and an irrevocable split between the Zhuo and Xie families seemed unavoidable as well. Even if Zhuo Dingfeng didn’t immediately turn against him, the hostility borne of a murdered child was no small matter. Even with the bond of marriage between their children, Xie Yu was not confident he could hold the loyalty of Zhuo Dingfeng. And Zhou Dingfeng had worked for him in his position as a master of jianghu for too many years, taking care of court business in ways that he could not, and so he simply knew too much. If he let him go now, he might as well send him tied and wrapped in ribbon to Prince Yu’s doorstep. Xie Yu knew he could not control his allegiance any longer, and so this was not a risk he could afford to take. Besides, after tonight, Prince Yu would certainly do his best to take him into his protection, and it would be difficult to dispose of him in the future if the need arose. On the other hand, if he took care of things in his own manor tonight, and burned these bridges as ruthlessly as he could, clearing away the muddied water for fresh, untainted springs, then there might yet be hope.

As he made his decision, his heart was a piece of solid, unyielding iron.

“Flying Eagle Squadron, surround them! Call in the archers!”

As soon as she heard the word ‘archers’, Xie Qi cried out loudly, “Father!” and was about to rush for him, but Xie Yu waved a hand and guards came forward to restrain her. By this time, Xie Bi was almost out of his mind with shock, and his mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

“Brother Xie,” Zhuo Dingfeng’s voice trembled, its coldness seeming to drive into the very bone. “What are you doing?”

“This woman is lying and delusional, and must die here according to law. If you protect her, I will not be responsible for any harm that comes to you!”

Zhuo Dingfeng had only intended to let Gong Yu finish, and to make a decision after he had investigated what had really happened all those years ago, and had not been intending to protect her at all. But when he heard Xie Yu’s response, he realized the malicious intent behind his words, and he was so angry he began shaking in fury. Xia Dong, who had been observing from the side, finally had to speak up. “Marquis Xie, did you forget about me and Commander Meng? Outright murder such as this is a little on the lawless side, wouldn’t you say?”

Xie Yu gritted his teeth. He knew it was foolish to kill Zhuo Dingfeng in front of Xia Dong and Meng Zhi, but if he didn’t kill him now, he knew Zhuo Dingfeng would be taken into Prince Yu’s protection as soon as he left the doors of this manor, and there would be no second chance. The arrow had been strung, and it must be fired. There was no good solution, but a decision still had to be made.

“Our nation has a law, those who meddle in witchcraft must die immediately. This woman has bewitched an audience within my manor and deluded and deceived them. Officer Xia, pray do not get involved.” Xie Yu turned away coldly and gestured for his men to fan out, blocking the exit from the hall.

But he knew very well in his heart that none of those present would be easy to deal with, especially Xia Dong and Meng Zhi, who posed a particular difficulty. Firstly, it might not be possible to kill off these two, and secondly, even if he did manage to kill them, it would not be easy explaining the deaths of these two persons in his own manor, and so Xie Yu was fully prepared for the possibility of these two escaping. There was no better plan to be had in the moment, and the best option was to shut as many mouths as he could now, and then when it came to his word against Xia Dong’s and Meng Zhi’s before the Emperor, then it was only a matter of seeing whom the Emperor would believe. And if that person came back as well, and spoke on his behalf, perhaps there could still be a way out.

“Marquis Xie, if you have something to say, let us use our words, why must we resort to bloodshed?” Meng Zhi saw that Xie Yu truly harboured murderous intentions, and couldn’t help raising an eyebrow. “Neither I nor Officer Xia could possibly stand by and let today’s events pass unnoticed, so please, I beg you to reconsider.”

Xie Yu laughed coldly. “This is my manor, what are you waiting for? If you mean to report this to His Majesty, feel free. But as for that woman and those she has bewitched, I fear you will not be able to save them.”

Meng Zhi's brow furrowed, and he knew these were no empty words. A first-ranked military official's manor contained 800 troops, and of those, 500 were armed, and so would be difficult to handle. Not to mention, once the archers arrived and began firing down at them from all sides, it didn't matter how good his own martial ability was, he would still be hard-pressed to protect himself, much less guard the Zhuo family and the others as well. He turned and looked at Mei Changsu.

But Mei Changsu was looking at Grand Princess Liyang.

Grand Princess Liyang was clearly dazed, but she was walking determinedly towards Xiao Jingrui, obviously wanting nothing more than to be by his side.

"Liyang," Xie Yu turned to her as well, his voice gentle. "Don't pay any attention, I will not hurt Jingrui, if I wanted to kill him, I would already have done so long ago, so do not worry. Everything I do is for you, you must not forget that...."

Grand Princess Liyang looked at her husband of more than twenty years and felt a shattering pain in her heart. She fell to the ground, sobbing silently.

Xie Yu's gaze turned to Yuwen Xuan, who shrugged and said, "If you do not hurt those Nian Nian cares about, then I will not wade into these muddy waters. After all, in the end, what does it have to do with me?"

Xie Yu laughed coldly. "Alright, I will certainly accept this favour from His Highness Prince Ling." His gaze swept over the hall once more, and halted over Mei Changsu, as if he was making up his mind to take care of this troublesome enemy strategist while he had the chance.

Meng Zhi, worried, took up a position in front of Mei Changsu and turned his head to ask, "Where's Fei Liu?"

Mei Changsu's eyes gleamed and he laughed out loud. "Finally, someone remembers Fei Liu. Actually, I have been waiting for Marquis Xie to ask this all along, but unfortunately, you seem to have forgotten that I brought along a little friend."

Xie Yu's heart sank just as a soldier came running over to report, "Marquis, it's not good, all the archers' bowstrings have been cut...."

"Useless!" Xie Yu kicked him over. "What about the backup bows?"

"Also.....also....."

There was practically steam rising from Xie Yu's head, but Mei Changsu's voice was gentle as he called, "Fei Liu, you're back, was it fun?"



“Fun!” The youth who had entered Rain-Shower Hall somehow at some point in time completely unnoticed now appeared beside his Su gege, his eyes wide as he took in the swords all around him.

Xie Yu had gotten his fury under control, and now he lifted his face to the sky as he laughed. “Su Zhe, you think I cannot deal with you all just because I have been deprived of my archers? I fear the qilin prodigy has underestimated the power of the Marquis of Ning.”

“Perhaps,” Mei Changsu said quietly. “The Marquis is determined to spill blood this night, so how can I stop him? But everything that bears fruit was once planted, and tonight, the Marquis is only reaping what he sowed. And no matter how you resist, this fruit you must eat in the end.”

Xie Yu put his hands behind his back, his voice proud. “Don’t make empty threats. I do not believe in divine decree, and I have weathered greater storms than this. Do you think the events of this night can topple me?”

“I know they can.” Mei Changsu inclined his head. “The Marquis does not believe in divine law, and does not know the meaning of righteousness or benevolence, and so naturally, there is nothing you would not dare. But I am not like the Marquis, I have always been a coward, fearful and wary, and so before I dared to enter the Marquis’ door tonight, I made some preparations. His Highness Prince Yu is standing outside your gate at this very moment with his army, and if I do not come out, then I fear he will not hesitate to force his way in for a rescue....”

Xie Yu peered at him in disbelief. “Did you really think I would believe that? For you, a mere strategist, Prince Yu would dare to break into the residence of a first-ranked Marquis?”

Mei Changsu’s smile was cheerful and his tone light as he replied, “Certainly he would not take the risk just for me. But for an opportunity to ruin you, then, Marquis, what do you think?”

## CHAPTER 91

### *Fighting Side by Side*

Mei Changsu had spoken with casual carelessness, but a muscle in Xie Yu's cheek jumped, and he beckoned one of his servants over and spoke to him in a low voice for a moment before the man ran off to carry out his orders, most likely to go and see whether there really was an army at their gates.

Mei Changsu smiled and said, "Looks like it won't come to blows for now. As we are standing around in any case, Miss Gong Yu, perhaps you may finish what you had to say? Perhaps Chief Zhuo will realize it was simply a misunderstanding after all, and that we have made a mountain out of a molehill, and that could only be a good thing, no?"

"Alright." Despite the tense atmosphere, Gong Yu still looked calm, her every word crisp and clear as she spoke. "As you have already heard, my late father was an assassin, and because his skill was formidable, he quickly became known for his craft. But though his reputation spread far and wide, the only person in the world who knew his true identity was the leader of the group of assassins to which he belonged. It is said that killers must be heartless, because those whom they love would only become a hindrance to them. And so it was that after my father met my late mother, he decided to wash his hands of this profession. At the time, Mother had just discovered that she was with child, and the leader of the assassins group asked my father to complete one last mission before retiring. This last mission was a request from a very important person in the court to kill a yet unborn infant."

She was speaking slowly, her tone even, but the words made those listening shiver with dread. Xiao Jingrui was shaken out of his stupor by the sudden realization that he was the infant who was supposed to have been killed, and the pain in his heart doubled.

"The instructions of the mission were given in great detail, from the identity of the pregnant woman, to her appearance and whereabouts, to the appearance of the momo always by her side – all of this was detailed thoroughly. Father followed the Grand Princess for a month, and finally, she went into labour. Who could have thought that such a great storm would rise up that night and cause such chaos? The woman and the child were both surrounded by so many people that Father could find no opening to

act, and so he could only return to the forest in the hills to hide for one more day. He returned the second night, and as he had already learned to recognize the Grand Princess' momo, he quickly and silently killed the infant in her arms...."

Mistress Zhuo let out a wail, swaying as her daughter clutched her tightly, holding her upright.

"My father thought he had completed the mission and so he left Rui mountain, not knowing that the families had confused the infants on the night of the storm after his departure from the scene. When Xie Yu returned and learned that the surviving child had an even chance of being the infant that he had wanted to kill, he was furious and said it was better to risk killing the wrong child than letting him live, and forced my father to go back to finish the job. By this time, my mother had been with child for some time, and as my father started to feel the movements of his own child in her womb, he could not find it in his heart to murder another infant, and so he took my mother and fled. The leader of the assassins caught us, but he had known my father since their youth and couldn't bear to kill him, so he let us go. Who could have thought that the assassin would let us go, but Xie Yu would not? He sent other assassins after us, and we had been on the run for two years when, finally, my father settled my mother and me in a brothel in a small town, and ran off alone to lead away the assassins on our tail. He never returned. After I grew older, I investigated in depth and learned that he had been killed by Xie Yu's men seven months after he left us."

"But if Father-in-Law.....ah.....Marquis Xie was unwilling to let even you go, how could he have spared Jingrui, and let him live until now?" Zhuo Qingyao, who had managed to remain relatively calm, immediately asked.

"For the answer to this question, we must ask the Grand Princess." Gong Yu turned slowly to the woman they were all pitying. "No one knew why that infant died, but you knew. That's why, for the first few years, you protected the remaining child almost frantically, refusing to leave his side day or night, isn't that right?"

Mistress Zhuo felt her heart lurch as she remembered the early years of Jingrui's life. When he lived in the capital, Princess Liyang never left his side, and when he stayed at the Tianquan manor, Princess Liyang still followed him closely. At the time, she had thought this was because it was her first child, and she had received a fright previously, and had not thought much more about any other reason for her protectiveness.

"As Master Xiao grew older, Xie Yu's determination to kill him grew weaker, because he too knew that the Grand Princess was aware of some things, and he did not want this to come between them. Most importantly, he had discovered that he could use Master Xiao as a tie to forge a close relationship with the formidable Tianquan Manor, and use the power of the Zhuo family to accomplish his goals." Gong Yu looked at Zhuo Dingfeng. "Chief Zhuo knows this quite well, do you not? With a son in common, and increasingly frequent interactions, you began to develop a friendship,

and even familial ties, and gradually, you started to trust this person unconditionally, and were willing to act in the dark for him, believing that what you were doing was right and for the good of the country, and that soon, your actions would bring glory to Tianquan Manor and the Zhuo clan....”

Zhuo Dingfeng’s lips were purple and he retched, vomiting fresh blood. The Zhuo family immediately clamoured in panic, but Mei Changsu said quietly, “He has taken the heart-protection pill, no harm will come to him.”

Yan Yujin heard this and jumped as if he had been reminded of something. He ran over to the table, picked up the bottle, and shook out a pill for Xiao Jingrui, shoving it into his mouth when there was no sign of any response from the latter and pouring a cup of tea down his throat afterwards for good measure.

Mei Changsu watched them, his gaze gentle, and let out a deep sigh.

“Brother Yue,” Meng Zhi looked at the Da Chu master with deep feeling. “If you had been willing to meet Chief Zhuo another day, he would not have had to injure his wrist for Xie Yu’s sake, and sacrifice all these years of work.”

Yue Xiuze’s face was stiff as he answered coldly, “My time was short. I only knew that he would discover on this night that this son was not his own, and worried that this would affect his mental performance when he came to fight against me, so I had to seize the chance and challenge him first. Who could have known he would be so foolish as to allow himself to sustain an injury, and how complicated the whole situation would turn out to be?”

“I do not blame Brother Yue, it was my own fault, I had eyes but could not see, and I was mistaken in my judgement.” Zhuo Dingfeng’s eyes were shining as he looked at Xie Yu, his forehead beaded in sweat. “When I think back on all the passionate words you said to me, it is enough to make me nauseous.”

“Not everything I said was a lie.” Xie Yu had actually managed to keep his calm. “Supporting the Crown Prince is a cause of great righteousness, all those others with wild ambitions are only traitors and usurpers. I once promised you glory for the Zhuo clan, and at least, up until now, I have never thought of going back on my word.”

“But as soon as he expressed the slightest doubt or dissatisfaction, you did not hesitate to wipe out his entire family?” Xia Dong laughed coldly. “In the end, how are you any different from those with wild ambitions?”

“The end justifies the means.” A corner of Xie Yu’s mouth curled in a smile. “His Majesty will understand my loyalty to the court.”

Mei Changsu suddenly interrupted. “Marquis Xie, has the man you sent to look outside the manor returned yet?”

Xie Yu gazed at him steadily for a moment, and then suddenly laughed. “So it is indeed Mister Su who is the first to react. I have naturally had my own reasons for allowing you all to tarry and delay for so long.”

Mei Changsu thought for a moment, and then raised an eyebrow. “You have summoned the Capitol Patrol?”

“Correct.” Xie Yu’s face was like ice. “What fighting power could Prince Yu’s household troops have? The Capitol Patrol is certainly capable of preventing them from entering.”

Meng Zhi said in a thunderous voice, “Xie Yu, the Capitol Patrol is not your household army, it is a great crime to seize them for your private use, are you truly so daring?”

“The Commander General should not make false accusations, how could I dare to summon the Capitol Patrol into my manor as my personal troops? But whether Prince Yu shows up or not, I am still able to have them stand guard on the street outside the manor to help keep the peace, am I not?”

Mei Changsu had never expected this night to pass peacefully, and with Xie Yu’s summoning of the Capitol Patrol, the situation would only escalate, which might not entirely be a bad thing. But the most important task at hand was to protect the Zhuo family, young and old, and ensure they were not wiped out, and so he turned and glanced significantly at Meng Zhi, telling him to be ready.

Xie Yu’s face was cold as frost, and he raised a hand, clearly about to give the order when someone ran forward and collapsed in front of him in a kneel, wrapping his arms around Xie Yu’s legs. He lowered his head to look. It was Xie Bi.

“Father, I beg of you, reconsider!” Xie Bi’s face was wan, his eyes shining with tears, as he pleaded, “The Zhuos and the Xies have been close for many years, as close as true family and perhaps closer, so whatever the misunderstanding, Father must not give the order to kill!”

“Useless!” Xie Yu shoved him aside with a foot. “How could I have raised someone as soft-hearted as a woman?”

“Father!” Xie Bi ignored the pain and crawled back to clutch his father’s hand. “Who has not heard of the close ties between our two families? Is Father not afraid of the rumours and gossip that will be spread?”

“What do they know? You remember, and remember well, only those who survive have the right to speak. This is a matter of sacrificing family for the sake of righteousness, so get out of my way!”

Xie Bi's last hope died, and the hand clutching Xie Yu's sleeve shook. Suddenly, he lunged forward and grabbed the dagger hanging at his father's waist and laid it against his own neck, tears streaming down his face as he said, "Father, pray forgive your son for being unable to witness the choice you have made. If you must kill them, then kill your son first!"

Xie Yu looked at him coldly and scoffed. "You want to take your own life? Alright, do it."

"Father....."

"I have raised you all your life, do you think I do not know what kind of a person you are? If you truly have the guts to cut into your own neck, then I as your father have underestimated you." As he spoke, Xie Yu strode forward and sent the dagger in Xie Bi's hand flying with one swift blow, then slapped his face with the backhand and gripped him by the neck, wrenching him to one side as he shouted, "Take the heir away and keep him under guard! The situation is chaotic, assist the Grand Princess and the young mistress back to the inner courtyard as well."

"Yes!"

"The woman in the hall is in league with the Zhuo clan, kill them on the spot according to the law!" Xie Yu turned and retreated to one side as the soldiers surged forward in his wake like a wave, full of bloodlust and murderous intent.

Xie Yu was a military man, and so his household troops were well-trained, particularly in the use of the long spear, and they seldom fought in close hand-to-hand combat, preferring to attack in formation. Although Meng Zhi and Xia Dong were masters, they could not use killing blows against these soldiers who were only following orders, and so the speed and strength of their attacks were somewhat limited. Besides, Meng Zhi was worried that Fei Liu would not be able to protect Mei Changsu on his own in the midst of such chaos, and so was often distracted. Two hours into the fight, the Zhuo family was in danger on all sides.

Zhuo Qingyao did not have a sword on his person, and only had a soft Emei sword Mistress Zhuo had handed to him, and he had to protect his newly-injured father besides, so it was not long before his arms were covered with blood. Zhuo Dingfeng's Tianquan sword had been seized by Xie Yu, Zhuo Qingyi only had the short dagger she carried for protection, and so Mistress Zhuo, wielding the other Emei soft sword, was standing guard in front of her husband and daughter, fending off attacks left and right, and it was clear she could not continue for much longer. She had just fended off several spears when there was a flash on her left, and when she retreated to defend herself, this left an opening to her front. The gleaming tip of a spear descended towards her, and by the time she saw it, it was too late to dodge. Zhuo Qingyi screamed in terror, "Mum!"

The spear was about to pierce her stomach when a shining sword swept over like lightning, slicing off the tip of the spear. A long, slender figure dropped down in front

of Mistress Zhuo, and the ten or more soldiers facing him retreated, several carrying wounds.

“Rui’er.....” Mistress Zhuo’s voice trembled, her eyes filling.

Xiao Jingrui said something to her quietly without turning his head, and from the back, it was impossible to see his expression. His low voice was shaking so much it was difficult to make out what he was saying.

But Mistress Zhuo answered tenderly, “Mum is alright.....don’t worry....”

When she saw Xiao Jingrui seize hold of the ceremonial sword hanging on the wall and leap into the fray, Yuwen Nian, who had been watching from the sidelines, stood as well and began cutting a path through the soldiers towards him. Yue Xiuzhe gazed doubtfully down on the scene for a moment and then let out a long sigh, and the Eyun sword was swept from its sheath once more as he began making his way to Zhuo Dingfeng’s side.

Xie Yu’s voice was furious as he shouted from the back, “Yuwen Xuan, didn’t you say you would not interfere?”

“I haven’t,” Yuwen Xuan spread his hands. “I said this has nothing to do with me, and so I have not moved so much as a step, so don’t wrong me like this, alright?”

Xie Yu had no time to deal with him, so he only scoffed and gestured for his subordinates to increase their attack. His two hundred spears were good fighters, and although the other side had just gained some strength, they had not yet managed to turn the tide, and all was yet quiet outside the manor, so it seemed that there would be no reinforcements.

“Officer Xia, I have heard that there is a kind of firework that is used for communication between Xuanjing officers, is that right?” At such a critical moment, Mei Changsu was actually striking up casual conversation with Xia Dong.

“Yes.” Xia Dong immediately understood his meaning and drew out a stick of firework from her pockets. She was about to turn to fight her way out to an opening when Mei Changsu stopped her.

“Let Fei Liu go, he likes these.”

Fei Lou did indeed like this, and he was much quicker at making his way out of the fight. The soldiers couldn’t even touch a corner of his robes, much less get their hands on him.

The firework soared into the sky and lit it up in a blaze of colour. Fei Liu lifted his head to watch, absently breaking the necks of two soldiers who had come chasing

after him. Mei Changsu nodded at him approvingly, then turned to Meng Zhi. “Commander General, it seems that Prince Yu’s household troops cannot make their way in for now, and it will be some time before Officer Xia Chun arrives. I’m afraid I must impose on you. To catch a thief, one has only to catch their king. Let us take a hostage so that everyone might have a rest, look, some are wounded already, and not lightly.”

Meng Zhi understood immediately, and with a loud shout that stunned the soldiers all around him, he flew over their heads like a great gray bird out of Rain-Shower Hall, straight towards Xie Yu.

Xie Yu saw him coming and shuddered, knowing that Meng Zhi meant to hold him hostage to force the Xie manor’s troops to stop fighting. He shouted hurriedly for his guards to surround him and retreated quickly. Meng Zhi’s fighting prowess was almost second to none, and Xie Yu’s guards could only hold him for a moment, but in that moment, the Marquis of Ning had managed to disappear.

At the sight of Meng Zhi’s efforts ending in failure, and his wife and children exhausted and injured all around him, the pain in Zhuo Dingfeng’s heart swelled. At the beginning, he had only wanted to hear Gong Yu tell the truth of the story, and had never thought that Xie Yu would turn on them so ruthlessly. Now, faced with a seemingly endless wave of soldiers, and with their own side growing weaker and weaker, he feared they would only last another hour at most before they were defeated. The thought that his clan would be wiped out because of his own misplaced faith made him bow his head with unbearable shame, and he gave up resisting, closing his eyes and turning to face the descending spears.

Xiao Jingrui threw himself at his father and shoved Zhuo Dingfeng out of the way, raising his sword to catch the spears and averting the danger, although he gained another wound on his ribs for his troubles. Yue Xiuze, his eyes bulging with fury, shouted, “You defeat me only to die at the hands of these bastards? How can I ever lift my head again?”

Zhuo Dingfeng was shaken awake by these words, and he turned and picked up a spear in each hand, shouting back, “You’re right, if I die, I will die with honour, and take a few of them with me!”



## CHAPTER 92

### *Escape from Death's Door*

Seeing Yue Xiuze scold Zhuo Dingfeng, Yan Yujin really wanted to follow his example and scold his friend as well. Although Xiao Jingrui had entered the fight, he was only putting effort into saving the Zhuo family, and was being rather half-hearted about defending himself, revealing how discouraged he was truly feeling. Yan Yujin looked over to Gong Yu and saw that she was fighting ferociously, with no reason to cause anyone worry, and so he focused his whole attention on Xiao Jingrui and stood shoulder to shoulder with Nian Nian, defending the openings Xiao Jingrui had left. After awhile, he realized that, regardless of anything else, the two of them cooperated well together, and were developing a sort of partnership.

In the entire bloody affair, the only one who had not so much as moved a finger was Mei Changsu. Aside from Meng Zhi and Gong Yu both keeping an eye on him, there was Fei Liu, and unless he was killed, he would not budge a step from his side. Any soldier who dared raise a hand against Mei Changsu had their wrists and arms promptly broken ruthlessly by the youth, who sent them rolling away in pain one after the other. Unexpectedly, Mei Changsu said quietly from behind him, “Hey Fei Liu, remember only to break their limbs, don’t break their necks as well by mistake.” His words made it sound like this cold-faced youth who fought like the devil often broke people’s necks by mistake, and the nearest soldiers retreated hastily in fear. Besides, Xie Yu had named the Zhuo family as the primary targets for the killing order, and so most of those attacking Mei Changsu gradually turned their attention to the Zhuo family instead, not wanting to have all their efforts wasted in broken arms and legs.

By this time, Meng Zhi had gone to chase after Xie Yu, and with the loss of such a formidable fighter, the situation was growing dire. Mistress Zhuo and Zhuo Qingyi, whose inner energies were failing, were finding it hard to keep going. Zhuo Dingfeng, who was carrying an injury, looked even worse off. Only Xia Dong, Yan Yujin, and the Da Chu visitors, who had not been included in Xie Yu’s kill order, were managing to hold their own. Nevertheless, the situation was becoming desperate, and if no reinforcements came, the end that Xie Yu desired would be soon in sight.

Suddenly, Xia Dong smelled a whiff of lamp oil, and her brow furrowed.

“Could it be that Xie Yu plans to set fire to Rain-Shower Hall...”

“What?” Yan Yujin jumped in fright.

“The back of this hall is near the lake, if they seal the front doors and set fire to the building, we can only escape by water, and if there are spears on the shore waiting, it will be very difficult to fight our way out of the lake. You and I may not have much difficulty, but for some of the others, it is hard to say.”

Although Yan Yujin never stopped fighting, he felt a tremor run through his heart. If everyone jumped into the water and gathered together at the shore, that would give the others the perfect opportunity to gather their own strength to attack, but if they split up, how could the weaker ones possibly hope to make it out alive? A sheen of cold sweat broke out over his forehead, and he cried, “Xia Dong jiejie, stop predicting what they’re going to do and tell us what we should do!”

“First, stay calm, Xie Yu had not planned to burn his home today, so there may not be adequate fire-setting materials in the manor, and they might bring over a little lamp oil, but it will not be enough, and they will not be able to make the flames reach the roof. At most they may start with the corridor and the outer pavilion. Fortunately, it rained yesterday and the walls are still wet, so it will be some time before they can force us into the water.”

“But no matter how slow, the fire will burn its way to us in the end! Besides, we cannot hold up much longer.”

Xia Dong spared a moment to glance at Mei Changsu, who had not reacted to their conversation, and couldn’t help being a little annoyed. “Mister Su, everyone is busy while you’re standing there, and you still can’t use your brain a little? What are you, meditating?”

“No.” Mei Changsu’s eyes were closed. “I was listening to you two falsely accusing Marquis Xie.”

“Ah? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We are currently in a waterside pavilion, and cannot be forced out cleanly or quickly by fire, so Xie Yu will not burn this place down. He is trying to kill people in his own manor in order to silence them, and so he cannot act openly. Although the Capitol Patrol outside are obeying his orders to keep the peace and prevent anyone from entering, they do not actually know what is happening inside. But once a great blaze rises up, it will be obvious that something is wrong, and then it will not matter whether Prince Yu finds an excuse to enter, because Officer Xia Chun and even Old Marquis Yan will be worried, and no one can hope to stop them. So why would Xie Yu make such a move, and set a fire that would draw them in?”

Yan Yujin's expression froze, although his arms kept moving, busily fending off the soldier in front of him. "Who did you say? My.....my dad?"

"You came to the Xie manor for a banquet, and then a fire breaks out inside, would your esteemed father not be worried? The Yan manor is only a street away from here, he will certainly receive the news very quickly."

Yan Yujin's heart was warm, but he couldn't help worrying. "It's such a mess here right now, and the Capitol Patrol is on guard outside too, it would be better for my dad not to come...."

A small smile spread across Mei Changsu's lips as he said soothingly, "Don't worry, General Auyang is the one on duty tonight with the Capitol Patrol, and he will certainly never harm so much as a hair on the head of the Old Marquis Yan...."

Although they were father and son, Yan Yujin did not know much about his father's past, and so he asked hurriedly, "Why's that?" Because his attention was diverted, a long spear almost pierced his ribs, and was only shoved aside by Yuwen Nian. The son of the Imperial Uncle regathered his focus, thanking her profusely.

"You be careful," Xia Dong drawled with a smile. "After tonight, you can come and ask me. Xia Dong jiejie also knows of the old friendship between General Auyang and your esteemed father."

Yan Yujin shuddered involuntarily, and quickly pretended not to have heard.

"Oh, it's burning...." Yuwen Nian said quietly, just as they all saw the glow of the flames against the window and smelled the smoke on the wind.

"Xie Yu won't start a fire, so who started this one?" Yan Yujin murmured. "Could it be.....but where did Commander Meng find lamp oil?"

Fei Liu grinned silently, baring two rows of shiny white teeth.

With the fire rising, the attacking soldiers became confused, some advancing and some retreating, and as their order broke up, Xia Dong and the rest pressed their advantage and gained a significant amount of ground.

"Hm.....although it is a bit late, I think it is still better to ask," Mei Changsu said suddenly. "Is there anyone among us who cannot swim?"

After a long moment with no reply forthcoming, Mei Changsu looked satisfied. "It seems that everyone can. ....Chief Zhuo, are you still holding up with your injury?"

Zhuo Dingfeng gritted his teeth. "No problem!"

At this moment, Meng Zhi came hurtling back towards them, scattering soldiers in his wake. Yuwen Xuan's voice carried in from outside, "Nian Nian, you must be careful!"

"I'm fine!" Yuwen Nian called back. "Xuan ge, hurry and get out of here!"

"Alright, then I'll leave first, and wait for you outside."

After this, they did not hear his voice again. After a long while, Yan Yujin said quietly, "You people from Da Chu really know how to keep your hands clean...."

The blaze outside was growing brighter, and they were beginning to feel its heat inside the hall. Most of the attacking soldiers had scattered, likely because Xie Yu knew it would be impossible to kill them all here, and so was regrouping his men anew on the far shore of the lake. When they had all gotten their breaths back, they retreated to the furthest corner from the fire and began examining each other for injuries. No one could have guessed that it would be Zhuo Qingyao who had been silently the most badly injured, his left chest and back completely soaked in fresh blood. Mei Changsu brought over a tube of ointment, saying that it was extremely effective in stopping blood loss, and Mistress Zhuo quickly swallowed her tears and thanked him. She gently tended to her son's wounds, weeping as she worked, and asking him how he felt. But Zhuo Qingyao only shook his head, his eyes rimmed in red, unwilling to speak, and looking out constantly to the red-lit sky outside, clearly worrying about his pregnant wife.

Gong Yu walked over to the Zhuo family, pushed back her sleeves, swept aside her robes and then knelt to the ground in a bow, saying in a calm voice, "Your esteemed son died at the hands of my father, this is a difficult crime to forgive. Since I have taken my revenge against Xie Yu, you may naturally take yours against me. Gong Yu lays her life in your hands, to do with as you please."

"Gong...." Yan Yujin was about to rush forward, but Xia Dong caught him.

Zhuo Dingfeng and his wife gazed at her doubtfully for a long moment, and though their faces were cold as snow, they did not respond immediately, instead slowly exchanging a glance as if communicating soundlessly.

A moment later, Mistress Zhuo turned and faced Gong Yu, saying coldly, "If your father were still alive, I would not hesitate to move heaven and earth to take his life, but he is already dead..... As for you, at the time, you had not even been born, and even if the hatred burned yet hotter in my heart, how could it be lessened by taking your life? The Zhuo family will not take our revenge on an orphan girl like you, now or in the future, but.....do not let me see you again after this night has passed....."

Gong Yu bowed her head, tears rolling down her face to land on her robes. She quickly wiped her eyes with her sleeves, murmured an indistinct reply and then stood and indeed retreated a distance away from the Zhuo family.

Mei Changsu, who had been observing silently from the side, walked over to Zhuo Dingfeng and said quietly, "Chief Zhuo, I know you are tired, but there are some things I would still like to ask you now."

Zhuo Dingfeng took a deep breath and wiped his face with one hand. "Ask away."

"Although the enmity of a murdered son lies between you and Xie Yu, if he had not tried to kill you and yours this night, would you have revealed his secrets?"

Zhuo Dingfeng lifted his head towards the sky, the wrinkles on his face seeming to deepen. He thought for a long moment, his gaze bleak. "To tell the truth, I do not know. The enmity of a murdered son burns deep, how can anyone lightly relinquish something like this? But if I were really to condemn Xie Yu and sentence him to death, Yao'er.....what will happen to Yao'er.....and his child...."

"But it seems that Xie Yu has not given you any opportunity to consider, as he is determined to silence you." Mei Changsu hardened his resolve, ignoring the pain and sorrow in his heart as he pushed on insistently. "Do you know why that is?"

Zhuo Dingfeng slowly turned his gaze to Mister Mei of Jiangzuo, his voice trembling as he said, "Pray Mister advise me."

"Because he cannot afford this gamble. He cannot leave his most dangerous secret in the hands of someone who bears him the enmity of a murdered son. Before, you thought you were working together, but now, you know that he was only using you, and even the bond of marriage between your families was only one of the ways he made use of your relationship. There is no longer any trust to speak of between you now."

As he spoke, Mei Changsu turned towards Zhuo Qingyao, whose face was pale as snow, and sighed deeply. "The most lamentable part is that, although this marriage was only a means to an end for Xie Yu, for Master Zhuo and Miss Xie, it was a beautiful dream, the stuff of fairytales.... But in the end, Miss Xie is Master Zhuo's wife, and the child she bears is his. As long as everyone survives this night, there may yet be hope."

Zhuo Qingyao covered his mouth and coughed violently for a long moment, then wiped away the blood stains at the corners of his lips and closed his eyes heavily.

"Mister Su," Zhuo Dingfeng's face was gray as he held onto his son's shoulder, speaking lowly. "I know why you are helping us today.....but.....I have already made a mistake for the sake of the so-called righteousness of supporting the Crown

Prince, and that mistake has cost us this day's disaster, and so I truly do not want to get any more involved...."

Mei Changsu nodded slowly, his expression grave. "So Chief Zhuo still believes he can remove himself from all of this, I should give him my congratulations."

Zhuo Dingfeng was taken aback, and his gaze drifted over his wife and children before he lowered his head in defeat. "I am the head of the family, it was I who led them down the wrong path...."

"Chief Zhuo understands people," Mei Changsu answered. "Now that you know Xie Yu killed your son all those years ago, then you know that unless you die, even if you swear to him to forgive this enmity, a person like Xie Yu would not believe you. From this day forward, the Zhuo and Xie clans are divided forever, and Xie Yu will never let any of you go. If you want to protect your family, then you have no choice but to bring Xie Yu down. But if you do this, then you, Chief Zhuo...."

Mei Changsu swallowed the rest of his words and did not continue, but Zhuo Dingfeng understood what he meant. In order to bring down Xie Yu, he must reveal certain secrets, and he himself was a participant in these secrets, and though he might gain favour for reporting them voluntarily, he could not hope to escape blame entirely.

"Mister Su, if you can guarantee the safety of the Zhuo clan, and can help us save Yao'er's unborn child, then I will certainly repay you...." Zhou Dingfeng spoke slowly, his voice full of sorrow and helplessness. "As for this great crime under heaven, let me bear it alone...."

"Dad...." Zhuo Qingyao stirred, suddenly opening his eyes and crying out in pain.

"Do not say anything...." Zhuo Dingfeng lifted a hand, wavered for a moment and then finally rested it on Zhuo Qingyao's head, stroking lightly. "You are the eldest son, you still have your mother and your sister to take care of, understand?"

Zhuo Qingyao pressed his lips together tightly, but couldn't stop their trembling, and it was a long while before he managed to say, "But Dad.....Qi'er is innocent as well, she does not know anything...."

"If she is willing to overlook the enmity between our two families and still wishes to be your wife, your mother and I will treat her well. But if she is not..... Yao'er, what can you do....."

Zhuo Qingyao gritted his teeth and held back, but it was Zhuo Qingyi who gave a sudden wail and dissolved into loud tears.

"It was I who made the mistake at the start, and became a burden to my whole family...." Zhuo Dingfeng looked at his daughter and gently drew her into his arms,

tears trailing down his own face. Xiao Jingrui, who was sitting a distance away, should not have been able to hear their conversation, but the shine of tears appeared in his eyes as well.

Mei Changsu glanced over at him, and then stood. “We will speak of all this later. The blaze is approaching, let us all retreat to the pier at the back.”

Everyone rose and filed out the back door. Xiao Jingrui sat with his head lowered unmoving, and it was not until Yuwen Nian and Yan Yujin came over and pulled at him that he silently followed after them, as if his mind was entirely blank.

At the rear of Rain-Shower Hall was a wooden pier extending more than a hundred feet into the lake, with a small pavilion at its end. Mei Changsu asked Meng Zhi and Xia Dong to break off the pier where it met land, to prevent the fire from spreading to them, and everyone gathered in the pavilion, safe for the time being.

“I’d forgotten this pavilion was here!” Yan Yujin smacked himself in the head. “Since the fire can’t reach us here anyway, why did Brother Su ask us if we could swim?”

Xia Dong reached out and pinched his cheek, annoyed. “The pier’s broken, won’t you need to swim to get back to shore? The lake is so shallow here, shall I dig it deeper and pull over a boat for the Young Master?”

Mei Changsu ignored these two, his gaze fixed on the far shore. There was no glow of lamps to be seen in the dark night, and who knew what kinds of demons and monsters were hiding in the inky darkness. Xie Yu’s defeat tonight was a foregone conclusion, and he must reap the fruits of the seeds he had sown. But Mei Changsu’s heart was full of pity for the younger generation, the innocents, who must suffer so much.

Xie Bi and Zhuo Qingyi, unable to wed, their families ending in ruin; Zhuo Qingyao and Xie Qi, husband and wife wanting so desperately to stay together, and their child, who would come into the world without any means of support; and then there was Jingrui.....

Jingrui.....

Mei Changsu stifled the sigh in his throat, unwilling to continue down this direction of thought.

Gentle waves rippled through the lake, and it seemed that the fire was being held back by the shallow water between them. Everyone who had emerged from the bloody fight suddenly felt the calm all around them, an unnatural stillness that was almost frightening, as if an invisible hand had uncovered the deepest fears of their hearts, and awakened the pain that had been suppressed during the previous confrontation.

After a long moment of silence, Yan Yujin suddenly stood. “Look, the situation on the shore is changing....”



## CHAPTER 93

### *Dissident*

The shore of the man-made lake near Rain-Shower Hall was curved, and so its distance from the pavilion varied. Some parts of the shore were covered in willow trees, while others only harboured low-lying grass. Gazing across the lake to the shore in the dark night, one could only make out patches of black and gray, with blurred movement indicating some kind of activity, and those with poorer eyesight could not see what was going on at all.

“Those are the reinforcement troops, right, they’re all running around....” Yan Yujin squinted, trying to see more clearly.

There was silence in the pavilion. A good while later, Meng Zhi coughed and said, “From what I can see, that looks more like.....Xie Yu has summoned some of the archers from the Capitol Patrol....”

Xia Dong grabbed Yan Yujin’s cheek, and he tried to dodge, but there was nowhere to go in the tiny pavilion.

“Xiao Jin, how did I not know about your night-blindness? Isn’t your eyesight quite good in broad daylight?” The lady Xuanjing officer teased, eyebrow raised.

“You’re the one...” Yan Yujin was about to retort, but the sudden pain in his cheek reminded him that this was Xia Dong jiejie, and he could not resist against her, and so he only said unhappily, “It’s just that my eyesight gets a tiny bit worse at night, it’s far from night-blindness.”

“Xie Yu must nearly be at the end of his rope, it looks like the external pressure from outside the gates of his manor is strong indeed. But a cornered beast is most dangerous, and though this place is a little distance from the shore, from certain angles, the distance is within range of the archers, so everyone be careful,” Mei Changsu advised.

“Don’t worry, Mister Su,” Meng Zhi laughed. “This is probably Xie Yu’s last stand. Arrows fired from this kind of distance will be considerably weakened by the time they reach us. Let the wounded and the ladies retreat to the back, and with the

few of us here, we can hold them off for some time yet.....eh, Officer Xia, where are you going?”

“Didn’t you tell the ladies to retreat to the back?” Xia Dong widened her eyes at him. “Do you mean to say I am not a lady?”

But even as she spoke, she was standing again, taking up a guard position at the south-eastern part of the pavilion. Yan Yujin muttered very quietly, “You’ve never been a lady,” and stood at the front as well. Soon, the pavilion was divided into two semi-circles, the inner comprising of the defenseless Mei Changsu and the wounded Zhuo family, and the outer formed by Meng Zhi, Xia Dong, Yue Xiuze, Yan Yujin, Xiao Jingrui and Fei Liu. Yuwen Nian and Gong Yu wanted to join the outer circle as well but there was not enough room, and they were pushed back by the men. Xia Dong couldn’t help chuckling. “Aren’t you all protective of the fairer sex....”

The words had scarcely left her lips when the first round of arrows fell, harder and faster than expected, and the outer circle focused on their defense, not daring to be careless. The archers on the shore were well-trained, the lines of archers switching seamlessly so that the arrows fell in unrelenting waves. Yan Yujin, who had always been on the weaker side,<sup>152</sup> was soon soaked in sweat, and he missed two arrows in the next onslaught, but fortunately, Xiao Jingrui’s sword flashed beside him and knocked them to the ground as he shoved him to the back with his other hand. Gong Yu grabbed the sword from Yan Yujin’s hand and took his place.

Mei Changsu helped Yan Yujin sit down beside him, urging, “Take a deep breath and gather your qi, then move it in two circuits around your body, gather it down at your navel, and hold it there for awhile. Your constitution is not strong by nature, and if you do not adjust your qi well, you will sustain harm to your body.”

Yan Yujin obeyed, closing his eyes and shutting out the noise around him as he breathed slowly. At first, he was a little distracted, but soon, he was concentrating hard, blocking the chaos around him as he focused on moving the qi around his body and calming his frantic pulse before settling it around his navel, and then letting it disperse bit by bit towards the pain around the different parts of his body.

When he opened his eyes again, he jumped in surprise. The shower of arrows had stopped, and everyone was gazing soberly at a particular spot on the far shore, but when he turned to look, he couldn’t see anything, and so he turned automatically and grabbed Xiao Jingrui by the sleeve, asking, “Jingrui, what’s going on at the shore?”

As soon as he spoke, he suddenly remembered that Xiao Jingrui was not in an ordinary state of mind at the moment, and he turned hurriedly to see that he was

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<sup>152</sup> I think it was mentioned before that YYJ survived some kind of serious childhood illness (that’s actually why his dad started him on martial arts – to improve his health)

indeed white as a sheet of paper, and he was about to say something comforting when Xiao Jingrui suddenly threw off his hand and plunged into the lake, swimming fast towards the shore.

“Hey....” Yan Yujin couldn’t stop him, and stamped his foot anxiously. Xia Dong, standing beside him, sighed. “We’d better go over there too.”

Yuwen Nian was in the water before she had finished speaking, chasing after the ripples Xiao Jingrui had left in his wake. Everyone else helped each other into the lake and swam together to the opposite shore. Although the water in April was no longer frosty, it was still far from warm, and when they emerged soaking into the cool evening breeze, the chill from the water was inevitable. Meng Zhi kept turning back to look at Mei Changsu, and the latter knew his concern, and so said quietly, “It’s alright, I took medicine.”

There were actually not many people on the shore by the lake. The Marquis of Ning’s soldiers and Prince Yu’s household troops were locked in a mutual stalemate, and had retreated to the other side of the winding path. Xia Chun and Yan Que had indeed come hurrying into the manor, and had arrived at the shore before the others had began their swim over from the pavilion. They were both of a rather reserved nature, and Xia Chun only glanced at his shimei,<sup>153</sup> saying nothing, while Yan Que merely asked, “Alright?”

“Alright, alright,” Yan Yujin did not care that his father had said so little, and besides, by this time, he had taken in the situation around the shore, and all of his attention was being diverted elsewhere.

Xie Yu stood beside the rock gardens, his face pale as death, his normally dark eyes ashen with despair. Prince Yu stood with his arms clasped behind his back about seven or eight paces away from him, and though his expression was solemn, his face devoid of any smile, somehow, he could not hide the sense of delight he so clearly felt at the scene of misfortune before him.

Both of their gazes were fixed on the same spot.

The Grand Princess Liyang sat in the middle of the dew-riddled grass, her dark hair falling around her face, her robes wrinkled and dirtied. Clutched in one waxy hand was a long, gleaming sword, resting on the ground beside her. Her face, streaked with tears, still bore the signs of exertion, her cheeks reddened, her breath coming quickly, the veins in her neck bulging slightly. Xiao Jingrui sat beside her, supporting her as her head rested on his shoulder, patting her on the back with one hand as he gently wiped her face with his other sleeve, murmuring, “Alright.....I’m here.....alright.....it’ll be alright....”

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<sup>153</sup> shimei = apprentice [younger] sister (I better start leaving these in their phonetic form because ‘shifu’ is coming up soon, and I know you all know that one)

“They.....are they.....” Grand Princess Liyang’s eyes were closed, her voice quiet.

“Some are injured...but everyone is alive....”

Grand Princess Liyang bit down hard on her lower lip, her breath still coming rapidly, but she did not open her eyes.

Xia Dong lowered her voice as she turned to her shixiong,<sup>154</sup> “What happened?”

Xia Chun answered in a voice just as quiet, “I hurried over once I saw your signal and saw His Highness Prince Yu outside the gates. Then, Marquis Yan also arrived, and Marquis Xie said it was only a small fire set by accident, and wouldn’t let us enter, and it was about to come to blows when the Grand Princess suddenly grabbed a sword, and stopped both sides from starting anything, and then let us all here.... Just what exactly happened tonight? How did it come to this?”

“Ai.....we can’t talk here, I will tell Brother Chun all about it when we get back.” Xia Dong thought about everyone whose fate had changed so suddenly over the course of this night, and couldn’t help sighing in sorrow and regret.

Mei Changsu saw Grand Princess Liyang’s hand tighten on the sword, and as she started to lift it, he cried out in warning, “Jingrui!”

Xiao Jingrui, a little frightened, immediately took his mother’s hand, saying softly, “Mum...let me hold this sword for you....”

Grand Princess Liyang shook her head and straightened, as if she had finally regained a little of her strength, and slowly lifted her head. “Do not worry, Mum still has many things she must do.....I will not kill myself....” As she spoke, she stood slowly with Xiao Jingrui supporting her, and then took a deep breath, lifted her head slightly, and with her sword still in hand and her voice cold as ice, she said, “Where is that young lady from Da Chu?”

Yuwen Nian was not expecting to be addressed, and she stared blankly for a moment before regaining her composure, “I, I’m here....”

Grand Princess Liyang turned to her and gazed steadily at her for a long moment. “My momo told me you bowed to me three times?”

“Yes....”

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<sup>154</sup> shixiong = apprentice [older] brother

“Did he tell you to bow to me with the intention of taking Jingrui away from me here?”

“I...” Yuwen Nian was young, and she stammered as she tried to answer. “I am of the younger generation, it is right for me to...”

“Listen well,” Grand Princess Liyang cut her off coldly. “That year, after he escaped, I said that as we are born with passion, so we will not regret our actions. But we cannot defy the mandate of heaven, and so what is the use in blaming gods or men? I will accept your bows, but Jingrui came of age long ago, and where he goes is for him to decide, I will not allow anyone to insist or demand anything from him.

Yuwen Nian was overcome by her fierce manner, and only lowered her head and answered, “Yes....” When she had left the capital of Chu, her father had spent a whole night without sleep telling her about the Princess Liyang he remembered – riding valiantly through a field on her peach-white horse, her pomegranate-red skirts flying in the wind, with a nature like a roaring flame. But after she had met the real person, she couldn’t help feeling that the reality differed quite a bit from the picture her father had painted. It was only now that she caught a glimpse of grace and grandeur she must have possessed in her youth.

After these words, Princess Liyang seemed to have regained her composure, and her expression was steady as she slowly pushed aside her son’s supporting arm and walked forward a few steps, saying quietly, “Jinghuan, come here.”

Prince Yu looked taken aback, but as everyone was watching, he could only walk forward obediently, even bowing as he said, “Aunt.” There was a sudden flash, and then the crisp shining point of the sword was pushing against his chest.

“Grand Princess....” Xia Chun was shocked, and was about to run forward when Princess Liyang spoke again. “Jinghuan, you came today prepared to take the Zhuo family away with you, am I correct?”

Prince Yu was calm despite the sword in front of him, and he nodded. “Although Xie Yu is part of the royal family by marriage, the law of our country does not permit him to act in this way, and the Zhuo family....”

“These kinds of empty words are unnecessary. I know very well why you do what you do,” Princess Liyang said coldly. “I want you now to promise me two things, if you do, then I will not go to speak with the Emperor, nor the Grand Empress Dowager, nor the Empress, and save you much trouble in the future.”

Prince Yu considered for a moment, and then bowed again. “Aunt, please give your instructions.”

“First, do not condemn anyone guilty by association.”

Prince Yu thought about it. All those in the Xie family besides Xie Yu were of royal blood, and did not hold any official position in the court, and so were not worth condemning in the first place. Besides, it was Xie Yu who was the Crown Prince's right hand, and so tearing him down already fulfilled his purpose, and he did not care about the others, and so he nodded immediately and said crisply, "Alright."

"Second, treat the Zhuo family well."

This demand seemed strange, and aside from a few in the crowd who kept their faces blank, most of the others looked a little confused.

Prince Yu saw Zhuo Dingfeng's expression out of the corner of his eye, and, worried that he would become suspicious, hurried to explain, "The Zhuos are witnesses, their testimony will be important, so I will of course treat them with every courtesy. Oh, there are also pardons to be considered, let me be responsible for requesting these from His Majesty."

"I do not mean now. I mean forever. Are you willing to swear on the imperial name, no matter whether the Zhuo family is useful to you or not in the future, to never act in any way against their interests?"

Prince Yu needed to draw in Zhuo Dingfeng and use him to topple Xie Yu, and so he seized the opportunity and said, "I respect Chief Zhuo's great righteousness, and not only in order to use him. If Aunt does not believe me, what harm is there in making this vow? I swear, on the imperial blood, and if I harm the Zhuo family in any way in the future, may both gods and men abandon me forever."

The sword in Princess Liyang's hand slowly lowered, and she turned, forcing herself to meet the eyes of the Zhuo couple. Her eyes filled with tears, but she forced them back, and said lowly, "I am a selfish person, I have concealed this from you all these years for the sake of my child, and there is not a word I can say in my own defense. But my daughter Qi'er is innocent, and she is already entered into the Zhuo clan. Even if you can bear no lingering ties of affection or memory towards me or my husband, please for the sake of the child, treat her well."

The Zhuo couple were silent for a long while, and finally, it was Mistress Zhuo who answered, "The Zhuo family are a jianghu clan, and draw clear the lines of our grievances, and do not implicate the next generation. Qi'er is my daughter-in-law, and if she returns to us with her child, she will naturally be treated as such, the Princess does not need to intervene for her."

Princess Liyang lowered her head and bowed, her tears falling to the ground, and she lifted a hand and wiped at her eyes before turning to survey her surroundings. "I must speak with Xie Yu, I pray you all to stay awhile yet."

There was silence all around her, and it seemed that they were giving their silent agreement. Princess Liyang patted Xiao Jingrui's hand, then left him standing there as she walked slowly to Xie Yu's side, indicating for him to follow her. The two turned together into the rock garden, away from the gazes of the crowd. Princess Liyang looked directly at her husband and asked lowly, "Xie Yu, do you hate me?"

Xie Yu looked abck at his wife, and seemed to think seriously before replying, "Even if you did not come tonight, they would have broken in eventually. Besides, I had indeed made up my mind to kill everyone, so it is hardly surprising that you could not trust me."

"I was not referring to this..."

"If you mean that year, in the past, I think..."

"I was not referring to that year either. Even if I cannot face you over the matter of Jingrui, even before that, could you face me?"<sup>155</sup>

Something flashed in Xie Yu's eyes, but he did not speak.

"You really have never understood what I was thinking..." Princess Liyang sighed lightly, shaking her head, and then smiled bitterly. "What I mean is.... a husband and wife should support and help each other, yet tonight, I have protected my three children, and protected the Zhuo family, and even indirectly protected those you had wanted to silence, but have not protected you. But you.....are in fact the person I should protect the most.....do you not hate me?"

Xie Yu immediately shook his head. "If you mean this, then I have never hated you."

"Why?"

"Because even if you tried, you could not protect me."

Princess Liyang nodded, saying slowly, "So it is true. When I saw the risks you were willing to take in silencing them by killing them, I guessed that whatever you had done, it was something from which I could not resolve you, even with my power as Grand Princess. May I ask, if you are convicted, what will happen?"

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<sup>155</sup> it's a little subtle, and comes out even clumsier in the translation, but in Chinese I think it's pretty clear:

"that year in the past" = Liyang's affair with the Chu prince

"the matter of Jingrui" = same thing (i.e. Jingrui's true origins)

"even before that" = Xie Yu's raping Liyang on their wedding night

“Sentenced to death, and my name wiped from the earth. The inheritance and noble rank of the Xie clan will also end here.”

Grand Princess Liyang looked at him, sighing lightly. “If it comes to this, the spirits of your grandparents will know, the spirits of all the ancestors of the Xie clan will know, and what will they think....”

Xie Yu laughed bitterly. “History is written by the winners, this has been known since the time of our ancestors.”

“Have you truly never thought of doing all you can to keep the name of the Xie clan from falling to ruin?”

This time, Xie Yu immediately understood her meaning, and there was a pain in his heart as he gritted his teeth.

“The Xie clan has been lauded for its achievements for centuries, and its name honoured throughout history, how can you stand to let it be destroyed overnight like this?” Grand Princess Liyang slowly held out the long sword in her hand towards her husband. “This is the only thing left that I can do for you, for the Xie family. Since you have failed tonight, and there is no way out of this alive, then why not die a clean death, without losing the heroic nobility befitting a male of the Xie clan?”

Xie Yu’s expression was wooden as he murmured, “If I die, will the waves cease?”

“At least, I will not let everything come to the surface. Prince Yu is only a political enemy, he does not harbour true enmity towards you. He only wants to see you fall, he is not intent on destroying the Xie clan. I will beg my imperial brother to let me leave, I will abandon my past and become a nun, and take the children with me away from the capital. That way, Prince Yu will not waste any more time on us.” Princess Liyang’s gaze was bleak, her expression mournful. “I cannot protect your life, but at least I can protect your reputation. If you are lonely in the afterlife, then, after I have settled the children, I will come to keep you company, alright?”

The moonlight illuminated the tears in her eyes as they trailed along her hairline to the tips of her ears. Xie Yu suddenly reached out and drew her tightly into his arms. He kissed her cheek and said lowly, “Liyang, no matter what else you think, I truly do love you....”

Princess Liyang shut her eyes tightly, but could not hold back the flow of tears. In the more than twenty years of their marriage, she had never once returned her husband’s affections, but now, she raised her arms and wrapped them around his waist.



But after this short embrace, Xie Yu slowly pushed her away, and pushed aside the long sword in her hand.

“Xie Yu....”

“I am sorry, Liyang,” Xie Yu’s face was hidden in shadow, his features blurred. “I do not want to die yet, and I have not yet arrived at the end of the road.....let the waves rise. Until the very last moment, who can know who will win and who will lose? Even if I lose everything, even if I lose the name and reputation of the Zhuo clan, what of it? It is only when a person dies that he truly loses everything.....even if I die, at least, I will die without regrets!”

## CHAPTER 94

### *Wretched Night*

After Xie Yu's answer, there was a complicated expression on Grand Princess Liyang's face, part disappointment, part relief. Perhaps she herself was lost as well, unsure of what the correct course of action was.

Xie Yu gently stroked her hair, then turned and walked out of the rock garden, his steps slow and steady as he made his way to Prince Yu. His gaze passed over the Zhuo family, but did not stop. "If Your Highness wishes to take these people away as your guests, please feel free to do so. The night has been long, and Your Highness did not enter by invitation after all, so if I have been amiss in my hospitality, I am sure Your Highness would not blame me."

He had regained his composure so completely that Prince Yu felt a bit uneasy. Mei Changsu spoke up quietly from beside him. "The guest houses the Zhuo family has been staying in have been burned down as well. Your Highness must act quickly."

Prince Yu's eyes widened. He immediately summoned one of his generals, giving him hurried but quiet orders to take his imperial seal and ride through the night to Fenzuo to seal off Tianquan Manour, and to prevent anyone from coming near it. Then he turned and scoffed at Xie Yu, saying only, "I will take my leave" before gesturing for his soldiers to escort the Zhuo family away. Mistress Zhuo's heart still ached for Xiao Jingrui, and she turned to look at him, as if she were about to say something. Just then, the Grand Princess also came over, looking exhausted as she leaned wearily on her son's arm and asked him softly to come with her to the Princess' residence to stay for the next few days. Xiao Jingrui lowered his head in agreement, then knelt down on the ground where he stood, turned to face the Zhuos, and touched his forehead to the ground three times without speaking. Mistress Zhuo wept so hard she almost choked, the tears falling from her face like rain.

Zhuo Dingfeng put a hand on his wife's shoulder and helped her forward, but the pain in his own chest grew almost unbearable and he finally stopped, turned his head, and said in a voice thick with grief, "Jingrui, come here, I have something to say to you...."

Xiao Jingrui stood frozen for a moment, then walked over slowly. This was his father, who had loved and doted on him for more than twenty years, and yet, at this moment, he could not bring himself to meet his eyes, and so he fixed his gaze on his shoulder.

“Jingrui,” Zhuo Dingfeng let his hand drop heavily onto Xiao Jingrui’s shoulder. “I know you have a high tolerance by nature, but there are some things that cannot be endured, and must be let out. Your mum and I.....are not unreasonable people. No matter who should bear responsibility for the events of the past, it is not you, so do not blame your.....”

He had not even finished his sentence when Xiao Jingrui’s pupils constricted, and he flung off the hand Zhuo Dingfeng had placed on his shoulder, turning and pushing him to one side in the same motion. Amidst the startled cries of everyone around them, a man rose up from the ring of Prince Yu’s soldiers surrounding the Zhuo family and thrust the gleaming point of a sword directly at Zhuo Dingfeng’s back. And though Xiao Jingrui had pushed him aside in time, the assassin was fast enough that the point of his sword still caught the edges of Zhuo Dingfeng’s robes. But since Xiao Jingrui had used his momentum to push Zhuo Dingfeng, he did not have enough time to dodge the sword himself, and the blade pierced his abdomen, emerging again dripping with blood.

All of this had happened in the blink of an eye, and none of the martial arts masters standing around had had time to react. If Xiao Jingrui had not avoided Zhuo Dingfeng’s compassionate gaze because of the grief in his heart, and turned his eyes aside for just a moment, he likely would not have been quick enough to save his adopted father from a fatal injury. The assassin had missed his chance, and he knew there would not be another. He reached up and pulled at something around his own neck, and then fell to the ground, dead. Xia Dong, who was standing closest, lunged forward, but was too late to stop him, and could only shake her head.

“Jingrui! Jingrui!” Zhuo Dingfeng held the limp body in his arms tightly, directing his inner energy along the channels in his body as he stemmed the blood flowing out of the open wounds. By this time, the Grand Princess and Mistress Zhuo had come running over in tears. Yan Yujin was patting frantically all over his own body, trying to find the bottle of heart-protection pills he had grabbed from the hall earlier, and in his distress, he couldn’t seem to find it. Mei Changsu had also come rushing over, and now he bent and carefully examined Xiao Jingrui’s wounds. He saw that, though the wounds were serious, they were fortunately not fatal, and since the young man had already taken a heart-protection pill this evening, his life was likely not in danger. He took a breath to still his pounding heart, and then handed a vial of gold wound ointment to Mistress Zhuo for her to start treating Xiao Jingrui’s injuries.

Yan Yujin had finally found the bottle, and he quickly poured out another pill, meaning to give it to his friend, but was stopped by a shake of Mei Changsu’s head.

“Keep it for now, this is invaluable, life-saving medicine, and is not meant to be used in this way. One pill for today will be enough.”

Prince Yu, who had frozen in fear at the bloodshed that had occurred only paces from him, finally regained his composure, and he turned to glare fiercely at Xie Yu. But the latter shrugged coldly and answered, “Everyone saw it clearly, that assassin was one of your men, what are you looking at me for?”

Prince Yu flushed furiously, his chest burning in rage, and he shouted at one of his soldiers, “Take that corpse away and find out where he crawled in from! No mistakes!”

Mei Changsu glanced at him, but did not speak. Even the best of plans could not control every variable, and the attempt just now had frightened even him. It was fortunate indeed that nothing worse had resulted. As for how Prince Yu controlled his soldiers, Mei Changsu had no suggestion whatsoever. In fact, Prince Yu was fortunate that Mei Changsu had refrained himself from making things worse.

Xiao Jingrui’s wounds had been tended to for the moment, and the bleeding had finally stopped, but he was still unconscious, his cheeks grey. The Grand Princess had already called for carriages, and was prepared to take him away to the Princess’ residence for further treatment. Yuwen Nian murmured something in a trembling voice about taking Xiao Jingrui back with her to her lodgings for rest and treatment, but no one paid any attention to this strange suggestion. Only Yue Xiuze noticed his young disciple almost in tears, and strode over and pulled her off to one side, saying in a low voice, “This is Jinling, you must be patient.”

“Where is Xuan ge?” Yuwen Nian looked around helplessly, her voice breaking.

“He probably did not come in, and is waiting for us outside. We are after all foreigners here....”

“Shi fu, what should we do?” Yuwen Nian wrung her hands. “The Grand Princess is so powerful, and gege did not seem to want to listen to me..... didn’t our sorcerer divine that April would be an auspicious month, and that if we came at this time, we would be sure to bring gege back with us....”

The Chu believed strongly in the astrology and divination of their sorcerers, and a Chu emperor had once even abdicated in favour of the Crown Prince because of the alignment of the stars, and so Yue Xiuze immediately said to her comfortingly, “The sorcerer has divined it, so what are you worried for? Although he was young, and not high in rank, all of his predictions for His Highness Prince Ling have been correct so far. You must have faith.”

The two were speaking quietly, and no one was paying attention to them except for Mei Changsu, who glanced over periodically. Prince Yu was reorganizing his

soldiers, appointing the most trusted to guard the Zhuo family, and arranging for a stretcher to be brought for the wounded. Grand Princess Liyang sent a few of her servants to fetch Xie Bi and Xie Qi, then turned and looked at her husband, who would be staying behind alone, and then swallowed her tears and followed the crowd out of the manor.

Yuwen Xuan was waiting calmly outside the gates beside the Capital Patrol, who still had no idea what was happening, and who had been gazing suspiciously at Yuwen Xuan the entire time. He was not interested in what had occurred in the manor, and when he saw his sister coming out safely, his face broke into a smile and he came forward, saying to her gently, "Nian Nian, what is it?"

"He still hasn't said a word to me...." Yuwen Nian whispered miserably, falling into his arms.

"Never mind, he has had too great a shock, and so hasn't had time to listen to you. You fought by his side tonight, and he will remember this sister of his in the end." Yuwen Xuan patted her shoulder, his gentle voice soothing. "Think about it, we chose such a public setting to reveal everything, and this has burned all of his bridges. This method cannot be compared to simply telling him everything in confidence. His identity and circumstance have changed so much so suddenly, and even if he doesn't know it yet, it will not be long before he realizes that, even with the Grand Princess' protection, he cannot stay in this Jinling of Da Liang. When that time comes, we will approach him again, and he will definitely agree to leave with us. After all, who would not want to meet his own birth father?"

Yuwen Nian nodded, her eyes following Xiao Jingrui, who was being lifted onto a carriage. A tear made its way down her cheek. Yan Yujin, who was about to leave with his father, looked over and saw her, and he couldn't help the stir of pity that arose in his heart. He hesitated for a moment before walking over to say to her, "Miss Yuwen, Jingrui's injuries are not fatal, you do not need to worry. The Grand Princess is generous by nature, if you go and knock on her door, she will let you in to see Jingrui."

Yuwen Nian saw his good intentions and hurriedly wiped her face, then curtsied and said in a quiet voice, "Thank you, Master Yan."

Yan Yujin nodded back at her, then turned to look at Yuwen Xuan, but he did not like this simpering Prince Ling of Da Chu, so he did not speak, and simply turned and left.

Before Xia Dong left, she purposefully found her way to Mei Changsu's side, leaning over to say quietly in his ear, "The great prodigy is indeed skillful. And some people say you aren't good at chess, what a joke."

Mei Changsu smiled. "I am indeed a poor chess player, Officer Xia has only to try me and she will see. But Officer Xia is only interested in the case on her hands, and probably won't care much about other people's chess games, isn't that right?"

"You are correct," Xia Dong laughed and blew out a breath lightly. "I care only about solving my own case, and have always been blind and deaf to anything unrelated. Tell His Highness Prince Yu not to bother finding me, he will only be wasting his time."

"I never pass on messages." Mei Changsu's ear was tickled by her breath, and he dodged away with a smile. "Besides, His Highness Prince Yu is an intelligent man, when has he ever bothered Officer Xia?"

Xia Dong lifted her head and laughed again, then turned and grabbed Xia Chun as she walked away.

By this time, Prince Yu had finally finished making arrangements for the Zhuo family to be escorted away. He had always been good at showing warmth and hospitality, and Zhuo Dingfeng was a straightforward jianghu man, and so although he had not completely let go of his suspicions, his impression of Prince Yu seemed to be improving. Mei Changsu knew it was time for him to withdraw and let Prince Yu handle the rest, and so he stood far off to the side. Besides, the Zhuos had managed to escape with their lives, at least for now, and he could finally breathe a sigh of relief. Zhuo Dingfeng had conspired with Xie Yu for so long that there were many things he knew, and his oral testimony alone could destroy Xie Yu. As long as there remained just a few pieces of evidence at Tianquan Manor, Xie Yu's ability to talk his way out of this one would be almost non-existent. And Prince Yu would certainly take care of these matters very thoroughly.

"Shall I arrange for some of my men to see Mister Su back to your manor?" Prince Yu came over, looking at Mei Changsu like he had found treasure. "Mister has been in the water and is wet all over, it would not do to catch a chill. I will send over a doctor to look after you, how about that?"

"I thank Your Highness," Mei Changsu smiled. "The matters which are to follow are of utmost importance, Your Highness will likely spend the rest of the night dealing with them, so you must not worry yourself on my account. Commander Meng has been forced into this mess against his will, and from his expression, it seems he has realized he has been used tonight, and is upset. He is still greatly favoured by His Majesty, and holds a high position in the court, so we cannot afford to offend him. Let Your Highness return to your residence first. I must go over and think of a way to explain things to him."

Prince Yu was taken aback, and he turned to see that Meng Zhi did indeed look faintly displeased, and so he said hurriedly, "I must trouble Mister in this matter then."

Commander Meng is upright and loyal, so you must be careful in your explanations. We cannot make him our enemy.”

Mei Changsu nodded. Prince Yu turned and went over to Meng Zhi, exchanging a few polite words with him before leading the Zhuo family away to a carriage waiting nearby. Mei Changsu came up slowly in his wake, smiling as he said, “We have troubled Commander Meng tonight.”

Meng Zhi looked around and saw that almost everyone had left, and finally let his face relax as he answered, “You’re still strolling around, aren’t you cold?”

“I am a little cold now.....it is already past curfew. It is dangerous for a commoner like myself to traverse the streets alone at night, would the Commander General be willing to escort me home?”

Meng Zhi didn’t know whether he was serious or joking until a carriage pulled up in front of them. He closed his gaping mouth and helped Mei Changsu inside.

“Where’s Fei Liu?”

“He’ll be somewhere nearby.” When the curtains were drawn, Mei Changsu relaxed a little. He took off his soaking outer robes and drew a blanket over himself. Meng Zhi braced a hand on his chest, pouring his inner energy into him to warm his blood and increase his circulation.

“To tell the truth, tonight really was....” When he saw Mei Changsu’s colour return to normal, Meng Zhi finally relaxed and retrieved his hand. He thought about everything that had happened and couldn’t help sighing. “Even though you told me about it beforehand, it was still shocking to witness.”

Mei Changsu sighed too. “And you were only an observer. To those who were involved, it was no better than torture....”

“That’s right, what happened to the Grand Princess all those years ago must have been a tightly guarded secret. Didn’t Prince Yu ask you how you managed to find out about it?”

“I didn’t.” Mei Changsu tightened the blanket around himself. “It was Prince Yu who discovered it for himself, and then told me about it.”

“Ah?” Meng Zhi couldn’t believe his ears. “What – what did you say?!”

Mei Changsu cocked his head from inside the blanket. “The entire affair started a year ago. First, we found a leather salesman who remarked while inside Crimson Sleeve House that some old prince from Da Chu looked a lot like the Young Master Xiao. Then, we arranged for an old palace servant to accidentally remind the Empress

of the Grand Princess Liyang's situation from all those years ago.... When the two pieces of information came together, they were enough to allow certain people to connect the dots. Prince Yu is a suspicious man by nature, and Qin Banruo cannot help but investigate any secret she comes across, so we didn't even have to push much before they started to investigate matters for themselves. There is one thing you don't know. Last month, Gong Yu tried to assassinate Xie Yu...."

"Ah?!"

"Of course, she was not successful, and she suffered a slight injury while trying to escape and couldn't make it to Miaoyin House, but she did happen to flee into Crimson Sleeve House, where she was saved by Qin Banruo...." Mei Changsu's gaze shifted coldly. "And that's how Prince Yu came to know the secret of Xie Yu killing an infant all those years ago."

"I understand!" Meng Zhi slapped his thigh. "Once Prince Yu discovered all of this, he would certainly come to you to discuss how best to use this information, and so you arranged for everything to be revealed at the birthday banquet. It is too perfect! But, what about Yuwen Xuan and the rest...."

"Prince Yu received the imperial command to host Yuwen Xuan when he arrived in Jinling, so naturally, he had the chance to see Yuwen Nian. And once he saw the face of Miss Yuwen, what more was there to understand? The lady's desire is plain to see, and with Prince Yu's quick tongue, it would not be difficult at all to convince them to pay a visit to the Marquis of Ning's manor tonight."

"That's right, that's right. It was a little harsh, but the opportunity was too good to pass up." Meng Zhi sighed deeply. "But the timing of their arrival was truly fortuitous."

"When Prince Yu first came to me for advice, I only arranged for Gong Yu to perform at the birthday banquet, so that she could find a chance to accuse Xie Yu before the Zhuo family. But that would only be a baseless accusation with no objective evidence, and the results would have been difficult to predict. So, when the Da Chu ambassadors for the marriage alliance arrived at the capital, and Prince Yu discovered Yuwen Nian, he couldn't believe his luck, and he came running over to me saying, 'Even the Heavens are on my side!'" Mei Changsu laughed coldly. "We will let him believe that his luck is really this good, and that the Heavens are helping him. After all, without Prince Yu, it would be much more difficult for me to bring down Xie Yu."

"It was fortunate that everything was within your anticipation, and the unexpected little accidents did not affect the overall outcome." Meng Zhi stroked his beard, sighing. "The poor Zhuo family, deceived for so many years. And there is Jingrui, who knows what will become of this young man in the future.... He has probably



guessed your role in all of this by now, right? You were friends, will he blame you for being so ruthless?”

“Let him blame me if he must.” Mei Changsu’s tone was light, but his eyes were dim as he murmured, “If I were any less ruthless, how could I sever so cleanly the connection between him and Xie Yu? This child.....had to face this in the end....”

## CHAPTER 95

### *Deadly Wounds*

With these words, Mei Changsu closed his eyes and leaned back against the wooden partition of the carriage, resting a little. Meng Zhi knew him well, and knew that though it had been necessary to take this step, and he did not regret it, there would still be pain and agony in his heart. And so Meng Zhi did not speak, only keeping him company quietly as they entered Su manor in silence.

“Let Physician Yan have a look at you, and if everything is alright, then go and have some rest,” Meng Zhi urged quietly before leaving.

Mei Changsu did not seem to hear him. His gaze was shuttered, clearly in deep thought. Meng Zhi, afraid to disturb him, turned away and was preparing to disappear quietly when he was stopped by Mei Changsu’s voice.

“Meng dage, has a hunt been arranged at the Hisbiscus Pavilion hunting ground the day after tomorrow?”

“Yes, it is the last Spring hunt of this year.”

Mei Changsu closed his eyes, his voice cold as he said, “The Da Chu ambassadors will certainly be invited to the hunt this time. Discuss it over with Prince Jing and find an opportunity at the hunt to subdue Yuwen Xuan a little, so he will not think that all military generals of our Da Liang court abuse their power like Xie Yu. Let us nip any wild ambitions he may have developed in the bud while we can.”

Meng Zhi’s heart shivered, and he answered lowly, “Yes.” But after a moment, he couldn’t help adding, “Xiao Shu, you cannot keep burning yourself like the oil of a lamp. Is even Yuwen Xuan yours to handle?”

Mei Changsu shook his head lightly. “If it were not for me, Yuwen Xuan would never have had the chance to see the inner conflicts of my court, if I do not handle him, my heart will not be at peace.”

“You cannot say that,” Meng Zhi disagreed vehemently. “The Crown Prince and Prince Yu have been fighting like cockerels for ages, everyone under the sun knows that. And besides, do you think conflicts like this do not exist in Da Chu as well?”

“They do not, at least not in the past few years.” Mei Changsu’s gaze was sad. “The Chu emperor is in his prime, and in the five years since his ascension to the throne, his political achievements have been remarkable, and the country is gradually entering into a golden age. Aside from dealing with the distant threat of foreign barbarians, they have not had any trouble. But if the internal friction of my court continues, our strength and defense against our mighty neighbours will wane, and it will be difficult to avoid conquest and assimilation then.”

“Oh you....” Meng Zhi sighed helplessly, but he was moved, and he patted Mei Changsu firmly on the shoulder, proclaiming solemnly, “Rest assured, you will have me and Prince Jing at the hunt, and we will definitely open Yuwen Xuan’s eyes and show him what the Da Liang military is made of. He’ll be speechless for years, even after he returns to the South. Besides, we have Princess Nihuang at the Southern border.”

“It’s always best to prepare for rain before the clouds gather. Let Da Chu fear the consequences, and Nihuang’s work will be lightened as well. I will leave it to the two of you.” Mei Changsu smiled, his expression relaxing a little. “Hurry and go, I’m really starting to feel cold now.”

Meng Zhi glanced at Mei Changsu’s complexion under the moonlight and didn’t dare linger, so he waved and disappeared quickly into the night. Li Gang had prepared hot water and was standing to one side waiting, and now he came forward immediately and helped Mei Changsu bathe in the herbal bath, and then brought Physician Yan over to examine him. Physician Yan concluded that the cold had infiltrated his outer muscles but had not affected his internal organs, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

That night, Mei Changsu did not sleep well. He couldn’t fall asleep, but was afraid of worrying Fei Liu, and so didn’t dare toss and turn on his bed. When he got up the next morning, his head ached, and Physician Yan came and silently administered acupuncture, his face dark. Li Gang, frightened by the old physician’s expression, made the news-bearing Tong Lu wait outside for four hours, refusing to allow him in to disturb the Chief’s rest. When Mei Changsu found out later that afternoon, the manor was subjected to one of his rare displays of anger, and even Fei Liu hid up in the rafters, too scared to come down.

Li Gang knew he had overstepped, and he knelt in the courtyard, awaiting punishment. Mei Changsu ignored him, sitting inside and listening to Tong Lu’s report on the important news from the imperial Yu manor and the Princess’ manor, his face slowly clearing.

It was near dusk, after Li Gang had been kneeling for nearly six hours, when Mei Changsu walked into the courtyard and said to him, "Do you know why I have made you kneel for so long?"

Li Gang fell over in a bow. "Your servant acted without authority, pray Chief forgive me."

"You acted out of consideration for my well-being, how could I not know this?" Mei Changsu looked at him, and though his gaze was fierce, his voice was calm again. "I will not be angry if you try to persuade me or hinder me, but I cannot allow you to conceal things from me! I place the Su manor into your hands, you are my eyes, my ears, and if even you hide things from me, then will I not become blind and deaf? What could I accomplish then? I have warned you from the beginning, unless I am so sick that even my mind is not clear, then there are certain people whose arrival to this manor, at any hour of the day, must be reported to me immediately. Tong Lu is one such person. Did you completely neglect this order, and let it pass in one ear and out the other?"

Li Gang's face was full of shame, his eyes brimming with tears, and he bowed again. "Your servant has betrayed the Chief's trust, and is willing to accept any punishment. Pray Chief take care of his health, and restrain yourself from anger."

Mei Changsu's gaze lingered on him for a long moment, and then he shook his head. "There are some faults that cannot be committed, not even once. Return to Lang province, and send for Zhen Ping."

Li Gang's face drained of all colour and he collapsed forward, grasping Mei Changsu's sleeve as he begged, "Chief, Chief, your servant truly understands what he has done wrong, if Chief is going to send your servant back to Lang province, then he may as well just kill your servant now...."

Mei Changsu looked tired, but his voice was gentle. "There are too many enemies, too many trials I must face here in the capital. Those by my side must be able to obey completely and to understand my meaning, assist me, and support me without requiring me to spend even the slightest shred of energy in managing my own household, do you understand?"

Li Gang swallowed a sob. The great warrior stood there stricken, shamed into speechlessness.

"Go, send word for Zhen Ping to come."

"Chief...." Li Gang had given up all hope, and he didn't even dare voice his request, his hands clenched so tightly that his nails were digging into his palms, drawing blood.

“You.....may stay as well. My illness has been acting up recently, and it is no wonder you have been under more pressure than usual. I asked you to manage the Su manor alone, and the yoke is too heavy, the bow drawn too tight, and you have not had any time to relax at all, so mistakes were inevitable. I should have noticed this before, but all my thoughts were turned to the outside, and I neglected this aspect. You and Zhen Ping have always worked well together, so when he comes, you may share the burden between you, and besides, I will be more at ease knowing you have someone to discuss with should problems arise.”

Li Gang lifted his head, his mouth open, and it was a long time before he seemed to understand Mei Changsu's meaning. A fierce joy rose in his heart as he answered loudly, “Yes!”

Mei Changsu didn't speak again, turning away to enter his room. Physician Yan appeared almost immediately, bringing with him a bowl of medicine. He said it was to cleanse away fire and heat, and proceeded to almost force it into his patient. Fei Liu also drifted over from wherever he had been hiding and lay down across Mei Changsu's knee, frowning as he said, “Angry!”

“Alright, Su gege is not angry any more.” Mei Changsu stroked his hair. “Was Fei Liu scared?”

“Scared....”

Mei Changsu smiled faintly, patting Fei Liu's shoulder gently. His eyes gradually closed, and he leaned back against the pillows, his body slowly relaxing. Physician Yan tucked a few cushions around the sleeping Mei Changsu, and then carefully spread a woolen blanket over him. Fei Liu insisted on staying sprawled over Su gege's legs, burying his face into the soft blanket, rubbing his cheek against it slowly.

“Don't make any noise,” Physician Yan warned the youth quietly before walking silently out of the room. He had just entered the corridor when he saw Li Gang coming from the other direction, and his brow furrowed.

“How is the Chief?”

“He just fell asleep...”

Li Gang's footsteps slowed for a moment, but he walked quickly around Physician Yan and entered the room. Mei Changsu lay on the long mattress, and his face, half hidden under the snow-white blanket, did not seem to bear much more colour than the blanket itself. His head had fallen to one side of the pillow, his breathing steady, obviously fast asleep. Li Gang looked at him for a long moment, and then finally knelt and called softly, “Chief, chief....”

Mei Changsu started, then asked, his eyes still closed, “What is it?”

“Tong Lu has returned.” Li Gang helped Mei Changsu sit up. “He said.....news arrived from the Princess’ manor just now. The young mistress of the Xie family is in labour, and the situation is not good....”

Mei Changsu’s gaze flashed. “Is it a difficult birth?”

“Yes, they said the position is not right, and the child is coming out feet-first.....five imperial physicians have already been summoned....”

“Is it desperate?”

Li Gang did not know how to answer, but Physician Yan, who had turned around and entered behind him, said, “Unless there is a very good midwife on hand, eight out of ten children born feet-first do not survive. This time, the mother is a girl of an imperial family, so she will not be physically strong. I fear it is not one life, but two, that will be taken today.”

Mei Changsu’s face was ashen. “Can not even one of them be saved?”

“We do not know the details of the situation, so it is hard to say.” Physician Yan shook his head and sighed. “But girls experiencing difficult births already have one foot in death’s door.”

“The Grand Princess has summoned imperial physicians, surely there must be some way?”

Physician Yan raised a white eyebrow. “Imperial Physicians may have outstanding medical knowledge, but assisting births relies mostly on experience, and how many births can an imperial physician have attended? They will not be as useful as a good midwife.”

Mei Changsu had stood almost unconsciously, and was pacing around the room. “I believe the Grand Princess will already have summoned the best midwives in the capital.....we can only hope Xie Qi survives this mishap....”

Physician Yan, who knew the dangers of childbirth even better than Mei Changsu, stroked his beard and said nothing. Li Gang thought of something, his eyes brightening as he said, “Chief, do you remember little Diao’er? When his mum was giving birth to him, he was coming out feet-first too, and everyone said there was no hope, but then Aunt Ji used some technique and corrected his position inside the womb, and he came out safe and sound....”

Mei Changsu said immediately, “Summon Aunt Ji, quickly!”

Li Gang ran out of the room and came back in moments, pulling Aunt Ji with him. Mei Changsu questioned her hurriedly and found out that it was a midwife technique passed down for generations in the rural villages, and was very effective. He immediately ordered for a carriage to be prepared, and took Aunt Ji with him as they sped towards the Princess' manor.

When they arrived at the door of the manor, everything was in chaos inside, and Mei Changsu barely managed to say, "Here to help with the birth," before the normally strict guards at the gate answered immediately, "Please enter." Inside the manor, the imperial physicians had all but given up, and servants had been sent to look for common doctors, and obviously, Mei Changsu had been mistaken for one of those doctors.

After passing through three sets of doors, they arrived at a courtyard shaded by trees and adorned with flowers. Inside the main hall, Grand Princess Liyang sat in tears, her hair disheveled, her gaze dull. Mei Changsu hurried over and bent down beside her. "Grand Princess, I heard that the young lady is in trouble and have brought a midwife, she is very experienced, may she try to help?"

Grand Princess Liyang shuddered and lifted her head towards Mei Changsu, her expression dazed, as if she had not understood what he said.

"Grand Princess..." Mei Changsu was about to continue when a howl sounded from the outer courtyard.

"Qi'er! Qi'er!" A thin, wan young man stumbled in, almost falling over. It was Zhuo Qingyao. Two guards followed him, likely an escort sent by Prince Yu as a show of his great kindness.

"Mother-in-law, how is Xie Qi?" Zhuo Qingyao saw Grand Princess Liyang and fell to a kneel at her feet, his face ashen. "How is she? How is the child?"

Grand Princess Liyang shuddered and tears spilled again from her swollen eyes, her voice broken as she said, "Qingyao, you...you came...too late..."

Her words fell like a bomb, leaving Zhuo Qingyao reeling. He knelt there in a trance, swaying slightly. Mei Changsu felt a sharp pain in his chest, and he turned his head and sighed. Aunt Ji leaned over and said in a low voice, "Chief, shall I go in and have a look?"

Mei Changsu did not know what there was to look for if they were already dead, and so did not react at first. Aunt Ji took his silence as permission and hurried into the room.

Almost immediately, a series of cries arose from inside.

“Who are you?!”

“What are you doing?”

“Guards!”

As if awakened by the voices, Zhou Qingyao rose, his expression stricken as he rushed forward. At the same time, Aunt Ji called loudly, “Chief, the child can still be saved!”

Mei Changsu’s trust in his subordinates was so absolute that he did not hesitate before stepping forward to block Zhuo Qingyao’s steps, stopping him from entering the room, but the young man, who had been completely overwhelmed by his turbulent emotions, reacted instinctively, and his fist rose and swung towards Mei Changsu.

“Fei Liu, don’t hurt him!” In the chaos, Mei Changsu only had time to shout this instruction. After a rapid exchange, Zhuo Qingyao was sent flying backwards, only stopping when he struck a pillar. But from the way he jumped up immediately and rushed forward again, it seemed that Fei Liu had indeed heard the order, and had obediently refrained from hurting him.

Mei Changsu was just about to call out an explanation when Zhuo Qingyao halted abruptly in the middle of his headlong charge.

The faint, weak cries of an infant carried out from the inner room. At first, the cries were not loud, and started and stopped in fits, but slowly, they grew louder and louder.

It was as if all of Zhuo Qingyao’s strength had been sapped away by the cries of the infant. He fell to his knees, one hand pressed to the stone-paved ground, the other covering his eyes, his shoulders heaving. Quiet, desperately suppressed sobs escaped from between tightly clenched teeth, and the sight was more heartbreaking than if he had been wailing openly.

By this time, Grand Princess Liyang had run into the room, and about half an hour later, she emerged slowly, carrying a swaddled bundle. Aunt Ji followed behind her, and slipped away to Mei Changsu to report, “Chief, when I entered, the girl’s breathing had not stopped entirely.....but now, she truly cannot be saved. She gave birth to a boy.”

Mei Changsu nodded, his mind blank, not knowing whether to turn to joy or grief. He had not had much interaction with Xie Qi, but the beautiful young wife of yesterday was now no more than a drifting spirit, and he could not help the grief that welled up in his heart.



“Come...this is your son, here he is.” Grand Princess Liyang held back her sobs and placed the infant she was carrying into Zhuo Qingyao’s arms. The young father only lowered his head for a glance before lifting it again in a frenzy, his gaze full of hope.

“What about Qi’er? If the child has been born, then she should be alright, shouldn’t she?”

Grand Princess Liyang looked stricken, but her tears had dried, and there was only a streak of redness left across her cheeks. “Qingyao, take the child away with you and raise him well.... If Qi’er still lived, she would want the child to be by his father’s side....”

Zhuo Qingyao’s steady gaze seemed to pierce through Grand Princess Liyang standing in front of him, seeing into some distant place beyond. The wind blew gently in the courtyard, carrying with it the faint scent of blood. He tightened his arms, drawing the child close to his chest, and stood slowly, trembling.

“Qi’er is my wife, I should never have left her....” Zhuo Qingyao took a few steps forward, then turned back suddenly, his gaze startlingly clear. “I want to take Qi’er with me. In life or in death, we should be together.”

Grand Princess Liyang swayed slightly, her face gray. Her grace and beauty had been wiped away, leaving behind only an aged mother, unable to bear, but having no choice but to bear, the sorrow that had arrived before her.

Mei Changsu did not stay to watch, turning instead to walk soundlessly out of the courtyard. The entire Princess’ manor was deathly still, like a graveyard, and here and there, people stood in stunned silence or weeping quietly, but no one spoke.

Just as when they arrived, no one came forward to question them as they departed. Mei Changsu walked along the main path through the gates and out of the manor. His steps never stopped, and instead picked up speed, faster and faster until he couldn’t breathe and was forced to halt, darkness wavering at the edges of his vision.

He closed his eyes and slowed his breathing. He felt someone holding tightly to his swaying body, and a young voice was in his ear, frightened. “Su gege!”

Mei Changsu lifted his head. He felt a gentle breeze ruffling through his hair, blowing it gently to and fro. When he opened his eyes again, his gaze was as calm as a windless lake, indifferent, cold, steady, and serene, as if he had gotten his feelings under control again, or as if he had never experienced any feeling at all.

“Fei Liu,” he held the youth’s hand tightly as he murmured, “a person’s heart can become hard, did you know?”

## CHAPTER 96

### *Xia Jiang*

In the days that followed, it seemed that Mei Changsu had calmed the ripples in his emotions, and he was able once again to tease Fei Liu on one side as he listened to Tong Lu's detailed report on the happenings in the different parts of the Capital on the other. He did not think again of the girl who had disappeared into the whirlwind of her family's fate, even though that girl had once, in her childhood, toddled around his legs clutching at the corner of his robes. But these memories were too distant, so distant that they did not feel as if they belonged to him, and his impression of the Xie Qi who had grown into adulthood was faint, as if she were merely the background to his plots.

So if he could avoid thinking about her, he would do his best to do so.

Prince Yu was not slow to act, and by the third day, Xie Yu was thrown into prison, rocking the court to its core. The Crown Prince's side rapidly amassed all their power and influence, dividing their resources between trying to find out the details of what had happened, and taking turns begging for imperial mercy.

A first ranked military marquis had been toppled in a single night, and this was by all accounts one of the major cases of the year. But what surprised many of those who were unaware of the details of the event was that neither Prince Yu's side, which had instigated the case, nor the Crown Prince's side, scrambling to mount a defense, requested a joint trial, which should have been essential.

And so it was that Xie Yu's case was left entirely to the judgement of the Liang emperor, without allowing a single external judge to interfere.

Because of all this, Xie Qi's funeral was somewhat delayed. After a few quiet rituals, her coffin was brought to a beautiful temple near the western part of the capital, and the altar lamp was lit, as she waited for her husband to receive her into the ancestral tombs of the Zhuo family. Xiao Jingrui's wounds had not yet fully healed, but he fought regardless to help bear his little sister's coffin. Grand Princess Liyang was requesting imperial permission to renounce the family and her royal ties to become a nun, and in the meantime, she had taken refuge in the old temple, spending her days keeping watch over her daughter, and lighting incense for her spirit's safe journey to the afterlife. The string of misfortunes that had plagued her family in the

past few days was more than even the experienced Liyang could bear, and she gradually fell ill. And because he had not rested as he should, Xiao Jingrui's wounds were not improving. And so it fell to Xie Bi to grit his teeth and lift his head, taking it upon himself to handle matters for the family, as well as take care of his ailing mother and wounded older brother.

Xie Xu, studying at Songshan Academy, had received with shock the news of the tremendous changes that had occurred in his family, but Grand Princess Liyang wrote personally to him ordering him not to return to the capital, and his teacher Mister Moshan also received word from Mei Changsu asking him to keep Xie Xu there, so he was not able to return.

The Emperor, who felt ill at ease by all these unpleasant developments, kept to his original plan of going to the Hibiscus Pavilion for the Spring Hunt, lingering there two days before returning to the palace. As soon as he returned, he bestowed upon Prince Jing twenty horses, ten gold pieces, and one jade ornament. Meng Zhi also received several pieces of pearls and jewels. Jealousy twisted sour in the hearts of the empty-handed Crown Prince and Prince Yu, but one felt secure in his position as the heir, and the other thought of the imperial gifts he had been bestowed in the past, which far exceeded these, and both decided they had better appear friendly this time, and so they did not allow their emotions to show, and instead added their own gifts to the pile, congratulating Prince Jing for his strength and courage, which had gained respect for the imperial face. Some of the other court officials followed the trend and came flocking to Prince Jing's door bearing gifts of their own. Prince Jing only received the gifts from the other princes, saying that he was honoured by the fraternal affection, and followed etiquette in sending back his own gifts in return. He refused all other presents from the other court officials, only appearing briefly to have a cup of tea with them before disappearing again, not lingering long to talk. When news of his conduct reached the imperial ear, the Emperor was very pleased.

The fifth day after the Spring Hunt, there was still no word of how Xie Yu's case was to be handled. Mei Changsu, unconcerned, was in the gardens trimming the flowers with a pair of long silver scissors. In the afternoon, Li Gang came to report that Prince Yu had come for a visit, and he did not have time to return to his rooms to change out of his soil-covered outer robes before Prince Yu came storming in. They went indoors together, and before all the servants could be dismissed, Prince Yu burst out, "His Majesty has lost his mind!"

"Your Highness, please take some tea." Mei Changsu handed a small, exquisite teacup to Prince Yu before asking quietly, "What was Your Highness saying just now?"

"Eh..." Prince Yu knew he had misspoke, and hurriedly corrected himself. "I was saying, I don't know what His Majesty is thinking. Xie Yu's case is solid as iron, and no matter what kind of defense they try to mount or who else they try to implicate, in

the end, it will be almost impossible to avoid a death sentence, so why is His Majesty hesitating?"

"His Majesty is hesitating?" Mei Changsu's tone was still nonchalant. "Weren't things going well just a few days ago?"

"You don't know, Xia Jiang is back. That old rascal, I never realized how close he and Xie Yu are. Xuanjing Officers should remain detached from matters of the court, but he's breaking this rule for Xie Yu, and seeking audience with His Majesty on his behalf. Who knows what kind of nonsense he sprouted into the imperial ear, but suddenly, His Majesty seemed to change his mind yesterday, and sent me to investigate thoroughly exactly what had occurred that day, as if he suspected that Xie Yu had been framed."

"There is a mountain of ironclad evidence. There are letters in Xie Yu's own handwriting at Tianquan Manor, and Zhuo Qingyao still has the blueprint maps of Minister of Revenue Shen Zhui's residence. Xie Yu plotted the murder of one of the highest officials of the court – surely this isn't a crime that can be so easily negated by a few clever tongues?"

"One would think so, but there is still some uneasiness in my heart. Xia Jiang is a subtle man, and His Majesty trusts him. I heard that, after he returned, Xia Dong received a terrible scolding at his hands for helping us that night, and she has now been confined to her quarters, not allowed to leave. From his actions, it seems that he is ignoring the consequences, determined to protect Xie Yu at any cost. They have never had close interactions in the past, how did they form such a solid relationship?"

Something flashed in Mei Changsu's gaze, but his voice was indifferent when he asked, "Has he been to the prisons to see Xie Yu?"

"He has gone once. He threw all of my men out, so we have no report on what they discussed."

"What about Xie Yu's statement?"

"He has confessed to some of the charges, and denied others."

"That is to say, he confesses to acting lawlessly for the Crown Prince, but denies killing palace guards or any other crimes that similarly defy the imperial face and power?"

"Yes, he confesses that he has indeed made use of Zhuo Dingfeng's strength in the past, and has even admitted to making an attempt on Shen Zhui's life. But he vehemently denies the other charges, and is crying that he is being wronged by Zhuo Dingfeng, who has fabricated these accusations in pursuit of personal revenge."

“Ng,” Mei Changsu nodded. “It looks like Xie Yu is only trying to preserve his life. It’s true, so long as he still lives, he can withstand any calamity. Once the Crown Prince takes the throne, will he not be reborn from the ashes?”

“That is a wishful delusion.” These words struck Prince Yu’s sore spot, and he scoffed coldly. “If I cannot take him down to the death this time, then I will truly have wasted all the efforts you have expended on my behalf.”

“By the way,” Mei Changsu did not answer, changing the subject instead, “I asked Your Highness two days ago to have Zhuo Dingfeng make a list of all the affairs of the previous year, I wonder if the list has been completed yet?”

“I brought it with me today.” Prince Yu drew out a sheet of paper from his pockets and held it out to Mei Changsu. “This Xie Yu really has some guts. It is fortunate indeed that I have not been murdered by him yet.”

Mei Changsu took the list and glanced over it casually as he asked, almost absently, “There must be some people Zhuo Dingfeng never knew why Xie Yu wanted dead, correct?”

“That’s right. There are some deaths whose purpose even I do not understand, like that.....that teacher.....truly a strange death.”

Mei Changsu looked as if he did not remember, and picked up the sheet again, scanning it briefly. “Oh, Your Highness means this Li Chongxin? He died twenty three years after the war, around twelve or thirteen years ago now, truly an old case. Perhaps it was some personal grudge.”

“A teacher, having some grievance with the Marquis of Ning? Mister must be joking.”

“It was indeed a joke.” Mei Changsu coolly shifted topics. “Your Highness does not need to worry, even though Xia Jiang has His Majesty’s trust, would Your Highness’ own heavy imperial favour prove inferior by comparison? If Xie Yu escapes with his life this time, to say nothing of whether he would be able to someday revive his power, I fear Your Highness power and influence would be greatly diminished in the eyes of the palace, so this is indeed a case on which we cannot afford to back down.”

Prince Yu’s face was grim, revealing that these words had struck a chord in him. Actually, Xie Yu had already lost all his power and influence, and whether he was dead or not, it did not make much difference. But since he had so grandly and loudly begun this whole affair, he could not let it die down with a whimper, for fear that his own supporters would lose faith, and believe his own imperial favour was waning.

But.....was it really something that was only a “belief”?

In his last few imperial audiences, the Emperor had treated him as warmly as always, but in their conversation, he seemed to have grown considerably colder and more distant, and Prince Yu, with his sensitivity, naturally picked up on this difference, though he did not know what to make of it.

“Your Highness,” Mei Changsu’s voice interrupted Prince Yu’s contemplation. “You still have some power in the prisons, do you not? Would it be possible to allow me to see Xie Yu?”

“You want to see Xie Yu? That man has the heart of wolves and jackals, and now that he is solely focused on staying alive, do you think he can be so easily swayed by words?”

“It depends on how those words are spoken.” Mei Changsu slowly held up the list in his hand. “Your Highness, you have said yourself that the relationship between Xie Yu and Xia Jiang is not deep, and so, it is my belief that he is protecting Xie Yu so fiercely not for friendship, but for mutual benefit.”

“What possible benefit could Xia Jiang reap here? Unless he, too, for the Crown Prince...”

“No,” Mei Changsu shook his head flatly. “Xia Jiang’s loyalty to His Majesty is beyond reproach. To him, everything he does is for His Majesty’s sake, I think even Your Highness would not question this?”

“That’s true, Xia Jiang’s loyalty to Father Emperor runs bone-deep. That’s why I don’t understand why he would choose a time like this to make a stand.”

“About that – just a few days ago, I experienced myself the reality that someone who is loyal to you may still hide things from you, and sometimes, they do so believing that it is for your good.”

“Mister’s meaning is, Xia Jiang is hiding things from Father Emperor?”

“It is only a guess.” Mei Changsu waved the long list in his hand. “Guesses must naturally include every possibility, for example, I was thinking.....could this list contain people.....that Xie Yu killed for Xia Jiang?”

As soon as he spoke, Prince Yu leapt to his feet, smacking his right fist into his left hand, his tone fierce as he said, “That’s right! Mister’s mind is certainly nimble. What possible relationship could exist between Xia Jiang and Xie Yu? Xia Jiang must be holding the advantage over Xie Yu – if he saves his life, then he will keep his mouth shut, that must be the agreement! That must be the agreement they reached the day they talked in the prisons!”

Mei Changsu slowly stretched out a hand and made a gesture for Prince Yu to calm down, a small smile at the corner of his lips. "Your Highness, please remain calm. Everything I have said just now is only a guess, and if we take guesswork as fact, and form our plans based on these, then I fear it will be difficult to avoid error. Your Highness, please first arrange for me to see Xie Yu, even if I obtain no answers, I can at least assess his state of mind."

"You are right, I am being rash." Prince Yu also felt he had lost his composure a little, and hurriedly calmed his expression. "Going to the prisons is easy to arrange, Mister does not need to be worry. I will have them chain Xie Yu well, in case he tries to hurt Mister."

"That's no problem, Fei Liu will be with me...." Mei Changsu paused, then asked, "Can he come with me?"

"Yes, yes," Prince Yu answered hurriedly. "I forgot, with Fei Liu guarding you, who needs to worry about Xie Yu?"

Mei Changsu bowed, then spoke again. "Your Highness must continue to carefully monitor the conditions of others in the court. Have there been any new developments of late?"

Prince Yu's eyebrow twitched involuntarily. He did not know what was happening to Qin Banruo, but somehow, many of the spies she had placed closely in the households of different court officials had run into trouble recently. Some had been caught in the act, some had committed other faults and were being punished, some had abruptly lost favour and were being transferred, and a few had even eloped, and run away from the capital. All in all, she had suddenly lost seven or eight vital lines of contact, and the immensely talented lady was in despair, so preoccupied by the chaos of her spy network that she had not provided him with useful information in a long time.

Mei Changsu glanced at him and shrewdly refrained from questioning further, only saying indifferently, "It is not anything urgent, after all, who among the court is not following Your Highness' lead? It is only that we have finally managed to diminish the Crown Prince's power, and Your Highness must not allow this momentum to pass unexploited."

A murderous expression passed fleetingly over Prince Yu's face, and his hands clenched into fists inside his sleeves. When he spoke, there seemed to be a seething energy under his words.

"Mister does not need to be concerned, I.....understand...."

Mei Changsu lowered his eyes slowly and picked up the white jade teacup beside him, lifted it to his lips, and peacefully took a sip.

## CHAPTER 97

### *Sky Prison (I)*

The sky prisons were not the most sinister, most horrible place on earth, but they were definitely the place on earth most able to convey a sense of disparity between what you once had and what you had now.

Before each person imprisoned here walked through those great, rusted copper gates, who among them had not been an outstanding and respected member of society? And so, to these people, who had fallen in dignity as far as it is possible for one person to fall, although this prison was truly no worse than any other, it was nonetheless the most frightening place on earth.

Old Huang was a guard of the sky prisons, and his son, Young Huang, was also a guard. Father and son alternated shifts, keeping guard over a separate area of the prison called the Winter Cells. Although they had to make daily patrols, and could not leave their posts by day or by night, in reality, their work consisted of little more than sweeping the courtyard.

This was because there were no prisoners inside the Winter Cells, not even one.

This place was a particularly special part of the sky prisons, and had always been reserved for those of the imperial family who had committed grave crimes. And although princes and royalty broke the law no less frequently than the common people, in reality, who would dare lightly accuse one of them of any crime, aloof and untouchable as they were on their lofty thrones? From Old Huang's vague recollection, there had only been a single incident, ten or so years ago, when this prison had once held the most respected and honourable prince in the world. Ever since that time, the Winter Cells had remained empty, kept clean but cold by their daily sweepings.

To the other side of the courtyard outside the Winter Cells was a long corridor called the Dark Path, the end of which led to a large, brick-lined jail cell. Court officials who had committed crimes were kept here.

Compared to the emptiness of the Winter Cells, the Dark Path was much livelier. Now and then, officials in varying stages of emotion – some weeping, some dazed,



some screaming, some numb with shock – would be seen being dragged into the cell in chains.

Old Huang often craned his neck and peered over at the commotion, and when his son came to take his shift, he would sigh, “It’s one of those great lords again...” This statement had been repeated many times over the years without the slightest variation.

Of course, some people walked out of the Dark Path as well. If they walked out still in chains, their faces rigid and dry, Old Huang would bid them farewell in his heart, murmuring quietly, “May your evil dissipate, and may you be reborn to a new life soon.” But if they walked out with a spring in their step, and with a guard for escort, Old Huang would bow and clasp his hands in greeting without saying a word.

Amidst the tedium of guarding the prisons, watching drama unfold in the Dark Path, be it joy or grief, was not a bad way to pass the time.

Today, Old Huang had swept the courtyard of the Winter Cells clean and locked the door, as he always did, and now he stood out in the open grounds, his hands tucked into his sleeves as he stared in the direction of the Dark Path. Once in awhile, one hand emerged from his sleeve pocket with a peanut, which he then put into his mouth.

He was chewing his fifth peanut when a rattling sound came from the door leading to the Dark Path, a sign that someone was turning the lock. Old Huang knew this meant some new criminal was being taken into that place, and he hurriedly retreated to the shadows at the side of the building.

The door opened, and two familiar faces emerged – the prison guards Ah Wei and Ah Niu. They stumbled to the side of the door and bowed hurriedly.

Old Huang shivered and pressed himself quickly against the wall again.

This was because the person who followed was the big boss of the entire sky prison, the judicial commissioner, An Rui, Officer An. He was not in his court uniform today, but in a plain robe, smiling broadly as he raised a hand and gestured towards the corridor, saying, “Please, Mister Su, this way.”

The person he had called ‘Mister Su’ was a thin but scholarly and handsome young man, and he did not look to be of any particularly high rank. But he seemed unmoved by the judicial commissioner’s courteous words, and only smiled at him indifferently as he continued to make his way slowly through the doorway.

They made their way along the Dark Path, clearly heading towards the jail cell for a visit. Old Huang raised an eyebrow, trying to guess the identity of the visitor, but suddenly, the young man halted, and his gaze swept over towards the other side of the

courtyard. Old Huang jumped and stumbled, thinking he had been discovered in his hiding place.

“That side...looks a little different....” The young man pointed in Old Huang’s direction.

“That way is the Winter Cells,” An Rui replied cautiously. “Mister Su should know, it is the place where members of the imperial family are held.”

“Ah.” The young man nodded, his face expressionless, and continued forward. Behind them, a figure suddenly flitted by like the shadow of a demon, one second behind them, the next in front of them. The young man called out to him, and the figure obediently halted, whereupon it became obvious that it was in fact a handsome youth. Officer An and the other two jailers looked curious, but did not speak, and the row of people continued down the corridor and disappeared through another doorway.

Old Huang hurriedly returned to the area he was meant to be guarding and let out a sigh of relief as he sat down and continued puzzling over the identity of this visitor. This was his entertainment, and no matter how close he came to being caught, he would not give it up, and he never minded the fact that he had no way of knowing whether any of his guesses were correct or not.

This young man that had given Old Huang something to do for another day was, of course, Mei Changsu.

Because Prince Yu had personally made the arrangements, An Rui had not dared to delay. Even though the visitor was only a position-less, rank-less scholar, he still personally came to escort him into the prison.

The prison cells in the sky prisons were single cells. And, like all other prisons, there was only a small window very high up, and a musty smell lingered in the air. Mei Changsu stopped when he entered the inner corridor, lifting a hand to his forehead as if he was not used to the dim light. Fei Liu came over and leaned up against him.

“Mister Su, please watch your step,” An Rui advised as they turned a corner. “Xie Yu’s cell is one floor down.”

Mei Changsu braced himself on Fei Liu’s arm and slowly descended the rough-cut stone steps to the floor below. He walked along the corridor, passing two or three cells before coming to one in the middle.

An Rui lifted a hand, gesturing for his subordinates to open the doors of the cell. The entire prison cell was only about six feet square. A little light streamed in from the small window near the top of the cell, illuminating the dust in the air, emphasizing the filthiness of the environment.

“Mister Su, please take your time, I will await you upstairs,” An Rui said quietly before turning and leading the other jailers away. Mei Changsu stood outside the door for a moment before slowly walking into the cell.

Xie Yu, who had probably heard the conversation outside, was standing up from the pile of hay in the corner of the cell, dragging with him the chains around his ankles as he turned to face his visitor.

“Marquis Xie, I trust you have been well?” Mei Changsu greeted him coldly.

Xie Yu looked at the young man looking back at him mildly, mixed emotions rising in his heart. Ever since he had known that this was Mister Mei of Jiangzuo, the qilin prodigy, he had made every effort to oppose him with every possible method, and had been many times more prudent and cautious than he normally was. But, in the end, he had been forced to the edge of the cliff nonetheless, and had fallen into this cold, wet jail cell all the same. If this had happened because fate had turned against him, then that was one thing, but if this was the result of the plans and plots of this Mister Mei of Jiangzuo, then he could not help the chill in his heart as he wondered just how exactly he had managed to bring this about.

“What is it? Has Marquis Xie forgotten me since we last met half a month ago?” Mei Changsu prodded.

Xie Yu forced down the fury in his chest and scoffed, “Of course I have not. When Mister Su first came to the capital, did you not stay at my home as a guest?”

“Correct,” Mei Changsu said plainly. “I still remember the first time I saw Marquis Xie, you were still the illustrious pillar of the court. One hardly dared to look upon you.”

“So Mister Su has come today to rub salt into my wounds. That...speaks rather low of your moral character.” Xie Yu turned his gaze to him. “I was wronged and have fallen into this misfortune because of ill fate, is Mister here today just to gloat over the hardships of a humble person like myself?”

Mei Changsu replied coldly, “So Marquis Xie still knows the word ‘humble’. Your hardship is undeniable, yet when were you wronged? You and I both know in our hearts that not one of the cases in Zhuo Dingfeng’s evidence is false. Your shameless denial is only a desperate attempt to save your own life. Unfortunately, the iron-clad evidence is piled high as a mountain, and the road to hell is near. All your struggling will not save your own life, at most, it might merely save Xia Jiang’s.”

Xie Yu’s gaze flickered, and a thin smile appeared at the edges of his lips.

He had already brought up Xia Jiang, just as expected. And if it were not for Xia Jiang, this Mister Mei of Jiangzuo likely would not have come in person to this hell-hole.

In such a clear case with so much evidence, Xie Yu knew well that the reason he had been imprisoned for half a month already without a verdict was because Xia Jiang was keeping his promise, and was finding ways to save his life. These ways would of course infuriate Prince Yu, and so the prince was retaliating by sending Mei Changsu here to try to find from himself some means of countering Xia Jiang.

And so, Xie Yu was prepared, and no matter what he faced, he would grit his teeth and refuse to react.

“Marquis Xie,” Mei Changsu took a step closer, leaning over slightly. “I know.....as soon as you saw me, you couldn’t help wondering just how it was that you ended up in my hands, am I right? And up until now, I fear you have not been able to arrive at a satisfactory answer, am I right? You simply cannot understand where it was you made a mistake, and do not know how things progressed to such a state that, all of a sudden, you were thrown into the depths of hell, descending in a single day from an extremely honoured official to a prisoner awaiting death, am I right?”

At these soul-piercing words, Xie Yu’s face tightened, and he visibly gritted his teeth, but he did not say a word.

“In fact, you do not need to waste your energy wondering. I have come today prepared to explain everything to you clearly. Marquis Xie, the reason you lost....” Mei Changsu’s gaze fell like ice onto the other’s face, as he slowly spat out the last few words, “is because you are stupid.”

Xie Yu’s eyebrow twitched.

“I am not saying you are more stupid than the average person, but you are simply more stupid than I.” Mei Changsu smiled. “It is because I am smarter than you, so I know how you will react, and how you will act. I see clearly what you plan, and what you seek. But as for what I am thinking, and what I am doing, and how I scheme, you haven’t even begun to crack the surface. So, if we look at it this way, how could you help but lose? What could you do but fail? And after you have lost, after you have failed, you cannot even understand why it is you lost, if this is not stupidity.....then what is it?”

Xie Yu’s face was pale as he forcefully suppressed the emotion in his chest, his nostrils flaring.

Mei Changsu paced a few steps in the small cell, as if taking a brief tour of the tiny room. He turned and glanced around before stopping before Xie Yu and slowly

kneeling to face him, as he smiled suddenly, “Do you know who, besides me, is smarter than you?”

Xie Yu turned his head away, determined to ignore him.

“Xia Jiang.” Mei Changsu did not seem to notice, and continued blandly. “Xia Jiang is so much smarter than you that you cannot help but repeat the failure you suffered at my hands, and continue to lose again and again.”

Mei Changsu stopped, looking at the bulging veins on Xie Yu’s neck, and then continued in his flat but almost bewitching tone, “Let me tell you how a smart person will defeat you. In fact, once you understand, it is really very simple. First, he will come to this place to look upon this fallen Marquis, and tell you that he will not stand by and watch, and so he will make you a deal. You will not betray his secrets, and he will save your life. This exchange is certainly not false. He will very seriously find a way to let you walk out of this sky prison alive. And once you have walked out of this sky prison without dying from a death penalty, his promise will be fulfilled. He has saved your life, and so naturally, you will not betray any of the secrets of his crimes. Then, you will be sentenced to exile, and banished to some distant cold land. Perhaps you believe that you can survive such suffering, but in fact, you will not even have the opportunity to taste it. Because, by this time, your case has ended, and no one will question you again, and no one will even listen to you seriously again, so no matter what secrets you hold for Xia Jiang, you simply won’t have the chance to reveal them. The road from the capital to your place of exile is long, and any one of the stops you make along the way may be your last. And when that time comes, your death will only be the death of an exiled convict, so no one will care, no one will even notice. And even if someone did, you will already be dead, and both you and your precious secrets will have been neatly disposed of and transported to the next world before anyone even has the chance to hear them. And Xia Jiang.....smart person that he is, will live a good life, without ever needing to worry again. Isn’t that nice?”

Beads of sweat as large as beans were crowding on Xie Yu’s forehead and dripping onto his plain, colourless robes, making dark wet patches on the cloth.

“Marquis Xie,” Mei Changsu’s urgent whisper carried such cold cruelty that it may as well have come from the depths of hell itself. “You had best lift your head and look at me, so the two of us can have a good long talk, what do you think?”

## CHAPTER 98

### *Sky Prison (II)*

Xie Yu did not heed his request to lift his head, but Mei Changsu's words pierced his heart like a poisoned needle. Even if he had been truly stupid, he would still have recognized the truth behind Mei Changsu's words, and he was not stupid in the slightest.

But if he did not depend on Xia Jiang, what other choice did he have? None. He had no choice but to cling to this lifeline, no matter how slim, because there was simply no opportunity left to plan or consider.

Xie Yu knew full well that even if he walked out of Sky Prison in the future, he would never betray Xia Jiang, because there was simply no benefit to doing so. Xia Jiang could save his life, could arrange matters in his favour, and could even one day be the starting point for his comeback, and so he would certainly keep Xia Jiang's secret until the end, so long as this Xuanjing Head Officer was willing to trust him....

"Who can predict the future?" It was as if Mei Changsu could read his thoughts, as he continued coldly, "Just as, half a month ago, you would never have thought you could have fallen to your current state, no? From your present circumstances, as long as Xia Jiang saves you, you will have no reason to betray him, but nothing in this world is certain, and he would do just as well to trust a corpse as to trust you, that would be even cleaner, and more in the style of a Head Officer of Xuanjing, no?"

Xie Yu finally raised his head and met Mei Changsu's gaze, his face determined. "You are not wrong, there is indeed the possibility that Xia Jiang will kill me to silence me when I am free of Sky Prison, but that is only a possibility. I have no choice but to roll this last dice, if I do not trust him, what would you have me do, trust you instead?"

"Why not trust me?" Mei Changsu smiled.

"Trust you? What joke is Mister Su making? I am here today largely because of your doing, if I trust you, I might as well commit suicide, at least that would be faster."

“You are wrong.” Mei Changsu’s tone was like ice. “You are here today by your own doing, and have not been wronged in the least. But I was not joking when I asked you to trust me.”

Xie Yu’s gaze flashed, but he did not answer.

Mei Changsu’s lips pressed into a thin line, and he spoke slowly and clearly, “Because Xia Jiang has reason to wish you dead, and I do not.”

“You do not want me dead?” Xie Yu lifted his head and laughed. “More like, you do not want me to die too slowly?”

“I have just said,” Mei Changsu ignored him and continued quietly, “even if you emerge from Sky Prison alive, you will only be an exile, what difference would it make to me whether you live or die? I attacked you only because the power you held was harmful to His Highness Prince Yu. You have been completely defeated now, and so your life no longer means anything to me.”

Xie Yu eyed him suspiciously. “Since I have nothing left but a life you are not interested in, then why not just let fate run its course? Why spend so much effort and energy to come to this dark place?”

“A good question.” Mei Changsu nodded slowly. “It is true that I have not the slightest interest in your life, what does interest me.....is Xia Jiang....”

Xie Yu spun around. “Su Zhe, you are truly daring. Xia Jiang is now the only hope I have left, and you dare hope to use me against him, are you insane?”

“So what if I use you?” Mei Changsu shot him a look. “Marquis Xie should be happy that he has any use left at all, given his current circumstances. If he truly had no use left, then only a dead end awaits.”

“Then I fear I must disappoint Mister Su.” Xie Yu gritted his teeth. “I am still gambling on Xia Jiang, gambling that he will trust that I will not betray him, because this is the only hope of survival I have left.”

Mei Changsu cocked his head, a smile suddenly lighting his face, appearing for all the world like the refined, weakly scholar that he was, but somehow still managing to instill fear and trembling in the hearts of those who looked upon him in that moment. “I am so sorry, I have already extinguished this last hope of the Marquis’.”

Xie Yu knew he should not take the bait, but he could not help himself. “What do you mean?”

“Thirteen years ago, when you sent your people to kill off an insignificant, obscure scholar named Li Chongxin, that was on Xia Jiang’s behalf, am I correct?”

Xie Yu's heart shuddered, but he forced a laugh. "What nonsense are you speaking?"

"Perhaps I am speaking nonsense," Mei Changsu's tone was light. "I am only making a gamble myself, hazarding a guess. But Prince Yu has already gone to ask Xia Jiang why he ordered you to kill off an obscure scholar. Of course, Xia Jiang will deny every word of it, but afterwards, he will not be able to help wondering how it was that Prince Yu knew that he was the one who wanted Li Chongxin killed, unless it was Marquis Xie who told him...."

"I didn't!"

"I know you didn't, but Xia Jiang doesn't." Mei Changsu's smile was thin, and he spread his hands as he continued, "By the Marquis' reaction, it seems that I have guessed correctly. So, I am sorry, but you have already betrayed Xia Jiang once, and perhaps he will believe that you did not leak this information voluntarily, but at least it has proven that your mouth is not as trustworthy as that of a corpse, and that there is much that might be excavated from the depths of your memory. Of course, to protect even greater secrets than this, he will certainly save your life first, but afterwards, in order to secure your silence forever, he can only act as a smart person would act.... Marquis Xie, you will lose for certain if you gamble on Xia Jiang, because the length of your life is determined only by his faith in you, and that faith has already ceased to exist...."

"You...you...." Xie Yu's teeth ground together audibly, his whole body trembling with fury. He made as if to lunge towards Mei Changsu, but Fei Liu was there, drifting around Mei Changsu as he played with the straw on the ground, and so he could only bite his lip and say in a voice shaking with anger, "Su Zhe, what enmity, what hatred is there between us, that you must force me to such a place as this?"

"What enmity...what hatred...." Mei Changsu murmured, and then threw back his head and laughed. "Marquis Xie, you and I both serve our respective masters in search of fame and glory. You have never held back in pursuit of your own ends all these years, so don't you find it funny that you are asking me this today?"

Xie Yu fell onto the straw, his face drawn and pale, hopelessness in his heart. Facing Mei Changsu was like facing a cat determined to play with the mouse in its grasp. One casual swipe of its claws rendered one completely incapable of retaliation.

He should not have let the Crown Prince so easily give up such a formidable person.

"Marquis Xie, since there is still the chance, hurry and change your gamble to me. You do not have any information you can use against me, so I do not care if you live."



Mei Changsu knelt before him, his voice soft. "In any case, there is still a sliver of hope for survival on this side."

Xie Yu lowered his head. His body was soaked in sweat, and it was a long time before he answered quietly, "What do you want me to do?"

"Don't worry, I will not ask you to openly accuse Xia Jiang of anything, and I have no interest in stirring up a case against Xia Jiang." Mei Changsu laughed gently. "You and I both know well that Xia Jiang does everything according to His Majesty's will, it is only that.....sometimes, he employs methods the Emperor is not aware of in order to accomplish his goals, have I guessed correctly?"

Xie Yu looked dazed as he slowly nodded.

"It is only that His Majesty is prone to suspicion, and so Xia Jiang wishes to continue hiding these methods that he hid from the Emperor in previous years," Mei Changsu continued indifferently. "In the end, all of this is unrelated to my current plans, and I have no interest in creating trouble for myself. But Prince Yu is worried that Xia Jiang is protecting you for the Crown Prince's sake, and worried that he will break the Xuanjing Bureau's longstanding neutrality in order to join the fight for the crown, and so I had to come to speak to you in person today. Marquis Xie, why don't you tell me about the entire affair with Li Chongxin? As long as I can be sure that this has nothing to do with the succession, I will not pursue it. After all, everyone knows that it's not easy being a Xuanjing Official. They're always receiving secret imperial commands, if they accidentally offend His Majesty in any way, then it won't end well, will it?"

Xie Yu looked at him. "If I tell you, what good is in it for me?"

"I cannot give you much, except to ask Prince Yu to back down, and let Xia Jiang save you from prison, and then to see you safely to your place of exile, where you will live out your sentence."

Xie Yu closed his eyes, clearly deep in thought. He was not worried that Prince Yu would stir up new waves with his secret about Li Chongxin, if he chose to tell it. This was because Prince Yu himself had benefited from the affairs behind this secret, and it was only that he had been young at the time, and so had not participated very deeply. Any waves and repercussions he stirred up now would undoubtedly involve himself and the Empress as well. As soon as Mei Changsu returned and conveyed the story to Prince Yu, he would understand immediately, and would not choose to implicate himself for the sake of accusing Xia Jiang. And what Xia Jiang wanted to prevent was the spreading of this whole story, for fear that certain details he had concealed from the Emperor might finally reach his ear.

But if he decided to open his mouth, would this Mister Mei of Jiangzuo truly keep his word?

“It is a gamble.” Mei Changsu said lightly, seeming to read his mind again. “You have nowhere else to turn. I am a jianghu man, I know how to ensure your survival. You have no choice but to trust in my promise.”

Xie Yu collapsed slowly to the ground, supporting himself by his arms. He was silent for the amount of time it took to burn a stick of incense before he finally began to speak.

“Li Chongxin.....was indeed only a scholar, but he had an extraordinary talent – he could forge the handwriting of any words he saw, completely and without anyone being able to tell the difference. Thirteen years ago.....he wrote a letter for Xia Jiang, and the person whose handwriting he forged was Nie Feng....”

“Who is Nie Feng?” Mei Changsu asked curiously.

“He was the general of the vanguard of the Chiyan army, and also Xia Dong’s husband. That was why Xia Jiang had much opportunity to obtain a copy of the drafts of his letters, and he cut out some important words and showed them to Li Chongxin, and had him forge a letter which even Xia Dong could not identify as false....”

“What did the letter contain?”

“It was a cry for help, in it was written: ‘Commander seeks rebellion, I discovered, to silence me, sent on death mission, beg for rescue.’”

“I think I have heard of this. So the letter was false.” Mei Changsu laughed coldly. “So.....your claim that you rode a thousand miles to save Nie Feng and arrived too late, only able to bring back his bones – that was false as well?”

Xie Yu did not answer.

“According to the tale I heard, it was General Xie yourself who led the rescue troops in a headlong rush to save Nie Feng, but when you arrived at the death valley he had been sent to, your scouts reported that there were no survivors, and the enemy’s army was rushing towards you, so you made the decision to seal the mouth of the valley and set it on fire in order to stem the enemy’s onslaught, and so preserve the left defensive perimeter of Da Liang.” Mei Changsu continued mockingly, “Thinking back now, what you sealed was actually Nie Feng’s line of retreat, so that the mission of the vanguard general, which had not actually been a death mission at all, would now, because of you, become one, and so led to the entire tragedy. Are my speculations correct?”

Xie Yu’s mouth was pressed into a thin line, but he did not answer.

“Never mind, these are all affairs of the past, there is no benefit to their further investigation.” Mei Changsu gazed at him, his voice cold. “And after this?”

“At the time, only Xia Jiang and I knew the letter to be false, he had his reasons, and I had mine, so with our mutual understanding, neither of us said anything. Because he did not want his apprentices to notice anything strange, he did not make use of the Xuanjing Bureau’s power, but gave me hidden hints, and I wiped out Li Chongxin’s entire family for him.” Xie Yu’s tone was flat, as if he felt no remorse at all for his actions. “The entire story has been told. It has no bearing on the current situation, are you satisfied?”

“So this was how the foundation of the ‘Pillar of the Court’ was laid.” Mei Changsu nodded. His hands, hidden in his sleeves, tightened into fists, but his face was a mask of calm. What Xie Yu had revealed was of course only the tip of the iceberg of the hidden events of the past, but no good would come of forcing more out of him now, and this short conversation had already achieved his purpose for coming here today. The paths that came afterwards must still be tread carefully, one step at a time.

As for Xie Yu’s fate, there would be enough people worrying about that. Sometimes, death is not the most frightening outcome.

“Rest well. Xia Jiang will not know that I have come to see you today, and His Highness Prince Yu has no interest in the affairs of the past. I will fulfill my oath not to let you die a violent death, but if you cannot withstand the harsh life of exile, that is not my problem.” Mei Changsu finished indifferently, and turned away without a second glance to leave the jail cell. Fei Liu hurriedly threw down the straw he had been weaving and followed him out.

On his way back to the stairs that led up and out of the prison, Mei Changsu glanced into the dark cell beside the one which held Xie Yu, but his footsteps did not falter, and he disappeared quickly up the stone steps.

After he was gone, the door to the dark cell opened soundlessly, and two people walked out, one after the other, moving very slowly, their footsteps a little unsteady.

The person in front was slender and dressed all in black, her dark hair parted to both sides around the flash of white in the middle, her handsome face completely bloodless, as white as paper. A small stone in the dark corridor almost caused her to stumble, but fortunately, the person behind her caught her.

The two emerged from the darkness without a word of conversation, and even as one caught the other in her stumble, he immediately retracted his hand afterwards, and they did not exchange a word. They walked up the stone steps in Mei Changsu’s wake, but instead of the judicial commissioner An Rui waiting for them at the entrance, it was Cai Quan, now officially Minister of Justice.

“We have troubled Officer Cai.”

“His Highness Prince Jing does not need to be so courteous.”

There was no further pleasantries beyond this brief exchange. They walked in single file out of Sky Prison by way of a hidden back door. Xia Dong walked off quickly without so much as a glance backwards, silent from beginning to end. Behind her, Prince Jing watched quietly as her lonely figure disappeared into the distance, a dim fire burning in his gaze.

## CHAPTER 99

### *Stunned*

After he returned to Su Manor, Mei Changsu immediately retreated to rest, because he knew he would not have a whole night's sleep this evening.

Sure enough, just after the third watch of the night, Fei Liu flitted to the side of his bed and said, "Knocking." He got up quickly and tidied his appearance, and then coaxed Fei Liu to remain outside while he hurried into the tunnel.

Prince Jing sat in his usual spot in the hidden chamber, his head lowered in deep thought. He only raised it when he heard Mei Changsu's footsteps, and his expression was calm, although there was a conflicted look in his eyes.

"Your Highness," Mei Changsu bowed slightly. "You've come."

"It seems that you have anticipated my coming." Prince Jing raised a hand and gestured for him to sit. "Mister Su's performance in the sky prisons today was marvelous indeed. Even a person such as Xie Yu can be held completely at your mercy, like a toy in the palm of your hand. Your qilin prodigy's reputation was not in vain."

"Your Highness is too kind." Mei Changsu continued, "But it is also reassuring to me that the truth has been forced out of Xie Yu. I was worried at first that Xia Jiang also harboured intentions to protect the Crown Prince, because he would be a difficult opponent, given his position as the Head of Xuanjing Bureau. But now we can be sure that he has no such intentions or biases in the fight for the throne, and there is already internal conflict between him and Xia Dong, so we will not have to spend further time or energy worrying about this person in the future."

Prince Jing did not speak, but continued to gaze at him solemnly for so long that Mei Changsu felt a little uneasy.

"What is it, Your Highness?"

"How can you only think about this?" A flash of rage passed across Xiao Jingyan's gaze. "Are you not shocked by the truth Xie Yu revealed today?"

Mei Changsu thought for a moment, then said slowly, “Is Your Highness referring to the old affair of Nie Feng’s murder? Many years have passed and the situation in the court has changed drastically, so there will be no meaning to pursuing this case further. Besides, Xia Jiang is not our enemy, and a wise man would not take up arms against a powerful enemy for a meaningless cause.”

“A wise man?” Prince Jing laughed coldly. “Did you know Nie Feng was the cause of the treason case against the Chiyan Army all those years ago? And now even this source of everything was false, so who can know what kinds of dark secrets are hidden within the folds of this great case that shook the nation, and what kind of injustice was dealt to Eldest Brother and the Lin family? And you.....you think this is just some old affair?”

Mei Changsu met Prince Jing’s gaze and said plainly, “Your Highness is not just discovering today that Prince Qi and the Lin family were wronged, are you? If I remember correctly, I think you have insisted all along that they never rebelled against the crown?”

“I...” Prince Jing faltered slightly at his questioning. “I used to believe in Eldest Brother and Commander Lin because of what I know of their persons, but today....”

“Today, Your Highness discovered this thread of truth, and many things that you could not understand in the past are now becoming clear, is that right?” Mei Changsu’s expression was still calm. “Then, what does Your Highness wish to do about it?”

“To investigate, of course, until the whole conspiracy of how they framed Eldest Brother and Commander Lin is revealed!”

“And then?”

“And then...and then....” Prince Jing suddenly discovered that he could not continue, and finally, he understood Mei Changsu’s meaning. His face paled, and his breathing quickened.

“And then, will you bring the evidence you have uncovered before the Emperor and ask him to turn over this treason case, starting a new trial and sentencing all those found guilty in the process?” Mei Changsu pushed on coldly, “Does Your Highness truly believe that Xia Jiang, Xie Yu, even the Empress and Consort Yue along with their sons – that these people alone were enough to murder the talented and righteous eldest son of the Emperor, and to uproot and overturn the house of an illustrious and mighty commander general?”

Prince Jing’s shoulders fell, his expression dejected as his fingers dug so hard into the desk that they threatened to leave impressions in the wood. His voice was low

when he answered, “I understand your meaning.....but why? Why? Even if the power Eldest Brother possessed at the time were enough to threaten the throne, and he and Father Emperor had numerous disagreements on the way the court was run, he was virtuous and kind by nature, and never so much as harboured the slightest dream of rebellion, so how could Father Emperor’s suspicions of him have grown to such a state.....they were still father and son, after all....”

“The number of emperors throughout history who have killed their own sons is surely not worth counting, is it?” Mei Changsu took a deep breath, reminding himself to control his own emotions. ” And this thin skin of our Emperor’s is nothing new. It is my belief that he was suspicious and jealous, but given Prince Qi’s influence at the time, he did not dare restrict his power lightly. Xia Jiang saw this, and with his loyalty to the Emperor, how could he not take it upon himself to ease his lord’s worries?”

“You mean Father really believed it?” Prince Jing’s expression was pained. “He believed that Eldest Brother was rebelling, and the Chiyan Army was committing treason?”

“With the Emperor’s highly suspicious nature, he probably did believe it at the beginning, which is why he dealt with them so harshly.” At this point, Mei Changsu was silent for a moment. “And from how desperately Xia Jiang is trying to silence Xie Yu now, the Emperor at least did not know the truth of Nie Feng’s death, which was the start of everything.”

Prince Jing gazed into the light of the oil lamp on the desk, shaking his head as he sighed, “No matter what else, if it were not for the suspicions already in Father Emperor’s heart, these kinds of false rumors could be dealt with by bringing the suspects back to the capital for investigation, why would we have to resort to..... It is only a shame I was not in the country at the time....”

“It was great fortune that Your Highness was not in the country, or you could not have avoided calamity by association.” Mei Changsu’s expression was indifferent. “Although this case was initiated by Xia Jiang, it was handled in the end by the Emperor, so it will not be easy for Your Highness to overturn it. Your Highness would do better to take this advice: let it go, and refrain from further investigation.”

Prince Jing stood and paced around the room. When he finally stopped, his face had cleared and resumed some semblance of calm. “Mister’s advice is not wrong, but if I were to truly let it go here, what friendship, what loyalty would remain on this earth? What Xie Yu has revealed is only the beginning, and I fear I could never rest until I understand clearly how the whole affair unfolded step by step until that ending. I know well Mister is a meticulous and thorough thinker who sees into the hearts of men. I pray you lend me your assistance in overturning this old case and clearing the names of all those involved.”

Mei Changsu raised his head and looked him in the eye, his voice soft. “Is Your Highness aware that if the Emperor discovers that Your Highness is investigating the old case of Prince Qi, it will mean disaster for you?”

“I am.”

“Is Your Highness aware that, even if the details of the case are revealed, they will have no relation to the matters Your Highness is planning now, and will be of no help in any way?”

“I am.”

“Is Your Highness aware that, so long as His Majesty sits the throne, he will not admit to wrongdoing, nor clear the names of Prince Qi and the Lin family?”

“I am.”

“Your Highness is aware, and you still insist on investigating?”

“I insist.” Prince Jing looked at him steadily, a hint of icy steel in his gaze. “I must know how they were persecuted and killed, so that I can clear their names when I take the throne. To ignore the wrongful deaths of my brother and my friend and only focus on my own selfish gains – this is not something I can do, so I ask Mister Su not to advise me to do so.”

Mei Changsu swallowed the rush of warmth that had risen in his throat, and sat quietly in the light of the lamp for a moment before slowly getting to his feet and kneeling in a bow before Prince Jing, his voice low as he said, “Since I have taken Your Highness as my lord, I will follow Your Highness’ wishes as my command. Although many years have passed and there are few remaining now who know the truth, I will spare no effort in uncovering the truth of this case for Your Highness.”

“I must trouble Mister on this account.” Prince Jing raised his cupped hands to receive the bow. “It is Jingyan’s fortune to have met Mister’s great talent. Xie Yu’s fall from grace was truly remarkable to behold, and though I was not present to witness it in person, I can imagine the tension and danger of that night. The Crown Prince has lost his greatest support, does Mister plan to have Prince Yu take advantage of the confusion?”

Mei Changsu shook his head. “No, I will advise Prince Yu to hold back.”

“Oh?” Prince Jing thought for a moment, and then understood. “It is a pity Prince Yu will not listen.”

“Of course, I will not insist either. I will only give a word of advice, and if he does not listen, then so be it.” Mei Changsu smiled mischievously, his gaze sharp.



“When everything is going well, it is difficult not to let success get to one’s head. The Crown Prince has lost so much recently, Father Emperor must give him a little support and protection. If Prince Yu does not hold back now, he will only fall into a trap of his own making.” Prince Jing tilted his head in thought. “Father Emperor has delayed for so long without sentencing Xie Yu, this is not only because of Xia Jiang’s interference, am I correct?”

Mei Changsu smiled. “Your Highness has come a long way ever since you started putting effort into observing the affairs of the court. Perhaps in a year or two, you will no longer have need for this strategist of yours.”

“Mister jokes well. Schemes and strategies are not my strength, at least I have enough self-awareness to be sure of that.” Prince Jing waved a hand carelessly and asked, “Does Mister truly mean to ensure Xie Yu’s survival?”

Mei Changsu answered indifferently, “I only mean to protect him against Xia Jiang’s men, anything else is not my responsibility.”

“Anything else?”

“Xia Dong is not to be underestimated,<sup>156</sup> and she will not let go of this enmity of her murdered husband easily....”

“But this enmity cannot be laid entirely on Xie Yu alone.” There was sympathy in Prince Jing’s expression. “And Xia Jiang is still her shifu, so who is to say how this debt will be paid....”

“She has been a Xuanjing Officer for many years, and is subtle in her own way. She is not nearly as brash as she appears on the surface. The more she believes Xie Yu’s words, the less likely she is to confront Xia Jiang openly. My greatest hope is that she will keep the matter in her heart, and become a great help to Your Highness in the future.”

Prince Jing understood the meaning behind his words and nodded. If a day truly came when he could clear Prince Qi’s name, Nie Feng’s widow crying for injustice would be the perfect opening.

But before all of that, the most important thing was to gather his strength and seize the throne.

Prince Jing calmed his mind, suppressing the grief that had arisen over learning the truth of Nie Feng’s death, and began discussing the latest affairs of the court with Mei Changsu.

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<sup>156</sup> literally: “is no vegetarian” LOL

Because he had been in the military for many years, one of Prince Jing's great weaknesses was his lack of familiarity with civil administration. Because of this, Mei Changsu had sought out many experts in this political field, and he created opportunities for Prince Jing to meet and befriend them, and to learn from them how to rule and govern the people. Every time they met in the secret chamber, the two would have thorough discussions using recent events as concrete examples, and they often talked in this way until dawn without realizing it.

Or, in other words, after a certain period of adaptation, the relationship between Prince Jing and Mei Changsu had reached a peak.

Yesterday, the court had been discussing the iron ores in different parts of the country as well as the war horses of the military. Prince Jing was a military general, and his knowledge of both the forging of weapons and war horses was deep, but he had to remain low-key in his appearances in the court, and so, as a rule, he kept his contributions short rather than impressive. But now he was freed from any such inhibitions and could express his views freely, and what was even more impressive was that Mei Changsu kept up with his thinking, and there were some ideas they seemed to share without having to need to explain. Prince Jing did not seem to notice at first, but as the discussion drew to a close, he finally realized and asked, "Although Mister is widely known as the qilin prodigy, you are nonetheless a man of jianghu, so how is it that you are so familiar with military topics, as if you yourself have experienced warfare....?"

Mei Changsu was taken aback for a moment, and scolded himself for his momentary carelessness, though he showed none of his emotions on his face, and only smiled nonchalantly as he answered, "One may not have eaten pork, but have we not all seen a pig walk? There are many members of my alliance who are veterans of war, and do not underestimate these soldiers of a hundred battles – they all have different perspectives, and one can learn much from talking to them. And after I arrived in the capital, Fei Liu was fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of Commander General Meng, and we have forged an unexpected friendship, I have gained much knowledge from his teaching as well. But to tell the truth, my learning in this subject is fragmented and incomplete, and I fear there are aspects that must be laughable in Your Highness' eyes."

Prince Jing had only asked out of curiosity and was not thinking very deeply about the question, and at this self-depreciation, he replied hurriedly, "Not at all, Mister's knowledge is deep and insightful. I see that Mister's talent is extensive indeed. You have truly earned Jingyan's respect."

Mei Changsu bowed in thanks, but he had grown cautious, and did not wish to continue the topic, and so he said, "It is late, and Your Highness must attend court in the morning, perhaps it would be best to retire for some rest. It is true that you are a military man in training, but it would not do to push yourself beyond endurance."

Prince Jing was not yet tired, but he saw the shadows beneath Mei Changsu's eyes and knew that he could not continue much longer, and so he immediately stood and bid him farewell, then walked swiftly out of the secret chamber towards the stone door to his own chambers.

When Mei Changsu returned to his bedroom, the sky outside was still dark. Fei Liu had lit a lamp and was sitting quietly, but when he saw Mei Changsu emerge, he leaped across the room to him.

"So long again!" The youth pouted unhappily.

"Sorry, sorry," Mei Changsu patted his back, smiling. "Let's go and have a good sleep while it's still dark out."

"Awake!"

"You're awake, but Su gege is tired."

Fei Liu pushed him towards the bed and said loudly, "Sleep!"

"If Su gege is sleeping, what will Fei Liu do?"

"Draw!"

Mei Changsu laughed in spite of himself and patted him on the head, then took off his outer robe and laid down to sleep. Fei Liu sprawled over the head of the bed and watched him for awhile. Then he went outside, found paper and ink, and began to draw idly.

After the Spring equinox, the days were long and the nights were short. It had been near dawn when Mei Changsu returned, and so Fei Liu had not yet finished his second drawing when the sky outside the window began to lighten.

Mei Changsu turned over to face away from the window. Fei Liu, who had been trained for this, got up and went to the window to draw the curtains. He had one hand on the bamboo rod when the hollow tolls of a ringing bell sounded from the distance. He cocked his head to listen.

Almost simultaneously, Mei Changsu leaped up from the bed and rushed out to the outer courtyard without putting on his outer robe or even his shoes.

"Su gege!" Fei Liu, greatly frightened, chased after him into the courtyard, where he saw him standing on the green-paved path in his white stockings, his face lifted to the sky, listening intently.

By this time, Li Gang and the rest of the household had heard the commotion and come running over to stand around their chief, but seeing his expression, none dared to call out to him.

“Fei Liu, how many times did it ring?” Mei Changsu asked softly when the bell had stopped.

“Twenty-seven!”

Li Gang’s thick brows jumped. “When the golden bell rings twenty-seven times, it is the toll of great mourning. There is no Empress Dowager in the palace any more, so it must be....”

Before he could finish, Mei Changsu, his face pale, had closed his eyes. He seemed to struggle for a moment, and then a stream of fresh blood erupted from his mouth onto his robes.

“Chief!”

“Su gege!”

The circle around him dissolved into frenzy. Someone ran off to find Physician Yan, while Li Gang hurried over to pick him up and carry him inside, where he placed him gently onto his bed. Physician Yan arrived with astonishing speed to take his pulse, and he was just about to insert his needle when Mei Changsu sat up and waved a hand, saying in a low voice, “Don’t worry, you may all leave, let me have some quiet.”

“Chief...” Li Gang pleaded, but Physician Yan raised a hand to stop him and stood up first himself, gesturing for everyone else to follow as he left the room. Only Fei Liu refused to move, and so they let him stay.

When the room was finally quiet, Mei Changsu slowly lifted his head and opened his eyes. They were red and shining with tears.

“Fei Liu,” he murmured, gently patting the youth’s head, “in the end, my great-grandmother couldn’t wait for me to return...”

## CHAPTER 100

### *National Mourning*

The passing of the Grand Empress Dowager was not an unanticipated event. She had been advanced in age, her mental state had been deteriorating for many years, and her physical health often fluctuated as well, and so the Ministry of Rites had begun making preparations for the rituals of her funeral long in advance. So when the time came, everything proceeded smoothly, and was not thrown into a frenzy as a result of the recent change in Minister of Rites.

As the last tones of the bells of great mourning faded, Da Liang immediately entered into a state of national mourning. The Emperor, in accordance with Liang custom, began thirty days of imperial mourning out of filial piety, and the whole imperial clan followed suit. All officials third-ranked and above entered the palace to perform sacrificial rites, and the entire country was banned from merrymaking for three years.

This brought about several different conclusions.

Firstly, Xie Yu had originally been sentenced to beheading, but because of the state of national mourning, the sentence could not be carried out, and so it was changed to exile to Qian province instead, and he was to start on his journey in two months' time.

The marriage contract arrangements between Liang and Chu also came to a halt, as only a promise could be given now, and it would be three years before any actual exchanges could happen. Da Chu had originally come to propose a union in order to forge stronger ties with Da Liang, so they would be free on the other hand to deal with their Burmese neighbours, and now that the other was in national mourning, custom and ritual became the best defense as it automatically prevented Da Liang from initiating attacks on other countries unprovoked, and so their objective had still been achieved. And so the Da Chu ambassadors did not protest, and only began preparations to return to their own country. Princess Jingning was on the one hand in deep mourning for her beloved great grandmother, and on the other greatly relieved at being granted a reprieve, however temporary, over the matter of her marriage. Torn all at once between grief and joy, she found it all the more difficult to contain her tears.

Grand Princess Liyang, living secluded in the mountain temples, immediately started back for the capital to pay her own respects. Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi officially no longer had any noble status, and therefore had no right or obligation to participate in the rituals to send off the Grand Empress Dowager's spirit, but the elderly lady had always had more than enough love to spare for the younger generation, and neither could find it in himself to refrain from joining the sacrificial rites, so although their positions were awkward and a great contrast to what they had been only a few months ago, they nonetheless accompanied their mother to the capital, staying with her in Liyang's Princess' residence.

The fight for the throne, which had been raging like a furnace within the walls of the palace, faded temporarily in the wake of the bell tones of great mourning. For the thirty days of the ritual guarding of the spirit, all the Emperor's sons were required to stay in the palace and were not permitted to return to their own residences. Neither were they allowed to bathe, sleep on beds, nor eat meat in their meals. They were expected to remain kneeling and bow to the departing spirit, as well as to weep and mourn as ritual dictated. Of course, there was no way the pampered Crown Prince and Prince Yu could undergo this kind of torture, and they only managed to hold up for a few days before succumbing to their vices. So long as the Emperor was not present, the grief on their faces lessened considerably, and their subordinates inevitably found ways around the inhibitions to lessen their lords' hardship, eager to curry favour. Because the rituals of the vigil were truly rather severe, if one did not find some way to break the rules, it was likely that he would end up half-dead himself before the vigil of the ritual guarding of the spirit even ended, and so it only made sense to look after one's own health first. Besides, they were both breaking the rules together, so neither could accuse the other of anything, and of course none of the officials accompanying the princes in the rituals dared to speak out. And once these two started violating the rules, though the other princes were not so obvious in their offenses, they too naturally relaxed their standards. In stark contrast to his brothers, Prince Jing, with his soldier's iron-like constitution and his pure, unyielding piety, stubbornly adhered to every letter of the rituals, refusing to yield so much as a syllable of disobedience. Because Prince Jing had not been raised to a Royal Prince, he normally seldom appeared by the Crown Prince and Prince Yu's side in formal settings. But this time, as he knelt beside these two for thirty days keeping vigil over their great-grandmother's spirit, the difference in his conduct stood out sharply to the court officials who had come to accompany the princes in the ritual, and he gained favour and approval in their eyes.

Mei Changsu kept the thirty days of vigil in his rooms at his own manor. Although Physician Yan knew the toll of the rituals on his body would be extremely harsh, he worried that if he prevented him from expressing his grief, it would build up in his heart instead and cause even greater harm, and so he could only do his best to build up his young lord's health as he kept watch in the background. Because Mei Changsu refused to eat anything except plain congee, Li Gang and Aunt Ji spent great effort hiding from him the nourishing herbs and medicines they slipped into his bowl. Fortunately, Mei Changsu was so dazed by grief that he never noticed anything.

Because everyone of importance had been called back to the palace, the entire capitol city was under heavy guard, and there was little fear of any great crime or case arising in the city during the period of mourning. The thirty days passed in unparalleled peace and quiet, and nothing of any significance seemed to occur. Li Gang and Zhen Ping, who had just hurriedly arrived in the capitol, kept watch over things from within the manor and Mister Shisan kept watch from without, but the peace was undisturbed, and they were able to avoid troubling their Chief in his vigil.

When the period of ritual mourning came to an end, the funeral was held complete with every honour due to the nearly hundred-year-old Grand Empress Dowager who had been beloved of both the common people and her own children and grandchildren. She was then escorted to the tomb where she would rest beside her husband, who had gone before her some forty years prior. The casket processed along the main roads, heralded by chants of mourning and showered in cascades of burning paper money. The noise of the procession could be heard from Su Manor, which was located only a street away from the main roads. Mei Changsu knelt in the corridors of his manor and bowed in the direction of the procession, his eyes rimmed in red but dry.

After the funeral, the Emperor resumed court, but because everyone was exhausted by the many days of ritual, he kept them only for a brief show of appearances before dismissing them to return to their own residences and families for a chance to bathe and rest.

It was little surprise that Mei Changsu's illness flared up after his month of vigil. Fortunately, Physician Yan was there to temper the flare, and it did not rise up as harshly as it had in the past. There was some blood-stained vomiting, some fever and coughing, and he spent a few nights soaked in sweat in near delirium, but a few doses of the physician's medicine soon managed to control the illness once more.

After passing out in a dazed sleep for an entire afternoon, Mei Changsu awoke in the evening and sat up in his bed, wrapped in his quilt, to see Fei Liu folding little men out of paper. As he glanced over, he caught a glimpse of a white letter on the table. It had been sent by Princess Nihuang via special messengers directly from Yunnan and had only arrived yesterday. On it was written only, "Brother, please take care." He had still been grief-stricken when he first saw it, and so had tossed it aside, thinking that Li Gang and the rest would not dare move it, and so it had been resting on his table this whole time.

"Fei Liu, bring me that letter."

The youth's figure blurred for a moment, and then he was beside Mei Changsu, his task complete. Mei Changsu opened the letter and stared at the four delicate characters which hid such wild emotion, and after a long moment, he told Fei Liu to

bring him the lamp, took down the lamp shade, and threw the letter into the flame, watching as it burned to ash.

“Burn?” Fei Liu asked, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Never mind,” Mei Changsu smiled. “Some words can be carved into the heart.”

The youth cocked his head as if he had not understood, but he was not the kind of person to muse over these kinds of questions, and soon, he had resumed his place on his little stool and was folding paper men once again. But he could not fold the heads of the paper men properly, and he threw them to the floor in frustration and stomped on them a few times, saying loudly, “Stupid!”

Mei Changsu waved him over and slowly, carefully, folded a beautiful little man out of paper, complete with a head and four limbs, with hands that moved if you tugged on the other one. Fei Liu was delighted, a smile breaking out across his face before he suddenly said, “Tricked me!”

These two words were spoken completely without context, but Mei Changsu understood, and glanced at him sternly. “The method Lin Chen gege taught you was correct, he did not trick you, it was Fei Liu who did not learn it properly, so you should not make false accusations!”

Fei Liu looked at the paper man in his hand unhappily and said in a small voice, “Not the same!”

“There are many ways to fold paper men. The method I know was taught to me by my great grandmother.... When I was small, she often folded paper men for me, and paper cranes as well, but at the time, I did not like them, and was always running away from her to go riding instead....”

“Small?” The youth looked confused, his mouth slightly agape, as if he could not imagine a time when his Su gege was small.

“It was a time when I was much smaller than our Fei Liu now....”

“Wa?!” Fei Liu exclaimed.

“Bring me another sheet of paper, Su gege will teach you to fold a parrot.”

Fei Liu was delighted, and ran to pick out a sheet of his favourite cream-yellow paper, his eyes wide and his brow furrowed with concentration as he studied Mei Changsu’s every move.

As the parrot’s tail was slowly appearing, Fei Liu suddenly turned his head and shouted, “Big uncle!”



Mei Changsu stared, his movements slowing for a moment, and then he ordered, “Fei Liu, go and bring the big uncle here.”

“Parrot!”

“When the big uncle has left, Su gege will finish it for you.”

Because his beloved paper-folding had been so abruptly interrupted, Fei Liu was deeply unhappy with the culprit, Meng Zhi, and his handsome face was dark with fury as he led him into the room, his entire body conveying such coldness that Meng Zhi was scratching his head, wondering what he had done to offend the little fellow.

“Meng dage, please sit.” Mei Changsu handed the half-folded parrot to Fei Liu for him to play with in a corner and then leaned forward and sat up a little, Meng Zhi rushing over to help him.

“Meng dage has worked hard this month, the palace has been in such disarray, since you have some time off today with the changing of the shifts, why not return to your manor for some rest?”

“I was worried about you.” Meng Zhi studied him under the light of the lantern, and saw that he was thinner than ever, and could not help the worry that twisted in his heart as he urged, “Although you were very close to the Grand Empress Dowager, she lived a long life, and in the end she passed on in peace and comfort, so there is joy to be found in the sorrow. You must take care of yourself.”

Mei Changsu lowered his eyes and answered, “Don’t worry, I understand this logic, it is only.... The last time I saw Great Grandmother, she held my hand and called me ‘xiao Shu’, and whether she truly recognized me, or was only calling out in confusion, it showed that, in her heart, she still remembered xiao Shu, or she would not have called out such a name.... I always hoped she would wait for me, but now even this wish is no more....”

