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The Bewitching Courtier - Chapter 001-111

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1

Please check the for a brief introduction if you'd like. Otherwise, read on!

Chapter 1: For what?

It was another full moon night.

Behind the silk screens in the storied loft, candle wax slowly dripped, highlighting a pair of shadows that were joining as one.

Chen Rong stood dazedly under a banyan tree as she motionlessly watched the couple clinging to each other, her lips pressing into a tight line unknowingly.

In the burning lamplight, a sound of laughter unbrokenly came her way. It was jubilant and bright, as if pain never existed in this world, as if it were the brilliance of spring flowers themselves.

A soft voice unexpectedly rose behind her: "So it's you? Hadn't His Lordship abandoned you? Why are you still here? Oh, that's right, at your tearful request, he had agreed to let you stay a few more days."

With these vicious words came a burst of fragrance. A dainty figure was now standing next to Chen Rong's side. She followed Chen Rong's gaze, and when she saw the pair of joined shadows on the storied loft, her lips drew into a hard line.

Nevertheless, though her eyes were filled with jealousy, she became delighted at the sight of Chen Rong standing in a daze. Her soft laughter sounded again: "Dear me, is that not your cousin? You did everything possible to get rid of her so that His Lordship would take you as his wife. You must not have thought that what isn't yours would never belong to you and that one day your cousin would still come back to take what was her."

The dainty woman clucked her tongue and smiled. "Scheming all sorts of calculations only to get discarded. Ah Rong of the Chen house, if I were you, I'd set myself on fire to erase it all!"

She offered one line after another, aggressive and vicious. But no matter how

taunting and sarcastic she may be, the rival in front of her never spoke a word. At this moment, Chen Rong who had always been contentiously insidious seemed to have become a whole other person. She was just staring away at the entwining shadows behind the screens, motionlessly and with an ashen face.

Not receiving a response, the dainty woman gave a laugher. “Oh that’s right, I heard that after His Lordship married you, he had not touched you once. Tsk, tsk, tsk, how regrettable for the famed beautiful and talented Ah Rong of the Chen house. His Lordship had always looked down on you!”

Her words were like a sword that drew blood from Chen Rong’s heart.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

With a rustle, Chen Yong who had been standing in a daze suddenly turned around.

In her lifeless eyes was a frightening dreariness. The moment she saw her glare, the dainty woman could not help herself from retreating backward.

Chen Rong took a step toward her.

Stunned, she retreated while hastily demanding: “You… what do you want to do?”

Chen Rong faced the panicking woman with a cold smile. Unknowingly, she had forced her to press back against the banyan tree.

At the time the woman’s scream was heard, only a cold light flashed by. “Thud,” a dagger had flown past her hair and firmly drove into the trunk, three inches deep.

The dainty woman gave a frightful scream.

“Shut up!” Chen Rong growled a growl full of murderous intent. The woman shuddered and actually closed her mouth.

Chen Rong stared at her. Under the moonlight, her eyes were as dark and deep as wolves’.

“Originally,” she coldly began, “I was going to kill you. But after thinking about it, you are quite adept at pretending that you’ve always managed to draw his attention. If I keep you alive, I can still give that cousin of mine some

heartaches.”

At this, Chen Rong withdrew her dagger with a quick motion of the wrist. As soon as her dagger entered her sleeve, a burst of rapid footsteps arrived. Several guards shouted: “Who’s here? Do we have assassins?”

“Nothing,” both women answered at the same time.

The guards could see the two woman glancing at each other and receding to the back. Lady Chen and Lady Lu had never gotten along; it was guaranteed to be fussy whenever they were together, and thus they had become accustomed to it.

As soon as the guards went away, Chen Rong flapped her sleeve and turned to leave.

Lady Lu watched her receding figure and for some reason suddenly felt a biting chill. She shivered and thought to herself that it was actually quite sad for someone as proud as Chen Rong to love a man as heartless as their master.

At this thought, Lady Lu gave a sigh and dejectedly walked toward her own courtyard.

No sooner had she stepped into her yard did she suddenly hear a loud explosion from the east wing. She whipped around only to find smoke billowing in the east, firelight aglow.

“Bring water, bring water!”

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Bouts of shouts and stomping feet gave rise. Lady Lu’s heart suddenly jumped. Without putting on her outer robe, she hastily headed to the east wing – that was Chen Rong’s courtyard. With that woman’s obstinacy, she might have really listened to her and set herself on fire.

As Lady Lu rushed over, she happened to see their master and his newly married wife also running toward the east wing from the main hall.

All three headed for the east wing.

The moment they entered the courtyard, a sudden burst of mad laughter rang. In the hoarseness was boundless pain and hatred, and even regret.

Lady Lu took a few unsteady steps forward. When she looked up, her face was drained of its color.

In the crackling fire, the eastern half of the building had collapsed, leaving only the wall in the far west corner standing. It was nevertheless also beginning to sway. Billowing smoke had consumed the entire courtyard. In the rolling flames, the woman dressed in silk with long loose hair gazed heavenward and laughed. Wasn't she Chen Rong?

She… she was serious!

Lady Lu's face grew ashen. She staggered one step backward. At this time, an indescribable pity and sadness swept over her.

All of a sudden, she heard their master's command: "Saver her. Save her!"

After those few urgent words, she heard him ask: "What caused the fire?"

"Her Ladyship, that is, the Chen woman dismissed us and then set the fire herself."

Shock emerged on their master's face. He hastily turned around to search for Chen Rong from the flames. Under the night sky, his cold voice sounded: "Chen Rong, for what must you do this?"

Illuminated by bright red flames, on that imperiously handsome face was a touch of ill-concealed dismay.

Chen Rong did not answer from the blazing sea. She only stared at her husband unblinkingly while laughing madly. She gazed skyward and, with open arms, laughed till she went hoarse, sounding as if she was singing an epic poem while also as if she was weeping. A flame wrapped her up as her painful laughter became increasingly louder in its madness.

At this sight, her husband frowned and waved his hand, coldly shouting: "If she wants to die, then let her." Then he flapped his sleeve and unconcernedly walked away, leaving behind the woman to be gradually swallowed by fire.

Lady Lu watched their master's unfeeling back in shock. At this moment, a bone-deep chill took over her entire being. She hastily turned to look at Chen Rong to see that she was laughing harder and harder. Though she was laughing,

Lady Lu could see two streaks of tears falling from Chen Rong's face, dripping into the fire and turning into ashes. What she saw even more clearly was a tearful Chen Rong, who had been laughing madly, slowly choking smaller laughter in self-disdain and pain. She heard her loud and clear: "For what! For what! For what…"

The laughter became smaller and smaller and gradually abated into nothingness.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

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"Ahh…"

A scream tore across the night sky. Chen Rong sat up and placed her hand on her chest, gasping for air.

After heaving for a while, she left her bed and followed the lamp light toward the bronze mirror on the table.

In the bronze mirror was a young girl, delicate and beautiful. At this second, her face was dripping with cold sweat, horror and madness remained in her widened eyes.

Slowly raising her sleeve, she wiped the sweat from her face.

Hasty footsteps arrived from the room next door as a gentle, concerned voice came to her from the doorway: "Ah Rong, did you have a nightmare?"

Chen Rong turned her back, took a breath and replied: "I'm all right now."

Behind the door, a woman's head poked in. She glanced toward Chen Rong's figure and whispered a consolation: "We have clan people in the south. Ah Rong, don't be too worried."

"I know. You may leave."

Hearing her footsteps slowly receding, Chen Rong again stretched her sleeve to dab her sweat. She turned and walked to the dressing table, sitting down opposite the bronze mirror.

The beautiful young girl in the mirror was opening her black, bottomless eyes

to look back at her.

Ah Rong's mouth slowly raised, revealing fine white teeth. She whispered, "It's all passed and will never happen again, right?"

The person in the mirror replied with a brilliant smile.

Watching this smile, Chen Rong looked to be very satisfied. She rose, picked up an ox horn comb and slowly combed her tangled hair.

In the mirror, she was only 14 or 15 years old. She was not yet developed though her youthful innocence barely concealed a gorgeous face.

She had returned to the past.

All madness, all obsessive love, all obstinacy, all resentment and pain, everything had simply turned into a memory after waking up!

She could remember all the experiences she had gone through, and yet her body was still at the tender age of fifteen.

She was still herself; nothing had changed. The only thing that changed was time. The heavens were playing with her, letting her return to a time when nothing had yet occurred.

This year, due to the imminent war, she and everyone in the City of Ping would be rushing south. She would return to her clan and then encounter the nightmare of her life.

But it wasn't to be a nightmare this time. Chen Rong smiled at her reflection in the mirror, her hand stroking her face, whispering: "You were too stupid before. Since the heavens have let you start over again, you must control the pieces in this new chess game. What say you, Chen Rong?"

The person in the mirror once again answered her with a brilliant smile.

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2,3,4,5

Chapter 2: The Knave

A cold and clear sky hung high beyond the silk screens. A few stars sparsely dotted its vastness, looking exceedingly lonely.

Chen Rong looked away from the bronze mirror and turned her gaze to the night sky. She watched it unblinkingly for a time before leaning back and closing her eyes as she quietly waited for time to pass.

For the past several days, she would sit until dawn each time she awakened from her nightmarish past. It wasn't because she was reminiscing nor was it because her hatred was too strong. Rather, she simply liked to sit there in quietude to watch the sky and to relish in the wonder of being reborn again.

Slowly, a mist emerged across the landscape. And slowly, a voice or two rang out in the fresh morning air.

This voice began as one or two and eventually turned rowdy when more and more gradually joined in.

Footsteps sounded. The gentle and concerned voice of the middle-aged woman from last night came to her: "Ah Rong, are you awake?"

"I am," Rong Chen replied, rising from bed.

The woman swiftly ordered: "Go in and help Ah Rong with her morning wash."

The door made a squeak and in came a maid holding a basin. The older woman went behind Chen Rong to help her comb her hair.

This woman had a round face and a pair of small eyes. Her smiling features showed kindness. She carefully regarded Chen Rong before saying: "The servants have made preparations. We can set out at any time."

Chen Rong throated a reply. Seeing her calm expression, the woman relaxed a little, continuing: "Ah Rong, this place isn't good anymore, we must move south. Compared to other major clans, the House of Chen is still much better. At least, we have clansmen in the south."

Chen Rong throated another reply.

Because she agreed so blithely, and her expression also did not seem to be absentminded as was two days ago, the woman rejoiced and added, “Do you understand now, Ah Rong? You won’t have nightmares tonight?”

Chen Rong nodded.

At this time, a man’s voice called to her from outside: “Ah Rong, our luggage has been prepared. When will we leave?”

Listening to this familiar voice, Chen Rong suddenly asked, “What day is today?”

Taken aback, the man then replied, “It’s the day of the ox (1).”

1. They are using a 60-day cycle made up of stems and branches similar to the 60-year cycle. This day is called the 辛丑*xin chou* day, *xin* being the stem and *chou (ox)* being the branch.

The day of the ox? Chen Rong stood up. The day of the ox! That’s right, on midnight three days later, she would be confronting her first calamity.

While the older woman was caught in bewilderment, she slowly sat down. “Are you Uncle Wu?”

The middle-aged man standing outside grew more surprised. He gave a loud reply: “Yes, I’m Uncle Wu. Ah Rong, what’s wrong?” At his last word, he went straight toward the door and pushed it open. A thin and pale face with a few sparse whiskers on the chin appeared before Chen Rong’s eyes.

Chen Rong was washing her mouth at this time. It was rather ill-mannered for a man as old as he to open her door.

She looked up at the man. Living for the second time, she could only now see the wickedness hidden behind his seemingly gentle and benevolent face.

The man in front of her was a scholar her father had saved while he was traveling. All along, her father had treated him as a friend. He respectfully kept him at the estate and even asked her and all the servants to call him ‘uncle’.

But it was this very man who colluded with thieves. The night before they left

for the south, the house was broken into and robbed of all its wealth.

If her father hadn't secretly hid some gold in his study, she wouldn't have been able to go to the south. She would long have begged on the street!

Chen Rong stared at Uncle Wu and unhurriedly stated, "We'll depart this afternoon!"

"What? Departing this afternoon? Ah Rong, why not wait a few more days?"

Chen Rong quietly sneered before hardening her face. "I said we're leaving this afternoon," she repeated loudly.

She was nevertheless a young girl who had yet to establish her influence. The man looked to the older woman behind her and demanded: "Nurse Ping, have you said something to Ah Rong? Traveling south is a serious matter, how can we just leave on a whim?" At this, he remembered something and raised his voice to say: "Besides, Ah Rong has been having nightmares for many nights. Since she is feeling unwell, why not rest for two more days?"

The kind looking woman quickly stepped forward and faced Chen Rong while saying: "Miss, there is validity in Uncle Wu's words…" Chen Rong interrupted her, shouting, "I said we're leaving this afternoon!"

Uncle Wu wanted to oppose her order, but when he met her fathomless dark eyes, for some reason he shuddered and swallowed back the words he had wanted to blurt out.

"Close the door," Chen Rong ordered after withdrawing her gaze.

For a second, Uncle Wu was slightly taken aback. At length, he realized she was talking to him. He closed the door in bewilderment, his heart feeling ill at ease: *What happened to Ah Rong? How did she change so much?*

As soon as Uncle Wu left, Chen Rong went to the study that housed thick bamboo slips and silk manuscripts. In the past, after Uncle Wu had conspired with thieves to rob their family wealth, she had recalled her father's reminder in desperation: *If anything unexpected were to happen, go to the study.* After a good cry in the study, she accidentally discovered numerous gold leaves in these bamboo and silk books. She had survived thanks to these gold leaves.

Loud clanging clashed outside. It was the servants busy at packing. At the moment, the entire courtyard was almost ready; soon they would be moving to the study.

These noisy voices, these rough clamoring, they were all so pleasant to the ears. How did she not realize this before?

Chen Rong slowly sat down and opened a roll of silk manuscript, her ears raptly listening to the bustling sounds.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed when a loud call came to her from outside the door: "Ah Rong, are you in the study? Elder Sun is here."

It was Uncle Wu's voice.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Chen Rong's face sank: *He didn't know when to give up. He even invited Elder Sun over!*

"Nurse Ping, is Ah Rong in the study?" Uncle Wu's shout sounded again. "He has come to visit because he heard she isn't feeling well. Let Ah Rong know so she can come to receive her guest."

Chen Rong rose. Before Nurse Ping could answer, she had replied with a crystal clear voice: "I'm coming." Then she pushed open the study door.

At the gate stood an elderly man with gray beard and hair. He was Elder Sun. Before her father left, he had entrusted her welfare and education to this elderly man. In front of him, she did not have much right to speak.

Chen Rong cast a glance at Uncle Wu, who was looking quite smug before offering the other man a curtsy. "Good greetings, Elder Sun."

Elder Sun nodded his head. He walked over to face Chen Rong and gave her an appraising look. "I heard you're having nightmares at night. Have you seen the doctor?"

"Nay, sir." Chen Rong shook her head.

Elder Sun frowned. Seeing this, Uncle Wu said on the side, "Sir, please persuade Ah Rong. She is saying that she wants to leave this afternoon in her condition. What distance are we talking about going south? If anything were to

happen along the way, wouldn't it be too late for regrets by then?"

Elder Sun nodded his head. He glanced over to Nurse Ping, who was standing behind Chen Rong and told her, "Nurse Ping, ask your lady to go back to her room. You'll leave three days from now."

"Aye, sir."

Then he turned and told the servants in the vicinity: "This is not a trifling matter. Keep an eye on Ah Rong. If she is capricious and stubborn, lock her in!"

"Aye, sir!"

"Why haven't you invited the doctor?"

"Aye!"

Elder Sun gave orders one after another. When he finished, he flapped his sleeve and turned to leave.

Uncle Wu gave a glance toward Chen Rong and smirked when no one was paying attention, then left to catch up to Elder Sun.

Chapter 3: Dispersing Wealth

At Elder Sun's words, everyone in the busy courtyard stopped their work. They all looked up at Chen Rong and awaited her instructions.

She mulled for a moment before looking around, saying: "Gather all the servants in the estate. Tell them I have something to say."

"Aye, miss."

"Nurse Ping, have them move everything to the courtyard."

Nurse Ping stared blankly at Chen Rong. It wasn't until she repeated herself that the woman replied with: "Aye, miss." She was more than confused: *The lady has changed so much recently. I don't understand her at all these days.*

Although the Chen estate was currently helmed by a young lady, her father had served as the governor of the City of Ping throughout the years. He had accumulated abundant wealth despite being only an eighth-ranking official. At the time Chen Rong's father and brother left, they had taken with them a large number of assets, yet what was left could still fill this entire courtyard.

In this era, gold and coins were both difficult to circulate. The real money that people worshiped were food and clothes. In precarious wartime such as this, the most popular kind of transaction was bartering.

In only half an hour, the courtyard stood full of servants and maids. Elder Sun had not gone. He and Uncle Wu were standing under a tall banyan tree, curiously looking in Chen Rong's direction.

Chen Rong knelt on a cushion Nurse Ping had laid out for her. She casually glanced at the crowd and asked, "How many people do we have in the estate?"

"Seventy-three, miss."

Chen Rong nodded and slowly sipped her wine – although she was only fifteen, her every move seemed refined and graceful at this moment due to the noble air she gained from the dozen years of experience in her previous life.

Elder Sun nodded on the side as he startlingly thought: *The House of Chen is said to be of noble descent. It is indeed true. Not only is Ah Rong from a subsidiary branch, but she is also a concubine-born daughter whose father is also concubine-born. She is young still, yet she possesses an aristocratic bearing that can only be attributed to the noble bloodline of her clan.*

Chen Rong took a sip of wine and casually swept her eyes across the crowd in the courtyard, lightly saying: "War is approaching. The House of Chen will bring our family south. If you want to leave our house and seek your own path, then you will receive one bolt of fabric and five pecks of rice each. If you are willing to go with me, you'll still receive one bolt of fabric and five pecks of rice."

The moment these words left her mouth, an instantaneous silence came over the courtyard.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Shocked, Uncle Wu couldn't help taking a step forward. He nonetheless could not bring his foot down — what right did he have to stop her?

After a long time of receiving no reaction, Chen Rong turned around to Nurse Ping and knitted her brow. "Nurse?"

Nurse Ping was gaping stupidly at Chen Rong. When she saw her fathomless

black eyes, she woke up, rushed forward and exclaimed: “We can’t, we can’t. Ah Rong, we don’t have that much rice and fabric in the estate to begin with. We can’t divide them up.”

Chen Rong said offhandedly: “If we don’t have enough then use silk and millet instead.”

“B-but, these are the only assets we have in the estate. If we divide them up among these many people, the estate’s wealth will dwindle into nothing!” With a little shortness of breath, Nurse Ping went on: “Our travel is long. It’s easy to run into problems on the road. Even if we successfully arrive in the south, how will you survive if you don’t have property? Ah Rong, there has been no news of your father and brother heretofore. You must not carelessly drain your family wealth!”

Nurse Ping’s caring words were indeed ones expected from a loyal servant. But she had not considered that her mistress was only a vulnerable woman, or that the estate did not have dozens of stalwart guards, so how would she secure this wealth? Even if she didn’t distribute her wealth today, the road going south was nearly a thousand miles long. If she and her few servants were to parade around with dozens of wagons, she wondered how many people and forces would be eyeing their possessions. By then, even her life wasn’t necessarily safe much less her wealth!

Previously, she had only carried a few gold leaves and had almost lost her life just because she was careless enough to expose them a few times.

Chen Rong moved her gaze to glance at her servants. Among the group, she saw seven or eight as worried as Nurse Ping. The others were suppressing their joy while nervously looking at her as though they were afraid she would take back her words.

Chen Rong withdrew her gaze from the crowd and slightly swept over to Uncle Wu and several young laborers standing among the servants.

With this sweep of her eyes, a chill flashed across her countenance.

Shaking her head, Chen Rong casually said, “Nurse, money and possessions are both useless. In this troubled time, it’s better to have clothes and rice.”

Not wanting to go on, she simply waved her right hand and loudly called: “Uncle Wu!”

All eyes swiftly gathered on Uncle Wu.

With this one look, many began to frown. Nurse Ping called out: “Uncle Wu, Ah Rong is asking for you.”

This translation belongs to hamster428.

At this point, Uncle Wu was looking especially odd. His face had turned purple and blue, appearing to be angry and slightly panicking. His left foot was still in the air; nobody knew if he was going to step forward or if he was going to retreat. Strange, didn’t he feel tired from standing on one foot like that?

Everybody’s gaze finally brought Uncle Wu back to earth.

He met Chen Rong’s eyes.

Chen Rong looked at him and slowly broke into a smile. With her eyes narrowing, she said to him in a crystalline voice: “Uncle Wu, you are a learned person. Since the entire City of Ping commends your fairness, please come out and give Ah Rong a hand.”

“Give you a hand?” Uncle Wu asked foggily.

Chen Rong’s eyes continued to narrow. The hearty laughter she produced was so different from anything else in the past that it made Elder Sun, who always boasted of being a virtuous scholar disdainful of money, continuously nod his head: *Only in crucial events can one see a person’s true nature. I had thought Ah Rong was foolish in wanting to distribute her wealth. Seeing her so cheerful at this moment tells me she is indeed indifferent to her money! This child is truly deserving of the surname Chen!*

Chen Rong’s crystalline voice carried an air of gallantry when she next spoke: “Yes, Ah Rong asks Uncle Wu to please record and divide these assets. Since you are fair, everyone will trust you.”

At this point, Chen Rong slightly raised her brow and called in surprised: “Uncle Wu, Uncle Wu? Why are you so startled? Or do you not want to do this?”

Uncle Wu quickly put on a smile. He swallowed as his face blanched,

stammering: “Of course I want to, of course I want to.”

“Then why have you not come over? It’s getting late.”

“Yes, yes, I’m coming.”

While Uncle Wu stiffly walked forward, Elder Sun heaved a sigh behind him: “Wu Yang, Wu Yang, even a young girl sees money as dirt. You are a scholar, but why do you look so pale? Why are your behaviors so rigid, your eyes so muddled? Tsk, you are much inferior to her!”

People in this era loved to remark on anything and everything. The elders’ opinions often affected a person’s entire life. When Elder Sun uttered his words, a dark ire loomed on Wu Yang’s thin face.

Wu Yang shuffled to Chen Rong’s side.

Chen Rong stood up. She covered her mouth with her sleeve and casually yawned before saying: “Distribute them well. It’s up to each of you whether you stay or leave.”

Then she lazily walked back to her bedchamber.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Seventy-odd people weren’t a large number, but it took four whole hours before Wu Yang finished giving everyone his portion.

Placing the brush down, Wu Yang stood up amid the servants’ laughter. He stared at the mountain of belongings that had shrunk into a small mound, feeling as though his footsteps had cemented onto the ground.

Heaven! Those people aren’t vegetarians! These things wouldn’t be enough to fill the space between their teeth. If they blame me, what am I supposed to do?

Dejected, he didn’t even pay attention to Elder Sun when the older man said goodbye to him.

In his panic, Wu Yang’s eyes lit up: *It’s said that the Chen estate has a precious treasure. Perhaps this would satisfy them!*

While Wu Yang was thinking of this, from the bedchamber came Chen Rong’s clear voice: “Uncle Wu, Nurse Ping, Old Shang.”

All three answered in surprise: “Aye.”

“How many have not left?”

“Fifteen, miss.”

“Very good. I’ve got something quite extraordinary. I would like to ask the three of you to lead those 15 people and bring it to the Wang estate. Just tell them that my guardians are not at home, and I am only a vulnerable female who cannot take charge. I would be pleased to gift the treasure my father left me if only the Chen house can join the Wang house’s troop and embark on this journey with them.”

At this point, the bedchamber door squeaked open. At the same time, a glassy and sparkling red treasure appeared in front of everyone’s eyes.

At the sight of this object, Wu Yang’s field of vision darkened and he almost fainted on the spot.

Chapter 4: Shattered Treasure

The whole body of the object shone in radiance. It was a coral three feet high and shaped like a tree. Born under the sea, it was extremely difficult to obtain. Moreover, the coral they were beholding was crystal clear and flawless.

A true treasure! Wu Yang could no longer bear it. He stepped forward and hastily exclaimed: “Ah Rong, you mustn’t!”

Seeing Chen Rong looking at him in surprise, he got hold of himself and explained to her: “You have just dispersed most of your wealth. This is presently the only thing that is worth something in the entire estate. Are you not keeping even the last treasure your father left? Should you gift it to someone else?” His tone was quite serious. He gave a long sigh and continued: “Miss, it’s difficult to build a home yet very easy to wreck one. If you do this, I’m afraid people will say you are a prodigal child.”

“Prodigal?”

Chen Rong blinked, mockery flashed in her dark eyes. She carelessly played with the coral in her hand – this action not only made Wu Yang but also Nurse Ping give a gasp.

Chen Rong's mouth drew in disdain as she said, "It's only a vulgar thing. Uncle Wu, you're paying it too much attention."

She then ignored him and directed her gaze to Nurse Ping and Old Shang. "Carry it away. There's no need to use a veil. Send it to the Wang estate at once."

Not veiling it? Then wasn't she parading it on the streets?

"Absolutely not!" Uncle Wu exclaimed.

Chen Rong glanced askance at him and coldly asked, "Why not?"

Uncle Wu stammered for a long while before answering her: "Such a treasure as this would lure thieves to our house."

Chen Rong smiled and narrowed her eyes, appraising Uncle Wu's facial expression while shaking the coral in her hand again. She casually said, "Take it to the Wang estate. It now belongs to the House of Wang. If it lures thieves, it is luring thieves into the Wang House, what has it got to do with me? And what has it got to do with you?"

With her last few words, whether intentionally or not, she actually raised her tone of voice.

Instantly, Wu Yang felt everyone's eyes on him. Cold sweat dripped down his forehead.

No, he must not let Ah Rong gift this object away. Blasted! Why was this girl so stubborn? How could he convince her?

While Wu Yang was struggling to think, Chen Rong turned to the crowd in the courtyard and ordered, "Bring me the agarwood tray. How can such an exquisite coral be placed on ordinary wood?"

"Eh? Aye, aye!"

Several servants quickly ran into the main hall and lifted a small circular tray – one that was made entirely out of pure agarwood. It was one of the few remaining valuables in the Chen estate. It had long been spotted by Wu Yang.

This time, Wu Yang's eyes grew red. His face next turned purplish especially after seeing several familiar shadows outside the gate.

By the time the circular tray was carried out, Wu Yang had strode forward and reached out to snatch the coral from Chen Rong's hands.

"Ahh…"

Watching what was happening, the surrounding crowd broke out in cries.

In a blink, Wu Yang's hand had touched the coral.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

The result was not as he had expected. While he was forcibly snatching it away, he in fact could not feel Chen Rong's resistance. Once the coral was in his hands, Wu Yang's red face showed a hint of a smile.

