To Be A Virtuous Wife Chapter 1-20

Chapter 1

The early morning at *Duan Wang* Fu[1] was not different from any other day. In the kitchen, the servants moved to and fro without any hint of hurry. Ma *pozi*,[2] after delivering the required pastries to the *neiyuan*,[3] came back to the kitchen with a group of yahuan[4] but her face wasn't looking very well.

"Hey, old sister, what's wrong? Why does your face looks terrible?" Another *pozi*, wearing a dark buttoned jia'ao[5], handed a cup of tea over to the other woman and exclaimed in shock: "Didn't you just go to the zhengyuan[6] to deliver the cheese, how come … …"

"Don't even mention it. *Wang* fei[7] just woke up this morning. Rough labor servants like us couldn't even enter the yard. We only saw one of *wang fei*'s attendants, Yin Liu *guniang*,[8]" When she spoke to that point, Ma *pozi* took a long swallow of tea, looked around at the surroundings and lowered her voice to whipser, "I saw that the expressions of the people of *zhengyuan* weren't right, so I hurried back."

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[1]端王府: 端王 is Duan Wang. Duan (端) means straight, upright; proper if it is used as an adjective. As a noun, it primarily means the beginning, end, or the limit. 王 can mean both a prince or a king. However, the highest power belongs to the emperor, not a 王. 府 is a compound, house or mansion. *Fu* (府) can only be labelled and called as such if it is bestowed as part of a position or inherited in the aristocracy. Families can be referred to using their actual surname or the name of their *fu* so it becomes the House of ——, similar to Western royalty. 端王府 is therefore the household and the mansion that was bestowed to Prince Duan when he received his title.

[2] literally old woman. There are three primary meanings: baggage – a despicable/pitiful woman, a wife, or an old female servant. Only the last meaning is relevant in this case. Po zi are usually lower ranked servants, used for common-labor or other tasks.

[3]内院: The "inner courtyard" where the women reside. It also refers to the interactions and social spaces of women. See more in the glossary on the *fu*.

[4] servant girl, can also be called *yatou* (丫□). Equivalent to maids.

[5] lined jacket. Wide sleeves and a length to the waist. This style was common during the Ming and especially the Qing dynasties.

[6] The main building or the primary building. The residence of the wife. See more in the glossary on the *fu*.

[7]王妃: the wife of a 王 or prince. 妃, on its own, is one of the highest ranks of imperial concubine under the Empress.

[8]姑娘: young lady, or young girl.

Hearing this, the *pozi* who wore the lined jacket sighed. With an attitude composed half being a spectator and half pitying, she said: "They hadn't even finished taking down the red canopies[9] hanging in the *fu* yet."

Wang fei had just married into the *fu* for less than two months. After the wedding night, *wang* ye[10] hadn't stepped a foot into the *zhengyuan*. In the last few days of sickness, *wang ye* had only sat for a period before leaving. No wonder the people of *zhengyuan* weren't looking very well. She once had the luck to see *wang fei*. She had been dignified and her appearance had also been beautiful. She didn't know which of those aspects *wang ye* didn't like.

"Don't say nonsense, I just saw one of Feng *ce fei*'s[11] *yahuan* come over." Both of them knew the words that Ma *pozi* didn't say. They stopped talking and went back to their duties.

In the *zhengyuan*, a host of *yahuan* carefully waited upon the *wang fei* in her morning ablutions. A piece of first-rate silk brushed over fingertips that were as thin as green onions before being set to the side.

There wasn't a hint of anger on the face of Qu Qing Ju, unlike the past few days as her black silk flowing freely. She lazily took off her wrist a green jade bracelet before casually throwing it into a carved mahagony box: "This color is too old-fashioned."

Upon hearing this, Jin Zhan paused slightly before waving her hand at the female attendants behind her. Several other boxes were brought before Qu Qing Ju. Inside, there were pairs of different bracelets. Gold-wrought, pearl-encrusted, jade, of all colors and none of them were ordinary.

Her gaze swept across the rows of bracelets. In the end, her final choice was an exquisitely carved blood-red jade bracelet that, when contrasted against the pale wrist, was unspeakably beautiful.

[9]□□子: the red canopy refers to both the decorations for the wedding, and also the bedroom canopy that covers the bed.
[10]王□: the pronoun to refer to a *wang* in normal conversation.
[11]□妃: ce(□) means side. *Ce fei* refers to a "secondary wife".

Seeing the situation, Jin Zhan's expression slightly changed . In the past, *wang fei* had resented the phoenix-blood jade bangle[12] as being too garish and never worn it. Today, she had picked this jade at first glance. Thinking about the days since marrying into the *wang fu*, she felt bitterness in her heart. Before marriage, *wang fei*'s personality had been warm and gentle. This would have been a virtue, but in a marriage into the Imperial family, that personality was a handicap.

Noticing Jin Zhan's expression, Qu Qing Ju smiled faintly. She stood and spread her arms to let the maids dress her in her handpicked wide-sleeved silk dress.[13] It was made from the highest quality of white brocade embroidered with *Shu*-style[14] red plum blossoms. When the cloth swayed, it was as though there were real plum blossoms swaying in the wind.

At the waist, there were a spice bag embroidered with a two blossoming lotus flowers on a single stem and a jade-beaded laozi.[15] The long soft hair was coiled up into a *fei xian* ji.[16] A vibrant red peach blossom was drawn on the brow. Eyebrows like willow leaves. Lips as red as cherries. Just a glimpse was enough to be unspeakably bewitching.

Pushing a *luan* bird[17] and cloud buyao[18] into her hair by herself, Qu Qing Ju slowly stood and enigmatically smiled as she looked out the winder, "This time should be the time to pay respects."[19]

A few steps away from Jin Zhan was Mu Jin who, upon hearing this, forced a smile and said: "*Wang fei*, since you were ill the last few

[12]□血玉□: the literal translation would be chicken blood (□血) jade bracelet/bangle(玉□)but phoenix blood is another name for the type of stone.
[13]□裙: *luo qun,* silk dress.
[14]蜀□: the style of embroidery originated from Sichuan so it is also called *chuan*-style. It is one of the four primary styles of embroidery in China.
[15]□子: *laozi*, it's an ornament that's usually made through knotting, such as the classic Chinese knot, to create various shapes.
[16] flying(□)immortal(仙) knot/braid(髻)
[17] mythical bird related to the phoenix
[18] angling hair ornament or literally *step shake*
[19] literally ask/request (□) safety/comfort(安). It is performed in the morning by all females of the family in the household to the eldest female, the mother of the highest ranking male member of the family, or in the absence of that, his wife. This includes daughters, concubines, sisters and if the family has not separated and the brothers live together, their wives would also go.

days, *wang ye* told the houyuan[20] so the *qieshi*=[21] wouldn't disturb your rest. "

"Oh," Gently caressing the red-stranded jade earrings on her earlobes, Qu Qing Ju leisurely sat down and adjusted into a somewhat comfier position. She accepted the warm water that Yin Liu handed over to rinse her throat. Ptting the lid back on the cup before wiping the corner of her mouth, she said: "Since that is the case, send somebody to each yard to deliver the news that *ben wang* fei[22] has just recovered and has terribly missed all the *ce fei* and the *shiqie*.[23]"

The four *da yahuan,*[24] upon hearing this, exchanged glances between themselves. Even if they didn't know the reason why *wang fei*'s personality upon waking had changed so much, they still obeyed and left.

Coming out of the main building, a slightly worried Jin Zhan said: "*Wang fei* doesn't seem normal today since waking up, I don't know why."

"In this *wang fu*, everybody shows *wang fei* respect on the surface but in their private time, they all go currying favour with that *ce fei* in *Xi Yuan*.[25] *Wang fei* has been married for two months. Other than the first three days where *wang ye* stayed in *zhengyuan*, he's spend all his time with other concubines. It's humiliating for our *wang fei*." Yin Liu said with creased brows and a quiet voice, "That Feng *ce fei* has such an attitude. She really thinks that she's worth something. She's just a qie[26]."

Yu Zan, hearing what Yin Liu was saying, looked around surreptitiously and after not finding anyone in the surroundings, came closer and said:

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[20] back(后) courtyard(院). Another way of referring to the *neiyuan*, the main difference is that *houyuan* is more commonly used to refer specifically to the women who were concubines of assorted rank and social status.
[21] (*qieshi*): general term referring to all concubines
[22]本王妃: this(本) *wangfei*(王妃). *Ben* (本) is used by a speaker to refer to themselves in the third person (illeism). This form of speaking is used for more formal occasions, usually when the speaker is part of a conversation among equals or as the highest ranking person in the room.
[23] *shiqie*. Lower in rank than *ce fei* but not the lowest in terms of rank among concubines.
[24] *da* for big(大) or first-rank. These are the highest ranked *yahuan* who have the most experience and spent the most time with the female they serve. According, they receive better treatment than other *yahuan*.
[25] literally the Western Park. It would be a set of rooms on the western side of the compound.
[26] *qie*.Shortened and very general name for concubine

"Don't say too much. Even if *wang ye* favors[27] Feng *ce fei*, he still gives *wang fei* the respect she's accorded. Don't make trouble for *wang fei*."

"This is called respect," Yin Liu snorted. Thinking about her mistress' warm and soft personality, she sighed in helplessness, "Whatever, Jin Zhan and I will go over to Feng and Jiang *ce fei*. The second-rank *yahuans* can go to the other *shiqie*."

Mu Jin, who hadn't spoken, nodded: "That's very good. Bai Luo and Pu Er are enough to invite Luo shi[28] and Han *shi*."

Among the *yahuan* in *wang fei*'s entourage, the first-ranked were named using flowers, the second using tea, the third and the heavy-labor *yahuan* had no guidelines. Mu Jin and the other three had followed *wang fei* from *Chang De Gong* Fu[29] so they naturally followed *wang fei*. But the *wang fu* was much more complicated. Before marriage, *wang fei* had been neglected by her stepmother and hadn't learned how to manage a household. Consequently, it didn't even take two months after entering this place that she had gotten ill.

Mu Jin had always been worried for *wang fei* but seeing that *wang fei* today had the desire to establish herself in the *wang fu*, she took a sigh of relief. She didn't worry that *wang fei* would fight, she would only worry if *wang fei* still had the personality of mud.

Seeing that all the *yahuan* had retreated out, Qu Qing Ju stood and walked in front of a very large copper mirror. The craftsmanship was excellent. Even if it wasn't as clear as the silvered-glass mirrors from before, it was still enough to distinguish a person's appearance.

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[27] *chong*(□) is to pamper/spoil/love. *Ai*(□) is love. *Chongai* is a very different concept than love. It usually refers to the amount often a man has sexual congress with one of his concubines. The more nights they have, the more *chong* the concubines is said to have. Favor and affection are terms that are very similar to the concept of *chongai*.

[28] *shi* means clan name. Women, upon marriage, are identified by their surname and it is very rare that their personal name is recorded. This is the case even for princesses. They would then be referred to as —*shi*, to identify the family they came from.

[29]昌德公府: *Chang De*(昌德) is the name associated with the title, meaning flourishing/prosperous (昌) virtue(德). *Gong*(公) means that it is a dukedom. 公府 is therefore the ducal compound.

The girl in the mirror was only about sixteen or seventeen. Her appearance was very beautiful. If she had lived in the era she did before, she would have been just a beautiful and proud high school student. Combing through the memories in her head, Qu Qing Ju sighed. Her father didn't care, her stepmother wasn't compassionate, her husband didn't have love and there was a crowd of troublesome *qie*. The original had had a soft personality. In this complicated *wang fu*, she had mysteriously gotten seriously ill and mysteriously became occupied by her, this woman who didn't know what warmth was. It could be said that she had gotten no justice even in her death.

"*Wang fei*, the kitchen has delivered breakfast." From the outside came a slightly thin male voice. It was probably one of the taijian[30] that had been assigned according to the Imperial protocols. In Qu Qing Ju's memory, the original were not very close to these *taijian*, but was full of courtesy as they were appointed before *wang ye* had been titled and during the time he had been in charge of the Department of Household Affairs, dianzhongsheng.[31]

"Start service." Playing with the strands dangling from the gold *buyao*, Qu Qing Ju turned to exit. Rui Xiang and Shu Kui, who had been waiting in the neighboring room, quickly opened the curtains, one person holding them aside while another came over to support her to welcome Qu Qing Ju out.

Both Rui Xiang and Shu Kui were originally from the *wang fu*. They understood that even though *wang fei* treated them with courtesy, but compared to Yin Liu, Mu Jin, Jin Zhan and Yu Zan, there was a difference in the amount of trust. The events that happened in the previous days would have magnified the difference. It was their luck that *wang fei* was weak, if she was just a bit stronger, they would have been thrown out. Who else would let them stay as first-rank *yahuan*?

Sitting down at a round pear-wood table carved with safflower, Qu Qing Ju's eyes swept across the table. A goblet of wine-stewed pork

[30]太□: eunuchs, who were men that were castrated, are not the same as *taijian* as *taijian* refers to specific positions in the Imperial palace and government which were occupied by men that were castrated.
[31] department under the Chancellery, responsible for all aspects of the Emperor's life

shoulder, a bowl of swallow's next porridge with strands of black chicken accompanied by a multitude of similar fatty sides. The only dish that looked light was a small dish of sautéed lettuce stems.

Waving away Shu Kui who had moved forward to serve her, Qu Qing Ju looked at the people bowing at the entrance with a smile on her face: "You are the ones that deliver food from the kitchen?"

"*Wang fei*, nucai[32] holds duties in the kitchen." Those people didn't why *wang fei* would ask such a question but they replied without any fear on their faces.

"Such a good *wang fu*'s kitchen," Qu Qing Ju nonchalantly leaned back on her seat. Under the confused gazes of the others, her face darkened and then her hand swept the goblet of wine-stewed pig shoulder to the floor. Very quickly, the room became saturated with the smell of meat, "Take them away and beat them."

Nobody managed to respond. They didn't know why *wang fei*, who had a personality as soft as mud, would suddenly act up and so nobody moved for a time.

"What is it? This I, a *wang fei*, cannot command you now?" Qui Qing Ju's large eyes narrowed. She stood and looked at the people in the room, "Or is it that you all feel that it is natural and proper for the kitchen to slight me?"

After being swept over by *wang fei*'s gaze, everybody shook and managed to respond. A few of the *taijian* and the stronger *mamas*[33] rushed to the forefront and acted as they were going to drag the kitchen servants away.

The servants that were dragged away didn't dare struggle and only begged for mercy. One servant even yelled slander, proclaiming that what they had served *wang fei* was the best food from the kitchen.

[32] literally meaning slave. It's the illeism used by servants to refer to themselves when talking to those in rank above them.

[33] while it is pronounced *mama*, it refers to old female servants, and is used similarly to *pozi*.

Flashing a look at the servant shouting slander, Qu Qing Ju's brow rose and she said quietyly: "What are you standing around for? Drag them down, administer the punishment here. I want to see you carry it out."

Upon hearing this, a quick-witted *taijian* took out a handkerchief and stuffed it in that servant's mouth. He immediately started to drag the person towards the yard, the strength in his not-so-considerable body wasn't small.

Seeing the situation, the others followed and dragged the others down. A few clever servants set up a table and chair before spreading out refreshments while waiting for *wang fei* to come see the punishment.

"What is that *taijan* called? I see that he has some strength," Qu Qing Ju asked Shu Kui who was supporting her as she stepped out.

"Answering *wang fei*, that little *taijian* is called Xiao Gao Zi,[34] he sweeps the yard." Shu Kui's voice held reverence that she wasn't even aware of and even her movements were more subservient than in the past.

"It doesn't look like he is very tall. Why don't we change his name to Huang Yang, to be an interior *taijian*." Qu Qing Ju smiled gently. When she walked out into the yard, the servants were already tied to the long benches and were under the long planks.

Sitting down on the prepared chair, Qu Qing Ju mentally counted to twenty. Then she slowly and calmly said: "Other than the one that talked back, stop on the other three."

Looking at the three who endured their pain as they knelt and thanked her, Qu Qing Ju raised her cup and took a sip, "A lot of people here are likely very confused as to why I punished you."

The heavy sound of flesh under blunt force rang in the ears of the three kneeling. They didn't dare wipe the sweat on their foreheads as they kowtowed and said they didn't dare.

[34] is small, *gaozi*(高子) means tall.

"I'm a reasonable person, but it is just that you, as part of the kitchen, has become intolerable. I cannot do anything other than punish you." Setting down the cup in her hand, Qu Qing Ju's voice seemed slightly helpless.

Even if *wang fei* didn't hold the favor of *wang ye*, she was still the *wang fei* that the Emperor had personally decreed marriage on. Did a kitchen dare act intolerably to her? Even though everyone present felt something wrong, nobody dared argue. Didn't they see the person who had just been yelling slander was still getting a beating?

"Who in this *wang fu* doesn't know that I'm ill, the taiyi[35] had previously ordered what I shouldn't be eating. But look at what you have served every day?" Qu Qing Ju gave a small sigh, her face full of sadness, almost as though she was a bullied stalk of little cabbage.[36] "I know you are cannot be bothered to treat an ill *wang fei*. I felt the same too, death was an end. But since I've recovered, I want to have a good life. You purposefully deliver oily foods, is it in hopes that I would get ill and die earlier?" After finishing, she sighed in woe. If it wasn't that somebody was still enduring a beating, her look would have made others feel pity.

The three servants started to kowtowing again, wanting to explain but didn't dare to. They were afraid *wang fei* would say "disobedience against their *zhuzi*" and continue their beating.

Seeing that the kowtowing had gone on long enough, Qu Qing Ju waved her hand weakly as though she had been severely wounded emotionally, "That's fine, you can stop now and all leave." Finishing, she turned to Rui Xiang who was right behind her, "Give some ointment

[35] imperial physician. It is an official position.

[36] it means little cabbage. There is a song lyric where it is "little cabbage, from childhood, there was no dad or mom". It is also the nickname of a woman in one of the major murder cases in 1872, nicknamed so as she wore a white shirt and green pants. She was childhood friends with a man who grew up to participate in the government exams and became a government official. However, she was a childhood bride and therefore had to marry into another family. When the two grew up, the man was accused of adultery with Little Cabbage and murdering her husband due to machinations of another official in revenge. After various ordeals and torture, the truth was revealed. However, the man's body was ruined by the torture and couldn't return to his position. He quickly died after and Little Cabbage became a nun.

to them. These people must be essential in this *fu*, we can't let them not attend to their vital duties."

The four kneeling felt despair rise. Since *wang fei* said they were important and held vital duties, then tomorrow, even if they had to crawl, they had to be doing their jobs, unless they wanted to be thrown out of the *fu*. But they were servants that had signed a death contract, what good outcome would await them if they were thrown out?

Finished ordering everything, Qu Qing Ju slowly stood and turned to look at the *ce fei* and *shiqie* that had arrived at some unknown time. Her face made a surprised expression, "When did you all arrive? Since you are here now, then come in."

Done speaking, she didn't care to what their faces showed, she took Shu Kui's hand and walked into her rooms.

Chapter 2

The *ce fei* and *shiqie* didn't think that they would see a beautiful play of brute force once they stepped into the *zhengyuan*. They looked suspiciously at *wang fei* and then at the servants who were at their limits due to pain but didn't dare show it in their twisted expressions. What had happened here?

Seeing that *wang fei* was walking into the room, the four didn't care whether if it was respectful or not and followed. Only Feng *ce fei*, when she passed, ordered for the people get carried back. However, when she saw that no servant in the surroundings moved, her expression changed and she didn't speak further.

At the front, Yin Liu and Jin Zhan lowered their heads as they guided the others along and held the curtains open for the four. From far away, they saw Mu Jin and Yu Zan coming over with meal boxes. They stopped walking and waited for the two to come close. Seeing that those two weren't clear as to what had happened, the four exchanged glances

and looked at the servants who had suddenly become more obedient in the yard before lifting the curtain to enter the rooms.

The rooms had already been cleaned. The smell of meat had been covered by burning fragrance. But Qui Qing Ju didn't like the smell and couldn't resist looking at the flying cane and golden beast brazier.

Rui Xiang went forward immediately to extinguish the incense, changing it for a fainter, less fragrant one. Seeing *wang fei*'s expression relax slightly, she breathed a sigh of relief as well.

"Look at how clever *wang fei*'s *yahuan* is. No wonder that even *wang ye* complimented your *yahuan*," Feng *ce fei* said with a faint smile as she bowed slightly to Qu Qing Ju. She was laughing at the fact that a few days earlier, *wang ye* had taken one of Qu Qing Ju's *yahuan* as a *tongfang*.[37] She dared to do so because of *wang ye*'s favour but no one else dared to follow.

Who knew that when she finished, Qu Qing Ju didn't even spare a look at her, as though she, a living breathing person, didn't even exist. The room settled into a heavy silence.

Holding Shu Kui's hand as she sat, Qu Qing Ju saw Mu Jin and Yu Zan entering with the meal boxes. She spoke: "Serve it up."

The boxes were opened. Various types of porridge were displayed out. A bowl of lotus and lily porridge, a goblet of Eight Treasures chicken soup, a few small vegetable dishes and desserts that were elegant yet light. Steam rose from each dish, just one glance was enough to see how much effort had been put in.

"It looks like there are at least some that have skill in the kitchen. Give those that cooked a reward of five taels[38] of silver each," Qu Qing Ju held a fine ceramic spoon and took a taste of porridge. She looked at Han Qing He, who was standing to one side. She was one of the *shiqie* in the *wang fu*. Her status was very low but she was very good at being

[37] lowest rank in concubine.

[38] a tael. Approximately 50 grams. The conversion of silver to gold and to copper ratio would have varied across time.

obedient. Even if she wasn't very favoured, it wasn't that she wasn't favoured at all.

"I heard that *wang ye* said you were very good at service, so today, you can serve the food," The porridge was passable and Qu Qing Ju's mood seemed to have lightened. Seeing Han *shi* dawdling about, she wasn't irritated but asked in a slow voice, "Oh, Han *shiqie* isn't willing?"

"*Nu*[39] doesn't dare," Han *shi*'s face showed a hint of humiliation. But the person in front of her was *wang fei*. She was only a *shiqie*, and it was in the natural order that she was to serve *wang fei*. Even if she didn't want to, did she dare do otherwise?

The other three looked in disbelief at Qu Qing Ju, who had lowered her head to drink porridge. Was *wang fei* crazy? Even though Han *shiqie* wasn't very favoured but she had been with *wang ye* for a long time and was the one that had taught *wang ye*. *Wang fei*, a not favoured *wang fei*, really dared to order Han *shiqie* to serve her food.

Not caring what others were thinking, Qu Qing Ju blocked the chopstick of shepherd's purse[40] and pheasant Han *shi* had picked up, "I don't like this dish. Remember to not serve this one next time."

Han *shi*'s expression changed slightly, the hand that held the chopsticks tightened but she didn't argue. In the end, she only woodenly bowed: "May *wang fei* have mercy. *Nu* has served *wang ye* for a long time, and assumed that *wang fei* would like the same dishes as *wang ye*. *Nu* thought wrong."

This was telling her, that she had seniority with *wang ye*? Qu Qing Ju smiled but didn't speak, turning her gaze to a dish of lettuce stems and pig stomach.

Sometimes, silence was the greatest humiliation. Everybody could see that *wang fei* didn't even look properly at Han *shiqie*, as though this

[39] way of referring to oneself as a servant, like "this servant".
[40] shepherd's purse. It is related to the mustard family and usually considered a weed.

woman wasn't different from any other *shiqie* who had to hold curtains and serve food for the wife in other noble families.

Qu Qing Ju took a long time to use her morning meal. Feng *ce fei* and the others stood until their legs felt soft but they never received a word to sit, so they could only stand at one side, and look upon Qu Qing Ju elegantly ordering Han *shiqie* to serve her food.

"Is there something *wang fei* has called us here for?" Seeing Qu Qing Ju finally setting down her chopstick, the *ce fei* Feng Zi Jin couldn't resist any longer. Her face still held a warm smile, "Or did *wang fei* call us here just for conversation?"

Qu Qing Ju took the tea that Jin Zan held to rinse and used rose and lemon water to wash her hands. The smooth cotton fabric wiped away the droplets on her fingertips. Qu Qing Ju finally looked at Feng Zi Jin: "I've always heard that Feng *ce fei*'s personality was as soft as water, but today I've seen that this rumor is true, your personality just as rushed and impatient as boiling water is."

Standing to the right of Feng Zi Jin was *ce fei* Jiang Yong Xu, who upon hearing this, buried her head deeper to disguise the smile at the corner of her lips. This Feng Zi Jin always loved using a warm and friendly façade to evoke the pity of *wang ye*, but *wang fei* purposefully said the exact opposite. It could be seen that *wang fei* didn't really have the personality of mud. It seems that this *wang fei*¸ who had just entered the *wang fu*, had her own way of doing things.

Seeing Qu Qing Ju laughing at her expense, Feng Zi Jin felt anger rise but the smile on her face became even warmer, "*Wang fei* is making a joke. *Nu* doesn't deserve such compliments. *Wang fei*'s open mind and innocent heart is what *nu* and others admire."

"What *ben wang fei* is like, the Emperor already stated very clearly when the marriage was bestowed," Qu Qing Ju smiled as her gaze swept across Feng Zi Jin quickly, as though she was very surprise that a little *qie* dared to discuss the behaviour of a wife, "The Emperor's words

are golden, his eyes are of a dragon, his pupils of a phoenix, he naturally sees more clearly than anybody else in this world."

Anything that Feng Zi Jin wanted to say was blocked by these words. What could she say? *Wang fei* had been handpicked personally by the Emperor. She was only a little *qie*, she couldn't say a word against the Emperor. Even *wang ye* didn't dare say anything about that.

As of the present, there were four imperial sons that had lived to adulthood. The Emperor was reaching his sixth decade. The struggle for the throne hadn't floated to the surface but underneath, it was already storms and clouds. No imperial son would want to throw dirty water on himself.

Wang fei dared to say something as audacious as this, it was clearly using the situation to her advantage. She was clearly relying on the fact that *wang ye* couldn't repudiate her, his wife.

Thinking back to the words on the imperial decree of marriage, something like naturally outstanding, virtuous and of good fortune. If the Emperor declared Qu Qing Ju was virtuous and of good fortune, who dared say otherwise?

Thinking there, the smile on Feng Zi Jin's face froze and she made a full bow[41]: "*Wang fei* have mercy, *nu* spoke wrongly."

"It is fine to say what ever in front of me, since once the door is closed, everybody is a member of Duan Wang Fu. But if you slip outside, if others say I cannot maintain discipline, it would be a minor matter, but if you shame Duan Wang Fu, it would be a different matter altogether," Qu Qing Ju sighed lightly, "Technically, you have great seniority in this *wang fu*, I shouldn't need to say more, it has wasted my words."

"The fact that *wang fei* is concerned for us *nu*, it is our honor, it is not wasted." Jiang Yong Yu, who had been standing silently by one side the entire time, came forward and performed a bow, "*nu* may have spent

[41] (*wan fu*): literal meaning is ten thousand good fortune. This is the proper greeting between women, the right hand covering the left in a loose fist and performing a movement from the right side of the chest moving downwards and at the same time, bowing with the legs bent as though trying to sit down.

more time in this *fu* but is not as respected and valued as *wang fei* and not as knowledgeable. *Wang fei*'s attentions have taught *nu*."

The other three didn't think Jiang Yong Yu would lower herself to such a respectful attitude. They felt distain inside but on the outside, their faces all showed looks of agreement.

Feng Zi Jin looked once at Jiang Yong Yu. Inside she thought disdainfully, it was obvious that she wasn't of high birth, that she would even curry favor with an unfavored *wang fei.*

Taking in all of the expressions, Qu Qing Ju held her chin in one hand on the carved wooden armrest, her right index finger tapping on the chair. Of the four women in front of her, Feng Zi Jin's birth was the best, her father was a third-rank assistant minister of the Ministry of Works. Jiang Yong Yu's father was only a sixth-rank official in the Ministry of Works. The other two *shiqie* was of even lower-birth. Han Qing He's father was only an eighth-rank official. It was only the fact that she taught Duan Wang on matters of adulthood that she was elevated to become a *shiqie*. The other silent and often ignored *shiqie* was Luo Yin Xiu. Her father was deceased and she had, along with her mother, depended on the support of her maternal uncle who was a seventh-rank official in the Department of Transportation.

Looking at the appearance, Feng Zi Jin was the most beautiful, followed by Jiang Yong Yu. Similar to her name, Han Qing He was very clean and Luo Yin Xiu's appearance was just as unremarkable as her personality.

These four simple-looking women and a few unable-to-be-seen-publically *tongfang* were enough to cause the original to be majorly ill. It could be seen that they weren't so simple after all.

"Naturally it would be good to remember," Qu Qing Ju stood, holding Mu Jin's hand as she started walking outside. The four, seeing her movements, obediently followed to the yard. The yard had been cleaned, not showing any signs that would allow an observer to find that an hour ago, there had been people undergoing a beating.

Squinting as she took a look at the sky, Qu Qing Ju then turned to look at the four women: "Today's weather isn't bad, accompany me on a walk. After so many days ill, I didn't have the time to develop a relationship with you. We will remedy that bit by bit from now on."

In any other *fu*, when the wife was sick, which concubine didn't come to pay their respects? It was only the concubines in Duan Wang Fu that had the guts to only send presents but didn't come in person. The original endured, but she didn't have to continue.

Listening to *wang fei*'s warm voice saying words with a heavy undertone, Luo Yin Xiu, who had the least courage, couldn't help but shudder. She had originally thought to pay respects daily but Feng *ce fei* didn't do so. She was only an unfavored *shiqie* and couldn't even say additional words, or walk an extra step. Now that *wang fei* wanted to settle old scores, Feng *ce fei* was fine with *wang ye*'s favor, but she had no such favor, what could she do now?

Jiang Yong Yu, after hearing this, stopped and then looked at FEng Zi Jin. She didn't have *wang ye*'s favor but due to the fact she understood her position, her life in the *wang fu* could be considered not too good or too bad. Today, upon seeing *wang fei*, she peculiarly felt that *wang fei* had some element of power. The woman walking in front of her looked the same, but didn't have that personality of mud. The beating of the servants in the morning had been *wang fei* making an example, otherwise she wouldn't have made such a ruckus.

Any nobleman with no problems in their brain would always give the wife some measure of respect, especially somebody as intelligent as *wang ye*. In the past, *wang fei* had been soft and didn't care to take up the issues and so nothing had happened. Now that *wang fei* wanted to bother with it, nothing would be smoothed over just because Feng Zi Jin was favoured.

Wang fei didn't have the attention and love of her father and stepmother at home but she had an influential maternal family. *Wang ye* wasn't a person without any ambition and naturally knew how to respect his wife.

She looked sympathetically at Feng Zi Jin who was walking in front of her once, then Jiang Yong Yu shifted her gaze away. She saw that a procession that was making their way towards them. At the very front was the master of this *fu,* Duan Qin Wang.[42]

Chapter 3

From very far away, He Heng[43] had seen a procession of people in the garden but it had been too far to see everybody clearly. The woman at the very front, he didn't see clearly, but from her movements, he could tell he was unfamiliar with her.

"Ming He, can you see who is it at the front?" He had just left the royal court, and didn't want to spare the effort to deal with these women. After he spoke, he stopped in his steps, his expression of one who was fed up.

"*Wang ye*, this one sees that it seems to be a procession of Feng *ce fei* and Jiang *ce fei*," Ming He opened his eyes wide for a look before quickly lowering his head. He might be an eunuch, but he didn't dare to look straight at his master's women.

"Then who is it at the front?" He Heng squinted his eyes to look at the woman at the very front, "Doesn't look very familiar."

Ming He quickly raised his head again. The woman walking at the very front had an extraordinary aura. He didn't know what flowers were embroidered on that wide-sleeved silk dress but it seemed beautiful. For a while, he really didn't recognize who it was. He spoke hesitantly: "Maybe it's *wang fei*?"

Even Ming He himself didn't believe what he said, but other than *wang fei*, what woman in this *fu* dared to walk in front of a *ce fei*?

[42] before, he had always been referred to as Duan Wang (端王) but Duan Qin Wang is his proper rank. This is the highest level of prince. The only rank higher would be the Emperor

[43] He is the surname, *heng* means the top gem that decorates a pendant, usually made of jade.

Hearing Ming He mention *wang fei*, He Heng remembered that woman with a soft personality. Her father was the Duke of Chang De, her maternal uncle was the Xiang Qing Marquis and also Supreme Justice of the Court[44]. Her birth was not in any way ordinary but she was raised to have that kind of personality. No wonder when his mufei[45] chose Qu *shi*, nobody tried to interfere.

Qu Qing Ju saw from far away what the original in her memory had feared, Duan Wang. His appearance was that of a twenty-year old, tall and of good posture. He was wearing a white robe edged in black, with a white jade coronet[46]. The first impression one would get would be that of a giant among men, a dragon among humans. After they walked closer, she saw that there was a hint of a smile on Duan Wang's face, but there was no mirth in his eyes.

Slightly bowing, Qu Qing Ju smiled and opened: "*Wang ye* has finished court, is there a need for nourishment?"

"*Wang fei* has recovered?" He Heng's gaze landed on that porcelain wrist, the red of the phoenix blood rock contrasting with the pale skin so that the wrist looked as though it would break with a touch.

"Thanks to *wang ye*'s good fortune," Qu Qing Ju smiled falsely, using a handkerchief to wipe at the inconspicuous sweat on her forehead, "it is just that my body is weak and the *taiyi* had already ordered me to a diet. Who knew that the kitchen servants would only pay lip service and send restricted and oily foods. I was so angry at the time, I pushed them with a bit of a beating."

Jiang Yong Yu, hearing *wang fei* mention this incident to *wang ye*, couldn't resist looking at *wang ye*. She saw that the other's expression

[44] *shaoqing*(少卿) is the highest position in the Department of Justice (大理寺). Similar to the Chief Supreme Justice.
[45] mother-consort or mother-concubine. Mother who is also an imperial consort. They cannot be simply referred to as mother because socially, the mother of the imperial sons is the Empress.
[46] the historical Chinese coronet, unlike European coronets that encircle the head, sit at the very top of the head and is secured by forming a bun of hair and pin.

was normal, obviously not placing any importance on this type of matter.

It was true that He Heng didn't care for this type of incident but he was a bit surprised that *wang fei* was actually able to order and carry out a punishment. Even though he held no good feelings towards *wang fei*, but it wasn't that he would embarrass her in this type of situation: "To servants that won't serve faithfully, it wouldn't be a pity to throw them out."

"*Wang ye*'s consideration is the great fortune of *qie*." If *wang ye*'s personality was really what she hypothesized, he was a controlled and ambitious man. She lowered her eyes and face, not smiling at him any longer. In her past life, she was considered a successful manager. What type of man she hadn't seen before? This *wang ye* wasn't peerless in his beauty, she didn't care that much.

He Heng saw that the other had no intentions of speaking further and turned to his other women. He saw that while Feng *shi*'s face had a smile, it seemed to hold traces of humiliation. He looked once at *wang fei* and saw she had lowered her head. At the end, he only nodded: "Since you have gotten better, it is beneficial for you to exercise outside." Finishing, he left behind the crowd of women for his study.

After He Heng left, Qu Qing Ju turned to look at Feng Zi Jin, her eyes slightly narrowed. She reached out with her right hand to lift a fine and glowing chin, and used a tone softer than silk, "This face of Feng *ce fei*, the more you look, the more you fall in love." Finishing, the thumb smoothed over the curve of the face until it felt Feng *ce fei* shudder before retreating. She used her handkerchief to scrub gently at her thumb and index finger, "That's fine, I'm tired. You can all leave now." Finishing, she held Jin Zhan's hand and turned to leave.

Feng Zi Jin looked at the handkerchief that *wang fei* had thrown to the ground after she took three steps away and her face, which usually held a warm smile, froze in anger. This was a great humiliation. What made her even more angry was that she had felt fear under Qu Qing Ju's gaze.

What was Qu Qing Ju worth, how dumb and dull she was, that she dared treat her like this?!

At this moment she felt that the other three beside was having a laugh at her expense. She swept them, her face dark as she scolded: "What are you looking at, leave immediately!"

The two *shiqie* quickly took a bow before leaving, but Jiang Yong Yu, who was of the same rank as her, slowly opened her mouth and said: "*Meimei*[47] should return to your rooms early, I will leave first." Finishing, she didn't stay to look at Feng Zi Jin's expression as she turned and walked away.

"Qu Qing Ju!" Feng Zi Jin, with a dark face, stomped a few time on the handkerchief on the ground before walking, full of rage, back to *Xi Yuan*.

"*Wang fei*, you really humiliated Feng *ce fei* today." Jin Zhan felt satisfied yet worried, "If *wang ye* knew, and blamed you … …"

"There's no need for worry," Qu Qing Ju laughed lightly, her gaze looking towards the study, "*wang ye* isn't the average person." This type of man, he wouldn't care about small things. As long as she, as his *wang fei*, didn't do anything to damage the interests of Duan Wang, Duan Wang, at this point, would respect her, as his *wang fei*.

Even though Chang De Gong Fu didn't care for her, but her jiujiu[48] was titled a marquis and was the Supreme Justice. Her *jiumu*'s[49] father was the Minster of Defense. The couple only had two sons and no daughters, and was very attentive to her, their niece. If it wasn't for those two, how else would the original have protected her mother's dowry?

Duan Wang might not need to depend on *wang fei* to accomplish things, but it was true he would never favor a *qie* over a wife to create conflict

[47] younger sister. All the women are "sisters" and the "age" is determined by first rank, and then seniority.
[48] maternal uncle
[49] maternal uncle's wife

with those people. At this time, every imperial son was restless and Duan Wang wasn't an unambitious person.

She wasn't the type of person live in discomfort. If she really had to live in hardship and unpleasantness for her entire life, it would be better for her to just jump into a pond right now. As to how Duan Wang would treat her if he gained the throne? She was too lazy to think that much. Who knows what would happen in the future. Even if she was really virtuous and generous, it didn't appear that this Duan Wang would like her very much.

Jin Zhan didn't understand the meaning in *wang fei*'s words, but since *wang fei* didn't explain, she didn't dare ask. She, along with Mu Jin and the others, carefully walked *wang fei* back to *zhengyuan* and then saw the steward of the kitchen had been waiting for a long time.

The moment the kitchen steward saw them, he immediately came up and took a formal bow and rushed into a list of explanations and requests for mercy.

They were very misfortunate. In the past days, they had sent the same items to *wang fei* but nobody knew that *wang fei* would pick today to erupt. If it was only that, then it wouldn't have been so major. But just now, even Ming He gonggong[50], who served by *wang ye*'s side came by to berate them. The original steward was discharged. He had originally been the assistant steward and managed to take advantage of the gap to become the steward. He didn't dare overstep so he had come very early to *zhengyuan* to make his apologies.

Qu Qing Ju looked at this steward. He wasn't very talk and looked very simple and honest. He did seem very obedient, but to become a steward in this *wang fu*, nobody was honest. She was weary of his apologies and said: "What the kitchen is like, I don't care, but if in the future I find you are not attentive, you don't need to kneel here."

[50] how to refer to a *taijian*.

The steward nodded frantically and handed over a menu, saying that it was for *wang fei* to pick the dishes for today and tomorrow morning.

"In the past, you have always said that everything was according to protocol, so it isn' possible to order." Qu Qing Ju didn't take the menu, only smiled at the steward.

Upon hearing this, the steward immediately said: "It was probably one of the messengers that said it wrong. It is true that *wang fei*'s food is mandated by the protocols, but it is possible to order dishes among the protocols." Finishing, he started to castigate the messenger for being dumb and misunderstanding.

Qu Qing Ju didn't want to hear any more wasteful talk and said: "Fine, I know you will be attentive. Yin Liu, give me the menu."

On the menu once it reached her hand, there was all the ways of cooking, all kinds of dishes. She picked a few dishes that she liked and spoke: "In the morning, I don't like using oily or heavy foods. The kitchen can cook like normal, if it meets my preferences, naturally there will be rewards."

The steward felt a heavy weight. Who knew what things suited this *wang fei*'s appetite . His mouth kept repeating that *wang fei* was generous and compassionate and so on.

Sending away the kitchen steward, Yin Liu massaged Qu Qing Ju's shoulders and said hatefully: "This pile of useless and spineless cowards."

The pressure of Yin Liu's massage was perfect. Qu Qing Ju leaned back comfortably on the recliner. Hearing Yin Liu's remark, she smiled and said: "In this world, there are many people but they are all this way. It is not worth it to be angry over a small insignificant steward."

Mu Jin came in carrying with a goblet of date and honey tea. Hearing what *wang fei* said, she laughed and said: "*Wang fei* is right, *nubi* [51]thinks that from now one, there wouldn't be any more disobedient servants."

Qu Qing Ju opened her eyes and sighed over those words: "In the past, I always thought the best of others but it is today that I have decided to use goodness to repay goodness, use evil to repay evil. That is the way to live in the Imperial Family."

Mu Jin smiled and placed the teacup on the redwood table. She pulled a thin blanket over Qu Qing Ju: "If *wang fei* thinks like this, it is a good thing." In all the first-rank *yahuan*, she was the oldest. In the beginning, when furen[52] had brought her and taken her into the *fu*, the little mistress had only been a year old. Now, the little mistress has become a *wang fei* and she was over two decades. She had said very early on that she didn't wish to marry, her only desire to guard beside *wang fei*. Now that *wang fei* had changed, it was for the best.

Qu Qing Ju looked at Mu Jin and thought back to the meaning of the flower Mu Jin. Resolve. This name was appropriate for this woman in front of her. It was one of the good things the original had, this *yahuan* who always wanted the best for her.

Closing her eyes, Qu Qing Ju didn't look at the sincere concern in the other's eyes, "Mu Jin's wish, I understand."

Mu Jin's eyes became red but she smiled and said: "*Wang fei*'s words are embarrassing *nubi*." Finishing, she covered her face and left.

In the study, He Heng folded closed a missive and waited for it to dissolve in a bowl of water before saying to Ming He: "Don't touch what's happening in the south, *da* ge[53] and *san di*[54] is fighting very fiercely. It's better for me to watch from the sidelines."

[51] how a servant refers to herself. With *bi*(婢), the phrase is slave-servant, rather than just *nu* or servant.
[52] the mistress/wife. In this case, Qu Qing Ju's mother.
[53] for big or eldest, *ge*(哥) is older brother
[54] *san*(三) three or third, *di*(弟) younger brother

Ming He nodded. He saw the pieces of the missive dissolved in the bowl and turned to a new topic: "*Wang ye*, the people in the kitchen have been reprimanded. The new steward seems to be a smart one, he already went to *zhengyuan* to ask for mercy."

He Heng nodded and didn't pay much attention, only saying: "Qu *shi* is *ben wang*'s di[55] wife. What she is due, she will receive." Thinking back to Qu *shi*'s vibrant new appearance that was contrary to the past plain one, his brow moved slightly, "As to how *wang fei* does in the future, we will wait and see."

Ming He nodded silently. This was between the *zhuzi* and the female *zhuzi*. He was a servant and naturally had no opinion. But he kept on sensing that today's *wang fei* was different from before. It wasn't just the change in wardrobe, even the gaze had changed. As the main steward of the *fu*, he had seen *wang fei* a few times before. He kept on feeling that *wang fei* seemed to have from … an unnoticeable gray bunny transformed to … a fierce female fox?

Recognizing he was guessing about his masters, Ming He buried his head deeper. Amitofo, he should be punished.

Chapter 4

A new day had arrived. the *ce fei* and *shiqie* of the *wangfu* obediently came to the *zhengyuan* to pay their respects. The result was that they had waited for almost an hour but didn't manage to see *wang fei*'s face.

The other three were still alright, only sitting there woodenly. But Feng Zi Jin's face showed a hint of impatience. Even so, even she didn't dare turn and leave.

Taking a drink of tea to suppress the impatience inside, Feng Zi Jin asked in a quiet voice to her *yahuan* behind her: "Chun Yu, what time is it now?"

[55] first and "legitimately" married to,

Chun Yu looked outside. The sun had already risen. She could only say: "Mistress, it's already past nine."

Jiang Yong Yu coldly observed the motions of Feng Zi Jin and her servant. She lowered her gaze to her lotus-colored dress as though she was an unfeeling piece of wood, waiting for *wang fei* to arrive.

After another fifteen minutes, they finally saw *wang fei*'s first-ranked *yahuan* Mu Jin slowly walk out, a face full of remorse. She bowed deeply to the four: "*Ce fei* and *yiniang*,[56] please return. *Wang fei* said that paying respects daily is a torment and that paying respects every three days would be enough."

"*Wang fei* is considerate," They waited for the better part of the morning, but they only received these few words. The insides of these four present were complicated and varied but their expression was the same. As one of the *ce fei* and the senior one on top of that, Jiang Yong Yu came up front and smiled, agreeing: "Then we wouldn't disturb *wang fei* any further."

"*Wang fei* is very busy everyday. If there had been a notice yesterday, there would be no need for a disturbance today. It was us that was rude." Feng Zi Jin smiled mirthlessly and followed with, "I am a rough kind of person, very undisciplined. I'm never good at the fine details, so *wang fei* will have to forgive me."

Listening to Feng *ce fei*'s ambiguous words, Mu Jin's smile didn't waver and she bowed again: "Feng *ce fei* has no need to worry. *Wang fei* is always lenient and wouldn't be moved to anger over small things."

The two pairs of eyes met. Mu Jin's gaze held laughter, a lowered chin giving the impression of respect. Feng *ce fei*'s smile gradually became colder and in the end, she only took her *yahuan* Chun Yu and Xia Yun and left.

[56] title used to refer to normal concubines/*qieshi*

The other three were much more courteous and left the *zhengyuan* with smiles on their faces.

Coming out of the *zhengyuan,* the three released a breath. Luo Yin Xiu couldn't help but say; "Now *zhengyuan*'s atmosphere has become frightening."

Jiang Yong Yu smiled but there was no mirth in her eyes: "That one is *wang fei*. Whether I am favoured or not, I cannot displease her."

Han Qing He was the eldest among those four and had been the *yahuan* arranged by the Department of Household Affairs to *wangye*'s side to teach him about adult matters. She didn't like what Jiang Yong Yu said, but she couldn't help but agree on the inside. She had assumed that *wang fei* would get her to serve at breakfast again, but who knew that she made them leave without even showing up.

"If there is *wang ye*'s favor, then it's fine, if there is no favor…" She grimaced and looked back at the *zhengyuan*, "will there be good days in the future?"

After these words came out, the three became silent. At present, none of them had children and nobody could be certain of the future. If *wang fei* wanted to torment them, only a few word could accomplish it.

Inside the *zhengyuan*, Qu Qing Ju finished her ablutions and sat in front of the copper mirror, playing with a jade scepter.[57] Seeing Mu Jin coming in, she then lazily stood, holding Yin Liu's hand to set down at the table in the outer room. She asked: "Were any of them unsatisfied?"

"The others were fine, but Feng *ce fei* said a few words." Mu Jin came front to serve her a few chopsticks of food. She smiled and said: "*Nubi* wasn't too courteous to her, so when Feng *ce fei* left, her face didn't look so good."

Motioning for her to stop, Qu Qing Ju rinsed her mouth before speaking: "That's a good way of dealing with it. People say that the gatekeeper of

[57] *ruyi*(如意) is a carved talisman, usually in an S-shape.

the Prime Minister is akin to a seventh-rank official, you are my first-rank *yahuan*, every action you take represents our *zhengyuan*. You can be courteous but you cannot be weak. Before, when I retreated a step, I didn't see any of them respect me one single bit."

Hearing what *wang fei* said, Mu Jin understood that *wang fei* was putting her in the first spot. She became excited but kept her smile: "*Nubi* will remember."

Qu Qing Ju nodded and started to eat. After she put down the chopsticks, it was rinsing and washing again. After everything was put in its place, it was the beginning of a new day.

"*Wang fei*, *nubi* doesn't understand, why let the *cefei* and *shiqie* pay respects every third day," Yin Liu asked in bewilderment, "Not saying anything about other compounds, but even in Chang De Gong Fu, the *ji*[58] mistress had the *yiniang* come pay respects everyday.

"What benefit do I get if they come everyday? I wouldn't even be able to have a good breakfast," Qu Qing Ju held their hands to cross over the doorway. She looked at the spread of green in the yard and her mood lightened: "I'm too lazy to wake up and prepare everyday to wait for them to come pay their respects."

Yin Liu nodded in understanding, carefully holding *wang fei*'s hand as they walked into the yard. This yard wasn't small, it had the required elements of a false mountain, water, a bridge and blooming flowers. The servants were doing their duties but Yin Liu felt that this yard was too quiet.

"*Wang fei*, do you want that little *taijian* that you wanted to put into the interior yard come over and kowtow?" Mu Jin saw *wang fei* stand on the bridge using fish feed to tease the fish in the water and spoke quietly, "If there is no meeting, what is to be his duties?"

[58] means to continue. It also refers to the new wife after the old, original, one died.

Dropping all of the feed in her grasp into the water and seeing a swarm of golden fish flash by, Qu Qing Ju smiled and said: "Let him come over."

A short while later, she saw that *taijian* whose name she had changed to Huang Yang kneeling in front of her. Qu Qing Ju examined him closely. His face was clean and seemed very obedient. She smiled suddenly: "Stand up. The *taijian* in this yard need a leader. In the future, you will be in charge of these *taijian*. As to what you need to do, you just have to understand inside." After her words, she saw this Huang Yang kneel down again to thank her. Qu Qing Ju looked once at Mu Jin: "Mu Jin has served many years at my side. If there is anything you do not understand, you will ask her."

Huang Yang confirmed and bowed to Mu Jin. Mu Jin returned the greeting and laughed: "*Wang fei* has selected you because you were obedient. You should try to live up to *wang fei*'s hope."

"Please don't worry, Mu Jin *guniang*. *Nu* will be careful in service of *wang fei*." Huang Yang didn't say any superfluous words. It could be seen that *wang fei* didn't like listening to useless things. Seeing the situation, Mu Jin nodded inside. He didn't seem to be of any great use, but at least had a good eye for detail and wasn't so dumb. What *wang fei* had just said, it was to make declare that all the servants in the *neiyuan* would be under her charge. She had no way of reciprocating except take note of every small thing and always putting *wang fei* first.

Huang Yang hadn't thought that he would receive *wang fei*'s attentions and he was ecstatic on the inside. To say nothing of bowing to Mu Jin, if he had to kowtow a few times, he would do it willingly. After retreating, his face finally revealed his state of excitement. Turning his head back to look at *wang fei* on the bridge, he thought, who said *wang fei* was a wood-like person, he didn't think there was a woman in the *wang fu* that could outcompete *wang fei niangniang*.[59]

[59] suffix which should only be applied to the empress or imperial concubines.

Seeing Huang Yang retreat, Qu Qing Ju sighed and leaned in boredom on a post on the bridge. She suddenly heard a serene stream of flute music from far away. The sound was both full of worry and like the cries of a woman. She looked in the direction of the flute and asked suspiciously: "Why is there flute music at this time?"

The faces of Mu Jin and the others changed slightly but nobody spoke.

Seeing the situation, Qu Qing Ju smiled and said: "Or is it that I am forbidden from knowing this?"

"*Wang fei*, over there is *Cui You Yuan*.[60] Supposedly, a *huakui*[61] that one of the officials gave to *wang ye* is living there." Mu Jin, seeing *wang fei* didn't seem affected, continued onwards, "*Nubi* heard this *huakui* called Yun Qing is famous in the capital. She's skilled in the zither, go, calligraphy and painting. *Wang ye* frequently visits her but Yun Qing *guniang*'s personality is very virtuous, so she is still a *guniang*."

The meaning was that *wang ye* hadn't managed to get a taste of this *huakui* yet? Qu Qing Ju laughed and her interest in the flute halved. If she was really noble and virtuous, who would let another gift her into this *wang fu* and then put out this attitude? Seeing but not touching was an eternally-successful skill of all beautiful women.

She clapped her hands and then Qu Qing Ju held Yin Liu's hand: "Let's go elsewhere."

They hadn't walked a few steps before seeing an unfamiliar little *taijian* run over. Upon seeing Qu Qing Ju, he made a full bow: "*Nucai* Xiao Gan Zi greets *wang fei*. *Wang ye* has commanded *nucai* to tell *wang fei* he is coming over to *zhengyuan* for the noon meal."

"*Ben wang fei* knows," It took a few seconds for Qu Qing Ju's brains to remember that this Xiao Gan Zi was one of the frequently used *taijian* of

[60] green jade, *you*(幽) is serene, secluded or hidden away, *yuan*(苑) is park or yard.
[61] the word oiran, courtesans in Japan, comes from the word 花魁. It refers to the top or best entertainer of a pleasure house.

Duan Wang. She nodded to confirm her understanding, "*Wang ye* has returned already?"

Xiao Gan Zi answered: "Back already, but hasn't entered the *fu* yet when he met the Royal Highness Cheng Wang[62] so he let *nucai* send a message. It will probably be a while before his return."

It was like that then. The sounds of the flute Cui You Yuan, did they appeared due to Duan Wang's presence? That time would have been the time that Duan Wang was returning, the flute sounds were too much of a coincidence.

It was so sad that nobody was there to admire such beautiful sounds, why didn't she go take some pleasure from it?

"Since *wang ye* wouldn't be returning very quickly, then let the kitchen prepare the noon meal. Somebody go to Cui You Yuan and inform them that *ben wang fei* likes Yun Qing *guniang*'s flute and will visit shortly." Qu Qing Ju touched the butterflies in flight of the *buyao* in her hair and smile happily.

Xiao Gan Ji stood in shock for a beat before bowing and leaving, turning towards Cui You Yuan. Even though *wang ye* had some minor interest in that women living in Cui You Yuan, but as somebody who had served at *wang ye*'s for many years, he understood that a small insignificant *huakui* wasn't as important as *wang fei*.

Entering Cui You Yuan, he saw Yun Qing *guniang* who was playing the flute under the grape trellis. He didn't pay attention to the other's music. Walking forward, Xiao Gan Zi stated: "Yun Qing *guniang*, *wang fei* enjoyed your flute. In a short while, she will be deign to arrive, so please prepare."

The sounds of the flute instantly stopped. Yu Qing looked coldly at Xiao Gan Zi and faintly said: "My place here is much too small, it isn't worthy for *wang fei* to lower herself to come."

[62] the Prince of Cheng (□). Cheng means honest, sincere, true.

Hearing this, Xiao Gan Zi laughed strangely: "Whether your place is good or not, I do not know, but it is an honor that *wang fei* wants to come. You only have to prepare. Or does *wang fei* have to report to you?" Just a plaything, did she really think she was of importance? This entire *wang fu*, unless it was the few used by *wang ye*, who dared to talk back to him this way? She was just too shameless and ignorant.

Yun Qin saw Xiao Gan Zi sweep away, her youthful face turning colors, unspeakably grotesque.

Chapter 5

Cui You Yuan was located in the west side of the *wang fu*. It was a bit out of the way but the surroundings were neat and quiet. Qu Qing Ju held Mu Jin's hand as she travelled through a half-moon door and Cui You Yuan's entrance was in sight. The *mamas* guarding the door and the steward of Cui You Yuan had been waiting at the door. Seeing Qu Qing Ju, they quickly came up with smiles on their faces.

The kitchen incident had already been spread to the entire *wang fu*. In a flash, no one dared to disobey *wang fei*. Didn't they see that even *wang ye* was on *wang fei*'s side? They were only servants, who dared offend the *zhuzi*?

"*Nubi* greets *wang fei*,"The mama who was the steward came forward and made a full bow. She then look fawningly at the first-ranked *yahuan*, "Refreshments have been prepared inside, *wang fei* can come in and rest."

"I hope it didn't trouble you," Qu Qing Ju inclined her head slightly. Disregarding the ingratiating smiles on the gatekeeping and steward *mama*s, she walked gracefully into Cui You Yuan.

Wang fei clearly was very courteous to them but the two *mama*s felt that *wang fei* was full of nobility and pushed their own attitudes lower.

Cui You Yuan wasn't very big but it was of high quality. Qu Qing Ju scanned the surroundings and at last, her gaze landed on the white-clad woman in the middle of the yard. Her hand holding a flute, the woman was very beautiful, wearing a wide-sleeved silk dress, almost as though she was untouched by mortal sins. She really didn't look like a *huakui* that came out of a prostitute house.

This was the first time Yun Qing met the *wang fei* that was rumoured to be not favoured by *wang ye*. She had thought that it would just be a normal woman, but who knew it was such an eye-catching woman. Phoenix eyes and brows like the willow. She had a *feixian* hair arrangement, the jewel on the headpiece perfectly falling between her eyebrows, contrasting with the porcelain skin. She wore a wide-sleeved dress made of *Shu*-brocade the color of moonlight. It was so fitting and beautiful that it appeared as though the dress was made to be worn by her. Just the two ornaments tied at her waist were more valuable than all the belongings she ever had.

This was the rumored Duan Wang Fei?

Yun Qing's mind stopped and she strangely felt inconceivably inferior. The hand that held the flute tightened. She performed a soft bow: "Yun Qing greets *wang fei niangniang.*"

"Yun Qing *guniang* doesn't have to be too courteous," Holding Mu Jin's hand, she sat down at the carved mahagony table underneath the grape trellis. She took a sip of the tea that a little *yahuan* presented: "This tea is not bad."

"The water for this tea comes from the dew that I collect every morning. To be able to receive *wang fei*'s compliments, it hasn't wasted my efforts. *Wang ye* also likes this tea." Yun Qing went forward two steps and smiled as she replied.

Mu Jin heard how she addressed herself and frowned. She saw that *wang fei*'s expression didn't change and her own expression recovered.

The hand that held the cup stopped moving. Qu Qing Ju place the cup down. She used her handkerchief to wipe the corner of her mouth, "I think that Yun Qing *guniang* knows why *ben wang fei* has come. I do not know if I have the luck to admire Yu Qing *guniang*'s flute." She didn't have the interest to drink the dew of this flower or that grass. Who knew if it was clean or not.

"*Wang fei*, I'm not one of this *fu*'s musicians," Yun Qing's face turned pale, as though she was humiliated, as she gazed at Qu Qing Ju, "Yun Qing's skill is poor. I don't dare let it enter *wang fei niang niang*'s honourable ears."

The moment the words came out, the entire yard suddenly quieted. One of the *yahuan* that served Yun Qing was frightened to the point of visibly shaking. She wanted to curl into a ball and didn't have the courage to even look in Qu Qing Ju's direction.

Smiling at the other's attitude as though she would die rather than comply, Qu Qing Ju threw the handkerchief she used onto the table, her hand supporting her chin, one slender hand picking a fine piece of pastry.

"How dare you!" Mu Jin's face darkened, "Just a *huakui* that somebody gave as a present to the *wang fu*. How dare you talk to *wang fei* in this manner? You really are something that came from such an unclean place, no sense of good behaviour. Come, slap her mouth."

Yu Qing's eyes suddenly widened. She didn't believe that *wang fei* would act against her. Wasn't she afraid that *wang ye* would feel she wasn't virtuous?

Before Yun Qing could finish her thoughts, she felt pain appear like fire on the left of her face. The person who had slapped her was the steward *mama* that always fawned over her in the past. She covered her face and exclaimed in a trembling voice: "You dare …"

"Yun Qing *guniang*. Sorry for the offense." The steward *mama* had a crying face as she gave Yu Qing a few more slaps. Inside, she despaired.

Today, she offended Yun Qing and potentially enraged *wang ye* but if she didn't offend Yun Qing, she would definitely offend *wang fei*. She could only blame her bad luck to have been sent here to serve. Originally, she thought it would be a profitable position but who know that she would have to face the ugly truth.

The beauty, after suffering the blows to the face, her originally beautiful visage became a sorry figure. Qu Qing Ju raised her head and her eyebrow rose: "What are we doing, *ben wang fei* is a protector of beautiful women. Yun Qing *nuniang* is virtuous and innocent, you cannot create difficulties for her." Finishing, she looked playfully at Mu Jin, "Mu Jin, apologize to Yun Qing *guniang*. In the past, I saw that Yin Liu was the impatient one, I didn't think you would learn from her."

The people present lowered their heads silently. Hearing *wang fei* "scold" Mu Jin *guniang*, they couldn't help but think in their minds that this was slapping somebody and beating them into the ground before saying that they were not violent. With this kind of strategy, *wang fei* wasn't a wooden person. If she was made out of wood, it was the soft and flexible willow tree. She let somebody get beat up, and then made them have to rage against the wind for being too harsh, causing the willow to accidentally whip somebody.

Mu Jin heard Qu Qing Ju's words and went forward a few steps. She stopped five paces away from Yun Qing and bowed: "Yun Qing *guniang* please forgive me. *Nubi* has offended you today."

Yun Qing pushed aside the old *pozi* that was in front of her. She covered her face with one hand and stared hatefully at Qu Qing Ju: "Mu Jin *guniang* is too serious. You are an important person of *wang fei*. Yun Qing is a person of low status and doesn't dare blame you."

Qu Qing Ju's index finger gently tapped on the tabletop. Hearing Yun Qing's words, her eyebrow rose and she smiled: "*Wang ye* feels heavy affection towards Yun Qing *guniang*, how can you not be less than Mu Jin as a little *yahuan*." Finishing, she let servants bestow a healing salve. Seeing Yun Qing behave as though she was humiliated, her smile grew

wider, "Since Yun Qing *guniang* feels that *ben wang fei* isn't worthy of hearing your flute, then we shan't speak of it further."

The steward *mama* who had been pushed to one side let out a long heavy exhale. An ignorant thing, to act so in front of *wang fei*. Did she really believe she held a part of *wang ye*'s heart?

The *yahuan* behind Yu Qing's face grew paler and paler. After Qu Qing Ju spoke, she was scared enough to suddenly kneel with a loud bang. In this *wang fu*, *wang fei* was ranked the highest other than *wang ye*. The way that her mistress acted, it was clearly not respecting *wang fei*. Not saying that *wang ye*'s attitude towards her mistress was only that of one treating a plaything, but even if he truly favoured her mistress, her mistress wouldn't have a good outcome today.

"*Wang fei* have mercy, *wang fei* have mercy," The *yahuan* continuously kowtowed, "Yun Qing *guniang* doesn't understand this *wang fu*'s protocols, w*ang fei* please have mercy."

"Jian Yun, what are you doing?" Yun Qing was covering her face but not one drop of tears fell down. She stubbornly widened her eyes, "You didn't do anything wrong, why are you kneeling?!"

"*Guniang*, please don't say anymore." The *yahuan* that was kneeling was called Jian Yun. She despaired inside. In the few days she had been sent to serve Yun Qing *guniang*, she had sensed that the way Yun Qing acted would create conflict in the *wang fu*. After feeling apprehensive for a few days, the conflict really came. Thinking of the situation, she could only heavily kowtow twice again and didn't speak anymore.

Qu Qing Ju sighed. She saw that this Jian Yun was only thirteen or fourteen. Maybe it was the fact that this *yahuan* had stayed for a long time in this *wang fu*, that she saw more clearly than Yun Qing did. She had no intentions of chastising this little *yahuan*. She motioned for one of the *yahuan* behind her to help this Jian Yun up. She had no more interest in looking at Yun Qing's act of stubbornness and virtuous. She said to Mu Jin who was beside her, "Let's return. Since Yun Qing *guniang* doesn't prefer this *wang fu*, then in the future then this Cui You Yuan's

allowance will be halved." Finishing, she pointed to Jian Yun, whose forehead was bleeding from the kowtowing, "This *yahuan* doesn't have to serve here. *Ben wang fei* sees that she looks proper, she can go serve in the tea room."

Upon hearing this, Jian Yun lit up. She was now one of *wang fei*'s people? Flooded with happiness, she started thanking profusely.

"This yard is very busy today."

Hearing this familiar yet strange voice, Qu Qing Ju looked towards the door and saw Duan Wang come in with two *taijian*. She had some impression of the two *taijian* in Qu Qing Ju's memories. They were the ones that served Duan Wang directly, Ming He and Qian Chang Xin. They had much more status with Duan Wang than Xiao Gan Zi.

Qu Qing Ju opened her mouth and heard Yun Qing cry tragically: "*Wang ye*."

This "*wang ye*" was said in a soft voice, like a bird crying, like a bell ringing yet it had one part affection, two parts anger, three parts grief and four parts stubbornness. It was enough to stimulate, upon hearing it, pity and tenderness.

Her lips curled in a smile. This Yun Qing lived up to being a famous *hua kui*. No wonder that official came up and gave her away. Normal people couldn't manage somebody of this skill. In her previous life, she had seen the truths and falsehoods of the entertainment circle. In one look, she knew what this icy and clean Yun Qing *guniang* really thought.

He Heng heard Yun Qing's call and looked briefly at her before moving his gaze towards Qu Qing Ju, "*Ben wang* heard Xiao Gan Zi say *wang fei* was here enjoying music. Why is there no music?"

Yun Qing realized that something was wrong, her expression changing to be even more pitiful as she looked at He Heng. Who knew that the other's gaze was still on *wang fei* and didn't look once at her.

"It is *qie*'s fault to not know ahead of time that *wang ye* would also come to listen," Qu Qing Ju walked to He Heng's side and looked pityingly at Yun Qing's slightly swollen face, "What can remedy this?"

He Heng finally looked at Yun Qing's pitiful and sorry-looking face. He said callously: "It's fine. In this state, there's no interest in admiring the music. *Ben wang* should leave." Finishing, he looked at Qu Qing Ju's slight smile and felt that the other's *buyao* was swaying slightly, making his eyes itch. He added, "After this, return earlier to *zhengyuan*. *Ben wang* is still waiting to eat together with *wang fei*."

"*Qie* would never forget *wang ye*'s words," Qu Qing Ju laughed lightly, the motion of her eyes seemed carry magnetism, "it should be *wang ye* that doesn't forget."

He Heng couldn't resist reaching out to touch that trembling *buyao* before smiling and leaving. Walking out of Cui You Yuan, he turned and looked back once at Cui You Yuan before saying to Qian Chang Xin and Ming He: "*Ben wang* remembers that there was a finely crafted golden *luan* in flight *buyao* in the stores. Get somebody to deliver it to *zhenyuan* for *wang fei* to wear for her amusement."

Qian Chang Xin and Ming He exchanged glances and quickly confirmed. They both were struck with realizations. In the past, they had only seen *wang fei*'s soft and weak nature. Only today did they know that they had been wrong. Her actions was both cruel and deft. What they also didn't predict as that *wang ye* actually wasn't angry and seemed to be letting *wang fei* have a free hand in managing the *huoyuan*.

After He Heng left, Qu Qing Ju looked at Yun Qing who had a gloomy expression. She smilingly held Mu Jin's hand and swept the yard before speaking: "*Ben wang fei* said before, *ben wang fei* is a reasonable person and a protector of beautiful women. Today, you didn't respect rank which is a big mistake, but since beautiful women are rare, I will forgive you today." Finishing, she lazily blinked and looked at the steward *mama*, "In the future, you have to be attentive in your duties at this Cui You Yuan. Even though Yun Qing *guniang*'s allowance is halved, but you cannot slight her."

The steward *mama* replied in agreement but after *wang fei*'s procession left, the steward *mama* spat at Yun Qing and declared loudly: "Why aren't you carefully serving our honourable Yun Qing *guniang* back to her room. She is a goddess that even *wang fei* isn't worthy of her service. Us mere mortals must carefully serve her, in case *wang ye* punishes us."

After the declaration, laughter rose in the surroundings. *Wang ye* didn't even properly look at Yun Qing earlier. What this steward *mama* said was really gouging at the heart.

Chapter 6

Coming out of Cui You Yuan, Qu Qing Ju raised her hand to touch the *buyao* in her hair and the corners of her lips lifted. She hadn't thought that this Duan Wang was interested in this aspect of a woman. That stare when he had been touch this *buyao*, she didn't dare look directly at it. This *wang ye* was to be pitied, he had to hide even this little fetish.

Unaware that her *wang fei* had made *wang ye* into a little cabbage in the ground during winter, Yin Liu said: "*Wang fei*, *nubi* doesn't understand, why move Jian Yun to *zhengyuan*?"

"You dummy, how can you not understand such an easy thing?" Mu Jin looked at the surroundings before saying lightly, "That Jian Yun is one of *wang fu*'s servants and wouldn't have much loyalty towards Yun Qing. Today, *wang fei* moved Jian Yun to *zhengyuan*, tomorrow, other people will have the same idea. Water will flow to the lowest grounds, people will walk to the highest grounds. Who knows if there are people beside the other *qieshi* that want to walk higher."

Yin Liu had a brief trance and was surprise at Mu Jin's understanding of *wang fei*'s mind. She now understood a little bit at why *wang fei* put Mu Jin at the first position. She looked at *wang fei* and Mu Jin and realized for the first time that *wang fei* was different than in the past.

The news that *wang fei* had disciplined that beautiful *huakui* in Cui You Yuan had already spread. Qu Qing Ju hadn't reached *zhengyuan* but on the way there she had encountered a few bowing *yahuan* and all of those *yahuan* were in the service of other *ce fei* or *qieshi*.

Just reaching the entrance to *zhengyuan*, Qu Qing Ju saw Yu Zan and Jin Zhan standing at the door. Seeing her return, the two shows expressions of happiness as they moved forward: "*Wang fei*, Qian Chang Xin came over with others and delivered a lot of good stuff. He said it was what *wang ye* picked especially for you. Xian Chang Xin is still here, do you wish to meet him?"

Qu Qing Ju nodded and entered the outer room of the *zhengyuan*. She saw Qian Chang Xin and a few *taijian* standing respectfully with eyes down. On the table in the room were a few moderately-sized boxes and bolts of cloth. There seems to be a lot of stuff.

Seeing *wang fei* enter, Qian Chang Xin bowed and said: "Greetings to *wang fei*. These are what *wang ye* ordered *nucai* to deliever to you. *Wang ye* also said, if *wang fei* needs anything else, to just order the servants to do."

"Thank *wang ye* for me," Qu Qing Ju opened the box on the very top. Inside was a speckled blue-green jade sparrow hairpin. She smiled as she closed the box, "Qian *gonggong* had to make a special trip, it must have been such a bother."

"No bother, no bother," Qian Chang Xin quickly replied to the contrary, and with both hands presented a box with good fortune embossed on the top, "This box, *wang ye* said specifically ordered *nucai* to present to *wang fei* in hopes that *wang fei* would like it."

Mu Jin received the box and delivered it into Qu Qing Ju's hands. Qu Qing Ju opened the box, her eyebrows raising slightly. She took it out with her hand and the room instantly filled with sighs.

It was a *luan buyao* but the craftsmanship was impeccable. A slight movement created the illusion that the bird was alive and in flight. Mu

Jin stood the closest and was able to distinguish every line on the *luan*. The eye was an inlay of bright agate. Mu Jin was instantly dumbstruck.

"Such a beautiful *buyao*," Even Qu Qing Ju was shocked into exclaiming. This was a masterpiece. Even in her previous life, she hadn't seen such an intricate piece. This was probably the legendary nobility of the Imperial House. Qu Qing Ju smiled widely and looked at Qian Chang Xin: "Thanks for your labors, Qian *gonggong*, I really like this *buyao*."

Ming He, who had just passed the entrance saw this smile and thought inside that this smile was blinding. Even Feng *ce fei* and Yun Qing *guniang* in comparison would be less vibrant. He couldn't resist looking at *wang ye* who was walking in front of him and wonder what *wang ye* thought.

"Liking it means that it has a use," He Heng walked in front of Qu Qing Ju and took from her hand the *buyao*, personally replacing the *buyao* she had originally in her hair with the new one.

The roomful of servants all lowered their heads. They couldn't gaze upon the intimacy of *wang ye* and *wangfei*. After *wang ye* spoke in admiration, then did they dared raise their heads.

"It suits you to perfection," He Heng stepped back and looked at the *buyao* in the black strands. A satisfied expression appeared, "*Wang fei*'s hair is as black as night and contrasts beautifully against this *buyao*."

An embarrassed smile appeared on Qu Qing Ju's face. She lowered her head to avoid meeting He Heng's gaze. She was a vain woman. She liked other people complimenting her. But this person in front of her that complimented her wasn't that simple, she didn't believe that this was purely a compliment.

The two hadn't interacted together for long periods before so after they sat down, they didn't have much to say. Thankfully, the presentation of food disrupted the silence between the two.

The protocol was to not speak while eating so when the two remained silent during eating, there wasn't an awkward atmosphere. Qu Qing Ju

looked at He Heng's eating and had to admit that this man in front of her had the most beautiful eating motion of all she had seen before. Those motions were much more soothing to the eye than the so-called higher nobility of her previous life.

The supposed feast for the eyes was this situation. The state of He Heng was enough to arouse the appetite of Qu Qing Ju who couldn't resist adding another bowl of rice. But in the eyes of others, it became "Of course, *wang fei* is definitely in love with *wang ye*, with *wang ye* here, she would even eat more."

He Heng hadn't thought that Qu Qing Ju would be so casual in his presence. In front of him, the other women in this *fu* would take small sips of soup, and quietly eat vegetables. When it came to *wang fei*, he kept on feeling strange with *wang fei*'s gaze on him.

After the meal was finished, Qu Qing Ju saw the *yahuan* that knelt in front of her with a copper bowl raised high. She quickly washed her hands and let the other stand to the side.

He Heng looked at Qu Qing Ju before taking away his gaze: "Now that *wang fei* has recovered, *ben wang* feels much less worried. In the future, you should manage this *houyuan* well. If you don't understand anything, don't worry. Qian Chang Xin and Ming He are the stewards of this *fu*. Any problems can be given to them."

Taking the silk handkerchief that Mu Jin presented to wipe her hands, Qu Qing Ju said: "These past days, *qie*'s body was constantly ill, and couldn't help *wang ye* manage the *houyuan*. *Qie* is embarrassed to face *wang ye*." Finishing, she looked at Qian Chang Xing and Ming He who were in the corner, "These two were very good at managing the big and little things. In the future, *qie* wouldn't have much to worry about."

Hearing *wang fei*'s words, Qian Chang Xin and Min He buried their heads deeper to express their humbleness and respect. Even if *wang ye* depended on them, *wang fei* was the true mistress of this *wang fu*. *Wang fei* taking charge of *houyuan* was the natural order of things, what was the two of them?

Putting the tea for rinsing to one side and wiping clean his mouth, He Heng saw *wang fei*, with a smile on her lips, lean back lazily on her chair. The corner of his own mouth rose: "When they were in charge, this *houyuan* was a mess. In the future, you will have to spend effort." He lowered his face, looking at the green flowers on the tea cup on the table as though he didn't place any importance on the women in the *houyuan*, "You are *ben wang*'s *zheng fei*[63], the others cannot compare to you."

These words were probably a pretty impressive promise that a man of the Imperial House would make to his "big wife." Qu Qing Ju looked from the corner of her eye towards He Heng and at the same time, the other raised his head. Their eyes met and both allowed the smile on their own faces to become even more friendly, as though they were an old couple that had no visible flaws.

"*Qie* has no skill but can only make the best effort, to help *wang ye* find a place to relax at home, if nothing else." Qu Qing Ju's smile became blinding, "The trust that *wang ye* places in *qie*, is *qie*'s honor."

He Heng looked at the bright smile of the woman in front of him and thought about her birth. She was a *di* daughter of Chang De Gong Fu, but soon after her birth, her birth mother passed away. The fact that the Duke of Chang De liked his second wife had already spread through all of the city of Jing. It was rumoured that the two had been involved even when the original wife had been pregnant and had been expressing his emotions through borrowing from the "Poems of *Luo Shen*.[64]" He had actually used the "Poems of *Luo Shen"* to name his daughters which had been the subject of much admiration of many wives and girls in the city of Jing. Unfortunately, they all forgot the previous Duchess of Chang De and her young daughter.

Actually, his own *wang fei*'s name came from "she wore shoes embroidered with delicate designs, what trailed behind was a garment

[63] proper, "legitimate" wife.

[64] Luo Shen Fu(poem). It is a collection of poems by Cao Zi when he passed by the river Luo. In mythical history, Luo Shen was originally the daughter of Fu Xi, a Chinese Emperor and the mythical creator of fishing. She drowned in the Luo River and became the spirit (神) of the Luo River, hence the name of the collection.

as light as the mist."[65] He named the daughter borne by his deceased wife using a name that represented the depth of love he had with his present wife. The Duke of Chang De was either too in love or had no love but what was certain that this daughter borne by his previous wife was to be pitied. Thankfully, she had a reliable maternal family. Otherwise, it wouldn't be certain that she would have grown up. The He Heng which had grown up in the Imperial Family was very clear about those dark schemes. *Wang fei*'s personality after the marriage was dull, he hadn't been surprised. But these two days, he was very surprised at what *wang fei* had done.

Was it that his *wang fei* in the past, living in Chang De Gong Fu, had suppressed herself in order to survive and was really showing her true self now that she was at *wang fu*?

Qu Qing Ju wasn't interested in what He Heng thought. She leaned back in the chair with a smile on her face, waiting for He Heng to speak first. This man wasn't simple. She didn't want to speak without preparation and make it difficult for herself.

"*Wang fei* does not have to worry needlessly. You are *ben wang*'s *wang fei*, your position is high. If the servants in the *fu* do not perform well, then just discharge them," He Heng narrowed his eyes, "My Duan Wang Fu will not tolerate servants who disobey."

"Yes," Qu Qing Ju smiled and turned to more minor topics.

The two discussed for another fifteen minutes before He Heng stood and said: "You've just recovered, take a noon rest. I'll come back at night."

Finding that He Heng had changed what he called himself from "*ben wang*" to "*I*", Qu Qing Ju understood that this Dung Wang had at least respect for her. She stood as well and walked him towards the door. Seeing him gradually walk far away, she finally let go of the smile on her face.

[65] The original poem phrase was: 践□游之文履，曳□□之□裾 and Qu Qing Ju's name came from the last two characters. □裾 is a light garment.

Mu Jin, standing behind her, saw her expression was calm and hesitated before speaking: "*Wang fei*, *wang ye* is coming over at night, is there anything to be done?"

Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow. In this present situation, she wasn't as unreasonable as to not be willing to sleep in the same bed as *wang ye*. She used a handkerchief to wipe at the non-existent sweat on her forehead, "Do what is needed, I'm going to rest. In two hours, serve me as I bathe."

Seeing *wang fei*'s expression was normal, a faint smile appeared on Mu Jin's face: "*Nubi* will order the others to prepare."

Nodding, Qu Qing Ju lowered her head and rubbed an ear. To be with somebody unfamiliar so quickly, there was just the slightest bit of embarrassment.

Chapter 7

The news that *wang ye* was coming to *zhengyuan* was enough to make the servants cheerful. Everybody started the preparations needed, wanting to renovate the entire yard if possible.

Qu Qing Ju actually became one of the calmest in the *houyuan*. Her hair hanging wet and loose, she allowed Jin Zhan to gently dry her hair, Yin Liu to manage her hands, Yu Zan her feet and Mu Jin to pick her clothes and accessories.

"*Wang fei*'s feet are very beautiful," Yu Zan sighed in admiration. *Wang fei*'s feet were pale, the toes round and tender to the touch. Half a beat later, she sighed again, "The last time Ban Xia was performing an exotic dance, *wang ye* had praised her feet too. *Nubi* thinks that she can't compare to *wang fei* at all."

"What thing is she, that you compare her to *wang fei*?" Mu Jin picked a red jade hairpin from a box. Hearing what Yu Zan said, she snorted: "She's just a lowly person, she doesn't deserve to be mentioned."

Yu Zan finally remembered that Ban Xia had originally been one of *wang fei*'s servants. She had seduced *wang ye* to become a *tongfang* and quickly added: "Mu Jin *jiejie*,[66] don't be angry. I was just struck by how beautiful *wang fei*'s feet were and my mind just didn't work."

Hearing the protectiveness of the two *yahuan* from their words, Qu Qing Ju couldn't resist laughing: "From what you have said, if others could hear, they'll think your *wang fei* is a goddess. You can keep hearing it, I can't bear it. Finish and help me up, I can't hear any more."

When this came out, all the servant girls laughed and felt relief inside. Evidently *wang fei* hadn't kept what happened with Ban Xia on her mind.

Qu Qing Ju had a preference for wide-sleeved dresses and in the end, still picked a red wide-sleeve dress. The color of fire contrasted with the snowiness of her skin. Casually allowing Mu Jin to style her hair and use the red jade hairpin to secure it, she leaned back against her chair and flipped open a story about a scholar and a beauty.

It wasn't that she had much interest in this type of story, it was just there wasn't many amusements in this time. After two pages, she couldn't muster the interest to read how the poor men in this time fantasized about rich ladies. Seeing the sky darkening, she let them present dinner.

"*Wang fei*, *wang ye* hasn't arrived. If *wang ye* hadn't eaten when he arrives and you have … …" Mu Jin opened worriedly, "If you are hungry, why don't I let the kitchen send over some porridge."

"It's already this late, *wang ye* wouldn't come here to eat dinner," Qu Qing Ju waved her hand, "Just send my orders, that's all." There was nothing exciting about that tasteless porridge. She didn't like waters and soups.

When He Heng entered the *zhengyuan*, he saw a stream of *yahuan* come out with empty meal boxes. Waving away their greetings, He Heng felt

[66] older sister

a bit complicated, a feeling of disappointment similar to "*wang fei* didn't wait for me to eat, my status doesn't seem to be very high".

Entering the room, at first glance He Heng saw *wang fei* sitting at the round table washing her hands in preparation of eating. It was that the red of the wide-sleeved dress that was too eye catching, that he had to pay his attention immediately. He couldn't move his eyes away after a glance, this crimson-clad beautiful woman lazily wiping jade-like hands was his *wang fei*?

"*Wang ye*'s arrived?" Qu Qing Ju set down the silk she had been wiping with and stood with a smile, "Have you eaten? if not, let's eat together."

Even though he had eaten, but feeling like he could still eat more, He Heng complied and sat. His gaze landed on the swaying strands beside Qu Qing Ju's face. It was only when Qu Qing Ju personally place a bowl of pearl chicken soup in front of him that he spoke: "Why is *wang fei* eating at this time?"

Qu Qing Ju jerked the corners of her lips: "Wasn't hungry earlier so this is a bit late."

He Heng nodded and felt his heart heal. Even though *wang fei* was explaining it this way, but he still felt that *wang fei* was waiting for him to eat together. Feeling his ego was satisfied, *wang ye* took a drink of the soup, suddenly feeling that he was a bit too thirsty.

After the meal, Qu Qing Ju proceeded as normal to wash her hands and drink tea to rinse. She found that the taste of tea today was much stronger than usual. Looking at He Heng who was sitting opposite her, she realized the work of Jin Zan who was crouched in front of her.

After the table was clean, Hen Heng and Qu Qing Ju moved to the more comfortable armchairs and let somebody light the lamps.

"Other than the wedding night, I had never seen *wang fei* wear a red dress," He Heng smiled as he looked at Qu Qing Ju from head to toe, "but this color suits *wang fei*."

Qu Qing Ju smiled and saw Mu Jin and the others light the candles in the room. She used one hand to smooth the hair beside her face, "They say that women use their appearance to please others, it must be that *qie* is trying to please *wang ye*."

He Heng's brow moved slightly. Standing and moving in front of Qu Qing Ju, he gently took that lock of hair: "*Wang fei* has definitely pleased me. *Wang fei* has given me a great surprise these past two days."

Qu Qing Ju raised her chin and smiled widely at He Heng: "He he."

The servants in the surrounding saw the situation. Ming He and Mu Jin exchanged looks and the two waved their hands. Everybody else in the room quickly retreated.

Ming He personally shut the door. Seeing *wang fei*'s personal *yahuan* was still standing to one side, he walked a few steps and she followed. He then lowered his voice to say: "Later we'll have to pay attention to see if the *zhuzi* still have anything they need." This *wang fei* named her useful *yahuan* using flowers. He remembered the most able of them was Mu Jin.

Mu Jin nodded and replied in a low voice: "Ming He *gonggong*, don't worry." Who wasn't important in front of their *zhuzi*. How to serve, Ming He wasn't the only one that understood.

Ming He saw that she wasn't one for words and didn't speak further. Thinking back to how *wang fei* acted today, he wondered, this *wang fei* might not be anything when she doesn't move, but when she moves, it's a shock. Clearly, it was just a simple red dress and dark hair, but why did it have some inexplicable attraction?

Rubbing strongly at his chin, Ming He stood quietly in the corner, paying attention to the movement inside the room, afraid that if he didn't catch his master's orders, somebody would steal his present position.

Inside the room, He Heng and Qu Qing Ju's struggle had moved to the bed. Both were untidily attired now. One with strong vigor, one with bewitching eyes. There was only the last step.

"*Wang fei* is so delicious," He Heng exhaled gently by Qu Qing Ju's ear, his voice becoming rougher. The tip of his tongue slid across the fine neck and was well satisfied to find the person below lightly shudder.

Qu Qing Ju responded by winding around He Heng's neck with an arm, her foot lightly sliding over the top of He Heng's foot: "*Wang ye* is a feast for the eyes." Oh god, this man was very skilled at flirting.

"*Ben wang* does want to let *wang fei* know who really is a feast." He Heng, whose appetite had been wheted by *wang fei* to a gaping hunger pulled away the only covering over Qu Qing Ju's chest. Seeing that slightly moving chest, he felt that fire burning inside had never been as bright. He wanted to bite at this woman's chest, to leave behind on that pale skin a mark that belonged to him.

At the moment, it was impossible to know who lit who's fire but two mouths touched and that fire couldn't be suppressed any longer. It was a wildfire on the prairies, a sea of red waves, whipped higher by the spring winds to a peak.

He Heng felt a never-experienced sense of rejuvenation. After the last tremors, he enclosed the soft woman in his embrace and laughed roughly: "*Wang fei* is my treasure."

Even though it was said you couldn't believe anything a man said after, but this didn't affect Qu Qing Ju's good mood after being satisfied. She allowed this somewhat-best-quality man to hold her and yawned.

Seeing that the woman was drowsy, He Heng raised his voice: "Come, prepare water."

Ming He, who had been waiting outside, waved his hand to others who had prepared a bathtub full of hot water to carry it in. He calculated the time. It had almost been two hours. He could see that *wang ye* and *wang fei* were full of emotions for each other.

Lazily finishing her bath, Qu Qing Ju didn't care to dress and only wrapped a thin layer of silk around before walking to the bed.

He Heng looked at that bare jade-like feet, and that snowy legs and arms and his eyes changed. He bent down to lift the person up and threw onto the bed. Then he covered her with a blanket and growled: "*Wang fei* is trying to tempt *ben wang*."

Qu Qing Ju laughed and one hand came out of the blanket. She curled her index finger: "This is tempting *wang ye*."

Seeing her move like she was motioning for a pet, He Heng couldn't resist. He pulled the blankets down and covered the other with his body again.

Outside the door, Ming He heard the sounds inside the room and stopped the servants that had been going in to carry out the bathtub. He couldn't help gazing at the moon. Didn't spring already pass?

On the morning of the second day, *wang ye* left the door full of energy. The servants that served *wang fei* were still standing in their original spots. Hearing *wang ye* order the servants not to disturb *wang fei*'s rest, Ming He, who was following behind *wang ye*, *wang ye* was worthy of his position.

Inside the room, Qu Qing Ju slept for another hour before calling for servants. Mu Jin and Yin Liu, who had been waiting with a cadre of little *yahuan*, silently moved in.

"*Wang fei*," Mu Jin saw the marks that had appeared on *wang fei*'s collarbone and moved her eyes away slightly. She quickly helped put on the under robe and picked a trailing bird and flowers dress for Qu Qing Ju to wear.

After Qu Qing Ju washed and sat in front of the mirror, Mu Jin finally spoke: "*Wang fei*, today, *wang ye* had a good expression when he left this morning."

Qu Qing Ju handed her a pair of tassels she picked and tried to let her face reveal an embarrassed blush: "You are talking nonsense. Go look to see the kitchen has delivered the meal."

Mu Jin, seeing *wang fei* was embarrassed, smiled and said: "Alright, alright. *Nubi* will go look. Jin Zhan, Yu Zan, serve carefully, Yin Liu and I will go." Yu Zan was the best hairdresser so she usually did *wang fei*'s hair.

Coming of the room, Mu Jin and Yin Liu exchanged happy looks. Now *wang fei* finally managed to establish herself in this *wang fu*.

Yin Liu smiled and said: "Next month is the Duke of Chang De's birthday, when *wang fei* goes, let's see who dare overstep."

Mu Jin, thinking about the unhappy mess of events and people in Chang De Gong Fu, lost some of the cheerfulness on her face and sighed: "As long as *wang ye* will always treat *wang fei* like he did in these last two days, nobody in Chang De Gong Fu will dare not respect *wang fei*."

As noble as Chang De Gong Fu was, could it be as noble as the *wang fu*? Hopefully at that time, *wang fei* wouldn't go back to her dull personally and let the people in the *fu* disrespect her.

Chapter 8

It was another day for paying respects. The *ce fei* and *shiqie* arrived early to wait in the outer rooms of the *zhengyuan.* This time, their attitude was much more careful and they were much more courteous to the servants there.

Jin Zhan, along with a few little *yahuan*, came to pour tea for the women before standing silently to one side.

"Jin Zan *guniang*, we came a bit early today, did we disturb *wang fei*'s rest?" Feng Zi Jin's face was full of apology and looked towards the inner room, "*Wang fei* must be very busy these past days and

exhausted." She had to be busy. Not just managing to gather all of *houyuan* into her hands, she also had the skill to let *wang ye* remain every night in her rooms. *Wang fei* had some smarts.

"Feng *ce fei* exaggerates," Jin Zan bowed, her brows containing humor, "This *fu* hasn't been very busy lately and *wang ye* also cares for *wang fei*, so there is no tiredness. Please don't worry, Feng *ce fei*, *wang fei* will arrive shortly."

Feng Zi Jin didn't expect that her words would be rebutted. She paused slightly before saying: "*Wang fei*'s good health, is the greatest fortune for us sisters."

Qu Qing Ju had walked to the door when she heard what Pin Zi Jin's said. She laughed as she entered: "Feng *ce fei*'s concern, I will remember."

The four heard the laughter and simultaneously looked towards the doorway. They saw Qu Qing Ju, wearing a complicated and sweeping embroidered silver *luan* and red clouds dress, walk in. That long dress trailed on the floor as though it was dragging on their hearts and inexplicably made them feel depressed.

The women stood and bowed towards Qu Qing Ju. As they bowed, they saw that red-colored dress stream across their eyes, the beautiful tail of the *luan* was painful to the eye.

"No need to be so courteous, sit already." Qu Qing Ju sat down at the front and waved for the others to sit down. She looked at the color of the sky and said with a touch of remorse: "Today I woke up a bit late, sorry to let you wait."

The others naturally didn't dare accept this apology. They only smiled and said they didn't wait long and then waited for Qu Qing Ju's next words.

"All of us here are *wang ye*'s people. I don't have anything to say. You should all serve *wang ye* to the best of your abilities." Qu Qing Ju's left hand held a teacup, her right hand lifted the lid, not looking at the faces

of those sitting below her, "*Wang ye* has placed the *houyuan* in my hands. I am not a harsh person, I just cannot stand those who do not follow protocol. If somebody breaks a rule, I don't need to care about any others, I only control the punishment. When the time comes, don't blame me, this *wang fei*, for not showing mercy. You can all do your best."

They didn't expect *wang fei* to talk so plainly. Feng Zi Jin paused slightly. She felt that these words seemed to be targeted at her but she couldn't say anything. Seeing the other three stand and express they would follow protocol, she also stood and weakly concurred.

"Since everybody understands, I don't have anything more to say." Setting down the teacup, Qu Qing Ju's expression lightened slightly, "I heard Qian Chang Xin say that the *wang fu* received a shipment of fabric previously. Later, somebody will deliver them to your residences. The weather is getting colder, you should make some new clothes from the fabric." Concluding, her hand raised the teacup and motioned towards the outside.

Everybody was perceptive enough to see and stood to leave. Coming out of *zhengyuan*, Feng Zi Jin snorted: "Using a few bolts of clothes to pretend to be a good person, it's like dispatching a beggar!"

Jiang Yong Yu had been walking behind her and heard this complaint. Her steps slowed and the distance between them lengthened.

After the women left, Qu Qing Ju stood and yawned: "Service now." She wasn't noble and virtuous. Even though she wouldn't be harsh without reason to other women, she couldn't act the part of virtuous. As to what Duan Wang thought, that was Duan Wang's problem.

Shaking her wide sleeves, Qu Qing Ju smiled. This medieval clothing was both finely made and beautiful.

After eating the noon meal alone, He Heng, as he wiped his hands, spoke: "*Ben wang* remembers that Chang De Gong Fu has sent an invitation a few days earlier. The Duke of Chang De's birthday?"

Ming He took the silk handkerchief from *wang ye*'s hands, "Yes, a few days before Chang De Gong Fu did present an invitation. Other than our *fu*, many in *Jing* also received one." But at the time, *wang ye* had just looked and threw the invitation to one side. Why was he mentioning it now?

"*Ben wang* heard that *wang fei* also received Chang De Gong Fu's invitation," He Heng's brows furrowed and his voice carried a hint of displeasure, "This Chang De Gong Fu is getting worse each successive generation but their pageantry hasn't seemed to have gotten smaller as well."

Ming He knew that this was *wang ye* was now dissatisfied with the Duke of Chang De. He lowered his head as he retreated to one side.

At the same time, Qian Chang Xin, who had been standing outside the door, walked inside, "*Wang ye*, a servant from Cui You Yuan came to report that Yun Qing *guniang* committed suicide."

"The person?" He Heng asked coldly.

"Already rescued, but she couldn't breathe properly and fainted into sleep now." Qian Chang Xi swore in his heart, these women from the brothels obviously couldn't be seen in public. Suicide was easy, just wrap around the roof arch in the middle of the night and it was done. She had to pick this time to act like this. He didn't know if she really wanted to die or do something else.

"If there's nothing wrong then let her stay there. Tell her if she still wants to die, then go back to her original place to die. Don't dirty my Duan Wang Fu's ground. "

Seeing *wang ye* push aside the teacup in front of him, Qian Chang Xin instantly understood. *Wang ye* was tired of the woman's ritual of first cry, two make noise and three hang. Yun Qing could be considered abandoned, "*Nucai* remembers."

She was just a small actress but she had to act like a virtuous person and also persisted in competing against *wang fei*. She had forgotten who she

really was. She had the heart of a noblewoman but the destiny of a *yahuan*. It was self-inflicted!

"Since she wanted to die while living in Cui You Yuan, get her to move immediately to Qiu Yi Zhai.[67]" He Heng stood and said in a fed-up manner, "That place is peaceful!"

Ming He saw Qian Chang Xin hurriedly retreat, his brow rose and fell. With such poor schemes, she still wanted to stir *wang ye*'s pity. It could be seen that this *huakui* didn't live up to her reputation.

Inside *zhengyuan*, Qu Qing Ju played with the invitation in her hands. The birthday banquet of the Duke of Chang De. Whether she was willing or not, she had to at least go to that *fu*, even if it was just a formality. But just remembering the rage and dissatisfaction that existed in the original's memories of that place, her face became colder.

In this kind of feudal era, there was nothing wrong with the dissolute nature of men in the eyes of society. But to marry somebody else when the body of the deceased person hadn't even cooled and to treat his own daughter as nothing, that meant his character was lacking. A man who couldn't even abide protocol during the one year after his wife had died, it was enough to make anybody feel extremely disappointed.

"*Wang fei*, if you don't want to go, just order somebody to send the present," Mu Jin saw that *wang fei*'s expression was strange and could only console her, "No matter how noble that Chang De Gong fu is, they aren't more noble than you."

A *qin wang fei* was nobler and higher-ranked than Chang De Gong Fu but the rumors wouldn't sound very good. Also, why would she let go of such a good opportunity?

Under the absolute might of the Imperial power, even if she was his daughter, the Duke of Chang De still had to bow to her. This was a

[67] Autumn building. Zhai (□) also means to a vegetarian diet or the diet of a monk.

perfect opportunity to "return in glory". If she didn't use it, wouldn't she be wasting her status as Duan Wang Fei?

"That's not necessary. My good father's birthday, I, this Duan Wang Fei, as his daughter, has to attend," Lips rising upward in a smile, Qu Qing Ju threw the invitation to one side and saw Yin Liu walk in with anger on her face.

Mu Jin place the invitation in its proper place before asking: "Your face is green, who angered you?"

"Nobody except that one in Cui You Yuan. There was a beautiful play right now," Yin Liu bowed slightly to Qu Qing Ju, "Just now, *nubi* heard that Cui You Yuan's Yun Qing tried to commit suicide. In her letter she wrote something like *qie* originally was the snow on a high mountain but has now landed in a swamp. She was implying that there were people in this *fu* who treated her cruelly. She was blaming *wang fei* for not treating her well!"

Finished telling the story, Yin Liu had an even harder time controlling the anger in her voice: "A *huakui*, she isn't some pure snow on a high mountain. Or does she mean no one is as noble as her!"

"When the snow on a high mountain melts, what is revealed is dirt. She loves to be the snow that is white on the outside and disguises a dirty inside, who wants to argue otherwise?" Mu Jin snorted coldly and immediately said: "What did *wang ye* say? Take care to not let anybody ruin *wang fei*'s reputation."

"Mu Jin *jiejie*, you don't have to worry about that. When the news spread earlier, *wang ye* reprimanded that person for needlessly dirtying the ground of Duan Wang Fu and ordered her to move to Qiu Yi Zhai." Speaking of this, she felt her rage lessen, "That Qui Yi Zhai isn't a good place. A beauty will become a wild person. You can see that *wang ye* is really dissatisfied with her. *Wang fei* has no need be angry over such a person."

Qu Qing Ju finished listening to Yin Liu's speech, laughed, and said: "I'm not angry, but you blew your top." She motioned for Mu Jin to pour a cup of tea for Yin Liu to moisten her throat, "That Yun Qing was never somebody that deserved any attention, I have no reason to become angry over her." This Yun Qing wasn't a smart woman. If she had been perceptive, acted well-behaved all the time, she would still have some influence with Duan Wang. But she had to pretend to be virtuous which was the worst strategy.

Perhaps normal customers had liked Yun Qing's virtuous and innocent act that fulfilled the desires of the masses, but who was He Heng? He was Duan Qin Wang of this entire Da Long Dynasty. What kind of women hasn't he seen before? The schemes Yun Qing used, they only worked as long as He Heng was willing to play along.

"Send somebody to reply to Chang De Gong Fu's invitation. Tell them that on the day of the banquet, I will go personally to congratulate my father." Qu Qing Ju pursed her lips in a smile. She was looking forward a bit now towards the upcoming banquet of the Duke of Chang De. There wasn't much entertainment in this era. She had to find something to do in order to not waste the time available.

Soon after, the Duchess of Chang De personally received the messenger *mama* of Duan Wang Fu and was informed that Duan Wang Fei would be coming that day to attend the birthday banquet.

After the messenger *mama* left, the Duchess of Chang De, Liang *shi*, sneered, commenting: "I've heard before that the *yatou*[68] wasn't favoured by *wang ye*. Today, that messenger *mama* acted as though *wang fei* was of some importance. I didn't think that a person that dull knew how to pretend."

Sitting by her side was Qu Yue Su who sighed and said: "*Taitai*[69], *jiejie* has already married. Whether or not *wang ye* favors her, she is still Duan Wang Fei."

[68] girl, servant girl. Can be used deprecatingly or as a term of endearment.
[69] Mrs, madam, wife, married woman.

Liang *shi* looked at her daughter that was as pretty as flowers and jade and understood the meaning in her daughter's words. She lowered her face and spoke coldly: "No matter what she is, she would not be as important as you in the future."

Upon hearing this, Qu Yue Su smiled faintly and didn't speak again.

Chapter 9

It had already entered autumn and the weather had gradually become colder. All over Chang De Gong Fu was an atmosphere of cheer as a variety of carriages parked inside. The gatekeepers had bowed to the point their waists couldn't straighten but kept smiles on their faces to welcome people inside the main gates.

At *ermen*, the Chang De Duke's only son and his nephew through his wife enthusiastically welcomed the coming guests. The two were still very young and received compliments of being promising youths.

In the recent years, Chang De Gong Fu had declined further and further but nothing could beat the fact that they gave birth to a good daughter that married Duan Wang to become a *wang fei*. No matter what they though inside, they still had to do all the formalities. If they didn't act on behalf of the monk, they still had to respect the Buddha. All of them still had to respect Duan Wang.

Thankfully, this Chang De Gong Fu was Duan Wang's in-laws so the benefits of coming in person and giving presents were higher than the cost.

"The Duke of Chang De's fortunes are as good as the North Sea is deep." The one that spoke was the Marquis of Bao Rong. He was only a middling character in the city of Jing but the Duke of Chang De didn't dare offend him and came up to greet him.

"It's nothing, nothing. Thanks, Marquis, for coming all this way." The duke took the other's hand as they walked towards the main hall. The

other didn't remain courteous and as they walked, he said, "Today is your birthday, I wonder when will Duan *wang ye* arrive. When the time comes, I will have to rely on the duke to introduce me to *wang ye*."

When the Duke of Chang De heard this, he didn't feel so good inside. The message that Duan Wang Fu returned said clearly that *wang fei* will come, but as to whether *wang ye* would come or not, that wasn't confirmed. The words of the Marquis of Bao Rong stirred irritation in the Duke of Changde's heart at his married daughter for not having any skill at conquering *wang ye*'s heart and forcing him to feel so awkward.

"Of course, of course," The duke smiled as he ushered the other person into the room to disguise his awkwardness.

The Marquis of Bao Rong smiled and said: "Since the duke is busy, I'll walk myself in, no need to be so courteous." Finishing, he entered the hall. Inside, he really was mocking the duke. Maybe others didn't know but he was clear, that daughter that the Qu Family married into Duan Wang Fu wasn't liked one iota by *wang ye*. It would be a strange thing indeed if *wang ye* did come participate in the Duke of Changde's birthday banquet.

Did he think that if his daughter was a *wang fei*, he was a relative of the Imperial Family? Pah!

In the gardens of *neiyuan*, Liang *shi* was receiving the womenfolk. Seeing that this year was busier than last year, Liang *shi* felt conflicted. In past years, these people only sent presents but didn't come personally. Today, they all had the spare time. It was all because that Qu Qing Qu became a *wang fei*. These people were still scorning her for not treating Qu Qing Ju well, as though if they said it, they were much more noble.

"The way I see it, *furen* really is lucky. The eldest daughter is Duan Wang Fei, and this third daughter looks like a flower," The Marquess of Bao Rong stopped and looked meaningfully at the *shu*[70] second daughter

[70] children born of a concubine, as opposed to those born from the wife as *di*

of Changde Gong Fu that was standing in the corner, "Er *guniang* is also a paragon, this type of good fortune is something we can't even touch."

"Wang *furen*, don't compliment these *yatou* anymore," Liang *shi*'s smile was slightly cold, "These wild girls, they can't compare to your *fu*'s ladies." This entire Jing, who didn't know that the Marquis of Bao Rong's eldest daughter wanted to marry a poor scholar to the point of death, but now she was coming back to her home every few days to beg for money.

Who knew that the Marquess of Bao Rong seemed to be unaffected by Liang *shi*'s words and only replied: "No, no."

The others indifferently watched the two's fight with tongues. The fact that conflict existed between the Marquess of Bao Rong and the Duchess of Chang De had started in their childhood. Now that they were married, they still allowed others to watch the spectacle they made.

A few that had known the two back when they were younger still remembered when Wang *shi* had married the Marquis of Bao Rong, Liang *shi* had been angered to the point of not attending any gatherings for girls in the city for the better half of a year. It wasn't until Liang *shi* had married the Duke of Changde, whose status wasn't below that of the Marquis of Bao Rong, that she started to compete with Wang *shi* again.

Some looked down at Wang *shi*'s frivolous attitude, but they dislike the way Liang *shi* acted even more so they didn't speak through the entire incident. But this finalized their decision to not take any young girls anymore to Bao Rong Hou Fu and Chang De Gong Fu.

At this time, not far away from Chang De Gong Fu, the entourage of Duan Wang Fei slowly neared. The other officials that came to attend, once they saw Duang Wang Fu's procession, quickly moved to one side and waited for the people of the *wang fu* to pass before resuming their own journey.

"Why did the carriage stop?" A first-rank *furen*, feeling the carriage she sat in stop, asked in confusion. She hadn't wanted to come to Chang De Gong Fu. Now that the carriage had to stop, her desire decreased even more.

An old *mama* came inside the carriage and said in a low tone: "*Furen*, Duan Wang Fu's people are coming up from behind. Everybody is making way."

Hearing that it was Duan Wang Fu, the dissatisfaction that the *furen* had instantly disappeared. She peeked outside through the gap in the curtains. She saw the guards forming a path, four date-red horses pulling a grand carriage slowly passing and then there was two relatively more normal two-horse carriages passing. Following that was handsomely dressed servants and *taijian*. Even if it wasn't ostentatious, it was possible to see at a glance that this was the grandeur of the Imperial Family.

"That seems to be Duan *wang* ye's carriage," The *furen* of a court official felt lucky. Lucky that she had come in person today. Otherwise, if *wang ye* arrived but her family only sent over a gift, wasn't that offending the Imperial Family? No matter which wang ye sat on that throne in the future, the honor of the Imperial Family couldn't be impinged upon by her kind of people.

The gatekeeper saw Duan Wang Fu's carriage coming from far away and turned to run into *ermen* to tell the duke.

The duke had been exchanged pleasantries with another when he saw a manservant quickly run over and say that *wang ye*'s carriage had arrived.

The other that had been talking perceptively expressed he didn't need any special care from the Duke of Change De. He saw the Duke of Chang De hurriedly walk towards the outside and walked into the inner hall, his mind whirling.

Inside the large carriage, Qu Qing Ju sat beside He Heng. She looked at the calm expression of He Heng and opened: "We're probably getting close to Chang De Gong Fu now."

"*Wang fei* is missing her home," He Heng didn't want to come at first, but thinking about the treatment that *wang fei* had received before her marriage, he strangely wanted to come. Seeing that *wang fei* had a calm and steady voice, he couldn't help but tease, "It is my fault that I am not a good husband, that *wang fei* misses her father."

"*Wang ye*, don't laugh at *qie* anymore," Qu Qjing Ju glared at He Heng. Early in the morning, this *wang ye*, with his strange personality, had let the servants deliver a variety of jewellery and said for her to pick whatever she wanted to and wear whatever. She had looked at the multitude of boxes, each containing a small fortune in jewellery, and assumed that this *wang ye* was going to open a jewellery shop.

After she finally managed to dress in her finery, this person had came out of nowhere in his moonlight colored with embroidered gold clouds robes, saying that he was going to accompany her to Chang De Gong Fu. Seeing the fact that he had dressed very handsomely, Qu Qing Ju had laughed and followed him onto the carriage. Who knew that he was saying strange things now.

"*Qie* is married to *wang ye*, Duan Wang Fu is home. *Wang ye* saying otherwise, is it due to disliking *qie* for not doing well?" Qu Qing Ju tilted her head and created the expression she didn't want to pay attention.

Upon hearing this, the smile on He Heng's face became more visible. He reached out his hand to grasp Qu Qing Ju's hand: "Don't be angry, if you are angry, the one who feels regret is me." Finishing, his face became more serious, "Some things, I know. You don't have to worry."

Qu Qing Ju turned her head towards He Heng. Seeing the other smile like usual, she didn't understand the reasoning behind him saying those words so she smiled and said: "*Wang ye*'s affections
for *qie*, *qie* understands in her heart." If she really believed, it would be a tragedy.

"*Wang ye, wang fei*, we've arrived at Chang De Gong Fu." The carriage slowly stopped and Qian Chang Xin's voice came from the outside.

"This lowly official greets *wang ye*, *wang fei*," The Duke of Chang De saw the carriage stop and quickly came forward with others to bow.

"Today is the Duke of Chang De's birthday, *ben wang* has come to celebrate, there's no need for such formalities."

Qian Chang Xin heard *wang ye* make a sound before coming up to raise the curtain for *wang ye* and kneel down for *wang ye* to step on his back to exit.

Qu Qing Ju put on a veil. When she came out of the carriage, she saw a hand appear in front of her. She looked at the smiling visage of the owner of that hand. Then she lowered her head slightly to hold He Heng's hand to get down from the carriage.

At the side, the sedan had been prepared already. Mu Jin lifted the sedan screen for Qu Qing Ju to enter. Putting down the screen, she bowed slightly to *wang ye* and then, along with the other first-ranked *yatou*, sat on the little sedans behind.

Seeing that Duan Wang had come personally to celebrate his birthday, the joy that the Duke of Chang De overflowed. Seeing the attitude that *wang ye* held towards his daughter, his face broke into a smile and he ushered He Heng from the front entrance inside.

When Duan Wang entered the doors, the heavy labor *mama*s that carried the sedan raised the sedan and entered as well. But the direction they went was different than Duan Wang, they were going towards the garden in the back.

He Heng allowed the Duke of Chang De to escort him towards the inner hall. He saw two youths that weren't yet fifteen follow behind and asked: "This two are?"

"*Wang ye*, this is my son Qu Wang Zhi and wife's sibling's son, Liang Rong." Seeing *wang ye* pay attention to his son, the Duke of Change De joyously said: "Quickly come greet *wang ye*."

The two people bowed again. He Heng calmly dismissed excused the two from their bow, "What books have the two read?"

"My son is very disappointing, he is still studying in the Dong Shan College. My wife's sibling's son became a *xiucai*[71] last year." The Duke of Chang De saw that *wang ye*'s tone was calm, and didn't dare to exaggerate, only telling the truth

This Duan Wang was only about twenty years old but he just wasn't someone that could be overlooked. The Duke of Chang De felt rueful, he was definitely an imperial son.

"This young man is the duke's only son. He is still young, the duke shouldn't put too much pressure." He Heng nodded, "*Ben wang* has heard of Dong Shan College, many famous scholars have come from there. *Ben wang* heard that your *furen* had the rare dragon-and-phoenix twins that year. This young man will be accomplished in the future."

"No, no, *wang ye* is too complimentary." As a father, he naturally liked others compliment his son. Additionally, Wang Zhi and Yue Su were a pair of dragon-and-phoenix twins which was rare in Jing Capital. That had been the subject of much pride for many years. But at this time, he didn't see the iciness in He Heng's eyes.

Qu Wang Zhi, who had been walking at the back, heard the discussion between the two men. Thinking of his mother's dislike towards his eldest sister, he couldn't help but think, now that eldest sister was a *wang fei*, would she purposefully take revenge against them? If it was third sister that became *wang fei*, it was much better. Mother wouldn't have to be angry over eldest sister.

[71] person that passed the county-level imperial exams

In the gardens, Liang *shi* and the Marquess of Bao Rong finished their duel of words and heard a *yahuan* hurried walked inside: "*Furen*, Duan Wang Fei has arrived."

The people present were not as highly ranked as Duan Wang Fei. Hearing the announcement, they all stood. As much as Liang *shi* didn't wish to, she still had to stand and wait by the Door of Hanging Flowers[72] to receive.

When she had walked to the Door of Hanging Flowers, she saw a sedan made of fragrant wood with inlaid jewels stop by the door. Before the sedan could be lowered, a host of *mama* and *yahuan* crowded around, their expressions full of cautiousness and reverence.

She smiled coldly. It was really a pheasant become a phoenix. Even her behaviour had become outrageous.

Chapter 10

The dark screen of the sedan was lifted and a pale hand reached out to land on the hand of Mu Jin, who had bent down beside the door of the sedan. After that, a foot that was wearing a slipper inlaid with precious stones and gold embroidery stepped out. Then there was a flash of a dress that moved like waves of water.

Liang *shi* looked at the woman who walked out of the sedan. The smile on her face didn't get smaller but the curve of her mouth froze. The Qu Qing Ju that stood in front of the her eyes, compared with the one that had returned home three days after the marriage was drastically different.

Following behind her was Qu Yue Su who saw that her mother's actions were not proper. She smiled and walked towards Qu Qing Ju. She bowed slightly and cordially said: "*Jiejie* finally came. *Taitai* and I have been eagerly waiting."

[72] Drooping flower door/gate

Qu Qing Ju heard those words as she walked towards Liang *shi* and said: "Originally, the preparations had started early, but *wang ye* wanted to come with me, so it took a bit longer." As she spoke, her person had walked in front of Liang *shi*, she slightly bent her body, "To let *taitai* wait so long, it is my fault."

It didn't matter how much Liang *shi* didn't like Qu Qing Ju, but in front of so many people, she couldn't accept that slight bend of the body. She quickly grasped Qu Qing Ju's hand and bowed in return before saying: "*Wang fei* is busy with matters in the *fu*, and to be able to come so early, it is the filial love you hold for *lao ye*. [73]Don't say such things."

Everybody had been waiting to greet *wang fei* had come close and heard those words. They quickly followed in complimenting Qu Qing Ju. Not taking into account whether Duan Wang Fei was favoured or not, but just the importance that the entire family of the Marquis of Xiang Qing put on was enough to let them put importance on Duan Wang Fei. Moreover, looking at Duan Wang Fei's attire and the fact that Duan Wang had personally accompanied her, it was enough to declare Duang Wang Fei's place in Duang Wang's heart.

After Qu Qing Ju rejected the invitation to sit at the front, Liang *shi* didn't persist. No matter how honourable and high ranked Duan Wang Fei was, according to their social relationship, she was her mother. If she sat at the front, it was not wrong.

The bystanders saw what Liang *shi* had done and laughed inside at her stupidity. Technically, Duan Wang Fei did have to call her "mother" but right now she was one of the Imperial Family. You're putting on the act of being the mistress of the household but did you ever think that this would enrage *wang ye*, and disadvantage her husband and children? Duan Wang Fei might respect you for being her mother in name, did you expect an imperial son to give you that respect?

[73] the lord, master, referring to the Duke in this case.

Whoever you were, you were always a fraction lower in front of members of the imperial family. Not to mention she was only the stepmother.

No wonder that the declining Liang Family had been so happy when their *di* daughter became the second wife of the Duke of Change De. With this kind of brains and upraising, she had made a match above her station.

Qu Qing Ju sat down at the highest place on the left side. She took a drink of tea before setting down the cup and turning to exchange chatter with the other *furen*.

"*Wang fei*'s appearance looks much better," The one speaking was the wife of the Minister of Defense, Luo *furen*. She was also Qu Qing Ju's *jiumu*'s mother. This old *furen* had paid attention to Qu Qing Ju and so nobody was surprised by the intimate tone, "This old one had remembered when it was time to add to *wang fei*'s dowry, *wang fei* had been small and thin. It's just been a few months, but this old one almost couldn't recognize. You can see that Duan Wang Fu takes good care of people."

"That is so true, not just Luo *taitai*, I almost couldn't recognize her too," Tian *shi* took over speaking. She was Qu Qing Ju's mother's younger *shu* sister. Even if she hadn't been considered close with Qu Qing Ju's mother, but emotionally, she still leaned towards Qu Qing Ju. Additionally, Qu Qing Ju was now Duan Wang Fei so her following words wasn't very polite, "I had seen the other two girls of this *fu* are as beautiful as a flower and had been worried for a long time for this niece. All the daughters of Chang De Gong Fu are beautiful."

Everybody present knew that this was criticizing Liang *shi* for harshly treating the original wife's *di* daughter. The words were nasty but honest. They saw that Duan Wang Fei was still smiling but not speaking and instantly understood this Duan Wang Fei's attitude towards Liang *shi*.

That year, Liang *shi* used schemes to seduce the Duke of Chang De to the point of insanity, and caused the pregnant Tian *shi* to give birth to a daughter before passing away due to illness. And not just two months after Tian *shi* had died, Liang *shi* had married in. After that, when Xiang Qing Hou Fu wanted *da guniang* to stay at the *hou fu* for short periods of time, it was frequently blocked by Liang *shi*. In the end, Xiang Qing Hou Fu was in constant conflict over everything with Chang De Gong Fu. The most pitiful was *da guniang*. If it wasn't that she had the protection of Xiang Qing Hou Fu, she probably couldn't have anything left of her mother's dowry.

When she did such a terrible thing, it became hard to blame Duan Wang Fei for making things difficult. It was only the Duke of Change De that considered such a poisonous woman a treasure. If it was a respectable family, they would be embarrassed to have her, even as a *qie*.

Qu Qing Ju apathetically watched as everyone laughed at Liang *shi* using their words and actions. She pretended to not understand, smiled and didn't speak. The state of Chang De Gong Fu at present, it was an empty scaffold. It was possible to see it from the attitudes of these *furen* towards Liang *shi*. The fact that she would be picked by the Emperor to marry Duan Wang, it was a trick that she didn't know which consort in the imperial palace had thought up.

Qu Qing Ju was pitiful as she was alone and became a sacrifice to the political machinations of others. If she didn't have a good *jiujiu*, before she could appear here, her corpse would have already disappeared.

The apathy of men, the resulting pain would be multiplied on the women. The weakness of women, the resulting pain would be multiplied on the children. But this kind of era, it couldn't accept too strong of a woman.

"Everything about *da guniang* is good, but she's just too dull. Now that *wang ye* treats her well, I, as her mother, has no more worries."

Hearing this, Qu Qing Ju raised her head to look at Liang *shi*. This wasn't a simple woman. So many people laughing at her, but the expression on her face never changed.

Touching the golden phoenix and agate *buyao* as though nothing had occurred, Qu Qing Ju jerked the corners of her lips: "*Taitai* doesn't have to worry for this daughter. In Duan Wang Fu, I am living very very well. The care that *taitai* has given this daughter over the years, I am clear in my heart." Finishing, she acted as she just remembered something, "Speaking of that, *didi* and *san mei*'s ages aren't so young anymore. I've brought some presents today. It isn't anything valuable, so I'll leave it for everybody to play with."

She didn't know why Qu Qing Ju specifically mentioned Wang Zhi and Yue Su but Liang *shi* understood she hadn't treated Qu Qing Ju well in the past. Saying such things today, it wasn't out of goodwill.

"We don't deserve *wang fei* spending the money." Liang *shi* forced a smile. Looking at the agate earrings on Qu Qing Ju's ears, she clearly realized for the first time, that whore Tian *shi*'s daughter had become a *wang fei.*

"*Taitai* doesn't have to be so courteous, we are all one family." Qu Qing Ju lowered her head, raising the teacup and blowing slowly but there was no interest in taking another sip.

Everybody looked upon this motion and suddenly felt that even though Duan Wang Fei's words were all polite and courteous, but what people could sense was an aura that was imposing, as though Liang *shi* was nothing but a joke in her eyes. As though it was only due to her compassion and generosity, that she didn't argue with her.

Qu Yue Su looked at the Qu Qing Ju in front of her. Her brows furrowed. The person was still the person, just that the makeup was finer, the motions more elegant, and that was enough to make others felt as though they were below here. Was this still the silent, introverted *da jie*?

Just when Liang *shi* couldn't manage anymore, she saw a few *yahuan* help support *lao taitai* walk in. Her expression relaxed and she hurriedly stood and walked over. In the past, she didn't like *lao taitai*, but since *lao taitai* was here right now, most people would give *lao taitai* a few fractions of respect and so she wouldn't be surrounded from all sides.

Lao taitai held Liang *shi*'s hand and went to bow towards Qu Qing Ju. She was held up by Mu Jin but still politely said: "The fact that *wang fei* could come today, it is our good honor."

"Grandmother speaks too seriously, today is father's birthday, granddaughter will of course come," Qu Qing Ju gazed upon the smiling *lao taitai*. She smiled and said, "If grandmother talks like this, you have made granddaughter an outsider." This *lao taitai* wasn't some benevolent person. When Qu Qing Ju had been living in difficulty in the *fu*, she hadn't seen this *lao taitai* say a word.

In a woman's eyes, nobody could outcompete her son. Qu Qing Ju had expected she would show up at this time because she would know that Liang *shi* would be in a bind. She didn't like Liang *shi*, but she would let her daughter-in-law get shamed by others because that meant her son was being shamed.

Even though this was a reality, but that didn't mean Qu Qing Ju would accept it.

Everybody once again exchanged pleasantries before sitting. Qu Qing Ju sat on the carved wooden chair and didn't make any noise anymore. If somebody talked to her, she would return a few sentences. Slowly, the atmosphere cooled.

Qu *lao tai tai* saw that the mood was getting cold and understood that this was Qu Qing Ju purposefully making things difficult. But the other's position was high and noble now so she could only flatter her: "The time is late, why don't everybody follow this old body to the West Hall for the banquet."

Everybody's gaze swept towards Duan Wang Fei. Seeing her smilingly hold up a teacup, they knew that she didn't disagree and so they all stood.

Qu Qing Ju stood and smiled friendly at everybody. She went forward to hold Qu *lao taitai*'s hand, "Grandmother first."

Qu *lao taitai* smiled and patted the back of her hand. She said in an intimate tone: "Such a *yatou*, you are now Duan Wang Fei, you can't be doing such things. Others would laugh."

The other *furen* immediately complimented Duan Wang Fei's filial love. Even though Duan Wang Fei just slightly held for only a few steps before letting go, but who would say she didn't do well?

Just when they reached the garden's exit, everybody saw a *yahuan* walk over with a cape in her hands. She didn't seem to be wearing the *yahuan* uniform of Chang De Gong Fu and tried to guess whose family she belonged to.

At one look, Mu Jin recognized that this was Lian Qiao, who served at *wang ye*'s side, and slowed her steps.

Lian Qiao saw Qu Qing Ju and quickly walked in front and bowed. Then she said: "*Wang fei*, *wang ye* saw that the sun was covered and was worried that you would get cold so *nubi* was sent to bring you a cloak. He also ordered that you shouldn't eat too much spicy food as it is fall and the wind is dry and cold, it will harm the throat and stomach."

"I'm not a child, there's no need to be so careful," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she lightly snorted. She looked to Mu Jin to receive the cape, "I've received the cloak. You tell Qian Chang Xin to be vigilant, don't let *wang ye* drink too much."

Lian Qiao noted it down and hurriedly retreated.

Those present saw the cloak in Mu Jin's hands with the underlying grain of Shu brocade. They felt moved inside. Who said that Duan Wang didn't like Duan Wang Fei? It was just that the day got cloudy and he

would anxiously send somebody over with a cloak and didn't even forget to warn about the food.

Everybody present was a *di* wife in their family. Looking at that cloak, an indefinable feeling of admiration rose.

Chapter 11

The West Hall of Chang De Gong Fu was specifically used for female gatherings so the majority of the furnishings were vibrant yet well-made. Inside, there were artwork and calligraphy of masters and it looked as this was a home with some foundation. But it was to be obvious that each generation was worse than the previous. The present Duke of Chang De was so preposterous that many laughed at him behind his back.

Qu Qing Ju was at the same table as Qu *lao taitai* and her spot was beside Luo *lao taitai*. It was obvious from the seating the attitude that the Qu Family held toward her. At the table, there were people who were willing to ingratiate themselves so the mood at the table was somewhat busy. But when Qu *lao taitai* seated the Qu Family's *san guniang* beside her, everybody's eyes changed. If this was a family banquet, nobody would say an extra word, but of the womenfolk present today, there were several females who ranked higher than Qu *lao taitai*. This Qu *san guniang* was both of a younger generation and wasn't titled. It really wasn't suitable for her to sit at the table.

The Marquess of Bao Rong smiled coldly at Qu *lao taitai*'s actions, understanding that this was Qu *lao taitai* wanting everybody at the table to meet Qu *san guniang* but the timing just wasn't good.

"This old one has always preferred these two girls. Now that *da yatou* has married, we've finally managed to gather together today," Qu *lao taitai* couldn't not know what others were thinking. She used her handkerchief to wipe at the corner of her eye, "Now that these girls have

grown up, this old lady still wants to keep them by my side all the time."

One of the *furen* that had good relations with the Qu family smiled and followed: "This is *lao taitai's* love for her granddaughters. But when the children grow up, they can't stay at home. *San guniang* is the epitome … …" When she got there, she smiled mischievously.

Qu Yue Su heard those words and quickly dropped her head in embarrassment.

Seeing her act like a little girl, Qu Qing Ju smiled at the woman that spoke. This person was on the side of Qu *lao taitai* Wei *shi*. Her husband was an assistant minister at the Ministry of Rites, a not very large yet not very insignificant position. But this person usually only treated Qu Yue Su courteously. At the beginning, both Qu Qing Ju and *shu* daughter Qu Hui Xue hadn't come into her eyes.

"Wei *furen* is very funny. At this time, *san meimei* is the youngest and grandmother loves her best. Why can't she spend more time with grandmother." Qu Qing Ju smiled thinly at Wei *shi*, and took the handkerchief Yin Liu handed over to wipe her hands, "It is *er meimei* who has less time to spend with grandmother."

Liang *shi* heard what Qu Qing Ju said and felt anger stir. Qu Qing Ju was trying to ruin her daughter's marriage. Mentioning the second daughter, she was telling others that her, the *di* mother, wasn't benevolent, would only think of her own daughter and neglect the *shu* daughter?

Wei *shi* paused and didn't seem to have any response. In the past, she had always ingratiated herself with her *gumu*[74] in this manner. Today, she was firmly pushed back by Qu Qing Ju and just realized that the person sitting across from her wasn't the Qu *da guniang* of the past, but the noble and elevated Duan Wang Fei.

[74] sister of father

Luo *lao taitai* smiled as she looked at Wei *shi*, her eyes full of distain. Who was Duan Wang? He was the second son of the Emperor. His mother Jing Fei[75] may not be as favoured as Shu Fei[76] but she still had some level of influence with the emperor. As to what Duan Wang was really like, nobody knew. But in the eyes of the entire court, Duan Wang might not be the most capable of the four imperial sons, but he definitely was not useless.

Jinshang[77] only has four sons. The eldest imperial son Ning Wang[78] had some power in the court. However, his birth was not high and his birth mother was only a *cairen*.[79] The mother of the third imperial son, Rui Wang,[80] Shu Fei was the most favoured of the Emperor which spilled over to favouring her son. It was just that while this imperial son had some ability, his schemes were cruel and many were afraid of him. The fourth imperial son was Cheng Wang. His mother was a *guipin*[81] but wasn't favored by the emperor. The Emperor's attitude towards the fourth imperial son was not special and as to the person Cheng Wang, he was also average.

Luo *lao taitai* didn't understand the politics of the court and government but she wasn't too bad at examining people. This Duan Wang's future was most likely limitless. Her own family, the Luo Family, might not have any desire to stand on any side but they didn't want to offend Duan Wang. To be in the situation that Duan Wang was in, he either was truly as he appeared or he had very deep depths.

But who in the Imperial Family was as they appeared? She had lived this many years, and saw many people so she understood even more clearly what people could not be offended or what people, if offended, wouldn't be a problem.

[75] 敬 (jing) means respected, venerated.
[76] shu (淑) is warm and virtuous
[77] the present one on top. Refers to the Emperor.
[78] ning means peaceful, serene.
[79] cairen, a lower-ranked consort.
[80] rui means lucky, felicitous omen, auspicious.
[81] gui(贵) is noble, pin(嫔) is a rank. Having gui as part of the title makes it of a higher rank than other *pin*.

Duan Wang was the former, and Chang De Gong Fu was the latter.

But she hadn't been correct about this Duan Wang Fei. In the past, she had only paid attention because she was born from a daughter of the Tian Family. But now she felt that this Duan Wang Fei wasn't a simple woman. Thinking about it, she felt lucky. She didn't beg that Duan Wang Fei would be grateful towards her, but if she did, due to her previous care, create goodwill on the part of Duan Wang Fei to the Luo Family and her daughter, it was a good thing.

In the time it took to blink, many thoughts had formed in Luo *lao taitai*'s head. On her face, she still had a friendly smile and complimented: "You can see that Duan Wang Fei still thinks for her sisters all the time. This old one's girls might occasionally say a few words, they cannot compare to *wang fei*."

"*Lao taitai* is too modest. I've seen the sisters of your family before. Each is well-educated in all aspects. Even my aunt frequently praises them." Qu Qing Ju received the goodwill of Luo *lao taitai*, "Someday, get the *meimei* to come to *wang fu* when they are free. My aunt is friendly and cares greatly for me but she has no daughters. Even if I want to interact with girls like my aunt, I don't have anybody. Luckily, the sisters of your *fu* will allow me to satisfy my desire. *Lao taitai*, do bear to part with them and let them come out."

Luo *lao taitai* heard that Duan Wang Fei's words were pointing out the care that her daughter had taken and, in passing, complimented her granddaughters. The smile on her face became larger: "*Wang fei*, don't praise them too much. If *wang fei* doesn't distain them for being too wild, this old one definitely will take them to the *wang fu* to greet you if there is a chance."

Everybody present had heard at least a bit about the care that Duan Wang Fei had received from Xiang Qing Hou Fu before her marriage. Hearing what she said today, they received some proof of the rumors. It did look like Duan Wang Fei was very close to her maternal uncle's family. It didn't waste the care that Xiang Qing Hou Fu had given her in the beginning.

Everybody was women and naturally understood the dark side of the inner home. It looked like Duan Wang Fei wasn't that close to Chang De Gong Fu at all. In that case, when they will interact with Chang De Gong Fu in the future, they didn't have to worry about Duan Wang Fu.

Qu Yue Su heard the discussion flowering around her, a smile was constantly on her face as though she didn't know what they were discussing. Seeing the dishes being brought up, she affectionately ordered a *yahuan* to specially put a dish of fragrant and spicy tofu in front of Qu Qing Ju: "*Meimei* remembers that *da jie*'s favourite this is this one. A few days earlier, mother had ordered the servants to make this dish well. *Da jie*, take a taste and see if you still like it."

White tender tofu sprinkled with green onions and pale yellow peppers and the red of the chili oil. It did look very appetizing. Qu Qing Ju smiled at Qu Yue Su and nodded in agreement: "Thank you *meimei*." This *san meimei* of her's wasn't a simple person.

"Please, *wang fei*, forgive this *nubi* for being disrespectful but there are some things *nubi* has to say." Mu Jin crouched, respectful yet helpless, "A few days earlier, you had been sick for half a month. The entire *fu* had been worried for you. The *taiyi* had said that you couldn't eat anything spicy or oily. Now that you have finally recovered and *wang ye* has allowed you to go out the door … … don't forget what *wang ye* had just said."

Luo *lao taitai* heard those words and also persuaded: "This *yahuan* is a faithful one. I had heard that *wang fei* had been ill. Even though *wang fei* has filial love, but the body still needs to be taken care of."

"Fine fine, this *yahuan* has served me many years. She is such a nag. I'm afraid of her." Qu Qing Ju seemed to sigh in helplessness. "The medicine that *lao taitai* sent over earlier, I still haven't expressed my gratitude yet."

"Excuse me for saying a disrespectful thing, but this one saw *wang fei* grow up. Everything is fine as long as the body is healthy, that doesn't need any gratitude," Luo *lao taitai* pointed at a dish of pigeon soup, "this

pigeon soup would be fine for *wang fei* to drink. Get a *yahuan* to serve a bowl to taste."

Seeing Mu Jin pour a bowl of soup, an awkward smile appeared on Qu Yue Su's face. The words implied that nobody at Chang De Gong Fu was concerned about *da jie*'s illness and also mocked her mother for not being loving towards *da jie*. Even the Luo family, who didn't have much of a connection to *da jie*, sent over medicine but her mother hadn't done anything. Once the word was out, what virtuous reputation would her mother have left?

Qu *lao taitai* heard those words, her smile didn't change, but she took a few more looks at her daughter-in-law, Liang *shi*.

Liang *shi*, sitting at one side, had managed to hear the meaning implied. She didn't think that the present Qu Qing Ju would be this forceful but she had no way of explaining. She could only smile and say: "*Wang fei* was sick? Why didn't you let somebody send a word, to let mother go take care of you for a few days?"

"I don't dare let mother labor," Qu Qing Ju had finished washing her hands and was wiping away the droplets of water that remained. Hearing what Liang *shi* said, she jerked her lips in a smile, "They say, a married daughter is thrown away water, this daughter didn't want father and mother to worry. There are a lot of servants in the *wang fu*. It was just a small illness, nothing that everybody had to know about. In the case of Luo *lao taitai*, it was because *jiumu* had somebody deliver things and received notice that I was sick. That was how she knew about my illness."

These words were much deeper and even nastier than the previous words once understood. Duan Wang Fei mentioned a "dare", it was enough to make people speculate on how Liang *shi* treated the daughters of others in the *houyuan*.

Smiling as she saw Liang *shi* pushed to the point of speechlessness by her words, Qu Qing Ju stopped talking and started eating. She wasn't afraid of ruining the good name of her paternal home, she wasn't even

afraid that her husband's family will hate her due to the reputation of her paternal home. It was just a life she had picked up, she would live freely until she couldn't. But what she had picked up was another person's life. At least, when she was living freely, she could help the other finish the gratitudes and grievances of her past. If there was really a day when Duan Wang really became the Emperor, or he failed in his attempt and wanted her life, she didn't think she would have any regrets. When she could still flaunt it, she would. Otherwise, maybe one day she wouldn't have a life.

Qu Yue Su looked at the elegant posture of Qu Qing Ju and felt inexplicably complicated inside. Even though her mother really didn't like her, but in private she still felt some sympathy for her *da jie*. So she had always given her some of the jewellery and playthings she hadn't liked to *da jie*. But now, the *da jie* that needed her sympathy was a *wang fei* that even her grandmother had to be courteous to. As for herself, in the future, she might have to always be below her.

Thinking about that, Qu Yue Su's slender brows slightly furrowed. Why did she have such a feeling of apprehension?

The banquet meal ended. The servants of the Qu Family guided everyone to the wide outer yard to hear a play. The stage had been built beforehand. The sexes were blocked from each other by tall screens. Even though everybody was in the same place, but they could only see the stage.

The first play was "Magu giving her birthday greetings"[82]. Qu Qing Ju sat on the chair and watched coldly at Liang *shi* who was coming towards her with a sandalwood box.

This Liang *shi* was going to personally put on a play?

Chapter 12

[82] is an immortal deity associated with the elixir of life/immortality

"This box should have been given to *wang fei* a long time before, but it was just that when *wang fei* was getting married, it was forgotten in the rush," Liang *shi* gave the box to Mu Jin. Seeing Qu Qing Ju take the sandalwood box from Mu Jin, she continued in a choked up voice: "I've been keeping it these past years, waiting to give it to you one day."

The purple color of the sandalwood looked aged but there was still a faint scent when held in one's hands. A gold lock was formed into the shape of a cloud. The lock had been opened already. Qu Qing Ju only had to lift the lid to see what was inside.

The hand that held the lid paused slightly. In a deep part of her soul, she felt the strong desire of this body towards the box. She could feel the hate and helplessness of a neglected and helpless little girl.

Slowly opening the box, inside there was high-quality cloth laid out and on top of the cloth was a single jade pendant. Fine mutton-fat jade had been carved into the shape of a gourd. The shape of peanuts were carved finely onto the gourd along with the words "Live for a hundred years." Her heart jumped and a length of memory, like a movie scene, floated to the top of her mind. The original Qu Qing Ju had always wanted to get this jade gourd from Liang *shi* but Liang *shi* deliberately kept it away. Now she was, of her own initiative, handing it over, and pretending to be a good person in front of so many people. She was most likely scared that Qu Qing Ju was going to act against her in the future.

"*Jiejie* had somebody prepare this jade gourd very early that year, but *jiejie* passed away. In the rush, the jade store sent the pendant to me," As Liang *shi* talked, her eyes reddened, "*Jiejie* died too young, her only concern was you, *wang fei*. In the past, I was worried that *wang fei* was too young and would lose what *jiejie* had left you, so I kept it for you. Now that *wang fei* has grown up, this jade gourd should be given into *wang fei*'s care." She scanned Qu Qing Ju up and down and said ruefully, "Seeing what *wang fei* looks like now, *jiejie* in heaven will be happy."

She lifted a hand to take out the jade gourd pendant. The feel of it was warm and smooth. Because it was carved to be small, there wasn't much

weight to it. It was possible to see that Tian *shi* had wanted to, at Qu Qing Ju's hundred-day celebration, put the gourd on her body.

The nobility had the fashion of giving children a hundred-day celebration. When the child reached a hundred days, the elders would personally put on the child charms for a long life. Most of the charms would have magic clouds and peanuts and other objects of good fortune along with the words "To live until a hundred years." This was to symbolize locking down a person's life and that the gods would protect the child to live a hundred years.

Pity the love of mothers in this world, Tian *shi* died so young. The rumors outside said that she became ill due to anger, but a woman that, at the very end, still ordered for her child a jade gourd, would she be so weak as to die due to anger? Mothers grow strong in protection of their children. Tian *shi* wasn't the type to fall into sadness, would she not care for her newborn daughter and get so angry as to die?

"Very early in life, I heard Gao *mama* say, not long after my birth, mother had ordered a jade gourd pendant for my hundred-day gift. But sadly, ten years ago mother made Gao *mama* retire and I never even once saw the jade gourd that *mama* mentioned. I didn't think that mother had been keeping it for me all this time." The hand that held the gourd tightened. Qu Qing Ju, in front of the females present put the jade gourd on her neck, her eyes reddening, "As a daughter, I troubled my mother to be pregnant for ten months. Even into death, my mother was concerned for me. The fact that I could not reciprocate, it is a failure of my filial piety." In the previous life, her parents had died early in a car crash but until the last moment, they had been thinking about her. Seeing this jade gourd pendant, she felt her heart twist and felt that the people of this Chang De Gong Fu was extremely disgusting, to the point of throwing up if she had to look at them.

"*Wang fei*," Seeing the situation, Mu Jin gazed worriedly at Qu Qing Ju. But she was a servant and couldn't freely comfort her.

"When the child wants to show filial love, the parents are not there … …" Qu Qing Ju stood, looking at the smiling Liang *shi*. The emotions on

her face gradually faded and her face became expressionless, “The care that mother has given Qing Ju, Qing Ju will never forget in this life. In the future, Qing Ju will definitely return the benevolence that mother has given in the past.”

Qu *lao taitai* had been feeling uneasy the entire time and seeing Qu Qing Ju was speaking so clearly, she couldn’t keep the genial expression up on her face. She wanted to speak to ease the tension but she didn’t manage in time.

“Today is father’s birthday and I should stay a bit longer. But there are many things to do in the *wang fu* so I have to leave,” Qu Qing Ju bent slightly towards Qu *lao taitai*, “This granddaughter makes her farewells. *Furen*, we will meet in the future.”

Everybody saw that Duan Wang Fei’s face was nothing to worry about but they didn’t make her stay. Liang *shi*, this stepmother, did things in such an unsightly manner that Duan Wang Fei couldn’t endure any longer. Not just Duan Wang Fei, but all children in this world, if they had to face such things, they couldn’t endure.

Qu *lao taitai* couldn’t sit any longer and could only stand to personally send away Qu Qing Ju. Duan Wang Fei, whose mother had died early, at the birthday banquet of her father, didn’t stay to watch the plays but left with red eyes. If this passed into the ears of others, this entire Chang De Gong Fu, what honor would they have left?

Everybody else stood to see her off, but when they reached the outside hall, Qu Qing Ju stopped them. Her white face held a smile: “All the *furen* don’t have to be so courteous, on another day, I will invite all of you to a gathering.”

Everybody accepted. Qu *lao taitai* still wanted to walk a bit further, but Qu Qing Ju stopped her. She smilingly said: “Grandmother is old now, we can’t let you send off your granddaughter, otherwise granddaughter would be unfilial.” Finishing, she ordered Mu Jin who was by her side, “Send somebody to give word to *wang ye*, I’m going to return first.”

Qu *lao taitai* had no other way but to see Qu Qing Ju leave. She turned to look coldly at Liang *shi*, and for the first time ever, she held onto *shu* daughter Qu Hui Xue's hand to return to the play. The common people said " to marry a wife was to marry virtue." The Duke of Chang De, now that he had this woman, Liang *shi*, sooner or later he would lose everything.

Once Qu Qing Ju left, many of the womenfolk that had come to attend the banquet who had done so due to Duan Wang Fu stood and made their farewells. In less than an hour, more than half of the female guests left.

On the side of the male guests, He Heng, as a *wang ye*, naturally sat on the seat of the honoured guests. The person sitting beside him was Qu Wang Zhi. He didn't have any interest in honouring others so he didn't pay any attention to any others. But even so, there were still many people that came up to fawn over him.

An act of "Magu giving her birthday greetings" hadn't finished when Qian Chang Xin had came over to Duan Wang's side and spoke a few words. Qu Wang Zhi, who had been sitting behind Duan Wang faintly heard the words "*wang fei*."

"What?!" Duan Wang's brows slightly creased. The face that had originally carried a friendly if polite smile froze. He placed the teacup in his hands on the table, the flower teacup making a crisp sound.

The Duke of Chang De, who had been paying attention to this side, felt his heart skip a beat. He didn't know what had enraged *wang ye*. Others pretended to casually look towards Duan Wang.

"The way that Chang De Gong Fu treats their guests has really widened the horizons of *ben wang*," Duan Wang smiled frigidly as he stood, "Qian Chang Xin, let's leave."

"*Wang ye*, this … …" The Duke of Change De knew that something had gone majorly wrong and hurriedly came up to make his apologies. But He Heng didn't even give him a glance but said coldly, "*Ben wang* came

today to accompany *wang fei* and knew that the Duke of Chang De was very much in mutual love with his wife. But *ben wang*'s *wang fei*, she is still the duke's *di* daughter. This *fu* has treated her so, is it that my Duan Wang Fu is being looked down at?!" Finishing, he didn't wait for the Duke of Chang De to respond, and swept away.

The *daren*[83] that had been present paused for a beat before managing to respond. Many of them had heard the past events of Chang De Gong Fu, but everyone were male so they hadn't paid attention to this type of things. But they didn't think that Chang De Gong Fu's people would be this ludicrous. It didn't matter just how the servants had treated the deceased Tian *shi*'s daughter originally in this *fu*, but she was Duan Wang Fei now. Treating her rudely was treating Duan Wang rudely. Wasn't this akin to slapping Duan Wang in the face over and over?

Even if Duan Wang was friendlier than Rui Wang, he wouldn't tolerate such disrespect. It seems that this Chang De Gong Fu was more and more foolish. Everybody stood and made their farewells, not caring how terrible the face of the Duke of Chang De looked. They had made *wang ye* angry enough to leave so why would they say? Or did they have to tell Duan Wang, *wang ye*, you go be angry by your lonesome, we're good friends with the Duke of Chang De and still want to stay here with the duke to drink tea and watch plays?

The Duke of Chang De was foolish, but they weren't. At this time, it was best to leave early. They had to pity the Duan Wang couple for coming to attend the celebration but were provoked by dumb people into leaving earlier.

The busy birthday banquet instantly became silent and cold. The Duke of Chang De threw the teacup in his hands to the floor. Hearing the e-e-ya-ya of the voices on the stay, he felt even more furious and shouted angrily: "Why are you still singing, get off!"

"Father," Qu Wang Zhi worriedly supported him, "Don't be angry, think about your body."

[83] adult, general term used to refer to those of status

"I don't need a body!" The Duke didn't bear to push aside his only son so he threw another teacup, "Go ask your mother, what happened to make Duan Wang this angry?"

Qu Wang Zhi looked at the servants standing in the surroundings and felt that it wasn't good for father to mention his mother so he persuaded: "At this time, grandmother and mother must be in *houyuan*. We could go ask together."

Liang Rong, who had seen the guests off, stood to one side and also urged: "We don't know what happened, Uncle shouldn't be angry. Responding after we know what happened wouldn't be too late."

The Duke of Change De managed to force down his anger and, with an ashen face, walked into *houyuan*.

When He Heng entered the carriage, he saw his *wang fei*'s eyes were slightly red, and had been visibly unhappy. The rage he had suppressed originally rose again: "*Wang fei*, who hurt you, tell *ben wang*, *ben wang* will help you take revenge."

Qu Qing Ju raised her head to look at him. Seeing the rage in his eyes wasn't fake, she said: "Nobody can hurt Duan Wang Fei, but it's just sadness from remembering the past."

"I accompanied you today just so I could support you. You don't have to be ashamed," Thinking, He Heng added, "Not just today, in the future, other than those few in the palace, you don't have to yield to anyone." Finished speaking, he found that on Qu Qing Ju's neck, there was a new addition of a fine jade gourd and looked twice.

"Isn't *wang ye* afraid that *qie* would be arrogant in her acts in the future and ruin Duan Wang Fu's reputation," Qu Qing Ju touched the jade gourd at her chest, the warm feeling making her smile.

"*Wang fei* isn't such an ignorant woman," He heng moved his gaze aside, smiling happily, "Moreover, if it was you, Qing Ju, arrogance is not a disadvantage."

Two pairs of eyes met. Qu Qing Ju gradually moved aside her gaze, revealing a warm smile.

These words, who believed them?

Chapter 13

What had occurred at Chang De Gong Fu did make its way through the aristocratic circles of the city of Jing. The type of people that Jing City never lacked for were officials and nobility. When the incident spread, the Duke of Chang De couldn't bear to go out to hear the mockery in other people's words. Every time he went to court, he rushed as fast as he could home after it ended.

Last time, he had gone to *houyuan* to ask Liang *shi* what had happened. The result was that he had saw Liang *shi* sobbing her heart out in her room. He knew that it was hard to be a stepmother. Now that *da yatou* was a *wang fei*, Liang *shi* could only respect her. She had to endure it even if she was annoyed. She was victimized.

They were all daughters of Chang De Gong Fu. Why was it that *san yatou* was so considerate and sensible, but *da yatou* was this senseless? If her paternal home was shamed, she, as a married daughter, wouldn't be well-off either.

Liang Rong was walking in the courtyards and saw his aunt's husband furiously marching past. He quickly retreated and bowed to the Duke of Chang De. The duke wasn't in the mood to pay him any attention so he nodded and strode away. This made Liang Rong to look longer at him.

"*Gongzi*,[84] what's going on with *gu lao ye*[85]?"The manservant that followed him said worriedly, "His face didn't look so good."

[84] son of an official or nobility, also a title of respect for young men.
[85] husband of a daughter when referred to by a servant. The servant is from the wife's side with *gu* being the in-law.

Thinking of the rumors these past days in Jing City, Liang Rong furrowed his brow. Because of the separation of the sexes, he hadn't had many interactions with his cousin-in-name, Qu Qing Ju. But in his memories, every time he saw her, she always preferred to lower her head and didn't speak. How did things get this bad? With aunt's nature and skills, how come she couldn't managed a little girl?

Now the reputation of Chang De Gong Fu wasn't good and in passing, people were saying to not marry any daughters of the Liang family. This had ruined the reputations of the sisters in his home and he felt somewhat insecure. The person they offended this time wasn't somebody ordinary, but the second imperial son Duan Wang. It wouldn't be very easy to supress the gossip.

But he had heard before that Rui Wang's mother Shu Fei and Duan Wang's mother Jin Fei did not get along. If they could get the support of Rui Wang, things would be much easier to accomplish. Furthermore, the present Emperor was old and all the imperial sons had reached adulthood. The Emperor's favourite was Rui Wang. Recently, the rumors had been saying that the Emperor was going to establish Rui Wang as *taizi*. [86]If that was true, then supporting Rui Wang would cause no harm and create many advantages.

Qu Qing Ju, after hearing the jokes that Huang Yang had heard about Chang De Gong Fu, was in a mood good enough that she ate an extra half-bowl of rice at noon. In the afternoon, she rewarded all the servants in the *zhengyuan*.

Wang fei's actions made everybody in *zhengyuan* feel confused and worried. Logically, *wang fei* should be angry but why did it not look like that?

There were some that asked Huang Yang, but while Huang Yang looked young, his brains were very quick and not one word could be pried from him.

[86] Crown Prince

Qu Qing Ju didn't care what about what the servants did and absolved the other *qieshi* of paying their respects in the next two days. She concentrated on combing through the memories that remained of the original in the body. These memories weren't hers and in her heart, they were like scenes of a movie. She would remember them but she wouldn't be involved in them.

After she managed to organize everything, Qu Qing Ju had nothing to do except eat, read and look at flowers until a *mama* from Zhong Jing Palace[87] came.

The mistress of Zhong Jing Place was Duan Wang's mother Jing Fei and this *mama* had come to convey Jing Fei's words. The meaning was that she had her that her *erxifu*[88] had recovered and as her *mufei*, she missed her so she was to, along with the two *ce fei*, go tomorrow to Zhong Jing Palace to visit.

Basically, it was that Jing Fei saw that her *erxifu* hadn't been to pay respects to her for a long time and felt uncomfortable inside. In this era, if the *popo*[89] didn't make something difficult for her *erxifu*, it wouldn't be fair to when she had been an *erxifu* and the way she was treated in that time. There were more liberal *popos*, but she wasn't very lucky, and such a thing of good fortune hadn't occurred to her.

Since *mufei* wanted a meeting, she, as her *erxifu*, had to follow the wishes of her elders. She sent two *yahuan* to notify the two *ce fei* of the event and Qu Qing Ju put the event aside.

At night when He Heng came to *zhengyuan*, he picked up the topic with Qu Qing Ju.

"I heard that *mufei* wanted to see you tomorrow?" After the two flipped the red waves, they laid calmly in the blankets. He Heng spoke as if he just thought of it, "You've been sick for more than a month so you had no way of going to the palace to pay respects. That wasn't your fault.

[87] *zhong* can mean clock, time or a goblet. *Jing* means bright, circumstance or scenery.
[88] wife of a son, daughter-in-law
[89] mother-in-law, husband's mother

The gifts, I've gotten Qian Chang Xin to prepared already. Tomorrow after court, I'll also go to *mufei*'s palace so you don't have to worry about anything else."

Qu Qing Ju reached out with her index finger and wrapped a lock of He Heng's hair around her finger, making a sound of assent. In the memories, this Jing Fei hadn't been very satisfied with her as an *erxifu* but because it had been a marriage bestowed by the Emperor, she had barely managed to go through the formalities. But even so, in her actions and words, there was still the hint of disdain.

The original, in the memories, had been very frightened of Jing Fei. It had seemed that every time she went into the palace, her heart had been in her throat. Now Duan Wang was saying these words, did he want to reassure her? No matter how much truthfulness was in these words, Qu Qing Ju accepted his goodwill.

"What is it, still unhappy?" He Heng heard the apathy in her voice and tightened his embrace. Looking at her fine brows, he teased, "*Ben wang* can protect you, are you still unhappy?"

"*Mufei* is *wang ye*'s birth mother, she wouldn't be too harsh on *qie*," Qu Qing Ju raised her head to look at He Heng and sighed, "*Qie* knows that *mufei* isn't very happy with *qie*'s own family. This can't be blamed on *mufei*, even *qie* is helpless against the people of that family. Before the Emperor decreed the wedding, *qie* hadn't even dare to think of marrying into the Imperial Family." She reached out with a hand to encircle Duan Wang's neck, "Luckily, *wang ye* hasn't abandoned *qie* because of Chang De Gong Fu, and is protecting *qie* in all matters. *Qie* is a lucky woman."

He Heng's eyes moved away from his stare with Qu Qing Ju's gaze and tightly clutched the person to him: "It is because *wang fei* is very good, *ben wang* protects you. You have no connection to that entire Qu family. The person I married is you, not the Qu family. How absurd they are I don't care. As long as they don't bully you, I will pretend to not see them."

"*Wang ye*… …" Qu Qing Ju buried her head into the space of He Heng's neck. When He Heng was speaking, he didn't dare look at her eyes. It seemed somebody had a guilty conscience. There wasn't anybody of note in Chang De Gong Fu, but that wasn't the same with the Tian Clan of Xiang Qing Hou Fu. Even if the Tian family didn't have the power to oppose the court, they were still a first-rate family in Jing City. And the entire Tian Clan treated her very well. Duan Wang couldn't have missed that fact.

"Alright, don't think too much, sleep early." He Heng gently patted Qu Qing Ju's back as though he was soothing a baby into sleep. He didn't have much affection for Tian *shi* in the beginning, so after the marriage, he had kept her on ice. He had let the servants serve her with respect because of the Tian family behind her but in the encounters of these recent days, he had found that Qu *shi* wasn't an insipid and tasteless woman. He wasn't the type of men to favor a *qie* over a wife. He wanted to interact more with his *zhengfei* and gradually build some positive emotion. Even if they didn't reach affection as deep as the sea, they had to get to mutual respect.

Qu Qing Ju wasn't just a beautiful woman, her words and actions were very attractive to him as a man so the more they interacted, the more satisfied he felt with her. He wanted to treat her even better. Even if the words he spoke weren't all true, but it still expressed more or less represented his desires.

The two fell asleep in an embrace. Undoubtedly, both had very different thoughts, but their position was as though they were the most intimate lovers in the world, displaying a beautiful sleeping posture.

Qu Qing Ju woke up very early on the second morning. After breakfast, she changed on to a majestic crimson trailing dress embroidered with round flowers. Using fake hair, she made a *feixian* knot. She picked the finest and most beautiful hair ornaments and jewellery to wear, the exact opposite of the plainness in the past. She wore whatever she found pleasing to the eye. As to whether Jing Fei would like it, she just wanted

to say, if you didn't like somebody, even their breathing was wrong, if you can't please somebody else, then please yourself.

Putting on the pearl embroidered shoes, Qu Qing Ju stood, the jewel over the middle of her forehead slightly swaying: "Let's go. Are the two *ce fei* ready yet?"

"The two *ce fei* are already waiting," Yu Zan came front to support Qu Qing Ju, "The carriage is ready. W*ang fei*, do you want to leave now?"

"It's about time, it'll take the better half of an hour to go from here to Zhong Jing Place. Send somebody to call the two *ce fei*." It was just going to the palace, but Jing Fei had to call the two *ce fei* as well. She really was honouring this *wang fei*.

Feng Zi Jin and Jiang Yong Yu had been waiting early by the gate of *zhengyuan*. Seeing *wang fei* come out, the two first paused before bowing to Qu Qing Ju.

Qu Qing Ju scanned the two. Jiang Yong Yu's clothing was the most proper it could get, it wasn't eye-catching but it displayed her identity as a *ce fei*. What Feng Zi Jin wore was much brighter, the pink of the girdled dress made her seem young and fresh.

The two *ce fei* were a bit surprised. The last few times *wang fei* had went into the palace, what she had worn had been the most proper with no distinguishing features. She was dressed so beautifully today that the two didn't manage to react for a period of time.

Those rounded flowers were embroidered looked as though they were alive. It was *Shu* embroidery. It probably had taken a long time to make the dress. And that water droplet forehead jewel made from a red ruby, the dark gold string braided in the hair so that the jewel sat perfectly in the middle of the forehead. Every move had the onlooker feel it was extraordinarily beautiful.

Wang fei was wearing this to the palace, wasn't she afraid that Jing Fei *niangniang* would say she was too extravagant?

Not caring what the two though, Qu Qing Ju took a few *yahuan* and walked to the front.

After she sat on the carriage in the front, the two *ce fei* climbed into a carriage in the back before the second-rank *yahuan* that was coming along finally expressed her awe. What *wang fei* was wearing today was beautiful. No wonder *wang ye* liked going to *zhengyuan* recently.

When the carriages reached the palace doors, they couldn't go any further. Qu Qing Ju stepped on a *taijian*'s back to get off the carriage. She looked at the black stone path that stretched long ahead of her and the tall red walls beside the path. She couldn't resist raising her head and look at the cloudless blue sky.

Feng Zi Jin stepped on the *taijian*'s back to climb down and saw the *taijian* that was kneeling by Qu Qing Ju's carriage. She lightly snorted. A few days earlier, *wang fei* had slipped on a *taijian's* back when stepping off a carriage so she didn't favor using *taijian* as a footstool any more. But now they were in the palace, she acted according to the protocols of the Imperial Family. She had assumed that she would be much more courageous.

Jiang Yong Yu calmly glanced at Feng Zi Jin and sped up to stand behind Qu Qing Ju. It irritated Feng Zi Jin who snorted again before following in her footsteps.

Chapter 14

The Imperial Palace of the Da Long Dynasty had been rebuilt on the foundations of the previous dynasty's palace. At the beginning when the members of the He family had overturned the despot of the previous dynasty, they had taken care of many of the licentious yet famous and powerful families. So when they furnished their imperial palace, they tried to go the route of simple yet grand.

Qu Qing Ju followed the guidance of the palace girl as she walked forward. She passed by one grand building after another. No matter

how frugal the founding emperor had been, while the present Da Long dynasty's excess were not equal to the lavishness of the previous dynasty, but it was still beautiful clothing, delicious food, and amusement abound.

"Duan Wang Fei, please walk this way," The person leading the way was a palace maid that had a rank and was of some use to Jing fei. This palace maid's attitude, from the calm one when they came, had instantly changed around and put herself in a low position. From a little palace maid to her present position, her most important asset had been a pair of perceptive eyes. From her first look of Duan Wang Fei today, she had understood. Duan Wang Fei was different than before.

Regardless of whether *niangniang* did or didn't like Duan Wang Fei, she was only a palace maid and didn't have the courage to offend this kind of a Duan Wang Fei. She respectfully guided them into the entrance of Zhong Jing Palace and retreated to one side to allow Ding *mama*, who served by *niangniang*'s side to take them inside.

The high-quality *Yun*[90] brocade slid soundlessly across the smooth ground. She looked at the red of the dress and dazedly raised her head. She could only see, against the light, that red shadow walked each step steadily and calmly.

"*Wang fei* and the two *ce fei*, please sit, *niangniang* would come out soon," Ding *mama* directed the little palace maid to serve tea and personally placed a cup of tea in front of Qu Qing Ju. She smiled and said: "This old servant congratulates *wang fei* for a successful recovery."

"Ding *mama* is too courteous," Qu Qing Ju sat on the chair and held out her hand to falsely help her up, "It was due to the good fortune of *mufei* and *wang ye*. These days, I haven't been able to come to *mufei*'s side and serve, it was unfilial of me as an *erxifu*. *Niangniang* wasn't angry but concerned, it was all my fault."

[90] brocade made in Jiangsu. In history, it was once exclusive to the Imperial Family and the common saying was one inch of gold, one inch of brocade (both brocade and gold have the same pronunciation in Chinese)

Ding *mama*'s gaze fell onto the blood red bangle resting on that porcelain wrist. She smiled, bowed and said: "*Niangniagn* knew it was because *wang fei*'s body wasn't well. She wouldn't be angry over such a small matter. For *wang fei*'s body to get better, that was what *niangniang* really wishes for."

Qu Qing Ju smiled and lowered her head slightly. This Ding *mama* was a trusted confidant of Jing *fei*. She always had a smile on her face and the feeling people had upon seeing her was friendly. Even the original Qu Qing Ju had like her very much. But when she had met her today, she felt that this Ding *mama* wasn't a simple character.

There were no simple women in this imperial palace. Ding *mama* had been by Jing *fei*'s side for many years and was the most trusted and relied upon. Her attribute couldn't be this friendliness. Beside the venerable Jing *fei*, there couldn't be simple people.

"I caused *mufei* to worry," Qu Qing Ju sighed, her expression slightly pained as she said, "I was heavily ill these past days, I had thought … … thankfully I recovered."

Ding *mama* had heard the news that Duan Wang Fei almost didn't make it. At the time, she had, on behalf of *niangniang*, left the palace to bestow many gifts. No wonder Duan Wang Fei was drastically different than in the past. She probably had been frightened by that illness.

People, when they walked past death's threshold, they would understand many things. Seeing *wang fei* right now, she probably understood a lot. *Wang ye* had favoured her recently. There had been news from others that said *wang ye* had been residing day after day in *zhengyuan*. Looking at her appearance, she did have the capital to attract men.

"*Wang fei* has plenty of good fortune and naturally could overcome the misfortunes," Ding *mama* smiled as she received the words. Hearing noise from outside the door, she closed her mouth and moved over.

Qu Qing Ju turned her head to look. She saw a beautiful matron wearing an orange palace dress, supporting herself with one hand on a *taijian*'s hand, calmly walk in. The beautiful matron looked like she was just over thirty years old. Even if her face was rather mediocre, it couldn't disguise the allure between her brows.

This was Jing *fei*. Qu Qing Ju stood and went forward: "*Erxi* greets *mufei*." The two *ce fei* stood behind her and followed with the greeting, but they referred to themselves as "*nu*"

"No need for courtesy, sit down," Jing *fei*'s steps slowed as she looked at Qu Qing Ju from top to bottom. She sat at the front and took a sip of the tea that Ding *mama* presents. Seeing the three sit down, she opened again: "*Ben gong*[91] heard that Qing Ju's body has recovered and wanted to take a look. Seeing you now, I feel that your face looks much better than before. This bright-red cotton trailing *Yun* brocade dress is complicated and lavish, most people can't wear it. You wear it well."

"*Erxi* thanks *mufei* for the compliment," Qu Qing Ju looked at Jing *fei* with eyes full of childish admiration, "*Erxi* hadn't dared to wear it originally, but thought that this color was celebratory and of good fortune. *Erxi* had just recovered from a big sickness and it is much better to be celebratory when coming to pay respects to *mufei*.
Thankfully, *mufei* also likes what *erxi* is wearing, otherwise *erxi* wouldn't know what to do.

Feng Zi Jin, sitting to one side, felt her mouth slightly quiver. *Niangniang* was implying that she dressed too lavishly. Was Qu Qing Ju really stupid or pretending to be stupid that she really believed that *niangniang* was complimenting her?

The hand that held the teacup slightly stopped, the motion Jing *fei* did to set down the teacup seemed to be heavier than normal. She looked with a normal expression at Qu Qing Ju. Seeing her smile happily, she asked: "Clothing isn't important, what is important is the intention. *Ben gong* heard yesterday that you had been unhappy with your family, Chang

[91] illeism for imperial consorts. "this palace"

De Gong Fu. This thing has spread all over Jing City, what really happened?"

"There's this thing?" Qu Qing Ju's eyes widened and she said in confusion: "What are they saying in Jing City?"

"Ding *mama*, you tell *wang fei*," Jing *fei* took a sip of tea to suppress that bit of agitation inside, "As a *wang fei*, you have to know some things about Jing City. Otherwise, how could you be *wang ye*'s good wife[92]"

Qu Qing Ju, upon hearing this, stood to beg for forgiveness: "It is *erxi*'s fault. These past days have been filled with managing the *houyuan* and neglected to pay attention to the happenings outside the *fu*. *Mufei*, please set a punishment."

Jing *fei* felt the roots of her teeth seemed to ache. These words just didn't seem right. In the Da Long Dynasty, it wasn't as restricting towards women as it had been in the previous dynasty, but it was still men on the outside, women inside. What was forgetting to pay attention to happenings outside the *fu*? Did she, her *popo*, have to tell her *erxifu* to meddle with things outside the *fu*?

Facing the feeling of powerlessness in this chicken-talking-to-duck conversation, Jing *fei*, in the end, could only push the teacup further away. In her understanding of Qu Qing Ju of the past, this *erxi* didn't dare disobey her. So what she had said before, she wasn't suspicious, but when she heard the words, her heart felt like it was blocked up.

"Your body wasn't well the past days, it was correct to manage the *houyuan* these two days," Jing *fei* smiled and let Qu Qing Ju sit before dismissing Ding *mama* from reciting the story, "It isn't a major thing, *mufei* wouldn't punish you. Really, this incident doesn't have too much connection to you. It was Chang De Gong Fu's behavior that was lacking, it just spread to you, such a good good *erxifu*."

To say bad things about the home of the married *erxi*, wasn't this putting her *erxi*'s face to the floor and stomping on it? It was a pity that Qu Qing

[92] also means virtuous inner assistant.

Ju didn't think of Chang De Gong Fu as her home. She wasn't pained or tickled by Jing *fei*'s words so just pretend that she didn't really care.

"*Mufei* has treated *erxi* so well, *erxi* doesn't know what to do," Qu Qing Ju, deeply moved, looked at Jing Fei, "*Erxi* had obtained some little playthings these past days, and wanted to let *mufei* play with them too, hopefully *mufei* wouldn't dislike them."

What was this deeply moved and then giving gifts? Do you know that *ben gong* is criticizing you? Do you know *ben gong* looks down at you? Do you know that this is *ben gong* being unsatisfied with you?! What are you moved about?!

Jing *fei* inhaled, smiled and said: "Come, come, you don't give stuff. As long as you are all fine, *mufei* is satisfied." Have to be calm, *ben gong* is Jing *fei*, *ben gong* is the high and noble Jing *fei*.

Qu Qing Ju saw that the smile on Jing *fei*'s face become warmer and warmer, the childish admiration on her own face became even more visible: "*Wang ye* and *erxi* live outside the place, and cannot expresse our filial love daily to *mufei*. But we thought that these little amusements could make *mufei* happier. If *mufei* is happy, it is the best thing for *wang ye* and *erxi*."

Feng Zi Jin saw the harmonious situation in front of her and felt disappointed. Didn't *niangniang* not like Qu Qing Ju as her *erxi*, why was she smiling brighter and brighter? And these gifts, did *niangniang* like them that much that *niangniang* was that happy? In the past, what Qu Qing Ju had presented wasn't simple but *niangniang* hadn't given a hint of a smile then.

The most painful thing in the world wasn't being pointed at and scolded indirectly but you pointing at somebody and scolding indirectly but the person didn't understand and assumed that you were complimenting her. Jing *fei* had lived in the imperial palace for many years and was used to words that took nine curves and eighteen turns. And her

opponents were the most skilled. Suddenly meeting a pig[93] of an opponent, she finally understood the pain of a punch landing in cotton.

Or was it that the dull personality of Qu Qing Ju had been a pretence and she was purposefully acting this way today to make her angry? Jing *fei*'s eyes narrowed and she couldn't help but carefully examine Qu Qing Ju.

After the examination, she suddenly fell, this *erxifu* of her's had a pretty good appearance and her smile was very inviting. Remembering when the Emperor had just decreed the marriage, the dull look when the Duchess of Chang De took her into the palace to give thanks, Jing *fei* couldn't help but furrow her brows and look at Qu Qing Ju's present appearance.

She didn't know the Emperor had listened to the persuasions of which whore in this *hougong* to want to bestow Qu Qing Ju to her son. He kept on saying that this girl's eight words carried good fortune. After loudly formalizing the arrangement, he had no shame and said to her, he had given Heng'er a good wife. She really didn't know how bad his eyes were to see a dead fish's eye as a pearl.

Automatically blaming this onto her rival Shu *fei*, Jing *fei* came back from her thoughts. She tilted her head as she gazed at Qu Qing Ju. Originally, she had wanted to keep dealing blows at the other but that desire had retreated. There was no taste to playing music at the cow.

Jiang Yong Yu had been keeping her head down and drinking tea. She raised her head to look at Jing Fei and then at *wang fei* with a smile on her face and then silently lowered her head.

Instantly, the room sank into a strange sort of silence. But this silence was only a quick instant because the *taijian* outside made an announcement that broke the silence.

"Duan Wang has arrived."

[93] Pigs are considered dumb.

The palace maids and *taijian* serving inside the room took a breath as though something terrifying just disappeared. They silently moved their heads lower towards the door.

Today … … the magic clouds on the soft palace boots that Duan Wang wore today were so good-looking.

Chapter 15

When He Heng entered the room with a smile, he bowed to Jing Fei immediately. After Jing *fei* allowed his to rise, he walked to sit next to Qu Qing Ju and took a sip of tea before inquiring: "What has *mufei* been talking to them about?"

Jing *fei* looked at the Yun brocade golden bordered robe of a *qin wang*, and with a cheerful expression said, "What can women say, it's just little things. Why are you so thirsty, are the servants of the *fu* not diligent enough?"

"The matters at court required some talking, nothing to do with the people of the *fu*," Knowing that *mufei* was meaning to put the blame to Qu Qing Ju, He Heng said, "These past days, the court has been arguing over some small things, even us brothers have been examined much by our *fuhuang.*[94]"

Touching upon matters of the court, Jing *fei* intelligently didn't continue the line of questioning, only continuing: "You should take care of your body no matter how busy it gets. Now that you are married, you cannot act like you did before." Saying to there, she looked at Qu Qing Ju who docilely sat at the side, "Your wife is a virtuous one. Just like *mufei*, she hopes to let *wang fu* be fruitful in children. You don't want all your brothers to have children, and you are still living idly."

Qu Qing Ju's brow moved slightly. Jing *fei* was criticizing her for being jealous, not letting He Heng go to another woman's bed? This man's

[94] father-emperor

legs are grown on his own body, it was his freedom where he wanted to go. The so-called rain and dew must be shared[95] was a joke. If it had to be shared, then why did the Da Long Dynasty still have the rule that the husband had to reside in the wife's rooms on the first and fifth of each month?

She didn't have any feelings towards He Heng but she didn't want to live like a widow. Additionally, she didn't like having something she frequently used be given into the hands of another woman of her own initiative. Did they think she stupid or a saint?

He Heng smiled slightly and didn't reply to Jing *fei*'s words. He turned his head and looked past Feng Zi Jin: "Did *mufei* like the little playthings Qing Ju sent, *erchen*[96] and your *erxi* had collected them for many days."

"I know you are filial," Jing *fei* saw he didn't want to follow up on the subject and turned to speak of daily life, asking everything about what He Heng dressed and ate everyday.

Qu Qing Ju listened silently at one side. She had to admit, Jing Fei might not be a good *popo* but was definitely a good mother. She was also very perceptive. Whenever she found a subject He Heng didn't want to talk about, she would move onto another topic, rather than, like other women, continue to try to educate the other until the other had accepted her way of thinking.

This was an intelligent woman. Otherwise she wouldn't be the only imperial consort that could match Shu *fei*. The present *hougong*[97] had an Empress but this Empress had no children and her own family wasn't of any significance. Consequently, she didn't have any real power in this *hougong*, just an empty scaffold at the top of which she could look at others engaged in conflict.