“This love you bear for her, the Grand Empress Dowager’s spirit knows and felt long ago. Ever since you were young, she always doted on you, and she would not be able to bear it if she saw you now in such grief for her sake. I heard that after Grand Princess Jinyang gave birth to you, the elderly lady could not wait for you to enter the palace for your one month’s celebration, but came personally to the Lin manor to see you. When I was serving as a guard in the palace, I often saw the Grand Empress Dowager surrounded by a crowd of children, but the one in the middle whom she loved the most was always you. Back then, you were such a mischievous child...”

“Is that right?” Mei Changsu’s eyes glistened, and a faint smile lingered at the corner of his lips. “These past few days, I have been thinking about that time as well.... Whenever I got into trouble, it was Great Grandmother who came to save me.

Soon, Father realized that as long as he did not beat me, Great Grandmother would not interfere too much, and so he came up with other ways to punish me, that were to me even worse than beatings....”

“I know, I know,” Meng Zhi was also smiling at the memory. “Once, you got into some kind of trouble..... you probably broke something of the former Emperor’s, and Commander Lin was furious, and although we were accompanying the Emperor to the hunting grounds, he deliberately forbade you from going with me to learn archery and riding, and instead gave you a crowd of children to look after as punishment, and said he would not tolerate any mistakes. And at the time, you were only a large child yourself.”

Mei Changsu nodded, indicating that he too remembered this occasion clearly. “At that time, I would have preferred wrestling a bear alone to dragging along a crowd of rowdy young boys along with me everywhere I went. Jingrui was quiet enough, but that Yujin, running around all the time, unable to stand still for even half a second....”

“And so you found rope and tied him to a tree?” Meng Zhi raised an eyebrow. “Prince Jing was helping you look after them, and he was so scared for you that he took the blame and claimed that he was the one who had done the tying....”

“But in the end, the one who was punished by kneeling for hours was still me, until Great Grandmother came and rescued me.... At the time, I felt so wronged, I thought, Jingyan already said he was the one who did it, so why was I being punished....” Mei Changsu smiled, and then began coughing. It was a long time before he stopped and continued, slightly breathless, “When I think back on those days, it is as if there is a ball of ice wrapped in fire buried in my heart, sometimes warm, sometimes so cold that it seems to pierce right through me....”

“Xiao Shu....” Meng Zhi felt something in his chest twist in pain. He wanted to comfort him, but could not find the right words to say, and the iron-hard warrior’s eyes reddened with emotion.

“Don’t be sad,” it was Mei Changsu who comforted him in return. “Great Grandmother is at peace, and I have passed the worst days of grief, and am much better now. It is only that you are the only person who can talk about the old days like this with me, Meng dage, and so I said a little more than I should have.”

Meng Zhi let out a long sigh and patted his shoulder. “My heart is conflicted. I want to talk to you about the past, so that you will remember that you are not Su Zhe, but still Lin Shu, but I worry that if I say too much, I will cause you grief instead.”

“I understand your good intentions,” Mei Changsu lifted his head, his eyes serene. “But neither Lin Shu nor Su Zhe are made of paper and clay, and this bit of suffering I am still able to withstand. There is still so much to do, how can I fall now, when I am

only halfway there? Meng dage, I believe that I can make it to the very last step, so you must also believe in me.”

Meng Zhi heard him say “very last step” and felt his heart shudder, though he did not know why. He hurriedly forced a trembling smile and answered, “Of course I believe in you. With your talents and temperament, what is impossible?”

Mei Changsu smiled at him warmly and then leaned back onto his pillows, coughing slightly before saying, “You should return home and keep Sister-in-law company while you can. You see that I am doing fine now, and there is nothing to worry about. After the changing of the shifts today, the Commander General will be busy once more.”

Meng Zhi saw that it was growing late and was afraid to disturb Mei Changsu’s rest, and so he stood and turned to leave, and then turned back to urge, “Everything has its time, and the most important thing for you right now is to rest and take care of your health. Everything else can come later, since nothing is urgent at this moment, and the best laid plans are built slowly with a strong foundation.”

Mei Changsu nodded in assent, and then summoned Fei Liu over to see his guest out. The youth was eager to go back to folding his parrot, and he obeyed so enthusiastically that he almost dragged Meng Zhi out of the room.

By this time, it was the second watch of the night. Mei Changsu listened to the distant sounds of the watchmen’s clappers on the street, stroking the fabric of his mourning robes as he focused hard to steady his mind, which had been wavering slightly.

Since the first step had been taken, then.....he must persist until the last....

The youth flew back into the room and handed over the half-folded parrot. In fact, only the last few steps remained, and with a fold and a flip, the tail fanned open, and the entire shape of the parrot emerged. Amidst Fei Liu’s happy exclamations, Mei Changsu slowly held up the parrot in his hand and murmured, “Great Grandmother, can you see?”

## CHAPTER 101

### *Exile (I)*

The capital of Jinling was divided into the inner palace city and the outer imperial city. The security of the palace city was the responsibility of the Emperor's personal Imperial Guard, the head of which was currently Commander General Meng Zhi. Compared to the single system of the palace city, the security of the outer imperial city was a much more complicated matter. Criminal cases among the common people, daily patrols, the capture of bandits, putting out fires and dealing with floods – these were the responsibilities of the Capital Government Office, while the Capital Patrol took care of the defense of the city gates, the enforcement of the evening curfew, and dealt with any and all armed conflict. The Capital Government Office was a regional authority, and thus answered to the Six Departments, and the Capital Patrol by rights should have been controlled by the Ministry of War, but for as long as anyone could remember, because it was directly overseen by the Marquis of Ning, who outranked the Minister of War, it had always functioned independent of the Ministry of War, which did not dare issue it any orders or commands. Aside from this, there were many households in the capital who had the right to possess their own private soldiers. The Eastern Palace was permitted to store three thousand soldiers, Royal Princes were allowed two thousand, Princes one thousand, and first-ranked officials eight hundred. Even at their most quiet, these soldiers held by private households had an impact on the peace of the city, and when they came to conflict with one another, the chaos they could raise was not to be underestimated. And so when Xie Yu, who held the Capital Patrol in his power, was toppled from his position, it was as if someone had reached into the tangled mess and forcefully removed a section, creating even more knots in the process.

About a month after the Great Grand Dowager had been laid to rest, the imperial edict was passed, and Xie Yu walked out of Sky Prison along the Dark Path and prepared to depart for his place of exile, Gui province. He had been born to a noble family and had achieved success early in life, eventually even attaining the position of a first-ranked court official, but all the power and prestige he had accumulated over the years had evaporated like smoke in the space of a single night, and now he wore chains and fetters like any other common criminal, marched out of his prison cell between two burly guards, without even a wooden torch to his name.

Fortunately, criminals always departed for exile at dawn, and so the streets were still largely empty, without crowds standing around to stare and jeer, and Xie Yu felt a little easier. He had not been beaten or tortured in prison, and had not even undergone any routine interrogation, and although his case had been judged by the Emperor in the end, he had not seen this liege of his since he entered the walls of Sky Prison. Within the prison itself, the food was not of any admirable quality, but at least it was provided in sufficient quantity, and the usual abuse of prisoners had been recently halted by the strict governance of the new Minister of Justice, and so, all in all, when Xie Yu came face to face with the Southern Gates of Jinling, chains dangling from his ankles, he was still in reasonably good physical shape.

Escorts and exile arrived at the Southern Gates just as the time came to open up the gates of the city for the day. Naturally, it was the Capital Patrol standing guard at the gates of the capital, and at first, they did not realize who it was that stood by the heavy city gates in chains and fetters, his hair disheveled, waiting for the gates to open. Some time passed before one of the escorting bailiffs stumbled upon a familiar face in the Capital Patrol, and after a quick whispered conversation, the Capital Patrol soldier cast a withering glance in Xie Yu's direction and said in a loud voice, "Look, it's your old boss the Marquis, a few months ago you lot didn't even dare lift your heads to look him in the face, guess you can look your fill now, and see, doesn't he have a nose and two eyes just like the rest of you? And his back isn't even as straight as yours!"

His words raised a minor clamor among the soldiers at the gate. These lowly guards had never had the chance to meet Xie Yu face to face, and Marquis Xie was to them like a lofty figure in the clouds. But now this lofty figure had fallen from the skies and was standing before them, and so they could not help the curiosity that overtook them, and soon, a few dozen guards were gathered around, and one even reached out to pull aside the hair that was obscuring Xie Yu's face, meaning to get a clearer look.

"What do you think you're doing? Get back to your positions!" A harsh voice cut through the clamor, its owner arriving to dissipate the crowd with a wave of his hand. "What are you all gaping at? The city gates are open, why are you not standing at your positions!"

"Seventh Uncle," one of the soldiers wheedled, "the gates are only just open, there isn't even a ghost to be seen, much less any people, and the brothers just wanted to have a look, we didn't mean anything by it."

"If it were you in the chains, would you enjoy being looked at like this?"

"I didn't commit any crimes, so why would I be in chains? And he's not some big Marquis anymore, so why are you sucking up to him?"

Seventh Uncle's face darkened in fury and he spat on the ground before saying in a thundering voice, "So when he was a Marquis, you suck up to him, and now that he's been convicted, you can treat him however you like? What kind of a man does that make you?"

Most of the crowd had only gathered out of curiosity, and naturally they grew a little angry at being scolded like this, but fortunately, Seventh Uncle was well-respected and usually got along well with everyone, and immediately, several others came forward to soothe the argument over, and it didn't come to blows between them. The two escorting bailiffs seemed to be enjoying the show, and called out a few words of encouragement now and then, while Xie Yu himself retreated to one side and gathered his composure and rearranged his hair, and no one could read his expression.

The leader in charge of this group of soldiers initially did not intend to interfere. After all, soldiers got into arguments regularly throughout the course of a single day, and on average got into a large brawl once every five days, and as long as no one got hurt, there wasn't much to worry about. Besides, the sun was just rising, and the city gates were still deserted, so there wasn't much to do, so this was like a warm up for his soldiers. But suddenly, he realized that the two bailiffs were standing there with jeering expressions on their faces, and not wanting outsiders to spread rumours of the Capital Patrol, fury rose abruptly in his chest and he cracked his whip to get the soldiers' attention and then shouted, "Damn it, all of you shut up!"

Although he was not of any high rank, at his sudden anger, no one dared disobey, and they all obediently shut their mouths and scattered away to their positions. The two bailiffs saw that the show was over, and so they turned away and herded Xie Yu out the city gate.

Beyond the Southern Gates was a long yellow dirt road, smooth and well-kept. Xie Yu was a military man, and kept in good physical shape, and so there was no chance for his escorts to scold or beat him for walking too slowly. About an hour later, the sun had risen fully, and one of the bailiffs stopped for a moment to wipe the sweat on his brow. He turned to look back almost absentmindedly and saw to his surprise the rise of dust on the road, followed by a carriage lined in dark silk. From the appearance of the handsome horses leading the carriage, it was obvious this was no ordinary well-wisher.

The three retreated to the side of the road, and while the two bailiffs gazed curiously at the approaching carriage, Xie Yu turned his back on it, half-concealing himself in the wild grass that grew along the side of the road.

The carriage stopped a few feet away from them, and a plain-robed young man jumped out and shoved a stack of paper bills into the hands of each of the bailiffs as he said in a low voice, "I have come to see him off, please forgive the inconvenience."

Although they did not recognize the newcomer, anyone who came to see Xie Yu off was no commoner, and so the two bailiffs only exchanged a knowing smile before tactfully retreating a good distance away.

“Dad...” Xie Bi’s voice shook, and his eyes were red. “Are you alright?”

Xie Yu stood there silently for a long moment before finally making a noise in response, “Ng.”

Xie Bi opened his mouth again, but he did not know how to continue, and he stood there helplessly for a moment before turning to look back at the carriage.

It was then that Xie Yu realized he had not come alone, and his gaze widened momentarily. At this time, and in this place, he did not know whether he wanted to see her again. But whether or not he wanted to, the choice had already been taken from him. The curtain of the carriage was drawn aside, and Liyang slowly descended from the carriage. Even more shocking to Xie Yu, the person helping the frail Grand Princess down the steps of the carriage was Xiao Jingrui.

Five or six steps away from Xie Yu, Xiao Jingrui let go of his mother and stopped where he stood. Grand Princess Liyang continued the few steps forward until she stood before Xie Yu, and looked at him quietly. Xie Bi, wanting to let his parents converse in private, and heedful of the turmoil of emotions in Jingrui’s heart, walked over and gently tugged him a short distance away.

“Is it over?” After a long silence, it was the Grand Princess who spoke first.

“No.”

“How can I help?”

“No need,” Xie Yu shook his head. “Even you could not protect me in the capital, Liyang, and you would only be even more helpless in the jianghu.”

There was peace but deep sorrow in Grand Princess Liyang’s eyes. She had shed many tears in the past days, and the circles around her eyes were dark, the wrinkles deep, and yet her steady gaze still hid a glimmer of strength, her expression as bewitching as it had always been.

“That Mister Su.....yesterday, he sent people to see me, to tell you to give me a letter.”

“Letter?” Xie Yu was taken aback, but seeing as it was the words of the chilling Mei Changsu, he did not dare dismiss them lightly, and so he hurriedly racked his brain, trying to understand what he meant.

“That person said, if you had not yet written it, to tell you to write it now, because there must be much more behind the things you told him. Write it down, give it to me, and you will live.” Grand Princess Liyang did not understand what she was saying. She only repeated what she had heard numbly but solemnly, word for word.

Even if this man had strangled her innocence, even if this man had once plotted to murder her child, he was still her husband of twenty years, and the father of her three children. She did not want to hear news of his violent death, especially when this man himself did not wish to die.

Xie Yu’s gaze wavered for a moment, and then suddenly lit up as he understood Mei Changsu’s meaning.

The secrets he held in his grasp, aside from those he had told Mei Changsu to his face, included many that he did not want to share at the moment, or that he could not. If Xia Jiang wanted to kill him on the long road to exile, it would be difficult to stop him. The only way to preserve his life was to write down all the secrets he knew and then hand them over to Liyang for safekeeping. If nothing happened to him, Liyang would never share what he had written. But if he died, then his letter would become iron-clad evidence. Xia Jiang was not a foolish man, and he would know that it would be better to let Xie Yu live, because even if he could no longer trust Xie Yu enough to leave him alive, neither could he risk having secrets that implicated both of them be brought into light, because then it would be Xia Jiang who would fall to ruin, with everything he had ever worked for burning to ashes around him.

This was surely, surely the last shred of hope that was left to him now....

Grand Princess Liyang still stood quietly, watching him and waiting for his decision, without the slightest sign of wanting to urge or persuade him.

Something warm welled up in Xie Yu’s chest, and his eyes watered abruptly. Although their relationship had not been without ripples these many years, nonetheless, right now, the only person left in the world in whom he dared to trust, the only person for whom he still held even a sliver of hope, was Liyang.

“Do you have paper and a brush?” Xie Yu asked quietly after he had regained his composure.

Grand Princess Liyang produced a long box from the long sleeves of her robes and opened it to reveal brush and ink as well as a long scroll of paper.

“Write it on this.”

Xie Yu glanced over at the two bailiffs who stood at a distance, staring at the entire proceedings with undisguised curiosity, and Liyang immediately said, “Never mind, that Mister Su said, the more who see you write this, the better.”



Xie Yu understood immediately, and hurriedly picked up the brush. Because he was still chained, Grand Princess Liyang mounted the scroll on a wooden frame and held it for him, moving it slightly every time he had written a few words. But the whole time the letter was being written, her gaze never lingered on the words on the scroll. When Xie Yu finished, she immediately rolled it up and placed it into an embroidered silk pouch and pulled the thread at its mouth shut tightly.

“Liyang....”

“I will not let anyone read what you have written, and I will not read it myself. I have not the slightest wish to know what you have done in the past, because for me, it is best not to know anything....” Grand Princess Liyang placed the silk pouch into her pockets, her expression growing pained. “I also prepared some clothing and money, take it for use on the road.”

Xie Yu gazed at her gently, wanting to reach out to brush her cheek, but when he moved his hand, he immediately remembered the chains on his wrists, and so he restrained himself, and only said softly, “Liyang, you must take care, I will surely come back to see you.”

Grand Princess Liyang’s eyes were rimmed in red, and she turned her head and did not reply, only lifting a hand to gesture for Xie Bi to return. Xie Yu hurriedly gathered his composure, and before his son came into hearing distance, he said quickly, “Liyang, that silk pouch, no matter what happens, you must not give it to Mei Changsu.”

Grand Princess Liyang looked at him and then nodded. “Do not worry, so long as you live, I will carry this pouch on my person at all times.”

As she finished, Xie Bi was already approaching. He was considerate and helpful by nature, and at his mother’s gesture, he had understood, and had stopped by the carriage to pick up the bundle she had packed, and now he helped Xie Yu tie it to his back. Xiao Jingrui still stood at a distance, occasionally turning to look in their direction.

Xie Yu had never harboured any true fatherly affection for Xiao Jingrui, Grand Princess Liyang understood the pain and misery in her son’s heart, and Xie Bi had always been sensitive to other people’s feelings, and so none of them called Jingrui over. They gazed silently at one another for a moment, and finally it was Xie Yu who spoke first. “The journey before me is long, let us part ways here. Bi’er, take good care of your mother.”

Xie Bi answered in the affirmative and then helped his mother return to the carriage. The two bailiffs saw that the farewells had finished, and began making their way back over. Xie Yu did not want to watch Liyang’s carriage depart and so he

turned his back and took a deep breath, preparing to leave. Suddenly, he felt a waft of cold energy strike him and he couldn't help shuddering. He lifted his head and looked around, but saw only wild grass all around him. He thought it had been a hallucination, and shook his head firmly.

It was at this moment that he heard Xie Bi's sharp intake of breath.

When he looked around again, he saw in the expanse of wild grass that had been deserted only a moment ago a person, the neck-high grass parting before her like waves in the sea. It was Xia Dong, dressed in pure black robes, walking towards him slowly.

If it had only been Xia Dong, Xie Bi would not have been so taken aback. What truly frightened Xie Bi was the expression on Xia Dong's face, the hatred and enmity deeper than the ocean, colder than ice, more bitter than frost, that seemed to be etched into her very bones....

## CHAPTER 102

### *Exile (II)*

Since even Xie Bi noticed Xia Dong's cold attack and blatant hostility, naturally the others did as well. Grand Princess Liyang immediately got down from the carriage, calling out, "Honourable Officer Xia...."

Xia Dong ignored her, her gaze never wavering as she continued slowly but steadily forward, step by step towards Xie Yu, not stopping until she stood three feet away from him.

But Xia Dong did not stop because she wanted to, but because Xiao Jingrui stood before her, blocking her way.

Because it had not even been a month since he was seriously injured, Xiao Jingrui was still pale, his cheeks sallow, but his gaze was still gentle, though also heavy with grief and loss. Standing before Xia Dong, who had been his teacher, and who was like an older sister to him, he raised his fists in greeting and asked in a steady voice, "What is Xia Dong jiejie here to seek, is it anything Jingrui can help with?"

"What do you think I am here for?" The corner of Xia Dong's lip lifted in a cold smile, murderous energy radiating off her in waves. "You do not need to help, you have only to stand aside, and that will be enough."

Xiao Jingrui met her fierce gaze without the slightest hesitation. "My honoured mother is here, and my beloved brother as well, please forgive Jingrui for not being able to stand aside."

"I bear no ill will towards the Grand Princess nor Xie Bi, what does this have to do with them?"

"But the person Jiejie intends to hurt, that person has very much to do with them."

Xia Dong's gaze pierced through Xiao Jingrui like a knife as she looked him up and down. "Do you think.....you can stop me?"

“Whether I attempt to stop you and whether I am able to stop you are two different matters. Jingrui only wishes to do his best.”

“What is the use of your best? I can step on your body like a stepping stone as I make my way over there.”

Xiao Jingrui nodded calmly. “Then let Xia Dong jiejie try to take this step.”

At his words, Xia Dong’s pupils contracted, and her ice-cold glare fell like a knife onto the face of this young man before her, her gaze fixed on him unwaveringly.

Xie Bi wrung his hands, uneasy over the tense atmosphere, and glanced over at his mother, whose face was grave.

But Xiao Jingrui still stood there unmoving. He quietly bore Xia Dong’s glare, seemingly as if in defiance, but in reality because he simply did not care.

After the tragedy of that night, how would Xiao Jingrui still care about something as mundane as whether Xia Dong would truly step on him?

Against his silent resistance, Xia Dong maintained her fierce glare. But as time passed, the corner of her lip gradually softened, and eventually began to turn up, until suddenly she exploded into loud gales of laughter, and when the laughter ceased, her entire demeanor seemed to change until she was once again the Xia Dong they all knew – a little devilish, a little haughty, always seeming to have an ironic smile on her lips, but nonetheless managing to command respect from all who met her.

“What are you all worrying about?” Xia Dong tossed back her hair, glancing fluidly around her. “What could I be here to do except to see the Marquis off? Let us call it a return for the favour Marquis Xie did me that year when he brought my husband’s bones back to the capital.”

The female Xuanjing Officer’s murderous energy had transformed into a dimpled, smiling face, and everyone let out a sigh of relief. Xie Bi’s eyebrows lowered in relief as he said, “Xia Dong jiejie, you still haven’t changed your habit of playing tricks on people. What kind of a time is this, to pull such a trick on us now?”

“Sorry,” Xia Dong apologized carelessly. She stayed where she stood and did not take a step forward, but her gaze had locked onto Xie Yu’s face as she said slowly, “Xia Dong has come on purpose to see the Marquis on his way, pray the Marquis take care. You must know the road ahead is a dangerous one; I fear peace and tranquility must be far from your heart at present. The Marquis must be careful, and must not let down his guard for even a moment. Gui Province is cold and bitter, you must bear your exile with patience. There are many fates on this earth worse than death, you must hold firm and endure yours in the days to come.”

That day, when Xia Dong went to Sky Prison with Prince Jing, they had gone in secret, and Xie Yu did not know that they had stood just on the other side of the wall. But whether it was because Xia Dong's expression just now had been so frightening, or whether it was due to the sensitivity borne of a guilty heart in the face of those they had wronged, Xie Yu had not relaxed along with the others at Xia Dong's change of attitude, but instead had immediately become certain that Xia Dong knew the truth.

The relief he had just felt at the reprieve he had been granted immediately vaporized, and fear filled his veins like fire, and the emotional whiplash of the past few minutes was almost enough to drive him to his knees. Xia Dong was different from Xia Jiang, what she bore was single-minded hatred and enmity, and she had no need for worry over her own self-preservation. And so, she would take her revenge, and she could do so at any time and in any place, and it would be an exceedingly brutal revenge, all this he knew beyond a doubt. And there was nowhere he could turn for help.

Xia Dong stood before him now smiling slightly, but there was no hint of laughter in her dark eyes. To her, the first step had been accomplished, and Xie Yu would now begin his journey of exile out of his mind with fear. And in the days to come, she would have countless opportunities to achieve her goal.

"It is time for the Marquis to leave, I must not delay your journey today." Xia Dong turned and walked to the side of the road, Xiao Jingrui following behind her, but Xie Yu did not take a single step forward. His disheveled hair hid his face, but from the beads of sweat falling heavily from his brow, from his rigid posture and faint trembling, his fear was almost palpable, it was only that Liyang and her sons did not know what it was he was so afraid of.

The two bailiffs looked up at the sky and exchanged a glance, and then strode forward and each seized Xie Yu by a shoulder and said, "It is time to leave!" before almost dragging him away between them, down the road towards the south-west.

After watching her husband depart, Grand Princess Liyang turned slowly and looked at Xia Dong, asking quietly, "Is Honourable Officer Xia returning to the city?"

"Yes," Xia Dong nodded coolly. "And you four?"

"We as well." The Grand Princess had not caught the strangeness of the question as she replied absentmindedly. It was Xiao Jingrui who raised an eyebrow and glanced around.

It was not as if Xia Dong could not count, so since she had said "you four", then there must certainly be another.

This person was not difficult to find, and the traces of her presence became obvious after a quick glance at their surroundings. Standing very far away on a small

slope was a small figure, her pink robes and yellow dress half-hidden behind an old willow tree.

The Da Chu ambassadors had left long ago, but she alone had not gone with them. It was clear that both Yuwen Xuan and Yue Xiuze doted on her, so how had they consented to allow her to remain behind alone....

Xiao Jingrui had first been injured, and then Xie Qi had died in childbirth, and the Grand Empress-Dowager had passed on in her old age, everything happening all at once, and so Yuwen Nian had not had a chance to make her request. But she did not have to speak for everyone to know what it was she wanted – to bring Xiao Jingrui back to Da Chu.

Grand Princess Liyang had not stopped Yuwen Nian from seeing Jingrui, whether in the Princess' Residence or at the temple, she had always let this young lady come and go as she pleased. But from her perspective as a mother, she was not willing to let Xiao Jingrui out of her sight for the time being, not because she was afraid of losing him, but because she knew very well that although her warm-hearted son did not appear much disturbed on the surface, there were deep shadows hidden in his heart that he had not yet allowed to emerge.

This kind of crippling pain was not something that could be healed with consolation. It required time for a person to slowly attend and adjust to. Grand Princess Liyang wanted to be with her son during this time, and did not want him to depart for a foreign country to meet his stranger of a father, and to face a whole new torrent of emotions.

If in the future after Xiao Jingrui's emotions had stabilized and he wanted to meet his birth-father, or wanted to go and live by his side, then Grand Princess Liyang was prepared to give her consent. But at present, she needed to see Xiao Jingrui by her side, and so although she had not kept her away, the Grand Princess had largely ignored Yuwen Nian while she lingered around them in the past days.

But Miss Nian Nian's perseverance was also admirable, and she showed no sign of giving up even after all this time of following them around. As long as the Grand Princess was not around, she would come forward and find some topic to chat to Xiao Jingrui about. Although Xiao Jingrui found it difficult to banish the memories of that night whenever he looked at her, this was still his little sister, and so he treated her kindly and gently, and not only answered when she spoke to him, but even spent considerable effort in making sure she was safe and healthy.

Yuwen Nian felt that she was coming to like this brother of hers more and more, and her determination to bring him back to Chu grew greater and greater.

Xia Dong had left by herself, and Grand Princess Liyang had gotten back into her carriage to return to the capital, and Yuwen Nian followed at a distance on her horse, not drawing near, but also unwilling to be left behind.

Just before they entered the city, they happened to come across Yan Yujin.

Although in fact, it was only a chance meeting from one side's perspective. Yan Yujin had in fact come hurrying over when he heard that today was the day Xie Yu was being sent to exile.

After the heartwrenching birthday evening, with the injury and the days of national mourning, Yan Yujin had not found a chance to say a few words to his good friend. So today, he had intended to find Xiao Jingrui and drag him along to a wine house, and to tell him that no matter what circumstances Jingrui found himself in, Yan Yujin would forever be his best friend. And if Xiao Jingrui was sad, then he would console him.

But it was only after he came face to face with him that he knew he was wrong.

When Xiao Jingrui got down from the stopped carriage, his demeanor and tone was as it always was, and when he spoke, there was even a faint smile on his face. "Yujin, what is it?"

"Can't I come find you without any reason!" Yan Yujin was laughing at first, and tried to use the same tone and attitude he had always used in the past. "Say, how long do you think it's been since we went out together? You're not busy today, right? Come to Taibai House with me, go on."

Xiao Jingrui shook his head lightly. "Sorry, Yujin, I need to take my mother back."

"Then I will go with you and we can go out after we take Her Highness back to her residence."

"I'm sorry, " Xiao Jingrui was still shaking his head. "Find someone else to go with you, alright?"

"It's not like you have anything to do, and I came all this way just to see you." Yan Yujin took Xiao Jingrui by the arm and started walking. "It's settled then, let's go, come on, we'll take the Grand Princess back first."

Xiao Jingrui slowly withdrew his arm and gently pushed him back. "Thank you for inviting me, but I truly am not going, find some other friend to go with you."

By this time, Xie Bi had also stuck his head out of the carriage, and he stood there now without speaking, watching silently.

“Jingrui, it’s only going to the winehouse with me.....I want to talk to you....” Yan Yujin could not keep the smile on his face any longer, and his eyes were wide as he stared at his friend.

“I am sorry,” Xiao Jingrui apologized again, the expression on his face as bland as it had been all along, emotionless. “Another day. I must go now.”

After saying this, he turned and returned to the carriage. Xie Bi reached down a hand and pulled him inside, and the carriage slowly resumed its journey.

Yan Yujin stared blankly after it. When he had seen Xiao Jingrui’s wasted figure, and Xie Bi’s lowered eyelids, he had suddenly realized, there was no going back.

There would be no returning to that youthful joy and laughter, to those shining days of friendship.

Although he maintained that nothing had changed, that Jingrui was still Jingrui and still his best friend, to Jingrui, to Xie Bi, and to perhaps countless others on this earth, everything had already changed long ago, and had changed so completely that there could be no turning back.

It was he himself, maintaining that “nothing had changed”, who was trying to fool himself and everyone around him.

As he stared after the departing carriage, Yan Yujin stamped furiously on the sandy road, feeling a nameless rage and helplessness that he had never felt before rising within him.

No matter how much he wanted to help Jingrui, he could not repair the life that had already been torn apart before their very eyes.

The sand he had kicked up was rising in a cloud around him. Yan Yujin rubbed his eyes, feeling them redden with pain. In his blurred vision, he suddenly saw a figure on a horse stop and dismount in front of him, looking at him quietly.

Yan Yujin recognized Yuwen Nian, Jingrui’s younger sister from Da Chu.

“You are a good friend,” Yuwen Nian said softly after she saw that he had noticed her. “But this is something Gege must endure by himself. We can only stand and watch from his side, and not let him fall.”

Yan Yujin gaped at her and was not able to formulate a reply before Yuwen Nian mounted her horse again and rode off behind the carriage, both of them growing smaller and smaller as they disappeared into the distance.



## CHAPTER 103

### *Favour and Generosity (I)*

After Xie Yu had been found guilty, the Capitol Patrol which had previously been under his command was temporarily transferred to Patrol Commander Ouyang Ji, but as Ouyang Ji was only a military official of the fourth grade, he could manage the day-to-day affairs, but the ultimate leadership and power of the Capitol Patrol could certainly not be granted to him. In this matter, the Crown Prince put forward the suggestion that the Capitol Patrol should be returned to the command of the Ministry of War. Of course, Prince Yu vehemently opposed this suggestion, stating that the Ministry of War was a part of the royal court and government, so how could it assume command over the Capitol Patrol? Of course, a suitable replacement must be found, but the Minister of War himself was currently overwhelmed with his own responsibilities and could hardly take on an additional position, and the other officials in the Ministry of War did not have the required qualifications or experience, and would not be much better than Ouyang Ji, and so he suggested appointing an externally-stationed military official of the third grade or above and recalling him to the capital to assume the role.

The Liang Emperor was not nearly as concerned about the Capitol Patrol as he was about his own Imperial Guard, but nonetheless, this was no small matter, as it affected various administrations in the capital, as well as the safety of numerous imperial residences and the balance of power and harmony between them. He was finding it difficult to make a decision amidst the Crown Prince and Prince Yu's squabbling, and before he knew it, it was the end of the Seventh Month, and a decision had still not been made.

The weather in the Seventh Month was very hot, and the cacophony of the cicadas in the afternoon only worsened the feeling of suffocation. To escape the heat, the Emperor had moved his court for the handling of daily affairs from Wuying Hall to Yixian Hall, the coolest part of the palace, with its trees and thick canopies of leaves hanging over numerous winding little brooks. But because of all the trees, the cicadas were also particularly numerous, and though the younger eunuchs hurried about all day, they could not silence them all.

In his youth, the Emperor could sleep in any place and at any time, undisturbed no matter how great the clamour around him. But in his old age, this pattern had

reversed, and now even the slightest noise was enough to startle him awake and into a fury. A few days ago, a young eunuch had accidentally broken a cup and woken the Emperor from his afternoon nap, and as a result had been dragged out and flogged on the spot. And so, from the noon hour onwards, all of the Emperor's attendants grew visibly more attentive and vigilant, wound tight with nerves.

Today, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu had quarreled in court again, so the Emperor was in a poor mood when he returned to his halls in the first place, and during the noon meal, the cicadas were louder than ever, and everyone could tell the noise was beginning to irritate him. The young eunuchs ran about in terror, desperately beating at cicadas with long bamboo poles, but by the end of the noon meal, there was still a dim but noticeable buzzing in the air.

The Head Eunuch Gao Zhan saw the Emperor's darkening expression and fear rose in his heart, and he cast about frantically before suddenly remembering something, and hurried forward to say, "Your Majesty, today is the birthday of my lady Consort Jing, will you not go to see her?"

For many years, Consort Jing's birthday had come and gone without fanfare, and aside from the gifts brought to her from the inner palace out of courtesy and ritual, the day passed like any other, and no one ever thought to remind the Emperor, and even if they had, he would not have expressed any special favour. However, this year, she had just been raised to the rank of Consort, and though she herself was as quiet and unassuming as she had always been, her position had been elevated all the same, and so Gao Zhan's comment was not out of place.

"Consort Jing's birthday?" The Emperor's eyes closed. "Have our gifts been sent over?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, they have been sent."

The Emperor thought for a moment and then stood. "She has been in the palace for so many years, we should indeed pay her a visit. Prepare one hundred yards of brocade, ten chains of pearl, and ten jade pieces, and bring them over with us."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Gao Zhan knew that this visit meant the Emperor would not be taking his afternoon rest at Yixian Hall, and let out a silent sigh of relief. He bowed and retreated, first to arrange for the relevant preparations to be made, and then to sternly order the young eunuchs to take advantage of this opportunity to thoroughly rid the gardens of all the new cicadas, and then hurriedly returned to the room to help the Emperor change his robes.

After Concubine Jing had been raised to Consort, she had stayed in her Zhiluo Court, although it had been changed now to Zhiluo Palace, and the number of palace maids had been increased and their attire changed in accordance with her new rank. She had always led a simple life, being pure-of-heart and content with whatever she

had, and this temperament had not changed with time, so she still passed her days tending to her garden of medicinal flowers and herbs, quietly pruning and tidying until her Zhiluo Palace was exquisite, fresher and cleaner than anywhere else in the palace.

When the Emperor had set out for Zhiluo Palace, he had especially commanded his attendants not to announce his arrival ahead of time. As they neared Zhiluo Palace, he turned into a long corridor adorned with green vines and fragrant blossoms leading off from the main palace road, and his face lightened considerably as he wandered into its depths, Gao Zhan trailing in his wake, the summer heat suddenly seeming to dissipate as they walked slowly down the corridor.

“Look, Concubine Jing is the only one who knows how to keep a proper palace, the air here is clean and pure, and though it is not as cool as it is in Yixian Hall, it brings peace and tranquility to the heart....” The Emperor stopped mid-praise, finding something odd. “But it is a little too quiet today. Is it not Consort Jing’s birthday? Even if there are not many esteemed guests paying their visits, should there not be at least a little laughter and merriment?”

“Perhaps....” Gao Zhan was choosing his words with great care. “Consort Jing has always been quiet, and would not like to host a great feast or banquet, and so even if any esteemed guests came to pay their visits, it is now past the noon hour, and any visitors will have taken their leave, so the manor is returned to its usual quiet.”

“Aren’t you good at finding explanations,” the Emperor shot him a glance. “Do you think we do not know the real reason? Consort Jing is not popular in the palace, we only fear there are not many who even know that it is her birthday today. If this were Consort Yue, the merry-making would last until nightfall, to say nothing of the noon hour.”

“Your Majesty is brilliant and wise as always.” Gao Zhan chortled, continuing, “This is because my lady Consort Yue likes excitement, and so everyone indulges her pleasure.”

The Emperor raised a foot and kicked him gently. “You are so diplomatic, never insulting anyone. So, according to you, those in this palace who like excitement are all very well, and those who do not, like Consort Jing, are also just as well, am I correct?”

“Just so, it is as Your Majesty says.” Gao Zhan bowed further. “We have nearly arrived, perhaps your servant should go on to inform Consort Jing to come and receive Your Majesty?”

“Close your mouth and give us your arm, that will be enough.” The Emperor held out his right arm and let Gao Zhan lead him down the corridor. The eunuchs and serving girls they passed along the way knelt and bowed under Gao Zhan’s subtle gesturing, not daring to utter a word.

Just beyond the main doors of the palace, there was a large embroidered screen made of fine gauze. Behind it, the shadow of a figure could be seen, revealing that Consort Jing was sitting just beyond the screen.

The Emperor was just about to speak and give her a good fright when suddenly, he heard another voice behind the gauze. It was Xiao Jingyan.

The Emperor was surprised at first, but he soon realized that it would be unusual if Jingyan had not come today, and the only reason he himself had not thought he would be here was because of how little attention he usually paid to this mother and son pair, and he couldn't help the sense of shame and guilt that arose in his chest.

“Mother's skill truly increases every year, this lily soup is refreshing and invigorating in the heat, perfect for summertime. When your son was far from the capital leading our armies on military campaigns, if our provisions were not sufficient, naturally I had to bear the consequences along with my soldiers, and as we endured through the pain in our bellies, I always thought of Mother's beautiful dishes as a way of easing the hunger pangs.” Prince Jing's smile was evident in his voice. “If I were not afraid of causing Mother trouble, I would wish to eat your cooking every day.”

Consort Jing's voice was warm with affection, and the light clinking sounds seemed to indicate that she was spooning food into her son's bowl. “I am not afraid of hard work, it is only that you are not free to come and go from the palace as you please, but there is nothing to be done about that. So while you are here, you must eat more to make up for it. Here, I have made golden dumplings and green bean cake, take those with you when you leave.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

“Come, try this fu ling chicken....”

“Ng.”

As he listened to the idle conversation of their little family, the Emperor suddenly felt uncomfortable, and purposefully gave a loud cough. Mother and son startled, and Prince Jing was the first to emerge from behind the screen. As soon as he saw the Emperor, his face drained of colour and he immediately fell to the ground in a bow. Consort Jing, only a few steps behind him, also hurried forward and curtsied deeply, saying, “Your humble wife did not know His Majesty had come to visit, I have failed in my duties as hostess, pray forgive your servant.”

“Rise.” The Emperor put a hand under her elbow and gently lifted her to her feet as he said to Prince Jing, “You may also rise.”

The Emperor had forbidden his attendants to announce his arrival and had come in quietly himself because he had wanted to give Consort Jing a pleasant surprise, but

now, though she was certainly surprised, even after Gao Zhan handed over the gifts he had brought specially for her, he did not see much pleasure in her expression. She looked quietly content as she always did when she thanked him in a gentle voice for his favour and generosity. The Emperor turned to look at her son and saw that his expression was similar to his mother's, and he did not look especially joyful or pleased by the generous favour his mother was receiving.

The Emperor, who was used to being fawned over with enthusiastic gratitude, and used to everyone fighting to gain even the slightest bit of his favour, felt the discomfort in his heart increasing by the moment.

“When did Jingyan arrive?” The Emperor asked, laying back on the soft couch.

“Father, your son arrived just after the noon hour.”

“It is your mother's birthday, why did you not come earlier to pay your respects?”

Consort Jing answered hurriedly, “It was your humble wife who ordered him to come in the afternoon. In the morning, your servant had gone to greet the Empress and to pay respects to the Grand Empress Dowager, so even if he had come, I would not have had the time to see him.”

“Ng...” The Emperor nodded, and though his expression was indifferent, his tone at least was calm, and when he spoke again, glancing at Prince Jing, they were words of praise. “Recently, Jingyan has done very well in the tasks we have assigned to him, we are very pleased indeed. We keep meaning to reward you, but things have been busy, and we have neglected what was due to you. Now, since your mother is here as well, tell us, what would you like?”

Prince Jing was a bit surprised, and did not know what to say. But the question was before him, and he could not fail to answer, and so he thought quickly and then said, “Father Emperor, your son has only fulfilled his duty in carrying out the imperial orders he was given, and does not dare hope for reward. But I cannot decline my lord's great favour, and since Father Emperor has seen fit to bestow this great kindness to me, then your son will dare to make his request. Pray Father Emperor, bestow your pardon on a criminal in exile and forced labour in Lingnan.”

“A criminal?” The Emperor was also surprised, and doubt and suspicion rose up involuntarily as he frowned and asked, “What criminal? Another haughty scholar babbling nonsense about this court and its government? You have always been loyal and honest, where did you learn these tricks for gaining fame and winning people's hearts? Who taught you this?”

In the face of this abrupt fury, Prince Jing did not appear frightened, but knelt and bowed as he answered, “This criminal is only a commoner, obscure and without prospects, it is only that his son in the preliminary round of the imperial examinations

forgot to omit the holy name of our divine emperor ancestor, and so committed this great violation, and caused him to be exiled by association....”

The anger in the Emperor’s face dissipated a little. “A lowly nameless commoner, then why would you beg for his pardon?”

“Pray Your Majesty forgive your humble servant for her crimes,” Consort Jing took a step forward. “This person is a rural doctor, and your servant once learned from him in her youth, and spent many years as his student. One month ago, I received word that he had been exiled to Lingnan, and pitied the hardship he must suffer in his old age. And yet, the crime he has been associated with is too great to hope for pardon, and I feared he must die in a foreign land, his lonely soul never to return home, and my heart found it difficult to bear. I told Jingyan about this matter just now, but I never thought he would hold it in his heart.....so if His Majesty must cast blame, pray see fit to cast it on your humble wife.”

“So it is like this,” the Emperor finally smiled. “You are soft-hearted indeed. But this is no difficult matter, Jingyan is a prince, so long as you say the word, there must be someone in your manor who will be able to rescue this commoner, why come to beg for his pardon from us? Come, choose another reward.”

Prince Jing’s eyebrows furrowed, and a dim unhappiness rose in his heart before he suppressed it, bowed again, and said, “It is your son’s belief that only Your Majesty has the power to pardon such a great crime. Though your son is a prince, I have no other ideas to resolve this matter. For the sake of soothing my mother’s sorrow, I can only beg for this pardon, pray Your Majesty grant this favour in your great mercy.”

The Emperor looked at him deeply, seeming to understand the unspoken meaning behind his words, and something stirred in his heart as he sighed, “That stubborn, unyielding temper of yours is the same as always. But you will not misuse your power and authority, and have kept yourself pure, and we are comforted to see this. What you wish for, we shall grant, and the imperial edict shall be issued this very day.”

“Your son thanks Your Majesty for his great mercy.”

The Emperor waved a hand for him to rise. He did not usually pay this much attention, but when he looked more carefully today, he suddenly realized that this son of his, standing with upright posture and his stoic, martial air, was looking more pleasing to the eye than he ever had before, and an idea came to him.

“Jingyan, you are experienced in leading armies, we want to hand over control of the Capitol Patrol to you, what do you think?”

## CHAPTER 104

### *Favour and Generosity (II)*

“Jingyan, you are experienced in leading armies, we want to hand over control of the Capitol Patrol to you, what do you think?”

At these words, Xiao Jingyan was stunned into silence for the second time today, so that for a long time after the Emperor’s question, he was unable to form a reply.

At first, the Emperor waited patiently. He thought Prince Jing’s silence was due to deliberation over how to express his gratitude, and felt that since this son of his had spent most of the recent years leading armies outside of the capital, and seldom received imperial favour, it was natural that his response time would be slower and his words less sweet when compared to Prince Yu, and so it would be not trouble to wait a little longer.

But as he waited and waited, the Emperor gradually began to realize that something was wrong.

Prince Jing’s expression was growing less and less like that of someone considering how to express thanks, and instead looked as if he was considering whether or not to accept this responsibility.

Displeasure arose in the Emperor’s heart.

It was not as if Prince Jing had not been in court when the Crown Prince and Prince Yu had fought so desperately over this position, and now it was being handed to him on a golden platter, surely hesitation was not the appropriate response, to say nothing of falling to his knees in gratitude the way anyone else might have done.

“Jingyan, are you afraid of the hard work?” The Emperor asked coldly.

“Your son would not dare,” Prince Jing knelt hurriedly. “Your son is deeply touched by Father’s great kindness, it is only....”

“Only what?”

Prince Jing hesitated for a moment, and then drew himself together and said, "It is nothing.... Your son accepts this responsibility, and will henceforth discharge all related duties to the best of my ability, so as not to betray the trust Father Emperor has placed in me."

Though Prince Jing had not answered the question, the Emperor thought he understood his hesitation. Although Prince Jing's lack of enthusiasm following this imperial favour had irritated him a little, it was a great comfort to him that this son of his evidently had no wish or intention to join in the fight for the throne that was currently dividing his court.

"You do not need to worry too much," the Emperor said, patting Prince Jing on the shoulder as he spoke. "You are a prince, and an accomplished military general, what is leading this little Capitol Patrol compared to that? Father Emperor is here to support you, and we will see who dares to say anything. In the days to come, if anyone tries to wrong you, be sure to tell Father Emperor, and we will certainly see that justice is done."

Actually, the reason Prince Jing had hesitated just now was not as simple as the Emperor believed. Since he had taken on the goal of attaining the throne, naturally any additional power was welcome, and the only reason he had hesitated was because his influence was still weak at the moment, and he did not want to suddenly appear to be receiving too much imperial favour, for fear of attracting the Crown Prince and Prince Yu's attention. But since the Emperor had offered this favour in person, he had no time to consult Su Zhe for advice, and so he could only grit his teeth and accept the responsibility, and deal with the consequences later.

Throughout this entire process, Consort Jing had stood quietly to one side, as if the matter had nothing to do with her at all. It was only when father and son seemed to have concluded their conversation that she came forward with a bowl of snow clam soup, saying in her gentle voice, "Has His Majesty taken his afternoon nap yet today? How about having a few spoonfuls of soup and then taking your rest here in your servant's rooms?"

The Emperor accepted the bowl and took a sip. This soup tasted even richer and purer than the snow crab soup he was accustomed to, and a crisp sweetness lingered on the tongue even after swallowing. He finished half the bowl almost unthinkingly, and then rinsed his mouth before allowing Consort Jing to lower him onto the bed, a pillow under his head, its sweet fragrance filling his nose as he lay down.

"What kind of pillow is this?"

"Your Majesty, it is made of cotton with sun-dried honeysuckle at its core, as well as plum flowers and lotus leaves and a variety of other medicinal herbs. If Your Majesty likes it, your servant will be glad to stitch a new one for Your Majesty's use."



“Good, good.” The Emperor felt his entire body relaxing and closed his eyes, only to open them again. “If we are taking our afternoon rest here, then Jingyan must leave. The two of you do not often have the chance to dine together, have we interrupted you?”

“Serving Your Majesty is your servant’s first and foremost duty,” Consort Jing smiled. “His Majesty will frighten Jingyan if he speaks in this way.”

The Emperor chuckled, and then turned towards Prince Jing and said, “Jingyan, we have disturbed the two of you today, and naturally must make amends. From this day forward, you may enter Zhiluo Palace to visit your mother as you please, and do not need to obtain imperial permission.”

He had bestowed favour after favour today in almost unprecedented generosity, but only this last favour generated the anticipated reaction. Consort Jing’s smile spread across her face, her eyes shining with unshed tears, and Prince Jing’s face lit up in joy as he fell forward into an emphatic bow. “Your son...thanks Father Emperor for his great generosity!”

The Emperor’s favour had always been the compass around which the palace oriented itself. Although he had only come to take a nap and drop off a few gifts, everyone was realizing that Zhiluo Palace was beginning to catch the imperial gaze. After the Emperor left, guests arrived bearing their own gifts, a steady stream that did not let up until nightfall. At sunset, when the time came for Consort Jing to attend the Empress, even she especially inquired after Consort Jing’s afternoon with the Emperor, taking the opportunity to send a few well-aimed remarks at Consort Yue at the same time. But Consort Yue, well-versed in the intricate games of the Inner Palace, showed not the slightest trace of envy, and instead smiled with loving tenderness as she joined in the praises for Consort Jing, and in so doing silently returning the Empress’ challenge. These two, enemies since their first days in the palace, continued exchanging barbs as sharp as knives, their tongues like swords hidden behind simpering lips and murderous smiles. It was Consort Jing, the origin of today’s excitement, who stood quietly through it all, almost blending into the background in her stillness, the very picture of serenity, so that all who looked upon her couldn’t help but sigh in secret admiration.

This latest wave of excitement in the palace had not yet been reported to the now-famous Su Manor. And so, when Meng Zhi slipped in quietly for a visit, he only came across Mei Changsu reading under his lamp at his table, as always.

“Lately, both your health and your mood seem to be well, it puts me at ease.” The Commander General of the Imperial Guard gave a relaxed smile. “What book is that? Are you writing annotations in the margin?”

“It is ‘Soaring over the Earth: A Chronicle’. It records both culture and geography in an interesting manner as well as with great accuracy, and is surely the best

substitute to travelling to such places in person,” Mei Changsu smiled as he set down the thin brush in his hand. “I have been to some of the places it mentions, and so am adding a few of my own remarks, it is just idle leisure to pass the time.”

Meng Zhi moved over for a closer look, and seeing that Mei Changsu seemed to be in a good mood, finally brought up a question he had been wanting to ask for a long time. “Your handwriting is much changed from before, did you purposefully train yourself in this way?”

“You may say it was with purpose, and you may say it was without choice.” Mei Changsu closed the book and laid it to one side. “The strength in my wrists is now much reduced, so the thickness of each brushstroke is changed, and the calligraphy itself must be simplified. Now, if I were to try to write even a few words in the style to which I was accustomed in the past, I only fear I would be unable.”

Meng Zhi regretted raising such an obviously painful topic and hurriedly sought to change the subject. “I hear you would not allow Mu Qing to apply for imperial permission to return to Yunnan, is that true?”

“Yes,” Mei Changsu poured a cup of tea for his guest and pushed it towards him. “Mu Qing initially stayed in the capital for the Grand Empress Dowager’s sake. Now, it has not been long since she was laid to rest, and Mu Qing is in a hurry to leave, this will first make him appear cold of heart, and second will arouse the Emperor’s suspicions. It is not as if Mu Qing is in any danger at the moment, so why not stay for another year yet, and spend the time learning and training here, there could be no harm in that.”

“You have a point,” Meng Zhi nodded. “Although Mu Qing is not of the imperial clan, the Grand Empress Dowager has always doted on the younger generations. To say nothing of the royal family, even the Princesses who married into the family and the children of princes and dukes who did not bear the royal surname – who among them did not call her Grandmother or Great-Grandmother in private? It is only natural for him to spend a year in the capital keeping her vigil out of filial piety.”

Mei Changsu gazed into the glow of the lamp beside him and said lowly, “She loved the children, and this the children knew in their hearts. And so, even Mu Qing with his temper immediately heeded my advice to withhold his request and agreed to stay in the capital to keep his vigil of piety. If Nihuang were able to return as well, I only fear she would have done so long ago....”

Meng Zhi was starting to feel as if he was putting his foot into his mouth with every sentence he spoke today, as if he had come just to disturb Mei Changsu’s peaceful leisure, and he hurriedly lifted the cup of tea to his lips as he sought yet another change of topic. “Xia Dong has been quiet lately, there’s been no sign of any trouble. But when I remember that temper of hers from the past, I must say this quiet is all the more frightening. Do you think Xia Jiang has noticed anything?”

“For the Xuanjing Bureau, I only wish to observe matters as they unfold. It is as I have always said – Xia Dong is not to be underestimated. Now that she has learned the truth, no matter how much she once revered her shifu, she will be wary and vigilant now, and she is more than capable of protecting herself, so it is hardly my place to worry over her. Whether Xia Jiang has noticed or not is of little importance. Let them have their confrontation. This, as well as Xia Chun and Xia Qiu’s reaction, I wish to see.” Mei Changsu’s tone of voice as he spoke seemed even more ruthless than it had before the national mourning, and a cold hard light was in his eyes as he continued, “I am certain Nie dage’s widow will not disappoint me....”

“Xiao Shu,” Meng Zhi looked at him intently, about to speak when Li Gang came running in to the room.

“Chief, Prince Yu is about to enter, he came rushing straight towards you as soon as he got off his carriage, we couldn’t stop him at all....”

Mei Changsu’s brow furrowed. He knew Meng Zhi could not be certain of leaving unseen at this rate, and immediately stood and opened the door to the hidden tunnel. He shoved his ‘Soaring over the Earth: A Chronicle’ into Meng Zhi’s hands as he pushed him inside, all while saying swiftly, “I must trouble the Commander General to spend some time reading here, when Prince Yu has gone, we will continue our conversation.”

Meng Zhi complied without a word, and the door to the tunnel had just been closed when Prince Yu’s footsteps were heard. Mei Changsu turned to receive him, indicating as he did so for Li Gang as well as Zhen Ping, who had followed Prince Yu into the room, to retreat.

“Mister Su, did you know the matter of the Capitol Patrol’s leadership has already been decided?” Prince Yu did not waste any time with pleasantries, and he spoke with his teeth gritted and a dark expression on his face.

“Oh?” Mei Changsu raised an eyebrow. “From Your Highness’ appearance, could it be that I guessed wrongly?”

“You did not guess wrong, Father Emperor indeed did not allow the Ministry of War to claim the position,” Prince Yu’s tone was extremely unhappy. “He gave the position to Prince Jing.”

This time, Mei Changsu was truly a little surprised. “Prince Jing? When did this occur?”

“This very afternoon. There was no sign of this decision beforehand, and His Majesty did not seek anyone’s advice before suddenly, it was done.”

“I do not understand why Your Highness is angry,” Mei Changsu said indifferently. “Is it not a good thing for the position to fall to Prince Jing? At least he is just and fair, and Your Highness does not have to worry about him favouring the Crown Prince.”

“If Prince Jing were truly only Prince Jing, then I would be content to see this matter decided as such, but...” Prince Yu had a special kind of sensitivity towards his enemies, and at this moment, this particular awareness was in full force. “Doesn’t Mister Su feel that Prince Jing has been rising a little too quickly recently? Since he accepted the Land Infringement Case, Father Emperor’s favour towards him has been increasing by the day, even the court officials have been praising him more and more, and his renown lately seems to be rising to the heavens. And all the newly appointed officials in the court seem to have a very good impression of him, and though he does not show any sign of taking sides or amassing support for his own claim, the Prince Jing of today is certainly not the same Prince Jing who returned to the capital last year.”

Mei Changsu appeared to be considering this very carefully before he said, “When everything is laid out in this way, it does seem a little suspicious. But even if Prince Jing had ambitions of his own, it would be difficult for them to come to fruition without any support. Is Your Highness certain that he has not been gathering support for his own claim?”

“That is what Qin Banruo has reported. But lately, Qin Banruo.....has been a little disappointing. Many things she only knew about after the fact, and some information was even wrong. She suspects there may be traitors in her network, otherwise her connections would not be so neatly cut, without leaving any trace or sign to be followed.”

Mei Changsu tapped his fingers lightly on his desk and said slowly, “I have never inquired much into Miss Qin’s methods. But I am sure the name list of her informers is very well-hidden, and rest assured, if she must investigate it for traitors, how could she fail to identify them?”

Something flashed across Prince Yu’s gaze, but he said nothing. He knew very well the list of the informers Qin Banruo had placed into various different households was known only to himself, her, the chief old master of his imperial household Mister Kang, and Zhu Hua, a scholar whom he trusted above anyone else. Each of these persons should have been above suspicion. Putting aside himself and Qin Banruo, Mister Kang had been a part of his household for more than twenty years, and Zhu Hua was his greatest assistant in the court as well as his wife’s own older brother.....his wife’s.....

Mei Changsu glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, but acted as if he had not seen the mix of emotions that had flitted across Prince Yu’s face, and only continued

peacefully, “His Highness came today in such a great rush, was it only because of the news that Prince Jing had been granted command of the Capitol Patrol?”

“Of course not. Father Emperor has also issued an imperial edict allowing Prince Jing to visit his mother in the palace whenever he likes, without needing to obtain imperial permission. This is a privilege given only to royal princes, and I fear he is about to rise one great step in rank, and will soon be rubbing shoulders with me. Father Emperor has neglected Concubine Jing for so many years, and then out of the blue he decides to raise her to Consort, so when you look at all of these things together, it cannot be coincidence, Father Emperor obviously means to support Prince Jing, just like that year when he...” Prince Yu came to a stop, suddenly realizing what he was going to say, and swallowed the rest of his sentence.

Just like that year when he supported you? Mei Changsu lowered his eyes to hide the cold smile in his expression, then prudently acted as if he had not understood what had almost been said, slowly continuing to trim the candle wick of the lamp before him, his expression as tranquil as a cloud in a gentle breeze.

“Mister Su,” Prince Yu was a little incensed by his nonchalance, and could not help the anger that leaked through in his tone. “I am not joking, and the way Mister is acting now, it is as if you are not taking to heart my current situation!”

Mei Changsu slowly put down his scissors and turned to face Prince Yu, his gaze cool as water, enough to quench the fire that had been almost palpably burning over the skin of this royal prince. When he spoke, his voice was as calm as a windless lake.

“Your Highness Prince Yu, since you have already seen that this is His Majesty’s imperial will, what more is there to worry about?”

## CHAPTER 105

### *Strategy*

“Your Highness Prince Yu, since you have already seen that this is His Majesty’s imperial will, what more is there to worry about?”

Prince Yu felt something stir in his heart, and he carefully turned over this statement in his mind before answering slowly, “Mister’s meaning is.....”

“After Xie Yu was sentenced, I urged Your Highness to exercise restraint in dealing with the Crown Prince. It appears that Your Highness thought I was being soft-hearted, and took my words only as idle chatter?”

Prince Yu thought for a moment and remembered something like this had indeed happened, and hurriedly tried to backpedal: “Mister only mentioned it in passing, I thought it was not important....”

At this, he abruptly stopped himself. Su Zhe was his strategist, this was true, but he had never used a particularly aggressive approach in all their interactions to date, and mentioning something was his way of expressing his advice. As for whether he himself listened, Su Zhe had never insisted, and so it was his own fault for failing to take his suggestions seriously.

“Even though the Crown Prince has committed wrong, he is still His Majesty’s own appointed heir. Recently, Your Highness has been a little too powerful, and have crossed the line to threatening the imperial authority.” Mei Changsu sighed and shook his head. “Has Your Highness truly not noticed that your imperial favour has been waning of late?”

“This is true. Father Emperor has been increasingly cold towards me recently, and I could not understand the reason for it, though I spent much time pondering over the matter.”

“What is difficult to understand about it?” Mei Changsu spoke bluntly. “The Crown Prince of the Eastern Palace has been so thoroughly subdued that he can hardly lift his head in the court, where all the officials now bow to Your Highness’ great talent, no one daring to utter a word in opposition whenever Your Highness speaks.

Do you think His Majesty delights when he sees this, and will continue heaping favour and support on Your Highness' head?"

"But.....but Father Emperor has always....."

"You are correct, His Majesty has always encouraged the competition between you and the Crown Prince. But he never imagined that the situation would progress to its current state. Several top-ranking ministers have been toppled from their position, there was the great court debate on the respective ranks of the sons of wives versus concubines, then there was the illegal fireworks factory, and finally Xie Yu's downfall – all of this was out of His Majesty's expectation, and he has attributed every one to Your Highness' doing. Think, if you were able to plot the undoing of the heir's greatest supporter and win over the entire court without His Majesty's support, how could His Majesty not grow fearful and suspicious, and move to suppress your power and influence?"

As he spoke, Prince Yu broke out in a cold sweat, and when Mei Changsu finished, he immediately cupped his hands and lifted them in a half-bow, saying, "I have indeed been a little over-ambitious of late, now that things have progressed to their current state, what should I do to redeem myself?"

"Your Highness does not need to be overly concerned. His Majesty is only heaping favour onto Prince Jing to remind you to calm yourself, and to remember who truly holds power and authority in the palace, and in this way, he is showing that he means to protect and preserve your position. I can see that His Majesty has already rejected the Crown Prince in his heart, and the naming of a new heir is only a matter of time, it is only..... the Crown Prince must be brought down by the weight of His Majesty's own disappointment and anger, and not by Your Highness' intervening attacks, trying to seize power and gain prestige by brute force. I trust Your Highness understands this difference?"

Prince Yu was calculating and observant by nature, and adept at reading people and situations, and so he understood what Mei Changsu meant, and sat down again, nodding slowly as he said, "That's right, the closer we are, the more important it is to act slowly. Father Emperor is favouring Prince Jing, and he is certainly watching for my reaction. If I step wrongly now, the consequences will be difficult to imagine, so it is better to choose passivity as our course of action for the time being."

Mei Changsu looked approving as he smiled and answered, "Your Highness' greatest competition at the moment is still the Crown Prince, but we cannot take no action at all against Prince Jing either. Please have Miss Qin keep a close eye on him."

Prince Yu's expression had lightened, and now he smiled back at Mei Changsu. "If Mister would consent to move to my palace and be consulted for your wisdom on a regular basis, I can assure you a much higher income and standard of living."

His invitation for Mei Changsu to move into his palace had been extended eight or ten times by now, but he never seemed angered by the other's refusal, and seemed only politely interested in recruiting this talent to his household. It was a pity that no matter what form this invitation took, that which could not be accepted simply would not be accepted.

“What I must say and do are not hidden.” Mei Changsu leaned back in his chair, his expression undisturbed. “Even if I were to trouble Your Highness and move into your residence, I would not speak any more than I do now, so what difference could it make?”

Prince Yu immediately took the chance to urge, “I know Mister Su lives in a carefree and leisurely manner, and in fact, there are few rules and regulations in my palace, and Mister would be free to do as he likes.”

A grim amusement stirred in Mei Changsu's heart. Since he had come to be his strategist, what good was there pretending to be carefree and idle any longer? But he kept the smile on his face as he replied tactfully, “It would not be fitting for Your Highness to cast aside rules and regulations on my behalf.... That's right, Xie Yu's case has finally ended, I wonder what Your Highness is preparing to do about the Zhuo family?”

“I will continue to care for them, of course, and help them return to Tianquan Manor to pass their days in peace and quiet. The roots of the Zhuo clan are deep, and they will not require much assistance from me in the end.”

“That is true. Although Zhuo Dingfeng is wounded, the foundation of Tianquan Manor still stands. They will survive this setback, and their days of glory will come again.” Mei Changsu thought for a moment, and then continued, “Though the Zhuo Clan still commands some power in the jianghu, they are now only people who have been used and cast aside by Xie Yu, and will be of no use to Your Highness in the future. Why not let them leave all of this behind and cut a clean break from the court, and so gain a reputation of generosity and kindness for Your Highness meanwhile?”

Prince Yu's thoughts faltered for a moment. He had indeed meant to make the most out of every resource, and thought that the Zhuo family might still be of some use to him at some point in the future, so on hearing this, he immediately replied, “Although the power of jianghu cannot stand against that of the court, it is still useful in its way, and despite the injuries the Zhuo family has suffered, they still have some influence left, so why....”

“With me here, what is there for Your Highness to fear in jianghu?” Mei Changsu answered calmly.



Prince Yu had been waiting for these words from the Chief of Jiangzuo Alliance, and when he heard them, his face lit up in a pleased smile and he stroked his mustache as he said, "You are right, even at the height of Tianquan Manor's powers, they could hardly have been Mister Su's match."

"Your Highness is over-generous in his praise, I would not dare to speak so boldly." Though his words were self-depreciating, his expression was grave with a cool haughtiness that seemed to emanate from his very bones, a kind of inexplicable confidence that was almost palpable. When Prince Yu thought about the fact that this mysterious qilin prodigy, revered throughout jianghu, was now working for him, an unspeakable joy and delight welled up in his heart, and the jealousy and anger that had surrounded him like a fog on his entrance into Su Manor now dissipated like smoke into the sky.

The conversation was winding down, and though Prince Yu meant to continue with some idle chatter, he found that Mei Changsu only answered briefly no matter which topic he tried to raise. He did not want to overstay his welcome, and Fei Liu was staring sullenly from a corner, and sure enough, when Prince Yu stood and bid a polite farewell, his host did not object.

After Prince Yu had departed from the manor, Mei Changsu said a few words to Fei Liu, and then left the unhappy-looking youth outside as he himself opened the door to the secret tunnel and slipped inside.

He went down the tunnel to the hidden chamber, but when he pushed open the stone door, the normally unflappable Mister Mei of Jiangzuo started in surprise.

Meng Zhi was not the only person in the hidden chamber. He was standing by the wall, and on hearing the sound of the stone door opening, he immediately turned. Beside him, sitting at the desk flipping through 'Soaring over the Earth: A Chronicle' by the light of the lantern, was Prince Jing Xiao Jingyan.

"Mister Su has returned," Meng Zhi said as he came forward to greet him. "Just now, when His Highness Prince Jing found me here, he was surprised too. I have already explained to His Highness how it was I found myself here."

Prince Jing put down the book in his hand and asked mildly, "Has Prince Yu left?"

Mei Changsu composed himself, and then walked forward and bowed. "Yes, Your Highness, Prince Yu just departed."

"Since Mister Su has already met with Prince Yu, there are some things you must know already...."

“Yes,” Mei Changsu nodded slightly. “I hear His Majesty has commanded Your Highness to take charge of the Capitol Patrol, and intends to raise you to the rank of Royal Prince.”

“Hm?” Prince Jing looked taken aback. “It is true that I have received the imperial order to take command of the Capitol Patrol, but there was not any mention of being raised to Royal Prince.”

“Did His Majesty not give you permission to enter the imperial palace at your leisure?”

“He did indeed.... So in the future, I will not have to wait for the appropriate dates or obtain imperial permission to visit my mother.”

“It is this which has infuriated Prince Yu so greatly. Has Your Highness not noticed that this has always been a privilege granted exclusively to Royal Princes?”

When Prince Jing had received this special privilege, he had only been delighted that he would be able to visit his mother any time he wished, and had not thought about the implications of this honour. But at Mei Changsu’s prompting, a cautious joy rose in his heart, only to be quickly suppressed by doubt. “I truly did not think so much of it.... Today is my mother’s birthday, perhaps Father Emperor was simply feeling generous, and has no other intention in mind.”

Mei Changsu answered, “The matter is all but decided. Your Highness’ promotion to Royal Prince should have happened long ago, and even if His Majesty did not think of it when he bestowed this privilege on you, when the court ministers carry out this imperial edict, they will certainly remind His Majesty that this is the privilege of a Royal Prince. If you are granted the privileges of a Royal Prince without the title, then what favour would that be? Since His Majesty has seen fit to bestow his favour on you, then he will not do things by halves, that would cause more confusion in the end. By the end of this month at the earliest, and the autumn sacrifices at the latest, the elevation in your rank will be confirmed, I am sure of it.”

“That is good,” Meng Zhi said joyfully. “Then Your Highness Prince Jing will no longer have to stand one rank below Prince Yu.”

“But...is this the right time?” Prince Jing closed his eyes. “Has Mister not cautioned me all along to keep a low profile in the court?”

“There is a time for everything,” Mei Changsu’s expression was calm. “Your Highness’ current position is still relatively weak, so keeping a low profile would naturally be the best option. But it would not do to hide forever and never take a step forward. We did not fight for the Capitol Patrol, but now that it has fallen into our hands, there is no need to push it away. With the preparations Your Highness has been making for the past year, if we are unable now to absorb the consequences of

obtaining the Capitol Patrol, then it will be counted as my failings as your strategist. I stand by what I have said all along: Your Highness cannot move forward prematurely, but neither can you not move forward at all.”

“Good.” Prince Jing nodded swiftly. “When His Majesty gave the Capitol Patrol over to me, I had no choice but to accept, and I have been worried that it would disrupt the rhythm of Mister’s careful plans. Now that it has not, everything has turned out for the best. But as for the Crown Prince and Prince Yu...”

“The Crown Prince is powerless to stop his own downfall, and he only has eyes for Prince Yu now. His Majesty could raise you to a Nine-Jewel Royal Prince, and the Crown Prince would still not spare any energy towards dealing with you. As for Prince Yu, I have taken care of it just now. If he follows my advice, he will not take any action against Your Highness, and Your Highness can take this chance and time to increase your strength. If he only pretended to listen and intends to give in to his jealousy anyway and deal Your Highness a blow, then we will absorb its force and redirect it, and let the matter arrive before His Majesty, so that he who bestowed this favour onto you may judge the situation for himself.”

“Then no matter what Prince Yu does, he cannot win?” Meng Zhi could not help laughing. “This was an unexpected turn of events, and yet Mister Su has managed to weave such a complete and intricate plan into place, I can only stand in admiration.”

“This is the nature of strategy.” There was no pride or satisfaction on Mei Changsu’s face. “If the chances of success depend on the choices of our opponents, then this is a poor option indeed. It is only when we have plans to counter every choice our opponents may make that we may tentatively say we have the situation in hand. Your Highness is a certain distance yet from this goal, but now the foundation at least has been laid.”

On hearing him say this, Prince Jing was greatly reassured. Ever since he had made up his mind to restore his fallen elder brother’s innocence, his yearning and determination for the throne had increased several fold. He had been studying diligently and taking every opportunity to put his learning into practice in the hopes of gaining experience, and so in many ways, he had come to appreciate and depend upon Mei Changsu much more so than before, and so he was purposefully adjusting his instinctive dislike towards strategists, so that this bias would not affect his judgement.

Although Mei Changsu did not comment aloud on Prince Jing’s efforts, he was in fact quite pleased, and had even mentioned as such to Meng Zhi.

But what Mei Changsu didn’t know was that, to Meng Zhi, his delight would always stir up an indescribable sorrow in the Commander General.

“My lady Consort Jing must be happy today.” Meng Zhi saw that the two had stopped speaking, and the atmosphere was turning cool, and so he hurriedly spoke up.

“With His Majesty’s new edict, it will be much easier for Your Highness to see my lady in the future.”

He might as well have not spoken at all, so useless was this comment, and so Prince Jing only smiled slightly and nodded in reply. Actually, in all the times Prince Jing and Mei Changsu had met in the hidden chamber before, the atmosphere had never grown cold. After discussing the fight for the throne, the two would inevitably turn to discussing court politics, and the conversation could go on for hours. But today, with Meng Zhi present, Prince Jing did not want to say too much. This was not because he did not trust the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, but because, although Meng Zhi had expressed a willingness to support his claim to the throne, he was still to the bone loyal first to his lord, and only afterwards to Prince Jing. He did not mind declaring his intention to fight for the throne in front of Meng Zhi, but as for the opinions he held over the Emperor’s decisions and manner of handling certain court affairs, these Prince Jing did not want Meng Zhi to hear too much about.

Mei Changsu had already understood Xiao Jingyan’s thoughts and reasoning, and so he had not tried to change the topic. But when he saw Meng Zhi trying so hard to lighten the mood, he could not help smiling. “Does the Commander General have an early shift tomorrow? Your Highness should retire for some rest as well.”

Prince Jing had already accepted that there would be no possibility for their usual discussions at today’s meeting, and so he immediately answered, “We have taken half of Mister’s day as well, you should get some rest. I will return another day to inquire of Mister’s wisdom.”

Mei Changsu did not bother with much courtesy, and only bowed in reply. Meng Zhi, standing between the two, hurriedly turned and cupped his fists in a bow of farewell.

Prince Jing nodded, and then turned to return to his own rooms through the hidden tunnel. At the door, he suddenly halted, and then turned around, reaching over to pick up ‘Soaring over the Earth: A Chronicle’, which had been lying on the table. “This book is very interesting, and I did not have time to finish it just now. Would Mister mind if I borrowed it for a few days?”

## CHAPTER 106

### *Sisters*

When Prince Jing made his request to borrow the book, Meng Zhi was standing about half an arm's distance from Mei Changsu. Though he did not turn his head directly to look, the Commander General of the Imperial Guard felt Mei Changsu's body stiffen, and heard the hitch in his breath when he froze for a moment.

"It is no matter, if His Highness so wishes, then by all means, please take it away with you." In the blink of an eye, the moment had passed, and there was a gentle smile on Mei Changsu's face again, his tone as bland as it always was.

Prince Jing nodded his thanks, tucked the book into his sleeve and turned to leave. Mei Changsu waited until the stone door on the side of the chamber closest to Prince Jing's quarters was closed before slowly taking his own leave. Meng Zhi followed him silently for a few moments before he couldn't help himself and asked, "Xiao Shu, was there something wrong with that book?"

"No."

His reply came so quickly that Meng Zhi was a little surprised. "But, just now, you...."

Mei Changsu's steps faltered, and something shone in his gaze as he answered lowly, "There is nothing wrong with neither the content nor the handwriting of my annotations, it is only..."

Meng Zhi waited, but he did not continue, and so after a long moment, he asked again, "It is only what?"

"There are two characters in which I omitted strokes out of respect.<sup>157</sup>"

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<sup>157</sup> I think the text explains it well enough but in case you're still confused: In (ancient?) Chinese custom, it's considered disrespectful / taboo to write the characters of your mother (parent?)'s childhood name / pet name, so the way to avoid the taboo is to omit a stroke or two when you write that character. I dunno. It's a respect thing?

“Omitted...omitted strokes? Which two words?” Meng Zhi didn’t understand, his eyes wide with confusion.

Mei Changsu coughed slightly and did not answer him directly. “It is the characters of my mother’s childhood name, which I came across in my annotations.”

“Is that...important?”

“Probably not. Jingyan does not know my mother’s childhood name, and those two characters are not often used, so in the past, he has never had cause to discover that I omit strokes in those two characters. Besides, I only omitted the last stroke, so it is possible he may not even notice.”

“Oh,” Meng Zhi let out a sigh of relief. “Well in that case, why were you so worried just now?”

“I do not know,” Mei Changsu’s gaze was a little distant, tinted with grief. “Perhaps it was because, despite everything, the book carries within it the scars of the past, and so a strange nervousness gripped me for a moment. And then I realized that, in fact, Jingyan will not be able to see it at all...”

By this time, the outermost door to the hidden corridor had opened, Fei Liu’s handsome face peeking in from outside. Although he had waited a long while, he was instantly reassured by this quick glimpse of Mei Changsu, and he immediately darted back to his own bed and went to sleep.

Before Meng Zhi had gone into the hidden chamber to hide, Mei Changsu had said “we will continue our conversation”, but now it was late, and their hearts were both heavy, and so after a word of farewell, Meng Zhi took his leave.

When Fei Liu had gone to sleep, he had not lit the lamp in the bedroom, and so the only light came from the silver lantern on the desk in the outer room. Mei Changsu walked over and picked up the lantern. His gaze roamed over the desk, stopping on the thin brush that still rested there, dark with ink, beside the empty space where the book had been lying just a few hours earlier. A faint uneasiness arose in his heart.

In this moment, it was as if the past had been spun into a shining silk thread, which had accidentally fallen into Xiao Jingyan’s grasp. But it was too thin, too fine, for him to ever be able to see.

Mei Changsu let out a deep breath, as if wanting to let go of his turbulent emotions, and picked up at random another book, then carried both it and the lantern into the inner room. Fei Liu was already deeply asleep, his light snores a peaceful hum in the lonely night. Mei Changsu glanced over at him, and then silently placed the lantern on the little table beside his bed. He was just unfastening his outer robes when suddenly, a low voice was heard outside his door.

“Is Chief asleep?”

“Come in,” Mei Changsu answered, taking off his outer robes and laying them on his pillow. Li Gang pushed open the door and entered, walking over to Mei Changsu and holding out in both hands a tiny bronze cylinder.

Mei Changsu accepted it, and then opened the cylinder with an ease born of long practice, withdrawing from within it a tiny paper scroll, which he unrolled and read, his face expressionless, before dropping it into the flame of the lantern beside him.

“Chief...”

Mei Changsu was silent for a moment, and then answered slowly, “Pay close attention to the household of the Grand Princess Liyang. If there are any new developments, inform me at once.”

“Yes.”

Originally, he had brought the lantern and book with him into the inner room with the intention of reading for awhile, but now, Mei Changsu seemed suddenly tired, and after delivering this order, he lay down and prepared to sleep.

Li Gang did not dare disturb him any further, and he blew out the lantern before retreating out of the room silently, closing the door behind him.

The wind had risen in the night and rain was falling, the sound of the raindrops hitting the window serving only to emphasize the silence of the room within.

Mei Changsu turned over, away from the window. In the pitch darkness, his eyes opened, but it was not long before they closed again....

Rhinoceros District was one of many small districts found around Jinling. Its population did not exceed two hundred, and there was only one main street, on which could be found little stores such as a tofu shop, a small restaurant, and a grocery store. Aside from market days, when the district became a little busier than usual, the area was otherwise exceedingly quiet.

Early in the morning on this particular day, a small, brightly coloured litter carried by a pair of palanquin-bearers bobbed its way into Rhinoceros District. Because it had rained the night before, the feet and legs of the palanquin-bearers were coated with yellow dirt. It was obvious at a glance that this litter had come from the palace road, and by the look of it, its occupant intended to find a place in the little district to stop for a rest.

Aside from a small tea-shop that also offered assorted dim-sum dishes, there was only one other restaurant in Rhinoceros District that sold hot meals, and so the little palanquin, with no other options available to it, turned around at the end of the main street and came to a halt before the small restaurant.

When the palanquin-bearers drew aside the curtains of the litter, it was a female customer who emerged from its depths. Though it was summer, she wore a face veil, and after entering the little restaurant, she stood at its center and looked around as if in vague suspicion or disapproval, unwilling to sit down.

The restaurant's owner came forward to receive her, and carefully wiped down a table and chair near the lady before coming forward with a smile. But just as he was about to speak, the lady suddenly said, "Is Fourth Sister not outside?"

The owner's smile froze on his round face, but in an instant, he had recovered his composure, and he laid his towel over one shoulder as he answered, "She is resting in the back. Does my lady wish to enter?"

The lady nodded and followed him to the inner courtyard. The two palanquin-bearers sat down at a table near the front of the restaurant to keep guard, and poured themselves a cup of tea as they waited.

The inner courtyard was separated from the front hall by only a low clay wall, but the difference between the two was palpable. There was not the slightest trace of dirt or filth in the inner courtyard, and it was not only impeccably clean, but also bright and comfortable. Two tall pomegranate trees stood at its center, their branches hanging heavy with fruit. The owner offered the lady a seat below the trees and walked into a room on the eastern side of the courtyard. A few moments later, another woman emerged.

"Fourth Sister," the lady guest immediately stood to greet her.

"Sit." This Fourth Sister looked relatively young in appearance, her skin flawless and her brows slender. Her plain robes and simple accessories could not conceal a natural grace and charm. It was a wonder how such a beauty could be kept hidden in such a quiet little district.

"It has only been a few years since we last met, but I see that Fourth Sister has grown a few more curves." The lady guest lowered her face veil, revealing a lovely smile on her snow-pale skin.

"Yes," Fourth Sister smiled back. "It has been a few years, and you yourself are more beautiful and charming than ever."

"How could I compare to Fourth Sister? Back in those years, in the prime of Fourth Sister's beauty, you once took third place in the Lang Ya List of Beauties.



Later, when you disappeared so suddenly into hiding, who knows how many people were left sighing in the wake of your shadow?”

Fourth Sister lowered her eyes, her mouth tightening so slightly it was almost invisible. Although she made no other movement, she somehow managed to exude a grief that penetrated the hearts of any who looked upon her in that moment. “Banruo, for leaving you that year without saying goodbye, I am truly sorry. But I am very tired.... I have not forgotten Shifu’s kindness and favour in raising and training me, but she herself is no longer here with us, may she rest in peace. And so... it is time we lived our own lives....”

A fierceness flashed through Qin Banruo’s graceful features, but in the next moment, she was smiling gently again, her tone very steady and controlled as she answered, “What could Fourth Sister possibly mean? So long as the great task of restoring our nation has not been accomplished, so long as the great dishonour of our nation’s destruction has not been avenged, how can we speak so lightly of giving up?”

Fourth Sister smiled bitterly. “Banruo, Shifu passed the mantle of leadership to you, so while we were in the capitol, I obeyed your every order. But there are some things I can no longer refrain from saying. It has been more than thirty years since our Hua nation was destroyed, and the pain of genocide is not one you nor I experienced first-hand, but rather only one which we inherited from Shifu. Besides, in those days, there were many warlords fighting over the same piece of land, and in the space of a decade, ten or twenty small nations were swallowed by larger countries, our Hua nation but one of these, so why continue to carry this grief in our hearts?”

Qin Banruo gritted her teeth and said coldly, “So because a nation is small, it must be destroyed?”

“That is not what I meant. I only wanted you to recognize the reality of our situation. Back when our Hua nation had its own country, of course we had no choice but to fight for survival. But we were first invaded by Da Liang, and then taken over by Da Yu, and despite all our best efforts, we could not preserve even a single line of the imperial clan. Finally, Da Liang seized on claims of rebellion as a pretext to wipe out our entire nation. We are without country, without root and foundation, and any surviving Hua clansmen have been scattered to the four winds, or assimilated into the Liang people. We are no longer the nation we once were, and to speak of restoring our country, this is truly easier said than done....”

“So, in the end, Fourth Sister still does not trust me.” Qin Banruo’s gaze was clear as water, her expression cold. “If Shifu still lived, with her prodigious mind and cunning genius, I suppose Fourth Sister would not be this discouraged?”

Fourth Sister was pale, as if struck by these words, and she turned her gaze aside. After a long while, she answered lowly, “It is said that the truly wise are easily broken, and it is because Shifu’s spirit was so great that she could never have

achieved a long life on this earth. Banruo, although you are highly intelligent, you are nonetheless not the same as Shifu. Think about it, since she passed on, may she rest in peace, by all your greatest efforts, have you achieved even half of what she accomplished in her prime? This is the reality of our situation, to achieve this goal without assistance is impossibly difficult, so what is the point of pushing on by force of will alone?”

As Qin Banruo listened, several emotions passed over her face, but by the end, her expression had stilled once more, and her voice was like ice when she spoke. “Then, by Fourth Sister’s meaning, the destruction of our temples, the murder of our monarchs – this blood enmity need not be avenged?”

“Has not this enmity been avenged?” Fourth Sister sighed. “Shifu, in her incomparable wisdom and her peerless understanding of the human heart, manipulated from her hidden position the winds of the palace, and succeeded in turning the imperial Liang household against itself, in driving suspicion between father and son, and in eliminating the leadership of the Chiyan Army. Does this not count as revenge?”

Qin Banruo shook her head. “Though it was the Chiyan Army that exterminated the Hua nation, the origin of the hatred that drove this genocide can only be laid at the feet of the imperial household of Da Liang. It is a pity the heavens were not willing to give Shifu more time, or surely by her wisdom, even if she could not have restored our country, she would have succeeded in overturning the nation of Da Liang. Though we are not her equal, you and I, who were raised and trained like sisters together in Shifu’s favour and kindness, we cannot sit by while her will is yet unfulfilled.”

“But, Banruo, Shifu achieved victory in those days through hidden plots and schemes, relying on her mind. And although you have preserved and managed very well the connections and networks she left for us, if we cannot reproduce the same kinds of schemes, how can we possibly bring her will to reality?” Fourth Sister’s eyelashes trembled. “You are now Prince Yu’s strategist, and you are merely using the same strategy Shifu employed of provoking conflict and quarrel between the brothers, and yet the result is far from what she accomplished back then. Firstly, you misjudged when you chose Prince Yu. He is mediocre at best, and in fact you might have done better to pick the Crown Prince – at least he is easier to control and manipulate. And even supposing you did succeed in assisting Prince Yu in destroying the Crown Prince, and then succeeded in destroying Prince Yu in turn – in the end, you would only have weakened Da Liang as a nation, and allowed other nations the chance to benefit from the fruits of your labour. The distance from this step to the restoration of our Hua nation is still so great as to be nearly immeasurable....”

A thin, icy smile drifted over the corner of Qin Banruo’s lips. “If there is no hope for the restoration of our nation, then so be it. If I can ensure that Da Liang too can taste the bitterness of its own defeat and destruction, then I will consider it sufficient

consolation for Shifu's soul in heaven. Fourth Sister, after everything you've said, what you really mean is that I will not succeed. But since I have inherited Shifu's mantle, how could I give up simply because success seems unlikely? These past years, you have disappeared to live out your days in peace, and in remembrance of our bond as sisters, when have I ever come to disturb you before today? If it were not for the crisis before me now, I would not have come knocking on your door. But, Fourth Sister, you have spoken many words of dismissal, but have not yet even asked why is it I have come to find you today, this is bitterly disappointing."

Fourth Sister lowered her head, remorse in her eyes and regret in her voice as she answered, "Banruo, I have been idle for so many years now, what possible help could I still bring to you? I did not ask, only because I did not dare to."

Qin Banruo gazed steadily at her, her lips trembling, a mist rising in her beautiful eyes. "Fourth Sister, my Crimson Sleeve House cannot last much longer, did you know?"

Fourth Sister's eyebrows jumped as she cried out, "How can this be?"

"In the past few months, the core members of my Crimson Sleeve House have either died or betrayed me. We are whittled down to the bone. The newly recruited girls have not been sufficiently trained, I do not dare send them out freely yet, and so the network is falling apart. But forget this, even the eyes I have deeply hidden in various households have been rooted out one by one, and I do not dare allow the scarce few I have left in place to make any kind of movement at the moment. And of late, Prince Yu seems to be gaining more suspicion than favour from his father, and the trust I have cultivated between them for so many years appears to be fracturing like ice under snow. If I had not taken steps to direct his suspicion towards Princess Consort Yu instead, I fear he would already have turned hostile against us as a result of these false reports.... Fourth Sister, Shifu once urged you to look after me, now the time has come when we must live or perish, will you not help me?"

She spoke so earnestly that Fourth Sister could not help being a little moved, and she sighed lightly as she implored, "Banruo, since we cannot keep going forward, let us take the opportunity to retreat, and live out our days in peace, would that not be a good thing?"

Qin Banruo's expression was like frost as she answered resolutely, "Fourth Sister may treat me as a stubborn child, but the orders of my master are my earth and sky, and though my talent is limited and thus success difficult to achieve, I will not give up halfway in favour of preserving my own life."

"You...." Fourth Sister let out a long sigh. "Alright, what is it you want me to do?"

Qin Banruo's delight lit up her entire face, and she half-bowed in courtesy before saying, "Banruo wishes to borrow Fourth Sister's beauty and charm in order to seduce a man."

## BOOK SIX

### THE SHADOW OF THE SWORD

#### CHAPTER 107

##### *Target*

Qin Banruo's delight lit up her entire face, and she half-bowed in courtesy before saying, "Banruo wishes to borrow Fourth Sister's beauty and charm in order to seduce a man."

"A man?" Fourth Sister raised an eyebrow. "If it comes to seducing a man, surely you do not lack for suitable candidates."

Qin Banruo shook her head. "My people will not do, they have worked in the capital for too long and are too easily recognized. Fourth Sister, you have hidden away for many years and are skilled in disguise, and so you will easily be able to hide yourself and thus increase the chances of success. Besides, if we speak of the art of provoking infatuation, who among my people could possibly compare to Fourth Sister?"

Fourth Sister's long thin eyelashes lowered, hiding her gaze as she said in a low voice, "Banruo, I am not entirely without acquaintances in the capital...."

"I know," Qin Banruo smiled sweetly. "I swear to you, Fourth Sister, while you are in the capital seducing this man, you will not have any interaction with those nobles and officials who were your guests in the past."

"Oh?" Fourth Sister was astonished. "Unrelated to nobles and officials? Then who is this person you want me to seduce?"

"Tomorrow morning, let Fourth Sister come to the Illustrious Embroidery House in the capital, and I will point him out to you."

Fourth Sister pursed her red lips and turned slowly, walking a few steps away, as if deep in thought, and did not answer for a long while.

“If Fourth Sister will lend a hand this time, then in the future, no matter what happens, your little sister will not disturb you again,” Qin Banruo added softly.

“And if...I am not able to succeed?”

“This person will not be difficult to seduce, I believe Fourth Sister will not have any trouble.”

“I am no longer as I was in the past....” Fourth Sister let out a long sigh. “If I prove unworthy of your faith in me, I pray you will forgive me. You and I started our journeys from the same door, and though our paths have diverged, I cannot deny the ties that bind us still. Since you say it is the last time, and I do not have any reason to mistrust you, then very well, I will do as you say, and meet you tomorrow at the Illustrious Embroidery House.”

Qin Banruo was delighted, and her powdered face, which had been clouded all along, now glowed with joy. She took Fourth Sister’s hand and spoke to her for a little while longer before replacing the veil over her face and taking her leave.

That night, Qin Banruo slept well for the first time in many days, and the next morning, she rose early, dressed in plain robes and a green cap with a hanging veil, and left quietly without bringing any serving girls or calling for one of her own palanquins, instead hailing one on the street, which brought her swiftly to the Illustrious Embroidery House. This embroidery house was one of the largest of its kind in the capital, and there were several small stalls located before its walls, selling everything from dyes, to needles and threads, to silk fabric, to fabric patterns. It had a reputation for attracting young ladies from all over the capital, who liked to spend time among the stalls browsing for supplies for their needlework. Qin Banruo walked between the stalls, looking at different selections of embroidery thread, and after about an hour, Fourth Sister’s graceful figure appeared not far away.

The two met and exchanged only a pleasant greeting. Qin Banruo did not say any more as she led Fourth Sister slowly through the stalls, stopping to purchase a few rolls of thread and a few fabric patterns before walking into an adjacent tea shop and sitting down at one of the tables closer to the outside street.

“Look over there,” Qin Banruo lifted a slender finger and slowly pointed. “Do you know what that place is?”

Fourth Sister looked in the direction she was indicating. Beyond the street stood the tall walls of a courtyard, with a black gate opening into a garden filled with tall lush trees whose leaves and branches extended beyond the top of the walls, hanging out like a canopy over the adjacent street.

“It looks like the back door of some nobleman’s home. Does the person you wish me to seduce live here?”

A thin smile lifted the corners of Qin Banruo’s lips and she slowly shook her head. “Although Rhinoceros District is not far from the capital, it appears that news does not travel very fast. The owner of this place is not a nobleman, but a commoner without an office, and has owned this manor for less than half a year. But if you were to mention the words ‘Su manor’ to anyone in the capital, his or her first thought would immediately be of this place here....”

“You make me very curious. How could a person without nobility or rank acquire such a position in the capital?”

Qin Banruo drew out a crimson handkerchief, which she placed in front of her lips as she leaned close to Fourth Sister and whispered something in her ear. Fourth Sister smiled and answered in a low voice, “If this Mister Su is Prince Yu’s strategist, what conflict could he have with you now? Do you wish me to target him to acquire some kind of information?”

“No,” Qin Banruo placed a hand on Fourth Sister’s arm, her gaze far away. “This Mister Su is difficult to fathom, and cannot be underestimated. If it were anyone else, seduction would be a formidable means of attack, but against him.....it would be the worst. I do not dare act lightly, and Fourth Sister must understand this as well.”

“Then you have called me here....”

“Pray Fourth Sister have patience, and you will see soon enough.”

Qin Banruo picked up her teacup but did not drink, gazing instead into its watery brown depths. Fourth Sister, who was patient by nature, saw that the conversation had come to a halt for now, and so did not press further, and turned to look quietly at the back gates of the Su manor.

The next hour passed slowly, and a steady trickle of people went in and out of the dark wooden gates, delivering the usual daily supplies of water as well as fresh fruits and flowers. Qin Banruo observed all of this coolly until, at last, she straightened abruptly.

Fourth Sister immediately turned her gaze back to the street, where she saw a small donkey cart piled high with fresh vegetables stop in front of the gates. A strong young man stopped beside it. He looked to be in his twenties, and his clothes were made of coarse cotton, the sleeves folded up to his shoulders, revealing two well-muscled arms. It seemed as if he was also a regular visitor, as the guards at the gates only shouted a greeting before letting him into the courtyard.

“This one.” Qin Banruo turned and exchanged a glance with Fourth Sister.

“That young man who brought the vegetables?” Fourth Sister was a little surprised. “Is there something suspicious about him? If he has caught your attention because he frequently goes in and out of Su manor, then surely you must also suspect all the others who came bringing fruits and flowers?”

“Fourth Sister is correct, at first I did not think him any different from the others who came bearing deliveries.” Qin Banruo’s face darkened, “If Uncle Qian had not discovered something interesting about him, I fear I would not have noticed this person even now.”

“Has even Uncle Qian come back out of hiding for you? Did you also promise him that this would be the last time?”

“If we lose this time, then we will lose all, so it cannot be but the last time.” Qin Banruo gritted her teeth. “And so, I can only put forth everything I have in preparation for this battle.”

“What did Uncle Qian discover?”

“Several of the eyes I placed in different residences suddenly disappeared for various reasons. At the time, I already felt it could not be a coincidence, and so asked Uncle Qian to help me investigate their whereabouts. Simultaneously, I stopped all activities of my other spies, thinking to preserve some of our strength. I could not have guessed that even this would not be able to stop things from deteriorating. By the end, the entire situation was out of my control. Fortunately, Uncle Qian had made some progress and managed to track down the locations of two of those who had fled. Naturally, I planned to capture them for questioning, but to my shock, they both managed to escape my grasp, and one of them was saved personally by the hand of that young man who you just saw delivering vegetables.”

“Perhaps he was simply taken by her beauty and wanted to act the hero?”

“That would be all well and good, but Uncle Qian investigated him further. His name is Tong Lu, and he not only saved the girl I intended to question, he was also involved in the disappearances of two or three of my other eyes. Fourth Sister, think about it, if he wanted to play the hero and help beautiful women, then why he is only helping mine?”

Fourth Sister murmured something indistinct, shaking her head slowly.

“Besides, a vegetable-seller who lives in a rundown little cottage – he should be a nobody, and yet Uncle Qian could not discover anything about his background. Later, I realized that one of the places he frequented was the Su Manor, and the more I thought, the more I began to wonder. However, all I know now is that Tong Lu



comes to the Su Manor to deliver vegetables, and as for whether that is all he does, I do not know.”

“Even Uncle Qian...could not find out?”

Qin Banruo sighed. “Uncle Qian said Su Manor is like a swamp – still and ordinary on the surface, but with bottomless depths. He could find no way to get near it at all. If he was able to find out more, I would not have come to disturb Fourth Sister.”

“You suspect...that Tong Lu is Su Zhe’s man, and that the recent calamity that befell your Crimson Sleeves was orchestrated by Su Zhe?”

“Correct.”

“But...Su Zhe is Prince Yu’s strategist, why would he want to attack you? Could it be that he knows of your disloyalty and true intentions?”

“Impossible,” Qin Banruo said confidently. “My disloyalty lies hidden in my heart. Until now, I have never done anything that could harm Prince Yu. Even if this Mister Su could read minds, he has not even seen my face before, so how could he possibly suspect my disloyalty?”

“If it is as you say, and Su Zhe only knows that you are Prince Yu’s trusted advisor, and does not know of your true intentions, then when he attacked you, was he not also attacking Prince Yu?”

Qin Banruo’s gaze was still as water as she answered slowly, “When you understand this point, then you start to realize many other peculiarities. Ever since this qilin prodigy gave his support to Prince Yu, it is true that he has contributed numerous clever schemes. In fact, most of Prince Yu’s successes over the past year can be attributed to him. But why is it that, despite all of these achievements, Prince Yu’s imperial favour has clearly waned, and his strength much diminished? Before this man’s arrival, Prince Yu held in his grasp the twin powers of the Ministries of Justice and Appointments, and also had the Duke of Qing for his military stronghold. But what does he have now? His hands are empty. His so-called power in the court comes only from the Crown Prince’s downfall, and on closer inspection, has no true root or foundation. It was said that he who held the qilin prodigy would hold the world – is this how the world is meant to be held?”

Fourth Sister looked at her deeply. “All of this you should say directly to Prince Yu.”

“Prince Yu...” Qin Banruo scoffed. “Ever since the mistakes I made, he has lost much of his trust in me, and this Mister Su is too powerful at present. Everything I have said just now cannot be pinned on him, he has distanced himself too neatly from

all of it. If I said any of this without proof, would Prince Yu believe me? And if Prince Yu really went and questioned him, by Su Zhe's cunning and prodigious mind, I fear I would end up doing more harm to myself than to him. Besides, there is a question I still cannot answer without further investigation...."

"What question?"

"Motive. If this is truly Mister Su acting against me in order to cut off Prince Yu's every source of information, then what is his motive? Why would he want to do this?"

"Could it be...that he is the Crown Prince's man?"

"That too was my first thought. But think about it – ever since he came to the capital, what has happened to the Crown Prince? He has been struck by disaster after disaster, stripped of his every support, and even Consort Yue in the inner palace no longer commands the rich favour and privilege she enjoyed in the past. The Crown Prince has become nothing more than a leaf tossed here and there before the winds of the oncoming storm, and the only thing left between him and the abolishing of his title is the scroll for the imperial edict. And if Fourth Sister could have seen how this Mister Su brought about the utter disgrace of Xie Yu, then you would not suspect him of any connection with the Crown Prince."

"Then why is he trying to weaken Prince Yu? Could it be that he has no true interest in the fight for the throne, and only intends to muddy the waters?"

Qin Banruo tightened her hold on the handkerchief in her hand and let out a deep sigh. "I do not know, and this is not something I can guess at without evidence. Fourth Sister, Tong Lu is the only possible avenue of pursuit that I know of at present, I pray you...."

Fourth Sister hesitated. In the same moment, Tong Lu, who had just finished his vegetable delivery, reappeared from the depths of the manor with his donkey cart and cracked his whip once before both he and it disappeared into the crowd on the bustling street.

Although she had only caught a distant glimpse of him, Fourth Sister knew that the steel of the resolve of a young man like this, no matter how strong, could not help but melt like oil before the tender flames of her seduction.

She did not think she would fail, but she worried that....

"Banruo, even if you discover Mei Changsu's true intentions, so what? From what you have told me, you are not his match."

“Whether I am his match or not, we will not know until the battle is over.” Qin Banruo’s voice was steady. “Mei Changsu is indeed a prodigy, but his current advantage lies at least in part in his ability to work from the shadows. I would like to see what clever schemes he would be able to come up with if he is suddenly dragged out into the spotlight, to wage his war in the open!”

Fourth Sister’s lips tightened, as if she wanted to say something, but in the end, she kept quiet.

Qin Banruo’s ferocious words reminded her suddenly of her shifu, all those years ago. It was a pity that the frightening intellect of the last Hua Princess was a gift that would not be seen again for a hundred years or more.

“Banruo, I promise you that I will do everything I can. You...must take care of yourself.”

With these words, Fourth Sister picked up the cup of tea that had long since cooled and swallowed it down whole, along with the sigh that she had not permitted to leave her lips.

## CHAPTER 108

### *Parting*

The two sisters' discussion had come to an end, and so they paid for their tea and got up, preparing to go their separate ways. At this moment, the gate to the Su Manor opened and a small palanquin covered in plain white cloth was carried out. Qin Banruo recognized this as the palanquin Mei Changsu used often when he went out, and she immediately slipped out of the tea shop and began following it from a distance. Fourth Sister was by nature quiet and did not like to involve herself in matters that had nothing to do with her, and so, as Qin Banruo had not called for her to follow, she too left the tea shop and vanished silently into the streets.

Qin Banruo had initially thought that Mei Changsu had left by the back gate of his manor because he was on some covert mission and was trying to hide his tracks, but after following his palanquin for two entire streets, she was forced to admit that, in fact, he had left by the back gate simply because it was closer to the South Gates of the city, and made for a more direct route.

Outside the South Gates, the crowds were much thinner than they had been in the city. Qin Banruo was on the one hand rather tired, and on the other not a formidable martial artist, and so she dared not continue her tracking, but stopped and watched as the palanquin disappeared into the distance.

Qin Banruo could not have known that Mei Changsu would not go far. In fact, his little procession only ventured about two miles down the road south of the city before stopping at a pavilion at the top of a small hill. Mei Changsu emerged from the palanquin and entered the pavilion, sitting down on one of its stone stools to idly flip through a scroll he had brought with him, while his guards settled themselves outside with wine and tea.

Around an hour later, a plume of dust arose from the direction of the city. Li Gang, standing guard nearby, was the first to notice, and called out softly, "Chief." Mei Changsu rolled up his scroll and stood to peer into the distance, where he could just make out two figures in horseback riding towards them, one in front of the other.

Li Gang's vision was a little better, and so while Mei Changsu was still trying to see if these were indeed the people he was waiting for, Li Gang had already recognized them, and said lowly, "Chief, it's them."

Mei Changsu nodded and did not speak, but Li Gang understood his intention, and was already leaving the pavilion to stand by the side of the road. The two riders came closer and closer, but they did not seem to have noticed Li Gang. He was just about to wave to attract their attention when suddenly, the rider in front swung his horse around for no apparent reason and stared back in the direction he had come from.

But the reason behind his action quickly became apparent. Out of the cloud of dust galloped a third rider, who cried out as he raced towards them, "Jingrui! Jingrui, wait!"

The rider beside Jingrui seemed agitated, and cried out herself, "Dage, dage, let's go, quick!"

Xiao Jingrui lifted his left hand and gestured placatingly at her, and not only refused to continue, but swung down off his horse.

"Dage!" Yuwen Nian's voice was trembling.

"Nian nian," Xiao Jingrui smiled at her sadly. "My friend is calling for me, and I have heard him, how can I ignore him?"

"But...you promised...."

"Don't worry, I promised you I would go back with you to visit him, and I will keep my word. But we are not running for our lives, and my friend has come to see us on our way, so what are you afraid of?"

By this time, Yujin had arrived before them, his hair and clothes covered with dust, entirely bereft of their usual grace and elegance. He leapt off his horse and rushed over to Jingrui, grabbing his arm. "Jingrui, where are you going?"

Xiao Jingrui answered bluntly, "To Ying, capitol of Da Chu."

"Jingrui!"

"Nian nian received a letter, her father is gravely ill and wishes...wishes to see me.... My mother has given her permission and so, by rights, I ought to go pay him a visit."

Yan Yujin had originally come with the intention of forcing him to stay, but after hearing this, he found there was nothing he could say. The hand grasping Xiao

Jingrui's arm loosened, and after a long moment, he couldn't help himself and asked, "Then, will you ever come back?"

Xiao Jingrui lowered his eyes. "Mother is still here, how could I never return?"

Though his tone were indifferent, Yan Yujin felt a pain deep in his heart on hearing these words. And yet, Xiao Jingrui himself was keeping his calm, and it would not do for him to be the one to become emotional, and so he hurriedly bit his lip and controlled himself, and a long moment passed before he was able to say, "Jingrui, ever since that day, I have been wanting to find you for a good long talk, but the time was never right. Jingrui, there are some things you really must not take too much to heart. After all, they are in the past now, and are the grievances of the previous generation, and have nothing to do with you at all...."

"Alright, Yujin," Xiao Jingrui cut him off gently. "You don't need to continue, I understand what you mean. But...no matter what, you cannot say they have nothing to do with me. My father, my mother, my brothers and sisters – these are ties that cannot be broken, not to mention all those years of affection, and the gratitude and loyalty I bear for everything they have done for me.... None of this can be so easily torn away by some truth that has been revealed...."

"Jingrui..."

"I know you want me to not take all of this to heart so much, and you wish that I could be the Xiao Jingrui of the past. But, Yujin, this I truly cannot do. To me, in the space of a single night, everything I had ever known was overturned, and so, if all of that has changed, then how can I not change as well? And so, whether I will it or not, Xiao Jingrui is no longer the Xiao Jingrui of the past, and has not been for some time, and in this respect, I fear I can only disappoint you."

Yan Yujin took a deep breath, and then stepped forward, grasping Xiao Jingrui's shoulder with both hands and shaking it slightly as he said, slowly and clearly, "That's right, I do indeed wish you could be the you of the past. But as you cannot do so, then it is of no matter. We have grown up together since we were small, and you have changed anyway, from that short round little boy into a tall and handsome man, from being so quiet and unwilling to speak into someone who joins Xie Bi in making fun of me. I do not mind your continuing to change, since no matter how you change, you are still my friend, unparalleled and second to none, and the friendship between the two of us will never change! So listen to me and listen well, no matter where you go, you must remember me, this friend of yours, because if you dare to forget, I will never forgive you, do you hear me?"

By the time he finished, his voice was a little hoarse, and his eyes ringed in red. The hands gripping Xiao Jingrui's shoulder were clenched so tight that his fingertips were beginning to hurt. His little speech had not been long, but no one could doubt the depth of its sincerity, and its honest, raw warmth. Xiao Jingrui lowered his head,

his eyes wet. Even Yuwen Nian, who stood to one side listening, could not help turning her head to one side and subtly wiping the corner of her eyes with a finger.

“Alright, now you may go wherever you like then. You have always wandered all over the place in the past anyway, it is only that Da Chu is a little far, so you must take care.” Yan Yujin inhaled through his nose and took a step back. “Whether you have news or not, remember to write to me.”

Xiao Jingrui made a soft noise of affirmation and lifted his head. The two held each other’s gazes for a long moment, and then smiled tremulously at one another. But beneath the smiles, they could both see the deep grief that could be neither concealed nor diluted.

Because the two young men knew in their hearts that, with this parting, they did not know when they would meet again.

Once the mourning period for the Grand Empress Dowager passed, even Grand Princess Liyang would return to her hometown, and then, even if Xiao Jingrui were to return to Da Liang, he would likely never step foot again in the capitol.

The two of them had grown up together, had been born of similar backgrounds, and were close in age and alike in disposition, and so they had expected to remain close friends as they accompanied each other down the paths of their lives, which would surely run parallel to each other, sharing milestones and trajectories. Who could have imagined that a single night could rent them so far apart that their roads now may as well be on opposite ends of the world?

Even someone as cheerful as Yan Yujin could not suppress the helplessness that welled up in his heart.

“Dage, should we go?” Yuwen Nian walked over, her eyes red, and tugged at her elder brother’s sleeve.

Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin raised their arms at the same time and embraced each other tightly.

“Go on then, I’ll watch you ride off. You must take care on the....” Yan Yujin’s parting words, spoken with a forced smile, abruptly came to a halt, and his gaze fixed on something behind Xiao Jingrui, his expression strange.

Xiao Jingrui immediately turned to look behind him and saw Li Gang standing by the road about thirty yards away, his back ramrod straight, and when he saw them notice him, he raised a finger and pointed to the small hill beside the road.

In fact, before Li Gang's finger had even lifted, Xiao Jingrui already knew whom it was he would see, and so, in that first moment, he hesitated, but after a brief pause, he calmly raised his eyes.

In the pavilion at the top of the small hill stood Mei Changsu, leaning on a rail, his robes blowing gently in the wind. Although it was impossible to see his subtle expressions from this distance, his stance made it clear that he was here purposefully awaiting Xiao Jingrui.

"Jingrui...." Yan Yujin sounded worried.

Xiao Jingrui gathered his composure and then answered indifferently, "He has likely come to see me on my way. I will go over and have a few words."

"I'll come with...." The words died in Yan Yujin's throat. Intelligent as he was, he understood that there were some heartaches that one had to face alone, without help or interference from any bystander, and so he backed away a few steps and did not speak again.

Yuwen Nian did not know of the friendship that once existed between Xiao Jingrui and Mei Changsu, and so she did not understand what was happening. She stepped forward, about to ask, but was stopped by Yan Yujin, who grabbed her and pulled her back.

By this time, Xiao Jingrui was already striding swiftly towards the pavilion, his face pale, but his stance and steps perfectly steady.

"Please sit." Mei Changsu gave a small smile, then lifted the silver pot on the table and filled a cup, pushing it over. "The road you must travel is long, let me lift a cup in toast to a safe and peaceful journey."

Xiao Jingrui accepted the cup, drained it, wiped at the corner of his mouth and replaced the cup on the table, then lifted both hands in a courtesy. "I thank Mister Su for coming to see me on my journey. The time has come for me to take my leave."

Mei Changsu watched as the young man turned and left, and it was not until he had walked to the edge of the pavilion that he asked softly, "Jingrui, why do you not hate me?"

Xiao Jingrui's figure halted, froze for a moment, and then he turned and looked straight at Mei Changsu. "What could I hate you for? You did not create my mother's past. You did not arrange the circumstances of my birth. The unjust deeds of Mar... Marquis Xie were his own doing, and were not schemed or designed by you.... You and I both understand, what caused me unmeasurable pain was the truth itself, and not the hands that uncovered it. The events of the past have no relation to



you, and I would not be so absurd as to cast my anger on you, and hold you responsible for wrongs that were committed by other people.”

“But I had the power to keep the truth concealed, and instead I let it erupt, and erupt with such ferocity. I did so without the slightest regard for your feelings, and without regard for the friendship between us. For this, you must bear some anger, no?”

Xiao Jingrui shook his head and smiled sadly. “To tell you the truth, I was once very upset by what you did. But I am no longer an arrogant child, and I understand that there are choices each of us must face. You chose what you believed to be important, and gave me up. This was only a decision you made, nothing more. I cannot hate you because you did not choose me, especially since.....you had no responsibility or obligation to prioritize me, and although this was something I once hoped for, in the end, it is not something I can demand.”

“It is true that I did not have to prioritize you, but ever since we met, you have always treated me with the utmost sincerity, and in this regard, I owe you.”

“I was sincere towards you because I wished to be. If I could gain something by that sincerity, certainly I would be glad, but if I cannot, then neither do I bear any regrets.”

There was sorrow in Mei Changsu’s eyes, but he still bore a small smile on his face. “Though you bear no regrets, the friendship between you and me is no more, and we cannot be friends again.”

Xiao Jingrui lowered his head silently. Ever since the two had met, he had always admired Mei Changsu’s talent, looking up to him as a teacher and friend, and had taken great care to preserve their friendship. He had never imagined that, step by step, they would journey to a point where they could no longer call each other friend.

In fact, aside from a little heartache, there was not any true enmity between them. But after everything he had experienced, Xiao Jingrui finally felt the truth of the words Yan Yujin had spoken so long ago – that he and Mei Changsu simply were not of the same world, and the inequality between them was so great that there could be no grounds for a true friendship.

To bear neither hatred nor anger towards one another was already the best ending they could have hoped for.

Perhaps, in the future, growth might bring about change. Perhaps, in the future, there could be encounters as yet unimaginable. But, for the present at least, just as Mei Changsu had said, they could no longer be friends....

“Jingrui,” Mei Changsu stepped forward, gazing warmly into the young man’s eyes. “You are the most forgiving child I have ever known. The Heavens have granted you such gentleness and kindness, and such a disposition for forgetting hatred, perhaps to offset the pain and suffering you must experience. I truly hope with all my heart that, in the future, you can preserve this sincere and earnest heart of yours, and that you may find peace and fortune, because it is what you deserve....”

“Many thanks.” Xiao Jingrui took a deep breath, and then blew it out again slowly. There was much in his heart he wished to say, but when the words rose to his lips, he found that they were useless, and so he merely composed himself, and then turned and quickly left the pavilion.

Yuwen Nian and Yan Yujin were waiting for him at the bottom of the hill, and the three only exchanged a few simple words of parting before Xiao Jingrui and his sister mounted their horses and rode off towards the south. Yan Yujin watched until their figures disappeared into the distance, his face sad, then turned and looked up at the pavilion again. He hesitated, and then decided to go over to pay his greetings.

But this was a poor circumstance for small talk, and the two were not in such a mood in any case, and so after a few polite words, Yan Yujin took his leave and rode back towards the city.

“Chief, the wind is fierce here, shall we return as well?” Li Gang asked lowly, gathering up the wine pot and cups as he spoke.

Mei Changsu nodded his assent and got up slowly to leave the pavilion. Just before he entered his palanquin, he turned and looked in the direction Xiao Jingrui had gone, standing still for a long moment, as if in deep thought.

“Chief? Chief?”

Mei Changsu’s long thin brows furrowed and he sighed. “Da Chu is not without danger.... Pass on my orders to send Zhu Xi over, and have him look after them in any way he can.”

## CHAPTER 109

### *The Beginning of Change*

The eighth month of the year normally marked the arrival of two extremely important days for both the court and the common people. The first was the fifteenth day of the eighth month, Mid-Autumn Festival, and the second was the thirtieth day of the eighth month, the Emperor's birthday. However, because of the Grand Empress Dowager's recent passing, all celebrations were suspended during the period of mourning, and so the former only warranted a holiday off from work, while the second was heralded by the arrival of gifts from all over the city and several small banquets held by senior officials, the imperial family, and the Inner Palace.

Though the banquets were small, the imperial family and high-ranking officials still had to abide by the usual custom of arranging for birthday gifts for the Emperor. This was typically a chance for them to compete for royal favour and attention, and so everyone took the task very seriously. The Crown Prince presented a beautiful nine-fold screen delicately embroidered with brightly coloured flying dragons, which drew gasps of admiration as it was unfurled before the Emperor. Prince Yu somehow managed to produce a huge taihu rock naturally carved into the character 'shou'<sup>158</sup>, a stunning, strange treasure that one could hardly hope to find again in this lifetime. The other princes came forward with rare copies of coveted ancient scrolls, or exquisitely carved jade pieces of gods and goddesses, each undoubtedly worth hundreds of thousands of gold pieces in value. Prince Jing's gift was merely a handsome falcon, perfectly trained, which sat with great dignity on the Emperor's arm and gazed steadily into his eyes with its head crooked, drawing a sudden bout of cheerful laughter from its new master.

Initially, the Emperor had expressed similar words of pleasure and admiration for all the gifts he had received, but as the sounds of his laughter rang through the hall, quite a few of those present seemed to be realizing something.

Because there could be no playing of music during the period of national mourning, the atmosphere of the banquet remained somewhat lacking despite the best efforts of the guests, and the Emperor's spirits were still not high, so after receiving a few customary toasts in his honour, he set out to return to the Inner Palace.

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<sup>158</sup> shou – longevity

In the Inner Palace, the Empress had led the Six Palaces in arranging a more intimate banquet to await the Emperor. The Emperor had already had a few cups of wine, and now he reclined on his chair and accepted the well-wishes and gifts the Inner Palace brought to him. After some time, his back began to ache, and after the gift-giving ceremony ended, he ordered Consort Jing to sit by his side to massage his back, as he sat watching the great hall, his eyes drifting close now and then.

Because it was both the Emperor's birthday and still the period of national mourning, no one dared to wear the plain white clothes of mourning, but neither did they dare to dress too exuberantly. At a glance, there were not the gaudy colours and extravagant silks of the previous years, and as a result, the overall atmosphere appeared all the more refined for it.

When the wives of officials and other external guests had paid their respects and left, there remained only the Emperor's consorts and the princesses. The Empress was of course the first to raise her cup to toast the Emperor's health, and after her came Noble Consort Yue. Ever since the Crown Prince's punishments, Noble Consort Yue had become much more subdued. Today, she had only lined her long slender brows, and had not powdered her face or lined her lips. There was a thin smile on her pale, plain face, and the stark contrast to her previous stunning beauty drew pitiful looks from everyone around her.

The Emperor accepted the golden cup from her ivory-white hands and sipped. He looked at her downcast eyes and thought of the Crown Prince, who had also looked drawn and thin at the larger banquet, and his heart softened.

Although he had been furious at the Crown Prince's conduct, he had nonetheless doted on this mother and son pair for many years, and the mutual affection ran deep. Besides, he was feeling his age of late, and found himself constantly worrying about the future as he gazed at his graying hair in the mirror, and so he could no longer bear to act as harshly as he had done in the past.

"You have grown thinner, are you unwell? We should have the imperial physician attend to you....." The Emperor put a hand on Consort Yue's forehead as he continued gently, "The Qin province has sent over some eyebrow pigment. We will have it delivered to you tonight."

"I thank Your Majesty." Noble Consort Yue's eyes were rimmed in red, but this was no occasion for tears, so she hurriedly forced them down, her eyes a little damp. The Emperor's heart softened even further when he saw this, and he took her hand and sat her down to his right, talking to her in a soft voice.

The Empress, a little unhappy, turned her gaze involuntarily to Consort Jing, who was behind the Emperor, massaging his back. Her eyes were lowered and her expression peaceful, as if she felt nothing at all, and the Empress knew she could

hardly rely on her to divert the Emperor's attention. As she was considering, she caught sight of a few of the younger princesses and hurriedly beckoned them over, instructing them to go forward to present their toasts to the Emperor.

Just like the banquet in the outer palace, this banquet did not last long. After three rounds of wine, the Emperor was tired and ordered the Empress to dissolve the banquet and hand out the ceremonial gifts, after which he finally returned to his own rooms to rest.

Perhaps he had overexerted himself, or perhaps it was the wine, but the Emperor awoke the next day unwell with indigestion, and sent orders for the court to rest for a day. The Imperial Physicians rushed to the palace, but after a detailed examination, they found no major illness, and so could only prescribe some general soothing remedies. The Emperor himself also felt it was only a mild case of indigestion, and did not feel any great discomfort, and so, not wanting to cause a great fuss, he passed on orders for the imperial relations and officials not to visit the palace inquiring after his health, and instead took his medicine and slept for a few hours. In the afternoon, he woke again much refreshed.

Although he was feeling better, the Emperor still did not want to deal with official matters, and so he read a few pages of his book before suddenly remembering Noble Consort Yue and the Crown Prince's wan appearances the day before, and he immediately summoned Gao Zhan and had him prepare a palanquin so he could quietly visit the Eastern Palace to visit the Crown Prince and show his favour.

The Emperor had specified that he wanted to go quietly, so naturally he did not wish his arrival to be announced in advance. Accordingly, Gao Zhan only notified Commander General of the Imperial Guard, Meng Zhi, and when they set out, it was with a small group of guards, less than ten altogether including Meng Zhi himself. They walked along the path beside the high wall that separated the Forbidden Gardens from the Eastern Palace and soon arrived at the gates of the latter.

The abrupt and unexpected arrival of His Imperial Majesty sent the guards at the gates into a panic, and they rushed forward and knelt in a circle before the Emperor. Because the Emperor was already standing before them and everyone was busy bowing, no one dared to rise to run inside to pass on the message of the Emperor's arrival, and so no one notified the Crown Prince.

“What is the Crown Prince doing?” The Emperor asked idly.

A man wearing the robes of a sixth-ranked official answered, trembling with fear, “Your.....your Majesty, the Crown Prince is.....is.....inside.....”

“What nonsense! Where else would he be if not inside? We are asking what he is doing inside?!”

“Your, your Majesty.....your servant is, is not sure.....”

Gao Zhan saw that his answer was truly improper, and hurriedly interjected, “Your Majesty, perhaps we may have them notify the Crown Prince to come receive Your Majesty?”

The Emperor grunted in approval. Gao Zhan pointed at the official who had just spoken and said softly, “What are you still kneeling there for, go quickly!”

The official touched his head to the ground, scrambled to his feet and ran towards the Eastern Palace. But in his frenzy, he tripped over his robes and fell face-first onto the ground, struggling to rise as he tripped and lurched his way towards the palace.

The Emperor watched him go and couldn't hold back his laughter, but after a few moments, he stopped again abruptly, a suspicion arising in his mind. He vaguely recognized this official, who frequently served by the Crown Prince's side, and though his rank was low, he was not a newcomer who had never been in the Emperor's presence before. And although he had arrived unexpectedly today, it still should not have frightened him into such a state....

“Call him back!”

Gao Zhan hurriedly ordered one of the eunuchs to bring the official back, dropping him before the Emperor where he knelt, still shaking.

“You said just now.....you aren't sure what the Crown Prince is doing inside?”

The official fell prostate to the ground, not daring to lift his head as he answered in a trembling voice, “Your servant is indeed not.....not sure.....”

The Emperor gazed steadily at him for a long moment, and then said coldly, “All of you, kneel. Do not pass on any messages, and do not move from your positions. Meng Zhi, Gao Zhan, follow us!”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

As he bowed, Gao Zhan felt uneasiness stir in his heart. Though he did not know the situation inside the palace, he felt that something was not right. He glanced furtively at Meng Zhi, hoping to catch some sign of what he meant to do, but there was no expression on the Commander General's face as he followed the Emperor silently. And so Gao Zhan could only bend even lower as he hurried to catch up to the Emperor, who was walking faster with every step.

Although the size of the Eastern Palace could not be compared to the Emperor's own residence, it was nonetheless the residence of the heir to the throne, and there was no short distance between the gate and Changxin Hall, where the Crown Prince liked

to spend most of his time. The Emperor suspected the Crown Prince was engaging in inappropriate affairs in his own palace, and so had decided to make his way there in secret to see for himself. But he was no longer young, and so it was not long before he grew short of breath.

Gao Zhan, well-attuned to the Emperor's every wish, had made preparations for this occasion. With a wave of his hand, the six-man carriage that had been trailing behind them came forward. The Emperor stepped onto it, and their pace immediately doubled. As they continued on their way, they came across many servants and guards, and although they did not understand what was happening, they understood Meng Zhi's gesture for silence, and prostrated themselves by the side of the road, not daring to move as the entourage passed.

As they neared Changxin Hall, the Emperor got off the carriage. As soon as he stepped into the wooden walkways outside the hall, he heard the sound of music playing. Fury rose instantly in his heart, and his steps redoubled.

The proper ceremonial rites dictated a national ban on music during the mourning period. However, the three-year period of pious mourning was considered long, and near its end, many of the commoners tended to violate the ban. So long as it was not done in public, not overly ostentatious, and not reported to the authorities, the court turned a blind eye. But the Crown Prince was an entirely different story – he was firstly the heir to the throne, and secondly the direct grandson of the Grand Empress Dowager, and so bore the double responsibility of national and familial piety. Not to mention that this was not the end of the mourning period – in fact, not even half a year had passed. And so, for the Eastern Palace to play music at such a time was an insult and a violation of the highest order.

Of course, it was not as if the Crown Prince was unaware that playing music at such a time was a gross violation. It was only that he had grown accustomed to having music, and couldn't wait until the end of the mourning period, not to mention that he had been feeling depressed and low-spirited of late, and so had wanted something to take his mind off his troubles. Besides, he figured that so long as he kept the doors and windows of Changxin Hall firmly closed, there was no way anyone would find out, and so he relaxed and allowed himself to indulge a little. As for his Father Emperor's sudden and unannounced arrival, this had simply never happened before in his entire life, and so he could not in his worst nightmares have imagined its occurrence.

The Emperor stood for a while in the hallway outside the tightly closed doors of the hall, listening to the deliberately quiet sounds of the music playing within. His expression was difficult to behold, but at this moment, he still retained the capacity for logical reasoning. He knew that if he burst into the hall now, the Crown Prince's great sin of violating the period of National Mourning would become irrevocable reality. To Da Liang, which had throughout history governed its people by upholding the values of filial piety and respect, this was no small crime, certainly enough to

destroy what little was left of the Crown Prince's good name. And then, not only would he lose his place as heir, everyone in or related to the Eastern Palace would suffer as well. On the other hand, though there was great anger in his heart now for the Crown Prince and what he was doing, and though he had no intention of showing this son of his any more mercy, the Emperor nonetheless preferred to handle this quietly, not wanting something he had stumbled upon entirely on accident to become the catalyst for the destruction of his heir.

And so, the Emperor suppressed the anger in his heart and turned silently away, intending to leave as quietly as he had come, when suddenly he heard voices from within the hall.

“Your Highness.....have another cup..... After all, His Majesty is ill and will not summon Your Highness today, so what does it matter if you are drunk.....”

The Crown Prince's cold scoff followed these gentle words. “Even if Father Emperor were not ill, he still would not summon me. Who does he have eyes for now, other than Prince Yu?”

“Why is Your Highness speaking in this way, you are the heir to the throne, the future Emperor, and so in His Majesty's eyes, surely there is only you....”

“It doesn't matter, I saw through it all long ago. Father Emperor is heartless and overly suspicious, always scolding me for not improving my morals and conduct.... But does he not realize that, if he had not supported Prince Yu in rising to become my opponent, I would not have had cause to act as I did? If my moral integrity is so tainted, does that mean Father Emperor's is not?” The Crown Prince's laugh rang out bitterly, followed by the sounds of swallowing and the clinking of wine cups.

The Emperor's face was livid, his entire body shaking. Gao Zhan, worried, came closer and reached out a hand to support the Emperor, but was shoved aside so violently that he fell onto his back on the ground. The Emperor didn't even look at him as he strode down the stairs in two great steps, grabbed a long curved sword from Meng Zhi's belt, and then turned around and rushed back up the stairs. Gao Zhan, ashen with fear, crawled on his knees over to the Emperor and wrapped his arms around his leg, crying in a soft voice, “Your Majesty, consider carefully! Your Majesty, have a care!”

In truth, the Emperor was simply in a rage, and he himself did not know what he meant to do. He had seized the sword and rushed at the closed doors, but now he stood there at a loss, and finally, he swung the sword in a vicious slice, carving a deep rut into one of the vermilion pillars that stood before the door of Changxin Hall, and then flung the sword onto the ground and stalked away.

The whole commotion had not been quiet, and the Crown Prince was finally realizing something was wrong. But by the time he stumbled out of the hall, all he



saw was the Emperor's golden yellow robe disappearing around the corner, and when he turned and saw the sword mark on the pillar, he started to sway, feeling as if his bones had turned to water, sweat pouring off his forehead and his ears ringing until at last, he collapsed onto the ground.

## CHAPTER 110

### *Rising Winds, Coming Storms*

In a fury, the Emperor left the Eastern Palace's Changxin Hall, refusing a carriage and support from anyone. As he did so in a hurry, he suddenly felt his vision go black and fell straight backwards just as he arrived at Yongfeng Hall. Fortunately, Meng Zhi swiftly rushed over to support him, and no harm was done. Gao Zhan quickly pulled out a soothing incense box from his sleeve and blew some of the powdered medicine towards the Emperor's nose. With a sneeze, he regained consciousness and could see clearly again through his slightly red eyes.

"Your majesty..." Meng Zhi carefully patted the Emperor's back to allow him to regain his breath, and supported him to sit on a rock nearby, slowly urging, "Your royal health is the most important of all, please take care of yourself."

The Emperor took the handkerchief that Gao Zhan passed him, and wiped his face and eyes. More than half of his body weight was supported on Meng Zhi's arm, and he was breathing heavily. It took a long time before the fury within him gradually subsided, yet it was then replaced with a cold feeling of sorrow and disappointment. An uncontrollable tear fell from his eye, and he bent over to cough, the wrinkles on his slightly yellow face seemingly becoming deeper.

"General Meng ...The Eastern Palace has such resent, have I...really done something wrong?"

Caught off guard by this question, Meng Zhi stared blankly and was unsure of how to respond. Being the General Commander of the imperial guards for the Emperor, he had been by his side for quite some time. However, during all these years, he had only seen the Emperor control and balance the powers of his sons and officials using many different means and tactics. Never had he seen the Emperor doubt himself in such a way and seem so powerless, withered, and dejected—as if he were just an ordinary father. Seeing the Emperor's graying hairs, trembling, wrinkled hands, and unfocused, cloudy eyes, he could not help but recall the days when the Emperor was once ruthless, decisive, and commanding. Meng Zhi felt as if he were in a daze, as the person in front of him felt strangely unfamiliar.

Maybe, as people age, they really do begin to change...

“Your majesty, with the Eastern Palace, you would like to...” Meng Zhi had only asked half of his question, when he realized that it was quite inappropriate, and hurried to swallow back the rest of it.

The Emperor raised his sleeve to dab his tears, clenched his jaw for a long time, and as he was evidently rather hesitant, no one dared to question any further. An entire pot of tea’s time had passed before he opened his mouth to command, “What has happened today, is strictly prohibited from being revealed to others. Keep it a secret for now.”

This command was unexpected from both Meng Zhi and Gao Zhan, yet neither one showed it on their faces, silently accepting the order. Yet the Emperor was not one to easily forgive, and thus after a long period of silence, added, “Beginning from right now, place a ban on the Eastern Palace, no one is allowed to enter or leave.”

Meng Zhi asked hesitantly, “Including the Crown Prince?”

“Including the Crown Prince!” The Emperor’s tone was bitter and very determined, “The Crown Prince’s Three Ministers,<sup>159</sup> without a decree, is not to visit either. Meng Zhi, you will be in charge of this matter.”

“Your majesty, please forgive me,” Meng Zhi knelt down and continued, “Confining the Crown Prince is a great matter, and it is hard for me to fulfill this task with merely a verbal command. May your majesty please provide me with a royal decree.”

The Emperor looked at him, and was just about to speak when Gao Zhan suddenly said, “Your majesty, the Crown Prince has followed over here and is kneeling by the Xianye Pond, would you like to see him?”

“...Tell him to go back, right now I am... I don’t wish to see him...” The Emperor closed his eyes, sounding exhausted. “Bring the carriage over here and return to the palace...”

“Your majesty,” Meng Zhi seemed quite anxious, “I...”

“Call the carriage!” Gao Zhan’s sharp, almost ear-piercing voice sounded again, interrupting Meng Zhi’s words.

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<sup>159</sup> Crown Prince’s Three Ministers: The Crown Prince has three ministers, all of the highest level rank, being the Taishi, Taifu, and Taibao. The three ministers were in charge of educating the Crown Prince, and were normally highly respected teachers.

At this time, the Emperor rose, and trembled as he stepped onto the carriage, shaking and unsteady. Under Gao Zhan's direction, a few eunuchs came over to help, allowing the Emperor to sit down and settle in.

"Your majesty..." Meng Zhi waited for him to sit down and was about to speak again when Gao Zhan raised his voice, completely covering Meng Zhi's voice while saying, "Raise the carriage!" When Meng Zhi furrowed his eyebrows and took a step closer, the Emperor was already leaning against the pillow in the carriage, waving his hand with his eyes closed.

The obvious distress on his face and hand gestures made it evident that he did not want to be disturbed by anyone. Although Meng Zhi felt a little helpless, he knew not to continue asking, and thus knelt down to see the Emperor's carriage off.

After the royal carriage left, the Eastern Palace was deathly solemn. Meng Zhi suppressed the overwhelming feelings he had and immediately worked to make the necessary arrangements. It was not hard to keep the happenings at the Changxin Hall a secret as there were not many people present in the first place, and he could easily ban the imperial guards from speaking about the happenings. Gao Zhan would ensure that the servants of the inner court do the same, and of course the Eastern Palace guards would not dare to say anything, so completely sealing off the information was very simple.

However, it was more difficult to prohibit everyone from entering and leaving the Eastern Palace. The Crown Prince himself knew exactly why the restriction was placed, and in despair, did not dare to make any more trouble. Since he stayed silent, everyone else in the Eastern Palace was even more afraid to cause any commotion, and thus the greatest difficulty came from the people on the outside. The others were not too hard to deal with, but the Crown Prince's Three Ministers always came to see him everyday, and although they were not involved in the battle for the throne, they were very dedicated in fulfilling their duties. If the Crown Prince had any wrongdoings, they would be the first ones to be fiercely scolded, and when the Crown Prince was moved to the Guijia Palace, they were the ones who did the best they could to protect him. Such quaintly dutiful ministers no longer had any power in the court, and did not hold the same importance as they did in the former dynasty. The Crown Prince respected them, yet did not rely on them, and Prince Yu valued them, yet was not the slightest bit afraid of them. Most of the time, they were only symbolic—they did not play much of a role in the true games and schemes of wit and deception in the battle for the throne. But regardless of whether or not they really held any power, they were still the teachers of the Crown Prince. With merely "a verbal command" and no further details as an explanation, it was difficult for Meng Zhi to restrain them from entering. Anyways, with such breaking news that a ban was placed on the Eastern Palace and Crown Prince, for there to not even have been an imperial decree, it was inevitable that people would question it.

After being questioned by the Three Ministers for two whole hours, Meng Zhi, with a dry tongue and parched throat, realized that his approach was too foolish. Why reason with them? This was not the time for a debate, and even more, this was not a matter for him to debate in the first place—his approach had been wrong this whole time.

After this epiphany, Meng Zhi immediately realized what he should do. Using an excuse to leave, he ordered a few rather impetuous soldiers to guard the gates of the palace, and informed them that regardless of what anyone says, simply respond with, “it is the verbal command of the Emperor.” If anyone tried to reason with these soldiers, it was clear that one side could not clearly communicate what had happened, and the other side could not understand. The Three Ministers were so exasperated that they asked the soldiers to bring Meng Zhi to them, yet the soldiers only blankly responded that they “were not qualified to call for the General Commander,” and refused to move. The three elderly teachers were so furious that they began to feel lightheaded.

Successfully avoiding the Eastern Palace officials and elderly ministers, Meng Zhi felt a little more at ease, and returned to the palace to arrange shifts. He replaced his most trusted guards who were on duty, and moved them to guard the Eastern Palace. Fortunately, after returning to the palace, the Emperor felt ill and was resting at the Zhiluo Palace. He had not moved since he first arrived there, making it much easier for Meng Zhi. Around noon the next day, the news that the Crown Prince had a ban placed upon him had slowly started to spread, and several parties came to inquire. The Eastern Palace was unable to be entered, the Head Internal Supervisor Gao Zhan kept everyone strictly quiet, and the imperial guards were unrelenting as well. Yet the more that there was no reliable source of information, the more peculiar the situation seemed. Prince Yu did not even bother to keep his distance to avoid rumors, and personally went to visit Meng Zhi, looking to receive some more information. However, he was unsuccessful as Meng Zhi was not to be found at either the Meng Prefecture or the General Prefecture. Thinking that General Meng may have been on duty, Prince Yu looked for him in the inner court, yet he was not there either—he seemed to have disappeared without a trace.

Not knowing the real reasons made it difficult to formulate necessary countermeasures. The Emperor was ill and did not call for the court, only allowing Consort Jing to attend upon him, even rejecting to see Noble Consort Yue. Unable to determine the attitudes of the Emperor, those who were planning on protecting the Crown Prince nor those making matters worse for him dared to take any actions. There were all sorts of strange rumors being passed around, and the court was a complete mess.

Of course, no one knew the whereabouts of one of the most important figures in all of these happenings, Meng Zhi, but it was sure that he could not possibly have just disappeared into thin air. The first-ranked martial arts expert in Da Liang that no one

could find was standing in the middle of Prince Jing's bedroom, and when faced with the startled owner of the room, he gestured at him appeasingly.

"Rest assured, your highness, no one saw me come here," Meng Zhi whispered, "The happenings of the Eastern Palace, I thought it would be best for me to report it to you."

Prince Jing had always been a calm and composed person, and had experienced quite a lot lately, so he quickly regained his composure. After instructing a trusted subordinate not to let anyone in, he pulled Meng Zhi to the inner room, opened the door to the secret passageway and said, "Tell me after we see Su-xiansheng, otherwise you will have to repeat it again anyway."

Agreeing, Meng Zhi followed Prince Jing into the secret passageway, entering the secret chamber that he had already visited several times before. Prince Jing lightly pulled the bell on the wall, notifying Mei Changsu of his arrival. Yet after waiting twice as long as usual, the advisor still did not appear, causing the two in the chamber to feel slightly uneasy, especially since they were unable to directly enter to see exactly why he had not responded.

Another incense stick had finished burning as they waited, and there were finally sounds of movement coming from the Su Manor. However, even Prince Jing, whose martial arts were not as skilled as Meng Zhi, could evidently tell that the footsteps following the sound of the door did not belong to Mei Changsu.

Sure enough, within a second, Fei Liu's young and handsome face appeared from the entrance of the secret chamber, and he coldly and rigidly said, "Wait!"

Meng Zhi looked at Prince Jing, and seeing that he did not seem angry, took a step forward and asked, "Fei Liu, did your Su-gege ask you to come here?"

"Mmhmm!"

"Where is Su-gege?"

"Outside!"

"Outside in the bedroom?"

"More outside!"

"In the living room?"

"Mmhmm!"

Meng Zhi seemed to have a general understanding now, continuing, “Is someone here to talk to your Su-gege?”

“Mmhmm!”

“Who?”

“Poisonous snake!”

Startled, Meng Zhi asked, “You said, who?”

“Poisonous snake!” Fei Liu did not enjoy answering the same question twice, and impatiently glared at him.

Meng Zhi thought for a moment, and confirmed, “Is it Prince Yu?”

“Mmhmm!”

After hearing this much, Prince Jing and Meng Zhi were now both clear of what had happened, and felt slightly more at ease. Fei Liu stood near the door, and carefully examined the two people in the room with no intention of leaving. Prince Jing suddenly had an idea, and waved his hand towards Fei Liu, asking, “Fei Liu, why do you call Prince Yu, poisonous snake?”

“Su-gege!”

Prince Jing had seen the method of interaction between Mei Changsu and Fei Liu many times before, and had generally figured out the thought process of this young man, guessing, “Su-gege told you that he is a poisonous snake?”

“Mmhmm!”

“Do you know why Su-gege calls him poisonous snake?”

“I know!”

“You know?” Prince Jing was rather surprised by this unexpected answer. “Why?”

“Disgusting!”

“Who...who is disgusting? Prince Yu?”

“Su-gege!”

Prince Jing and Meng Zhi looked at one another, neither one understanding what he meant. After thinking for a long time, Prince Jing thought of a reasonable

explanation: “Fei Liu, what you mean, is not that Su-gege is disgusting, but that after seeing Prince Yu, he feels very disgusted, right?”

“Mmhmm!”

Prince Jing looked around, and suddenly curious, he followed up with the question, “If Prince Yu is poisonous snake, then what am I?”

Fei Liu tilted his head in thought, not breaking eye contact as he slowly said, “Water buffalo.”

Meng Zhi almost choked, saying, “Water buffalo? Why would you think his highness Prince Jing is a water buffalo?”

“Don’t know!”

“You don’t know?” Meng Zhi was really confused now. “Did you just randomly choose the words water buffalo for his highness?”

At this point, there was not a hint of a smile on Prince Jing’s face, yet he seemed calm. “I’m thinking, Fei Liu means that he doesn’t know why Su-gege calls me water buffalo.”

Meng Zhi’s heart jumped, and he hurried to defend Mei Changsu, saying, “That can’t be, Su-xiansheng is a very prudent person, how could he come up with nicknames for your highness? That doesn’t suit his personality.”

Prince Jing faintly responded, “Maybe Su-xiansheng has a side that we do not know? Anyways, he is not the first to call me water buffalo. In the past, my eldest royal brother...And xiao-Shu, they all called me this. They often said that I did not like drinking tea and only liked drinking water, and since I was also stubborn like a buffalo, I seemed to be just like a water buffalo.”

Now, Meng Zhi was so scared that he was holding his breath, and the muscles on his face became stiff, as if he did not know what kind of expression he should make. There was no harm in his temporary loss of composure though, as right at this moment, Mei Changsu walked in. Prince Jing’s attention was drawn to him, and he stared fixedly at his advisor.

“I apologize for being late. Prince Yu had come to discuss some matters, and he left just now.” Mei Changsu was in the middle of explaining when he saw the strange expression on both Prince Jing and Meng Zhi’s faces, and immediately felt that the atmosphere within the chamber was off, asking, “What’s wrong? Were you all... talking about something just now?”



“Not much,” Prince Jing said, staring straight into Mei Changsu’s eyes, and with a very light tone of voice continued, “We were talking about...water buffalos....”

## CHAPTER 111

### *A Favor*

When Prince Jing finished his sentence, the most nervous in the entire secret chamber was Meng Zhi, and the most relaxed was Fei Liu. In between the reactions of the two, was Mei Changsu, who did not seem to be startled, yet was evidently not purposely pretending to be calm either. He slightly narrowed his eyes in concentration, as if trying to understand exactly what Prince Jing had just said, and when realizing what had happened, he then revealed emotions of slight surprise and alarm, looking apologetic as well. He turned slowly, and in a reprimanding tone, called out, “Fei Liu...Did you say something you are not supposed to say?”

“Did not!” The young man did not know why he was being reprimanded and he widened his eyes with his mouth slightly open, looking very upset and misunderstood.

“Fei Liu, haven’t I told you before that Nihuang-jiejie was joking around, and that you can’t copy her?”

“You!”

Mei Changsu seemed to be put off by the young man’s retort, and took a moment before saying, “Yes, Su-gege copied a couple times as well and that was wrong too, let us both change in the future, okay?”

“Oh.” Fei Liu tilted his head to glance over at Prince Jing, and said, “Change!”

“I’m sorry, your highness.” Mei Changsu bowed forwards and continued, “After the new year, Princess Nihuang came by to visit. As we chatted, she brought up some past happenings and I found it quite interesting. So even though I know it is improper to do so, in private, I could not help but use it a couple times, not knowing that little Fei Liu would copy too. I was too presumptuous, please forgive me.”

“So it was Nihuang who told you,” Prince Jing’s facial expression did not change much, but he looked down with a sliver of disappointment in his eyes. “I almost thought that...”

He purposely trailed off, and Mei Changsu stood there calmly, not intending to finish the conversation. It was Meng Zhi who could not help but continue to ask, “What did you think?”

“I thought that maybe before, Su-xiansheng...was acquainted with some other people...” Prince Jing’s eyes became a little misty for a split second, but then he suddenly regained focus and forced a smile, saying, “It seems that Princess Nihuang really trusts and values Su-xiansheng—she is even willing to tell you about past happenings.”

“Your highness, don’t you think I make a great audience?” Undisturbed by the happenings, Mei Changsu smiled, continuing, “I have a lot of respect for Princess Nihuang as well, and did not conceal many of my views and opinions. Although she does not yet know that I am working behind the scenes for your highness, she does know that I looked up to Prince Qi greatly, and once hoped to serve under his leadership. She knows it is only for the sake of the current affairs that I deal with Prince Yu, and that I do what I can perfunctorily to appease him. After understanding this, she was less precautious around me and would tell me some past happenings that were neither very important nor secretive. Nothing more than to reminisce about the past. Anyways, the Princess does not have any truly close friends that she can confide in. Since she holds strong military power just like your highness, it is not suitable for the two of you to be overly close to avoid raising concerns. With Xia Dong, there are hidden, unspoken disagreements, and many topics are avoided and never spoken about. Mu Qing is still young, and did not go through those days, so he does not understand that event... I may not be her good friend, but still, being this age, and having experienced a lot, I can more or less resonate with her. I think, this must be the main reason that the Princess is willing to tell me so much.”

Prince Jing glanced at him, and with a very serious expression, nodded his head, agreeing, “Princess Nihuang is a heroine, and is much more wise and perceptive than I. It is only recently that I have gotten to know xiansheng well, and realized your talent and magnanimity. You are far more than just the advisor that I once thought you were.”

His words of praise were sincere and not merely flattery—Mei Changsu could clearly see this, and thus did not conventionally reject the praise to be humble. He bowed in acknowledgement to Prince Jing’s words. Seeing that the atmosphere of the chamber had returned to a harmonious state, the happiest was Meng Zhi, the spectator. He rubbed his hands together, and laughed, “A ruler and his ministers is a gathering of the talented and able, just as it is here. Your highness Prince Jing is altruistic and honorable, and Su-xiansheng has unimaginable talent. With the two of you joining forces, what is there that you cannot accomplish?”

“General Commander Meng seems to have much more confidence than us,” Mei Changsu said, while slowly sitting down, smiling, “But no matter how ambitious we are, we must do things steadily, step by step. We have chatted idly for quite a while

now, if the General Commander has important matters to report, shall we move on to that topic?"

Being reminded, Meng Zhi's facial expression suddenly shifted, saying, "His majesty placed a ban on the Crown Prince and the Eastern Palace, you already know that right?"

"Not the details." Mei Changsu shifted his gaze towards Meng Zhi, "Exactly how this happened, and his majesty's exact words and actions at the time, we will need the General Commander to tell us all the details, starting from the beginning."

"Of course." Meng Zhi took a moment to recollect, and then retold the details of the day he accompanied the Emperor to the Eastern Palace. Although he was not particularly good with words, his memory was excellent, and even with his simple explanations, the description of the happenings of that day was very clear.

After he finished, Mei Changsu thought to himself for a second, then asked, "Are the current servants of the Crown Prince still the same ones from the Eastern Palace?"

"Yes. But I was afraid that in his desperation, he might take some inappropriate actions, so I still ordered a few clever and reliable guards to keep watch." Meng Zhi sighed as he continued, "You can consider this Crown Prince to have ruined his own future. I just don't understand what his majesty plans to do about it?"

"According to my judgment, he will not dethrone him from the Crown Prince position quite yet, and even if he does, he will not crown a new one right away." Mei Changsu turned towards Prince Jing. "Your highness, do you understand what I mean?"

Prince Jing nodded. "I understand."

He understood, but Meng Zhi did not. However, the Commander General was not one with extreme curiosity, and although he could not figure it out after some thought, he did not continue asking either.

"The Eastern Palace is in the imperial city, and the guards within the palace are led by the imperial guards. The guards outside the palace are led by the capital patrol guards, so your highness, you will have to make sure to increase the patrols on watch around the Eastern Palace. No matter how much chaos there is in the court, there can not be any chaos near the Eastern Palace. When chaos erupts, accidents happen, and the responsibility will fall on the two of you—Prince Yu would be more than happy to take advantage of the situation."

Meng Zhi immediately agreed, saying, "This is indeed a heavy amount of responsibility, didn't I tell you both just now? I don't even have a clear royal decree

right now. That day, I asked his majesty for one, but every time I was interrupted before I could finish asking. So now I have nothing but merely a verbal command.”

“Speaking of this,” Mei Changsu turned to look at him, “You should prepare a hefty gift to give to Head Eunuch Gao.”

“What? Why?”

“He interrupted you with good intentions—a favor to you—and if you return the favor with a gift, it represents that you knew he had good intentions, and accept his favor.” Mei Changsu smiled at him. “That’s how it is.”

Meng Zhi glared back at him, “Su-xiansheng, you clearly know that my mind cannot entangle all these confusing things! So stop teasing me, and tell me in a more understandable way, what is going on!”

“Then let me ask you, when you first asked for a royal decree, did his majesty respond to you?”

“No...”

“Then why did he not respond to you? Did he not hear clearly, or was he unable to understand you?”

Meng Zhi stared blankly, and did not know how to answer.

“If you were to say who in this world understands his majesty’s feelings and intentions best, it would definitely not be the Noble Consort, not the Crown Prince or Prince Yu, nor any of the court officials who continuously try to speculate the Emperor, but Gao Zhan. He serves by his majesty’s side day and night, and his majesty’s fondness and trust in him has not waned at all. This could not be done without astute reactions and accurate judgments.” Mei Changsu made clear eye contact with Meng Zhi and continued, “Take the happenings at the Changxin Hall as an example. You asked for a royal decree, and his majesty ignored you. This demonstrates that his majesty was still hesitant at that time, and neither wanted to punish him immediately, nor did he want to handle it in a way that would cause unrecoverable damage. If the Executive Court Secretariat issued a royal decree placing a ban on the Crown Prince and Eastern Palace, they would have to provide a reason. No matter what reason is provided, any cause resulting in the house arrest of the Crown Prince could not be a small crime. With the current situation of the Crown Prince, he could not endure having such a royal decree. Once it is announced, even if he isn’t officially dethroned, he could be considered to be dethroned. So to his majesty, when you were asking for a royal decree, you were pretty much asking for a royal decree to dethrone the Crown Prince...”

At this point, Meng Zhi had worked up a cold sweat, and anxiously said, “But that’s not what I meant! I only...”

“You only wanted a royal decree so that it would be more convenient for you to manage the Eastern Palace. I understand this, Gao Zhan understands, and even his majesty understands. So when you first asked, his majesty was not angered, he just chose to ignore it. But if you continuously ask for him to issue a royal decree, with his majesty’s state of mind at the time, and with his suspicious and mistrustful personality, I’m afraid it would result in more than him just ignoring you. Anyways, do not forget, in the case where the imperial messengers were assassinated, Prince Yu went to plead for mercy for you. In his majesty’s heart, there will be, a little more or less, some suspicion that you lean towards Prince Yu. At this time, if you ask for a royal decree, pretty much pushing the Crown Prince to his death...well then...” Mei Changsu laughed coldly and continued, “Is his majesty very forgiving? Very thoughtful? How much would he overthink the situation?”

Meng Zhi took two steps back and fell into the chair behind him. He took two deep breaths, yet was still unable to recover from what he had just heard.

“His majesty wanted to postpone this most urgent matter, and Head Eunuch Gao knew this very well. So by interrupting you, he really had good intentions. Don’t you think you should bring him a gift to thank him?”

“Hearing you put it this way, I really do need to go thank him.” Meng Zhi wiped the sweat on his forehead and said, “But why would Gao Zhan want to help me? Even though we have never had a conflict, we have never been especially close either.”

“At the sides of an emperor, are those who wait on him as if he were a tiger. Being in the dark depths of the inner palace, there is no doubt that Gao Zhan has great wisdom and intelligence. He is loyal only to the Emperor, and does not get involved with the conflicts of the inner palace or political affairs. He never plots to harm anyone, and when given the chance, will do some favors and give some assistance without anyone knowing. This way, no matter who comes out on top, or who is favored in the future, there will always be a good ending for him. It is actually those who take too many actions to support and lean towards one or the other, that end up falling to their own doom. It is like this with the imperial court, and the inner palace... when has it been any different?”

“Su-xiansheng, since Gao Zhan is such an important figure by his majesty, and is so intelligent, why don’t you find a way to induce him to lean towards his highness Prince Jing?”