As Wu Yang withdrew his hand, Chen Rong fell sideways in the direction of his pull. It did not matter that she fell, but her long sleeve was placed under the coral and was now pulling it along.

The red splendor flashed downward like a falling meteor.

Neither Chen Rong nor Wu Yang had time to exclaim. All they could see was the brilliant and flawless coral falling down and onto the ground.

"No!" Wu Yang screamed. Both his hands were outstretched, his entire body leaning forward to grasp onto the coral.

Perhaps when people are pushed into a corner, their potential would be catalyzed. In desperation, Wu Yang's hands held onto the coral. He hastily pulled his hands back and shouted in awe: "I got it, I got it!"

While shouting, Wu Yang quickly stood up without paying attention to the skirt under his foot.

The moment Wu Yang's foot stepped on the skirt, Chen Rong gave a grunt and leaned sideways. His center of gravity was already unstable, now that his foot was caught by Chen Rong's skirt, his whole body tipped forward.

"Whump…"

At the moment this loud impact boomed, a crisp shatter also sounded.

And then deathly silence ensued.

Those in the courtyard dropped their mouths as they stared at Wu Yang's face-

in-the-ground posture. To the left of him, they could also see the coral branches that had been shattered to pieces.

Wu Yang remained motionless on the ground. He seemed to have fallen into unconsciousness, his whole body rigid.

Silence, great silence.

Suddenly, Chen Rong's childish voice was heard, tinged with anger: "Uncle Wu, my father had sheltered you because you hadn't had anywhere to go. Our forefathers said we mustn't forget the grace we were given. Our kindness to you hadn't been merely a meal, had it? Please tell me why you must take this coral from my home? Why do you rather break it than give it to the Wang clan?"

Due to the iciness present in her voice, she sounded quite commanding at this moment.

Uncle Wu gave no answer. He still did not move. It wasn't clear whether he had really fainted or not.

Chen Rong's face sank. "Guards!" she decidedly shouted.

"Aye."

"While guardians are absent from the House of Chen, this Wu Yang fellow as a scholar had plotted to steal my assets and had broken my family's priceless treasure. Presently, clans are moving south. No one will be present at court to see this knave to justice. Throw him out of the Chen estate and let the world know of his actions!"

Because Chen Rong displayed both might and reason this time, no one dared to speak up for Wu Yang. Several servants came forward and lifted Wu Yang up.

As soon as he was lifted, he suddenly opened his eyes and glared at Chen Rong, screaming: "You! You little wench! How dare you touch me? You're actually going to touch me?"

His eyes were ripping. The redness on his face revealed a viciousness.

This time, those who sympathized with him suddenly felt disgusted. This man had broken the mistress's family heirloom. Not only did he shamelessly feign a swoon, he even accused the mistress so callously. It seemed he was as wicked as

Ah Rong said he was!

Chen Rong was rather calm facing a furious Wu Yang. She simply watched him with nary a trace of panic detected in her eyes. While Wu Yang was still stunned, a few strong servants had held him down and dragged him away.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

“What are you doing? Put me down, put me down at once!” Wu Yang cried in panic, his hands and feet struggling to break away.

But he was only a frail scholar. How could he move if on one wanted to let him go? Six men solidly pressed down on him and lifted him into the air before they carried him out of the estate.

By the time they got to the gate, Wu Yang was still shouting in dismay. But his loud cries, which started out deriding Chen Rong, turned into sobs and then eventually subsided into stillness.

Soon, six uniform voices made their way to Chen Rong’s ears: “This knave Wu Yang took advantage of his master’s absence to attempt thievery. We hereby expel him…”

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The six uniform voices shouted thusly three times before the statement no longer echoed back.

Listening to the din growing louder and louder outside, Nurse Ping came to Chen Rong and whispered concernedly: “Ah Rong, don’t be sad… you were going to give it away in any case.”

Chen Rong looked up to Nurse Ping with a smile – a remarkably bright smile. Amid everyone’s surprise, she leisurely said, “I’m not sad.”

How could she be sad? Her father and brother were not home. As a girl who needed help, she would do anything for anyone who would take her in.

However, she had been seeking a small return when she wanted to gift this

treasure away. None of the corrupt officials in the city would dare to receive her gift, much less the great house of Wang. Anyone who took it would've stained his own name.

She brought the coral out because she wanted to break it, but she didn't think Wu Yang would be so accommodating. He actually took the initiative to bear the responsibility for her.

"Why aren't you sad?" Nurse Ping asked, completely astonished.

Chen Rong gave no answer. She only gazed in the direction of the gate with a faraway look in her eyes, a touch of ease emerging across her face. "People of the Wang House are coming, right? I heard they are leaving tomorrow. Get ready so we don't slow others down."

She caught everybody by surprise.

Chapter 5: The Famed Qilang from the House of Wang

(This is Qilang, you're not allowed to disagree :P)

Everyone was still looking at each other until Chen Rong flapped her sleeve and turned to go back to her bedchamber. “Nurse Ping? Is Ah Rong serious?” someone finally asked at length.

Nurse Ping stared at the man and replied, “It doesn’t matter if she was serious or not. We can’t be wrong to be prepared.”

“Aye, aye.”

While the flock dispersed and began their busy work, a burst of rapid footsteps arrived. A sweaty guard was running toward Chen Rong’s bedchamber: “Miss, Qilang of the Wang House is here.”

Whoa –

Everyone halted and turned to look, staring at Chen Rong’s room in shock.

It was really Qilang of the Wang clan! Dear heavens, Qilang of the Wang clan (2) had personally come here!

2. He is commonly referred to as Wang Qilang because he is the 7th male offspring of the Wang clan. Similarly, his cousin is called Wang Wulang because he is 5th. They are terms of endearment much like nicknames.

The house of Wang was no ordinary clan. In the entire City of Ping, the house of Wang was among the most powerful. Moreover, the person who came this time was Wang Qilang.

Needless to say, families who resided in a place such as the City of Ping were only branches of major clans. For example, Chen Rong’s father only belonged to a Jiangnan subsidiary branch of the Chen clan; the same was true of the Wang clan.

But this Wang Qilang was known to all his kinsmen! His drove a chariot with grace, he was well-dressed, he came and went as he pleased, and he mingled with other major clans. There was easily a dozen people in his clan who were high-ranking court officials! Such a clan was as good as royalties. They stood in the clouds high above and let the world look up to them!

People said gentlemen from this class of clans all possessed bearings of immortals. They weren’t sure whether their remarks were appropriate or not,

but everyone in the City of Ping knew that Qilang of the Wang house who arrived three months prior was indeed a godly kind of person!

To the servants, Chen Rong was also a noblewoman, but her background compared to Wang Qilang's was like a cloud in the sky and mud on the ground, as distant as two ends of the Milky Way!

At the rap on the door, Chen Rong hastened out. Because she had divvied up her family wealth and broken the coral, she reckoned the Wang clan would hold her in high regard. If she could go with them, the journey would be much more peaceful. And if she could befriend them, she would have much to her advantage after arriving in the south. With this said, she didn't expect the result to be this good. She had drawn the famed Qilang of the Wang clan here!

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Presently, she was wearing a pair of wooden clogs and a spacious purple robe that highlighted her jadelike skin. On her exquisite face was a pair of sparkling eyes and an air of childlike innocence.

She did not ask which gate Wang Qilang was currently at. Just like that, she strode out of the courtyard. Sure enough, she had only left the gate when she heard a stream of melodious music ahead.

The sounds of zither floated like a mountain brook and drifting clouds, carrying in them indescribable freedom and ease.

Chen Rong followed the music to the square where a splendid horse carriage parked. The music was, sure enough, coming from the carriage.

Two dozens entranced people were gathered around the carriage, all gazing inside as they perked their ears to listen to the music.

Chen Rong did not do so. She walked briskly toward the carriage, her wooden clogs clomping on the ground from time to time with her steps. They were particularly abrupt and jarring while the notes were floating. The most annoying of all was that, whether intentional or not, each time the wooden clogs touched ground was right at the turning point of the music. She was really making the listeners stew in irritation.

Unconsciously, they all glared at Chen Rong, forgetting that she was their

mistress.

The music in the carriage halted, replaced by a delightful laughter: “My lady, have you suddenly come because the music isn’t beautiful?”

Chen Rong did not stop walking. She went straight to the carriage, softly laughed and replied: “The zither playing is very beautiful. But since I am preoccupied, I cannot listen to such carefree music.”

The delightful laughter inside the carriage grew louder.

“What are you worried about?” the same man asked her.

Chen Rong smiled. By now she had arrived at the horse carriage.

In the amazement of the crowd, she reached her hand out to lift the carriage curtain while very naturally replying: “I’ve long heard that Qilang of the Wang House is blessed with bearings of the gods. Unfortunately, I’ve not had a chance to meet you. I was very happy to hear that my lord has come today, but I became worried for fear that my lord would lose his interest and deny our meeting.”

After answering him, she drew the curtain.

Whoa –

A colorful rainbow blinded her eyes. At this moment, she couldn’t help but turn sideway to avoid it.

While she was turning away, the person in the carriage laughed and said, “My lady, you have come to see me. Now that you see me, why do you turn your gaze?”

Chen Rong rubbed her eyes and replied, “I am but a young girl. The godly looks that you possess make my heart tremble and prevent me from looking closely.”

The laughter in the carriage boomed louder. Like ice and jade clashing onto one another, it was very crisp and clear, and extremely pleasant to hear.

Chen Rong finally turned her head at this time and looked at the young man in the carriage.

He was an uncommonly handsome man of about seventeen or eighteen.

He was as beautiful as jade, his eyes as dark as paint. He was smiling at her. For some reason, Chen Rong's heart really did tremble when confronted with his smiling face.

It should be said she had just been wounded in love and had also just come back to life. She had thought her heart would never beat for a man again. She could now, however, feel her heart thumping against her chest. It could thus be inferred how handsome the man before her eyes must be.

There was no need to describe the young man's facial features. The most noteworthy was the mystery in his eyes – that which called to mind centuries of ice that sat on the mountains, the haze of a magnificently rising sun, the water in an ancient lake, and a willow swaying in springtime, all containing a striking sense of peace.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Unknowingly, Chen Rong found herself genuinely staring at him in a stupor.

The handsome lad regarded her and noticed that, despite staring at him in stupefaction, her dark eyes were very clear. He could not help but smile, revealing a row of snow-white teeth. "Have you seen enough?" he asked.

Chen Rong smiled while keeping her gaze on his flawlessly handsome face and replied, "I finally know today what people mean when they say 'godlike'."

He laughed.

Amid his laughter, Chen Rong retreated and, without hesitation, pull downed the carriage curtain, cutting off the line of sight between him and her.

Wang Qilang's pleasant laughter rang out again: "If you like me as you have confessed, why do you hasten to retreat?"

Chen Rong sighed in reply. "My lord's looks are too majestic. I still would like to get married and have children. After meeting you today, how can any other man come into my eyes from now?"

Wang Qilang was delighted. He laughed a while before the melodious zither sounded again.

Amid the music that wound its way like spring water, Wang Qilang gave a low

chuckle. “I’ve had no harvest since I arrived in the City of Ping several months ago. Until today, that is, when I heard that the lady of the Chen house had drained her family wealth, and I thus hurriedly came over. This has indeed been a worthwhile trip!”

At this, he softly ordered, “Let’s go.” The music ceased at these two words.

All the way until his carriage left the estate, he had not left his ride nor had he proposed to Chen Rong that her family would be traveling with the Wang clan.

An old servant looked after the departing carriage in puzzlement before asking Chen Rong in unease: “Ah Rong, what did the house of Wang mean by this?”

Chen Rong withdrew her gaze and smiled broadly. “What did they mean? They have agreed to let us join them on the road tomorrow!”

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You should know by now you had just read four chapters! This may change but I am trying out a new update format where I would update less frequently (2 weeks?) but instead have batch chapters for each update (3-5 chapters). I feel like this novel needs to be read in chunks for momentum sake since its pacing is more deliberate. You guys can let me know your preference after a few runs and I’ll see if things should be switched up.

6,7,8

Chapter 6: Departure

The Chen estate resumed their work. With about a dozen servants left behind, they began to load the horse-drawn carriages with what little clothes and rice they had left.

After Chen Rong had distributed her wealth, only ten carriages were needed to transport the rest of her assets. Three were used to hold rice and silk, one was filled with her clothes, and bamboo slips occupied the remaining six.

In the past, Chen Rong had used only one carriage to hold books – the books that hid gold leaves. The rest were used to carry other items. Because of this, she spent a decade after returning to the south being stigmatized for her vulgar ways. The scholars had criticized her for she would rather fill her carriages with clothes than to bring valuable books.

In an era where even the air was filled with ‘elegance and courtesy’, the stigma of a vulgar nature could completely bring down a noblewoman’s future. In the ten years since then, despite doing everything she could and using every means she knew, she had had no way to restore the reputation that’d been destroyed.

It had been too late.

The gate was tightly shut tonight at the Chen estate. With each change of night shifts, no unexpected guests came to visit through the whole of the night. It made sense, of course, since Chen Rong’s action of dispersing her wealth during the day had spread through town. What blind thieves would take the risk to rob what was now only a small fry?

The next day arrived in the blink of an eye.

Early in the morning, the Wang estate sent a servant to inform the Chens that they were to meet at the south city gate.

By now, the Chen house had finished loading their luggage. Chen Rong sat inside a horse-drawn carriage and marched toward the meeting place.

The streets were packed with carriages. In this hubbub, everyone was rushing to the south gate.

As Chen Rong's carriage was running on the street, people would turn to look at her from time to time. Faint judging sounds came to her ears: "That's Ah Rong of the Chen house."

"What a beauty."

"I heard she had distributed her family wealth to the servants yesterday. Look at her troop, the large Chen estate is now reduced to only a dozen carriages. Was the news true, then?"

"Of course it's true. Even the godly Wang Qilang made a personal visit."

"Only in times of crisis can we see people's true nature. I heard that despite her young age, Ah Rong of the Chen house still chose honor over money in this turbulent time. That is indeed a difficult thing to do. Difficult thing to do indeed."

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Amid the coming and going buzz, Chen Rong softly smiled and slowly withdrew her gaze.

She soon reached the south gate. Here, she saw the Wang clan's procession, whose flying flags stretched to the end of sight. It was an impressive spectacle, all right.

As Chen Rong's carriage approached, a man of about twenty rode near and raised his voice to ask: "Are you Ah Rong of the Chen house?"

The appellation 'Ah Rong of the Chen house' had spread like wildfire a day ago. Had this been any other time in the past, he'd surely only call her 'Miss Chen.'

Chen Rong drew the carriage curtain and replied, "It is I, Chen Rong."

The young man was dressed in a purple cloak, possessing fine facial features. He laughed and remarked, "I see it's true you're quite a beauty. Since the Chen estate has few people, you should join the middle of the queue. It will be safer this way."

Gratefulness showed on Chen Rong's small, beautiful face. She bowed to the man from her sitting position in the carriage, saying: "I thank you, Wulang."

Wang Wulang's bright eyes stared back at Chen Rong as he shook his head and observed, "According to Qilang, Ah Rong of the Chen house carries with her a graceful ease though she is a woman. I hadn't expected to meet such a ceremonious Ah Rong." While saying so, he repeatedly shook his head, seemingly disappointed.

Chen Rong gave a closed-lip smile as she thought to herself: *But you're not Wang Qilang either. If I lack etiquette in front of you, I would be shunned!*

Under Wang Wulang's guidance, the Chen carriages went toward the middle of the queue. The Wangs had so many carriages that one couldn't see where they ended even if one tried. Compared to them, the Chen estate seemed rather pathetic.

Along the way, Chen Rong learned from the Wangs' whispers that, this time, smaller families who wanted to join the Wang house were numerous in number. Many of them even offered items much more precious than Chen Rong's coral, but all were refused by the Wang house.

As soon as the Chen carriages joined the group, they launched full speed ahead, kicking dust with each galloping hoof that gradually obscured the crowd in sight.

Chen Rong turned to look at the city walls that were receding farther and farther behind her. In her memory, the nomadic riders would be attacking this city within a month. Then, they would plunder those who did not leave the city before torching this bustling miniature Jiangnan to ashes.

She had lived in the City of Ping for fifteen years since her previous life, but it was to become just a name in her memory now. Only at night in her dreams would she ever see the familiar courtyard and its occupants again.

Upon this reflection, Chen Rong gave a soft sigh.

Suddenly, Wang Wulang's chuckle gave rise: "Why does Ah Rong sigh?"

Chen Rong replied in a low voice: "My heart saddens to think I'll never see this place again."

Wang Wulang grew silent.

After four hours of traveling, Wang Wulang had exhausted the etiquettes required of him as the host. He bade goodbye and returned to the forefront of the team.

Chen Rong closed her eyes to rest. From afar, the Wang girls' laughter could be heard ahead. These young ladies were raised in the privacy of their chambers; how far beyond the door could they have left? Although they were fleeing at present, in their hearts, this journey still felt more exciting than anything they'd yet encountered.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

At noon, the crowd began to eat.

Chen Rong sat in her carriage looking to the Wangs' damask mats and satin cushions spread out on the grass. She quietly shook her head.

The fragrance of meat and wine wafted from the tables. She noted that in front of every young gentleman and lady were four tables, on which filled with food.

She knew these were people who would throw everything away if they didn't finish it.

She gave some thought and bade Old Shang, who was driving the carriage: "Old Shang, go forward."

"Aye."

As Chen Rong's carriage pulled up during the Wangs' mealtime, dozens of eyes turned her way. From the distance, Wang Wulang stood up, raised his glass toward Chen Rong and flashed a grin: "Is Ah Rong here? Come, come, come and eat with us."

Chen Rong shook her head, gave him a slight curtsy, and then told Old Shang to drive the carriage toward the Wang patriarch, Wang Zhuo.

She gave a quick glance, but not detecting Wang Qilang, quickly withdrew her gaze.

She stepped down from her carriage, faced Wang Zhuo, who was having his meal, and said in her crystalline voice: "Good greetings, Sir Wang."

Wang Zhuo was surprised to see her. A congenial smile emerged on his round face: “Ah Rong? Why are you here?”

“I have something I would like to say,” Chen Rong said, bowing again.

“Speak.”

“On this trip south, there are also a large number of migrating commoners in addition to gentry folks like us. In my humble opinion, even if these commoners had brought all of their wealth along, what they could take would only last for half a month at most, if not ten days.”

The Wang clan was presently partaking their meal. At her sudden appearance and eloquent talk, all the young ladies of Wang house instantly frowned: *It’s said that we do not talk during meals and sleep. This Ah Rong of the Chen house is already very rude for coming when others are eating. Now that she’s here, she has to speak of the dirty and crude commoners, how very inconsiderate. What was wrong with Qilang’s eyes that he praised this woman incessantly?*

Chen Rong recognized the dissatisfaction in the eyes of the Wangs, but she just smiled and continued. “They say honor and disgrace can only be discussed after our stomachs are fed. In Ah Rong’s humble opinion, after those commoners finish their food, they might turn desperate due to hunger and cold.”

Chen Rong’s eyes gave a glance at the line of food heaping high on the tables: “I’m sure you’re not afraid of one or two refugees, but what if there are hundreds and thousands of them? At a time like this, I think meals can afford to be simpler.”

When she finished, she again bowed to Wang Zhuo and bade Old Shang to turn the carriage around.

As soon as her carriage made the turn, Chen Rong heard a ripple of disdainful laughter behind them: “Ah Rong of the Chen house is such a worrywart. She is the one who is afraid of the commoners. How could she point fingers at us when it was she who dispersed her wealth?”

Chapter 7: Refugees (1)

After they had turned around, Old Shang muttered to her in displeasure: “That Wang missy was very rude. You were obviously well-intentioned.”

So saying, he turned to look at Ah Rong. The Chen Rong he saw was one with clear lucent eyes and no trace of chagrin.

After lunch, the company hit the road again.

By suppertime, the house of Wang still dined as sumptuously as before. It was as if they were not fleeing but taking an outing, rather.

The Wang girls’ excitement gradually dissipated with each passing day. Slowly, Chen Rong heard more and more grumbling.

This was also when Chen Rong found out Wang Qilang did not join them because he had gone to greet another scholar.

It was no longer hot, being early autumn. But as carriages and people moved along, dust would roll up and dirty the crew.

When this happened, the Wang family who had always paid attention to the upper-class’ propriety would bathe several times daily. For this reason, they could only cover twenty to thirty miles a day.

They continued this way for seven days when more and more refugees appeared on the road. These commoners were rushing south in droves. After using up all of their dry rations, they had automatically begun to follow the Wangs’ caravan, the reason being that there would be plenty of leftovers each time the Wangs finished their meals.

The house of Wang began to feel irritated when more and more people tailed them. These filthy refugees were covered in dirt and stench. As they followed behind, the wind would pick up their smell and send it drifting for miles, and it is unbearable. Nonetheless, they didn’t dare to do anything detrimental to their good names, such as driving the refugees away. All they could do was to reduce their bathing time and increase their speed.

None of this had anything to do with Chen Rong.

She was the only master to be served in the Chen house. At mealtimes, she also ate one simple dish. After she finished, she did not sleep in a large tent like

the Wangs did, but stayed in her horse carriage.

Recently, she mostly sat inside for an hour or so before changing to horseback riding or simply walking.

Because Chen Rong was proficient in martial arts and had good physique, she could follow the team for miles without pausing for a breather.

“Let’s stop to eat.” Amid the clopping hooves, a rider called out loudly while riding toward the back of the team.

Chen Rong gazed to the bright red sun in the west and then dismounted her horse.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

At this time, everyone was busy at work again, either securing tents or bringing out food.

Upon seeing Chen Rong approach, Nurse Ping lowered her voice as she carried food into the carriage: “Miss, it’s as you said.” At the same time, she cast a glance at the Wang house three hundred paces away.

The sun was now setting in the west, casting a golden light on the still-verdant poplar trees. At present, thick damask mats were spread under the poplar trees, on which stood tables, and behind these tables were family members of the Wang clan in rich, vibrant clothing and footwear. They were all handsome, and in the sunlight, appeared to be fairies from above.

However, these refined ladies and gentlemen were now frowning. Their faces displayed loathing mixed with frustration. They stared at the food in front of them, but none could bring himself to raise his chopsticks.

That was because there were, at least, hundreds of refugees about three or four hundred paces behind them. These refugees towed their wives and children along, all dressed in rags, their eyes glazed over as they looked to the Wang clan. Some children were staring in a trance at the food and wine on the tables, saliva drooling from their dirty mouths.

Receiving such stares, the Wangs were made to feel as uncomfortable as though they had swallowed a fly. A middle-aged man leaned toward Wang Zhuo

and whispered, “My lord, what do you think?”

Wang Zhuo shook his head, placed a piece of dog meat into his mouth and whispered back: “Ignore them.”

“Aye.”

This translation belongs to hamster428.

He had great tolerance, but the younger ones were not as good. A girl about fifteen or sixteen picked up her chopsticks, bitterly picked at the rice in her bowl and said in disgust: “Honestly father, how can you not get rid of these peasants?”

Next to her, a young lad replied: “It’s easy enough to get rid of them, but if the literati in the south found out we mistreated the commoners, it would inevitably lead to idle remarks.”

“Isn’t it strange?!” another lad began. “These peasants normally respect us as if we were gods, wishing to prostrate and kiss our toes, even. Why are they so audacious now?”

This question apparently stumped the youths who had been living inside a dream and who did not know what the word ‘hunger’ meant. While everyone was busy mulling over this, a girl yelled out: “Hey, this is as Ah Rong of the Chen house has said! Someone call her here. Let’s ask her what’s going on.”

The girl’s voice had just faded by the time another slightly sharp and equally anxious voice gave sound: “Certainly not. I’m sure Chen Rong was only making things up.”

This young lady had a pointy chin and a long, thin face. She was pale and pretty, the very one who had laughed at Chen Rong for being a worrywart that day. Seeing the way she looked, everyone knew she didn’t want to lose face. In the midst of their laughter, a round-faced girl spoke: “Are you afraid Chen Rong will gibe at you, Seventh Sister?”

The pretty girl with the pointy chin was about to refute but then decided to close her mouth.

Nevertheless, though these people laughed at her, in the end, they did not

mention Chen Rong again.

Inside the horse carriage, Chen Rong placed her chopsticks down after she had had enough to eat and told Nurse Ping: “Tell everyone to sleep in our carriages for the next few days. Don’t wander around unless it’s necessary.”

Nurse Ping looked at Chen Rong in puzzlement. At long last, she replied with an “Aye.” Her lady kept changing day by day ever since she had those nightmares. Before she even knew it, the nurse had developed a kind of trust in her.

Nurse Ping cleared away the dishes and stepped down from the carriage. The moment she stepped away, she heard her lady’s murmuring: “I had also once admired them, but they turned out to be mere dolls carved from wood and clay.” Great disappointment was detected in her voice.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

The night wore on.

Tonight, a bright moon hung in the sky, sprinkling silver beams across the ground. On such a moonlit night, even the deathly exhausted youngsters of the Wang house reveled in the poetic atmosphere.

Chen Rong slowly neared the Wang crowd who was, at present, praising the wind and admiring the moon.

Under the moonlight, there was something indescribably beautiful about her willowy figure and her clear watery eyes. Unconsciously, several Wang lads turned around to look at her.

Wang Wulang lead the reception by saying: “Ah Rong, we have a moonlit sky tonight. With an illumination that shines for miles, we are trying our hand at composing poetry. Won’t you come join us, as well?”

At Wang Wulang’s words, a girl began chortling. “Fifth brother, are you asking Chen Rong to wax poetic? You might as well ask for her life.”

As soon as she said these words, amusement arose all around.

Watching Chen Rong’s loveliness under the moonlight, a young lad could not help but remark: “Ah Rong is indeed a very beautiful lady. Surely, you are as accomplished in poetry as you are beautiful.”

The same girl laughed again. “Everyone in the City of Ping knows Ah Rong of the Chen house likes whips and horses; she does not like poetry and verses.”

Using whips and riding horses were interests of northern nomads. People from the Central Plains scorned northern nomads with a bone-deep contempt. The girl’s laughter had contained obvious derision.

Chen Rong turned to look at the girl. She instantly recognized her as the one who had laughed at her the other day for being a worrywart.

Chen Rong lightly smiled. She curtsied to the general crowd and gracefully replied, “I beg your pardon, but I’m afraid anything I might say would only offend the moon.” And then she took leave.

Her words were remarkably classy, and she had the crowd in a daze. It took a good long while before delight rang out. While listening to their laughter, Chen Rong’s mouth upturned and revealed a slight sneer. She had originally come for she had seen the refugees acting strangely, their eyes looking unkind. She had wanted to remind everyone else. Now, she did not want to tell them. The team had more than enough guards, in any case. Even if the refugees were to come on strong, they would not be able to damage the cavalcade’s overall might. She’d just let them teach certain people on her behalf, then.

Chapter 8: Refugees (2)

The moon gradually climbed atop the poplar crown and moved to the west. Eventually obscured by the clouds, its beams faded from the landscape.