[95] the rain and dew is the favor, this idiom means that the women should "share" a man's favor. Usually applied to the rulers who shouldn't be "unjust" in his favors in order to have more children to ensure succession.
[96] son-servant(or subject), used when speaking to empress, mother or emperor. It means that when the person is an imperial child, they are still a subject of the emperor
[97] back of palace or inner palace. Refers to the harem of the Emperor. In common usage, it also includes the Empress and the children that live in the palace.

He Heng didn't try to intentionally say good things about Qu Qing Ju in front of Jing Fei but he was more attentive in his words to Jing *fei* than normal. This caused Jing *fei*'s smile to not disappear from her face for an instant.

When it was time for the noon meal, Jing *fei* retained He Heng to eat. Feng Zi Jin and Jiang Yong Yu had to stand at one side to serve. Qu Qing Ju, due to the fact that she had just recovered, received *popo*'s extra "affection" and was released from the act of having to serve *popo* and sat down beside He Heng.

There were more than ten dishes that were presented. Each dish was finely made and the skill of the chefs in Zhong Jing Palace could be seen. What could also be seen was Jing Fei's position in the imperial palace.

"Go down to serve *wang fei*, *ben wang* doesn't need your service," Waving away Feng *shi* who had been coming near, He Heng used his eyes to indicated to Ming He and pointed to the fish stewed in milk in front, "This dish *mufei* likes, serve some over."

Even if it was a favourite dish, it wasn't a rare dish but a common one. However, Jing *fei* still enjoyed He Heng's attitude and looked twice at Qu Qing Ju. At least, after her son got closer to her, he was more concerned about her as his mother. Before, she hadn't seen him be this attentive.

After a meal, Qu Qing Ju found that her tastes were very similar to Jing fei. After rinsing and washing, she silently sat at the side and continued to watch the heart-warming act of the benevolent mother and the filial son.

"Since you have come into the palace, then go to Kui Yuan Palace[98] to kowtow to the Empress," Jing *fei* lazily waved her hand, "The Empress' body has been not well these past days. Even if she isn't in need of anything, it is a bit cold there." Finishing, she lifted her eyelids and looked at the two *ce fei* standing to one side, "You two can go outside the palace to wait. *Ben gong* is tired, you can all leave." Even though she

[98] *kuiyuan* means first among peers, the chief, the best and the brightest

wanted to use the two *ce fei* to attack Qu Qing Ju, that did not extend to giving them the honor of a meeting with the Empress. She looked down at Qu Qing Ju as not being worthy of being her *erxifu* but she was still of a noble family. Behind her was a strong Tian family. That was enough for her to be a level above the other two.

Feng Zi Jin was unwilling but still assented and bowed. After she walked out of Zhong Jing Palace with Jiang Yong Yu, her face darkened.

Jiang Yong Ju took a quick look at her and gave a small smile at the end. With a lowered head, she silently walked out of the inner palace. After she went into the carriage and finding Feng Zi Jin was still slowly walking, she gave a cold smile and said in a low voice: "Fool."

The *yahuan* beside her acted as though she hadn't heard anything and poured her a cup of tea: "Mistress should use some strong tea to chase away sleepiness. *Wang ye* and *wang fei* will probably take some time before they could get back."

Jiang Yong Ju took the cup. Seeing Feng Zi Jin come near, her face slowly returned to her normal expression.

Qu Qing Ju walked behind He Heng. The original didn't have much of an impression of the Empress, only knowing that the Empress' family wasn't of remark, and she didn't have much favor with the Emperor. The Emperor had made her Empress because he had seen she was obedient.

Because the Empress had no children, the Emperor didn't frequently go to her palace, so the entirety of Kui Yuan Palace was usually respectful and careful. It couldn't compare with Shu *fei*'s place of residence, Zhao Xiang Palace.[99]

Coming into Kui Yuan Palace, Qu Qing Ju felt that the inside was overly silent. The palace maids and *taijian* were quite as though they were statues.

[99] million, mega-, trillion, tera- or billion *xiang*(祥) is auspicious, propitious.

The messenger *taijian* quickly came out, and guided the two with a smile on his face into the inner hall. Qu Qing Ju saw the Empress attired in a plain dress and jewellery, her hair in a *chui yun* knot[100]. The Empress looked around forty-years old, much older than Jing *fei*. On her wrist was a bracelet of Buddha beads. She had a slight smile on her face, but it seemed bland, making it uncertain whether it was a true smile or just out of politeness.

"*Erchen erxi* greets *muhou*.[101]" He Heng and Qu Qing Ju performed a proper greeting, not being any less careful because the Empress had no power.

"You two do not have to be so polite. Sit down," The Empress motioned for the two to sit and after a maid poured tea, she said: "How come Heng'er has come today?"

"I heard that *muhou* was ill, has *muhou* taken medicine?" He Heng's tone held concern, "*Erchen* was using a meal at *mufei*'s place today and heard the news. *Muhou*, please take more care with the phoenix body."

"It's just old problems, I've already taken medicine. Heng'er has no need to worry," The Empress smiled and used her handkerchief to disguise the cough that came up and turned to look at Qu Qing Ju, "*Er erxi* is more and more beautiful."

"*Muhou* is laughing at *erxi*," Qu Qing Ju saw that the Empress' face was pale and there was no spirit in her eyes. She sighed inside, "But after recovery, I have more energy. If *muhou* recovered, you could go sunbathe more. *Erxi* heard the *taiyi* say that this was beneficial to the body."

"*Muhou* remembers your intentions," The Empress nodded, "Last month, *san erxi* who just married sent over an amount of ginseng and deer antler. *Ben gong* cannot use them as the body is too week, but this sunbathing might work."

[100] hair in a knot at base of neck

[101] mother-empress. All children of the emperor has a *di* mother, the empress, who they refer to as *muhou* and for those born of concubines, who is their *shu* mother, they will call them *mufei*.

San erxi… … wasn't it Rui Wang, He Yuan's *zhengfei* that he married just last month? Qu Qing Ju couldn't help look twice at the Empress and He Heng. These two's conversation was normal yet formal but she kept on feeling something wasn't right. The Empress just casually mentioned that *san wangfei* had come a few days ago to Kui Yuan Palace and intentionally said she couldn't use those present, what was she telling He Heng?

Scanning the servants inside the palace, there were only two *taijian* and two maids, all silently standing with heads down. They probably were the people the Empress used frequently.

Hearing the two start discussing Buddhist scripture, Qu Qing Ju stared at that string of Buddhist beads on the Empress' wrist. She found that the Empress' wrist was very thin, just a layer of pale skin wrapped around the wristbone, appearing to be shrivelled.

"The "Lengyan Scriptures" say, the heart becomes moral; due to morals, there is concentration; with concentration, insight is found,[102]" The Empress coughed, "That is to say, as long as the person can control the heart, then they will not be influenced by the environment?"

He Heng smiled warmly, and took a sip of tea: "*Muhou*'s insigts, *erchen* can't compare."

"It's just eating a few more bowls of rice than you have," The empress moved her gaze past the two of them, looking out the door, "In really, what *ben gong* sees, it's just this little space of the inner palace."

Qu Qing Ju followed her gaze. There wasn't any sunlight outside, just some light that came in from the door so the room inside wasn't very light.

A woman who had nothing, no power, no favor but she could become the Empress. This kind of woman, a woman that sees the truths in the *hougong*, could she be simple?

[102] This is a paraphrase of the three fold training that came from Buddhist scripture. The three tenets are morality, concentration and insight.

"The day is getting dark, you two should return," The Empress raised a hand to touch the box on her lap. Inside was the knick-knacks that the couple had presented which came from outside the palace, "These things, *ben gong* hadn't seen them for many years. *Ben gong* likes very much. Zhang *mama*, take out the bolts of Yun brocade from *ben gong*'s stores and let them take back with them. These things have to be worn on the younger people to look good."

Qu Qing Ju, hearing this, hurriedly stood to refuse.

"Seeing you dress well, *ben gong* will be happy too. Don't try to refuse, Kui Yuan Palace might not be as rich as Zhao Xiang Palace, but can still afford to give these things to you younger people."

When that was said, Qu Qing Ju didn't refuse anymore.

He Heng saw that the Empress wasn't very energetic and didn't stay longer. Together with Qu Qing Ju, they bowed and left. Zhang *mama* personally sent the two out. Qian Chang Xin and Ming He, who had been waiting outside, took the Yun brocade. She bowed to the two: "*Wang ye, wang fei*, walk slowly. This old servant will not send you off further."

"Zhang *mama* doesn't have to be so courteous," Qu Qing Ju smiled. Just like how she came, she slowly walked behind He Heng as they walked towards the outside.

Zhang *mama* called them *wang ye* and *wang fei* without their title in the front. This was the same as the servants in Zhong Jin Palace. Were they the same to all the *wang ye* or just … …

When they reached the doors of the palace, He Heng turned his head back and saw Qu Qing Ju docilely walking. He suddenly smiled and raised a hand, saying: "*Wang fei*, we've reached the carriage."

Qu Qing Ju raised her head and saw the *wang fu*'s carriage was just ten steps away. She looked at the hand in front of her and raised her own hand when she heard a series of steps come from behind her.

Chapter 16

Qu Qing Ju turned her head and saw a male and female walking together. The man looked about the same age as He Heng. His appearance was very fine, fine to the point that the word beautiful could be used to describe him. But between his brows, there exuded the arrogance that belonged to those of high position and made it difficult for others to feel close. The female beside him was only about sixteen or seventeen, just a girl. She wasn't very beautiful, but her movements exuded a sense of dignity that told the observer this girl came from a noble family with a good upbringing.

The four people stood three steps apart. Qu Qing Ju saw the man opposite give a fake smile and say: "*Huang di*[103] greets *er huang xiong, er huang sao*[104]." The girl beside him followed with a bow.

Taking back her gaze, Qu Qing Ju slightly lowered her head. So this was the rumored Rui Wang, He Yuan, the most favored by the Emperor. This pair of brothers did seem more polite than affectionate.

"*Sandi* doesn't have to be so courteous," He Heng smiled and returned a bow, looking at the numerous attendants and maids behind him, "Between us brothers, there isn't a need to be so polite."

"*Er huang xiong* is joking, courtesy cannot be thrown away," He Yuan placed his hands behind his back and looked coolly at the docile Qu Qing Ju standing at one side, "*Huang xiong* and *huang sao* are very much in love." The Qu Family was a joke but this good *huang xiong* of his, to get the support of the Tian family, had very good tolerance.

"*Sandi* is teasing," He Heng didn't like He Yuan's attitude but he didn't show it on his face, "The day grows dark, *didi* can walk together with *wei xiong*[105]."

[103] imperial younger brother
[104] second imperial brother, sister-in-law
[105] means as or is, *xiong*(兄) is older brother so *weixiong* is this older brother or I, your brother

Qu Qing Ju silently stood to one side but hearing He Yuan's words, she furrowed her brows. As a younger brother who wasn't emotionally attached to his older brother, yet carelessly discuss the relationship between his brother and his sister-in-law so, this He Yuan was very impudent.

"*Huang xiong* first," He Yuan's lips forced themselves into a smile, "*didi* will follow after."

"Then *weixiong* will go first," He Heng didn't waste words with him, taking Qu Qing Ju and walking away. At the carriage, he helped Qu Qing Ju climb on first before following after.

"Che, *ben wang*'s *huang xiong* is such a kind lover." He Yuan looked at the far away carriage, his face showing a disdainful smile. A few days earlier, he had been angry on behalf of his wife and struck out at Chang De Gong Fu. Now, right in front of the palace doors, he was full of meticulous concern for his *wang fei*. Who was he acting for?

The silent Rui Wang Fei, Qin Bai Lu, standing to one side, raised her head upon hearing the words. She looked with a complicated gaze at the far-away carried and said in a low voice: "Maybe it's true."

"My good *wang fei*, are you not yet clear about the Imperial Family?" He Yuan scoffed as he walked forwards, "Let's go, don't look anymore."

Qin Bai Lu curved her lips as she followed. Her eyes looked at He Yuan as he climbed onto a carriage at the front as she held a *yahuan*'s hand go get on a carriage behind.

Inside the slightly swaying carriage, Qu Qing Ju reclined back on the cushion: "His Highness Rui Wang, his actions are really honest and uninhibited."

He Heng heard that description, his eyebrow slightly moving. If these words were used to describe famous people and scholars, it was a compliment. Used to describe an imperial son, it wasn't a very kind description. This *wang fei* of his, she was a wondrous person, "This description *wang fei* used is very unique."

This man definitely did not like Rui Wan very much. She, as his *wang fei*, naturally will be in the same trench as him during battle. Hearing He Heng say this, Qu Qing Ju smiled as she straightened: "Is *wang ye* complimenting *qie*?"

He Heng smiled, looking at her for a beat, before saying: "Naturally."

The smile on Qu Qing Ju's face became brighter. If He Heng could say this to her, this meant that he had some basic trust in her. As to how deep that trust went, that wasn't something she needed to be concerned about.

He Heng also didn't keep talking about Rui Wang and leaned back against the soft cushions behind.

When Qu Qing Ju closed her eyes, she thought, He Heng was even more complicated than she had thought. This type of man was like the epitome of a person of the Imperial Family. Anything other members of the Family had, he also had.

The journey into the palace ended like that. The following month, she spent it peacefully passing time in the *wang fu*. But the weather was getting colder and the *fu* had to change to winter clothes and use charcoal. That meant that Qu Qing Ju had to meet all the stewards multiple times. As the *wang fei*, she didn't have to do everything herself. For many things, she only needed to make the decision and there would be enough servants to do the work for her. It was just like the CEO's of big companies in her previous life that didn't need to personally order what duties a janitor had to do. If she had to manage everything herself, she didn't need to keep being this *wang fei* and this *fu* didn't need to support these people.

In the silent hall, Qu Qing Ju leisurely flipped through a ledger. On the ground, there knelt a few of the major stewards of the *wang fu*. These major stewards had come from the palace and had gone through tribulations but at this time, each had an expression of fear and their faces were full of sweat even in this cold winter as they knelt on the ground.

Eggs are one tael of silver for five," Smiling as she closed the ledge, she looked at the steward responsible for buying vegetables and other groceries. Qu Qing Ju gently threw the ledger in front of him, "I heard that a normal family in Da Long Dynasty, they live on about twenty-five taels of silve a year. I hadn't known that our Da Long Dynasty's people were in such difficult conditions that their living expenses for a year isn't enough for us to eat a hundred eggs?! Just like this, you, a major steward, still say that there isn't enough money to go around. Come on, say how there isn't enough?"

This steward was frightened to the point of shuddering. He had assumed that *wang fei* and the *yahuan* beside her were used to luxurious living and would know how much profit there was in here. And the stewards that did the purchasing in other *wang fu*s were the same as him so he had been confident that there weren't any slip-ups. Who knew that *wang fei* would just flip a few pages of the ledger before erupting with anger.

"Replying to *wang fei*, you may not know, but twenty-five taels is the yearly expenses of rural areas. In this Jing City of ours, everything costs multiple what they do in other places. *Nucai* is helpless." The steward had no other way except refusing to admit anything.

Qu Qing Ju didn't look at him and continued to flip open another ledge: "A bolt of cotton is five taels, normal satin is twenty taels a bolt… …" She threw the ledge onto the person responsible, not listening to the excuses and continued to flip.

In just an hour, all the ledgers had been thrown to the floor. Qu Qing Ju raised a tea cup and took a mouthful: "Huang Yang, get the people you found to copy the prices at the market to come in. Tell those people, if they copied it well, they will be the new stewards."

The people heard the words and their expressions changed. They had assumed that *wang fei* would only berate them, not that she was going to discharge all of them. Instantly, some started yelling that they were innocent, one of them that had been responsible for purchasing cloth, relying on the fact that he had been with *wang ye* when he came out of

the palace, actually said: "*Wang fei*, *nucai* has served *wang ye* for many years and wouldn't do anything to harm the *wang fu*. What you are doing, it is saying that *wang ye* was mistaken in his choices."

Qu Qing Ju heard this and suddenly smiled, viciously throwing the teacup in her hand in front of this person: "What things are you, that you say you are worthy of being picked by *wang ye*. The only servants in this *fu* that deserve these words are Qian Chang Xin, Ming He and a few that serve him directly. *Wang ye* hasn't punished you yet, you already started over-reaching. If these words spread, wouldn't they say that I, *wang fei*, isn't as valuable as you servants?!"

Qian Chang Xin and Ming He coincidentally heard those words as they just walked to the doorway. The two exchanged looks, stopped walking and guarded the doorway, looking as though they were protecting *wang fei*.

Huang Yang had coming in with a few *taijian*. He bowed in greeting to the two before entering the rooms. Qian Chang Xin and Ming He found that these people were some of those that were capable in this *fu*. If *wang fei* chose these people to take over from the originals, that would be the best solution.

The two suddenly felt cold. It had appeared that *wang fei* didn't care to manage this *houyuan* so they hadn't thought that she understood the servants of this *wang fu* this well. Thinking of this, the two found that they had been underestimating *wang fei* in the past. They had assumed that she had some skill with *wang ye* but didn't think on these matters, she was also unremarkable when not moving, but shocking when she moved.

"This year, the harvest of rice is two hundred and fifty wen denomination of money. 1000 wen is one tael of silver per *dan*[106], eggs are two wen each, normal satin is five taels per bolt … …" As the people that came in recited the prices of good, the kneeling stewards' faces

[106] one *dan* is 103.55 liters, it is a volume measurement

grew pale and the only reason they didn't collapse was that they were holding their breath.

"Look at how this has exhausted these stewards," Qu Qing Ju held a newly changed tea cup and said calmly, "Somebody come, bestow these stewards each a big bow of iced pickled plum soup."

The season was already winter. Each bowl of pickled plum soup had more ice than water. After the stewards drank it down, their teeth started to chatter. The rebellious steward of before looked at Qu Qing Ju and said stutteringly: "*Wang fei* has such schemes, *wang ye* should really look at your might."

This was telling her, if she was harsh, she would be disliked by *wang ye*?!

Qu Qing Ju didn't get angry but smiled instead. She blew on the tea in the cup and slowly announced: "This person disrespected *ben wang fei*, beat twenty times and then send the person to the Department of Household Affairs. Just say that he hasn't learned etiquette well-enough, that Duan Wang Fei can't retain such a servant." Since he said her schemes were good, how could she disappoint him?

When she finished, there were people who dragged this steward down. The remaining few instantly became respectful, only begging *wang fei* to not sent them back to the Department of Household Affairs. Servants that had been sent out from Household Affairs that were sent back, even if they didn't die in strange circumstances, their fates would be worse than death. They would rather get beaten than go back to that place.

Seeing the stewards quiet in fear, Qu Qing Ju set down the teacup: "Do you know your mistake?"

The stewards heard the tone of *wang fei*'s voice and it seemed that this matter could still be negotiated so they instantly started to kowtow and admit their wrongs.

Qu Qing Ju said out of the corner of her mouth: "Since you are sincere and you know your wrongs, I have a soft heart, so you are only sentence to ten strokes, and half a year's salary, the position … … just vice

steward, and these people are now the main stewards. Any opinions?" She pointed at the people who had copied the prices.

The stewards didn't think that they wouldn't be sent back to Household Affairs and could keep a position of vice steward. All were brimming with gratitude and said that *wang fei* was benevolent and would work hard for the *wang fu* etc etc.

"In the future, you should all do good work. Who really did work, who slacked off, I will know. If people will do this again in the future, I won't take your life, just compliantly go back to Household Affairs." Qu Qing Ju sighed and held Mu Jin's hand as she stood, "Go back to work if you have work, punishment if you have punishment, you can all leave."

Standing at the doorway, Qian Chang Xin and Ming He looked at the people that came out. Each looked as though they were lucky. They sighed again, *wang fei* had good schemes.

Chapter 17

The new winter clothes were distributed out in the *fu*. The servants found that this year's clothes, while made of the same cloth as in the past, were much thicker. Each person also got an extra robe. Everybody was cheerful, and thought that this *fu* was certainly different now that a mistress arrived. Even their living conditions, as servants, increased.

Xiao Gan Zi's hand held the little things that the people underneath him gave, a smile on his face as he said to the little *taijian* beside him: "Look at the happy faces of everybody, it's like new year's." He knew the truth inside. This *wang fu* looked golden and wealthy, but the servants at the very bottom only just managed to fill their hunger. If they were compared to the servants that were of significance to their *zhuzi*, it was the difference between the sky and the ground. No wonder these people were so happy when they received a little bit of goodness.

"It's just that *wang fei* is benevolent and that *gege* and the two main stewards are good managers," the little *taijian* carefully fawned from

beside him, "The last few days, the stewards were punished by *wang fei*, but they didn't get angry, and became obedient. Now, this entire *fu*, who would make things difficult on purpose for those below them?"

"They're nothing. If *wang fei* wants to punish them, they should accept it. Even if she wanted their lives, they could only rage that their luck isn't good," Xiao Gan Zi said to here and looked at the *taijian* in front of him, "You're one of my subordinates, remember that the decision-maker of this *houyuan* is *wang fei*. If you do stupid things, they don't blame *gege* for not protecting you."

"Don't worry, *gege*, don't worry," The little *taijian* received Xiao Gan Zi's warning and said in gratitude, "I will listen to *gege*'s words and definitely will not do stupid things."

Xiao Gan Zi nodded in satisfaction. Even if he wasn't relied on as much as Qian Chang Xin and Ming He, he was still one of those relied on by *wang ye*. Presently, *wang ye* was clearly desiring to support *wang fei*. *Wang fei* was like a storm. Those actions had been so fast, he hadn't managed to recover yet.

What warning, what talk before battle, all that wasn't used. It was first a storm of beating, to frighten people and then things became much easier. Those people had thought that *wang fei* would be constrained by *wang ye*'s way of doing things, even he had thought so, so when the event had occurred, he had found an excuse to get out of the *fu* to avoid the storm. Who knew that *wang fei* directly punished the people, not even notifying *wang ye*. After *wang ye* resided another night at *zhengyuan*, he had energetically went to court the second morning. He just knew that this incident had allowed Qian Chang Xin and Ming He get a big freebie.

Not as skilled as others, no wonder those two were most influential with *wang ye*. Xiao Gan Zi sighed, he had a long way to go to be as clever. Even if he couldn't compete against the pair of Qian and Ming, at the very least, he had to make sure to not let others take over his position.

Inside the gardens of the *wang fu*, Huang Yan hurriedly walked. A *yahuan* with a sweet face came over and kept on yelling "Huang Yang *gege*", blocking him on the path.

Huang Yang was irritated inside but asked in a normal voice: "This *jiejie*, is there something?"

The little *yahuan* didn't dare accept his label of "*jiejie"*. In the past, it wouldn't have matter, but now, who in this *fu* didn't know that he was the *taijian* that *wang fei* relied on the most? She smiled, refusing the title, and said: "Huang Yang *gege*, my mistress has been sick these past days, the doctor was called but didn't help. Please help my mistress by saying a few good words in front of *wang fei,* and get *wang fei* to send an invitation to the Imperial Hospital?" Finishing, she tried to push a pouch into Huang Yan's hand.

Huang Yang saw her face was unfamiliar and didn't take that pouch. He placed his hands behind his back, his tone became more serious: "Who is your mistress?"

The little *yahuan* saw Huang Yang wasn't accepting it. Feeling frantic and helpless, she could only say: "Good *gege*, I serve Yun Qing *guniang*. Could you help my mistress ask *wang fei*, I'll thank you here first." Finishing, she gave Huang Yang a deep bow.

"Who's *yahuan* is this?!"

The little *yahuan* heard the voice and turned to look. She saw *wang ye*, with Qian Chang Xin and Ming Ye, walk over. The one that spoke was Ming He. She instantly cheered up and knelt with a bang: "*Nubi* is Yu Er, a servant of Yun Qing *guniang*. *Nubi* greets *wang ye*."

He Heng slowly neared, slightly lowering his head to look at Yu Err kneeling by his feet. He then asked Huang Yang: "What's going on?"

Huang Yang bent his body and said: "*Wang ye*, this Yu Er *guniang* said Yun Qing *guniang* is ill, to let *nucai* tell *wang fei* to let *wang fei* send a notice to the Imperial Hospital and invite a *taiyi* to take a look at Yun Qing *guniang*."

He Heng frowned and, with no hesitation, walked away. Qian Chang Xin quickly followed behind.

Ming He, who had remained behind, looked arrogantly at Yu'er, and said in a tone of fake wonderment: "Yun Qing *guniang* must be confused due to her illness. Our *fu*, except for *wang ye* and *wang fei*, there is only the *ce fei* and proper *qieshi* that can request for a *taiyi.* Is her *zhuzi* one of the above that she could invite a *taiyi*?"

When she had been sent into the *wang fu*, wasn't it her, with a face full of virtue, that said she would rather be a poor person than a *qie* of a wealthy person? A brothel girl that had been given as a present who really thought she was a noble lady. With her birth, being made a *tongfang* would be giving the official that gave her a great honor. She didn't care to be a *qieshi* in this *wang fu*, what fantasy did she have? Now she was ill, and the doctors outside the *fu* wasn't worthy of serving her, she wanted a *taiyi*? She wasn't worthy!

Ming He scoffed and walked away. Huang Yang looked at the shocked Yu Er, his expression unchanging and said: "Go back and tell your mistress, if this doctor isn't useful then change the doctor. If you need something, then tell Mu Jin *guniang*. I have duties to do, I'm leaving first."

After Huang Yang was more than ten steps away, Yu Er finally managed to react. She looked in shock at the direction that *wang ye* had left and seemed to understand in part why the people around her had looked at her in sympathy when she had been ordered to serve in Cui You Yuan. So it was really the case that *wang ye* didn't care at all about mistress, and it wasn't like mistress said, that *wang ye* liked mistress in his heart. That was just mistress' fantasy?

If he really liked mistress, why would *wang ye* not even react? Yu Er slowly stood and slowly walked back. Ming He *gonggong* had said the facts so clearly that even if mistress was unsatisfied, she had tried her best.

When Huang Yuan reached *zhengyuan*, he told Qu Qing Ju what had occurred, reciting the entire incident from beginning to end.

"Yun Qing *guniang*?" Towards Yun Qing, Qu Qing Ju only remembered the white clothing and that virtuous attitude.

A honoured *wang ye* falls in love with a *huakui*. Due to the chasteness of the *huakui*, his love deepens. At the end, he overcomes all forces and lived happily ever after with the *huakui*. That kind of story was a fairytale.

Did that stupid woman really believe that He Heng was a character from a story?

"Send somebody to deliver some medicine and find a useful doctor," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she said calmly, "Just a sixteen year old girl. She has a long life ahead, we shouldn't let her lose her life."

"*Wang fei* is too kind. You are grown up now, why are you still so moved by others?" Yin Liu put a hot water bottle wrapped in cloth into Qu Qing Ju's hands, "At the beginning, her face and that mouth, they were so proud."

Qu Qing Ju smiled and held the bottle with both hands; "You dumb girl." Yin Liu wasn't as clever as Mu Jin, but people with this kind personality had their own uses as times. What was rare was her loyalty. She was used to this kind of nagging.

"This entire *fu* is watching," At one side, Mu Jin stood as she looked helplessly at Yin Liu, "This person isn't causing pain to *wang fei*. If she stood by and watch her die, what would it look like in the eyes of others?"

Qu Qing Ju didn't care for the two's discussion and waved at Huang Yang, saying: "This thing, you personally order somebody to do, just say I have an affection for Yun Qing *guniang*'s appearance, and let others take good care of her." She didn't like Yun Qing personally, but not to the point of watching her die of illness. She didn't have such a twisted state of mind.

Huang Yang took his orders and retreated, thinking coldly, that Yun Qing *guniang* though she was so virtuous, but right now, it was only due to *wang fei*'s pity that she could keep her life. If she had the skill, she could find somebody else. That was true virtue.

Inside Cui You Yuan, Yun Qing laid on bed with a yellow face. Hearing Ye'er, with a face full of happiness, say that *wang fei* was benevolent and on and on, the hate in her eyes grew deeper. Why was is that she could only live by the sympathy of other women who were much higher in position, why was it that she had both skill and looks but she couldn't beat the plain Jiang Yong Yu and others?

Drinking the bitter medicine, a strong desire to live infected her eyes. She couldn't die, she definitely couldn't die. She wanted to stand at the high position and see who dared to sympathize with her? And who dared look down at her?!

Qu Qing Ju heard that the Yun Qing in Cui You Yang cooperated greatly with the doctor and placed down the pen in her hand with interest. Looking at the butterfly in flight on the paper, she examined for a while before saying; "Heart higher than the sky, life thinner than paper."

Mu Jin placed a branching tree peony brazier onto the desk and said with a smile: "*Wang fei* had expected it?"

"This type of person, they can't hear words of pity," Carelessly throwing the paper to one side, Qu Qing Ju started to draw a vibrant peony, "Feng Zi Jin is too idle these days, otherwise how could she send the news of the *fu* over to Jing *fei?"*

"Why is *wang fei* sure it's her?" Mu Jin hesitated before saying; "It looks as though Jing *fei* looks down at the two of them."

"The type of person that Jing *fei*, she wants to suppress me who doesn't have her favor, but doesn't want a *ce fei* to really win over me. So she would try to understand me from a certain *ce fei* but she wouldn't want that *ce fei* to break etiquette. That was why that day in Zhong Jing Palace, she would easily release me from service and let the two *ce fei*

stand from beginning to end," Qu Qing Ju wielded the pen, quickly sketching a peach blossom, "Jiang Yong Yu is a smart person, so she surely wouldn't do something that will offend me. Then the most suspicious is Feng Zi Jin." In this era, how *popo* treated *erxi* was the strangest mindset in this entire world. A lot of the time, they liked to bully their own *erxifu*, but they couldn't see others embarrass their *erxifu*. Otherwise, why would they say a woman's heart, a needle at the ocean bottom?

Mu Jin heard the words and thought carefully, finding that it was somewhat rational. But thinking about how Jing *fei* would sometimes make things purposefully difficult, Mu Jin still felt that Jing *fei*, as a *popo*, was hard to serve.

A simple daffodil appeared on the page. Qu Qing Ju didn't have the interest in drawing anymore and let Jin Zhan, who had been at the side, put it away. She smiled at Mu Jin who seemed to be in deep thought: "You don't have to be too worried, Jing *fei* might be hard to deal with, but she isn't impossible." To deal with those that thought too much, the most effective weapon was naivety. She wasn't naturally naïve, but she could pretend to be. The women in the palace preferred to use their mouths as blades to stab people. Pretending not to understand would enrage her. Since Jing *fei* wouldn't really move against her right now, what was she afraid of?

Chapter 18

In the study, He Heng closed the missive in his hands. Looking at the completely darkened sky, he said: "Come, light the way to *zhengyuan*."

Ming He, who had been waiting at the door motioned for a little *taijian* to hold a sectioned off lantern and personally held a tasselled palace lamp. He waited quietly at the side for *wang ye* to start on his way.

The study and *zhengyuan* were separated by a garden. He Heng walked to the border of the garden and saw a shadow hidden beside the fake

mountain. The person couldn't be identified from the pale shadow but the sound of a female voice reciting a poem spread.

"When the geese are returning, the full moon shines down on the Western tower. The flowers fall, the waters flow… …"

"Who's there?" He Heng looked expressionlessly at that shadow. The flickering lamplight made as though his eyes had an additional light.

"*Wang ye*?!" The voice suddenly stopped, visibly frightened. A woman wearing a pale robe tied at the waist with red eyes kneeled in front of He Heng. A white jade hairpin was the only ornament in her hair, the thin figure kneeling on the ground seemed as pitiful as one could ever be.

Ming He saw the lack of expression on *wang ye* and spoke: "Yun Qing *guniang*, what are you doing here? It's cold these winter nights, you've just recovered, you should wear more clothing."

He Heng's lips curled. He looked at the insubstantial article of clothing on Yun Qing and started to walk around Yun Qing. Originally, he had felt that she was a little bit interesting, but looking at her pitiful act, he suddenly felt nothing at all. This wasn't as enticing as when she had acted virtuous and noble. When a virtuous woman suddenly turned to ingratiation, it didn't seem as interesting.

Yun Qing watched as *wang ye* walked away. She gritted her teeth and said: "*Wang ye*."

He Heng turned his head to look at the woman still kneeling on the ground. He suddenly spoke: "Do you still remember when *ben wang* wanted to make you my *tong fang*, what you said?"

"*Nu* said, to receive the heart and soul of one person, to not separate until the heads turn white." Yun Qing raised her head to look at He Heng, her eyes full of adoration.

"Then what are you doing now?" He Heng scanned Yun Qing in an interested manner from head to toe before his gaze, at the end, fell upon that pale while chest.

"*Nu* is truly in love with *wang ye*," The tears in Yun Qing's eyes glimmered, "If *nu* had the foresight to know what would happen today, *nu* wouldn't have stayed in this *wang fu* in the very beginning."

"Che," He Heng raised his eyebrows and spoke to Ming He, "Remember tomorrow to remind *ben wang* to raise this woman to a *tong fang*. Send somebody to deliver her back. It's very late, don't alarm any others." Finishing, he turned and walked towards the *zheng yuan*, not looking even once more upon Yun Qing who was still kneeling.

Ming He smiled and glanced at Yun Qing, "*Nucai* will remember." He turned to follow.

After everyone had left, Yun Qing finally stood. She wiped away the tears at the corners of her eyes, staring with wide eyes in the direction that *wang ye* had left in. Her gaze lit up with unprecedented brightness.

He Heng stepped into the *zheng yuan* and dismissed the announcement of the servants. He strode directly into the room that Qu Qing Ju lived in. At the doorway, he saw Qu Qing Ju gazing at a jade gourd pendant under the light. Her gaze held a peace that he had never seen before, as though time had stopped within her eyes.

He knew that this jade gourd had been left behind by *wang fei*'s birth mother, Tian *shi*. These past days, *wang fei* had kept it constantly on her neck. Seeing her posture, he assumed that she was reminiscing about her birth mother so he said: "*Wang fei*, why haven't you gone to sleep yet?"

"*Wang ye*'s here?" Qu Qing Ju placed the jade gourd back around her neck. She stood and walked in front of He Heng. She smiled as she saw the familiar palace maids and *taijian* outside the doorway and said, "It's so deep into the night, I thought *wang ye* wouldn't have come."

"The long night passes by slowly. Without *wang fei* at the side, *ben wang* has no desire for sleep," He Heng enclosed the person in front into his arms. He lowered his head to kiss Qu Qing Ju's forehead, "Come, a bath and a change of clothes."

Hot steam rose from the enormous bathtub. Flower petals floated on the surface as Qu Qing Ju was taken along by He Heng into the water. The two faced each other nakedly and experienced together in the tub the intimacy of skin.

He Heng's hand's swept across Qu Qing Ju's pale chest, his index finger curling around the delicate jade gourd. He gave a deep laugh, "The way Qing Ju looks, nobody could resist," He bent over to suck on those moist lips. He didn't like kissing women, but to be this intimate with *wang fei*, he felt a few stirrings of emotion.

Taking advantage of He Heng's bent legs as a seat, Qu Qing Ju lifted her hand to wrap around He Heng, pressing her soft chest into He Heng's embrace. There was an unspeakable charm about her full head of hair spread out in the water, contrasting against the vibrant flower petals.

A warm palm glided across a smooth back, slowly moving downwards and lighting a ferocious fire.

A round of delights of the flesh later, both felt very contented. He Heng offhandedly grabbed a robe, bending down to carry Qu Qing Ju from the slightly cold water. He placed her on the bed and took a towel to personally dry her hair for her.

When men were satisfied, they always were especially caring. That quality could be seen very clearly on He Heng.

Qu Qing Ju slid on an inner robe, and allowed He Heng to continue his attentive behaviour. She yawned: "Why did *wang ye* come so late this night?"

"Had to take care of something, so it was a bit late," He Heng saw that the hair was more or less dry and switched for a new towel to dry his own hair. The two wrapped around each other as they sat inside the blankets. In the time as they waited for hair to dry, they started to chit-chat about other things.

"I heard that you had sorted out that group of disobedient stewards?" He Heng inquired suddenly, "That group is truly disgraceful. You were

too benevolent to them, this type of people, they should be beaten to death."

"Lives aren't that worthless," Qu Qing Ju laughed, "I saw that they are very sincere in their present duties. They have learned their lesson. If they can fulfill their duties, it would be a great boon for this *wang fu*."

"Those disobedient servants, you don't have to be soft-hearted," He Heng knew everything about how Qu Qing Ju was handling the affairs of the *hou yuan*. He didn't find anything unsound. To take control of the *hou yuan* and at the same time make others feel appreciated while inspiring respect, that took skill. The *wang fei* that he, He Heng, wanted, was this kind.

"If a death occurred, it wouldn't be good for our Duan Wang Fu," Qu Qing Ju understood He Heng's intentions and said, "This is enough."

Upon hearing this, He Heng didn't continue on the matter and turned to the jade gourd on Qu Qing Ju's neck: "This jade gourd is very exquisite."

Qu Qing Ju rubbed the jade gourd when it was mentioned. Her smile became fainter: "This was left behind by *qie*'s mother, and was always in the possession of stepmother. At the beginning, all possible ways were tried, but this couldn't be wrested from her hands. Now that *qie* is Duan Wang Fei, she quickly presents it." These words praised He Heng and also took a few stabs at Liang *shi*. Qu Qing Ju felt no pressure doing it.

"This Liang *shi* is a cruel person," He Heng's face darkened as he said, "Now, with me to protect you, she wouldn't dare to be as bold. It was good fortune that your *jiujiu* protected you in the past. Otherwise, where would I find such a virtuous wife."

To call the Tian Family by *jiujiu*, but to call the Chang De Duke by Duke. Even if he was a member of the Imperial Family and he could use whatever titles he liked, this double standard was a bit too obvious.

"My *jiujiu* and *jiumu* always protected *qie*. Otherwise, how could *qie* have the hundred and twenty trunks for my dowry when I married into the *wang fu*. And those properties and stores. All of those were left for

me by my mother or added by my aunt on the day of," Qu Qing Ju laughed lightly, "*Qie* is both unfortunate but fortunate. At least *qie* has a protective *jiujiu*."

"*Jiujiu* is kind," He Heng smiled as he hugged the other, "Now that you are the mistress of the *wang fu*, if you have free time, you could invite your *jiumu* over. I also want to meet your two *biaodi*[107]."

"If *wang ye* doesn't distain *Jiujiu*'s family, *qie* will definitely let the *biaodi* pay their respects to you if there is a chance." Qu Qing Ju raised her head to look at Duan Wang. A smile bloomed on her face as though she was very happy that He Heng was close to her *jiujiu*.

"We're brothers of the same family, don't discuss paying respects," He Heng was very satisfied with Xiang Qing Hou Fu. The family discipline was tight and proper and their actions were upright. This type of family didn't dishonour the reputation of the noble families. So to call the Marquis of Xiang Qing by *jiujiu*, he was very willing to do so.

Qu Qing Ju's smile didn't change upon hearing the words: "They wouldn't dare call themselves brothers of *wang ye*. *Wang ye* might not know, those two *biaodi* of *qie*'s are very pedantic from studying all day. The only things they talk about all day are the Heaven, Earth, Emperor, Family and Teacher.[108] For them to disregard your position, it would be harder than for them to stop studying."

"This is a good family," He Heng caught the closeness that Qu Qing Ju felt towards the Tian family. He patted her back and said, "In future interactions with the Tian Family, don't doubt yourself. They're our relatives, there's no need to be overly cautious."

Qu Qing Ju naturally agreed. As to what she would do, that was her concern. The conduct of the Tian family was naturally one loyal to the

[107] male relative from the maternal line (younger)

[108] The tradition was that men only knelt for these five. They would kneel for Heaven and Earth while praying, they would kneel to the Emperor (to show fealty and respect) and to their elders of the family and their teachers (filial piety).

emperor. She didn't dare be interested in what He Heng thought, but she didn't want the Tian Family to get swept into this type of matter.

She, Qu Qing Ju, was not a kind person, but she knew an eye for an eye and to repay others for their kindness. She mysteriously possessed this body, so she had to repay the favor.

When she woke on the morning of the second day, Qu Qing Ju sent off He Heng to the Royal Court before taking a beauty nap. She just rose to wash and eat breakfast but heard a curious matter before she finished her meal.

"You are saying that *wang ye* is taking Yun Qing *guniang* as a *tong fang*?" She wiped her hands. Looking at Xiao Gan Zi, she said with a joyless smile, "That being the case, bestow upon Yun Qing a pair of jade bracelets as my congratulations to her."

"Wang Fei is very kind. Just a *tong fang*, it isn't worth your gift," Xiao Gan Zi replied with a smile, "It was just last night that Yun Qing nagged *wang ye* in the gardens. *Wang ye* was too impatient to deal with her so he said to make her a *tong fang*. It was just a sentence, nothing else has been bestowed down."

"Nagged *wang ye*?" Qu Qing Ju smiled thinly. No wonder he was late last night. He had stopped to admire a beautiful woman.

Xiao Gan Zi saw that *wang fei* had a calm smile and thought to himself that *wang fei* didn't seem to care for the matter. His heart went back into his chest and he continued: "Yes, those of inferior birth, they only know those cheap tricks. *Nu cai* is afraid of dirtying *wang fei*'s ears if he said them out loud."

"It must have been hard for Xiao Gan Zi *gonggong* to be so clear of the matter," Qu Qing Ju smiled, "The *wang fu* is getting busier these days. You can help me look at the stewards in charge of purchasing, see if they have been remiss in any areas."

"*Nucai* will keep a close look," Xiao Gan Zi felt a burst of joy. The purchasing of good was a rich duty. With what *wang fei* had said, those

stewards responsible for daily purchases, didn't they had to carefully worship him on a pedestal?

As expected, the best way was to ingratiate himself with *wang fei*. He wouldn't try to compete with Ming He and the others. But to be favoured with *wang fei*, wasn't that also a sign of his abilities?

Chapter 19

He Heng wasn't the most favored by the Emperor of the four *wangs* but there were still many invitations that were sent on a daily basis to Duan Wang Fu. Today there would be somebody presenting tea, tomorrow somebody would offer the new fruits from their farm, then the day after somebody would send over a famous piece of art.

All invitations for the females of the household would be given over to Qu Qing Ju. Some people, she would meet. Some people she would put aside the invitation and could be satisfied by a meeting with those under her.

It was truly "the gatekeeper of the Prime Minister's residence was a fourth rank official." Not just her as a *wang fei*, there were many who wanted to ingratiate themselves with the maternal families of the *qieshi*. So when she saw the card that the family of Han Qing He sent in, Qu Qing Ju hesitated before saying: "Let somebody meet this person, then tell him the rule of the *fu* is the *qieshi* can receive their family during the festivals[109] or if pregnant, but not otherwise." This wasn't just that this was a *wang fu*, even in normal families, there wasn't the tradition of a *qieshi*'s family being invited if it wasn't festival time.

"This family is very rude. *Wang fei*, even your relatives know to not ask for an invite when there are no important matters, but this *yiniang* has to be special," Yin Liu looked disdainfully at the unremarkable card, "*Nubi*

[109] There are two major festivals: The Spring Festival (Chinese New Year, first month of the lunar year) and the Mid-Autumn Festival (fifteen of the eight month of the lunar year)

still remembers that attitude that Han *yiniang* had in the beginning, just because she was the first ever to serve *wang ye*."

"Alright," Qu Qing Ju looked calmly at Yin Liu, "Get somebody to send the gifts this person presented to Han *shiqie*. Tell Han *shi*, it isn't that I am not accommodating, but the rules of this house has to be respected."

Presently, several of the *wang ye* were all thirsting for that position. It would be best for the *wang fu* to not interact with strangers. If something went wrong, Duan Wang might just strangle her to death. Her arrogance could lead to her death but that was better than being strangled by somebody else.

In Xi Yuan, Han Qing He looked at the things on the table. It was just a few playthings that wasn't worth much. She didn't know how hard those watching from the doorway were laughing on the inside. She forced out a hint of the smile and said to Shu Kui in front of her: "My thanks to Shu Kui *guniang*, and please give my thanks to *wang fei* ."

"*Yiniang* doesn't have to be so polite. Before *nubi* came over, *wang fei* had said that it was a woman's good fortune if her relatives thought of her. It is just that the *wang fu* has rules and cannot allow you to meet them so hopefully you can understand." Shu Kui had originally been one of the *wang fu*'s servants. She was now a first-rank *yahuan* serving *wang fei* and was well respected by other servants in the *fu*. So upon seeing the respectful attitude of Han *shi*, her expression was normal, but her actions still carried the appropriate level of subservience for a servant as she kept her head lowered in respect of Han *shi*.

"*Wang fei* is too kind. It is truly *nu*'s family who is nagging and *wang fei* was benevolent to keep their things. *Wang fei*'s virtues, *nu* will remember in her heart." Han Qing He was quieter now. She understood very well. Originally, these things wouldn't have been brought in front of her. *Wang fei* was able to let her keep these things. Regardless of if *wang fei* was true or false in her intentions, she had to admit she felt gratitude towards *wang fei*.

Her maternal family was of low status and could never sent over anything good. These things were plaything she had liked before she had entered the palace. But when she had followed *wang ye* into the *wang fu*, she had never received anything from home. Looking at it now, her family most likely sent something every year, but the servants never delivered it inside. Remembering that before *wang fei* had married in, the most favoured had been Feng Zi Jin, Han Qing He laughed icily inside.

She hated that her maternal family wasn't of significance and was ashamed to mention them, but looking at the gifts, she felt very complicated. Something sour and bitter manifested in her heart.

The second of the twelfth month, it was an auspicious day. Qu Qing Ju sat on the center seat. Sitting under her was Feng, Jiang, Luo, and Han. At the moment, all four didn't have their eyes on Qu Qing Ju but were inspecting Yun Qing who was standing in the middle of the room in a pale pink dress.

Leaning on the armchair, Qu Qing Ju used a hand to hold her head up. She lazily sipped at a cup of tea and looked at the five women underneath her. She said slowly: "Since *wang ye* wants to raise you to become a *tong fang*, we have no objections. *Tong fang* cannot compare to a *yiniang*, we can't hold a banquet. I couldn't bear to let you enter *wang ye*'s house without even a sound so you should perform a greeting to *ben wang fei* and these seated hear. This is to let those under you know that you are not a guest of this house anymore, but one of *wang ye*'s women."

"That's so true. At the beginning, I had thought that *wang ye* would elevate you, but who knew that you weren't willing and became a guest of this house. But good things come to those who wait, you have finally entered this *fu*," Feng Zi Jin smiled as she looked at Yun Qing, "Look at this face, it's so tender a touch will squeeze out water. No wonder *wang ye* likes it." Everybody in the *wang fu* knew what had happened. Feng Zi Jin's voice was full of scorn and clearly wanted to embarrass Yun Qing.

Yun Qing's face suddenly paled. She bit her lip and replied: "Feng *ce fei* is joking, Yun Qing is of low birth. It is just that *wang ye* has taken pity, I cannot compare to how much *wang ye* favors *wang fei* and those here."

"It seems Yun Qing *guniang* still doesn't understand the etiquette of this *wang fu*," Feng Zi Jin laughed coldly, "This *tong fang*, in front of the *zhuzi*, have to call themselves *nubi*. Even how their limbs are placed, how they stand, there are rules. If you don't understand, we can have some of the *mama*s of the *fu* teach you."

"*Nubi* will remember." Yun Qing hesitated before bending her legs, her head hanging even lower.

Qu Qing Ju sat on her elevated seat and saw how pale her lips turned and the tightly gripped hands hidden under the sleeves. This was like the teacher at the podium and the student of the past life. The student believed that their little movements were concealed but didn't know that the teacher could see everything clearly.

Feng *ce fei*, seeing Yun Qing's state, snorted in disinterest and didn't speak further.

Jiang Yong Xu and the others were never overly talkative in front of Qu Qing Ju and at this time wouldn't speak at all, so they bent their heads and drank tea.

"Alright, then start the salutation." Qu Qing Ju slightly straightened her body and smiled down at Yun Qing standing at the bottom.

A *tong fang* giving the full greeting of three bows and nine kowtows to the wife, that was the generosity of the wife and a glorious honor for the *tong fang*. But this type of event occurring on Yun Qing, it was a humiliation, not an honor.

When *qieshi* performed their saluations, they just had to offer tea. She was a *tong fang* and she had to bow three times and kowtow nine times, what honor was that? But even so, she had to bear the humiliation and knelt down. She slowly bowed, knock, knock, and knock. She stood and

did the greeting three times before opening in a trembling voice: "*Nubi* greets *wang fei*."

"En," Qu Qing Ju nodded and handed a gold hairpin to her from a tray that Jin Zhan held, "In the future, serve *wang ye* well."

Yun Qing knelt and took the gold hairpin with two hands. She kowtowed to Qu Qing Ju again before walking to Pin Zi Jin and performed a one bow and three kowtow greeting: "*Nubi* greets Feng *ce fei*."

"I'm not as wealthy as *wang fei* and I heard before that you distain gold for being too vulgar and silver too blinding. You are multi-talented. You can flip though this book "Fan Hua Ji" for your amusement." Feng Ji Zin held the book to Yun Qing and smiled, "I think you would like this book."

"Fan Hua Ji" was a story that spoke of a rich young man who fell for the schemes of a *huakui* and almost lost his true love in the form of a noble young lady. In the end, the rich young man and the noble young lady married but the *huakui*, due to her many despicable actions, was detained in jail and sentenced.

Qu Qing Ju looked at that book that was wrinkled as Yun Qing held it and silently drank tea. It was only when Yun Qing finished greeting the other two *shiqie* before she opened: "Now the *fu* has three *tong fang*. Ban Xia was from my side, Bai Zhi and Yun Qing were sent in from outside the *fu*. I don't have many rules and I don't need you to come to *zhen yuan* to serve me. In the future, if *wang ye* doesn't call for you to serve, you should stay in your rooms to rest and not worry about other matters."

Hearing this, the other four sitting felt a spurt of joy. Everybody in this *fu* knew that *wang ye* didn't like *yahuan* to serve him on a daily basis. And those *yahuan* were now of a greater age with two of them already engaged to others in the *fu*. Now that these three *tong fang* couldn't appear daily in front of *wang ye*, they had no place to enact their wiles.

"*Wang fei* is kind to treat them so. In any other *fu*, couldn't they escape holding the teapot or the drapes?" Jiang Yong Xu smiled and followed the topic, "Yun Qing *guniang*, shouldn't you thank *wang fei*?"

Yun Qing knelt again: "*Nubi* thanks *wang fei*."

Qu Qing Ju looked at her and waved a hand, "Stand up, I feel tired just walking you kneel here and kneel there. If there isn't anything else, you can all leave." She was too lazy to bother with watching the drama.

After the noon meal, Qu Qing Ju saw the sun come out from the clouds and headed to the gardens. A walk would help her digest and get some sun.

There was no time that the *wang fu*'s gardens would be withered. Even in this twelfth month, the garden was still green and there were many blooming flowers. Many of those flowering shouldn't bloom in this season. Most likely, it was the servants who came up with ways to force the flowering.

"Go away, worthless scum, you can't search my body!"

"Ban Xia *guniang*, I think you should return it. Otherwise, if others knew that a thief came out of here, it wouldn't be good."

Walking past a flourishing wall of flowers, the place was dark and out of the way. Qu Qing Ju saw a young woman wearing an embroidered dress surrounded by a few *yahuan* and *pozi*. Her hair was down and tangled, almost as though a physical altercation had occurred.

"You're the thief. I'm *wang ye*'s women, how dare you search me? Also, if something went missing, why aren't you suspicious of others and only accuse me?"

"Oh, Ban Xia *guninang* really believes she's a *zhuzi*?" A slightly chubby *mama* sneered: "Just a *tong fang*, still a servant. You really believe you are one of those on top? Look at yourself in the mirror. Only you went into the room that it was placed in, other than you, who else would have taken it?"

"Pah!" Ban Xia spat, "It's just all of you saw that *wang fei* is favored now so you come over to make things difficult to put yourselves in her favor. Do you think that *wang fei* would pay attention to you. Just a worthless servant pretending to be a detective! When *wang fei* falls out of favor, see who else you can curry favor with!"

Mu Jin, who was following behind Qu Qing Ju heard this and called out icily: "What act is playing here today? Such a beautiful garden, look at what you've done!"

The women turned to look and their faces changed color due to fright. They quickly knelt down with a bang, leaving only the woman called Ban Xia standing.

Qu Qing Ju expressionlessly examined this Ban Xia. She raised an eyebrow and said: "What is going on?"

The road one picked, even if they had to kneel they still had to carry on to the end. That was true for Yun Qing. The same was true for Ban Xia. When Ban Xia betrayed her mistress at the beginning, she had to think that this day would come. When she, as *wang fei*, was favoured, there would be others that would seek favor with her through harassing a *tong fang* that wasn't a true mistress.

Some choices, once made, couldn't be undone. Qu Qing Ju looked at the still standing Ban Xia. Was she regretful now?

Chapter 20

For the first time, Qu Qing Ju focused on this *yahuan* called Ban Xia. Other than her dishevelled state, her appearance was rather pretty. Large eyes, curved brow. When she spoke, there were hints of two dimples on her cheek. She looked innocent and adorable. If it wasn`t that she personally had heard the brutality she exhibited when she had just spoke, Qu Qing Ju wouldn`t have believed that she would say those things.

"This garden has other people, what sort of conduct is yelling and screaming?" Mu Jin look coldly over the kneeling servants and then looked at Ban Xia, "Ban Xia *guniang* is very brazen, when was it that you could discuss the actions of *wang ye* and *wang fei*?"

When Ban Xia saw Qu Qing Ju, she had felt slightly afraid. But seeing Mu Jin's proud posture and remembering when they had both been *yahuan*, Mu Jin had been proud because she had been most favoured by *wang fei*, she couldn't bear it any more. She was just one *yahuan* of *wang fei*'s entourage, how dare she lecture others?

"It's not *meimei* who is brazen, but Mu Jin *jiejie* who has become more bold," Ban Xia pushed aside the tangle of hair by her face, "No wonder these lowly servants are rushing to fawn over you, it is really 'one person achieves immortality, dogs and chickens fly to Heaven.'"

Hearing this, Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow. She held Jin Zhan's hand to sit down at a nearby stone table. She didn't want to start arguing with a *tong fang*.

"Ban Xia *guniang*'s mouth has become sharper, but this conduct is even more shameful," Mu Jin wasn't angry and smiled thinly, "*Tong fang* Ban Xia disregarded the rules of the *fu,* disobeyed her superiors, thirty slaps."

When Mu Jin finished, one of the *mama*s that had been kneeling on the ground hurriedly stood and gushed: "Mu Jin *guniang*, please move back a few steps. Don't let something dirty spill onto you." Finishing, she turned and gave Ban Xia a slap on the face.

"*Wang fei*, you are evil, I … …"

Another *yahuan* quickly climbed up from the ground and stuffed a handkerchief into her mouth. She grabbed the tangle of hair to reveal Ban Xia's entire face to ease the way for the *mama*'s blows.

Qu Qing Ju started at the patterns of the stone table with half-lidded eyes. She listened to the sound of flesh being hit and used a handkerchief to wipe her hands. She drawled: "You are just a *tong fang*

but you are so arrogant. Where did you get the courage?" She raised her head and pierced Ban Xia with her gaze, "Or is it that my past leniency made you forget your bounds, to dismiss protocol to the point of carelessly discussing your superiors? You might not have been born to a rich family, but you were born to a clean one. To be this disrespectful, you shame your parents!"

Ban Xia's mouth was stuffed but hearing Qu Qing Ju mention her family, she gave a muffled protest before quieting down.

"That's enough. We don't want to ruin a pretty face," Qu Qing Ju took away her gaze. The slaps stopped, "*Tong fang* Ban Xia disobeyed her superiors. Her punishment is to work in the laundry rooms." Stopping there, she looked at Ban Xia, "You don't have to try to find *wang ye*, I will personally tell him about this."

Mu Jin glanced at *wang fei* before turning to speak to the *yahuan* and *mamsa*: "Go help Ban Xia *guniang* pack her luggage and deliver her to the laundry room worker residence. Make sure not to burden Ban Xia *guniang*."

"Don't worry, Mu Jin *guniang*, we will take good care of Ban Xia *gunaign*," The *mama* who had delivered the slaps said. After bowing to Qu Qing Ju with the rest, she dragged the still silenced Ban Xia away.

After the surroundings were clear, Jin Zhan worried started: "*Wang fei*, Ban Xia is a despicable person, she should be thrown out of the *fu*, why leave her untouched?"

Qu Qing Ju used her as support to stand: "What kind of place is the laundry room? Beautiful women require delicate care. In that kind of place, any beauty will be worn into plainness. Will *wang ye* have any desire for her when he sees her again? A woman who attracts a man at first glance has to become more and more beautiful, not uglier with time." That was why the world had so many men who disliked their wife and favoured their concubines. Women needed to raise children and manage the household. They had to support the elders above them, handle the concubines in the middle and below them, they had to raise

their own or other people's children. When they were old and haggard in the end, the men will scorn them for not being desirable.

She couldn't become that type of virtuous wife. Rather than satisfy a man that way, it was much better to satisfy herself instead.

"That's so true. In the future when *wang ye* sees that hussy, he will only shun her and won't remember the past," Yin Liu ranted in a low voice, "For a traitor, this is letting her off easy!"

Mu Jin looked at the surroundings to confirm no one else had heard Yin Liu's words before suggesting: "*Wang fei*, sitting in the shade for too long isn't healthy. Why don't we walk somewhere else?"

Qu Qing Ju nodded, "Jin Zhan, go ask if *wang ye* is busy right now. If not, I will go visit *wang ye*."

Jin Zhan nodded and raced forward.

In another part of the garden, Jiang Yong Yu looked on in distain at Ban Xia who was being forcefully dragged out of the garden by the others. After they were long gone, she quietly spat: "Fool."

The *yahuan* beside her crowed: "*Zhuzi* was right, this Ban Xia didn't have many days left to swagger."

Jiang Yong Yu looked at her: "From the moment she betrayed her mistress, this day was going to come. It isn't that there aren't servants in other *fu* like her, but none as impatient. It hasn't been a month since *wang fei* married but she was already rushing to climb onto the bed. Receiving this outcome, it is only due to *wang fei*'s kindness. Ai Lu, you have to remember. In the future if you meet this kind of person, you have to stay far away. Those that betray their masters, they almost never have good endings."

Ai Lu lowered her face and respectfully confirmed: "*Zhuzi*, don't worry. *Nubi* will remember."

Jiang Yong Yu saw her state and nodded in satisfaction. She smiled as she watched *wang fei* walk in the direction of *wang ye*'s study.

Wang fei Qu *shi* Qing Ju was an intelligent and rational woman. In her life, she never wanted to be on the bad side of this kind of woman. Since *ce fei* was already the highest she could ever achieve in this lifetime, it was better to follow this kind of person. At least her future days wouldn't be as miserable as the arrogant Feng *shi*.

"Jiang Nan's salt governance is getting even more complicated," He Heng closed the report in his hands and ordered his subordinate standing by the desk, "Get somebody to keep a watch first. Both *laoda* and *laosan'*s men are in there. Let the two of them brawl it out. *Ben wang* doesn't want to be the villain to disturb their enthusiasm."

The person standing was one of He Heng's retainers. His name was Wang Chang Ming. His appearance was unremarkable but he was very good at gathering information, his brain very agile so he was a frequent visitor in front of He Heng.

"*Wang ye*, this subordinate has also heard from Jiang Nan that Rui Wang's people are putting out loans," Wang Chang Ming furrowed his eyebrows as he reported, "But it is all under other people's names so there isn't any evidence that has been found right now."

"*Laosan* always uses and eats the best. It's natural for him to spend silver," He Heng's forefinger taped the desktop and he stated, "This matter, we won't get involved in. His daily spending, the Emperor sees as well. The Emperor hasn't spoken, so as his elder brother, *ben wang* can't lecture him. Sometime in the future, find an opportunity to pass this into the ears of Ning Wang. It is said that the eldest brother is another father. For *laoda* to pick up this matter, it is the most appropriate."

"Yes, *wang ye* is wise," Wang Chang Ming agreed, "His Highness Ning Wang is of high authority and will teach His Highness Rui Wang well."

The corners of He Heng's lips curled in response. He raised his head to see Ming He come in with a tray. The mirth on his face became hidden: "What is it?"

"*Wang ye*, *wang fei* is outside. She said if you are not busy, she has a matter to discuss with you," Ming He looked at Wang Chang Me standing to the side and lifted the tray in his hands higher, "*Wang fei* also said, if you are busy, you should drink some pigeon soup before working."

He Heng's expression softened slightly and motioned for Ming He to put down the tray. He ordered to Wang Chang Ming: "Retire for now."

Wang Chang Ming bowed and left. Coming out the door, he buried his head even deeper. A close distance from the door, he saw a dress embroidered with clouds and a hint of the pearl-embroidered Yun brocade shoes peeking out. He smelt the floral scent emanating from the other, pushed his head deeper and sketched a bow before racing away.

Not looking at the black-clad man leaving, Qu Qing Ju saw Ming He come out to greet her and held Mu Jin's hands to enter the study. Seeing He Heng sitting at the desk partaking in the soup, she smiled and went forward: "It is said that this soup is good for the brain. *Wang ye* is so busy everyday with government affairs, it's beneficial to have some.

A few large mouthfuls were enough to finish the soup. He Heng took the handkerchief that Ming He presented to wipe his mouth. He stood to walk over to Qu Qing Ju and raised a hand to caress the hairpin in her hair: "If I eat this and that daily, after a few years, *ben wang* will be fat."

Qu Qing Ju moved her body back and looked up and down his body: "It would be very hard for *wang ye* to get fat, but it would be great if you did get fat," Her glance was tantalizing, "When *wang ye* becomes fat, there would be less beautiful women wanting to throw themselves at you. Has *wang ye* never heard about this, that if you like a person, you should use delicious food to fatten him up so nobody else will come to take him away."

"So my Qing Ju actually has such nefarious thoughts," He Heng laughed quietly and buried his face in Qu Qing Ju's neck to take a breath, "But I do like hearing this. At least Qing Ju is thinking of me in her heart."

Qu Qing Ju pulled on the jade belt at He Heng's waist with one hand and buried her head at his neck. She laughed quietly and taunted: "But does *wang ye*'s heart have *qie*?"

Gradually enveloping the person in his grasp, He Heng turned to sit at the nearby chair and eased Qu Qing Ju to sit on his leg. His palm glided across the back before resting at the waist. He smiled and kissed the smooth cheek: "My heart, Qing Ju still can't see?"

Qu Qing Ju blinked her eyes and drew circles with a hand on He Heng's chest: "*Qie*'s eyes aren't that wondrous, to be able to see *wang ye*'s heart through flesh and blood. How about *wang ye* let *qie* hear it." Her head started to make its way to He Heng's chest. She laughed inside. He wanted to play the romance card, was she a naïve teenager?

Ming He and Mu Jin saw the intimacy between the master and mistress and quietly retreated with the others. After the door was such, it was still possible to hear words and laughter from behind.

The two exchanged a glance and mutually retreated further.

The pair of Qu and He in the room wasn't doing what the servants were thinking in terms of harmonious acts. After playing for a while, they supressed the fire that had rose.

He Heng wrapped an arm around Qu Qing Ju's waist to let her sit more comfortably on his leg: "You say that the gift to *fuhuang* should be increased by two-tenths this year. This is appropriate, especially since I married this year. It didn't matter what I had given in the past but in the future, I'm afraid I will have to trouble you."

"It's just an idea. If *wang ye* has no objections, I'll let them prepare. The end of the year is approaching, it's best to prepare early," Qu Qing Ju smiled and leaned into He Heng's embrace, "*Wang ye* trusting *qie* like this, it is *qie's* good fortune."

"Husband and wife are one, why does Qing Ju say that," He Heng gently gathered the person he held closer, "Letting you take care of *hou yuan*, I have full faith in you."

Qu Qing Ju smiled, "That's great. If *qie* punishes somebody, *wang ye* can't get angry."

"Those people are just *qieshi*, they can't be seen in public. Punish away, there won't be any pity," He Heng didn't care and turned to say, "Qing Ju's name, did it come from "Luo Shen Fu", where 'she wore shoes embroidered with delicate designs, what trailed behind was a garment as light as the mist?'"

Qu Qjing Ju laughed: "*Qie* had thought that the fact the Duke of Chang De using "Luo Shen Fu" to name his children had already spread through the city." This wasn't something to be proud of. A man using the content of a love letter to a woman to name children, that was romantic in novels, but among the nobility, that was a joke.

He Heng understood the meaning in her words and warmly comforted: "Qing Ju shouldn't think so much. In my eyes, your name is peerless, and naturally you are too."

Upon hearing this Qu Qing Ju couldn't resist raising her head to gaze at He Heng, a smile blooming on her face.

Of course it's peerless. In the aristocracy of the entire Da Long Dynasty, who would choose such a crass name? That's what she thought inside.

To be a Virtuous Wife Chapter 21-40

Chapter 21

When Qu Qing Ju walked out of the study, it was more than an hour later. She adjusted the slightly askew hairpins and narrowed her eyes to smile at the western sunset at the doorway. When she turned back, she saw the shadow of He Heng standing straight by the desk.

A person in the dark, a person in the light. They always will find the other exceptionally dazzling. When He Heng raised his head, it just happened that he saw the smile and his eyes were blinded. Unexpectedly, feelings of amazement rose. He seemed to understand "a beauty melt's one's heart with her coquettish smile."[1]

"*Wang fei*," Yu Zan came forward and wrapped a thin cloak around Qu Qing Ju. She bent to tighten the cloak. "It's cold outside, *wang fei* has to take care of her body."

Slightly raising her chin to let Yu Zan finish adjusting, Qu Qing Ju laughed: "You *yahuan*, are you all really thinking of me as a porcelain doll?"

"*Wang fei* has been ill recently. *Nubi* and the others were very worried. Even though all is well, there's still a need to be careful." Yu Zan tied off the cloak and smiled as she bent in a bow. She moved to Qu Qing Ju's side and supported her hand.

Qu Qing Ju shook her head in amusement and stepped onto the stone stairs, "I remember I have an unfinished pouch to embroider, let's return."

[1] the phrase is actually a variation on 回眸一笑百媚生 which is part of the lyrics of the Song of Everlasting Regret (or Sorrow). The particular lyrics are at the beginning of the song describing the beauty of the Imperial Noble Consort Yang Yu Huan of the Tang Dynasty who met a tragic end as the Emperor was forced to kill her. The entire line is 回眸一笑百媚生,六□粉黛无□色 which, loosely translated, meant "when she gave a coquettish smile, the six palaces paled in comparison". The six palaces referred to the Emperor's group of concubines.

Ming He watched as *wang fei* left with a herd of *yahuan*. He bowed along with the other servants, calling: "*Wang fei* take care."

Qu Qing Ju stopped in her steps to turn and nod at him before continuing forward.

Just this little action, it suddenly decreased the distance between Ming He and *wang fei*. The status embodied by *wang fei*. For her to nod at him, that was a great honor. He turned to look inside the study, walking to the door way and inquired: "*Wang ye*, The Department of Household Affairs delivered some lamb from the Northern borders. Master can have a bit of a taste."

"Get somebody to prepare meats and vegetables and deliver it to *zhengyuan*. *Ben wang* and *wang fei* will eat hotpot together," He Heng walked to the door. He looked at Ming He before adding, "A while earlier, didn't one of the Eastern Commandery official present some roe deer and other game meat, get them to prepare it carefully. *Wang fei* mentioned a few days ago she wanted to eat hotpot. With the weather now, it's a good time to do so."

"*Nucai* will go order it immediately," Ming He bowed and retreated. He sped up as he left the yard. On his way, he had to tell this to *zhengyuan* so *wang fei* wouldn't be surprised.

To eat hotpot inside in the winter was a very satisfying experience. Even more so when the food were very fresh and there was no need to worry about pesticides or loss of texture from freezing it.

Picking up an authentic wild mushroom and putting it in the bowl, she dipped it into the prepared top-notch seasoning. One bite, rich and spicy, it was unspeakably enjoyable.

Qu Qing Ju didn't like lamb, but the preparation of the lamb meat this time was very good. She could only taste the smooth and fine texture of the lamb and there was no rank odor. The mountain chicken was tender, the shrimp succulent, and the deer and game meat that was rarely eaten in her previous life, Qu Qing Ju couldn't resist but eating those too.

He Heng stared with shock at the disappearance of dish after dish of food. This was the first time he saw a woman who had this hearty of an appetite. He thought he had seen many different kinds of women, but seeing Qu Qing Ju's chopsticks wielded with such precision, speed and strength. This kind of woman, he had never encountered before.

At the end, Qu Qing Ju swiped the mushroom on her chopsticks before swallowing and setting them down. She rinsed her hands and mouth before exclaiming: "It's been so long since I've eaten so freely, has *qie* scared *wang ye*?"

He Heng had been wiping his hands. Upon hearing this, he said: "Seeing *wang fei*'s appetite is this good, *ben wang* has nothing to worry about. Since you like hotpot, in the future, the kitchen should make it frequently."

"For *qie*, hotpot isn't delicious if often eaten, but if it had been a long time, the desire will rise. The past few days, my body hadn't fully recovered so I didn't dare eat this type of food. But now, my desire has been fulfilled." Taken a handkerchief from Yu Zan to wipe her hands, Qu Qing Ju stood and asked He Heng, "Is *wang ye* willing to accompany *qiei* for a walk?"

"After each this much, it necessitates a walk," He Heng stood and extended a hand to Qu Qing Ju, "Qing Ju, come with me."

Qu Qing Ju smiled as she gave her hand to the other. The other's warm palm fit perfectly around her hand. She moved slightly to let their fingers intertwine. She smiled at He Heng and remarked, "Some say, ten fingers intertwined, will live together until the hairs turn white."

He Heng smiled warmly and his hand tightened around hers. The two held hands as they walked out of *zhen yuan*, a long procession loudly following behind and lit up the road in the night.

Qu Qing Ju looked regretfully at the dark sky: "Summer nights are much better to look at. Even if there is no moon, there are still stars." He

assumed she was a naïve young girl, then let's have some literature, discuss some moon and stars, chat about some poems and songs.

"Today is the second of the month, naturally there would be no moon. But a winter moon is also very beautiful," He Heng imitated Qu Qing Ju's motion and lifted his head. He then turned to Qu QingJu and stated, "But it is cold on winter nights so many have overlooked it."

Qu Qing Ju's eyebrows moved slightly but she was full of smiles when she looked at He Heng: "Many people like bright and colourful things, like the summer's moon and stars, the spring's flowers, and the winter's plum blossoms. *Qie* isn't different from them and prefers the things that everybody admires."

He Heng saw the smile on Qu Qing Ju's lips, his heart jerking slightly and he immediately moved his gaze aside. He found that his throat was a bit itchy. He tugged the person with him to walk forwards. On the stone path, light steps sounded.

"The world is full of common people, I also cannot be excused from being one of them." He tilted his head to smile at Qu Qing Ju. The smile was gentle and skilled. It was unspeakably good-looking.

Someone once said that when a man and a woman held hands and walked together; if the man always walked quickly in front, that meant that this man didn't know what was love. Qu Qing Ju looked at the man who had been walking alongside her and thought inside, but even when a man was forever watching the steps of a woman, it didn't mean he loved this woman. It could also mean this man was a womanizer and understood how a woman thought.

The two walked for almost an hour and when they were preparing to return, they encountered in their way Feng Zi Jin wearing a pale cloak.

Feng Zi Jin looked at the clasped hands and pursed her lips. She bowed and greeted: "*Nu* greets *wang ye, wang fei*."

"It's this late, why aren't you resting inside?" After He Heng finished speaking, he turned and took a cloak from Mu Jin's hands to wrap around Qu Qing Ju for her.

Qu Qing Ju took the change to scan Feng Zi Jin. The other held a palace lamp imprinted with the Lady in the Moon. Behind her, there were two little *yahuan*, each carrying two little baskets.

"*Wang ye*, the winter nights are long and *nu* retires late so an idea came to walk in the garden," Feng Zi Jin lowered her face, "I didn't think to encounter *wang ye* and *wang fei*."

Fingers carefully manicured to a clean and round edge quickly tied the cloak. He Heng looked at the two little *yahuan* behind Feng Zi Jin. He saw the paper boats and candles in the basket and faintly opened: "Since the winter nights are cold, then stay in the rooms. It's almost the year end, getting sick would be unfortunate."

"*Nu* thanks *wang ye* for his concern," Feng Zi Jin smiled widely, "But thinking back to when with *wang ye*, we floated paper boats, since it is a sleepless night, I thought to float some in the lotus pond. *Nu* is wearing sturdy clothing and it will only take a short while."

This was having managed to find out that she and He Heng was strolling in the garden and specially coming with tools to reminiscence about the past with He Heng? Qu Qing Ju curled her lips in a smile, "This boats are very well crafted. But after a night in the water, they wouldn't look pretty tomorrow morning. My suggestion, *wang ye*, you might as well get somebody to make Feng *ce fei* a gold boat. No matter what happens, that wouldn't be damaged."

"It's just a plaything, you take it so seriously," He Heng looked at the servants carrying palace lamps. This many people with lanterns, this Feng *shi* was still able to encounter them, that wasn't easy. When he teased a woman, it was his hobby. But he didn't want to see a woman take something from the past to try to curry favor. This Feng *shi* was starting to act out of her bounds.

"I think I've digested most of it. Let's return, the mists will be coming soon," He Heng held Qu Qing Ju's hand again, and looked at Feng Zi Jin who at retreated to one side before he left without a hint of hesitation.

Feng Zi Jin stared in disbelief at the back of He Heng and Qu Qing Ju. She didn't believe that *wang ye* would just leave. Was it that what she had done wasn't enough to stir up his memories of the past?

At that moment, she saw Qu Qing Ju turn her head, a faint smile appearing on her face. She suddenly started, a strange cold creeping up her back.

The biggest difference between men and women was that men were always best at forgetting the good of women and women was best at remembering the good of men. So when a woman interacted with a man, it couldn't always be good. If she was too good to him, he would take it for granted and forget the effort that the woman put in. To let a man remember you all the time, the first thing to do is to put yourself first all the time. If you forgot yourself, how could somebody else remember you?

A few days later, Qu Qing Ju received a gift. It was an Ashtamangala glass lamp. When this lamp was lit at night, it was possible to see light similar to the moon and stars fall into the corners of the room. It was breathtaking.

Hearing the exclamations of the servants around her, Qu Qing Ju smiled faintly at that Ashtamangala glass lamp hanging on its pearl-encrusted gold stand. The joy revealed through her brows was perfectly measured.

Blinking her eyes, Qu Qing Ju pointed in a direction: "Place the lamp there."

The servants carefully set the lamp in its place but the amazement in their eyes hadn't faded.

"*Wang fei*, that place is good, but there's always people walking by all the time. It wouldn't end well if there was an accident," Mu Jin

interjected hesitantly, "How about our storage. When *wang fei* wants to see it, *nubi* will take it out."

"Isn't the purpose of a lamp to be used?" Qu Qing Ju smiled as she watched the floating dots of light, "I very much like this lamp. It would be a pity for it not to be here to gaze at."

"*Nubi* understands," Mu Jin didn't continue and docilely stood being Qu Qing Ju. Her attitude was respectful yet didn't emanate flattery.

The story of how *wang ye* gave *wang fei* a valuable Ashmangala glass lamp quickly spread through the entire *wang fu*. The servants who had saw the lamp, when they spoke of it, it was as though it was their own. Their eyes danced and they rehashed with great pleasure.

Feng Zi Jin smashed many things in her own rooms. She wanted to burst into the *zhengyuan* and smash that lamp. Qu Qing Ju that whore. It was just a lamp. Did she have to let the servants spread it to the entire *fu*, as though it was that marvellous.

After smashing another piece of porcelain, Feng Zi Jin panted as she looked at the *yahuan* by the door and snarled: "What is it?!"

The little *yahuan* shrunk into herself before carefully announcing: "Mistress, *wang fei* has invited you to *zhenyuan*."

Feng Zi Jin's face darkened. She then wiped at the loose strands of hair by the face, "Send someone in to serve me."

She just wanted to go see what ploy that whore had cooked up again!

Chapter 22

The door to *zheng yuan* was on the same line as the door to the *wang fu* itself. This was showing that the person living in *zhen yuan* was the owner of the *fu*. The other concubines, including *tong fang*, were spread out in two side yards between the second and the third door. The

guardsmen, manservants and married servants resided outside the *ermin*.

The rules of the *wang fu* were strictly enforced. The area that a person could move in was clearly divided. For the servants, to be one that could walk inside the second door to serve, that made them a rank higher than the average servant as they were serving the inner courtyard. Even if it was just sweeping the ground, it was still a duty that many competed for.

So it could be seen that Qu Qing Ju, who lived in *zhen yuan* and had the power over *houyuan*, was an existence that could not be defied.

"*Wang fei*, Jiang *ce fei*, Luo *yiniang* and Han *yiniang* have arrived," Yu Zan announced from the door.

Qu Qing Ju sat on the armchair where a thick blanket had been laid down. She laid down halfway on the back, her hands holding a pearl encrusted hand warmer. Hearing Yu Zan's announcement, her eyebrow rose: "It's cold outside in the outer hall, invite them in."

Yu Zan bowed and silently retreated.

A short while later, three different beauties walked into the rooms. After they obediently greeted Qu Qing Ju, Qu Qing Ju allowed them to sit. She drawled: "Just now I had somebody organize my personal stores. I found some good cloth and called you here to let you pick and make some new clothes." Finishing, she tilted her head to look at Mu Jin.

Mu Jin motioned for the *yahuan* to present the bolts. The cloth was actually of good quality. Even though it couldn't rival Yun and Shu brocade, but it still was expensive.

Of the three sitting, Jiang Yong Yu held the highest rank. She looked at the large heap of cloth on the table and couldn't help but stand to say: "*Wang fei*, we can't do this. The *fu* has already sent over cloth for us, how can we take yours?"

"There's so much even I can't wear it all. If it stays, the color will fade," Qu Qing Ju looked at the cloths. These had come from Chang De Gong Fu who had, to not shame themselves, used them as several chests of dowry. There was a lot of it, but even ten bolts of these cloths couldn't compare to the price of one bolt of Shu brocade, "Seeing you wear it, it will brighten my eyes. If it was left at the bottom of the chest, wouldn't it be a waste?"

Hearing this, Jiang Yong Yu smiled and bowed to Qu Qing Ju, "*Nubi* thanks *wang fei* for her genoursity." Finishing, she pointed at two bolts of umber cloth, "Then I'll take these two bolts first."

Qu Qing Ju looked at the two bolts of brocade and commented, "Those two are very nice. Mu Jin, give those two bolts of sapphire blue to Jiang *ce fei* as well. Jiang *ce fei*'s skin is pale, the sapphire blue will show her off best."

Jiang Yong Ju remarked that *wang fei* was teasing her but didn't refuse. The other two *shiqie* picked a bolt each. Qu Qing Ju picked a bolt for each of them. The mood in the room started to become lively.

The three had the desire to ingratiate themselves and their implied compliments flowed. They weren't debasing themselves but it was possible to detect their respect.

"I had wanted to make a girdled dress but the color wasn't right. These lotus colored brocade that *wang fei* picked for *nu*, it will satisfy *nu*'s wishes," Han Qing He caressed a bolt of lotus brocade with joy, "This color is also good for making pouches."

"Hear that? It's as though she got the best," Jiang Yong Yu chuckled and looked at Qu Qing Ju who sat above her, "It is *wang fei* who has spoiled them to the point of no return."

"Jiang *ce fei* is making fun of us. *Nu* saw that when you were picking, your face was happy too," Han Qing He laughed, "And now you come to tease *nu*."

"So that's what is creating the fuss. Everybody is picking good things here." Feng Zi Jin could hear from outside the door how these women were flattering Qu Qing Ju. When she came in, she saw the bolts that the *yahuan* behind each *qieshi* were holding. The table still had some as well. She came and bent slightly to Qu Qing Ju, "*Nu* is late, is there anything good left over?"

Qu Qing Ju placed the hand warmer to one side and grasped the tea Mu Jin presented for a drink. With good humor, she looked at Feng Zi Jin: "I had thought that Feng *ce fei* wouldn't come. Take what you like."

Feng Zi Jin casually swept the pile, "*Nu* likes that bolt, is *wang fei* willing to part with it?"

Everybody looked and found the Feng Zi Jin was pointed at a pomegranate red bolt. Instantly, their expressions differed. Pomegranate red wasn't true red, but it was already a vibrant shade of red. Feng *shi* was a *ce shi*, she wasn't allowed to wear red. Was she challenging *wang fei*?

The smile on Qu Qing Ju's face grew warmer: "I had thought that, based on Feng *ce fei*'s looks, the blue colors suits you better. But since you like it, then take it. I have too much red brocade already. It hurts my eyes to look at it." Finishing, she said to Mu Jin, "Mu Jin, send the remainders to Feng *ce fei*'s rooms."

"Don't worry, *wang fei*. *Nubi* will certainly send somebody to deliver it," Mu Jin bent in a bow and started directing for the cloth to be gathered and delivered to Feng *ce fei*'s rooms.

Jiang Yong Yu held a smile in the corner of her lips. She kept her head down as she drank fine "Snow Falling on the Pool" tea[2]. Upon hearing *wang fei*'s words, her thin fingers slightly curled. She placed down the cup, and out of the corner of her mouth, she said to Feng Ji Zin, "*Meimei* is too brash. You might like the pomegranate, but I don't think it matches you."

[2] it is a type of flower tea originating from E Mei Mountain

Han Qing He heard Jiang Yong Yu clearly stating her side and narrowed her eyes at Jiang Yong Yu. She added: "*Nu thinks* Feng *ce fei* isn't fit for the pomegranate at all." A *ce shi* who wanted to wear red, what sort of daydream was that? Did she think *wang ye* was an imbecile who would disregard protocol?

Feng Zi Jin's face turned ugly. When Jiang Yong Yu spoke, she already felt annoyed. Seeing Han Qing He, a *shiqie*, dare speak to her, she lectured: "You are a *shiqie*, is there a place for you to speak here?"

"Feng *ce fei* assumes too much. Whether *nu* can speak or not, that's *wang fei*'s decision, not yours," Han Qing He mocked, "Unless Feng *ce fei* thinks she is capable of making *wang fei*'s decisions for her?"

"Shut up, what nonsense are you speaking?" Feng Zi Jin's family was somewhat well off. She didn't really care about the cloth. She was annoyed at how Qu Qing Ju had treated her. Seeing that Han Qing He, a *shiqie* from a lousy family, dare mock her, she shouted furiously, "Who let you remark on my affairs?"

In her anger, Feng Zi Jin had forgotten that Qu Qing Ju's personality wasn't like before. What she had done, it was disregarding her superiors, disregarding protocol.

Han Qing He heard the distain in Feng Ji Zin's speech for her birth and anger rose. Her expression became more respectful, her smile even warmer: "Feng *ce fei*, don't be angry. *Nu* is just stating the truth."

"You!" Feng Zi Jin stepped forward in anger. Somehow, she stepped on the hem of her dress and with a high shriek, she fell down. The instant she fell to the floor, she seemed to hear the clear sound of something breaing. Before she could see what she had bumped into, she heard a multitude of inhales and then there was a room full of silence.

She grabbed the hand of a *yahuan* to lever herself up and saw a glass lamp smashed on the floor. The little pearls that had been encrusted rolled away to the side. The jewels and pearls that had been on the

corners had fallen off. As to whether the body of the lamp had cracked, nobody knew.

"Heavens, this is the Ashtamangala glass lamp that *wang ye* specially found the craftsman to make for *wang fei!*" Han Qing He exclaimed before closing her mouth, her face flustered.

By this time, no matter how dumb Feng Zi Jin was, she knew that something was astray. Her body froze and she knelt with a bang, "*Wang fei*, *nu* didn't mean to. Please investigate clearly."

Everybody carefully peeked at *wang fei*'s expression. They found her face was frozen, almost as though she still hadn't recovered. Instantly, the hearts of those present started to tremble. Everybody in the *fu* knew how much *wang fei* liked this lamp. *Wang ye* had been flush with joy. Now that the lamp was damaged, nobody knew how furious *wang fei* would get. If *wang fei* was unhappy, *wang ye* would naturally be angry.

"*Wang fei*… …" Cold sweat started to form on Feng Zi Jin's palm. She didn't understand. How was it that she just couldn't control herself, that she would fall directly onto the lamp?

"You can all leave," Qu Qing Ju stood and looked tiredly at Feng Zi Jin, "I knew before that you had been unhappy with me. In the past, I thought you were proud but you were not cruel. I didn't think you would be like this."

Yes, it was too much of a coincidence. She didn't hit anything else, but she managed to directly bump into the token of love that *wang ye* gave to *wang fei*? It was jealousy. A little *ce fei* could be arrogant and demanding, but she had to disregard *wang fei*. It was a major overstep. Wasn't she just riding on the fact that *wang fei* had never punished her before?

The people inside watched at *wang fei* dazedly return to her inner rooms. They all paused for a beat before carefully picking up the Ashtamangala glass lamp and found that the lamp had already cracked.

"Such an exquisite work of art, a pity," Jiang Yong Yu sighed, "Let us leave. *Wang fei* is probably not in a good mood now. We shouldn't disturb her." Finishing, she took the two *shiqie* with her.

Feng Zi Jin dazedly stood and dizzily leaned on the *yahuan*'s hand to walk back to her rooms. The terror in her heart grew larger and larger. She didn't know what to do. Everybody had seen her bump into the lamp. She didn't even have any leeway to explain.

In another set of rooms, Jiang Yong Yu heard that Feng Zi Jin had already returned to her own rooms. She instantly sneered; "She's a moron!" Anybody with brains would be kneeling in front of the *zhen yuan* to beg for forgiveness. At least, when *wang ye* knew of the incident, his rage would lessen slightly. Now that she had retreated into her own rooms, wasn't that provoking *wang ye* even more?

Han Qing He sat opposite her and smiled upon hearing this, "In the past, she depended on the fact she had the highest birth of the entire *houyuan* and was favoured by *wang ye*. She harassed everybody, she didn't even treat you, who has the same status, as an equal. It isn't strange that she is a simpleton."

"You weren't very polite today to her," Jiang Yong Yu eyes Han Qing He, "Han *shiqie* has this side, I was fooled in the past."

"Jiang *ce fei* is nimble-minded and has never just wrong before." Han Qing He smiled and rose to bow to Jiang Yong Yu, "*Nu* is just going with the flow. I learned this from *ce fei*, so *nu* has to thank you."

Jiang Yong Yu jerked her lips and said flatly: "Han *shiqie* doesn't have to be so polite. I just want to have an easy life. You and I are water of the well and water of the river. There's no need for pleasantries."

Han Qing He snorted and bowed again, "If that is so, *nu* will bid farewell."

"I won't bother seeing you out," Jiang Yong Yu tilted her head and watched the figure of Han Qing He disappear outside the door.

A beat later, Ai Lu opened: "Mistress, what did Han *shiqie* mean?"

"She is just displaying her loyalty to *wang fei* and feeling me out," Jiang Yong Yu snorted, "Just wait, tomorrow there will be something for that Feng *ce fei* to worry about."

"If the heavens wish for one's death, it will first allow for one's madness," Jiang Yong Yu stood, "She's been mad for too long. She forgot her own identity. It isn't undeserved that *wang fei* is going to sort her out."

Ai Lu wanted to ask that if it was clearly Feng *ce fei* who kept on provoking which created the disaster, but why would it turn out to be *wang fei* sorting out Feng *ce fei*? But seeing her mistress remain silent, she docilely closed her mouth.

Chapter 23

Feng *ce fei* was arrogant and villainous, she broke the Ashmangala glass lamp *wang ye* gave to *wan fei*. The news spread like fire through the entire *fu*. The people who disliked Feng *ce fei* felt a vicious satisfaction and waited to see her misfortunes continue.

But who knew on the second day that the *zheng yuan* didn't make any moves, *wang fei* didn't even send out any words of admonishment. Those servants that had been offended by Feng Zi Jin were disappointed. Was the incident going to be covered up like this?

Another two days passed and just when the rumors were starting to settle, members of the Feng family came to the *fu*. Feng *ce fei*'s father was a third-grade assistant minister in the Department of Works. Relatively speaking, this wasn't a very important position in the City of Jing. Moreover, it was in the Department of Works and not an important department such as the Rites or Revenue.

Before the Feng Family's card could be passed into *zheng yuan*, it was blocked by *wang ye*'s people. They only said that the *fu* was temporarily

not receiving any visitors. The Feng family didn't even get to meet *wang ye* and *wang fei*. They didn't even manage to leave behind their gifts before they were thrown out.

The *fu* became lively again. *Wang ye* was very rude to the Feng family, did it mean that he was very discontent with Feng *ce fei*? Before everybody could react, Feng *ce fei* was moved to a small set of room in the western corner of the *wang fu*. Her allowances were all halved. Even though she e still called a *ce fei*, her allowances were no different than any other *shiqie*. Instantly the news came out that *wang ye* wanted to demote Feng *ce fei* to a *shiqie*.

The title of *ce fei*, it was just a pretty-sounding title. In the most basic terms, it was just a *yiniang* of somewhat good birth. The only one of w*ang ye's* women that could enter the genealogy book of the Imperial Family was *wang fei* and no one else. Today, *wang ye* could let the servants call you *ce fei*, tomorrow he could let the servants call another person *ce fei*. No matter how noble this *ce shi* was, it couldn't measure up to half a hand of the *di* wife.

In the *zheng yuan,* Qu Qing Ju looked at the box that He Heng had personally presented and then looked suspiciously at He Heng: "*Wang ye*, what good thing is in this box, that you have to taunt *qie* with it?"

He Heng pointed to the door and windows and ordered the servants: "Close the door and windows, make the room darker."

Because of the weather in the winter, the rooms were already darker than in other seasons. Once the openings were closed, the room instantly plunged into a darkness that was hard to adjust to.

"Open and take a look," He Heng smiled at Qu Qing Ju and hinted to her to open the box.

Qu Qing Ju smiled at He Heng, her forefinger caressed the lid for a while and under He Heng's expectant gaze, she opened the box. The moment the box was opened, a warm light streamed out of the box, illuminating the entire room.

Her finger stopped moving, Qu Qing Ju's eyes slightly widened. Inside the box was a mutton-fat jade lamp. The base of the lamp was a *qing luan* bird holding a lotus in its beak. Both the center of the lotus and the wings of the *qing luan* were glowing.

Qu Qing Ju looked awestruck at this lamp. That stone, the size of an infant's fist, sitting in the middle of the lotus, was that a night luminous pearl?[3] And the thumb sized beads encrusted on the wings, were they night luminous pearls too? And the base of this lamp clearly was carved from a single piece of jade, how big was the original for the product to be like this? The lotus flower wasn't small, it's weight almost surpassed the base of the lamp, so how did it maintain balance with the lamp base?

Even though the luminous pearl's light was gentle but on this lamp, Qu Qing Ju could only see the radiance of the *tuhao*[4]. The ancient people had endless imagination and creativity. In this instant, a certain dumb hick from the modern times knelt under this great culture.

The glass lamp before had exquisite workmanship, but Qu Qing Ju had been used to the different glass products of the modern age and wasn't amazed to this point. Today, with this night luminous pearl, the only thing she could do was worship it.

Seeing Qu Qing Ju's awestruck face, He Heng smiled and informed her: "This lamp was bestowed to me by *fuhuang* when I moved out of the palace two years ago to start my own *fu*. Supposedly, it was the masterpiece of a master craftsman a hundred years ago. This might not be as beautiful as the light of the moon and stars, but the carving on this jade lamp is passable. It will be suitable for you to use when you sleep."

The servants in the room were already dumbfounded. A night luminous pearl, it was already a valuable artifact. This lamp, it was worth entire cities. *Wang ye* really did place great importance on *wang fei*.

[3] a type of volcanic stone, usually fluorite. The stone glows in the dark, which was the origin of the word fluorescence. It was used for decoration

[4] a word similar to nouveau-riche but the Chinese term has gradually penetrated the international culture. See Wikipedia for the phenomenon.

"In the myths, *qing luan* is the messenger bird of good news besides the Heavenly Empress. They say that the *qing luan* is a romantic bird, it spends its entire life searching for the one." Qu Qing Ju's face, under the gentle light, seemed exceptionally warm, her eyes seemed to have been infected with the light from the pearl, "Meeting *wang ye*, is the greatest fortune of *qie*'s life."

He Heng slightly lowered his head, not looking at that luminous pair of eyes. He said softly, "It's just an object. If Qing Ju likes it, it has fulfilled its highest duty."

Touching the warm wings of the *qing luan*, Qu Qing Ju's finger stopped on the night luminous pearl embed in the wings, "*Wang ye*'s kindness, *qie* knows, but this is too valuable … …"

"No matter how valuable an object is, it doesn't compare to Qing Ju's place in my heart," He Heng took her hand in his, "Don't think so much, it's alright for you to just like it."

Returning the *qing luan* lotus lamp back into the box, the rooms became dusky again. He Heng saw that Qu Qing Ju seemed to be in a daze staring at him and his grasp tightened.

The servants reopened the door and windows. Light came into the room. He Heng released Qu Qing Ju's hand, "Earlier, a decree came from the palace. I have been summoned to enter in a little while. I'll probably return late, you don't have to wait up for me."

"Yes," Qu Qing Ju nodded with a smile. She stood and carefully placed the box to one side, "If that's going to happen, we should prepare early. If you are late, it might cause *fuhuang* to dislike you."

He Heng nodded and held Qu Qing Ju's hand again before leaving the *zheng yuan* with his entourage.

Qu Qing Ju saw the back of his figure disappear at the door and expressionlessly returned to sit on the armchair, "Mu Jin, place this lamp in my bedroom. Take care placing it to avoid any accidents." Regardless

of He Heng's intentions, she liked this lamp so it should be placed somewhere to be admired.

The rooms of the mistress of the *wang fu* were not a place anyone could enter. Mu Jin nodded and carefully held the box as she walked inside in fear of damaging it.

A short amount of time later, when Qu Qing Ju had just finished a cup of tea, she saw Huang Yang quickly walk in, "*Wang fei*, Feng *ce fei* is kneeling at the gates to beg for forgiveness."

Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow: "She came to beg forgiveness?" Ruminating for a while, she asked, "Did *wang ye* leave the *fu* yet?"

"Just left," Huang Yang thought a bit, "Feng *ce fei* is wearing plain clothes. She says she is truly regretful and begs *wang fei* to forgive her."

"Such a good show but the intended audience isn't here," Qu Qing Ju chuckled and stood, "I do wish to see how she is truly regretful."

Draping on a fox-skin cape, Qu Qing Ju took with her a group of high and low ranked servants as she walked to the gate. She saw Feng Ji Zin dressed in black and kneeling with a small *yahuan*. Maybe it was that the clothes weren't thick enough, her face was also slightly dark. When she came out, a few flickers of regret appeared on Feng Zi Jin's dark face and she gave a heavy kowtow, "*Nu* was ignorant and made a great error and begs for forgiveness from *wang fei*."

"Feng *ce fei*, what are you doing?" Qu Qing Ju walked to the top of the stairs at the gate. She calmly looked at Feng Zi Jin's state, "I have never done anything to Feng *ce fei*, what is the meaning of your actions?"

"*Wang fei*, please forgive *nu*. In the past, *nu* was disrespectful, *nu* didn't know her bounds," Feng Zi Jin gave a few more kowtows and then crawled in front of Qu Qing Ju, "*Wang fei*, please persuade *wang ye*, don't demote *nu*. Please, *wang fei*, help say something on behalf of *nu*."

Qu Qing Ju just saw that, in the span of a few days, Feng Zi Jin had become haggard, her eyes bloodshot. There was no sign of the liveliness

and arrogance in the previous few days. In the past, this person carried herself as though she was on top of the world. Did she ever think that a day like this would happen?

However, He Heng was actually going to demote her from *ce fei* to *yiniang*, was this telling everybody that in this *wang fu*, other than him as *wang ye*, there was only her as *wang fei* who was one of the owners of this *wang fu*?

She had already known He Heng was a smart and sensible person. Otherwise, he couldn't act so decisively. To purposefully let Feng Zi Jin find out, wasn't it just to make sure this scene would happen?

That man wanted her to release her anger and letting everybody in the city know how much he, Duan Wang, respected his wife and how correct his conduct was? His title was *Duan*[5]. Based on appearances, it fit him well.

Lowering her eyes to look at the person continuously kowtowing to her, Qu Qing Ju slowly asked: "Feng *shi*, who do you think I am?"

Feng Zi Jin paused and stopped kowtowing. She raised her head to dazedly gaze upon this woman she had never really placed any importance on.

"I am the mistress of Duan Wang Fu, *wang ye*'s *di* wife," Qu Qing Ju bent at the waist and used a hand to lift Feng Zi Jin's chin, "But why do you always forget this fact?"

Feng Zi Jin suddenly widened her eyes. She remembered when Qu Qing Ju had humiliated her before by lifting her chin. At that time, she had been enraged and felt humiliation. But now, she felt a coldness seep into her entire body. This woman in front of her wasn't a harmless bunny, she was a seductive fox-demoness, a poisonous scorpion.

Qu Qing Ju laughed in satisfaction as she saw Feng Zi Jin start to tremble. She slowly straighten and using a handkerchief, one by one, she

[5] See chapter one or glossary for definition of Duan

wiped her fingers, “I remember when I just got very sick, I vaguely heard you say outside, it was annoying to waver between life and death.”

Feng Zi Jin’s trembling became more severe, even her teeth started chattering.

“I didn’t die. How can I receive your pleas?” The smile on Qu Qing Ju’s mouth was so gentle it seemed to be made up of water. She exclaimed, “Feng *ce fei*, what are you doing? It’s so cold on the ground. *Wang ye* always makes his own decisions, you have made it difficult for me too.”

“Who– … …” Feng Zi Jin’s terror reached its peak and turned to rage. Before she could start swearing, Yin Liu covered her mouth.

“Oh, I had forgotten. The Feng Family does have some influence. Presumably, the family teachings are strict. Do your cousins have the same lively personality that you have?”

Feng Zi Jin instantly stopped and sank powerlessly to sit on the ground. She looked dazedly at the smiling Qu Qing Ju and muttered in a low voice: “You want to coerce me?”

Hearing this, Qu Qing Ju used her handkerchief to muffle the laughter coming out of her mouth: “Feng *ce fei*, don’t joke. Us inner chamber women, the most important part of us is our reputation. Matters outside, they aren’t easy to deal with, and meddling is an embarrassment.”

Feng Zi Jin opened her mouth but could say anything. She didn’t understand. She was the most favoured *ce fei*, how could she end up like this?

Didn’t *wang ye* not like *wang fei*, why was it like this?

Qu Qing Ju kept a faint smile as she watched Feng Zi Jin leave, aided by the support of the servants. The smile gradually faded at Qu Qing Ju’s lips and she looked coldly at the back of the figure, not a hint of warmth to be found.

Chapter 24

Qu Qing Ju toyed with the invitation sketched with a flower and had an underlying fragrance. She looked at Mu Jin with interest: "Let's hear it, it's winter, Rui *wang fei* is inviting people to some plum-blossom banquet, it is really due to interest or to torture people?" The Qin Family was a literary family so this Rui Wang Fei, Qin Bai Lu's actions did fit the label of the refined person.

"The flowers did not fall due in the white dew, and dried in the cold wind. No one loves the desolate state, even more, they avoid it and look from far away," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she put the invitation to one side, and exhaling a warm breath, "If there is much white dew, the autumn rice's ears are full. I wonder after the frost, is there really a good harvest?"

Mu Jin smiled and placed the invitation to one side. She replied: "*Nubi* heard that if there is frost before and after the white dew, there will be a good harvest. Dew without frost, the harvest could only be bad."

"Our Mu Jin knows so much," Qu Qing Ju stood, "Since it is the first banquet since *san dimei*[6] married into the Imperial Family, I, as her *saosao*[7], can't be absent. Get somebody to send back a reply, just say that I will arrive on time."

Yin Liu came in with a branch of red plum blossoms. Hearing Qu Qing Ju's words, she remarked as she inserted the branch into a vase: "Yesterday night, it just coincidentally snowed. Even though it is a good time to look at the plum blossoms, but it is very cold."

Qu Qing Ju gazed at that branch of red plum blossoms. She taunted: "So common, so common. Tomorrow, I'm not taking you to Rui Wang Fu."

[6] younger brother's wife
[7] older brother's wife

Yin Liu opened her mouth to speak but saw Yu Zan walking in followed by Jin Zhan. Both had smiles on their faces as though they had encountered something good.

"*Wang fei*," The two bowed. Yu Zan, who had walked at the front notified in a quiet voice, "*wang fei*, just now news from the west corner came. *Wang ye* demoted Feng *shi* to *yiniang*. The Feng Family came again and was lectured by *wang ye.*

Hearing the news, Qu Qing Ju had the feeling that this was what was expected. She loosened her grasp on the hand warmer to hold a cup of hot tea, "Did Feng *shi* make any noise?"

Yu Zan curled her lip and continued: "*Nubi* heard the tantrum started early in the morning but nobody paid attention so some things were smashed. It managed to quiet down by noon but until now, she still hasn't eaten." This Feng *shi* still hadn't given up. Last time after she had begged in front of *wang fei*, she had quieted for two days. Today, hearing that *wang ye* was demoting her, she once again started a senseless tantrum.

"Let the kitchen know to not slight Xi Jiao Yuan's food," Qu Qing Ju sipped on a cup of tea and intoned, "It doesn't matter if Feng *shi* eats or not. Whatever her stipend is, it will all be given to her. As to the objects she smashes? Let her. Our *wang fu* might not be extravagant, but it's possible to sacrifice a few vases. Don't stop her." That little suite in the western corner of *wang fu*, she wondered what it was like now.

Hearing *wang fei*'s words, Mu Jin assured from the side: "Don't worry, *wang fei*. *Nubi* will tell Huang Yang to send your words over immediately. It's such a pity that *wang fei*'s generosity and mercy hasn't eased Feng *shiqie*'s hubris. Such a disappointment."

"It can't be helped. She's a pampered and spoiled daughter of a government official, her hubris is a habit," Qu Qing Ju put down the tea cup, "Just a little *shiqie*, there's no need to take her seriously."

Yin Liu heard this and raised her head. She saw *wang fei* and Mu Jin share the same smile. This smile seemed to have a hint of deviousness. The words were reasonable but why were *wang fei* and Mu Jin's smiles so strange?

"Feng *shi* is still having a fit?" He Heng came back to his *fu* and heard Xiao Gan Zi's report. He frowned, "What's she throwing a tantrum about?"

Hearing this, Xiao Gan Zi lowered his head and an awkward expression appeared on his face, "Feng *shiqie* hasn't eaten or drank since this morning. She attempted to see you but was blocked by the guards so she just said a few words of complaint."

"Complaining? Complaining about who?" He Heng stopped in his steps, his brow slightly furrowing, "Complaining of *ben wang* or is it *wang fei*?"

Xiao Gan Zi bent his body even lower, his voice smaller: "Feng *shiqie* holds such deep affection for *wang ye*¸ she wouldn't complain about *wang ye*."

"Then she is complaining about *wang fei*?" He Heng sneered, "Just favoured her for a few days and she forgets who she really is. Qian Chang Xin, go personally to Xi Jiao Yuan to tell Feng *shi*. The Feng Family came to the *fu* today, if she still isn't satisfied and can't keep calm, then pack up and return back to the Feng family. *Ben wang*'s place won't accept a *shiqie* that's nobler than *wang fei*."

Qian Chang Xin received his orders and stared deeply at Xiao Gai Gi before leaving. This kid stated that Feng *shi* was full of love for *wang ye* but the underlying meaning was that she was discontent with *wang fei*. He seemed to be serving at *wang fei*'s side. The kid did have brains. No wonder he was a few years younger but already climbed to such a position.

How a servant answered a question, there were different ways. The same meaning, said in different ways, the impression would be

different. Feng *shi*, she would spend the rest of her life in that cold and remote Xi Jiao Yuan.

When Qian Chang Xin reached Xi Jiao Yuan, he saw haphazardly planted banana trees, gathered in messy clumps. Weeds crowded in the corners. The scenery wasn't as beautiful as the name had implied.

Qian Chang Xin's brows creased and relaxed as he saw the rice and dishes that littered the ground of the doorway. A young *taijian* who had been following him quickly came forward and kicked aside the pieces of broken porcelain, "Qian *yeye*,[8] be careful with your feet."

Qian Chang Xin silently walked in. He scanned the room. The ground was full of broken pottery, and then he looked at Ping Zi Jin who had just raised a slender porcelain vase. He raised his voice to holler: "What is Feng *zhuzi* doing?"

Feng Zi Jin saw the person that came was Qian Chang Xin, who served by *wang ye*'s side and her eyes light up. She put down the vase and asked: "Qian *gonggong*, is it *wang ye* that sent you to see me?"

Qian Chang Xin snorted and picked a place to set down his feet: "Who else other than *wang ye* would send *nucai*?" When he finished, he saw happiness crawl onto Feng *shiqie*'s face. He slowly drawled, "*Wang ye* said, if you keep throwing a fit like you this, your family will be called to take you home. Today, the Feng Family had come to our *fu*. Looking at how concerned they were for you, they would love to do so.

The joy on Feng Zi Jin's face retreated like the tide. She stared dazedly at Qian Chang Xin who left without a second look and powerlessly sat on a worn chair. A long while later, her eyes reddened and the tears came down. She knew she was finished, this was it for her entire life.

"*Zhuzi*," A *yahuan* saw the paleness of Ping Zi Jin's face and couldn't resist comforting her, "Don't take it so heavily. After *wang ye*'s anger cools, he will be good to you again."

[8] grandfather, gramps, term used to refer to a *taijian*

Feng Zi Jin gave a smile that was uglier than her crying. She stared with red-rimmed eyes at her *yatou*, "Bi Tao, don't comfort me. *Wang ye* doesn't want to see me again." Stopping there, she suddenly laughed, "How could I forget, I'm just a *qie*. Why did I think that the only difference between *ce fei* and *wang fei* was only one word?"

Thinking back to when she purposefully organized for servants to give Qu Qing Ju incompatible foods to cause Qu Qing Ju to slowly fall ill. She muttered: "Karma, this is all karma."

Bi Tao heard her mistress's whispers, her face suddenly changing. The servants had passed around the rumor that *wang fei* was too angry over Ban Xia which caused her to become ill. But she knew, *wang fei* wasn't ill because of her anger but due to having eaten incompatible foods. Those foods had caused her body to become weaker and weaker to the point of not being able to leave the bed.

But who knew that *wang fei* had suddenly recovered and punished the kitchen servants. After that, she personally ordered her food. Perhaps it was from the day that *wang fei* had recovered, this day was fated to happen.

She looked around at the dilapidated Xi Jiao Yuan. Bi Tao scrunched up a handkerchief to wipe her mistress' face as she gave a bitter smile. Maybe it was karma, or fate.

Due to the fact snow had fallen for the last two nights, so even though there were people who swept the streets, there was still a thick layer remaining. The people who made a living on the street bore the attack of the snowflakes as they saw, from far away, a carriage with an ebony roof drawn by four horses slowly proceed. Each time the horses stepped forward, a ringing would come from the carriage. Preceding and succeeding the carriage were guardmen, *taijian* and Imperial bodyguards. Everybody on the street understood when they saw the procession. This was another procession of an Imperial family member. The rumor was that the third Wang Fei was holding a plum blossom viewing banquet. That would be the most likely destination for these people.

"This carriage isn't as luxurious as the last few," A passerby commented in a quiet voice, "Wonder which family is it."

"Just shut up and don't be so ignorant. The carriages before were two-horse carriages, that one was a four-horse carriage. Unless it's a *jun wang* or above, who else dare to use four horses for a carriage?" A person beside him who had heard the comment explained, "That person is most likely a *wang fei*. See how the carriage is made out of ebony," Stopping, he pointed in the direction of the Imperial Palace, "Only the Emperor and the Emperor's children can use a sandalwood carriage."

The person who had spoken before instantly paled. He feared that his words would pass into the ears of the noble personages. That would be very unfortunate for him.

Qu Qing Ju didn't think that the carriage she was riding would become another's topic of discussion. When she reached Rui Wang Fu, she coincidentally arrived at the same time as the procession of Ning Wang Fei, the wife of *laoda*. After allowing Ning Wang Fei to enter first, she sat down on the sedan to enter *er men*.

Passing through the Gate of Drooping Flowers, the sedan stopped. After she held Mu Jin's hand to exit out the sedan's door, she saw a few women dressed grandly standing at the threshold of the gate. She looked over and bowed to Ning Wang Fei: "Greetings to *da huang sao."*

"*Er dimei* doesn't have to be so courteous," Ning Wang Fei reached out to support Qu Qing Ju, a warm and gentle smile on her face.

Qu Qing Ju smiled at Ning Wang Fei and looked towards Rui Wang Fei who had been standing a step behind Ning Wang Fei. The two bowed one after the other which passed for a greeting.

At this time, many others came over to greet Qu Qing Ju. When the disturbance calmed, the three *zhouli* chatted among themselves as they walked at the very front. They seemed so intimate that even blood sisters couldn't compare.

"*Er huang sao* was late today, she has to drink later." Qin Bai Lu held Qu Qing Ju's hand. Her voice was thin and soft. She teased, "You can't refuse."

Ning Wang Fei knew that Qu Qing Ju arrived at almost the exact same time as her but she let her enter first so she interjected: "*San dimei*, you may not know, your *er sao* arrived at the same time as me. But it was just I came in first, you can't punish her for that."

The two had arrived one after the other. How could Qin Bai Lu not know? But finding out that the two hadn't agreed to arrive together, she didn't raise the issue again and turned to converse on the plum blossoms in the garden.

Qu Qing Ju listened cheerfully and her gaze seemed to accidentally pass over Ning Wang Fei. The rumour was that Ning Wang Fei Wei Qing E was very virtuous as she ran Ning Wang Fu very successfully and the concubines lived in harmony with her. Today, as she met the real person, the rumors didn't live up. She couldn't help but sigh, no wonder she was a wife of the Imperial Family!

Chapter 25

The plum forest of Rui Wang Fu might not be the most beautiful in the City of Jing, but it was the most famous plum forest in the City of Jing. Because these plum trees were personally bestowed by the Emperor. At the beginning when Rui Wang was leaving the palace to construct his *fu*, he said he liked plum blossoms so the Emperor sent out an imperial decree and picked plum trees for the Ministry of Works to plant.

Therefore, nobody in the entire Jing city would say that the plum blossoms of Rui Wang Fu were not beautiful. Even though there was a mountain full of plum trees in the suburbs where many scholars and literati preferred to compose their poems and paint, nobody dare say that the mountain was the most beautiful plum forest in the city.

Rui Wang Fu's size was about the same as He Heng's *wang fu*. The layout was similar but the style and finer details were drastically different. If Qu Qing Ju had to pick a label to describe it, it would be lavish.

Long stretches of corridors, fake mountains with flowers and grass. Every bit projected the feeling of luxury. Qu Qing Ju was forced to admit, He Heng was actually a good child with his frugality. But this Rui Wang Fu was too ostentatious. It was as though they were afraid that people wouldn't know that their master was the most favoured by the Emperor.

People said that you could see a person's taste from the house they lived in. Of course, this only applied to people who had money. If Rui Wang Fu's style was considered to be lavish, then the house He Heng lived in was low-key tasteful luxury. From this point, it was possible to see the different personalities of the two brothers.

Passing through a moon door, the snow that had gathered on the stone paths had already been swept away so that the people admiring the flowers were not impeded. Qu Qing Ju gazed afar. This moderately sized plum forest, in the midst of the fine snow, did have a sense of beauty. She blinked her eyes and teased Qin Bai Lu: "*Dimei* is so lucky to have such a large and beautiful plum forest in your own home."

"Oh, it's nothing," Qin Bai Lu returned the smile, "*dimei* has heard that *er sao* will have a beautiful lotus pond when the summer comes."

"If what *meimei* says is true, then next summer, I will definitely invite everybody there to admire the lotuses," The cloak that Qu Qing Ju was draped in was a vibrant pomegranate red, edged in silver fox fur. The silver and red contrasted against Qu Qing Ju's pale face to seem even more fresh and young, "Such a pity that I entered only when it was autumn and didn't know that the *fu* had such beautiful attractions."

At this time, Ning Wang Fei Wei Qing E laughed: "As a little unmarried girl, who would know such things. But saying it now, it can be seen that *er shu* treats *dimei* very well. Otherwise, how can there be such free

and relaxed days, and to not have to pay attention to what's inside the *fu*?"

Qu Qing Ju heard this and knew that Wei Qing E was laughing at Qin Bai Lu for knowing so much as a just married woman and mocked her for not knowing how to run a household. But she said it so beautifully, nobody could pick it out. So she smiled widely and with a voice full of admiration, she pled: "*Saosao*, don't tease *dimei* any more. *Da sao* is so virtuous and good at running a household. But I'm such a dummy. When I have to deal with the household, I'm always flustered. Luckily, our *wang ye* is magnanimous and doesn't blame me. Otherwise, I'll be too ashamed to leave my rooms."

"*Er sao*'s words are a little incorrect, "Qin Bai Lu followed, "You're more capable than I am. Yesterday, our *wang ye* laughed at me for mixing many things up. What I think we should do is we should learn from *da sao*."

The loving affection that was being boasted off directly hit Wei Qing E's wound but the smile on her face grew warmer: "This is nothing, you'll slowly learn." At this time in a new marriage, it was naturally sweet like honey. But as the days pass and new people come, let's see if you can still say our *wang ye*, "When I first married, they laughed at me too. Now that you mentioned it, I'm now thinking about the past."

The three mutually looked at each other and laughed. They slowly walked towards the Pavilion Overlooking Plums in the middle of the plum forest.

Behind them, the crowd of noblewomen and official's wives followed with smiles on their faces but their hearts were tense. It looked as though all three of the *wang fei* weren't gullible. Especially tense was Luo *shi*, who was also in the crowd. As Qu Qing Ju's aunt, she was worried that her niece would accidentally fall into the word traps of the other two *wang fei*.

The Pavilion Overlooking Plums was a two-level pavilion built specifically for admiring plum blossoms in the winter. The womenfolk

sat inside the pavilion to look at the plum trees. They were free from the cold of the wind and snow and could partake in refreshments. The height to look at the scenery was especially good.

Qu Qing Ju loosened her cloak and revealed a head full of hair that had been hidden. Under Mu Jin's service, she exchanged the cloak for a silver fox skin cape. She waited for Wei Qing E to sit before sitting down herself at the table under the guidance of Qin Bai Lu. Because there were charcoal pans in the corner of the room, even the wind that blew in didn't cause her to feel cold.

Qu Qing Ju had just been poured a cup of hot tea when she heard Wei Qing E ask, "Isn't this a very good Long Jing?" She followed the sound and saw the other take a sip of tea.

"As expected from *da sao*," Qing Bai Lu smiled and informed, "This is Xi Hu Long Jing. The Emperor bestowed down from part of the Imperial Tribute. It is too much of a waste to drink this on a daily basis but to use this tea to treat everybody, it is most fitting."

"Rui *wang fei*'s tea is so good that even us common people find it delicious, " The Marquess of Bao Rong interjected, "*Chenfu*[9] is taking advantage of *wang fei*'s good fortune, to be able to taste such deliciousness."

Everybody knew that Bao Rong Hou Fu was close to Rui Wang Fu. Seeing the Marquess of Bao Rong's ingratiating manner, it was sweet enough to make their teeth ache. The people who were able to come admire the plum blossoms were not of insignificant status and most were very careful when speaking. There really weren't many who were as straightforward as the marquess.

"Bao Rong Hou *furen* is too complimentary." Qin Bai Lu didn't like the over-keen flattery of the Marquess of Bao Rong but knowing that the Marquis of Bao Rong was one of *wang ye*'s people, she kept a smile on

[9] means official or "your servant" when speaking to the Emperor/Imperial Family □ is woman, and used for married women.

her face as she gazed at the crowd, "The greatest accomplishment it will ever achieve is that everybody enjoys drinking it."

Each year, not even ten catties of the Imperial Tribute Long Jing were produced. The fact that Rui Wang Fu could serve it to guests, it could be seen just how much the Emperor had bestowed. This was also what Qin Bai Lu wanted everybody present to know. Otherwise, any tea would do. Why did she have to specifically use the Long Jing tea from the Imperial Tribute?

Was it to let everybody feel that the one the Emperor held most important was He Yuan and turn to support He Yuan to succeed the throne? Qu Qing Ju blew on the tea leaves floating on the surface, a smile appearing on her face. Nobody who sat here was stupid. If they really changed sides because of this bit of tea, they wouldn't have made it to this place in the first place.

"*San dimei* is so generous," Wei Qing E took another sip, "to be willing to let everybody have a taste of the tea that *fuhuang* has bestowed. *Da sao* here will give her thanks."

"*Da sao*, don't be so polite. We are one family, there's no need to distinguish so much," Stopping there, her gaze suddenly landed on the Marquess of Xiang Qing, Luo *shi*, "Speaking of this, the Marquess of Xiang Qing is part of *ersao*'s maternal family."

Qu Qing Ju heard the topic had moved towards her and put down her teacup to look at her aunt. She had seen her aunt, Luo *shi*, when she had arrived, but it hadn't been a good place to converse. Since Qin Bai Lu was pushing the focus onto her now, she would naturally accept it, "*San dimei* isn't wrong. This is my *jiumu*. From very little, I have received much care from my *jiumu*. If I knew earlier that *Jiumu* was coming today, I'm afraid I would have come to disturb you much earlier."

"I see that the person *ersao* wants to see the most isn't *dimei*, but the Marquess of Xiang Qing," Qing Bai Lu covered up a smile and said in a mocking tone, "I can't compete with the Marquess of Xiang Qing."

"You and I are part of one family, we will see each other often in the future. There's nothing special. *Jiumu* is my relative, we won't be as intimate as you and I," Qu Qing Ju said in a confiding tone, "*Dimei* isn't sad, you're laughing at me."

"I don't dare laugh at *saosao*," Qin Bai Lu hadn't expected that Qu Qing Ju would say such words and, with a smile, she replied, "*saosao* is close to her aunt, nobody would laugh."

Luo *shi* saw the two had finished and said warmly: "Rui *wang fei* must excuse us. It's just that *chenfu* and Rui *wangfei* hasn't seen each other for many days, *wang fei* is angry at *chenfu* as her *jiumu* so she is purposefully saying such things."

Qu Qing Ju smiled and stood to beg for mercy, "*Jiumu*, don't say anymore, if my cousins knew that I wronged you, they wouldn't let me into the *fu* in the future."

Luo *shi* smiled and half-declined to receive the bow and bowed in reply. They exchanged a few more words before calmly sitting down. She didn't forget her own position because of Qu Qing Ju's identity.

The people present clearly saw the intimacy between the two. People had said that aunts usually didn't treat their nieces well but look at this family. Weren't they so very close?

Qu Qing Ju knew that Luo *shi* was worried that she would be bullied by Qing Bai Lu so she had stood out. But she didn't want to involve the Tian Family into the succession conflict and purposefully put the Tian Family on the position of the stern elder, and not normal people who were relying on the *wang fu*.

Everybody gradually saw a hint of what really occurred and sighed in their hearts. The Tian Family was really a hard rock. Other than loyalty to the Emperor, they didn't side with anybody. Even if their niece had married into the *wang fu*, it didn't seem their attitude had changed. They didn't purposefully dissociate themselves but nor did they insincerely

flatter. This type of conduct really did seem like what the Tian Family would do.

So sometimes, something that seemed natural wouldn't cause people to think much of it. Even Wei Qing E and Qin Bai Lu could see that the Tian Family didn't have the desire to side with He Heng. They couldn't help but sympathize with Qu Qing Ju. Disregarding the troublesome maternal family, even her uncle's family wouldn't change their attitudes for her. How would she continue to live in Duan Wang Fu?

"The snow is getting heavier," Wei Qing E turned to look outside the window and saw the plum flowers proudly blooming in the snow, "In this white worlds, it is the red blossoms which are the most eye-catching. And they are also beautiful."

"Of course, the red is the right color. No matter how pretty the other colors are, in the midst of the winds and snow, they don't distinguish themselves," Qin Bai Lu smiled and asked: "What does *furen* think?"

Qu Qing Ju continued her interest in drinking tea. The words on the surface were complimenting the flowers, but underneath, wasn't it saying that the wife was the right way, and the *qie* were an embarrassment?

Everybody present was a wife and naturally concurred, full of praise for the red blossoms. A few of the younger ladies who came with their mothers, regardless if they understood or not, smiled and listened as though Qin Bai Lu was really complimenting the plum blossoms.

After admiring the flowers for a long while and the snow get even heavier, the participants were served the noon meal in the pavilion. After the meal, there was tea and conversation. Qu Qing Ju mused that this kind of gathering was boring and at the same time, she defended against the verbal attacks of Wei and Qing. A lot of tea was poured into her stomach in the meantime.

Wei Qing E saw the snow was becoming heavier and heavier so she stood to make her farewells. Seeing the situation, Qu Qing Ju and the

others also stood to make their farewells together. But they were persuaded by Qin Bai Lu who said that the snow was too heavy and that the carriages wouldn't be able to travel easily on the roads to wait for each of the *fu* to send over their sedans.

Everybody could only agree. They once again sat to chat about hair ornaments and clothes and give mutual compliments.

Chapter 26

When it came to clothing and adornments, women would always have many words. Which place had the best rouge, which place had the most exquisite hairpins, which place had the best embroiders. In conclusion, the topic was limitless.

The three *wangfei* present were different in their styles of dress. Ning Wang Fei was dignified and staid. An embroidered goose-yellow dress covered with a pure white cape. The hair was styled into a *yuanbaoji*[10] and set off with a whole set of jewelled *toumian*. [11]She looked dignified yet noble. Rui Wang Fei didn't have a cape but wore a silver mouse fur coat. She had a subdued *duowoji*,[12] beautiful and graceful with a hint of scholarliness.

Qu Qing Ju's appearance was the best among the three of them. What she wore wasn't as dignified as Ning Wang Fei or as scholarly as Rui Wang Fei. She was breathtaking, was what the women present thought. No wonder Duan *wang ye* would get angry on her behalf at Chang De Gong Fu. If any newly married wife had such a beauty, not many men would not favour her at all.

"*Er dimei*, the butterflies and peony embroidered on the edge of this dress is very beautiful," Wei Qing E's eyes swept over the hem of the

[10] a style of hair with the hair gathered in a topknot
[11] ornaments for hair. The specific style would vary by the dynasty.
[12] a hairstyle where the hair is gathered in a knot at one side of the head near the top. It has been described as "on the edge of falling off"

dress Qu Qing Ju wore that was revealed under the cape, "At a glance, it seems almost alive."

"*Saosao* is too nice. There's a *yahuan* that serves on by my side. When it isn't busy, she likes to work on this kind of things," Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow, "I normally don't use any other embroidery-women so I let them play among themselves. It's fine as long as I can wear it out the door."

"Everybody else sitting here also have some embroidery-women but *er sao* is too modest. I think this dress is extremely beautiful." Qin Bai Lu complimented Qu Qing Ju but inside she thought this *ersao* was too shallow. No matter how much care she took with her clothing, without any scholarly and artistic talent, how was she different from the common people?

The others *furen* present complimented the three, their words along the lines of noble, beautiful, magnificent or dignified . Along the way, they criticized themselves to create a contrast. To them, admiring the blossoms wasn't the most important. What was important was that these three were happy. Then they have almost completely fulfilled their duty at this plum-blossom banquet.

Wei Qing E was the eldest among the three so she held herself as the most steady and when talking with Qu Qing Ju and Qin Bai Lu, her voice held a hint of the affection elders had for those younger. She waited for the officials' wives to finish flattering them and interrupted: "All of you should not compliment these two anymore. Otherwise, they would get bashful."

The *chenfu* laughed and replied that they only said the truth, it wasn't complimenting them.

Qu Qing Ju looked at this room full of women. Each person had the most natural smile, as though each was happier than the next. At this time, she couldn't help but feel tired for these people but thinking that when these people returned home, they would naturally have others to flatter them, she could only sigh to herself. It was lucky that she hadn't

become a wife of a common man. Otherwise, it would be even more difficult to live in this kind of era and social conventions.

"*Er sao,* I heard that the Duchess of Chang De fell sick in the past few days. She couldn't even manage to attend today's banquet. How is she now?" Qin Bai Lu looked at Qu Qing Ju who seemed to be always smiling with the corners of her eyes and suddenly asked, "The third young lady of the *fu* even seemed to have fallen ill due to caring for her mother?"

Qu Qing Ju's eyebrows moved slightly, the mirth at the corner of her eyes not diminishing: "Really?"

"*Er sao* didn't know?" Qin Bai Lu asked with a hint of shock, "It seems like I asked the wrong person."

Putting down the teacup in her hand, Qu Qing Ju pushed the teacup to one side, "*Dimei*'s eyes and ears are as intelligent as expected. *Er sao* thanks you for your notice." Finishing, she stood, "It seems that this snow has stopped already. *Dimei* is so hospitable that I shouldn't leave but there is much to do at the *fu* so *er sao* will leave first." Finishing, she didn't care to see what expression Qin Bai Lu revealed and bowed slightly to Wei Qing E. She turned and left, supporting herself on Mu Jin's hand.

Everybody present stopped in shock and quickly stood to bid farewell to find that Duan Wang Fei had already passed the door.

Qin Bai Lu hadn't thought that Qu Qing Ju would just stand up and leave. She had been smiling just a second ago. Her expression had instantaneously changed. Her own face was frozen in irritation that somebody had insulted her and it took her a while to suppress the rage.

Wei Qing E smiled and stood. She also unhesitatingly bid her farewells. She clearly didn't desire to remain at this place to give honor to Qin Bai Lu. Ning Wang might not be close to He Heng, but it was better than with He Yuan. Why would she side with Qin Bai Lu and offend Qu Qing Ju?

When the two *wang fei* left, half of the crowd of noblewomen continuously left, leaving behind only the members of the families that had sided with He Yuan.

"*Wang fei*, this Duan Wang Fei is too straightforward," The *yahuan* that supported Wei Qing E exclaimed in a quiet voice, "*Nubi* saw that Rui Wang Fei's expression even changed."

"Change is good. She keeps doing her act of the talented woman, it's so distasteful," When Wei Qing E came out of the pavilion, she mocked, "This entire city, who doesn't know that the second Duchess of Chang De[13] treated Duan Wang Fei badly. Qin Bai Lu was clearly accusing Qu Qing Ju of being unfilial. She was purposefully embarrassing Qu Qing Ju."

"Even so, but the way Duan Wang Fei left, wouldn't people say she is unfilial?" The *yahuan* looked at the surrounding and seeing no one around, she quipped, "I hadn't thought that Duan Wang Fei's personality was like this."

"Who doesn't have sore spots," Wei Qing E expressionlessly stepped on the snow, "All in the Jing City knows that, as a stepmother, the second Duchess of Chang De was not loving. Qu Qing Ju dares to do so, she isn't afraid of being talked about. Also, in Jing City, who would, for a second Duchess of Changde, criticize a *wang fei*? A member of the Imperial Family, a right is right, but a wrong is still right. Didn't you see that Duan Wang Fei was very respectful to the Marchioness of Xiang Qing?

Thinking that she was experienced after reading those stupid books? Wei Qing E smiled coldly. From her point of view, Qin Bai Lu clearly was a pedant. Were those words what she, as a *dimei*, could say to her *saozi*? No wonder Qu Qing Ju mocked Qin Bai Lu for being intelligent with her eyes and ears. After what happened today, tomorrow the rumor would be that Rui Wang Fu knew everything that occurred in the City of Jing.

[13] The "second" refers to the fact she is the second wife of the Duke of Changde, not the original wife.

Whose home didn't have things that people shouldn't see? In the future, the officials in Jing would be at least wary of Rui Wang Fu. She was happy to spectate at the chaos. But Qu Qing Ju had guts, to turn and leave. Not just anyone would have the boldness.

At this time, the sedan carrying Qu Qing Ju was slowly making its way to the front gate. Qu Qing Ju sat in the sedan without the anger that everybody else was imagining. At the beginning, she had the decree that if you who wouldn't let me be happy, then I would make it difficult for you. She dared to leave and she wasn't afraid of becoming enemies with Qin Bai Lu. Additionally, even if she didn't storm off, the two of them wouldn't have good relations in the future.

The swaying and bouncing sedan suddenly stopped. Qu Qing Ju heard the servants outside kneel and voice a greeting. She slightly pulled back the window curtain and saw a person wearing a white cloak with a *taijian* accompanying him, standing five paces away from the sedan.

This person was Rui Wang He Yuan. Qu Qing Ju instantly let go of the curtain in her hand, and sat back in the sedan without a word.

He Yuan saw the slight movement of the curtain on the sedan and slightly bowed at the waist: "Greetings to *er sao*."

"*San shu* is too courteous." Qu Qing Ju didn't have any interest in men that was as beautiful as a woman and faintly returned, "Thanks for your hospitality today, but it is late, so farewell."

"Farewell *er sao*," He Yuan place his hand behind his back and looked at the sedan sway and bounce as it left. Then he saw a young *taijian* quickly run over.

"*Wang ye*, one of the gatekeepers just reported that Duan *wang ye*'s sedan has stopped at the gate but he doesn't know why it hasn't entered."

Turning to look at the far-away sedan, He Yuan snorted: "Since *ben wang*'s good brother isn't entering the *fu*, *ben wang* won't disturb him."

He actually came personally to pick her up. Did this He Heng get addicted to pretending to be a romantic?

Just as he finished, he saw a few more sedans coming from the direction of the plum forest. He turned and walked to the side, avoiding the sedans of the womenfolk. Knowing that Qin Bai Lu had invited the women to today's banquet, he didn't have any objections. But he looked down on his *wang fei*'s love for admiring plum blossoms in a snowstorm. No wonder people said the virtue of a woman was to have no talents. Women who read too many books, they were so picky. Was it impossible to admire plum blossoms at some other time?

Luo *shi* sat in the sedan and thought back to what had happened at the banquet. She felt that her niece seemed different than before. Her words were as few as in the past, but the aura she exuded had become stronger. It seemed that Duan *wang ye* did treat her well. Otherwise, her niece wouldn't have the bravery to storm away to embarrassed Rui Wang Fei.

The sedan stopped inside the main gate and Luo *shi* came out. She found many of the *furen* were standing at the spot as though they were waiting for something.

"What's going on?" She walked towards a *furen* that she had good relations with and asked in a light voice, "Why aren't they leaving?"

"Duan *wang ye*'s sedan is outside," This *furen* raised her chin and motioned for her to look at the main gate. She suddenly smiled and teased, "I think that Duan Wang really cares for your niece."

Luo *shi*, upon hearing this, looked at the gate and saw her niece take Duan Wang's hand to enter the sedan. That red cloak dragging over the white snow was especially beautiful.

Seeing that Duan Wang waited for her niece to sit down before he followed, Luo *shi* took back her gaze. Under the gazes that the women surrounding her sent over, the smile on her face was the same as any other day.

Wei Qing E held her servant's hand as she stood outside the gate. Seeing Duan Wang Fu's sedan being carried far away, her expression was distant. For Ning Wang Fu, she poured her heart in, but she hadn't seen *wang ye* treat her this way. Qu Qing Ju, other than her exceptional appearance, was she as good as her in any area? Could it be that everything she had done, it wasn't enough to surpass Qu Qing Ju's gorgeous dress?

Even that cloak that Qu Qing Ju carelessly dragged on the snow, it was made from the finest Yun brocade and sewn with silk on the inside. When it touched water, it would wrinkle. Just this one cloak, it would cost several hundreds of gold. Now that this cloak has been dragged in the snow, naturally it couldn't be worn anymore.

The *wang fu* naturally didn't care about the money, but she was used to running a household and everything used in the household was budgeted. She herself wasn't used to such extravagance. As the wife, why would she copy those *qieshi* and spend all her attention on clothing and makeup?

"*Wang fei?*" The *yahuan* beside her saw she hadn't moved and worriedly looked at her.

"Let's go," Wei Qing E smiled. She didn't have to compete with Qu Qing Ju. When He Heng was tired of her, her beautiful dress would become lavishness and wastefulness. Her conduct will become willfulness and pretension. And she herself didn't need this time of magnificence. No matter what time and place, she was always the most dignified and virtuous Ning Wang Fei.

This was the road that the wives of the Imperial Family should walk.

Chapter 27

Because it was a snowy day,and even though the sedan carriers walked very carefully, Qu Qing Ju still felt that the sedan underneath her swayed heavily. She wanted to raise the curtain to look outside but

thinking that He Heng was still sitting beside her, she only smiled and asked: "Why did *wang ye* come?"

"I had to attend to some matters in the morning and I coincidentally passed so I thought that since you were on *san di*'s *fu*, I would wait for you to go home together," He Heng raised a hand to pull back the curtain to look outside. The snow was falling heavily and not many people were on the streets, "This snow is getting worse. In the future, if the weather is like this, then you shouldn't leave home."

"Who is willing to bother in this kind of weather," Qu Qing Ju smiled and glanced at him, "But it was *san dimei*'s first time sending an invitation. It wouldn't be good to reject her, so I had to come."

He Heng saw her expression held hints of unwillingness and laughed. He patted the back of her hand: "Did something make you unhappy at the banquet?" He Yuan's *wang fei* Qin *shi*, didn't she come from a well-educated family?

Telling you to make you happy? Qu Qing Ju turned and patted his hand: "Don't even mention it. Our good *dimei*, she criticized *qie* for not being filial to my step-mother."

He was a bit surprised by the pat that Qu Qing Ju gave. He Heng looked at the back of his hand that had suffered a blow and felt that that place felt a bit tickled. He curled his finger and raised an eyebrow before stating: "She, as your *dimei*, to say such things, don't pay any attention. That Liang *shi*, she isn't deserving of any of your filial piety. As your step-mother, she wasn't loving, yet she still wants others to respect and love her. She should take a look in the mirror." He looked down on the entire family of Chang De Gong Fu. And for Liang *shi*, he had an even worse impression. At present, Qu Qing Ju was his wife, was this dynasty's *wang fei*. The other was a little duchess. Did she think she could posture in front of *wang fei*?

The fact that Chang De Gong Fu was rude to Qu Qing Ju, that was not taking him seriously. He, as a *wang ye*, how could he be overlooked by this family, they weren't anything!

Detecting the other's emotions, Qu Qing Ju's smile became even prettier: "*Wang ye*, don't be angry. You care for me, I know."

Hearing Qu Qing Ju changed her way of speech in front of him to call herself "I", He Heng didn't feel as though he wasn't respected. Quite the opposite, he felt that this was Qu Qing Ju becoming closer with him. He raised his head and saw the other's eyes shining like the stars and the thankfulness on her face.

His heart moved slightly and he suddenly felt that this was good between husband and wife. This woman was his wife, she was the woman that was going to accompany him together down the road. If they always maintained the respect and distance, it wouldn't be interesting.

"This is caring for you?" He Heng smiled even more warmly, "I know you don't like going to Chang De Gong Fu. In the future, you don't have to bother with those people. For everything, I'm behind you."

Qu Qing Ju turned her head to look at him and right as he stared in a daze, suddenly pushed her head into his chest: "*Wang ye*, the way you are would make me change into a bad person."

"*Ben wang's* woman, she only needs to be good to me. To others, being bad is fine." The corners of He Heng's lips raised lightly and he unconsciously reached out with his hand to carefully wrap around her waist to prevent Qu Qing Ju from accidentally falling off.

Lying on He Heng's chest, Qu Qing Ju thought that it was lucky she had seen many men comfort women. Otherwise, with how skilled He Heng's tactics were, she would have fell in early on. Look at this conduct, the words, it was the epitome of deep love.

At this time, the sedan abruptly swayed. He Heng quickly reached with both hands to protect Qu Qing Ju, their bodies moving backwards and avoiding the window which would be an easy avenue of attack. He then manipulated the other to lie on his knees before asking harshly: "What is it?"

"*Wang ye*, there's someone blocking the road ahead," Outside the curtain, Qian Chang Xin looked at the "ruffians chasing a beauty" act and bowed before answering, "There's some people chasing after a woman ahead." His voice was relaxed but the place he was standing perfectly blocked the entrance to the sedan. The other guards placed their hands on their swords.

Hearing this, Qu Qing Ju moved her body and in response, He Heng reached with two fingers to tap on her head.

Seeing Qu Qing Ju stare with two big eyes at him, He Heng smiled at her before commanding: "Clear the road."

When the rough men in pursuit saw the procession, they had quickly stopped and retreated to one side. They only hated that they didn't have good luck, that they would, in this kind of weather, encounter nobility sitting in an eight-person sedan.

Hearing the noble speak, the men obediently knelt to one side, afraid the noble would blame them for their offense.

The young woman kneeling at the front saw the situation and her eyes brightened. She knelt with a bang about six meters from the sedan, "*Daren*, please *daren*, save this girl. These criminals want to capture this girl to become a concubine for a landlord. Please, *daren*, save this girl."

They could even encounter such a thing as kidnapping a citizen? Qu Qing Ju crisply moved herself into a comfortable position leaning against He Heng's legs. She teased with a laugh: "Such a cold and wintry place, a helpless and pitiful girl asking for help. *Wang ye*, do you want to be a hero and rescue the damsel?"

He Heng saw the mischief in her smile and pressed against the corner of her lips with his index finger: "The beauty is already here, I don't see a beauty anywhere else."

Opening her mouth and biting down on that finger, Qu Qing Ju used her teeth and ground against it before whining: "Who knows if that little beauty's pitiful state would move someone?"

Enjoying Qu Qing Ju's pretty state very much, He Heng smiled and scorned, "This vinegar[14] is unreasonable. A strange common woman, I won't even want her to be a servant girl on the *wang fu*. How would I let her serve me?"

Standing outside, Qian Chang Xin silently turned his head in the other direction and pretended he didn't hear anything from the sedan. He looked at the girl kneeling. She was about sixteen or seventeen, her hair tangled from running. But with that pale and fine face, there was a hint of a delicate beauty that would provoke pity. She was wearing a water-blue tight girdled cotton dress which wasn't very sturdy and did have some hints of beauty. But when his gaze swept across the hand that was half hidden in her sleeve, his face darkened and he ordered: "Retreat, in front of *wang ye*'s procession, there cannot be any infractions." Finishing, he gave a look to the two guardsmen beside him. The two guardsmen walked forward and dragged the woman to throw to one side.

Not looking at the woman covered in snow due to being dragged, Qian Chang Xin shook his sleeve: "Onward!"

They even had shamelessness to use such an old scheme. The clothing was normal, but the craftsmanship wasn't average. And the fingers like water onions. Which girl in a normal family didn't do any household chores and could protect her hand to be that tender? Did they think that he, Qian *yeye*, was blind?

After the sedan had continued forward for a distance, He Heng finally allowed Qu Qing Ju to straighten. He said with a faint smile: "I wonder who would send me such a good gift, but it's just that the presentation needs some work."

Hearing the meaning in He Heng's words, Qu Qing Ju asked in return: "Why so confident it is somebody sending a gift, not this woman wanting to send herself??

"The preparation was too good. There could be no such coincidence in this world. If it was a normal person, they would have already hid to

[14] Vinegar is a metaphor for jealousy

one side, not come close to the sedan," He Heng's smile was slightly cold.

"This person is underestimating *wang ye*." Qu Qing Ju understood that there wasn't many "hero rescuing the damsel-in-distress" in this world. This wasn't a novel or a TV show. No wonder He Heng was so wary. He wasn't a lustful person. A person suddenly rushing out in front, he would naturally be careful.

"Oh?" Seeing the distain on Qu Qing Ju's face, He Heng smiled again. He turned to open the window. Looking at the snow floating outside, he suddenly felt that the snowflakes were somewhat beautiful.

The two returned to the *wang fu* and after eating, they slept early. As to this little interruption, Qu Qing Ju was too lazy to think about it and He Heng didn't mention it again.

On the second morning, the snow had stopped but the snow on the ground hadn't melted so it was colder than when it was actually snowing. He Heng stood in the Great Hall and listened to the officials of the court argue over the examinations for next spring, his face expressionless.

Both He Qi and He Yuan's people wanted to recommend a person from their side to be Chief Examiner. The spit flew and the words flowed without pause. The verbal skills of the literati could be seen clearly.

Qing De Emperor, sitting at the top felt a headache come on due to the argument under him. Seeing He Heng standing and maintaining his silence, he said: "Duan Wang, what do you think?"

Picked out by the Emperor, He Heng stepped forward, and raising his hands in a greeting he said, "*Fuhuang*, what the *daren* here have said all are reasonable, but *er chen* feels there are two others that could fulfill such an important duty."

"Speak further." Qing De Emperor looked at his eldest son and then his third son before returning to He Heng.

"According to *er chen*'s thinking, the Minister of Defence, Luo *daren* and Great Scholar Lu could fill such a position. Both *daren*, in their year, were of first rank for their examination and they are just in their conduct, and steadfast. If the two *daren* could be examiners, it would be the best fit." He Heng wasn't dumb enough to try to compete for the position of examiner at this time. *Fuhuang* was old now, he was wary of his young sons. It would be less troublesome if he recommended two of *fuhuang*'s old subordinates.

He Qi and He Yuan hear this and stared at He Heng. What was *lao er* thinking?

Qing De Emperor's face softened as though he had heard the answer he wanted. His finger tapped on the armrest of the dragon chair: "This matter will be discussed upon later. Let's break up now."

Everybody knew that the Emperor had made his decision and gave three calls of "Ten Thousand Years" while kneeling to bid farewell. After the Emperor had left, each slowly stood and left in small groups.

"*Er ge*, that was a good idea," He Yuan already understood He Heng's motivation and walked to He Heng's side with a mirthless smile to walk with him, "But *didi* heard that Luo *daren*'s daughter is *er sao*'s aunt. *Er sao* and this aunt have a great love for each other, is that the truth?"

He Heng's steps slightly paused and he smiled as he looked at He Yuan: "*Yuxiong*[15] didn't know when *didi* started to be interested in the matters of other families. This matter between womenfolk, it's a matter for women to pay attention to. *Yuxiong* doesn't control these things."

Hearing the sarcasm in He Heng's words, He Yuan's face didn't look very good. He never really cared for He Heng's conduct of insincere smiles and coldly smirked before retorting: "*Er ge*'s words are in error. Husband and wife are one being. Mutually paying attention is right, why distinguish between man and woman."

[15] means stupid, dumb. this is referring to oneself as a stupid elder brother.

"*Yuxiong* naturally knows this," He Heng's smile became even softer, "But it's probably *didi* who doesn't know."

He Yuan snorted. When he turned, he saw *laoda* heading towards them and his face instantly darkened.

Chapter 28

"*Er di, san di,* let's walk together." He Qi smiled as he walked in front of the two, "I heard that a new restaurant opened in Jing, why don't us brothers make a visit together?"

He Yuan sneered: "*Da ge* is too polite but *didi* has other matter and so will leave first." Finishing, he flung his sleeve and walked away with a cold face, not even leaving behind a hint of respect for He Qi.

This type of encounter had happened more than one. He Qi's expression didn't change as he eyed the back of the figure and said unconcernedly to He Heng, "He's not going, you're coming with *ge*."

He Heng smiled and complied. His attitude was casual as he walked together with He Qi. There were no sparks of the struggle for succession between the two. He understood, He Qi might seem upright and honest but he was definitely one who "pretended to be a pig as he eats tigers". The reputation spread that He Yuan had of being arrogant and brash, half of it could be put on his head.

It was just a pity that *laodao*s mother's birth was too low. This was his greatest challenge in trying to compete for the throne. But the rumor was that the Emperor was planning on bestowing the *hougong* soon. Nobody know if he would raise *lao da*'s mother's position. Based on the fact that she had *laoda* as an imperial son, she should have been promoted much earlier. It was *laosan*'s *mufei* who kept on getting in the way, so that the eldest Imperial Son's birth mother still only had the title of *cairen*.

The two came together to the restaurant and left separately after a meal. He Heng didn't manage to experience the taste of the wine and food

before *laodao* had already hinted at his desire to ally with him against *laosan*.

Returning to the *wang fu*, He Heng found that every servant in the *fu* seemed to have cheer on their faces. He couldn't resist asking Ming He who welcomed him back: "Did something good happen on this *fu*?"

"*Wang ye*, it's just that it's almost the winter holidays, *wang fei* had rewarded some silver to us as servants," Ming He knelt and answered, "*Nucai* forgot ourselves in joy, *wang ye* have mercy."

"Stand up. *Wang fei* has rewarded you all, it's natural for people to be happy," He Heng waved his hand, "what's *wang fei* doing right now?"

"Just now *nucai* went to *zhengyuan* to kowtow and express thanks. *Wang fei* is probably still there, but *nucai* doesn't know anything else," Ming He bowed and retreated to one side to express that he had no intentions of inquiring of news about *zhengyuan*.

"En," He Heng nodded, his steps changing direction, "Let's go see *zhengyuan*."

Stepping into *zhengyuan*, He Heng stopped the servants from announcing him and walked straight into the rooms. Just outside the door, he heard the conversation inside the room.

"*Wang fei*, this pouch is actually pretty good, why are you hiding it?"

"It's fine, I know you are comforting me. This thing, I can't present it as a gift."

"But … …"

"What thing you can't gift?" He Heng walked in and saw Qu Qing Ju try to hide something behind her. He smiled and walked behind her. Taking the object for a look, it was a dark blue pouch. Embroidered on one side was a simple design of clouds, on the other, there was a large character for good fortune. The skill of embroidery really couldn't compare to what he usually used.

"Is this for me?" He Heng looked again and again at the pouch and wouldn't return it to Qu Qing Ju. Seeing the other in a state of awkwardness, "I think it is very good."

Qu Qing Ju coughed: "That is, it's just for amusement, I didn't say it was for you."

"Then I am asking for it from you," He Heng jerked the pouch he had on his body off and personally put on this one. He smiled and commented, "This color is pretty good."

Qu Qing Ju glanced at the pouch before instantly moving his gaze: "Since *wang ye* likes it, then use it." Finishing, she turned to ask, "*Wang ye*, are you using the night meal here?"

He Heng nodded his head, "The hotpot last time was good, let's have the same tonight."

Qu Qing Ju, who had desired to eat hotpot again, naturally agreed. She felt that it hadn't been a loss to put the effort in. At least now, she could eat good, drink good and occasionally play at being arrogant. She peeked again at the deep blue pouch and curled her lips.

The end of the year was getting closer and closer. The result was that the people at court also became busier. The matter of the examinations had been finally. The Chief Examiner was the Great Scholar Lu Jing Hong, a member of the Hong Yuan Cabinet. This person was one of the two that He Heng had recommended, the Deputy Examiner was one of He Yuan's people.

When the Imperial Decree came down, He Heng didn't feel any surprise. *Fuhuang* might be wary of his sons but he still heavily favoured He Yuan over all. Otherwise, why would he keep the position of Deputy Examiner for him?

It was a pity his *fuhuang* didn't know that spoiling was a type of harm. He Yuan's appetite would become bigger and bigger under his care. He would definitely create trouble.

On the twenty-sixth day of the twelfth month, a decree came out again from the palace. Many of the consorts were promoted. Ning Wang's birth mother, Tao *shi*, was promoted to Noble *Pin*, her title was Wen.[16] Both He Yuan and He Heng's mothers took a step forward from *fei* to *guifei*.[17]

Just when everybody in Jing was preparing celebratory presents, a decree for marriage came down. Minister Luo's *di* granddaughter was to be married to Cheng Wang He Ming. The marriage would take place when spring arrived.

When this decree came down, it shocked everybody to the point of seeing stars. They all gave out a lot in congratulatory gifts and then each raised their heads and stretched their necks to gaze and see the mess that Jing would fall into next year.

Qu Qing Ju finished preparing the gifts to send to the Luo Family and Cheng Wang Fu. There were also gifts for the consorts who had been promoted inside the palace. She sat down with a cup of tea and let Shu Kui massage her shoulders, her head revolving around the matter of the Luo Family and Cheng Wang.

The Luo Family was *Jiumu*'s maternal family. It wasn't very distinguished, but did have some reputation in the City of Jing. It wasn't a surprise for a girl of the Luo family to marry into the Imperial Family. But marrying this Cheng Wang, it still couldn't be seen if it was good or bad.

If it could be said that the three *wang ye* at the front had hope of succeeding the throne, He Ming was just a passer-by. Unless the three people in front all died, he wouldn't have a hope of reaching the throne. This person's abilities were as average as his name. Who knew how much Qing De Emperor didn't like this son. The three sons in front, one had the meaning of the "good luck of the *qilin*¸" one was" the beauty of

[16] warm, tender, soft, gentle

[17] a position above *fei*. □ means valued, or noble.

jade," one was "of profound and deep learning." Each one was of higher quality than the one before.

But when it came to Cheng Wang, the brain cells suddenly snapped and the skill of naming dropped. He gave a name that was very common. The meaning was "bright" but it wasn't as dignified and noble. Just as well the Emperor didn't know of the "Little Student Ming"[18] from the math textbooks of the past life and how busy it was. He was continuously pouring and catching water, continuously walking from place A to B, continuously riding the bike to deliver apples, continuously going from grandma's to uncle's.

Thinking about it, Qu Qing Ju shook her head and said to Mu Jin: "Add half more to the gifts to Cheng Wang Fu." Just that name, it was deserving of sympathy.

Mu Jin confirmed before asking: "*Wang fei*, just now, the Department of Household Affairs sent over the allowance for the year. *Nubi* has already checked the items against the list. Should the items be entered into the stores?"

Even though the items from the Department of Household Affairs weren't rare, but it was still items belonging to the Imperial Family. This was a matter of honor. Qu Qing Ju nodded and thinking that after a few days, she had to enter the palace to kowtow and ask for morning greetings, she felt her knees ache. Disregarding the complicated connections and thoughts of the women inside of the palace, just those two troublesome *zhouli*, it was enough to irritate somebody.

At the year's end, the Luo Family was one of the busiest. The people that sent gifts to the *fu* were endless. Even though the daughter of Luo was marrying Cheng Wang, who wasn't favoured by the Emperor but he was still a *wang ye*, and the people in the city of Jing had to pay some respect.

[18] It's akin to John

The elder Luo *taitai* flipped through the stacks of gift lists and commented to her daughter in law sitting under her: "Oh, Yao *yatou* married to that kind of place, it is … …"

The wife of the Luo Family's eyes reddened slightly as she replied: "The Emperor's Imperial benevolence is mighty and broad, it is our family's good fortune," Speaking to there, she choked. If she could choose, she would that her daughter married into a normal official's family rather than suffer in the Imperial Family, "*Erxi* heard that Cheng Wang is kind and honest. When Yao'er marries, she most likely wouldn't suffer much."

"Each person has to live their own life," The Elder Luo *taitai* place the gift list down, "Duan Wang Fu isn't as easy as Cheng Wang Fu but that girl from the Qu family is living well. Duan Wang treats her very well. In the past, our Luo family has treated Duan Wang Fei well, when Yao'er marries, there's some measure of protection."

"But Duan Wang and Cheng Wang … …" The worries of the wife of the Luo Family hadn't finished being said before the Elder Luo *taitai* interrupted.

"Relationships between women have always been between women," The elder Luo *taitai* said in a meaningful tone, "Anything else is the matter of men. Our Luo Family will only be loyal to the Emperor."

The Luo *erxi* nodded in a gaze. She was going to speak when she heard the servant report that Duan Wang Fu had sent gifts over.

When the list was delivered over, the elder Luo *taitai* took the list before nodding and commenting: "Duan *wang fei* is very good to our Luo Family. We should increase the year-end gifts we send over." Finishing, she gave the list to her *erxi*.

The Luo *erxi* took the list and thought in relief that it was lucky that the Luo Family had been kind to Duan Wang Fei and Duan Wang Fei also knew to pay back. When she entered the Imperial Family, Yao're will

have somebody to guide her, and if Duan Wang succeeded the throne … …

She quickly shook her head and suppressed the idea.

In Rui Wang Fu, He Yuan smashed many pieces of pottery. His beautiful face was full of darkness: "Is *fuhuang* dim-witted, to marry one of the Luo Family to *lao si*, isn't this clearly pushing the Luo Family and *lao si* towards *lao er*?!"

The *taijian* serving him heard this and shuddered in fear. He quickly knelt on the floor, pieces of broken pottery cutting into his knees. He didn't dare frown even a bit.

"*Wang ye*, *wang fei* requests to see you." A young *yahuan* stood shakily at the doorway, afraid to even look at He Yuan.

"Not now!" Smashing another piece of porcelain, He Yuan sat down on the carved sandalwood chair. After musing with a dark face he ordered: "Come, prepare a carriage to enter the palace!" Damn it, if he had known it would be like this, he shouldn't have in the beginning pushed *mufei* into letting *fuhuang* bestow marriage between the member of the Family Qu and *lao er*. Now, it was a boon for him!

As the clear winner in He Yuan's eyes, He Heng wasn't as joyful as He Yuan imagined because he knew the conduct of the Luo Family. As to how *lao si* would choose, that remained to be seen.

Holding a cup of Long Jing Tea, and leaning back on the chair with half-lidded eyes, He Heng thought about He Yuan and He Qi's possible reactions. He Heng raised and lowered his eyebrow. No matter what, this incident was advantageous for him.

But this was also time to pass the news that He Yuan was giving loans to *lao da*. As long as the two of them were fighting, they wouldn't care about *lao si*'s marriage. That was, in their eyes, *lao si* wasn't that important.

"*Wang ye, wang fei* sent somebody with chicken soup." Ming He's voice sounded from outside the door.

Looking at the chicken soup in front of him, He Heng suddenly thought of Qu Qing Ju. *Fuhuang*'s Imperial Decree said that she was "of plentiful good fortune". It wasn't wrong. *Wang fei* was really his lucky star.

Chapter 29

On the twenty-eighth day of the twelfth month, the Royal Court seals its pens and the palace started to bestow gifts into the households. Most that received gifts were officials and noble families of some significance in the City of Jing. Therefore, the absence and presence of gifts from the Emperor represented the Emperor's favor. Lower-ranked officials that wanted to climb up kept their gazes tightly locked to see which houses they could curry favor with, which houses they could find a way in.

Qu Qing Ju followed He Heng and knelt in the front hall of the *wang fu* to receive the Emperor's gifts. It was just a couplet for the Spring Festival that the Emperor wrote personally, a "good fortune" character and two plates of golden-yellow kumquats. Kumquats had the meaning of luck and it was a good beginning.

Bidding farewell to the *taijian* that passed on the decree, the two returned to *zhengyuan* and opened the Spring Festival couplet. It was gold on red paper, with flowers on the border. Based on Qu Qing Ju's inexpert opinion, the characters were very good-looking but from the strokes, Qing De Emperor's characters was more soft than bold, revealing his personality.

Casually tearing open a kumquat that was about the size of a thumb, Qu Qing Ju fed half into her own mouth and fed He Heng the other. She nodded and commented: "Good characters, the kumquats are sweet, too."

He Heng looked at her stream of actions and smiled as he placed the couplets down, “Qian Chang Xin, you and Ming He go personally put the Spring Festival couplets up.”

“Yes,” Qian Chang Xin carefully bore the plate with the couplets on it and retreated with Ming He.

Qu Qing Ju looked at the pair of “good fortune” characters, “Then where do we put these two characters?”

“In our rooms, naturally. I’ll put it up later,” He Heng pointed to the gate of *zhengfang* and saw that Qu Qing Ju had started on another kumquat, “It’s very cold, don’t eat too much cold food.”

Qu Qing Ju’s wrist bent and shoved the kumquat in her hand to him: “Since *wang ye* is personally putting up the characters, then I will help you see if it is skewed.” Finishing, she took the characters and started to order the servants to bring the tools to paste the paper.

He Heng saw her enthusiasm and allowed her to proceed. Under the protection of a few *taijian*, he stepped on a stool to put up the “good fortune” character.

“It’s tilted, move a bit towards the right.”

Move right.

“Too much, a little little bit to the left.”

Move left.

Qu Qing Ju looked with a bit of dissatisfaction at He Heng’s results and reluctantly nodded: “More or less this is good.”

The *taijian* heard this and hurried guided *wang ye* to step down the stool. They dragged the stool as they retreated to the side to not affect the little amusement between *wang ye* and *wang fei*.

He Heng walked back a few stepped and nodded in satisfaction. He then lifted his head to tap Qu Qing Ju's forehead, "I think you are terrible at directing."

Qu Qing Ju went back a step and teased: "It's *wang ye* whose skills aren't high, how can you blame me?"

Not far away, Jiang Yong Yu, accompanied by the three *shiqie*, stood and watched the antics between *wang ye* and *wang fei*. They didn't know whether they should leave or stay. Originally, she had come with the others to thank *wang fei* for the hairpins *wang fei* had bestowed down today, but looking at the scene before her, she wasn't so thoughtless to interrupt.

The other three didn't feel at ease either but didn't dare show any of it on their faces. They all looked at Jiang Yong Yu for her response.

"It's fine, we can come tomorrow. *Wang ye* and *wang fei* are busy now," Jiang Yong Yu looked away and was going to turn around but they suddenly met Yin Liu who was carrying a meal box.

"Greetings to Jiang *ce fei* and *yiniang*," Yin Liu bowed.

"Yin Liu *guniang* doesn't have to be so courteous," Jiang Yong Yu smiled, "We thought to give thanks to *wang fei*, but hadn't known that *wang ye* and *wang fei* are busy. We shan't interrupt and will leave first."

Before Yin Liu could reply, they saw Yu Zan quickly walk over and bow to the procession of four, "Jiang *ce fei* and *yiniang*, *wang ye* and *wang fei* invite you in." It had been that Qu Qing Ju saw the movements on this side and sent somebody to call them over.

In the front room, He Heng and Qu Qing Ju sat at the front, the four *ce shi* sitting quietly and obediently under them.

Qu Qing Ju glanced at Feng Zi Jin. Just half a month, Feng Zi Jin seemed more fragile than before. Sitting there, she seemed akin to a statue

without any hint of life. She took a small mouthful of tea before opening: "For what matter are you here?"

"Today, us sisters received *wang fei*'s gifts and felt grateful so we thought to come to give thanks," Jiang Yong Yu replied, "We disturbed *wang fei*, and ask for *wang fei*'s forgiveness."

"You are too polite," Qu Qing Ju set down the teacup, "A good flower needs a good vase. Those ornaments and hairpins need to accompany beauties to shine. I was just making sure good things didn't go to waste, it wasn't worth you making a trip."

Jiang Yong Yu smiled and said: "Even though *wang fei* says so, but *nu* still is grateful. If there wasn't *wang fei*, *nu* wouldn't have such good things." Finishing, she touched the hairpin on the side of her head. Apparently it was one of the hairpins that Qu Qing Ju gave.

He Heng noticed her movement and interjected: "*Wang fei*'s kindness, you only have to bow and give thanks." Finishing, he laughed at Qu Qing Ju, "No wonder you ordered the servants to make hairpins and ornaments, so it was for this."

Qu Qing Ju didn't have any desire to purposefully act virtuous and kind in front of He Heng. It was just it was the end of the year and she wanted to make it pleasing to her eyes. Either way she wasn't spending her own money, so why should she save?

Now that *wang ye* had spoken, Jiang Yong Yu couldn't continue and could only sit silently by the side drinking tea to waste time.

At this time, Huang Yang walked in. After a bow, he reported: "*Wang ye, wang fei*, Yun Qing *guniang* asks for an audience."

He Heng furrowed his brows slightly, visibly irate: "She's a *tongfang*, what matter does she need to ask *wang fei* for?" These words were very discourteous. Huang Yang, the messenger, slightly froze.

"*Wang ye*, Yun Qing *guniang* said she was grateful for the care *wang fei* has given her and wanted to bow in thanks." Huang Yang replied obediently.

"Get her to just kowtow at the door," He Heng opened, "Tell her that *wang fei* is a busy person most days. If there aren't any important matters, then she should say in her own rooms." He was sick of the entire act Yun Qing had. First it was virtuous and then it was playing pitiful. What was the act she's playing now called?

This type of woman, no matter if attention was paid to her or not, would always find all the excuses possible, and in all possible ways appear. He Heng played with the teacup in his hand: "Nevermind. In the next days, get somebody to send her to one of the estates outside. *Ben wang* doesn't want to see her."

The other *ce shi* at this time buried their heads deep down, afraid that *wang ye* would find them an eyesore as well. Letting them go to the outside estates, if the people in this *fu* were sent away, there wasn't a good change they would return.

They didn't know how Yun Qing managed to provoke *wang ye* into disliking her. What they did understand was that they should never ever offend *wang fei*. Before them was the lesson of Yun Qing, behind them was the example of Feng Zi Jin. They didn't dare have any other thoughts.

"*Wang ye*, this Yun Qing is a very young girl. Sending her to an estate like this, it is such as waste," Qu Qing Ju felt it was a great pity, "Such a young and beautiful girl."

He Heng looked at her face full of regret and said helplessly: "Just a woman. But you care more than I do. If that's the case, we'll find a match for her on the estate, so she wouldn't be alone and without support."

Qu Qing Ju knew that the so-called *tongfang* was nothing more than a man's plaything and turning to match them to a manservant was

normal. In this case, *wang ye* hadn't even touched this Yun Qing and didn't have any possessive feelings. But a *huakui*, skilled in all four major arts, matched to a rough person, it was very wasteful.

If Yun Qing was really of great virtue, she should turn and hang herself. If not, she could make a living on the estate. It most likely would be better than losing her life in the future.

The other *shiqie* heard how *wang fei*, using just a few words, let *wang ye* marry Yun Qing to a rough person. Their hearts shook, especially Feng Zi Jin. Sweat started to form on her hands. If it was just being sent to an estate, there could be a day where *wang ye* would go to the estate and place importance on her again so there was a hope of return. If it was marrying another person, she could only livethe rest of her life with a rough person. To those who were used to an easy and luxurious life, this was very frightening.

When Yun Qing heard this news that appeared like thunder out of a clear sky, she went crazy begging to see He Heng. However, she was pushed down by the *taijian* and on the same night, she could only take a small bag and was forced onto a donkey-cart to a property in the suburbs. They traveled through the night and she was married to one of the minor stewards on the property.

A woman being sent away, to those of the *wang fu*, was a very normal occurrence. The only thing worth discussing was how this Yun Qing *guniang* was how virtuous she had been and how much importance *wang ye* had once placed on her, and how she had looked down on the servants.

"Pah, she deserves to be sent away." A young *taijian* that hand suffered slaps from Yun Qing spat. He thought about how his ear was not as good as before and the *taijian* wanted Yun Qing's life.

The other servants looked at him in sympathy. This person's luck wasn't good. When he had been sweeping Yun Qing's room and cleaning the *guqin*, he had broken a string on the instrument. As a result, he had been punished with tens of blows to the face. Now his ears weren't very

good and what person was willing to use him? It was going to be hard for him to climb up in the future.

The day of the Spring Festival, Qu Qing Ju rose up early. She changed on a thick *luan*-embroidered tight-waisted wide-sleeved dress. In her hair she had a phoenix-tail *buyao* that represented her status. After a period, she looked at the eye-catching and radiance self and revealed a hint of satisfaction. She put out her foot to let Mu Jin put on for her a pair of god threaded shoes embroided with clouds. When she stood, she saw He Heng was already standing at the doorway.

He Heng's entire body exuded nobility, the only thing slightly low-key was that dark blue pouch. Qu Qing Ju came up and bowed: "Is *wang ye* waiting especially for me?"

He Heng held her hand, "Qing Ju today has shocked me." Qu Qing Ju rarely put on such attire, but today when she put on the whole nine yards, He Heng really couldn't tear his eyes away.

Slightly raising her chin, the jewel at the forehead slightly swaying and revealing the cherry blossom drawn in the middle of the brows: "As Duan Wang Fei, naturally others should not be unimpressed."

He Heng curled his lips and bent down to hold her hand. He slid next to her ear to breathe lightly: "My *wang fei*, she is naturally more beautiful than any other woman."

Qu Qing Ju smiled and blinked at him. Inside she thought, these words he wouldn't dare say to Jing *guifei*, otherwise, Jing *guifei* would whip him to death.

Thinking that later in the palace she would see her *popo* that had become a *guifei*, Qu Qing Ju felt a strange excitement.

The expression Jing *guifei* made when she was choked up and was still pretending to be calm, it was such a lovable expression. Thinking about it, Qu Qing Ju revealed an expectant smile.

As he lowered his head and saw the bashful smile on Qu Qing Ju's face, He Heng's expression became even gentler.

Chapter 30

Even though the palace banquet was to be happening at night, but Qu Qing Ju and He Heng needed to kowtow to the Emperor and Empress so they rose early.

The relationship between the Imperial Couple wasn't good but today, the two of them actually sat together. Qu Qing Ju and He Heng traveled to the Emperor's residence of Tian Qi Palace.[19] When the *taijian* ushered them in, they saw the married couple of He Qi and Wei Qing E already situated on the chairs.

He Heng went forward a few steps and pulled Qu Qing Ju to kneel in front of the Imperial Couple: "*Er chen* and *wang fei* wishes *fuhuang* and *muhou* a good new year." Finishing, he held up a sandalwood box with both hands, "That the three stars[20] of "luck", "good fortune", and "long life" accompany *fuhuang* always and good fortune for the world."[21]

Qing De Emperor took the sandalwood box and saw the carvings of the three stars inside. He smiled and said: "Heng'er and your wife, stand up." When a person became old, the thing desired most was luck and long life. This "good fortune" also had a second meaning of status, and it matched Qing De Emperor's desires so his smile became a fraction softer, "You two sit down." Finishing, he ordered the *taijian* to move two chairs for the two.

[19] is sky, heaven 启 is open, start, to enlighten. This palace could be called the Palace of Heavenly Enlightenment. However, 天启 in modern times also means apocalypse.

[20] The three stars are 福禄寿. 福 is luck or good fortune, 禄 is good fortune but also means the salary an official receives 寿 is long life.

[21] The word used here rather than world is 天下 which means the world, land under heaven and China as a country. Due to the pseudo-alternate world nature of this novel, "China" doesn't exist and the novel states later that the surrounding countries pay tribute to the Emperor, hence the "world", rather than just the country.

This was the first time Qu Qing Ju met the Emperor. Making use of the motion of sitting down, she took a peek at the other. The Emperor's appearance was average compared to his sons, his body softer and heavier. Between his brows, there was tiredness and old age. No wonder his sons all had other ideas.

"*Da ge* came so early," He Heng, after he sat, raised his hands in a greeting to He Qi and smiled, "*Didi* greets *gege*."

"*Er di* came early too," He Qi gave a bright smile and then looked at the emperor. Seeing the emperor was still looking at what *lao er* had given him, he said, "*Fuhuang*, this year the treasury is very rich. *Er chen* heard that the storytellers in the tea shops and restaurants have been praising *fuhuang* for your benevolence. I don't know if *fuhuang* had heard it."

Qing De Emperor heard those words and closed the box in his hands. He placed it to one side and looked at He Qi, "You're such a child. Still running to the shops, there's nothing worth in hearing these things."

"*Fuhuang*, please forgive me. *Er chen*'s words may slightly offend you. *Er chen* feels that most of the public are honest and dutiful. If they say you are benevolent, it naturally comes from the heart. When *er chen* heard this, *er chen* was secretly happy." He Qi straightened his neck, looking as though he had to explain, "*Er chen* cannot be like *fuhuang* and not place any importance on the reputation. But since they were complimenting you, *er chen* couldn't help but feel happy."

This boot-licking was really well done, Qu Qing Ju though silently. Ning Wang appeared to speak straightforwardly but it was too pleasing to the ear. Look how happy the emperor was, even his laugh was pitched a few notes higher.

"*Da ge*, really. You already knew that *fuhuang* doesn't like hearing this, but you still said it," He Heng complained, "Not just this year, in the past there have been many citizens that said *fuhuang* was benevolent and a good ruler. I didn't dare tell *fuhuang* and just felt happy in secret."

He Qi heard this and started to swear on the inside. This *lao er* was too f——g good at following up. What he just did with his words, he pushed *fuhuang* even higher and underneath, he criticized him for only finding out this year. Wasn't this digging a hole for him?

After hearing He Heng's words, Qing De Emperor's smile became even happier. After a few sounds, he turned and said to the empress: "Look at these kids, they don't look like *wang ye* at all. To be so happy over such a little thing, people would laugh at them."

The empress gave a fitting smile and with a tone that said she felt unjust on behalf of the two: "Emperor, these two children are full of filial love. When they hear others praise their father, they naturally are happy. How can you call their love childish, *qie* will call it unjust for these two children."

Qu Qing Ju stole a glance at He Heng who was next to her. This person was good with words, understood the hearts of people and his personality was steady. This type of man, wherever you put him, he would be a successful person. So the likelihood that he could become emperor wasn't small. Thinking that in the future after he succeeded the throne and her possible fates, Qu Qing Ju felt that before he would success the throne, she would enjoy everything.

Even though the separation between the sexes in the Da Long Dynasty wasn't as serious as the Ming and Qing Dynasties in history, but Qu Qing Ju was very perceptive and kept her head down. Even if she did raise her eyes, it was in the direction of the Empress and Wei Qing e. During one of the times she casually raised her head, she found Wei Qing E was also looking at her and in the other's expression, it held a certain distain and sympathy for her.

Qu Qing Ju, who felt very strange at seeing such emotions, paused for a while. Just at the same time, the rumoured "Little Student Ming" came in. She finally found some interest in sitting here. She wanted to see how this child that had been overlooked by his father looked like.

Quickly scanning the blue-clad He Ming, she found he wasn't as masculine as He Qi, not as warm and gentle as He Heng and not as beautiful as He Yuan. He looked very normal, but could be considered a handsome little fellow. Looking at his sincere greeting before sitting down, Qu Qing Ju felt a bit sad. Such a good baby, such a pity he met such a bad father.