“That would not do.” Mei Changsu shook his head, saying, “First of all, Gao Zhan’s practice of keeping himself neutral will not change because we try to win his support. Secondly, he is too close to his majesty, if we want him to join forces with us, it is inevitable that we will reveal some confidential information to him. If we can’t

control it well, it may end up being more troublesome than beneficial. For Prince Jing to vie for the throne, we have to use the right ways and continue to strengthen ourselves so that we can garner more support. Although Gao Zhan is very important, he is not absolutely crucial, and thus we need not be so greedy. Anyways, knowing Head Eunuch Gao, even if he doesn't join forces with us, he will not get in the way of any of our plans either. When his highness is strong enough, even if he isn't one of us, he will be."

Meng Zhi waved his hands, seeming almost a little bit embarrassed, and said, "Never mind, I am too dull witted, and I won't interrupt you in the future so that I don't get in the way of discussing more important matters. If you didn't put it this way I wouldn't understand, but now that you have, I see that it is true!"

Prince Jing, who had been silently listening at the side, couldn't help but smile and said, "It is a good thing that you asked, Su-xiansheng sometimes does not feel like explaining. Now that you asked, I am more clear as well."

"It isn't that I don't feel like explaining, it's just that recently, your highness has improved greatly. I only have to slightly mention it for you to understand. Since you understand, why take the extra time and effort to explain that much?"

Prince Jing's smile shifted and he said more seriously, "But there is a third reason that you do not ask me to recruit Gao Zhan, this I understand. I have to thank you."

This was an unexpected statement, and Mei Changsu was quite surprised. There was a sudden warmth within his chest and he turned away smiling, not saying anything more.

Although there were difficulties and disadvantages to winning over Gao Zhan, the benefits that it would bring were absolutely tremendous. In the end, the most important reason that Mei Changsu decided not to force Prince Jing to go for Gao Zhan, was indeed one that he did not say aloud.

It was that he did not wish to get Consort Jing involved.

After all, it wouldn't be suitable for Prince Jing to visit the inner palace too often, so regardless of whether it was during or after they successfully recruited Gao Zhan, they would need to go through Consort Jing to carry out certain actions. Consort Jing was insightful and very calm, so it was not that she would be unable to fulfill the duty. She was a tranquil and compassionate person, and Prince Jing would never wish to see her involved in the deception and scheming that would go on.

Mei Changsu was very considerate and understood this, so he never asked Prince Jing to cooperate in plotting something to happen in the inner palace. He was surprised that Prince Jing, who had never brought it up, actually understood his good intentions.

“Then what do we do next?” Meng Zhi did not understand the hidden meanings behind their words, and did not want to ask either. The only thing he was concerned about, was that he did not make any more mistakes or wrong moves.

“Three words: wait and watch.” Mei Changsu said decisively. “It is said that abnormality is a demon, so you should imagine that you were never involved with vying for the throne—that is how you should go about taking care of situations. The General Commander should continue to carefully guard the Eastern Palace, and just follow the royal orders as they are given. Prince Jing can continue to perform his duties diligently, and continue to be indifferent towards Prince Yu and the Crown Prince, just as before. During these times, whoever adds to the trouble, ends up in trouble. Just now, I told Prince Yu to ‘act cautiously, secretly,’ but in reality, the correct way to approach this is to do nothing at all. Right now, the only thing his majesty would like is peace—whichever can be the most peaceful, whoever he will have more preference for. Within the palace, isn’t it like this as well?”



## CHAPTER 112

### *A Cloud of Suspicion*

After all matters were discussed, Prince Jing stood up to signal the conclusion of the meeting. With Prince Jing's back to him, Mei Changsu took this opportunity to shoot a glance at Meng Zhi and signal to him. The General Commander was still deep in thought, processing the various analyses that Mei Changsu had just talked through, so he did not immediately understand what Mei Changsu was hinting about. It was not until Mei Changsu secretly mouthed some words to him that he suddenly remembered what he was instructed to do earlier.

“Oh yes, your highness,” Meng Zhi quickly said as Prince Jing was just about to open the door, “The last time the book that you took, ‘Soaring over the Earth: A Chronicle,<sup>160</sup>’ have you happened to finish reading it? I have flipped through the book a few times and found it quite interesting, so I want to read it to gain some more insight. I am wondering if your highness can lend it to me for a couple of days?”

“Why do you ask me? The owner of the book is Su-xiansheng, if you would like to borrow this book, shouldn't you ask him?” Prince Jing raised his eyebrows, saying, “As long as Su-xiansheng agrees, then I will give it to you.”

Mei Changsu smiled, responding, “It is just a book, whoever likes it can take it to read it. If General Commander Meng did not bring it up, I would've forgotten about it.”

“But, respected General Meng will have to wait a couple of days,” Prince Jing said smiling, “The book is with my mother—when I go in to pay my respects to her in a few days, I will bring it to you.”

Mei Changsu jumped a little, and was quite startled, asking, “How... Why is it with Consort Jing?”

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<sup>160</sup> Used Lang Ya Scribe's version of the translation for 翔地记 for the sake of consistency for readers (I know most readers come from reading her translations first). Hope our dear friend does not mind, since I was unable to contact her.

“Although my mother is naturally quiet, she has traveled to many places prior to entering the palace. Now that she is in the palace and cannot leave, she is often bored and thus enjoys reading works about travel. Su-xiansheng’s book is such a rare and elaborate piece of writing, so when I brought it up, my mother was very interested and wanted to read it. Now that I think about it, she has been reading the book for around half a month now, and must be almost finished with it. Since General Meng would like to read it, next time I will remember to get it from her.

Meng Zhi was not the one who wanted to read the book, rather, it was Mei Changsu who asked Meng Zhi to request the return of the book. Hearing the words of Prince Jing and seeing the expression on Mei Changsu’s face, he pretended to act casually, but could not help but worry. He was not quite sure exactly what should be said, and only responded, “Oh,” along with, “Thank you,” before leaving from the secret passageway with Prince Jing.

When Meng Zhi secretly entered Prince Jing’s prefecture, it was already dark out, so now it was late into the night. After saying goodnight, Meng Zhi was preparing to leave as quietly as he had entered, but just as he began to walk away, Prince Jing called out, “Wait a moment.” He stopped in his footsteps and quickly turned around.

However, after Prince Jing stopped Meng Zhi, he did not speak for quite some time. After a long pause, he slowly asked, “General Meng, when you asked for the book, *Soaring over the Earth: A Chronicle*, did you really want to read it, or did someone else ask you to ask for it?”

Meng Zhi was caught off guard by this sudden and unexpected question, and could not help but feel startled. Fortunately, the words he followed up with matched the look of surprise on his face, saying, “Why would your highness think that? Of course I want to read it! Who would your highness think would ask me to ask for this book? Unless other than us, there is someone else who knows your highness borrowed this book from Su-xiansheng?”

Although the reasoning for his surprise was different from the one he voiced, but the look of surprise on his face was genuine, and thus Prince Jing did not question it to be fake. He couldn’t help but feel a little awkward, and smiled, explaining, “It’s just that I didn’t know General Meng enjoyed reading as well, so I just thought to ask. No need to think much of my question.”

Meng Zhi laughed as well and said, “I am a martial artist who has never had anything to do with books. If it weren’t for me flipping through a few pages and finding it quite interesting, I would not want to ask to read it. No wonder your highness finds it a little unexpected...”

“It was I who was discourteous.” Prince Jing nodded his head slightly in apology and continued, “I should not have asked it in such a manner. General Meng need not think much of it and...Need not tell Su-xiangsheng about this...”

“Uh...” Meng Zhi could not understand what he meant, and was afraid that by asking more questions, he would say something wrong and be blamed by Xiao-Shu later on. He laughed and quickly said goodbye, leaving so fast it seemed he was flying.

Once Meng Zhi had left, for a while, Prince Jing sat under the light doing nothing. He recently felt as if he couldn't focus completely, and instead went outside to handle some of the affairs for the military and capital patrol guards. Afterwards, he practiced his swordsmanship in the garden for an hour, and it wasn't until he felt tired that he returned to his room to rest.

The next morning, he entered the palace to attend the imperial court, but the administrative court issued a decree saying that the court was still not called for by the emperor today. Prince Jing then entered the inner palace from the Zhuque Gate to visit his mother. He counted that it had been about seven days since he last saw Consort Jing. The last few times, he had just arrived outside her palace before being notified that the Emperor was inside, and could only bow outside her palace, not daring to disturb them. Hearing that the Emperor had not called for the court again today, Prince Jing was prepared that he may not be able to see her again. However, as soon as he arrived outside the Zhiluo Palace, he was quickly welcomed inside by the servants.

Consort Jing greeted her son in the day-to-day living room, the Xinuan Hall,<sup>161</sup> and was wearing light colors and makeup as usual. She smiled gently as she asked to make sure that he was healthy and doing well, then called for the servants to bring the tea and pastries she had made herself. She contentedly watched as her son ate.

“How come Father Emperor is not here today?” Prince Jing asked casually as he ate a black sesame cake.

“I heard... Xia Jiang came into the palace today, to discuss some matters with his majesty.” Consort Jing answered the question simply, then passed another bowl of chestnut pudding to him, saying, “Try this, this is freshly made.”

“Every time I come, you act as if I have no food to eat outside,” Prince Jing joked, continuing, “Ever since I could come to visit mother whenever I would like, I have gotten a whole size larger.”

“How are you fat?” Consort Jing gently said, “As a mother, I am only afraid you are not eating enough.”

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<sup>161</sup> 西暖阁—Xinuan Hall or West Warm Hall. I've seen the translation “West Warm Hall” used, but personally feel that it is too literal of a translation since “Nuan” means warmth and genial rather than only warm. This is the “living room” like area of Consort Jing's palace.

The chestnut pudding was in a very small bowl, and Prince Jing finished it with two sips. He wiped his mouth with a napkin and said, "Mother, last time the book that I brought, *Soaring over the Earth: A Chronicle*, have you finished it?"

"I have finished reading it. Are you going to take it back?"

"Another friend would also like to read it."

Consort Jing stood up, and personally went to the shelf to bring it over. Her gaze lingered on the cover for a moment before handing it over to her son.

"Mother... Do you really like this book?"

"Yes..." Consort Jing smiled faintly, and lamentingly continued, "It reminds me of the past, and it brings up some nostalgic feelings... Oh yes, the margin notes in this book were written by the Su-xiansheng you speak of often?"

"Yes."

"Reading the notes, it seems that the writer should be a bright and gallant young man. Why is it that hearing from you, it seems that this Su-xiansheng is calculating and manipulative?"

"Su-xiansheng is a multifaceted person. Sometimes he is so manipulating that it chills my heart, yet other times I feel he is very profound." Prince Jing raised his eyebrows, asking, "Why? Mother, you find him very interesting?"

"You have great ambitions, and want to redress the injustice of your older brother. You want to support the citizens and rectify the imperial court system, and I am so proud of you for that. Unfortunately, I am weak, and cannot be much help to you. I only hope that there is someone loyal and capable by your side to assist you to succeed." Consort Jing's eyes sparkled like reflections in the water, and gently said, "I think this Su-xiansheng is very good, he gave up the easy path of supporting the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, and is fully dedicated to you. You can see his sincerity. You have always been impartial, and I have confidence in you—so normally there wouldn't be anything more that I need to remind you of. I just really feel that such talent like Su-xiansheng is so rare to come by, and you should treat him with more respect than others. No matter what happens in the future, never forget that he is the one who has been helping you since the very beginning."

Prince Jing listened quietly, then was silent for a moment before making eye contact with his mother, and slowly said, "You have said this to me before..."

"Ah?" Consort Jing was quite surprised, and said, "What?"

“Mother, not long after you read this book, you specifically asked me who wrote the margin notes in the book. After that, you reminded me to be respectful and kind to Su-xiansheng, and to rely on and trust him... How come you thought of bringing this up again? Unless you are afraid that I will forget?”

“Oh, really...” Consort Jing laughed to herself, and gently wiped her mouth with a handkerchief, saying, “When a person is becoming old, they become more and more forgetful. Things that I have already said before, I repeat them multiple times. It seems, that I really am getting old...”

Prince Jing hurried to stand up and bowed, saying, “Mother, you are still thriving and prosperous, why would you say such a thing? It is all because I spoke wrongly, please forgive me.”

“Alright,” Consort Jing smiled at him with a little laugh, “I am your mother, what is there to look so afraid about? You have already grown up and are both ambitious and responsible. I am very proud. No matter what happens outside, as long as you take care of yourself and stay safe, that is enough for me.”

“Yes.” Prince Jing was just about to comfort her some more, when a servant appeared outside the entrance, and called out: “I have something to report to Consort Jing.”

“Come in to speak.”

The servant walked in with her eyes down, and knelt down, reporting, “The Wuying Hall just sent word that his majesty is coming this way, please prepare to welcome him.”

“Understood, you may leave now.” Consort Jing took her time standing up, and went to bring two pastry boxes to give to Prince Jing. She said to him, “I prepared these herbal pastries, one box is for you, and the other is for Su-xiansheng. It represents my gratitude to him for his hard work assisting my son.”

Prince Jing pursed his lips and stacked the two boxes on top of one another, holding them both in one hand as he used the other to grab the book. With everything in his arms, he bowed to Consort Jing, and slowly walked away. In order to avoid running into his majesty, he purposely used the side door and walked all the way around the Huaisu Pavilion, going in the opposite direction of the Zhuque Gate before finally arriving at his carriage, which had been long awaiting him.

As soon as he stepped into his carriage, Prince Jing set the two boxes aside, and pulled out *Soaring over the Earth: A Chronicle*, he flipped through it multiple times, focusing especially on Mei Changsu’s margin notes. He repeatedly looked over every word and sentence written by Mei Changsu, reading it much more detailed than usual.

Yet no matter how he read it, he could not find any deeper meaning, and in the end, could only helplessly throw the book aside.

Exactly what was so strange about this book? In the beginning, when he inadvertently asked to borrow this book from Mei Changsu, there was a sudden waiver in Mei Changsu's expression. It was as if a sliver of a crack had appeared in a thousand year ice sheet, or the flash of a secret door seen at the end of a long and dark tunnel. Even though it disappeared without a trace within an instance, Xiao Jingyan immediately knew that there must be something in this book.

But what could it be? What could allow Mei Changsu, who would not even change expression if the Tai Mountains collapsed into an avalanche in front of him, have such a waiver in expression? What could allow the General Meng Zhi, who had never had an interest in reading, come to ask for this book? Most importantly, what could allow his mother, who has indifferently lived in the depths of the inner palace for more than ten years, repetitively ask and care about an advisor that she has never even seen before?

Prince Jing knew, that if even his dearest mother deliberately avoided the topic, then it was impossible for him to ask anyone else about his suspicions. Even if he did ask, it was likely that he would not receive the truth he was looking for. If he wanted to have his confusions clarified, he would have to think for himself.

Xiao Jingyan picked up the book that he had thrown aside, and flipped through it carefully again. Even after he carefully tried reversing and reassembling the characters and sentences in the footnotes written by Mei Changsu, he still did not discover anything special.

When the carriage entered the main entrance of Prince Jing's Prefecture, Xiao Jingyan sighed hopelessly and closed the book, jumping off the carriage.

As a servant came to help him untie his cape, he passed the book to him and ordered, "Send a person to bring this to General Commander Meng's Prefecture, and ask him to accept it."

"Yes."

Prince Jing took a few steps towards the study, then suddenly remembering stopped in his footsteps and said, "There are two pastry boxes in the carriage, bring them both to my room."

"Yes."

"Ask for General Lie, General Ji, Advisor Liu, and Inspector Wei to come to the study."

“Yes!”

Prince Jing looked up at the sky, took a deep breath, and pushed all his confusions to the back of his head. Regaining his spirits, he confidently walked towards his study.

Right then, there was a sudden burst of noise outside the door, and a soldier ran in, breathlessly reporting, “His majesty’s royal decree has arrived! Your highness, please go to accept the decree...” As he finished saying this, the soldier cleared his throat, and excitedly added, “The one here to deliver the decree, is the Head Court Eunuch of the Imperial Ceremony Court.”

Prince Jing understood immediately, and could not help but feel a rush of joy. However, he remained calm and composed, and only showed a slight smile. He had not yet changed out of his court attire so there was no need for further delay, and thus quickly went outside.

The one delivering the royal decree was indeed the Head Court Eunuch of the Imperial Ceremony Court, who was wearing his official uniform and a bright smile on his face. After they exchanged greetings, Prince Jing walked inside with him. The governor of the house had already excitedly prepared the altar room, and after entering, the Head Court Eunuch opened up the yellow, silk imperial decree and read aloud, “In the name of the heavens, the Emperor royally declares: the seventh royal prince, Xiao Jingyan, is honest, devoted, and filial. He is both virtuous and righteous, loyal and brave, and has had great achievements. Because of this, he is bestowed the title of a five-pearl qin<sup>162</sup> prince. Please accept this decree and honor!”

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<sup>162</sup> Qin Prince is a title and way of ranking the prince’s level. In NiF, there is only mention of the Jun Prince title and the Qin Prince title, with Prince Jing previously being a lower ranking Jun Prince.

## CHAPTER 113

### *Unsheathing of the Sword*

Before Xiao Jingyan was crowned a qin prince, whether it was in the inner palace, in the royal courts, or even for the Emperor himself, everyone felt that they had narrow options and were solving a problem with only two choices. It seemed that if you did not choose the Crown Prince, then you should choose Prince Yu, and if you did not choose Prince Yu, then you should choose the Crown Prince. Even if at this time, one did not clearly display the intent to support one or the other, it was inevitable that sooner or later, one of the two would take over the throne.

After thinking in such a way for a long time, when everyone saw Prince Jing, who was previously only a second-ranking royal family member, wearing royal robes and a five-pearl crown standing confidently and valiantly next to Prince Yu, the visual impact of the scene was even stronger than when they all first heard the news of Prince Jing's promotion. Even the most insensitive to political happenings realized at that moment, that a new era of politics had begun.

In truth, at this time, Prince Jing was not yet completely comparable to Prince Yu as he had two fewer pearls on his crown. Yet regardless, they were now both first-ranking qin princes, and the distance of two pearls was much less than that of a qin and jun prince as it had been previously. In comparison, it seemed that this distance could be easily overcome.

People often are prone to having blind spots that they do not notice, and when something goes unnoticed for long periods of time, it may seem invisible even when placed in plain sight. Yet once the thin film is uncovered, all of a sudden, it becomes perfectly clear. Everyone suddenly realized that Prince Jing really did not have anything less than Prince Yu. Although he was once obscure and rarely heard of, it was only because he lacked attention. However, it was also this lack of attention toward him that sent him away from the capital city quite often, allowing him to gather both political and military achievements that none of his siblings were comparable to. In the end, his lack of attention was really a blessing in disguise.

As for birth rank, thanks to Prince Yu's court debate before the New Year, everyone was quite clear that since neither was the son (by birth) of the Empress, neither was considered to be more noble than another. Even more, Consort Jing was



being increasingly favored by the Emperor, and although Prince Yu was raised by the Empress, his own mother was only a Concubine before her death.

And for birth order, it is true that Xiao Jingyan was not one of the oldest, but after all, this was not an important factor anyways. If the determining factor really was birth order, then the Crown Prince and Prince Yu would both have been working in vain for the past decade.

If someone had said, around two to three months ago, that another prince would suddenly emerge and be capable of rivaling Prince Yu, that person would have been seen to be an idiot and a foolish dreamer. Yet in the short time that had passed, everyone now clearly understood not only that Prince Yu had a new adversary other than the Crown Prince, but even more so that Prince Yu did not have much advantage over him at all.

Of course, as to the change in circumstances, the person who noticed the change most evidently was Prince Jing himself. In the very beginning, when he initially decided to take part in vying for the throne, he seemed to have little potential and had no confidence. He had even asked Mei Changsu, how he should euphemistically communicate to his generals and subordinates that he had intentions, without scaring them. At the time, Mei Changsu only answered, “There is no need to reveal your thoughts, as you slowly develop the eligibility to take part, the people around you will notice it even before you do.”

After being crowned a qin prince, Prince Jing slowly began to understand the true meaning behind Mei Changsu’s words. Before, when he had discussions with his subordinates, even when they were complaining, the most they would complain about was the quality of soldier provisions, that the cotton coats were too thin, and why the court did not pay more attention to these things. But now, the discussions in the Tiger Shadow Hall of the Prince Jing Prefecture were all about how to establish a more efficient soldier and horse assembly system, how to promote the implementation of this system, and other important government affairs. A few of his insightful friends and trusted deputies had even begun to either consciously or unintentionally entice and encourage him to reveal more of his abilities in the court, and to recruit talented individuals for future use. If Prince Jing even showed a subtle hint of interest in the throne, his confidants would immediately light up with excitement and speak with such great enthusiasm to the point that it was Prince Jing who needed to suggest that they remember to slightly restrain themselves.

The water had already risen to such a point that there was no longer a need to say anything—everyone was already fully aware of what was happening.

Although Prince Jing believed that even if he had never gained influence, his generals and soldiers who had stood by him on the battlefields would never abandon him, from the perspective of ambition and achievement, he understood that following

a prince who had hopes of establishing a new era was much better than following a prince who was constantly oppressed.

Of course, the person who was most frustrated about Prince Jing's new position was no one other than Prince Yu, Xiao Jinghuan. Thinking back, he felt as if he had just idly stood by as he clearly watched Prince Jing, step by step, discreetly plant a firm stance in the courts. During this entire process, there were so many obvious opportunities where he could have intervened and suppressed Prince Jing's movements. He couldn't believe that he unexpectedly let it all pass by him, even providing assistance to Prince Jing in certain situations.

Prince Yu felt as if he was the farmer who had saved the freezing snake<sup>163</sup> and was so remorseful over what he had done that he wanted to curse someone. For many years, he had placed his time and energy focusing on the Crown Prince, and did not know much about this newly emerged opponent. He only had a few rather superficial impressions of Prince Jing, and did not know what role Consort Jing played in the inner-palace either.

After Xiao Jingyan was crowned a qin prince, within a month, Prince Yu held several meetings with his confidants and deputies to come up with countermeasures, but in the end, they could not form any useful tactics. When he went to discuss with Mei Changsu, Mei Changsu was not worried in the slightest, and calmly smiled, saying, "Congratulations."

Prince Yu could not help but angrily hit the table, yelling, "Jingyan has been crowned a qin prince, and you are congratulating me?"

"Prince Jing being crowned a qin prince represents that the Crown Prince is about to be dethroned. Your highness' long-cherished wish is about to come true. Shouldn't I congratulate you?"

Prince Yu furrowed his eyebrows and did not say anything. He understood what Mei Changsu was saying. Back then, Prince Qi had an overwhelming amount of power to the point that the Emperor no longer had control—because of this, the Emperor was keen on keeping powers balanced, and allowed for Prince Yu to obtain the power he had today in order to balance out the Crown Prince's position in the court. The rise of Prince Jing represented that the Crown Prince was about to be abandoned, and the Emperor intended to have a new balance of powers. Yet although this all made sense to Prince Yu, the more he thought about it, the more it seemed as if his years of hard work resulted in nothing, causing further frustration.

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<sup>163</sup> the farmer who had saved the freezing snake: This is referring to Aesop's fable, where the farmer saves the freezing snake, but then is in return, bitten and killed by the snake: <http://read.gov/aesop/094.html>

“It took me ten years to dethrone the Crown Prince. Do I really have to spend the next ten years competing with Prince Jing?”

Mei Changsu smiled coldly, saying, “How could you compare the Crown Prince with Prince Jing? The Crown Prince already had the title, and thus it was difficult for your highness to compare to him. But Prince Jing is only a five-pearl qin prince and is only recently being favored, which makes him seem special. If we first disregard what may happen in the future, if the Crown Prince is dethroned, then your highness has already made a great victory. If this first step does not happen, if one day, something unspeakable happens to his majesty, no matter how much power you have over the Crown Prince, the title and position both still belong to him. At that point, if you try to compete for it, it would be treason. “

After hearing this, Prince Yu felt persuaded and was slightly calmer, but once he returned to his prefecture, he still felt uneasy and was restless. If it were at this time last year, and he still held much power in his hands, Mei Changsu’s explanation would immediately please him. Yet at this time, after carefully calculating the power in his hands, Prince Yu suddenly realized that he was holding onto little to no power, and could not help but feel panicked.

Prince Yu felt a lot of uncertainty and doubt, and Mei Changsu understood that this time, it was difficult to completely persuade him. So after Prince Jing was crowned with his new title, the defense outside the Su Manor was strengthened. Though it looked lax on the outside, in reality, Li Gang and Zhen Ping controlled it so tightly, that it was as difficult to get into as an iron bucket.

Tong Lu continued to come by once every two days, and would come every day if there was urgent information. However, he never stayed at the Su Manor for too long, at most a little less than an hour. If Mei Changsu had any instructions for Mister Shisan, he would stop by the Miaoyin House afterward, in the name of delivering fresh produce. Otherwise, he would return to his own place of residence.

Since he needed to conceal his identity, Tong Lu lived in the rather impoverished neighborhood of the area. His neighbors directly to the left and right of his home were from the Alliance, but other than the two of them, the rest of his neighbors were all underprivileged, ordinary inhabitants of the city. Some sold tofu, some sold sundries, and others would do miscellaneous work such as carry bags, run errands, mend clothes, and more. They worked hard but lived extremely difficult lives, and thus rarely had additional time or energy to notice him.

Most of the time, it was already almost dusk when Tong Lu returned to his dilapidated residence. Sometimes, just after he put away his vegetable cart and led the donkey into the stable, he would hear the sound of heavy breathing and panting from climbing up the hill. When he heard this, he knew that Auntie Qiu, who lived two houses down, had come back.

Auntie Qiu married at a young age and lived most of her life in this neighborhood. Both her husband and son died early, and she only lived with her granddaughter who was around the age of seven or eight. Every day, she made some syrups and would push them to the market to be sold in a wheelbarrow—by the time she returned home, she had little energy to push the cart up the hill.

So, as long as Tong Lu saw her, he would always go outside to help.

This had become an established habit from when Tong Lu moved in a few years ago, yet recently, some things slightly changed.

The change was that in the past, he would help her only if they coincidentally arrived home at similar times, but now, he would unconsciously ensure that he arrived home at a specific time, just so he could help Auntie Qiu push her wheelbarrow.

After helping her out, he would also receive a bowl of unsold syrup in return, and it would be specially delivered to him by Auntie Qiu's niece, who had come from afar to seek shelter.

Auntie Qiu's niece's name was Jun Niang, and she came about a month ago from the far away Wu Province to seek help. When she first found the neighborhood, it was evident that she encountered a long and difficult journey, as she looked so thin and sallow that even her eyes seemed unfocused. After being unable to speak clearly when asking for help, she fainted on the street. It was then that Tong Lu saved her and brought her back, discovering that she was looking for Auntie Qiu. However, Auntie Qiu had been married away from her home town for a long time, and although she remembered having a niece, she could not recall what she looked like anymore. It was only seeing the reddish birthmarks on Jun Niang's shoulder that she recognized her, and they burst into tears while hugging one another. They did not stop crying until the neighbors came by to comfort the two of them, and from then on, Jun Niang stayed at Auntie Qiu's house.

Once she settled in, it was natural that Tong Lu and Jun Niang often ran into one another when leaving and returning to the neighborhood. Jun Niang would reveal a little information about herself—it seemed that she had no children and her husband had died, and was almost assaulted by a gang leader before escaping. Although she was frail from being so thin, it was clear that she was a beauty, and thus no wonder that others would have their eyes on her. Everyone felt sympathetic, especially Tong Lu, who was reminded of the humiliation his younger sister once endured. Because of this, he would help out whenever he had a chance, and since he saved Jun Niang, she hoped to return favors to him as well and would help him with housework. It was inevitable that the two of them interacted and conversed frequently.

With a newcomer moving into the area, Mister Shisan also conducted procedural investigations, confirming that Jun Niang's history was as she had described it to be—becoming widowed, being unwelcome in her family, and escaping assault. After

arriving, she rose early, rested late, and helped Auntie Qiu sell and stew syrup every day. It was evident that she was skillful, accustomed to hard work, and lived a very simple life. It could be seen that she developed these habits from growing up on a farm as a child, and thus Mister Shisan did not think much of it.

Though life was not easy, she had a loving family, had a harmonious relationship with their neighbors, and life was peaceful. Following a month's recovery, Jun Niang became both happier and healthier, and her figure looked more elegant as well. Even in just a simple cloth dress, she looked graceful and charming. Tong Lu frequently visited the Miaoyin House and it was not uncommon for him to see beautiful women. Yet despite this, he was still mesmerized by her shy gaze and would feel lost and empty if he even went a day without seeing her. As for Jun Niang, it seemed that she did not lack feelings toward him either, and occasionally displayed affection for him, other times feeling so close, yet also so far. Her exquisite allure and gentleness had caused Tong Lu to unknowingly become so attracted, that he was head over heels for her.

## CHAPTER 114

### *Resentment*

As the first frost began to settle in, the required statistics of each province's autumn harvests were slowly being received by the court. Due to the summer and spring drought, many province officials reported disasters, with some places having locust plagues resulting in not a single grain being harvested. Famine refugees scattered everywhere begging for food, and the situation was very serious. Prince Yu, in order to boost his reputation, announced that he would be cutting down on personal spendings, and donated thirty thousand pieces of silver to improve the conditions for the citizens, in addition to the Ministry of Revenue's own disaster relief fund. He won widespread praise for his actions. Prince Jing on the other hand, never had a wealthy background and was also providing for a large group of orphans in his army—Consort Jing was unable to provide assistance in this aspect either, and thus Prince Jing seemed less generous and paled in comparison.

Right at this time, there was a robbery and homicide case of a convoy in the Fu Province, which alerted the Ministry of Justice to investigate. In the end, the case was solved, as they recovered the stolen property, arrested the robbers, and successfully closed the case. Originally, this was neither an overly small or large matter, and the most that the Ministry of Justice needed to do was to report on the case. However, unexpectedly, it was discovered that the convoy was escorting a routine gift given to Prince Yu by the Magistrate of the Yue Province, totaling no less than five thousand pieces of gold. The Yue Province was one of the provinces most affected by the disaster, and many citizens had starved to death while awaiting governmental aid. When interrogated, the arrested robbers stated that they were indignant over such happenings, and thus put their own lives in jeopardy in an attempt to steal the goods and redistribute them to citizens in need. This news spread, and the people of the Yue Province pled to reduce the punishment of the robbers, raising an uproar of criticism which caused Prince Yu's name to become thoroughly disgraced. He made multiple statements declaring that he had absolutely no knowledge of the gifts coming from the Yue Province and had never received any gifts in the past either. Nevertheless, no matter how much he tried to prove his innocence, it is difficult to say how many court officials would believe that the Yue Province never sent gifts in the past, yet would randomly send gifts in a year of incredible hardship.

Due to such a scandal, although the Emperor never explicitly blamed Prince Yu, Prince Yu was asked to distance himself from the situation due to potential conflicts of interest. He was banned from any involvement in organizing disaster relief and aid, and the duty was reassigned to Prince Jing instead. Prince Jing was already good friends with Shen Zhui, a civil official at the Ministry of Revenue, and the two cooperated tacitly, feeling unrestrained when communicating with one another. Since both were extremely principled and self-disciplined, they quickly took control of the situation by executing or discharging some officials who were continuously acting in accordance with past practices. Although you could not say that they handled the situation perfectly from start to end, compared to past years where only thirty percent of the silver sent for disaster aid was distributed to the citizens, it was like night and day. Shen Zhui was a hard worker who preferred firsthand opportunities and thus couldn't stand to sit around in the capital city. He requested to be sent to the disaster-stricken areas to ensure that there were no riots, minimal deaths, and a safe winter, so that when spring came around, there would be successful farming. Prince Jing exchanged letters with him on a daily basis, and spent much of his time searching for other possibilities for the people to restore their livelihoods as soon as possible. Although Prince Jing was not as knowledgeable in this respect, Mei Changsu had been in the Jianghu for more than ten years, and had great expertise regarding the living conditions of the citizens since many of his subordinates had once struggled as lower-class citizens. He gave some suggestions to Prince Jing to discuss with Shen Zhui, who after his on-site investigations, agreed with much of Prince Jing's proposals, and only added a few thoughts before reporting back to the Emperor.

In previous years, the occurrence of major disasters was prone to leading to riots, because the citizens were in need of food and clothing, and also because they had nothing else to do—the disasters caused them to be unable to prepare for spring plowing. Because of this, they were in such despair that even the slightest stimuli could lead to extreme chaos, becoming extremely problematic for the royal court and government every year. The memorial to the throne<sup>164</sup> written by Prince Jing and Shen Zhui needed to provide a solution to this specific issue, and covered many other articles as well. The main purpose was to allow the victims of the disasters to recover, and based on the situation in each province, provide support and arrange for the citizens to take up other work in the meantime. For example, Wei Province is near a waterfront and rich in narrow-leaf cattails, which can be woven into aprons, tea strainers, straw mats, and other goods. After being shipped into the capital city, it became extremely popular, just as goods from other province's newly discovered, supplemental industries were too. At the same time, while the weather was still warm for another month, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce coordinated new construction of roads and bridges, dredging of rivers, and reclamation of mines which allowed victims who did not master craftsmanship to have a basic income. In some of the warmer provinces where there was no snow, once construction began, they could

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<sup>164</sup> Memorial to the throne: A formal essay/report written to the emperor regarding formal affairs. More about this here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorial\\_to\\_the\\_throne](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorial_to_the_throne)

continue working until spring. Seeds for spring plowing would be allocated by the government to each disaster-stricken area, and farmers who did not have any seeds could collect some. They were exempt from all taxes for the year, and if the following year turned out to be a plentiful harvest, the costs for the grain seeds would be added to the taxes, without any additional fees. With all of this, victims benefitted much more than they had in previous years, while the court spent less money as well. The majority of citizens had jobs, and although not all were completely self-sufficient, it was better than living on the streets, starving, begging for food, or hopelessly waiting for the government to take action. It was evident that if the government officials had a flexible mindset and could come up with suitable solutions, the suffering from any disaster could be greatly alleviated.

The implementation of the memorial, after being approved by the Emperor, yielded great results. Not only did it eliminate the chaos that normally accompanies disasters, but the state treasury also did not suffer any major losses, and it rectified the behavior of local officials by setting precedents as well. Prince Jing established an image of being able to lead troops on the battlefield and manage state affairs off the battlefield. Shen Zhui became increasingly well known and held more prestige in the courts too. Though Prince Yu tried to find fault with them multiple times, he was unable to succeed.

At the end of the year, the Imperial Astronomer reported that there was scarlet light reflected on the Emperor Star,<sup>165</sup> showing unlucky signs in the horoscopes. The Emperor wrote an imperial decree stating that because the Crown Prince was unvirtuous, and the heavens had issued a warning, he is deposed as Crown Prince and will thereafter be Prince Xian. He was ordered to move out of the capital city to the Xian province. At the same time, Prince Jing was bestowed two more pearls, and became a seven-pearl qin prince, just as Prince Yu was.

When this decree was officially released, Prince Yu, who was one step ahead and had already received the news, was absolutely furious and threw a fit, smashing everything possible within his study. Even his most beloved pot of orchids was not spared. No one dared to even step near the storm inside, but Qin Banruo, who had not been seen around for a while, had the courage to stand in the corner of the room, watching the enraged Prince Yu.

When Prince Yu had vented out the majority of anger, the lady from the Crimson Sleeve House smiled coldly, saying, "It is said that 'to obtain the qilin prodigy, is to obtain the world.' The Lang Ya Hall was not wrong at all!"

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<sup>165</sup> Emperor Star: a star representing the Emperor in Purple Star Astrology, a form of fortune-telling in ancient China which delineates fate. More about this here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zi\\_wei\\_dou\\_shu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zi_wei_dou_shu)



Her words were like a sharp knife that cut deeply into Prince Yu's heart. He whipped around with his eyes deep red, glaring at Qin Banruo while angrily asking, "What do you mean?"

Qin Banruo's eyes were dark, cold like ice, and she raised her delicate chin, clenching her teeth as she spoke, "Last autumn, when Mister Mei of Jiangzuo first entered the capital, what was the position of your highness, and what was the position of Prince Jing? A year has passed now, and now what position is your highness in, and what position is Prince Jing in? When you compare the changes in the two positions, isn't it obvious, who ended up obtaining the qilin prodigy?"

Prince Yu took a few abrupt steps back, and fell into the chair behind him. He had rising suspicions when Jingyan was crowned a qin prince in September, but had been hesitant and indecisive. With Qin Banruo pointing out the truth in such a direct manner, he suddenly felt his blood pounding, and wished to crush everything in front of him into dust.

"Your highness, don't hope for a fantasy anymore. Prince Jing has obtained Mei Changsu, and I have already confirmed this. Your highness, do you really want me to give you evidence?" Qin Banruo purposefully tried to distress him by saying this, and seeing him lower his head in dejection, laughed coldly, continuing, "Speaking of this Chief, he is really quite amazing. He's decisive, bold, and a good teacher. Without his help, how could Prince Jing ever reach the status he has today? Even the situation in the inner palace has changed, Noble Consort Yue has lost her position, and Consort Jing has risen. She has been quiet in the palace for so many years, who had ever given her an extra thought? But who knew that once they began to rise in status, she would be so difficult to deal with. I'm sure that the Princess Consort has told you all of this already."

Prince Yu clenched his teeth, but did not deny it.

In great contrast to the pretentious Noble Consort Yue, Consort Jing was like a delicate river. Whether it was discrete or direct, no means seemed to ever work on her. She was never overly-sensitive or suspicious, didn't care for attention or wealth, and didn't try to win the support of others. She was meticulous in her etiquette, and only thought about how to serve the Emperor so that he was happy and comfortable, and never spoke a single word more than necessary. If the Emperor rewarded her, she would accept it, and when he didn't, she would never feel resentful or ask for any. If you treated her well, she would be respectful in return, and if you tried to put her in difficult positions, she would accept the hardship. In short, she was like a ball of cotton, impossible to crush or flatten, and if you tried to punch it, you could not damage it at all. It wasn't nearly as difficult to deal with Noble Consort Yue for ten years as it was to deal with Consort Jing in this short time period.

"It was I who underestimated this mother and son." Prince Yu sighed a long breath and continued, "I thought it was a sheep, but it ended up being two wolves. But it is

too early for me to admit defeat. If I can get rid of the Crown Prince, I can tear down Prince Jing too.”

“To know that your highness has such ambition, Banruo greatly admires this. But Mei Changsu is inconceivably insidious, and if we are unable to defeat the Jiangzuo Alliance, I’m afraid we will not be able to tear down Prince Jing...”

Prince Yu glanced at her and responded, “To defeat them, is much easier said than done. Your Crimson Sleeve House has fallen to such circumstances, wouldn’t you say that they defeated you instead?”

His words hit Qin Banruo’s weak spot, and a look of resentment and contempt washed over her charming face, saying “If we are speaking of this one round, then I have lost. But it is not important if I lose, what is crucial is that your highness’ grand future cannot be ruined by an unworthy man. Your highness, don’t you want revenge for being deceived and used?”

Her words provoked something within him, and Prince Yu was infuriated once again, slamming his palm onto the table in front of him so fiercely that a prickly feeling ran through the palm of his hand. After venting out his anger through this motion, he calmed down quite a bit, and although he still felt repressed and sighed repeatedly, he finally clenched his teeth and spoke, “You want to focus your attention on Mei Changsu, and seek revenge for destroying your Crimson Sleeve House, this I understand. If you are talking about resentment, I hate him even more than you do. But with the current situation, it is no longer what it was like a year ago. At that time, if we could dispose of Mei Changsu, then Prince Jing would have no way to achieve any success. Now, my seventh younger brother is one with high aspirations and a promising future, and this is not due to the effort of Mei Changsu alone. I cannot repeat my past mistakes, and continue to let him rise in power. Anyways, no matter how powerful Mei Changsu is, he is nothing more than an advisor, and the greatest weakness in an advisor, is always in the one he is advising. Rather than try to get rid of Mei Changsu, it is much better to take on the person who makes up the foundation. Without someone to advise, no matter what kind of qilin prodigy he is, he is still just a stray dog without an owner.”

When Prince Yu finished his sentence, the ruthlessness in his voice was so far beyond what can be described, that even Qin Banruo felt secretly startled. She quickly composed herself and asked, “Where does your highness intend to start?”

“Where?” Prince Yu paced around his disheveled room, coldly laughed and said, “I may not know Mei Changsu’s weakness, but Prince Jing’s weakness is incredibly obvious. What is the root cause of why he has never been favored these past ten years? Is it that he was stupid, couldn’t take responsibility for his duties, or that he made some mistake? It is not because of any of these things. On the contrary, he’s had many military achievements and worked very hard, yet Father Emperor has never

rewarded him. The reason he doesn't reward him... Standing in between the father and son, where neither is willing to make any concessions, is that old case..."

Qin Banruo narrowed her eyes and slowly nodded, replying, "That's right, Prince Jing's sore spot is indeed the Chiyan Army and Prince Qi's old treason case."

"The number of times that Prince Jing has defiantly contradicted Father Emperor for those traitors, I can't even count anymore. It is just that after more than ten years of sending him out of the capital city, Father Emperor is also getting old, and doesn't bother to argue anymore. Prince Jing has also learned to behave himself, and it is as if they both turned the page, hiding it deep in their hearts, with neither bringing it up. But just because they don't bring it up, doesn't represent that it has been forgotten or forgiven. As long as we find a good opportunity to bring it up, it is still the deepest rift between the two of them..."

"This is indeed a good entry point," Qin Banruo agreed, "But, your highness, when you rip off this old scab once again, you cannot do so arbitrarily. You must rip it off all at once, and the bloodier it is, the better."

"It is exactly because of this, that we cannot do it arbitrarily, that I have yet to figure out how to do so. How nice would it be if a good opportunity were to arise now..."

Qin Banruo's dark, crystal-like eyes looked around for a moment, then she slowly said, "As for an opportunity... Banruo has yet to think of one, but there is a person, who your highness should try and join forces with."

"Who?"

"The head officer of the Xuanjing Bureau, Xia Jiang."

"Xia Jiang?" Prince Yu frowned slightly, continuing, "I'm afraid that is not possible... The Xuanjing Bureau's past tradition has always been to stay out of the fight for the throne. Back when the Crown Prince and I fought like a raging fire, he never..."

"The past is the past," Qin Banruo quickly interrupted, "It is not a surprise that he never intervened between you and the Crown Prince, but now your opponent is Prince Jing. Xia Jiang is not at all ignorant, and is very clear about his relationship with the old Chiyan case. He still, of course, clearly remembers who led the investigation of the Chiyan Army's case. To put it lightly, it is a disagreement, but to put it more seriously, it is resentment. Your highness, do you think Xia Jiang will just turn a blind eye and allow Prince Jing to slowly move closer and closer towards the Emperor's throne? No matter how loyal he is, he still has to consider his own future, right?"

Qin Banruo's words had the exact effect on Prince Yu as she had intended, and Prince Yu uncontrollably rubbed his hands in anticipation, looking quite excited. To Prince Yu, whose strength had suffered great losses, the influence Xia Jiang had on the Emperor and the undercover scouts the Xuanjing Bureau controlled would be like receiving a gift of charcoal on a freezing snow day.

"Your highness," Qin Banruo smiled charmingly, bowing in courtesy while suggesting, "If we would like to covertly test whether or not Xia Jiang has intentions of joining forces with us, then I could assist this process. I have a senior sister,<sup>166</sup> who is Xia Jiang's old acquaintance..."

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<sup>166</sup> Senior sister – an older female within an apprenticeship program under the same master/teacher.

## CHAPTER 115

### *Wind and Snow*

The days before the turning of the year were particularly cold, and it snowed so heavily that the entire capital was covered in a sheet of white. Mei Changsu's old illness flared up again, and he could often be heard coughing through the night. He had met Prince Jing once in the hidden chamber, coughing the entire time, and ever since then, Xiao Jingyan had not come again, either because he was too busy with his own year's end affairs, or because he was purposefully giving Mei Changsu some peace and quiet to recover his strength. In contrast, Prince Yu had come to visit several times, his manner and tone as concerned as ever as he enquired after Mei Changsu's health, as if there was no bitterness or ill-feeling between them. However, no matter the face he presented, no one was foolish enough to believe his pretence, and as the situation had developed to its current state, Mei Changsu was not so impractical as to think that Prince Yu remained as clueless as he had been before.

"Chief, Tong Lu is here." Li Gang was out of the manor today handling affairs under Mei Changsu's orders, so it was Zhen Ping who came to report on the new arrival.

"Let him in."

Tong Lu strode forward in huge steps, bringing a gust of chilly air in with him. Zhen Ping, who was second to none in his attention to detail, grabbed him and pushed him over to the stove to warm up before allowing him to proceed to Mei Changsu's side.

"It looks like there's nothing urgent to report today," Mei Changsu smiled and gestured at his table. "Come and have a cup of tea."

Tong Lu rubbed his warming hands and hurried over with a smile, picking up his cup and draining it in two large swallows. Zhen Ping scolded with a laugh, "Manners of a cow!", before leaving the room to continue his work.

"There are two items Mister Shisan has ordered me to report to the Chief." Tong Lu knew this was important, and he wiped the tea stains from his mouth as he spoke quickly. "Xie Yu has recently been ambushed multiple times in his exile, requiring us

to rescue him, and he is now frightened out of his mind. Also, Xia Dong's whereabouts outside of the capital these past few months have been identified. She has gone to find Xie Yu's former Left Deputy General, Wei Qi, the current Commander of the Jiaxing Mountain Pass. However, we received news yesterday that before she could reach Jiaxing Pass, Wei Qi was found dead mysteriously in the middle of the night."

"Dead?" Mei Changsu's expression was like ice. "Was it Xia Jiang's work?"

"Very likely.....but we are currently still investigating."

Mei Changsu closed his eyes in thought. In fact, though Xie Yu's Left and Right Deputy Generals had been involved, they had only been following orders, and knew no more about the truth of the events of that year than he himself did, and so whether they lived or died was not a matter he had to take to heart. Only..... that year, when Spirit Valley was raided, Wei Qi had not been there. If Xia Dong was simply investigating Nie Feng's death, why would she have gone to him? Unless.....this Xuanjing Officer had decided, for the sake of her dead husband-general, to re-investigate his commanding officer's entire case from beginning to end? And Xia Jiang's swift silencing must mean that he still very much cherished this already-suspicious student of his, and did not wish to embark on a road that would end in the breaking of their ties.

It was a pity Xia Jiang did not know that, on a certain cold day in the dark cells of Sky Prison, Xia Dong had already heard the deadly confession from the mouth of Xie Yu himself.

And so, no matter how much he attempted to conceal the truth now, from the moment he struck the murderous blow all those years ago, the breaking of their ties had already become an unavoidable reality – the inevitable end to the road they were now on.

"Alright, I understand. You may return now." Mei Changsu shifted the little stove resting on his knee a little, one finger rubbing its top absently as he continued, "Tell Mister Shisan, Qin Banruo is not a person who gives up easily, and against her.....we must not let down our guard."

"Yes." Tong Lu bowed and took his leave.

He had just left the room when Zhen Ping came bearing a bowl of medicine, placing it gently in Mei Changsu's hands and watching as he drank it with a pained expression, before handing him a cup of tea to rinse his mouth.

"Physician Yan's medicines have been getting more and more bitter. Have I offended him recently?"

“Chief’s illness is already an offense to Physician Yan,” Zhen Ping answered with a smile, placing the empty bowl back in the tray. He thought for a moment and finally asked hesitatingly, “Chief, did you think Tong Lu.....seemed a bit different...?”

“Hmm?” Mei Changsu spat out his mouthful of tea into the rinsing basin and turned to look at him. “I hadn’t noticed. What is it?”

Zhen Ping scratched his head. “I can’t put my finger on it.....it’s just that he seems to be in more of a hurry than usual, as if he’s always in a rush. Just now, when he was saying goodbye on his way out, his steps never even slowed. It’s not his usual manner, and it’s like his whole person is much more energetic<sup>167</sup> than he used to be.”

Mei Changsu thought about it. “To my recollection, Tong Lu has always been energetic.”

Zhen Ping laughed. “That is true. When I mentioned this to other people, they also did not see any difference in Tong Lu. I suppose I’m making my usual mistake of seeing things where no one else has seen anything. I remember when I first came to Jinling and saw Aunt Ji, I told her she’d gained weight, and she was so mad, she came after me with her spatula....”

“Aunt Ji has gained weight?”

“Of course she has, her waist circumference has grown by at least two units!<sup>168</sup>”

“Aunt Ji’s waist must span nearly three feet, and you can see a difference of two units?” Mei Changsu couldn’t help laughing as well. “No wonder she hit you, you know Aunt Ji is most afraid of gaining weight.”

“That’s why I’ve been spending the past few months getting back into her good graces.” Zhen Ping winked and stood, gathering the bowls and basins. “Chief, get some rest, I’ll take my leave.”

Mei Changsu nodded and watched as he turned and made his way out of the room. Suddenly, he called out, “Zhen Ping, tell Mister Shisan to pay attention to what you said. You have always been attentive, and these intuitions are usually not formed without reason.”

“Yes,” Zhen Ping bowed to receive the order, and then added after a moment’s thought, “Don’t worry, Chief, Tong Lu will not notice anything.”

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<sup>167</sup> an inadequate translation; a more complete explanation of the term used here would be to describe one’s whole mind and spirit as full of vigour and vitality

<sup>168</sup> one unit is equivalent to 0.33cm according to Chinese google

Mei Changsu knew that Zhen Ping was one of the smartest people currently by his side, and some things he did not have to say for him to understand, and so he smiled and nodded his reply before allowing him to leave.

The room was silent and peaceful, with only the sounds of the crackling fire in the stove, and of Fei Liu crunching on a pastry. Mei Changsu closed his eyes to rest, but after a while, he couldn't help opening them again to say with a smile, "Fei Liu, if you keep on eating like that, you will turn into a little pig."

Fei Liu, sitting on a small stool beside his couch, turned to him with a pastry in his mouth and mumbled, "Tastes good!"

"Of course it does," a wistful look came over Mei Changsu's face. "We all used to love her pastries...."

Fei Liu cocked his head in thought, and then bounded over and brought back the entire box of pastries, holding it out in front of Mei Changsu. "Eat!"

"Surely not? You've already eaten so many, will you still be able to eat your dinner after this?"

"Ng!"

Mei Changsu smiled again and selected a small cake and placed it in his mouth, biting into its familiar sweetness. The first time Prince Jing had brought over a box of pastries, he had declined tactfully, but Jingyan wouldn't listen, and had only said something about not disobeying his mother's orders, and had put down the box and left. After that, a new box arrived nearly every month, and its arrival had slowly become a routine occurrence.

Once, the box had held an unusually large assortment of pastries, with more than a dozen different types, and so Mei Changsu had said with a smile, "Has His Highness made a mistake, and given me the box meant for himself?"

Prince Jing had answered without thinking, "Both boxes are the same, so there can be no mistake to make."

Mei Changsu's expression did not change at this reply, but inside, he felt a kind of fear stir in his heart.

Xiao Jingyan had never been the kind of person who paid much attention to what he ate, and so he had not yet discovered the change that had occurred within the boxes of pastries ever since Consort Jing had begun preparing double the usual portions. But Mei Changsu did not dare to hope that he would remain ignorant forever.



Because of this worry, when the box of pastries that Fei Liu was currently enjoying had arrived at the manor, Mei Changsu had requested Prince Jing to pass on a message to Consort Jing, asking her not to prepare any more pastries for him in the future, as he found himself unable to repay such an honour.

But Xiao Jingyan had taken his humble words at face value, and jokingly replied, “Mother is showing her appreciation for your rare talents, and enticing you with these bribes on my behalf, since she knows I will not indulge in bribery of any kind.”

Mei Changsu, afraid of drawing even more attention to the pastries, did not dare press the matter, and only smiled in answer.

Fortunately, ever since his promotion in rank, Prince Jing’s responsibilities had suddenly increased many times over, and as he was occupied with his duties every day from morning to night, he apparently did not have much time leftover to contemplate such trivial matters.

“Plum blossom biscuit!” Fei Liu said suddenly, leaning against his leg as he rifled through the box.

“Oh, our Fei Liu recognizes the plum blossom biscuit? Who taught you that?”

Fei Liu pressed his lips together, obviously unwilling to answer, and when Fei Liu refused to give an answer, the answer was usually glaringly obvious.

“Alright, you had better not eat any more,” Mei Changsu hid a smile as he patted him on the head. “Go and see whether Uncle Li Gang has come back, alright?”

“Back.”

Mei Changsu was surprised. When Li Gang left, he had been given orders to come straight to Mei Changsu upon his return, so how could he have not known he was back?

“When did he come back?”

“Just now!” Fei Liu cocked his head to listen. “Coming in the door!”

Mei Changsu understood and had just started laughing when Li Gang’s voice was heard through the door. “Chief!”

“Come in.”

The door was pushed aside, and Li Gang entered, snowflakes dusting the shoulders of his navy cotton robe, gusts of snow blowing in the wind behind him through the open door.

“From your expression, it seems everything went smoothly?” Mei Changsu gestured at the stool beside his couch. “What did Marquis Yan say?”

“At first, when Marquis Yan heard that Chief is supporting Prince Jing, he was shocked, but quickly calmed himself and even said “no wonder” a few times out loud. I explained to him directly Chief’s plans, and he thought for a long time and finally made a request, and said that it was his hope that when Prince Jing succeeds in the future, he would not treat the Empress badly.”

“His request does not make things difficult for me. ....After all, the Empress is still the Imperial Mother, and though there is the enmity of the old case between them, the majority of the blame does not fall on her, and once Prince Jing has succeeded to the throne, if only for the sake of filial piety, he will not mistreat her out of spite. So, Marquis Yan.....does indeed favour Prince Jing.”

“Yes. Marquis Yan only made this one request before agreeing to everything Chief proposed. He will use the cover of the new year’s visits to different manors to observe the opinions of the court officials towards Prince Jing.”

“I am glad he agreed.” Mei Changsu relaxed into his seat. “Marquis Yan is powerful and well-respected, not to mention eloquent, and with a reputation for staying out of court politics. He is the only one who could accomplish this task without leaving the faintest trace of suspicion. Not to mention, when it comes to matters of perception and judgement of character, he has no peer.”

“By my observation, Marquis Yan only turned away from politics to seek the Dao because he has grown bitter with the Emperor, the former Crown Prince, and Prince Yu. In his heart, he still cares deeply about the court of Da Liang and its proceedings.”

Mei Changsu nodded slightly. “That is only natural. Marquis Yan was raised in an aristocratic family, and once spent many years in his youth fighting for noble causes. How can the fires of such passion ever be truly quenched? I cannot allow my communications with Marquis Yan to be discovered, so in the future, I must trouble you to act as messenger between us.”

Li Gang answered hurriedly, “A thousand deaths could not prevent me from carrying out Chief’s orders. Why is Chief being so polite with me today? It is making me feel very uncomfortable.”

Mei Changsu placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed lightly without speaking, and then, fatigue passing over his face, he reclined back onto his pillows and closed his eyes. Grief rose in Li Gang’s heart as he thought about how hard his Chief worked even during his illness. He turned his face hurriedly to the side, and his gaze

landed on Fei Liu, sleeping peacefully on his Su gege's leg, sated on pastries, his handsome face innocent and peaceful. The pain in his heart swelled.

"Last night, you did not sleep until the early hours of the morning, you had better go and get some rest as well." Mei Changsu, sensing that Li Gang had not left, had opened his eyes again. "Though there is danger in the night in times like these, you do not need to stand guard overnight yourself, or what did you spend all that effort training your brothers for?" Let the night watch fall to Ah Qing and the others."

Li Gang raised an eyebrow. "The guard and defensive arrangements of Su manor have been agreed upon by myself and Zhen Ping. Chief does not need to worry about this, on top of everything else."

"Alright, alright, alright, it's my fault, I won't worry, you all do as you like."

A sudden smile broke through Li Gang's scowl. "I know Chief only wishes the best for us, but we do not want Chief to spend any more energy worrying over matters such as this. Besides, since Chief knows I did not sleep until the early hours of the morning, then that must mean Chief himself also did not sleep well last night?"

"My sleep was already much improved actually, it was only that I woke a few times in the night," Mei Changsu answered lightly. "It is just the weather, I will be better once spring arrives, so don't you spread any nonsense in your letters back to Lang province."

Li Gang couldn't bear arguing with him, and so he lowered his head and watched until Mei Changsu had once again closed his eyes before lightly stepping out of the room.

The snow was still blowing wildly out in the courtyard. Zhen Ping was standing in the corridor, his back to the room, but when he heard the door opening, he turned his head.

"What is it? Why do you look so distraught?" Li Gang walked over and slapped him on the back. "What, has the cold finally gotten through your leather skin and iron bones?"

Zhen Ping lowered his eyes and said softly, "Just now, Physician Yan asked me to arrange for someone to keep watch inside Chief's room at night...."

"Isn't Fei Liu there?"

"Physician Yan meant to arrange for someone in addition to Fei Liu, someone a bit more quick-witted...."

Fear leapt in Li Gang's heart as he grabbed Zhen Ping's arm. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"The cold is even fiercer this year than last, and this blizzard is particularly bad. It has already snowed for five days without stopping. Physician Yan was performing his exam this morning when he discovered that the cold poison of Chief's illness seems to be recurring, and he had no choice but to start prescribing his strongest medicines. And so, these coming few days will be very dangerous.....but as long as he can endure past this period, then there will be no serious harm."

Li Gang stood stunned for a long while, and finally shook his head roughly and took a deep breath. When he spoke again, he did not know whether he was talking to Zhen Ping or to himself. "It will be alright, he will endure, he must. Chief was in good spirits just now, I saw it myself."

Zhen Ping gathered himself and answered, "Tonight, when it is time for Chief to take his medicine, we will ask Physician Yan to come, and tell him that he must take this time to recover from his illness, and must not be allowed to handle anything at all, or allowed any visitors, whether they be Prince Jing or Tong Lu. And as for you and me.....we must keep a steady heart, and see this through."

Li Gang pressed a hand to his forehead, and was silent for a long moment. "Zhen Ping, it is truly fortunate that you came.....if it were only me, I fear I would be even more afraid...."

"You think I am not afraid?" Zhen Ping pulled on his arm forcefully. "Come on, we'll continue our discussion in the Western courtyard. We can't have Fei Liu overhearing us here."

Behind them, the main house was silent, as Mei Changsu and Fei Liu slept on peacefully. Li Gang and Zhen Ping did not walk along the corridor, but turned and walked outside into the fierce wind, as if hoping the bitter cold would calm the turmoil in their minds.

It was just as well that they had no way of knowing that a certain piece of shocking news was on its way to the city, and would arrive coincidentally just as Mei Changsu's illness took a turn for the worse....

## CHAPTER 116

### *Ambush*

Continuous snowfall was suddenly interrupted on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month. The skies cleared, and a sun that seemed especially golden and warm rose in the sky. However, after a night of clear skies in the capital city, it became more dry and cold, with foggy condensation following every breath taken. The piercing cold seemed as if it was about to freeze all internal organs, flowing into the body through the lungs.

Due to the bitter cold and that there were only two more days until the new year, naturally, everyone stayed at home as much as possible, enjoying the comfort of the toasty fireplace and warm drinks and meals. At this same time, those who were traveling outside out of necessity appeared to be more toilsome and lonely.

Early in the morning, the Capital Patrols followed their regular schedule and opened the four city gates promptly. The four patrols covering the first shift of the day each stood next to the entry of the gate, monitoring the people entering and leaving the city. Under Xie Yu, the Capital Patrol was already well-disciplined, and with Prince Jing setting up even stricter regulations, no one dared to neglect their duties, and the soldiers were even more attentive. After standing for only a short time, their feet began to feel as if the cold was biting into them, yet not one of them walked around or stomped their feet in an attempt to stay warm.

There are not many people out and about on winter mornings, especially near the west city gate leading to smoky, deserted territory—other than a few leaving the city, not a single one came in. Once the sun rose to be around three poles high,<sup>169</sup> it gradually became more lively, and the vendors set up their stalls near the city gates, mindlessly calling out to the sparse group of people to buy their goods. After another hour, outside the city gates, a dark group of shadows emerged faintly near the horizon, heading towards the city.

“Is that a merchant caravan?” A guard stretched his neck and looked around for a moment, continuing, “It is rare to ever see such a large caravan.”

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<sup>169</sup> A type of measurement in ancient China that refers to late morning, when the sun has risen to be around three poles high.

“You’re new here, so you don’t know about it,” said the veteran soldier standing next to him, immediately answering, “That is the merchant caravan transporting medicinal herbs. Except for two or three provinces, the majority of the western region of Da Liang is either frigid plateaus, alpine regions, or smoky, deserted territory. However, it is in these types of areas that precious medicinal herbs are found. My uncle owns a pharmacy, and he said the best medicine is transported from the western regions, so there are often merchant caravans that come in through the west city gate. But the day after tomorrow will be new year’s eve, and the merchant caravan has only just now arrived. They are so hardworking...”

As the two spoke, the caravan coming from afar was slowly getting closer and closer, and the horse-drawn carriages and attire of the people gradually came into view.

“How I come I think... It doesn’t look like a merchant caravan...” The new soldier stood for a long time, and finally, couldn’t help euphemistically expressing his opinion, “A merchant caravan, wouldn’t be escorted by city soldiers, right?”

At this time, the veteran soldier noticed the difference as well, and after some indistinct mumbling, said in a surprised tone, “It really isn’t a merchant caravan... The carriage in the middle of the group doesn’t seem to be holding medicinal herbs, it looks like... like... It’s a prisoner carriage!”

By the time he made a conclusion with certainty, the other guards had already seen it clearly as well. Coming towards the city gate on the winding path, was a prisoner convoy. What was different from usual, is that the number of guards escorting the carriage totaled to be around 300, yet there was only a single prisoner carriage.

Exactly how important of a prisoner needed to be so heavily guarded and required the mobilization of so many troops to be escorted into the capital city? As if there would be someone who dared to try and intercept the entry of the prisoner carriage?

Under the curious stares of the west city gate guards, the long convoy finally reached the city walls. Unlike the heavily armored military escorts, the man at the forefront of the convoy wore only a plain, day-to-day outfit made of soft material. He was riding a gray horse, had a slender, nimble, and well-proportioned figure and a tall, straight posture. Although his hair was gathered into a knot, a few loose wisps of hair rested down to his shoulders. On both sides, he had strands of silver hairs that were smoothed into the knot and held together by a jade ring. When looking at his smile, you could tell that he was quite handsome, and though there were a few wrinkles on his face, it was difficult to determine his age. There was a sense of feminine elegance in his masculine qualities, and his arched eyebrows and sharp eyes occasionally had an evil, chilling look.

“Ah...” All the veteran soldiers had already recognized the face, and lowered their heads, bowing in reverence. The new guards did not know what was happening, but understood that anyone who could lead such a large convoy of soldiers, was definitely one of high rank and status, and thus followed to bow down as well.

In the center of the convoy, was the prisoner carriage, and although the size and style were pretty much the same as an ordinary prisoner carriage, a closer look revealed that the bars on the carriage were made out of wrought iron, with each bar was half a palm wide, welded extremely stably to the carriage. The prisoner inside was curled up in a corner, heavily chained, and his dark, messy hair covered his face, unable to make out his facial features. From his posture and the position he was sitting in, as well as the blood-soaked bandages, it was evident that he had a rather major injury on his upper left leg. Many speculated whether or not it was from combat with the soldiers before being captured and arrested.

The city walls of Jinling were heavily built and sturdy, and naturally, the entry path into the city was very wide too. Yet when the man at the head of the convoy slowly rode into the shadow of the walls, he pulled back on the reins of his horse, and stopped suddenly. The Capital Patrols guarding the city gates didn't dare to go and ask what the problem was, and only blankly stared at him instead. After a moment, the man laughed coldly, and suddenly raised his voice, yelling, “We are about to enter the city. Once we enter the capital city, there will be no more opportunities. Don't you want to try once?”

His words felt as if they came out of nowhere, and everyone nearby was utterly bewildered. However, they weren't left confused for long—after only a few moments of silence, violence broke out, and around fifty or so strong men, each bearing long swords, swiftly charged out from the woods to the west of the gate, straight towards the prisoner carriage. Simultaneously, the small street vendors on the side of the main road also sharply drew out their swords and quickly moved into a formation. There were three to four of them who were seemingly in charge of the strategic offense, with the rest taking a detour, cutting into the space in between the man at the head of the convoy and the rest of the convoy, as if they first wanted to hold him off. Immediately, that man narrowed his eyes, raised his hand, and within a second, his own sword was unsheathed. Unexpectedly, he pulled out a sword with a curved blade, and with a simple wave of the sword, its reflection and strength shone into the eyes of the attackers approaching him, and no matter what angle they were coming from, they felt as if the blade was swinging directly towards them, and were forced to stop their footsteps in self-preservation. There was only one attacker, dressed in crimson red, who was completely unfazed, and made no change in direction as he continued, and as soon as he was about to close in on the man, with a flash and within the blink of an eye, he appeared in a different direction.

The man at the head of the convoy let out a perplexed, “hmm,” as if it were completely unanticipated, and the confused look on his face froze for a second. He did not dare to be careless in the slightest, and adapted nimbly, moving to attack and

defend himself with his sword, exchanging multiple moves with the oncoming attacker within mere moments.

There was another man who had moved to attack along with the one dressed in crimson red who seemed to be the commander of the ambush. Seeing that the one dressed in crimson red was successfully holding off the head of the convoy without being at any disadvantage at all, he immediately whistled, leading a new group of attackers within the city to converge with the group from outside, surrounding the prisoner carriage as they closed in on the soldiers.

Though the 300 or so soldiers in the convoy greatly outnumbered the attackers, they were all only regular soldiers, and evidently could not match the combat abilities of the martial artists from the Jianghu. Once chaos broke out, they became disorganized, and other than the ten or so elite soldiers positioned nearby the prisoner carriage who continued to retaliate, the others had been separated by the oncoming attackers. Thus their advantage in numbers was not evident at all, and it did not take long for the attackers to reach the prisoner carriage. Unfortunately, the cage was too sturdy, and though they tried hard to cut through the bars, the sword became dented without even a scratch on the carriage, and thus they could only attempt to drive the entire prisoner carriage away instead.

It was unknown whether it was because there were people trying to rescue him or another reason, but the prisoner in the carriage suddenly became very agitated. He tried to drag his body and metal chains forward, shook the bars on the metal carriage, and made indistinguishable noises, as it seemed that something had been stuffed in his mouth. Due to his agitated state being very abnormal, the commander of the ambush immediately called out, "Retreat! Everyone retreat!"

As soon as the words left his mouth, the head of the convoy smiled coldly. As his sneer seemed to freeze the air around him, simultaneously, at the top of the city walls, emerged around a hundred bowmen who brought forth a looming feeling of death. The prisoner carriage had stopped a little bit outside the city gates, and other than a few of the attackers who were hidden under the entryway of the wall, everyone else was in the direct range of the bowmen up on the city walls. Although after receiving the order to retreat, everyone immediately ended the attack and retreated, how could traveling on foot be nearly as fast as the feathers flying through the air like shooting stars? Within an instant, the sounds of arrows cutting through the sky and cries of pain echoed together, and the capital city seemed to have turned into a war zone. Even though those escaping were martial artists of the Jianghu, unless they were martial art masters, they would become living targets for the mass of arrows, and it was only a matter of how long they could withstand it for, or how far they could escape.

After several rounds of arrows were released, only about half of the attackers escaped with the help of the cover of their companions, fleeing into the woods outside the city. There were bodies scattered in the snow, some pierced by so many arrows to the point that they looked like porcupines, with their dark blood staining the white



snow black. Seeing such a tragic sight, the commander of the ambush's eyes visibly turned red. However, he was evidently a tenacious person and took control of his distressed emotions within an instant. He ordered everyone to charge into the city, and fled with the dozen or so people who were fortunate enough to have been hidden under the entryway before the mass arrow shooting. Yet their opponents were by no means ordinary people—if there were hidden soldiers on the city walls, how could there not be any in the city? In the blink of an eye, hundreds of soldiers emerged from the alleyways and formed a large circle that surrounded them. From the look of their uniform swords, gray leather armor, and attire, it was clear that they were the elite soldiers of the Xuanjing Bureau, waiting for orders from their Head Officer like wolves and tigers eyeing their prey.

But right at this critical moment, the head of the convoy didn't say a single thing, which was quite surprising.

From the beginning up to the present, no matter how the battle situation had diverted, there was one person who was not in the slightest affected by the sharp change in the surroundings—the one dressed in crimson red, engaging in combat with the head of the convoy. He just continued to engage with great concentration and seriousness, and it seemed that the martial art skills of the head of the convoy greatly satisfied him. Along with a stiff look on his face, his cold, dark eyes shone with the desire to win, and his strikes showed no mercy. At the moment, they were in the heat of the battle, forcing the head of the convoy to resist with all his energy, and in order to keep his breathing steady, he couldn't open his mouth and say a single word.

If the person dressed in crimson could capture the head of the convoy and hold him hostage, there would, of course, be a drastic turn of events. However, the commander of the ambush could clearly see that in order for this to be achieved, it would still take quite another lengthy period of combat. The soldiers of the Xuanjing Bureau weren't foolish either, and although the head of the convoy did not speak, they wouldn't just stand by and stare blankly, and it didn't take them long to react to the situation and initiate combat. In a split second of thought and consideration, the commander of the ambush shouted, "Good boy, we must leave now, come tear a path for us!"

Hearing that it was time to leave, the person in crimson put on an unhappy expression, but in the end, followed the directions given to him. He turned around and leaped into the air, changing targets quickly and quietly, as if he were a ghost. As a matter of fact, the head of the convoy had already prepared for this as soon as he heard the commander's words, and put 120% of his energy into combat. Yet it was completely unexpected that his opponent still effortlessly broke away from their combat, as if he just turned around and walked away with no difficulty at all. Given that he did not expect there to be any martial artists of such elite abilities, and that he hoped to capture a few of the attackers alive, there were no bowmen within the city. Even though the soldiers were more powerful than ordinary ones, even the head of the convoy was no match against the person dressed in crimson, and thus when the one

dressed in crimson arrived, he was unstoppable against the charging soldiers. The rest of the dozen or so attackers who were also surrounded by the soldiers fought back with blood red eyes in desperation, and naturally put in all their effort, trying to save their own lives. It didn't take much time for them to tear out a path in the circle that had surrounded them, allowing many to escape.

However, there was still a disparity between the numbers and strength of the two sides, and although some escaped, the head of the convoy also captured three or four people, ordering his subordinates to send them to the prison. He knew that the martial art skills of the person in crimson were too high, and it would be a futile attempt to try to catch up to him, and thus simply ordered everyone to ignore him, focusing on tailing the commander of the ambush who had fled into an alleyway instead.

The roads and alleyways in the city of Jinling were not particularly complicated, and other than in the central region of the city nearby the river, most paths were straight, intersecting others in a perpendicular manner. On several occasions, by following the trail of blood, the head of the convoy could almost see the silhouette of the fugitive, yet after flipping over a wall, the trail of blood suddenly disappeared. It was likely that the opponent realized that he was bleeding, and cleaned up the wound. At this time, there were only two similar-looking paths in front of him, each leading to different neighborhoods, and after quietly taking a moment to make a judgment, the head of the convoy smiled coldly, speeding off to the left. After navigating through a small path with walls at both sides, he rushed out onto the main road. To one's surprise, at this exact second, a carriage came flying towards him from the right, and with the speed at which they both were traveling at, almost collided together. The reaction time of the head of the convoy was extraordinarily fast, and he immediately twisted to one side, leaping onto the other side of the road while the coachman pulled back on the reins of the horse, bringing the carriage to an abrupt stop.

"What's the matter?" The person sitting in the carriage had probably fallen over due to the sudden stop, and angrily protruded his head out from the carriage, complaining, "It's near new year's, who is being so rampant and reckless?" As he finished his sentence, his eyes had fallen onto the head of the convoy, and he suddenly froze, involuntarily crying out, "Xia Dong jiejie, when did you come back?"

The head of the convoy shrugged his shoulders, glancing over at him.

"Umm..." The person in the car scratched his head, scrunched his eyebrows, and carefully called out, "Xia Qiu gege?"

The glance turned into a glare, yet the one being glared let out a sigh of relief, complaining, "Why didn't you say anything earlier? Qiu-xiong, this is such a bad problem, why do you have to dress up to look exactly like Xia Dong jiejie? It's quite scary, don't you know?"

“Well, I’ll say, xiao-Jin, I’m not dressing up, I just look like this, okay?” Xia Qiu walked over and smacked Yan Yujin on the shoulder, saying, “I haven’t seen you in more than a year, you’ve grown stronger.”

“It’s not wrong that you were born with this face, but what about your hair? Did you purposely dye these two strands here white?” It was evident that Yan Yujin and Xia Qiu had a close relationship, and he was not even the slightest afraid, loudly saying, “How did you get this white? I tried all sorts of dyes, and none of them worked.”

“Let’s not talk about this now,” Xia Qiu smiled sinisterly, and suddenly leaned closely in front of Yan Yujin, staring him right in the eye, saying, “Tell me, did you see someone with an injury pass you nearby just now?”

## CHAPTER 117

### *Crisis*

“Someone with an injury?” Yan Yujin looked around and asked, “Who?”

“Did you see someone or not?”

“I was in the carriage earlier.” Yan Yujin patted the coachman and asked, “Did you see anyone?”

The coachman shook his head.

Xia Qiu knitted his eyebrows slightly. Did he chase in the wrong direction? Otherwise, the Yan carriage must have run into the fugitive. Unless...

“Xiao-Jin, where are you planning on going?”

“I’m going home! My old man<sup>170</sup> loves eating the braised pork shoulder from the Full Courtyard,<sup>171</sup> and being the son, there’s nothing I can do but crawl out of bed early in the morning to buy it—if you go too late, they’ll run out.” Yan Yujin muttered under his breath and complained, “Really, if my father loves Taoism so much, why doesn’t he become vegetarian like them too?”

“Did you manage to buy it?”

“I bought three!” Yan Yujin leaned into the carriage and brought out a large food basket. “Would Xia Qiu-gege like one?”

Xia Qiu was a food connoisseur as well, and with just a whiff of the wafting smell, he could tell that it was indeed the Full Courtyard’s limited quantity braised pork shoulder that only sold 100 a day. He smiled faintly and said, shaking his head, “I

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<sup>170</sup> “old man” — Yujin is referring to his father here, translates directly to: old father

<sup>171</sup> Full Courtyard — a restaurant that is apparently famous for its braised pork shoulder, and only sells 100 a day.

have some pressing matters on my hands, you filial boy should hurry up and head home.”

“Wait, wait, wait! Wait!!” Yan Yujin rushed forwards and made a dive toward Xia Qiu, who had just turned around to leave. Grabbing him, Yan Yujin blinked his eyes innocently, asking, “Qiu-xiong, who are you chasing? Is it a criminal? What crime did he commit?”

“Really,” Xia Qiu bent his fingers and knocked them firmly on Yan Yujin’s forehead, continuing, “How are you so curious? Even since you were a child, there’s never been anything that didn’t interest you! If you don’t hurry up, your pork shoulders will turn cold. Watch out, your father might spank you!”

“Hehe,” Yan Yujin laughed aloud, the corners of his smile lifting up with glee, “My father never even hit me as a child, and even more so now. Speaking of getting hit as a child, the only person who would ever do so is Xia Dong-jiejie. Is she not back yet?”

“No. I’m not sure what she is investigating out there.” Speaking of his twin sister, Xia Qiu seemed slightly anxious, and in addition to the fact that he didn’t capture the commander of the ambush, knew that there were still many matters waiting to be dealt with. He did not delay any further, and patted Yan Yujin on the back while turning to leave.

Yan Yujin watched to ensure that he left into the distance before commanding the coachman with only two words, “Hurry, go.” He then returned to his seat in the carriage, and draped down the heavy carriage curtains.

His carriage was four-wheeled and horse-drawn, so the interior was very wide and roomy. On the very inside, there were piles of wintersweet blossoms,<sup>172</sup> and there was a person huddling amongst them. Seeing Yan Yujin walk in, he shifted the position of one of the bouquets, standing up halfway and bowing in courtesy, saying, “Thank you, Young Master Yan, for saving my life.”

“You’re welcome, it’s not like I took any risks either. If Qiu-xiong had discovered you earlier, then I’d just say I was threatened by you to do so, and even then, he still wouldn’t do anything to me.” Yan Yujin casually shrugged his shoulders, continuing, “Anyways, in any case, your Chief had done a great favor for my father, so this is just a small one in return.”

The fugitive seemed slightly surprised, and quickly said, “Young Master Yan, you must be mistaken. I’m not quite sure what you are talking about...”

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<sup>172</sup> Wintersweet blossoms — the only species widely grown as an ornamental plant, and are prized for its attractive and sweetly scented winter blooms. They look similar to plum blossoms, but are yellow and white.

“Head Manager Li, there’s no need to conceal anything,” the young master of the Imperial Uncle household smiled faintly, “Though you’ve disguised your appearance, I remember the tattoo on your wrist well... Oh yes, is your injury alright? It’s quite fortunate that I bought half a carriage of wintersweet blossoms, otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to conceal the smell of the blood on your body from Qiu-xiong.”

“Don’t worry about it, it’s just an external wound.” Li Gang regained his composure and said, “Young Master Yan, please find a secluded area on the neighboring street for me to disembark.”

“Okay.” Yan Yujin, took a long, hard look at him, but then said in a light tone, “Isn’t Su-xiong sick? How does he still have the mental ability to plan a conflict with the Xuanjing Bureau?”

Li Gang lowered his head, and was silent for a while, then responded, “If I said that our Chief has heard nothing of any of the happenings today, would Young Master Yan believe me?”

Yan Yujin thought for a moment, then honestly answered, “No.”

“But the truth is, he really doesn’t know about it.” Li Gang lifted his head, and with a bright and piercing gaze, said, “Young Master, your act of savior today, I will surely repay in the future. However, the happenings today really are completely unconnected with our Chief, please, I hope you understand.”

Yan Yujin looked at him for a moment, unconvinced, but then suddenly broke into laughter. “What are you so nervous about? It’s not like I would use the fact that I saved you and ask for something in exchange from your Chief. Plus, it isn’t like I demanded that you must return the favor either. Actually, regardless of whether you have either jianghu or governmental affairs related disputes with the Xuanjing Bureau, it is all irrelevant to me. If you think I am asking too many questions, just don’t respond to them. Rest assured, although I am curious about everything, I would never force someone to reveal something they do not wish to say.”

Li Gang knew that although the young master of the Imperial Uncle household seemed like an imperceptive socialite, he was actually sincere and open-hearted, and thus did not elaborate on the happenings, merely crossing his hands into a bow. The carriage took a detour into a hidden alleyway near the Su Manor, and Yan Yujin dismounted the carriage first, scouting out all four directions. Seeing that there weren’t any abnormalities, he waved his hand, and Li Gang swiftly leaped out of the carriage, disappearing into the alleyway.

The ambush aimed at rescuing the prisoner could be considered a complete failure. Not only were they unable to rescue him, but they also suffered heavy casualties. Luckily, there were only a limited number of soldiers led by the Xuanjing Bureau, and

without the permission or cooperation of the Capital Patrol, they didn't have the jurisdiction to initiate a citywide search. It was only because of this that those who had escaped had a chance to survive. Although Li Gang could not yet confirm the final death toll, when he returned back to the Su Manor, the look on Zhen Ping's face told him that the situation was grim.

"Has Fei Liu returned?" The first words he spoke were to ask this.

"He came back a long time ago." Zhen Ping assisted his comrade into the room, and ordered someone to bring water and medicine.

"He didn't say anything to Chief, right?"

"Chief is still sleeping. But seeing from the expression on his face, Fei Liu was very unhappy. I coaxed him for a long time, but I'm not sure it made a difference."

Li Gang closed his eyes heavily. They needed to bring Fei Liu along, and thus coaxed him into doing so by saying there would be a great martial artist for him to challenge. The young man was very excited. However, although Xia Qiu could be considered a martial arts master, they left halfway into the battle, and so it was hard to say whether or not Fei Liu would complain to Mei Changsu that his Uncle Li had tricked him.

"What do we do now?" Zhen Ping dropped down to sit beside him, as if asking Li Gang, but himself as well. "We made three ambushes along the way into the city, and weren't able to rescue him. Now that he's imprisoned inside the bars of the Xuanjing Bureau, the difficulty of saving him has exponentially increased... I'm afraid when Chief wakes up, there's nothing we can do but tell the truth..."

"What did Physician Yan say?"

"He said for us to hold on for two more days..." Just as Zhen Ping spoke, there was suddenly a sound in the courtyard, and he suddenly stood up. "I think Madam Wei is here."

He had barely finished speaking when the doors of the room were pushed open, and the shadow of a slender and elegant lady seemed to float in. Dressed in a flowy light green dress and having delicate facial features, it was the Xunyang Physician, who was once a beauty on the Langya List—Yun Piaoliao. She rushed in and hurried to ask, "I heard Li-dage has returned?" She saw Li Gang and his many injuries as soon as the words left her mouth, and suddenly turned pale as flour, fighting to hold back tears as she gently asked, "Li-dage, you're hurt? Are you alright?"

Seeing Yun Piaoliao, whose heart was evidently burning with anxiety yet could only hold it back and first ask about his injury, Li Gang felt very touched, and hurried

to respond, “I’ll be fine, but Madam Wei, I’m so sorry. General Wei Zheng.... We weren’t able to rescue him...”

In reality, as soon as she saw the circumstances that Li Gang was in, Yun Piaoliao had predicted that there would again be no success, but still couldn’t help but feel heartbroken when hearing him say the truth aloud. It took her a long time to force herself to stay steady, and with a shaky voice asked, “Then did you see him? Is he... Is he okay?”

“Madam Wei, please rest assured, there is nothing life-threatening to him at the moment.” Li Gang sighed, “Only that, once we’ve entered the city, Wei Zheng will be immediately locked in the Xuanjing Bureau Prison. With his criminal charge as a Chiyan traitor, they only need to inform the Emperor, and there will be no need for another trial. He could be executed at any moment, which leaves us little time.”

Yun Piaoliao felt her legs give out beneath her, and dropped down to sit in the chair beside her, softly speaking, “Other than using brute force, are there really no other alternative options? In terms of financial resources, the Herbal King Valley of Western Yue ranks seventh on the Langya List of Wealth. Wei Zheng has been Valley Chief Su’s<sup>173</sup> adopted son for the past eight years, and he’s single-handedly managed all necessary affairs these few years. Surely he would be willing to put in all the wealth he has in order to save him, and in addition to the Yun family of Xunyang and the Jiangzuo Alliance, that should be more than enough... Unless, even if we all join forces, we still wouldn’t be able to buy back Wei Zheng’s life?”

“If General Wei Zheng was discovered by anyone else, there could potentially be more leniency in the situation. But Xuanjing Bureau’s Xia Jiang... He isn’t an easy one to rival. No matter how wealthy the Herbal King Valley and Yun family are, they are only rich in their respective regions. The saying that with great wealth, one can rival the country, is really nothing more than a saying. In this world, what can rival governmental forces? What can rival the mighty imperial power? The Li Nanhua family that once ranked third on the Langya List, wasn’t it exactly because they felt self-assured that they had great wealth, fought against Prince Yu over some land with outstanding fengshui? It ended up costing them the lives of many, a lost lawsuit, and ultimately resulted in the collapse of their status.” Zhen Ping was more calm and rational out of those present at the moment, and analyzed with a heavy voice, “Now, it is no longer a matter of only Wei Zheng’s life. Exactly how ambitious the Xuanjing Bureau is, we aren’t clear yet. Xia Jiang captured General Wei Zheng, and could possibly accuse the Herbal King Valley and Yun family of harboring rebels. In that case, I’m afraid there could be a darker storm to come. Even more, on the route the escorts took back to the capital city, it seems that they purposely took great measures to avoid the Jiangzuo Alliance’s 14 provinces, heavily restricting our ability to take

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<sup>173</sup> Valley Chief Su — the character Su is different from that of the one in Su Zhe/Mei Changsu’s name, so don’t be confused and believe that the two are related, since they are the same in pinyin.



action. It seems that Xiang Jiang has begun to suspect the connection between the Jiangzuo Alliance and the survivors of the Chiyan Army.

“Not necessarily,” Li Gang shook his head saying, “General Wei Zheng has never been in direct contact with the Jiangzuo Alliance. In reality, Xia Jiang captured General Wei to challenge Prince Jing, and now that many are aware Chief has devoted himself to Prince Jing, it would be natural for him to view the Jiangzuo Alliance as part of the enemy party as well. It may not necessarily mean that they have suspected General Wei and Chief have an even more direct connection.”

Zhen Ping thought in silence for a moment, and agreed, adding, “That’s right. Our Jiangzuo Alliance has hidden our true identity for more than a decade, and will not be so easily discovered by others. Fortunately, we had considered in advance the failure of the operation, and deployed our undercover forces from the borders of Jinling. Their knowledge is limited, so even if they were arrested, it wouldn’t implicate us. Only... Given the current circumstances, it is completely outside of what we can control. Chief is currently seriously ill, do we really want to alert him?”

Li Gang stomped his feet, saying, “If only Young Master Lin would be willing to come to Jin Ling and control the situation for a couple of days, then there would be no need at all for us to bother Chief at such an untimely moment. Yet he’s currently having fun in Da Chu right now, and distant waters are powerless against near fires.<sup>174</sup>”

Zhen Ping, in a slightly resigned tone, continued, “There’s nothing we can do about it. Unlike the rest of us, Young Master Lin isn’t a survivor from the Chiyan Army, and only joined the Jiangzuo Alliance for fun. He does as he pleases, and no one can tell him to do anything otherwise. Exactly what background he comes from, I reckon that only Chief would know.”

Li Gang was just about to continue the conversation, but turned his head and saw that at the moment, Yun Piaoliao had tears silently flooding across her face. Understanding her longingness and anxiety, he bent forwards to comfort her, saying, “Madam Wei, please don’t be sad, we haven’t exhausted all possibilities yet. Chief will find a way for sure.

Yun Piaoliao immediately shook her head saying, “I’ve felt Chief Mei’s pulse. We cannot disturb him at all right now. Although there are many things that I don’t know about yet, I do know exactly how important Chief Mei is to Wei Zheng. Besides being Madam Wei, I am also a physician. No physician would allow a patient who already has such critical symptoms to then be alarmed, concerned, and required to tax both his mind and body.

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<sup>174</sup> Distant waters are powerless against near fires — an idiom, in this case, meaning that Lin Chen is useless in the scenario because he is all the way in Da Chu.

Hearing her words, both Li and Zhen fell quiet, feeling a little dejected. Ever since Lin Shu had his own Chiyu Battalion to lead at age 16, Wei Zheng was always one of the three Vice Generals, and the only one to have narrowly escaped death in the flames of the battlefield. Everyone was clear that alerting him of this news would greatly impact Mei Changsu, and could bring about extremely serious consequences. But the happenings were completely unpredictable, leaving them unprepared, and the Xuanjing Bureau only used less than half a month to both capture and escort Wei Zheng back into the city. As soon as the Jiangzuo Alliance received the news from the Herbal King Valley, they hastily organized two operations to rescue him during transport, but failed due to the lack of time to prepare and put resources together. Today, being their last chance before the prisoner convoy entered the city, they went all out and even brought Fei Liu along. Yet the heavy precautions taken by the opposing side resulted in their failure again, leaving their rescue efforts in vain.

Just as the three of them were at a loss for what to do, the investigator that Zhen Ping had sent out as soon as Fei Liu returned, hurried into the room, reporting on the current situation within the city. Yun Piaoliao understood that they had important matters to discuss, and excused herself to the back courtyard. Although Li and Zhen were not intending on hiding anything from her, they didn't want her to overthink and worry either, and thus didn't urge her to stay. They went into the inner chamber and questioned the investigator about the happenings thoroughly.

The investigator had been carefully taught by Zhen Ping himself, and was extremely bright and capable, bringing back critical points based on information he gathered. According to what he reported, out of the hundred or so people who took part in the ambush, other than the thirty or so who had died in battle, eight had been arrested. The others had fled outside the city, into the woods, or hidden by undercover spies in the network,<sup>175</sup> and were safe from the possibility of arrest for the time being. Most likely, Xia Qiu wasn't interested in anyone other than the high-level commanders of the ambush, and didn't pursue to capture them. Instead, he quickly restored order and escorted Wei Zheng and the others back to Xuanjing Bureau.

“Was there anyone to collect the bodies of our brothers?” Li Gang asked in a pained voice, feeling heart-wrenched while fighting to hold back tears.

“Yes, after all, it was in front of the city gate. The Capital Governing Office quickly ordered people to clean up the situation, and sent the bodies to the burial site. Manager Li, rest assured, we will ensure that they are laid to rest in peace.”

Zhen Ping patted Li Gang on the shoulder, saying, “Don't worry about comforting and compensating their families, I'll take care of it. You must pull yourself together, now that Mister Shisan is forced to go into hiding and the Miaoyin House has closed, it is our responsibility to reorganize and integrate the different branches of the hidden

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<sup>175</sup> Network of Spies — reminder that Mister Shisan leads MCS's spy network in Jinling, previously headquartered in the Miaoyin House.

spy network and undercover information channels. Even if General Wei had not been captured, there is much to keep us busy.”

Li Gang took a deep breath, sighing, “Speaking of Miaoyin House, I still can’t imagine that Tong Lu would betray...”

Zhen Ping’s expression turned cool, saying, “We are still unable to confirm whether he really betrayed, or was just threatened and deceived. It was fortunate that Mister Shisan had quick reactions, and disbanded all spy operations, ordering everyone to go into hiding as soon as Tong Lu disappeared. It was because of this that the officials had no trails to follow at the Miaoyin House, but many of our brothers and sisters are forced to stay undercover for the time being...”

Li Gang nodded his head, pacing back and forth inside the room. What concerned him the most was not the disappearance of Tong Lu. This young man who was in charge of passing on information didn’t understand or have knowledge of the most deadly secrets hidden at the core of the Jiangzuo Alliance. Even if he betrayed, the most he could do was betray Mister Shisan’s whereabouts and any previous information he had passed to Mei Changsu. Now, Mister Shisan had successfully gone undercover and much of the past information had become irrelevant. The secret that Mei Changsu was actually helping Prince Jing was no longer a secret either, so the damages brought about by Tong Lu’s betrayal were very limited. At the moment, the most pressing matter was how to rescue Wei Zheng, whose identity had both been exposed, and had also fallen into the hands of the Xuanjing Bureau.

“Li-xiong,” Zhen Ping seemed to know exactly what Li Gang was thinking, and his eyes darkened, saying with his teeth clenched, “Although Chief agreed to retreat to recuperate, and allowed us to manage all affairs by weighing our options carefully, with the seriousness of the current situation, can we really continue to hold up ourselves, and not notify Chief?”

Li Gang knitted his eyebrows tightly and was silent for a long time. Right when he lifted his head and was about to speak, the doors of the inner chamber were abruptly pushed open from the outside, and Fei Liu’s poised silhouette appeared outside the door. He lifted his chin and called out with his bright voice, “Calling you guys!”

## CHAPTER 118

### *Receiving News*

As they walked from the courtyard to the main house where Mei Changsu resided, Li Gang tried repeatedly to learn from Fei Liu why their Chief had summoned them, but Fei Liu, apparently still holding a grudge, either ignored him or gave short and strange answers that were impossible to understand.

They arrived at the house and opened the doors to discover that Mei Changsu was neither alone in the room nor resting in bed. Instead, he was reclining on a long couch in front of the lotus-coloured screen placed at the southern end of the room, wrapped snugly in furs and cloaks with only his arms exposed, the sleeves rolled up high where Physician Yan was bent over him intently, performing acupuncture.

“Many thanks,” Mei Changsu smiled, rolling down his sleeves when the last of the needles was removed from his arms. His condition during the day was usually not too bad, certainly not suggestive of someone gravely ill, but at night, he burned with fever, his limbs ice cold, often gasping for breath and coughing up blood. Fortunately, with Physician Yan’s careful ministrations, the worst seemed to have passed.

“Chief, you called for us?” Li Gang asked softly, approaching slowly after Physician Yan had packed up his medicine box.

“Ng,” Mei Changsu gestured to the stools beside him. “Sit, both of you.”

Li Gang and Zhen Ping exchanged a glance but didn’t dare speak as they sat silently.

“Tell me the truth,” Mei Changsu gazed steadily into the distance, his voice a little weak. “Has something happened to Wei Zheng?”

He had cut so sharply to the issue at hand that his two subordinates could not help jumping to their feet.

“Fei Liu said a ‘Wei jiejie’ had come to the manor....” Mei Changsu raised a hand to placate the two of them and continued, “I thought about it, and there is no other

lady with the surname Wei who could obtain your permission to enter, and the only person I could think of was the wife of Wei Zheng.”

“It is true that Mistress Wei has come,” Zhen Ping answered quietly. “Chief has needed to rest and take care of his health, and so we did not....”

“Even if Yun Piaoliao was not travelling with Wei Zheng, and had come to the capitol alone, since she has come to Su manor, she should have come to see me....” Mei Changsu’s gaze rested gently on Zhen Ping. “She has not come...because you did not wish for me to know that she is here, is that right?”

Li Gang and Zhen Ping lowered their heads as one.

“Do not worry,” Mei Changsu’s voice was light and peaceful. “I know that my health is not well at the moment, and that it would not do for my emotions to be agitated. But surely it would neither be a good thing for me to continue guessing blindly like this? Tell me what has happened to Wei Zheng. I am not so fragile yet that I will collapse from one blow.”

By this time, he had grown a little short of breath, and he coughed lightly and closed his eyes for a few moments before opening them again to meet the slightly dubious gazes of his two subordinates. He asked softly, “Fei Liu said Wei jieje was not wearing mourning clothes, so at least that must mean Wei Zheng is alive..... has he...been captured?”

Li Gang’s hand clenched and unclenched on his knee several times before he answered, “Yes, he was arrested half a month ago.”

“Chief....”

“Never mind..... start at the beginning, both of you.”

“Yes.” Li Gang did not want Mei Changsu to waste his breath asking question after question, and so he began to tell in detail how Xia Qiu of the Xuanjing Bureau had ambushed and arrested Wei Zheng, how Jiangzuo Alliance had heard the news, how their two rescue attempts on the road to the capitol had failed, how Yun Piaoliao had entered the capitol, how they had made one final attempt before the city gates which had finally failed as well, etc. etc.. At the end, after he had recounted the whole affair from beginning to the end, he added consolingly, “General Wei’s injuries did not look severe, pray Chief do not worry.”

Mei Changsu, who had been pale to begin with, did not show much change of expression after hearing all this, although his breathing was a little rapid, but when Physician Yan came forward to massage his chest, he was pushed gently aside.

“And what else?”

“Chief....”

“Has anything else happened in the capitol?”

Li Gang and Zhen Ping exchanged another glance, and the latter bent forward slightly in a bow before answering in a carefully mild tone, “Nothing of much importance, it is only that I mentioned to Chief last time that Tong Lu seemed to be acting a little strange, and no one could have guessed that this would turn out to be true.... Prince Yu’s camp likely realized that Miaoyin House has been working for Chief undercover, and so they sent some soldiers to search the place. Fortunately, Mister Shisan caught word early enough and sent everyone out in time, and they are all safe in hiding now without a single loss or injury.”

“It is time for Chief Mei to take his medicine.” Physician Yan chose this time to interrupt, handing over a crimson pill for Mei Changsu to take, and then watching closely as he drank, sip by sip, the entire bowl of medicinal soup. After this interruption, when Mei Changsu once again turned his attention back to the perilous situation at hand, his emotions were much calmer.

“Have there been any abnormalities on Nie Duo’s side?” This was Mei Changsu’s first question after draining his bowl of medicine.

Li Gang, taken aback, answered, “Not at present.”

“Send a coded message to him immediately with orders for him to stay in Yunnan no matter what news he hears. He is not to leave the province under any circumstances.”

“Yes!”

Mei Changsu paused, his expression pained. “Back in those days, the Chiyan Army had no shortage of talent and courage, with as many great leaders as there are clouds in the sky. But now, amongst those who were fortunate enough to survive, only Wei Zheng and Nie Duo remain out of those whose reputation was so great that they might still be recognized today.... But just in case, send word to the veterans in Lang province, no matter what rank they used to hold, they are to stay hidden for the time being, and not make any sudden movements.”

“Yes!”

“As for the two of you....” Mei Changsu turned to look at Li Gang and Zhen Ping beside him, about to continue when they both suddenly fell forward and knelt.

Zhen Ping said, choking a little, “We are both of us orphans, and grew up from a young age in the Chiyan army. In that year, we were only lowly sergeants,<sup>176</sup> and more than a decade has passed since then so our appearances have changed as well, so no one of any importance will be able to recognize us. Chief, pray do not send the two of us away, especially at a time like this!”

Mei Changsu knew that the two of them had no families, and that the chance of their being recognized was exceedingly small, which was why he kept them by his side in the open, and so far, there had not been any problems. Besides, as things were developing at present, it was true that he could not manage without their assistance, and so he only sighed and warned helplessly, “The two of you must be careful.”

“Yes,” Li Gang and Zhen Ping promised loudly, sighing in relief.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, and Fei Liu, who had disappeared as soon as they entered the house, called brightly from outside, “Arrived!”

“Since when did Fei Liu learn to knock?” Zhen Ping wondered, and when he went to open the door, he found that standing outside was not the youth, but Yun Piaoliao.

“Mistress Wei, please enter,” Mei Changsu said warmly. “Li dage, please bring another chair.”

Yun Piaoliao walked up to Mei Changsu and curtsied before sitting and saying gently, “Chief Mei has asked Fei Liu to summon me here, what orders does he have for me?”

Mei Changsu looked at this strong and beautiful lady, and for a moment, it was as if he saw Nihuang before him, and both grief and tenderness filled his heart. “Wei Zheng has come to harm. I am truly sorry for the trouble this has brought upon you.”

Yun Piaoliao’s eyes glistened with tears, but she did not allow them to fall as she shook her head and replied, “Wei Zheng remained safely in hiding in Yaowang Valley<sup>177</sup> for so many years ..... it is from our Yun clan that a traitor has emerged, and so it is I who have brought trouble upon him....”

“The Yun clan has grown like vines along a trellis, and it is natural for there to be one or two rotten tendrils amongst the batch. Compared to the love and loyalty you have borne for him over so many years of hardship and suffering, what is a little risk if it means the chance of seeing you again?”

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<sup>176</sup> taking some creative liberty here; the term literally means someone in charge of ten men (‘decurion’, according to Roman army terminology, like how a centurion is in charge of a hundred men)

<sup>177</sup> literally Medicine King Valley

“But now....”

“Now he is still alive, and so there are still ways.” Mei Changsu looked frail, but his words were firm and his gaze steady. “Mistress Wei, do you trust me?”

Yun Piaoliao immediately stood, about to answer, but Mei Changsu smiled gently and cut her off. “If Mistress Wei trusts me, then she must return immediately to Xunyang.”

Li Gang said hurriedly, “Chief, the Yun clan in Xunyang has been surrounded in secret, as soon as the capital gives the order, they will be arrested. If Mistress Wei returns at this time, won’t she be walking directly into the Xuanjing Bureau’s ambush?”

“That is correct, as soon as Mistress Wei returns to Xunyang, she will be arrested for certain.” Mei Changsu’s expression was clear, his gaze deep as he continued, “But arrest does not equal conviction, whereas fleeing from arrest may be seen as self-admission of guilt. I know what it is like to become a fugitive of the law, to be forced to flee after you have been convicted of a crime, and unless there is no other option, we cannot choose this path. Besides, even if Mistress Wei manages to escape, what about Old Uncle Yun? What about the rest of the vast Yun clan? Harboring a traitor is a crime of which one might be convicted guilty by association, and if you tried to flee, then this accusation will seem to gain validity, and if the Xuanjing Bureau decides to take Old Uncle Yun as hostage, then what will you do? Will you turn yourself in or not?”

Yun Piaoliao’s face was pale as snow as she stammered, “Then Chief Mei means for me to... allow myself to be captured, and then maintain my innocence?”

“Yes. Wei Zheng was branded traitor thirteen years ago, yet you have only been married for a little over a year, and everyone knows that it makes no sense for the Yun clan to knowingly harbour a fugitive. You would be well within reason to defend yourself by saying you only knew that he managed the household of Yaowang Valley, and did not know of his traitor status. Aside from the statement made by the Yun clan informant, the Xuanjing Bureau cannot prove that the two of you have known each other for many years. Internal conflict within large clans is nothing new, and you are the only daughter of the eldest branch of the family, and so it would be perfectly reasonable for you to suggest that they have somehow managed to uncover Wei Zheng’s true identity in order to disinherit you and claim the property that would have been yours. Besides, the Xunyang Yun clan is no ordinary household, and you know better than I how many noble families have benefited from you and your esteemed father’s medicines and draughts. As long as someone initiates the plea for leniency, you may be sure that an outcry for your innocence will follow. The Yun clan has done much good for the people over many years, and you may depend upon the common people’s support, as well as His Majesty the Emperor’s own favour towards all of you. If the Xuanjing Bureau does not have the definitive proof to refute your



defense, it will be difficult for them to secure the conviction of harbouring a traitor. It is only that.....though there is hope for the Yun clan to escape a guilty charge, as for you yourself....”

Yun Piaoliao nodded, understanding his meaning. The Yun clan was an aristocratic family well-known for its medicines and healing draughts, and its prestige and reputation made it difficult for anyone to convict it of guilt by association without ironclad evidence. But she herself was Wei Zheng’s wife, and even if she did not know of his traitor status beforehand, no matter what anyone said, she was still the wife of a criminal.

“I think what Wei Zheng fears the most now is that you may be implicated in his crime by association, and so, even for him, you must not be stubborn, and must insist that you did not know anything, so that even if you are convicted guilty by association, it will be a lighter sentence. So long as your life is preserved, once you are released from the Xuanjing Bureau’s prisons, arrangements will be made and we will ensure that you suffer as little as possible.”

“Do not worry, Chief Mei,” Yun Piaoliao smiled faintly. “I am no pampered lady, and am not afraid of suffering. So long as there is the hope of seeing Wei Zheng again someday, I can endure any hardship. But.....even if the Yun clan is spared from this disaster, Yaowang Valley....”

“I am not particularly worried about Yaowang Valley,” Mei Changsu smiled. “Valley Chief Su is not to be underestimated, and I am certain his self-preservation instincts are still intact. The smoky lands to the West are vast, and the towering mountains and ridges countless in their numbers. Valley Chief Su may enter the court to cry his innocence, or he may hide himself in the rainforests, we can only wait and see what he chooses to do. In any case, if the Xuanjing Bureau wishes to topple Yaowang Valley, I fear they do not have the power, and at most, they might close the transport routes for their medicines, and encircle Yaowang Valley in the mountains.”

“Close the routes and encircle the valley?” Yun Piaoliao looked worried. “Then will they not....”

“It is no matter, Yaowang Valley has the resources to easily last three or four years in siege without even noticing the inconvenience. Besides, who do you think is more familiar with the Western lands, the Xuanjing Bureau or Valley Chief Su? The Bureau might be able to obstruct a few routes, but to shut down all of them? That is easier said than done.”

Yun Piaoliao let out a sigh of relief. “That’s alright then, as long as his foster father does not come to much harm, Wei Zheng will not feel too guilty or ashamed.”

“Li Gang, go and make preparations for an escort to accompany Mistress Wei out of the city before the beginning of the dusk curfew today.”

“Yes!”

“Mistress Wei, you must be very careful on the road. If you are captured anywhere else, the Xuanjing Bureau may claim that you were caught escaping arrest. Only if you return to the Yun manor will they be unable to make any such claims.”

“That’s right, what kind of escaping prisoner heads back to his own home?” Li Gang said with a laugh. “The necessary arrangements will be made along the way, Mistress Wei, you do not need to worry.”

“One other thing you must beware: Wei Zheng was arrested on the road while transporting medicinal herbs, and then escorted to the capital under guard. Throughout the whole process, his criminal charge was never made public. Once you are captured in the Yun manor, you must act as if you do not even know why you are being arrested, and so long as no one informs you outright of Wei Zheng’s traitor status, you only know him as Su Xuan, and nothing else, do you understand?”

“I thank Chief Mei for the direction.” Yun Piaoliao got up and bowed, and then wished him good health before following Li Gang out the door.

As soon as they had left, Fei Liu drifted over, a cluster of bright red plum blossoms held tightly in one hand, and began removing the two-day old blossoms from the largest vase in the room and replacing them with new flowers.

Mei Changsu watched him absently for a few moments before suddenly saying, “Fei Liu, there are no red plum blossoms in our courtyard. Where did you get those?”

“Other people’s homes!” Fei Liu answered brightly.

Mei Changsu, whose thoughts had been heavy and pained up until now, didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at this response. He coughed a few times and then waved Fei Liu over to him. “Fei Liu, go to the hidden chamber and knock on the door, and then wait for a little while. If someone comes, then come back and help me over there, alright?”

Fei Liu cocked his head. “Water buffalo?”

“It is his Highness Prince Jing!” Mei Changsu scowled at him fiercely. “How many times have I told you, and you still will not listen?”

“Easy to say!” Fei Liu said defensively.

“Alright, never mind whether it is easy to say or not, no matter what, you must not call him that again. Now go, quickly.”

The youth spun lightly and disappeared behind the hanging screen in the blink of an eye.

## CHAPTER 119

### *Palace Debate*

Yet Fei Liu's waiting did not result in the arrival of Prince Jing, as Xiao Jingyan was not even in his prefecture. Although the bloody showdown at the west city gate was not known in advance by the Capital Patrol, it's not as if they would continue to be blind to the happenings after. Before long, Prince Jing received the report stating that the Xuanjing Bureau had escorted a serious criminal, and was ambushed at the city gates. Due to the fact that the Xuanjing Bureau was directly under imperial jurisdiction and followed its own independent procedures, oftentimes, relevant ministries and departments of the court were not notified of their operations. Originally, Prince Jing didn't think much of the happenings and only notified Capital Patrol Commander Ouyang to keep a careful watch. If the Xuanjing Bureau intended to round up all criminals who participated in the ambush, unless they had an openly announced imperial decree, they would be required to coordinate with the Capital Patrol to set up the operation and avoid unnecessarily disturbing the citizens. After confirming this protocol with the commander, he went to visit his critically ill royal uncle, Prince Li. Unlike when he was once unnoticed and unfavored by the Emperor, Xiao Jingyan's current status had now changed like day and night. When he arrived at the Prince Li Prefecture, out of the other visitors of the imperial family and members of the court, there wasn't a single one who didn't rush to exchange conventional greetings with him. After engaging in pointless conversations out of courtesy, it was already after noon. At this time, Ouyang Ji rushed to report that there was no communication from the Xuanjing Bureau at all, but that they didn't begin conducting any unauthorized searches in the capital city either. It was as if they didn't care for the escaped ambushees at all, and instead concentrated all their manpower on heavily guarding the newly imprisoned criminal in the Xuanjing Bureau.

At this time, Prince Jing began to raise suspicion, but after thinking carefully for a moment, he couldn't think of any recent events that the criminal could be related to. However, there had always been a rift between himself and the Xuanjing Bureau, and knew that sending someone to inquire further would just be asking for contempt in return. In addition, the absence of a Crown Prince resulted in many ritual changes for the end of year memorial ceremony. The Emperor ordered that he be accompanied by the dual qin princes, Prince Yu and Prince Jing, on the altar. Unlike Prince Yu, Prince Jing had not been involved in the higher levels of the court for many years, and was unfamiliar with the protocol and etiquette of this regard. He invited the succeeding

Minister of Rites, Liu Ji, to personally prepare him in the inner court, and was in the midst of the busiest of times. Thus, although he had many confusions, he didn't end up investigating further, only reminding Ouyang Ji to continue searching for information before going to the inner court.

After practicing and studying etiquette for close to two hours, though Prince Jing was not in the least bit tired, Minister Liu, who was more than sixty years of age, was already breathless and worn out. He was Head Secretariat Liu Cheng's cousin, born into a noble family, viewed with great prestige in the court, and never treated any one prince different from one another. Prince Jing had never tried to deliberately get in his favor either, but out of consideration for his frail body, used the excuse of seeking advice regarding historical decrees and regulations to allow him to sit down and rest. Unexpectedly, as the conversation went on, it ended up being a very insightful and agreeable discussion.

As a matter of fact, this is where Prince Jing had a major advantage—most court officials' impression of Prince Jing was that he was determined and hardworking, but only knowledgeable in military affairs, not policy governance. But in reality, Prince Jing had been carefully brought up in the palace by his mother and Consort Chen as a child, and later was personally educated by his eldest brother, Prince Qi. He didn't lack a strong foundation in this sense, only that back in the day, the spirited, willful, and brilliantly talented Chiyan Young Marshal Lin Shu had overshadowed him completely, leaving him unnoticed. The decade or so following Prince Qi's conviction of treason, Xiao Jingyan indeed had developed extreme disgust and contempt towards the court, and was thus let loose to manage affairs outside the capital city, resulting in, to some extent, the neglect of him. But no matter what, he too was once taught by honored scholars and prestigious teachers, studying alongside Lin Shu as classmates, and performed well in his studies. If one were to judge him as simply a man of the military, they would naturally be thoroughly surprised after having a deep discussion with him.

It was not until the evening that Prince Jing left the inner court, and he happened to run into Meng Zhi outside the palace walls. He took the opportunity to ask Meng Zhi whether or not he knew who the Xuanjing Bureau had imprisoned, but Meng Zhi was completely unaware of any of the details. They only exchanged a few brief words before parting. Afterward, Prince Jing returned directly to his prefecture. Unfortunately, the second he entered his bedroom was the exact moment that Fei Liu, who had still received no response after knocking thrice, turned around to leave—they had missed one another by mere seconds. Into the night, Mei Changsu's condition worsened, and in the end, he didn't have the energy to send Fei Liu a fourth time, so the two were unable to meet.

Early the next morning, Prince Jing entered the palace to pay his respects and greetings. Because it was the end of the year, the imperial courts were sealed, and there were no court councils. When the princes came daily to pay their respects, they headed directly to the Wuying Hall. When Prince Jing entered, he ran into Prince Yu

in front of the hall entrance, whom he had not seen in quite a while. It was unknown whether he was coincidentally lucky or the opposite.<sup>178</sup>

“Jingyan is here,” Prince Yu greeted him with a great smile, reaching out to hold Prince Jing’s hand, seeming to look like a loving elder brother. “Seeing your glowing cheeks, you must have rested well last night?”

Prince Jing had never liked engaging in feigned gestures of politeness with him, and Mei Changsu didn’t see any point in maintaining superficial relations either. Under these similar viewpoints, though Prince Jing was never disrespectful to Prince Yu, it was inevitable that he treated him indifferently. For example, at this moment, he only bowed slightly, then slowly tugged his hand away, out of Prince Yu’s grasp.

“Here, come, let’s go in together, I heard Father Emperor is very happy today.” Prince Yu had long become accustomed to his indifference, and didn’t take it to heart in the slightest, gesturing forwards as they walked into the Wuying Hall together, side by side.

At this time, there were three people in the hall. The Emperor of Liang, Xuanjing Bureau’s Head Officer, Xia Jiang, and the Imperial Guard General, Meng Zhi, who seemed to have just finished discussing some sort of affairs. One was seated on the imperial throne, forehead in his hands, and in deep contemplation, one was slowly stroking his beard with a suspiciously suppressed smile, and the other didn’t have much of an expression at all, though his face was tight and tense. As the two qin princes entered, Xia Jiang, looking at Prince Yu, nodded slightly, whereas Meng Zhi, looking at Prince Jing, furrowed his eyebrows.

“Your son wishes Father Emperor great health and prosperity.” The brothers respectfully knelt down together, paying their greetings.

“Mm, sit.” The Liang Emperor massaged his temples and slowly lifted his head, looking at the two sons who were standing in front of him. Now that they were of the same rank and had similar robes and adornments, the other similarities in appearance between the two brothers became much more prominent. They were similar in both stature and facial features, only with one being more strong and reticent, and the other more smooth and clever. For the past ten years and more, the Emperor had always favored Prince Yu, and it was only recently that he became displeased with Prince Yu’s excessive ambition, deliberately reducing special favor shown towards him, but still loving him dearly. On the other hand, Prince Jing, after regaining opportunities to capture the Emperor’s attention, acted more and more in line with his likings, and was

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<sup>178</sup> Coincidentally lucky or the opposite: this has a double meaning that is more obvious to the reader than to Jingyan. The character “巧” means a coincidence, but can also mean lucky. We know that he most likely is unlucky to have run into Prince Yu, and that it really wasn’t a coincidence either since it was planned by Prince Yu. So really he was just uncoincidentally unlucky...

currently right in the midst of increasing favorability. So at this time, when looking at the two, even the Emperor himself could not tell which he favored more. In his daze, he suddenly thought of Prince Qi, the son who was brilliant to the point where he had lost control over him. He felt a sharp pain in his heart, unknowing whether it was due to old age, or if Xia Jiang had recalled memories he had deliberately locked away.

“Father Emperor, what is wrong?” Prince Yu asked, expressing his concern as he stepped forwards. “Unless there was something troublesome being discussed just now? Would your son be able to share Father Emperor’s worries?”

The Emperor waved his hand, saying, “It’s New Year’s, what troubles could there be....”

“Yes,” Xia Jiang, seeing that the Emperor had only spoken half a sentence and was not intending on elaborating further, took over the conversation, continuing, “Fortune and prosperity come with a new year’s celebration, what troubles could there be? In fact, being able to capture a traitor from an old case is actually a great sign.”

“A traitor?” Prince Yu showed an expression of shock on his face. “Has there been a case of treason lately, how come I am unaware?”

Xia Jiang laughed aloud blatantly, saying, “Your highness, of course, you know about it, only that this case is not recent. It is from thirteen years ago.”

“What? Head Officer Xia, unless you are referring to...” Prince Yu responded immediately while stealing a glance at Prince Jing. Sure enough, Prince Jing had lifted his head, glaring at Xia Jiang with a burning fire in his eyes.

“Is there a second case of treason from thirteen years ago? Naturally, it is the Chiyan Army’s case.” Xia Jiang spoke in a light tone, saying, “The Chiyan Army was charged with treason and had colluded with the enemy, however, when we massacred them at Meiling, there was heavy snowfall and a windstorm. Though his majesty ordered the 17 high-ranking generals leading the rebellion to be captured, only 4 were arrested alive, 11 bodies were found, and it was unknown if the other 2 had escaped, or had their bodies obliterated beyond recognition. All these years, the Xuanjing Bureau did not dare to lose alertness regarding this matter. Fortunately, with the blessings of the heavens on the Emperor, they were unable to escape from the watch of the skies. Though 13 years have passed, we were still able to capture one of the rebels. “

“Who is it?”

Xia Jiang took a glimpse of Prince Jing from the corner of his eye, and coldly stated, “Former Chiyan Battalion Vice General, Wei Zheng.”

Prince Jing couldn't help but clench his fists, feeling different waves of expressions flip through his chest. Yet after being repressed for the past decade, his recent experiences had changed him from the impetuous youth he once was. He gritted his teeth and lowered his gaze to hide the rising sparks in his eyes.

"Ah, this is indeed good news!" Prince Yu purposely raised his voice, sounding both sharp and shrill, "Your son congratulates Father Emperor. Even fugitives who have been on the run for over ten years can be captured, evidently showing the mighty power of our imperial administration. This Wei Zheng must be publicly executed in order to subdue any disloyal hearts."

Xia Jiang pretended to think for a moment, then slowly agreed, stating, "Prince Yu is indeed sharp. With careful thought, this is indeed a good idea. Education is useless to those who harbor treacherous thoughts, and we must implement extreme punishments to instill fear in the hearts of the people. Traitor Wei has been at large for more than ten years, showing that he did not feel remorse in the slightest. I believe that a public execution by severing him at the waist would be suitable."

Prince Jing had been clenching his teeth so tightly that his cheek muscles were twitching, and abruptly raised his head. Yet right as he was about to speak, Meng Zhi knelt down, saying, "Your majesty, it is currently the celebration of New Year's and a time of national mourning. It is inadvisable to have such public shows of cruelty!"

"General Meng's words are invalid." Xia Jiang continued lightly, "Treason is an unpardonable crime, what does it have to do with national mourning? Be harsh on traitors and benevolent to the loyal. To follow such will result in a prosperous nation, and to go against such will result in the destruction of a nation. The treatment of the two, traitors and the loyal, must not be mixed. Isn't that so, Prince Jing?"

He breezily tossed the conversation right towards Prince Jing, evidently trying to force him to speak. However, whatever he was to say in response, would either be words against his own heart, or disrespectful ones of defiance.

At this point, Meng Zhi felt extreme panic, and thought about making another attempt to stop him from speaking, yet was also afraid that doing so too obviously would be counterproductive. Right as he was at a loss regarding what to do next, Prince Jing had already bowed forwards, speaking out frankly and clearly, "Your son dissents."



## CHAPTER 120

### *Hidden Thorns*

When Xiao Jingyan said these words, his voice was not loud but its tone penetrated with a strong force, their meaning loud and clear. The Emperor's drooping eyebrows suddenly trembled, and he slowly lifted his cloudy eyes into a squint. Suddenly his eyes flashed with a sharp gleam of light, and fixed their gaze on Prince Jing's face.

"You...what objections do you have?" The Emperor of Great Liang dragged out his words, his tone showing neither pleasure nor displeasure, but neither was there much goodwill.

Prince Yu who was seated on his left immediately respectfully adjusted his sitting position. The corners of his lips twitched upwards into a smug smile, but he was conscious of it and immediately suppressed it.

Prince Jing noticed this but did not look at Prince Yu, only bowed his head and replied: "Your son thought that no matter the outcome of that past case, it had caused great sorrow to the royal family. Such damage to the imperial dynasty was a calamity that cannot be misconstrued as luck, nor should it be brought up and discussed so enthusiastically in this manner, without the least bit of heaviness in one's heart. Director Xia has always been known to handle matters with an iron fist, strict and fierce, really to be admired. But the kingdom is not in chaos now. Proposing such a severe punishment is easy, but as for how to reinvigorate the country or how to bring a country to ruin, the rulers of past generations have long since written books about this. In the presence of Father Emperor's great wisdom, how dare I answer when Director Xia asks me if his reasoning is correct?"

Such high level words coming from Prince Jing, who had never been known for his eloquence, shocked his enemies.

Prince Yu straightened his back and was just about to say a few words to counter this when Xia Jiang stood up, chuckling, "When official business is being discussed in His Majesty's presence, it is normal for political views to differ. If Your Highness does not approve of my proposal, just say it as it is, why be so angry? Could it be that

the words I said just now offended you, making you unhappy? If so then let this old minister be the first to admit my mistake.”

“Yes. Jingyan, you....” Prince Yu chimed in to lend his support, but caught a quick glance from Xia Jiang and immediately kept quiet.

He was a smart man. In a flash, he understood that Xia Jiang didn't want the two of them to appear to be cooperating too excessively, in order not to arouse the Emperor's suspicions. Fortunately, he was able to quickly take back the words at the tip of his tongue and modify them. “....what Jingyan says is not wrong, just that he has a bit of a temper. But Director Xia is too oversensitive. You know Jingyan's temperament is like this but he didn't mean anything by it.”

“Whether Your Highness Prince Jing had any intention or not, this old minister cannot discern. Regardless, what you said just now about the past case I didn't really understand. This case was personally examined and decided by the Emperor, every thread and every strand examined in detail without discrepancy. Could it be that till today, Your Highness is still unclear about the evidence?”

Actually, at this time, all Prince Jing needed to say was a few words such as “I didn't mean that” or “It's not an objection to the past case”, and the issue would have dissolved. No matter the circumstances, Xia Jiang was a senior minister, a vassal of the court, and Prince Jing could not keep striking at him indiscriminately. However, when all was said and done, Prince Jing was Prince Jing. Thirteen years of stubbornness cannot be polished away in a such a short span of half a year. One might even say that this further fanned his outrage following his recent discovery of some of the actual facts concerning the case (Xie Yu's confession). Which is why, at this moment, even though he knew fully well that the Emperor was only pretending to not pay any attention, but was in actual fact waiting to evaluate his response, Prince Jing could not ignore his innermost self to say such ingratiating words. Xiao Jingyan really could not do it.

“What happened that year, I really do not know. I only know that I received imperial orders to leave the capital for Dong Hai on a diplomatic mission. Then, the wise Prince Qi was still a highly revered prince, the loyal Commander Lin was still outstanding in meritorious deeds, the mighty Chiyan Army was still protecting the northern borders of Great Liang, but when I returned, I was informed that they were rebels, traitors, sinners, all dead. Apart from the mass graves and the memorial tablets, I didn't see a single corpse, so how could I have clear proof?”

“So that's how it is,” Xia Jiang nodded, his tone of voice remaining unchanged. “It turns out that in Your Highness's heart, as long as there are wise princes, outstanding individuals with meritorious deeds, mighty armies with soldiers as numerous as clouds, then they can rebel (without punishment)?”

After Xia Jiang's malicious question, Meng Zhi tried his best to make eye contact with Prince Jing, to signal to him to calm down.

However, his blood had boiled over to such an extent that it was difficult to extinguish in a flash. In that moment, 32 year old Xiao Jingyan was really unable to allow himself to patiently endure having someone crush his deepest and most painful wound underfoot. "This so-called rebellion, there is no real basis. I looked into it and only found the case report Director Xia presented."

"That is not possible. Did you only see the case report Director Xia presented?" Prince Yu interjected in a mild tone. "Jingyan, don't tell me you didn't see Father Emperor's personally issued imperial edict?"

Hearing this, the Emperor who was reclining pushed himself off the pillow and finally lowered the hand from his forehead. Sitting upright, he slowly stared into Prince Jing's eyes and said, "Jingyan, about how I handled the Chiyan case.....are you dissatisfied?"

Even though this question sounded unextraordinary, it was a delicate one and in actual fact, extremely critical. Prince Jing immediately rose and knelt before the Emperor, bending forward to lie prostrate in obeisance, but when he raised his head, it would appear that he was still unwilling to concede.

"Your son really doesn't harbour any dissatisfaction towards Father Emperor. Your son simply believes that Prince Qi has always....."

"It's Xiao Jingyu the commoner!" The Emperor suddenly erupted in unrestrained anger, his voice loud. "What Commander Lin, that's Lin Xie the rebel! Haven't you learnt how to use the right appellation?"

Prince Jing bit down firmly on his lower lips, leaving deep teeth marks, and composed himself to relax the throbbing muscle on his face.

Meng Zhi immediately knelt down and said softly, "Your Majesty, the New Year is almost here. Please hold back the anger of the Son of Heaven for now to reassure the people of your benevolence."

"Jingyan, you should at least also say a few words," Prince Yu urged him softly. "How can you contradict Father Emperor in the presence of myself and a court official?"

Actually, since the beginning of the debate, Prince Jing had only said a few words to the Emperor, and these words didn't contain the slightest hint of contradiction, but Prince Yu's accusation seemed to imply that Jingyan's words were deliberately directed against the Emperor. It was a truly impressive underhanded tactic.

Meng Zhi's forehead broke out into sweat, but he wasn't as quick of mind, and couldn't find a way out of the current situation. He could only worry in silence.

"Your Majesty...." Gao Zhan, who had been kneeling continuously at the corner of the hall waiting on his Emperor, quietly crawled over and moved close to the Emperor's ears, saying softly, "May your servant boldly remind Your Majesty that it will soon be time for your daily herbal foot bath and massage. Zhiluo Palace has sent a letter over to inform that Concubine Jing has already made the necessary preparations."

The Emperor's chest was heaving obviously. All those looking at his change in expression....the worried and uneasy Meng Zhi, the apparently submissive and placid Prince Yu, the expressionless Xia Jiang, and the one kneeling there neither defending himself nor apologizing, Prince Jing.

The old emperor who had lived past 60 years suddenly felt discouraged. He closed his eyes and waved his hands saying, "Leave, all of you leave...."

Prince Yu was somewhat disappointed, and wanted to say a few more words, but the expression in Xia Jiang's eyes stopped him. Forced to exercise patience, he offered his salutations and left with everyone else.

Outside, Jingyan walked hurriedly away without looking at either of his peers, his face taut.

Prince Yu and the Crown Prince had practised the skill of keeping a harmonious façade for many years. Regarding this new opponent, this cold person who did not give any face and completely no response, Prince Yu stared dully at his departing back for a while before stamping his foot and turning his head to say, "Director Xia, look at him, this manner of person...."

"Turn him upside down and he won't lose any blood (fig. of speech). Your Highness, keep calm and don't be impatient. I will take my leave first." Xia Jiang briefly clasped his hands in obeisance. Prince Yu understood that he was being cautious. He glanced left and right, then returned the courtesy without saying much and they both went on their separate ways.

Not long after the three left, the Emperor's palanquin arrived at the front of Wuying Hall. Gao Zhan carefully helped the Emperor out and onto the carriage, which then swayed its way towards Zhiluo Palace.

In recent months, the Emperor's foot often suffered from a wind attack (rheumatism?), and the pain was difficult to bear. The medicine prescribed by the physicians were not very effective, but the medicinal foot bath and massage prepared by Concubine Jing for him alleviated the symptoms considerably. This was why he

went to Zhiluo Palace everyday at this time. Gao Zhan's reminder just now was not devised but the fortunate timing was coincidental only, nothing more.

As far as the disturbance in Wuying Hall was concerned, Concubine Jing was as yet still unaware. Even if she knew, it was hard to say if her calm and peaceful manner would change because of this.

After welcoming the Emperor into the palace, apart from making the appropriate responses according to etiquette, she didn't say much else. She busied herself waiting on the Emperor, who was half reclining, half seated on a soft chair, first removing his shoes and socks, then massaging his foot in a steam bath.

Normally, at this time, the Emperor would engage her in small talk to distract himself, but today he was in extremely low spirits. As soon as he arrived, he closed his eyes as if to fall asleep, but the three creases that furrowed between his eyebrows expressed his unhappiness.

Concubine Jing did not ask for the reason, but when she saw him close his eyes, she took out a soft, warm and fragrant smelling towel. She heated it up and folded it into a narrow strip, before lightly putting it over the Emperor's eyes, changing it every half an hour.

After a long while, when the treatment was ended, Concubine Jing took an old pair of white cotton socks and put it on the Emperor. Lifting both his legs, she put them evenly on a stool that the palace maid brought over, suspending his ankles. Then she began to massage his thighs by beating them with her fists.

As she was busy doing that, the Emperor suddenly removed the fragrant smelling cloth on his eyes, leaned forward and grabbed hold of Concubine Jing's wrist, pulling her before him, exclaiming, "Concubine Jing!"

"Yes," Concubine Jing let him pull her over without any resistance. "What instructions does Your Majesty have?"

"Tell me, the past event concerning the Chiyan case, what is your opinion of it?"

Faced with this sudden question, there was a ripple in Concubine Jing's normally tranquil eyes, and she hesitated before asking, "Why is Your Majesty asking this...."

"Just answer me. Your view of it, I want the truth."

Concubine Jing slowly withdrew the hand that was massaging his leg, took a step back, knelt down with her head bowed and asked, "Your Majesty, this question you asked, your servant doesn't dare to not answer. It's just that no matter how your servant replies, it will inevitably make Your Majesty sad, so I will start off by asking for your forgiveness in advance. Your Majesty, please forgive me."

The Emperor was somewhat moved, and sitting up, he said, "Why do you say this?"

"Your servant was born in the Lin mansion, and had a very close relationship with Concubine Chen. Your Majesty has always known this. If your servant only criticizes and speaks malicious words, wouldn't Your Majesty be sad that Concubine Chen never had an intimate friend to remember her after death? But Your Majesty personally handled the details of the Chiyan case according to your wisdom in order to stabilize the imperial court. If I think about my relationship with Concubine Chen, it would seem to exonerate someone at the heart of Chiyan. Your Majesty would inevitably think your servant does not understand the pains you go through to maintain the peace....Your servant is only a very minor concubine in the palace. No matter how I view the Chiyan case, it is trifle and not worth mentioning, but if my reply makes Your Majesty feel sad, that would be your servant's biggest offence, so your servant boldly requests Your Majesty in advance to make allowance for it." Concubine Jing bowed again and lay prostrate, tears escaping her eyes.

With regard to Concubine Chen, Lin Yue Yao, the Emperor had also mourned her in secret all these years. So when Concubine Jing spoke of her old friendship, it hit a soft spot in the Emperor's heart. Not only did he not get angry, on the contrary, he harboured similar feelings that agreed with her meaning. He stretched out his hand to beckon Concubine Jing to come close and said with a sigh, "Let it be. You are as gentle and kind as Concubine Chen. I won't make things difficult for you. You were both by my side, do you think I still don't understand the both of you? In the end, you are both different from the Empress and Concubine Yue. Matters outside the palace shouldn't involve the both of you, it's only that...."

Seeing the Emperor shed tears of sadness, Concubine Jing quickly picked up a handkerchief to wipe his face, saying with a soft voice, "Your servant understands that all those years ago, Your Majesty left a way out for Concubine Chen. But you also know that although her temperament was gentle and kind, she was, after all, related by blood to the General's family. Confronted with such circumstances, she was naturally unwilling to be the sole survivor. Because your servant understands her, rather than say she committed suicide because of fear of punishment, it would be better to say she felt unworthy of you, Your Majesty, and felt there was nothing left to live for. That is all."

These words of Concubine Jing comforted the Emperor, and he cannot help but nod his head repeatedly (in agreement). It would be inaccurate to say that the Emperor wasn't cruel towards Concubine Chen at the time. While alive, she was stripped of her position, and after her death simply buried in a small coffin, a lonely tomb, no monument erected, no sacrifices offered. The only exception was that was no imperial decree for her to take her own life. The cold and despicable acts he was capable of were not insignificant, and all of them had been carried out. It's just that now that he

was reminiscing in his old age, he chose only to remember that he treated her with generosity, in order to comfort himself.

“So many years have passed by in a flash. These days, the only person in the palace who dares to talk to me about Concubine Chen is you.” The Emperor stroked the back of Concubine Jing’s hand, sighing with sorrow. “Less than a year after Jingyu was born, you entered the palace. You are obviously aware of how well I treated both mother and son..... The day before yesterday, at the temple festival, I caught sight of Yan Que. He so seldom appears before me all year round, I had almost forgotten all about him, but in the end, when I met him the day before yesterday, I realized that some matters cannot be forgotten.....”

“Your servant was wondering why Your Majesty was feeling so sorrowful today. As it turns out, it was because Your Majesty saw Marquis Yan....”

“No, that’s not why. The reason I recalled these matters is because Xia Jiang came to the palace today to inform me that he has finally managed to arrest a Chiyan traitor who managed to escape capture during that time....”

Concubine Jing was taken aback, using all her energy to stop her hand from trembling, but she could not control her facial expression, and quickly lowered her head, steadying her state of mind. After a long while, she said, “It has been more than ten years.....I don’t know which traitor?”

“You don’t know him. He was Xiao Shu’s.....er....he was one of Chiyu Battalion’s central deputy generals, named Wei Zheng or something.”

Concubine Jing who had only just composed herself, silently exhaled, saying, “How could it be? Didn’t the past report say that the entire Chiyu Battalion was annihilated by fire, so there shouldn’t have been any survivors?”

“I thought so too, which is why I specifically asked Xia Jiang. He said that that Wei Zheng was very lucky to have escaped with his life. He was originally Chiyu’s lead deputy general, and really should have been at Meiling’s northern gorge, but that day he so happened to have received orders to go to the main camp in the southern gorge on official assignment, so that gave him the opportunity to escape with his life. If he had still been in the northern gorge, there wouldn’t even be any bones left.”

Speaking about Wei Zheng, the Emperor did not have the same tender feelings as when he spoke about Concubine Chen earlier. His words were cold and ruthless.

Listening to him, Concubine Jing felt her whole body tremble. She had to rely on her many years of self-cultivation to exercise profound self-control in order not to display any inappropriate expression. Why the massacre facing the Chiyu Battalion in the northern gorge was more cruel, more ruthless compared to the main camp, the fire wiping them out so completely, Concubine Jing actually understood in her heart.

The chief commander of Chiyu Battalion, Lin Shu, that heroic spirit that soared to the skies, who was favoured by the gods, was the only son of Chiyang's Supreme Commander Lin Xie and Princess Jinyang, and had always been most treasured<sup>179</sup> by the Grand Empress Dowager.

When the Chiyang case first broke out, this old lady who had lived through 3 generations of rulers and never interfered in any of the court affairs went barefoot with her hair hanging loose over her shoulders, lying prostrate (as if she was kissing the floor) in Wuying Hall, her face covered in tears, begging the Emperor to remove Lin Shu's name from the criminal name list.

It was impossible for the heartbroken and inconsolable Grand Dowager Empress to save the Chiyang Army, but she hoped at least to be able to save her young 17-year-old great grandson's life. What she didn't realize was that once the Emperor had made his decision to dispose of the Chiyang Army, there was no way he would leave alive that Lin Shu who had been on the battlefield since he was 13 years of age to scheme and raise army to take him by surprise. And so to prevent any (future) schemes or hidden threats against him, the Emperor could not allow this undefeated young general famed for his military exploits to go free.

So even though he had no choice but to make his promise to the Grand Empress Dowager, he did not remove Lin Shu from the criminal list. He still secretly gave orders to Xie Yu to ensure that Lin Shu did not have the slightest chance of escaping with his life. Later, the Chiyu Battalion resisted fiercely, and the situation got out of control. In the end, the news of this indiscriminate destruction was reported back to the Grand Empress Dowager.

And Grand Princess Jinyang, who had been waiting calmly for news, upon hearing about her husband's death, carried a sword with her into the palace, to Chaoyang Hall, and in the presence of everyone, drew it across her throat, her blood splattering across the jade steps.

However, the Grand Empress Dowager's serious illness and the blood of Grand Princess Jinyang did not prevent the Emperor from re-establishing the supremacy of his sovereign power with an iron fist. Three days later, Xiao Jingyu was forced to commit suicide by Imperial Order. Concubine Chen committed suicide on the same day.

In that moment, Prince Qi's Mansion, once full of vigour and vitality, with its many people of outstanding talent, vanished like smoke and dispersed like clouds, leaving behind only the sounds of its past lingering in the court. From that moment, deep in the palace, Concubine Jing carved the cruelty of the imperial family deep into her marrow. At the heart of all those who died were Lin Xie who saved her life and

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<sup>179</sup> He was her "flesh of the heart and mind"!



regarded her as his own sister, Grand Princess Jinyang with whom she had shared an intimate friendship and mutual admiration, Concubine Chen with whom she had a relationship that went beyond sisterly affection, having supported and kept each other company in the palace. But she had no choice but to hide her tears for them, conceal her innermost anger and resentment, keep away her knowledge and emotions, be just like an invisible person in a corner of the palace, waiting for an unknown ending.

## CHAPTER 121

### *Ties of Affection*

After conversing with Concubine Jing, the Emperor felt tired and sleepy, and he moved to the bed to sleep. Concubine Jing put down the sheer curtain, changed the incense in the burner, and sat down. As soon as she did, she felt worry rise in her heart.

As the saying goes, the mother knows her son best. Concubine Jing couldn't be more clear about her son Xiao Jingyan's temperament. Although she did not know who Wei Zheng was, on the basis of his identity as a deputy general of Chiyu Battalion, Concubine Jing knew that Jingyan would not sit idly by.

But what could he do...plead with the Emperor for mercy? There was as yet no hope of redress for the Chiyan case, simply no grounds whatsoever of pardoning the traitors. Would he, for Wei Zheng's sake, go to great lengths to reopen that which has been closed? Xia Jiang, the Director of Xuanjing Bureau, had deliberately laid this net, waiting for him to run into it, no doubt to use military force to rescue Wei Zheng? This was a most undesirable strategy, with no second chances if the execution were to fail.

Unable to arrive at a conclusion after approaching it from all angles, Concubine Jing heaved a sigh to get rid of her chaotic train of thoughts, stood up erect, and walked to the wing of the outer hall, where she ordered someone to bring her fresh plum flower pistils. Then, she sat down and sieved through them with her hands, selecting the ones she wanted, preparing to steep them to make plum cakes.

At this time, Xin'er the maidservant walked over, carrying in both her hands a wooden box. After making her salutations, she said, "Niang niang, these are top quality hazelnuts that the Inner Court Department just sent over. Would you like to have a look at them?"

Concubine Jing merely cast a brief glance at them and said, "Leave them."

"Yes." Xin'er put the wooden box on the shelf, and returned to help Concubine Jing shake the sieving board. Smiling, she said, "Niang niang, are the hazelnuts not

good? You have not made any hazelnut shortbread for Prince Jing in a long time. Didn't you say that it is His Highness's most favourite?"

Hearing this, Concubine Jing stopped selecting the plum flower pistils, narrowing her gaze.

How long had she not made them? She had not been making them since she started making twice as much the number of food boxes.....Jingyan was a good son who was not choosy about what he ate. His so-called "most favorite" was no more than just because that would be the first item he would pick out when given a large quantity of food. If it wasn't given to him, he would also not particularly take notice. As a result, she didn't realize this change.

Reflecting on it, it was really interesting. They were undoubtedly a great pair of friends, but while one loved to eat hazelnuts, the other would turn red all over and struggle for breath if he accidentally ate any, and they would have to use medicine to induce vomiting before he was better. This was probably the only thing the both of them disagreed with.....

Hopefully that person could hold Jingyan back from his impetuosity in this current situation and find a safe way to get him through this.

"Niang niang, on the way back just now, this servant passed by Concubine Hui's carriage on the road. Her face was swollen, like she had been crying," Xin'er lowered her voice. "According to Eunuch Qi, she had just come from Zhengyang Palace. She must definitely have been scolded harshly by the Empress."

Concubine Jing frowned. "Why did you inquire about such things?"

"This servant did not inquire," Xin'er hurriedly replied, "It is Eunuch Qi himself who told this servant. If niang niang does not believe, ask Eunuch Qi."

Concubine Jing smiled faintly. "It is not a big matter, but I must remind you again that the Palace has its own code of conduct. Don't find trouble for yourself."

"This servant understands." Xin'er stuck the tip of her tongue out delicately and covered her mouth with her hand in an exaggerated manner. It's a face she makes when she's trying to act adorable to avoid further reprimanding.

Actually, the affair Xin'er spoke of was something Concubine Jing was already familiar with. Concubine Hui was the mother of Prince Xu, the Emperor's third son, and though she had spent many years in the palace, she was not well-favored. Last month, Prince Xu took a fancy to a minor official's daughter and wanted to make her his concubine. Verbal arrangements were made, but before the betrothal gifts could be sent out, the uncle of Prince Yu's Consort, Zhu Yue, took a fancy to her. As that minor official coveted Prince Yu's power and influence, he quietly delivered her to

the Zhu mansion, whilst falsely claiming that his daughter was ill in order to hide the truth from Prince Xu. Later when this news leaked and Prince Xu found out, he conceded and did not put up a fight for her. But he was after all, a prince, and in his anger, he sent someone to question the minor official. In his fear, the minor official ran away through the back gate and when given chase, he slipped, fell into the water and died. His daughter wept in sorrow when heard the news. To help his young concubine give vent to her emotions, Zhu Yue raised a petition through an imperial censor he was friendly with, accusing Prince Xu of murder, and at the same time also passed a report through Prince Yu's consort. Because it was the new year, the case was temporarily retained and not issued, but Concubine Hui, because of the charge of not bringing her son up well got a harsh scolding.<sup>180</sup>

Concubine Jing had never said a word or done anything about matters in the Imperial Harem, and she only listened to what Xin'er said. Remembering that tomorrow was the first day of the lunar new year, and that there would be so many important occasions, after considering for a while, she immediately got up to look for two medicine bags and a box of ointment. She instructed Xin'er to bring them discreetly to Concubine Hui's palace and teach her how to treat her swollen eyes in order to avoid letting the Emperor see that she had cried on the first day of the new year, else it would only add to her troubles.<sup>181</sup>

When the afternoon finally arrived, the Emperor woke up and had his afternoon meal with Concubine Jing in attendance. Because he still had to confirm the final details of the sacrificial ceremony with the Minister of Rites, he did not remain for much longer and departed for the court.

As soon as the Emperor left, Concubine Jing began to hope that her son would enter for a time, so she could say some things to him, but though she waited until the evening, there was still no sign of Prince Jing. Presumably he wouldn't be coming.

While Concubine Jing was waiting hopefully, the person Prince Jing had narrowly missed meeting the day before, Mei Changsu, was glad to receive news that Prince Jing was waiting for him in the secret chamber.

His health and physical condition had taken a slight turn for the better that day and he was on the road to recovery. He could even walk a circle around the garden that morning, his body no longer feeling the effects of the deep and serious illness of the past few days. However, just to play safe, Li Gang and Zheng Ping still insisted on getting him to bring Fei Liu along with him when he entered the secret chamber.

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<sup>180</sup> How well a child behaves (or not behave) is considered the responsibility of a mother. In this case, Concubine Hui was being accused of not teaching her son right, of being too lax in his upbringing.

<sup>181</sup> Crying or pulling a long face is considered unlucky on the first day of the Lunar New Year.

Opening the door of the stone chamber, Mei Changsu had taken only a step in when he was startled by what met him. Prince Jing was not waiting alone.

“Greetings Your Highness Prince Jing. General Lie has also come along....” Although he was a little taken by surprised, Mei Changsu immediately circled back, stepped forward and said in greeting, “My broken body is sick and has suffered many days of severe and lingering illness, so I am afraid that I have missed many matters concerning Your Highness and seek forgiveness.”

“Sir, please do sit down,” Prince Jing rose slightly from his seat politely in welcome. “You are still recuperating and should not be disturbed. It’s just that I have an urgent matter and have no choice but to come ask you for a plan.”

“Your Highness is too polite,” Mei Changsu said without any preamble, getting straight to the point. “This is about the matter of Wei Zheng’s arrest, isn’t it?”

Prince Jing couldn’t help but be surprised. “Sir, how did you know?”

Mei Changsu fixed his eyes on the person behind Prince Jing, whose expression was worried and anxious, the General Lie Zhanying, and said casually, “I have already accepted Your Highness’s orders to investigate the previous years’ Chiyan case of long standing, how could I dare not take it to heart? But I only got to know about Wei Zheng’s arrest a few days ago. Jiangzuo Alliance spared no effort to rescue him, but did not succeed, so Wei Zheng is now held under arrest in the capital. Presumably Your Highness received this news today. According to what I know, General Lie in those years had a relatively good friendship with Wei Zheng. Now that he has purposely come along, it is definite that the purpose is to discuss this matter.”

“You are right,” Lie Zhanying spoke urgently. “It is certainly to discuss this matter. I had always believed that Wei Zheng was wronged and died a tragic death. Fortunately he is still alive, except that he is now behind bars, his life in the hands of someone else, so we must intensify rescue efforts. His Highness frequently said that Sir’s wisdom in strategy is unparalleled, so we really need to trouble you and request for you to think it over and give us some advice.”

“General Lie’s deep affection for an old friend is very touching, but you are Prince Jing’s most trusted aide and should put His Highness’s interest first before everything else.” Mei Changsu’s manner of speaking was slow and deliberate. “This so-called injustice is something we can only speak of here. But to the public, Wei Zheng’s identity is that of a traitor. This is something nobody can deny so can you deny it?”

Lie Zhanying replied urgently, “It is precisely because he has been falsely accused as a traitor that is why we need to make this request....”

“General, please stay calm.” Mei Changsu made a placating gesture. “I understand your feelings, but ask that you think it over carefully. No matter what plan I come up

with, it will still ultimately require His Highness to personally put it into effect. Think of all the grief His Highness had endured all these years of being suppressed because of the Chiyan case. Surely you understand that once he acts personally, it would be difficult to avoid triggering the Emperor's memory, and cut off the very good imperial favor he currently possesses."

"Today, in His Majesty's presence, I already made Father Emperor angry over this matter," Prince Jing responded harshly, "So Mister Su does not need to be overcautious. Just think of a way to resolve this dangerous situation."

"Is that so..." Mei Changsu shot a glance at him. "First, I would like to request for Your Highness to please recount the details and specific circumstances."

Prince Jing had a good memory and began speaking of the details of the event from the beginning to end. What was said by each person present that morning was repeated by and large. His face turned dark towards the end as he clearly recalled to mind his anger.

"Your Highness," Mei Changsu sighed as he shook his head, "Xia Jiang was setting up a trap to draw you in, did you not sense it?"

"I know," Prince Jing gritted his teeth, "But as far as I am concerned, some things should not be swept aside."

"Today, Xia Jiang and Prince Yu had originally planned for you to have a fierce clash with His Majesty, but they were interrupted halfway. You also practised some self-restraint, which is why they did not manage to get the effect they had anticipated, and were in all likelihood very disappointed. But since Wei Zheng is still in their hands, they would still be on the offensive. No matter what plans Your Highness may have of rescuing Wei Zheng, Your Highness will still fall into their trap, does Your Highness realize that?"

Prince Jing nodded his head. "I definitely understand this without a doubt. This old Chiyan case casts the longest shadow between me and Father Emperor. Though this matter of Wei Zheng, Xia Jiang intends to incite me to take action, to make Father Emperor realize that I still cherish this old resentment in my heart, that I desire to reverse the verdict, and now that I have been given power, influence and status, I then become a prince who is a threat and danger to Father Emperor, because when all is said and done, the person most responsible for the previous case was Father Emperor himself."

"It is good that Your Highness is clear about this," Mei Changsu's eyes were like a frozen lake, his face still and cold. "You have always sympathized with the people at the heart of Chiyan. Your Highness's stance is well known by all. To sum up this point, your clash with His Majesty today was very normal. He is unlikely to overthink it and will tolerate it, but Your Highness must understand that this is the limit. His

Majesty is not a soft-hearted person. Once he believes that you are genuinely provoking his authority, he will put you in your place without the slightest hesitation and show no quarter. If this happens then the setback that Prince Qi encountered will be right before Your Highness's eyes."

"In that case....," Lie Zhanying interjected, stammering. He turned to look at both the men and asked, "What do we do about Wei Zheng?"

Mei Changsu had some difficulty replying. He shut his eyes briefly, and gradually said, "General Lie is very clear on His Highness's greatest undertaking today. The place of difficulty with respect to Wei Zheng lies in the ties of affection, and that is all. In advancing Prince Jing's interests, rescuing Wei Zheng affords no advantage whatsoever. His Highness must naturally give this up for the sake of the greater plan."

Lie Zhanying's expression paled and he took a step back. Unable to find words to refute this, he opened and closed his lips a few times attempting to respond, before managing to squeeze out these few words: "Not....not rescue him?"

"Zhanying," Prince Jing stood up, his face cold, "Let us leave."

"But Your Highness...."

"Hasn't Mister Su already made his opinion very clear?" Prince Jing laughed bitterly, his every word seeming to spit forth from between his teeth. "I once believed Mister Su to be a different kind of advisor, and did not expect to see clearly in this moment that you also seek to gain the advantage at the slightest pretext, seemingly without human feelings or conscience. If I comply with Mr Su's intention, give up morality, justice and the friendships in my heart, my heart and soul intent only on pursuing and seizing that mighty position, then what becomes of my original purpose of seizing that position? If I indeed become so heartless I leave someone cold, wouldn't you worry that I would cast aside the ties of affection<sup>182</sup> that I had built with you due to your support of me, for the sake of other advantageous gains in future? As matters stand, you are unwilling to provide any assistance, and there is nothing more for me to say. You had already dispatched Jiangzuo Alliance to rescue Wei Zheng, and I have counted that in the heart, so just pretend I had never spoken on this matter."

"Your Highness!" Mei Changsu a few anxious steps forward to block Xiao Jingyan's way out, but because his breathing was uneven, he had difficulty speaking,

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<sup>182</sup> Ties of affection. This is my translation of the phrase “情义” (qíng yì). I recall Lang Ya Scribe mentioning in one of her earlier chapters that it is a concept that runs deeper than love or friendship. “Ties of affection” was the translation Pleco gave me, and I found it most apt, for ties they are indeed, deep and abiding ones that cannot be broken, even across time. Ties that bind two people together for all time. If you can think of an equivalent English term, I would appreciate it if you could please leave it in the comment section!

and started to cough, gasping violently for breath. Although he was angry, upon seeing Mei Changsu's sickly body and his apparent difficulty in supporting himself, Prince Jing felt his heart soften and feel bad for him, so he stopped and did not force his way out.

After coughing for a spell, Mei Changsu caught his breath and said in a low voice, "Hearing Your Highness speak, you have made up your mind to rescue Wei Zheng?"

"Yes."

"Even if, for the sake of rescuing him, you may incur great cost and suffer great disaster, to the extent of possibly risking your life if you proceed, yet without guarantee of succeeding?"

"If we do not try, how would we know?"

"Wei Zheng is merely one of Chiyu Battalion's deputy generals. Is it worth it?"

"When I meet Lin Shu after I die, if he asks me why I never rescued his deputy general, how could I give him an unworthy reply?"

"Your Highness attaches great importance to affection, I already know this very well," Mei Changsu held in check his tumultuous emotions, taking a deep breath, "But it is still impossible."

"What?" Prince Jing was just about to erupt into anger but felt a hand pressing down firmly on his arm, a hand that was weak and lacked strength. He stepped back, not knowing why he didn't force it away.

"Your Highness must not save him. You will also not be able to save him." Mei Changsu looked directly into Prince Jing's eyes, and said resolutely, "I will do it. I will think of a way to rescue Wei Zheng."