The Wang youngsters’ laughing voices also disappeared into the distance and at length completely vanished.

Chen Rong lay in her carriage, not feeling sleepy. She tilted her head to look outside where it was pitch black. There was only a faint light issued from a single torch staked into the ground. In the dead of night when all were asleep, loneliness and mystery seemed to hover in the air with the swaying of that lone light.

Her eyes were wide-open in the dark.

It’s not for certain how long she had been listening by the time her mouth suddenly curved upward and revealed a little smile.

Her bright eyes were now staring at some approaching figures. These shadows made audible noises when they walked by. From time to time, someone also stumbled and fell. Faintly, there were also gasps, wheezes, and coughs that couldn’t be suppressed, as well as low barks.

They were not great sounds, but the contrast was rather blatant in the dead of night.

Chen Rong quietly watched them, her eyes following the clusters of shadows in both the front and back of the caravan. The front was where the principal members of the Wang household stayed; there were many riches to be had there. The back was where the Wang kept their food supply.

After these people snuck into the troop, Chen Rong could hear waves of low barks and sounds of things being carried away.

Fifteen minutes later, the shadows were retreating with bags of various sizes. Just as they were pulling back, another group of shadows entered the team.

A dwarf shadow hurtled forward and ran into something, the contact making a sound. This sound was low, but whatever got knocked into suddenly grumbled: “Who bumped into me?”

The sudden grumble startled everyone. The owner of this voice opened his eyes. He stared with eyes as large as brass bells at the tiny figure in front of him and finally yelled out in shock: “Who are you people? Wake up, everybody wake up!”

Despite being in a deep sleep, people immediately roused at this man’s howl. For the time being, clamors began to spread.

Abruptly, a powerful voice shouted: “Insolent vagrants!”

With this shout, torches began to light, and the entire team woke up.

The Wang patriarch, Wang Zhuo’s voice quickly rumbled: “Stop these refugees!”

He was referring to the shadows that were now scattering and fleeing away

after they had stolen from them.

At Wang Zhuo's command, the group was sent into a flurry. The guards rushed out of their tents without being properly dressed. Amid their chaotic shouts, a young girl also dashed out on bare feet, her hair untied, while angrily wailing: "My necklace is gone. My pearl necklace from the Southern Sea is gone!"

Another member of the Wang house shouted: "Seize them, seize them all! These peasants dared to attempt thievery. They dared to offend traveling nobles. Men, kill them. Don't let a single person escape. Not one single person."

This translation belongs to hamster428.

The guards who were chasing after the refugees were quite riled — who were they? How capable were they? Yet they had allowed these unarmed refugees to actually near them and even steal things under their noses! With this mentality, the previous shout had fueled their courage to vent their anger.

Thus, a shrill scream soon resonated in the night sky. It rang out in the distance and attracted echoes all the way from Shanming Valley.

These were the cries issued from dying people!

Everyone stopped what they were doing in shock.

At this point, the Wang patriarch, Wang Zhuo, yelled out hastily: "Stop the killing, stop the killing…"

His panicking call broke the stupor and also brought everyone back to his senses.

After the red-eyed refugees heard these words, bloody fervor receded from their heads. They gave repeated shouts and quickly pulled back.

Wang Zhuo's voice rang again: "Sirs, please leave what you have taken! Otherwise, don't blame me for being ruthless!"

By the time his voice resounded, hundreds of guards on horsebacks had surrounded the refugees.

Seeing that they could not escape anymore, a brutish voice came forth among the refugees: "Brothers, don't listen to this fogy. We are going to starve to death if we don't take these things. If we're going to die sooner or later, we might as

well go big before we die!”

Another voice, slightly sickly, next said: “Sir Wang, one of your meals can feed hundreds of us for three days! Please be gracious and give us some food.”

These refugees were all honest people who knew their places. If they hadn’t been forced into a corner, they would never dare to rob the nobles. On the heels of the sickly voice, dozens of people cried out in chaos: “Sir Wang, let us have some food.”

“Give us some food and we’ll go away.”

“Aye, aye, give us food. All you have to do is eat a little less, and you’ll have saved countless lives.”

“If you won’t give us food, then my life isn’t needed!”

“We’ll return these things as long as you give us food!”

The clamor grew louder and louder, and louder still.

A young lad hurried to Wang Zhuo and exclaimed, “Father, you must not. We must never be threatened by these peasants!”

“Uncle, I think we should give them food,” said another youth standing beside them.

Wang Zhuo frowned, raised his right hand to stop the few youngsters from their yapping. He gloomily shouted: “Give them food! Wang You.”

“Present.”

“Order the team to leave immediately.”

“Aye.”

“Wang Ya.”

“Present.”

“Lead the guards and herd these refugees to the side of the road. Tell them food will immediately be distributed to them. Ask them to give back all that they took.” He composed himself and called out solemnly: “If there are still those who want to lead a riot, don’t hesitate to kill off a few!”

“Aye.”

“Give them food after we leave. Untie five sacks of corn, then drive the carriage away and just leave the corn on the ground.”

The moment Wang Zhuo finished what he had to say, several Wang youngsters lit up with pleasure. “It should be this way,” a young lad blurted. “How dare they threaten us. We shall let them sprawl on the ground to eat grains mixed with dirt!”

There was no need to speak of the trained guards’ stalwartness. Twenty starving refugees could not fight one of them. And so the situation was soon brought under control. In a short time, all that were taken had been recovered. These unarmed people couldn’t run a few short steps even if they wanted to. After several of their leaders were slain, they stood transfixed on the sides of the road and watched the Wang cavalcade drive away. They remained so until they walked to the stream of corn outflowing from the last carriage, their woodenly and helpless eyes abruptly lighting up.

Chen Rong lazily leaned against the carriage wall as she listened to the refugees’ cheers.

By the time a brilliant red glow hung in the eastern sky, the team had finally left the refugees behind, dashing through the vast wilderness.

At this time, a burst of hooves arrived outside her carriage, followed by a respectful inquiry: “Is your lady still awake? Sir Wang would like to see her.”

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9,10,11,12,13

Chapter 9: Drought (1)

Before Old Shang could answer the man, Chen Rong sat up and said with an alert voice: “I’m still awake.”

“Excellent, excellent,” the other voice said heartily.

Chen Rong’s carriage began moving and soon arrived at the forefront of the cavalcade. At this time, Chen Rong, having tidied her robe and hair, proceeded to lift the curtain.

Carriages of the Wang house lined the road. When they saw Chen Rong’s approaching carriage, all simultaneously looked in her direction.

Chen Rong met their gazes with her lucent one.

Wherever her eyes went, a good number of people turned sideways to avoid her gaze. The girl who mocked her was nowhere to be seen.

Chen Rong’s carriage drove up beside Wang Zhuo’s.

His laughter rang out from the side even before she got near. “Is that Ah Rong? Come closer, have a talk with your uncle.”

He sounded very kind.

“Aye,” Chen Rong replied with a bow.

Wang Zhuo had long lifted his curtain. He was sitting in his carriage to regard Chen Rong with a pair of penetrating eyes, sighing when Chen Rong looked in his direction. “Ah Rong, how I regret I didn’t heed your warning that day.”

His face scrunched up at the memory.

He truly regretted it. Last night’s incident would forever be a taint on their clan’s good name! Be it the fact that they had slain refugees or that they had conceded to leave food in exchange for stolen goods, either incident would make them face the clan’s reprehension. His political future hereafter would be bleak – if he couldn’t even handle a small group of refugees properly, how could he be

counted upon to govern the people on behalf of the state?

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Looking at Chen Rong, he ceremoniously said, “I’ve invited you over for I want to personally make an apology. Ah Rong, I pride myself in being wise, but I am far inferior to you who are a woman.”

He was sincere in saying this.

Nevertheless, Chen Rong knew that if Wang Zhuo did not want to carry a foolish, conceited, and unrepentant reputation, whether he was willing to or not, he hadn’t any choice but to apologize to her.

At the moment Wang Zhuo bowed to her, Chen Rong quickly leaned sideways to avoid his gesture. She bowed her head and respectfully said, “Sir, why do you say this? Leading a clan to migrate south is a major undertaking. Even the sages would overlook a thing or two!”

Though her consolation was not very moving, it was nonetheless pleasant to hear. Wang Zhuo’s face immediately grew even more affable. He sighed twice and said to Chen Rong: “Ah Rong, whatever may come our way henceforth, you only need to tell me frankly. Do let me know any concerns you have.”

“Aye, sir.”

He sighed again.

Chen Rong glanced at a sullen Wang Zhuo, bowed and said, “I’ll take my leave of you, then.”

“Go ahead.”

After such calamity, the Wang house finally understood simplicity. For lunch that day, each member of the family was only presented with four to five dishes.

Chen Rong had also been officially invited to the group, sharing meals and journeying with them.

The team had presently traveled for twenty days and had gone five hundred miles from the City of Ping. Their journey was half-way through.

Today, a small voice sounded outside: “Fifth brother, the fields on both sides

are dry.”

Wang Wulang had not answered by the time he heard a swoosh. The curtain was lifted, giving way for Chen Rong to poke her head out.

The Wang youngsters all turned to look at her. Although they had only spent a few days together, they’d found that Chen Rong, despite her young age, could be very calm in the face of crises. This was the first time they saw her so flustered.

Chen Rong ignored their curious eyes and only frowningly stared at the fields on both sides of the road. After a long pause, she told her retainer: “Old Shang, bring me to see Sir Wang.”

“Aye.”

This translation belongs to hamster428.

The carriage drove on.

Under the youngsters’ eyes, Chen Rong’s carriage soon pulled up next to Wang Zhuo’s carriage.

From inside, Chen Rong bowed toward Wang Zhuo and said to him, “Sir Wang, look at these dry fields. Perhaps there is a drought here.”

She had barely finished speaking when three ripples of laughter rang out behind her. A faint, small voice spoke: “My father was just being somewhat polite to her last time, now she thinks she’s actually special.”

The voice had belonged to the 7th daughter of the Wang house – Han’yun – the one who had mocked her.

Since that day, Chen Rong had always been respectful whenever she saw Wang Zhuo. She had not suggested anything again until now.

Wang Zhuo frowningly raised his head, looking to the fields on both sides of the road. There was no water in these fields, but he vaguely remembered that on the way here, the fields in need of harvesting were also dry.

At this thought, Wang Zhuo nodded to Chen Rong. “Thank you for reminding me, Ah Rong.” There was a slight impatience in his expression.

Seeing this, Chen Rong faintly smiled and again bowed to Wang Zhuo, then pulled away.

As soon as her carriage left Wang Zhuo's, Han'yun, the 7th daughter of the Wang house, stared and called after Chen Rong: "Ah Rong of the Chen house, don't tell me you want to show off again with one of your silly ideas?"

Chen Rong smiled. She didn't need to look back to know that Wang Zhuo was still observing her. "If you don't believe me," she raised her voice slightly and replied in seriousness, "why don't you ask the nearby villagers? Or ask the refugees ahead, and then we will know whether my words are true or not."

Wang Han'yun snorted. She turned a disdainful eye and scoffed, "I can't bother to ask those peasants."

When she was done rolling her eyes and saw that Chen Rong's carriage was driving to the back, she yelled out: "Hey, *you're* not going to ask them, are you?" She paused to snigger. "Ah Rong, listen to me, you are only a woman. Why try to mind everything? Don't tell me you want to be recognized for your wisdom and become a court official?" She burst out laughing as soon as she finished her words.

Chen Rong paid her no attention.

She just drove her carriage on and came back to the middle of the queue. After she returned to the Chen group, Chen Rong very soberly announced, "From now on, if you see water, be sure to remember to stop. We can't leave until all the barrels are filled up with water. Additionally, no one is allowed to wash any longer. Unless you are extremely thirsty, do not use the water in the barrels!"

The moment these words were conveyed, the crowd looked at one another in confusion. At length, they replied with an "Aye."

Chen Rong went back inside the carriage. She stared at the gloomy sky ahead for a while, poked her head out and added, "Nurse Ping, tell people to wet all the fabric we have and load them back onto the carriage."

This time, people were more surprised. They hesitated for a long while before they acquiesced at Chen Rong's cough. Looking at the drawn-down curtain, Nurse Ping turned to Old Shang and whispered, "What's going on with our lady?

Why is she making such a fuss?”

Old Shang shook his head. He looked to the people standing around and softly said, “The lady is acting very strange this time. All of you, just quietly do as she says and remember not to tell anyone.”

“Aye, aye. Exactly so.”

Chapter 10: Drought (2)

The servants had worked together, but all they could bring were three barrels and several small tubs. Of the three barrels, one had been used for Chen Rong to bathe, the other two had been for the servants.

After traveling for more than ten miles, a body of water appeared in front of them. The Chen servants filled up the three big barrels and several small wooden tubs, and then thoroughly soaked the fabric.

Wang Zhuo frowned as he watched the Chen people running to and from the lake behind him. He contemplated a little and then shouted left and right: “Go and fill a few drums of water, too.”

He took everyone by surprise. A Wang lad exclaimed: “Uncle, why believe a woman’s nonsense?”

Wang Zhuo abruptly barked: “What are the empty carriages for? Why are you so full of opinions? Fill them up!”

Through twenty days, both the Wang and Chen houses had eaten a large amount of food. Now there were several empty carriages, perfect to hold this water.

Nobody dared to say a thing at Wang Zhuo’s shout. They couldn’t but follow behind the Chen house to fill up water. But merely wanting to do a perfunctory job, they only loaded a total of twenty barrels.

As the cavalcade moved forward, three more large lakes appeared in the next ten miles. Looking at those clear rippling waves, the Wangs repeatedly shook their heads. Wang Zhuo glowered again and regretfully thought: *She is merely an ignorant girl who pretends to be learned. Why did I listen to her and believe her*

words? Alas, I've made myself a laughingstock!

In the evening, the team settled down next to a water source. Under the ridiculing eyes of the Wang youngsters, Chen Rong quietly told her people to refill the barrels that had spilled during the bumpy travel. Then under Nurse Ping's care, she chose a clean location at the water source and took a bath.

Not only did she wash, but she also forced her group to wash thoroughly.

Fortunately, those who had followed her here were all loyal retainers in the Chen family. Despite feeling that their lady was making a fuss over nothing, they nonetheless carried out her orders without a word.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Early next morning, Chen Rong bade everyone to soak the fabric in water again before she began to wash and leave.

Today, the horizon was glaring red the moment the sun rose from the east.

Nurse Ping looked to the sky and called into the carriage: "Miss, it's going to be a blazing day."

From the carriage came Chen Rong's soft hum.

Since yesterday afternoon, Chen Rong had returned to the middle of the queue not wanting to see the looks the Wangs were giving her.

The team continued to drive forward.

By this time, the Wang children were no longer in a playing mood. Under their urging, the group moved at a brisk pace. They covered almost forty miles in only one morning.

By noontime, however, the weather got increasingly stifling.

Everything on the ground was heated by the scorching sun above. As the cavalcade moved along, scattered dust was sent straight to the sky. It appeared this place had not received any rain for some time.

The troop suddenly slowed down in front.

Poking her head out, Nurse Ping was surprised to find smoke whipping high ahead. They turned out to be uniformed men on horsebacks belonging to the

Wang house.

Strange, their trip had been peaceful all along. Why had the house of Wang sent explorers to scout the roads?

These men rushed to the Wang patriarch. She did not know what they said. All of a sudden, the Wang children's griping murmurs flowed into their ears.

"What happened?" Nurse Ping asked in curiosity.

Next to her, Old Shang lowered his voice in reply: "They said there is no water within thirty miles ahead of us. The wells have dried up along the way, and the villagers said it had been a full month without rain here. The water they normally use is from the east side of the mountain, but that Qishan mountain range is twenty miles from here. Going there and back will take at least one day."

At this point, Old Shang looked into the carriage where Chen Rong sat. Shock was evident in his eyes, as it was in Nurse Ping's. She looked to the fluttering curtain in astonishment while uttering: "Our lady seems to have known about this."

This translation belongs to hamster428.

The cavalcade came to a stop at this time.

Nurse Ping noticed that the Wang servants were taking a few barrels of water from the carriage and began to feed the horses.

With the clear water in plain sight, a girl suddenly demanded: "Uncle, why give water to these animals? It's such a sweltering day, and I still hadn't taken a bath."

Another Wang lad also cried out: "Father, let us take a bath and then give what's left to these animals."

The rest quieted down for Wang Zhuo's reply that shortly came: "Silence. Before we can find a well, we shan't waste a single bucket of water."

"Uncle, we'll only wash lightly. As long as we don't make a splash, it would be all right."

"Aye, aye, it's so wasteful to let these animals drink such clean water."

Wang Zhuo briefly paused before his commanding voice rose again: “I’m only giving eight barrels of water to the horses. With so many of you, to whom should the eight barrels be given? Stop making a ruckus. No one is allowed to use the available water to bathe.”

“We will speed up after the horses have their water,” he began to placate them at this point. “We shall have to find sufficient water as soon as possible. By then, there would be plenty for you to bathe and play.”

This time, the Wang children stopped their clamor, but the low mutters and complaints remained.

Nurse Ping had just recovered her attention by the time Chen Rong’s voice came to her from the carriage: “Nurse, let our horses chew on the wet fabric.”

“Aye, miss.”

After all the horses had been fed, the team started up again. This time, they quieted down and began to go at full speed.

Both houses of Wang and Chen had thoroughly planned for the journey south. It could be said that this team was primarily composed of carriages. In addition to four pulling horses, there were two backup horses for every carriage.

Under the present situation, the thirty-mile road took an hour to travel.

The sun in the sky nonetheless remained scorching. Fields on both sides of the road were still covered in dry cracks. Dust filled the air as they drove along, not a drop of water was found in the wells. Thick clumps of weed told them that this place had been arid for a long time.

This time, the Wang children had a vague feeling that things weren’t so good. Their grumbling soon turned into worried questions and curses.

The cavalcade continued to rush forward.

Another hour passed by.

The sun was descending to the west, and the air current was not so stifling anymore.

Nonetheless, the team was shrouded under a dreadful unease. The more south they went, the more they discovered in dismay that the conditions of the fields

were getting worse and worse.

Everyone now felt his throat to be parched. Even the dashing horses began to feel anemic.

And yet in front of them was still an empty vastness. It was only early autumn, but everything in sight was barren and dry!

Panic and anxiety seized the group. Only horses of the Chen house were still full of energy for having chewed on soaked fabric.

Amid restless eyes, Wang Zhuo gave an order: “Wang You, give the horses enough to drink and go scout the area. Report back once you see water!”

“Aye.”

After a pause, Wang Zhuo’s tired voice spoke again: “Call Ah Rong of the Chen house over.”

“Aye.”

The order had scarcely been accepted before a Wang child hastily said, “Father, don’t. You must not do that.” He lowered his voice and nervously added under the questioning eyes of Wang Zhuo: “Father, you are the patriarch of the Wang house. But in just a short distance you have twice asked for advice from a concubine-born daughter of the Chen house. Isn’t this the same as handing your reputation to Chen Rong?”

Chapter 11: Drought (3)

Wang Zhuo sullenly pondered for a moment, waved and motioned everyone to leave.

The cavalcade stopped to feed the horses some water again before continuing on.

To save water, the Wang house stopped cooking and only gave out some dry food for dinner; a small amount of water accompanied this food. Because there were so many people, only a kettle of water was sent to each group of ten. Against the setting sun, Wang Zhuo stood in front of the carriages and sternly said, “The remaining water had been sent to you. Before we can find water, it’s best to be prudent.”

The team was abuzz.

In the midst of the clamoring crowd, the 7th young lady's voice was the most resounding. "Father, how can you give us the same amount of water as everyone else? These lowly people also have a share?"

Silence took over the moment she spat these words out.

All the guards and servants kept their heads down. Everyone seemed to be holding his breath, the air thick with tension.

Wang Zhuo glanced at the burly guards and snapped at his daughter: "Hold your tongue! We are in this together; thus, we must share our suffering. Don't let me hear such words again!"

These words rewarded Wang Zhuo the servants' grateful eyes as he had wished.

When had the 7th lady of the Wang house been reprimanded like this by her father? She pulled a long face, her eyes welling up with tears. Her complaining siblings muttered nonstop next to her.

At this time, a faint moon hung in the vast sky. If one did not look closely, he might not find it.

The team sallied forth. As the last rays of light faded, torches were lit up for illumination. In the autumn wind, these torches' fluttering sounds gave the team a needed vitality as they moved along in the night.

Their pace was brisk due to restlessness.

Chen Rong sat inside her carriage. Her team did not have many people, and because they had received her orders, they were never wasteful, only consuming a small amount when they were extremely thirsty. After one day, the large barrel was still full of water.

For this reason, The Chen House appeared to be much calmer compared to the anxiety outside.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Time trickled on. Before they knew it, the team had gone through most of the

night. By the time the moon was already high in the sky, they still found in dismay that they had not seen even half a drop of water.

The scouts sent by the Wang House had not come back. In desperation, Wang Zhuo sent more people to ask nearby commoners where water lay. The answer they received was that the nearest source of water lay forty miles of mountainous road away, rugged and difficult to travel. Even the locals who were familiar with the area would need an overnight trip to bring the water back. For this reason, many villagers had also migrated to the south after they were unsuccessful in praying for rain.

The team did not stop for rest in the evening. When dawn came, the thirsty and tired horses trotted to the roadside for a few licks of dew drops. Of course, the Wangs could not behave like animals and run out to drink morning dew.

By the time the sun rose high, the Wangs had stopped to rest and contemplate their situation. Until now, the scouts they sent still had not returned.

By noon, the Wangs used up the last of their water, now made to face the never-ending thirst.

Their eyes finally turned in the direction of the Chen troop who was still full of energy due to having sufficient water supply.

Crisp hooves made their way to Chen Rong's ears.

Nurse Ping leaned into the carriage and whispered: "Miss, the House of Wang is here."

The hummed reply inside remained calm and cool.

Considering the situation, her tone gave Nurse Ping much peace.

Soon, Wang Wulang's apologetic voice arrived from outside the carriage: "Ah Rong, pardon my presumptuous visit. Please do not take offense."

The curtain lifted.

The Wangs lit up when they saw Chen Rong, revealing a mix of jealousy and envy. Chen Rong's face at this time remained clean, her hair was still dark and glossy, and she did not look tired in the slightest. Compared to her, where had their former elegant and refined looks gone?

Chen Rong faced their eyes with a smile. Before anyone had a chance to speak, she unhurriedly said, “If you do not mind, then this barrel is yours to take. It was previously used as my bath tub and is relatively clean. The remaining two barrels were used for my servants to wash, and I fear they will foul your noble persons.”

She was sincere. She knew that this drought was not widespread. Within a few days, they would be able to get out of this predicament. What she needed now was the Wang family’s goodwill and the good reputation that could be spread by the literati.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

The Wangs never imagined she would be so pleasant. Up to this point, the 7th lady of the Wang house had thought of at least ten things to accuse or insult her, but not one of them could be used now!

After Chen Rong had stunned everyone, Wang Wulang cleared his throat and led the group in thanking her, then tilted his head to signal his people.

Three servants promptly came forward. They carried Chen Rong’s tub and returned to the front.

When the water was brought before Wang Zhuo, his daughter pursed her lips and said bitterly: “Father, there’s only half of the barrel left! Hmph, I’m sure Chen Rong kept using it to wash. That’s how she wasted so much of it!”

The moment her words escaped, Wang Zhuo glared at her and snapped: “What kind of nonsense are you spouting? She had given you water. Not only are you unappreciative, but you’re also resenting her with no sense of restraint. How did our family give birth to a daughter like you?”

His scolding was very harsh.

In reality, he had to reprimand her. The 7th lady’s voice was not low. Those standing around must have heard her.

The 7th lady of the Wang house never imagined she would be scolded like this by her father. Moreover, she had never heard this kind of disgust in her father’s voice before. Tears welled in her eyes. Sniffling her nose, the 7th lady pulled down her curtain and crawled into a corner. Shortly after, sobbing filled the

carriage.

“Yun’er is still young. She doesn’t mean what she says,” a middle-aged man advised.

Wang Zhuo growled: “She and Ah Rong of the Chen house are the same age. Why is she still young while Ah Rong already knows how to conduct herself appropriately?”

He next sighed and closed his eyes. “Invite Ah Rong to come over.”

Chen Rong did not delay when the Wang house asked her over. She immediately left for the forefront.

In the distance, she bowed to Wang Zhuo from her sitting position in the carriage and respectfully said, “Good greetings, Sir Wang.”

Her expression and tone of voice were exceptionally respectful, even more than they had been two days ago.

Wang Zhuo’s frown unconsciously relaxed. He waved at her kindly and called out: “Ah Rong, come closer.”

“Aye.”

“Ah Rong, let uncle ask you, how did you know there would be a drought? Why did you so decisively tell people to fill water and wet the fabric? Did you receive divination from the gods? Is that how you knew there would be such a turn of event?”

When he mentioned the ‘gods’, Wang Zhuo increased his tone of voice and watched Chen Rong’s eyes, unconsciously giving himself a ray of hope.

Chen Rong understood what he was hoping for. She quickly bowed in saying: “It’s as you said.”

At these words, Wang Zhuo lit up while the neighboring whispers came to a silence.

Chen Rong said compliantly: “When we arrived in this county, I had dreamed of an elderly white-haired man who faced the cracking fields and sighed. Two days later, I heard brothers of the Wang house say that there was too little water in the fields. That was when I remembered my dream and came to let you know.”

“So it really was a divine warning,” Wang Zhuo sighingly said while nodding his head. “I have only myself to blame for I did not believe in the supernatural.” This was an era in which Confucianism was rebuffed, Daoism and Buddhism ran rampant, and Mohist atheism still persisted. Wang Zhuo had covered up his mistake with a simple ‘I did not believe in the supernatural’. In a few nice words, he had easily erased his blunder.

At this moment, not only Wang Zhuo but even the Wang youngsters were regarding Chen Rong with hospitable eyes. Not only did she unhesitatingly acknowledge to have received a divine warning, but she also mentioned that the Wangs had long known about the drought. Consequently, even if people talked, they would only hold them responsible for being careless.

Wang Zhuo stroked his beard. After he had received the answer he wanted, he waved to dismiss Chen Rong.

Her horse carriage had barely pulled away when he suddenly thought of something else and hurried to ask: “Ah Rong, did the elderly man in your dream say how many more days this drought will last?” After showing concern for the overall fate of the populace, he asked what he really wanted to know: “How many more days do we have to go until we can get out of this dilemma?”

Chen Rong indicated for the carriage to turn around. She bowed and shook her head, humbly replying: “I also do not know this.” Seeing Wang Zhuo’s disappointment, she added uncertainly: “Perhaps not very long?”

“I certainly hope so. Go.”

“Aye.”

Wang Zhuo watched Ah Rong’s gradually disappearing carriage, stroked his long beard, and suddenly said, “That Chen Rong is a fine lass. I dare say she’s suitable for my son!”