Seeing that *lao si* had arrived but *lao san*, who he favoured the most, hadn't arrived, the smile on Qing De Emperor's face became fainter and fainter. And the three brothers present, as though they had planned it, didn't try to amuse the emperor anymore, each becoming silent.

After sitting for close to fifteen minutes, when the smile on Qing De Emperor's face had disappeared, He Yuan finally arrived. Qu Qing Ju saw how he, with just a few words, made Qing De Emperor smile and laugh and understood what it meant to have a heart that deviated until it was at the armpit. [22]

Watching as Qing De Emperor cheerfully put on the Buddhist beads that He Yuan gave onto his wrist, He Heng calmly took a drink of tea. He Qi jerked his mouth to one side. He Ming sat silently. The expressions of the three, it was proof that they were used to this occurring commonly, that they didn't even have any jealousy left.

Qu Qing Ju felt grief on behalf of the emperor. Maybe he didn't know yet that his other three sons didn't have any feelings left for him. Because if they did feel anything, they wouldn't be so calm seeing what occurred. On the other hand, it was more tragic for the three imperial sons. Having such a father, it was a great misfortune. Not giving them any love, and being partial to only one child and pretending they didn't exist.

A short while later, the three brothers were ushered out under the excuse of greeting their mother consorts. Only He Yuan was left sitting there. The contrast became even more obvious. No wonder He Yuan was so arrogant.

[22] The idiom for favouring is usually "偏心" which literally means slanted, deviating heart.

Qu Qing Ju walked with Wei Qing E. After the plum blossom banquet, they hadn't seen each other again. This time, the two both had warm smiles on their faces.

"*Er dimei*, your life has been good lately. I heard a rude person had been married into an estate a few days earlier from the *fu*?" Wei Qing E asked with a faint smile, "I heard it from *san dimei*, not sure if it is true or not."

"Just an ignorant *yahuan*. Originally, it was just sending her away, but I couldn't bear seeing her so young and without a support so I appealed to *wang ye* that it was good to marry her off," Qu Qing Ju gave an unburdened smile, "These minor things, I wonder where *san dimei* heard it."

"*Er dimei* is too kind. This kind of disobedient servants, you should just sell them, there's no need to think more for them," Wei Qing E jerked her lips, "As to how *san dimei* know, I don't know either."

"There is nothing that can't be said. It was probably *san dimei*'s concern for me." Qu qing Ju smiled as she rubbed at her earing. She gave a sweet smile, "As to sending off this person, it was *wang ye*'s desire. I was fine either way."

Wei Qing E suddenly felt that this smile was blinding to her eyes. Seeing that her own *wang ye* was bidding farewell to Duan Wang Ye, she said in a regretful voice: "It looks like I will have to part with *dimei* here, we'll meet again at the banquet."

"Walk carefully, *saosao*," Qu Qing Ju cheerfully bowed and bid farewell. After Wei Qing E walked alongside He Qi, she then walked to He Heng's side. They were all muddling along in this profession called wang fei, who didn't know how to make others choke?

He Heng knew that Qu qing Ju had been conserving with *da sao* just earlier, but as a man, he wasn't interested in the topics of women and didn't listen carefully. Seeing the smile on Qu Qing Ju's face, he didn't ask but slowed his steps to match Qu Qing Ju's as they walked forward.

When they reached Jing *guifei*'s Zhong Jing Palace, before they even entered, Qu Qing Ju first heard the laughter of a young female. The palace maids wouldn't dare laugh like this, the imperial concubines wouldn't laugh like this. It looked like it was somebody that Jing *guifei* was familiar with.

When they walked into the room, Qu Qing Ju, as expected, saw a female standing behind Jing *guifei*. As she massaged Jing *guifei*'s shoulders, she joked to amused Jing *guifei*. Then she saw that this female's eyes fly over to He Heng.

Jing *guifei* saw He Heng and the smile on her face became more visible. After the two performed their greetings, she let them sit and asked a few questions about He Heng's living conditions. She then turned and said to Qu Qing Ju: "*Erxifu*, you might not know this *yatou*, she is *ben gong*'s maternal family's cousin's daughter. Ran Shuang, come greet your *gege* and *saozi*.

"Ran Shuang greets *gege*, greets *saosao*," Wei Ran Shuang moved with ease and with a shy smile, she bowed in front of the two. She then retreated with a blush to one side, but her gaze still sneakily remained on He Heng's figure.

"So you are my *wang ye*'s *meimei*. I didn't know you would be here today, and didn't prepare any gifts," Finishing, she took down the jade bangle on her wrist and stood to walk in front of Wei Ran Shuang. She took the other's hand and after personally putting the bangle on, she said "This was a piece that my mother left for me. Even though it isn't very famous, but its color is good and I hope *meimei* won't dislike it."

Qu Qing Ju knew that Jing *guifei*'s surname was Wei. Her father had been the *tai bao*[23] when the present emperor had been crown prince. The present Wei *daren* still carried the title of *taibao* but had no real power. Wei *daren* had a younger brother who was a fifth rank provincial governor. In all these years, he hadn't made any real progress. Right now when Jing *guifei* was calling Wei Ran Shuang her cousin's daughter,

[23] Grand Tutor

it was just to disguise Wei Ran Shuang to look better. Wasn't she really just a fifth-grade local level official's granddaughter? Since this Wei Ran Shuang had the guts to call her *saosao*, then she would happily accept it.

"Ran Shuang doesn't dare take *saosao*'s things," Wei Ran Shuang wanted to take off the bangle but her hand was pulled by Qu Qing Ju, "You are *wang ye*'s *meimei*, then you are my *meimei*. We shan't be so courteous." Finishing, she looked in confusion at Jing *guifei*, "*Mufei*, *meimei* didn't live in Jing before, did she? Otherwise, such a beautiful *memei*, how come I haven't seen her before?"

Jing *guifei* looked at how Qu Qing Ju had stopped her niece and smiled faintly: "Her father had held a post elsewhere, they have returned to the city just recently."

"No wonder," Qu qing Ju smiled as she pulled Wei Ran Shuang to sit beside her, "Now that *meimei* has returned to Jing, then I have another sibling in the future to play with."

Jing *guifei* looked at Qu Qing Ju's enthusiasm and felt her heart hurt. Did her *erxifu* not even think about the meaning of her leading this person here?

Her cousin was only a little sixth-grade official now that he transferred back to Jing City. Even if she did have the desire to promote him, even if Ran Shuang would marry someone of a good family, she wouldn't be able to hold her hand up. So she wanted to let her son see this *yatou*. If he liked her, then she wouldn't be done a disservice in the future. If he didn't like her, then it was just letting cousins meet. Also, she actually didn't really want her niece to be a *qie* of her son.

Seeing that her son didn't even look once at her niece, Jing *guifei* knew it wasn't going to happen. She turned to look at Qu Qing Ju and her expression almost broke.

What was she doing holding Wei *yatou*'s hand and not letting go, what did she mean?!

"*Meimei*'s skin is so good, it's so smooth to the touch," Qu Qing Ju had a face of envy, "I can see that the place *meimei* lived in was better than Jing City." Finishing, she actually smiled and rubbed that tender and white hand.

Jing *guifei* felt it. Where did her *erxifu*'s brains go, didn't she have a sense of danger, didn't she know to be wary of other women? Complimenting another woman's skin in front of her own husband, was it to arouse curiosity in her husband?!

For no apparent reason, when she looked at Qu Qing Ju's joyful smile, Jing *guifei* felt helpless and fretful.

She turned to look at her son and saw her son smile as he savoured his tea with no hint of response. She could only say: "Heng'er, in a few days, your second uncle will visit you. Find a time to meet him."

He Heng knew his mother's intentions and nodded lightly. He answered: "*Er chen* understands." Finishing, he pushed a plate of kumquats beside him in the direction that Qu Qing Ju was sitting in.

Jing *guifei* saw his movement but didn't say anything. But when she looked at Qu Qing Ju, she felt her heart was even more fretful.

Chapter 31

During the noon meal, Qu Qing Ju and He Heng sat on either side of Jing *guifei*. The palace maids carried trays in like a school of fish and served them as they washed and dried their hands.

Jing *guifei* might have had the intentions to elevate Wei Ran Shuang but due to Wei Ran Shaung's status, she couldn't sit with the three of them. Qu Qing Ju looked at Wei Ran Shuang as she stood being Jing *guifei*. This Wei *meimei* that returned from outside to Jing City had a good appearance, innocent and clean. Her manner as she obediently stood behind Jing *guifei* was also very attractive. It was just in this kind of

ancient era that it was very likely for cousins to get together. Qu Qing Ju stole a look at He Heng and guess as to whether if he had any desire.

Taking the handkerchief that a palace maid handed over, Qu Qing Ju's gaze scanned over He Heng. The other person didn't seem to have any interest in Wei Ran Shuang. She smiled and watched as dish after dish was brought in.

After the noon meal, Wei Ran Shuang accompanied Jing *guifei* as she returned to the inner rooms for a short rest. Qu Qing Ju and He Heng went to one of the side rooms. There was a full set of furniture and other essentials in the side room. Qu Qing Ju even managed to see that a page of awkwardly written characters hanging on the wall. It looked like the writings of a young child.

He Heng saw Qu Qing Ju was looking at the words and coughed before explaining: "This was the room I lived in when I was young and lived with *mufei*. Only after I was six did I move to the side hall. When I was ten, I moved to my own palace."

Qu Qing Ju looked at the date under the characters, the seventeenth year of Qing De. At that time, He Heng would have only been five years old. She took her gaze back and smiled: "*Wang ye*'s talents are above others."

"From such a set of characters, Qing Ju can see talent above others, it's your ken that are above others," He Heng smiled and sat down on the bed, "Come rest for a while on the bed. It will be very late tonight before we can return back to our *fu*."

Qu Qing Ju, under the service of servants, took down the hair ornaments and the decorated outer robe. After everyone had left the room, she crisply sat down on the bed. She stared at him and said: "If my ken aren't good, I wouldn't have fallen for *wang ye*."

To this kind of response, he couldn't help but laugh. He Heng had to admit he liked hearing this. In the end he could only press the person onto the bed, "You married me because *fuhuang* decreed married, how was it you fell for me?"

Qu Qing Ju wrapped the blanket around her and muttered: “Fell later, then.”

He Heng looked at the person who had buried her head into the blankets. The corners of his lips couldn’t help but curl up, his eyes unconsciously becoming softer.

The nap that Jing *guifei* took at noon wasn’t long. It wasn’t a bit more than an hour when she woke. She stood from the bed and looked at Wei Ran Shuang who stood to one side, allowing the palace maids to put on the clothing and adornments needed for the evening banquet.

Seeing Wei Ran Shuang come forward to help style her hair, Jing *guifei* stopped her. Looking at herself in the mirror and the lingering traces of beauty, Jing *guifei* asked in a cool tone: “Ran Shuang, do you know why *ben gong* let you enter the palace?”

Wei Ran Shuang had never interacted with Jing *guifei* for a long length of time so when she heard Jing *guifei* ask this, she became nervous. She answered with a bit of embarrassment: “Niece doesn’t know.”

Picking out a peach blossom hairpin made from rubies out of boxes of ornaments, Jing *guifei* said with a calm expression: “I suppose that before you entered the palace, your mother had already said a lot to you. But some things *ben gong* has to say clearly to you. Duan Wang is an adult. *Ben gong* cannot make his decisions for him, and doesn’t want to force him into accepting any decisions. Lay rest to your wishes now.”

Wei Ran Shuang paled and she gripped her fingers together for a beat before whispering: “*Gumu*, I don’t ask for much, I just want to remain at *biao ge*’s side.” Finishing, her face became red.

Hearing this, Jing *guifei* smiled, whether in distain or something else. She raised an eyebrow as she looked at the young girl standing at her side: “You’ve just seen Heng’er for just this little while and you want to spend your entire life with him?” Young girls were easily influenced by a man’s status, appearance and conduct. They didn’t care what his

personality was like, how his family was. They thought it was true love and would rush in. As to the end result, they would never think about it.

Wei Ran Shuang's face became even more flushed and buried her head slightly, not rejecting Jing *guifei*'s words.

"Then what do you think about Duan Wang Fei?" When Jing *guifei* mentioned her *erxifu*, she felt her temple throb.

"Duan Wang Fei is more beautiful than any other," Wei Ran Shuang bit her lips and squeezed out, "I don't want to compete with *wang fei*, and doesn't dare to."

"You can't compete with her," Jing *guifei* personally drew her eyebrows and she was merciless when she looked at Wei Ran Shuang again, "I don't want you to become a *qieshi*. If you are willing, I will definitely find you a good family." Her *erxifu* might not be what she wanted, but she had to admit that her niece couldn't even compare to Qu Qing Ju.

Appearance, family, composure, conduct and even the special traits that aroused interest and affection in men. Wei Ran Shuang was drastically weaker than Qu Qing Ju. As a *qie*, she had nothing that could outcompete the wife, what would she use to compete for a man's favour?

Wei Ran Shuang's face became even paler but she refused to speak.

Jing *guifei* looked at her state and furrowed her eyebrows. She didn't speak further. Plainly speaking, it wasn't her actual brother's daughter. Since the other wouldn't listen to her persuasions, she was lazy to speak more.

Coming out of the inner room, Jing *guifei* saw that no one was in the outer room and asked: "Have they not risen yet?"

Ding *mama* knew who *niangniang* was asking for and responded: "It probably was that *wang ye* and *wang fei* would have risen early today and be tired. They haven't risen. *Nubi* will go now to summon them."

"That's fine, let them sleep. I don't know how late this will go tonight," Jing *guifei* waved her hand and took a drink of tea to help her focus, "That woman, Shu *guifei*, is most likely going to be troubling *ben gong* again tonight. Make sure that everybody who is accompanying *ben gong* tonight to the banquet to be careful."

Ding *mama* confirmed. Her *niangniang* had been locked in struggle with Shu *guifei* for many years. After so long, they held a mutual hate. Thankfully, *wang ye* was a good child. Otherwise, based on how the emperor favoured only Shu *guifei*, *niangniang* would have been at a disadvantage.

As the two were talking, they saw He Heng and Qu Qing Ju walk in holding hands.

Jing *guifei* stopped the topic and saw her *erxifu* looked at her with amazement, she felt very satisfied and opened: "You've just woken, drink some tea to wake up. After a bit, use some refreshments."

At this type of banquet, the tendency was to go hungry. Qu Qing Ju understood and after she took a drink of tea, she complimented: "*Mufei*'s dress is very beautiful."

Because the other's compliment was too straightforward and unskilled, Jing *guifei* held a teacup and explained: "This dress was specially made by the Clothing Department. It took many days. It's natural it wouldn't be bad looking." Other family's *erxifu* speaks in twists and turns. Their compliments were classic and literary. But why was it that when it came to her, it was such a bare sentence? Even the desire to show-off was halved. Jing *guifei* signalled that she wasn't happy.

Wei Rang Shuang saw the situation and came forward to exchange Jing *guifei*'s tea for a hotter one. She smiled: "The cranes on Aunt's dress are as though they came from Heaven. I wonder how they embroidered it, at one glance, one can't tear their gaze away."

Look at her, look! Jing *guifei* glanced at Qu Qing Ju and held the new cup of tea. She smiled and declared: "The things that *ben gong* wants them to

make, they naturally will make it well. Otherwise, there's no use in keeping them."

"*Gumu* is of high status, they wouldn't dare do you a disservice," When Wei Ran Shuang finished, she said to Qu Qing Ju, "The craftsman on *saosao*'s dress is also very skilled. It must have also taken many days."

Qu Qing Ju squinted her eyes in a smile as she looked at Wei Ran Shuang, "Us members of the Imperial Family, we do have to take more care at these times." Her good cousin wasn't a pure harmless little white bunny.

Wei Ran Shuang's smiled dimmed slightly: "Yes, people like me, we don't get to use these things."

"That's true," Qu Qing Ju nodded," Girls like you, it doesn't matter what you wear. There's no need to take a lot of care."

Her face dimming, Wei Ran Shuang felt that the matter-of-fact tone of the other made her heart feel as though it was blocked. A beat later she forced a smile and said: "*Saosao* has a noble status, and naturally has to take more care."

"There's no way around it, I can't shame my *wang ye* now," Qu Qing Ju sighed in helplessness and turned towards He Heng, "Right, *wang ye."*

He Heng nodded and without looking at Wei Ran Shuang, he admitted: "You are right."

A man with ability, usually they wouldn't care how much women spent and how valuable was what she wore. There were only two types of men that criticized women for being extravagant. One type was the type that had no ability. The other type was he had a change of heart. Qu Qing Ju didn't know if He Heng had a heart but she did know that He Heng was very able.

Seeing the interactions between the two, the dimness on Wei Ran Shuang's face became more real but she had no way of saying

something else. She could only force a smile and comment: *Gege* and *saosao* have such a good relationship."

He Heng slowly followed with this: "I and your *saosao* are husband and wife. We naturally have good feelings for each other."

Wei Ran Shuang didn't speak again.

Jing *guifei* looked calmly at this scene and put the teacup in her hand to one side. She motioned for Ding *mama* to change her cup before announcing: "The kitchen should have finished making the refreshments now. *Ben gong* will let them serve it. *Erxifu*, when we get to the banquet later, don't drink too much." If she had to leave in the middle of the banquet, it would shame her.

Qu Qing Ju nodded: "*Erxifu* will remember, thanks, *mufei*, for the reminder." Finishing, she gave a grateful look of "*Mufei*, you are such a good person."

Jing *guifei* jerked her lips and felt that she didn't want to talk to her again.

When the sky darkened, Jing *guifei* finally opened again: "Heng'er, you go to the front hall. *Ben gong* will take *erxifu* to the rear hall."

He Heng stood and performed a greeting. He gave Qu Qing Ju a reassuring look before he walked out the door of Zhong Jing Palace.

"Let's go, *erxifu*." Jing *guifei* touched the *buyao* inserted in her hair as she stood, "Later, follow *ben gong* and don't speak freely." She kept on feeling if she didn't give a few more warnings, she would be too worried.

Qu Qing Ju came up to hold her hand and smiled. She affirmed: "*Erxi* knows."

Chapter 32

The Imperial banquets of Da Long Dynasty were always set in Zhao Yang [24] Great Hall. Therefore, the entire hall was very large. Even the decorations were full of grandeur, carrying the intimidation and prestige of the Imperial Family.

In the very front of the hall there was a gold-inlayed dragon and phoenix sandalwood table. Underneath that on the right and left was a row of eight-person square tables. When Qu Qing Ju walked into the Great Hall, she found that everyone sitting on the left side was male and the right side was filled with women. On the first table on the right, there were already people seated. Qu Qing Ju examined them. Both Wei Qing E and Qin Bai Lu were each accompanying a beautiful woman. These two must be Shu *guifei* and Wen *guipin*. The pretty woman sitting beside them in plainer attire must be Cheng Wang's birth mother An *guipin*.

Jing *guifei* carried a smile as she walked forward and allowed Qu Qing Ju to hold her to sit down on the seat beside Shu *guifei*. She pointed to the spot next to her, "*Erxifu*, sit down too."

Qu Qing Ju smiled and bowed to the others. She addressed the others present: "Greetings to Shu *guifei*, An *guipin*, Wen *guipin*." An *guipin* was Cheng Wang's birth mother and looked like a very gentle woman. She looked similar to her neighbour, Wen *guipin* but Qu Qing Ju found that An *guipin* had a very warm visage overall, unlike the warm exterior of Wen *guipin*.

"*Lao er*'s wife doesn't have to be so courteous, sit down," Shu *guifei* smiled, "you became sick not long after you married so *ben gong* hadn't seen you close up before. Now that I've seen you, I understand. Such a good *erxifu*. No wonder *jiejie* has hidden you all this time and not let you out."

When Jing *guifei* hear this, her eyebrow twitch and she gave a thin smile. She divulged sarcastically: "*Ben gong*'s *erxifu* doesn't like going out all the time. *Ben gong* can't do anything about it. She's just dull, not like

[24]昭阳: 昭 is clear, bright 阳 is the sun, the masculine side

your *lao san*'s. *Meimei*, don't tease her." She had an *erxifu* that like fluttering about and joins in everything. She dared to criticize her *erxifu*, she should look at herself first.

Wanting to pick at the relationship between her and *erxifu* wasn't that easy!

The smile on Shu *guifei*'s face became uglier by a few fractions. She glanced at Qin Bai Lu who was sitting beside her and, with a mirthless smile, she replied: "*Jiejie* is too funny. They all come from noble families, they are all virtuous and intelligent."

"That's true," Jing *guifei* allowed a palace maid to top up her tea. She turned and continued, "*Lao san*'s wife comes from a well-educated family, she must be one of those rare talented girls.

"I don't dare lay claim to talented," Qing Bai Lu stood and bowed, "Jing *guifei niangniang* is overestimating *erxi*."

Jing *guifei* looked at the pale white dress she was wearing and looked at the complicated red tight girdled wide-sleeved dress embroidered with a *luan*. Even if it was a bit wasteful, for the end of the year, the red did look more celebratory.

An *guipin* silently watched and occasionally sipped tea. Her own *erxifu* hadn't married in yet, she wasn't as high in status as these two so she didn't have any desire to compete. But *lao er'*s wife, she was truly good looking, too good looking. Before this girl had married, she had seen her in the palace but she hadn't been this attractive.

"The Emperor has arrived, the Empress has arrived!"

The two *guifei niangniang* that had been throwing verbal darts simultaneously stopped talking and respectfully stood, then slowly knelt down. Qu Qing Ju, who was watching on the side, sighed in amazement. Look at how familiar they were with their duties, they could change at the blink of an eye.

As Jing *guifei* knelt, and hearing the *taijian* call for a kowtow, Qu Qing Ju then helped Jing *guifei* stand. Taking advantage of this movement, she found that Jing *guifei*'s eyes as she looked at the emperor were expressionless.

She couldn't help but look at the man standing at the highest place. The old man was wearing a bright yellow dragon robe, his swollen physique had turned a once handsome man to an average man. But just this kind of a man, he was the aim of all the thousands of machinations of the women in the *hougong*, he was the one that wasted all of their youth and beauty.

"Today is the end of the year, you all don't have to be so courteous. Sit." Qing De Emperor waved his hand and sat down. He saw as the people kneeling at his feet shout "Ten Thousand Years" three times before they dare sit down and the smile on his face became even more visible. A couple of claps, and women dressed in multi-colored costumes streamed in and gave festive dances.

The drinks and dishes came out like a stream of water. Qu Qing Ju looked at the plates of food and her mouth twitch. But seeing Jing *guifei* sitting like a mountain, in the end she didn't speak.

No wonder Jing *guifei* told them to use refreshments before coming here. These dishes appeared beautiful but from the looks of it, they didn't have much warmth. In the winter, who liked eating this?

Slighting turning her head, she looked at the young women dancing in the middle of the hall, each bend of the waist and each wave of the arm full of flirtation. But all the people in the audience had a slight smile on their faces, the mirth at the corner of their lips was as though it was stamped on, not too much but not too little.

After a dance, there came some boys and girls in costumes, singing about luck and good fortune. Qu Qing Ju wasn't interested and allowed Mu Jin to pick a piece of refreshment to waste time.

"*Lao da*'s[25], why isn't your Zhong'er here today?" Shu *guifei* looked at Wei Qing E, her voice full of regret, "there are not many children in the palace, it's much too quiet."

"*Guifei niangniang*, Zhong'er got a cold a few days ago. *Erxi* was worried that he would transfer the sickness to the valued persons if he came to the palace so he was left in the *fu*." He Zhong was Wei Qing E's child. Usually, he was carefully protected so when she heard Shu *guifei* mention her child, her heart tightened. On her face, she only allowed a warm smile to appear, her voice full of respect as she promised: "When he get better, *erxi* will bring him in to greet *niangniang*."

"So that's why," Shu *guifei* nodded and after she ordered somebody to take some medicine to Wei Qing E, she smiled and commented, "We should always be careful with children. It's been cold these past days. As a mother, you have to put more effort in." This attitude, it was as though she was the mistress.

Sitting beside Wei Qing E, Wei *guipin* didn't even say a word, a gentle smile hanging on her face.

Wei Qing E concurred. She turned her head to personally pick serve Wen *guipin* a thousand-layer cake, "*Mufei*, taste this."

"Sweet yet not too sweet, it's good," The smile on Wen *guipin*'s face became warmer. After two bits of the thousand-layer cake, "You don't have to be attending me constantly. Eat something yourself."

"If *mufei* has eaten well, it is the good fortune of *erxifu*," Wei Qing E put down her chopsticks and smiled as she poured Wen *guipin* a cup of plum flower wine. "This wine doesn't go to the head, it's perfect to accompany the thousand-layer cake."

"*Lao da*'s is very virtuous," The smile on Shu *guifei*'s face became a few fractions fainter. She looked at Qin Bai Lu who was sitting with a glass

[25] This is an abbreviation of —-"s wife. In Chinese, the wife is referred to as "of ___'s home" or "——'s" as though they were a possession of the man (which they pretty much were)

of wine and felt her heart beat unevenly. She turned to look at Jing *guifei* and ask: "*Jiejie,* don't you think?"

Jing *guifei* glanced at Shu *guifei*. She smiled and praised: "These *erxifu*, they are all full of filial love. *Meimei* doesn't have to admire Wen *guipin* and forget your own good *erxi*." She didn't feel good herself and wanted to drag her down as well, did she think she had no brains?

Qin Bai Lu knew that her *popo* wasn't happy and set down the wine cup. She turned to personally place Shu *guifei* a piece of crab meat into her bowl.

Shu *guifei* made a slight bite before commenting: "This winter crab isn't as tender as autumns. Such a big grab, it only looks good."

Qin Bai Lu's hand tightened around the chopsticks. In the end she could only smile and suggest: "*Mufei* speaks the truth. Why don't we try this picked duck tongue, *erxi* thinks it is acceptable."

"No need," Shu *guifei* smiled, "You have a good time, *ben gong* doesn't have an appetite."

"*Ben gong* sees that it seems pretty good," Jing *guifei* looked at Qu Qing Ju, "*erxifu*, get some for *ben gong* to taste."

Qu Qing Ju saw the other wanted to display her so she could only smile and push back her sleeve to pick two for Jing *guifei*. She also considerately broke the soft bone at the end of the tongue.

"Such a honest child, don't just pay attention to me," Jing *guifei* finished the duck's tongue and smiled to let the palace maid behind her serve Qu Qing Ju a bowl of soup, "Us women should drink more soup, there's many benefits."

Qu Qing Ju gave a happy smile as she raised the bowl. She said in an intimate tone: "Thanks, *mufei*." Then she buried her head to focus on obediently consuming the soup.

Shu *guifei* looked at this scene of motherly and filial love and threw her eyes away with a snort. But her heart started to beat even less smoothly.

Jing *guifei* used a handkerchief to wipe her lips in a very good mood. Only a stupid woman would make it difficult for her own *erxifu* in front of others.

Whatever matter, go back to your own rooms to fight it out. Your *erxifu* is a titled *wang fei*. This entire place was filled with noble matrons and titled ladies. If your *erxifu* was shamed, as her *popo*, would you benefit? It was shaming your own son, and letting others laugh at you.

At the men's side, the top right table was the four He brothers and a few old *wang ye* from the Imperial Family. But these old *wang ye* were very perceptive and courteous to the four.

He Heng sat between He Yuan and He Qi, and conversed with everyone present with a smile on his face. He held himself with elegance and a majestic bearing.

"*Si di*'s good matter is coming up. You should drink a few more cups with your brothers today," He Qi raised the wine cup and called He Heng, "Come!"

Drunkenness had already started to make its way across He Ming's face but he couldn't refuse his *da ge*'s request. He could only raise his wine cup with a painful expression: "Thanks *da ge*. *Didi* will finish first."

He Yuan's pale finger rubbed the rim of the cup. He looked at *lao da*'s forthright manner as he finished toasting everyone at the table. He raised an eyebrow as he tapped the wine cup, "*Da ge* has a good capacity."

"Haha, *da ge* can't do anything else, but this capacity, I have," He Qi raised his hand to pat He Yuan's shoulder, the blow causing the wine in He Yuan's hand to splash out, "I can't drink delicately like you."

Looking at his hand that had been splashed with wine, He Yuan disdainfully put done the wine cup. He took out a handkerchief to clean

his hand before he retorted coldly: "*Didi* doesn't go to the restaurants and tea shops as often as *da ge*, so my capacity for drinking naturally isn't as great as *da ge*."

As though he hadn't heard the underlying thrust in the words, He Qi chuckled: "Men cannot be unable to drink wine, don't you think so, *er di*?"

"It's not just men that can drink wine, and not all men would like drinking wine," He Heng smiled as he raised his cup to He Qi, "Occasionally drinking a few cups along is a relaxing thing, but it's better to avoid to drink like your life depended on it. *Didi* doesn't have the capacity that *da ge* has. This cup is to salute *da ge*." Finishing, he didn't care to see He Qi respond and threw back his head to drink to the bottom.

He Yuan watched with cold eyes and sneered with disdain. He took the new cup that the *taijian* served.

"*Er di*'s words are rational," He Qi keep on smiling in a forthright manner but didn't keep toasting others. He quietly sat on his spot and started to eat.

He Heng lowered his head and smiled as he swung the empty cup in his hand.

Chapter 33

After the drinks and dishes were taken down, it was time for the tributes from each of the subordinate countries. Qu Qing Ju looked at the obedient diplomats and the matter-of-fact attitude of everybody else and suddenly understood what was "might is right"

As the *taijian* finished reading the pages of the lists that the diplomats presented, she found that those who had a larger tribute had faces with color and those with few tributes were full of poverty as though they

wanted to kowtow to Qing De Emperor to express the helplessness they felt that they didn't have any more to offer.

When these diplomats retreated, it had been more than an hour. Qu Qing Ju held a teacup and had a new insight into Da Long Dynasty. This mighty dynasty, it was akin to a holy land in the eyes of the surrounding little countries. Because of this, the likelihood that there would be an attack on Da Long Dynasty in the next few decades was very small. It was then no wonder that Qing De Emperor had such a weak personality.

At this time, a heavy drum started. Qu Qing Ju saw the Emperor and Empress walk out of the Great Hall and kneel on the white stone platform outside the hall. As she followed everybody outside, she went into as daze as she knelt with Jing *guifei*. She listened as Qing De Emperor gave his prayers to the Heaven. He seemed to be begging for good weather in the coming year and a good fulfilling life for the citizens.

When the fireworks exploded above Qu Qing Ju's head, she finally woke up. Coincidentally, at this time the prayers of the emperor stopped. She supported Jing *guifei* to stand and retreat to one side. Then she heard the singing voices of the musicians and the chatter flow into her ear. She raised her head and saw the multi-colored fireworks in the sky. She couldn't help but blink her eyes, her eyes seemed sore and uncomfortable.

Jing *guifei* also stared in a daze at the fireworks before lowering her head and informing: "Emperor and Empress have already returned to their palace. It's late now. You should return too." Finishing, she took a palace maid's hand, "*Ben gong* is also tired."

"*Mufei*, *erxi* will take you back." Qu Qing Ju held Jing *guifei*'s hand. She saw tiredness between her brows and took the cape that Mu Jin had prepared to wrap around Jing *guifei*.

"There's no need," Jing *guifei* looked at the red dress that Qu Qing Ju wore and her hand gently fell on the knot of the cape in front of her

throat, “It’s cold at night. You and Heng’er should return early. This isn’t far from Zhong Jing Palace, *ben gong* will sit on the step-carriage.” Finishing, she waved her hand and dismissed Qu Qing Ju, walking away with the support of a palace maid.

Qu Qing Ju stood for a while at the original spot before she let Mu Jin help her as she walked down the high white jade stairs. The long train of the dress flowed across the stone steps as though a stream of water had passed by.

At the bottom of the stone steps, the four He brothers stood mutually a few steps away. He Yuan’s face was icy. Behind him was an expressionless Qin Bai Lu. The two of them originally didn’t have many feelings between them but when the two had met, Qin Bai Lu acted as though she had been bullied. That was enough to make He Yuan flip his face so the two of them stood an arms-length away with mutually frozen faces.

Qin Bai Lu hated the fact that her *popo* had shamed her and was angry that He Yuan didn’t treat her warmly. Originally she had been bullied and now she had to act according to He Yuan’s temper so she felt even angrier. She didn’t care what others though and just stood with a heavy expression.

Looking at her, He Yuan irritably moved aside his gaze. When he raised his head, he saw a crimson clad figure come down across the white jade steps. The white and red, under the light of the fireworks, had an unspeakable sense of beauty. He tried to regain focus. When the person came near, he found it was He Heng’s *wang fei*. When he saw it was his brother’s woman, he didn’t look any more. He faintly moved his gaze away and turned to walk without another word. There evidently wasn’t any desire to bid farewell to his brothers.

He Ming wanted to say farewell but seeing that *da ge* and *er ge* seemed as though they didn’t see it, he hesitated and then lowered his head.

“Your hands are a bit cold,” He Heng walked to the stairs and as Qu Qing Ju stepped on the last step, he grabbed her hand. He took down

the cape he was wearing and wrapped it tightly around Qu Qing Ju before he said to He Qi and He Ming: "*Da ge, si di*, I'm going to leave first."

"Feel free, *er di*," He Qi glanced at the tightly bundled *er dimei*, smiled and waved his hand: "It's late, *er di* and *er dimei* should return early." No wonder *lao er* protected her like she was his eyes, and was wearing a not well-made pouch. He looked with a teasing look at He Heng. This *er dimei* did have some beauty.

He Ming was so honest that he didn't even dare look anywhere. He respectfully bowed with his hands in front: "*Er ge*, take care." He made as to accompany them.

The fox fur that swept across the nose was a bit ticklish so Qu Qing Ju raised a hand to push it aside. She happened to saw He Ming's proper farewell.

"There's no need, *si di*," He Heng held Qu Qing Ju's and gently refused, "We're brothers, there's no need to be so polite." Finishing, he turned to leave.

He Ming stared in confusion at the figure of *er ge* striding away, the step he had taken hadn't even been completed.

"After you get married, you'll understand," He Qi patted his shoulder and happened to see Wei Qing E come out. He finished, "*Ge's* also leaving, you should return early too." Finishing, he boldly also left.

He Ming watched with even more confusion as He Qi walked aside. He saw *da sao* come over and bowed in greeting. In such a quick length of time, all his brothers left. He felt it was even harder to understand them.

It was a rare night that there wasn't a curfew in the palace. He Ming waited for everybody to finishing leaving before he started walking towards An *guipin*'s palace.

An *guipin*'s palace wasn't big, the furnishings weren't exquisite but because she had an imperial son, the Department of Household Affairs

didn't dare skimp. Compared to the consorts that were not favoured, her days were already very good. She never lacked the necessities.

Mother and son were always afraid of other people's suspicions so they didn't spend much time together normally. Meeting today, they could speak more. When An *guipin* heard her son mention what had happened after the night banquet, she couldn't help but laugh: "It's not our business what they do. As to Ning Wang's words … …" seeing her son's ignorance, the smile on her face brightened, "just a joke, you don't have to think about it."

Duan Wang's wife had an exquisite appearance. As the Imperial Family, they didn't lack in beautiful women but Duan Wang's wife had an extra hint of flavour in there. As a person that had stay for so long in the palace, she naturally understood how attractive this kind of women was to men.

As a *wang fei*, to have this kind of looks, she didn't know if it was a boon or a curse. Thinking back to Duan Wang Fei as she subserviently drank tea and ate desert next to Jing *guifei*, An *guipin* shook her head. Jing *guifei* wasn't a simple person.

Reminiscing back to how she was the same age when she had entered the palace, she wanted for Duan Wang Fei to have a comfortable life. She said in a meaningful tone: "Ming'er, in the future, treat your wife well. It's hard to be a woman."

He Ming obediently answered but still didn't understand how the topic had moved to his future wife. Maybe, it was that he was too dumb, Little Ming *wang ye* thought helplessly.

After the New Year, it was the first day of the first month of the new year. Qu Qing Ju and He Heng sat in the Great Hall of the *wang fu*. The major and minor stewards came up one by one to perform greetings for the New Year and the lower-ranked servants kowtowed outside the hall.

Listening to the variety of celebratory words of the servants, Qu Qing Ju motioned for Mu Jin and Shu Kui to reward these people. She looked at

the joy and cheer on these people's faces. Thinking back to the previous life and her mood when she had received a bonus at her agent company, it was probably the same as these people here.

"*Nucai* kowtows to *wang ye* and *wang fei* and hope *wang ye* and *wang fei* have a good and smooth new year," Qian Chang Xin and Ming He were close to He Heng. The wishes they said were shallow and clear but the loyalty on their faces were more visible than any other.

Qu Qing Ju looked at the two of them and then at He Heng. She commented: "*Wang ye*, they don't have it easy running her and there with you every day. You have to give them a good reward."

Hearing this, He Heng smiled. He pointed out: "In our home, it's *wang fei*, you, who makes the decisions. So it's you who decides how to reward them."

The stewards present heard *wang ye*'s words and stopped breathing. In the last few days, *wang fei* had been controlling *houyuang*, but some people were still trying to worm their way through. Today, *wang ye* was saying it very blankly. Some of the people who understood felt sweat forming on their foreheads.

"Since that is so, then *qie* will take matters into her own hands," When there were many people around, Qu Qing Ju followed protocol and called herself "*qie*" in spite of the fact she disliked this ileism very much, "Mu Jing, give two pouches to the two *gonggong."*

The two received the pouches, not squeezing or looking at them. They instantly kowtowed and gave thanks, their attitudes extremely deferential.

Those two were definitely worthy of serving by He Heng's side. They had no visible flaws. She looked at the audience and announced in a loud voice: "It's the first, there's no need to be so reserved. You can all retreat."

The servants kowtowed again before bowing as they left. Coming out of the Great Hall, some started admiringly at the two senior *gonggong* for

catching the eye for the master and mistress. They carefully flattered them and some tried to find out what the pouches contained but were brushed off by the two men.

After the people in the surroundings left, the two then opened the pouches. It wasn't some rare item in the pouch but a banknote for fifty taels of silver. The two simultaneously gave a sigh of relief. If *wang fei* really did bestow some rare item, then it would be troublesome.

The two exchanged a look. Qian Chang Xin sighed: "Our *wang fei* isn't a simple one. Us two have to do our best in the future." For normal people, fifty taels of silver was a large fortune, but to them, it wasn't that hard to get. *Wang fei* had given them this number and it showed that *wang fei* wasn't trying to entice them. It was telling them she thought them worthy but hoped that they wouldn't do something they shouldn't.

Fifty taels, it matched their status perfectly. Wasn't it just telling them to know their place?

After the stewards had left, He Heng's women came in a short while. In these women, other than the four *shiqie* that had status, there was a *tong fang* called Bai Zhi.

He Heng originally had three *tong fang*. But Yun Qing had been married off to someone on an estate, Ban Xia had been sentenced by Qu Qing Ju to become a laundress so the only one remaining that Qu Qing Ju hadn't saw before was Bai Zhi.

After these women greeted her, Qu Qing Ju didn't have any advice to say to them. She turned to ask He Heng: "*Wang ye,* do you have anything to say?"

He Heng didn't understand, but to the *shiqie*, he really didn't have anything to say so he shook his head.

"Since *wang ye* has nothing to say, you can all leave," Qu Qing Ju raised her teacup, "Mu Jin, take out the red pockets that I prepared for them. Usher them out."

The *shiqie* stood in shock. They hadn't expected to be so quickly thrown out. Where was the required lecturing that occurred in other *fu*s? Wasn't she supposed to say something along the lines of serve *wang ye* well, respect the *wang fu*'s rules?

Each one of them held a red pocket and hadn't recovered when they came out of the Great Hall. Luo Yin Xiu asked dazedly: "We're leaving like this?"

"If we don't return, what are we doing here?" Han Qing He pulled on the cape she wore and walked away without looking back.

Bai Zhi looked with some reluctance at the Great hall before she slowly started her steps.

Inside the hall, Qu Qing Ju stood and shook her body, "*Wang ye* is reluctant to part with the beauties?"

He Heng put down the teacup in his hand. He followed in standing. In a helpless tone, he announced: "It's almost noon, let's go eat." Finishing, he pulled Qu Qing Ju's hand and said warmly, "Don't think too much."

Hearing this, Qu Qing Ju smiled, but there wasn't any mirth in her eyes.

Chapter 34

"I thought the holidays would be more relaxed, not busier than normal," Qu Qing Ju held a thick stack of gift lists from each *fu*. She rubbed at her forehead and put the lists to one side, "After we finish with these, this year's festivities will pretty much be over."

"Celebrating the New Year is to indulge in the celebration so naturally there will be more gifts." Mu Jin kneaded at her shoulders as she persuaded, "It has been tiring these past days going to the other *wang fu*. After you go to Xiang Qing Hou Fu tomorrow, it would be relaxing."

Qu Qing Ju was very satisfied with Mu Jing's skill. At this time, her eyes were at half-mast, "It's not that simple. Tomorrow, at Xiang Qing Hou Fu, it wouldn't just be me. Womenfolk from the other *fu* will also be there. It will still be busy."

At year's end, the tradition of visiting each other still hasn't changed much in this place. Qu Qing Ju was sick of hearing plays, nauseous when she saw meat. Thankfully, due to her high status, she didn't have to run around.

"*Wang fei*," Yu Zan walked in. She saw Qu Qing Ju's relaxed state and informed: "*wang fei*, Bao Rong Hou Fu sent you an invitation."

"Bao Rong Hou Fu?" Qu Qing Ju remembered that this Marchioness of Bao Rong was at odds with Liang *shi* and was one of He Yuan's so she waved her hands, "Put it down. Send somebody with a reply that I don't have the time." The type of house that was Bao Rong Hou Fu, they were shameless enough to send her an invitation. Did they think that because she didn't like Liang *shi*, she would give them the honor, such a joke.

Yu Zan put away the invitation. She gossiped: "*Nubi* heard, this year, they had picked many beautiful women to enter the place from all the places. It's unknown if some will enter our *fu*."

Qu Qing Ju moved her neck to relieve the soreness there before replying faintly: "It hasn't happened yet. There's no need to worry. But get Huang Yang to look inside the *fu*. If somebody starts something, tell me straightaway."

Yu Zan heard that *wang fei*'s tone with calm and assumed that *wang fei* had a plan so she stopped. She reported: "These last days, there wasn't anything, but a few days ago, Han *shiqie* and Feng *shiqie* argued for a bit in the garden."

Qu Qing Ju smiled, "Don't stop them. Let's wait a few day." Han Qing He was a good hand at moving with the current. When Feng Zi Jin was favoured, she followed Feng Zi Jin like she was her alpha. Now that she, as *wang fei*, had the power, she naturally had to show her side.

There wasn't anything interesting in this type of person. Qu Qing Ju was too lazy to see her act and sighed: "Get somebody to go without to inventory the gifts from outside and put them into stores with Qian Chang Xin and the others."

Hearing this, Yu Zan bowed and retreated.

Mu Jin said hesitantly: "*Wang fei*, Han *shiqie*'s personality shifts constantly. *Nubi* is worried that she will have ideas in the future."

"It's still nothing no matter how many ideas she has," Qu Qing Ju laughed lightly, "She is the oldest woman at *wang ye*'s side. *Wang ye* doesn't like her anymore. She naturally has to find somebody to rely on. I don't need to always keep an eye on such a person."

Mu Jin understood what *wang fei* had meant. No matter how this flea was strong, it was still a flea, it can't become a tiger. Spending too much focus on a flea, that was throwing away a watermelon to get a sesame seed.

In the afternoon, He Heng returned from a banquet. After he drank half a cup of tea, he finally controlled his drunkenness. He ordered the servants to prepare a bath and when he saw a few *yahuan* follow in, he waved his hand: "Retreat, *ben wang* doesn't need your service."

The people inside the room all retreated. He took off his clothes and relaxed in the bathtub for a while before he started to wash. After he put on his inner robe he then called for servants. He ordered: "In the future, *ben wang* doesn't need any servants for a bath." Just now at the banquet, he had heard a joke. A certain nobleman had been touching a servant girl during his bath. Who knew that he had been caught by his powerful wife. During the resulting argument, his manhood had been wounded. The rumor was that it was crippled now.

This incident had caused the male guests that heard it to feel their lower half hurt. And He Heng didn't have any more interest in letting servant girls serve him during his bath. At least, he didn't have any interest in the short term. Reminiscing back to the endless pleasure of that

"mandarin ducks" bath with Qu Qing Ju, He Heng felt that his throat was itchy.

After he was attired, He Heng adjusted the deep blue pouch at his waist: "To *wang fei*'s place."

Ming He, who had been serving at the side, was used to it by now. He took up *wang ye*'s cape and followed. He mentioned for the young *taijian* at the back to follow as well. Qian Chang Xin was sorting the gifts for stores right now so he had to focus for the time being.

It wasn't early in the day when He Heng returned. After a bath, it was already time for the evening meal. Qu Qing Ju saw him come and the two could use the meal together. Even though vegetables occupied the majority of the dishes on the table, the two had a good appetite.

After the noon, it was still early. He Heng had an itch for a game of *weiqi*[26] and just had to have a match with Qu Qing Ju. Qu Qing Ju, who only knew the rules, had to helplessly sacrifice herself.

If Heaven would give He Heng a chance, he would never let Qu Qing Ju play *weiqi* with him. Looking at the terrible state of the board, and the interested look in Qu Qing Ju's eyes, he helplessly put down a stone

"Ah, *wang ye*, how can you play here!" Qu Qing Ju saw her stones were blocked and couldn't resist picking up the stone that had been put down before, "Then I won't play here, change a place, change."

"For gentlemen, once the stone is down, it cannot be moved. How many times have you changed your stones tonight?" He Heng couldn't help but sigh. This was the worst game he had played his entire life. Even when he had just started learning, it hadn't been as torturous as right now.

"I'm a woman, I have the right to regret it. It's you men that are gentlemen, it doesn't count with me," Qu Qing Ju shoved the white

[26]棋: (qi) can refer to many kinds of board games but the one they play here is *weiqi* or *go*.

stone into He Heng's hand. She picked up her black stone and put it down somewhere else, "Here."

He Heng pretended not to see the gap at that place and randomly put his stone down. Watching as Qu Qing Ju joyfully ate his stone, he asked: "Didn't you just say that women had great intelligence?"

"What does women's intelligence have to do with me regretting my move?" Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow, a face full of surprise, "*Wang ye,* you must have misunderstood." Finishing, she put down another stone.

He Heng wanted to say that it was his move, but seeing the other's cheerful state, he couldn't open his mouth. The *weiqi* skill that he had so much pride in front of his *wang fei*, it was a total loss.

When a person just learned something, it was the time that they had the greatest interest. Qu Qing Ju was at the point where she had the greatest interest.

After playing for close to two hours, He Heng looked at the disaster of a match and avoided the interested face of Qu Qing Ju. He stood and walked in front of Qu Qing Ju, bending at the waist to lift the person: "It's late now, Qing Ju, you should retire with me."

Qu Qing Ju wrapped an arm around his neck: "Then you have to play with me tomorrow."

He Heng felt his throat choke but the smile on his face was as warm as always: "We'll talk about it tomorrow." Finishing, he carried the person as he walked towards the inner room.

Ming He, Mu Jin and the others saw the situation and quickly retreated. But as they left, they both thought, *wang fei*'s *weiqi* skills, it stank terribly. It was a miracle that *wang ye* could tolerate it for this long.

Maybe it was that he was too worked up from playing *weiqi*, but after he finished with Qu Qing Ju, He Heng felt very relaxed. Under the light of the night luminous pearls, he saw the eyes with which she looked at

him. With a look, he couldn't help but reach out with his hand to that soft skin. The feeling under his hand was too comfortable, so comfortable that he didn't bear move his hand away.

"Ticklish!" When He Heng's hand moved to her waist, Qu Qing Ju couldn't resist lightly kneeing the other. Who knew that she pressed on the wrong spot, and that hand moved from the waist downwards.

The mischievous hand caused Qu Qing Ju to squirm but was suppressed by He Heng. He rubbed against her chest and asked: "Is it ticklish here?" The hand had reached a certain warm place.

"En … …" Qu Qing Ju felt her body soften. On the bed, He Heng could be considered a very good man. At least, when the other was being satisfied, Qu Qing Ju was also satisfied. She reached across the other's back, her moist lips brushing past his slightly cold ear. She blew a warm breath, "Also ticklish."

This move lit a great fire. He Heng bit down gently on her collarbone: "I'll help you stop it."

It was another physical exercise full of hotness. After both of them were comfortable, Qu Qing Ju leaned against He Heng and rubbed against the other's body for warmth as she fell asleep.

He Heng put his hand at Qu Qing Ju's waist. Looking at her sleeping visage, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

The second morning, Qu Qing Ju sat up on the bed and looked at the man wiping his face with a cotton cloth. She said with some surprise: "*Wang ye* is coming with me to Hou Fu?"

"A husband accompanying the recently married daughter to perform New Year greetings to the elders, isn't it normal?" He Heng threw the towel back into the basin and mentioned for the kneeling servant girl holding the basin to leave. He walked in front of Qu Qing Ju and pinched her face. The smooth feeling he received made his mood even better, "Wake up quickly and eat. Later, you still have to attire yourself."

Finishing, he didn't look at Qu Qing Ju's reaction and walked out the inner room.

Qu Qing Ju stilled and was speechless. A man satisfied in a certain area, he did become much gentler.

After the morning meal, when Qu Qing Ju was dressing, He Heng sat with interest at the side. Seeing the servant girls present box after box of jewellery, he opened: "Put on that *buyao* I gave you."

Hearing this, the hand Qu Qing Ju was using to pick a *buyao* made a turn and held up that *qing luan buyao* to Yu Zan who was doing her hair. Looking at this peerless *buyao* inserted in her hair, Qu Qing Ju's lips curled: "This *buyao* is so beautiful I don't bear wear it."

"No matter how beautiful, it needs somebody to wear it," He Heng came behind her, touching the *buyao*. He took the forehead jewel and personally put it on Qu Qing Ju. He bent down to look at her image in the mirror, "As long as you like them, these coarse items don't cost anything."

Qu Qing Ju rubbed the forehead jewel. She raised her head to look at He Heng. There was a warm smile on the others face as though he was an infatuated man looking at his beloved woman.

She smiled and turned her head down. She drew with an eyebrow pencil to make her brows even more beautiful. After she finished drawing the flower between her brows, she raised her head again and asked with a bashful smile: "Is this good?"

He Heng felt as though he was struck by this smile. The smile on his own face was so gentle it was like water: "Very good." Pulling up the person by the mirror, he exclaimed, "That 'The teeth are as white as a rhinoceros' horn, the eyebrows are as beautiful as a butterfly, the blushing face is akin to a blooming lotus, the pale skin is like the frost.' is just so. But there aren't enough poems in this world to describe the feelings I have at this time."

"In *wang ye*'s eyes, I am that good?" Qu Qing Ju tilted her head, "I don't believe it."

"Has Qing Ju ever heard that beauty is in the eye of the beholder?" He Heng smiled as he touched the hair next to her face, "It's fine, you'll naturally understand in the future. It's late, we should go now.

Yu Zan and the younger *yahuan* who had been doing the attiring were blushing at one side, amazed at the depth of feeling between *wang ye* and *wang fei*.

It was the people by the door, Qian Chang Xin, Ming He and Mu Jin who had much steadier faces. They quietly had their heads low as though they couldn't hear what *wang ye* and *wang fei* said. And they were just wooden puppets that couldn't hear or speak.

Chapter 35

The Marquess of Xiang Qing, Tian Jin Ke, wasn't yet fifty this year. His personal conduct was sincere but he wasn't inflexible. He had a good reputation in Jing City. Chang De Gong Fu was probably the only entity he didn't like in the entire city of Jing. By now, there wasn't anyone in Jing City that didn't know Duan Wang Fei was close to her relatives in Xiang Qing Hou Fu, and treated Xiang Qing Hou Fu like her own maternal family.

Due to the fact that what the Duke of Chang De had done really wasn't something to be proud of, there were some that praised Tian Jin Ke for being so loving. Not everybody would care for a niece that didn't even have a mother. Karma was real. See how Duan Wang Fu had distanced itself from Chang De Gong Fu, this was karma.

Today was the Tian Family banquet. After the morning just had passed, the guests started to arrive. Tian Jin Ke took his two sons, Tian Kun and Tian Jun, to welcome the male guests. Just as he was deep in conversation with the guests, he saw the stewards run over quickly to say Duan *wang ye* had come.

"Duan Wang?" Tian Kun looked in shock at the steward. He realized the surrounding guests were gazing in this direction and lowered his voice to ask: "Father, why would Duan Wang come?"

Tian Jin Ke waved a hand: "*Lao da*, come with me to the middle door to welcome *wang ye. Lao er*, stay here and accompany the guests." Finishing, he walked with great strides towards the outside.

Tian Jun looked at the backs of his father and brother. When he turned, he saw all the guests had curiosity on their faces so he started to divert their attention. He was surprised inside. His family didn't have many interactions with Duan Wang. Was it really that Duan Wang was willing to lower himself for *meimei*?

"Tian *er gongzi*, is there a valued guest coming?" A guest of the same age as him put his hands up in a greeting, "Who is it?"

Tian Jun smiled as he returned the greeting: "Everybody is a valued guest. When the person arrives, everybody will have to drink a few more cups."

"Of course, of course." This person smiled. Even though he hadn't found out anything but at least what Tian Jun said didn't embarrass him, so he wasn't angry.

The others saw that it wasn't likely and they settled down. No matter what, they would see them later. This person might be of high status, but he wouldn't be the Emperor.

Tian Kun stood behind his father and looked at the large eight-person sedan imprinted with the characters of Duan Wang Fu stop at the gate. He raised his feet to walk outside the door and bowed: "This lowly official welcomes *wang ye*, *wang fei*."

Qian Chang Xin came up to bow to Tian Kun with both hands raised. He bowed to open the curtain and revealed to Tian Kun He Heng and Qu Qing Ju sitting together. There was a hint of intimacy between the two. He quickly lowered his head, afraid to look.

"*Biao xiong*[27] doesn't have to be so courteous," He Heng held Qu Qing Ju's hand as they walked out of the sedan. He smiled: "We are one family, there's no need to be so polite." Finishing, he held out a hand to let Tian Kun straighten before he walked into the gate with Qu Qing Ju.

"*Jiujiu*." Qu Qing Ju gave a very deep bow. She looked at the middle-aged man in front of her. His appearance was proper and he had a strong posture. It was easy to feel at ease with this man.

As her uncle, Tian Jin Ke hadn't spent much time with Qu Qing Ju. He made a motion as to support Qu Qing Ju and quickly scanned her. He saw that his niece seemed to be living well before he bowed with two hands up: "*Wang ye, wang fei*."

"Marquess doesn't have to be so courteous. You are *wang fei*'s *jiujiu*, so you are *ben wang*'s *jiujiu*," He Heng returned a greeting, "There's no need to be so polite."

Tian Jin Ke smiled as he straightened. In a warm voice he responded: "If that it so, then this lowly official can only overlook protocol. *Wang ye*, please come with this official." The smile on his face became much friendlier but his conduct still held to protocol. But even like this, it still allowed people to feel that his attitude was much more intimate.

Qu Qing Ju looked at this uncle of hers. No wonder he was like a fish in water in Jing City. Such conduct, everybody would praise it. It could be seen how important emotional intelligence was.

The male and female guests had separate banquets. After He Heng followed Tian Jin Ke and left, Qu Qing Ju smiled at Tian Kun who kept five paces away from her and turned to get on the already prepared sedan.

Watching as the sedan was carried away by heavy labor *mama*s, Tian Kun allowed a smile to appear. It seemed as though his sister had a somewhat good life. His family could rest some of their worries. Putting his hands behind at his back, he slowly headed inside. Instantly, the

[27] male relative from the female line of the same generation, older.

smile on his face grew fainter. The members of the Imperial Family, their desires and interests changed quickly. Who knew if Duan Wang would always treat his sister this way.

He himself was a man and naturally understood those desires of men. What about a man like Duan Wang who was used to seeing beautiful women?

When the sedan came into *er men*, it stopped. Qu Qing Ju came down the sedan and saw Luo *shi* with a young girl standing not far away. She walked a few steps in front of Luo *shi* and bowed in greetings: "Good day, *jiumu*."

Luo *shi* and the girl behind quickly returned a greeting before she reached out with a hand to meet hers to observe: "You look thinner. Come with me inside now, this cold period in spring is too strong."

All the elders of the world were the same. When they saw younger generations after a long time, they always felt that they had become thinner. Qu Qing Ju intimately held Luo *shi*'s hand "I'm not thin, the entire *wang fu* is under my command. The servants don't dare treat me badly."

Luo *shi* cared for her like she was half a daughter. Seeing that she was willing to be close to her, she naturally felt happy. Luo *shi* patted her hand as she said lovingly: "You have to manage such a large *wang fu*, you must be tired, it doesn't matter how good you eat." Finishing, she started to ask whether the servants were easy to manage or if she had troubles with her residence and food. Her actions were very similar to how Jing *guifei* questioned He Heng.

Qu Qing Ju answered the questions one by one. She saw the girl behind Luo *shi* kept quiet all this time and inquired: "*Jiumu*, such a pretty *guniang*, which family? She looks so adorable."

Luo *shi* stopped walking and looked at the *guniang* that Qu Qing Ju mentioned. The girl's face was already crimson. Luo *shi* answered: "She's the same year as you, but a month younger. It's appropriate for

you to call her *meimei*. This is the eldest niece of my maternal family, Wen Yao. In the future, you will spend a lot of time together so I wanted you two to meet."

Wen Yao, Luo Wen Yao? Qu Qing Ju instantly understood. This was the *di* granddaughter of the Luo Family that had been decreed to marry He Ming? She saw that Luo Wen Yao's face was as red as it could get and didn't ask for confirmation, only commenting: "I like this *memei*."

Luo *shi* heard her inappropriate words and sighed: "Just a few days, you are even more mischievous." Finishing, she pulled Luo Wen Yao over to let them stand right and left of her, "But, you like this *meimei*, then I don't have to worry any longer."

Qu Qing Ju understood Luo *shi*'s meaning. Such a good girl forced to marry an disfavored imperial son. Not every family was willing. The waters of the Imperial Family were muddy, her husband wasn't favored, none of her *zhouli* were simple. If there wasn't somebody there, she would definitely be at a disadvantage.

Thinking about it, she let a smile appear on her face, "Aunt, don't worry. I will definitely care for Wen Yao *meimei* like she was my own." There were four *erxifu* in the Imperial Family. But the three had to be at odds with each other. If she was close to Luo Wen Yao, it wasn't a bad thing. But she hadn't though that the Luo family would actually take this step. It could be seen that they really loved this girl.

Luo Wen Yao quietly listened to her aunt and Duan Wang Fei talk. In the past, she had heard much about how before Duan Wang Fei had married, she had been harshly treated by her stepmother. Today, as she saw the real person, she felt this was a blinding woman. Each move and laugh full of grace and stirring in her a strange feeling of closeness.

People were very easily attracted by people dissimilar to them. Luo Wen Yao's personality was quiet and gentle, her future husband had no conflict with Duan Wang. Seeing the friendliness of Qu Qing Ju, it was naturally easy to feel close to her. So when they walked into the room, the two of them had started conversing.

The elder Luo *taitai* who had been sitting in the room already expressed a relieved smile as she saw the scene. It looked like this Duan Wang Fei took after the Tian family's personality.

The female guests present were close-knit to the Luo and Tian families so they weren't too formal as they interacted with Qu Qing Ju. It was just when they heard that Duan Wang had accompanied Qu Qing Ju that they felt deeply moved.

Some detected that Duan Wang Fei came in with a *guniang* of the Family Luo and understood what was happening. Nobody announced it but only talked about some interesting local events to wile away the time.

"I heard that an able person came to the Five Estates Monastery. He's very skilled at explaining the divination sticks. After the flowers bloom, I will go beg with my family."

"Isn't the Five Estates Monastery in the Jing suburbs, when are you going, let's go together to beg for a stick."

Qu Qing Ju heard this piece of conversation and put the teacup in her hand down. The dominant religion in Da Long Dynasty was Buddhism. The Court didn't support any, but the citizens each had their own beliefs.

Luo *shi* saw that Qu Qing Ju seemed to be interested in the Five Estates Monastery and elaborated: "That Five Estates Monastery is the biggest monastery in Jing, it's on the Bai Yun Mountain on the suburbs. The able person they are talking about is most likely Spiritual Master Xuan Ling. If you are interested, you can go take a visit."

Qu Qing Ju smiled: "There's no need. A person's fate is already set down by the Heavens. To go divine it, it would decrease the good fortune." She wasn't a resolute atheist but she did believe that good fortune and luck will decrease with divination so she wasn't interested in begging for a divination stick.

Nobody thought Qu Qing Ju would say something like this. Luo *shi* stared in astonishment before nodding: "This is true."

Luo Wen Yao, listening in, felt her heart jump. She looked with respect at Qu Qing Ju. With such an open mind, how many women in this world could achieve such a thing? At this time, she felt that the worries she had about her marriage were just she making it difficult on herself. Nothing would be different thinking about things that had already been set in stone. It would be better for her to think how she would live the rest of her life, that was her good fortune.

Thinking about this, the stare that Luo Wen Yao gave Qu Qing Ju had a hint of gratefulness, a smile appearing on her face.

After the banquet, the guests listened for a long while before bidding farewell. Qu Qing Ju, when most of the guests had left, finally stood and held Luo *shi*'s hand as she announced: "*Jiumu*, I need to return now."

Luo *shi* was a bit reluctant but had to agree: "In the *fu*, take care of your body. There's a lot of people you should take notice off." This was reminding her of the *ce shi*, but due to Luo *shi*'s identity, she couldn't say it.

Qu Qing Ju nodded before she bent to enter the sedan. After she looked again at Luo *shi*, she let the servant drop the curtain.

Watching as the sedan disappear outside *er min*, Luo Wen Yao exclaimed in a quiet voice: "Duan Wang Fei is really an amazing person."

Luo *shi* looked at her niece and thought about the days that her niece had suffered through in Chang De Gong Fu. She sighed. Hopefully Duan Wang would continue to treat her well.

"You have to remember, for a woman to live well, the priority is to treat herself well. If she could discomfort herself, others will also do so." Luo *shi* opened in a meaningful voice, "Cheng Wang might not have the emperor's favour, but I have seen him before. He has a lenient personality, you don't have to be too worried."

"*Gumu* … …" Luo Wen Yao's face instantly reddened, in the midst of her bashfulness there were a few hints of expectancy.

At the main gate of Xiang Qing Hou Fu, He Heng watched as Qu Qing Ju walked out of the sedan. A hint of a smile appeared on his face, and Tian Kun, who had been accompanying him at one side, couldn't help but look.

He watched as Duan Wang walked towards *biao mei*[28]. Maybe it was that the two had such outstanding appearances, or maybe their smiles were too intoxicating, this scene was very beautiful but it was so beautiful it didn't seem real.

Tian Kun blinked his eyes. Maybe he was thinking too much.

Chapter 36

On the eighth day of the first month, the Royal Court opened once again. The carriages and sedans that moved through the city lessened and peddlers gradually filled the streets again.

But just as the court opened, a grand case was pushed out. There was an official who accused Rui Wang of putting out high-interest loans in Jiang Nan, of participating with the salt governance and casinos. Once this came out, it instantly caused huge ripples. On the third day as this incident grew larger and larger, this official suddenly accused Rui Wang of having a guilty conscience and threatening his family. After he finished, under the gaze of the entire court, he rammed himself into the gold coiled dragon pillar with his head for an instant death.

This was akin to throwing water into boiling oil. The explosion rocked the entire Jing City. The emperor was so angry he fainted in the Royal Hall. For a time, each person in Jing defended themselves, afraid they would be involved.

In Duan Wang Fu, Qu Qing Ju flipped through the ever increasing states of calling cards. She furrowed her eyebrows and ordered: "In the future, if somebody asks for a meeting, just say I am sick, and *wang ye* is busy

[28] female relative of the same generation from the female line, younger.

with his duties, not in the *fu* and cannot receive guests." At this time, He Qi was locked in conflict with He Yuan. Duan Wang Fu didn't need to involve itself.

Enough smart officials in Jing should have already found that the dead official was connected with Ning Wang. Ning Wang was also fighting with Rui Wang at this time. Everybody was content to look at the spectacle. Why involve themselves?

Mu Jin nodded to show she remembered. Seeing *wang fei*'s face was dark, she informed: "This morning, people from Chang De Gong Fu came. They said that *lao taitai* missed you."

Qu Qing Ju gave a disdainful smile. She marvelled: "When I was at Chang De Gong Fu, I didn't see that *lao taitai* missed me. To think they would think of me now." She just didn't like the conduct of Chang Dee gong Fu, "Right now, they don't have anyone at court. They just want to use *lao taitai* as an excuse to find information. Tell the messenger that I received a cold a long time ago. Now when I get cold, I will get sick."

Since the reputation of Chang De Gong Fu was already terrible, she didn't mind adding more negativity. Either way, the news that Liang *shi* abused the daughter left behind by the first wife was already out there.

"This is good, it will stop those shameless people from trying to associate themselves," Yin Liu added some smokeless charcoal to the copper lion basin in the corner. She said with righteous fury, "*Nubi* is just afraid if you let them a bit, they will try to paste themselves onto in the future."

Qu Qing Ju heard this metaphor and couldn't help but smile, "You're thinking too much. Chang De Gong Fu might be shameless but they wouldn't dare rush to fawn." With the Duke of Chang De's personality, how could he bear to shame Liang *shi*. As to Liang *shi*, she didn't want to see her even more. The only person that might sincerely want to have good relations with Duan Wang Fu was Qu *lao taitai*. But it was a pity she was old and she was no longer the ruler of Chang De Gong Fu.

Mu Jin looked at Yin Liu, forbidding her from saying what she shouldn't say. Yin Liu was more and more brash recently. Even if *wang fei* was kind, she shouldn't use *wang fei*'s favour and forget her own boundaries.

Under Mu Jin's stare, Yin Liu knew she broke protocol and quickly shut up, not daring to talk nonsense.

Watching the movements between the two, Qu Qing Ju smiled but didn't speak. Yin Liu's personality was a bit too brash. Letting Mu Jin teach her a bit, it was to prevent her from being harmed by this personality.

In Rui Wang Fu, He Yuan smashed a teacup with a dark face: "He Qi made such a good play this time!" Thinking about that official that performed suicide on the pillar in the Royal Hall, He Yuan felt his anger reach a peak. At what time did he need to threaten a minor official?! But now that the incident has reached the point of no return, *fuhuang* had to calm the others and actually rescinded his qualification to attend court. Even more, he couldn't leave his *wang fu*.

He never was at peace with *lao da*, but due to *fuhuang*'s partialness for him, he had never lost much at the Royal Court. He hadn't expected that this time he would suffer such a large fall.

"*Wang ye*, this incident is most likely complicated. As to what to do, the most important is to clean up what was going on in Jiang Nan," A subordinate persuaded, "Now that this has been uncovered and revealed by Ning Wang, the emperor will definitely send somebody to Jiang Nan to investigate. As long as there is no proof, then it will still be fine if a few more people die." He actually understood inside that no matter if *wang ye* could pick himself out of this incident, his reputation would be damaged.

People usually believed bad news, not good news. When it was time and there was proof that this incident had nothing to do with *wang ye*, in the eyes of others, it was the emperor that wanted to protect *wang ye* and purposefully absolved *wang ye*. In this case, *wang ye* had done these things in the first place.

"It's fine if a few more people die?" He Yuan smiled coldly as he looked at his subordinates. He looked at another subordinate, "Gao Duo, who do you say that *fuhuang* would sent to investigate in Jiang Nan?"

The retainer called Gao Duo didn't rush to speak because He Yuan called on him. He ruminated for a while before replying: "*Wang ye*, you are the most favoured of the emperor's sons. This to you, it is the biggest factor in your favour. By now, Ning Wang's actions are getting bigger and bigger. This is increasing the emperor's wariness of him. If this one hasn't guessed wrong, the emperor will send Cheng Wang and an official that the emperor favors to Jiang Nan."

"*Lao si*?" He Yuan raised an eyebrow, "*lao si* is always cowardly and has no ideas, there's no need to worry there. The only problem is the accompanying official."

"At the Royal Court now, there are four officials that the emperor trusts the most. The first is the Marquis of Xiang Qing, Tian Jin Ke who is also the Junior Minister of Justice. But this man is Duan Wang Fei's uncle so the emperor won't send him. The second is the Minister of Defence, Luo Chang Qing, but this man is Cheng Wang's future father-in-law so the emperor would have even less an likelihood of sending him. The third is also the person already responsible as Chief Examiner for this year's examinations, the Great Scholar Lu Jing Hong. Taking away these three, the only one remaining is the Minister of the Right Wei Wen Guang. And this person might not be the most able, but he is very perceptive and good at pandering to the emperor's desires." Gao Duo performed a bow and said in a meaningful tone, "*Wang ye*, all that this one has surmised, all of it rests on the premise of the emperor's partialness for you."

He Yuan finished listening and sat in thought on the chair. The franticness on his face gradually calmed: "Mr. Gao's meaning, *ben wang* understands. You can all leave."

Hearing the change in what *wang ye* had called him, Gao Duo left with a calm expression along the other men. After them came out of *zhengyuan*,

he smoothed the scraggly hairs on his chin and smiled as he bore the jealous stares of the other subordinates as he walked out of the *wang fu*.

In the front hall of Tian Qi Palace, He Heng and his three brothers stood at the bottom. Beside them there were some officials. Maybe it was that the expression on Qing De Emperor's face as he sat on the dragon chair was too ugly but their faces were one heavier than the other.

There were more than one hundred complaints from the court to investigate Rui Wang. Even if Qing De Emperor had the desire, he couldn't suppress it. His already old visage became even more ancient. Looking at the sons and officials under him, he said in helplessness: "The incident of Rui Wang, *zhen*[29] still has suspicions. We shall wait for it all to be investigated before making a decision."

Even though everybody knew this was true but at this time, they couldn't do anything other than shout "Emperor is wise" and start arguing over who to send to Jiang Nan.

"Stop, *zhen* has an idea about what you are all talking about. *Zhen* will send down a decree personally tomorrow at court. You can all leave." Qing De Emperor may have understood in his heart that these accusations were true but he couldn't bear to punish his favourite son so he distraughtly threw everybody out.

He Qi's face didn't look well as he walked out of the front hall. He didn't look at He Heng and He Ming before he swept away. It could be seen just how angry he was.

He Ming blinked at *da ge* who had rushed away and turned to look at *er ge* standing by his side as though he was waiting for him.

"It's late, us brothers should return too," He Heng's smile was casual, "*si di* walk with *er ge*?"

"*Er ge* first." Hearing this, He Ming politely let He Heng to go ahead.

[29]朕: (zhen) the royal I or We

"Us brothers don't have to follow these rules," He Heng patted his shoulder and walked first. But it was unknown whether on purpose or not, but he almost always was walking abreast with He Ming.

When the two reached the gate to the palace, they met He Yuan as he came out of a carriage. He Yuan was wearing a jewel-blue satin robe. He looked more serious than before, even his face was a few shades whiter.

The three performed greetings. He Yuan looked at the two and asked: "Is *er ge* and *si di* preparing to leave the palace?"

He Heng was clear inside that He Yuan, at this moment, should be in his *fu* and not be appearing at the palace gates but said with a normal face: "Yes, of course."

"Then *didi* will say farewell first," He Yuan revealed a hint of mirth on his face, "*Er ge* and *si di*, take care."

"*San ge*, too." Because He Yuan didn't usually pay him attention and suddenly being mentioned, He Ming's face showed a hint of surprise. He instantly smiled and returned a greeting, "*Didi* won't disturb *san ge* anymore."

He Yuan nodded and started in the direction of Tian Qi Palace with large strides, accompanied by a *taijian*. The jewel-blue back of the figure seemed a bit fretful.

Seeing this scene, when He Heng looked at He Ming, the smile on his face grew fainter. When the two separated to get on their carriages, He Heng patted his shoulder: "*Si di*, take care of yourself."

He Ming smiled and bowed with two hands raised in a fist: "*Er ge*, take care."

Looking at the horse-drawn carriage that was imprinted with the characters of Duan Wang Fu travel out the palace gates, He Ming entered his own carriage. After the curtain was let down, the smile on his face slowly disappeared. His eyes were filled with helplessness and pain.

Once he came out of the carriage and as He Heng stepped into the gate, he saw a paper *luan* flying in the sky as he raised his head. His eyes narrowed and he frowned as he looked at Ming He behind him: "Find out who is doing it, in the future, no one in the *fu* is allowed to fly such a thing." In the previous dynasty there had been people who used flying *luan* to pass messages to the outside. Right now, it was a tense time in Jing. He didn't want spies in his Duan Wang Fu.

"Yes," Ming He beckoned to the *taijian* behind him. They quickly retreated and competed to use the quickest speed to find the person flying the kite.

In *zhengyuan*, Qu Qing Ju smiled at the flying beautiful *luan*. She turned and remarked to Mu Jin: "Look, isn't there people who use such tactics?"

Mu Jin smiled warmly: "*Wang fei* is all-knowing."

But who was it that was so stupid that they would do such an idiotic thing at this time?

Chapter 37

Qu Qing Ju saw the paper kite disappear after a while and said with some pity, "Oh, the weather hasn't turned warm yet but some already have the leisure time to fly kites. It must be such a refined person."

"What refined person," He Heng walked in with large steps and happened to hear this sentence. He promised with a thin smile, "If Qing Qu likes it, when the weather turns warm, I'll take you to the estate to play. You can fly whatever you want."

"It's too tiring to run," Qu Qing Ju disliked it, "if *wang ye* really cares for me, how about finding a few more chefs for this *fu* and let me taste all the foods in the world."

"That's good too. After a bit, I'll take you to the estate to taste authentic peasant food," He Heng pulled her inside and took down his cape to hand to a *yahuan*, "Those foods might not be as refined as in the *fu* but it has a special flavour in itself."

"En, the dried meat that the estate sent over a few days ago was good," Qu Qing Ju poured him a cup of tea. After He Heng received it, she then sat down on the chair next to him, "I'll let them send some more over."

"Even if the flavour of these smoked foods is good, but it isn't good for the body to consume too much. You still have to abstain," He Heng took a drink of tea. When he heard what Qu Qing Ju said, he set down the teacup, "Don't act according to your likes only."

Hearing this, Qu Qing Ju smiled and turned to trim a short pine tree: "Don't worry *wang ye*, I won't do stupid things." On the matter of food, the ancients had been experts a long time ago. But He Heng's words, did it have a double meaning?

"Alright, I know you like good food and will control yourself," He Heng felt that Qu Qing Ju was still smiling but the mirth had lessened. He could only helplessly change the topic, "The person who was flying the paper *luan* in the *fu*, no matter who, you have to lock them up."

Qu Qing Ju saw his face was slightly stern and slowly nodded: "*Wang ye*'s meaning is … …"

"Let's investigate before anything else first," He Heng raised his cup again but didn't drink. He looked seriously at Qu Qing Ju, "There is always some people that don't belong to you or me in this *wang fu*."

She hadn't thought that He Heng would tell such things to her. Qu Qing Ju looked at this man in a new light. This person definitely was decisive and ruthless, but he was gentle and elegant normally and lowered people's defences, "*Wang ye* is suspicious that this person has other loyalties."

"There's many ways to attract my attention, this way isn't very skilled," He Heng smiled thinly, "I saw that paper *luan* hadn't flown very high

before the string broke and it fell outside the *fu*. This isn't something done to attract my attention."

Qu Qing Ju slightly raised an eyebrow. She had assumed that someone was using this way to attract He Heng's attentions. She hadn't thought that someone would actually use this tactic to pass on a message at this special time. Thinking to there, she gave a shallow smile and pointed out, "Maybe it's a coincidence?"

"Coincidence, on purpose, it doesn't matter," He Heng calmly spoke, "We can't keep this person."

The hand Qu Qing Ju used to trip the bonsai turned askew and cut down an additional branch. She picked up the pine branch with some pity. This pot was another one she had cut into a failure. In her last life, she had studied dancing and later became an agent in the dance circles. At the very least, she would be considered to be nimble in hand and feet, but how did she become a murderer of bonsai?

Putting down the scissors in her hand, she turned to wash her hands in the copper basin a *yahuan* was holding. As she wiped her hands, she said: "These things, *wang ye* can make the decisions. The only thing I can help you do is manage this *houyuan*."

He Heng looked at her pale and think fingers rubbing in the soft cotton and felt that this pair of hands was incomparably tempting. He stared in a daze before waking and praising: "You've done very well, after you came, this *houyang* has become much more quiet."

Putting the cotton cloth back onto the tray, she motioned for the *yahuan* to retreat. Qu Qing Ju turned to smile at He Heng. She asked: "Is *wang ye* disapproving of *houyang* for being too quiet?"

"It's not quiet, it's calm," He Heng stood and pulled the person closer to him, "I actually like the present state of *houyuan*."

Flinging a flirtatious look at the other , Qu Qing Ju turned and sat down on a chair by the side, "It's good as long as *wang ye* likes it. I'm just

afraid that *wang ye* thinks there aren't enough beautiful women and is angry at me for not being generous and virtuous enough."

He Heng walked to her side and smooched a kiss on her cheek before replying: "*Ben wang*'s Qing Ju is the most virtuous, able, deferent and intelligent."

Reaching out with two fingers to push the other's face aside a bit, Qu Qing Ju raised her chin and chuckled: "*Wang ye* has to remember these words." Finishing, she saw the other's face full of smile and, as though it was a great favour, she gave a kiss to his chin.

He Heng was so tempted by this move that his heart was trembling. There had been women that kissed him of their own initiative before, but he just felt that only this woman's actions were the most tempting. He didn't wasn't to resist and bent to pull the other into his embrace.

"*Wang ye*, we have captured the person flying the paper *luan*. *Wang ye*, what should be done?"

He Heng had never before felt that Qian Chang Xin was this unperceptive. He took a deep breath before standing and sitting down at the front, "Come in."

Qu Qing Ju raised a white and blue-flowered tea cup to hide half her face before she turned to smile cheerfully at He Heng.

He Heng coincidentally saw the look and his heart was tickled again. He gave a deep look at her, sighed in frustration and helplessness before reluctantly move his eyes away.

Qu Qing Ju was very satisfied with He Heng's response. She adjusted into a more dignified posture and turned her head to watch as Qian Chang Xin come in with a few others. At the very end was two strong *mama*'s pinning a young woman wearing a pink dress. She looked somewhat familiar.

When everybody had knelt down, Qu Qing Ju finally recognized this person. It was Bai Zhi, one of He Heng's *tong fang*. She wasn't very clear

why Bai Zhi had stayed so long by He Heng's side. This person had never competed for attention and had been compliant for such a long time, was it all an act? She had assumed that people would use she tactics to get favour, it seemed that she was wrong. It seemed, in this fight for the throne, it obviously couldn't be without the role of spies. Her eyesight wasn't far enough. This incident, to her, it was a very good lesson.

If she was passing on news to the outside, what was she passing on? She was a minor *tong fang*, what could she have found?

He Heng scraped the rim of the cup with the lid, making a slightly ear-piercing sound. But just this movement, it was enough to send Bai Zhi into shivers of fright.

"*Ben wang* remembers that you became a *tong fang* two years ago," He Heng blew on the surface of the tea, and said in a calm and emotionless tone, "The paper *luan* you dropped outside, *ben wang* ordered them to pick it back. Why don't *ben wang* have a good look at that paper *luan*."

Ban Zhi's face slightly changed but she kowtowed as she pled; "*Wang ye*, forgive me. *Nubi* didn't know it wasn't allowed to fly a kite in the *wang fu. Wang ye*, please forgive me!"

Disregarding her appeals, He Heng saw Ming He come in with the paper *luan*. When he took it, he saw a simple picture of a beautiful woman, beside the picture there were two lines of poetry.

"'she wore shoes embroidered with delicate designs, what trailed behind was a garment as light as the mist'" He Heng looked at the beauty drawn wearing a grand set of clothing, standing at a high place. He gave a soft snort: "Such a good drawing, such a good poem."

Qu Qing Ju raised her eyebrows as she looked at Bai Zhi. If she didn't guess wrong, the drawing was pointing at her? "*Wang ye* … …" Bai Zhi's expression changed, "*nubi* hadn't been thinking clearly and forgot to avoid *Wang fei*'s name. Please forgive me, *wang fei*." Finishing, she started to kowtow repeatedly to Qu Qing Ju.

A difficult expression appeared on Qu Qing Ju's face and she bit her lips as she gazed at He Heng.

"You don't have to beg *wang fei*," He Heng slammed the paper *luan* in his hand to the table and ordered icily, "Someone come, Bai Zhi has transgressed against *wang fei*. Drag her into the firewood room."

Very quickly, someone came to drag Bai Zhi away. He Heng stood and said to Qu Qing Ju, "I have some matters to attend to, wait for me tonight to eat together."

Qu Qing Ju nodded and tied his cape for him. She looked at the shambles of the paper *luan* that had been slammed into the table, "This paper *luan*?"

"Ming He, take the paper *luan* and burn it," After He Heng ordered Ming He, he turned to smiled Qu Qing Ju. He grasped her hand, "Don't worry."

The back of her hand was being gently pinched. Qu Qing Ju glared once at He Heng. Seeing him turned to walk away, she finally opened: "The weather is changing fast these days. If *wang ye* is going out, you have to pay attention to your body."

He Heng smiled again at her before leaving *zhengyuan* with his procession. Once he was outside, his face was dark as he commanded Qian Chang Xin: "Pay attention to see who will try to get near to the firewood room in the next few days. We would leave any of them around in the future."

Qian Chang Xin nodded before informing quietly: "*Wang ye*, Wang Chang Ming has come."

"To the study," He Heng's face was still heavy. Thinking about the bothersome women in the *houyuan*, a disdainful smile appeared on his lips.

When he met Wang Chang Ming, He Heng's face had recovered, "Is there any news from that side?"

"*Wang ye*, Rui Wang has already entered the palace to meet the emperor. He wants Cheng Wang to go to Jiang Nan," Wang Chang Ming's face held joy, "It looks like our plan succeeded."

"*Lao san* always felt that he was above us other three brothers. He looks down the most at *lao si*. Naturally he would want to pick a soft target," He Heng smiled coldly. "Find a way to spread the news to Ning Wang. With Ning Wang's personality, if he doesn't make a ruckus, *lao san*'s efforts would be such a waste."

Pretending not to hear the secrets between the imperial sons, Wang Chang Min switched to say, "This subordinate understands. What should be done at Rui Wang's side?"

"Nobody has to do anything. With his personality, he'll do something himself," He Heng responded faintly, "we just have to watch."

Wang Chang Ming instantly understood and bowed: "*Wang ye* is perceptive."

On the second day at court, the emperor send down the decree as expected. He ordered Cheng Wang and the Minister of the Right, Wei Wen Guang to investigate the incident in Jiang Nan and bestowed a gold medal for "As if it was *zhen* here." He asked for the two to investigate finely, to prevent those people to mistakenly accuse Rui Wang.

These words boldly broadcasted the emperor's attitudes. Many were clear. Even though Rui Wang still couldn't attend court, he was still the emperor's most favoured and trusted imperial son. No wonder that person was fearless.

A day later, He Ming and Wei Wen Guang left with men and horses under the title of imperial envoy. Everyone in Jing sympathized this unfavored Cheng Wang. Everyone knew that the emperor just wanted to go through the motions. But if he did protect Rui Wang, this was going to put onto his reputation a stain of protecting villains that would

be shown to the entire populace. It could be seen just how unequal the emperor favoured his sons.

He Qi sat in a tea shop and looked at the procession as it left the city. His face revealed a disdainful smile. After the procession had disappears, he put down his teacup, and said to the tea scholar that was pouring tea next to him: "On the road, find a chance to attack … … try to not harm Cheng Wang."

Chapter 38

In the deep of the night where no one was there, a dark shadow flashed at the corner of the firewood room. Before this person could near the room itself, suddenly several lamps lit up in the surroundings. He looked in surprise and found many people surrounding him.

"Qian *yeye* here has waited so many days. Finally caught this rat," Qian Chang Xin held a lamp as he came out of the corner. He looked disdainfully at this servant in the guise of a manservant and raised his hand, "Bind him up, don't disturb anyone else."

The servants rushed in. Before the person could speak, he was gagged, bound and dragged away.

"Stupid trash," Finishing, he spat on the ground. He kicked the door to the firewood room with one foot and looked down at Bai Zhi who was tied and gagged in the corner. He gave a joyless smile and said: "Bai Zhi *gunaing*, your accomplice has already been captured. Why don't we have a chat and you tell me who let you into the *fu*?"

Bai Zhi squirmed against the rope on her body but the ropes were too tight and she could not escape. She glared hatefully at Qian Chang Xin.

"Free her mouth," Qian Chang Xin took a whip from a person behind him. He slowly whipped it on his palm, his face still carrying a harmonious smile, "Bai Zhi *guniang*, have you thought what you are going to say?"

"I don't know anything," Bai Zhi hatefully turned her head away, not looking at Qian Chang Xin, "I just wanted to fly a paper *luan*, *wang ye* has the wrong person."

Qian Change Xin was too lazy to argue with her but only said impatiently: "There's not much difference between you saying or not. But it's such a pity for your old and young in the family, and the newly married sister of yours. How about we give you a crime of poisoning *wang ye*, wonder what would your family have to suffer?"

"Shameless!" Bai Zhi turned her head and stared straight at Qian Chang Xing, "What do you want to do?"

"You aren't the first person to praise *yeye* this way," Qian Chang Xin uncoiled the whip, the smile on his face even more visible. Suddenly the whip dealt a blow on Bai Zhi's body, "Usually the people who praise *yeye* like this, by now their teeth won't even be on their body."

The pain caused her body to shrink, Bai Zhi stated with a white face: "*Nubi* is innocent."

"Since you are willing to give up on your family to protect your master, then *yeye* won't care about your family either," Qian Chang Xin proclaimed cheerfully, "Tomorrow, I'll let your family go first. Hopefully when you go down to see them, you can still face them."

Tears were streaming down Bai Zhi's face. She covered her wound and chocked out: "It's His Highness Ning Wang that wanted *nubi* to pay attention to the movement of the *fu*. Except *nubi*'s status was too low and couldn't pass out any news. A few days earlier, His Highness Ning Wang wanted *nubi* to investigate how *wang ye* treated *wang fei* in the *fu*. *Nubi* assumed this wasn't such an important matter and so dared to pass on the news." She wasn't afraid of death but was afraid of it involving her family.

"That's nonsense, His Highness Ning Wang is a straightforward and honest person, you can't slander him!" Qian Chang Xin disagreed, "Such vile slander, *wang ye* won't believe you."

"It's true. A while ago, *nubi*'s *didi* entered Ning Wang Fu for a job. *Nubi* had no other way and did wrong things. *Gonggong*, please investigate carefully, *nubi* really didn't pass on any information." Bai zhi cried as she knelt in front of Qian Chang Xin.

"Fine, *yeye* I don't want to listen to your nonsense," Qian Chang Xin retreated two steps, not allowing Bai Zhi to hug his leg. He said in a cold voice, "Bai Zhi died due to an illness recently. Send somebody to give her family thirty taels of silver." Finishing, he motioned for the person to pour the poisonous wine into Bai Zhi.

"Thank you *wang ye*, thank you *gonggong*." Bai Zhi trembled as she held a hand and poured down the wine. No matter what, at least *wang ye* let her family go.

Qian Chang Xin came out of the firewood room and threw the whip to one side. He took a handkerchief that a lower-ranked *taijian* handed over to wipe his hand, "Bury the person carefully. At least she served *wang ye* before. People, they can't try to find death themselves. Those that betray their masters, they don't have good endings." Finishing, he left without a second glance.

Tong fang Bai Zhi's death didn't arouse much interest in the *fu*. Everybody new, Bai Zhi died suddenly. Curiosity wasn't allowed in the case of a sudden death.

When Qu Qing Ju heard the news, she was trimming a newly delivered bonsai. She finished listening to Huang Yang before she put down her scissors to order: "Since the person is gone, don't mention the past anymore. Get someone to send something to her family, it is *wang ye*'s grace." Since He Heng said Bai Zhi died of illness, then she had to give the appropriate response.

Even Yin Liu who was quick of the mouth didn't say anything at the time. After Huang Yang left, she spoke with some fear: "She's just gone."

"As a servant, you can't have multiple masters," Mu Jin sorted away the scissors that Qu Qing Ju placed on the table to prevent Qu Qing Ju from accidentally harming her hand, "This way, it was very generous of *wang ye*." This type of thing, it wasn't just a life, it was possible to influence an entire family.

Yin Liu didn't argue with the words. To her, all she had to do everyday was serve *wang fei* well. She didn't have to think about anything else. She didn't want to think that much either.

Qu Qing Ju propped her chin up with one hand and looked outside in boredom. In these days without a computer or phone, it was boring. She gave a yawn and drawled lazily: "Mu Jin, find a story book for me."

Mu Jin retreated but after a while, she didn't receive her novel, but Qu Qing Ju received a flower and gold printed invitation.

"The Jin An Princess Royal?" Qu Qing Ju looked at the invitation in her hand. At the banquet, there had been a few princesses and 郡主: daughters in the Imperial Family, most likely daughters of wangs. One rank lower than princess (gongzhu)*jun zhu*[30]. But this Jin An Princess, she had never met before. If her memory wasn't wrong, Jin An Princess was the eldest daughter of Qing di Emperor. Her birth mother had died, but she was adopted under the empress. The emperor had also decreed her the title of "the Princess Royal[31]. She had significant status within the womenfolk but since she married down to the Count of Bei Lu, she moved to live in Jing Zhou and rarely returned to Jing.

The rumor was that the Count of Bei Lu and Jin An Princess Royal were deeply in love and had one son and daughter. She was the object of admiration from many of the women at court and was the epitome of husband of wife in many people's eyes. But why was she returning to Jin now, at a time that wasn't a festival and to hold a picture-admiring banquet.

[30] daughters in the Imperial Family, most likely daughters of *wangs.* One rank lower than princess (*gongzhu*)

[31] The title in Chinese is "长公主" which means the elder, head princess. It is equivalent to the "Princess Royal" in English nobility as a title except there could be more than one Princess Royal at a time.

She looked at the beautiful flowery *xiaokai* script[32] on the invitation. The invitation that was sent to the *wang fu* would have been personally written by Jin An Princess Royal. To see a person through their writing. This Jin An Princess Royal was a very talented woman.

Personally writing a reply, Qu Qing Ju waited for the ink to dry before folding the paper. She passed it to Jin Zhan who had been grinding the ink: "Get someone to send it to the Princess Royal's *fu."*

At night, He Heng came to the *zhengyuan*. When the two finished eating the evening meal, Qu Qing Ju brought up the matter.

He Heng wasn't very close to his *jiejie* but he did hear some rumors floating in Jing: "Two days earlier, the Princess Royal came back to Jing. You might have never met her before, but since the invitation has been sent, you can go."

Qu Qing Ju gave him a cup of digestive tea, "I already sent a reply. It's just that the picture-admiring banquet is three days later. The day after that would be the Lantern Festival.[33] I was just surprised at the date that the Princess Royal had set down." When He Heng took the teacup, he took advantage and rubbed her hand. She glared at him half-heartedly, "Has the Count of Bei Lu returned as well?"

He Heng shook his head, "Haven't heard it. I've just heard that the Princess Royal came with her two children."

Qu Qing Ju felt that there definitely had been something that happened. The Princess Royal returning before the Lantern Festival, with her children but not her *fuma* .[34] Nothing serious was occurring in Jing at this time, why was she in such a rush?

Was it that this Count of Bei Lu had done something and let down the Princess Royal? Because in this world, the people that were held as

[32] *xiaokai* is a style of writing called regular script where the characters are of small size. It is akin to printing in English writing rather than handwriting/cursive writing.

[33] shang yuan jie. It occurs on the fifteenth day of the first month, also called 元宵节 (yuan xiao jie)

[34] the husband of a princess, the emperor's son-in-law.

examples of matrimony usually would screw up. This was most likely the supposed "the more loving, the faster you die."

If the truth was like this, then it was very interesting that the Princess Royal was returning to the palace right now.

"Don't think too much," He Heng set down the teacup and reached with a hand to scrape Qu Qing Ju's nose, "The Princess Royal is the most noble princess among my sisters. No one dare offend her."

Qu Qing Ju instantly understood the meaning in these words. If the Count of Bei Lu really did let down the Princess Royal, if the Princess Royal was so angry and wanted to get revenge, then this Count of Bei Lu won't have a good outcome. She looked at He Heng. These words might not be actual concern for his sister, but it was very honest.

"*Wang ye* is right," Qu Qing Ju smiled, "I was overcomplicating it."

"En, since it is already done, why don't you think about us," He Heng moved next to her body and gently bit her ear, "Like when should we prepare to sleep?" Finishing, he pulled on the hairpin in her hair. Instantly, her hair poured down like a stream of water.

Qu Qing Ju smiled at him, "What is *wang ye* thinking now?"

He Heng felt that this stare was like a string, pulling him in. He carried her up in a lengthwise embrace, "What I'm thinking, Qing Ju will know in a while."

Qu Qing Ju laughed out loud into his chest.

The second morning, Qu Qing Ju sat up in the bed. She looked at the scattered clothing on the bed, then at He Heng who was dressing in front of the mirror before she lazily retreated back into her blankets.

Seeing her wake, He Heng said: "Today is the Lantern Festival, I'll take you out on the carriage to sightsee."

"*Wang ye*, you have to keep your promise," Qu Qing Ju flipped around upon hearing this, propping her head up on one hand to look at He Heng, "Then you need to come back early, I'll wait for you."

"I'll certainly return very early," He Heng walked to the bed and bent down to steal a kiss from her lips. He straightened and announced, "I have to go to court. If you are tired, sleep a bit more." Finishing, his gaze sweep ambiguously over the red marks on Qu Qing Ju's collarbone.

Pulling the blankets to under her chin, Qu Qing Ju pointed outside and gently gave a snort: "*Wang ye*, you should be going to court now. *Qie* is still tired, and won't see you off." Finishing, she flipped around and left her back to He Heng.

He Heng shook his head as he smiled and his mood was light as he went out the door.

Qu Qing Ju slept for almost another two hours before lazily getting out of bed. She looked calmly on as the *yahuan* cleaned up the clothing under the bed. She sat at the mirror and drew her brows when she said: "Jin Zhan, get someone to ask around what's going on with the Princess Royal."

Jin Zhan bowed and left without a sound.

Silently looking at the woman in the mirror, Qu Qing Ju raised the corners of her lips.

Chapter 39

The reason that the Princess Royal had suddenly returned to Jing was as Qu Qing Ju had expected. Something had happened. It really wasn't some unexpected incident. It was just an usually good man like the Count of Bei Lu had suddenly taken a fancy for a daughter of a little official and had wanted to take the person into the *fu*. Such a person like the Princess Royal didn't even argue with him and crisply sent

somebody with the girl to return home. Who knew that the Count of Bei Lu was so angry he installed this person a mistress[35] outside.

When the Princess Royal found out, she gathered her servants and tore down the residence that the Count of Bei Lu had outside. Then she took her children with her back to Jing. As to how the Count of Bei Lu was, the Princess Royal didn't care at all.

Qu Qing Ju finished listening to the entire story and sighed: "The love between husband and wife, it's just this." The daring that the Princess Royal had, a lot of it was based in the fact that she was the Emperor's daughter, that she was the Princess Royal of noble birth. If it was another woman who met such a thing, even if she left, who would help get justice for her?

After Jin Zhan recited the story from beginning to end, she whispered: "*Nubi* has also heard that the Emperor and Empress already know of the incident. The Emperor is very angry and has summoned for the Count of Bei Lu to come into Jing. "

A man like the Count of Bei , he hadn't really been in love. He was only wary of the status of the Princess Royal and hadn't met the woman that made his heart move. Now that he met a young and innocent girl, he forgot his wife, forgot his children and forgot his own identity. This kind of man, compared to those womanizers, was there a difference?

When He Heng came back from court, his expression wasn't well. It looked like he also knew what had happened with the Princess Royal.

"In the future, when you go to the Princess Royal's residence, spend some time with her," When He Heng stopped, he gave a sigh, "This Count of Bei Lu is too outrageous."

Qu qing Ju pretended to not have known already: "What is it?"

[35] meaning outside room. The woman that becomes a *waishi* isn't recognized in any way by the family of the man and neither are the children, usually. The woman also has no real status, unlike a concubine of any rank and therefore no income except what the man gives her.

He Heng instantly went silent for a beat before answering: "He let down the Princess Royal, *fuhuang* was very angry and summoned him back to Jing."

Knowing that he didn't want to go into the details, Qu Qing Ju smiled and said: "It's late, let's eat now."

He Heng glanced outside before nodding. He affirmed: "It's really not early anymore. After we eat, I'll take you out to see the lanterns." He was still thinking about this event and didn't want other people's happenings to affect the mood between the two of them. He then continued, "There's going to be many people tonight. I've gotten someone to prepare a veil for you. It will be good to go for a walk."

Qu Qing Ju revealed a smile: "Then let us eat quickly. I still have to change." The clothing she was wearing was beautiful, but it reached the floor and wasn't appropriate to go outside.

Knowing that she wanted to go outside, He Heng smiled and agreed: "Yes." He turned and washed his hands, preparing to eat.

The meal started with a small bowl of *yuan xiao*[36]. Qu Qing Ju used half a bowl before randomly eating a few other dishes before she started to wash her hands and rinsing her mouth. When He Heng put down his chopsticks, she stood to go to the inner room to change.

Holding a cup of digestive tea, the smile on He Heng's face grew deeper. Looking at the gradually darkening sky outside, He Heng ordered Qian Chang Xin and the others to prepare a carriage.

Qu Qing Ju changed on a blue-green tight girdled short dress. She styled her hair into a *douwoji*. When she came out she saw He Heng sitting at the side drinking tea. She came forward and asked: "What does *wang ye* think of this?"

He Heng saw the short dress in blue-green that she wore. It was different than the laziness she exuded usually. Like this, she seemed to

[36] the food takes its name from the Lantern Festival. It is a dessert type food made with a sweet filling rolled around in sticky rice flour to form a thin coat before being cooked.

have more of the lovable nature of a young girl, just like a tender flower but which was became water with a pinch.

"Very good," He Heng came forward to pull her hand, "let's go, it will start soon."

Sitting on the carriage for a while, she found that it became gradually louder coming from the street as though they had entered a high density area. But there wasn't anyone who blocked the carriage. The one they were riding in didn't have the symbols of the *wang fu*, but the people who could sit in a two-horse carriage, how low would their status be?

After the carriage travelled for another while, it stopped. He Heng passed a veil to Qu Qing Ju, "Almost to the river, come down with me." Finishing, he got down the carriage first, holding a hand out to her.

Qu Qing Ju gave her hand to him, allowing him to help her out of the carriage. She didn't know what the veil was made out off. Even though it seemed that a thin mist covered her view, she still could clearly see everything. Her hand was grasped in He Heng's, hidden in the other's wide sleeve. It felt a bit like the first romance between boy and girl as they came out to walk together. But Qu Qing Ju was very clear inside. She wasn't an innocent girl. And the other wasn't a youth in the middle of his first crush.

By this time, both sides of the river shore was filled with beautiful lanterns. There were some stalls where lanterns were hung up for people to spend money and guess riddles. If they were right, they would receive a lantern as a gift.

Behind the two of them were the *taijian* and guards, all in common clothing, who didn't let other people crowd them. Passing through the busy crowds, Qu Qing Ju saw people take river lanterns as they walked towards the edge of the river and some children running around with animal lanterns. In this instant, her mood was very good.

"What has always been said to come, but has never really came?"

"Wind?"

"Clouds?"

Qu Qing Ju heard the exchange and couldn't help laugh out loud. He Heng saw she was very happy and asked, "What, does Qing Ju know?"

This, placed in her previous life, it was a brainteaser that would be placed on the winter homework of elementary school children.

"Of course I know," She turned to look at the people still guessing, "It's tomorrow."

Hearing this answer, He Heng couldn't resist smiling, "That's correct." Behind him, he pulled on the veil and made it more secure on Qu Qing Ju. He then complimented, "Qing Ju is very smart." Finishing, he dragged her in front a stall.

"Which one do you like?" He pointed at the lanterns hung above them.

Qu Qing Ju followed his hand to look up. She pointed to a moon rabbit lantern and commented: "That bunny is very cute."

He Heng motioned for the peddler to take down the moon rabbit lantern and check the tag hanging on the lantern. It was the first part of a couplet, and asked for the matching second half.

Qian Chang Xin saw this and quickly gave money to the peddler to let his master guess the right answer to the couplet.

"The rabbit's soul is connected to the silver sea … …" Qu Qing Ju recited the first line. She wasn't skilled at this topic, and didn't know if He Heng could give the answer. She prepared to look at the lanterns hanging elsewhere.

"The crab's mountain receives the purple star.[37]" Who knew that Qu Qing Ju hadn't even seen clearly what was hanging on the other lantern

[37] is the complete couplet. The meaning is "The moon shines widely and brightly, the lanterns mutually fold over each other high."

before she heard He Heng give the matching line. She raised and eyebrow and laughed: “So skilled.”

“Just a simple couplet,” He Heng took the moon rabbit lamp from the peddler and presented it in front of Qu Qing Ju, “For you.”

She took this lantern. Qu Qing Ju raised it and looked in examination for a while before replying: “Thank you *wang ye*.”

Seeing Qu Qing Ju like this lantern, the smile on He Heng’s face became even more visible. It was just when he took a few steps, the smile on his face wasn’t so natural anymore.

Because he saw He Yuan was coming straight over in his direction. Beside him, there was a woman, but she wore a veil that disguised her appearance.

It was obvious that He Yuan saw him. The two brothers both stopped in their steps before they walked near each other.

“*Er ge*.” He Yuan’s gaze swept next to He Heng. He took his eyes back: “*Er ge* has such good spirits today.”

“*San di* is as well,” He Heng casually moved to the side, managing to hid half of Qu Qing Ju’s body behind himself.

“Greetings to Duan Wang, Duan Wang Fei.” Just at that moment, the female next to He Yuan opened to speak.

Hidden under the veil, Qu Qing Ju’s eyebrow jumped. She paused for a beat before questioning: “*San mei*?”

Why was Qu Yue Su walking together with He Yuan, what was the people of Chang De Gong Fu doing?!

Chapter 40

Qu Qing Ju felt that she didn't understand what was going on. This era didn't treat women as strictly as the previous dynasty, but Qu Yue Su had just reached her marriageable age of fifteen. She just casually walked with a *wang ye* that already had a wife on this public street, wasn't it a bit inappropriate?

She looked at the veil that the other was wearing. Her appearance was faintly unclear through the fabric which would more easily cause others to speculate. She didn't want to involve herself in whatever Chang De Gong Fu was doing so in the end she didn't say anything

"It is *meimei*," Qu Yue Su's voice was as sweet as usually and had an extra hint of gentleness. She gave Qu Qing Ju a slight bow, "I didn't think to be able to see *jiejie* here."

She had just called her Duan Wang Fei. After one call of "*san mei*" the other instantly changed appellations. In her voice, nothing of the conflict between Qu Qing Ju and Chang De Gong Fu could be heard, as though Qu Qing Ju was just her sister.

"Just a good festival so I came out to see," Qu Qing Ju had no interest to chat in front of two *wang ye* and an unfamiliar woman. She replied coldly and didn't speak further.

Qu Wei Su saw she didn't want to speak and casually responded before stopping talking. She clearly was a perceptive person. This series of actions made Qu Qing Ju feel that it was a miracle that Liang *shi* could raise such a daughter.

It instantly became silent between the four people. Nobody spoke. Suddenly, a ball of fire exploded in the sky. Qu Qing Ju raised her eyes to watch. She saw the eye-catching spread of fire as she heard the cheers of people in her ears.

Qu Yue Su also raised her head but she only saw the sparks as the fireworks faded. She had no desire to watch so she turned her head to look at Rui Wang beside her. The other's handsome appearance caused her to slightly blush.

"*Didi* has a pleasure boat by the river, how about *er ge* and *er sao* come together on to see the river lanterns from there." He Yuan said calmly, "It's rumoured that the fireworks would be going on for two hours tonight. It wouldn't be as noisy on the boat. *Er ge*, you can't disdain the boat for being too crude." Finishing, his face revealed a smile that held a hint of pride.

Hearing the other mention the pleasure boat, He Heng knew this boat. It had been commissioned from the Ministry of Works specifically by *fuhuang* for *lao san*. He had never been on it, but he had heard people mention it. This boat had exquisite carvings all over. Since the other had the desire to boast, he couldn't reject.

"That's great, *er ge* hadn't had the chance to see *didi*'s boat. It's very fortunate to have met tonight, we'll have to disturb you," Finishing, he turned and held Qu Qing Ju's hand as he explained with a shallow smile: "Seeing the lights from the river, it has a distinctive flavour."

Qu Qing Ju's index finger scratched his palm and nodded her head lightly.

He Yuan looked at their close conjugal state and put his hands behind his back in disgust, moving his eyes away.

On the side, Qu Yue Su was deeply moved. A person like *da jie* who had such a dull personality, she was able to receive Duan Wang's affection. Even her personality was more outgoing than in the past. It could be seen just how great the influence Duan Wang had on her. A sense of admiration rose in her heart, a bit sour and a touch bitter

Chang De Gong Fu's days were one worse than the past one. So they thought to let her enter Rui Wang Fu. Even if she couldn't become *zheng fei*, but after Rui Wang succeeded the throne, she could at least be a *fei*. If she gave birth to a son, she might even have better fortune in the future.

She had already accepted that she had to walk such a past, but seeing how *da jie* was able to hold hands and walk together with Duan Wang, her heart still felt ill.

In this world, which girl didn't want to be wearing a phoenix crown and a red cape as they married. Why did they have to wear that mountain crow dress to become another man's *shiqie*, and that man, she couldn't call him her husband.

The guards at the two sides quickly pushed aside the surrounding crowds, leaving behind enough walking space for their masters. Qu Qing Ju and He Heng walked at the very front, a feeling akin "a very important person was coming and onlookers had to leave."

On the two sides of the road there were peddlers selling snacks. *Yuan xiao*, candy, and other foodstuffs. It had attracted many customers. She even saw a chubby child holding a bowl of hot sesame soup and wolfing it down.

These fresh scenes caused her to smile. She pointed to a small stand selling sticky rice cake and commented to He Heng: "*Wang ye*, that cake has sesame seeds and peanut bits on it, it seems interesting."

He Heng looked at the nondescript stand. The sellers were a normal couple, past their sixties, but they seemed very energetic.

"Foods outside aren't very clean, you can't eat too much," Finishing, he motioned for Qian Chang Xin to go buy.

Qian Chang Xin hurriedly walked to the small stand and gave a handful of copper to the owner. He even brought the bowl and spoon. Then he carefully held the sticky rice cake to He Heng, "*Wang ye*, *nucai* had them add extra peanuts."

He Heng nodded and took the bowl to have a taste. The flavour was normal but there was some distinctive style. He held the bowl in front of qu Qing Ju, "Here, if your stomach aches at night, don't blame me."

"I'm not that delicate," Qu Qing Ju didn't take the bowl and reached out with her left hand to hold the spoon to eat the cake. Her right hand slightly pushed aside the fabric of her veil in front of her face, totally treating He Heng like a servant of hers.

Qian Chang Xin saw the master and mistress walk even slower and silently lowered his head. He definitely didn't see *wang ye* taking pleasure in the act.

After a few pieces of cake go into her stomach, Qu qing Ju put down the spoon. She took out a handkerchief to wipe her mouth and commented: "The flavour is good. I just saw someone selling tofu, but it's hard to eat and walk on the road."

"Get the *fu*'s chef to make it for you," He Heng threw the bowl at Qian Chang Xin and wiped his hands. He declared, "You can only just taste the flavour with these, but they should be more finely crafted."

Qu Qing Ju obediently nodded, acting like "*wang ye,* you are right. I listen to you for everything."

He Yuan, who had been following them the entire road, stayed silent. When he had saw He Heng hold the bowl for Qu *shi*, he felt surprise. As one of the imperial sons and descendants of the dragon, they never served anyone else. This Qu *shi* had some ability to let *er ge* be this happy in serving others.

No wonder *mufei* said she was a fox spirit. To wrap He Heng around her fingers, her tricks should be extraordinary.

People said to marry a wife was marrying virtue. This wife that *lao er* had married, she probably wasn't a very worry-free one. Thinking of this, he raised his head to look at the backs of the two. This type of women, it would be better for her to be a beautiful *qie*.

They hadn't walked for fifteen minutes when they reached the pleasure boat. At this harbour, there was only He Yuan's boat. It even had guards protecting it. The other pleasure boats were anchored far away, clearly afraid to even cause any chance of collision.

He Yuan disregarded the guards as they bowed to him and ushered the couple onto the boat. As he led them inside, he informed: "This boat has two levels, we'll go to the top."

Qu Qing Ju found that even the handrail of the stairs was carved with pictures of mountains and rivers. The steps her feet rested on were made from high quality red wood. Each step was as steady as she was walking on solid ground.

He Heng walked at the front, carefully pulling Qu Qing Ju's hand as they went up. Only when they reached the top did he let go.

The windows of the boat were open. Next to the window was a set of table and chairs. He Yuan ushed the two to sit, he himself sitting down by one side before he said to the still standing Qu Yue Su: "Qu *san xiao jie*, please sit." He knew the idea that Chang De Gong Fu had. He didn't have any interested in this third daughter, but if he took Duan Wang Fei's *meimei* as *qie*, what would *lao er*'s face look like?

His good *er ge* was in love with *wang fei*, so he thought he wouldn't be angry at her.

Qu Qing Ju sat beside the window, looking at the surface of the river as it turned red due to the lanterns on both shores. She used a hand to prop her chin as she admired the scenery. Occasionally, there were lotus lanterns that floated by, the candle in the middle fluttering, creating another kind of beauty in the night.

"In the cold night, a guest has come with such urgency that tea has to substitute for wine. The water started boiling in the bamboo pot, the fire crimson red and hot." He Yuan raised a teacup, "*er ge, er sao,* why don't you taste this boat's tea?"

Qu Qing Ju heard his words and felt this couple of Rui Wang both had the habit of wanting people to taste tea. A person like her that didn't have much learning in tea, the thing she disliked most was hearing this type of question. She raised the veil, revealing an ivory chin. Qu Qing Ju smiled as she took a sip and then she lowered her veil, elegantly putting the cup back on the table.

"Simple and elegant, the taste lingers in the mouth," He Heng put down the teacup and smiled. He praised, "*San di* has such leisurely days. *Er ge* can't find good things like this."

"Recently I don't have to go to court so naturally I will spend more attention on these things," He Yuan said with a mirthless smile, "*er ge* has busy duties, there's no attention left for these common things."

Seeing the other mention the court, He Heng turned his head to look outside the window. He turned his head back to say, "*San di* is joking. *Fuhuang* is just angry momentarily. Once *si di* has uncovered the truth, I'm afraid *san di* will be busy with the court again."

"I hope *si di* can return soon, and wash away the accusations again *didi*," He Yuan gave a seemingly helpless sigh. He turned and said to Qu Yue Su who had stayed silent by one side, "I've heard that *san xiaojie*'s is exceptional at the *qin*. Is it possible for this small *wang* to hear a song?"

Under the veil, Qu Yue Su's face froze. After a slight pause, she put down the teacup in her hands. With a light voice she said: "An inelegant song, hope everyone doesn't laugh." Finishing, she walked to sit behind the *qin*. When she plucked the chords, notes rang out.

The smile on He Heng's face didn't change but he looked down even more at the people of Chang De Gong Fu. Now, Qing Ju was Duan Wang Fei. Qu Yue Su, as her sister, was willing to play music for Rui Wang. A *di* daughter of a gong fu, she was rushing to become a *qieshi*. He didn't know if it shamed Qing Ju or the reputation of Chang De Gong Fu.

Qu Yue Su's skills were good. Qu Qing Ju listened and had a deeper understanding of the arrogance of He Yuan. He could, in front of her as his *er sao*, let Qu Yue Su play for him. That was clearly saying that he didn't even put any importance on He Heng and his *er sao*.

Arrogant people usually died early. Qu Qing Ju smiled icily. Just this type of tactics and he wanted to be emperor. He was delusional. And this Chang De Gong Fu, it was too shameless. Thankfully the entire Jing

City knew that she, as Duan Wang Fei, wasn't close to Chang De Gong Fu. Otherwise, if they didn't care about humiliating themselves, she cared.

Qu Yue Su played a famous song called "Clouds Over Xiao and Xiangjiang Rivers[38]". Some thought this was a song lamenting the present and reminiscing on the past, but others felt this song just simply described the scenery. No matter what, this song required very high skills. If there were any weakness, they couldn't play the meaning in the song.

Qu Qing Ju wasn't an expert in the *guqin*, but as a former dancer, she did have a sense of music. At least she could hear, that when Qu Yue Su was playing this song, her mood wasn't as good as imagined.

"*San xiaoji*'s skills are as extraordinary as said," He Yuang listened for a while before continuing to drink tea. He suddenly remarked, "*Er sao*'s skills must be extraordinary as well."

These words overstepped. Qu Qing Ju smiled rather than get angry. The motion she made as she set down the teacup was heavier than before. She retorted icily: "*San shu* does indeed have lots of leisure time. No wonder you would pay attention to such insignificant matters."

These words were very impolite, it didn't leave behind any coverings for He Yuan. Sitting by her side, He Heng didn't speak, clearly feeling that there was nothing wrong with what Qu Qing Ju had just done.

He Yuan's face showed an astonished expression. When he had finished speaking, he had already detected it wasn't proper but he was used to being brash, and didn't expect that this *er sao* would be so impolite.

A flame burned in his heart. He looked at He Heng and saw the other's expression wasn't very good. He could only raise his teacup, "It's *didi* that transgressed, *er sao*, please forgive me."

[38] is a place Hu Nan

Qu Qing Ju lazily raised her teacup, "*San shu* is too polite." But she didn't drink the tea.

A sliver of a smile appeared on He Heng's face. He raised the teacup and said to He Yuan: "*San di*, this tea isn't wine. Don't get intoxicated." His woman, she showed have this daring. If she had to silently suffer such a thing, where did it put him as the husband?

He Yuan squeezed out a smile and took a drink but he felt that the tea in his mouth was bitter and harsh, the fire in his heart unable to be doused.

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Chapter 41

Once "Clouds over Xiao and Xiangjin Rivers" finished, Qu Yue Su took down her hands and elegantly stood to bow to the three people before she returned to her seat.

Qu Qing Ju saw her fingertips appear to be slightly red and her eyebrow twitched. She turned her head to look at the desserts in front of her, and reached with a hand to pick one.

He Heng looked at the pile of salty pastries on the place getting smaller and smaller and opened to warn: "Careful you don't get thirsty." Eating this kind of pastries at night, wasn't she afraid of getting fat?

Raising her teacup for a sip, Qu Qing Ju didn't eat any more pastries and pointed with emotion at the fireworks blooming outside the window, "The fireworks last year must have been as beautiful as today's but *qie* was in the *fu* and could only see the light when the fireworks erupted, not how beautiful it was."

Hearing this, Qu Yue Su's heart jumped. Last year's Lantern Festival, she and *didi* came out to look at the lanterns. *Da jie* and *er jie* had been left behind in the *fu*. In the past, she had felt somewhat guilty but if *da jie* wasn't present, it was more carefree. Now that she was hearing *da jie* mention the incident, she felt strangely insecure inside.

"In the future, you will see the fireworks each year until you get sick of it," He Heng tilted his head towards the windows, the flames painting his eyes red and blurring his gaze, "The past, don't place too much importance on it." Finishing, he moved his eyes and kept on drinking his tea.

On the side, He Yuan hadn't spoke since he had been flayed by Qu Qing Ju. He clearly was trying to suppress his anger, but to He Heng, He Yuan's flames weren't really anything. What was going to happen at the Royal Court tomorrow will make his fire burn higher.

"En," Qu Qing Ju didn't look outside anymore. The wind blew past her veil, revealing a pale neck that was quickly hidden under the veil. She rubbed the edge of the teacup and remarked to the quiet Qu Yue Su, "*San mei*'s musical skills are better and better."

"*Da jie* is too complimentary," Qu Yue Su managed a smile. She knew that the other looked down at her but she had to keep a respectful attitude, "Just practiced more during the days."

Qu Qing Ju nodded, "You usually are much better than I as your *jiejie*."

"*Da jie*'s appearance is among the most beautiful of the country, how can *meimei* compare." Qu Yue Su stood and bowed, afraid to receive the compliment. It was just that something was off about the words she just spoke.

Most beautiful of the country? Qu Qing Ju felt that she was saying she had looks but no education. But she didn't care. Others complimented her beauty, she felt happy. As to whether she had brains, it was fine as long as she was clear. What others said, did it mean anything?

In this world, who wouldn't be spoken of, who wouldn't be the object of jealousy, wouldn't be called mediocre. She wasn't afraid of the malicious slander of others.

Smiling carelessly, she put down the teacup in her hand. She suddenly observed: "There's less and less people on the shores."

He Yuan looked outside and saw that it was true there were less people. He remarked faintly: "It's late, let the boat near the shore." He didn't want to see *lao er* and his woman being sick.

As beautiful as the fireworks were, there was a time where it had to stop. The people on the shores gradually left and the busyness turned quiet.

As the boat slowly reached the shore, Qu Qing Ju looked at the lanterns that were hanging by the shore without an audience. She remembered her own moon rabbit lantern that she had let a servant hold.

"Who's looking after the lantern?" Qu Qing Ju allowed He Heng to guide her down and asked about the whereabouts of the lantern.

"Don't worry, Qian Chang Xin has somebody keeping a watch," He Heng came down the last step. Seeing Qu Qing Ju still reluctant over that roughly crafted moon rabbit lantern, the smile on his face grew stronger, "There's many lanterns hanging in the *fu*. After we return, I'll get someone to pick some pretty ones to hang in *zhengyuan*."

Qu Qing Ju nodded and held hands with He Heng as they left the deck. She looked at the surroundings and found that a thin mist had formed, and it had gotten colder.

Waiting at the side, Qian Chang Xin held the two's capes. He first helped *wang ye* put his own. When he was preparing to serve Qu Qing Ju, he was waved away by He Heng who personally did it.

The soft Shu brocade cape was embroidered with faint flower patterns. Under the moon, it had a hazy beauty. Qu Qing Ju saw He Heng put the cape on her and lowered her head to tie it but found He Heng had stolen ahead again.

He Heng's fingers had been carefully cut and cleaned. The joints were somewhat visible, given off the feeling of security and strength. Qu Qing Ju smiled and raised her chin to allow He Heng to tie her cape for her.

Qu Yue Su silently stood in the corner. Nobody came up to server her, no one even looked at her. She watched as Duan Wang lowered himself to tied *jiejie*'s cape for her and suddenly felt ill and ironic. Nowadays, *da jie* was high up in the sky, served and fawned over by countless people as Duan Wang Fei. And she had to use all her heart and mind to curry favour with Rui Wang. Even if she was successful, she could only be a *ce shi*.

"Since it's late, *er ge* and *er sao* should return to rest early," He Yuan saw He Heng's actions and stopped. He continued, "I should return too."

The two carriages had been waiting at one side to take their owners back to their *fu*. He Yuan finished speaking and headed to his own carriage.

Behind him, Qu Yue Su hesitated and bowed to He Heng and Qu Qing Ju. In the end she still followed in He Yuan's footsteps and got on the carriage of Rui Wang Fu.

Qu Qing Ju watched as Rui Wang Fu's carried leave. The smile on her face had a hint of additional disdain, "Rui *wang ye* has such an unrestrained temperament."

Hearing this, He Heng smiled, "He's always been like this since he was young. Because of it, he's gotten into countless conflicts with *da ge*. It's just *fuhuang* has biasedly favoured him that after these years, he has gotten more and more … … of a personality."

That He Heng could say the words "biasedly favoured", it could be seen just how unfair Qing De Emperor was. And He Yuan has offended many. Rationally, an imperial son as favoured by the emperor as much as he was, there should be many who followed him to earn a part in pushing him to the throne. But this Rui Wang really didn't have that many people following him. It could be seen that even the officials in the court felt that one day, he would break himself.

But, it might be that Qing De Emperor preferred him this unruly. Maybe it allowed him to feel safer?

Feeing that her thoughts were running off-topic, Qu Qing Ju blew out a breath, "I don't know why *san mei* would follow Rui Wang, this is getting messier." She couldn't discuss the imperial sons so she could only shift the topic to Changd D Gong Fu.

"Whatever they do, it has nothing to do with you. There's no need to worry yourself over these people," He Heng understood what He Yuan was planning. To how cheap He Yuan was, he looked down on it. He was going to take a woman of Chang De Gong Fu and thought that was slapping him on the face, and for him to blame Qing Ju?

He Heng thought to there and thought it was a bit funny. He wasn't a rash young boy, he wouldn't blame others for this occurrence. He Yuan was thinking of others like they were him, that really didn't fit him.

When they returned to the *wang fu*, the night was already late. Early on, servants had hung lanterns in the *zhengyuan*. Qu Qing Ju and He Heng washed before they slept. They were in a good mood thought, not being affected in the slightest by He Yuan.

It was He Yuan that, upon returning to his *fu*, threw a moderate fit. He didn't even pay attention to Qin Bai Lu's request for a meeting. He only ordered the servants to send Qu Yue Su back to Chang De Gong fu.

When Qin Bai Lu heard that *wang ye* and Qu *san xiaojie* were together at the Lantern Festival, she almost smashed something in anger. At last, she could only push down the anger. Chang De Gong Fu already had a *wang fei* come out of there, why would they think to send the other *di* daughter to be a *ce shi*?

Barely keeping a lid on her temper, Qin Bai Lu thought hatefully that no matter what, if this woman did enter the *fu*, she wasn't going to go easy on her.

On the second day after the Lantern Festival, a major event exploded at Court. Before the imperial envoy sent to Jiang Nan had reached their destination, they had been attacked by assassins. Cheng Wang had been wounded in the arm and gotten a high fever. The Minister of the Right, Wei Wen Guang was wounded even more serious, and was still in a coma.

Instantly, the entire court roared. Who would have such daring to assassinate imperial envoys, did they want to silence them?

Chapter 42

Assassination of the imperial envoy was a major event. Even though Qing De Emperor had a soft personality, but when he encountered such an event, he felt that he was personally humiliated and furiously ordered for an investigation.

He Heng stood next to He Qi. Hearing He Qi's righteous and fervent words, as though he was really trying to help *fuhuang*, his eyebrow moved slightly as he silently lowered his head.

"Since it is already done, then this event will be investigated by Ning Wang and the Ministry of Justice," Qing De Emperor's temper hasn't calmed and his voice was somewhat coarse, "These criminals, they are too outrageous!"

"*Er chen* accepts the order." He Qi knelt on one knee to receive the Imperial Decree, the lowered head disguising the satisfaction in his eyes.

After court, He Qi didn't chat with others like he did usually but quickly left. He Heng looked at He Qi's rushing figure, a sliver of smile appearing on his face.

"Has His Highness Duan Wang ever heard of the story of the mantis and the cicada," The Minister of Defense, Luo Chang Qing, walked next to He Heng and bowed to him. He smiled as he looked at Ning Wang's back, "The story is too common, but it does have some meaning."

He Heng tilted his head slightly. He praised: "Luo *da ren* is wise."

"What wise, it's just speaking nonsense," Luo Chang Qing rubbed his beard, the cheer still on his face, "How is His Highness Cheng Wang's injuries, as imperial subjects, all of us are very worried."

"Luo *da ren* doesn't have to worry. *Ben wang*'s *si di* was only wounded in the arm. The messenger said the injury was already controlled," He Heng put his hands behind his back, leading Luo Chang Qing by half a pace, "*fuhuang* has already sent the head and the professor of the Imperial Hospital to quickly travel there."

"That is good. As subjects, we won't have to worry any longer," Hearing the answer he wanted, Luo Chang Qing chuckled as he raised his hands together, "Your Highness Duan Wang, this subject still has other matters and has to leave first, farewell."

"Luo *da ren*, take care," He Heng smiled lightly and nodded at him.

Walking as Luo Chang Qing walk away at a sedate pace, the smile slowly disappeared from He Heng's face. Luo Chang Qing, that wily fox, was worried about his grandson-in-law. He talked for this long period of time just to confirm He Ming's condition.

Thinking about the ploys that *lao da* and *lao san* were playing behind their backs, He Heng curled his lips. No matter how loyal someone appeared, but at certain times, they had to look out for themselves, just like the present Luo Family.

If He Ming really had been mortally wounded, then that girl from the Luo Family would become a widow. Most likely, the Luo Family wouldn't let it go. Hearing what that old fox Luo Chang Qing had said, he had probably guessed who had been the person that really sent the order. As to why the other would tell him, he didn't care. He was certain of at least one thing now, which was the Luo Family had negative feelings towards *lao da* and *lao san*.

In Duan Wang Fu, Qu Qing Ju looked at the flower lanterns hanging in the courtyard and let the servants take them down. The flower lanterns might be pretty, but each night, someone had to light them. They also needed people to stand watch in case of a fire. It was too troublesome. She might enjoy the luxuries of life but didn't want to trouble others for such a minor matter. More so, beautiful objects could only be looked at during special times to become even more beautiful.

"*Wang fei*, *nubi* heard that there was a fuss at Rui Wang Fu this morning. Rui *wang fei* was so angry she rode a carriage back to her maternal home," Jin Zhan walked behind Qu Qing Ju and gossiped in a low voice, "Some people on the outside are spreading the news that Chang De Gong Fu want to send *san xiaojie* to Rui Wang Fu." She couldn't understand. *San xiaojie* had the skills and the looks and was a *di* daughter on top of that. Why would she want to be a *ce shi*?

The hand Qu Qing Ju reached with to hold a flower lantern paused and then, with waning enthusiasm, she took her hand back. She held the other's hand as she started to walk out of the courtyard, "That year, Liang *shi* used everything to try to get in through the main door of

Chang De Gong Fu. My good father didn't even wait for a hundred days before welcoming her in. Everyone in this world has their own thoughts. The road they pick, we cannot interfere, but it's fine as long as they don't conflict with ours."

Jin Zhan heard the absence of emotion in these words. She understood that Chang De Gong Fu hadn't been good to *wang fei*. She, Yin Liu, and Yu Zan had been inserted into the gong fu by Xiang Qing Hou Fu to serve near *wang fei*. And Mu Jin *jiejie* had been taken into the *fu* when *furen* had still been alive. After *wang fei* had been born, she had followed *wang fei*. Even though they had tried their best these years to protect *wang fei*, *wang fei* still had to suffer indignities. Now that *wang fei* was cold to the people of the gong fu, it was almost expected.

"But *nubi* is worried that if they did this, it would affect *wang fei*'s reputation," Jin Zan thought back to the things that the gong fu had done. Her face showed disgust as she frowned, "It's so infuriating."

"What's infuriating?" Qu Qing Ju smiled, "This entire Jing City, who doesn't know that this Duan Wang Fei isn't on good terms with Chang De Gong Fu, and is enemies with the stepmother. Even more, in the Jing City circles, almost everyone assumed that I was raised by aunt. How Qu Yue Su conducts herself, it would only reflect on Liang *shi*, it wouldn't touch me."

Jin Zhan instantly understood. After *wang fei* recovered, she distanced herself from Chang De Gong Fu, and became closer to Xiang Qing Hou Fu. The incidents of the past had spread through Jing. She said with some joy: "Thank the heavens that these people can't affect *wang fei*." If *wang ye* blamed *wang fei* for these happenings, that would be a disaster.

Qu Qing Mu only laughed. There weren't that many lucky happenings and coincidences in this world. It was all made by people. Thinking

about that family, her smile turned cold. And this world didn't have that many people that repaid grievances with a virtue .[1]

Coming out of the *zhengyuan*, it was a green stone path. On the two sides of the path were bamboo forests that were hidden behind the fake mountains, creating a clean and elegant scene. After passing through a moon door, it led straight into the main garden of the *wang fu*. At the end of the right stone path, there was a small stream and a little bridge on top. When Qu Qing Ju had free time, she liked coming to the bridge to feed the fishes. That was more interesting than sitting in the halls and looking at the koi in the lotus pond.

Randomly scattering the fish feed down, she watched as some goldfish carefully and quickly swallowed the food. She pointed at a nondescript black fish, "This fish isn't as beautiful as the koi, but just swimming quietly next to the stones, if we don't pay attention, we can't even find it."

Jin Zhan took a closer look and said uncertainly: "That one also seems to be a koi, but it's just so inconspicuous."

Raising an eyebrow, she scattered anther handful of fish feed. She saw the black koi was like a bolt of lightning, swallowing a series of pellets before swimming away. It was the epitome of fast and precise.

Qu Qing Ju poured the rest of the fish feed into the water with some disinterest. She asked in boredom: "Which ones are going to the Princess Royal's *fu* tomorrow?"

"*Nubi* isn't clear, but heard that the Princess Royal had invited many," Jin Zhan thought for a while, "*Nubi* heard that many young ladies not of age had also received invitations from the Princess Royal."

[1] The phrase used here was 以德□怨 which is the question that led the answer which created the phrase 以直□怨. To repay grievances through virtue was thought by the scholars to be unusable as if they replayed grievances with a virtue/boon, how would people repay a virtue? Therefore, the correct answer was to repay grievances justly and to repay a virtue with a virtue.

Qu Qing Ju nodded and knew what the Princess Royal was doing. Rather than be hurt over a man, why wouldn't she find people to amuse her?

Women had to treat themselves.

"Did Chang De Gong Fu also receive one?" Qu Qing Ju suddenly asked. If tomorrow both Qu Yue Su and Qin Bai Lu came, she wondered with Qin Bai Lu's personality if something would happen.

Jin Zhan nodded, "Chang De Gong Fu received an invitation."

Qu Qing Ju rubbed her chin and observed: "Then I have to be careful tomorrow, and prevent myself from being pulled in."

Just as she finished, she saw Huang Yang running quickly towards her and reporting that Jing *guifei* had bestowed some gifts.

What Jing *guifei* had bestowed, the servants didn't have the qualifications to receive. Qu Qing Ju could only personally come to receive them. What surprise her was that Jing *guifei* had let people send over a few palace flower and glass hair ornaments. These were finely crafted and from a glance it could be seen only those of high status could use them.

Strangely, Qu Qing Ju felt that Jing *guifei* was helping to prop her up. Tomorrow, there would be many womenfolk at the Princess Royal's *fu*. When there were many women gathered together, they naturally would like to compare clothing and jewellery. Jing *guifei* was bestowing down objects from the palace. It at the very least sent a message that Jing *guifei*, as her *popo*, was very satisfied with her, as the *erxi*.

She touched the palace flower. Qu Qing Ju's face revealed the smile. Maybe Jing *guifei* wanted to tell the others that she, as her *popo*, wasn't unsatisfied at all because of what was happening with Chang De Gong Fu.

What Jing *guifei* had done was block the insults she might have gotten from the two *zhouli* tomorrow. And also told the women tomorrow that Jing *guifei* was on her side.

Even though the majority of the reason that Jing *guifei* had made such a move was because of Duan Wang, Qu Qing Ju took this offering of good will. Because Jing *guifei* had many ways to show her side but chose the one that was most advantageous for her.

"Tomorrow, I'll be using this palace flower and this glass hairpin," Qu Qing Ju picked two and put them in a small sandalwood box. She gave it to Yu Zan who usually made up her hair, "Pieces from the palace, they should be more exquisite and rarer."

The most important was that, to anyone with some skill and knowledge, they would know at a glance that these ornaments could only be used by those high up in the palace. Then there was no need to say where these objects came from.

In Zhong Jing Palace, Jing *guifei* leaned on an armchair and said to Ding *mama*: "The gifts went out. I hope *erxifu* will understand."

"*Niangniang*, don't worry. Duan *wang fei* is an intelligent person, she definitely will understand your efforts," Ding *mama* passed her a cup of tea and carefully served as she praised, "*niangniang* is kind, Duan *wang fei* will of course remember your good."

"It's not important if she remembers," Jing *guifei* held her cup and thought about her *erxifu*. She couldn't help but frown. Could intelligent be a description for that person?

Bearing a tray of pastries, Wei Ran Shuang quietly stood in her spot, a flicker of sadness and jealously passing through her eyes. Didn't they say that the relationship between a *popo* and the *xifu* was like the sky and the ground, why was even Aunt worrying for Duan *wang fei* now?

Thinking about Duan *wang fei*'s conduct and manner of speech and what her aunt had once said to her, Wei Ran Shuang gritted her teeth but the plate she had been holding accidentally fell to the ground.

Jing *guifei* saw Wei Rang Shuang standing at the doorway and set down the teacup in her hand. She said calmly: "Ran Shuang, you have stayed for a long time in the palace. Your mother is probably missing you. *Ben gong* will let someone send you back tomorrow."

Chapter 43

Wei Ran Shuang sat inside a blue cloth-covered carriage, holding a bag in a daze. The shaking as the carriage moved forward did nothing to clear her head.

After the carriage moved forward for a period of time, it suddenly stopped. She sat in a daze for a beat before asking: "What's happening?"

"*Guniang*, Duan Wang Fu's carriage is coming over, we have to clear the road." The person outside answered.

Duan Wang Fu? Wei Ran Shuang's expression changed and she pushed aside the curtain covering the window. She saw up ahead that there were guards clearing the road, protecting an Ashtamangala carriage pulled by four horses. From a glance, it could be seen that it was a carriage specifically for Duan Wang Fu's womenfolk. Behind the large carriage, there were a few small yet finely made carriages. They most likely were used by the personal servant girls of Duan Wang Fei.

Wei Ran Shuang bit her lower lip, her heart uncomfortable. Even Duan Wang Fei's personal attendants were riding in a carriage that was better than the one she had. She let the curtain down. As she listened to the people outside use astonished and admiring voices to talk about Duan Wang Fu's carriage, her stare gradually became resolute.

After Duan Wang Fei's procession had passed, the green cloth covered carriage that Wei Ran Shuang sat in started to sway as it made its way forward again. When she came out of the carriage, Wei Ran Shuang looked at the relatively bare door of her family's *fu*. There weren't any sedans. She held her *yahuan*'s hand as she walked in. Her family home

was just this big, there were no high-ranking officials and basically no space to stand on protocol.

Wei Qin *shi* saw her daughter return and a crowd of people carrying gifts. She smiled and remarked: "You seem heavier. *Guifei niangniang* is very good at raising people."

Wei Ran Shuang forced a smile and let her mother put away the objects that Jing *guifei* had bestowed down. Then she said: "Aunt said you probably were missing me, so she let me return."

Hearing this, Wei Qin *shi*'s face slightly changed. After she motioned for the others in the room to leave, she said with some worry: "Did *guifei niangniang* not like you?"

Wei Ran Shuang shook her head, her voice carrying full of distress: "*Guifei niangniang* said Duan *wang fei* was very good."

"What does that mean, does she spurn you to become her son's *ce shi*?" Wei Qin *shi's* voice was full of indignation as she ranted, "She's our Wei family's daughter. Now that she's become *guifei niangniang,* has she forgotten her maternal family." No matter what, her father-in-law and Jing *guifei*'s father had been full brothers. Now that their branch was declining, Jing *guifei* hadn't done anything to help and even looked down on her daughter. It was somewhat upsetting.

But remembering that her own husband was only a minor fifth-grade provincial governor before transferring back to Jing and that both husband and her children needed to rely on Jing *guifei* in the future, she could only suppress her dissatisfaction and sighed: "*Niangniang* has bestowed down so many things, it can be seen she is still looking after you. As to Duan Wang … … I'll try to think of a way for you."

Wei Ran Shuang's face reddened and she whispered: "His Highness Duan Wang is a good person."

Wei Qin *shi* looked at her daughter's bashful expression and decided to meet that Duan Wang Fei before making a decision. Her maternal father

and brothers might not have great abilities but they were a branch of the Qin Clan, and could find someone who could speak out.

If her daughter went into Duan Wang Fu, it was a good road. At least there still was Jing *guifei niangniang* so Duan *wang fei* wouldn't harshly treat her daughter. Duan Wang and her daughter also were cousins and would care a bit more based on the relationship. Going into the *wang fu*, it was better than marrying a minor official who was never going to come into the light.

The Princess Royal's *fu* at this time was full of noise, clothing and music flying everywhere. When Qu Qing Ju walked into the *houyaun*, she found that if it wasn't that these people were wearing medieval clothing, she thought she was at one of the modern parties.

When she came in, instantly a formally dressed *mama* carefully ushered her into a pavilion. She saw Wei Qing E sitting down next to a grandly dressed woman. That person was most likely Jin An Princess. She cheerfully came and performed an elegant bow: "So this must be *jiejie*. Nice to meet you *jiejie*."

Jin An Princess stood and held her hand, returning the same greeting: "*Er dimei*, don't be so still. I called everyone here just for relaxing and having fun, not to be so courteous." Finishing, she pulled her to sit down beside herself, and let the servants serve tea.

Qu Qing Ju smiled and replied: "That's great, I'm so tired of the rules everyday," Finishing ,she looked at the surroundings, "Where's nephew and niece?"

"I got the two of them to go play with the little guests from the other families," Jin An Princess waved her hand, "Big people and little people can't play together. They don't come and disturb us, isn't this nice?"

Qu Qing Ju smiled but didn't respond. Even though young children were noise, but as an aunt, she could only hear this but not agree.

"Which child isn't loud," Wei Qing E responded. She herself had a son. When she talked about children, she always had enthusiasm, "It's good for children to run around and be loud, their bodies becomes stronger."

Jin An Princess nodded: "That's so true, It's so hard for a woman to raise a child." Finishing, she smiled at Qu Qing Ju, "*Dimei* doesn't have children now, you still have some relaxing days."

Qu Qing Ju smiled as she took a drink of tea, "It's nice too to have children around." She detected the friendliness barely noticeable in Jin An Princess. If it was any other person, at this time they would asked when she was having a child, but Jin An Princess made it seem like a joke.

"Looking at the noise in other families, I find it much harder to care for a child than looking." Jin An Princess had no desire to keep discussing children and turned to say, "When *er ge* and *dimei* married, I wasn't in Jing, and didn't have the luck to meet you. Today, I have to say that my *didi* is very lucky to marry such a good person, it's an event of great fortune."

Trying hard to let herself reveal a bashful expression, Qu Qing Ju lowered her head.

Jin An Princess saw Qu Qing Ju's red cheeks and knew she was embarrassed. She smiled and teased: "I forgot you're newly married, you're embarrassed now." When she first saw the other, she had felt she was eye-catching, but this bashful young girl in front of her made her agree with the empress's words. This Duan Wang Fei was very suited to *er di*.

Wei Qing E saw that Jin An Princess Royal had the desire to be close with Qu Qing Ju and looked at Qu Qing Ju in surprise. Today, her *er dimei* was still dressed vibrantly. That already beautiful face, if it was a nine before, today it was a ten. She knew very clearly how men liked this type of beautiful woman, but she was even clearer of the fact that, just based on a face, a woman couldn't keep a man.

"Princess, Rui Wang Fei has arrived."

Jin An Princess heard the servant's report and the smile on her face dimmed. But if one didn't look closely, they wouldn't have seen it. "Quickly welcome them in." She had never interacted closely with Rui Wang, but the arrogant conduct of Rui Wang had passed into her ears a long time ago. As a married princess, she never commented on these kinds of matters but she didn't like Rui Wang and his family. A man with this personality, if he succeeded, then all of his siblings won't have easy lives.

Qin Bai Lu's mood wasn't very bright but the usual smile on her face didn't dim. She walked into the pavilion and after exchanging bows with Jin An Princess, she sat down next to Qu Qing Ju.

Sitting closely together, Qu Qing Ju found her face seemed slightly swollen. Qin Bai Lu had applied heavier makeup today and seemed more mature.

Wei Qing E held a teacup and blew on the tea leaves on the surface. She slowly took a drink before smiling at Qin Bai Lu, remarking: "*San dimei* is a bit late today."

"When I came out today, I met some matters. Sorry, *da jie* and the two *saosao*, for waiting," Qin Bai Lu forced out some mirth, the hand holding the teacup tightening, "It was *dimei*'s fault."

"Your *da sao* is joking with you, you aren't late," Jin An Princess saw that something wasn't right from her appearance and her voice softened, "Since you have all arrived and come with me to chat with the others. After so many years, I'm not familiar anymore with Jing's womenfolk."

Since the sister-in-law asked, the three *dimei* naturally stood and accompanied Jin An to converse with the women. The three sat at the front with Jin An Princess and found that many young girls were sitting in the garden. They didn't know why Jin An Princess had done such a thing and smiled without speaking.

Qu Qing Ju found Liang *shi* was in the gardens as well with Qu Yue Su and Qu Hui Xue. She tilted her head to look at Qin Bai Lu. As expected, her face had become darker.

Watching the scene, she couldn't help but sigh. Liang *shi* was in too much of a rush and too short-sighted. She knew that Rui Wang Fei was coming today, why did she come, did she think that Jin An Princess would favour Qu Yue Su?

"Today, so many lovable guests have come. *Ben gong* likes having a good time. Why don't these lovable guests look at some paintings and compose a few poems to widen our scope," Jin An Princess' tone was a consulting one, but when her words landed, people appeared with drawings and brush and ink.

To show off in front of the princess and the *wang fei*, many were very willing. So these young girls started to examine the drawings and compose a good poem.

Qu Qing Ju saw the excited young girls and, in a flash, felt that Jin An Princess was amusing herself. These young girls didn't have many important connections to her and having some fun was a good thing.

These people were appreciating drawings. Qu Qing Ju and the others naturally wouldn't partake in the activity and so they chatted as they drank tea.

"I heard that the lanterns a few nights ago at the Lantern Festival were very beautiful. It was a pity I didn't have the time, otherwise I would have gone to see," Ning Wang Fei Wei Qing E's voice held regret, "The lanterns in the *fu* might be beautiful but they don't have the same flavour."

Qu Qing Ju saw that Qin Bai Lu's face became even uglier.

"*Er dimei*, did you go?" Wei Qing E pushed the topic onto Qu Qing Ju's head.

By now who didn't know that Duan Wang had taken Duan Wang Fei out to see the flower lanterns and onto Rui Wang's boat to see the fireworks? Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow. Wei Qing E was asking this just to instigate a conflict between her and Qin Bai Lu. That was because, Qu Yue Su was like her, they were all named Qu.

At the same time in Duan Wang Fu, He Heng heard expected news.

"*Lao san* is taking the Duke of Chang De's third daughter as *ce fei*?" He Heng repeated with a calm face as he looked at Wang Chang Ming, "You are sure?"

"Rui Wang Fu has already sent the letter and the gifts to Chang De Gong Fu, it's very likely." Wang Chang Ming said, "But it's unknown if Chang De Gong Fu will accept."

Wang Chang Min didn't dare to mention *wang fei* so he only said: "Dai Duo has also passed along information. Rui *wang ye* is very angry at the attempted assassination of the imperial envoy. He is suspicious it was Ning Wang that purposefully framed him."

He Heng lowered his head, putting down the carved root. He tapped the bottom of the root: "Let him have his tantrum."

It could be seen at the bottom of the carved root, there was a hollow building. It looked beautiful, but in reality, it wasn't strong.

Chapter 44

Females tended to prefer subtle and graceful poems. Qu Qing Ju took the poems that Wei Qing E passed over. She casually took a look and saw characters for light wind, wispy smoke and others along those lines. She carelessly flipped through before handing them to Qin Bai Lu on her other side, "I feel all of these *guniang* have literary skill, but I am not skilled poetically. *San dimei*, have a look instead."

Qin Bai Lu took these poems that had been picked out by Jin An Princess. The one on top was the work of the third *guniang* of Chang De Gong Fu. A hint of ice appeared at the corner of her lips. She flipped through and said to Qu Qing Ju: "*Er sao* comes from a noble family. Even your *fu*'s *san guniang* is this talented, why should you underestimate yourself?"

These words were somewhat harsh. Even though Rui Wang had the emperor's favour, he was still an younger brother. You, as a *di mei*, talking in this type of tone to your *saosao*, it was not having any respect. How was it that the Family Qing was an educated and literary family yet produce a woman of such conduct?

Jin An Princess' eyes jumped. She glanced at Qin Bai Lu before lowered her head to drink tea.

"My *fu*?" Qu Qing Ju giggled as she took out a handkerchief to wipe her mouth. Her voice was gentle as she lectured, "*San di mei,* it's not that *saosao* likes lecturing others, but your words are too improper. Us women, when we marry, we follow our husbands. My *fu* is *wang ye*'s *fu*. *San dimei*, are you saying that I am not a member of the Imperial Family?"

This kind of words, even the empress couldn't say them, to say nothing of Qin Bai Lu as a *dimei*?

Qin Bai Lu finished listening to the speech and in her heart, she hated Qu Qing Ju for not leaving her a shred of dignity. On the outside, she could only smiled and apologize: "*Er sao*, forgive me. It's just my mouth got away from me. *Saosao,* please forgive me." Finishing, she stood to give a bow.

Qu Qing Ju didn't stand to return the bow but nodded instead: "*Meimei* doesn't have to be so courteous. There isn't that many protocols between us *zhouli*, but today, I had to say a word. Now, I am Duan Wang Fei, my mother is Qu Tian *shi*. *Dimei*, you can't get mixed up in the future.

The smile on Qin Bai Lu's face almost froze. She hadn't expected Qu Qing Ju to straightforwardly throw the Duke of Chang De aside. Thinking about the rumors involving Chang De Gong Fu and Duan Wang Fei. That the Duke of Chang De was a dissolute person, not yet one hundred days after his wife had died, he married a wife. That Qu Liang *shi* was not a loving mother and harshly treated the daughter of the previous wife, and didn't even care for the *shu* daughters, only being caring to her own daughter and her maternal family.

No wonder that everywhere in these past days were the previous scandals of Chang De Gong Fu. It was waiting here. Qu Qing Ju wanted to clearly express her attitude towards Chang De Gong Fu.

Many people had come today and in front of all these people, Qin Bai Lu couldn't throw a tantrum despite the great humiliation she endured. She could only sit with her suppressed rage. She handed the poems in her hand back to Jin An Princess: "Which one does Princess think is the best?"

Qu Qing Ju looked at her anger simmering under the surface and thought uncharitably that Rui Wang and his wife were naturally a couple. Their way of speech was not well-thought out and insulting. Their arrogant conduct was just asking for retaliation.

"*Ben gong* feels that the young ladies Qu and Lu are both good," Jin An Princess raised her head, "Who are these two *guniang*, come up to let *ben gong* see."

Qu Qing Ju looked at the *guniang* that came up to bow. Qu Yue Su was warm and beautiful to the eye, the Lu Family's *guniang* was thin and graceful. She was truly someone that would catch someone's eye. If she didn't guess wrong, this Family Lu's *guniang* should be the Great Scholar Lu Jing Hong's daughter, Yu Rong.

"*Ben gong* sees you two's poems both have their own merits. They say there is never just one winner in the arts. Why don't you both be the winners, " Jin An Princess had heard of the event between Qu Yue Su

and Rui Wang. She gave Qu Yue Su an extra look. This woman did have the looks of a spring flower, her brows like a painting.

At this time, she couldn't help but look at Duan *wang fei* as she smiled faintly and tasted the tea. The two were sisters of the same father, but their appearances and aura were completely different. Qu Yue Su was very beautiful, but it wasn't a rare kind of beauty. But while Duan *wang fei*'s appearance wasn't peerless, it just made people feel she was unspeakably beautiful, each move and word carrying the flavour of beauty.

This probably was each person's charisma. Jin An Princess let the servants present a set of precious ink and hair ornament to Qu and Lu before giving a few more compliments and letting the two sit down. She didn't even mention once the relation between Qu Yue Su and Qu Qing Ju.

Very quickly there were servants that presented fresh cakes and fruits. Everyone saw that these were all good things and it could be seen how much the emperor favored Jin An Princess. No wonder the *wang fei*s were all this harmoniously interacting with Jin An Princess. Even a person as proud as Rui Wang Fu was courteous.

From beginning to end, Wei Qing E, who hadn't spoken more than a few words, felt that Qu Qing Ju's fate seemed to naturally conflict with Qin Bai Lu. And each time, it was Qu Qing Ju who won.

Qu Qing Ju dared to humiliate Qin Bai Su, she must be relying on the favour that Duan Wang held for her. Otherwise, why would she speak without regard for the consequences. She thought in derision, when Duan Wang didn't favour her, how would she live? If she had offended the *zhouli* underneath her, who would pity her in the future?

If it was her, she would have said it more beautifully, at least, she wouldn't have made it so the person had no dignity left. She sighed and raised a teacup to disguise her emotions. Sometimes, only the cruel reality could make women learn and grow.

"We are pretty done with the drawings. If everyone doesn't dislike it, why don't you come with *ben gong* to hear some music?" Jin An Princess held a *yahuan*'s hand as she stood. Once she spoke, everyone all agreed and said they had no dislike.

The stage had already been set up. After everyone sat down, the actors started singing. The meaning, broadly said, was a heartless man and a girl in love. In the end, the woman grew old and left before the man regretted his actions and repented.

Qu Qing Ju saw this kind of plot and felt uncomfortable. Why was it that the woman had to stay at home to care for the elders, raise the children while the man could drink and be merry outside. When the woman was old and her youth was gone, the man would have been bored of playing outside and wanted to return home. Why was it that the man was considered to be so valuable and admirable when he repented?

Who saw the youth of the woman, the blood and tears of the woman? When she was old, and couldn't enjoy the beautiful times of youth anymore, what was the use in the man repenting?

According to her, these plays had been written by vulgar scholars to satisfy their own desires. They always wanted their own wives to be virtuous and taciturn, and hoped that other people's wives were extremely lusty. In reality, they would never be able to find a wife. The only thing they could do was eat one meal before looking for the next, squatting in old and drafty cottages fantasizing that a landlord's daughter or a noble daughter will wanted to marry them.

Mu Jin saw her mistress' face wasn't well and changed a cup of hot tea for her. She asked in a small voice: "Mistress, is your body not well?"

Qu Qing Ju held the teacup as she faintly replied: "It's fine. I just don't want to see this kind of man have such a virtuous and generous woman."

She had been talking in a small voice but Jin An Princess had heard. Jin An Princess nodded and laughed icily: "That's so true, this type of man

still managed to live out his days with his family, it's so disgusting. Get the singers to leave, *ben gong* doesn't like this play."

The actors quickly retreated, not understanding how they had provoked Her Highness the Princess into such anger.

"A few days earlier, I heard a repeat of "The Record of Pan Zhe"[2], it's somewhat interesting. Does *jiejie* want to hear?" Qu Qing Ju gave a faint smile and commented, "The men and women in this world, they have to respect that karma will happen by the end. How can someone take advantage all the time?"

Jin An Princess felt that Duan Wang Fei was becoming more and more pleasing to look at. She picked "The Record of Pan Zhe" before she said to Qu Qing Ju: "*Dimei*, your words are good. I think the same."

This Jin An Princess really did have some temper. Qu Qing Ju smiled as she raised the teacup, "Your Highness is wise."

Qin Bai Lu stared coldly as Qu Qing Ju and Jin An Princess talked. She turned her head to glare icily at Qu Yue Su who sat in the corner. The women of the Family Qu were all fox-spirits disguised in those long sleeves which danced beautifully. The *jiejie* was a temptress, the *meimei* did what fox-spirits always did. None of them were good.

"The Record of Pan Zhe" was the story of a grassroots *xuicai* who fell in love with a noble *xiaojie* and tried different ways to win the good feelings of the *xiaojie*. But this *xuicai* had a childhood sweetheart who was his fiancée. The *xuicai* wanted it all so he concealed the information. In the end, what he had done had been found out by both the *xiaojie* and the childhood sweetheart. He was rejected by both people and was in poverty for his entire life.

The one he wanted to climb up to was the noble *xiaojie*, the one he wanted to break off was the childhood sweetheart. In the end, he didn't climb up or break anything off. This was the biggest insult to the poor scholar's greediness. When this play came out, no one had originally

[2]攀折: 攀 is to climb, to claim connections of higher status 折 is break, twist, snap, suffer loss.

recommended it. Which man would like to watch such a play? And the women who were enclosed in their inner chambers naturally didn't know there was this kind of a play.

So when this play was acted out, many were deeply attracted. After the play finished, the crowd started discussing, this saying how shameless the scholar was, that saying that what the *xiaojie* and the sweetheart done was right.

"It's true that the scholar is deserving of hatred but this noble *xiaojie* should have secretly met with the scholar before. She nearly ruined her reputation," Qin Bai Lu pointed out with a mirthless smile, "This world still lives by the decisions of the mother and father. Such a good girl, it's not a good thing to mix with adult men."

These words had an indirect target. Many people present had heard what occurred at the Lantern Festival and so no one continued the topic. That was a matter of Rui Wang Fu. Rui Wang's personality had always been proud, it was better not to provoke him.

Liang *shi* heard Qin Bai Lu's speech and her face changed. However, Qu Yue Su, standing by her side, didn't change her expression as she kept a smile on her face. It was as though the target that Qin Bai Shaung's "pointing at the mulberry tree and swearing at the locust tree" wasn't her.

Wei Qing E and Qu Qing Ju both smiled and didn't speak. They seemed to have not heard Qin Bai Lu's words. The two exchanged a glance, raised the teacup in their hand, and simultaneously took a drink.

"Luckily this noble *xiaojie* didn't make a great mistake. To know she had stepped wrong and return rather than continue onwards, it is a good thing," Jin An Princess's words broke the tense silence. A sharp smile appeared on her face, "This kind of man, you can't tolerate or spoil him. Otherwise, he'll forget who he really is."

Once the words came out, everyone's inside was full of different flavors. In this world, what man didn't steal some, what man didn't like beauty?

Qu Qing Ju looked at Jin An Princess. On her face, she saw what looked like a certain type of resolution.

Chapter 45

After watching two plays, it was already past one and Jin An Princess invited everyone to a meal. She let the *guniang* who hadn't come of age to gather and freely chat. She and the noble ladies and official's wives that married chatted about the interesting things in Jing.

Qu Qing Ju heard these people once again mention the Spiritual Master Xuan Ling on the Five Estates Monastery. It looked like this Spiritual Master Xuan Ling had some skill. Regardless of whether there were ghosts and gods in this world, but the fact that a person could be recommended by so many women used to living in a complicated environment, it showed his abilities were exceptional. As to in which direction they laid, that depended on the person.

When Jin An Princess heard this, she was unexpectedly calm. She smiled calmly: "If he is an extraordinary person, there definitely will be a change to meet him in the future." She did say that, but Qu Qing Ju could see that she didn't even care about such a thing.

Qu Qing Ju held Mu Jin's hand as she stood to change clothes. On her way back, she met Qu Yue Su accompanied by her *yahuan*. She stopped in her steps and calmly watched as Qu Yue Su gave her a full and respectful greeting.

"Greetings to Duan Wang Fei," Qui Yue Su was now very clear, the *da jie* in front of her didn't want to interact with Chang De Gong Fu at all. She could even see on *da jie*'s body the coldness she held towards Chang De Gong Fu. She had heard many of the rumors on the outside. She wanted to argue but found all the rumors were true. And some events that occurred were even worse than the rumors. She didn't have the courage to use the appellation of *da jie*.

The reputation of the *fu* was worse and worse. It had affected her and *er jie*'s marriage prospects. She wasn't content with becoming the *furen* of a normal official. But none of the *di* sons of the noble families wanted to marry her. So she wanted to try her best using her talents and beauty. It was better than mediocrely finishing her life.

"*San xiaojie*, please rise," Mu Jin saw her *wang fei* stand still and came up a step to give insubstantial support. She once again moved behind Qu Qing Ju.

Qu Qing Ju looked at the color of the sky: "Why are you alone here. I just saw the *guniang* of the Tao and Lu Families chatting together, why don't you go play with them?"

Qu Yue Su's face was somewhat ugly. She forced a smile and answered: "Just wanted to take a walk."

Nodding, Qu Qing Ju didn't speak more, "I'll go first, you be careful."

"Farewell *wang fei*." Qu Yue Su bowed again. She looked at Qu Qing Ju surrounded by quite a few *yahuan* as they ushered her towards Jin An Princess. She bit the corner of her lip to push down the soreness in her heart. By now, those noble girls weren't willing to interact with her. They thought they were so high up, not willing to interact with her as someone willing to become a *qie*. Really, they were normal people as well. In the future, they also had to pour their heart to try to hold their husband's heart and still manage the favoured *ce shi*. By that time, they would all be that common eye of the fish.

This kind of thoughts might just be Qu Yue Su comforting herself but by now she could only think like so to keep that strange sense of jealousy she had towards Qu Qing Ju. She shouldn't fantasize, that if the person decreed would have been her, the person respected and flattered would be her.

Wei Qing E and the others saw Qu Qing Ju return and teased: "You finally came back, we just mentioned you."

"Mentioned me?" Qu Qing Ju sat back on her original seat, picking up an already skinned tangerine to put into her mouth.

"Said you have good fortune. All the *ce shi* in the *fu* are so obedient and doesn't have too many tricks." Wei Qing E smiled, "Not like our *fu*, there's many beauties."

Qu Qing Ju gave a cough and swallowed down the tangerine. She wiped the corner of her mouth: "*Da sao* is joking." Just recently, a *ce fei* on Duan Wang Fu had been demoted to *qie,* and then a certain *tong fang* had died due to illness. Before that, there was a *tong fang* married off to the estate. This was being called obedience, was this Wei Qing E purposefully shaming her?

"I'm not as virtuous as *da sao* and can't run a household so well. *Da sao*, don't laugh at me," Qu Qing Ju knew the only people present who dared to discuss Duan Wang Fu was the three of Jin An Princess, Wei and Qin. She smiled at Jin An Princess and informed, "*Jiejie*, you may not know, *da sao* is virtuous and able but she always compliments those that are not, like me. *Jiejie*, you have to help get justice for me."

"Alright, alright, *ben gong*'s brothers could marry you all to be *wang fei*, it's their good luck," Jin An Princess smiled as she placed a place of red date cake into the middle, "All of you eat a bit more cake, and don't mutually compliment each other anymore."

Wei Qing E smiled and let the topic go. She knew that Duan Wang Fu was controlled now by Qu Qing Ju. The *houyuan* was like a steel box. A few days ago, *wang ye* had a dark expression on his face because of a certain *tong fang*'s death. That *tong fang* must have been *wang ye*'s person.

The people accompanying them were *furen* that were of some status. It was a pity that Qu Qing Ju's aunt, Tian Luo *shi* wasn't here. Otherwise, Qu Qing Ju wouldn't feel so bored.

Jin An Princess holding a picture-admiring banquet today, it was to let these *furen* knew that she, Jin An Princess, was going to put roots down

in Jing. At the same time, it was letting them go home to tell their husbands, she was going to sort out her *fuma* the Count of Bei Lu. These people should widen their eyes and don't involve themselves.

This tactic had the flavour of pressuring people through privilege. But who was it that let her be the Princess Royal as personally decreed by the Emperor. It wasn't as though there weren't other princesses in the Da Long Dynasty, but she was the only Princess Royal. This was enough to prove her position.

Qu Qing Ju felt that Jin An Princess was a smart and realistic woman. She had a privileged identity, she didn't have to embarrass herself for that supposed feelings. She had given birth to son and daughter for the Count of Bei Lu. Rationally, the Count of Bei Lu shouldn't be able to have a *qie*, but the Count of Bei Lu did such a thing. This didn't just humiliate Jin An Princess, it was humiliating the Imperial Family. If today, Jin An Princess allowed such a thing to occur, then in the future, other princess' *fuma* will follow in doing so. One leads to the next. At the end, the most tragic would be the women.

After the banquet finished, Qu Qing Ju came out of the Princess' *fu* and saw Liang *shi* and Qu Yue Su at the main gate. Towering above them was Qin Bai Lu. She didn't stop her steps, passing through the three of them to enter her carriage. Others were willing to act out a drama, she didn't want any drama.

The carriage started moving. Qu Qing Ju looked through the window and managed to see Qin Bai Lu show a disdainful smile at Liang *shi* and Qu Yue Su. Liang *shi*'s face was full of rage that didn't dare erupt. She curled her lips and let go of the curtain.

Returning to Duan Wang Fu, Qu Qing Ju saw Shu Kui and Rui Xiang standing guard outside the gate to the *zheng yuan*. She knew that it was possible that He Heng was inside so she asked: "Is *wang ye* inside the room?"

She Kui bent and answered: "*Wang fei*, *wang ye* had come for a while."

Nodding to show she knew, Qu Qing Ju passed through the main gate and crossed the garden of the *zhengyuan*. When she came to the outer room of the suite, she saw He Heng was looking at the "beauty dancing under the moon" that she had the servants hang up on the wall.

"*Wang ye*," Qu Qing Ju smiled and walked next to He Heng. She stood abreast with him "What's wrong with the painting?"

"I remember, you also have such a long dress," He Heng kept on feeling that there was a shadow of Qu Qing Ju in this painting.

"How come *wang ye* didn't think that this painting is me." Qu Qing Ju laughed.

He Heng looked at the signature of the scroll. It was actually Qu Qing Ju's work. The time of the painting was just a few days ago. No wonder he hadn't seen it yesterday. It must have been that someone hung it up today.

"Qing Ju knows how to dance?" He Heng was shocked. There were many noble girls that studied the *qin, qi,* literature and art, but there was not even a few that learned how to dance.

"Learned myself," Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow, as though she was proud yet helpless, "In the past, there wasn't anything to do. In the room by myself, I wanted to spend away the time so I studied from the books."

He Heng knew that Qu Liang *shi* hadn't been good to Qu Qing Ju and had expected that she wouldn't have spent any thought on letting Qu Qing Ju learn the things that proper women should know. He saw her smile was both proud and helpless. He smiled and asked: "When will I have the luck to see?"

Qu Qing Ju raised her smooth and beautiful chin like a proud empress, "When *wang ye* does something that makes *qie* happy, *qie* will consider this matter."

Clearly calling herself *qie*, but He Heng heard a hint of pride. But he still felt that the other's state was so ticklish to his heart. He couldn't resist reaching with a hand to touch Qu Qing Ju's waist, "Qing Ju's waist is thin and flexible, it should make for an extremely beautiful dance."

The corners of Qu Qing Ju's mouth drew back: "*Wang ye*, are you mocking me for being a dancer girl?"

He Heng seemed to understand why women always made trouble without a reason but strangely felt the need to explain himself. He helplessly drew the person into his embrace, "Those women aren't worthy of being mentioned together with Qing Ju. You only dance for me, no one else will see. This is between us as husband and wife. I like it, I'm not teasing you." Finishing, he added another sentence, "In the future, when I make you happy, you have to lower yourself to dance once for me."

Qu Qing Ju gave a gentle snort, "Since you are so expectant, when the spring comes, I will dance one for you to watch." This body was truly flexible. When it danced, it wouldn't seem hard and without grace. But she wasn't really wanting to dance for He Heng like this. Men were a strange type of creature. They liked playing with willing women, but they looked down at a woman for being too willing. From a certain viewpoint, men were even more conflicted than women at times.

But if she made such a matter a delight between the two of them, to let the other feel expectant, but not let the other easily see. Then it will let He Heng's heart give birth to a feeling of intimacy akin to "a secret belong to the two of them".

Sometimes, a beautiful secret was useful in closing the distance between man and woman.

He Heng saw Qu Qing Ju's pouty state and felt the cat in his heart was tickling him even more. He breathed in the smell of her hair and said in a hoarse voice: "Alright." There was clearly layers of clothing separating them but he seemed to be able to feel the fineness under the clothing. He couldn't resist carrying the person to bed.

Qu Qing Ju didn't want to play the game of being on top of the other before eating. She leaned her head to He Heng's chest as she said: "I saw that Jin An Princess Royals seems to want to separate from Count of Bei Lu."

A second of silence, she then heard He Heng's voice full of disdain with a hint of anger.

"Separation is necessary, how could he slight an Imperial Princess? This matter, it won't end so easily!"

Qu Qing Ju gave a smile of unclear meaning. Look, look, this was the people of the Imperial House. No matter how arrogant, warm, or honest they were usually, in their bones, the high attitude naturally existed.

Chapter 46

The Count of Bei Lu managed to travel to Jing City on the twenty-sixth day of the first month. The first place he went to was the Princess Royal's *fu*, but before he could enter, he was thrown out by the servants of the *fu*. He hadn't known that the servants would make things this difficult for him. When he was about to start in on them, Jin An Princess came out, supported by a *yahuan*.

Because the Count of Bei Lu had constantly been thinking of that mistress, the husband and wife hadn't been together for many days in the recent months. The Count of Bei Lu stood under the main gate, looking at the grandly-dressed princess. The fiery anger instantly was extinguished by cold water. He muttered: "Princess."

"What is *fuma* doing?" Jin An Princess looked mockingly behind him, "Why don't I see your little lover?"

The Count of Bei Lu's face was conflicted. The servants and guards of the princess' *fu* had filled the gate. He didn't want to humiliate himself in front of these people but he had to do so. Otherwise, his entire Cao

Family would be impacted, to say nothing of protecting the mistress he liked.

"The princess misunderstood, it was just a little bit of fun, it wouldn't have influenced the feelings between us," Count of Bei Lu forced himself to smile as he gave a deep bow, "I ask for Princess to forgive *weifu*[3], *weifu* will not do such an idiotic thing in the future."

Jin An Princess disdainfully looked at the man in front of his eyes. He still was elegant and graceful, full of warmth and education. The person was still the same person, but the heart had changed. A man with a changed heart. If she kept it, it was just guarding a stinky skin, she would just disgust herself.

For some reason, she wanted to laugh and she did: "*Fuma*, this joke is really funny. *Ben gong*, in the past, hadn't known that *fuma* would have lost himself because of playing with an amusement. Idiotic or not, you know in your heart. These kinds of words, *ben gong* doesn't care to hear. Since it was *fuhuang*'s Imperial Decree that summoned you into Jing, you can go into the palace to explain to *fuhuang*."

The Count of Bei Lu's heart suddenly panicked. He heard the disdain in the princess' words. But if this event didn't have the princess to mediate, the emperor will definitely heavily punish him. And the Family Cao would be over. Originally, his Family Cao had been one with only a title yet no power. Now that the incident has gotten larger, they might not even be able to keep their title.

Thinking about this, the Count of Bei Lu could only continue: "Princess, we have been together for so many years, we can't let such a minor thing affect our feelings for each other. This event, it was *weifu*'s great mistake. As long as Princess is willing to forgive *weifu*, *weifu* is willing to do anything."

"Since you know we have been married for so long, why did you do such a shameless thing to break our union?" Jin An Princess wasn't moved and looked expressionlessly at the Count of Bei Lu, "In this

[3]□夫: this husband, as the husband

world, there is a reason for anything. These years, *ben gong* has never slighted any of your Cao family. You have treated me so, how can you come here?" Finishing, she turned and ordered the gatesmen: "Close the main gate!"

The Count of Bei Lu watched as the main gate slowly closed. He wanted to beg, but seeing Jin An Princess' gaze, he couldn't say one word. Because the other's eyes told him, no matter what he said, the other wouldn't change their heart.

The news that the Count of Bei Lu had begged to see the princess but was rejected quickly spread through Jing. Many said that the Count of Bei Lu was too reckless, and there were those that said the Count of Bei Lu wasn't smart enough, but no one dared to say that Jin An Princess Royal was too aggressive. It wasn't easy marrying a daughter of the Imperial Family.

When Qu Qing Ju heard of the incident, she let people find out more to tell her. In the deep courtyard, there really wasn't anything, if she didn't listen to what was happening outside to amuse herself, she didn't know how to spend her time. No wonder the women here put on big or small banquets, looked at flowers, tea, paintings when they had time. All these were just excuses for the noblewomen to gather and waste time.

The night that this news had spread, the *fu* received the empress' decree. It said they were having a family banquet at Kui Yuan Palace tomorrow and that He Heng and Qu Qing Ju both had to be there.

After receiving the decree, Qu Qing Ju felt a bit surprised. The Empress didn't seem to be one that meddled. To hold a family banquet so unexpectedly, it was most likely for Jin An Princess' matter.

He Heng saw Qu Qing Ju in deep thought so he spoke: "You don't have to think too much. Tomorrow, other than us brothers, I'm afraid there will only be *zhang jie*[4] Jin An, *fuhuang* and *muhou*."

[4]□姐: eldest sister

This was saying that the other consorts didn't have the qualifications to be there? Qu Qing Ju understood. This was the warm-up to sorting out the Count of Bei Lu. She nodded, "Yes, it should be us maternal family who sort out this heartless man. To put aside such a good wife and entangle himself with an unclear woman, we can't let him off easily."

Detecting Qu qing Ju's anger, He Heng smiled and stated: "It seems you had a good time with *Zhangjie*."

Qu Qing Ju sat down on the carved chair. She sighed and observed: "*Zhang jie* is a good woman. The Count of Bei Lu is truly despicable. He clearly had a very good person at home but he had to go out to touch the unclean and unknown ones. It can be seen that the feelings from these many years, to him, it wasn't important."

Seeing her expression seemed tired, he didn't know how he just started speaking: "There are millions of men in the world. Some don't care for old affections, other people deepen their affections over time. *Zhang jie* just met a bad man."

Qu Qing Ju suddenly smiled. Her left hand propped up her chin. She tilted her head to He Heng and said: "*Wang ye* has to be the person whose affections deepen over time."

He Heng's gaze was dark. He answered hoarsely: "Naturally I'm the kind of person whose affections deepen over time." But in this sentence, he put emphasis on a certain word.

A man and woman alone. He Heng's purposeful flirtation aroused Qu Qing Ju's interest. They didn't know who moved first but when Qu Qing Ju managed to react, she was already lying on the bed, revealing half a shoulder. He Heng's dog teeth were licking and biting at her shoulder.