## CHAPTER 122

### *Right and Wrong*

“You?” Prince Jing’s was shocked to his being, and he didn’t know how to respond. “How would you save him?”

Mei Changsu did not respond initially, but slowly walked to the eastern wall of the chamber. Suspended on that rough stone wall was an ornamental sword. He stretched out his hand to draw the blade, its gleam dazzling the eyes, and his fingers gently flicked its sharp end, its vibration sending out a clear pitch like dragons singing and tigers roaring.

Xiao Jingyan immediately understood and inhaled sharply. “Are you preparing to do it by force?”

“You are right.”

“But that is Xuanjing Bureau Prison! Its security is tighter than Sky Prison or anywhere else in the capital.”

“I know this is a bad plan, but the question is, is there really a best plan?” Mei Changsu’s expression was cold and serious, like a board made of iron. “His Majesty will not pardon Wei Zheng, which is why any great effort to obtain it from him would cause more harm, and on the contrary fulfill exactly Xia Jiang and Prince Yu’s objective of sowing discord between the both of you. In any case, this matter is something for which a price needs to be paid, no matter the cost. How can there be an absolutely foolproof solution that will result in no injury or harm? Now that the decision has been made to proceed, we would naturally need to fight a quick battle to force a quick decision as the longer this is dragged out, the deeper the thorn will plunge. Without meeting mortal danger, how can we pull this thorn out from its root?”

“If that is the case, I cannot allow Mister’s Jiangzuo Alliance to do it alone.” Prince Jing straightened his back and said sternly, “The people of my household are experienced in battle and will not avoid this matter either.”

“What His Highness says is right,” Lie Zhanying added on. “I may not be able to speak for the rest, but I will not stand by with folded arms. It is against my principles. As long as we can rescue Wei Zheng, I am ready to carry out Sir’s orders.”

“Order you to do what? Give Xia Jiang material evidence to present to His Majesty, so that he can accuse Prince Jing’s household of participating in breaking a prisoner out of jail?” Mei Changsu replied tersely with no trace of politeness. “Xuanjing Bureau has many martial arts masters. If you or anyone else from Prince Jing’s household makes this attempt, do you have absolute certainty that you would not fall into enemy hands?”

At his direct words, Lie Zhanying cannot help but turn red in the face, unable to respond for a while. Instead, it was Prince Jing who replied calmly, “Actually, as matters stand, I cannot avoid being implicated. Apart from me, who else in the capital would go to this extent of getting into a fight in order to rescue Wei Zheng? Which is why even if Xia Jiang does not eventually manage to capture my people (during the rescue attempt), all he would need to do is to mention that it was me inciting them behind the scenes, and Father Emperor will more or less believe him.”

“Actually,” Mei Changsu said, “Xia Jiang’s move is a checkmate. Even if our operations are extra meticulous and careful, as long as someone wants to rescue Wei Zheng, His Majesty will undoubtedly suspect Your Highness. Besides, taking Xuanjing Bureau by force to rescue a prisoner is a defiant move that would greatly provoke the imperial authority and dignity of the Emperor, and would inevitably arouse His Majesty’s fear of reprisal by former Chiyan subordinates. And Prince Jing, your stand of favoring the Chiyan Army is common knowledge, which is why this fear will first land on your head..... In short, your imperial favor will terminate. I am afraid Your Highness must get ready to once again go through times of being suppressed and inhibited.....”

He said it so gravely, each word and sentence precise and logical, spoken like truth, without exaggerating any point. Prince Jing’s face did not betray his thoughts, but Lie Zhanying was already dripping cold sweat, saying anxiously, “Sir, since you have analysed it so clearly this way, what other method is there to resolve this?”

Mei Changsu lowered his head, his thoughts indiscernible. After pondering for a long while, he heaved a deep sigh and said, “I will do my best.”

Xiao Jingyan had a firm and persistent character, and was often pig-headed and wilful. The more he faced adversity, the more he would not bend in spite of setbacks. Seeing Lie Zhanying’s apprehension and Mei Changsu’s exhaustion and physical weakness, his fighting spirit instead burnt all the brighter and he said resolutely, “Man proposes, Heaven disposes. Until the last moment, I will absolutely not give up.”

Mei Changsu's lips betrayed a faint smile, but he was immediately beset by an attack of dizziness, forcing him to grit his teeth. Supporting himself on the edge of the table to his left, he sat down.

At this time, Prince Jing was still standing. Lie Zhanying, who did not understand Mei Changsu's health condition, thought that his action was a breach of etiquette, thought that this Qilin prodigy, because he was deep in thought, had neglected etiquette, and with good intentions coughed slightly to alert him to it.<sup>183</sup>

Prince Jing immediately frowned at Lie Zhanying and shook his head. He walked over to Mei Changsu, sat opposite him and pouring him a cup of tea with his own hands, pushed it over to the advisor's hands.

"Sir must be tired. Go back early to rest. Although the matter should not be delayed, in the end it is not something that can be resolved in a matter of one or two days. Besides, tomorrow is the eve of the Lunar New Year. No matter how it is sped up, we can only act after the New Year. As for the imminent cold treatment after the operation is carried out, I have already been accustomed to it since early on. It is nothing I cannot withstand, so Sir does not need to rack your brains and body so urgently for my sake."

To outsiders, Prince Jing's words may be construed to be merely polite remarks (lacking genuine care), empty words spoken simply because they were appropriate, but Mei Changsu knew fully well that Jingyan disdained the use of hypocrisy to win others over. His heart was warm as he smiled and said, "Your Highness is correct. Resolving this in the shortest time possible also doesn't mean that we can do it tomorrow. A great deal of details and particulars must be planned out and carefully thought over, and we still need to wait for one person to come back."

"Wait for one person?" Prince Jing raised his eyebrows. "Who?"

"Breaching Xuanjing Bureau's dungeons to rescue someone is inherently impossible, but if this one person returns, this impossibility may perhaps become a strong possibility."

Lie Zhanying could not make sense of his abstract words, but Prince Jing had a better grasp of the whole situation than him, and after thinking it over briefly, he understood, though he was a little doubtful. After all, she was Xia Jiang's apprentice. "How sure are you that she would assist you?"

"It is not an absolute certainty." Mei Changsu closed his eyes. "But she is not helping me. Rather, she is helping her husband's comrade-in-arms. Xia Jiang's underhanded murder of Nie Feng in the past has already cost him this relationship as

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<sup>183</sup> One should not sit down in the presence of a prince, unless told to do so. Especially if the prince is still standing.

master (shifu). Because of Xia Dong's temper, she is unlikely to stubbornly cling on to this relationship and still go on being manipulated by him. We only need her to agree to lend a helping hand, then my plan will be halfway on the road to success."

"You are sure that Xia Dong will return after the New Year?"

"That should not be a problem. Every year, on the 5th day of the lunar month, Xia Dong will go without fail to Gu Shan to hold a memorial ceremony for Nie Feng. I have sent people to take note of her whereabouts. Based to the direction of her movements, she will enter the capital in two to three days."

Xiao Jingyan hesitated then slowly asked, "Do you, Sir, intend to personally go and persuade Xia Dong?"

"Yes."

"However, I believe it is inappropriate for you to go."

Mei Changsu turned his head, a little taken aback. This was definitely not the first time Prince Jing had raised an opposing opinion, but before, he had only countered as to how certain matters should or shouldn't be handled, and never raised an objection to overrule a specific method of action.

Because plotting, scheming and eloquence had always been Mei Changsu's strengths, Prince Jing had always only complied and heeded his advice.

"I merely feel," Prince Jing said, half rising from his seat, "You is now my advisor, and although it has not been made public, at least Xia Dong is aware of it. As an advisor, even though you want to meet her in order to stir her emotions for past events, to persuade her to support a righteous cause, I am afraid that it will be difficult for you to fully convince her. After all.....she is a member of Xuanjing Bureau, and she has all along been used to first viewing others with suspicion. If you appear personally, she will first be reminded of the faction fights. Perhaps I am afraid that it will not be so easy for her to believe you are merely looking for her in order to rescue Wei Zheng."

"That is also true," Mei Changsu laughed faintly at the back of his throat, its tone carrying some trace of self-mockery. "How could I, an advisor who stirs up wind and clouds (to cause stormy and unstable situations), take hold of ties of comradeship to advise her impartially, for naturally, credibility will be somewhat lacking."

Prince Jing glanced at him, saying sternly, "I judge the matter on its own merits. There is no other meaning. I hope you do not overthink it."

“Your Highness’s words are very sensible. I have taken it too much to heart.” Mei Changsu’s smile did not change. “That means that Your Highness’s desire is to go personally?”

“That is correct.”

Mei Changsu moved the teacup around in a circle as if he was pondering.

“Thirteen years ago, at the heart of that massacre, she lost her husband, I lost my elder brother and best friend. We can both understand each other’s pain and suffering. Facing me, someone on the inside, familiar with this old affair, compared to facing you, Sir, an outsider, it will be easier for me to evoke emotions of the past. At least Xia Dong is unlikely to suspect my sincerity in rescuing Wei Zheng, and instead, she would most likely be conflicted right from the start.” Even though Prince Jing was still explaining, through his manner of speaking, one can tell that he had already made up his mind. “This matter of Wei Zheng, Sir does not want me to act too much on it personally, I understand you mean well. But the heart of the matter is, to want to rescue someone, to want to exonerate the old case, to want to fight for the throne, all of it comes back to me. Naturally, I should be the one making the most effort, go through the most hardships, not depending on others for everything, for them to serve me, isn’t that so?”

If he had been any other advisor, the most appropriate response at this moment would be to say something like “honored to be able to serve Your Highness” or words to this effect, but Mei Changsu followed his first instincts and intuition in the spur of the moment, feeling comforted and gratified, he said, “When Your Highness was at war, you were also of such temperament, willing to fight bravely in the forefront, unwilling to be shielded by others, even more unwilling to redirect difficult-to-defeat adversaries to other people; even if the odds were great, you would still insist on fighting together with everyone else, cannot.....”

Lie Zhanying who had been standing and keeping watch quietly by the side could not help but interject at this point to say, “That is exactly how it is. His Highness is exactly of this temperament. How does Mister Su know?”

Mei Changsu was startled, and he knew in his heart that he had made a slip of tongue, so he quickly replied “All under heaven know of His Highness’s military might. I have also heard many people talk about His Highness’s heroic deeds in the battlefield.”

Prince Jing also initially felt rather surprised by Mei Changsu’s words, but after giving it some thought, he realized that for this Qilin prodigy, choosing a master to serve was not the same as mustering the troops or appointing an officer to a task, just go with whoever was selected. Naturally in selecting a master to support as the future monarch, he would have investigated in detail, so his awareness of Prince Jing’s own military prowess was not at all surprising. Therefore he did not think too much about

it, merely acknowledged it and said “I will prepare to meet Xia Dong personally, even though it is risky. Whether the odds of success are large or small, can you handle it, Sir?”

Mei Changsu himself knew that it would be more effective for Prince Jing to personally act as the mediator, and he believed that even if Xia Dong did not agree she wouldn't sell Prince Jing out. They just needed to iron out the details for the time of meeting in order ensure comprehensiveness and utmost secrecy, that is all, so having no other objections at the moment, he nodded his head in agreement.

After reaching an agreement on the general direction to take, Mei Changsu looked even more tired and frail. Prince Jing also had to get ready to participate in the next day's year-end ceremony to offer sacrifices. So both of them spoke no further, after briefly taking leave of each other, parted ways.

Returning to the bedroom, Mei Changsu no longer had any strength and immediately went to bed to rest. Fei Liu, who had been instructed beforehand, pulled the bell. Physician Yan quickly rushed over to examine Mei Changsu thoroughly, and when he reckoned that he was satisfied with Mei Changsu's condition, ordered him to drink down a final decoction of herbal medicine before sleeping, and then he withdrew to leave.

Except for Fei Liu who also settled indoors to keep watch at night, the other attendants had received orders two days before to move out, so the interior became peaceful and calm soon after Physician Yan left. Fei Liu lay on his own small bed, his upturned body wrapped tightly in a quilt, just about to fall asleep when he happened to raise his head and catch sight of Mei Changsu's unexpectedly opened eyes staring at the embroidered pattern on the bedcovers, which Fei Liu found odd.

“Sleep!” The youth said in a loud voice.

“Alright,” Mei Changsu quickly responded, obediently closing his eyes.

But Fei Liu fixed his eyes on Mei Changsu's face, and after watching him for a while, refused to let the matter drop but instead, he got up sullenly, leapt to the bedside, saying once again loudly, “Sleep!”

“Sleeping already!”

“Not sleeping!”

“Eyes are closed....”

“Eyes closed, not sleeping!”

Mei Changsu forced a smile, sighed and opened his eyes. Grabbing hold of Fei Liu's hand, he said coaxingly, "Su gege cannot fall asleep at the moment, Fei Liu go to sleep first alright?"

"Why?"

"Fei Liu, not all things have a reason...."

"Why?" The youth persisted in asking this although he may not truly understand even if he got an answer.

Mei Changsu watched him calmly for a while, then slowly sat up and draped a cover over his shoulders. Leaning against the head of the bed, he said softly, "Alright then, we shall have a chat."

"Chat?"

"Ng. Chat."

Fei Liu was quite happy at this, his gloomy and cold expression dispersing considerably. He crossed his legs and sat on Mei Changsu's bed.

"Actually, Su gege was wondering, tonight's decision....in the end was it a wrong decision....." Mei Changsu's gaze was unfocused as he looked at Fei Liu, as if in talking to him he was also talking to himself. "If I was a qualified advisor, I should have done all I could to prevent Jingyan from rescuing Wei Zheng. Because I know perfectly well we should not do it, but to do it, maybe you could call it courage and at the same time extreme foolishness. Wei Zheng is, without a doubt, Xia Jiang's one trick to kill. As long as we ignore him, he would have no other tricks, no more room for manoeuvre. At this time however, any response given to him will be foolish, but we have no choice but to be fools this one time...."

Fei Liu did not understand what he heard, but he looked at Mei Changsu very calmly, his pair of eyes seem to be as pure as crystal that does not contain any impurities, making the chaos in one's heart and mind to gradually settle.

"Jingyan is with his troops all year round. For his manner of person, ties of comradeship is more important than anything else. These ties cannot be understood by Prince Yu or those of his ilk. Only those who have been to the battlefield together with fellow comrades, fighting bravely shoulder to shoulder, will understand how valuable it is....." Mei Changsu murmured these words vaguely.

"Jingyan himself is like this, and most of his trusted aides are also like this, which is why it is unlikely for anyone else to dissuade him from rescuing Wei Zheng, even if it would stir up the Emperor's rage. At this time, as his advisor, I should be weighing

out the advantages and disadvantages for him, make him go after the advantages and avoid harm, to strive for the best outcome, but yet.....”

Mei Changsu’s voice grew gradually softer. Fei Liu crooked his head and drew closer to him, blinking his eyes.

But Xiao Jingyan’s only advisor was also incompetent. He was also confined by the past, he also had the same weakness as Xiao Jingyan, cared about this sentiment between fellow comrades, which is why he could not prevent this erroneous decision, even to the extent that he himself would also step into this wrong path without looking back.

“Fei Liu, I have let Jingyan down. I once told him that having only me for an advisor is enough, but in fact I am basically not a real advisor.” Mei Changsu caressed away the hair on the youth’s forehead. Even though he knew fully well that Fei Liu did not understand, he still said these words seriously to him, “If I fail this time, then Jingyan’s future will be done for. The path I have pushed him to walk will be robbed away by this road we take. I think it is because I myself am fundamentally incapable of abandoning this. I did not firmly set him straight on the matter, leave him no room to manoeuvre. This is where I have fallen short.”

“Will not fail.” Fei Liu said in a resolute and decisive tone. “Can!”

Mei Changsu started, and after a good while he unexpectedly laughed, laughed until he bent over at the waist, panting and coughing until he curled up like a ball. It was quite a while before he lifted his head up again, patting Fei Liu’s shoulder with some energy. “That’s right, what you said is correct. We only need to not fail, then everything will be alright. We absolutely cannot fail, right?”

Fei Liu pondered for a while and replied “Don’t have.”

This time Mei Changsu really could not make the connection and was dumbfounded. “What do you mean “don’t have”?”

“You said it, don’t have.”

Mei Changsu fixed his gaze, thinking carefully for a long while. He leaned back, relaxed the tense muscles on the small of his back and threw out a long breath, “Indeed, in the world perhaps there is fundamentally nothing that is absolutely right. In my own heart, I had never hesitated over whether or not I ought to rescue Wei Zheng. This shows that it is not a wrong thing. Since this is right as far as I am concerned, it should be so for Jingyan as well. We cannot possibly turn completely into people who can cast aside the past, so what we can do today, is to use all our capabilities to the best we can, to try hard not to fail, nothing more.....”

“Don’t fail!” Fei Liu’s eyes gleamed, his tone clear and firm.



Mei Changsu looked at this youth who was like his younger brother and smiled gently. “Thank you, Fei Liu. Su gege is actually not as clever as you, more often than not, think too much, too convolutedly. Speaking with you, my own heart and mind have become at ease and brightened up. You are truly my.....most indispensable arm...<sup>184</sup>...”

Fei Liu carefully took hold of Mei Changsu’s arm between his fingers, then touched his own, his expression puzzled, causing Mei Changsu to laugh out loud before ordering the youth to hurry back to his bed.

“Sleep. Tomorrow will be the new year!”

Like all kids, the Lunar New Year is something Fei Liu looks forward to, a time to be happy, so he immediately forgot his earlier question and quickly slipped into his quilt, reclining completely.

The night was peaceful. The heart, however, whether or not it could be as peaceful, cannot be known. But whatever the case might be, when all was said and done, all the agitation and tension from the day’s ruthlessness and deceit, would each have to be manifested in turn.

Tomorrow will be the new year.

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<sup>184</sup> Most indispensable aide. But I’ve used the literal translation of “arm” here else Fei Liu’s response would’t have made sense.

## CHAPTER 123

### *The Beginning*

For the Great Liang Imperial Court, the year that had just passed was one that was filled with many shocking changes emerging one after the other, beginning with the case of the bloody murder of the eunuch, and ending with the year end sacrificial ceremony.

The illustrious and triumphant Marquis Ning's household had caved in. The Crown Prince had his position as heir to the throne abolished, after having held it for 10 years, although this abolishment had been a relatively peaceful one and was not followed by a bloody purge by the sword. However, when all was said and done, one could conclude that the peace and stability of the imperial government had already been broken. Practically all of the officials branded as being part of the Crown Prince's faction believed that Prince Yu had not begun operations to purge them because of Prince Jing's sudden meteoric rise, but once his hands were free, anyone who had not managed to escape would meet a bad end.

So for these people, Prince Jing Xiao Jingyan was their lifeline. Even if he had made it clear that he would not form his own faction, allowing this prince to take the throne would be better compared to Prince Yu, since there were no old enmities.

Due to his conscientiousness and the care he paid to every detail at the sacrificial ceremony, Prince Jing gave everyone the impression that he was of a firm and stable character. Those weary of the many years of power struggle, who were disappointed in the current state of affairs at court, the courtiers who sincerely desired to serve the country and the people, had also more or less placed their hopes on him.

These two types of courtiers added together – those who had supported the Crown Prince, and those who were sincere – meant that the strength of support for Prince Jing was already in fact not weaker than Prince Yu. More importantly, this strong support was not apparent but hidden, so much so that Prince Yu could not counter it the same way he had done with the Crown Prince previously, that is, by launching an offensive against this or that member of Prince Jing's faction before the Emperor. Being thus powerless to make a move, Prince Yu was therefore forced to pin all his hopes on Xia Jiang. Just as it was impossible for the officials in the Crown Prince's faction to switch loyalties and support him, Xia Jiang, the mastermind behind the

Chiyan case, could never stand by to see Prince Jing make his bid for the throne without doing anything.

On that matter, Prince Yu sought solace in the fact that Xia Jiang did not let him down. The mighty and unflappable Director of Xuanjing Bureau seemed to have ruthlessly taken a firm grip of Prince Jing's Achilles heel with his first move.

"But is Xia Jiang absolutely certain that Prince Jing would definitely act?" In Prince Yu's Mansion, Qin Banruo couldn't help asking this question. "Wei Zheng is a traitor after all. Even if Prince Jing is obstinate and impetuous, wouldn't Mei Changsu also find a way to hold him back? The advantages and disadvantages of this matter are really too imbalanced!"

"To be honest, I am also unable to understand it," Prince Yu shrugged. "But Xia Jiang seems to be very confident. He said that for some people, no matter how much one tries, there are many things that are in one's core nature that cannot be erased."

"But Mei Changsu..."

"I had also mentioned Mei Changsu to Xia Jiang, but he feels that even if Mei Changsu has an ability as large as the heavens, he is still only an advisor. Prince Jing is not one to easily allow an advisor to influence the decision. The Chiyan case is also the deepest thorn in Prince Jing's heart, so this time Mei Changsu will not be able to hold him back." Prince Yu smiled maliciously. "If that Qilin prodigy opposes too intensely, perhaps the both of them will fall out because of this. Did you hear that on the first day of the lunar month, Mei Changsu went to Prince Jing's mansion to pay a new year call and left before the time it takes to burn one joss stick?<sup>185</sup> It is evident that this is a case of "when views are irreconcilable, it is a waste of breath to continue discussions."<sup>186</sup>\*

Hopefully this is so," Qin Banruo smiled with some effort, and did not put forward more doubts. In those years, when the Chiyan case first erupted, though she was still young, she had already started becoming aware of such matters. She was very clear beyond a shred of doubt about Xia Jiang's schemes & methods, but deep within her heart, she still believed that the reason it was possible to defeat the household of Chiyan's Commander-in-Chief and Prince Qi all those years ago, was because the true mastermind behind the whole operations was her shifu, that unsurpassed talent, that intriguing and unparalleled princess of a vanquished nation. She was not as confident of Xia Jiang as Prince Yu was, not after he had lost to the first rate, unrivalled think tank, Princess Xuanji.

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<sup>185</sup> anything between 5-15 mins, definitely no more than 30.

<sup>186</sup> this is a well-known phrase I decided to leave whole rather than translate into an appropriate phrase in English

But the Qin Banruo of today dared not voice her misgivings as she would have before. During Jiangzuo Alliance's counterattack, they had eliminated almost all the talented girls in her network, so nowadays she can only be regarded as an ordinary advisor, just one of the subordinates serving Prince Yu's household. Besides being a beautiful woman whose looks captivated Prince Yu more than the others, she didn't possess any other advantage, so as a consequence she needed to be more careful with her behavior. Moreover, Prince Yu had lately been in an unfavorable mood and was easily agitated, thus he was not as lenient and indulgent towards her as before.

"I went to Xuanjing Bureau yesterday to take a look at Wei Zheng. He seems to be the sort who possesses a very strong moral character. In order to prevent him from taking his own life, his four limbs had been secured. Even his mouth was stuffed with a round sack so I was unable to speak with him." Prince Yu narrowed his eyes, his expression a little baffled. "He is in such a desperate situation, yet he could still glare at me without the slightest hint of fear nor acknowledgment of defeat. This traitor is truly too arrogant and completely without reason. I simply cannot understand it."

Qin Banruo was also unable to understand it but as a woman, she could not possibly bear any ill-will towards a man with such a determined strength of character, so she merely echoed "Yes" softly in agreement then got up to pour Prince Yu a cup of tea.

"But after Xia Jiang became aware that I had been to Xuanjing Bureau, he was a little angry," Prince Yu took the freshly poured cup of hot tea and continued, "He said that he was not too keen on his three apprentices finding out that he and I are in touch. He is right on this point – I had blundered."

"That Your Highness was able to so boldly acknowledge your mistake and modify your words so adeptly, it is indeed the true mark of a prince." Qin Banruo smiled sweetly and charmingly, saying, "Xuanjing Bureau's one inviolable rule throughout each successive dynasty is to not involve themselves in faction fights. Thus, each Xuanjing envoy acts independently. Although Xia Jiang is the chief, he cannot brazenly do whatever he likes, so if Your Highness should have any need to deliver information to Xia Jiang in future, it would still be better to go through Banruo's Fourth Sister."

Prince Yu looked at her, his expression turning cold. "With regard to that Fourth Sister, what is that all about? Is she unwilling to serve me? Every time I make her do something, she declines with all sorts of excuses. If not for the fact that she and Xia Jiang are old acquaintances and I clearly need to let her be the go-between, I wouldn't have condoned her impudence long ago."

Met with his reproach, the pretty dimpled smile that was pretty as a flower froze on Qin Banruo's face. When she had first gone to beg Fourth Sister's help to make a breakthrough with Tong Lu, the latter had stated explicitly that this would be the last time she would get involved in such matters. As expected, Tong Lu was unable to

escape the ties of love that that brilliant Xuanji follower had wound around him and he was ensnared. Qin Banruo had pretended to threaten Fourth Sister's life in order to force Tong Lu to reveal Miaoyin House's secrets, but unfortunately they were a step too late, and did not achieve any significant results. Even though that was a disappointment, it was during this time that she unexpectedly discovered that Fourth Sister also harboured true feelings for Tong Lu. In a sudden brain wave, she used this as a bargaining chip to coerce her fellow Xuanji follower to get in touch with Xia Jiang, and only after she had achieved what Qin Banruo required would she be allowed to escape to faraway places with Tong Lu. But promises extracted using such underhanded tactics were unreliable and Qin Banruo was unable to exert much control over her Fourth Sister to achieve the outcome she desired, which was why when she was confronted with Prince Yu's displeasure, she could only remain silent.

"Isn't your Fourth Sister very close to that village boy who was formerly under Mei Changsu? The next time she delays my affairs, cut off one of her lover's fingers and let her see. That boy is in our hands, what else can she do?"

Qin Banruo understood that even though her Fourth Sister appeared gentle on the surface, her temper could be especially fierce when she was pushed into a corner, so she did not dare to agree but could only attempt to soothe him with a soft voice, "I understand that Fourth Sister has a good deal of faults, but Xia Jiang is oversuspicious and does not trust anyone else. No matter how unappealing my Fourth Sister is, she is after all a former Xuanji follower. Even if she leaves in the future and goes away, she would definitely not betray us. Please be magnanimous and be a little forgiving towards her, Your Highness."

"What else is there for me to say? You and Xia Jiang both trust her." Prince Yu, who knew very well how to control others, slowly relaxed his tone, "When you are free, advise her, let her know the current state of affairs."

"Yes." Qin Banruo lowered her head meekly in response. Seeing her black hair covering her cheeks like clouds, her graceful eyelashes sweeping downwards delicately, Prince Yu could not help but to be aroused. He leaned closer, smelled the faint whiff of her fragrance, and stretching out his hand to encircle her waist, he pulled her to him.

Qin Banruo did not struggle at all. This did not mean that she actually intended to give in to Prince Yu today, but rather, before she could object, a warm voice sounded from the outside.

"Your Highness, can I come in?"

Prince Yu frowned and let go of Qin Banruo, then straightened his jacket slightly and replied, "Come in."

The brocade enclosed carved wooden door slowly pushed open. Princess Consort Yu walked in gracefully, and catching sight of Qin Banruo, immediately displayed her usual gentle smile as she said, “Is Miss Qin also here?”

“I greet you Princess Consort,” Qin Banruo hurriedly stepped forward to make her salutations, but a hand raised her up just as she was going down on her knees.

“You and I are sisters, so there is no need for you to behave like an outsider,” Princess Consort Yu smiled politely as she said this, then turned to Prince Yu, “I didn’t know that Your Highness was discussing matters with Miss Qin in the study and came without permission. Please do not take offense, Your Highness.”

“What are you saying?” Prince Yu said reproachfully. “You are my wife and can come into my study any time you want to without a need to ask for permission beforehand. What’s more, Miss Qin and I were not discussing any important matters.”

Qin Banruo immediately said tactfully, “Yes, we have more or less finished our discussion. Banruo will ask for leave to withdraw first. Please excuse me Princess Consort.”

Princess Consort Yu beamed with happiness and politely walked Qin Banruo out before returning to sit at Prince Yu’s side.

“How is the situation in the imperial palace?” Prince Yu asked.

“I heard the Empress say that Concubine Jing is still very much being doted on by the Emperor. Among all the concubines, she received the most gifts at the annual banquet. But Prince Jing did not enter the palace again after paying his new year respects on the first day (of the lunar new year), not even once these past few days.”

“Could it be.....that he is still trying hard to plan something.....” Prince Yu said, thinking aloud, “Is it so urgent that it cannot even wait out the New Year celebrations?”

“There is one more important matter,” Princess Consort Yu drew close to her husband and whispered into his ear, “The Empress received a secret report saying that Concubine Jing had set up a memorial tablet for the late Concubine Chen in the small room by the family worship hall and often offers sacrifice to it.<sup>187</sup>”

“What?” Prince Yu leapt up all of a sudden, at first stumped for words. After he got over his shock, he began to rub both his hands together excitedly. “This is a big leverage! Concubine Jing is really bringing about her own destruction! She is

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<sup>187</sup> Chinese practice of ancestral veneration by burning joss sticks or making offerings as a sign of respect to the deceased

currently Prince Jing's key pillar of support. Once she falls, Prince Jing will suffer great damage and no longer be a cause for worry! How did the Empress handle it?"

"The Empress knows that this is no trifling matter and did not dare act hastily for fear of "beating the grass to alert the snake". She is waiting a few days to look for an opportune moment, in order to ensure that she hits the mark with one strike."

"Good! Good!" Prince Yu walked up and down the room a few times in his delight. "The Empress's method is very sound. I think even if Concubine Jing does not die for this, she will at the very least lose some skin. This woman is really too foolish, just like her son!"

Seeing her husband so happy swept away the clouds of melancholy that had been hanging over her these past few days, and Princess Consort Yu smiled along with him, saying as she stood up, "I think there will be good news by today. Please be at peace these few days Your Highness. We are still in the midst of the Lunar New Year celebrations and still need to receive many guests. We also need to go around to pay our royal uncles and elders a visit. It has long since stopped snowing outside. Shall I arrange a carriage for Your Highness?"

"You are really my good wife," Prince Yu pulled her into an embrace, intimately caressing the side of her smooth cheek and said teasingly, "When you have accomplished this, I guarantee that there will be no imperial concubine whom I will favor above you."

Hidden away from Prince Yu's gaze, the smile Princess Consort Yu usually displayed suddenly disappeared and her facial expression turned sorrowful. Stretching out her hands to tightly embrace her husband, she murmured, "The words Your Highness said today, you must definitely remember in future...."

"Definitely." When had this suddenly good-humored Prince Yu ever taken care to observe and understand a woman's sensitive mind? As soon as he released Princess Consort Yu from his embrace, he hurried out, preparing to make his new year visitations while telling himself that he was still high-spirited and full of vigor, undeterred by the rise of Prince Jing.<sup>188</sup>

The snow that had been falling since the 3rd day of the Lunar New Year had indeed stopped. As Prince Yu's custom-built yellow-canopied four-wheel box carriage moved along the capital city's broad streets, the luxurious saddles adorning the bodies of fine horses dazzled in the frail golden light of the sun, absolutely eye-catching in its conspicuousness. It was too bad that there were too few people on the

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<sup>188</sup> This is probably a less than accurate translation but modified for readability. Literally translated: "his vigor was not suppressed by the rise of Prince Jing's sparrow". I took the sparrow to mean "small and insignificant".

streets in either direction to pay courtesy to this royal procession, so few that Prince Yu felt a little surprised.

But he very quickly understood the reason behind this.

The Capital Patrol was normally in charge of guarding the city gates, and would get involved in maintaining the peace only under emergency situations. Today, however, they filled the streets. Not only had they set up checkpoints to guard all the capital's vital routes, they also had armed troops patrolling all areas – outside the households of nobles, high officials and other such important people, as well as government offices. It was a large display of force, as if facing a formidable foe.

Prince Yu was suspicious, and just as he was about to send men to inquire on the situation, the subordinate he had appointed to keep tab on everything that was happening in the capital caught up with him and came over to report everything to him in careful detail.

It turned out that a few bandits roaming outside had taken advantage of the new year celebrations to sneak into the capital to pull off a grand heist. The night before, they had broken into the homes of several high-ranking officials and nobles in succession, stealing jewelry and treasure. Even the fire phoenix beads in Bao Guang Pavillion, a tribute from Ye Guo<sup>189</sup> had been stolen. The Emperor had flown into a rage after receiving the news this morning. Holding the Capital Patrol guard in charge of the evening curfew responsible for neglecting his duty, he had immediately commanded Prince Jing to take him to task. Prince Jing had calmly acknowledged the mistake, assuring the Emperor that he would do all he could to investigate closely, capture the bandits and recover the lost treasure. This was why the Capital Patrol guards came out in full force today and completely cordoned off the city on this scale. It was said that the Emperor was very pleased with the way Prince Jing carried this out, “with the power of a thunderbolt and the speed of lightning”.

Although Prince Yu's carriage was not on the Capital Patrol's inspection list, observing the Capital Patrol's operations all along his journey made him very uncomfortable. But he was very astute and sharp, and after going past a few royal mansions, he realized that the Capital Patrol had actually deployed the bulk of their force in certain districts. The districts surrounding Xuanjing Bureau.

Upon this realization, Prince Yu felt a burning sensation rise in his stomach, some excitement yet also mixed in with a bit of anxiousness.

Xia Jiang's prediction was on the mark. As expected, Prince Jing was preparing to act. Under the pretext of arresting the perpetrators of the grand heist, using the imperial order as a cover to mobilize the troops without restraint in a reasonable and compliant manner – it was indeed a clever trick. It was just too bad....

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<sup>189</sup> a small country along the Silk Road



“Even if you were Sun Wukong, you would also not be able to escape my Five Finger Mountain.<sup>190</sup>” Prince Yu said silently, gritting his teeth, his entire expression overshadowed by extreme ruthlessness. Looking at him, one could not be sure if he was cursing Prince Jing or to drum up enthusiasm in his hollow heart.

Just at that moment, hoofbeats could be heard clearly from the crossroads, their sound carrying particularly well on the especially quiet streets.

Prince Yu raised the thick cotton curtain covering the side window and looked out. He saw a fine purebred horse sporting an embroidered bridle and a magnificent saddle dashing down the mouth of the street with the troops looking on, before turning southwards. The rider astride the horse was clothed from head to toe in fashionable new clothes, with an embroidered lapel and a jade belt. Dazzling and ostentatious, he carried himself with the confident and distinguished air of nobility, and he was as pompous as a wild honey bee that had just gathered fresh nectar.<sup>191</sup>

“It’s that kid....Who would have thought that in the whole capital, he would be the most happy-go-lucky.” Looking at Yan Yujin’s disappearing back, Prince Yu released the window curtain and sighed softly with feeling, reflecting his complex state of mind.

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<sup>190</sup> This is a reference to a place originating from the Legends of the Monkey King where the Monkey King was trapped by Buddha in the palm of his hands, caged in by his five fingers.

<sup>191</sup> this should have been literally translated to “newly picked fresh flowers” but since bees gather nectar, I thought “fresh nectar” would make a more appropriate translation

## CHAPTER 124

### *Hidden Hands*

That most happy-go-lucky Yan Yujin who had caused Prince Yu to sigh was actually not as relaxed and easygoing as he had displayed. This noble young master with the fashionable new clothes, embroidered lapel and magnificent saddle, galloping through Jinling's streets astride a fine purebred horse, had not long ago just accepted an assignment from his father, an assignment that wasn't very dangerous but yet not easily accomplished.

On the matter of Yan Que getting involved again in the affairs of the court, Yujin was already well aware earlier, but this was confirmed by his father in person during the eve of the Lunar New Year. That night, after completing the sacrifices to the ancestors in the ancestral hall, both father and son returned to the warmth of the small side room and sat around the fire drinking wine, talking freely and uninhibitedly almost all night long.

Yan Yujin had only heard Mei Changsu speak of the unstable events of Yan Que's youth in a general manner, but this time, it was even more meaningful to hear it directly from the person involved in those events, as he recalled the past. In those years, there was uninhibited affection, there were bold and upright leaders, passionate ideals, great sorrow and tragedy, there were so many people whose memories needed to be cherished, and there were so many things that were difficult to forget. More than ten years of decay and oppression could not change the bold and passionate nature. Raise the head and drink away the pain, throw away the cup and whisper softly.<sup>192</sup> Although this old Lord Marquis's heroic spirit had long since whittled away, his face seemed to glow with health and radiate vigor as he spoke of past events, and he did not look in the least bit old and tired.

Yan Yujin decided he liked his father like this, a father who was full of life and in high spirits.

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<sup>192</sup> This was a difficult phrase to translate in context. Even my Chinese speaking friend found it challenging. So this is just my interpretation of it. I almost dropped it but decided not to because it sounded so wistful!

“Yu‘er,” Yan Que stroked his son’s shoulder, looking straight into his eyes, “I dislike faction fights because they are too repulsive, consuming so much that is beautiful and good. I also dislike Mei Changsu. He is too cunning, too unfathomable and impenetrable, which is why I was only willing to support him in some matters previously. But this time, I have decided to support him wholeheartedly, at any cost, because of this decision between him and Prince Jing.....it has truly shocked me. Even though they know fully well that this is a trap, with such obvious advantages and disadvantages, they still want to attempt the rescue, for the sake of nothing more than old ties of affection and justice.....I have not seen such foolish yet at the same time such courageous and bold men in a long time. If I don’t help them now, in future, how will I face my departed friends in the underworld? Yu‘er, do you understand my thinking?”

“I understand.” Yan Yujin held back his usually exuberant expression, and the eyes reflecting the blazing stove fire were especially quiet and deep. “Dad, don’t worry, your son is a descendant of the Yan family, and understands loyalty, and filial piety. Regarding the current situation in court, your son’s view is actually similar to Dad’s. It’s just that I do not know much about Prince Jing.....but since Dad and Su xiong are willing to be employed for his purpose, he must be outstanding.”

“Prince Jing had followed Prince Qi closely since he was a child and he has inherited Prince Qi’s character and the way he dealt with the country’s administrative matters. I am still confident in him from this aspect. But his temperament is quite unlike his brother. He is much more inflexible and pig headed, and lacks poise. You are young, perhaps you don’t really remember Prince Qi.....Jingyu.....so very much like his mother.....”

Regarding youthful infatuations and the feelings between himself and Concubine Chen, Yan Que’s words were especially vague when he recalled the past events. But Yan Yujin had a perceptive mind. He sensed the conflict within his father as he watched him muttering to himself, but he was unable to tell if his father was sighing with sorrow or regret.

Jingyu.....Yujin.....was the connection between these two names a coincidence, or was it done subconsciously? Yan Yujin did not ask, but as a child who cared deeply about his father in his heart, he could not resist asking the other question.

“Dad, what about me? Am I also like my mother?”

“You.....” Yan Que returned his glance, taking a good look at his son, his eyes revealing a loving expression, “You are like me when I was young. But when you are my age, I hope you do not become the person I am today.”

“Dad, you’re very good now. Your heart is not cold and your person is not old. What is there that is not good about you?”

“You, child, have a honeyed tongue.” Yan Que smiled and got up, pouring his son another full cup of wine.

“Actually, I have not forgotten the past. Uncle Lin, Concubine Chen niang niang and also Prince Qi. I remember a little bit,” Yan Yujin raised his chin as he recollected, “Prince Qi treated us children very well. If we asked him anything, he would always explain clearly, and when he brought us out for horse-riding and archery, he also took care of us completely, unlike Lin Shu gege, who would get impatient very quickly, and complain that we were slow and stupid, frequently taking us off our horses and tossing us into the carriage for the wet nurse to look after, before running to the front on his own....I remember this most clearly!”

Yan Que cannot help but smile, but his smile soon faded away, “Xiao Shu.....ah.....the most unfortunate is him....”

Yan Yujin could see his father becoming sad again and quickly said, “Dad, has Su xiong mentioned how he intends for you to help him?”

“He had more or less explained it once. My role on that day would mainly be to draw Xia Jiang out and secretly arrange for courtiers to exonerate Prince Jing after the incident. Nothing difficult.”

What Yan Que said might have sounded simple, but it was in actual fact not easy at all, especially in dealing with the latter. He needed to be extremely accurate in his judgment and very careful with his words and actions. Even the slightest deviation would produce the opposite of the desired results.

“Dad, are you sure?”

“With effort, one can achieve anything.” Yan Que’s face was suddenly arrogant. “Your father has been observing these court intrigues impartially all these years. My sense of judgment (of the situation and people in court) is still accurate.”

“Is there anything your son can help you with??”

“Mei Changsu mentioned he wanted to ask for your help, but he asked me to ask you first. If you don’t want to, don’t force yourself.”

Yan Yujin smiled bitterly, saying, “This Su xiong....how could I be unwilling when this is already how matters stand? What is required?”

“He didn’t say. I need to meet with him again, and will ask him then.” Yan Que firmly grabbed hold of his son’s shoulders, saying, “Mei Changsu promised he will not let you do anything dangerous, I will also not take chances.”

“Dad, it’s ok....”

“You might think it’s okay, but your dad still has his concerns. Listen to me. I have already wronged you all these years.”

Yan Yujin was unaccustomed to such tenderness from his father. His nose felt tinglingly and he raised his head to drink his cup of wine, suppressing the turbulence in his heart.

That night both father and son drank one and a half jars of wine before collapsing, each learning for the first time the other’s tremendous ability to hold his liquor. This drunkenness lasted until the late morning. When they woke up, they noticed a youth with fine features and a cold expression squatting before them, staring at them. As soon as he saw them open their eyes, he shoved a letter at them and said in a loud voice, “Burn it!”, after which he disappeared.

Although the drunkenness had not passed, Yan Que was still sufficiently sober and did not immediately burn the letter as commanded so succinctly by the youth. Instead, he first opened it to read its contents.

It was precisely because of this letter that Yan Yujin let himself loose on Jinling’s streets, in full ostentation, on the 4th day of the Lunar New Year, as he went to call on his friends, before finally arriving at the front of Prince Ji’s mansion.

Known for his straightforward manner and fine wine, the famous royal uncle, Prince Ji, was Yan Yujin’s good friend in spite of their great difference in age. As soon as he saw his young friend, Prince Ji blossomed like a flower and hurried eagerly to the main hall to receive his guest, summoning all his musicians and singing girls to perform a new tune that he had taught them.

But despite his generous hospitality, Yan Yujin was rather inattentive, having just gone through three rounds of drinks earlier. For the sake of politeness, however, he still tried to act like he was enjoying the performance but unfortunately his eyes gave him away.

“Your ears, they have been spoiled by Miaoyin House,” Prince Ji said sullenly. “You are obviously looking down on my household’s simple ballad singing.”

“Your Highness, aren’t you also like that?” Yan Yujin waved his hand at him, not taking this to heart at all. “I don’t think I’m the one most crazy over Miss Gong Yu playing the qin?<sup>193</sup>

“Alas.....,” Prince Ji sighed. “Such a pity. A place like Miaoyin House, how could they have conspired with the bandits.....”

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<sup>193</sup> musical instrument similar to the guzheng

“Cheh,<sup>194</sup> you actually believe this.....” Yan Yujin blurted it out without thinking, then suddenly aware of what he had just said, swallowed the rest of his words and raised his glass to propose a toast.

Prince Ji immediately understood. Without batting an eyelid, he followed suit, throwing back two cups of wine. After dismissing the servants, he moved to Yan Yujin’s side and asked softly, “Are you trying to say that Miaoyin House did not actually conspire with the bandits?”

“Conspire with what bandits?” Yan Yujin retorted, “Are those bandits well-known? Does the Ministry of Justice have a case file on them? Who is the main whistleblower? Is there any evidence? This matter has absolutely no foundation in fact.”

“Since they had been wrongly accused, why did the people of Miaoyin House run away to evade blame?”

“That’s very simple. They may have been wrongly accused of collaborating with bandits, but not of offending someone. After offending someone whom you should never offend, if you don’t run, aren’t you just waiting to die?”

Prince Ji suddenly flared up in indignation and said angrily, “Under the Son of Heaven,<sup>195</sup> who can be so insolent?”

Yan Yujin shot him a glance and lowered his voice. “Your Highness, do you not know who went to arrest them that day?”

“As a matter of fact, I heard that it was not the Ministry of Justice but the Imperial Court of Justice....” At this point, Prince Ji suddenly understood. The Imperial Court of Justice’s Deputy, Zhu Yue, was Prince Yu’s brother-in-law. He had always been known for his lecherous nature, and if he tried to seize Gong Yu under the pretext of his brother-in-law’s orders, it would actually not be considered an unusual matter.

“Now you understand. There is nothing Gong Yu can do about it. She just intends to hide for a while, to see if there is any other way around it.”

Prince Ji raised his eyebrows and suddenly pointed his finger at Yan Yujin, smiling strangely.

“Your Highness, what is it?”

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<sup>194</sup> vocal expression similar to “tsk tsk”

<sup>195</sup> the Emperor is also known as the Son of Heaven. But it also refers to the land immediately under the jurisdiction of the Emperor, specifically, the capital city.

“How do you know what Miss Gong Yu is thinking?” Prince Ji smiled wickedly. “Speak, was it you who hid her away?”

“Me? Me? How could I possibly have?” Yan Yujin was startled and couldn’t help stammering. “Your Highness, don’t, don’t simply say such things....”

“Guilty guilty,” Prince Ji laughed heartily and continued to pursue it, unwilling to let it go. “Little Yujin, tell me the truth, is it very serious? I am also quite worried for Miss Gong Yu. Is she alright?”

Yan Yujin took a long look at him and then gave up, his shoulders drooping in defeat. “I didn’t hide her away. She got into trouble after fleeing, and sent someone to ask me for help, so I gave her some help. That’s all. She’s alright, and has even learnt a new song. I even listened to it when I sent her some new year merchandise just before the year end.”

Prince Ji was also a music lover, and once he heard that Miss Gong Yu had a new song, he couldn’t help but drool with envy. He tugged at Yan Yujin’s arm and said, “Bring me there. Miss Gong Yu and I are also old friends. Now that she is in distress, how can I not inquire after her?”

“But.....”

“Don’t worry. There’s nothing to fear. After all, isn’t it only Zhu Yue? I don’t really care about that young man. Prince Yu is also unlikely to go so far as to fall out with me because of him. Like it or not I am still his elder.”

“Actually.....” Yan Yujin dragged out his voice. “There’s no issue bringing you there. But Miss Gong Yu is quite disheartened, and I’m afraid she wouldn’t be too keen on meeting any more nobles like yourself.”

“Am I the same as the rest of them?” Prince Ji rapped the table, saying, “No matter what you say, I insist on going. Come, let us go there now!”

“Why so anxious?” Yan Yujin could not help but laugh. “Shouldn’t we look at the time first? Alright, since I am unable to stop you anyway, I will go with you and take any blame. I will bring you over tomorrow.”

“That’s close enough. What time tomorrow?”

“In the afternoon, between 1 to 3pm.<sup>196</sup> I have to accompany my father somewhere before noon.”

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<sup>196</sup> Actually, they didn’t have the modern concept of hourly time in those days but I’m using the corresponding time for convenience and ease of understanding.

“You really are a filial son,” Prince Ji smiled at him teasingly. “In the afternoon between 1 to 3pm then. You must not go back on your word.”

“Don’t you think you would come and knock on my door If I go back on my word?” Yan Yujin stretched out his body and said, “Don’t dress in royal clothes tomorrow. We need to go quietly.”

“I know, I know,” Prince Ji repeated his response, then ordered his servants to arrange for a fresh new round of dishes, keeping his guest, who was already intending to leave, for another half an hour or so of drinks.

At this moment, the evening breeze began to rise, and the atmosphere became a little thick and heavy, with a fishy smell. Tomorrow was definitely not going to be a bright and sunny day. Yan Yujin covered his head with the hood of his cloak and got astride his horse.

Rimmed by the snow white fox fur, that usually cheerful face was solemn.

“On the 5th day of the Lunar New Year in the afternoon between 1 to 3pm, bring Prince Ji to northern Dengjia Alley where Gong Yu is staying.” This was what Mei Changsu had asked Yan Yujin to do. He had carried it out carefully after giving it a lot of thought.

But at the time, he was unable to understand how Mei Changsu’s task for him fit into the larger scheme of things.



## CHAPTER 125

### *Old Letter*

While Yan Yujin was at Prince Ji's mansion enjoying song and dance, Mei Chang Su was in his Su mansion secretly receiving a group of travellers, except that the atmosphere here was a little more dignified.

"I have brought along a total of ten people. Their martial arts skills may not be particularly good, but fortunately they are pretty skilled in qing gong.<sup>197</sup> They are also experts in using drugs to make poison. Chief Mei, do not hesitate to use them as you see fit." The person who had just spoken was seated to Mei Changsu's left,<sup>198</sup> approximately 60 years or so in age. He was lean and wizened, with snowy white hair, but his complexion was ruddy and he appeared to have a lot more vigor and vitality compared to his host.

"I am truly grateful, Chief Su. I apologize for having to act in Chief Su's name this time." Mei Changsu smiled slightly and half rose from his chair (to express his gratitude).

"What is Chief Mei talking about? Who is Wei Zheng to me? Has he called me an adopted father all these years for nothing? I left the mountain pass with my children<sup>199</sup> and rushed all the way here for the sole purpose of rescuing him, so what are you thanking me for?" Su Tianshu waved his hand and continued in a straightforward manner, "As for name, reputation and so on, if there is a need to use them, then use them. During such a dangerous operation, it's hard to say that nobody would slip up, and when the time comes, no matter who is caught, do not hesitate to say that the person belongs to my Yao Wang Valley. There is no need to implicate others. Since Yao Wang Valley is in a remote place far beyond the reach of the central government, I have sufficient resources to wait things out in the forests while they do not."

Mei Changsu smiled at his words, nodding his head, "This reminds me of the first time I arrived in Yao Wang Valley. If not for Lin Chen, I would have been confused and disoriented, and till today. I would still not have found my way out."

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<sup>197</sup> a type of martial art ability to make the body light

<sup>198</sup> the guest of honor usually sits to the host's left

<sup>199</sup> men from his household

Su Tianshu burst into laughter, complimenting him in turn, “But Chief Mei, you are truly amazing. Young Master Lin only brought you there once, but when you went there on your own the second time, you managed to penetrate through my defenses. If the imperial court had as much substance as you, I wouldn’t have boasted the way I did earlier.”

“That is because Chief Su looks favorably on my humble efforts.” Mei Changsu picked up the teapot and poured out the tea. “When Chief Su passed by Xunyang, how were things with the Yun family?”

“Don’t worry. The Yun Clan has always had a good reputation and they also have people who would defend them in the royal court. Xuanjing Bureau also has no interest in relentlessly pursuing them. This is why they have not been accused of colluding with traitors, but are only being kept watch by the local magistrate. The Yun clan has been a prominent family in Xunyang for generations, so the local officer would merely turn a blind eye. He would probably make things difficult for them only if they desire to leave Xunyang.”

“If that’s the case, that’s good.” Mei Changsu breathed a small sigh of relief. Just at this moment, Li Gang entered and bowed silently. Mei Changsu immediately understood and got up, saying, “Chief Su, all those participating in tomorrow’s operation have already gathered. Would you like to join me to head over for a look?”

“I am very much obliged. Chief Mei, please lead the way.” Su Tianshu got up and stepped aside. The both of them left the main house together, arriving at a small, narrow, and clean room in the rear court.

Within the room were forty to fifty people, divided into a few groups, studying a few sheets of paper containing blueprints. Upon Mei Changsu and Su Tianshu’s arrival, they came over one after the other to make their salutations.

“Everyone has been working hard.” After taking his seat by the side of a large rectangular table in the middle of the room, Mei Changsu stretched out his hand to flip through the blueprints, asking, “Have you more or less memorised the entire layout and passageways of Xuanjing Bureau?”

“Yes.”

“We have discussed all the details of the entire operation extensively these two days, but today our friends from Yao Wang Valley have joined us, so I will explain once again from the beginning.” Mei Changsu signaled for everyone to move closer and said in a smooth and steady tone, “Our operation will take place at midday tomorrow. At this time Xuanjing Bureau will be changing shifts. We have already arranged with Xia Dong to find a way to bring you through the front door. Wang Yuan, you will lead 15 men outside to keep an eye on the state of affairs in the

surrounding area. Be prepared to provide reinforcements. Zheng Xu Ting will bring along 30 men to follow Xia Dong. That day, Xia Jiang, Xia Chun and Xia Qiu will not be in Xuanjing Bureau, so it will go very smoothly in the beginning. However, the moment you get to the dungeon's outer courtyard, there will be pushback, so we would need to put up a strong offensive from this point onwards. All of you must remember that Xia Dong will merely observe and she will not help you. What you will need to do is to break into the dungeon, get to the prison cell mentioned by Xia Dong, then rush back out."

At this moment, somebody from Yao Wang Valley looked like he had some doubts. Mei Changsu turned in his direction with a slight smile. "Even though there are many guarding Xuanjing Bureau, the entrance of the dungeon is only a narrow corridor. Four or five men would be able to defend it for a long time. When the time comes to breach it, we would then need to rely on our friends from Yao Wang Valley. If we were in the battlefield, these "poison powder worms" would not prevent the continuous attack of a large army, but in the relatively narrow and confined spaces of Xuanjing Bureau, they are very useful. You are all skilled martial arts masters. We just need to loosen their tight defenses a little to break through. Among all the methods, this is the one I have decided on." He tapped the blueprints on the table a few times with his finger in emphasis. "From here to the back gate, the distance is a little shorter compared to the distance from the main gate, but all along the way, there will be no open ground, limiting the use of crossbows. When they use powerful bows to seal the passageway, deploy the "smoke-inducing powder balls" from Thunder Fire Hall, and when the enemy's field of vision is confused, you must rush out no matter how much you are blinded by the smoke and dust. Qin De, the ten men with you are skilled at fighting blind. Under these circumstances, they must immediately move to the front to clear the way. As long as we are able to rush out of Xuanjing Bureau's gates, it will be easier to handle what follows."

"Why is that?" Su Tianshu pinched his beard and asked, "Once outside, the place is an open plan. Xuanjing Bureau would have the advantage and bring its large military force into play. How would this make things easier to handle?"

Mei Changsu smiled faintly, "Because on that day.....the robbers from the grand heist that the Capital Patrol had been investigating for a long time will suddenly reveal their whereabouts. Two groups of people chasing each other in every direction, jostling against one another, that would certainly be a chaotic scene. For us, the more chaotic it is, the better."

Su Tianshu immediately understood and laughed heartily, saying, "I can imagine that would definitely make for a very interesting state of affairs."

"As for going underground after that, arrangements have already been made. That covers everything." Mei Changsu's eyes swept across the whole room. "Finally, I wish to reiterate what may seem like an unrelated requirement, which is that I would like all of you to escape unscathed. Do not leave anyone behind, do you understand?"

“Yes!” The rumble of firm and resolute voices raised in assent immediately filled the room.

“Does anyone else have any more questions?”

After a brief moment of silence, some of them countered with all sorts of hypothetical scenarios one after another, and of potentially unforeseen circumstances. Mei Changsu addressed them one by one, providing solutions for each one. Watching him do it so naturally, with such calm and ease, one wouldn't have been able to discern how much time he had spent strategizing, how much painstaking effort and mental power it had consumed.

“Chief Mei is truly a rare talent,” Su Tianshu exclaimed after hearing this and he couldn't help but sigh, “You can even think of all these things. This old man really admires you.”

“In the end, this is actually only a small battle,” Mei Changsu smiled faintly, his expression betraying his exhaustion. “Consolidating your military strength, understanding your enemy in detail, exploiting the terrain of your battlefield, designing an appropriate military strategy, predicting the probabilities of advancing in the battlefield.....these actually form the foundation for deploying military tactics. There is nothing rare about it.”

“Hehe, Chief Mei is really too modest,” Su Tianshu said. Stretching out his hands to tap at Mei Changsu's meridian points, he shook his head, “But when it comes to taking care of yourself, this is an ability you greatly lack. Did you not get any sleep last night?”

Mei Changsu caught sight of Li Gang and Zhen Ping both turning simultaneously in his direction, their expressions intent on participating in this interrogation, and hastily replied, “I slept, I definitely slept.”

“Perhaps you didn't fall asleep.” Su Tianshu said with certainty. “I have brought along some medicine which I have left with Physician Yan. You should immediately go and have some and then go to sleep. Don't worry, these children's<sup>200</sup> skills are not insignificant. Recover your vigor so that you will be in good condition to personally take charge of the operations tomorrow.”

Mei Changsu knew that he meant well. Besides, he was really exhausted, so he did not protest, but got up and after instructing Li Gang to take care of the guests, returned to his room, bringing Fei Liu along with him.

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<sup>200</sup> generic reference to all the men under their leadership

That night nobody knew if he slept well or not, but on the surface, he at least appeared to have slept peacefully. His breathing was calm and he did not toss and turn. He was wrapped snugly in a thick quilt and he was as peaceful as an old monk that had entered into a meditative state. After midnight, the snow began to fall, neither lightly nor heavily, breaking into fragments on hitting the roof tiles, its sound akin to the pricking of (acupuncture) needles, falling in drifts until the break of dawn.

At the break of dawn on the fifth day of the Lunar New Year, cold wet rain began to mix with the snow, and a chill wind began to whip up. In the midst of the snow and rain, a woman appeared, dreamlike, on the main street. She was wearing a bamboo rain hat and a rain cloak made of rush draped over her shoulders. She slowly made her way, step by step, towards the just-opened Eastern City Gate. Without exception, all the guards keeping watch at the city walls bowed before her in salutation, their expressions a mix of fear and respect, their eyes following this senior Xuanjing disciple who wore mourning clothes and left the capital at this time every year.

After a period of time, a junior Xuanjing Bureau officer rode by on horseback and shouted out, “Has Xia Dong da ren left the city?”

“Yes, she will be away for a period of time.<sup>201</sup>” The garrison squad leader who had stepped forward to reply thought the other party was pursuing Xia Dong for some urgent matter. As he replied, he gestured to his men to clear the path. But that junior officer merely turned around and left after hearing his reply.

After returning to the Xuanjing Bureau office, the junior officer immediately headed straight to the Director’s room. Xia Jiang, dressed in a weathered jacket, was tearing open an envelope to read the enclosed letter. After making salutations, the junior officer said in a low voice, “Director, Xia Dong da ren really left the city.”

Before Xia Jiang could respond, another junior officer hurried in, fell to his knees on the steps saying, “Director, that Su Zhe just left through the West City Gate. He was completely in disguise and almost evaded us.”

“Ng.” Xia Jiang waved his hand to dismiss both of them, lost in thought as he flipped over the letter he was holding, his eyes unfocused. His face bore an odd expression, sinister with ruthlessness, yet at the same time slightly anguished. After a moment, he quickly left the room and headed outside. There, he ordered a mount to be brought to him, immediately jumped astride it, whipped it into a gallop leaving Xuanjing Bureau.

At about the same time Xia Jiang left, a sedan also left Marquis Yan’s mansion, followed by a cart full of joss sticks, candles and sacrificial paper. Yan Yujin rode alongside on horseback to keep guard as it meandered towards Han Zhong Temple in

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<sup>201</sup> time was measured in 12 periods of 2 hours each

the west of the capital, apparently with the purpose of conducting some sort of religious ritual.

But Han Zhong Temple didn't seem to be prepared for their arrival. When the master of the temple came over to welcome Marquis Yan, he seemed completely confused. "Uncle Marquis, you did not mention that you were coming today. This old priest is afraid that he has not prepared anything....."

"You can just prepare a clean room with hot tea and water for me. I intend to receive a friend." Just as he had finished speaking, Yan Que heard the sound of hoofbeats behind him. Turning his head, he saw that Xia Jiang had arrived.

"Did Xia xiong arrive on horseback?"<sup>202</sup> Yan Que called out in greeting. "This Han Zhong Temple is probably difficult to find, with its many forks along the way. Even though Xia xiong was on horseback, you arrived later than me in my sedan."

"Or maybe it's because you left first, Marquis Yan?" Xia Jiang replied coldly. Not seeing anyone step forward to assist him with his horse, he tied his horse to a post and walked over with large strides.

"There is no need for all of you to remain here. Please do not inconvenience yourselves and leave us." Yan Que had just uttered these words to dismiss the temple master when he noticed the droop in Yan Yujin's facial expression. "I brought you here today to kneel before the scriptures. Why are you still following me? Hurry and go to the front of the temple!"

"Dad," Yan Yujin said like a pampered child, "Do I really have to kneel for a whole day?"

"If you complain some more you will have to kneel for two days!" Yan Que glared at his son, about to lose his temper. Met with this unfavorable situation, Yan Yujin ran swiftly away. The way he skipped and jumped about, one couldn't be sure if he truly ran to kneel before the scriptures.

"This child," Yan Que sighed, saying to Xia Jiang, "It can't be helped, I have pampered him too much, so much so he can not endure any hardship."

"I think Yujin is still alright. He is very similar to you when you were young, Marquis Yan."

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<sup>202</sup> This might seem like an obvious statement since Yan Que saw Xia Jiang riding up on horseback, but it's a polite greeting similar to us Chinese greeting our neighbours with "Have you eaten?" when we happen to meet around meal times. Then again, in context, it's also his attempt to make small talk!

“How could I have been as well turned out as him when I was young?” Yan Que smiled as he refuted the previous statement, fixing his eyes on Xia Jiang as he deliberately said, “But children always grow up too fast. If Xia xiong’s son was still around, perhaps he would be as old as Yu’er.”

Xia Jiang’s heart felt like it had been pierced by a needle. He experienced a sharp burst of pain, but he pressed his lips tightly together, forcing himself to endure it, his face not betraying any emotion. Instead, he replied coldly, “Yan xiong, did you invite me just to stand around here for a chat?”

“How would I dare?” Yan Que extended his hand to show the way, “The temple has prepared a clean room for us. Please, after you.”

Xia Jiang stepped silently forward. Accompanied by Yan Que, they soon arrived at a clean, well-lit stand-alone room in the back garden. A young Taoist acolyte kept watch outside, probably instructed by his master to prepare the tea when they arrived. Yan Que told him to leave them, took hold of the teapot himself and poured Xia Jiang a steaming hot cup of tea.

“This temple’s tea is one of a kind. Xia xiong should try it.”

Xia Jiang looked directly at him, clearly not comprehending the need for all these formalities. He merely extended his arm to accept the cup of tea but he did not drink. His first words were direct: “Yan xiong, your letter said you know the whereabouts of someone who has been constantly on my mind. Are you referring to my son?”

Yan Que did not reply immediately, but held his own tea cup with both hands, taking two sips before slowly putting it down. “Xia xiong, during that time, for the sake of a pretty face, you ignored all your old friends’ advice, refused to listen to any one of us, abandoning your first wife without a care, causing her to take your son with her and leave without a trace. Now, after so many years, does the heart and mind still miss only the son, but not the woman you first married?”

“These are my family matters.” Xia Jiang sounded cold as ice. “Marquis Yan does not need to concern yourself with them.”

“Since you don’t want to give way to your feelings, why did you come here after reading the letter?”

“I came intending only to ask a question. Since you were unwilling to tell me the whereabouts of my son at the time, why is it that you are suddenly willing to speak of it?”

Yan Que fixed his gaze on him, heaving a long deep sigh. “You really think that we were unwilling to tell you back then. Actually.....sister-in-law<sup>203</sup> was determined to leave and did not tell anyone of her whereabouts at all.”

Xia Jiang sneered and said in disbelief, “Really?”

“I think sister-in-law was extremely disillusioned.....” Yan Que looked out the window, his expression indiscernible, “Because of a moment of kindness, she rescued a woman from slavery in Yeting, took care of her like an elder sister, like a mother. She never expected that in this world, such kindness could be repaid with such evil, by a completely heartless person.....after receiving such a huge blow, how could sister-in-law trust anyone else? Not telling anyone of her whereabouts is probably her way of fulfilling her desire to sever ties with the past.”

The muscle on Xia Jiang’s cheek twitched a few times, before being forcefully held in check. His tone remained indifferent. “If that is the case, then why did you invite me out today?”

“Please relax.” Yan Que took a quick sidelong glance at him, and replied neither quickly nor slowly, “When sister-in-law left, she did not inform anyone, that was true. But five years ago, she sent me some news.”

“Why did she send it to you?”

“Perhaps of all the old friends, only I remain.” Yan Que’s expression suddenly became fierce, and his gaze was sharp on Xia Jiang’s face. “Xia xiong, this was your own doing. How could you forget?”

Xia Jiang refused to respond to his provocation, and asked further, “What did she say?”

“She said that because of a disease your son contracted in winter, he did not grow to adulthood and died young. She was also seriously ill and had limited time. She hoped that the old friends in the capital would remember her and offer sacrifice for her during Qing Ming...<sup>204</sup>..”

The tea cup in Xia Jiang’s hand shattered, the hot tea spilling through his fingers, but he didn’t seem to feel anything, staring penetratingly at Yan Que with his cold eyes. After a while he said through gritted teeth, “Do you think I would believe this?”

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<sup>203</sup> ”sao fu ren” – polite form of address for a friend’s wife / married woman of similar age

<sup>204</sup> Chinese festival to venerate and commemorate the dead



Yan Que took a light yellow envelope from his chest pocket and handed it over, “Whether you believe or not, have a look. You were both fellow disciples. Even if no longer husband and wife, you would still recognize her writing.”

He hadn’t yet finished speaking, but Xia Jiang had already taken the letter out of the envelope, hastily spreading it out to read its contents. He hadn’t even read it halfway through before he tore the letter to shreds, his lips pale, both his hands shaking badly.

Yan Que’s eyes were sorrowful, and he sighed, “This is probably the last thing she left behind. You have really torn it apart.”

Xia Jiang didn’t hear a word he said. He stood up, pressed both his hands down on the table and faced Yan Que with the full force of his rage, said, “Why didn’t you tell me immediately then?”

“This letter was written to me. Furthermore, its contents did not mention that I should keep you informed,” Yan Que’s expression remained calm without a ripple, “Which is why, whether or not to tell you, when to tell you, it was all up to me. I didn’t want to tell you anything at the time, but today I suddenly felt like telling you. That is all.”

At first, Xia Jiang seemed to be so enraged by this sudden harsh and grievous news that his face turned red, his whole body shook, and the hands pressing hard on the table seemed like they would leave an impression in the wood, all these revealing his turbulent emotions. But Xia Jiang was after all, still Xia Jiang. After the first wave of anger passed, he immediately strived to exert control over his emotions and hold them in check, until only his eyes revealed the depths of his resentment and anger, before slowly sitting down again.

“Marquis Yan,” The Xuanjing Bureau Director had recovered his expressionless facade and adjusted his speaking tone so that even though he appeared to be speaking casually, it would make a person tremble. “It seems that Prince Jing is planning a prison raid today, isn’t he?”

## CHAPTER 126

### *Puzzles*

If Xia Jiang had uttered these words in order to take Yan Que by surprise and shock him, one could say that he had completely failed to do so. Though this old Marquis had once been volatile like the wind and clouds, today, there were few in the world who could compare to him when it comes to keeping calm and motionless like (still) water. Which is why even if the world's most sinister pair of eyes were on him at this moment, they would be unable to read his expression. But actually, he really didn't have any emotional response to these words.

“What is Xia xiong talking about? What prison raid?” Yan Que asked, his eyebrows raised, his face wearing a suitably surprised expression.

“Of course it's to rescue Wei Zheng, that deputy general of Chiyu Battalion. The Xuanjing Bureau prison is impenetrable. If you hadn't drawn me out, Prince Jing wouldn't have dared to make a move.” Xia Jiang's face was like cold iron as he looked at Yan Que, his gaze like ice. “When did Marquis Yan start working for Prince Jing? You have kept the truth hidden all these years, even I really thought that.....you had become so depressed that you had withdrawn from the world.”

“You have always believed yourself to be infallible, yet you have not rectified your own shortcoming of playing judge to others,” Yan Que's eyes were piercing cold as he evaded the question. “For you, there is probably no crime that you are incapable of uncovering, only crimes that have not occurred to you. You are accusing a royal prince of breaking into prison to rescue a traitor with no basis or evidence. Xia Jiang, don't you think you are a little crazy?”

“Did I accuse him unjustly? Isn't he going to rescue Wei Zheng?” Xia Jiang raised his chin slightly and cast a sidelong glance at Yan Que, “What I fear is that he would pull back and ignore that Chiyuan deputy general. But I believe that with Prince Jing's temperament, he will not disappoint me.”

Yan Que thought for a while, and nodded lightly in agreement, “You are right, that seems to be Prince Jing's temperament. But he is also not stupid. Your Xuanjing Bureau is like a dragon's pool and tiger's den. Even if he wanted to charge into the place, I'm afraid he would be powerless to do it.”

“Which is why you personally drew me away, Lord Marquis Yan,” Xia Jiang’s gaze narrowed faintly as he spoke. “Maybe it’s not just me. I heard that the skill of Prince Jing’s advisor is not insignificant. It wouldn’t come as a surprise if he managed to find a way to lure Xia Qiu and Xia Chun out as well. Without the three of us around, perhaps he would really risk everything to succeed in one attempt.”

“I remember a long time ago, when you had just completed your discipleship, you weren’t like this, constantly using your imagination to substitute for facts.” Yan Que heaved a sigh and said, “How did you become like this? Were we too stupid or did you become too clever?”

“Is it really just my imagination or have the Capital Patrol troops deployed around Xuanjing Bureau increased? Prince Jing seems to think that if he secretly deployed his troops in such a fragmented manner that he would be able to conceal it from me.” Xia Jiang’s smile was arrogant. “Too bad he is fighting a losing battle. I’m actually encouraging him to come, revealing flaws (along the way) to lead him along, giving him opportunities to take advantage of, to feed his confidence, to let him think that there is hope to succeed in rescuing that person, especially when he thinks he has someone on the inside.....”

Yan Que glanced at Xia Jiang, his gaze hard and unmoving. For this old Marquis Yan, this was the most alarmed expression he could muster.

“I still haven’t discovered why Dong’er suddenly became suspicious, why she suddenly began to track down and look into that rotten old case. But it’s good that she has fallen to your side right at this moment. I was worried that there would be no way to further increase Prince Jing’s confidence, to get him to accelerate his move.” Xia Jiang stepped a little closer to Yan Que, as if he wanted to pierce through his calm exterior. “She has been back for three days and I still treat her the same as I had always done, not limiting any of her actions, but when she tried to find out the location of Wei Zheng’s cell through Qiu’er,<sup>205</sup> I devised a suitable way to divulge it to her, so that she wouldn’t think that anything was out of the ordinary. As for Prince Jing, with me as his inside accomplice, he would definitely think that his plan is proceeding very smoothly. So, success is more or less in the palm of my hands, don’t you agree?”

“I think you are giving yourself too much credit.” Yan Que said without a trace of politeness, “I know that your Xuanjing Bureau prison is a formidable place, but all your key personnel are not around. Furthermore with Xia Dong on the inside, it would probably not be difficult for them to breach the place? Are you really not afraid that Xia Dong will bring men in to storm the dungeon and rescue Wei Zheng?”

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<sup>205</sup> Xia Qiu

“You’re not wrong,” Xia Jiang nodded his head, “It’s a difficult problem. I am giving up the child to lure the wolf, yet at the same time I cannot truly give the child up completely. Wei Zheng is still very useful to me today. As long as he is still in my hands, no matter the circumstances or how many unforeseen changes take place, the odds would still be in my favor.”

Yan Que poked at the fire in the stove, then lifted the teapot cover and peered in to check the water, as if he hadn’t been listening.

“If the men Prince Jing deploys are fairly capable, Dong’er would indeed be able to lead them in to break into the dungeon.” Xia Jiang continued speaking, unconcerned. “But Lord Marquis Yan, do you really think that just because they manage to break into the dungeon, that they would find Wei Zheng?”

Yan Que replaced the teapot cover, his gaze finally becoming a little unsteady. He understood the implications of what Xia Jiang had just said.

After all the care that Mei Changsu had taken to devise a plan that could overcome the challenges of breaking into the Xuanjing Bureau dungeon, it would be a pity to discover that Wei Zheng was in actual fact not there.

Xia Dong was the best inside accomplice, but if this accomplice was a pawn placed there by someone else, then the more information and assistance received from her, the bigger the chances of defeat.

Xia Jiang appeared to be very pleased that he had finally made a crack in Yan Que’s ironclad expression, and persisted, “Marquis Yan, did Prince Jing tell you how he is going to absolve himself from blame after breaking Wei Zheng out?”

“I have no contact with Prince Jing,” Yan Que replied coldly. “Furthermore, I believe that Prince Jing isn’t doing anything against the law. Xia xiong, you think too much.”

“You still seem to lack judgment,” Xia Jiang spat out this comment then stood up, walked slowly to the window, pushed it open and propped it up with a rod. He took a deep breath, inhaling the cold wet air. “This temple halfway up the mountain is cool and refreshing compared to the city. No matter what kind of commotion ensues there, it will not reach here. Isn’t that a shame?”

“Why is it a shame? Why is it a shame that no commotion will reach this place?”

“Of course,” Xia Jiang replied indifferently, “It’s too far away to hear or see anything. We won’t know if things are beginning to get lively in Xuanjing Bureau right now.”

Yan Que looked at the shadow of the sun, it was at most just past noon. The rescue mission shouldn't have begun yet. But the journey from the Taoist temple back to the city would take three hours, which is why there was no turning back.

"It's a pity I have a good dungeon." Xia Jiang turned back. "There is no Wei Zheng, but there is fire thunder concealed within. As soon as the fuse next door ignites.....just imagine. As long as flesh and blood begin to fly, I don't believe that Prince Jing would continue to remain calm after receiving such news. So many Capital Patrol troops surrounding Xuanjing Bureau, most of them under the leadership of Prince Jing's most trusted officers. Do you think they could bear to just watch helplessly and do nothing? All it needs is for Prince Jing to be agitated, recklessly increase his force and throw more men into the fray, then the situation would naturally get more and more out of hand, and when it does, it would not be so easy for him to absolve himself of blame. As for me, I will definitely not give him any opportunity to clear himself of blame."

Yan Que lowered his gaze and remained silent for a long while. Then raising his head, he said, "Xia xiong, I would like to ask you a question."

"Please."

"Have you ever thought, when the fire thunder fuse is lit, where would your apprentice Xia Dong be?"

Xia Jiang pressed his lips tight, his eyes emotionless. "Her recent behavior has disappointed me. She is no longer qualified to be a Xuanjing official."

"In your eyes, is that all she is? Since she was a child, she had been following you, learning your knowledge and skills, a disciple who always respected and obeyed you. Is that all she is now? You've always used, deceived, and used her over again, to the extent that when she finally became aware of the truth and you could no longer use her, you would destroy her....." Yan Que said each word and each line sadly and helplessly. "How unfortunate Xia Dong is, to have been your disciple, and how unfortunate she is, to not have clearly seen your true colors in time."

"Your words are starting to sound unpleasant," Xia Jiang was not moved in the slightest. "Why, are you getting impatient? If you have any regrets it is still not too late. Marquis Yan, in those years, you had already chosen the wrong side. Don't tell me you are still thinking of making the same mistake?"

"Right or wrong, it's all in the heart. You think that I am wrong, but I have never thought you were wrong." Yan Que shook his head and sighed. "But I want to let you know, you can choose to ignore ties of affection, but it would be best not to look down on them, otherwise you would be defeated by them."

Xia Jiang threw back his head and laughed. He laughed for a very long time before he stopped, and when he had caught his breath, he said: “All these years, have you grown only in age? How can you still spout such naive words? Actually all of you will be the ones defeated by these ties of affection. By right you should all have been victorious but you all gave it up. This was how it was back then, so it is now.....”

Yan Que turned again to look at the shadow of the sun, drank up his last cup of tea and stood up.

“What are you doing?”

“I can leave already. I cannot stand staying here with you for another moment.” Yan Que replied without looking at Xia Jiang. He made his way out to the courtyard without looking back. Xia Jiang did not expect him to end the conversation so abruptly and leave so suddenly. He was surprised but also a little suspicious. He followed and saw Yan Que getting into his sedan, giving orders to return to the city. There was nothing unusual about it, but he felt even more uneasy.

But what was it? Xia Jiang pinched (the corners of) his eyebrows and pondered a while. Yan Que’s final words suddenly flashed in his mind.

“I can leave already.....”

What Yan Que said was “can” leave already, and not “I wish to leave already”. Could it be that he “could not” leave before that?

But why “could not leave”? What mission did he have? His mission today was obviously to lure him away from Xuanjing Bureau!

At this revelation, a flash of light suddenly shone in Xia Jiang’s head, and a thought arose. His facial expression suddenly changed and he moved impatiently, flying straight to the front gate of the temple. He did not expect to see his horse foaming at the mouth and lying limp on the ground, the place quiet and deserted with no one around. There seemed to be no hope of finding another horse.

Having no other choice, Xia Jiang grit his teeth and made a quick decision. He made his body light<sup>206</sup> and quickly ran in the direction of the city.

However, no matter one’s skill in martial arts, even if he could run faster than a fine horse for a while, he would be unable to sustain such a speed for a long period of time, which was why even though Xia Jiang’s internal energy was deep and he was skilled in the art of breathing, it was almost four hours later when he finally arrived at Xuanjing Bureau’s main door.

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<sup>206</sup> using the same martial arts technique “qing gong” practised by Su Tianshu’s men from the earlier chapter

By this time, the prison break was clearly completed, but without any evidence of flesh and blood, nor piles of rubble. The dungeon was still very much there and the fire thunder fuse was damaged. The Xuanjing Bureau soldiers on location seemed to be at a loss, with the two junior commanding officers looking vexed. As soon as they saw Xia Jiang, they immediately hurried towards him, anxious to give him a report of the situation, but they immediately stepped back in fright after seeing their Director's expression.

Actually these two junior commanding officers who were charged with this heavy responsibility were talents whom Xia Jiang had been taking notice of recently, to the extent that he considered suspending the master-disciple tradition that Xuanjing Bureau had been practising for generations to promote a few more people to the job.<sup>207</sup> As such, this day's defeat was not due to their incompetence, but rather the error of the person behind the planning.

Yan Que's mission was really only to get Xia Jiang to leave the city, nothing more. But the purpose of luring him out was not to make the prison break easier, but rather to prevent him from having the opportunity to detect abnormalities on scene and adjust his plan in time.

That's because Xia Jiang's experience was too extensive. For example, at this moment, all it took was one look at the scene for him to realize that Prince Jing's men did not actually storm into Xuanjing Bureau, that there must have been an ulterior motive for him to have devoted so much effort into feigning an assault, and that the purpose was of course to draw the attention of those present away from the actual place of operation.

But Xia Jiang didn't have time to delve deeper. One look at the situation in Xuanjing Bureau at that moment told him that things weren't looking good, so he immediately leapt astride the closest horse and wielding the whip, hurried away towards the city centre.

The two junior officers glanced at each other, still confused, not knowing what to do next. For the two of them, the plan had originally been very clear and effective. First allow Xia Dong to bring men into Xuanjing Bureau, then wait for them to approach the dungeon before starting the offensive. Once the majority of the men were close to the entrance to the dungeon, ignite the fire thunder. The first half of the execution was relatively smooth, but when those men began to approach the dungeon, they detected a change in the situation. The men did not continue to advance, but instead seemed as if they were preparing to enter the adjacent compound. In order to prevent the men from discovering the fire thunder, they had advanced the offensive, but their opponents' combat power was unexpectedly strong, and a deadlock had ensued. Then these men who had supposedly come to break into the prison did not

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<sup>207</sup> presumably of rank similar to disciples like Xia Dong, etc.

even enter the dungeon's outer courtyard, but instead began to immediately break away. The Xuanjing soldiers who were designated as sweepers once they had set off the fire thunder also did not effectively seal the passageway. When the enemy deployed their medicine powder, poison insect powder and smoke pills all at one go, it then became very difficult to capture any of them, especially since the courtyards were so closely connected to each other, so they were ultimately able to break their way out. To add to that, the Capital Patrol officers outside appeared just at this moment to arrest the robbers of the grand heist, and after all that confusion had passed, not a trace was left of the men.

This entire prison break was a chaos, passing by like loud thunder with small raindrops. It was a far cry from the fierce and terrible situation it was originally meant to be, and thus, a trap laid in vain.

But as these two junior officers were looking at each other helplessly, Xia Jiang had arrived posthaste in the city centre, rushing directly into the central courtyard of the Imperial Court of Justice office. By some good fortune, the official registrar had a keen sight and recognized the very disheveled Xuanjing Bureau Director. He immediately held back the two office guards who were advancing to obstruct him, and stepped forward to offer his salutations while ordering his men to send for Zhu Yue, the Deputy of the Imperial Court of Justice.

Xia Jiang didn't even look at him, but immediately charged to the east side of the Imperial Court of Justice where its prison was located. It was still peaceful here, but this peace did not put Xia Jiang at ease. This place was different from Xuanjing Bureau, it had too many weak points that could be breached easily.

"Open up, quickly!" The jailer had come forward to greet him, but just as he was about to inquire, he heard this command. Catching sight of the signal from the official registrar behind Xia Jiang, he quickly took the key hanging from his waist and opened the main gate. Next came the inner gate, a narrow lane, the inner prison, then the water dungeon. Xia Jiang forged ahead at great speed and finally arrived at a small heavy black iron gate with only a tiny opening.

This time, it was Xia Jiang who took out a key from his own body to open the iron door. The black shadowy figure of a man was curled up on the floor, arms and legs tightly bound in shackles. Xia Jiang took hold of his hair, turned his face upwards, looked intently at him with the faint light of an oil lamp, then breathed a sigh of relief.

But just as he breathed this sigh of relief, he suddenly realized that he had committed an extremely stupid mistake, even more stupid than the failed trap that he had set earlier.



## CHAPTER 127

### *Catastrophe*

The chill crept up from the lower back, slowly rising up. Initially, it seemed to be merely psychological, but it permeated through the cracks, materializing suddenly into cold thorns, a piercing cold wind that spat the darkness of death straight out into skin and flesh, making Xia Jiang's hair stand on end, to stake all of his energy to evade it, making him almost forget to breathe.

Sparing no effort, he leapt forward and turned his body around. A back-lit figure appeared before him. From its graceful outline and fine hands, he could make out a youth. He was well-dressed in sapphire blue colored clothes with a sapphire blue headband. Unfortunately his face could not be seen because he was masked.

Xia Jiang simply could not believe that the person who had applied such overwhelming force on him just a moment ago, was actually so young, but he was forced to believe it when the second wave offensive followed quickly in succession.

Such vicious and cunning moves, with an internal force that was mingled with a warm and sunny disposition, two completely different types of martial arts contained in one person, made one feel decidedly strange, so strange that one loses confidence when fighting against him.

But Xia Jiang was no ordinary opponent. The number of fierce battles he had experienced in his entire life was not inferior to the most dynamic Jianghu person. With such a high level of martial arts achievements and abundant battle experience, although this first generation Xuanjing Bureau leader had never been a part of the Langya martial arts masters list, he was one of the most undefeatable persons in the world.

It was said that the City Lord Wu Wan, who once ranked third on the martial arts masters list, was forced to retire from Jianghu after standing in for a friend in a fight against Xia Jiang and suffering injury at his hands. What was most formidable about Xia Jiang was his unwavering determination and endurance. No matter the battle situation, Xia Jiang had always been able to persevere in maintaining his own rhythm without being ruffled by his opponents.

If that City Lord Wu Wan were here now, he would be very shocked because Xia Jiang, whom he knew to be as steady as a mountain, had, during a hand-to-hand combat with a youth not even half his age, been unexpectedly thrown into a state of confusion before the fight had even begun.

When martial arts masters competed, their greatest risk lay in a wavering heart and mind. Xia Jiang believed the stability of his mental state would not falter in the face of any world famous martial arts master. Unfortunately, this belief would not hold with the youth he was facing.

That youth could not even understand the concept of “the mental state of hand-to-hand combat”.

He just took it seriously, his heart focused single-mindedly on the attack, to the extent that you could say that he was learning as he fought and enjoying it, as he slowly pressed his opponent into a corner.

A piercing whistle came from Xia Jiang’s mouth. At the youth’s relentless advances and sharp and incisive assaults, it wasn’t easy to whistle long and loud. Because he had expended his energy running long distance, Xia Jiang’s physical strength was not at its peak, and he was quaking after two moves. But what made him even more apprehensive was that the alarm he had sounded that was strong enough to penetrate through the thick walls of this prison did not receive any response.

He had originally believed that Prince Jing would spare no effort for the break-in, but when he had realized that the operation at Xuanjing Bureau was a feint to cover up actual operations in the Imperial Court of Justice, coupled with Marquis Yan’s words, “I can leave already”, he couldn’t help but feel that he was a step too late. In his impatience, he had dashed all the way here to the Imperial Court of Justice, intending only to get here quickly to confirm that Wei Zheng was still here. It did not occur to him at the time to arrange for men to follow after to provide support.

But the streets were currently filled with Capital Patrol soldiers. In his heart, Xia Jiang knew that if Xuanjing Bureau’s soldiers were to come out en masse, the Capital Patrol would undoubtedly find countless reasons to stop and interrogate them along the way and delay their arrival.

Xia Jiang’s whistle only served to confirm the current state of affairs in the Imperial Court of Justice. Whether there was just this one strange youth with an irregular martial arts skill who had followed him in or if the entire prison had been overtaken, it was now very clear. Nobody from the Imperial Court of Justice appeared, which meant that there were people outside. Although they had not stormed the place for the time being, it was only a matter of time, unless Prince Jing’s men were so weak that even the men from the Imperial of Justice were able to suppress them.

Although the Imperial Court of Justice was also an institution for punishment, their focus was on correction. Criminals and the accused were primarily imprisoned in the Ministry of Justice, but once in a while, when the need for an inquest arose, they would imprison them here out of convenience. This was why the dimensions and defenses of its attached prison could not compare to Sky Prison, to the extent that many people were unaware that the Imperial Court of Justice actually housed a prison. Because it was inconspicuous and easily overlooked, Xia Jiang felt it the best place to imprison Wei Zheng and secretly had him transferred over.

In truth, it wasn't a bad decision. It certainly didn't occur to anyone that Wei Zheng might be locked up here, until Xia Jiang himself brought them here.

At this moment, the sound of footsteps could be heard approaching the prison, light of feet but definitely belonging to more than one person.

The youth was still in high spirits, forcing Xia Jiang to have to focus all his energy on dealing with him. Maybe it was just as well, for it spared him the agony of watching others carrying Wei Zheng out.

"Time is tight. Be a good boy, and leave quickly." The last remaining man called out though it was unclear who that statement was directed at.

"Not leaving!" The youth who was enthusiastically striking at Xia Jiang responded angrily.

"Have you forgotten who you promised? Listen to me, quickly follow me, we can't tarry here." That person pleaded with him.

Fortunately, the youth finally obeyed him and turned around, breaking away from the fight. He moved out of Xia Jiang's reach and glided away like a ghost.

Xia Jiang supported himself against the moist dark prison wall, panting for breath. Staring at the faint light halo penetrating from outside, his eyes resentful like a snake, but he did not give chase.

Because he knew that with that youth around, giving chase would be futile.

Prince Jing had already won this battle. But all he had won was Wei Zheng. Even though Xia Jiang had never expected Prince Jing to be truly capable of rescuing Wei Zheng from the start, losing this counter-offensive was not the end but merely the beginning.

He would stick to the plan, but now that there was no more Wei Zheng, Xia Jiang could not continue to provoke Prince Jing over and over again as before until he succeeded. Now, owing to his own error, there was only this one window of

opportunity left. If he could not make use of this to thoroughly defeat Prince Jing, then the future would become extremely dangerous.

As Xia Jiang walked out of the Imperial Court of Justice's mouldy, smelly prison, he put his thoughts in order. He didn't pay attention to the office guards lying around all over the garden, but just walked straight past them. He didn't care if those men were dead or alive. At that moment, all he wanted to do was rush to the Liang Emperor with his dishevelled appearance and attempt to fan high the flames of anger of this oversuspicious Emperor.

"Mister Su, will Xia Jiang go immediately before His Majesty and make a serious issue out of this matter? How should His Highness respond?" This question was posed to Mei Changsu as soon as he entered the secret chamber after dealing with follow-up matters.

"It's not Xia Jiang who will make a serious issue out of this matter. It has been a very serious matter from the start." Mei Changsu glanced at Lie Zhanying, throwing this response at him. Well, Wei Zheng has been rescued, so this general can now worry wholeheartedly about his Lord, but where was the passion and drive from earlier?

"What Mister Su said is right. Using force to enter Xuanjing Bureau, trespassing into the Imperial Court of Justice to break a prisoner out of jail. These facts alone would be enough to make Father Emperor fly into a rage, let alone having Xia Jiang present them." Compared to his well-loved general, Prince Jing himself appeared a lot more composed. "It's not that we didn't think of these things beforehand. Since we had already decided at the outset how things should be executed, we must naturally bear with the consequences. I have prepared myself for what comes next, so please don't worry, Sir."

Mei Changsu was a little exhausted today and he looked listless. Upon hearing these words, he merely half raised himself in acknowledgement.

"Actually, my main purpose of coming here today was to express my deep appreciation to Sir for devising such a brilliant strategy to rescue Wei Zheng." Prince Jing did not take offense at Mei Changsu's breach of etiquette and continued, "Sir, you had originally chosen to serve me in order to help me distinguish myself and strive for the throne. Unfortunately I am unable to be as coldhearted and unfeeling as Father Emperor, so if it is difficult for Sir to succeed in the future, I would like to apologize beforehand."

"It's still too early to apologize." Mei Changsu's expression flickered, but his tone held steady. "We were in a position where we were sure to lose. With the current situation, Xia Jiang does not have any conclusive proof that we rescued Wei Zheng. This is great fortune in the midst of adversity. But what comes next is still extremely critical. Your Highness must be careful at all times. Although the operation was a

success, it still has many flaws, especially the coordination of the Capital Patrol all around on the outside. Xia Jiang will definitely pursue this point relentlessly. His Majesty trusts Xia Jiang. His accusation alone would be able to cause great damage. To add to that, Your Highness is now the greatest suspect.”

“I understand,” Prince Jing replied determinedly, “But I will also not allow myself to be taken advantage of. Whether or not I fall out of favour, whether or not I am suspected, this is not a dead end. Xia Jiang has no hard evidence, so even if Father Emperor believes him, he would be unlikely to immediately execute me. Furthermore, Father Emperor may not be completely convinced.....”

“Your Highness must be sure to remember, you must never waver in your resolve, but persevere and keep insisting that you were not involved in this matter. The longer His Majesty takes to make his final ruling, the greater the chance of a turnaround.” Mei Changsu warned repeatedly, “I will take care of Wei Zheng and arrange for a proper place to put him up. Please do not care or ask about it, Your Highness. Just behave as if you had absolutely nothing to do with Wei Zheng, can you do that?”

“I’ll let you make the arrangements, Sir.” Prince Jing nodded his head, then said to Lie Zhanying, “There are a few in my household who are party to this matter. You need to warn them repeatedly to follow Mister Su’s instructions. Everyone must act as if they do not understand or know anything about Wei Zheng.”

At this moment, Lie Zhanying was at the apex of his gratitude and admiration, and immediately replied in a loud voice, “Yes!”

Prince Jing exhaled softly and sat down on the chair, slowly easing the tension in his shoulders that he had held on to for so long, but thanks to habits formed in the military, he continued to remain as upright as before, unlike the person Mei Changsu who was seated beside him with his back plastered to the back of the chair.

“Does Your Highness lack confidence? Why do you seem to be a little at a loss? Are you unsure of how to handle what is coming?” Mei Changsu asked him after observing him.

“That’s not the case,” Prince Jing shook his head, “I merely feel like this is unreal. Till now, I still dare not believe that Sir has actually rescued him. Actually, all Xia Jiang needed to do was lock Wei Zheng up tightly deep in the dungeon and make sure that he was heavily guarded. That would have been enough. Unless his men revolted, there was basically no way of breaking into the place. Why did he insist on playing this game?”

“Because Xia Jiang didn’t intend only to hold on to Wei Zheng,” Mei Changsu smiled coldly, “His primary objective was to seduce Your Highness into taking action. If he had kept the place heavily guarded, the hopes for success would have been so slim that Your Highness would have been unable to act. Then what would have been

the point of capturing Wei Zheng? For him, Wei Zheng wasn't that important. He had merely lost a Chiyu Battalion Deputy General. It was Your Highness's inability to just sit by and watch Wei Zheng be executed that made him important."

Prince Jing muttered silently to himself for a while then nodded his head saying, "That's right. Provoking me to act without really losing Wei Zheng, this was Xia Jiang's wishful thinking."

"Although Xia Jiang knew that Your Highness would definitely not just look on without acting, he was uncertain of how much you would actually be able to accomplish. Whether or not Your Highness would shrink back if he had taken precautions to make Xuanjing Bureau impenetrable, these are questions that Xia Jiang had to take into consideration. If all he wanted to do was hold on to Wei Zheng, I would have been at wit's end. Because his motives were so complicated, the matter also became complicated, but no matter how shrewd and clever his game was, it could be deciphered. What I was afraid of was that he had no game plan at all."

"Reflecting on how this affair unfolded, this is indeed how it was." Prince Jing clenched his fingers into fists on his knees, "But Xia Jiang's next move will definitely be even more crazy and unrestrained."

Mei Changsu's gaze slowly narrowed to a point and fixed on a distant space on the wall before him, silent for a long while.

"If you have anything else to say, Sir, please feel free to say it."

".....Your Highness is determined to deal with everything and I am relieved by your tenacity. However Concubine Jing niang niang will be implicated to some extent. I hope Your Highness will not waver then."

Prince Jing was also silent and after a good while, he said frankly, "I have already discussed this thoroughly with Mother Concubine once. She is more resolute than I am. Please do not worry about this, Sir."

"Ng." Mei Changsu murmured softly, "And also....."

"What else is there?"

"....." His advisor's complexion was a little pale, but after a moment's hesitation, he smiled faintly, "Forget it, it's nothing. We'll discuss further when the time comes."

## CHAPTER 128

### *Crisis (I)*

When Xia Jiang entered the palace, he did not send anyone to notify Prince Yu of what had just taken place. It wasn't that he had forgotten that he had a secret ally, but rather because according to the original plan, Prince Yu should already be in the palace.

The Liang Emperor's health hadn't been very good since last winter. He remained in Zhiluo Palace everyday, except for when he was attending to political affairs in Wuying Hall, and visited his other concubines only occasionally. When Prince Yu entered the palace, he was a little groggy from having just woken up from an afternoon nap and did not want to meet anyone. However, after he heard that Prince Yu was here specially to report an auspicious omen, he was delighted, and purposely went to Wuying Hall to meet him.

The auspicious omen that Prince Yu reported was a block of rare stone, acquired from Qinzhou. Rectangular in shape, three feet wide, five feet long and approximately two feet high, it was fine and smooth, inscribed naturally on it were the distinct words "Liang Sheng" (The Great Liang Emperor). Very rare indeed. Although the Liang Emperor wasn't the kind of person who was especially interested in auspicious omens, he couldn't help feeling happy when he saw it, and even lavished Prince Yu with words of praise. His mood was elevated and he ordered men to summon some old scholars from Taishi Academy<sup>208</sup> to look into records of auspicious omens from past dynasties. When the results were presented half a day later, they said that it was only during the period of the first Sage Emperor Wen that it was recorded, "Fen Waterfall, rare stone issued, Liang An<sup>209</sup> bestowed by heaven". After the northern war, the Sage Emperor Wen was buried with this rare stone in Da'an. After hearing this, the Liang Emperor's happiness increased from a 7-point rating to a full 10. As he looked at the stone, it became even more like a pearl, a very rare treasure. He instructed Prince Yu to carefully assign a craftsman to encase it within a red sandalwood frame and take it to Rentian Pavilion.

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<sup>208</sup> The Taishi Academy is in charge of observing astronomical phenomena, compiling almanac and other astronomical and calendar affairs.

<sup>209</sup> Peace of Liang

Prince Yu smiled broadly from ear to ear in assent, while taking the opportunity to sing his father's praises. "Father Emperor is virtuous as the sages, praised by all the people. Even the virtue of ancient rulers does not exceed this. Since this auspicious omen has been revealed, Heaven's mandate is clear, why not comply with this heavenly sign and offer sacrifice on Mount Tai? What does everyone think?"

This flattery of his was rather excessive and superfluous. The old Taishi Academy officials in attendance nearby could not agree with him but could only force their laughter. Although the Liang Emperor was very pleased to hear this, he actually understood that offering sacrifice to Heaven and Earth on Mount Tai was a very important event. Not many of the monarchs of past dynasties had the absolute conviction to dare execute this, which is why he only smiled without committing himself.

But in spite of this, this auspicious omen still made the Liang Emperor very happy. Not only Prince Yu, but the old scholars were also bestowed rewards. Everyone engaged in pleasant conversation and the atmosphere in the hall was very lively. Just at this moment, the eunuch<sup>210</sup> on duty suddenly entered to report, "Your Majesty, Director Xia requests for an audience."

The Liang Emperor laughed and said, "He has arrived just at the right time, as if he had an informer. Let him come in to have a look at this auspicious omen."

Prince Yu had been wondering what was going on outside, uncertain of how events had unfolded. Once he heard that Xia Jiang had arrived, he was glad, yet at the same time a little nervous, and it took a lot for him to maintain his composure and keep the smile on his face natural.

But when he entered the hall, Xia Jiang's appearance gave both the Liang Emperor and Prince Yu a shock. One because he had never seen the Xuanjing Bureau Director in such a dishevelled state, the other because he was surprised that Xia Jiang was so good at putting up such a performance, his face exhausted and angry, as if it was completely genuine.

"Minister Xia, what's the matter with you?" The Liang Emperor's keen perception detected a major issue, and his face immediately sank.

"Your Majesty! Your subject came to confess his guilt. Please forgive your subject for being incompetent....." Xia Jiang kneeled on the ground, his eyes red. "Today, Xuanjing Bureau and the Imperial Court of Justice suffered surprise attacks in succession by rebels. Your subject resisted with all his might but was unsuccessful. That Chiyu Battalion traitor Wei Zheng.....they have broken him out by force!"

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<sup>210</sup> interesting trivia: Hai Yan referred to him as "Little Yellow Gate". Apparently this was a legit title for a eunuch of a certain rank.



The Liang Emperor could not believe his ears and he hesitated before asking curtly, "What are you saying?"

"That traitor Wei Zheng, he has been taken away by force!"

"Taken....taken away?!" The Liang Emperor slapped his palm on the table in front of him, his expression deathly pale and his hand trembled as he pointed at Xia Jiang, "Explain clearly. How could this have happened? Under the Son of Heaven, storming into Xuanjing Bureau to snatch a traitor by force. This...isn't this a rebellion?! Who? Who is rebelling so wantonly?"

"Your Majesty," Xia Jiang touched his forehead to the floor, kowtowing as he said, "These traitors were cunning and fierce, Your subject.....although your subject was well aware of the situation, he didn't manage to obtain concrete evidence, so dare not speak carelessly."

"You are well aware of the situation and you still want to keep it to yourself? Speak! Tell me, quickly!!"

"Yes," Xia Jiang sat up straight and wiped the beads of sweat dripping from his chin. "After your subject apprehended Wei Zheng, someone sympathized with him and came to his defense. Your Majesty is well aware of this. During the sudden fierce and cunning attack to rescue the traitor, the soldiers from the Capital Patrol flooded the streets and lanes. Not only did they not assist your subject to capture the traitor, on the contrary, they created a great confusion with the excuse of arresting bandits, thus making way for the rebels and restricting my Xuanjing Bureau soldiers. As such, your subject was unable to pursue and attack."

"How can that be possible?" Prince Yu interjected at this point, his expression of alarm completely unfeigned. He had been completely caught off guard with the words "he has been taken away" but fortunately he was quick on his feet and immediately got back into character, saying intentionally, "In ordinary times, Prince Jing is not very sensible, but he cannot go so far as to be as reckless as this! Seizing a criminal by force is a big crime. Moreover Wei Zheng is a traitor. Could it be that Prince Jing has gone mad?"

The Liang Emperor felt all the blood rush into his head. His forehead burnt hot while his arms and legs were ice-cold, and he was speechless for a time. Gao Zhan hurried over to pat him on the back and rub his chest. After a while he ambled over slowly, still trembling all over, and said with a husky voice, "Traitors! All traitors! Go and summon Prince Jing here! Go quickly!"

"Quickly go and summon Prince Jing to court by imperial edict!" Prince Yu followed suit, instructing them to expedite the order, after which he hurried to the Liang Emperor's side, solicitously handed him a cup of tea and massaged his back.

“Father Emperor, your health is important, you must take care of yourself.....this is the kind of person Prince Jing is, you know that well.”

“Recognizing neither Emperor nor father!<sup>211</sup> He has really disappointed me.....” In a short span of time, the Liang Emperor went from being ecstatic to feeling angry and dejected. If Prince Jing had continued to remain an overlooked and forgotten prince, perhaps he would have been a little more relaxed, but because he believed that he had treated Your son with so much favour, his heart filled with so much anger for having been let down this way, and he could not hold it back.

The few old scholars who had been summoned to turn a pile of outdated books and papers inside out did not expect to have encountered such a big affair. They were all silent as cicadas in cold weather,<sup>212</sup> kneeling in their positions, not daring to move. They considered asking for leave to withdraw, but Prince Yu kept speaking (to the Emperor), trying simultaneously to both comfort and instigate him, so they had to keep waiting until Prince Jing’s arrival was announced before they had the opportunity to ask for leave to withdraw.

When Prince Jing came in, his appearance was the same as usual. He was meticulously dressed with a calm demeanour, every move imbued with the vigor of a soldier. Although the Liang Emperor’s expression was obviously different from normal, he only passed a mildly surprised glance at him before immediately making his usual salutations.

“Your son greets Father Emperor.” Prince Jing kowtowed. The Emperor remained silent for a very long time, and he was forced to maintain this prostrate posture in the middle of the hall, his body deathly still. As long as the Emperor did not speak, nobody else dared to utter a sound either.

The tense atmosphere stretched on, to the extent that it was more uncomfortable than if the Emperor had shouted and scolded violently. Xia Jiang stood with his mouth pursed, his eyes deep in concentration. Prince Yu wasn’t as calm and composed as him, but managed with some effort to control his breathing, occasionally stealing a glance at Father Emperor’s expression.

The Liang Emperor’s eyes were now nailed violently onto Prince Jing. Although he was being watched so closely, Prince Jing did not notice this because he was still bent over.

The silence was long drawn, so long drawn until Prince Yu couldn’t stop his body from quivering. But the Liang Emperor remained expressionless, and Prince Jing

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<sup>211</sup> The literal translation was “no emperor no father”. It essentially implies that Prince Jing has no respect for nor recognizes the authority of the emperor nor the father. I’ve retained it as it is repeated in the next chapter.

<sup>212</sup> keeping quiet out of fear

remained as still as carved stone. His body was flat on the floor, propped up by only his arms, and he didn't show any sign of trembling.

But his calm and cool composure ultimately infuriated the Liang Emperor. He suddenly erupted upwards, grabbed the tea cup from the table and threw it at Prince Jing, cursing furiously, "You unfilial son! Up till now do you still not feel any remorse?"

Prince Jing did not dodge out of the way. The teacup glanced off his head, flew past and broke into pieces on the pillar behind. It had evidently been thrown with some force.

"Father Emperor please calm your anger. Disciplining Jingyan is a small matter compared to the injury to yourself," Prince Yu hurriedly stepped forward to soothe him. Then, putting on his big brother role, he turned to Prince Jing and reprimanded him, "Jingyan, quickly admit your error and beg for Father Emperor's forgiveness."

"Your son was summoned to court to make his salutations. As your son has not completed it, and he is not aware of any crime or how it came about, your son dares not arbitrarily make this request." Prince Jing remained prostrate on the floor and said, "Father Emperor has always known that your son is stupid, so your son requests Father Emperor to please instruct him and make clear his crime."

"Very well!" The Liang Emperor raised his hand and pointed at him. "I will give you an opportunity to defend yourself. Tell me, the raid to break Wei Zheng out of Xuanjing Bureau today, how do you explain it?"

Prince Jing sat up straight, cast a glance at Xia Jiang and expressed surprise as he asked, "Has Wei Zheng been rescued?"

"Is Your Highness saying that you didn't know?" Xia Jiang interjected coldly.

"I truly did not know." Prince Jing replied expressionlessly, then turned towards the Liang Emperor, "Xuanjing Bureau reports directly to Your Majesty. Since it is not under your son's supervision, why is your son being asked to explain what happened at Xuanjing Bureau?"

The Liang Emperor snorted and said plainly, "Wasn't it you who arranged for men to rescue Wei Zheng?"

Both of Prince Jing's thick eyebrows leapt upwards, and his expression immediately changed, "Father Emperor why do you say such a thing? Rescuing a traitor is a great crime. Your son would not dare to act so arbitrarily. Who made such a report? Your son would like to request for a confrontation (in court)."

Xia Jiang definitely had not counted on Prince Jing admitting his guilt so easily. Upon hearing this, he immediately looked towards the Liang Emperor for guidance. As soon as he was given the go-ahead, he stepped forward and said, “This old minister admires how righteous Your Highness is. But the facts are there and it is impossible to deceive. Your Highness, you have deployed a large number of Capital Patrol troops in front of Xuanjing Bureau these few days, yes?”

“I didn’t deploy troops only in the areas surrounding Xuanjing Bureau. They were deployed across all significant locations across the capital in order to arrest the bandits of the grand heist. His Majesty is aware of this.”

“To arrest the bandits of the grand heist? That is a good excuse.” Xia Jiang sneered, “Then please tell me, Your Highness, with all this fanfare, after so many days, have you caught them?”

“Speaking of this, I was intending to have a proper discussion with Director Xia.” Prince Jing raised his chin in an imperious manner, “I was actually about to enter the palace to make a report. We had actually discovered the whereabouts of the bandits today, and as we were giving chase, Xuanjing Bureau’s soldiers suddenly appeared everywhere. As a result, the bandits dispersed, making this a futile effort. I would like to request for Director Xia to give me an explanation on this matter here and now.”

“Indeed, the villain sues his victim before he himself is prosecuted....” Xia Jiang gritted his teeth slightly, “Your Highness, do you think that by doing this, you can confuse those listening?”

“Exactly who is suing who first, there is no need to mention.” Prince Jing retorted coldly, “Director Xia, you know this yourself.”

Xia Jiang’s pupils contracted and pierced him with a cold stare. Just as he was about to speak, someone suddenly came from outside, panting hard, saying, “Reporting to Your Majesty, this servant received orders from niang niang,<sup>213</sup> there is an urgent matter to report....”

After listening to the squabbling, the Liang Emperor who was already quite upset, responded angrily, “What urgent matter can she have? She will have to wait!”

Prince Yu’s eyes shifted, and he moved a little closer to the Emperor, saying quietly, “Father Emperor, niang niang is usually sensible and has never caused Your Majesty any alarm without good reason. From that servant’s frightened manner of speaking, perhaps it is truly an urgent matter.”

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<sup>213</sup> By default, the generic use of this before the Emperor refers to the Empress

“Yes,” Xia Jiang chimed in, “Based on how His Highness Prince Jing is speaking, this cannot be dealt with properly in such a short period of time. This old minister also feels it’s best to listen first to what urgent matters niang niang has.”

“Ng.” The Emperor nodded as he called out, “Ask him to come in.”

Gao Zhan announced his entry with a sharp voice. A eunuch in black clothing entered, his body curled downwards. Falling to his knees, he said, “This servant pays respects to Your Majesty.”

“What is the matter?”

“Niang niang commanded this servant to submit a petition to Your Majesty. Concubine Jing niang niang has been engaging in traitorous affairs in Zhiluo Palace, and has been apprehended on site by (Empress) niang niang. Because she is Your Majesty’s beloved concubine, niang niang dares not punish her arbitrarily, and so has requested Your Majesty to head over to deal with her personally.”

The Liang Emperor was quite taken aback. He suddenly got up and overturned everything on the table before him. Tea, food, utensils, all fell onto the floor, splashing tea onto his imperial robe. All the frightened eunuchs and imperial maids in attendance in the hall quickly came over to clear up. Gao Zhan also hastily took a handkerchief and wiped the front of his robe clean.

“Say it one more time,” The Liang Emperor paid absolutely no attention to this chaos, his burning eyes fixed on that messenger eunuch, “Who is it? Concubine Jing?”

The trembling eunuch responded, “Yes.....it’s Concubine... Concubine Jing niang niang.....”

“Traitors! Traitors.....both you mother and son.....truly traitors!” The Liang Emperor trembled as he said these few words over and over again. All of a sudden, he descended the throne with large strides and kicked Prince Jing to the ground. “How well have I treated the both of you! Both of you, heartless and ungrateful!” His anger was still unabated and his leg kicked out again, twice.

“Your Majesty.....would you like to set out now?” Gao Zhan asked in a low voice after hurrying over to support the Liang Emperor’s unstable body.

The Liang Emperor his chest tightened and he wheezed slightly. He calmed down a little after taking a few breaths and pointed his finger at Prince Jing, cursing at him, “You little beast! You will kneel here! Once I have put your mother in her place, I will come and deal with you!”

Xia Jiang and Prince Yu exchanged quick glances after the Liang Emperor’s departure, both seeming to be very pleased with the timing of this development. To

avoid being caught out, however, both of them bowed in an inconspicuous manner and did not speak anymore, but watched silently and smugly as the Liang Emperor walked swiftly out in anger.

## CHAPTER 129

### *Crisis (II)*

At this moment, the tense atmosphere at Zhiluo Palace was at its peak. The people attending to Concubine Jing had been driven to the outer courtyard, and they were all kneeling on the ground en masse, buffeted by the cold wind. Empress Yan sat on the southern seat<sup>214</sup> in Concubine Jing's bedchamber, her face overcast with displeasure, her eyes narrowed in anger. Tossed at her feet was a wooden memorial tablet, bearing a few cracks from being thrown forcefully on the ground. It was facing upwards and the words written on it, "Yue Yao from the Lin Clan Formerly Concubine Chen of Great Liang", could be clearly seen. Connected to the bedchamber's western wall was a clean room that served as Concubine Jing's Buddha Hall.<sup>215</sup> In normal times, the door to this room would be closed, but today, the doors were wide open and from within, an overturned altar table could be seen, with fruits scattered messily all over.

Kneeling to her side was Concubine Jing. Compared to Empress Yan's icy demeanor, Concubine Jing was her usual picture of calm, her expression respectful and polite, revealing no trace of fear.

This was the scene that first greeted the Liang Emperor as he stormed angrily into Zhiluo Palace, his eyes sweeping across the room.

And when he had had a clear look at the interior of the side room, he immediately understood what the matter was.

At this moment, any changes to the Liang Emperor's emotional state was known only to him, but on the surface, his expression remained unchanged, and he still looked as grim and gloomy as before.

"This wife greets Your Majesty." Empress Yan got up and stepped forward to make her salutations.

"You are in charge of the harem. Why do issues keep cropping up? What's the commotion now?" He hurled these words at her, shaking his arms at her in anger, the

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<sup>214</sup> The owner / host's usual designated seat, presumably also the seat of "power"

<sup>215</sup> Room used for worship & making spiritual offerings

wide sleeves of his coat flapping violently.<sup>216</sup> The Liang Emperor strode past her to sit on the southern seat.

Empress Yan's eyebrows lifted involuntarily. She felt that there was something off with his tone, but since she had a firm handle on Concubine Jing, she kept her composure.

"Your Majesty, this wife is incompetent. Even though this wife had done all she could to enforce discipline in the imperial harem, this wife was still unable to suppress all petty traitors. Concubine Jing had committed the greatest treason of secretly setting up a memorial tablet for the criminal Lin Yue Yao in her Buddha Hall. This wife had failed to notice this and discovered it only today. This wife has neglected her duty and begs for pardon."

The Liang Emperor glanced coldly at her and said, "How did Concubine Jing explain herself?"

Empress Yan's eyes inadvertently revealed some resentment at being posed this question. She was obviously being rebuked.

"Your Majesty, Concubine Jing knows that she is guilty of the crime and has not said a word to defend herself since she was apprehended."

The Liang Emperor's mouth tightened. He had already anticipated such a reply and was a little moved by it. Looking at Concubine Jing, he felt his heart soften further.

Since Xia Jiang had evoked his memory of past events, the Liang Emperor did not have any peace in his heart for three whole days. He would wake from his dreams with a pounding heart in the middle of the night, and when he was awake, vague and indistinct fragments of the dream would linger. What's more, in that space between sleep and wakefulness, he would see a woman's silhouette swaying to and fro before his eyes, causing him to tremble in terror. When Concubine Jing had tried to soothe him, asking if maybe he dreamt of Concubine Chen because he missed her, it hit the mark on the burden he carried in his heart. But the Liang Emperor did not want his fear of Concubine Chen's soul to become hearsay, for it threatened the dignity of the Son of Heaven. This was why Concubine Jing suggested offering up sacrifice to Concubine Chen in secret in order to pacify her soul. Of course, the Liang Emperor immediately approved of this, and sure enough, he slept peacefully that night, all the way until dawn. He didn't expect to have this whole arrangement turned upside down after two days of peace.

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<sup>216</sup> The actual term used for his anger was "swinging his sleeves"



Concubine Jing knelt on the ice-cold floor, dressed plainly, her hair loose.<sup>217</sup> In order to conceal the Liang Emperor's secret, she had given up the right to defend herself, willingly accepting this serious accusation. Realizing this, the Liang Emperor felt a little inadequate at heart.

Of course, he couldn't proceed to vindicate Concubine Jing just because of this feeling of inadequacy, but he could think of a way to shield her.

"Where did Concubine Jing set up this Lin memorial?"

"In the Buddha Hall in her bedchamber. Your Majesty, please have a look. All the fruit and wine had already been prepared. She was obviously going to hold a memorial ceremony in secret."

"Since she had been holding the memorial ceremony in secret, this would naturally not have been public knowledge. How did you find out about it all the way from Zhenyang Palace?"

His tone of voice sounded even more off. Empress Yan muttered involuntarily to herself, then said, "Concubine Jing's palace maid was indignant with such treasonous behavior and came to Zhenyang Palace to report the matter in advance."

"Oh?" The Liang Emperor took another look around the room again, and saw Concubine Jing's personal maidservant Xin'er kneeling in the corner. He hadn't noticed her earlier. She was all curled up, trying her best not to attract attention. "Telling on your mistress is treason. How can such a creature remain in the palace? Guards, drag her out and beat her to death!"

At this command, a burly eunuch immediately appeared and dragged Xin'er to her feet. The terror stricken young palace maid cried out in a shrill voice, begging for mercy. "Your Majesty, spare your servant's life....Your Majesty.....niang niang.....Xin'er has been handling your affairs, you must save Xin'er....." Her wailing continued to be heard as she was dragged away, but it gradually faded until it became inaudible.

Empress Yan's face flushed crimson. The way the Liang Emperor handled this was tantamount to a slap to her face. She had always exercised restraint, but this time she couldn't help herself and stepped forward, saying, "Your Majesty has entrusted this wife with the order in the imperial harem, so it is natural to prohibit violations of etiquette and the law. Concubine Jing's crime has been clearly established and it is irrefutable. As the head of the six palaces (in the imperial harem), this wife cannot

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<sup>217</sup> The etiquette for a concubine who has committed a major fault. They would kneel to beg for forgiveness, their hairpin removed leaving the hair loose and luxurious clothes are replaced with plain ones.

tolerate this. If Your Majesty has another perspective, please enlighten this wife, otherwise this wife can only act according to the law.”

“You want my perspective?” The Liang Emperor looked coldly at her. “Why do you need my perspective on such a small matter? Do you want everyone to say that the imperial harem is unruly? Is this how someone who is supposed to set an example for virtue and moral excellence assists me? Do you know how valuable the peace and harmony of the imperial harem is?”

“Your Majesty thinks that this is a trivial matter, but this wife dares not treat it as a trivial matter. By setting up a memorial in the palace to offer sacrifice to a criminal in secret, Concubine Jing is clearly showing contempt for Your Majesty. Her intentions are truly alarming. How could such a big crime not be dealt with?”

Thus provoked, the Liang Emperor felt his anger rise, close to erupting, but he suppressed it. Turning to Concubine Jing, he said, “Concubine Jing, do you understand your crime?”

“This concubine understands her crime.” Concubine Jing kowtowed, and said calmly, “This concubine was confused by affections for her old friend and wanted to reminisce in secret, with no intention of showing contempt for Your Majesty. But this does not adhere to palace rules after all, so please confer blame on this concubine.”

The Liang Emperor snorted disapprovingly, slapping the table, intentionally responding with anger, “You call yourself a traitor then say that you were merely confused by affection for an old friend. How is this understanding your crime? You obviously do not understand! Guards, confine Concubine Jing in Zhiluo Palace to reflect on her errors. She is not allowed to leave her palace without an imperial decree. I will return when you have thought it through clearly.”

“Your Majesty!” Empress Yan called out urgently to him.

“I have already handled this matter as you had requested. What else do you want?” The Liang Emperor cast a sidelong glance at her, waving his hand. Looking at the memorial tablet on the floor, he looked at Concubine Jing meaningfully and said, “You are now atoning for your guilt and the privilege of serving your Emperor will be halved. Clean this mess up yourself and put everything in order.”

Concubine Jing’s eyes flashed her understanding. She bowed again and said, “This concubine obeys.”

(Speaking to Empress Yan,) “You’ve worked hard too. Return to your palace.” The Liang Emperor stood up, his face weary. “There have been so many matters to attend to recently. You must learn to share my burden. Gao Zhan, the Phoenix Tail silk received as tribute over the Lunar New Year, have you delivered it as I ordered?”

Gao Zhan replied quick-wittedly, “Your Majesty, there was a delay in settling the inventory today. Your servant will immediately arrange for someone to deliver it.”

“Just make sure you remember. Let’s depart.” The Liang Emperor did not look back at Concubine Jing. Assisted by Gao Zhan, he proceeded out. Empress Yan saw him out to the carriage according to etiquette. As she watched the imperial dragon carriage wind its way away, anger blazed in her heart, but there was nothing she could do about it. All she could do was cast a hateful glare back at Zhiluo Palace’s quiet and beautiful vine covered gates, swallow her anger and return to her own Zhenyang Palace.

“Your Majesty, are you going back to Wuying Hall? Or are you going back to the Warm Pavilion to rest?” Gao Zhan walked timidly over to inquire when the imperial dragon carriage arrived at a fork after passing by the Phoenix Pond. The Liang Emperor hesitated for a while, his expression uncertain.

When he had first departed Wuying Hall to attend to the report, he was enraged. But now that his anger with Concubine Jing had evaporated, his anger at Prince Jing had also subsided substantially. At the same time, his suspicions had arisen over how both these matters concerning Prince Jing and Concubine Jing followed so closely one after the other. Since he had realized that one of them had been wronged, then what about the other?

“Go to Wuying Hall.” The Liang Emperor rubbed the area between his eyebrows, leaning back in exhaustion. He was beginning to miss Concubine Jing’s gentle massages. “This matter still needs to be dealt with. There are still things I need to clarify.”

“Yes.” Gao Zhan dared not say anything more. He gestured forcefully with his hand to notify the eunuchs to turn right and exit from Xin Jian Gate, and they soon arrived at Wuying Hall. Xia Jiang and Prince Jing were still waiting, one standing, the other kneeling, unchanged from before. Seeing his footprint on Prince Jing’s torso, he couldn’t help but feel a little soft-hearted.

“Father Emperor, please take your time with your questions. Don’t get angry again. It’s difficult for your son to watch.....” Prince Yu did not waste any time, saying these words earnestly as soon as he had paid his respects. But the Liang Emperor’s expression seemed a little calmer at this moment, making him a little uneasy, and he couldn’t help but open his mouth to try to provoke him again.

“Your Majesty,” Xia Jiang didn’t expect the Liang Emperor to return with such a calm and mild expression, and he asked softly, “That urgent matter reported by niang niang.....”

“My wife was merely creating a fuss in the imperial harem. It wasn’t anything serious. There’s no need to ask further.” The Liang Emperor cut him off with these

words and said with a grim voice, “Continue with the confrontation. Where did we stop?”

Xia Jiang had been serving the Liang Emperor for many years, and had been cut off in a similar manner a few times in the past. He immediately sensed that something had gone wrong, that events were not unfolding as expected. It was quite possible that the storm they had deliberately set off in the imperial harem had achieved the opposite effect.

Who would have thought that the quiet and unassuming Concubine Jing would have such ability to persuade.....

He didn’t attempt to pursue this thread of conversation. Prince Jing had already raised his head and begun speaking. “We had spoken until the clash between Xuanjing Bureau and the Capital Patrol. For now, let’s disregard who is responsible for causing this conflict. The conflict happened right in the middle of the streets. Is Director Xia saying that my Capital Patrol was trying to break the prisoner away on the main streets?”

“Before the Xuanjing Bureau soldiers had left the building in pursuit, the perpetrators had already broken into Xuanjing.....”

“Is that a joke?” Prince Jing’s expression was cold. “Is Xuanjing Bureau the kind of place that one can simply break into if he chooses? Your Majesty, you are fully aware of Xuanjing Bureau’s military strength. What kind of men do I have in my command? None of my men left my mansion without permission today. The officers in my command are registered with the Board of War. Perhaps you would like to examine their records to see who among them is skilled enough to break into Xuanjing Bureau? What’s more, everyone is well aware that your dungeon has multiple layers of security to prevent anyone from escaping. Even if I really wanted to rescue Wei Zheng from within, I must also have the ability to do so!”

Hearing this, the Liang Emperor frowned, “Explain clearly, Minister Xia. How did they manage to break into the dungeon?”

Xia Jiang straightened, hesitating a while. “Your Majesty, Wei Zheng.....was rescued from the Imperial Court of Justice.....”

“What?” The Liang Emperor asked in confusion. “How did the Imperial Court of Justice get involved?”

Xia Jiang did not bring up the Imperial Court of Justice earlier in order to set up a trap for Prince Jing. He had hoped to trick Prince Jing into being the first to mention it but had failed, and his words caught up with him, putting him in an awkward position.

“When this old minister came in, this old minister reported to Your Majesty that Xuanjing Bureau and the Imperial Court of Justice were attacked in succession. The criminal was broken out of the Imperial Court of Justice prison as he had been transferred there.”

Prince Jing’s eyes were ice-cold, and he replied dispassionately, “Not imprisoning such an important prisoner in Xuanjing Bureau but in the Imperial Court of Justice. Did Director Xia intend for someone to break the prisoner out or not? Alright, let’s say the prisoner was rescued from the Imperial Court of Justice, then does Director Xia mean to say.....that my Capital Patrol also created chaos outside the Imperial Court of Justice to obstruct your pursuit, under the pretext of arresting the bandits?”

The soldiers of both Capital Patrol and Xuanjing Bureau were of course not in the surrounding neighborhood when the conflict happened in the Imperial Court of Justice, which is why Xia Jiang was made speechless for a while. Prince Yu couldn’t help himself and interjected, “Jingyan, I was already here when Director Xia entered. He didn’t actually say anything other than explaining the facts of the matter to Father Emperor, that the prisoner had been broken free, and that the Capital Patrol was outside Xuanjing Bureau obstructing the pursuit. That’s all. As for holding you suspect, that is of course according to Father Emperor’s sage wisdom and ability to immediately grasp the truth of the matter. That’s why you were summoned to this confrontation. If you are innocent, all you needed to do was refute this. Why are you being so aggressive towards Director Xia?”

Prince Jing sneered. “Prince Yu xiong, were you there at the time of the incident?”

Prince Yu was stunned by this question. “Why would I have been there?”

“Did Prince Yu xiong receive an imperial decree to take charge of the Wei Zheng case?”

Prince Yu froze again. “No, no.....”

“Since Prince Yu xiong is neither an eyewitness nor the person in charge of the case, this matter has nothing to do with you. Father Emperor is here. Why are you so anxious?”

Prince Yu did not expect Prince Jing to be so unyielding. His face turned green, and when he noticed the Liang Emperor being deep in thought, he felt his anxiety mount, and could not help saying in a loud voice, “Prince Jing! Father Emperor said that you don’t recognize him either as Emperor or father.<sup>218</sup> I see that this is really true. I am your royal elder brother. How can you speak to me like this? With your wilful and disobedient character, I foresee that you would not be able to evade this

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<sup>218</sup> Corresponds to what the Emperor said in the earlier chapter, “no Emperor, no father”.

responsibility! What kind of person is Wei Zheng? He is the deputy general of the traitorous Lin Shu. At that time, you were such good friends with that Lin Shu and were like hand in glove. Who doesn't know that? In this capital, who else could cause such a big upheaval other than you?"

As Prince Yu was redirecting the topic under discussion, Xia Jiang had already slowly recovered himself. He knew that moving the prisoner to the Imperial Court of Justice was his error, and could not continue to pursue this line of thought in His Majesty's presence. Before the Liang Emperor could speak and inquire further, he quickly stepped forward and fell to his knees, saying, "Your Majesty, this minister knows that he did not obtain substantial evidence and had originally no intention of speaking irresponsibly. It's just that Your Majesty had commanded this minister to speak, so this minister dared not stay silent. But in the face of such accusations, His Highness Prince Jing must naturally spare no effort in defending himself, so it would be difficult to arrive at any conclusion. On the contrary, these arguments would only continue to provoke Your Majesty's anger. But.....breaking into a government office to rescue a traitor is a very serious matter, and cannot be ignored simply because it is difficult to examine it closely. Xuanjing Bureau lost hold of the prisoner. In this matter, this old minister bears full responsibility. If this minister does not carry out a full investigation and get to the bottom of this matter, this minister would feel ashamed to face Your Majesty. It's just that the situation is complex and involves members of the royal family and nobility. This old minister would like to prevent anyone connected to it from obstructing investigations. Please grant this favour."

The Liang Emperor glanced at Prince Jing and muttered briefly to himself. He was feeling suspicious again, and this statement hit straight at the heart of this matter. In any case, he wanted it properly clarified, and if anyone was wronged in the process, he didn't care.

"Then Minister Xia will be responsible for investigating this thoroughly. But.....there is no need to investigate Prince Jing's men if they had not left his mansion. If you intend to involve anyone under him, you should still inform him first beforehand. Jingyan, you must understand that you are now still the lead suspect. If Minister Xia informs you beforehand who he intends to interrogate, you cannot obstruct him."

Xiao Jingyan's face was stretched taut, but there was nothing more he could say. He could only kowtow, saying, "Your son obeys."

"Many thanks to Your Highness Prince Jing." A cold smile that looked like it had been tainted with the poisonous waters of hell flitted across Xia Jiang's face, before he replied, each word and sentence deliberately spoken. "This minister now intends to summon a very important person to Xuanjing Bureau. Your Majesty, please grant permission to leave. I'm afraid if I'm a step too late, this person would anticipate this and take the opportunity to escape punishment....."

“Oh,” The Liang Emperor raised his eyebrows in curiosity and looked at him. “Who are you talking about?”

“Su zhe.” As Xia Jiang spat out these two words, he fixed his eyes on Prince Jing. “If we can pry this person’s mouth open, this matter would be made very clear, no matter how complex.”

## CHAPTER 130

### *Confrontation (I)*

As Xia Jiang observed Prince Jing's expression closely, Prince Yu also fixed his eyes on his younger brother. In a flash, this prince knew that Xia Jiang was an old ginger with a really spicy kick.<sup>219</sup> With just one move, he had hit Prince Jing's weak spot, suddenly balancing out their unfavourable position.

But it was a pity that the Liang Emperor did not see the violently shaken expression that flashed across Prince Jing's face, because at that moment, his eyes were squinted, apparently trying to remember who Su zhe was.

"The person you're referring to.....is he the supposedly famous talent, Su zhe, whom Princess Nihuang recommended to be my chief examiner for the written examination?" It didn't take this wise Liang Emperor long to recall this. "He also defeated that Northern Yan that....that person before....with three young boys. I really like that Su zhe. How is he also involved in this matter?"

"Is Your Majesty aware of this Su zhe's other identity?"

"Oh? What is that?"

"Although Your Majesty is in the court, has Your Majesty heard of the Lang Ya Rankings?"

"Naturally."

"Looking at the new list this year, Jiangzuo Alliance ranks as the largest secret society on earth for the fifth time in a row. This Su zhe is actually Jiangzuo Alliance's current chief, Mei Changsu. Is Your Majesty aware of this?"

"I am aware."

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<sup>219</sup> I know this sounds awkward but I couldn't resist retaining this. Essentially, it means that Xia Jiang was a veteran who still had all his moves. It's also a play on his name, because the Chinese word for ginger is "jiang"



“Er....” Xia Jiang did not expect this. “Your Majesty is aware?”

“I have had a chat with Su zhe before, during a tea tasting session. He had informed me who he was at the time.” The Liang Emperor fixed his eyes on Xia Jiang. “Su zhe is certainly exceptional, and has the heart to serve the country. If it wasn’t for his poor health, I would have employed him. Why, do you mean to say he got close to Jingyan while recuperating in the capital?”

“This minister has not been back in the capital for very long and dare not speak carelessly, but everyone knows who Mei Changsu serves.”

Prince Jing met Xia Jiang’s gaze without flinching. “I don’t know how you came to that conclusion. After Su zhe was recognized by Your Majesty, nine out of ten in the capital strove to befriend him. Princess Nihuang is well-known for holding him in the greatest esteem. Xuanjing Bureau’s Xia Dong and Xia Chun have also been to the Su Residence as guests. The Su Residence compound was also recommended by Commander Meng. The number of times Prince Yu xiong had paid a visit to Mei Changsu far exceeds mine. The person leading the many processions to present gifts to the Su Residence was also Prince Yu xiong. If I manage even to get a seat (at his table), no matter how inferior a seat, I would consider myself lucky. In spite of all this, how does one finally conclude that Mei Changsu is serving me?”

The most frustrating thing for Prince Yu was that no matter how much he investigated, he couldn’t figure out how Mei Changsu and Prince Jing kept in touch when they so rarely had contact. He was going to defend himself at this point, but Xia Jiang was already a step ahead. “Very well. Since Mei Changsu does not serve Your Highness Prince Jing, it makes this easier to handle. Your Highness shouldn’t mind if I wanted to interrogate this person, right?”

Prince Jing’s heart sank, and just as he was wondering how he should respond, the Liang Emperor said, “Since he and Jingyan are not particularly close, why interrogate him for no reason?”

“Your Majesty, every one of the rebels who attacked Xuanjing Bureau possesses the skills of a martial arts master. In the capital today, who else other than Jiangzuo Alliance’s chief is capable of organizing such a large group of martial arts masters? This minister believes that interrogating Mei Changsu will yield some results.”

Prince Jing responded through gritted teeth. “This is a case of giving a dog a bad name before hanging him. Doesn’t the Lang Ya Rankings include many unusually skilled and esteemed men? Just because you say it’s him, does that make him the only one? Aren’t you afraid that others would ridicule<sup>220</sup> Xuanjing Bureau for using intuition as evidence to handle this case?”

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<sup>220</sup> Hai Yan describes this as “laugh until their teeth drop”

“But it’s just an interrogation. Why is Your Highness Prince Jing so anxious? Whether Mister Su is good or evil, he is after all His Majesty’s visiting guest. What can I do to him? It’s just a conversation to clear things up. It really has nothing to do with his affairs. I will make sure he leaves Xuanjing Bureau intact, without a single injury. That’s the sum of it.”

As he said these words, he deliberately set his eyebrows in a ruthless expression to make Prince Jing even more anxious. Xuanjing Bureau’s methods of interrogation had been passed on from one generation to the next. They did not leave a scar, yet left a person feeling as good as dead. Mei Changsu’s greatest weakness was his health. Imagining that weak and pale body entering Xuanjing Bureau, Prince Jing felt his heart twist involuntarily.

“Father Emperor, Mister Su is in poor health, of this you are aware. He is also someone with a great reputation. The court should value such talent, and treat him with the appropriate courtesy and respect. What kind of reputation would we have if we engaged in such bullying and humiliation as we please without any basis? What’s more, Xuanjing Bureau reports directly to Your Majesty and acts according to Your Majesty’s orders. In the event of any mishap, it’s not Director Xia who will receive the people’s criticism, but you, Father Emperor!”

“Jingyan aren’t you over-exaggerating?” Prince Yu said, “According to what you said just now, I have a better relationship with Mei Changsu, and I don’t think it’s a big issue. He might be a reputable scholar, but he is also after all, a royal subject, so why should he be untouchable? Father Emperor trusts Director Xia’s behavior. How can you not? In the end, it’s merely for the sake of asking Mei Changsu a few questions. Why do you behave like someone with a guilty conscience? At this moment, let’s not mention Father Emperor, even I am beginning to be a little suspicious of you.”

What he said wasn’t wrong. Prince Jing’s earnest attempts to defend Mei Changsu aroused the Liang Emperor’s suspicions. Moreover, the Liang Emperor believed in his bones that Prince Jing certainly had sufficient courage and motivation to pursue this matter of the prisoner rescue. He also believed that with Xia Jiang’s wealth of experience and keen judgment, he wouldn’t direct an attack at Prince Jing without any basis. Of course, he also understood in his heart that Prince Yu was taking advantage of the situation. In his view, however, it was acceptable for royal princes to fight because he believed in his ability to control and suppress them. But his greatest fear lay in the possibility of Prince Jing really employing force to break a prisoner out of jail without care or consideration, and succeeding unexpectedly.

Therefore, having to choose between suppressing Prince Yu or Prince Jing, he preferred first to suppress Prince Jing and investigate the matter thoroughly in order to set his own mind at ease.

“Minister Xia, I grant you permission to investigate according to what you have mentioned. Investigate it thoroughly. Make sure it is unequivocal and not something that is fabricated. Don’t go from pillar to post with me!”

“Father Emperor, your son thinks.....”

“Keep quiet! Do you not realize that you are yourself a suspect? Have you no fear of the law of your lord and father in your heart?” Prince Jing’s persistently stubborn expression reminded the Liang Emperor of a time before when another son was similarly unwilling to lower his head, and his face immediately turned ugly. “Regardless, your Capital Patrol has been implicated. If we don’t investigate, how would you be absolved? Deliver an imperial order. The Capital Patrol will be temporarily taken over by the Ministry of War. Prince Jing is to return to his residence to contemplate in silence and he is not allowed to enter the palace without an imperial decree.”

Gao Zhan stole a glance at the expressions of everyone in the hall and quietly responded with just a simple “Yes”.

This time the imperial debate was forcibly suspended by the Liang Emperor. The facade had been ripped apart. He had already observed that both Xia Jiang and Prince Yu had colluded to attack Prince Jing. But whether these two men were only “attacking” or “framing” he was unclear, which is why it was very necessary to allow this matter to cool off for a time and for more evidence to emerge.

After Xia Jiang left the court, he immediately summoned his men and headed straight for the Su Residence. He was worried that Mei Changsu had absconded, but he also harboured some hope that Mei Changsu would abscond because running away indicated a guilty conscience and fear of punishment for a crime committed. But if he really ran away and was unable to be captured, that would be a case of loss outweighing gains.

This unsettled court atmosphere became calm when it reached the Su Residence. Mei Changsu remained peacefully in his residence. He did not abscond, even though this Jiangzuo Alliance chief had obviously already anticipated that Xia Jiang would come.

Previously, when he had said the words “And also.....” to Prince Jing, Mei Changsu was actually referring to himself. Though he was on the verge of saying what was on his mind, he held back because he knew that there would be no benefit in saying it. Prince Jing wouldn’t be persuaded by the words “Don’t argue with Xia Jiang when he wants to deal with me” to really look on and not speak, and would still be recklessly disobedient when the time came.

Li Gang had already brought Fei Liu out beforehand. The “Must Not Resist” order had already been sternly communicated to all his subordinates, so even though Zhen

Ping had to grit his teeth until he nearly ground them to pieces while they waited, Mei Changsu calmly followed Xia Jiang, undeterred, to Xuanjing Bureau.

Actually, Xuanjing Bureau was not a place that was unfamiliar to him. He used to regularly tag along with Nie Feng to walk about its vicinity, but considering today's circumstances, it's as if it were a lifetime ago.

Xia Jiang did not interrogate him that evening, merely pushed him into a narrow black room, locking him for the night. It had just enough space to turn one's body around, but to prevent him from freezing to death, sufficient bedding was provided.

The next day, Mei Changsu was dragged out of his quilt and brought to a pavilion facing the water. Xia Jiang was there waiting, dressed fully in black, standing with his hands clasped behind his back. When they met, he smiled genially.

"Mister Su, you have learnt a lot about the world, and have a lot of knowledge and experience. Do you know what kind of place this is?"

"Hell." Mei Changsu looked at him, returning a faint smile, "Ghosts and malevolent spirits from the netherworld, nothing living, only demons and monsters."

"Mister Su, you flatter. I'm just skilled at removing someone's skin and flesh to reveal their real lungs and intestines, that's all." Xia Jiang gestured with his hand. "Please sit, Mister Su."

"Many thanks."

"I don't normally invite anyone here for no reason. Once I do, unless I let him go, he wouldn't be able to fly out of here even if he had wings." Xia Jiang pushed a cup of tea towards him. "Prince Jing knows that Mister Su is here as a guest, but he can't even defend himself now, much less you."

"I think so too." Mei Changsu nodded his head serenely. He picked up the cup of tea with both hands, carefully looked at the color of the tea before taking a sip. Suddenly he frowned and said, "Isn't this tea just terrible? The person in charge must be embezzling the tea money. Director Xia, why don't you look into it?"

Xia Jiang did not pay attention to his words and continued. "I know Mister Su is a rare talent, with an extraordinary strength of will that is incomparable. But I have seen many such hard-boned<sup>221</sup> people. Do you recall a military embezzlement case I had handled before? The general who was involved had a mouth that was unyielding as anything, but after two days here, he surrendered a complete name list of his accomplices."

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<sup>221</sup> dauntless & unyielding

“He confessed? I heard he went mad.”

“He went mad after he had confessed. I didn’t allow him to go mad before that. I have always known how far to go and when to stop.” Xia Jiang said dispassionately, “I wonder what Mister Su thinks. Would you like to confess obediently or stay here for two days like that general?”

Mei Changsu held his forehead in his hands, seriously pondering for a good while, before finally saying, “Then I will confess.”

Xia Jiang had just entered a state (of being),<sup>222</sup> but he was jolted out of it when he unexpectedly heard these words

“What would Director Xia like me to confess? That I colluded with Prince Jing?” Mei Changsu replied rapidly, “That’s right. I have been colluding with Prince Jing since early on. Wei Zheng’s rescue was instigated by Prince Jing and I orchestrated it. After we stormed Xuanjing Bureau and realized that the guards were too few, we knew it was a trap and withdrew. Oh yes, when we withdrew, the Capital Patrol helped us, which was why we managed to escape. Director Xia, you came back after that. My informer who was at the main gates of Xuanjing Bureau noticed that your actions were a little odd, and secretly followed behind you. When you led him to the Imperial Court of Justice, he was pleasantly surprised to learn that Wei Zheng was there. As a result, we were besides ourselves and immediately beat you up, before seizing the traitor. That’s how everything happened. Is there anything else you are unclear about?”

Xia Jiang had interrogated many people behind Xuanjing Bureau’s closed doors, but had never encountered such a prisoner and it took great effort to maintain his composure. Observing Mei Changsu, he kept his tone grim as he said, “Do you know what you have just confessed?”

“I know.” Mei Changsu said lightly, “You can write a statement according to what I had just confessed. When you have written it, bring it to me and I will put my signature on it. Once I have signed it, you can bring this statement to His Majesty then this case will be settled and everyone can relax.”

Xia Jiang suddenly understood Mei Changsu’s meaning. The implications of this case were too great, and as it happens, sorely lacking in evidence. The Liang Emperor would be unlikely to arrive at a final conclusion so easily based on such a statement. When the time arrived, he would definitely summon Mei Changsu in to personally interrogate him. Suppose this Qilin talent withdrew his confession then and charged

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<sup>222</sup> This is a literal translation which I struggled with. I presume it either means that MCS was pondering for VERY LONG or he was already preparing to extract a forced confession from MCS

Xia Jiang with “extorting this confession through torture and forcing him to incriminate Prince Jing”, he would really be unsure of the Liang Emperor’s reaction.

“Mei Changsu, don’t be too pleased with yourself. Things have reached such a stage and you are still so stubborn. Could it be that you desire to experience my Xuanjing Bureau methods?”

“That’s strange,” Mei Changsu put on an innocent expression. “I have already confessed and yet you still say that I am stubborn. Do you think my statement would sound a little better after you hit me? That as long as I have experienced your methods, His Majesty would not summon me for an inquiry? I have already confessed that I was instigated by Prince Jing. Is it possible that you have someone else whom you want me to confess about?”

“If you want to confess, you should confess thoroughly,” Xia Jiang came closer, saying, “Tell me, where is Wei Zheng now?”

“He has already left the capital.”

“Impossible!” Xia Jiang sneered. “Before I entered the palace yesterday, I had ordered men to keep guard at the Western Gate and examine all passersby. Even if the Capital Patrol wanted to leave, they wouldn’t be able to. Now that Prince Jing has his hands tied, this capital is even more like an iron bucket.<sup>223</sup> Unless Wei Zheng has a means of escape, he would never be able to get out.”

“These words are too boastful. If there is a way into the iron bucket, there is a way out. As long as people can leave the capital, there is also an opportunity for Wei Zheng to get away.”

“Mr Su certainly knows how to joke. I know that Wei Zheng has multiple injuries and cannot even stand and walk. These two days, nothing placed horizontally has gone out without being scrutinized by my men, not one carriage, travelling box, nothing that can carry a person. I have even ordered them to pry open and examine coffins closely. Come, tell me how Wei Zheng was smuggled out.”

Mei Changsu revealed a slight smile, “Do you really want me to tell you?”

“Of course.”

“If I don’t, will you resort to your methods?”

“I’m glad you’re aware.”

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<sup>223</sup> tightly encircled

“Then I have no choice.” Mei Changsu swirled his teacup, toying with it. “Your soldiers were very thorough, but....they still missed examining something.....”

“Impossible!”

“They did. For example, one of your people from Xuanjing Bureau.”

Xia Jiang’s pupils suddenly contracted. “I have already ordered men to keep watch on Xia Dong. She couldn’t possibly have....”

“Not Xia Dong. Xia Chun....”

“”Nonsense.” Xia Jiang immediately gave a snort of contempt., obviously trusting Xia Chun completely.

“Hear me out. It was Xia Chun’s wife.....didn’t she receive news that her father was seriously ill yesterday, leaving the capital urgently to return to her family?”

Xia Jiang’s expression stiffened immediately. This was Xia Chun’s domestic affair so he didn’t pay any attention though he was aware of it. If it was Xia Chun’s wife leaving town, the Xuanjing Bureau soldiers would definitely not have scrutinized it too closely but how could Mei Changsu possibly have devised a way to smuggle Wei Zheng out as part of Xia Chun’s wife’s retinue?

“Xia Chun’s wife is from Wudang, right? She has a nephew called Li Xiao, right? As chance would have it, I had once done Li Xiao a favour, and in his gratitude, he would frequently visit me to pay his respects. Li Xiao accompanied Xia Chun’s wife this time so I asked him to help me relay a box of local goods to Langzhou. Do you think he would have refused? Once this box leaves the capital as part of Xia Chun’s wife’s retinue, arrives in a secluded place and gets seized by robbers, that wouldn’t be entirely impossible, would it?” Mei Changsu looked on leisurely as Xia Jiang’s expression increasingly contorted in anger. “Director Xia, Wei Zheng is no longer in the capital. You can no longer capture him. It’s time to give up.”

## CHAPTER 131

### *Confrontation (II)*

For a split second, Xia Jiang really wanted to drag Mei Changsu up and crush all his bones one by one, but with his many years of mental cultivation he was able to immediately restrain himself, barely holding his clenched fist in check.

Ultimately, because Mei Changsu was not Wei Zheng, not only did he have to be careful when torturing him, he also had to have a purpose for doing so. He wasn't so infantile as to torture him just to vent his anger.

Moreover, with all his years of experience leading the Xuanjing Bureau, Xia Jiang only needed a moment's contact to decide that torture would be wasted on Mei Changsu. This is because, first of all, the strong perseverance seeping out from within his bones could not be ignored. Secondly, he was in such poor health that one touch could result in a mishap. If that happened, even though he hadn't actually extorted a confession from Mei Changsu, it would seem like he did.

Xia Jiang recalled Prince Yu mentioning Mei Changsu's constantly wary expression before. At the time, he thought that Prince Yu was exaggerating. Today, after crossing swords with him for the first time, he realized that this Qilin talent was really somebody who wasn't easy to deal with.<sup>224</sup>

"Director Xia," Mei Changsu seemed very pleased as he observed Xia Jiang's pale face, and he remained smiling as if the moon was white and the wind was clear.<sup>225</sup> "I have known since early on that you would come and look for me. I could have fled. Even if I couldn't get out of the capital, the capital is so big it would have been easy to hide. But do you know why I didn't flee?"

Xia Jiang's gaze hardened, but he tried to conceal his rising emotions. "You think that I wouldn't be able to do anything to you."

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<sup>224</sup> trivia: the metaphor used was "you couldn't save oil with this lamp"

<sup>225</sup> (I think) this is a reference to a poem. Essentially I presume it means "as if everything was just fine". I've kept this simply because it's beautiful.



“Yes, you simply cannot do anything to me. I’m also not afraid of you.” Mei Changsu smiled faintly, and anyone who saw him would think him refined and elegant, except for Xia Jiang. Xia Jiang just felt that he needed a good beating. “Director Xia, you have no real intention for me to die here in Xuanjing Bureau because that would bring you more trouble than you would like. Leaving aside what His Majesty would think, Jiangzuo Alliance would be the first to come after you. Although Jianghu people are not as noble as Director Xia, but put together, they will not be easy to deal with. And it goes without saying that I have a bit of a reputation and have made quite a few friends.....”

Xia Jiang’s face tightened and he said nothing.

“Not letting me die here means letting me live, but what’s the point of letting me live? Naturally it’s because you have more questions to ask me,” Mei Changsu looked into the distance and continued, “On this, you don’t have to worry. I cannot repeatedly endure torture, and don’t intend to be tortured. I’ll answer all your questions. But will my confession really be of any use to you? Would you be willing to allow me to be interrogated by His Majesty? Of course not. Because you wouldn’t be able to control me. You’re afraid that when the time comes, I would get confused and suddenly speak some undesirable words before His Majesty.....”

“You would definitely withdraw your confession before His Majesty,” Xia Jiang snorted coldly. “That’s why you confessed so happily.”

“That’s not all. I confessed so quickly because I was afraid you would resort to torture. I would have had to confess sooner or later. Why would I want to hold on to that guilt? Isn’t it just a confession after all? If that is what Director Xia wants, how dare I disobey.....” At this point, Xia Jiang suddenly grabbed hold of Mei Changsu’s pulse,<sup>226</sup> and an internal force jolted forward. Instantly, it felt like icy thorns were piercing and twisting in his heart, causing such pain that Mei Changsu’s whole body contracted upwards.

“Su zhe, it’s not a good idea to annoy me,” Xia Jiang shook off his wrist and coldly watched the person opposite lying on the table like a white sheet of paper. “You are in my hands now. I can treat you however I choose. It would be good for you to remember that.”

Mei Changsu chuckled softly as he pressed a cold hand to his forehead. “Alright, I will keep that in mind. So, how does Director Xia intend to deal with me?”

“I want the truth.”

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<sup>226</sup> technically, one can only grab the wrist, but the translation was “pulse” and I’ve left it at that because it is a key gateway in traditional Chinese medicine

“Isn’t what I said just now the truth? Could it be that I didn’t collude with Prince Jing, didn’t break in and rescue a prisoner, and didn’t arrange for men to fight with you?”

“You know what I’m asking,” Xia Jiang ignored his taunts and leaned his head a little closer to him, “Mei Changsu, why did you choose Prince Jing?”

Mei Changsu raised his head slightly, his mocking smile fading, replaced with a solemn expression. “Between the former Crown Prince, Prince Yu and Prince Jing, I of course choose Prince Jing, because he is the best.”

“Prince Jing is the best?”

“Of course.” Mei Changsu said coldly, “Even if my foresight is not always accurate, it’s still slightly better than Director Xia’s.”

“But you actually don’t have to choose anyone,” Xia Jiang fixed his stare into Mei Changsu’s eyes. “You are Gentleman Mei who holds Jiangzuo Alliance, the world’s largest secret society with all its fame and fortune, in the palm of your hands. You could be free and unfettered, and live out your life in Jianghu. Why do you want to get embroiled in this capital city’s murky waters?”

“Does Director Xia not know how I first came to be in the capital?”

“Qilin talent, obtain him, obtain the world. I am definitely familiar with this comment. At first, I also thought you really came here because you were being pursued closely by the former Crown Prince and Prince Yu, and so had no choice but to enter the capital. Now that I have taken you on, I can confirm that this was completely unfounded, because with your intelligence, nobody could force you to be involved in court affairs if you really didn’t want to be.”

“To be given such high praise, I can’t thank you enough.” Mei Changsu half rose in polite salutation.

“So, why are you doing this? Do you wish to have the wealth of a high ranking official? Or gain authority over everything on earth? Or a reputation to be handed down to all future generations?”