Chapter 12: Escape

A middle-aged man frowned in reply. “But she is, after all, a concubine-born daughter of a subsidiary branch; her father is also concubine-born.”

Wang Zhuo shook his head. He did not speak, but he was quietly thinking to himself that: *Though Chen Rong is lowly born, she will inevitably become known to the nobles in the wake of these two incidents. Furthermore, if she married into the Wang house, what happened would not be her feat to boast. The honor would belong to the exceptionally clever daughter-in-law of the Wang house. Then, our reputation would no longer be undermined, no?*

Wang Zhuo began to feel a little anxious and could not help but carefully consider the matter.

“But if you make her a concubine, I’m afraid she won’t agree,” the middle-aged man offered after some thought.

Wang Zhuo nodded while thinking again to himself: *Pity that her father is not here. This marriage will have to wait until we arrive in the south to be decided.*

In the evening, the scouts sent by the House of Wang returned and reported that from what passers-by had told them, they would be able to find water if they went a hundred miles more.

This news lifted the Wang family’s spirit and the team hurried on.

Even so, both men and horses were parched. They had only gone fifty miles though they had traveled through the night.

The early morning dew was no longer for only horses. People also began to slurp up what they could. Of course, the Wangs had Chen Rong’s half-full barrel and were not reduced to lying on the grass to lick morning dew. Doing so were only the servants and guards.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

By the time the moon emerged on the third day, they finally came across a patch of green, and when they listened, they could hear the sound of rushing water.

The cavalcade abruptly burst into cheers. Ecstatic, they drove the carriages ahead without waiting to be told.

The cheers did not cease this evening. Many were reluctant to leave their soaking spots in the river all the way until dawn.

The sun once again climbed high.

As they marched on the green road and listened to the chirping of birds coming from the trees from time to time, each of them reveled in the miracle of being alive again.

By now, the Wang youngsters had also matured; they did not complain about the birds in the sky and instead laughed in delight.

“Ah Rong, come over here.” Wang Wulang waved to her from afar; a light glinted in his elongated eyes.

Since she met with Sir Wang yesterday, Chen Rong found that Wang Wulang’s attitude toward her had begun to contain more apparent enthusiasm. The gaze he directed at her would always be accompanied by a strange gleam she did not quite understand.

Chen Rong nodded in Wang Wulang’s direction, indicating for her carriage to head that way.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Because Confucianism was fiercely rebuffed in this time period, what previously confined women had considerably eased. In certain states that were established by northern tribes, even women could enjoy political status. In the state of Jin, it was not uncommon to see widows remarrying. It was common for women to express their admiration and gladness to men. As occurred in history, each time the heartthrob Pan An went out, droves of women would encircle him and throw fruits into his carriage. Pan An would always come home with his basket full. Wei Jie, another heartthrob, even suffered a claustrophobic death from these women’s attack. He contributed to history the idiom “Wei Jie was watched to death” (看杀卫玠).

Wang Wulang’s inviting Chen Rong to accompany him was thus as ordinary as it could be.

Chen Rong had barely drawn near when she heard the irritable voice of the 7th lady: “Fifth brother, that Chen Rong is only a concubine-born daughter, how is she worthy of you? Your treating her like this is making the family lose our face!”

Chen Rong wrinkled her brow upon hearing these words. She lightly sneered and said to Old Shang: “Old Shang, slow down.”

“Aye.”

When her carriage stopped, the griping voice ahead was still ringing out: “I don’t know what father is thinking. If you ask me, Chen Rong is only fit to be your concubine. Marry her as a wife? Hmph, she is not worthy!”

At those last few words, Chen Rong’s black, bottomless eyes flashed a cold chill.

But she instantly concealed her emotions and lightly commanded her retainer: “There’s no need to go anymore. Let’s turn around.”

As a servant, Old Shang understood the 7th lady’s words even better than Chen Rong. He nodded right away and drove the carriage off.

Wang Wulang was lowering his voice to answer. When he raised his head and saw Chen Rong’s carriage turning around, he hastened to call: “Ah Rong, Ah Rong, why are you turning back?”

Chen Rong did not answer him.

Wang Wulang frowned. As he was about to chase after her, another youngster protested: “Fifth brother, don’t chase her. You can’t indulge her like this.”

Wang Wulang gave some thought and then slowly raised his hand, motioning the carriage to stop.

Chen Rong had just returned to the middle of the cavalcade when she heard a burst of noisy commotion ahead.

She lifted her curtain and looked outside.

Before she could see what was happening, Old Shang, who was squinting to look ahead, gave a cry: “Miss, it’s Wang Qilang’s troop! I can’t believe we get to meet him here!”

Immense joy was heard in Old Shang's voice.

Wang Qilang?

She unconsciously recalled his handsome figure in her mind. She drew her curtain and tilted her head to look.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

A very large troop came into sight. It was not any smaller than the group she had joined. From the waving flags, she could tell that in addition to Qilang of the Wang house – Wang Hong – the team also included people from the Yu house.

No wonder Old Shang was so happy. Now that both teams had met up, they would be much safer!

"Old Shang, let's go up to them," Chen Rong said, staring at the dusty smoke rising ahead.

"Aye, miss."

No one noticed Chen Rong's arrival. All Wang youngsters were rushing out. In an instant, there was a group of fifty to sixty persons between the two teams. And everyone in this group was handsomely dressed to match their fine-looking faces.

In addition to about two dozen members of the Wang house, Chen Rong had never met the rest before. She reckoned they must be members of the Yu house.

These people formed a circle as they talked and laughed, trapping the two men within. At a glance, Chen Rong could see the 7th son of the Wang house, Wang Hong, standing out like a heavenly existence in the crowd.

Next to Wang Hong was another man with extraordinary bearing, but at this distance her line of sight was blocked, and Chen Rong could not make his face out.

As Chen Rong was watching them, a sigh came floating next to her: "I heard that whenever members of the Wang house of Lang'ya (1) gather, people would sigh '*like gems and pearls'*. Now as I watch these youngsters, somehow I feel ashamed and foul."

1. Qilang belongs to the larger Wang clan, but his branch hails from Lang'ya, hence he is also sometimes known as Lang'ya Wang Qi. I assume this is one of the more influential, if not the primary branch of the Wang clan.

The speaker was the middle-aged scholar who was often seen accompanying Wang Zhuo. Although he was of gentry background, his family name was on the lower rung of high society. After he had finished speaking, he turned to look at Chen Rong, who was sitting inside her carriage and lamented: "I fear only you can understand my lamentation."

Even though Chen was an exceptionally distinguished house, Chen Rong's father was a concubine-born son of a subsidiary branch. She, too, was concubine-born. They could be said to be of a lower class among the nobility. This was the reason why the middle-aged scholar had lamented thus.

Chen Rong made no answer, but when she gazed to the Yu and Wang youngsters, her eyes were remarkably clear and bright, betraying neither shame nor foulness. After the scholar carefully regarded her for a while, he suddenly offered: "Miss, your looks and knowledge are both superior compared to ordinary people. No wonder you don't share my feelings." He briefly paused and then could not help himself from adding: "Unfortunately, your background is still too humble."

Chapter 13: The Sensational Sonata

Chen Rong remained unspeaking. She knew her background was indeed too humble.

But what does that matter? I have started over again! Chen Rong clenched her hands and said to Old Shang: “Old Shang, go up a bit.”

Going forth was to squeeze in between these boys and girls.

As Chen Rong’s carriage approached, several youths turned to look in her direction. Their gazes forthwith turned agog as they stood silly in place.

Chen Rong’s looks were originally exquisite. After she was reborn, a maturity also existed in her youthful beauty. This maturity belonging to a woman combined with the innocence of a young girl made her particularly stand out among the group of adolescents.

A young man from the house of Yu gawked at her with bright eyes. “Whose house does this young lady belong to?”

Without waiting for Chen Rong to speak, Wang Wulang smiled and answered, “She belongs to the Chen house in the City of Ping. Her given name is Rong.”

The Chen House in the City of Ping? The moment this name was announced, every lad in the Yu house lit up. The Chen House in the City of Ping was only a small branch of the Chen clan – their daughters were not considered very high in status. Since she did not have a high status, the beautiful damsel in front of them was not difficult to obtain, whether as a wife or a concubine.

Under the appraising gazes of the Yu youngsters, Chen Rong’s mien remained as placid as water.

She stepped down from the carriage and took two steps forward. She next raised her head and, with eyes as black and bottomless as the midnight sky, she looked to Qilang of the Wang house, Wang Hong, who was currently being encircled by a group of girls.

Wang Hong was also looking in her direction.

Standing face to face, the handsome man who rarely smiled suddenly beamed. Against the sunlight, his snow-white teeth blurred one's vision. Unconsciously, Chen Rong tilted her head to the side and looked away as she did the first time they met.

Suddenly seeing his smile, the congregation of girls swarming Wang Hong first went into a trance before erupting in delight.

The man next to Wang Hong was Yu Zhi. He appeared to be at most twenty years old, possessing a rectangular face and sword-like brows – a handsome young man in all respects. When he heard the squeals, he could not but turn around and follow Wang Hong's gaze.

Facing the beautiful Chen Rong, Yu Zhi chuckled and said to Wang Hong: "So this is the kind of beauty you like."

"She is Ah Rong of the Chen House I had told you about."

Yu Zhi's eyes lit up with interest. He again looked toward Chen Rong with appraising eyes before withdrawing his gaze.

Chen Rong had scarcely arrived but had already attracted the two handsome men's attention, making the other ladies feel incredibly frustrated. They threw a look in Chen Rong's direction and, in an instant, every single head and fluttering garment, and even several carriages had squeezed in and obscured Chen Rong's sight so that she could not see Wang Hong and his friend anymore.

Chen Rong recovered her gaze and went back into her carriage.

As soon as she was inside, she retrieved the seven-string zither placed next to the carriage wall.

At this age in her previous life, she had indeed been unlearned.

But ever since she met that man, she had practiced the zither for a number of years to remove her 'vulgar' repute. Turning out to be quite a talent, she was able to grasp the zither's secret after only two years of practice. Before her death, she had made a name for herself with just her zither playing.

Chen Rong bowed her head, placed the zither on its table, and then lightly plucked the strings.

With the birth of the soaring music, the noisy crowd momentarily quieted down.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Chen Rong did not look up.

She lightly plucked the strings to make music which flowed like wind and water. Like the moon in the sky, it quietly came and spilled over the sky.

All noises died out.

The group of girls turned around to look at Chen Rong.

At this time, Chen Rong's focus was entirely on the zither. Her features were as tranquil as vernal water though glowing and radiant – a beauty which appeared to be woven from both serenity and light.

Unknowingly, the crowd had been enraptured by her performance.

With their backgrounds, these youngsters must have had an excellent education. Even if they were not proficient in the four arts (2), they must've been taught at least the basics.

1. The four arts are music, chess, poetry, and painting.

As soon as Chen Rong's zither soared in the air, they knew her playing was extraordinary.

The zither has a tradition dating back to the times of Emperors Yao and Shun. Its sound is upright and elegant. It was the musical instrument most esteemed by contemporary scholars. Very few among the literati did not play this instrument. Without mentioning others, Qilang of the Wang house, Wang Hong, was an outstanding player.

Since their first meeting, from Chen Rong's approaching footsteps, Wang Hong had known her to be a zither player.

But he never imagined Chen Rong could play so well! A fifteen-year-old girl having such techniques, changing her notes so quickly – notes as smooth as the wind, boundless and vast – as if she was confiding in him her longing during their separation and her joy when they reunited. What's more, these feelings drifted

like vernal wind and streaming water – at times affectionate, at times aloof – ’twas a sentimental piece.

That is to say, all scholars without exception wanted to express honor and elegance in their music. But this girl’s zither playing had a striking ardor different from everyone else’s.

Her playing was not any inferior to his.

Involuntarily, they all raised their heads. Wang Hong and a few others even closed their eyes to listen.

No one knew how long it lasted until those flowing zither notes gradually dissipated and vanished into oblivion.

Chen Rong slowly raised her head.

A ray of playful sunlight danced on her jade-white cheek as she quietly raised her midnight eyes to Wang Hong.

They locked gazes.

There were shyness and joy both in Chen Rong’s eyes. She next looked down and slowly said, “I’m very happy to see you again, sir.”

After these eight words, she drew her curtain closed. A muffled command was heard from inside, at which Old Shang steered the carriage and turned around again.

Amid whispering voices, Chen Rong’s carriage drove back to the middle of the queue.

Everyone, be he a Wang or a Yu, looked in the direction of Chen Rong. But no matter how they may stare, that curtain did not lift again.

At length, a Wang girl exclaimed: “When did she learn this level of zither playing?”

No one had an answer.

Wang Wulang at last recovered from his stupor. He knitted his brow while shaking his head, saying: “I’ve never heard anything of it.”

“Chen Rong’s zither is indeed pleasant. Unfortunately, she is nothing more

than a concubine-born daughter of a subsidiary branch.” This sneer came from the 7th lady of the Wang house.

Her voice was rather loud.

Several people nodded in agreement at her words. Their bemused eyes instantly unclouded. Unconsciously, disdain once again returned to their proud faces — so what if she had extraordinary zither skill? So what if she was beautiful? A concubine-born woman from a subsidiary branch would always be beneath them. Somebody like that did not deserve their admiration.

The group regained their lucidity and promptly withdrew their gazes from Chen Rong.

At this point, a Yu girl hastily cried out: “Hey, where’s Hong Lang?”

Wang Hong?

The girls all turned their heads to look. After searching about, they discovered that Wang Hong and Yu Zhi had long returned to their carriages. What they could see was only a fluttering curtain.

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Chapter 14: The Young Gentleman from the House of Sun

Both Nurse Ping and Old Shang were gaping their mouths outside the carriage.

“Miss, when did you learn how to play the zither so well?”

Chen Rong fell silent.

“I learned it in a dream,” she said at last.

Without waiting for them to recover, Chen Rong’s voice dropped low in an order: “Do not let this be known. If anyone asks, tell them I began learning the zither after my father and brother left.”

Nurse Ping and Old Shang looked at each other.

They had lived their entire life in the small Chen estate in the small City of Ping – they were uneducated. Despite finding what Chen Rong said difficult to believe, they could not come up with any other answers.

“Aye, miss, please rest assured,” Old Shang finally said. Next to him, Nurse Ping also nodded vigorously.

They stopped thinking about it altogether in their simple minds. These days, their lady was acting as though she had divine intervention. Perhaps she really did learn the zither in a dream.

Chen Rong nodded from her seat inside the carriage and told them: “If anyone comes to see me, tell them I’m asleep.”

“Aye, miss.”

At this time, the cavalcade hit the road again.

They had gone for nearly ten miles from the time the two teams met up. Flying dust was sent scattering in the air by the treading horseshoes. From the middle, one could not see the front and back.

After Chen Rong played her song, she quietly stayed inside her carriage and did not make another appearance. In the meantime, people sent by Wang Wulang

were also politely rejected by Old Shang and Nurse Ping.

At first, the aggravated ladies of the Wang and Yu houses were ready to pick a fight with her. Even if they were not better than her at the zither, they ought to be able to compete with her at other things. And even if they could not compete, they could still force her to keep proving her arts. As long as she showed up, they'd have a way to win at least once.

They weren't expecting Chen Rong to go to bed and never make another appearance.

At this time, the traveling troop suddenly came to a stop.

Chen Rong drew her curtain and whispered an inquiry: "What's wrong?"

"I'll go see," replied Old Shang.

He returned thirty minutes later, jumping onto his driving seat and saying to Chen Rong: "We've run into a branch of the Sun clan. It appears they have encountered bandits on the way here. Most adults have died, only a young master and some servants survived."

No sooner had Old Shang finished than a commotion boomed in the front. Forthwith, a dusty carriage was driving up to them.

The black satin and mahogany wood hinted at the extravagance it once bore. At the moment, however, the satin was worn and the mahogany was scarred with sword traces.

Sitting in the driver's position was a boy of fifteen. He had a pair of bright eyes, a straight nose, presently tightly drawn lips, and an exhausted expression.

Even so, his back was ramrod straight, his outfit was white and clean, and only his hair was slightly wind-blown.

Wang Wulang was frowning as he said to the boy: "Sir, let a servant drive the carriage. If you don't mind, I'll send a few ones here."

The young gentleman shook his head, "No need," and offered no more words.

Wang Wulang's frown worsened. He dragged his lips to say: "This is our Qilang's idea. Sir, there's no need to be unneighborly."

This time, the young master of the Sun House gave no reply.

Unable to sway him, Wang Wulang impatiently made a goodbye gesture and ordered his carriage to return to the front.

The young lad reached Chen Rong's carriage shortly after, making a turn when their carriages were side by side.

The team got going again.

"Young Master," a hoarse voice was heard from his carriage at this moment, "how can you do the driving? Better to let me do it." When he finished talking, they could hear him struggling to get up.

His young master pursed his lips and shouted without turning around: "Don't bother."

He made not another squeak.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

The sun began to sink into the horizon after the team had traveled another ten miles.

At a whistle, all carriages came to a stop. The servants wasted no time in preparing for dinner.

Chen Rong stepped down from her carriage. She turned and looked at the young man who was still sitting ramrod straight in the driving position. Under the golden light, his handsome childlike face was both solemn and desolate, like a lone wolf in the wilderness. In her past life, she had seen the same desolation in the mirror countless of times.

Amid the laughter which rang to them from time to time, his loneliness felt strikingly out of place.

"If you want to seek revenge, then you must save your strength," said Chen Rong as she walked up to the young Mr. Sun. "Only a weakling would reject all the help offered to him and the changes bound to happen, and keep himself immersed in sadness and anguish."

Her voice was soft and cold.

The young Mr. Sun whipped around, staring at Chen Rong with his dark eyes.

She paid him no attention, turning away and not giving him another look.

After she had returned to camp, she lowered her voice in an order: “After the meals are ready, send two portions to Mr. Sun.”

“Aye, miss.”

By the time the last golden ray sank into the horizon, the houses had finished their meal preparations. Meat and wine from the Wang and Yu houses were laid out in two straight lines.

As she ate, Chen Rong noticed that both houses had sent food over, but the young lad from the Sun House only took hers.

She smiled and shook her head.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

After the two groups joined as one, everyone became much more relaxed. Laughter could still be heard till the moon had climbed high in the sky.

Chen Rong walked ahead, stepping on the moonlight as she went.

The campsite was on an open field by a river on the hillside.

Under the moonlight, the river quietly ran in a silvery glow.

As she walked on, she heard the playing of a zither.

The music was serene and ethereal. As soon as she heard it, Chen Rong knew it was being played by Wang Hong. Unconsciously, she followed the sound.

But she stopped in her track after only a dozen paces. Under that far-spread moonlight, Wang Hong was indeed holding the zither and plucking it. In front and behind him, however, were a huddle of fashionable girls.

Chen Rong shook her head upon seeing them and slowly backed away.

She had just retreated to the riverside when a raspy, pubertal voice sounded: “Are you called Chen Rong?”

She nodded.

“I’m Sun Yan, yet to have a courtesy name.”

Chen Rong nodded again. She tilted her head and looked at the tall, handsome boy beside her. Under the moonlight, his chiseled features seemed to her mountain ridges and sinuous canyons.

Sun Yan stared into the sparkling silver water and again raised his raspy voice: “The Wangs and Yus both feel sorry for me. All of them want to make me a charity. Hmph! I’m a man, why would I want pity from other people?”

He was explaining to Chen Rong why he had treated so coldly the people of Wang and Yu.

Chapter 15: Near the Yellow River

Chen Rong fell silent.

Sun Yan turned his head and solemnly watched her, suddenly asking, “How old are you?”

“Not yet fifteen,” she replied after a moment of stupefaction.

“You’re younger than me.” Then he looked at her and said matter-of-factly: “Call me gege (older brother), then.”

Chen Rong looked up at him in surprise.

Under the moonlight, her stunned expression apparently pleased Sun Yan. He smiled a smile that swept away the desolation on his face.

Chen Rong glared at him and retorted: “Hmph, it’s not for sure you’re older than I.”

Sun Yan smiled again. It was apparent he had often smiled in the past. When he smiled, his whole face came aglow.

He gave Chen Rong a once over, nodded and said, “Yes, but if you didn’t say, nobody could’ve guessed you’re only fifteen. Tsk, you’re clearly just a little girl, but you already have the comportment of a woman.”

Chen Rong’s small face at once flushed. She drew a deep breath to suppress her anger, but since she had a quick temper, she needed several more before she could move her lips to respond: “That’s still better than your quacking voice!”

Sun Yan burst out laughing.

He laughed and laughed. When his mirth finally subsided, he tilted his head and continued to look at the silver water running in front of them, murmuring: “Your eyes are like those of wolves… I like them.”

Chen Rong snapped her head up. She wanted to refute but couldn’t get her words out.

Turning her head, she followed his lead in watching the rippling waves, quietly thinking to herself: *I keep telling myself to forget the past, but it seems I’m not doing enough. It’s not acceptable to be like this. I have to make myself truly at peace, so that even if I see that person again, I will not let it affect me.*

The two stood side by side, both wordless.

But perhaps because they were in the same boat and felt to be kindred spirits, they did not need to speak in order to enjoy each other’s company.

With campfire aglow, sounds of laughter unceasingly rang in the distance. Contrastingly, the two shadows by the river bank seemed to dissolve among heaven and earth, as if they had been standing there since time immemorial and would continue for eternity more.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Time flew by. In the blink of an eye, three days had passed.

Wang Hong and Yu Zhi had been swarmed by the young ladies in these three days. When they occasionally met, all they could do was smile at each other, having no opportunity to speak.

Sun Yan stuck to Chen Rong’s side since that night. He used the Chen estate’s driver, ate the Chen estate’s food, and naturally formed a small group with Chen Rong.

By this time, the cavalcade was getting closer to the Yellow River.

Major noble clans all around the state were turning up from time to time. In the far distance, one could see the large road covered with flying dust and a clamorous din.

“Miss, we’ll soon reach the Yellow River! After the Yellow River would be Luo’yang. Miss, we’re almost there!” After the Yellow River would be Luo’yang. If

nothing unexpected happened, they would be settling down in Luo'yang.

Nurse Ping went up beside the carriage and called out in joy. Her small eyes stretched into lines when she smiled. Nearby, everyone else also beamed.

"Luo'yang?"

Chen Rong showed no joy on her face.

She looked up and stared out ahead. At the end of the blue sky were puffs of white clouds. Blocked by the mountain range, she could not see the city's many ornate houses.

Thinking that the Yellow River was less than forty miles away, the exuberant group did not want to take a rest. One after another, the carriages hastened forward.

After dashing for twenty miles, they found the road packed with other groups. And it wasn't just the road; even barren fields on either side were full of guards on horseback.

Chen Rong turned to look. All around her were people and carriages. Even if two people leaned in close, they'd have to shout to be heard.

"Miss, there are so many people." Nurse Ping looked left and right while gasping.

Chen Rong didn't answer. There was a faraway look in her eyes, her lips drawn into a tight line.

Twilight soon descended.

They were now only about ten miles away from the Yellow River.

After they finished dinner, Chen Rong, who had been in a daze up until now, suddenly walked ahead. Sun Yan had just placed his utensils down by the time he saw her unusual behavior. "Ah Rong, the Wang house is still dining," he spoke in his raspy voice, frowning at the same time.

In accordance with aristocratic etiquette, meals were not times to talk, much less times to visit.

Chen Rong paused and turned to look at Sun Yan. She watched him with her

vacant eyes for a while before murmuring: “Only now have I thought it through. Even if my life is already destined to turn out that way, I still have to try my luck.”

Her words had no rhyme or reason, so how could Sun Yan know what she was talking about? He blinked and looked at her quizzically.

Chen Rong withdrew her gaze, walked on, and again said, “The house of Wang takes an hour each time they dine. I cannot wait that long.”

Sun Yan frowningly stared after her for a while, then sprang to his feet and followed her out.

On the wild plains, the Wang house had laid damask mats into two lines and placed tables on top of them. Fragrant meat and wine filled these tables.

The nobles kept quiet when they dined. From her position, she could see Wang Hong and Yu Zhi to the left of Wang Zhuo.

When Chen Rong arrived, people would look up at her from time to time. The Wangs couldn’t help themselves from staring when they saw her walking straight to Wang Zhuo.

She curtsied to him from the distance.

Wang Zhuo, Wang Hong, and Yu Zhi all looked up, appraising the beautiful girl who stood under the sunset glow.

Before Wang Hong could speak, Chen Rong had said in her crystalline voice: “Sir Wang, Luo’yang has always been a battleground since the time of yore. At present, the five Hu tribes are invading the Central Plains. I don’t think they will let go of Luo’yang.” (1)

1. The five Hu tribes are Xiongnu, Jie, Xianbei, Di, and Qiang, but the term actually includes all nomadic non-Han tribes in northern China and was often used with a negative connotation to mean barbarians.

She was commenting on the state’s affairs. Including Wang Hong, everybody stared at her in surprise.

The contemporary literati did not like to discuss politics.

Ever since scholars were killed one by one for talking about politics, philosophy

and merriment became the only two subjects they discussed. They had not talked of politics in a long time.

For that reason, even Yu Zhi was frowning this time to hear Chen Rong, a female, talk about “battlegrounds” and similar such.

As though she didn’t see anything, Chen Rong directed her attention solely on Wang Zhuo and solemnly added: “In my humble opinion, the city of Luo’yang is no longer safe for settlement. If we went there, I fear we would fall into the traps the tribesmen had laid.”

“Traps?” Wang Zhuo finally placed his chopsticks down and asked, “You’re saying those barbarians have captured Luo’yang?” Chen Rong had twice displayed her prowess. He had begun to take this girl’s words seriously.

Chen Rong shook her head. “The city of Luo’yang is too strong to be attacked that easily. I only meant I am afraid they have planted their soldiers in the vicinity of Luo’yang and the Yellow River banks, just waiting for us to walk into their trap.”

Wang Zhuo ruminated before turning his head to look at Wang Hong. “Qilang, what do you think?”

Wang Hong was regarding Chen Rong with eyes that called to mind the reflection of an autumn sky. He had heard that the girl before him had twice prophesied like a god – she was a young lady entirely different from other girls.

He quietly watched Chen Rong for a moment before asking: “Then in Ah Rong’s opinion, which Hu tribes will be there?”

“I do not know,” Chen Rong shook her head with a wry smile. “I’ve come to ask Sir Wang to allow me to separate.”

Separate?

Everyone simultaneously looked up at Chen Rong in shock.

Chapter 16: I much prefer you

“I am only a woman,” Chen Rong continued after a pause. “I am bound to be incomplete in my assessment. It is merely a guess that nomadic tribes would be intercepting the Yellow River. I dare not delay Sir Wang with what is only a

speculation. I only want to part ways with you and find another path on my own."

Sir Wang frowned. After some quiet contemplation, he glanced to Wang Hong again.