Feeling her shoulder tickle, Qu Qing Ju shrugged her shoulders and laughed out loud. This provoked He Heng to bite tighter. He said hoarsely: "It seems I didn't put in enough effort, that Qing Ju can still laugh." Finishing, he purposefully pinched at her waist, causing Qu Qing Ju to laugh even louder.

He clearly knew that she was most ticklish at her waist, yet he still purposefully put his hand there. Qu Qing Ju flashed to deliberately hide in his embrace and before he noticed, she took grasp of Little Heng. She threatened: "*Wang ye*, don't tickle me, it wouldn't be good if I accidentally move my hand."

He Heng gave a deep laugh. He replied: "*Wang fei*, are you threatening me?" Finishing, his body pushed down, pinning the person under his body. He gently kissed her ear before raising his head to look at her and saying, "Then you have to take good care of it."

"What is taking good care of it?" Qu Qing Ju widened her eyes, looking innocently at He Heng. Her hand very carelessly trembled a few times and felt Little Heng stand to attention.

This was igniting He Heng's very large fire and he instantly threw himself in.

An hour later, the servants started to move the bathtub and hot water to *zhengyuan*. These *taijian* all carefully kept their head down, afraid to even look twice at the clothing and ornaments on the ground. But just from the clothing on the ground, they knew just how fiery it had been between *wang ye* and *wang fei*.

Qu Qing Ju sprawled at the border of the tub, permitting He Heng to knead her shoulders. Her voice carried laziness as she asked: "I heard we have a property in the Jing suburbs, it has hot springs?"

"You like them?" He Heng's hand touched the fine skin and smiled as his chest glued itself onto that smooth and thin back, "Yu Quan Yuan[5] does have a large hot spring. In a few days, I'll take you to play for a few days.

"That would be good," Qu Qing Ju tilted her head to gently kiss He Heng's face, "*wang ye*, don't forget."

[5]玉泉园: Jade springs orchard/garden

A beautiful woman giving a kiss was naturally a good thing. He Heng stole a few more from Qu Qing Ju's lips before confirming, "Things that I have promised you, I won't forget."

Qu Qing Ju smiled as she straightened her head. The inky strands of hair flowed in the water, hiding the bottom of the tub.

When she came to Kui Yuan Palace, Qu Qing Ju found that there were a few more hints of life this time. There were even more servants around, as though they were deliberately acting out such liveliness.

Following He Heng into the main hall, she saw the Emperor and Empress there as expected. The person sitting directly under was Jin An Princess Royal. Under Jin An Princess were He Yuan and Qin Bai Lu.

Qu Qing Ju felt that the Rui Wang couple had come quickly this time and weren't too proud. After she finished her greeting with He Heng, they sat down opposite the couple of He Yuan. Qu Qing Ju, as usual, drank tea and lowered her head.

Qing De Emperor, as emperor, and as a father, he might not be a good one, but at the very least, he still followed social conventions. Sitting at the top, he very rarely looked at his two *erxifu*, and only talked with his two sons.

A quick while later, the Ning Wang couple arrived. Qu Qing Ju watched as the two sat above them and He Qi started to amuse the emperor. She couldn't help but think each imperial son was a master of flattery from birth.

"Since your *didi* have all arrived, *zhen* will ask you one more time, do you really want to separate?" Qing De Emperor gave a sigh. The old face showing tiredness, "Gui Nian, *zhen* shouldn't have given you in marriage to that boy of the Cao family."

"It has nothing to do with *fuhuang*. It's knowing someone's face not knowing their heart. Back then, it was this daughter that had agreed before *fuhuang* decreed the marriage. Basically, it was this daughter who

didn't have a good eye," Gui Nian[6] was Jin An Princess Royal's name. This name had been personally chosen by Qing De Emperor. Perhaps it was that when choosing this name, Qing De Emperor had thought that this daughter, even if she had married, still remembered this home of hers that was the palace, so he named her Gui Nian.

Qu Qing Ju found that the Emperor treated Jin An Princess very well, better than the three sons other than He Yuan. Maybe it was that Jin An Princess was his first child, that the feelings were different.

"These years, this daughter and the Count of Bei Lu were full of respect in and in harmony with each other. But now, the Count of Bei Lu's heart is not with I and the children any longer. He didn't even care about my identity and the old feelings as he involved himself with a nine-grade official. He can humiliate this daughter, but he cannot humiliate the Imperial Family. Such a heartless man, what use would I keep him for. Separation, it would allow me to have clean days." Jin An Princess gave a bitter smile, "Otherwise, if I forced myself to be with him, this daughter will feel disgust."

Chapter 47

The front hall fell into a period of silence. Then Qu Qing Ju heard Qing De Emperor gave a sigh.

"Since that is so, then *zhen* will allow you to separate from the Count of Bei Lu. As to your children, they will be raised by you. Let your *didi* help some in the future," Finishing, Qing De Emperor looked at the three brothers, "Do you have any objections?"

He Qi and He Yuan quickly demonstrated they had none. But it was He Heng that stood to ask: "*Fuhuang*, after separation, *zhang jie* will be raising two children by herself. Even if us brothers will be there to it, it

[6]□念: □ is return 念 is remembrance

still might be too difficult. Why don't *fuhaung* bestow a title on nephew and niece?"

When Qing De Emperor had originally seen He Heng stand, his expression hadn't been good. After He Heng had finished, his face showed a smile, "*Lao er* is right. It should be like this. We will especially decree Cheng'er to be the Marquess of Ding Zhong, Xuan'er as Ru Yi *jun zhu*. Both shall change their surname to their mother's. After they grow up, then they will be titled."

This was a true grace. He Heng's nephew and niece would change their surnames from Cao to He, and also received a title. In the future, no one in Jing would slight them because of their father. If they touched the Imperial name, their statuses were drastically different.

Jin An Princess Royal hadn't thought that it would be this smooth. She stood with tears in her eyes to thank Qing De Emperor. After the bow, she furtively looked at He Heng. Qu Qing Ju noticed that glance and knew the other was going to remember the gigantic boon He Heng had given her.

To this, He Qi and He Yuan didn't have any objections but hated He Heng for being the one to do so. Even if this nephew did change to the surname He, it couldn't affect them competing for the throne and had no strong relationship to them. It was better to follow *fuhuang*'s desires and he could do a favour.

Sitting at the side, the Empress who hadn't spoke at all changed the look on her face. Jin An Princess wasn't her blood daughter but she had raised her for many years. They naturally held mutual feelings for each other. Jin An was humiliated, the most hurt was her as the mother. But she wasn't favored by the emperor and could only side. Hearing that the emperor was rewarding the two grandchildren, she had no more worries about Jin An Princess' separation.

After the matter was settled, Qing De Emperor stood: "*Zhen* still has matters and will leave first. If that boy from the Cao family comes, you

don't have to be courteous. The decree that *zhen* will give him will be sent down tomorrow."

These words meant, the man who bullied *zhen*'s daughter, you can play whatever with, and *zhen* will take care of it?

Qu Qing Ju quietly shed two large crocodile tears for the Count of Bei Lu. Landing on the hands of the He brothers, if he didn't die, he'll shed layers.

After Qing De Emperor left, the atmosphere in the hall seemed to relax a fraction. Qu Qing Ju picked a small chopped piece of sugar cane and put in her mouth. After she chomped and sucked for the liquid, she hid her mouth as she spat out the remainder into the fine plate that a palace maid held with a bent waist. She ate a few more pieces before she wiped her mouth clean. She felt slightly constrained. Sugar cane, it needed one to bite off a piece and then another to chew for it to be enjoyable. Eating like this, it didn't have the freedom that was present biting the sugar cane off. But the act of eating was much prettier.

Wei Qing E almost couldn't believe her eyes. How did Qu Qing Ju dare to eat sugar cane in front of others, wasn't she afraid of her eating appearance? She watched as Qu Qing Ju crisply chewed on a few more pieces before wiping her mouth. She jerked the corners of her lips: "*Di mei* has a good appetite."

Qu Qing Ju smiled, "Sweet things are eaten to make one feel better." She handed the dirty handkerchief to Yu Zan who was behind her and took the clean handkerchief Mu Jin handed her, "*Da sao* should try sometime."

Wei Qing E gave a short dry laugh, "I don't like using such snacks."

"To me, living in this world is for eating and drinking. *Da sao*, don't laugh at me," Qu Qing Ju laughed unconcernedly.

He Heng heard this and just smiled. He clearly didn't feel that Qu Qing Ju placed too much importance on food but felt that his *wang fei* was so honest.

Of course, this was due to the fact that when a person held good feelings as they looked at another, whatever they did was good.

He Qi raised his head and coincidentally saw the smile on He Heng's face. He gave a sigh, feeling that his teeth were slightly sore.

"*Er sao* is very careful about food and clothing," Qin Bai Lu smiled as she looked at Qu Qing Ju. What the other wore was both carefully chosen and beautiful.

"This type of sugar can is both crisp and sweet. I like eating this in the winter," Jin An Princess took a piece of sugar cane as well. After she spat out the piece, she said, "It seems that *er di mei* has some preferences in common with me." Finishing, she smiled at Qu Qing Ju.

Qu Qing Ju returned a smile, "That's great. In the future, if I find something tasty, there's someone I can share it with."

Hearing this, Jin An Princess looked at He Heng. She teased: "This is your fault, *er di*. How could you let *di mei* experience delicious food alone?" When she finished, she saw Qu Qing Ju's face flush. Jin An Princess roared with laughter.

"*Jiejie*, don't tease," He Heng gave a bow and pled, "Otherwise someone's face will be like a monkey's ass."

"Nonsense, nonsense, where in this world could there be such a beautiful monkey's ass. What words couldn't you use, that you had to use such a vulgar one," The Empress smiled as she carefully examined Qu Qing Ju's face, "*ben gong* feels, it looks more similar to the heavenly peaches of the Heavenly Empress." Finishing, she laughed first.

Qu Qing Ju bore a face full of bashfulness as she tilted her head to glare at He Heng. Then she buried her head to drink tea.

That glare she gave caused He Heng's bones to feel soft. He stood and pleaded for mercy from the two. He was subjected to a torrent of laughter. Once again, he understood a truth, a man couldn't participate in the world of women.

When He Yuan lowered his head, he coincidentally saw the glare Qu Qing Ju gave He Heng. It did have that bit of flavour. He raised an eyebrow to look at the still pleading and forcefully smiling He Heng, his eyes carrying a hint of examination.

Just as everyone was laughing, a *taijian* came in to report that the Count of Bei Lu was asking for an audience.

The mirth on Jin An Princess' face retreated like the tide. She adjusted her clothing and icily held up a teacup.

The Empress' face went cold. She said in a heavy tone: "Let him roll in."

At this instant, Qu Qing Ju felt that the empress was full of maternal protectiveness. She turned to look towards the door and saw a man with an extremely elegant appearance bow slightly as he walked in. Just from the appearance, he was a man who easily created good feelings in women. So, this world had invented a phrase to describe this kind of man, that was "an animal in clothing".

"This son-in-law greets *muhou*, meets *didi*."

"Who is your *didi*? Not just everybody can call *ben wang didi*." He Yuan snorted and lazily leaned back on the chair. He looked indolent, "Don't try to stick gold to your face. You don't feel embarrassed but I still find it blinding."

Qu Qing Ju silently swallowed a mouthful of tea. This He Yuan's mouth was a knife, and there was poison on this knife.

The Count of Bei Lu hadn't expected that he would be harassed right after he entered. But the other was a *wang ye* so he could only endure.

"Just this cowardly state, he still dares to womanize outside. He dirties my eyes." He Qi happily added a knife.

"*Da ge*, your words are slightly wrong. When *didi* saw the Count of Bei Lu a few years ago, he had proper conduct, and was almost enough to be worthy of *zhang jie*," He Heng blew at the leaves in the teacup and

continued at a sedate pace, “Only now did I know, the Count of Bei Lu is a good actor. I’m afraid that none of the famous corners of Jin can compare to him. Otherwise, how dare he trick us Imperial Family for so many years?”

To compare the Count of Bei Lu to an actor, Qu Qing Ju felt that He Heng had inserted a good knife. It was even more painful considering that when after he spoke his first sentence, the Count of Bei Lu had given him a gaze of hope.

In really, all these brothers were good at inserting a knife while being bloodless. Qu Qing Ju gaze a dry cough. She remarked to Jin An Princess, “*Zhang jie*, don’t be sad. Who doesn’t meet a disgusting thing or two in their life. Don’t let these things affect your mood and dirty your gaze.” She felt that at this, if she didn’t add a knife, she didn’t fit in with the crowd.

Even Wei Qing E and Qin Bai Lu at this time attacked in the same direction.

“The body is not right, the conduct is not right, it’s unbearable,” Qin Bai Lu disdainfully moved her gaze aside, acting as though she didn’t want to see a disgusting object.

Wei Qing E’s words were relatively softer. She said, expressionless: “The Count of Bei Lu *daren*, when you did such a thing, did you think of Princess and your children? Now that you have hardened Princess’ heart, you want to rescue it, do you feel that us Imperial Family members are easy to bully?”

The people who spoke all were of higher status than the Count of Bei Lu. The Count of Bei Lu felt that these words were a humiliation and hatred formed in his heart towards Jin An Princess, but he could only kneel in the hall and beg for forgiveness.

Jin An Princess looked at the cowardly man in front of her eyes. At the beginning in Jing Zhou, she hadn’t seen him as regretful as this. For that

woman, he had even been angry at her. He was afraid now so he put on such an act, how did she even fall for this man in the first place?

Moving her gaze away in disgust, Jin An Princess stood and said: "*Muhou*, this daughter is somewhat tired. I'll return first to the back to rest." Finishing, she didn't look again at the Count of Bei Lu and held the hand of a palace maid to leave the main hall.

The Count of Bei Lu's heart froze. He knew that this incident couldn't be resolved. He could only heavily kowtow to the empress, describing how regretful he was, describing how he would repent his ways and started reminiscing about the good of the princess and how he wanted to go back to the time when they had good feelings for each other.

"*Ben gong* feels that *lao er*'s words aren't right. This Count of Bei Lu isn't some good actor, he's one of the storytellers in the tea shops. Look at his words, if one didn't already know, they would think that the Imperial Family was making too much of a fuss over nothing," The Empress gave a cold laugh, "You don't have to kowtow. Don't bleed on the floor of my Kui Yuan Place. Quickly roll away, when *ben gong* sees you, *ben gong* gets angry."

There wasn't a mother that would be happy at a cheating son-in-law. The conduct of the empress was already very constrained. In a normal family, the Count of Bei Lu would have already beaten to the point his mother didn't recognize him.

Qu Qing Ju saw the Count of Bei Lu forcibly dragged away by the *taijian* and said disdainfully: "Thankfully nephew and niece didn't see this state of his."

He Heng heard this and thought about those two children not even ten years old. He sighed, "Separation is good, better than having such a father." He didn't know why he started thinking about Chang De Gong Fu, his brows unconsciously furrowing.

Chapter 48

After the Count of Bei Lu was dragged out of Kui Yuan Palace, the brothers of the He Family each held their heads down and drank tea. They listened to their wives converse and if they didn't have to speak, they wouldn't say even one additional word.

The conflict between He Yuan and He Qi had been almost pushed to the surface. Recently when *lao si* and Wei Wen Guang were sent to Jiang Nan to investigate the case, who knew that just a few days after they left Jing, they encountered an assassination attempt. Both Wei Wen Guang and *lao si* were wounded, stopping in their trip to recover. Many *taiyi* from the Imperial Hospital had been sent. By this time, the two were in no danger of danger, but a storm was raging in the Imperial Court.

Who would have such daring to assassinate the imperial envoys? Those that would dare, they were either rebel or a person of great power and status. The Da Long Dynasty had already ruled for hundreds of years, there weren't any of the so-called rebels. Those assassins could have only been sent by a personal of great power. Then why would such a person do a thing like this?

There were already people at the court that were guessing the matter was connected to Rui Wang. But this matter had been given to Ning Wang to investigate. This time, Ning Wang's mouth was securely sealed, no news had been leaked. Rui Wang also didn't seem to be acting differently so everyone then felt Rui Wang wouldn't have such daring to do it. That kind of conduct was almost akin to opposing the emperor. No matter how much Rui Wang was worried and how arrogant he was, he wasn't outrageous to this step.

The Empress was clear to the conflict between the three brothers. Seeing that it was almost the noon hour, she said: "It's so rare for you three brothers to gather together. *Ben gong* is happy, let's go eat together."

The three pairs followed the empress to the table. A short while later, someone ushered the princess and the two children over. The elder child, He Cheng, was only seven or eight. He wore a red cotton robe, a long-life lock around his neck. He looked very adorable. The smaller was He Xuan. She looked almost five years old, her eyes large. Her smile

was very cute. The two children together felt very much like the golden boy and jade girl of legend.

"Greetings to Imperial Grandmother, greetings to *jiujiu* and *jiumu*," The two children gave a proper bow. It could be seen that Jin An Princess had raised them well. Even Qu Qing Ju, who felt that little children were noisy, liked them.

"Cheng'er and Xuan'er have grown so much," Wei Qing E, who had seen the two before, smiled as she gave the two a meeting gift. She remarked to Jin An Princess, "Last time when I saw these two, Xuan'er wasn't walking. Now she's has grown to be an intelligent girl."

Jin An Princess gave a gentle smile: "Just a naughty child, she's not as good as you praise her to be."

Qu Qing Ju had prepared a meeting gift very long ago. Hearing Jin An Princess say such a thing, she interjected: "*Zhang jie*, you can't criticize these those children this way, I like these two very much." Speaking, she waved her hand at the two children, "Cheng'er, Xuan'er, come over for *er jiumu* to take a look."

He Cheng and He Xuan obediently walked in front of Qu Qing Ju, carefully examining this *er jiumu*. Her face becoming rosy red, He Xuan timidly reached with a hand to pull on Qu Qing Ju's sleeve, "Nice to meet *er jiumu*."

"Nice to meet Xuan'er," Qu Qing Ju bent to place He Xuan onto her own knee. She took a pendant from Mu Jin's hands to hang on Xuan'er's neck, "*Er jiumu* is giving you this as a toy."

He Xuan bent down to look at the pendant. It was a blooming lotus flower, the craftsmanship making it appear almost real. And the entire jade stone was transparent like ice. It was very beautiful and suitable for females to wear.

Jin An Princess found that this pendant was carved from an ice jade. This type of jade was extremely rare. It was more beautiful than glass

and extremely expensive. She hadn't expected that *er dimei* would use something as valuable as this to give to a child as a meeting gift.

"*Er dimei*, she's just a child, she doesn't need to use such a rare jade," Half of Jin An Princess' words were courtesy, half was real.

"Us imperial family's daughters, nothing is too precious to wear," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she touched He Xuan's hair buns, "Our Xuan'er is more beautiful than jade, I was afraid that this jade was too tacky for our *guniang*." Finishing, she took another jade pendant from Mu Jin's hands, "Here, Cheng'er, this is for you."

He Cheng looked at Jin An Princess and seeing the princess didn't block him, he took it and gave a bow: "Thank you *er juimu*." He spread his palm. It was a bat carved from a piece of black jade. Bats represented good fortune and were appropriate to give to young children.

Jin An Princess saw that *er dimei* had given very thoughtful gifts. These two jade pendants had been carved skillfully, the material itself was rare and couldn't be found in normal places. She said to He Xuan, "Xuan'er, come down quickly from *er jiumu*'s knee. Don't crush your *er jiumu*. Sit beside your mother here and prepare to eat."

He Xuan jumped down from Qu Qing Ju's knee and smiled as she ran to the spot beside Jin An Princess. He Cheng followed her as she sat down. Qu Qing Ju gave a sigh as she watched. The children in the previous life really should learn from these children, the gap was too large.

Wei Qing E had already met the two children before, so it didn't matter if she gave a less weighty gift. But Qin Bai Lu fell into an awkward state. Both she and Qu Qing Ju were newly married. The first meeting with these two children, Qu Qing Ju gave out gifts before her. The gifts she had already prepared were embarrassing in comparison.

Thinking that Qu Qing Ju was purposefully embarrassing her, Qin Bai Lu silently marked down another strike against Qu Qing Ju. She put on a bold face and gave out the objects. Jin An Princess held a normal

attitude as she gave her thanks but she felt that Jin An Princess clearly was more intimate with Qu Qing Ju.

The palace maids streamed in with teacups and copper basins as well as towels. Qu Qing Ju and He Heng sat together. After washing hands and rinsing mouths, there were many more maids and *taijian* that came in. Delicious food, steams, sautéed or fried, were set down like a flow water. The palace maids that held the plates each had pale white hands. Presenting the white porcelain plates, it made for a beautiful image that increased the appetite.

This made her think back to the memoir of a certain last emperor of a dynasty from the previous life. This scene in front of her didn't differ much from that memoir, it might be even more outrageous, since this was the golden age of Da Long Dynasty.

In reality, everything about the meal the nobility used was good, except for the rule that there was to be no speaking while eating. Qu Qing Ju was somewhat unused to such a practice. In the previous life, she always ate while either having a phone call or organizing an artist's schedule during the meantime. Here, she seemed to be in a retired state. There were no cellphones or computers. She could only read, practice her writing and draw. Originally, she had a bit of interest towards the *qi*, but after a few times, He Heng wasn't willing to play with her. Her life instantly became boring.

After the noon meal, the queen didn't keep the three brothers. The brothers took their own wives as they walked out of Kui Yuan Palace.

Coming out of the main gate of Kui Yuan Palace, He Yuan took Qin Bai Lu with him as he separated from the other two brothers. He Qi and He Heng didn't mind. After He Yuan's figure disappeared, He Qi said: "This morning, news came from outside Jing. *Si di*'s wounds are better, but his arm might have problems remaining, when it's winter, it will ache."

He Heng gave a sigh, and held his hands up to the sky together: "Thank Heavens nothing major happened to *si di*. Otherwise, there will be one person less among us brothers to play together in the future."

"Exactly," He Qi's words were full of rage as he said, "this evildoer is too daring, too outrageous. He dares to assassinate an imperial son and a prime minister. This is the Imperial Envoy representing *fuhuang*!"

Walking at He Heng's side, Qu Qing Ju's eyebrow twitched slightly before instantly returning to normal.

"*Da ge* has to find the person hiding in the back, and get justice on behalf of *si di* and Minister Wei." He Heng bowed to He Qi with two fists raised together, "*Da ge*, thanks for your trouble."

"This matter already has some leads," He Qi returned a bow, "It's no trouble, this is what I should do."

He Heng heard this, smiled and didn't reply.

He Qi didn't care if he responded. He raised his hands in a fist: "*Gege* still has matters to attend to, I'll leave first." Finishing, he strode towards another path. Wei Qing E slightly bowed to He Heng before quickly following.

Qu Qing Ju and He Heng returned a bow. Looking at the backs of the Ning Wang couple, the two sedately walked towards the exit of the palace.

"*Da bo* seems to be full of life these days," Qu Qing Ju serenely opened, "He seems to be even more majestic than usual."

He Heng detected that Qu Qing Ju had words within her words. He smiled: "It may be that it was the holidays earlier, he ate too much meat and drank too much."

Those normal citizens hoped to touch a bit of oil during the holidays. As a member of the imperial family, when did he not eat well? Qu Qing Ju giggled and said: "*Wang ye* is right."

After the two got on the carriage, He Heng then said: "Wei Wen Guang comes from the same branch as the Changde Gong Fu *lao taitai*'s maternal family. But Wei Wen Guang is of *shu* birth. During his earlier years, he was met with much cold care from the Family Wei. Now, he's a bit at odds with the Family Wei. And the entire Family Wei is slowly declining."

Qu Qing Ju hadn't thought that there would be such a connection. She thought about the conduct of the *lao taitai* of Chang De Gong Fu and had to admit that He Heng's words were reasonable: "*Lao taitai* was much colder to me. In the past when people from the Wei Family came to the *fu*, they liked to flatter *san mei* and brother Wang Zhi. It must have been that time that the Family Wei was already not well."

He Heng knew that his *wang fei* was, in reality, a very intelligent woman. It could be seen from how she treated others and received gifts. She was able to clearly prioritize and recognize what was important. She didn't demean the status of Duan Wang Fu because Rui Wang Fu was favoured. She didn't slight Jin An *zhang jie* because she came back to Jing with only her children. When it was time to be aggressive, she never retreated. When it was time to be gentle, she was never wilful. This type of woman most likely took after Tian *shi*, that she could be so intelligent.

Clearly, in the heart of the most honoured Duan Qin Wang, Chang De Gong Fu was a pile of idiots and his *wang fei* was a pure white lotus flower untouched by the mud.

"In the future, our *fu*'s gifts to Xiang Qing Hou Fu should increase a few fractions," He Heng's tone was serious as he continued, "The Tian Family's conduct is strict. There is no harm to you in having closer relations with them."

What was this tone that held hints of gladness?

Qu Qing Ju jerked her lips. She nodded and confirmed: "Alright."

He Heng smiled and then gravely said: “In the future, stay further away from people from Ning Wang Fu.” He knew that Qu Qing Ju was at odds with the people of Rui Wang Fu and didn’t need his reminder.

Qu Qing Ju paused slightly before nodding gravely.

Chapter 49

Very quickly the Imperial Decree concerning the Count of Bei Lu and Jin An Princess Royal was sent down. At the same time, there was also the decree bestowing the titles to the two children of Jin An Princess. As to the Count of Bei Lu, Qing De Emperor didn’t take away his title. He only let the servants drag him to the Meridian Gate of the Palace to be punished with forty blows. In the Imperial Decree, he clarified “The conduct of Jing Zhou’s Cao Clan is not good, their morality lacking. They cannot be a choice for marriage. *Zhen* is shamed to regret, but it is too late. The only wise is that no other in the future will suffer *zhen*’s pain.”

This sounded like that the emperor was reflecting on himself but in reality, it was saying, this entire Cao Family isn’t any good, their conduct and morals aren’t good, *zhen* was blind to marry his daughter to the Cao Family. Hopefully, no other person will be blind and enter into marital relationships with the Cao Family.

This was actually the most vicious. The Cao Family was a famous family in Jing Zhou. There would have unmarried males and females in the clan. Once the emperor’s decree came out, no one would dare make marital relations with the Cao Family. Otherwise, wouldn’t that be going against the Emperor? This Count of Bei Lu doomed his entire clan.

When Qu Qing Ju heard this decree, she suddenly understood, this was true imperial power. If the Emperor said that the people of the Cao Family weren’t good, then it was that the members of the Cao Family one hundred percent had problems. Whoever dared to ask for mercy

would be as lacking in morals and conduct as the members of the Cao Family.

How many innocent males and females of the Cao Family would be affected, Qu Qing Ju didn't know but she sympathized for them. She also felt that the conduct of the Count of Bei Lu was truly disgusting. When he returned to the clan, how much would the clan hate him?

When He Heng came into the *zhengyuan*, he coincidentally saw Qu Qing Ju sitting in a daze. He walked behind her: "What are you thinking with such focus about?"

"About the members of the Cao Family," She turned her head back to look at He Heng, not covering the truth, "and how many people would be implicated with the Count of Bei Lu."

"These people are truly innocent, but who let them all have the same Cao name?" He Heng understood that she was sympathizing with the innocent members of the Cao Family, and explained, "If only the Count of Bei Lu was punished, then where is the Imperial House's dignity. Additionally, *fuhuang*'s actions are already light. A hundred years earlier, an ancestor had a *fuma* who took a *qie* into the *fu* and imprisoned the princess. In the end, his family was sentenced to execution. His relations within five clans were all demoted to *jian min*.[7] "

Qu Qing Ju stopped in shock. If the cost was so high, why do such a thing? If the princess' conduct was lacking, then it was reasonable, but Jin An Princess raised a son and daughter and treated the Count of Bei Lu very well. To do what the Count of Bei Lu did, didn't he feel guilty?

"Alright, don't think about such things," He Heng patted the back of her hand. He smiled and said, "Now it is already like this, you don't have to worry. In the future when you have the time, just visit the princess' *fu* more often."

Qu Qing Ju nodded, her face relaxing slightly. She looked at the condition of the sky outside. It was dark and likely to rain: "The weather

[7]□民: □ inexpensive/lowly 民 people/citizen. *Jian min* is a social stratum below ordinary people.

doesn't look good. The wind might start up. If you are going out, you have to wear more."

"Don't worry, there's Ming He and the others," He Heng waved his hand, "I'll accompany you for the noon meal before going out. This afternoon, the Count of Bei Lu is leaving Jing. Us brothers have to at least bid him farewell."

Hearing this, Qu Qing Ju silently lit a candle for the Count of Bei Lu inside.

There were always people passing through the four main gates of Jing City. The city of Jing's prosperity caused many to come to Jing to make a living. There even were many foreigners that set down roots in Jing City to live. But at this time at the north gate, not many people were passing through, only some of the public watching from far away.

"Count of Bei Lu is leaving so soon? Why don't you stay a few more days, *ben wang* and brothers hadn't even properly received you, you're in such a rush." He Qi looked at the Count of Bei Lu that knelt in front of him. He gave a hearty laugh and reached out to heavily pat on the Count of Bei Lu's shoulder. He watched as the Count of Bei Lu's originally pale face become even uglier.

" "Look at the count's white face. No wonder he could seduce those unclean and unknown women outside," He Yuan sat on a tall white horse, staring from half-lidded eyes down at the Count of Bei Lu, "Now you can go far away with that woman freely. Such a cause for celebration. *Ben wang* will give his congratulations here. Come, present the gift that *ben wang* has prepared for the Count of Bei Lu's beloved."

The Count of Bei Lu had been sentenced to a beating, and shivered as he knelt. When Rui Wang's gift was presented, his expression changed out of fright. He had seen such a medicine bottle before. Inside was a medicine called "Linked in Countless Ways". After the person swallowed the medicine, his stomach and intestines would hurt in countless ways. The medicine would sap all energy from the body to the

point that suicide wasn't possible. They had to suffer in pain for an entire day before death.

"A beauty is only fit to use a medicine with a beautiful name, what does the Count of Bei Lu think of *ben wang*'s gift?" He Yuan jumped off the horse, walking in front of the Count of Bei Lu. He used the tip of his foot to raise the chin, looking at the other's sweaty state, he revealed a few fractions of mirth, "If you don't like it, *ben wang* can give you another gift?"

Hearing Rui Wang put emphasis on the word you, the Count of Bei Lu kowtowed and said: "Thanks to Your Highness Rui Wang for your gift."

Seeing his state, He Yuan took his foot away in disgust. The little *taijian* that followed behind him hurriedly knelt on the ground and took out a handkerchief to carefully wipe the tip of his shoe, the disdain clearly displayed.

He Heng cheerfully watched this scene. Seeing the Count of Bei Lu tighten his fist, he bent down to speak to him: "Think how grand you were in the past, and look at you now. You don't want to be that high up *fuma*, but you want to be that dog that everyone hates. Should *ben wang* say you are pitiful or disgusting?" Finishing, he straightened his body and announced in a loud voice, "The princesses of the Imperial Family are born into high status, beautiful and virtuous. You betrayed Princess and son and daughter. The Imperial Family can't have a *fuma* like you. In the future, the Cao Family of Jing Zhou is forbidden to ever enter the City of Jing. Otherwise, our He Family will punish each as they appear." Finishing, he gave a kick to the body of the Count of Bei Lu, brushed off the non-existent dust on his clothes and got on his own date-colored steed.

"Get out, get out," He Qi disliked his disgusting state too, turning and leaving on his horse. He Heng and He Yuan didn't look at him, leaving on their horses as well.

The horse that He Yuan was riding made his tail whip across the Count of Bei Lu's body, but the count could only kneel straight up, not daring to evade.

Seeing the *wang ye* leave, the surrounding people then came over, pointing and telling the countless versions of what the Count of Bei Lu had done. But in all of them, it was how despicable the Count of Bei Lu was and how enticing the woman that seduced the count was.

To the citizens, if the emperor and the *wang ye* said it was not good, then it was naturally very not good. As to if this matter occurred between ordinary people, what they would have done, only they themselves would know.

The Count of Bei Lu forced himself onto the carriage with the help of a manservant. He laid on his stomach on the soft cushions as he thought back to how magnificent he was that year he had come back to Jing and the sorry figure now. He started to become regretful.

If he had always been good with the princess, then these *wang ye* today would have been courteous to him, and everyone in the Cao Family would have been carefully flattering himself. Now, even if he did go back to Jing Zhou, the entire Cao Family probably wanted to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

Tightening his grip around the medicine bottle in his head, the Count of Bei Lu's eyes darkened. If it wasn't that whore seducing him, he and the princess wouldn't be in this position today!

After the incident involving Jin An Princess Royal had been passed around in Jing for a few days, it settled down. For the womenfolk, it was just that there was another person to praise and flatter in Jing. To men, it was reminding them not to interact with the Cao Family of Jing Zhou in the future. Otherwise, there was no change.

The first month quickly passed by. Just as everyone quieted down, another storm of thunder and lightning came upon Jing. His Highness Ning Wang had found the mastermind behind the attempted

assassination of the imperial envoy. And that person was the most favoured by the emperor, His Highness Rui Wang.

His Highness Rui Wang's people tried to argue for Rui Wang but Ning Wang provided many pieces of evidence. For example, how the assassins killed by the guards had once served in Rui Wang Fu, and a protective talisman found on a certain assassin's body had been requested from the Five Estates Monastery from a certain *yahuan* of Rui wang Fu. There were even witnesses who claimed that on the second day after Cheng Wang left the city, Rui Wang had secretly met with certain members of the group.

After Qing De Emperor finished listening to the entire matter, he was so angry he couldn't speak a word. On the spot, he was so angry he spat out a mouth of blood and fainted. He was quickly sent back to Tian Qi Palace under a crowd of people, the *taiyi* on duty at the Imperial Hospital summoned.

Because He Yuan couldn't come to court, the Emperor had regained consciousness when he had received the news. He wanted to leave the *fu* to see the emperor but he found that the Imperial Guards that he assumed he could casually order around suddenly became unmovable.

The people inside couldn't go out, the people outside couldn't come in. He Yuan smashed a few more objects in frustration before he remembered his subordinate Gao Duo was coincidentally in the *fu* and had a *taijian* summon him.

When Gao Duo rushed to the study, He Yuan's anger hadn't calmed. He pointed at Hao Duo and accused: "In the beginning, it was you who put out such a bad idea, now that it's like this, how is it possible to end it?!"

Gao duo gave a proper greeting, his face not changing expression. He explained: "*Wang ye*, this one didn't think that it would happen like this. And this one is suspicious, someone is purposefully framing you."

"Of course, *ben wang* also knows that someone is framing me, do I need you to tell me?!" He Yuan pushed a brush stand onto the ground, "Killing brothers, if this kind of label comes down, *ben wang* is finished."

"*Wang ye* naturally knows that there is someone framing you, but this one's meaning is, why is this person framing you, and who is the person framing you?" Gao Duo's tone became slightly deeper, "You are the most favoured imperial son of the Emperor. Naturally, others would be jealous. Only if you fall, will he then have a chance."

"He Qi, it must be him!" He Yuan hatefully concluded, "This incident was investigated by him, he was more enthusiastic than anyone else. He dares to frame me."

Gao Duo lowered his face and bowed to comment: "*Wang ye*, this one thinks that this time, you have to let some blood out."

He Yuan's eyes slightly changed. He thought for a beat before ordering: "Come, bring a cloth."

Gao Duo smiled, "*Wang ye* is wise and understands how to move the emperor's heart. This one will retreat first."

He Yuan waved his hand, letting him know he could leave.

Coming out of the study, Gao Duo ran his fingers through his beard, a smile appearing on his face.

Chapter 50

A letter personally written by Rui Wang in his own blood was quickly presented by Shu *guifei* in front of Qing De Emperor. Shu *guifei* knelt down in front of Qing De Emperor as she cried, her tears like the pear blossoms in the rain. Even though she didn't defend Rui Wang, her actions were already worth more than a thousand words.

The blood letter was almost completely splattered with bloody tears. Firstly, its contents showed his concern for Qing De Emperor's body and secondly, it expressed his longing for the emperor. Because he couldn't leave the *fu*, he could only kowtow in the direction of the palace. Thirdly, it defended him, proclaiming how innocent he was and that he was mistakenly accused by others. Lastly, it asked Qing De Emperor to protect his health and not suffer because of this unfilial son.

When Qing De Emperor saw the dense mass of dark red characters on the snowy white cloth, his heart had already half-softened. After reading the entire missive, he sighed and helped Shu *guifei* up. He patted Shu *guifei*'s hand and comforted her: "*Zhen* knows that *lao san* was wronged. This matter, *zhen* will have someone to take a closer look."

Understanding the emperor's meaning, Shu *guifei* tearfully replied: "Thank you, Emperor." Inside, she was a bit smug. For someone as devious as Jing *guifei*, it didn't matter how many plots she had. As long as she was favoured, no one would be able to shake her and her son's position.

Around the same time at Zhong Jing Palace, Jing *guifei* watched coldly as Wei Qin *shi* cried in front of her. Technically, Wei Qin *shi*'s husband was of the same branch as her and she should be courteous, but she really didn't like the petty-mindedness of Wei Qin *shi*. She looked shrewd but what she said was so idiotic that she felt nauseous upon hearing it.

"Ran Shuang has been sick these past days. I, as her mother, feel so terrible just seeing her. *Niangniang*, what should we do?," Wei Qin *shi* wiped away the scarce tears lingering at the corner of her eyes. She hesitated before asking, "*Chen fu* heard that not many people are serving in His Highness' *fu*, why don't … …" When she raised her head, she saw that *guifei niangniang*'s eyes had gone cold and she swallowed the rest of her words.

"If niece's body isn't good, *ben gong* will send a message for the Imperial Hospital to take a look. Girls should be pampered, the body cannot be harmed. Otherwise, it could affect the heir." Jing *guifei* gave an aloof

smile and turned to order the person beside her to send a message to the Imperial Hospital.

Wei Qin *shi*'s face slightly changed. Seeing the palace maid walk out to summon the *taiyi*, she gritted her teeth: "*Niangniang*, Our Ran Shaung is a good *guniang*. Why doesn't she go to the *wang fu* to serve? It would help cement old ties."

Jing *guifei* raised her teacup to take a sip. After hearing Wei Qin *shi*'s words, she didn't fly into a rage. She drawled slowly: "Ran Shuang is such a good girl. How can *tang sao* bear to part with her just to go serve *ben gong*'s useless son?"

"His Highness Duan Wang is of magnificent bearing. *Chen fu* has never seen a more outstanding young person than His Highness," Wei Qin *shi* flattered, "To go into the *wang fu* to serve is our *yatou*'s great fortune. There's no such thing as bearing it."

Jing *guifei* knew that Wei Qin *shi* was short-sighted but she hadn't known that she could be this shameless. If Wei Ran Shuang got married, the husband and his family would treat her well because of her and Heng'er. Now, she was breaking her head trying to get into the *wang fu* but Heng'er didn't have any interest in her. This was inviting humiliation upon herself. Furthermore, after this matter, the branch of her *tang xiong* would only be the lesser maternal family of a *qie* to Duan Wang Fu and not the elders.

Putting down the teacup, Jing *guifei* replied with a jerk of her lips: "Heng'er has married his *wang fei* already. *Wang fei* is virtuous and able, *ben gong* cannot allow Heng'er to take a *qieshi*. *Ben gong* will not participate in this kind of matter. If niece still wants to be a *qie*, then *tang sao* should find Heng'er to discuss it." She raised her hand in conclusion, "*Ben gong* is tired and won't keep *tang sao* company."

Wei Qin *shi* could only stand and bow in farewell. Jing *guifei* disdainfully looked on as she left, remarking in a light voice: "No wonder their branch had no achievements from the generation of

grandfather onwards. What kind of brains do they have? If they request to see *ben gong* in the future, reject all of them."

She, a respected and titled *guifei*, didn't need to curry favour with a distantly-related *tang sao.* Even her true *tang* brother's wife was full of respect in front of her. This Wei Qin *shi* was only married to the eldest grandson of her grandfather's brother, she wasn't anything. Did she think that because her branch was prosperous and well-mannered, they would also be soft and easy-going?!

To ask for such humiliation, it was disgusting. Because Wei Ran Shuang had this kind of mother, she wouldn't let her enter Duan Wang Fu.

He Heng didn't know that others were thinking about him. Hearing that He Yuan had already sent a blood letter into the palace, he smoothed his chin as he opened the curtains of the sedan window. Looking at the bustling crowds, he gave a light laugh.

He had already anticipated He Qi making his move against the imperial envoys. But he still had some decency and didn't let them seriously harm *lao si*. Now that the matter had grown in significance, He Qi wanted to take advantage of the situation to suppress *lao san*. But he still had to consider Shu *guifei* in the *hougong* and whether *fuhuang* was willing to let this charge fall on the head of *lao san*.

As expected, on the second day, Qin De Emperor expressed his doubt about the evidence He Qi had presented at the Royal Court. In his speech, he even expressed his suspicion that He Qi hadn't actually fulfilled his duties. Even though He Qi tried to explain further, ultimately he was ordered to continue investigating.

He Heng stood at the side, looking at the humiliation and helplessness on He Qi's face as he knelt on the ground. He turned to glance at the others at Court. These officials also had their faces facing the ground but this time, they couldn't help but feel that *fuhuang* was foolish as well. Just to protect Rui Wang, he deliberately censored Ning Wang. The wounds that the Right Minister Wei and Cheng Wang had received were for nothing.

Thinking about the Emperor's mediocrity and partialness, and the arrogance of Rui Wang, many of the senior officials present felt cold inside. The Right Minster Wei was one of the emperor's closest confidants and Cheng Wang was the emperor's youngest child. The two were wounded so seriously but that didn't hold as much importance compared to Rui Wang's few words of complaint. If this continued, what would happen to the Da Long Dynasty?

"Emperor, His Highness Rui Wang is the most suspicious person in this matter. Please, Emperor, temporarily imprison Rui Wang until the matter has been investigated thoroughly before making a decision," An official moved forward to kneel down, "Please, Emperor."

"Enough, *zhen* has already made a decision on this matter. There's no need to speak anymore," Qing De Emperor raged, "Get out."

"Emperor, have you already forgotten Imperial Censor Zhao who had died running into a pillar?" The official kowtowed and asked, "If this matter has no connection with His Highness Rui Wang, who else would try to assassinate the imperial envoy? This official postulates that perhaps Rui Wang had a guilty conscience, and in order to stop the envoys from investigating, committed such an act. But thankfully, Right Minister Wei and His Highness Cheng Wang were not mortally wounded and His Highness Rui Wang did not make a great mistake."

Was this how Rui Wang's crime would be resolved? He Heng lowered his head to look at the official. He wasn't an essential official of the Royal Court. His forehead was beaded with sweat and he looked nervous. He couldn't help but look at the still kneeling He Qi. This person was one of *lao da*'s? What kind of blackmail did *lao da* have against him that he had to step out at such a difficult time?

"Please, Emperor, reconsider." One of the officials behind He Heng followed in kneeling down.

"Please, Emperor, reconsider!" Within a few minutes, more than half of the people at Court had knelt down. Of these people, only a fraction were *lao da*'s people. In their hearts, they all believed that the

mastermind behind the assassination was He Yuan and were bitterly disappointed by the emperor's attitude so they decided to came out at this time.

Qing De Emperor hadn't thought that this many people would oppose him. His face reddened in anger but he didn't want to let go. He took a deep breath to continue: "These events are only Imperial Censor Zhao's retelling. Rui Wang could have been mistakenly accused. *Zhen* cannot sentence without investigating the matter thoroughly."

Who knew that the officials would still kneel with their backs straight, not saying a word?

Qing De Emperor was so angered by these people to the point that his face changed color. He turned and swept away, leaving everyone in the hall. He Heng jerked his mouth. His *fuhuang* was always like this. He was narrow-minded, prejudiced and worst of all, he had no great skill at ruling. No wonder *lao san* had been spoiled by him into his current state.

The news that the Emperor had taken the side of Rui Wang and refused to sentence him quickly swept through Jing. Those who had suffered at the hands of Rui Wang added to the news as they spread it. Soon, the Emperor became known as an unwise and unfair person. One son had nearly been murdered but he still favoured another son.

No one dared to speak the words in broad daylight but nothing could stop the common people from writing this incident into a story with imaginary characters. Some storytellers made it into a performance. Those who heard the story all swore at the parent for being unfair and how innocent and pitiful the youngest son was.

The storm grew bigger and bigger. When it passed into the ears of Qing De Emperor, it had already finished spreading throughout Jing. Even three-year-olds had heard a version of the story. He was instantly provoked into spitting out another mouthful of blood. Inside, he was starting to wonder if this incident had been ordered by *lao da*. How else would have the rumors spread so quickly in Jing?

He couldn't scold his son at the moment so Qing De Emperor summoned the commander of the Imperial Guards to scold instead and ordered him to imprison those who were spreading the rumors.

The commander of the Imperial Guard came out of the Imperial Study with a distraught face. Right now, the incident had already spread and yet the Emperor had sent down an order to catch the people. Wasn't this pouring oil on top of the fire? But since the Emperor gave him an order, he had to do it even if he didn't want to. He felt his head grow two sizes bigger just thinking about it.

Coming out of the palace gate, he happened to see Duan Wang preparing to enter his carriage. Instantly, his eyes lit up. He strode forward with large steps and performed a greeting, intoning: "*Wei chen* greets Your Highness Duan Wang."

He Heng turned his head. Seeing the Commander of the Imperial Guards Sun Bo Hai, he stopped and replied: "Commander Sun."

Sun Bo Hai didn't waste any time on pleasantries, stating: "The Emperor has ordered *wei chen* to manage the rumors in Jing and those who spread the rumors will be imprisoned in jail. But *wei chen* is afraid of not satisfactorily fulfilling the order, could *wang ye* give *wei chen* a suggestion?"

"How about first sending down the order, clearly stating that these people are not allowed to spread rumors? If they are found, they will be sent to jail. *Ben wang* heard that the rumors at Niu Wei Street were the most extensive. Commander Sun could send someone there to take a look." He Heng gave a faint smile as he concluded, "*Ben wang* still has other matters to attend to and will leave first."

"Great thanks to *wang ye* for such a clever plan. Respectful farewell, *wang ye*." Commander Sun watched as Duan Wang Fu's carriage travel far away, releasing a breath inside. The Niu Wei Street that Duan Wang had mentioned was the gathering place for local bullies and hoodlums. It wasn't really unjust to send those people to jail. He could also report to the Emperor about the completion of his duties.

He Heng returned to the *wang fu* and found that a slightly above-average carriage had been parked outside the gates of the *wang fu*. He raised an eyebrow and asked the gatekeeper, "People came to the *fu*?"

"*Wang ye*, it's Wei *furen* and Wei *xiaojie*. *Wang fei* is receiving the two." The gatekeeper replied in a small voice.

Hearing this, He Heng's brows creased. What was the family doing here?

Chapter 51

Qu Qing Ju sat high up in the side hall, calmly looking down at the two women sitting beneath her. She had seen Wei Ran Shuang before, and as for this Wei Qin *shi* who'd wanted to meet her, Qu Qing Ju strangely felt that she looked somewhat similar to Liang *shi*.

"His Highness Duan Wang, when he was younger, had actually piggy-backed our *yatou*. It's been so many years now. His Highness Duan Wang has already gotten married and our *yatou* is almost grown up and ready for marriage herself," Wei Qin *shi* sighed and reluctantly said to Qu Qing Ju: "Time passes by so quickly."

Qu Qing Ju smiled and motioned for Wei Qin *shi* to continue speaking.

Wei Qin *shi* hated that Duan Wang Fei could sit there so calmly, unmoved by her words. She took a sip of tea before continuing: "At the end of last year, our entire family had finally returned to Jing from the outside post. It was all thanks to His Highness Duan Wang's kindness that our family received an adequately good job here. Ran *yatou*, as his cousin, always thought about the boon His Highness Duan Wang gave us but since there is a separation of sexes, they were unable to meet each other. Today, I will give my thanks to *wang fei*. If I'm lucky, we'll get to personally thank *wang ye* as well."

Wei Ran Shuang seized the opportunity to stand and bow to Qu Qing Ju, "Ran Shuang thanks *biao ge*, thanks *biao sao."*

Qu Qing Ju felt her teeth were getting a bit sore. She looked at the color of the sky outside and then at the mother and daughter duo who had been sitting there for almost four hours. These two were most likely waiting for He Heng to return to the *fu*. She smiled and replied: "*Biao mei* doesn't have to be so courteous. As *gege* and *saozi*, it's proper to treat *meimei* and family members well."

"*Wang fei* is virtuous," Wei Qin *shu* took advantage of her words, and shamelessly proclaimed, "Shuang *yatou* has always really liked His Highness Duan Wang, her *biao ge*. Just speaking about it, I'm afraid you will laugh. Even now, she still remembers how His Highness Duan Wang cared for her in the past."

How thick did a person's skin have to be that she could say to a woman that her daughter liked the woman's husband? Qu Qing Ju jerked the corners of her mouth. She heard that this Wei Qin *shi* was of the same clan and branch as Qin Bai Lu, but just more distant in relation. The Qin Family was a well-educated noble family, how did it produce a woman such as Wei Qin *shi*?

Yin Liu, who was standing behind Qu Qing Ju, heard her words. The rage on her face was barely hidden. It was only the fact that she was more afraid of making it difficult for *wang fei* that made her suppress it. But her gaze, as she stared down at the mother and daughter pair of the Wei Family, became increasingly cold.

"He he," Qu Qing Ju raised the teacup for a sip to hide the mirth that nearly surged up within her, "*wang ye* had never mentioned *biao mei* to me."

The smile on Wei Qin *shi*'s face froze. She instantly replied: "*Wang ye* is occupied with a myriad of state affairs. He wouldn't have remembered to discuss such minor things when he returns to the *fu*."

"What does Wei *furen* mean?" Qu Qing Ju's face darkened, "*Wang ye* is just an imperial son. Where does this myriad of state affairs come from? Furthermore, *wang ye* usually resides in *zhengyuan* and he always talks

about the household matters with me. Why does it seem like you mean that *wang ye* has matters he doesn't like discussing with *ben wang fei*?"

Wei Qin *shi* was in shock. She didn't think that Duan Wang Fei could change faces so quickly without a hint of warning. She paused for a second before regrouping and said: "Please forgive me, *wang fei*. *Chen fu* meant no such thing."

Wei Ran Shuang bowed to Qu Qing Ju with a pale face as she joined in: "Please *wang fei*, don't be angry. Mother wasn't being deliberate and didn't mean it like that."

"We are all related here. There's no need to be so strict," Qu Qing Ju's face softened and she smiled again. After she motioned for Wei Ran Shuang to sit down again, she continued, "If Wei *furen* didn't mean it, then it's naturally good."

Wei Qin *shi* had never seen someone who could change expressions so fast. Right now, as Qu Qing Ju smiled, she could only follow: "*Chen fu* doesn't know how to speak. It's lucky that *wang fei* doesn't object, *wang fei* is really tolerant."

"The thoughtless words of normal people, I won't get angry at," Qu Qing Ju replied calmly, "Why isn't *biao mei* attending in front of *mufei*, and also left the palace?"

Wei Ran Shuang answered in a small voice: "*Guifei niangniang* was worried that my family missed me so she sent me back to the *fu*." Was *wang fei* implying that they were normal people and not worth bothering with?

"En, *mufei* is always very considerate," Qu Qing Ju examined Wei Ran Shuang from head to toe: "I see your bones are thin and weak. When you return to your *fu*, you should eat more." She then let Rui Xiang and Shu Kui bring out some quality medicinal herbs for Wei Qin *shi* to take back.

"We shouldn't let *wang fei* spend so much," Wei Qin *shi* stood and gave her thanks. She saw the sky was becoming darker and darker and no

one had reported *wang ye*'s return to the *fu*. She was getting impatient but she still wanted to wait. She could only rudely sit and not bid farewell.

Qu Qing Ju wasn't in any rush either. She was waiting for He Heng to return. These two women were so interesting that if He Heng didn't experience this for himself, how would the suffering she underwent this afternoon be justified?

Wei Ran Shuang was unable to sit still in her seat. She might've been interested in Duan Wang but her face was much thinner. Seeing *wang fei* staring pointedly at her, she felt her face heat up and didn't dare to meet Qu Qing Ju's eyes.

Just then, Xiao Gan Zi hurriedly walked in and bowed to Qu Qing Ju. He said lightly: "*Wang fei*, *wang ye* has returned."

Wei Ran Shuang's eyes were immediately filled with light. She raised her head slightly and saw the other woman reveal a bright smile. Even though she was a woman, she had to admit that Duan Wang Fei was attractive.

"Since *wang ye* has returned, why don't we greet *wang ye?*," Wei Qin *shi* positioned herself as an elder by sitting on the chair and commented, "*Chen fu* hasn't seen His Highness for so many years."

Xiao Gan Zi was still standing, his body bent at the waist. Upon hearing Wei Qin *shi*'s words, he twisted his mouth in disdain. No wonder this Wei *xiaojie* looked so petty-minded. With such a mother, how good of a daughter could she raise?

A not even closely related *jiumu* had the nerve to posture as an elder in front of *wang fei*. If you gave them an inch, they would take a mile. They should take a good look at their rank before acting.

"*Wang ye* is here."

Qu Qing Ju stood and saw He Heng striding towards her. She smiled and went forward, their two hands naturally coming together, "Today, you're later than usual."

"There were more matters to attend to so you had to wait a bit longer," He Heng brought her along and they sat before looking down at Wei Qin *shi* and Wei Ran Shuang standing below, "Wei *furen* and Wei *xiao jie* have enough free time to visit *ben wang's fu*?" He didn't need to use courtesy towards these kind of people. The imposing manner of a *wang ye* came out naturally.

Wei Qin *shi* felt an indescribable sense of awe. She gave He Heng a bow of greeting, "Since returning to Jing, I haven't seen *wang ye* and *wang fei*, so today I brought my daughter here to greet *wang fei*."

"It must have been great trouble for you to come. *Wang fei* has already met Wei *xiaojie* at the palace," He Heng raised Qu Qing Ju's teacup to take a mouthful. He calmly remarked, "Based on *mu fei*'s ancestors, you are *ben wang*'s elders. How can it be that you came here to meet us?"

"*Wang ye* isn't someone we can compare to," Wei Qin *shi*'s tone, as she spoke, became politer. She carefully said, "Shuang *yatou* kept talking about her memories when you were younger so *chen fu* had to come here with this *yatou*."

The hand that held his teacup stilled. What did those words mean? He turned his head to look at Qu Qing Ju. As expected, he saw that there were hints of ice in the other's mirth. He slightly furrowed his eyebrows and commented, "Wei *xiaojie* had only met with *ben wang* a few times during our younger years. These words Wei *furen* has spoken are perhaps too inappropriate."

Wei Qin *shi* heard that Duan Wang didn't have any interest in her daughter. The smile on her face became ugly. After a beat, she replied: "*Wang ye* is too serious. You are cousins, there's no need to care too much?"

He Heng expressionlessly stated: “Protecting females when the males are older is human nature.”

“Yin Liu, get someone to bring hot water for *wang ye* so that he can wash his hands,” Qu Qing Ju stood to look outside, “It’s late now and almost time for the evening meal. How about you two stay for the meal?”

Wei Qin *shi* saw that Duan Wang wasn’t currently interested in her daughter and lost her desire to stay. She smiled and stood, bidding farewell: “Then I won’t disturb *wang ye* and *wang fei* any further. *Chen fu* will say her goodbyes.”

“Take care. We won’t bother seeing you out.” He Heng nodded slightly, not saying a word to detain them. This caused Wei Qin *shi*’s heart to become colder and she understood that the matter was most likely closed for discussion.

Coming out of Duan Wang Fu, Wei Qin *shi* and Wei Ran Shuang went inside their carriage to go back to their *fu*. Wei Qin *shi* sighed and said to her daughter sitting beside her: “I haven’t met this Duan Wang Fei previously. Now that I’ve seen her, the matter of you entering Duan Wang Fu will most likely be a struggle.” She wanted her daughter to enter Duan Wang Fu, but from the moment Duan Wang came in to when they left, he hadn’t even properly looked at her daughter once. He had completely disregarded her daughter.

“Daughter knows,” Wei Ran Shuang bit her lips as she pleaded, “But mother, daughter wants to enter Duan Wang Fu.”

Wei Qin *shi* sighed. After a long time, she said: “We’ll think of some other way.”

Inside Duan Wang Fu, Qu Qing Ju focused on washing her hands, not saying a word.

“Angry?” He Heng looked at her dark face and her unwillingness to speak. After he dried his hands, he moved to sit next to Qu Qing Ju, “Don’t be angry over such a muddle-headed woman. In the future, we won’t allow them to enter the *fu*.”

"If you don't let them enter, how will you be able to look at your childhood sweetheart *biao mei*?" Qu Qing Ju glanced from the corner of her eye, gently snorting, "Otherwise, tomorrow there will be some other *biao mei* who will also be saying how much she thinks of you."

Men usually didn't value women who pushed themselves upon others. Inside, there was even a hint of looking down at them. Qu Qing Ju knew that He Heng had that hint when he looked at Wei Ran Shuang. This was one of the reasons why she wanted the two women to stay until He Heng came back to the *fu*.

"I don't want her so she can't be forced in," He Heng saw that she still had a dark face and could only comfort her, "Didn't we already say there's only Qing Ju? You are peerless. *Ben wang* doesn't even want to take a second look at other women. Don't be angry, it's not good for the body, en?"

Reaching out with her hand to gently twist on his forearm, Qu Qing Ju turned her head to state: "You said it, I didn't force you."

"These are the words of my heart," He Heng smiled as he caressed her hair, "Let them serve the evening meal. Didn't you want to play *weiqi*? Later, I'll play a match with you."

Qu Qing Ju reluctantly nodded.

Standing in the corner, Xiao Gan Zi thought that the members of the Wei Family were blind to not know how much importance *wang ye* placed on *wang fei*. This ingratiating manner, if he told anyone, he was afraid no one would believe it.

It was most likely that *wang ye* had, after today, marked a strike against the entire family of Wei Qin *shi*.

Chapter 52

The news that the Wei Family's *guniang* went to the *wang fu* to offer herself on a pillow had somehow passed into the ears of Jing *guifei*. Originally, she felt that Wei Ran Shuang was an indecisive person, but now she believed that this was a *guniang* who had no sense of conduct and has subsequently dirtied the Wei Family's reputation. Thankfully, they didn't share the same grandfather. Otherwise, even she would be compromised.

"Ding *mama*," said Jing *guifei* in a cold voice and a dark expression on her face: ""You go with *ben gong*'s sign to personally visit Wei *lang zhong's*[8] *fu*. Just say that Qin *shi*'s moral conduct is lacking and she has improperly educated her daughter. I hope that he can admonish his wife and daughter so that the reputation of the Wei Clan is not adversely affected. If he cannot, then there will be no interactions between the two *fu* in the future." This *tang ge* of hers was mediocre with no great ability. He had properly fulfilled his duties outside and once he'd returned to Jing, it was only because of Heng'er's efforts that he'd received the position of a fifth-grade *lang zhong* in the Ministry of Revenue.

No mother liked a woman who recommended herself to be a bed-warmer for her son. Jing *guifei* was no exception. Even if this woman was a relative of her maternal family, and that as a *guifei*, she had no power to send a decree, she could still lecture on any inadequacies found within the clan. Many *fei* in the past had been accused and imprisoned for not effectively controlling their clans' behavior.

Ding *mama* was the most favored among Jing *guifei*'s servants. When she arrived on a green-clothed carriage at Wei *lang zhong*'s residence, the servants at that *fu* were very courteous to her. Wei *lang zhong* himself even went to the gate to greet her and he ushered her into the main hall which was used to receive valued guests.

Ding *mama* courteously bowed to Wei *lang zhong* and rejected Wei *lang zhong's* offer when he told the servants to bring in refreshments: "Wei *da*

[8]郎中: title of an official

ren, this old one has come today to pass on some words from *guifei niangniang*."

"What does *guifei niangniang* have to say?" Wei *lang zhong* rose from his seat and lifted his hands to perform a bow in the direction of the palace, "Please, *mama*, tell me."

Ding *mama* looked at the honest and sincere Wei *lang zhong* and sighed for him. This distantly related *biao ge* of *niangniang* was a good man. It was a pity that he had such a troublesome *di*[9] wife. He was only a small fifth-grade *lang zhong* in the Ministry of Revenue. It seems he wouldn't get a chance to climb any higher.

She bent at the waist as she spoke: "A few days earlier, *niangniang* heard some vague rumors and felt worried. She then requested this old one to send word to *da ren*." She raised her head to look at Wei *lang zhong* and saw his face was full of concern. It was clear that he was still in the dark as to what had happened, "*Niangniang* said that Wei *furen*'s moral conduct is lacking, and she has improperly taught her daughter. She's afraid that the reputation of the Wei Clan would be affected and hopes that *da ren* would be able to advise her."

After hearing Ding *mama*'s words, Wei *lang zhong*'s face turned dark and then white. A while later, he finally forced some sound out of his throat: "I hope *mama* can clearly explain what my wife and unfilial daughter have done?"

Ding *mama* looked at him in sympathy. She made a bow, saying: "This matter, *da ren* should ask your *furen*. This old one has to return to the palace to serve *niangniang*. Goodbye."

Wei *lang zhong* didn't know what happened but he understood that *guifei niangniang* was feeling discontent with his family. His heart started to tremble as he waited for Ding *mama* to enter the carriage before he turned to walk towards the *neiyuan*.

[9] Legitimate/first wife. The original spouse of a man. In many cases, the second wife, if the original di wife had died, would not be from a family higher in rank than the first wife.

Because he was only a fifth-grade *lang zhong*, his residence was just a two-entry compound but it was located at a very good area. Because the seller had favourably considered his familial connection to His Highness Duan Wang, it was easy for him to purchase the compound. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to live at that location. In the city of Jing, the location of residence was a symbol of status. It wasn't possible to buy a house with just money.

When he came into the courtyard, he saw that Qin *shi* was chastising a servant. His face was dark as he motioned for the punished servant to retreat. He asked icily: "What good deed did you do recently?"

"What did I do?" Wei Qin *shi* had a bad expression on her face as she looked at Wei *lang zhong*. Her voice rose in pitch as she demanded, "Wei Ru Zhi, speak clearly. What have I done that warranted such an expression on your face?"

The servants, who were standing nearby, saw the situation escalating and carefully retreated to the corners, trying to bury their heads deeper.

"If you didn't do anything, *guifei niangniang* wouldn't have sent someone to express her displeasure," Wei Ru Zhi's face was ashen as he saw Wei Qin *shi*'s shrewish manner, "All these years, I've always endured your behavior, but I cannot allow you to ruin the reputation of my Wei Family."

"Wei Family?" Wei Qin *shi* sneered, pointing at Wei Rui Zhi as she scolded, "You think you are so important! Go see if *guifei niangniang* would look favourably upon you. That branch is one family, we aren't anything. You are yelling at me because you want to boast that your Wei Family has a *guifei niangniang*. My Qin Family is an educated noble family. Who knows how many *niangniang* were my ancestors. I don't want you showing off in front of me!"

"Stupid woman!" Wei Rui Zhi was so angry that he threw his hand at Wei Qin *shi*'s face. His personality was usually gentle but now he was furious enough to threaten, "How did I marry a woman like you? If you

really feel that the Qin family is good, I'll help you. A letter of divorce[10] doesn't require much effort. Don't keep telling me about how great the Qin Family is. I didn't say anything in the past because you raised my children. Since you have become so shameless, I don't have to cover for you anymore. You can go to the main Qin Clan to complain and see if they will recognize you. You're just a distant side branch, don't think you're somebody!"

Wei Qin shi opened her mouth but couldn't say a word. She was so used to being the sole decision maker and Wei Ru Zhi rarely interfered. Now he was saying he would give her a letter of divorce. She felt as if cold water had been poured over her head. She was furious yet afraid.

Acting as if he had reached the end of his rope, Wei Ru Zhi became angrier as he spoke: "Now that the children are grown, you don't have to worry about me slighting them. I won't marry again in the future. As soon as you say the word, I'll give the divorce to you immediately, and avoid wronging you."

"Wei Ru Zhi, I've raised your children. I have put so much in. Now you want to kick me aside?!" Wei Qin *shi* grabbed a reason out of thin air and instantly shrieked, "Now that the children have all grown up, you don't need me anymore and you despise this old woman. It won't be that easy!" She surged forward to scratch Wei Ru Zhi's face.

Wei Ru Zhi pushed her aside. He icily retorted: "If it wasn't for the children, I would have divorced you a long time ago. If you don't want me to divorce you, then just quietly stay in the *fu*. Your Qin Family is educated and noble so they're not worried about tarnishing their reputation. But my Wei Family is smaller in comparison and they cannot afford to lose theirs." He left the courtyard with a swish of his sleeves.

Wei Qin *shi* sat on the floor, tears and snot running down her face. After crying for a long time, she used her sleeves to wipe her face clean. Thinking about her husband had said to her, she understood that

[10] literally cease letter. A letter that a man will give to his wife to end the marriage which has to occur for one or more of seven reasons (childlessness, adultery, unfilialness, chattiness, stealing, jealously, and serious illness.)

Jing *guifei* was displeased about her trip to Duan Wang Fu. She uttered hatefully: "You really believe that your family's son is the greatest in the world? When another *wang ye* succeeds the throne, let's see how arrogant you are then!"

Wei Ran Shuang stood at the window and watched as her father and mother fought in the courtyard. She couldn't help but start sobbing. Father was usually gentle. He must have gotten into such a vicious fight with mother today because of her. She started sobbing harder.

"*Guniang*, don't cry," Her *yahuan* carefully comforted her, "If *furen* saw, she would be worried."

Wei Ran Shuang stilled and stared in shock at Wei Qin *shi* standing in the middle of the courtyard. Mother was in a dishevelled state. Father had humiliated mother in front of all the servants. How could mother run the household in the future?

"It's all my fault. Otherwise, it wouldn't have ended up like this," Her tears ran down again.

The news of Wei Qin *shi* being harshly scolded by Wei Ru Zhi hadn't spread beyond the walls but Jing *guifei* knew. She understood that this was Wei Ru Zhi's way of expressing his resolve and decision. After she finished listening to what the servant reported, she nodded: "This should have been done earlier. *Ben gong*'s distant *tang xiong* just was too soft." She turned to look at Qu Qing Ju sitting beneath her, "You don't have to worry any longer. Wei Ran Shuang, that *yatou*, won't be entering the *fu*."

Qu Qing Ju blinked her eyes. A beat later, she said: "Thanks *mufei*, *erxi* had been worried about on how to treat her if she had entered the *fu*."

"What treatment, she's just a *qie*," Jing *guifei* drank a mouthful of tea, her tone icy, "This kind of person wants to enter the *wang fu*. Did she really think that any kind of toy could serve my son?"

Qu Qing Ju slightly lowered her head. Her attitude revealed that she didn't really hear nore understand these words.

Raising her head and seeing her *erxifu*'s naïve manner, the corners of Jing *guifei*'s lips jerked. A smarter person would've been saying some good words right now to make her happy. Why was her *erxi* just sitting there?

"You have been married to Heng'er for half a year now," Jing *guifei* changed the topic abruptly, "*ben gong* was the same age as you when I entered the palace that year. It took almost four years after I entered when I had Heng'er. At that time, the position of the fetus wasn't right and it wasn't easy giving birth. The midwife *mama* said that it was lucky that *ben gong* was almost twenty when giving birth. The bones in the body had matured. Otherwise, it was quite possible that both of us would have died. Even though I couldn't have any more children, *ben gong* has no regrets since Heng'er is a filial child ."

Qu Qing Ju stilled. She hadn't thought that Jing *guifei* would say such a thing to her. She looked at the beautiful matron in front of her. She always had the bearing of one high in status, but these words revealed the feelings that a mother had for her son.

Jing *guifei* wanted her and her son to have a good relationship and even hinted that she didn't have to be in a rush to have children. It didn't matter if only a fraction of the concern was for her well-being. At least, the other hoped that she would survive labor so she can raise her own children.

She carefully digested these words. Maybe her *popo* really was telling her not to be in any rush, and let it occur naturally?

"*Mufei* must have had a hard time raising *wang ye* in those years," Qu Qing Ju smiled and remarked, "No wonder *wang ye* always remembers *mufei*. He even knows what desserts *mufei* likes and dislikes."

The smile on Jing *guifei*'s face became more prominent. A hint of mirth made its way into her voice; "As a mother, one always wants the child to be well. Nothing else is needed."

Qu Qing Ju thought of her deceased parents. When they had been alive, they had protected her like she was the apple of their eye. When she had wanted to learn dancing, they put all their effort into supporting her. They treasured all the pictures of her performances. But when they died, no one else had treated her as well as they did.

Seeing her *erxifu*'s mood had become somewhat downcast, Jing *guifei* remembered that her *erxi*'s birth mother was deceased. For some reason, she felt that the other was quite pitiful and patted the back of her hand: "Just recently, *ben gong*'s kitchen created a new type of pastry. *Ben gong* has found it quite delicious. You should have a taste too." She ordered a servant to get some pastries from the kitchen..

Qu Qing Ju looked up at Jing *guifei*. She smiled and said:
"Thanks *mufei*."

Jing *guifei* looked at her sparkling eyes and smiled. She said: "For such a minor thing, there's no need for thanks. You've brought so many things into the palace today. It's fine if *mufei* gives you a plate of pastries in exchange."

"The food at *mufei*'s palace is so delicious. If it weren't for gossipmongers, *erxi* would be coming here to eat everyday." Qu Qing Ju wrinkled her brow, "The stuff made in the *fu's* kitchen doesn't compare to what *mufei* has here."

The corners of Jing *guifei*'s mouth trembled. You are scorning the *wang fu* in front of your *popo*. Did you even think of how *ben gong* would feel? Even if you were trying to purposefully flatter me. But seeing that honest gaze made Jing *guifei* believe that this *erxifu* of hers really disliked the *wang fu'*s kitchen.

"That's fine, *ben gong* will let someone copy the dishes and pastries you like and deliver it to the *fu*." Jing *guifei* smiled as she reassured her. She didn't want the others to assume that the chefs in Duan Wang Fu were useless.

Such a stupid *erxifu*, she definitely was not feeling sorry for her!

Chapter 53

When Qu Qing Ju visited the Zhong Jing Palace, she had taken many things with her. When she left, she still had many things with her. The bystanders looked on and marveled at the maternal and filial love between Jing *guifei* and Duan Wang Fei.

Qu Qing Ju looked back at the servants who had accompanied her to the palace. They all had their hands full. She couldn't help but sigh. From a certain perspective, Jing *guifei* was a really good *popo* in the Da Long Dynasty. Intelligent, beautiful and she's able to prioritize what was important. This kind of woman, if she's placed in a novel, would most definitely be the main character. It was a pity that she had met a man like Qing De Emperor.

Even though she needed to be careful around Jing *guifei* because her *popo* was too smart, she still was a much better *popo* compared to Shu *guifei*. If she was a normal *popo*, she would have pushed her to have children immediately rather than telling her not to rush. Even in Qu Qing Ju's previous life, this kind of conduct wasn't something many mother-in-laws would do.

But this kind of *popo* might not like an *erxi* who was too intelligent. Their current form of interaction was good enough.

Inside Zhong Jing Palace, Ding *mama* returned from seeing Duan *wang fei* off. Walking in front of Jing *guifei*, she reported in a small voice: "*Niangniang*, *wang fei* has left."

"En," Jing *guifei* nodded. She sighed and remarked, "Heng'er has set his heart on her." Otherwise, he wouldn't have implicitly asked her not to make things difficult for Qu Qing Ju.

"It's a good thing that *wang ye* and *wang fei* have deep feelings for each other," Ding *mama* came up to massage her shoulders. She said in a light voice, "If it was like the pair at the other *fu*, wouldn't they have become a laughingstock of Jing City?"

"You are right," Jing *guifei* laughed, "Qu *shi* is still young. It would be best for her child if she gives birth a year or two from now. If the mother is too young, the child would be born sickly and that would be alarming." If her son and daughter-in-law were fighting like the pair at Rui Wang Fu, then that would be really worrisome. Her own *erxi* might be simpleminded and naïve but it was infinitely better than having a *wang fei* like Qin *shi*.

"*Niangniang* is highly principled," Ding *mama* said, "It is *wang fei*'s great fortune to have a *popo* like you."

"In the beginning, *ben gong* didn't like her unworldliness. But upon closer examination, despite being somewhat stupid, she isn't disagreeable. As long as they maintain their good relationship, *ben gong* will not become a villain," Jing *guifei* smiled as she shook her head, "But it is remarkable that Heng'er sing her praises to me."

Ding *mama* had served Jing *guifei* for many years and knew that *niangniang* was very good to *wang fei*. She naturally followed her lead as her mistress discussed the attributes of *wang ye* and *wang fei*. And the fact that *niangniang* keeps saying *wang fei* was stupid … …

Such a stupid *wang fei* and yet *niangniang* still protected her. If that wasn't affection, then what else could it be?

Not long after Qu Qing Ju came back to the *fu*, He Heng returned home. When the two met, she first mentioned the gifts that Jing *guifei* bestowed and sighed in admiration: "*Niangniang* is so good to *wang ye*. She remembers you at every turn."

When He Heng heard this, he smiled and remarked: "Didn't you already know that *mufei* is good to me? Why are you mentioning it today?"

"There is a phrase "love the house so love the crow". *Wang ye* is that house, I am that crow," Qu Qing Ju passed on the words that Jing *guifei* said to her, "If it wasn't for *wang ye*, why else would *niangniang* care so much for me?"

Hearing that, He Heng couldn't help but laugh, "You, you."

Qu Qing Ju heard him laugh in response yet he didn't confirm nor deny her statement. She smiled as she asked: "It's still early today. Why don't I accompany *wang ye* in playing a match?"

The smile on He Heng's face instantly froze. He Heng looked at the smiling Qu Qing Ju. Who was really accompanying who?

In the end, He Heng endured the pain as he played one round with Qu Qing Ju. The process was a tragic sight but the ending was very beautiful. As to what kind of beauty, one could examine the evening meal that was eaten two hours later than usual and the hot water that was sent to the *zhengyuan* soon afterwards.

The Commander of the Imperial Guards was perhaps the busiest person in Jing City over the last two days. He, along with his subordinates, had tossed many bullies and gangsters into the prisons. Right now, not only did he have to think of ways to suppress the rumors spreading in Jing but he also had to ensure that he didn't offend any of the major powers.

He didn't know what the Emperor was thinking. Even though there were countless voices opposing his actions in the Royal Court, the Emperor still allowed Rui Wang to freely leave the *wang fu*. He was even allowed to enter the Imperial Palace without any restrictions. That had disappointed many at court and cooled many hearts.

Thinking about the mess, he couldn't help but sigh. He turned to order the subordinates behind him: "Keep investigating in the city and see if there are any more rumor-mongers."

"Yes, Sir!" The Imperial Guards instantly separated into several troops and entered the alleyways.

Commander Sun raised his head to look at the sky. The weather wasn't very good. It looked like it was going to rain. As he was about to enter the palace, he saw a sedan moving not too far away. Behind the sedan, there were several people carrying luggage. It looked like a procession

of dowry chests but the sedan in front was blue in color, not a red-flowered one. There were also only two strong men carrying the sedan.

He stared for a beat before realizing that some major personage was taking a *ce shi*. Otherwise, there wouldn't have been such a big procession. But the amount of dowry that was being carried wasn't befitting of a *ce shi* at all.

"I heard that the person inside is the *san xiaojie* of Chang De Gong Fu?"

"Yes, it's that *fu*'s *xiaojie*."

"Such a good family but now she's become a *ce shi*. It's such a sin."

"What do you know? Look at that person being taken into Rui Wang Fu, how can any normal person compare?"

Since the topic had changed to Rui Wang, the people who had come to see and gossip about the procession all scattered. They only hated that they couldn't walk any faster and that their mouths had been idle enough to discuss the matters of Rui Wang Fu.

Commander Sun sighed. He had an irritated expression on his face as he watched the common people ran away. Rui Wang's current reputation had almost reached a point where he was seen as the boogeyman by the public. The Emperor might have done all he could to protect Rui Wang but in the hearts of the common people, Rui Wang's reputation had fallen drastically.

"Commander Sun!"

Commander Sun turned his head and saw Ning Wang riding towards him on a black horse. He wore a black robe embroidered with silver patterns and had a sincere smile on his face. His heart tightened. The fact that Ning Wang and Rui Wang were at odds was an open secret at court. He was currently doing his best to protect Rui Wang's reputation. Ning Wang greeting him openly like this, did he have ulterior motives?

"*Wei chen* greets Your Highness Ning Wang," Commander Sun walked in front of He Qi's horse and made a bow. He asked, "Does Your Highness Ning Wang have anything to ask of *wei chen*?"

"Just saw Commander Sun here and came over to say hello," He Qi played with the horse whip in his hand. He raised his chin in the direction of the blue sedan, "Is that the *qie* that *lao san* took?"

Commander Sun lowered his head: "Your Highness, *wei chen* doesn't know."

He Qi stared steadily at Commander Sun. From his view, he could only see the other's deeply lowered head and bent back. This leading commander of the Imperial Guards was a very smart person. Otherwise, *fuhuang* wouldn't have put him in charge of the post.

"There are things in Jing that the commander of the Imperial Guards doesn't know?" He Qi twirled his horsewhip, looking unconcerned, "*Lao san* is really filial. He knows that *fuhuang*'s body isn't good now so he took a *qie* to flush away the bad luck. This filial love is really moving, don't you think so, Commander Sun?"

Commander Sun couldn't help but give a dry laugh. His Highness Ning Wang was outwardly complimenting Rui Wang but everyone could hear the sarcasm. Since when did taking a *qie* ensure that "the bad luck would be flushed away"? The father was still ill but the son didn't hesitate in taking a *qie*. If a normal person acted this way, it would have been a cause for castigation by others.

It was true that Rui Wang shouldn't have acted this way. The Emperor was worried about his matter yet he himself had no qualms about taking a *qie*. That heart of his was really broad and as a son, his conduct was truly unfilial. Because the Emperor favoured him, no one dared to openly criticize him. Consequently, it fell on him, as the commander of the Imperial Guard, to think of ways to protect Rui Wang. Otherwise, he wouldn't know how to explain the situation to the Emperor.

After earnestly thinking about it, Commander Sun could only give a bark of laughter, "Whatever *wang ye* says." He was only a little commander of the Imperial Guards. How can he afford to play word games with the higher-up *wang ye*?

"Ha," He Qi smiled, turned his horse and trotted away.

At Rui Wang Fu, Qin Bai Lu was standing near the Gate of Drooping Flowers, watching the blue sedan being carried into the *Xi Ce Yuan*. Her face dark, she said to the *yahuan* behind her: "In the end, *wang ye* really did take her in."

The *yahuan* comforted her: "*Wang fei*, Qu *shi* is only a *ce shi* who will not be written into the genealogy book. You don't have to worry about that kind of person."

"Don't worry?" Qin Bai Lu smiled icily, "If she was only a normal person, why did *wang ye* go to the Lantern Festival with her?" She had fought and vented but in the end, *wang ye* was still the same and acted even colder to her. At that time, she knew that to *wang ye*, she was no different from any other woman in this *fu*.

Qin Bai Lu's expression became bitter just thinking about it. She had been proud for so many years. Only after she'd married, did she realize a certain man could crush her pride into the ground and grind it to dust. However noble she was as a daughter of the Qin Family, how could it ever compare to the status of an imperial son?

Qu Yue Su, who was currently being hated and envied by Qin Bai Lu, wasn't as well off as the other had imagined. She sat on the bed and looked at the pink bed curtains and blankets. The only thing that was red in color was a pair of burning candles. There were no matrons of honor, no lotuses or peanuts, no red headdresses, not even the exchange of the wine cups. The surroundings were silent. The only people present in the yard were the two *yahuan* of the *wang fu* who stood guard outside and the *yahuan* who had accompanied her into the room.

Yao Xi saw her *xiaojie*'s face didn't look healthy. She said in a small voice: "*Xiaojie*, *nubi* heard that *wang ye* had set up a few tables in celebration today. He must not have left yet."

Knowing that Yao Xi was trying to comfort her, she smiled bitterly and said: "I'm just a *ce fei*. Would anyone of significant status come to such a banquet?" With Rui Wang's status, would he be willing to personally receive those who didn't have a prominent status?

She had chosen this road. Whatever ending she got, she asked for it.

Chapter 54

"*Wang ye*, be careful where you step," said the *yahuan* holding the lantern in a gentle voice, "Not many people come to Xi Ce Yuan. The road isn't easy to walk on."

He Yuan smiled at the *yahuan* until the other bashfully buried her head lower and lower. He finally spoke: "If that's so, then the lantern needs to be raised higher."

The *yahuan*'s face turned red and the lantern in her hand swayed before she recovered her composure.

Originally, no one had lived in Xi Ce Yuan. Because a *ce fei* was soon to be taken in, the chief steward of the *wang fu* told the servants to clean it. The majority of the furniture had not been renewed before Qu Yue Su's imminent arrival.

The procession entered Xi Ce Yuan. Inside, the lights shone brightly but He Yuan didn't have the innate joy that sprang from taking a beautiful woman as a *ce shi*. He looked at the tightly closed door, and then at the two kneeling *yahuan* who were safeguarding it. In a heavy voice, he said: "Open the door."

"Yes," One of the *yahuan* bowed and gently pushed open the door. He Yuan stepped inside and passed the Shelf of Many Treasures to see Qu

Yue Su sitting on the bed. She was wearing a light-colored girdled dress. The girdle was pale green in color. Her head was bowed, revealing a pale neck. She did seem to have some beauty.

He Yuan stood next to the Shelf and motioned for everyone inside to leave before slowly moving forward.

"*Wang ye*," Qu Yue Su stood and bowed. Her movements were graceful and subtle, acting more like a daughter of an educated and noble family than his own *wang fei*, Qin *shi*.

"Was Beauty waiting for *ben wang*?" He Yuan raised her chin with his index finger, his thumb curling at her lip, "Each minute of the spring night is worth a thousand gold pieces. We shouldn't waste any more time." He didn't wait to hear Qu Yue Su's thoughts before pushing her onto the bed.

The piercing pain erupting in the lower half of her body made Qu Yue Su spill hot tears. She'd never thought that her wedding night would end up like this, painful and without a shred of warmth. She hadn't even heard a gentle word from the man lying on top of her body. To this man, she was probably just a plaything.

The pain slowly dulled into numbness. She stared wide-eyed at the lotus flowers embroidered on the pink curtains above her head. She wouldn't always be in this position. Qu Qing Ju had achieved a good life so why couldn't she? What Qu Qing Ju could do, she could do also.

When Qu Qing Ju first heard that the Duke of Chang De had put Qu Yue Su in a blue sedan and sent her off to Rui Wang Fu, she was sitting in *zhengyuan* listening to the flattery of the *qieishi*. When she had finished listening to what had happened, she sighed ruefully: "Such a pity." She might not like Qu Yue Su personally, but to send a fifteen-year old girl away to be a *qie*? It really was a waste of her talent and beauty. Her entire life had been ruined because she had a mother like Liang *shi*.

The *qieshi* sitting below her didn't know what to say in response. They knew that *wang fei* didn't have a good relationship with her maternal

family. Her half-sister rushing off to become a *qie* of Rui Wang wasn't some glorious event. Should they be outwardly happy that a person *wang fei* disliked became someone's *qie* or sad because *wang fei*'s sister had shamed her?

Jiang Yong Yu glanced at *wang fei* and saw she wasn't angry yet she wasn't happy. She looked regretful. Jiang Yong Yu's thoughts switched tracks and she said: "*Qie* heard that Qu *san xiaojie* is talented and beautiful. No wonder His Highness Rui Wang would fall in love with her."

He Yuan was the type of person who saw women as just playthings in his heart. There was no such thing as love in his mind. She smiled helplessly:"If it was like that, then this match would have been good."

"Some people want to be a *qie*. Who can stop them?" Ping Zi Jin smiled mirthlessly as she spoke, momentarily forgetting that she too was a *qie*.

Qu Qing Ju glanced at her. She felt too lazy to argue and lightly remarked: "Ping *shiqie* should think about her own identity before speaking." She then told the *shiqie* to leave.

When Ping Zi Jin came out of the *zhengyuan*, her face still hadn't recovered. Now that she had been demoted from *ce fei* to *shiqie*, the people who had fawned over her in the past were nowhere to be seen. Even the other *shiqie* beside her didn't want to talk to her.

She hated seeing the disdain Qu Qing Ju had towards her but she was helpless. She had no favour and no status. If Qu Qing Ju wanted to move against her, it would take only a few words. What could she do in return?

The news that He Yuan took a *qie* quickly spread throughout Jing City. The Imperial Censors who had already been opposing him redoubled their efforts to impeach him. It seemed as though they would not rest without defeating He Yuan.

Even Qing De Emperor was angry this time and summoned He Yuan to the palace. He looked at his child kneeling in front of him with a bowed

head and thought about his adorableness when he first learned how to talk and walk. His heart softened in an instant. Using a handkerchief to muffle the sound of coughing, he asked a few seconds later: "*Zhen* thought you were young and inexperienced so *zhen* tolerated you at every turn. Who knew that you would commit a thoughtless action? Do you not know the discontent that the entire court feels towards you?"

"*Er chen* only took a woman. It has nothing to do with them," He Yuan raised his head to look at Qing De Emperor. "*Fuhuang*, these people are purposefully attacking *er chen*. No matter what *er chen* does, they will always find an excuse to make things difficult for *er chen*. There's no difference whether or not *er chen* actually committed it."

Qing De Emperor saw He Yuan's face had turned slightly red with anger. He coughed several more times before asking: "How could the entire court be deliberately opposing you? Yuan'er, you are not small anymore. Think before you act. Even *zhen* cannot do whatever *zhen* pleases."

He Yuan's face darkened but didn't say a word.

"*Zhen* knows you have a fiery personality. All these years, there hasn't been any criticism. *Zhen* only thought that after you grew up, you would understand and change. But after seeing your conduct becoming even more outrageous, *zhen* hurts inside." He gave a sigh, "Stay in your *fu* and reflect. If you do such things again, even *zhen* cannot protect you."

"*Fuhuang* is the Son of Heaven, the master of all the people in the world. Do you have to consider other people?" He Yuan looked at Qing De Emperor and asked with a hint of defiance, "The entire world is yours. Why do you have to take their opinions into consideration?"

Qing De Emperor looked at his most beloved son. A beat later, he said: "You shall go back and reflect. Leave now."

"*Er chen* asks for leave." He Yuan saw Qing De Emperor's expression wasn't good, and could only bow and leave. Coming out of Tian Qi Palace, his face became progressively angrier. If he was the Emperor, he

would control all the power. He didn't need anyone ordering him about. If they didn't want their position, there would be hundreds of thousands of people who did. He wouldn't get threatened because of these matters. After all these years, *fuhuang*'s personality was still soft so he allowed the people in the Royal Court to push him around.

"Yo, *san di* is leaving the palace?" He Qi had a smile on his face as he strode towards He Yuan. Seeing the ugly expression on He Yuan's face, his smile became even brighter, "I heard that in two days, *si di* is being transported back to Jing for his recovery, what does *san di* think?"

"Whatever *da ge* thinks, I will also think," He Yuan raised his chin, his eyes full of disdain as he looked at He Qi, "Did you think that you could jump up in order to push me down so you could climb even higher? Dream on." A scornful smile appeared on his face.

He Qi didn't become angry. He only came up and patted He Yuan's shoulder. He lowered his voice and said: "To climb up or not is not important. If *san di* falls down, *wei xiong* would be even happier." He straightened and said with a smile, "That year, *san di* and this brother were playing together. *San di* tripped and caused *ben wang* and *mufei* to kneel at Zhao Xiang Palace for an entire night. Don't forget it."

"We all rely on our abilities. If *da ge* and Wen *guipin* had the ability, why would you ask for mercy in front of the doors of *didi* and *mufei*'s palace?" He Yuan raised his lips in a smile, "Of course I wouldn't forget such a matter. It was such a good show in the past."

He Qi's smile became darker. He stared icily at He Yuan, "Pray towards the Heavens that you would see an entire lifetime of good shows."

"*Da ge* doesn't have to worry about that," He Yuan raised an eyebrow and looked towards the palace gates, "Farewell."

He Qi watched expressionlessly as He Yuan left the palace and a thin sliver of icy mirth appeared on his face. Arrogant people died quickly. He wondered if the other would be as arrogant at the time of his death.

Around the corner, He Heng smiled as he saw his two brothers part ways. He turned and said to Ming He behind him, "*Ben wang*'s *da ge* and *san di* have such good relations."

"To have harmony between sons of the Imperial Family, it is a lucky event." Ming He responded with a smile.

"Of course it is a lucky event," He Heng rubbed his chin as he smiled. Remembering that *lao si* was coming back to Jing in two days, he ordered, "After returning to the *fu*, remember to let *wang fei* prepare some healing and blood-enriching medicines."

Ming He acknowledged the words with a bow of his head, realising that *wang ye* was preparing it for Cheng Wang. He said: "*Wang ye* doesn't have to worry. *Nucai* remembers that the *fu*'s stores has many rare blood-enriching medicines. Cheng Wang will certainly recover quickly."

He Heng nodded. He turned and went inside the carriage to return home. At the *fu*, he walked towards the *zhengyuan* to eat the evening meal as was his custom.

As he entered the main gate of *zhengyuan,* he detected the distinct smell of medicine. When he looked around and saw the *zhengyuan*'s servants moving back and forth as they sorted out the medicines. It was a busy scene. When the servants saw him, they stopped what they were doing and bowed in greeting.

"No need to bow, just perform your duties," He Heng went inside the room to see Qu Qing Ju writing, her head bent. As he moved closer, he saw that she was writing several lists of medicines. All of them seemed to contain good items that would help improve a person's health.

"*Wang ye* has returned?" Qu Qing Ju raised her head to glance at him before returning to her writing, not even bothering to stand for greeting.

"This is all in preparation for *si di*?" He Heng glanced a few more times at her characters that were only neat, not beautiful. "We have a good variety here."

"There are only two months left before the wedding of *si shu* and the girl from the Luo Family is held," Qu Qing Ju put down her pen and scanned the list before saying, "Originally, *si shu* returning home victoriously and his upcoming marriage was a cause for celebration. Who knew that villains would try to assassinate him? Thankfully, he is in no mortal danger, but what good is that if he doesn't have a healthy body?"

He Heng just realized that the date of marriage was almost here and the Spring Examinations were also about to begin.

When *fuhuang* had sent *si di* to investigate the case, did he think of *si di's* impending nuptials?

Maybe he did think about it, maybe he didn't. But he was certain of one thing, for He Yuan, *fuhuang* could overlook anything.

Chapter 55

Qu Qing Ju didn't know what kind of feelings He Heng had towards He Ming as his *didi*, but she felt that it wasn't to the point of indifference. Qu Qing Ju was only certain that his desire to see He Ming recover and regain a healthy body seemed sincere.

The items on her list weren't extremely rare but they were certainly valuable and definitely suitable for He Ming's consumption. She placed the paper aside to dry before standing up, "After two more days, *si shu* will be back in Jing. *Wang ye* shouldn't worry too much."

"I remember, when I was younger and living in the palace, I used to play with *si di* for a long time. But when the schoolwork started increasing, our interactions gradually lessened," He Heng started to reminiscence about the past. Even though he was not as important as He Yuan in *fuhuang*'s eyes, He Heng was still treated much better compared to He Qi. Out of his four brothers, the most neglected one was He Ming, "As we grew up over the years, the feelings have diminished, but we're still brothers so there is some lingering camaraderie."

Back then, right after *si di* had been born, it wasn't known what Shu *guifei* had said to *fuhuang* which made him start to neglect *si di* and *si di*'s birth mother. No other imperial children were born after that. Perhaps his romantic of a father had promised something to Shu *guifei*. But whatever had happened between his father and Shu *guifei* wasn't that important to He Heng.

He Heng didn't really have much thoughts and feelings towards his *fuhuang*. He was just a silly man. Otherwise, the Da Long Dynasty wouldn't be currently showing slight signs of decay instead of prosperity.

Qu Qing Ju saw that He Heng's face held disdain. She stared for a beat and then understood. No one would be happy to have a father who treated his children like the Emperor did, "The feelings between two people in childhood are probably the purest."

"Qing Ju's words hit me at my heart," He Heng smiled but didn't want to discuss what occurred in the past. He remarked, "*Lao san* added a *ce shi* to his *fu*. It's not some major event, but our *fu* should send a gift."

Lao san had been quite sneaky, and hadn't properly notified his brothers. But as his *gege*, it was only proper that he paid attention.

Qu Qing Ju felt that He Heng didn't have any good intentions. Clearly, the Emperor had already expressed dissatisfaction towards He Yuan for taking a *qie*. But he just had to say it was a happy occasion. Was it really good to stick a knife in his brother like this?

"The day after he took the *qie*, I had someone deliver a gift," Thinking about how she felt when the news first reached her ears, Qu Qing Ju couldn't resist sighing, "My maternal family is becoming more and more unpresentable. A *di* noble daughter of a duke going to become a *ce fei* of a *wang fu*, and it wasn't even because someone in the palace had made the match. It's such a laughing stock."

"Why worry over such minor things? You are my wife, therefore you are of my Duan Wang Fu. How Chang De Gong Fu acts has no connection

to you," Assuming that Qu Qing Ju would feel bad because of such a thing, He Heng reiterated his thoughts, "You are you, Chang De Gong Fu is Chang De Gong Fu, I won't confuse the two."

Qu Qing Ju saw his face was serious and understood that his words were mostly sincere. At least, he seemed genuine at this moment. And if his attitude somehow changed in the future, well, that wasn't something she could control, "*Wang ye* treats me well, I know." Leaning her head on acthis shoulder to disguise the calm in her eyes, "Like I said before, being able to marry *wang ye* was my good fortune."

The women who married He Heng and He Ming would be slightly more fortunate than the other two He brothers. He Qi's wife would be forced to become an obedient steward. Marrying He Yuan would most likely be the biggest challenge in any woman's life.

Disregarding the fact that He Ming had an honest and generous personality, He Heng might have a deep and complicated mind, but he didn't have that attitude of He Yuan where he used the bottom of his foot to look at women. This was a lucky happenstance of her time-travel.

Gently patting the back of the person in his embrace, He Heng felt an unspeakable joy in his heart. It wasn't that he had never seen beautiful women before, and this woman certainly wasn't the most beautiful woman, but he felt that she was a perfect fit for him. Even with her small temper and occasional cheating at weiqi, in his eyes, that was extremely attractive.

Suddenly thinking of the phrase "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", He Heng couldn't help but smile. No one would believe it and even he was surprised that a man like him could feel that rarest feeling of them all for a certain woman. If he really did fall in love, then wouldn't everyone else in the world be romantics?

Maybe it was only because that he felt she was good and thus she appeared beautiful in every way. Maybe after some time, she wouldn't be any different from the other women in the *fu*.

Loosening his grasp of the woman he embraced, He Heng raised his hand to pinch at her soft earlobe, "After *si di* returns to Jing, I'll take you to that estate in the suburbs to soak in the hot springs."

Qu Qing Ju gave a smile, "That will be wonderful. After a few more days, the apricot, peach and pear flowers will have all bloomed. We could go sightseeing outside the *fu*."

"Alright, we'll have them prepare some barbeque. It will be a picnic." He Heng didn't blindly follow the rules. During his leisure time, he enjoyed his life. When Qu Qing Ju mentioned the blooming flowers, he immediately thought of a picnic.

"That's a good idea," Qu Qing Ju clapped her hands, "Hot springs, barbeque, flowers. It's would be a great experience."

He Heng saw her face was full of joy and couldn't help but laugh. Standing guard outside, Ming He, Mu Jin and the others heard the laughter and chatter inside and relaxed in response. As servants, if their owners were happy, their lives became easier.

At this time, He Yuan had returned to his *fu*, and saw Qin Bai Lu sitting with a crowd of *yahuan* and *mama* in the garden. His concubines were also kneeling on the ground, including the one he had recently taken, Qu *shi*. His mood hadn't lifted and his face became even darker after taking in the scene. He stared coldly at Qin Bai Shuang: "*Wang fei*, why have you made all these *shiqie* kneel here and obstruct *ben wang*'s path?"

The expressions of Qin Bai Lu and the concubines instantly changed. The former because she had just been publicly humiliated, the latter because of the uncaring attitude *wang ye* showed towards them. The gardens became silent.

"Get lost! What are you all kneeling here for? If you really want to block *ben wang*'s path, why don't you all go kneel at the main gate?" He Yuan kicked aside the manservant kneeling nearby. He pointed at Qin Bai Lu and berated her, "This was a good *wang fu*. Look at what you have done to it. *Ben wang* gets bothered just looking at it."

Qin Bai Lu knew that *wang ye* may have been reprimanded by the Emperor at the palace. Qu *shi* was the one who caused all this trouble but he raged at her instead. Her heart felt ill just thinking of it. She lowered her head to glare at Qu Yue Su standing close by. Barely suppressing the rage inside, she said in a somewhat gentle tone, "*Wang ye* doesn't have to get so angry. You were just taking a *qie*. *Fuhuang* certainly wouldn't be angry at you because of that."

"Are you allowed to surmise *fuhuang*'s thoughts?" He Yuan's face darkened. As He Yuan thought about *fuhuang*'s eyes when he had admonished him, he felt that his own rage was unsightly. Turning, he saw Qu *shi* standing submissively on the sidelines and said, "Qu *shi*, come with *ben wang*. Everyone else scatter!"

Qin Bai Lu ground her teeth as she watched *wang ye* lead that slut Qu *shi* away. She could only hatefully point at the other concubines and scold harshly, "You can't even serve *wang ye* well. What's the use in keeping all of you here, leave!"

The *shiqie* who became *wang fei*'s punching bag hastily retreated. They hated how unkind *wang fei* was and also hated Qu *shi* for her trickery. These days, *wang ye* was constantly spending the night at Qu *shi*'s place. Was there any room for them to survive?

Qu Yue Su wasn't being tenderly loved like they all imagined. He Yuan's actions against her were brutal and merciless. To him, she was nothing more than a plaything, something used to vent his anger and desires on. He loved tormenting her but she couldn't speak of it. Every morning when she woke up, she looked at the bruises on her body and then at the valuable items He Yuan bestowed upon her. She felt both humiliated and resentful. She hated the Heavens for being unfair and He Yuan for his cruelty.

After suffering through another round of He Yuan's venting, he stood up and left, leaving her to lie alone on the spacious bed . For some strange reason, Qu Yue Su thought of Qu Qing Ju as she heard Yao Xi murmuring and sobbing. What was she doing now? Was she sleeping in

an embrace with Duan Wang or sleeping soundly alone in a soft large bed?

"*Zhuzi*, *nubi* will get you a bath," Yao Xi looked at her mistress, her face looking vacant as if she had lost her soul. Her voice rose in pitch as she repeated her words, "*zhuzi*, *nubi* will get you a bath."

"Yao Xi, what do you think *da jie* is doing right now?" Qu Yue Su woodenly stood up and allowed Yao Xi to support her into the bathtub.

Yao Xi stilled and she responded a beat later: "It's late now. She is probably preparing to sleep."

"Yes, sleep," Qu Yue Su raised a hand to cover her face and laughed loudly.

Qu Qing Ju let the servants put away the *qi* board and insatiably said to He Heng: "*Wang ye*, don't you think that my *weiqi* skills have improved a lot?"

He Heng's expression faltered briefly: "En, improved a lot."

"It's all due to *wang ye*'s efforts," Qu Qing Ju walked up to him and kissed his cheek, "Then, we'll continue to play next time."

He Heng touched the spot she'd kissed before picking her up and carrying her to the bed, "Qing Ju makes me happy. I will certainly make Qing Ju satisfied in return."

Qu Qing Ju twisted her waist, indicating his words were too perverted. As a woman with proper upbringing, she expressed her embarrassment of his words.

And then she reached out to pull at his belt and looked up at him with a clueless face, "What happy and satisfied?"

If anyone could still resist at that point, then they weren't a man. He Heng pressed down on the person underneath him. The Yun brocade robe on Qu Qing Ju's body was pulled off, the under-robe was

heartlessly torn off. When pulled by his big hand, the chest covering embroidered with peach blossoms easily fell off.

Qu Qing Ju raised her left hand to cover her chest, her right hand pulling the other's lapel, trying to express her hope to share in good fortunes and in nakedness.

Men were always skilled at undressing, especially on the bed.

When the two of them nakedly started moving, Qu Qing Ju thought that it was delusional to think that He Heng was becoming more enthusiastic of late.

In the end, Qu Qing Ju was carried by He Heng to the bathtub. As was their usual custom, they mutually washed each other, He Heng groping her occasionally. After putting on their clothes, she pouted for He Heng to carry her back to bed.

Her reason was that … … her endurance had all been used up. So He Heng was most willing to carry her, his face blooming with pleasure.

Chapter 56

On the day He Ming returned to Jing, the city was enveloped in a light rain. He was half-lying inside the carriage, listening to the sound of rain outside. His face looked pale as he lifted up the curtain. He smiled indifferently as he saw the city gate looming closer.

As the carriage drew up near the gate, he saw da ge and er ge sitting astride on their horses. Behind them, several officials stood nearby, waiting to welcome him back to Jing. He motioned for the carriage to stop and moved to step out.

"Si di is wounded, don't get up," He Heng rode his horse forward, smiling as he prevented He Ming from coming down to bow. He dismounted, cupping one hand over his other fisted hand: "Si di has suffered this time."

"Er ge's words are an exaggeration. I failed in accomplishing the duty fuhuang asked of me. I'm extremely embarrassed," Nonetheless, He Ming still made a bow in front of the carriage. His face had an expression of shame, "To hear that fuhuang is worried about it makes er chen unfilial."

"You were fulfilling your duty. It was the bad intentions of others that ruined the mission. What does that have to do with you?" He Heng smiled, "Fuhuang requested that da ge and I receive you before returning to the palace to report. Si di, you can rest your heart."

"Thanks da ge, er ge." He Ming made a bow towards He Qi before sitting back properly inside the carriage. The driver carefully put the curtain down and waited for Ning Wang and Duan Wang to move first.

He Heng got on his horse and moved towards the still-mounted He Qi. He looked at the carriage waiting behind him and said to He Qi, "Da ge, we should go."

"En," He Qi nodded and remarked as if he was both concerned and relieved, "Si di looks much thinner. He must have had a hard time on the road."

He Heng nodded in agreement. He switched topics, "After a few more days, the examinations start. When the Spring Examinations end, it would be si di's big day. At that time, us brothers should have a good celebration."

"Naturally, we will celebrate," He Qi gave a bright laugh, and fell silent for the rest of the journey.

When He Ming went to see Qing De Emperor, he was given some medicine before he left Tian Qi Palace. An guipin shedded many tears when she saw He Ming appear in front of her.

After listening to his mufei narrate the events that recently occurred in Jing City, He Ming smiled as he assured her: "Mufei no longer needs to worry. This is a good thing. At least er chen could close the fu by using

my recovery as an excuse. That way, I would not be drawn into their business."

An guipin heard this and her face suddenly changed, "Ming'er, did you … …"

Checking that no one else was in the room, He Ming lowered his voice: "Those assassins seemed to have no intentions of harming er chen. They were only targeting Right Minister Wei. Er chen's wounds may look dangerous but they didn't hit any critical parts. So mufei doesn't have to worry too much."

An guipin wiped away her tears as she hatefully declared: "He Qi and He Yuan are intolerable. They can fight for the throne all they want but why do they have to involve my son?!"

"Those two – one is the oldest, the other is the most favoured. Naturally, neither will care about other people," He Ming gave a bitter smile, "Mufei shouldn't get angry over these matters."

An guipin barely managed to suppress her anger. She was not usually favored. After she had given birth, Shu guifei had kept on bullying her. Thankfully, the Empress was fair and just. Otherwise, her days would have been even more difficult to endure. She sighed: "It's mufei that's useless. If mufei was more favored, you wouldn't have been so neglected." She suddenly thought of Jing guifei. Even though Jing guifei wasn't as favoured as Shu guifei, she still had some standing in the Emperor's heart. Her son, He Heng, was second in terms of favor, right behind He Yuan. She had never interacted with him but he seemed to be a very able person.

She thought out loud: "He Heng might not be an open and honest person, but mufei thinks that this person isn't as cold-blooded and ruthless. If you interact with him more frequently, a good friendship could grow between brothers."

He Ming understood what his mufei meant. He paused for a beat before replying: "Mufei doesn't have to worry, er chen will consider this matter

thoroughly." If He Yuan or He Qi succeeded the throne, it was likely that his days would become even more difficult. If He Heng succeeded, even though he was a sanctimonious person, he wouldn't slight him since he was just a unthreatening younger brother. To show the love between brothers, He Heng would even treat him well.

He Ming didn't want to fight, but he didn't want to be a sword that a person used and threw away. He could choose a wise master and plan for the rest of his life.

"He Heng's wife Qu shi is extremely close to the Luo Family. When you left Jing City, Qu shi had sent people to deliver stuff to me. Jing guifei was very attentive to me as well," An guipin was a woman inclined to an ordinary life but she wouldn't allow others to harm her child, "No matter what ideas they have, at least their execution is much better-looking than the other two."

He Ming knew deep down that He Yuan and He Qi hadn't even properly looked at him. It was only er ge with whom he had camaraderie from all those times they playing together as children. It might have faded much over the years but he still treated him much better than the other two and he remembered the good turns he had been given.

He sat down on the step-carriage, provided specially to him by the order of fuhuang, and left the palace. Soon after He Ming returned to his fu, he received the gifts sent by the other families. Even da ge and san ge had sent something over. Although their presents were only decorations that looked valuable but were practically useless, at least they had showed some concern.

The presents that er ge's fu had sent had been identified by his own fu's doctor as restoratives that were good for the body. He Ming started to understand the concern er ge felt for him.

Remembering how fuhuang subtly hinted that he should ignore the officials who believed san ge was behind the assassination attempt, the smile on He Ming's face became colder. Since fuhuang wanted him to

believe him, naturally he wouldn't make fuhuang disappointed. As to whether or not anyone would trust his actions, that would depend on fuhuang and san ge.

"Paternal love?" He Ming threw the sandalwood bead bracelet that Qing De Emperor had given him onto the floor. He watched as the beads bounced in every direction. He sneered as he spoke aloud, "It's such a joke."

On the first day of the Spring Examinations, the carriages filled the areas outside the examination halls, all of them waiting to deliver the student-scholars.

Liang Rong and Qu Wang Zhi sat inside a tea tower, watching as the flood of students lined up to enter the examination hall. The two felt their faces turn bitter. Both of them were students of the Eastern Mountain Academy. Because the academy was on holiday today, they came specially to look at the examination hall. They felt some pressure thinking about how they would also be entering this place soon.

Qu Wang Zhi was particularly tense, since he would be entering the exam hall in the fall. He looked at the stern examinees underneath and felt that he couldn't breathe.

"Biao xiong, there's not much to see here, let's leave," The exam had only been going on for four or six hours when a few white-haired examinees had been carried out. Qu Wang Zhi's expression became uglier as he stood to leave.

"That Qu fu, didn't it have a wang fei? Why did they send their little daughter off to be a qie?"

"Who knows. I just heard that little daughter was a child of the second wife. This second wife was only of a declining family. Duan Wang Fei was born from the original duchess, do you know who she is?"

"Who is she?"

"Do you know the Marquess of Xiang Qing, Tian daren of the Supreme Court?"

"That famous person, who hasn't heard of him? I heard that no matter how difficult the case could be, if it was delivered to the Courts, it will be thoroughly investigated."

"Yes, that's the one. Duan Wang Fei's birth mother was the Marquess of Xiang Qing's full-blooded jiejie. How can you say that their education and birth were the same? The fact that one became a wang fei and the other becoming a concubine, isn't that normal?"

Qu Wang Zhi's face became ghastly as he overheard the conversation. He wanted to rush down and argue with the people downstairs but Liang Rong stopped him, "Wang Zhi, this is the entrance to the examination hall. It would not be good for you if you start something."

"But to let them keep discussing my family like this?" Qu Wang Zhi's rage didn't dissipate but he didn't insist on rushing down. If the matter became public, it might affect him later on if he went into politics.

Liang Rong looked at the surroundings before lowering his voice to advise: "Right now, they are just having a good time. You have to know, the most favoured right now is His Highness Rui Wang. Biao mei has gone into Rui Wang Fu to be a ce fei. In the future, she would … …" He raised a thumb at Qu Wang Zhi, the meaning evident.

Qu Wang Zhi gritted his teeth and kept a lid on his anger. The two came down the tea tower. After travelling for a while on their horses, they saw a grandiose procession heading towards them. The leading guards were all stocky and tough-looking, their eyes alert. From a glance, it could be seen that these were the type of guards which could never be owned by normal families. The carriage behind was pulled by eight stallions. Bells attached to the sandalwood carriage rang merrily as it moved forward.

The two could only yield the right-of-way. When the carriage came closer, they saw that the carriage was imprinted with the symbol of

Duan Wang Fu. Qu Wang Zhi's face darkened but he could only helplessly lower his head to show his respect to the wang fu.

After Duan Wang Fu's carriage travelled further ahead, the two continued to proceed. Liang Rong asked with some confusion: "That's the direction heading out of the city. Duan Wang Fu is taking this many carriages, I wonder where they are going?" Was the family of Duan Wang really heading out to relax at this important time?

"Who knows what these wang ye want to do?" Qu Wang Zhi's tone wasn't friendly. He turned to look in the direction the Duan Wang Fu carriages took. He paused before noting, "I heard that Duan wang ye had a hot spring estate in the suburbs. The flowers bloom early on that mountain. They must be going sightseeing."

Qu Wang Zhi was born to a duke and knew more than Liang Rong. He was pretty clear and knowledgeable about the more important properties the wang ye in Jing owned in the suburbs of the city.

"Going out to play?" Right now, the wounded Right Minister Wei and Cheng Wang had both returned to Jing after the attempted assassination. Ning Wang and Rui Wang were engaged in a white-hot battle, and Duan Wang had the leisure to go on holiday?

Liang Rong felt his head wasn't able to process it at all. At this time, wasn't he supposed to take advantage? What did avoiding it mean?

The play was going to start but Duan Wang had done such an action. How would the daren engaged in conflict at Jing endure?

Inside the carriage, Qu Qing Ju, her hair in a simple hairstyle, leaned on the soft cushions as she asked: "Wang ye is really leaving Jing like this?"

He Heng smiled calmly at her: "Didn't Qing Ju want to soak in the hot springs? The weather is just perfect."

Qu Qing Ju giggled, turning to burrow into his embrace: "Wang ye treats me so well."

Her words sounded so fake to He Heng's ears. He smiled helplessly as he explained: "At this time, Jing City would certainly fall into a storm because of si di and the rankings from the Spring Examinations. Ben wang isn't interested in these things. It's better to stay away and find some peace."

Qu Qing Ju looked at his face, and strangely, on his face, the words two-faced were written there.

Ha, did he really believe she never heard the story of the mantis stalking the locust, unaware of the oriole behind it?[11]

Chapter 57

The hot springs in the Jing suburbs were located not too far from the city. Qu Qing Ju saw that the nameplate of manor's front gate had "Fu Lang Manor" written on it. Releasing the curtains, she commented to He Heng sitting beside her, "This name is popular and literary. The meaning is very good."

"En, this property was bequeathed by *fuhuang*, and *mufei* named it." He Heng tilted his head to smile, "After entering this gate, we would be travelling for quite a while before reaching our residence. There are many crops planted here. Some off-season fruits and vegetables can only be grown near the springs. Much of our *fu*'s fruits come from this manor."

The intelligence of the ancients were, as expected, endless. They didn't have any plastic tarps or greenhouses to plant vegetables. Instead, they used the aid of nature to grow the food that shouldn't be in season. And their produce were a lot more natural compared to those that grew in the greenhouses.

[11] This is a very famous Chinese idiom. There's a very good explanation here (http://history.cultural-china.com/en/233History3285.html) but the general gist is that the players are all focus on who they want to defeat, to the point they cannot see the enemy behind them.

"There's a patch of peach and pear blossoms blooming right now on the mountain. After we rest today, I'll accompany you there tomorrow," He Heng saw her face was full of admiration and his smile became more visible. "Bai Yun Mountain is very close by. If we have the time, we should go see the Five Estates Monastery at the peak."

Bai Yun Mountain Five Estates Monastery? Qu Qing Ju felt the name sounded familiar but couldn't recall where she had heard it. It probably wasn't anything important. Otherwise, she would have remembered it. She didn't think about it any further and raised the curtain occasionally to look at the scenery.

The road had been constructed well. It was completely paved with black stone. Large trees were planted beside the road. To her left, some sections of the field were planted with wheat and all kinds of vegetables behind the trees. To her right were several fruit trees. The surroundings didn't look very symmetrical but Qu Qing Ju didn't have an obsessive compulsive disorder so she thought it looked rather interesting.

After travelling for a while, the carriage stopped. Qu Qing Ju heard a voice speaking just outside the carriage.

"This humble person Zhang Hong greets *wang ye*, *wang fei*."

Qu Qing Ju stilled for a beat before she understood. This Zhang Hong was most likely the chief steward of this manor. No wonder he had come out to welcome them in the middle of the road. She looked at He Heng and saw the other seemed to think it was normal behavior.

"Steward Zhang doesn't have to be so courteous. Has everything in the manor been prepared?" Qian Chang Xin smiled insincerely at Zhang Hong as he could see the other's desire to curry favour, "Today marks the first time *wang fei* has come to this estate. If you serve them well, naturally there will be rewards. If a mistake occurs, you yourself will receive the punishment."

"Don't worry, Chief Steward Qian. Us humble people will serve well, and wouldn't be remiss in any way," Zhang Hong didn't expect *wang ye*

or *wang fei* to pay any attention to him. He smiled as he retreated to join the other stewards, "Hot water and food have already been prepared on the mountain. It cannot compare to the *fu*, but it wins at having more of a wild taste. *Wang ye* and *wang fei* can taste something new."

"Smart. Coming out here at this time, it's good to eat something fresh," Qian Chang Xin spoke quietly and gave Zhang Hong an appreciative glance before he waved his hand for the procession to move ahead.

As they watched the train of carriages depart, the steward behind Zhang Hong asked: "Chief Steward Zhang, what should we do now?"

"Do now? Hurry and keep up. If any of the people down there do something wrong, we will all be affected," Zhang Hong's fawning manner instantly disappeared and he glared at the speaker. He started chasing after the carriages.

The other stewards stared at each other. *Wang ye* didn't usually come to the manor. They didn't know the preferences of *wang ye* and *wang fei*. But seeing how tense the chief steward was, they also started running.

After the carriage had stopped for the second time, Qu Qing Ju finally saw the gate of the main building on the property. The building wasn't as grand as the *wang fu*, but it had its own sense of style. It was very exquisite, especially the three-level tower located behind it. Qu Qing Ju couldn't help but look at it more closely.

"If you like the Jade Cloud Tower, we could live in there for the next few days." He Heng smiled as he suggested, "Beside Jade Cloud Tower is the hot springs pavilion. A white jade pool has been constructed there. It's very easy to soak in there."

Qu Qing Ju nodded, "Great. A better view of the scenery can be seen from the top of the tower."

After hearing that *wang fei* and *wang ye* wished to live in Jade Cloud Tower, the servants moved everything over. They lit the fragrances, the copper beast stoves and other things in order to heat up the building so that their owners would be warm and happy.

Qu Qing Ju let He Heng accompany her as she walked around the main building of the estate. She found that the carvings and the halls of this estate were finely crafted and held hints of the construction style of Jiang Nan. She even saw a hot stream winding its way through the property. It must have been constructed using the water from the hot springs.

Qu Qing Ju felt that the hot springs that called themselves emperor-level treatment in her previous life were just weaklings compared to what was before her eyes. Look at this hot spring estate that a *wang ye* had. If it was like this, how much grander would the Emperor's one be?

"This property is slightly small but it is very exquisite. It's fine to come out here occasionally." He Heng didn't have much interest in the flora and fauna of the estate. He held Qu Qing Ju's hand and walked slowly towards Jade Cloud Tower, "Over the years, I've only come here once or twice and I haven't had the chance to take a good look around the place."

"Then *wang ye* has to stay here with me and play for a few days," Even though Qu Qing Ju knew he had no intention of interfering with court matters, she still added, "It's just that this is very far for *wang ye* to go to court."

He Heng smiled, "That's fine. I don't have many matters to deal with nowadays. After I attend court, I'll come back here to keep you company." As he thought of the pre-arranged events in Jing City, the smile on his face dimmed, "I'll also use the carriage. Even if I have to wake up earlier than usual, I could nap inside whilst travelling."

Qu Qing Ju laughed at him for being lazy and He Heng pinched her cheek in retaliation. The two held hands as they played the entire way. The servants passing by all lowered their heads, not daring to look at their faces directly.

After the noon meal, the two took a nap before rising and prepared to take a walk outside. Qu Qing Ju sat in front of the mirror and watched Yu Zan familiarly style her hair. She ordered: "These days, you don't

need to take as much care with the hair ornaments. Over here, there's no need to show my status."

Yu Zan nodded in response. She picked up the hairpins for Qu Qing Ju and chose a pale yellow short dress for her to wear. Qu Qing Ju tilted her head as she looked at herself in the mirror. There was a hint of the style of the women of Jiang Nan. She smiled and complimented: "Yu Zan's hands are so clever." As she spoke, she rewarded each of the four *da yahuan* who'd accompanied her when she married with a pearl encrusted hairpin.

He Heng also finished dressing at the same time. Seeing Qu Qing Ju's light and clean appearance, he commented: "Qing Ju is beautiful in whatever you wear, as expected."

As expected? Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow, "*Wang ye* is always unusually handsome in anything he wears." He Heng was wearing a moon-colored long robe. He did seem to have some of the looks needed to attract women. She came forward and tickled his palm, "I can't look away."

Wasn't he supposed to say that to her? He Heng smiled helplessly. He took her hand and said, "Let's go. The rain has stopped. We can take a look at the back of the mountain."

The entire mountain they were situated on belonged to He Heng. Qu Qing Ju had the feeling that she was investigating her husband's assets. She and He Heng got on the step-carriage together. They looked at the grasses and trees on both sides. After they reached the back of the mountain, she pointed at the small waterfall that had formed when the water on the mountain first flowed down and exclaimed: "This is like a drawing."

A green mountain, a thin mist, and the pink peach blossoms blooming in the trees. Qu Qing Ju was moved. No wonder the main male lead in the novels liked to use the scenery to chase after their beauty. Because looking at beautiful scenery made people happy. Even though Qu Qing

Ju had been part of the entertainment circle for a long time, she was still dazed by the scenery before her.

But Qu Qing Ju's happy mood didn't stay for long because an incident occurred.

"*Wang ye*!" This voice was so deeply tragic that a person's heart would break upon hearing it. She looked behind her and saw Yun Qing wearing a slightly faded cotton dress and standing on a rock slightly behind them. Qu Qing Ju was even able to see the tears of excitement that came down her face.

Was this estate that Yun Qing was sent to?

He Heng didn't think anyone would have the nerve to interrupt their admiration of the scenery. He frowned as he looked over at Yun Qing, blind to the tears on her face. He asked harshly: "Who let her in? Weren't you ordered to guard this area and not let anyone in?!"

A steward hurriedly ran over and knelt with a bang in front of them, "This humble person greets *wang ye, wang fei*. Please forgive us. She is this humble person's wife. Just now, she came here to deliver food to this humble person, and accidentally came in. It was this humble person's slip. Please, forgive this humble person's wife." He started kowtowing.

Qu Qing Ju lowered her head to look at the man dressed in the blue clothing of a steward. He was short and slightly plump, beads of sweat running down his forehead as though he was very worried for Yun Qing.

Yun Qing didn't attend to the man pleading mercy for her. She came forward a few steps to kneel in front of them, wailing tragically: "*Wang ye*, *nu* has finally seen you."

Qu Qing Ju saw that He Heng's expression was ugly but he didn't seem to want to speak to the woman. She could only scold: "Outrageous, how can you speak so in front of *wang ye*?"

Yun Qing's face paled. She stared with fear at Qu Qing Ju. This was the woman who'd sent her out of the *fu* and married her to a short and fat man. Now, she wasn't a pure woman. How could *wang ye* want her now?

"*Nu* forgot on account of seeing *wang ye*. Please forgive me, *wang fei*." Yun Qing gave another bow. She didn't speak any further but continued sobbing, her thin shoulders slightly trembling and appearing very pitiful.

The short and fat man who had been begging for mercy on her behalf stopped in a daze after hearing her words. He hadn't thought that the woman he was protecting with all his heart would say such … … unrestrained words. His face started to change over and over, feeling extremely embarrassed.

He Heng frowned in irritation, looking visibly sick of the whole matter. His left index finger impatiently tapped the handrail.

"As a woman who is now married, you should pay more attention to how you speak," Qu Qing Ju saw that the steward Wang Dong was still in a daze and added, "Steward Wang, take your wife and leave." She didn't understand what Yun Qing was thinking. A man had sent her away. Naturally that meant he no longer had any interest in her. Why do something like this and make her future days harder?

Wang Dong woodenly made a kowtow and pulled Yun Qing along as he started to walk, not caring as Yun Qing tripped and stumbled behind him.

After he pulled the other to a place where he couldn't see *wang ye* and *wang fei*, Wang Dong silently released Yun Qing's hand. Yun Qing said resentfully to Wang Dong: "Move, I don't need you controlling me."

When she had finished, she felt a pain burning on her face. Wang Dong had hit her. Yun Qing stared wide-eyed in disbelief. This weak and cowardly man dared to hit her?!

"Shameless!" As he spoke, the slightly plump face of Wang Dong didn't have any expression. None of the gentleness and emotion that had appeared in the past was visible now.

Yun Qing stilled. She saw Wang Dong turn and walk away, refusing to look at her again. Her mind fell into a sea of emptiness.

He Heng felt that his ears were finally clean. A beat later, he revealed a satisfied smile as he pointed in the other direction and informed: "There's a very big mouth over there, the pool is even bigger than the one in the pavilion. But the surroundings are not good so only an open hot spring was constructed. When the weather warms, we could play there like ducks."

Qu Qing Ju glanced in the direction that Yun Qin left in. She smiled, nodded her head and announced: "Then, I'll have to take a look."

To want something that one could never receive, that person's life was fated to be a tragedy.

Chapter 58

It was not a secret that Cheng Wang had been wounded in the arm by the assassins. Even though the wound had healed, but the *taiyi* said there may be remaining symptoms. When it was winter, there would be unbearable pain. So the Imperial Doctors gave a suggestion that Cheng Wang soak in the hot springs whenever he was free. This would be of benefit to his bones.

But He Ming didn't have many properties in the first place, and he didn't have any hot springs. Just at that time, he coincidentally heard that *er ge* ad gong to his estate to soak in the hot springs. He instantly clapped his hands, and personally sent an invitation expressing that he wanted to go to the hot springs at Fu Lang Manor.

This move, in the eyes of others might have been a coincidence, but in the eyes of those using their heads, it held a different meaning. They

understood that His Highness Cheng Wang had returned for a few days to Jing, but why didn't anyone already suggest the hot springs earlier, but only at this sensitive time?

Suspicions could only remain suspicions. Cheng Wang wasn't participating in the battle for the throne, he wasn't usually a brave person. No one at the court cared about him, putting their focus on the rankings from the Spring Examinations and the criminal behind the assassination incident. As to the victim that had been nearly assassinated, because the Emperor didn't place any importance, he was simultaneously overlooked.

He Heng had received He Ming's missive at the palace gate. The characters that He Ming wrote on the paper were like him, proper, straightforward and regular. It didn't have any style, but no one would dislike it. He Heng gave the missive to Ming He, "Go personally to Cheng Wang Fu, say that *ben wang*, as his elder brother, will always welcome his *didi*."

Ming He nodded, turning and getting on a horse. He sped up as he made his way to Cheng Wang Fu.

He Heng looked in the direction that Ming He left in. He raised his head to look at the sky. Frowning, he said: "This sky doesn't look very pleasant, the mist has come in so early. We should head back to the manor early."

Qian Chang Xin came forward to put down the curtain of the carriage that He Heng was sitting in. Turning his head, he sent a look at the guard driving and indicated for him to leave quickly.

When the carriage trotted its way out of the city gates, the mist had already become thicker. Even the sky was dark and heavy. Occasionally, bursts of cold wind blew by. Qian Chang Xin rubbed his arms and inhaled a breath. This cold snap was too strong, today was much colder than the previous days.

He looked carefully at the road ahead, suddenly seeing the grass on the side of the road moving. He indicated for the carriage to stop. Before the carriage had completely stopped, he flipped off to stand in front of the entrance the carriage, shrieking: “Guards!”

This high piercing shout rang out in the mist and cause the guards to shudder. When they managed to react, they saw almost twenty men wielding large blades leaping out of the grass, heading straight and chopping at *wang ye*’s carriage.

Arrows flew out of the woods randomly. It was lucky that there was a layer of iron on inside the carriage. Qian Chang Xin had closed the door to the carriage in time so those arrows all dropped outside the carriage, but one arrow, taking advantage of that moment Qian Chang Xin was shutting the door, quickly pierced inside.

“Come protect *wang ye*,” Qian Chang Xin unsheathed the large blade that the driver had on his back, guarding against the assassins that were heading to the side of the carriage.

The guards knew very clearly if something did happen to *wang ye*, they didn’t need to live. They could only grit their teeth and fight. If they didn’t die, a good life awaited them, if they died, it was showing their loyalty to the very end.

Because no one had expected that someone would dare to assassinate a *wang ye* on the main road, He Heng hadn’t taken many guards with him. After a period of time, the situation turned for the worst.

Commander Sun felt that he had definitely offended the gods this year. He had just taken the Imperial Guards for a casual patrol in the Jing suburbs and he could encounter an assassination attempt. The target also had to be His Highness Duan Wang. When he saw the scene, his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. He hurriedly sent his subordinates to help.

The assassins hadn't expected that the Imperial Guards who preferred to patrol inside the city would appear here, quickly retreating. The only thing they left were a few corpses that had been killed by the guards.

"*Wei chen* was late in protecting. Has Your Highness Duan Wang been wounded?" Commander Sun saw the assassins retreat and waved his hand to let the subordinates give chase, he himself getting off the horse and kneeling on one knee in front of He Heng's carriage.

Qian Chang Xin also got off the carriage, kneeling in front as well: "It was us that was useless, and startled *wang ye*."

The door to the carriage slowly was pulled open. He Heng walked out under the worried and fearful looks of everyone present. Qian Chang Xin looked at the sleeve of his right hand which had been dyed crimson with blood. He was so afraid his legs were soft: "*Wang ye*, you were wounded?!"

When Commander Sun heard the words, the sweat on his forehead started to flow down. He raised his head to take a look and saw that the sleeve of Duan Wang's left hand was completely drenched in red, his right hand holding an arrow speckled with blood.

"Just a graze, it didn't reach the bones." Finishing, he gave the arrow to Qian Chang Xin, "This arrow was left behind by the assassins that wounded *ben wang*, hopefully this will be helpful to Commander Sun."

Commander Sun received the arrow from Qian Chang Xin. He found that it was a very normal arrow, the arrowhead made from normal iron, and there were no special attributes about the feathers at the end of the arrow.

"*Wang ye*, please do not worry. *Wei chen* will definitely investigate this matter thoroughly," Finishing, Commander Sun let his subordinates take away the corpses on the ground. He picked up the remains of the blades and the scattered arrows, hoping to find a clue from those pieces.

By this time, Ming He had caught up from the city, and found that *wang ye* had nearly been assassinated and was wounded. He could only turn his head around to the Imperial Hospital to find a *taiyi*.

After Commander Sun left, He Heng allowed the servants to give a makeshift treatment to his wound. He announced to the people present: "Today, everyone here will be rewarded according to their deeds. The fact that *ben wang* could leave here safely is all due to your efforts."

The guards bowed in thanks, their hearts beating faster. *Wang ye* hadn't punished them because of being wounded from the assassination but had rewarded them. It didn't waste their efforts in fighting with their lives.

After He Heng returned to sit inside the carriage, he covered his wound, his face not showing any of the fear and anger after being attacked by an assassin.

Climbing up from the hot spring, Qu Qing Ju put on new clothing and felt her back strangely become cold. She walked back into the inner room, asking Mu Jin and the others who had been standing guard outside: "Has *wang ye* returned to the manor?"

"*Wang fei*, there hasn't been anyone who has reported so," Mu Jin saw the hair of *wang fei* was loose, the strands still dripping water and took a piece of cotton to dry Qu Qing Ju's hair for her. After just a few wipes, she saw Huang Yang rushing in. Seeing that she was drying her hair, he hesitated before reporting: "*Wang fei*, *nucai* has heard that *wang ye* was attacked. He's coming back to the estate now."

"Attacked?!" Qu Qing Ju's voice rose. She stood, saying: "Follow me to take a look." Finishing, she rushed out the door.

Mu Jin paused and then threw the cloth to one side. She grabbed a sandalwood hair comb before following. *Wang fei*'s hair was still dripping. It wouldn't be good for the servants to see her hair down and loose.

Qu Qing Ju was very clear that a person like He Heng wouldn't be easily wounded by others. But the road from the city gate to the manor was a major road. What person had the bravery and drive to stage an assassination attempt at that kind of place?

"*Wang ye*, *wang fei* is here." Just as Qian Chang Xin's voice sounded, He Heng saw Qu Qing Ju walk in from the outside. He saw that she was wearing a simple wide-sleeved blue girdled dress, her hair carelessly brushed behind her back. It looked like it wasn't even dry.

"*Wang ye*, how are you?" Qu Qing Ju walked in front of He Heng. He was sitting in front of the desk, the light colored robe that he wore as he had left in the morning was changed for a blue soft silk robe, white muslin wrapped around his left arm.

"I'm fine, sit here," he patted the spot beside him, motioning for Qu Qing Ju to side beside him.

As Qu Qing Ju sat down, her gaze still stayed at his wound but the white muslin covered the wound: "What's going on, why did the assassins come, who has such daring?" Finishing, she furrowed her eyebrows, "How's the wound, has the *taiyi* been summoned?"

"It didn't reach the bone, just a graze from the arrowhead," He Heng smiled, "the *taiyi* will arrive soon."

Just as he said so, Ming He brought the *taiyi* in. Seeing *wang fei*'s hair flowing free, he paused before reacting with a bow, announcing: "*Wang ye*, *wang fei*, the head of the Imperial Hospital has arrived."

"*Wei chen* greets *wang ye, wang fei*." The head of the Imperial Hospital was over half a century old but still energetic. He saw that *wang ye* and *wang fei* were sitting extremely close and instantly understood. The outside always spoke of how good the relationship was between the Duan Wang couple. He had thought it was just a rumor, but today he saw that it did seem true.

"Please stand. Look at *ben wang*'s wound and stop *wang fei* from fretting so much," He Heng extended his left arm. He gave a faint smile and teased, "Don't purposefully make it too serious."

"Yes," The dean carefully untied the white muslin wrapped around the wound. He saw the wound on Duan Wang's wrist was very long, it did seem like a graze from an arrow. The appearance was very frightening, but it hadn't made any significant damage.

Qu Qing Ju inhaled sharply. She watched as the *taiyi* skilfully treat the bloodstains on the wound before putting a poultice on and wrapping the injury.

"*Wang ye,* your wound might not have reached the bone, but the wound is very large. It will take a few days of recovery and cannot touch the water in these next days." Remembering that *wang ye* had come to this manor specially to soak in the hot springs, the dean felt sympathy for the injured person.

Why was Duan Wang get attacked, or who directed it, it wasn't important to him. The most important was that he wouldn't be dragged in. After the dean finished everything, he stood to bid farewell.

Ming He personally sent him off and presented a large amount of fees: "Dean *daren*, you say, with *wang ye*'s wound, should he rest peacefully for a few days?

Peacefully?

The dean ruminated for a second before smiling and assuring: "Naturally he should rest peacefully and recover. *Wang ye* might be busy usually, but he would have to make himself idle in the next little while."

"This one understands. Thanks for your trouble, Dean *daren*. D*a ren*, this way." Ming He gave a bow and smiled as he made a motion in the direction of exit.

"Ming *gongong* doesn't have to be so courteous. No need to send me off, farewell." The dean returned half a bow, smiling before he sat on the mule cart to leave the manor.

Ming He looked at the mule cart as it left, giving a bark of laughter before turning to return to Yu Yun Lou.

"Ah, how did I come out with my hair down?" Qu Qing Ju suddenly stood from her seat. She held her hair, hurriedly declaring, "*Wang ye*, I'm going back to the inner rooms." Turning, she muttered, "So embarrassing."

He Heng thought about her state just now and couldn't help but laugh out loud.

In the inner room, Qu Qing Ju slightly frowned. This matter didn't seem right somewhere.

But the finer details determined success and failure. She had been so worried she came out with wet hair to see He Heng. Such concern, did it count as coming from the heart?

Thinking about the fierce wound, Qu Qing Ju furrowed her brows. She then thought, these assassins were very stupid not to poison the arrows. They really wasted a very good opportunity.

Chapter 59

Putting up her hair, Qu Qing Ju came out again to see He Heng was sitting on a recliner reading a book. She unhesitatingly sat down next to him: "*Wang ye*, an assassination attempt is a serious matter. Shouldn't we tell *mu fei* and let her know you are not seriously wounded to stop her from worrying."

He Heng nodded: "You are the most considerate," Finishing, he called for Qian Chang Xin and gave out his waist plate for him to enter the

palace to see Jing *guifei*. He was to clearly tell the process and the important point was that his wound wasn't serious.

Qian Chang Xin hurriedly left the manor. Even though it was late now, even if the palace was already locked, he had to think of a way to pass the message into the palace.

The guards at the city gate recognized Qian Chang Xin as Duan Wang's personal *taijian*. They didn't ask any questions before allowing him to pass. By this time, the news that Duan Wang had been attacked by assassins had spread through Jing City. They saw the rush that Qian Chang Xin was in, who would dare to block him?

Entering the palace gate, Qian Chang Xin scurried as he travelled to Zhong Jing Palace. Before he could state his intentions, he was ushered in by the servants of Zhong Jing Palace. When he enter the room, he didn't dare to see the expression on Jing *guifei*'s face, submissively kneeling on the ground, announcing: "*Guifei niangniang*, His Highness has sent *nucai* to come give a morning greeting to *niangniang*."

"How is *wang ye*'s condition?" Jing *guifei*'s voice was heavier than usual but she still didn't lose her composure. Ding *mama*, the person standing by her side, was the only one that found that the hand *niangniang* had was tightly grasping on the arm of the chair, the fingers almost white. It was clear how worried *niangniang* was.

"The Dean of the Imperial Hospital has already seen to it. His Highness isn't seriously injured, it just grazed the flesh. *Wang ye* and *wang fei* were afraid you would become worried listening to the inaccurate rumors and sent *nucai* to personally tell." Finishing, he obediently recited the string of events, not emphasizing or distorting any part.

After Jing *guifei* heard the course of events, she was much calmer. She thought for a while with half-lidded eyes before she raised her head to inform Qian Chang Xin; "You go and tell His Highness to recover for the next few days in the manor. Sent more people to the manor to protect your *wang ye* and *wang fei*." Finishing, she stood and rubbed her cheeks.

She raised her head slightly as she announced: "*Ben gong* is going to Tian Qi Palace to beg to see the Emperor."

It wasn't only Shu *guifei* that could use the trick of injuring oneself to gain another's sympathy. She, Wei Chan Yi, also could use it, and she would use it better, and without a trace.

Reaching up to take out a few hairpins from her hair to let the finely crafted hairstyle become loose, Jing *guifei* took out a handkerchief to wipe the corners of her eyes. Suddenly, her foot tripped and she stumbled as she walked towards the outer room, wailing tragically: "Your Majesty, our child … …" As she ran, a few locks of hair fell loose, framing her face and making her look even more sorrowful.

Ding *mama* quickly wiped the corners of her eyes with force, choking as she followed, "*Niangniang, niangniang,* be careful of where you step." As the words landed, the person had already disappeared from the room.

Qian Chang Xin's face was full of reverence as he looked at the empty door. A beat later, he climbed up from the ground. When he walked out of the inner room, he saw the palace maids and *taijian*, each covering their faces, sobbing or looking fretful. In this instant, he felt he had a very large room for improvement.

In the end, no one knew that Jing *guifei* said when she went to Tian Qi Palace. But that night, Qing De Emperor sent out many Imperial Decrees. The Junior Minister of Justice, the Minster of Justice, the Commander of the Imperial Guards all received a decree. The meaning was they could sacrifice everything in order to find the mastermind. It showed just how furious the emperor was about the matter.

Other than that, Qing De Emperor bestowed many different kinds of rare herbs, gold, silver, jewellery and outstanding martial arts guards, *taiyi* skilled in treating all kinds of injuries. This night, the gate of Jing City seemed to open and close, close and open as an endless stream of gifts were delivered from the palace by horse courier to the Fu Lang Manor where Duan Wang was recovering.

A low ranked soldier that guarded the gate looked at the fast horses as they disappeared into the night. He said with some awe: "The Emperor treats His Highness Duan Wang so well."

A senior soldier snorted at the side: "Other than Rui Wang, Duan Wang is the most favoured by the Emperor. Did you see the Emperor this worried when Cheng Wang was attacked last time?" If they didn't already know, they would have thought that Duan Wang and Cheng Wang's injuries were reversed.

It could be seen that a person just didn't have to choose a father when he reincarnated, but also the mother. Otherwise, why was it that they were all imperial sons, but the care was so drastically different?

"Are you suicidal, are you allowed to discuss the matters of the *wang ye*?" Commander Sun passed by on his horse. Hearing the conversation, he said with a heavy face, "Shut the gates!"

The expression of the two changed with fright. Along with the others, they obediently close the city gate. The result was that not long after, they saw a few more people speeding on horses, a gold token held up in one hand. They instantly understood, oh, this was also from the palace heading to Fu Lang Manor.

On the backs of the horses were several boxes wrapped in bright yellow cloth. The gatesmen didn't know what was inside but their expression was wooden. How many horses have already passed by?

Qu Qing Ju disguised a yawn and looked at the piles of gifts in front of her. She turned to look at the lazily sitting He Heng. Smiling as she commented: "The Emperor has such care for *wang ye*, how many rounds of gifts have already come?"

With an expression like a smile yet not a smile, He Heng glanced at Qu Qing Ju before flipping a page of his book, "It will be better tomorrow. By that time, we would have had a good sleep. Regardless, I'm not going to court any time soon. I can accompany you now."

This disdainful tone might be a bit too hurtful. Qu Qing Ju blinked her eyes: "Doesn't *wang ye* have to rest to recover?"

"*Ben wang* was frightened and needs to see the mountains and water to comfort the soul," He Heng smiled as he closed the book. He looked at Qu Qing Ju as he commanded: "Qing Ju has to keep me company. Otherwise, I would be frightened if I was alone."

Qu Qing Ju raised the corner of her mouth to make her smile brighter, "Don't be afraid, *wang ye*, I will keep you in good company."

He Heng smiled broadly: "Qing Ju is so kind."

Standing in the corner, Ming He and the others buried their heads. The tactics of *wang ye* and *wang fei* as they teased and flirted were better and better. As the servants, they had to pretend to not hear, and control their expressions. It was very hard.

"Imperial Decree has arrived!"

The two exchanged a look and calmly patted at the non-existent dust on their bodies before they knelt in the center of the room. After the *taiyi* recited the decree and the gifts, Qu Qing Ju, as the uninjured party, took over the imperial decree and bowed to give thanks. She watched as the *taijian* present the items and then as the *taijian* quickly left.

Randomly opening a box, Qu Qing Ju's eyes narrowed. Hundred year old blood ginseng, very rare stuff. She tilted her head to look at He Heng and found that the other didn't even look at the items in the box.

Closing the box, Qu Qing Ju asked: "Why don't *wang ye* sleep first, it's alright if I stand guard."

"Just a minor injury, don't worry like this," He Heng smiled helplessly, knowing that the other was worried about his wound. He assured, "It's passed eleven now, there shouldn't be any more." Finishing, he used the right hand which wasn't injured to pull the person to sit beside him.

Qu Qing Ju followed and sat. She sighed, saying: “If they find the mastermind, they must punish him strictly.”

“Don’t worry. In the end, someone will be punished,” He Heng clasped her hand as he said, “After a few days, Cheng Wang might be coming to the manor. You need to get someone to prepare a residence.”

“*Si shu*?” Qu Qing Ju stilled before smiling as she mused, “That’s true, soaking in the hot springs would be good for *si shu*’s body.”

“En,” He Heng kissed her cheek, “My Qing Ju is so smart.”

Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow: “Is *wang ye* comforting a little child?”

He Heng laughed lightly. The result was he was bitten firmly on the shoulder by Qu Qing Ju which ended up with him laughing even more joyously.

Qu Qing Ju pushed her head onto the other’s chest, gave a yawn, rubbed a few times before she closed her eyes.

Seeing the person in his embrace sleeping like this, He Heng smiled helplessly. Just before, she had said for him to go sleep first, how did it turn out to be her falling asleep first?

Thinking of how the person he was hugging had looked as she ran in with her flowing hair, He Heng’s heart felt ticklish. Even though she had not been wearing makeup, her hair a tangle, but in his eyes, she was the most beautiful at that instant.

Gently touching a finger to the slightly moist lips, He Heng’s lips curled. Even his eyes were full of mirth.

On the second morning, the court had turned into a mess due to the fact Duan Wang had been attacked. The incident with the envoys hadn’t been cleared yet, and now Duan Wang was also attacked by assassins. It was lucky that the Imperial Guards had patrolled in that area. If Commander Sun hadn’t went to that location, who knew how bad the situation would have been.

Qing De Emperor was in a rage, ordering the Imperial Guards, Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Court to cooperate at the highest level and find the criminal. He even said at court, if they couldn't make clear of the matter of Duan Wang being attacked, then the three top officials of these three places would not stay there.

The only imperial son left at court, He Qi, thought suspiciously, did *lao san* really do this?

Commander Sun felt fortunate at this time. Thankfully he heard been hearing about robbery occurring at a certain place outside the city these past days. It was why he decided to patrol there yesterday. Who knew he would coincidentally save Duan Wang, this was a boon from the gods.

But who was that person that reported to him that robberies were occurring at a spot outside the city? He remembered that low ranked soldier's appearance was very normal. He couldn't remember what he looked like. He was the commander, but there were several thousand people in the Imperial Guards. Was he to know all of them?

Really unable to remember about the person, Commander Sun gave up. It was just a coincidence, the heavens helping him. Otherwise, if Duan Wang had died due to an assassination when he was the Commander of the Imperial Guards, he might not have been able to keep the hat on top of his head, but his head would have dropped along with the hat.

In Cheng Wang Fu, He Ming finished listening to the servant report on the matter of *er ge* being attacked by assassins. He thought for a beat before ordering: "Prepare the gifts for Duan Wang. *Ben wang* might be going to Fu Lan Manor in a few days to accompany *er ge* in his recovery.

As expected, in the afternoon, the Fu Lang Manor sent someone to Cheng Wang Fu. They said that Fu Lang Manor was beautiful and clean and the *taiyi* there were skilled at treating injuries. They hoped that His Highness Cheng Wang would stay for a few days at Fu Lang Manor to soak in the hot springs and let this *taiyi* look at his wounds again.

Chapter 60

The white jade hot spring, in Qu Qing Ju's eyes, was just a small swimming pool. She happily did a few strokes of butterfly, and then backstroke. She swam from one side to another before she stopped to lean forward on one side and looked at He Heng who was sitting near the edge, drinking tea: "It's such a pity that *wang ye*'s wounds haven't healed yet. Otherwise, we could be soaking together." She saw the other's eyes glance in her direction. Her feet pushed off and she swam away.

Seeing Qu Qing Ju treat the hot spring as her personal swimming pool, He Heng smiled helplessly. Even though the other's actions were a bit annoying, her posture was very beautiful. His gaze fell upon the body in the pool. She was wearing a red body-length dress embroidered with a scale pattern. It spread out in the water, making her look like a mermaid. There was a beautiful dash of red in the pool, and then she purposefully struck a seductive pose.

When he saw Qu Qing Ju throw her head back, revealing the clean and white neck, He Heng gulped a large mouthful of tea to cool the heat inside.

It wasn't good to soak for too long in the hot springs. Qu Qing Ju climbed on the jade stairs beside the hot spring to leave the pool. After using a large cotton cloth to towel herself down, she took off the now-transparent scale dress right in front of He Heng. She tied a large loose robe around her body, walked towards He Heng and bent down to pick up his teacup. She smiled as she commented: "*Wang ye,* drinking too much tea can cause your wound to scar."

He Heng was too busy admiring the picture of the beauty in the bath, and had forgotten about his tea. He reached out with his right hand to pull the other into his embrace, the teacup falling to the floor with a tinkling sound, "Since I cannot drink tea, why don't I have a taste of a beauty instead?"

Qu Qing Ju's finger gently swiped across the bandaged wound on He Heng's left arm. She gave a smile full of regret and uncertainty: "But the *taiyi* said *wang ye* has to rest."

"The *taiyi* didn't say that Qing Ju had to rest," He Heng moved as he held the person closer. A certain part that was exceptionally alert coincidentally touched Qu Qing Ju's sensitive part, "Why doesn't Qing Ju exercise some more?"

Qu Qing Ju twisted. Seeing the other inhale, she breathed softly and licked at his neck, "Is *wang ye* asking *qie* to help?"

As his right hand caressed that willowy waist, He Heng's voice trembled, "Is Qing Ju willing to help?"

Her arms wrapping around He Heng's neck, the corner of Qu Qing Ju's mouth curled, looking unspeakably enticing. The tip of her tongue swiped across her lips and she asked in a light voice: "*Wang ye*, why don't you take a guess?"

Their gazes met. In the midst of the white steam obscuring the room, the two curled around each other, igniting the excitement and tension in the room.

More than an hour later, Qu Qing Ju and He Heng came out together. Qu Qing Ju only had a red jade hairpin in her simple hairstyle and wore a wide-sleeved dress as red as the sunset. When contrasted against the black cotton robe of *wang ye*, it looked extremely picturesque.

He Ming was escorted by the servants to his residence. He coincidentally saw *er ge* and a red-clad woman walking together. He paused momentarily before lowering his eyes as he quickly walked in front of the two: "Good morning, *er ge, er sao."*

"Good morning *si shu*." Qu Qing Ju lowered her head slightly and took a small step back.

"You finally came, *wei xiong* has been hoping for a long time that you would come," He Heng released Qu Qing Ju's hand. He said with a

smile, “Go see your residence first. If there is anything lacking, just order them.”

“Thanks, *er ge*.” He Ming cupped his hand over his other in a fist. He, along with his entourage, followed the manor servants to his residence. His rooms were not far from Yu Yun Tower. It was called Joyful Jade Pavilion. Located beside his rooms was a hot spring. This seemed to have been specially arranged for He Ming.

He Ming looked at his surroundings. The furnishings were all very fine, even the color of the bed covering were what he usually used. Sitting down at the carved pear-wood table, the *yahuan* came in with tea and refreshments, presenting them to He Ming.

Just as he took a drink, He Ming saw Ming He coming in with a smile. He gave a respectful bow before he spoke: “Your Highness Cheng Wang, our *wang ye* said that after you have rested, he invites you to join him for the evening meal at Jade Cloud Tower. If Your Highness is not used to this room, *nucai* will get the servants to change it immediately.

“This place is very good, nothing needs to be changed. Give my thanks to *er ge*.” He Ming smiled, pushing his teacup to one side, “It is me who is disturbing him. *Gonggong*, please tell *er ge* that I will arrive on time.”

“Your Highness Cheng Wang exaggerates. You and our *wang ye* are brothers. There isn’t any disturbing here,” Ming He bowed as he replied, “*Nucai* will report back to *wang ye* now. Your Highness, please have a good rest.” He gave another bow before shutting the door as he left.

Once the door was closed, the rooms became much quieter. He Ming deduced that the servants were purposefully stepping lightly as they passed by his rooms, clearly being careful so that his rest was not disrupted.

“*Er ge’*s people are very proper,”” He Ming spread his arms, allowing his personal *taijian* Sun Hai to undress him. After his jade coronet was taken down, he leaned back into the sofa, “Coming here today means that I am standing with *er ge*.”

Sun Hai carefully placed the jade coronet into a box. Hearing *wang ye* say such a thing, he questioned in a small voice: "*Wang ye*, you came here to recover, why … …"

"I'm already in the middle of the situation, who can I avoid it?" He Ming laughed carefree, "In any case, it wouldn't be as bad now. More so with *er ge.* He may be usually warm and polite but he certainly isn't a benevolent and soft-hearted person. *Lao da* might be straightforward and generous on the surface but in reality he was narrow-minded and remembered only offences, not boons. To ally with such a person, the other wouldn't have gratitude for his allies unless every venture was successful. *Lao san*'s personality is arrogant and brash, his heart only has power, not the people. To be close to such a person, even if he became the Emperor, there wouldn't be any easy days."

As He Ming spoke, his tone changed: "But *er ge*, his personality isn't as generous as *lao da*'s but he doesn't look at everyone haughtily. His thoughts might be deep but he isn't of fickle character. As long as nothing seriously wrong occurs, there will be at least some feeling." Originally, he had been hesitant but when he saw *er ge* and *er sao* holding hands as they walked, he made his decision.

As an Emperor, he naturally couldn't be compassionate and lenient but he would not be completely emotionless. Someone like *er ge* was perfect.

Sun Hai didn't understand why *wang ye* suddenly made such a decision, but as a personal *taijian*, aside from loyalty, he also had to know when to speak. So he only needed to follow *wang ye*'s orders.

"Go deliver the gifts *ben wang* brought to Jade Cloud Tower. Say that this is the regard *ben wang* has as a *didi*." He Ming stood, "Go, *ben wang* will rest."

"Yes," Sun Hai looked at the bed that had already been prepared and carefully retreated.

Qu Qing Ju looked at the heap of gifts that Cheng Wang had delivered. He had included items that were suitable for women. It looked like he

had even prepared gifts for her. She turned to look at He Heng who was toying with a jade lion biting a ball. For some reason, she was reminded of the lion that had won the ball in the New Years Lion Dance..

"*Wang ye* likes this jade statue?" Qu Qing Ju smiled as she asked, "This lion is good-looking, so majestic."

"En, the multi-colored pearl in the mouth was also carved well," Returning the jade statue to the box, he closed the lid. He Heng commented. "It's very rare that *si di* has such intentions."

Qu Qing Ju smiled, nodding: "*Si shu* is really too polite. He can come freely, but why send over so many gifts?" Her eyes swept over the jade lion box. She thought calmly, the busy Little Student Ming wasn't as honest as he appeared.

That made more sense, how could a naïve child appear in the Imperial Family? If there ever was a naïve child, they would have already been reincarnated into another family.

"You like it too?" He Heng nodded at how Qu Qing Ju kept gazing at the box. He said, "Since you like it, then take it. It's just a small ornament. It would be its greatest fortune to make a beauty happy."

"I'm a woman, what do I want with these lions and tigers?" Qu Qing Ju snorted, "In the future, why don't *wang ye* find me some jade lotuses or hibiscuses? I find them more beautiful." She looked disdainfully at the box, "It's only you rough men that like fierce beasts that chew raw meat."

He Heng fell into speechlessness. It clearly represented grandeur and bravery, such a fierce and majestic lion. Why was it then, that in the words of his *wang fei*, it simply became a beast that only knew to eat raw meat?

He immediately changed his point of view. It was just a beast, where was there any other meaning?

Even if it did have one, right now, it was just a jade lion.

That night, He Heng put on a banquet to receive He Ming. Qu Qing Ju didn't attend. Even though the separation of the sexes in Da Long Dynasty was similar to that of the North and South Song Dynasties of the previous life, she was perceptive enough to not meddle in this matter.

Qu Qing Ju's appetite wasn't affected at all as she ate the food that was made for her alone. She was even able to drink an extra half bowl of pearl pheasant soup.

"*Wang fei*, *wang ye* said he might drink some wine with His Highness Cheng Wang and that *wang fei* can retire early if tired." Ming He had entered the bottom level of the tower and saw *wang fei* was washing her hands since she had finished eating. He added, "*Wang ye* also said that he wants to climb the Bai Yun Mountain with you tomorrow."

"I know. Get the servants to make some sobering soup. If the banquet is over, serve some of it to the two *wang ye*." Qu Qing Ju wiped her hands dry. She added: "Also, pass my words over: *wang ye* should drink less wine, too much wine isn't good for his wound."

"Yes, *nucai* remembers."

After Ming He retreated, Qu Qing Ju's brow jumped. If he was playing the tactic of self-inflicted injury, then he had to play from beginning to end. The details determined the success. Whatever he shouldn't do, he really was not allowed to do them.

After hearing Ming He's message, He Heng smiled helplessly. Turning to He Ming, he said: "Look, this is the bothersome part of having a *wang fei*. She reminds you at every turn."

He Ming saw that even though *er ge* was complaining, the smile on his face was growing brighter. He replied: "*Er ge*, don't get angry. Based on *didi*'s humble opinion, this is *er sao* acting concerned for you. No one else would dare to restrict your pleasures like this. It can be seen that *er sao* has your body in mind."

When he finished, he saw the smile on He Heng's face becoming even more visible. He raised a cup to He Ming: "It looks like *si di* will love his wife in the future. That's a good thing."

He Ming followed in raising his cup then drained his cup in one swallow.

He Ming said to Ming He: "Return to tell *wang fei* and say that I know and rest early."

"Yes," Ming He once again left to ferry messages between *wang ye* and *wang fei*.

He Ming seemed to feel that *er ge* was showing off. But given his understanding of *er ge*'s character, he very quickly rejected the thought and admonished himself for even thinking of it. Sometimes, the truth just accidentally brushed past others.

To be a Virtuous Wife Chapter 61-80

Chapter 61

The assassination attempt against He Heng had caused both the court and the hougong to descend into chaos, yet He Heng himself was at peace. He didn't have to wake up early to attend court nor did he have to fence with those two bothersome brothers. He saw He Ming, clad in a brown robe, approaching him and a smile appeared on his face, "Today's weather is pretty good. It's perfect for going outside."

He Ming nodded in agreement. The day after er ge was attacked, there had been a rainstorm. Today's sun was exceptionally bright. Thinking back to last night, after he had finished eating, er ge had invited him for a walk to Bai Yun Mountain. He didn't hesitate in accepting his invitation. But right now, he noticed that er ge was standing in the courtyard as if he was waiting for someone.

"Yu di heard that there is a Five Estates Monastery on top of Bai Yun Mountain. Many people have visited the area." He Ming smiled, "It's just that I've never been there."

"Us brothers are too busy with Court matters. It's rare that we have free time like now. Let's go for a nice walk and take a good look around." He Heng's tone was relaxed, as though he had never been attacked at all.

Whilst the brothers were talking, an unfamiliar taijian scurried over to bow in front of them: "Wang ye, wang fei said that it's possible to set off in less than ten minutes."

He Heng nodded, "Order the servants to prepare the items needed for the outing. We will leave in fifteen minutes."

He Ming watched the relatively young taijian walk away before hesitantly saying: "Er ge, yu di didn't know that er sao was going to come, this … …"

"We're one family, there's no need to follow protocol for such a minor matter," He Heng smiled as he patted his shoulder, "You saozi has been married to me for several months. She'd been running the household all this time and hadn't had a chance to walk around. Today's weather is so good, wouldn't it be a disappointment if she stayed in?"

Seeing that er ge really was treating him as one of his own people, He Ming's heart warmed. He raised his hands together in a fist as he said: "Er ge is right, it was didi who is too much of a zealot."

Inside Jade Cloud Tower, Qu Qing Ju stepped into her embroidered flat shoes. She was in a good mood as she came out the door with her yahuan. After seeing that both He brothers were waiting for her, she paused before walking rapidly to He Heng and bowed properly to He Ming, "Good morning, si shu."

"Good morning, er sao." He Ming hurriedly returned a bow.

Qu Qing Ju retreated half a step, clearly avoiding half his bow. She turned to smile at He Heng: "Has wang ye waited long?" She wasn't wearing her usual floor-length dress. Instead she had on a short dress that was embroidered with peach blossoms. It was perfect, matching perfectly with the spring sun.

"Did you leave anything behind? If not, we should leave." He Heng touched the butterfly and flower gold buyao in Qu Qing Ju's hair. For some reason, even though he hadn't yet seen the scenery outside, he'd already felt that it was lovely.

Qu Qing Ju shook her head, the buyao gently sliding against He Heng's palm: "I didn't leave anything behind. Now is the best time to leave."

"If that's so, then let's go," He Heng grasped Qu Qing Ju's hand. He turned to He Ming, "Si di, please."

"Er ge and er sao first," He Ming took a step back, slightly lowering his head to indicate his respect for his elder brother and wife.

He Heng smiled at him and walked with Qu Qing Ju in the front. He Ming walked two steps behind. His gaze fell on their backs and he felt admiration. Er ge and er sao had such good feelings for each other. Thinking about his own marriage to the xiaojie from the Luo Family, the Rites Ministry had already started preparing the wedding and He Ming felt expectation bloom in his heart. After his wang fei entered the fu, would they be as affectionate as his brother and his wife?

Sun Hai, following behind He Ming, was also deeply moved. They had said that the Imperial Family had no emotions, but that was only because they hadn't met the right person. Look at Duan Wang and Duan Wang Fei. This was a real perfect couple, a match made in the Heavens.

As the chief steward of Cheng Wang Fu, even though his ears and eyes might not be considered talented, he knew what he should know. He had heard that there had been a few beautiful women in Duan Wang Fu, but after wang fei entered the fu, a beauty had been sent away but Duan Wang wasn't dissatisfied with Duan Wang Fei. Even with the matter of Chang De Gong Fu, there hadn't been any whispers of dissent between the couple.

Maybe it was because Duan Wang was infatuated or perhaps Duan Wang Fei had great skill. But no matter the reason, out of the three Highness' who were married, only Duan Wang was the subject of the public's admiration.

As it was quite a hike to reach the top, the servants had prepared the sedans in advance. If their masters became tired, their strength would be required.

After coming out of the range of Fu Lang Mountain, they hadn't walked far before she saw Bai Yun Mountain. Qu Qing Ju looked at the sign engraved with the three characters of Bai Yun Mountain. She raised her head to gaze at the towering green mountain which appeared especially majestic under the sun.

"What is it, are your legs soft?" He Heng teased as he noticed her look of awe. Smiling, he suggested, "If you don't want to walk, you can have them carry you." He pointed at the line of sedans behind them.

Qu Qing Ju slightly raised a brow and reached out to pull his sleeve: "I'm not afraid of going up. I'll just pull on you."

He Heng laughed lightly. He whispered into her ear: "If you can't walk up, I'll carry you."

Qu Qing Ju gave him a smile, which instantly disappeared. She looked regretfully at his left arm, "What a pity that wang ye is wounded."

He Heng: … …

He Ming felt that that his name wasn't good, for sure. Otherwise, why else would his brother and sao zi act as though he was as clear as a crystal – not existing at all? He shifted his gaze to look at the Five Estates Monastery that was located halfway up the mountain and wondered how much longer it would take to climb.

The couple continued teasing each other before regaining their usual composure and continued their climbing. Both of them knew that the Five Estates Monastery was famous and it would have many visitors. If they met some family members of officials, it would be too embarrassing.

The mountain road was made up of stairs carved directly from the rocks. There was an unspeakable feeling as they stepped on these stairs. As she listened to the birdsong, Qu Qing Ju turned to look back at her progress and felt joy at her accomplishment.

Breathing hard, Qu Qing Ju used a handkerchief to wipe at the fine sweat on her face. She panted: "I didn't think I've ever climbed this many steps before." She saw He Heng's face wasn't red nor was he breathing hard. She felt that it wasn't fair. Didn't they say that these imperial sons had no strength, that they only knew how to eat, drink and play? Looking at this calm and composed state of He Heng, was her knowledge faulty?

“Wang ye’s endurance is very good,” Qu Qing Ju reached out to pull on his sleeve so she could climb another step, “How many more?”

“We started learning the six arts when we turned six years old. When I was younger, I liked riding, shooting and polo. You don’t even need strength to climb such a small mountain like this.” He Heng saw her state and wanted the servants to help her onto the sedan. But Qu Qing Ju refused.

“I won’t be defeated,” Qu Qing Ju waved away the servants. She raised her head to look at the seemingly endless stairs, “Continue.”

He Heng smiled helplessly. He looked at her for a beat and extended his palm to her.

Qu Qing Ju slightly lowered her face. She looked at the clean palm in front of her, pausing momentarily before putting her left hand onto his wide palm.

Even the most difficult road would end. Qu Qing Ju finally stepped on the last rock stair. She looked at the black stone path that led to the monastery, breathing heavily. She wiped the sweat off her slightly rosy face and revealed a smile: “Finally here.”

He Heng looked at her, smiled and nodded, “Many wives of the officials and powerful men come to this place from Jing City. Wang fei may be the only woman who has actually walked up the mountain. Today, when you go inside to request a stick, it will be the best one.”

Qu Qing Ju couldn’t believe that He Heng would say such a thing. She stilled before replying: “Wang ye walked up as well. So both of us will get a good stick.”

He Heng reached out to touch her forehead. He found that she hadn’t over-sweated. Relieved, he said: “Husband and wife is one being. When you request a stick, it will represent the both of us.”

Qu Qing Ju thought to herself, who doesn’t know that you feel that it is improper for males to do such things? The smile on her face became

even luminous: “Great. With our combined luck, it would be an extremely good stick.”

The three walked to the main gate of the Five Estates Monastery and found that the monastery wasn’t very large in size. It looked very ancient and dignified. A black-bearded master sat near the door, the Buddhist robes on his body slight worn and clean. He didn’t seem to react to their appearance.

The monastery worshiped the Jade Pure One, the Grand Pure One and the Supreme One. Qu Qing Ju, the atheist, started to revere deities after her time travel. After she had entered the hall of the gods through the side door, she knelt down on the praying mat. She bowed then took the jar of sticks and closed her eyes as she shook.

A short while later, a stick dropped out. She scanned it. She found that if the characters were separated, she could recognize them, but she couldn’t understand the meaning of the whole poem. She returned the jar to its original spot, picked up the stick and left through the same door to see the master.

“Please, master, explain this stick to this one,” Qu Qing Ju politely presented the stick with both hands.

The black-bearded master looked at her hands before raising his head to gaze at her face. He stood to take the stick with both hands, a harmonious smile on his face as he requested: “This honoured female, please sit. Wait for this poor Taoist to take a look.”

He Heng saw Qu Qing Ju sit down in front of the black-bearded Taoist and stood to walk up behind Qu Qing Ju, waiting to hear the Taoist’s explanation.

Who knew that the Taoist would take just one look at the stick before placing it to the side. He ran his fingers through his black beard: “The Endless One,[1] recently Jing has encountered great change. Not many

[1] The Endless One isn’t actually one of the deities. In Taoism, the three great deities can be called the “Three Endless (Eternal) Ones”. The “One” in the “endless one” is an emphasis on endless (which could be translated

have come to the monastery to request sticks. The fact that the two honoured ones have walked up at this time, it might be fate. This Taoist sees that both have brows that are full and light auras. Even if a stick hadn't been requested, you already have great karma.

"This Taoist has profound wisdom to know that we had walked from just a glance," Qu Qing Ju smiled, neglecting to mention their supposed great karma.

"This Taoist Xuan Ling has stayed at this monastery for more than half a year. In all of this honoured one's life, only you two cannot be explained by this Taoist," The bearded Taoist stood up to bow to them and placed the stick in He Heng's hand, "This Taoist has failed the two honoured ones' hopes. I'm ashamed, ashamed.

He Heng took the stick and smiled warmly as he reassured: "Spirit Master Xuan Ling is too serious. The Mandate of Heaven is all around the world. We shouldn't make things difficult for Spirit Master.

He lowered his head to look at the stick. Written on top was, "Nine mountains quiet green tears flower red, three geng[2] fire five geng chicken. Feng[3] flies elegantly, the four seas beg huang."

A strange stick. The first part was not related to the second. The words did not match, not to mention the lack of any coupling. It was a mess. He Heng handed the stick over to Qu Qing Ju. He didn't know why women liked believing in this kind of stuff.

Chapter 62

The Spirit Master didn't notice He Heng passing the stick over to Qu Qing Ju. He gave them another Taoist bow, "Two honored ones, no

as limitless or countless), which is used as one of the most respectful ways of referring to someone and represents the highest and greatest power.

[2] Geng is equivalent to o'clock. Three geng is the time from 11pm -1am at night. Five geng is the time from 3 to 5 am.

[3] Feng and huang are two mythical birds, often combined as one being. Feng is male, huang is female. As fenghuang, the being can be translated to be the phoenix.

other guests are coming here today. This Taoist bids you farewell." He left the place, stroking his beard.

Before Qu Qing Ju could react, Spirit Master Xuan Ling had already walked into the forest. She could only see the back of his figure as he quickly disappeared from her sight.

He really did look like a powerful master, leaving so gracefully and only showing the back of his figure. Qu Qing Ju lowered her head to look at the stick in her hand. She might not understand the meaning of what was written but she could still detect what was wrong with the stick.

Most sticks were part of a set amount, the writing of a particular style. The one she received had the wrong type of coupling, the topics were unrelated and the tone was wrong. Even the poem was constructed randomly with no rhyme or reason.

Perhaps this stick had been a practice stick of one of the junior Taoists of the monastery? No wonder the Taoist looked profound but couldn't explain the stick. Did he also think the stick wasn't right?

"Nine mountains quiet and green tears flower red, three geng fire five geng chicken .. …" Qu Qing Ju toyed with the stick as she recited the two unrelated lines. She raised her brow and stood up, "Wang ye, I don't think there is anything more to see here. Why don't we leave?"

He Heng saw that she didn't seem to care about the stick since she'd handed it over to Mu Jin behind her. He smiled and agreed: "Let's leave then." The Taoist said that they were some honoured persons and that the number of Jing guests had lessened after that incident in Jing City. He must have noticed their status from their high-quality clothing and the assassination attempt had only occurred a few days earlier.

As for that part about them climbing up the mountain, he turned to look at the rosy blush that still hadn't faded from Qu Qing Ju's face. It was a very visible fact. Ghosts and gods, it was just that one saw what one expected.

What nine mountains quiet and green tears flower red, three geng fire five geng … … He Heng's expression suddenly changed. He stopped dead in his tracks and turned to look at Mu Jin, who was supporting Qu Qing Ju, "Let ben wang see the stick again."

After seeing no objections coming from wang fei, Mu Jin carefully gave him the stick. She noticed that wang ye's expression was slightly strange.

"This stick has nonsense written on it. Don't waste any effort in keeping it," He Heng threw the stick to Qian Chang Xin beside him, before turning to speak to Qu Qing Ju, "The road down is more difficult, we'll use the sedans this time."

Qu Qing Ju didn't look at his actions and only smiled and nodded in response. The couple walked ahead of He Ming, who was perplexed by his brother's actions. He Heng said: "A stick that has no rhyme or reason, it seems that your er sao's hand isn't very lucky."

Qu Qing Ju smiled as she replied: "I asked you to come along this time. You didn't join me because you said that I was requesting for the both of us. Now you disdain my hand for being unlucky. That's not fair."

"Fine, fine, good men don't fight with women," He Heng smiled as he waved his hand, "We should still descend. There's a small stream at the foot of Bai Yun Mountain. We can have a picnic beside it."

"That's good," He Ming acted as though he didn't see the flirtations between the two, a sincere smile on his face, "Yu di had always wanted to have a meal in the midst of nature."

As the three talked, they walked along the black stone path. Somehow, the topic switched to the matter of He Ming being attacked when he went to Jiang Nan.

"The Royal Court might be fighting heavily but this matter will eventually reach a conclusion," He Heng understood his predicament, patting his shoulder as he comforted sympathetically, "There is always difficult matters in the world. You just have to endure them."

"Er ge is right, even if fuhuang is honoured of the nine-five ,[4] he cannot do as he pleases." He Ming smiled, "Don't worry er ge, yu di understands."

He Heng nodded. He looked at the three step-carriages in front, saying: "Si di first."

"You first." He Ming slightly bent his body, expressing the respect that he had as a didi for his elder brother in every way.

After the three got on, Qu Qing Ju looked at the scenery through the sheer cloth. She felt the carriage start to sway as it moved. He Ming was right. Even the Emperor, as the honoured of the nine-five, could not do as he pleased, let alone everyone else.

Suddenly, she straightened, honoured of the nine-five … … nine … … five … …

Patting her face, Qu Qing Ju once again relaxed lazily onto the soft cushion. It didn't matter if she thought too much. All she did today was get a trash stick, nothing else happened.

Every step taken going down the mountain had to be firm. The servants carrying them carefully and steadily stepped on each stone stair. When they had finally reached flat ground, they all simultaneously let out a breath. Flat road was much easier to travel on than going downhill, and much safer too.

[4]九五之尊: the numbers nine and five come from possibly the most influential Chinese Classics I Ching (Yi Jing). It is a book on divination taken in part from Zhou Jing (of Western Zhou Dynasty) which was based on oracle bones. The divination is done on a set of 64 hexagrams(each with six horizontal lines, unbroken ones are yang, broken lines are yin). The first and best hexagram is Qian (six unbroken lines) which is the most masculine and also represent Heaven or the Sky. The first two lines represent the earth, the second pair the people, the third pair heaven. The first, third, and fifth lines are yang (the position, unrelated to whether the line is broken or not). The second, fourth, and sixth lines occupy a yin position. Five is the most masculine and the best representation of heaven. The nine (jiu) isn't an actual number, it's a symbol that indicate (yin/yang) of the number. Hence, nine-five representing the Mandate of Heaven and the Emperor – creating the nine dragons on the emperor's robes with five feet, the construction of the Forbidden Palace and was one of the reasons the first Zhou Emperor (as king

Just then, they saw several carriages heading towards them from the opposite direction. The carriages looked alike and had two armoured guards standing by each carriage.