Mei Changsu asked him seriously, “All three of those that you have just mentioned, can I possibly desire them?”

“Or perhaps.....it’s for something else.....” Xia Jiang grabbed hold of his pulse again and said coldly in an ominous tone, “Mei Changsu, tell me the truth.....”

Mei Changsu looked at him silently for a while, and asked, “This has nothing to do with Wei Zheng’s rescue.”

“Of course it has.” Xia Jiang’s pupils suddenly became deep and bottomless. “I had underestimated you before, so I didn’t think too much about it. Now, after being defeated by your people, I have begun to seriously reflect on things. The more I think it over, the more I feel I am unable to understand why you would help Prince Jing to do such a stupid thing..... For an advisor of your level, it’s easy to discern that the best way to deal with Wei Zheng’s case is to ignore it. The most insane and illogical course of action is to have a treasonous charge imposed on you for taking him by force.....why did you make the worst possible choice?”

“It’s not so simple,” Mei Changsu replied indifferently, “I wanted to ingratiate myself with Prince Jing. After rescuing Wei Zheng, my influence over Prince Jing would increase exponentially. My standing in Prince Jing’s household would also be different. Of course, there was a second reason. I truly believed that even if I chose the worst possible path, I would still beat you.”

“Do you think you have won?”

“Do you think I have lost?”

“Don’t forget, you are still in my hands.”

“That’s because I was willing to come. I wanted to see how long you can hold on to me, to see how you plan to make use of me.....”

“It seems that you really have no fear,” Xia Jiang’s finger tapped lightly on his pulse, “Mei Changsu, since establishing Xuanjing Bureau, there hasn’t been a prisoner I haven’t been able to deal with. You won’t be the exception.”

“Director Xia’s self-confidence doesn’t seem to be any less than mine,” Mei Changsu raised his other hand and pressed it down on his chest. “Shall I get ready for another round?”

“I was just playing with you. Other than causing you pain, it’s not a very useful tool.” Xia Jiang’s lips curled into a cold smile as he asked, “Mei Changsu, are you afraid of dying?”

Mei Changsu muttered momentarily to himself, then said, “If one is not afraid to die then why still bother staying alive?”

“Well said.” Xia Jiang’s smile became even more inscrutable, “I asked you just now why you wanted to get embroiled in the affairs of the court and you changed the topic, obviously unwilling to answer. It’s alright if you don’t want to answer me. In any case, whatever your purpose might be, you still haven’t achieved it today. I presume you would be unwilling to die before achieving them?”

“I’m also not willing to die after achieving them.” Mei Changsu smiled as he said that.

“Naturally. Once a person is dead, everything ceases to exist. Life is always the most important.” Xia Jiang sighed ruefully while removing a small bottle from within his robes. He turned it over and a small black pill spilled out. “Do you know what this is?”

“I’m guessing.....it’s not medicine?”

“It’s poison.”

“You intend to poison me to death?”

“That depends on you.” Xia Jiang’s voice sounded cruel and heartless. “This Wujin pill<sup>227</sup> will show its effects seven days after ingesting. If the antidote is taken within the seven days, then death will not occur.”

Of course, Mei Changsu was an intelligent man, and Xia Jiang didn’t need to elaborate further. “If you are pleased with my performance when His Majesty summons me, you will give me the antidote. Otherwise I’m dead, is that right?”

“You are absolutely right.”

“Why should I believe that you would give me the antidote? What if you don’t follow through after that?”

“You are in my hands. You have no choice but to trust me.”

“So, let’s put it another way. Why are you so sure that I would definitely comply with your orders just to get the antidote? What if I am so loyal to Prince Jing to the extent that I would rather die than sell him out?”

“Reflecting on your true motive, you didn’t come to the capital to express your loyalty to Prince Jing. Although I do not know yet what it is, I will inevitably find out one day.”

Mei Changsu narrowed his eyes, looked directly at him for a while and smiled. “Director Xia, you don’t look at all like a gambler. Why are you suddenly taking chances? Based on this conjecture alone, why would you believe that I wouldn’t withdraw my confession when I am before His Majesty ?”

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<sup>227</sup> black gold / coal pill

“Of course not. I have made other arrangements.” Xia Jiang raised his right hand and pointed his finger high up in the air in the direction of a weeping willow five steps away from the pavilion, snapping off a dry twig which fell straight to the ground.

“That’s a very good cut the air<sup>228</sup> move! Only one who is a specialist in interior martial arts<sup>229</sup> can do this.” Mei Changsu praised him and applauded in admiration.

“Once you appear before His Majesty, if you dare to speak foolishly at will, you would be like that dry twig before you’ve even finished speaking.”

“You intend to kill someone in front of the Emperor?”

“Since I can cut the air, I would naturally be some distance away from you. I wouldn’t even be touching you. Who would be able to say I killed you?”

“Director Xia is taking advantage of my lack of knowledge in martial arts. People are different from dry twigs. Let’s first ignore your competency and whether or not your cut the air move is skilful enough to actually kill a person. Even if you do, it is impossible to not leave a trace. Aren’t you afraid that Commander Meng would be able to see through it at the time?”

“Then can he see through this?” As Xia Jiang spoke, he flicked his finger very slightly, without moving his forearm, and the teacup on the table was overturned.

“He wouldn’t be able to see through this. But this can’t kill anyone at all, not even someone as weak as me.”

“It is of course not possible to rely on this alone.” Xia Jiang looked very pleased with himself. “But don’t forget, by that time you would have already taken the Wujin pill.”

Mei Changsu’s eyebrows lifted involuntarily.

“I only need to make the slightest cut the air move, briefly touch your Tianchan acupoint, and the poison from the Wujin pill would immediately take effect. Before you can utter a word, everything would conclude.”

“But if I die in front of the Emperor, wouldn’t His Majesty be stirred by anger to investigate?”

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<sup>228</sup> self explanatory – martial arts skill that uses air movement to kill

<sup>229</sup> translation may be inaccurate. I gather it refers to martial arts using cultivation of internal energy

“There would be nothing to investigate. It will leave no mark on your Tianchan acupoint. The final conclusion would be.....that you committed suicide by taking poison.”

“Aren’t you afraid that His Majesty would suspect you of poisoning me?”

“If I wanted to poison you, wouldn’t there have been plenty of time and opportunity to do so in Xuanjing Bureau? Why would I need to drag you all the way to the palace and do it when you are in His Majesty’s presence? How would that benefit me? Isn’t that pushing it a bit too far?”

“That’s true,” Mei Changsu nodded his head in agreement. “Looks like I must die.”

“Who says so? Of course, you don’t have to die. You just need to.....think carefully about what you will say.....” Xia Jiang fiddled with the Wujin pill in his palm, his voice cold as if it could freeze a person completely from head to toe.

Then, he got up and walked to the outside of the pavilion, and stood looking at the rough gray tiles on the surrounding wall, his hands clasped behind his back. He had stopped talking and no longer looked at Mei Changsu.

It was obvious that Xia Jiang wanted to leave this Qilin talent some time to seriously think things over.

## CHAPTER 132

### *Confrontation (III)*

After approximately the time it takes to burn an incense, Xia Jiang reentered the pavilion. Mei Changsu remained seated, his body slanted as he leaned on the stone table, his eyes slightly lowered, staring at the graphite covered floor.

“Mister Su, have you finished thinking about it?”

“No,” Mei Changsu sighed in reply, and said, “When it comes to life and death, sages and men of virtue have often made the wrong choice, let alone me.”

“Sages and men of virtue have never themselves chosen death. They only know how to tell others to die.” Xia Jiang’s voice was colder than the north wind that was howling outside the pavilion, “When this Wujin pill is in your stomach, you will understand that staying alive is always the right choice.”

Mei Changsu fixed his gaze on the unremarkable black little pill Xia Jiang held in his hand, and it began to take some effort to keep the smile on his face. “I guess I don’t have a choice but to eat it? Since I am in your hands.”

Xia Jiang did not respond. Instead, he stepped forward and grabbed hold of Mei Changsu’s lower jaw.

“Wait, wait wait.....” Mei Changsu struggled briefly, “Can we be a little more refined? I will take it on my own.”

Xia Jiang fixed his eyes on him briefly, then released his hand and handed over the Wujin pill he was holding in his palm. Mei Changsu picked it up with his fingers, put it in front of him and looked at it carefully for a while before asking, “Is it bitter?”

“Mei Changsu,” Xia Jiang said calmly, “Why are you delaying it? This is Xuanjing Bureau. Who’s going to come rescue you?”

“One can never be certain about that.” Mei Changsu toyed with the black pill between his fingertips. “What if someone really comes? If I can delay it, then I had better delay it. Once I’ve eaten it, I will become your puppet. I would have no choice

but to say anything you want me to say. I think that's something that would be difficult to endure."

"Mr Su is a truly wise man to be able to understand this point." Xia Jiang's gaze locked onto him. "I've said it before. There has never been a prisoner that the Xuanjing Bureau hasn't been able to handle. Either you do as I say or you die. There is no third option."

Mei Changsu laughed bitterly. "Looks like I had underestimated you. I should have fled."

"Do you really believe that you can escape? This is the capital city, not Jiangzuo. Your Jianghu's influence here is limited, and Prince Jing wouldn't be able to put up this pretense for long. The person in full control here is still His Majesty. As long as he agrees to an interrogation, who would be able to protect you?" Xia Jiang leaned over and looked down at him, "Mei Changsu, from the moment you made the worst possible choice of helping Prince Jing to rescue Wei Zheng, every step you took was fraught with danger, with not a peaceful day in sight."

Mei Changsu's expression was finally solemn. He put the pill in the centre of his palm and cradled it, slowly saying, "Director Xia, may I ask you a question?"

A faint smile flitted across Xia Jiang's lips, and he sat down. Mei Changsu was finally willing to negotiate seriously with him. For him, as long as his opponent was open to negotiation, he could take advantage of it and turn it into an opportunity to achieve his objectives.

"Alright, go ahead and ask."

"You asked me earlier why I didn't want to pass my days free and unfettered in Jiangzuo, but wanted to be swept up in the centre of this capital's whirlpool," Mei Changsu slowly raised his eyes from the Wujin pill to look Xia Jiang in the face, "I would now like to ask you a similar question. In all this time through past generations, Xuanjing Bureau had never embroiled themselves in court politics, adopting an impartial position. His Majesty's faith in you is also incomparable. So, why are you embroiling yourself in these muddy waters?"

"Hunting traitors down has always been Xuanjing Bureau's responsibility and also a demonstration of our loyalty to His Majesty."

"Then wouldn't it suffice to lock Wei Zheng up in Xuanjing Bureau and keep an eye on him? And once the new year has passed and court sessions resume, get an imperial decree to execute him? That would have been simpler and less complicated." Mei Changsu responded unhurriedly. "Why did you deliberately reveal your flaws to set up a trap? Were you worried that Prince Jing wouldn't make a move?"



Xia Jiang's countenance remained unchanged as he said, "Revealing a traitor's true colors is also an act of loyalty to His Majesty."

"You're not being honest," Mei Changsu shook his head, "But it doesn't matter. I'm just asking casually, but I already know."

"What do you know?"

"I know why you must set up a deathtrap for Prince Jing."

"Oh?" Xia Jiang sat down again, and said with curiosity, "Why don't you tell me and see."

"Because you're afraid of him."

"Afraid of who? Prince Jing?" Xia Jiang laughed contemptuously, "How did you come to such a ridiculous conclusion? Why would I be afraid of Prince Jing?"

"You're afraid of Prince Jing," Mei Changsu repeated calmly. "Just like you were afraid of Prince Qi back then."

Xia Jiang's laughter did not cease but when he turned his head, there was a cold gleam in his eyes.

Mei Changsu stared back, his gaze steady and unwavering. "Prince Qi once planned to dissolve Xuanjing Bureau. He felt that a truly wise ruler did not need an organization like Xuanjing Bureau by his side, which is why he had made a suggestion to His Majesty to incorporate Xuanjing Bureau into the Imperial Court of Justice, and had requested for an imperial edict to look into this. Of course, the Imperial Court of Justice he had in mind was not the messy and disorderly one that exists today."

A murderous look swept over Xia Jiang's eyes, but Mei Changsu didn't bother looking at him and continued, "Very few people knew that His Majesty had withheld this proposal. But you knew about it. You also knew that even if Prince Qi couldn't implement his proposal at the time, he would have eventually implemented it himself sometime in the future."

Xia Jiang suddenly got up, and this time he didn't bother concealing his expression. His eyes were fierce as arrows, fired resentfully at his enemy.

"You were relieved when this threat died with Prince Qi, until Prince Jing rose to a high position. Prince Jing had grown up under Prince Qi's instruction, and he has an even greater dislike for Xuanjing Bureau. If Prince Qi had once contemplated how to find a suitable position for you after dissolving Xuanjing Bureau, this is something Prince Jing would never even consider. It would be generous of him if he doesn't

subject you to dismemberment by five horses.” Mei Changsu’s voice became increasingly soft while Xia Jiang clenched his jaw even more tightly. “For you, inheriting the generations old Xuanjing Bureau tradition is important because owning Xuanjing Bureau means owning the privilege and prerogative that comes with it. But just for this sake, you disregard everything on earth to falsely accuse a virtuous prince. This is the work of a demon. Xia Jiang, you are a demon, and you know this in your own heart.”

This poisonous tumour that had been hidden for so long was suddenly cut open and exposed, and dark black pus and blood burst forth. In a split second, Xia Jiang’s expression turned savage. He grabbed Mei Changsu by the front of his jacket, dragged him up and gripped him firmly by the neck. “I understand now.....You’re not here to support Prince Jing, but to reverse Xiao Jingyu’s verdict! Who are you, really? Were you previously from Prince Qi’s household?”

“I’m just someone who admires and respects His Highness Prince Qi,” Mei Changsu smiled faintly. “In those years, the people who admired and respected Prince Qi could be found everywhere, but you probably already know that.”

Xia Jiang’s hand tightened. Mei Changsu suddenly felt a sharp pain in his throat and he was unable to breathe. Just as his vision began to darken, he suddenly felt the pressure ease. His entire being collapsed all at once and the Wujin pill rolled onto the ground. Xia Jiang immediately picked it up and stuffed it along with the dirt into Mei Changsu’s mouth, then pushed him back forcefully, forcing him to swallow it.

“Really, really not.....not refined.....” Mei Changsu said with a smile as he coughed, gasping for breath. “Swallow....cough....Wujin pill, with, with a sip of tea....cough....also not.....given to me.....”

“What Qilin talent, what Gentleman Mei of Jiangzuo,” Xia Jiang’s tone was indescribably ruthless. “I would like to see how long you can remain elegant?”

“I.....No matter how elegant, I can’t compare.....cough.....can’t compare to Director Xia’s great nerve,” Mei Changsu took a while to calm himself down then said, “Why did you force me to eat the pill? After everything that had been said, do you actually still dare to let me meet His Majesty?”

“You can go and meet His Majesty, but you won’t have an opportunity to speak,” Xia Jiang dragged him up from the ground and threw him onto the stone bench. “Right now, I just want you to die. But you will not die in Xuanjing Bureau. That’s right. You’re too powerful, so powerful to the extent that I am afraid, so powerful that no matter what you say, I dare not record your confession and report it to His Majesty because I am unable to foresee what trap you have laid within. But what’s the use of being so powerful when those words would be useless once you’re dead? I admit now that I can’t compete against you, but.....I can take your life. Once I’ve dealt with you, I’ll deal with Prince Jing....”

At this point, Xia Jiang's face suddenly changed, and he turned around shouting sternly, "Who is it?"

Just when he had finished speaking, a slender silhouette slowly emerged from the rockery next to the weeping willow. Against her completely black dress, Xia Dong's looked even more pale, and her red eyes looked intently at her shifu, her face expressionless.

"Dong'er," Xia Jiang said, startled, "How did you get here?"

"Because we're in Xuanjing Bureau, Chun xiong was a little careless so I found a way to shake him off." Xia Dong walked forward slowly, her eyes confused. "After all these years of receiving instruction from shifu, if I couldn't even pull this off, how could I still call myself a Xuanjing official?"

After all, she was a disciple he had groomed from the time she was young. Xia Jiang's expression was a little uneasy. "When did you get here?"

"I was here before shifu became so agitated." Xia Dong paused on the pavilion steps and raised her head. Her complexion was white as snow and her eyes brimmed with tears. "Shifu, I've always believed that the values Xuanjing Bureau had passed down for generations were loyalty to the ruler, justice and the elimination of corruption from the imperial court. You'd always taught me this before.....but why am I unable to understand what you are doing today?"

"Because shifu is interrogating a criminal. You should leave." Xia Jiang coldly interrupted her.

"Even if he is a criminal, since when did Xuanjing Bureau force poison into criminals' mouths? How is it something I am not aware of?"

Mei Changsu smiled and interjected, "It's always been around. This Wujin pill has also been handed down through the generations. It's not your shifu's creation, so don't accuse him wrongly. It's just that he hasn't passed it down to you, that's all."

Xia Jiang didn't look back at him but pressed down on Mei Changsu's ya xue<sup>230</sup> with a flick of his hand. Still looking at Xia Dong, he said, "Dealing with extraordinary people requires extraordinary measures. There are many matters you do not know about so please do not ask about them."

Xia Dong inhaled deeply to compose herself, then replied slowly, word by word, "Shifu, I can choose not to inquire into other matters, but I cannot ignore what the

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<sup>230</sup> it literally translates into "dumb acupoint" so I presume it was a move to shut Mei Changsu up

both of you were discussing just now. That year.....that court case concerning Prince Qi, it is related directly to me. I would like to know, what was your role in it?"

"Such impudence!" Xia Jiang finally stopped all pretense. "Is this how you interrogate your shifu? Your behavior has been very disappointing of late. Is this what Mei Changsu has put into your mind? Prince Qi rebelled and deserved his punishment! Have you forgotten that it's because of this that your husband died at Lin Xie's hands?"

Through her tears, Xia Dong looked at this elderly man whom she had respected for so many years. She felt great despair, and felt herself give up any remaining hope she might have had. Mei Changsu sat looking at her from the stone bench, his gaze gentle and sympathetic. He could sense Xia Dong's sorrow and anger at this moment, but the truth was the truth. Sooner or later, it would have shattered the illusion of tender feelings, revealing the cold and despicable face twisted by selfish desire hiding behind it.

"Shifu, tu'er<sup>231</sup> is begging you for the last time.....give him the antidote and turn back....." Xia Dong's voice trembled with desolation. A murderous expression flashed through Xia Jiang's eyes, frightening her to the bone, but she did not flee, "Heaven's law is written in the heart. If you're unable to repent, even if you kill ten Mei Changsu, it would be useless...."

Xia Jiang's face was as still as the surface of a frozen river, showing no signs of thawing. Although he had no intention of killing her at the moment, it wasn't because of any sentiments he had for their master-disciple relationship. Rather, he had to take into consideration Xia Dong's position as a third-rank Xuanjing official and her status as a general's widow, so he couldn't just do as he wished.

But a deadlock could not be sustained for long. After a moment's hesitation, Xia Jiang seized hold of Mei Changsu and lifted him up, at the same time emitting a loud shriek. Xia Dong understood what this shriek meant and slowly closed her eyes, standing calmly, cold and silent.

When the lingering sound of the high pitched shriek finally faded away, Xia Chun and Xia Qiu quickly appeared, one behind the other. They approached swiftly from a distance, and were only a few leaps away from the front of the pavilion. What was surprising was that Xia Qiu was at this moment dressed exactly the same as Xia Dong, wearing the same black female skirt and a similar hair clasp on the head. Xia Jiang only needed one glance to understand how Xia Dong managed to evade Xia Chun.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> "your disciple"

<sup>232</sup> in case we've forgotten, Xia Qiu and Xia Dong are twins

“Shifu,” Xia Chun realized his own mistake at that moment, and he turned green. He hurried before Xia Jiang and made his salutations, “Forgive tu’er for overlooking his duties. Tu’er wasn’t paying attention.....”

“It goes without saying. Bring Xia Dong back to her room and watch her closely. She is not allowed to leave without my command, and no one is allowed to be in contact with her.”

“Yes.”

Xia Qiu was obviously the only one who didn’t understand the state of affairs. He was startled and immediately rushed forward to ask, “Shifu, did Dong’er commit any offense? Why are you punishing her so severely?”

“You especially will not be allowed to meet her in private without my permission!” Xia Jiang narrowed his eyes, his voice even more stern.

“Shifu.....”

“Forget it Qiu xiong,” Xia Dong smiled sadly, her chest twisted inside out with the anguish of severing everything she had ever believed in. “There is no need to say more. Shifu wanted to teach me something new, but I am unable to learn it, and I don’t want to learn it. That’s why he is angry.....”

Xia Qiu looked at her blankly and turned again to look at shifu’s ironclad expression, obviously not understanding. At this moment, Xia Chun stepped forward to tug at Xia Dong’s arm, signalling her to follow him. Xia Dong did not resist and turned around obediently. She looked at Xia Chun with her cold sad eyes and said, “Chun xiong, have you already learnt these skills from shifu?”

Xia Qiu turned away, avoiding her gaze, and transferred his grip to her wrist. As she was pulled away, Xia Dong turned her head to glance at Mei Changsu. The latter still couldn’t speak and could only smile faintly in her direction, a smile that was kind and gentle. Xia Dong couldn’t hold back her tears anymore and they began to roll down her cheeks.

These were the Xuanjing lady officer’s final tears of weakness. As they fell silently onto the dusty ground, Xia Dong’s heart condensed into ice.

## CHAPTER 133

### *Fatal Blow*

In the outside world, no one could detect what was going on in the government office of the Xuanjing Bureau. However, the great commotion that was the prison break was public knowledge, and the ensuing news of Prince Jing being ordered back to his household to reflect on his conduct had immediately spread like wildfire across all levels of society. Even news of Concubine Jing's confinement without an imperial decree, which should have remained secret in the imperial harem, had leaked out and become widespread.

The Prince Jing of today was no longer as insignificant as he once used to be. He was no longer an easily forgotten princeling, but a Seven Pearl Royal Prince who stood shoulder to shoulder with Prince Yu. Although he hadn't quite proven himself yet,<sup>233</sup> the Liang Emperor's increasing favour in him and his growing prestige in court made him a strong contender for the Eastern Palace.<sup>234</sup> This matter of the life and death of such a royal prince naturally shocked the people and set off a wave of alarm and unrest.

Against this tide of widespread rumors, deadlock in Xuanjing Bureau and internal strife in the imperial court, Elder Prince Ji's carriage rumbled away from his mansion, past a group of common folk, making its way towards the palace.

Elder Prince Ji was the current Emperor's younger brother, younger than him by 12 years. When the Liang Emperor ascended the throne, he was still underaged. Age-wise, he was also the youngest of the previous generation. He had an easygoing nature, with a frank and straightforward character. He was one to speak his mind freely and had no love for deception. Overall, he was an inherently leisurely and idle royal uncle. For this Liang Emperor, who had wrested the throne by killing the designated heir, having such an unthreatening brother made him a subject of great affection. Amongst all the princes, he received the most tolerance and privileges from the Liang Emperor, and he lived everyday freely and happily, surpassing even the gods and immortals.

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<sup>233</sup> Hai Yan uses the term "although he hadn't pierced through some window paper yet", which seems almost analogous to losing one's virginity

<sup>234</sup> the official residence of the Crown Prince

But even gods and immortals cannot enjoy peaceful and uneventful days all the time, and it was during this most lively and happy New Year period that this royal uncle encountered something he simply couldn't ignore.

Prince Ji's carriage swayed along the snow-covered streets of the capital city. In the carriage, Prince Ji cradled a small heating stove, deep in thought. By his side sat another person.

"Royal uncle, shall I enter the palace with you?" Yan Yujin asked tentatively.

"Why do you need to go in? It will just complicate matters. Huang xiong<sup>235</sup> will definitely believe what I say, and even if he doesn't, so what? I just need to say what ought to be said. I don't care about what follows, nor can I control it anyway." Prince Qi heaved a deep sigh. "To tell the truth, I really don't want to get involved in these matters, but I don't have a choice. I cannot pretend that I haven't seen what I saw."

"Me too. I was speechless with panic after seeing it." Yan Yujin also heaved a sigh. "Speaking of which, it was truly coincidental. If you hadn't gone with me to call on Miss Gong Yu, we wouldn't have encountered this matter...."

"In any case, I am unable to keep this to myself. Once I tell Huang xiong what I saw clearly and in great detail, I would feel more relaxed. You can alight when we pass by the Western Path. Don't follow me into the palace and get mixed up in this. Huang xiong is a very suspicious person. The more people involved, the more suspicious he would be."

"Alright." Yan Yujin nodded, his lowered eyes seeming to conceal some profound and complex thoughts, but his expression was calm. Once they arrived at the mouth of the Western Path, he took his leave, raised the curtain and alighted.

The carriage continued forward, turning eastwards at the palace gates, before finally arriving at Dan Xi Gate. According to Liang etiquette, unless one was specially conferred the Son of Heaven's sedan chair, one had to go on foot from this point, which is why it was only after Prince Ji had ordered men to find out where the Emperor was at that moment that he leapt out. Wrapped in thick fur and supported by two attendants, he strode in.

The Liang Emperor received his younger brother in the Warm Pavilion of Qianyi Hall. Without Concubine Jing's care, he looked even more tired, but the pair of eyes beneath the thick and grey eyebrows still shone with an intimidating light that was difficult to ignore. Seeing Prince Ji enter, the Liang Emperor's face broke into a smile. He half rose in greeting and invited him to sit down, saying warmly, "It's such a cold

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<sup>235</sup> royal elder brother

day, and about to snow. The court is still on break. You only needed to send a note to pay your respects. Why did you need to come all the way here?"

"This younger brother should actually have come more often to pay his respects," Prince Ji had always been informal. He walked to the seat indicated by the Liang Emperor and sat by his side. "Besides, there's a matter I need to report to Huang Xiong. If not, this younger brother's heart would be uneasy."

"What happened? Who offended you?"

"Nobody offended me." Prince Ji sat closer, lowering his voice. "On the fifth day of the new year, this younger brother saw something. It didn't seem to be a big deal at the time, but with the news of the recent commotion....."

"The fifth day?" The Liang Emperor's eyebrows quivered, his senses piqued. "What is it? Take your time and speak clearly!"

"Yes. Huang Xiong knows that this younger brother has some commoner friends with whom he has occasional contact. Since there was nothing going on at home on that fifth day, this younger brother was restless and went to pay a visit to such a friend. She lives at Dengjia Alley.....Huang Xiong, you wouldn't be familiar with that place....in short, it's a secluded private house, very small. If you opened the window, you would be able to see the alley outside.<sup>236</sup> At that time, this younger brother was there, happily enjoying a conversation with her when we heard the sound of movement from the outside. We opened the window to have a look, but never thought that we would see an acquaintance....."

"Acquaintance? Who?"

"Xuanjing official, Xia Dong. She was coming from another direction with a group of fighting men dressed in green, each of them holding either knives or swords. They were carrying someone in their midst. After a while of waiting, a carriage appeared and after they had loaded the man onto the carriage, they left. Because Xia Dong was leading them, this younger brother thought it was Xuanjing Bureau arresting a criminal at the time, so he did not pay much attention to it." At this point, Prince Ji took a deep breath. "But then....this younger brother realized that it had happened on the same day as the prison break to rescue Wei Zheng....and after taking a look at the pictures plastered all over the four city gates, this younger brother realized that they looked exactly like the person Xia Dong and her men had taken away....."

The Liang Emperor tried very hard to control the muscle twitching on his cheek and said, "Are you absolutely sure?"

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<sup>236</sup> usually, private dwellings opened into inner courtyards rather than outwards towards common spaces



“If not 100%, then at least 90%<sup>237</sup> sure. While they were in the alley waiting for the carriage, that person suddenly choked on his blood, and he was supported upright. That’s why this younger brother saw his facial features very clearly.....”

\*technically, they went by a 10 point system, so it should have been “if not 10 points, then 9” but this read better

“Xia Dong....” The Liang Emperor gritted his teeth, “The prisoner rescued by the rebels from the Imperial Court of Justice, how could he have been in Xia Dong’s hands? And transferring him secretly in a secluded alley? What is Xuanjing Bureau trying to do?”

“This younger brother also could not understand, which is why I came to report it to Huang Xiong.” Prince Ji heaved another sigh. “After all, this isn’t a small matter. I heard that Huang Xiong cannot rest or eat in peace due to this. This younger brother is worthless for not being able to share in Huang Xiong’s burdens and cares, but I cannot hide what I have seen with my own eyes. But....for the sake of caution, maybe Huang Xiong can summon Xia Dong here for an inquiry. Maybe it would be clearer once she has explained this?”

The Liang Emperor was obviously not as optimistic as Prince Ji. His expression became as deep as a deep pond in winter. He was silent for a while, then shouted, “Gao Zhan!”

“Your servant is here.”

“Send men to Xuanjing Bureau.....” the Liang Emperor stopped mid-sentence, then paused to think before saying, “Summon Meng Zhi in first.”

“Yes.”

The Commander of the Imperial Guards was just outside the hall making his rounds of inspection, and immediately hurried in when he heard the summons, falling to his knees in obeisance. “Why has Your Majesty summoned your servant?”

“Go personally to Xuanjing Bureau, bring Xia Dong back to see me. Remember, you need to be quick and this has to be kept a secret. Do not delay, and do not allow Xia Dong to come into contact with anyone along the way, in particular Xia Jiang.”

“Your servant obeys Your Majesty’s command.” Meng Zhi was a martial arts practitioner, and he stood up and walked out in one fluid movement. Prince Ji was not used to such situations and felt a little uneasy. The Liang Emperor’s heart was

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<sup>237</sup> technically, they went by a 10 point system, so it should have been “if not 10 points, then 9” but this read better

churning with suspicion at the time and he was too preoccupied to pay him any attention. Both men remained silent, and the atmosphere in the hall was tense.

Ordering the Commander of the Imperial Guards to fetch someone was a wise move. His actions were swift and didn't allow time for any response. When Xia Jiang received the report and rushed over, Meng Zhi was already astride the horse with the Xuanjing lady officer. Throwing out the words "Imperial command to summon Xia Dong for an audience", he immediately galloped away like a whirlwind, leaving behind only a cloud of dust.

When Xia Dong entered the Warm Pavilion of Qianyi Hall and paid her respects, she received the same reception as Prince Jing did not too long ago. The Liang Emperor similarly let her remain in her prostrate position for a long time. It was only when the tense and repressive atmosphere became sufficiently dense that he asked in a stern voice, "Xia Dong, on the fifth day of the New Year, when the prison break happened, where were you?"

"Your servant was away from the city offering sacrifices to her deceased husband...."

"When did you return?"

"At night."

"Nonsense!" The Liang Emperor said angrily, "Someone saw you with his own eyes at that....that....what alley?"

Prince Ji hurriedly reminded him in a whisper, "Dengjia Alley."

"What were you doing in Dengjia Alley?"

Xia Dong's complexion was a little pale, but she persisted in saying, "Your servant did not go to Dengjia Alley. Perhaps that person was mistaken."

Initially, Prince Ji had no real opinion about the whole incident. He suggested calling for Xia Dong only because he wanted to hear from her if she had a reasonable explanation, but he hadn't expected her to completely deny being at Dengjia Alley, making it seem as if it was him, the dignified royal uncle who was speaking nonsense. This annoyed him, and he raised his eyebrows resolutely, saying, "Xia Dong, I am absolutely certain I saw you. Accompanying you were no less than 20 men, and although they weren't wearing Xuanjing Bureau uniforms, they obeyed your orders. You were also guarding someone who looked exactly like the traitor Wei Zheng, lifting him onto a carriage. Do you really dare to deny it?"

“Xia Dong!” The Liang Emperor shouted loudly, “You dare to utter falsehoods in my presence! Your Xuanjing Bureau, is it still my Xuanjing Bureau?! In your eyes, other than your shifu, do I still matter?!”

These last words were very severe. What little colour Xia Dong had remaining in her lips completely disappeared, and she immediately kowtowed again, her fingers trembling against the floor.

“I believe His Highness Prince Ji wouldn’t falsely accuse you. Speak. What were you doing in Dengjia Alley?”

This pressure from the Emperor’s personal interrogation was different from other occasions. The person who had recognized her was a royal prince of great standing, one who had the Emperor’s unreserved trust. Even though Xia Dong gritted her fine white teeth as hard as she could, she couldn’t stop her lips from trembling as she admitted, “Your servant.....your servant went to Dengjia Alley.....”

The Liang Emperor’s anger surged with the force of a current, and he pressed further, “Was that man Wei Zheng?”

“Yes.....”

Confessing to these two points was equivalent to confessing to everything else. After thinking through the whole thing, the Liang Emperor could more or less piece everything together.

“I had thought it very strange all along. The prisoner was already well locked up in Xuanjing Bureau, guarded by a few hundred soldiers. Unless they rebelled, nobody would have had the ability to break in and rescue him. But in the end, he was moved unexpectedly to the Imperial Court of Justice,” The Liang Emperor bent over, scrutinizing Xia Dong with murderous eyes, “You.....speak.....that day’s surprise attack on Xuanjing Bureau, those men, were they under your command?”

Xia Dong whispered, “Yes.....”

“Well.....well.....” The Liang Emperor’s entire body shook, “You’ve all played it well. The mighty Xuanjing Bureau, broken into by rebels, yet not one was apprehended dead or alive, rebels who supposedly escaped because the Capital Patrol created a confusion....Xia Dong, I’ve always had faith in you. You’ve certainly demonstrated yourself here\*!”

\*in Chinese, this is actually a bit of a sarcastic comment. This is the closest I could come to articulating it.

Meng Zhi, who hadn’t left since bringing Xia Dong in, couldn’t help himself at this point and interjected in a low voice, “Your Majesty, your servant believes that

this is too big an affair for Xia Dong to be solely responsible. There should probably be someone else taking the lead?"

"That goes without saying!" The Liang Emperor brought his hand down hard on the dragon table in front of him, and pointed at Xia Dong, "Take a look at her, who is she? Who else could make her do this? Don't you know who she has been taking orders from her whole life?" At this point, he was so upset he couldn't continue. After Gao Zhan stepped in to massage his back and smoothen his anger, he continued, "Then what about Wei Zheng? After you pretended to remove Wei Zheng, where did you send him?"

"Your servant has killed him."

"What?!"

"Wei Zheng was from the Chiyang Army, my mortal enemy for having killed my husband. He had stayed alive for so many years. Your servant was not willing to let him live another day....."

"You.....Wei Zheng is guilty of a capital crime (and needs to be punished accordingly), do you know that?"

"Wei Zheng was only a deputy general, and not the principal offender. Your Majesty favours Prince Jing so much today. If he were to give a full account of the event, there was no guarantee that Your Majesty wouldn't take action for his sake. Your servant was unwilling to see that happen, which is why your servant took preemptive action." As Xia Dong spoke, her complexion gradually returned to normal. She raised her head and continued, "Your servant acted of her own accord. This has nothing to do with your servant's shifu, so please do not blame him....."

"Be quiet! At this point, you're still trying to incriminate Prince Jing. You're truly a good disciple! How could you have acted on your own? Could you hide your transfer of Wei Zheng to the Imperial Court of Justice from Xia Jiang?" The Liang Emperor's face was as hard as a sheet of iron. "Xia Dong, Xuanjing Bureau's most important tenet is loyalty to the Emperor. But you all.....you've been deceiving me from the very beginning!"

"Huang xiong, please calm down. You're not in good health. It's more important to take care of yourself. Whatever the case might be, it's fortunate that we were able to get to the bottom of it." Prince Ji sighed as he gently urged the Emperor.

The Liang Emperor took a deep breath. When he was slightly calmer, he looked at Prince Ji and said, "Fortunately you caught this by chance, otherwise Jingyan would have suffered great injustice this time. He is inflexible by nature, and reacts rashly to provocation. One misstep and it's easy to lure him into a trap."

“With Huang Xiong’s insightful and wise scrutiny, what would Jingyan have to fear?” Prince Ji smiled, then turned to look at Xia Dong, “Xia Dong has also suffered a lot these past few years. It’s a little difficult to avoid going to extremes. Huang Xiong, be a little lenient on her.”

The Liang Emperor sneered, his anger aroused again. “I don’t wish to deal with her now. Meng Zhi!”

“Your servant is here.”

“Bring a thousand Imperial Guards with you and immediately seal Xuanjing Bureau. Put everyone under house arrest, regardless of their rank, and kill whoever dares to make a move!”

“Your servant obeys.” Meng Zhi bowed and asked, “What about Xia Jiang? Does Your Majesty want to see him?”

“Why would I want to meet him when he has dared to act so recklessly to deceive his Emperor?” The Liang Emperor was already enraged, and the mention of Xia Jiang only served to stoke his anger further. “He....and this Xia Dong, lock them both up in Sky Prison!”

Meng Zhi bowed to receive this command, but hesitated a while before saying, “When your servant was at Xuanjing Bureau just now, he caught sight of Xia Qiu supporting Mei Changsu to the prison cell. Mister Su appeared to have been tortured.....”

“Tortured?” The Liang Emperor was startled, “I only told him to conduct an inquiry. Why was he imprisoned? Why was he tortured?”

“Your Majesty, Xia Jiang is within his own Xuanjing Bureau. Of course he would have no qualms with such behavior.....”

The Liang Emperor was stunned. He heaved a deep sigh. “It would seem that Mei Changsu had nothing to do with this matter. Looks like Xia Jiang wanted him to substantiate Jingyan’s indictment.....in my impatience, I have caused him to suffer under Xia Jiang’s hands. When you go over this time, rescue him as well and return him to his residence to recover.”

“Yes.” Meng Zhi bowed again. Just as he was making his way out of court, a eunuch hurried in to report, “Your Majesty, Minister Cai Quan is waiting outside. He says that he has an important matter to report to Your Majesty.”

## BOOK SEVEN

### BROTHERHOOD ETERNAL

#### CHAPTER 134

##### *Old Case*

According to the Great Liang system, the eve of the Lunar New Year till the start of the 16th day of the first lunar month was a holiday, and everyone was excused from court.<sup>238</sup> This day was only the ninth day, and the lunar new year had not yet passed. For Cai Quan to request an audience on this day, it was definitely not for any ordinary matter, which was why even though the Liang Emperor was emotionally upset at that moment, he still summoned Cai Quan in.

“Huang xiong is going to discuss court matters. This younger brother shall ask for leave.” Prince Ji said as he hurriedly got up.

“Sit down and stay with me a little longer.” The Liang Emperor raised his hand with a tired expression, “I would like to chat with you a little longer. Besides, since when should any matter of the court need to be hidden from you?”

“Yes.” Prince Ji dared not disobey and sat down again. The Minister of Justice, Cai Quan, was shown into the hall shortly. He was only about 30 years or so in age, and the youngest amongst the Ministers of the six core Ministries,<sup>239</sup> except for Shen Zhui. His face was beardless, his features neat, his every move comfortable and fluid, obviously displaying a sense of self-confidence. After performing his ceremonial greetings, he knelt in the centre of the hall, facing East.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations still run for a full 15 days plus the eve, when families would gather for a reunion dinner

<sup>239</sup> the 6 ministries which formed the central govt (Personnel, Revenues, Rites, War, Justice and Works)

<sup>240</sup> for more on seating arrangements, follow this link:  
<https://chaari.wordpress.com/tag/chinese-imperial-palace/>

“Minister Cai, what do you have to report?”

“Your Majesty,” Cai Quan responded in a flat tone, “The Ministry of Justice had recently concluded a trial for a case. In the process, we discovered that it had some connections to the event surrounding the illegal fireworks factory, the one set up in secret by the Ministry of Revenue last year. Your servant felt that it was necessary to report this to Your Majesty in detail.”

“Illegal fireworks factory?” The Liang Emperor frowned, thinking very hard, “Is it that affair where Prince Xian colluded with the previous Minister of Revenue, Lou Zhijing to make a profit? Haven’t we already clarified that long ago? Don’t tell me there was a mistake with it?”

The Prince Xian mentioned by the Liang Emperor, of course, refers to the former Crown Prince who had been abolished less than a year ago. That year, he had instigated Lou Zhijing to secretly set up an illegal fireworks factory for the purposes of profiteering. After the affair was exposed, it had caused a big uproar and played a fundamental role in his downward slide from his position as Crown Prince.

“The case of the illegal fireworks factory was personally investigated by Minister Shen. The facts are clear and recorded in detail. The responsibilities borne by Prince Xian and Lou Zhijing were also accurately represented. Your servant is not saying a mistake was made,” Cai Quan paused for a moment here, then continued, “Your servant is referring to the explosion of the illegal fireworks factory.....”

“Explosion?”

“Yes. 69 people killed, 157 injured, hundreds of families destroyed by the fire, a period of public discontent.....”

“Hasn’t it already been dealt with? The people have been placated. Isn’t that enough?” The Liang Emperor was a little annoyed.

“That time, everyone believed it to be an accident due to the careless use of fire sparking the explosion in the illegal fireworks factory.” Cai Quan lifted his eyes, looking squarely at the Emperor on the throne, “But based on the evidence your servant discovered today, this wasn’t an accident.”

The Liang Emperor’s eyebrows raised inadvertently. Before he could speak, Prince Ji couldn’t help but interject in shock, “Not an accident? What kind of person would have intentionally set it off?”

“Your servant has testimonies. Please have a look Your Majesty.” Cai Quan did not reply Prince Ji directly but instead removed a roll of scrolls from within his sleeves and passed it to an eunuch who delivered it to the table on the throne.

The Liang Emperor slowly unrolled the scrolls. There was no reaction when he first began reading, but the more he read, the darker his expression. When he reached the third page, he shook in anger and hurled all the scrolls onto the floor.

Prince Ji, who was seated by the Liang Emperor's side, quietly bent over to pick the scrolls up and looked at them. He hadn't read even half of them before he turned deathly pale.

"Your Majesty, these five testimonies were collected separately, and all of them correspond with each other, without exception or fault. Your servant believes that they are credible." Cai Quan remained calm as he continued, "From the beginning, in order to mitigate the perpetrators' crimes, your servant investigated this layer by layer, and was increasingly shocked to discover the actual state of affairs. In fact, your servant knows that he is still far from getting to the root of the matter, but since officials of similar rank were involved, your servant could not proceed further. This is why your servant has entered the palace today, to request for Your Majesty's decree to send someone from the office of the Minister of Justice<sup>241</sup> to supervise the matter. Your servant hopes to be able to bring the high official Zhu Yue of the Imperial Court of Justice to trial as soon as possible."

"Although Zhu Yue was ultimately identified," Prince Ji asked in a daze, "But.....but why would Zhu Yue instruct people to ignite the illegal fireworks factory?"

The Liang Emperor pressed his lips tight. Cai Quan also did not respond.

Why? Only Prince Ji, this passionate lover of music and wine, could ask such a naive question, but it didn't take him long after asking this question to come to his own realization.

Who was behind Zhu Yue? It didn't need a lot of thought to know this. To expose the secret of the illegal fireworks factory in such a terrible way, thus inciting great public grievance against the former Crown Prince. Obviously this would only bring great benefits to that other person.

The Liang Emperor began to feel dizzy, his four limbs cold with anger, and he was unable to speak.

The illegal fireworks factory, Zhu Yue, the Imperial Court of Justice, Xuanjing Bureau, Xia Jiang, Wei Zheng.....these names tumbled chaotically in his mind, giving him a splitting headache, and in the midst of this confusion, the only thing that was clear was that he had been deceived all along.

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<sup>241</sup> referring to his own department, highest level in the Ministry of Justice



After successfully toppling the Crown Prince, the target had shifted to Prince Jing. Even if one considered the possibility that Prince Yu had merely caught the former Crown Prince at his own wrongdoings, this time he was clearly framing Prince Jing.

However, what was most shocking to him was that Prince Yu didn't use just any method. He had unexpectedly allied himself with Xia Jiang to use Xuanjing Bureau, once loyal to the Emperor, to lay an ambush using a convict, with the ultimate aim of pinning the crime of rebellion on Prince Jing.

For the Liang Emperor, Xuanjing Bureau's betrayal and deception was the last straw.

"Summon Prince Yu." The Liang Emperor forced these three words out through gritted teeth, although his low voice was enough to send shivers through anyone. Seeing Cai Quan sitting upright, Prince Ji had some foreboding that a great storm was brewing. In truth, he really didn't desire to stay on to witness this "crow covered scene",<sup>242</sup> but unfortunately he didn't have the courage to stand up and beg leave to withdraw at this moment, and was forced to remain seated where he was.

Before receiving the imperial decree to enter the palace, Prince Yu had already received news of the Imperial Guards sealing Xuanjing Bureau, but no matter how much he enquired, he could not find out why. And while he fluttered around in confusion like a headless fly, the Liang Emperor's summons arrived.

His being summoned this time was definitely not due to the Emperor's desire to see a son who was dearly missed. Thinking about Mei Changsu and his ability to secretly "produce clouds with one hand and rain with the other",<sup>243</sup> Prince Yu suddenly shivered in trepidation. All the way to the palace, though he wrung his brains dry and he was breaking out in cold sweat, he still couldn't come up with an excuse.

"This son greets Father Emperor. What instructions does Father Emperor have?" Entering the Warm Pavillion, Prince Yu didn't have time to see who else was around, but hurried hastily to pay his respects.

A roll of scrolls were hurled at him in response, hitting him sharply on the face like a chill wind.

"See for yourself!"

Prince Yu shuddered briefly at this rebuke, but soon recovered himself, quickly picked the scrolls from the ground, rose up and spread them out to read. As he read,

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<sup>242</sup> literal translation that to me is reminiscent of crows picking at a dead man

<sup>243</sup> idiom for "being tricky and inconstant"

his face paled. Dripping with perspiration, he kowtowed and called out in a shrill voice, "Father Emperor, this is a false accusation....."

"Zhu Yue has been identified. What false accusation are you crying about?" The Liang Emperor berated him.

"Er....." Prince Yu still had his wits about him. He was only momentarily speechless, and soon replied, "Zhu Yue is this son's brother-in-law. This testimony clearly identifies Zhu Yue, but this son has been summoned. With Father Emperor's great wisdom, I should have known....."

"You were very quick to label this a false accusation," The Liang Emperor sneered, "Do you intend to vouch for Zhu Yue?"

Prince Yu did not dare to respond carelessly. After giving it some thought, he said, "These have been testified by wicked people. How could Father Emperor believe them? Zhu Yue has never been one for evil deeds. These accusations.....it's a great wrong done to him."

"Your Majesty," Cai Quan bowed and continued, "Your servant had also considered the possibility of unjust accusations, but the person who identified Zhu Yue was his personal attendant, not an outsider with malicious intentions. If it was still ambiguous at this point, it would be difficult for it to clear the law. Therefore, your servant earnestly requests Your Majesty's gracious permission, once court reopens, to immediately summon officials from the three ministries involved in the illegal fireworks factory to conduct a joint hearing in court. This case must be properly clarified in order to prove Official Zhu's innocence."

"Conduct a joint hearing?" The Liang Emperor looked at Prince Yu with a grim expression. "Jinghuan, what do you think?"

Prince Yu gritted his teeth, the inside of his brain buzzing. Whether Zhu Yue had actually suffered injustice, he was clear. Whether or not Zhu Yue would stand unyielding against the pressure of a public trial, he was even clearer. He believed that his wife's younger brother would remain loyal and do his best to help him, but he couldn't be sure that when faced with such a well-known criminal expert like Cai Quan, if Zhu Yue would have the ability to resist him to the last and not give him away.....

The results of such a joint court hearing had to be proclaimed publicly. Once the joint court hearing was agreed upon, one had to be prepared to bear the consequences that followed. Once the verdict was reached, there would be no room to beg the Emperor for his favour and keep this matter concealed. How could Prince Yu dare to force himself to agree to this?

Xiao Jingyan's hesitation for fear of being found out was being observed by everyone present. Although the Liang Emperor knew fully well what was going on, he was still filled with rage when looking at him. His left hand tightened around the fine porcelain teacup he was holding, almost shattering it. Prince Ji, who was seated by his side, felt great trepidation upon seeing this.

"Your Majesty, whether Prince Yu desires to sit in on the hearing or not, it doesn't matter." Amongst all the people, Cai Quan was the only one whose expression continued to remain unchanged, businesslike in appearance. "Your servant will definitely do his best to enforce the law impartially. Your Majesty, please issue an imperial edict to call for a joint hearing with the three ministries."

"Father Emperor...." Prince Yu's voice trembled, his facial expression increasingly difficult to behold. As Cai Quan's expression became more indifferent, the more flustered he became. He wasn't sure if this Minister of Justice had any other reliable evidence beyond these five written testimonies, but Cai Quan was a cold-hearted leader who did not differentiate people. If he truly had conclusive proof, what good did it do to object to the hearing?

The Liang Emperor finally threw the teacup he had been holding at Prince Yu. Although it didn't hit him, it expressed his wrath at that moment. Prince Ji hastily walked over, and holding on to his arm, urged him in a low tone, "Huang xiong, calm down.....calm down....."

"This unfilial spawn! You won't be satisfied until I die from anger! To think I've loved you so much all these years!" The Liang Emperor pointed at Prince Yu, cursing loudly, "All these underhanded deeds, one after the other, do you think I'm old and senile? You've even managed to get your hands on my Xuanjing Bureau. Xiao Jinghuan, I have underestimated you!"

Prince Yu was in shock. He kowtowed, banging his head on the floor, crying out, "If this is Father Emperor's view, this son dare not argue, but Xuanjing Bureau.....this son did not....."

"Silence! Xia Dong has already confessed to framing Prince Jing and you're still disputing this!"

In truth, even though they were allies, Prince Yu never clearly understood how Xia Jiang intended to make use of Wei Zheng to trap Prince Jing. He was even more unclear about what Xia Dong did during this time and what her role was. But he knew that Xia Dong was Xia Jiang's cherished disciple, and that she had always been obedient to Xia Jiang's orders. Which is why once he heard the Liang Emperor say that Xia Dong had confessed, Prince Yu was even more unsure to what degree matters had deteriorated, and was immediately thrown into utter confusion.

“I’ve always turned a blind eye to the games you’ve been playing, letting them pass. Who would have thought that you would go so far. If you dare to deceive me today, in time, who else do you have in mind?” The more the Liang Emperor scolded, the angrier he got, fire practically bursting forth from his eyes. “Speak! Are Zhu Yue’s actions related to you? If you speak any more empty words, I will not let you off lightly!”

Prince Yu crawled forward two steps, crying loudly, “This son has never forgotten Father Emperor’s favour, but also because of Father Emperor’s favour, it caused the former Crown Prince to be intolerant of this son. That time, the former Crown Prince did everything he could to suppress this son. This son was unwilling to make Father Emperor worry, and in order to protect himself, had no choice but to come up with this bad plan.....Father Emperor.....this son had no intention of showing any disrespect. It was just a mistake made in a moment of confusion.....”

“Then what about this time? Was it Prince Jing who suppressed you?”

“This time, this son really does not know anything about this matter. Xia Jiang acted alone. This son merely.....did not try to dissuade him.....”

The Liang Emperor sneered, “Fine! You’ve completely pushed away any responsibility! Poor Xia Jiang. He thought helping you was demonstrating loyalty to the new Emperor in advance. Who would have thought that things would end like this! Dare to do but dare not accept the consequences. How are you anything like me?”

Prince Yu dared not respond, merely cried mournfully while glancing at Prince Ji from time to time. Looking at him, Prince Ji’s heart softened, and he couldn’t help but step in to try to persuade his brother. “Huang xiong, Jinghuan has already acknowledged his mistake. He can’t endure anymore scolding.....it’s just that with regards to this matter, how best to deal with it?”

At this moment, Cai Quan stood up solemnly and said in a crystal clear voice, “Your servant would like to earnestly request again for Your Majesty’s grace to allow a joint hearing with the three Ministries.”

## CHAPTER 135

### *The Emperor's Way*

The Minister of Justice's words were firm and clear. Upon hearing it, Prince Yu's heart trembled and he couldn't help crying out "Father Emperor". The Liang Emperor snorted coldly, his expression still as hard as iron, but his heart was already a little hesitant.

Until now, he had determined that Xia Jiang and Prince Yu had colluded to frame Prince Jing. He was also very clear that Prince Yu was behind the tragic explosion of the illegal fireworks factory. For the role these two men played in deliberately deceiving and provoking the Emperor, the Liang Emperor had no intention of forgiving them, but now that the situation was under control, he was unwilling to make public all this chaos happening in court.

"Minister Cai, I will immediately issue an imperial edict to remove Zhu Yue from his position. After the dismissal, there will be no need to conduct the joint hearing with the three Ministries. You may handle it with full authority." The Liang Emperor's tone was calm as he said to Cai Quan, "I think we can cease investigating this case. At Zhu Yue's level, it is sufficient to placate the people so let's just conclude it here. There's no need to review or inquire further."

"Your Majesty....."

"As for dealing with the rest of the parties involved, I will handle it myself." The Liang Emperor's face was expressionless as he cut the Minister of Justice off. "Settling this case has been hard on Minister Cai."

The muscles on Cai Quan's cheeks were tight. He lowered his head to hide the internal struggle apparent on his face and the deep anger in his eyes. He didn't hear Prince Yu's voice as the prince knelt in the hall, kowtowing his head in gratitude. He was trying his best to control his emotions, forcing himself to stop arguing with the Liang Emperor because he knew that arguing was useless.

"Minister Cai, do you understand what I mean?" Emperor Liang had waited for a long time but did not get a response. He frowned and his tone was more grim.

Cai Quan took a deep breath and paused again. Then he bowed and said in a low voice: "Your servant obeys."

"If there is nothing else, you may withdraw first."

"Yes." Cai Quan's lips were pressed into a straight line, and he bowed sharply before exiting the Warm Pavilion. As soon as he stepped out onto the porch, a cold winter wind blew with a piercing chill, but the young Minister of Justice felt his heart burn so hot it was unbearable. The eunuch who was waiting in the outer hall brought the cloak he had removed before entering the pavilion but he didn't put it on, but merely grabbed it and strode out.

Outside the palace gate, the Cai household sedan was still where he had left it. The servants hurried forward to greet him as soon as they saw him, but Cai Quan didn't get in. Instead, he pulled a horse out from his entourage, got astride it and ran alone towards the city, ignoring the panic behind him. Just like this, he spurred his horse into a gallop, and it was quite some time before he gradually heard someone yelling from behind: "Cai xiong! Cai xiong!"

Cai Quan reined in his horse and stopped. The round face of Shen Zhui, Minister of Personnel, appeared before him, huffing and puffing. He appeared to have been chasing after him for a while.

"What's the matter? Look at your expression....." Shen Zhui asked with concern as he stretched out his hand to grab hold of the horse's head.

Cai Quan raised his head and looked at the overcast sky. After a moment's silence, he suddenly said, "Shen xiong, accompany me to the restaurant for a drink?"

Shen Zhui was startled, but smiled soon after and said softly, "You're still in court wear. My home is just around the corner. I have a jar of 60-year old Shaoxing wine. You can drink your fill there."

Cai Quan did not decline, and they rode to the Shen Mansion together. Shen Zhui led his guest to the garden pavilion in the front courtyard where they sat down as he ordered a banquet. As soon as wine and dishes were laid out, Cai Quan downed three cups of wine in succession.

"That's enough. Even if you can hold your liquor, you probably shouldn't drink so much," Shen Zhui held down Cai Quan's cup and asked, "What's wrong? Did you enter the palace?"

"Yes....." Cai Quan heaved a deep sigh, "Regarding the case of the illegal fireworks factory....I've mentioned it to you before...."

"Have you carefully examined the key testimonies?"

“Yes.....” Cai Quan rubbed his forehead vigorously, and said in an exhausted voice, “I pulled a few all-nighters reviewing them and I was finally ready to report them to His Majesty today. But.....His Majesty ordered me to conclude the case, to stop at Zhu Yue and not continue to investigate further.....not to continue digging at the root.....”

Shen Zhui shook his head dejectedly and said, “You should have expected this outcome.”

“I was actually already prepared,” Cai Quan’s eyes were red as he reached for the wine cup and tossed down another mouthful, “Shen xiong, you don’t know how disappointed and unhappy I am.....His Majesty was really angry after reading the testimonies. He kept scolding Prince Yu, for resorting to underhanded tactics, for deceiving the Emperor, and Prince Yu kept apologizing, kept saying he was forced to do it, that he had no choice, that he would never challenge the Emperor’s might....but that wasn’t the point! Sixty-nine lives, sixty-nine lives! Were they not enough for the Emperor to reprimand Prince Yu and for Prince Yu to repent? Neither mentioned it, neither took it seriously! What matters to them? What do they care about? What?!”

Shen Zhui stared blankly for a long while, then suddenly grabbed hold of the cup of wine and tossed it down.

“It’s really heinous to have such disregard for human life just to pursue their personal interests. What frightens me most is.....the Emperor doesn’t seem to care one bit.....” Cai Quan’s hands clenched into fists on the table, his eyes looking straight ahead, “At the very least, human lives should be valued. To treat these lives so frivolously, what will the fate of Great Liang be? How will the common people survive? Not caring about the people’s livelihood....is this the kind of Emperor we are serving?”

“Who says so?” Shen Zhui suddenly hit the table with his palm. “I’ve never said this before but I can tell you now. Don’t be disheartened. There’s still His Highness Prince Jing.”

Cai Quan’s eyebrows shot up and he slowly turned his gaze to look straight at Shen Zhui. “Since you’ve mentioned it, I will not hide the truth from you. I have the same hopes for His Highness Prince Jing. It’s just that....Prince Yu’s methods are truly ruthless. If His Highness Prince Jing doesn’t have someone by his side who can help him deflect hidden arrows, he may not be able to get to the final step.....this is not something we can help.”

Hearing his opinion, Shen Zhui’s face also became gloomy. He shook his head and sighed. “You’re referring to His Highness Prince Jing’s house arrest.....there’s no explanation of what’s going on, nor any way to plead on his behalf.....”

“Speaking of this, you don’t have to worry,” Now that Cai Quan had let off steam, he felt a little more relaxed. “I didn’t hear all too clearly in the palace today, but it seems that Prince Yu was behind this, and the Emperor has seen through it. I think His Highness Prince Jing should be released soon.”

Shen Zhui was very pleased. He drew a deep breath and said, “That’s good, that’s good. At least the Emperor’s no longer confused.”

“Xuanjing Bureau also appears to be implicated. As His Majesty was scolding Prince Yu, he was also cursing Xia Jiang. This has never happened before.”

“Xuanjing Bureau?” Shen Zhui suddenly said, “No wonder.....as I was heading out today, I saw Imperial Guards sealing up Xuanjing Bureau.....it looks like this storm is not a small one. His Highness Prince Jing would be really fortunate to be able to avoid it.”

Cai Quan closed his eyes wearily and said in a low voice, “But this state of affairs is really discouraging.....”

“You’re wrong,” Shen Zhui looked at him with intensity, “The graver the situation, the less we should be discouraged. With our position in the government, though we may be powerless in some things, we still have the desire to serve the country and the people. This surpasses those who are interested only in enjoying the privileges of holding office.”

Cai Quan seemed to be in a trance, his eyes fixed, lost in his thoughts. After a while, he heaved a deep sigh and poured himself another cup. Shen Zhui tried to persuade him otherwise, but he was also melancholic and ended up having another cup with him.

As the two ministers were drowning their sorrows in Shen Mansion, Meng Zhi had completed carrying out his orders and had meticulously sealed up Xuanjing Bureau. Xia Jiang was not the kind of person who would allow himself to be arrested without putting up a fight, but with an Imperial Decree hanging over his head and Commander Meng personally taking charge at the scene, neither soft nor hard approaches would have been of any use, so Xia Jiang did not resist but merely requested repeatedly to meet the Emperor. Meng Zhi listened with a cold expression but did not respond. Instead, he watched to make sure that Xia Jiang was well-secured with iron shackles before heading to the small prison cell at the back to release Mei Changsu.

In all honesty, Xuanjing Bureau did not really cause Mei Changsu much harm. Xia Jiang had detained him for a few more days because he didn’t want to give this Jiangzuo Alliance Chief with his astonishing talents any time to find a way to counter the poison. But it was a prison after all. His daily recuperative medication had been interrupted, and his food and drink were of poor quality. After a few days there, he



had become pitifully thin. Looking him over carefully, Meng Zhi couldn't help but feel a burst of anguish in his heart.

Because there were so many soldiers around, Mei Changsu was unable to console him. He could only smile and say, "Commander has come in person to rescue Su mou.<sup>244</sup> For that, Su mou is deeply grateful. Unfortunately, it's chaotic here and inconvenient for me to express my gratitude. I will definitely call on you another day<sup>245</sup> to do so and hope Commander will receive me then."

Meng Zhi held his emotions in check and managed to smile and say a few polite words before he turned around and ordered two of his trusted subordinates to escort Mei Changsu back to his residence. After this had been arranged, he personally delivered Xia Jiang to the Sky Prison and locked him up in the most secure and forbidding Tian Zi cell. Only when that had been done did he get changed and return to the Palace to report to the Emperor.

"Did Xia Jiang say anything?" The Liang Emperor, having just finished scolding Prince Yu and ordering him to return to his residence to await punishment, was still in a vile mood as before. His expression was so dark it looked like it could release a thunderbolt at any time.

Meng Zhi reported the facts. "He refused to admit his guilt and kept asking for a royal audience."

"Of course he would," The Liang Emperor smiled coldly and said, "Xia Jiang is someone who is unlikely to give up till the last moment. I would be surprised if he had immediately admitted his guilt."

"But Your Majesty....." Meng Zhi took a step forward and said with a bewildered expression, "When your servant delivered Xia Dong to Sky Prison, she kept defending Xia Jiang, saying.....she was the one who rescued Wei Zheng, that she acted on her own in order to avenge her husband, and that her shifu had nothing to do with it.....do you think this was really the case?"

The Liang Emperor glanced at Meng Zhi, "You and your warrior's way of thinking. You're too simple minded. Only you would believe Xia Dong's words. If all she wanted to do was avenge her husband, she could have just killed him in prison. Why bother pretending to rescue him? Didn't Prince Ji also catch them supporting Wei Zheng so he wouldn't drown in his own blood? Clearly they didn't want him to die. If Xia Dong had acted alone, Wei Zheng would have been long dead. I think Xia Jiang intended to continue to use Wei Zheng for some purpose, for example secretly

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<sup>244</sup> a term referring to one's self

<sup>245</sup> In our culture, once a connection is forged, especially one of debt and gratitude, it continues forever. It's proper etiquette to visit the person one is beholden to on a regular basis to express this gratitude, and more often than not, bearing gifts.

placing him somewhere under Prince Jing's jurisdiction, then sending men to search him out. Naturally, this would become proof of Jingyan's guilt....."

"Huh?" Meng Zhi was horrified. "This.....this is too vicious.....only Your Majesty could connect the dots and make sense of this. Your servant is simple-minded.....never would have thought of this....."

"I am very familiar with Xia Jiang's methods," The Liang Emperor narrowed his eyes, his expression fierce and ruthless, "I never thought he would deceive me so I was never worried. Looking back now, it's really shocking....."

"Then Xia Dong....."

"Xia Dong's words were intended to exonerate her shifu, that's all. You may listen to them, but do you believe them?"

"If that's the case, Wei Zheng may still be alive....."

"He should still be in Xia Jiang's hands. But he will not surrender Wei Zheng."

"Why not?"

The Liang Emperor cast another glance at Meng Zhi. "Have you stopped using your brains just because I said you're simple-minded? Xia Jiang obviously needed to prove that Prince Jing had sent people to break a traitor out of prison, but in the end, he was the one who transferred Wei Zheng out. Isn't that equivalent to admitting his guilt? I've said before, Xia Jiang is not one to confess so easily."

In his heart, Meng Zhi was dying to laugh, but this Lang Ya second ranking martial arts master couldn't have so little self-control as that, so he forced himself to adopt a solemn expression as he said, "Framing a prince is an irredeemable crime. If Xia Jiang had the slightest intention of preserving his life, he would never surrender Wei Zheng."

"You're finally seeing some light." The Liang Emperor heaved a deep sigh and leaned back weakly. "Go and tell Xia Jiang that I do not wish to listen to his grievances now. Tell him to think things over properly, and when he's clear about how things stand, give him pen and paper and tell him to write down (his confession)."

"Yes."

"Leave me." The Liang Emperor waved his hand. Feeling exhausted, he unexpectedly closed his eyes and dozed off. Gao Zhan tiptoed forward and asked softly, "Your Majesty, will you rest here today?"

The Liang Emperor was silent for a long time and seemed to have fallen asleep, but after a while, he opened his eyes and instructed him, "Let's go to Zhiluo Palace."

## CHAPTER 136

### *Worries*

Concubine Jing carried a small bowl containing a green brew and walked daintily to the daybed. The person on the couch had just completed a foot bath and head massage, and was now reclining comfortably with his eyes closed, his body covered with a soft fox fur quilt as he enjoyed the faint herbal fragrance from the burning incense.

“Your place is still the most comfortable,” After swallowing the green brew that had been brought to his lips, the Liang Emperor stretched his body and opened his eyes. “I have wronged you these few days.”

“This concubine’s temperament is too laid back to take any offence.” Concubine Jing smiled gently. “I’ve only had my privilege of paying my respects in court revoked. Should this concubine feel like she is missing out? This concubine understands that His Majesty is looking out for her, so her heart is at ease. Besides, being confined here means having to perform less court ceremonies so this concubine feels more at ease and relaxed.”

“Only you can think so,” The Liang Emperor removed the bowl she was carrying and held her hand tightly. “Aren’t you worried about Jingyan?”

“With Your Majesty’s august wisdom, this concubine has nothing to worry about.....” Although Concubine Jing was smiling, after saying this, she couldn’t help her voice from trailing off.

“In the end, you’re still worried,” The Liang Emperor smiled and gestured for her to draw nearer. “Let me tell you, Jingyan will be alright. Now that the case has been clearly investigated, I will make it up to him.”

Concubine Jing’s expression remained unchanged, but her lips lifted in a slight smile. The Liang Emperor was surprised that she didn’t take the opportunity to express her gratitude and quickly asked, “What’s wrong?”

“The source of Jingyan’s troubles today is because he is unlucky. He cannot receive too much of Your Majesty’s favour. In future.....Your Majesty, it would be good if you loved him a little less.”

The Liang Emperor frowned, his temper piqued. He reprimanded her, “What are you talking about? Jingyan earned all that favour himself. I have never shown him any favoritism. Besides, if I wanted to bestow favour on him, I would naturally enable him to bear it. Why do you think so much?”

Concubine Jing lowered her head and didn’t say more. She just continued to silently massage the Liang Emperor’s wrist, but worry continued to linger faintly in the eyes that were deep as autumn waters.

“Alright, I know you’re afraid now so soon after the event,” The Liang Emperor relaxed his tone. “It’s not surprising that you’re worried. Jingyan has a straightforward nature. He tends to behave impulsively and will say whatever’s on his mind. He knew that I would be displeased if he spoke in defense of the old Chiyan case, but he still spoke out, regardless. This gives me better peace of mind than those who think too deeply. But I never expected Xuanjing Bureau to be so bold this time, and failed to defend Jingyan, wronging him. Fortunately the heavens protected him and younger brother Prince Ji managed to witness Xia Dong, otherwise who knows what evidence Xia Jiang would have fabricated by forcing a confession out of Su zhe.”

“Su zhe?” Concubine Jing wore a slightly curious expression. “The one Jing Ning mentioned.....the Mister Su who defeated the Bei Yan martial arts expert with three boys.....”

“That’s him. You’ve also heard of him?”

“This Mister Su is a guest of the court. How is he also involved?”

“You may not know this, but this Su zhe’s real name is Mei Changsu, known throughout the land for being unsurpassed in his knowledge and talents. Rumor has it that many in the capital have tried to court him. Jingyan must have also had some association with him, so Xia Jiang must have wanted to make use of this association to accuse him of being Jingyan’s accomplice. Think about it. What’s Jingyan’s position? And with his kind of temperament, could Xia Jiang actually get anything from interrogating him? But unlike him, this Mister Su is a scholar who is physically weak. Once within Xuanjing Bureau walls, wouldn’t Xia Jiang easily have his way with him?”

Concubine Jing inhaled softly and replied, “Then hasn’t this Mister Su suffered needlessly? Is he alright?”

“How could he be alright? Meng Zhi mentioned that he had undergone some torture.....He is a distinguished scholar. I will personally appease him, lest the world says that we did not take care of him here in the imperial court.

“Hearing how Your Majesty speaks of him, this person is of no ordinary character. It’s unfortunate that this concubine has not had the opportunity to meet him.” Concubine Jing smiled as she said these words without thinking.

“It’s not easy for you to meet him. Just ask Jingyan to bring him in to visit you.”

“Let it be,” Concubine Jing shook her head, “He’s neither a relative or a court official. Palace rules are strict. There is no need to make things difficult for (Empress) niang niang.”

“You, you’re too obedient. But you’re not wrong. It’s better to avoid unnecessary trouble,” The Liang Emperor paused to think it over. “How about this? Tell Jingyan to bring him along to the hunting grounds for the March Spring Hunt. There are less obstacles outside the palace. You can meet him then.”

“Is Your Majesty bringing this concubine along to the March Spring Hunt?”

The Liang Emperor gave her a baffled look. “Who else would I bring along?”

Concubine Jing’s eyes shifted imperceptibly, but she finally lowered her eyelashes and said in a low voice, “This concubine will obey.”

“How is this an order? Shouldn’t you be thanking me for such favour?” The Liang Emperor reached out and drew her close into his embrace, “You need not fear. If I choose to favour you, who would dare to do anything to you?”

Concubine Jing gently caressed the Emperor’s lapel and murmured, “This concubine is no longer young. All these years in the palace, she has seen many who were favoured fall from favour. As long as this concubine can serve Your Majesty, she has no other desires. It’s just that.....”

“It’s just that you can’t stop worrying about Jingyan, can you?” The Liang Emperor smiled as he tucked the stray strands of hair on her cheek behind her ear. “I have recently realized that Jingyan has many good traits which I had never noticed before. But this child is too stubborn and needs some guidance. Ah, that’s right, that Mister Su is a knowledgeable person. Jingyan should consult him more. I heard Jinghuan used to visit him regularly.....”

Concubine Jing didn’t think much of it and replied indifferently. “Jingyan’s first loyalty should be to the court. Although we should respect such reputable scholars, there is no need to deliberately court them.”

The Liang Emperor's eyes suddenly flashed with a gleam of light, and after a long while, he said with great deliberation, "Does Jingyan want to remain merely a prince who only manages court affairs?"

Concubine Jing was alarmed. In a rare instance, she forgot herself and suddenly sat up straight and looked steadily at the Liang Emperor.

"You need not panic. I just wanted to raise this with you," the Liang Emperor spoke gently, "I know that you've both been wronged in the past and never harboured such thoughts. But it's not too late to think about it now. Jingyan has never formed a faction in court, and I like that he is fair and just. But he still needs someone by his side.....this time, he almost fell into another's trap. Isn't it because he lacked someone who could help him think things through?"

Concubine Jing lowered her head and pondered for a long while before saying slowly, "This concubine understands that Your Majesty bears great love for both of us mother and son. This concubine will pass these words on to Jingyan. But what that child dislikes the most is.....Your Majesty probably already knows.....if he chooses not to listen, this concubine won't be able to do much about it....."

"That pig-headed child!" Though the Liang Emperor was scolding him, he was actually laughing instead. "Alright. It's not a big deal. I will look after him. Both of you have been under house arrest these few days and haven't met. Let Jingyan come in for the next two days, and you try to pacify him for me."

"What's there to pacify?" Concubine Jing couldn't help smiling. "Even children from small families cannot avoid punishment, let alone him, a prince? Enduring such suffering will increase one's wisdom, so this is also beneficial to him. If he really complains, it means that this concubine did not teach him well."

The Liang Emperor found these words pleasing to the ear. Feeling relaxed and at ease all of that day, he couldn't resist lying back as Concubine Jing massaged his waist, and soon fell into a deep sleep.

Since he said that Jingyan could enter the palace, Prince Jing wasn't too formal about it, and entered the palace on the third day. Empress Yan was fully aware that the Emperor had remained in Zhiluo Palace for the past two days and understood that the "house arrest" was in name only but because she didn't want to court a rebuff, she turned a blind eye from Zhenyang Palace.

Since Xin'er's execution, there had been no spy in Zhiluo Palace. Concubine Jing had been very cautious and thorough in ferreting out any others, so when mother and son were at ease when speaking here.

Concubine Jing brought her son to the warm room and asked as she served him a slice of custard cake, "Is that Mister Su alright?"

Xiao Jingyan raised his head and glanced at his mother. Putting down the cake, he said, "I don't know yet."

"You don't?"

"This son went over yesterday but didn't get to see him." Prince Jing frowned. "When he was ill previously, this son was also unable to meet him."

Concubine Jing couldn't help feeling a little worried. "If he's ill, it's only right for you to visit him more often."

Xiao Jingyan was baffled by his usually calm mother's behavior, but based on his previous experience, he knew there was no point in asking. Concubine Jing's reply would be along the lines of "He's your most important advisor, you should take better care of him," and so on.

"Don't worry, Mother. I will visit him tomorrow. No matter what, I want to meet him. Thanks to him, we were able to rescue Wei Zheng. Even though he wasn't in favour of it, he still exhausted himself planning the rescue because I insisted, and ended up suffering in Xuanjing Bureau....."

"He wasn't in favour of rescuing Wei Zheng?" Concubine Jing asked this question, but understood as soon as she thought it over. "Under the circumstances, he was right, but the both of you ultimately saw this through its most critical moments. It makes me relieved to know you have someone like this by your side."

Prince Jing's eyes were deep as he breathed a soft sigh. "Mister Su hid Wei Zheng away after the rescue, but did not tell me where, saying that it was better I didn't know.....But I would really like to meet Wei Zheng, to hear from him what happened then, how the Chiyan Army was wiped out, how Xiao Shu died, if he had said anything before he died, if he had any final wishes....."

"I heard that Wei Zheng was in the southern valley. I'm afraid he may not have been at Xiao Shu's side....."

Xiao Jingyan pressed his lips hard to keep them from trembling. His eyes were red as he said softly, "Mother.....sometimes I find it very hard to believe that Xiao Shu died this way. Before I went to Nan Hai\*, he even told me to bring him back a pearl as big as a pigeon's egg for him to play marbles with, but when I returned, not a single one of his bones remained.....Even the Lin Mansion, where we used to play together so noisily, was razed to the ground overnight, becoming only a memory....."

\*South China Sea

"Jingyan," Concubine Jing bent forward to wipe away her son's tears, saying softly, "As long as you do not forget him, he is still alive, alive in your heart....."



Prince Jing stood up suddenly and strode to the window where he stood silent, holding on to the window sill. After a long time, he said, "I don't want him alive in my heart. I want him alive in this world....."

"Such things cannot be demanded," Concubine Jing gazed at her son's trembling back, her eyes sad. "What is lost can never be regained. Even if Xiao Shu could return to this world, he may no longer be the Xiao Shu of before....."

In his state of grief, Prince Jing did not pay attention to his mother's words. He looked at the gurgling stream that wound around the garden outside and the wutong tree<sup>246</sup> with its sparse leaves as he thought of the future, and he strengthened his resolution to fulfil his vow of exonerating his close friend.

Prince Jing murmured, "They are probably looking at me from somewhere.....nothing will make me turn back and give it up."

Concubine Jing's face bore an unfathomable expression. She was on the verge of saying something but held back. She was a soft-hearted and considerate person. Before meeting Mei Changsu, perhaps it was better to remain silent.

"Jingyan, His Majesty mentioned yesterday to invite Mister Su along to the March Spring Hunt."

Prince Jing turned around abruptly in surprise. "What?"

"I will also follow along in a carriage. His Majesty has granted permission for you to bring Mister Su to meet me." Concubine Jing smiled faintly. "I've heard you speak so much about his shrewd and quick mind. How could I resist meeting such a person?"

Prince Jing's gaze flickered. Concubine Jing's intense interest in Su zhe was truly unexpected and went beyond mere curiosity. What's more, Concubine Jing had a quiet and calm temperament, there wasn't much that could pique her curiosity.

After a moment's pause, Xiao Jingyan bowed to receive the order. "Since Father Emperor has already given permission, I will invite him along."

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<sup>246</sup> Chinese parasol tree

## CHAPTER 137

### *Visiting*

Mei Changsu didn't want to meet Prince Jing, because his condition did indeed take a turn for the worse upon his return to Su Residence. He was afraid that he would unconsciously utter nonsense in his delirium, so he ordered Fei Liu to prevent anyone from visiting him.

But Fei Liu couldn't repeatedly deny all visitors, for example Meng Zhi.

The Supreme Commander of the Imperial Guard and the young bodyguard fought with each other from the foyer right up to the outside of the bedroom. Li Gang and Zhen Ping followed anxiously on their heels all throughout the fight, breaking out in cold sweat, but when they turned around, they couldn't help feeling all knotted up. Their Chief, who was ill and delirious just yesterday, was at this present moment holding his quilt tight around him as he chuckled at the sight of the spectacular hand-to-hand combat that had swiftly reached the front of his bed, looking happy and very much alive.

Li Gang whispered, "Chief, since you're awake, tell Fei Liu to stop!"

"It's alright. Let them fight for a while." Mei Changsu didn't mind in the least. "Meng dage knows when to stop even if Fei Liu doesn't. Anyway, he wouldn't be able to hurt Meng dage."

Hearing Mei Changsu come to their defense, Meng Zhi wasn't sure if he should laugh or cry, but since this person was lively enough to joke around, it meant that his illness was temporarily held at bay. Those who were keeping guard outside his bedroom relaxed and began to try to get Fei Liu's attention.

Having to walk around this chaotic scene to get to the centre of the room, Physician Yan was panting with anger when he arrived at the bedside with a bowl of medicine. Mei Changsu hurriedly sat up and without a word, drank it clean of the medicine, after which Physician Yan took the bowl back with a scowl.

Mei Changsu asked with a smile, “Physician Yan, people say that anger will cause harm to the liver. How come you are so healthy even though you’re always so furious?”

“You still dare to ask! Because of you, boy, I will be short of breath for two months!” Physician Yan snorted and left, fuming with anger.

Mei Changsu smiled silently, then raised his voice to say, “Fei Liu, invite da shu<sup>247</sup> over!”

Fei Liu reluctantly stopped, and tilted his head at Meng Zhi. “Go over!”

Meng Zhi smiled and reached out to ruffle Fei Liu’s hair. The youth unexpectedly tolerated this gesture, causing the observing Li Gang and Zhen Ping to drop their chins. Mei Changsu smiled as he said, “Meng dage, it looks like Fei Liu doesn’t dislike you anymore. Congratulations.”

“You can still kid around. How’s your illness?” Meng Zhi strode to his bedside and looked down to examine him carefully. “Why is Fei Liu preventing people from entering? It gave me a fright.....”

“The first two days weren’t so good but I’m a lot better today. When I instructed Fei Liu at the time, I was delirious and wasn’t very clear with my instructions. I hadn’t intended to keep you away.” Mei Changsu lifted his hand to point at the chair by his headboard. “Meng dage, please have a seat.”

Meng Zhi nodded his head in understanding. “Was it Prince Jing you didn’t want to meet? Then it would have sufficed to keep the door of the secret chamber closed.”

“He might also come in through the main door, right?” Just as Mei Changsu was saying these words, Fei Liu glided over and said loudly, “Knock on door!”

“Mention Cao Cao and he arrives.<sup>248</sup>” Meng Zhi glanced at Fei Liu and smiled, then turned back, obviously waiting for the host to decide.

Mei Changsu sat upright, and after muttering to himself for a bit, said, “Can I trouble Meng dage to receive him?”

Meng Zhi immediately stood up and walked to the secret chamber as Li Gang and Zhen Ping retreated.

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<sup>247</sup> big uncle – a polite term used by the young to address those elder

<sup>248</sup> Chinese equivalent of “Speak of the devil”. Cao Cao is a warlord from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms

Prince Jing was surprised to be so unexpectedly received by Meng Zhi. “Meng Zhi, why are you here? Didn’t I see you on duty when I entered the palace today?”

Meng Zhi smiled as he made his salutations. “I just got here. When I was at Xuanjing Bureau to release Mister Su that day, he wasn’t looking too well so I was worried. Since I had some time today, I came over to visit, and didn’t expect to meet Your Highness.”

“Ng.” Prince Jing didn’t ask more, but followed him out of the secret chamber, past the hanging screen into Mei Changsu’s bedroom. The host raised himself into a semi-reclining position and smiled in greeting, “Please forgive Su mou for being unable to receive you personally and for troubling Your Highness.”

“There’s no need to get up.” Prince Jing stepped forward hurriedly. “Is Sir feeling better?”

Mei Changsu smiled slightly. “Your Highness, please have a seat. It’s not a serious problem. Su mou just needed to rest for two days.”

Prince Jing looked carefully at Mei Changsu’s pale and wan appearance as he sat down and couldn’t help feeling guilty. He sighed as he said, “If not for having to divert the blame away from me Sir, you wouldn’t have had to endure the dangers of Xuanjing Bureau. Xia Jiang is not a compassionate and lenient person. Sir, you must have suffered greatly but are unwilling to tell us.”

Meng Zhi had a question he wasn’t able to ask earlier, and took this opportunity to ask it. “Mister Su, has the poison cleared from your body?”

Prince Jing said in alarm, “What poison?”

Mei Changsu blinked and followed suit, “What poison?”

“Don’t pretend. When I delivered Xia Dong to Sky Prison, she said that Xia Jiang forced you to take the lethal Wujin pill!”

“Oh,” Mei Changsu shook his head nonchalantly, “I wasn’t poisoned.”

“You don’t need to hide it from us. Xia Dong said she saw with her own eyes.....”

“What she saw was Xia Jiang giving me the Wujin pill, me dropping the pill on the floor, and Xia Jiang picking it up from the floor and forcing me to consume it. That’s all.” Mei Changsu smiled craftily. “I’ve really not been poisoned. If I had known that

Xia Jiang had such a Wujin pill and was still tricked by him, then that would have been really foolish of me.”<sup>249</sup>

Prince Jing and Meng Zhi looked at each other, understanding his meaning. They laughed in relief, but after a while, they couldn't help feeling some lingering fear.

“Speaking of Xia Dong, how is she now?”

“Before Xia Jiang was convicted, she was fine.” Meng Zhi sighed. “Such a pity. She had been alone for so many years. Now, she is in despair, disillusioned by her shifu's coldheartedness. I'm afraid no one would be able to share the burden of this suffering with her.”

“We are indebted to Xia Dong,” Mei Changsu's eyes also filled with sorrow, “We can only do our best to fix this. Xia Dong is different from Wei Zheng. Your Highness Prince Jing and Concubine Jing niang niang can try to plead leniency for her. His Majesty will think that you're just being generous and will not suspect anything. Even if she were to be convicted in the future, it would hopefully be a light sentence.”

“This is only natural.” Prince Jing nodded as he said, “Xia Dong is Nie Feng's widow. This time, she was only obeying her shifu's orders. There are many reasons to plead for the Emperor's grace. My mother and I will spare no effort to plead leniency for her, and will definitely not let her suffer severe punishment.”

“As long as His Highness is around, Xia Dong will not encounter great difficulty. Mister Su need not worry.” Meng Zhi understood better than Prince Jing the remorse Mei Changsu bore in his heart, and hurriedly tried to comfort him.<sup>250</sup>

Prince Jing leaned forward slightly, his eyes meeting Mei Changsu's. His tone was grave as he asked, “Mister Su, now that the dust has more or less settled, would it be possible to arrange for me to meet Wei Zheng?”

Mei Changsu was a little taken aback and hesitated for a moment before responding softly, “Even though Xia Jiang has been imprisoned, the situation has not concluded yet. It's better to be careful during this time. Wei Zheng is very safe now so Your Highness doesn't need to worry.”

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<sup>249</sup> In the TV series, the Poison of the Bitter Flame burnt away the Wujin Pill poison from MCS's body, but this chapter seems to imply (to me) that MCS exchanged the pill for another more innocuous one. Whether he made that up just to assure MZ & XJY, I'm not sure, but if so, I guess we'll find out in later chapters!!

<sup>250</sup> This seems to me to imply that XJY was heartless with little empathy! But perhaps MCS bears more guilt because he had known her personally through Nie Feng, so he had closer personal ties, whereas to XJY, Xia Dong was just someone from Xuanjing Bureau. Or maybe like with Xiao Jingrui, he felt guilty having had no choice but to engineer this.

“Is he still in the capital?”

“He’s still here.”

“Where is he?”

Mei Changsu raised his head to look at him, and shook his head. “Please forgive Su mou for not being able to inform Your Highness. If Your Highness knows where Wei Zheng is, you wouldn’t able to resist meeting him in secret, and if not careful, wouldn’t it have been a waste of effort?”

Prince Jing turned to look out the window, sighing softly. “I had hoped to hear from him what happened back then sooner rather than later. Sir cannot understand.....”

Mei Changsu lowered his head and pursed the corners of his lips, saying, “Su mou is an outsider and naturally would not truly understand, but as eager as you are, surely it can wait awhile. Wei Zheng has not completely recovered from his injuries yet. Your Highness also needs to focus your energies on dealing with the turmoil that will inevitably ensue once court reopens. For now, it would be best to keep calm. Once Su mou feels it is a good time for the both of you to have a conversation, I would arrange it even if Your Highness does not remind me.”

Seeing Prince Jing’s melancholic expression, Meng Zhi was just about to interject in an attempt to lift the mood when Li Gang’s voice could be heard from outside. “Chief, Mu Qing from the Mu Household is here to visit.”

Mei Changsu frowned inadvertently. Even though Mu Qing was on their side, he was young and rash. It would be a bad idea for him to see Prince Jing and Meng Zhi here, but if he sent this young prince back on the pretext of his serious illness, he was afraid that Mu Qing would write to his sister spouting nonsense, causing Nihuang and Nie Duo to worry needlessly, so either way, he was in a dilemma.

Prince Jing understood why Mei Changsu was hesitating. Taking the initiative, he stood up and said, “It’s considerate of Mu Qing to come and visit. There’s no reason to avoid meeting him. I will leave with Commander Meng and visit again tomorrow.”

Mei Changsu humbly thanked him, saying, “Instead of troubling Your Highness to come here everyday, it would be better for us to meet and continue discussions in the secret chamber.”

Prince Jing smiled, his eyes shifting slightly. Then, he suddenly said, “Will Sir be fully recuperated by March?<sup>251</sup>”

“How can my illness drag till March? I’ll be fine in a few days.”

“If that’s the case, please take care of yourself, Sir. His Majesty has asked me to bring Sir along with me to the March Spring Hunt.”

Mei Changsu’s eyebrows leapt in surprise. “Why have I been invited to the Imperial Spring Hunt? It’s an occasion reserved for the Imperial Family.”

Prince Jing stared directly at Mei Changsu without blinking, saying slowly, “My mother would like to meet you.”

Under that gaze, Mei Changsu’s eyebrows trembled faintly for a brief moment, but other than that, there was no other change in his expression and his voice was steady as he said, “Your Highness must be joking. Even though I serve Your Highness, I am merely a commoner. Why would Concubine Jing niang niang want to meet me?”

“Mother holds you in great esteem. She has mentioned it many times to me. I hope Sir will not decline.” Prince Jing withdrew his burning gaze, nodded briefly in courtesy, turned and walked towards the secret chamber. Meng Zhi, who had been standing silently by, listening to this, immediately followed on his heels.

Just as his parting silhouette was about to disappear, Prince Jing suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned around to ask, “Mister Su, is Wei Zheng in the Mu Household?”

Mei Changsu was stumped for a while and couldn’t help but sigh ruefully. “Your Highness is really sharp these days. It won’t be long before Su mou is rendered useless.”

Prince Jing smiled faintly and said, “Sir must be joking. Since the Mu Household is willing to protect Wei Zheng, I’ll not worry. Please take care, sir. I’ll leave now.”

Mei Changsu sat up to see him off. After some time, he heard the faint sound of the secret chamber door closing shut, confirming that they had truly left.

“Invite young Prince Mu in.”

“Yes.” The sound of someone accepting his orders could be heard from outside the window. After approximately the time it takes to brew a cup of tea, Mu Qing walked

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<sup>251</sup> technically, “March” is not a Chinese month, but I’m using this for ease of translation. It’s literally translated as “the third month”

into the room, brimming with energy. Though he was still a few steps shy of the bed, he already began to speak, “Mister Su, I’ve brought you a letter!”

“Letter?”

“Yes. Jiejie sent a rider to deliver it. It was enclosed with her letters of instruction to me.” Mu Qing didn’t sit on the chair but headed directly to sit on the edge of bed. As he handed over the letter, he cocked his head and looked curiously at it. “Quickly open it. What does it say?”

Mei Changsu smiled and put the letter under his pillow saying, “My eyes are a little blurry now. I will read it when I’m more wide awake.”

“Then I’ll read it for you, Sir!” Mu Qing’s eyes immediately brightened.

Mei Changsu didn’t know if he should laugh or cry. Fortunately, Fei Liu glided over just at this moment. He pointed his finger at the chair and said, “You, sit here!”

“I don’t want to!” Mu Qing raised his chin, “I will sit on the bed. I like to sit on the bed. Mister Su isn’t bothered, so why are you?”

“Alright,” Mei Changsu hurriedly interjected to curb an argument between the two youths, and suddenly had a flash of inspiration. “Prince Mu, would you like to exchange a few moves with our Fei Liu?”

“Wa, can...can I?”

“I don’t see why not.” Mei Changsu turned his head, saying to Fei Liu, “Fei Liu, go and have a hand-to-hand combat with this xiao gege.<sup>252</sup> Remember, you have to be as careful with him as you were when fighting Hua meimei.<sup>253</sup>”

Fei Liu’s expression immediately stiffened, but he couldn’t disobey Su gege’s instructions, so he could only turn around and head out to the garden. Mu Qing followed behind, looking very pleased, and soon the sounds of the fight could be heard from outside.

Mei Changsu reached under the pillow for the letter and tore it open. As expected, both of them were beseeching him again to let Nie Duo enter the capital. He immediately shook his head and sighed. Lifting his quilt, he got off the bed. Li Gang, who was standing at the door, immediately walked over to support him while draping some clothes over him. “Chief, what would you like to do?”

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<sup>252</sup> young older brother

<sup>253</sup> younger sister Hua. Probably some random girl Fei Liu had a hand-to-hand combat with before or maybe she was referenced somewhere else I fail to recall!



“Write a letter in reply.”

“Chief, why don’t you dictate from your bed? This subordinate will write on your behalf.”

Mei Changsu shook his head. “Nie Duo recognizes my handwriting. If someone else writes on my behalf, their imagination will run even wilder.”

Li Gang dared not disobey. He supported him to the writing desk, quickly ground the ink stone and spread out writing paper. The content didn’t bear much thought as he only needed to sternly reprimand the two of them.<sup>254</sup> However, he was worried that the weakness of his (writing) strokes would cause them to worry, so writing it took a lot of effort. By the time he finished writing the letter, his forehead was covered in perspiration. Li Gang helped him back to the bed first, then returned to the desk to carefully fold the letter up and put it in its envelope. Bringing it back to the bedside, he said softly, “Chief, shall I invite Prince Mu back in?”

Mei Changsu looked out the window. As he listened to the sounds of the fight still going on outside, he didn’t know why but he suddenly remembered the days of his youth from what seemed like a lifetime ago. He couldn’t help his thoughts, and after a good while, he said with great melancholy, “I’m going to sleep first. When Mu Qing returns after the fight, just hand him this reply and ask him to send it back. There’s no need to see me again.”

Li Gang agreed and supported Mei Changsu to lie down. His gaze swept the room, but all he could see were those pale lips. His heart constricted and a lump pressed painfully down on the pit of his stomach. He quickly looked down to take control of his emotions, before finally making his way slowly back to the doorway.

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<sup>254</sup> I wonder who the 2 people he was referring to were. I can’t imagine he would scold Nihuang so I don’t think she’s one of them! Plus, he mentions that Nie Duo would recognize his handwriting....Nihuang would have too, no? Yet she wasn’t mentioned.

## CHAPTER 138

### *Introductions*

If there is something that passes fastest through the capital, it's gossip. When court reopened on the 16th day of the first lunar month, most court officials had more or less heard some news, and tensions were high as they waited to see what would happen, so they did not expect the day to pass by as calmly as it did. No imperial decree was issued, and only some necessary ritualistic ceremonies were carried out. The Emperor's facial expression also remained no different from usual. But after a few days had passed, when everyone thought the news was inaccurate, or that the situation had changed, everything that was expected happened all of a sudden.

On the 20th, the Emperor issued an imperial decree to suspend all powers of the Xuanjing Bureau, and all its officials were suspended from duty. At the same time, Zhu Yue was removed from his position in the Imperial Court of Justice and detained by the Ministry of Justice.

On the 23rd, the Inner Court issued an imperial edict to downgrade Prince Yu Xiao Jinghuan from a Seven Pearled Prince to Double Pearls on the grounds of disobedience, and he was ordered to retreat to his mansion for three months. Seven senior officials in the Yu Household were transferred out for not properly fulfilling their government duties.

On the 27th, Concubine Jing was promoted to Imperial Consort Jing and she was bestowed a gold seal.

Although none of the imperial edicts directly involved Prince Jing, anyone with eyes could tell that Xiao Jingyan was now the highest ranking prince. When he walked past the assembled officials on some occasions, supporting the arm of the increasingly old and stooping Liang Emperor, the future appeared very clear.

However, what most of the officials who were tired of all the faction fights were most glad with was that although Prince Jing was closer to the throne of the Eastern Palace and progressed rapidly through government, he had no major changes in his temperament. He was still as upright, tough, and steadfast as before. To Prince Yu and his supporters, Prince Jing's attitude seemed cold and arrogant to the point of being disdainful, but the more he was like this, the more at ease these officials felt. There

was no need for them to speculate. One only needed to observe his respect and recognition of ministers like Liu Cheng, Shen Zhui, Cai Quan and others of similar rank to understand what type of ministers he liked. As a result, the atmosphere in court began to change unconsciously.

“Xiao Shu, Prince Jing spoke of you before His Majesty today.” Meng Zhi said this seriously as he sat in the small library outside Mei Changsu’s bedroom. “Although the situation is very good now, shouldn’t he avoid rousing suspicion?”

“Did he initiate it?”

“Not really. At the time, His Majesty had just read Xia Jiang’s account. It said that you were Prince Qi’s supporter, so His Majesty asked if Prince Jing believed that. How do you think Prince Jing responded?”

Mei Changsu shook his head.

“He responded too boldly,” Meng Zhi lamented, “He said, ‘If Mister Su was Prince Qi’s supporter, how could I not have recognized him?’ Hearing this really made me break out in cold sweat. But it turned out alright. Although he acknowledged his intimate relationship with King Qi in this manner, His Majesty surprisingly did not get angry. Instead he laughed out loud and said that Xia Jiang must have been really desperate to be biting at straws. ‘Mei Changsu and Prince Qi, how is it possible for them to be related?’”

Mei Changsu slowly nodded and said: “In fact, Prince Jing was right to answer this way. His Majesty is already aware of the brotherly affection between him and Prince Qi. If he didn’t admit it, would that mean he was trying to hide something? His circumstances with regards to Prince Qi are now completely different from before. His Majesty’s heart is now stable and unsuspecting. Concealing anything from him would only indicate a guilty conscience.”

“That’s true,” Meng Zhi agreed. “Prince Jing then continued to talk about you, saying that you were connected to court only because you had used the three boys to defeat Baili Qi, and because of this, you were involved though innocent of any wrongdoing. His Majesty felt truly apologetic, which is why he sent me to deliver this scepter to you to appease you.”

Mei Changsu looked nonchalantly at the green jade scepter laid on the table and smiled faintly.

“You don’t think it’s anything do you,” Meng Zhi discerned his meaning and moved closer, “However, their conversation did not end there.”

“Oh? What else did Prince Jing say?”

“His Majesty brought it up first. His Majesty said to him, ‘I heard that Mei Changsu was Prince Yu’s advisor. Did you know that?’” Meng Zhi repeated this word for word, “Prince Jing replied, ‘I don’t know how Prince Yu thinks, but I think Mister Su had no such intention. I have had in-depth conversations with him. This person has deep knowledge in statecraft, earning him great admiration. If one treats him merely as an advisor, I’m afraid that wouldn’t be doing him justice.’”

Hearing this, Mei Changsu’s expression became increasingly serious and he frowned slightly.

“His Majesty then smiled and said, ‘Mei Changsu is indeed a talent. I intend for you to get closer to him, and feared that you would reject him for having once served Prince Yu. Since you also bear him respect, this is an opportune moment to visit him to assess the situation. This person is very knowledgeable, and has a good grasp of current affairs. You have been away from the court for more than ten years. I would like to find a way for you to make faster progress.’” At this point, Meng Zhi raised his eyebrows, “Regarding His Majesty’s instructions, all Prince Jing needed to do was oblige him, but his reply really took me by surprise.”

“Did he turn it down?” Mei Changsu also looked surprised.

“That’s not the reason,” Meng Zhi massaged his cheeks with his hands, and when he was relaxed he said. “Besides me, there were two other people. Who do you think they were?”

“Who?”

“Minister of Revenue, Shen Zhui and Minister of Justice, Cai Quan. They were there to conclude the case of the illegal fireworks factory.”

“Did Prince Jing’s reply have anything to do with them?”

Meng Zhi slapped his thigh and said, “Indeed! At that moment, Prince Jing looked back at Shen Zhui and Cai Quan and said ‘It is beneficial to have more association with scholars in order to progress, not just for me, but for court officials too so that they do not become set in their ways. Since I’m going to visit, Minister Shen and Minister Cai should join me. They are young and talented, so it would do them some good.’ His Majesty laughed when he heard this. He said ‘You silly boy, don’t you understand that I’m telling you to ask Mei Changsu for guidance? Bringing the both of them along, isn’t that just an intellectual discussion? Anyway, I leave it to you.’”

Mei Changsu got up slowly, and paced thoughtfully around the room, his expression changing indeterminately. Meng Zhi felt uneasy and hurriedly asked, “Is there anything wrong with what Prince Jing has done?”

“No.....it’s nothing.....I understand Jingyan’s good intentions,” Mei Chang Su sighed deeply, “but he actually needn’t go through all this trouble.....”

“Good intentions?”

“Shen Zhui and Cai Quan will be the pillars of Prince Jing’s administration. He’s bringing them here to meet me just to pave a way for my future,” Mei Changsu gazed around. In a soft voice, he said, “No trace will be left of what has happened here. Like the secret chamber, once it is no longer needed, it will disappear without a trace. Even if in the future, Prince Jing succeeded in his great undertaking, I wouldn’t be able to take credit for it. Jingyan is a sentimental person. He doesn’t want me to be forsaken in future, which is why he so eagerly seized this opportunity to let his important ministers get to know me. In future, besides Shen and Cai, he will think of ways to bring more people along.....”

“Good, good!” Meng Zhi slapped the table happily, “That’s Prince Jing for you! He won’t let your support of him be in vain.”

Mei Changsu’s gaze intensified and he slowly shook his head, “I’m exhausted, not only from serving Prince Jing. We have a common goal. He doesn’t need to feel that he owes me something.”

“You can’t say that. You have done so many things for Prince Jing, it is only right that he doesn’t forsake you. You wouldn’t want him to be so cold as to completely ignore you, right?”

Mei Changsu couldn’t help smiling. He returned to his seat and nodded as he said, “That’s true. The greater one’s hopes and expectations, the greater the contradiction. It’s natural for Jingyan to have this intention. But times are uncertain. I need to find an opportunity to advise him not to be impatient. Finding a place for me is a minor matter and can wait. “

Meng Zhi looked meaningfully at him. Some thoughts came to mind, but he held himself back. In his confusion, the intelligent and quick-witted Mei Changsu wasn’t the least bit conscious of what he had just said. The way he spoke just now was completely unlike an advisor, at least, not like a typical advisor whose goal was to gain fame and fortune. But he thought it better not to remind Mei Changsu of this.

About two days later, Prince Jing brought Shen Zhui and Cai Quan to pay him an official visit. Mei Changsu had more or less recovered. Wrapped in thick white fur, he welcomed his guests into the front hall. There were heating stoves all round the room, and the guests soon felt warm enough to remove their warm outer clothing.

Before they came, Shen Chai and Cai Quan still harboured dislike and resistance in their hearts towards this Qilin prodigy who had chosen to recuperate in the capital city. When they met him, however, they were shocked to realize that he was actually

truly ill. And after Prince Jing opened the conversation and their discussions gradually deepened, their prejudice began to unconsciously fade away.

In fact, most of the talents that Prince Jing was now relying on were recommended by Mei Changsu. So Mei Changsu understood Shen Zhui and Cai Quan very well and held them in high esteem. Where they shared the same philosophy, the more they differed in minor viewpoints, the more satisfying the discussion became. Cai Quan, in particular, went as far as to revise specific clauses of the criminal law after all these discussions, completely forgetting that the other party was a civilian with no official position.

They conversed in this manner from morning till noon. When Li Gang brought out wine and food, the guests did not decline, and after eating, they continued their conversation. When the sky began to turn dark, Prince Jing couldn't help but remind them, "Mr. Su is not in good health and this may be too tiring for him. He won't be leaving as he lives here, so you can consult him another day."

The two ministers raised their heads in a daze, only then realizing that the sun was setting, and quickly got up to apologize. Mei Changsu smiled and said, "It is rare for Su mou to have the opportunity to get close to such young and talented da ren.<sup>255</sup> Having enjoyed such an open and uninhibited discussion today, there is no need for such formalities."

Cai Quan had a more straightforward nature. Now that he had acknowledged Mei Changsu's talents and knowledge, he became more direct when making some points. "Mister Su has the talents equivalent to our country's scholars, which I deeply admire. But talent and virtue must match, which is the way of the sagely. At the present moment, the world longs for order. I hope Mister Su will place value on good virtues and not go astray."

Mei Changsu understood what he meant, and glanced at Prince Jing, smiling without speaking. Seeing that Prince Jing was standing on the sidelines, not taking the opportunity to issue a declaration to canvass this important talent, Shen Zhui felt more anxious than him<sup>256</sup> and hurriedly interjected to say, "Mister Su is such a wise man, so of course, you would naturally have a unique point of view. These days, who can revitalize the decline of the imperial dynasty? Who is able to strive for the interests of the common people? Presumably Mister Su already knows the answer to these questions?"

"Yes," Mei Changsu couldn't help but smile. "Su mou has been in the capital for more than a year and I have seen it all very clearly, so the both of you, please rest assured."

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<sup>255</sup> literally, "big people" – term for nobility / superiors

<sup>256</sup> this line literally translates to "the Emperor's not in a hurry, but the eunuch is"

Everyone there was intelligent, and up till that point, both the host and his guests had very much enjoyed their conversations. Shen Zhui and Cai Quan were thoroughly satisfied when they took their leave, and just as they were out the door, they caught hold of Prince Jing, suggesting that he secure Mei Changsu's immense talents (for his own use). This was the outcome Xiao Jingyan had originally desired, so he didn't need to put on an act but readily agreed.

## CHAPTER 139

### *Prison Visit*

The Sky cell was the most heavily guarded cell in Sky Prison, but it did not mean that it had the poorest conditions. On the contrary, it was spacious and clean. It's just that its walls were thicker than other cells and it had several more layers of iron bars.

Xia Jiang squatted in the corner of the cell, his eyes closed as he recalled the course of events leading to his failure. In all his many decades in the bureaucracy, he had always been thorough when acting so ruthlessly, and had never encountered such a wretched situation until now. Though on the surface it would seem that his apprentice had unexpectedly betrayed him, the fact that he was unable to convince the Liang Emperor of this betrayal shows that this was the result of an expert's design.

At the moment, the Liang Emperor's trust in Xuanjing Bureau had dropped to freezing point, and he was so angry that he refused to see Xia Jiang. He merely ordered Meng Zhi to visit Xia Jiang regularly to ask if this former Xuanjing Bureau director was ready to confess his guilt.

Even though he was asked to confess many times and even if Xia Jiang agreed to confess, he was unable to because he couldn't actually hand over Wei Zheng. Moreover, confessing to the crime of framing a prince is a path to certain death.

One thing was very clear to Xia Jiang – the Liang Emperor would be ruthless in handling this matter once involved.

The wet and mouldy air of the cell wafted through his nose. Xia Jiang gritted his teeth as he thought of the frail and delicate young man who could be crushed with a pinch of the fingers, yet at the same time so valiant he could inspire fear in other's hearts. When he had first heard of Su Zhe, he didn't pay him much attention, thinking that he was just another Jianghu person who had ambitions in the Imperial court and likely had little power to do so. More importantly, he had no interest in the fight for the throne at the time. It didn't matter to him if the Crown Prince or Prince Yu won because Xuanjing Bureau would continue to remain, so there was nothing to worry about.



But the situation changed drastically. Prince Jing suddenly appeared almost out of nowhere, and rose rapidly in power, filling Xia Jiang with a sense of foreboding. It was only then that Xia Jiang began to seriously counter this change in circumstances. However, he had never expected the jianghu person he had overlooked to cost him the victory that was already in his hand, and reduce him to this.

Now, Xia Jiang was no longer thinking about how to bring down Prince Jing. He was thinking about how to survive, especially given that there was not even the slightest response to the two written letters he had passed on to the court.

Just at that moment, the iron lock outside the door clanged and the door was thrown wide open. However, Xia Jiang made no move to escape, for the only person who dared to open the door so carelessly was Meng Zhi.

Meng Zhi. Who ranked second in the Lang Ya list of martial arts masters, and first in all of Great Liang.

The Commander General of the Imperial Guard brought pen, ink, paper, and inkstones, evidently showing that the emperor was not satisfied with the suspect's last confession.

"Xia Jiang, your majesty has limited patience, and if you still will not truthfully confess to your crimes, your majesty will have to sentence a severe punishment with no mercy." Meng Zhi said coldly, with his arms folded across his chest.

"It is already a capital crime, how much more serious can the sentence be?" Xia Jiang stood up, supporting himself with the stone wall. "Commander Meng, what I have confessed is the truth. Why doesn't your Majesty believe it?"

Meng Zhi expressionlessly said, "You identify Mei Changsu as an old supporter of Prince Qi. Is there any evidence?"

"He admitted it himself..."

"If you were an old supporter of Prince Qi, would you admit it yourself? Besides for no reason. Why should he take the initiative to show you that he is an old man of King Qi? Is Mei Changsu Xiang stupid enough to find death?" Meng Zhi sneered, "If you want your Majesty to believe, don't bite at will, just tell the truth, such as handing over Wei Zheng."

"Wei Zheng is not in my hands anymore, how can I hand him over?"

"If you don't hand him over, then you are pleading guilty?"

Interrogation fell into the same strange cycle like the previous few times. Xia Jiang felt he was going to go mad. He took a few breaths to calm himself and said,

“Commander Meng, I admit that I moved and imprisoned Wei Zheng in the Imperial Court of Justice and deliberately led the raiders into the Xuanjing Bureau with evil intentions, but everything else that Xia Dong said I instigated her to do are all falsehoods. His Majesty can’t just believe only what he chooses!”

Meng Zhi stared at him for a long time, his eyes cold. “Xia Jiang, fortunately for you, Xia Dong kept exonerating you.....As it stands, even if you refuse to accept blame for what you have done, how can you push all the guilt onto your own disciple? His Majesty has given you many opportunities to defend yourself, so how can you say that His Majesty believes only what he chooses? Xia Dong is clearly your cherished disciple. Why would she frame you?”

The muscles on Xia Jiang’s face twitched uncontrollably. He could offer no good explanation to Meng Zhi. Everyone was well aware of his relationship with Xia Dong, and there had never been any news of conflict between the master and his disciple. If he were to say they’d already fallen out prior to the incident, others would inevitably be suspicious, and especially more so, when he couldn’t say what the reason for the fallout was.

“You can drag this out and refuse to plead guilty. It doesn’t matter,” Meng Zhi continued, “Your two junior officials have already confessed that you had instructed them to allow the raiders into Xuanjing Bureau, so you don’t need to keep denying it.”

“I was going to wipe them out with one fell swoop! I set up gunpowder in the dungeons just to kill these raiders. Didn’t they mention this?”

“Based on their confession, no.” Meng Zhi’s steady voice could make a person despair. “After I sealed up Xuanjing Bureau, I could find no traces of gunpowder in the dungeon. Neither Xia Chun nor Xia Qiu mentioned this in their confessions. Do you have any other proof of innocence?”

Xia Jiang turned pale. On the day of the incident, in order to encourage Prince Jing to take bold action, he had intentionally led Xia Chun and Xia Qiu out, keeping them away from the operations. Naturally, he wouldn’t have told them about the gunpowder trap. After all, once the gunpowder exploded, Xia Dong would have blown up with it. So he wouldn’t have mentioned it to Xia Qiu. Not even to Xia Chun, who though not blood related, had been disciples with her since their childhood, to avoid sprouting off new problems. Now there is nobody with any evidence.....except those two junior officials....

“Commander Meng, please report to His Majesty that there is a problem with the confessions of both these junior officials. They are very clear that the gunpowder had been prepared to destroy the raiders.....”

“Too late,” Meng Zhi coldly extinguished Xia Jiang’s last hope without any show of pity. “Both the junior officials only recognize you as their superior, forgetting that

they are court officials. When being tried, they said that they were merely obeying orders, so they were innocent of any wrongdoing. His Highness Prince Xu reported this arrogance to His Majesty. Naturally, this angered His Majesty and he ordered the prison supervisor to flog them forty times and they died before the count ended.”

“Dead.....” Great beads of sweat rolled down Xia Jiang’s forehead. He took two steps forward blankly and asked, “Why was His Highness Prince Xu at the trial?”

“This was a special case. His Majesty did not want court officials to participate in the proceedings. Even though His Highness Prince Xu pays no attention to court affairs due to his disability, he is still after all a prince. What is so unusual about appointing him to oversee the trial?”

Xia Jiang closed his eyes, unable to move, his four limbs feeling like they were being shackled. Because of the fight over the concubine, Prince Xu had been greatly oppressed by Prince Yu. If he wanted to pick this moment to vent his anger, it would be quite normal. That may be how things are in the world. The person one never paid any attention to while one was in power would be the person who delivers the greatest blow. There is no way to foresee or avoid it.

Looking upon this man who had been forced into despair, Meng Zhi’s eyes were bright, his expression not softened in the least. “Xia Jiang, you have until today. Actually, both cause and consequence are borne by you. What does it mean for His Majesty to lose trust in Xuanjing Bureau, you would know best. He is increasingly not wanting to hear any matters concerning you. I would probably eventually stop coming. Then, you would definitely be done for. When you will die is still uncertain, but likely before autumn ends. Until then, you’ll have to remain in this cell for a while. I believe you have more debts than this so make full use of this time. Here’s paper and ink. Take your time to reflect and to write them down. Don’t bring them along to your grave and carry your sins along with you to the next life.”

After saying this, the Commander General of the Imperial Guard turned around and left without another glance at Xia Jiang. He locked the door well behind him, leaving Xia Jiang alone in suffocating silence in the dark room.

Exiting the Sky cell, did not leave immediately but walked along the long corridor until he came to the women’s prison, looking for Xia Dong. The women’s prison was located in the uppermost level, making it a lot brighter and more airy than below. When Meng Zhi entered, Xia Dong was standing in the centre of her prison cell, her head raised looking up at the sunlight streaming in wanly through the tall window, not looking up even when she heard sound at the door.

“Xia da ren, someone requested that I come and check on you. Are you okay?”

Xia Dong didn’t reply. As the sun shone on her face, her skin seemed translucent and her wrinkles were clear and distinct. She narrowed her eyes, as if counting the

specks of dust in the light. Such a state of pure tranquility was in reality just another form of despair.

Meng Zhi suddenly didn't know what to say. What comfort could he offer this woman? Tell her that someone would plead for her, that her life would remain intact? After all the heartbreak and suffering she had gone through in her life, why would Xia Dong still care if she lived or died.....

After a long silence, Meng Zhi could only ask helplessly, "Xia da ren, do you have anything you would like to convey to anyone?"

Xia Dong finally turned her gaze slowly towards him, her bright eyes stirring faintly. "How are Chun xiong and Qiu xiong doing?"

"Oh, neither of them were there on the day of the incident. Since it could not be assumed that they were both accomplices, they will probably just be dismissed from their positions. There will probably be some other form of punishment, but it should be nothing too serious....."

"Then...what about him?"

"He is the principal culprit, so he can't escape responsibility." Meng Zhi felt there was no need to be tactful. "He is guilty and deserves to be punished. Xia da ren should not keep this matter to heart."

Xia Dong bowed her head and smiled bitterly, "I will not keep it to heart. My heart has been gone for a long time, where would I keep it?"

"Xia da ren, General Nie Feng did not die peacefully. Until the truth is revealed, please take good care of yourself."

At the thought of Nie Feng, Xia Dong's eyes flashed with pain, and she involuntarily raised a hand to slowly stroke the gray hair from her temples. Perhaps breaking down like this was the easiest. To weep with grief, escape, feel numb, even dying are all easier than gritting one's teeth to persevere on. But she knew herself that she was incapable of choosing that easier path.

Because she was Nie Feng's wife, even though she had nothing left to live for, she hoped that the deceased could rest in peace. She had to get to the bottom of the tragic truth and offer it at her husband's grave.

"Meng da ren, please tell Mister Su that Xia Dong believes he is not the kind of person to run aimlessly after fame and fortune. Xia Dong also believes that he is able to return justice to the dead. Moving forward, even if I am exiled, I will still support him. Please tell him not to be distracted by me."

Meng Zhi bowed solemnly towards her, referring to her by her other title, “Lady Nie’s words, I will definitely convey to Mister Su. Regarding that old case, Mister Su is not the only one who will not let it be buried. His Highness Prince Jing has also vowed to investigate it to the end. Although General Nie’s reputation wasn’t harmed, he played a key role in the Chiyan case. If he is unable to reveal the truth to the world, General Nie’s spirit will not rest in peace. It is difficult to predict when this dream can be realized, so I beg Lady Nie to be patient and continue to endure.”

Xia Dong turned around. The light flashed across her cheeks, leaving a silhouette on the side of her nose. She didn’t reply, but the calm and perseverance in her eyes spoke volumes. Meng Zhi also didn’t say anymore, but clasped his hands in a bow and withdrew from the prison cell. In the darkness outside, an old jailer peered furtively from his hiding place, or perhaps he thought he was hidden.

The Han cell was as empty as before, desolate and quiet. Meng Zhi merely cast a hasty glance in its direction before he strode away.

Prince Qi’s last footsteps were left in that cell, along with the dreams and hopes of many, but the Commander General of the Imperial Guard understood that now was far from the time to mourn.

## CHAPTER 140

### *Reunion*

The second month of this year happened to coincide with the civil service examinations, which were held every three years. According to the system, the Ministry of Rites presided over the examinations. The Emperor would appoint a chief examiner and 18 deputy chief examiners to select the best scholars in the realm. During this time in previous years, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu would attempt to support their own people into the new civil service positions by whatever means possible, creating trouble both overtly and secretly. Furthermore, the examiners who took advantage of these faction fights for personal rank and power naturally had to in turn look after the interests of their respective masters, and so these private corrupt practices continued to prevail. There were some loyal imperial court officials who would admonish them countless times, but not only was it ineffective, they also came to a bad end. This corruption in selecting scholars had become the imperial government's most chronic disease, with few who had the experience or knowledge to understand it.

But everyone understood that this year, the circumstances would definitely change. As for how, many were keeping watch.

Apart from being the eldest son who inherited the nobility and merits of his family, the civil service examination was the only way for the majority of people to begin an official career in the civil service. The various aspects involved were very complicated. Geography, origin, in-laws, old friends and acquaintances, teachers....many factors could affect the final result. It's not just about faction politics. To avoid taking that path and put an end to any rumour, one must endure pressure from all parties in one's network, while simultaneously safeguarding one's integrity and fairness in order to avoid others nitpicking on one's mistakes and so meet with failure.

This time, the crown prince was out of the game and Prince Yu was under house arrest. It seemed that Prince Jing was the only one who could influence the Emperor's choice of examiners this year. If he wanted to exercise such influence, no one would dare to argue with him.

At the end of the first month, the Ministry of Rites announced the year's auspicious date for the civil service examinations after reading the heavenly bodies. Presiding over the selection of examiners in court, the Liang Emperor asked Prince Jing for his opinion on the matter, to which he replied, "This is a serious matter. I dare not respond arbitrarily. Please give your son several days to carefully consider this," even though there was no clear answer. However, it was very clear that he had no intention of staying out of it. But reversing such long-standing abuse within the system was no easy matter, and if not handled carefully it may have the opposite effect, so everyone waited in great anticipation for the time when the final list of names would be revealed. In fact, they were actually waiting to see this prince's final decision, whether he would strive to recommend the kind of upright and outstanding scholars whose worth he recognized without worrying about offending people, or capitulate to the previous years' usual practice of appointing an accommodating examiner who would leave a gap for some special people to enter (the system).

On the fourth day of the second month, the Imperial edict was finally issued, and it was read aloud to the public by a ceremonial officer. If their chins could drop off, one would have seen many chins scattered all over the court that day. The deputy chief examiners were the youngest and most energetic officials from the six ministries, but the chief examiner was the elderly 73 year old Cheng Zhiji from the Phoenix Pavilion. Although Cheng lao da ren<sup>257</sup> had the grace of remaining at home for many years without having to be at court, although being the Master of the Pavillion was well-known to be an honorary official position, but in the system, he was still a first-grade court official, and qualified to be selected as the Chief Examiner.

It's just that no one like him had been appointed to such a position before, and no one thought of him when speculating about potential candidates.

But everyone soon understood what Prince Jing was trying to achieve by proposing such a mix of young and old. Cheng Zhiji was not a particularly tough and unyielding old court official. He was kind and gentle, never rejected anyone nor caused anyone to lose face. He was well-informed about the current state of affairs, even though it seemed to have forgotten about him because he had simply been away from court too many years. Because he had no clear connections at court, his conversations with others centred around matters that were public knowledge and everything had to be explained in detail. The crucial point was that if an ironclad relationship didn't exist, who would dare to play the martyr and say something for personal gain without careful thinking? Especially so before someone who had been forgotten for so many years and whose limits one was unclear of. After all, one must first consider the risk when doing something. One can't simply insist on bringing along a chest full of gold, silver, pearls and jewelry to ask for help when the path is no longer the same old familiar one. After all, his predecessors weren't vegetarians.

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<sup>257</sup> old lord – form of respect

But between the selection of the examiners to the start of the examinations, there were only ten days. Before anyone had the time to discover the path to win Cheng Zhiji over, he was already in the examination room with his bags. Without any outside influence or personal selfish motives, even arguments and objections became simple. Actually, the biggest flaw in mixing the old and the young was that the elder tended to stick to their conservative views, unwilling to accept new ideas, while the young were arrogant and impetuous, not respecting the experience of their elders. This was what Prince Jing was contemplating when deciding on the candidate during the “several days” he requested. Although the final list of names weren’t completely those he had selected, and the Liang Emperor had made a few changes, it retained the original plan and ultimately achieved Prince Jing’s desired outcome. This is mainly because Cheng Zhiji was a suitable choice. Even though he was old, he wasn’t stubborn and was willing to listen to other points of view. At the same time, he was a former scholar, and the Master of the Phoenix Pavilion. With such weight behind him, all eighteen deputy chief examiners had high regard for the old master, and not one of them dared to show him any disrespect when the time came for grading on the first day of the examinations. When the Chief Examiner does not react badly to the varied views and impulsiveness of the young and the Deputy Chief Examiners recognize the authority of the Chief Examiner, mutual restraint can naturally become mutual benefit, avoiding the likelihood of major contradictions.

Actually, this year’s civil service examinations was still far from being able to avoid missing any talents, because that was simply not possible, but at the very least, this was the fairest and cleanest preliminary examination round for the past many years. Prince Jing’s goal was “no pass with no achievement”. He did not expect to completely clean up such long standing corruption all at once, nor did he adopt a hard stance to enforce integrity that could have easily led to resentment and opposition. What he first wanted to change was the old notion of “no disadvantages for not passing the examinations”, stopping the so-called “usual practice” that had lasted for so many years, thereby taking the first step in cleaning up the election of government officials.

The civil service examinations ended smoothly without any major disturbance, which made the Liang Emperor very happy. What he was most worried about was that Prince Jing would be unaware of the current situation and cause a political upheaval by blindly imposing his own way of thinking, so the Emperor was glad to notice that he was becoming increasingly moderate and amiable.

In the blink of an eye, the third month arrived. The court began to busy itself with preparations for the imperial family’s Spring Hunt which would be held away from the palace at Jiu’an Mountain. Apart from Prince Yu who was under house arrest, all the rest of the princes were expected to go. Including the rest of the imperial clan and the retinue of high officials, there were close to two hundred people, each of them bringing their own entourage, making this the largest group in history. Those ordered to stay behind to take care of things were the same as previous years, but the imperial



concubine who joined the hunt wasn't the previously favoured Concubine Yue from Guanliu Palace but Concubine Jing.

Two days before they departed for the hunt, Mu Qing made his way once again to the Su Residence on his palanquin, heading directly to the rear garden before alighting. Besides the young prince, there alighted from the palanquin another young man who seemed to be recovering from a serious illness.

Li Gang came forward silently to make his salutations before turning around to guide them into Mei Changsu's quarters in the main building. As soon as he entered the room, Mu Qing headed exuberantly towards the host, his hands cupped in greeting, saying, "I have brought him here safe and sound. Nothing happened along the way." Saying this, he turned to the side, revealing the young man behind him.

"Many thanks, Prince Mu," Mei Changsu smiled politely in return. At the same time, he glanced at the young man. "Mei Changsu has the pleasure of meeting General Wei Zheng. Is your injury healing well?"

Wei Zheng suppressed his turbulent emotions and replied in a trembling voice, "For Mister Su's grace in coming to my rescue, I will never forget....." After saying this, he looked like he was going to fall on his knees but he was stopped by the other's soft gaze, and so forced himself into a deep bow with his hands clasped.

Feeling that his mission had been accomplished, Mu Qing swung his arms and asked, "Where's Fei Liu?" "He's not here". Mei Changsu understood the young prince's intention, but at the moment there was somebody waiting in the secret chamber, so of course he had to think of a way to make him leave. "I will bring him to your mansion another day. I'm afraid I can't keep you company today as I now need to make arrangements for General Wei Zheng."

"You must remember to come." Mu Qing was a frank and straightforward person and didn't feel that anything was amiss. After this reminder, he immediately turned around and strode directly away. As soon as his silhouette disappeared, Wei Zheng fell heavily to his knees, saying tearfully, "Young Commander.....please blame Wei Zheng for not being careful....."

"That's enough. Do such words need to be said between us?" Mei Changsu didn't help him up. Instead, he, too, knelt down, and clutching Wei Zheng's shoulders, said, "Calm down. Don't get too excited. I am going to bring you to meet Prince Jing. Be careful not to let slip who I am in front of him."

"Yes....."

"Come, get up."

Wei Zheng took a few breaths before stretching out his hand to Mei Changsu for support, and they stood up together. Both of them approached the bedroom side by side, and opening the secret door, they entered, one after the other.

“Your Highness Prince Jing, General Wei is here.” Following this simple announcement, Mei Changsu got out of the way like Mu Qing earlier and quietly retreated into the corner.

“Wei Zheng....greet Your Highness Prince Jing.....”

Seeing this person from his past that he had never thought to ever meet again, Xiao Jingyan found it more difficult than expected to control his emotions and he quickly steadied himself as he stepped forward to support Wei Zheng up. Standing behind him, Lie Zhanying also couldn't resist taking a step forward, carefully looking Wei Zheng up and down several times, after which the rims of his eyes were red.

“Your Highness, let's all sit down and talk. I think tonight's conversation won't be a short one.” Meng Zhi, who was the most calm as he had met with Wei Zheng many times, came forward to arrange the seats. Lie Zhanying insisted on standing to the side, according to military decorum, while Wei Zheng cast a covert glance at Mei Changsu, evidently wanting to stand behind him too, but the latter merely leaned against a table, fiddling with the heating stove, not looking up.

“Wei Zheng, since we are in a secret room, you don't have to stand on ceremony. There are many things I would like to ask you, so please sit.” Prince Jing pointed to the seat closest to him. “So many doubts I have kept hidden in my heart all these years, that I didn't think I would ever find any answers to. The Heavens have blessed me now, to be able to once again meet someone from the past. I hope you will allow me to clear them up one by one.”

“Yes.” Wei Zheng bowed deeply and slowly moved to take the seat. “Your Highness, please ask your questions. I will answer them without reservation.”

Prince Jing looked straight into his eyes and asked his first question. “Were there any other survivors?”

Wei Zheng was prepared for this question, and immediately replied, “Yes, but not many, and even less of those with rank. Because they were declared as rebels and would have been sentenced to hard labour, even low rank soldiers dared not return home, and could only live in exile.”

“What about those I know?”

“I'm afraid Your Highness does not know these lower ranking officers. Of the higher ranks, only Nie Duo.....”

Prince Jing's gaze wavered. "Nie Duo is still alive?"

"Yes, but I have no idea where he is now, which means he is well hidden."

"Nie Duo was also one of the key ranking officers.... Then what about the Northern Valley? Were there truly no survivors from there?"

Wei Zheng lowered his head. It was hard to tell if he couldn't bear to reply, or if he was unwilling to.

"How could this be....." Prince Jing tried to keep his trembling voice steady. "Others may not be aware, but I know fully well that the Chiyu Battalion was the toughest army to face in any battle. Xie Yu and Xia Jiang brought in 100,000 cavalry from the western border. How did they end up in such defeat?"

Wei Zheng suddenly raised his head, his eyes blazing. "Did Your Highness really think that we would engage Xie Yu in battle? Was our Chiyuan army really a rebel army, to engage in such a terrible battle with an army the court appointed?"

Prince Jing grabbed Wei Zheng's arm, squeezing it as if he would shatter it. "Did you mean to say that Xie Yu continued to attack even though you all didn't resist? But knowing Xiao Shu, even if he hadn't anticipated this at first, once the butcher's knife was raised, he wouldn't just sit back and wait for death!"

"Your Highness is right, but....." Wei Zheng's cheeks were stretched taut like strands of iron, "At the time the butcher's knife was raised, we had just gone through a fierce battle and no longer had the strength....."

## CHAPTER 141

### *The Facts*

“Fierce battle.....” Prince Jing was relatively familiar with the situation in the northern border back then and pondered it over with horror. “Don’t tell me that what Xie Yu reported, that he was trying to repel 200,000 Da Yu troops and protect the northern borders, that wasn’t actually true, that it was actually you.....He...caan he still call himself a soldier? Does he feel no shame, laying false claims of meritorious deeds just to obtain a Marquis title and the Commander’s seal?”

“Repel them?” Wei Zheng sneered. “Da Yu was established through military force. If it was merely to repel them, why has it been so peaceful these past more than ten years? If it wasn’t for the concerted effort of our entire Chiyan army, who devoted our flesh and blood to eliminating their 200,000 strong imperial army, do you think Da Liang’s northern borders would have enjoyed these thirteen years of peace?”

“But Da Yu has never.....” His trembling voice trailed off mid-sentence as understanding dawned on him. 200,000 Da Yu troops were annihilated. Obviously they weren’t going to report to the Liang Court that “We weren’t repelled by Xie Yu since we had already been destroyed by Chiyan.” Very likely, if the Emperor of Da Yu had known the fate of the Chiyan army in Meiling that day, he would have been only too happy to further fan the flames. If his army hadn’t been lost, this militant Emperor would probably have taken the opportunity to march south and invade again. As for the Liang Emperor who was safely ensconced in his capital of Jinling, how would he have known the true state of affairs in the northern border? He could only rely on official letters and Xuanjing Bureau’s reports. Furthermore, suspicion and fear had long since been branded deep in his heart, and so in this way, he made the decision to weaken his own strength.<sup>258</sup>

“So this is how it all came to an end back then. Most of what we knew were false,” Lie Zhanying said angrily, “Wei Zheng, slowly tell it all to His Highness from the beginning. As long as the actual facts still exist, justice will be served one day!”

Wei Zheng nodded, taking a moment to compose himself before saying, “In the beginning, our garrison was at the northern line of Ganzhou. At this time, we received

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<sup>258</sup> actual idiom used, literally translated: self-destruction of the great wall

an imperial order from the Emperor for the entire army to stay put. We never expected that just one day after receiving the imperial order, our scouts would return to report that Da Yu had dispatched their 200,000 strong imperial army. They had seized Sutai and were pressing towards Meiling. If we had obeyed and stayed put, should Da Yu's army break through Meiling, it would be difficult to defend the next ten prefectures as they were primarily flat lands. It had always been the Chiyan army's duty to safeguard the borders and keep our citizens safe. How could we sit back and watch as millions of people faced fatal disaster? Moreover, in critical war situations, a general in the field is not bound by orders from the ruler, which is why Commander Lin sent an urgent report to the Emperor while at the same time issuing orders to strike camp and meet the enemy. Later, this move also became another proof of great crime."

"Commander Lin's report did not arrive in the capital at all. It must have been intercepted along the way." Prince Jing barely suppressed his anger, and with great effort closed his eyes momentarily. "Please continue."

"We marched night and day, arriving in Meiling at almost the same time as the Da Yu army. Your Highness may be aware that because our numbers were reduced at the beginning of that year, we had only 70,000 troops at the time. We couldn't fight recklessly, so Commander Lin ordered General Nie Feng to circumvent the Jiehun Valley in the north to provide flank support. The Chiyu Battalion was the vanguard to attack the northern valley. The main force would intercept and divide the enemy, and then we would attack. That night, strong winds and snow began to blow. Nie Zhen da ren accompanied the Chiyu Battalion, using the cover of snow to attack with fire by burning grease-soaked pieces of cloth....In that fierce battle, all 70,000 of us bathed in blood for three days and three nights, staking everything and exhausting every last bit of our energy to finally destroy the imperial army that was the pride of Da Yu, leaving behind only a few scattered remnants." Wei Zheng's face lit up with pride, but only for a brief moment before it darkened again. "But we ourselves had also suffered heavy casualties, and our military strength was in critical condition. In our exhaustion, we had no choice but to remain there to rest and recoup. It was at this time that Young Commander began to sense that something wasn't right, because the flank support from Nie Feng never appeared at all. There was a cliff separating Jiehun Valley and Northern Valley. Even though the terrain was dangerous, General Nie Feng, who was nicknamed "Swift Wind"<sup>259</sup>, shouldn't have taken so long to arrive. So Young Commander ordered me to proceed to the Southern Valley to check with the main camp. Who would have thought that as soon as I arrived, before I could approach the Commander's tent, Xie Yu and Xia Jiang's 100,000 troops had already rushed there...." Prince Jing suddenly slammed down hard, unexpectedly breaking off a corner of the hard pear-wood table, its wood shavings rustling as they fell to the floor. Meng Zhi was also hearing these details for the first time, and he felt rage surge in his heart. Gritting his teeth, he turned back and shot a glance at Mei Changsu, but was met by a blank face as he sat in the corner, his head slightly raised, completely still, as if frozen into a lifeless silhouette.

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<sup>259</sup> literal translation of "ji feng"

“When we first saw them, we thought.....we actually thought.....they were reinforcements.....” The grief and desolation in Wei Zheng’s voice could crush even the hardest of hearts. He raised his head and looked straight at Prince Jing, “The ending....Your Highness is already aware. The Southern Valley was reduced to hell, and the Northern Valley.....it was set on fire and became scorched earth. All our swift and brave brothers who endured against Da Yu’s imperial army finally and unexpectedly fell under the hands of our own friendly forces. Many of them didn’t understand what was going on even as they were standing at death’s door. I tried desperately to rush to Commander Lin’s side, but he was already seriously injured and dying. His last words were for us all to run, if even one more of us could survive, then we should. I can only imagine how much his heart ached at that moment, the cold, the hurt. Perhaps it is a blessing that he died without seeing the thick smoke rising above the Northern Valley.....his deputies, his men, not one of them left him, even if in the end, they were only protecting a corpse. But I wasn’t able to, because my commander was Lin Shu. I wanted to rush back to the Northern Valley, but there were too many of them. I was only halfway when I collapsed, and when I woke up, I had already been rescued by my foster father Valley Chief Su.....”

Prince Jing clenched his jaw tight, barely restraining himself, but in the end, he still couldn’t stop himself from burying his fist in his palm. Meng Zhi, too, turned his head to the side and wiped the hot tears from the corner of his eyes with his finger. Lie Zhan Ying’s tears had long since fallen like rain. Only Mei Changsu continued to maintain his original position, his eyes staring faintly at the rough surface of the wall before him.

After a long while, Prince Jing took a deep breath to steady himself before asking again, “Chief Su.....why was he there at the time?”

“Meiling has an unusual medicinal ingredient, one that is extremely rare. At the time, my adoptive father and his old friend were there to gather medicine, and stumbled across this tragic situation. In that chaos, they couldn’t do much. It was only when Xie Yu finally started clearing the battlefield that they could disguise themselves to enter, to find a way to save some people.”

“Then Nie Duo.....”

“At the time, Nie Duo was dispatched by Commander Lin to check on Nie Feng’s situation. On his way back, he detected something unusual and did his best to escape.”

Prince Jing lowered his head and remained silent for a long time. Then he asked again what he had asked before, “Wei Zheng, the Northern Valley.....were there really no other survivors?”

Wei Zheng avoided his gaze and whispered, “I’ve not heard of any.....”

Although he had long understood in his heart that hope was slim, after hearing Wei Zheng's reply, Xiao Jingyan still couldn't help but feel heartbroken. His friend, the one whom he had played and "rolled around" with since they were young, the friend with whom he had studied and trained, who was always strutting around with self-importance, trying his best to show off but who was in actual fact the most attentive and considerate friend that friend who fought on horseback and was on the battlefield with him, friends who entrusted each other with their lives, the friend who laughed and persistently asked him to bring the pearl back before he left. He was really never coming back....

The pearl from the South China Sea was still lying cold and lonely deep in the chest by his bedside, but of the young general who was originally intended to be its owner, he didn't even know where his bones had been scattered. Thirteen years had passed, but the soul was still restless, the name not cleared. Even if he had seven pearls on him and immeasurable honor, what was the point?!

"Your Highness, please don't be rash." Mei Changsu's soft voice carried over. "This case was decided by His Majesty. Its implications are extensive, so it will not be so easy to overturn it. At the present moment, Your Highness can only make plans, and have no choice but to temporarily suppress your grief and anger. Pace yourself. As long as the goal has been decided, stay the course, and solidify your core strength one step at a time. Why feel sad about it?"

"That's right," Meng Zhi was also a little calmer now, and said soothingly in a low voice, "To reverse the verdict, you must first get His Majesty to admit his mistake. But this mistake is too great. Even if His Majesty believed it, he may not acknowledge it. Besides, Wei Zheng is now a traitor. Whether or not his words will carry weight and whether or not he would get to speak them at court, all these are unknown. Your Highness must absolutely not act prematurely!"

"But.....but....." Lie Zhanying cried, "How can we endure such injustice? Is this the only ending for our comrades in that bloody battlefield?"

"This case is not about the Chiyan army," Mei Changsu said quietly, "What's more important is that it involves the blood of the Emperor's eldest son. Getting His Majesty to reverse the verdict would be equivalent to getting him to rewrite history for future generations, to leave behind a reputation for unjustly killing his son and loyal minister. Which man, let alone the Emperor, wouldn't care about his reputation after he dies? If Your Highness Prince Jing wants to achieve your final goal, you absolutely must not propose a retrial of the Chiyan case at this time."

"I understand what Sir is saying." Prince Jing raised his head, his eyes red, his face ashen. "But I would also like to remind Sir that my ultimate goal is to wipe this case clean. If there are others, we can put them on hold for the time being."

Mei Changsu returned his gaze for a long time and smiled faintly. “Yes, Su mou will keep that in mind.”

“Will Wei Zheng continue to stay here Sir?”

“Even though they have relaxed the search for him, it may still be too risky to send him back to Yao Wang Valley, as mishaps may happen enroute. My people are discrete, so it will be safe for him here. Your Highness need not worry.”

“If so, I will then have to trouble you, Sir” Prince Jing then turned towards Wei Zheng and said, “We were able to rescue you this time due entirely to Mister Su’s clever strategy and accurate foresight. While living here, you must obey Mister Su’s orders.”

Wei Zheng immediately clasped his hands before him, saying “Yes! Wei Zheng will definitely obey Mister Su’s orders!”

He responded so quickly and directly that Prince Jing was a little startled. Though Mei Changsu had rescued him, it shouldn’t have been so easy for a general with a fiery and forthright disposition to proclaim such words of obedience.

“There are no rules in our house. General Wei is too polite.” Mei Changsu smiled and changed the topic. “If there is anyone you shouldn’t provoke, it’s Physician Yan. Your wounds have not healed completely, so he would most likely attend to you. When that happens, you must not offend him at all costs, otherwise I will also get into trouble.”

“I have also met this old physician. He is indeed very intimidating,” Meng Zhi added on, “And Mister Su is rarely afraid of others.”

Lie Zhanying stepped forward, pinching his brows as he suggested softly to Wei Zheng, “Why don’t you come and stay in Prince Jing’s mansion? There are many old friends, and it’s safe there.....”

Mei Changsu shot him a quick look, frowning slightly. Lie Zhanying realized his mistake, and quickly took two steps backwards, bowing his head. In this way, however, Prince Jing’s attention was thus distracted, and he said reprovingly, “Zhanying, you shouldn’t interfere with Mister Su’s arrangements.”

“Yes.” As a high-ranking general, Lie Zhanying wasn’t being blindly impertinent, and he was also naturally sensible and experienced. He immediately bowed down to apologize, “Zhanying spoke too much. Please forgive me.”

“General Lie is His Highness’s personal bodyguard. In future, please be more thorough in your thinking to keep him safe.” Mei Changsu’s words were direct, after



which he turned towards Prince Jing and said, “Has Your Highness made arrangements for your people to remain behind during the Spring Hunt?”

“They have been properly deployed. The Spring Hunt will last for a full half a month. In the capital, the imperial order will be observed. Prince Yu will also remain behind. We really can’t be careless.”

Mei Changsu sighed softly and murmured, “Actually, my thoughts are now similar to Xia Jiang’s then, hoping that they would make a move. Unfortunately, as far as the situation is concerned, Prince Yu may not dare to take such a risk. Your Highness just needs to take care to leave people behind to keep an eye on them.”

Prince Jing nodded, his expression beginning to look a little distracted. The details and facts revealed that evening had made him both angry and heartbroken, as if a huge boulder was pressing down on his chest, causing great anguish. He actually wanted to hold himself up, to continue to discuss matters with Mei Changsu as usual, but after those few sentences, he realized he couldn’t do it anymore, at least not tonight. He couldn’t think of anything else because his whole head was hot like lava, and he was unable to suppress it, to return to his normal state.

“Your Highness, please go back and rest.” There was a trace of weariness in Mei Changsu’s voice. He moved his gaze away from Prince Jing, taking a few steps back. Silence descended over the room. Xiao Jingyan slowly stood up, his eyelids hanging low, concealing his emotions. He patted Wei Zheng’s shoulder, as if to say something to him, but in the end he didn’t say anything. Instead, he turned around to walk towards his own doorway, followed closely by Lie Zhanying. Meng Zhi originally intended to stay behind for a while, but observing Mei Changsu’s expression, he had no choice but to leave with Prince Jing.

The stone door closed slowly, cutting off all sound. Mei Changsu’s body shook slightly, and Wei Zheng immediately stepped forward to hold him tightly, supporting him.

“Thank you.” The former Junior Commander moved part of his weight to his deputy general’s supporting arm, but his exhaustion was overwhelming him and it was almost impossible for him to fight it. “Let’s go. We should go.”

Wei Zheng extinguished the lights in the secret chamber and the light from the passageway spilled in, faint in the darkness, bringing with it a sense of the distant past. Mei Changsu stopped when he reached the line dividing light and shadow, his gaze deep in thought.

Wei Zheng stood to the side, quietly looking at his profile, and suddenly said, “Young Commander, I think we can tell.....”

The Chiyu Deputy General swallowed the rest of his sentence when his Junior Commander turned his head to glance at him.

The meaning behind that glance was very clear.

“Those words, don’t mention them again.....” After saying this, Mei Changsu withdrew his fierce gaze and once again returned to his tired and confused state, as if that fierce and burning gaze from just a moment ago was nothing more than just Wei Zheng’s imagination.

## CHAPTER 142

### *Foya (Buddha's Tooth)*

The Imperial family's Spring Hunt was in fact a kind of hunting sacrifice. It was meant to thank the gods for the gift of bravery,<sup>260</sup> so it was an annual practice and a necessary part of national mourning. The Spring Hunt was always held at Jiu'an Mountain, about 500 miles away from the capital, an area which encompassed dense forests, pastures, and a hunting palace. But as a rule, not even the Emperor was allowed to stay in the hunting palace for they had to camp in the countryside to honor the heavens.

On the 27th day of the 3rd month, the banner of the Son of Heaven fluttered as they made their way from the city, as the ministers who were left behind to take care of things bowed at the gates, sending them off. Although Prince Jing had been ordered to "bring Mister Su along", his position required him to ride beside the Emperor's Dragon Carriage, so this "Mister Su" could only follow behind with the people of Prince Jing's household.

As it happened, Prince Jing was summoned to the Emperor's side early that morning, and so missed what would have been a very unexpected and bewildering spectacle, and for this, Mei Changsu was grateful. In the late morning, Zhanying arrived somewhat ostentatiously at the main gate of the Su Residence to pick Mei Changsu up, as it had already been pre-arranged for everyone to meet at Prince Jing's mansion. Altogether, there were thirty of them in Prince Jing's Spring Hunt entourage. Since the auspicious time for departure was midday, it was still early, so once they arrived in Prince Jing's mansion, Lie Zhanying invited Mei Changsu into the reception hall to rest. He sat down too, to keep him company, and the both of them chatted casually about military affairs to pass the time.

He had barely finished drinking a cup of tea when Mei Changsu suddenly heard a loud howl from outside the hall. After a moment of shock, he suddenly realized what that sound was.

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<sup>260</sup> Originally established to commemorate Manchu's nomadic life of animal husbandry and martial spirit (<https://en.dpm.org.cn/collections/collections/2013-04-27/1554.html>)

At that moment, Lie Zhanying had run to the hall entrance, shouting, "Why are you tying him up so early? Quickly let him go and wait till it's time to board the carriage."

Mei Changsu's face was a little pale and he quickly tried to cover it up, his thoughts awlirl. After a while, when Lie Zhanying had returned to his seat, he asked in a casual tone, "What was making that sound outside?"

"That's Foya, a wolf raised by His Highness."

"His Highness raised a wolf?"

"Sir doesn't come to the mansion very often which is why you do not know. Foya doesn't usually come to the front. He was still suckling when His Highness brought him back, but he's now already 15 years old. Who knows how much longer he will live.....Foya is very proud. Other than His Highness, he won't let anyone else near him. In the mansion, His Highness is the leader, and he is the second in command!" Lie Zhanying laughed out loud at his own exaggeration.

"Oh?" Mei Changsu laughed with him awhile then asked, "Are you bringing him along this time?"

"Buddha's Tooth likes to play outside. But he doesn't have many days left so His Highness brings him out whenever he can."

"Even though he was raised at home, he is still a wolf. Why did you tell them to let him go?"

"Don't be afraid, Mister Su. Foya doesn't like being with people. As long as His Highness doesn't give the command, he won't bite anyone."

Mei Changsu rolled his eyes and laughed. "I'm not afraid of him biting me. I'm afraid he will bite others. Let me tell you, I have an extraordinary ability. No matter how violent an animal is, it would be willing to let me near it, and wouldn't bite me."

"Does such an ability exist in the world?" Lie Zhanying was greatly surprised. "I have never heard of it."

Just as he was saying this, a light gray shaggy shadow appeared silently at the hall entrance, its head held high and proud, like an emperor patiently inspecting his domain.

Mei Changsu said praisingly, "Foya is truly beautiful."

“Of course,” Lie Zhanying replied with pride as if he had raised the wolf himself. He has a strong body, thick and dense fur. He was even more beautiful a few years ago. Even though he’s older now, his coat still looks very good.”

Foya turned its head towards them, its bright and shiny brown eyes intelligent. It remained at the hall entrance for a moment, then suddenly raised its head, emitting a long howl, its back arched like a bow, and lunged straight for Mei Changsu, as if to swallow him whole.

Lie Zhanying had never encountered such a situation before. His face pale with fright, he hurriedly jumped forward to stop the wolf. Mister Su was the most important person to Prince Jing now. If he let Foya hurt him in his presence, one might as well hit him to death with a piece of tofu. But even though Lie Zhanying’s reaction was very quick, a wolf’s reflexes would always exceed that of humans, not to mention the distance from the hall entrance to Mei Changsu wasn’t very long in the first place. Just as he leapt to grab hold of Foya, the gray wolf had run past him, plunging straight into Mei Changsu’s embrace, practically knocking him off his seat.

“Er...” In the next scene, Lie Zhanying stood speechless with his mouth inelegantly half-opened. What he saw was Foya resting his two front paws on Mei Changsu’s shoulders, its wet pointed nose sniffing at his neck, rubbing against him from time to time, this coquettish manner exactly the same as when it was on Prince Jing.

“How’s this, General Lie?” Mei Changsu finally extricated himself from the slobbering Foya, smiling as he said, “I didn’t lie about my extraordinary ability, did I?”

“It...it’s as you said.....” Lie Zhanying was stunned. “This is very amazing.....”

“There was once a proud horse that nobody could tame that would only eat grass from my hand.” Mei Changsu patted Foya on its shoulders, making it go down on its knees. “Foya is probably too lonely. Prince Jing is probably too busy to spend much time with him?”

“Yes, especially...especially this past half a year, His Highness has been very busy.....so busy his feet hardly touched the ground....” Lie Zhanying still hadn’t gotten over his shock and stammered. Mei Changsu leisurely picked a few topics of interest and slowly led him back into conversation. Lie Zhanying wasn’t a very complicated person, and as the conversation picked up, his attention drifted from Foya and he began to follow Mei Changsu’s guidance. The more they spoke, the happier he became, eventually dominating most of the conversation. Mei Changsu merely smiled and listened attentively, interjecting occasionally in encouragement. Foya remained by his side, circling his seat from time to time, sometimes hitting Mei Changsu with its great tail to amuse itself. After a long while, Lie Zhanying gradually became accustomed to it.

In this manner, the hour passed very quickly. Outside, preparations were ready. Qi Meng, who was once reduced to a centurion because of a word from Mei Changsu, was also a part of the retinue. When he strode in to inform them that it was time, Mei Changsu observed from the colour of his clothes that he had already been promoted to a military officer and couldn't help smiling as he asked, "Have you caught the monster?"

Qi Meng replied dejectedly, "Not yet....that creature is very cunning....."

Fei Liu entered at this moment. Seeing Foya, he exclaimed in surprise. As soon as he stretched his hand out to touch it, the gray wolf moved disdainfully away. He immediately chased after it with his hand outstretched, and Foya once again moved out of the way but it wasn't fast enough this time and was grabbed roughly by the scruff of its neck. Immediately furious, it turned around to fight back, and boy and wolf ended up creating a great disturbance right in the middle of the hall. Mei Changsu stood watching by the side with a big smile plastered on his face, having absolutely no intention of restraining them.

"Mister...Mister Su," Lie Zhanying felt a little weak, "it'll be time soon....."

"Oh, let's go then."

"He....they....."

"Once we leave, they'll follow." With these words, Mei Changsu walked out. Lie Zhanying had no choice but to follow. Fortunately, Fei Liu and Foya stopped their fighting and followed behind as Mei Changsu had said they would, both running out of the hall at the same pace.

Most of Prince Jing's company were military men. Only Mei Changsu sat in the carriage. Since Foya insisted on boarding the carriage with him, Fei Liu, who had never sat in a carriage before, jumped into a carriage for the first time. A boy and a wolf, sitting opposite each other, continuing the game of touch and dodge, bite and dodge, made the entire journey less boring.

In the evening, they arrived in the small town where they would stay the night, and the entire hunting party stopped to set up camp. After he had completed paying his respects (to the Emperor), he retreated to the royal tent Lie Zhanying had prepared for him to rest. Just as he arrived in the front of the tent, he saw two shadows flash past and disappear after bypassing the wooden gate and couldn't help being surprised.

"On the way here, Foya already got acquainted with me and Fei Liu." Mei Changsu emerged from within the tent, smiling as he stepped forward to greet him. "General Lie said that Foya doesn't like being close to people, but actually, he is

pretty good-natured. I have always been good with animals so it was easy, but Buddha's Tooth is also very good with a loner like Fei Liu."

"Is that so? Foya really doesn't like letting other people close to him. Looks like you and Fei Liu are really different." Even though Prince Jing was very surprised, because he didn't see Foya enclosed in Mei Changsu's embrace, reluctant to leave, he didn't pay it much attention. Instead, he looked around and asked, "Where's Zhanying?"

"The strings of my (musical) instrument were broken, so I asked him to help me select two strands of first-rate horsehair to replace them." Mei Changsu pointed to the rear of the tent, "Look, he's already seen Your Highness and is running over."