Wang Hong observed her for a while before saying: "Ah Rong, I'm sure you know that each family has sent guards to scout the road. If there really are Hu tribesmen, why has no one reported back to us? Or are you referring to the other side of the river?"

Chen Rong nodded: "Indeed I mean the other side of the river."

Wang Hong knitted his brow this time. He told the people around him: "Send a few men to cross the river ahead of us. Make sure to check carefully."

In doing so, he was acknowledging her opinion.

But Chen Rong wasn't made happy. She again said, "Whether barbarians are on the other side or not, I do not want to cross the river. Sir Wang, Qilang, please allow me to bid goodbye."

She was very firm. Wang Zhuo lapsed into silence.

Behind him, Wang Wulang furrowed his brow. He watched Chen Rong's innocently beautiful face for a moment, stood up, placed his hands together and said, "Ah Rong, why are you in a rush to leave? Qilang has sent scouts ahead, so why not wait a while longer?" Then he added: "You are only a vulnerable woman, and you do not have many guards by your side. What would you do were you to encounter bandits?"

Wang Zhuo nodded on the side and said, "That's exactly right. Ah Rong, if you believe your Uncle Wang, then don't speak of leaving any longer. Go go, this old man still wants to finish his dinner."

Wang Zhuo waved his hand, indicating he did not wish to talk any further.

Chen Rong startlingly realized that if she insisted on leaving, she would not be considerate of the Wangs' faces.

She pressed her lips and then at length curtsied to Wang Zhuo before turning around to go.

After she went roughly ten steps, she saw Sun Yan standing under a poplar tree, his posture as straight as a sword.

But as soon as she glanced his way, the boy turned away and sprinted back to the team.

Chen Rong was preoccupied and paid him no further attention. She put her head down and also returned to the team.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

She had just mounted the carriage when Nurse Ping's voice sounded outside: "Miss, Sir Wang thinks highly of you. Perhaps he has chosen you for a Wang gentleman."

She stopped in her tracks, turning to look in the direction of the Wang house.

Old Shang laughed: "You're exactly right. What kind of man is Sir Wang? He must have picked out our lady. If we separate from the Wang house at a time like this, we would never meet again. Where would the Wang lads find another lady like Ah Rong?"

Chen Rong's expression sank upon hearing this. She thought to Wang Wulang's attitude toward her along the journey. Could this be true?

As the sun slowly descended into the horizon, the wilderness broke into a commotion. All cavalcades stopped and hurried to prepare the ships for the next day's departure.

Absentmindedly, Chen Rong stepped down from her carriage.

Everywhere around her was bustling with busy servants. She wandered aimlessly for a while before unconsciously coming to a mound.

She stood on the mound looking at the servants from five hundred meters away. There, laughter filled the air, and satin mats draped the lawn a pure white.

Hundreds of nobles had gathered there.

Of course. All the majors clan had gathered at the Yellow River shore. The youngsters wouldn't miss this chance to meet one another.

"Why aren't you going over there?"

A male quacking voice suddenly rose behind Chen Rong.

“I’ll go over soon,” she smilingly answered.

Sun Yan took two steps to join her on the mound. After a brief silence, he suddenly said, “You seem a little nervous. Why?”

Chen Rong’s back stiffened. She kept her smile on: “I’m not nervous.”

“You are too!”

“I said I’m not!” She turned and snapped at him.

With the last ray of the setting sun, Sun Yan fixed his gaze on her. His eyes were so sharp that Chen Rong was made to feel the awkwardness of being seen through.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

She quickly turned away, avoiding his gaze.

Sun Yan withdrew his gaze and murmured: “Chen Rong, you are only fifteen years old. Why is it that there are so many secrets hidden in your eyes?”

She scoffed and vehemently countered, “I don’t have any secrets!”

Sun Yan didn’t refute her. He looked to the distant horizon where heaven and earth joined and, after a while, turned to the nobles’ gathering place while saying: “I thought you like Wang Hong. Why aren’t you sticking to his side like the other girls? Qilang of the Wang house would never know that you’re standing here.”

She? Likes Wang Qilang? Chen Rong snickered.

She turned around, smiling at Sun Yan with her midnight eyes. “Who says I like him?” Looking at the boy whose beard had obviously just begun to form a shadow but was always putting on a grown-up demeanor, Chen Rong mischievously winked and said to him, “Compared to him, I much prefer you. Didn’t you know?”

His handsome face instantly turned red.

She didn’t expect this reaction from him. Surprised, she couldn’t help herself from curiously staring at him. Under her gaze, Sun Yan turned even redder. He

harrumphed and turned to the side, his raspy voice speaking angrily: “Never repeat such nonsense!”

Then he flapped his sleeves and left the mound, rushing off and disappearing in the blink of an eye from Chen Rong’s field of vision.

Chen Rong stared after him in befuddlement, murmuring: “Did he have to react so strongly? What a strange fellow.”

Chapter 17: Beautiful Still

Brought by the wind from time to time, the sounds of laughter coming from the nobles’ gathering place made Chen Rong itching to go. If her mind weren’t preoccupied, she would have gone over already. It wasn’t every day she got this kind of opportunity. If she performed well, it would be advantageous to her in the future.

After some deliberation, she returned to the carriage to change her clothes and then walked over to the crowd.

The nobles had chosen a barren field just beyond the woods. Damask mats were spread out on this field.

People had formed circles, sitting behind tables that were filled with meat, wine, and pastries. Encircling them were bright torches. Chen Rong gave a glance and found that the corner in the south actually used candles in place of torches.

Weren’t they burning money by illuminating the wilderness with candles?!

Chen Rong shifted her gaze and then walked to the east. Occupying that corner were people from the Wang and Yu houses.

At this time, she was wearing a loose robe and a pair of wooden clogs. Her hair was pulled back and simply tied. There was an easy-going charm in her casual way of dressing.

Amid the clopping of her clogs, the boisterous crowd looked up to her from time to time, many lads rendered silly.

Chen Rong’s had excellent features to begin with, her allure completely different from other girls. Her style of dressing now added to her beauty a bewitching languidness.

Chen Rong did not seem to notice the young men's eyes. She continued to walk forward with each clomp of her clogs, showing a faint smile in the swaying torchlight.

Before long, she reached the corner where the two families of Wang and Yu sat. She had barely arrived when she heard the 7th lady's cry: "Father, father, why don't we also use candles? Look at the Shi family's laughing faces. I'm irritated just by looking at them!"

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Dozens of other youngsters followed suit in grousing.

At this time, Wang Hong's indifferent voice rose to say: "The Shi family is the Shi family. The Wang family is the Wang family. It's good enough to do things our way. Why should we imitate others?"

The youngsters simultaneously silenced. The 7th lady of the Wang house turned her head in embarrassment, her eyes diverting from Wang Hong. Casting a glance, she detected Chen Rong and could not help calling out: "Ah Rong, you're finally here. Hey, what are you wearing? Aren't you afraid of offending people with that androgynous appearance?"

The others glanced to Chen Rong at her words, many lighting up at the sight of her – Wang Hong not to be an exception.

Under his sharp gaze, Chen Rong shyly smiled and bowed her head to say hello, then slowly walked to a corner where a few tables were laid and took a seat.

In the firelight, her small blushing face resembled a blooming rose.

Her gait was leisure though she was bashful. Under the loose robe, her slender waist swayed attractively with each of her movement.

Her beauty and allure did not decrease because of her androgynous attire but instead gained a touch of spontaneity and ease like that of water flowing its course.

Unknowingly, Wang Hong became absorbed looking at her.

A scholar slowly said after a sip of wine: "What a beauty, indeed, if she can make the godly Wang Qilang watch her to distraction."

The crowd all turned to look at Wang Hong upon hearing the man's words.

Wang Hong coughed, raised his glass to block his face, and smiled uncomfortably: "Your eyes are too piercing that my thin face cannot bear the sting!"

Bursts of laughter rang out.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Yu Zhi slapped his thigh laughing while waving to Chen Rong and calling her: "Miss Chen, come and take a seat over here."

And then he pointed to Wang Hong: "Right there."

Everyone's eyes instantaneously gathered on Chen Rong's figure.

These included both burning gazes from the young lads and jealous ones from the girls.

Chen Rong did not move. She lowered her gaze and coyly said, "Qilang's presence is so unearthly that a mere mortal like me does not dare near him."

Wang Hong's soft laughter gave sound: "I've not been able to see you again ever since you played that song for me. Now I know it's because you 'dare not near' me."

In front of so many people, his voice was one of rich smoothness, like a flowing mountain stream. It was as if he was affectionately reproaching her. How unbearably ticklish his words had strummed people's hearts.

Before she knew it, all the girls were glaring at her with jealousy and antagonism.

Chen Rong had a good laugh to herself, thinking in her mind: *As a man, if you had any feelings for me at all then why didn't you approach me? Instead, you want a woman like me to approach you. My, Wang Hong's sweet words are very charming. He must be another womanizer.*

The ladies' eyes from all four sides were too threatening. Under Wang Hong's gaze, Chen Rong merely smiled and made no other reply.

When she did not speak, Wang Hong's attention soon turned to the topics of

the scholars' conversations.

At this time, Wang Wulang's voice came to her from behind: "Ah Rong of the Chen house."

"Hmm?" Chen Rong looked up.

Wang Wulang was watching her with a fiery gaze, one that was different from his previous intensity. It seemed Wang Hong's interest in Chen Rong had roused this young man.

Under her quizzical eyes, he briefly paused and then at length laughed and said, "By the way, why did you want to leave during the day? Isn't it better to stay with us? Or do you feel that we have not been good hosts to you?

He had wanted to start a topic, but the moment he opened his mouth to speak, his tone came out somewhat intimidating.

Chen Rong shook her head, saying: "Why do you say that, Wulang? I just… I just feel uneasy, that's all." At this point, she felt especially stuffy. Seeing that Wang Wulang was about to speak again, Chen Rong quickly inquired, "Have the guards come back? How is the situation on the other side of the river?"

"How can they come back in so short a time?" said Wang Wulang in an unconcerned manner, shaking his head. "In any case, everyone will cross the river tomorrow regardless of whether they come back or not." After a pause, he added, "This is what the scholars have all agreed on just now. Ah Rong, you're just overly worried."

Is that so?

Chen Rong's heart gave a start as she thought: *Never mind, that man would not do anything out of line to the nobles. It's just that, it's just that… I really don't want to see him…*

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Chapter 18: The Trap on the Other Side

Because they would be crossing the Yellow River the next day to go to Luo'yang, everyone rested for half an hour and then returned to camp.

They set out at daybreak the next morning, reaching their destination in just ten miles. Rolling water called to their ears at the same time a line of moored ships emerged along the river bank.

There were big ones, small ones, old ones, and new ones. The nobility groused upon seeing these ships – their complaints nothing more than why there were so many small and old vessels, for such crudeness and dirtiness were not befitting their status.

"These are the only ships we have," shouted one of the well-known scholars. "Those behind you even need to build temporary ones to cross the water."

Another lad also shouted: "Say no more. Fortunately, we left early. Had we been late, we wouldn't even have a ship to sit on."

The grumbling gradually ceased at the double remarks.

At this time, the guards began to organize the crowd and prepared to board. Larger ships carried the carriages while smaller ones carried guards and servants.

There were not many large ships, however. After assigning places, many members of the nobility had to ride on the smaller ones.

Because Chen Rong was the sole master of the Chen house, and because she had also made good merits on the journey, they were able to board a larger ship with their carriages.

The rowdiness transpired for half a day until noon, at which time all the ships finally started moving.

On the oscillating waves, Chen Rong saw those on the smaller boats praying for a peaceful voyage.

Good luck indeed smiled upon everyone, for they had a very peaceful voyage.

It made sense, since the Central Plains were going through a dry-spell presently. Otherwise, it could be very dangerous if they were to encountering stormy weather on the water.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

The long line of vessels meandered its way to the other side.

It felt to be a long time, but also only a brief moment. “We can see the banks! We can see the banks!” These cheers came to Chen Rong while she was sitting in her carriage, spreading far and wide.

After half an hour passed by, a surprised voice abruptly sounded: “Hey, what are those black spots on the other side? Are they people? Or perhaps our clans have sent people waiting for us?”

People at once looked up; their chattering filled the air. Amid the cheers, Chen Rong’s face was one of indifference.

When the cheers outside had gradually subsided, Wang Wulang’s hasty voice at last called to her: “Ah Rong of the Chen house, Ah Rong of the Chen house, come and take a look. Aren’t these people all Hu soldiers?”

In his voice was evident panic.

Chen Rong lifted her curtain.

She had barely poked her head out when everyone on the large ship turned to look at her. There was hope interspersed with dismay and panic in their eyes. Looking at these people’s hopeful eyes, Chen Rong smiled wryly and thought to herself: *You all can’t really be thinking that a woman such as myself will be able to come up with a way out?*

Wang Wulang stepped forward and regarded anxiously, asking again: “Ah Rong, what do you think?”

Chen Rong nodded and murmured: “They are indeed soldiers.” She did not mention anything about the barbarians.

At her words, Wang Wulang staggered several steps backward, almost slumping to the ground.

He was better than the nearby young men who had begun to tremble with

fear.

A cry came from the next ship over, the bewailing of a thin boy: “How can there be soldiers? What are we going to do? What are we going to do?”

The boy’s crying attracted the crowd’s sympathy. Momentarily, sobs and screams arose all around.

Fear is contagious. Instantly, cries and screams, thuds of kneeling and kowtow, and even frantic splashes of those who jumped into the water ceaselessly came into ears.

Amid the panic, the ships started to lose their control.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

At this very moment, Wang Hong’s honorable voice shouted: “Don’t panic! Boatmen, helm your ships!”

His strong plea brought everyone back, and the crowd slowly quieted down.

“Turn around, let’s turn around!” someone else yelled.

“We must never turn back!” Wang Hong opposed in a stern manner.

Many looked at him in surprise. In the meanwhile, Chen Rong’s team had turned to look behind them — up till now, the ships were speeding up while marching forward without paying any attention. At this time, all of them were crowded together. If the boatmen were not careful, the ships would ram into one another let alone being able to make a turn.

It is of relevance to say that these nobles had lived in the north for so many years that they were afraid to even see a river and simply did not know how to swim. One improper movement would send all the ships colliding and overturning people into the water.

While everybody was busy thinking of how to turn around, dozens of ships suddenly emerged upstream on the other side. This fleet had evidently been renovated to add more speed. Before they knew it, these ships had reached them.

As the crowd was caught in a frenzy, those large ships lined up and push them to the shore.

They were forcing them to come ashore!

As realization dawned upon them, people's faces began to drain like a sheet of paper. In this panic, Wang Hong shouted: "Everyone, calm down. As long as they are not barbarians, there is nothing to worry about!"

The crowd finally reacted to these words. Yes. The ships behind them and the people ashore ahead of them were all Hans. As long as they were Hans, even if their banners did not show that they belonged to the royal house of Jin, they would not act in the ways of the ruthless.

While reassuring themselves so, the ships sped toward the riverbank.

Near Chen Rong, several shaking youngsters clustered together, their teeth chattering in fear.

Once the ships docked, respected scholars such as Wang Hong straightened their backs and cheerfully talked as they walked ashore.

With their lead, the crowd no longer hesitated. Both men and carriages soon arrived at the river bank.

A dozen scholars ordered the crowd to line the carriages up. Afterward, Wang Hong went to the front. He raised his clasped hands toward the expressionless and motionless soldiers, announcing: "I am Lang'ya Wang Qi. I and the nobility across the state would like to offer our greetings."

At this juncture, he pointed to the carriages in the back: "Please take the properties you see behind us. I only ask that you let us go and allow us to return to Luo'yang with our robes unstained."

His resounding voice shot through the clouds.

At length, a long burst of laughter rang out.

Amid this loud laughter, a burst of hooves shot to the crowd, causing the stoic soldiers to clear the way.

A young man in purple was galloping forward at the end of the road. Mingling with his laughter was the flapping of his long dark cape in the wind.

The crowd fought for breath at his arrival.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Society in this era preferred a frail and androgynous beauty. Yet the young man standing before them was not fair, had chiseled features, a pair of deep eyes, and a defined straight nose.

If one were to speak of his features, then there were almost no flaws on his face – it was the sort the heavens had specially sculpted. Most importantly, his waving purple cape and imposing presence exuded a different handsomeness from the frail men of words. A very uninhibited, very feral, but also very blinding handsomeness.

After the cavalry galloped to the nobles, the young man alighted from his horse and walked to them in majestic strides.

Now that he was standing on level ground, the scholars discovered that he was a tall man, with wide shoulders and a tapered waist. He was yet near but already felt to them threateningly imposing.

He stopped in front of Wang Hong and company and then turned his head to survey the crowd. His deep eyes seemed to contain a moving flame while also bearing an endless darkness. Wherever his eyes swept, they would force the noble youngsters to hold their breath and retreat backward.

His eyes finally returned to Wang Hong, accompanied by a dazzling smile. He clasped his hands together and spoke loud and clear to the crowd: “I, Ran Min, am delighted to hear that you have arrived from afar. I’ve specially ordered my men to wait here for you.”

Chapter 19: That Man

Ran Min smiled affably, but the nobles only stared at him without a word.

Wang Hong clasped his hands together, looked at him and asked, “Ran Min? Are you perchance a descendant of Ran Yong, one of the twelve philosophers?” (1)

1. The ‘twelve philosophers’ refers to the twelve eminent disciples of Confucius

“That’s right,” Ran Min replied with a smile.

These two words caused the crowd to stir in whispering noises.

The weight of a prestigious family status had carved into the bone and marrow of the literati. The nobility in the Central Plains knew crystal clear which surname descended from which scholar. There were those who did not read much but had had lineages memorized. Wang Hong's opener was the only thing the scholars needed to immediately know who was standing in front of them.

Their whispers were low, everyone suppressing his voice. They seemed to want to avoid provoking the man in front of them.

Wang Hong sighed in a murmur: "Sir, your roots are from the Central Plains. Your ancestor was also disciple to a sage." Here, whatever he may be thinking, his tone changed to instead be full of dignity: "What is it that you want to do? Are you to gift us to Shi Hu? Or are you to take our properties to fund the army?"

His words were beginning to lose their courtesy.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

At this time, Wang Hong was still looking calm and sounding eloquent, but the nobles standing behind him had paled upon hearing 'Shi Hu'. They migrated south because they were avoiding the barbarians; they never imagined they'd still fall into the barbarian's hands though they had crossed the Yellow River!

Furthermore, they were falling to the hands of the most fearsome Shi Hu! This man had ordered that any nomadic tribesman could openly obtain from the Hans whatever he might be missing, be it clothes, properties, or women.

Wang Zhuo stood with a face as white as a parchment. Behind him were the trembling Wang children.

This time, they not only experienced despair but also remorse: *That young lady from the Chen house is evidently a prophet! Why didn't he listen to her advice? Why didn't they wait another day or two and then cross the river after the scouts return to report their findings?*

This regret and despair spread throughout the crowd in a short period of time. Many youngsters could not keep steady, and some were unable to suppress their sobbing.

Ran Min leaned against his tall red horse, his deeps eyes quietly sweeping across the crowd.

He only had to stand there to instill a soaring bloodlust in the air. Moreover, there was an intense flame in his eyes at this time. Wherever they went, people would shrink away.

Looking at these timid people, Ran Min slowly straightened up.

He was already very tall. When he stood straight, his towering build was even more striking. His fiery and fathomless eyes swept the crowd, and then suddenly he howled, “Do not cry!”

The crying came to a grinding halt.

Ran Min let go of the rein and took two steps forward. People involuntarily retreated with his movement. Only Wang Hong and other renowned scholars did not move, smiling and calmly looking at him instead.

Upon seeing this, Ran Min’s thin lips curved downward into somewhat of a frown.

How imposing was he? Only one wrinkled brow had sent dozens of noble children dropping to the ground in a series of thuds.

Ran Min’s frown worsened. He turned around and glared at the children, his clear voice ringing in a bellow: “Don’t be frightened so easily. Don’t forget you are men!”

The children continued to tremble nonstop, but a few scholars lit up, looking at one another.

At this time, Ran Min’s voice softened: “Don’t be afraid. You will not lose your lives. Nor will you lose your money and goods.”

All voices vanished. Even those who were crying had widened their teary eyes in surprise, hopefully looking at the rootless vagabond in front of them.

Ran Min smiled and turned back to the scholars, pointing a finger toward Luo’yang to say: “Gentlemen, please return to your carriages! I, untalented Ran Min, will escort you back.”

…

After the scholars looked at one another, Wang Hong stepped forward, raised his clasped hands toward Ran Min and audibly asked, “Lord Ran, your meaning?”

Ran Min grinned, flashing a penetrating coldness from his white teeth: “Nothing really. The Hans in the north have migrated to the south. After they heard of this news, the Hu have been waiting in nearby areas. I don’t want to let them get more provisions, so I’m blocking them.”

His words caused people to buzz in murmurs.

Wang Hong and his group looked up, their eyes observing Ran Min. A faint smile appeared on Ran Min’s face as he nonchalantly let them appraise him.

Of these people, only Chen Rong believed what this man said was true.

The murmurs grew louder. People continued to whisper, their eyes avoiding Ran Min while surprise and doubt surfaced their countenances.

At long last, Wang Hong suddenly turned around and searchingly surveyed the crowd.

He saw Chen Rong bowing docilely, as calm as a water surface. He picked up his pace and walked to her.

All eyes were on his actions. It should be said that Wang Hong was the most famous man in the cavalcade, he was everyone’s pillar.

Wang Hong came to Chen Rong’s side and, after nodding to Wang Zhuo and his group, turned to her, placed his hands together and asked, “Ah Rong, do you think what General Ran says is the truth?”

In front of so many people in such a time, he actually asked a little girl about an important affair.

All of a sudden, those who were stunned could not be counted.

Stunned, too, was Ran Min. He stared with interest toward Chen Rong and, ignoring everyone else, took big strides to her and Wang Hong.

He walked very briskly, and when everyone automatically gave way, he arrived behind Wang Hong in an instant.

All eyes were now gathered on Chen Rong.

“When he saw us,” she replied while bowing to Wang Hong, “the general claimed a Han surname. His words do not appear to be lies.”

Wang Hong regarded her for a second, nodded and murmured: “This man has no reputation for lies, that I have heard.” Here, he smiled wryly, thinking that they were meat on a chopping board anyway. Whether Ran Min wanted to cook them or mince them, there was nothing they could do. It was unnecessary to ask a lady like Chen Rong.

Then again, this young lady had been correct three times on their way here. Her words are credible.

At this moment, Ran Min’s laughter arose behind them: “I would never have thought that after all these years in my life, the one who understands me would be a beautiful damsel.”

And then he turned back amid his booming laughter, his dark purple robe flapping in the river wind. He leapt onto his red horse, waved his right hand, and shouted: “Let’s go –”

Chen Rong noted with clarity that although he said she ‘understood him’, his eyes were lucid and not the slightest trace of awareness a man might have for a woman’s beauty could be seen from his face.

Chapter 20: The State of Affairs

The soldiers’ footsteps also marched forward at Ran Min’s departure. Under Wang Hong’s leadership, the nobles followed behind them.

All were now looking at Chen Rong in astonishment. They just could not understand why Wang Qilang would ask for a young lady’s opinion. Why did Wang Qilang seem to be more at ease once she said Ran Min could be trusted?

In just a short time, the group arrived at the main road.

The road was covered in deep wheel paths. Wang Hong furrowed his brow as he bade for the carriage to approach Ran Min. Placing his hands together, he asked the other man, “Sir, why are there so many carriage marks on the ground?” Anxiety was evident in his voice.

Ran Min turned to look and faintly smiled at Wang Hong.

There was a strong bloodlust in his handsomeness, his entire being as if enveloped in burning flames; even his eyes could burn. At the same time he looked over, the children lowered their heads to avoid his eyes, and even Wang Hong's group sank in spirit.

Ran Min said dismissively, "Everybody is moving south. Naturally there would be heavy wheel paths."

Wang Hong gave a start.

Without waiting for him to speak, Wang Wulang hastily asked, "What is your meaning, sir? They are so close to Luo'yang – why do they still go south?"

Wang Wulang's voice was very loud. Suddenly, the crowd's murmurs stopped as they looked up, waiting for Ran Min's answer.

Ran Min gazed to the front, there was an indescribable somberness in his indifferent voice: "Why do they go south? Didn't I already say? This place is overtaken by the barbarians!"

He was saying there were many barbarians here. But, wasn't this Luo'yang?! This was the capital of Jin. Had the situation gotten so dire?

The crowd began to panic. Sobs again arose amid the commotion.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Witnessing the confusion growing louder and louder, Ran Min who had been looking to the front shouted: "Silence!"

His shout was so savage that the children quickly shut up in shock.

In the silence, Ran Min coldly spat: "So what if you'll die? You are men of honor, how can you be so quick to tears? Hmph! What a disgrace!"

His words were somewhat harsh. These youngsters were used to being pampered and had always felt superior to other people. Even if Ran Min were incredibly frightening, in their eyes, only the frail scholars were true men of honor. Despite being extraordinarily handsome and remarkably imposing, just like a volcano hidden under a snowy peak, the man in front of them was but a barbaric brute.

All of a sudden, many turned a disdainful eye at Ran Min. Nonetheless, they

could only secretly roll their eyes, for the person before them was a devil incarnate.

Wang Hong gloomily stared in the direction of Luo'yang and then at length whispered: "Is Luo'yang presently a ghost town, then?"

"There are some who haven't moved," replied Ran Min.

He paused and turned his head, looking at Wang Hong to say, "Might you have guessed who have left and who remain?"

"Would Lord Ran happen to know where the people of Luo'yang have gone to?"

"Jiankang." (2)

2. Short history lesson: Luo'yang is the Jin's capital from 265-311 AD and Jiankang is its capital from 317-420 AD. The change was caused by the invasion of the nomadic tribes in the north, pushing the Hans south.

Jiankang? That was thousands of miles away. Dismay once again seized the crowd.

Wang Hong lowered his voice to ask: "Then, are you escorting us to Luo'yang? What if we want to continue ahead?"

Ran Min laughed, replying without once looking back: "Do you not believe me, still? Rest assured. After 100 miles, you can decide for yourselves whether you will go to Luo'yang or Jiankang."

Everyone was overjoyed. Wang Wulang raised his voice: "Lord Ran, are your words true?"

Answering him was Ran Min's cold harrumph.

Seeing his mood had soured, the crowd who awaited his confirmation closed their mouths.

The long cavalcade once again kicked dust up to the sky. As they drove on, a series of hooves advanced from afar. A man hollered out in a strange Central Plains accent: "Han clans, it's a group of Han clans." Excitement filled his voice.

Several hundred nomadic men turned in their direction. Whiz, not waiting for

Ran Min's order, all of his soldiers simultaneously raised their bows. A shower of arrows instantly landed before the newly-arrived calvary's hooves.

The Hu hastily pulled the rein on their horses. After a long silence, the same large man shouted: "Which tribe do you belong to?"