Qian Chang Xin's eyes narrowed and he instantly understood. This was most likely the female candidates [5] who were being sent to Jing City from the other parts of the country. His expression didn't change and continued to proceed forward, not letting the servants give way.

The driver in the front didn't know who it was, but after seeing the many guards following behind the three sedans, he knew it was most likely a family of an official or nobility who'd came out to see the wilderness. He drove the wagon to one side and waited for them to pass by before moving on.

The candidates in the wagons looked at the sedans traveling past them and started to talk amongst themselves.

"I wonder who is sitting in the sedans. Look how big the procession was." A candidate who looked fifteen stated, "It looks so magnificent."

"With this many guards and servants, it can't be a normal person," A slightly fatter candidate glanced at her, "Maybe it's a wang ye or jun wang."

"Dream on! Is it that easy to meet a wang ye or someone similar?" Another candidate joined in, "Maybe it's a wang fei or a xiaojie."

Instantly, the candidates in the carriage laughed.

The guard driving the wagon heard the noise inside and his face became colder. Looking at the way they boasted, they didn't have the fate to become an honoured person.

He recalled the news he'd heard recently. There was a rumor going around that Jing City wasn't stable these days. Cheng Wang and Duan Wang were both recovering in the Jing suburbs. His expression changed.

[5]□女: women (girls) chosen for the draft into the palace. They will either end up as palace maids, or concubines.

Could it have been Duan Wang or Cheng Wang who had passed by? Otherwise, who else would have such a big procession in this place right now?

When the sedan stopped, the curtain in front of Qu Qing Ju was lifted. She took Mu Jin's hand to get out of the sedan. Looking at the green grass and the stream nearby, she couldn't help but sigh: "This place does have good scenery."

When she turned back, she saw the servants were already building a stove and lifting chairs. In a short while, everything that needed to be prepared was completed. Qu Qing Ju felt that the artists under her management who acted in historical works were weaklings. Just looking at the sheer abilities these servants had, those artists would fail in comparison.

He Heng walked to her side, pointing at the stream as he spoke: "This stream is very wide, so it was named Qing Xi River. On the other side lies one of our properties. It was bestowed by fuhuang two years ago.

The frustration of having too many houses and not enough time to live in them made Qu Qing Ju give a small smile: "A piece of fuhuang's paternal love. It's just a pity that we don't go out very often. We can't even visit all the properties that fuhuang has bestowed, such a regret."

"In the future, I will spend some time accompanying you out and about," He Heng saw the joy in her smile and his own smile became more visible. He pulled the other to sit down on the table constructed earlier by the servants before announcing, "I had the guards hunt down some game so that the chefs from the fu can make some dishes for us to taste."

He Ming soaked in the sunlight, his heart warming up. He pointed at the stream as he ordered: "Sun Hai, see if there's any fish there. If there is, bring me a fishing rod."

Sun Hai hurriedly ran to look at the edge of the stream. He quickly ran back. He smiled as he answered: “Wang ye, this one saw fish in the water, but could not see how large they were.”

“Then ben wang is going fishing,” he stood and raised his hands in a fist to He Heng, “er ge, didi is going to fish for a while.”

He Heng nodded, “Be careful, don’t get your feet wet.”

Hearing this, He Ming smiled, “Don’t worry, er ge, didi knows.”

Qu Qing Ju watched as He Ming lifted up his robe. After tying the cloth at his waist, he ordered the servant to bring a bench, a rod and fish bait to the stream edge. She sighed. Many of the seventeen or eighteen year old youths in her previous life were immature children. He Ming was already this steady. Now though, he was expressing some of the vitality that young people had. She didn’t know if it came from the heart or if it was just an act.

She glanced at He Heng sitting beside her. This person was just over twenty. To have the mind and tactics he did, it could be inferred that the Imperial House was a place that toughened people. The complexity of the Imperial House already surpassed the entertainment circles of her previous life. In the entertainment circles, the most you lost was fame. In the Imperial House, if you lost, your life, wife and children were also forfeited.

Just thinking about it, it couldn’t have been easy for He Heng, as a young man in his early twenties, to be the way he was. She felt, in a deep part of her heart, a small drop of maternal care form.

But after she thought of the person’s cunning, that tiny bit of maternal care instantly disappeared. She casually used a silver pick to spear a piece of pear and put it into her mouth. Tender, juicy, the taste was also good. She speared another piece to hold up in front of He Heng, indicating for him to have a taste.

Tasting it straight from Qu Qing Ju’s hand, He Heng nodded. He smiled: “Not bad.”

Qian Chang Xin glanced at the pear that had been placed very close to wang fei. Didn't wang ye dislike pears?

At Jin An Princess Royal's fu, He Gui Nian flipped through the invitations in her hand. She said with a calm expression: "Just say that ben gong is exhausted these days, and won't be receiving any guests." These people only wanted to get exclusive news about Duan Wang and Cheng Wang. Didn't they know that as a woman, how would she even know such things? But even if she did know, she wouldn't tell them anything.

Thinking about the palace news, she hesitated and summoned one of her most intimate servants, Du mama: "Last time at the admiring picture banquet, ben gong heard er dimei likes fruit. Ben gong has lots of new fruit here. Get someone to send some over to er dimei. Also, the medicine that ben gong had prepared for er di and si di, send that over as well."

Du mama listened before asking: "Princess, since the court is in a mess because of the assassination attacks, why don't you wait a few days before sending the items over?"

He Gui Nian's face was solemn as she explained: "The Imperial Guards had found out that while the handicraft of the arrow used to attack Duan Wang was normal, the wood used for the arrow shaft is one that could only be found in the mountain of one of Rui Wang's properties. This matter has already been transferred to the Supreme Court and the Ministry of Justice. Sooner or later, they will be reporting to fuhuang."

Du mama's expression changed slightly. A long pause later, she finally hypothesized: "Emperor has always been partial to Rui Wang, then this … …"

"The world is watching," He Gui Nian gripped a card, "fuhuang might favour Rui Wang but he cannot stop the mouths of the world. No matter what the result is, Rui Wang… … unless ben gong's three brothers are all gone, he will have no fate with the throne."

“Nubi will go immediately,” Du mama understood and hurriedly left.

Flipping the card in her hand, she saw what was written on top, “Chang De Gong Fu Wei shi.” She gave a cold smile. Did that person think she would be honored by her presence because she was the lao taitai of Chang De Gong Fu? She thought too highly of herself. There were many people in Jing City who were older than her, but she didn’t pay them any honors. Not to mention that this old lady was part of a gong fu that was definitely going to fall.

TLN: I made a terrible translation here because the author grabbed bits and pieces and shoved it together

九山静绿泪花红， 三更灯火五更鸡。凤飞翩翩兮，四海求**凰**

Nine mountains quiet and green tears flower red is from a poem by Li He called Xiang Fei. Xiang Fei is the daughter of Emperor Yao, and actually the younger of two very famous sisters of Chinese mythology, E Huang and Nv Ying who both married the same Emperor Shun who succeeded their father. The poem refers to the death of Emperor Shun, after which the two sisters committed suicide in the river. Nine mountains is Jiu (nine) Yi Mountains, the burial place of Shun, quiet and green is the color of bamboo, and the tears flower red are the bloody tears of Xiang Fei.

Three geng fire five geng chicken is a Tang Dynasty poem called “Encouraging Learning” (劝学). It is about a scholar working hard into the night (until 11) with the lantern fire and then sleeping until when the chicken/rooster cries (3 am) to wake up and start studying again.

Feng flies elegantly, the four seas beg huang is from the poem “Feng Seeks Huang”. It’s a love poem about a man who saw a woman and is expressing his longing and love for her. He’s the feng seeking the huang around the world.

The basic meaning that Qu Qing Ju and He Heng saw here was the nine-five of the Emperor in the first phrase. And everything else is up for

people to examine. The first phrase belongs more to He Heng and the second about Qu Qing Ju.

Chapter 63

By now, Rui Wang was the most infamous person in Jing City. First of all, he was suspected of attacking his *didi*, and now he was suspected of doing the same to his *gege*. Such ruthless conduct, disregarding all fraternal duty. Even though it had not been proven, in the eyes of everyone, Rui Wang had now charged with being unfraternal along with being arrogant and domineering.

Qing De Emperor hadn't thought that the two matters would have become intimately connected to three of his sons. He looked at the arrow which had been presented to him by the commander of the Imperial Guards. A beat later, he sighed. Regardless of the truth, Yuan'er wasn't suited to become an Emperor.

"Your Majesty, Shu *guifei niangniang* requests a meeting," The chief *taijian* entered the room and knelt in front of him.

Qing De Emperor stood and walked to the window and saw the woman waiting outside. He closed his eyes as he refused, "Tell Shu *guifei* to return. Just say that *zhen* is too busy and cannot see her right now."

A flicker of surprise appeared in the chief *taijian*'s eyes before he instantly recovered. He bowed and retreated. It seemed that the Emperor had lost hope in the Third Highness.

"*Guifei niangniang*, Emperor is concerned with state matters at the moment so he cannot meet you." The chief steward walked in front of Shu *guifei*, respectfully announcing, "Please leave."

"Emperor doesn't want to see *ben gong*?" Shu *guifei* looked at the wide open door, anger rising up within her. She turned and left, clearly furious at the conduct of the Emperor.

"Respectfully sending Shu *guifei niangniang*," The chief *taijian* serenely bent at the waist. He looked on as Shu *guifei* hurriedly left his view before slowly straightening. A smile, just like any other smile he had given before, appeared on his face. Shu *guifei*'s personality hadn't changed after all these years. But what was she doing by having a tantrum at this time?

Shu *guifei* came out of the main gate of Tian Qi Palace. Her face had darkened considerably as she entered the step-carriage. Not even the bright sunlight could lighten up her mood.

When Jing *guifei* met Shu *guifei* in the Imperial Gardens, she was holding two roses in full bloom. Seeing the ugly expression on the other's face, she smiled as she asked: "*Meimei*, what has made you so angry?"

"*Jiejie* seems to be in a good mood," Su *guifei* snorted, "I see that His Highness Duan Wang's injuries weren't that serious."

"It was the Heavens that protected him," Jing *guifei* handed the flowers to the palace maid beside her, "I just don't know how the victim feels right now."

Shu *guifei* smiled coldly. She had always looked down on Wei *shi*'s act, using pretty words to make His Majesty happy. She indicated for the *taijian* supporting the step-carriage to continue since she had no desire of disembarking.

Jing *guifei* narrowed her eyes as she saw the procession of Shu *guifei* leave in a huff. She smiled lazily: "*Ben gong* loves her temper." Otherwise, how else could she have climbed to such a high position?

Just as everyone assumed that the matter was definitely related to Rui Wang, the Associate Justice Tian *da ren* gave a report at Court which surprised everyone with its contents.

Tian *da ren* reported that the Supreme Court had, just three months before Duan Wang was attacked by assassins, received a report from a steward of Rui Wang's property. He said that the mountain had lost a large number of trees. It wasn't very valuable, but to prevent others from having nefarious aims, the steward had immediately notified the Supreme Court.

"So what Tian *da ren* means to say is that given the report from *san di*'s *fu*, this incident has nothing to do with *san di*," He Qi said amusedly before asking, "But didn't *da ren* think that this may have been purposefully done by *san di*?"

"What the truth of the case is, this official does not know. This official is only reporting what is known to the Emperor," Tian Jin Ke didn't care for Ning Wang's nitpicking. He gave a bow to Qing De Emperor before continuing, "Emperor, this official has also found that three months ago, the Imperial Guards had run across some wagons transporting wood. When they asked, they were told that they were the servants of His Highness Ning Wang. One of them had even revealed His Highness Ning Wang's medal."

"Nonsense, *ben wang* had just been fixing up a property in the suburbs. Half a year ago, the residence was burned, everyone in Jing knows that. What does Tian *da ren* mean to say?" He Qi hadn't thought that Tian Jin Ke would divert the matter onto him, instantly yelling back: "*ben wang* thinks that you have treacherous aims and is purposefully slandering *ben wang* in front of *fuhuang*."

"Please quell your anger, Your Highness Ning Wang. This official has already said that he is only saying what he has found, and has not said this matter is connected with Your Highness," Tian Jin Ke gave a bow with two hands pressed together, "Perhaps it is only a coincidence."

Qing De Emperor narrowed his eyes at his eldest son. He trusted Tian Jin Ke. This was a person that he had met before he had succeeded the throne. He impatiently interrupted before He Qi could defend, "No need for discussion. Let the Ministry of Works investigate how much wood you used to fix your estate so we can find out the truth." He turned to

ask Tian Jin Ke, "Beloved Official Tian,[6] do you know how much wood was purchased by Ning Wang?"

"This official has already investigated. Emperor, please take a look." Tian Jin Ke bent his body as he presented the evidence with both hands. After the palace hall *taijian* presented the account to the Emperor, he silently retreated to one side.

"*Fuhuang*, you don't believe *er chen*?!" He Qi looked in disbelief at the man sitting at the top. He knelt with a loud bang, "*Er chen* definitely wouldn't do anything unfraternal, *fuhuang*, please investigate thoroughly."

"Hasn't *zhen* sent someone to investigate? Get up," Qing De Emperor irritably waved his hand, "Tomorrow, *zhen* wants to know the results. End of Court!"

Once the Emperor left, the officials started to leave. He Qi looked fiercely at Tian Jin Ke. The other's peaceful expression made him even angrier, "Tian *da ren* is such a good dog, when you bite, you take half of a life."

Tian Jin Ke raised his eyelids, and lifted his hands up as he drawled: "Your Highness Ning Wang is making jokes. Instead of *wang ye* joking around with this official, shouldn't you check to see if there is anything wrong with the lumber?"

"Such a good Tian Jin Ke!" He Qi's face was black as he swept away.

Tian Jin Ke watched as Ning Wang savagely rushed out of the discussion hall. He calmly adjusted his own clothing and continued to walk at a sedate pace towards the entrance.

In Fu Lang Manor, Qu Qing Ju sat in the bathtub. She looked at the man bathing beside her, one of his arms raised high. She used a cloth to wipe

[6] term used by Emperors to refer to officials, usually those he is close to. The translation is beloved official.

his chest, caressing the other's muscles. She nodded in satisfaction, "*Wang ye*'s body isn't bad."

"How my body is, Qing Ju should know best, "He Heng smiled as he rubbed Qu Qing Ju's hair. He abruptly asked, "Has Qing Ju ever wanted something very much as a youngster?" His gaze swept across the jade gourd that was hanging on her chest. His eyes passed her white and tempting chest and slowly moved away.

"Wanted very much?" Qu Qing Ju didn't stop her hands and wiped down his stomach. She teased him a few times before smiling, "When I was young, I wanted so many things. It was different each day. When I saw other people's beautiful clothes, beautiful hair ornaments, I felt that I really wanted them. Afterwards, when I grew up, I wanted a peaceful life, a person to accompany me through my days, to accept and love me." She then laughed out loud, in either joy or self-disdain.

He Heng assumed that the 'other people' she'd mentioned were Qu Yue Su and the Qu Family. He smiled as he reassured her, "In the future, you don't have to admire others. I will give you many good things and have others admire you instead." He reached out to touch the luminous jade gourd, "I will accompany you and love you."

Qu Qing Ju's hands stilled. She smiled at He Heng, something swirling in her eyes, "I believe that right now, *wang ye*'s words are sincere." In this world, many men were sincere when they were spoke. But the length of this sincerity could be one month, one year, even a lifetime. No one knew for sure.

As a gentle and soft hand smoothed over the other's back, Qu Qing Ju laughed as she promised: "If *wang ye* loves *qie* for a lifetime, then naturally *qie* won't leave."

He Heng's heart stopped. For some reason, he felt a slightly numb yet piercing pain as a sweet yet sour feeling took over his heart. He reached out to grab her waist. The waist in his embrace was very soft, but it gave him the feeling of strength. In this instant, he suddenly understood that even if a more remarkable woman appeared in front of his eyes in the

future, there wouldn't be anyone who could make him feel the way he did right now.

The steam from the bathtub blurred the figures of the two, spreading out so that their eyes became hazy like the steam. It was beautiful and somewhat unreal, but it made one feel that it should be like this.

At Court on the second day, all the officials stood in fear as they listened to the people of the Ministry of Works reporting the strings of numbers. They focused their absolute attention to the result announced at the very end.

"… … this official and subordinates, after investigating all night, have found that the amount of lumber His Highness Ning Wang had brought and the amount he had actually used did not match up," The Minster of Works trembled as he finished reciting the numbers in his hands and submissively shrunk his head as he stood to one side.

He Qi hadn't expected that he would be implicated to this extent. He moved forward a step to plead: "*Fuhuang*, *er chen* has nothing to do with this matter. Lumber would have been wasted when they were reconstructing the residence. These numbers might not all be correct. *Fuhuang*, please re-investigate."

"If it has nothing to do with you, why did the fingernails of the assassin's corpses have pollen from the balsam and rose flowers in your estate?," Qing De Emperor threw a secret report in front of his eldest son. He watched as the other knelt down with a face full of disbelief. He continued, voice full of hurt, "And the shoes they were wearing and their clothing, they were the handiwork of the embroidery women on your estate. Did you assume that others couldn't find out because they were just minor details? If you didn't want others to know, you shouldn't have done it in the first place."

"These assassins, they wore the same clothes as the ones who tried to assassinate Cheng Wang. Even the blades and arrows were from the same craftsmen. How do you explain all of this?!" Qing De Emperor ranted furiously before coughing harshly, "As the eldest son, you tried

to frame and kill your brothers. Do you still have *zhen*, or your brothers in your heart?!"

"*Fuhuang*, *er chen* is innocent!" He Qi didn't understand how his assassins were now mixed up with the unknown assassins who attacked He Heng. He kowtowed furiously, "*Fuhuang*, *er chen* didn't know anything about this matter. *Fuhuang*, please investigate!"

"Z*hen* had asked you to investigate the case of the attacked envoys. The truth seemed to have been uncovered, but who knew that the true mastermind was you, an unfilial son," Qing De Emperor pointed at He Qi, not wanting to hear his explanation, "*zhen* will pretend to not have an animal like you as a child. Come, imprison him in the Bright Moon Tower within the Jing suburbs. He will not be released in this lifetime!"

When he finished speaking, his body swayed and he fainted against the arm of the dragon chair.

"*Fuhuang*!" He Qi saw Qing De Emperor faint, his already bad expression becoming even more ugly. Before he could stand, the Imperial Guards held him and started to drag him out of the hall.

He struggled to raise his head in the hands of the Imperial Guards. He could only see, in the pandemonium of the great hall, a crowd of officials escorting *fuhuang* out.

At that moment, he suddenly thought that if the evidence had pointed to He Yuan, would *fuhuang* have made the same decision?

He twisted his body and stopped fighting when he found that he couldn't break free. He allowed the Imperial Guards to drag him away in a wretched state. He raised his head to look at the clear sky that stretched for thousands of miles. How did he lose?

Had he underestimated He Yuan's intelligence, or was it that He Yuan was too smart that he had bought his act as just an arrogant and brash imperial son?

He lowered his head, the finely crafted white jade coronet in his hair dropping to the ground. Looking at the coronet on the black stone, he gave a low laugh.

Chapter 64

"Before placing a stone, one has to look at the front, back, left and right. You have to break the other person's path and also leave a retreat path for yourself. The worst tactic is to damage the enemy one thousand but lose eight hundred yourself," He Heng played with the stones in his hand. Seeing Qu Qing Ju hesitating on where to land, he pointed to a corner, "This place will block my retreat and eat two of my stones. If I play and block your retreat, you could play here and don't have to worry."

Qu Qing Ju looked at the black and white stones. She couldn't see any back paths or forward paths so she messily put down a stone where He Heng indicated earlier. She smiled and commented, "Today's weather is so good. It's such a pleasure to soak in the sun whilst playing *weiqi*." And the person sitting in front of her seemed to be in a good mood.

"I think you are just lazy," He Heng wanted to go easy on her so he didn't bother blocking those visible holes. Before he continued speaking, he noticed Ming He guiding a black-robed Wang Chang Ming over to his table in a rush. Apparently, some major event had occurred.

Qu Qing Ju also saw He Heng's subordinate's arrival and prepared to stand and leave. Who knew He Heng would put down another stone on the board? That implied he wished for her to stay and continue playing.

"Greetings to *wang ye, wang fei*," Wang Chang Ming bowed to the two and said with a lowered head, "*wang ye*, His Highness Ning Wang is currently being imprisoned in Bright Moon Tower and the Emperor has fallen sick in anger."

Ning Wang had overplayed his hand? Qu Qing Ju's hand that held her stone stilled, her face showing surprise, "Why is *da be* imprisoned? What crime did he commit?"

"From the investigation conducted by the Supreme Court, the Ministry of Justice and the Imperial Guards, His Highness Ning Wang was implicated with the case of attempted assassination of the imperial envoy as well as the case of attempted assassination on *wang ye*." Wang Chang Ming didn't expect *wang fei* to speak but seeing that *wang ye* didn't seem to mind, he answered her truthfully, "The palace has already sent down the decree freeing His Highness Rui Wang from his house arrest. This one heard that Rui Wang has already entered the palace to give his thanks."

Da ge was just locked up and the sick *lao san* released. This old emperor was in too much of a rush. Wasn't the head of the Supreme Court her *jiujiu*? Did this matter have something to do with him?

She turned her head to give He Heng a look of "how is this possible, I don't believe it", followed by a doubtful expression, "*Da be* wouldn't do such a thing. Maybe there is a misunderstanding?"

"The Associate Justice Tian *da ren* has already thoroughly investigated the matter. The proof is indisputable," Wang Chang Ming hadn't lifted his head the entire time, "This one's status is low and unclear about many matters. However, this one heard that this matter has already been settled and has no suspicious aspects. The three *da ren* who were responsible for this case have all confirmed that they have no doubts."

Did no one ever suspect that this was He *lao er*'s tactic of injuring himself to gain confidence? Qu Qing Ju peeked at He Heng before randomly putting down a stone and exclaiming: "We're all the same family. Why should it come to this?"

He Heng pushed the stones in front of him, looking agitated: "How could it be like this? *Da ge* is honest and straightforward. Why did he try to harm *si di* and I?"

Qu Qing Ju looked at the servants hovering nearby and worriedly grasped his hand: "*Wang ye*, your wounds hasn't healed. Don't get angry. *Fuhuang* is ill, and he would be waiting for you to visit him."

He Heng turned to stare raptly at Qu Qing Ju. He then stood and announced: "*Wang fei is right*, you and I will return to the city and enter the palace right now." He turned to Ming He, "Ming He, invite Cheng Wang to enter the palace with me."

"Yes," Ming He quickly left.

Wang Chang Ming saw this scene and stated: "*Wang ye*, please take care of your body. This one bids farewell." He bent as he left. He hadn't even given a single glance at Qu Qing Ju.

Qu Qing Ju watched this Wang Chang Ming leave. This person had excellent self-control and took great care in his speech and mannerisms. When he was answering her questions, he always maintained the respect for He Heng. Even then, this person didn't put her on a lesser position. She turned her head to look at He Heng. It looked like the subordinates he supported were just like him. On the surface, none of them had flaws. In reality, only they knew what they really looked like inside.

"What, *da ge* is locked up?" He Ming asked in surprise, after hearing the words of *er ge's taijian*, "*Fuhuang* fainted from anger, what is going on?" His face was suspicious but he walked outside with the servant, expressing how much he completely trusted He Heng.

Ming He slightly bent his body as he narrated the series of events in a small voice behind him. When the procession arrived at the main gate, they saw that the carriages had already been prepared. He Heng and Qu Qing Ju were waiting for them beside the carriages.

"It's *didi*'s fault for making *er ge* and *er sao* wait," He Ming lengthened his stride, and raised his hands in a fist to the couple, "Please,"

"We just came out as well," He Heng's expression was grave, "You should know the cause now. We're going into the palace to see *fuhuang* right now. Anything else will wait until after that."

The procession quickly got on the carriage. At this time, they didn't care about being in recovery. He Heng sat back-straight in the carriage, his face increasingly pale yet his spine did not bend one bit.

Qu Qing Ju saw his appearance was getting worse, and guessed that this was what he wanted Qing De Emperor to see. So she said, "*Wang ye*, since *fuhuang* has already woken up, it must not be very serious. You have to take care of your own body."

"I know, but just thinking about *fuhuang* lying ill on the bed, I feel so restless," He Heng sighing as he patted her hand.

Husband and wife gazed at each other, both showing an expression of "I'm very worried, I'm very sad".

This was most likely the supposed two hearts linked as one … … right.

Once the carriage had reached the main door of the Imperial Palace, it couldn't continue inward. The three came down the carriage to walk to Tian Qi Palace and saw a matron kneeling in front of the main hall. Qu Qing Ju recognized that the woman was Ning Wang's birth mother, Wen *guipin*.

As she passed by Wen *guipin*, she couldn't resist glancing at this woman. She saw that she only had a green jade hairpin in her hair and a bent neck.

After waiting momentarily at the door, a *taijian* ushered them in. Qu Qing Ju reached out to clasp He Heng's hand, and dropped half a step to walk at He Heng's right.

Qing De Emperor was leaning on the dragon bed. Seeing the couple of He Heng come in with He Ming, a sliver of guilt and regret appeared on his face. Before they completed their greeting, he'd already bestowed their seats.

"Just now, when we heard *fuhuang* had fainted, us two brothers rushed to the palace. When we got to the door, we finally remembered that we didn't bring along anything. *Fuhuang*, forgive us for our impulsiveness." He Heng stood and said with some embarrassment, "And the game we'd originally planned to give to *fuhuang* was also left behind."

"This is your filial love, *zhen* wouldn't criticize you for it," Seeing that his son had become worried enough to forget protocol, Qing De Emperor examined his second son in a good mood. He found that his face looked pasty-white. Furrowing his brow, he said, "Sit down, you haven't recovered and yet you rushed to the palace, how can the wounds bear it?"

"Just a small wound, sorry to make *fuhuang* worry," He Heng gave a carefree smile, "*si di*'s wounds are much more serious than *er chen*."

Qing De Emperor glanced at He Ming sitting at the side: "*Lao da* that animal, *zhen* hadn't thought he would conduct himself as an animal. *Zhen* has let you be wronged." He sighed, his spirits low, "Is it because *zhen* isn't a good *fuhuang* that he would do such a thing?"

"This has nothing to do with *fuhuang*," He Heng violently rose, his feet tripping. He was quickly held up by Qu Qing Ju. He said urgently, "*Fuhuang* is a humane ruler. *Da ge* usually is honest, this matter sounds fishy."

"*Zhen* knows that you've always cared for your brothers, but this matter has been investigated thoroughly. *Zhen* doesn't want to believe that he sent people to assassinate the two of you either. And to purposefully frame *lao san*. This son has such malicious desires, he doesn't deserve to be *zhen*'s son." Qing De Emperor was so angry that he heavily punched the bed and instantly started coughing again.

The palace maid on duty hurriedly came up to rub his back. Qing De Emperor made her retreat in irritation. He forced down a mouthful of water, suppressing the itch in his throat, "You don't have to beg for mercy for him. *Zhen* has already made the decision."

Qu Qing Ju watched this scene of paternal and filial love. In her mind, she silently thought, Emperor, don't worry, your son really didn't come to ask for mercy. Whatever way you wish to sentence *lao da*, he wouldn't object.

Qing De Emperor looked at the *erxi* who hadn't spoken at all but was attentive and protective of his second son. He beckoned with his hand for her to walk in front of him: "*Zhen* has picked a good *wang fei* for you, treat her well." A woman, no matter the time and place, should always remember to protect her husband. This woman certainly was a good one.

"*Fuhuang*, *er chen understands*," He Heng gave a smile. He reached out to grasp the slightly wrinkled hand of Qing De Emperor, his eyes reddening, "You've become thinner recently."

"Such a child," Qing De Emperor looked at the red around his son's eyes. The heart that had been turned cold by *lao da* warmed again. He reached out to pat a shoulder, "You are still wounded, return early and get some rest. These next few days, rest well in the *wang fu*. After this period, continue to handle affairs for *zhen*."

"*Er chen* will definitely recover quickly," He Heng assured, "*fuhaung*, please don't worry."

Qu Qing Ju listened to the conversation. For some reason, she thought of Shu *guifei*. Wasn't that the type Qing De Emperor liked so did he use the same standard to judge his *erxifu*? After thinking about it, she lost the joy from his compliment.

Was it really okay to have a double standard like this?

As she watched father and son earnestly say many more words before reluctantly parting, Qu Qing Ju inwardly thought, both father and son must be very satisfied with this warm act. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been so immersed in their roles.

He Ming was still in his invisible role. Until the three of them had left, He Ming only said some lines at the beginning and at the end. Qu Qing Ju saw his calm expression and knew that he was used to this situation.

Coming out of the door, Qu Qing Ju saw Wen *guipin* was still kneeling outside the door. She couldn't bear to look any longer. How many mothers would stand by and watch as her child beared hardship? Even the most careful and timid person like Wen *guipin* will gather the courage to beg at Tian Qi Palace. Wasn't all this just for her child?

"Your Highness Duan Wang!" Wen *guipin*, whether it was because she had no other choice or her mind was unclear from kneeling so long, she grabbed a corner of He Heng's robe, begging: "Your Highness Duan Wang, say a few words for Ning Wang. Qi'er wouldn't try to assassinate you, help him."

He Heng took a step back. Seeing that Wen *guipin* had a solid grip, he replied, "Wen *guipin niangniang*, I have already asked for mercy for *da ge*. This matter, *fuhuang* has made his decision."

"Try again, just ask again for Ning Wang," Wen *guipin* wept, "I'm begging you, say a few more good words for Ning Wang." She saw He Heng didn't make a noise in response and turned to beg Qu Qing Ju, "Please, I'm begging you."

Qu Qing Mu moved away her eyes, not wanting to look into Wen *guipin*'s teary eyes. She wasn't a soft-hearted person, but she couldn't look at such a scene.

"What is this? Who dares to make such a ruckus in front of *fuhuang*'s front door?"

Qu Qing Ju furrowed her brows. He Yuan wanted to invite death just after being freed?

Chapter 65

He Yuan strode in front of the pleading Wen *guipin* and smiled as he lowered his head to look at her: "What is Wen *guipin* doing? It's a major offence to cause a disturbance at Tian Qi Palace."

Wen *guipin* used her sleeves to roughly wipe away the tears on her face. She gave a cold smile as she stood, raising her chin to look at this *wang ye* who had a face full of pride in front of her: "If that was true, then it's unknown how many times Rui Wang would have been punished. Whether or not I should be punished, that is up to the Emperor, not a *wang ye* like you. *Wang ye* must have learned protocol as a child. Didn't anyone ever teach you how to interact with a *shu* mother?"

He Yuan's face instantly darkened. An unfavored *guipin* dared to rebuke him? He said in a low voice: "*Ben wang*'s protocol doesn't need to be corrected by you. If Wen *guipin* has the ability, you should go beg *fuhuang* to free *da ge*." He turned to raise his hands in a fist to He Heng. "*Er ge, er sao*, greetings."

"Good day, *san di*," He Heng looked at the guards standing nearby, a polite smile on his face, "If *san di* is requesting to see *fuhuang*, it's better to let them report early. *Fuhuang* has just taken his medicine. I'm afraid he will be resting for a while."

"I didn't think that *er ge* and *si di* would arrive here faster than me," He Yuan's words implied that He Heng had arrived early because he'd been notified in advance.

"We used a quick horse and whip to rush here right after we heard *fuhuang* became ill," He Heng didn't seem to hear the implication, a hint of embarrassment on his face, "It was lucky that *fuhuang* is as long-lived as the sky and was not seriously ill. But I was being ridiculous."

He Ming, who was standing near the couple, bowed to He Yuan without speaking and retreated to the far side of the room.

He Yuan glanced at him, calmly commenting: "It seems *si di*'s body is much better."

"Thanks for *san ge*'s concern. *Yu di* has no major problems," He Ming switched topics as he continued, "It was a pity that I couldn't help *fuhuang* with this matter. I feel guilty."

He Yuan narrowed his eyes at this nondescript *didi*. A while later, he gave an icy smile and didn't reply.

Qu Qing Ju silently watched this great play of the Imperial House. The hatred Wen *guipin* had towards He Yuan, the scorn He Yuan visibly held towards He Ming and the barely discernible dissatisfaction He Heng held towards He Yuan. Everything was displayed before Qu Qing Ju's eyes. She felt that, in this world, the most complicated relationships to ever occur between husband and wife, father and son, brother and brother, were all formed in the Imperial House.

Ever since *lao da* framed him, he'd been restricted to his *fu* and even *fuhuang* seemed disappointed in him. Therefore, after being freed from house arrest, He Yuan would always think of those stifling days whenever he saw someone connected to He Qi. His personality had always been loud, and he was never willing to discomfort himself. He'd always said whatever he thought and did whatever he wanted.

He gazed icily at Wen *guipin*. Seeing her eyes were full of hatred, he sneered: "Wen *guipin* shouldn't use such eyes to look at *ben wang*. If it wasn't for *da ge* framing me, I wouldn't have been imprisoned in the *wang fu*. If you want to hate someone, hate *da ge* for having such malicious thoughts. Don't hate an innocent person like me."

"Your Highness Rui Wang is innocent?" The gentleness and sincerity that usually appeared on Wen *guipin* was now completely absent. She pointed at He Yuan and, with a piercing voice, accused him, "You dare to say that you didn't control the salt governance, didn't put out high-interest loans, didn't buy and sell official posts?!"

He Yuan looked disdainfully at her. A long beat later, he said: "If there is no evidence, then it's slander. I don't know why, as an imperial consort, Wen *guipin* is so concerned with the matters of the Royal Court. What is the meaning here?"

Wen *guipin* stared hatefully at him, but couldn't say a word. Her shoulders shaking slightly, she slowly lowered her head. Half a beat later, she didn't look at anyone else as she held a palace maid's hand to stagger away.

Qu Qing Ju saw He Yuan's attitude and remembered the case of Jiang Nan. Was that case going to be set aside? Did the old emperor's brain have a problem? Such a major matter of the people, how could it be treated like a joke?

As the emperor, because he was partial to one son, he would not care for the death of his citizens. High interest loans, the salt governance, buying and selling official appointments, which one of those wasn't a major matter? If he didn't know, at most it would be an oversight, but knowing and not stopping it, wasn't that telling the people that the Emperor didn't care about this matter, that the criminals could do whatever they wanted?

Thinking about it more, she felt disgust forming inside. This kind of person had become the Emperor. It was a calamity for the people of the world. If the previous emperor had even one more son, then it was most likely that the seat wouldn't have fallen to this kind of person.

Just then, a *taijian* hurriedly walked over and said that the Emperor was summoning Rui Wang for an audience.

Qu Qing Ju watched the young *taijian* bowing and scraping as he ushered He Yuan inside. She moved her gaze as she descended the white jade stairs with He Heng. When their carriage had travelled a certain distance towards the *fu*, she looked over at He Heng and stated: "*Wang ye*, it isn't easy being one of the common people." She reached up to pull the curtain aside, and looked at the common people in sackcloth moving aside for their carriage, their wooden faces filled with awe and caution.

She wasn't a true lady of a noble family. She might like beautiful clothes, delicious food but she wouldn't feel that it was her right to oppress others, and sacrifice the majority to satisfy her own desires.

He Heng couldn't believe Qu Qing Ju would say such words to him. He silently looked at this woman. At this moment, she had no charm on her face, no smile, not even her gaze was on him. But he had never felt that she was more worthy of the people's respect as he did now.

He followed her hand to look at the crowds in the street, his eyes gradually calming. A beat later, he dropped his face down as he stated: "The hardship of these people should be the reason why the top people have to be more diligent and fair in governance."

Qu Qing Ju let go of the curtain, turning her head to look at He Heng. She smiled suddenly, as though she had just made a decision. She nodded, "*Wang ye* is wise, I believe you."

He Heng silently looked at her and reached out to grasp her hand. He gave a sigh: "You."

Qu Qing Ju lowered her head to look at her hand being held in the other. This person in front of her eyes might not be a good man, but he would become a good emperor. Originally, she didn't care who would become emperor, but after today, she hoped that it would be this man.

She wasn't a saint, but she was still a person. So she couldn't accept the conduct of He Yuan and Qing De Emperor, couldn't agree with the way they took everything as their prerogative.

So … … if He Heng wanted to become Emperor, she wouldn't try to stop him.

Cheng Wang Fu and Duan Wang Fu was separated by a street. When He Ming bid farewell to *er ge* and *er sao*, he felt that there was something different about the atmosphere between the two people. They were still intimate, but now there was something more that couldn't be quantified.

After he'd returned to Cheng Wang Fu, a list was presented to him by the Ministry of Rites. It listed the bride-price that the Ministry of Rites had given to Luo Shang Shu Fu. It represented all the items that the Imperial House was willing to give on his behalf. If he didn't want to

add anything personal, they would prepare the bride-price according to this list.

As he put the list to one side, He Ming recalled the way *er ge* and *er sao* interacted with each other. He summoned Sun Hai and added many more things. He might not be favoured, but he was still a *wang ye*. He wasn't poor to the point where he couldn't give out good things himself.

The next day, Cheng Wang Fu returned the list to the official of the Ministry of Rites and he became deeply moved after reading the additions. This Cheng Wang was very generous. Minster Luo was fortunate.

A few days later, the rankings of the Spring Examinations were released. The ones who qualified were mostly from noble families. Some intelligent people discovered that none of the top scorers had been recommended by Ning Wang's side. There were also not that many from Rui Wang's side. The top ranks had mostly gone to unknown second sons or *shu* sons from noble families.

Ning Wang was now imprisoned so it was natural that none of his people were ranked. But Rui Wang didn't have many either, wasn't that interesting?

Soon afterwards, people found out that Rui Wang had argued with his *shu mu* in front of Tian Qi Palace a few days ago. Some conservative officials couldn't help but sigh inside, this Rui Wang was too reckless. Even if his *shu* mother's position wasn't high, she was still Ning Wang's birth mother. Rui Wang's conduct didn't care for anyone.

After the rankings were released, it was time for the Court Examination. He Heng was still recovering in the *fu*. The *fu* frequently received the Emperor, Empress, and Jing *guifei*'s gifts. Qu Qing Ju told the servants lock up all the gifts in the stores.

She remembered the Emperor hinting to He Heng when they'd recently visited him, wanting him to quickly recover so he can attend Court. But seeing He Heng's leisurely state, it was clear that he wanted to drag out

his recovery period until the examinations were over before returning to Court.

"*Wang ye*, how about taking a look at how I trimmed this pot of bonsai?" Qu Qing Ju put down the scissors in her hand. Seeing He Heng walk over, she waved for him to come admire her new work.

After glancing at the bonsai, He Heng couldn't find the appropriate words to describe it. The atmosphere created by the way a bonsai was trimmed was a learned art. His *wang fei* somehow managed to force the bonsai into the shape of a gold ingot.

"This shape is very special," He Heng smiled as he touched the middle of the ingot. He didn't feel irritation when he saw the table was covered in leaves and branches as he sat beside the desk. He stated: "Today, I accompanied *si di* in sending the bride price over to Luo Shang Shu Fu. Luo *lao taitai* asked about you."

"Luo *laotaitai* has cared for me lots. It must be that she saw *wang ye* and was reminded of me." Qu Qing Ju smiled and twisted her body to finish washing her hands in the basin Jin Zhan had brought. As she wiped her hands, she remarked, "I have even prepared the additions to Luo *guniang*'s dowry."

He Heng wasn't interested in the affairs of women. Hearing this, he only smiled. To a man who implicitly trusted his woman, the *houyuan* could be given over to her care. He didn't have to control it too much.

"It won't be long before *si di* marries," He furrowed his brows as he wondered, "This year, many candidates have entered the palace. I don't know what *fuhuang* is planning."

Qu Qing Ju stopped wiping her hands, handing the cloth to a *yahuan* behind her. Her eyebrow slightly moved, "Does *wang ye* mean that new people are entering the *fu*?"

He Heng carefully looked at her expression. It seemed normal, but he felt that it was wrong for some reason. He hesitated before saying: "I'm not sure about this matter. But don't worry, I won't look at them."

"Who cares who you look at, there's going to be even more beauties arriving in the future," Qu Qing Ju stood, flinging a look at him. She rubbed her forehead as she announced "*Wang ye*, *qie* doesn't feel good, and will rest for a while." She turned and left with the support of Mu Jin.

He Heng rubbed his nose as he smiled helplessly. He stood to follow her to her bedroom. Strangely enough, he felt relaxed and carefree after being glared at by Qu Qing Ju.

Chapter 66

Qu Qing Ju didn't go to sleep when she entered the inner room. Instead she just picked up a book to read as she sat next to the window. When He Heng came in, she didn't pay any attention to him, flipping the pages of the book in her hand.

Step by step, He Heng slowly made his way behind her. Looking at her book, he spoke: "This "Qian San Wanderings" isn't as novel as "*E Nuo*[7] Biography", you could change your reading choice."

"What E Nou, E Nou? The saying is the "many graces of beautiful woman," *wang ye,* what does this phrase mean?" Qu Qing Ju glanced at him, placing the book to one side, "I suppose *wang ye* prefers works like "Thousand Red Biography" and "Harmonious Spring Hall"." Those two books were about men who had managed to receive the affections of several beautiful women.

"That's totally untrue. With a beautiful wife, I don't need those," He Heng smiled as he semi-crouched in front of her, his slightly slanted eyes seemed especially focused, "Doesn't Qing Ju already know what I think?"

Qu Qing Ju looked at this man crouched in front of her, her expression gradually calming. She moved her gaze slightly: "Doesn't *wang ye* know

[7] 婀娜 (e nou) means a graceful bearing of a woman

how hard it is to guess the hearts of others? In this world, there is no one who can completely know the heart of another person."

He Heng smiled and moved to grab a round stool to sit on. He wrapped Qu Qing Ju's hand with his palm, "I don't need a person to completely understand me, but I know you understand my intentions, understand what I want, and understand what kind of person I am. That's enough."

Qu Qing Ju felt, for the very first time, that this man in front of her was a teensy tiny bit pleasing to look at. She stared into his eyes for a beat before saying: "*Wang ye*, I am just a normal person. It's not important what others say, what is important is what they do."

"I understand," He Heng stood, kissing the corner of her eye, "Those of the Imperial House think more than others from birth, but other than that, they aren't that different from normal people."

Qu Qing Ju looked deeply at him and smiled suddenly. She didn't say whether she believed him or not. Instead, she stood up to walk to the bed and took out a pouch to give to He Heng. She pointed at his waist: "The one I sewed before is old now. Change it for this one."

He Heng smiled as he took the pouch. Carefully switching the pouches, he grasped the old pouch in his hand. He stood and said: "Later, I have to go to *si di*'s *fu*. I'll try to come back early tonight."

Qu Qing Ju nodded. Gazing as he hurriedly walked out of the inner room, the expression on her face slowly disappeared. She stood and walked to the window. She saw that as He Heng walked into the yard, he put the old pouch into his chest pocket. She furrowed her brow, her eyes murky.

"*Wang fei*, *wang ye* treats you so well. When he left just now, he specifically ordered *nubi* to serve you well," Yin Liu walked in from the outer room. She saw Qu Qing Ju standing in front of the window and asked: "The kitchen steward has just delivered the list, do you want to order?"

Qu Qing Ju turned to look at her. As she walked towards the bed, she took the menu from Yin Liu's hand and randomly picked a few dishes based on the pleasing nature of their names, "Just these, let them pick the other fruits and refreshments."

"Yes," Yin Liu put the list away. Seeing *wang fei*'s expression was a bit strange, she asked, "*Wang fei*, what is it?"

Qu Qing Ju waved her hand: "Nothing, just a surprising little discovery."

Yin Liu didn't understand but couldn't ask further, submissively retreating.

Qu Qing Ju sighed. The truth of the matter was that He Heng's acting was already the epitome of perfection.

In Cheng Wang Fu, He Heng and He Ming faced each other. He Ming raised a wine cup: "*Er ge*, *didi* toasts you."

He Heng raised the cup, tilting his head back to drink to the bottom. After putting down the wine cup, he asked: "I heard you sent away the two *tongfang* on the *fu*?"

Hearing this, He Ming smiled: "Even *er ge* knows." Two days ago, he had sent away the *tong fang* in the *fu*. The outside was saying that even before he married his *wang fei*, he was already afraid of his wife. He hadn't thought that this matter would pass into the ears of *er ge*, "I just wanted to live a calm life with a *wang fei*, treating her sincerely. By keeping those *tongfang*, except making *wang fei* uncomfortable, what other use is there?"

"*Si di* is attentive," He thought back to the wedding night when Qu Qing Ju had married him. At that time, he felt the Qu Family was too bothersome, and that Qu Qing Ju was too weak and cowardly. His heart hadn't felt at ease with her. The two had barely managed to live through the three days after the wedding. After she had returned to her paternal home, they hadn't been together. Even though he had specially ordered

the servants not to slight her, he also hadn't had that much affection for her.

In his first impression, Qu Qing Ju, if her head wasn't down, would have a wooden face and she didn't talk. She wouldn't say an extra word, wouldn't wear an extra hair ornament. At the time, he sympathized with her for being beaten into that state by Chang De Gong Fu and felt that the days the two spent together were dull.

He didn't know exactly when Qu Qing Ju became colourful and lively in his eyes. He gradually didn't like going to the side rooms. Now that he'd heard He Ming's words, he couldn't help but nod: "If the two have good days, then these *ce fei* and concubines are just gilding the lily. Having or not doesn't make that much of a difference."

"*Yu di* knew *er ge* would definitely understand," He Ming smiled, "It was because I saw your love for *er sao*, that *didi* made the decision to take this step."

He Heng slightly stilled. Swirling the wine cup, he smiled and advised: "One's *wang fei*, one naturally should love." He raised the wine up, "Come, drink a cup."

The slightly cold wine as it flowed into his stomach became a scorching hotness.

The night was as cold as water. He Heng quietly made his way to *zhengyuan*. He waved away the greeting bow of the *yahuan* standing guard and headed straight into the inner room. He saw Qu Qing Ju was wrapped up in her blankets, sleeping peacefully. After some thinking, he went out of the inner room, washed his hands and face before soaking his feet outside, and silently walked back in to undress before lying on the bed.

Qu Qing Ju, muddled, felt someone lying next to her and twisted her body. Her eyes didn't even open: "*Wang ye* has just returned now?"

He Heng saw her dazed state and didn't speak. Reaching out to pat her back: "Sleep." As expected, the person beside him fell asleep again within a minute.

Qian Chang Xin and the others had retreated after serving *wang ye*. He walked with Ming He as they left *zhengyuan* before commenting in a small voice: "It's so late yet *wang ye* is still thinking of *wang fei.* It can be seen just how much importance he places on *wang fei*."

Ming He knew the hidden meaning in his words. He quietly replied: "In the *fu* now, the other *ce shi* basically can't even enter *wang ye*'s eyes. Us brothers only have to serve *wang ye* and *wang fei* well."

"Who knows what the future is like, walk a step and look a step. Regardless, we serve *wang ye*," Qian Chang Xin put his hands behind his back, "We will respect whoever *wang ye* wants us to respect? We aren't in control of anything else."

Ming He smiled: "*Gege* is right."

"What special occasion is it today, that it's so lively?" Qu Qing Ju found that the streets were very busy, many people standing in the tea and restaurant towers. She was on her way home after visiting Jin An Princess. Who knew that she would encounter such a situation so she indicated for the sedan carriers to stop moving.

"*Wang fei*, today is the day for the top ranked advanced scholars[8] to ride and parade on the street," Huang Yang answered from outside the sedan, "Right now, they are walking towards here so it's busier."

Qu Qing Ju instantly understood. The top thesis author, the eyes positioned beside, and the flower snatcher[9] were parading on the street. The culture of Da Long Dynasty was relatively liberal so there were many young women throwing handkerchiefs, pouches and flowers

[8] □士: the highest degree achievable by scholars in Ancient China.
[9] 状元, 榜眼, 探花: top three performers in the Imperial Exam. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_examination#Degree_types

among other things towards the three males. Qu Qing Ju couldn't see the people, but could see the objects flying in the air.

This road headed straight towards the Imperial Palace. After these three finished parading on the streets, they would have to participate in the Qiong Lin Banquet in the palace. He Heng would be appearing at the Jasper Forest Banquet[10] as well.

After fifteen minutes, the crowds gradually thinned and Qu Qing Ju's sedan continued forward. Sitting in the sedan, she heard a passer-by remarking about how the "flower snatcher" was so handsome and how scholarly the top thesis holder was. She couldn't help but smile. It was lucky this era wasn't ridiculous to the point where women couldn't leave the house. Otherwise, it would have been terrible.

The culture of Da Long Dynasty was similar to the Tang and Song Dynasties of history. There were even some similarities in cultural habits. But the structure of government was a mishmash of different dynasties. It was slightly complicated but it meant that she wasn't exactly in the dark. Qu Qing Ju's knowledge gave her the motivation to keep on living.

The people on the side of the street found an eight-person sedan with *qing luan* ornaments, and pearl-encrusted dark yellow cloth and red heading their way. They all simultaneously moved out of the way. Other than the Imperial House, who else dared to sit in such a sedan?

"Mistress, there is an honoured person passing by, we have to move out of the way." Qu Yue Su heard the words as she sat in the sedan. She asked, "Which *fu*?" As she spoke, she raised the curtain to look outside and saw an eight-person large sedan heading her way. She frowned, "Quick, move back."

Feeling the sedan she was sitting on sway as it retreated a length, Qu Yue Su's heart was bitter. Unless she could sit on the position of

[10] □林宴: A banquet hosted specifically for all new advanced scholars by the Royal Court

Empress or Dowager Empress in this lifetime, she would never be able to use red cloth.

After the procession of the eight-person sedan passed them by a certain distance, Qu Yue Su's sedan was raised again. The *taijian* guarding the sedan outside said: "Mistress, this one saw that the person sitting in that sedan was most likely Duan Wang Fei."

Duan Wang Fei? Qu Yue Su stilled, wasn't that Qu Qing Ju?

Thinking about the other's honors and her present situation, she gave a cold smile, "Alright, I know."

The *taijian* who spoke heard the tone wasn't right and jerked his mouth to one side as he lowered his head.

At Jasper Forest Banquet, the advanced scholars that qualified were all in a good mood. All those years of hard studying, wasn't it just for this day?

Qing De Emperor only sat a while before leaving. The rest were being handled by the Ministry of Rites. Some advanced scholars were composing poems or getting to know each other, making the Jasper Forest Banquet very busy.

But there were many who were steady, who didn't not casually speak nor show off. They didn't excessively drink wine to prevent loss of composure after getting drunk.

He Heng sat on the first spot at the left side. Looking at the variety of people under him, there were so many students, but the ones who would be used would only be a select few.

That was the cruelty of politics.

Chapter 67

Qu Qing Ju flipped through the account book in her hand for a long moment before smiling with narrowed eyes at Xiao Gan Zi standing below her: "You've done well these last few days." She motioned for Mu Jin to give a pouch to Xiao Gan Zi.

"They say that when the water is clear, there are no fish. I know that there is some untruthfulness in here," Qu Qing Ju closed the account book. She raised a teacup to slowly take a sip. Seeing the smile on Xiao Gan Zi's face freeze, she laughed out loud, "You can control the ambitions of the stewards, that's your ability. Don't be nervous, I know how it is."

Xiao Gan Zi's back felt cold. On the surface, he gave a fawning smile as he complimented: "*Wang fei* is a brilliant tactician. Us small ones are just a joke. It's just that the *wang fu* is complicated, and at times, it's really … …" He didn't know how to say it. He had received benefits in private. Looking at *wang fei*'s mien, she probably knew all about it.

Qu Qing Ju nodded: "You've done very well, I'm not concerned."

His heart instantly dropped back into its place. Xiao Gan Zi assured her with a grateful expression: "*Wang fei*, please don't worry. This one will definitely handle the affairs well."

"En," Qu Qing Ju bestowed him some refreshments and fruits before allowing him to leave. As for the accounts, she didn't look at them anymore and handed them off to Mu Jin.

"*Wang fei*, these people embezzled money. Why not punish them?" Yin Liu asked in puzzlement.

"Why push someone to the cliff, it's not good if it's too extreme," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she explained, "All things in the world have a limit. Is anyone willing to work without accruing some benefits?"

"If they don't work, then they could be punished," Yin Liu's tone had weakened but she was still dissatisfied with the embezzlement of the servants.

"Leave room in all matters. Your personality should change," Qu Qing Ju suggested, "Such a minor matter, it isn't worthy of the attention."

Hearing this, Yin Liu obediently bowed: "*Nubi* will remember."

What Qu Qing Ju liked about Yin Liu was this quality of hers. Her personality may be impulsive, but she was very obedient and there were no suspicions about her loyalty. Seeing her face so grave, Qu Qing Ju smiled, "It's fine. Accompany me for a walk in the garden."

Xiao Gan Zi cupped the fruits in his hands as he walked into the garden with a smiling face. The servants he ran into were all respectful. Seeing that he was holding something in his hand, they put all their efforts into complimenting how good the fruits looked.

"Of course it's good. *Wang fei* is kind. She saw that I was tired from running around and bestowed some for me to have a taste," Xiao Gan Zi carefully placed the fruits in his pocket, his mouth speaking good things about *wang fei*, and the bystanders who heard him were furiously nodding their heads.

Further away, He Heng had been walking with Qian Chang Xin, Ming He and a few servants behind him. He watched the scene for a long time before observing: "This Xiao Gan Zi is clever, no wonder *wang fei* prefers him handling the affairs."

Qian Chang Xin's eyebrow slightly moved as he mentioned: "A few days ago, *wang fei* said that Xiao Gan Zi was worthy of having served by *wang ye*'s side. Both his head and legs are very functional."

"Those words complimented you too," He Heng smiled, "It's hard for *wang fei* to manage all the matters of the *fu*. Keep an eye out for anyone who are not respectful of *wang fei*. Take care of them immediately."

Qian Chang Xin, as a personal *taijian*, had watched *wang ye* give more and more of his heart to *wang fei*. He himself had become more and more respectful of *wang fei*, afraid of offending *wang fei* and causing *wang ye* to be discontent. Hearing *wang ye*'s words, he gave a confirmation.

"*Nubi* greets *wang ye*." A low and soft voice came from behind him. Qian Chang Xin turned around to look. It was a low-ranking *yahuan* with dark yellow skin and wearing coarse clothes. He instantly frowned. Who was this low-ranking *yahuan* who didn't know protocol and came inside to try to meet with *wang ye*? The other *yahuan*, when they saw their superiors, the servants carefully avoided them, who would specially come over?

"Stand up. Where are you a *yahuan* at? How did you get in here?" This area was still inside the second door. If the rough *yahuan* didn't have duties, they couldn't come in.

"Qian *gonggong*, *nubi* is from the laundry rooms. The *mama* who is responsible for delivering the clothes is sick so *nubi* replaced her to deliver the clothes to Luo *yiniang*'s residence."

Qian Chang Xin felt that the voice seemed familiar, but he couldn't remember where he had heard it. He took a furtive look at *wang ye*. Seeing his expressionless face, he knew that *wang ye* was irritated. Before his mouth could open to drive away this delinquent, he saw *wang fei* walking in front of a few *yahuan* as she made her way towards them.

"Greetings to *wang ye*!"

"Greetings to *wang fei*!"

The servants on both sides both bowed. Qu Qing Ju smiled as she walked in front of He Heng. Her gaze unconsciously sweeping across the low-ranked *yahuan* standing five steps away, "I didn't think *wang ye* would be here."

"Just came back from the outside," He Heng smiled as he pulled her hand, pretending that the rough *yahuan* didn't exist, "Today's weather is good. Let's us have a walk in the garden."

"Yes," Qu Qing Ju's eyes roamed around. Acting as if she'd just realized there was a rough *yahuan* standing nearby, she asked: "Where do you serve at? Raise your head and let me take a look at you."

This *yahuan* raised her head. Her features weren't bad, but the messy hair and the rough skin reduced the pretty nature. Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow, "Why do you look so familiar to the eye?"

By then, Qian Chang Xin recognized who she was. Wasn't this that Ban Xia who had originally been a first-rank *yahuan* of *wang fei* before she became *wang ye*'s *tong fang*? He'd heard that Ban Xia had been demoted from *tong fang* to the laundry rooms by *wang fei*. Looking at her now, she really didn't resemble the sweet beauty she'd once been.

"*Wang fei*, *nubi* sees that she looks like the Ban Xia who had once served *wang ye* and you," Mu Jin bowed, talking in a moderately loud voice, "Did you forget? She recently made a large offence and *wang fei* was kind and didn't throw her out. Just sentenced her to the laundry room."

Qu Qing Ju's face showed an expression of realization. She looked at Ban Xia from top to bottom. If Ban Xia, at the beginning, had been a blooming tender flower, she now was wilted.

Ban Xia lowered her head in embarrassment, unconsciously taking a step back. She hadn't thought that she would meet *wang fei* in her grand clothes. Even the *yahuan* by *wang fei*'s side were more beautiful than her at this time. The clear contrast made her want to hide herself away and not let anyone see her.

He Heng glanced casually at Ban Xia, no emotion in his eyes: "Since you are a worker in the laundry room, then stay there to perform your duties. Do not run around the *fu*."

The rims of Ban Xia's eyes reddened. A beat later, she gave a trembling bow: "*Nubi* will remember."

"Leave," Since he had became closer and closer to Qu Qing Ju, he didn't have much interest in the women in the *houyuan*. He looked at the average-looking woman in front of him. He couldn't even remember what Ban Xia had looked like originally.

Seeing that *wang ye* and *wang fei* were going to stroll in the garden, Ming He personally ushered Ban Xia away. After they exited *ermin*, he gave a

cold smile, "I advise Ban Xia *guniang* to behave in the future." He pointed at the Door of Drooping Flowers, "This door isn't the entrance for people like you."

Ban Xia's body buckled but she gritted her teeth and didn't speak.

"Don't blame your Ming *yeye* for speaking clearly to you. If you play these shameless tricks again, then you wouldn't be walking out on your own next time." Ming He disdainfully examined her, "Why don't you have a good look in the mirror? With *wang fei* present, how can *wang ye* even be attracted to you? You don't find it embarrassing but Ming *yeye* does." He shook his sleeves as he sedately walked back inside *ermin*.

Ban Xia stared fixedly at his figure, her eyes lifeless.

If one had to say who was the most pleased over these past few days in Jing, there wouldn't be any other choice other than Rui Wang. The Jiang Nan case which had been making a storm was now silently suppressed, and he was washed clean of the suspicion of attempting to assassinate his brother. Even the greatest eyesore, *lao da*, was imprisoned.

Rui Wang felt that he hadn't been this happy in years, so the sight of his *wang fei*'s expressionless face didn't affect his mood.

"Speak, what is it?" He Yuan sat at the front, glancing at Qin Bai Lu's dark expression.

Qin Bai Lu saw his flippancy and bit the corner of her lips before she confessed: "Tomorrow is *qie*'s father's day of birth. Does *wang ye* have the time … …"

"Since it is your father's birthday, then open the *fu*'s stores to take along some gifts," He Yuan stood, "*Ben wang* is busy tomorrow, so I won't accompany you. Have an early rest tonight, *ben wang* is going to Xi Ce Yuan."

Qin Bai Lu looked at He Yuan's back, her eyes slowly becoming cold. Again it was Xi Ce Yuan, Qu Yue Su that whore!

"*Wang fei*," The *yahuan* supporting her looked at her worriedly.

"It's fine. Send down the order, *ben wang fei* is going to check the stores," she gave a cold smile. He didn't want to go so she wouldn't beg him.

In Duan Wang Fu, Qu Qing Ju and He Heng wandered around the garden and sat together to read after they eating the evening meal. One person was reading the highly reputable "Book of Dao", the other was reading a novel.

After reading for a while, He Heng saw Qu Qing Ju's face held a hint of anger. He put down the book in his hand and went to her to inquire: "What is written in this book that makes you so angry?"

Qu Qing Ju slammed the book shut, her voice carrying a layer of rage as she snapped: "The men in these stories are too fickle. The two had been in companionship for more than ten years, but it couldn't compare to the tenderness of a youthful *guniang*. In the end, he wanted to divorce his wife and blamed her for not being loving. When he was studying at the beginning and had no money, he didn't say that when he was being completely supported by his wife; when he left at the start to go to a post in another place, he didn't say that when he left his son and daughter and his elders at home for his wife to support; but when he reached a high position of power, he felt that the wife was lacking in every aspect. But this man had to be the protagonist of the story. The views of this author are disgusting."

He Heng took away the book in her hand, smiling as he comforted: "Just a story, don't be angry about this kind of thing. A person's days has to be lived by the person. What the end result would be is in the control of the person." He looked with disdain at the name of the author on the book page, "Shangguang *gong zi*? Most of the people who would use such a name, they are poor scholars. They don't have the bride price to find a wife, and lack the ability to place in the examinations. They have to depend on writing such amusements to earn some money for food and to satisfy their fantasies. We shouldn't argue with this kind of useless men, okay?"

Qu Qing Ju snorted.

Okay your entire family!

Chapter 68

Mu Jin held an invitation in her hands as she walked into *zhengyuan*. She saw Ming He and Yin Liu were guarding at the door and knew that *wang ye* and *wang fei* were still in the room and hadn't risen out of bed. She looked at the already blinding sun and then at the servants waiting in the corner, holding the tools for washing and cleaning. She didn't know how many times the water in their copper basins had already been changed.

Yin Liu saw her come and motioned her to be quieter. As she came closer, she saw the flowery invitation in Mu Jin's hand, and asked in a light voice: "Whose *fu* sent this invitation that you have to personally deliver it?"

Mu Jin looked at the tightly shut door: "It was Rui Wang Fu that sent it. They are inviting *wang fei* to their *fu* to admire the flowers."

"Didn't they just admire the plum blossoms last winter?" Yin Liu knew that her *wang fei* didn't have much of a relationship with Rui Wang Fei. Originally, it had been alright when Ning Wang Fei was still here, but now that Ning Wang Fei left to accompany Ning Wang in the Bright Moon Tower in the Jing suburbs, there wasn't even a mediator, "What flower is it this time, peach, or pear?"

"Just stop talking so much," Mu Jing glared at her, turning her head to look at Ming He who had his head down and didn't speak, before she continued to instruct her, "*Wang fei* will make her own decision on the matter. You really need to change your impulsive personality."

Yin Liu smiled embarrassedly: "Mu Jin *jiejie*, don't be angry. I was just muddled for a bit."

Just then, sounds came from inside the room. Mu Jin and Yin Liu's expressions disappeared and they stopped talking. Hearing someone call from within, they indicated for the servants, who were holding the jars and basins, to walk in to serve in the morning ablutions.

After Qu Qing Ju washed and rinsed, she rubbed her sore legs and waist. As she picked a long green dress to wear, she gave a yawn and commented: "It seems that *wang ye*'s wounds have almost healed."

He Heng walked up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. He laughed deeply and responded: "Qing Ju is disliking the fact that this husband put in too much effort last night."

Qu Qing Ju glared at him. Try to at least care about the unmarried *yahuan* in the room. Even if he was shameless, she wasn't. She reached out to firmly pinch on his arm, "*Wang ye*, did your refinement and manners get eaten?"

He Heng buried his face in her neck as he laughed. A while later, he released her as he promised: "Alright, alright, I won't talk anymore. I'm going outside to wait for you to eat the morning meal together." He brushed a kiss at her ear and walked out of the inner room in a good mood.

Qu Qing Ju wiped her ear and sat down in front of the copper mirror. Jin Zhan and Yu Zan finally came out of the corner where they had been silently standing and went to her side to make her hair and apply makeup.

Mu Jin walked up behind her, informing in a small voice: "*Wang fei*, Rui *wang fei* has just sent over a message. She has invited you to attend a flower-admiration banquet two days later."

Admiring flowers again? Qu Qing Ju really felt that Qin Bai Lu could change the topic. Last year, it was making her admire plum blossoms while enduring the snow storm. Was she now making her endure a rain storm to admire plum, pear, almond and cherry blossoms?

"Isn't today Rui *wang fei*'s father's birthday? How does she have the time to have people send out invitations?" Qu Qing Ju felt that Qin Bai Lu had too much energy. Wasn't she tired after doing so many things everyday? She herself hadn't thought of putting on any kind of banquet ever.

"It most likely had been prepared in advance," Mu Jin paused before asking, "*Wang fei*, should we reply?"

Qu Qing Ju turned her head to look at the *feixianji* that Yu Zan had constructed for her. She picked out a pair of tassels to hand to Yu Zhan before responding: "Don't be in a rush. There's still two more days."

Did she have to respond instantly to Qin Bai Lu's invitation. Thinking of the actions of the Rui Wang family, she had the impulse to also commit such actions. If they did so, then everyone should also follow.

Mu Jin understood *wang fei*'s meaning, tucked the message away and didn't mention it again. After Qu Qing Ju dressed, she hurriedly reached out in support, "*Nubi* heard that after Ban Xia returned to the laundry room a few days ago, she had been laughed at by many people. Right now, she's the laughingstock of the laundry room."

"She chose the road," Qu Qing Ju stood, taking one step at a time as she walked towards the outside, "Becoming a joke, she did it to herself."

She wasn't laughing at the other's misfortunes but she didn't sympathize. She only felt heartbreak for this body's original owner. Now that ashes were ashes, dust was dust, hopefully she would have a beautiful future life, and never meet people and events like the ones in this life.

Qu Qing Ju's morning meals were on the side of light but not bland. When He Heng had started spending more time in *zhengyuan*, he gradually liked to eat with Qu Qing Ju. After all this time, he felt that even the *zhengyuan*'s tea was more tastier than other places.

Seeing Qu Qing Ju come out, he urged: “We got up late today. Come have some porridge to prevent the stomach from being harmed due to hunger.”

Walking to sit down by his side, Qu Qing Ju washed her hands. She drank a small bowl of porridge and ate some vegetables and pastries before putting down her chopsticks to rinse her mouth.

“*Wang ye* isn’t going out today?” Qu Qing Ju waited for He Heng to wipe his hands before asking, “Just now, I’d received Rui Wang Fu’s invitation to attend a flower-admiration banquet.”

“I also received *san di*’s invite,” He Heng threw the cloth at the servant standing at the side, stating blandly: “I’ll go with you when the time comes.”

So this flower-admiration banquet had been put up by *lao san* and his wife. No wonder Rui Wang Fei had sent the invite on the day of her father’s birthday. Even though Qin Bai Lu might be a proud person, she had never been seen tearing down Rui Wang’s stage.

“Since *wang ye* has to reply, when the time comes, send someone to deliver my reply as well,” Qu Qing Ju furrowed her brow, and pushed her voice lower to muse, “Even though they are hard to interact with, but in the end, he’s still your brother.”

Hearing his *wang fei* making such a conclusion about *san di*, an additional hint of smile appeared on He Heng’s face: “Don’t be afraid. If someone is blind enough to try to harass you, just stand up for yourself. For everything, there is still me.”

Who this “someone” was, Qu Qing Ju knew. She smiled and nodded: “With *wang ye*’s words, I won’t worry anymore.”

He Heng saw her manner and couldn’t resist giving another smile: “I know you don’t like this kind of people. In the future, if it isn’t necessary, then we don’t have to interact with them. If you get bored, then you can take a walk to the Princess Royal’s *fu*. Our *fu*s aren’t too far apart.”

"Based on this, after *si shu* gets married, then isn't it closer to go to *si shu*'s *fu* to find *si dimei*?" She had just found out that Cheng Wang Fu and Duan Wang Fu were separated by one street.

"As long as you like, you can go to anyone's home," He Heng reached out to rub her earlobe. He knew inside that, even though Qu Qing Ju's words seemed like a joke, it was really asking him if it was fine to be close to Cheng Wang Fei in the future, "*Si di* is a sincere person. The Luo family in the past has given great care to you in the past. We ought to interact more."

Qu Qing Ju blinked her eyes, her lips curling as she replied: "I understand."

Just as the two were cozying up, they saw Qian Chang Xin hurry in from the outside, reporting that the Emperor's decree had arrived.

Qu Qing Ju was slightly surprised, but seeing He Heng didn't seem to be surprised at all, she followed him out. After the messenger *taijian* finished reading the decree, Qu Qing Ju understood. This was Qing De Emperor reminding He Heng to go back to work. While most of the Imperial Decree was worries about his son's wounds, but the conclusion was He Heng should return to work, and he also bestowed down a heap of stuff.

If Qing De Emperor's four children had to be ranked, then He Yuan had been carried by Qing De Emperor as he grew up, He Heng had been watched by Qing De Emperor as he grew up, He Qi was raised free-range by Qing De Emperor, and as to Little Student He Ming … … he was most likely the freebie that Qing De Emperor had gotten whilst purchasing something incognito.

Since the Emperor had personally sent down the decree, He Heng returned a message that was sent into the palace on a fast horse. The gist of it was that this son's wounds were almost healed and that it was unfilial of this son to cause *fuhuang* to be worried. In two days, *san di* was holding a flower-admiration banquet. After attending this banquet,

this son will concentrate on work, *fuhuang wan sui, wan sui, wan wan sui.*[11]

The Half Pagoda Mountain in the northern suburbs of Jing City was famous due to the half-constructed pagoda located halfway. And Bright Moon Tower was constructed at the top of this mountain. Bright Moon Tower's name also had a special origin. Half Pagoda Mountain was very tall, and since the wooden tower was constructed at the top of the mountain, it seemed as though it was very close to the moon, thus it was named Bright Moon Tower.

He Qi sat by the window looking at the moon hanging in the sky. A long time later, he sighed and mused, "Time and life, *lao san* was vicious this time." Purposefully using the timber from his own mountain to make arrows to attack *lao er*, and make people feel that he wouldn't do such an idiotic thing, and then using the thoughts of others to frame him. He just didn't know which of the subordinates gave him the idea.

Wei Qing E heard his sigh. She hesitated before opening: "Hasn't *wang ye* ever thought that this matter could be related to *er shu* or *si shu*?"

"*Lao si* doesn't have that kind of manpower, he can't do it even if he wanted," He Qi sat down by her side, "Even though I'm not entirely clear about *lao er*'s personality, but if there really was a good opportunity such as this, I'm afraid he would scheme against both me and *lao san*. Why would he leave *lao san* alone, the one *fuhuang* favors the most? I's not worth it." If he was *lao er*, he couldn't bear to let go of such a good chance of two birds with an arrow. So why would *lao er* when he had the ability to do so?

Wei Qing E listened to the entire speech and knew she had thought too much. She exclaimed: "Rui Wang is too hateful."

"I just regret that my actions have affected you and our son, and now you and Zhong'er have to endure such difficulties with me," He Qi's expression was slightly bitter. He was much calmer than he had

[11] ten thousand years, ten thousand years, ten thousand ten thousand years.

appeared right after being imprisoned, but even so, he had become slightly deflated, "I'm the useless one."

"*Wang ye* cannot say such things. We are one family so we cannot say words of two families." Wei Qing E grasped He Qi's hand, "Also, except that there is less people at Bright Moon Tower, there isn't anything else lacking."

He Qi gave another sigh and continued to look at the moon in the sky: "In the future, when the new Emperor ascends the throne, as long it isn't He Yuan, we will be able to leave." He was clear inside. He had failed. The only ones left that could succeed the throne were *lao er* or *lao san*. Both for himself or for the country, he hoped *lao er* would succeed.

Lao san's personality wasn't good enough, he wasn't the type to be an Emperor. If he became Emperor, it would be ruin for the common people.

It was a pity that *fuhuang* was too partial. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been fighting with *lao san* for so many years. If *fuhuang* was even slightly more just, *lao san* would have been out of luck a long time ago.

Thinking about this, He Qi ordered: "Come, serve me brush and ink."

Since he wanted to get something out of the new Emperor in the future, then he had to pay the price.

Chapter 69

"Your Majesty, are you going to flip a name tonight?" The *taijian* from the Department of Household Affairs, who was responsible for the daily life of the Emperor, presented the placards of the *feipin* to the Emperor. On the tray were the fish-shaped signs which represented the status of each concubine.

Qing De Emperor finished reading the message that *lao er* had presented. He didn't look at the signs and put the folder gently on the

table, "Tonight, *zhen* is going to Zhong Jing Palace. Jing *guifei* has been worried about Duan Wang's wounds these days. She has lost a lot of weight recently, *zhen* has to go check on her."

"Yes," The *taijian* in charge of recording the life of the Emperor wrote down the Emperor's words and bowed as he left.

Qing De Emperor felt that even though the one he loved was Shu *guifei*, Jing *guifei* was a clever pearl and a satisfying confidant. When he was irritated, he liked to go sit at Jing *guifei*'s palace. Thinking about the worry Jing *guifei* had gone through these past days, he felt bad.

Everyone had seen the heightened attentions the Emperor had given Duan Wang and Jing *guifei* recently. So when the Emperor went to Jing *guifei*'s place, no one was surprised. It was only Shu *guifei*, after hearing of the incident, who reacted by smashing a cup.

"Wei *shi*, that slut," Shu *guifei* gasped for breath before speaking to He Yuan sitting below her, "Yuan'er, now that *lao da* has fallen, you have to take advantage of the opportunity and not let Wei *shi* and her son sneak in."

"Don't worry, *mufei*. Even if they wanted to, they have to see if *fuhuang* thinks they are worthy. Jing *guifei* has played so many tricks, but doesn't *fuhuang* still love you the most?" He Yuan condescended, "*lao er* always like to act as though he's so sanctimonious. Some always fall for it."

Shu *guifei* furrowed her brow: "You cannot underestimate Duan Wang. He is regarded as important by the Emperor. He must have some skill. Wei *shi*, that whore, isn't as favoured as me, but after so many years, the Emperor still hasn't forgotten her. Even her position isn't lower than mine. You have to be careful of that mother and son's tricks."

He Yuan finished listening and objected unhappily: 'As long as *fuhuang* isn't willing, it's futile, no matter what tricks they use."

Shu *guifei* opened and then closed her mouth. Even though she felt that, over the years, the Emperor had been using his heart to care for her, and

because of her complaint, he hadn't allowed any other woman of the *hougong* to have children, she didn't know why she still felt very insecure deep inside presently.

"Tomorrow, you are holding a flower-admiration banquet at your *fu*. Get your wife to become intimate with Jin An Princess. She may not have actual power, but she is the Emperor's first daughter. The feelings are naturally different," Shu *guifei* raised the teacup to take a drink, "The year she married, the Emperor didn't care about the objections of the officials of the Ministry of Rites and gave her the title of Princess Royal. No one else can compare to this kind of favouritism from the Emperor."

In the Da Long Dynasty, the previous Princess Royals had mostly been the sisters of the Emperor. Almost none had been given to the daughter, but the Emperor gave it anyway. He had even posthumously titled Qin *pin,* who had given birth to He Gui Nian and died as *huang guifei*.[12] It could be seen just how important He Gui Nian was to the Emperor.

"Qin *shi*'s conduct is too proud. This son really has nothing to say to her," Thinking of Qin Bai Lu, He Yuan unhappily complained, "If I knew she was this kind of woman beforehand, *mufei* should have let me marry Qu *shi* instead. She's better than an uninteresting woman like Qin Bai Lu."

"Ridiculous!" Shu *guifei* was proud, but even she knew that He Yuan's words were outrageous, "What is the position of Qu *shi*? What status does Qin *shi* have? Behind Qin *shi* is the Qin Family which is revered by many scholars. When you married her, you received the support of the Qin Clan. How could that fox-spirit Qu *shi* help you? Just the conduct of Chang De Gong Fu, if they didn't make any more trouble, it would be good fortune. And right now, she is your *er sao*, you cannot say this again!"

"What educated and noble family? I can't really see how Qin *shi* has the composure of a daughter of an educated and noble family," He Yuan submissively listened to Shu *guifei*'s admonishment, but still felt

[12] 皇□妃: the highest position in the Imperial Harem other than the Empress. 皇 is imperial so the title is imperial guifei.

dissatisfied with Qin *shi*, "She has made the *wang fu* a total mess. I get irritated just looking at it."

As a *popo*, there was always a tendency to pick on the *erxifu*. After He Yuan complained, Shu *guifei* became even more dissatisfied with Qin Bai Shuang: "Qin *shi*'s birth may be better than Qu *shi* but her tactics aren't as good as Qu *shi*. Don't be irate. During the great selection, I'll pick a few suitable women for you."

He Yuan bowed with his hands together raised in a fist: "Then I will have to rely on *mufei*." He thought that it would be best to pick a woman with more flavour than Qu *shi*, but thinking that Qu *shi* was his *saozi*, he didn't say the words that would definitely breach the rules.

"The flowers are wilting and falling in the night, the flowers carry their fragrances as they float to the ground." Qu Qing Ju stood on the stone bridge and looked at the red flower petals as they floated in the stream. She couldn't help but think of these two lines of poetry that described spring. She scattered the fish feed into the water and watched as the red koi turned into a swarm. In a happy mood, she ordered, "Mu Jin, tomorrow at Rui Wang Fu, I will wear that floor-length wide-sleeved dress with the hundred flowers and butterflies. Such a good spring, it wouldn't let down that beautiful dress."

There was no way to avoid it, she was a mortal. She liked wearing beautiful clothes, liked wearing exquisite jewellery. It was already such a tragedy that there was no internet in this era. If she couldn't find some interests, then her days would be too miserable.

"Yes, those clothes would perfectly fit the swallow ruby and lapis lazuli encrusted head comb, and that pair of five petal jade flower *buyao*." Mu Jin started to ponder in her head which earrings and bracelets that Qu Qing Ju should wear. Even the handkerchief, shoes, and the ornaments hanging on the dress had to be match perfectly.

Qu Qing Ju saw Mu Jin and the other *yuhuan* had already started to discuss her outfit and smiled as she leaned against the stone post. Looking at the bottom of the clear water, she narrowed her eyes as she

uttered: “No matter what, all I have to be tomorrow is the most beautiful.” Didn’t Qin Bai Lu like wearing light-colored cloths and act all virtuous and high? As a common person, she could only develop herself towards becoming beautiful and stunning.

Thinking about wearing a beautiful dress in a sea of flowers and standing in front of Qin Bai Lu, Qu Qing Ju strangely felt that she was in a good mood.

She knew that Qin Bai Lu looked down on commoners like her. She couldn’t stand Qin Bai Lu’s conduct either. Since the dislike was mutual, it didn’t matter that she would deepen the negativity.

“*Wang fei*, Luo *yiniang* wants to see you,” Rui Xiang rushed over and bowed in front of Qu Qing Ju, “*Nubi* saw that Luo *yiniang*’s face didn’t look well. Something major must have happened.”

Luo Yin Xiu? Her impression of the person was silent and reticent, didn’t compete for favour and didn’t speak much. Qu Qing Ju didn’t have a deeper impression of her. After hearing Rui Xiang’s words, she responded, “Get her to sit in the outer hall, I’ll come over immediately.”

“Yes,” Rui Xiang bowed before retreating.

“*Wang fei*, why would this Luo *yiniang* suddenly want to see you?” According to Jin Zan’s knowledge, Luo *yiniang* was very aware of her role and she didn’t have much courage. When she appeared in front of *wang fei*, she usually was shrunk in and didn’t dare to speak. On her own, she was asking to speak to *wang fei*, what major event had occurred?

“Let’s see first,” Qu Qing Ju felt that, out of He Heng’s concubines, both Jiang Yong Yu and Luo Yin Xiu, if they had the choice, wouldn’t have been willing to be a concubine of a *wang ye*. But they had to accept the reality.

In the front hall, right after Qu Qing Ju sat down, Luo Yin Xiu knelt in front of her with a bang. Qu Qing Ju saw that Luo Yin Xiu already had tears streaming down her cheeks.

"*Wang fei*, *nubi* begs *wang fei* to help *nubi*!" Luo Yin Xiu was gasping from crying and couldn't speak properly.

"What is this? Yin Liu, help Luo *yiniang* up," Qu Qing Ju saw Luo *shi*'s face had turned entirely red from crying. She asked, "What happened? Tell me first."

After Luo *shi* brokenly finished talking, Qu Qing Ju finally understood what had happened. Luo *shi*'s parents had died when she was young and she had been raised in her *jiujiu*'s family. Her *jiujiu*'s family had been good to her. Even though her *jiujiu* was only a small and minor seventh-rank official, they made sure that she'd never lacked for nothing. They treated her like she was their own daughter.

But right now, Luo *shi* had received a letter from her *jiujiu*'s family that said her *jiujiu* had died due to illness and was going to be buried three days later. Luo *shi* wanted to go to the funeral for her *jiujiu* but as a *qieshi*, she wasn't allowed to leave the *fu* unless it was for a major matter. Even more so, when the one who had died was her *jiujiu* and not her parents.

"*Wang fei*, you also have a very good *jiujiu*, please take some pity on *nubi* and let *nubi* say farewell to *jiujiu*. *Nubi* doesn't need very long, it will be fine for me to just kowtow on the day of *jiujiu*'s funeral, please." Luo Yin Xiu sobbed and knelt again in front of Qu Qing Ju.

When He Heng entered the front hall, what he saw was that scene. He frowned in displeasure. Why did these *qieshi* keep bothering Qing Ju all the time? He was going to speak out but then he noticed the sympathetic expression on Qu Qing Ju's face so he closed his mouth. He walked to sit down next to Qu Qing Ju, "What is going on?"

Luo Yin Xiu looked at *wang ye*, her face changing and her heart froze. Would *wang ye* agree to such a thing? She widened her swollen eyes to look at *wang fei*, hoping that *wang fei* would put in a good word for her.

Qu Qing Ju hadn't expected that He Heng would appear at such a time. She looked at Luo Yin Xiu. She was just seventeen or eighteen. In her

previous life, she would have been a student preparing for the university exams.

"Luo *shi*'s *jiujiu* has died of illness. Luo *shi* has been raised by her *jiujiu* for so many years, she should go to the funeral," Qu Qing Ju sighed, "For those who come after, it is good fortune to have a good *jiujiu*. As one of the younger generation, you cannot disappoint your elders. I think Luo *shi* could go back for a few days, kowtow more, burn incense and paper money to satisfy her filial piety."

He Heng might not like to have the *shiqie* running around, but he had already investigated Luo *shi*'s background. There was nothing suspicious. Additionally, Qing Ju had only managed to grow up due to her *jiujiu*'s care, so it wasn't beneficial for him to contradict Qu Qing Ju. He nodded and confirmed: "You can make the decision at this time."

Hearing this, Luo Yin Xiu started crying due to joy and kowtowed heavily towards the two: "Thank *wang fei*, thank *wang ye*."

Standing to one side, Mu Jin looked sympathetically at Luo *yiniang*. Such a minor matter yet she had forgotten the order to give thanks in. It was tragic and pitiful.

After Luo *shi* left, He Heng pinched Qu Qing Ju's hand gently: "Do you like what I had the servants deliver?"

Hearing this, Qu Qing Ju smiled and informed: "Very beautiful, I'm wearing them tomorrow." From a certain perspective, He Heng's tastes fit what she desired.

"As long as you like them." Looking at Qu Qing Ju's smile, He Heng revealed a satisfied smile. He loved seeing his *wang fei* dressed and adorned beautifully. This preference probably wouldn't change in this lifetime.

Chapter 70

"Since *wang ye* wants you to attend, then you will have to perform well," Qin Bai Lu picked at her fingernails, which had been dyed yesterday. She glanced at Qu Yue Su standing in front of her, "I heard that your musical talents are exceptional,. If there's a chance later, you will play for everyone."

Qu Yue Su's hands, which were hidden in her sleeves, tightened. She knew that Qin *shi* was insulting her, but she had no choice but to endure so she kept her head down. She bowed: "*Nubi* will remember."

"En," Qin Bai Lu nodded and raised her chin, "Today, many honourable guests will come. Pay attention to your conduct and don't shame the *wang fu*." She didn't look at Qu Yue Su as she took a *yahuan*'s hand and left the room.

"Mistress," Yao Xi saw that Qu Yue Su's expression wasn't right and rushed forward to support her. She comforted, "Don't be angry, *wang fei* is just jealous of how favoured you are."

Qu Yue Su gave a bitter smile as she sat down on a chair. She turned to look at the Jiao Wei seven stringed zither[13] that *wang ye* had sent someone to specially deliver to her. She had been happy for a few days. But this valued *qin* was only to be used to ply her talents like a musician.

Since Qin *shi* thought she was an eyesore, then she will obstruct her eye!

Qu Yue Su relaxed her fisted hands. Sitting in front of the mirror, she looked at her reflection and forced a smile: "Yao Xi, help me put on my makeup."

She wanted Qin *shi* to see who would be laughing at the end.

When she arrived at Rui Wang Fu for the second time, Qu Qing Ju felt that her attitude was different compared to last time. She took He Heng's hand as she walked down the carriage and looked at the two magnificent stone lions at the gate of the *wang fu*. She tilted her head to lightly stipulate: "After a few more days, I'll also hold a banquet and

[13] one of the four famous zithers in Chinese history.

make all these people ride in a carriage to our *fu*." It wasn't a comfortable experience to sit in a carriage. She felt that it was necessary for others to endure for her as well, just to be fair.

He Heng smiled as he looked at her. His gaze swept across the pair of tassels in her hair. He agreed in a low voice: "Alright, after getting back, we'll get the servants to start preparing."

Qu Qing Ju noticed his gaze and used a handkerchief to hide the corner of her lip: "Are you satisfied with what you see?" These words were usually said by the male protagonist to the female protagonist in the novels. Qu Qing Ju felt very dominant.

"Very satisfied, Qing Qu is more stunning than usual." He Heng was very cooperative and followed her lead, even though he didn't understand why his *wang fei*'s eyes suddenly became especially spirited.

"This one greets Duan *wang ye*, Duan *wang fei*, please come in," The chief stewards had noticed the two exiting the carriage and hurriedly bowed as he walked in front of them, "*Wang ye* has been waiting for you to come."

"Aren't you He Fu Er? Why are you receiving?" This He fu Er was a personal *taijian* of *lao san*. Usually, he served near *lao san*'s side. It was very rare for *lao san* to let him personally receive guests.

"To come here and receive *wang ye* is this one's good fortune," He Fu Er bowed as he made a motion of welcoming, "As long as *wang ye* and *wang fei* doesn't find this one an eyesore."

He Heng nodded and, holding Qu Qing Ju's hand, crossed the main gate of Rui Wang Fu.

"Was that Duan Wang and Duan Wang Fei who just went in?" Tian Jin Ke and Tian Luo *shi* came down the carriage and coincidentally saw He Fu Er welcoming the two inside. Tian Jin Ke looked at their backs and asked Tian Luo *shi* beside him, "*Furen,* look."

Hearing the request, Tian Luo *shi* looked over and also saw the backs of the two before they stepped into the compound. She nodded hesitantly: "They look similar. Qing Ju's manner is more and more imposing these days."

"The one guiding them is His Highness Rui Wang's personal servant He Fu Er, you must be right," Tian Jin Ke saw that there was someone coming out to receive them and walked with Tian Luo *shi* towards the gate, "People have to grow up one day."

Tian Luo *shi* smiled: "This is good." It was better to have an imposing aura in the Imperial Family. She had originally been worried that they would scorn Qing Ju because of the matter with the *san xiaojie* of the Qu Family. Seeing that Qing Ju was living well, she could now rest her worries.

Thinking about what the Qu Family had done, Tian Luo *shi* couldn't help but frown. They were a somewhat honourable family. How did they have the shamelessness to do such a thing? It wasn't that their lives were at stake, so why go to become a *qie*? Was it because being a *qie* for a *wang ye* meant that she became a rank above the rest? In this Jing City, a *di* daughter of a duke pursuing to become a *qie*. Even if the other was a *wang ye*, it was still a laughingstock.

He Fu Er dropped half a step back as he walked behind Qian Chang Xin, Ming He and the rest. He looked at the back figures of Duan Wang and Duan Wang Fei. He couldn't help but sigh. If his *wang ye* and *wang fei* could be as intimate, he would have a much easier time as a servant.

This Duan Wang Fei was really beautiful and Duan Wang was really willing and generous. That jewel on the hair comb was that bright. How many good things were cut up to create such an effect?

But women, they had to be like this to have flavour. He might be an impotent *taijian* but he was at least half a man. If Duan Wang Fei had even stronger tactics, there would be no space for the *qieshi* of Duan Wang Fu to survive.

After he guided the people to their destination, He Fu Er perceptively retreated. Before he left, he received a pouch bestowed by Duan Wang Fei. Even though it wasn't anything rare, but at least she had looked at him, a *taijian*, didn't she?

By this time, there were members of both sexes present in the pear tree forest. After they heard the *taijian* announce the arrival of Duan Wang, they stood to welcome him. He Yuan and Qin Bai Lu personally took a few more steps forward and waited at the entrance for the two to come over.

The instant she saw Qu Qing Ju, the smile on Qin Bai Lu's face became colder. She had always had looked down on women that only knew how to dress but didn't have anything of value inside. But Qu Qing Ju had to appear each time more beautiful than the last time they met..

When some women wore a dress embroidered with a hundred flowers and butterflies, it was gaudy. Others, however, looked stunning. He Yuan's gaze swept across Qu Qing Ju beside He Heng, his eyebrow slightly moving. Just a few days, and his *er sao* seemed even more beautiful.

Noticing He Yuan's gaze, He Heng carelessly released Qu Qing Ju's hand. He took a step forward, managing to walk directly in front of Qu Qing Ju and smiled as he greeted He Yuan: "We are disturbing *san di, san dimei* today."

"*Er ge* is too polite. Why don't we have a drink?" He Yuan made a sweeping motion, indicating for He Heng to walk on his left side. Even though the banquet hadn't been intentionally divided, the men were gathered on the left side drinking while the women were on the right side, drinking tea and eating pastries. Each side were occupied with their own amusements.

He Heng's smile didn't change: "Then *yu xiong* will respectfully accept." He commanded Mu Jin and the others, "Serve *wang fei* with great care."

"Yes," Mu Jin and the others bowed, "*Wang ye*, please rest your heart."

He Heng nodded and started to walk with He Yuan to the already prepared tables on the left side. Very quickly, the male guests, who had already arrived, moved forward to greet him. After a ruckus, the He brothers finally managed to sit.

"*Er ge* has become more attentive to your people," He Yuan raised a wine cup to him, taking a sip, "No wonder Jing City is praising *er ge* and *er sao* as one of those rare good couples."

"*San di* is drunk," He Heng mimicked the other in raising a cup and taking a small mouthful, "It is expected for men to be good to their own people. How is it worth to be talked about?"

He Yuan's lips curled, his gaze unconsciously starting to search for the figure of Qu *shi*. He caught a glimpse but before he could take a closer look, a wine cup appeared in front of his eyes.

"*San di*'s *fu* has such beautiful pear flowers. Let's drink another cup," He Heng smiled with narrowed eyes as he raised the wine cup, "Such beautiful scenery, if we don't drink to it, it will be such a waste."

"That's true," He Yuan turned his eyes away and smiled as he drank with He Heng.

Qu Qing Ju was going to sit down with Qin Bai Lu but seeing Tian Luo *shi* had also come, she turned and walked a few steps towards her. Coming up to support her, she exclaimed: "I didn't see *jiumu* before. Otherwise, I would have come in with you."

Tian Luo *shi* gave a gentle smile and held hands with her as they walked to the tables. She patted the back of the hand, saying: "*Wang fei* was walking at the front. How could you know what was happening behind?"

The other womenfolk came forward to greet Qu Qing Ju, their eyes admiring and shocked as they swept across Qu Qing Ju's entire body. They couldn't help but be moved. Once Duan Wang Fei appeared, all of them seemed to pale in comparison. Even Rui Wang Fei seemed bland as she stood to the side.

Qin Bai Lu noticed the gazes of the other womenfolk, her smile becoming strained. Hearing a servant report that Jin An Princess had arrived, she turned to welcome the princess. She didn't want to look at Qu Qing Ju and also, she didn't want to stand next to her.

"*Er dimei* has already arrived?" When Jin An Princess came in, she smiled as she walked to Qu Qing Ju and Tian Luo *shi*. She examined Qu Qing Ju thoroughly before exclaiming: "In the past, people described beautiful women by peerless, or exquisite. *Ben gong* always thought it was just exaggerations, but seeing *er dimei*, I feel that the praises can be true. Such a stunning and peerless beauty."

"*Jiejie*, stop mocking me with so many people present. Otherwise, I can't go outside anymore," Qu Qing Ju acted along, and lowered her head, "You think that I am an easy target so you're purposefully embarrassing me."

"Don't be angry. If this beautiful face won't come out anymore for *ben gong* to look at, *ben gong* will have no desire for food or sleep." Jin An Princess bowed, "*Jiejie* will say sorry to you right now, so my good *dimei*, don't be angry."

"Where did this lecher come from? So frivolous and outrageous." Qu Qing Ju pretended to gently push Jin An Princess and then acted embarrassed by hiding her face as she sat down.

When the womenfolk standing nearby saw the scene, they all hid their smiles. But inside, they were all shocked at the intimacy between Jin An Princess and Duan Wang Fei. Rui Wang Fei, sitting nearby, didn't seem to be even part of the same family.

"Beauty, don't be angry, don't be angry. *Ben gong* will pour tea for you to absolve myself," Jin An Princess really did pour Qu Qing Ju tea, and with a masculine bow, she went on, "Please."

Qu Qing Ju instantly smiled as she raised the teacup to take a drink: "En, it isn't bad. I'll keep you to serve my tea. Are you willing?" She could detect Jin An Princess's desire to become closer. Even though she didn't

know what the other's objective was, it was clearly not malicious so she was happy to receive the goodwill.

"How can I refuse a beauty's wish?" Jin An Princess' smile became even brighter.

Qin Bai Lu looked coldly at the interaction between Jin An Princess and Qu Qing Ju. An icy smile appeared on her face. *Wang ye* told her to become intimate with Jin An Princess, but once the princess came, she moved closer to Qu *shi*. What could she do?

Once most of the guests had arrived, Qin Bai Lu announced: "Today is such a rare occasion for everyone to honor our *fu* with your presence. Our *fu* has prepared some songs and dances for everyone to appreciate. I hope everyone would enjoy." When she finished, she clapped her hands. Everyone saw a plainly dressed woman come out, holding a *Jiao Wei* zither in her hands.

After this plainly dressed woman sat down, everyone didn't know what expression to show. Because this woman was the third daughter of the Qu Family.

This Qu *san guniang* could be considered to be Duan Wang Fei's sister. Rui Wang Fei letting her come out to display her talents like this, was it to embarrass Duan Wang and Duan Wang Fei?

Qu Qing Ju ignored the eyes on her. She smiled and commented to Jin An Princess and Tian Luo *shi* beside her: "This tea isn't bad. The fragrance lingers in the mouth, not common at all." A long time ago on the boat, He Yuan had played the same ploy. Now Qin Bai Lu was also doing it. Didn't these two have any other tactics to attack their opponent?

This type of attack, to her and He Heng, it was all ineffective!

Chapter 71

Music produced by females were usually gentle and touching. Qu Qing Ju leaned back against the cushion, her index finger slowly caressing the rim of her tea cup. She watched the flower petals fall on Qu Yue Su's hair. The wind blew and the petals all fell down, displaying a special kind of charm.

Due to the influence of her profession in the previous life, she liked admiring beauties of all types. A plainly dressed beauty, hair flying in the midst of a rain of flower petals, it was a beautiful scene. Even more so when the beauty's music was also pleasing to the ear. .

"The drizzling rains are moisturizing the streets of the capital, the color of grass can be seen far yet not near, it is the best attribute of summer, and definitely wins over the colors of the capital." Qu Yue Su's voice was light as she recited a poem describing the spring. Her fingers stopped moving, leaving behind the perfect ending for the song.

The surrounding people woke up from the music. Some clapped while others gasped. But there wasn't anyone who dared to dampen the spirits by mentioning that this *qie* was a daughter of a duke.

"Beautiful person, beautiful song," He Heng played with the wine cup and praised insincerely, "Good."

"To receive a compliment from *er ge*, that's her good fortune. Qu *shi* may only be *ben wang's cefei*, but she is also *er sao*'s *meimei*. So she can call *er ge* brother." He Yuan smiled as he raised a cup to He Heng, "The person is beautiful, the wine even more so. Let's have another cup."

Sitting on the right hand side of He Heng, He Ming heard the words and felt that they were strange. He looked at the *qie* sitting by the *qin*, and then at *er ge*, his brow furrowing. Was *san ge* purposefully trying to humiliate *er ge*?

"*San di* is joking," He Heng didn't get angry and smiled instead. He gave a disinterested look at Qu Yue Su, "*San di* is gracious enough to have your beloved *qie* to play a song for us, and allow us to see what is meant by the person is beautiful, the song even more so. So it should be

er ge toasting you." This Que Yue Su might have been a noble lady of a *gong fu* but now she was in your Rui Wang Fu. You let your woman come out and display herself, it didn't have anything to do with him. If you don't find that embarrassing, what could he be afraid of?

When he finished talking, He Heng turned to look at He Ming and asked: "*Si di*, don't you think we should toast *lao san*?"

He Ming showed a confused expression as he raised his cup and smiled sincerely: "*Yu di* toasts *san ge* and thanks *san ge* for being so welcoming."

"There's no need to be so polite. Just a *qie*, she's nothing worth treasuring." He Yuan gritted his teeth as he drank down the cup of wine, the fire roaring inside.

"Haha, *san di* is very right. Let's drink, let's drink." He Heng laughed as he raised the cup and called for the people seated nearby to drink as well.

Under the pear tree, Qu Yue Su's fingernails pierced her palm. A drop of vibrantly crimson blood fell on the *Jiao Wei* zither. Her jade-like fingertip roughly wiped away the drop. The index finger swiped at the strings and a harsh "Ambush From Ten Sides" was played.

" 'Ambush from Ten Sides', the murderous intent from all sides, the danger from all sides. Your *fu*'s *ce fei* has done a good performance," He Gui Nian took a drink of tea and smiled as she looked at the woman playing, "This *guniang* has brilliant talent and is as beautiful as a flower, and plays such a good zither. No wonder *san di* desperately wanted to take her into the *fu*."

What did having so many skills do for her? Wasn't she still shameless for becoming someone else's *qie*? Qin Bai Lu smiled insincerely at He Gui Nian before her gaze fell onto Qu Qing Ju, "That isn't all. It's not just *wang ye*, even I usually like listening to her songs. *Er sao*'s *meimei* is a very rare kind of female."

Hearing this, Qu Qing Ju sighed: "It's *san shu* and *san dimei* who have the good fortune. Before I'd married, *san mei* lived with my stepmother. We

rarely saw each other, much less admire *san mei*'s musical talents. It's only at *dimei*'s *fu* that I have the good fortune. No matter what, I have to thank *san dimei*. Otherwise, I wouldn't have had many chances to hear *san mei*'s songs in this lifetime." She smiled, looking deeply moved, "It's *san dimei* who has good fortune, to have such a good assistant in helping to take care of *san shu*."

He Gui Nian couldn't help but feel awe after hearing Qu Qing Ju's words. She was really worthy of being *er dimei.* She was a perfect match in heaven with *er di*. Even the way she spoke was the same method of killing without seeing blood.

She turned her head to look. As expected, Qin Bai Lu's expression had changed. Any woman, after hearing such words, wouldn't feel comfortable. What woman was willing to share her husband with a talented and beautiful *qie*?

"Thanks *er sao*, I hope *er sao* will have the same good fortune in the future," Qin Bai Lu raised a teacup and took a drink, trying her best to make the smile on her face appear natural.

"Not everyone could have this kind of good fortune, I won't try to hope," Qu Qing Ju gave a wide smile as she continued, "Just listening isn't very interesting. *San dimei*, why don't you call some beauties for a dance? That would be enjoyable."

Qin Bai Lu forced out a small smile: "The dancers have already been prepared. Since *er sao* wishes to admire the dances of beautiful women, *di mei* will have the servants prepare."

Did she think that Rui Wang Fu was a playhouse, that she could order whatever? Qin Bai Lu indicated for the already prepared program to continue. Very quickly, dancers in white dresses with green girdles appeared in the garden. There were also musicians accompanying them from the side. The entire garden was filled with noise.

As the atmosphere became busier, Qu Qing Ju's gaze swept across the male guests opposite her. These men were either drinking, changing

cups, or using the silver chopsticks to tap along with the music. For some reason, she thought of the "Song of the Pipa Player" by Bai Ju Yi. Written in it was "The hairpins and silver combs broke as they were used to tap the beat, the red dress was dirtied by spilled wine, this year's cheer repeats next year, the autumn moon and spring winds pass in leisure." This was almost the entire truth. Luxury would disappear. Men were greedy for fresh and beautiful but a woman's youth was so short. After the best times had passed, where is the man's heart?

After watching half of the dancing, He Yuan pointed at the dancer leading the troupe, "*Er ge,* what do you think of that one?"

He Heng smiled as He looked at He Yuan. He slowly drawled: "Her beauty is above average, but not my type."

He Yuan had been waiting for the other's compliment so he could give his brother a beautiful woman. He hadn't thought that He Heng would reply with such words. He stilled for a moment before asking: "What is *er ge*'s preference?"

"With one look, the heart feels pleased, that is my preference," He Heng put down the wine cup in his hand. Taking the stance of the elder brother, he lectured seriously, "*San di*, no matter how many beautiful women there are, it's just flowers on the gold. A man shouldn't be too lustful. The so-called houses of beauty and happy dens are the easiest ways to wear down the drive of men. We are all young, we should put more attention on state affairs and try to lessen the burden for *fuhuang*."

He Yuan didn't manage to give out the woman and got lectured in return, causing him to almost lose the smile on his face. He put his wine cup on the table, "*Er ge* is right to scold me. These people are just for pleasure, and cannot be taken seriously. I made *er ge* worry, it's *didi*'s fault."

"I know you are usually mature, I just said a few words," He smiled as he raised the wine cup, "Come, drink."

He Ming widened his eyes as he watched *er ge* push away the beauty like this, and managed to scold *san ge* as well. He instantly felt awe rise for *er ge*.

The story of Rui Wang appreciating the dancing and wanting to give Duan Wang a woman passed into Qu Qing Ju's ears only when they had started the noon meal. She didn't change expression and blankly stated, "To receive a beautiful woman as a gift, that's a good thing."

"Such a pity you won't be bringing that beauty home," He Gui Nian smiled as she wiped her hands dry. She looked at Qu Qing Ju as she grinned, "My *er di* has said, no matter how beautiful the woman, it's still just flowers on the gold. It's enough to have only one who pleases the heart. He also said that men should pay more attention on state affairs."

The bunch of womenfolk on the side admired Qu Qing Ju's good fortune. One said that Rui Wang's conduct was of good taste, another said Duan Wang was illustrious. Both families were complimented, and even He Gui Nian was praised for having two good brothers.

Qu Qing Ju heard these people's words and couldn't help but think, the pitiful Little Fourth He, he had been forgotten by these womenfolk again.

Qin Bai Lu looked at the happy smile on Qu Qing Ju's face. The sourness in her heart seemed to have reached her throat. She was the one with higher birth than Qu Qing Ju, and she was the more talented. Her husband was more favoured by *fuhuang* but why was it that the other was better than her in every aspect, her *popo* was warm to her, her husband loved her, and even her clothing and jewellery were more sumptuous than her?

She was the one who should be more proud, right? Except for the fact that Qu Qing Ju was more beautiful, where else could she win?

The Heavens weren't fair. This type of vulgar woman could have such a good life. But why could she not receive the love of her husband, the

satisfaction of her *popo* and she had to compete for a man with those *shiqie* who couldn't even be seen out in public.

"Those ordinary rouge and common powders cannot compare to *er sao*'s beauty," Qin Bai Lu opined, "It's no surprise that Duan Wang doesn't have an interest in those dancers."

These words seemed to be complimenting her but why did it not sound right? Qu Qing Ju smiled as she looked at Qin Bai Lu, "*San dimei*'s words are really making me embarrassed. *Da jie* had mocked me already and now you've come to take a go. Us women's youth is only these short few years. Whatever beauty that exists, it becomes nothing."

Many of the womenfolk had been married for a long time. After hearing Qu Qing Ju's words, they couldn't help but agree. Duan Wang Fei's words were very truthful. Who hadn't been young once? But out of the people present, some always had the love and respect of their husbands, and some had nothing to say to their husbands. So the thing that is beauty, it can only be for a short time, whose beauty lasts for eternity?

In Xi Ce Yuan, Qu Yue Su calmly watched as Yao Xi cleaned her wounds. Hearing the chatter and laughter outside, she smiled bitterly: "Today, I've lost all my honor." Now, she was regretful but it was too late.

"*Xiao jie*!" Yao Xi comforted with red eyes, "*Xiao jie*, don't think too much. You still have many days ahead of you."

"Yes, long days." Qu Yue Su stared dazedly at the half-open door. She remembered the conversation between Duan Wang and *wang ye*. So she was nothing but an amusement.

Amusement … …

Chapter 72

After the noon meal, the parade of people spread into the pear forest. They played *tou hu*[14] and ordered a few shows before everyone started to make their farewells.

Qu Qing Ju seemed to be fated to be enemies with Qin Bai Lu and naturally took the chance to bid farewell. Both Jin An Princess and Tian Luo *shi* also stood to make their farewell.

Qin Bai Lu insincerely tried to detain them, and seeing it didn't work, she walked a few steps to send them off. She had just walked a few steps when she saw Duan Wang walked in their direction. She slightly lowered her head, looking only at the corner of Duan Wang's embroidered robe and dark boots.

"Want to go home?" He Heng saw Qu Qing Ju walk out and knew she wanted to return to the *fu*. He saw Jin An Princess was also present and raised his hands in a greeting.

Jin An Princess jested: "Okay, okay, no need to be so polite in front of me. I'll go first, there's no need to send me off."

"*Jiejie*, take care." Qu Qing Ju bowed slightly. Jin An Princess returned a bow before she took the hand of her *yahuan* as she left, not wanting to be a third wheel.

Tian Luo *shi* naturally wouldn't stand there as well. She spoke a few words to Qu Qing Ju before leaving as well, leaving behind Qu Qing Ju, He Heng and the He Yuan couple.

"It's still early, *er ge* and *er sao* can still stay for a while," He Yuan put his hands behinds his back as he offered, "Otherwise it would be such a waste of this good spring sunlight."

"The spring will still remain, it's not a matter of wasting it," He Heng held Qu Qing Ju's hand, "*san di* and *san dimei* don't have to send us off, we shall make our farewells now."

[14] ancient drinking game, players toss arrows into a pot and the loser drinks.

"If so, we won't forcefully detain you, take care." He Yuan raised his hands in a fist, a silent Qin Bai Lu bowed as she stood to the side. When she raised her head, she saw that Qu Qing Ju's hand was held by Duan Wang as they walked away.

She suddenly remembered the first time she saw Qu Qing Ju, it had been at the door to the palace. It had been like this that time, Duan Wang and Qu Qing Ju's fingers entwined together while she and He Yuan would never walk together.

It was only when the figures of the two had disappeared from view that she took her gaze back. Looking at the man two steps away from her, she suddenly felt tired. She rubbed her forehead as she expressed: "*Wang ye*, I'm slightly tired. I'm going back to *zhengyuan* to rest."

He Yuan expressionlessly nodded. Thinking about what had happened on the banquet, his mood wasn't well and he didn't want to see Qin Bai Lu either, "Go, don't wait for me tonight."

Qin Bai Lu smiled coldly. From a long time ago, she didn't wait for him anymore. A man that would never arrive, why should she wait?

The news that Duan Wang turned down a beautiful woman was passed around. Many praised the feelings between Duan Wang and Duan Wang Fei. Duan Wang's reputation for some reason dramatically increased among the womenfolk and he became the standard for noble ladies to pick their husbands.

Qu Qing Ju couldn't help but smile as she heard the discussions outside. She listened as Huang Yang and Jin Zhan cleverly acted out the rumors from outside. She couldn't help but tease: "Based on what you tell, I'm not even human. It's all unfounded, but you all believe it like it's the truth."

"*Wang fei*, just let them play, otherwise they'll explode," Mu Jin took a cushion to place behind Qu Qing Ju to help her sit more comfortably, "Rui *wang fei*'s expression wasn't good when *wang fei* left this time. *Nubi* thinks she is very discontent with you."

"We are on different sides, no matter what I do, she would be displeased," Qu Qing Ju thought about Qin Bai Lu's conduct at the banquet. She frowned, speculating, "It may be that because of Qu Yue Su entering Rui Wang Fu that hatred formed and she hates me by association."

Mu Jin heard this and thinking of the road that *san xiaojie* picked, she sighed: "No one thought that *san xiaojie* would do such a thing. *Nubi* thinks that Rui Wang Fu isn't a good destination." Once she finished, she instantly reacted. She couldn't say those words. She bowed down as she pled, "*Nubi* was speaking nonsense, please forgive me, *wang fei*."

"There's no need to stick so closely to the rules," Qu qing Ju said, "you have a steady personality. I believe that you just slipped this time."

Mu Jin heard *wang fei*'s words and her heart became even more alert. She reminded herself to not slip again in the future. It was alright here where no one else was present. If other people were present, wouldn't they say *wang fei* had no discipline?

"*Wang fei*, Luo *yiniang* asks for an audience." Yu zan walked in. Seeing Mu Jin *jiejie*'s expression wasn't right, she lowered her voice to say, "*Nubi* sees that Luo *yiniang*'s spirits aren't very good."

"Just let her come in," Qu Qing Ju thought for a bit but didn't switch to another place to receive Luo *shi*. In a short while, she saw Luo *shi* docilely walk in.

Luo Yin Xiu walked in, and without a word, knelt down. Qu Qing Ju hurriedly let a servant help her up, "What are you doing, Mu Jin, help Luo *yiniang* to a seat."

"Originally, *nubi* shouldn't have come like this to visit *wang fei*, but *nubi* is really grateful for *wang fei*'s kindness," Luo Yin xiu's eyes were red, "*nubi* has nothing to repay *wang fei* except to do a full greeting to express the gratefulness."

"To want to support your elders but they are already gone is a huge regret of all people. We are women, we cannot even help support those

who raised us. If we cannot even see their last moments, how would we face them in death?" Qu Qing Ju sighed. Even though this era was similar to late Tang in terms of the status of men and women, but it was still the man as the sky, the woman as an accessory of the man. There was a rare strong woman, but they were dependant on the power of the maternal family. It was alright for a princess to not want her *fuma*, but were there an empress that dared not want the emperor?

Men and women were, in the end, not equal in this world. She stood and patted the back of Luo Yin Xiu's hand, "Don't think too much right now. Go back and get a good sleep. I understand your desires." She saw the colors that Luo Yin Xiu were wearing were very light and plain. She knew that it was out of desire to observe morning for her *jiujiu* and didn't have any objections.

Luo Yin Xiu wiped away her tears and stood to bow to her: "*Nubi* thanks *wang fei*." Originally, she had thought *wang fei* was arrogant and wouldn't pay attention to one as useless as her. She hadn't thought that she would help her and speak words of comfort.

She was a *shiqie*, one that could be easily taken care of. How *wang fei* treated her, it was her good fortune to enter this *wang fu*. If she encountered a woman more dangerous, she wouldn't have been allowed to wear plain clothes, much less return to her uncle's home for the funeral.

Coming of the *zhengyuan*, Luo Yin Xiu, with the support of a *yahuan*, wiped her tears as she said: "Shu Wen, remember *wang fei*'s boon today. Even if I cannot repay it all in this lifetime, I have to remember it well."

The *yahuan* named Shu Wen carefully supported her and observed in a small voice: "Mistress, I feel that *wang fei* treats people well, and isn't at all like what Ping *yiniang* said."

"Ping *yiniang* is bringing trouble upon herself," Luo Yin Xiu's expression had returned to normal. To weep in this kind of place, it was providing amusement for others.

"As a *qie*, how could she ever shake the prestige of the Mistress?" Luo Yin Xiu thought about what Ping Zi Jin had done in the past, "Three years ago, she entered the palace as a female candidate. Because her status wasn't enough, she was bestowed by Jing *guifei* to serve His Highness. His Highness was able to give her a position, she should have treasured it. Now it's like this, she lost even His Highness' affections. She lost more than she had gained."

Shu Wen nodded. Looking around at the surrounding and seeing no one was around, she furtively said: "*Nubi* feels that *wang fei* is better looking than Ping *yiniang*. *Wang ye* liking *wang fei* and not Ping *yiniang* is right."

"What does a young girl like you know, don't mention this in the future," Luo Yin Xiu's face darkened, "let's go, help me change once we return."

"Yes," Shu Wen embarrassedly lowered her head, not daring to speak.

He Heng had returned to the Royal Court but when he heard the decree *fuhuang* had sent down, he couldn't help frown. Let *lao san* take the decree to scold *lao da*. What was the meaning of the decree, hating *lao da* for failing to meet expectations, or wanted to let *lao san* get some revenge?

This conduct was too preposterous. He raised his head to look at Qing De Emperor, stepping forward to raise his hands: "*Fuhuang*, *er chen* had assumed that since *da ge* has already reflected in Hao Yue Tower already, he knows what he did wrong. Why don't *fuhuang* give *da ge* a change?"

"Heng'er, *lao da* tried to assassinate you, why do you beg for mercy for him?" Qing De Emperor looked at his second son, his face full of surprise and displeasure.

Thinking out the message that *lao da* had others send to him where he had explained that he didn't try to assassinate him and there were hints of intentions of ceding to him, He Heng knew that even though *lao da* was imprisoned, he was still in a life-or-death battle with *lao san*.

"It's not that *er chen* has the intentions of asking for mercy for *da ge*. But up until now, *da ge* had been very reverential of *fuhuang*. If *fuhuang* scolds him again, *er chen* is worried that *da ge*'s body won't hold up. Your eldest grandson has just turned three years old, can he be without a father?" He Heng's voice was full of earnestness as he persuaded, "*fuhuang*, can you endure the pain of losing a son?"

I'm saying you can't bear to let your son die, can you say you can bear it?

Evidently Qing De Emperor was very moved by these words. His eldest son would not eat or sleep because of his condemnation. If he really died due to that, he, as a father, would really care. So he nodded and concluded: "If that's so, then it would be as you say. There won't be a decree condemning him. *Zhen* will send some more books over to let him read and write to cultivate his moral character."

"*Fuhuang* is kind and wise." He Heng's face was moved and reverent as he knelt.

He Yuan turned his head to look at the scene. His face darkened as he thought, when would He Heng's? mouth be clumsy?

The court officials standing at the back also knelt down as they shouted the emperor's benevolence, and caused Qing De Emperor to reveal a smile. He praised He Heng, expressing the side of him that was a loving father, before he ended court.

After court, He Heng coincidentally managed to be walking together with Minister Luo Chang Qing. After Luo Chang Qing made his greetings, He Heng remarked: "After a few more days, it would be your daughter's special day. *Ben wang* will give early congratulations to Luo *da ren*."

Luo Chang Qing raised his hand and acknowledged: "*Wang ye* is too polite, great thanks *wang ye*."

This appellation, it even omitted the title at the front. It was much more intimate than before.

Chapter 73

Today Luo *fu* was especially busy. Luxurious sedans of all kinds stopped at the doors of the Luo *fu*, and the line was so long it took half the street. The common people watched from far away on the side as the sedans that carried the noblewomen passed by and started to discuss the matter of Luo *xiaojie*'s upcoming marriage..

The time at which Qu Qing Ju arrived wasn't too early or too late. Once her sedan appeared, the other sedans quickly moved out to make a path to let her eight-person *wang fei* ranked sedan smoothly pass through.

Getting off the sedan, the person receiving her was Luo Wen Yao's mother Luo *taitai*. She reached out to hold Luo *taitai*'s hand, stopping her from bowing in greeting to her: "Luo *taitai*, what are you doing, you are my elder, there's no rationale for elders bowing to their descendants. Today is Wen Yao *meimei*'s day of adding to the dowry. Coming here is me butting in to receive some of that celebratory cheer."

"*Wang fei* could come, it's bringing light to this humble abode, it isn't butting in," Luo *taitai* was smiling widely as she supported her hand to walk into the *fu* and usher her into the *houyuan*. She saw that many people had already arrived. These people must be on good relations with the Luo Family to come at this time to add to the dowry.

Tian Luo *shi* might have been Qu Qing Ju's *jiumu* but she hadn't expected that her niece would personally come. Seeing her, she fell into a short daze before revealing a smile. The fact that her niece was honouring her maternal family, it was out of fondness for her.

"*Jiu mu*," Qu Qing Ju walked over to Tian Luo *shi*. She saw that Tian Luo *shi* was holding the accounts for Luo Wen Yao's dowry. She casually took a look and said to Luo *taitai* behind her, "Luo *taitai* loves her daughter very much, this dowry is very generous."

The other *furen* present, when they heard the words, followed with their compliments. The family attitude of the Luo Family in placing

importance on the next generation was famous in Jing City. Qu Qing Ju ruminated on the stuff listed on the dowry list. This desire to care for their daughter, it was very rare.

As Luo *taitai* heard the praises, she smiled as tears ran down. It could be seen she was happy at her daughter's marriage yet sad to part with her daughter.

A short while later, everyone started to demand to see the soon-to-be-married bride. Qu Qing Ju went with the crowd into Luo Wen Yao's room. After entering, she saw Luo Wen Yao wearing a pink dress, her cheeks red as she sat by the window, clearly embarrassed. Luo *lao taitai* was sitting beside her, a benevolent smile on her face. It seemed that she, as an elder, was discussing something with her beloved granddaughter.

Qu Qing Ju's footsteps paused. She felt that this scene before her was very warm and unconsciously gave a smile, holding Tian Luo *shi*'s hand as she stood silently at one side.

"So beautiful," One *furen* looked at Luo Wen Yao who had her head lowered, and gasped: "It wasn't so long ago you were just a young *yatou* and now you are getting married." She walked in front of Luo *taitai* and gently patted her hand, "As her aunt, I don't have anything good to give her, but these things are just a token of my love as an elder."

Once she finished, the *yahuan* behind her revealed the gifts. Qu Qing Ju found that inside were two pairs of bangles, two pairs of earring, two *buyao,* and two sets of jade artifacts. The craftsmanship of all these objects were very fine, it seemed that this aunt of Luo Wen Yao's had put some thought in.

The close relatives of the Luo Family started to give out the objects to add to the dowry. Tian Luo *shi*, as the aunt, didn't give jade artifacts or jewelry. She straightforwardly gave out the deeds to the land and house for a shop. It was an exceedingly generous gift. Of course, it also implied her position in the Tian Family.

After the relatives presented, then it was time for the friends. As a *wang fei*, Qu Qing Ju naturally wouldn't be left until last. She indicated for the *yahuan* behind her to present what she had brought. She walked next to Luo Wen Yao, gently holding her hand to say: "According to age, you are some months younger than me. It's appropriate for me to call you *meimei*."

Luo Wen Yao's face was crimson as she bowed: "*Jiejie*."

Qu Qing Ju smiled as she touched the other's delicate face. Fifteen years old, still half a child, and to be marriage in this ancient time. She suddenly thought about the "Gou Jian Destroys Wu" from the previous life's humanities classes, there was a phrase "if a woman is not married by seventeen, her parents are at fault" which used to be a great target for mockery by everyone. Now that she was living at this place, she knew how real it was.

"You have to remember, a woman can be virtuous, can be dignified but cannot forget to be good to herself," Qu Qing Ju slightly lowered her head, and spoke at a volume by Luo Wen Yao's ear that only the two of them could hear, "don't assume that, as a *wang fei*, you have to be careful with speech and laughter. Everything else is fake, to have your husband be good to you is the best tactic of all. You have to remember he isn't just a *wang ye*, he is also a man."

Speaking to that point, Qu Qing Ju didn't go any further. She took a step back. Looking at Luo Wen Yao's face that was bursting with blood, she couldn't resist touching her face again. Such a good girl, Little Student Ming better not disappoint her.

Luo Wen Yao looked at the smiling woman in front of her. For some reason unknown, she put what she had just heard deep into her heart. Even though the two had only met a few times, but she felt what the other said was the truth and the conduct of the other was good.

A beat later, she nodded her head gravely: "*Jiejie*, *meimei* will remember." In that pair of large eyes were reverence and trust.

The others thought that they spoke a few words due to the similar age of the two and that they would be *zhouli* in the future. They definitely wouldn't have thought that Qu Qing Ju was teaching Luo Wen Yao the skills to manage her husband. They looked at the gifts that Duan Wang Fei was adding to the dowry and had to admit to themselves that Duan Wang Fei was one that repaid the kindness done to her.

A phoenix-blood jade pendant, ruby hair comb, mutton-fat bangles, twelve double-sided embroidered silk handkerchiefs, a whole set of pearl hair ornaments, and a dotted jade *buyao*. Those were all rare objects on their own and Duan Wang Fei had given so many. It could be seen that she still remembered the kindness of the Luo Family from the past.

Thinking about that, everyone laughed on the inside at Chang De Gong Fu. Neglecting an eldest *di* daughter. Now this eldest *di* daughter was grown, she was estranged from them. The second *di* daughter that was put on their hearts rushed up to become a *qie*. This was already a laughingstock in Jing City. They had to wonder, did the people of Chang De Gong Fu have the courage to leave their home?

Not long after, even the Princess Royal and some of the *feipin* from the palace sent people to add to the dowry. It could be seen that the importance placed on the Luo Family, and expressed the fact that after Luo Wen Yao married, she wouldn't be slighted by the Imperial Family.

After the guests left, Luo Wen Yao sat by the window. Thinking of Qu Qing Ju's words, her face flushed. She twisted to look at her grandmother that was keeping her company and expressed in a small voice: "Grandmother, Duan Wang Fei is a good person."

Luo *lao taitai* heard her granddaughter's words and smiled: "Duan Wang Fei might not be a good person, but she hasn't treated you badly. Yao *yatou*, you have to remember, tomorrow, you will be marrying into the Imperial Family. The people good to you might not be good, the people true to you might not be true."

Luo Wen Yao nodded. She hesitated before commenting: “For some reason, from the first time granddaughter met Duan Wang Fei, there was a feeling of closeness. Was granddaughter too impulsive?”

“You usually are calm and steady, grandmother knows that,” Luo *lao taitai* shook her head. She reached out to straighten the slightly askew *buyao* in her granddaughter’s hair. She smiled and replied, “In this world, destiny is important. If you feel you can be close friends with someone, then look and think more. In the end, that will tell you if your instincts are right or not.”

Luo Win Yao ruminated before lowering her head, confirming: “Granddaughter will remember.”

“Even Duan Wang Fei didn’t always have smooth sailing. When she had just married, she wasn’t favoured by Duan Wang. At that time, she had to endure Liang *shi*’s attitude when she went home,” Luo *lao taitai* said ruefully, “but who knew that after two short months, Duan Wang started to be seriously attached to her, and for her, created conflict with Chang De Gong Fu. It can be seen that Duan Wang Fei is a very outstanding woman.”

As she finished listening to her grandmother’s words, Luo Wen Yao’s worship of Qu Qing Ju became even greater. If a woman like Duan Wang Fei couldn’t receive the affections of her husband, then it meant Duan Wang’s eyes were too lacking.

After finishing adding to Luo Wen Yao’s dowry and staying in Luo *fu* to eat a meal, Qu Qing Ju sat on the sedan to return to the *fu*. From the outside of the sedan came sounds of peddling. She brushed aside the curtain and saw a stall not far away selling stewed eggs. It didn’t look extremely clean but the fragrance drifted into the nose.

“Stop,” As Qu Qing Ju spoke, the sedan slowly stopped.

“*Wang fei*,” Huang Yang walked to the window of the sedan and asked in a small voice, “Has something happened?”

Qu Qing Ju peeked from behind the curtain, "I see that the stewed eggs seem fragrant, buy some for a taste. Get the owner to add some of the soup. After returning to the *fu*, it has to be heated so the taste will not change."

Hearing this, Huang Yang turned his head to look at the stewed egg stall at the side of the street. He jogged in front of the stall and took out a handful of copper, buying a dozen or which were then wrapped with lotus leaves. He held a bowl filled with the stew as he ran back to the side of the sedan, informing in a small voice: "*Wang fei*, this one has bought them."

"En, let's return." Qu Qing Ju rubbed her nose. Even though she wanted to taste one now, due to the need for appearances, she resisted the craving.

The old woman that sold the stewed eggs didn't expect that her food would be bought by an important person one day. Her face was full of excitement as she looked at the red and yellow sedan leave, muttering: "The Heavens, that was a noble."

The passersby saw that even a noble and relative of the Imperial Family had bought the stewed eggs and for a time, many bought a few for a taste. This was something that even a noble liked to eat.

Not far away, He Yuan sat on a horse as he looked at the stewed egg stall surrounded by people. He frowned as he raised his horse whip to point to the stall: "He Fu Er, go buy a few."

He Fu Er quickly left with two guards. He pushed into the crowd and brought a few stewed eggs before squeezing out of the crowd. Taking them to He Yuan, he warned: "*Wang ye*, the food on the street isn't clean, don't eat too much."

Looking at the unsightly egg, He Yuan used a white handkerchief to hold the already peeled egg. He hesitated before taking a bite. The egg had been cooked for a long time, it was tough and slightly salty, but the smell was very special.

"What is this, just throw it away," He Yuan ate a whole egg before wiping his hands and throwing the handkerchief away. He ordered coldly, "Return to the *fu*."

He Fu Er blanked. When he raised his head, *wang ye* was already far away on his horse. He turned to carelessly shove the stewed egg wrapped in lotus leaves to one of the children on the street and jogged to catch up.

The child that had the egg shoved into his hand stared dazedly at the back of He Fu Er. He unwrapped the egg and took a bite, instantly giving a smile. Tao *popo*'s stewed eggs were really flavorful, so delicious!

That rich person has terrible sense, to pass on something this good!

Chapter 74

On the day of He Ming's marriage, Qu Qing Ju and Jin An Princess received the womenfolk who'd arrived for the celebration as the mistresses of the house. Now that Ning Wang Fei was under house arrest in Bright Moon Tower, Qu Qing Ju held seniority among the *wang fei*. For this wedding of He Ming, her little brother-in-law, even if she wanted to be lazy, she couldn't avoid it.

The womenfolk were fine. Order a few cheerful plays, put out some fruit and refreshments and chit chat. It wasn't very difficult. But it was more complicated on the men's side. It didn't just touch on the personal interests of some, they had to pay attention to people who were drunk and would cause an unfortunate disturbance. Additionally, He Yuan wasn't willing to demean himself by receiving guests so He Heng and some of the officials of the Ministry of Rites had to organize the guests.

Even if it seemed busy, most of those who came were smart. They wouldn't cause a disturbance at this kind of setting, and wouldn't try to find trouble. Most of them respectfully sat down and waited for the wedding to begin.

Jin An Princess paid attention to the time. Not long after, a *taijian* ran over and reported that the wedding sedan was almost at its destination. A crowd of women stood to walk to the front hall and waited for the couple to bow to the Heaven and Earth.

Qu Qing Ju and Jin An Princess stood together. She swept a gaze across the hall. The men and women stood at their own sides, the men on the left and woman on the right, clearly divided. In a short while, the music sounded. She tilted her head to look and saw He Ming wearing the bright red wedding clothes, his hand holding one end of a red silk cord as he walked in from the outside. On the other side of the red silk cord was Luo Wen Yao, who was wearing a phoenix crown and cape.

While Qing De Emperor and the Empress didn't personally attend, their gifts had been sent down very early beforehand. Qu Qing Ju watched as the couple bowed to the empty seats above them and once again looked down on the Imperial House. The father wasn't present when the son got married. Was there even any meaning left when the Imperial father and son were like this?

When the three brothers in front of He Ming had married, Qing De Emperor had personally written out a celebratory speech to be read at each of the ceremonies, expressing the regret of his absence and wished to make up for such a deficiency. Why wasn't there one when it was He Ming's turn?

After the ceremony, Qu Qing Ju and the others followed the newly wedded pair to their bridal rooms and waited for He Ming to lift the bride's veil.

The bridal rooms were very busy. Qu Qing Ju even saw Jin An Princess' two children. She watched as He Ming slowly lifted the bride's veil. Underneath it, Luo Wen Yao's face was full of bashfulness, like a flower just before blooming.

Some said that a woman was most beautiful on the day of her marriage. Qu Qing Ju smiled at the bashful Luo Wen Yao and had to admit it was true. She and Jin An Princess smiled as they came forward to say some

lucky words. After the children received their red packets, they ushered everyone out and left a silent space for the newlyweds.

Coming out of the bridal room, Jin An Princess looked at the darkening sky. She smiled as she reminisced: "That year I was married, the *didi* were still all children. Now, all of them are married."

Qu Qing Ju guessed that Jin An Princess was thinking of her failed marriage, comforting: "Time is like flowing water, *jiejie* doesn't have to be sad."

Listening to the noise from the banquet in front of them, Jin An Princess smiled as she glanced at Qu Qing Ju: "You are assuming that I am sad over what happened with the Count of Bei Lu?" She laughed, "Right now, I am the Princess Royal, I have a son and daughter, and they have their titles. What do I need to be sad about?"

Qu Qing Ju hadn't thought Jin An Princess would say such unaffected words and stilled before conceding: "It's me that was mistaken."

Jin An Princess shook her head: "When the Count of Bei Lu betrayed me in the beginning, he should have thought of the conclusion. I am the daughter of the Emperor, he underestimated the people of the Imperial Family." Maybe it came about because of the Imperial Family were too courteous to him when they used to return to Jing, and that made him forget what they were truly like.

Qu Qing Ju felt that Jin An Princess was extremely domineering right now. As they walked closer to the wedding banquet, she looked ahead and hesitated before speaking: "A few days ago, a subordinate of my *wang ye* came back from Jing Zhou. I heard him say that ninth-grade official's daughter died from sickness, the Count of Bei Lu hasn't stepped out of his home and even sent up a request to transfer the title to his *didi*."

"*Fuhuang* will not agree," Jin An Princess smiled as she explained, "This title, until the Count of Bei Lu dies, will always be on his head. But after he dies, it isn't certain that this title will still be the Cao Family's."

Qu Qing Ju looked at the smile on Jin An Princess' face, instantly feeling reverence. This was what a true woman should be like.

At the wedding banquet, He Heng occasionally drank a cup with the guest but most of the time, he only had to sit to one side and wait for others to come to him. Looking at the noisy play on stage, he gave a yawn of disinterest.

"*Er ge* is tired?" Sitting by his side, He Yuan played with the wine cup, looking lazy, "Now that *lao si* has married, he will get busy in the future."

He Heng didn't seem to hear the implication in his words. He raised the wine cup and swirled the contents: "With a *wang fei* to care for him, *si di* will have more relaxing days."

"Ha," He Yuan snorted, "When did *er ge* become so simple? *Didi* finds it very unexpected." He Heng was pretending not to understand his words, still acting in front of him.

He Heng gave a warm smile as he responded: "*Er ge* is always like this. It was *san di* who didn't know before today."

The corner of He Yuan's lips jerked. He turned his head to avoid looking at He Heng's expression and saw his eldest sister and Duan Wang Fei emerge from the back and walk to the female side. He frowned as his gaze landed on Qin Bai Lu who had been seated the whole time. The hand which held the wine cup tightened. They were both *wang fei*, but why was the difference in conduct so large?

The noise eventually had to quiet down. When Qu Qing Ju and He Heng came out of Cheng Wang Fu, it was already the deep of the night. She inhaled, watching as the guards surrounded Jin An Princess as she left, before she said: "We can finally return and rest."

He Heng helped tie her cloak: "Let's go back."

"*Er ge* and *er sao*, take care."

Qu Qing Ju turned her head and saw He Yuan and Qin Bai Lu walking together with a stride length between them. Qin Bai Lu's expression didn't seem right.

"*San shu, san dimei*," Qu Qing Ju smiled, "It's late, you two should return and rest too."

"Thanks for the concern, *er sao*. Of course we know to rest," Qin Bai Lu calmly said, "Today, *er sao* was very busy, don't exhaust yourself."

It was easy to detect the queerness in her tone. He Heng's brows furrowed slightly, his eyes instantly becoming cold. Even the smile on his lips disappeared without a trace. It was only the fact that the other was his *dimei* that he didn't speak.

"Shut up," He Yuan snapped, "If you're tired, then go to the carriage and rest."

Qin Bai Lu's expression changed as she coldly answered: "If that's the case, *qie* will leave first. *Wang ye* can do as he pleases." She really did abandon He Yuan to leave first, and didn't even care that He Heng was present.

Qu Qing Ju felt that Qin Bai Lu painted a gigantic black dot on the reputation of the Qin Family as an educated and noble family. And this stain couldn't be washed out, and couldn't be brushed off.

He Yuan's face was so dark, ink could be squeezed out of it. He managed to raise his hands to the two and state: "*Er ge, er sao*, you go first." He said to Qu Qing Ju, "*Er sao,* forgive me for the wife's ill manners, and for letting you see such a joke.

This wasn't the first time I've seen your embarrassments. Qu Qing Ju smiled calmly as she replied: "It might be that *dimei* isn't feeling well. *San shu* should go take a look. We don't live very far from here and can get back to the *fu* very quickly. You go first."

He Yuan nodded: "Goodbye."

Qu Qing Ju reached out to hug He Heng's arm, whispering in his ear: "Our *san dimei*'s temper isn't soft at all."

He Heng smiled coldly, wrapping an arm around her waist to enter the carriage before declaring: "The Qin Family raised a good daughter!"

Qu Qing Ju listened to the tone of his voice and had the impression of it expressing "wait and see". She smiled, "Who cares whose daughter she is? It has nothing to do with us."

He Heng embraced the other in his arms, gently patting her back. A long time later, he stated: "Don't worry. In the future, no one would dare to be disrespectful to you."

The person in his embrace didn't speak. A beat later, he lowered his head to look but only saw the other's sleeping visage. He smiled helplessly. It seemed that today had exhausted her.

"Clang!" A blue-ink porcelain teapot smashed onto the floor. He Yuan angrily pointed at Qin Bai Lu, "Look at what you've done. How does it look like anything a proper lady would do? Even an uneducated shrew would be better. *Ben wang* gets angry just looking at you."

"Who do you not get angry looking at? Lu He in the Dong Yuan, Qing Liu or that whore in Xi Yuan?! The women of the Qu Family are all fox spirits but you men stop moving after taking a look … …"

He Yuan dealt a blow to Qin Bai Lu's face, making her stagger. He expressionlessly looked at Qin Bai Lu who was covering her face, "Before saying this, think of your position. If you feel that you can't stay in my Rui Wang Fu any longer, then get out and stay in your paternal home for the rest of your life. Don't come here to be an eyesore."

Qin Bai Lu covered her face. That slap had been extremely heavy. She still felt her ears ringing. She raised her head to look at He Yuan. From the other's handsome face, other than dislike for her, she couldn't see anything else. She looked dazedly at the man, her tears streaming.

"The Qin Family is an educated and noble family. Don't stain the Qin Family's reputation. My Da Long Dynasty has had *wang ye* in the past who'd divorced their wives. If you don't accept, you could try." He Yuan took out a handkerchief to wipe his hands in disgust. He turned and left the room, not looking once at Qin Bai Lu.

It didn't matter how noble the *xiaojie* of the Qin Family were. He was an imperial son, a *wang ye*. If she married him, she had to obey his rules. If she couldn't obey, then get out.

"*Wang fei*," Seeing that *wang ye* had left, the *yahuan* who served Qin Bai Lu hurriedly supported her to a seat. She got others to bring a towel and medicine, the *zheng yuan* quickly descended into chaos..

Qin Bai Lu was crying and laughing: "I can't even scold that Qu Family whore. Just a *qieshi*, but *wang ye* treats me like so for her. That whore has good tricks."

"*Wang fei*, why do this?" Ru Hua, one of the *yahuan* who was part of Qin Bai Lu's dowry, had reddened eyes as she helped put on medicine for Qin Bai Lu, "No matter how Qu *shi* is, she's just a *qie.* Why be hostile against *wang ye* for her?"

Qin Bai Lu woodenly looked at the darkness outside the door, "Come say, which part of Qu Qing Ju is stronger than me? Do men really place such importance on a woman's face?"

Ru Hua asked in confusion: "*Wang fei*, why are you mentioning Duan Wang Fei?"

"Why is it that I can't receive what she can get?" Qin Bai Lu still remembered the rumors before the marriage decree. At that time, there were people saying that the Emperor wanted to marry Qu Qing Ju to *wang ye* and her to Duan Wang. However, the decision had been changed at the last minute for some reason.

She had rejoiced that she was engaged to Rui Wang because Rui Wang was more favoured by the Emperor than Duan Wang. And two years

ago, she'd seen Rui Wang in the palace once, she had silently given her heart away.

Ru Hua didn't understand why her *wang fei* would have that kind of idea. After she applied the medicine, she carefully said: "How Duan Wang Fei lives, only she knows. What we usually see might only be intentional. *Wang fei*, you have no need to compete with Duan Wang Fei. You have to know that, other than a face, she is less than you in every other aspect."

Qin Bai Lu listened to her words and suddenly laughed, "Yes, I want to see just how long she can be proud."

She wasn't living well and so she couldn't bear to see people who were lesser than her have better lives.

Chapter 75

The morning after Cheng Wang's wedding day, he took his wife to the palace for the formal greeting. The Emperor might have been indifferent to his youngest son, but on the surface, he didn't slight him. What should have been bestowed down was given.

The Empress didn't discriminate. What her attitude was when the previous three imperial sons had married, that was her attitude towards He Ming's marriage. But she seemed to be friendly towards Luo Wen Yao.

Coming out of Kui Yuan Palace, Luo Wen Yao's face was slightly red as she walked next to He Ming with her head down. Even though she had dreamed of her husband as one who was well educated and skilled in both martial and literary arts, in reality, she felt that Cheng Wang treated her better and was more steadfast than the one in her dreams. Nothing would be better than to have a place in his heart.

"Don't worry, *mu fei* is very friendly, she will definitely like you," He Ming saw his wife's nervousness and gripped her hand reassuringly, "Don't be afraid. I'll be there with you."

"En," Luo Wen Yao gave the smallest of nods, her face blushing harder.

An *guipin* really did like having Luo Wen Yao as her *erxi* very much. She had a warm personality and a good conduct. The Emperor might have neglected her child for so many years but thankfully the *erxifu* he had chosen was a good one.

She looked at her *erxifu* whose face was full of embarrassment and indicated for the palace maid beside her to take out the prepared gifts. She gently grasped Luo Wen Yao's hand, smiling as she spoke: "Today, I'm putting Ming'er into your care. In the future, if Ming'er does something wrong, don't let him off. Tell me and I will certainly sort him out."

"*Mu fei* is abandoning your son since you have an *erxifu*," He Ming stood and raised his hands in a fist, "*Mu fei*, don't worry. We will try to live a good life."

Seeing the situation, Luo Wen Yao perceptively stood and followed in bowing. Her face might have been bashful but her tone was resolute: "Don't worry *mufei*. *Erxi* will definitely take good care of His Highness and have a good life."

An *guipin*'s eyes slightly reddened. She put the two people's hands together, and said happily: "It's good to try to have a fulfilling life. A person's life is like a long road. It's a fortunate thing to have someone to walk with along this long road. You have to treasure it."

He Ming turned to look at his wife. The hand that held Luo Wen Yao's hand tightened as he nodded gravely.

The couple let An *guipin*'s residence and started to head slowly out of the palace. He Ming noticed that Luo Wen Yao kept walking half a step behind him and reached out to grab her hand, remarking: "When we get

back, we should go to see to the gifts prepared for the return to your paternal home and check to see if there's anything lacking."

Luo Wen Yao shook her head and replied in a small voice: "Your Highness has already prepared everything. How could there be anything wrong?"

"I don't know what father and mother-in-law like so you have to take a look," He Ming smiled as he responded, "Otherwise, what will happen if father and mother-in-law aren't satisfied with their son-in-law?"

Luo Wen Yao heard his words and her hand that was being held by He Ming gripped his broad hand. She smiled as she teased: "That's even more of a reason not to help you. If you prepare, it's called being thoughtful. What is it if I prepare it?"

The two smiled simultaneously, their hearts gradually becoming closer.

Qu Qing Ju stood at the side of the fake mountain, looking at the sweet young couple not far away. She couldn't resist smiling and remarked to Mu Jin beside her: "Those two are pretty good like this."

Mu Jin smiled as she responded: "*Wang fei* likes Cheng *wang fei* very much?"

"I like all the good *guniang*," Qu Qing Ju slowly headed towards Zhong Jing Palace. Looking at Mu Jin's confused expression, she smiled and explained, "A young *guniang*, she's more beautiful than the most beautiful flower. A woman's whole life depends on one man, but that one man might not only have her as his only woman. Society is like this. A woman's beauty might be very short, or very long, but the only thing in common is that they had all been beautiful. It's just that they've all met different men and had different fates."

Mu Jin didn't think that *wang fei* would say such a complicated speech. She mused: "So it's good for *nubi* to accompany *wang fei*. Many of the men in this world are fickle, and *nubi* won't like them."

Qu Qing Ju felt that Mu Jin was affected by the Duke of Chang De's actions and the body's original owner's mother. She helplessly patted the back of Mu Jin's hand: "I won't force you to do something you're not willing to. But if you meet someone you've fallen in love with in the future, you have to tell me."

Mu Jing smiled as she acquiesced, but she didn't put it on her mind. The kind of being that was man, it couldn't even be compared to a handkerchief. At least a handkerchief was useful for wiping things. Men, other than being fickle and emotional, what else could they do?

When they had reached Zhong Jing Palace, Ding *mama* received Qu Qing Ju and ushered her inside. Only when she had entered did she realise that, aside from Jing *guifei*, Wen *guipin* was also present. She went forward to give a greeting to Jing *guifei* first before greeting Wen *guipin*.

"Duan *wang fei* has no need to be so courteous," Wen *guipin* hurriedly stood to return half a greeting. Her face was still fragile, but her mental state seemed much better than last time at the gates of Tian Qi Palace.

"*Meimei*, sit down. Heng'er's wife, sit down too," Jing *guifei* smiled and let the two sit, motioning for a palace maid to serve the pastries her *erxi* liked, "Why did you think of coming here today?"

Qu Qing Ju smiled as she looked at the pastries the palace maid served. She gushed to Jing *guifei*: "*Mufei* is so good to *erxi*, I like eating all of these." She reached out to pop one in her mouth, joyfully swallowing before replying, "Because of *si di* 's wedding these past days, *erxi* didn't have the time to enter the palace to greet *mufei*. One of my *taijian* managed to find a few jars of peach wine. I had a taste and found that the wine was light and sweet, perfect for women so I brought some along to let *mufei* have a taste. The stuff of the common people might not be as fine as those of the palace, but the taste is unique."

"Just a few jars of wine, fancy that! You had to send it in," Jing *guifei*'s tone was reproachful but the smile on her face became more evident, "Such a child, people will laugh at you."

Wen *guipin*, who was sitting to one side, heard those words and interjected: "*Guifei niangniang*'s words will harm this child's heart. Look how filial this child is. She remembers you whenever she gets something and brings it to you. *Niangniang*, what are you unsatisfied with?!"

"You don't know her. Today, it's two jars of wine, tomorrow it's a few boxes of food, the day after it's some novels. It's all just petty amusements but she treats them like treasures," Jing *guifei*'s face was helpless, "It's lucky that it's you here today. If it was anyone else, wouldn't it be a laughingstock if it got out?"

Qu Qing Ju saw that after Jing *guifei* said those words, Wen *guipin* seemed to release a breath. She couldn't help but think Wen *guipin* was siding with Jing *guifei*. Was it that Ning Wang was wagering on the second He?

"It's the thought that counts, *guifei niangniang* shouldn't disdain her efforts," Wen *guipin* smiled as she looked at the docilely seated Qu Qing Ju, "Based on what *pin qie* sees, this is a very rare and good *erxi*."

Jing *guifei* smiled as she pointed at Qu Qing Ju, ordering: "Why aren't you thanking your Wen *mu fei* for saying good things on your behalf? You have to pour tea for her later."

Qu Qing Ju smiled as she stood to bow to Wen *guipin*: "Many thanks to Wen *mufei*."

Wein *guipin* waved her hand repeatedly as she said she couldn't accept it. She was very courteous in her treatment of Qu Qing Ju.

Jing *guifei* smiled as she watched her *erxi* personally pour a cup of tea for Wen *guipin*. Then she naturally helped switch her own cup as well. The mirth in her eyes became even more evident.

Qu Qing Ju ate the noon meal at Jing *guifei*'s palace before leaving. She walked on the black stone paths of the palace and thought about Wen *guipin* flattering Jing *guifei*. She couldn't help but sigh. In the past, Wen *guipin* might have been warm and courteous, but she wasn't at this level. This was all for her son.

"*Wang fei*, it seems that Shu *guifei* is coming up front," Mu Jin informed in a small voice as she looked at the procession coming towards them.

Qu qing Ju raised her head to look ahead. On the other side, walking in front of numerous palace maids and *taijian,* was Shu *guifei*. She moved sideways to retreat to the side of the road. When Shu *guifei* drew near, she bowed and greeted: "Greetings to Shu *guifei*."

"Isn't this *lao er*'s wife?" Shu *guifei* stopped in her steps. She raised an eyebrow as she looked at Qu Qing Ju who had her head slightly lowered. She said in a sarcastic voice, "After just a few days, *lao er*'s wife has become even more beautiful."

"Thanks, *niangniang* for the compliment," Qu Qing Ju faintly smiled as she gave another bow.

Shu *guifei* looked coldly at the woman in front of her. Her looks truly were better than her own *erxifu*. No wonder she could tempt *lao er* to not walk when he saw her. Thinking that this was her enemy's *erxifu*, her tone was icy: "But a woman's appearance is not the most important. As a wife, virtue is the most important of them all."

Even Jing *guifei* hadn't said anything, so how could Shu *guifei* act as though she was her *popo*? Qu Qing Ju raised her head to glance at Shu *guifei*, her voice soft as she responded: "Qing Ju only has a fleeting beauty and can't measure up to the word beautiful. *Guifei niangniang*'s appearance rivals that of the goddesses. If Qing Ju could even have a fraction, it would be the greatest fortune in this life."

Shu *guifei*'s face darkened. Those words were complimenting her for being beautiful on the surface, but its true purpose was to block the words she had said previously. She was going to flare up when she heard another person's voice come from behind her.

"Greetings to Shu *guifei*," He Heng had a slight smile as he walked in front of Qu Qing Ju, his voice reproachful as he said, "You went to bother *mufei* for the noon meal again?"

"*Mufei* cares for me, and knows that I like to eat the food at her place so she specially let me stay back to eat," Qu Qing Ju snorted, "Just right now, *mufei* said I was filial. How can you say that I was bothering her?"

"Fine, *mufei* always protects you," He Heng raised his hands helplessly to Shu *guifei*, "*Mufei* is partial to my wife. We have let Shu *guifei* see a joke."

Shu *guifei*'s smile had already disappeared. These two's words inside and out were implying that they were Jing *guifei*'s son and *erxi* and thus, she didn't have the qualifications to lecture them. A long time later, she suppressed the anger inside before she spoke: "Duan Wang exaggerates."

He Heng smiled insincerely as he replied: "Shu *guifei niangniang* is magnanimous."

"If that is the case, then you should leave the palace early. *Ben gong* still has to go to Tian Qi Palace, and won't keep you," Shu *guifei*'s hand, that was supported by a palace maid, tightened. That whore Wei *shi*'s son, he was just as horrid as Wei *shi*.

After Shu *guifei* was far away, Qu Qing Ju came to a realization. So this was the type that Qing De Emperor liked. This Shu *guifei* could be favoured for so many years, it could be inferred that her ancestors must have been generous and virtuous people.

"What are you thinking?" He Heng saw Qu Qing Ju look as though she had an epiphany, and couldn't help asking.

"Nothing, I just suddenly felt that intelligence could determine a person's taste."

Chapter 76

After Cheng Wang's wedding, the bustling and rumbling Jing City slowly calmed down. It seemed that no one remembered the

imprisonment of the eldest imperial son in Bright Moon Tower nor did they recall the imperial censor who'd rammed himself into a pillar in the court hall. The people who lived in Jing City were the most pragmatic. They would only remember what they should. What they should forget, they definitely wouldn't even remember a hint.

Just as everyone was peacefully living their lives, news came out of the palace. The Emperor was sick. Shu *guifei* and Jing *guifei* spent day and night looking after the Emperor but there were still no signs of recovery. Shu *guifei* even had a professor of the Imperial Hospital beaten to death.

The Emperor was sick, and it was serious. This matter was a sign in Jing. If Shu *guifei* had not ordered the death of the Imperial Hospital's professor, the news wouldn't have been revealed so early. Upon hearing the news, every family's immediate thoughts were different. All the senior officials who were held in the Emperor's confidence, such as Tian Jin Ke, had shut their doors and rejected all who came.

There were many who'd tried to find information from Duan Wang Fu. Excluding Qu Qing Ju's family, even the paternal families of Feng Zi Jin, Jiang Yong Yu, and the others had eavesdroppers. These people didn't think it through. What would the paternal family of a *qie* of a *wang fu* know? Did they really believe that Duan Wang was an idiot, and would tell such things to a *qie*, and in this sensitive time, allow the *qie* to pass crucial information to her paternal family?

The ones who could only beseech the paternal families of the *qie* clearly didn't have any great abilities. It was also clear that their brains weren't any good. They wouldn't be able to climb up any higher in their lifetimes unless the Heavens willed it.

Qu Qing Ju listened to Jiang Yong Yu report that people had come to seek information from her paternal family and let her sit down below her.

"My father isn't experienced, and doesn't know anything about this kind of a great matter. He could only decline all of them," Jiang Yong Yu presented the letter in her hand to Qu Qing Ju, "This is a list of those

who came to visit. My father is timid and took down the names of the people as well as the gifts they have sent. Please have a look, *wang fei*."

Qu Qing Ju took the letter and placed it to one side. She didn't even look at the contents of the letter. She smiled at Jiang Yong Yu as she promised: "This must have been bothersome for your parent. I will definitely speak of this matter to *wang ye*."

In Qu Qing Ju's eyes, Jiang Yong Yu was the one who saw the situation most clearly in He Heng's *qieshi*. She was also the one who had the greatest abilities. She even felt pity for Jiang Yong Yu. If Jiang Yong Yu hadn't been selected as a female candidate to enter the palace, she would have had good life, marrying a son of a normal rich family as a wife.

Jiang Yong Yu wasn't surprised that *wang fei* didn't read that letter. Based on *wang fei*'s personality and conduct, she definitely wouldn't look at such things. This was *wang fei*'s intelligence at work.

"*Nubi*'s needlework is not yet finished so I will not disturb *wang fei* any further. Farewell." She had said what she had needed to say. Jiang Yong Yu didn't want to rely on *wang fei* to gain *wang ye*'s favors. She knew very well now her looks had no chance of being liked by *wang ye*. It was better to walk behind *wang fei* at her tempo. She would have much easier days.

Qu Qing Ju didn't detain her, nodding her head and letting Mu Jing to personally send her out.

Jiang Yong Yu came out of the door of the room, and thanked Mu Jin repeatedly in order to reject her escort. In the end, Mu Jin still saw her off to the gate of *zhengyuan* before turning and leaving.

Ai Lu supported Jiang Yong Yu as they carefully descended the stairs. She turned back to look at the decreasing figure of Mu Jin, and commented in a small voice: "Mistress, *wang fei* let the most trusted Mu Jin *guniang* to see you off. It shows that *wang fei* puts importance on you."

Jiang Yong Yu didn't speak. Not long after, she saw *wang ye* walking towards her from another direction. Her steps paused and she lowered her head to bow in greeting to *wang ye*.

He Heng noticed that she was coming from the direction of *zhengyuang* and asked: "Has *wang fei* not had her noon nap?"

"*Wang ye*, *wang fei* has risen just now," Jiang Yong Yu obediently answered.

"En," He Heng nodded and proceeded to walk in the direction of *zhengyuan*, not even looking twice at Jiang Yong Yu.

Jiang Yong Yu straightened her body and raised her head to look at the back of He Heng. She suddenly thought, now that the Emperor was seriously ill, if *wang ye*……

She shook her head. No matter what, she had to respect and honor *wang fei*. She could see this *wang fu* very clearly. It had been, from very early on, grabbed by *wang fei*. Even if other women entered the *fu* in the future, they would just be *wang ye*'s playthings. *Wang ye*'s love towards *wang fei* wasn't a pretence.

He Heng carelessly flipped through the list in his hand. Seeing Qu Qing Ju was tormenting the bonsai again, he remarked: "These people are unimportant. Some were subordinates of *lao san* who'd come to fish. The people of the Jiang Family are very sensible."

Qu Qing Ju was carefully trimming out a rabbit's ear. Hearing He Heng's words, her hands stilled. She hadn't thought He Heng would mention what was occurring outside to her. Was it that he really thought of her as one of his people so he didn't even disguise his words?

"Does *wang ye* mean that *san shu* has secretly done something?" She put down the scissors. After washing her hands, she said, "*Wang ye*, how about I tell you a folk tale?"

"What tale?" He Heng saw Qu Qing Ju's expression was solemn and waved his hand to let the all servants leave the room. He smiled as he urged, "Let me hear it."

"An old man had two sons in his family. The old man was partial to his youngest son and always wanted to give the good things to his younger son. Afterwards, when the old man was seriously ill, the younger son assumed that the old man would leave behind the family property to him. One day, the younger son heard a neighbor say that his father secretly gave the good things to his brother. The younger son was angry and went to argue with his father. Who knew that he managed to cause the old man to die. The younger son was very regretful. A while later, he finally found out that what the neighbor said was a lie, but the deceased was already gone and regret was useless." Qu Qing Ju gave a sigh, "Don't you think that this younger son harmed himself. It isn't a good thing to believe what others say."

He Heng smiled and replied: "I've actually heard this story before. Qing Ju and I really are two hearts linked as one."

Qu Qing Ju smiled and talked about some other matters with him before he hurriedly left. She knew inside that what He Heng wanted wasn't her idea but her attitude. This man had ambitions but he didn't want the person in his bed to not have the same stance as him. But he was very satisfied with her as the person in his bed, so he had said what he did to try to feel her out.

She hadn't been here for one year, but she now understood what was power, and the magnitude of power. With power, a woman could divorce her husband. Without power, one had to kowtow and bow to another.

She looked at the letter He Heng had left behind. Qu Qing Ju reached out to take a look and slowly folded the list, handing it to Mu Jin and told her to carefully hide it away.

Mu Jin looked worriedly at her. By now, Jing City was a mess and it was unknown what could happen, "*Wang fei*……"

"There's no need to worry. Tell the others to proceed normally, but if there is anyone who dares to talk nonsense, throw them all out of the *fu*. No one is to be spared." Qu Qing Ju commanded with a calm face, "The *qieshi* in the *fu* cannot pass messages to the outside. If anyone disobeys, report it to me."

"Yes," Mu Jin saw *wang fei* seemed to be confident and slowly lowered her heart back to its place.

"*Niangniang*," A palace maid frantically ran in front of Shu *guifei*. Seeing that everyone in the room was a confidante of Shu *guifei*, she spoke: "*Nubi* just managed to get some news from Xiao De Zi in Tian Qi Palace. Today, when it was Jing *guifei niangniang*'s turn at care, the Emperor praised Duan Wang in front of many people."

Shu *guifei* had been lying on the recliner since she was massaged by a maid. She instantly sat up when she heard the report, her expression changing as she demanded: "The Emperor is awake?! What did he say?!"

The palace maid knelt down with some fear, replying; "*Nubi* heard that the Emperor praised Duan Wang for his conduct, and generosity for being similar to *Xiandi* ."[15]

"*Xiandi*?" Shu *guifei* furrowed her brow. *Xiandi* had been considered a wise ruler by many. The Emperor deeply respected *Xiandi* and had always exclaimed that he himself wasn't a wise ruler in comparison, and that if *Xiandi* didn't have him as the only son, he most definitely wouldn't have succeeded the throne. She had heard it many times. Shu *guifei* understood the position *Xiandi* held in the Emperor's heart. Now that the Emperor was comparing Duan Wang to *Xiandi*, what did it mean?

That year Yuan'er was born, didn't the Emperor say that Yuan'er's brows were similar to that of *Xiandi*? Why was he now praising that whore Wei *shi*'s son?

[15] previous emperor

"Go summon His Highness Rui Wang to the palace. Say that *ben gong* is sick from exhaustion due to constant attendance and let Rui Wang do his filial duty at the Emperor's bed."

The *yahuan,* who was still kneeling on the floor, hesitated but then eventually, silently retreated. At this time, *niangniang* was telling the outside that she was ill due to exhaustion from attendance. Wouldn't the others assume that she wasn't willing to constantly attend the Emperor? But then again, she was just a low ranking palace maid. *Guifei* certainly wouldn't appreciate someone like her voicing an objection. Furthermore, the Emperor had always favored *guifei* so it probably wasn't a major matter.

In Tian Qi Palace, Qing De Emperor woke up from his dreams. Smelling the faint scent of medicine in the room, he fell into a short daze. When he looked outside his canopy, he could only see an indistinct figure sitting outside. She must have been keeping watch over him all this time. His heart warmed and he couldn't resist speaking, "Beloved *fei*, why haven't you gone to rest yet?"

"Emperor, you are awake?" The canopy was raised and Jing *guifei*'s tearful yet joyful face appeared in his vision. He suddenly understood. The person who'd been keeping watch was Jing *guifei*, not Shu *guifei*. In an instant, he was slightly afraid. Twenty three years ago, when he had fainted due to illness, who had been the one crying by his ear?

"Emperor, what is it? Are you not comfortable?" Jing *guifei*'s face was full of fear. She turned to let the servants call for the *taiyi* who were keeping guard outside before kneeling by his bed and sobbing, "Emperor, you really scared *qie*. If you really had something wrong, where would that leave *qie*?"

"It's not that serious," Qing De Emperor coughed. He reached out to pat the arm she had on the bed, "Heng'er is already grown up. Why are you still crying like this?"

"It's that since Heng'er has grown up, *qie* has nothing to worry about. But if you … … *qie* would have no meaning in life," Jing *guifei* saw

the *taiyi* had come in and stood as she wiped the tears running down her face. She feigned dignity as she ordered, "Take care in diagnosing the Emperor's pulse. If you don't take care, your fate will be the same as the *taiyi* who was beaten to death by Shu *guifei*."

"*Niangniang*, please don't worry," The *taiyi* bowed to Qing De Emperor before reaching out to feel his pulse. A long time later, he slowly released a breath, "Now that Emperor has wakened, it's more than half the road to recovery. But there was too much anger in the recent past which caused the body to weaken. Additionally, the state affairs have increased exhaustion, allowing illness. A short period of rest is all that's needed."

"You are telling the truth?" Jing *guifei* didn't care that the *taiyi* was still present as she sobbed. Smiling as she gasped, "Thank the heavens and earth, thank the heavens and earth."

The *taiyi* looked at this scene and felt deeply moved. Didn't they say that Shu *guifei* was more favored than Jing *guifei*, but why was it that Jing *guifei* was the one who had kept watch over the Emperor, and would cry from sheer joy due to the Emperor's body taking a good turn? Thinking to there, he couldn't help but shake his head inside. The Emperor didn't cherish the woman who had a true affection for him, but favored that tyrannical Shu *guifei*. The Emperor had really wasted Jing *guifei*'s affections.

"Quick, write out a prescription for the Emperor," Jing *guifei* ordered as she wiped her tears, "After the Emperor recovers, *ben gong* will reward you greatly."

After the *taiyi* left, Jing *guifei* took a bowl of porridge from a palace maid and served half a bowl to Qing De Emperor. Seeing that Qing De Emperor's complexion had improved, she remarked: "Seeing Emperor like this, *qie* is reminded of twenty three years ago. That time, *qie* was kneeling at your bed, and was sobbing and begging the heavens at the same time. *Qie* endured until fainting but didn't see you awaken." She grimaced, "But now that *qie* has finally seen you awake personally, it truly is the Heaven's blessing."

"Twenty three years ago, you ……" Qing De Emperor's expression changed. He looked at Jing *guifei*'s fragile complexion. A beat later, he gave a long sigh, holding her hand as he observed, "*Zhen* sees that you are exhausted, go to the side room and rest for a bit."

"But ……"

"Do as you are told. If you are still worried about *zhen*, *zhen* will let someone wake you after four hours. This is *zhen*'s decree." Qing De Emperor's voice was resolute.

Jing *guifei* could only helplessly stand and walk out of the main hall. Only when she had lied down in the side hall did a sliver of a smile reveal itself on her lips. Shu *guifei*, that good sister of hers, always left these kind of opportunities for her. They made her felt that if she didn't take advantage of those opportunities, it was letting down her good sister.

Twenty three years ago?

At that time, the seriously ill Emperor didn't have any brothers, only distantly related cousins. She, along with the other *feipin* who didn't have children, who hadn't been crying to the heavens to not take the Emperor's life?

In the main hall of Tian Qi Palace, Qing De Emperor stared in a daze as he lay on the bed before he asked a *taijian* standing in the corner: "Where is Shu *guifei*?"

"Emperor, last night, after Shu *guifei* attended to you, she caught a cold. At midnight, she was supported by the palace maids back to her palace to rest and recover from her illness."

The person speaking was the chief steward of the *taijian*. He informed in a small voice, "This morning, a servant came to report. They said that Shu *guifei niangniang* was exhausted and most likely will become weakened if she doesn't rest and recover."

"Then when did Jing *guifei niangniang* start to attend *zhen*?" Qing De Emperor's expression was slightly cold.

"Jing *guifei niangniang* was in attendance starting from when she had heard you fainted," The chief *taijian* peeked at the Emperor's expression and carefully continued, "This morning, Jing *guifei niangniang* fainted once from exhaustion but *niangniang* wasn't willing to leave. *Nucai* didn't dare to persuade too strongly so *niangniang* hadn't closed her eyes for two complete days."

"En, *zhen* knows now." Qing De Emperor closed his eyes. Just when the chief *taijian* thought he had fell asleep, he once again spoke, "Let the Imperial Kitchen simmer the lily yam pigeon soup for Jing *guifei*. *Zhen* remembers that she likes this one."

The chief *taijian* hurriedly confirmed before retreating. After he came out of the door to the main hall, he looked at the horizon dyed red by the setting sun. This sky was most likely going to change.

In the quiet main hall, Qing De Emperor let out a sigh. Had he been wrong all these years?

Chapter 77

When He Heng brought Qu Qing Ju to Tian Qi Palace, the children of the Emperor along with their mothers were all present. Qu Qing Ju even saw some unfamiliar princesses and their *fuma*, but these people were evidently not valued by Qing De Emperor and silently stood to one side.

The person sitting next to the dragon bed was none other than Jing *guifei*. She saw her son and *erxi* come in but didn't pay any attention to them and persisted in her efforts to feed Qing De Emperor his entire medicine before announcing: "Emperor, Heng'er and *erxi* have arrived."

Qing De Emperor's mental state was much better compared to when he had first woke up yesterday. He watched as his son and *erxi* bowed in

greeting before waving his hand, "Stand up, no need for such protocol." He indicated for a *taijian* to bring a bench for the two to sit.

Qu Qing Ju detected that the smile Qing De Emperor directed towards Jing *guifei* was especially warm and his eyes, as he looked at He Heng, was kinder than in the past. She strangely felt her back turning cold. He was only sick for a few days, but why did Qing De Emperor seem strange?

She looked at the still standing *feipin* and princesses, and saw He Heng pulling his stool closer to sit next to the bed. She followed to sit next to He Heng and watched obediently as Jing *guifei* warmly placed a cushion for Qing De Emperor and gently put a blanket over Qing De Emperor as though, in the eyes of Jing *guifei*, Qing De Emperor was a more important existence than her own son.

Her eyebrow slightly twitched. Qu Qing Ju felt that she thought something she shouldn't have. She silently moved her gaze to He Heng and saw He Heng appeared to be deeply worried as he looked at Qing De Emperor. She also adjusted her expression and tried not to get left behind.

"Has *fuhuang* gotten better? A few days ago, *er chen* heard *fuhuang*'s body wasn't well and felt so worried. *Er chen* waited at Tian Qi Palace many times but didn't see you awaken. Today, your state looks much better and this son can finally be at ease," He Heng's expression slightly relaxed as he examined Qing De Emperor's complexion before saying, "This son was unfilial for not being in attendance the entire time that *fuhuang* was ill."

"You are an adult now, and there are many affairs at court. You can't keep watch over *zhen* all the time," Qing De Emperor smiled and glanced at Jing *guifei*, "Your *mufei* has taken very good care of *zhen*, *zhen* understands your filial piety."

Qu Qing Ju raised her eyelids to look at Jing *guifei* but only saw a faint smile on the other's face.

"These last few days, Jing *guifei* didn't have it easy," The Empress who had been silent all this time spoke. She came forward and stood next to the bed. He Heng and Qu Qing Ju stood to move to one side. There wasn't any reason for them to be remain seated when the Empress was standing.

"Emperor, after you recover, you have to greatly reward Jing *guifei*. The last two days, *qie* tried many times to get her to rest, but she couldn't bear to part from you," When the Empress spoke to there, she gave a helpless sigh at Jing *guifei*. "After just a few short days, she's thinned a whole circle. Not just you, Emperor. Even I feel pain looking at her."

Qing De Emperor nodded: "Her regard, *zhen* knows."

The Empress smiled, not a hint of jealousy on her face. From what Qu Qing Ju saw, the Empress was very satisfied with the present situation. That made her suspect that the Empress might be on the same side as her *popo*.

"Emperor, Shu *guifei* and His Highness Rui Wang are asking for an audience," The chief *taijian* came in and after seeing the relaxed mood inside the room, he informed in a small voice, "His Highness Cheng Wang and Chang Wang Fei are also waiting outside the hall to be summoned."

She didn't know what Qing De Emperor seemed to be thinking given his brow had slightly furrowed, "Let them all come in."

Looking at his true love and his most favored son come in, what was Qing De Emperor's expression? Why was Jing *guifei* smiling so warmly and the Empress's smile so cold? This situation seemed fishy.

Shu *guifei* took her son and *erxi* with her as she walked in the front and He Ming and Luo Wen Yao walking behind them. After the five performed their greetings, Qing De Emperor didn't bestow any of them a seat and only asked Shu *guifei*: "*Zhen* heard you became ill from attending on *zhen*, are you better?"

The rims of Shu *guifei*'s eyes were slightly red as she walked to the bed, sobbing as she choked out: "*Qie* is fine. Everything became fine when Emperor woke up. It is *qie*'s body that's useless. Otherwise, *qie* would have kept constant guard and served Emperor."

"Jing *guifei* has taken very good care of *zhen*, it wasn't a hindrance when you weren't present," Qing De Emperor faintly returned. He looked at his favored son and the He Ming couple, coughing a few times before stating, "*Zhen* isn't in any serious danger, you don't have to worry."

He Yuan was reminded of what *mufei* had said to him and saw *fuhuang* looked very close to Jing *guifei*. He felt discontented inside but on the surface, he had to smile as he replied: "Seeing *fuhuang* is well, *er chen* can rest the heart."

"En," Qing De Emperor nodded. Seeing the room was full of people, he let the other *feipin*, princesses, and *fuma* all leave. When only a few were left, he said, "This illness of *zhen* this time, it made you all worry."

Everyone replied that as long as nothing was wrong with the Emperor, that was the best, and now the Emperor had to take care of his body and so on.

"Now that you have all grown up and settled down, *zhen* is very content," Qing De Emperor sighed, his gaze sweeping across his three sons and their *wang fei* behind them. He gave a few more harsh coughs, "*Zhen* is growing old. You all have to put more effort into state matters and help lighten the load for *zhen*."

The three He brothers instantly agreed, and said they would be willing to die for *fuhuang* and so forth.

Shu *guifei*'s heart became more and more insecure. Why was the Emperor saying these things? Didn't he favor Yuan'er the most? why did it seem he was treating them equally?

"Alright, *zhen* is tired, you can all leave," Qing De Emperor thought for a second, "Jing *guifei* stays."

Shu *guifei*'s expression changed slightly. Seeing the Emperor had already closed his eyes to rest, she could only close her mouth. She looked at the mirth on Jing *guifei*'s face and felt that her smile seemed to be mocking her.

Coming out of Tian Qi Palace, the smile that Shu *guifei* had pasted on disappeared and her face darkened. She glared icily at He Heng and Qu Qing Ju before taking He Yuan and Qin Bai Lu with her as she left.

Qu Qing Ju turned and saw the smile on He Heng's face. As she stepped on the white jade steps, she asked: "What is *wang ye* smiling about?"

"*Fuhuang*'s body is recovering, naturally I'm happy," He Heng smiled as he glanced at her, "Don't you think so?"

"This kind of event is naturally worthy of joy," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she nodded. She turned her head to look at He Ming and Luo Wen Yao walking behind them, "The *fu* hired a Shu-cuisine chief a few days ago. How about *si shu* and *si dimei* come for the noon meal?"

Luo Wen Yao turned to look at He Ming. Seeing him nod, she then answered: "To taste the gourmet food at *er bo* and *er sao*'s *fu*, it is our good fortune."

Qu Qing Ju smiled, "Eating is a type of good fortune. You don't have to say these things to me."

Luo Wen Yao gave a bashful smile, evidently embarrassed. Seeing the situation, He Ming bowed in apology to Qu Qing Ju.

Seeing him protect Luo Wen Yao, Qu Qing Ju smiled, "Alright, alright, if one didn't know, they would think that I, as your *saosao*, is bullying you two. Spare me."

He Heng smiled as he saw the intimacy between Qu Qing Ju and Luo Wen Yao. Holding her hand, he interrupted: "I think you should pay attention to walking. Otherwise, a trip and fall would damage your looks."

"I'm not a child," Qu Qing Ju sniffed, but docilely allowed He Heng to pull her along.