Just as his voice trailed off, Lie Zhanying had already rushed forward, his hands clasped in respect, "Your Highness, all camps have been set up. Please rest."

"Mister Su's tent is to be surrounded by all your tents, understand?"

"That's exactly how it has been arranged."

"That's good." Prince Jing nodded in approval, then turned towards Mei Changsu and said, "It's still early. Perhaps Sir would like to sit with me in my tent for a while?"

Mei Changsu was worried that Foya would return so he smiled politely and said, "I would like to comply but after the day's journey, I feel a little tired and would like to retire early."

Xiao Jingyan knew that he was not in good health so he didn't mind being rejected, and said warmly, "Then I shall not hold you back. We have another day's travel tomorrow so you should indeed rest early."

Mei Changsu gave a slight bow and retreated to his tent. Because Lie Zhanying was in charge of all affairs surrounding the royal tent, his nerves were a little stretched, so of course it wouldn't have occurred to him to make any mention to Prince Jing about Foya's initial reaction to Mei Changsu. As soon as Prince Jing disappeared into his tent, he went around patrolling the area again.

Early the next morning, Prince Jing hurried to the Liang Emperor's tent to pay his respects. Because he was served a meal there, he didn't return but proceeded to accompany the Emperor's carriage as the hunting party continued its journey. Mei Changsu deliberately got up later than him, so the both of them did not meet.

They travelled faster that day than they did on the first day and quickly arrived in Jiu'an Mountain by dusk. Tents were set up in a large area of land just in front of the hunting palace. Situated right in the centre was the gold-topped Cloud Dragon

imperial tent, five feet<sup>261</sup> tall and ten feet wide. Even though it was a temporary structure, its interior was beautifully decorated. Embroidered velvet curtains hung from the centre, dividing the area into two different sections – a sitting area, and a sleeping area. Concubine Jing's tent was next to the imperial tent. Its style and dimensions were not as grand, but because she waited on the Emperor, she would basically spend the nights in the imperial tent, returning to her tent only when the men go out hunting.

With Meng Zhi and his three-thousand imperial guards standing guard all round, the imperial tent seemed as if it was enclosed in an iron barrel, the security so tight that even a groundhog wouldn't be able to get past.

The tents of other imperial family members and key officials were naturally much smaller, and were arranged around the imperial tent in rings that varied according to rank, like a myriad of stars surrounding the moon.

After resting and regrouping for the night, the Spring Hunt officially began the next day. Although Mei Changsu had changed into appropriate attire and stood by Prince Jing's side, he carried not even an arrow with him, obviously not intending to have anything to do with the "hunt". It was inevitable that other members of the hunting party who knew him by reputation would come over to greet him, so they had to stop many times to reciprocate as they made their way through the grounds. When they arrived at the hunting stage, the Liang Emperor ordered Gao Zhan to summon him and Prince Jing both onto the stage where he smiled and said a few words. Although he didn't say anything of any real substance, at least he demonstrated his love and affection before the rest of the surrounding imperial family and nobles.

Because Spring was the season for all living things to multiply, it was not appropriate for them to kill. Therefore, the Spring Hunt was different from the Autumn Hunt, and attached greater importance to ceremony than a competition of skills. Roaming around the forest was mostly for appearance, and other than occasionally shooting at hare or pheasants, deer, roebuck and other similar types of prey were completely off limits.

The Liang Emperor presided over the launch of the hunting ceremony early in the morning, and heavily protected by his imperial guards, he roamed the forest for about two hours, finally carrying two pheasants with him back to his tent. After all, he was old, and feeling tired after lunch, he fell into a deep sleep as Concubine Jing gently pounded him with her fists (in massage).

With this free time now on her hands, Concubine Jing ordered Gao Zhan to carefully watch over him and left the imperial tent to return to hers, where she instructed her personal maid, "Go quickly to Prince Jing's quarters. Tell him to bring Mister Su to meet me."

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<sup>261</sup> Chinese feet, which is about 3.3m



## CHAPTER 143

### *Meeting*

Prince Jing returned from the hunting ground with the Liang Emperor. After accompanying his father back to his tent, he took his leave but did not return to his tent, proceeding instead to visit the third prince, Prince Xu and the fifth prince, Prince Huai. Though they weren't especially close to Prince Jing, the relationship between these brothers was generally good. During the time of the Spring Hunt in previous years, the crown prince and Prince Yu were in elevated positions and only revolved around the Liang Emperor, while the three brothers were of similar rank and thus housed in the same location. But this year Prince Jing's rank was a lot higher compared to previous years, so the both of them dared not visit him as they pleased like they used to do, so now that Prince Jing had some free time, he took the initiative to visit them. The tents of Prince Xu and Prince Huai were next to each other. In order to receive Prince Jing, laid mats, barbecued meats and wine in the open space between the tents and enjoyed each other's company.

Just when everyone had eaten and drunk to their heart's content and were starting to have tea to aid their digestion, Concubine Jing's maid came over, accompanied by Lie Zhanying, with Mei Changsu standing in the distance, waiting. Once they heard that Imperial Consort Jing had summoned him, Prince Xu and Prince Huai did not delay him and hurriedly got up to see him off.

The princes' tents weren't very far away from the imperial tent, except that they needed to pass through the imperial guards posted around it. Meng Zhi stood by the entrance of the surrounding tall wooden fence and saluted them, ready to accompany them in. He glanced meaningfully at Mei Changsu, and the latter smiled faintly in return, his expression calm.

When they arrived at the entrance of Concubine Jing's tent, her maid announced their arrival, and both men entered one after the other. The internal furnishings were simple and neat. There were only a chest, a divan and two small tables, with four to five low chairs with curved backs. Concubine Jing was wearing a gray mink coat over a plain long skirt because she was still in mourning, and on her head, only a silver hair ornament. She looked graceful, gentle and unassuming. When she saw her son kneel down to pay his respects, she smiled and stretched out her hands to raise him up.

Prince Jing raised his hand and gestured in introduction, “Mother, this is Mister Su.”

Mei Changsu stepped forward and bowed in greeting. “Su mou greets Concubine Jing niang niang.” He was just a step behind Prince Jing so Concubine Jing had already caught a glimpse of him, but she was in a complex frame of mind and dared not look closely. Now that they were standing face to face, seeing that frail figure and hearing that strange voice, she felt a sudden chill in her heart and a tautness in her throat, and couldn’t speak for a very long while.

“Mother, are you feeling unwell?” Surprised by her reaction, he gently supported Concubine Jing by her arm.

Concubine Jing smiled with difficulty and steadied herself, saying, “.....Mister Su must be tired from the entire journey. Please sit down.”

Mei Changsu thanked her and sat down on the guest’s seat. Concubine Jing was a little calmer, and after ordering for tea to be served, she asked politely, “Mister Su has lived in the capital for more than a year, right? Have you gotten used to it?”

“Winter time is a little cold, but other than that, it’s not bad.”

“Is Sir afraid of the cold?”

“Yes.”

Concubine Jing turned to Prince Jing and said, “You really don’t know how to take care of others. Have you checked if there are enough hot coals in Mister Su’s tent? Camping out in the wild is much colder than the house.”

Mei Changsu smiled and said, “Thank you for niang niang’s concern. His Highness has been very thorough with his care. Everyone is reluctant to enter my tent now as they feel that it’s too hot.”

Concubine Jing shook her head and said, “These few days will not be like home. You’ll constantly have to move in and out of the tent. If the inside is too warm and the outside too cold, it’ll be easy to fall sick. It would be better to keep the inside of the tent well-ventilated to ensure a suitable temperature.”

“Niang niang is really knowledgeable in the art of healing and maintaining one’s health,” Mei Changsu raised himself slightly off his seat,<sup>262</sup> “I also have a physician at home, it’s just that he didn’t accompany me these few days. I shall make sure I keep warm. Thank you niang niang for your advice.”

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<sup>262</sup> polite gesture

“Sir just came in from the wind and should not drink this tea.” Concubine Jing immediately summoned her maid and instructed her, “Go and bring the purple ginger tea.”

The maid went to carry out her instruction and soon returned with a clay teapot and a small cup. When Mei Changsu saw Concubine Jing stand up to pour the tea herself, he immediately thanked her humbly and said, “How dare I trouble niang niang? Please let this jie jie pour the tea.”

Concubine Jing smiled serenely, ordering the maid to retreat. Lifting the tea cup with both her hands, she said, “Sir, in sparing no effort to help Prince Jing, it is only appropriate for me to offer you a cup of tea to honour you.” Having said this, she passed the cup to him, but the cup slipped unexpectedly, rolling down, its contents splashing onto Mei Changsu’s sleeves.

“Oh no! Sir, did you get burnt?” Concubine Jing hurriedly reached for a cloth to wipe the tea off him. Prince Jing also hurried over.

Mei Changsu understood Concubine Jing’s intentions. In his heart, he knew that it would be hopeless, so he did not try to evade it, letting her seize that opportunity to roll his sleeves up.

When Concubine Jing saw that his arm was smooth, with no scar in sight, she had the same expression as Princess Nihuang, except that her reaction was more understated. All she did was take a step back in a daze, nothing more.

“Su mou is not hurt. Niang niang doesn’t need to worry.” Mei Changsu looked away and said this in a soft voice.

Prince Jing helped his mother back to her seat, looking a little bewildered. He wanted to ask but he wasn’t sure what to ask, and after a moment’s hesitation, he said, “Mother, you seem to be tired today. Why don’t you take a rest, and Mister Su and I will return another day?”

Concubine Jing seemed lost in thought and did not seem to have heard her son. After a moment of silence, she suddenly said to Mei Changsu, “I really liked your book, “Xiangdi’s Travel Notes”. It mentioned a waterfall in Tuzhou. Seeing Sir’s annotation, you must have been there before?”

“Yes.”

“According to the book, this waterfall flows straight down with a force that is magnificent. I regret that I’m unable to see it in person. But I can never seem to remember, which Tuzhou county is this waterfull in?”

Mei Changsu's gaze wavered slightly, his lips tightened. Tuzhou Qinying Prefecture. A very simple answer, but it was actually his deceased mother's maiden name. Although he understood why Concubine Jing asked this question, he still couldn't speak it calmly, and so after a moment's hesitation, he had no choice but to shake his head and say, "Su mou doesn't remember either."

Concubine Jing stared at him quietly. For some reason, her eyes became clear yet at the same time laden with grief. Looking at his mother, Prince Jing felt a little uneasy and asked her, "Mother, do you really want to see this waterfall? Your son still remembers, that place is....."

"No need," Concubine Jing quickly cut him off, "I was just asking. How could I leave the palace?"

"Niang niang's status is too precious now, and so cannot travel at will. She can only be aggrieved and leave it as regret." Mei Changsu lowered his eyes as he said this.

"Status is too precious...." Concubine Jing smiled dejectedly, her expression bleak, "Let's not speak about this. Sir, you seem to be out of breath and your complexion is pale. Your illness must have lingered for a long time. What medicine do you usually take?"

"It's a sort of restorative tonic. I don't know much so I just listen to my physician."

"I still have some medical knowledge. If Sir doesn't mind, allow me to feel your pulse?"

Since she said this in front of Prince Jing, of course Mei Changsu could not mind. On the contrary, Prince Jing was the one who said, "Mother, Mister Su already has a famous doctor tending to him. You don't need to....."

"I'm merely feeling his pulse, not treating him with acupuncture or medicine. Why so serious?" Concubine Jing smiled gently. "Don't you know all doctors like to broaden their experience through more medical cases?"

Prince Jing knew that even though his mother had a gentle nature, once she had her mind set on something, it was difficult to change it so he had no choice but to get up as she moved her seat to Mei Changsu's side and then went to fetch a small pillow bag.

Mei Changsu squeezed his arms tight within his sleeves. He was very well aware of his own physical condition, but he didn't know how far Concubine Jing had progressed in her medical knowledge. Naturally that also meant that he wasn't sure if his secret could be kept once he stretched out his hand.

But at that moment, he had no choice. Concubine Jing's deep and sorrowful eyes also made it difficult for him to refuse. Which is why in the end he slowly extended his left wrist and put it on the pillow bag.

Concubine Jing calmly adjusted her breathing and slowly pressed two fingers on Mei Changsu's pulse, her eyes lowered. She remained like this for a very long time before she slowly loosened her fingers.

Prince Jing bent forward, just about to enquire about his condition, but who would have thought that one look would make him turn pale with fright. After Concubine Jing retracted her hand, he saw her covering her lips with the back of her wrist, her long eyelashes fluttering, drops of tears falling down like pearls, unable to hold them back. Xiao Jingyan hadn't seen his unassuming and quiet mother cry like that in many years, and he was greatly alarmed. He immediately knelt down and asked anxiously, "Mother, what's wrong? If there is something you are unhappy about, please instruct your son. I will do my best to take care of it....."

Concubine Jing took a deep breath but she still couldn't stop sobbing. The more composed and cautious one was in ordinary times, the more difficult it was to suppress emotions once they broke through. She put her hands on her son's shoulders, leaning on him. No matter what he asked, she only shed more tears and shook her head. After weeping for period of time, she said softly, "Jing....Jingyan, today....have you paid your respects to your father?"

She wept so much yet spoke such words. Prince Jing was stunned for a moment. "I was with Father Emperor....I was with him this morning....."

"What about this afternoon?"

"Not yet."

"Then....you should go pay your respects to your father....."

Prince Jing was dumbfounded and said, "Isn't Father Emperor having a nap?"

"Even if he's taking a nap, you should still go," Concubine Jing stammered, "At least wait, wait for him to wake up. If his attendant says....you dropped by, he will....definitely be happy....."

In a daze, Xiao Jingyan looked at his mother for a long time. Suddenly understanding her intentions, he turned to look at Mei Changsu, and saw that the advisor had already stood up and moved quietly to one side, looking as if he was wearing a mask, his face revealing nothing.

“Go, quickly, go....” Concubine Jing patted her son’s chest, slowly but firmly pushing him out. But after he left, she didn’t immediately speak to Mei Changsu, but dropped onto her chair, still wet with tears. Mei Changsu gazed helplessly at her for a moment and finally, heaving a long quiet sigh, he stepped forward, crouched before her and removed a soft handkerchief from his sleeve to wipe her tears, saying softly, “Niang niang, please stop crying. What good will crying do?”

“I know....it’s just that I’ve endured it all these years and I suddenly couldn’t bear it anymore....” Concubine Jing tried her best to calm herself, pulling Mei Changsu up to sit by her side. She gazed at him for a while with teary eyes then bowed her head again, taking hold of the handkerchief to dab her eyes.

“I’m fine now,” Mei Changsu softly comforted her, “Just a little more ill than the ordinary person, and it doesn’t really bother me.”

Choking with emotions, Concubine Jing said, “The poison of the bitter flame is the world’s most poisonous. Isn’t it far more than just removing a layer of skin to clear it out? The doctor who took the poison out, did he say anything?”

“He said.....I have a good constitution. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“How could it be alright? After clearing out the poison by rearranging the bones and peeling off the skin, the most important thing is full recuperation.” Concubine Jing grabbed hold of Mei Changsu’s hand and said earnestly, “Don’t worry about Jingyan anymore. Take good care of yourself. I will manage things in the capital. Trust me, I will succeed.....”

Mei Changsu looked back at her warmly but resolutely and slowly shook his head, “It won’t work. The inside of the palace is different from the outside....I have come this far, overcome so many roadblocks. Niang niang, are you also going to block my way?”

Concubine Jing felt as if a knife had stabbed her heart, and her tears overflowed, gushing out continuously, as if more than ten years of suppressed emotions had chosen that very moment to burst forth.

“If you want to help me, you mustn’t say anything to Jingyan,” Mei Changsu’s eyes were also gradually turning red, but the corners of his lips still held a faint smile, “Jingyan is very good. I’m not as tired as you think. Don’t worry yourself. I know my limits....In future, you should continue making hazelnut pastries for Jingyan. Even if he isn’t careful and gives me the wrong set, I won’t be confused and eat it carelessly.”

“Xiao Shu.....Xiao Shu.....” Concubine Jing murmured this name aloud, gently caressing Mei Changsu’s face, “You used to look so much like your father last time....”

“Niang niang, let’s not talk about this anymore,” Mei Changsu continued to wipe away her tears, “Now is not the time. You’ll help me, won’t you?”

Concubine Jing gazed at him through a blur of tears for a long time. She finally closed her eyes and with great heaviness, nodded her head.

Seeing her promise, Mei Changsu’s lips revealed a faint smile, obviously relieved yet at the same time sorrowful. Concubine Jing couldn’t bear to look at him and lowered her head, burying her face in the handkerchief.

“Niang niang,” Mei Changsu slowly stood up, saying gently, “It’s late. I should leave. Will you be alright on your own?”

Concubine Jing took a deep breath, did her best to wipe dry the tears on her face and lift her head, “Don’t worry about Jingyan. I know what to do.”

Mei Changsu nodded and stepped back, knelt down and bowed deeply with respect, then composing himself, he turned around, drew the curtain and left without looking back.

It was noon, faint warmth of the last of the winter sun could be felt outside the tent, but the air was still cold. Xiao Jingyan was standing quietly beneath the porch of the imperial tent with his arms clasped behind his back, completely motionless as if he had frozen over.

Hearing the sound of footsteps behind him, Prince Jing immediately turned his head, his eyes piercing as he asked in a low but forceful voice, “Mother had me leave. What did you both talk about?”

## CHAPTER 144

### *Warning*

Faced with Prince Jing's query, Mei Changsu didn't immediately answer but instead turned to face the Emperor's tent on the east side. "Didn't Your Highness go over to pay respects to His Majesty?"

"Father Emperor is having his afternoon nap. How long could I do that?"

"So why didn't Your Highness come in?"

"Mother clearly wanted me out of there. Why would I go back in so fast and annoy her?"

"But Your Highness, you.....would still like to know what we talked about?"

"Of course." Xiao Jingyan was getting impatient with his nonchalant manner. "Mother has not lost her self control like this for many years. I must know the reason for this."

"Then why didn't Your Highness eavesdrop at the tent door? Neither niang niang nor I are martial arts masters. If you were careful, we wouldn't have noticed."

Prince Jing stared at him, a slight scowl on his face. "I've never done that, much less do it to my mother."

"Since Your Highness didn't eavesdrop, why bother asking me now?" Mei Changsu replied coolly, "There isn't much difference between the two. If Your Highness really wants to know what we talked about, it would be better for you to ask Concubine Jing niang niang. It's not appropriate to ask me."

Prince Jing was momentarily at a loss for words, and he hesitated, his eyes flickering.

"Actually....." Mei Changsu said slowly, "In Su mou's humble opinion, it's enough for Your Highness to know that Concubine Jing is a good mother who would do her best for you, so why is there a need to pursue this? Everyone has something



they do not wish anyone else to know. Not asking is also a form of filial piety. If you really can't help it, then you should ask her personally. In short, I will not say anything. I seek Your Highness's understanding."

Prince Jing strode back and forth several times, then stopped. "Did Mother forbid you to say anything?"

"Niang niang gave no such command, but since she sent you out, she obviously didn't intend for you to know."

"If she didn't intend for me to know, then why is it okay for you to know?"

Mei Changsu's shoulders collapsed in defeat. "It looks like Your Highness really cannot bear not knowing. Then you should go and ask niang niang. I shall return to my tent first." With these words, he clasped his hands, turned around and walked off.

Prince Jing's anger flared momentarily, but this matter concerned his mother and had nothing to do with Mei Changsu. He hesitated for a while, but he couldn't stop worrying so he proceeded to enter the tent.

At the time, Concubine Jing was cleaning her face with a wet towel. Other than her swollen red eyes, there were no other traces of weeping on her face. Seeing her son enter, she put down the towel and gave him a slight smile. "You're back. Mister Su didn't wait for you and has left."

"Your son knows. We....ran into each other outside...." Xiao Jingyan walked over and helped his mother over to the seat. He pulled a cushion over for himself and sat by her knees. Looking up at her, he slowly asked, "Mother, do you really have nothing you want to tell your son?"

Concubine Jing put a hand on her son's head, gently stroking it. She sighed deeply and said, "Jingyan, can you not ask?"

"But I have not seen Mother so sad in such a long time. Maybe if you tell me, I can do something...."

"I understand your filial piety," Concubine Jing smiled at him sadly, her voice still gentle and calm, but Jingyan, Mother used to have a life of her own. Many things happened before you were born that have nothing to do with you, so why must you ask?"

"Before....before I was born?" Prince Jing was dumbfounded. For every child who looked up to his mother, it was really hard to imagine her having a life of her own before he was born.

“I was sad because it had been so long ago, so long ago that I had forgotten about it and didn’t guard myself against it, so when I suddenly recalled it, it was hard to control myself,” Concubine Jing murmured vaguely, “Actually, it has nothing to do with Mister Su. It’s just that, those memories.....he just brought back those memories, that’s all.....he is a most attentive and considerate person. Even though I didn’t ask him not to, he would naturally not mention anything, so don’t keep asking him. When I am ready to explain it to you, I will definitely do so.”

Though Concubine Jing and Mei Changsu didn’t discuss it, they both had a tacit understanding and adopted the same method of deflecting Prince Jing. The earlier scene had now become Concubine Jing’s secret rather than Mei Changsu’s without Prince Jing’s realization. Out of concern and love for his mother, even though he was still filled with doubt, he had to suppress his questions and stop asking them.

Although he was not convinced, he had turned this over many times in his head, considering all possibilities, but in the end, he still had no choice but to lower his head and whisper, “Then please take care of yourself Mother. Your son will take his leave.”

Concubine Jing nodded her head silently, not detaining him. After her son left the tent, she removed an ointment from within her sleeve, looked at the mirror and applied it on her eyes, but even as she wiped, she couldn’t help the tears from falling.

In this way, the meeting was swiftly concluded, with no great waves or mishaps, but the outcome was a little strange. At least that was how Lie Zhanying felt. Two people who went out together came back separately, one after the other, one nonchalant, the other frowning, deep in thought. One could say that they had become estranged. Though they still greeted each other everyday and spoke as usual, they suddenly seemed to have drifted apart, not sharing a meal or conversation for quite a while. Instead, Prince Huai, who loved reading, regularly visited Mei Changsu to borrow his books and had more frequent contact with him.

This went on for seven to eight days, and was finally interrupted by an unexpected visitor.

“According to the guard, the man came looking for Mister Su. He should have been turned away, but a captain of the guard who happened to pass by knew that I regularly pay my respects to Mister Su, so he ordered his men to watch him while he came over to inform me.” Meng Zhi was sitting in Prince Jing’s main tent, his body encased in soft armour, obviously there for a while. “But that person refuses to say his name. Would Mister Su like to meet him?”

Mei Changsu muttered briefly to himself then said, “If it’s not too troublesome, it might be a good idea to meet him.”

“Then I’ll ask someone to bring him over.” Meng Zhi walked to the entrance to issue the order, then returned to his seat. Looking at the two men seated opposite him, he asked, “What’s wrong with Your Highness and Mister Su?”

“Eh?” The two men looked up at the same time. “What do you mean what’s wrong?”

“Did Mister Su do something....to make Your Highness angry?”

“No,” Prince Jing quickly replied, “Some other matter that has nothing to do with Mister Su.”

“Oh.....” Meng Zhi actually wanted to find out what happened during the meeting with Concubine Jing, but Mei Changsu refused to say anything and he dared not ask, but looking at Prince Jing’s demeanour, he couldn’t determine if the latter was still in the dark.

After approximately the time it takes to brew a pot of tea, two imperial guards brought in a man wearing a ragged cloak. They pushed him to the centre of the tent, bowed and left. The cloaked man fell to the floor and shuffled two steps forward on his knees, paying his respects to Mei Changsu and called out in a hoarse voice choked with emotion, “Chief....”

Mei Changsu was startled. Just as he was about to stretch out his arm to part the man’s hair, Meng Zhi had already stepped forward to lift the man’s chin up. The hair immediately parted, revealing a bruised and dirty, barely recognizable face.

“Tong Lu?” The Jiangzuo Alliance Chief’s eyes leapt in shock. “Why are you here?”

“Chief!” Tong Lu fell prostrate, bursting into tears, his voice barely audible amidst his sobs, “This....this subordinate....asks...asks for your forgiveness.....”

Mei Changsu stared at him. After a long while, he took a glass of water and placed it before the man, saying calmly, “Drink some water first, and calm down.”

Tong Lu wiped his face, then grabbed the cup of water and drank it down before saying, “Thank you Chief.”

“Tong Lu, Mister Shisan said that you have betrayed us. Do you admit to it?” Mei Changsu asked quietly.

Tong Lu sobbed violently, lying prostrate on the floor, unable to speak.

“Since you plead guilty to treason against the alliance, why did you come here? Isn’t it better to serve Prince Yu?”

“Chief....this subordinate made a mistake, but had no intention of betraying the alliance,” Tong Lu gritted his teeth, his face pale, “I left Miaoyin House because....because....”

“I know. Mister Shisan had already investigated. It’s because of a woman named Junniang, right?”

“Yes.....” Tong Lu lowered his head in shame, “I can give up my life, but I couldn’t give up Junniang’s life, so.....so.....”

“There’s no need to say more. I understand.” Mei Changsu said lightly, “You didn’t reveal everything you knew, so we guessed that you were forced to betray us, and it wasn’t voluntary. But betrayal is betrayal. There’s nothing more to say. Mister Shisan looked closely into your whereabouts but could not find you. Why did you come out and reveal yourself?”

Tong Lu touched the ground with his forehead, his previously pale face turning red. In a low voice, he said, “In the beginning, they used Junniang to threaten me, but later, they imprisoned me to threaten Junniang. One day....Junniang secretly came to look for me. That’s when I found out that they were the ones who sent Junniang....sent her....”

“Junniang was a sister disciple of Qin Banruo. We only discovered this later.”

“The way Junniang lied to me, I shouldn’t have trusted her anymore. But she said....she also wanted to cut herself away from the past, to return with me to the countryside, to live a carefree life....Chief, she was also in a helpless predicament. She’s different from Qin Banruo.....”

“I don’t want to talk about Junniang. Get to the point. Why did you come and see me?”

“Three days ago, Junniang broke me out, but as soon as we left the city, assassins overtook us and we barely escaped with our lives. However, Junniang sustained serious injuries, and that night....she....she choked....” Tong Lu’s lips trembled violently, his eyes blood red, but there were no tears. “We had originally planned to find a small village to quietly live out our days....Chief, Junniang is really different from Qin Banruo, really....”

Mei Changsu couldn’t hide the trace of pity in his eyes, but he immediately suppressed it. Keeping his voice level, he said, “An assassination is an assassination. But why did they try to assassinate you? Did you both discover some secret information? Is that why you came to look for me?”

“Yes,” Tong Lu bit his lip hard, as if the pain would help clear his head. “Prince Yu is plotting a rebellion....”

As soon as these words were spoken, not only Meng Zhi but Xiao Jingyan too leapt up. “That’s impossible. Prince Yu doesn’t have that many men. Why is he plotting a rebellion?”

“I...I don’t know very much....” Tong Lu said as he thought hard, “According to Junniang, as soon as the hunting party left the city, Prince Yu secretly went to visit Xia Jiang in Sky Prison. I’m not sure what plan they hatched, but what is certain is that Prince Yu had already figured out a way to take control of the imperial guards who had stayed behind in the capital....”

“What?” Meng Zhi’s expression changed drastically. “The guards who stayed behind number approximately 7,000. It won’t be so easy to take control of them. How is he going to do that?”

“Word has it that the two deputy commanders of the imperial guard who stayed behind have already sworn loyalty to Prince Yu.”

Faced with Prince Jing’s questioning gaze, Meng Zhi was a little embarrassed. “These two deputy commanders were not the ones I trained and promoted. They were transferred over after the murder of the palace eunuchs. I really have very little hold over them. But....I believe my men will not obey orders to start a rebellion.”

“Tong Lu said that they had only taken control, not that the imperial guards have fallen completely under their control.” Mei Changsu shook his head as he said, “The imperial guards have always been well-trained and have always followed orders. Now that the capital has to respect the imperial order,<sup>263</sup> if they were separated into groups with their weapons recovered in batches, and then gathered and watched over in a central location, it would be possible to control them. After all, there is no fighting outside. Although the imperial guard may not understand their superiors’ orders, they won’t use force to resist for no reason.”

“Even if the imperial guard is disarmed, Prince Yu only has 2,000 soldiers. What could he do with them? At most cross swords with the Capital Patrol, maybe not even succeeding....”

“It’s more than that....” Tong Lu spoke urgently, “Junniang learnt from her contact that Prince Yu has strong support from Jingxi....what’s his name....Xu....Xu...”

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<sup>263</sup> I’m not sure what this really is and it was difficult to find an explanation on google. I believe it refers to the system that was in place when the Emperor was not in the capital i.e. they had to listen to the officials / commanders left behind to manage things while the Emperor was away.

“Xu Anmo!” Prince Jing’s eyebrows leapt up, his hand that was on the table clenched tightly into a fist.

## CHAPTER 145

### *Reinforcements*

"The commander of the Qingli army, Xu Anmo?" Meng Zhi's pupils contracted. He looked at Prince Jing. "That's the one....who was late for battle without reason, that Xu Anmo who was almost court martialled by Your Highness? But he's the Crown Prince's cousin. I remember, back then, Your Highness and the Crown Prince had a big argument when the Crown Prince came to his defence. How did he get involved with Prince Yu?"

"Where's the Crown Prince now?" Mei Changsu smiled ironically. "In good times, one is favored; in chaotic times, one is forgotten. Someone like Xu Anmo would be easily persuaded by someone of rank."

"So do you believe Tong Lu then?"

Mei Changsu let out a small sigh. "Rather than say I believe Tong Lu, it's better to say that I believe that Prince Yu has reason to make such a desperate choice. His Majesty has now put him back to where he had originally started. To make a comeback would be extremely challenging, and more importantly, he doesn't have another ten years to defeat Prince Jing like he had with the Crown Prince. Having lost Xia Jiang, his cronies and His Majesty's favour, Prince Yu seems to have been pushed into a corner. When he can no longer bear it, he would either sink into despair or act recklessly. There is no third option."

"Mister Su thinks that Prince Yu would choose to act wildly?"

"It would be fine if he had remained in the mansion. But if he couldn't help himself and went to see Xia Jiang, that Xuanjing Bureau director has plenty of ways to instigate him to act recklessly. After all, Xia Jiang is at a dead end. It would only be natural for him to want to burn his boats." Mei Changsu turned to look at Tong Lu and coldly said, "Tong Lu, you're avenging Junniang, aren't you?"

Tong Lu knocked his head hard upon the floor, bleeding from his forehead.

"But you've betrayed me once. Why should I trust you? If Prince Yu had forced you here and His Highness reports Prince Yu's plan to rebel after hearing your words,

only to discover later that there was no such plan, then wouldn't His Highness have brought false charges against Prince Yu?"

The blue veins stood out on Tong Lu's neck, but he remained silent, unreplying. Suddenly, he leapt towards the sword hanging on the wall of the tent, drew it and put it against his neck. Meng Zhi immediately wrest it away from him.

"There's no point demonstrating your sincerity by dying." Mei Changsu's voice was still cold. "What if you truly care so much about Junniang that you are willing to die in her stead?"

"Junniang is dead...." Tong Lu couldn't hold back any longer and burst into tears, sobbing loudly. "Her...her body is still buried in Wu Feng Po....Chief can....can send someone to check...."

Mei Changsu looked quietly at his former subordinate for a moment. Then he stepped forward to help him up, and gently said, "Alright. We will verify this information. But you must still be held under custody. You must have no contact with anyone or speak to anyone, understand?"

"Tong Lu understands. I don't care about anything else as long as I can avenge Junniang...." Tong Lu continued to kneel down, unwilling to rise, still lying at the feet of Mei Changsu, unable to stop sobbing.

Catching Mei Changsu's meaningful glance, Prince Jing immediately summoned two of his trusted soldiers. He instructed them to give Tong Lu a change of clothes and a meal, and keep careful watch over him. As soon as the tent flap closed, Meng Zhi looked around and asked, "What are we going to do next? Do we believe it or not?"

Prince Jing said succinctly, "I think we should be prepared, on the basis of believing him."

"I agree with Your Highness's suggestion." Mei Changsu nodded and said, "This is both an unexpected problem and an opportunity. How to respond, how to take advantage of it, these must be carefully considered."

"Don't tell me Sir thinks that Prince Yu's actions are unexpected?" Prince Jing raised his eyebrows.

"Does Your Highness think I can really predict everything? Although it occurred to me that Prince Yu would find a way to meet with Xia Jiang, I never expected him to seize control of the imperial guard, nor did I expect Xu Anmo to be in the picture." Mei Changsu's expression was grave. "If what Tong Lu said is true, then I have underestimated Prince Yu this time."



“When a person is in a desperate situation, his burst of strength is always terrifying.” Meng Zhi frowned. “It seems like Prince Yu is intending to risk everything with this move.....”

Mei Changsu was just about to speak, but stopped suddenly and looked at Prince Jing saying, “Does Your Highness have any ideas?”

“Let’s analyze the situation first.” Prince Jing drew his sword and drew on the sand, “This is the capital, this is Jiu’an Mountain. Qingli camp is stationed on the west side about three days’ travel from the capital, and five days’ travel from Jiu’an Mountain. But one thing to note is that Qingli is not a Xingtai army. When it’s not wartime, the commander has no authority to act on his own initiative. With more than ten cavalry units, without a military seal, how would Xu Anmo be able to mobilize all 50,000 men?”

Mei Changsu frowned as he looked at the sketch on the ground. “He would probably have no choice but to produce a fake imperial edict and military seal...the person examining the military seal is Xu Anmo. He could always cover it up.”

“But the other five Qingli commanders also have the right to examine it. If Xu Anmo were to refuse them, his colleagues have the right to refuse to mobilize their troops. I don’t believe all five of these commanders would revolt,” Meng Zhi challenged.

“Two or three willing to revolt are enough. Those who object can be killed.” Mei Changsu glanced at Prince Jing. “Your Highness should probably have a clearer understanding of the state of affairs in the army?”

Prince Jing’s face sank. He silently sheathed his sword. He knew that Mei Changsu’s words were not unfounded. The army was no longer what it used to be. Apart from the Xingtai armies guarding the four borders, the rest of the armies in other places had long ago lost the loyalty of their soldiers due to low military pay and deterioration of military discipline. It wasn’t impossible to buy off a few military officers with the lure of profit.

“The men Your Highness had arranged to remain in the capital will not be completely blind to Prince Yu’s movements. There’ll probably be news two days from now. Then we can confirm Tong Lu’s words.” Mei Changsu narrowed his eyes, his finger touching his chin lightly, “But...all this may just be a ruse set up by Prince Yu. If we act blindly without thinking and no rebellion happens, the trust you have recently earned will quickly disappear, and you’ll fall into the same situation as Prince Yu.”

Meng Zhi burst out saying, “If that’s the case, then even if we get news in advance, even if we can believe what Tong Lu said is true, isn’t it the same as not having any information? In any case, we can’t say anything to His Majesty now.....”

“It’s different. We can try to make some predictions and formulate multiple pre-emptive plans in advance. It’s better than being caught off-guard.” Because Mei Changsu was thinking rapidly at the time, he unconsciously reached for Prince Jing’s sword, drew it and began to draw on the ground, his movements so natural that the onlooking Meng Zhi broke out in cold sweat and Prince Jing couldn’t help but look at him dumbfounded.

“Look at this,” Mei Changsu continued, unaware of what had just happened, “While the Emperor is travelling, sentries are placed in all directions. Between the capital and Jiu’an Mountain are two sentries. Prince Yu would definitely take out the one closer to the capital, but the one closer to Jiu’an Mountain is occasionally inspected by the imperial guard stationed here, so Prince Yu can’t do anything about it. For the Qingli army to attack the hunting party, they would first have to pass through several towns, so they won’t be able to conceal themselves for long. What’s critical is that in order to get here fast and save time, they cannot bypass this sentry and take another route.”

“You mean, once this sentry sounds the alarm, we can confirm that Prince Yu is truly rebelling and that it isn’t a ruse?” Meng Zhi did some calculations. “But wouldn’t that be too late? The Jiu’an sentry is only 50 (Chinese) miles away. If we wait for the warning before escorting the hunting party off the mountain, we would definitely meet the oncoming army head on.”

Mei Changsu didn’t reply but glanced at Prince Jing again.

“Jiu’an Mountain is easy to defend and difficult to attack. Once the warning comes, I would prefer to defend the mountain rather than descend.” Xiao Jingyan understood Mei Changsu’s meaning at that moment, and frowned as he did his calculations. “Assuming Xu Anmo manages to mobilize the full 50,000 Qingli troops. With a strength of 3,000 imperial guards, we would probably only be able to resist them for at most two to three days?”

“You underestimate our imperial guards,” Commander General Meng said with dissatisfaction. “Since we now know that they’re coming, we can make some advanced preparations. Five days shouldn’t be a problem, but.....three or five days, what’s the difference?”

“The access to Jiu’an Mountain is limited. Whether 30,000 or 50,000 Qingli troops arrive, there won’t be much difference. But five days is the limit.” Mei Changsu looked at Prince Jing profoundly, “Can Your Highness make it back?”

The corners of Xiao Jingyan’s lips curled into a resolute smile. “Mother and all of you are on the mountain. I will make it back even if I die.”

Meng Zhi stared at the map sketched onto the ground for a long while before finally responding, “Is Your Highness going to mobilize the Jicheng army in the north?”

“This is one of the reasons why I have to wait for the warning to come.” Mei Changsu sighed. “His Majesty is overly suspicious and indecisive. Even if we took the risk and reported this to him now, he may not completely believe us. It’s only when it is confirmed that the rebel army is approaching that he would hand over the military seal to mobilize the army. Therefore, we have no choice but to sit quietly and wait.”

Meng Zhi felt there was something wrong with this reply and it took a long while before he figured it out. “Mister Su, you only asked His Highness if he will make it back in five days. Why don’t you wonder if he will make it out? Once the warning arrives, we will still need to spend time requesting for the military seal. The rebel army will adopt surprise attack tactics, and immediately cut off all routes off the mountain. It won’t be so easy to leave then!”

Mei Changsu was rendered speechless by his question. It’s not that he had no answer but rather, he could not answer. All he could say was, “This was my oversight. To break through a siege to ask for outside help...perhaps we can only rely on His Highness’s dauntless courage.”

Meng Zhi quickly said, “I know that Prince Jing is unequalled on the battlefield. But...how can we be certain he will manage to break through? Getting reinforcements is our last resort. If His Highness doesn’t succeed, aren’t we all just waiting for certain death?”

Mei Changsu lowered his head, apparently deep in thought, but he peered secretly at Prince Jing from the corners of his eyes.

Fortunately, Prince Jing very quickly took the initiative to reply to Meng Zhi’s question. “Commander Meng doesn’t need to worry. I can descend via the northern slope.”

“The northern slope is an overhanging cliff. There is no path!”

“Yes there is. There’s a dangerous and steep little path which is completely covered with weeds. Xiao Shu and I discovered it way back when we were wandering around Jiu’an Mountain. Apart from the both of us, no one else knows about it.”

“Really?” Meng Zhi was elated. “This is heaven sent!”

“Then it’s settled,” Prince Jing also smiled and made the final decision. “We will not inform His Majesty first. Commander Meng will organize the defence of Jiu’an Mountain and make sure there’s no confusion. No matter how dangerous the future situation is, His Majesty and the Imperial Consort must be kept safe.”

“Yes!” Meng Zhi obeyed solemnly, but then couldn’t help glancing at Mei Changsu. At that moment, the latter didn’t realize that he hadn’t been included in the list of people who must be “kept safe” because he had just realized that he was holding Prince Jing’s sword, his expression a little awkward.

Prince Jing briefly followed Meng Zhi’s gaze, then realizing his oversight, he hurriedly added, “Although Mister Su has accompanying guards, you still need to ensure his safety.”

“Yes!”

“Please forgive me Your Highness. I wasn’t paying attention just now.....” Mei Changsu handed the sword back with both hands, looking embarrassed, and bowed humbly.

“It’s alright. We were discussing important matters. There’s no need for such courtesy.” Prince Jing said lightly, replacing his sword back into its sheath.

Meng Zhi concluded other matters pertaining to defence then got up and immediately took his leave. Mei Changsu didn’t want to be left alone with Prince Jing in case he was interrogated further, so he left immediately after.

Foya was just outside the tent, and seeing Mei Changsu, it immediately threw itself on him, wanting to lick his mouth. Meng Zhi chuckled as Mei Changsu stood helpless against it. Fortunately the flap of the tent behind him remained tightly closed so Prince Jing didn’t get to witness it.

“I heard from Zhanying that you’ve been keeping away. I thought you were feeling unwell again, but it turns out that you’re hiding from Buddha’s Tooth.” Meng Zhi approached them. “Why don’t you just kill Foya to silence him?”

Although Foya didn’t understand human speech, it immediately wailed in protest. Worried that Prince Jing would hear it and come out to investigate, Mei Changsu ignored Meng Zhi and hurriedly led the wolf away with him to his tent.

Two days later, Prince Jing received a secret report from the capital as expected. Although it did not contain the inside story mentioned by Tong Lu, it reported that the imperial guard was too quiet, their shifts different from normal, and that Prince Yu repeatedly visited Xia Jiang in Sky Prison. According to the secret report, his visits lasted for very long and because he pulled rank, not even the Minister of Justice Cai Quan could prevent him from visiting. But other than this, the capital still appeared calm, the Capital Patrol was still guarding the four gates and there were no major movements.

Because the actual movements didn’t happen within the capital.

The Emperor had long since moved into the hunting palace, but apart from the royal princes, the rest of the hunting party continued to remain outside in their tents, maintaining the formalities of the ceremonial hunt. Meng Zhi was the busiest and most highly tense person these past two days. On the one hand, he had to organize Jiu'an Mountain's defences, on the other, he couldn't allow anyone to think that anything was out of the ordinary, so his nerves were stretched taut the entire time.

Fortunately, they only had four days of looming crisis when the shocking news arrived.

The soldier who brought the report was blood-soaked and speechless when he was brought before the Liang Emperor. He cut a sorry figure, and looking at him, one could tell that the rebel army was closing in.

The entire Jiu'an Mountain trembled. Meng Zhi narrowed the scope of the imperial guards according to what he had planned earlier, quickly laying down several peripheral defense lines and trenches along the mountain roads and surrounding areas. Fortunately, this was the royal hunting ground, and all the small roads were closed off to pedestrians. Mountains and streams surrounded the grassland on which the hunting palace sat, with suitable slopes, dense forest and a quarry. If the rebel army wanted to avoid the road and climb up to attack, they wouldn't be able to withstand the rolling logs and stones. In this way, they would be able to create a tighter defence and put the enemy at a disadvantage.

"What? What are these traitors clamoring about?" As he listened to the sentry's report, it was hard to tell if the Liang Emperor was angry or frightened. His whole body trembled. "You...say it one more time!"

Prince Jing stood calmly by his father's side and said, "The rebel army banner says that your son has rebelled and is holding Father Emperor under duress, so they have come to Father Emperor's rescue."

"When have you held me under duress?"

"The rebel army needed a reason to plan the rebellion. In the future, they can then say that when they came to your rescue, the situation was chaotic, that even though they managed to kill your son, your son had already killed Father Emperor. Then, in the absence of a crown prince, they will demand the imperial order to establish a new heir."

"What delusion!" The Liang Emperor bellowed. Then taking control of himself, he looked at the son by his side and said, "Jingyan, the rebels are approaching. What solution do you have?"

“Your son feels that leaving Jiu’an Mountain now is a suicidal move. The only thing we can do before the rebel army surrounds us is to prepare to resist them, while at the same time, send for reinforcements.”

“Good! Good! I’ll immediately write an edict for you.....”

“Father Emperor, the Jicheng army cannot be mobilized without a military seal.”

“Why do we need to mobilize the Jicheng army? The closest reinforcements should be the imperial guards in the capital!”

“Father Emperor, the rebel army is coming from the west. Do you still think there’s any use in sending for reinforcements from the capital?”

The Liang Emperor used his hand to stave off the cold sweat breaking out on his forehead, slumping weakly in his chair. Concubine Jing, who had been sitting beside him all this time took this opportunity to say, “We can send for reinforcements from both the capital and Jicheng, and see who arrives sooner. Isn’t that better?”

“That’s a good idea.” Prince Jing nodded and said, “In order to avoid arousing suspicion, your son should not go to the capital. Your son requests Father Emperor to bestow the military seal. Within five days, your son will lead soldiers back to protect Father Emperor and Mother. As for the capital, please arrange for a trusted official to send for reinforcements. If reinforcements arrive from the capital, then regard it as your son’s error in judgment, but if not, then Father Emperor will be able to see the truth a little more clearly.”

The situation was critical. At this time, there was no room for hesitation. Besides, Concubine Jing was by his side, so the Liang Emperor wasn’t worried that Prince Jing wouldn’t rush back. After briefly muttering irresolutely to himself, he personally went to get the military seal and solemnly gave it to Prince Jing. “Jingyan, the fate of the country now lies with you. Remember there can be no mistakes en route!”

“Yes! Your son will not fail.” Prince Jing knelt to pay his respects, then got up, grabbed his cloak from the attendant, shook it out, tied it to his shoulders and strode out of the hall.

At this moment, there was panic outside the palace. Many ran around at a loss, as if they wanted to escape but could not, hide but could not. Prince Jing’s face was cold like iron, and he walked by like the wind, totally unaffected by the situation around him. After his upright and firm silhouette disappeared, those around watching him felt a little more calm.

Bypassing the large platform outside the hunting palace, he caught sight of Mei Changsu and Meng Zhi standing shoulder to shoulder on side of the mountain road, one pointing at the terrain ahead while saying something, the other nodding in

agreement. When they sensed someone approaching, Meng Zhi turned his head first followed by Mei Changsu. When they saw that it was Prince Jing, both of them immediately greeted him.

“I’m setting off now.” Prince Jing said solemnly. “I am entrusting the mountain to you, Commander Meng.”

“Don’t worry, Your Highness!” Meng Zhi cupped his fist, his words direct.

Prince Jing then glanced at Mei Changsu with intensity, saying, “Even though Mister Su said that that you studied military methodology from veterans, from the way you gave instructions for military defence just now, even a military leader like Commander Meng deferred to you, so you must have had another great teacher. When I return, I shall consult you. Sir, please take care of yourself in the meantime.”

“Just now, we weren’t.....” Mei Changsu wanted to deny it, but for one, Prince Jing had guessed correctly, for another, they were in a perilous situation and it wasn’t appropriate for the two of them to have a conversation by the mountain road, so he was forced to keep silent.

Fortunately, Prince Jing was preoccupied so he didn’t think too much about it at that moment. Turning around, he strode towards the northern slope. At the foot of the mountain, water for the horses had already been prepared, and the five elite guards accompanying him, who had descended the mountain the day before, were waiting for him at the crossroads. Without a word, they all got astride their horses, turned around and made their way with speed.

## CHAPTER 146

### *Holding Fast*

Perhaps it was irony. As the smell of blood pressed towards them, the weather was bright and clear, the trees were green with new growth, and rays of golden sunlight bounced off them, evoking a feeling of comfort and warmth.

Meng Zhi stood at the front of the imperial guard's defensive line with his sword, still as a mountain. Born on the battlefield, he knew that when an enemy ten times the number of one's own is pressing down in throngs, the sense of oppressiveness would be astonishing. Once the soldiers can no longer bear it and succumb to cowardice, they could disperse for a thousand miles anytime, so he had to take the lead in the front, stir up their courage and not lose contact with them for even a split second from the moment they engaged in battle.

Because the mountain was tall and the forests were dense, the roads were narrow and winding. The imperial guards were well-outfitted, their armour and shields strong. The Qingli army could neither use cavalry nor crossbows to clear the way, so their infantry led the way with spears, pointed tips dazzling as they surged forward like a dense forest. A battlecry soared from their ranks, and as they approached, they could hear an officer crying in a loud voice, "Charge! Three taels of gold for every head!"

There were only three thousand troops on the mountain, 9,000 taels of gold to remove their barrier. Prince Yu certainly knew how to strike a deal. But for the soldiers, it was different. Most of them had only used copper in their lifetime, never having received even silver. With this reward, they could return home to buy a small plot of land. Whether or not this was a rebellion, they wouldn't think too much about it. Anyway, their superiors had issued their orders. Coupled with the promise of such reward, how could they not rush forward desperately?

Faced with an offensive that surged like a huge wave, the imperial guards remained firm as a rock. The frontline bore thick and heavy shields, covering the archers with their crossbows in the second row. Once the rebel army rushed into range, the whooshing sound of feathered arrows could be heard as they were released, not dense, but extremely accurate. As soon as the enemy frontline fell, more surged from the back, and men kept falling to the ground. In this way, the momentum the enemy gained from their large numbers was suddenly broken in several places.



Someone dressed in a general's attire screamed, "Charge! Charge forward and fight!" He was right. As long as they had numbers on their side, they could pass beyond the range of the arrows to engage in a full contact fight and leverage their military advantage. But as soon as he shouted these words, he had no further opportunity to lead the command, because a black cloaked figure suddenly swept down like a great winged bird, stepped on the heads of the rebel army towards him and with one slashing movement, sent his head flying as his blood gushed out. The mysterious cloaked figure then leapt back to where he came from, his sword carried horizontally against his chest, his visage proud.

In an instance, Da Liang's top ranking martial arts master had suppressed those present with the force of his blow. The imperial army's applause was like thunder, as the Qingli army's frontline was broken and they were unable to advance.

But only for a brief moment. Another general immediately took over, this time standing farther away, working hard to drive the army forward, adding incessantly to their numbers. At the same time, they also replaced them with heavily armoured soldiers. This was very effective in dealing with the rain of arrows, for few archers were skilled enough to penetrate through the gaps in metal armour. Almost no one fell in the front section, while only a small number fell in the rear section. However, the majority of them continued to rush towards the shield bearers. At this moment, the shield bearers suddenly pulled back and retreated to the rear as the archers turned to one side. A row of swordsmen suddenly appeared from behind them, men highly skilled in martial arts. Their armour was light but sturdy, and their swords thin as ice. Dealing with the heavy armoured soldiers was like cutting through melons. They sliced through unprotected joints, and when they faced the enemy's occasional counterattack, they easily dodged the slow advance.

In the face of this massacre, the armored soldiers were immediately followed by the light-footed infantry behind them. They were originally appointed as the main attack after the heavily armoured soldiers had dispersed the archers. Although the bloody massacre ahead was terrifying, the archers had already withdrawn, so they began to surge violently forward. Suddenly, the unexpected swishing sound of arrows released were heard again. Meng Zhi had arranged for archers to be hidden in the surrounding trees. After this rapid round of arrows, the Qingli army suffered even greater casualties than earlier.

Just as the rebel army began to panic and retreat, someone shouted, "Don't be afraid! Charge! They don't have many arrows!"

Meng Zhi frowned and looked around. After shouting, the man retreated back into the crowd and disappeared under the cover of the forest. At that moment, apart from those in the rear who retreated backwards, the armoured soldiers had been taken care of. The imperial guard withdrew and once again replenished their arrows.

This tug-of-war continued for four hours. The Qingli army's general eventually decided to cease the attack and wait for nightfall when the arrow attack wouldn't be as effective. The imperial guard also took the opportunity for a little rest and meal, so it was a stalemate.

When the black wings of night covered the line of sight, the sound of killing could be heard again. The imperial guard's defense line wasn't as firm as during the day. The more they fought, the more they retreated. The Qingli army was like a mighty earthquake, and one could say that victory was almost theirs. In the end, apart from Meng Zhi and a few brave individuals still fighting hard, the rest of the guards had more or less run away. To the rebel army, this was like gold walking away. How could they let them go? So they followed close on the heels of the retreating shadows, and as soon as they crossed the ridge, the soldiers in front felt the ground fall from beneath their feet. Before they could react, they fell into a deep trench. The men immediately behind came quickly to a halt, but the rebel army kept surging forward, causing them to fall and roll down one after the other, screaming. The more that came, the more that fell. When they finally stabilized, all they could see ahead of them was inky darkness. Just as they lit a flare intending to have a look, they became targets for the surrounding archers waiting in ambush and had no choice but to retreat until they were out of range, and remained there.

Once the sky turned bright, the commander of the Qingli army couldn't help but get angry. Although the trench wasn't narrow, it was definitely not wide. Any normal and healthy man could leap over it with a little momentum. Furthermore, the actual mountain road in this area had a sharp bend. It was piled up with branches and weeds, and in the dark, nobody noticed that turn in the road.

And so the fierce battle began to repeat itself in the day. This time, the Qingli army mobilized 30,000 men. With its overwhelming advantage in numbers, they could deploy their troops in batches, while the imperial guard had no choice but to fight continuously in spite of their fatigue, sometimes not even having the time to drink or eat. Even though they were brave and fierce, they had no choice but to withdraw bit by bit, relying completely on pre-laid traps and changing tactics to resist them.

In the early morning of the third day, the imperial guard had almost withdrawn to the edge of the forest. At this moment, despite their fatigue, they initiated an unexpected counterattack. Caught by surprise, the Qingli army hastily pulled back, temporarily retreating. As soon as this happened, the imperial guard also retreated with great speed, evacuating the forest. When it was clear, a team of archers fired flaming arrows, setting on fire the kindle that they had earlier arranged around the forest. The mountain wind was strong, and it didn't take long to form a ring of fire that spread rapidly.

Outside the forest was a mountain stream about 50 (chinese) feet wide. It had a strong flow of water and formed a natural divider against the wall of fire, so they weren't afraid that the fire would spread upwards to the hunting palace.

Mei Changsu stood on the high platform outside the hunting palace, staring at the thick smoke and increasingly fierce fire rising from the forest, his pale face calm and expressionless.

“Mister Su,” Lie Zhanying rushed over, panting for breath, his face covered with ash, “The imperial guards now number 1,300. Including the guards from the various households, that will be a total of approximately 2,000 men. The Commander General would like to suggest that everyone retreats into the hunting palace and has instructed me to seek Sir’s opinion.”

Mei Changsu nodded. “That’s the right move. The hunting palace is surrounded by open and grassy slopes, impossible to defend, so there is no need to set up defences. Retreating into the hunting palace is our best option.

“Yes.” Lie Zhanying replied as he stretched out his neck to look at the fire in the distance. “Although it’s spring time, look at the fire. As long as it doesn’t rain, it’ll burn for two nights and a day. It’s too bad that these are royal gardens and have been well-kept, so there is no accumulation of leaves to set the whole forest on fire and can only set on fire the parts that are easily accessed. But even if that group of rebel army managed to retreat in time and avoided being burnt alive, there is no clear path for them. There are steep slopes on both the north and south sides. Some rolling logs can crush them to death. On the east is another mountain top. They can only wait till the fire abates before going round to climb up. The earliest they would be able to get to the stream is tomorrow night.”

“I’m afraid if His Highness doesn’t make it back tomorrow....” Mei Changsu said faintly, “The imperial guard is already worn out, while the Qingli army is still at least 10,000 strong. We cannot possibly continue to wage war in the forest. Take advantage of the respite tonight. Apart from the sentries, everyone should make full use of this time to rest.”

“The Commander General has already made arrangements for the rest shift,” said Lie Zhanying when he suddenly remembered something. “Oh, that’s right, when I was making my way over, I happened upon Concubine Jing’s maid. She was delivering a medicinal soup for restoring qi to Mister Su’s room.”

“Ng.” Mei Changsu acknowledged softly, then wrapped his cloak tightly around him and turned around to walk off the platform. At this time, almost everyone had moved into the hunting palace. It was very crowded for a while, but under the circumstances, nobody was in the frame of mind to grumble about the living conditions. Everyone’s face was drawn taut, their complexions as sallow as clay.

During this time, Concubine Jing demonstrated her calmness and penchant for order. There was no sign of chaos in the hunting palace thus far due to her arrangements and mediation. The princes were summoned into the Emperor’s Qin

Hall to accompany him, firstly to make space for the other members of the imperial clan and accompanying court officials, and secondly, so that they can keep the Emperor calm by engaging him in conversation. Because Prince Jing wasn't around, the men from his household stood in the battle. After Concubine Jing received permission from the Liang Emperor, Mei Changsu was also summoned in, with Foya following on his heels, but Fei Liu was sent to Meng Zhi's side.

After what seemed like a suffocating day and night had passed, the rebel army was once again sighted from the hunting palace at dusk on the fourth day. The fierce battle this time was different from the previous few days, because they were too close now, so close that those in the palace could almost smell the blood. Against wave after wave of the rebel army's attacks, the imperial guard, which had run out of arrows, tightened their frontline, defending each door by door, each step by step. Because these were the most elite troops of the most elite team personally trained by Da Liang's number one martial arts master, and because the courage to fight to the last man ran in their veins, they fought on till late night, and the rebel army was only able to penetrate to the outermost auxiliary pavilion.

"Haven't reinforcements from the capital arrived yet?" The Liang Emperor muttered these words as he listened to the battle cries outside. It was unclear if he was speaking to someone or to himself.

Actually, by this time he already understood that although he had sent his most trusted personal bodyguard to the capital to gather reinforcements, although he had received a message that the bodyguard had successfully concealed himself from the rebel army and made his way out, reinforcements will not arrive from the west.

"Your Majesty, please rest assured. Jingyan will be back in time." Concubine Jing comforted him with a soft voice, holding on to the old emperor's trembling hand. To avoid calling themselves out as targets, only a few dim lamps were lit in the room, the dim light making the faces look even more pale. Prince Huai, who was the most timid by nature, could no longer withstand it and was curled into a ball, his voice trembling as he said, "If they break through, would they really dare to.....touch us?"

"Shut up!" The Liang Emperor shouted angrily, trying his best to maintain his royal composure, not willing to reveal his nervousness in front of the rest. "How is the rebel army going to break through? I have faith in Meng Zhi and I have faith in Jingyan!"

In the wake of this outburst, the room was silent, making the battle cries coming from outside even more piercing, and the smell of blood more pronounced.

Foya suddenly raised his head in a long howl, causing the people in the hall, whose nerves were already stretched taut, to jump in fright.

The Liang Emperor shouted in anger, “What kind of beast is this? How did it get in?”

Mei Changsu gently stroked Foya to calm down the wildness aroused by the smell of blood as Concubine Jing smiled and said, “Your Majesty, be at ease. This is Jingyan’s battle wolf. Even though he’s not here, he has left this wolf behind to guard Your Majesty in his stead.”

“Oh?” The Liang Emperor’s anger immediately changed to delight. “Can this wolf kill the enemy?”

“Yes. With it standing in front of Your Majesty, who would dare to approach?” Concubine Jing’s quiet and calm smile relieved the tension in the hall at just the right moment. Under Mei Changsu’s hand, Foya gradually calmed down, only his ears remained standing alertly upright.

However, as the night descended, it became less and less calm. Even though the imperial guard’s retreat was slow, they were still retreating step by step. Everyone in the hall was well aware of this.

“Haven’t the reinforcements arrived yet?” This time it was Prince Ji who couldn’t help asking. “The hunting palace is the last line of defence!”

“No, it’s not.” Mei Changsu’s calm, ice-cold voice rang through the hall at this moment. “If they break through the palace gates, there’s still the door to this hall. If they break through that, there’s still our own bodies. As long as there’s still breath in our bodies, we will not fall.”

His manner of speaking was so cold that Prince Ji was struck with terror, and the Liang Emperor’s gaze leapt towards him.

Mei Changsu turned around and faced the Emperor. “Your Majesty also has a sword by your side, right?”

His penetrating gaze aroused in the Emperor the tumultuous feelings of his youth. His fingers tightened, and he grabbed the sword by the side of the throne, but even though he stared at it for a long time, he couldn’t unsheath it. Concubine Jing slowly got up. With a stretch of her hand, she brought the point of the sword to her eyes, and a chill reflected in those autumn waters.

“Your Majesty, please give this sword to your concubine. Your concubine is willing to be Your Majesty’s last line of defence.”

## CHAPTER 147

### *Turbulence*

“Your Majesty, please give this sword to your concubine. Your concubine is willing to be Your Majesty’s last line of defence.”

These words shook the Liang Emperor to the core. Being so greatly moved, the heroic spirit of his past suddenly surged within him. He grabbed Concubine Jing’s hand, the one holding the sword, and said loudly, “As long as I’m here with you, who would dare to hurt you?”

His voice had barely faded away when an arrow pierced through the window and with a swooshing sound, struck the wooden pillar, as if it was orchestrated to crush his imposing manner. Though it was far from hitting any mark, it was enough to cause panic in the hall. Fearful gasps and low cries could be heard, and some even began sobbing in the dark.

At this moment, the Eastern sky was beginning to brighten, but the situation was rapidly deteriorating. The other members of the imperial clan and court officials rushed into the Qin Hall non-stop, each cutting a sorry figure as they reported that this and that hall had fallen into enemy hands, and as a result, the door to the hall kept flapping open and shut. Everytime it opened, everyone’s emotions were pushed one step closer to collapse.

“Rebels and traitors.....rebels and traitors.....” The Liang Emperor’s dishevelled grey hair was plastered to his cheek, wet with cold sweat. He was still sitting upright, not wanting to lose his imposing manner, but he unconsciously cursed them sourly through clenched teeth.

Foya sat with its back arched, its fur bristling, repeatedly wanting to rush out. Mei Changsu didn’t have much strength left and could no longer hold on to him, and he broke free, heading straight for the door. Nobody expected the door to suddenly burst open, allowing in a gust of cold wind, causing everyone to jump in fright.

This time, what appeared before everyone was a coldly elegant youth, his body enveloped in cold air. He was dressed in blue, his hair tied back with a purple headband, and he carried a light weight dagger in his hand, its sharp point clear as

water, with no sign of blood stains. Although the way he burst through the door was impulsive and rude, his movements were light and fluid as a ghost. His face was serious as he said in a voice that was hard and cold, “Here already.”

With an unwavering gaze, Mei Changsu asked softly, “Fei Liu, is His Highness Prince Jing back?”

“Ng!” Fei Liu replied emphatically. Having completed his mission to report this, he sat down to play with Foya’s tail.

But no one was bothered by his rude behaviour. Loud sighs sounded throughout the hall, and the Liang Emperor, unable to contain his relief, embraced Concubine Jing, saying over and over again, “Good child.....good child.....”

After about an hour had passed, the sounds of battle outside began to cease. As the sun’s rays were now illuminating the hall, Concubine Jing began to slowly blow out the candle flames. The bloody and terrifying night had finally passed.

The sound of firm and uniform footsteps could be heard from outside the hall, as if a new defence formation was being put in place. Immediately afterwards, Prince Jing’s raised voice could be heard clearly saying, “Your son has carried out the imperial edict to put down the rebellion and seeks an audience with Your Majesty!”

“Hurry, open the door,” The Liang Emperor quickly called out to Gao Zhan, “Let Jingyan in.”

Without waiting for Gao Zhan, several court officials closest to the entrance ran forward to unlatch and open the doors. Prince Jing strode forward. Though he was full of vigor, his hair was dishevelled, his face covered in dust, and his azure uniform blood-stained. He had carefully unfastened his sword before entering the hall. The first thing he did after kneeling and bowing was to lift the military seal high and say, “The Jicheng Army has obeyed the imperial edict to come and protect the royal party.<sup>264</sup> Having overseen this, your son returns the military seal.”

“Good, good.” The Liang Emperor personally walked down to support Prince Jing up, one hand taking hold of the military seal, the other hand stroking his son’s hair as he said with a trembling voice, “You’ve worked hard. Are you injured?”

“Just some minor injuries.”

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<sup>264</sup> I realize I haven’t been very consistent with the translation of “jia” (驾), which is (almost) literally translated as “harness / drive” – basically, the royal party / procession for the Spring Hunt. Depending on context, I’ve mostly used “hunting party” or the Emperor. In this instance, I’ve used “royal party” because it just seemed more appropriate. In any case, I thought I should highlight what a more “accurate” translation should be, just in case the inconsistency ended up being a little confusing!

“Until we return to the capital, the Jicheng Army will be under your command. You must do your best to hunt down the members of the rebel army at all cost!”

“Your son obeys.”

“Come come come, have a seat and rest for a while. You must have been on the road day and night these past few days, right?” The Liang Emperor held on to Prince Jing’s hand, and brought him up to sit beside him, saying to Concubine Jing, “Quickly, bring our son some food. He must be starving.”

“Your son was late in protecting the royal party, causing Father Emperor and Mother to suffer from fright,” Xiao Jingyan cupped his fist in his palm and continued, “There are still many things to settle outside. Not everyone managed to escape to the Qin Hall last night. Some imperial clan members and court officials have died. The imperial guard faced hard battle for five days and have also suffered great casualties. Your son needs to go help Commander Meng to handle these matters at the moment. Once everything has been taken care of, your son will return to pay respects to Father Emperor and Mother.”

“Indeed,” said the Liang Emperor, looking sad after hearing this, “Those killed this time include soldiers which have been loyal to the end. I will greatly compensate their families, but for now, we really need to settle the aftermath of the battle. I will not delay you. Please handle it as you see fit.”

Prince Jing got up, bowed and swiftly retreated, leaving the hall. Concubine Jing immediately dismissed those gathered in the hall so that they could return to their individual accommodations and manage their personal affairs. Mei Changsu seized this opportunity to leave the Qin Hall, not expecting to stumble into Prince Jing and Meng Zhi in the courtyard outside. He immediately turned to look behind him, but fortunately, Fei Liu had already dragged Foya away by force to play elsewhere.

“It wasn’t convenient for me to greet you just now in Father Emperor’s presence,” Prince Jing briefly looked Mei Changsu up and down, “How are you, Sir?”

“I was always far from the frontline, so why would I not be ok?” Mei Changsu looked around him, and seeing blood still remaining on the steps, couldn’t help but sigh deeply. “I’m afraid the imperial guard must have suffered the greatest casualties?”

Meng Zhi replied sadly, “Only slightly more than 700 men survived. Among them, 200 were seriously injured, almost none of them in good condition.”

“Even the Commander General is injured. It was a really close shave this time.” Mei Changsu’s eyes were piercing cold. “But this is definitely Prince Yu’s last stand.”



At this moment, men came over successively to report matters related to dealing with the aftermath of battle, so the conversation came to a halt. Of the 50,000 Jicheng Army troops that Prince Jing had deployed, 30,000 followed him in the advance, while 20,000 followed behind in horseback, bringing with them necessary supplies, so the latter were probably still halfway there. After the rebellion, they cleared the battlefield, removing all the dead bodies to the foot of the mountain. One by one, they were wrapped up and placed in coffins, their names recorded. As for the enemy, they buried them together after making a count of their numbers. The captured soldiers were confined in a large tent while their generals were imprisoned separately as they awaited interrogation. Outside the hunting palace, a special area was set up to tend to the wounded. The Jicheng Army temporarily took over the duties of the imperial guard, allocating 3,000 men to stand guard over the hunting palace. The rest of them set up camp at the foot of the mountain awaiting further orders.

In accordance with the Liang Emperor's decree, they also began to scour the surrounding mountain area for remnants of the rebel army who had fled, while at the same time declaring a reward for those who have loyally served to protect the royal party. With this opportunity to shine, the entire Jicheng Army combed through the mountain like a sieve, making every effort to render meritorious service.

After the major matters had been satisfactorily taken care of, Meng Zhi immediately changed his clothes, then followed Prince Jing again into Qin Hall to debrief the Liang Emperor. The old emperor was now calm and composed. However, the flicker in his eyes were no longer that of relief, but they were ruthless as he said, "Jingyan. Commander Meng. How do you think we should deal with those in the capital?"

Prince Jing glanced at Meng Zhi, signaling him to speak first. The Commander General of the imperial guard was unable to restrain himself and immediately cupped his fist in his palm, saying, "There are 70,000 imperial guards left in the capital. This servant does not believe that they would betray Your Majesty. They were definitely being controlled by someone. As long as this servant is able to return first, he would return them to Your Majesty."

"I believe so, too." The Liang Emperor was grim, saying coldly, "Meng Zhi, rest the night, then tomorrow, you will take 10,000 mounted soldiers and set off for the capital. First, detain Prince Yu and his accomplices. Then, collect the seal and close off the palace. I will take care of things there when I return. Remember, you must put the capital in order. Once the situation is stable, immediately send me a report. I will wait to hear from you before returning to the capital."

"This servant obeys." After kowtowing, he was just about to walk out when the Liang Emperor called out to him, "Why are you in such a hurry? This order is neither an oral command nor a secret one. I need to issue you with an imperial edict!"

“Imperial edict?” Meng Zhi was slightly taken aback. “But once an imperial edict is issued, it can’t be changed....”

“What is there to change?!” The Liang Emperor suddenly struck the dragon table, his eyes shooting anger. “If someone had his way this time, I would have died on Jiu’an Mountain, and there would have been no way out! The imperial edict is already being written. Once I have put my seal on it, you shouldn’t hesitate to deal with those rebels and traitors. Why should I continue to defend them?”

Meng Zhi immediately said loudly, “This servant obeys!”

At this moment, the official in charge of writing the imperial edicts came forward and bowed, clasping the newly drafted edict in his hands. The Liang Emperor looked briefly through it, and after putting his seal on it, rolled it up and gave it to Meng Zhi saying, “Anything not included in this edict, I allow you to act as you see fit.”

“This servant will uphold Your Majesty’s trust!”

“Alright. You may leave.” With a sigh, the Emperor beckoned Prince Jing to his side, saying, “Jingyan, you have performed a great service in rescuing the royal party this time. What reward would you like?”

Xiao Jingyan smiled faintly and said, “Order hasn’t yet been restored. At this moment, even though Father Emperor intends to confer favour, your son dares not accept. If the hunting palace has any gold and valuables in store, it would be better to first reward the soldiers.”

The Liang Emperor looked towards the sky and laughed heartily. “You and your mother have this one thing in common. She would also say the same thing. Alright. Bring some men with you to sort it out. Issue this first round of rewards, then once we’ve returned to the capital, we’ll have another round.”

“Your son obeys.” As soon as Prince Jing finished making his obeisance, Concubine Jing entered from the side of the hall with a few maids bearing food. Smiling, she invited both father and son over for dinner. It was a very harmonious and happy meal. The Liang Emperor frequently put food on Prince Jing’s plate, appearing to be indescribably happy and loving.

After dinner, the Liang Emperor retired with Concubine Jing in attendance and Prince Jing took his leave. He was a 7-pearled prince and was allocated his own courtyard within the hunting palace to accommodate himself and his household. This time, those who followed Xiao Jingyan to Jiu’an Mountain were brave and valiant soldiers who were born and bred on the battlefield, so despite five days of hard battle, they didn’t suffer much casualties, with only two who died in battle and three who were seriously injured, while the rest were fairly unscathed. Qi Meng in particular,

was especially energetic. After just a brief moment's rest, he immediately gathered a group to go up the mountain and participate in the manhunt for rebel soldiers.

As part of Prince Jing's entourage, Mei Changsu also stayed in the same courtyard. Out of respect for him, Prince Jing arranged a separate room for him and Fei Liu. It was dark at this time, but there was no light coming from his room. Prince Jing stood in the centre of the courtyard, staring at his pitch black window. He hesitated for a long while before stepping forward to knock on the door.

The door quickly swung open, and Fei Liu glided out. "Sleeping!"

"So early and he's already asleep? Is Sir feeling unwell?"

"Tired!" said the boy loudly.

"Oh." Prince Jing nodded, turned around and slowly retreated. Unwilling to immediately return to his own accommodations in the main building, he walked to the centre of the courtyard and stood still, raising his head against the early spring wind as it caressed his somewhat hot, dry face.

He actually didn't really know what he wanted to say to Mei Changsu, except that he was indescribably troubled. Ever since discovering that the mother on whom he had depended on for all these years had her own secrets, his feeling of loneliness had grown even deeper. At that moment, he was standing in the centre of his own courtyard, surrounded by his most trusted aides and subordinates, but he could only look around feeling at a loss, realizing that there wasn't even one person he could confide in and share what was weighing in his heart.

The higher one goes, the more lonely one is. Xiao Jingyan really wasn't prepared for this. It's just that he had been rushing about these few days and nights. In his physical and emotional exhaustion, he could no longer avoid feeling the heaviness and loneliness. Unable to bear it, he shut his eyes and imagined that he was back in the past.

Those warm and happy days, with his elder brother and his friend, those days that seemed perfect because they were now lost.....

But imagination was still just imagination after all. The snow of Meiling was the fire in his heart. No matter how painful or how tired he was, this fire would never go out.

Victory was close. There was no room for error. Xiao Jingyan tightened his lips and opened his eyes once again, eyes that flickered like stars in the night. The dead were looking down at him from the heavens. They did not want to see him standing there indulging in memories and weakness.

“Men!”

“Here!”

“Strengthen the guard at night. Once Xu Anmo has been apprehended, immediately come and report it to me, no matter the time!”

“Yes!”

After issuing this command, Xiao Jingyan drew a deep breath, shook off the melancholy that clung to him like cobwebs, and walked decisively towards his room.

## CHAPTER 148

### *The Beast*

Xu Anmo, the Commander of the Qingli Army, was apprehended on the third day. When the news arrived, Mei Changsu was sitting across from Prince Jing, discussing follow-up matters after returning to the capital. Upon receiving the news, both of them were very happy.

“Xu Anmo must be confined alone. Don’t beat or scold him. He must return to the capital alive,” commanded Prince Jing.

“Yes!” Lie Zhanying couldn’t lift one of his arms to cup his fist so he bowed instead. “Those guarding him are mostly from our household so Your Highness can rest assured.”

“Did he say anything?” asked Mei Changsu.

“He was shouting all the way, saying that he had been deceived by Prince Yu.”

“It seems that he is not intending to sacrifice himself for Prince Yu.” Mei Changsu couldn’t hold back a smile. “Prince Yu and Xia Jiang are walking into this dead end on their own. But there is a favour to ask of Concubine Jing niang niang. The Empress cannot be put to death. Like it or not, she is still Marquis Yan’s younger sister.”

“Mother already mentioned this. I believe she will try her best.” This thought reminded Prince Jing of something, and his gaze was profound. “When I went in to pay my respects today, Father Emperor spent a better part of that time cursing Xia Jiang. He even showed me Xia Jiang’s confession.”

“That’s good. Showing it to Your Highness means that His Majesty doesn’t believe it.”

“That’s right. Father Emperor doesn’t believe a word of Xia Jiang’s confession. However, you and I both know that most of what Xia Jiang confessed is the truth and not false allegations.” Prince Jing looked intensely at his advisor. “What I can’t figure out is, if he was telling the truth out of desperation, why did he keep saying that you

used to be Prince Qi's man? Without any basis, such a statement will make one think he said this because he was cornered, but Xia Jiang isn't so stupid, is he?

"He's not stupid." Mei Changsu chuckled. "I told him so."

"Oh?"

"Prince Qi is a thorn in Xia Jiang's heart. His fear of Your Highness stems completely from this. Claiming that I was someone from Prince Qi's camp was more likely to cause him to be emotionally unstable, making it easier to advance my plans in future."

"So that's how it was...." Prince Jing leaned back, his expression mild. It was hard to tell if he believed this or not, but he didn't ask further.

Mei Changsu sorted out the papers that were spread out on the table, and just as he was about to move on to another topic, a loud sound could be heard from outside.

"Go and see what's going on." Prince Jing frowned, raising his chin in Lie Zhanying's direction and the latter immediately ran out, returning with Qi Meng not long after.

"Your Highness! We've caught him!" Qi Meng knelt and said this loudly, his face beaming with excitement.

"We know you've caught him. Zhanying just reported this."

Lie Zhanying hurriedly said, "No no, Qi Meng wasn't referring to Xu Anmo."

"If not Xu Anmo then who is it that's making you so excited.....?"

"The beast, Your Highness. It was such a coincidence! It also happened to be here in the vicinity of Jiu'an Mountain. We surrounded it while scouring the area for rebel soldiers. Hehehe. Hehehe." Qi Meng laughed in a silly manner after saying this.

Prince Jing didn't share his obsession with the beast. It took him a while before he responded with "Oh. The one for which Jingzhao county came to seek help, which you hadn't managed to catch after more than a year?"

"We've caught it, Your Highness. We've caught it. It's just outside, locked up in an iron cage. Would Your Highness like to look at it?"

Prince Jing waved his hand disinterestedly, but Mei Changsu grabbed the opportunity to stand up and say, "I would like to have a look. Your Highness, please allow me to take my leave."

“Sir, please do as you wish.”

Mei Changsu leaned forward slightly in a bow then followed Qi Meng out. Prince Jing picked a document up from the top of the pile on the table, opened it, and hadn't even read half a page when a mournful wail suddenly sounded from outside.

“Mister Su!”

“It's dangerous.....quick...quick....”

“Mister Su, no.....”

Xiao Jingyan immediately stood up and rushed out with Lie Zhanying hot on his heels. At first glance, his heart almost leapt in his chest. In the corner of the spacious courtyard stood an iron cage about one and a half times a man's height. Huddled in the cage was a shaggy, dark brown creature that was struggling violently at that moment. His view of Mei Changsu was blocked by a few of his household soldiers who surrounded him, looking on in panic. But what was clear was that both of Mei Changsu's pale arms were already in the cage, both his palms trapped within the creature's brown paws.

“How did this happen?” Prince Jing was pale as he stepped forward. “Don't just stand there. Quickly rescue him!”

But after he walked to the front and got a clearer view, he was as stunned as his subordinates. The beast didn't grab Mei Changsu's arms. On the contrary, it was trying to avoid him, but the cage was too small, so no matter how much it dodged, Mei Changsu still managed to grab hold of its wrist, unwilling to let go.

“Don't be afraid....don't be afraid....There's nothing to fear. Everything will be okay....it's okay, it's okay....” Completely oblivious to all the confusion around him, Mei Changsu focused his attention on pacifying the creature. “I won't harm you. I can help you. Don't move, let me feel....”

The beast was quiet for a while, blankly allowing Mei Changsu to feel about his left wrist, but it didn't take long for it to get agitated again, its body constantly spurting out hot air.

“They're red, they're red, its eyes are red,” Qi Meng yelled, “Mister Su, quickly get away. Once its eyes are red, it must drink blood. It almost sucked someone's blood on the way here!” Prince Jing was startled. He immediately grabbed Mei Changsu's arms and pulled them away.

“Let me go!” Mei Changsu firmly pulled back his arms and turned back. “Can't you see him restraining himself? Yes, he longs to suck blood, especially human blood. Only then can he alleviate some of his pain. But he keeps restraining himself. He's

doing his best to control himself in order not to hurt anyone. Didn't any of you observe this?"

As if confirming his words, the beast suddenly roared, struggling painfully in the cage. Mei Changsu leaned against the cage, staring intensely at it. Suddenly he called out, "Qi Meng!"

"Oh? Here....."

"Give me your sword."

"What?"

"Give me the knife!" Mei Changsu raised his voice sternly. Qi Meng jumped in reflex, then blankly pulled out his waist knife and handed it over. But Mei Changsu did not reach out to grab hold of the knife by the handle. Instead, he drew his wrist against the knife blade, and blood immediately flowed from the small opening. Qi Meng was so shocked his waist knife dropped onto the ground.

"Don't be afraid. Come, take a few sips." Mei Changsu put his bloody wrist through the iron bars, extending it towards the beast's mouth, saying softly, "There's medicine in my blood. It will make you feel better. Come, don't be afraid. You won't be able to suck me dry. I'll be fine....if you don't drink, the blood will flow in vain...."

The beast gasped and tried to resist for a while, but in the end, it couldn't resist the dark red blood, and its mouth descended on Mei Changsu's wrist. All around, the men cried out in alarm. Prince Jing also couldn't help rushing forward two steps.

But everything was as Mei Changsu said. The beast had no intention of harming anyone. It had taken no more than ten sips, and when its pain began to ease a little, it removed his wrist from its mouth, and couldn't be persuaded to have more.

"Bring me the key." Mei Changsu simply tied the wound on his wrist with a towel. Standing up, he extended his hand to Qi Meng, "The key."

Stunned by the earliest scene, Qi Meng handed the key over like a puppet. Mei Changsu quickly opened the iron cage and helped the beast out.

"Your Highness, I will take care of this person. Will you allow him to stay in my room?"

"This.....person?"

"Yes, even though he doesn't look like it, he is a person." Mei Changsu's usually placid eyes were blazing at this moment. "If it is not convenient here, I will bring him



with me and camp outside. I would just need Your Highness to arrange for someone to help me.”

Xiao Jingyan looked at him in a daze, feeling confused and disoriented, as if he hadn't yet recovered from the earlier shock. Mei Changsu didn't rush him either, but merely waited quietly as he supported the “person” by his side.

After a very long while, Prince Jing finally came to himself. He looked around him, then at Mei Changsu's resolute expression, then said with a slight cough, “Since Sir is so sure of this, there's no harm for him to stay here, but please be careful.”

“Many thanks, Your Highness.” Mei Changsu smiled faintly, bowed, then led the “person” by his arm into his room on the west side of the courtyard. Prince Jing frowned, signalling for Lie Zhanying to follow them in.

After a while, Lie Zhanying came out and instructed men to arrange for hot water and a bathing barrel, then went to the master bedroom to report to Prince Jing, “Mister Su didn't say anything to that...that person. He just kept comforting him, and even looked for medicine for him to eat. The person is calm now, so Mister Su would like to give it a bath.”

Prince Jing frowned, rubbing his right wrist with his left hand, saying to himself, “But who would let anyone suck one's own blood just because that's a person?”

Lie Zhanying blinked, not knowing how to respond, so he stood silent. After a long while, Qi Meng also came in. Cupping his fist, he blurted out without thinking, “Reporting to Your Highness, it's actually white.”

“What's white?”

“That beast....er, that person. After bathing, we discovered that his fur is white, but it was so dirty we thought it was brown.”

“Qi Meng!” Lie Zhanying said in reproof, “Why are you telling His Highness all these insignificant details?”

“I thought His Highness would like to know....”

“What His Highness would like to know is not this. You should leave quickly.” Seeing Prince Jing silent and morose, Lie Zhanying hurriedly ushered Qi Meng out.

Out in the courtyard, two soldiers were carrying the dirty bath water out, while someone else brought clean towels. The beast that Qi Meng had so painstakingly tried to capture for more than a year was suddenly defined as a “person”. This made him very uncomfortable, so he stood outside Mei Changsu's room for a long while before going in for another look.

The man with the white fur was at that moment lying on Mei Changsu's bed, curled into a ball, his facial hair concealing his features. He didn't resist as Mei Changsu inspected his body, but as soon as he touched his wrist, the man would instinctively retract it to his chest.

Qi Meng stood behind looking at him blankly for a very long time. Mei Changsu didn't bother about him, so he soon felt bored and left sheepishly of his own accord. As soon as he left, Mei Changsu immediately got up to close the door and windows. Returning to the bed, he tried to tug at the man's wrist but was again refused.

"There's no need to hide it. I know what it is," Mei Changsu said quietly, "That's a Chiyang Army wristband, each one engraved with each person's name. If one died in battle, even if the body was unrecognizable, one could still be recognized with the wristband, am I right?"

The man with the white fur trembled violently all over, the lump on his throat moving as he made a "hu hu" sound, his teeth rattling.

"I would just like to see your name, see if there is anything I can do to help you," Mei Changsu gently patted his back, whispering in his ear, "Come, let me have a look. What harm can it do? How much worse can it get?"

The man with the white fur eventually allowed himself to be persuaded and his stiff body slowly relaxed. Mei Changsu gently and carefully pulled out his wrist, and little by little pushed aside the long fur. Due to the swelling in the arm, the finger-wide silver wrist band was deeply embedded in the flesh, and its surface was a little black and indistinct. But the unique double cloud flame pattern of the Chiyang Army, as well as the name surrounded by the flame pattern, could still be recognized.

Mei Changsu looked at the name, his face pale as snow. His eyesight blurred. He blinked his eyes and tears fell. His vision sharpened for only a brief moment before it blurred again.

The man with the white fur breathed roughly, peering from behind his long fur at this man who was weeping before him without any reservation. He opened his mouth, but the only sound that came out was an ear-piercing "Hu hu" sound.

It was unclear how much time passed before Mei Changsu finally raised his hand to wipe away the tears on his face with his sleeves, take a deep breath and break into a broad smile.

"Nie Feng dage, you're still alive.....this is truly very good...." After saying these words, Lin Shu finally couldn't suppress his emotions and opened his arms to bring his former comrade-in-arms into a tight embrace.

## CHAPTER 149

### *Strange Poison*

When the doors and windows to Mei Changsu's room were completely sealed shut, Prince Jing felt a great urge to give in to impulse, to take advantage of Fei Liu's absence to arrange for someone to eavesdrop on the conversation within. But ultimately, he managed to control his impulse and didn't do anything.

He now knew without a doubt that Mei Changsu was concealing a secret, but as to whether or not he should uncover this secret by unscrupulous means, Prince Jing still hesitated. More than a year of collaborating with the counsellor he had once held nothing but disgust and suspicion for defecting to support him, one that gradually grew into the trust and respect of today. He didn't want to break this trust, nor did he want to reduce this respect.

So even as he faced the closed doors and windows of Mei Changsu's room,<sup>265</sup> Xiao Jingyan took great efforts to suppress the doubts and suspicions that were surging within, keeping silent.

On the contrary, the one who took the initiative to open the door and walk out was Mei Changsu.

The advisor's face was pale, and his eyelids were a little flushed, but he was otherwise calm, and when he walked into the main room, he seemed to be his usual self.

But as soon as Prince Jing raised his head, he suddenly knelt down.

“What's wrong with Mister Su?” Prince Jing was alarmed and hurriedly stepped forward to help him up. “Why have you suddenly made such a big gesture of respect for no reason?”

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<sup>265</sup> At this point, it's worthwhile pointing out that MCS was staying in the “West room”, while XJY, as the lord & master was staying in the “East room”. As such, XJY could clearly see the goings-on surrounding MCS's room (not that he deliberately stalked him).

“Su mou has a presumptuous request. I hope Your Highness will grant it.”

“Just say it. If it is within my ability, I will do my best to fulfill it.”

“If Su mou may be so bold, would Your Highness please go to the inner hall.....and request Concubine Jing niang niang....to diagnose and treat a patient....”

“Patient?” Prince Jing’s gaze flickered. “That...patient in your room?”

“Yes.”

Prince Jing frowned, looking a little disgruntled. “Although we’re in the hunting palace and it isn’t difficult for Mother to come over, to diagnose and treat a patient.....don’t we have imperial physicians for that?”

“The imperial physicians can’t treat this patient.” Mei Changsu raised his head, his eyes beseeching him earnestly, “I know that this request is unreasonable, but I have no choice but to ask it of Your Highness. For the sake of my efforts this past year, I hope Your Highness would make this request to Concubine Jing niang niang for me. If she refuses to come, I would not speak of this again.”

Prince Jing pursed his lips and hesitated a while. Since Mei Changsu started to support his ascent, he had made countless contributions, but he never asked for anything. Now that he was kneeling before him, he couldn’t refuse.

“.....Alright. I’ll go in to speak to Mother, but whether or not she comes, it’s up to her.”

“Many thanks, Your Highness.”

Since Prince Jing had agreed, he wasted no time. After putting his attire in order, he entered the inner hall. As it happened, after the bloody events of the past five days, the Liang Emperor didn’t sleep well in the night, constantly waking up, coughing and wheezing. Concubine Jing had just given him some medicine to help me sleep peacefully and was sitting outside the hall calmly observing a parrot, having some time to herself. She was very happy when she saw Prince Jing approaching.

“Why are you here again? You have so many matters to attend to. There’s no need for you to keep coming to pay your respects.” Concubine Jing took her son’s hand, about to lead him into the hall, but stopped when she saw his expression. “What’s wrong?”

“Your son....actually has something to talk to you about.” Prince Jing for a while and said, “To be precise, it’s concerning Mister Su.”

Concubine Jing was slightly taken aback, and hurriedly asked, “What’s wrong with Mister Su?”

“There’s nothing wrong with him. It’s just that he has a strange patient whom he has taken in, a man whose whole body is completely covered in white fur. He would like Mother to examine him.”

“His whole body.....” Concubine Jing’s liquid eyes flashed, and she suddenly shivered, “I see. Wait a while.”

Prince Jing thought that Concubine Jing would at least ask why he didn’t summon the imperial physician. He hadn’t expected her to say nothing, and instead, to personally go in to retrieve her medicine chest and decide to follow him out. He couldn’t help becoming more suspicious, his eyes narrowing.

Concubine Jing walked ahead, unaware of her son’s expression. She walked quickly and soon arrived at her son’s courtyard, which wasn’t very far away. Mei Changsu greeted her in the courtyard. After making his salutations, he led her into his room with Prince Jing following closely behind.

Nie Feng was wrapped in a thick blanket, only half his head exposed, but he was quiet. Prince Jing’s gaze fell on a small bowl on the table that still contained two drops of unconsumed blood. Looking at Mei Changsu’s newly bandaged wrist, his heart suddenly tightened.

He knew that Mei Changsu was in poor health. To bleed himself over and over again like this, it was the same as risking his life. If this patient was merely a stranger, why would he do it?

“Niang niang, how is he?” Mei Changsu couldn’t pay any attention to Prince Jing at that moment. All his focus was directed at Concubine Jing’s fingers on Nie Feng’s pulse. “How deeply has the poison penetrated?”

“It’s not too bad.” Concubine Jing heaved a sigh of long sigh of relief. “It’s not too deep. It’s only penetrated to the third layer. I will apply some (acupuncture) needles on him. This will keep it at bay for about two months. But the poison of the bitter flame is the most unusual poison on earth. My medical skills are insufficient. Besides, he has been poisoned for too long. Countering it will be very difficult.”

“Oh.” Mei Changsu muttered briefly to himself. “Then please apply the needles.”

Concubine Jing looked intensely at him, then without a word, she opened her medicine box and took out a fine silver needle. She sterilized it in the flame and began to perform acupuncture on the patient with full concentration. This treatment seemed to be very complex, taking no less than an hour to apply the needles one by one. There

still wasn't much response from the patient, and Concubine Jing was dripping with perspiration.

"Many thanks for niang niang's generosity. Su mou...."

"It's fine. A physician should have a benevolent heart. There is no need for such words." Concubine Jing smiled as she took the handkerchief he held out to wipe her perspiration. Then she asked tentatively, "You....should know someone who can cure this poison, right?"

"Ng." Mei Changsu nodded calmly. "I will invite him over as soon as possible, but it's quite a long journey, so it'll be a bit of a wait."

"If anything the patient relapses before that physician arrives, don't hesitate to look for me."

Mei Changsu responded quietly in assent, before he remembered to look at Prince Jing.

"It seems that Mother and Mister Su have known each other for quite a while," Prince Jing raised his eyebrows as he looked at the both of them when they finally remembered he was there. "But Mister Su looks younger than me, so he can't be someone who knew Mother before I was born, right?"

Concubine Jing slowly collected her needles and sighed softly. "You are still curious after all...."

"But Mother is still unwilling to speak of it, right?"

Concubine Jing glanced at Mei Changsu, who turned his face aside, shaking his head slightly.

"Mister Su is the son of an old friend. I was previously unaware of his existence. It was a coincidence that we managed to meet."

"Old friend?"

"That's right. Old friend...." Concubine Jing's eyes revealed a complex mix of nostalgia and grief. "At the time, I was still a young girl, following my shifu around to practise medicine. We were being humiliated and bullied by local physicians. If this old friend hadn't passed by at that moment and rescued us, we would have long since been dead and abandoned in a ravine...."

Prince Jing had never heard about this part of his mother's past, and he was immediately moved. "Why has Mother never mentioned that you have such a relationship with Mister Su?"

“Until I met niang niang, I never knew either.” Mei Changsu lowered his head.

“But....this is already in the past. Mother, why were you unwilling to tell me?”

Concubine Jing seemed to expect this question. She smiled sadly and said, “It’s not that I was unwilling to tell you. I just didn’t want to talk about it. That old friend is dead. To speak of it would only make one sad.....”

Seeing his mother’s sadness, although he felt she hadn’t said enough, he couldn’t bear to ask anymore. Turning to face Mei Changsu, he said, “Then this patient.....what does he have to do with Sir?”

“He’s a friend.” Mei Changsu replied succinctly. “A very good friend.”

Xiao Jingyan was at a loss for words. To ask further would be to invade someone else’s privacy. Besides, Mei Changsu had only been his advisor for slightly over a year, so it was natural that he had friends he didn’t know about.

“Jingyan, His Majesty should be awake. Let’s go.” Concubine Jing slowly got up, nodded slightly at Mei Changsu, and walked out first. Though frustrated, Prince Jing could only pick up the medicine chest and follow suit.

Mei Changsu saw them off at the doorway, then turning back, he smiled to comfort Nie Feng. “Fortunately the poison did not penetrate too deeply. You shouldn’t worry about it. Rest and recuperate well. You can count on me for everything. You can trust me, right?”

Nie Feng extended his fur-covered arm and held fast to him, as he made a “hu hu” sound.

“I know.....” Sorrow swept faintly across Mei Changsu’s smile. “You have already endured untold hardships, making your way from Meiling to the imperial capital, hiding to avoid capture or being driven out, just to see Xia Dong jie jie.....I’m sorry. She didn’t come with us this time....but if she knew that you are still alive, her happiness would be indescribable.....Once we get back to the capital, I will quickly arrange for the both of you to meet, okay?”

Nie Feng’s shoulders trembled and he was unresponsive for a while. Then he suddenly shook his head violently.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Mei Changsu hugged him, softly patting his back. “Xia Dong jie jie will not care how much you have changed, as long as you’re alive. Staying alive....to her, that’s her greatest comfort.”

Nie Feng's head slumped down onto Mei Changsu's shoulder, hot liquid dripped from his fur, soaking through his clothes.

"Your life, our brothers fought desperately to preserve it too, right? They gave up their lives so you might live, so you must live well. Of the Juehun Valley Vanguard Battalion, you're the only one to survive. Of the Chiyu Battalion, there's only Wei Zheng and myself left....Of the main battalion's 16 generals, it was by sheer luck that Nie Duo managed to escape. Father Commander, Uncle Nie, Uncle Qi, Uncle Ji....and 70,000 Chiyun souls, each and every one of them lives on in us. No matter how painful, we must bear this responsibility as survivors....." Mei Changsu gently lowered Nie Feng onto the pillow, arranging the quilt around him. "Nie dage, I'm very tired from carrying this. You must help me, okay?"

Nie Feng breathed heavily as he cupped his fist in his palm.

"That's right....Now, sleep. I'll keep you company. Sleep well." Mei Changsu smiled tenderly. Nie Feng looked at him, then suddenly closed his eyes.

Because that wasn't Lin Shu's smile. That wasn't the smile he remembered, the one that was full of exuberance and youthful vigor, the world's most flamboyant smile.

Looking at this Young Commander's transformation after returning from the grave was like looking at his own future. This made him feel pain, not only for himself, but more so for Xia Dong.....

Fei Liu, who went out to play, came back about half an hour later. When he entered, he saw Su gege folding a piece of written paper into a small strip. He thoughtfully went out and brought back a homing pigeon that they had brought from the capital and helped to attach the strip of paper to the small drum tied to the pigeon's leg.

"Let it go. When Uncle Li and the others receive this letter, they will immediately find a way to inform Lin Chen gege to come over."

Fei Liu had just released his hold on the pigeon, but when he heard this, he instinctively grabbed hold of the pigeon that had just spread its wings to fly, clutching it tightly.

"Fei Liu, let it go." Mei Changsu gave him a reproachful look.

"Don't want!"

"Lin Chen gege has to attend to important matters here. He won't have time to tease you, so don't worry."



The youth blinked his big eyes as if he didn't believe it.

“Quickly let it go. If you don't behave, Su gege will be angry.”

The youth pouted and released the pigeon reluctantly, watching it resentfully as it flew swiftly up and disappeared into the horizon without a trace.

“His poison has only penetrated through to the third layer. He'll be much better than me.....” Mei Changsu's gaze fell gently on the person sleeping peacefully on the bed. Using a handkerchief to cover his mouth, he suppressed a low cough as he walked out. Fei Liu ran over to pat him on the back. Seeing the white cloth wrapped around his wrist, he pointed at it and said angrily, “Who?”

“I wasn't careful.”

Mei Changsu couldn't stop coughing, his chest was growing tighter and tighter, and he was starting to feel dizzy. He knew it was bad, and he immediately drew out a small bottle from his pocket with shaking hands, swallowed one of the little red pills inside, and then leaned over and laid down across his table.

Fei Liu remembered that things were very bad every time Su gege took this kind of medicine, and, out of his mind with fear, he circled around him a few times and then suddenly rushed out of the house, crying loudly, “Water buffalo! Water buffalo!”

## CHAPTER 150

### *Confusing Night*

When he heard Fei Liu's voice, Xiao Jingyan had just returned from escorting Consort Jing away, and was just sitting down to go over the name list for the first round of rewards and honours. At first, he thought he had misheard, and he stared blankly for a moment before realizing he was the one being called and rushing out of the room.

The guards in the courtyard were all staring at Fei Liu, obviously wondering what he was yelling about, but Fei Liu ignored them completely, treating them as little better than decoration. When he saw Prince Jing, he pointed behind him and said, "Su gege!"

Prince Jing knew something was wrong and dashed inside. He found Mei Changsu lying motionless on the table, and when he examined him more closely under the light, he realized he was unconscious, his body temperature frighteningly low. He hurriedly picked him up, but there was already someone lying on the bed in the room, and Fei Liu's bed was little more than a mattress on the floor, and so, after a moment of hesitation, he carried him into the main room of his own quarters and ordered for the imperial physician to be summoned immediately.

With a summons from Royal Prince Jing himself, the imperial physician couldn't get there fast enough, but after he had taken his patient's pulse, he was silent for a long time. "His Highness is waiting, have you finished or not?" Lie Zhanying, who was standing to one side, asked impatiently.

"Reporting to Your Highness," the imperial physician bowed, embarrassed. "From the patient's outer appearance, it seems to be a disease of a cold nature, but on detailed examination, his pulse reveals a burning fire in his veins, so the source of his illness must be exceedingly strange indeed.....your servant has never encountered its like, and does not dare to prescribe any medicine before consulting with my colleagues."

"Consulting?" Prince Jing turned to Lie Zhanying. "Go, summon all of the imperial physicians who are here attending the Emperor." Lie Zhanying bowed and was about to leave when a weak voice protested from the bed, "No need...."

Prince Jing rushed over and reached out a hand to support Mei Changsu as he sat up, helping him lean back onto the pillows on the bed.

“I thank Your Highness for his concern. This is only an old illness of many years, and I have already taken medicine, I will be alright after a night’s rest.” Mei Changsu looked around, realized he was not in his own rooms, and began struggling to rise. “I have disturbed Your Highness. It would be better for me to go back, there is a patient in my room....”

“Right now, you yourself are the patient!” Prince Jing held him down unhappily. “Don’t worry, I have already sent people to take care of the patient in your room, and he looks much better than you, so worry about yourself first. You are the son of my mother consort’s old friend, if anything happened to you, what would I say to Mother?”

Mei Changsu had only struggled for a moment, but his heart was already pounding and sweat was breaking out over his forehead. He knew his situation was not optimistic, and so didn’t dare struggle any further, afraid that, if he deteriorated, there would be no one to take care of Nie Feng. But his illness always worsened after midnight, and no one could predict how it would affect him, so he was worried about sleeping in Prince Jing’s rooms.

After all, there were secrets hidden in his heart that even Meng Zhi did not know completely.....

“Mister Su does not need to mind,” Lie Zhanying had already been feeling grateful towards Mei Changsu over the matter of saving Wei Zheng, and from their interactions in the recent few days, he had developed an even greater sense of respect for him, and so now he hurried to reassure him. “Our Highness is always like this. Before, when we were in difficult situations on the battlefield, we not only shared beds, even our clothes and food had to be shared from one person to the next. Stay here and rest tonight, and tomorrow I will have someone bring another bed over to the Western House, and you can move back over then.”

Originally, arranging for a bed to be brought over for Mei Changsu even in the middle of the night was no difficult matter, but Prince Jing felt that Mei Changsu had some other reason for being in such a hurry to leave, and he was growing suspicious. It was not as if he had never seen the sickly qilin prodigy lying ill in bed, but previously, no matter how frail he appeared, it had only been a physical weakness, whereas this time, it was obvious that Mei Changsu’s state of mind was very unsteady as well, and Prince Jing did not believe that this unease was only due to concern over their ranks as lord and servant.

“Mister, please lie down, I keep a couch in my outer rooms anyway, and often sleep there if official business keeps me up until the early hours, so you will not cause

any trouble by resting here,” Prince Jing said decisively, then turned to Lie Zhanying. “Even if the imperial physician did not prescribe medicine, he must have a little food, there is still some congee in the boxes I brought back from the inner palace, bring it over for Mister.”

“Yes.”

Prince Jing’s gaze turned back to the bed, but Mei Changsu had lowered his head, and he could not clearly see the expression on the strategist’s face. “Rest well, there are still some documents I have not finished reading, so I will not stay to keep you company.” Mei Changsu was eager for him to leave, and hurriedly bowed from the bed to see him out. Soon, the food Consort Jing had prepared, which consisted of different kinds of congee and exquisite little dishes, was brought in. Mei Changsu ate a few bites, but was preoccupied with worrying about Nie Feng. He sent Fei Liu over several times to check on him, but the youth only reported that he was still sleeping, and so Mei Changsu finally relaxed a little.

Prince Jing was going through the military audit records in the outer room, and before he knew it, he had worked late into the night. His eyes were drooping, and he was just about to stand up and stretch when Lie Zhanying came rushing out of the inner room looking worried and saying, “Your Highness, Mister Su doesn’t look good.”

“Not good?” Prince Jing didn’t wait for an answer but strode quickly to the bed, where Mei Changsu was tossing fitfully, his cheeks flushed red, his breathing quick and irregular. When he felt his limbs, they were cold and rigid as ice. Frightened, he said quickly, “Hurry and summon the imperial physicians, bring them all here, and tell them to have their consultation.”

“Yes!”

After Lie Zhanying ran out, Prince Jing bent over and examined Mei Changsu closely, but the more he looked, the more frightened he became. He knew nothing about medicine, and so, after adjusting the patient’s blankets and feeling his forehead for his temperature, he could only sit down helplessly onto the chair beside the bed, keeping watch silently. After a long moment, he suddenly realized that Fei Liu, who was kneeling on the floor with his head resting on the bed, had opened his eyes and was staring at him with a hopeful expression, as if waiting for him to come up with some idea, and a helpless grief welled up in his heart.

“I’m sorry, Fei Liu.” Xiao Jingyan patted the youth’s shoulder, and the youth did not dodge away. “I will do my best, but I truly do not know what I can do....”

“Can!” Fei Liu looked at him, his face full of unwavering hope. “You can!”

On the bed, Mei Changsu opened his eyes involuntarily, and in the midst of the dancing lights and colours in his vision, he tried to focus on a single point, which gradually enlarged until it resolved into a face.

“Father.....”

Xiao Jingyan did not hear clearly, and he leaned closer, “What do you want?”

Mei Changsu’s body trembled, his pale lips pressed together tightly, and he shook his head.

“Get up!” Fei Liu pulled at him. “Su gege, get up!”

Prince Jing quickly stopped him, saying, “Stop moving him, he’s ill.”

“Every time!” Fei Liu gestured. “Always gets up!”

“You mean.....” Prince Jing suddenly understood, and he lifted Mei Changsu’s upper body into a sitting position, leaning him against his own body. Immediately, he saw that his breathing was indeed improving a little. He couldn’t help feeling a surge of relief as he cried, “Guards!”

“Here!”

“Bring more pillows!”

“Yes!”

The pillows were quickly brought, and Prince Jing supported Mei Changsu as he instructed the guards to arrange the pillows into a circle on the bed, supporting the patient so that he could lie in a half-seated position. Just as he was getting settled, the imperial physicians arrived.

But the conclusion of this consultation was not much more helpful than the first physician’s decision, and though the old men spent a long time in discussion and finally produced a prescription, they only dared to say, “Try it and see.”

Although Prince Jing knew that the physicians of the palace had always been conservative, preferring to err on the side of caution rather than make any mistakes, and really could not be expected to have many ideas when faced with diagnostic dilemmas such as this, his worry and anxiety got the better of him and he couldn’t help muttering, “Useless!”, so that they stood there even more frightened than before, not daring to speak.

Fortunately, Mei Changsu was looking a little better ever since he had sat up, and even had occasional moments of clarity. He opened his eyes during one of these and

said to Prince Jing, "I'm alright," but after he said this, he fell into unconsciousness once again, and everyone could tell at a glance that he was really not alright.

"Never mind, never mind, all of you may take your leave." Prince Jing dismissed the imperial physicians, annoyed, and began pacing restlessly around the room. On the bed, Mei Changsu was mumbling again, and Lie Zhanying, who had taken up watch beside him, leaned closer to listen, and suddenly his face froze.

"What is it? What did he say?"

"It wasn't very clear, I probably misheard." Lie Zhanying scratched his head.

"What did you hear?"

"I heard.....Jingyan, don't be afraid."

Prince Jing stared at him. "He told me not to be afraid?"

"That's why I said I misheard," Lie Zhanying lowered his head in embarrassment. "Mister Su has never addressed Your Highness by name."

"That's right," Prince Jing sat down dazedly beside the bed, staring at the person lying beside him. "Why would he call me by name....."

"Fei Liu....." Mei Changsu spoke again, this time with unusual clarity, making everyone in the room jump. The youth threw himself over to the bed and grabbed his hand tightly, saying in a loud voice, "Here!"

"Go and see the big gege....."

Fei Liu disappeared and returned before Prince Jing and Lie Zhanying had even realized who the big gege was, and he reported, "Very good! Sleeping!"

Mei Changsu let out a light sigh, coughed a few times, and, seeming much more awake, turned to look at Prince Jing and said apologetically, "I have truly troubled Your Highness this time, to have you keeping watch over me all night, it is not my place...."

Prince Jing couldn't help letting out a light sigh as well. "You're being polite again, looks like you really are feeling better. If you hadn't improved by sunrise, I was planning to go to Mother Consort again."

Lie Zhanying went over to the window. By this time, the sky towards the east was growing pale, and dawn was near. He remembered Prince Jing had not yet slept, and went back over to urge, "Your Highness, since Mister is awake, you should rest as well. I will keep watch here, and make sure nothing happens."

Prince Jing saw that Mei Changsu had fallen asleep again, his breathing much steadier, and, feeling reassured, he got up and returned to the outer room where he lay down onto the couch fully dressed and went to sleep. But he only dozed until the second watch of the morning<sup>266</sup> before getting up to wash, and then went over to the inner palace to pay his morning's greetings.

The Emperor's energy was still poor, and he had not yet gotten out of bed. When Prince Jing began making his routine reports, he stopped him halfway and said, "You may make the decisions, you do not need to defer to us." After saying this, he rolled over and went back to sleep.

Consort Jing gestured furtively to her son, beckoning for him to follow her into the outer part of the hall, where she said, "His Majesty did not sleep well last night, next time, don't come so early, wait until noon at least."

"Yes. How was Mother's rest?"

"Don't worry, although His Majesty only dozed lightly all night, he did not wake fully, so the serving girls took turns caring for him, and I did not need to come attend to him myself, so I am not tired." Consort Jing smiled at her son. "Look at you, did you sleep at all last night?"

Prince Jing shook his head. He did not tell her about Mei Changsu's bout of illness, but instead asked a seemingly unrelated question. "Mother, yesterday you said Mister Su was the son of your old friend, what was that old friend's name?" Consort Jing had not expected this question, and was taken aback for a moment. She did not know whether Prince Jing had first asked Mei Changsu this same question before coming to ask her, or whether he planned to go straight to Mei Changsu after asking her in order to compare their answers, but no matter which, the chance of two people casually making up the same name without deciding on their answer together beforehand was really too low....

"Mother, you would not have forgotten the name of your saviour, would you?" Prince Jing's voice was calm as he asked again, "What was his name?"

Consort Jing hesitated for a moment, and the shinan tree of her courtyard flashed across her mind as she answered quietly, "His name was Mei Shinan."

"Mei Shinan..." Prince Jing repeated, then asked, "Which shi, and which nan?"

Consort Jing gazed at him steadily, feeling, for the first time in her life, as if her son was slipping out of her grasp a little, and she was lost in thought for a long moment.

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<sup>266</sup> 7-9am

“Mother?”

“Oh...yes...shi as in shi tou,<sup>267</sup> nan as in nan mu...<sup>268</sup>.”

“I understand.” Prince Jing bowed quickly. “If Mother has no other orders for me, I will take my leave.”

Consort Jing felt something stir in her heart, and she grabbed Prince Jing by the arm, saying, “Wait.”

Prince Jing halted obligingly and said quietly, “Does Mother have something to say to me?”

Consort Jing gazed at him for a long time, her eyes growing a little wet, but finally, she shook her head, distressed, and said, “Go.....go ask him then....”

Prince Jing bowed silently and walked out of the inner palace. On the way back to his rooms, he did not delay in the slightest, but walked into his courtyard so quickly that he gave the guards a fright.

“Your Highness, you’ve returned....” Everyone bowed hurriedly, but Prince Jing ignored them all, rushing straight into the main rooms.

Mei Changsu was looking much better. He had just finished a bowl of congee and was handing the empty bowl to Fei Liu, who stood off to one side, but when he saw Prince Jing rushing into the room, his expression turned to surprise.

“What has happened, Your Highness?”

“I have a question for Mister,” Prince Jing stood before the bed, cutting straight to the point. “What was the name of your esteemed father?”

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<sup>267</sup> rock

<sup>268</sup> cedar



## CHAPTER 151

### *Bewilderment*

"My father's name?" After Mei Changsu got over his surprise, he immediately understood the purpose behind his question, and his expression changed.

"Since your esteemed father was my mother's benefactor, I should also know his name, shouldn't I?"

"In that case, Your Highness....why don't you ask the imperial consort niang niang?"

"I've already asked her". Prince Jing did nothing to hide this fact. "I'm now asking you Sir."

Mei Changsu slowly lowered his head. He clenched the hand beneath the quilt tightly into a fist before slowly releasing it, his complexion pale as if it was translucent.

"Is there any difficulty in answering the question Sir?" Prince Jing bent forward, trying to see his eyes clearly. "Is your esteemed father's name also a secret?"

"How could it be?" Mei Changsu laughed weakly, finally raising both his eyes. "My father's name, the first character was Shi, the second character Nan."

Prince Jing's body shook, his face almost as pale as Mei Changsu's. It took tremendous effort for him to hold himself in check. "Can you....say it again?"

"My father, Mei Shinan...."

"Which Shi, and which Nan?" Prince Jing squeezed this question through clenched teeth, as if making a final attempt to hold himself in check.

"Shi from shi tou and Nan from nan shu." Mei Changsu observed Prince Jing's facial expression and knew that he had made the right gamble this time. However, he didn't feel the least bit at ease in his heart. On the contrary, it was heavy, as if something heavy was pressing down on his chest, causing a dull pain.

Prince Jing swayed slightly, then staggered two steps back, closing his eyes heavily. For him, after going through the confusing events of the night before, the thought that had flashed through his mind was so sudden, so bizarre that he wondered if he hadn't gone mad. But the cold and succinct words spoken to him just now. Turned out that he was well and truly mad.

So mad that he would seek the soul of that person who would never return, so mad that he put two completely different persons together, thinking they were the same.

But in the end, it was just a disappointment that was as cold as snow.

Lie Zhanying, who was standing timidly at the doorway withdrew a little, somewhat fearful of the atmosphere in the room, but the news he had in hand was important and had to be reported immediately.

“Your Highness....Commander Meng’s messenger has arrived from the capital....”

Prince Jing stood silent and still for a moment, as if trying to control the hot and cold emotions that were waging war within him. When he had finally taken control of himself, he turned around and walked out without a word, but because his emotions were in such turmoil, he didn't notice as Foya slinked past him, his tail wagging as he threw himself into Mei Changsu's arms.

Meng Zhi's messenger stood silently at the courtyard entrance looking travel-worn. As soon as he saw Prince Jing, he immediately fell to his knees and raised the document case he was holding out to him. Taking it, Prince Jing briefly inspected the seal then said, “Follow me in.”

“Yes!”

As soon as he heard that news had arrived from the imperial capital, even though he was tired, the Liang Emperor immediately got up and put on his coat to Prince Jing on the couch. The messenger knelt by the door, waiting to answer any questions.

The Liang Emperor spread the letter out to read. “Good! I'm relieved.” The lines on his face slowly relaxed. “Commander Meng acted fast. The imperial guards we left behind are back in his control. The palace defence has also been reorganized, so we can return to the capital anytime.....Eh!”

“What's wrong?”

“....Xia Jiang has escaped from prison.....”

Prince Jing's eyebrows leapt up. “How did that happen?”

“It happened during the chaos of Commander Meng’s confrontation with Prince Yu after returning to the capital. An apology from the Ministry of Justice for losing the prisoner was included in the letter.” The Liang Emperor’s expression turned very gloomy. “This traitor has disappointed me. Forgiving him would be more difficult than forgiving Prince Yu. Immediately issue a warrant for arrest. He must be captured, dead or alive!”

“Yes.”

“You’ll have to work hard again. Make the arrangements today. We return tomorrow.”

Prince Jing knew that the Liang Emperor was eager to return to the capital so he said, “Father Emperor, please rest assured. Your son will immediately make arrangements to ensure we depart tomorrow.”

“Good, good.” The Liang Emperor smiled at him with affection, “Since we’re returning to the capital soon, find some time to think about what reward you would most like to have.”

Prince Jing said impassively, “There’s no need to think too much about it. Father Emperor will reward your son as you wish. If your son thinks too much, that would be overstepping his duty.”

The Liang Emperor looked intensely at him, then lifted his head and laughed out loud, looking very happy. “I like your undemanding nature. It’s just like your mother. Hurry along then. There’s no need for you to come in again to pay your respects.”

After Prince Jing kowtowed and took his leave, the Liang Emperor leaned against the side of the couch, contemplated a while, then said, “Summon Prince Ji.”

Gao Zhan quickly went to deliver the order. As this place was not like the palace in the imperial capital, Prince Ji very quickly arrived and made his salutations before the couch.

“Sit down. There’s something I would like to discuss with you.” The Liang Emperor pointed at the low chair next to him. “Did you know that Prince Yu initiated this rebellion?”

“This younger brother knows. Xu Anmo has already confessed. Besides, other than Prince Yu, the rest of the princes are here with the royal party. The capital....has also once always been partial to Prince Yu....”

“Jinghuan has bitterly disappointed me. I once had such hopes for him, all in vain. But what about him? He had no strategy, no resolve, and made a mess of things. As

far as the rebellion goes, I can no longer put up with it.” The Liang Emperor’s expression was full of bitterness, and his fingers massaged his forehead as if he was feeling unwell. “But ultimately, he is still my son. No matter how I think about it, my heart still aches....”

Prince Ji hurriedly soothed him, “Huang xiong, things have already reached this point. It’s better to take care of the dragon body first.....”

“Let’s not talk about this.” The Liang Emperor sat up and looked at his younger brother. “Now that the Crown Prince has been deposed and Prince Yu is guilty of an unpardonable crime, who do you think should be the future heir apparent?”

This greatly startled Prince Ji and he bent forward saying, “This decision belongs to Your Majesty alone. This brother dare not comment.”

“I’m just asking within the family. Must you be so nervous?” The Liang Emperor extended his arm to pull him up. “What do you think of Prince Jing?”

Prince Ji considered a moment and slowly replied, “Prince Jing....His strengths lie in his benevolence and filial piety. He’s sincere, loyal and brave. He can be....a role model for all princes....”

The Liang Emperor looked out the window with intensity. After a long while, he heaved a great sigh as if from deep within his chest. “Actually, Prince Jing is not my most outstanding son....don’t you think so?”

Prince Ji was trembling with fear and trepidation, and dared not even breath.

“However, Jingyan has Jingyan’s own strengths. He knows how to exercise restraint. On this point, he is different from....from Jingyu. Perhaps it has something to do with his mother’s nature.” The Liang Emperor didn’t really seem to expect a response from Prince Ji, his gaze remaining fixed where it was. “When Prince Jing hurried back to rescue the royal party, the imperial guards were already greatly weakened. The hunting palace was actually already in the palm of hands, but he just returned the military seal without a word. At that time, that took me by surprise....”

“Surprise?”

“I thought he would ask for something, or at least hint at something.”

Prince Ji smiled reluctantly. “Jingyan doesn’t seem to be that kind of person.”

“After we return to the capital, I will reclaim full control of all matters, but when I mentioned this to Jingyan just now, he seemed to have no intention whatsoever of delaying the return.” The Liang Emperor moved closer to Prince Ji. Lowering his voice, he said, “Tell me, do you think he has ambitions for the Eastern Palace?”

Prince Ji was a little taken aback and smiled awkwardly. “Not just Jingyan. Any royal prince who says he doesn’t have ambitions for the Eastern Palace would be lying.”

“Oh?” The Liang Emperor glanced at him. “You’re also a royal prince. Do you have such ambitions?”

This time, Prince Ji smiled easily. “This brother is not a royal prince. This brother is a royal younger brother. That’s different.”

The Liang Emperor chuckled, enthusiastically patting his younger brother’s shoulders. “You, you were born a little too late. But because of you, I have someone to talk things over with. Now wipe away your sweat and have some snacks. Why are you so nervous? Don’t I love or indulge you enough?”

Prince Ji chuckled along, then picking up a piece of pastry from the plate, he put it in his mouth and after chewing twice, he said praisingly, “This is the handiwork of the imperial consort niang niang right? Huang xiong hasn’t been willing to give this to this brother so I have to come here to eat it.”

“Alright alright, pack it up and bring it back if you like. The imperial consort is still with me so I don’t have to worry about not being able to eat (of her cooking).” The Liang Emperor smiled from ear to ear, but he signaled Gao Zhan with his eyes, saying, “Summon Prince Huai and Prince Xu.”

Prince Ji looked up distractedly and said, “Then this brother will first....”

“There’s no need for you to rush. Continue eating.” The smile on the Liang Emperor’s face gradually subsided, and became solemn. “Didn’t you say that all royal princes have ambition? I would like to hear what they think.”

Prince Ji almost choked, and he hurriedly swallowed a mouthful of tea.

It wasn’t long before Prince Huai and Prince Xu entered. When they had paid their respects, the Liang Emperor smiled as he invited them to help themselves to the snacks, but before they could swallow them, he suddenly asked, “If Prince Jing becomes the Crown Prince, does any of you have objections?”

Prince Ji immediately passed the pitiful princes each a cup of tea. After choking and coughing for a while, they both knelt prostrate, not daring to say much.

“Why? Do you have objections?”

“Your sons dare not.....” Prince Xu was a little bolder. He composed himself and said, “There’s nothing to say against Prince Jing. If Father Emperor thinks he is suitable, your sons will think he is suitable.”

“There’s no need to mention the Crown Prince and Prince Yu. If Prince Jing doesn’t become the crown prince, I would have to choose between the both of you....” The Liang Emperor looked intensely at both his sons. “Do the both of you harbour such ambitions?”

“Your son...is incompetent and asks only to be able to perform his filial duty before Father Emperor, nothing else.” Prince Xu kowtowed after his profession, and Prince Huai quickly followed along.

“But....” The Liang Emperor drew out his words, “You’re both older and should rank ahead of Prince Jing, right?”

Prince Xu choked. He quickly tugged at the scholarly Prince Huai who then stammered, “Your sons....are not the sons of the first wife. We are also not that different in age. So, Father Emperor.....choose impartially based on ability and virtue....”

“That’s a good one, to choose based on ability and virtue.” The Liang Emperor smiled mildly. “If one considers filial piety, Prince Jing is fully deserving. I am relieved that the both of you have such an open mind. Come, get up. I called you here to have some snacks and thought I’d ask by the way. Come, eat, eat. I’m also tired. Once you have finished eating, go in and pay your respects to the imperial consort.”

They two princes clearly understood why they had been ordered to pay respects to the imperial consort. But although Prince Huai and Prince Xu had never involved themselves in court politics, they had not lost the ability to judge a situation and had long since anticipated this day so they weren’t surprised. So they hurriedly had a few snacks, bowed to the Liang Emperor who had fallen asleep, then entered the inner room as ordered.

Prince Ji quietly withdrew and sent men to prepare his horse, intending to leave the palace to relax. Just as he walked through the door, he spotted Prince Jing walking by with a group of civil and military officials in the distance, probably making arrangements for the royal party to return. Observing his steady and confident manner, he could see the dignity of a ruler.

“It looks like the country is finally his.....” mumbled Prince Ji to himself. Suddenly, he remembered the one with the heroic bearing who rose high, the eldest son who commanded the people’s support, and he couldn’t stop the complex feelings surging in his heart, unable to define exactly what they were.

“Greetings Prince Ji....” A voice suddenly sounded from behind, startling him. He turned around.

Standing before him was a scholar dressed in a green jacket and white fur coat, a thin figure with a sickly look. At one glance, he looked frail and harmless, but in all the world, he was the one person nobody dared underestimate.

“That’s right. The Qilin talent is also his....” said Prince Ji to himself as his heart palpitated. He had never had any direct contact with Mei Changsu, but he recognized him. There wasn’t anyone of any standing in the capital today who didn’t recognize this Mister Su.

“Is Royal Uncle heading out?”

“Yes. Is Mister Su feeling unwell?”

“Thank you for asking. After sleeping for a day, I just wanted to get up and walk a little. I heard we’re returning to the capital tomorrow?”

“That’s right. Once we’re back in the imperial capital, everything will be decided. Sir can also be more at ease.” The royal uncle smiled faintly.

Mei Changsu smiled too, his eyes soft. “Actually, His Highness Prince Jing has been meaning to say thank you to Your Highness. It’s just that with one thing after another, it hasn’t been too convenient.”

“Thank me for what?” Prince Ji laughed as he said, “I’ve always looked at the heart, not the person. Why thank me?”

Mei Changsu looked at him for a long while, then slowly bowed down. “His Highness wants to thank Royal Uncle for rescuing Ting Sheng. If it wasn’t for Royal Uncle’s compassion back then, he wouldn’t have existed in this world....”

Prince Ji’s body trembled all over, his smile gradually fading, as if there was something bubbling within that threatened to spill out, causing lines of sorrow and grief to ripple on his forehead.

“Even more so, this is not something to thank me for.....He’s family. Aren’t we all each other’s flesh and blood?”

With these words, this prince who had lived an easy and leisurely life turned around, his sleeves fluttering in the mountain wind, his sad and bowed back retreating into the distance.

## CHAPTER 152

### *Return to the Capital*

The Spring Hunt was originally meant to return to the capital on the 15th day of the 4th month, but due to the chaos caused by the Qingli army, it was delayed to late April. Only a few hundred of the three thousand imperial guards who first escorted them remained, and a few more imperial clan members and court officials didn't make it after that last bloody night. Throughout the Liang Emperor's life, he had experienced a rebellion of this scale twice. Previously, he was the one to launch the offensive, while this time, he was the target. Both times, the victory was his. The first time, he had won the throne. The second time, he wasn't sure what he had won.

As for the great upheaval that happened thirteen years ago, the "Prince Qi's Rebellion" that ended with the blood of tens of thousands of people, thinking about it now, there was actually no real sword that came at him. This sense was especially strong as the old emperor's trembling gaze took in the remnants of the imperial guard around him.

Outside the walls of the imperial capital waiting to welcome the Emperor back were the ministers and court officials who had remained behind. No, there was no Prince Yu. Meng Zhi immediately led two thousand imperial guards to set up defence around the Liang Emperor. The Jicheng army withdrew from the capital, making camp outside to wait for their reward before returning to their base station.

So far, the Liang Emperor could only keep calm and prepare to face the storm that had been brewing along the way back.

Unlike Xia Jiang, who had fled the capital, Prince Yu hadn't planned on escaping, nor did he escape. Because they were not capable of fleeing, to leave the riches and glory of the capital behind, without which they wouldn't be able to survive.

Two days after the Liang Emperor's return, Prince Yu's entire family became the second royal family of the current dynasty to live in the "Han Zihao" cell.<sup>269</sup> One wonders that as he lay shackled and curled up on the cold floor in his prison uniform,

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<sup>269</sup> cell marked with the chinese character for "cold"



if he thought of his eldest brother who never gave in even though he was suppressed with heavy shackles.

Because of Imperial Consort Jing's earnest request, Empress Yan wasn't branded as one of the traitors, but as one with authority who remained in the capital, she didn't make any move to stop Prince Yu and even issued an imperial edict to suppress the imperial guards. The three words "I was forced" were not enough to absolve her of all the charges against her. Punishment was unavoidable. As atonement, Yan Que issued a memorial to the Emperor, requesting him to abolish the honors and titles conferred to the Yan clan for successive generations. For unknown reasons, the Liang Emperor didn't allow it, and after a while, this matter was left forgotten without an echo. When the court held a hunting ritual at the beginning of the 5th month to confer rewards to the younger generation of the nobility, Yan Yujin still received his portion. Regarding the preservation of the Yan family name, many of his old friends and former students, and all the court officials who secretly supported him were greatly relieved, for Yan Que clearly had no affiliation with Prince Yu's faction. In the end, a total of 27 names were listed as Prince Yu's accomplices, only two of them ranked third grade or higher. Although the other ministers who remained behind were fined for not thoroughly looking into the rebellion, the blood that was expected to bathe the streets of the capital was far less than expected.

That old case, covered in dust for 13 years, almost forgotten by people, it was inevitable that many old court officials would recall their deepest memories one by one and compare, secretly lamenting that the passing of time could soften even the most ruthless iron fist.

But for Prince Yu who was at the centre of the storm, he didn't feel that his father showed him any mercy at all. He was very regretful, regretful that he so easily trusted that Qilin talent, regretful that he allowed Xia Jiang to instigate him to burn his boats. But at the same time, he was also very clear that even if he had to do it over again, he would still make the same choices, because the ambition and obsession for the throne had already seeped deep into his blood and bone marrow, becoming his main motivation and goal in life. He could never be like Prince Xu and Prince Huai, lying at the foot of another brother, waiting for his praise.

Now that he had lost, it could only end in death. But this death is different from that of his eldest brother back then. He knew that he would forever be exiled and cut off from the imperial family. No matter how many 13 years may pass, no one would want to vindicate him.

This is not only because he had suffered no injustice that needed to be redressed, but also because he wasn't that unmatched Xiao Jingyu who smiled at the world.

There will never be a second Xiao Jingyu in the world. Even Prince Jing, who virtually held the Eastern Palace in the palm of his hand could only hope to stand in his shadow.

“Have you managed to track down Xia Jiang?”

In the Su Residence, the visiting Meng Zhi shook his head regretfully. “He’s a sly old fox. I still blame myself for not checking on him....”

“Xia Jiang will be captured sooner or later. I’m not anxious,” Mei Changsu sighed and said, “What I’m anxious about is Xia Dong jie jie. His Highness had already requested for her pardon. When will she be released?”

Meng Zhi already knew about Nie Feng by now, so of course he understood Mei Changsu’s urgency, but he needed to be aware of the current situation in the palace. Trying to placate him, Meng Zhi said, “Calm yourself down first. She has only been granted pardon for committing a capital offence. A lighter sentence doesn’t mean no sentence. Since Xia Jiang defected and escaped, His Majesty has been very angry with the whole of Xuanjing Bureau, so how could it be so easy to get her released? If Prince Jing exerts too much force, it may once again arouse His Majesty’s suspicions. Isn’t it because of this that you haven’t told Prince Jing that Nie Feng is waiting? What’s more, Nie Feng has already heard you explaining the cause and effect from beginning to end, so he isn’t worried, as long as Xia Dong remains unharmed. Waiting a month or two is akin to facing some setbacks on our road to success.”

Mei Changsu already knew in his heart the truth of these arguments. He sighed softly and did not reply. Turning to look at the graceful figure in the room, he said, “Gong Yu, you can stop what you’re doing already. Go and get some rest.”

Gong Yu, who was behind a muslin screen fumigating the room with an elaborate incense burner, lowered her head when she heard this, her cheeks blushing red clouds as she whispered, “I want to fumigate all around the room so that Chief can sleep better at night.”

“It’s already very good,” said Mei Changsu warmly. “I’ve said before, you’re not my maid, so there’s no need to serve me like this.”

Seeing how flushed Gong Yu was, Meng Zhi hurriedly smiled and said, “Has Gong gu niang<sup>270</sup> moved into Su Residence? The house feels different from usual.”

“Commander Meng must be teasing me. Li dage and the rest are still in charge of the place. I wouldn’t dare to meddle.” Gong Yu began walking daintily out of the room, but about five steps away from Mei Changsu, she stopped. Hesitating awhile, she took two steps towards him, lowered her head and said, “Gong Yu overhead that Chief is facing some difficulty and thought of a plan. I’m not sure if it’ll help....”

“Are you referring to the matter concerning Xia Dong?”

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<sup>270</sup> polite term for a young lady

“Yes.....”

“Why don’t you tell us your plan?”

“Gong Yu’s has some rough knowledge of a disguise technique. Although it’s impossible to conceal it from someone for a long time or completely stand in for another person, the prison is poorly lit. Everyday, there’s at most only one old jailer who makes the rounds. Suppose it’s possible to remain concealed for a few days, then they may never find out....”

With Mei Changsu’s kind of intelligence, he immediately understood after hearing it. “What you mean is for us to bring you to the Sky Prison and exchange you with Xia Dong for a while?”

“Yes. General Nie and Nie furen<sup>271</sup> have such a deep affection for each other, I can imagine how they would like to meet each other as soon as possible....But when Nie furen can be released is still uncertain, so it would be better for me to take her place for a few days so they can meet at least once and speak to each other....”

Mei Changsu looked down and pondered for a while. Then he asked slowly, “Are you sure?”

“Gong Yu is confident that she won’t be exposed.”

“But your height is different from Xia Dong’s.”

“I’m just a little shorter than her. But I have special shoes that can make me a little taller, so it’ll be about the same.”

“Your plan is feasible....as long as Xia Dong isn’t summoned for interrogation during that brief period of time, we should be able to pull it off....” Mei Changsu fixed his gaze on her. “But if you enter and take her place in Sky Prison, you’ll have to suffer some hardship.”

With him looking at her in that manner, Gong Yu felt her heart beat a lot faster. In a soft voice, she said, “As long as Gong Yu can share in Chief’s difficulties, it will not be suffering.....”

“That’s great,” Meng Zhi clasped his hands together and smiled, “You keep worrying about this matter. It worries me. Gong guniang’s strategy is pretty good. Even if it’s Sky Prison, it’s possible to find an excuse to enter and inspect the place, so let’s just do it. I’ll make the arrangements. You don’t have to bother about anything.”

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<sup>271</sup> Mrs Nie (Nie’s wife)

A faint smile flitted across Mei Changsu's face. He said warmly to Gong Yu, "I'm sorry to have to cause you such great inconvenience. Go and prepare early, then listen to the Commander General's arrangements."

"Yes." Gong Yu pursed her cherry lips, an expression of great joy flashed through her eyes. After bending forward to wish him well, she slowly walked out.

Meng Zhi craned his neck to look at her retreating back, then turned to look at Mei Changsu. Raising his eyebrows, he said, "Xiao Shu, I'm considered a very thick person, but even I can tell...."

"It's better that you continue to remain thick," said Mei Changsu coldly. "Does the Commander General have a lot of idle time now? Prince Jing doesn't have time to manage the Capital Patrol now and has asked you to find a suitable partner for Ouyang. Have you done it?"

"I've recommended a few. Prince Jing thinks Zhu Shouchun is not bad. He was my deputy commander, an honest and reliable man." Meng Zhi moved his head closer and lowered his voice. "There's more news. The inner court has already issued a decree to the Astrological Bureau to divine a few auspicious days. This news will probably spread across the city in two days."

"Are you referring to auspicious days for the investiture of the Crown Prince?" Mei Changsu smiled faintly. "This wasn't unexpected."

"Although it's not unexpected, it's still a happy occasion. You should be happy, that step by step, you're approaching what you have wished for these many years." Meng Zhi patted him on the shoulder. "His Majesty has been ill recently so he hasn't been to court. Once the Crown Prince is invested, it would justify Prince Jing running the country. All yours years of hardship and suffering, wasn't it for this? Why are you in such low spirits?"

Mei Changsu remained silent, turning his head to look out the window. Seeing Li Gang walking quickly towards them from across the courtyard, obviously bringing some news, he narrowed his eyes.

"Chief, a pigeon from Qianzhou brought news...."

"Come in and speak."

"Yes." Li Gang entered, cupped his fist and said, "Reporting to Chief, Xie Yu is dead."

Shocked by this news, Meng Zhi blurted, "How did he die?"

“The authorities concluded that it was an accident. He was serving out his sentence in a quarry when falling rocks from a slope crushed him to death.”

“Such a coincidence?” Meng Zhi rubbed his forehead in a daze. “But when I think of all the sins he had committed, this kind of death is too good for him.”

“It might be too good for him, but he’s more useful dead than alive.” Mei Changsu’s eyes flashed ruthlessly. “Xia Jiang committed treason, the old emperor is dying and the new Crown Prince is high in prestige. Now is the best time to seek a retrial of the old Chiyan case, but we just lacked the right opportunity.”

Meng Zhi’s heart leapt in his chest and he asked, “You mean....”

“Xie Yu is someone who greatly valued his life. Having been released from capital punishment, he would never willingly revive the old case, which is why it was useless for him to be alive. The opportunity I need is in the hands of Grand Princess Liyang. It’s only after his death that his handwritten confession can be revealed.”

“I understand what you mean. But isn’t it a bit too soon?” Meng Zhi asked this anxiously. “Prince Jing hasn’t even been invested. I think it’s better to let the dust settle first.”

Mei Changsu glanced at him and couldn’t help but laugh. “Meng dage, have you forgotten that we got this news from a homing pigeon? Xie Yu was a convict, so news of his death would be transmitted slowly via post horse with no urgency. By the time Grand Princess Liyang receives this news from Qianzhou, it will be another one to two months, and the time would be just about right.”

“Aiya!” Meng Zhi hit his head. “That’s right. I’m not very detailed in my thinking. Nobody can match your ingenious mind.”

“Things must remain calm and stable these coming few months. Prince Jing’s status is different now. He has to work harder attending to court affairs. Fortunately, after these two years of revision, there are many capable officials in court so the situation is quite good.” The corners of Mei Changsu’s lips lifted slightly, and his face held a look of relief. “His implementation of plans to transform famine-struck regions into fertile land was done so beautifully, who would dare to say that His Highness Prince Jing is not good at handling civil affairs?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Meng Zhi said, “This might sound strange, but he’s like you now. He obviously has so much to be happy about, but he still looks like he’s in low spirits. You’re down because of the poison in Nie Feng. What reason does he have to be down?”

“You should put yourself in his shoes. The responsibilities he is carrying are now getting heavier and heavier, and this would inevitably wear him down.” Mei Changsu

sighed regretfully. "I have you all to confide in. Who does he have? Court officials, military generals, advisors....Although Consort Jing niang niang could help him to alleviate some of his worries, they are still separated by palace rules and prohibitions."

After hearing him say this, Meng Zhi was stunned for quite a while. He was dispirited, and wanted to say something, but after glancing at the melancholy on Mei Changsu's face, he was unable to say it.

"Chief," Zhen Ping's voice suddenly sounded from the doorway. "General Nie is awake."

Mei Changsu suddenly smiled from ear to ear. Grabbing Meng Zhi's arm, he said, "Come, let's go keep Nie dage company. Wei Zheng has been staying with him. Let's all go over. He'll definitely be very happy to see us!"

This rarely seen cheerfulness suddenly disconcerted Meng Zhi, as if he was seeing once again the silver-robed young general whose bright smiling face called out, "Come! Let's look for Nie dage for an archery match!" But it was only for a split second. The scene before him became clear again, and there was only that pale face with the vague smile without any trace of the past.

"Xiao Shu," The Commander General of the imperial guard grabbed hold of his shoulder and blurted without thinking, "I think....let Prince Jing know?"

## CHAPTER 153

### *Encounter*

The Shangshu<sup>272</sup> of the Ministry of Justice, Cai Quan, had been very busy recently. Though the Xuanjing Bureau still existed in name, many of their unresolved cases had been handed over to the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry of Justice's methods and procedures for investigating and filing cases were entirely different from those of Xuanjing Bureau. A memorial for all these cases had already been presented to the Liang Emperor, and he had personally ordered them to investigate. Every one of these cases was like a red-hot charcoal ball. But Cai Quan was strong-willed by nature. Xia Jiang's escape had caused him to choke on his own breath, so even though it was difficult to swallow what was assigned to him, he would still swallow it.

Fortunately, he had Prince Jing's support and several capable people under him. He also often went to the Su Residence to discuss matters with the Qilin talent where he often got helpful suggestions, so all his hard work yielded results after a month.

Who would have thought that the new ruling minister of the Imperial Court of Justice, Ye Shizhen would be such an eccentric and critical person. When the case files were sent to him for review, he at once picked out quite a number of discrepancies. Apart from "the manner of writing does not comply with standards" or "the phrasing is vague" which can be regarded as nitpicking, the rest of the discrepancies were genuine. Because of this, Cai Quan, who was always full of energy and enthusiasm, who had never met defeat since taking office, became dejected and depressed for a period of time. Everyone in the Ministry of Justice also felt a sense of shame, and they rallied together, vowing to get it right the second time. According to Shen Zhui, "it quickly descended into madness".

But such madness bears its own fruit. In the second round of review, Ye Shizhen couldn't find anything no matter how many times he combed through them, so he had no choice but to sign off, put his seal on them, and have them sent to the inner court. Having passed through his rigorous review, the Liang Emperor was satisfied. It was only to be expected that the original plan to select a candidate to be in charge of Xuanjing Bureau would be abandoned. Prince Jing was given permission to dissolve it

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<sup>272</sup> High official / Minister

and divide its powers. Part of it will be incorporated into the Imperial Court of Justice, while the other into the Ministry of Justice.

The dust had just begun to settle, and the young Shangshu of the Ministry of Justice had just breathed a sigh of relief when the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, Meng Zhi dropped by with two constables in tow. It happened that these two men were so disgruntled with how the Imperial Court of Justice had made things difficult for the Ministry of Justice that they went so far as to try to collide into Ye Shizhen's sedan chair on the pretext of chasing after a criminal. Fortunately, Meng Zhi happened to pass by and stopped them before it happened, thus avoiding any repercussions. Then he quietly dragged them to the Ministry of Justice's government office, handing them over to Cai Quan to deal with, rendering him speechless.

After summoning everyone in the ministry and severely admonishing them against acting out any personal grievances against the Imperial Court of Justice, Cai Quan repeatedly thanked Meng Zhi for preventing the incident. Before this, the both of them had no personal friendship but because of this matter, they chatted briefly, discovering that they could get along, and that they didn't live far from each other. Cai Quan, who hadn't seen his wife and children in more than half a month, having spent all this time in the ministry office, decided after the conversation to go home, and they both journeyed together in the carriage belonging to the Ministry of Justice.

Along the way, they found a new topic of conversation, and as they happily talked about the Mister Su who now served as an honorary visiting high official, Meng Zhi happened to glance out the window and suddenly burst into laughter.

Cai Quan followed his gaze and couldn't help but smile. On the busy street outside, the casually dressed Shangshu of the Ministry of Revenue Shen Zhui was carrying a watermelon that was as round as his belly in his arms, strolling around the various stalls, occasionally stopping to chat with a stall owner.

Meng Zhi smiled and said, "Shen Shangshu is a good official who is constantly paying attention to the people's cost of living. But why is he doing with the watermelon?"

"Perhaps he just bought it?" Cai Quan also smiled and shook his head. Instructing the driver to stop, both men alighted to say hello, when an unforeseen event suddenly took place.

There was a wagon full of logs in front of them. One of the ropes securing the logs suddenly snapped, and they all began to roll off the wagon in Shen Zhui's direction, threatening to crush him. People all round screamed as they dodged out of the way, but Shen Zhui was fat and moved slowly. Meng Zhi leapt forward, but he was too far away to come to the rescue. Just as the logs were about to hit him, a quick and light figure flashed past and lifted the rotund figure of the Shangshu like a sack and released him under the eaves by the streetside.



“Fei Liu!” Meng Zhi was overjoyed, “Luckily you passed by!”

Cai Quan rushed forward to support his good friend. When he had gotten over his shock, Shen Zhui hurriedly turned towards Fei Liu to thank him, but the youth merely grunted “Ng”, looking at him with a cold and expressionless face. Due to their recent frequent visits to the Su Residence, both Cai Quan and Shen Zhui were familiar with Fei Liu’s behavior so it didn’t bother them. Though the logs were scattered all over the place and many stalls had suffered damage, it was fortunate that nobody was injured. The owner of the log carriage was sweating profusely, his face pale, and he was soon surrounded by the damaged stall owners demanding compensation.

“Fei Liu, where were you heading?” Seeing that the people were merely arguing over the amount of compensation and that there was no big conflict, Meng Zhi didn’t bother much about it and turned to smile at the youth.

Fei Liu snorted and flicked his head away, refusing to look at him. The Commander General of the Imperial Army smiled wryly. Ever since he angered Xiao Shu by suggesting that he came clean with Prince Jing, the overprotective-of-his-Su-gege Fei Liu treated him as the bad guy and ignored him.

But he found it strange. Previously, no matter how often he made this error, Xiao Shu would patiently explain to him why not. That day, however, he turned away and left without a word, looking exceedingly weary and emotional.

Constantly thinking about this, even though he regarded himself as rough and unrefined, Meng Zhi felt uneasy.

“Shen xiong, are you hurt?” asked Cai Quan suddenly.

“No....”

“Then this red spot....” Cai Quan reached out to touch it. “Oh. Watermelon.”

Fei Liu crooked his head and glanced at him, then removed a piece of silver from within his clothing and gave it to Shen Zhui, who looked confused and said, “What’s this for?”

“Compensate you!”

All three men tightened their faces, trying hard to hold back laughter that was about to burst out, until their bellies ached. Gasping for breath, Shen Zhui placed the piece of silver back in Fei Liu’s hand and said, “Fei Liu xiaoge,<sup>273</sup> you’ve saved my

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<sup>273</sup> younger brother

life. If you need to compensate me for a watermelon, what kind of person have I become?"

"I topped!" said Fei Liu earnestly, "I compensate!"

"Alright, Shen daren will accept it," said Meng Zhi, holding back his laughter. "Fei Liu has been brought up well. If you don't accept it, he will be angry."

Shen Zhui looked at the piece of silver that had been stuffed back into his hand, not knowing if he should laugh or cry. Just as he was about to speak, he heard a flirtatious voice beside him.

"Beautiful young lady, such lily-white hands shouldn't come in contact with such pungent things. Come, let me help you pick them up....."

All three men turned to look. They saw a vegetable stall that had been knocked over by a log, and a young girl of about sixteen picking up garlic that had rolled onto the ground, who was blushing because a strange man was hitting on her. Though she was a pretty girl from a humble background, when they looked closely, they could see that she was astonishingly beautiful.

"You're really beautiful....." Looking at his attire, the frivolous wastrel squatting beside her appeared to be from a wealthy family. He was actually quite handsome but the lecherous expression on his face detracted from his good looks, and his next words were even more inappropriate. "Young lady, what's your name? Have you been promised to anyone?"

The young lady blushed and tried to get away. The moment she turned around, the lecher blocked her way. "Don't leave so soon. I won't offend such a beautiful woman. Let's just chat for a while?"

Cai Quan couldn't stand it any longer, and snorting contemptuously, he said, "A person of noble background should restrain himself in such broad daylight."

The lecher's passionate eyes flickered. Turning halfway to look at them, he said, "Restrain what? Are you jealous that I'm speaking to a beautiful young lady?" At this point, he suddenly noticed Fei Liu and his eyes immediately lit up.

"Wow. This little brother is also very beautiful. He has a very sturdy body. Let me pinch and see....."

As Meng Zhi and the rest watched the lecher move closer with a lustful look on his face, his hand reaching out as if to touch Fei Liu's face, they raised their eyebrows simultaneously, knowing that they would soon get to see a wonderful acrobatic performance.

But what followed almost made their eyes pop out. To their surprise, Fei Liu just stood stiffly in place, his thin lips pressed tightly together, allowing the lecher to lightly pinch his face.

“Hehehe, Fei Liu is very obedient. Looks like you’re a little fatter. I told Changsu a long time ago not to feed you so much. If you’re fat, you won’t be so pretty.....” As soon as the lecher said this, he suddenly remembered. Turning around, he stamped his foot and exclaimed, “Where’s the beautiful young lady? She ran away so quickly....I’ve not seen such an unpolished gem in such a long time. What a shame.”

“Over there!” Fei Liu pointed in a certain direction.

“Ah, our little Fei Liu is the best. I’m going to chase the beautiful young lady. Go and tell Changsu that I’m going to bring him a generous gift. He must be happy. See you tonight.” Then, with a flick of his fan, he dashed off into the distance.

“This....this person....who is he?” stammered Shen Zhui as he stared at the retreating back of that person with that seemingly free and easy nature.

“It sounds like he’s a friend of Mister Su....he also has such friends?” Cai Quan’s eyebrows narrowed doubtfully.

But Meng Zhi looked thoughtfully at that person’s less than swift footwork, his expression solemn.

Fei Liu was probably struck by the words “See you tonight” and stood dumbfounded for a long time before he abruptly tightened his lips and vanished. It was unclear if he returned to the Su Residence or fled elsewhere.

Once the two of them left, the three men still at the scene naturally didn’t remain standing in the middle of the street. Meng Zhi had originally planned to follow Cai Quan all the way home, but this encounter with the lecher piqued his curiosity and he wanted to check it out for himself, so he suddenly recalled that he had an appointment and took his leave. Coincidentally, Shen Zhui also hinted to Cai Quan that he had something to tell him, so everyone parted company politely, with Shen Zhui and Cai Quan boarding the Ministry of Justice’s carriage together, leaving Meng Zhi behind.

“Have you heard?” said Shen Zhui excitedly as soon as the curtain was lowered. “The Astrological Bureau has already divined a few auspicious dates. The Crown Prince investiture has been fixed on the 16th day of the 6th month.

“Really?” Cai Quan was suddenly cheerful. “I’ve been so busy these few days I haven’t been paying attention to any news. So that means that in about half a month’s time, Prince Jing will be the Crown Prince....Things are beginning to look up for the court!”

“Yes, I just hope nothing happens before this....”

“Why do you say that? Everything looks set. What could go wrong?”

Shen Zhui glanced at him. “Haven’t you noticed that His Highness Prince Jing has seemed depressed recently, as if there’s something on his mind?”

“No....I’ve been so busy I was close to collapsing...why is His Highness unhappy?”

“If I knew why would I discuss it with you?” Shen Zhui wrinkled his stubby eyebrows. “The court is running smoothly, there’s no threat at the borders. He is also very well favored by His Majesty. I really can’t figure it out. What’s causing His Highness to be dissatisfied?”

Cai Quan raised his head and ponder for a long time, but couldn’t think of a reason. “Could he be ill?”

“I heard that he tamed a wild horse sent from the southern border just two days ago, so how could he be ill.....”

“Then perhaps he’s nervous about the approaching investiture....”

Shen Zhui remained silent for a long while before saying, “It seems unlikely.....but there seems to be no cause or reason, and I don’t know how to ask him. I only hope that things would be better for him after the investiture. Now that the investiture of the crown prince has been determined, I’m afraid the imperial edict ordering Prince Yu to take his own life will soon follow suit in the next few days. I heard he had been writing a memorial everyday expressing his repentance and requesting for a waiver of the death sentence, but His Majesty has not approved it.”

“How can a traitor avoid the death sentence?” Cai Quan shook his head as he said, “Prince Yu should also have understood the risk he took. If he won, he would have won the world, and if he lost, he would be utterly crushed. How can there be another way?”

“If that’s the case, then it would have been better for him to have lost to the former Crown Prince,” Shen Zhui sighed regretfully. “Even if he ended up being exiled outside the imperial capital, at least he would save the life of his whole family. Whether that would have been lucky or not, it’s difficult to conclude.”

Cai Quan suddenly narrowed his eyes and slowly said, “Do you think....His Highness’s moodiness, is it because of what happened to Prince Qi then?”

Shen Zhui leapt up in shock. Forgetting that they were both in a carriage, he instinctively looked around. “Why are you suddenly bringing this up?”

“The case of rebellion is similar. What’s so strange about recalling that incident?” Cai Quan looked at him strangely. “Why are you so nervous?”

“Don’t you know....” Shen Zhui drew a breath, “At that time, when the incident surrounding Prince Qi happened, the streets of the imperial capital were practically bathed in blood. Half the civil and military ministers pleaded for leniency, but the more they pleaded, the more the situation deteriorated. People were killed, one round after the other, and several households were terminated. When my mother entered the palace at the time, she saw the body of the once much favoured Consort Chen niang niang carried out bundled in a white silk cloth....All these years since then, who would dare to speak so casually of Prince Qi?”

Shen Zhui was the son of Qinghe county lord and related to the imperial clan, so naturally, he was much more aware of the circumstances surrounding the bloody and tragic events that happened those years ago, compared to Cai Quan who was only a local official. Just saying those words caused him to shiver. Cai Quan remained stunned for a long time. Then his expression suddenly turned grave, and he said solemnly, “But Xia Jiang was in charge of investigating Prince Qi’s case, right?”