A series of disciplined voices came as a single reply: "Our commander is the Heavenly Prince Shi Min. (3)" This translation belongs to hamster428.

3. Ran Min was adopted by one of the nomadic tribes so his adoptive name is Shi Min. His title is explained here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tian_Wang.

As soon as 'Shi Min' was announced, the man exclaimed: "I did not know you are the Heavenly Prince Shi Min. We shall leave at once."

Following his panicking voice was another dignified one: "Please don't be affronted. We were merely passing through here."

Several hundred stalwart Hu soldiers all at once turned their horses and raced away like the wind. Their speed was even faster compared to when they came.

The nobles stared at one another.

What happened had exceeded their knowledge and experience. In their cognition, barbarians were like wild beasts. Under normal circumstances, one barbarian could easily handle four or five Han soldiers. Until now, they had only heard of the Hans fleeing away upon meeting the barbarians. This was the first time they saw the barbarians fleeing when meeting the Hans.

The 'Heavenly Prince' was indeed a resounding appellation!

Wang Hong signaled for the carriages to go ahead while he walked behind with Ran Min. He raised his clasped hands and spoke: "Sir, we are all men of honor. I've misspoken." A Han who could chase the barbarians away was, no matter what, always worthy of respect.

He took a pause and then sincerely asked, "In your opinion, would it be favorable for us to go to Jiankang?"

"The road leading to Jiankang has been taken hold by the Di and Xianbei tribes.

If you insist on going, you will only become their army provisions." Ran Min's voice remained indifferent. It did not change because of Wang Hong's display of respect.

He said 'army provisions' very simply, but those who knew the term's meaning could not help themselves from shuddering. Barbaric cannibalism. The so-called provisions for the army were referring to them, living people.

Wang Hong bowed deeply as he inquired: "Though this world is large, I dare ask if there is any place for us?" His voice had started to sound bleak.

Suppressed sobs rose from the crowd yet again.

This time, Ran Min did not stop them. He pondered for a while and said, "You might try Nan'yang. The road leading to Nan'yang is under my jurisdiction. The Prince of Nan'yang, Sima Mo, also has a great army. For the time being, that place should be secure."

"I thank you for your counsel, escort, and regard!"

Wang Hong was well-traveled. His experience compared to the present nobles was profound and broad. He thus could clearly determine Ran Min's words were not lies.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

While Wang Hong and Ran Min talked, Chen Rong kept her curtain down and quietly stayed in her carriage. She had been abnormally quiet since Ran Min appeared.

Suddenly, her curtain was lifted – it was Sun Yan poking his head in to see her. He first stared at her before raising his raspy voice: "Is Ran Min truly trustworthy?"

She gave him a nod.

"My parents and the rest of the family were all made into army provisions by the Xianbei tribe."

Suddenly hearing such a thing from the lad, Chen Rong looked up at him, stunned.

After some silence, she whispered: "It's all in the past now. Don't be too sad."

“I’m not sad! I have to make them pay with blood. I can’t afford to be sad!”

Sun Yan slowly straightened his back. Eyes staring at Ran Min, he murmured: “The barbarians are all afraid of him. The barbarians are actually afraid of him! Ah Rong, tell me, should I join this man’s camp?”

Chen Rong stared wordlessly at him.

Recently, he was no longer submerged in grief and hatred. He ate well and slept well. His face grew healthier in color, his facial features increasingly handsome and fair. That silky skin, those sword-like brows and crystal eyes, straight nose and rosy lips, they all gave this young man an androgynous beauty.

Seated on horseback this very second, his thin stature and slender waist were more pronounced. Viewing his figure and milky handsomeness from the side and then thinking of his killing appearance on a battlefield, unconsciously, in Chen Rong’s mind emerged a line: “The warrior bends his willow waist…”

While she was in her trance, Sun Yan turned his head and watched her.

After some time, his dark eyes seemed to have caught on as a flash of ire sparked in them. A hint of blush also emerged on his overly beautiful face. He glared at Chen Rong and gritted his teeth: “Ah Rong of the Chen house, are you looking down on me?”

Chen Rong shuddered, quickly withdrew her gaze, and emphatically replied, “No, of course not.”

Sun Yan harrumphed and cracked his whip to send the horse darting forward. He left her an ashamed and chagrined line: “Ah Rong of the Chen house, you…! I’ll make you regret this!”

She stared after his disappearing figure, flabbergasted. “I didn’t even say anything…”

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Chapter 21: The Clansmen's Arrival

Just then, another series of rapid hooves was gaining on them.

The resulting flying dust did not clear for a long time, and when it did, was to the appearance of at least four or five thousand people.

Before they could realize what was happening, flying flags with a wolf-head coat of arms were coming into sight. "The Hu…" dozens of Hans cried out.

These mere two words revealed how terrified they felt.

At this moment, that large army burst into cackles. A man shouted using a strange Han accent: "They are Hans. So many Han nobles. Bwahahaha."

His laughter was extremely disrespectful.

Unwittingly, the nobles turned to Ran Min, their expressions were those of panic and apprehension, and mostly despair. They knew what 'five thousand elite Hu soldiers' meant. Ran Min's army only had 800 soldiers, how could he rival the other party? Not only him, but even 100,000 Jin soldiers would end in total defeat were they to confront 5,000 Hu.

Ran Min's expression was that of indifference as he faced the crowd's full attention. A cold light flashed from his blazing dark eyes. He looked in that direction nonchalantly, then blithely turned his head and continued to ride forward.

In a moment's time, that large team had come within five hundred paces of the nobles.

Once again, the soldiers raised their bows and aimed their arrows at the sky.

"Fire!"

Whoosh.

In the blink of an eye, hundreds of arrows pierced through the sky and landed in front of the barbarians' horseshoes.

Being superb riders, the Hu simultaneously reined their horses and, after the animals gave long neighs, came to a halt.

A young Hu, who was masked, rode out and demanded: “Who are you people?”

He was, of course, asking about the clans’ escort.

Again, the soldiers replied in unison: “Our general is the Heavenly Prince Shi Min!”

The masked Hu was visibly stunned. He pulled on the rein, repeating: “Heavenly Prince Shi Min?”

“That’s right.”

He frowned upon hearing this. At a glance, he could see the nobles’ escorting team was composed of less than a thousand soldiers while he had five thousand behind him!

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Noticing the Hu’s hesitation, the nobles became unnerved. They all turned their heads anxiously watching Ran Min.

They were met with his back as he leisurely continued to ride forward as though none of this mattered to him.

Yes, of course he doesn’t care. Even if we really clashed with the Hu, he could very well leave us. As this thought passed through their minds, the young nobles’ dismay heightened significantly.

At this point, another Hu rushed his horse forward and started whispering: “Fourth brother, why are you hesitating? There are so many carriages, all of them filled with treasures. These are nothing but stupid Jin slaves, what are you afraid of?”

“He’s Heavenly Prince Shi Min!” the masked man coldly replied.

At the same time, he raised his clasped hands toward the man in question and spoke: “I did not know you are the Heavenly Prince. Do accept my apology. Retreat!”

Upon his words, the elite army began to change direction, slowly and orderly receding.

Only until they were two or three miles away and the dust their horses left diminished to mere specks did the nobles turn to look at Ran Min.

Ran Min continued on in his leisure pace, his red stallion's hooves clopping on the ground in an extremely relaxed manner.

"This man can actually frighten the barbarians so?" Wang Zhuo muttered quietly, his voice full of disbelief.

In reality, all of them were staring in disbelief at Ran Min while their murmurs filled the air.

Nonetheless, they relaxed much more visibly after this experience. He did not take a second look at the 5,000 elite Hu soldiers though he only had 800 men. With this kind of escort, what were they afraid of?

The team kept their pace going forward. At this time, an extremely handsome boy rushed his horse to Ran Min's side as he said something to the other man.

The Wangs and Yus knew this lad as the young gentleman from the Sun house who had been traveling with Ah Rong of the Chen house. They wondered what it was he had to say to Ran Min.

Curious, they kept looking to the two of them.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Not long after, they saw Sun Yan trotting on and retreating behind Ran Min, following him.

After encountering the barbarians twice, the road was pronouncedly quieter.

They went on like this for two days. By the third day, the cavalcade had gone nearly a hundred miles from the Yellow River.

Just then, a burst of excitement gave sound. Amid the noises, Wang Wulang shouted: "Ah Rong of the Chen house, come out, come out quickly. Your clansmen are here!"

Clansmen?

That's right, they should be arriving at about this time!

Chen Rong faintly smiled and drew her curtain.

From the other side of the drapery, Wang Wulang seemed to her very happy. He looked at Chen Rong with sparkles in his eyes, smiled and said, "It's another branch from your clan. Isn't that great?"

Great? Why is it great?

Seeing Chen Rong stock-still, he turned and told Old Shang: "Quick, take your lady to see her family."

"Aye, sir."

Chen Rong's carriage drove forth and squeezed through the crowd, toward the group that had just joined in the front.

At this time, several elders from that group were circling Ran Min. Fifty paces away from them, a beautiful and frail girl about Chen Rong's age was staring silly at him. Her eyes were gleaming with joy, ardency, and even desire.

Chen Rong closed her eyes upon seeing this scene.

Meanwhile, Nurse Ping, who was walking beside her carriage looked to Wang Wulang while happily telling her: "Miss, I think Wulang of the Wang house really likes you. Look how happy he is to know that your family has come. Perhaps he will even ask for your hand tonight."

Chapter 22: Déja Vu

Very quickly, Chen Rong's horse carriage arrived at the forefront of the queue.

Several elders were talking to Ran Min. Since she came at an inopportune time, Chen Rong quietly remained on the side.

The beautiful, frail girl finally recovered her gaze at this time. When she saw Chen Rong, she approached her with the help of a maid and then looked at her smilingly. "Are you Ah Rong? They were just talking about you a moment ago. They have nothing but praises for you."

"My name is Chen Wei," she then added. "I am your older cousin."

Of course Chen Rong knew she was her cousin.

“How do you do,” she raised her voice in reply while dropping her gaze. When she found herself unconsciously wringing her garment, she drew a deep breath and relaxed her grip.

Chen Wei blushed; there was an abashment on her beautiful face that commonly belonged to young maidens in love. She again stared dreamily at Ran Min and actually imprudently asked Chen Rong: “Ah Rong, do you think is he a true man of honor?”

The ‘he’ she spoke of was, of course, Ran Min.

Chen Rong turned her gaze in his direction. At this time, a faint smile was found on his face, the blaze was gone from his dark eyes, and his entire being looked to be much gentler.

She removed her gaze and indifferently said, “Yes, he is a man of honor.”

Having received Chen Rong’s confirmation, Chen Wei’s small face grew redder. She happily looked at Ran Min and said, “I’m glad you also feel he is a man of honor.” Her blush had now spread all the way to her neck. She looked down and said to her cousin in embarrassment: “For some reason I like you the moment we met. I just want to tell you everything.”

Really? Chen Rong sneered deep down inside.

She lowered her eyes, smiled and said, “Jiejie (older sister), you’re like a lotus flower. Your purity stems from within.”

Chen Wei was overjoyed by Chen Rong’s assessment. Only now did she begin to properly look at the other girl for the first time.

Watching the undisguised joy and pride on Chen Wei’s face, Chen Rong could not help but feel taken aback: The truth was that she had forgotten. She had forgotten that after the last segment of their journey, she was no longer the old Chen Rong of the past. Her opinions now carried with them a certain weight.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

At this time, the elders surrounding Ran Min had dispersed, leaving only a middle-aged scholar who beckoned Chen Rong over.

She stepped down from the carriage, curtsied to him and bowed her head

while saying in an honest manner: “I’m Chen Rong from the City of Ping. Good greetings, uncle.”

The middle-aged scholar nodded. “So you are Ah Rong? You don’t have to introduce yourself. I know who your father and brother are. I saw them a year ago before they followed everyone to Jiankang.”

He paused to wave Chen Wei over.

Chen Wei’s gaze quickly withdrew from Ran Min, running to her father’s side with her face still colored with a flush.

“Wei’er,” the scholar lovingly said to Chen Wei, “Ah Rong’s guardians are not here. We are her family. I hope you’ll take care of each other as though you are sisters.” Then he turned to Chen Rong and said, “Since your father and brother are not here, I will be your guardian. When we arrive in Nan’yang, you and Wei’er will stay together.”

Chen Rong bit her lips, wanting to say something. After some deliberation, however, she could only whisper an “aye” in reply.

Chen Wei smiled and happily complied. “I got it, father. We were just talking moments ago. Ah Rong even said I’m just like a lotus flower.”

There was a naiveté in her voice. The middle-aged scholar laughed and caressed her hair, shaking his head. “When will you ever grow up? All right, run along with Ah Rong now.”

Chen Wei laughed and bounced to Chen Rong, taking her hand and skipping off to the crowd. Even as she ran, she could not help looking back toward Ran Min.

One glance at that masculine handsomeness rendered Chen Wei’s face a deep red again.

Perhaps sensing Chen Wei’s gaze, Ran Min suddenly turned around and cast a glance at the girls with his deep electrified eyes.

Chen Wei blushed terribly and quickly lowered her head, almost to the point of burying it into her chest.

At this sight, Ran Min raised a brow in curiosity and then walked over to them.

Holding Chen Rong’s hand, Chen Wei involuntarily trembled as she asked, “H-

he's coming over. Ah Rong, what should I do? What should I do?" Embarrassment, joy, and fear were all detected in her voice.

Chen Rong quietly watched the man who was making his way over. "He's only coming over," she lightly said, "He won't eat anyone. What are you afraid of?"

Despite saying so, her left hand clenched into a fist under her sleeve. In her previous life, she had never understood this man. Years later, she would recall this scene and think that he had likely walked toward the two of them out of affection for her cousin.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Living it all over again, she could finally see things clearly.

Ran Min had at this time reached the two girls.

He was a tall man. When he stood like that in front of them, looking down from above, he felt strikingly towering. Chen Wei shook despite herself.

Chen Rong was much calmer. Her eyes were not directed to Ran Min, nor were they to Chen Wei. She just stood there as if she didn't know that he was standing in front of her.

Ran Min gave Chen Wei a glance before turning his attention to Chen Rong. "What are your names?" he inquired with a pleasantly deep voice.

Right, in the past, he had also opened with this line.

Chen Rong didn't answer this time. She turned to her cousin waiting for her to speak first.

Chen Wei blushed and nervously curtsied to Ran Min, stammering: "I'm… I'm Chen Wei."

Ran Min's eyes returned to Chen Rong.

She slightly moved her lips to say in a low voice: "I'm Chen Rong."

"Ah Rong of the Chen house? I know you," he remarked, nodding. These were not words he said in the past. Back then, he had looked at the whip in her hand and asked, "Are you fond of using riding whips?" How had she answered him then? She had likely wanted to say yes, but thinking of the world's opinion on a

woman who uses a whip, she had quickly hid it behind her and answered, “This is someone else’s. I’m only borrowing it to play.”

He said he knew her. Though they were three simple words, Chen Wei’s rosy face drained white the moment he said them, and then she extracted her hand from Chen Rong’s.

Chen Rong looked over to Chen Wei, this time not answering Ran Min.

He watched her for a while, nodded, then turned and walked away.

Chen Rong stood rooted to the spot all the way until his back disappeared from her sight. So too, did Chen Wei.

All of a sudden, Chen Wei whipped around and hurried back to her carriage.

Watching her departing figure, Chen Rong frowned in puzzlement and thought to herself: *Could it be that he also doesn’t feel much more for her? I used to think he fell in love with her at first sight, was that just a mistaken speculation?*

Chapter 23: A Lifetime Lost Due to a Glance

While Chen Rong was staring off, a clear voice came to her from behind: “Ah Rong?”

It was Wang Wulang.

Chen Rong turned and spoke: “Good greetings, Wulang.”

“There’s so need for such formality between you and me.” Wang Wulang hopped down from his carriage and went to Chen Rong’s side. He dithered for a moment before asking: “Ah Rong, did your uncle say how your father and brother are doing in Jiankang right now?”

“How they’re doing?” Chen Rong looked at him quizzically.

“That is, what ranks are they holding currently?” As soon as he said these words, Wang Wulang hurried to repeat himself: “I’m just asking, I’m just asking.”

Chen Rong looked at him. After offering a little smile, she suddenly replied just as he was turning to go: “I think my father is still only an eighth-ranked magistrate.”

Wang Wulang paused at her words. He knitted his brow, his face a bit solemn

when he asked, “What about your brother?”

“Likely also an eighth-rank.”

“Is that so?” He sounded disappointed. He gave her a nod and took his leave.

He had barely left by the time the 7th lady’s carriage drew near. She glanced toward Chen Rong and asked her brother, “Fifth brother, what did she say?”

Wang Wulang frowned and said unhappily, “Her father and brother are still only minor eighth-ranked officials.”

The 7th lady scoffed: “Promotions are common among nobles who went to Jiankang. I can’t believe her father and brother are so useless that they’re still only minor eighth-ranked officials.” Here, she turned to Wang Wulang and told him in seriousness: “Fifth brother, if that’s the case, then you cannot marry Chen Rong as your primary wife.”

Wang Wulang nodded, saying in uncertainty: “But if I were to ask her to be my concubine, I’m sure she wouldn’t agree.” When his eyes turned to Chen Rong, her beautiful face blinded him under the sunlight. Admiring her awhile, his heart drummed a bit quicker. “This is an important matter. I should talk to father about it regardless.” He removed his gaze from Chen Rong’s face and clenched his teeth determinedly: “I will let father know and then discuss the matter after we arrive in Nan’yang.”

This translation belongs to hamster428.

The team started moving again.

In the Chen camp, Chen Yuan was laughing in delight.

At his resounding laughter, the Chen children all turned to look at him in surprise.

“I did not expect Ah Rong to be so clever. How capital!” Ah, so he was talking about Chen Rong. The youngsters nodded and paid him no further attention. When Chen Yuan and Ran Min were talking earlier, all the young nobles were also standing nearby and had heard of Chen Rong’s matter. After all, Chen Rong as a young lass was able to foresee correctly three times. Something so rare and remarkable easily became a topic of gossip.

Chen Wei sat in her carriage listening to her brothers talking about Chen Rong outside. She pursed her lips at first, but whatever she was thinking, she immediately clenched her teeth and lifted the curtain.

She instructed her carriage to approach Chen Rong's, and then from across their curtains, she timidly spoke: "Ah Rong, I was rude. Don't be upset with me."

Chen Rong lifted her curtain, her expression was one of grievance and confusion. "Jie, I don't understand. Why were you angry at me?"

Chen Wei froze.

She carefully regarded Chen Rong and when she saw that her look of grievance did not seem to be pretense, she bit her lips, bowed her head and quietly said, "Ah Rong, how did you know General Ran Min?"

Chen Rong looked at her in puzzlement and asked, "Wasn't everyone talking about my foretelling? He naturally knows me from those stories."

Suddenly realizing the matter, Chen Wei smiled and said in a slight embarrassment: "I-I-I thought he was happy to see you."

Really?

Chen Rong watched her timid older cousin and all at once felt a rush of dread. She unconsciously clenched her fists again before letting go an instant later.

Not hearing Chen Rong reply, Chen Wei raised her eyes to study her and said rather seriously, "Ah Rong, you don't like him, do you? Tell me you don't like him."

Chen Rong gave a tight-lipped smile, lowered her gaze and slowly said, "Jie, our marriages are determined by our parents."

"My father wants to betroth me to him," Chen Wei immediately replied. "Ah Rong, it's fine as long as you don't like him." She raised her head, watching an indecipherable Chen Rong across the curtains. As she watched her, her heart took a little dip. For some reason, she always felt that her cousin, while not necessarily more beautiful than her, was so enchantingly different. If Ah Rong didn't want to yield, Chen Wei was definitely not her opponent.

With that said, she was only a concubine-born daughter of a concubine-born

man belonging to a subsidiary branch. Chen Wei, although also concubine-born, was daughter to a direct descendant. In terms of status, hers was much higher than Chen Rong's.

Chen Wei looked to be a little too anxious.

Chen Rong furrowed her brow when she saw this look. She gave some thought before looking to the crowd, her eyes unconsciously landing on the somber handsome man.

She silently smiled and lowered her eyes, coyly saying: "Jie, let's not talk about feelings and love." And then she turned her back toward the other girl.

That… wasn't acquiescence.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Layers of dark clouds took over Chen Wei's heart. She bit her lips, wanting to probe yet again, but in the end felt a bit embarrassed to do so.

Night soon fell. The cavalcade stopped and the servants hurried to set camp and prepare dinner.

The nobles felt gratitude toward Ran Min ever since he scared away the barbarians twice. They all knew that without his help, their fate would be very worrying.

Unknowingly, the scholars all surrounded him. Elders like Wang Zhuo also came to sit by his side, according him full respect and ceremony.

Ran Min seemed as though he did not notice any of these things. He did not pay heed to the elderly scholars around him, merely keeping his head down as he carefully wiped his double-edged spear with a cloth. Under the sunset, the cold tip vaguely seemed as if it was seeping blood.

After some time, Wang Zhuo scowled when he did not get a response to the few things he said, stood up, flapped his long sleeves and walked away.

More time lapsed when the rest angrily rose and left like Wang Zhuo.

In the end, only Wang Hong, who was busy tuning his zither, still sat next to him. It was uncertain whether he noticed if there was a bloodthirsty and tasteless man who was playing with a weapon at his side or not.

Chen Wei bit her lips saying worriedly: “Everyone thinks so highly of him. Why doesn’t he appreciate their respect and indulge them in conversations on philosophy or the arts, instead of playing with weapons like that? I only hope my father will not change his mind.”

She turned to look at Chen Rong and when she saw her looking at Ran Min in absorption, she could not help calling: “Ah Rong, Ah Rong, what are you looking at?”

She had to call a few times before Chen Rong suddenly awoke. She whirled around, hopped off the carriage, ignored Chen Wei and strode to the distance.

Chen Wei bit her lips at this scene, her face filled with anger.

Chen Rong quickened her steps forward, her hands balling into fists as she thought: *No, not again, never again… Last time, it was at this very moment that I fell in love with that man.*

It was with her entire life that she had had to pay for this one glance!

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Chapter 24: Men of Honor

Chen Rong suddenly halted after scampering for fifty paces.

She turned around and then smiled, slowly walking back.

As she saw her approaching, Chen Wei harrumphed and pulled down her curtain.

Unexpectedly, Chen Rong did not go to her to apologize but instead unhurriedly went on toward Wang Hong, which was also toward Ran Min.

She soon arrived at Wang Hong's side, and then after dismissing Nurse Ping and the others, sat down on his damask mat.

She was doing what all the ladies there wanted to do but did not actually dare to. All at once, their eyes were affixed to her.

Wang Hong's attention was held by the tuning of his zither. When he suddenly felt another presence next to him, he couldn't help but frown.

Turning his head, he saw that Chen Rong was hugging her knees and looking to the skyline pensively.

At a loss for words, he finally spoke in a low voice: "My dear (1), it's seldom you come to sit with me. Are you here to watch the idle clouds at the end of the sky?" There was an implied affection in his gentle voice.

1. He is using the word 卿 which, though a term of endearment, can also lean a little patronizing depending on context as it is one-directional from the "higher" to the "lower" person, like parents who call their child "sweetie" but not the other way around. Here, he means to be ambiguous, as "dear" is something he often uses to address scholars of lower ranks as well, but obviously, when he talks to Chen Rong there is always playful flirtation involved.

For this reason, the moment he said what he said, all the girls glared sharply at

Chen Rong. Even Wang Wulang snapped his head up, looking unblinkingly at her, a conflicting struggle once again emerging on his face.

Chen Rong casually turned to look at him, her eyes remaining lucid when she was faced with that overwhelming gaze of his.

Her lips drew into a line.

Thereupon, she turned back to Wang Hong, and in a thoughtful yet artless manner, she gently said to him, “Qilang, look how free that white cloud is. If there are no storms, it can go on forever freely like that. But once a storm arrives, it would be filled with anger and grief, turning to rain that washes the Earth anew. Or, it could choose to stay in a place where, whether the wind scatters it or swirls it into darkness and rain, as long as it remembers it was once an idle cloud, then it can continue to be free.”

Regarding Wang Hong, and then Ran Min who was turning around to look, her dark, bottomless eyes slowly curved into crescent moons. Then she smiled and said, “In my mind, Qilang and Lord Ran are both men of honor.”

She stood up, adding: “And there are not very many men of honor in this world.” When she finished, she waltzed away, leaving behind an amused Wang Hong and an astounded Ran Min.

Chen Rong’s voice wasn’t high, enough for only the two men to hear.

Several girls encircled her as soon as she left. A beautiful one who had a pointy chin asked her, “What did you say to them?”

“Tell us, what did you say?” another twittered. “Qilang doesn’t like others to near him in his quiet times. Why were you able to join him, even making him laugh so merrily? Ah Rong of the Chen house, you are not worthy of those two dashing men. It’s best you stay away from them.”

She was immediately met with Chen Rong’s eyes.

Ones that were vaguely murderous.

Aghast, she quickly shut up.

Chen Rong withdrew her gaze and dismissively said, “What does it matter whether I’m worthy or not?” Then she flapped her sleeves and left.

People of this era loved to say cryptic things and loved to ponder a sentence over and over again. Despite being quite simple, Chen Rong's line still made those who heard it begin to ponder over the hidden meanings of its words.

Before long, Chen Rong had mounted her carriage. She drew her curtain down, seeming as though she did not see Chen Wei repeatedly looking her way.

Inside, Chen Rong's lips upturned and exposed a slight sneer.
As darkness descended, torches steadily lit up to illuminate the vast wilderness.

As usual, the youngsters spread damask mats on the lawn and gathered to talk and jest.

Wang Hong reclined against his seat and gazed up to the moon in the sky while saying: "*'Filled with anger and grief, turning to rain that cleanses Earth anew.'* Ran Min, Miss Chen has great respect for you."

Ran Min was different from him. Belonging to the Wang house of Lang'ya, it could be said that Wang Hong's surname alone gave him immeasurable glory. With this surname, whatever he did would be interpreted as courtly. If he went on to do a few things that were worth mentioning, he would even board the seats of the sages.

On the other hand, Ran Min was nicknamed Tumbleweed (2). Though he came from an exemplary lineage, his own father was adopted by a barbarian. As a man whose surname had even changed, no matter what he did, it was difficult to obtain the respect of Central Plains nobles.

2. Rootless, outsider, *etc.*

Chen Rong's praise was certainly meant for the both of them, but though such praise was superfluous for Wang Hong, it was rather rare for Ran Min.

Ran Min was holding a blade of grass on his lips with his arms folded across his chest. Upon hearing Wang Hong's remark, he turned his head and beheld the crowd under his deep eyes.

In the moonlight, scented garments flittered in throngs. They did not seem to be fleeing but sightseeing, more like. His eyes swept across the crowd briefly before returning to the sky again.