Luo Wen Yao followed behind them. Seeing the clasped hands of the two, a smile appeared on her face.

When Shu *guifei* returned to her palace, she let all the servants in the room leave. She looked at her son who also didn't have a good expression, and asked in a lowered voice: "Yuan'er, I'm afraid that the Emperor might want to pass the throne to He Heng."

He Yuan's brows furrowed: "How come?"

Shu *guifei* carefully narrated the chain of events before concluding: "The Emperor's heart has changed." She really found it hard to accept that the Emperor would one day choose Wei *shi* and slight her. But just now in Tian Qi Palace, the Emperor treated that whore Wei *shi* much more intimately than her.

After just two short days, why was it this way? Was it that the Emperor was angry that she didn't serve him? But her body had become uncomfortable so she had to leave. Or was it that Wei *shi* said some words disadvantageous to her in front of the Emperor?

"Are you sure that *fuhuang* said that *lao er* seemed similar to *xiandi*?" He Yuan thought deeply for a long time, and shook his head to refute: "It can't be so, *fuhuang* has never treated *lao er* better than me. Why would he suddenly change his opinion. Maybe it's Jing *guifei* who's purposefully spreading false information?"

"I got suspicious as well, but you also saw the attitude the Emperor had towards Wei *shi* today," Shu *guifei* coldly argued, "The Emperor's heart has definitely changed. We cannot wait to be defeated. Yuan'er, I won't let what belongs to you be taken away by others!"

He Yuan ranted: "*Fuhuang* really feels that Wei *shi* and her son is better than us, is he blind?"

When Qin Bai Lu who was in the corner heard these words, her heart jumped and she couldn't resist pushing deeper into the corner. She sneaked a look at the ugly visage of He Yuan and couldn't seem to remember what the Rui Wang she fell in love with two years ago looked like.

"Yuan'er!" Shu *guifei* heard He Yuan's words, her expression instantly changing and disapprovingly said in a small voice, "How can you even say such things?"

"But previously, *fuhuang* clearly said the only one of importance in the *hougong* was you, and the most loved imperial son was me, but what is the reality?" He Yuan became more and more furious, "Wei *shi* just cared for him during his illness, and his attitude completely changed. Is that how he would act if he'd really cared for us?"

"But he's the Emperor," Shu *guifei*'s eyes reddened and she used her handkerchief to wipe the corner of her eyes. She cried, "If his heart changes, what can we do?"

"There's always a way," He Heng looked at Shu *guifei*, his face gradually calming, "Wei *shi* can try to compete for favor. *Mufei*, you have so many years of feelings with *fuhuang*, how can you lose to her?"

Shu *guifei* thought about the coldness in the Emperor's eyes as he looked at her and nodded.

"As for He Heng," He Yuan gave a cold smile, "No matter who he resembles, only the person who laughs to the end is the winner. Before, I was more favored than him. In the future, I won't lose to him."

In Tian Qi Palace, Jing *guifei* looked at the sleeping Emperor. She slowly drew her hand out of the Emperor's hand. She looked calmly at the old man on the bed, the corners of her lips rising.

What was "having missed these years"?

The Emperor was becoming fonder of making jokes, but it was a pity that after these many years, this kind of joke wasn't funny anymore.

Chapter 78

It was the first time that Luo Wen Yao visited Duan Wang Fu. She found that Duan Wang Fu was more magnificent and refined than Cheng Wang Fu. She couldn't help squeezing He Ming's hand, feeling sympathy for this person who was walking beside her.

He Ming assumed she was nervous and smiled at her, "Whatever you like to eat, tell *er sao*. We shouldn't try to scrimp for them."

"Even if you want to be frugal, you couldn't save," He Heng smiled as he led the others into the front hall. After everyone had sat down, he teased, "Your *er sao* takes great care of her eating and wardrobe. With her here, it isn't possible to save."

"*Wang ye* dislikes the fact that I eat too much?" Qu Qng Ju took a teacup from a *yahuan* and sniffed upon hearing his words.

"I'm happy you have such a good appetite, I wouldn't dislike it," He Heng smiled as he ordered, "Qian Chang Xin, go hasten the kitchen and have them make that peanut pastry that *wang fei* likes. Otherwise, your *wang fei* won't forgive me today."

"Nonsense. If they didn't know, they would assume that I was a shrew," Qu Qing Ju put down her teacup, and burst into laughter, "*si shu* and *si dimei* are still here. You just want them here to laugh at me."

"*Er sao*, I didn't see or hear anything," He Ming smiled as he followed up, "*Er ge* and *er sao* are indulging in conjugal love. Us, being *didi* and *dimei*, can only be happy for you, not laugh at you."

Luo Wen Yao used a handkerchief to cover the smile on her lips. Even though she didn't speak, the uneasiness between the four people slowly disappeared.

Qu Qing Ju could see that He Ming was desirous of becoming closer to He Heng. He Heng evidently accepted He Ming's goodwill, so her own

attitude towards He Ming was very carefree. On the matter of how to treat people, if He Heng called himself second, there wasn't anyone that dared call themselves first.

As expected, the topic slowly skewed towards the matter of He Ming being attacked. He Heng held a teacup as he put in: "Based on my opinion, *si di*'s attack by assassins might not be connected with *san di*, but the case of Jiang Nan definitely is connected to *san di*."

He Ming nodded and said nonchalantly: "Since *fuhuang* isn't investigating further, I will not think more. Either way, I'm fine right now. It's not important who did it as long as I can have a good life from now."

Hearing the words, Qu Qing Ju felt that He Ming was probably the least ambitious and the most easily satisfied among the four He brothers. But it was due helplessness. He Qi was the eldest. He Heng had a useful mother. He Yuan had the favour. What did He Ming have? His mother wasn't favored, his father didn't care for him. If his own attitude wasn't good, how would he live?

Maybe He Ming understood in his mind that these matters had the shadow of He Heng, so he would say all would be well if he could have a good life in the future. This was expressing his attitude towards He Heng. The meaning might be that he, as the younger brother, was siding with *lao er*?

The peanut pastries came up. Qu Qing Ju picked a piece to put in her mouth. Her gaze fell upon Luo Wen Yao and saw her eating pastries thoughtlessly.

Qu Qing Ju smiled. It didn't matter if she knew or she really didn't know, but this girl wasn't stupid. At least, she seemed smarter than Qin Bai Lu.

"Days always become better," He Heng smiled, "It's very good that *si di* has such goals."

He Ming smiled upon hearing the words. Even his eyes were full of visible mirth.

They chatted and when it was noon time, the four of them sat at the table and watched the *yahuan* present the dishes. The dishes of Shu cuisine were mostly sour and spicy. Thehe color alone gave the viewer the impression of very hot and delicious.

Even though most of the table was Shu cuisine, there were some bland dishes. Qu Qing Ju had no immunity to good food. In her own home, she didn't want others to serve her. One of the great pleasures in experiencing delicious food was reaching out to the dishes she liked herself.

The Sichuan poached fish was made from the tenderest part of the fish belly. For the meat, one had to use the fresh meat from the pig's leg. The pickled cabbage in the dish was well-aged pickled cabbage so that when one took a sniff, their saliva would spill. The fish head and tofu soup were densely flavorful, the roasted tendons were crisp yet smooth. There were also some mushrooms with cabbage, steamed wild mushroom and other such dishes. The raw ingredients for those dishes weren't any special things but the taste that was created was able to make Qu Qing Ju eat another bowl of rice.

Qu Qing Ju would never try to preserve her impression in front of He Heng through eating one less bowl of rice. After she elegantly yet swiftly finished two bowls of rice, she rinsed her mouth and washed her hands. Afterwards, she slowly wiped her mouth as she looked at the table full of food. She spoke with some regret: "Tonight, let's eat hotpot. It's much more enjoyable with four people."

Luo Wen Yao knew of hot pot, but before she married, her family rarely ate it. Her family felt it was inelegant to crowd around a pot to cook food. Hearing *er sao*'s suggestion, she felt her heart move. She couldn't help asking, "Is it two-soup pot?"

"Of course. If the moon tonight isn't bad, we could set the pots up in the pavilion outside and admire the moon as we eat. We don't have to care

about the rules of not talking while eating. Tell some interesting stories, it would be great." Qu Qing Ju felt that hotpot needed more people gathered around telling tall tales. If they didn't happen then hotpot wasn't perfect.

He Ming didn't think that *er sao* would be like this in private. He looked with some degree of shock at *er ge* and found that his gaze was on *er sao,* a wide smile on his face. In this instant, he understood.

"Alright, if that's the case, then *si di* and *si dimei* won't leave tonight. After the evening meal, just sleep for the night at the *fu*. It will be refreshing," He Heng called in Ming He and ordered him to let the kitchen servants prepare. After he finished, he added another sentence, "Prepare more wild mushrooms."

"Yes," Ming He knew that *wang fei* liked eating all kinds of fungi. *Wang ye* was taking care of *wang fei*.

"*Dimei*, this is your first time at the *fu*. Why don't we take a walk? After eating, if one sits too long, they'll gain weight," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she stood, giving the two He brothers the room to talk.

"Then I will trouble *er sao*," Luo Wen Yao also stood and followed Qu Qing Ju to walked out of the front hall. She herself also knew that w*ang ye* most likely had things to discuss with Duan Wang.

He Ming watched as his wife followed *saozi* out before asking; "*Er ge, er sao*'s paternal family … …" Chang De Gong Fu was on He Yuan's side. Even he knew that.

"She doesn't have good relations with the Qu Family. These years, she endured a lot from the Qu Family," He Heng's brows furrowed. When the Qu Family was mentioned, it always caused a bad mood, "The people of Chang De Gong Fu, you don't have to have any qualms. Your *er sao* won't care about it."

He Ming nodded, "If that's the case, the matter of the Qu and Liang Families, I'll get someone to leak."

"Families like this one, they shouldn't have been kept for this long," He Heng remembered the wrongs that the Qu Family had done to Qu Qing Ju and coldly ordered, "keep them alive. Living but having nothing, it's better than death."

He hadn't expected that *er ge* would dislike the Qu Family that much. He Ming nodded in a daze. He remembered that the Qu Family had a daughter who was a *qie* in He Yuan's *fu* and mused: "I wonder if *san ge* would help."

"What *lao san* is like, is he the kind of person to give aid for a *qie*?" He Heng raised a teacup to take a sip and scorned, "He always enjoys having people revolve around him, when would he revolve around someone else?"

"That's true," These years, He Yuan was arrogant even when interacting with him, much less a *qieshi*. A smile appeared on his face, "That Qu Family is quite pitiful."

Luo Wen Yao and Qu Qing Ju took a tour of the gardens before going to the *zhengyuan*. When she saw the furnishings in Qu Qing Ju's room, she couldn't do anything except gape. Glass lanterns worth cities, a night luminous pearl of great craftsmanship and a variety of other finely made decorations. She had heard her grandmother mention when Duan *wang fei* married, the Qu Family didn't add much to the dowry. What she brought to the *wang fu* was the dowry that her birth mother had when she married into Chang De Gong Fu and the additions that the Tian Family and other relatives and friends added.

Luo Wen Yao's dowry could be considered to be very generous but seeing that the decorations in this room were finer than the objects in her dowry, so she knew very clearly, these objects wasn't Duan *wang fei*'s dowry. Rather, it was what Duan Wang had brought for her. Thinking about the gift that Duan *wang fei* added to her dowry before she married, Luo Wen Yao couldn't help but exclaim: "*Er bo* treats *er sao* so well."

Hearing this, Qu Qing Ju gave a light laugh. She pulled the other to sit by the window. A white jade orchid was blooming right outside the window.

"*Si shu* treats you very well too," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she looked at Luo Wen Yao, "I can see that *si shu* treats you truly well. This is the best scenario."

Hearing this, Luo Wen Yao gave a sweet smile. For some reason, she felt it strange that *er sao* used the word "truly". She hesitantly glanced at Qu Qing Ju, her gaze somehow coming to rest at the orchid outside the window, "This flower is very beautiful."

Many in Jing City liked to plant orchids in their gardens because of the rumor was if orchids were planted in the home, their lives would become better and better. Some lovers liked to exchange orchids and use white jade orchids to represent the sincerity of their love.

Luo Wen Yao didn't know what the truth was, but she believe that if a man would go to such an effort to seek out these objects to give to a woman, no matter what, the woman occupied a spot of some size in his heart. She looked at the faint smile on Qu Qing Ju's face, hesitantly offering: "A person's heart can be seen slowly through interacting. There isn't a clear line between truth and lies."

The hand Qu Qing Ju held a teacup with slightly paused. She looked at Luo Wen Yao. She didn't know if the other was speaking of He Ming or if she meant something else. She followed Luo Wen Yao's gaze to look at the orchid outside the window, smiling and responding, "You are right. It's not so easy to separate truth and lies. It's better to work towards a better life."

"*Er sao*'s words are sensible." Luo Wen Yao's smiled as she nodded. She pointed at the orchid outside, "Just like the orchid flower, the days would become more and more beautiful."

Qu Qing Ju blew on the surface of the tea and lazily glanced at the orchid. She suddenly remembered that a short while ago He Heng had

sent over a set of orchid hairpins and jewellery. But due to the fact that He Heng would always send things over all the time, she had never worn the set of orchid jewellery.

Musing, she curled her lips. A good life was controlled by people, was it possible to live well just by depending on a flower?

Chapter 79

As expected, there really was a glowing moon. The servants in the *fu* had already prepared everything that was needed. He Ming and Lu Wen Yao looked at the heated lanterns hanging in the pavilion and then at the two tables nearby, holding of a variety of foodstuffs. They finally understood what *er ge* meant by his earlier statement of "no need to save".

The four sat down around the table, each one taking a pair of the public chopsticks to start cooking in the pot. Even the not so favored He Ming had rarely ever cooked on his own, and his ignorance about how long something could be cooked created laughter and lifted the mood of the meal.

Luo Wen Yao looked at Qu Qing Ju rapidly picking up what she liked to cook in the pot. She always knew when to take the ingredients out when they were perfectly cooked. Luo Wen Yao couldn't help but look down at the people of Chang De Gong Fu. *Er sao* was the eldest *di* daughter, no matter what had happened, but *er sao* had suffered so much. Otherwise, why else would she be so familiar about such matters?

Ignorant of the fact that she had become a little white cabbage in the snow in Luo Wen Yao's heart, Qu Qing Ju contentedly drank a small bowl of silver tree-ear fungus and date soup to wash away the spiciness in her mouth. She felt that she was sixth-tenths full before commenting: "It's been some days since I ate hotpot. This soup that our kitchen has made is getting better and better."

"It's alright to occasionally eat some. If you eat it every day, you won't like any kind of soup," He Heng used a pair of public chopsticks to serve a tea tree mushroom into her bowl, smiling as he said, "You ate so much meat today that it will be hard to sleep."

Qu Qing Ju picked up the tea tree mushroom to dabble in the condiments dish. After she finished eating, she pouted: "Then later, you have to play *weiqi* with me."

"Fine," He Heng grimaced. Turning, he started to put what Qu Qing Ju liked to eat into her bowl.

He Ming poured Luo Wen Yao a small bowl of silver tree-ear fungus and date soup. Seeing *er ge* and *er sao* proficiently serve each other what they liked, he thought inside that he hadn't done enough.

"*Si di*, your wounds have healed. You've gotten married now. *Fuhuang* has said that us brothers have to put more energy to state affairs. Why don't you go spend some time in the Ministry of Revenue? That could be considered as going to learn something new." He Heng raised a cup to He Ming and drank before continuing, "Even though I am the second eldest, I'm not even two years older than you. You should pay more attention to state affairs."

He Ming didn't refuse. Out of the four brothers, other than *da ge* who was seven years older than him, *er ge* and *san ge* weren't that much older than him. But both *er ge* and *san ge* had been involved in state affairs for a long time. He was the only one who'd attended court after turning sixteen but he still didn't have anything to do.

Fuhuang never spent any attention on him, his mother wasn't favored, his maternal clan really didn't have anyone. The result was that he had muddled his way for three years at court yet had never accomplished anything. Now that *er ge* had said this, it was like giving him a helping hand to let him establish himself at court.

"Thanks *er ge, yu di* definitely will learn how to do things, and not disappoint *er ge*," He Ming raised the wine up, "*Yu di* toasts *er ge*."

Sitting on the side, Luo Wen Yao gave a grateful smile to Qu Qing Ju. Even though she didn't know the whole story, now that Duan Wang was willing to help her *wang ye*, from the bottom of her heart, she was grateful to Qu Qing Ju as Duan Wang Fei.

A whole meal ended in contentedness. The four admired the moon for a while as they digested before returning their rooms.

He Heng naturally accompanied Qu Qing Ju in playing a *weiqi* game before gathering up the beauty into their warm den. A round of physical pleasure later, the two contentedly fell asleep.

In the guest room, Luo Wen Yao took down her adornments and laid with He Ming together on the bed. She hesitated for a long time before inquiring: "*Wang ye*, does *er be* want to win you over?"

"Silly Wen Yao, *er ge* has no need to win me over," He Ming leaned back on the headboard, gathering the other in his embrace, "What I have, *er ge* also has. What I don't have, *er ge* still has. If I had not married you, *er ge* might not have been willing to help me."

Luo Wen Yao stilled. She suddenly thought about her second aunt in Xiang Qing Hou Fu and Duan *wang fei* who was very close to second aunt. Instantly, she understood. She hugged He Ming in sympathy, comforting in a small voice: "That's because *wang ye* is capable so *er be* wants to help you. Otherwise, it doesn't matter who you married. It still wouldn't work out."

He Ming smiled as he patted her back, his laughter filling the entire room.

Because of Qing De Emperor's serious illness, the people of Jing City were extremely anxious. However, after a few days, the Emperor started to take a good turn and could even continue to attend court. Those whose intentions had risen settled down.

Soon afterwards, the imperial censor wrote a complaint against Chang De Gong Fu. He detailed the scandals of Chang De Gong Fu, such as allowing servants to victimize others, putting out loans, buying the

common people's land at low prices by using their positions. He also mentioned that sixteen years ago when the *di* wife of the Duke of Chang De had just passed away, he immediately married a new wife which was a dishonorable thing. He even allowed the new Duchess of Chang De, Liang *shi,* to cheat others by using the position of the Duke and abused the original wife's daughter as well as the *shu* daughters.

Instantly, the court erupted. They had heard what happened with Chang De Gong Fu before but no one could spare the attention to take care of it. But now that someone had censured them, naturally all these matters became unpardonable crimes. Even more so, there was no one in Jing who didn't know that Duan Wang was very much in love with his wife. What Chang De Gong Fu had done, wouldn't that Duan Wang unhappy?

Of course, there were those who looked at Rui Wang. Liang *shi*'s daughter was Rui Wang's *qie*. If Rui Wang had any intentions of protecting them, it wouldn't be wise for them to throw stones while the other was down. After they watched for a few days, they found that Rui Wang showed no reaction to the matter. Then everyone understood. Rui Wang didn't have any desire to look after the matters of a *qie*'s paternal family.

Since Rui Wang wasn't going to act, and Duan Wang didn't have any good feelings towards Chang De Gong Fu, the hearts of the court officials were like a mirror. Within a few short days, the memorandums that censured Chang De Gong Fu fell like snowflakes in front of the Emperor. Numerous minor and major matters were revealed. Instantly, Chang De Gong Fu became the mouse that everyone was yelling to kill, as if one look at them would dirty their eyes.

When Qu Qing Ju heard that Chang De Gong Fu was being censured, it was the third day since the matter had started. After she'd finished listening to Jin Zhan's report, she paused for a beat before inquiring: "Is there no one asking for mercy on behalf of Chang De Gong Fu in court?"

Jin Zhan shook her head. She took a look at *wang fei*'s face and found that *wang fei* didn't seem to be worried at all for Chang De Gong Fu

before continuing: "*Nubi* heard that many are censuring the Duke and the Liang Family. The Emperor is very angry about the matter."

Qu Qing Ju nodded, "I understand." Due to how much He Heng disliked Chang De Gong Fu, he definitely wouldn't ask for mercy for the Duke of Chang De. The best case would be that he didn't try to step on them even more. But according to He Heng's style of conduct, he wouldn't do it himself. No matter what, on the surface, the Duke of Chang De was his father-in-law. If he came out personally, others might purposefully exaggerate it and it wouldn't be good for his reputation.

Then again, the kind of person that He Heng was, his best skill was doing everything in the dark. For him to be like He Qi or He Yuan and personally act, it would be very hard for him.

He Heng didn't want to help Chang De Gong Fu. The intelligent people at Royal Court understood. And He Yuan didn't have any intentions of giving aid. All together, everyone understood that Chang De Gong Fu was taking its last breaths. They said that not many gave coal in the snow, many dropped stones instead. People who censured Chang De Gong Fu and the Liang Family naturally popped out.

Hearing people mention the crime of the duke's marriage to a new wife before the bones of the first wife was cold, Qu Qing Ju felt elated. Qu Tian *shi* was very unfortunate to have met a man like the Duke of Chang De. Additionally, Qu Tian *shi*'s cause of death was suspicious but her death was said to be illness by the Duke of Chang De. Now that the people of Xiang Qing Hou Fu had this chance, would they give it up?

As expected, Tian Jin Ke sent up a memorandum on the exact day. The general meaning was that his *jiejie*'s cause of death was suspicious. Liang *shi* was married for only eight months when she gave birth to twins. He was suspicious that the Duke of Chang De killed his wife so that he could marry Liang *shi* because she had been pregnant.

Once the news came out, Jing became even noisier. That year, Liang *shi* truly did give birth to the twins not even eight months after marriage. The statement given out at the time was that she was carrying twins

which caused an early birth. But thinking of it now, the matter was fishy.

If nothing was wrong, why would the Duke of Chang De be in such a hurry to marry her, could he not even wait for the hundred days after his wife's passing?

When the matter was exposed, those who had relationships with Chang De Gong Fu and the Liang Family all stopped interacting with them. The two families didn't even have anyone to ask for aid.

As Qu Qing Ju heard the new situation each day about the Qu Family at court, her mood became better and better. But who knew that on this day when she had just finished listening to Jin Zhan tell her the gossip, one of the servants came to report that the Duke of Chang De was requesting to meet her.

The Duke of Chang De?

The memories in Qu Qing Ju's mind of the Duke of Chang De were very apathetic, and there was even a hint of hate. She heard the Duke had come, and hesitated before standing to say: "Order the gatekeeper to let the Duke of Chang De wait in the side hall of the *wang fu*."

"Mistress, you are going to see the duke?" Mu Jin looked worriedly at Qu Qing Ju, clearly worried on her behalf.

"There's nothing to fear. Now, I am *wang fei*. Do I still have to fear that he will reprimand me for Liang *shi*?" Qu Qing Ju gave an icy smile, "Jin Zhan, help me dress."

Jin Zhan quickly complied and the group of *yahuan* in the room joined in.

Seeing the *yahuan* bring in the different hairpins, jewellery and the grand clothes, Qu Qing Ju picked an extravagantly lavish wide sleeved *qing luan* robe. In her memory, didn't the Duke of Chang De like taking up the role of the father to reprimand the original owner of this body?

Then she would let him know what it was like to be suppressed by authority.

The Duke of Chang De waited a long while outside the gate of Duan Wang Fu before someone came in to lead him inside the front gate. He followed the *taijian* in front to the side hall of the *wang fu*. Liang Hong, who had been following behind, took out a pouch to shove in the hand of the *taijian* leading the way, asking in a fawning tone: "This *ge*, do you know when *wang fei* will be free?" He had accompanied his *yi fu*[16] to quite a few homes. Some straightforwardly didn't receive guests, some allowed them inside but after filling their stomachs with tea, they still didn't see anyone. So he couldn't resist asking.

The *taijian* took the pouch and politely smiled as he replied: "This little *gong zi* is too polite. This one is just a servant, and doesn't know anything about *wang fei*. You two can wait here, it should be only a while before you can meet *wang fei*." He made a bow before quickly leaving.

Soon afterwards, servants came in to serve them tea and refreshments. Liang Hong restlessly sat on the carved pear tree chair. He looked at the servants of the *wang fu* standing in the room with their tastefully chosen attire and strangely felt that he couldn't breathe.

Chapter 80

The Duke of Chang De held a teacup for fifteen minutes. Looking at the silent door leading to the hall, it stirred up memories of the cold receptions he had received in other homes. He had endured it then. Now that he was at his daughter's place, he still had to sit on the bench. His face instantly darkened and he heavily slammed the teacup to one side, ranting: "I've raised such a good daughter. When her own father comes, she still acts like a *wang fei*. It was a waste raising her all those years!"

[16] husband of mother's sister

Liang Hong's heart jumped. He looked at the servants in the room who didn't react at all. He appeased: "*Yifu*, Duan *wang fei* has to take care of such a *wang fu*. She wouldn't be as free as she was before her marriage. We've only just arrived, don't be angry. If Duan *wang fei* heard what you said, she would be hurt."

"What does she have to be hurt about? After she'd married *wang ye*, she's never even seriously looked at her father. She came to my birthday banquet and threw a tantrum in front of the whole *fu*," When the Duke of Chang De thought about the contents in Tian Jin Ke's censure memorandum, his face flushed, "How is she my daughter? From the looks of it, she shouldn't be named Qu. She should've been named Tian!"

Liang Hong listened as his words became increasingly nasty and felt frantic inside. Right now, they had come to ask for aid, not to throw around their temper. How *yifu* had treated Duan Wang Fei these years, he had personally seen it. If *wang fei* was willing to help, that would be a blessing from the Heavens. But *yifu* had to maintain the face of an elder. If *wang fei* saw, even if Duan *wang fei*'s personality was gentle, she wouldn't stand for *yifu*'s attitude.

He was anxious but didn't dare say more in case he provoked *yifu* to get even nastier. He carefully looked at the servants in the room. These people were like statues. No matter how nasty *yifu*'s words were, they didn't even move an inch. It was as though he and *yifu* didn't even exist. The conduct of these servants made Liang Hong feel the strictness of the protocol of the *wang fu*.

"Duke Qu, are you angry because this *fu*'s tea and pastries aren't suited for your appetite?" Xiao Gan Zi asked scornfully as he came in with a lower-ranked *taijian* into the hall. He glared furiously at the *yahuan* serving in the hall, admonishing: "Useless beings! Remember what kind of place this is. You don't even know how to serve people. Go switch Duke Qu's tea!"

Liang Hong hurriedly interjected: "This *gonggong* is too courteous. The tea and pastries are all good. There's no need to trouble anyone." How

could he not detect that this *taijian* was pointing at the mulberry but swearing at the locust tree? But they had come here to seek aid. Furthermore, the pattern on the robe of this *taijian* was different to that of a normal *taijian*. His position in the *fu* wouldn't be low. The saying was that "the gatekeeper of the Prime Minister's gate was a fourth-*pin* official." How could he even dare to offend the *taijian* who had some status in the *wang fu*?

Xiao Gan Zi turned to look at the young person in front of him. He mockingly raised his hands in a fist to Liang Hong as he said: "This *gongzi* must be Duke Qu's son. This one greets you two."

"I don't dare receive *gonggong*'s greeting. This student is Liang Hong, and *yifu*'s nephew." Liang Hong returned a bow and tried to hand a pouch to Xiao Gan Zi.

"Liang *gong zi* doesn't have to be this courteous. This one is insignificant and doesn't dare to take *gong zi*'s gift," Xiao Gan Xi unhesitatingly pushed aside Liang Hong's pouch, "Please sit, our *wang fei* will be here shortly."

"Hong'er, sit down. Today, I'm going to see when this good daughter of mine will arrive. I've waited this long and she's just sent a *taijian* to brush us off. Once she became a *wang fei*, her airs have become arrogant enough that she won't even attend to her own father." The Duke of Chang De impatiently looked at Xiao Gan Zi and Liang Hong, his actions and tone of voice showing just how much he looked down upon this *taijian* named Xiao Gan Zi.

Xiao Gan Zi smiled instead of getting angry. He came forward and bowed, saying: "Duke Qu, don't be furious. Our *wang fei* isn't as idle as Qu *san xiaojie*. Every day, she has to manage the *fu* and all the matters of the different estates. That's awfully busy work. After hearing that the duke had come today, she went to dress and groom herself in a rush to see you. One can see just how much she respects you."

Upon hearing this, Liang Hong's heart became even more bitter. What was not as idle as Qu *san xiaojie*? On the inside, he blamed *yifu* for his

fiery personality and improper manner of speech. He also was angry at Qu Qing Ju for not respecting them. But he also knew that the current circumstances were disadvantageous to them. If *yifu* kept acting like this, when Duan Wang found out, the matter would be even more difficult to diffuse.

The Duke of Chang De snorted icily: "If she respects me, why would she let me wait for so long?"

Just as he'd finished speaking, the half-closed door to the hall was suddenly pushed open. The hall was instantly saturated with light. The Duke of Chang De and Liang Hong turned to look and saw Qu Qing Ju wearing a red floor length dress as she stood expressionless at the doorway. Behind her were more than ten *yahuan* and *taijian*. Without even speaking, they made others feel intimidated.

Qu Qing Ju looked indifferently at the Duke of Chang De who sat still on the chair. She held Mu Jin's hand as she walked into the room. Once she'd sat on the center seat, she then lifted her chin slightly to look at the standing Liang Hong and the still seated Duke of Chang De.

This was the first time that Liang Hong saw the married Qu Qing Ju. Last time, he had heard that she came to *yifu*'s birthday but he didn't have the chance to see her. Seeing her today, he finally understood what was called "the world turned upside down." The woman in front of him wearing the majestic clothes hadn't changed in appearance but he felt that something was different. He began to feel intimidated now that he was standing in front of her.

Barely suppressing the fear inside, after Qu Qing Ju sat down, Liang Hong came forward to raise his hands in a greeting: "This student Liang Hong greets Duan Wang Fei."

Qu Qing Ju barely glanced at him. She took a sip of the tea that was on the table, then frowned and criticized: "Today's tea is too bitter. Change it."

"Yes," Mu Jin bowed to take the teacup. She turned to give it to the second-rank *yahuan* behind her. Very quickly, a *yahuan* handed a new cup to her. She turned again to place it on the table beside Qu Qing Ju.

Liang Hong obediently bent his body as he stood, too afraid to even move.

"Liang *gong zi* doesn't have to be so courteous. Please sit." Qu Qing Ju raised the teacup once again. She raised her eyelids slightly to look at the Duke of Chang De, "Why have the two of you come today?"

"You are a *wang fei* now. Don't you know what has happened to your paternal family?" The Duke of Chang De accused in a heavy voice, "Or is it that you don't even care about your paternal family at all?"

"Oh?" Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow, "Are you talking about how Liang *shi* took advantage of the status of Chang De Gong Fu to let the Liang Family abuse the people of Lan Cheng county, or that you took a new wife before your first wife's bones had even cooled, or how exactly did *ben wang fei*'s mother die?"

She spoke slowly, her tone was very calm but it made Liang Hong, who had been sitting restlessly, feel a chill on his back. He looked at how Duan Wang Fei's red-nailed hand slowly caressed the teacup. The strings in his brain were so tight that they almost broke. He was now regretting the fact that he'd accompanied *yifu* to Duan Wang Fu.

"Is this the attitude that you, as a daughter, should have towards your father?" The Duke of Chang De was a bit shaken, but seeing that even the daughter who had once been so submissive to him dare talk like that to him, the anger inside erupted. He stood and pointed at Qu Qing Ju, cursing, "If I knew that this would happen, in the beginning, I would have choked you to death and not let you live to anger me today."

Upon hearing this, Qu Qing Ju gave a sweet smile to the Duke of Chang De. Then she threw the teacup in her hand onto the ground. The expensive government-kiln teacup instantly shattered into pieces, the

crisp sounds frightening the Duke of Chang De, who shrank back in response.

She spread out her hand and looked at her nails which had been dyed red. She looked at the Duke of Chang De from the corner of her eye: "Why aren't you cursing? Weren't you so happy cursing right now?"

The Duke of Chang De unconsciously took a step back. He opened his mouth but found his throat had turned wooden and couldn't say a word.

"I'm the kind of person that has a bad habit. That is, I hold grudges," Qu Qing Ju lowered her hand and smoothed her dress. From Mu Jin's hand, she took another teacup. She smiled cheerfully as she spoke, "Liang *gong zi*, in all those years that you've lived at Chang De Gong Fu, come say how the *fu* has treated me?"

Liang Hong's face was full of sweat but he couldn't say a word. He might be a member of the Liang Family but he also knew that *yimu* had not treated Duan Wang Fei well before her marriage. Now that Duan Wang Fei was asking him, he couldn't say well, but couldn't say not well, and could only remain silent.

"Take a look, even the people of the Liang Family can't say a word. It can be seen just how well Chang De Gong Fu treated me," Qu Qing Ju sneered, "Coming here today, were you hoping that I could persuade *wang ye* to help Chang De Gong Fu?"

She saw the Duke of Chang De nod his head and the smile on her face became even more visible, "But why?"

The Duke of Chang De's tone warmed greatly. He carefully looked at the broken teacup on the ground, "I know that the *fu* had been lacking in some aspects with the way they treated you, but no matter what, it's your paternal home. If a scandal came out of your paternal home, you would be dishonored as well. Would Duan Wang still regard you well?"

If He Heng treated her like He Yuan treated Qin Bai Lu, then this matter would have really impacted her. But right now in Jing, who didn't know

that Duan Wang Fei wasn't close to Chang De Gong Fu? Who didn't know that Duan Wang and Duan Wang Fei were deeply in love? Thinking about it, Qu Qing Ju suddenly wondered what He Heng was after, since he treated her so well.

The Tian Family? But the Tian Family were only ever loyal to the Emperor, that was the mantra passed down from their ancestors. Would they even support He Heng just because she married him?

He Heng wouldn't neglect her because of the Tian Family. When he had just married the original, he kept her in good food and comfort but wasn't even close to her. The original's personality had been weak. Other than what Tian Luo *shi* had taught her in the rare occasions they had met, there were no other elders to teach her the dark secrets of the *houyuan* or how to treat marital relations. That's why after her marriage, the *shiqie* were able to sneak in and cause her to lose her life.

The tragedy that was the life of the original had all come from the Duke of Chang De. It was amazing that he was still shameless enough to come here to yell and holler. The fact that this kind of man could live until now, it was really by the virtues of his ancestors.

The Duke of Chang De saw Qu Qing Ju's head had lowered in thought and assumed that what he said had moved her. He continued: "Don't believe what the Tian Family said. You have to know that we are of one family. Can you believe what outsiders say?"

Qu Qing Ju, who was so disgusted by his words that broke her train of thought, sarcastically responded: "Even outsiders were willing to add so much to my dowry when I married, but why was it that this family of mine wasn't willing?"

"It's all shameless and dishonorable!"

Qu Qing Ju heard the words and suddenly lifted her head to look. She saw He Heng with a dark face come striding in from outside.

This time, the Duke of Chang De didn't dare remain seated. He and Liang Hong obediently performed a greeting and stood in the center of the hall, but they didn't dare to look at He Heng's angry visage.

When He Heng heard the Duke of Chang De say that he would not regard Qu Qing Ju the same because of Chang De Gong Fu's scandals, the fire in his heart couldn't be suppressed any longer. He looked at the broken teacup on the floor and walked to sit next to Qu Qing Ju. He patted her head as he said, "Anger harms the body, there's me for all matters." He glanced at the Duke of Chang De, furrowing his brows as he asked, "Duke Qu, you weren't satisfied with making your wife die from anger, so you came here today to *ben wang*'s place to show-off your might! Who gave you the guts?!"

"*Wang ye*, please understand that this lower official only said it out of anger," the Duke of Chang De wasn't sure if Duan Wang had heard what he had said before. He raised his hands and cautiously responded, "The matter of my wife, it is purely Tian Jin Ke slandering this lower official. *Wang ye* cannot trust that person."

"Ha," He Heng raised an eyebrow as he looked at the Duke of Chang De, "That there's a person who is as shameless as the duke in this world. It has really broadened *ben wang*'s knowledge."

"*Wang ye*……" The Duke of Chang De didn't think that Duan Wang would speak so mercilessly and couldn't help but look at Qu Qing Ju.

"Someone come and see off the guests!" He Heng smiled icily and snorted with disdain: "Don't dirty *ben wang*'s place."

Qu Qing Ju looked at He Heng's state and couldn't help but burst into laughter.

Some rough-labor *taijian* "saw off" the Duke of Chang De and Liang Hong. Xiao Gan Zi stood at the gate and from high up, looked down at the two people at the bottom of the stairs. He slowly drawled to the people beside him: "In the future, clean your eyes when you receive a card. Don't accept just anyone. Otherwise, some will think that they are

worth something and yell and shriek at *wang ye* and *wang fei*. If one didn't know better, they'd think that he was the *wang ye*."

He clapped his hand, and in front of the two, he closed the gate to the *wang fu*.

Liang Hong looked at the tightly shut gate of the *wang fu*. He suddenly realized that from beginning to end, Duan Wang Fei hadn't called *yifu* father once. He looked at the man whose face was full of discontent and anger, and cold sweat formed on his palms.

If *yimu* had treated Duan Wang Fei better in the beginning, maybe it wouldn't be like this.

This time, if *biao mei* couldn't persuade His Highness Rui Wang, he was afraid the Liang Family would be finished.

To be a Virtuous Wife Chapter 81-100

Chapter 81

The side hall was very quiet. Qu Qing Ju sat on the chair as she looked at the shattered cup on the floor, her expression dark.

He Heng indicated for the servants to sweep away the broken shards of porcelain. He rarely saw such a dazed expression on Qu Qing Ju's face. But he didn't want to see it anymore so he couldn't resist going up to her and deliberately rubbed her face, smiling as he teased: "What, you don't have any more energy after that outburst?"

Qu Qing Ju raised her head to look at the mirth on his face. She looked seriously into his eyes and from his purposely relaxed expression, she found the concern that was hidden behind his smile. She forced a smile: "I have just discovered that he's not worthy of my mother and I." She wasn't clear as to why the Tian Family had married their daughter off to the Qu Family, but she'd heard that it was due to a promise made by the previous generation.

These parents, because of their own feelings, didn't care for their children's desires and carelessly gave them away in a marriage. They glorified the marriage of their children as a means of proving their friendship with each other. Or did they believe that because the elders were friends, their children would be happily married and the husband wouldn't neglect the wife?

The reality was always harsher than the ideal. Qu Tian *shi* didn't receive gentle treatment from the Duke of Chang De just because their elders had been friends. Did the old Marquess of Xiang Qing, who hadn't passed away at that time, ever regret it?

She wasn't a person from ancient times, so she couldn't understand their mentality. But if she had children in the future, she would be reluctant to treat them that way.

"I know," He Heng gathered the person into his arms, quietly promising, "The people who had bullied you in the past, I will remember them for you. We will live for a long time so don't harm your body for these people. We will find an opportunity for you to bully them back."

Qu Qing Ju sat on the chair as she put her head into He Heng's lap. She listened to the man holding her tell how she could bully the people who once bullied her. That bit of grief in her heart had already disappeared without a trace. She turned to wrap an arm around him, laughing as she rubbed her head on his waist.

The servants all cautiously lowered their heads, not daring to look at the two *zhuzi*. But a smile was on the mouths of Mu Jin and the others. It seemed that no matter how Chang De Gong Fu was, *wang ye* wouldn't lessen his affections for *wang fei*.

These days, all the servants of Rui Wang Fu were trembling with fear. It was an open secret in the *fu,* which they didn't dare to spread outside, that *wang ye* and *wang fei* weren't on good terms. The fact that *wang fei* extremely disliked Qu *ce fei* of Xi Ce Yuan was something that everyone knew. But because Qu *ce fei* was favoured by *wang ye*, no servant dared to offend Qu *ce fei*.

In the days after the details of Chang De Gong Fu's circumstances leaked, there was more idle talk among the servants. Even though they didn't dare to openly mention it in front of Qu Yue Su, Qu Yue Su could still detect that the eyes of the servants as they looked at her weren't right. As she faced the curious or disdainful stares of the servants, she could only bitterly endure and not show even a hint of discontent.

"Qu *ce fei*, *wang fei* asks to meet you," A *taijian* came in and bowed to Qu Yue Su nonchalantly. He said in a neutral tone, "*Wang fei* said that if Qu *ce fei* doesn't have the time, it's fine not to go, but then *wang fei* will reject the card of the Duchess of Chang De."

"It must have been an inconvenience for *gonggong* to pass on the news. I will go immediately," Qu Yue Su didn't seem to notice the slight the

taijian gave her, smiling as she stood from the chair. She also let Yao Xi shove a pouch to the *taijian*.

It wasn't that she wished to endure it, but this *taijian* in front of her was most favoured by *wang fei*. She was just a *shiqie* so she didn't dare offend him. After the *taijian* left, the smile on Qu Yue Su's face completely disappeared as she ordered, "Yao Xi, help me dress."

By now, Chang De Gong Fu must be a mess. She didn't even need to guess to know that their so-called friends and relatives were hiding far away.

Qin Bai Lu disdainfully looked at the card in her hand and carelessly threw it to one side: "This Chang De Gong Fu is such a joke that they actually came begging to our *fu*."

Ru Hua, who was standing behind her, inquired in a small voice: "*Wang fei*, if that's the case, why would you allow Qu *shi* to see her paternal family?" Wasn't that giving Qu *shi* an opportunity?

"Why not let her see?" Qin Bai Lu smiled coldly, "I want her to see if *wang ye* would really aid the Qu and Liang Families for her."

Ru Huan looked at *wang fei*'s icy stare and didn't speak any longer. By now, *wang fei* and *wang ye* were at the stage where they had nothing to say to each other. *Wang fei*'s hatred towards Qu *shi* became more and more evident. Now that the situation had turned out like this, unless Qu *shi* was spurned by *wang ye,* there was no other way for it to end.

A short while later, Qin Bai Lu saw Qu Yue Su dressed in a slightly old, plain dress as she came in. She looked at this woman who respectfully bowed to her in greeting, a hint of mirth appearing on her lips: "The Duchess of Chang De asks to see you. I'm not a cruel person, so I will allow your mother and you to see each other at Xi Ce Yuan. What does Qu *ce fei* think?"

"*Nubi* thanks *wang fei*," Qu Yue Su almost bent in half. She looked at the disdain in Qin Bai Lu's gaze and gritted her teeth as she turned and walked out of the gate of *zhengyuan*.

Qin Bai Lu didn't really sympathize with her. She wanted to see her begging. The more Qu Yue Su's family situation worsened, the more happier Qin Bai Lu became.

Taking Yao Xi's hand to support her as she returned to Xi Ce Yuan, she sat for a long time before a servant led Liang *shi* into the door. Qu Yue Su looked at her mother whose complexion had become more fragile, and stood to welcome Liang *shi*.

"Su'er," Liang *shi* looked at her daughter, her tears pouring before she even spoke, "Our *fu* is not in a very good situation."

Qu Yue Su supported her in sitting down and comforted her: "Mother, don't cry. First, tell me what's happening outside." Now that she was in the *houyuan* of the *wang fu*, she didn't hear much news. She only knew that there were many people at court who were censuring her paternal family but didn't know much else.

Liang *shi* wiped away her tears as she gave a complete narration of the condition of her home. When she mentioned that Qu Qing Ju wasn't willing to help, her voice held hatred: "If I had known that damned *yatou* would one day act like this, I wouldn't have left her alive in the beginning!"

After hearing this, Qu Yue Su gave a bitter smile. She said helplessly: "Mother, now that it's like this, it's useless to complain. Right now, no one is willing to help us. Not even the heavens or the earth would respond."

"Even your *didi* was persuaded to leave the Eastern Mountain Academy. I had originally planned for him to attend the Autumn Examinations. Now that it's like this, how could your *didi* get a good score?" As she thought of her son, Liang *shi*'s expression became even uglier, "The most horrid is the Tian Family. They had to pull out the matter from ten years ago."

Qu Yue Su felt that it wouldn't end very well this time, but looking at her mother's face, she couldn't say it.

"Su'er, you are this *wang fu*'s *ce fei*. Why don't you beg Rui Wang? Rui Wang is most favored by the Emperor. If Rui Wang could say a few words on behalf of our family, it would be more useful than anything else," Liang shi tightened her grip on Qu Yue Su's hand, "Just help our *fu* in thinking of some more solutions."

Her hand hurt from being gripped so tightly. Qu Yue Su felt bitter inside. She was only a *shiqie*, she had no qualifications to ask *wang ye* to do something for her. But once faced her mother's pleas, she could only nod and decide, "I'll go beg *wang ye*. If *wang ye* doesn't agree … …"

"Rui Wang will most certainly agree," The fear on Liang *shi*'s face halved. She looked at the beautiful face of her daughter and stated confidently, "I've even heard it outside. Rui Wang likes you very much. If you begged, why wouldn't he agree?"

Likes?

Thinking of *wang ye*'s attitude towards her these days, Qu Yue Su could only squeeze out a small smile and didn't say a word.

Mother and daughter didn't manage to speak for much longer before the steward came in to rush them out. Liang *shi* assumed that it was *wang fei* who got jealous of her daughter and left unwillingly. As she came out of Rui Wang Fu's front gate, Liang *shi* thought with some smugness, so what if Qu Qing Ju was a wang fei? She wasn't willing to help her *lao ye*. In the end, didn't the hopes of the *fu* lie with the daughter she gave birth to?

The moonlight was like frost. Qin Bai Lu looked at the bright moon outside and asked Ru Hua in a mirthless voice: "*Wang ye* went to Xi Ce Yuan?"

Ru Hua nodded, "Just now, someone saw *wang ye* heading that way."

Qin Bai Lu unexpectedly laughed out loud. It was carefree yet full of sorrow. The laugh grew louder and dissipated into the night.

He Yuan released his hand which had been holding Qu Yue's chin and allowed her to tilt the cup for him to drink wine. He mockingly put his hand at the softness of her chest: "Why is beauty so enthusiastic today?! Is there something she wants to ask for?"

Qu Yue Su's heart jumped. She then gave an enchanting smile and said: "What is *wang ye* saying? *Qie* sincerely wants to serve you."

"Really?" He Yuan examined her closely. Just when the smile on her face was going to break, he said, "Such a pity. Originally, *ben wang* was thinking that if you had something to ask, *ben wang* would try to help. Since you don't have anything, a minute of the spring night is worth a thousand gold so we should live in the present."

Sliding into the man's arms, Qu Yue Su reached out to trace He Yuan's chest: "*Qie* does have a small matter. *Wang ye*'s eyes are keen to have found me out."

"Oh?" He Yuan held one arm around her, the other hand holding a wine cup as he asked, "What matter does beauty have?"

"*Qie* wanted to ask about Chang De Gong Fu … …"

He Yuan pushed the person in his arms away, not caring that she had fallen to the floor. He Yuan placed the wine cup on the table and sneered: "*Ben wang* didn't think that you would be shameless enough to mention this matter."

"*Wang ye*," Qu Yue Su's expression changed. She knelt in front of He Yuan, reaching out to hug his leg as she pleaded, "*Wang ye*, please save *qie*'s paternal family, *qie*… …"

"From beginning to end, *ben wang* had never even looked at Chang De Gong Fu," He Yuan sneered and kicked her aside. He slowly stood, "If it wasn't for finding your eyes somewhat attractive, *ben wang* wouldn't have taken you into the *fu*. Just a *qie*, did you really think that you are *ben wang*'s heart?"

He didn't even look at the woman he had kicked, now sprawled on the floor. He adjusted his clothes, "So disappointing. It seems that Qing Liu of Dong Yuan is still more tactful."

Qu Yue Su covered the chest that had been kicked and struggled to sit up. She only looked at He Yuan's back as he unhesitatingly left. The silver moonlight illuminated his shoulders, and for no discernible reason, made her feel colder.

Chapter 82

In the end, the Qu Family didn't manage to find anyone to help them. Even though they couldn't examine what had happened sixteen years ago, the *taiyi,* who had been requested by Tian *shi* after she had given birth to a daughter, was still alive. He had taken the pulse of Qu Tian *shi* quite a few times. The pulse had been very steady with no hint of illness. However, the final outcome was that by the end of the month, Qu Tian *shi* had passed away due to illness. He was inwardly suspicious so he clearly remembered, even after all these years, that he had been the first person to take Qu Tian *shi*'s pulse at that time.

The testimony of this *taiyi* didn't prove that Qu Tian *shi* was killed by Chang De Gong Fu, but once combined with the others facts: soon after Qu Tian *shi*'s death, the Duke of Chang De had been in a rush to welcome the new wife, Liang *shi*, the dragon and phoenix twins who Liang *shi* had given birth to not even eight full months after entering the *fu*, all these series of coincidences was enough to prove that Qu Tian *shi*'s death wasn't accidental but deliberate.

Once the proof was revealed, it shocked the entire court. If a man was lustful, it meant that his morals were deficient but it wasn't enough to make others dislike him. But to harm his wife for a woman on the outside, that was being an animal in clothing, a person that everyone could beat up.

Qing De Emperor had originally heard that Duan Wang Fei was estranged from her birth father. Hence, he had been slightly dissatisfied with Duan Wang Fei. Since the marriage had been decreed by him, he couldn't act on it. But once this matter came out, and Qing De Emperor looked at the memorandums which described how Chang De Gong Fu had abused the eldest *di* daughter and *shu* daughters, he felt that his second *erxi* didn't have an easy life.

He couldn't help but say to Jing *guifei,* who had been grinding ink for him: "Originally, *zhen* had thought that this was a woman who didn't respect her parents. I didn't think that she had such a tragic past. It was fortunate that Official Tian cares for his relatives. Otherwise, our *er xi* might have been someone else."

Jing *guifei* didn't look at the memorandums and only responded: "Emperor, you don't even know that Heng'er's wife is extremely filial. Normally, when she receives something interesting, she would impatiently deliver it to *qie*. In the beginning, *qie* thought she was too childish, but only now does *qie* know that this child most likely thinks of *qie* as her own mother so she would think of *qie* at every turn." The rims of her eyes reddened, "Such a good child, but Chang De Gong Fu abused her. It really is too cruel."

Qing De Emperor was extremely moved by what Jing *guifei* said. He reached out to pat her hand and comforted her: "Now you are her *popo*, that makes you her mother. She remembers beloved *fei*: one is that she is filial, the second is that you are close to her. It isn't just that she is a good *er xi*, you are also a good *popo* which made the two of you become more intimate."

Jing *guifei* was so comforted that she smiled through her tears. At this time, a *taijian* from the outside reported that Shu *guife* was asking for an audience.

Jing *guifei* had a conflicted expression on her face as she said: "Since *meimei* has something to ask Emperor, then *qie* will retreat."

"There's no need," Qing De Emperor reached out to pull Jing *guifei* closer, not allowing her to leave. He turned his head to look at the *taijian*, "Tell Shu *guifei* that *zhen* has no time and won't see her."

"Emperor ……" Before Jing *guifei* could finish, she was interrupted by Qing De Emperor.

"Beloved *fei,* come see how this drawing is," Qing De Emperor rolled open a drawing, and started to admire it with Jing *guifei*.

Jing *guifei* smiled as she went forward a few steps. After closely examining it, she nodded and praised: "This drawing has both mountains and water, the sky and earth are vast. Not even taking into account how good the artist's skill is, one can see the artist has a generous personality. Whoever drew this, if Emperor can hire such a person to enter politics and work, he will become a pillar of the country."

"What pillar of the country? This was just a product of *zhen*'s leisure time,' Qing De Emperor contentedly put his hands behind his back. Seeing the shock and awe on Jing *guifei*'s face, he said happily, "How about *zhen* teach you how to draw?"

Jing *guifei* naturally went with the flow and allowed Qing De Emperor to enclose her hand and start drawing.

Watching as a peony formed under the brush, Jing *guifei* glanced outside at the steadily darkening sky, an indiscernible hint of mirth at the corner of her lips.

Shu *guifei* looked at the tightly closed gate to the palace hall and unwillingly turned to slowly leave. What was not having the time? How could that whore Wei *shi* accompany the Emperor?

Twenty-something years ago, Wei *shi* didn't manage to enchant the Emperor so how could Wei *shi,* twenty-something years later, manage to captivate the Emperor? This kind of matter, she wouldn't believe it, and no one who heard it would believe it either.

Because the matter was connected to the mystery of Qu Tian *shi*'s death, along with the series of events that had occured at Chang De Gong Fu, Qing De Emperor was so angry that he wanted to execute the Duke of Chang De. In the end, because he had remembered that the Duke of Chang De had the grace of giving birth and raising Duan Wang Fei, he exempted his death sentence. Instead, he took away the Qu Clan's title, and demoted the family of Chang De Gong Fu to a *shu min*. The Duke of Chang De Gong Fu was imprisoned in jail. Those not in jail were thrown out of Chang De Gong Fu.

As for the small family that was the Liang Family, Qing De Emperor didn't have to waste much energy. He just sealed the Liang *fu* and erased the scholarly honor of Liang Hong, and decreed that the next three generations of Qu and Liang Family could not attend the examinations.

The Qu Family who had caused so much fuss in Jing City fell down just like that. Among the people, there were even ones who had started to use Chang De Gong Fu as the basis for many plays. A fickle man who killed his wife to marry again. A cruel father and step-mother who abused the previous wife's daughter. And how the first wife's daughter endured such humiliations and in the end, married an ideal husband.

No matter how much the story had changed, the Duke of Chang De and Liang *shi* were eternally known as the most malicious villains and Qu Qing Ju was the abused little white cabbage.

After she had finished reading how she had married an ideal husband and the aggressive and contemptible paternal family story, Qu Qing Ju laughed so much that she cried. As expected, the plays were based on reality but larger than life.

When did she ride a twelve-person gold sedan? When did *wang ye*, full of rage, drag everyone of the Gong Fu out to be beaten? Those points were too drastic.

Mu Jing saw *wang fei* crying from laughter as she read the story and came forward to attentively help rub her stomach. She smiled as she

commented: "*Wang fei*, don't choke. *Nubi* heard another version before. How about *wang fei* take a listen?"

"Tell me," Qu Qing Ju took a drink of tea and asked in interest.

After Mu Jin finished narrating, Qu Qing Ju felt that the creativity of the ancient people was extremely strong.

The main idea of the story was that she, the little white cabbage, endured the snow in the middle of winter to buy red bean buns for Liang *shi*. She struggled in her journey in the midst of the harsh winds wearing very little and encountered Duan Wang on a white horse. The two of them fell in love at first glance. In the end, a romance that moved the heavens was written.

Did the logic of this story get eaten by the author? Liang *shi* would eat red bean buns in the winter and not sparrow's nest? And in that kind of weather, who would be selling buns? Even if people were selling, who would go buy them? The most strange was that in such a snowstorm, He Heng wouldn't sit in a sedan or carriage outside but would masochistically ride a horse.

Just as Qu Qing Ju was going to laugh herself silly, Ming He unexpectedly came over. He said that *wang ye* wanted to take her out of the *fu*. Qu Qing Ju didn't know what it was for, but seeing Ming He's state, it was an emergency. She glanced at her attire to see if anything was wrong and didn't change before following Ming He out.

When she got on the *wang fu*'s carriage, Qu Qing Ju saw He Heng was already sitting inside. She asked with some confusion: "*Wang ye*, where are we going?"

"The play has to go on til the end. If you don't get to see the conclusion, there's no meaning," He Heng smiled and held her hand. He ordered the driver outside, "To Chang De Gong Fu."

Qu Qing Ju looked in surprise at He Heng. After the carriage started moving, she asked: "Why does *wang ye* want to take me there?"

"Today is the day that everyone of Chang De Gong Fu is being evicted completely. That place was where you used to live. Before the *fu* is sealed, I'll get you to check if there is anything wrong," He Heng cheerfully responded, "I know that Qing Ju is a person who remembers the old times."

Hearing He Heng give such a dignified reason for going to spectate, Qu Qing Ju smiled and followed: "*Wang ye* is right, I am one who remembers the old times." The saying, "the clothes should be new, the people should be of the past", had its own logic.

When the carriage made its way to the front door of Chang De Gong Fu, there was a great mess at the gate. Loud sobbing and pleading made the entire place sound like the market.

Ming He came up to pull the curtain at the front of the carriage slightly open, allowing the two *zhuzi* inside to have a perfect view of the great play occurring outside the *fu*.

The uniformed Imperial Guards were forcefully escorting some people who didn't want to leave. On the ground were dropped luggage and clothes. There were many servants who had left with their heads down. Seeing Duan Wang Fu's carriage, they carefully came forward to bow before hurriedly leaving.

Qu Qing Ju watched apathetically as Qu *er xiaojie* supported Qu *lao taitai* out the front gate. Behind the two was Liang *shi*, her face full of panic. Qu Wang Zhi was trailing Liang *shi*, his crestfallen attitude like a duck plucked of its feathers.

The family stood at the gate, watching as the servants who had once served them all leave. Gradually, the crowd grew smaller and smaller, and then there was silence.

Qu *lao taitai* watched as the plaque, on which "Chang De Gong Fu" was written, got taken down and smashed onto the ground. Then continued watching as the crimson red doors of the gate got sealed with papers from the government. A long time later, she sighed: "Karma, karma."

She pointed at Liang *shi* who was wiping her tears to rant, "That year, if it wasn't for taking this person of bad luck into the *fu*, would my Qu Family be like this?"

By now, Liang *shi* wouldn't listen to what Qu *lao taitai* said. She instantly retorted: "*Lao taitai* might have forgotten that it was *lao ye* who had married *erxi* into the *fu*. *Lao taitai*, rather than blame me, blame *lao ye*!"

"You," Qu *lao taitai* was so angry that she staggered. It was only because of Qu Hui Xue's support that she barely managed to not fall down, "Did the Liang Family teach you to not respect your elders like this?"

"There's not even a Liang Family now. Wasn't it impacted by your Qu Family?" Liang *shi* felt that her paternal family had been indirectly affected by the Qu Family. She instantly shrieked, "Why is *lao taitai* turning around to blame our Liang Family?"

"Mother, don't speak any more," Qu Wang Zhi heard Liang *shi*'s words becoming nastier and couldn't help wading in, "Now that our family is like this. What are you fighting over?"

"I will disturb everyone. This is our *wang fei's* gift to everyone, please receive it."

Qu Wang Zhi heard that this voice didn't belong to a normal man and turned around. He saw a *taijian* wearing a blue robe standing behind them, a pouch of silver in his hand. He couldn't resist looking behind the *taijian* and saw a magnificent carriage parked not too far away. Inside the carriage was Duan Wang and *da jie* sitting together.

Because of the distance, he couldn't distinguish the expression on the two's faces. But in this instant, he felt that he was entirely mired in an awkward and embarrassed state.

Chapter 83

Sometimes, the most painful time wasn't when you had lost everything. It was when you had lost everything and the person who had been suppressed by you was standing in great circumstances right in front of you.

Qu Wang Zhi looked at the silver in the hands of the *taijian* standing in front of him. He might have been a bit of a wastrel but even he knew that the amount of silver in the pouch wasn't insignificant. It was enough for a normal family to live on for a few decades without doing anything. But even though he didn't have anything at present, he still didn't want to receive that pouch of silver.

Liang *shi*, who had been wiping away her tears, snatched the silver from Ming He's hands and threw it ferociously on the ground. She pointed at Qu Qing Ju in the carriage, ranting: "We don't need you coming here at this time to falsely give aid!"

The snowy-white silver rolled out from the cotton pouch, scattering to the ground. Under the sunlight, it was even more blinding. The spectators in the street saw the scene and started gossiping amongst themselves.

Qu Hui Xue supported her grandmother. Listening to the mocking laughter of the spectators targeted at Chang De Gong Fu, she embarrassedly lowered her head and saw an ingot of silver that had rolled to her feet. For some reason, she suddenly thought of a certain day three years ago when *taitai* had thrown a teacup in the exact same manner at *da jie*'s feet.

That cup of tea had been very hot. It had been the beginning of spring yet she was able to see the white steam as the tea splashed onto *da jie*'s feet. But at that time, *da jie* always kept her head down so she wasn't able to see the expression on *da jie*'s face.

For some reason, she suddenly felt somewhat elated. Liang *shi*, well-off for more than a decade, Liang *shi*, who had abused her mother, finally met today's outcome. As she thought some more, a smile appeared on

Qu Hui Xue's face and she bent down to pick up the silver at her feet. She blew away the dust on the silver and put it in a pouch at her waist.

Liang *shi* didn't notice her actions. However, Qu *lao taitai* saw but didn't say a word. She wasn't intelligent but she was able to see the situation more clearly than Liang *shi*, so she wouldn't do anything that would provide more food for gossip.

Liang *shi* had never thought that there would be a day when her and Qu Qing Ju's positions would be switched. That *yatou* in her memory, who had always been submissive, is now become high up in the sky and she has now become a base *shumin*. She was both hateful and unsatisfied, so she placed the source of the misfortunes onto Qu Qing Ju who was sitting in the carriage.

Qu Qing Ju calmly looked at Liang *shi*. This woman did have some beauty, but only just some. She couldn't understand how the Duke of Chang De was so captivated by her that he would do something as crazy as killing his wife. A man that heartless, did he really know what was love?

After seeing Liang *shi* lose her composure and started to curse, Qu Qing Ju felt the discontent, deep inside her heart, gradually dissipate. She covered her chest, as though she could see the lonely and helpless little girl enduring the days and nights in Chang De Gong Fu, saw her marry into the *wang fu*, saw her resist the man's approaches, saw her silently lie down on the carved bed and calmly close her eyes.

He Heng noticed that Qu Qing Ju's expression wasn't right and gently grasped her hand, "Qing Ju, what's wrong with you?"

Qu Qing Ju's gaze met his and she suddenly smiled. She shook her head, answering: "Nothing." She moved her gaze back towards Liang *shi*, and bent to get out of the carriage. She gave her hand to Mu Jin who had been standing by the side of the carriage and stepped on a wooden stool as she got off the carriage. Step by step, she walked to stand in front of Liang *shi,* whose face was distorted, and in a very small voice, she said:

"If you keep making a fuss like this, that's not accumulating virtue for your children. Didn't anyone tell you that I hold grudges?"

Liang *shi* was so angry that she wanted to scream. But when she saw the smile on Qu Qing Ju's face, she couldn't say a word. She turned to look at her son, and thought about her daughter who was a *ce fei* in Rui Wang Fu. She gritted her teeth: "What do you want to do?"

"Take a guess," Qu Qing Ju made a long exhale and took a few steps back, "No matter what, you've taken care of me for so many years. I just need to reminisce on the past to feel overwhelmed and beside myself."

"You slut!" Liang *shi* reached out to try to scratch Qu Qing Ju's face but was pushed aside by Ming He's hand. He said in a loud voice: "Outrageous, *wang fei* was thinking of Qu *lao taitai*'s age and especially came here to give some silver to make your days easier. It's fine if you aren't grateful, but you want to harm *wang fei*, you are too evil."

The crowd of spectators saw the scene and extrapolated on how Duan Wang Fei, who had been abused in Chang De Gong Fu, was still sympathetic of Qu *lao taitai* due to her advancing age and made a trip just to give some silver. The result was that the evil step-mother cursed her when she saw her without a hint of regret. It did seem as though this Liang *shi* was even more malicious than what was rumoured. They didn't understand how the kind and filial Duan Wang Fei escaped her evil clutches.

Qu Qing Ju looked very hurt at Liang *shi,* who was being supported by Qu Wang Zhi. She said helplessly: "Since you don't welcome me, I won't ever appear in front of you in the future." She made a bow in the direction of Qu *lao taitai*, "Everyone, take care."

When she'd finished speaking, Qu Qing Ju looked very wane and she held Mu Jin's hand as they went back to the carriage. When the curtain to the carriage was put down, the loss on her face instantly disappears. She really just loved watching Liang *shi* live out her days in fear.

Maybe what she should be worried about was just how she, as Duan Wang Fei, would harm her children. Maybe she would live every day in her hatred. But these issues weren't important anymore.

"Let's return," He Heng smiled slightly as he held her hand.

Qu Qing Ju smiled and nodded, "Return."

The people of Duan Wang Fu left, and so did the spectators. Before the Qu Family could react, several ruffians and gangsters suddenly ran over and picked up the silver from the ground and disappeared.

Qu Wang Zhi looked at the scattering ruffians and turned his head to look at his family. For an instant, he felt that there was no place in this great big world for them.

"Let's go," Qu *lao taitai* banged her walking stick and glanced icily at Liang *shi*, "What are you standing here for? This place isn't the Qu Family's anymore." She started walking away, supported by Qu Hui Xue.

Liang *shi* looked at her son and in the end, she could only helplessly follow *lao taitai*. But in every street she passed by, there were many people pointing at her. She even saw some spitting behind her.

She looked blankly at these people. She finally understood. She wasn't a duchess anymore. There weren't any more riches and honors. She didn't have anything. And the daughter left behind by that whore was going to plot against her.

Finished, all finished.

The spring gradually passed and the hotness of the summer slowly came. By this time, Qu Qing Ju didn't like to go out. Most of the time, she was hiding in the cooled room, wearing a silk dress as she waved a fan and listen to Jin Zhan and Huang Yang tell her the gossip in Jing City.

A few days earlier, something unexpected happened to Qu Qing Ju . Qu Hui Xue had been married to a *xiucai*. This *xiucai* had no parents but he had land and servants. Even more unexpected, this *xiucai*'s mother had once been Qu Hui Xue's mother's good friend. After the *xiucai* married her, he didn't slight her because of Chang De Gong Fu and the two had a good relationship.

This event was probably the most fairytale-like incident since Qu Qing Ju came to this time. This incident also proved that sometimes, real life was more unexpected than stories. After she was informed of the matter, she let Xiao Gan Zi send some appropriate celebratory gifts to Qu Hui Xue as well as the questions from past examinations and the best answers. It counted as her good wishes to the couple.

Qu Hui Xue didn't start interacting with Qu Qing Ju greatly because of the presents. She solemnly wrote a letter of appreciation and let a servant deliver some fresh produce as well as some of her own embroidery. After that, she went on to live her own life.

"*Wang fei*, this is a lily silver tree-ear fungus Buddha fruit soup which has just been made by the servants. Drink some to reduce the heat," Yin Liu put down the bowl of soup in front of Qu Qing Ju and took the fan from a *yahuan*. She helped fan Qu Qing Ju at a moderate pace. Seeing the white sun outside, she gave a sigh, "It's become hotter and hotter. I wonder when it will rain."

"You just came from outside, there's ice here. Careful not to get sick," Mu Jin pulled Yin Liu further away from the ice, smiling as she took the fan from her hand, "Take care to not stink *wang fei* with your sweat."

Yin Liu instantly protested her innocence. The two fell into battle, causing Qu Qing Ju to laugh. She put down the spoon to interject, "Stop, stop. Let the kitchen make each of you a bowl of iced plum soup and stop your mouths."

"That's great, *nubi* certainly won't fuss," Mu Jin smiled as she walked back to Qu Qing Ju's side to fan her. Qu Qing Ju looked towards the door to see Huang Yang run over as he wiped away his sweat. She

couldn't help but frown. Huang Yang wasn't this helter-skelter usually. Did something happen?

"*Wang fei*, just now *wang ye* sent a message saying that he's afraid he can't return to the *fu*," Huang Yang's head was full of sweat, his clothing and his back was all wet and he gasped as he spoke.

"Pour Huang Yang a cup of cold tea," Qu Qing Ju said with a grave expression, "Did something happen in the palace?"

Huang Yang usually did care for his impression in front of *wang fei* but the speed at which he drank tea was much faster than normal. After a bowl was drunk, he used his sleeve to wipe his mouth and narrated: "Ming He *gonggong* passed on that the Emperor suddenly fainted today at Court. All the *taiyi* on duty at the Imperial Hospital were summoned into the palace. *Wang ye* is there too. He was afraid that you would worry and specially sent a message for you."

Was Qing De Emperor He *meimei*, that he would have an incident every few days? Qu Qing Ju frowned. She felt that He Heng was more proactive today than all the other times Qing De Emperor had been sick. Was it that this time, Qing De Emperor's illness was dangerous?

Seeing a roomful of *yahuan* who didn't dare speak, she said in a heavy tone: "Spread the news that before *wang ye* returns to the *fu*, the *fu* will not receive guests. Anyone who needs to manage an affair outside the *fu* must report to the stewards and register the time they left and the time they come back. Everything has to be recorded. If someone resists, throw them out of the *wang fu*."

Huang Yang's eyebrows jumped. He pushed down the fear in his heart: "Yes, this one will pass it on."

After Huang Yang left, Mu Jin said uncertainly: "*Wang fei*, this matter … …"

"*Fuhuang* is a son of Heaven, he would be protected by the Heavens," Qu Qing Ju held the spoon to take a sip of the lily silver tree-ear fungus Buddha fruit soup. With a calm face, she said, "Make sure the servants

control their mouths. If I hear something that shouldn't be said, everyone will be heavily punished."

"Yes," Mu Jin detected *wang fei*'s cautiousness and exchanged a glance with Yin Liu. She hurriedly left to start managing the other servants.

A bowl of lily silver tree-ear fungus Buddha soup was soon finished. Qu Qing Ju took out a handkerchief and slowly wiped her mouth clean. She stood to walk next to the bed. The winds had picked up, and thick clouds started to appear on the horizon. The sky was half light, half dark with clouds.

"*Wang fei*, *nubi* thinks that it is going to rain," Yu Zan noticed the wind was too heavy and afraid that the window would block *wang fei*'s line of sight, reached out to hold the window. She looked at the horizon and gasped: "Such mighty winds and thick clouds. The rain won't be small."

Qu Qing Ju smiled: "No matter how heavy, after it comes down, it has to stop. We are inside, what is there to be afraid of?"

Staring at the thick clouds as they came closer, Qu Qing Ju's brows furrowed. She kept feeling anxious inside.

Chapter 84

The interior of Tian Qi Palace was suffocatingly hot but no one dared to complain, not even to wipe away the sweat on their heads. All their attention was focused on the dragon bed. The man lying there was the master of their honor and even their lives.

The *taiyi* present took their turns as they shakily checked the pulse. When they had finished, they knelt in front of the Empress. The Dean of the Imperial Hospital said in a trembling voice: "Empress *niangniang*, His Majesty's pulse is as thin as silk, faltering occasionally before rising. This official has no solution."

"Wasn't His Majesty just overwhelmed by the heat?" The Empress's expression changed dramatically. She might not know medicine but even she knew that only the mortally sick would have a weak pulse. She looked at the *taiyi,* their faces pale even in the sweltering heat, and ground out: "No matter what, you have to make His Majesty wake up!"

The *taiyi* present exchanged looks between themselves and gritted their teeth as they complied.

The Empress looked at the unconscious man on the bed and wiped away the sweat on her forehead. She thought for a while before summoning a messenger *taijian*: "The Emperor is seriously ill. Even if it's not good to have too much noise, but as a father, he would certainly be thinking of his children. Summon Duan Wang, Rui Wang, Cheng Wang and Jin An Princess from outside the hall. Shu *guifei* and Jing *guifei* should also come in to attend."

Outside Tian Qi Palace, all the *feipin* who had children, the princesses and the *wang ye* were all standing in the scorching sun as they waited. Seeing a *taijian* come out, the eyes that had been scattered due to the blinding sun instantly became spirited.

"Passing the decree of the Empress to summon Jing *guifei*, Shu *guifei*, His Highness Duan Wang, His Highness Rui Wang, His Highness Cheng Wang, and Jin An Princess Royal to attend." After the *taijian* passed on the Empress's decree, he didn't look at anyone's expression as he hurried back into the hall.

The others were discontent but had no other solutions. Right now, the Emperor was unconscious so the Empress held the highest status in the palace. If she said not to let someone in, who dared to force their way in?

The group of people entered the humid hall. Shu *guifei* furrowed her brow as she complained: "It's so hot inside the room, why not use some ice?"

The Empress glared icily at her: "Right now, His Majesty's pulse is weak. How could we use anything cold? If Shu *guifei* finds it too hot,

then go back to your palace to rest. The Emperor here won't lack people to attend him."

Shu *guifei* was stung by the Empress' words. She didn't feel happy inside, but due to the other's position, she could only bow to the Empress, "*Pinqie* was just worried that the Emperor would overheat. Please, Empress, forgive *pinqie*'s slip of the tongue."

The Empress looked at her and then her gaze swept across He Yuan beside her, not paying any more attention to her. She turned to look at the *taiyi* who was performing acupuncture and massaging the Emperor. Her voice was heavy as she announced: "The Emperor's illness this time is critical, the pulse is very weak. You …… serve well."

The people who were called in instantly changed their expressions. They were all understood what a weak pulse meant. But why did it suddenly become like this?

The person with the ugliest expression was most likely Shu *guifei*. She looked at everyone in the room. If the Emperor passed like this, how likely would it be that her child would succeed the throne? Thinking about it, she looked with enmity at He Heng, whose face was full of anxiousness. If Wei *shi*'s son became the Emperor, would there even be a space in this Da Long Dynasty for her and her son?

"Why is it like this?" Shu *guifei*'s voice got louder, and became rather piercing, "The Emperor was fine yesterday, how could his pulse be weak?!" She started to cry mournfully, occasionally calling for His Majesty.

Jing *guifei* wasn't like Shu *guifei* but the rims of her eyes reddened and tears silently ran down. A short while later, the handkerchief in her hand was sodden from her tears. But she didn't notice it. She only stood by the dragon bed as she cried silently.

Qing De Emperor seemed to hear a piercing voice which made his head hurt. When he managed to open his eyes, he saw a woman dressed in peach red kneeling in front of him. When he focused, he saw Shu *guifei*'s

tearful face show happiness. His heart moved and when he opened his mouth to speak, he saw Jing *guifei* standing at the end of the bed. Her swollen eyes were centered on his body. Even though she didn't say anything, he could feel her worry and concern for him and the joy when she saw him awaken.

He wanted to sit up and say that he was fine but found his body was paralyzed. He wanted to say a few words, but found it difficult to even breathe. He moved his eyes and saw the woman dressed impeccably by his side, and the woman standing by the bed whose attire was dishevelled and her hair not even properly made up. A long time later, he closed his eyes and found strength deep inside his body to order: "Summon the Chief Justice Tian Jin Ke, Minister of Revenue Luo Chang Qing, Prime Minister Wei Wen Guang, Minister of Rites Zhang Yu Cheng, Commander of the Imperial Guard Sun Zhang You."

After just a short sentence, Qing De Emperor was gasping for breath. Shu *guifei*, kneeling in front of him, felt her hands become cold. Her intuition told her that this man who had favoured her for more than twenty years was most likely going to leave her. She was sad inside, but she felt even more frantic. Did this man remember the promise he had made, that he would leave the throne to Yuan'er?

"Emperor, look at Yuan'er, he came to see you," Shu *guifei* stood to pull He Yuan next to the bed and said frantically, "Did you forget that you once said you wished to climb mountains with Yuan'er and ride horses. You haven't done those things yet. After you recover, you'll have to fulfill your promises."

Qing De Emperor looked at his most favored third son. He had changed this child's diapers, washed his feet, carried him on his back to play on the bed. He had watched this child grow up, bit by bit, to become a handsome youth.

"*Fuhuang*," He Yuan knelt of Qing De Emperor's bed, his eyes red as he pled, "*Er chen* remembers every word you said. Please recover quickly."

Yes, at that time he had said many things, even promising that his third son will be the next Emperor. But after all these years, he hadn't installed him as Crown Prince. His third son's personality was too arrogant. He had always been waiting for him to mature. But now, he didn't have the strength to keep waiting.

His blurry gaze passed He Yuan's shoulders to see the second son standing a few steps away. This was the child that Wei *shi* gave birth to for him. He remembered his schooling was good, his protocol was good and he was filial. He had bestowed many things to this son but he couldn't remember anything else.

When this child was small, he must also have been white and plump. He remembered when Wei *shi* had carried him and he reached out to call him *fuhuang*.

The children had grown up, but he was old.

"Emperor, the *daren* have all arrived." The chief *taijian* reported in a small voice.

"Summon," Qing De Emperor moved his eyes away and said weakly.

When Tian Jin Ke and the others entered the hall, they detected that something wasn't right. When they saw the Emperor's rosy face, their hearts jumped and they quickly knelt down, "This official greets Emperor, greets Empress."

Qing De Emperor didn't call for them to rise but ordered: "Prepare the Four Treasures of the Study."

Shu *guifei* stared with wide eyes as the *taijian* brought the instruments. She knew what the Emperor was doing, her heart seemed to be trying to burst out of her throat.

"*Zhen* dictates, Official Tian writes, you all listen." Qing De Emperor's gaze slowly swept across everyone in the room. In the end, he saw Jing *guifei* in the corner, clearly sobbing so hard she couldn't breathe yet not

making a sound. He closed his eyes. A beat later, he opened them, his eyes full of determination.

He Yuan saw his *fuhuang*'s gaze and felt that it wasn't reassuring. He couldn't help but ask: "What *fuhuang* once said, does it still count?"

Qing De Emperor glanced at him and slightly moved away. He took a breath: "Ever since ascension the throne, *zhen* had no achievements in governance, no ability to expand the borders, but had a son …… Heng, born intelligent, benevolent and kind, of good moral character and governance of his household, with the virtues of *xiandi*. After repeated thought, only this son is able to govern the world, *zhen* therefore passes the throne to the second imperial son Heng and to pick an auspicious day for ascension."

When he'd finished speaking, Qing De Emperor was gasping heavily and his sight became blurry. He looked at the jade seal and personal seal that were presented in front of him. Trembling, he raised the jade seal and pressed down on the Imperial Decree Tian Jin Ke held up.

"*Fuhuang*!" He Yuan watched as the crimson stamp of the jade seal fell on the Imperial Decree and asked in disbelief, "Why are you changing your mind?"

Qing De Emperor didn't pay attention to him. He laboriously stamped his personal seal on the Imperial Decree. When he had finished, he seemed to have lost all energy, coldness creeping up his back.

"*Fuhuang*, *fuhuang*, why!" He Yuan tried to grab the Imperial Decree but was restrained by the *taijian*. He turned to furiously stare at He Heng, "What ploy did you play that made *fuhuang* create such a decree?"

The rims of He Heng's eyes reddened as he replied: "*San di*, don't cause a fuss now … …"

"Stop acting, your mother and you always act. Other people might believe it, but I find it disgusting," He Yuan looked heatedly at Qing De Emperor, "*Fuhuang*, this is how you treat me?"

Qing De Emperor didn't seem to have heard He Yuan's screams. He stared dazedly at the end of the bed, muttering: "Chan'er don't cry, Chan'er … … *zhen* was wrong, was wrong … …"

Shu *guifei*'s eyes suddenly widened, looking in disbelief at Qing De Emperor as though she didn't recognize the person in front of her.

The hall was entirely silent. They didn't know who Chan'er was nor why the Emperor was calling for her, and they also didn't know why the Emperor would say that he was wrong. But they did know that Duan Wang was the future Emperor. The heir had been determined and it would minimize the upheaval.

It might have been a long time, or just an instant of time before Jing *guifei* walked to Qing De Emperor and bent down to grasp his hand.

Qing De Emperor looked at her, a smile appearing on his lips as he slowly closed his eyes.

Jing *guifei*'s other hand trembled as she moved the index finger of her other hand under the nose of Qing De Emperor and her tears immediately fell down.

"Emperor!"

Shu *guifei* pushed aside Jing *guifei*, throwing herself onto Qing De Emperor's body as she loudly started bawling, "Emperor!"

The chief *taijian* knelt with a bang on the ground, loudly announcing: "The Emperor is dead!"

The people in the room knelt down like dumplings falling into the pot. Tian Jin Ke knelt in front of He Heng , holding the Imperial Decree high up: "The country cannot be without an emperor, please, Emperor, arrange for the funeral of *xiandi.* This one kneels to request Emperor to restrain your grief."

"Kneeling to request the Emperor to restrain your grief!" Everyone loudly mimicked.

The people outside the hall sobbed as they knelt down. No matter if they were really sad or acting, at this moment, all of them were sobbing so much that they couldn't breathe.

He Heng slowly reach out with both hands to receive the Imperial Decree from Tian Jin Ke. He knelt in front of Qing De Emperor and gave three hard kowtows: "*Er chen* is of mediocre ability, received *fuhuang*'s love today, and will strive to the utmost to govern the people of the world." After he had finished speaking, he staggered as he stood up, crying out loud.

When the guards and *taijian* guarding outside the hall heard that Duan Wang had succeeded the throne, they took advantage of the moment to silently retreat out, as though they had never appeared before.

Suddenly, a clap of thunder sounded and the first rains of summer finally came pouring down.

In Duan Wang Fu, Qu Qing Ju stood next to the window as she looked at the *wang fu* shrouded in mist, and occasionally fanned herself.

A few days earlier, she had detected that He Heng and He Ming had been secretly conspiring on some matters. Did they manage to account for the possibility that Qing De Emperor would suddenly die?

Thinking about it, Qu Qing Ju furrowed her brows. Why would she, for no reason at all, think that Qing De Emperor had passed away? Was she extrapolating too much?

Chapter 85

The winds and rain were strong, but they stopped as dusk approached. The sun even came out from behind the clouds, covering all of Jing with a coat of gold. Qu Qing Ju stood on the only three-level tower in the *wang fu*. She narrowed her eyes to look at the shockingly beautiful sunset, a smile on her lips.

Suddenly, a heavy bell rang out from the direction of the Imperial Palace. Because Duan Wang Fu was very close to the Imperial Palace, she could clearly hear the ringing.

Mu Jin and the others behind Qu Qing Ju instantly changed their expressions, kneeling down and covering their eyes, trying their best to make themselves cry more sorrowfully. Huang Yuan even grievously moaned "Emperor" before using his sleeves to start wiping away his tears.

Qu Qing Ju's head seemed to ring then blanked. She looked in disbelief at the Imperial Palace. Under the sunset, the Imperial Palace seemed to be coated in a layer of mysterious gold. If this kind of scene was exaggerated a bit, it would become a good omen. How was it that the Emperor had passed away?

She stilled before turning to order: "Quickly change everything in the *fu* that needs to be changed. Nothing bright should be seen." After seeing Huang Yang leave the tower with reddened eyes, she looked down at her own clothing, "Let's return to *zhengyuan* to change."

Even though she wasn't sure of the situation in the palace, Qu Qing Ju still used the fastest speed possible to wash away the makeup on her face and also took off the peach red corseted silk dress to change into a snow-white plain dress. The girdle she used was a neutral colored one. She took down all the pouches and pendants on the dress, put her hair in a simple style, using a few hairpins to secure it, and even took down her earrings.

The servants in the *wang fu* also took off the bright clothes they wore. White lanterns with black characters and white banners were hung up in the *wang fu*. Anything red in colour was stored away.

Jiang Yong Yu watched as the servants in her rooms hurriedly put everything away. She changed into a dark green cotton dress. She asked Ai Lu beside her, "Has *wang fei* given any orders?"

Ai Yu helped remove the adornments in her hair and changed her hairstyle to a simple one, securing it with two silver hairpins, "*Wang fei* didn't have any orders. She just said for everyone to clean up what should be cleaned up and hang what is required."

Jiang Yong Yu faintly frowned. She walked uncertainly to the gate of her yard and looked at the servants walking outside, sighing: "I don't know what the palace is like now."

Ai Lu knew that her mistress was worried about the new emperor. Right now, it was good if their *wang ye* succeeded the throne. If Rui Wang succeeded, their lives from now on wouldn't be very peaceful.

"What, you can't wait either," Feng Zi Jin held Xia Yun's hand and looked disdainfully at Jiang Yong Yu, "I had thought that you would endure longer, but aren't you just the same?"

Jiang Yong Yu calmly looked at the sapphire in Feng Zi Jin's hair and commented indifferently: "If you have the time to come over and fuss, why don't you take down what you are wearing? If *wang fei* knew, I wonder if she would get angry?"

"You're just a dog of *wang fei*, what do you have to be smug about?" Feng Zi Jin snorted and held Xia Yun's hand to leave.

Ai Lu retorted in anger: "She's a *shiqie* who's unfavored by *wang ye*, there's nothing to be proud of!"

"Her father is a third-grade assistant minister in the Ministry of Works. My father is under his command. It's natural that she dares to show off in front of me," Jiang Yong Yu gave an ambiguous smile, "There's no need to argue with this kind of person."

Ai Lu looked at the smile on her mistress' face. Even though she didn't understand why, her anger lessened.

The main gate to the palace opened, and a fourth grade imperial bodyguard rode a horse as he raced out of the palace. The guards saw that he was going in the direction of Duan Wang Fu and were envious.

The people of Duan Wang Fu were going to rise on their master's success.

Following him was a troop of bodyguards accompanying a carriage as it proceeded out of the palace. White flowers were hanging on the carriage but from the structure, it was the carriage that only the Empress had the status to ride.

They instantly understood. This carriage most likely was going to receive Duan Wang Fei.

Qu Qing Ju's face was strict as she sat in the front hall of Duan Wang Fu. Behind her were four *yahuan* and four *taijian*. Everyone's face was grave.

Looking at the doors to the hall pushed wide open, Qu Qing Ju took a sip of holly tea. The pale finger tapped gently on the table, releasing that small bit of anxiety inside.

"*Wang fei*, the Imperial Decree from the palace has arrived." Huang Yang raced in, his face joyous yet sad, looking very comedic. But Qu Qing Ju didn't have any mirth on her face. She slowly stood and watched as a person dressed in the dark uniform of the imperial bodyguards stride in and then kneel in front of her.

"The Emperor has decreed to especially welcome *niangniang* into the palace to manage the affairs of the *hougong*."

Qing De Emperor was dead. The person that would be called Emperor now could only be the new Emperor, and the women of the new Emperor naturally could be called *niangniang*. Qu Qing Ju slightly nodded: "This *da ren*, please stand." She examined the person, confirming that he really was an imperial bodyguard before responding, "Is the Emperor well?"

"The Emperor is fine, but due to his grief, he hasn't drank or eaten," The imperial bodyguard respectfully answered, "The Emperor especially let *wei chen* come here first to give the decree. The carriage and guards will arrive shortly. *Niangniang,* please wait for a moment."

Qu Qing Ju nodded calmly. The peaceful state she expressed made the imperial bodyguard who had passed on the decree admire her. No wonder she was Duan Wang Fei. Even facing a major event such as Duan Wang succeeding the throne, she could be so peaceful and not lose her composure. She really was majestic and had the composure necessary to "mother the world".

Mu Jin and the others behind Qu Qing Ju were bursting with joy, but due to the fact that an outsider was present, they managed to keep up the expression on their faces. Mu Jin came up to support Qu Qing Ju's arm and asked in a small voice: "*Niangniang*, why don't *nubi* go pack some things?"

Qu Qing Ju nodded and asked the imperial bodyguard: "*Da ren*, please sit. What should *da ren* be called by?"

"*Wei chen* doesn't dare," the imperial bodyguard raised his hands, "*Wei chen* is a fourth-grade imperial bodyguard Gao Jin, and had been a bodyguard before in the *wang fu* for a time."

Qu Qing Ju nodded. She knew that this person was most likely one of He Heng's people. She calmly sat down at the front of the hall, not speaking anymore.

A short while later, the carriage arrived. Mu Jin and the other *yahuan* had finished packing. Qu Qing Ju allowed some of her personal attendants to follow as she walked out of the main gate of the *wang fu*. When she saw the majestic carriage, she sighed, and paused in her steps before using Mu Jin's hand as support to enter the carriage.

The common people on the side of the street had been already ordered back by the guards. Qu Qing Ju sat in the carriage and found it slightly boring. In the past, when she sat in a carriage, she could still hear the voices of some passer-bys. Now, other than the sound of the axles, the ground and the hoofs of the horses, she couldn't hear anything. Was this the difference between a *wang fei* and the Empress?

The carriage didn't stop after it entered the palace. She slightly lifted up the curtain and saw people all kneeling on the ground. All of them were trembling and cautious, as though if she frowned, they would lose their lives.

The carriage travelled a short distance past the palace doors before stopping. Qu Qing Ju got off the carriage and got on the phoenix carriage to sedately circle around to reach Tian Qi Palace. When she got off the phoenix carriage, she saw He Heng standing at the top of the jade stairs.

She stood at the bottom of the jade stairs, staring into his eyes. Step by step, she made her way up. Each step was especially steady and especially strong.

Just when there were three steps left between her and He Heng, he actually walked down the steps and firmly took hold of Qu Qing Ju's hand. The two ascended to the top of the stairs together. He Heng lifted his head to look at the plaque of Tian Qi Palace: "*Fuhuang*'s mourning hall has been set up in Shou Kang[1] Palace. Later, you and I should go to pay our respects."

Qu Qing Ju suddenly understood. So Qing De Emperor's corpse was already not in Tian Qi Palace? She turned to look down the jade stairs and found that the scenery at the top was drastically different compared to the bottom.

She tilted her head to look at Tian Qi Palace's sign. At this moment, she didn't know whether to say to restrain grief or congratulations. She turned to look at the man beside her. He wasn't as happy as she had thought, but had a kind of expected steadiness. After thinking for a bit, Qu Qing Ju decided to speak: "I heard that you haven't eaten or drank. It's so hot right now. You can't harm your body."

He Heng smiled. He looked at the dimming sunset at the horizon, "If you are worried about me, then eat together with me."

[1] is long life, age 康(kang) is healthy, peaceful

Qu Qing Ju nodded, concern on her bare face.

The two walked together into Tian Qi Palace. Food was very quickly brought up. Even though there wasn't any meat, the dishes were very finely made and didn't diminish one's appetite.

After eating and rinsing, He Heng wiped his mouth as he remarked: "These days, the palace would be busy. You should follow *muhou* to manage the affairs of the *hougong*. After everything is settled, that would make it easier for you to manage the *hougong*."

Qu Qing Ju's eyebrows twitched. Did he Heng mean that *hougong* was going to be under her management in the future?"

"There are two *muhou* in the palace, it doesn't need me to do this," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she responded, "Does Emperor not worry that it could exhaust me?"

"How would I not worry for you? But this is our *hougong*, you have to run it," He Heng gave a warm smile, "If I give it to anyone else, I won't feel at ease."

Qu Qing Ju looked at his eyes and found that he looked extremely serious as he spoke, so serious that she almost believed it.

A silent beat later, Qu Qing Mu smiled and complied: "Alright."

In Zhong Jing Palace, Jing *guifei* slowly waved the fan in her hand and remarked to Ding *mama* beside her: "The Emperor welcomed Qu Qing Ju into the palace?"

Ding *mama* answered: "*Nubi* heard that right now, *niangniang* is keeping the Emperor company for the evening meal."

Jing *guifei* nodded: "That's good, with her there, the Emperor knows to take care of his body."

Ding *mama* hesitated before being unable to resist asking: "But if Qu *niangniang* entered the palace, this *hougong*… …"

"*Ben gong*'s son's *hougong* should be handed to *ben gong*'s *erxi* to manage," Jing *guifei*'s expression grew serious, "Do not mention this matter again."

Ding *mama*'s face paled, her body sinking lower into a bow, "*Nubi* slipped, *niangniang*, please forgive me."

Jing *guifei*'s expression relaxed and she continued to wave the plain circle fan in her hand, not speaking anymore.

Chapter 86

"What did you say, Duan Wang succeeded the throne?!" Liang *shi* stood in front of a black bricked farmhouse, face pale as she looked at her nephew. To her, the news was the worst possible. She muttered disbelievingly, "Why is it Duan Wang, what about Rui Wang? Rui Wang?"

Liang Hong looked at *gumu*'s state and sighed: "Rui Wang, due to making a fuss in *xiandi*'s mourning hall, caused everyone's dissatisfaction. Thankfully, the Emperor was merciful and didn't punish him heavily, just sentenced him to kneel in the morning hall to reflect.

"Wasn't Rui Wang the most favored by *xiandi*, why is it like this?" Liang *shi* staggered, and a beat later, she started to cry, "Then what about Su'er, what should she do?" Now that Rui Wang couldn't become the Emperor, Su'er was still a *qie*, what good life would she have in the future?

Liang Hong saw how violently *gumu* was crying and didn't know how to comfort her. In the beginning, he hadn't been in favor of *biao mei* becoming a *qieshi*. Now that Rui Wang Fu had lost power, *biao mei* as a *qieshi*, would she even have a comfortable life in the future?

He looked at the brick farmhouse behind *gumu* and couldn't help but think of the three *biao mei* of Chang De Gong Fu. The eldest *biao mei* married Duan Wang. Now that Duan Wang succeeded the throne, eldest

biao mei was certainly going to become the Empress. She had to wait for the immediate mourning period to pass before she could be formally titled. *Er biao mei* might have been a *shu* daughter, but after the Qu Family fell, there was a prosperous *xui cai* that married her. In the end, it was *san biao mei* who had been birthed and raised by *gumu* who became a shameful *qie*.

Was this all because *gu fu* disregarded everything in order to marry *gu mu*? Liang Hong took out a small pouch of silver: "*Gumu*, our entire family is planning on moving back to the old home in Xi Jun. Take this silver." He saw Liang *shi* standing woodenly and pushed the silver into her hands, "Now that the new Emperor is ascending to the throne, he would pardon some people. I already got someone to find out, *gufu* will soon be released from the prison. When the time comes, you should try to live a good life. I will bid farewell to you here."

He had lived in the *fu* of the Qu Family for a significant amount of time. Now that the entire family was leaving, the only thing he could leave behind was just this small pouch of silver.

"*Biao ge* is leaving?" Qu Wang Zhi walked out of the room. He was wearing a dusty sackcloth robe, his hair dishevelled. His overall appearance was very sorry.

Liang Hong looked at the state of his *biao di* and with some pity, he raised his hands to bid: "Good bye, take care."

Qu Wang Zhi looked at the figure of *biao ge* as he left, the terror in his heart growing. By this time, even *biao ge*'s family was moving away, and the *da jie* who had been abused by his mother was going to become the Empress. Would his family even be able to make a living? He suddenly felt resentment towards his mother. If mother had treated *da jie* better, they wouldn't have fallen this low.

Liang *shi* looked with discontent in the direction of the Imperial Palace. When she turned and saw the sorry figure of her son, she couldn't breathe and fainted. Before entering the darkness, she saw her son's panicked and helpless eyes.

By now, the *hougong* was a mess. The consorts of *xiandi* all had to move out of the places they had been living in. It was fine for those who had been favored and had children. They only had to move towards the place in the *hougong* for the *taifei*.[2] Those that didn't have children and weren't *fei* could only move to a makeshift palace in the Jing suburbs to live out the rest of their lives.

Qu Qing Ju looked at the list of *xiandi*'s *taifei* and took a count. There were twenty-something that held a position. Other than those of high position or had children, there were twelve who had to move to the outside palace. As to those who had been favored by *xiandi* but didn't have a position, according to the traditions, they were going to be sent to a monastery in the Jing suburbs to become nuns with no hope of leaving for the rest of their lives.

Qu Qing Ju sighed and closed the list in her hand: "According to the traditions, do the favored women have to be sent to the monastery?"

Qian Chang Xin looked at the list that *niangniang* had folded up. He bowed as he replied: "*Niangniang*, that was the usual method. However, it isn't required to send the women that had been favored into the monastery to become nuns."

"If that's the case, then arrange for these people to move to the auxiliary palace in the Jing suburbs. That palace might not be as comfortable as the Imperial Palace, but it would be better than a destitute monastery," Qu Qing Ju furrowed her brow as she continued, "There will be more people, and even though it would mean more spending each year, with only these women, it wouldn't be a big expenditure." A monastery with only nuns had no sources of income. Going there, it's the same as prison. As a woman, she didn't have the habit of making things difficult for other women.

Qing De Emperor had ruled for several decades and only favored this number of women total. In this kind of era and dynasty, he really couldn't be considered to be lustful.

[2] consorts of a deceased emperor

"*Niangniang* is kind, *nucai* will order for it to be carried out," Qian Chang Xin received the list and took out a blueprint, "*Taihou niangniang* has already moved from Kui Yuan Palace to Chang Ning[3] Palace. This is the blueprint for the renovation of Kui Yuan Palace. Does *niangniang* require any place to be changed?" This *Muhou Huang Taihou*[4] had moved out, the new owner was this person in front of him.

Qu Qing Ju took the blueprints to take a look and became dizzy looking at the straight and perpendicular lines. She responded: "I'll look at the blueprints, it's not likely that there would be any major problems."

Qian Chang Xin didn't say anything and announced that the Emperor was coming over for the evening meal before retreating.

Qu Qing Ju stood at the window of the back hall of Tian Qi Palace. She could see Kui Yuan Palace located in the same center meridian as Tian Qi Palace. These two palaces were the only palaces that were constructed in the center. The two palaces were also the closest to each other, but the previous owners of these two palaces were like strangers, full of mutual respect between them and until death there weren't any feelings.

She had heard Jin Zhan narrate what had happened when *xiandi* had passed. Jin Zhan's storytelling abilities were good and when she narrated, it was as though she was there. Because of that, Qu Qing Ju felt that it wasn't easy being a person in the *hougong*.

The Empress' calm intelligence, Shu *guifei*'s loss of composure and Jing *guifei*'s heartbreaking grief, as well as Wen *guipin* and An *guipin* who couldn't even enter the gate of Tian Qi Palace.

Qing De Emperor held Jing *guifei*'s hand when he died. Some said that he was smiling when he left. Qu Qing Ju didn't understand. Wasn't Qing De Emperoro's true love Shu *guifei*, but why, at the very end, he was only concerned with Jing *guifei*?

[3]

[4] literally means Mother Empress Grand Dowager Empress

And that"Chan'er" or "Chan'er" ,[5] who was it, Jing *guifei* or another woman?

The day that *xiandi* was buried, Qu Qing Ju and He Heng wore mourning clothes as they guarded Qing De Emperor's corpse all the way to his tomb. And then it was kneeling west and kneeling east. When He Heng recited the lament, Qu Qing Ju knelt with the other people underneath as they sobbed. After the funeral finished, she felt that her legs weren't legs anymore and her eyes were a line. The hemp mourning clothes so wet, water could be wrung out.

When she finally made it back to the palace, it was already deep in the night. Qu Qing Ju soaked in the bathtub until she felt herself be revitalized. When she just finished dressing, she saw He Heng walk in wearing a light-colored silk robe.

When He Heng entered the room, he saw Qu Qing Ju looked tired but wasn't harmed by the scorching sun, and his heart was relieved. He took the towel from Mu Jin's hand and started to dry Qu Qing Ju's wet hair for her: "It was hard for you these days." He sighed, "A few more days, and the people of the *fu* have to be received. Their positions, do you have any thoughts?"

According to protocol, other than the wife, the other women of the new emperor must wait at least twenty-seven days after *xiandi*'s passage before they could enter the palace. The official titles could only be bestowed after three months. But no matter what, what had to be arranged needed to be arranged. Even if they couldn't be instantly titled, but the rank they would receive and where they would live had to all be finalized.

Qu Qing Ju snatched the cotton cloth from He Heng's hands, slowly rubbing her hair herself, "They are Emperor's *feipin*, I can't decide."

Seeing the other's distant eyes, He Heng felt slightly bitter inside. He sighed, and pinned down the hand Qu Qing Ju was using to dry her hair, "They are just the *feipin* in the *hougong*, you are my Empress, the

[5] The first "chan" means beautiful, the second means cicada

woman who is going to accompany me my entire life. Naturally, you are the one to decide such matters."

Qu Qing Ju suddenly smiled. She threw the towel to one side, looking at He Heng with a smile, asking: "Emperor, is that a promise?"

Even though Qu Qing Ju's tone was joking as she said the words, but He Heng felt that the other was especially serious when she asked it.

His heart shook. Gazing at her as he solemnly nodded his head, he leaned over to kiss her forehead, "What I say is true."

Qu Qing Ju silently lowered her face. Following that, her eyes changed and she smiled as she replied: "Since Emperor has said it, then I will decide the ranks of the women in the *hougong* in the future." Since she had already decided to live each day like it was her last, she wouldn't change anything now.

How long He Heng could tolerate her, that was how long she would run rampant. When it came to the day that He Heng couldn't tolerate her, the worst was just death.

Who never died since the beginning of time, it was just dying in pleasure or in hardship.

Detecting that the other had strangely become energetic, He Heng didn't understand why she would change so fast, but that bit of dejection in his heart instantly disappeared. He smiled as he took up the towel to start drying Qu Qing Ju's hair again.

"Jiang *shi*'s birth might not compare to Feng *shi*, but she is a very steady person and understands her bounds. Why don't we promote her to *fei* and let her reside in Yu Ping Palace? Luo *shi* is of few words but a docile person. She would be perfect for a third-grade *guipin*. The first person to serve you was Han *shi*. But since she was of low birth, how about she gets granted a fifth-grade *liangdi?*[6] As to Feng *shi*, she has a good birth, but she was demoted to *shiqie* from *ce fei*. I don't have any good feelings

[6] imperial consort, middle rank

towards her. So Emperor, you can decide her rank." Qu Qing Ju straightforwardly expressed her likes and dislikes. As to what He Heng thought, she was too lazy to care so much.

He Heng truly didn't think Qu Qing Ju would blankly tell him that she didn't like a certain *shiqie*. Seeing her look as though she didn't care what he thought, his mood was light as he responded: "The others, we'll do according to you. As to Feng *shi*, since you don't like her and I don't like her, she'll be a seventh-grade *cairen*. No matter what, she has been in the *fu* for a significant amount of time, it wouldn't be appropriate if it was lower than seventh.

As to He Heng's last sentence which seemed like an explanation, Qu Qing Ju glanced at him from the corner of her eye: "This is what Emperor decided, it has nothing to do with me."

"Didn't I say I didn't like her, it has nothing to do with you," He Heng touched her hair and found it was almost dry. He reluctantly stood, "It's late, and you were out the whole day, have an early rest."

Because it was the hot mourning period, they couldn't even spend much time together, even in private, much less have any relations. Qu Qing Ju smiled as she watched him leave the back hall. She reached to pluck at her hair, the smile on her lips becoming more evident.

The thirty-fourth year of Qing De, Qing De Emperor of Da Long Dynasty passed away. The second imperial son succeeded the throne. Because of *xiandi*'s death due to illness, the new emperor was struck with grief, indicating that for the year, the era name would still be kept as Qing De, and he would observe mourning for three years. His officials were moved by the Emperor's filial piety, but due to the Emperor's position being a busy yet honorable one, observing mourning for three years would damage the dragon's body and not beneficial to the country. So after the entire Royal Court pleaded numerous times, the new Emperor finally agreed to substitute years with months and observe mourning for three months.

Due to this matter, the new Emperor spoke of his unfilial conduct and made atonements many times in the mourning hall of *xiandi* and visited to light incense every day. His actions received the praises of the scholars in the world, and many wrote stories and told tales to express the filial piety of the new emperor.

Regardless of what happened at Royal Court, one month after the passing of *xiandi*, Qu Qing Ju finally sent the order to receive the *shiqie* of Duan Wang Fu into the palace.

Of course, other than He Heng and some of the personal servants, no one else knew that the positions of the *shiqie* weren't decided by the Emperor, but decided by the Empress.

Chapter 87

The master and mistress of Duan Wang Fu might have already entered the palace but there were still guards at this place. The people passing by knew that this compound was the home of the new emperor before he ascended the throne and was extra careful as they passed by.

By now, even the paternal families of the *qieshi* of Duan Wang Fu's status were elevated in status. Even though not many went to deliberately fawn over them but they were now much more courteous.

For the *qieshi* of Duan Wang Fu, the fact that *wang ye* succeeded the throne, it was a great and joyful surprise. How could the *shiqie* of a *wang fu* be compared to being a *niangniang* in the palace? Even more so, they had served before the Emperor ascended the throne so their ranks wouldn't be very low. By that time when the Emperor wouldn't favor them, their ranks would still be passable enough that they would be written into the history books. If they were just *shiqie* of a *wang fu,* who would remember them after their death?

But very quickly, their exhilaration disappeared. *Wang fei* had been sent for to enter the palace the night the Emperor entered. After that, no Imperial Decree came. Even though *xiandi*'s body was sent to the tomb

and the Emperor held the Ascension Ceremony, still no one came to receive them to enter the palace.

Feng Zi Jin and Han Qing He were frantic inside. They discussed it before going together to find Jiang Yong Yu. At this time, Jiang Yong Yu held the highest position among them. But when the two went into Jiang Yong Yu's resident, they stilled. The two of them had been burning with anxiety but this one was sitting under the willow reading a book. A cup of cold tea was placed in front of her, a *yahuan* fanning her from behind. She looked very idle.

Feng Zi Jin, who had always looked down at her calm attitude, moved forward to comment: "Jiang *ce fei* is really restrained. At this time, you still aren't anxious."

Jiang Yong Yu closed the book. She looked at the two, "*Meimei*, please sit. Such a hot day, why have you come to my place?"

The *yahuan* brought over two stools to place behind the two of them. Han Qing He was also impatient but knew that Feng Zi Jin's words were inappropriate. She gave her thanks, smiled and sat down: "These days, Emperor and *niangniang* both aren't in the *fu*. I found it boring and thought to come to *jiejie*'s place to chat."

Jiang Yong Yu knew Han *shi* was impatient about entering the palace. Even though her words were prettier than Feng *shi*, her thoughts weren't any less than Feng *shi*. She raised a teacup and responded: "These are the tea leaves that *niangniang* especially had someone deliver a few days before. With one sip, it keeps the heat away. *Meimei* should have a taste."

Raising the teacup in front of her to take a sip, Han Qing He felt that the tea was slightly bitter but after swallowing, she really did feel the heat inside slightly dissipate. She put down the teacup, smiling and complimenting: "The things that *niangniang* has bestowed, it's really great. We can see how *niangniang* cares for *jiejie*." Of the four *shiqie* in the *wang fu*, Qu Qing Ju wasn't close to anyone but she treated Jiang Yong Yu slightly better. Thinking about it, Han Qing He was slightly regretful.

If she had copied Jiang Yong Yu in the beginning and sided with Qu Qing Ju, then even if the Emperor didn't favor her in the future, with the Empress at her back, her days would be much better.

Hearing the meaning in Han *shi*'s words that tried to flatter her, Jiang Yong Yu gave a slight smile: "*Niangniang* treats us all the same. *Meimei* must be joking." Finishing, she looked at Feng Zi Jin, "Did *meimei* also come here to chat with me?"

"I'm not going to beat around the bush with you. I'll just ask, do you know when we are entering the palace?" Feng Zi Jin didn't look at the tea on the table and impatiently waved the fan in her hand, "Don't say anything false, are we going to be ignored by *niangniang* like this?"

"The time we enter the palace, that's to be decided by Emperor and *niangniang*. How could I know?" Jiang Yong Yu looked at the fan in Feng Zi Jin's hand. Painted on the fan were large blooms of red peonies. She curled her lips, remarking, "By now, there must be many matters in the *houyong*. It hasn't been a month since the passing of *xiandi*. Both Emperor and *niangniang* must be grieving. Should we try to add even more trouble for Emperor and *niangniang*?"

Feng Zi Jin glanced at the smile on Jiang Yong Yu's face, snorting: "Jiang *ce fei* has great composure. Since that's the case, I'm leaving." She stood, sneering, "If you're able, then don't enter the palace." Finishing, she rushed furiously out of the *ce yuan*.

Han Qing He gave a dry laugh as she held a teacup. She looked at Ping Ji Zin's shadow, "Feng *yianiang*'s personality is still the same."

"Entering the palace with such a personality, there's more waiting for her," Jiang Yong Yu was used to Feng Zi Jin's conduct and calmly turned to say: "We are experienced people that have served at the Emperor's side. Sooner or later someone will come receive us to enter the palace. There's nothing to be impatient about. Everything in the palace is changing. The mistresses of each palace have to move. We aren't the wife, do we have the qualifications like *niangniang* to enter the palace early?"

"*Jiejie* is a rare clear-headed person, *meimei* has learned," Han Qing He smiled as she responded, "*Niangniang* is virtuous and will certainly arrange everything." She might have been the first woman to serve *wang ye*, but in front of Jiang Yong Yu, she could only call her *jiejie*. Thinking about how she would soon be entering the palace, she was apprehensive. She didn't know what rank the Emperor would give her. She held the lowest position of the four at the moment and her future position would be the lowest as well.

Thinking about it that way, her excitement instantly halved. She remarked to Jiang Yong Yu: "Between the four of us, my birth is the lowest. Even Luo *meimei* had a *jiujiu* that died at his post. I don't have anyone." She thought of her father's eighth-grade position. It was an official position but in reality, it couldn't even compare to the gatekeeper of the *wang fu*.

"Why does *meimei* think that way? We all serve Emperor, does the Emperor rank us according to our paternal families?" Jiang Yong Yu comforted, "You can't think that way."

Han Qing He instantly realized. *Niangniang* didn't even have a paternal family anymore. She couldn't say such things. Thinking quickly, she followed: "It was me that strayed off the road."

"That's right. As long as people can think, there is no challenge that can't be overcome," When Jiang Yong Yu finished speaking, she saw a steward of the *wang fu* run in, his full of joy. Seeing them, he came up and bowed, reporting, "Mistresses, the Emperor's Imperial Decree has come down. It's to receive all the *zhuzi* to enter the palace."

Jiang Yong Yu counted the days. Today was the thirty-second day since the passing of *xian di*. To enter the palace now, it was the perfect time.

She looked in the direction of the Imperial Palace and sighed. She had packed everything, and was just waiting for this Imperial Decree to come down.

Because of the death of *xiandi* and the succession of the new emperor as well as the good weather, no one tried to disgust He Heng with any matters. The only thing that made him unhappy was that at this time, there was an imperial censor at court who said that Qu Qing Ju's status wasn't fitting to be the Empress.

He sat with a grave expression while listening to the imperial censor's words. Then he smiled coldly and responded: "According to what you say, then all the men would abandon their wives if their wife's paternal family did something wrong. Then how is there "the chaff wife cannot be divorced?" Or is it that, in the heart of Imperial Censor Qin, your wife can be voluntarily abandoned." He slammed his hand down on the dragon chair, pointing angrily at the imperial censor, shouting, "Such a ruthless and unscrupulous person, how can you act as an imperial censor of my Da Long Dynasty? If the imperial censors of the world were like you, my Da Long Dynasty won't even have any virtues!"

"Emperor!" Imperial Censor Qin didn't think the Emperor would speak so severely. His legs softened and he knelt down, "Emperor, *wang fei* might be your wife, but she has such unprincipled elders, how can she mother the world?"

"Is Qin *da ren* accusing my Tian Family's daughter of being unprincipled?" Tian Jin Ke stepped out, tone wounded as he argued, "Emperor, this official's *meimei* might not have been a talented woman but she was of careful speech and good conduct, intelligent and virtuous. Even though she lost her life due to the unscrupulous actions of others, she was never unprincipled. Please, Emperor, give this official's *meimei* justice!"

Everyone knew that Imperial Censor had been focusing on the former Duke of Chang De and Liang *shi*. But Tian Jin Ke's sister was *wang fei*'s birth mother. Imperial Censor Qin had exposed the hole in the argument into the other's hand.

"Emperor, this official thought that because *wang fei*'s birth mother had been once praised by Xiao Ci Gong Empress, and had been taught from childhood by the Marquess of Xiang Qing, as a person she is extremely

generous and virtuous. She is also Emperor's wife and the only choice for Empress. The crimes that the Qu Family committed, *wang fei* was a victim. Imperial Censor Qin has no sympathy but tries to slander *wang fei*'s reputation, it is really outrageous. This official earnestly request Emperor to severely punish this person and give Tian *da ren* justice." Luo Chang Qing's face was also grave as he walked out. Xiao Ci Gong Empress had been *xiandi*'s deceased *muhou*. Luo Chang Qing mentioned her to elevate the status of Qu Tian *shi*.

"This subject seconds!" Wei Wen Guang stood out.

"This subject-*di* agrees!" He Ming followed in stepping out.

"This subject agrees!"

All of the senior officials present could see the affection of the Emperor towards *wang fei*. Even more, Duan Wang Fei still had the Tian Family at her back. This Imperial Censor Qin was a member of the educated and literary family Qin Clan, but he had done such a stupid thing.

"Come, take away this person's post, he cannot be used in this lifetime" He Heng icily looked at Imperial Censor Qin whose complexion became terrible. In a deep voice, he announced, "Scholars should first learn their morals. Otherwise, no matter how many books they read, it's useless if they lose their emotions. The matter of the Empress is settled, *zhen* will only establish Qu *shi* as Empress, and no other!"

The words at the beginning were good, but everyone paused when they heard "no other". Following, they all knelt down: "Emperor is caring and benevolent, us subjects will follow the example."

Looking in satisfaction at the court officials kneeling under him, He Heng stood, announcing: "End of court!"

The people knelt as they watched the Emperor leave before slowly standing up. Many started to praise the virtues of the Emperor. After today, it was likely that in Da Long Dynasty, there would be less men that would favor a *qie* and neglect their wife. Men that would respect their wives would increase in number.

Even Tian Jin Ke didn't think that the Emperor would make such a promise such as this in front of all the officials. He didn't seem to be able to believe it, that the Emperor had decided to only have his niece as his only Empress this entire life.

"Virtuous son-in-law, shall we walk together?" Luo Chang Qing smiled as he walked in front of Tian Jin Ke, reaching out to pat his shoulder.

"Father-in-law first," Tian Qin Ke raised his hands and made a motion of request, dropping half a step behind Luo Chang Qing.

Luo Chang Qing didn't persist with him. The two slowly left the Great Hall. He remarked: "I heard long ago that *niangniang* and Rui Wang Fei's relationship wasn't good. From the looks of it today, it really isn't a rumor."

Tian Jin Ke jerked his lips, "Father-in-law is right."

But the Qin Family was too obvious and ham-fisted this time. He smiled happily. No matter what, the fact that the Emperor would care for his niece so, his deceased sister could rest in peace.

"Emperor," Qian Chang Xin looked at the terrible expression on the Emperor's face and cautiously held out a cup of tea.

"Qin *shi*!" He Heng pushed the teacup to throw the tea back, declaring, "It seems that there still isn't enough people serving in *zhen*'s *san di*'s *fu*."

Chapter 88

Several plain carriages entered through the side door of the Imperial Palace's main gates. The guards protecting the doors watched as the carriages slowly moved away. This procession, compared to when the Empress *niangniang* had came into the palace, was drastically lacking.

Right now, the Emperor hadn't officially crowned the Empress, but due to the fuss at Royal Court, who in the palace didn't know that Qu *shi*

was the unofficial Empress? They didn't know how many palace maids and *taijian* in the Department of Household Affairs were currently breaking their backs trying to get a chance to serve the Empress. It was a pity that the Emperor had personally picked the servants for Empress. Just the amount of care that the Emperor was taking was enough to let everyone in the palace understand very clearly that, in the heart of the Emperor, those *shiqie* of Duan Wang Fu added up together couldn't even compare to one finger of the Empress.

"Stop!" The long thin voice of a *taijian* sounded from outside the carriage. The carriages simultaneously stopped. The *taijian* in command looked at the carriages behind him, and announced in a loud voice: "Please, mistresses, get off the carriage and proceed to the step-carriage."

Jiang Yong Yu held Ai Lu's hand to get off the carriage. She saw that there were four step-carriages not too far away, one of which was grander than the others. Before she could react, the *taijian* who had been speaking walked in front of her, smiling as he greeted: "Greetings to *niangniang*, *nucai* is Yu Ping Palace's chief steward He Shou. Please, come this way." He reached out his arm to usher Jiang Yong Yu to the finest step-carriage.

As she supported Jiang Yong Yu, Ai Lu's heart leapt in joy. This *taijian* dared to call her mistress *niangniang*, didn't that mean the Emperor was going to give her mistress a high rank?

After Jiang Yong Yu settled on the step-carriage, the *taijian* raised a hand: "Up." He didn't care about the other three and walked away with Jiang Yong Yu.

After Jiang Yong Yu's step-carriage started moving, another *taijian* came up to call the other women and ushered them onto the remaining step-carriages to follow behind Jiang Yong Yu.

These *shiqie* had to first greet the Empress after entering the palace. After they travelled a certain distance, near the back hall of Tian Qi Palace, the step-carriages were lowered and the four had to proceed on foot.

He Shou walked to the entrance of the back hall and said to the *taijian* guarding the door: "The people of Duan Wang Fu have been received into the palace. Can I trouble *gonggong* to report?"

The *taijian* guarding the door wasn't as highly ranked as He Shou but his post was at Tian Qi Palace. He saw that He Shou was very polite and naturally didn't make it difficult for him. He raised his hands to He Shou: "So it's He *gonggong*. Please wait, this one will go in to ask."

"Thanks, thanks!" The smile of He Shou's face became even friendlier. Seeing the other go in to investigate, he turned to walk next to Jiang Yong Yu, informing in a small voice, "*Niangniang*, because the renovations of Kui Yuan Palace are quite extensive, the Empress is temporarily living in the back hall of Tian Qi Palace. The Yu Ping Palace you will live in isn't far from Kui Yuan, so it is very convenient for you to give morning greetings to the Empress in the future."

Jiang Yong Yu realized why this one called He Shou was the chief *taijian* steward in her palace. She quickly examined him. Seeing his conduct and awareness of boundaries, he didn't seem stupid. She nodded, "The Empress is of the highest position. It's natural that it would take more effort to renovate her residence."

He Shou gave a smile, releasing a breath inside. Originally, he was worried that he would have to serve a stupid mistress. Taking a closer look now, this one was a smart person indeed. She should be one. Out of the four *shiqie*, only she was made a *fei*. Even her residence was the Yu Ping Palace, which wasn't far from Kui Yuan Palace. That, at least, made it clear that the Empress was closest to her.

It wasn't clear whether the Emperor liked her or not. But if even the Empress didn't like her, how would he live in the future?

Feng Zi Jin stood behind Jiang Yong Yu, her expression ugly. From entering the palace until now, these people were overly and secretly flattering Jiang Yong Yu. Was it that she would be the highest-ranked out of the four of them in the future?

She had the highest birth of the four, but why was the highest now Jiang Yong Yu?

Luo Yin Xiu and Han Qing He docilely stood nearby. They didn't dare to even raise their heads to look at the door to the back hall, and just waited for the Empress' summons.

The four stood for a while before the *taijian* who had been guarding the door came out. His face was full of smiles as he announced: "The Empress invites *zhuzi* inside, please." Jin Zhan came out and bowed to the four people, "Honorable mistresses, please follow *nubi*."

"Thank you for your trouble, Jin Zhan *guniang*," Jiang Yong Yu smiled at her and lifted her foot to start walking towards the inside.

"*Nubi* is not worthy," Jin Zhan retreated to the side and made an inviting motion, ushering the four inside the hall.

"*Niangniang*, the honourable mistresses have come," Huang Yang reported in a small voice. By now, everyone in the other parts of the palace called Qu Qing Ju the Empress, but the people who attended Qu Qing Ju still called her "*niangniang*." That was because it hadn't formally come down so it was inappropriate to call her Empress.

Qu Qing Ju opened her sleepy eyes and saw the four walking in. They simultaneously knelt down, did a three bow, nine kowtow full greeting.

Qu Qing Ju kept her face up as she was bowed to by the four of them. After they finished, she gave them each a seat. She examined the four women. They were dressed tastefully, it seemed they had put some effort in their appearances to enter the palace.

"It's been a long time since we saw each other, is everyone fine?" Qu Qing Ju raised a teacup to take a sip, slowly waving the fan in her hand, "We wanted to welcome you into the palace earlier but there were several reasons for the delay. One was that the residences hadn't been prepared and the second was that it hadn't been long after the passing of *xiandi*. A few delays and the days became more than a month."

"Thanks, *niangniang*, for thinking of us, *pinqie* is perfectly fine," Jiang Yong Yu answered, "It's just that *pinqie* were all worried about *niangniang* who was tired by the affairs of running the *hougong*. So we didn't send any messages to you. After seeing you today, it does seem that Empress is thinner."

It was a lie that Qu Qing Ju was thinner, but since she was wearing a white robe, she did seem weaker than she usually did in the *fu*.

Jiang Yong Yu secretly examined the other. She didn't know if it was her false perception but she felt that the Empress' appearance had changed from when she had just married into the *fu*. But after thinking about her silent and dull personality when the Empress had just married, she attributed the changes to her dressing differently.

Appearances originated from the heart. The core had been changed so there were some changes in looks. Qu Qing Ju had looked at herself in the mirror and hadn't found much of a difference. She smiled and responded, "It must be that more sweat flowed under the hot weather of the summer which has caused the thinning."

"That's so true, this summer is the hardest to endure," Han Qing He carefully took over, "*Niangniang* also has to take care of the numerous matters of *hougong*, how would you not thin?"

Not long after they came in, they saw He Heng walk in wearing a soft brocade robe embroidered with dragons. He walked very quickly, not looking at the *shiqie* sitting to the side and raised the cup that Qu Qing Ju had been drinking tea from to take a mouthful. Then he sat down on the other chair at the front, "The days are becoming hotter. Just coming in from the front hall was a struggle."

"Greetings to Emperor." Jiang Yong Yu and the others hastily stood and bowed. If He Heng didn't call for them to stand, they didn't dare straighten.

"En, you entered the palace today?" He Heng glanced casually over the four people. He frowned slightly, "Since you have finished the

greetings, return to your residences." He waves his hands, clearly not wanting too many people to remain here.

"*Qie* asks to be excused." Jiang Yong Yu and the others bowed and left. Coming out of the doors to the back hall, they saw some *taijian* holding long bamboo sticks with a cloth bag catching summer cicadas. They couldn't help but ask, "What are you doing?"

He Shou, who had been waiting outside, quickly answered: "Just now when the Emperor came, he heard the sounds of the cicadas and said that the Empress hadn't rested properly these days. He ordered the servants to drive away the cicadas so the Empress could take a good noon nap."

Jiang Yong Yu looked at the scattering cicadas. No wonder the Emperor was in a hurry to send them away. He had been annoyed with them for disturbing the Empress' noon nap.

Walking at the back, Feng Zi Jin jerked her mouth but didn't dare say anything. She felt that the care that the Emperor took with Qu Qing Ju was becoming over the top.

On the second day after the *shiqie* entered the palace, He Heng sent down the decree which bestowed the titles for the *hougong*.

The Empress of *xiandi* was made *Mu Hou Huang Tai Hou*,[7] and was to reside in the eastern Chang Ning palace. He Heng's birth mother Jing *guifei* was made *Sheng Mu Huang Tai Hou*[8] and her residence was the western Fu Shou[9] Palace. An *guipin* was promoted to *gui taifei*, Shu *guifei* to *gui taifei.* According to the old traditions, both could be received by their sons to live outside the palace. The other *feipin* of *xiandi* were also promoted. But some had to move to the auxiliary palace while others stayed in the palace.

"*Zhen*'s wife Qu *shi*, praised by *xiandi* to be full of good fortune to be especially decreed in marriage to *zhen*. Qu *shi* entered the *fu* at fifteen

[7] Mother Empress Grand Empress Dowager
[8] Holy Mother Grand Empress Dowager
[9] happiness and longevity

years, gentle, excellent and perceptive, kind and virtuous, spirited and elegant, peerlessly intelligent, a rarity in the world. She serves *zhen* personally in all matters, and is the epitome of a woman and the mother to the world. *Zhen* has such a wife, it is the blessing of the Heavens. Today, this decree is sent to the world to crown her as the mother of the world.

– By the Emperor"

This Imperial Decree, which later historians believe it to be evidence of the great love He Heng held for his Empress, was recited like so in front of all the officials. After one recitation at court, they had to recite it again in front of the Empress. Afterwards, the Imperial Astronomers calculated an auspicious time to proceed with the full crowning ceremony for her to receive the gold seal and gold book, before it was truly over.

When Qu Qing Ju heard the first-rank palace maid recite the Imperial Decree crowning her Empress in Tian Qi Palace, she was suspicious that this wasn't really a decree crowning her empress, but a love letter that He Heng wrote to her and broadcasted it to the world. What was "spirited and elegant, peerlessly intelligent, a rarity in the world"? And that "*zhen* has such a wife, it is the blessing of the Heavens?"

Had he never heard a phrase called, "show your love, die even quicker"?

"Congratulations Empress, congratulations Empress." The palace personnel in the room all gave their congratulations, the smile on their faces even brighter than Qu Qing Ju's.

With both hands, she took the Imperial Decree from the female official before she stood. Qu Qing Ju looked at the Imperial Decree in her hands. She knew He Heng's writing. The words on this Imperial Decree had been personally written by He Heng, and not by the imperial assistant.

"Congratulations, Empress," The female official performed a full greeting to Qu Qing Ju.

Qu Qing Ju let someone reward the female official. After the official left, she saw the servants in the room were all brimming with joy and remarked: "Why is it that you are all happier than I am?"

Mu Jin bent slightly as she replied; "Empress' happy occasion is *nubi*'s good occasion. Why wouldn't *nubi* be happy?"

Qu Qing Ju smiled as she shook her head. She rewarded everyone in the back hall who had served her. After the people that had nothing to do all left, she read the Imperial Decree in her hand again. A long time later, she sighed: "Mu Jin, lock it up."

In Zhuo Jing Zai, Feng Zi Jin looked in disbelief at the Imperial Decree in her hand. She couldn't believe that the Emperor only made her a small minor seventh-grade *cairen*.

"By the Mandate of Heaven, the Emperor has spoken: "The daughter of the Feng Clan served *zhen* in the house. Today, is made a *cairen* and given the title Ping[10]."

Ping, what sort of title was this?

After the better part of an hour, Chun Yu who went out to gather news came back. Feng Zi Jin put down the Imperial decree in her hands, asking: "Did you find out what the other people's ranks are?"

Chun Yu trembled and shrank into her shoulders as she responded: "*Zhuzi*, *nubi …… nubi* found out. Jiang *ce fei* was promoted to Heng[11] *fei,* Luo *yiniang* promoted to *guipin*, Han *yiniang* …… was promoted to *liangdi*."

"Even Han Qin He was given a fifth-grade *langdi*?" Feng Zi Jin's face paled and she fell back into her chair. She looked dispiritedly at the Imperial Decree on the table. Did the Emperor dislike her this much?

[10] means peaceful, flat, calm.
[11] worthy, virtuous

Chapter 89

After the people of the *hougong* were titled, it was then time to give new titles to those who did service in the Royal Court. Of course, these new titles weren't like cheap lettuce that everyone could get a bite of. The first ones to be rewarded were the clans of the two Empress Dowagers in the two palaces. The paternal clans were all people of leisure. So He Heng only bestowed a noble title, full of glory but no real power.

And then it was senior officials who served He Heng. They were promoted, and bestowed things. As for the people who had sided with He Yuan, sorry, go stand to one side, it's a miracle that you were being demoted.

Of all of the rewards, the most spectacular one was given to Tian Jin Ke. His family already had a hereditary marquis title but in Jing where marquises were everywhere, his present position had all been due to his own efforts. Now the Emperor waved his hand and made his hereditary marquis elevated to a hereditary first-rank duke, and bestowed the title *Zhong Yi*.[12] He also rewarded down five thousand taels of silver to the Duke of Zhong Yi to construct the compound and generously personally wrote "Zhong Yi Gong Fu" on the plaque for the compound to bestow upon Tian Jin Ke. His imperial favour was enormous.

Zhong, it was naturally referring to his loyalty to the Emperor. As for Yi, some thought that it was the Emperor remembering the care Tian Jin Ke gave to the Empress as well as his call for justice for his sister, Tian *shi*, so he was given the character *Yi*.

When they compared the honored Duke of Zhong Yi to the fallen Qu Family, many sighed. It could be seen that people had to accumulate virtue. Karma really did come back to bite you.

The Duke of Zhong Yi might not have a good daughter, but he had a good niece. That was his life, they could only admire it.

[12] zhong is loyal, devoted. 义 yi is friendship, justice, righteousness

When Qu Qing Ju heard He Heng had elevated her *jiujiu* to first –rank Duke of Zhong Yi, she wasn't surprised. She had earlier detected that He Heng admired *jiujiu* and clearly enjoyed his personal conduct. Now that he was in power, he needed people like *jiujiu* to work for him. Rather than saying that he was rewarding *jiujiu*, it was better to say that he was telling the world just how much he admired talented people who were loyal to the throne.

Ming He entered the back hall and bowed in front of Qu Qing Ju, mentioning Kui Yuan Palace that was still in the process of renovation, "Empress, the construction of Kui Yuan Palace is almost done. Why don't you take a look to see if there are any places that are not to your liking so it could be changed. Then the decorations can be moved in."

The renovation of Kui Yuan Palace was the biggest project in *hougong*. Over the past month, there were three shifts of people working day and night in order to renovate the palace according to the blueprints. Because they were afraid that the new paint would crack since it was being applied in the summer, blocks of ice were specially placed in all the areas a few days before painting commenced. It was obvious the amount of importance the Emperor had placed on this matter.

Qu Qing Ju looked at the sky outside. Today was shady and it wouldn't be too sunny to go outside. Ming He must have deliberately picked this kind of weather before he opened to speak. She nodded, responding: "Today there is a lot of shade. It will be good to take a walk. It's been suffocating for *ben gong* to stay inside all day."

Because Tian Qi Palace and Kui Yuan Palace were very close, Qu Qing Ju didn't ride the phoenix carriage. She, along with her entourage, walked on the main road of the palace that led straight to Kui Yuan Palace. As she entered the palace, she found that the inside was quite different to when she had first seen Kui Yuan Palace. At that time, Kui Yuan Palace had been spacious but felt quiet. Also, at that time, she had only been a *wang fei* who was going to see the Empress. Now, she was the owner of this palace. The attitude wasn't the same.

The house, the garden and the trees in her view had already been meticulously turned over, so that when one entered, it would look tasteful yet bright. This was the so-called "easy on the eyes." The flowers, grasses, and the fake mountain in the outside gardens were in the Jiang Nan style so that from a glance, it would feel extremely elegant. Inside was the main hall. The doors and windows of the main hall were all new. A dragon and phoenix were carved on the door, and other designs had been carefully chosen for the windows.

The main hall was the place where Qu Qing Ju would live. She found that every part of the main hall was in great taste, and she could see just how much effort the designer had put in. She couldn't pick out any place that was lacking.

Ming He saw the Empress wearing a satisfied expression and spoke: "The Emperor heard that some paints are damaging to the body and specially ordered them to use paints made from natural materials. Empress, take a sniff. The paints all have a fragrance."

When Qu Qing Ju entered the room, she had detected a faint fragrance. Hearing Ming He's words, she smiled, responding, "The Emperor took a lot of trouble."

"The Emperor said that it's all good as long as the Empress likes it," Ming He retreated a step to the side, "*Niangniang*, please follow *nucai* to the western side hall for a look."

When the door of the western side hall was opened, Qu Qing Ju was stunned. Because inside was a very large white jade bath. On all four sides of the bath, there were two dragon heads, the wide gaping maws of the dragon clearly were the places for introducing the water. Beside the bath was a place enclosed in silk coverings. Qu Qing Ju brushed aside the silk and saw that inside was a very large couch. Beside the window there was a table and two comfortable recliners. From a look, it made one feel the impulse to lie down.

She hadn't thought that He Heng would actually remember that she had wanted a swimming pool. She came out from under the silk canopy,

walked to the pool and reached down to touch the warm and clear water. A long time later, she said: "*Ben gong* likes it very much."

Ming He smiled. He pointed at the two dragon heads at one of the sides: "The dragon head with the sapphire inlaid is cold water, the dragon head with the ruby is the hot water. If *niangniang* likes it, then soak often. The Emperor has already asked the dean of the Imperial Hospital. Appropriate amounts of swimming is good for the body."

Qu Qing Ju stood and, for some reason, thought that for this big pool, it really wasted water and physical labor. Cold water in the summer was good, but if it was hot water, how many people were needed to boil water in order to fill the entire pool?

"Does the palace have a source of water?" Qu Qing Ju straightforwardly asked. She liked to enjoy herself but wasn't so wasteful to have people labor just so that she could swim.

Ming He smiled, explaining: "Don't worry, Empress. This place uses water from underground. It was actually a coincidence that there is a hot spring in the palace. The Emperor ordered for the water to be transported here."

Qu Qing Ju felt relieved. Looking at the night luminous pearls encrusted on the pool, each the size of an infant's fist, she wondered what this place would look like at night.

When the palace maids and *taijian* that served Qu Qing Ju stepped into Kui Yuan Palace, they were already shocked stupid. Mu Jing was deeply moved. She had always thought "a surprise around every corner" was an exaggeration but today, she found that there was a place like that. This Kui Yuan palace wasn't all covered in gold and white jade but it felt unspeakably beautiful. Thinking about it, she felt suspicious. From the time the Emperor ascended until now, it hadn't been even two months. What kind of genius could plan out the renovation in such a short amount of time and leave so much time for the craftsmen to work?

Or was it that the Emperor had people working before he had succeeded the throne …… her heart shook. Mu Jin slightly furrowed her brows, sensing that she was thinking of something she shouldn't have and turned to put her attention on the Empress.

As she came out of the western side hall, Qu Qing Ju toured the eastern side hall. It had been changed to a place for writing and painting. The back hall was now her personal storage.

After a tour of the entire Kui Yuan Palace, Qu Qing Ju had only one thought. After all the furnishings were moved in, her Kui Yuan Palace would most likely become even more magnificent than Tian Qi Palace.

"Are the Imperial Gardens located behind the back hall?" Qu Qing Ju pointed in the direction of the back hall. She had come to the palace multiple times, but the roads in the palace twisted and turned. She wasn't familiar with the major roads, and wasn't clear about the structure of the *hougong*.

"Empress, as you come out of the back hall and go through a bamboo forest, there is a lotus pond located at the corner of the Imperial Gardens. When you go through the corridors over the lotus pond, you'd see the Imperial Gardens." Ming He meticulously explained.

Qu Qing Ju nodded. She didn't have the desire to go tour the garden. The passing of *xiandi* wasn't even two months ago, and if the Empress of the new Emperor went to tour the garden at this time, it wouldn't be right if the news got out.

"*Ben gong* has finished looking, the halls are very beautiful," Qu Qing Ju thought of the white jade pool. She smiled and added, "After seeing the enormous effort the Emperor has put in, *ben gong* likes it very much."

Upon hearing this, Ming He raised his hands and replied: "It is good that the Empress likes it. *Nucai* will leave now to report on the completion of orders. *Nucai* asks to be excused."

Qu Qing Ju nodded. As she came out of Kui Yuan Palace, she stepped on the clean black stone path and looked at the roses blooming on both

sides of the path. Many butterflies were flying in between the flowers. For some reason, she suddenly felt that she was the Cinderella in a romance novel and He Heng was the rich CEO.

When He Heng finished listening to Ming He's report, he couldn't help but smile. He remarked: "If it was any other, they would have already praised it. But she had to care about where the water came from." He helplessly shook his head, "It seems very hard to get on the good side of *zhen*'s Empress. Luckily, there is a source of water. Otherwise, the pool that *zhen* had specially constructed for her wouldn't have been used."

These words expressed helplessness but Ming He had attended to He Heng for more than a decade so he knew that the Emperor was happy. He bowed and served a new cup of tea: "Emperor, *nucai* feels that *niangniang* doesn't want the people to work too hard. How can other women compare to the Empress? With an Empress who mothers the world like this, it is the good fortune of the world."

"En, you're right," He Heng nodded. He took the teacup for a drink and started to annotate the memorandums on the table, a sliver of a smile appearing at the corner of his mouth.

Two more hours passed before Ming He saw the Emperor stand. At a glance, he saw a dark colored pouch embroidered with the character of luck hanging at the Emperor's waist. The Emperor liked to use the pouch the Empress had embroidered for him, and scorned even the pouches made by the palace embroiderers from Jiang Nan.

He Heng looked outside and noticed that the sky had darkened. He was going to ask for the time but then he saw a flash of lighting. Then, thunder started to rumble and the fierce wind blew so hard, the windows shook.

"To the back hall." He strode quickly towards the outside, clearly not caring that it was going to rain soon.

Ming He and a bunch of younger *taijian* held lanterns that were protected from the wind as they followed. He looked at the sky and saw another flash of lightning. A rainstorm was most likely going to come down this night.

He looked at the Emperor's slightly rushed figure. Was the Emperor worried that the Empress was afraid of thunder?

Chapter 90

When the first roar of thunder occurred, Qu Qing Ju had started consuming her evening meal at the table. Because she had toured Kui Yuan Palace in the afternoon, she had taken a nap when she got back. When she woke up, the evening meal had to be delayed.

The mushroom slice she had in her chopsticks almost fell to the table. She listened to the roar of wind outside, and put down her chopsticks, frowning as she asked: "It's going to rain?"

"It must be." Mu Jin and some of the other palace maids firmly shut the windows in the hall. She walked next to Qu Qing Ju to gently fan her, "There wasn't any sunshine today, but it was humid. It's not strange that thunder will occur."

Qu Qing Ju nodded. The common people liked to use the days of the sixth month to describe a baby's face. It could be seen just how quickly the summer weather had changed. This moment, it was raining, the next, the sun could come out.

She picked up her chopsticks again. When she just picked up a piece of tofu, there was another clap of thunder. But her adaptive abilities were high and she calmly placed the tofu into her mouth. A short time later, she heard the sound of rain falling. From the sound, the rain seemed very heavy. If someone was walking around the outside corridors at the moment, with that wind and the rain, they would definitely become a drowned rat.

The hand that Mu Jin was holding a fan with stopped moving. She looked in surprise when the Emperor, drenched in water, appeared at the doorway. She retreated to one side and with the other servants, knelt down.

"Emperor?" Qu Qing Ju put down the chopsticks in her hands. She walked quickly to He Heng and touched his soaked clothing. Turning, and from a quick-witted Jin Zhan, she took a cotton cloth, wiping him down as she led him towards the inner room, "Such heavy rain. From the front hall to here, it's an entire circle around, what are you doing coming now?!"

As she reproached, she reached out to take down the dragon and pearl coronet in He Heng's hair. She took out a clean robe and reached to untie the other's belt.

He Heng looked at the palace maids and *taijian* that had followed in and used his eyes to order them to leave. He turned, smiling, as he explained: "I just heard the thunder and was worried you would be afraid. Just wanted to take a look, but didn't expect that the rain would come down halfway."

"With this weather, the rain comes down whenever it wants. There's so many people keeping me company, I won't get scared. Running out like this, it makes people worry," Qu Qing Ju peeled off his clothing, and poked at the muscles on his chest, "How are the servants attending you, don't they know to have an umbrella to block the rain for you."

He Heng smiled, he didn't say that he left so abruptly that the servants didn't have the time to prepare. He gathered the other in his embrace, the muscles on his chest feeling her warm breath: "Just a few drops of rain, it's nothing."

Qu Qing Ju glared at him and pinched at his waist: "Change first."

Helplessly releasing the person in his arms, He Heng stripped himself bare in front of Qu Qing Ju. Seeing her teasing look as she examined him up and down, he asked: "What is it?"

Qu Qing Ju rubbed her chin, and then came forward to caress his muscles: "Such a handsome beauty, why don't you let *xiao ye* have a kiss? If you follow *xiao ye*, you'll get to drink and eat well." Finishing, she went on tiptoes to kiss He Heng's chin and then quickly stepped back. She saw He Heng's little brother stand up spiritedly.

Standing up this easily? Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow and smiled as she took another step back. In a regretful voice, she said: "It's hot mourning right now. This servant has no way to serve Emperor, such a pity." Finishing, she pretended to wiped her tears away.

He Heng took a large step forward and captured the other in his arms. He turned and put her down on the large bed, fiercely pressing down on Qu Qing Ju and kissing multiple times before panting as he declared: "People say the fox spirits enchant people, yet I didn't know what was a fox spirit. Today, I know that one as tempting as Qu Qing Ju is a fox spirit." Finishing, his hand rubbed at Qu Qing Ju's chest, smiling as he teased, "Is Beauty happy with the service of *xiao ye*?"

Qu Qing Ju reached to slide her hand from He Heng's shoulders to his waist, the tip of her tongue swiping across the corner of her mouth, "Why is beauty so eager and so naked to throw yourself into an embrace, it's really making *xiao ye* embarrassed."

He Heng's entire body was burning from Qu Qing Ju's actions. His hands pulled and he spend a long time on her body before in a raspy voice, he promised: "After these three months, watch how I sort you out." Finishing, he pulled her hand and slowly moved it down.

In the end, He Heng finally extinguished the fire with Qu Qing Ju's help. He pulled a blanket to wrap around the two of them, his nose rubbing at Qu Qing Ju's fragrant and smooth shoulder. Hearing the rain outside, he said: "With Qing Ju, I feel that all the women in the world are just so. A thousand of them cannot compare to one of Qing Ju."

Qu Qing Ju smiled as she wrapped an arm around his neck, permitting him to play around at her chest, but she didn't speak. After He Heng ascended the throne, except in front of outsiders, he had never called

himself "*zhen*" in private with her. His attitude towards her was the same as when they had been at Duan Wang Fu, and it was even more intimate now.

She wasn't a cynic, so she wouldn't retreat out of fear because of He Heng's attitude. From a certain perspective, she enjoyed the good He Heng gave her, and she would return the same to He Heng. If He Heng really had feelings towards her, she would be delighted. If He Heng had no feelings for her, she wouldn't be heartbroken. And she had the confidence that before she would die in exhilaration, she would dig a hole for He Heng.

Love wasn't essential in life. But if there was love to flavor her life, she wouldn't reject enjoying it.

In the novels, the women tortured themselves because of love. But she wasn't the female protagonist, she didn't have to walk the road they did. She wasn't even scared of death, would she be scared of this thing called love?

Qu Qing Ju's smiled coquettishly. Her right hand moved up and down his back. Just when He Heng became totally distracted, she kicked He Heng aside, grabbing He Heng's robe to wrap around her body and flipped off the bed. She stood beside the bed, looking from high up down at He Heng, "The fact that the Emperor could say such things, it's that you have seen a thousand ships. But it's a pity that *qie* only has Emperor as the only man and doesn't know which man is better. So sorry to disappoint."

He Heng had suffered a kick from Qu Qing Ju but he couldn't find one bit of anger. He sat up against the headboard, looking at Qu Qing Ju who had a raised chin and narrowed eyes, and laughed out loud.

Why was it that when Qu Qing Ju was clearly wearing his robe, but he felt she was still inexplicably attractive?

He Heng didn't know that the thing that attracted him, it had a special name. It was the "composure of a queen".

The palace attendants outside heard the laughter of the Emperor coming from inside the room. Their expressions didn't change. They had never seen the Emperor come and be in a bad mood when he left.

By midnight, the thunder had stopped, but there was still a shower of rain. He Heng took advantage of the light from the night luminous pearls to look at Qu Qing Ju who was deeply asleep. He quietly and softly made his way out of the bed. When he put on the robe, he found from the pile of clothing the pouch that Qu Qing Ju had embroidered for him, and didn't even tie his hair before quietly leaving the inner room.

Ming He, who had been waiting outside, saw the Emperor was holding his socks and shoes as he walked out barefoot. He quickly knelt in front of the Emperor to help him put on his socks and shoes before asking in a small voice: "Emperor, return to the palace now?" Right now, it was the hot mourning period. If the Emperor stayed for the whole night at the Empress' residence, even if no one dared to say anything, it still wouldn't look good.

"En," He Heng nodded. He looked behind him and left with his attendants.

Inside the room, Qu Qing Ju was sleeping happily.

After finishing the matter of Duan Wang Fu's *shiqie*, Qu Qing Ju finally had the time to go to the two palaces of the two Dowager Empresses to sit. The past few days, she had made her greetings before leaving. Now that her title was established and she had finished off much of the matters in the *hougong*, it was time to exchange feelings with the two *popo*.

Muhou Empress Dowager wasn't very chatty. She spoke with Qu Qing Ju for a short while before letting Qu Qing Ju leave to rest. On the second day, Qu Qing Ju headed towards the residence of *Sheng Mu* Empress Dowager.

Empress Dowager Wei's Fu Shou Palace was on the western side of the palace. Qu Qing Ju had to travel for a significant period of time on the

phoenix carriage until she reached the gates of Fu Shou Palace. From the names of the palaces for the two Empress Dowagers, it was possible to see the Emperor's intentions. *Muhou* Empress Dowager had eternal and peace. When it got to *Sheng Mu* Empress Dowager, it was good fortune and long life.

It could be seen that the best children were your own.

Coming into Fu Shou Palace, Wei Empress Dowager got Qu Qing Ju to sit. Her treatment of Qu Qing Ju hadn't changed. Even when she mentioned He Heng's announcing of crowning her Empress that was more like a love letter, Wei Empress Dowager wasn't unhappy, just smiled and said: "After *aijia*[13] heard the Imperial Decree, it caused *aijia* to laugh for a long time. The Emperor set his heart on you, that's a good thing." She sighed, "Don't think too much. *Aijia* knows you are a good child. If there is someone stupid in this *hougong*, you are the mistress of this *hougong*, just severely punish them."

This was blankly telling Qu Qing Ju she wasn't going to touch the affairs of the *hougong*.

This gave Qu Qing Ju a new understanding of her *popo*. According to the old ways, after a woman, riding on the success of her son, became the Empress Dowager, she would try to enjoy the taste of being high up, but why was her *popo* worried for her like she wouldn't be able to control the *hougong*?

"*Muhou*, don't worry, *erxi* understands," She looked at the surroundings and found that the decorations were not brightly colored due to the mourning person but they were finer than the original Zhong Jing Palace, "Does *muhou* have any place that needs something to be added? *Erxi* will get them to do it immediately."

"With you and the Emperor on top, *aijia* won't lack for anything here. Whenever something good comes out of the Department of Internal Affairs, you and Emperor always rushed to let them deliver it to *aijia*'s here. If you get them to send more, there would be no room in this

[13] literally grieving person, how Empress Dowagers refer to themselves.

palace," Empress Dowager Wei smiled and patted her hand, "If you have any idle time in the future, come more often to sit at *aijia*'s palace. Any other things, *aijia* would have more than you."

Empress Dowager Wei was speaking the truth. She was the Emperor's mother. The Emperor was a filial son. The Empress wasn't an *erxi* that would oppose her at every point. Every day, she was being fawned over by the *taifei*. She occasionally would summon Shu *taifei* to chat about life realizations. If there was time, she would summon the artists from the palace department to tell stories to her. Her days were very comfortable.

What she wanted had all came true. Her son was the Emperor, she had a good relationship with her *erxi*. She didn't want to be a female emperor. Trying to fight for the control of the *hougong* with her *erxi* rather than living her good days, was she stupid?

Even more, there were two Empress Dowagers in this palace. If she entered into the affairs of the *hougong*, the other Empress Dowager would naturally have reason to enter. Her own son's harem, would she let others meddle?

So Empress Dowager Wei felt it was good right now, nothing had to change.

Qu Qing Ju managed to bum off a noon meal off of Empress Dowager Wei. The *poxi* also talked about the events of He Heng's childhood before she left in satisfaction.

Walking out of Fu Shou Palace, Qu Qing Ju said to Mu Jin: "*Muhou* is probably the woman I admire the most." This kind of woman, in any place, was worthy of admiration. The only pity was that she didn't meet a good man.

Mu Jin knew that the *muhou* the Empress meant was *Sheng Mu* Empress Dowager. As a palace maid, she couldn't comment, but she agreed in her heart. She was also relieved. If *Sheng Mu* Empress Dowager liked to control everything in the *hougong*, it would be very worrisome.

When the phoenix carriage passed the Imperial Gardens, Qu Qing Ju unexpectedly found He Heng was standing beside the lotus pond. Kneeling in front of him as a young girl dressed in a green girdled dress.

Her brows furrowing, Qu Qing Ju indicated for the phoenix carriage to stop.

Mu Jin looked towards the lotus pond, her brows also furrowing. Was that one of the female candidates left over by *xiandi*?

In the beginning, they had picked a few hundred candidates to enter the palace from across the country. In the end, only twenty something people had remained. But after *xiandi* passed, the candidates could only live in Tuan Fang Hall and couldn't move freely. Running to the Imperial Gardens, that was breaking protocol!

Qu Qing Ju stepped down the carriage, smiling as she said: "Mu Jin, let's go take a look."

"Yes," Mu Jin carefully held the Empress' hand, and the palace maids and *taijian* followed behind.

He Heng's face was so dark, ink could be squeeze out. He was going to speak but saw Qu Qing Ju heading in his direction. His expression changed slightly, and he took a step back to increase the distance from the kneeling candidate.

Qian Chang Xin reported in a small voice: "Emperor, Empress is coming over."

"*Zhen* knows," He Heng glared at him, "Stop blabbing!"

Qian Chang Xin silently lowered his head and started to examine the patterns on the Emperor's shoes.

The expression of the girl kneeling on the ground changed, and she buried her head deeper.

Chapter 91

Qu Qing Ju walked over to He Heng and, not looking at the female candidate at the side, and acted to bow. She was stopped by He Heng who put his hand out and pulled her to stand under the shade of the roof, "Just now, *zhen* was going to the back hall to see you, and heard you went to *muhou*'s place. Is *muhou* fine these past days?"

"Everything about *muhou* is well," Qu Qing Ju held up a fan and started waving it, moving her hand towards He Heng so that both would feel the breeze, "*muhou* has said for us to go to her residence to eat. She's always thinking of you."

"Since that's the case, then tomorrow, we'll go together to Fu Shou Palace for the noon meal," He Heng then pointed at the girl kneeling on the ground, his voice becoming cold, "do you know this candidate?"

Qu Qing Ju followed and turned her body. She saw the candidate's head was lowered and ordered: "Raise your head."

The candidate was hesitant to raise her head. A *taijian* behind her pinched her chin to lift it up. Her eyes were flitting around, afraid to look straight at Qu Qing Ju.

She frowned. Qu Qing Ju did have the memories of the previous Qu Qing Ju's life, but much of the time, she wouldn't deliberately flip through the original's memories. Seeing the girl now, she remembered some unhappy events. She said coldly: "Isn't this Wei *guniang*, just two years, Wei *guniang* has become more beautiful."

This girl was Qu *lao taitai*'s paternal family's grand-niece. She had once stayed for a time in Chang De Gong Fu and had a good relationship with Qu Yue Su. If she had the time, she liked to jeer at the original. Was her name Wei Jing, or Wei Zhu?

"Candidate Wei Zhu greets Empress." When the *taijian* released Wei Zhu's chin, she instantly leaned down on the ground, clearly very afraid that Qu Qing Ju would settle old scores.

"Didn't think *jiugong* would willingly send you into the palace," Qu Qing Ju gave a yawn, lazily waving the fan in her hand, "right now, the *xuannu* should be living in Tuan Fang Hall, how did you get here?" When she finished speaking, she saw Wei Zhu's shoulders start to tremble. Originally, she had been bored but she was now intrigued. She turned to look at He Heng beside her, "Emperor, how did this Wei *guniang* encounter you?"

He Heng saw the mockery in her eyes and smiled helplessly. He narrated: "*Zhen* waited a long time for you, but you didn't return so *zhen* decided to greet *muhou*. Who knew that *zhen* would encounter such a bold and disrespectful candidate, who dared to slander Empress in front of *zhen*."

"Oh?" Qu Qing Ju gave a small smile as she watched the trembling of Wei Zhu's shoulders increas, "What good matter of *ben gong* did Wei *guniang* speak of?"

Wei Zhu was frightened. Originally, she was indignant that, the kind of woman that Qu Qing Ju was, became the Empress. Who knew that after saying a few words, the Emperor became angry. Seeing Qu Qing Ju's powerful composure so different than in the past, she was so frightened she couldn't speak.

"If Wei *guniang* doesn't want to say, *ben gong* won't force you, come … …"

"Empress, do you remember two years ago?" Wei Zhu raised her head, and resignedly spoke, "At that time, grand aunt and *chen nu*'s grandfather made a spoken promise, do you still have an impression?

Qian Chang Xin heard the words and motioned for the palace attendants to all leave, leaving behind the personal attendants of the Emperor and Empress. He didn't know if this candidate would be crazy and say something. Since the Emperor and Empress didn't call for her to shut up, he could only not let the servants hear.

"Do you mean two years ago when grandmother and great uncle had the intentions for *ben gong* to be engaged to your brother?" Qu Qing Ju was very unrestrained. She waved her hand and stared at Wei Zhu like she was looking at an idiot, her voice surprised as she said: "*Ben gong* has such a good husband as the Emperor, how would *ben gong* remember those unfounded matters. Right, what is your brother called?"

My dear Empress, how could you just say it, what would the Emperor think? Mu Jin nervously looked at the Emperor. The result was that she only saw a satisfied smile on the Emperor's face. She was confused. Did something she didn't know happen?

Even though he was slightly furious when he heard that the Qu Family wanted to marry Qu Qing Ju into the Wei Family, but He Heng was very quickly soothed by Qu Qing Ju's words. Those words were right. With such a good man as him, what were other men worth?

Even more, the engagement between Qing Ju and the Wei Family was only mentioned and hadn't been finalized. He wasn't as extreme to blame Qing Ju for such a minor matter.

According to the attitude of the Qu Family towards Qing Ju, he didn't believe that Qu *lao taitai* was really thinking for Qing Ju. Thinking about the rich dowry that Qu Qing Ju had when she married into the *wang fu*, He Heng smiled coldly. They were definitely conspiring for the dowry that Tian *shi* had left behind for Qing Ju. Thinking about it, he glared coldly at Wei Zhu kneeling on the ground, "Such nonsense, you dare slander the Empress, such recklessness!"

Wei Zhu heard the discontent in the Emperor's words, and quickly continued: "Emperor, please investigate thoroughly, this subject's words are all true. If *xiandi* didn't decree the marriage, great aunt would have agreed to the Wei Family's proposal."

"Since the engagement wasn't made, it naturally means that it was the will of Heaven that *zhen* and Empress should be together. To mention these matters deliberately in front of *zhen*, are you trying to ruin

Empress' reputation?!" He Heng's voice became darker, harshly proclaiming, "The daughter of the Wei Clan is of an improper family, and lacking in protocol. Pass *zhen*'s decree, the members of the Imperial House of Da Long Dynasty are not allowed to take the daughters of the Wei Clan as wife or *qie*. The daughters of the Wei Clan eternally cannot be female candidates and enter the palace."

This decree was breaking the upward road for the daughters of the Wei Clan. Qu Qing Ju looked at the expressionless He Heng, smiled and turned her head. Her gaze landed on Wei Zhu who had collapsed on the ground.

"Drag her down, bestow forty blows and send her back to the Wei Family," He Heng gripped Qu Qing Ju's hand, coldly ordering, "In the future, if there are candidates that walk in the palace where they shouldn't, all will receive a beating of forty before being thrown out of the palace."

A woman that had been sentenced to a beating by the Emperor before being sent out of the palace. She wouldn't ever marry in this lifetime. Qu Qing Ju watched as Wei Zhu was dragged out by the *taijian* and sighed, "I just went from being an unfavored *di* daughter to being the Empress, but so many cannot tolerate it."

"To get this kind of person to slander you in front of me, they think me an idiot," He Heng caressed the silver hairpin in her hair, his tone unusually warm, "Don't waste any attention on these people. Come, accompany me for a nap."

Qu Qing Ju smiled, "With Emperor here, I won't waste any attention. Emperor is brilliant and wise, peerless through the ages."

"*Zhen*'s peerlessness, isn't that also yours?" He Heng smiled, his mood light as he took Qu Qing Ju back to the back hall of Tian Qi Palace. As to what had just occurred ……

Qing Ju had such a good man as him, would she think of any other?!

Qian Chang Xin and Mu Jin stared at each other, seeing the same moved emotion in the other's eyes before silently following.

"The female of the Wei Family was thrown out of the palace?" He Yuan kicked aside the *taijian* that was rubbing his knees. These days he often had to go to Shou Kang Palace to pray for *xiandi*, so his knees were already bruised.

"*Ben wang*'s brother is so infatuated with Empress, that he could even tolerate this kind of thing," he smiled coldly, "He does have good skill. Such a short amount of time and he has managed to control everyone at court."

Gao Duo, standing under him, heard the words, and hesitated before asking: "*Wang ye*, the circumstances are stronger than the people. Why don't we stay still now and wait for a good opportunity?"

"Good opportunity?" He Yuan snorted, "By now, the people of *ben wang* have been almost completely suppressed. *Lao da*'s people have already stood on the new Emperor's side. Among the advisors of *fuhuang*, Tian Jin Ke and Luo Chang Qing have tight connections with the Empress, they naturally would do their best to support the new emperor. As to the kind of people like Wei Wen Guang and Lu Jing Hong, the new emperor doesn't have to do anything and they would be the new conservative fraction. *Fuhuang*'s abdication decree was written in front of the senior officials, and he did the seal himself. What good opportunity do you think *ben wang* has?"

Gao Duo didn't think Rui Wang would see the situation so clearly. He hesitated before suggesting: "Since that's the case, *wang ye*, why don't you help the Emperor with his affairs, then the Emperor wouldn't directly attack you?"

"The kind of person He Heng is, on the surface, he would make it more beautiful than anyone else. If he attacks, not many can compare to his ferocity," Originally, He Yuan was a very proud person. But after two short months, he was so beaten by reality, half of his pride had gone away. "Even if *ben wang* submitted to him, he wouldn't be very close to

ben wang. Even more, *ben wang* doesn't want to fawn over him." He coldly twisted his mouth, "*ben wang* just doesn't want to see him well."

Gao Duo silently glanced at He Yuan. To keep going even with nothing at stake, what was he thinking?

"What should be done with the Wei Family?" He asked uncertainly, "The love between the Emperor and Empress is stronger than gold. The Wei Family's tactics are just embarrassing themselves. If they beg aid from *wang ye*, what would you do?"

He Yuan sneered: "In the beginning, it was them that asked *ben wang* to help. They were stupid themselves and mucked up. It has nothing to do with *ben wang*." Finishing, he summoned He Fu Er, "In the future, if the Wei Family shows up, don't receive them."

"Yes," He Fu Er noted it down and hesitated for a second before reporting, "*Wang ye*, the Qu *ce fei* in Xi Ce Yuan is seriously ill, should an invite be sent to the Imperial Hospital for a *taiyi* to examine *ce fei*?"

"*Wang fei* is responsible for such matters, why ask me?" He Yuan impatiently waved his hand. It was clear that he didn't have the person of Xi Ce Yuan on his heart.

He Fu Er understood. It had been because *wang fei* didn't do anything that he had taken a bribe from Yao Xi to beg *wang ye*. From the looks of it, that one in Xi Ce Yuan had lost favor. So he wouldn't have to waste any more time for Xi Ce Yuan in the future.

Gao Duo, as a subordinate, when he heard a matter of the *wang ye*'s *houyuan*, he naturally closed his mouth. Only after He Fu Er left did he interrupt: "*Wang ye*, this one heard you have a *ce fei* that is the sister of the Empress, is it this one?"

He Yuan didn't understand Gao Duo's meaning: "It's her, but the Empress didn't have good relationships with the Qu Family, so this Qu *shi* wasn't useful."

Gao Duo smiled: "If that's the case, then please forgive this subordinate to say something overstepping the bounds. *Wang ye*, you should not treat Qu *ce fei* too well. Otherwise, in the eyes of others, they would assume that you are feeling unjust on behalf of the Qu Clan and the Emperor would have more reason to target you."

He Yuan waved his hand, dismissing: "Just a plaything, *ben wang* isn't at that point to waste so much effort on her."

Gao Duo smiled as he raised his hands, "*Wang ye* is wise."

Chapter 92

"*Zhuzi*," Yao Xi's eyes were red as she helped Qu Yue Su sit up on the bed. Then she turned to bring over the medicine bowl, which was steaming due to the temperature of its contents, "Drink the medicine."

Qu Yue Su leaned weakly against the headboard. As she took the medicine bowl, she saw Yao Xi's burned hands and grimaced: "It's me who has dragged you down. All these years you stayed with me, when did you ever have to do this?" Even if she didn't see it with her eyes, she knew that the medicine had been brewed by Yao Xi on her own. Now that *wang ye* didn't come to her rooms, and *wang fei* targeted her at every occasion, even the servants in her yard dared to steal and cut corners, pointing at the mulberry and cursing the locust tree, much less the kitchen people.

"*Zhuzi*, what are you saying?" Yao Xi forced a smile and hid her burnt hand back into her sleeve, "Drink the medicine and after a night, it will all get better." Thinking about what Chief Steward He had just said, she almost couldn't keep the smile up. Now that even *wang ye* wasn't willing to help *zhuzhi*, how would they live?

Qu Yue Su finished the medicine in a few mouthfuls. Seeing Yao Xi's state, she sighed: "Yao Xi, do you remember my father's birthday banquet held five years ago?"

Yao Xi took the empty bowl from Qu Yue Su's hand and minutely shook her head.

"It's normal that you don't remember, but it remains fresh in my memory," Qu Yue Su grimaced, "That year, I accidentally broke a porcelain in Father's room. That day was Father's birthday and breaking something was unlucky. I was very scared and purposefully got someone to lure *da jie* into father's room … …"

When she heard, Yao Xi remembered. She recalled that after *lao ye*'s birthday, he had been so angry that he slapped *da xiaojie* on her face and sentenced her to stand in the yard for a whole night. After that, *da xiaojie* became seriously ill. *Furen* wouldn't get a doctor to see *da xiaojie*. If it hadn't been that the Tian Family had sent someone to deliver something to *da xiaojie*, *da xiaojie* probably would have died that year. She hadn't thought that the matter had been connected to *zhuzi*, and even more, she hadn't thought that her *zhuzi* would have such tactics at such a young age. She hesitated before remarking, "*Nubi* remembers that *da xiaojie* nearly died that year."

"Yes, almost gone. At that time, I was afraid and guilty," she coughed, "But she lived. If she hadn't lived, then it would have been me who would've married into Duan Wang Fu."

Yao Xi's hand, which held the bowl, shook. She looked at the sickly complexion of *zhuzi* and supported her to lie down and tucked the blanket in. She comforted: "*Zhuzi*, you're sick, don't talk nonsense. *Nubi* will go see if there is something to eat." As she came out of the room, she released a long breath. She still remembered Mu Jin painstakingly begging *zhuzi* to beg *furen* to send for a doctor.

At that time, *zhuzi*'s face was full of helplessness, and even used the reason of filial piety to refuse Mu Jin. Afterwards, *zhuzi* had sent her to give some pills to *da xiaojie* and never mentioned it again. She had never expected the truth of the matter was actually this. She rubbed her arms, feeling cold in the hot summer day.

"Isn't that Yao Xi?" A *yahuan* wearing green saw Yao Xi come out and hollered, "Is Qu *ce fei* well? Our *zhuzi* has missed her."

"Not well yet, thanks to *yiniang* for thinking of her." Yao Xi's smile wasn't pretty. This *yahuan* was one who served another *yiniang*. Usually, they didn't have much interaction. But now, even a personal *yahuan* of a *yiniang* could mock *zhuzi*.

"Such a hot day, it's such a pain to endure," The *yahuan*'s tone suddenly changed, "I heard that when the Empress hadn't yet married, she had been abused by her family, don't you think …… what it's like now, isn't it karma?"

She saw Yao Xi's expression change and smiled. Clapping her hands, she remarked: "The Heavens have eyes. People who do evil things don't have good endings." The green-clad *yahuan* bowed slightly, "I respect you for being a loyal servant but think more for yourself." She turned and left.

Yao Xi looked at the *yahuan*'s back. She gave a helpless smile and went on her original path to the kitchen.

The news that the Wei Family's female candidate had broken palace protocol during the mourning period for *xiandi* and was expelled from the palace by the Emperor, quickly became the joke of Jing City. The Wei Family had some reputation in Jing but now, they'd lost all honor and didn't have the courage to even leave the house.

The female candidates had gone through countless rounds of elimination. Originally, they were people who had a chance to be given to other members of the Imperial House or to be taken into the *hougong* to serve. Due to the passing of *xiandi,* aside from the Imperial House that had to observe mourning, even the common people couldn't marry for a month.

But that Wei Family, they'd thought to let their daughter capture the attention of the new Emperor during the mourning period. Why didn't they think of the Emperor's personality, was he a lusty person? Even

more so, the love between the Imperial Couple was known by everyone in Da Long Dynasty. Was the Wei Family's daughter more beautiful than a goddess? From where did she get the confidence to break into the Imperial Gardens?

The second day after Wei Zhu was sent back to the Wei Family, she was sent by the Wei Family into a nunnery. The reason given was that she would cultivate morals and pray for *xiandi* and the Emperor.

Everyone knew that this was the Wei Family pulling a cloth to hide themselves. The Emperor had already sent down the decree. The daughters of the Wei Family couldn't enter the Imperial House, this Wei Family was over.

The three months of mourning passed by quickly but He Heng still followed the protocols of mourning, paying close attention to his attire. This caused the world to praise the filial piety of the Emperor.

But not matter what, according to tradition, He Heng was now allowed to take new concubines. However, everyone in the *hougong* knew that the Emperor had no intentions of entering the *hougong*.

The sixth day of the eighth month of Qing De Thirty Fourth Year was the most auspicious day in the near half year as calculated by the Imperial Astronomers. The *Ziwei* star and its pair were bright, and it had the influence of the phoenix raising its head. So it was the most appropriate day for the crowning ceremony of the Empress.

The Empress' crowning ceremony was a very momentous occasion in Da Long Dynasty. First, sacrifices would be offered to the Heavens and prayers would be recited; next the Emperor and Empress would bow to the ancestors to notify them that this woman was one of the Imperial Family. Then the Emperor would personally put in the phoenix hairpin personally for the Empress and draw on her brows. Lastly, the Empress, wearing the phoenix robe, would receive the bows of the Royal Court Officials and the noblewomen.

In front of the copper mirror, Qu Qing Ju wore the phoenix robe that the weavers had rushed to make in three months by working day and night. Though the layers of clothing looked complicated and majestic, it didn't feel very heavy on the body.

The outermost wide-sleeved floor-length phoenix robe didn't have any gold or pearls but it was so beautiful that it blinded everyone's eyes.

As she watched He Heng solemnly draw on her brows for her and gently put the phoenix crown on her, she gave a smile.

Once they finished everything, they clasped their hands together as they walked to the high platform. On the platform were the dragon chair and the phoenix chair; dragon on the left, phoenix on the right.

Qu Qing Ju stood in front of the phoenix chair, slightly raising her chin to look at the hundreds of officials under her and watched as those people simultaneously knelt down towards her.

"Emperor, *wan sui, wan sui, wan wan sui*, Empress, *qian sui, qian sui, qian qian sui*!"

And then it was the three bows and nine kowtows. Qu Qing Ju stood side by side with He Heng. Looking at the scene before her, she felt strangely exhilarated.

"Rise," the Minister of Ceremonies called, "Music."

The music sounded slightly solemn yet light. Qu Qing Ju didn't really know what song it was, but looking at the reactions of the officials as they stood with bent bodies, she could guess that it was a very high standard for her crowning ceremony.

After the music stopped, Qu Qing Ju and He Heng sat down at the same time. Then it was the officials' turn to bow, one by one according to their ranks. Then it was the titled women. Just to watch people kneel to her, Qu Qing Ju sat for more than two hours.

After the people finished, He Heng spoke: "Today is the Empress' crowning ceremony, and also the year that *zhen* ascended to the throne. To accumulate virtue for the Empress, the world would be especially pardoned. Those banished would be reduced sixty miles, those in prison reduced one year, those on the death sentence will be delayed one month to their execution!"

The people under shouted the Emperor and Empress were kind, and would be lucky for ten thousand years.

Qu Qing Ju hadn't thought that He Heng would pardon the world at her crowning ceremony. Even though it was customary for the new Emperor to pardon the world after ascending the throne, but waiting for today to announce the decree, it was too ……

She turned to look at the person beside her and smiled helplessly.

Even if the Empress' crowning ceremony was done extremely grand, but the ceremonies for Heng *fei* and the others were much simpler when they followed. Heng *fei*'s was still alright, but the other three couldn't compare to the occasions when the *xiandi*'s consorts of equivalent rank were promoted. Especially Ping *cairen*. It was absolutely unbearable to see. If it wasn't that the Empress' bestowments also came down that day, almost no one in the palace would have known that it was the day that she was officially titled.

For people, what was worse was not being ignorant, but being able to make comparisons. All those in the palace were intelligent. And they could all see what was happening. This Ping *cairen* not being favored by the Emperor was a certainty. Since the Emperor didn't care for her, would they be willing to flatter her?

Feng Zi Jin finally knew just how difficult palace life could be. The food delivered each day was cold. The tea was old, and not of good quality. If something was lacking or needed fixing, it was extremely difficult for the Department of Internal Affairs to come remedy it.

She had fought and complained but in the end, she found that what was sent to her became more and more terrible. Sometimes they wouldn't even send anything. After these months, she finally knew what was "the servants bullying the masters" and the torture of the deep palace.

"*Zhuzi*, Han *liangdi* has come," Xia Yun quickly walked into the room, her expression unpleasant.

Feng Zi Jin grimaced as she stood. As she came out of the inner room, she saw Han Qing He drinking tea as she sat on the chair. Her steps paused. She walked in front, bowing, and made a greeting: "*Pinqie* greets Han *liangdi*."

"Please stand, Ping *cairen*,' Han Qing He smiled as she examined Feng Zi Jin. The other was wearing a slightly worn dark dress, completely devoid of the arrogance she once had in the *fu*. She put down the teacup, wiping her mouth, and remarked, "Your tea is too bitter. I'll have someone deliver some new tea to you tomorrow."

Feng Zi Jin declined: "There's no need to trouble Han *liangdi*."

"We can't have that. Once upon a time, *meimei* wouldn't drink anything at *wang fu* except the Long Jing before the first rain. Now that you have entered the palace, you can't deny yourself." She stood, asking, "Today's sunshine is great, why doesn't *cairen* accompany me on a walk?"

Knowing that she was intentionally making it difficult, Feng Zi Jin could do nothing except to follow behind Han Qing He.

Han Qing He gave a cold smile as she walked at the front. In the past when Feng Zi Jin humiliated her, she had been even more ruthless. What she was doing now wasn't really anything. Thinking about it, Han Qing He turned back to look at Feng Zi Jin, the smile on her face growing wider.