Shen Zhui trembled, immediately understanding his meaning, and raised his eyebrows.

“Prince Jing had always objected to Prince Qi’s case. This position is well-known. Because of this, he was suppressed for more than ten years, and was frequently asked to leave the capital. If the person who led the investigation against Prince Qi himself committed treason, how could Prince Jing not start planning?” Cai Quan was grim as he said, “I think he has been worrying recently, most likely because he has been thinking about whether or not to propose a reinvestigation of Prince Qi’s case to His Majesty.”

“He absolutely must not!” Shen Zhui was dripping with cold sweat. “The investiture has not happened yet. If he offends His Majesty, there will be a lot of trouble. Although Xia Jiang was the chief investigator, the person who ultimately decided the case was His Majesty. If he calls for a reinvestigation without strong evidence, His Majesty will think that he is now bringing up the old case just because he has achieved new merits. Do you know what His Majesty hates the most? Someone challenging his sovereign power! Wouldn’t reinvestigating Prince Qi’s case clearly demonstrate that His Majesty had committed a big mistake back then? His Majesty will never tolerate it!”

“But.....” Cai Quan persisted, “Based on Xia Jiang’s betrayal, perhaps one can see that the truth back then.....”

“Why do you still not understand?” said Shen Zhui grimly, “What is the truth? Do you think nobody called the truth into question all those thirteen years ago? In the end,

they were either exiled or had their heads separated from their body, or....they obediently kept silent. Perhaps to His Majesty, it wasn't important whether or not Prince Qi truly rebelled at the time. What's important was that if he wanted to rebel, he could rebel anytime!"

This was the first time Cai Quan heard such a perspective. He felt numb all over, and looked silently at Shen Zhui for a long time.

"In short, Xia Jiang's betrayal is insufficient reason to speculate that the previous case was unjustly concluded." Shen Zhui relaxed his tone again, looking a little helpless, "I think His Highness would probably have realized this, which is why he has been so low in spirits....."

Cai Quan looked up at the roof of the carriage, deep in thought, then said coldly, "If I were His Highness Prince Jing, I wouldn't give you."

"What are you saying?" Shen Zhui didn't quite understand and looked at him in surprise.

"What does it mean if he wanted to rebel he could rebel anytime? Just because of this, tens of thousands of lives were lost?" The more he spoke, the angrier Cai Quan was. "The Emperor is responsible for the care of his people, and his power lies in being a model of benevolence. To suspect someone of treason when there is no such intention....if that's how the Emperor thinks, then how could he be noble and benevolent towards his subjects? I had originally thought that Prince Jing was resentful only because of Prince Qi, because they were both very close, but now that I hear what you have to say, actually....."

"Alright," Shen Zhui interrupted his good friend, "Pretend I didn't say anything. But seeing your indignation, I can better understand His Highness's frame of mind. But no matter how pressing it is, now is not the right time. It's better to wait till later....when that time comes, is there anything that can't be achieved? We must find an opportunity to persuade His Highness not to act impulsively."

"If you want to persuade him, go ahead. I won't join you."

"Alright. You continue to be just and upright. I'll be smooth and cunning and persuade him myself." Although Shen Zhui said this in a huff, after giving it more thought, he still felt that it wasn't proper. "It's not appropriate for me to go. It's better to ask Mister Su to persuade him one day. He followed His Highness to the Spring Hunt and stood against the rebellion with him. The men from Prince Jing's household also mentioned that His Highness now has even greater respect for him. It's better for him to speak. If he personally persuades His Highness, His Highness will definitely listen."

Cai Quan actually knew deep down that Shen Zhui's point of view was more appropriate to the situation than his. Unwilling to budge for a while, he finally grunted "Ng."

Outside, the carriage happened to pass by Prince Yu's former mansion. Looking through the screen window at the once majestic and impressive royal mansion that was now in ruins and exposed to wind and dust, the two Shangshu recalled their recent conversation, suddenly realizing how unpredictable the affairs of the world could be. Looking at each other, they couldn't help but heave a long sigh.

## CHAPTER 154

### *Lin Chen*

The frivolous wastrel that Meng Zhi and the rest ran into on the street was definitely the Lin Chen gege whom Fei Liu refused to mention. After he left to chase the beautiful young lady, there was no sight of him even after the sky turned dark, but when Mei Changsu saw Fei Liu sitting in the corner of the room with a frightened expression on his face, he understood and said to Li Gang, “Lin Chen has probably arrived....”

So the manager of the Su Residence quickly went to prepare a room, while Zhen Ping grumbled beside him, “He knows fully well that Chief is waiting for him. Why doesn’t he come here directly?”

“Because Chief is always here, but if I don’t chase after the beautiful young lady, she will get away.....” A voice seemed to fly in from the sky outside. The shadows cast by the candle flickered, and a tall and slender backlit silhouette appeared at the window, casually waving a folding fan.

“Chief is with the patient in the southern house. Hurry and make your way over,” said Zhen Ping through the window.

“Help me ask Aunt Ji to prepare a bowl of glutinous rice eggs and bring it over. I haven’t had my dinner.....” The last few words were faint, drifting from the southern direction.

Mei Changsu was sitting in front of Nie Feng’s bed, with Wei Zheng by his side. As soon as Lin Chen entered, he smiled and said, without looking back, “Nie dage, the Mongolian doctor<sup>274</sup> is here. Let him feel your pulse and listen to his nonsense.”

“You’re too much. One letter from you and I broke my leg rushing here from Nanchu, and this is what I get?” Lin Chen’s shoulders slumped and he shook his head as he sighed, “When I was passing through Yunnan, Nie Duo cried and begged to come with me. Do you think it was easy for me to manage him for you? And today, all my hardwork till now has made me so hungry.”

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<sup>274</sup> Literal translation – basically, MCS jokingly refers to LC as a quack doctor



“Are you still hungry?” said Mei Changsu with a smile. “That’s great. Quickly feel his pulse. If you don’t, you won’t be allowed to eat.”

“Ruthless, you are ruthless.” Lin Chen stepped forward exasperatedly, grabbed a wrist, and was immediately pushed away before he could feel the pulse.

“I asked you to feel his pulse, not mine.”

“I think it’s about time for me to check yours too.” Lin Chen leaned down and looked at him. “I can tell Physician Yan has been having a difficult time this year.”

Mei Changsu extended his hand and pulled Lin Chen to the front of the bed. Forcing him to sit down, he said, “Master Lin, stop cracking jokes and quickly attend to the patient.”

Lin Chen smiled broadly. He extended his hand and smoothened Nie Feng’s sleeves, then pressed down on his left wrist. After a short examination, he carefully inspected his fingernails, the back of his ears, the white of his eyes and the coating on his tongue. When he had done this, he softly exhaled and signaled Mei Changsu to go outside with him.

“How is it?”

“Although his appearance is frightening, the poison has only penetrated to the third layer, which is not very serious.”

Mei Changsu looked at him from the corner of his eyes. “You’ve never really dealt with this kind of poison. Can you do it?”

“Ha.” Lin Chen raised his eyebrows. “If you don’t have faith in me, why did you call me to come?”

“If I could find the old pavilion master, who would be willing to call you to come?” retorted Mei Changsu. “Fei Liu, would you be willing?”

The youth who was sitting in the corner of the room shook his head vigorously.

Lin Chen laughed. “Alright, I concede that if the level of toxicity was as bad as yours back then, I would really not be able to dispel it, but that isn’t an issue with this person. But...you should already know...the choice of treatment, you need to explain clearly and let him make the decision.”

Mei Changsu closed his eyes tiredly, his eyelids heavy. Speaking quietly, he said, “If that’s the case, then let’s talk about it tomorrow. His wife will be coming here tomorrow, so it will be good for them to discuss this with each other.”

Lin Chen looked at him intensely, as if he had something to say, but he finally shrugged his shoulders and laughed, changing the subject. "I've brought you a present this time, did Fei Liu tell you?"

Mei Changsu slowly opened his eyes, his feathered eyebrows raised in question. "It would seem that he didn't mention it....Fei Liu, you've been a naughty boy. Chen gege is going to wrap you up in castor-oil leaves from head to toe, put you into a barrel and roll you down from the top of the hillside....."

"Alright," Mei Changsu hit him impatiently on the elbow. "Stop teasing him already. What treasure did you bring?"

"Hehe," Lin Chen made a gesture of offering with both hands, "A beauty!"

Mei Changsu turned around and walked towards the courtyard. Lin Chen chased after him saying, "This is no ordinary beauty. You know her!" As soon as he said this, he noticed Gong Yu from the corner of his eye. She was walking quietly out of the house, as if carefully combing the ground for something. Lin Chen couldn't help laughing boisterously as he said, "Gong Yu, you don't have to worry. No matter how beautiful she is, she cannot compare to you. Even if Changsu cares about this beauty, it's for other reasons...."

Hearing what he said, something stirred in Mei Changsu. He stopped and turned around. "Did you capture Qin Banruo?"

"How can you use the word capture on a beauty?" replied Lin Chen disapprovingly. "I had just left Yunnan, and she only happened to walk into my net coincidentally. Then, I conveniently and gently swept the net to invite and bring her here."

"Does she know Xia Jiang's whereabouts?"

"She had originally fled with Xia Jiang, but midway, Xia Jiang found her a burden and abandoned her, leaving her on her own. Wherever she ended up, she had only a rough idea which direction to head next. But now that all the borders are sealed, even Xia Jiang with all his abilities, wouldn't be able to escape. I've already found some clues so I'm keeping my head down and following them closely."

Mei Changsu was lost in thought, muttering to himself, and after a long while, he softly responded with an "Ng".

"Changsu," Lin Chen leaned forward, half laughing half asking, "I would like to ask, after Prince Jing comes to power, how do you intend to handle the Hua nation? After all, Qin Banruo is just an intermediary. It's undeniable that the Hua nation still

has people who long to restore their country. From their perspective, that's their right, isn't it?"

Mei Changsu sneered, his tone so cold as if it would penetrate deep into the bone, "I admire their aspirations to restore their country, but I won't be lenient just because of this. When Father Commander eliminated Hua back then, it was based on the circumstances at that time. I won't dispute with the people of the Hua nation on who was in the right or wrong. It's just that.....now that I'm in Da Liang, just like the Hua nation, wiped out and swallowed up. Just like Ye Qin, a vassal state, or like several large nations in neighbouring Zhou which are facing similar issues. Just this year, Nanchu suppressed the people of the Mian nation. Wasn't it also to reclaim it and suppress their rebellion? After Prince Jing takes power, this is also an obstacle he would need to suppress and overcome in order to become the ruler and Emperor. I'm afraid it won't be an easy path."

"Your heart, it keeps trying to see so far ahead," Lin Chen shook his head as he said, "It seems you didn't take to heart what my father had advised you repeatedly back then. I won't bother about you anymore. I'm going to eat. I'm starving to death. Where are Aunt Ji's glutinous rice eggs? Why haven't they brought them?"

His last sentence was shouted out especially loudly, so a clear voice immediately sounded in reply, "I've put it in the main room. Go over yourself and eat!" Hearing this, Lin Chen's face lit up and he happily made his way over. Just at this moment, Gong Yu was slowly approaching, saying in a low voice, "Commander General has already made the arrangements. Tomorrow, Gong Yu will leave temporarily. Once in the prison, Gong Yu will always be cautious and not make any mistakes, so Chief should not worry."

Mei Changsu nodded and replied impassively, "I've never had to worry about you. Have an early rest." With these brief words, he immediately turned around and returned to Nie Feng's room.

Gong Yu stood alone in the courtyard for a long time, in a daze, the wind and dew that gradually rose in the evening almost soaking through the hair piled on her head. She remained motionless. The satiated Lin Chen walked over from the veranda and looked at her silently for a while before saying, "Gong Yu, why don't you play a tune."

The beautiful woman's soft eyes that were like stars turned towards him, as if glimmering with moistness. In the shadow of the moon, she lowered her head and slowly walked back to her room. Not long after, the sound of a stringed instrument could be heard.

In the quiet night, the tune was natural and melancholic. Although it was clear, simple and unhurried, it made one feel lost in life, like fallen flowers being carried away by flowing water, evoking an infinite yearning for love.

But the tightly closed doors and windows of Nie Feng's room remained unopened. Early the next morning, following Meng Zhi's plan, Gong Yu pretended to head out. Whether those in the Su Residence waited anxiously or leisurely, it was approximately the 5th segment of the day<sup>275</sup> when a chariot entered the side gate. As soon as it came to a stop, Meng Zhi alighted first, extending his hand into the carriage but Xia Dong didn't need his assistance and jumped out without even the support of the wooden side of the carriage, her visage still as upright and proud as before, with no sign of being subdued.

Li Gang led them into the main courtyard and first asked Xia Dong to wash off her camouflage. Then Mei Changsu came out personally to accompany her into the southern room.

Nie Feng was sitting on a chair beside the window, basking in the sunlight. When Xia Dong entered, he quickly covered his head with his arms, not daring to look at her. Wei Zheng leaned forward and supported him by the shoulders, quietly urging him but failed to persuade him to move, and finally had no choice but to smile wryly at Xia Dong.

But Xia Dong did not see his wry smile. From the moment she entered, her vision never left that person seated on that chair, even though he could hardly be called a person.

The white fur that covered his face and body, the swollen deformed body, the trembling and curled up posture. There was nothing that reminded her of that heroic and soldierly husband who was able to take on the wind and clouds.

But he was still alive.

Compared to the remains that were laid at her feet those thirteen years ago, the one standing before her was at least still alive.

Tears fell from Xia Dong's eyes, but a smile emerged on her lips. She walked to Nie Feng's side, crouched down and without a word, embraced him, holding him tightly to her.

In that moment, there was no doubt, nor did she inspect the silver bracelet on his wrist. Perhaps in the moment that Meng Zhi explained to her, she was anxious to believe the good news.

The silent hug, the hot tears, the pounding heart, the fear (and hope) of finding again that which was lost. All this made Xia Dong dizzy, so dizzy that she closed her eyes, not daring to open them again.

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<sup>275</sup> approx. 11am to 1pm

After a long while, someone could be heard coughing softly. “General Nie, Nie furen, it’s not that I want to be a wet blanket....the both of you will have plenty of time to slowly enjoy your reunion later, but for now, can you listen to this Mongolian doctor explain matters pertaining to the poison of the bitter flame?”

Xia Dong pulled herself together and slowly released her husband. Wei Zheng brought a stool over so both of them could sit together. Meng Zhi also found a seat nearby but Mei Changsu sat in a corner of the room.

“The poison of the bitter flame is the most unusual poison on earth. What is strange about it is that it can save a life, and at the same time take it away. It can also put someone through hell-like torture.” Lin Chen spoke animatedly in a normal tone of voice. “During that time, when General Nie suffered burns all over his body, the fire poison penetrated his heart, paralysing him. But fortunately, he fell into a snow nest and was bitten all over by snow beetles,<sup>276</sup> thus preserving his life. These beetles can only be found around Meiling. Some of them can also be found around the wall separating Juehun Valley from the northern valley of Meiling. They eat only burnt meat, and at the same time spitting out poison, which together with the cold air, suppresses the fire poison, thereby forming a new and unusual poison, the poison of the bitter flame.”

Although he said it matter of factly, everyone could already tell what a terrible and unusual poison it was. It wasn’t just Xia Dong who trembled, but Meng Zhi’s face also lost all colour.

“The people who have been struck by the poison of the bitter flame have deformed bones and swollen bodies, and their entire body would be covered in white fur. The root of their tongues would also stiffen, removing their ability to speak. The poison’s toxicity would also flare up a few times everyday, and when that happens, only blood can suppress it, human blood being the most effective. Although this poison can linger throughout one’s life, as long as it doesn’t flare up, one’s physical strength would remain the same, but in the face of such torture, perhaps death may be cleaner.” Lin Chen looked sympathetically at Nie Feng. “For General Nie to have persevered all these years, your resolve is unrivalled, and you have my greatest admiration.”

“Can this poison be eliminated?” asked Xia Dong anxiously, as she gripped her husband’s hand.

“Somewhat,” said Lin Chen bluntly. “There are two methods. One is somewhat thorough, and the other not so thorough. You must choose one.”

“Of course we want the thorough one,” replied Xia Dong without the slightest hesitation.

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<sup>276</sup> actually, more accurately translated as “cold scale insects”

Lin Chen looked intensely at her for a long time, then said with a soft sigh, “After I have explained the differences between these two methods, only then shall Nie furen choose, alright?”

## CHAPTER 155

### *Choices*

Hearing the deeper meaning behind Lin Chen's words, Xia Dong's heart trembled with fear, and she held on tighter to Nie Feng's hand.

"The process of eliminating the poison of the bitter cold is extraordinarily painful. Simply put, the skin must be peeled away and the bones must be bent back." Lin Chen looked at Nie Feng and continued, "General Nie is a man with an iron will and would be able to withstand this suffering, but...if you want to thoroughly eliminate the poison, we must break the bones to remove the fire and cold poison within and then reconstruct them. After that, you would be bedridden for at least a year as the bone and flesh are regenerated. The advantage of this method is once the poison is eliminated, you would look no different from an ordinary person, the tongue would be restored to its softness, but you would look very different from what you used to look like."

"That's not a problem," Xia Dong breathed a sigh of relief. "It's not a big problem if he looks different."

"I haven't finished." Lin Chen lowered his eyes. "Breaking the bones to remove the poison causes tremendous harm to the body. Not only is the internal breath completely destroyed, you will no longer have any fighting strength left. On the contrary, you will be more susceptible to illness and injury from now on, suffering constantly from cold, unable to enjoy the lifespan of a normal person."

Xia Dong's lips trembled slightly, while Meng Zhi leapt up and said loudly, "What did you say?"

"The human body has a limit which cannot be exceeded. The process of completely removing the poison of the bitter flame is essentially giving one's life in exchange. But if proper care is taken to recuperate well after the poison is eliminated, there shouldn't be a problem living till forty....."

Meng Zhi's complexion had by this time gone from black to green, his flaming eyes fixed penetratingly on Mei Changsu's face, as if he was looking at his enemy.

Xia Dong was astonished and couldn't help asking, "Commander Meng, what's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter with me?" Meng Zhi gasped roughly for breath and turned his gaze back to Wei Zheng, "You....and Nie Duo....what have you been doing all this while when you were by his side? Did you just look on without doing anything as he acted so rashly?"

Wei Zheng did his best to hold back the tears in his eyes, his face practically twisted and deformed, but confronted with Meng Zhi's question, he said nothing to defend himself.

"Meng dage...." Mei Changsu called out softly."

"What else do you have to say?" Meng Zhi roared in anger. "Who was the one who told me that all that's needed is to take care of the body? And you still run crazily up and down the capital like this? You may not care about your life, but we....we...."

At this point, this man who seemed made of iron suddenly choked with emotions, his eyes bloodshot. Lin Chen looked at him expressionlessly, then blankly said, "There's no point in scolding him. He's very opinionated. Whether it's you or Wei Zheng, who can stop him?"

"Stop talking nonsense," Mei Changsu shot Lin Chen a cold glance. "Hurry and finish saying what you want to say."

"Alright." Lin Chen took a deep breath and continued, "I'll now talk about the less thorough method. This method is similar in principle, but it keeps the toxicity under control and does not fundamentally harm the human body. After the treatment, you can be sure that the toxicity will not flare up as it does today, and there is no need to drink anymore blood. Although the body won't return to its full fighting strength, you won't be very different from the ordinary person and can enjoy a natural lifespan. However, the body will remain covered with white fur, and the tongue will remain stiff making speech difficult."

Mei Changsu hurriedly said, "There will be less toxicity, so he should be able to articulate simple syllables, right?"

"I'll do my best. But he will definitely not be able to speak like a normal person."

"What about his appearance?"

"Of course it'll be a little better than now."



Xia Dong was in a daze after hearing all this. She slowly turned her head and gazed at her husband. Both their eyes met, each of them feeling complex emotions in their hearts that flowed to the other through the openings of the eyes.

They knew if they wanted to spend more time together, they couldn't insist on perfection.

"Even if you look the way you do now, I would think it's very good." Xia Dong smiled as she smoothened the long hair on Nie Feng's face. "Feng ge, will you bear with this a little longer in order to keep me company for a few more years?"

Mei Changsu's eyes were tender as he looked at both husband and wife leaning close to each other. With a long sigh of relief, he said to Lin Chen, "Since they have decided, you should quickly start making preparations. Fei Liu has already mastered the xi yang<sup>277</sup> formula you taught him. When the time comes, you can get him to help you."

"This is the Mongolian doctor's business. You don't have to stick your nose in it." Lin Chen turned his head, pointing his chin in Meng Zhi's direction, "That there is your business. Are you going to let him continue glaring at you like this?"

At this moment, Nie Feng sounded "hu hu" twice, got up anxiously and walked towards Mei Changsu. Grabbing his hand, he shook it gently. Xia Dong didn't understand what he meant, so as she stood supporting her husband from behind, she asked, "What's wrong?"

Mei Changsu smiled, turned his hand around to hold on to Nie Feng's arm, and said soothingly, "Don't worry too much. My circumstances are different from yours. I'm very good now."

"It's different," said Lin Chen coolly, "Compared to him, back then you were even more...."

"Shut up!" Mei Changsu suddenly turned on him in anger. "If you want to spout such idle words then get lost. This no longer concerns you!"

"Alright, alright," Lin Chen raised his hand in a soothing gesture, "I'll get out of the way. You think I like to watch you taking on more burdens when you are already so overburdened? Actually, you are the most wilful person on earth, don't you think?"

"Master Lin" Wei Zheng wrinkled his face and tugged at Lin Chen's arm, "Don't always argue with Young Commander. Young Commander has his own difficulties."

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<sup>277</sup> some method Fei Liu uses to regulate his body after being rescued (because his previous martial arts practice was harming his body)

“He’s your Young Commander, not mine. To me, he’s Mei Changsu.” Lin Chen’s lips held a trace of a smile, but there was no smile in his eyes. “I have been helping you because it is the duty of a friend to help you fulfill your wish, but not so you can kill yourself.”

Mei Changsu ignored him and spoke to Nie Feng, “Nie dage, rest first. I’m going out for a while.” After that, he turned around, looked at Lin Chen and Meng Zhi and said, “Both of you, please follow me out. We’ll speak there.”

Lin Chen shrugged and said, “You don’t have to speak to me. I’m just complaining. When have I ever been able to say no to you? The sun is good outside. I’ll go bathe in it first, since I’ll have to obey you and treat him tomorrow. “ Saying this, he swung his arms and walked away leisurely. Outside, he grabbed hold of Fei Liu, dragging him along as he ruffled his hair.

Meng Zhi wasn’t as relaxed as Lin Chen. When he followed behind Mei Changsu, his face was dark. The three people left behind in the room remained silent for a long while before Xia Dong finally found her voice.

“Wei Zheng....what did you call him just now? Young Commander?”

Wei Zheng lowered his head and tightened his lips. “But you only have one Young Commander.....” Xia Dong moved to face him and set her eyes firmly on him. “Did you mean what I think you meant?”

Wei Zheng still didn’t answer, but Nie Feng hugged her from behind, holding her tightly.

“Oh my God....” Xia Dong’s face was pale as snow, and she almost couldn’t breathe. But as a woman, her first thought was obviously different from a man’s. “Then....Nihuang....”

Wei Zheng turned his head slowly away. At that time, he had unceasingly taken Nie Duo to task over Nihuang, and was scolded severely by Lin Shu for this. But now, he didn’t care about this anymore.

The wishes of the past had slowly narrowed to a point today. These days, he only hoped that his Young Commander would live year after year, and as for all other matters, they would just carry them out according to his wishes. Whatever outcome he wishes, then so be it.

Although deep in his heart, Wei Zheng knew that this smallest wish of his was actually the greatest luxury.

Just as the Deputy General of the Chiyu Battalion struggled with his helplessness and sorrow in this room, in the other room, the angry Meng Zhi suddenly felt helpless

and at a loss, his mind blank, as he stood before Mei Changsu's calm but grief-laden gaze. "What else could I do?" Mei Changsu looked quietly at him, then continued mildly, "There were things I still needed to do. I needed a normal appearance and voice. I can't just find a peaceful mountain or forest, to recuperate there until I am forty or fifty....Meng dage, what else could I do?"

"But you should have told me....."

"If I had told you earlier, you wouldn't have agreed to all my plans." Mei Changsu smiled sadly, "It's sometimes difficult not to feel weighed down by all your affections (qing yi) for me. I'm very sorry, but I have no choice but to do it this way....."

"I thought you were only hiding things from Prince Jing. I never thought you were hiding things from me." Meng Zhi sighed deeply, his eyes red. "It's a blessing that Prince Jing doesn't know anything....."

Mei Changsu frowned, and slowly sat down on the chair by his side, murmuring, "Jingyan....I'm afraid I won't be able to hide this from him for much longer.....I hadn't expected Nie dage to still be alive, but since he is, he deserves to live with dignity. I can't conceal this. But once Jingyan knows that the patient is Nie dage, I will no longer be able to conceal myself from him...."

"When I urged you to tell Prince Jing the other day, you were angry with me. But it's impossible to wrap fire in paper. Even if he doesn't find out that it's Nie Feng, I don't believe he doesn't suspect anything until now."

"I intend to conceal it a while more," said Mei Changsu softly. "The Crown Prince is yet to be invested, the old case is yet to be reinvestigated, and so many things left to do. First the Eastern Palace will be conferred, then after that, Consort Jing niang niang will request the Emperor to confer marriage and confer the title of Crown Princess on the granddaughter of the Zhongshu Ling Liu Cheng. Zhongshu Ling is the head of the civilian court and has an ability to grasp the laws and discipline of the imperial court that far exceeds anyone else. With this marriage, things will be more smooth sailing for Prince Jing when he ascends."

"Xiao Shu...."

"So during this time," said Mei Changsu, intentionally cutting him off, "Prince Jing must not be distracted. I must see him put on Crown Prince's diadem, see him get married. When he is sufficiently stable, then try to find a way to use the written evidence in Grand Princess Liyang's hands to overturn the old case. If I don't manage to get the current Emperor to reinvestigate the case, I fear that future generations would denounce Prince Jing for practising favoritism in view of his past relationship (qing yi) with Prince Qi. If I want to prove our innocence, then I must do it thoroughly. Just like the poison of the bitter flame in my body back then, I have to

bear it, no matter how painful it gets. Meng dage, I've come to the last step. Please let me take it?"

Meng Zhi's heart and mind were in turmoil, and his eyes were red. Just as Lin Chen had said, no matter how angry he was, no matter how he ranted, when one was face to face with this person, who would be able to say no to him?

"Meng dage, you really shouldn't feel so sad. I'm not going to die immediately." Mei Changsu relaxed his tone and revealed a smile that was impossible to resist, "I promise you, once Chiyan is exonerated, I will let go of everything and take a good rest. I will definitely live past forty, alright?"

Meng Zhi's shoulders collapsed in defeat, as he scolded him, "It's your life, so you should take good care of it yourself. Since Prince Jing will find out sooner or later, good or bad, shouldn't you leave him a way out? With your life in such a precarious state, after the grand occasions of his investiture and marriage, when he learns about everything in future, how would he feel? Have you thought about it?"

Meng Zhi hit the nail on the head. Mei Changsu's face turned pale, and he remained silent for a long while. Pain twisted in his heart. Due to Nie Feng's appearance, he could no longer conceal it to the end as he had anticipated. But he understood Xiao Jingyan well. On the day the truth was finally revealed, his good friend would find it too difficult to bear and blame himself. There's no need to imagine to know this from experience.

"But Xiao Shu, you shouldn't worry too much," Seeing his sad expression, he immediately regretted his words, and adjusted his words, saying soothingly, "In order to overturn such a big case, in order to wipe clean all the injustice borne by Prince Qi and Chiyan, who wouldn't be able to bear a bit of hardship? Prince Jing is resilient and has a strong will. He will eventually overcome this on his own. If you try to manage his reaction, that's truly underestimating him."

Mei Changsu knew he had good intentions and he forced a smile as he said, "You're right. Actually in those days, Jingyan came to my defence many times. He won't retreat from difficulty. In future, I would still need to count on him for protection."

Disgruntled, Meng Zhi said, "If you were willing to be protected, we would thank the heavens! In short, you should remember this when you next decide to act rashly. Don't count on me to hide it from Prince Jing again!"

"Alright. Commander General, you were the one who taught me to ride, shoot and act confused. How dare I not heed your words?" Although Mei Changsu's heart and mind were still in a turmoil, he didn't want to add to Meng Zhi's worries so he tried hard to put on a cheerful and lighthearted expression. With a relaxed tone, he said,

“Don’t pay attention to that Lin Chen. He likes to talk rubbish. Just see how much Fei Liu hates him and you’ll know it’s not a good thing....”

“Hey,” said someone immediately from outside the window, “That’s not hate. That’s respect.”

Meng Zhi was startled. Someone was so close by yet he couldn’t sense his location in the least, which was shocking.

“You don’t have to be alarmed.” It was as if Mei Changsu could read his thoughts. Smiling, he said, “Lin Chen has this ability to sneak around. If it was a real fight, he may not be able to beat you.”

As soon as his voice trailed off, the window opened and Lin Chen stood outside with his arms folded, an evil smile on his face, “The Mongolian doctor says that it’s late. Go to bed early. The Commander General can come again tomorrow, alright?”

Meng Zhi turned his head to look at the hourglass. Sure enough, it was late, so he hurriedly said to Mei Changsu, “I’ll leave then. You must really take care of your health. I wasn’t joking.”

Mei Changsu smiled in promise and sent him all the way to the door. After his silhouette disappeared, Lin Chen slowly swayed over and said, “In the end, he was still persuaded by you....but I’m not surprised. Even my father was helpless against you back then, let alone them?”

“Lin Chen,” Mei Changsu put away the smile on his face, looked at the darkness ahead and whispered, “....I don’t feel so good now.”

“I know....” Lin Chen’s tone was still light, “I’m rarely this angry....”

Mei Changsu turned around, a glimmer of light flashing in his eyes, “Please help me. I need at least another year....”

“Then you also need to pull yourself together,” Lin Chen’s face took on a solemn expression that was rarely seen. “You’re afraid of Prince Jing finding out because you don’t have confidence in your own health, right?”

“I don’t have a choice....If I’m still around, even if Jingyan found out the truth later on and gets emotionally upset, there would always be a way to placate him. But now I’m not sure myself when I will collapse. Consort Jing niang niang is deep in the palace. Jingyan’s temper....that time, who would be there to allay his anger?” Mei Changsu was very composed as he said these words, obviously determined. “The current situation is far from being foolproof. After all these years of scheming and calculating, at this juncture, I can’t allow myself to be the weakest link. Which is why....I have to let Jingyan down....”

“Actually, that Meng Zhi hit the nail on the head. Prince Jing has his own responsibilities to bear. He’s not the kind of soft and timid person who can’t bear them. Just do it according to your own considerations. Why do you have to feel that you’re letting him down? Ultimately, clearing this case is not your responsibility alone. You are obsessing too much about this one point, which is why you are so mentally exhausted.”

Mei Changsu sighed with melancholy and nodded. “Everything you’ve said, it’s not that I don’t already know. I just can’t help myself, that’s all. After going through so much to get here, to have to wait for Jingyan to be conferred the Eastern Palace, then for him to get married, supervise the country, solidify his hold of the court, wait for news of Xie Yu’s death to arrive in the capital, wait for Xia Jiang to be captured, force the Emperor to have no choice but to agree to the reinvestigation.....For Jingyan, all these will require his effort, but for me, what I need most is time.....”

“But you don’t want Prince Jing to act prematurely either, just to give you that time, right?” Lin Chen raised the corners of his eyebrows and smiled confidently. “Don’t worry, I’m here. I’m also going to use your power in the new dynasty to show off in the future, so how could I so easily let you go to your death?”

Amused by this thought, Mei Changsu smiled and nodded his head, “Yes, then I shall thank you in advance for your hard work.”

Lin Chen’s eyes immediately glowed, “If you really want to thank me, give me xiao Fei Liu!”

Mei Changsu immediately said, “Don’t even dream about it, don’t even think about it.” After saying this, he turned around and left. Fei Liu suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and greatly moved, he threw himself into Su gege’s embrace.

“Ha, you little thing with no conscience. Do you ever think about who cured you then? Come, go for a walk with me!” Lin Chen laughed, peeling Fei Liu away from Mei Changsu, dragging him away.

Mei Changsu smiled and watched them walk away. Just as he was about to turn around, his face suddenly turned pale. Clutching at his chest, he bent over, his vision turning dark as he fell forward.

But of course, he never hit the ground. Someone rushed over just in time to hold him steady, soothing his chest and patting his back. This fainting spell came and went quickly. After taking a few breaths, the pain passed, and his eyes gradually returned to clarity. Raising his head, he saw the white hair and beard of Physician Yan standing before him. Mei Changsu instinctively shut his ears while smiling apologetically.

But this time the old doctor did not scold him. He merely glared sullenly at the patient for a long while before finally sighing as he said, "Let's quickly go in."

## CHAPTER 156

### *Old Haunts*

On the 16th day of the 6th month, the new Crown Prince was crowned. In the early morning, the banners flew high and the ceremonial weaponry was brought out in full array, but because they were still in a state of national mourning, there was no music. Hundreds of government officials assembled at the Fengtian Main Hall as Xiao Jingyan, wearing the diadem of the Crown Prince, led by the ceremonial officer, entered the Danbu, then entered the Danbi where he was received by the interior assistant official to approach the throne and pay his respects. After the imperial edict to establish the Crown Prince was read out, the Liang Emperor took the Crown Prince's seal to the Zhongshu Ling, who then descended the steps to give it to the new Crown Prince. Once the Crown Prince received the seal, he then handed it over to the book-keeping official from the Eastern Palace before bowing four times to thank the Emperor for his favour.<sup>278</sup>

After the court ceremonies were completed, the new Crown Prince took his seat and accepted the congratulations of hundreds of court officials, after which he entered the inner palace and paid his respects to the imperial consort. In the afternoon, the Liang Emperor brought the Crown Prince to the Tai Miao<sup>279</sup> to make an announcement to the ancestors, receiving the common people's respects along the way. It was a spectacular scene.

Xiao Jingyan was a very physically fit young man. Due to his regular training, his tall, slim and graceful posture was very pleasing to the eye. His temperament was very different from the sinister and ruthless former Crown Prince, and the sleek and sophisticated Prince Yu. Whenever he dressed for court, it was vastly different from his usual casual attire or military uniform, as if he had amassed an air of nobility and long-repressed majesty that suddenly burst out, inspiring awe in everyone.

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<sup>278</sup> This is just an approximate translation. There were too many terms and details which I was unfamiliar with and I was more interested to get on with the storyline. PLUS, the drama does a better job with the visuals! "Danbu" refers to the red "carpet" leading up to the steps of the hall that houses the throne, while the "Danbi" refers to the red steps of the hall.

<sup>279</sup> High Temple



When the investiture ceremonies finally ended, the Liang Emperor declared an amnesty for everyone across the land, after which the new Crown Prince then helped him down from the Fengtian Tower. Perhaps he didn't notice it, but from the bystanders' perspective, the future emperor's eyes were radiant, his body tall and straight like a pine tree, while the old Emperor's hair was gray, his body stooped over and trembling with lethargy. This sharp contrast made it unavoidable for people to lament secretly in their hearts, and even somewhat disrespectfully speculate when the new dynasty would arrive.

Perhaps due to exhaustion from a full day's worth of investiture ceremonies, two days after the Crown Prince investiture, the Liang Emperor fell ill and decreed a ten day absence from court. During this time, all government matters had to go through the Eastern Palace in advance, and the country was to be supervised by the Crown Prince.

On the 30th day of the 6th month, the Inner Court Bureau issued an edict. Since the former Princess Jing had already passed on, the position was vacant. The granddaughter of Zhongshu Ling Liu Cheng was specially selected to become the Crown Princess. The grand wedding day was fixed on the 15th day of the 7th month.

The secret passageway between Prince Jing's Mansion and the Su Residence was completely sealed up shortly after the return from the Spring Hunt, erasing all traces of Mei Changsu's dedicated support in the past year. Perhaps due to the indescribable disappointment deep within Xiao Jingyan's heart, or perhaps due to the extreme busyness brought about by his change of status, he hadn't visited the Su Residence in more than a month, though Lie Zhanying frequently visited to call on Wei Zheng.

After moving to the Eastern Palace, Xiao Jingyan's style of handling government matters was vastly different from the former Crown Prince. He obviously liked to judge and discuss matters on their own merits and preferred people who were straightforward, agile and uncorrupt. In dealing with matters, he emphasized efficiency and cut back on procedures, but at the same time paid special attention to disallow anyone from using the terms "new policy" or "reforms" and so on, in order to maintain a kind of subtle balance.

The 5th day of the 7th month was Imperial Consort Jing's birthday. Xiao Jingyan entered the palace early in the morning to convey his birthday congratulations. The Consort Jing of today was different from the Consort Jing of the past, so naturally, mother and son could no longer gather as privately and peacefully as before. After sitting with his mother for an hour and receiving some important court officials and imperial clan members, Xiao Jingyan took his leave and arranged to come again the next day.

Prince Ji and Marquis Yan also visited the imperial consort early that morning to congratulate her. They met at the palace gate and went in together. Because Xiao Jingyan was dealing with the inheritance and salary reduction of the imperial clan's

future generations, he wanted to hear the opinions of these two old men. Since he met them on his way out, he invited them over by the way to go with him to the Eastern Palace.

Salary reductions for the imperial clan members. Something nobody liked discussing over the generations. But because Da Liang had been around for a long time, the imperial family had multiplied, and the closeness of relationships had changed, so it was no longer possible to adhere to former practices. The Liang Emperor had always intended to make changes to this, but he didn't want to offend anyone, so after the establishment of the new Crown Prince, when he was still flying high and was unstoppable, he threw the matter to him.

After half a month of planning, the salary reduction plan was more or less finalized. Prince Jing invited Prince Ji and Marquis Yan over because they were quite popular with the imperial relatives. He wanted to leverage their influence to explain and pacify the imperial relatives to minimize repercussions and complaints to the Liang Emperor. Since the Crown Prince requested, and the matter was indeed something they could both manage well, neither Prince Ji nor Marquis Ho declined. Not long after this was decided, they all sat down and had tea. At that moment, someone came to report that the Emperor had specially ordered Commander Meng to send over a soft pair of boots made from ice silkworms<sup>280</sup> after hearing that the Crown Prince continued to train with the sword on a daily basis. Xiao Jingyan hurried out to welcome him, kneeling as he received the Emperor's favour.

After Meng Zhi made the announcement on the Emperor's behalf and handed the yellow silk-wrapped boots over to the steward of the Eastern Palace, he then knelt to make his salutations to the Crown Prince. Xiao Jingyan held his arm out to raise him up and smiled, saying, "Since Commander General came all the way here, of course you can't just turn around and leave. Come in and have a seat. It just so happens that Royal Uncle Ji and Marquis Yan are here, and we're having a chat."

"I'm not deserving." Meng Zhi hurriedly cupped his fist and said, "Your Highness is very kind. This servant accepts with honour."

After entering the hall and making his salutations, the steward brought the silk boots to Xiao Jingyan for a closer look. This pair of boots was a tribute from Yeqin, soft to the touch, cool and light, well suited for martial arts training in the summer. After everyone sang its praises, Prince Ji laughed and said, "Commander General, you are Da Liang's top martial arts master. What do you think of his Highness' skill in martial arts? Could he be listed on the Langya rankings?"

Meng Zhi was startled by this and was unsure how he should respond, but Jingyan smiled. "Royal Uncle shouldn't make things difficult for Commander Meng. I'm a

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<sup>280</sup> (冰蚕) MAY be a mythical creature, or simply a reference to silkworm cocoons

general in the army, which is not the same as a Jianghu master. If someone like me can get on the list, doesn't that mean there's nobody in Jianghu?"

Meng Zhi hurriedly replied, "Your Highness is too modest. The master of the Langya Pavilion has the final say as to whether or not one is ranked on the list, but with your Highness' skill in martial arts, it would be more than enough whenever you decide to travel around Jianghu."

"To be honest," Jingyan's gaze grew distant, "I have frequently imagined myself as someone from Jianghu, travelling with two or three good friends among the mountains and rivers. Wouldn't that be one of life's greatest pleasures?"

Yan Que set down his teacup and said in reply, "Not only your Highness, but for all the boys born into the imperial household and noble families, when they hear the legends of Jianghu, which one of them wouldn't dream of roaming about there, carrying his sword over three thousand miles to deliver justice?"

"I didn't," said Prince Ji bluntly. "Travelling in Jianghu means having to bear hardship, which I knew I could not. I never had that dream, and live a carefree life everyday that many envy."

"Not many can imitate Your Highness's straightforward manner," said Meng Zhi with a laugh. "But what Marquis Yan said is the truth. Let's not talk about rest. Just look at Yujin. He's obviously a pampered son of a wealthy family. Hasn't he always liked to roam about outside? I've often heard him say that he loves the happiness of travelling, the ability to fulfill his desires, free from all restraint."

"As if that counts as roaming in Jianghu." Marquis Yan shook his head. "He's only having fun. Given his status as a Marquis's son, when he runs into trouble others would back down. He hasn't truly experienced Jianghu."

Prince Ji looked up and said without thinking, "That's true. Compared to the trouble you all got into, Yujin is really just having fun."

"So in the past Lord Yan..." Xiao Jingyan raised his eyebrows, his interest piqued. "I've not heard this before. Earlier you said that Yujin, with his status as a Marquis's son, is just having fun. Could it be, then, that you hid your identity at the time and changed your name?"

"Hehe, back then we were young and foolish. Best not to mention it, best not to mention it."

"We?" Xiao Jingyan felt his heart jump. "Who else?"

The look in Marquis Yan's eyes turned gloomy. The room went quiet. Who had been such good friends with Marquis Yan in the past as to travel with him, keeping their names concealed? Well, that went without saying.

“What is it that you can't mention?” Xiao Jingyan gritted his teeth and said coldly, “Was it Commander Lin?”

Although it wasn't appropriate to mention the name of a traitor like this, among those present, Marquis Yan and Meng Zhi had great respect for Lin Xie while Prince Ji had his own reservations about the Chiyan case. Now that the new Crown Prince had mentioned his name so openly, they no longer needed to treat it as taboo. Their expressions slowly became more natural, though they still held back from speaking freely. Only Xiao Jingyan continued in a fit of temper, persevering with the topic.

“Lord Yan is not a martial arts practitioner. I think if not for Commander Lin accompanying you, the old master<sup>281</sup> wouldn't have let you go, right? In those days Commander Lin's martial prowess was top-notch in Da Liang. Even if he hid his name, Jianghu wouldn't have allowed him to run amok.”

“There are some things Your Highness is not aware of. At that time, we hadn't even come of age, and were far from being capable of running amok. But for greenhorns like us who hadn't encountered adversity at that age, a trip like that brought many new experiences.” Marquis Yan was influenced by Xiao Jingyan's unperturbed manner, and continued to speak with assurance, “The customs and social relationships of the outside world, the people's livelihood and local conditions, it is difficult to truly understand these by staying home and listening to others.”

“Then I imagine you must have visited many places?”

“We travelled all over the famous mountains and great rivers. Even now, when this old veteran still feels that he has benefitted a lot when he recalls those days.”

Prince Ji smiled and interjected, “Since you went to so many places, you must have met some heroes and beautiful women, right?”

“Jianghu is a place of hidden dragons, crouching tigers, so we met many people with strange extraordinary talent. After making our rounds, we made some good friends whom we really admired. As for beauties...hmm, we kept a distance.”

Prince Ji burst into laughter. “So different, so different! This is where you're different from Yujin. Xiao Jin would definitely meet beautiful women first and then only make friends!”

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<sup>281</sup> Yan Que's father. He was from a line of imperial tutors.

Xiao Jingyan couldn't help smiling too. "What did you all use as pseudonyms? Did you make a name for yourselves in the Langya rankings back then?"

"Now I'm embarrassed," Marquis Yan said with a smile. "We went to gain knowledge and experience, not to fight and surpass others. We had a few adventures, but avoided the limelight and kept a low profile."

Prince Ji shook his head from side to side. "To be honest, I only knew that you were out there causing trouble for about half a year, I practically never heard you all mention anything after that so I thought that nothing interesting happened."

"After we returned to the capital, we were immediately drawn into the situation at court. With one challenge after another, Jianghu soon faded into the distant past without us realizing it," said Marquis Yan as he sighed, "At the end of the day, we didn't belong there, and were merely there as guests."

"Hey, His Highness asked you what pseudonym you used just now?" Prince Ji reminded him with curiosity. "Did you choose the names yourselves?"

"Just names that we simply picked at random. At the time I chose a simple name, Yao Yiyan, one nobody in Jianghu would have heard of."

"Your surname is Yan, so you picked the name Yiyan.<sup>282</sup> That's really too simple!" Prince Ji couldn't hold back his laughter.

"Anyway, it was just a pseudonym, nothing important. Someone even pointed to a tree and made it his name!"

Xiao Jingyan had just lifted his teacup to his mouth but suddenly froze when he heard this. He stared fixedly at Yan Que with his mouth opened. His throat had gone dry, and he could not speak.

Surprised by this, Yan Que asked, "Your Highness, is anything the matter?"

"What you just said...who pointed to a plant and made it his name?" Xiao Jingyan gripped his teacup tightly, swallowing as he strove to stay calm.

Yan Que sensed that something was off, but at the same time he couldn't think of a possible reason. He hesitated for a moment before saying in a low voice, "Lin...."

"Commander Lin, what plant did he point to for his name?"

“At the time, there was heather growing in the garden,<sup>283</sup> so...”

Before he had even finished speaking, the teacup in Xiao Jingyan’s hand slipped from his fingers, fell to the marble floor with a sharp clinking sound and shattered into tiny pieces.

The three men present were startled and leapt to their feet in unison, asking one after the other, “Your Highness, what’s the matter?”

“Shinan...” Xiao Jingyan leaned on the table for support as he slowly got to his feet, his body swaying as Meng Zhi supported him with his arm. He was dimly aware of a buzzing noise in his ears, but he couldn’t make anything out. Many forgotten scenes from the past came rushing back to him one by one, cutting through his heart like a razor blades.

That man saying, “You are the one I have chosen to be my lord....”

That man saying, “Tingsheng, I will rescue you....”

That man who had rubbed the quilt between his fingers when he was deep in thought, that man who had so naturally drawn his own sword...

That man who had built the secret passage so that he could exhaust himself for his sake everyday, that man who when in a delirium had said, “Jingyan, don’t be afraid....”

His mother had sincerely beseeched him, urging him time and again to “never mistreat Mister Su”, but he had never really paid attention; when he had believed that his eldest brother and good friend were watching him from heaven, his friend had always been by his side, doing his best to lay each step of the way for him....Xiao Jingyan’s face was pale as he stood there, waiting for the blood that had surged into his very being to subside. When he could once again move his stiff, trembling limbs, he immediately charged out without a word, heading straight for the stable where he saddled and mounted the first horse he saw, then kicking it into motion, he dashed madly out of the palace.

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<sup>283</sup> The Chinese characters for heather is 石楠, which is exactly MCS’s father’s pseudonym, and the characters that make it up ARE the characters for “stone” and “Chinese cedar”. The Chinese character for “tree” (树) is also the same one for plants, so in this case, Lin Xie was pointing to a plant rather than a tree. I’ve used heather here (though inconsistent with the whole tree concept) because it’s probably more accurate, but when XJY asked his mother “Which Shi and which Nan”, it’s only normal for her to be specific about explaining each character. I hope that makes sense!

Everyone in the Eastern Palace was stunned by this unexpected scene, and at first, nobody reacted. Only Meng Zhi rushed out, calling for the Eastern Palace guards to accompany him as he mounted a horse to follow closely after Xiao Jingyan.

## CHAPTER 157

### *Heartache*

It was noon in the 7th month, and the summer sun beat scorchingly down on the head. Because the sun was too fierce, there weren't many pedestrians around. The peddlers also tried as much as possible to shift their stalls backwards to get some shade under the eaves. This made for streets that were wide and clear of traffic. Without anything to block his way, Xiao Jingyan rode with greater speed, and it took a lot for Meng Zhi to keep up.

Around the corner after passing by Huarong Embroidery Workshop was the street along which the main entrance to the Su Residence was located. But just as the corner was within sight, it was unclear why Xiao Jingyan suddenly pulled to a stop, his violent movement causing his mount to neigh and rear back on its hind legs. When it landed again, Jingyan's grip loosened and he fell off and landed heavily on the ground, scaring Meng Zhi, who was following closely behind, out of his wits. He immediately flew over to support him up, busily examining his body for injuries.

But Xiao Jingyan didn't seem to feel any pain, nor did he seem to notice the person by his side. His gaze was fixed on the not so distant corner of the street, his jaw clenched.

A turn of the corner and he would be at the Su Residence. Once he entered, he would be in Xiao Shu's presence. But he had no choice but to force himself to stop in his tracks. Even if he fell, he couldn't continue to go forward.

By this time, the Eastern Palace Guards had caught up, and following Meng Zhi's gestures to isolate and guard the Crown Prince, they surrounded him and kept onlookers at a distance.

In the circular space surrounded by that human wall, Xiao Jingyan continued to sit on the ground, his head covered in sweat, his face robbed of color, completely in a daze. After at least half an hour, he slowly stood up with Meng Zhi's support.

The mount that threw him off was beside him, its nostrils snorting as it snuggled its head against him, biting at his sleeve. Xiao Jingyan reached out to stroke its beautiful mane, then holding on to the saddle, he mounted the horse again, but this



time, his hold on the horse was relaxed as he turned around towards the direction he had ridden so madly from.

“Your Highness?” Meng Zhi held on to the horse’s reins uneasily, “Are you...returning to the Eastern Palace?”

“Let’s return to the palace...” Xiao Jingyan murmured, “Since he doesn’t want me to know. For him to do this, he must have naturally his own difficulties. Why should I insist on knowing when it would only add to his worries.....”

Meng Zhi understood his meaning. He felt his heart burn, and bitter pain burnt in the back of his throat.

The Eastern Palace Guards were well-trained and swiftly changed formation, moving from circular enclosure to front and rear guard, matching the Crown Prince’s movements. But the return trip was vastly different from the hurricane with which he arrived. Xiao Jingyan seemed like the wind had been knocked right out of him, and he looked dazed and at a loss. He didn’t know how to describe how he felt. If he was happy because his best friend was still alive, then why did he feel as though his chest had been carved open by a blade? But if he felt angry at being kept in the dark, then why did his heart feel so full of pain and regret that it hurt even to breathe?

Who was Lin Shu? Lin Shu was his proud and flamboyant, fiercely competitive, never willing to concede defeat, close and intimate friend. Clad in silver with a long spear in hand, always rowdy wherever he went. He was the xiao huo ren who didn’t know what cold was. His joy was like that of a sparrow’s, his anger a tiger’s. He was the Young Commander of the Chiyan army who never concealed any of his emotions...

But who was Mei Changsu? He always had his head lowered with a superficial smile on his lips. His speech was mild and unassuming, and no one could ever see what he truly thought. He was always wrapped in a fur cloak and huddled near a brazier, measuring the depths of people’s hearts with his deep and flickering eyes, his face always as pale as paper. He had not the least bit of vitality and his fingers were always as cold as ice, as though they carried the chill from hell.

He was like the embers left behind after a blazing fire was extinguished. Others might be reminded of the blaze he once was but he no longer had that roaring heat and liveliness.

Xiao Jingyan found himself completely unable to imagine what could have brought upon this change. When he tried, the pain that engulfed him was deeper and darker than a starless, moonless night.

As they entered the Eastern Palace, Meng Zhi went to help Xiao Jingyan dismount. But as the newly-elected Crown Prince slowly ascended the white jade steps up to the

main hall, he suddenly felt as though every step was a step upon the back of his friend, who was supporting him with gritted teeth. His legs felt weak and he stumbled, sitting down heavily on the steps. By his side, the Commander General of the Imperial Guard also bent down, half kneeling, half squatting, keeping guard.

Prince Ji and Yan Que, who had been inexplicably left behind in the hall, rushed out, but dared not approach, and could only watch from a distance, just like the Eastern Palace Guards.

“You’ve always known, haven’t you?” After sitting still for a long while, Xiao Jingyan finally raised his eyes and fixed them on Meng Zhi’s face.

But the firm and determined man avoided his gaze, not knowing how to respond.

Xiao Jingyan clenched his jaw, one hand clamped around Meng Zhi’s right wrist like iron tongs, the skin of his palm hot as fire. “How did you find out? Did you recognize him?”

“It...it was him who contacted me.....”

Xiao Jingyan’s eyes turned red as he slowly repeated that name, “Xiao Shu....Xiao Shu...he was my best friend, but why, when he survived and returned to the imperial capital, why didn’t he first get in touch with me?”

Meng Zhi gently said, “Your Highness, Xiao Shu has different expectations for you. You should understand his thoughts on this better than anyone else.”

“Yes...I understand. If I didn’t understand, why would I have come back....” Xiao Jingyan drew a few breaths, but no matter how he tried, he couldn’t stop the trembling in his lips. “But Meng qing, you must tell me, how did he become like this? What kind of horrors did he go through? He’s Xiao Shu! You and I both know what Xiao Shu was like. I used to think that even if you break him into a million pieces and put him back together again, he’ll still always be that lively and spirited Lin Shu...”

Xiao Jingyan’s last few words were just an analogy but to Meng Zhi, they were like a blade striking right through his heart, and though he had been trying to endure it, his face paled.

“You must know.” Xiao Jingyan’s gaze was fiercer than the summer sun, aimed right at Meng Zhi without mercy. “He’s unwilling to tell me, so I won’t force him. But I want you to tell me. Tell me!”

“Your Highness...” Meng Zhi was completely overwhelmed by him but after lowering his head, he shook his head and said, “I promised him...”

“Alright,” Xiao Jingyan didn’t persist. He suddenly got up, seeming to finally regain his strength. “Men!”

“Here!”

“Prepare to enter the palace!”

“Yes!”

Meng Zhi took a step forward, as if to dissuade him, but though his lips moved, he didn’t say anything.

“Royal Uncle, Uncle Marquis Yan, forgive me. I have something important to attend to now. I will invite the both of you for a chat another day.” Xiao Jingyan strode up the stone steps, and paused at the doorway to cup his fist in respect, but before Prince Ji and Yan Que could react, he had already turned around and walked out of the palace hall, jumping into the prepared palanquin. Before he had even settled in, he shouted the order, “Move! Move faster!”

The two men who were left in the cold at the doorway were forced to cast their puzzled gaze at Meng Zhi, who was still standing at the foot of the steps, but in the end, all they got was a wry smile and a brief statement that didn’t explain much: “It’s a long story. Let’s talk about it later....”

There were still some late arriving guests<sup>284</sup> who had not left Imperial Consort Jing’s palace and when the Crown Prince’s arrival was announced, they quickly hurried out to greet him. Xiao Jingyan pasted a faint smile on his face in response, fully composed, but the first words that left his mouth upon entering the palace were, “Mother Consort, your son has brought you a gift that is for your eyes only. Would you like to have a look at it now?”

Only a fool would fail to understand the meaning behind these words. The guests hurriedly completed their last words and expressed their good wishes, then took their leave one after the other, and the palace was quiet soon after.

Consort Jing was naturally puzzled by her son’s return. Observing his conduct, she suddenly understood that he had something important to say, and immediately dismissed all her attendants, then led him into the inner hall.

“Mother Consort,<sup>285</sup>” Xiao Jingyan came to a stop as soon as he entered the hall, and got straight to the point, “What illness is Xiao Shu suffering from?”

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<sup>284</sup> related to the upcoming wedding

<sup>285</sup> XJY in most times calls his mother “Mu guifei” or in earlier chapters before she became the imperial consort, “Mu fei”, “Mu” being mother and “guifei” and “fei” being imperial consort and consort respectively. It’s a formal term similar to “Father

Consort Jing's body began to tremble, and she almost tripped over her next step, but she immediately steadied herself and turned around to fix a direct gaze on her son.

“You didn't hear wrongly. I'm asking about Xiao Shu...I don't think you would tell me that you don't know who is the Xiao Shu I'm now talking about, right?”

The initial shock soon passed, and Consort Jing's expression turned from astonishment to sadness. Supporting herself on the chair's armrest, she slowly lowered herself and sat down.

“Commander Lin used the pseudonym Shinan, and during his travels, he rescued you when you were still a young female physician and brought you back afterwards to the Lin Mansion for protection, didn't he, Mother?” Xiao Jingyan continued, “Mother's past was never made known to me before, and of course, as long as you didn't mention it, it was only natural that nobody else would. Which is why when you spoke vaguely about your old friend, it never crossed my mind that the old friend would be Commander Lin....”

“Then how did you finally come to the realization?” asked Consort Jing with a sigh.

“I was attending to a matter, and was having a chat with Marquis Yan....” Xiao Jingyan advanced a few steps and knelt down by his mother's knee, “But these are not important. What's important is....What happened to Xiao Shu? You cried after you checked his pulse. Is his illness very serious?”

Consort Jing thought for a while, then slowly said, “It is....”

“Then what needs to be done?” Xiao Jingyan felt a sudden rush of anxiety and held his mother's hand in a tight grip. “Xiao Shu trusts your skills so much, you must be able to do something?”

Consort Jing muttered briefly to herself, debating what to say, her eyes obscured by her lashes. She said softly. “Xiao Shu has a physician who is more skilled than I am by his side. The physician should be able to make sure he's alright...”

“Then, how long will it take for his illness to be cured?”

“About this....I'm not sure. Maybe a day.....maybe a year....”

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Emperor” but XJY also sometimes falls back to calling her “muqin” which is the more casual term for Mother. I've mostly kept it to Mother due to their more intimate relationship.

If Xiao Jingyan had understood the real meaning behind his mother's words, he would have leapt straight up. Unfortunately, he did not and instead, felt somewhat comforted. "What's important is that he can be cured, no matter how long it takes. But why would this illness cause his appearance to change to what it is now?"

Consort Jing shook her head. "The change in Xiao Shu's appearance is not because he is ill. It's because he was once poisoned by the Poison of the Bitter Flame. After it was removed, his body and appearance went through a huge change...."

"Then this change means that the poison has been removed, right?" Xiao Jingyan felt a glimmer of joy. "It was due to the detoxification of the poison that his body had become so weak and susceptible to illness, so all he needs is time to recuperate, right?"

Consort Jing stared blankly at him for a while, then said with a slight nod, "Yes...."

"That's good." Some of the tension in his body finally left him and Xiao Jingyan stood up. "I understand why he couldn't relax and recuperate in the past, but I can handle everything from now on. He just needs to concentrate on his recovery. Mother, are his symptoms more or less the same every time he falls sick?"

"That depends on the cause, whether it's due to cold weather, exhaustion or emotional stress. The symptoms presented may differ."

Xiao Jingyan said without hesitation, "That doesn't matter. Xiao Shu won't have to suffer from cold or exhaustion in the future. As for emotional stress, being happy shouldn't be harmful, right?"

"Happiness can never bring harm, no matter the situation." Her eyes glistened and her smile was tinged with sorrow. "You intend to make him happy?"

"I know very clearly his innermost desire." Xiao Jingyan drew a deep breath, his vision clear. "I will speed it up and clear their names earlier, so that he can recuperate without worry...."

"Jingyan." Consort Jing held on to her son's hand and said with great urgency, "You must not take chances. At this stage, you might still be able to bear failure but Xiao Shu cannot endure anymore, do you understand?"

Xiao Jingyan pressed his lips together and nodded heavily. "Mother consort, don't worry. I know what to do. Xiao Shu is still watching over me from behind. I won't act rashly."

Consort Jing suddenly felt as if her heart was being gouged out. She knew that while Xiao Shu watched, Jingyan would advance gradually and steadily, but how

much longer could Xiao Shu watch on? He was holding on so persistently, but could he hold on until the day the Lin family name is restored and their graves rebuilt?

“Looking back now, I can understand why Xiao Shu didn’t want me to know,” Seeing his mother’s tragic expression, thinking that she was merely feeling sad about the past, he took her hand and held it tightly. “If I had known his identity earlier, we would probably not have taken this path....”

“Jingyan, over the past year, you have become more calm and collected, more dependable. Xiao Shu must be very pleased.” Consort Jing bit down hard on her lip, trying to recover her calm and gentle demeanor. She said quietly, “So you must have no regrets, nor should you feel sad. You must keep calm at all times in order not to add to his troubles.”

Xiao Jingyan deliberated for a moment, then nodded silently.

“Alright, why don’t you return to the palace. His Majesty will be coming over later to discuss your marriage. In the next few days, Liu Shangshu from the Ministry of Rites will also go over to the Eastern Palace to brief you on the preparations....”

“Mother consort,” Xiao Jingyan frowned with annoyance, “Just handle it according to the rules and regulations. I’m not in the right frame of mind now....”

“Jingyan,” Consort Jing’s expression was stern, “You just promised that you would keep calm, or have you forgotten? The marriage is not for its grandeur. The Crown Princess was appointed by your Father Emperor. Senior Lord Liu is fair and respected, and his granddaughter is sincere and sweet-tempered. From His Majesty’s perspective, he hopes this will keep your temper in check, but for you, this marriage is also of great benefit. You must not appear disrespectful or disinterested, at least not your attitude, alright?”

Xiao Jingyan had in fact already understood these points a long time ago, but it was just that his thoughts were in a turmoil at that moment, and he grumbled without thinking. After being thus admonished by his mother, he was aware of his indiscretion and didn’t try to contradict her. Instead, he lowered his head in agreement, then slowly took his leave. The Eastern Palace attendants who were waiting immediately came to wait on him as soon as they saw him come out. Taking one look at the bright and resplendent ceremonial weaponry of the Crown Prince, he felt even more restless, and the stab of pain in his heart went deeper. Unable to bear the thought of being cloistered within the palanquin, he strode off with a wave of his hand.

Meng Zhi was waiting for him along the corridor outside the palace gate. Though he was worried, it didn’t show on his face. As soon as Xiao Jingyan appeared, he carefully checked his expression, and seeing that His Highness seemed to have regained control of himself, he relaxed and hurriedly stepped forward to make his salutations.

“Meng qing,<sup>286</sup> you may dispense with the formalities.” Xiao Jingyan glanced at him and said quietly, “I’m increasingly being caught up with court matters and have found it difficult to keep up with my martial arts practice. Meng qing is Da Liang’s number one martial arts master. In future, please come over more frequently to give me some advice, whether or not you have a reason to come over.”

Meng Zhi understood his meaning. Kneeling down on one leg, he solemnly pledged, “This subject obeys the Crown Prince’s order.”

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<sup>286</sup> XJY has referred to MZ as “Meng-qing” here and not “Commander Meng”. This term came up a few times in other chapters, but I’d previously stuck to the latter for consistency. The term “qing” is translated as “subject”, so “Meng-qing” is “Subject Meng”. I suppose the difference lies in whether one is speaking to MZ as a subject vs. as his official role of Commander General of the Imperial Guards. But in this chapter, it’s also XJY’s more casual term for MZ, appropriate to his emotional state.

## CHAPTER 158

### *Leakage*

As the imperial capital of Da Liang, Jinling was naturally brimming with senior officials and nobles. In order to facilitate the passage of their palanquins while at the same time avoiding the inconvenience of common people having to constantly get out of their way, the streets were built very wide. Unless it was the imperial chariot of a high ranking noble that was out and about, chaotic situations that involved servants or soldiers clearing the way were rare. A normal official's palanquin that usually had about a dozen or more attendants accompanying it could move leisurely along the street. The capital's residents were used to seeing them, and if they were to run into one, they were very adept at getting out of the way.

The Shangshu of the Ministry of Justice, Cai Quan, came from a poor and humble background. He joined the ranks as an official by way of the imperial examinations, and began his career as a low ranking official. He had always kept a low profile and didn't like flashy displays of power or prestige. Everyday, he came and went in a palanquin that bore only the Ministry of Justice tag, with no other sign to indicate that he was a second rank high official. Over time, however, people gradually began to recognize his pasty blue and white 4-seater palanquin, and officials who were lower ranked than him, though they had more luxurious and extravagant palanquins, learnt to give way to him.

After the investiture in the Eastern Palace, although Cai Quan was not as busy as the previous few months, work still kept him busy. He even carried case files with him into the palanquin, reviewing them on the way home.

But on this day, just as he was opening a case file in the swaying palanquin, he was violently interrupted by an arrow.

The arrow seemed to appear out of nowhere, and stuck fast to the top of the palanquin. It wasn't followed by another, so this was clearly not an assassination attempt.

After the bodyguards of the Ministry of Justice swiftly stood to attention, ready to defend, the arrow was removed. Fastened to its shaft was a small note, which was



delivered to Lord Shangshu. Cai Quan unfurled it, flattened it out and looked at it. Written on it were a few succinct words.

“Meng Zhi, the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, took advantage of his prison visit to exchange the prisoner Xia Dong and remove her from Sky Prison. This is not a false accusation. If da ren does not believe, kindly investigate it.”

Cai Quan’s eyes narrowed. After a moment’s pondering, he slowly folded the note and kept it away, then raised his voice to call out, “Go to the Sky Prison!” The blue and white palanquin turned around, heading back eastward, and arrived at Sky Prison after about a quarter of an hour. The warden on duty came out to greet him in a panic, but received only a brief command, “Open the Zhu Zihao cell in the female prison.”

The warden on duty couldn’t decipher the expression on his superior’s face and dared not say more, so he quickly ordered the jailer to retrieve the key and accompanied him in. Zhu Zihao was located slightly deep within the level housing the female prison. It was surrounded by solid walls and had only one high west facing window. That was also the only natural light source in the entire prison cell.

A woman in prison uniform was sitting on a straw strewn platform. When she heard the door open, she turned her face slightly away, the strands of her long hair covering her cheeks. Although her hair was messy and there was dirt on her face, at one glance she definitely looked like Xia Dong.

Cai Quan’s piercing gaze fixed on the female prisoner’s face, and as time went by, his pupils narrowed further and his face turned grey.

“Men! Take her to the interrogation room!” ordered the Shangshu of the Ministry of Justice in a stern voice.

Two guards came forward to obey his command. One on her left, the other on her right, they dragged Gong Yu up. At this moment, although Gong Yu was aware of how bad the situation was, she was unable to resist. She could only hang her head down as she was pushed and pulled out of the prison cell towards the interrogation room and suspended from the torture rack.

Cai Quan brought a basin of cold water and splashed it fully on her face, motioning to his men to scrub it clean with a piece of cloth, very quickly revealing Gong Yu’s fair and delicate skin.

“Who are you? How did you end up in Xia Dong’s cell? Who brought you in? Where is Xia Dong?” Faced with the angry Shangshu’s rapid line of questioning, Gong Yu shut her eyes, as if she hadn’t heard them.

Cai Quan observed the subtle changes in the young girl’s facial expression and quickly made his judgment. In the end, he didn’t rush to resort to torture, but ordered

someone to first bring him the list of names of people who had visited the Sky Prison's female prison in the past two months. At a glance, Meng Zhi's name leapt out at him.

Very few Xuanjing envoys had personal friendships and Xia Dong was a widow. Since her imprisonment, other than the people under imperial or ministerial orders to interrogate her, basically nobody else came to see her, and there were even fewer after the return from Jiu'an Mountain. Among them was Meng Zhi, about whom he had been tipped off. He came the most frequently, making him the prime suspect.

Cai Quan had always regarded Meng Zhi as a loyal and straightforward subject, so this made him very angry. He took a step forward, grabbed Gong Yu by her hair, raising her face up to his, his eyes shooting into her like daggers. In the face of such a brutally intense gaze, those without strength of will would be terrified.

But Gong Yu's eyes still remained closed, her fine long eyelashes casting a shadow on her cheeks, with no sign of trembling.

One of the principals who had accompanied him in suddenly said, "Da ren, I recognize her. She was a female musician with the former Miaoyin Hall, named Gong Yu."

"Miaoyin Hall?" Cai Quan frowned. He had never involved himself in such activities, but he was aware that Miaoyin Hall had once been raided by the former official Zhu Yue on the pretext of looking for bandits, so he was momentarily confused.

Miaoyin Hall was raided by Zhu Yue. Zhu Yue was Prince Yu's man. Prince Yu and Xuanjing Bureau conspired to frame Prince Jing then later plotted treason. But the Xuanjing envoy, Xia Dong was rescued and replaced with a former musician from Miaoyin Hall....

Faced with such complicated relationships, the Shangshu of the Ministry of Justice, who was once well-known for his detailed analysis to create order out of complexity, found his brains somewhat inadequate.

"Da ren...." said the principal beside him in a low voice, after seeing him silent for so long.

Cai Quan's face sank. "Don't stand there idle. Try to make this woman open her eyes and have her look at the torture instruments in this room. If she has something to say, best say it soon so that she won't inconvenience us."

"Yes."

Cai Quan then turned again to gaze darkly at Gong Yu before slowly turning around to sit at the table behind him. He closed his eyes, deep in thought, ignoring everyone else in the interrogation room.

Although the unfortunate event of Gong Yu's discovery happened very quickly and unexpectedly, it was fortunate that Meng Zhi had planted an informer in the Sky Prison, just in case. As soon as Cai Quan brought her into the interrogation room, the informer immediately sent news.

As it happened, Meng Zhi was off duty and resting at home when he received the news. His first reaction upon receiving the news of Gong Yu's exposure was to change into his casual clothes and make a beeline for the Su Residence, but after he had rushed into the rear courtyard, he suddenly worried about Mei Changsu's current physical condition and immediately stopped in his tracks.

"Commander Meng," Li Gang greeted him, "You look bothered. What has happened?"

"Where are General Nie and Nie furen?"

"They're in the southern courtyard."

Meng Zhi turned in that direction. As soon as he entered the courtyard gate, he noticed Xia Dong and Nie Feng sitting shoulder to shoulder on a bench, holding each other's hands tightly, smiling at each other. It was a very warm and pleasant atmosphere.

"I really don't want to disturb the both of you," said the Commander General of the Imperial Guard with a sigh, "but I can't withhold this bad news."

"What happened?" Xia Dong stood up immediately. "Did something happen in Sky Prison?"

"Nie furen is really sharp," Meng Zhi wiped his face and said in a worried tone, "Gong Yu was discovered by Cai Shangshu when he was making his rounds of the Sky Prison. She's currently being interrogated."

"When? Was it today?"

These questions were asked rapidly, but not by Xia Dong. They came from the eastern corner of the wall. Although the voice was soft and light, and very gentle, it caused Meng Zhi to jump in shock.

Mei Changsu sat beneath a honeysuckle trellis by the east well, his pale green gown blending with its light green branches and leaves, his pale face almost the same tone as its flowers.

“Xiao Shu.....” stammered Meng Zhi, “When did you get here?”

“I’ve always been here,” replied Mei Changsu casually, before proceeding to ask again, “When was Gong Yu discovered?”

“Today, about two hours ago.”

“I can’t let Gong guniang suffer on my behalf,” said Xia Dong decisively. “Commander Meng, I must go back.”

“She’s already been discovered. What’s the point of going back only to walk right into a trap?” said Meng Zhi urgently.

“No. Dong jie must return immediately.” Mei Changsu walked over slowly, sat down on a bamboo chair and gestured to Meng Zhi and Xia Dong to approach. “Stop worrying first. I had already anticipated the possibility of Gong Yu’s discovery and have a general idea of a few ways we can respond. Fortunately only Cai Quan has discovered this, so the situation isn’t too bad yet. If the both of you do as I say, it will probably pass.”

“Alright.” Xia Dong and Meng Zhi had absolute confidence in Mei Changsu and did not doubt him in the least. They walked over to him and listened attentively, and committed his words to memory.

“This will require the both of you to make changes and improvise based on the situation, but this shouldn’t be too difficult for Dong jie.” Mei Changsu smiled and looked at Nie Feng. “It’s just that the both of you would have to part ways again, for a while.”

Nie Feng had already walked over earlier, his expression calm. His face still had a layer of white fur, and his facial features were still slightly distorted, but the cowering and twisted posture was gone. He stood erect, and his eyes were clear. After he had walked to Mei Changsu’s side, he leaned forward and gripped his hand tightly. A few thick, heavy and indistinct syllables sounded from his throat. Meng Zhi tried, but could not make out what he was saying, but Mei Changsu understood and smiled, nodding his head.

“Xiao Shu, you look quite good today. Has your illness healed then?” asked Meng Zhi happily.

He was interrupted by a lazy voice, “That’s not going to be possible, but what makes the difference is whether or not the Mongolian doctor is around.”

As he said this, Lin Chen walked over slowly from where he was leaning against the other end of the corridor, but when he caught sight of Physician Yan walking past

the Moon Gate on the other side, puffing out his white whiskers and making a few “Humph!” sounds, an indignant expression on his face, he immediately ran after him, trying to explain, “Lao<sup>287</sup> Yan, don’t be angry. I didn’t mean that. I really didn’t....”

Mei Changsu shook his head and broke out into laughter. He stood up with Meng Zhi’s support and said to Xia Dong, “Dong jie is a woman who’s tougher than a man, so there’s nothing else I need to say. Please take care of yourself.”

“Please take very good care of yourself too.” Xia Dong stepped back and went down on her knee to wish him well, then turned back to give her husband a deep, heartfelt look, saying simply and succinctly, “Feng ge, I’ll take my leave.”

Nie Feng nodded, and made a few “Ng” sounds, his eyes following as the both of them left, turning back only when their backs had disappeared. He noticed that Mei Changsu had sat back down, frowning, deep in some thought. Nie Feng leaned forward and patted him gently on his shoulders, shaking his head at him.

“I’m just thinking randomly. It doesn’t take much energy.” Mei Changsu smiled to relieve him of his worries. “There’s something strange about this. If you all don’t let me figure it out, it would keep bothering me.”

“Waztrangaborit (What is strange about it)?” asked Nie Feng in reply.

Cai Quan is the Shangshu of the Ministry of Justice, a second rank high official. Even though the Sky Prison is under his jurisdiction, why would he have gone to personally inspect it for no reason?” Mei Changsu leaned back and narrowed his eyes. If everything goes smoothly for Dong jie and the rest, this....this is a question we must ask ourselves....”

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<sup>287</sup> ”old” – but usually indicating affection or familiarity, or means venerable or experienced

## CHAPTER 159

### *Prisoner Return*

Just as the hardworking Mei Changsu was sitting deep in thought under the flower trellis, the carriage carrying Meng Zhi and Xia Dong quickly made its way to Sky Prison. When they arrived at its main gate, everything seemed as calm as before. As the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, Meng Zhi often visited prisoners like Xia Jiang and Xia Dong and others of similar rank, so most of the prison's duty guards recognized him. Someone immediately came forward to greet him, politely leading him and the cloaked Xia Dong through "the road to hell" and into the female prison.

When they arrived before the Zhu Zihao cell, the old jailer unlocked the door, nodded his head and withdrew. After Meng Zhi had taken a good look around him, he opened the cell door, bent down and walked with Xia Dong through the low hanging door, their eyes sweeping the room.

As expected, the prison cell was empty, and there was no trace of Gong Yu. Both of them exchanged a brief meaningful glance, then quickly retreated outwards. As expected, as soon as they arrived at the exit at the end of the corridor, the figure of a man with a face that was as deep as water blocked their way. Cai Quan, the Shangshu of the Ministry of Justice.

When they came face to face in that narrow corridor, the air around them seemed to freeze for an instant, the surrounding atmosphere dark and silent. Cai Quan fixed his burning gaze on the disguised Xia Dong for a very long time, then he sneered and said, "Forgive my clumsy eyes. I can't recognize your distinguished self. Will you reveal your true identity to me?"

With an awkward expression on his face, Meng Zhi stepped forward and said, "There's a reason for Meng mou's actions that Cai da ren isn't aware of yet. Please stay calm and don't jump to conclusions."

Cai Quan said impassively, "Alright. I will stay calm. Then please explain, Commander Meng."

“Actually.....actually, it’s like this....” As everyone knows, Meng Zhi wasn’t very good with words, and at this moment, he felt even more painfully awkward, his words seemingly vague and evasive. He started a few times but nothing came out.

“Forget it, Commander Meng.” Xia Dong wiped off the disguise on her face, revealing her face. “Just tell the truth. You’re already being put on the spot. What else can you do besides telling the truth?”

“Xia Dong?” Cai Quan’s pupils narrowed, the fog in his mind becoming more dense. He had received the secret note today, hurried to Sky Prison to personally investigate it, and was furious when he found out that the person in the prison cell was indeed not Xia Dong. After dragging her to the interrogation room and rigorously interrogating her for a long time, he still got no answers, and just when he was getting really frustrated, the old jailer rushed over to report that Meng Zhi had showed up. He didn’t even have time to think about it, hurrying over quickly to block his way, and now, besides Meng Zhi, Xia Dong herself was here, making him even more confused.

“Why is Commander Meng still hesitating?” Xia Dong ignored Cai Quan’s scrutinizing eyes and sneered, “Cai da ren is the one who’s trying to get to the heart of the matter now. It’s not that you’re not trying to save his face. His Highness cannot fault you afterwards.”

“His Highness?” Cai Quan’s eyebrows trembled slightly. “Who are you referring to?”

“Who else can order the Commander General of the Imperial Guard around?” said Xia Dong with a slight smile, “Cai da ren is someone who cannot tolerate not being able to get to the root of a matter, which is why you are listening calmly for Commander Meng’s explanation. It’s because you think that this matter defies common sense, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. I’m very baffled.” Cai Quan looked directly into Meng Zhi’s eyes, “You had obviously replaced Xia Dong and removed her from the prison. I interrogated the false prisoner just now and she didn’t confess that it had anything to do with you. I can’t figure out why you’ve now brought the real prisoner back. As they say, if something defies common sense, it would more often than not have its own reasons. If Commander Meng can provide a plausible explanation, there’s no harm for this lower ranked officer to listen to it.”

Meng Zhi rubbed his eyebrows, his expression still a little hesitant. Xia Dong suddenly looked up and laughed, “It looks like the Commander General is still afraid that His Highness would blame him. Then let me explain. Maybe I’ll explain it better. Cai da ren might as well listen.”

“You’re a criminal. I will not believe you.”

“Believe it or not, listen first before deciding. Cai da ren is a recognized expert in solving crimes. Even the most flawless confessions are unable to escape da ren’s discerning eye. So why be stingy and deprive me this time?”

Cai Quan looked at her intensely for a long time, and finally nodded his head. “Alright, carry on.”

Xia Dong smiled slightly and half rose in a polite bow. Her tone was relaxed as she said, “It’s a fact that Meng Zhi sent me back to the prison and got caught by da ren. But he wasn’t the one who secretly stole me away from the prison. That’s also a fact.”

Cai Quan raised his eyebrows, “Such empty words are cheap.”

“Although Sky Prison is heavily guarded, I’m not the only one who can escape from it. Cai da ren once admitted to letting someone else escape and was severely punished for it, so I’m sure you remember it well?”

Cai Quan understood that she was referring to Xia Jiang’s escape, and his expression became even more gloomy.

“If someone could help my shifu to escape, naturally I would be able to escape too. Furthermore, I’m cleverer than him. To bring someone in and leave her behind, keeping you in the dark for almost a month. Such a strategy, doesn’t Cai da ren think it’s worthy of praise?” Xia Dong chuckled, paying no attention to Cai Quan, who looked like he was about to erupt. “Are you not going to praise me? Even if you don’t, it doesn’t matter. In any case, there’s nothing to be proud of. Not long after I escaped, I was captured again.”

“What you mean is...he was the one who caught you?” Cai Quan looked Meng Zhi up and down from the corner of his eyes, obviously not convinced.

“Commander Meng is at the forefront of the imperial defence. How would he have found the time to capture me?” Xia Dong’s mouth curled slightly downwards, “Someone else caught me. Commander Meng is just sending me back.”

“It doesn’t matter who captured you. You should have been brought directly to the ministry office, not brought back here with such secrecy,” Cai Quan gazed at Meng Zhi as if his eyes were like knives wanting to slice him in two. “Such strange behaviour should also have a similarly strange reason?”

“Cai da ren is very forgetful,” Xia Dong smiled and leisurely stroked the long hair by her ear. “Do you remember what His Majesty wrote in his punishment order after my shifu escaped from prison?”



Cai Quan's heart suddenly trembled. The words "If he fails again, this will be considered a first level crime and he will be removed from his position and handled accordingly" flashed across his mind, and his throat tightened.

"The person who caught me was a subordinate of the prince who is the new master of the Eastern Palace. It was only natural that I was presented to him the moment I was apprehended," Xia Dong's twinkling eyes looked directly into Cai Quan's eyes, "Cai Quan da ren is probably well aware of how much this prince values you. If I was publicly brought back, it's tantamount to saying that the Ministry of Justice not only lost another prisoner, but also took a long time to discover that a prisoner went missing. If these charges are brought against you, even if someone pleads for leniency on your behalf, even if you are not removed from your position, a demotion is inevitable. As it turns out, someone is not willing to let you be demoted. Which is why Commander Meng has to be inconvenienced, to bring me back to Sky Prison in such secrecy to keep this matter under cover....."

Emotions warred on Cai Quan's face. He gritted his teeth and deliberated for a long while. Then his eyes narrowed again, and he asked with a stern voice, "If, according to you, you had been recaptured after someone helped you escape, then it should please you to see the misunderstanding between Commander Meng and myself. Why have you spoken in his defence?"

Xia Dong smiled miserably, raised her chin and let out a long sigh, "Because my position has changed....."

"Position?"

"Yes. The purpose of my escape from prison was different from my shifu's. As long as I haven't killed that Chiyen traitor who caused my husband's death with my own hands, I will not be at peace. That's why I wanted to escape, to look for shifu, to ask him where he had hidden Wei Zheng, but I didn't expect that shifu hadn't managed to find him. Then I fell into the hands of the subordinate formerly from Prince Jing's mansion, and was brought before His Highness the Crown Prince." Xia Dong's gaze drifted, and her voice grew softer, "In the Eastern Palace, His Highness told me about an old matter that he had long since investigated thoroughly, and as a result, I was convinced. I began to wonder if my hatred all these years were misplaced....Xia Dong is not an indecisive person. Since I had already decided to believe His Highness, I promised him that I would return to Sky Prison to wait for the truth to be revealed, so of course I wouldn't want you to misunderstand Commander Meng and continue to stay silent, but whether or not Cai da ren believes my words or not is beyond my control."

Cai Quan's eyes shifted, his expression still as reserved as before. "What did His Highness tell you to change your attitude so completely?"

Xia Dong smiled faintly and said in a low voice, “Cai da ren, the old case that I was referring to, can you not guess what it is? Forgive my directness, but this matter is too important, too heavy. It’s better for you to forget what you have heard. You really shouldn’t ask further.”

Cai Quan suddenly recalled what he had discussed with Shen Zhui in the carriage that day, recalled the reign of terror from thirteen years ago and tightened his lips.

Meng Zhi, who had been listening silently by the side, stepped forward at this moment and said, “Cai da ren, even though we don’t know each other very well, I’ve always admired da ren’s upright and outstanding nature. But the Da Liang of my generation seems to be showing signs of decline, greatly lacking in good officials like yourself to aid in its restoration. Since His Highness of the Eastern Palace values you so much that he would ensure your protection, why does da ren have to be so rigid and inflexible. Wouldn’t that be unworthy of his good intentions?”

Cai Quan lowered his gaze, as if he was deliberating. Xia Dong and Meng Zhi didn’t say more, giving him space to think it over himself. After quite a while, the Shangshu of the Ministry of Justice lifted his gaze once again and said with a solemn expression, “If everything you have said is true, then who was the one who sent the arrow to tip me off?”

His words really took the both of them by surprise. Xia Dong and Meng Zhi exclaimed simultaneously, not bothering to hide it.

“An arrow that tipped you off?” said Meng Zhi in astonishment. “Those of us with His Highness who are aware of this situation are very discreet. Furthermore, I’m delivering her back, not taking her out, so even though it goes against the law, it’s not a big matter. Who would tip you off?”

“The informer accused you of exchanging the criminal and didn’t mention that you would send her back....” Cai Quan spoke as he pondered this, “Maybe someone knew that Xia Dong had escaped, and also knew that Commander Meng visited the Sky Prison often under imperial orders, and combining the two together, wrote the secret note. It was only natural for me to investigate after receiving the letter, and after investigating, find that Xia Dong had actually been replaced. There aren’t many who pass through the Sky Prison so it was easy to make Commander Meng the prime suspect. It’s just that they hadn’t anticipated that the runaway Xia Dong would actually be brought back today in secrecy....”

Xia Dong chuckled and said, “Commander Meng, it sounds like you were the primary target. Think properly, what enemies might you have?”

“Speaking of which,” Cai Quan, who was still rigorous in handling the matter, turned his gaze back to Xia Dong and said, “I’m afraid you’ll still have to explain how you escaped back then.”

“Are you looking to fix any loopholes in the Sky Prison?” Xia Dong’s smile was relaxed, “Actually it’s very simple. The inner prison jailer does not keep watch all the time. We only needed to identify one who loves his drink and arrange for someone to invite him for drinks. After we got him drunk, we exchanged his clothings and disguised someone as him. As soon as the sky turned dark and the light was dusky, the imposter entered the prison. Since all that the guard on duty saw was the old jailer, he didn’t investigate further, thus making entry a possibility.....”

Cai Quan snorted coldly, “But there are two keys. For it to work, two jailers must unlock the door simultaneously.”

“Who said so? It’s also possible if one jailer holds two keys.” Xia Dong’s reply was as light as a feather, “Keys cannot be taken out of Sky Prison, which is why the first entry was for the purpose of making a mold of the key, nothing else. The drunk jailer suspected nothing after waking up. After a few days, we targeted a second jailer and applied the same strategy.”

“And you found another jailer who loves his drink?”

“Even if he wasn’t one who loves his drink, it’s not a problem. A rap on the back of his head produces the same effect as getting drunk.” Xia Dong was so focused on what she was saying that she didn’t notice as Cai Quan’s expression grew darker. “Of course, when entering as the second jailer, we had to bring along the substitute prisoner. This was a little more challenging but it wasn’t impossible to find a pretext, for example, saying that the false jailer was bringing a friend in to visit a prisoner or something like that. Because it’s taking someone in, not out, the guard on duty would let him through as a favour. By this time, the false jailer had two keys in his hands, so he could take advantage of the darkness within the prison to unlock the cell door, make an exchange and bring me out. As long as the guard on duty at the gate didn’t realize that the person that was brought in and out were two different persons, the operation was a success. If, after waking up, the jailer who was hit on the head felt that something was amiss, he wouldn’t necessarily think it had anything to do with Sky Prison. Furthermore, there are so many prisoners in Sky Prison, and nobody was missing, so why would he cause a commotion trying to locate the problem? If he was lucky, things would remain as they were, and if he wasn’t, then at least it would be noticed only the next day. In any case, I had already left, so why bother?”

“So you escaped. Then what about the person who stood in for you?” Cai Quan snorted coldly (again), “How is that Gong Yu from Miaoyin Hall related to you?”

“Cai da ren,” said Xia Dong as she pushed back the hair on her forehead, “Did you know that Xuanjing Bureau has its own spies?”

The muscles on Cai Quan’s cheeks suddenly twitched. “Gong Yu is one of your spies?”

“That’s right. The identity of all Xuanjing Bureau spies are kept secret. Other than the Director and the spies’ contact persons, nobody else knows who they are. I had once saved Gong Yu’s life before, so she is willing to do anything for me. She’s a most useful spy.”

“No wonder,” muttered Cai Quan to himself, “A musician...the head constable said that she actually possessed martial arts skill and wasn’t someone who was weak...”

Meng Zhi took the opportunity to say, “Cai da ren, since Xia Dong is back, the real prisoner was not lost so this matter can remain concealed. I don’t think there’s any need to further interrogate Gong Yu, since she is after all just one of Xuanjing Bureau’s subordinates, so let me handle it. If she remains with the Ministry of Justice, it might cause you more trouble.”

Cai Quan didn’t respond immediately. He calmed himself down, considering in detail what the both of them had said from beginning to end. Not finding any loopholes, he grunted “Ng” and said, “Alright. After Xia Dong returns to her cell, I will hand Gong Yu over to you.”

Xia Dong smiled nonchalantly, followed behind a warden assigned by Cai Quan, and entered the prison cell without looking back. Cai Quan couldn’t help worrying and personally went in to make sure she was well shackled. Then after strictly admonishing her again, he stepped out and sent someone to fetch Gong Yu.

Perhaps because she hadn’t been under interrogation for a long period, or perhaps because Cai Quan wasn’t one to abuse instruments of torture, Gong Yu was merely dishevelled and grimy in appearance, nothing more. There were no obvious traces of maltreatment on her. After looking at her, though his face didn’t reveal it, he felt very relieved.

After wrapping the young woman tightly from head to toe in the cloak previously worn by Xia Dong, Meng Zhi turned towards Cai Quan, took his leave and walked out with Gong Yu. Just as he was about to walk out of the gate, Cai Quan suddenly called out from behind, “Wait a moment.” Meng Zhi’s heart jumped. He paused in his steps and slowly turned around, holding his breath.

“Commander Meng, please convey my gratitude to His Highness.” said the Shangshu of the Ministry of Justice with a faint smile.

## CHAPTER 160

### *Night Conversation*

”What did you say? Xia Dong was sent back?” The angry and bewildered voice that echoed through the quiet night was oppressive and terrifying. “How could this be possible? They had clearly rescued the bitch. Why did they bring her back?”

“This subordinate still cannot find an explanation for it, even after considering all possibilities. Normally, we’re very quick in our execution. Once we received news that Meng Zhi had secretly exchanged a prisoner in jail, we had immediately begun making plans. Initially, everything went very smoothly. After receiving the secret note, Cai Quan had immediately headed for the Sky Prison to investigate. He even personally interrogated the false prisoner. He had never been one to secretly cover up matters. Besides, with the real prisoner missing, he wouldn’t be able to cover it up. At this time, I was preparing a memorial to report this to the Emperor. As long as this matter came to light, Cai Quan’s dereliction of duty would not be taken lightly. In his anger, he would go all out to track down Meng Zhi. After all, not many can enter Sky Prison to see Xia Dong. So even if his suspicions against Meng Zhi might have no real basis, it would at the very least be difficult to convince him otherwise. If these two men face off, regardless of who wins or loses, we would stand to benefit. But...who would have expected such a coincidence, that Xia Dong would actually be sent back to Sky Prison by Meng Zhi today. Our informer tried but was unsuccessful in finding out what they had explained to Cai Quan. In short, Sky Prison is now calm. The false prisoner has been taken away by Meng Zhi while the real prisoner has returned to her cell. In view of this, if you force me to bring a complaint to the Emperor, what would I complain about?”

“So if I understand your meaning, Fan da ren would like to back down?”

“Xia da ren, it’s not that I want to back down. You know how strong the opponent is now. Even though I’m the imperial censor, and I can deliver the memorial directly to the Emperor without having to go through the Eastern Palace, such words bear some reflection. Since Meng Zhi came to the defence of the royal party in the Spring Hunt, he has been greatly favoured. And now that Xia Dong is back in the prison, there is nothing to use against him, so I am also powerless.”

In the dim light of the oil lamp, Xia Jiang's face seemed to flicker, giving him a sinister look. He gazed at the middle-aged man before him and sneered. "What are you afraid of? The secret arrow is the most difficult to guard against. For Mei Changsu to consecutively overturn the fortunes of both the Crown Prince and Prince Yu in one to two years from the inside, isn't it because he schemed in secret? Besides, you have no other choice. All evidence of your rotten dealings are in my hands. If you don't help me, I will ruin you absolutely and unconditionally."

The middle-aged man gritted his teeth, his eyes quivering.

"I've held control of Xuanjing Bureau for so many years. How could it be so easy to defeat me?" Xia Jiang looked at him coldly and did not relax his stance. "If Mei Changsu truly thinks that I no longer have the power to retaliate, then he's near the end of the road."

"That being said, I believe I'm not the only one in court who serves you. But in order to attack, there must be proper justification. We had originally thought that we had the Xia Dong matter in hand, but it still turned out this way. So in my opinion, it would be better to remain quiet for a while. Nobody knows that Xia da ren is currently living with me. There's still time in future, so there's no need to rush things."

Cold light flashed through Xia Jiang's eyes. He also believed that he still had time. But how much time did the old Emperor have left? There was no certainty. Relying on people which the former Xuanjing Bureau had a hold over, and its extensive connections, he had managed to keep himself hidden within the capital. Remaining in this most dangerous place on earth is not surviving. Even if he were to die, he should at least put up a fight before dying. Although his words to the deputy imperial censor were ruthless, the truth is that Xuanjing Bureau's covert power had already more or less been wiped out due to Xia Dong's defection and Xia Qiu's wavering, and it has been more and more difficult to get in touch with those connections that are still intact. Although there were several ministers in court whom he could secretly control, nobody dared to face the new Crown Prince in the Eastern Palace, who was like the sun at noon, magnificently at the peak of his power. This frequently stoked Xia Jiang's anger and resentment. Of course, if he could sneak out of the country and escape with his life, Xia Jiang wouldn't insist on resisting Xiao Jingyan, but the danger he had faced every time he attempted to abscond made him realize how rigorous the search and capture operations were outside, leaving no other option beyond death or breaking through. But if he continued to stay in the capital like this, not doing anything, and lost control of those on whom he depended on for asylum, Xia Jiang wasn't sure how much longer he could keep his head above water.

Actually, at this moment, Xia Jiang was no different from a fish that had been brought ashore. If he didn't flop around a few times, death would be completely inevitable. Which is why he spent his days and nights agonizing, thinking of all ways and means to uncover Xiao Jingyan's fatally weak points. As long as he could act, he

did. Whether the act itself was dangerous or not, it was completely inconsequential to him.

“Xia da ren, I’m doing this for your own good. As long as there’s life, there’s hope.” Imperial Censor Fan was a little disturbed by Xia Jiang’s dark and gloomy expression and his smile was stiff. “Perhaps if you sit out this turbulence, circumstances will improve.....”

“Fan da ren,” Xia Jiang ignored his superfluous words and pursed his lips, “Didn’t you say we need to come up with some justifications? Actually, as long as we’re bold and adopt more aggressive means, it wouldn’t be difficult to come up with evidence. Because.....I know where the evidence lies.....”

“Where.....?”

“In the Su Residence.” Xia Jiang spat out these words. “During the Spring Hunt, I had gone to search the place once, but at the time, Mei Changsu was away in Jiu’an Mountain. The men he left behind must have suspected something, because the place was like an uninhabited ghost house, making my search in vain. But now that Mei Changsu is back, the residence must be lively again. Xiao Jingyan is obviously preparing to overturn the old case, step by step, so human testimony and material evidence must be slowly making their way to the capital. Where else would they keep them? The Eastern Palace is naturally out of the question, so that makes the home of Mei Changsu, Prince Qi’s old henchman, the most suitable place. Fan da ren, as long as we can break into the Su Residence, why worry about whether or not we can evidence of Xiao Jingyan’s attempts to overturn the old case?”

Fan Chengxiang had trouble swallowing his saliva. His face was pale as he countered, “Xia da ren, it’s not as easy as you say. The Su Residence isn’t in a remote location. Breaking through requires great effort. The Capital Patrol belongs to the new Crown Prince. Would they let it slide?”

“Of course we need to find the right opportunity,” said Xia Jiang condescendingly, “Have you forgotten that the newly-elected Crown Prince’s grand wedding is happening in five days’ time? Reflecting on it, it’s hard to say if it’s His Majesty or Consort Jing who’s impatient. The first year of mourning for the Empress Dowager ended only in the fifth month, after which there is a further two-year period of mourning. And the result? Sacrificial ceremony at the Imperial Ancestral Temple, spiritual decrees, the room allocation ceremony in the Eastern Palace,<sup>288</sup> yet according

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<sup>288</sup> These are loose translations of the wedding ritual. I’m unable to expound further other than speculating that it refers to:

1. Informing the ancestors of the marriage
  2. Getting agreement or blessings from the gods
  3. Allocating a room in the Eastern Palace for the bride
- For factual accuracy, more research will be required.

to the regulations, they're not allowed to consummate the marriage....in the end, it's all just a formality. And none of you imperial censors accused him of misconduct...."

"Xia da ren, His Highness the Crown Prince is of the fourth generation, and this is not his first marriage. According to the regulations, the wedding ceremony can be held after a year of mourning and offering a sacrifice at the Imperial Ancestral Temple. Even if they are really just going through the motions, they will be proceeding with it in any case, so how can we accuse him of misconduct?"

"I'm just saying. I'm not forcing you to use this matter to provoke him. What's absurd is how Consort Jing and Xiao Jingyan only appear to be mild, respectful and filial in normal times. Princess Jingning is also of the fourth generation, and she can also request for an imperial decree to get a divination from the Imperial Ancestral Temple. She's a daughter who is getting older, yet they're not in a hurry to get her married. Are they going to let her wait out the full three years of mourning? I wonder why they're in such a great rush?"

Fan Chengxiang glanced at Xia Jiang, but did not reply.

"Let's put gossip aside and talk about the day of the wedding. Even though it will be limited by regulations surrounding the mourning period, with only half the pomp and ceremony, what kind of limelight is Xiao Jingyan enjoying now? A newly established Crown Prince and an imperial consort to be honored in the palace. The Zhongshu Ling is the bride's grandfather. The Shangshu of the Board of Rites is his cousin. No matter how, this would not be a small occasion. When the time comes, the whole city would rejoice and celebrate. Wouldn't it be even livelier than the Lunar New Year? The Capital Patrol would be deployed in advance to maintain order, and since the Su Residence will not be along the wedding sedan parade route, who would be paying any attention to it?" Xia Jiang's face took on a murderous look, the corner of his lips curled with ruthlessness, "I can still gather some people, and Marquis Qian from the army is also my man. Go and get in touch with him on my behalf. He has 800 troops. As long as they are dispatched early in the morning or in the dark of night, swallowing up his house would be no effort at all, right?"

Fan Chengxiang's gaze flickered. He obviously didn't have Xia Jiang's confidence. His teeth chattering, he asked, "What if it fails?"

Xia Jiang said coldly, "We're fighting with our backs to the water, so what victory or defeat are you talking about?"

Fan Chengxiang's hand jerked involuntarily within his sleeves. He hurriedly tried to compose himself and force a smile. "You're right. How can we succeed if we don't take some risk? I think this will work. Xia da ren, why don't you plan the details first? I'll go meet Marquis Qian as soon as possible to discuss this. The more we prepare in advance, the more we can be assured of success."



“Then I’ll leave the hard work out there to Fan da ren.”

“There’s no need for such formalities between us. It’s late. I’ll take my leave first.” Fan Chengxiang laughed facetiously and slowly left the secret room. Closing the door carefully behind him, he walked back to his own room, deep in thought.

“My lord, why have you returned so late? Did you go and meet that Xia da ren?” As soon as he entered the room, a beautifully delicate woman with up-turned eyebrows and almond-shaped eyes greeted him and helped him to remove his garments.

“Yaozhu, why aren’t you asleep yet?”

“If my lord isn’t back, how can this concubine sleep?”

Fan Chengxing smiled as he stretched out his hand and took her into his embrace. He and his first wife had no feelings for each other and lived in separate courtyards. The one he loved and trusted most was this little concubine, Yaozhu. She was there when Xia Jiang escaped and entered his bedroom in the middle of the night, so there wasn’t much he kept hidden from her when it came to Xia Jiang.

“My lord always looks so worried every time after meeting Xia da ren. It makes this concubine uneasy. Although I am a woman, if my lord is troubled, telling me about it might be a way to ease your burden....”

“How would you know,” said Fan Chengxiang as he leaned against the pillow and heaved a deep sigh. “This Xia Jiang is getting more and more crazy. He wants to fight with his back against the river, but why should I take a gamble with my life, future and wealth for his sake?”

“Didn’t my lord say....that he has information that can be used against you?”

“That’s right, he does....” Fan Chengxing’s eyes were fixed on the embroidered canopy overhead as he slowly said, “Being constantly in his control like this is not a way to live. Perhaps I can make amends by rendering meritorious service to seek pardon from His Highness the Crown Prince....”

Yaozhu’s clever eyes immediately registered understanding, “What my lord means is to hold Xia Jiang and go to the Eastern Palace to report him in order to render meritorious service?”

“You’re clever,” Fan Chengxing pinched her cheek and smiled, “Xia Jiang is the person the Crown Prince wishes most to have today. If I can render this meritorious service, I hope it will not only erase my past crimes, but with luck, I would also be able to preserve my future prospects....”

“My lord.....are you sure?”

“Today, His Highness the Crown Prince is not as inflexible as he used to be when he was still only Prince Jing. The crimes that Xia Jiang holds over me were just accepting bribes due to greed and harbouring a few murderers, nothing more. And it’s been seven to eight years since, not worth taking seriously. If he is willing to forgive me, he would have Xia Jiang in his grasp. No matter how he weighs it, he won’t refuse.”

Yaozhu’s eyes were fluid as she smiled, revealing a pair of dimples. In a soft voice, she said, “If things really happen according to what my lord has said, then it will be very good. These frightening past few days have been difficult to bear. It would be best if my lord reports it to the Eastern Palace at the earliest possible.”

“You’re right. I’ve always sought peace and stability. It would be best to get rid of the devil incarnate as quickly as possible. Even though he knew he wouldn’t be able to escape, he foisted himself on me. I really can’t stand it anymore, so I’ve decided to go see His Highness the Crown Prince first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow?”

“It’s better to deal with something like this earlier than later. I’ll go over tomorrow.”

“My lord definitely won’t be wrong in his decision. Why don’t you have some calming tonic now, and have an early rest? Tomorrow will be another tumultuous day.” Saying this, Yaozhu went to the stove and returned with a bowl of hot soup. After feeding him two mouthfuls, she lay his head down and gently fanned him.

Maybe because he was at peace after coming to a decision, or perhaps the calming tonic was really effective, Fan Chengxiang soon fell into a deep sleep. Yaozhu waited for him to snore, then taking him by the shoulders, she shook him a few times, yelling at him. Seeing that there was no response, she immediately put down her fan and quietly got out of bed. Wrapping herself in a black cloak, she floated out like a phantom, and soon disappeared into the black night.

## CHAPTER 161

### *Recovery*

After the grand Crown Prince investiture ceremonies were over, the court situation was calm due to the old Emperor's convalescence and the new heir apparent's request for stability. In the absence of any major incidents, the sudden death of the deputy imperial censor, Fan Chengxiang drew everyone's attention.

At first, this incident didn't cause much of a stir because the government office's verdict after the initial investigation was "accidentally slipped and drowned". Even though the death of a second grade high official by drowning in his own backyard provided fodder for gossip, it wasn't something that was too surprising. But the matter took an odd turn when Fan Chengxiang's wife insisted that the cause of her husband's death was suspicious, and the government office had no choice but to get the Ministry of Justice involved. Cai Quan sent a newly promoted assistant minister to investigate the matter. After this person had thoroughly checked the inner courtyard and back garden of the Fan mansion, he summoned everyone in the household, from his wife right down to the servant girl, questioning everyone who had daily contact with Fan Chengxiang. On that very day, they pronounced the case a "homicide", and for a period of time, the whole city was in an uproar. The Ministry of Justice immediately reopened the case and followed up with a detailed investigation by the Ministry of Justice.

By the end of the 7th month, the wedding ceremonies to confer the title of Crown Princess was held as scheduled. Although several procedures like a grand banquet with singing and dancing were excluded, the fireworks display was cancelled due to Xiao Jingyan's insistence, and the bridal welcome procession was plain and simple without any accompanying instruments to make it lively, to the common folk, as long as the majestic Phoenix (Bridal) Carriage made its round, it was already a grand sight, and the whole city turned up and made up for the lack of joy and music with the noise they made.

As Xia Jiang had rightly pointed out, the Su Residence was not on the bridal procession route. Being so far away from the noise, it seemed calm and quiet here. In actual fact, Lin Chen and Physician Yan had been in a fierce argument since two days ago. In the end, Physician Yan finally agreed, so Lin Chen prepared some sort of concoction for Mei Changsu. After drinking it, he fell fast asleep and remained so

from early morning till late night, without any sign of waking up, so much so that all those in the courtyard dared not sleep. Although they didn't all keep vigil by his bed, they were all feeling greatly anxious in their respective places.

Lin Chen didn't sleep either, because he was enthusiastically demanding for Fei Liu to perform a dance with him. He even made a peacock tail out of poplar leaves to tie around Fei Liu's waist. Because Su Gege was fast asleep, Fei Liu couldn't call to him for help and could only attempt to flee chaotically around the courtyard.

But that was the biggest sign of activity that night. All night till dawn, the Su Residence did not experience any assault from the outside. The ruthless words Xia Jiang had said before Fan Chengxiang that night were obviously not carried out.

Mei Changsu continued to remain asleep, way past the afternoon, way past evening. When another dawn broke, Li Gang and Zhen Ping could no longer bear it and rushed to Lin Chen's room where they grabbed hold of the soundly sleeping Lin Chen, woke him up and questioned him.

"He'll wake soon, he'll wake soon. Probably around noon." Lin Chen smiled widely, trying to soothe them.

But at noon, Mei Changsu didn't even turn over, so Lin Chen amended the timing to later in the day, then again delayed it to night time, then the early hours of the morning....When everyone began to imagine themselves beating him up, Fei Liu suddenly glided over and said, "Woke up!"

This time, after waking up, Mei Changsu's condition seemed to have improved a lot. He was not so easily out of breath after walking for a longer period, and when Lin Chen bullied Fei Liu, he could even extend a hand to protect the youth, using the other to hit the former with a fan.

"You've no conscience. The both of you have no conscience," grumbled Lin Chen. He sat down and stared at Mei Changsu, with Fei Liu hiding behind him. "If I had known earlier, I wouldn't have helped the both of you, neither one of you!"

Mei Changsu ignored him, turning instead to Li Gang. "Ignore him and continue with what you have to say."

Li Gang held back his smile and looked away from Lin Chen. Straightening his expression, he said, "This person, Yuan Sen, has been with Commander Meng for the past seven to eight years. From his initial position as an attendant to his current position as a general, he has always been a faithful and trustworthy general. He was the one who drove the carriage when we were removing Nie furen from the prison, so he's one of the few people who knows about this matter. Master Lin said that if all our opponent did was discover that the prisoner wasn't Nie furen, then it's clear that all they have is an informer in Sky Prison, nothing more. But since they had very clearly

pointed out that Commander Meng was the one who arranged the exchange, then the news must have come from a court insider. Since they are so familiar with the situation, we can't rule out that possibility.....”

“Just tell me the outcome,” said Mei Changsu as he raised his eyebrows, “You may leave out the reasoning process. I know it.”

“Yes. In the end, Yuan Sen admitted that he had told his wife about Commander Meng secretly conducting the prisoner exchange. We immediately checked out his wife. At first, we didn't find anything peculiar, but after facing several stumbling blocks, we discovered that she is someone from the Hua nation....”

“Hua nation?” Mei Changsu's gaze shifted. “The Hua nation again....”

“Yes. The Imperial Censor Fan who died on the day of the Crown Prince's wedding, his favourite concubine was also a woman from the Hua nation. Although she kept her identity deeply concealed, she was eventually found out by the Ministry of Justice.”

Mei Changsu's expression lost some of its coldness and he let out a sigh. “Prince Xuanji has been dead all these years, but up till now, we still can't overlook her influence. After all, there is more than just one Qin Banruo from the Hua nation....”

“Actually when you think about it, the Hua nation had always been known to be soft and timid, but it's only the men who are soft. On the contrary, their women are very much stronger and harder, which is very strange.” Lin Chen interjected, and continued, “Isn't it strange that on this earth, extraordinary talent isn't just born in men?”

Mei Changsu rubbed the corner of his coat between his fingers in a circular motion, saying slowly, “These two matters, though seemingly unrelated, involve women from the Hua nation, so let's assume that they're connected for the time being. Back then, Xia Jiang left his wife and child for Princess Xuanji, so his relationship with the Hua nation isn't superficial. I've always felt all along that he's still in the capital....”

Lin Chen said in agreement, “I think so too. The search for him outside the city is so rigorous yet there has been no wind of his whereabouts, so it is truly possible that he never left the capital, but is hiding in a location where nobody would search, for example in the imperial censor's mansion and so on....”

Mei Changsu glanced at him, “Who was the one who told me that he had picked up a clue leading to Xia Jiang and had sent men to investigate?”

“I’ve investigated it...it was the old bastard’s smokescreen...” said Lin Chen dully. “If I wasn’t rushing over to see you, I wouldn’t have been so foolish then. This is really humiliating ah.....”

Mei Changsu couldn’t keep from laughing and said in consolation, “Well, this isn’t considered a humiliation. At most, you have just lost some face.”

Lin Chen rolled his eyes. “Humiliation and losing face, aren’t they the same thing?”

“Are they?” Mei Changsu thought for a while. Then he nodded and said, “They seem to be the same thing.”

Fei Liu, who was sitting by his knee, couldn’t help but grin. Lin Chen stretched his hand out to pinch him, saying, “You kid, you’re enjoying watching Su gege annoy me aren’t you?”

“Yes!” Though his cheek was twisted out of shape, he still proclaimed this loudly, and the person beside him suddenly burst into laughter.

“Fine, I shall not lower myself to argue with you both. Whatever face I’ve lost, I’ll take it back multiplied by a few times more.” Lin Chen raised his chin and said, “Changsu, pay attention. Xia Jiang is now mine. Whatever rathole he has hidden himself in, I’ll seek him out. You’re not to intervene or worry about it, is that clear?”

Mei Changsu knew he had good intentions. He smiled faintly, then turned his head to continue with Li Gang, “The excuse Dong jie gave for returning to Sky Prison. Cai Quan will still carry out his own investigations. Is there any news about it?”

“Yes. This Cai da ren is really very rigorous in checking the facts. He not only did a detailed investigation of Sky Prison, but even went as far as to make indirect inquiries around His Highness the Crown Prince to verify the information. Fortunately we had made some timely preparations to fill the gaps so he couldn’t find any major loopholes. In addition to that, he has limited resources, so this matter has finally been put to rest. Chief doesn’t need to worry about it anymore.”

Mei Changsu nodded his head in satisfaction. At this moment, Zhen Ping strode in, holding a tray. “Chief, will this do?”

“What’s that?” Lin Chen moved closer to have a look. On the tray was a pair of pure white jade sacrificial vases with carvings on them. Though they were delicate, they didn’t look very valuable. “What are they for?”

“Gifts,” replied Mei Changsu with a smile. Then, turning to Zhen Ping, he instructed, “This will do. Wrap it up.”

Lin Chen was a quick-witted person and soon understood. Laughing heartily, he said, "This is all you're giving the Crown Prince as a wedding gift? Never mind that it's not valuable. It obviously didn't take much effort, did it?"

"Jingyan is now the heir apparent. For one, he doesn't lack for anything. For another, he wouldn't pay any attention to it. So giving him something expensive would be a waste. This is already very good. In any case, I'm just bringing it along as a courtesy to congratulate him."

"No wonder you dressed Fei Liu in new clothes today. You're preparing to bring him to the Eastern Palace for a congratulatory visit, aren't you?" Lin Chen rubbed Fei Liu's forehead and laughed. "By now, those who are eligible to visit have more or less paid their visits. You went through the Spring Hunt rebellion with him, so if you don't show up and give him face, it would seem deliberate. Besides, thanks to me, you no longer look like a ghost and can now go out to meet people."

"Yes, it's all thanks to you." Mei Changsu cupped his hands, half jokingly, half seriously, and Lin Chen did the same in return, also half jokingly, half seriously. Looking on, Fei Liu didn't feel anything, but Li Gang and Zhen Ping couldn't help feeling a little sad. In order to hide the emotion on their faces, they lowered their heads and quietly withdrew to make preparations for Mei Changsu's visit.

"By the way, now that the information leak surrounding the Sky Prison matter has been clarified, Gong Yu can finally relax. Since the prisoner exchange plan was proposed by her, after things got messy, she kept feeling guilty for adding more to your troubles. She came by to keep watch everyday when you were ill, but now that you've woken up, she doesn't dare to come and see you."

Mei Changsu frowned slightly, "Even though the plan was hers, the final decision was mine. When she returned, Nie Feng also specially went to thank her. This young lady really spends too much time on insignificant problems. Why didn't you comfort her?"

"I've already tried. Since she came back, everyone in the Su Residence apart from Fei Liu also tried to comfort her, but for Gong Yu, all these words cannot compare a single word from a certain someone. Why don't you just be pleasant and take the initiative, call her over, smile and say a few words to comfort her?"

Mei Changsu lowered his eyelids, his expression still as indifferent as before. He remained silent for a good while then asked quietly, "Lin Chen, if I don't comfort her, what will happen to her?"

Lin Chen didn't expect this question and looked at him blankly. "Nothing, I guess. She'll just feel sad."

“Since nothing will happen to her, then why bother?” Mei Changsu’s face was cold and expressionless. “I don’t have so much energy these days to take care of everyone’s sadness, so I will have to let her down.”

Lin Chen didn’t say anymore but tilted his head to stare at Mei Changsu’s face. He stared for so long that Fei Liu also tilted his head to look at Su gege with blinking eyes.

Li Gang appeared at the door and said, “Chief, the carriage is ready.”

“Ng.” Mei Changsu got up and walked out. Behind him, Lin Chen gave out a rare sigh and said, “To be honest, for a man, you’re really heartless.”

Although these words could clearly reach Mei Changsu’s ears, he acted like he didn’t hear them. He didn’t stop at all, and left without looking back. Lin Chen was left alone in the empty courtyard. He raised his head and covered his eyes with his hands, looking at the sunlight through the cracks between his fingers. After a while, when he probably felt a little bored doing this, he swung his hands and said to himself, “To see a beautiful woman in distress and not be able to help her, this is truly a sin.....a sin.....”



## CHAPTER 162

### *Congratulatory Visit*

After the shock of the Spring Hunt rebellion and his wrathful punishment of Prince Yu upon his return, the Liang Emperor felt his health steadily deteriorating, no longer able to sustain him. Though the royal physicians who treated him were smooth in their words, telling him that all he needed to do was free himself from worries and fully recuperate, one look at their expressions was enough for the Emperor to know that his condition was not too encouraging. When people suffer old age and disease, they will feel that life is precious, so even though he wasn't able to completely relinquish his power, the Liang Emperor had no choice but to reluctantly put it aside for a while. So the imperial decree for the Eastern Palace to supervise the kingdom was issued, specifying that the Liang Emperor would temporarily not be attending court and that the Crown Prince would manage government affairs in Chengqian Hall in the Eastern Palace. Initially, the Liang Emperor deliberately probed and observed from the side, but after he saw that Jingyan handled matters cautiously and in a fair manner, with no sign of egotism and arrogance, he gradually let go. Other than summoning three public and six ministry officials to assemble in his inner apartments and report any major events happening in court, he spent the rest of the other days focusing wholeheartedly on his recuperation.

With the authority to manage government affairs and make rough and general decisions, Xiao Jingyan's position as the Crown Prince in the Eastern Palace was much more secure than his predecessor's, but at the same time, also much more tiring. Sometimes, after listening to all the reports from Da Liang in Chengqian Hall and reviewing piles of accounts, he still had to receive ministers and officials in his own apartments to discuss difficult matters.

Most of the Shangshu from the Six Ministries today were newly appointed in the past two years. Only Lilin, the Shangshu of the Ministry of War, one of the former Crown Prince's henchmen, remained from the old guard. During the explosion of the fireworks factory a year ago, he had accused Prince Jing of deploying military resources for personal reasons, so even though Prince Jing ultimately received praise and recognition for the way he handled the matter, Lilin had already committed a faux pas. As a result, after the former Crown Prince was deposed and throughout the course of Prince Jing's ascent to power, Lilin naturally tried all ways and means to make up for his mistakes, but no matter how hard he tried, he got no response from Xiao

Jingyan. After the imperial decree for the Crown Prince to manage the affairs of the kingdom, Lilin feared his career was over, and waited everyday for the Eastern Palace to remove him from his position, but nothing happened though he waited a good while. Instead, he received an important assignment in court, requesting the Ministry of War to be in charge of coming up with a plan to reorganize the garrison troops surrounding the imperial capital. Lilin spent much time trying to figure out what the Crown Prince's intentions were, and it wasn't till after the Ministry of Revenue's Shangshu, Shen Zhui said something sarcastic in passing that he realized that this Crown Prince was different, that instead of trying to figure him out, he was better off just getting the job done first. He had been the Shangshu of the Ministry of War for many years and had a good understanding of all aspects of the military system and its disadvantages. Faction politics aside, he was a capable man, and in that moment, he resolved to put all his energy into it. Ten days later, he presented a draft of the plan in court. It was unexpectedly well-received, requiring only some minor adjustments in details and clauses before it was submitted to the Emperor for approval, and subsequently implemented. The Crown Prince's approval and the praise of his colleagues restored satisfaction and joy to Lilin, who had been for so long trapped in faction politics, and his fear of the new Crown Prince, who obviously harboured no grudges from the past in his heart, transformed into loyalty and awe.

“Speaking of it, the faction politics were really a nightmare. Although some people had already been trapped to death by this nightmare, fortunately some people were able to wake up from it,” said Shen Zhui with a rueful sigh, after a meeting to discuss government matters. “Actually, most people aspire to dedicate their lives to serving the country and bring honor to their ancestors at the beginning of their careers, but when the state of the bureaucracy is murky, it gradually eats away at their wisdom and they end up following the flow. It is truly benevolent of His Highness to be willing to give a chance to these people when renewing the atmosphere of the court.”

“But such chances should not be given over and over again. The nature of some people cannot be so easily changed.” Cai Quan, who had always been more extreme than Shen Zhui raised his eyebrows and continued, “There are so many virtuous men in the world. Wouldn't it be better to keep these positions for the scholars from poor and humble families who are as yet uncorrupted?”

“Whether they hail from poor and humble or rich and powerful families, there will be opportunities for each and every scholar. As long as the court is equitable and fair, and does not differentiate them according to their family status, there's no need to overcompensate. You must know that when it comes to governing and the government, experience is still very important. Although newly promoted government officials are superior in character and spirit, they don't have very much experience.”

“Who is born knowing everything? Given more opportunities to practise and improve, they would naturally grow in experience.”

“But that takes time,” said Shen Zhui with a wave of his hand. “For example the matter concerning the reorganization of the garrison troops. Lilin’s seniority isn’t just for show. If I were the one to make these changes, I fear I would not be as thorough as him, nor as able to hit the nail directly on the head.”

“I admit that the Ministry of War’s plan is very good. But this is only one case and cannot be extended to the majority of people. Such seniority and experience varies from person to person. Some people, after holding a position for just one year, can be as capable as those who have held the same position for ten years, while others who have held it for more than ten years still don’t know anything. Such things cannot be generalized and must be evaluated case by case.”

“However, there are so many officials of different grades in the government and the various provinces. Without a unified system and common standard, how does one evaluate them one by one? Should they all descend by their thousands in the capital?”

“So we shouldn’t do it just because it’s difficult to do it? Screening talents, assigning and appointing virtuous and capable people, these are what’s most important to a ruler. Today, there are too many people who occupy positions without doing anything. Now that the Crown Prince is in charge, a new dynasty obviously requires a new atmosphere.”

Xiao Jingyan had been listening intently to the debate between his two most trusted court officials. At this point, he frowned and said in a low voice, “Cai Quan, watch what you are saying. What new dynasty are you talking about?”

Cai Quan immediately realized his error and hurriedly got up to apologize, saying, “It was a slip of the tongue. What this servant means is that....”

“Alright. I understand your meaning. Just be careful in future.”

“Yes.”

Xiao Jingyan was about to let the two of them continue their discussion when a servant from outside the hall rushed in and said, “Reporting to Your Highness the Crown Prince, the guest official Su Zhe\* has come to congratulate Your Highness on your marriage. He’s currently outside waiting to be announced.”

The both of them hadn’t met since the return from Jiu’an Mountain. One was busy, the other one ill. Furthermore, there were complicated preoccupations that stood between them, so although they still kept in close contact with each other, they hadn’t met in a long time. As a result, the moment he heard that Su Zhe had requested for an audience, Xiao Jingyan was a little stunned and he stared at the servant in a daze, not saying anything for a long while.

“Your Highness, Mister Su purposely came to congratulate you. Is Your Highness not going to invite him in?” asked Shen Zhui in a perplexed manner.

“Oh.” Xiao Jingyan came back to himself and hurriedly said, “Please ask Mister Su to come in.”

The servant bowed and left, returning shortly with Mei Changsu. By this time, Xiao Jingyan had already put his thoughts in order and maintained control over his expression in order not to reveal his inner turmoil.

Mei Changsu walked forward slowly, his eyes downcast. Compared to the last time they met, he seemed to have lost some weight, but his complexion had improved slightly. Today, he was wearing a satin long coat the color of autumn waters and carrying a plain colored fan in his hand, his crow black hair tied back in a bun on the crown of his head. His sleeves fluttered slightly, giving him an air of grace and elegance, like jade. But for Xiao Jingyan who already knew the truth, looking at this man and his appearance was like a stab to his heart, making it difficult for him to look directly at him.

“Greetings to His Highness the Crown Prince.”

“This is the inner hall, so Mister Su can dispense with the courtesies. Please have a seat. Pour a cup of tea for Mister Su.”

“Thank you Your Highness.” Mei Changsu bowed but didn’t take the seat. Instead, he gestured for Fei Liu, who was behind him, to present the small gift box he was carrying. Smiling, he said, “Your Highness’s marriage is a happy occasion. Please accept my humble gift as a token of my respect.”

Xiao Jingyan ordered the attendant to take it. Noticing Shen Zhui and Cai Quan’s curious expressions, he smiled and opened it. When he saw that there were only a pair of ordinary looking jade bottles within, he knew that Mei Changsu did not intend to attract attention, so he merely said politely, “Sir needn’t have troubled yourself.”

Presenting the gift was Fei Liu’s first time in the Eastern Palace. The moment he began to look around, Xiao Jingyan, who knew that Mei Changsu loved him like a younger brother, didn’t want to hold the youth back. So, he told him to amuse himself anywhere he wished in the Eastern Palace, but Mei Changsu added, “Play only in the front yard.” before letting him go.

“Mister Su, I visited you awhile ago, but was told that you were ill. Are you in better health now?” Shen Zhui usually spoke freely in Xiao Jingyan’s presence so as soon as Mei Changsu sat down across from him, he asked this question with deep concern.

“Many thanks for your concern, Shen da ren. It’s just asthma attacks due to the hot summer, nothing serious.”

Cai Quan, who also knew about his illness, frowned and said, “Mister Su is the most talented scholar in the kingdom, yet unexpectedly limited by this illness. It’s truly regrettable. Is there no cure?”

Mei Changsu swept a glance at Xiao Jingyan and didn’t want to continue talking about this topic, so he smiled and said faintly, “Everything is mandated by heaven, so let it take its time. By the way, Cai da ren, I heard that the Ministry of Justice has made some progress on the case of the death of Imperial Censor Fan by drowning?”

“Yes, the real culprit in this case is very clever, setting up decoys and diversions to mislead the Ministry of Justice. But this case was evidently not premeditated but hastily executed. Because of this, there were many clues left behind, as well as verbal confessions. Sir should probably already know that in every murder case, as long as someone lies, that person bears the greatest suspicion. Even if he isn’t the murderer, he would at the very least be familiar with the facts of the matter. Assistant Minister Ouyang, who’s in charge of this case, is the best at uncovering secrets by finely combing through details. It’s harder to lie to him than it is to lie to me.”

“So....what’s her name, the concubine detained by the Ministry of Justice....she’s the murderer?” asked Shen Zhui.

“We can’t confirm this yet, but she has told the most lies and behaves the most suspiciously. She even tried to abscond when the Ministry of Justice went to detain her. These are the factors that increased our suspicions of her. But this woman has so far done everything within her willpower to remain tight-lipped, Furthermore....we haven’t found a sufficiently convincing motivation for her to have committed the murder....”

“Rumor has it that she’s from the Hua nation?” asked Mei Changsu casually.

“Only half. Her mother’s from the Hua nation, while her father is from Da Liang. To the average person, she would be regarded as someone native to Da Liang.” Cai Quan raised his eyebrows and looked at Mei Changsu. “We discovered this identity while investigating her background and didn’t place much importance on it. Does Mister Su think....this is very important?”

“No,” said Mei Changsu with a smile. “It’s because I’m constantly wondering where Xia Jiang had escaped to, so I’m a little more sensitive when I hear the Hua nation being mentioned.”

Cai Quan asked in surprise, “What’s the connection between Xia Jiang and the Hua nation?”

“Didn’t you know?” Shen Zhui’s eyes widened in surprise at his good friend. “The last princess of the Hua nation was Xia Jiang’s lover.”

“Huh?”

“After the Hua kingdom was absorbed, many females from noble families were distributed everywhere and made servants,” said Shen Zhui briefly. “Xia Jiang’s wife found the Hua princess washing clothes outside in the cold of winter, took pity on her and brought her home with her, treating her like a younger sister. Who would have expected that this princess would eventually hook up with Xia Jiang. Xia furen was also a former envoy with Xuanjing Bureau and was unyielding by nature. In her anger, she left with her son, and till now, her whereabouts are still unknown.”

“This doesn’t sound like a trivial matter,” said Cai Quan in a daze. “Why have I never heard of it?”

Shen Zhui glanced over at him. “Princess Xuanji died seven years ago. You were posted to the capital five years ago. By then, the affair was already cold, and Xia Jiang had become a semi-recluse. And you’re so strict and serious, who would take time out to chat with you about his romantic affairs?”

“But many Hua nation women are concubines in wealthy and noble families. Even if Xia Jiang’s lover was once a princess, their kingdom’s already lost and gone, so why is this so noteworthy?”

“It would seem that Cai daren is not very familiar with Princess Xuanji,” said Mei Changsu grimly, “She’s not someone who merely depends on her lover for survival. In those days, before the Hua kingdom was exterminated, she was one of the princesses who ran the country, her rank second only to her elder sister, Princess Linglong, who died in battle, though she was the more cunning one. She was adept at keeping her claws sheathed, so much so that many were not aware of what a dangerous woman she was, and how many people of the Hua nation she had control over. Although she is now dead, Xia Jiang had to some extent inherited some of it. If Cai daren cannot find any other motive for the murder, there’s no harm in considering the possibility that they might want the victim silenced.”

“Silenced?”

“Perhaps Fan Chengxiang discovered that his concubine was aiding Xia Jiang, or perhaps he was already giving asylum to Xia Jiang, but later decided to report him for some reason or another....Having been in charge of Xuanjing Bureau for so many years, he would definitely have underhanded methods that we cannot foresee. If we don’t ferret him out soon, it’s hard to say what kind of harm he can cause His Highness the Crown Prince....”

Cai Quan's eyebrows lifted. He muttered to himself and then said, "What you've said is very true, Sir. It is a big concern not just for His Highness but also for the Ministry of Justice that Xia Jiang is still at large. Even if this case seems to have little connection with Xia Jiang, we should still investigate it first before ruling it out."

"Yes. If this was just an ordinary murder, it's ok. But if it's truly related to Xia Jiang, it's a good opportunity to track him down."

"By the way, Assistant Minister Ouyang had just given me a copy of the records for the current case. I brought it along to review it on my way here. Would Sir also like to have a look and see if there's anything we might have overlooked?"

Before Mei Changsu could reply, Xiao Jingyan, who had been listening attentively, cleared his throat and said, "Cai qing, you've already handled this case very well. Mister Su has just recovered from a serious illness so there's no need to trouble him. Why don't we find a lighter topic of conversation?"

Cai Quan had already reached into his sleeves to remove the record, but when he heard the Crown Prince say this, he froze. When Xiao Jingyan said this, he had kept his face completely expressionless, so it was hard to tell if he was truly considerate of Mei Changsu's health or if he was displeased with Cai Quan for handing out Ministry of Justice records to a guest to have a look. Shen Zhui, who was watching on the sidelines, was a little more shrewd. He immediately connected the fact that both the men hadn't seen each other in a long while, with Xiao Jingyan's hesitation in inviting Mei Changsu to enter earlier. It was inevitable that he would conclude that the Crown Prince was intentionally avoiding this shrewd Qilin talent who excelled in strategy and planning. This shook him for a while, and he immediately signaled Cai Quan to beg for forgiveness.

"This servant was not thinking and really shouldn't trouble Mister Su. Please forgive me, Your Highness." Cai Quan was also not a fool. He immediately understood his meaning, and after thinking carefully over what he had said earlier, he realized he had spoken out of turn and immediately bowed in apology.

Xiao Jingyan didn't care if these two Shangshu had misunderstood him, but he didn't want Mei Changsu to have a similar misunderstanding, so he explained, "I've heard that Sir will require a lot of peace and relaxation to recuperate from your illness, not to mention that Sir didn't come to the Eastern Palace to discuss the details of the case. These few pointers you've given are sufficient. There's no need to trouble yourself with the details."

Mei Changsu took a long look at Xiao Jingyan, and when he avoided his gaze, he couldn't help but wonder. Shen Zhui laughed gently to ease the tension and said, "What His Highness means is that Cai daren is to blame. Mister Su came to congratulate His Highness, but before he could even have a sip of tea or some pastries, you already dragged him into a discussion about the case!"

Actually, it was Mei Changsu who first brought up Fan Chengxiang's murder, but even the forthright Cai Quan couldn't argue this point at this moment, so he just made some indiscernible "Ng" sound which could be interpreted as agreeing with Shen Zhui's words.

But Mei Changsu didn't follow along, but instead smiled and said, "I appreciate Your Highness's kindness towards Su mou, but I would really like to have a look at Cai daren's record of the case. Your Highness will not mind, will you?"



## CHAPTER 163

### *Escape*

Hearing him say this, Shen Zhui and Cai Quan didn't know what to do for a while. Fortunately, Xiao Jingyan didn't seem to be angry at being disobeyed. He just hesitated and said, "Since Sir is interested, then Cai qing, please ask Sir for his views."

Cai Quan exchanged a quick meaningful glance with Shen Zhui, then removed the record from his sleeve and passed it to Mei Changsu.

It wasn't very thick, approximately ten pages, neatly bound, its handwriting small and clear. After Mei Changsu took it, he looked towards Xiao Jingyan to inform him politely (that he was going to read it), then leaned against the back of the chair and casually browsed through it. But as he was browsing through the record, the other three present couldn't possibly look on foolishly from the side waiting for him to finish, especially not the one in the seat of honor, who was ultimately still an unrivalled and distinguished Crown Prince, so Shen Zhui quickly put his mind to finding a topic of conversation to fill in the awkward silence.

"Your Highness, His Majesty celebrates his birthday next month. I remember that Your Highness presented His Majesty with a handsome falcon last year which His Majesty liked very much. This year, Your Highness would probably give him an even better gift, hehehehe....."

"For any child, the best gift is filial piety. As long as I cultivate my virtues and manage the government well, Father Emperor would like anything I give him....." Xiao Jingyan tried very hard to continue conversing with Cai Quan and Shen Zhui in a normal manner, but he would glance over at Mei Changsu from time to time.

Mei Changsu didn't pay any attention to their conversation, seemingly absorbed by the contents of the record. He browsed through it, page by page, deep in concentration, reaching out occasionally for his cup of tea. When Xiao Jingyan turned again to glance at him, he was just putting the teacup back on his table. When his finger accidentally brushed against the plate of pastries, he took a piece without looking up and absentmindedly put it into his mouth.

Shen Zhui and Cai Quan suddenly saw a blur before them. Xiao Jingyan had suddenly taken a big stride forward between them, grabbed hold of Mei Changsu's hand, removed the piece of pastry close to his mouth, and thrown it far away.

This bizarre scene made everyone freeze. After doing this, Xiao Jingyan immediately became conscious that his actions were rather inappropriate and looked a little awkward. His eyes shifted about as he said, "This pastry....is already stale...."

To say that the pastries served to guests in the Crown Prince's Eastern Palace were stale is actually similar to saying that they were too fresh. With the effect he achieved, he might as well not have offered an explanation at all.

Mei Changsu's gaze slowly turned towards the small table beside him. Laid out on a fine serving plate was an assortment of pastries including hibiscus cake, golden silk, walnut brittle, and.....hazelnut pastry....

Judging from his expression, Mei Changsu didn't seem to be too shocked. He merely lowered his eyes slowly, his complexion turning gradually pale. One could not tell that he was at that present moment facing an internal turmoil of gut wrenching emotions. He had originally only intended to test his theory out, but now that he knew it for a fact, he felt an indescribable pain, and his chest felt tight and cold.

Xiao Jingyan was still holding on to Mei Changsu's wrist. The wrist that had once been so strong and sturdy was now so weak and soft, trembling slightly in his grip. He felt like there was a boulder in the pit of his stomach. His grip tightened involuntarily, as if he would transfer all of his own energy over. But apart from that, Xiao Jingyan did not move an inch nor speak a word.

That was because the person sitting before him was his best friend, yet at the same time, he was not the friend Xiao Jingyan once knew. The Lin Shu who had undergone so much to return was no longer the Lin Shu who could take hits and falls as if he were moulded from iron. At this crucial moment, Xiao Jingyan did not dare to do or say anything wrong, and could only hold on to that hand in silence.

After a long while, Mei Changsu gently pried Xiao Jingyan's hand away and slowly stood up, holding on to the armrest for support. He pressed his pale lips together then said softly, "I still have some matters to attend to at home. Please allow me to take my leave."

"Xiao..." Xiao Jingyan opened his mouth but finally did not dare to call out to him. He could only watch as Mei Changsu turned and walked towards the door, his gait slow and unsteady.

Shen Zhui and Cai Quan were watching dumbfoundedly from the sidelines with similar expressions, their eyes bulging and their mouths agape. But Xiao Jingyan had

completely forgotten that they were there. After standing in the middle of the hall for a moment, he ran after Mei Changsu.

Mei Changsu was walking as quickly as he could, but he had only just recovered from a serious illness and was in an emotional turmoil. His limbs and face felt numb. Just as he reached the long flight of steps outside the corridor, his knees trembled and he had no choice but to stop, holding on to the banister to catch his breath.

Even though he did not look back, Mei Changsu knew that Xiao Jingyan was looking at him, so he gritted his teeth and pushed himself up, unwilling to display any sign of weakness in that moment. They used to grow up side by side, racing their horses together, sparring with each other, competing for glory in the autumn hunts, fighting together on fierce battlefields against hostile enemies. They led the vanguard to lure the enemy, and when an army ten times larger than their own had surrounded them, they had fought back-to-back to carve a bloody way out together. The proud and stubborn Lin Shu could never have imagined that one day, Jingyan would rush up to him to support his frail and useless body, and ask in a voice full of sympathy and pity, "Xiao Shu, are you all right?"

It was unthinkable and unacceptable. So he had escaped, wanting to get out of there quickly, to return to the Su Residence to clear his head and slowly think things over, slowly come to a decision.

But after he had regained control of his breathing, he was unable to take another step forward because Fei Liu suddenly rushed in from the side door. His footsteps were a lot heavier than usual, and he carried a large grey wolf close to his chest.

"Won't wake up!" The youth carried Foya to Su gege, his tear-filled eyes alarmed and confused. "Won't wake up at all!"

Mei Changsu stroked the wolf's grey fur with fingers so pale they were almost transparent. The body beneath his fingers was cold and stiff to the touch, and his heart felt a sharp pain. Foya's eyes were closed and he seemed at peace. Fei Liu tried to lift his head up a few times but the moment he moved his hand away, it would drop again.

More footsteps echoed from the side door. Lie Zhanying, who had been transferred to lead the Eastern Palace guards, rushed in, his forehead damp with perspiration. He was shocked to see the Crown Prince standing outside but before he could say anything, Xiao Jingyan motioned to him to stand aside and remain silent.

Foya was already seventeen years old. For a wolf, that was a long life. Though his death brought about sadness, for a mature and rational adult, it was not something that was difficult to accept.

But Fei Liu couldn't comprehend this. When he saw Foya being put into a coffin and ran over to have a look, Lie Zhanying had told him, "Foya is sleeping." Based on

the boy's understanding, to sleep means to wake up eventually. Just like when Su gege went to sleep, he would always wake up eventually, no matter how long he slept.

However, when he asked when Foya would wake up, Lie Zhanying had looked at him with sad eyes, saying that Foya would never wake up again.

This was the first time Fei Liu realized that it was possible to sleep and never wake again. This terrified him, and he instinctively carried Foya and headed straight to Su gege.

Mei Changsu stroked the boy's hair. He could see Feiliu's confusion and dismay but he was not in the right frame of mind to comfort and explain it to him. The Reaper's black shroud covered him perpetually, so cold and so visceral that he was unable to explain to the boy what death was.

"Feiliu, will you always remember Foya?"

"Yes!"

"As his friend, it's enough for you to continue to remember him." Mei Changsu took Foya from Fei Liu, but because he could not bear the weight, he was unable to remain standing and sat down. Lifting the wolf's head, he pressed his cheek against it as a final farewell.

"Su gege....." The youth was very frightened, but he didn't understand why. He could only move closer and squeeze into Mei Changsu's arms like Foya.

"It'll be alright. Stand up. Carry Foya and return him to General Lie. General Lie will bring him to a comfortable place to lie down. Go on." Mei Changsu placated Fei Liu with a soft voice, tugging at his black hair. But before Fei Liu could stand up and obey, another pair of hands had taken Foya's body off Mei Changsu.

Fei Liu leapt up to snatch it back, but once he saw who it was, he immediately remembered Su gege's most absolute order and didn't dare move.

Xiao Jingyan carried Foya with one arm, while his other arm was extended, palm facing down, fingers clenched loosely in a fist a few inches away from Mei Changsu's right shoulder. After a few moments of silence, Mei Changsu lifted his eyes and met Jingyan's gaze.

In that split second, the both of them felt the most incredible pain, and at the same time, they each also felt the pain the other bore in his heart.

Pain that could not be spoken aloud, for if they were to open their mouths, only blood would pour out.

Xiao Jingyan's arm was still calmly extended, steady and unwavering. Mei Changsu's pale face showed no emotion, but finally, he raised his right arm. Pressing it down on the arm that was held steady before him, he used it to support himself as he slowly stood up. Once he seemed steady on his feet, that arm quickly withdrew, as if it had never supported him in the first place.

"Fei Liu, we're going back."

"Ng!"

Lie Zhanying, who was standing at the foot of the stairs, looked at the always well-mannered Mister Su with a puzzled expression. After standing up with the support of the Crown Prince, he didn't even say thank you, but instead, simply left with his young bodyguard. And Xiao Jingyan, who was still carrying Foya as his eyes followed them out. The sad expression on his face caused Lie Zhanying to freeze.

"Zhanying...."

"Er....this servant, this servant is here!"

"Carry Foya with you. Prepare him well for burial. Tomorrow....I will observe his burial."

"Yes!"

Although Lie Zhanying had all sorts of questions in his head, he knew what to ask and what not to ask, so he hurriedly stepped forward to take Foya, quietly bowed and took his leave. Xiao Jingyan's robe fluttered as he turned swiftly around and walked back to the hall like the wind was carrying him.

During his absence, Shen Zhui and Cai Quan recovered from their shock with some difficulty. They discussed the strange event that had transpired earlier, but because they lacked sufficient information, these two high-spirited nobles whose prospects were limitless, for whom no problem was too difficult, finally ended up exchanging superfluous words that were as good as not saying anything.

"Cai xiong, what was that all about?"

"I was just about to ask you. What was that all about?"

"If I only knew. But really, what was that all about?"

In the wake of their "What was that all about?", they heard the sound of His Highness the Crown Prince's approaching footsteps and immediately kept silent, standing respectfully to attention.

Xiao Jingyan's expression when he came back was different from when he went out. He wore a tight frown, his face was gloomy and his eyes flashed with a cold, sharp light. When he began to speak, it was with a ferocity that they had rarely heard.

“Shen qing, Cai qing, I have something important to say. Listen carefully.”

“Yes!”

“I have made up my mind on this matter a long time ago. It must be carried out. What I am telling you today is not up for discussion, but for you to give me your wholehearted support.”

Shen Zhui and Cai Quan glanced at each other, then immediately replied, “Your ministers wait on Your Highness's command.”

“Alright.” Xiao Jingyan clenched his jaw, tightly gripping the dragon's head carved into his armrest, and said in a cold and resolute tone, “I...want to overturn the case of the Chiyan rebellion from thirteen years ago. Reinvestigate, rejudge, and have an imperial decree issued to the world to clear the names of Royal Eldest Brother and the Lin Clan. We will never give up until we achieve this goal!”

## CHAPTER 164

### *Miracle Grass*

When Mei Changsu returned after his visit to the Eastern Palace, his expression was clearly abnormal, but he kept his facial expression forcefully in check. After drinking his medicine, however, he threw it all up, including two mouthfuls of blood towards the end. This frightened everyone out of their wits, but he told them he was okay. Physician Yan hurried over to treat him with some acupuncture needles, to calm him down and let him sleep. Then, Lin Chen called Fei Liu over to question him, but the boy didn't seem to know anything. No matter how he asked, he just said, "Foya! Sleep! Won't wake up!" and other such words. No matter how intelligent Lin Chen was, no matter how long he frowned in thought, he couldn't figure it out.

Foya was a battle wolf raised by the former Prince Jing, who was very close to the Young Commander," said Wei Zheng as he and Nie Feng left Mei Changsu's bedroom quietly, bringing Lin Chen with them to the courtyard. "Based on what Fei Liu is saying, it's likely that Foya has died, so Young Commander must be broken hearted...."

Lin Chen shook his head and said, "I'm afraid that's not it. His old affection for the wolf is not as great as that. If the Crown Prince suddenly died today, spilling all those years of accumulated heart's blood, then that would be more likely."

Nie Feng hadn't associated with Lin Chen for very long so he was unaccustomed to his unrestrained manner of speaking and started at him with wide open eyes, while Wei Zheng, who was standing to the side, frowned and said, "Master Lin, don't speak of such taboo matters, alright?"

"What did I say?" Lin Chen shrugged. "If the Crown Prince is truly the dragon son of heaven, how could I curse him simply by opening my mouth? There's no need for you to keep worrying and circling the courtyard. Changsu is a very tough and resilient person. He is also doing his best to manage his state of mind to avoid harm to himself. Vomiting the two mouthfuls of blood is a good thing. He won't die today."

The more he spoke, the more excessive he was, but unfortunately there was no one in the whole of the Su Residence who knew how to deal with him. Although the two former Chiyan generals glared at him for a long time, he acted as if he didn't notice.

In the evening, Mei Changsu woke up and had some food, then went out to the courtyard to play the zither, but when the melody reached its most sorrowful peak, it suddenly cut off with a resounding twang when one of its strings broke unexpectedly. There was a fine cut on his finger where a bead of red blood was forming. There he sat, under the moonlight, his pale face frozen. Nobody dared approach him. Only Lin Chen, who sighed faintly as he asked, “Changsu, is your blood still red?”

Mei Changsu smiled slightly and said, “This blood is still red, this body is still here....Lin Chen, my pride has failed me lately. It’s all tangled up with the grief and sorrow in my heart. You’re probably mocking me, to see me in this state.”

Lin Chen looked up at the sky and after a long while, said, “I’ve always been arrogant, making fun of everything under the sky. You worry so much about so many things, and there are many things you do that could make me laugh, but I always find it difficult to laugh at you. Do you know why?”

Mei Changsu pinched the broken string between his fingers, looking at it as he replied vaguely, “I do.” Then, not saying anymore, he got up and returned to his room. Lin Chen lowered his head and walked slowly to the outer courtyard. Those looking on were confused and extremely worried. They pushed Wei Zheng forward to enquire. Lin Chen smiled for a moment then said, “Don’t worry. Changsu is alright. In any case, even if he wasn’t, what can we do to help?”

Wei Zheng was impatient and was just about to retort when Lin Chen suddenly said in a loud voice, “It’s a fine night, a fine wind and a fine moon. That cultured and enigmatic Changsu has gone to bed. Everyone, stop trying to figure him out. Why don’t you join me for a drink instead?”

Seeing that he was making a ruckus again, Li Gang and Zhen Ping knew that they would get no further information from him and immediately made their escape, leaving only the inexperienced Nie Feng, who was promptly dragged away by him, so Wei Zheng had no choice but to follow along to keep him company. The three of them went to the kitchen to fetch food and drink, then bringing them to the stone table and stools in the courtyard, they ate and drank while chatting about everything under the sun.

After drinking three pots of wine, they were all in high spirits. Even Nie Feng joined in with his vague syllables and hand gestures, and Wei Zheng’s face was as red as Guan gong.<sup>289</sup> Tugging at Lin Chen, he said, “Master Lin, our Young Commander....it’s rare for him....to have a friend like you.....please....”

“I know, I know.” Lin Chen’s eyes were like stars, and he wasn’t even the least bit drunk. Lightly rotating the wine cup in his left hand, he said, “There’s no need for you

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<sup>289</sup> Guanyu, famous general the Three Kingdoms period who has a red face



to ask. Although I've not known him for as long as the both of you, we've been friends for more than ten years.....”

Wei Zheng wiped his face and was just about to say something when swift footsteps sounded from outside the courtyard. As they got closer, they heard Li Gang say, “Here, they're drinking in the courtyard....”

Before the words had faded away, a figure rushed in, heading directly for Lin Chen. Clutching him tightly on the arm, he shook it vigorously while exclaiming excitedly, “Found it! I've found it!”

Lin Chen blinked. Without struggling, he asked calmly, “What have you found?”

“Eternal Ice Grass, Eternal Ice Grass!<sup>290</sup>” The person who had just arrived looked travel worn, and his lips were dry and blistered, but his eyes were bright and shiny, and he was in high spirits. As he spoke, he felt around among his robes. “Have a look! I've used a glass bottle, and I've been very careful. Even the roots are still intact....”

“Nie Duo?” Wei Zheng's face was filled with surprise and he roused from his stupor. “Why are you here? When did you get here? Weren't you forbidden to come?”

“I'll tell you later.” Nie Duo was too busy to pay attention to him. Taking out the corked glass bottle from within his robes, he put it into Lin Chen's hand and asked eagerly, “Can you please confirm if this is Eternal Ice Grass?”

Lin Chen looked at it as requested and nodded.

Nie Duo let out a long sigh, then only turned towards Wei Zheng and said, “I heard from Li Gang that my elder brother is here, too. Why haven't I seen him?”

Wei Zheng's gaze shifted slightly to the left. Nie Duo's gaze immediately followed it. Actually, when he had first rushed in, he did notice someone sitting by the side, but he only had a vague glimpse and couldn't make out from his figure and appearance that it was his elder brother. Now that he was having a closer look, his eyes suddenly turned red, and he immediately knelt down, and in a rough voice that was choking on tears, he said, “Dage.....”

Nie Feng stood up to support his brother up, but because he feared that his brother would feel sad if he heard his high-pitched and raucous voice, he didn't say anything, but drew him into his embrace and hugged him tightly. Since they had already received news of each other earlier, their emotions and pain were not as raw, but gazing at each other now face to face, the brothers' eyes were unavoidably wet with tears. After a long while, Nie Duo took a deep breath and supported his brother to take

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<sup>290</sup> Bingxu Grass literally “ice continuous grass” so I've taken the liberty to translate it to Eternal Ice Grass. Sounds appropriate.

a seat. Laughing, he said, "I see that dage is recovering well. I guess it won't be long before you can hit me and send me flying thirty feet away."

"You still dare to laugh." Wei Zheng came over and punched him. "Young Commander forbade you to come. Why did you disobey his orders?"

"I came to deliver medicinal herbs," said Nie Duo righteously. "Master Lin knows how important that medicinal herb is to Young Commander, right?"

Wei Zheng moved sideways and looked carefully at the glass bottle that Lin Chen had in his hand. Something stirred in his heart, and he quickly asked, "Master Lin, what is this herb? Is it a miracle herb?"

Lin Chen didn't reply, but put the bottle down on the table behind him. Looking at Nie Duo, he said, "The Eternal Ice Grass is a very rare herb. For you to have found it, you must have faced a lot of danger and expended a lot of effort?"

"No, nothing like that," said Nie Duo quickly in reply, waving his hand, "I was just lucky. I never expected to find it."

Lin Chen was silent for a while. Then, he sighed softly and said, "Nie Duo, I don't want to disappoint you, but....who told you that the Eternal Ice Grass can treat Xiao Shu's illness?"

"The old pavilion master!" Nie Duo's happiness was short-lived, and his expression changed. "Master Lin, Lin Chen, what did you say? What disappointment? It was the old pavilion master who told me that the Eternal Ice Grass can treat the internal coldness that Young Commander is suffering from. Is it because you don't know how to use it? If you don't know how to use it, I'll go and look for the old pavilion master...."

"Nie Duo," said Lin Chen, his eyes lowered, "When did my father tell you about the Eternal Ice Grass?"

"It was the year I was ordered to accompany the old pavilion master to sea to look for the island. We were on the deck of the boat, and he had just had some wine. We were chatting, and the old man accidentally mentioned that there was a record in the Lang Ya library that described a precedent where the Eternal Ice Grass cured the Poison of the Bitter Flame. When he woke up the next day, he wouldn't admit having said it, saying that they were just drunken words. But this time, before I went to Yunnan, I was in your library looking for some other information. To my surprise, I stumbled upon this record, and found that there truly was an account written about it. There were even drawings....."