He did not answer his companion. Wang Hong also closed his eyes, raising his head to feel the cool autumn breeze and saying nothing more.

The two of them sat that way in silence beside each other, appearing to be very comfortable and unmindful of the other person.

In the meantime, Chen Rong merely kept her head down as she quietly ate her pastries. Opposite her, her cousin Chen Wei was laughing and joking with the other girls.

It was evident to Chen Wei that Chen Rong was sullen tonight and did not appear at all to be in a good mood.

Nonetheless, Chen Rong still hadn't apologized to Chen Wei for her rudeness. Chen Wei's status was much higher than Chen Rong's to begin with. She was already condescending herself to be putting on a smiling face for Chen Rong. At the very least, other girls of Chen house wouldn't be able to do the same.

Chen Wei finally lost her patience. She leaned back to ask: "What did you say when you went to Wang Qilang just now? Why did he look at you that way?"

What Chen Wei asked was what everyone else wanted to ask. The moment she spoke, the two girls sitting beside her turned around and watched Chen Rong as they waited for her answer.

Chen Rong slowly swallowed her pastry before answering: "Nothing much. I was only asking for Wang Qilang's advice on zither playing. As for General Ran, perhaps he might think I'm a bold girl."

A young lady to Chen Wei's left laughed and replied: "You *are* a bold girl."

Chen Rong ignored her.

"Since you were daring enough to discuss zither playing with Qilang, your music must be excellent, then?" the same lady asked.

Chen Rong again did not reply. She only placed the pastry in her hand down and said to Nurse Ping, who was standing behind her: "Bring me my zither."

"Aye, miss."

Chapter 25: Purchasing Food

Surprised, Chen Wei managed to put on a smile as she asked, “Ah Rong, don’t tell me you want to play a song?”

Chen Rong smiled and nodded.

The three girls simultaneously laughed – in addition to several renowned scholars, no one touched music along the way, for everyone knew that with the numerous masters in this large cavalcade, one ought not to show off lest he revealed his own incompetence.

Chen Rong was only a little girl. If she dared to play in front of the masses, might her playing be that good?

“How bold of Miss Chen,” a man’s voice sounded at this time.

Without lifting her head, Chen Rong lightly replied: “When our hearts are not at ease, music will bring us peace. When our hearts are already at peace, music will bring us leisure. Just what about music and poetry is bold, may I ask?”

A few girls wanted to say something but quickly thought better of it. They naturally heard the sublimity in Chen Rong’s words. No matter what they say now, their words would only be made to sound vulgar when juxtaposed with her brilliance.

Nurse Ping had brought a zither to Chen Rong by this time.

Chen Rong placed the instrument down and lifted her fingers. Suddenly, another series of zither notes flowed from the distant wilderness. Leisurely and pleased, they painted a picture of tall mountains and winding streams – the culmination of all things ethereal.

The crowd immediately moved that way. Chen Wei and the other girls rose to follow the sound – such music could only be played by Wang Qilang.

Before she knew it, surrounding Chen Rong was but empty space.

She bowed her head, stroking the strings with her alabaster fingers as she smiled before resting her hands on the strings.

Seeing her not playing, the man who questioned her earlier chuckled and asked, “Miss, why are you hesitating?”

Chen Rong handed the zither back to Nurse Ping and thought to herself:

Though my music is notable, I would only be highlighting my deficiencies in front of Lang'ya Wang Qi's music. What good is it to interrupt his playing? Even so, she softly replied, "A heavenly song is already amongst us. 'Tis enough to banish sorrow."

Tongue-tied, the man had nothing to return.

In an era that worshiped debates, uttering words where others had no answer to was a talent all nobles esteemed.

In her previous life, Chen Rong's temper had been fierce, her speech had been clumsy, and she had always fallen prey to others' verbal traps. After suffering time after time, she found that in this troubled world, if you did not want to become someone else's laughing stock, you must practice the art of the tongue. If she could use sophisticated and humorous words to render others speechless, it would be good for her social advancement.

After she handed the zither to Nurse Ping, while no one paid attention, she quietly rose and retreated to the dark.

Stepping on the round moon, she wandered to the mound. Standing there, Chen Rong gazed down to the corner where Ran Min and Wang Hong resided.

That corner was forever lively and restless.

Chen Rong stared for a while before she dropped her gaze and looked at the ground where her shadow drew long.

The night soon passed.

The team left again the next day.

Whatever it was Ran Min had said, the team began to gain speed that morning.

They progressed in that way for days on out. On moonlit nights, they would charge on until the rat hour (11 pm) before stopping to rest.

Due to the previous encounters with Hu armies, the noble children did not dare to complain even though they felt incredibly miserable.

After ten days of traveling, a city fortress appeared ahead.

Looking at the tall walls, Chen Rong summoned her servants and bade, “I have some gold leaves. After we arrive in the city, the first thing you are to do is buy food. The more, the better.”

Having pressed on the entire way, the grains she brought from Ping had almost depleted. “Pawn all the fabric and silk to buy food with the money,” she added after some thinking.

“Old Shang, borrow from the Wangs, the Yus, and the direct line of Chen ten carriages each. Tell them that I’m worried there would be a food shortage in Nan’yang, so I would like to buy food here.”

Nurse Ping, Old Shang and everyone else looked at her in surprise. Nurse Ping cried: “Miss, we’ll have clansmen in Nan’yang. Why do we have to do this?”

Old Shang also cried: “Miss, thirty carriages can all be borrowed from the Chen house. Why borrow from outsiders?”

“Although Nan’yang is a great city,” Chen Rong frowningly began, “so many nobles and refugees flooding it in such a short time will surely create a food shortage. My father and brother aren’t here, so no matter where I go, I would have to depend on other people. If I don’t want people to give me a hard time, I’ll need adequate food and money. I’ll think of some other way to obtain money, but food will need to be stocked up before we enter the city.”

“Aye.”

She then explained to Old Shang: “I want to borrow carriages from the Wangs and Yus only because I want to let them know of my speculation, lest they resent me by the time we’re in Nan’yang should there really be a shortage of food, saying I knew but did not tell them.”

“Miss, how wise and farsighted you are.”

Listening to Nurse Ping and Old Shang’s praises, Chen Rong wryly smiled: *If I hadn’t experienced it once*, *would I have possessed this wisdom?*

It was eventide by the time the cavalcade arrived in the city. After traveling nonstop for the past few days, the nobles were all exhausted. To finally arrive in a city that was still bustling and peaceful, albeit somewhat shabby, all wished they could stop and not go another step.

As the fleet entered the city, the tiny town became awash in ebullition.

Soon after, Nurse Ping said to Chen Rong outside her carriage: “Miss, food is very expensive here. A bolt of fabric can only be exchanged for nine pecks of rice. In Ping, a bolt of fabric was worth twenty pecks, you know.”

Chen Rong’s decisive voice returned to her: “Exchange everything into food based on that price.”

She took out a bag and handed it to the older woman: “Nurse, here are thirty pieces of gold leaves. Use them all to buy food.” The city was full of nobles at this time; nobody would dare to design for these gold leaves.

“But miss, we’ll need money for everything after we reach Nan’yang. We only have a dozen people, why are we buying so much food?”

Chen Rong’s displeased voice came from inside: “Just do as I say.”

“Aye.”

Because of Chen Rong’s adamant attitude, the servants started moving. That night, they filled all thirty-three carriages with food.

This was a very small town. After Chen Rong’s food had filled the carriages, she heard Old Shang muttering that food had gone up in price again, from a bolt of fabric for nine pecks of rice to one bolt of fabric for five pecks of rice – leaving them with no money left over.

The Wang house and those who also came from the City of Ping did not question Chen Rong’s ability to buy grains though she had dispersed her family wealth. Any noble family would accumulate wealth for decades, and no one would really squander his own emergency funds. Those who dispersed their family wealth for the peasants and then reduced themselves to beggars were fools, not wise men.

Chapter 26: Change in Status

Early next morning, the cavalcade pressed on amid the noble children’s grousing.

Chen Rong was very reticent as of late. Unless she felt the need to appear, she remained quiet the rest of the time.

After twenty days of traveling day and night, they found themselves only a hundred miles away from Nan'yang.

When they heard Ran Min's announcement, the crowd erupted in loud cheers. Only a hundred miles more before they could settle down. There would be no living in tents and constant fear any longer!

As they approached their destination, each clan began to tighten its watch on the children. Chen Rong's carriage was also not allowed to freely come and go. Additionally, she was grouped with the Chen queue and had to stay with other young ladies of the Chens.

As for the position of the carriages, hers was right next to Chen Wei's. This was not a trifling matter, for her status after arriving in Nan'yang was decided at this very moment.

Chen Rong let out a long exhale and finally relaxed. She had often showed off along the way, never giving up any opportunity to display her talent. She at last received her rewards.

One ought to know that a gentlewoman's position in the clan typically decided her marriage. In the past, she was pushed to the outermost peripheral of the Chen unit. As soon as she arrived in Nan'yang, she was almost promised as a concubine to a decrepit man by her uncle, Chen Yuan. Had she not thrown out a series of schemes, she wouldn't have been able to escape that dreadful marriage.

Wang Wulang and his sister who had long paid attention to Chen Rong quickly noticed her change in status. While they were lost in thought, another Wang youngster laughed: "Hey, isn't Ah Rong of the Chen house now a direct descendant? It seems that if any of us Wang wanted to marry her, it'd be a tad difficult to take her in as a concubine." He turned to Wang Wulang and teased him with a grin: "Wulang, you should be content and marry her as your wife. Despite her humble background, she has extraordinary talents, is viewed highly by Qilang and praised by the elders. You can deign yourself to marry her, methinks."

On their journey, Wang Wulang had struggled regarding Chen Rong's matter. The Wang children had taken notice. When the opportunity arose, they all took

the chance to make fun of him.

Wang Wulang harrumphed and responded, “My marriage will be decided by the elders.” Irritation was detected in his voice.

A surge of restlessness suddenly broke out in the forefront at this time.

At the crowd’s puzzlement, Ran Min was seen riding away on his red stallion as he led his army to a smaller path.

Watching their figures going farther and farther, the noble children were quick to cry:

“Why is this happening?”

“What is going on?”

A middle-aged scholar responded: “General Ran has other business to attend to and must leave first. Everyone, we can only rely on ourselves from now on.”

Commotion ensued. “Then what are we waiting for? Hurry, let’s go, else the barbarians will catch up to us,” a young boy yelled out.

“Aye, aye, we should make haste.”

“Hurry along. What are you still standing around for?”

These nobles had been full of complaints all day every day along the way. Now that Ran Min left, they automatically urged themselves on.

Amid the calls and noises, a young lad from Ran Min’s departing group suddenly turned his horse around and galloped straight for them.

He cantered quickly and soon darted to the Chen house to the surprise of everyone. Chen Rong raised her head to see that it was he. She quickly told Old Shang to steer the carriage over.

The person who came had a small, dashing face, fair and soft skin, a tall nose and rosy lips. Enchantingly beautiful, it was indeed Sun Yan.

He looked up at Chen Rong.

Facing him, she smiled and said, “Young Mr. Sun, you’ll have to be careful of swords and arrows now that you’ll join the general.”

Here, she thought to herself that the place he would be following Ran Min to wasn't just any ordinary battlefield. With her voice suddenly lodged in her throat, she took a good long while before saying: "Protect yourself. Only when you stay alive can you take revenge."

Sun Yan grinned, his smile resembling moon beams breaking through the clouds.

He smiled with squinted eyes. "I've come to hear you say this. I'm glad I got to hear it."

He kicked the horse's girth, causing it to trot to Chen Rong's side. Then he leaned in so close that his face almost touched hers.

Pressing against her ear, he used his pubertal voice to huskily say: "Ah Rong of the Chen house, you're not little anymore."

Chen Rong turned a supercilious eye.

Sun Yan's voice continued to pour into her ears. Whether he was intentional or not, his breath blew straight into her ear, raising goose bumps on her skin.

"I'm sure you'll be promised away after you arrive in Nan'yang. But your birthright is too humble that most of these proposals can't be great. Listen to me, don't compromise so easily. You must drag your feet, drag them until the day no one wants you anymore and until I have come back."

Whatever he was thinking, Sun Yan suddenly laughed. He was still cackling by the time Chen Rong shoved him away.

Watching the boy merrily ride off, Chen Rong muttered under her breath: "I can't believe he had the nerve to laugh with that quacking voice. What a grating sound!"

Though she grumbled, at this moment, Chen Rong thought she saw faint tears from the young boy who had suddenly returned.

The team went forth again.

As night fell, they could not go on for the sky was moonless. While they set camp, the youngsters almost caused a scene after some relentless pressuring.

Fortunately, their journey was free from harm. Three days later, the city gates

of Nan’yang came into view.

Looking at the towering gates, the crowd abruptly broke into ecstatic cries. These were cries from people who used all their strength to howl after they had survived the worst. They attracted turning heads at the city gate where numerous people looked in their direction.

A scene of joy ensued. There were still clansmen in Nan’yang, all of whom came out at this time to welcome them. Since he belonged to the primary Lang’ya line of the Wang clan, Wang Qilang even received a reception from the Prince of Nan’yang. As for other clans like the Chens, despite being direct descendants, they were only branches instead of the main household of Yingchuan, and they thus could not meet the city’s master.

Through the hustle and bustle, Chen Rong’s horse carriage followed the Chen clan’s enormous queue and headed for a residence. This residence had belonged to the Chen house of Nan’yang before they vacated it for them.

Room assignment came next. Even though Chen Rong was only a concubine-born daughter of a subsidiary branch, she was the only member of her branch. Furthermore, she had displayed extraordinary wisdom on the journey, and thus was given her own courtyard. This courtyard was a bit removed from the main compound, and next-door was the courtyard belonging to Chen Wei and her younger sister.

Nurse Ping led the group and began to busy themselves with sorting out the rooms and then storing away their food. When everything was taken care of, they went and returned the carriages.

Because she was understaffed, Chen Rong was also put to work. Of course, the tasks she did were of the scholarly variety such as organizing her study and cataloging her books.

This flurry of activities was one that spanned two full days.

[Back] [] []

Whew, we finally got to Nan’yang! That sure took forever.

I’ll try to keep the weekly updates coming but don’t be surprised if they come a little later from now on. Our workload at work isn’t very consistent so I might be

running into a heavy spell as soon as this coming week -_-

27,28,29,30,31,32,33

Chapter 27: Important Affairs

It was the third day, and Chen Rong was sitting in the courtyard that had been newly remodeled while bowing her head to tune the zither.

“Miss,” Nurse Ping came over and whispered to her.

“Hmm?”

“We are running out of money and fabric,” she said, before adding: “Some furnishings will need to be replaced. You’ll also have to acquire new clothes as you have very little right now. Miss, should we mention this to the master?”

Chen Rong’s eyes did not move from the strings when she replied with a no.

“But miss…”

Here, Nurse Ping thought to the extraordinary way her mistress had conducted herself along the journey and calmed herself down as she awaited Chen Rong’s instruction.

Chen Rong placed the zither to the side, looked up to Nurse Ping and said, “Tell Old Shang to listen around and see whether my uncle Chen Gongrang has returned.”

“Aye.”

Seeing Chen Rong starting to play with the strings again and looking to be slightly absent-minded, the nurse asked in curiosity, “Miss, what have you been thinking about these past few days?”

What has she been thinking about? What else but the events that had happened in her previous life? For whatever reason, her memory was becoming blurrier and blurrier. She completely couldn’t recall some of the pieces of the past; even a few of the more crucial events did not come to her mind until the very last minute.

It was making Chen Rong ill at ease.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

At this time, laughter rang out from the courtyard next-door.

Chen Wei's courtyard.

Nurse Ping sighed and couldn't help herself from saying: "The rooms have been visiting one another in these past three days. But when I tried to make appointments on your behalf, people from the Chen house of Nan'yang would only give lukewarm responses and look to be rather unhappy."

"I know." Nan'yang was suddenly overcrowded by people like her and other migrants. Even if the Chen house of Nan'yang was prosperous, she wasn't exactly a favorite guest. Since they didn't want these people to come, they would put forward all kinds of conditions once they asked for a visit.

Of course, she was mainly shunned due to her inferior line. Chen Wei next-door had long mingled with other girls in the clan while her place had been deserted for the past three days with not a single soul stopping by.

In the past, she didn't understand these things and would follow Chen Wei house to house each day in Nan'yang. As a result, everybody thought she was seeking charity. They looked at her as if she was a beggar, never bothering to hide the sarcasm in their words while they thoroughly humiliated her. Of course, it had been for her lack of food and money that she had had to solicit her family.

At this point in her train of thought, Chen Rong bade: "Tell Old Shang he's never to bother the master no matter what we're missing."

"But miss, we're family."

"Do as I say," she ordered frowningly.

"… Aye."

"That's right miss, the master has ordered every lady to attend tomorrow night's banquet. What will you be wearing?"

"Tomorrow night?" Chen Rong asked, rising from her seat. *Tomorrow night? Yes, it would be tomorrow night!* In honor of the Prince of Nan'yang, who already had one foot in the grave, the Chen house would be hosting a night banquet. Back then Advisor Xu, an aide to the Prince of Nan'yang, had taken a

fancy to her looks and demanded to have her as a concubine. At the time, she was so lovestruck with Ran Min that even her dreams were filled with his shadow. She had been thunderstruck to hear this news. Because refusal turned out to be futile, she had even thought to kill herself.

That nightmare was too dark and deep. Even now, her voice would involuntarily tremble at the mention of it.

Nurse Ping looked at her in surprise, nodded and said, “Aye. I heard the Prince of Nan’yang, Qilang of the Wang house, and the Duke of Jiangzuo will all be in attendance.”

Seeing Chen Rong’s quivering lips, the nurse worriedly called, “Miss, miss, are you all right? Are you feeling ill?”

Yes, yes, I can pretend to be ill!

Chen Rong’s ashen face slightly relaxed. She turned to her nurse and hastily said, “Nurse, announce to the master at once that I have been looking ill since we arrived in Nan’yang; that I’ve had no appetite and am now bedridden. Ask him to find a doctor for me.”

“For what reason, miss? I heard all the young ladies and gentlemen will come to tomorrow night’s banquet. If you make a good impression, you might even find a favorable match.”

Chen Rong didn’t want to explain. She snapped impatiently: “Just do as I say!”

“… Aye.” As she watched Chen Rong, the nurse couldn’t stop herself from thinking: *My mistress is acting more and more peculiarly these days.*

By the time Nurse Ping left, Chen Rong’s face was still drained of color.

She knew because she was only a concubine-born daughter of a subsidiary branch, at the banquet in her previous life, her uncle Chen Yuan had agreed to give her to an advisor who was already in his fifties. It was the beginning of everything. She had had to exhaust all means and almost made her reputation into an entangled mess before she could barely escape from that nightmare. At the time, she had heard her uncle say that not only Advisor Xu took a fancy to her, but so did the Prince of Nan’yang.

Her uncle had been filled with regret then. In his opinion, if Chen Rong hadn't acted with impropriety, the Prince of Nan'yang might have asked Advisor Xu to transfer her to him.

In other words, even if she didn't go tomorrow night, even if she painstakingly tried her entire life to elevate her status, even if she wasn't going to be promised to Advisor Xu this time, she still may not be able to escape the claws of the Nan'yang Prince. That lecherous monster had almost a hundred concubines in his inner quarters, assembling every temperament and face that existed on Earth. It was her stunning looks and fiery temper that had caught his attention.

Chen Rong's heart became weary at this thought. She rubbed her hands together while pacing back and forth in the courtyard. What could she do, what could she do?

And yet the laughter from the other side of the wall kept drifting over.

It was becoming more and more audible.

Sensing that the laughing voices had come into her courtyard, Chen Rong gave a glance to Old Shang before turning away and darting into her bedchamber.

Soon, she heard Chen Wei pleasantly asking outside: "Oh, your lady isn't home? There is a banquet tomorrow night and we are all taking a look at our new clothes. Tell your lady to go with us."

"Our lady is sleeping," Old Shang's respectful voice was heard.

"Is that so?" Chen Wei sounded a little disappointed. "The dress for Ah Rong is very beautiful. I had wanted to see how it would look on her."

Standing in her bedchamber, Chen Rong's brain started to buzz when she heard these words. *I remember it now, I remember it now!* It was exactly like this previously. The clan had prepared the most beautiful gown for her and given her gorgeous accessories. When Advisor Xu asked Chen Yuan to let him have her, Chen Yuan's face had seemed a little disappointed. *Yes, that's right*, at the time, the Nan'yang Prince's attention had been lured away by an equally glamorous courtesan. Seeing as the prince did not appear to be interested in Chen Rong, Chen Yuan had agreed to give her to Advisor Xu.

The house of Chen had long meant to give her to the Prince of Nan'yang! And

yet considering his status, even though she was now a direct descendant, she could only be his concubine.

Chapter 28: Uncovered

It had not been long since Chen Wei left when Nurse Ping returned. But she did not bring back a doctor. Seeing Chen Rong pacing to and fro in the room, the nurse relayed: “Master sent you a ginseng, miss. He asked me to take good care of you. He also said…” Her voice was quiet: “He said that your body is in good health and you should not be too gravely ill. Even if you are, you’ve weathered it for a few days already. He also said there will be many young folks tomorrow evening and that you should go and meet them.”

At this juncture, Nurse Ping looked eagerly to Chen Rong, hoping her mistress would agree.

Seeing her nurse’s expression, Chen Rong thought with a headache: *No wonder my uncle doesn’t believe us. How can I be gravely ill with the way my nurse is looking?*

Chen Rong mulled for a moment, lowered her gaze and said, “Say no more. Henceforth you must put on a look of anxiety. If the master sends people over tomorrow, you must tell them my illness is severe and I cannot step down from bed.”

She looked to Nurse Ping and decided to explain to her: “Think about it, nurse. There will be many young men tomorrow night, but with my status, I can only be a concubine, right?” She paused, her obsidian eyes showing a flash of cunning. “Nurse, you didn’t know this, but when we were still in the City of Ping, I faintly heard Uncle Wu say that my father has done something that gained him a respectable reputation and the approval of an important man. He even got a promotion of some sort.”

“Is that true, miss? Is it really?” Nurse Ping hastily exclaimed in joy.

Chen Rong nodded and replied, “That’s what Uncle Wu said. I wonder if it’s true.”

“Why, that’s great news!”

Nurse Ping lit up. Due to her excitement, her tiny eyes were drawn into lines.

She covered her mouth and sounded a little tearful: “How good. Nothing would be better if it’s really so.” She hastily turned and walked toward the door while beginning to fuss: “You’re right. The matches the master lined up for you can’t be favorable at all. I will now tell the servants that you are sick and bound to bed.”

Just as the nurse opened the door, a burst of noises entered their ears. Very clearly, Chen Rong heard a middle-aged woman’s gentle voice: “Where is your mistress?”

“She’s in her bedchamber, ma’am.”

“Is she unwell?”

“This I do not know, ma’am.”

This translation belongs to hamster428.

As their dialogues progressed, Chen Rong dashed to her bed, took off her shoes, and dove under the quilt.

As her curtains dropped, a man loudly announced from beyond the door: “Is Ah Rong inside? Your aunt has brought a doctor here to see you.”

Because these people came out of the blue, Nurse Ping did not have enough time to react. She blankly turned to look at Chen Rong. When she saw the fluttering curtains, she quickly turned around and replied, “My mistress is asleep. Elder, please enter.”

Then she hesitatingly opened the door.

A sumptuously dressed woman in her late twenties led an older doctor in.

Chen Rong’s heart pounded louder with each of their nearing footsteps.

She couldn’t believe her aunt had actually found a doctor for her. One should know that those who came south this time were mostly of the wealthy and delicate breed. It couldn’t be counted how many got sick in the wilderness. With patient demand exceeding doctor supply and considering her standing, it couldn’t be her turn so quickly, could it?

It seemed she was of high value to her clan.

A whiff of fragrance followed the footsteps in. The ornately-dressed woman stepped to her bedside and, not stopping there, reached out to lift Chen Rong's bed curtains while smilingly saying: "I heard that Ah Rong likes to use the whip and so should have the courage of men. I wouldn't think she is shy like ordinary females."

Her voice had barely landed by the time she had the curtains drawn. Following the ray of light, Chen Rong appeared to view. She was lying in bed, her hair had not been let down, and her clothes had not been changed.

The woman gave her a glance and retreated, then turned to the doctor and politely said, "Elder He, please take a look."

The doctor nodded his head and then took a seat by his patient's bedside. Chen Rong dithered awhile before slowly extending her hand.

Suddenly remembering that she had not taken off her outer robe, she rolled up her sleeves and thereby revealed her smooth porcelain wrist so that the doctor can check her pulse.

The doctor rested three of his cold fingers on her wrist. After a few seconds, he let go of her hand, nodded and stood up.

"Elder He, how is she doing?" asked the woman, her eyes acutely bright.

Elder He shook his head replying: "She has adequate energy and blood flow. Some dizziness isn't worrying, there's no need for a prescription."

"See Elder He out."

"Aye."

After the doctor's footsteps had died away, the ornately-dressed woman turned to look at Chen Rong and her servants. She glanced at Chen Rong, who was still buried underneath her quilt, her back turned to her, her eyes closed and body motionless. Smiling, the woman said, "Ah Rong, stop playing around. Your uncle said few men in our clan have better health than yours. How can you fall ill so suddenly like this?"

She didn't wait for Chen Rong's answer when she turned around and reprimanded the nurse and maids: "Your lady is young. If you indulge her

frivolousness the next time, all of you will be expelled from the estate! Hmph, there are presently too many people for the amount of food we have anyway. We actually need to get rid of a few idle ones."

When she finished, she flapped her sleeves and swung her hips to walk out.

By the time the door squeaked close and only until she no longer heard those footsteps, an ashen Nurse Ping recovered to ask: "Miss, what are we going to do?"

Chen Rong slowly pulled her quilt away.

She sat up and brushed aside her tangled hair, clenching the bedsheet before quickly letting it go: "Leave me."

"Aye."

In the evening, a gown for the next day's banquet was sent to Chen Rong's courtyard.

Time slowly trickled by.

Chen Rong sat in her courtyard late into the night, listening to the laughter ringing in from other courtyards.

Chapter 29: Meeting the Elders

Nurse Ping busied herself in the yard for a while and then anxiously watched Chen Rong, who was resting her hands on the zither strings motionlessly.

Seeing as it had gotten to high noon, she went to Chen Rong's side and concernedly prompted, "Miss, you haven't even eaten." She paused. "Marriage is determined by the heavens. I'm sure my lady is blessed. Wang Wulang might even ask for your hand tonight."

Nurse Ping glowed at this thought.

Chen Rong shook her head, held her zither and slowly stood up. "Nurse."

"Aye."

"Tell Old Shang to ask around whether my uncle Chen Gongrang has returned. If he isn't in, then which elders are at the estate?"

"Aye."

Nurse Ping had scarcely lifted her soles when she heard a series of zither notes rising behind her. The intermittent music made it hard for people to breathe.