In the future, there was still more to come. The humiliations she had suffered, she didn't suffer them for nothing.

Chapter 93

Because the mourning period had passed, the flowers placed in the Imperial Gardens now red and purple. Han Qing He looked at the beautiful Imperial Garden and thought about when she'd entered the palace as the daughter of a common and good family to become a candidate. She had then been placed by Empress Dowager Wei to serve at the side of the Emperor. In a blink of an eye, five years had passed and she was now one of the mistresses of the palace.

As the palace maids passed her, they bowed to her. She enjoyed the feeling as others bowed their heads to her, as though if it was like this, she could forget her low birth and the unhappiness of the past. Turning back to see Feng Zi Jin blindly following behind her, she revealed a satisfied smile: "Walking the Imperial Gardens, I would think of the times I'd accompanied Ping *cairen* in the *wang fu*."

Feng Zi Jin didn't speak when she heard the words. She expressionlessly looked at Han Qing He before slowly moving her gaze away.

"From Ping *cairen*'s expression, it seems that you don't like walking in the garden with me?" Han Qing He sneered, "Or is it that Ping *cairen* thinks herself higher than me?"

"*Liangdi* is high up in the sky. *Pinqie* is only a small seventh-grade *cairen* who doesn't dare look down," Ping *cairen* uttered coldly, "*Pinqie* is only listening to *liangdi* speak."

Han Qing He was going to speak before suddenly hearing the sound of clapping behind her. Her heart jumped with joy and she took a step to the side before kneeling down.

"*Qie* greets Emperor," When the dark gold boots walked in front of her, Han Qing He's voice was sweet and soft as she lowered her head. But a second later, she saw a pair of gold embroidered slippers appear next to the gold boots. She paused and then added, "*Pinqie* greets Empress."

Qu Qing Ju looked at Feng Zi Jin and Han Qing He as they knelt on the ground. This was the first time Han Qing He used such a saccharine voice. She looked at He Heng who didn't seem to have any reaction, and said: "Stand."

"Thank Emperor, thank Empress," Feng Zi Jin slowly stood. She raised her head to gaze at the Emperor but found the Emperor's gaze wasn't on either her or Han Qing He's bodies. She lowered her face numbly, not speaking another word.

'Didn't think to encounter Emperor and Empress at such a place," Han Qing De didn't want to give up the chance to show her face in front of the Emperor. Her appearance wasn't as good as Feng Zi Jin's but she had a distinctive flavor when she smiled, "It's *pinqie* who has disturbed Emperor and Empress' mood."

Qu Qing Ju looked at her blooming smile. Her lips curled, but she didn't speak.

"Since you know you disturbed *zhen* and Empress' mood, why haven't you retreated?" He Heng's tone was icy. He looked at Han Qing He who was draped in gold and silver, his brows furrowing, "Retreat."

The smile on Han Qing He's face froze. She didn't think the Emperor would not even take the slightest bit of care. She couldn't help but turn her head to look at the Empress and found that the Empress' expression hadn't changed from beginning to end, as though she knew that she would embarrass herself. She bowed in mortification, "*Qie* asks to be excused."

Seeing Han Qing He retreat, Feng Zi Jin followed in leaving. Before she left, she looked again at He Heng and Qu Qing Ju, as though it was the first time she'd met them.

After both of them left, Qu Qing Ju finally smiled as she remarked: "Han *liangdi* has served Emperor for so many years, but her appearance hasn't changed at all." Han Qing He had been serving by He Heng's side since she was sixteen. Right now, she was just twenty one. In her previous life,

it would have been the best years of her life. In this era, her age was slightly old.

"Really, *zhen* doesn't remember what she was like before," He Heng glanced in the direction of Fu Shou Palace, "Don't think of those people anymore, let's go eat in *muhou*'s place."

Fu Shou Palace knew very early that the Emperor and Empress were coming over to accompany the Empress Dowager for the meal so they had prepared beforehand. When the two of them entered, Empress Dowager Wei was in the yard trimming twigs off a pot of flowers. Seeing the two of them, Empress Dowager Wei stood and led them into the room.

After washing and drying her hands, Empress Dowager informed the two: "*Aijia* had the small kitchen prepare the dishes you two like. Later, you can have some."

"It was bothersome for *muhou* to remember," He Heng stood to bow to Empress Dowager Wei, but his posture was more casual than before others, clearly showing just how mutual the feelings were between mother and son, "They should prepare more wine-pickled duck feet."

"Alright, your duck feet, *erxi*'s duck tongue, *aijia* had them prepare, you won't be lacking," Empress Dowager Wei apparently liked her son's carefree and intimate attitude. She gave a sigh, "Even though the mourning period has passed, there's no need to celebrate *aijia*'s birthday. Tomorrow, *aijia* will send a decree declaring to not hold a birthday banquet this year, and won't receive the court officials' respects."

When He Heng came here, he originally planned to discuss the matter of Empress Dowager's birthday. But he hadn't thought that *muhou* was so straightforward. It wouldn't be good to hold a big celebration but it might be too cold if she didn't even receive the Court's respects.

"*Aijia* knows you are filial, but *aijia* has thought this through before making the decision," Empress Dowager's expression became stern,

"Son, you have to remember. To gain something, you also have to gain the reputation, then your conduct would be spotless."

On the side, Qu Qing Ju agreed wholeheartedly when she heard the words. If one acted, they had to act to the end. To receive both the gains and the reputation was the only way to become a true winner. But when saying such things, was it wise to speak in front of her?

"I understand *muhou*'s intentions," He Heng nodded, "Then on mother's birthday, us three will gather and have a good meal."

"Yes," Empress Dowager smiled. Her gaze swept across her *erxi* sitting docilely by one side, "For a family to sit together and eat, it's much better than having those useless things." This son of hers, to say that kind of a thing in front of her, he really had his heart on Qu *shi*.

With Qu *shi*, there was no risk of the relatives. She was also the established Empress. After Qu *shi* had children, a fight for succession would be avoided. It wasn't a bad thing to have love between Emperor and Empress.

"Since *muhou* isn't having a celebration, then we should also save on *erxi*'s celebration," Qu Qing Ju's birthday was in the next month. Her brows furrowed as she said, "It's always so noisy at a banquet, not that interesting."

"Alright, we'll save on us mother and daughter's birthday celebrations, and we don't have to endure the torment." Empress Dowager Wei smiled. Saying to Ding *mama* who was beside her, "It's almost noon, get the kitchen to prepare to serve."

Ding *mama* left with her orders. Once she left the room, Ding *mama* finally smiled and shook her head. Clearly the Empress Dowager and the Empress were two kinds of people but they really did form a connection as they interacted. To have this kind of connection between *popo* and *erxi* in the Imperial Family, it was extremely rare.

But the Empress was also talented. To be able to pout, play and laugh and do anything else in front of the Empress Dowager, acting as though

the Empress Dowager was her own mother. Thinking about the deceased birth mother of the Empress and the evil stepmother, Ding *mama* sighed. The Empress hadn't had it easy. She must really be thinking of the Empress Dowager as her own mother.

The three people were very happy as they finished the meal. Empress Dowager Wei watched Qu Qing Ju lean back contentedly in the chair, smiling and teasing: "To eat seven-tenths full is to cultivate life. Eating like you do is of no benefit to the body."

"*Muhou*, *erxi* is growing right now, I can't not eat," Qu Qing Ju giggled, "If I'm not full, how will I grow my body?"

Empress Dowager Wei was amused by her words. She pointed at Qu Qing Ju, "Yes, yes, have to grow the body. After you grow up, you have to have grandsons and granddaughters for *aijia* to play with." When she'd finished speaking, she couldn't help laughing herself.

He Heng watched as his mother and *xifu* get happier the more they chatted. He silently took a sip of the digestive tea. So even when his *xifu* hadn't grown up, his mother was already preparing to play with his children. Was this scene really *popo*, son and *erxi* and not wife's mother, husband, and daughter?

On the second day, the Empress Dowager and the Empress sent out their decrees. The main meaning was that since *xiandi* had just passed away, they had no interest in enjoying their birthday celebrations and were grateful for the well-wishes from the people etc etc.

Instantly, the Court praised *Sheng Mu* Empress Dowager and the Empress for being virtuous and filial, and they were the epitome of what a woman should be.

He Heng listened to the officials' praises of his mother and wife and added: "*Zhen*'s mother and Empress have no interest in amusements. *Zhen*, as the son of *xiandi*, also does not have the heart for the birthday celebration. This year, *zhen* will not hold a birthday banquet, you all shall not persuade otherwise."

Naturally, the officials urged and urged again and then under the Emperor's steadfastness, they helplessly surrendered. In the end, they hollered three times the Emperor was filial. Both monarch and subjects were satisfied.

Standing at the bottom, He Yuan gave a scornful smile. The Wei mother and son liked to act. Even at this step, they didn't forget to act in order to achieve a good name.

"*Chen* has a memorandum!" After the monarch and subjects enjoyed themselves for a while, the Minister of the Right, Wei Wen Guang stepped forward, "Emperor, this official encountered a thirteen years old urchin a few days earlier on the road, felt that he was pitiful and wanted to shelter him, but who knew this official heard a great matter."

The atmosphere of the court instantly turned tense. He Heng's brows slightly furrowed as he urged: "Right Minister Wen, quickly speak."

"This subject heard the urchin say that he had begged his way from Jiang Nan to Jing. His father was a steward of a certain official in Jiang Nan and had been killed because he found out that this official had colluded with His Highness Rui Wang, and dragged his entire family with him. Thankfully, the urchin had been hiding out of naughtiness in the cellar of the home and his life was spared." He raised an accounts book with both hands, "This is the accounts of the steward who had been killed. The little urchin, even under the struggles of the road, managed to protect this item. Emperor, please take a look."

Once the speech came out, the court fell into silence. But no one dared to speak in defense of Rui Wang.

"Present it up," He Heng looked at He Yuan, "Rui Wang, do you want to say anything?"

He Yuan sneered, raising his hands in a fist, responding: "Emperor, subject-*di* is innocent. Right Minister Wei uses an urchin of unknown origins to accuse subject-*di*, and even made a fake account book. His intentions are enough to sentence him to death."

He Heng took the book from the hands of a *taijian* and randomly flipped open a page to take a look. With a calm face, he replied: "What the truth really is, *zhen* will send someone to investigate. End court."

The officials realised that they didn't really know the Emperor's true intentions. If he believed Rui Wang, then he wouldn't have sent someone to investigate. But if he didn't believe, then he should be in a rage. For the Emperor to be this calm, they were at a loss.

But smart people reacted very quickly. The Emperor was going to settle the old scores of Rui Wang. Previously, the case of Jiang Nan had been unclearly suppressed by *xiandi*. The Emperor cared for the people of Jiang Nan and naturally wouldn't pretend the matter didn't exist.

Jiang Nan was going to see a large purge.

Chapter 94

The case of Jiang Nan was taken up once again, but this time, no one begged for mercy for Rui Wang. The Emperor didn't send an official of high position to investigate in Jiang Nan but sent down an imperial decree for the Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Court to cooperate in the investigation.

Originally, some people had thought that the Emperor would use the chance to take down Rui Wang, but who knew that he was doing everything according to the rules. He didn't seem to side with his brother, and didn't take the chance to settle the score with his half brother. Many people were deeply moved by the benevolence of the Emperor.

Whether or not He Heng was really so generous, it wasn't very important to Qu Qing Ju. In the palace at the moment, she dominated above all. And she ate, drank, played and amused herself greatly.

The weather slowly moved into the fall but her appetite became better and better. She preferred to eat sour and spicy food. One night at the

end of the ninth month, she ate two bowls of rice, one bowl of hot and spicy fish, and one bowl of mushroom tofu fish head soup in one sitting. It was all home-style cooking. But she just liked it and it scared He Heng into accompanying her on a walk of the gardens for more than two hours that night.

Qu Qing Ju's birthday was the second to last day of the ninth month. That day, Empress Dowager Wei held a family banquet at Fu Shou Palace. Other than their family of three, there was only *Muhou* Empress Dowager, Jin An Princess Royal and Heng *fei* present. The other three *feipin* only kowtowed outside the palace doors before being excused to leave.

Jiang Yong Yu was the only one of the imperial concubines whose position was a first-grade *fei*. Appearing at the banquet, she represented the generosity and virtue of the Empress who was able to tolerate other women in the palace. But Jiang Yong Yu understood inside what her identity was and what she should do. So after making her greetings, she picked the corner furthest away from He Heng to sit and quietly pretended to be a statue.

After He Heng ascended the throne, he elevated the titles of Jin An Princess' children. Everyone in Jing knew by then that Jin An Princess was on good relations with the new Emperor. Of all the princesses of *xiandi*, only Jin An Princess' position hadn't been affected, and the people in Jing still carefully flattered and respected her.

It was human nature. One's father being the Emperor or a half-brother being the Emperor, it really was two different things. No wonder some princesses would pick a side on the matter of succession. Jin An Princess managed to make a correct decision.

Those who had eyes all knew that when the new Emperor was still Duan Wang, Jin An Princess had been extremely close to Duan Wang Fei. When the news that Duan Wang had been attacked, Jin An Princess had sent many herbs and medicine to Duan Wang. Didn't her actions clearly show Jin An Princess' position?

The other person who benefited was Cheng Wang. Originally, he had been a pitiful little thing that his own father didn't care for. But now, he could be considered to be one of the most trusted people by the new Emperor. His wife had connections with the Emperor so overall, his status was even higher than when *xiandi* had been alive.

"Empress, your appetite is so good," After the meal, Jin An Princess looked with amazement at Qu Qing Ju who was wiping her mouth. A beat later, she commented, "Eating is good fortune."

"It's not that much," Qu Qing Ju took a mouthful of the digestive tea that a palace maid presented and looked in confusion at He Heng beside her, asking, "Really too much?"

"It's good you like eating," He Heng smiled. He looked at the other's pale and smooth face, his fingers slightly trembling as he resisted the urge to reach out and pinch her face. He turned to order Ming He behind him, "Today, the pickled cabbage fish head and Kung Pao beef tendons were made well. Who was the chef, reward!"

Ming He noted the two dishes. He knew that it was the Empress who liked them and indicated for a *taijian* behind him to go reward the chef in the Imperial Kitchens.

Empress Dowager Wei raised the teacup to take a sip, smiling as she commented: "Recently, Qing Ju's appetite is getting even better. When *aijia* sees her eat, *aijia* feels the appetite improving and can eat an extra half bowl."

Hearing this, *Muhou* Empress Dowager smiled and teased: "*Meimei* and Empress' good appetites, even I at Chang Ning Palace have heard of. Even the Imperial Kitchen is thinking all day of creating new pastries and dishes in hopes of receiving your favors."

"It seems that our mother and daughter's gluttonous reputation has spread," Empress Dowager Wei smiled at Qu Qing Ju, completely uncaring of people in the palace spreading such news. She said to *Muhou* Empress Dowager, "*Jiejie*, we have known other for more than

twenty years. When *xiandi* was alive, we were always cautious and alert. Now that our children have grown up, we don't need to live so cautiously. In this time that we can still eat and drink, it's better to enjoy it."

Muhou Empress Dowager hadn't thought Empress Dowager Wei would say such a thing. She paused slightly before smiling, "You're right. A life is short and hard. We've endured for more than half a lifetime, it can't be put to waste." She and Wei *shi* had no conflicts of interest. Now that Duan Wang had ascended the throne, he had treated her well. Even Jin An Princess who had been recorded under her name was the most important among the princesses. Right now, she was only an idle Empress Dowager, what did she have to worry about?

Qu Qing Ju listened to the sisterly-like conversation between the two Empress Dowagers. If one didn't know, they really wouldn't believe that the two had once served the same man. The words basically meant, we finally made it through, let's enjoy ourselves.

But as the two chatted, the topic unknowingly skewed to land on Qu Qing Ju. *Muhou* Empress Dowager looked at Qu Qing Ju's waist that never grew thick no matter how much she ate: "Today is Empress' birthday, it's not good to let a *taiyi* take the pulse. But, it's fine for a *taiyi* to take a look tomorrow. If too much is eaten, it might harm the stomach." Her words were very euphemistic, but inside, she was suspicious of another matter.

What kind of person was Empress Dowager Wei? When *Muhou* Empress Dowager's words came out, she knew what the other hand meant. She quickly calculated in her head. The passing of *xiandi* was the end of the fourth month. The end of the seventh month was the end of the mourning period. After the mourning period ended, Qu Qing Ju was still living in the back hall of Tian Qi Palace. Heng'er hadn't gone once to any of the other women in the palace. It was the end of the ninth month now, two months had passed, was it that ……

The two Empress Dowagers were experienced and knew to not casually say their conjectures. Otherwise, if there was first hope and then

disappointment, it was harmful. The two exchanged a glance. Empress Dowager Wei said: "Since *jiejie* has said this, I'm worried now as well. Why don't we have a *taiyi* take the pulse tomorrow?"

Qu Qing Ju felt helpless. After entering the palace, even though her body didn't have any ailments, the *taiyi* would take a pulse every two weeks. They had also prescribed some tonics. She really didn't like drinking those things.

He Heng's eyebrow slightly twitched. He then smiled, promising: "Since both *muhou*s are worried, this son will summon the dean of the Imperial hospital tomorrow to take the pulse for the Empress."

Qu Qing Ju put down her teacup, interjecting: "The weather turned cold lately, so I couldn't help but eat more. There shouldn't be any problems, but I should not cause both *muhou* to worry."

Empress Dowager Wei smiled and sighed: "As long as you are all well, us, as *muhou* will be comforted."

Qu Qing Ju's heart moved slightly. She wasn't stupid, so she could hear that the majority of Empress Dowager's words were sincere. As a *popo*, Empress Dowager Wei was really very good. Not even in this era, in the place that she lived in her previous life, a *popo* as fair and considerate as Empress Dowager Wei was rare.

Thinking about how she and Empress Dowager Wei had interacted, from the mutual probes at the intimacy now, Empress Dowager Wei tried to do the best for her as the *erxi*. Even when He Heng had given out a decree that was more of a love letter to announce to the world and not going to the *hougong* after the mourning period ended, Empress Dowager Wei had never been discontent with her and treated her even better.

"*Muhou*'s words have made *erxi* ashamed. As the younger generation, as long as you have healthy bodies, and are happy, it makes us happy." Qu Qing Ju spoke with a smile, "With a *muhou* so concerned with *erxi* like this, it is *erxi*'s good fortune."

Empress Dowager Wei stilled. Then her voice was soft as she said: "Stupid child, even now as Empress, you make *aijia* worried."

At one side, Heng *fei* listened to Empress Dowager Wei's words. Her heart was also full of admiration. When the Empress had just entered the *fu*, the Empress Dowager had been somewhat dissatisfied with Empress. Yet now, the Empress Dowager treated her like she was her own.

From beginning to end, He Heng had a smile on his face. Even as they left Fu Shou Palace to return to Tian Qi Palace, the smile on his face didn't dissipate.

His good mood maintained itself until morning court. When he heard officials suggesting he take a few female candidates as concubines, his brows wrinkled.

Some certain officials didn't put any attention all day on state matters, didn't do any work, and their attention was entirely focused on the matter of his *hougong*. Such subjects, what was the use in keeping them?

"Emperor, now that the mourning period has passed, your *hougong* is empty. This subject thinks that the *xuannu* should be taken as *fei* to expand the *hougong*." An official in the Ministry of Rites said, "This is a critical matter of continuing the line. Please, Emperor, make a decision."

The words seemed like they were urging He Heng to take *fei*. In reality, they were saying that the Empress was childless, and wanted him to take other women to have children.

The kind of Emperor that was He Heng, he wouldn't listen to this spiel. If this person was speaking on behalf of the people, he might have felt that this person could be used. But this person was criticizing the matter of the women of the *hougong*. He Heng's face was cold as he looked at the Rites official: "Are you meaning to criticize that *zhen*'s Empress has no son, or implying to *zhen* to let other *feipin* give birth to the eldest imperial son?"

This official of the Ministry of Rites nearly bit his tongue. He clearly only had been urging the Emperor to take concubines, how did become slandering the Empress and scheming about the Imperial Heir? He apprehensively knelt down: "This subject did not mean that. Please forgive, Emperor."

It was the orthodox way for the *di* son of the middle palace to succeed the throne, unless the Empress really couldn't have a child. He wouldn't dare to imply for the Emperor to let other *feipin* give birth to the eldest son, wasn't that heretical?

"The Empress has been married to *zhen* for not even a year. Before, she had to observe mourning for *xiandi*, and then she had prayed for *xiandi* everyday without pause. Such a virtuous Empress, to be marred by you in such a way, it is abominable," He Heng uttered, "As an official, the heart should be placed with the people and not to put the focus on *zhen*'s *hougong*. Does everyone here like other people meddling in their *houyuan*? Or is it that some people believe they can arrange everything for *zhen* and make the decisions for *zhen*?"

As the words landed, the entire court followed in kneeling down to ask for mercy. In this world, who would dare to make the decisions for the Emperor, wasn't that the great crime of treason?

He Heng gave a cold snort, looking at the people kneeling below, "*Xiandi* hasn't passed for a long time yet. Even though *zhen* used months to substitute for years to come out of mourning, but every time *zhen* thinks of *xiandi*'s appearance and voice, it still hurts. There is much less interest to take other women. You all are scholars, and naturally know what is filial piety and righteousness. To respect the elders is filial piety, to be responsible for siblings and wife is righteousness. If filial piety and righteousness cannot be achieved, how is one a human?"

"Emperor is enlightened!" He Ming shouted.

"Emperor is enlightened, this subject is ashamed!" Luo Chang Qing and Wei Wen Guang simultaneously clamoured.

The other's followed in shouting the Emperor was enlightened. No one dared to argue with the words, otherwise, wouldn't they be the person that wasn't filial or righteous?

As to that official of the Ministry of Rites that suggested for He Heng to take other *fei*, he was so frightened his face was pasty-white and trembling. The officials on either side of him silently took a step back from him to distance themselves even more.

He Yuan looked coldly at He Heng sitting on the dragon chair. The unshakable love between Emperor and Empress, it really …… was an eyesore.

Chapter 95

The Emperor had become angry at Court, the officials underneath were all shaking. But some were very envious of the Tian Family. To have this kind of niece, it was really the good fortune from the previous life.

He Yuan still attended court, but due to the case of Jiang Nan, he didn't have much power to meddle in other affairs. Hearing the officials beside him discuss the relationship between the Imperial Couple, he revealed a scornful smile. In this world, how many men had a love as deep as the ocean and how many emperors could be like the Yu Ming Emperor of the previous dynasty?

Before the He Family took the country, the world was ruled by the Tong Family, and Yu Ming Emperor had been a rare good ruler in the previous dynasty. This person had done something that was famous in the world. That was, his palace only had his Empress, and no other woman.

Many people had written their own versions of the love story between Yu Ming Emperor and Zhao He Empress. The stories were happy or sad, touching and wistful, but in all of them, they praised the infatuation of Ming Yu Emperor and his wisdom, as well as the virtues and intelligence of Zhao He Empress.

People always had a shortcoming. The rarer something was, the more they liked to tell of it. The fact that there was so much written about Yu Ming Emperor and Zhao He Empress, wasn't it because an emperor's true love and monogamy were rare?

Thinking of it, the smile on He Yuan's face grew wide. How many Yu Ming Emperors were there in this world?

After He Heng left the court, he started to walk towards the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace. As he walked, the coldness on his face retreated to become warm. When he reached the entrance to the rear hall, it seemed normal. The *taijian* guarding the door saw him, and was going inside to report before being stopped.

"Ming He, go pass on *zhen*'s decree. Summon the Dean of the Imperial Hospital to take the pulse of the Empress," He took the step into the door as he finished.

Qu Qing Ju felt that as she travelled into this era, her hobbies became more and more elegant. Reading, calligraphy, flower arrangement, pruning, poetry, painting. She had done all of them. It was a pity that she could never have a sustaining interest in any of the hobbies.

Disinterestedly looking at the bonsai that had been trimmed by her into a mushroom shape, she sighed: "There's nothing to play with this bonsai."

Mu Jin knew that the Empress was bored. In the *hougong*, aside from the *feipin* and noblewomen coming to pay their respects, it was the people of the Department of Internal Affairs coming to ask about the matters of the palace. After a time, it wasn't interesting.

"Empress, *nubi* saw the chrysanthemums in the Imperial Gardens have bloomed. Why don't we summon some noblewomen into the palace to keep you company and admire the flowers, it would pass the time." Mu Jin suggested, "This way, it can also decrease the distance from you to them."

Qu Qing Ju sighed. No wonder when she had searched for historical information in her previous life, there would always be some woman riding a horse, woman toying with a cat, and scenes of parks and kickball. It was because an idle life was too one-note, and the crowds of Ms. Perfects needed to find things to pass the time.

But the relationship between the Empress and the wives of the officials was important. The Emperor was the boss of the men of the world, therefore the Empress was the boss of the women of the world. If there weren't any interactions, it wouldn't be right.

"Alight, *ben gong* knows. Three days from now, summon the wives above third-rank into the palace to attend a banquet to admire the chrysanthemums," Qu Qing Ju pondered for a second, "If there are unmarried *di* daughters in the family, they can bring them as well."

"Yes, *nubi* will go to let the female official announce the decree." Mu Jin wholeheartedly plotted for Qu Qing Ju. Any matter that was advantageous for Qu Qing Ju, she would cleanly and nimbly do, and wouldn't leave any blemishes.

Just as she turned, she saw the Emperor walk in. She quickly retreated to one side and knelt down, proclaiming: "*Nubi* greets Emperor."

Qu Qing Ju heard Mu Jin's voice and raised her head to see He Heng walk over, still wearing the gold dragon-patterned robe that he wore when at court. She stood, meeting him and asking: "Emperor, why have you come right now?"

"When I got off from court, I remembered that a *taiyi* was being summoned today to see your pulse and came to take a look," He Heng held her hand to sit down on an armchair at the side. Seeing the bonsai that seemed to be almost bare, he smiled and remarked, "Just now on the outside, I heard you want to have a banquet, is it because the *hougong* is boring?"

Qu Qing Ju smiled: "A bit duller than at the *wang fu*. But it will slowly get better."

"It probably won't happen this year, but next year, I will take you out," He Heng touched her sighing, "If you are really bored, you can summon Tian *furen* in to talk with you, don't shut yourself in."

"Alright," Qu Qing Ju felt that the other thought of her as a lonely and weak white flower. She smiled helplessly, responding: "Emperor doesn't have to be so worried. I'm the Empress. If I'm bored, the servants would naturally think of ways to make me happy."

He Heng knew that what she said was true and a grimace appeared. Treating her like this, he really couldn't rest his worries. This was what it felt like to have your heart tied up with someone.

A while later, Ming He came in to report that the Dean of the Imperial Hospital had arrived.

Qu Qing Ju saw a sixty-something man come in wearing the official uniform of the Imperial Hospital. A fine sweat was on his forehead. He must have hurried over. Otherwise, in this early autumn, where would the sweat come from?

"Subject Du Bai Zhu Shu greets Emperor, greets Empress."

It was possible to know from the name that he came from a family of medical practitioners. Qu Qing Ju silently examined the *taiyi*. His cheeks were red, his hair was salt-and-pepper but his overall energy was good. He must have taken very good care of his own health.

"Du *taiyi* doesn't have to be so courteous. You have been in the Imperial Hospital for many years and very experienced. Recently, the Empress' appetites have increased. Come to take the pulse of the Empress and see if there are any ailments." He Heng looked at Du Bai Zhu kneeling and indicated for him to come near to take Qu Qing Ju's pulse.

When Du Bai Zhu heard the two words increased appetite, he paused. Then after thanking, he bowed and walked in front of Qu Qing Ju, holding his hands up and apologizing: "Empress, subject offends." Finishing, he took a silk cloth from his sleeve to place over Qu Qing Ju's wrist and started to take Qu Qing Ju's pulse.

Five minutes later, Du Bai Zhu switched to his other hand and then Qu Qing Ju saw his expression become joyful.

Du Bai Zhu took away the silk cloth over Qu Qing Ju's wrist, his face full of joy as he knelt in front of He Heng; "Congratulations Emperor, congratulations Emperor. The Empress has a slippery pulse, it is a happy occasion."

Qu Qing Ju's eyebrows jumped. Slippery pulse …… did he mean she was pregnant?

"Really?" He Heng, who didn't usually express his emotions, asked in surprise, "Can you tell how many months?"

"Because the pulse isn't very evident, it shouldn't be more than a month. Unless a *taiyi* had practiced for many years, it would have been unlikely to detect the pulse." Du Bai Zhu's face was full of delight, as though he was happier than anyone else that the Empress was pregnant. But at the same time, he didn't forget to compliment himself.

"Good, good," By this time, He Heng was grinning from ear to ear. He waved his hand, "Reward, heavily reward."

"This subject thanks Emperor, thanks Empress." Du Bai Zhu gasped at his luck inside. The Empress' pulse wasn't evident but it was definitely pregnancy. This time, he really showed his face in front of the Emperor and Empress.

If this matter had occurred with *xiandi*, he would have been shuddering with fear. But now, the *hougong* was managed by the Empress and the Emperor only favored the Empress. He had nothing to worry about. It was a very good thing.

"From today onwards, you don't have to attend anyone else, just serve the Empress," He Heng mused as he barely managed to suppress his joy, "From the Imperial Hospital, you can pick two trusted people to be your assistants. The diet of the Empress, *zhen* will get a pregnancy *mama* to pay more attention. If there is anything that cannot be used, you have

to tell the pregnancy *mama*. *Zhen* requires you to guarantee that Empress and the child in her stomach will be absolutely safe."

"*Chen* will not fail Emperor's trust," Du Bai Zhu gave a kowtow. Wealth could only be found through danger. If he could serve the Empress well this time, his status in the Imperial Hospital would be unshakable!

After Du *taiyi* left, Qu Qing Ju finally looked in disbelief at He Heng: "I'm pregnant?"

The palace maids and *taijian* in the room were all kneeling with happy faces as they gave their congratulations. For them, the fact that the Empress had children, it was a good thing to them. Only when their mistress was well, would they, as servants, be well.

"Yes, you have our child," The smile on He Heng's face hadn't disappeared. His hand cautiously touched Qu Qing Ju's belly. As though afraid of harming the child, he quickly jerked his hand back, "Tomorrow, I'll pick a useful and trusted pregnancy *mama* to serve you. Don't worry about any other matters, I'm there for everything else."

"Then the affairs of the *hougong*, I'll hand over to the two *muhou*," Qu Qing Ju wasn't attached to the power of the *hougong*. Even more, with He Heng's heart here, she would always be the first in the *hougong*. If He Heng didn't treat her well, it was useless even if she kept a grip on the power of the *hougong*.

"Right, I have to tell the two *muhou*," He Heng thought, "Take a good rest, I'll be back quickly. I'll eat the noon meal with you."

Qu Qing Ju gaped at He Heng as he rushed out of the room, appearing to float in the air. She shook her head in helplessness and then gave a faint smile.

Empress Dowager Wei and *Muhou* Empress Dowager had been chatting together when they saw the Emperor rush in. They were surprised but seeing that his face was full of joy, the two were very happy, and also smiled.

"*Muhou*, just now, the *taiyi* took the pulse and found Empress is pregnant," He Heng was happy and sketched a bow to the two, "This son is coming to announce the good news."

It had been a long time since Empress Dowager Wei saw her son forget appearances. She even felt that her son's eyes had become brighter. Her heart warming, she smiled, replying: "Since that's the case, you should be keeping Qing Ju company. Us here, it's fine to let someone else report."

"This son was just too happy and forgot," He Heng curbed himself slightly, but from each strand of his hair to his feet, "jubilation" was written in large font, "This son has also come to ask a certain favor."

"*Aijia* had expected that you were here about the management of the *hougong*." Hearing it, *Muhou* Empress Dowager smiled, "*aijia* had managed the *houyong* for decades, and doesn't want to suffer again. If you care for your wife, then beg your *muhou*. *Aijia* isn't willing to meddle."

Hearing this, Empress Dowager Wei responded: "*Jiejie* is making things difficult for me. I haven't managed such things before. How about *meimei* will temporarily work, but can ask *jiejie* for help everyday. After our *erxifu* has given birth, then let her manage herself. Us two, being *muhou*, might want to be lazy but still have to care for the younger generation."

"That's fine," *Muhou* Empress Dowager smiled, agreeing, "After our big grandson comes out, we only have to care about grandson."

Naturally, He Heng gave his profuse thanks. As to the two Empress Dowagers expressing explicitly that they would only manage until the Empress gave birth, he understood the two's desire.

Leaving Fu Shou Palace, He Heng got the Department of Household Affairs to present more good things to the palaces of the two Empress Dowagers to express his gratefulness.

Empress Dowager Wei looked at the things that He Heng let others deliver and smiled helplessly. As a mother, she wouldn't bear to see her child in difficulty. The peace of the *hougong*, to an emperor, it was an important matter.

Chapter 96

The news that the Empress was pregnant quickly travelled from the *hougong* to the court. On the second day, many officials' wives sent congratulatory messages to the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace, expressing the joy the entire court felt towards the pregnancy of the Empress.

Qu Qing Ju carelessly flipped open a note. The main idea was that the entire court heard that the Empress was pregnant and couldn't contain their joy, couldn't eat, couldn't sleep and had to write of their joy, and wrote a whole pile of good wishes before finishing with greetings to the Empress Dowager, Emperor, Empress etc etc

The content of the messages weren't different, but what they expressed was the same. It was, us common people, we're happy today.

Qu Qing Ju knew that the people had been keeping watch over her belly. If she gave birth to a son, it was the *di* eldest son. In the future, even if the other *feipin* had children, they couldn't shake the eldest son's position.

Thinking of her body now which was only sixteen, and was raising another little life, she felt complicated. And then she couldn't help but have another bowl of rice.

The Empress Dowagers of the two palaces had already let the servants deliver a whole pile of useful and useless things over. Especially Empress Dowager Wei. She seemed to want to stuff the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace full, sending over pile after pile of stuff. Qu Qing Ju started to wonder if Empress Dowager Wei still had anything left in her personal stores.

"Empress, Jin An Princess had someone send congratulatory gifts into the palace," Huang Yang held a list as he entered which he gave into Qu Qing Ju's hand. "Her Highness Princess Royal also said to wait until the flower banquet tomorrow to have a good chat with you."

Qu Qing Ju flipped the list. The things listed avoided stuff that might cause trouble. It could be seen that Jin An Princess Royal had the intentions to become closer but was worried of getting into trouble. Putting the list to one side, Qu Qing Ju smiled, "Go tell the messenger, say that *ben gong* will remember and to let Jin An Princess come early tomorrow."

Jin An Princess Royal and her, originally it had been half friendship, half beneficial. The way they interacted now, it was the best. Jin An Princess Royal might be female, but Qu Qing Ju felt that she was very decisive in her conduct. When she had separated from the Count of Bei Lu, she was unhesitating and didn't show any weakness. In the end, she had protected the reputations of the princess of the Imperial House, and captured titles for her children. In reality, if the Princess Royal and the Count of Bei Lu hadn't separated, her children might not have the same rank as they did now.

After that, Jin An Princess expressed goodwill to He Heng and clearly distanced herself from *lao da* and *lao san*'s family. The action seemed reckless, but it was much easier to obtain the good opinion of He Heng that way. No one liked people who backstabbed. In the very end, Jin An Princess' step was right. Now, she was the most free, most important princess, the Princess Royal, of all of *xiandi*'s daughters. Even if she didn't have a *fuma* now, who in Jing would underestimate her?

A woman as skilled as her, it was no wonder that an emperor as unjust as Qing De Emperor was soothed by her to not care about traditions and make her the Princess Royal. Even Qu Qing Ju herself didn't think she could do as well.

"Empress, Cheng Wang Fu sent gifts."

"Empress, the Duchess of Zhong Yi sent gifts."

Qu Qing Ju spent the whole morning looking at different lists. She sighed. It wasn't an insignificant number of officials' wives that were qualified to send gifts to her. She didn't know how much had been just placed into the stores without a word.

"Empress, Rui Wang Fu sent gifts."

The presents from Rui Wang Fu came relatively late. Qu Qing Ju had been preparing to use the noon meal when the people delivered it. She casually flipped open the list and was slightly shocked. Did Qin Bai Lu really prepare this for her? Thousand year ginseng, *Tian Shan* snow lotus, hundred year knotweed and so on. Things like cultivating bangles, and other valuable objects had been stuffed in. When she finished reading the list, Qu Qing Ju felt that Qin Bai Lu wouldn't be this good to her. Something along the line wasn't right.

"Who sent this list?" Qu Qing Ju folded up the list in her hand, her brow furrowing as she asked, "*Ben gong* has always been at odds with Qin Bai Lu, when has she been so good to me?"

"Empress, you are the Empress now. How can Rui *wang fei* compete against you now?" Huang Yang responded, "This list was personally sent by the steward of Rui wang Fu, He Fu Er. It shouldn't be wrong."

"Right now, the Emperor is investigating the old case of Jiang Nan. Rui Wang sending so much over, he must have other intentions," Qu Qing Ju just remembered that the court was in the middle of the case of Jiang Nan. Rui Wang Fu sending so much over, were they thinking for her to have some pillow talk?

That was funny. She, an Empress that the Emperor put importance on, would be stupid enough, for just this paltry amount of stuff, to go beg for mercy for Rui Wang, wasn't that was seeking suicide, being tired of living?

The matter was overlapping with the court so the servants attending Qu Qing Ju cleverly didn't follow up. This was a quality that Qu Qing Ju

was satisfied with. In this world, no one liked other people saying things they shouldn't by their ear.

In the Imperial Study of Tian Qi Palace, He Heng finished reading the memorandum on the case of Jiang Nan, his face grave as he drummed his fingers. A long time later, he ordered: "Summon the Duke of Zhong Yi for an audience."

When Tian Jin Ke came to Tian Qi Palace, He Heng had finished all of the memorandums on the desk. Seeing him come in, he called: "Beloved Official Tian doesn't have to be courteous. *Zhen* has called you today to discuss the matter of Rui Wang."

Tian Jin Ke hesitated before replying: "The evidence has been conclusive for the case of Jiang Nan. This subject doesn't know what the Emperor means."

"In his life *xiandi* liked *zhen*'s *sandi* the most, so *zhen* doesn't want his life. But the case is truly frightening. *Zhen*, as a ruler, cannot tolerate such things to happen," he sighed, "It's hard to fulfill both righteousness and loyalty."

Hearing that the Emperor had spoken to such lengths, Tian Jin Ke couldn't even pretend to not understand. He immediately responded: "Rui Wang's crimes are serious, but these cases were committed mostly by his subordinates who couldn't not moderate themselves and are not directly linked with Rui Wang. *Wei chen* thinks that Rui Wang is guilty but not guilty of death."

"Then you say, how should *zhen* determine Rui Wang's crimes?" He Heng looked at Tian Jin Ke below, mocking, "At the very least, he is *zhen*'s brother. *Zhen* doesn't bear for him to live too bleakly for the rest of his life."

Tian Jin Ke's heart jumped, fine sweat dotting his forehead. The Emperor, at such an age, had such a manner, it was truly shocking: "This subject doesn't know."

"Fine, *zhen* won't bother you," He Heng didn't keep going at the question. His tone suddenly became light, "Now Empress is pregnant. She had always been close to your *furen*. In the future, if your *furen* doesn't have any major matter, then come to the palace to keep the Empress company."

Hearing the Emperor mention such a matter, Tian Jin Ke naturally happily complied. His niece was still very young. As an elder, he was happy she was pregnant and could steady her position as Empress but was worried she would be inexperienced and become worried, and frightened due to pregnancy.

"*Zhen* doesn't have anything else. You are excused." He Heng said with a faint smile.

Tian Jin Ke saw the relaxed expression on the Emperor's face as though he wasn't affected by the case of Jiang Nan and left unworried. When he passed through the gates of Tian Qi Palace, he thought in puzzlement, did the Emperor only summon his to ask about the matter of Rui Wang?

But why did he feel that it wasn't right?

In Rui Wang Fu, He Yuan raised a wine cup to take a sip. He looked lazily at Gao Duo on his side whose face was full of worry. He smiled, asking, "What, *ben wang* isn't worried, but why are you even more uneasy than *ben wang*?"

"*Wang ye*, now that the evidence for the Jiang Nan case has all been presented to the Emperor, if the Emperor would try to take your life, you have no way out," Gao Duo sighed, suggesting, "Why don't we think of another way?"

"Think of what?" He Yuan snorted, "If he wants to kill, then kill. The winner as king, the loser as outlaw. Now that he is the Emperor, even if he didn't have the evidence of the Jiang Nan Case, he could still easily sort me out."

"But has *wang ye* thought of the people on the *fu*, and Shu *gui taifei* still waiting for you to receive her out of the palace? If you get in trouble, what about them?" Gao Duo sighed.

"Don't worry, He Heng wants to settle accounts with me, but the hypocrite he is, definitely won't leave behind a bad name. The lives of everyone in this *fu* will remain," He Yuan lowered his face, throwing his head back to drink to the bottom of the cup, "Even more, the Empress is now pregnant, he wouldn't bear to start killing."

How did the matter relate to the Empress? Gao Duo looked in puzzlement at He Yuan. Seeing that his face wasn't pleasant, he didn't dare to use the Emperor's name and responded: "If that's the case, *wang ye*, why don't you take advantage of the chance and save yourself?"

"I can't hide forever," He Yuan careless threw away the cup in his hand, "don't waste any more attention for *ben wang*. *Ben wang* knows, you can leave."

Gao Duo looked at the wine cup rolling on the floor and left in helplessness. When he came out of the gate, he saw Rui Wang Fei standing at the door, and lowered his head, making a greeting.

Qin Bai Lu didn't pay attention to him. She only stared at the gate of the building, as though the person inside was an enemy of hers.

"*Wang fei*?" Ru Hua saw that *wang fei*'s expression wasn't good and carefully urged, "It's cold in autumn, let's go back to the room."

"Now he doesn't even want me to meddle in the matters of *houyuan*," Qin Bai Lu grimaced as she spoke. Then her expression became malevolent, "The congratulatory presents for the Empress' pregnancy, he didn't even ask me, the *wang fei*, before sending it off. This *wang fei* that I am, what's the meaning?"

"*Zhuzi*, don't be angry, let's return." Ru Hua reached to pull Qin Bai Lu. This was the doorway to the main building. What would happen if *wang ye* heard?

"Humph," Qin Bai Lu snorted, holding Ru Hua's hand as she left in discontent. It wouldn't matter if she didn't leave. By now, *wang ye* practically didn't go to her rooms, and didn't let her enter his.

Chapter 97

At Court, as the speaker recited the contents of the investigation, the officials listened with wide eyes and gaping mouths. They didn't think Rui Wang would have committed so many crimes.

"Rui Wang, do you have anything to say?" He Heng calmly looked at He Yuan standing below, "When *fuhuang* was alive, he was extremely good to you. Why did you have to commit such major crimes?"

"If Emperor wants to kill subject-*di,* then do as you wish. There's no need to talk so much," He Yuan did not beg for mercy. His face was full of scorn as though He Heng, sitting at the top, was just a joke, "If *fuhuang* really cared for me, then I wouldn't be standing here today. By saying this much, you just want to proclaim me disloyal and unfilial."

"*Zhen* has never thought that way," He Heng sighed, "We were almost born at the same time, and had played together as children. *Zhen* doesn't bear to kill you. Even more so, many of the acts were committed by your subordinates, and aren't seriously connected to you."

He Yuan furrowed his brows and then sneered. He wanted to see how He Heng would deal with him.

The officials looked at the expressions of the two brothers. On one hand, they were moved by the feelings of the Emperor, on the other, they felt helpless at Rui Wang's arrogance. Rui Wang had been arrogant and despotic in Jing for many years. Even now, with such undeniable evidence, he was still so unmanageable.

"Pass *zhen*'s decree. Rui Wang exhibited unruly behavior, and forfeits his salary for five years. He allowed his subordinates to smuggle salt, and buy and sell official posts and titles. *Zhen* hurts at heart but as *xiandi*

once told *zhen* to hold fraternal affection, *zhen* doesn't bear to but still has to punish. From this day forth, Rui Wang cannot enter court, is demoted from *Qin Wang* to *Jun Wang*, deprived of his salary for five years, and will write a list of his own crimes to be posted on the city gates of all the regional capitals of Jiang Nan. The wealth that was seized from the Jiang Nan case will not be taken into the Treasury. *Zhen* will personally send it to Jiang Nan so it can be used to fix roads and construct bridges in order to benefit the people of Jiang Nan." He Heng had a disappointed face as he stood, "*Qing* can all leave."

"The Emperor is wise, this subject asks to be excused," Everyone knelt to send the Emperor off, becoming even more respectful of the new Emperor.

The Emperor did not take Rui Wang's life, did not erase him from the Imperial House's lineage. That was due to fraternal love. The Emperor punished Rui Wang, used the wealth seized to construct infrastructure for Jiang Nan, and asked for him to write his own apology letter to post on the gates of Jiang Nan's cities, it was so the Emperor didn't want to fail the people. It really was a win all around, with no flaws.

This move seemed to look as though it was protecting Rui Wang, but on reflection, it was actually stomping Rui Wang to the ground. A *wang ye* who couldn't attend court, a *wang ye* who wrote his own crimes to present to the world. He wasn't a risk, and would become a blemish in history. In the future, people would most likely praise the Emperor for being loyal and righteous.

A ruler with such cunning, as subjects, they naturally had to be more cautious in their work. If they made the Emperor angry, even in death, they may not have a good name.

He Yuan quietly stood in the empty Grand Hall. The Emperor on the dragon chair had left, the officials beside him had also left. He looked calmly at the surroundings. A long time later, he smiled lightly: "To kill without a trace, as expected of my good brother."

"Your Highness," The little *taijian* who guarded the Great Hall carefully walked in front of him and informed in a small voice, "It's closing time."

Looking at the *taijian* whose legs were quivering, He Yuan smiled, "What, *ben wang* is very frightening?"

The young *taijian* knelt with a bang and started to kowtow, pleading: "Forgive me, forgive me, *wang ye*."

"Alright, stand up," He Yuan didn't look at the *taijian* as he walked to the doorway leading into the hall. When he turned back, he saw the *taijian* was still kowtowing, and laughed out loud, "Don't be afraid, *ben wang* won't ever stand here again."

The *taijian* froze. A beat later when he dared to look towards the doorway, he only saw the shining sun outside. Rui Wang had disappeared.

He patted his knees as he stood, mumbling to himself: "Still thinks he's the same Rui Wang, such arrogance."

The *hougong* was very busy at the moment because Qu Qing Ju had invited the wives of officials third-grade and up into the palace. Those who couldn't get out of the bed were the only ones in Jing who couldn't come.

This was the first time the Empress had invited the titled women into the palace. No matter what the Empress was intent on doing, the people under didn't dare to slight her. Some thought that since the Empress was pregnant, she wanted to pick *di* daughters from the families of officials to enter the palace as *fei* to serve the Emperor. However, those who wanted to seize the opportunity took along the unmarried *di* daughters of their family, and smart people came alone, unwilling to even mention their daughters.

Which woman in this world wanted to find other women to share their husband? Disregarding the fact that the Empress hadn't known she was pregnant when she had sent out the decree, even if she had known, based on the affection between Emperor and Empress, they wouldn't

benefit if they sent their daughters in, and would offend the Empress instead.

They also should think about where the Empress was living now. It was rumored that the Emperor had disliked the smell due to the new renovation of Kui Yuan Palace and specially made a decree that, until a month after the Empress has given birth, she was not to move out of the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace.

The wife and the husband were living together. For a *qie* to blindly interfere, wasn't that just begging for punishment?

Qu Qing Ju didn't feel any different even though she was now pregnant. When she reached the Imperial Gardens in her phoenix carriage, the people who should have come had arrived. Once she got out, the crowd knelt.

"*Furen*, don't be so courteous. Please rise," Qu Qing Ju looked at the different varieties of chrysanthemums placed in the garden. She smiled, teasing, "*Ben gong* has met you all before. *Furen,* don't be restrained with *ben gong* just because the location has changed."

The wives gave their thanks and sat down according to their ranks. Very quickly, *taijian* started to place rare chrysanthemums onto the pedestal previously constructed in the middle for the women to see. Each pot of chrysanthemums would be brought up for a time, and then the next one would be even more beautiful.

No matter if they were really amazed or just acting, they continuously gave their compliments, as though the chrysanthemums weren't of mortal hands and had been given down from the gods.

Qu Qing Ju slowly drank a cup of date tea. She wasn't allowed to drink any other kind, not even ginseng. Red date tea was the only tea that was good for her and the embryo, so she had gradually started to change her diet.

"This one is interesting," Qu Qing Ju pointed at a pot of flowers where the back was white, and the inside was purple. She had once had such a

flower, but she never knew the name. Because of her busy job, she never spent much time caring for it, and the flower, once it bloomed, wasn't as beautiful.

"Empress, this chrysanthemum is called the "Fragrant Young Phoenix". Because the petals are as beautiful as a phoenix, so it received this name." The *taijian* that had been holding the flower answered with joy. Originally, he had thought that this pot wasn't eye-catching and thus, wouldn't receive the favor of the Empress. Who knew that it was the only one the Empress would ask about? It was a blessing from the ancestors.

"'Fragrant Young Phoenix'?" Qu Qing Ju mused for a second, "That's a good name. Mu Jin, reward."

After seeing the Empress admire that flower, the wives followed in complimenting it, making this somewhat commonplace flower become rare.

"This female subject has only seen chrysanthemums in the books, the plum blossoms are jealous of its fragrance. Today, borrowing the good fortune of Empress to view so many chrysanthemums, it is really this female subject's luck," A girl wearing a light yellow short dress said in a moderately loud voice, "The 'Golden Dragon Leaping Clouds' was also extremely beautiful."

Qu Qing Ju looked at the person who spoke. It was a girl, about fifteen or sixteen. She had a simple *shuang ping ji*, but that made her seem even more youthful.

"For *zhen*, that 'Jade Phoenix Cloud' was the most beautiful," He Heng, followed by a crowd of attendants, walked towards the direction where Qu Qing Ju was standing. He looked at the girl who spoke, "Whose family are you?"

"This female subject is the *di* granddaughter of Grand Duke Jing, Qin Chao Yun, greets Emperor," The young girl saw the Emperor inquire

and stood with a calm face. She gave a full bow to He Heng, "This female subject spoke nonsense, and let the Emperor hear a joke."

Qu Qing Ju saw Qin Chao Yun's elegant posture and gave a small smile. Wasn't Grand Duke Jin Qin Bai Lu's grandfather, then wasn't Qin Chao Yun, Qing Bai Lu's sister or cousin? But the looks, the conduct, it was more pleasing than Qin Bai Lu.

"En, you spoke too much," He Heng calmly concluded, "There's so many elders present, there's no reason for you, as one of the younger generation, to speak."

Qin Chao Yun seemed shocked that the Emperor would say such a thing to her. She stilled, then with a normal expression, she responded: "The teachings of Emperor, this female subject will remember in her heart."

En, this conduct was much better than Qin Bai Lu. If a normal person had been admonished by the Emperor like this, she would have been red all over. But she acted as though the Emperor was teaching for her benefit. Qu Qing Ju sighed. It looked like the Qin Family did have some women with high attack power. Qin Bai Lu and Wei Ran Lu's mother only counted as the failures of the Qin Family.

He Heng felt a bit surprised. He couldn't help but look again at Qin Chao Yun. She didn't seem to have deliberately dressed up, but her appearance gave others a feeling of elegance. It didn't stain the Qin Family's reputation. When his gaze fell upon a pair of pearl embroidered slippers, he took away his gaze, his voice even colder: "*Zhen* isn't instructing you, but reminding you. At the very least, you were born of an educated and noble family so your conduct cannot stain the reputations of the noble families."

Everyone could hear that the Emperor didn't seem to like the Qin Family. They remembered that Rui Wang's *wang fei* was a daughter of the Qin Family, and didn't have a good relationship with the Empress. They instantly understood. This Qin Family had married a daughter to Rui Wang Fu. The result was that Rui Wang fell. So they wanted to

shove a daughter into the palace. They really did think everyone else was stupid and couldn't see what they wanted.

Some of the *furen* examined Qin Chao Yun's appearance and thought scornfully, just these looks, and she wanted to seduce the Emperor. Could she even compare to a finger of the Empress?

The Duchess of Zhong Yi, Tian Luo *shi* took a sip from a teacup, uncaringly commenting: "The reputation of the daughters of the Qin Family is good, but the rare ones who haven't learned well, it's of no benefit to their reputation."

The people beside her, hearing it, instantly agreed, provoking the Duchess Dowager of Jing's face to pale in anger.

He Heng didn't look at the women, turning to walk towards Qu Qing Ju. Look at the time, the flower banquet should be finishing now.

Chapter 98

As He Heng walked up to her, Qu Qing Ju prepared to stand and properly greet him but was stopped when he gently pushed on her shoulder: "There's no need, *zhen* just came from *muhou*'s palace, and came here to take a look."

Hearing that, Qu Qing Ju responded: "It had been planned for *muhou* to also come here, but who knew that the two of them would say that due to the complexity of the palace affairs, they wouldn't be able to attend this flower banquet." As she spoke, a hint of guilt appears on her face, as though it was her fault that the two Empress Dowagers were so busy.

"You're pregnant now and it's not necessary to do those burdensome matters," He Heng smiled as he sat down beside her, "Both *muhou* will understand." Towards the two Empress Dowagers, he was confident of their abilities.

Earlier, he had asked the *taiyi*. They said that during a woman's pregnancy, she can't be exhausted, and can't be angry, or else it would harm the body and the child. That was a big no-no.

Hearing He Heng say so, Qu Qing Ju smiled, "This is escaping from frustration into relaxation."

Even though he was sitting at the front of a crowd of women, He Heng wasn't the slightest bit unsettled. He even managed to disregard the womenfolk sitting below, full of ease as he chatted with Qu Qing Ju about some small matters, acting as though the other people were also pots of flowers.

Using a gap in the conversation, Qu Qing Ju looked down. All of the womenfolk seemed to be comfortably engaging in conversation with those beside them. The atmosphere hadn't cooled because the Emperor had arrived. They tried very hard to make the Emperor feel welcomed.

Qu Qing Ju felt that she couldn't waste the time of the womenfolk present and said: "Originally, everyone was to stay for a meal before leaving, but *ben gong* is pregnant. The *taiyi* has reminded many times not to sit long in the first three months so today, we won't keep everyone. To have neglected everyone so, *ben gong* hopes for everyone's understanding."

The womenfolk who had children stood in succession, thanking the Empress for inviting them as they mentioned that it was important to be careful in the first trimester. They also said that the Empress and the embryo inside were full of good fortune, and would smoothly coast and meet auspicious events along the way.

Qu Qing Ju smiled and let them leave. Before they left, she took another look at Qin Chao Yun. A pretty beautiful young girl. She knew how to show herself off. But it was a pity that she wore such plain clothes, but her slippers exposed her true nature.

If a person had to act, then they had to make it more realistic. Except for the normal hairpins, the plain clothing, how could she forget about her slippers?

The embroidered shoes of unmarried girls were frequently changed. Especially the kind that were encrusted with agate or pearls. Because it wasn't easy to clean, the pearls and agate would fall apart or the color would be wrong. So after they wore it once, they wouldn't wear it again. This caused families who didn't have the wealth to not frequently wear that kind of slippers.

This was where Qin Chao Yun had failed. If she had really preferred plain adornments, why would she wear that kind of slippers?

She might have had some schemes, some bravery but was still too inexperienced. It wasn't enough in front of He Heng.

Jin An Princess Royal had originally planned to privately talk with Qu Qing Ju after the banquet. But seeing the Emperor protect her so, she felt she didn't need to say those things and smiled as she left with the other womenfolk.

After the womenfolk left, the two of them returned to Tian Qi Palace to eat. Each dish was tested by a *taijian* before they started to eat.

The meat and vegetables of the dishes were perfectly complementing and all of them were beneficial to a pregnant mother and her child. Qu Qing Ju didn't like how the dishes became slightly less flavorful but still ate a lot.

After the meal, He Heng went to the front hall. Qu Qing Ju leaned back on the recliner, calmly asking: "The people who brought their *di* daughters into the palace, have you remembered all of them?"

"*Niang niang*, don't worry," Mu Jin put a thin blanket over her, "There were only a few families who took their unmarried daughters into the palace, *nubi* remembered them all."

Qu Qing Ju nodded. She was confident in Mu Jin, "The Qin Family is very fortunate to still be an educated noble family. Doing what they have done, it doesn't look anything like what a noble family would do." She wasn't very clear about the Qin Family, but based on what she knew about educated and literary families, weren't they elegant, respectful, modest yet not false? Why was it then, when it came to the Qin Family, it seemed that they were ruining the reputation of all literary families? Wasn't that morally wrong?

"Empress, you might not know," Jin Zhan, who usually had the most information, interjected, "*Nubi* heard that the last Grand Duke Jing was a man of great character. Who knew that the heavens were jealous and he died before thirty without even a son. They could only pass the title to his *shu di*'s son, who is the present Grand Duke Jing. The Grand Duke Jing's personality is weak and usually listens to the Duchess of Jing. In the past, it wasn't visible, but the Qin Family are more and more restless. If this continues, they might not be able to keep their label of a literary family."

"If that's the case, does it mean that the present Qin Family isn't considered as orthodox?" Yin Liu thought about how Rui Wang Fei acted, asking, "Since they aren't orthodox, Rui Wang Fei also acts like this?"

"Yes, thinking about it this way, Rui Wang Fei's branch is *shu*." Mu Jin gasped ruefully, "No wonder Rui Wang Fei is like that."

Even though she held a suspicious attitude regarding the division due to blood, Qu Qing Ju finally understood another matter. No wonder the conduct of the Qin Family was so short-sighted. So the real decision maker was a woman in the house. One had to know, in this time, no matter male or female, if they stayed in the home the entire time and didn't try to understand what was happening outside when they sent out orders, it was easy to make a wrong decision.

The inner compound easily restricted a person's knowledge and judgment.

When He Heng returned to the front hall, he abruptly dug out the list of the female candidates that the Department of Household Affairs had presented, "Rui Wang's conduct has become confused, one of the causes is that Rui Wang Fei could not restrain him. *Zhen* doesn't bear for *didi* to have a person who doesn't serve him with the entire heart, and specially bestows some female candidates to serve in Rui Wang Fu in hopes their conduct can move Rui Wang." After speaking, he then circled four names from the listed twenty eight, and let Qian Chang Xin leave with his words to send them to Rui Wang Fu.

These four female candidates didn't seem to be of significance, but in reality, their paternal homes were all in Jing. Even though they weren't of exceptional families, they still had some standing in Jing City, and they had done some things which He Heng didn't like. So when he sent the four girls to Rui Wang Fu, he felt very good.

He Heng put the list to one side. Right now, he didn't have any interest in taking a *fei*. In the past, he felt that the variety of beautiful women by his side was flowers on the gold, but now he felt, regardless of how many there were, if they weren't satisfactory, they just took up space.

"Come, send down the order, bestow every one of the female candidates in Tuan Fang Hall a pair of gold bangles for their dowry. Three days later, they can return to their homes for marriage so they don't have to stay in the palace."

By making such an order, the Emperor was explicitly telling others he had no intentions of taking the female candidates as *feipin* so he's allowing them to go home to marry of their own initiative.

The female candidates were sent home to marry on their own, the Empress was pregnant, then who would serve the Emperor? The people in the palace started to have thoughts, seemingly forgetting the lessons of the past.

Qin Bai Lu listened to the servants report on Qu Yue Su's sorry situation, her mood light. She rewarded a handful of copper to the clever-tongued *yahuan*. Raising a teacup, she said to Ru Hua beside her,

"I just want to see, without *wang ye*'s favor, how long she would survive."

Ru Hua saw the mirth on *wang fei*'s face and said helplessly: "*Wang fei*, *nubi* heard that today at court, *wang ye* was ……"

"His matters has nothing to do with me," Qin Bai Lu smiled coldly, "Right now, I can't even run the inner compound, much less what happens outside."

Seeing *wang fei*'s expression, Ru Hua understood. *Wang fei* still might not know that *wang ye* had been demoted and banned from court. This matter was extremely serious. If *wang fei*'s state was seen by *wang ye*, would there be another fight?

"*Ben wang*'s affairs naturally doesn't have anything to do with you," He Yuan strode in from outside. He didn't look at Qin Bai Lu and Ru Hua's expressions, and sat down at the front, faintly remarking, "Right now, your Qin Family has put their hats for the Emperor, how would they even look at *ben wang*?"

Qin Bai Lu's face instantly darkened. He Yuan's words were ugly, but it wasn't unsubstantiated. If he said it, then it meant that the Qin Family really did want to arrange someone to enter the palace.

He Yuan lightly laughed, "You really believe your Qin Family's daughters are goddesses that everyone falls in love? Your Qin Family might not find it embarrassing, but *ben wang* feels embarrassed for you." His fingers gently tapped on the arm of the chair, mocking, "Also, if you say that you have nothing to do with *ben wang*'s affairs, why don't you pack up and go home? *Ben wang* will definitely ask for a divorce from the Emperor."

Qin Bai Lu's heart jumped. She looked at He Yuan, trying to find even the slightest hint of humor on his face. But his face didn't seem to be joking.

"*Wang ye* ……*qie* was personally decreed by *xiandi* to be your *wang fei*, you cannot treat me this way," Qin Bai Lu stammered, "You can't divorce *qie*."

"Even if *xiandi* was here, if *ben wang* wanted to divorce you, then it will happen. Even more so, now that *xiandi* isn't here," He Yuan looked frigidly at her, "Get out, *ben wang* doesn't want to see you."

The rims of Qin Bai Lu's eyes reddened, she bowed and prepared to leave when she saw He Fu Er rush in, and then he said something which made it harder for her to endure.

Why would the Emperor bestow a few concubines down, and accuse her of not serving *wang ye* well? Qin Bai Lu felt that her face was burning like someone had slapped her, burning with pain.

He Yuan didn't care for her, only ordering He Fu Er to lead the people over for him to take a look.

Qin Bai Lu looked at He Fu Er as he trotted away. She felt as though a basin of cold water had poured over her, freezing her from head to toe.

Chapter 99

The four candidates who had been bestowed by the Emperor were all taken in. Only after they had become *yiniang* did the people of the *wang fu* find out the shocking reality – *wang ye* had been demoted. Since he wasn't a *qin wang* anymore, the allowances in the *fu* and the number of servants had to decrease. The size of the *wang fu* had to shrink so some people were going to be thrown out.

Just as the servants were worried for their future, they heard another piece of news. *Wang ye* had been banned from court, and his salary was to be docked for five years. Additionally, he had to admit his crimes in writing to the public.

The servants who had been reluctant to leave the palace weren't reluctant anymore. They waited for the notice to come so they could find a new employer. As for the *taijian* and palace maids who had came out of the Department of Household Affairs, they wanted to go back to the department to be assigned again. They would rather find another master than to serve one who had no future. At the very least, anything would be better than now.

Qin Bai Lu hadn't thought that such an event would happen. She listened to Ru Hua recite the happenings, and choked for a long time before stammering: "Didn't he want to divorce me? Now that he's like this, how can he divorce me?!"

Ru Hua sighed in helplessness. Not speaking of the ego that *wang ye* had, even if a normal person heard what *wang fei* had said, they would have been angry. In the beginning when *wang fei* just entered the *wang fu*, she rashly sorted out the concubines in the *fu*. When *wang ye* said a word, the two started to fight there and then, a subject of much mockery by the servants in the *fu*.

Now that it was like this, *wang ye* and *wang fei* had nothing to say to each other, and *wang ye* had lost power. *Wang fei* should be thinking of how to comfort *wang ye* or secure the people of the *houyuan*. But she was rejoicing in the misfortune. To keep going like this, would there be any feelings left?

Seeing Ru Hua wanting to speak but kept restraining herself, Qin Bai Lu uttered coldly: "Since *wang ye* doesn't want me to manage anything in the *wang fu*, then whatever happens in the *fu*, I don't need to spend the effort for nothing. If anyone begs to see me, just say that I'm ill."

"Yes, *wang fei*." Having served *wang fei* for almost a decade, Ru Hua was clear about *wang fei*'s personality. She wouldn't have appreciated any more conversation. She bowed and silently stood to one side.

But Qin Bai Lu couldn't remain calm for too long. Because the Qin Family had passed on the news that her cousin had been reproached by the Emperor in front of all the noblewomen. Earlier, she had called in

sick to avoid attending Qu Qing Ju's chrysanthemum banquet, so she hadn't thought such a thing would happen.

Listening to the cause of the matter, Qin Bai Lu was irritated. No wonder *wang ye* would speak of her Qin Family's daughters that way. So it had been because of this. It was also no wonder that her paternal family hadn't sent in their cards to her. So they had wanted to climb on the high branch that was the Emperor. She was only a failed *wang fei*, what use did she have?

After managing to clearly figure out the matter, Qin Bai Lu felt her heart becoming cold. Both her family and her husband were like this. She had no hope left in her life. Thinking about the pregnant Qu Qing Ju, she lowered her head to touch her own empty belly. She didn't understand why all the good things of the world happened to Qu Qing Ju. A good *popo*, a good husband, a good birth, even more, she would soon have a child.

Who said that the heavens had eyes? Some people lived well and others didn't.

"Ru Hua, pass my orders, Qu *shi* is seriously ill. To prevent her from infecting others, she will not live in Xi Ce Yuan. Today, she will move to the Xi Ping Zhai in the western corner to recuperate." She didn't believe all the women of the Qu Family would be lucky.

Ru Hua heard *wang fei*'s sinister order, and shook slightly, "*Nubi* will send it down right now."

Coming out of the *zhengyuan,* she looked at the large building and for some reason, felt a gust of cold enter from her back into her heart.

Qu Yue Su, who had been sick on the bed, watched as the servants of the *fu* roughly pack up her things and piled them in the middle of the room. She hated Qin Bai Lu for being cruel and hated herself because she couldn't do anything to the loathsome servants.

After the things in the room were packed up, one of the *mama*s came up and jerked off the blanket on her, coldly announcing; "Qu *ce fei*, you

should get up. *Wang fei* has ordered for you to move to Xi Ping Zhai before midnight. *Nubi* will have to offend you here." She easily pulled Qu Yue Su from the bed, who was dressed in her undergarments.

Qu Yue Su was seriously ill and couldn't tolerate her handling. Her body froze and she started to cough. As she covered her mouth, she looked hatefully at the *mama,* wanting to eat her flesh and break her bones.

"*Ce fei*, don't look like that at *nubi*. *Nubi* isn't the one at fault," The *mama* waved her hand saying to the other *yahuan* behind her, "What are you doing standing there? Help *ce fei* change."

When Yao Xi carried a bowl of hot medicine to enter the Ce Yuan, she coincidentally saw Qu Yue Su being pulled out of the room by two *mamas*, wearing a repulsive colored dress, her hair falling messily behind her back, cutting an extremely sorry figure, "What are you doing to *ce fei*?!" She put the bowl onto the ground and tried to rush forward to push aside the *mamas* dragging *ce fei*.

"Yao Xi *guniang*, this is *wang fei*'s order, you shouldn't interfere," The *mama* who was in command sneered, "If you make a fuss, I can only assume you are angry at *wang fei* and deliberately opposing *wang fei*'s command."

Yao Xi stilled. She was panicked and angry as she went forward to support Qu Yue Su, coldly asking: "What do you mean *mama*, that it is *wang fei*'s intention for *ce fei* not to be properly attired?"

The *mama* twisted her mouth and then responded: "Yao Xi *guniang* should say less. I'm old and can't hear anything." She waved her hand for the servants to drag Qu Yue Su away. Yao Xi could only follow.

The Xi Ping Zhai's name was better than the room. Yao Xi knelt by the bed with red eyes, looking at her mistress who was unnaturally flushed, kowtowing as she said: "*Zhuzi*, *nubi* will ask for *wang ye* to come, *wang ye* will save you."

"There's no need to go, *wang ye* won't come," She looked at Yao Xi who was crying in hurt, smiling, "Don't cry, everyone has to make the journey." She had been ill originally, and after suffering such an ordeal, she wouldn't survive.

"*Zhuzi*, don't say that, you will get better," Yao Xi went forward to grasp Qu Yue Su's hand, "*Nubi* will go make medicine for you, you'll get better after eating it."

Qu Yue Su shook her head. In a daze, she seemed to have seen the beautiful lanterns at the riverside at the Lantern Festival, the bustling and tight crowds, and Qu Qing Ju and the Emperor holding hands. She muttered: "That originally belonged to me, it's mine … … Qu … … Qing Ju, why … …"

Her voice gradually grew smaller and finally faded in the silence of the room. Yao Xi looked at the motionless person on the bed and cried out loud.

"*Wang fei*, Qu *ce fei* of Xi Ping Zhai has passed." Ru Hua entered the room and saw *wang fei* was reading a book by the window. She went forward to report in a small voice, "Yao Xi, the servant of Qu *ce fei*, hopes to see *wang ye*."

Qin Bai Lu flipped a page, her head not lifting as she rejected: "Let her go beg He Fu Er, I can't make the decision."

Ru Hua saw that *wang fei* didn't want to speak and could only retreat. Looking at Yao Xi waiting at the door, wearing plain clothing and her bright red and swollen eyes, she revealed a conflicted expression, not knowing how to tell her.

"*Wang fei* said that she hasn't been in charge of the household recently. If you want to see *wang ye*, then go find Chief Steward He," Ru Hua furtively looked at the surroundings and quickly stuffed a pouch filled with silver into Yao Xi's hands before acting normal as she returned to the *zhengyuan*.

Yao Xi slowly stood up. Looking at the pouch in her hand, she walked blankly towards the main building. No matter what, *zhuzi* had served *wang ye* for a length of time. Would he not even let the person be properly buried after death?

He Yuan had a beautiful woman in his arms as she served him wine. As he became drunk, he let another beauty play the zither to raise his spirits. He drank until he was almost senseless, and couldn't even see clearly.

"*Wang ye*, Qu *ce fei* has passed away." He Fu Er reported at his side, "Yao Xi, who served *ce fei,* asks for an audience."

"Who is Qu *ce fei*?" He Yuan placed a kiss on the face of the beauty in his arms. As the woman laughed, he frowned, "Gone is gone, why tell *ben wang*?"

"*Wang ye*, Qu *ce fei* is Empress' half-sister," he Fu Er saw that *wang ye* was drunk and could only pour tea as he added, "Many people are looking from the outside." No matter how it really was, they should make it appear better.

"The *meimei* of the Empress," He Yuan pushed away the beauty in his arms, rubbing his forehead to clear his mind. He took a long draw of the tea He Fu Er handed over, "If that's the case, then make sure the servants won't slight her, and bury according to protocol."

Not slighting yet according to protocol. That would be difficult. He Fu Er thought but didn't show any of it. Thinking about whom to appoint to carry out the affair, he praised, "*Wang ye* can take care of her, it's her good fortune. This one will get someone to do so."

He Yuan sneered: "If she wasn't Empress' *meimei*, *ben wang* wouldn't have spent the thought."

He Fu Er changed: "The fact that Qu *ce fei* had a *jiejie* who is the Empress, it is her good fortune."

"Alright," He Yuan gave a yawn, "According to you, then isn't it the Empress' misfortune to have a sister like her?"

He Fu Er laughed dryly. He knew that *wang ye* was drunk and didn't dare to reply.

"Leave," He Yuan once again gathered the beauty beside him into his arms, "don't disturb *ben wang*."

There were many women in Rui Wang Fu. It wasn't a major matter for a *ce shi* to die but this *ce shi* was the Empress' *meimei*. So they had to find someone to report it into the palace. The news first passed to the Department of Household affairs, then the department would report to the Empress. But, according to emotional reasoning, this matter should have been reported to the Empress directly. Yet, according to protocol, Qu Yue Su was only a *ce shi*. Such an unlucky minor matter shouldn't ever have passed to the Empress. In the end, He Fu Er pondered for a long time before finding a circular way.

Qu Qing Ju had been perplexed upon hearing that the junior supervisor of the Department of Household affairs had asked for an audience. At the moment, she wasn't in charge of palace affairs so why was the supervisor running to her?

When she finished reading the announcement of death that the supervisor had presented, she felt conflicted inside. She held the letter, but didn't know what to say. In her impressions, Qu Yue Su was a talented and beautiful woman. She could have married into a good family, but she had to run with her ambitions and picked a wrong path, ruining her life.

If she hadn't become a concubine of Rui Wang Fu in the beginning, and instead married a son of a noble family, then she wouldn't have lost her life.

Weakness could harm one's life, that was the original Qu Qing Ju. Greed could ruin a woman, that had been Qu Yue Su. The former was pitiful, the latter was lamentable.

"Empress," the junior supervisor of the Department of Household Affair saw the Empress' expression wasn't well and his heart jumped. He didn't know what the Empress was thinking.

"You are excused," Qu Qing Ju put down the letter in her hand, waving her hand, "Huang Yang, take some people with you to Rui Wang Fu, and burn some incense for *ben gong* to Qu *ce fei*, and add some paper money and candles."

It was lamentable as a concubine, but as a wife, how many women were happy?

In this era of one wife and many concubines, women were fated to sacrifice themselves in history.

Chapter 100

"Empress, this is what the Emperor ordered *nubi* to deliver to you."

Qu Qing Ju looked at the objects the palace maids held and saw that it was clothing and shoes suited for a pregnant female. She smiled, commenting: "It must have been difficult for Emperor to take all this trouble." Even though the palace maids on her side had already made many pieces for her, she would remember He Heng's goodwill.

Mu Jin saw the palace maids out to the doorway of the hall. When she came back, she found that everything had already been sorted away. She assumed Qu *xiaojie*'s death a few days earlier had affected the mood of the Empress, and went forward to ask: "*Niangniang*, *nubi* heard the *taiyi* say that when the embryo is three or four months old, there would be movements. Have you felt anything?"

"Really? *Ben gong* had thought it was an upset stomach," Qu Qing Ju had been very interested in the fetus in her belly. She rubbed her chin, pondering, "No wonder I kept feeling strange movements in my belly."

"If it was an ailment of the digestive system, Dean Du would have already found it," Mu Jin opened the windows in the room, looking at the appearance of the sky, "*Nubi* sees that the weather is well, *niangniang* could take a walk."

Lu *mama,* who had been standing silently at one side, looked out the window and nodded: "Mu Jin *guniang* is right. Right now, His Highness has been in *niangniang*'s belly for more than three months. Appropriate walking would be beneficial for you and His Highness."

Lu *mama* had been He Heng's decreed pregnancy *mama*. She was extremely knowledgeable about pregnancy. For Qu Qing Ju, she was an encyclopedia of pregnancy. From movement to diet to thinking, she knew everything.

"Since Lu *mama* says so, then let's walk," Qu Qing Ju touched her face, and took Jin Zhan's hand to stand up from the recliner.

Mu Jin placed a fox skin cape to Qu Qing Ju before allowing Qu Qing Ju to walk outside.

The weather at the beginning of winter wasn't very cold. Qu Qing Ju uneasily pulled at the cape on her body, taking in the sun that had no heat. Giving a yawn, she asked: "Heard yesterday that Emperor punished a palace maid, do you know what happened?"

Mu Jin and Jin Zhan exchanged a glance. In the end, it was Mu Jin who spoke: "*Nubi* isn't very clear but only heard that the Emperor found that the attire of the maid broke protocol. It provoked the Emperor's temper and he flared out." They had been afraid that this matter would affect the mood of the Empress and hadn't told her. Even though they hadn't said anything to *niangniang*, how did *niangniang* know?

Qu Qing Ju knew what they were thinking, lazily pointing out: "*Ben gong* is pregnant, many people in the *hougong* are having thoughts. Now, even the palace maids have other ideas."

"*Niangniang*, it doesn't matter what they think since Emperor isn't interested in them. What you should do now is rest and take care of the

fetus. Why should you waste attention on these people?" Mu Jin urged, "Futhermore, *niangniang*, you are Empress, can anyone overtake you?"

"Naturally, I won't waste attention on these people," Qu Qing Ju curled her lips in a smile, looking at a corner in front of her, "But there are those people who come to hinder *ben gong*'s eyes."

Mu Jin and Jin Zhan simultaneously followed Qu Qing Ju's gaze. Their faces both darkened. It was Han *liangdi* and the Emperor standing together as they talked. Looking at the smile on Han *liangdi*'s face, it was as though she had found a treasure.

Seeing the scene, the two looked worriedly at the Empress and found the smile on the corner of the Empress' mouth had grown wide. Her eyes though, had grown cold. Mu Jin couldn't resist saying, "*Niangniang*, maybe the Emperor just coincidentally encountered Han *liangdi*."

Qu Qing Ju snorted. There weren't that many coincidences in the world, and not that many emperors who would keep themselves pure for a woman. The previous dynasty had Yu Ming Emperor and he had been extolled for a few hundred years. It could be seen just how rare the love of an Emperor was, one in a few hundred years.

Han *liangdi* hadn't thought she would coincidentally encounter the Emperor in the Imperial Gardens. She looked bashfully at the upright figure of He Heng, asking in a soft voice: "Emperor, *qie* has learned a new song a few days ago, does Emperor want to listen?"

"Han *liangdi*'s voice is like a oriole in a valley. *Zhen* hasn't heard you sing for a time," He Heng saw a pavilion nearby and pointed at it, "How about you sing for *zhen* today?"

Han *liangdi* was so happy she almost couldn't disguise her expression. Following behind the Emperor and watching as he sat, she said: "*Qie* will disgracefully present."

"Cutting by candlelight by the western window, the moonlight silver frost, asking when next month she would return, but saw that she was at another place… …"

Ming He, standing by He Heng, listened and then sniffed his nose. The song seemed as though Han *liangdi* was trying to invite favour from the Emperor?

"She doesn't see the others tears, and doesn't know of the other's hurt … …"

When the song ended, Han *liangdi*'s eyes were slightly red as she pretended to be unaffected and bowed to He Heng: "*Qie*'s voice isn't as good as it was once, sorry to have disappointed the Emperor."

"En, Han *liangdi*'s songs are as pleasing to the ear as before, *zhen*……" He Heng glanced outside the pavilion and his eyelids jumped, "*Zhen* thinks that these matters of music, it's fine to play with occasionally, but shouldn't pay too much attention to these things. Right now, you are a fifth-grade *liangdi*. It isn't very dignified to practice singing all day. In the future if you want *zhen* to listen to a song, you can let the Department of Music rehearse and then let *zhen* see.

She hadn't thought she would hear such a thing. Han *liangdi* instantly choked. Even the tears that had almost brimmed out were choked down,

"Emperor's words are too harsh. *Qie* feels that Han *liangdi*'s songs are very good, and the people of the Music department cannot compare." Qu Qing Ju held Mu Jin's hand as she walked into the pavilion. After she walked in front of He Heng, she was going to bend in a greeting but was held up by He Heng.

"If you like it, then let Han *liangdi* go back and practice more. In the future, you and *zhen* can listen together," He Heng supported her to sit beside him, placing a stack of pastries in front of her, "Or you can let Han *liangdi* sing now. *Zhen* remembers that Han *liangdi* had a "Tan Lian Fu" that she sang well."

Qu Qing Ju smiled enchantingly, her eyes flickering before resting on Han *liangdi*. After thinking for a short while, she shook her head, rejecting: "No, it's alright. It's just as Emperor has said, Han *liangdi*

might not have a high rank but she is one of the *feipin* of the palace. To let her sing for *qie*, it is too humiliating."

"You are the Empress who mothers the world. There's no humiliation in her singing for you," He Heng slightly raised his chin as he looked at Han *liangdi*, "Han *liangdi*, what do you say?"

"To be able to sing for Emperor and Empress is *qie*'s good fortune," Han Qing He forced out a warm smile and bowed to Qu Qing Ju, "Please *niangniang*, allow *pinqie* to sing for you." She felt half of her heart was freezing and the other half was boiling. The turmoil was extremely painful, but she had to make herself a singer.

"Peach blossoms are bewitching, pear blossoms white, only the lotus blossom……"

Qu Qing Ju gave a yawn and lazily leaned on He Heng's shoulder, muttering: "Today's weather is so good, it makes people sleepy."

He Heng knew that after a woman became pregnant, she was easily drowsy. He reached around her back to let her lean more comfortably. The other hand slowly held a teacup that he sipped from as he frequently lowered his head to look at Qu Qing Ju leaning on his shoulder.

Han Qing He looked at the scene and for some reason, felt her throat hurt, as though singing one word was extremely difficult. By the end, even she didn't know how she sang.

"Stop," He Heng said in a small voice, "Empress is asleep, don't disturb her." He bent down to lift the person leaning on his shoulder. Then he took a deep breath, pretty heavy.

His empress looked beautiful and had a thin waist. Even three months pregnant, her belly wasn't visible. But when he lifted her, he found that she was much heavier than in the past. It did seem that what she ate everyday was effective.

Thinking that Qu Qing Ju's belly would get bigger in the next few months, he couldn't help but furrow his brow. By that time, he didn't know how much Qu Qing Ju would endure. Even sleep would be difficult then.

"Emperor, why don't *nucai* get someone to bring the sedan?" Seeing the situation, Ming He came forward to ask.

"No need," He Heng firmly held Qu Qing Ju, "This place isn't far from Tian Qi Palace."

"Yes," Ming He complied and dropped to follow behind with a bent body. He prepared for the possibility of the Emperor's hands faltering, he would use his body to cushion the Empress. From there to the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace, it was a somewhat horrifying experience for him.

"Respectfully seeing off Emperor and Empress," Han Qing He watched as the Emperor carried the Empress down the stairs of the pavilion. When she couldn't see their figures anymore, she finally angrily threw the cups from the table. What did the Empress mean, that she, Han Qing He, was born to be a singer?

They were all the Emperor's women, yet she had to sing for the other to hear!

"*Zhuzi*," The palace maid behind her was frightened by her actions. Scanning the surroundings, she sighed when she saw no one was around, urging, "Don't be angry outside, be careful since the walls have ears."

"Right now, she's pregnant and can't serve the Emperor but she's still holding onto the Emperor and not letting go. Even like this, many people are praising her for being virtuous, pah!" Han Qing He's anger couldn't be restrained. In the recent days as she bullied Feng Zi, she forgot her bounds and also forgot her identity.

"*Zhuzi*!" The palace made was so frightened her legs grew weak, kneeling in front of her, "Stop talking, that will get your head chopped off!"

"Stand up, why do I only have people as stupid as you serving me," Han Qing He breathed heavily. Seeing the person beside her pale in fright, she slowly calmed down, "Return!"

Such a good chance to get close to the Emperor had been ruined by Qu Qing Ju just like that. It was enough to make people hate!

Qu Qing Ju had her eyes closed as she leaned into He Heng's embrace. Hearing his ever heavier breaths, she opened her eyes when they neared Tian Qi Palace. She looked confusedly at the surroundings, before raising her head to look at He Heng, "Emperor?"

"Awake?" He Heng stopped walking, lowering his head to look at the woman with a confused face in his arms, "You fell asleep. I'm taking you back to the palace."

"I'm much heavier now, set me down," Qu Qing Ju urged, "Emperor, how could you carry me this entire way? It's too tiring."

"It's nothing," He Heng tightened his grasp, "Don't fuss, we're almost there. *Zhen* will carry you back."

Qu Qing Ju buried her head in his chest, muttering: "So embarrassing."

"I've seen you in more embarrassing situations," He Heng laughed out loud, "But it's true that you are much heavier now."

Qu Qing Ju pinched at his waist, sniffing: "Well, whose fault is that?"

"My fault, my fault," He Heng continued to take large steps forward, not at all affected by Qu Qing Ju's pinch, "Heavier is good, I like you heavier."

The crowd of people following behind silently pushed their heads lowered. They expressed that they hadn't heard anything.

……Of course, they also didn't see the fawning act of the Emperor as he tried to win favor with the Empress.

To be a Virtuous Wife Chapter 101-123

Chapter 101

"*Niangniang*," Fine sweat beaded Huang Yang's forehead as he looked in trepidation at the Empress who was partaking in her meal. He didn't even dare to breathe hard, as though any movement would enrage the Empress.

"What is it?" Qu Qing Ju slowly ate a bowl of chicken porridge. Matched with the crisp pickled cabbage, it was flavourful. She saw Huang Yang refraining from speech in a panicked manner as she rinsed her mouth with the tea that Jin Zhan handed over and wiped her mouth with a handkerchief from Yin Liu, "Say it, what has made you so panicked?"

Huang Yang dropped to kneel at Qu Qing Ju's feet: "Han *liangdi* was found this morning in the lotus pond of the Imperial Garden, already swollen."

Qu Qing Ju stilled. Han Qing He died?

"How can you mention such a matter in front of *niangniang*?" Mu Jin's brows furrowed. Now that *niangniang* was pregnant, this kind of matter would scare *niangniang* and the small Highness in her belly, "Shut your mouth."

"It's fine," Qu Qing Ju's left hand slowly caressed her slightly upraised belly, "Your expression wouldn't be this terrible for this kind of minor matter. Is it related to the cause of Han *liangdi*'s death?"

Huang Yang saw *niangniang*'s calm composure and could only say through gritted teeth: "The people of the Department of Household Affairs found a white jade hairpin on Han *liangdi*'s body. Someone recognized that it was *niangniang*'s."

When Jin Zhan and Yu Zan heard the words, their faces paled in fright. The clothing and hair ornaments of *niangniang* were under their management. If *niangniang*'s things were lost, the most suspicious

people would be them. The two knelt down, faces terrible as they said: "*Niangniang*, *nubi* wasn't able to look after the ornaments properly and begs for mercy."

Qu Qing Ju laughed out loud, motioning for the two to stand up. Then she stood, uttering: "Such a cold and desolate month but such a good play. They could even find the white jade hairpin that *ben gong* had lost half a month ago. Since right now, it's the two *muhou* who are in charge of the *hougong*, let us go visit Fu Shou Palace. *Ben gong* is very curious about this matter."

Huang Yang looked in puzzlement at the Empress. *Niangniang* didn't even seem to be the slightest bit angry.

Mu Jin was perplexed and then recovered, "That's so true. Huang Yang, go prepare the phoenix carriage. From last night, the snow had been coming down. *Zhuzi* is pregnant with His Highness. She can't endure the wind."

"Yes," Huang Yang cheerfully stood and turned to let the servants prepare the phoenix carriage.

In Fu Shou Palace, the two Empress Dowagers, He Heng, Jin An Princess Royal, the three other *feipin* and the main and assistant supervisor of the Department of Household Affairs were gathered for the matter of Han *liangdi*'s drowning.

Empress Dowager Wei's expression finished listening to the report the palace maid kneeling had reported. With a grave face, she repeated: "You mean to say that yesterday in the late evening, Han *liangdi* went out of her residence alone. An hour later, you felt that it was strange, and started to search with the other servants and eventually found Han *liangdi*'s corpse?"

"Yes," The one that answered was Han *liangdi* personal maid. She looked frightfully at the room full of powerful people, "Before *zhuzi* left, she said … …"

"What did she say?"

"Said that if the Empress could put importance on her, then in the future, she would receive the Emperor's favor." When the palace maid finished speaking, she pressed her forehead to the floor, so afraid she trembled all over.

"According to what this palace maid says, the one who invited Han *liangdi* out was Empress, and then the Department of Household Affairs found the Empress' hairpin on Han *liangdi*'s body," The corners of Empress Dowager Wei's lips drew back, her voice scornful as she concluded, "Meaning that the Empress murdered Han *liangdi*?"

He Heng's brows furrowed as he asked: "*Muhou*, Qing Ju is the Empress of a country. Why would she try to kill an unimportant minor *feipin*?" Last night, he had slept in the front hall of Tian Qi Palace, and hadn't been together with Qing Ju, but he believed that Han *liangdi*'s death had nothing to do with Qu Qing Ju.

Hearing her son unconsciously call out her *erxi*'s name in front of so many people, Empress Dowager Wei raised an eyebrow at him before responding; "*Aijia* is very suspicious of the matter as well."

"Empress Dowager, Emperor," The palace maid's voice shook: "It was because half a month ago, *zhuzi* had sung for the Emperor in the gardens, and had been found out by the Empress. Not long after that, people started to shortchange *zhuzi*'s allowance. *Zhuzi* went out last night to see the Empress because there was no other way for her to survive. Please, Empress Dowager and Emperor, give *zhuzi* justice."

"Yesterday in the evening, it started to snow. The Empress is already three months pregnant. She would go visit Han *liangdi* in the snow and somehow managed to push Han *liangdi* into the lotus pond," Jin An Princess snorted, "After doing all that, she wouldn't have detected that she had lost something, just returning to rest in the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace. She is too vigorous."

"*Nubi* didn't say that the Empress did it," The head of the palace maid shrunk back as she stuttered, "And *nubi* thinks that it could have been a servant … …"

"Outrageous. How can *zhen* not be clear about when someone enters or leaves *zhen*'s residence?" He Heng slammed the table, "Tian Qi Palace has guards and secret bodyguards at all times. Not just the Empress, even the normal palace maids and *taijian*'s entry and exit would be recorded. You couldn't slander the Empress so you turn to slander Empress' people. What is your purpose?"

The palace maid clearly hadn't thought of that flaw. She had been taken into the palace by Han Qing He from the *wangfu* and didn't know that the security of Tian Qi Palace was that stringent. A beat later, she started to bang her head continuously: "*Nubi* doesn't mean anything, and asks for Empress Dowager and Emperor to investigate thoroughly."

Empress Dowager Wei raised a teacup as she looked icily at the kowtowing palace maid. She didn't care that the maid's forehead was bleeding and turned to say to *Muhou* Empress Dowager: "Not even these people, even us sisters had entered the palace for a few years before knowing of the matter. The daring villain, who has plotted to harm the palace *fei* and slander the Empress, is truly evil."

"That's so true. *Aijia* had been Empress for more than a year after entering the palace before finding out that there are hidden guards in Tian Qi Palace to protect the Emperor," *Muhou* Empress Dowager smiled mockingly as she raised her head, her gaze sweeping over the three of Jiang, Feng, and Luo. "But in the past, no one dared to frame *aijia*. The younger generation is much more courageous."

Jiang, Feng and Luo couldn't sit and walked together to kneel at the center of the hall. Until the matter had been solved, all three of them were suspects. But the consequences of the enormous crime of plotting to harm the Empress and the palace *fei* would reach even their families. Could they bear to suffer the outcome?

"Alright, you three don't have to kneel," Empress Dowager Wei set down the teacup, "Regarding *Aijia*'s *erxi*, *aijia* is very clear. She isn't a person who would do such a thing. Even if she did, she wouldn't act so stupidly. *Aijia* doesn't care why the person is so reckless, but if they

could admit it themselves, *aijia* won't act against her family. But when *aijia* finds out personally, don't blame *aijia* for being ruthless."

The main and vice supervisors of the Department of Household Affairs, by this time, had realized that the two Empress Dowagers and the Emperor were protecting the Empress. The three had worked together for many years and didn't need to exchange a look to know what the others were thinking.

The main supervisor of the department stepped forward; "Emperor, Empress Dowagers, *nucai* has just found that Han *liangdi* showed traces on the back of the head from being hit with something heavy. From the impact and the location, the criminal must be shorter than Han *liangdi*, and is a female. The Empress is slightly taller than Han *liangdi*, and pregnant women cannot lift heavy objects so the criminal cannot be the Empress. *Nucai* has also looked at the record from yesterday to today of the entrance and exit records of Tian Qi Palace. There are no suspects among the palace maids and *taijian* that attend the Empress. From this, it can be concluded that the Empress is certainly unconnected to the matter of Han *liangdi*.

He Heng nodded, his face softening: "It seems someone wants to hit two birds with one stone." His gaze swept across the three *feipin*, his gaze landing on Luo Yin Xiu and Feng Zi Jin who were shorter than Han Qing He, his face darkening again, "Catch all of the palace maids and *taijian* that serve Luo *guipin* and Ping *cairen*, and interrogate each one."

"Emperor!" Feng Zi Jin crawled forward, "*Qie* is innocent, Emperor!"

Luo Yin Xiu looked at the overly excited Feng Zi Jin and continued to keep her head down.

"Emperor, the Empress asks to see you." Ming He came in to report.

"Allow," He Heng's fierce expression instantly became gentle. When Qu Qing Ju entered, he couldn't resist standing and supporting the person to sit beside him, "It's snowing outside, why did you come?"

"Just heard that Han *liangdi* passed away, and *qie*'s hairpin was coincidentally on her body. *Qie* couldn't stay away," Qu Qing Ju frowned slightly, "*Qie*'s hairpin was lost half a month ago. It was that time when *qie* fell asleep in the Imperial Gardens. The location was unknown. Emperor had then specially bestowed *qie* a set of cat's eye hairpins as a replacement. Who knew that it would be found at Han *liangdi*'s body."

He Heng remembered. Half a month ago, he and Qu Qing Ju heard Han *liangdi* sing and then Qu Qing Ju feel asleep. Afterwards, he had carried her back to Tian Qi Palace before they had discovered that two hairpins had fallen off. On the second day, he had gotten Ming He to deliver a box of hair ornaments decorated with cat's eye stones to the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace. It seemed that the white jade hairpin was one of the two that had fallen off before.

"Don't be angry, *zhen* knows you aren't connected with the matter," He Heng patted the back of the hand, "*Zhen* will definitely send someone to investigate and clear your innocence."

Qu Qing Ju sighed and nodded her head slowly. She looked in apology at the two Empress Dowagers: "*Erxi* is extremely unfilial to have made both *muhou* worried."

"This matter has nothing to do with you," *Muhou* Empress Dowager said, "Empress, you are just too naïve. This *hougong* always have those of malicious and daring thoughts. *Aijia* and your *muhou* have been in the *hougong* for so many years, but really haven't seen tactics as stupid as this one. To keep such a person in the *hougong*, *aijia* wouldn't feel safe."

"That's so true. You are pregnant, don't waste attention on such matters. *Aijia* is here for anything and won't let them slight you." When Empress Dowager Wei finished talking, she said to He Heng, "Take the Empress away quickly. Such unlucky matters shouldn't dirty one's ears. You two, don't worry, *aijia* and *jiejie* will certainly uncover the truth. You should leave here now."

He Heng stood and bowed to the two, “This son has no attention to spare for the matters of the *hougong* and has to trouble the two *muhou*.”

“Leave, leave,” Empress Dowager Wei waved her hand, shooing them off like she was hurrying away ducks. After the Emperor and Empress left, she gave a cold smile, calmly ordering: “For anyone suspicious, use heavy torture. *Aijia* doesn’t believe that it can’t be found out.”

She swept a cold gaze at He Heng’s three *feipin*: “This *hougong* will not tolerate women who think themselves clever!”

…

The three of Jiang, Feng and Luo couldn’t help but shudder. Jiang Yong Yu’s face was solemn as she bowed respectfully: “Thanks Empress Dowager for instructing.”

Empress Dowager Wei slightly nodded her head at her, and then said to Feng and Luo who were still kneeling: “Before the matter is solved, you two will stay in the Sheng Shen Zhai behind Fu Shou Palace to reflect, and will save *aijia* from having to put people to watch you.”

“Yes.” Luo Yin Xiu respectfully gave a kowtow. She was clear that the Empress Dowager was cutting off their escape route. But since she didn’t do it, what did she have to be afraid of?

Chapter 102

In the place that was the *hougong*, there were many secrets. It was possible that there wouldn’t be a trace of what you had done. The crucial aspect was how high you climbed and how steady you stood.

The two Empress Dowagers ordered the Department of Household Affairs to use torture. The people who served Luo Yin Xiu and Feng Zi Jin all went through the process. It didn’t take their lives but it made people unable to even plead for death. Unable to endure the last cycle of

torture, a palace maid called Zhu Yu spilled it all, even revealing what her *zhuzi* had done in the *wang fu*.

"*Aijia* did wonder how a *feipin,* who didn't even have a secure position, could kill someone and remain undetected. So there was someone who helped," *Muhou* Empress Dowager read through the confession and handed it to Empress Dowager Wei sitting beside her. She sighed, exclaiming, "This Feng *shi* is too bold."

Empress Dowager Wei scanned the confessions, so angry that her face became red. She wasn't one who showed what she felt, but what the confessions revealed was shocking and infuriating. Especially when the criminal was someone she had personally picked for her son out of the female candidates.

"Come, lead Luo *guipin* and Ping *cairen* here," She suppressed her anger and sighed at *Muhou* Empress Dowager. "We should have known earlier. *Aijia* shouldn't have arranged for such a cruel woman to serve at the Emperor's side." No wonder Heng'er and *erxi* had been residing everyday but still didn't have any children in the past. It must have been the poison which harmed the body and it took about half a year to recover from.

"*Meimei*, you should not blame yourself. You can only see a person's appearance but not their hearts," *Muhou* Empress Dowager comforted, "It was lucky that it wasn't more serious. It was the heavens that protected them. But since this matter has been solved, should we tell Emperor and Empress?" Such a major matter, the Empress poisoned when she had been in the *wang fu*, it wasn't right not to inform them.

"This kind of major incident, we can't conceal it from the Emperor and Empress," Empress Dowager Wei had recovered her composure, "Also, send someone to lead Shu *gui taifei* and Rui Wang over."

"It should be like this," *Muhou* Empress Dowager nodded. This matter was related to Shu *gui taifei*.

As they talked, Feng and Luo came in. Just two days in Sheng Shen Zhai but both of them looked much more fragile. Luo *guipin* still managed to keep her posture but Ping *cairen* was a sorry figure. Both eyes were dry and unfocused as though she hadn't slept for two whole days.

"Come, give Luo *guipin* a seat." *Muhou* Empress Dowager's lips curled. Even though she was smiling, others could still feel her imposing dignity.

"Thanks, Empress Dowager of both palaces," Luo Yin Xiu released a breath inside. To let her sit now, it meant that the matter had been investigated. She was clear that she had nothing to the matter but was afraid that others would wrongly accuse her. After seeing the present situation, she had nothing to worry about.

Qu Qing Ju heard that the two Empress Dowagers had called for her and He Heng to Fu Shou Palace, and looked in shock at He Heng who had been playing a match of *weiqi* with her: "*Muhou* has investigated the matter this quickly?"

He Heng naturally wouldn't inform her of the various strategies the Department of Household Affairs had, and only set down the stone in his hand. He smiled, answering: "In this world, when something is done, then a trace will be found. You have to know that in this world, there isn't a case that cannot be solved. It's only whether someone will seriously investigate it."

Qu Qing Ju agreed with He Heng's words. People always talked, the best way for others not to find out was to not do it, so it was better to not commit malicious acts.

Seeing her face full of approval, He Heng stood, adding: "Since *muhou* wants to see us, let's go take a look at Fu Shou Palace." He ordered for a servant to bring a fox skin cape and then made Qu Qing Ju put on a thick rabbit-skin hand muff before leading her out of Tian Qi Palace.

Coming out of Tian Qi Palace, Qu Qing Ju felt the harsh winter wind blow into her face. The snow on the road had been swept away by the

taijian but the roofs and the trees were full of snow. She took in a breath, "Such heavy snow."

Reaching to pull the collar of her cape higher to cover her face, He Heng helped her onto his own carriage. Once the two of them settled, he replied: "Now, it's the twelfth month. It's normal to have this much snow."

Even though she had seen the heavy snow of Jing City last year, Qu Qing Ju had a special feeling for snow. It was most likely due to the fact that she lived in the south and always read of the people making snowmen in the language books and had been disappointed that she couldn't make one herself.

Not being able to obtain something that other people told them about from when they were little, most people would be stubborn in their attachment.

Qu Qing Ju occasionally lifted the curtain as the Imperial carriage traveled and saw the palace maids and *taijian* kneeling on both sides of the road. Snow was still falling, the ground was cold, but those people knelt with their backs straight, not a hint of slacking.

As they entered Fu Shou Palace, He Heng saw Feng *shi* kneeling in the center of the hall. Kneeling behind her was a few pale-faced palace maids and *taijian*. His expression darkened and held hands with Qu Qing Ju to bow to the two Empress Dowagers before sitting to the side.

The ground and walls of Fu Shou Palace were heated. Qu Qing Ju had taken off the fox skin cape but still felt hot. Using her hand to slightly pull at her clothing, she looked at Feng Zi Jin kneeling on the ground, asking: "*Muhou*, what is going on?"

"These years, this Feng *shi* has been very brave. Emperor, Empress, take a look," Empress Dowager Wei handed Chun Yu's confession to He Heng. Seeing her son's face become colder, she knew he was angry, and sighed, "It's *muhou* who has to apologize for arranging such a villain beside you."

"*Muhou* cannot say that. Feng *shi* is malicious and adept at disguising herself. Is that *muhou*'s fault?" He Heng furiously slammed the confession onto the table beside him, "It was *zhen* who was blind to have kept such a woman like this for so many years."

"Emperor!" Feng Zi Jin knew that the matter had been exposed and looked discontentedly at the furious Emperor, "If it wasn't that Emperor had to marry her, and favor her, why else would *qie* have to do such things?"

Seeing the hand that Feng Zi Jin pointed at her, Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow. The marriage had been decreed by Qing De Emperor and He Heng who decided to marry the bride, so why did it become all her fault in the end? If she had the ability, she should be trying to kill Qing De Emperor and He Heng, what was the point of poisoning the original Qu Qing Ju?

"Empress was the *wang fei* who *xiandi* decreed. Emperor and her are in deep love, it's the natural order of the world. You are just a small *qieshi* who, in jealousy, decided to plot against the Emperor. You poisoned *wang fei* in the *wang fu*, murdered Han *liangdi* after entering the palace and framed the Empress. Such a frightening person, and shameless to be angry at the Emperor for marrying. It is very funny," Empress Dowager Wei smiled icily, "So many *shiqie* in this world. If they were all like you, wouldn't the world end?"

"*Shengmu* Empress Dowager, you were only a *feipin* too. Didn't you have times when you had been discontent, but you still became the high up *Shengmu* Empress Dowager?" Feng Zi Jin raised her head to stare directly at Empress Dowager Wei, scornfully asking, "What's wrong with *qie*? We're all women, how is Qu Qing Ju nobler than me?"

"A villain like you cannot compare to *Shengmu* Empress Dowager," *Muhou* Empress Dowager looked coldly at Feng *shi* babbling nonsense, "Both in appearance and morals, you cannot compete against *Shengmu* Empress Dowager. In the past when *aijia* was still Empress, *Shengmu* Empress Dowager respected *aijia* at every turn, and didn't slight *aijia* who did not receiving any Imperial favor. The Emperor she raised is

intelligent and thinks of the people. Becoming *Shengmu* Empress Dowager, it is the will of the heavens. A woman such as you who dares to poison the wife, how can you compare? You are full of nonsense."

Muhou Empress Dowager's words defended *Shengmu* Empress Dowager from all angles and told other people that she was approving and in great favor for *Shengmu* Empress Dowager to sit and rise at the same height as her. She even pushed the matter onto the fate of the heavens, flattering both Empress Dowager Wei and the Emperor and explicitly expressed her position.

When she heard the speech, Qu Qing Ju finally understood how *Muhou* Empress Dowager, in all these years without the favor of the Emperor and with no son of her own, managed to keep her seat and why Qing De Emperor hadn't ever thought to dispose of her. Her attitude and tactics, such an understanding woman. But just like Empress Dowager Wei, she hadn't met a reliable man, it was so regretful.

She turned her head to look at He Heng. As expected, his expression had relaxed, clearly very satisfied and grateful for *Muhou* Empress Dowager's words.

"Emperor, Shu *gui taifei* and Rui Wang have arrived."

"Summon."

"*Er chen* greets both *muhou*, greets *huang xiong, huang sao."* When He Yuan entered the hall, he calmly bowed to the four people as though he didn't see the people kneeling.

This was the first time Qu Qing Ju saw He Yuan after He Heng had ascended the throne. Due to the fact that she didn't like He Yuan in the first place, she hadn't looked at him when he entered. But once the other spoke, she felt that He Yuan felt wrong, as though he went from a delusional youth to a steady yet silent uncle. The change was so drastic that she felt suspicious that the person in front of her and the He Yuan of the past were two different people.

When Shu *gui taifei* saw Feng Zi Jin kneeling on the ground, her expression became slightly ugly. Before she could speak, *Muhou* Empress Dowager threw the confession in front of her, "Shu *gui taifei*, look at that!" If Empress Dowager Wei had done that, others might have said that she was arrogant. But if *Muhou* Empress Dowager did it, then it was right.

He Yuan looked at the confession that landed on the ground, and then at his *mufei*, whose expression had changed. He then knew that *mufei* had done something in the *hougong* that the Empress Dowager had found out. When he bent down to pick up the paper, and saw that Ping *cairen* and *mufei* had cooperated to kill Han *liangdi* to frame the Empress, his calm face became white. He turned to look at Shu *gui taifei*, "*Mufei*?"

Shu *gui taifei* didn't dare to look at her son. She apprehensively declared to the two Empress Dowagers: "This throne should belong to my son. Why is it that you can live here?!"

"Stop her mouth!" *Muhou* Empress Dowager commanded darkly, "Shu *gui taifei*, *aijia* thinks that you should be more careful. The Emperor ascended the throne properly and rightly. When *xiandi* made his will, all the advisors had been present. Your misrepresentation of the facts won't be tolerated!"

"*Mufei* is ignorant, *er chen* begs both Empress Dowagers to spare her life!" He Yuan watched as his *mufei* was held down by two *mama*s, a handkerchief stuffed into her mouth. He gritted his teeth and knelt in front of He Heng, "Please, Emperor, punish lightly."

Qu Qing Ju had been sitting by He Heng's side. Looking at a once willful and brazen person kneeling in front of her, she felt a strange sense of pity.

When Shu *gui taifei* saw it, she couldn't stop shaking her head. Tears of panic fell down as she couldn't speak. No one would recognize that just a year ago, she had been the Shu *guifei*, the most favored of the *hougong*.

Ten years west, ten years east. But Shu *gui taifei* and He Yuan hadn't thought that this day would happen.

Qu Qing Ju couldn't help but look at the two Empress Dowagers and found that their expressions were frightfully calm, as though Shu *gui taifei* and He Yuan were putting on an unfunny play in front of them and they were criticizing from high up.

She couldn't help but touch her belly. If she was Shu *gui taifei*, she wouldn't want to see this either.

Chapter 103

The temperature of winter mornings were especially cold. The Imperial Guards guarding the palace doors drew in a cold breath but didn't dare stomp their feet to warm themselves. Watching the officials who usually preferred to ride a horse, sit on the sedan, the guards whose faces were paralyzed from the cold felt envious.

"Hey brother, did you hear that Ning Wang is coming back to court?" The two Imperial Guardsmen that were changing shifts walked out of the palace gates, one of the brawny men said in a low voice as he looked at the surroundings, "I heard yesterday many people had sent up a memorandum to the Emperor about such a matter."

The slightly thinner and taller one gave a superior expression: "It is certain that Ning Wang would return to court. *Xiandi* was partial to Rui Wang so he locked Ning Wang on the outside. Now that it's cold, the Emperor is kind and honest, it's natural that he would summon Ning Wang back. Just watch, in three days, Ning Wang will be summoned back to court by the Emperor."

The brawnier one rubbed his head, laughing honestly: "You're right. Rui Wang did such large mistakes, but the Emperor didn't take his life due to fraternal love. So it should be the same for His Highness Ning Wang." If he had a say, Ning Wang was really mistakenly accused and locked

up. Maybe the assassination had been done by Rui Wang. It was just that *xiandi* was partial and used Ning Wang as a shield.

The thinner and taller one saw his mentality and didn't speak further, sighing inside. The twists and turns of the thoughts of those in the Imperial Family, whether it was fraternal friendship or anything else, it had nothing to do with them guards. Now that Ning Wang was returning to court, Rui Wang had become a powerless *jun wang*. These two had been at odds from the beginning. Rui Wang had been arrogant and offended countless people. One of those victims had been Ning Wang. There would be a reckoning for Rui Wang now.

On the court, all the officials were discussing the matter of Ning Wang's return to the court. Some said since that Ning Wang had been locked under *xiandi*'s orders, the Emperor shouldn't change it. Some said that Ning Wang now knew his mistake and was brothers with the Emperor, it was right for him to return to court to help shoulder the burden for the Emperor, and that was all the reason to summon him to court.

In reality, everyone knew that it was suspicious that Ning Wang had been locked up by *xiandi*. Some suspected that Ning Wang had been a scapegoat pushed out by *xiandi* for Rui Wang. But now, no one dared to mention that thought, and only fought over whether Ning Wang should return to court or not.

Those that were at odds with Ning Wang naturally didn't want Ning Wang to return but there were people who supported Ning Wang's return. Those of keen eyes found that among those that supported Ning Wang's return were many of the conservative faction. So these people started to think about the Emperor's intentions.

By now, Ning Wang's power base had been swept clean. Those officials that had been close to Ning Wang were suppressed completely by the officials that the Emperor favored, and some became part of the conservative faction. Was the Emperor trying to show the world he had fraternal love?

The Duke of Zhong Yi who had once proved Ning Wang's guilt in front of *xiandi* suddenly changed his stance. The main idea was that Ning Wang had repented and changed for the better, he could make up for his offenses by returning to the court and working for the Emperor etc etc.

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"At the very least, she's the Emperor's cousin. If she married, her husband's family wouldn't dare to treat her unwell," Thinking about Wei Ran Shuang's fragile act, Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow. Hopefully, after Wei Ran Shuang married, she wouldn't keep acting so pettily.

"Who knows what her family is thinking, she's not a good person anyway." Jin Zhan scornfully twisted her mouth. She still remembered that Wei Ran Shuang had wanted to be the Emperor's *qieshi*.

"That was said well," He Heng had a smile on his face as he strode in. He glanced at Jin Zhan before proclaiming, "A woman like that, she really isn't a good person."

"Emperor!" Jin Zhan and the others were so frightened their faces were pale, legs soft as they knelt down. She hadn't thought that the Emperor would hear her words. What would happen if the Emperor thought the Empress was jealous, why did she act like Yin Liu and couldn't control her mouth now?

"Stand up, *zhen* knows you all protect Empress," He Heng waved his hand, evidently not caring what Jin Zhan said. He walked in front of Qu Qing Ju and bent down. Seeing a cup of red date tea in front of her, he said, "I read some medicine books a few days ago. They said that a pregnant woman who drinks too much red date tea would increase blood circulation and it isn't good for the body." Finishing, he pushed the red date tea to one side.

When did he start studying that area? Qu Qing Ju looked at him, smiled and asked, "Then what should I drink?"。

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Knowing that his Empress was changing the topic, He Heng saw the even brighter smile on her face, and could only smile and shake his head, ordering the servants to serve the meal.

The food in the palace on the surface was set down, but the raw materials differed within the standards set down. The little kitchen Qu Qing Ju had almost equalled the Imperial Kitchen in terms of product. This was disregarding He Heng who frequently got the Department of Household Affairs to send things over to Qu Qing Ju.

After the noon meal, He Heng leaned on the recliner as he read, Qu Qing Ju leaning on him as she played with a jade nine ring chain. A short while later, she untangled the chain in her hand, yawning as she threw it to one side. She twisted her body to place her head on He Heng's thigh, "So boring."

He Heng looked at her slightly swelling belly, cautiously putting his hand on top. Occasionally, he could feel the small movements of the little life within. He smiled, asking: "What do you want to play, I'll have them prepare."

"Nothing I really want," Qu Qing Ju's hand moved back and forth on his leg, "Why don't you talk about what you thought when you first saw me."

"At that time, you were wearing heavy makeup and didn't dare to look at me. I really thought I had married a weak and timid wife," He Heng rested his hand on her back, allowing Qu Qing Ju to mess around on his leg, "I'm very happy you managed to overcome the poison Feng *shi* fed you. Otherwise, I would never know that a man and woman can be together like this."

Qu Qing Ju's hand stilled. She didn't know what to say. A beat later, she asked: "If I hadn't made it through?"

He Heng gripped her hand tightly that she felt some pain: "There isn't anymore 'if'. The result is that you are here, *zhen* is here."

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There was nothing in being alone at the top, so each dynasty, each generation of emperor would have women that they favored. It was only because they couldn't find what they wanted with the bodies of the woman they favored, so they would continue to look for the next one.

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Chapter 104

The temperature of winter mornings were especially cold. The Imperial Guards guarding the palace doors drew in a cold breath but didn't dare stomp their feet to warm themselves. Watching the officials who usually preferred to ride a horse, sit on the sedan, the guards whose faces were paralyzed from the cold felt envious.

"Hey brother, did you hear that Ning Wang is coming back to court?" The two Imperial Guardsmen that were changing shifts walked out of the palace gates, one of the brawny men said in a low voice as he looked at the surroundings, "I heard yesterday many people had sent up a memorandum to the Emperor about such a matter."

The slightly thinner and taller one gave a superior expression: "It is certain that Ning Wang would return to court. *Xiandi* was partial to Rui Wang so he locked Ning Wang on the outside. Now that it's cold, the Emperor is kind and honest, it's natural that he would summon Ning Wang back. Just watch, in three days, Ning Wang will be summoned back to court by the Emperor."

The brawnier one rubbed his head, laughing honestly: "You're right. Rui Wang did such large mistakes, but the Emperor didn't take his life due to fraternal love. So it should be the same for His Highness Ning Wang." If he had a say, Ning Wang was really mistakenly accused and locked up. Maybe the assassination had been done by Rui Wang. It was just that *xiandi* was partial and used Ning Wang as a shield.

The thinner and taller one saw his mentality and didn't speak further, sighing inside. The twists and turns of the thoughts of those in the Imperial Family, whether it was fraternal friendship or anything else, it had nothing to do with them guards. Now that Ning Wang was returning to court, Rui Wang had become a powerless *jun wang*. These two had been at odds from the beginning. Rui Wang had been arrogant and offended countless people. One of those victims had been Ning Wang. There would be a reckoning for Rui Wang now.

On the court, all the officials were discussing the matter of Ning Wang's return to the court. Some said since that Ning Wang had been locked under *xiandi*'s orders, the Emperor shouldn't change it. Some said that Ning Wang now knew his mistake and was brothers with the Emperor, it was right for him to return to court to help shoulder the burden for the Emperor, and that was all the reason to summon him to court.

In reality, everyone knew that it was suspicious that Ning Wang had been locked up by *xiandi*. Some suspected that Ning Wang had been a

scapegoat pushed out by *xiandi* for Rui Wang. But now, no one dared to mention that thought, and only fought over whether Ning Wang should return to court or not.

Those that were at odds with Ning Wang naturally didn't want Ning Wang to return but there were people who supported Ning Wang's return. Those of keen eyes found that among those that supported Ning Wang's return were many of the conservative faction. So these people started to think about the Emperor's intentions.

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Chapter 105

Halfway through the night, Qu Qing Ju suddenly woke up from her dreams, the cramping in her legs unbearable, as though something had twisted her foot tendon and was swinging on it.

"Qing Ju, what is it?" He Heng suddenly awoke from his slumber and saw that the forehead of the person beside him was dotted with sweat. From the light casted by a candle in the corner of the room, he saw that even the colors of her lips had changed, and paled himself, hurriedly calling for a servant.

A commotion later, Qu Qing Ju's cramps disappeared under the massage of the pregnancy *mama*. She rubbed her forehead tiredly. She felt that she was very drowsy but couldn't fall asleep.

"Emperor, please don't worry. When a woman is pregnant, hand and foot cramps may occur. If care is taken with the diet, it will subside in a while." The pregnancy *mama* saw that the Emperor didn't have a happy expression and informed cautiously, "Normally, if someone massages *niangniang*, it can help relieve the symptoms."

He Heng's face cleared slightly. Seeing Qu Qing Ju's tired state, he ordered: "*Zhen* will get the nurses from the Imperial Hospital for this matter. You can all leave." He didn't understand medicine but knew that a person had many acupuncture points. If a wrong spot was pressed, it was deleterious to the mother and the fetus.

The pregnancy *mama*, Mu Jin and the others carefully left. After leaving the room, they finally took a breath. The Emperor's expression had been very dark, so frightening that they didn't dare to breathe.

"Can't sleep?" He Heng kept on patting Qu Qing Ju's back and seeing that she didn't fall asleep, he asked, "Still uncomfortable?"

Qu Qing Ju shook her head and changed positions: "Can't sleep."

"What is it?" He Heng pulled the blanket up and wrapped it more securely around the two of them, "I'm not having morning court tomorrow so we can talk now." Tomorrow, it was the start of sealing the pen and the break from court. In reality, He Heng still had a pile of things to do but to comfort the person beside him, of course he wouldn't say those things.

Qu Qing Ju felt that she didn't have any desire to talk, but looking at the other's spirited state, she could only respond: "Talk about what?"

"Anything will do," He Heng forced down the urge to open his mouth in a yawn, "Like your childhood, or what things you like."

Qu Qing Ju stared for a beat before sighing: "I don't remember much from my childhood. Before, I didn't have many chances to leave the compound. When I grew older, only *jiumu* would take me to meet others, but I couldn't spend all my time with *jiumu*. The relationship between Tian Family and the Qu Family became antagonistic after that. So from birth, life was like that, there's not much to talk about."

"Liang *shi* was truly horrid," He Heng lovingly ran his fingers through Qu Qing Ju's hair behind her back, "*Xiandi* hadn't done many things for me. This entire life, the only good things he did are two matters. One is you, the other is the succession edict."

"I can't compare to the succession edict. In this world, this is only one succession edict, but there are hundreds of thousands of women," Qu Qing Ju squirmed and changed her position to put her head at He Heng's neck, "Liang *shi* was horrid, but my father was the true culprit. My mother died of unknown causes and father was in a rush to

welcome a new wife. If it wasn't for *jiujiu* and his family, I'm afraid that even my dowry would have been very meager. If I really had married that shoddily, then what reputation would I have had with the Imperial House?"

"The family of the Duke of Zhong Yi is very good," He Heng said a beat after hearing her words, "In this world, there are men like your father, but there are couples who are together for their lives."

Qu Qing Ju's lips curled. Was He Heng telling her that he wasn't the same kind of person as the Duke of Chang De?

"There are women in this world who like hearing pretty words, but there are also those who only see reality," She put a hand on his chest, "Coincidentally, I am the latter. I don't like hearing what people say, only like seeing what people do."

"Doing is better than seeing?" The smile on He Heng's face grew wide, "I'm very comforted by how smart Qing Ju is."

He was afraid that she wouldn't like to hear him, and also wouldn't like to see what he did.

On the twenty ninth day of the twelfth month, the court pen was sealed. Except for those who had to be on duty in each ministry, the other people had gone home to pass the year. But even so, those officials weren't truly idle. They were proactively finding out whose family received gifts from the Emperor and which families were able to attend the Imperial Family's year-end banquet.

This was the first year since the new Emperor had ascended the throne. Those who received gifts from the Emperor meant that those people, at the very least, had caught the Emperor's eyes. It would have been strange if no one in Jing cared about them.

So from the twenty ninth to the thirtieth day, there were gifts coming out of the palace. Those who received them were ones such as Cheng Wang and the Duke of Zhong Yi. Aside from the luck character and spring couplets from the emperor, there were gifts from the two

Empress Dowagers and the Empress. Some, such as the Right Minister Right, Ning Wang, Rui Wang, and Minster Luo, also received some gifts.

As for the others' families, some people received the Emperor's character, some received the Empress' gifts but they didn't have the honor to receive gifts from the four big personages. However, at this year end, all the officials in Jing City understood one thing. That was, you could only eat if you followed the Emperor.

The year banquet was on the thirtieth day. Other than the members of the Imperial House, only families who had a first-rank title were lucky enough to be able to enter the palace to enjoy the banquet, such as the Duke of Zhong Yi and the two heads of the two Empress Dowager's paternal families.

Qu Qing Ju and He Heng sat together at the very front. Due to her pregnancy, she didn't drink any wine. In front of her was a "phoenix returning to the nest" soup. Basically, it was a chicken stuffed inside a pig's stomach and then cooked using an old pot, but the taste was good and fitting to drink in the winter.

The people below knew that the Empress was pregnant and no one was foolish enough to toast her. So halfway through the banquet, she had been idle.

"The Empress' belly is so round and smooth. *Chen fu* thinks this child must be male." Qin Bai Lu raised a wine cup, stood and said to Qu Qing Ju, "*Chen fu* toasts *niangniang*, and wishes that *niangniang* will give birth to a son soon and stays young forever."

The Empress was already pregnant. Wishing for her to give birth to a son soon, wasn't it not appropriate? Luo Wen Yao furrowed her brows, and followed in standing and raising her wine cup, "*Chen fu* wishes Empress to stay healthy and have a good year."

Qu Qing Ju grasped the wine cup from her side. Mu Jin poured her a cup of water. She raised the cup towards the two people: "Many thanks

to both *dimei*. Since I can't drink now, I have to use water in place of wine to thank both of you."

He Heng placed a duck's tongue into Qu Qing Ju's bowl, smiling as he declared: "Everyone here isn't an outsider so *zhen* isn't afraid everyone will laugh. *Zhen* and Empress are both young and feel the sex doesn't matter."

Everyone followed in agreeing, and along the way, praised both Emperor and Empress. The major idea was that no matter if it was an imperial son or daughter, they would certainly be the recipients of Emperor and Empress' good genes, and in the future, would become one that would stun the world.

Qin Bai Lu couldn't believe that the Emperor would so brazenly protect Qu Qing Ju to the point that he would say in front of all those people that he didn't care whether it was a boy or girl. Did the Emperor not want someone to carry down the line?

"In the future, *zhen* and Empress will have many children. To guess whether each one is a boy or girl, that would be *zhen* and Empress bringing trouble upon ourselves." He Heng roared with laughter, self-mockingly adding, "*Zhen* doesn't want to go to such trouble."

Everyone naturally followed in laughing, but their hearts were scared witless. What the Emperor just said, it seemed to mean that he was only going to have children with the Empress only.

It must be that they heard wrong!

Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow at He Heng. Seeing he was smiling as he listened to the flattery of the people below, she lowered her head to continue drinking soup.

Wei Qing E and He Qi sat together. She looked dazedly at Qu Qing Ju dressed in a purple wide sleeved dress embroidered with a hundred birds bowing to a phoenix. She couldn't believe her eyes and ears. The Emperor was really willing to favor only one woman, and was even willing to have only her have children?

She thought about the *tongfang* that the other officials had sent over after they returned to court. Even though she had shared in the hardships with *wang ye* and *wang ye* treated her much more closely, didn't he still take the women that others gave as *tong fang*?

Was it really true that this world had a man that was faithful, and this man was the Emperor as well?

Wei Qing E slowly took her gaze back. Strangely, her gaze fell on Qin Bai Lu. Qin Bai Lu's expression wasn't well. Rui Wang beside her didn't seem to pay any attention to her. The two sat at a two-person table but their atmosphere wasn't any different from strangers.

It was no wonder then that Qin Bai Lu was that jealous of Qu Qing Ju. As a woman, she could understand what the other thought, even she was slightly jealous of the Empress. She had the status, she would almost have a child, and she even had the fidelity of her husband. And this woman who had everything didn't even need to be kind or generous, didn't need a high birth but still lived better than all of them.

"What are you looking at?" He Qi pulled her sleeve under the table, warning in a small voice, "Don't copy *lao san*'s *wang fei's* stupidity. I heard the Emperor doesn't like that one and already bestowed down a few beauties to Rui Wang Fu.'

Wei Qing E's heart jumped. Her brow creasing, she asked: "Wasn't it said that the Emperor didn't keep any of the female candidates?"

"He didn't keep any, but that doesn't mean that he can't bestow them to other people," He Qi swirled the wine cup in his hand, flicking a look in the direction of He Yuan, "*Lao san* was too arrogant in his conduct, but that one of his isn't a peaceful one. I heard that in the past, she had done many things to offend the Empress. The way the Emperor dotes on the Empress, would he spare that one of *lao san*'s?"

"The Emperor wouldn't ……" Wei Qing E's tongue twisted. The Emperor wouldn't manage such matters.

"Don't see only his appearance, he's ruthless," He Qi pushed his voice so quiet that only the two of them could hear, "How that Qu *ce fei*'s of *lao san* passed away, there's a lot that went on there."

Wei Qing E gripped her wine cup tighter. Then a woman who could keep a man like that in the palm of her hand, how scary was she?

In that instant, the look that Wei Qing E gave Qu Qing Ju was as though she was seeing a devastatingly beautiful demoness.

Qu Qing Ju didn't know that she had been levelled up to demoness. She gave a yawn and ate the fruits that had been cut up. She occasionally exchanged words with the noblewomen as the year banquet slowly came to a conclusion.

At precisely midnight, the fireworks exploded outside the hall, dying half of the hall red.

Qu Qing Ju looked outside the hall and managed to see one of the fireworks burst, impossibly beautiful.

"Like it?" He Heng reached out a hand to her, "I'll accompany you outside to see."

Qu Qing Ju gave him her hand. The two walked out of the hall holding hands and stood at the tall stage outside the hall. They watched as bud after bud of fire bloom and then wither, beautiful as though it was a dream.

Behind the two were the people who had come to attend the banquet. Everyone saw the hands of the Emperor and Empress entwined together. Under the fireworks, the figures of the two were like a painting.

Wei Qing E stood next to He Qi. Her gaze was fixed on the Emperor and Empress' hands that hadn't let go from beginning to end. She seemed to once again see the last evening of the year one year ago, as Qu Qing Ju, clad entirely in red, walked down step by step from those stairs, and the

Emperor, still a *wang ye* then, couldn't resist going forward to support Qu Qing Ju.

It seemed that she had never forgotten that scene, and it was deeply embedded in her heart.

The fireworks then, it was still as bright and attractive as today, but what she could remember was the hand the Emperor couldn't help but reach out.

Maybe some things were fated.

Like her and He Qi, Qu Qing Ju and the Emperor, Qin Bai Lu and Rui Wang.

Chapter 106

After the New Year festival passed, it was the time for the families to visit each other. As the Empress in the central palace, Qu Qing Ju naturally received many notices, but due to her pregnancy, she had just seen the members of the two Empress Dowager's paternal family, Tian Luo *shi* and others. Today, she needed to meet Ning Wang Fei and Cheng Wang Fei.

"Ning Wang Fei, Cheng Wang Fei, please come in," Huang Yang hurriedly walked out of the door into the rear hall, a wide smile on his face as he performed a greeting to Wei Qing E and Luo Wen Yao before bowing to lead the two people inside.

"Thanks *gonggong*," Luo Wen Yao smiled politely at Huang Yang. She knew that Huang Yang was someone that the Empress used often, so she treated him extremely courteously.

"Cheng Wang Fei is too polite, please," Huang Yang's attitude became even more humble as he steadily walked inside, "Empress knew that both *wang fei* were coming and had woken early to wait."

Wei Qing He followed Huang Yang's words with some words expressing her gratefulness. When they reached the door to the room, she didn't speak anymore. Huang Yang announced: "Empress, Ning Wang Fei and Cheng Wang Fei have arrived."

"Quickly come in please," Wei Qing E heard Qu Qing Ju's voice. And when the curtain in front of them was raised, a very familiar looking palace maid coming out, bowing to them and ushered them into the room.

This was the first time Wei Qing E came to this place. At a glance, she saw that much care had been taken with the tasteful furnishings in the room, and there was nothing with corners, since they were worried that those things would harm the pregnant Qu Qing Ju.

She looked at Qu Qing Ju who sat in front. Qu Qing Ju only had a simple hairstyle, a *buyao* inserted from the side. With her black hair, it expressed an indolent beauty.

"Greetings to Empress," Wei Qing E and Luo Wen Yao simultaneously made a bow, their movements full of deference.

"Us sisters-in-law don't have to be so polite with each other," Qu Qing Ju waved her hand and got the palace maids to bring a carved stool for each of them. Then she said: "It's still snowing today, it must have been trouble to make you two visit *ben gong*."

"*Niangniang*'s words are taking good fortune from *chen fu*," Wei Qing E added a smile as she said, "*chen fu* should have come in before to give thanks, but these last few days were so busy so the visit was delayed. It's lucky that *niangniang* is kind and hasn't blamed *chen fu*."

"*Da sao*'s words are too polite," Qu Qing Ju saw that Wei Qing E was attired even more dignified than in the past and sighed inside. There were many women in Ning Wang Fu. Wei Qing E had a *di* son herself, and must have spent limitless amounts of attention, "Ning Wang Fu had been empty for so long, it's natural to spend time cleaning it up. Originally, *ben gong* should have sent servants to do so, but the Emperor

missed *da be* and summoned you back to Jing as soon as possible. Your family must have gone to great trouble."

"It's our entire family's good fortune that Emperor missed our *wang ye*," Wei Qing E smiled, replying, "*wang ye* frequently mentioned the good of the Emperor and said that even dying won't be enough to repay the kindness of the Emperor."

In the beginning, Wei Qing E hadn't been as antagonistic as Qin Bai Lu who had picked a fight whenever possible with Qu Qing Ju, but she acted as she was the eldest. Now, her words and actions were done to flatter to her, the *er dixi*. Qu Qing Ju couldn't see any discontent in her actions and couldn't help but sigh again. Such a virtuous wife, and didn't abandon or give up on Ning Wang. Now that Ning Wang returned to Jing, he had taken quite a few women as *tongfang*. That really wasn't a good thing to do.

"They're brothers, there's no need to speak of kindness," Qu Qing Ju waved her hand, and said to Luo Wen Yao: "*Ben gong* heard you have some happy news, this really is a happy event."

Luo Wen Yao's face instantly blushed and she lowered her head as she responded: "The *taiyi* diagnosed it a few days earlier. *Chen fu* had thought to wait a few days before telling you."

"Such a happy event, you can't conceal it from *ben gong*," Qu Qing Ju smiled, adding, "*ben gong* let them prepare some things for pregnancy. When you leave, take it with you. If you are lacking in anything, send someone to tell *ben gong*, don't restrain yourself."

Wei Qing E listened to the conversation between the Empress and Cheng Wang Fei. She could detect the closeness that the Empress treated Cheng Wang Fei with. It was very different from the politeness that was offered to her. One year ago, no one would have thought that even Cheng Wang would have a change of fortune.

"Actually, *ben gong* heard yesterday that people were saying that Rui Wang Jun Fei was ill, have you two heard?" Three days ago, she had just

attended the year end banquet, and then got sick right after. If the news came out, who would be embarrassed?

"*San dimei* has always been delicate. Yesterday night, it snowed, maybe she wasn't careful and got sick," Wei Qing E spoke on the subject. She had an idea what the Empress meant and naturally would follow the direction, " But *san dimei* usually doesn't interact much with *chen fu* and *si dimei*, so we also don't know."

Qu Qing Ju nodded, looking rueful: "That's so true, *san dimei*'s personality usually is proud. Even *ben gong*, she wasn't willing to interact much with. In a while, *ben gong* will get them to bestow some things down, it will be a token of *ben gong*'s goodwill."

The words appeared to be concerned about Qin Bai Lu but the implication was accusing Qin Bai Lu was discourteous to the Empress. Wei Qing E glanced around the room. There were many palace maids and *taijian* standing around. If these words were leaked out, everyone would know of Qin Bai Lu's haughtiness.

She dropped her gaze slightly so she would not look at the warm smile on Qu Qing Ju's face. The tone of her voice was assenting: "Empress is kind-hearted and benevolent. Rui Jun Wang Fei's actions are truly somewhat discourteous."

Really kind-hearted and benevolent. Even when a *jun wang fei* was discourteous to her, she would still let bygones be bygones and bestow gifts down. This entire court, who wouldn't praise her for being virtuous?

"We are all one family, both you and I knew her temperament," Qu Qing Ju displayed a helpless look, "*ben gong* will just hope that she will recover quickly now."

Luo Wen Yao used a handkerchief to cover her mouth as she agreed: "Empress is right, the best thing would be that *san sao* recovers."

Wei Qing E felt for a second that the closeness between the Empress and Cheng Wang Fei, perhaps it was because they were strangely similar in some aspects?

"Emperor?" Ming He saw the Emperor walk to the door of the rear hall and then turn to circle back to the front hall, and couldn't help cautiously asking, "Should *nucai* go in to notify Empress?"

"No need," He Heng waved his hand. He took down a book from the shelves and buried his head down. Ming He took a peek. It was still that "Prescriptions Worth a Thousand in Gold" that the Emperor had read for many days. Ever since the Empress had been found to be pregnant, the Emperor seemed to develop an interest in medical books.

A long time later, just as Ming He assumed that the Emperor would keep reading, an attendant of the Empress came to ask if the Emperor was going to go have a meal together. Then he saw the Emperor throw away the book and stand up.

Looking at the medical book that the Emperor had heartlessly thrown to one side, it wasn't anything. In front of the Empress, it couldn't compare to one hair strand."

In Rui Jun Wang Fu, Qin Bai Lu furiously smashed everything that the palace had sent down before she felt her fury had been somewhat relieved. She hatefully looked at the ginseng, sneering: "Pretending to be so virtuous, like I don't have these things?"

She once hated Qu Yue Su, and after Qu Yue Su died, the one she hated most became Qu Qing Ju. The two sisters of the Qu Family seemed to have been born to be at conflict with her, and disturb her days.

"*Wang fei*, *wang ye* is already unhappy that you called in sick to not pay your respects to the Empress. Now, you smashed the Empress' gifts. If *wang ye* knew, it won't be good," Ru Hua rushed the servants to clean up the room. After the attendants had all left, she urged, "Right now, even for yourself, you have bear it."

"Bear it?" Qin Bai Lu pointed in the direction of the main building, "He only amuses himself everyday and has never thought about me. Even if I tore down this room, he won't care!"

"But if you keep going like this……"

"You don't have to persuade me. In *wang ye*'s eyes, I'm afraid that even a fingernail of the Empress is better than me. Maybe right now he's regretting that he hadn't married the Empress in the beginning rather than me!" Qin Bai Lu was so infuriated that she didn't control her words, "The Empress is so noble, so beautiful, I'm nothing!"

Ru Hua sighed helplessly. She thought about the rumors about *wang fei* outside. Jealous, not virtuous, arrogant and bad-mannered, disrespectful of the Empress. There were even people that said *wang ye* was going to divorce *wang fei*. If *wang fei* knew of those things, her sadness would be great.

She just didn't understand what great irreconcilable enmity there was between Empress and *wang fei* that *wang fei* would hate Empress so. It was clear that the two hadn't interacted much. Was it really because of the rumors about the decree of marriage? But the Empress and Emperor were very well together and *wang fei* really didn't need to be jealous of the Empress.

Outside the door, He Fu Er stood behind He Yuan, his legs trembling. He hadn't thought that *wang fei* would say such reckless things. If it passed into the Emperor's ears, wouldn't it cost *wang ye* his life?

Thinking about the stories of the love between the Imperial Couple, He Fu Er swallowed. It would really cause his death. He was so unfortunate to have heard these words.

Furtively looking at *wang ye*'s expression, He Fu Er's legs grew even weaker. It had been a long time since he had seen *wang ye* look so terrible. Hearing the continuing complaints of the *wang fei* inside the room, He Fu Er finally couldn't stand and knelt down hard.

He Yuan didn't look at He Fu Er, and with a grim face, went up to kick open the door. Gazing at Qin Bai Lu who had abruptly froze, he ordered icily: "He Fu Er, bring pen and paper."

"*Wang ye*!" Qin Bai Lu shrieked, "I'm the *wang fei xiandi* decreed to you, you can't divorce me."

"So you do know that your words would cause *ben wang* to divorce you, then why couldn't you control your mouth?" He Yuan looked in disgust at Qin Bai Lu, "*Ben wang* might only be a *jun wang* now, but it doesn't mean having to tolerate a *wang fei* like you."

"Pen and paper!" He Heng's voice grew even more harsh.

Very quickly, someone brought pen and paper. Grinding the ink and laying down the paper, it seemed to have all been done in the blink of an eye in Qin Bai Lu's eyes.

"*Wang ye*," Qin Bai Lu knelt down. She knew that He Yuan was serious this time and couldn't resist hugging his legs, crying: "You can't treat me this way."

"Get her off!" He Heng didn't even look at Qin Bai Lu. He held up the brush to dip in the ink and fluidly started writing.

"*Wang ye, wang ye*," Ru Hua knelt down at He Yuan's feet, "*wang fei* wasn't doing it on purpose, please, forgive her this time, *wang ye*.'

The two minor *taijian* saw that *wang ye*'s face darkened even more and went up to drag and pin Ru Hua at one side.

Ru Hua stared as *wang ye* wrote the entire letter of divorce in one go as though he had finally vented all the emotions he had suppressed for a long time. She suddenly stopped pleading because she felt that, no matter how she and *wang fei* pleaded, *wang ye* wouldn't change his mind.

"Take it," He Yuan threw the still wet letter of divorce in front of Qin Bai Lu, coldly gazing down at her kneeling on the ground, "The thing that *ben wang* regrets the most in this lifetime was marrying you."

Qin Bai Lu's head buzzed as though she couldn't hear anything. She looked dazedly at the man that looked from high up down at her. She suddenly stood, pushing aside He Yuan and was going to throw herself at the wall, before she was pulled back by He Fu Er at the side.

"If you want to die, go back to your Qin Family to die, don't dirty *ben wang*'s place," He Yuan sneered, "Someone come, pack up all of Qin *shi*'s things and send them back along with Qin *shi* back to the Qin Family."

"Yes," He Fu Er saw that the matter had progressed to this step and didn't dare provoke *wang ye* so he started to order others to start packing.

He Yuan didn't look again at Qin Bai Lu, he turned and walked away.

The news that the daughter of the Qin Family had been divorced by Rui Jun Wang spread through the entire Jing City by the afternoon. Almost everyone didn't believe that Rui Jun Wang would do it. Right now, Rui Jun Wang didn't have any real power. If he offended the Qin Family, wouldn't his days become more difficult in the future?

There were those that felt the daughter of the Qin Family wasn't worthy of being a *wang fei*, were moved by Rui Jun Wang who wasn't willing to suffer, and sighed.

On the second day, there was an Imperial Censor who reproached Rui Jun Wang's actions. The main idea was that the daughter of the Qin Family had been declared by *xiandi*. The fact that Rui Jun Wang had divorced his wife, the daughter of the Qin Family, it was being unfilial to *xiandi*. It ruined the conduct of Da Long Dynasty. Along the way, he praised the love that the Emperor had for the Empress.

"The Empress is virtuous in her conduct, filial to her elders, attentive to *zhen*, *zhen*'s love for her is only natural," The boot-licking had been

misconstrued. He Heng's face was dark as he continued, "The daughter of the Qin Family dishonorably conducted herself, was of arrogant manner, and no virtues at all. Even in front of *zhen* and Empress, she was arrogant and disrespectful. Rui Jun Wang is *zhen*'s brother, how can *zhen* bear for him to be served by such a *wang fei*?"

The Imperial Censor choked. The terrible reputation of Qin *shi* had already spread through Jing. It really was somewhat inappropriate for him to compare Qin *shi* to the Empress. He then knelt down and didn't say another word.

"*Zhen* thought, as a man, one should be filial to elders, esteem his wife, and love and protect his children. As a woman, one should have proper conduct, esteem her husband, be virtuous and intelligent. Only like this, can husband and wife be harmonious." He Heng furrowed his eyebrows, adding, "*Zhen* heard that the Great Scholar Lu *da ren* of Hong Yuan Cabinet has a good daughter of both talent and good appearance. Why don't *zhen* act as a matchmaker and let Lu *xiaojie* and *zhen*'s *sandi* be engaged and will marry by the end of this year."

Lu Jing Hong paused and then forced out a smile as he knelt, replying: "*Wei chen* thanks the Emperor for decreeing the marriage."

The Emperor was cutting off the Qin Family's retreat. And also pulled his daughter in. But he could not refuse.

He could only hope that Rui Jun Wang would treat his daughter well in the future. He would thank the heavens and earth if it didn't turn out like Qin *shi's* circumstances.

Chapter 107

Lu Yu Rong knelt as she listened to the Ministry of Rites' official finish reciting the Imperial Decree before respectfully kowtowing along with her family. She watched as her father received the Imperial Decree from the official. Her expression wasn't joyful nor angry, and no one was able to see her thoughts regarding the marriage.

After the Rites official left, Lu *furen* looked worriedly at the Imperial Decree: "*Lao ye*, what are we going to do, Rui Jun Wang's personality …" Everyone knew what Rui Jun Wang's personality was like. Her daughter marrying that kind of a person, what good days would she have?

Even more, the Emperor wasn't close to Rui Jun Wang. Shu *gui taifei* was at odds with the two Empress Dowagers and had once even done an idiotic thing as to try to harm the Empress. Their Lu Family becoming connected to Rui Jun Wang, it was a great problem.

"Don't worry, since the Emperor decreed the marriage, it shows that he trusts our Lu Family," Lu Jing Hong sighed, not knowing if he was comforting Lu *furen* or himself, "Furthermore, Rui Jun Wang has no real power right now. What does the Emperor have to be suspicious of?"

Luo *furen* knew that the matter was set in stone and there was no benefit in discussing it anymore. She was only feeling sorry for her daughter, marrying a powerless member of the Imperial Family.

"Mother doesn't have to be worried for me," Lu Yu Rong squeezed out a smile, "Rui Jun Wang is still a jun wang. Also, he has no children in his *fu*. Daughter might be marrying over as the second wife, but the first one was divorced, so I'm not that different from the original. Furthermore, another person might not be better a better match than Rui Jun Wang."

Lu Jing Hong's *di* son, Lu Zhan, heard his *meimei*'s words and ground his teeth: "*Meimei* don't worry, *gege* will be here. If Rui Jun Wang dares to bully you, *gege* will go accuse him in front of the Emperor to bring you back."

"It's not that scary," The smile on Lu Jing Rong's face became brighter. She looked at the Imperial Decree in Lu Jing Hong's hands, "Life, it's just like that."

Once the words came out, the Lu family became silent. No matter what, they felt they had fallen short for their daughter.

When the peach flowers were in full bloom, He Heng, after the officials begged him three times, finally changed the era name to Jia You, and informed the ancestors to use the first year of Jia You to count the years. At the same time, the world started calling He Heng by Jia You Emperor.

In the fourth month of the first year of Jia You, rain continued to come down for a few days, but what made He Heng feel restless wasn't the fine rain but Qu Qing Ju, who was close to childbirth. As the time grew closer, he became more and more nervous. A woman giving birth, it was like a foot in life and a foot in death. Thinking about the frightening event, he couldn't calm himself.

It was now the end of the fourth month, but due to continuing rainfall for three days, the weather was slightly cold. He Heng finished reading the memorandum in his hands, and prepared to go to the rear palace, when he saw Ming He rush in, and make a sloppy bow.

"Emperor, Empress is giving birth."

"What?!" His expression changed slightly, he stood and took large steps, not even taking the time to change the robe he was wearing, which was stained with drops of ink.

When they came to the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace, the door to the delivery room had been closed. He Heng didn't know that his pale face had frightened all the palace attendants. He looked at the tightly secured door to the delivery room, demanding gravely: "When did the Empress start labor?"

"This morning, the Empress felt her belly hurt and let *nubi* help her take a bath and then a meal. She walked for a while in the room before entering the delivery room," Jin Zhan bowed as she narrated, "Please, Emperor, don't worry. The midwife *mama* said that *zhuzi*'s fetus is in a good position and it will be a smooth delivery."

He Heng's brain was a mess. He unconsciously raised a teacup for a drink, "Why not tell *zhen* earlier?"

"*Niangniang* said that Emperor had many state affairs and to let *nubi* inform you when she entered the delivery room," Jin Zhan heard the anger in the Emperor's words and knelt down fearfully in front of He Heng, "Pease, Emperor, don't be angry."

Waving to let the palace maid who'd answered stand, he wasn't in a good mood, but still recognized that the palace maid was one of Qu Qing Ju's personal maids. So he didn't want to lash out at her, and continuously downed tea.

When Empress Dowager Wei and *Muhou* Empress Dowager rushed over, they saw the black face of the Emperor and a silent room. There wasn't even much sound coming from the delivery room. Their hearts grew cold as they assumed that the Empress wasn't well, and asked urgently, "How's the Empress?"

"Empress Dowager, just now a midwife *mama* came out to say the Empress was fine and had drank a bowl of ginseng porridge." Jin Zhan carefully answered, 'But His Highness would have to take some more time before being born."

"Childbirth is a hardship for women," Empress Dowager looked worriedly around the room and walked to sit down on a chair. She even forgot to invite *Muhou* Empress Dowager to sit down as well. Her brows creased as she said to Jin Zhan, "Tell the other servants to be careful. Anything the midwives want, you have to immediately send it in, understand?"

"*Nubi* will remember," Jin Zhan turned to walk outside the hall and pass the Empress Dowager's decree to the other servants.

Muhou Empress Dowager sat down next to Empress Dowager Wei. She had rarely seen the Empress Dowager Wei be so panicked and could only comfort: "*Meimei*, don't be too worried. These days, the *taiyi* and

the pregnancy *mama* all said that the position of the child is very good. Very quickly, you can hug your big grandson."

Empress Dowager forced a smile. Her gaze still fixed on the door to the delivery room, not even noticing the bow He Heng gave her.

He Heng saw the two Empress Dowagers arrive but his mental state didn't calm down much. With a stomachful of tea, he couldn't help standing and started pacing in circles around the room. After a few minutes, sweat dotted his forehead. He didn't know whether it was from nervousness or the heat.

The palace attendants in the room didn't dare to even breathe heavily. Watching as the Emperor becoming more and more jittery, they wished to push their heads down even further in hopes that the Emperor wouldn't see them.

"Ah!"

A shout of pain from Qu Qing Ju finally passed out of the room. He Heng rushed forward a few steps to the door of the delivery room. But after listening, he couldn't hear any more noises and couldn't resist asking: "Why hasn't there been news?"

Ming He looked at the hourglass from the corner of his eye. It had just been half an hour. He might be a *taijian* but even he knew that it wasn't so easy for most women to give birth the first time.

"Why hasn't the Empress made a sound?" He Heng pointed at a palace maid, "Go take a look."

"The Empress is giving birth, there's nothing for the other people to do," Empress Dowager Wei stood to walk next to He Heng. She restrained the panic in her own heart, "Look at the time. That year that *aijia* gave birth to you, it took the entire night. Don't panic, no one has come out from inside. That means that the Empress is fine."

He Heng roughly wiped at the sweat on his forehead and paced around the room twice. If it wasn't for the stupid protocols of the Imperial Family and his worry that others would say things about Qing Ju in the future, he would have burst in already, and wouldn't be so frantic outside the door.

The quiet surroundings made him feel it was harder to endure. He didn't know how much time passed when he seemed to have heard the midwife *mama* inside the room say something. He couldn't resist pressing himself against the door, wanting to see from the crack of the door. But to prevent the wind from entering the delivery room, all the curtains had been shut down. Other than a patch of black, he couldn't see anything else.

An unknown amount of time later, He Heng felt many hours had passed when in reality it had been only one hour, just when he wasn't able to resist trying to push his way in, cries of an infant sounded suddenly from the delivery room. The wailing was so loud it seemed to burst through the roof.

He Heng exhaled greatly and realized that his entire body felt weak, and the tea in his belly was pushing uncomfortably.

"Congratulations Empress Dowagers, Emperor," One of the midwife *mama*s jubilantly opened the door and walked out, another midwife *mama* behind her carrying a swaddled infant. Kneeling down in front of the three noble personages, she announced, "Empress gave birth to a healthy imperial son!"

"Reward, great reward," Empress Dowager Wei walked to the doorway and took over the infant from the midwife *mama*, smiling joyously at the chubby imperial son, "Pretty heavy, good, good, the brows and eyes are like the Emperor, Emperor come ……" Empress Dowager Wei looked in the direction that He Heng was standing and then glanced around the room, where was he?

She looked at the half-open door, paused for a beat and then smiled as she shook her head. Together with *Muhou* Empress Dowager, they smiled as they started to look at their sturdy grandson.

After giving birth, Qu Qing Ju felt as though she had used up all the strength she had in her life. She tiredly gave a yawn and drowsily watched as He Heng pushed aside two of the midwife *mama*s who'd tried to block him and strode next to the bed. He was a sorry figure with his head full of sweat. She grew suspicious that the person who gave birth was He Heng, not her.

"Emperor, the blood is thick in the delivery room, you cannot enter……" A midwife *mama* was still trying to stop him but was paralyzed by He Heng's icy glare.

"*Zhen* is in a good mood today, don't make *zhen* angry," he uncaringly sat down at the bedside. After shouting away the midwife *mama*, he loving held Qu Qing Ju's hand, "Thanks for your trouble. Do you feel uncomfortable anywhere?"

"Just tired, want to sleep," Qu Qing Ju gave a yawn, "I've used all my energy."

"Aright," He Heng looked around the delivery room. He called for a palace maid to bring a clean blanket and wrapped Qu Qing Ju's hands and feet inside before bending down to lift her entirely with the blanket, "There's too much blood here. I'll take you back to the room to sleep."

The entire room of people watched with gaping mouths as the Emperor just carried the Empress away. Then they recovered and hurried to follow them out.

The midwife *mama* looked at the gory blanket left on the delivery bed and couldn't help but be moved. She had delivered for many noble families before, but she had never seen a husband be as attentive as the Emperor. Who said that the Imperial Family had no love, the Emperor treated the Empress much better than those gentlemen of the noble families.

Qu Qing Ju's room had already been prepared. After He Heng put her down on the clean bed, he took out a handkerchief to wipe the sweat on her forehead for her. In a soft voice, he said: "*Muhou* had our child carried down to drink milk. Sleep now. Once you wake up, I'll get them to bring him here for you to see."

"Alright," Qu Qing Ju saw that there was still sweat on his forehead and smiled as she suggest, "Emperor should also change."

Who knew when she finished speaking, He Heng's expression changed, as though he was holding something back.

"What is it?" Qu Qing Ju asked in puzzlement.

"*Zhen* drank too much tea just now," He Heng stood, quickly responding: "*Zhen* will be back quickly." He headed in the direction of the bucket in the side room.

Qu Qing Ju stilled and then laughed, her mood unspeakably good.

Mu Jin and the others who were attending Qu Qing Ju in the room saw the Empress laugh. Even though they didn't know what the Emperor had just said to her, they followed in laughing. No matter what, as long as the Empress was well, they were well.

After He Heng hurriedly solved his problem in the toilet and came back, he saw Qu Qing Ju had fallen asleep. Looking at her sleeping visage, he tucked in the blanket for her and couldn't help giving a warm smile.

Empress Dowager Wei stood at the doorway. The foot that had been raised went back down. A beat later, she turned and retreated. Looking at the sky that had clearly at some unknown time, she serenely sighed: "This is good."

"Empress Dowager, the sun came out," Ding *mama* beside her exclaimed in shock, "The sky cleared when Little Highness was born. This is very auspicious."

Empress Dowager Wei peered out at the sun that had came out of the clouds, smiling and declaring: "*Aijia*'s grandson will naturally have a good life."

Ding *mama* nodded: "*Nubi* saw that the earlobes of His Highness are big and fleshy, the brow high and clear, the hair black and thick. It is all signs of good fortune."

Empress Dowager Wei smiled, clearly very satisfied with what Ding *mama* had said.

"The Empress gave birth to an imperial son?" When Jiang Yong Yu finished listening to what Ai Lu said, she gave a faint smile, "Then the clothing I made will be useful."

It had been a very long time since the Emperor had ever come to her palace. Luckily, the Empress treated her well. For her, as long as the Empress remained unshakable in her position, she would have good days. Take for example, the rank she held. If it wasn't for the Empress, what qualifications did she have to be titled a *fei* in the first place?

"*Nubi* heard that the Empress had been personally carried by the Emperor out of the delivery room," Ai Lu informed in a small voice, "Emperor treats Empress so well."

"That is good," Jiang Yong Yu finished the sewing on the small undergarment in her hands. Embroidered on it was a chubby infant hugging a gigantic red koi. The size was perfect for an infant a few months old to wear, "The Empress is well, then we will be well."

The news that the Empress had given birth to the Imperial Eldest Son very quickly made its way to the ears of the noble families. It caused a fuss in every family as they wrote congratulatory messages and prepared gifts. Many women were admiring. The Empress had been the only one favored by the Emperor and in one sweep, got a son. This was the good fortune that others could admire but didn't have.

In Rui Jun Wang Fu, He Yuan was tipsy. After hearing He Fu Er's report, he stilled and then ordered: "Send the gifts that *ben wang* prepared a few days ago to Tian Qi Palace."

He Fu Er paused and hesitated for a beat before asking: "But *wang ye*, isn't it supposed to be a month before … …"

"Send it, don't be so chatty," He Yuan drank to the bottom of the wine cup, "*Ben wang* isn't lacking those things."

He Fu Er helplessly complied. He sighed inside. If those things were sent into the palace, he wondered if the Emperor would misunderstand. If he thought that *wang ye* was trying to use the presents to get back into court, then it would be troublesome.

Oh, he was becoming less able to predict what *wang ye* thought now.

Chapter 108

His Highness the Eldest Imperial Son was the only heir of the Emperor at present so everyone knew that this Eldest Imperial Son held special meaning. So when the third day "washing ceremony" came, the people who were allowed to attend all prepared auspicious gifts for the basin to express their regard for the Eldest Imperial Son.

Because the Empress was in her confinement period, the Eldest Imperial Son was personally carried out by the two Empress Dowagers. Additionally, the Emperor sat from beginning to end. Everyone could see how much importance was placed on the infant by the three major personages of the palace.

At the washing ceremony, some noblewomen of significant status were fortunate enough to get close to the Eldest Imperial Son. When they left the palace, they kept on praising how well the Eldest Imperial Son looked and how auspicious his features were.

Those that didn't have enough status to be close to the Empress Dowagers also crowded around to praise as though they would offend someone if they said it too late.

More people in Jing started to fawn over the members of the Tian Family, but to their surprise, the Tian Family became more low-key. Even the families that the *shu* daughters of the Tian Family married into started to be low-key. When the actions of the Tian Family passed into He Heng's ears, it improved his impression of the Tian Family to be even better. After a short while, he would find a chance to bestow some things to the Tian Family to imply that he was very satisfied with the Tian Family's methods.

The Jing City was always a prosperous place and there were naturally people in stalls on the sides of the street. So when one vendor saw a large stallion with a golden-yellow cloth tied around it, he knew that it was a messenger with a decree and chatted about it with his customers.

"After the Empress gave birth to the Eldest Imperial Son, our Jing City has become busier as well," A dumpling vendor chuckled as he wrapped the dumplings in lotus leaves and handed them to the customer in front of him, "We can try to partake in the cheer as well."

Qu Wang Zi had a difficult expression on his face as he stared at the cabbage stuffed buns in his hand. He turned to look at the distant stallion, asking in befuddlement: "That road seems to be Zhong Yi Gong Fu?"

"Yup. The Duke of Zhong Yi is a good official, and also the paternal family of the Empress. For the palace to bestow something to Zhong Yi Gong Fu, isn't that very normal?" The owner placed the prepared buns into the steamer basket, lowering his head to look at the fire in the stove, his face proud as he said, "The empress once brought the stewed eggs that my *dai jie* sold. Right now, many noble personages go to taste my *da jie*'s stewed eggs. They all say that my *da jie*'s stewed eggs are full of flavor. If this guest is interested, then go buy some for a taste." He pointed at the stewed eggs stall opposite the street, his face full of pride.

Qu Wang Zhi twisted his head to look. As expected, many people were crowded around the stall buying eggs. He had seen some of them people, they were the stewards of some noble families.

"Hey, isn't this Young Master Qu?" A youth wearing the uniform of the Dong Shan Academy sitting on a horse looked down at Qu Wang Zhi with a scornful expression, "What lucky day is this that I'm so fortunate to see Young Master personally buying buns?"

The manservant that held the reins for the youth respectfully raised his hands, uttering: "This one greets Young Master Qu."

Qu Wang Zi recognized that this youth was the Duke of Zhong Yi's *shumei*'s son and instantly felt his face burn. He laughed dryly and raised his hands to greet: "Nice to see Young Master Chen."

"I can't receive Young Master Qu's bow," The youth sat straight on the horse, smiling coldly as he declared, "Your *fu* is such a noble family that it feels even the Empress is lower than them. Us poor little families cannot receive a bow." That year at the Empress' coming of age ceremony, that was how Liang *shi* had mocked his mother. When his mother had returned home, she had cried over the matter to the point she became sick. If it wasn't that the Emperor had decreed a marriage for *biao jie* half a month later, his mother would have remained ill for much longer.

He had never met his *yimu* but heard from his mother say that his *yimu* had been very caring of her, and never bullied her because his mother was a *shu* daughter. So even though it had been a few decades, his mother still sighed when she mentioned *yimu*.

Thinking about the family of Chang De Gong Fu, he felt slightly disgusted. At the very least, they were a ducal family but they acted worse than any common family. And this Young Master Qu always carried himself arrogantly in the past at the Dong Shan Academy. Every

time they met, his nose was pointed at the heavens. Seeing Qu Wang Zhi's lackluster state, he felt it was karma.

"Young Master Chen is joking," Qu Wang Zhi couldn't even force out a smile. He even felt that the eyes of the surrounding vendors become strange as they looked at him. That made him, who was very attentive to his honor, almost not able to stay up. He made a messy bow, "This one still has other matters, and will go first. Young Master Chen, do whatever you want."

Squeezing out of the crowd that had been spectating, he didn't even realize that the buns in his hand had been crushed flat by his hands. His steps grew faster and by the end he was sprinting. Only when no one was looking at him anymore did he find a store selling medicine as he panted. He brought a packet of medicine and then slowly made his way outside the city.

After his father was especially pardoned, because it had been cold in the jail, his knees had worsened. Now, he could only lay in bed all day. Because his *jiejie* had died, his mother cried all day. His grandmother couldn't endure it and passed away not long ago. The funeral had been done by *erjie* who gave the silver. Thinking about the mutually-blaming father and mother, he wanted to turn and leave, and never return to the old village house.

"You don't have any right to blame me. That year, it was you that begged for me to marry to the *fu*. You couldn't teach your daughter properly and blame me for neglecting her, why don't you think of what you did before?!"

"You evil woman. That year, I shouldn't have married you. If it wasn't for you, I would be the Emperor's father-in-law, it's all because of you ……"

Hearing the sounds of arguing inside the house, Qu Wang Zhi showed a fed up expression. In the end, he put the buns and the medicine at the doorway, then turned and left the noisy place.

In the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace, Qu Qing Ju finally came out of the confinement. She took a refreshing bath and changed into a beautiful silk dress before sitting at the bed to slowly wave a fan at the deeply asleep son. In the end, she couldn't resist kissing her son's mouth.

Mu Jin saw the Empress' actions and she smiled. Walking next to the bed to look at the imperial son who fisted his hands in sleep, she informed in a small voice: "*Niangniang*, Heng *fei niangniang* has come to pay respects."

"Heng *fei* has come?" Qu Qing Ju moved her gaze away from her son. After ordering the nursemaid to keep a watch over the imperial son, she stood, ordering, "Let's go and see her"

Jiang Yong Yu had been drinking tea as she sat on a chair. Seeing Qu Qing Ju come out, she immediately put down the teacup and rose to give her a greeting.

"Heng *fei* doesn't have to be so courteous," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she sat down at the front, "Please sit. Now that it's the sixth month, it's so hot. Why did you come over?"

"*Pinqie* has nothing to do usually, and made some clothing for His Highness, just not sure if they fit," Jiang Yong Yu took a stack of infant clothing from Ai Lu's hands, "Hope that Empress doesn't dislike *pinqie*'s handiwork."

Qu Qing Ju took over the clothing for a look. She sighed in admiration: "Heng *fei*'s skills are so exquisite. What *ben gong* makes cannot compare to you." She indicated for Mu Jin to put the clothing away, "It must have been great trouble for you to make such eye-straining things in this heat."

Jiang Yong Yu hurriedly responded: "Just some children's things, it doesn't take much effort. Saying something inappropriate here, *pinqie* has liked His Highness at first sight. *Pinqie* is happy to make clothing for His Highness."

"Then in the future, *da* imperial son's clothing will have to trouble his *shu mother*," Qu Qing Ju's face was happy, "Then *ben gong* will be much more idle."

Jiang Yong Yu's smile grew wider when she heard Qu Qing Ju's words. But she was very aware of her boundaries and knew that the Emperor might come over at this time. She stood to bid farewell. Her intention was to follow the Empress to live her life. If she met the Emperor, then what would that be?

Mu Jin saw Heng *fei* off and then, with the other servants, inspected the clothing that Heng *fei* brought one by one. She concluded: "The materials are the best, and there's nothing wrong with them."

"En," Qu Qing Ju wasn't surprised. She knew that a person like Jiang Yong Yu definitely wouldn't do something disadvantageous to others and to her. She randomly picked up one of the undergarments. The material used was fine satin, smooth and fine to the touch. Even if it was worn in the summer heat, it would feel cool. It was most likely that Heng *fei* had used the best fabric she had to make these things. Touching the tiger embroidered on the undergarment, she smiled, remarking, "After His Highness takes a bath, put this on him."

Mu Jin hesitated for a second before asking: "*Niangniang*, why do you treat Heng *fei* so well?"

"She has never harmed me, and expressed goodwill to me. I won't make it difficult for her," Qu Qing Ju looked at the pile of baby clothes. She didn't know how long it would take to make these clothes that even the threads were cut clean, "We're all women, I don't have to make life difficult for her."

Mu Jin pondered and then understood what the Empress was thinking. Thinking about the usual conduct of Heng *fei*, she asked in puzzlement: "Heng *fei* didn't try to take advantage of the opportunity to catch the attention of the Emperor, it's such a surprise."

"She knows what she wants," Qu Qing Ju put down the undergarment in her hand, smiling, "she's a smart person so that's why I dare to treat her so."

When He Heng walked into the inner room of the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace, he saw Qing Ju fiddling with a pile of baby clothes. He walked in front of her and picked up a small shirt, "The bat embroidered on here isn't bad."

"En, Heng *fei* embroidered it," Qu Qing Ju looked at him, "These clothes are all made well."

Putting down the shirt in his hand, He Heng turned to ask, "*Huang'er* is still sleeping?"

"Slept for two hours, he might wake soon," Qu Qing Ju pulled him over to the bed to look at her son. Pointing at the askew limbs of her son, she commented, "Like a pig."

"My son sleeps so aggressively," He Heng gave a satisfied smile as he examined his son from head to toe. Along the way, he pulled up the silk blanket on his son's stomach, "Looking at his posture, why don't we name him Tun'er,[1] a base name makes it easier to raise."

When Qu Qing Ju heard the name, the first she thought about were the cute animals like dolphins and blowfish.[2] She looked again at the round tummy that was pushing on the silk blanket. He seemed more like a piglet.

"You don't like it?" He Heng saw her face full of doubt and thought she wasn't happy. He pointed to his son's stomach: "Look at that stomach, it's like a pig."

So *Tun* meant pig. She laughed dryly: "Tun Tun is good, I like it."

Maybe that he was disturbed by his unreliable parents, Tun Tun pouted as he opened his eyes. Smelling the fragrance of his mother, he moaned

[1] suckling pig

[2] Dolphin in Chinese is 海豚 (sea pig) and blowfish is 河豚 (river pig)

a few times but didn't cry. Just as He Heng went to lift him, a stream of infant urine landed on He Heng's robes.

The nursemaid on the side was so scared her face changed. But Qu Qing Ju roared with laughter as she pointed at He Heng's dripping robes, "Emperor is very lucky. An infant's urine is good stuff, it can ward off evil. This year, our Da Long will have a good year of good weather."

Tun Tun groaned on his father's body as though he agreed with what his mother said. He Heng helplessly rubbed his son's butt once before handing the child to the nursemaid and let them leave for his son to nurse. Turning, he went to sit down next to Qu Qing Ju.

"Don't come over, you're damp," Qu Qing Ju held a hand out to block but she was pinned down by He Heng on the bed and rubbed against.

"It can't be just me alone that enjoys our infant son's urine. Qing Ju should also ward off spirits," He Heng pinned the other under him, reaching to touch the waist that had recovered very well, "They all say that after a woman gives birth, the waist becomes thick. How come Qing Ju's waist is still so soft?" As he spoke, he placed a kiss on Qu Qing Ju's face.

Qu Qing Ju reached to touch his ticklish spot, but her hand was caught in his. His other hand took advantage of the opportunity and sneaked inside her clothes.

Standing outside, Mu Jin, Qian Chang Xin and the others heard the laughter of the two *zhuzi* as they played around. They indicated for the people waiting outside to retreat to the outer doors and then dropped their heads to stare on the patterns of the floorboards.

More than an hour later, the Emperor and Empress finally came out. Both had changed, and their moods were pretty good.

Qian Chang Xin and the others quickly served the noon meal up. He looked the Emperor's eagerly attentive state as he personally served the Empress. He thought on the inside, the *da ren* of the court, would any of them ever think that the Emperor could act like this?

Looking at the Empress that had no qualms about accepting the Emperor's service, he thought that it was hard to find a woman who could treat the Emperor like a normal person. The Empress was also rare in the world.

As the sun set in the west, Yu Ping palace was a flurry of activity. The Emperor and Empress had bestowed down many good things which caused the entire palace to be enveloped in good cheer.

Jiang Yong Yu looked at the valuable objects and smiled as she rewarded some to her servants. Then she let Ai Lu put everything away in her personal stores, her anxious heart finally settled down.

It looked like that the Empress really had accepted her. In the future, it meant that she would have a steady support.

"Didn't think that the Emperor would also bestow so much," Ai Lu said happily, "It seems that the Emperor still has *zhuzi* in his heart."

"Stupid girl, the Emperor is rewarding me for being tactful," The corner of Jiang Yong Yu's lips went up, "Don't think about those useless things, serve the evening meal now."

Today, the Emperor had gone as far as to send down a decree to let her have her own small kitchen. That represented that she had really become the mistress of a palace.

It didn't matter if it was fated to not compete for the favor of the Emperor, it was better to compete for the favor of the Empress. The days were idle and secure, so why not?

Chapter 109

Qu Qing Ju's recent days were extremely carefree. Everyday, she played with her son and ate delicious food. Her days were both easy and comfortable.

Today, when He Heng came to the rear hall, he saw his son wearing underwear as he struggled to wave his limbs on the bed, his neck toiling to raise itself up slightly before heavily falling down. It caused his mother to laugh out loud.

“What is this?” He Heng sat down at the edge of the bed, watching his son move his limbs like a turtle. The result was that he didn’t move an inch. But he didn’t throw a tantrum, only resolutely pushing his legs.

“Nothing, just letting him exercise his legs and neck,” Qu Qing Ju proficiently flipped her son around, dealing a slap on his butt. Seeing him smile widely at her, she bend down to kiss his cheek. Taking a talcum powder box from Mu Jin’s hands, she started to dust the powder to prevent rashes.

“The nursemaids can do this,” He Heng poked his son’s arms that were like lotus roots, “This brat does have a good temper.”

“My son takes after me,” Qu Qing Ju pulled out Tun Tun’s arms to powder in his armpits, “I can do these things. If I don’t care for my one son, why did I give birth to him?”

He Heng felt slightly upset for a bit. He looked with a complicated expression at the grinning fat infant on the bed and for a second, felt that his place in Qing Ju’s heart wouldn’t even compare to half a finger of his son,” Tomorrow is Tun Tun’s Hundred Day Ceremony. Do you have anything to add to the schedule I gave to you earlier?”

“It’s pretty good,” Qu Qing Ju carried Tun Tun into the arms of his nursemaid for her to bring him down to eat. After the nursemaid and others left, she commented, “But isn’t it too grand? It’s just supposed to just be a hundred day ceremony……”

“He’s the Imperial Eldest Son. His status is noble, there’s nothing wrong with grand,” He Heng understood Qu Qing Ju’s misgiving. He gathered the other into his arms, “After our other children are born, we’ll make it slightly less than their brother.”

"Alright," Qu Qing Ju smiled. She didn't seriously considered the vow-like words He Heng said. She knew that his words were sincere now, but it didn't mean that she would believe the words would always be effective.

The time for the Hundred Day Ceremony of the Eldest Imperial Son had been chosen by the Imperial Astronomers, based on the birthdate characters of the Eldest Imperial Son and the celestial stars of the day. They had even examined the furnishings in the Luan He Hall to guarantee which time was the best time of the day and the most advantageous for the Eldest Imperial Son.

Qu Qing Ju wasn't very knowledgeable about that kind of complicated matters, but from the preparation of Tun Tun's Hundred Day Ceremony, it showed how much importance He Heng placed on the ceremony.

Personally putting her son into the "hundred day" clothes that the Empress Dowager had personally made for Tun Tun, she had heard that the cloth for this clothing had been sought by the Empress Dowager from many prosperous and healthy families. On closer look, it seemed that even the thread had come from more than a hundred families.

Touching the gourd peanuts and other designs embroidered on the hundred day clothes, Qu Qing Ju bent to lift up the still asleep Tun Tun, "Go, to Luan He Hall."

Luan He Hall was the place used by the court only to hold large banquets, such as the coronation of an empress, or the crown prince. To use such a place for holding a Hundred Day Ceremony, it was enough to prove Tun Tun's position.

In Luan He Hall, the people who should have arrived came. Everyone looked towards the entrance as they waited for the Empress to appear with the Eldest Imperial Son. But due to the fact that the Emperor and the two Empress Dowagers were present, their moves were very subtle.

When it was almost at the auspicious time, the guests finally heard the sound of the *taijian* making the announcement.

“Presenting the Empress, His Highness Imperial Son.”

The people rose and then knelt. What they then saw was a procession walk past on the red carpet, the pair of gold slippers walking at the front, embroidered with phoenixes in flight, were astoundingly magnificent.

“Rise!”

Everyone then stood and then saw the Empress carrying His Highness Imperial Son sit down on the right side of the Emperor. She was wearing a heavy phoenix robe, her eyes bright, she was unspeakably beautiful.