“Yes.” Lin Chen nodded. “This record truly exists. I know about it, too. But have you ever wondered, if there was such a miraculous drug, why didn’t my father and I tell you all about it all these years, or ask you to look for it?”

“According to the record, this grass thrives in a pond that is far away and difficult to reach. Many have lost their lives searching for it and failed. I guess it’s because Young Commander didn’t want us to take such risks for his sake, which is why you weren’t allowed to mention it....”

Lin Chen peered at him and said, “You really think that we wouldn’t mention it just because he didn’t allow us to? Do you think my father and I are the same as your group of people, that no matter what he says, we would follow obediently?”

“Master Lin....”

“We’ve never mentioned it because we knew that it was pointless.” Lin Chen couldn’t stop the sadness that swept across his face. “Since it was pointless, why mention it and cause more worry?”

Nie Duo stamped his feet impatiently and asked, “Why is it pointless? It has cured someone before....”

“Yes, it’s cured someone before, but do you know how he was cured?” Lin Chen looked at the miracle grass in the glass bottle, with its branches and leaves outspread and sighed. “The method of treatment is recorded in another book. It requires ten men with great vitality and abundant qi and blood, to exchange their blood with the patient. Only after this can the patient be reborn. But the ten men who gave of their blood, they not only have to suffer, but their blood would eventually dry up and they would die. Simply put, to use the Eternal Ice Grass to save someone, it’s equivalent to exchanging ten lives for the sake of one.”

Nie Duo didn’t think twice. He grabbed Lin Chen’s arm and held it in a tight grip as he said in a loud voice, “I’m willing to exchange my life!”

Wei Zheng followed closely, saying, “I am willing, too!”

“I know that all of you are willing,” said Lin Chen as he looked at both the men, “It’s not difficult to find ten men who would die for Changsu, but have you wondered if Changsu would be willing?”

“Can’t we keep this a secret....?”

“No. The entire process requires both parties to be absolutely focused and clear-headed, with absolutely no hesitation. It requires the patient to proactively absorb the qi and blood from each and everyone of these men....” Lin Chen’s tone was stripped of all emotion, yet carried with it an indescribable sadness. “You are the ones who

know Changsu best. If you want him to do this, you would be better off killing him....”

Nie Duo’s knees were weak and he dropped onto the stone bench.

“The man who was cured of the Poison of the Bitter Flame more than a century ago took away the blood of ten brothers willing to exchange their lives for his,” continued Lin Chen without looking at him, “To save his life, he discarded the relationships closest to his heart. Compared to him, Changsu never considered this path to save his life, not even as a last resort, but he preserved the affection he had for the brotherhood he most valued on earth...Life and righteousness. To choose one is to lose the other. To make a choice, one only needs to examine one’s own heart.”

“But...but...” Wei Zheng’s hands were clenched as he said through clenched teeth, “Why is it that those who think only of preserving their lives can live, but Young Commander, who cannot bear to hurt us, must die? How cruel are the Gods, to create such a choice. Where is the fairness in this?”

“I had similar questions, but even my father couldn’t answer them. Instead, it was Changsu who said, “In the eyes of the world, life and death are matters of great importance, but in the eyes of the heavens, the world is large. Its vastness, the vastness of the universe, the fairness of all living beings, all these are by no means reflected in the length of a person’s life. For every so-called gain, there must be loss. Although the person who survived then kept his life, isn’t what he lost more important than his life?”” Though Lin Chen kept smiling, his eyes were bright with tears. “Listening to these words of his, one could attain enlightenment. If you can understand his thoughts, then don’t try to persuade him with your loyalty. He will never agree. Instead, he would have to spend his limited energy to dissuade and console all of you, so why bother? If you continue to force him, I’m afraid he’ll become a monk before he dies....”

At this point, Lin Chen made an attempt to smile mockingly, but the muscles in his cheeks wouldn’t obey, so he grabbed hold of the wine pot and took a few swigs before saying, “Don’t feel sad. This grass isn’t completely useless. It’ll at least give him a few more days.” Saying this, he put the bottle into his robes, patted his lapel, and left, alone.

## CHAPTER 165

### *Blind Spot*

The three men Lin Chen left behind in the courtyard remained as still as statues, stiff and unmoving, for a long time. Amongst them, Nie Duo experienced the longest period of joy, the most eager anticipation, and the deepest level of disappointment. He kept holding his head in the palm of his hand, not responding even after Wei Zheng reached out to shake him.

“Nie Duo, when you meet the Young Marshal tomorrow, just tell him that you’re here because you’re concerned about the situation here. Don’t mention the grass....If he knows that we are sad, he will be sad, too....”

Nie Duo continued to stay that way for a good while, both his hands clenched into fists. Suddenly, he turned around, and knelt with a plop before Nie Feng, and said in a trembling voice, “Dage, there are some things....you should already know. Now that Father and Uncle are gone, you must be the one to discipline me. Hit me, please, hit me!”

“Nie Duo, what are you doing?” Wei Zheng came over to pull him up. “Is there any use in hitting you? If there is, then a group of us will hit you. So what are you doing?”

“Leave me alone!” Nie Duo jerked his arm away and roared, “Do you know that there was a time when I really hated you? At first everything was fine. Even though I had feelings I shouldn’t have had, nobody knew about them. Even the Young Marshal didn’t detect anything. But you had to keep asking me what was wrong, forcing me to speak even after I was drunk! And in the end? After I spoke, you beat me up, and Fei Liu heard it. I could no longer take back my words, nor could I deny it....”

His words aroused Wei Zheng’s anger, and he kicked out at him, saying with fury, “You still dare to ask why I beat you up! Do you still remember your words? You said that your love for the princess surpassed everything, that because of her, you don’t give a damn about anything, not even if you had to betray the Young Marshal!”

“Yes,” said Nie Duo, his eyes red, nodding heavily. “That was what I said and what I thought back then....but no matter what I had thought or said, I also knew that

it wasn't right. But the truth is, my heart would often revisit these selfish thoughts, so much so that even when I was wading through the poisonous pond in search of the Eternal Ice Grass, I couldn't help but wonder if the reason I was risking my life was because as long as Young Marshal lives, there would be some hope that Nihuang and I could be together? He would forgive us and give us his blessings. It didn't matter how many people objected, as long as Young Marshal was willing to break their wedding engagement, he would surely find a way for us to be together....but if he's gone, even if we ignored other people's views and opinions, Nihuang and I....we would never be able to get past this chasm in our hearts."

"Nie Duo....."

"These thoughts sound so very despicable don't they?" Nie Duo drew in a deep breath and lifted his head, "But I still had those thoughts. But looking back now, I realize that none of these are important. Putting aside my selfish thoughts, putting aside Nihuang, putting aside my weakness and confusion, I asked myself, if the opposite was true, that in order for Young Marshal to live, I can never be with Nihuang, what would I do? There is no doubt in my mind that I would wish for him to live. You know this feeling very well because you feel the same way. All of us feel the same way. But why, why is it so absolutely impossible? Why?"

Wei Zheng looked at him, unable to respond. Nie Feng drew in a deep breath, his still slightly purplish lips trembling, his eyes shedding tears which soaked the thin layer of fur on his face. Compared to Nie Duo and Wei Zheng, he had far more experience and greater depth of feeling. It's just that he was unable to express it, and in his pain, neither did he wish to say anything.

After this brief outburst, the courtyard was still again. Looking at Wei Zheng's sad and mournful face, he was a little deflated. He stretched out his hand to give him a few pats, then turned again to bow to his elder brother. "Dage, take care of yourself. I'm leaving."

Wei Zheng leapt up all of a sudden and asked, "Where are you going?"

"I'm returning to Yunnan. Young Marshal forbade me to come, so don't let him know. I shall leave quietly."

"Are you....not going to meet him?"

Nie Duo shook his head and turned to leave, but Wei Zheng held him back.

"Don't leave. Just let the Young Marshal scold you, but remain here in the capital." There was a flicker in Wei Zheng's gaze, as if he couldn't decide whether or not to say it. "Yunnan is a long way away. I'm afraid....when the time comes, it would be too late to inform you...."

“Inform me about what?” Nie Duo was shaken to the core by his implied meaning and his heart almost came to a stop. “What the hell do you mean?”

Wei Zheng swallowed hard and whispered, “The situation in the capital is pretty good, unlike when Young Marshal first forbade you to come....but Young Marshal is not in a very good state now, so you should stay.”

“What do you mean by “not in a very good state”? Isn’t Young Master Lin here?”

Wei Zheng looked at him, his eyes suddenly filled with tears. He turned away to hide them but Nie Duo pulled him back and asked forcefully, “He keeps writing letters, saying that he’s been very well, so he should be very well. Do you know that Young Marshal has only just turned thirty? So what nonsense are you spouting?”

Nie Feng slowly stretched out his hand and put it over his younger brother’s hand, grasping it firmly. Back then, this general of the Chiyan army vanguard was someone who was well able to stabilize any given situation, more so than the headstrong and brash Young Marshal, and it was no different now. Under his steady gaze, Nie Duo slowly took control of his emotions and released his grip on Wei Zheng.

None of them spoke again. The atmosphere was heavy and almost suffocating.

That night, Nie Duo stayed in his elder brother’s room. He did not make a sound, nor toss and turn, nor did he sleep, for his eyes remained open until dawn. Upon rising, he freshened up and put himself in order, then, wearing a pale face, he went to see his Young Marshal.

Perhaps it was truly because the situation in the capital was different, but Mei Changsu wasn’t really angry when Nie Duo knelt before him, begging for forgiveness. In fact, his eyes were filled with joy when looking at him, although he did still admonish him lightly with “Why didn’t you do as you were told?”, before asking about the recent developments with Princess Nihuang.

Even though Nie Duo was in Yunnan, the both of them had actually deliberately avoided each other and never met up. Fearing that Mei Changsu’s suspicions would be aroused, he didn’t tell the truth but replied vaguely, saying, “She’s alright.”

Just at this moment, Zhen Ping entered to remind Mei Changsu, “Chief, it’s Marquis Yan’s birthday today. An invitation was sent a few days ago inviting you to admire the early blooms of the sweet-scented osmanthus. Does Chief wish to go personally or send a gift over?”

Mei Changsu considered for a while then said, “Make the preparations. I will pay a visit later.”

Lin Chen, who was leaning on the table with his chin propped on his hand, said, "Marquis Yan would probably also have invited the Crown Prince over for his birthday, wouldn't he?"

Mei Changsu turned to glance at him and knew that he had seen through the reason for his emotional turmoil yesterday. He laughed and said, "Since he already knows, it's pointless to keep avoiding him. I spent the whole night thinking about it. Things have already reached this point, so the more often we meet, the sooner we'll get used to it. As far as Jingyan and I are concerned, this will be more advantageous for us."

"Then bring me with you." Lin Chen stretched and stood up. "I like that smiling young master of the Yan family. He once came to Lang Ya Pavillion and spent money to ask what his future wife would be like. So very adorable."

"So you just teased him and talked nonsense?"

"Hehe." Lin Chen laughed wholeheartedly, not denying it, then dashed into the courtyard to go after Fei Liu again. Mei Changsu ignored him and instead, leaned against the bench as he asked Nie Duo about the status of the border defence between Yunnan and Da Chu, before proceeding to again remind him to also pay attention to the situation in the Eastern Sea. While conversing with him, Nie Duo also took the opportunity to look closely at his Young Marshal whom he hadn't seen in a few years. The more closely he looked, the more he began to understand that Wei Zheng's words from the night before were not baseless, and his heart knotted up, twisting within him like a knife.

Opposite him, Mei Changsu didn't notice the expression on his officer's face. After conversing for a while, he stopped to rest and gazed out the window.

The sound of Lin Chen's laughter floated in from the courtyard, full of life and joy, without the least worry.

Although, the truth is, it's impossible for such worry-free people to exist on this earth.

After a short moment of silence, Mei Changsu called out softly, "Nie Duo...."

"I'm here."

"Jingyan already knows about me," said Mei Changsu, turning his head to look gently at him, "You know, he's someone with a one-tracked mind, so he will definitely object to you and Nihuang....you have to be a little patient. I will find a way."

Nie Duo looked fixedly at him. He didn't understand why but he suddenly felt very angry, and couldn't stop himself from yelling, "Young Marshal, please stop



worrying about us. This is not important nor is it urgent. What's most important now is you. You obviously.....”

At this point, he choked and could say no more. Obviously what? Obviously hanging onto life by a thread. Obviously wearing himself down with his thoughts. But why still continue to take on these burdens and deplete his heart's blood? Mei Changsu's blind spot lay in this: as he dies a death of a thousand cuts for the sake of the departed, for the sake of old friends, for the sake of brothers whose lives and deaths were intertwined with his, he forgot that others would also worry about him, forgot that his friends could only look on helplessly as he continued to sacrifice his life, feeling in their hearts only guilt and pain.

After his outburst, Nie Duo was a little at a loss. Holding back his tears, he pressed his forehead against the armrest of his Young Marshal's chair as Mei Changsu looked at him in shock and confusion. Out of nowhere, Lin Chen suddenly popped his head through the window, and tilting his head to look at the scene in the room, he said with a sigh, “Changsu, I can tell from the look on your face that you cannot understand at all why Nie Duo is so angry.”

Before Mei Changsu could speak, Nie Duo jumped up and retorted, “Don't talk nonsense. I'm not angry. How could I be angry at Young Marshal?”

“Alright alright alright, said Lin Chen, waving his left hand. “Just think of it as me meddling in your affairs. I really can't stand your group of people. Really can't stand it. How did such a free and easygoing person such as myself get mixed up with all of you?”

At this moment, Fei Liu suddenly appeared with a large basin of water, and from a few steps away, splashed it at Lin Chen, while simultaneously saying in a loud voice, “Lost already!”, after which Lin Chen instantly looked like a chicken that had fallen into hot soup.<sup>291</sup>

Young Master Lin was certainly no less than the free and easygoing person he claimed to be. He was stunned for a moment, but soon regained his composure. After wiping the cold water from his face, he gracefully turned around to face Fei Liu, and said with a serious face, “Xiao Fei Liu, I'm telling you seriously, that even though I was playing the water splashing game with you just now, we've already declared a truce for the past half hour. When I started having a discussion about other matters with your Su gege, any normal person would understand that the game was already over, but during this time, you snuck up behind me and splashed water all over me. It's not only wrong but also futile, do you understand?”

Fei Liu obviously did not understand, because his face immediately turned red with anger. “Lost already! You blame!”

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<sup>291</sup> literal translation of a phrase similar to “drowned rat”

In the wake of their commotion, the sorrowful atmosphere was instantly dispelled. Nie Duo drew a deep breath and stood up straight, a little annoyed by his sudden emotional outburst, which would only add to his Young Marshal's troubles. Fortunately, Mei Changsu's attention had already been distracted by Fei Liu, and he was smiling as he gently stroked the boy's hair, listening as he complained about Lin Chen's despicable ways. In the end, based on the principle of teaching children not to break their promises, the master of the Su Residence forced Lin Chen to honour the punishment for losing – to wear a long skirt and dance the fan dance. Everyone in Su Residence ran over to watch, and for a while, the place was filled with cheering and laughter, sweeping away the sadness and despair of the past few days.

In the afternoon, Lin Chen carefully examined Mei Changsu's pulse and appeared fairly satisfied. At this time, Li Gang had also already made preparations for them to make their congratulatory visit, so the both of them got into the carriage and made their way to Marquis Yan's mansion.

Although he said that he could no longer deliberately avoid Xiao Jingyan, Xiao Jingyan had already come and gone when Mei Changsu arrived, so neither of them met face to face. Because the period of national mourning hadn't passed, large gatherings and banquets were prohibited, so Marquis Yan had invited various members of the public to admire the early blooms of the sweet-scented osmanthus that grew abundantly in the Yan mansion's rear courtyard. Not many people were invited, so the mansion was still calm and peaceful. When Mei Changsu entered, there were only four or five people in the Osmanthus Hall. Though they knew each other, they weren't very familiar with each other, so they merely exchanged a few words of pleasantries after greeting each other.

Mei Changsu looked around, then asked, "Why don't I see Yujin around?"

"He was here most of the day, accompanying me to entertain the guests, but unfortunately he left shortly before Mister Su arrived, saying that he had to send a friend off."

There was a slight shift in Mei Changsu's expression, before he immediately smiled once again and changed the topic of conversation. Such an occasion was just a courtesy. Yan Que invited his guests for the sole purpose of making it clear that he had resumed an active role in court. Since they didn't have any urgent matters to discuss between them, Mei Changsu sat down briefly before getting up to take his leave.

The carriage returned along the same route it took when it arrived, passing through the Zhu Que Main Road, which cut diagonally across several narrow lanes. When they came to an intersection, a black carriage appeared from the south. The coachman from the Su Residence pulled back the reins and brought the carriage to a stop by the side of the road, letting the other carriage through first.

“Liyang Mansion.....” muttered Lin Chen as he peeked through the window screen, looking at the black shrouded lantern that hung from the front of the other carriage.

“The news of Xie Yu’s death arrived a few days ago,” said Mei Changsu quietly. “The friend Yujin rushed to send off should be Xie Bi. Although Qianzhou is far away, as his son, it’s only right for him to go there to retrieve his remains and bring it back. It’s a pity that none of Aunt Liyang’s children are by her side now....”

“As long as they’re alive, they will return.” Lin Chen glared at him. “Why are you sympathizing with her? She’s in a much better position than you.”

Mei Changsu didn’t mind his uncouth manner of speaking. Instead, his lips were slightly upturned as he lifted his arm to pat Lin Chen on his arm, quietly saying, “Lin Chen, thank you....”

## CHAPTER 166

### *Return*

Seated within the Liyang Mansion carriage that had a brief encounter with the Su Residence carriage at the intersection was Grand Princess Liyang herself. She had just arrived at the city gates to send off her last child, to send him across the Jianghu to barren hills and wild rivers thousands of miles away, to retrieve his father's remains. Xie Bi was different from his older brother, Xiao Jingrui. He was a noble's son in every sense of the word, whose impression of the Jianghu was nothing more than landscape and legends. His journey would be as high as the mountains and as long as the rivers, and even though he brought with him a few household servants, his mother couldn't help feeling anxious.

Just outside the Nanyue Gate, the only person who came to see him off was Yan Yujin. Perhaps one could say that the world was indifferent to the family, not because they had lost power, but because nobody wanted to continue to pay too much attention to them.

Before leaving, Xie Bi bowed three times, requesting Yan Yujin to visit his mother frequently, his words sincere and his expression calm. Having been beaten by violent storms, this young noble from a once prestigious family had matured a lot. Because he had remained largely unnoticed amidst the bizarre events of that night, many people had neglected Xie Bi's pain and suffering, but in actual fact, he had lost just as much as everyone else. Without the title, there was no future. Brothers were separated and loving relationships were broken. His father, once so highly admired, left him with a bad name. Yet though his world was turned upside down, he couldn't be dispirited or depressed, because he had to take care of his mother, who was getting weaker by the day.

Xie Bi had never been Grand Princess Liyang's favourite child, but after the catastrophe, he had proven himself to be the most dependable child. He had to clean up the terrible mess that had crashed down on them from hell, dispose of their belongings and dismiss the servants; he had to constantly pay attention to his mother's emotional ups and downs, and accompany her through her sleepless nights; he had to bury his younger sister. After sending his half-brother off, he had to pacify his younger brother, who was away studying at the Shanzhong Academy, to minimize the impact of this disaster on Xie Xu. And now, he had no choice but to make the long

and difficult trek to retrieve his father's remains, with a simple pack of belongings on his back.

As the heir to Marquis of Ning, Xie Bi had been educated to take over the family title and everything it entailed, but he now faced a situation he had never expected. Which is why when Yan Yujin saw him off, he said to Xie Bi with utmost sincerity, "Xie Bi, I had underestimated you before."

After sending off her last child, Grand Princess Liyang's tears had dried up. She politely refused Yujin's request to accompany her and sat alone in the empty carriage, returning to that place she could no longer call home. In terms of treatment, the Grand Princess still continued to enjoy the status she had before, with everything it entailed. Though a luxurious life was provided for, deep inside, she felt so poor as to not have anything at all. Everything she valued, the people and affections she cherished, had left her far behind.

The momo who had been caring for her since she was a child hurried forward, helped her change into light silk clothes, unwrapped her hair bun and helped her to lie down on the couch, making her as comfortable as possible. Two maids knelt on their knees and gently massaged her waist and legs. Another maid waved a feathered fan to generate a cool breeze. A jade cup was filled with dew, while musk burnt by the window sill. The luxury and wealth remained as before. Except that the heart was empty and full of sorrow.

No matter how strong and resolute one was, it wasn't possible to withstand such loss. Family, love, husband, children.....one slash of the knife after another. After that, even if one could forget the pain, only numbness and weakness would remain.

"Princess, why don't you have a bowl of calming soup?" said her momo softly, trying to persuade her, her eyes filled with affection and concern. Because she couldn't bear to deepen the worries of the grey-haired old woman, Liyang tried with great difficulty to pull herself together and said, "Alright, put it there. I'll drink it on my own. Go and rest. I'll settle myself."

The old momo gestured for the maid to put the soup bowl down on the table, then instructed all the servants to withdraw. After fifteen minutes, she quietly returned. Seeing that the soup bowl was empty and that the princess seemed to be sleeping peacefully, she felt her worries ease and finally went to rest, making her trembling way back to her room with the help of a young servant girl.

It was coming to the end of summer. The sounds of the cicadas were waning, but the sounds of autumn hadn't yet arrived, so it was still as water all around. Grand Princess Liyang didn't like company when she was taking her nap, so all the palace maids withdrew after lowering the screen, waiting in attendance outside the hall entrance, leaving her on the couch, in the hall, all by herself. In that quiet stillness, the screen on the west side of the room suddenly moved, and a light and slender silhouette

of a woman slipped in. Like a cat with its claws sheathed, she slunk her way to the side of the couch, where she crouched, observing the princess's reclining body for a while, before lightly removing the hand resting on her waist with her fingers, and then lifting the front of her jacket. Against her white clothing was a bright yellow pouch that was tied to her waist. Seeing this, the intruder's face lit with joy, and she immediately reached out to unfasten it.

Although the pouch looked ordinary, it was tightly knotted and the intruder was unable to untie it even after several attempts. She removed a dagger from within her sleeve and just as she was about to cut through the ribbon, she suddenly felt a strong gust of wind approaching from behind. In her alarm, she quickly turned around to dodge it, but was too late. A palm hit her on the back of her shoulders, sending her flying several feet away, where her body hit against the vermilion pillar and she fell unconscious to the ground, blood pouring from her mouth.

It was not an insignificant movement. Not only did the maids outside the hall rush in, the sleeping Grand Princess Liyang was also jolted awake. She immediately sat up, but before she could look clearly around her, a strong pair of hands supported her while a familiar voice simultaneously whispered gently in her ear, "Mother, are you alright?"

Grand Princess Liyang trembled all over. Bringing her gaze into focus, she stared blankly at the face before her. It was thinner, more tanned, and the eyes were calmer, more steady, but apart from that, he still looked just like he did before, still her most beloved child.

The child she most favoured, but also the one she had hurt the most, for whom she bore the most guilt.

"Jingrui...." As soon as the pale lips uttered this name, the tears that had all dried up began to flow again. She hugged him tightly to her, never wanting to let him go.

"Yes. It's me...." Xiao Jingrui patted his mother's back comfortingly. Though her eyes were red, she remained smiling. Before, when things were peaceful and they still had their honor, the relationship between the mother and son was distant and formal, but after the catastrophe, they were now able to experience such intimacy between flesh and blood.

"Jingrui, it would have been good if you were back a day earlier." After her burst of tears, Grand Princess Liyang drew in a deep breath and relaxed her hold. She looked at her son's face and said, "Bi'er set off for Qianzhou today. You just missed him...."

"I heard from the housekeeper. It's alright. He'll be back as soon as he retrieves the coffin." Xiao Jingrui wiped the tears from his mother's cheeks with his sleeves and said softly, "I will be keeping you company until Second Brother returns."

This very ordinary sentence made Grand Princess Liyang cry again. Holding her tears back with great difficulty, she continued to gaze at her son. Unable to take her eyes off him, she looked him up and down as if she couldn't get enough of him. Xiao Jingrui had better control of himself, and was at that moment thinking of the person he had sent flying earlier. He quickly got up to have a look and found a woman dressed in servant's attire. Having sustained serious injuries, she was still lying in the same spot. Because they didn't know what was going on, the maids didn't dare to move her.

"Jingrui, what's going on?" Grand Princess Liyang also stood up and walked over to have a look.

"I'm not too sure either. I didn't inform anyone when I came in because I heard Mother was having a nap and came in just in time to catch her withdrawing her dagger by your couch. In my urgency, I've probably hit her a little too hard." Xiao Jingrui inspected the woman's injury and frowned. "It looks like she won't wake up for a while. She looks a little familiar. Was she a former servant?" The lady in charge of the princess's mansion said that this woman had been in service for three years. This puzzled Xiao Jingrui, who muttered to himself, saying, "If she has been here for so long, there would have been many opportunities for assassination. Why delay it till today?"

Grand Princess Liyang also couldn't help frowning. "I'm an insignificant person now. Who would want to assassinate me? Jingrui, are you sure you saw her try to kill me?"

Xiao Jingrui's eyes narrowed as he recalled what had just transpired. "Mother, do you have anything on your waist?"

"My waist?" Grand Princess Liyang slowly felt around her waist. When her fingers brushed against the soft silk surface of the pouch, her face paled. "Only....only this....you already know....Xie....the letter he wrote before he left...."

Hearing her mention the handwritten letter, Xiao Jingrui suddenly recalled the events of the past, and he shivered. He asked urgently, "What's in the letter? Has Mother read it?"

Grand Princess Liyang shook her head weakly. "The only reason I kept this letter he entrusted me with was to save his life. I have no desire to read its contents...."

Xiao Jingrui was also not interested in knowing the secrets Xie Yu might have left behind. Because the more he knew, the more pain he suffered. The consequences of digging up ugly scars of the past is unbearable suffering and torture. He knew this better than anyone else. But now that someone was targeting and had made their move for the sealed letter, without understanding its contents, it would be difficult to guess

who the enemy was or judge the extent of danger it posed. Which is why after thinking it through over again, he dismissed the servants from the room.

Grand Princess Liyang took hold of his hand. “Jingrui, are you going to read it?”

“Your safety is more important. We would only know how to respond once we know who’s implicated in the letter. If Mother really doesn’t wish to know, your son will read it himself.”

Grand Princess Liyang smiled faintly, lowered her head and opened the pouch at her waist. Removing the ink-stained piece of silk, she said softly, “If you’re going to read it, let’s do it together. If it’s another hurt from the past, it’s better for two people to bear it together than to bear it alone.”

Xiao Jingrui reached out to take the piece of silk, then sat by his mother’s side, spreading it out flat. Both mother and son held its corners and read it carefully from the beginning. At first, both their expressions were mildly grave, but after a while, their faces turned deathly pale, and the feather light piece of silk in their hands suddenly seemed to weigh a thousand jin.<sup>292</sup> After reading, Grand Princess Liyang relaxed her grip and collapsed onto the pillows, burying her face in her hands.

Xiao Jingrui clenched his jaw and picked up the piece of silk his mother threw aside, holding it in his palm as he persisted to finish reading it to its last word. Before reading, he had already known that the contents would be shocking, but after reading it thoroughly, he realized that nothing could have prepared him for what he had just read. Those words that leapt out at him froze his blood, repeatedly sending terrifying chills through him from head to toe, and each time, his heart tightened even more. After going through that heartbreaking night, Xiao Jingrui thought that nothing else could possibly shake him. But today, the truth revealed by this flimsy piece of cloth was a kind of hell that was completely different from what he had experienced. It was deeper and darker, a hell that was extremely despicable and depraved, full of blood, injustice and hate, a hell that was dark and cruel, filled with grief and indignation.

Buried in the fires of this hell were a generation’s virtuous prince, honorable marshal and 70,000 loyal souls, with the brightest and most dazzling youth of Jinling at the time, and the hopes and ideals borne by the hearts of countless people.

The soft piece of silk should have been cool to the touch, but when Xiao Jingrui clutched it tightly in his palm, it seemed to ignite into flames, flames that travelled through his meridian points into his veins, into his organs, as if they would burn him up inside.

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<sup>292</sup> one catty or 500g equivalent



Grand Princess Liyang, who had collapsed onto the pillows, whimpered softly, almost unable to breathe. Before her eyes, she saw again the blood of her elder sister, Jinyang, spilling on the jade steps, turning everything red, never to be washed clean.

Xiao Jingrui reached out to support his mother. Holding on to her thin shoulders, he turned her to face him. The moment their eyes met, they each understood what the other was thinking.

“You mustn’t, no....” Grand Princess Liyang grabbed hold of her son’s arm in horror, breaking out in cold sweat. “This case was personally handled by His Majesty. What can you do? What can you possibly do?”

Xiao Jingrui looked at his mother, unmoving, his gaze determined.

“Mother....I don’t know what I can do. I only know....faced with such facts, I can’t not do anything....”

## CHAPTER 167

### *Request*

Though Xiao Jingrui's voice was soft when he said these words, their insistence and determination were penetrating. Grand Princess Liyang felt like an invisible hand was gripping her throat, like she was drowning, clinging on desperately to driftwood. She held on tightly to her son, not letting go.

“Jingrui, listen to me.....you don't know, you don't know how ruthless he is. It wasn't that nobody cried out against the injustice back then. He just didn't listen, he didn't listen! Jinyang jiejie, Concubine Chen, Jingyu....When I watched them die, I knew that the Emperor had already made the most absolute, ruthless and cruel decision. This case is the Emperor's greatest bane. Whoever tries to touch it would be tantamount to attempting to overthrow his supreme authority and there would be no good outcome to this! Think it through. Old Master Li, the great teacher, and your uncle Prince Ying. Which of them is not well-known and influential? But in the end, none of them could dissuade a harsh and cold-blooded Emperor....Jingrui, don't be foolish. Do you think you could tell everyone of the great mistake His Majesty had made?”

“Mother, should we make as if we haven't seen anything then?” Xiao Jingrui asked quietly, “Erase these facts from our minds, as if we never read this letter? If we really do this, would we be at peace with ourselves?”

“Jingrui.....”

“Mother, I understand you, but the truth is the truth. Whether or not we are able to right the wrong, we should at the very least not be accomplices in concealing the truth.” Xiao Jingrui wanted to release his hand from his mother's grip but she held on all the tighter, her tears falling like a broken thread, so he had no choice but to stop and patiently continue to persuade her, “Mother, someone has already tried to get their hands on this letter, so it may no longer be possible for us to stay out of it. You must believe that in this world, what is most important is not the ruler or the emperor, but justice and truth. But don't worry, even if I am unable to ignore it, for Mother's sake, I will not act recklessly.”

Grand Princess Liyang shook her head frantically, her messy hair, wet from her cold sweat, sticking to her face, making her look old and haggard. Seeing that she was unable to persuade her son, her mind spun rapidly, and an idea suddenly shone through her mind.

“Jingrui, let’s hand this over to the Crown Prince.”

“What?”

“The Crown Prince,” said Grand Princess Liyang impatiently. “While you were away, did you hear that Da Liang has a new Crown Prince?”

Xiao Jingrui thought for a while then nodded slowly, “I’ve heard of it. It’s Prince Jing.....”

“Yes, that’s right.” Grand Princess Liyang drew a deep breath, trying to remain calm. “Perhaps you may not remember, but as a child, Jingyan had a strong relationship with Prince Qi and the Lin family. He grew up with Xiao Shu from the Lin family, and they were the best of friends. If there’s anyone on earth who would truly want to reclaim the innocence of Prince Qi and the Lin Clan, it would be him. Let’s give the Crown Prince this letter. Wouldn’t it be better than leaving it in our hands?”

“The new Crown Prince....” Xiao Jingrui frowned thoughtfully, “I have not had much association with him, so I’m not sure what kind of person he is. Although they were friends back then, now that he is the Crown Prince in the Eastern Palace, waiting to succeed to the throne, would he risk His Majesty’s anger to overturn such a big case?”

“Jingyan has always been upright in nature. I believe he won’t forget old feelings of kindness and loyalty.” Liyang folded up the letter and put it back into the pouch, saying hurriedly, “I’ll go to the Eastern Palace immediately. You don’t need to bother about it anymore. No matter what the Crown Prince’s stand is, I’m still his aunt after all, so I’ll be alright.”

“How could I let Mother go alone?” Xiao Jingrui smiled gently, but his tone was firm. “Since the Crown Prince will not make things difficult for Mother, he won’t make things difficult for me either.”

Grand Princess Liyang had of course originally intended for her son to not get involved in this matter at all, but he was after all, still her son, and she knew him well, that he had made up his mind and would not be deterred, so she did not try to stop him.

That night, Xiao Jingrui reorganized the defenses of the princess’s mansion. He kept the pouch with the letter on his own body and stood guard at his mother’s door.

The night passed by safely. Early the next morning, both mother and son had breakfast, and when the approximate time came for the Crown Prince to dismiss court, they took a carriage to the Eastern Palace.

Although Xie Yu was censured for his crime, Grand Princess Liyang was still an imperial kinswoman and the Emperor's younger sister, so attendants of the Eastern Palace dared not neglect her. They quickly sent someone to announce her arrival while respectfully showing her in. Xiao Jingyan had just returned from court, and hadn't yet changed out of his Crown Prince attire, but stood at the steps of the Eastern Palace's main pavilion waiting respectfully for his aunt. Due to their different temperaments, they were both never close, so they merely greeted each other politely and entered the pavilion together.

But the moment they stepped into the pavilion, Grand Princess Liyang and Xiao Jingrui, who was supporting her, were immediately stunned and frozen in place. The main pavilion of the Eastern Palace wasn't a place anyone could simply enter, yet someone else was standing there, someone dressed in a plain white jacket, an outsider with neither rank nor duty.

This man was at this moment smiling lightly, like a light breeze on a cloudless day. He bowed respectfully towards the Grand Princess while saying, "This commoner greets Your Highness Grand Princess. Jingrui, long time no see."

When Xiao Jingrui first left the capital, Mei Changsu was still Prince Yu's man, but now that heaven and earth had reversed, he was standing by the new Crown Prince's side. Seeing this, it not only made one suddenly see the light, but also caused a tide of emotions to surface.

"I didn't expect to see Mister Su here," said Grand Princess Liyang with a cold smile. "When I first met Mister Su then, I only knew that you were someone with ambitions. Now, it would appear that it was a Qilin strategy."

"Princess flatters me." Mei Changsu smiled placidly, "Due to His Highness the Crown Prince's recognition of Su mou's efforts, how could I, as a subject of Da Liang, not do my best?"

Though he had a soft air of resignation and a mild expression, Grand Princess Liyang didn't know why but when she looked at him, she always felt dread in her heart, so she avoided his gaze and said, "Jingyan, I am here today to speak to you about confidential and important matters, so it's not convenient for outsiders to be present. May I ask Mister Su to withdraw for a while?"

Xiao Jingyan immediately said, "No need. You can treat Mister Su like myself. Anything *gu mu*<sup>293</sup> has to tell me can also be said to Mister Su."

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<sup>293</sup> aunt; father's younger sister

This sentence bore great weight. Even if the Crown Prince was merely speaking out of politeness to his guest, it wasn't trivial, especially not when he spoke so seriously, without a second thought and with no other implied meaning. Grand Princess Liyang looked at the both of them nervously and hesitated.

Not appearing to notice her expression, Mei Changsu proceeded to ask, "Did Your Highness Grand Princess come here today regarding the letter Marquis Xie wrote before he left the capital?"

Hearing this, Xiao Jingrui assumed that the matter was within his control and so he asked accordingly, "How did Su xiong know?"

"I was the one who came up with the idea of him writing this letter to preserve his life then. Jingrui may not know, but Your Highness probably will not have forgotten," Mei Changsu took a step forward, his eyebrows raised. "Since the both of you are here in the Eastern Palace, you probably already know the contents of the letter. What are your thoughts?"

Grand Princess Liyang looked at him in shock, and said with a trembling voice, "Don't tell me you already know? Have you known the contents of the letter all along?"

"So what if I know. The rest of the world still doesn't know." Mei Changsu's expression at that point in time held a ferocity that nobody in that room had seen before, his lips raised in a grim smile, his eyes blazing, his pupils scorching and penetrating such that nobody dared look at them. "Grand Princess, you and your sister once had deep affection for each other. These past few years, has she entered your dreams?"

Grand Princess Liyang couldn't bear his gaze and suddenly turned aside. Clenching her teeth, she said, "There's no need for you to say more. Since you already know the contents of this letter, you must want it. We actually came here today prepared to give it to the Crown Prince, so take it."

Mei Changsu looked at the pouch in the hands of the Grand Princess and smiled placidly, saying, "You're wrong. This letter is not merely for me to read. His Highness the Crown Prince has another favour to ask of the Grand Princess, one that is much more difficult than this. I wonder if you would be willing to listen?"

Xiao Jingrui casually blocked his mother on the side, and said in a low voice, "Su xiong, my mother is now living a secluded life, and won't be able to do much. If His Highness the Crown Prince has a request regarding this matter, Jingrui is willing to undertake it."

Mei Changsu glanced at him and shook his head gently, “Jingrui, with regard to this matter, there are truly limits in what you can do.”

“Gu mu, since I am speaking to you, of course only you can carry out what I have mentioned.” Xiao Jingyan looked straight into Grand Princess Liyang’s eyes and asked, “Are you really not willing to listen to it?”

At this point, it was evident that it wasn’t a simple request. After a long moment of hesitation, she said, “Tell me then.”

“We will be celebrating the Emperor’s birthday in a few days. I will hold a ceremony for him where we will gather the members of the imperial family and relatives as well as court officials in Wuying Hall to congratulate him.” Xiao Jingyan said this calmly. “The account in this letter was written by Xie Yu, and you are Xie Yu’s wife. I would like to request gu mu to bring along this letter before the court officials on the day of the ceremony, and confess these crimes on Xie Yu’s behalf.”

Grand Princess Liyang was so shocked she couldn’t help retreating a few steps.

“What Father Emperor cares most in his life is his unquestionable supremacy and authority. This case is tied to his reputation. No matter how shocking the truth, he will not admit his mistake and allow himself to go down in history as a foolish and ruthless emperor who murdered his own son and wiped out those loyal to him. Therefore, I have to create a situation he cannot get out of, where everyone is against him, a situation that is completely out of his control. Whether or not he is willing, he will have to give his consent to re investigate this case. In order to kick start this, I would need gu mu’s support.”

“This....this....your idea....it’s too reckless....” Grand Princess Liyang was pale as snow, and she looked at him in a daze.

“Please don’t worry, gu mu. No matter what happens at the time, I will safeguard gu mu. No harm will fall on you.”

“If His Majesty takes forceful measures in his rage, how will you protect me?”

“Since I have decided to take this step, I have naturally made all necessary arrangements. Father Emperor is no longer the same as before. I am also not the same as Prince Qi then. What I want to do is clear their names, not plunge myself into the abyss. Without any contingency plans, wouldn’t it be sheer recklessness and not courage?”

Grand Princess Liyang was shaken by the implied meaning of his words, and she was speechless for a long time. She had been living in seclusion for the past year, and wasn’t much aware of what was going on outside. Her impression of Jingyan was of someone who was always on the losing end, but looking at him now, with his iron-

clad expression, with the Qilin talent by his side, she suddenly realized that this nephew had a strength that was beyond the control of the sickly emperor.

“Jingyan,” said Grand Princess Liyang after she had calmed down. Casting a glance at her son who was frowning in thought by her side, she raised her face. “No matter how you say it, revealing the truth of this case in front of everyone is not an easy task. If I do as you ask, how will it benefit me?”

“Are you asking how you will benefit after you reveal the truth?” Mei Changsu’s eyebrows leapt, his eyes flashing at her. “Your Highness Grand Princess, you already know the truth of the massacre back then, yet you’re asking if there’s any personal benefit for giving them justice?”

Grand Princess Liyang’s heart trembled, and her eyes lowered involuntarily.

“Forget it,” said Mei Changsu with deep disappointment in his voice. Turning back to Xiao Jingyan, he said, “One needs the utmost courage to be the first plaintiff in court. If the Grand Princess is unable to do it wholeheartedly, I’m afraid it’ll cause the opposite effect and foil Your Highness’s plans. It would be best to choose someone else....”

## CHAPTER 168

### *Promise*

Xiao Jingyan held Mei Changsu's arm and patted it lightly. He knew that Lin Shu truly despaired at that moment, and that he was suffering in his heart, but he had originally known that there wasn't much hope with Grand Princess Liyang, and he also knew that forcing her was meaningless, so he did as Mei Changsu said and took the pouch from his aunt's hands, saying, "Thank you for your efforts in bringing this here. Your nephew expresses gratitude on behalf of the deceased. There are more things I have to discuss with Sir Su. Thank you for coming, gu mu. I won't be seeing you out."

With that, he dismissed his guests, without attempting to persuade further. This instead made Grand Princess Liyang feel discomfited and at a complete loss as to what to do. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. In the end, she was forced to turn around walk silently out, her head bowed. Xiao Jingrui turned and bowed, paying his respects to the Crown Prince before turning to catch up with his mother, gently supporting her arm.

Leaving the main pavilion, across the white jade tiles of the outer courtyard, just before the screen wall,<sup>294</sup> Grand Princess Liyang suddenly stopped in her tracks and lifted her eyes to look at her son. "Jingrui, do you think...I was too heartless?"

Xiao Jingrui thought for a while and said, "There are grounds for supporting either action. It all depends on what Mother values most in your heart. Nobody else, including your son, has the right to influence Mother's decision. What's more, once this immense case is overturned, Marquis Xie...Marquis Xie's crime would become high treason. Although he is dead, second and third brother would undoubtedly be implicated. Mother is unwilling to be the hand that pushes them into the abyss. I understand Mother's love for us."

Liyang held back her tears and patted the back of his hand which was supporting her. "Only you understand my thoughts. But looking at the Crown Prince's determination, this case would be overturned sooner or later. Having Bi'er and Xu'er in mind, I wanted to be the first to present the plea in exchange for their pardon. This

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<sup>294</sup> wall used after the entrance to shield the rest of the house from outside eyes



seemed like a reasonable resolution, and I had originally expected that Mister Su, with all his shrewdness, to try to use this to persuade me. I never expected....that he would be so angered by those few words I said.....”

Xiao Jingrui thought it through and felt equally puzzled. He said softly, “When I first got to know Su xiong then, I admired his talent and generosity. In spite of all that happened after, I still always felt that...the struggle for power was not his style. Since he had long since known the truth about the injustice faced by the Chiyan army, then perhaps right from the start, his goal had always been for the sake of this case. As for who he sided with, who he supported, these were all but a means to an end.”

“It looks like this Mister Su is no outsider....” Grand Princess Liyang frowned, her eyes intense. “Who is he? And what does the Chiyan case have to do with him?”

“There’s not much point in delving into this now. Whether Su xiong is involved in the case or merely the Crown Prince’s advisor, they have both already decided to disclose Marquis Xie’s testimony. They are resolute in their intention to clear the names of the wronged and they will not retreat. I admire them for this. Unfortunately, my position is awkward, so there are many things I cannot do on Mother’s behalf.....”

“Jingrui, if you were me, you would definitely have agreed to their request, wouldn’t you?”

Jingrui gave it serious thought and said, “Your son is different from Mother, so it’s not possible for us to think the same way. Many things in this world come with a dilemma. How could your son be inconsiderate towards Mother’s struggle and sorrows?”

Grand Princess Liyang exhaled a long breath and stared at the colorful carving of nine dragons<sup>295</sup> on the screen wall for a good while, before finally turning around to say, “My good son,<sup>296</sup> why don’t you accompany me to go back in again.”

Xiao Jingrui was not surprised by his mother’s decision. He nodded and supported her by her arm. “Mother, your son swears to you, no matter what happens in the future, we will go through this together as a family. If anyone wants to harm Mother and my brothers, they will have to get past me first.”

Grand Princess Liyang felt her heart boil over (with emotions) and returned her son’s hold with strength. Supporting each other, they turned and walked once again through the door of the main pavilion.

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<sup>295</sup> likely in reference to the “9-dragon wall” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine-Dragon\\_Wall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine-Dragon_Wall))

<sup>296</sup> literal translation of “好孩子”, an expression of affection and praise which Chinese are usually pretty sparse with

Xiao Jingyan rose and stepped forward to welcome them, as if this was the first time he was meeting the Grand Princess today. “Gu mu, please have a seat. Do you have something more to say?”

“I agree.” Grand Princess Liyang was succinct in her reply.

“Gu mu, have you given this careful thought?”

“Since I left and returned, I have of course thought it over thoroughly.” Grand Princess Liyang smiled sadly. “Actually, no matter how much I think about it, I can’t just stand by and be indifferent. Had I left your Eastern Palace today, I’m afraid my nights would be filled with nightmares.”

“Alright,” said Xiao Jingyan with his eyebrows raised, “Since gu mu has such feelings, then I will assure you that once we have cleared Chiyan of the injustice, all your children will be pardoned and not be implicated.”

Grand Princess Liyang began to tremble, saying in a faltering voice, “So you actually knew.....”

“Gu mu’s thoughts are only natural. How could it be difficult to discern?” Xiao Jingyan exchanged glances with Mei Changsu, then said lightly, “Sir Su didn’t want to say more earlier, because he didn’t want to turn this into a deal. Having come so far, at this most critical stage, any vow that is extracted by force, that is not wholehearted, would become an uncontrollable variable. Not forcing gu mu would also avoid any unexpected risks.”

“Your candidness actually puts me at ease. It appears that you won’t accept the help of anyone who is not sincere in their intent to help clear the names of the deceased.” Grand Princess Liyang turned towards Mei Changsu and looked at him. “Since this is the case, then for Mister Su to be here, he must presumably sworn undivided loyalty to you, for you to have such deep trust in him. But how did you verify Mister Su’s sincerity?”

Xiao Jingyan pursed his lips and glanced at Mei Changsu, who was looking out the window expressionlessly, as if he hadn’t been listening to a word Grand Princess Liyang said. He suddenly felt a dull ache in his heart, and paused for a while before saying, “Sir Su has expended his greatest efforts for my sake. It’s difficult to explain to you in one sentence. Besides, doubt not the person you use. I had already told you that Sir and I are like one person.”

“Doubt not the person you use.....” Grand Princess Liyang muttered these words to herself, then nodded her head, “Jingyan, I had never paid much attention to you in the past. I realize today that although you and Jingyu were different in temperament, deep inside, you’re both exactly the same.”

“If I can carry out royal eldest brother’s legacy in this life, it would be my greatest wish.” Xiao Jingyan nodded his head faintly. “If you change your mind after you leave, there is no need to force yourself. When the time comes and you have to withstand the pressure of His Majesty’s wrath in the palace, without steadfast determination, it would be difficult to complete what you have to say.”

Grand Princess Liyang did not respond immediately, but thought it over carefully, nodding her head in silence. At this moment, Mei Changsu turned around and smiled as he asked, “Jingrui, you’ve been away for more than a year, so you must have gained a lot of experience. How is everything?”

Xiao Jingrui smiled warmly and said, “Yes, having been away from the country, meeting certain people and experiencing certain things, when I recall the past now, I can see things more clearly, and understand better. But...Su xiong doesn’t seem to have changed much. Looking at you now, you still seem as mysterious and enigmatic as before.”

With just these few words, both men looked at each other and smiled, as if a weight had been lifted off their hearts, and they suddenly felt light. Grand Princess Liyang also did not say much more. She nodded slightly towards Xiao Jingyan and then left with her son.

There were only the both of them left in the hall and a certain heaviness hung in the atmosphere for some time. When Mei Changsu had taken the initiative to come to the Eastern Palace in the morning, Xiao Jingyan was pleasantly surprised, but the moment they met, he realized that they were still a little estranged, and spoke only about business matters, so he didn’t dare mention anything else. Not long after, both the Grand Princess and her son arrived. Though the matter had been settled, the impasse between both of them still remained. “Do you think Liyang gugu<sup>297</sup> has really made a firm decision to assist us?”

“The Grand Princess is not an impulsive person. Since she has agreed, she would most likely follow through. But just in case, we should have a backup plan.”

“That’s not a problem. Marquis Yan will not back down. He has already assured me that when the time comes, if the time comes for him to present the injustice, even if the Emperor were to direct his full anger at him, he would persevere in stating all the facts. Of course, if we were to use Xie Yu’s letter to reopen the case, it would be better for Liyang gugu to personally present it.”

“Ng,” said Mei Changsu softly in agreement. “The situation at the time may be unpredictable, so Your Highness must maintain control of it.”

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<sup>297</sup> another more casual term for “aunt”

“You don’t have to worry about this. I have already spoken separately with members of the imperial family and court officials who can be trusted. The results are as I had expected. Whether it’s with sincere intentions or to take advantage of a situation, they’ve all expressed their unconditional support. But in order to prevent any of those who are as yet undecided from informing Father Emperor, I had specially requested Mother Concubine to prevent anyone from meeting Father Emperor these next few days. The imperial guards on duty at the palace have also been personally selected by Meng qing himself. No matter how much Father Emperor shouts at them, they will stall for time and not do anything until gu mu has finished speaking.”

“Your Highness has prepared well ahead.” Mei Changsu smiled.

Seeing his smile, Xiao Jingyan was secretly relieved. “I contacted the court officials without first discussing it with you and was worried that you would reproach me for being reckless. According to Meng qing, you’ve always emphasized the need to take one steady step at a time, which is why you kept so much from me, for fear that I would be too extreme.”

Mei Changsu lowered his eyes and said quietly, “As long as His Majesty is on the throne, overturning the verdict would never be entirely without risk. I would just like a little more certainty. At this point, the time has come for everything I had planned beforehand to ripen. The time has come for Your Highness to take the lead on this matter. In truth, I can’t...I don’t want to wait anymore...so I’ll leave Your Highness to make all the arrangements. Whether it’s for the deceased or for the people, having His Majesty personally order the reinvestigation of the case and exoneration of the crime, has a completely different meaning from if Your Highness were to overturn the case after ascending the throne in future.”

“I understand what you mean, and understand what you expect of me.” Xiao Jingyan looked intently at him, wanting to call out Xiao Shu’s name, but he was a little uncertain. He hesitated, and in the end restrained himself, saying instead, “As long as we succeed in making Father Emperor agree to order the reinvestigation in front of everyone, I would be able to overturn this case beautifully, and not leave behind any cause for question later on.”

Mei Changsu smiled again and slowly lifted his eyes. “There’s one more thing which I would like to request of Your Highness....”

“Why are you being so polite? Just say it.”

“On the day of the birthday ceremony, please bring me along with Your Highness.”

Xiao Jingyan’s eyes opened wide and stared at him in amazement.

“I have the status of a visiting court official. Although I would still attract attention at such an occasion, it would not be especially unexpected....after waiting all these years, whether we finally fail or succeed, I would like to witness it with my own eyes....” At this point, Mei Changsu suddenly realized that something was amiss with Xiao Jingyan’s expression and broke off mid-sentence to ask, “Does Your Highness think it would make things difficult?”

“What are you talking about?” Xiao Jingyan continued to stare at him, his eyes filling with anger. “Do you still need to ask this of me? Of course you have to be there! To arrive at this stage, all that painstaking effort with your own heart’s blood. How could I....not let you witness the outcome with your own eyes?”

“Your Highness....”

Xiao Jingyan didn’t know why, but he suddenly couldn’t control himself. With a calm face, he asked, “What Highness? Don’t you know my name? Did you just get to know me today? With what identity did you make that request of me earlier? As my counsellor?”

“Jingyan,” Mei Changsu extended his left hand and put it on Xiao Jingyan’s arm, pressing down firmly, calling his name clearly for the first time since meeting again. “This too....there’s something I need to tell you clearly....”

## CHAPTER 169

### *Identity*

When he first heard his name called out like it used to be in the past, Xiao Jingyan felt a mix of astonishment, sorrow and joy. Emotions surged within him, forming a lump in his throat. But he was unwilling to reveal his emotions for fear that his close friend would feel sad, so an array of expressions passed through his face, but in the end, he still couldn't settle on one.

Mei Changsu couldn't help but laugh at him as he said, "You can also stop being so considerate of me. If I could survive the bloody ocean that was Meiling and make my way here, how could I be so fragile? Pain is inevitable when I'm with you, but to wallow in misery and grief, unwilling to pull myself away from sorrowful emotions, that's not me...."

These words spoke directly to Xiao Jingyan's heart. He cheered up immediately and said, "If you have moved on, then I am relieved. Actually, you haven't really changed much either. You're just a little quieter, which happens as we grow older. Look at me. I don't argue with you as much as I used to in the past. As long as we're still around, why should a few changes matter? Once this case is overturned, you would still be Lin Shu, and I would still be Jingyan. We can still be like we were before....."

"Jingyan," interrupted Mei Changsu, shaking his head, "That's no longer possible. No matter how completely this case is overturned, I can only remain as Mei Changsu. I can never return to being Lin Shu...."

"Why?" Xiao Jingyan's eyebrows lifted in startlement and he stood up all of a sudden. "As long as your name is cleared, you can always return to your former identity. Whoever dares to say otherwise...."

"Hear me out," With a calm gaze, Mei Changsu indicated for him to sit down again. "The kind of person Su zhe is, and how he moved back and forth between the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, this is something everyone in the capital already knows. A master of schemes who uses underhanded methods. Although it's an effective way to seize power, it's not the proper way...."

“But.....”

“Jingyan,” Mei Changsu didn’t let him speak and immediately cut him off. “For me, overturning the case is the end. I’m already very content to be able to see this day. But for you, redressing this case is only the beginning. You still need to clean up the long standing corruption, establish a strong nation and protect the citizens, revive Da Liang after more than ten years of decline, replace what is false with truth, and rebuild a court that is well-ordered and magnanimous. In order to achieve this, you need a perfect start. All the souls of the deceased above also wish to see you established as a fair, righteous and selfless ruler in the hearts of the people. People like Su zhe can never be regarded as one of your favored ministers. This will everyone misunderstand that the new ruler, like the previous one, is someone who loves checks and balances, which would run counter to our original intentions. What’s more, I’ve been in the capital as Su zhe for a long time, and I am unlikely to be able to dissociate myself from the disturbances that have happened these past two years. To add to that, my appearance has changed a lot, and there are no traces left of me from the past. Relying on the testimonies of a few people to suddenly say that I am Lin Shu would be too shocking and unbelievable. I think of my 70,000 Chiyan brothers, their fierce and loyal souls waiting for the day when they would be vindicated. If, due to my selfishness, when history is written in future with a pen like a knife, and the act of vindicating these innocent souls are raised for conjecture, it would be difficult to argue if it was true or false when the details are only known to insiders. Then why have I worked so hard for all these thirteen years?”

“It’s because of all your thirteen years of hard work that I can’t bear for you to continue to be wronged!” Xiao Jingyan could no longer stop himself from refuting him. “If the world misunderstands you, that’s their stupidity. Why should you care?”

“To be honest, I do care.” Mei Changsu smiled with melancholy. “Not only do I care, but I hope you care too. Those who do not keep the appraisal of the world in mind do not understand what introspection and restraint are. Then how does one become a wise ruler? Besides, I don’t feel wronged if I can’t return to my identity as Lin Shu. I’ve been Mei Changsu for more than ten years, so I’m used to it. So let everyone forever remember Lin Shu as he used to be. Isn’t that also very good?”

Xiao Jingyan tightened his lips and looked intensely at him for a long while before asking all of a sudden, “Are you intending to leave the capital?”

“Eh?” Mei Changsu didn’t expect this question. His gaze wavered and his face turned pale.

“You insist on remaining as Mei Changsu, yet you say that he’s a master of schemes, not suited to remain by the side of a ruler. In other words, doesn’t that imply that you are not suited to remain by my side?” Xiao Jingyan stared intently into his good friend’s eyes, not relenting one bit. “Do you intend to leave the capital after the case is overturned, and retreat into Jianghu?”

Mei Changsu wore a perfect smile on his face and he said in a relaxed manner, "I've not taken a moment's break for thirteen years, and I'm feeling very tired. You have plenty of assistants now, and many good and virtuous court officials by your side, so you shouldn't have to worry about ruling the country. Why not let me leave and be free? After three or five years, I will return to visit you. Our fraternity and friendship won't fall apart just because we don't meet, right?"

Xiao Jingyan wasn't the least bit moved by his smile, and his expression was still as cold and resolute as before. "Xiao Shu, tell me the truth...is your health better?"

"My health," Mei Changsu smiled as he rubbed his temples, "It can certainly not be compared to how it used to be back then. There is no strength and it's completely incapable of any martial arts. If I spar with you now, I would only be beaten."

"Is that right...." Xiao Jingyan stared for a long while into his eyes, then broke out into a smile. "Then I'll wait for you. Once you have recovered well, we will compete."

Mei Changsu lowered his eyes and didn't say a word.

"...Won't you be able to recover?"

"Ng."

"It doesn't matter then." Xiao Jingyan endured the turmoil raging within him and patted his shoulder. "As long as you're still around."

Mei Changsu smiled too and nodded his head, lifting up a cup of fresh tea from the table, taking a sip.

"From the way you look, apart from telling me not to publicize your identity, what else do you want to tell me?"

"Yes," said Mei Changsu as he put the teacup back on the table, his expression becoming serious. "I also want to discuss the matter of Ting Sheng with you."

"Ting Sheng? It's been very good for him here. His depth of knowledge in both the literary and martial arts are praiseworthy, and he has his father's elegant demeanor. In future, once the dust has settled, we can...." At this point, he suddenly realized the issue and stopped short.

"When it comes to royal inheritance, the verification of the bloodline has been subject to strict rules," said Mei Changsu in a low voice. "Without the gold chest and jade discs at birth, an imperial seal and a record in the Imperial Palace Affairs Bureau, he cannot be identified as a member of the Imperial family. Although we know that



Ting Sheng is Prince Qi's posthumous son, he was born hidden away in the Secluded Courtyard and given another identity. Even though it was done in order to save his life, because there was no other choice, it also made it impossible for him to return to the Imperial family...."

As a member of the Imperial family, of course Xiao Jingyan knew the truth of these words, but since he wasn't sure if he could actually ultimately overturn the case, he never considered the issue of Ting Sheng's identity. Now that he thought about it, he couldn't help feeling stunned.

"As for Prince Qi's line, even if you want to carry it on in future, you can only choose from the children born to yourself or other royal princes. In short, Ting Sheng will never qualify." Mei Changsu looked a little sad as he said this. "Even when you become the Emperor in future, you can't set a new precedent just for his sake, and disrupt the entire imperial clan system...."

Xiao Jingyan heaved a long sigh and said, "The imperial clan system is very strict. There's nothing to be done about it. Looking back, the childless Emperor Hui could not bring back the illegitimate son he had left with the common folk, what more Ting Sheng."

"Jingyan," Mei Changsu moved a little closer to his good friend and asked softly, "Have you told Ting Sheng about his past?"

"No. He's still young, and has been through so much suffering. I don't want him to seek revenge either, so why tell him?"

"Prince Ji never mentioned...." Mei Changsu's brows furrowed as he pondered. "But I've always felt that Ting Sheng knows....there are many things in this world, when you don't know, you're content, but when you know, it would only increase your wild thoughts and worries. Jingyan, the quieter Ting Sheng is, the more I worry about him. In future.....you would have to pay a lot of attention to him so that he can live out his life in peace and stability, to live up to Prince Qi's spirit in the heavens...."

Xiao Jingyan looked up and thought for a long while before saying, "Let it be then. Since it's impossible for Ting Sheng to return to the imperial family, I will adopt him, and at least raise his status. He is Qi wang xiong's son and not a commoner. At least he can be one of the pillars of the court."

"I think...." Mei Changsu frowned and threw this out with some hesitation. "...it would be better to keep Ting Sheng far away from the centre of the imperial family...."

"Why?"

Mei Changsu hesitated awhile as he pondered, then smiled. “No reason....perhaps I’m thinking too much. I’ve always felt that for a child like Ting Sheng who has suffered so much, he might be happiest enjoying an ordinary and healthy life.”

“It’s because he has suffered so much that I have to make it up to him,” said Xiao Jingyan, smiling too. “It wasn’t easy for Ting Sheng to stay alive. I will bring him up well and look out for him. Besides, doesn’t he have you too? Even if I were to neglect him in future, you’ll just have to remind me.”

At the mention of the word “future”, Mei Changsu felt a constriction in the pit of his stomach, and remained silent. He laughed with some difficulty, then got up and said, “I should take my leave. The burden of the next difficult step lies on Your Highness’s shoulders. Thank you for going through the trouble.”

“You’re being polite again,” Xiao Jingyan finally had an open conversation with his friend, as it should be, and he was in a very good mood. As he stood up to see him off, he said, “Mother said that peace of mind would be good for you, so take good care of yourself these next few days. On the day of the birthday ceremony, we can’t let our guard down, even for a moment. Will you be alright?”

“What do you think?” Mei Changsu smiled faintly. “I’ve waited all these years for this day. Even if I die, I will see it through.”

Xiao Jingyan didn’t know why, but this sentence pierced through his heart. He frowned and said, “You don’t have to exaggerate. Actually, everything that needs to be done has already been done. Our chances of success are high, so there is no need to be too anxious. I will be on constant alert these few days. Liyang gugu will not rest either. So please take care of your health and recuperate well. As long as I am here, nothing will happen.”

Seeing his absolute confidence, Mei Changsu was comforted. Nodding in agreement, he left the main pavilion and summoned Fei Liu. Xiao Jingyan wanted to send him out to the palace hall and summon a palanquin for him, but was flatly refused, so he had no choice but to stand by the screen wall and watch as both persons left.

After returning to the Su Residence, Mei Changsu felt a little tired. With Fei Liu supporting him, he was intending to lie down on the couch when the room door opened and Lin Chen strutted in with a mysterious smile on his face, proudly exclaiming, “Good news! Would you like to guess what it is?”

He didn’t ask if they wanted to listen, but asked if they wanted to guess, so he must have been feeling a little bored at that moment. Mei Changsu didn’t feel like entertaining him, so he closed his eyes and lay down.

“Take a guess, take a guess,” Lin Chen rushed forward and dragged him up. “I detect that you’ll soon enjoy great fortune, and I have a feeling that your wishes will come true. This good news will be like the icing on the cake for you. I’ll give you three guesses!”

Mei Changsu stared fixedly at his overtly smiling eyes, and his heart suddenly skipped a bit. In a faltering voice, he said, “Did you catch Xia Jiang?”

## CHAPTER 170

### *The Beginning*

Mei Changsu stared fixedly at his overtly smiling eyes, and his heart suddenly skipped a bit. In a faltering voice, he said, “Did you catch Xia Jiang?”

Lin Chen’s face was unsmiling, and he said very sulkily, “Didn’t I give you three guesses?”

By their side, Fei Liu said delightedly, “Once!”

Lin Chen reached out to pinch his face. “It’s your Su gege who guessed it right the first time and not you, so why are you so pleased with yourself?”

“Stop bullying Fei Liu,” said Mei Changsu as he reached out to tug him over. “Why don’t you tell me how you caught him? Where is he now?”

Lin Chen extended his hand, palm up and gestured in a beckoning manner.

“Zhen Ping!” Mei Changsu shot Lin Chen an exasperated glance and called out loudly, “Bring in banknotes worth one thousand taels of silver!”

A sound of agreement came from outside. Shortly after, Zhen Ping pushed open the door and entered, carrying what looked like brand new banknotes in his hands. “Chief, here are the banknotes. What would you like to do with them?”

“Give them to him,” said Mei Changsu, nudging his chin in Lin Chen’s direction. “Lang Ya Pavillion charges people for answering their questions. I asked two questions just now. He charges five hundred taels per question, so two questions would be one thousand....”

Lin Chen gleefully took the bank notes from Zhen Ping’s hands, unfolding them to verify their authenticity. Then he laughed and said, “I actually charge fifty taels per question. Since Chief Su is so rich and insist on giving me a thousand, it would be impolite for me to refuse.”

“Fei Liu, let’s go out,” Zhen Ping beckoned to the youth. “This guy is unbearable. He’s a bad influence on children.”

Fei Liu was in full agreement with the “unbearable” description, and left with Zhen Ping to play outside.

“Alright, now that I’ve received payment, I’ll answer you,” said Lin Chen as he very satisfactorily stashed the banknotes away into his bosom.<sup>298</sup> “There are only three categories of people who would shelter Xia Jiang: the Hua tribe,<sup>299</sup> former spies of the Xuanjing Bureau and those people he’s got a hold over. Narrowing it down to these few, it wasn’t difficult to investigate further. I finally found him in a Buddhist nunnery. Let me tell you, apprehending Xia Jiang was a small matter. What’s key is that there was a very beautiful young nun in the nunnery. I’m going to include her in the list next year....”

“Where did you lock that person up?”

“The young nun? Still in the nunnery. Why would I lock her up?”

“Lin Chen.....” said Mei Changsu dangerously.

Lin Chen laughed and raised a hand in surrender. “Alright, alright. I’ve locked Xia Jiang up in one of my storehouses. Don’t worry. He may have been able to escape from Sky Prison but he won’t be able to escape from my family’s storehouse.”

“Is it yet another Hua tribe woman hiding him?” asked Mei Changsu thoughtfully.

“Yes. Princess Xuanji’s former subordinates are really giving us a headache. They’re all over the place like scattered sand. I wonder if we’ll ever root them all out.”

Mei Changsu fixed his gaze on the ochre frame of the green muslin window screen, remaining silent for a long while before suddenly saying, “Why are you standing outside? Come in.”

Lin Chen got up and stretched his body, saying tiredly, “Last night I had a bean picking competition with Fei Liu so I didn’t get enough sleep and have to make up for it. That child lost again. Tomorrow we’ll be making tofu, so you can look forward to eating it.” With these words, he sauntered out. At the door, he smiled encouragingly at Gong Yu who was slowly entering the room with her head lowered.

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<sup>298</sup> literal translation I’ve kept because it just seemed so apt!

<sup>299</sup> I’ve decided at this point to replace “Hua nation” with “Hua tribe”. They’re an ethnic group, plus “nation” is no longer relevant since their country had been eliminated

“Is there something you want to say to me?” Mei Changsu asked her gently as he waited for her to approach him.

Both of Gong Yu’s hands were twisted tightly around the muslin sash around her waist, so tightly that it wasn’t until her fingers were pale and bloodless that she remembered to kneel down. In a trembling voice, she said, “Chief, please....forgive me....”

“For what?”

“The crime....the crime of deception....”

“What deception?”

“I...I’m also from the Hua tribe....” Gong Yu drew in a deep breath, clenched her jaw and lowered her head. “But I have absolutely no ties with Princess Xuanji. When I was born, the Hua nation had long ceased to exist. Furthermore, Chief saved my life....in this lifetime, Gong Yu will not do anything that will cause Chief any harm. When I suggested the prisoner exchange at Sky Prison, I sincerely wanted to help Chief to lighten your worries. I never expected it to turn out that way....I....I....”

At this point, Gong Yu was trying so eagerly to explain that she stumbled and couldn’t carry on. Mei Changsu looked gently at her and smiled. “Alright. I understand your intentions. There’s no need to worry.”

“Chief....”

“I’ve long known that you’re from the Hua tribe, but I didn’t mind it. The Hua nation had been integrated into Da Liang for several decades, and there’s no longer any distinction between the majority of the Hua tribe and the common folk of Da Liang. Those from Princess Xuanji’s camp are actually small in number,” said Mei Changsu lightly. “She also had her own convictions and beliefs. She just couldn’t grasp the reason for her nation’s downfall or the power shifts at play in the world. Naturally, there would be retribution for her deeds, but if we take our anger out on all of the Hua tribe for this reason, this would be too narrow-minded, so you shouldn’t concern yourself too much with it. Please get up. Lin Chen says that women are very precious, so why are you kneeling like this?”

Gong Yu had been worrying frantically about this for a while, and had trouble sleeping at night. Now that she had plucked up the courage to face Mei Changsu and tell him, she didn’t expect it to be so easy. When she stood up as he had requested, her eyes were rimmed in red.

Mei Changsu waited for a while in silence, and when he saw her still standing there before him, he asked, “Is there anything else?”

“Chief....you look a little tired. Gong Yu has composed a new song that can help you sleep peacefully. Can I....can I....”

“Oh,” Mei Changsu remained expressionless, but nodded his head and said, “Thank you for your trouble.” The fact that he didn’t turn her down made Gong Yu very happy, and a pair of dimples appeared on rosy cheeks. She hurried out to fetch her guqin. After a few minutes of tuning it, she slowly sat down, stretched out her wrists over it and began to strum its strings.

The new composition was soothing, like water that was clear and tranquil, its melody gentle and exceptionally peaceful. Under her skilled fingers, the melody expressed sincere feelings of care and affection, and it evoked in those who listened to it a peace of mind that was free from worry. Mei Changsu leaned back on his pillow and listened to it with his eyes closed. His expression remained unchanged, but after a while, he turned over slightly, turning his face away, inwards.

Lin Chen, who was at that moment helping Fei Liu to soak the beans in the courtyard next door, was listening leisurely to the melody, when he suddenly sighed and lifted his wet hand, flicking a few droplets on Fei Liu’s face. “Xiao Fei Liu, tell me. Is your Su gege just too insensitive or just too awkward?”

Fei Liu didn’t understand and was preoccupied only with angrily wiping the water from his face, his face turned away, ignoring him. The wind picked up at this time, and dark colored clouds quickly bore down from the east, pressing down thickly. Aunt Ji ran out to the courtyard, busy collecting the laundry. Lin Chen looked up at the sky and narrowed his eyes. Under its gloomy darkness, it would appear that fine-weathered Jinling was going to experience its first torrential autumn rain.

Heavy rains after the mid-autumn festival was the best way to wash away the summer heat. After a few days of rain, the hot summer receded into the distance, and the days and nights were cool. Mei Changsu wore thicker clothing and spent his days at home playing the guqin and reading. He truly showed no interest in the outside world, and focused wholeheartedly on his recuperation.

Under the Crown Prince’s governing of the country, all levels of society were calm and carried on as normal. Only the Ministry of Rites was a little busier than usual preparing for the Emperor’s birthday ceremony. Other than the few court officials and imperial family members whom Xiao Jingyan trusted, no one else was aware of the brewing storm that was coming.

In the early morning of the 30th day of the 8th month, the Crown Princess woke up early in the inner courtyard of the Eastern Palace and dressed in her best clothing. Then, she ordered the servants to bring along the Crown Prince’s ceremonial robes, which had been prepared the night before, and hurried to Changxin Hall, where Xiao Jingyan was currently residing.

According to the mourning system, after the wedding, the Princess had to wait 100 days before living with the Crown Prince. As a result, the newlyweds were as yet unfamiliar with each other, and the young granddaughter of the Zhongshu Ling couldn't help feeling somewhat shy and fearful in the Crown Prince's presence.

Xiao Jingyan always got up early, and on this day, he was especially early. When he had finished his morning exercise and had his bath, the sky was just beginning to turn bright. After the Crown Princess personally helped him with his belt and crown, he calmed down his slightly fast beating heart and said, "Thank you for your trouble."

"This is your consort's duty," said the Crown Princess softly. "Would Your Highness like to have breakfast in the Eastern Palace or have breakfast with His Majesty and Mother Consort?"

"Let's go pay our respects in the palace."

The Crown Princess immediately arranged for a carriage, and personally went to inspect the birthday gift that would be presented that day. Once she had confirmed that everything was satisfactorily in place, she returned to inform Xiao Jingyan, then both husband and wife got into the same royal carriage, and escorted by the Eastern Palace's ceremonial weaponry, they made their way to the Forbidden Courtyard. Once they arrived at the danxi,<sup>300</sup> they alighted the carriage and changed to a palanquin to enter the Emperor's hall.

At this time, the Liang Emperor had finished his morning rituals with Concubine Jing's assistance. Hearing that the royal couple was here to pay their respects, his face broke out into a smile, and he ordered the servants to hurry and bring them in.

"Your son comes with his wife to pay respects to Father Emperor and to congratulate Father Emperor on your birthday!" Xiao Jingyan and the Crown Princess knelt and bowed three times before the Emperor to pay their respects, then turned towards Consort Jing and kowtowed, saying "Mother Consort, please accept our respect."

"Stand up, stand up," The Liang Emperor laughed and beckoned them to rise. "It's so early. I'm sure you haven't had breakfast. You're just in time. We'll be having lunch with the court attendees and it will be very noisy, so let's have a quiet breakfast now as a family."

"Your son thanks Father Emperor for the meal." After making his salutation, he sat to the Emperor's left and Consort Jing's right. The servant maids immediately went back and forth arranging the meal items. The Crown Princess sat to the side and served the dishes, respectfully fulfilling her duty as the daughter in law.

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<sup>300</sup> the long steps / aisle leading up to the palace hall



The meal was a pleasant one, and the atmosphere was peaceful. As time passed, Xiao Jingyan continued to try to keep in check the restlessness that he had very firmly suppressed earlier, and upon seeing his mother's calm and steadiness, he was even more determined to hold it in.

After the meal, the Liang Emperor asked a few questions about court matters. Xiao Jingyan had anticipated those questions and was thus able to reply smoothly and comprehensively, which pleased the Liang Emperor. After expressing a few words of praise, he then ordered the servants to bring out the chess board for a round of chess.

Halfway through the game, it was still unclear who was winning. Xiao Jingyan suddenly stopped and said, "Father Emperor, it's already past sishi.<sup>301</sup> Most of the officials must have already arrived. Father Emperor should start making your way to Wuying Hall."

The Liang Emperor started at the chessboard for a while, then shook out his sleeves and said, "It appears to be a stalemate. Looks like we won't be able to conclude this game so soon. Let's continue after the ceremony."

Observing the situation, Gao Zhan immediately turned around to summon the palanquin. With Consort Jing's assistance, the Liang Emperor got up to change his clothes and then left the hall. Just as he was about to board the palanquin, a shrill voice was heard shouting loudly from the side porch.

"I want to see His Majesty....I have an important matter....you dog, let me go....Your Majesty! Your Majesty! You can't go....they are conspiring to....." It sounded like someone had covered that person's mouth, and the sound of struggling could be heard.

"What's going on? Who's that?" The Liang Emperor frowned and asked sternly.

"It's Concubine Yue," said Imperial Consort Jing calmly, her expression unchanged. "She has been delirious for a long time, and has had difficulty recovering. Please forgive your servant for not properly taking care of this and causing Your Majesty to be startled on your way out."

"Oh, Concubine Yue," said the Liang Emperor thoughtfully. "Yes, you've told me before that her symptoms aren't very good. This Concubine Yue is just too proud and arrogant. She cannot stand losing so her mental illness must have stemmed from this. She has been in the palace for so many years. I don't have the heart to see her in such a miserable state. Please take better care of her."

Consort Jing smiled and said gently, "Your servant has been ordered to manage the imperial harem, and this is my responsibility. With regards to Concubine Yue,

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<sup>301</sup> the period time between 9-11am

your servant has also been finding it difficult to bear with her, and have tried as much as possible to go easy on her, but I never expected her to go so far as to charge in here and alarm you. It looks like she still hasn't grasped the limits of her behaviour yet."

The Liang Emperor patted her on the back of her hand to comfort her. By this time, the porch had resumed its quiet. At the sound of Gao Zhan voice calling a long drawn out "qi—jia—", the two palanquins bearing the four highest ranking people in Da Liang were raised, their jade green canopies swaying as they made their way to Wuying Hall.

## CHAPTER 171

### *Injustice*

To prepare well for the Emperor's birthday ceremony, Wuying Hall was newly refurbished. Places were set out for guests according to their ranks. The men of the imperial clan, led by Prince Ji, would be seated to the right of the steps, while the womenfolk would be seated behind a golden screen in a separate area to the left. The rest of the ranking court officials would be distributed to the left and right according to their ranks. The lower their rank, the farther away they would be. Those of rank 5 and below could only pay their respects outside the hall and withdraw, not partaking in the banquet. Because dancing and singing were not permitted, there was no need to leave a lot of empty space at the front of the hall, so the Ministry of Rites could arrange for more compact seating, leaving a space of only ten square feet about three zhang<sup>302</sup> away from the steps to the throne, over which was laid a brocade carpet. This was where well-wishers would stand to convey their birthday wishes. These arrangements were nothing new to the Ministry of Rites. Processes and customs were well-established, and systems and precedents were already in place for the various palace halls. Other than minor variations, preparations went off without a hitch. A few days away from the ceremony, however, all these arrangements that should have been able to be executed with one's eyes closed encountered a curveball as a new name was added to the guest list. As a visiting official, Mei Changsu was unrelated to any of the other guests, nor was he a member of the imperial family. He also did not have a formal position, so he couldn't be placed with the court officials either. Yet His Majesty had personally invited him, and His Highness the Crown Prince, who was by the Emperor's side, had especially reminded them to "take good care of him", so they couldn't very well put him in a corner of the hall. Though they racked their brains, the members of the Ministry of Rites could find no solution and found themselves in a terrible fix. On the day of the birthday ceremony, this problem unexpectedly resolved itself. Just as Mei Changsu was about to ascend the steps to speak to a member of the Ministry of Rites, Mu Qing rushed forward excitedly, his face beaming like a flower in full blossom, and he insisted on pulling Mei Changsu over to sit with him. This problem had been a headache for the shangshu of the Ministry of Rites, and as soon as he saw this, he vaguely dismissed Mei Changsu as one of the Mu household members. Anyway, he was already sitting at Mu Qing's table. As long as he didn't squeeze in

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<sup>302</sup> Measure of distance. Ten Chinese feet (3.3m).

with anyone else, or sat too close to the throne, or cause inconvenience to anyone, everyone was happy.

The golden bell rang nine times. Xiao Jingyan supported the Liang Emperor up the golden steps to take his seat. Standing steady, his gaze swiftly swept once through the entire palace hall. It was only when he saw Mei Changsu seated by Mu Qing, smiling, and Grand Princess Li Yang's calm expression that he felt a little more at ease, and proceeded to officially commence with the ceremony. With the exception of the lack of song and dance, this year's ceremony was no different from previous years. Relatives, nobles and court officials took turns to kowtow and congratulate the Emperor, and he in turn bestowed each of them a reward, after which the ceremonial officer proclaimed the commencement of the banquet. After the emperor touched his chopsticks to the food and filled three cups of wine, the Crown Prince led the selected relatives and court officials to one by one present their carefully prepared gifts. Generally speaking, the preceding ceremony for congratulating the Emperor was more solemn, but when it came to the presentation of the gifts, the atmosphere became more lively, as they waited for each gift to be revealed. The more confident court officials would request permission to stand on the brocade carpet and recite their personally composed hymns of praise, using eloquence and wit to elicit praise and win attention. Based on previous experience, there would be one or two outstanding persons on that brocade carpet every year, so everyone ate and drank while waiting to see who would steal the limelight this year.

"Haha, hahaha, that's also considered a poem....haha...." Mu Qing laughed heartily, slapping his palm on the table top, after the assistant minister of the Ministry of Works finished his recitation. "Mister Su, if I wrote such a poem, I would have been caned by my Master....."

"For this poem to make you laugh so, there must be something humorous about it. All those old Masters teaching you are really unable to produce such lively language." Mei Changsu smiled as he adjusted Mu Qing's perspective of things, but his eyes swept lightly to the front, the corners of his mouth a little tight.

His gaze landed on Grand Princess Liyang. She was fiddling with the cuffs of her light jacket, raising a hand to brush back the black veil that was hanging down on one side of her face. Though her face was pale, her eyes were focused. Not long after her gaze secretly met Xiao Jingyan's, she slowly stood up.

Princess Jingning, who was seated beside her, whispered in surprise, "Xiao gugu,<sup>303</sup> where are you going?" Grand Princess Liyang didn't hear her, her long skirt billowing lightly as she made her way beyond the golden screen right to the centre of the brocade rug, graceful and upright.

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<sup>303</sup> younger aunt

Da Liang's imperial family had no shortage of talented women, and there were also many who had written poems to congratulate the Emperor on his birthday, which they dedicated to him in private. Never before had one stood publicly on the brocade rug during the birthday ceremony, let alone Grand Princess Liyang who had experienced so many strange twists and turns, a woman whose life was a tale in itself. Thus, as soon as she appeared, there was silence in the entire hall. Everyone stopped eating and drinking, and looked at her with wide eyes. Even the Liang Emperor couldn't help putting down his golden cup in shock and ask, "Liyang, are you intending to recite a poem?"

"Your younger sister lacks literary talent and is not capable of writing a poem...." Grand Princess Liyang's gaze was determined. She drew a deep breath and raised her chin. "Please forgive me, Your Majesty. Your younger sister would like to take this golden opportunity, before all gathered here, to confess on behalf of the subject Xie Yu to the crime of deceiving the Emperor, falsely accusing the innocent of rebellion and killing the loyal and faithful. For upsetting Your Majesty, your younger sister deserves ten thousand deaths, but Xie Yu's crimes are truly wicked and offend both man and God alike. Your younger sister dare not conceal it. If I do not confess it before the imperial court and reveal it to the world, I fear that I would incur divine punishment. Your Majesty, please allow your younger sister to present a detailed petition."

"What are you talking about...." The Liang Emperor said with displeasure, his expression confused. "I heard that Xie Yu's already dead, isn't he? His punishment has already been carried out....Liyang, although I had punished him, I had been lenient with you and didn't implicate you and your children. What else do you feel is lacking that you should cause such a fuss during my birthday ceremony?"

"Once Your Majesty listens to this, Your Majesty will understand why your younger sister must confess her deceased husband's crime now in this hall." Face to face with her Huang xiong's<sup>304</sup> dark gaze, Grand Princess Liyang gritted her teeth and waited for her fear to dissipate before saying in a clear and distinct voice, "Thirteen years ago, Xie Yu conspired with Xia Jiang to force a scholar to imitate Chiyan's Vanguard General Nie Feng's handwriting and forge a secret letter accusing Commander Lin of plotting a rebellion, deceiving the Emperor and finally breaking out into a case of enormous proportions. This was his first crime...."

With these words, Wuying Hall instantly erupted, like cold water poured onto hot oil. The Liang Emperor's expression also changed, and he raised a trembling finger towards the Grand Princess, saying furiously, "You....you....are you mad?"

"To make the accusation more realistic, Xie Yu secretly sealed Juehun Valley with fire, pushing Nie Feng's troops into a corner and completely annihilating them, then shifted the blame to Commander Lin. This is his second crime." Grand Princess

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<sup>304</sup> royal elder brother

Liyang paid no heed to the uproar around her, and continued to say in a loud voice, “Having been from the military, Xie Yu understood battle situations and the Chiyan troop movements. Lying that Commander Lin was advancing his troops into the capital, he deceived Your Majesty into giving him the military seal and went with Xia Jiang to set up an ambush in Meiling. Taking advantage of the Chiyan army’s exhaustion after invading Da Yu, without announcing the imperial decree, without calling for surrender, they charged at them and unjustly massacred 70,000 loyal souls in Meiling. Afterwards, they claimed to be victims of rebellion as the Chiyan army resisted imperial orders, so they had no choice but to put them down on the spot. This was his third crime...”

“Shut up! Shut up!” hissed the Liang Emperor, who couldn’t listen anymore and was shaking all over. “Men! Drag her away! Drag her away!”

The palace guards looked at each other in dismay for a period of time before walking over hesitantly. Just as they came into contact with Grand Princess Liyang, she shook them off, and they immediately showed reluctance to take her by force, and stood aside.

“After the massacre at Meiling, Xia Jiang and Xie Yu made use of Commander Lin’s golden seal and signet to produce counterfeit documents framing Prince Qi for instigating the Chiyan rebellion in order to seize the throne. As a result of this false accusation, Prince Qi and his entire family was exterminated. This was his fourth crime,” Grand Princess Liyang knew that she could not stop now. She did not look at the imperial guards by her side. Relying on her determination, she persisted. “After this injustice took place, Xie Yu and Xia Jiang used their imperial power over the military to seal off all avenues for redress, Anyone with the slightest knowledge of the truth who had any intention of reporting it was eliminated one by one so none of these ever reached Your Majesty’s ears. This was his fifth crime. Five capital crimes, each one confessed and written by Xie Yu’s own hand. Not a word has been falsely fabricated. After reading this letter, your younger sister was shocked to the core and greatly distressed by this, and therefore have stepped forward to announce this, hoping that Your Majesty would clarify the facts of this injustice, and by the order of heaven, order a reinvestigation of the Chiyan case so that these loyal souls can rest in peace. If this request is granted, even if your younger sister dies...at least I would be at peace.”

Tears rolled down from the corners of Grand Princess Liyang’s eyes as she spread her sleeves and prostrated before the throne, her forehead touching the floor. Slowly, she knocked her head against the floor like a heavy hammer, and each time, it resonated in the chests of all those present. Although her words were succinct and unexaggerated, the facts revealed by her confession today were too shocking and evoked feelings of grief and indignation in anyone with a conscience and a sense of right and wrong. Amidst the impassioned uproar filling the hall, Shi Yuan Qing, the shangshu of the Ministry of Appointments, was the first to step forward. Clapping his fist, he said, “Your Majesty, although what the Grand Princess has said is horrifying, with Xie Yu’s written confession as evidence, these aren’t wild and baseless

conjectures. If this is not investigated thoroughly, the court will be uneasy. Your Majesty, please allow for this petition and assign fair and impartial court officials to reinvestigate the Chiyan case over the next few days and clarify the facts, in order to demonstrate Your Majesty's wisdom and great virtue!"

As soon as he had finished speaking, the Zhongshu Ling Liu Cheng, the Master of Cheng Pavilion, Shen Zhui, Cai Quan and other similarly ranking officials stepped forward and said unanimously, "Shi shangshu is right. We second it!" By this time, everyone's emotions were running a little high. These were considerably high ranking officials. The moment they stood up, those in the back immediately stood followed suit in large numbers. Even the usually uninvolved Prince Ji slowly got up and said with slightly red eyes, "Your younger brother thinks that the request made by the court officials is very reasonable. May Your Majesty grant it."

"You....even you...." The Liang Emperor's jowls trembled, and he fell into a coughing fit, gasping for air, his entire being restless. Leaning forward on the table, he overturned a cup of fragrant tea onto the floor. "What are all of you planning to do? Force me? Xie Yu is already dead. Why is there still talk about whether he's guilty or not? It's just an insignificant handwritten letter whose authenticity cannot easily be ascertained. To get so many people involved like this, aren't you all making a mountain out of a molehill? Leave me all of you....leave me....."

"Your Majesty," Cai Quan took a step forward, and said with his head raised high, "The truth surrounding this matter is not just about whether or not Xie Yu is guilty of the crime. What's crucial here is the people's confidence in the way the imperial court handles such matters. Whether or not there was injustice, this can only be realized after proper investigation. If this is brushed aside, it would only invite criticism from everyone everywhere. The people will renounce virtue, the troops would be anxious and disillusioned. For the sake of the victims, and to maintain Your Majesty's virtuous name as well as the stability of all of Da Liang, may Your Majesty accept your servant's advice and allow for the reinvestigation of the Chiyan case!"

"Your servant seconds it! I second it!" Mu Qing practically waved his hand as he said, "After hearing this, who in this hall can with good conscience pretend not to know about this outrageous injustice, to not investigate further, to not ask more questions? Since there was a mistrial, it should naturally be reinvestigated. This is the most straightforward logic."

"How dare you!" The Liang Emperor sputtered in anger, his teeth rattling. "All this bluster in the imperial palace. Mu Qing, are you revolting too?"

"Your servant seconds it too," interjected Marquis Yan coldly. "When the Grand Princess made her plea, her words were logically sound and factually clear, without any flights of fantasy. Based on the situation, logic and the law, Your Majesty should grant this request and reopen the case for reinvestigation. Your servant truly cannot understand why Your Majesty is hesitating?"

His words pierced the Liang Emperor's heart like a knife, rendering him speechless in his anger. At that moment, His Highness the Crown Prince, who had all this while stood by observing in silence, finally stood up, drawing all eyes to him. Dressed in his dragon embroidered gown, inclining slightly towards the old Emperor, who was visibly weak and old, the Crown Prince dazzled the room with a presence that was majestic and full of vigor.

“Your son seconds it.”

These four simple words carried with it the energy of thunder and lightning that hit the ground with a loud crash, crushing the Liang Emperor's last attempts at resistance.



## CHAPTER 172

### *Reinvestigation*

In the split second after the Crown Prince made his stand clear, it was as if the wind blew through a field of wheat. The rest of the court officials who had decided to wait and see immediately bowed down one after another in succession, clamoring the two words, "I second". After a while, even the timidly cowering Prince Xu and Prince Huai ventured to mumble something very softly as they joined those assembled in protest at the steps. By now, the entire hall was assembled in protest, except the one guest official, who observed all these proceedings with eyes that were clear and cold as ice.

If it had been just an assembly of court officials causing a commotion, the Liang Emperor was confident of suppressing them, but confronted in that moment with Xiao Jingyan's fiercely intense gaze, he began to feel a little flustered.

Because he understood this son's feelings towards Prince Qi and the Lin clan. Back then, although he was severely disadvantaged, he totally disregarded the consequences and argued fiercely for them. Now that irrefutable evidence had emerged, Xiao Jingyan would naturally not let it go.

If he didn't restrain this son, he wouldn't be able to keep the presently tumultuous situation in court under control. But after some consideration, he suddenly realized that he no longer had any real power in his hands now, to control and suppress a Crown Prince who had been supervising the country with outstanding achievements.

For the cold-blooded Emperor, the knowledge that Xiao Jingyan had grown beyond his expectations was far more shocking and unacceptable compared to the facts that Grand Princess Liyang had just revealed, so he gritted his teeth as he walked around the palace hall, looking for support.

Old court officials, new court officials, the imperial family, the harem...he couldn't find what he was looking for in any one of their faces. Not even the gentle and sweet-tempered Consort Jing, whose eyes were presently so bright he couldn't bear to look at them.

In all his decades as the supreme ruler and absolute monarch, the Liang Emperor had never felt truly alone and helpless until that moment. What's even more important, he could no longer override all objections with force and cruelty as he did back then.

After a period of uproar, the hall gradually quietened, but the quiet carried with it a sort of silent power that made the Emperor feel even more pressured compared to the earlier chaos. Because all present were no longer behaving impulsively or simply following the crowd, but were now calm-headed. They all continued to stand in place, showing no sign of retreating.

The Liang Emperor knew that now that matters have come to this, it didn't matter how long they remained in stalemate, there could only be one outcome.

"I...allow the ministers to present a memorial...."

The old Emperor spat these few words out weakly. Xiao Jingyan suddenly felt his heart surge, but he immediately suppressed it and didn't reveal anything. Instead, he gave Cai Quan a quick glance.

"Since Your Majesty has approved the reinvestigation of the Chiyan case, would Your Majesty also like to appoint someone to preside over the reinvestigation?" asked the shangshu of the Ministry of Justice as he bowed respectfully.

"I won't discuss matters of the court now," declined the Liang Emperor softly, "...the presiding judge will be decided another day."

"Your Majesty, this is a serious matter and should not be delayed. Since matters have already come to a head, why postpone it?" said the Zhongshu Ling Liu Cheng in response, "This old minister thought it over. Selecting the presiding judge is no small matter. He must be a person of good moral standing and reputation, loyal, upright and impartial. He must also be astute and meticulous. I'm afraid it would be difficult to find all these qualities in one person, so perhaps it would be best to appoint a few presiding judges to conduct a joint reinvestigation."

"Liu daren is right," said Shen Zhui immediately. "Your servant proposes Prince Ji."

"Your servant proposes Marquis Yan!" said Mu Qing loudly as before.

Faced with all these proposals, the Liang Emperor squeezed his eyes shut. Actually, it no longer mattered who would be presiding judge. As long as Xiao Jingyan remained, the outcome of the reinvestigation of the Chiyan case was clear. Even if he himself was the imperial throne, he no longer had the power to prevent this. Prince Ji, Marquis Yan and the Senior Official of the Imperial Court of Justice, Ye Shizhen received the most votes for the role of presiding judge. Feeling the fatigue

suddenly surge in his heart, the Liang Emperor gave in and approved all of their requests. When the three men appointed to bear that great responsibility bowed to receive the imperial decree, Xiao Jingyan, who had been doing all he could to hold it in, suddenly felt a burning sensation in his throat and involuntarily turned to look at Mei Changsu.

Mei Changsu remained as silent as before. Although beneath the surface, he was like a pot of water brought to a rolling boil, he was so quiet it didn't seem like he was there at all. But anyone observing carefully would notice the deep anger in his dark, bottomless eyes as he stared with scorching eyes at the old emperor seated on the throne, as if he wanted to pierce through that decaying and weak exterior to stab at his fierce, vicious and self-centred past self.....

But the Liang Emperor did not perceive this guest official's gaze. He got up to get away from the hall where he could no longer breathe, his entire body swaying, his white hair and beard trembling in disarray. As before, the Crown Prince and all present still proceeded to kowtow deferentially as he took his leave. Looking down at them in that moment, however, what he felt in his heart was already entirely different from what it used to feel like in the past. This difference was in the bones, so deep that no words could describe it.

Consort Jing got up to accompany the Liang Emperor as she had always done, but just as she extended her hands to support him, the Liang Emperor pushed her away, leaning only against Gao Zhan's shoulders for support to board the Dragon Carriage alone. His refusal did not bother Consort Jing. She bore it with equanimity, her lips lifted faintly in a calm smile as she took another palanquin back to the inner palace.

On the small table in the Emperor's bedroom, that morning's unfinished game of chess was still laid out, untouched. It was the first thing the Emperor saw when he stumbled in. In a sudden fit of anger, he overturned the chessboard, scattering the black and white jade chess pieces. Some of them hit his face, causing a stinging pain on his skin.

Father and son were supposed to resume their game after the birthday ceremony...but after what happened today, was there any point to the game? Regardless of its outcome, he had already been forced against his will to capitulate to the Crown Prince and all the ministers during the earlier uprising, so he had already conceded defeat.

The Chiyan case was the greatest knot between father and son. This was something the Liang Emperor had long since been aware of. However, he didn't expect that there would be so many facts tied to the case that he wasn't even aware of, and that they would suddenly surface again after thirteen whole years, as if the resentment of all the dead souls refused to be pacified.

The Liang Emperor suddenly began to shiver all over. He was just about to summon Consort Jing but stopped himself.

He didn't know why but the old emperor suddenly recalled the commotion that happened in the outer corridor this morning. Slapping his palm on the top of the table, he called out loudly, "Men! Summon Concubine Yue! Quickly summon Concubine Yue for an audience!" The Emperor was still the emperor after all, and his orders were quickly executed, and before a quarter of an hour had passed, Concubine Yue was led into the hall. She had lost the elegance she once had, and looked like a haggard old woman now, though the contours of her eyes were still graceful and elegant, and they flashed occasionally with a cold gleam. As soon as she saw the Liang Emperor, she immediately rushed forward, repeating the same words over and over, "Your Majesty, your servant has a secret report.....a secret report....."

"Concubine Fei," The Liang Emperor held her chin between his fingers and raised her face up, "What secret report do you have? Was it about Liyang's sudden revolt in Wuying Hall today?"

"Your concubine wants to secretly report Prince Jing....Prince Jing is plotting some wrongdoing...."

"You've been in the palace. How would you know what Jingyan is doing?"

"Zuo Zhongcheng, the Eastern Lord mentioned it...." said Concubine Yue eagerly, her speech a little incoherent. "His niece entered the palace....told your servant...that the Eastern Lord is loyal to the Crown Prince....loyalty to the Crown Prince makes him loyal to Your Majesty...."

The Liang Emperor frowned. It took him a while before he realized that the Crown Prince she was referring to was the abolished Xiao Jingxuan, and his face immediately darkened.

"Prince Jing has been summoning the court officials non-stop, and many of them....the Eastern Lord heard of this....but Your Majesty hasn't been attending court, so he couldn't tell Your Majesty, and could only think of your concubine. After so long, he was the only one who still remembers your servant....as long as Prince Jing falls, the Crown Prince can return....the Eastern Lord is a faithful official. The Crown Prince will not treat him unfairly. Your Majesty will also not treat us unfairly. We are the first to report this. It's the highest merit. You must be sure to break Prince Jing into a million pieces and bring the Crown Prince back....Xuan'er is the true Crown Prince. By preventing Prince Jing's conspiracy, your concubine is rendering great merit. The Eastern Lord also supports Xuan'er. Your Majesty, please restore the Crown Prince, restore the Crown Prince!"

As she spoke, Concubine Yue's previously gloomy expression changed. She became more emotional, her voice shrill and she even began foaming at the mouth,

greatly alarming the Emperor. Perhaps he hadn't seen Concubine Yue in a long time, but he never thought that this once magnificent imperial consort would become like this, her shrewdness and eloquence completely gone, leaving behind only paranoia and delirium. Even though what she said was true, she was clearly mad. Realizing this, the Liang Emperor began to shake off the hands that clung him, but the more he shook her off, the more she clung on, her fingernails gouging into his flesh, the pain causing him to cry out loudly, "Men! Take her away! Quickly, take her away!"

"Your Majesty....Prince Jing is planning a rebellion. For this servant's meritorious deed in reporting it, please restore the Crown Prince....", screamed Concubine Yue as she was being dragged away. The Liang Emperor's hands and feet felt cold, his eyes flickering, and he unconsciously slumped forward, his eyes squeezed shut as he gasped for breath. Gao Zhan rushed forward with calming tea, patting the Emperor softly on his chest and stroking his back as he drank it up.

The Liang Emperor felt a pain in his chest, like he couldn't catch his breath, and all his limbs were numb. Thinking about what Concubine Yue had said, he felt angry and helpless at the same time. As matters stand now, what difference did such knowledge make? He didn't even have the energy and mental strength to pull himself together.....

"Your Majesty, shall I summon the imperial physician?" asked Gao Zhan.

"Summon....go summon...." No matter what, staying alive was the most important. The more he struggled to breathe, the more anxious the Liang Emperor felt. Fortunately, after the imperial physicians quickly rushed over to examine him, they concluded that it was due to irregular flow of qi and blood caused by disharmony in the viscera<sup>305</sup> with no major symptoms. They prescribed a dose of herbal medicine and quickly steeped it. After drinking it, the Emperor was a little more calm. Then he had his bath, after which he went to bed.

Whether it was the effect of the medicine, or because the Liang Emperor was too old to endure such turmoil, it wasn't long before he fell asleep. Gao Zhan kept watch by the foot of the bed for a while, and when he was sure that the Emperor was sound asleep, he silently got up, looked at the bed for a while, then quietly retreated backwards in a crouch, one step at a time until he reached the side door where he slipped out without a sound.

Just outside the side door was the long and winding Yunding corridor. Consort Jing was still waiting patiently along the corridor, the sleeves of her robes fluttering, her gown billowing in the wind. Her gaze was clear and calm, and bore no particular expression. Gao Zhan stopped about ten zhang<sup>306</sup> away from where she stood, gazing

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<sup>305</sup> approximate translation for TCM medical diagnosis. High likelihood of an inaccurate translation

<sup>306</sup> ten x 3.3m (1 zhang is 10 Chinese feet i.e. 3.3m)

attentively at this imperial consort who had risen steadily to the top without getting embroiled in a fight for the crown. This steward of the inner palace had always kept his gaze downcast and vaguely submissive, but for the first time now, his face revealed an expression, an expression of secret determination.

Gao Zhan knew that it was finally time for him to take a stand.

“Reporting to niang niang, it was Zuo Zhongcheng, the Eastern Lord....” Approaching Consort Jing, he simply said these few words, after which he curled forward and waited unmovingly for a response.

Consort Jing’s pupils shifted faintly, and she merely gave a quiet “Ng”, but the tension in Gao Zhan’s face relaxed visibly. After bowing deeply at the waist in salutation, he retraced his steps back to the Emperor’s bedroom.

The Liang Emperor remained in the same position as before on the bed, but his breathing had become increasingly irregular, and after a short while, he began to stir agitatedly, his head tossing side to side on the pillow, his forehead breaking out in cold sweat, his hands stretched out, grasping the air, his mouth muttering incoherently.

“Wake His Majesty up. He’s having another nightmare,” Consort Jing gently instructed, seeming to have suddenly appeared.

Gao Zhan hurriedly responded. Getting up, he leaned over the bed and gently shook the Liang Emperor’s arm.

“Your Majesty....Your Majesty!!” After calling out to the Liang Emperor a few times, he suddenly sat up as if something had jolted him awake, staring dully ahead, his head dripping with perspiration. “What did Your Majesty dream about?” Consort Jing wiped away the old Emperor’s perspiration with a plain handkerchief and said softly, “It’s probably not only Concubine Chen. Was there anyone else?”

Trembling all over, the Liang Emperor shook her hand away, saying angrily, “You still have the audacity to appear before me? All my generosity towards you mother and son has been in vain, for you to harbour such evil intentions and deliberately scheme to overturn the Chiyan case! I have been really blind, to have trusted such disloyal and unfilial persons!”

“Even if we had deliberately schemed,” said Consort Jing calmly, “There is something Your Majesty must understand. In addition to long-standing feelings and long-standing planning, there is another more important reason for overturning the Chiyan case.”

“What, what other reason?”

“The truth. The truth of the matter.” Consort Jing’s gaze pierced right into the heart of the Liang Emperor. “Your Majesty is the Honorable Son of Heaven. As long as you refuse to admit to the facts revealed today, of course nobody could force you to. But even though you are the Son of Heaven, there are some things you cannot do, for example influencing the conscience and convictions of the people, modifying the opinions of future generations, nor can you prevent the people of the past from appearing in your dreams.....”

“Stop talking!” The Liang Emperor’s face was pallid and he was shaking all over, both his hands clasping his forehead as he fell backward with a loud cry, convulsing and gasping for breath against the pillow.

Consort Jing extended a cool hand and gently massaged the area between his eyebrows, saying softly, “Your Majesty, if you speak of loyalty and filial piety, one can’t say that Commander Lin was disloyal, or that Prince Qi was unfilial. They had always been Jingyan’s role models. What they did not do, neither would Jingyan. Your Majesty, please don’t worry yourself unnecessarily.”

The Liang Emperor slowly relaxed the hands covering his face and looked fixedly at Consort Jing, “Can you guarantee it?”

“If Your Majesty truly understood Jingyan, you wouldn’t ask your consort to guarantee it.” Consort Jing kept the corners of her lips lifted in a slight smile, but her eyelashes hung low, concealing the expression in her eyes. “What Jingyan is requesting is for nothing more than truth and justice. If Your Majesty is able to give him this, then why harbour other suspicions?”

The Liang Emperor was expressionless as he contemplated, his gaze pinned fixedly on Consort Jing’s gentle face for a long while before he finally heaved a long sigh and murmured, “....things have already reached this point....just do as you will....I’ll not say more....”

## CHAPTER 173

### *Righting Wrongs*

The day after the Emperor's birthday, the Inner Court Division issued a formal decree, ordering Prince Ji, Yan Que and Ye Shizhen to be the presiding officials to reinvestigate the Chiyan rebellion case. Regarding this case, that had once greatly shaken the entire Da Liang, there were many who were sympathetic and harboured doubts back then, but due to the threat of power and intense pressure, they were suppressed for all these thirteen years. In the wake of Xia Jiang's confession and in-depth review of the case, the details of the massacre at Meiling were revealed bit by bit. The grief and indignation of all levels of society and all the common folk grew and intensified to a boiling point.

Nie Feng, Nie Duo and Wei Zheng were taken away by Xiao Jingyan to provide their witness testimonies and to reinstate their identities. Finding the most opportune moment and natural way for them to reappear wasn't a simple matter. As was habitual for him, Mei Changsu naturally wanted to put his mind to planning this, but this time, Lin Chen and Xiao Jingyan happened to share the same mind on this. One issued an order as his doctor, while the other interfered as a friend, so the matter was ultimately drawn out in full detail by the strategists amidst the Crown Prince's trusted aides, not allowing Mei Changsu to intervene, merely keeping him updated daily on its progress. As far as possible, they sheltered him from the disturbances that were raging through the outside world in order for him to wait for the final outcome with a calm mind.

By the middle of the 9th month, the reinvestigation process was concluded, but because this case had far reaching implications, it wasn't just a matter of amending the judgment, so it dragged on for more than half a month as the details of the amendment, as well as those of compensation for survivors and financial support for their families, and other such matters were worked out.

On the 4th day of the 10th month, the Crown Prince led the three presiding officials to the palace to meet the Emperor, remaining there from early morning till nightfall. Two days later, the Inner Court Division issued three imperial decrees. The first, exonerating Prince Qi, Lin Xie and thirty-two other implicated civil and military officials from the criminal charge of plotting a great rebellion, declaring the facts of this injustice far and wide. The second, to order that the remains of Consort Chen, Prince Qi and all his direct line of descent be moved to the imperial tomb, and to



rebuild the ancestral hall of the Lin clan in order to reinstate the ritual sacrifice to the departed for both families; to restore all survivors to their original positions and reward them; to order the Ministry of Rites to discuss a manifold, generous compensation to support the families of the deceased who had suffered injustice. A grand ceremony was scheduled on the 20th day of the 10th month, when a spiritual altar would be set up in the temple of the imperial household, and the Emperor would lead hundreds of officials to personally offer sacrifice to appease the souls of the deceased. The third, the leading conspirators, Xia Jiang, Xie Yu and their accomplices were convicted of the capital crime of rebellion, and were sentenced to death by a thousand cuts. Since Xie Yu was dead and it was not possible to execute him, after some consideration, all nine of his clan branches were implicated and wiped out except for Grand Princess Liyang and her three children who earned merit by reporting it first.

These three orders more or less confirmed the reversal of the case verdict, and the next step was to plan and implement it across the various ministries, departments and local administrations. On the 20th day of the 10th month, the sacrificial ceremony was held as scheduled. As a show of respect, both the Emperor and the Crown Prince wore plain caps made of cloth, personally lit the incense before the spiritual tablets and burnt written prayers, offering them to the heavens. The sky was overcast that day, and the atmosphere was solemn. After the Liang Emperor added his joss stick and candle, he wept before everyone to show repentance for his own guilt. Although Xiao Jingyan never expected the Emperor to pull this off, he wasn't surprised. He merely said something polite to console him, but did not participate in the tearful performance his father put up in order to arouse sympathy. And it was obviously all hot air. Days after the sacrificial ceremony, he never made any further mention of repenting his guilt.

During this period, Mei Changsu suffered another attack of the chills, his condition this time was much better compared to when he had suffered similar symptoms before. Because it was obviously effective, Physician Yan began to follow Lin Chen's treatment directive. Everyone was delighted and grateful, making the Great Master Lin very pleased with himself for a good long while.

Xiao Jingyan had by now basically taken over the work of managing the affairs of the state and was increasingly busy. But when he had some free time, he would simply get on his horse to visit his good friend in the Su Residence. After the ancestral hall of the Lin Clan was rebuilt, he secretly made special arrangements for Mei Changsu, as a son of the clan, to hold a formal sacrificial ceremony for them for the first time. Except for that day, the small wooden tablet that said "Lin Shu's Place" would forever remain in the cool and secluded depths of the ancestral hall, occupying the spot where others expect it to be, and Xiao Jingyan would always feel a heart wrenching pain every time he looked at it.

In contrast to the mixed emotions of the Eastern Palace's Crown Prince, Lin Chen, who had never recognized Lin Shu, felt only unadulterated joy. After all, Mei

Changsu had finally achieved his heart's greatest desire, and as far as his physician was concerned, this was an opportunity to be seized.

"Changsu, how is it that the closer we get to this final juncture, the more peaceful you appear?" asked Lin Chen happily after his routine examination of Mei Changsu's pulse. "I had originally thought that that day in Jin Hall would be a big moment for you and didn't expect you to look so good when you came back, just that your face was a little pale, you were a little short of breath, your pulse a little erratic and you were shaking a little."

"This is called 'looking so good'?!?" Li Gang who was standing by in attendance couldn't help but want to spit at him.

"The extent of it had improved," said Lin Chen, paying him no attention, "A little bit of recuperation, and he was out of the woods. You must understand that what I feared most was that you would actually release that breath you had been holding and expire in that crowd of people. That's what I would call 'not being able to do anything about it'."

Mei Changsu withdrew his wrist, tucked them back in his sleeves, and laughed as he said, "Perhaps it is as Jingyan had said. We had prepared well ahead. The greater our preparation, the more certain we were of the outcome and the less anxious I felt within. The gradual progress I had made over these past thirteen years, bit by bit, has allowed me to relax a little, to the point that when the day finally arrived, it was just a matter of witnessing the fulfillment of my most cherished desire with my own eyes. Since the result is now within my grasp, what could possibly stir me up emotionally?"

"That's a lie," snorted Lin Chen. "I praise you and you play along, thinking I really don't know what's going on? You've managed to hold yourself together, not because you weren't stirred up emotionally, but because you haven't completely let go of that breath you have been holding. I know how you think. You don't have any confidence in your body. You're afraid, afraid that just as everyone is finally happy, you are suddenly unable to hold on, that overnight, the happy occasion suddenly becomes a funeral, causing your friends to go from extreme happiness to extreme sorrow and suffer great pain, am I right? You feel that it would be better to put off dying for a few months rather than dying just after the case was overturned, so that the impact on everyone would be a little less, am I right?"

"Young Master Lin," Li Gang's expression changed. "Why do you speak so crudely? What dying and living. Why would our Chief not be able to hold on?"

"You've got it," Lin Chen waved his hands and cast a glance at him, "All of you, don't just look at who he is and tread so carefully around him, avoiding the topic like it's taboo. Not speaking the truth and hiding your worry, it might be good for some patients, but for him...all of you should just take a break. What can you hide from

this dear little delicate crystal? You're only deceiving yourselves and others, weighing down everyone's hearts, doing nobody any good!"

"But....but...." The usually eloquent Li Gang was unexpectedly at a loss for words after being thus admonished. Although he didn't quite agree with Lin Chen, he could only stare at him speechlessly.

Mei Changsu cradled a cup of hot tea in his hands, speechless for a time before slowly saying, "What are you trying to say?"

"What I'm trying to say is that you have to do only one thing now. Relax. Have faith in me," Lin Chen smiled widely and moved to stand in front of him. "Stop setting limits for yourself, stop wondering if you can last for another five months, or another ten months. As long as you do your best, I will also do my best, alright?"

Mei Changsu looked silently back at him. It was one of those rare moments when Lin Chen was serious, without a hint of a smile on his face. Sometimes, communication between two intelligent people didn't always require words. After a brief period of peaceful silence, Mei Changsu lowered his head with a low "Ng".

"As for your plans to leave the capital, I have no objection," said Lin Chen with a laugh. "Beautiful mountains and clear waters are suitable for recuperation. The capital is too messy and complicated, and it's not easy to find peace. Let's go back to Lang Ya Mountain. The best scenery in the world still belongs to my Lang Ya Mountain."

"Yes we can," said Mei Changsu with a small smile. "The clear and refreshing autumn weather will be good for excursions. But we should inform Jingyan before we leave. If we suddenly disappeared, his imagination would run wild."

"Chief, will you bring us along with you?" asked Li Gang hurriedly.

"Why would I bring you all along?" Mei Changsu raised his eyebrows. "Although you all don't have family to worry about and don't want to resume your previous identities to receive your reward from the court, you don't have to keep following me around right? The Jiangzuo Alliance still has a lot of matters that need attention. Don't tell me you're intending to leave them to me? I'll be bringing only Fei Liu along. The rest of you should go back to Langzhou."

Li Gang immediately responded anxiously, "Chief, Fei Liu is just a child. He won't know how to take care of you!"

"Isn't there still Lin Chen?"

"Please, Chief, Young Master Lin....if you don't have to take care of him that's already considered good...."

“Hey,” responded Lin Chen with displeasure, “What do you mean by that?”

Li Gang ignored him and knelt before Mei Changsu with a plop, saying insistently, “Chief, no matter what, you must bring along either Zhen Ping or myself. If you leave with just a child and someone with no scruples, we will never agree!”

Lin Chen grabbed hold of a folding fan and rapped Li Gang on his head, scolding him, “What are you thinking? He’s the Chief. You have to go if he tells you to return to handle Jiangzuo Alliance matters. Who dares to disobey? If you’re still thinking of going out to roam with him, it’s wishful thinking. It’s not going to happen. Go back to Langzhou and pledge your life to the alliance! If there’s anyone who should follow along, it should be Gong Yu. She’s the only one who can afford to!”

Before Li Gang could react, Mei Changsu immediately sat up and said, “Lin Chen, what did you say.....”

“It’s the best of both worlds!” Lin Chen said excitedly, “They say I have no scruples and will never agree to let you leave unaccompanied. So we can’t let them down, right? But Li Gang and Zhen Ping will be kept very busy. As you said, Jiangzuo Alliance still has a lot of matters that need attention! So, of course, Gong Yu is the most suitable choice. Li Gang, go and inform Gong Yu and ask her to make preparations.”

Li Gang responded swiftly this time, and he disappeared after sounding his assent. Mei Changsu glared sternly at Lin Chen, saying, “Stop making trouble. If you really want to bring someone, there are many to choose from. Do you know how inconvenient it would be to have a girl along?”

“Girls are more attentive. Anyway, Li Gang has already informed her. If you refuse to bring her now, she would be deeply hurt,” said Lin Chen, his face beaming. “Alright, you just pretend you’re bringing along a servant girl. You were born the son of a noble, so don’t tell me you’ve never had servant girls around you.”

Mei Changsu didn’t put up any further resistance for the moment. Li Gang had already left so there didn’t seem to be a way out of this. If he continued to insist on not bringing Gong Yu along, she would very likely still follow along secretly, which would make it even more awkward. It was better to remain calm so that everyone got along well as usual.

When he saw him conceding, Lin Chen’s elation grew. “Let me tell you, I’ve planned it all out. First, we will go to Fuxian Lake in Huozhou to taste Xianlu tea. After two days, we will go to Grand Master Qin’s place for vegetarian food and practise cultivation there for half a month, then follow the river to Xiaoling Gorge whose mountain top shines with Buddha’s light, which we will definitely see if we keep watch for it for ten days. Then, we will continue on to Fengqi Ravine to see the monkeys. We haven’t seen Wei Ming, Zhu Sha and Qing Lin in a long time, so we

shall call on them along the way. Didn't you enjoy eating Ding Zhen's grandmother's drunken peanuts? Let's get two jars before we head back to Lang Ya Mountain...."

"Alright, alright," Mei Changsu lifted both his hands in surrender. "Lin Chen, based on your itinerary, wouldn't it be more than half a year before we arrive on Lang Ya Mountain?"

"What's wrong if we take more than half a year?" Lin Chen looked intensely at him, "Why are you counting time? Is there any benefit from doing so? Have faith in me. We'll just follow this route. Whether or not we can finally return to Lang Ya Mountain, that's not something we need to think about, right?"

Mei Changsu returned his gaze, and warmth filled his heart. He understood Lin Chen's intentions, and because of this, there was no need for any pleasantries.

"Alright. Then I shall leave it all to the Mongolian doctor. In two days' time, I'll inform Jingyan, then we shall set off together."

Lin Chen laughed heartily and leapt up, patting Mei Changsu's shoulders a few times before dashing out happily to the courtyard, shouting loudly, "Xiao Fei Liu, quickly come here. You're heading out with Lin Chen gege!"

Fei Liu, who was perched by a nest counting the chicks within immediately jumped up in fright and fell down with a plop. Lin Chen laughed at him. Aunt Ji laughed, too, and Li Gang, Zhen Ping and Gong Yu who had rushed forward also laughed along. Hearing this, even Mei Changsu couldn't help shaking his head and laughing on the other side of the window.

The people of Su Residence were cheerful and lighthearted today. Some had rid themselves of heavy burdens, some were hopeful, but everyone wanted to laugh happily, hoping that this moment would last forever.

But in that moment, neither Mei Changsu with all his well-laid plans, nor Lin Chen with his clear view of the world could have foreseen that in two days' time, several urgent reports would arrive post haste in the capital, like the crash of thunderbolts in Da Liang's skies.

## CHAPTER 174

### *Rising Winds*

“Da Yu launched a surprise attack on the border with 100,000 troops. Ganzhou has fallen!”

“Shangyang Army has been defeated. Hezhou and Xuzhou have fallen. Hangzhou has been surrounded, and they are calling for reinforcements!”

“The Donghai Navy has invaded the Linhai prefecture, plundering at will. We have had difficulty keeping the situation under control. Please send help!”

“50,000 mounted cavalry from Northern Yan have broken through Yinshan pass and have headed directly to Hetao, pressing towards Tanzhou. Please send urgent assistance!”

“Yeqin has rebelled. The governor general has been murdered. Please send troops to suppress them!”

Reports requesting for urgent assistance stacked up like a small mountain on Xiao Jingyan’s desk, with many more on the way, each announcing a worsening state of affairs. Three neighbouring countries had attacked almost at the same time, and rebellions were breaking out within the country. Had this happened during Da Liang’s golden age, this would have been a great crisis, what more now that it has happened during this period of Da Liang’s decline. Following Prince Qi’s failed attempt to reform the system, the government and military, especially, fell into great decline. For the past almost one year, although Xiao Jingyan expended great effort to put everything in order and things had improved, it wasn’t possible to fix more than a decade’s cumulative weakness overnight. Facing such strong enemy troops now, if one didn’t have a good defence strategy or go all out to resist them, territories would be lost and the country would be unstable, causing the people to suffer the loss of their homeland.

“Your Highness, apart from the troops that must remain to defend the various regions, the deployable troops number 170,000, 100,000 of which are from the Xingtai Army and the other 70,000 from Zhufang Army. To add to that, the Southern and Western Border.....”

“The Southern and Western Border Armies cannot be deployed. First of all, they’re too far away. Mobilizing them from such a distance will wear them out. Secondly, Da Chu and Xi Li are not just going to sit by and observe the unfolding of events. We must maintain our forces to deter them.” Xiao Jingyan took the report from Lilin, the shangshu of the Ministry of War and quickly reviewed the distribution of troops. “The Xingtai Army aside, how prepared is the Zhufang Army?”

“Not too bad. About 20,000 people are without armour, but the Ministry of War has them in stock and will be able to quickly allocate them.”

“What about money and food?”

“In this time of crisis, your servant will spare no effort to raise funds,” responded Shen Zhui immediately, “Your servant has come up with a few methods to raise funds. As long as Your Highness approves, your servant will perform his duty to implement them.”

“There’s no need to go into detail. Request granted. Hurry and expedite it.” Xiao Jingyan’s hand clenched around the report he was holding, muttering again, “70,000....what do all of you military officers think?”

His words were clearly aimed at the imperial military officials who had been summoned to discuss the matter. They looked at each other in dismay and were momentarily speechless. In the end, it was Duke Hengguo who stammered, “Your Highness, your servant would like to push for a peaceful settlement....it would be good to first send someone to discuss this.....”

“Peaceful settlement?” Xiao Jingyan sneered. “Usually, it’s the civil officials who sue for peace while the military officials advocate war. How is it that it’s the other way round for us in Da Liang? The fires of war are already swiftly burning across our rivers, yet it’s our civil officials who are advocating war while all of you military officers are suing for peace?”

“Your Highness, Lord Liu and Lord Shen are of course speaking up for the country and the people. It’s just that, it’s all very well to talk, but reality is quite another matter. It’s not that your servant is afraid to go to war, but we have only 170,000 troops, which are insufficient to face Da Yu, Dong Hai, Bei Yan and Ye Qin all at once.....”

Xiao Jingyan’s face was like cold iron, his eyes like icy needles piercing into the face of that old military official. “Whether the army is sufficient or not depends on our calculations.”

Duke Hengguo choked, his face turning red. He hurriedly got up and said, “This old servant is ignorant. Your Highness, please advise your servant.”

“Da Yu, Dong Hai, Bei Yan and Yeqin have all deployed their troops at almost the same time, so it would seem that the winds of war are blowing from all directions. But do we absolutely need to put them down all at the same time? We need to prioritize them, observe how the situations develop and their outcomes. Dong Hai’s naval invasion limits the number of troops they can bring onto land. Our garrison troops should actually be able to deal with them, but the local officials have enjoyed too long a period of peace so they’re a little rusty when it comes to naval warfare, nothing more. As such, the court does not need to dispatch troops over, just a general who is well-versed in naval warfare to plan the overall strategy would suffice. Most of the garrison troops stationed in the coastal provinces have already settled down there. Compared with troops dispatched from elsewhere, they would spare no effort to defend their homes.” Xiao Jingyan looked directly at the various court officials, his voice completely calm. “Moreover, Yeqin is located in the western frontier and their military strength is weak. It’s just a local rebellion that will reach no further than the Chaoyang Ridge, like suffering a skin irritation. We can first mobilize the troops in the neighbouring provinces to control the situation, and put everything in proper order when we can free up more troops.”

After hearing Xiao Jingyan’s words, the chaotic court atmosphere calmed down. The Zhongshuling,<sup>307</sup> Liu Cheng held his beard in his fingers and said, “Your Highness’s analysis is quite right. The real threat to Da Liang are Da Yu’s 100,000 strong army and Bei Yan’s 50,000 mounted cavalry. Looking at our numbers, there’s no need for us to be so apprehensive.”

“But military strength is not just a number game.” Xiao Jingyan’s gaze sliced like a knife as it moved slowly across the faces of the imperial military officials. “The military might of the same soldiers will differ under different leaders. What’s lacking now are not soldiers. The organization of the junior officers is also complete. What we lack now are generals and commanders. Gentlemen, Da Liang is now at war. As the highest ranking military officials in the country, it’s now time to step forward to help the country and accomplish military merits. Who would like to volunteer? Recommendations are also welcome.”

At his words, the imperial military officials tensed up and silently lowered their heads. For the past decade, Da Liang’s battles were mainly focused on the Southern borders flanking Da Chu and the Western borders flanking Xili. All other battle fires elsewhere were mostly stamped out by Xiao Jingyan when he was Prince Jing. Most of the high-ranking officials gathered here today had not experienced war in a long time. What’s more, some of them were there because they inherited their titles. Although they were high-ranking, they were useless, corrupt and neglected their duties, embezzling funds meant for the troops. When civil riots happened, or when bandits staked out the mountainside, and the court commanded them to manage these matters and earn military merits, they left the job completely to the mid-level officers

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<sup>307</sup> Head of the Secretariat



but claimed all the benefits. So, seriously speaking, in Xiao Jingyan's eyes, they were not really considered military men. To hope that they would go into battle was as good as sending the soldiers on a suicide mission. But these men had good connections in the capital and came from influential families. Without the right opportunity or justification, he could do nothing about them.

"Why are you all not saying anything?" Xiao Jingyan's voice was like ice. "Duke Hengguo. Speak."

"Your....your servant is already old and unable to bear such heavy responsibilities. Your Highness, please...."

"The Marquis Huaiyi, what about you?"

"Your....your....your...your servant is also old. As long as there's anything your servant can do, your servant would risk his life to do it, but to lead soldiers to face the enemy....though your servant's heart is willing, your servant does not have the strength...."

"Marquis Huaiyi, I was just about to tell you," interjected Shen Zhui, aren't you rearing more than 700 steeds on your Yulong pasture? I heard that they have all been raised to be warhorses. During the Spring Hunt, you even mentioned that generations of nobles and aristocrats have been there to buy your horses...."

"Aiya," responded Marquis Huaiyi swiftly, smacking his forehead, "If Shen da ren hadn't reminded me, I would have forgotten about it. I had even instructed my household manager to inspect the horses in the pasture this morning. The court can definitely make use of them!"

Xiao Jingyan's face was cold, as if he didn't hear what had been said, but his gaze had moved on to others, and soon, these "old" or "weak" imperial military officers began to wrack their brains, vying with each other to offer their own personal assets for the court's use....

"You can communicate all these to Shen Zhui later," Xiao Jingyan cut them off curtly. "The most urgent task at hand is to quickly reinforce the north, to prevent Da Yu and Bei Yan from progressing southwards, and recover our lost territories. Our northern Shangyang army has just been defeated, Marshall Qi has died in battle, and the army's morale is low. The 170,000 reinforcement troops need to go north and achieve a swift victory to stabilize the current situation. So, I have decided...."

Before he could continue, the hall fell into an uproar. Shen Zhui rushed forward, clamoring, "Your Highness, please reconsider! The country is currently in danger, and His Majesty is...his health is unstable. At this time, we really need Your Highness to keep watch over the capital. You must not leave!"

Ten more ministers stepped forward one after another to exhort him, and the military officers followed suit, saying repeatedly, “You must not”. Xiao Jingyan sighed and said, “Of course I understand where you’re coming from, but if the country is not protected, won’t all of us perish as well?<sup>308</sup> Isn’t the life and death of Da Liang more important than my own safety?”

Be that as it may, none of them could tell how the situation would unfold if Xiao Jingyan went out to battle at this point in time. All his trusted ministers were in a furore. Unfortunately, there really weren’t many that the court could appoint to lead the battle. What’s more, these weren’t small battles, which one could suppress by just temporarily promoting a few mid-level officers. It was Da Liang’s biggest crisis in more than a decade. To find someone to replace Xiao Jingyan in such a short time was truly not easy.

“By the way, Your Highness,” said Cai Quan. After wracking his brains, he seemed to have a sudden inspiration. “We can make use of the reinstated Chiyan generals. Although....to send them out to war so soon after the case was redressed....er....but the country is in a desperate situation. They also have a responsibility.....”

The previous Chiyan generals represented the military system and leadership guidelines from Prince Qi’s era. In peacetime, all these high-level military officials would do all they could to hinder their advancement, but it was now wartime, and the fires of war were pressing on them. They were on the brink of crisis. As long as there were people willing to take the lead in this bloody battle, they would of course support it wholeheartedly.

Upon hearing this proposal, Xiao Jingyan thought briefly to himself. With the current state of the country, it was impossible for the old Chiyan generals to remain uninvolved. This had already crossed his mind earlier, but after careful analysis, only Nie Feng could assume this responsibility. Yet he had problems with his speech and will inevitably have problems issuing commands. As for the rest, as far as he recalled, they were competent generals, but were not sufficiently qualified to be commander-in-chief.

At this point, Xiao Jingyan’s gaze inadvertently shifted towards the eastern corner of the hall, where a screen with a detailed map of the northern border had been set up. A tall and thin figure stood before it, his hands clasped, observing it with full concentration, apparently unperturbed by all the commotion.

“Mister Su, come and persuade His Highness too.” Shen Zhui felt that the Crown Prince’s manner had changed recently, for he seemed to especially favour this Qilin

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<sup>308</sup> the actual idiom reads something like: without the skin, where will the hair attach to?

talent, so he spoke without thinking twice. “If there’s no one taking charge of matters in the capital, the people would experience instability.”

Hearing Shen Zhui call out to him, he turned his head and asked blankly, “What did Shen da ren say?”

“His Highness says he wants to personally lead the battle!”

Mei Changsu frowned and glanced at Xiao Jingyan. Although he didn’t speak, his objection was apparent.

Xiao Jingyan knew that time was really pressing now, and that nothing good would come from continuing this discussion with these people, so he ordered them to attend to their respective matters. After everyone withdrew, he got up, walked towards Mei Changsu and said, “From your expression, it looks like you already have an opinion on who should be the commander-in-chief?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t tell me you want to go. Even if I go, I won’t let you go.”

“Then let’s talk about other matters first,” Mei Changsu didn’t argue. “You must use the old Chiyan generals in this war. Your Highness doesn’t object to this, right? I’m not trying to boast, but with Chiyan’s reputation, even if the troops are men they are unfamiliar with, there’s no need to worry about acceptance of their leadership.”

“Of course. As far as the old Chiyan generals are concerned, it will not be difficult to establish them in positions of power as they are already well-admired,” said Xiao Jingyan in agreement. “Furthermore, taking on leadership in this time of crisis immediately after their names were cleared, this will garner a lot of admiration. If we assign this to anyone else, the troops’ first thought might be that they have to sacrifice their lives so that some other noble can claim credit....”

“I’ve made a rough line-up. Nie Duo would be the most suitable for Dong Hai, so you don’t have to worry about it. There’s nothing much to discuss about Yeqin, so we can leave that aside for now. Bei Yan’s Tuoba Hao has rushed over like a whirlwind with his 50,000 cavalry so he would have a problem with reserves. It doesn’t look like he has made a lot of effort nor is it a large scale attempt. His objective is most likely to negotiate with us after gaining the upper hand, for riches or perhaps for the return of the three provinces they ceded to us forty years ago. Tuoba Hao is a firm supporter of their seven princes. Bei Yan values military skill. If he can reclaim these lands with one battle, the reputation of the seven princes would increase. If not, obtaining more riches can’t hurt. With this in mind, he won’t be able to bear any defeat. Therefore, to handle him, we need to crush his spirit. Once he realizes that the gains are not worth the losses, he will naturally retreat. For a strong and swift victory, this is where Nie Dage, known for being the “strong wind”, can come in. Although others cannot

understand his speech now, Dong jie already understands him completely. Working together with a few good military officers and lieutenants, Tuoba Hao won't be able to get away so easily."

"Yes, I share the same view. Divide the troops into two. Nie Feng will lead 70,000 against Bei Yan. I will lead the rest against Da Yu...."

"Jingyan," Mei Changsu put his hand on his arm and gently shook his head, "Hear me out first, okay?"

"Okay. Continue then." Xiao Jingyan raised an eyebrow. "Let's see how convincing you can be."<sup>309</sup>

"First of all, you cannot go. In such a big battle, besides those fighting in the frontlines, the dispatch of back end supplies are even more important. It's not that I don't trust His Majesty the Emperor. It's just that he absolutely cannot be trusted. I have no doubt that if you are reckless enough to go, the consequences would be too terrible to contemplate. On this point, you absolutely cannot leave it to chance."

"This hasn't occurred to me. However...."

"Since you can't go, the next question we need to consider is who would be the right person to go," said Mei Changsu, swiftly cutting him off. "From the perspective of lower ranking officers and the soldiers, what kind of chief commander will they need? It must be someone who wholeheartedly desires to resist foreign threats, who is popular, capable, someone they would be willing to follow. Apart from Nihuang and Grand General Zhang from the Western garrison, whom we cannot mobilize, I can only think of one person."

"Who?"

"Meng Zhi."

Xiao Jingyan wrinkled his brows and immediately began to object, but Mei Changsu raised his hand, stopping him. "When Meng dage was in the army previously, he was widely known for his courage and strength in combat, and there were many legends and anecdotes about him. He has a great reputation, and he is also Da Liang's top ranking martial arts master. For the soldiers, he is like a god. If you send him, he would have full control of the situation."

"But whether or not someone is good in the battlefield, and whether or not he is suitable to be a chief commander, these are two different things, right?" Xiao Jingyan looked incredulously at him. "You know this fully well. It's true that Meng Zhi is a valiant leader, but to take on the role of the chief commander, he's still..."

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<sup>309</sup> the literal translation of this was "let's see how big a flower you can speak"

“Yes, I know. The high-level considerations for appointing a chief commander are completely different from that of the soldiers. As a chief commander, his primary duty is to have an overall perspective of the situation, plan accordingly and position soldiers for battle. This is really not something Meng dage is good at, so we need to try to make up for this....”

At this point, Xiao Jingyan suddenly understood. “Oh. Are you trying to tell me that as long as there is someone by Meng Zhi’s side who is able to have an overall perspective of the situation, plan accordingly and position the soldiers for battle, that would be enough? Is that person you?”

Mei Changsu smiled faintly at him and replied softly, “Jingyan, don’t be so quick to reject this idea. I didn’t suggest this on a whim. Thinking back to those days, wasn’t Nie Zhen shushu also frail in health with little martial arts ability? He was in the frontlines all the time, and apart from that time when nobody escaped, was he ever in danger? If you let me go this time, it’ll be just like it was for him. With Meng dage and Wei Zheng around, what do you have to worry about?”

“But how can these reinforcements compare to the Chiyan army back then? You and I both understand the challenges and terrible dangers of the battlefield. I’m not worried that you’re unable to deal with the war situation. In fact, that’s the least of my worries. But Xiao Shu, marching to war, that requires physical strength!”

“If I didn’t have confidence in my body, I wouldn’t have asked you to allow me to go into battle. Think about it. I know very well that Meng dage lacks the talent, yet I advise you to appoint him as chief commander. If I suddenly fall ill and lose consciousness at a critical moment of the battle, wouldn’t that bring harm to Meng dage and more so, let down all the troops and the people of Da Liang?” Mei Changsu gazed at his good friend. “Jingyan, believe me. My first consideration is the state of my health. It will not pose a problem. Faced with such a critical situation, I wouldn’t act rashly!”

Xiao Jingyan pursed his lips, unable to find the words to refute him, but in his heart, he was anxious. Unwilling to agree, he kept his face blank and did not speak.

Mei Changsu did not try to persuade him further, but slowly walked towards the window and looked out at the dreary late autumn scenery outside. He had a faraway look, as if looking back in time, thinking of the youthfulness and vigor of the past.

“The Northern border is the battlefield I am most familiar with, and Da Yu is the enemy I am most familiar with.” After a long while, Mei Changsu slowly turned around, his thin smile coldly arrogant. “Maybe it’s because deep inside, I’m still a soldier. Even though I was on the long road to clear the injustice these past thirteen years, I would still follow Da Yu’s military movements relentlessly. Don’t get angry with me, but even you may not grasp this as well as me, much less others. The

primary duty of the sovereign is to choose and use the right person. What we have between us are just personal considerations. Jingyan, it's a matter of life and death for Da Liang. Isn't it more important than my safety?"

Mei Changsu had not paid attention to the debates going on earlier, but his last few words were exactly the same as Xiao Jingyan's when he was trying to persuade the court officials. This caused the heart of the Crown Prince, who bore on his back the heavy responsibility of running the country, to tighten.

If it was Lin Shu standing before him, all of this would be logical and only to be expected. Nobody would ever think of keeping Lin Shu from the battlefield. He was a natural God of War, the undefeated young general, the legend of Chiyan, the pride of Da Liang, the most trustworthy friend and the most dependable chief commander....but reality is always cruel. Even the most resolute and intrepid mind couldn't resist the ravages of a body burdened with illness. Whenever he recalled that night when his friend was all dazed and confused due to his illness, Xiao Jingyan's heart would clench up tightly. When all is said and done, Mei Changsu is, after all, no longer Lin Shu.....

"Wei Zheng mentioned that you have a Mongolian doctor?" After a long moment of contemplation, Xiao Jingyan thought of an excuse to refuse his request. "I would like to meet him. If he says you can go, I will agree...."

Upon hearing this requirement, a complex expression flashed in Mei Changsu's eyes but it disappeared in an instant. If one looked closely, one would only see a face whose expression was perfectly held in check.

"Alright. I'll go back and speak to Lin Chen," said Mei Changsu, half rising from his seat. "Your Highness still has a lot to do in order to raise funds for the war. I'll take my leave first."

In the wake of Mei Changsu's composure, Xiao Jingyan felt a little nervous. He couldn't help feeling that things were going to unfold that were going to be beyond his control, but when he looked closely, he was frustrated, for he couldn't detect anything.

But this unusual feeling did not last long, because a fresh wave of urgent reports from the frontlines came in, instantly occupying his thoughts. Mobilizing the troops, reorganizing personnel, raising funds for supplies, ministers who came in one after another to make their reports. The crown prince who was now regent of the country was kept so busy his feet barely touched the ground that he didn't even notice when Mei Changsu quietly withdrew.

Compared to the tense and busy atmosphere in the Eastern Palace, the Su Residence appeared extremely quiet and peaceful. But the shadow of war had already pervaded the entire capital, and the Su Residence was no exception. When Mei Changsu passed through the doors and got off his palanquin, even though everyone

did their best to keep their composure, they couldn't help casting uneasy glances at him.

"Please send Master Lin in."

After his brief instruction to Li Gang, Mei Changsu went directly back to his bedroom. Lin Chen entered shortly, alone, his face still sporting a smile. He stood in the middle of the room waiting for Mei Changsu to speak. But though he waited for a long while, Mei Changsu appeared to still be deep in thought, so he spoke first. "I was out and saw some of your young friends enlisting in the army recruitment bureau. It looks like the younger generation of this household is split into two types. One completely useless like a worm, the other, exceeding ordinary folk by sharpening themselves to become the country's backbone...."

"We're in the face of a national crisis, so how could its men not enlist?" Mei Changsu said calmly, "Lin Chen, I would like to go too."

"Go where?"

"To the battlefield."

"You must be joking." Lin Chen's expression turned cold. "It's already winter. The battlefield is in the north. If you insist on going, how long will you last?"

"Three months."

He responded so swiftly that Lin Chen was taken aback. His lips turned pale.

"Nie Duo brought two Eternal Ice Grass with him," Mei Changsu gazed serenely at him and said quietly, "This grass cannot last for long. You must have already made them into pills, haven't you?"

"How did you know?"

"This is Su Residence. Why is it strange that I know?"

Lin Chen turned around, took a few deep breaths before saying, "So what if you know? I won't give them to you."

"I understand very well how you feel." Mei Changsu gazed at his back and said quietly, "If we keep to the original plan and roam the mountains and rivers together, relax our minds, with your medical skills, maybe I can live in a leisurely and carefree manner for another half a year....a year....or maybe longer...."

"Not maybe. It's definitely possible. I know I can do it!" Lin Chen suddenly turned around, his eyes intense. "Changsu, the old case has already been cleared. You

can already put down the responsibilities you have taken on yourself. It wouldn't be too much for you to put yourself first this time right? There are so many affairs in this world, one after the other, unceasing, all of which can't be resolved by you alone! Why do you always give up at a time when you shouldn't be giving up?"

"This is not giving up, but a choice," Mei Changsu looked straight into his eyes, his face pale, a smile on his lips. "People are greedy. Previously, I would have been satisfied with overturning the old case and clearing the names of the deceased, but now, I want to do more. I want to return to the battlefield, to return to the northern border. I want to revive the spirit of the Chiyan army in my final moments. Lin Chen, after being Mei Changsu for thirteen whole years, to be able to choose to be Lin Shu at the end, for me, isn't this a blessing?"

"Who is Lin Shu?" Lin Chen shut his eyes, trying to keep his emotions in check. "The friend I'm trying so painstakingly to keep alive is not Lin Shu....you said it yourself before that Lin Shu is already dead. In order to resurrect a dead person for three months, you're willing to bring about your own end?"

"Although Lin Shu is dead, the duty that belongs to Lin Shu cannot die. As long as any trace of the Lin clan's upright spirit survives, then Da Liang's northern borders cannot be lost and the country cannot be torn apart, its people displaced. Lin Chen, I'm very sorry. I promised you, but I need to break my promise....I really need these three months. As far as justice is concerned, the beacon in the north has been blazing, but there is no chief commander the court can send. As a descendent of the Lin clan, how could I just sit idly by, lingering the rest of my life among the mountains and rivers? From a selfish point of view, although I have you, I actually don't really have many days left. If I can put on armor and ride into battle again, I would have no regrets in this life. In this case, it's very likely that I will gain much more than I lose...." Mei Changsu's palm burnt like fire as he gripped Lin Chen's arm, his eyes bright and shining as the stars. "The Eternal Ice Grass is a miraculous herb that one only encounters by chance and cannot be sought. The heavens allowed Nie Duo to find it so that I can stave off this illness for three months, and return to the heroism of the past. Lin Chen, let's put aside righteousness and the fates of the country and its people. Please, help me fulfill this one desire of mine."

Lin Chen stared at him dazedly and asked quietly, "Then after the three months?"

"I've already studied and worked out the entire war situation. I also understand the state of affairs within the enemy leadership to some extent. Within these three months, I'll definitely be able to stamp out the fires of war and strengthen defenses in the northern border. As for reorganizing the military, Jingyan has already been planning for this. After this war, I believe that Da Liang's military might will gradually return to what it once was in our golden age."

"I was referring to you." Lin Chen's eyes were intense, his face extremely sombre. "What happens to you after three months? Although these Eternal Ice Grass pills can



stimulate your physical strength, it cannot stop the life-shortening effect of the poison. Once the three month period is over, even the immortal Daluo cannot give you one more day.”

“I know that,” said Mei Changsu, nodding faintly. “One who is alive will eventually die. Lin Chen, I’m ready.”

Lin Chen clenched his jaw tightly. Tearing open the front of his lapel, he removed a small vase from its inner pocket and flung it at Mei Changsu, saying coldly, “To give up or not, it’s your choice. I have no right to veto it. Do as you wish....” After saying this, he turned around, kicked the door open and strode out.

“Where are you going?”

“The recruitment office outside is probably not closed yet. I’m going to enlist.” Lin Chen paused and said without looking back, “I made a promise to accompany you to the last day. Although you broke your promise, I will not break mine. Once I am assigned military duty, may Mei dare summon me to be part of his army.”

Intense heat flared in Mei Changsu’s heart as he held the small vase in the palm of his hand. Though it was ice-cold, it suddenly felt like it would burn through his hand. Although those standing guard in the courtyard didn’t know the existence of the Eternal Ice Grass pills nor were they privy to the conversation between both the men, based on Lin Chen’s parting words, they could guess that Mei Changsu had already decided to go to the north. Some of them were hot-blooded youths, while Li Gang and Zhen Ping were former officers. On the one hand, they wanted to ride into battle to defend the kingdom, but on the other hand, they were worried that Mei Changsu would not be able to withstand the hardships on the battlefield. Faced with these conflicting thoughts, they stood blankly in the middle of the courtyard, uncertain of how they should react.

In this tense atmosphere, Gong Yu brought the qin out to the corridor and began to stroke it. With the touch of her delicate fingers, the strings were soft and supple. A deep and powerful thrumming resonated through the residence, evoking the spirit of youth and a mighty army. As the song reached the peak of its intensity, someone suddenly began to beat rhythmically against a board in accompaniment and sing:

“Thinking of the day I tied back my hair and joined the army, thinking of the day at Frosthorn Gate. Thinking of the day I held my sword, fierce as the wind. Thinking of the day my spear reached the clouds....time passes in an instant, and the pain of

parting engulfs me. Gazing at Yun Mountain, at its cliffs that were once barriers, now covered with vines in the sunset.....”<sup>310</sup>

Amidst the singing, Mei Changsu got up and pushed open the window. He gazed up at the sky, his eyebrows creased as if surging with battle spirit, his eyes glittering like the sharp edge of a sword.

Two days later, the cabinet issued a decree commanding Nie Feng to lead an army of 70,000 against Bei Yan’s cavalry and Meng Zhi to lead an army of 100,000 against the mighty army of Da Yu, and the date was fixed for their commissioning before the troops and receive their military seals. In the same imperial decree, the famous non-ranking visitor in the imperial capital, Mei Changsu, was also specially appointed as a military supervisor accompanying Meng Zhi into battle, and was given the Crown Prince’s jade plaque. The day before dispatching the troops, the Liang Emperor suffered a stroke, probably due to the recent shocking events. He lay paralyzed in bed, unable to move nor speak. Xiao Jingyan led the members of the imperial clan, the ministers and all the military officers involved to pay their respects by his bed, and inform him of the upcoming battle. As they each took turns to make their salutations, Mei Changsu suddenly bent down close to the Liang Emperor’s ear and whispered something. Nobody knows what was said, but the old emperor’s eyes suddenly opened wide, and saliva dribbled from the side of his mouth. With great effort, he tried to lift up one of his arms towards Mei Changsu.

“Father Emperor, you can rest assured. Mister Su is the most talented scholar in the kingdom. He’s not only absolutely well-versed in court politics, he is also unsurpassed in killing tactics in the battlefield. Together with Meng qing, they will definitely suppress the chaos and secure the Northern border this time.” Each of Xiao Jingyan’s words were clear and pointed, and his eyes held a gleam that chilled the bones.

The Liang Emperor’s hand finally dropped back dejectedly onto the bed, and a “wuwu” sound emitted from his crooked and trembling lips. Where there once was supreme authority, now all that remained was superficial etiquette. After the nobles and ministers left along with Xiao Jingyan, he lay, unminded by anyone, and the only sounds he could hear were that of his own heavy breathing, which reverberated through the cold, inner recesses of the palace.

The next day, the high-ranking officers of both the reinforcement armies bid their farewells at the Emperor’s doorway, and set out in full armour. Just as it silently observed the arrival of Mei Changsu in the imperial capital years ago, the lofty city gate of Jinling silently observed his departure that day. When he arrived, he was an unknown commoner who was full of schemes and intrigues, but when he departed, he

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<sup>310</sup> An attempted translation of an excerpt from poem “Nanxian Lu·Bangzhuangtai·Self-narrative” written by Xia Wanchun (夏完淳《南仙吕·傍妆台·自叙》)

galloped astride a horse towards the distant fires of war. After two years of plotting and scheming, the country had changed. The only thing that remained unchanged was the loyal and sincere heart, which would live forever and never die.

The early winter wind blew past Mei Changsu's black mane, causing his jade green cloak to flap behind him. The war horse, the light silver armour, the carefree and uninhibited feeling that felt so familiar in the heart, as if imprinted deep in the bone marrow, that cannot be erased.

Looking at the one hundred thousand troops, surging forward like tigers. Looking at his beloved generals and close friends, mutually supporting each other. It was as if they had returned to that world that had been lost in the cold of Mei Ling's snow. In the midst of the battle, Mei Changsu's lips revealed a hint of a bright and jubilant smile, and without looking back at the capital, he turned his horse's head around, urged his horse into a swift gallop, resolutely dashing forward into the future he had chosen, the ending he had chosen.

## CHAPTER 175

### *Epilogue*

After 6 winters had passed under Yuan You<sup>311</sup> in Da Liang, Da Yu retreated after losing three wars and 60,000 soldiers, sending gifts to sue for peace. The prefectures were recovered, amnesty was granted, and the people were pacified. Meng Zhi's troops were combined with the defeated Shangyang army, reorganized and renamed Changlin Army, and stationed in the northern border as its line of defense. During this war, many young officers stood out, and formed a pool of reserved talent who could be vigorously cultivated. Both Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin also received many military merits, but due to the former's life circumstances, he did not receive any rewards.

For the people, the ministers and the imperial family, this was a great triumph. A strong enemy had retreated, the borders had stabilized, and both political and military reforms were progressing rapidly. Homes that had been destroyed in the various prefectures were slowly being rebuilt. In this atmosphere of rejoicing and celebration, it was as if most people had already overlooked those who had suffered losses and were in mourning.

But Xiao Jingyan did not forget. In a plain and unadorned room within the Eastern Palace, he spent sleepless days and nights earnestly copying the names of all who died in battle, starting from the lowest ranking soldier, but often, when he got to the last name, he would inevitably put down his pen, and lean sobbing over the table, unable to control his deep sorrow. Even the pregnant Crown Princess, who was by his side, was unable to console and dissuade him.

In the summer of the 7th year of Yuan You, Nie Duo returned with his report of the situation in Dong Hai. Regarding his marriage to Ni Huang, Xiao Jingyan never gave his blessing, and it wasn't until Gong Yu brought him a handwritten letter from Mei Changsu that he silently consented to it. After the wedding, Ni Huang handed over the Southern Border Army to Mu Qing, who had grown into maturity, then, after

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<sup>311</sup> I don't think this actually means 6 years after the war started. It's just a time reference related to a particular era under a monarch. I didn't delve too much into it, but you might be able to find more info here: [https://wiki2.org/en/Chinese\\_era\\_name](https://wiki2.org/en/Chinese_era_name)

accompanying Nie Duo to pay their respects at the Lin ancestral shrine, they left for the Eastern border garrison, Haiphong.

In the autumn of the 7th year of Yuan You, the Crown Princess gave birth to a baby boy. Three days later, the Liang Emperor passed away. After fulfilling the one month period of mourning, Xiao Jingyan officially ascended the throne, installed his mother Consort Jing as the Empress Dowager, and crowned the Crown Princess from the Liu clan as Empress.

As expected, Xiao Jingyan adopted Ting Sheng as his son, and appointed a renowned and great scholar to carefully instruct him. Due to his intelligent, firm and straightforward nature, Xiao Jingyan doted on him, so although he didn't have the rank of a prince, he could come and go in the palace as he pleased, to visit the Empress Dowager and pay his respects.

The long-lived Gao Zhan continued to maintain his title as the head manager of the inner palace, but the Empress Dowager had graciously granted him retirement so that he could live out his days comfortably in the palace without having to work. Gao Zhan really loved the little prince Yuxue, and often visited him in the palace. Everytime Ting Sheng carried the little prince when they played outside, he would insist on keeping watch by the side.

“Gao gonggong, would you like to carry him?” Seeing how this white-haired old man stood by anxiously keeping watch, Ting Sheng would sometimes smile and ask him this question, but everytime, Gao Zhan would bow and shake his head, and say in a faltering manner, “This is the future lord of the world. This old servant dare not carry him....”

Ting Sheng merely let his reply pass by, not minding it at all, continuing to laugh heartily as he teased the babbling little prince, who was just learning to talk.

“Looking at these two brothers, they seem to have a good relationship,” said the wet nurse who was standing by the side. Glancing up at the sky, she continued, “But we should bring him in already. The sky is so overcast. Gao gonggong, do you feel it.....the wind rising?”

“No, it's not the wind rising. Rather, within these palace walls....the wind has never stopped.....” said the old eunuch who had lived through three dynasties, as he narrowed his dim eyes.

The End.