Some people said after a woman gave birth, she then becomes a dried plum, sour and bland. But how the Empress looked, did she look as though she just gave birth?

Some people started to sigh. No wonder the Emperor was so infatuated. This kind of woman, placed in any home, was the kind to draw a man’s affections.

The Hundred Day Ceremony really wasn’t a complicated event. Since the child was still so young, who would invent a large heap of rituals to torture the child?

It was just the Emperor and Empress personally praying to the heavens for the child, and then personally putting on a “long life” lock and bracelet, to represent locking down the child’s life expectancy and good fortune. Then it was the two Empress Dowagers putting on the tiger shoes and tiger hat for the child and touching the top of the child’s head to represent the good wishes of the elders for the child. That was the end of it.

After the process, Tun Tun was carried down by the nursemaid. The two Empress Dowagers also left with them, leaving He Heng and Qu Qing Ju to partake in the banquet with the other people.

The names of the dishes on the banquet were all ones that were auspicious and good-sounding. The taste came second. But everyone still managed to decipher the significance placed by the Emperor on the Empress and the Eldest Imperial Son from the banquet.

No one dared to force the Emperor to drink, but they gave many compliments about the Eldest Imperial Son to the Emperor and Empress. This caused He Heng to feel good and he couldn't resist drinking a few more cups.

Qu Qing Ju saw his state and was worried that he would get drunk. She got him to drink some soup to suppress the drunkenness, but after seeing how happy He Heng was, she felt that the soup wasn't effective.

"*Chen di* toasts the Emperor, and wishes for Emperor and Empress to grow old together, and His Highness Imperial Son to be healthy and fortunate," Just as the banquet was coming to an end, He Yuan raised a wine cup as he stood and said to He Heng, "*Chen di* will drink first."

He Heng looked at He Yuan who had his cup raised high up, and raised up his own wine cup as he slowly stood, giving a small smile as he replied: "Many thanks *san di*."

The brothers gave each other a smile, and threw their heads back to drink all of the wine.

Qu Qing Ju watched the two people and found that there wasn't much mirth on either of their faces. She looked at the others sitting down under her. There was a height of nine stairs that separated her from the rest of the people and the gap between their places was even further.

As expected, He Heng was somewhat drunk after the banquet. Although his actions were no different from normal, but from his eyes and the tone of his voice, Qu Qing Ju detected that the other wasn't clear-minded.

"Return to the rear hall," When He Heng pulled Qu Qing Ju onto the Imperial Carriage, he didn't forget to order Qian Chang Xin, "Make sure the nursemaid takes good care of the imperial son."

The Imperial Carriage wasn't fast or slow but moved at a very steady pace. Qu Qing Ju could only feel a slight sway. She gazed at the person next to her as she raised two fingers: "Emperor, how many?"

He Heng enclosed the two fingers she raised in his hand, smiling as he responded: "I'm not drunk, don't worry."

The palm of the other's hand was slightly hot. Qu Qing Ju reached to touch his forehead, smiling helplessly as she said: "That's good," No drunk would say that he was drunk, just like those who committed many mistakes wouldn't admit that they were wrong.

"You don't believe me?" He Heng raised his head to look at her, his eyes bright. With a hint of poutiness and discontent, he added, "You always don't believe me."

"I believe you," Qu Qing Ju saw his pout and smiled, reassuring, "You aren't drunk, I didn't say that I didn't believe you, right?"

"Many times, you don't believe me," He Heng leaned his head on Qu Qing Ju's chest, "I said that I would always treat you well, you didn't believe; I said that I will only have you from now, you also didn't believe; I said that in the future, I will only have you to have my children, you still doubt me. Why can't you believe me?"

The hand that Qu Qing Ju had been running down He Heng's back slightly stilled. She looked down at the man complaining to her, smiling gently a second later, declared: "Emperor, you think too much."

"I didn't think too much, I know very well," Both of He Heng's arms wrapped around her waist, tightly embracing her, "We still have decades in the future. One day, you will believe *zhen*'s words."

His voice was already somewhat indistinct. Qu Qing Ju knew he was going to enter sleep soon. Like she comforted Tun Tun, she gently patted his back, murmuring: "There isn't trust that has no reason. If Emperor wants me to believe, then always treat me well. Only time will tell."

The man in her arms mumbled something Qu Qing Ju didn't manage to catch. She only patted the man's back, her expression calm and serene.

Outside the Imperial Carriage, Qian Chang Xin and Ming He didn't seem to have heard the noise from inside. The two didn't even exchange looks but the expression on their faces became much more solemn.

The eighth month was still hot. After He Heng was supported to the bed so he could sleep, Qu Qing Ju got the servants to move away the two ice basins in the room. Drunkenness and too much cold, it was a recipe for pain after waking up.

Taking the handkerchief that Mu Jin handed over to personally wipe He Heng's face and hands, Qu Qing Ju said, "Let someone prepare the sobering tea. If the Emperor wakes up, he needs to drink it."

Yin Liu soundlessly went out. The others also detected that the Empress seemed amiss, but they didn't know what had happened. But no one dared to needlessly ask, putting more care as they served.

When He Heng woke, the sun was setting. He rubbed his aching head as he sat up in the bed. From a look, he recognized that it was Qu Qing Ju's bedroom. After thinking for a long while, he still couldn't recall how he had laid down on the bed.

"Emperor's awake?" A blue and white teacup was held in front of him, "Drink the sobering tea."

He raised his head to look at Qu Qing Ju. The sun's rays pierced through the window to spill onto her body. Due to the backlighting, he couldn't make out the expression of her face, but he was strangely confident that the other was smiling now.

Maybe it was that confidence that had him obediently take the teacup and drain down the entire cup of nasty-tasting sobering tea. After that, he rubbed his throat, asking: "It's already this late?"

"Yes, you drank a bit too much at the banquet," Qu Qing Ju took the empty cup from his hand, "I got the kitchen to prepare some light dishes. Come up and eat some."

He Heng dressed into his robes. He still felt this head was dizzy. He furrowed his brows as he looked around the room, discontentedly barking: "Where did all the servants go? How can they let you stay in the room alone?"

"You don't count as a person?" Qu Qing Ju glared at him, "You were in a deep sleep so I made them all leave, rather than have them disturb you."

He Heng became refreshed once Qu Qing Ju glared at him. Then he thought suspiciously, something wasn't right, were Qing Ju's eyes, as they looked at him, slightly warmer?

Was it that he still wasn't completely awake or did he wake up the wrong way?

Chapter 110

The scorching summer gradually dissipated. The various *zhuzhi* in the palace took off their silk clothes, threw away the fans in their hands, their hairpins changed from jade to other types. There were some palace maids that thought to attract the Emperor and put effort into their clothing and ornaments. But as they still had to adhere to the protocols of the palace, they had to put even more effort in. It was a pity that the Emperor's entire heart was on the Empress' body, and no one was able to attract the Emperor's attentions.

Kui Yuan Palace had finished its renovation. The night luminous pearls encrusted in the room had been completely taken off because of the His Highness Imperial Son. Beautiful glass lanterns were put in their place. The whole endeavor had only been due to a careless remark of a certain official of the Ministry of Works who said that it was possible that night luminous pearls were harmful to the body.

Everyone knew that night luminous pearls were rare objects. Many people didn't understand why the Empress didn't use them, so very quickly on the outside many people praised the Empress for being thrifty. Such a beautiful misunderstanding. He Heng felt that he should let it stay beautiful forever.

Even though people knew that the Empress was living in Tian Qi Palace which was slightly inappropriate but the Emperor had said before that the new renovation of Kui Yuan Palace wasn't good for newborns. Since it had already passed the sixth month, the good moving day was in the second month of the next year. So in the end, the day that the Empress was to move to Kui Yuan Palace was finalized on the twenty second of the second year of Jia You.

Since the Emperor himself had already made the decision, there wasn't anyone at court blind enough to argue. Either way, with how strong the love with between Emperor and Empress, they, as outsiders, would stir dislike from the Emperor if they meddled. Furthermore, the Empress Dowagers didn't object, so why would they care?

Qu Qing Ju occasionally would hear some of the rumors from the outside about her. Most of them were about her goddess-like beauty, her generosity, frugalness, and love for the people. Even though she felt that the Empress in the rumors didn't have much of a relation to her, but she knew inside that behind the rumors was He Heng's manipulations in the shadows.

She reaped the benefits of He Heng using such tactics to protect her so she didn't bear to tear down his stage. Occasionally she would use the position of the Empress to reward some of the kind and famous women in the Da Long Dynasty. In the ninth month, after her birthday, she even personally rewarded a twice-married woman that saved a few children in a great fire.

This woman, because of her second marriage, had been the subject of gossip in the village. But after the handkerchief that Qu Qing Ju had embroidered with "As brave as any man", she became the most

respected matron in the entire county. No one looked down at her again because she had married twice, but became courteous.

Qu Qing Ju never once thought that she had the power to promote change in history, but she wanted to do the things she could. In this world, if a man had a wife and many concubines, he would be praised as romantic, but why couldn't they tolerate a remarried woman?

Certain scholars in Da Long Dynasty though it was a duty of a woman to not marry twice, but the act of the woman who saved others couldn't be erased. Therefore, not many people jumped out to criticize the Empress' actions as being inappropriate. Even more, what the Empress praised was the woman's act of saving others, not praising her for remarrying. It wouldn't be appropriate for them to object.

So this matter calmly passed away. Qu Qing Ju still acted at the mistress of the *hougong*. When bored, she would listen to songs, listen to interesting matters outside of court before picking one or two to praise and reward some things down, then play with her son. Her days were very comfortable.

After the Empress Dowager's and Qu Qing Ju's birthdays had passed, it was He Heng's birthday celebration. Because it was the first birthday after He Heng ascended the throne, even if they wished for the birthday celebration to not be grand, it would still become grand.

Disregarding the noble families and officials of the country of Da Long itself, even those small subordinate countries on the borders would send envoys to congratulate the new Emperor and attend his birthday celebration to express their respect and sincerity to the new Emperor.

Since Da Long Dynasty was a strong country, there were many small subordinate countries that relied on Da Long. Qu Qing Ju looked through the tribute that those subordinate countries had sent up to Da Long over the years and instantly felt that Da Long was very awesome.

Something that Qu Qing Ju found interesting was a small subordinate country called Jing. The present ruler of this country was a female one, and the ones coming to give the tribute this time to Da Long were her son and daughter. The reason that she sent both was that she wanted He Heng to decree one of them as the successor to the throne and through her attitude, express the loyalty of the country of Jing to Da Long.

This feeling of the world coming to rest at Da Long's feet really made people feel refreshed all over.

He Heng returned to the rear hall and saw that Qu Qing Ju was still looking at the information of the subordinate countries. When he took a closer took, he found that what she was reading explained some of the customs of the country of Jing. Then he asked: "What's so special about this Jing?"

Qu Qing Ju fanned the papers in her hands: "I heard that Jing's Hou Guo[3] Princess is amazingly beautiful. Coming to Da Long this time, I wonder how many men would she enchant."

"That's just the Jing people's own opinion," He Heng's tone was slightly disapproving, "Jing's territory is high up, so the majority of people's skin are dark colored, so how beautiful could they be? Compared to our Da Long's females, they must be severely lacking. It's all just unfounded rumors to deceive ignorant people."

The corners of Qu Qing Ju's lips jerked. It did seem like that the males of the Da Long Dynasty did prefer women with white and soft skin. So He Heng's attitude, it really …… was normal.

"What, you don't like this princess?" He Heng assumed that Qu Qing Ju was worried that he would have an interest in that Jing Country princess and assured, "Don't worry, I have no interest in other women. Even more, this Hou Guo Princess wants to be empress, not our Da Long's *feipin*."

[3]□ 国: □ (hou) protect 国(guo) country

Qu Qing Ju placed the information on Jing Country to aside and snorted: "Emperor, you're thinking too much."

"En, I was thinking too much, don't be angry." He Heng laughed lightly, holding up another stack of information, "You don't need to waste too much effort on these subordinate countries. Like this Duo Han. A hundred years ago, they frequently robbed and killed our people at the northern border of Da Long. In the end, they were soundly defeated by our Da Long. They got scared and then obediently gave their allegiance.

If they were not obedient, they would get beaten up?

Qu Qing Ju finally realized the attitude Da Long held towards those subordinate countries. The main idea was 'be docile for me, listen to what I say, or I'll beat you up, down into the ground'.

"I was just reading through because I was bored," Qu Qing Ju massaged the back of her neck, "Our Da Long is so strong."

He Heng smiled: "Falling behind means getting beaten up, that was the lesson that the previous dynasty taught us," He Heng reached out a hand to gently massage her neck, "However, has Qing Ju forgotten something that was promised to me?"

"What?" Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow. She thought that her recent memory was pretty good and hadn't diminished due to her pregnancy.

"For example …… you once said you would dance for me," He Heng reached to grasp that soft waist, "I often wonder what Qing Ju's dancing is like."

"I said that it depended on your performance," Qu Qing Ju smiled, Seeing He Heng's let down expression, she smiled, conceding, "Alright, looking at your good behavior recently, I'll let you see three days later. Wait for *ben gong*."

He Heng saw that her eyes were suddenly lit up, and his disappointment all dissolved into a smile, "Thanks, Empress for her grace."

"What is this?" In the evening, Mu Jin saw a palace maid come out with a stack of paper that had ink on it, and became worried that this palace maid was taking out something she shouldn't have. She reached to take the papers and casually scanned. Seeing something about the Hou Guo Princess was beautiful and skilled in dancing, her brow furrowed as she asked, "Who let you clean this up?"

"Mu Jin *jiejie*, it was *niangniang* who let *nubi* clean up," The palace maid submissively answered.

Mu Jin saw that the palace maid was quite young and seemed quick-witted so she ripped what was in her hands and rolled it into a ball, "Go and burn it, it's nothing useful." No matter what it was, as long as it was something that came from *niangniang*'s place, she always likes for the others to clean it completely.

"Yes," The young palace maid took over the paper ball and carefully held it in her hands as she left, clearly in a rush to burn it.

"Still too inexperienced." Mu Jin sighed. Clever, yes. But her actions were still immature. She still needed more training.

Entering the room, she saw the Empress was practicing a back bend. She was accustomed to it and went forward, asking: "*Niangniang*, *nubi* and Jin Zhan has already picked the fabrics. Jin Zhan's skills are better than *nubi* so the clothes will be made by her and Yu Zan. *Nubi* has also prepared what you ask for. Do you want to see?"

"I'm confident in your abilities, there's no need to make trouble," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she replied," You just have to finish decorating the western hall before tomorrow night according to what I ordered."

"*Nubi* knows," Mu Jin didn't ask why the Empress was preparing those things. As a servant, she was very clear to her position, and knew what to say or not say.

Qu Qing Ju returned to standing but didn't immediately sit down, only wiping the sweat from her eyes as she ordered: "Send some water in, I want to bathe."

After Mu Jin retreated, Qu Qing Ju walked to the window to look at the parasol tree. She sighed. It had been almost two months since that time that He Heng was drunk. Everytime she thought about He Heng's discontent and sorrowful expression, she felt that she might have been too ruthless with He Heng.

But she always was mind over heart. To lose her mind when interacting with a man, that wasn't her style. What she could do was when the other treated her well, she would treat the other well; if the other had no feelings, then she wouldn't offer herself. If a person disappeared from the world, the sun would still rise.

The nights in autumn were cold, but the moon was exceptionally bright. When He Heng finished attending to state matters, he rushed to the rear palace. He still remembered that dance that Qu Qing Ju had promised him. The result was that when he reached the rear hall, he found it empty, even Qu Qing Ju's shadow wasn't seen.

"Emperor, Empress invites you to the western hall of Kui Yuan Palace," Yin Liu was holding a lantern as she bowed at the doorway, "Please."

He Heng didn't get irritated and was in a good mood as he followed Yin Liu. The rear hall wasn't far from Kui Yuan Palace. But what He Heng found unexpected was how exceptionally dark the road was. The only brightness came from the lantern that Yin Liu held. On the lantern was drawn a woman wearing red, flying in the air.

When he reached Kui Yuan Palace, He Heng saw the tightly closed western hall was lit up brightly. At the door, there were two palace maids standing guard. Other than that, he couldn't see anything else.

Qian Chang Xin and the others that had followed after He Heng were curious. What was the Empress up to that was so mysterious?

"Emperor, please." Yin Liu smiled as she ushered the other towards the western hall and then turned back to look at Qian Chang Xin and the others waiting behind.

"You all can wait outside. Other than *zhen*'s decree, you are not allowed to enter," He Heng waved his hands, indicating he didn't need Yin Liu to lead him and headed straight for the doors to the hall. Seeing the two palace maids at the door bow to him before leaving, the curiosity in his heart grew. What kind of dance would the Empress perform for him?

He took a breath and reached to slowly push open the doors to the hall. He only saw that the silk curtains flying in the steam and heat as though it was a paradise. But that wasn't the most attractive thing. The one thing that caught his attention was, on the waters with countless lotus lamps floating in the white jade pool, there was a large flower stage, and in the center of the flower stage, there laid a beauty dressed in an indigo and red dress.

Chapter 111

The lights in the western hall suddenly extinguished. Only the night luminous pearls on the stage and the flower lanterns floating on the water provided illumination, as though in the world, there only existed the woman on the stage.

The music of the ancient *qin* quietly started, and the person on the flower stage moved. The red sleeves seemed to cut through the dark night, flying in the air like ripples in the water. The flower stage slightly trembled and the red-clad woman moved with it, suddenly starting to spin as though what was under her feet wasn't the unsteady flower stage floating on the water, but the solid ground.

The bells at her ankles rang out in the darkness, striking deep into the soul, again and again striking He Heng's appreciation.

Qu Qing Ju was dressed entirely in red. It was a pure vermilion. No jewelry, no jade, other than a string of bells on her ankles, she had no

adornments on her body. The night wind blew in through the open windows, lifting up the silk curtains in the room, and also the vermilion dress. The flexible waist suddenly stopped, and then a back flip. The red sleeves drawing out a circle in the air. In the blink of an eye, the person was reclining on the flower stage. Flower petals slowly floated down, falling on the steaming water, and creating charm for the amazing dance.

At some unknown time, a *pipa* appeared in Qu Qing Ju's hands. She slowly stood, her right foot slowly curling, her fingertip gently flicking, her neck slightly raised, like a goddess taking a flight to the heavens. Even though there was a moving smile on her face, but it stirred fear in the onlooker that she would suddenly leave.

He Heng couldn't resist walking forward, and saw Qu Qing Ju's eyes swirl as she started to dance and play the *pipa* at the same time. After the song ended, a red silk rope suddenly fell down from the top. Qu Qing Ju wrapped her hand around the rope and with a push of her feet, she managed to fly off the flower stage in the midst of a rain of flower petals.

"Qing Ju!" He Heng pushed aside layers of silk. When he saw the faintly smiling person reclining on the bed, his heart jumped. He muttered: "The ancients talked about one 'dancing the "Feathered Coat and Rainbow Skirt" with a breeze in her skirts.' It's only today that I know what it meant."

Qu Qing Ju turned around, changing to lean on the bed, her eyes bewitching as she asked: "Is Emperor satisfied with my dance?"

"A dance that overturns the state," He Heng walked next to the bed, reaching to pull out the jade hairpin in her hair, his voice husky as he replied: "To have such a woman, in this life what else do I need to ask for?"

The wind started, the sleeves slightly swayed as though it stirred He Heng's heart. He couldn't resist gathering Qu Qing Ju in his embrace.

Such scenery, such beauty, his heart was tangled like hair, and there was nothing else that could enter his eyes.

The servants all waited outside Kui Yuan Palace. No one knew what had happened inside Kui Yuan Palace. Some of the attendants that had cooperated with Qu Qing Ju in her dance had all left when Qu Qing Ju stopped dancing. The moment the doors to the western hall closed, it also closed on the romantic night of the Emperor and Empress.

The moonlight was still there, the people were still the same, but to Mu Jin and the group of people waiting outside, if the Emperor hadn't appeared out of the western hall now, then it meant that before the sunrise tomorrow morning, the Emperor wouldn't come out.

Mu Jin turned to look at the western hall. Not just Emperor, even her, a woman, when she saw the Empress in that vermilion costume had been dumbstruck.

Perhaps, there really were women in this world that might be the most beautiful in the world, but they didn't have the ability to entice others, like Empress did.

When Qu Qing Ju woke up, the sky was turning pale. She looked at the man who was holding her, and reached out to brush aside the strands of hair in front of the face. Two pairs of eyes met, and she found the other was already awake, his eyes incomparably warm.

"Awake?" He Heng reached to brush through Qu Qing Ju's hair, smiling as he asked: "Call for the servants to come in?"

Qu Qing Ju yawned and looked outside the window through the layers of silk. She lazily leaned her head on He Heng's chest: "Don't want to get up."

"A beauty in the arms, I don't want to get up either," He Heng's hand gently slid across Qu Qing Ju's back, and unwillingly and

discontentedly sighed, “I finally understand the reason behind ‘from now, the Emperor will not have morning court’.”

“Emperor is willing to be the incapable ruler, but I’m not willing to be that calamitous demoness,” Qu Qing Ju pinched at his waist, and got up to throw the red outer garment casually over her body. She flung her head of soft and smooth hair, revealing her pale legs as she walked through layers of silk to enter the hot spring, the red robe spreading out in the water.

He Heng dressed and when he walked next to the water, he saw her swim around in a circle with seductive poses. He turned to grab a large and clean towel, squatting down and reaching with his hands, urging: “Come up, it’ll be cold when you get out of the water.”

Qu Qing Ju swam in front of him. She looked at the hands he had reached out with, and suddenly pulled, dragging He Heng into the water.

Ming He and the others that had been waiting outside the hall heard the sound of something landing in the water inside, and then the laughter of the Emperor and Empress. They could only quietly bend down even more and bury their heads even lower.

The end result was that He Heng managed to arrive at court almost ten minutes late. But it was such a short gap that no one thought more about it. The only thing that the officials couldn’t understand was why the Emperor was in an exceptionally good mood. Even his voice as he decreed to investigate corrupt officials was softer than usual.

The officials thought in puzzlement, was the Emperor expectant of the upcoming birthday?

At the end of the ninth month, the envoys of the minor countries started to arrive in Jing City. They were placed to live in the visitor palace that was set aside for guests. Even though it was a palace, it wasn’t connected with the Imperial Palace, but was constructed on a certain

wide and clean street. That same street was also home to many noble families.

After the envoys arrived, they quickly sent their cards to He Heng. However, it was the Ministry of Rites' officials that saw them. If they wanted to see He Heng in person, they had to wait for the birthday celebration.

When it was time for the country of Jing to arrive, it caused a portion of the people to gather on the side of the street. They held curiosity for the carriages from another land. Even more, they had heard that a beautiful princess was sitting in the grand carriage. Such alluring gossip, even if they didn't see the person, it was enough to see the carriage.

The envoy from Jing was settled down in the Jiao Xiang Compound of the visitors palace. After moving in, the imperial son and princess of Jing, and the envoys from other countries mutually exchanged greetings, sought out news about the city of Jing before they returned to their compound.

Dai Rong looked at the teacup in her hand, her voice slightly awed: "Da Long is so prosperous and glorious, even a teacup like this would be something in our Jing that everyone would fight over. But here in Da Long, it's just something common." A smile formed on her beautiful face, "I heard from others that said that the new Emperor is extremely handsome and is a very capable ruler. Also, he doesn't have many women in the *hougong*. Such a rare kind of emperor."

"But I heard that the Empress of Da Long is as beautiful as a goddess, kindhearted and in love with His Majesty the Emperor," Tu Er seemed to have seen through his *meimei*'s mind, indifferently playing with a bracelet of agate, "It makes one admire."

"There is no man in this world that doesn't want something new," Dai Rong smiled carelessly, her expression extremely confident, "The past Emperors of Da Long, they all had many beauties in their *hougong*."

Tu Er shrugged, and spreading out his hands, he declared: “Alright, I won’t stop you from whatever you will do. If you make His Majesty the Emperor mad, and lose the right to succession, it would be a great event for me.”

“My good *gege*, there isn’t a man that would neglect a beautiful woman,” Dai Rong’s index finger slid across her red lips, “Just wait and see. I will become Jing’s greatest Empress.”

“Since you insist on doing so,” Tu Er put down the agate bracelet in his hands and spread them, smiling: “I hope you succeed.” When he finished, he smiled and walked out of the room, turning to return to his own rooms.”

“Princess, what does the imperial son mean?” A female attendant behind Dai Ron frowned as she asked, “would the imperial son try to set you up?”

“Don’t worry, *gege* isn’t so stupid as to fight with me in front of His Majesty the Emperor. That wouldn’t be of benefit to Jing’s reputation,” Dai Rong set down the cup in her hand, “Even more, mother favors me more. More people are willing to listen to me. If he wanted to scheme against me, he doesn’t have many helpers.”

Thinking about the Empress that Tu Er mentioned, she snorted. Most of the women of Da Long were in the mold of being virtuous. For a time, a man would find it interesting. If they had to always face such a kind of women all the time, it would be strange if they didn’t get sick of it.

If she could use her beauty to obtain the favor of His Majesty the Emperor, she would get the throne, and also get more benefits for Jing from Da Long, why shouldn’t she do it?

So what if there was an Empress, would the Emperor remain pure as jade for her?

In the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace, Qu Qing Ju was teasing Tun Tun to reach and grab the small drum in her hand. Seeing his head sway about with the drum, and reaching out to grab, she smiled as she pushed the

small drum into his hand. Then she saw Tuo Tuo clumsily shove the drum into his mouth.

Qu Qing Ju didn't stop him. Seeing his toothless mouth smear the drum with saliva, she took a handkerchief to wipe his face. Then she reached out to rub his back. Finding that his temperature was normal, she lifted Tuo Tuo up, "Tun Tun, say ma."

"Ah,"

"Ma."

"Ah,ah."

Seeing Tun Tun smile ignorantly at her, Qu Qing Ju couldn't resist kissing his face repeatedly, "Tun Tun, tomorrow is your father's birthday, say ma."

"It's my birthday, why should he first call you?" When He Heng came in, he heard the words and helplessly walked in front of his son. He reached out to poke his son's face. Seeing him duck into his *muhou*'s arms with a dark face, his eyebrow raised as he remarked, "This brat knows how to hide."

"Don't poke," Qu Qing Ju slapped aside his hand, "Rough hands and feet, it'll harm his skin."

"He's not tofu and can't be touched," He Heng resentfully took his hand back. Seeing Tun Tun reach with his plump hands to lie on Qu Qing Ju's body, he asked; "Why do I feel that he is much closer to you?"

"He lived in my belly for more than nine months," Qu Qing Ju shot him a glare, "If you can give birth to a child, he will be close to you."

He Heng rubbed his nose. He felt that he couldn't challenge a woman's power and status in this field, and only responded: "En, it's good that the child is close to you. It means that this child will be a filial one." Finishing, he took the advantage to rub his son's butt.

Qu Qing Ju handed the child to the nursemaid and sat down on the chair with He Heng. She knew that many envoys from subordinate countries were arriving tomorrow and asked: “Have all the envoys arrived?”

“All here. Even the one from Du Han managed to arrive four days earlier,” He Heng thought and then added, “The imperial son and princess from Jing also came. I heard that they caused quite a fuss.”

Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow, arguing: “A beauty’s entrance should be grand.”

He Heng smiled. Then he objected: “As a subordinate country, they should act like one. What host would like a loud guest that overwhelms them?”

Qu Qing Ju listened to his tone of voice and detected that the envoy from Jing had done something to make him unhappy so she asked: “What did they do?”

“I heard they created a furor when they entered Jing City and then came in in a twelve horse carriage,” He Heng’s brow furrowed, “*xiandi* hasn’t yet passed away for three years yet, but they are already dancing and singing, they have no sense of propriety.”

Qu Qing Ju finally understood. Even though it was already past the mourning period, but it was very likely that when the envoys of the subordinate countries arrived and expressed their allegiance, they certainly expressed their grief at the passing of *xiandi*. So the country of Jing’s behavior was lacking to He Heng.

A twelve horse carriage …… when He Heng was still a *wang ye*, he could only use an eight horse carriage. Were the imperial son and princess of the country of Jing even nobler than a *wang ye* of Da Long?

Didn’t the information on the country of Jing say that the Hu Guo Princess was beautiful, good at dancing and singing and peerlessly intelligent? Why was it that her actions seemed to rub He Heng the wrong way?

Or was it that, this was the tactic that the Hu Guo Princess was using to attract the new emperor's attention?

Such a pity. Regardless of her real intentions, her ploys were being performed in front of blind people. It also made He Heng discontent.

It really …… made people feel sympathy.

The feathers coat and rainbow skirt dance (霓裳羽衣曲) originated in the Tang Dynasty when Tang Xuan Emperor dreamed of going to the Palace of Heaven and saw the goddesses dance. He took inspiration from that to compose a song and dance suitable to perform in the palace. Later, Yang *guifei* was one of those who did the performance. Additionally, the phrase comes from the Song of Everlasting Regret.

Chapter 112

The day of the Emperor's birthday, all the attendants of the palace made themselves one hundred and twenty percent alert. No one dared to slip up. If they managed to mess up in front of their superior, even if they didn't die, they would be torn off half a body of skin.

The palace maids and *taijian* under the supervision of the Department of Household Affairs perfectly arranged everything from clothing to food. Even the Luan He Hall itself was washed again and again. The white jade steps outside were wiped so clean that even a speck of dirt couldn't be found.

"Today's weather is really good," A blue-clad *taijian* raised his head to look at the sun hanging in the sky, and in a lower voice, said to his partner beside him, "Hey, have you heard yet how beautiful the princess of Jing is? She's planning to present a dance at the banquet."

"There's nothing strange,' his partner used the cloth in his hand to carefully wipe the pillars of the corridor, "Just a princess from a minor country, is she worth you being so curious?"

"I think your brains are made out of a wood. A normal princess, why would she present a dance out of the blue in front of the Emperor?" The blue-robed *taijian* proclaimed hatefully, "That one's thoughts aren't simple."

"Isn't there still the Empress?" His partner bent to wash clean the rag in a basin, "Just a pellet sized country's princess, there's nothing to gape about."

"No matter how good a woman is, they can't compare to a new … …"

"Who is speaking nonsense?" A steward *taijian* wearing deep blue rippled robes walked over with a group of young *taijian* behind him. He pointed expressionlessly at the blue-robe *taijian*, "Drag him down, drag him down. Presuming to comment on his *zhuzi*, sparing his life will only make other people's lives harder."

Before the blue-robe *taijian* could beg for mercy, his mouth was stuffed and he was dragged down. His partner was already collapsed on the ground in fear.

"You at least know your bounds," the *taijian* steward rubbed his hairless chin. He waved his hand, "Continue working. If I hear something I shouldn't hear again, the one just now is the lesson. By that time, don't blame me for not warning everyone."

"What's going on here?" Jin Zhan, wearing a water blue palace dress, saw a *taijian* being dragged from far away. When she neared, she found that the *taijian* and palace maids present all had abnormal expressions on their faces. She asked, "What did that *taijian* do just now?"

"Good day, Jin Zhan *guniang*," When the steward *taijian* saw Jin Zhan, a smile instantly appeared on his face. He went forward to bow to Jin Zhan, "Does Jin Zhan *guniang* have something to order us to do?"

Jin Zhan saw the steward *taijian* wasn't willing to speak on the *taijian* that had been dragged away and didn't persist. She opened: "The Empress said, everyone has worked hard. After a little while, everyone can go to the kitchen to receive a bowl of lily porridge to warm up. The weather of the tenth month is cold at night."

"Thanks to the Empress for her grace," The steward *taijian* instantly gave a grateful expression. He made a full bow in the direction of the back end of Tian Qi Palace and then said a few more compliments regarding the Empress before stopping.

Jin Zhan didn't stay for long. After some polite chit-chat with the steward *taijian*, she left.

The steward *taijian* watched her back and sighed. Right now, the Empress's side was splendid. If he could join in on the Empress' side, he wouldn't still be a steward. It was a pity that the people surrounding the Empress were like a metal barrel. It was hard for an average person to even show their face in front of the Empress.

Others said that the Empress was kind and generous, but based on his experience of serving more than twenty years in the *hougong*, the Empress wasn't a simple person. Earlier, when Chang De Gong Fu had fallen, her reputation hadn't been affected but became even better. That wasn't something that any woman could do.

Then there was the earlier matter of Han *liangdi*'s accidental death. Everyone knew that it was caused by the cooperation of Shu *gui taifei* and Ping *cairen*. The Empress was only washed of suspicion due to the heavy defenses of Tian Qi Palace.

But he felt that the matter wasn't that simple. Many people in the *hougong* knew that the two Empress Dowagers and Shu *gui taifei* were at odds. After the new Emperor ascended the throne, Shu *gui taifei*'s people had been cleaned out. It wouldn't have been easy to cooperate with Ping *cairen*.

Then, who was the person that made it easy for them to act together?

The steward *taijian*'s shoulders trembled. He didn't dare to think further. As a tiny steward, he should obediently fulfill his duties. He already lost his manhood, he didn't want to lose his life as well.

"*Niangniang*, do you think that this is appropriate?" Yu Zan and Yin Liu brought out the mirrors and let Qu Qing Ju gaze at her front and back. They asked cautiously, "Is there any place lacking?"

Qu Qing Ju's index finger lightly swiped over the red flower on her forehead. She smiled, complimenting: "Very beautiful, Yu Zan's skills are getting even better."

Taking out a phoenix in flight *buyao* from her jewelry box to insert into her hair, Qu Qing Ju slowly stood: "The hour is late, let's go to the main hall to meet the Emperor."

After He Heng changed his robes, he heard that the servants report that the Empress had arrived. He didn't hesitate and let the servants welcome the Empress in, himself standing in front of the large mirror for a crowd of palace maids and *taijian* to attire him.

"Greetings to Emperor," Qu Qing Ju walked behind He Heng and examined him from top to bottom, "Handsome, with a natural character that all will sigh over. The ancients talked of a pear blossom that suppresses the apple blossoms, the Emperor is worthy of this line."

The palace attendants in the room, upon hearing the Empress tease the Emperor, jumped in fright but didn't dare to show any signs on their face.

"With a pearl on the side, I appear like dirt," He Heng wasn't angry hearing the words. Instead, he smiled and turned to look at Qu Qing Ju dressed in a vermilion floor length phoenix robe with wide sleeves, "With Qing Ju here, everything else in the world is nothing."

The palace attendants quietly lowered their heads. So the Emperor and Empress were playing a game of 'you-compliment-me, I-compliment-you'. As servants, they will act as though they were deaf.

The lights of Luan He Hall shone brightly. Those who were able to attend and sit in the hall, scornful all of them were full of joy, as though it was their birthday. He Yuan sat beneath He Ming, lazily swirling and concentrating on a finely crafted porcelain wine pot. He occasionally took a draw, a slightly sardonic smile on his face.

The people sitting here, how many of them were really happy due to the Emperor's birthday? It was just a play that everyone knew of, but each person deceived themselves. If they couldn't fake it to others, they still needed to fake it to themselves.

"The Emperor has arrived, the Empress has arrived."

He turned to look and saw the Emperor and Empress holding hands as they walked in from the doorway. One wearing a black robe bordered in red, one wearing a vermilion floor length dress. The picture was beautiful. The hand he had on the wine cup slightly froze and then he stood with the others in kneeling to welcome the Emperor.

Seeing the vermilion dress slide across his eyes, he felt as though something was sliding across his heart, sour and difficult to bear, as though his breath was caught, the suffocation making his head ring.

"Everyone rise" He Heng and Qu Qing Ju held hands as they sat down on the wide two-person chair. With a slight smile, he said, "Just one of *zhen*'s birthdays. To trouble everyone here, *zhen* really feels grateful."

Everyone hurriedly kowtowed and expressed that the Emperor was exaggerating. They really sincerely were happy for the Emperor and were loyal etc etc.

After the officials did the three bows and nine kowtows to congratulate He Heng on his birthday, He Heng bestowed the seats. Then it was the envoys from all the subordinate countries to enter the hall to offer their tributes.

Qu Qing ju noticed that there was great care in the order the subordinate countries came in. It seemed the earlier the envoys of the countries came in, the more they were favored by He Heng.

After seven or eight subordinate countries offered their gifts, Qu Qing Ju finally heard the name that she was interested in.

“The country of Jing’s Imperial Son Tu Er, and Princess Dai Rong for an audience!”

“Summon!”

Qu Qing Ju looked with a smile towards the door and saw a male and female wearing clothing of a different culture come in. It seemed that both of them were very young. Two servants followed behind them.

“Tu Er and Dai Rong of the country of Jing congratulates His Majesty the Emperor. May you live a long life, and Da Long be prosperous and flourishing.” Dai Rong walked into the center of the hall and gave a local greeting with all her grace. Thinking that her Jing was the second last to enter the hall, she felt dissatisfied. Even a small country like Wei was put in front of her Jing country. The Rites’ officials of Da Long might be underestimating them too much.

Qian Chang Xin looked at the Emperor. Seeing the Emperor slightly raise his hand, he hollered: “Excused, rise!”

“Thanks to the honored His Majesty the Emperor and Empress.” Tu Er also made a bow and stood up together with his sister. He took advantage of his movement to quickly glance at the Empress. He saw a woman who was even younger than his *meimei*, wearing a grand robe brighter and redder than a fresh flower. This was the first time he saw a woman more suited than his *meimei* to wear a red dress.

“You two have come such a long distance. *Zhen* is very grateful to the two of you,” He Heng raised a hand, “Please sit.”

“The honored Your Majesty the Emperor is too polite. To be able to come celebrate your birthday, it is this one and *meimei*’s great fortune. This one’s mother has prepared a birthday gift for Your Majesty the Emperor and hopes that Your Majesty the Emperor will like it.” Tu Er turned to take the gift box from the hands of his servant behind him and

raised it with both hands, “Please, honored Your Majesty the Emperor, take a look.”

Qian Chang Xin walked down the nine steps of stairs and took the gift box from Tu Er’s hands. He first quickly opened it to see if there was any poisonous gas or concealed weapons before bowing and presenting the box with both hands in front of He Heng.

He Heng took over the gift box. Inside there was a mutton-fat jade pendant carved into the shape of two lotus flowers on the same stalk. He closed the box, remarking: “The ruler of Jing has spent effort. Please sit.”

Tu Er couldn’t see any of He Heng’s emotions from his face and could only sit down with his sister. Because of the flutterings in his heart, he didn’t even notice what the country of Duo Han that came after them had sent.

Since there were birthday wishes from the envoys of subordinate countries, naturally there had to be dances that showed the prosperity of Da Long. Many of the envoys, when they saw the beautiful dances of Da Long’s dancers, forgot to even take up their chopsticks, their faces full of awe. It satisfied many of Da Long’s officials’ vanity.

Qu Qing Ju looked at He Heng beside him and found that his expression was extremely calm, as though the state of the envoys didn’t please him. She nodded inside. These envoys might belong to the subordinate countries, but they were all nobility from those countries. None of them would show such their inexperience just because of a dance.

It was deliberately pretending to act so ignorant to please the people of Da Long.

To be able to be an envoy, it required a thick skin.

“Your country’s dance moves one’s heart. This little woman wants to show everyone a dance from Jing. Will Your Majesty the Emperor allow it?”

Like this one, her skin wouldn't be thin. Qu Qing Ju looked at the Hu Guo Princess dressed in red who had spoken and the smile on her face grew wider.

Chapter 113

No one felt surprised by the princess of Jing's proposal. There were even officials who gave dubious smiles that they thought they hid well, as though they knew what the princess of Jing was thinking and were waiting to see a good show.

A princess of a minor country giving a dance of her own initiative in front of this many people. No one would believe that she didn't have any ulterior motives. But right now, the Empress was still present. This method that this princess of Jing took was too straightforward. To try to seduce the Emperor in front of the Empress, was this because she was confident in her beauty, or just that she didn't have any brains?

After He Heng heard the request from the princess of Jing, he didn't immediately agree, but turned to look at Qu Qing Ju. It was as though he was asking her if she was interested in the dances of a different culture.

"*Ben gong* has heard that the country of Jing's Hu Guo Princess' beauty is the most beautiful in the countries and can dance the world's most beautiful dance. Today, seeing the princess, if we cannot see the princess dance in our palace, it would be such a pity." Qu Qing Ju gave a dignified smile, "Please, Princess, dance."

Dai Rong didn't think that the person who would speak would be the Empress of Da Long and not His Highness the Emperor. She first froze for a beat before standing and bowing, responding: "Great thanks to the Empress, this little woman will display her meager talents." She took off the boots on her feet, and the large robe on her body, revealing a grand attire full of exoticness.

When the men and women present saw her actions, they were slightly shocked. But thinking about the cultural differences between countries, they didn't reveal their reactions blatantly. But inside, they couldn't resist comparing this Hu Guo princess to the dancers. Because in this type of setting, the noblewomen wouldn't lower themselves to display their talents, but would use dancers instead to raise the mood.

Also …… the most beautiful dance in the world? A pellet-sized country dares to boast so. It was really ignorant and narrow minded.

Qu Qing Ju looked at the bare arms and flat stomach that Dai Rong showed after she took off her outer robe and smiled slightly as she raised the teacup. Her gaze swept across the Jing country's musicians who had been invited in, and leaned to whisper into He Heng's ear: "This princess of Jing's waist looks so enticing, it's like a willow branch. It makes one want to go and touch." What she said was the truth. This Hu Guo Princess might have skin that was slightly tanned, it didn't comply with the sense of beauty of the men of Da Long but her features were extremely beautiful, and her figure also extremely hot. She was like a very flavorful pepper. Not a necessity, but when one looked, they couldn't stop thinking about wanting to have a taste.

He Heng carelessly looked at the woman who was twisting her waist like an eel. He thought back to how Qu Qing Ju looked when she had been flying dressed in red and laughed lightly in her ear: "Compared to Qing Ju, she's only just so." In his mind, this Hu Guo Princess did have some attractiveness, but it wasn't something that was rare in the world. On the other hand, it was the intangible charm that Qu Qing Ju showed during her dance that moved his heart. A tasteful woman is like old wine. The more one tasted, the more flavor there was to savor. And not like this kind of strong spirit where there was some taste at first taste, but if more was drank, how was it different from the rotgut liquor sold on the streets?

Dai Rong's movements became even more provocative, like a poisonous viper that unconsciously attracted the gaze of many males. When they

looked at her moving waist, there were only two words in their mind, “beautiful creature.”

As the drums beat faster, the bare feet of Dai Rong spun even faster. The second the drums stopped, she made a pose with her hands together and one of her feet slightly curled, as though a seductive goddess suddenly took away all her magic, and once again became a noble princess.

He Heng had just focused on talking with Qu Qing Ju and didn’t pay any serious attention at all to how this Hu Guo Princess had danced. Seeing her finish, he raised his hand: “This dance of the princess of Jing’s truly has a certain style. What do you think, Empress?”

“Emperor is right,” Qu Qing Ju smiled as she followed, “The princess is as beautiful as the burning sun. How about *ben gong* gives that red jade hairpin from *ben gong*’s stores to the princess? It would really mean that this hairpin won’t be neglected.”

“Many thanks to the honored Your Majesty the Emperor and Empress,” Dai Rong saw that He Heng didn’t seem to be attracted by her dancing. She did feel regretful but her opinion of He Heng became higher. A man that wasn’t easily swayed by beauty, it made her feel that he was more of a challenge than normal men, “But it is one of Empress’ favored objects. This one can’t take away something from the other.”

“The princess is too polite,” Qing Qing Ju smiled faintly as she touched the golden phoenix *buyao* in her hair, “Or does the Princess looks down on *ben gong*’s hairpin?”

“This one doesn’t dare,” Dai Rong saw that the Empress didn’t have a good expression and hurriedly bowed, replying: “Many thanks for Empress’ gift.”

“No need to be polite,” Qu Qing Ju’s smile eased, “*Ben gong* has heard that the queen of your country has been ill lately. Earlier, *ben gong* has heard many of the queen’s wise deeds and is very admiring of her.

When Imperial Son and Princess return, please give *ben gong*'s goodwill to the queen."

Hearing the Empress mention his mother, Tu Er also stood up, and stopped beside his *meimei*. He respectfully made a bow: "Many thanks for Empress' concern. If mother knows of this matter, she would definitely recover due to happiness."

Qu Qing Ju smiled: "Imperial Son is too serious. It does seem that both of you are giants among men, who is the eldest and youngest?" She raised a teacup to sip at the surface of the tea, her tone extremely calm, as though she was only casually asking.

"Empress, this one is the eldest," Tu Er remembered that he seemed to have called Dai Rong by *meimei* in the hall already. Even without the appellation, Da Long should have already known who was the eldest already due to their envoy status. But since the Empress was asking it right in front of him, then he could only obediently reply.

"So that's how it is," Qu Qing Ju nodded, turning her head to speak to He Heng, "Didn't the queen have a matter for Emperor to decide? *Qie* feels that right now is a good time. All the major officials and the envoys from the countries are here, it's fitting to settle the matter."

By this time, everyone present became silent, their gaze flickering between Tu Er and Dai Rong. Even though everyone knew what matter the Empress spoke of, but no one had thought that the Empress would boldly take up the topic. But knowing that the letter had been written by the Jing's Queen, it was normal for the Empress to have viewed it.

"If Empress hadn't mentioned it, *zhen* would've almost forgot," He Heng naturally didn't need to spend much time on such a small matter. Furthermore, he was partial to Tu Er as the successor. The kind of woman that Dai Rong was had too much ambition. For the Da Long Dynasty, it didn't need a subordinate country's ruler to have such great ambitions, "Not long ago, the Queen of Jing had sent a letter to *zhen* hoping to pick a successor between the two of you. Based on what *zhen* has seen, both of you are very able. It really is hard to make a decision."

By now, the officials who had received presents from Dai Rong beforehand didn't dare to speak. They weren't dumb. Just now, the Empress had implied that the Imperial Son Tu Er was the elder, and Dai Rong Princess was the younger. If they were so blind to help speak for Dai Rong Princess, wasn't that working against the Empress?

"Emperor, Imperial Son and Princess are both *di*, but there is the order of seniority. *Wei chen* thinks that Imperial Son Tu Er should be made Crown Prince." The Duke of Zhong Yi stood and raised his hands in a fist, declaring, "If none of the heirs have done anything wrong, the best choice is the eldest among the *di*."

Once the Duke of Zhong Yi's words came out, many of the senior officials came out to second it. None of them abandoned their standpoint just because Dai Rong was a gorgeous woman.

"Since that is the case, *zhen* will title Imperial Son Tu Er as the Crown Prince, and write an Imperial Decree for the envoys to take back to Jing to read," He Heng lowered his head slightly, revealing an approving expression, "Since the matter is settled, the banquet will continue."

Dai Rong didn't think that the position of Crown Princess would slip away so silently. Before coming here, mother had clearly implied that the Emperor of Da Long favored her, but at this time, she couldn't see any sign of protection from the Emperor?

She was the most favored and popular princess of Jing. Even her mother had used "Hu Guo" as her title. But why did His Majesty the Emperor turn away and establish her *gege*?

Tu Er didn't think that the position of Crown Prince would come so suddenly. He first dropped in a daze for a few seconds before remembering to kneel and give thanks. He didn't know if he was thinking too much but he felt that if the Empress hadn't said what she had just said, maybe this position of Crown Prince wouldn't have been delegated to him.

But why did the Empress help him?

He suddenly stared with a complicated expression at his *meimei* who was kneeling beside him. He had heard that Empress of Da Long was very appreciative of able women. If *meimei* hadn't given this dance, and became slightly close with the Empress, would he have what he did now?

Earlier, he had said that *meimei* would use the wrong methods, but she persisted in believing that all the women of Da Long were gentle and virtuous. Why didn't she think, even the women of Jing had many different personalities, so how about the vast and abundant Da Long? Where in this world would there be women who were all the same?

Meimei had lost because she was too egotistical and overconfident. She didn't believe in the sincerity of the feelings between the Emperor and Empress. But this Imperial Couple before them, they were not what she had expected. Perhaps, this is the so-called fate?

Even as the birthday banquet finished, Dai Rong Princess still hadn't recovered from the blow of losing her position as successor. When the banquet had ended, and she had walked out of Luan He Hall to feel the cold wind and saw the exploding fireworks in the sky, she finally slowly woke up. She really failed. *Gege* already became the successor recognised by the Emperor of Da Long.

What was the use of a princess who couldn't succeed the throne? After returning to the country, she could only find a *fuma*, and then have children, and then slowly age away in the Princess *fu*… …

Those kind of days were too scary. She wanted to be the high up queen. If she couldn't be queen, wouldn't the pride she had before become a joke?

Raising her head, she saw the blinding fireworks. She had heard that it wasn't difficult to make this kind of fireworks but the crucial step was the dosage used. Her country couldn't produce it so they had to spend much wealth buying it from Da Long. So unless it was an important occasion, they wouldn't use such valuable objects, and couldn't have such a show of such duration like Da Long.

It was just a birthday of an emperor yet they would have a fireworks show for this long. By now, the banquet attendees had dispersed, but they still continued to set them off, as though those things were worthless, that even a child on the street could light one and play.。

A prosperous and flourishing Da Long, a poor Jing.

Dai Rong Princess' steps paused. She turned to look at the majestic and luxurious Luan He Hall. Even the jade steps and pillars outside the hall were so tasteful and extraordinary. Then how lavish were the days of the women who lived in the Imperial Palace?

Not far away, a procession held beautiful lanterns as they escorted an unbelievably beautiful phoenix carriage. Following behind the carriage were pretty palace maids dressed finely. Such an extravagant scene made her slightly dazed. She couldn't resist asking a guard outside the Luan He Hall: "Who is sitting in that beautiful carriage?"

The guard saw that it was a princess of a subordinate country and politely answered: "That is the phoenix carriage of the Empress. Because the Empress had already left with the Emperor, so most of the phoenix carriage's attendants have left together with the Imperial Carriage."

This kind of procession when there was no one inside? Dai Rong Princess felt astonishment. If the Empress was sitting inside, then how grand would the scene be?

Was this the life inside the Imperial Palace of Da Long? No wonder mother had always talked about how rich and prosperous Da Long was. She had thought it was just mother exaggerating. Coming to Da Long personally, she finally knew that the actual Da Long was even more prosperous and marvelous than her mother had said.

She watched dazedly as the phoenix carriage proceeded further away, and couldn't help but falling into a trance. If she could also live this kind of luxurious life in the future, it would be wonderful.

Right now, she couldn't become the future ruler of Jing, but if she could become an Imperial *fei* in Da Long and live such a sumptuous life, it also wasn't a bad choice.

Didn't they say that the women the Emperor of Da Long favored were even more honored than the Empress? If she could become that woman that was even more honored than the Empress, by then, would she still have to send gifts to flatter the minor officials of Da Long? The throne of Jing wasn't anything. Even if *gege* became king, when he met her, he would still have to bow to her. Moreover, even the Empress wouldn't dare to use such a proud attitude towards her.

Chapter 114

The incident of the princess of Jing giving a dance at the birthday banquet very quickly spread throughout Jing. Many people who liked to gossip began to speculate on how was the princess' dance, how beautiful she was. There were even people who started to say that the Emperor was going to take the princess into the *hougong*.

The people of Jing had seen many things and naturally guessed that the Jing princess hadn't simply offered a dance, rather, she wanted to display herself in front of the Emperor. A woman trying hard to show off her attributes in front of another man, if she didn't have any other motives, it was a bit suspicious.

At one time, the rumors about the princess from Jing increased. Some said that they saw the Jing princess buying jewelry at certain stores, and then incense at another store. All of the rumors had one similarity, the princess of Jing was very beautiful and could steal a soul with a glance.

The rumors became stronger and stronger. It gradually became how devastatingly beautiful Dai Rong Princess of Jing was, and how in love she was with the Emperor. But the Emperor was obstructed by the Empress and had to painfully stop himself from taking Dai Rong Princess into the *hougong*.

The Empress had already been married for two or three years to the Emperor, she even had a child, but she really was too overbearing by occupying the Emperor and not allowing him to take other *fei*.

Some men felt that the Empress wasn't virtuous enough. Other women had slightly sour hearts and said the Empress wasn't generous enough. By the end, Dai Rong Princess became that innocent and beloved woman and the Empress was the evil wife who used her position to bully the princess.

When the rumors from outside passed into Qu Qing Ju's ears, she was playing with Tun Tun and his small drum. When she finished hearing Huang Yang's report, her face held mirth as she remarked: "Such a good story. When did the Emperor take pity on this beauty that is Dai Rong Princess, and when did he have to endure abandoning her?"

When the room heard the words, the people all held their breath as they stood, afraid that the Empress would get angry.

"The Emperor is master of Da Long, he doesn't need to hesitate if he wants to take a woman. Control the court, balance the *hougong*?" Qu Qing Ju sneered, "Only a useless emperor will rely on women to govern the court. *Ben gong* thinks that the people who spread these rumors have ulterior motives."

An unfounded rumor, but it affected both the court and the *hougong*. Even some of the senior officials that He Heng placed importance were involved in the rumor. Those senior officials became the rebellious officials who had taken control of the court, and herself, the Empress, was the mastermind in the shadows, while He Heng was the trapped and suffering Emperor.

There were many noble families in Jing. Usually when something happened, there were many different versions, yet this time, all of the rumors were so similar, so it meant that someone certainly was manipulating them in the background. The main targets were her and Zhong Yi Gong Fu. If He Heng felt even a hint of dislike for her, then

when the rumors streamed into his ear, that bit of dislike would become a lot.

The tactic wasn't clever but very useful. It ruined her reputation, affected the reputations of the strong officials in court, and was also involved the subordinate countries. Right now, the envoys from all the superior countries were still in Jing. If this Dai Rong Princess returned peacefully and safely to the country of Jing like this, what would the envoys of the subordinate think?

Thinking all this, Qu Qing Ju frowned. She watched as Tun Tun's fat hands finally grabbed the rattle-drum, and laughed because of the sounds he made. Her brow steadily smoothed out, and as she rubbed Tun Tun's face, she said: "Since there are so many rumors, let's make them even livelier."

Huang Yan hesitated: "*Niangniang* means to … …"

"Right now, there are suddenly rumors spreading around Jing, and it happened just after Emperor's birthday. Is it that people are deliberately spreading rumors? This kind of movement will shake the support of Da Long itself, it is too terrifying," Qu Qing Ju sighed, "As a citizen of Da Long, I really feel hatred for this kind of person."

When Huang Yan heard the words, his eyes lit up, and he instantly responded: "*Nucai* understands."

Half a day later, some of the people in Jing became suspicious. Everyone knew how virtuous and kind the Empress was and how deep her love was with the Emperor. The Emperor had even written on the coronation decree that the Empress was a blessing from the heavens. How was it that after just a few days, it became the Empress was jealous, and the Emperor and Empress were only pretending to be together and weren't really in love? And as for the officials who had been harmed by the rumors, they all had done good things for the public, how did they all become rebels?

Was it those people with ulterior motives that deliberately spread those rumors, wanting to harm the Empress and the other upright and honorable *daren*? Then who was the person manipulating the rumors, were they enemies of Da Long, or traitors to Da Long itself?

The city of Jing never lacked for intelligent people. The stronger the original rumors became, the more they felt suspicious. When the speculation came out, they threw out many suspects, such as traitors, people from the subordinate countries, Dai Rong Princess who wanted to enter the *hougong*, the Qin Family who was at odds with the Empress, and the brothers of the Emperor.

Slowly, more and more people began to doubt the past rumors and started to feel righteous indignation. They started to roll up their sleeves to find the true mastermind. As to whether they were really angry, or just wanting to get in on the fuss, it depended on what each spectator thought.

In the Imperial Study, He Heng looked at the major officials under him. They were all the "rebel" officials who had been in cahoots with the Empress in the rumors. Thinking about the ridiculous rumors, He Heng smiled as he comforted: "*Aiqing* doesn't have to blame yourselves. *Zhen* never cares about this kind of false rumors. *Zhen* has eyes to see what kind of people you all really are, and won't just listen to the rumors."

Tian Jin Ke stepped forward with a grave face. He raised his hands in a greeting as he responded: "It's *chen* who is useless and has caused these kind of rumors to spread, harming the reputations of Emperor and the Empress. Please, Emperor, punish us." He was the Junior Justice of the Supreme Court. Even though he didn't have a direct connection with the matter, there was still some related points..

Commander Sun of the Imperial Guards felt his heart shrink. As one of the "traitorous officials who cooperated with the Empress," he wasn't just a target of the rumors, it was possible that he would be punished by the Emperor because he didn't manage to stop the rumors in time. When Tian Jin Ke had asked for punishment, he knelt down preemptively. He was directly connected to the matter.

"*Zhen* has already said that *aiqing* doesn't have to blame yourselves," He Heng stood from the Imperial Table and personally helped them back up, "You are all pillars of the country. *Zhen* is still hoping that you can do more things for Da Long, and won't punish you for such a trivial matter."

The hearts of the people presents warmed. To be able to have such a wise ruler as the Emperor, it really was their good fortune as officials and subjects. For the moment, many of the old men's eyes were filled with tears, and they all knelt down to thanks the Emperor for his benevolence. Inside, they became even more resolute that they had to clear up the matter. Even though it became a minor matter due to the trust of the Emperor, they wouldn't tolerate this happening again.

"The only thing that *zhen* is extremely worried about is that the Empress, originally a virtuous person, has been falsely accused by people with malicious aims," He Heng sighed, "*Daren* must all thoroughly and diligently find out the mastermind behind the scenes to restore justice for *aiqing* and the Empress."

"Emperor, please don't worry, *chen* will thoroughly investigate this matter," Commander Sun bowed as he responded, "By now, many people in Jing have already noticed the malicious aims of the villain in the shadows. Not many people still believe the rumors. The virtuousness and kindness of the Empress will not be stained by others."

Luo Chang Qing raised an eyebrow at Commander Sun. Who said that soldiers had no brains? Look how well this one flattered. He raised his head to peek at the Emperor and, as expected, saw that the Emperor's smile had grown wider. He went forward a step, interjecting: "By now, many people in Jing are suspicious of the princess of Jing, Duo Han and …… the *wang ye*. *Wei chen* thinks due to how generous Emperor has been to the *wang ye*, they wouldn't have done such distasteful things."

Luo Chang Qing dared to say this because, one, the rumors were not beneficial to the solidarity of the Imperial House, and two, because his granddaughter was married to Cheng Wang. But no matter what, his suggestion wasn't wrong.

He Heng nodded, agreeing: "*Zhen*'s brothers are all honest people, *zhen* believes that they aren't that kind of people."

Not long after the *daren* left the Imperial Study, many of the people in Jing knew of the words the Emperor had said and were deeply moved by the depth of friendship with which the Emperor treated the *wang ye*. They also felt if the *wang ye* weren't loyal to the Emperor, then they were really cruel and unscrupulous people.

In Cheng Wang Fu, He Ming finally breathed a sigh of relief when he finished hearing the servant's report. He walked into the room of the *wang fei* who was in her confinement period. Seeing that she was holding their child, he smiled and asked: "Is Wang'er still asleep?"

Luo Wen Yao saw him coming in with a smile and gave the child to his nursemaid, "Did something good happen?"

He Ming faithfully narrated the events and sighed at the end: "Emperor and Empress treat us so well, but I am limited in what I can do for Emperor."

"*Wang ye* and the Emperor are blood brothers. Feelings cannot be calculated like this," Luo Wen Yao urged, "A few days ago, Mu Jin, one of the Empress' attendants, had specially come to visit *qie*, and told me a lot of things. Is this because the Empress expects *qie* to pay her back for all of this?"

"I had thought too narrow-mindedly," He Ming went forward to hug her, not caring about the unclean state she was in due to her confinement. He said ruefully, "With Yao Yao here, I don't feel sad at all."

Luo Wen Yao laughed quietly, the happiness on her face clear for all to see. She had the fidelity of her husband and a son, what reason did she have to not be happy?

In the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace, Qu Qing Ju took down her hairpins and jewelry. Rubbing her shoulders, she said: "The days are getting colder."

Jin Zhan and Yu Zan sorted the hairpins and jewelry to be placed away in their boxes. Mu Jin used a rhinoceros horn comb to brush Qu Qing Ju's hair. Hearing that, she replied: "It's already deep autumn, the weather always changes quickly now."

"That's so true, winter is almost here," Qu Qing Ju curled her lips, "I heard that the winters of the country of Jing are especially harsh. Once it enters the winter months, it's all wrapped in silver silk, I wonder what it looks like."

"The country of Jing is a poor place. When it's winter, the people don't have good days," Mu Jing's hands were brushing her hair at a perfect pace. She smiled, saying, "*Nubi* doesn't know much, but feels if the people of the country of Jing saw the prosperity of our Da Long, they wouldn't want to leave."

"Really?" Qu Qing Ju took off the jade bangle on her wrist and suddenly smiled, declaring, "Not willing to leave, then they should stay here."

Mu Jin's hands stilled. She didn't know what the Empress meant. Hesitating, she asked: "Whys hould such people stay here, wouldn't it make more trouble for others?"

"Peaceful days will make people forget the beauty of the past," Qu Qing Ju smiled, "Remaining doesn't have to be a good thing. You have to know that the prosperity of others doesn't have to be yours. You dare to scheme against others, then you have to know that others will scheme back."

When He Heng arrived at the rear hall, Qu Qing Ju had already changed into her sleep robes and was leaning on the bed as she read. He furrowed his brows, going forward to reproach: "Reading so late, it'll harm the eyes."

Qu Qing Ju closed the book in her hands. She smiled, answering: "Just bored, waiting for you to come back to sleep."

Just those words were enough to make He Heng's heart move. He took off his own clothing and made a feast of the beauty.

Afterward, the two of them lay in satisfaction on the bed, Qu Qing Ju on He Heng's chest, "I saw that your mood hasn't been well these few days. Is it because of those words outside the palace? It's just rumors. When the people get bored, they won't pass it on anymore. It's not worth it to be affected by those things."

"For whom am I getting angry on behalf of?" He Heng smiled helplessly, "The rumors are targeted towards you. I can't not be angry."

"These people are targeting me, that means that they hate me inside," Qu Qing Ju smiled, replying, "Only daring to attack from the back, it means that there are many things these people have to consider. Why should I care for such people?"

"Well, look how clearly you think," He Heng smiled. Then suddenly his tone turned cold, "I have already found the people in the shadows."

Qu Qing Ju stared with wide eyes at him, looking curious, "Who are they?"

"The Qin Family and the princess from Jing," He Heng sneered, "That these people from two sides can work together, they really have skill."

Qu Qing Ju stared blankly and then hummed: "I just knew that Dai Rong Princess is interested in you. To do such things for you, she really is in love."

"In love after just one meeting?" He Heng gathered her in his arms, "Don't accuse me wrongly. What she's in love with is my position, not me. I'm innocent."

The tips of Qu Qing Ju's feet stroked on the front of his feet: "Regardless, this Dai Rong Princess is interested in you. But why is the Qin Family meddling in this matter?"

He Heng sighed helplessly: "Did you forget that the Qin Family wanted to send someone into the *hougong*?"

Qu Qing Ju displayed an expression of realization. A beat later, she teased: "If you were just a *wang ye*, there wouldn't be this many women looking at you."

Even though he was happy at the possessiveness his woman had towards him, the words just didn't seem right. Was it only his position that attracted others?

"No, that's not right. Even if you are a *wang ye*, there would be many women looking at you," Qu Qing Ju's brow furrowed as she mused, "Really want to lock you up, and not let anybody else see you."

This complaint made He Heng's heart beat faster. He flipped to push her under him, gently kissing Qu Qing Ju's ear: "I, originally, am yours."

Qu Qing Ju's eyes stared at his. Seeing his two eyes filled with emotion, she reached around his neck.

"En, you are mine."

Chapter 115

Waking up in the morning, Qu Qing Ju looked beside her. The space had become empty, the light coming in through the windows. She rubbed her forehead as she got up. It seemed to be late in the morning.

The palace attendants waiting outside heard the noise from inside, and quickly came in with the washing tools. They served her to get out of bed and change. After everything was prepared, she then sat in front of the table to sedately eat the morning meal.

"Mu Jing, how many days until Cheng Wang Fei's confinement ends?" When the child was one month old, they would have a month-old banquet. She didn't need to personally go, but it would be good to prepare what she needed to give.

"About ten more days. Is *niangniang* worried about what to give for the month-old banquet?" Mu Jin handed over a handkerchief for Qu Qing Ju to wipe her hands and then a lotion for Qu Qing Ju to rub on. After entering autumn, the wind became stronger. If the hands weren't taken care off, they wouldn't look good after a few days.

"En," Qu Qing Ju rubbed her hands against each other and sighed, "The wives of the noble families, this back and forth isn't something easy. Any other person, I can hand off for someone else to do, but not Cheng Wang Fei." Thinking some more, she eventually had them prepare things that would help a woman recover and things that infants could use. For other people, she only had to give things that looked good. But she and Luo Wen Yao had some feelings between them, so she naturally had to repay her for her sincerity.

"Today's weather is good to take a walk." Qu Qing Ju thought for a second, "Let the nursemaid take His Highness Imperial Son out to walk as well."

Mu Jin hurriedly let the others prepare. She saw that the Empress' expression didn't seem right and couldn't resist asking: "*Niangniang*, should the phoenix carriage be prepared?"

"No need, we'll just walk outside," Qu Qing Ju stood to walk to the door. The warm sunlight spilled onto her body, making her dazed for an instant. She raised her head to look at the sky and turned back and saw that the nursemaid had already carried Tun Tun over. Smiling, she said: "Let's go."

When the Empress set out, even though there wasn't a troop of servants before and after her, there were still many attendants that followed. Even more, there were quite a few servants that were there to take care of Tun Tun. Qu Qing Ju walked over the white jade bridge over the lotus pond and entered the Imperial Gardens. Looking at the blooming chrysanthemums, she suddenly realized that autumn had really arrived.

Passing by a pavilion, Qu Qing Ju stopped walking. She turned back to look at that pavilion in the midst of the flowers, asking with a raised

eyebrow: "Winter last year, didn't Han *liangdi* sing there for the Emperor?"

Mu Jin didn't know why the Empress would suddenly mention Han *liangdi*. She looked at the pavilion, nodding: "*Niangniang*, what is it?"

"Nothing," Qu Qing Ju sighed, seemingly in regret, "Just rueful. Almost a year has passed in the blink of an eye. Time passes so quickly."

"*Niangniang* doesn't have to think about these things," Mu Jin smiled as she supported Qu Qing Ju's wrist, "*nubi* heard the black chrysanthemums over there have flowered well. Do you want to see?"

"No, Tun Tun is still little, it's not good to be too close to the flowers," Qu Qing Ju pointed to a stone table near a fake mountain not far away, "Let's go sit there. We can also soak in some sun."

Tea and pastries quickly were put on the stone table. A soft cushion was put on the stone bench. Qu Qing Ju sat down on the bench. Seeing Tun Tun looked around at the surroundings with wide eyes, she knew that he was curious about the outside scenery so she let the nursemaid carry him to see the surroundings. Listening to his happy cries, she couldn't resist laughing: "Children are just children, anything can make them happy."

"His Highness is clever," Mu Jin put out a cup of hot tea for Qu Qing Ju then turned to give a hand bell to His Highness the Imperial Son. Seeing him happily grasp the hand bell, she remarked happily, "His Highness grips it so steadily and can wave it around. He really has strong wrists."

"Almost half a year old, it isn't strange that he can grasp things," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she informed, "Not long from now, he should be able to crawl."

Mu Jin smiled as she bowed: "*Niangniang*, don't laugh at *nubi* for making a fuss. *Nubi* thinks anything that His Highness does is good."

Qu Qing Ju laughed at her words. When she turned her head, she saw a procession that surprised her. She asked with a furrowed brow, "What is going on there?"

Mu Jin looked into the distance and saw Ming He leading some womenfolk around the Imperial Gardens. Most of the womenfolk were the *furen* of the envoys of the subordinate countries, but the princess from the country of Jing was also among them.

"*Nubi* will go ask," Mu Jin bowed, and turned to walk in the direction of Ming He and the others.

Because several of the *furen* of the officials and the princess had looked forward to seeing the Imperial Gardens of Da Long, Ming He had to, under the imperial order, serve them to tour the Imperial Gardens. But thinking about the rumors from outside about the princess of Jing and the Empress, his heart was bitter. If the Empress saw, he didn't know what would happen.

Just when he was thinking it inside, he saw Mu Jin coming over when he raised his head. He sighed inside, but forced a smile onto his face. He went forward a few steps, exchanging bows with Mu Jin: "Where is Mu Jin *guniang* coming from? The Empress can't be without your service."

"Ming He *gonggong* is exaggerating," Mu Jin smiled and looked at the womenfolk behind him. She gave a shallow bow: "*Nubi* Mu Jin greets everyone."

These women might not have recognized Mu Jin but all knew that there was a high ranked palace maid called Mu Jin that was especially favored by the Empress. Additionally, when they saw that Ming He's attitude towards Mu Jin was especially friendly, they were certain to Mu Jin's identity. Then they all gave slight smiles, and exchanged some pleasantries with Mu Jin using their basic knowledge of Da Long language.

"Because all the *furen* has never toured the Imperial Gardens, so *nucai* has been ordered by the Emperor to accompany the *furen* to walk the

garden," Ming He said with a faint smile, "Didn't think to encounter Mu Jin *guniang*."

"*Niangniang* is drinking tea up front. She saw you leading the women into the garden so she let *nubi* come ask," Mu Jin's gaze swept in the direction of the princess of Jing, her smile not changing as she responded, "Since *gongong* is busy, I won't disturb any further." It seems that the Emperor didn't think much of the *furen* of the envoys. Otherwise the one receiving them wouldn't be Ming He. At the very least, it would be a noblewoman of some significant status or a *furen* from the Imperial House.

"Since the Empress is here, we should greet the Empress," The *furen* of the envoy from Dong Yu said in a respectful tone, "If it wasn't that the Hu Guo Princess that especially asked, we wouldn't have the good fortune to enter the palace for a tour. To greet the Empress, it is our good fortune."

Mu Jin smiled as she looked at the Dong Yu envoy's *furen*. This envoy's wife said what seemed to be a normal and casual sentence but in reality it was expressing goodwill towards the Empress. She followed with a smile, answering: "*Nubi* doesn't dare to make a decision. Please, honored guest, wait for *nubi* to inform the Empress."

Watching Mu Jin walk towards the fake mountain in the front, Dai Rong couldn't help looking more at the fake mountain. When her movements were spotted by Ming He's eyes, he thought scornfully, country ignoramuses are country ignoramuses. Just this kind of scheming, any palace maid in the *hougong* is stronger than her. It seems that the country of Jing was one generation worse than the previous.

When Qu Qing Ju heard Mu Jin's report, her brow slightly furrowed, "A special request from the princess of Jing?" Having said that, she couldn't resist snorting, "It seems that she is exceptionally interested in our Da Long's *hougong*. Alright, let them come. *Ben gong* wants to get to know this princess of Jing."

She looked at Tun Tun who was still playing with the handbell and said to the nursemaids: "Take Tun Tun back to the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace, don't let anyone casually near His Highness."

The nursemaids obediently left, not even turning to look back.

Hearing that the Empress was willing to see them, the wives of the envoys all gave smiles. They were highly ranked in their own countries, but compared with the noblewomen of Da Long, they weren't really anything. Once they came to the City of Jing, they carefully managed their speech and conduct. Whenever they met a noblewoman from one of the noble families, they were extremely courteous. The fact that the Empress was willing to meet them, it was a happy unexpected occurrence.

The procession followed in Mu Jin's footsteps next to the fake mountain when they saw a woman dressed in a white floor length dress embroidered with red flowers lazily sitting on the stone table. Her black hair was restrained in a beautiful and exquisite *feitainji*, all of her hair ornaments and jewelry were finely made. But what made them lose their focus the most wasn't the grand decorations, but the Empress' own composure and beauty. Just a glance was enough to make them feel inferior, but at the same time, they felt it was appropriate that the Empress of Da Long should be this noble and beautiful, that it was natural that they couldn't compete with the Empress. When they saw the Empress, they couldn't find any jealousy, only admiration and reverence.

"*Chenfu* is the *furen* of Dong Yu's prime minister, greets the honored Empress."

The womenfolk came up one by one to pay their respects to Qu Qing Ju. They all gave the full greetings of their own countries. Before their arrival, Qu Qing Ju had learned a basic understanding of their customs and politely allowed the womenfolk to take a seat.

"The country of Jing's Dai Rong greets the honored Empress," This was the first time that Dai Rong saw the Empress at such a close distance.

She examined Qu Qing Ju from top to bottom. Even though she wasn't willing, she still had to admit that this Empress was somewhat beautiful.

"Hu Guo Princess doesn't have to be this courteous," Qu Qing Ju indicated for her to sit, "*ben gong* remembers you. Your dance in Luan He Hall was very beautiful."

"Didn't think that Empress would remember this one, this one isn't worthy," Dai Rong's face was full of bashfulness, "Coming to the Imperial Gardens for the first time and being able to encounter Empress, it really is our great fortune."

"You all like to mention fortune, but *ben gong* feels that it is destiny," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she raised a teacup, "Everyone, come taste our Da Long's tea. It isn't anything rare, but the taste is still good."

"Da Long's tea is worth a thousand gold in our countries, it is very valuable," The *furen* of the envoy from Dong Yu smiled as she took a drink, "The tea that the Empress has, it really is a rare and seldom one."

"If you like it, when you return, take some back," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she responded, "Coming from so far away to celebrate Emperor's birthday, it must have been hard."

"His Majesty the Emperor is brave and outstanding. To celebrate His Highness the Emperor's birthday, there is no hardship," Dai Rong put down the teacup, smiling and said, "His Majesty the Emperor is a god in my country of Jing. All the people of Jing would never find it hard for our gods."

"Ah," Qu Qing Ju raised an eyebrow at Dai Rong, "Then all of Jing is full of loyalty for my Da Long.

"Of course, my Jing's heart towards Da Long is like shining like the sun and moon," Dai Rong's eyes met Qu Qing Ju's, "this one believes that the honored His Majesty Jia You will be one of those wise rulers seen once in a thousand years.""

The two's eyes met in the air. Qu Qing Ju found that the other had a pair of beautiful eyes. She gave a faint smile: "As the Empress of Da Long, I'm very grateful for the loyalty that the people of Jing feels towards Da Long."

Da Rong followed: "So, as the Hu Guo Princess of Jing, I'm willing, for the honored His Majesty Jia You Emperor, to become his *fei*."

Qu Qing Ju laughed out loud. She had heard that the culture of country of Jing was extremely liberal, and the relationships between men and women were relaxed. Hearing Dai Rong's words today, she finally understood what a liberal culture was like.

Chapter 116

The words of Dai Rong shocked many people. Especially Ming He. He felt his legs weaken. If he had known that this Hu Guo Princess was this bold, today, he wouldn't have done this. If the Empress thought that he had deliberately ushered the person in front of her, then would he have any more good days to live?

The *furen* of Dong Yu's envoy stared with shock and wide eyes. She used the teacup to conceal her open mouth. She couldn't resist looking at the Empress, how would the Empress resolve this matter?

Qu Qing Ju was slightly surprised at the actions of Dai Rong to recommend herself into the Emperor's bed, but she quickly calmed down. She had heard before about the liberal nature of the country of Jing. Even though she hadn't thought that this Dai Rong Princess would speak so blankly of the matter, but it wasn't as though she would lose her composure due to it. Elegantly putting down the teacup in her hands, she used a handkerchief embroidered with a beautiful design to wipe her lips: "Where does the Princess' words come from? If you are in love with the Emperor, why not tell him, instead of telling *ben gong*?"

"This one heard that the Empress of Da Long has the power to manage the *hougong*. Then the expansion of the *hougong* should be your duty.

This one telling you of the matter, it should meet protocol," Dai Rong Princess stood from the bench and gave a full bow in the style of Da Long to Qu Qing Ju, "Dai Rong sincerely is in love with the Emperor and begs Empress to fulfill this request."

Dai Rong's actions were nothing but forcing the Empress to admit her position. At the side, Yin Liu and the others were gritting their teeth, but due to their status, they stood quietly at the side.

The other *furen* of the envoys from subordinate countries felt awkward inside. Many of them had heard the rumors from before but knew very well how suspicious the rumors were. But they hadn't thought that this Dai Rong Princess actually had an interest in His Majesty the Emperor of Da Long. Right now, they regretted coming with Dai Rong Princess to tour the gardens. Such an incident as this, they didn't know what expression was appropriate for this situation.

"Dai Rong Princess isn't wrong, *ben gong* has the power to expand the *hougong*," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she stood, looking from up high down at Dai Rong bent in front of her, "but *ben gong* is Emperor's wife, and naturally cannot neglect Emperor's wishes and randomly take other women into the palace. If Princess truly is in love with the Emperor, you should confess to Emperor. If Emperor is willing to take you into the palace, *ben gong* naturally is happy for the palace to have another woman to serve the Emperor."

Dai Rong didn't think the Empress would push the matter to His Majesty the Emperor. After a slight pause, she said: "If that's the case, then please, Empress, act on behalf of this one to express this true love to the Emperor. This one will thank Empress here and now." Finishing, she lifted her skirts and knelt. Even more, she put out a posture of prostration.

Ming He saw the princess of Jing's almost wretched-like actions and looked undetectably at the Empress. Right now, the Emperor should be leaving court. He didn't know if Xiao Gan Zi would manage to lead the Emperor over. If this matter wasn't solved correctly, it would blow up.

Thankfully, the conduct of the Empress was steady and dependable. If one step was wrong, right

"If it is sincere, then why let others tell about it, wouldn't that tarnish that true feeling?" Qu Qing Ju went forward a few steps, reach a hand in front of Da Rong, and smiled widely, "Princess, please get up. The country of Jing might be a subordinate country of Da Long, but you are still a princess of a country, how can you give such a big greeting to *ben gong*?"

When the *furen* of Dong Yu's envoy heard it, she felt embarrassed on behalf of Dai Rong. The Empress' words mocked her for lowering her status and being shameless. A princess, regardless of how small the country was, it was still a country. Her conduct represented the country. Right now, she was kneeling and begging just so she could enter the *hougong* of Da Long to become a *feipin*. If the Queen of Jing knew of the conduct, what would she think?

Dai Rong had a high opinion of herself but she wasn't stupid. Naturally, she heard the implication in Qu Qing Ju's words. Looking at the hand that the other offered to her, she said in a respectful tone: "Don't dare to trouble Empress." And then she stood. She sighed somewhat tragically, "This one is a woman, when would there be a time to meet the honored His Majesty the Emperor. It's just a futile hope to expect to accompany him."

"Princess has only seen the Emperor only a few times, but lost her heart. It really is deep love, and *ben gong* is very shocked," Qu Qing Ju's face gave a few hints of mirth, was scornful yet proud, "If that's the case, why don't *ben gong* give you a chance for you to tell of your desires to the Emperor?" When she finished speaking, her eyes looked towards the side of the fake mountain. There, standing, was He Heng dressed in the black dragon robes. The other's face was so calm, it was scary.

Dai Rong seemed to detect that someone was behind her. When she turned to look, she hadn't thought it was the Emperor. She first stilled and then reacted, given a sweet smile and a graceful bow: "Greetings to the honored Your Majesty the Emperor."

The other *furen* of the envoys all followed in standing and making their bows. They were all married women and naturally knew how to read expressions. So it only took just a rough glance and they were able to see that the Emperor's expression wasn't too good, and seemed to be indistinctly angry.

The atmosphere seemed to returned back to when Dai Rong Princess recommended herself as a *feipin*. He Heng walked to sit down next to Qu Qing Ju. He glanced at the princess of Jing dressed seductively and said in a heavy tone: "*Furen*, please rise."

Dai Rong, who had been preparing to stand, swayed in her place. She hesitated but in the end still maintained her posture in greeting. He Heng didn't seem to have seen her, and exchanged a few words with the *furen* of the envoys before become silent and only drinking tea on the side.

The envoys' *furen* didn't know whether they should leave or sit at this time. They furtively looked at the princess of Jing who was still locked in her position and didn't dare to breathe. They were all minor subordinate countries. If they encountered any disasters, they had to rely on Da Long to give aid. No one dared to be disrespectful in front of Da Long's Emperor. Not to mention, even if the Emperor of Da Long found a reason to take one of their lives, they didn't dare to say anything.

Thankfully, the generations of Emperors of Da Long were not tyrannical, so these years, the subordinate countries had relatively peaceful days. But if they really made the Emperor angry, other than the fall of their country, they had no other road to walk.

Qu Qing Ju was also aware the atmosphere wasn't good and said: "Why did Emperor come over?"

"*Zhen* heard you came to walk in the garden and came to look," He Heng's tone softened greatly. He glanced at Qu Qing Ju and saw her expression was normal, and not angry due to the actions of the princess

of Jing before he smiled and added, "*Zhen* will wait to eat the noon meal with you."

When the *furen* of Dong Yu's envoy heard this, she couldn't help but feel disdain towards Dai Rong. The Emperor and Empress of Da Long were in a harmonious relationship, but this Dai Rong Princess was greedy and vain, wanting to enter the *hougong* of Da Long. It really was both stupid and shameless. Right now, she was a princess of Jing, so the Empress was still courteous to her. If she became one of the *feipin* of the *hougong*, with the weak strength that Jing had, if the Empress wanted to sort her out, the Empress would not have the slightest concern while doing so.

"Just now, *qie* has heard something very touching from the princess of Jing. Is the Emperor interested in listening?" Qu Qing Ju looked cheerfully at He Heng, "after *qie* heard it, *qie* was extremely shocked."

"The successor for the country of Jing has already been settled. Due to the separation of genders, *zhen* and the princess of Jing, have nothing to discuss," He Heng put down the teacup, speaking icily, "Your Highness Princess, if your country has something to discuss with my Da Long, then please let your country's Crown Princess to have an audience."

"Emperor, this matter has nothing to do with state matters," Dai Rong looked at the frigid eyes of the Emperor of Da Long. She already felt regret inside, but since the words had been spoken, she had to continue, "It's this one that is in love with Emperor, and begs for Emperor to take pity."

Qu Qing Ju's eyebrows jumped and she raised a teacup to hide the corners of her lips that rose up.

"*Zhen* heard that the country of Jing is extremely liberal. Seeing the princess today, it does live up to the rumors," No pity was found in He Heng for the beauty of Dai Rong and her humble posture. He looked at her and said, "The love of the princess, *zhen* appreciates, but *zhen* is only in love with the Empress and has no intentions of taking another into the *hougong*."

"This one doesn't beg to be able to receive the Emperor's favor, but only to be able to serve Emperor," Dai Rong's eyes brimmed with tears as she looked at He Heng, "is that also not possible?"

"There are countless women in the world in love with *zhen*, so does *zhen* have to take pity and take them into the *hougong*?" He Heng's voice became forceful, "If *zhen* did so, it is not beneficial to oneself nor the person *zhen* is in love with. *Zhen* appreciates the intentions of the princess, but asks Princess not to mention this matter again in the future."

If the words were spoken more clearly, it would be "There's many women that like me in the world, but do I have to take all of them into the palace, isn't that disgusting myself?"

Dai Rong didn't think that when she had said those words, the Emperor would so ruthlessly reject her. He even compared her to other vulgar women, as though she wasn't different from other women.

She almost didn't dare to look at the faces of the other *furen* of the envoys. Because even without looking, she knew that they were laughing at her inside. Because the husbands of these women lost their focus after seeing her, and fawned over her. So these women were jealous of her, and hated her.

"Emperor, the Crown Prince of Jing asks for an audience, His Highness Cheng Wang asks for an audience." Qian Chang Xin seemed to have not seen this farce and with a peaceful expression walked over, disregarding Dai Rong on the way who was still kneeling on the ground.

"The Crown Prince of Jing?" He Heng glanced at Dai Rong. With a dark face, he responded, "Let the Crown Prince of Jing return. Tell him if the country of Jing still wants Da Long to continue to support them, then to show sincerity. *Zhen* doesn't lack for women, and even more, isn't interested in the women of Jing. Also, tell *si di* to wait in the Imperial study for *zhen*. *Zhen* will be there shortly."

Those words were like a heavy slap to Dai Rong's face. She didn't dare to think when the words reached the country of Jing, how the citizens would think of her. And didn't dare to imagine if the country of Jing was neglected by Da Long due to her, how bad the situation would be.

"If that's the case, then Ming He, continue leading these honored guests through the garden. *Ben gong* should be returning to the palace," Qu Qing Ju smiled as she stood, telling He Heng, "Since Emperor has other matters, then go early. *Qie* will wait for you to return to eat."

"Alright, *zhen* will be quick," He Heng lowered his head slightly at the envoys' *furen* before leaving with a procession of attendants behind him. From beginning to end, he didn't look again at Dai Rong.

Qu Qing Ju walked in front of Dai Rong, smiling as she said: "Princess, please stand. The Emperor is always like this, hope the Princess doesn't mind."

"This one doesn't dare," Dai Rong felt that even her bones were cold. She trembled with fear as she bowed to Qu Qing Ju, "Respectfully sending off Empress."

"En," Qu Qing Ju nodded and took Mu Jin's hands as she turned and walked away.

The *furen* of the envoys watched as the Emperor and Empress left, then scornfully looked at Dai Ron. One of the *furen* shook her head, remarking: "Aiya, such a pity."

A few others followed in laughing. The sound of laughter passed into Dai Rong's ears, piercing and nasty, but she was helpless.

Chapter 117

Sometimes, rumors spread very quickly. Such as the new rumor of the love and hate between Dai Rong Princess and Jia You Emperor. The main idea was that Dai Rong Princess coveted the prosperity of Da

Long, and not wanting to return to the poor country of Jing, tried all she could to become one of the Emperor's *feiqin*. Even more extreme was that Dai Rong Princess recommended herself in front of the Emperor and Empress. But who knew that she was rejected multiple times by the Emperor. Due to her actions, the Emperor became dissatisfied with the country of Jing and even rejected the request from the Crown Prince of Jing for an audience.

There were others that said it was previously Dai Rong Princess who targeted the Empress and the honorable officials because she wanted to enter the palace as *fei*, so she specially spread rumors to blight the Empress' reputation.

In the subconsciousness of the people in the Jing City of Da Long, they looked down at the kind of small country that was Jing. Previously, when they gossiped about how exceptional Dai Rong Princess was, no one ever said that Dai Rong Princess was better than the Empress, they were only speculating that the Emperor wanted something fresh and fancied Dai Rong Princess.

When what had happened in the Imperial Palace reached the ears of the people of Da Long, there was an explosion. The princess of Jing was shameless, the Emperor didn't even want the princess when she recommended herself, she couldn't compare to a finger of the Empress. Maybe she had nothing inside, and wanted to grab onto their Da Long. Furthermore, others started to say that this princess of Jing had ulterior motives and wanted to enter the Imperial Palace of Da Long to give birth to a son and take Da Long's throne, to conquer Da Long's lands.

When Tu Er, wearing the attire of the country of Jing, came back to the guest palace from the outside, his face was extremely nasty. He angrily burst into Jiao Xiang Yuan and saw Dai Rong venting her temper at a maid. He shouted: "You still have the time to be angry, our Jing has been completely humiliated by you!"

"Don't shout at me, you aren't the ruler of Jing yet," Dai Rong had been embarrassed by He Heng and hadn't calmed down. After hearing Tu Er use a critical tone whilst speaking to her, the embarrassment inside

turned into anger, “Don’t think that because you are now the Crown Prince, you can order me around. It’s too early for that!”

“I don’t want to order you around,” Tu Er angrily kicked aside the bench in front of him, pointing at Dai Rong, demanding, “But think of what you have done since you came into Da Long’s Jing City. Has the prosperity of Da Long really blinded your eyes?”

“Yes, what’s wrong if I’m blinded by Da Long’s prosperity?” Dai Rong defended with red eyes, “I am the most beautiful woman of Jing, the most favored daughter of mother. Why can’t I live the most luxurious life? The *feipin* of Da Long aren’t as beautiful as me, why can’t I enter the palace?”

“Because the Empress is stronger than you!” Tu Er shouted. Seeing his *meimei* refusing to change, his voice was frigid as he continued, “I already told you. The Imperial Couple of Da Long are deeply in love. The *feipin* in the *hougong* is nothing more than decorations. Comparing yourself to the *feipin*, that means you also know that you can’t compare to Da Long’s Empress.”

“Where can I not compare with her?!” Dai Rong was furious, her voice growing in pitch, “Because she’s from Da Long’s nobility?”

“You’re wrong. The Empress isn’t Da Long’s nobility,” Tu Er scornfully looked at his *meimei* who thought herself clever. “When you and the Qin Clan allied to scheme against the Empress, didn’t you ask about the Empress’ birth? The Empress’ mother died early, her father and stepmother were not loving and have been demoted and lost their home. Her family is a stain on her. But even so, the Emperor treats her the same. Even to the point, that on the coronation decree, he wrote that the Empress was peerless in the world and to have the Empress was a blessing from the heavens. But you, where did you get the confidence to think you were better than the Empress?”

Dai Rong shook her head as she rejected: “No, the Qin Family said that the Emperor treats the Empress well only because of the Tian Family, so it’s impossible!

"The Tian Family has a good reputation but no real power. All they have was given to them by the Emperor. Did you think that Da Long's Emperor is a useless and stupid ruler?" Tu Er snorted, "My pitiful *meimei*, you were tricked by the Qin Family."

Dai Rong froze. A beat later, she looked in disbelief at Tu Er: "Why do you know so much about Da Long, you ……" Did he already scheme for the position of Crown Prince beforehand, so that's why he knew so much about Da Long?

"You are finally smart for once," Tu Er saw that she had finally reacted and smiled as he walked in front of her, "I'm not like you, so spoiled by mother that I can't distinguish important matters from other ones. I understand better than you what is called circumstances, what is putting effort on crucial matters. Therefore, you lost, my pitiful *meimei*."

Dai Rong staggered. For what seemed to be the first time, she looked at her useless and average *gege*, but after looking at the other's slightly smiling face, she couldn't say anything.

In Tian Qi Palace, Qu Qing Ju smiled as she looked at the men and women kneeling by her feet. One of those in a worn sky-blue robe was a woman she was familiar with. She played with a jade scepter in her hands and sighed, lamenting: "*Ben gong* hadn't thought that your Qin Family was also involved in the rumors around Jing. If it wasn't for the Emperor's investigation, perhaps *ben gong* would still be in the dark." Speaking thus far, she turned to smile at He Heng sitting by her side, "Bai Lu at least was *zhouli* for two years with *ben gong*. The Qin Family is too ruthless."

"If the Empress wants to kill or torture, you don't need to say these things ……" Before Qin Bai Lu could finish, her mouth was covered by a matron beside her. The matron kowtowed with a pale face, "This criminal woman hasn't taught her daughter properly. Please, Emperor and Empress, forgive her."

Qu Qing Ju watched as Qin *furen* kowtowed to plead for her daughter, yet Qin Bai Lu was still staring at her with a face full of hatred. She

couldn't help but sigh; "Qin Bai Lu, *ben gong* just doesn't understand why you would hate *ben gong*. Ever since we met for the first time, it was always you who deliberately made things difficult for *ben gong*. When has *ben gong* ever schemed against you?"

Qin Bai Lu took away her mother's hand, and smiled scornfully: "It's natural that you don't understand why I hate you. But that year, if *xiandi* hadn't suddenly changed his decision when he decreed the marriages, our positions would be switched. The person sitting would be me, the person kneeling at the bottom would be you."

By this time, the members of the Qin Family were so frightened, their faces were the color of dirt. Qin *furen* didn't dare to stop her daughter's mouth anymore, and could only tremble as she knelt at the side.

When Qu Qing Ju heard something this hilarious, she instantly laughed out loud. She didn't have any more interest in talking with Qin Bai Lu. How strange was her brain that she would push all the misfortunes onto her. Qu Qing Ju did not believe that she herself had such great abilities. Or was it also her who'd ordered He Yuan to divorce Qin Bai Lu?

How *xiandi* decreed the marriage, it was *xiandi* who made the decision. Could she have forced *xiandi* to make a decision?

"Once, *zhen* only thought that the present Qin Family was just vulgar, but didn't think that they even didn't have no brains at all," He Heng, who had been silent the entire time, glared icily at Qin Bai Lu, "Just a thing like you dares to compare to Empress, it is laughable."

"But that year, if *xiandi* didn't marry her to Emperor, then she would be Rui Wang Fei. Even if I couldn't enter Emperor's eyes, she wouldn't be your woman," Qin Bai Lu's smile carried hate and insanity, "Do you think that I'm the only person like this? You're wrong. Even He Yuan is regretful about the decreed marriage. Right now, he's thinking about Emperor's good Empress!"

By now, the members of the Qin Family wanted to strangle Qin Bai Lu. If it wasn't for the *furen* of the head of the family, who was strong in her

conduct, they wouldn't have tolerated a divorced woman living in their ancestral home. If they knew beforehand that she would say such insane things, do insane things, even if they had to start a conflict, they would have sent her away rather than let her drag down the entire clan.

He Heng's face was frigid as ice. No man was willing to hear about how his beloved woman was being thought of by another man. Furthermore, this man had nearly taken over his position.

"Have you ever heard of destiny?" Qu Qing Ju calmly looked at Qin Bai Lu, as though she was looking at a stray dog. "You said that *xiandi* changed the partners that we were decreed marriage to. That means, in *xiandi*'s heart, I was the person most suited to Emperor, I am the woman fated for the Emperor. You can be jealous of *ben gong*, hate *ben gong*. *Ben gong* just received the Emperor's love. What can you do to me?"

Qin Bai Lu had pushed all of their conflicts onto He Yuan. Then, Qu Qing Ju would purposefully distort it into Qin Bai Lu being jealous of her receiving the Emperor's affections. The two matters seemed to be the same matter, but the feeling it gave others was quite different.

She wanted He Heng to know. The person she wanted to capture was him. The person she paid attention to was him. Only like this would there be no danger left hidden. It would even increase the trust and affection He Heng had towards her.

"Even the heavens helped *ben gong*, what do you have that can compare to *ben gong*?" Qu Qing Ju turned to look at He Heng. As expected, she saw that he was already smiling. She glared at him, mouthing "womanizer" before turning to declare at Qin Bai Lu, "You are discontent that you lost to *ben gong*, and cooperated with the princess of Jing to purposefully spread rumors to malign the reputations of me and the officials of Da Long. Such malicious aims. It's no wonder that even the heavens helped *ben gong* become the woman of the Emperor. If you had become the Empress of Da Long, wouldn't have the world fallen into chaos?"

"You!" Qin Bai Lu hadn't thought Qu Qing Ju would give such a speech. She opened her mouth to start cursing but Qin *furen* by her side unexpectedly threw a heavy slap on her face, throwing her onto the ground.

"Shut up!" Qin *furen* sobbed, "You faithless, unfilial daughter. Do you want to kill our entire family?"

Other than the crying of Qin *furen*, there were no other sounds in the hall. Qin Bai Lu covered her face, not looking at her own mother, but at the Emperor and Empress sitting in front of her, her eyes full of hate. Grabbing out the sharp silver hairpin out of her hair, she suddenly stood and rushed towards Qu Qing Ju.

"*Niangniang*!" On the side, Mu Jin was so frightened that she threw herself from behind Qu Qing Ju to halfway across Qu Qing Ju. There was a sound of porcelain breaking, and then she heard a smothered grunt from nearby. Then the entire hall started to make a racket.

Raising her head in puzzlement, she saw Qin Bai Lu lying on the side in a sorry state, the Emperor in front of the Empress, one of the corners of his robe creased.

"Emperor, are you alright?" Qu Qing Ju stood, her face fearful as she examined He Heng from top to toe. She released a breath, and then in a voice filled with anger, she shouted, "What are you doing, there's so many people, what are you doing in front of me?!"

The entire hall instantly became silent, all those that were shocked, that had been pushing Qin Bai Lu down, been asking for mercy. At one point, it was as though their necks were being strangled so that they were unable to make a sound.

"There's so many people in the hall, who let you go in front of me, showing off how long your legs are?! Ah! Do you not have regard for your life, who needed you to save me, I'm not an idiot, would I have just sat for her to stab?! Do you have brains?! Ah!"

Mu Jin stared with wide eyes and mouth at the Empress flipping out. As she watched the Emperor unconsciously step back as the Empress ranted at him, her shoulders couldn't help but shake as she swallowed.

At the side, Qian Chang Xin, Ming He and the others also stood with dumbstruck eyes. Who had seen the Empress be so valiant?! Who had even seen the Empress scold the Emperor? As the personal attendants of the Emperor, they should stop the finger that the Empress was poking onto the Emperor's chest, should reproach the Empress for her disrespectful conduct, but …… for some reason, they didn't dare speak, and didn't dare to even breathe loudly.

"Go away!" Qu Qing Ju kicked aside the head of the Qin Family who had been kneeling at the very front, scolding, "They all said your Qin Family is an educated family, but look at what you've done. No sense of propriety, uncivilized conduct, disloyal, and immoral. Calling the Qin Family an educated family, it brings shame to the word educated! Qin Bai Lu's outrageousness, it was all because of how you all spoiled her!"

After the Qin Family was criticized, they finally managed to react. All of them banged their heads on the ground, begging for the Emperor to spare their lives. For their family to have someone who'd tried to kill the Empress, that was a serious crime worthy of killing off their nine generations.

"Qing Ju……" He Heng reached out to hold Qu Qing Ju's hands and discovered her hands were slightly trembling. He gave an ingratiating smile, "Don't be angry, don't be angry. Anger is bad for your health."

Qu Qing Ju pushed away his hand, directly sitting back on the chair. She picked up a teacup and lowered her head to drink, not looking at him again.

Qian Chang Xin and Ming He silently retracted their left foot which they had mustered up the courage to extend out. Since even the Emperor who had been scolded was full of smiles, as servants, what could they say?

But the Empress when she was angry was really too frightening. Not even the roars of the lioness from He Dong could compare.

“The daughter of Qin Family is of ill conduct and dared to kill the Emperor and Empress. Heaven itself will not tolerate such behavior. Capital punishment will occur in three days.” He Heng saw Qu Qing Ju was refusing to acknowledge him and sat down beside her, ordering in an icy voice, “The Qin Family didn’t teach their daughter well, reckless and dared to slander Empress and officials of court. All are to be jailed and sentenced at a later date.”

“Spare us Emperor!” Before the members of the Qin Family could plead for mercy, others covered their mouths and dragged them down. As for Qin Bai Lu who tried to kill Qu Qing Ju, she had been kicked unconscious by He Heng and didn’t stir when she was dragged off.”

“Leave,” He Heng looked at the interior of the hall and waved his hand. After everyone else had left, he gathered Qu Qing Ju in his arms, “Don’t be angry, I know that you were worried about me.”

“Who’s worried about you?!” Qu Qing Ju pushed him. Seeing that it was futile, she didn’t waste any more energy, allowing him to embrace her.

“A silver hairpin, even if it entered the body, wouldn’t be fatal. Furthermore, as I once said to you, I practiced martial arts. Would I have no way of dealing with a woman?” He Heng gently patted her back, “You already scolded me, so don’t be angry, alright?”

“What would have happened if it hit your organs?” Qu Qing Ju frowned as she declared, “I don’t want to be a widow so young!”

“Alright, I know I was wrong. Don’t be angry. Let’s go see Tun Tun, he’s certainly missing us.” Even though he had been scolded, He Heng felt happy. If it wasn’t out of concern for him, based on Qing Ju’s normal behavior, she wouldn’t have acted so inappropriately.

It was somewhat useless point, but this feeling was still really …… refreshing.

"All of you take care to control your mouths," Qian Chang Xin looked at the palace maids and *taijian* who'd came out of the hall. Even if they were all close attendants of the Emperor and Empress, he still had to say the words, "If there is the slightest leak of what happened, you don't need what's on your necks any more."

Everyone gave their agreement. Mu Jin looked with trepidation at the hall behind her, and couldn't resist wiping the fine sweat on her forehead.

Empress was really very ……amazing!

Chapter 118

The Qin Family was imprisoned, and the eldest *di* daughter of the Qin Family who had once been Rui Wang Fei was decreed to be beheaded. Many people were speculating that this outcome, in addition to the fact that Qin Bai Lu had tried to kill the Empress, was related to the previous rumors that had been spread throughout Jing.

But disregarding all that, it was true that the conduct of the Qin Family in recent years had gradually lost the literary and scholarly style of the educated families. There were even some storytellers who said that the present head of the Qin Family was a shame on the ancestors of the Qin Clan.

Some reminisced on the conduct of the Qin *shi* in the past. When they returned, they used the matter of the Qin Family to teach their descendants so they did not walk the same road as the Qin Family.

When Dai Rong heard that Qin Bai Lu was to be publicly beheaded, she was so scared that she didn't dare to step outside. More than anyone, she knew as to what had really happened. In the beginning, when she and Qin Bai Lu had plotted to wreck the reputation of the Empress, Qin Bai Lu had told her many things about the *hougong* of Da Long. She hadn't thought that this matter would be uncovered so quickly and that Qin Bai Lu, the mastermind, couldn't even keep her own life.

On the day of Qin Bai Lu's execution, the autumn air was refreshing and many came out to watch. But until the moment just before she was executed, no one had come to send her off.

She looked blankly at her surroundings, and suddenly saw a man on a white horse behind the crowds. She stilled, tears suddenly streaming out of her dull eyes. At thirteen, her heart had moved for this man; at fifteen, she had married him; at seventeen, she had been divorced by him; at the moment before death, the one she saw was still him.

The black cloth covered her eyes. She twisted her head, wanting to have one more glance at him. In the end, she couldn't escape the executioner blocking her eyes. She heard the sound of cursing and mockery. Even though she concentrated, she didn't hear his voice.

That year at the palace banquet, if she didn't encounter him, that would have been good.

The only thing to blame was that at that time, she was too young, and that the stunning beauty of He Yuan had taken her time.

Maybe, who she really hated wasn't Qu Qing Ju or Qu Yue Su. All her hate, it really came from discontent, the discontent she had towards him. If a person could live their life again, she would become a normal woman, marry a normal man. Either rich or poor, but at least she could receive a portion of feelings that belonged to her.

Just like Qu Qing Ju, who had a man that protected her, and someone she could rely on for an entire lifetime.

"It's time, proceed!"

The noon gold sun shone off the blade the executioner raised, scattering bits of silver light. The brawny man took a mouthful of liquor and blew it over the large blade. Then he slowly raised it, and swung down hard.

A smile appeared at the corner of Qin Bai Lu's lips, as though she once again saw the bright youth at the palace banquet. Then, the world plunged into darkness.

The hand that He Yuan held the reins with, tightened and then slowly relaxed. He pulled on the reins to turn the horse, not looking at the executioner's platform. He gave a sigh, ordering: "He Fu Er, get someone to bury her properly."

When people were executed, if there was no family to take their corpse, they would be thrown into a mass burial ground in the end. Although he didn't have feelings for her and in the end, there was only mutual dislike, He Yuan hadn't reached the stage where he could see his former woman die without a coffin.

He Fu Er saw his master's expression wasn't well and hurriedly indicated for the people behind him to collect Qin Bai Lu's body, "*Wang ye*, the sun is fierce right now. Let's return to the *fu*."

He Yuan raised an eyebrow at him: "Let's go."

He Fu Er rushed up to take hold of the reins, guiding the horse in the direction of the *jun wang fu*. When he was going to turn around a corner, he couldn't resist turning back to look at the executioner's platform that was now cleared of the crowd. A person executed at noon. After being shone at by such a strong sun, even the soul might have disappeared.

But attempting to kill the Empress, she really had courage. No wonder the Emperor would give out such a decree. She really did it to herself. It was lucky that *wang ye* had divorced her a long time ago. Otherwise, even the *jun wang fu* would have been affected by her.

Dai Rong didn't dare to go to the place where Qin Bai Lu had been executed. Hearing that Qin Bai Lu's corpse had been collected by people from Rui Jun Wang Fu, she sat restlessly in her room. If someone walked outside her room, she became so scared that she would tremble.

The Emperor would even order to execute a daughter of a noble family like Qin Bai Lu. If he found evidence of her participating in the rumors, what would be her outcome, and would the country of Jing also be involved?

She now regretted working together with Qin Bai Lu. How dumb was she to believe the words of a woman who had been divorced by the Imperial House?

After taking a drink of cold tea to suppress the terror in her heart, as the teacup left her lips, Dai Rong saw her maid push open the door and come in with a face full of panic to report: “Princess, His Majesty the Emperor of Da Long summons you and Crown Prince.”

The teacup in her hand dropped to the floor. Dai Rong stood up in fright. Through the doorway, she could see a *taijian* of Da Long standing outside. She staggered and forced out a smile: “Wait for me to change……”

“Please, Princess, don’t waste time. Emperor and Empress are both very busy. Princess should hurry to enter the palace.” Qian Chang Xin walked inside, his face expressionless as he whipped the duster in his hand, “Princess, please.”

Dai Rong recognized him as the personal *taijian* of the Emperor of Da Long and didn’t dare to offend him. She forced a smile and followed Qian Chang Xin out of the room. When she went outside, she saw Tu Er was also wearing his normal clothes, his expression unwell.

“Crown Prince, Princess, please,” Qian Chang Xin raised an eyebrow, “Don’t make the Emperor wait.”

Seeing Qian Chang Xin’s attitude, the uneasiness Dai Rong had inside grew even more until she couldn’t seem to breathe.

When they had entered the Imperial Palace and they followed Qian Chang Xin and the others into Tian Qi Palace, Dai Rong could hear the sounds of the Emperor and Empress talking from outside the door. After Qian Chang Xin went in to report, the sounds of conversation stopped. She walked in amidst the cold stares of the palace maids and *taijian* in the surroundings.

Qu Qing Ju was playing with a kaleidoscope. Seeing Dai Rong and Tu Er enter, she handed to the kaleidoscope to a palace maid and resumed a

proper sitting posture. After the two made their greetings, she only drank tea silently, allowing He Heng to converse with the two of them.

"*Zhen* heard that Hu Guo Princess was very close to Qin *shi*, what does Princess have to say?" He Heng looked coldly at Tu Er and Da Long. Just one sentence was enough to frighten the two into kneeling on the ground. He looked at the two people kneeling in front of him, his expression still ugly, "In the past, the country of Jing was one of the subordinate countries that Da Long put importance on, but your conduct has made *zhen* extremely disappointed."

When Tu Er heard the words, his face became scared. He quickly made a full bow, replying: "The honored His Majesty the Emperor, my Jing's loyalty to you can be seen by the heavens. Please, Your Majesty, don't lightly believe the rumors!"

"Whether or not it's just rumor, both of you should know very well" He Heng thought about the rumors that had gone through the city of Jing and what Qin Bai Lu had done, his brow furrowing, "*Zhen* only wanted to hear how the country of Jing will give my Da Long an explanation."

Tu Er's forehead already had sweat forming. He gritted his teeth and gave a kowtow: "Your Majesty, we are willing to increase our tribute by two-tenths to show our loyalty to Da Long."

"My Da Long doesn't lack for those kind of things," He Heng coldly sneered, "If *zhen*'s Empress and the court officials had been harmed by the rumors, even if the country of Jing was flattened, it still wouldn't calm *zhen*'s anger!"

"Please, Your Majesty, don't be angry!" Tu Er's sweat slid down his face to land on the ground but he didn't dare to raise a hand to wipe. He went forward two steps, begging, "*Chen*'s sister is ignorant, please, Your Majesty, have mercy! Please have mercy!"

Qu Qing Ju looked at the sorry state of Tu Er. Even Tu Er was calling himself a subject in front of them. It could be seen that Tu Er had no other solutions left. She hadn't wanted to join this matter, but He Heng

had to call her over. Reality proved it, she didn't like seeing others kowtowing to her.

"Your Majesty, all the wrongs are this subject's wrongs. It was this subject that was greedy for the wealth of Da Long, and has nothing to do with the people of Jing. Please, Your Majesty, spare the people of Jing. Dai Rong is willing to endure all of the punishment," Dai Rong thought about how poor the country of Jing was. They couldn't bear the pressure of a tribute that was two-tenths higher. Even if she didn't want to admit it, she had to confess that she had done something wrong, "Please, Emperor, spare Jing. Jing is a poor place. Our people have no more strength to endure war and increased yearly tributes."

Hearing that, Qu Qing Ju looked again at Dai Rong. At this critical time, this Hu Guo Princess wasn't stupid to the bone and finally knew how to protect her people.

In reality, how many people in the world could resist the temptation of wealth and prosperity?

He Heng looked indifferently at the pair of siblings, entirely unmoved. This was between countries. His priority was protecting the interests of his country before he had the time to divide some sympathy to other people. He was the Emperor of Da Long, not the Emperor of the country of Jing.

Their standpoints were different, so how would there be sympathy?

"Since Princess knows that the country of Jing cannot stand *zhen*'s rage, then why do such a daring thing?" He Heng threw what had been discovered in front of the two siblings, "If *zhen* ordered the army to Jing, it is for your crimes, Hu Guo Princess."

Dai Rong didn't dare to look at those things, only fearfully begged: "This subject was possessed, this subject is willing to be punished. Please, Emperor, spare the people of Jing." She didn't want to think about it. If Da Long really sent their army, how would mother and the

people of Da Long look at her. Would it be disappointment? Anger? Or would it be hatred?

“Emperor, this subject is willing to use her life to apologize for the offense. Please, Emperor, spare the innocent people!” Dai Rong knelt with a straight body, looking at the exceptional yet ruthless Emperor. There was no sign of the initial seductiveness on her face now. She looked at Qu Qing Ju who had been silently drinking tea and walked towards her on her knees. Dai Rong gave a heavy kowtow, “This subject was ill-mannered and offended the Empress. Please, Empress, give punishment.”

Qu Qing Ju looked down at Dai Rong for losing her composure in her greed for prosperity, was offended by her and Qin Bai Lu for spreading rumors to slander her. But right now, Dai Rong seemed to have given everything up, and became the country of Jing’s Hu Guo Princess, willing to use her death to make up for her mistakes rather than harm her people.

People who knew their wrongs were more soothing to the eyes than people who stubbornly didn’t change even into death. The most important factor was that Dai Rong was a princess of the country of Jing, and not one of Da Long’s citizens. One Jing was easy to deal with, but if other subordinate countries started to rebel due to this matter, then even if it wasn’t hard for Da Long to deal with all the countries, it still wasn’t a good thing.

An unnecessary war happening to the common people, it was a disaster.

“Emperor, why don’t we send a letter to the Queen of Jing about the matter and let her give an explanation to our Da Long?” Qu Qing Ju put down the teacup and opened, “The matter has already passed, I don’t want a war to start because of me.”

He Heng sighed: “But if the rumors had really caused bad consequences, then what?”

"I know the intentions of the Emperor," Qu Qing Ju smiled, "I'm a lazy person. I don't like to care about what's happening at court, but I know one thing, the people are the ones who suffer in wars."

A beat later, He Heng nodded: "*Zhen* understands what you wish for. This matter will be handed to the Queen of Jing so she may give an explanation to Da Long."

The historian at the side recorded the actions of the Emperor and Empress, "The tenth month of the first year of Jia You, the princess of Jing offended the Empress, the Emperor was angry and wished to raise an army against Jing. The Empress urged against, saying that the people suffered in war. The Emperor heard this, and the anger disappeared."

Chapter 119

At the end of the tenth month, the weather was already very cold. Each of the subordinate countries were preparing for their journey back to their own countries, so before departure, Da Long held a banquet and invited all the envoys from the subordinate countries.

He Heng didn't mention the matter of the country of Jing again in front of Qu Qing Ju. She didn't ask either. There wasn't a rule in Da Long that the *hougong* couldn't participate in politics but she was very clear of her own limitations. A person who couldn't even finish memorizing "The Art Of War", it was better if they didn't go out into the world to wreck the people.

She had been a manager in her previous life. She knew how to use the desires of other people. Knew how to grasp another to benefit herself. This was the little smarts that belonged to her. But she was self-aware and knew what she was good at, and what she wasn't.

Just like when Feng Zi Jin took advantage of Han *liangdi* to harm her, she went along with the plan and used it to take care of a woman who was constantly scheming against her. Shu *guitaifei* had already moved

out of the *hougong*, the two Empress Dowagers were at odds with her so how could they allow Shu *gui taifei*'s people to remain in the palace?

The fact that Shu *gui taifei* had been implicated in the matter was due her scheming in the background but the greatest influence came from the two Empress Dowagers. They simply used Feng Zi Jin and Han *liangdi* to pull Shu *gui taifei* into the mud, to make her life worse than death.

She had guessed the intentions of the two Empress Dowagers so she allowed Feng Zi Jin to pull the crime onto her body, and then watched as she dug her own grave and lost her life.

What person, after they'd developed, would still tolerate their opponent who'd once bullied them? History had the story of the "human swine"[4], here, there was the living lesson that was Shu *gui taifei*.

As she sat in the phoenix carriage and passed by the pavilion Han *liangdi* once sang in, Qu Qing Ju tightened her arms around Tun Tun. Her eyes steadily became calm. She wouldn't allow herself to fall to the end that Shu *gui taifei* got!

"The Empress has arrived!"

Passing through the main doors of Luan He Hall, the vermillion phoenix robe slid silently across the carpet. She disregarded the envoys kneeling on both sides with the officials. Walking to the bottom of the nine jade steps, she bowed to He Heng: "Greetings to the Emperor."

"Quickly rise," He Heng stood from the dragon chair. Seeing Qu Qing Ju walk up the jade stairs, he held her hand to sit down. Qu Qing Ju turned to look at the people still kneeling, announcing: "Everyone, please rise."

[4] The "human swine" is the story of the Consort Qi. Emperor Gaozu, the founder of the Han Dynasty was extremely favoured and her son a contender for the throne. Consort Qi tried to persuade the Emperor many times to crown her son and her ambitions were well known. Empress Lu (who also had a son) was her opponent. In the end, the court supported Empress Lu's son who succeeded the throne and Prince Ruyi had to leave for his own lands as *wang.* However, Empress Lu, now Grand Empress Lu, wanted mother and son dead. Her own son, the new Emperor, kept his brother, Prince Ruyi, with him constantly to prevent his mother from putting in poison or assassination attempts but ultimately failed. Then the Grand Empress chopped off Consort Qi's limbs, took out her eyes, sliced off her ears, and ruined her voice before putting her in a latrine.

"Thanks, Emperor. Thanks, Empress."

Qu Qing Ju smiled and tilted her head. After the people stood, she took away her gaze and turned to stare at He Heng. She continued: "Having made everyone wait, *ben gong* will self-penalize with a cup." She raised the plum wine in front of her, and using her sleeve to hold the winecup, she threw her head back to drink.

No one really dared to let the Empress drink a cup as penalty like that and followed in raising their own cups to drink. The Emperor had arrived first but he wasn't angry at the Empress' actions. They don't have to meddle in other people's business even more.

"*Zhen*'s son was just crying in Fu Shou Palace. The Empress had no other way but to turn back," He Heng explained with a smile, "It's the duty of parents. Once the child is crying, we can't sit still."

Fu Shou Palace. That was the place that *Shengmu* Empress Dowager lived. His Highness Imperial Son was crying unstoppably over there, did something happen? If it had just been normal crying, would the Empress make a special trip there?

Everyone felt that something was fishy about the matter. However, after seeing that the Emperor and Empress looked normal, they presumed that it wasn't a major incident and smiled as they took up the topic of childrearing. Even the officials who didn't interact with their own children usually suddenly seemed to become a multi-talented househusband, as though they had personally raised their children.

The mood of the banquet instantly rose. The dancing and songs continued. People toasted and changed cups. It was very harmonious.

He Heng asked quietly at Qu Qing Ju's ear: "Are the two Empress Dowagers alright?"

"Just a shock," Qu Qing Ju raised a winecup. She had a smile but her words were cold, "The people of *muhou* were cautious. Those things had been found before they could get near Tun Tun. This person of Shu *gui taifei* hid too deeply, even the two *muhou* hadn't found them out."

Originally when she had been preparing to travel to the farewell banquet at Luan He Hall, she had met Ding *mama* of Fu Shou Palace right as she came out of the door to notify her of the matter. Immediately, she lost interest in Luan He Hall and turned to travel to Fu Shou Palace.

The two Empress Dowagers were women who were skilled, and they'd quickly found the person, even uncovering the fact that Shu *gui taifei* was behind it. She hadn't thought that even though Shu *gui taifei* had been sent to the Imperial Tomb, she was discontented ehough to have planned such a major attack before leaving.

"What were the things found?" He Heng's face became dark.

"Some dirty blood. It must have been the bloodstains of a person seriously ill. But I'm afraid that Shu *gui taifei*'s person didn't know that anything Tun Tun uses, I'll get them to inspect even a handkerchief before usage," Qu Qing Ju smirked, "I heard that Shu *gui taifei*'s life at the Imperial Tomb is extremely lavish. Since she's so dissatisfied, I have already ordered for them to decrease her allowance, and that each year except for the Mid-autumn Festival, no one is allowed to disturb her peace. When a woman gets old, if her temper is still so fiery, then she needs peaceful days to calm her emotions. I think that Shu *gui taifei* will soon know how good peaceful days are."

A destitute lifestyle, the people were all dumb and deaf. She wanted to see how Shu *gui taifei* will live in the future. If she died, that was letting her off too easy. If she couldn't make Shu *gui taifei* understand what regret was, how would she be at ease?

He Heng heard the meaning in her words and didn't expand further on the topic. He knew just how fierce women were when they were protecting their children. Just like in the past when *muhou* had protected him using every scheme so that no one could hinder them.

"To hear the Imperial Words and see the Honored Your Majesty the Emperor, and to see the prosperity of Da Long, it wasn't a wasted journey. Envoy of Duo Han, Ah Ji Ka wishes for Da Long to flourish for

a thousand years," As the envoy for Duo Han, Ah Ji Ka knew he wasn't favored by Da Long so he put his own status very low when he entered the city of Jing this time in hopes that the people of Da Long believed that Duo Han was sincere in their allegiance to Da Long.

"Many thanks to Ah Ji Ka *da ren*'s lucky words," He Heng raised a winecup towards Ah Ji Ka and took a sip of wine.

Ah Ji Ka saw him drink the wine he toasted and his face became joyful: "*Chen* represents the people of Duo Han and toasts you. The loyalty of my Duo Han to Da Long can be witnessed by the heavens." He threw his head back and drained the cup. Then he flipped the cup. Not a drop spilled out, "If Duo Han betrays the oath, then let the Heavens send down disasters to punish us."

"*Zhen* receives the loyalty of the people of Duo Han," He Heng smiled as he finished off the wine in his cup, "*Zhen* will remember Ah Ji Ka's oath today."

After Ah Ji Ka sat down, he looked smugly at Tu Er and Dai Rong sitting below him. With the actions of this Dai Rong Princess beforehand, his Duo Han wasn't the most horrid subordinate country in the hearts of the people of Da Long. It seemed that he should be grateful to this beautiful princess.

Dai Rong saw the smug smile on Ah Ji Ka's face and a grimace appeared on her own. She raised her head to look at the Emperor and Empress sitting at the top of the nine jade stairs. It was these two people who made her understand what was really regret, what was fear and what was prosperity.

At last, her gaze landed on He Heng's smiling face. To this young emperor, her heart had really moved. Humane, kind, charismatic, and full of true love for the Empress. But it was a pity that the true love didn't belong to her.

Tu Er saw his *meimei* was still gazing at the Emperor of Da Long and demanded with a frown: "*Meimei*, haven't you given up yet?"

Dai Rong grimaced: “There’s no giving up. From beginning to end, he never even properly looked at me.” It was this man who made her understand that not everyone loved her. Maybe the reason that the people of the country of Jing loved her that much, aside from her beauty, was her identity.

She was a princess of the country of Jing. Even if she might not be the future ruler of Jing, but she was still a hope for the future of Jing. She received their devotions but what she had wanted was the prosperity of Da Long. If the people of the country of Jing knew of her actions, how disappointed would they be?

She should be grateful to the Empress of Da Long. If it wasn’t for this exceptional Empress, she might not be able to sit in this hall, and the country of Jing would be expecting the iron hoof of Da Long.

Stupidity once in a lifetime was enough. Her position didn’t allow for her to keep being stupid, and even more, continue to make mistakes. Otherwise, the result might be the damnation of Jing.

“This subject toasts the honorable Empress a cup, and wishes for the Empress and Emperor’s love to be stronger than gold and everything be smooth,” Dai Rong stood and raised a winecup at Qu Qing Ju, “This subject is grateful for the honorable Empress for giving *this subject* the chance to grow up. Please, Empress, receive this subject’s sincere bow.” She made a bow towards Qu Qing Ju that in Jing, carried the meaning of goodwill and respect, and then drained the wine.

Qu Qing Ju looked at Dai Rong below. In just a few days, this Hu Guo Princess had rapidly grown up. She couldn’t see a hint of the past self. It was like a fragile and spoiled girl had become a strong woman. Not many people could make such a change. Was it Qin Bai Lu’s death that shocked her awake? Or was it the lives of the people of the country of Jing that made her understood what was responsibility?

But no matter what, Qu Qing Ju accepted Dai Rong’s toast. She smiled and raised a winecup, responding: “Every person has a time when they are wrong. The crucial part is whether or not they could turn back, if

they could understand. *Ben gong* hopes for the friendship between Da Long and the country of Jing to continue for a long time, and the people of Jing to live long and secure lives."

"Many thanks for the lucky words of the honorable Empress. My Jing, generation after generation, will always be loyal to Da Long!" Dai Rong's eyes became red. She knew that this was the Empress promising that Da Long wouldn't send soldiers into Jing. She switched for another cup of wine and unhesitatingly drank it down.

On the day the envoys left, the autumn winds were blowing and wild chrysanthemums were blooming all over the suburbs of the city of Jing. Qu Qing Ju and He Heng stood on the tall city gates, watched as the envoys made a three bow nine kowtow greeting to them before gradually leaving in the carriages. The carriages slowly went further away, and disappeared into the horizon.

Qu Qing Ju brushed aside the hair that had been blown free by the wind. She sighed, stating: "The song ends, people leave, flowers blooming over the entire city so it isn't that lonely."

He Heng saw her expression was slightly depressed and held her hand to lead her down off the tower: "Some people leave, some come. It's all good when we are still at the original place."

Qu Qing Ju turned to look at him, a clean smile at the corner of her lips. It was faint, but very real.

Chapter 120

When the plum blossoms of Da Long were just blooming, snow the size of goose feathers began to land in the city of Jing. The entire Jing city was enveloped in a layer of silver silk. Qu Qing Ju, dressed in a fox skin coat, stood under the leaves and reached out to hold the icy snowflakes.

Watching the snow fall, she didn't seem to be as excited as she once had been. It was like anything else beautiful. No matter how beautiful, it was

just like normal once one got used to it. She took her hand back and focused on the snowflake on her hand. It did seem to have six petals and was extremely beautiful upon inspection.

She used a handkerchief to wipe away the snowflake on her hands and grasped a hand pot, "It's Rui Wang's wedding tomorrow. Nothing can go wrong with what is to be bestowed tomorrow."

"*Niangniang* don't worry, *nubi* has already closely inspected them," Mu Jing saw the Empress wasn't trying to catch snowflakes anymore and put up an umbrella to block the flying snowflake for her. In a small voice, she suggested: "*Niangniang*, the wind is heavy here, let's go back."

Qu Qing Ju nodded. She pulled on the red fox skin cape on her body and slowly walked into the vermillion corridors. The palace boots made muffled sounds as they stepped on the stone slabs. She expressionlessly travelled through the long corridors, past a moon door, saw the *taijian* that was sweeping the snow, and having finally learned to disregard their distorted backs, and sat down on the comfortable and grand phoenix carriage.

"Proceed!"

The phoenix carriage swayed slightly and then started to slowly move. As they travelled through a patch of plum trees, she pushed aside the silk curtain and saw the a branch of red plum blossoms peeking out from the walls. She could barely detect the faint scent of the plum flowers. The phoenix carriage slowly proceeded. In her vision, that blooming red plum flower gradually distanced itself and then it couldn't be seen.

She suddenly felt depressed, and put down the curtain. For some reason, she suddenly remembered the instant when she first opened her eyes in this world. A painting of red plum blossoms had been hanging on the wall. The writing of the woman at the corner of the art had been graceful and refined, just like the plum flowers in that yard. Not as grand as other flowers, but there was a delicate fragrance.

"Greetings to the Empress," The speed of the phoenix carriage slowed. Qu Qing Ju heard a somewhat familiar voice. When she lifted the curtain, she saw a woman bent beside the phoenix carriage. After a second, she finally responded, giving a faint smile and acknowledging: "Luo *guipin*, please rise."

"Many thanks to Empress," Luo Yin Xiu straightened her body. She didn't stare at Qu Qing Ju's face, only submissively looking at the ground.

"It's so cold out, why isn't *guipin* travelling on a step-carriage?" Qu Qing Ju looked at the worn fur cape on her body. Her brow furrowed and then she ordered, "Huang Yang, go take a look in the Department of Household Affairs and see if they slighted *guipin*. If someone was reckless enough to shortchange their superiors, then it's thirty blows."

Luo Yin Xiu bowed again: "Thanks for Empress' concern. *Pinqie* is fine."

Qu Qing Ju understood the rules of the palace very well. Gaze at the higher ups and step on the low ones. Flattering those who were favored. In the time of *xiandi*, they even dared to short-change the Empress, more less Luo Yin Xiu who had no favor or power. Thinking about it, she said in a slightly heavy voice: "The carriage, furnishings and food that a third-rank *guipin* should have, *ben gong* believes the people of the Department of Household Affairs should understand. Huang Yang, go tell them. If they can't figure out those things, they don't need to stay in their duties."

"Yes," Huang Yang performed a bow and then another to Luo Yin Xiu before leaving.

"It's late, I should return to the palace, *guipin* should return too," Qu Qing Ju gazed at Luo Yin Xiu's docile manner and put down the curtain, blocking off the gaze Lui Yin Xiu raised.

The phoenix carriage travelled away. The *yahuan* beside Luo Yin Xiu, Shu Wen, watched as the carriage became fuzzy in the snow and moved

the umbrella over Luo Yin Xiu's head, commenting in a small voice: "*Zhuzi*, Empress is still this warm to others."

Luo Yin Xiu turned her head to look in the direction the phoenix carriage was travelling. Over there was the Tian Qi Palace of the Emperor and Empress. She gave a slightly indifferent smile and sighed, remarking: "If I want to easily live out the rest of my life, the only one I can rely on is the Empress." So, she would deliberately wear old clothing to encounter the Empress at this place so the Empress could understand her circumstances.

The days of the *hougong* were difficult. It was lucky that she encountered an Empress that was relatively kind. If it was anyone even a bit more callous, she didn't know what her days would be like.

The character for "happiness" was pasted all over Rui Jun Wang Fu. The guest streamed in. Even those Rui Jun Wang had fallen in power, but this marriage had been decreed by the Emperor. If they didn't come to congratulate, wouldn't it become embarrassing the Emperor?

But what they found unexpected was that Rui Jun Wang didn't refuse any of the toast. After the wedding banquet, he was almost completely drunk. Thankfully, the guests remembered that Rui Jun Wang was the groom. Along with Cheng Wang's protection, they didn't dare to make it too extreme.

He Qi had never been at peace with He Yuan. He watched as He Yuan drank as though it was water, not wine and scoffed. If he didn't know better, he would have thought his good *didi* was drinking away his sorrows. He glanced at *lao si* who was blocking wine for *lao san* and sighed. Who would have thought that *lao si* would have become the second proudest person among the four brothers?

Seeing the other people didn't dare to force it too much, He Qi picked up the wine pot and held a wine cup as he walked in front of He Yuan who had drank enough that his cheeks were red. He asked sarcastically: "*San di*, we are brothers. Today is your good day. How about us brothers drink a few cups?"

He Yuan carelessly raised his wine cup, smiling and answering: "*Da ge*'s wine, *didi* has to drink." Finishing, he took over the fine wine pot and wine cup. Pouring a full cup and swallowing it all, he swirled the empty cup and recited, "Lan Ling's wine with tulips, the jade bowl becomes amber. It makes the owner and I drunk, and forget where is home. Today, there is wine and there is drunkenness, *didi* toasts *gege*."

He Qi hadn't expected that He Yuan was even more blunt than he was. Before he could react, the other had drained another cup. It instantly made him lose interested in forcing him to drink. If the person being force was even happier than the person doing the forcing, where was the meaning?

When others saw the scene, they all assumed that Ning Wang was purposefully forcing Rui Jun Wang. Thinking of the battles between the two brothers over the years, no one was stupid enough to involve themselves and silently drank.

When He Ming saw the scene from the side, for some reason a certain secret rumor came to mind. It said that *san ge* had some affections for the Empress. Realizing that he was thinking about something he shouldn't be thinking, He Ming hurriedly shook his head. There hadn't been any relationship between *san ge* and *huang sao*, so *san ge* wouldn't have any affections for *huang sao*. It was just the two had almost been married so other people personally slandered them.

Seeing that *san ge* was totally drunk, He Ming could only support him back to the *houyuan*. The bride's veil hadn't been taken off, the cups of wine hadn't been exchanged. If the groom was so drunk that he was unconscious, then it was too unsightly.

He Qi didn't stop He Ming. In waning interest, he watched as He Ming supported the other away and turned to leave Rui Jun Wang Fu. Looking at the thick layer of snow on the streets outside, he exhaled and said to his attendant behind him: "So uninteresting, let's return."

He and *lao san* had fought for some many years but in the end, the throne hadn't landed on either of their heads. Thinking about it this way, it was very ironic.

He Yuan supported himself using the door and staggered over to the wedding bed. Looking at the woman with a veil of dragon and phoenix entwined, he took over the stick and took off the veil. His eyes changed and he muttered: "Such beautiful brows."

That year on the jade steps under the fireworks, that crimson-clad woman had been also so bright, brows like the sun, bright that one couldn't resist looking just a few more times.

Taking out the wine cups, his drunken eyes were smiling. The arms of the two crossed and his voice was hoarse yet full of satisfied mirth: "Then let us be together for a hundred years and not separate even when our hair turns white."

Lu Yu Rong looked at the handsome man smiling at her and her heart jumped. Her cheeks became flushed. She took the wine cup the other handed over and as he watched gently, she drained the wine cup.

He Yuan reached to push her into his arms, his smile touched yet tender: "So good, so good."

Her hand trembled slightly but in the end she slowly embraced this man. The snowy night was long yet short, but for her, it was better than imagined.

The red candles of Rui Jun Wang Fu burned for the entire night, just like it was burning a beautiful dream, beautiful yet illusory.

In Tian Qi Palace, Qu Qing Ju was laying in He Heng's arms when she suddenly woke up from her dreams. Outside the window, weak light lit up the window silk. Listening to the sound of snow outside, she felt incomparably tranquil, her bed incomparably warm.

"Go to sleep," The voice of the man beside her was fuzzy as though he hadn't woken from his dreams. But his arms familiarly pulled her back

in, as though he had done it countless times, practiced and matter-of-fact.

Qu Qing Ju smiled, placing her head on the man's chest and slowly closed her eyes.

The second year of Jia You, the Eldest Imperial Son was named by the Emperor as "Yao"[5]. "Shi Ming – Explaining Heaven"[6] had "Bright, shining, light illuminating". The "Shijing – Style of Kuai"[7] also said "The sunrise is bright."

Just this name, it was enough to show the expectations of the Emperor to His Highness the Eldest Imperial Son. In this world, was there anything more important than light?

And then the Empress moved out of the rear hall of Tian Qi Palace and moved to Kui Yuan Palace. Some became to speculate, was the Emperor finally going to move his eyes onto the other women in the *hougong*?

But who knew that the Emperor would eat and sleep in Kui Yuan Palace? No other woman in the *hougong* was favored. The love between Emperor and Empress became even deeper, almost becoming a legend of Da Long about the love between Emperor and Empress. But right now, the idea wasn't still there. Who knew just how long this deep love of the Emperor would continue?

Right now, the two Empress Dowagers in the *hougong* didn't express an opinion. Certain senior officials wanted to express their opinions but didn't dare to provoke the Emperor's anger. So the Emperor only favoring the Empress, no one wanted to say anything. Perhaps the people of the entire world wanted to see how long it would take for this good play of the love between Emperor and Empress to end.

No matter how beautiful a play was, it would always have an ending. They really didn't believe that there was an Emperor that was faithful to

[5] bright, glorious
[6] Shiming is an ancient Chinese Dictionary. Explaining Heaven is the very first chapter.
[7] Shijin is an ancient collection of poetry. Kuai style is one of the fifteen types of poetry describe in the Airs of the States.

his love in the world. The Emperor and Empress who had a love stronger than gold in the previous dynasty, didn't their ending turn out terribly?

On the tallest stargazing tower in the palace, Qu Qing Ju looked at the clear blue sky and reached up to block the blinding sunlight. She suddenly asked: "Mu Jin, what do you think that cloud would change into?"

Mu Jin tilted her head up to look at the white cloud. Before she could respond, she saw the Emperor at the bottom stairs below the two. At a glance, she knew he was coming to find the Empress: "*Niangniang*, the Emperor has come."

Qu Qing Ju lowered her head. Watching the man that was hurriedly climbing up the stargazing tower, a smile appeared on her face.

Mu Jin looked again at the beautiful pale cloud and thought carelessly, the clouds originally were things that changed constantly. Who knew what it would change into? But that bright sun. It would rise each day, and set down like normal.

He Heng came up the tower. Looking at the woman dressed in a crimson phoenix robe in the sunlight, he suddenly thought of a poem called "*Feng* Seeks *Huang*."

"I saw a beautiful woman, after seeing her, it's unforgettable. If I don't see her each day, the thoughts become crazy. I'm like that *feng* bird flying high up in the sky, trying to find the *huang* bird in the world… …"

"I hope my conduct is matching to yours, so we can hold hands together. If the marriage is not allowed, it's a death sentence for me… …"

The smile of a beauty is unforgettable in this lifetime, a downfall in this lifetime.

Chapter 121 – Epilogue 1

It was another blooming time of the year. Recently, all of Rui Wang Fu was full of cheer. *Wang ye* had just recovered his *qin wang* rank, and *wang fei* was pregnant. This could be considered the best things to have happened in the recent years for Rui Wang Fu.

Before marrying into the *wang fu*, Lu Yu Rong had thought Rui Wang was a lecherous and preposterous man. But only when she had entered the *wang fu* did she know how unfounded rumors could be. The third day after she married into the *wang fu*, *wang ye* accompanied her back to her paternal home and sent away a crowd of *tong fang* from the *wang fu*. Even though some of them had been bestowed down by the Emperor and couldn't move out of the *wang fu*, the time that *wang ye* went to those women's rooms lessened dramatically.

Gradually, *wang ye* started to like painting. And what he liked to draw best were bright and eye-catching red flowers. She had once asked him why he liked painting such vivid flowers but he didn't say anything.

Before marriage, there was someone else in her heart. But one could not rebel against the Imperial Order. She had to marry this man who didn't have a good reputation but her days were much better than she had imagined.

But maybe it was the nature of all men to be fickle. After she became pregnant, *wang ye* became interested in a *tong fang*. He visited her frequently in the day, but the majority of the time, he slept in the *tongfang*'s place.

But to her, this wasn't anything major. Since she couldn't marry the man she liked. Who she married, who that person loved, what did it have to do with her?

All the servants in Rui Wang Fu knew that the relationship between *wang ye* and the new *wang fei* was better than the old one so no one dared to slight *wang fei*. Even more, *wang fei* was pregnant. But quickly, servants with keen eyes found the brows and mouth of *wang ye*'s newly

favored *tongfang* were very similar to *wang fei*. The servants then understood that it was that *wang fei* couldn't have relations with *wang ye* due to her pregnancy so *wang ye* was finding comfort on another person's body.

When Lu Yu Rong heard that rumor, she was even more generous to all the *tong fang* and *qieshi*. In the end, the *houyuan* of Rui Wang Fu became more and more peaceful, drastically different than the smoke and fire of the past.

She had once encountered a *yahuan* named Yao Xi in the *wang fu*. She recognized this *yahuan*. She was the personal maid of Qu Yue Su. She remembered that year when she and Qu Yue Su had composed poetry to amuse Jin An Princess Royal and the other *wang fei* had judged them. But who knew that the previous Rui Wang Fu would be executed, Qu *ce fei* would die from illness and she would become the second *wang fei*.

Destiny was just this ironic. If people wanted it, they didn't get it, if they didn't want it, it was shoved onto them. Wrongs and rights. By the end, who was the one who was the joke, who was the one that is a pity.

The first time she saw *wang ye* could draw people, it was the third month of her pregnancy. At that time, the beginning of summer had ended and she was too hot to fall asleep. She had walked around. For some reason, she walked into the study and saw the unfinished painting on the table.

It was a very solitary painting. The blooming plum blossoms, the thick layer of snow, and a half-open exquisite sedan in the midst of the snowflakes. There was a hazy shadow in the sedan, only revealing a shock of black hair and a red sleeve.

An empty painting, but she felt as though she was the artist of the painting, and was admiring the woman in the sedan, waiting for her to raise the curtain the entire way. But in the end, the person had pulled down the curtain instead.

Sighing, she reached out with a hand to touch the corner of the sleeve that was flying in the harsh wind. But before she could touch, heavy steps came from behind her.

She suddenly turned back and saw *wang ye* standing with a cold face at the door. The eyes he had when he looked at her, it was as though he was looking at a stranger, cool and indifferent.

"*Wang ye*… …" Her voice was somewhat dry and she strangely felt guilty.

"Why has *wang fei* come here?" He came up and put away the painting, his voice as gentle as usual, "I'll accompany you back, the road is hard to walk at night."

She followed him out of the study. Turning back to look at the doors to the study that were already closed, she couldn't resist asking: "That drawing, *wang ye*, it's seems like the landscape outside our plum forest."

"En," He nodded ambiguously, "White snow, red plums, it's beautiful to draw."

Thinking about the feeling from the painting, she agreed wholeheartedly with *wang ye*'s explanation. The white of the snow and the red of the plum flowers were especially beautiful. Even that piece of sleeve was to tempt others' imagination. *Wang ye*'s skills were getting better and better.

Since then, she never saw *wang ye* draw other people, not even her or their child. But, *wang ye*'s paintings steadily became famous in Da Long. Many people would give a thousand gold to beg for one of *wang ye*'s paintings. But she rarely saw *wang ye* give them away, the *fu* accumulating many.

She knew that the relationship between the Emperor and *wang ye* wasn't close so she and *wang ye* rarely were summoned into the palace. Thankfully, *wang ye*'s personality was a lot better now so even though the palace was cold to *wang ye*, if he was summoned, *wang ye* would control his temper and go each time. And in front of the two Empress

Dowagers, the Emperor and Empress, he was extremely friendly. Even she couldn't see any signs of unhappiness.

If *wang ye* had been like this in the beginning, the circumstances of Rui Wang Fu wouldn't have been so awkward.

Later, the reason that the circumstances of Rui Wang Fu were resolved was actually because the Empress suddenly became interested in paintings. So the noble families all wanted to curry favor with the Emperor by buying good artwork everywhere in hopes of gaining the Empress' favor.

The Emperor and Empress had been together for quite a few years. But after so many years, the love between Emperor and Empress was still strong. Many people that were waiting for a spectacle were disappointed. In the end, they reasoned that the Empress was very good at taking care of herself, her looks were still so seductive after so many years.

She scoffed at such sour words. Just by looks, the Empress was beautiful but not to the point of the most beautiful. Even though she had willow brows and "phoenix eyes", but those weren't a rarity in the world. Even her own features were the same, but she didn't have the Empress' snow white skin and composure.

Beautiful women could be found everywhere, but what was rare was the qualities of attractiveness. The feeling that the Empress gave others was seductive yet out of the world, vivid yet dignified. Such a contradictory woman was rare in the world but it was easy for people's hearts to move. Because this disregarded the outer shell and was something that came from the deep parts of the soul, it was hard for others to ignore.

When *wang ye* took out some paintings for her to take in the palace, she was very surprised. But she hoped that the Empress would look on *wang ye*'s paintings and help Rui Wang Fu to not be in such an awkward position, so her child could establish himself in Da Long as he grew up.

Kui Yuan Palace was forever lavish and bright. Every time she entered this place, she would forget this was the *hougong* and not some family's compound.

"Good day, Third Aunt." The seven years-old Crown Prince stood in front of her. His looks were outstanding. Even though he now had *didi* and *meimei*, but no one in Jing would think that the position of Crown Prince was going to shake.

The Empress was a great woman. She raised the Crown Prince well. His actions and speech were extremely polite yet didn't seem rigid.

"Your Highness Crown Prince, good day," She couldn't help but smile. Adults frequently were most soft-hearted for children, "Is the Empress free now?"

"*Muhou* just said that if I encountered you on the road, I should tell you to just head in," the Crown Prince smiled and added, "Third Aunt, I'm going to accompany *fuhuang* to practice writing."

Such a young age. It was clearly the Emperor teaching him to write but in his mouth, it became him accompanying the Emperor. Lu Yu Rong sighed. It was clear to see how patient the Emperor and Empress were in teaching the Crown Prince.

Entering the main hall of Kui Yuan Palace, she saw the Empress and the wife of *lao si* were chatting as they sat together. Seeing her enter, they involved her in talking about some of the interesting things around the city of Jing, the mood so harmonious that one could forget it was still the *hougong*.

However, she still remembered to take out the three paintings that *wang ye* gave her. She didn't know what was drawn on the scrolls so when the Empress went to open them, she was curious as well.

The first painting was a cat playing with an orchid. Just a glance made people relax and refreshed. She had seen this before. *Wang ye* had done many copies before he made one he was satisfied with. She hadn't thought he would willingly send it to the palace.

The second painting was of spring. The green mountains, the blue waters, the hundreds of flowers blooming. This was a scene that couldn't be seen in the *hougong*. So beautiful it seemed unreal. Her heart moved when she saw it. *Wang ye* had spent more than a few months to finish painting this work. He had hung it in his bedroom to admire, but now he also sent it to the palace.

When the third scroll was gradually opened, she was shocked still. She didn't think that this painting that *wang ye* had put away that year would once again appear in front of her.

"Drawing of winter snow and red plums……" The white fingers of the Empress gently touched the corner of the drawing. A long time later, she said, "Such a good plum blossom painting. The whiter the snow, the redder the plum blossoms."

She just was able to see where the Empress had touched, there was half a figure barely discernable. But because that person had been wearing white, it was very hard for others to find.

"A person's life on earth is like a white steed racing past, suddenly gone……" She didn't understand the expression on the Empress' face. She didn't even understand why the Empress would recite such a line.

Even when she was leaving the palace, she still didn't understand what the Empress meant. She didn't know if the Empress liked *wang ye*'s paintings. However, not long after, the Empress became tired of admiring paintings and turned to favor listening to the stories of talented women across the country.

She didn't tell *wang ye* of the two lines of nonsensical poetry that the Empress had said. But *wang ye* had never asked her what happened when she went to the palace that time. It was as though nothing had happened, unperturbed and quiet.

Later, *wang ye* was pardoned by the Emperor and could attend court. But she felt that *wang ye* didn't feel very happy at such a thing.

Wang ye still liked painting, and still didn't like giving the paintings away to anyone. Gradually, the child grew up. The one she had once liked was indistinct in her mind, just like a dream. After a while, one woke up.

The day of her son's wedding, seeing her son and *erxi* kneel to her, she suddenly realized that this was pretty much her lifetime.

After the newlyweds were sent into the bridal rooms, she suddenly turned but only saw the back of *wang ye* as he personally sent the Crown Prince out the door.

The day that *wang ye* left, feathery snow came down from the sky, and the plum flowers in the plum forest had bloomed exceptionally well.

She sat at the head of the bed, looking at this old yet still handsome man. Sorrow quietly creeping in.

"Today's snow is quite heavy, did it snow all night?" He suddenly became focused, even his pale face became red.

"En," Her voice was choked. Beside her, her son and grandchildren started to cry.

"The snow that year wasn't this heavy, the plum blossoms weren't as good as this year……" His gaze landed on the branch of plum flowers in the pot and shook his head, saying: "A pity, a pity."

"*Fu wang*… …" Her son sobbed in front of the bed, and her own eyes started to mist up.

"Guan'er, don't cry. After I pass, remember to take that painting in the sandalwood box of the fifth square in my study into my coffin," He slowly closed his eyes and sighed.

"After seeing the ocean, no other water can compare ……that's it…… that's it……"

She didn't know how she stood up, how she watched the white banners hung up over the *wang fu* until she saw her son take out the sandalwood box that held the painting.

The scroll slowly rolled open and she froze in place..

On the painting, it was a busy street during the Lantern Festival. The beautiful lanterns, a beautiful woman dressed plainly holding a lantern and the fireworks exploding in the sky.

It was a painting that was so beautiful one couldn't tear the eyes away. It contained all the feelings of the artist, just to depict the skin of the beauty, the bones of the beauty and the emotions buried deep in the heart.

"You walk and walk and don't stop, and tear you and I part. Now, there are thousand upon ten thousand miles that separate you and I, I at this end of the world while you at the other … …" Shaking as she recited the poem inscribed on the painting, Lu Yu Rong suddenly remembered how he had gently touched her brow on their wedding night.

Gently rolling up the painting, she put it in the wood box. Closing the box, she dried off her tears: "Put this under the pillow of *wang ye*."

A painting of a beauty, the bones of a hero. In the end, it was all a handful of dirt.

A person's life in this world is like a white steed racing past, suddenly gone.

She thought, she understood somewhat now.

Chapter 122 – Epilogue 2

In the seventh year of Jia You, the Empress gave birth to the Eldest Princess for the Emperor. With that, the Imperial Couple had two

Imperial Sons and one Princess, with both sons and daughter, it was all good.

For seven entire years, the Imperial House did not take candidates into Jing and the memorandums urging the Emperor to select candidate increased. Even though the Emperor might not be willing to take too many women into the palace, he had to think about the other males of the Imperial and noble families, those people wanted to take concubines.

This time, He Heng didn't strongly oppose it and agreed to let candidates enter Jing. After three months had passed, the female candidates from all over the country were chosen to enter the palace.

These women all came from common but good families. Those of rough conduct were eliminated, the same with those who did not have a fair appearance. After rounds of elimination, just twenty people were left. However, those twenty could not be considered as one of the palace. Unless the Emperor selected to favor one of them, then, according to protocol, these people would all be sent back to their homes after five years. Otherwise, they may be chosen by the Empress or Dowager Empresses to bestow to someone as a concubine. But that was not what they wanted.

He Yao, the Crown Prince of Da Long, already knew what female candidates meant even though he was only seven years old. He looked at his four years-old brother behind him, and a profound expression came onto his face: "*Er di*, weren't you learning [Thousand Word Text] recently? Why don't we go ask *fuhuang*? *Fuhuang* had taught me in the past when I was learning to write."

Qu Qing Ju, who was standing behind them, heard her eldest son's words, and couldn't help but laugh. In the past, wasn't it just two years ago? She saw the serious expression on her eldest son's face and summoned the two sons to her: "Tun Tun, Teng Teng, come over!"

He Yao hadn't thought that *Muhou* overheard his words. He led He Teng obediently in front of Qu Qing Ju and said in a small voice: "*Muhou*, why have you come over?"

"*Muhou* is just walking around," Qu Qing Ju crouched down to hug her two sons and smiled, "I'm going to Chao Ming Hall to take care of some affairs. You two brothers have fun. At noon, *muhou* will let the chefs make your favorite dishes."

He Yao's foot drew circles on the ground and then he said: "Is *muhou* going there to select *feipin* for *fuhuang*?"

"Who told you these things?" Qu Qing Ju laughed, but she didn't fool them because they were young children and explained seriously, "*Muhou* is going to see those female candidates, but not to chose them for your *fuhuang*. These female candidates, other than your *fuhuang*, they can serve other people."

"Then I'll let them dig earthworms for me," He Teng happily clapped his hands, "I can't find any."

Would the people in the palace take you to places that had earthworms? Qu Qing Ju brushed the bowl cut hairstyle of her younger son.

"Don't go to see the fuss," He Yao sternly patted his *didi*'s shoulder and raised his chin, "What we need to do now is to keep *fuhuang* further away from these female candidates. Let the *taijian* dig for earthworms. Those candidates are too soft, they don't have any strength and can't find any earthworms. Something that you can't do, can those female candidates accomplish it?"

He Teng heard his big brother state this, and his chubby face had an expression of realization. He nodded emphatically: "En, we'll keep them away from *fuhuang*." He turned and tugged Qu Qing Ju's sleeve, "*Muhou*, I'm also going, I'm also going."

Qu Qing Ju smiled as she looked at her two sons. Her eldest son had his hands at his back, expressing "I don't want to see those women, but for *muhou*, I can manage to go". At the expectant expression on her younger son's face, she shook her head helplessly, "Alright, you two can come."

Seeing *muhou* agree to their request, He Yao coughed dryly and then grabbed his *didi*'s hand, seriously ordering: 'When we see the female

candidates, you have to be good. We are *muhou*'s children and cannot embarrass *muhou*."

He Teng obediently nodded his head and patted his chest. "Don't worry, *gege*. We are Crown Prince and Imperial Son. *Muhou* doesn't need to say anything. The two of us together are the most honored and invincible yellow buns."

The corner of He Yao's mouth jerked. The words that were used to comfort little children, he hadn't believed them for a long time. He wasn't a child.

The female candidates that had made it through the rounds of eliminations felt very insecure. How in love the Emperor and Empress was had long spread throughout all of Da Long. They were afraid that the Empress would treat them badly, letting them enter the Imperial Palace but without a life to enjoy the riches and luxury. However, they found that they were not shortened in their residence or food. They hadn't even seen one of the Empress' attendants. Only now when they were taken into the Chao Ming Hall did they remember this was the last elimination round where the Imperial Couple would personally interview them. If they were suitable, they could become one of the *feipin* in the palace.

Some women were still tentative, other women had thoughts that were already soaring. They were all very beautiful females from all over the country. If they could receive the favor of the Emperor, couldn't they honor their ancestors and enjoy the great luxuries and wealth?

Even more, the Empress was now three above two-tens. The Emperor was just a few years older than the Empress. After so many years, even the deepest feelings would not be as strong as in the beginning. They were all females of double-eight. Even though they may not be as beautiful as the Empress, they were younger, had more vitality. That was their asset.

But no matter their thoughts, when the Empress who was not as 'young' or 'lively' as them appeared, they were all dumbstruck.

A grand phoenix robe, exquisite hairpins, and skin whiter than snow. She didn't seem like a woman who had given birth to three children. When the Empress walked up the jade stairs with the help of a palace maid to sit down on the phoenix chair, they all knelt down and gave a full greeting. The little bit of conceit they had completely disappeared.

"Stand up." Qu Qing Ju let her two sons sit beside her, smiling as she looked at the twenty or so youthful females below her. "Our Da Long has good weather and can raise all kinds of beauties. Seeing everyone today, *ben gong*'s eyes feel very good."

The female candidates hadn't thought the Empress was such a beautiful and warm person. Many people suddenly had good feelings towards the Empress and forgot their original intentions.

Those with keen eyes saw the two male children sitting beside the Empress and understood that they were probably His Highness the Crown Princess and Second Imperial Son. Thinking that there was a five-month old princess on the knees of the Empress, those that were smart gave up on entering the palace. Regardless of whether or not they would be favored, if they offended the Empress, they wouldn't have good days in the future.

"The Emperor is busy with state affairs and especially ordered *ben gong* to see you girls." Qu Qing Ju swept across the expressions on the faces of the women. Seeing that they all had appropriate expressions, she knew that this batch of candidates would be less troublesome than the batch of the last year of Qing De. "Are you girls now accustomed to living in the palace?"

The female candidates standing below all said they were living comfortably and complimented the people of the palace. A few of the females especially expressed their loyalty in front of the Empress. That expressed their true thoughts.

Of course, Qu Qing Ju understood, but from beginning to end, she didn't respond to the good intentions those people expressed. After leaving Chao Ming Hall, she said to her sons: "Did you see? Your

fuhuang would not be interested in these kinds of girls. You two are young now. Just enjoy growing up. These things are something little men shouldn't be concerned about."

"As a son, a man should be concerned about the affairs of *muhou*." He Yao raised his chin to say, "Men should be like that."

"En!" He Teng nodded his head at the side. He didn't really understand but he heard *muhou* and a man. To that, he gave his agreement.

Qu Qing Ju's heart warmed, she crouched down to hug her two sons: "*Muhou* is very fortunate to have two good sons. In the future, Tun Tun and Teng Teng need to protect your mother and wife. This is what a man should do."

"En!" The two children nodded their heads seriously.

Qu Qing Ju looked at them, a smile blooming.

Not long after, most of the female candidates were sent back to their homes. These candidates were all extremely happy when they left. When they got back, if someone asked them, they would all talk about the virtues of the Empress. Many of the poor scholars wrote many stories about the Empress, all beautifying the Empress.

Qu Qing Ju didn't know what happened outside the palace, but something that happened inside the palace surprised her. One of the remaining candidates complained that the Empress had taken all of the Emperor's favor and was too jealous.

Once the words came out, it created a storm in the *hougong*. Everyone was waiting to see what would happen to this candidate. It had to be said that the Empress treated Heng *fei* and Luo *guipin* very well. The Emperor resided daily at Kui Yan Palace, that was the Emperor's decision. No matter how skilled the Empress was, could she tie up the feet of the Emperor?

So those kind of words, in the eyes of everyone else, were a great joke. Over the these years, weren't there unperceptive palace maids

who wanted to turn from sparrows into phoenixes but they had never succeeded? Where did this candidate get the confidence from?

In reality, Qu Qing Ju was also slightly curious. She sat at a pavilion located in the middle of the pond in the Imperial Garden, and threw the fish feed in her hands to the goldfishes in the lotus pond. Turning, she looked at the female candidate called Chu Bi who was kneeling in front of her. This was a very beautiful girl, her brows carrying proudness that the other girls didn't have. She took the handkerchief that Mu Jin passed over to wipe her hands and sighed: "These years, the palace has never lacked for women who wanted to be *feipin*. You are not the first, and won't be the last."

Chu Bi had started regretting saying what she said out of anger long ago. Hearing the Empress speak, she obediently knelt, afraid that the Empress would be angry and she would lose her life.

"As a woman, if one could choose, it would be to receive one person's heart and to not separate until death." Qu Qing Ju saw puzzlement on Chu Bi's face and smiled, "But most of the men of the world are heartless while the women are infatuated. The end is always much crueler than imagined."

Hearing this, Chu Bi's heart moved. For some unknown reason, she gathered the courage to raise her head and look at the Empress. She found that there was no anger on the Empress' face, but an unspeakable warmth. Her heart moved, and she regretted her rash outburst even more.

"Empress *niangniang*… …" Chu Bi said, "*Nubi* knows her mistake, and asks the Empress for forgiveness."

"Stand up," Qu Qing Ju smiled slightly as she raised a hand, "If you really want to become a *feipin* of the *hougong*, *ben gong* naturally wouldn't stop you but hope you will not regret it."

Chu Bi stilled. She knew that the Empress was not lying but she was more hesitant now.

At this time, she heard the sounds of feet coming behind her. Before she could raise her head, she heard the maids and *taijian* all kneel down, calling the Emperor.

The Emperor? She boldly raised her head and saw the Emperor and Empress were holding hands together. It seemed that, in the eyes of the Emperor, there was only the Empress and nothing else.

She respectfully greeted the Emperor, but from beginning to end, the Emperor didn't look at her or ask about her. When the Emperor left hurriedly, that was when she knew that the Emperor still had state affairs. It was only that he had seen the Empress in the pond pavilion so he had especially come over to see her.

How deep did the feeling have to be for him to do this?

Chu Bi walked in front of the Empress and made a full greeting: "West Region Outside Official's daughter Chu Bi courageously asks for the phoenix blessing of the Empress, and begs the Empress to allow *nubi* to return home to marry freely."

She might admire the luxury and status, but she also knew what things could be achieved and what should be given up. Otherwise, the ending would only be a tragedy.

Qu Qing Ju looked at this girl and smiled. As expected, she had not been wrong. A female like this might have a stubborn personality but she wouldn't lose her head. So she hadn't wasted the effort put in.

Since He Heng had no intentions towards other women, why would she, for a virtuous reputation, keep these young women in the palace to be living widows? They were all women. She wouldn't do something so shameless and selfish in order to look good.

Chu Bi left like this. Afterwards, she had heard that none of the five remaining candidates had become the *feipin* of the Emperor and had become the concubines of other people. She looked at her husband who treated her very well beside her, and for some strange reason, she thought about what the Empress had said.

As a woman, if one could choose, it would be to receive one person's heart, and to not separate until death.

It was only now that she understood the rules the Empress held for the candidates. If the Empress hadn't taken care of them, and let the twenty or so candidates spend five years in the palace before they were sent off, their youth would have disappeared. Where could they find a good spouse then?

"What are you thinking about?" The man next to Chu Bi asked.

"Nothing," Chu Bi shook her head and said: "Just thinking, if it wasn't for one person, I probably would never have encountered you."

"Who's that person?"

"She is probably the best woman in the world." She closed the book in her hands, her smile warm and sweet. "It's late, let's sleep."

The man beside her looked at the book in her hand. Wasn't that a novel about the love between the Emperor and Empress?

Supposedly, the Imperial Couple had great love. After more than a decade of marriage, the Emperor had not changed his love for the Empress. Right now, they had both sons and daughters and were the object of admiration for many people.

He smiled. That was probably the most moving, unprecedented love story in Da Long dynasty.

Chapter 123 – Epilogue 3

He Heng had never thought he would encounter a woman who would move his heart, but the reality was that he really did meet a woman like that.

He disliked women who thought themselves smart, and disliked women who thought themselves kind. In a place like the Imperial Family,

people that were too kind never lived well. He also disliked people that were too weak. Weakness usually made people compromise, lose their dignity, and, in order to live, they had the ability to do evil deeds. If a person was forced into such circumstances, what could they be afraid of?

He liked seeing Qu Qing Ju dress herself beautifully, liked seeing her proud attitude, liked how she never back down when it came to her own interests. For some reason, even though she was his *wang fei*, he felt she lived a freer life than he did.

When he finally stood on the nine levels of jade stairs, he found that this dragon chair was abnormally big and abnormally hard, as though it was exaggerating the elevated status of the Emperor. It had an attractive appearance, so *lao da* and *lao san* fought for this position for many years.

Those with kind and soft hearts, even if they managed to survive in the Imperial Family, wouldn't have good lives. He was not an ignorant person, so he had been tricked by people, and tricked others. In the Imperial Family, no one owed another person, there was only those who won.

Qing Ju's hobbies always changed constantly. He felt that none of those hobbies were as amazing as her dancing, but to his regret, Qing Ju didn't frequently dance for him. However, every time she danced, he would see her attractiveness.

How could the world have a woman like this? One who could be dignified, lazy, generous, cruel, and seductive. This kind of woman, any man couldn't help but look twice, not to mention she was his Empress. Even if he only favored her, where did other people have the grounds to object?

He wasn't a useless ruler who had to sacrifice his woman to achieve peace in the Court so on the matter of favoring one person, he wouldn't compromise to anyone..

If he easily compromised, where would he have the qualification to talk about love?

The reason that the love of an Emperor would be doubted was usually due to the excuse of "forced with no other way." They would satisfy themselves with other women but act deeply in love. In other words, it was just pretense and not having loved deeply enough.

"Emperor, are these the paintings you wanted to see?" Qian Chang Xin put a sandalwood box in front of the Emperor, bending at the waist to open the box before retreating to one side, not looking at the paintings. A few days ago, the Empress suddenly became interested in viewing paintings so many people had sent paintings into the palace. Even Rui Wang Fei had personally sent a few paintings over. But who knew that after two or so months, the Empress didn't like it anymore. These valuable paintings had been placed into the East Hall of Kui Yuan Palace. If the Emperor wanted to see a painting, he only needed to send someone to take it out of the East Hall. The Empress really didn't care.

Rolling open [Winter Snow Red Plums Drawing], He Heng expressionlessly looked at the painting. A beat later, he gave a cold smile: "*Zhen*'s *sandi* has become idle and emotive now that he doesn't attend court." He had heard that *lao san* was very good at drawing landscapes. But this painting of his that had people, it was also this touching.

Xian Chang Xin saw the expression of the Emperor was not well. He remembered that Rui Wang Fei had sent in this painting, and guessed that the Emperor still had bad feelings towards Rui Wang so he didn't dare to speak. He obediently stood to one side and waited for the Emperor's orders.

"Put the painting back." He Heng curled his lips, a hint of disdain revealed. "Even though the Empress doesn't like to look at paintings and has forgotten all of these things, the servants should still store these away well."

"*Nucai* will remember," Qian Chang Xin didn't understand what the Emperor intended but still packed away the painting to take back to Kui Yuan Palace. When he step inside the main gate of Kui Yuan Palace, he encountered the Empress holding the little princess as she came out to soak in the sun. He instantly knelt down in front of the Empress.

"The Emperor got you to take some paintings out again?" The Empress gave the little princess to the nursemaid behind her, and bent down to randomly pick up one of the boxes. After she opened the scroll, she smiled slightly: "How can I split into several thousand bodies, in order to compliment each plum flower on each tree? This person must love plums. Who is the artist?"

Qian Chang Xin didn't know what to say. Rui Wang Fei had sent someone with this painting. Even the Emperor had gotten him to take it out for him to have a look. But the true recipient didn't even know who sent it.

"Empress, *nucai* is also unclear." Qian Chang Xin forced out a smile, "The Emperor wanted to see some paintings so *nucai* took a few over, and didn't look at them. *Nucai* doesn't dare to look at the paintings."

"En, there's no signature on the painting." Qu Qing Ju carelessly shoved the painting into Qian Chang Xin's hands and waved her hand, saying, "Since that's the case, you can put them back."

After Qian Chang Xin left, Qu Qing Ju looked at her daughter who was deeply asleep in the arms of her nursemaid. Her willow eyebrows were slightly curved as though she was smiling, but there wasn't much mirth in her eyes.

After Qian Chang Xin returned, he told the Emperor all about his encounter with the Empress. Then he found the Emperor's temper continued to be good for the next few days. Even the fact the female candidates had entered the palace didn't affect the good mood of the Emperor.

Those female candidates were generously allowed to go back home to marry freely. Only five were left and were bestowed by the Emperor to other people to be concubines. Due to this, the Crown Prince and the Second Imperial Son had been close with the Emperor for quite a few days. Especially the Second Imperial Son. He kept on saying the Emperor was a good father.

He was a *taijian* and didn't understand the feeling between men and women, but he knew very well an average person could not separate the Emperor and Empress. Since the two Empress Dowagers had no objections to the Emperor and Empress, then who would be so stupid?

So like this, one year repeated each other. He saw His Highness the Crown Prince turn from a child to a youth, saw the Empress become an elegant and dignified young woman, and add another imperial son for the Emperor. He saw the Emperor spend every day in Kui Yan Palace as though Kui Yuan Palace was their home.

There was no one who doubted the feelings between the Emperor and Empress. No one picked up the topic of the candidates again. It was like a person who had eaten the same thing for a decade. If his tastes suddenly changed, it was a scary matter. The scholars of Da Long were used to the monogamy of the Emperor. If the Emperor really had broken the feelings one day, how many palace anger poems and calls on behalf of the Empress would there be?

Even until his middle age, He Heng was always doubtful of one thing. That was, what was the feelings that Qing Ju really had for him. Even though the two of them spent every day together, he always suspected that the Empress did not have feelings as deep for him as he did for her.

But usually, the Empress was always concerned about him in every way and never disregarded him. Over time, he felt that he was thinking too much. He was demanding too much and that was why he was disgruntled.

He had never asked the question of love and she had never responded. It was only once when he had been seriously ill, and when he woke up,

and found Qing Ju, who was usually so attentive to her appearance, was guarding his side without beautiful makeup, and heavy shadows as though she had cried, that he didn't have the question anymore.

Some feelings in this word did not have to be spoken, but if it existed, time would prove it. He seemed to understand what Qing Ju had said. Love was not spoken, but proven through actions.

What he had been discontent with was demanding an empty phrase, and what Qing Ju could give him was true concern.

"In this life, with Qing Ju's companionship, I feel that I didn't waste it." He held her hand as they walked in the deep purples and reds of the Imperial Gardens. "I finally understand why some Emperors seek immortality. If possible, I would also want immortality medicine, to be with you forever."

"Emperor believes this?" She smiled as she looked at him, "A hundred years is just perfect. If it really is thousands of years, who knows if there is a day that dislike occurs? If that happened, it would be better to have a beautiful beginning and a fulfilled ending."

He could not object. Maybe the two of them did not believe in love that did not change even as the rocks changed, but they believed they could live for a lifetime together.

"This is good. Even into death, we will still think of each other." He smiled, but the hand that was holding hers tightened. "Our tomb has started construction. A few decades later when we lie in there, we won't be lonely."

"Birth not of the same blanket but death in the same cave. Separated this life, but the love is everlasting." Qu Qing Ju smiled. Who could think that she would walk to this step with a man, and this man was also an Emperor. But now, she has come to believe this phrase.

"It's good as long as Qing Ju understands me." He Heng raised his head and pointed at the sunset. "This sun looks like a poached egg."

"En," Qu Qing Ju nodded and said: "It's pretty similar."

The two held hands and stood together. The sunset drew their shadows out, merging into one, inseparable.

Not far away, Heng *fei* and Luo *guipin* were looking at their backs. The two left silently. When they walked to the Drooping Flower Door, Luo *guipin* suddenly sighed: "Maybe the Emperor just wanted a woman who could see the sunset as a poached egg with him. What picturesque sunset? What glow-like fire? It isn't what the Emperor wants."

Heng *fei* had a light smile as she said: "What the Emperor wants is a real woman. The four arts are just embellishment, and not needed." Her voice was extremely calm as though the man she was discussing had nothing to do with her, "The Empress, she's the right person that he met at the right time. This is probably what is called fate."

If they had met later, like if the Emperor had already ascended the throne, then the Empress would, at maximum, become the Emperor's most favored woman but not his only one. She, herself, would not become Heng *fei*, but one of the many *feipin* the Emperor would have forgotten. She may not have even gotten the rank of a *guipin*.

"This is our fate. All things in the world have a destiny. You and I are just people that have touched a little bit of good fortune due to destiny." Heng *fei* looked away from the sunset, "Let's return."

"I'm just slightly despairing, but I also find it rational that the Emperor only favors the Empress." Luo *guipin* smiled, "Ever since the Empress allowed me to mourn for my *jiujiu*, I had gratitude towards the Empress."

"So, when Han Qing He wanted you to help her get favor in the beginning, you didn't agree." Heng *fei* slightly tilted her face down, her voice very small but enough for the two of them to hear, "So, after you knew of Feng Zi Jin's plan, you allowed her to kill Han Qing He. You even meddled in the affair, but you pushed the suspicions of the affair towards Feng Zi Jin and Shu *gui taifei*, and not the Empress."

Luo *guipin* heard her words, and slightly paused before smiling: "Heng *fei niangniang* is a smart person." She wasn't afraid that Heng *fei* knew this and smiled even more freely, "Heng *fei niangniang* might not know my personality. If I remember someone's generosity, I will remember for a lifetime."

Heng *fei* looked at her smile. A long time later, she sighed: "This is good." It was due to the Empress that the two of them live comfortably without favor.

The Imperial Couple, as smart as they were, they might not necessarily be ignorant of some things, it was just that they didn't say it.

She turned, her eyes passing through the Drooping Flower Door. The Emperor and Empress were standing there side by side, the pair of shadows even more elongated as though it was one person.

Several thousand years later, archaeologists found the combined burial tomb of the Emperor and Empress of Da Lon. To their shock, they found the Imperial Couple had used one coffin. Two sets of skeletons laid together. It was like the legendary love story of the Emperor and Empress had passed on for thousands of years, gentle and touching.

They found many burial items within the tomb. Countless exquisite hairpins, glass lanterns worth cities, jade instruments and porcelain. Someone even found a stele in the tomb. There was a pair of extremely attractive man and woman carved on the surface. Under their feet were lucky clouds, as though they were ascending into immortality.

All of the archaeologists thought that the man and woman were Da Long's Jia You Emperor and Hua Ren Empress. This discovery also made others speculate about the love legend between them. Many people felt that those love story movies and productions about the love between this Imperial Couple did not even reach the feelings that the Emperor and Empress had.

Not long after, people also found that the woman carved on the stele of the Da Long tomb looked extremely similar to the one in the Lantern

Festival painting found in the coffin of Da Long's Zhong Rui Wang. Archaeologists quickly proved that Hua Ren Empress and Zhong Rui Wang didn't have any romantic relationship. Zhong Rui Wang was not importantly regarded by Jia You Emperor, and the person in the painting was most likely Hua Ren Empress' sister because history had recorded that Hua Ren Empress' half-sister had been a concubine of Zhong Rui Wang.

Even though the archaeologists said so, there were still many who looked towards the unofficial histories. They said that Jia You Emperor's father, Qing De Emperor, originally intended to pair Hua Ren Empress and Zhong Rui Wang together. Due to many reasons, in the end, Hua Ren Empress married Jia You Emperor.

As a result, people made a movie about the love triangle between the three and earned a lot of hot tears from people. But even so, everyone believed that Jia You Emperor and Hua Ren Empress had deep feelings between them. Even if something did happen with Zhong Rui Wang as the unofficial histories said, that was just a detour in their romance.

How history was, it was long buried in the long river of time. No one knows the truth, but people would believe the existence of one thing.

That was love!

Author's note: I always wanted to write a pure time-travel love story and finally did it. This is a fulfilled historical romantic fairy tale, the Emperor and Empress will live happily together.

I hope that the readers will encounter the person right for them and live their own happy lives.

Every time I finish, I want to say many things, but at the end, I don't know what to say. After thinking it over, it's still the old words. That is, I hope all the readers have a happy life and your families are healthy.

If lucky, see you in my next novel (ノ3 ヽ).