Old Shang was hasty in nature. Within an hour he had come back to report: "Your uncles Chen Yuan, Chen Lie, and Chen Shu are all home."

Uncle Chen Shu is also here?

"Old Shang."

"Aye, miss."

"Bring the chestnuts and grains in the warehouse out and fill up ten carriages for me."

Nurse Ping and Old Shang looked at each other for a while before Old Shang replied: "Aye."

Loading food was not a simple matter. A dozen servants took four full hours before they could finish. In the meanwhile, Chen Rong had given herself a careful bath and put on the clothes the clan sent last night: a set of soft yellow and

purple outfit.

Nurse Ping was rendered spellbound while she helped Chen Rong comb her hair. She stared at her mistress, murmuring: “I never realized how pretty you are, miss.”

Looking at the beautiful face in the bronze mirror, Chen Rong also rounded her eyes. She touched her face and whispered: “How did I change so much?” At this age, it would have been impossible to possess such looks in her previous life.

In the mirror, her gorgeous features were softened by her beautiful clothes and her youthfulness added a purity to her looks. She resembled a blossoming rose in the early morning dew at this moment, tenderly dazzling, stunningly pure.

“Nurse, we don’t need to do my hair,” said Chen Rong as she watched herself in the mirror.

“Aye.”

“Bring me my wooden clogs.”

“Aye.”

After she was properly dressed, Chen Rong took a deep breath, reached for the dagger hanging on the wall and hid it in her sleeve. Having done all this, she finally stepped out.

Color drained from the nurse’s face when she saw her put the dagger into her sleeve. “Miss?!”

Chen Rong did not look back, casually saying: “Don’t worry. I won’t do anything stupid.”

This translation belongs to hamster428.

Meanwhile, Old Shang’s voice called from outside: “Miss, the chestnuts and grains have been loaded.”

“Good work.” Chen Rong opened the door where she, predictably, was faced with the widened eyes of her servants. “Let’s go see the clan elders.”

“Aye.”

It was near evening, and Uncle Chen Shu's quarters were located on the east side of the estate.

Chen Shu was an astute and sociable man, his speech eloquent. Within the Chen house of Nan'yang, he was second only to Chen Gongrang.

Because he was sociable, carriages were always seen coming and going in his courtyard with youngsters in fancy garments fleeting to and fro. Under the current circumstances, it was a popular gathering place even among the young Chen ladies.

It was a rare sunny day and, in the garden where delighted laughter ceaselessly rang, sparse leaves rattled with the flow of a late autumn wind. A group of courtesans surrounded the guests while a stream of servants served them meat and wine.

Chen Wei and the girls were standing by the swings, looking to several young men in the pavilion while covering their mouths in giggles.

"Ah Wei, I heard uncle has decided to betroth you to General Ran, is that true? He's remarkably handsome, and the most strapping of them all. You're quite a lucky girl."

Another lady belonging to the Chen house of Nan'yang disdainfully scoffed and interjected: "He's merely a commoner who has changed his surname. So what if he is good looking?" Seeing Chen Wei glaring at her, she raised her chin and haughtily added, "But then again, if he doesn't come from such a background, it wouldn't be your turn as a concubine-born woman to marry him."

"Chen Qian, you!"

"What about me?"

"Can you two soften your voices? Look, they're all staring at us."

The two girls simultaneously stopped.

At this very moment, they heard a stream of noises out in front and couldn't help looking in that direction. They were surprised to see Chen Rong's coach leading a mighty train of carriages into the courtyard.

People were enjoying music and autumn leaves swirling in the air. For so

spectacular a queue to emerge in this place at this time, not only the youngsters stopped joking but even the courtesans stopped dancing, all turning around to look.

Chen Rong's coach came to a stop.

Nurse Ping hopped down and helped her lady out.

The curtain lifted.

A milky hand contrasting against soft yellow fabric appeared in front of everyone like beautiful jade.

The youngsters were stunned by what they saw. They straightened their postures and raised their heads, waiting for the person in the carriage with interest piqued.

With the help of the nurse, a beautiful girl appeared before their eyes.

She was Chen Rong.

This translation belongs to hamster428.

At Chen Rong's appearance, Chen Wei and the other girls widened their eyes in astonishment.

Chen Rong looked up to the crowd and then let go of her nurse's hand, brushed her hair to the side, clicked her wooden clogs and gracefully walked toward the youngsters, which was also toward Chen Shu.

These youngsters had seen many women as beautiful as Chen Rong. What made them stare unblinkingly was that her charm was completely different from the others. There was something pure and fresh In her sophisticated ways.

Under their watchful eyes, Chen Rong went to wait in front of Chen Shu's table, curtsied and said with her head bowed: "Good greetings, uncle." She briefly stalled and then, with her head still bowed and her face a little flushed, abashedly said to Chen Shu: "Ah Rong didn't know you're treating guests. I apologize for intruding."

She then gestured her jade-colored hand toward the carriages behind her and stammered: "When I passed by the City of Pu on my way to the south, I suddenly thought that with everyone migrating to Nan'yang, there was surely to be a food

shortage in the city. I've traded all of my silk and money for grains and corn. I've just heard from my second aunt that the estate is low on food. I have no talents and can only offer ten carriages of chestnuts and grains to help you fund your travels."

She was saying she would give all ten carriages of grains to Chen Shu alone, just so he could fund his traveling!

Chen Shu was in his forties, plump and fair-skinned, with honest features. When Chen Rong said 'ten carriages of grains,' a shade of surprise emerged on his affably smiling face.

This young lady was in possession of such great wealth!

Ten carriages. It must be said that each time their clan donated to the Prince of Nan'yang and Ran Min to fight the barbarians, it was also just ten carriages!

He had heard of Chen Rong's generosity and talents but two days ago. Now meeting her, it seemed she was truly as extraordinary as they said!

Seeing a shy-looking Chen Rong, mature though young, Chen Shu could not help letting a pleased smile appear. He stood up, offered his hands and kindly smiled to her. "Why so ceremonious, child? Sit down, take a seat."

She did not take advantage of this opportunity to stand up, shaking her head instead while stammering: "Ah Rong… Ah Rong still has something to say."

Chapter 30: Uncle Chen Shu

“Oh?” Chen Shu chuckled kindly. “If you have something to say, then let’s hear it.”

Now Chen Rong waffled.

She looked left and right, bowed her head and stammered, “I have nothing to say.”

That clearly meant she had something to say.

“Come with me,” said Chen Shu as he rose.

“Aye.”

Watching Chen Rong’s beautiful figure following behind Chen Shu, a young lad asked the Chen servant with interest: “Who is this young lady?”

“Ah Rong of the Chen house, daughter of a concubine-born descendant from a subsidiary branch.”

The young man suddenly deflated, shook his head and sat down again.

Chen Shu led Chen Rong into the guest hall. He walked to the host seat and regarded Chen Rong smilingly. “What is it? Can you tell me now?”

Ah Rong took one step forward, knelt down before him and said, “I’ve come to see you because I want to ask that I not be given to any man as a concubine.”

Chen Shu knitted his brow, staring at Chen Rong for a long while as he thought: *She is only a lass who just arrived in Nan’yang. How can she know the clan has decided on this recent arrangement?*

Since she didn’t nose around, then did she take a guess? But she was only fifteen years old. Not only did she know in advance Nan’yang would have a food shortage, but she also knew of the clan’s arrangements. This young lass was, as told by everyone, an intelligent girl.

Chen Shu studied Chen Rong as he took slow sips of wine. After placing the lid down, he lightly asked, “Did you gift me ten carriages of grains for this?”

His words were very straightforward, brutally direct even.

Chen Rong kept her head down and after some time, she replied in a low voice: “Aye.”

She said ‘aye.’ She actually told him ‘aye’!

This time, Chen Shu was at a loss for words. He placed the cup down and regarded Chen Rong carefully, though there appeared to be no anger on his face.

At this time, Chen Rong seemed to have plucked up all her courage for she raised her head, pressed her lips together, and stubbornly said to Chen Shu, “Uncle, in your opinion, how is my intelligence compared to the other Chen ladies?”

Chen Shu furrowed his brow without answering.

Chen Rong paid no attention and continued: “In Ah Rong’s humble opinion, if the clan sent me to be a man’s concubine, I would only become his plaything. It’d even be normal were I to meet my death after several years because I had married a terrible man.”

Chen Shu couldn’t help looking dour upon hearing her words.

Chen Rong looked at him hopefully and added: “Such arrangement would not benefit the clan. With my ability, I would still be able to help my husband even if I were to marry to a second-tiered noble. If luck is on our side, who’s to say he can’t be a hidden dragon among men and become of great assistance to the Chen house?”

Chen Rong knocked her head on the ground in a kowtow and quiveringly said, “Uncle, both my beauty and wits are uncommon. If these strengths are properly placed, I can be of great advantage to the family. If they are not properly placed, on the other hand…”

At this juncture, Chen Rong suddenly stopped.

She slowly looked up.

Her small face at this time was deathly blanched and her eyes were misty, but her lips were tightly pressed together, on her stubborn face was also a ruthlessness. “If the clan must send me to be someone’s concubine, then I’m

afraid I can no longer say anything should matters arise in the future!”

Could no longer say anything should matters arose in the future!

She was threatening them!

Outrage instantaneously rose in Chen Shu’s heart. He glared at her and was about to snap when he saw tears pitifully rolling down her elegant face. He then recalled that she had just given him ten carriages of grains and helped him in his urgent time of need, and so was unable to lash out.

He sighed at length. “Ah Rong, you’re only a little girl. How can you think to threaten the clan?”

Though his words were grave, there was no malice in his voice.

Chen Rong quickly knocked her head in kowtows and cried: “Uncle, I’m afraid. I’m very afraid…” She choked and then burst into tears.

Chen Shu was a merchant and, therefore, conducted business as the tradesmen do. Other elders would be furious to hear Chen Rong’s threat. He was different, however. From the moment he received ten carriages of chestnuts and grains from Chen Rong, he had wanted to return the favor.

He watched Chen Rong’s beautiful appearance, thinking awhile: *this young girl not only has an elegant deportment, she moreover has wits. As she said, if her strengths can be placed properly, she’ll surely be of help to the clan.*

While he was in rumination, Chen Rong’s suppressed sobbing could be heard, making her seem more pitiful in his eyes.

He at last sighed and rose to say: “Don’t cry. Stand up.”

When he saw Chen Rong obediently stop crying and get on her feet, he nodded and said, “I will consider your request.”

“I thank you, uncle.”

“Go.”

“Aye.”

Chen Rong kept her head bowed and slowly receded outside, her shoulders trembling.

After having gone five steps, she paused. Chen Shu saw her take a handkerchief from her sleeve to carefully wipe away her tears. After she finished, she even produced a mirror and a powder box, and then looked into the mirror to carefully redo her makeup.

This girl did not want to let others know she had just cried. She wanted to leave face for the both of them.

Chen Shu nodded to himself unknowingly.

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At the moment he withdrew his gaze and Chen Rong stowed the powder box into her sleeve, a coldness flashed.

Chen Shu stared wide-eyed in shock. He clearly saw the sheath of a dagger inside Chen Rong's right sleeve.

This little girl had actually brought a personal weapon with her. Perhaps…?

Chen Shu frowned, staring after Chen Rong, who was making a brisk exit, as he carefully considered the situation.

At this time, a guard by the door respectfully asked, "My lord, what should we do about the ten carriages of grains the young lady had brought?"

Ten carriages of grains? Despite being so young, this girl was really the decisive type that could pick up and let go.

"First move them into the west warehouse."

"Aye."

"Go tell the young lady, by which I mean Ah Rong, that per my permission, she does not need to appear at the banquet tonight."

"Aye."

"Tell her it's already known that there is a beautiful lady in the Chen clan. There won't be much that I can do, sigh…"

"Aye."

In addition, Chen Shu thought to himself: *She's a young orphan girl who is seeking shelter from the clan. No matter what, I cannot take her food*

unrecompensed.

For this reason, he instructed: “Send her eight carriages of silk and two of fabric, give her twenty gold leaves as well.” These goods came out to precisely worth slightly more than the current price of ten carriages of grains.

Chapter 31: Courtship?

Chen Rong’s courtyard.

Nurse Ping busily greeted the crowd as she beamed happily. She had been worried about the shortage of food just moments ago, but everything had been replenished moments later. There were so much silk and fabric that not only could they be used to pay for new furnishings and clothes, they were enough to buy an ordinary house.

Looking at the money and goods, then looking back at Chen Rong, who was still in contemplation, Nurse Ping felt that her mistress was undoubtedly profound and unpredictable. It had been nerve-wracking starting from the moment Chen Rong headed out with her dagger. She never imagined that not only did she come back safe and sound, she even got her uncle to hold her in high regard.

Time flew by in a flash.

Soon, the sun sank to the west and lanterns were lit.

Having been instructed by Chen Rong, not only did the maids stay inside, but the servants were also ordered to make no sound and light no lanterns. The entire courtyard fell into a hushed silence.

With the faint crescent moon hung in the sky, sounds of reeds, flutes, and pipes mingled with one other as they diffused across the land and into the air, sprinkling a ray or two of melancholic autumn.

Standing in the courtyard, one could hear laughter from the direction of the main compound.

Tonight’s gathering was in fact very important to every clansman of Chen. Though this banquet, the nobles from the north would be telling the nobles in Nan’yang that they had returned.

The youngsters, in particular, depended on this banquet to let others know that there are still this young lad and that young lady in the house of Chen waiting to be married.

Chen Rong would never reject this banquet had she not remembered the past. She not only wouldn't refuse, but she would also even try her best to showcase herself. As best as she could, she'd make all of Nan'yang elites remember her.

Chen Rong lowered her eyes. She stepped onto the dry leaves on the path and walked to the woods behind her courtyard.

On the sky was the moon, on the ground was a lone figure. 'Twas the eternal scene of loneliness.

She knew not how much time had passed by the time she heard footfalls approaching behind her.

Following bright lantern light, several servants stepped into her courtyard. Without waiting for Old Shang to ask, a clear voice arrived: "Is Ah Rong of the Chen house in?"

Looking for me?

Ah Rong shivered.

While Old Shang hesitated to answer, Nurse Ping quickly replied, "My lady is ill and bedridden."

The servants briefly looked at one other, one saying: "Qilang of the Wang house did not see Miss Chen at the dinner and thus asked after her. Lord Chen sent me to invite Miss Chen over."

Pausing, the man standing in front shouted: "Even the Prince of Nan'yang dares not to offend the godly Wang Qilang. Nurse, please ask your lady. If she can make it, then she should get dressed and see Qilang. This is a very rare opportunity."

His words were very sincere.

Nurse Ping knew if this man dared to say so, then it must be the truth. As he said, this opportunity was a very rare one.

Unconsciously, she looked to where Chen Rong stood in the dark.

She continued to watch for some time, but she did not hear any sound coming from that dark place.

Sighing to herself, Nurse Ping pretended to walk to the bedchamber's door. After raising her voice to call a few times, she turned to the servants and said, "My apology, it seems my lady is asleep."

"What a pity." The two servants in the front bowed and turned to go. Only until they turned did Nurse Ping discover that they were wearing uniforms belonging to the Wang house of Lang'ya! They were really people who served Wang Qilang, no wonder their speech was gentle, their manners courteous. No wonder!

All of a sudden, Nurse Ping felt rather upset. She looked to where Chen Rong was standing in the dark with a flash of complaint in her eyes.

As soon as the lights retreated, Chen Rong came out from the shadows. She ignored Nurse Ping's complaining eyes as she stared straight to the hustle and bustle in the main hall and said, "It's indeed a rare opportunity."

In the dark, Chen Rong's eyes shone stunningly bright.

"Nurse, what if a young lady courts Wang Qilang in front of everybody in this case?" she suddenly asked at length.

Nurse Ping blinked her small eyes in confusion.

Chen Rong did not look at her. She frowned, continuing to stare at the main hall. After a long while, she murmured: "As long as he does not reject me too badly, as long as he leaves me a little face…"

At this time, Nurse Ping finally understood what she meant. "Miss, you must not. How can you match Qilang of the Wang house? You'll only become a laughing stock to the people of Nan'yang!"

Chen Rong dropped her gaze. After pondering for a while, she suddenly turned and walked toward her bedchamber.

Nurse Ping was most familiar with her character. One look and she knew her mistress had already made up her mind. She anxiously picked up her pace to catch up to her, caught her sleeves and hastily pleaded, "Miss, miss, don't! You

must not! Don't you still have your uncle Chen Shu? He holds you in high regard. If you need anything, he'd be willing to help."

Chen Rong did not look back, merely saying: "He will not. He gave me ten carriages of silk and fabric in addition to gold leaves; he no longer owes me anything. With his personality, he certainly will not." His meaning was clear. He meant just to help her this once. If the Prince of Nan'yang were to demand her tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, or if other elders insisted, she would be forced to a dead end.

Here and now, Qilang of the Wang house actually mentioned her in front of the others. The importance he placed on her was enough to attract the Prince of Nanyang's attention. At the prince's single word, she could very well be carried into his estate tonight, and hereupon, there'd no longer be an Ah Rong of the Chen house in this world!

No, she must control all developments in the palm of her hand! Even if she only had half the certainty!

'Creak,' Chen Rong gave the bedroom door a hard push, then flapped her sleeves and subtly threw Nurse Ping's hand off.

She went inside for two hours.

Two hours later, Chen Rong walked out. She was still herself, but she had put on the set of yellow and purple gown she had worn during the day.

Her hair was still loose, her feet fitted with wooden clogs.

The only difference was that there now hung a jeweled dagger at her waist. When she walked, the studded scabbard collided with the jade ornament on her sash and made a nice jingle sound.

Nurse Ping couldn't believe her lady went inside for two full hours only to do nothing. She couldn't help widening her eyes at Chen Rong.

Chen Rong smiled at Nurse Ping's expression and then bent down to pick up her zither.

She walked past her nurse, her wooden clogs clopping on the ground, as she unhurriedly headed out front. Her inky hair draped her shoulders and swung

with each of her steps. Watching her back, Nurse Ping secretly admired: *My lady has such a lovely figure. Not only among the Chen ladies, but there are also few gentlewomen in the whole of Nan'yang who have her grace and charm.*

She stood frozen for a moment and then quickly chased after Chen Rong at the time she realized that she had disappeared. The nurse then thought that Chen Rong, being so stubborn, would not listen to her words. She'd better call Old Shang over. And so she hastily turned and ran toward the inner courtyard.

In the meanwhile, Chen Rong had walked out of her home to the clopping of her clogs.

Chapter 32: A Phoenix's Love Song (1)

Though Chen Rong's gait was seemingly relaxed, in reality, she was walking very fast. By the time Nurse Ping and Old Shang chased out, she had arrived at the main hall.

There was heavy traffic here, with both vehicles and people flittering to and fro. Not ones to dare raise their voices in such location, Nurse Ping and Old Shang could only pick up the pace and secretly try to dissuade Chen Rong.

The banquet had gone on for four hours by now. The night sky was illuminated by a bright moon, chilled by a passing wind. The feast would probably end within another hour.

Chen Rong kept her head low. At the time she left, she had deliberately powdered her face to make it pale. Her diminished liveliness, in turn, gave her a touch of demureness.

Chen Rong arrived outside of the main hall. Seeing Nurse Ping and Old Shang nearing, she ordered: "Prepare a table for me."

"Miss!"

"Quickly!"

"But miss –"

Listening to the pair of them steadfastly dissuading her, Chen Rong sighed as she was forced to explain: "Nurse, Old Shang, I heard today from my uncle that the clan means to give me as a concubine to the Prince of Nan'yang."

Her servants covered their mouths, uttering a low gasp.

Fortunately, the three of them stood in a shaded area and did not call attention to themselves.

Chen Rong smiled wryly. “You must’ve heard about the hundreds of different women in his inner quarters. As if that’s not enough, he adds more to his collection each day! My life is as good as gone if I join his harem.” She sighed and barked, “Go, I have my plans.”

“B-but…”

“Say no more. Think about it, have I made a wrong decision in the past few months?”

These words were actually justified. They looked at each other and then retreated.

In only moments, Nurse Ping had moved a table and placed it under a large tree.

Chen Rong raised her head and stared at the lighted hall. There, ringing laughter and merry music filled the air. The people inside all seemed to her an unearthly type, as though they never had any worries or troubles like her.

Chen Rong lowered her eyes and slowly knelt down by her table.

And then she slightly lifted her hands.

Forthwith, a series of flowing notes wound their way around strands of autumn wind and gradually rose.

Like the melancholic season, the music lightly came and lightly went. Besides softly tickling its listeners, it did not leave behind any other message.

Gradually, the zither notes deepened and soared to the sky. They passed through layers of clouds and across marshes and fields, and then abruptly, a shadow came into view. Thereupon, the song’s spirit was no longer the same, as if the heart was finally old…

Chen Rong was playing “The Phoenix’s Love Song” (1) that Sima Xiangru had played to court Zhuo Wenjun long ago. But because their circumstances were different, her song had an overwhelming melancholy of one who yearns for the

unattainable and the despair of one who admires from afar and never to join wings.

1. 鳳求凰 (lit. The Male Phoenix Seeks The Female Phoenix) – known in history as the song that famous poet Sima Xiangru of Western Han played to court his wife, the widowed Zhuo Wenjun.

Such melancholy and despair gave this courtship song a faint desolation as well as a sadness of separation. It contained part acceptance and part wistfulness.

The guest hall was still noisy at the time Chen Rong's zither sounded. Gradually, however, the music slowly trickled into the merry scene and became its main melody.

Slowly, one or two individuals came out, looking in the direction of the music.

And slowly, more people came out of the hall, their jesting sounds dissolving into the floating music.

Chen Rong did not notice any of this.

She merely kept her head down, her porcelain hands sweeping across the strings, her facial features shadowed by the season's sorrow. In the silver light, her small, exquisite face was slightly pale, but the pallor contrasted her yellow and purple gown to reflect a certain ruefulness.

Under the moonlight, sparse leaves obscured her beautiful face in half darkness.

Chen Wei widened her eyes, staring in disbelief at the zither player under the tree. After staring for a while, she laughed out loud along with the nearby girls.

"Heavens, isn't this Ah Rong of Ping? Why is she playing 'The Phoenix's Love Song'?"

"Heehee, this is definitely very interesting."

"I wonder whom she is playing it for?"

"Yes, I wonder which gentleman she has fallen for?"

"No matter which gentleman he is, with her status, she'd only be able to confess her feelings in heartbreak this way."

Ripples of laughter, murmurs, and judgment replaced all the pipes, songs, and dances.

Increasingly more people followed out in the courtyard. Among them were youngsters who poured out to appraise the solitary figure playing under the tree canopy.

Before anyone could realize, the laughter diminished with each passing second.

Perhaps it was due to the fact the zither player had seemed a little too lonely. Her loneliness was one of eternal solitude, of never receiving love, and of admiring one's love from far away.

In this world, what can be more painful than the thirst for the unattainable and the inability to near those we love?

Listening to the clamor outside growing louder, the plump Prince of Nan'yang turned his head and asked in surprise: "What is happening?"

An aide in his fifties went to his side, smiled and answered, "I'm not sure which lad she has fallen for, but a beautiful maiden from the House of Chen is playing 'The Phoenix's Love Song'."

The Prince of Nan'yang chuckled and said, "Is that so? What a romantic thing to do! Go, go, let us also take a look." He turned around and called, "Qilang, let's go together." No sooner had he called than he began to laugh awkwardly: "It seems Qilang has long gone."

"Aye, Qilang is young lad after all. How can he not be curious when something so amorous occurs?"

"Enough talking. Let's go and see."

"Aye, aye."

Supported by his aide, the Prince of Nan'yang slowly stepped out. As others made way for him, he came behind Wang Hong and saw that he was staring into the courtyard. The prince laughed heartily while asking: "Which beauty has caused Qilang to stare in beguilement like this?"

When he finished, he also turned his head looking in the direction of the music.

At this glance, the Prince of Nan'yang froze as his eyes affixed on Chen Rong unblinkingly, asking his aide: "This young lady is exceedingly beautiful. Is she a daughter from Chen house?"

The scrawny advisor was in his fifties. Also a lecherous man, he knew exactly what was in the prince's mind. He leaned over and whispered: "Not only is she a Chen lady, but she is also the lady that Wang Qilang was asking about at the banquet just now!"

"Is that so?"

"I dare not deceive you."

"Good, good." The Prince of Nan'yang cheerfully turned his head to take a serious appraisal of Chen Rong. The more he looked, the more brightly his eyes lit up.

Upon seeing this, the advisor stroked his sparse beard and smilingly said, "This damsel is even prettier than the courtesans at the banquet. Your Highness, you're quite lucky when it comes to women." He again leaned into the prince and whispered, "Chen Yuan had mentioned her to me just now at the banquet. He also said that if you like her, she can be sent over at any time."

The Prince of Nan'yang was pleased to hear this. He slapped his thigh and said in good humor: "Good, good. Good for Chen Yuan!"

Chapter 33: A Phoenix's Love Song (2)

While the two of them were standing there whispering, nearby, Wang Hong was as still as water. He strode to the front, and in a flash, had come ten paces in front of Chen Rong.

As if their hearts were linked, Chen Rong looked up upon his arrival.

Her face flushed at first, head bowed in fluster. But before long, she quickly looked up again.

She opened her eyes wide to look bravely at Wang Hong – her eyes becoming increasingly bright. For perhaps she was too discomposed, her hand trembled and plucked a few wrong notes in a row.

The crowd erupted in laughter.

These voices seemed to have no impact on Chen Rong. She merely kept her gaze on Wang Hong and then, slowly, she looked down again. The moment she lowered her head, a flush of red dyed her jade-like neck.

“Oh, could this young lady be playing the ‘Phoenix’s Love Song’ for Qilang?”

This line broke the calm, sparking a wave among the crowd. Wang Wulang, who stood next to Wang Hong, was also watching Chen Rong with a sharp gaze. He was moving toward her at the time he heard these word. He knitted his brow and involuntarily stopped.

As if to answer the man’s question, Chen Rong lowered her gaze and slowly rose, then she curtsied to Wang Hong from behind her table. Afterward, she bowed her head and let her dark, willowy hair cascade down her white collar. She trembled in the autumn breeze as she fearfully said, “I was very happy when I heard that Qilang is here.”

Pausing, she took a deep breath before shakily raising her voice again: “I hazard to ask the gentleman: does my rendition of the ‘Phoenix’s Love Song’ please you, sir?”

Her words were followed by a stretch of silence.

Wang Hong was dumbfounded.

Wang Wulang was dumbfounded.

The Prince of Nan’yang, too, was dumbfounded.

Chen Yuan, Chen Wei, and everyone else were all dumbfounded.

In this silence, Chen Rong shook so much that she could hardly speak. “The song is vulgar and so am I. But in consideration of my sincerity, I hope you’ll give it a listen.”

When she finished, she sat down again.

Carrying a wandering sorrow, the music floated in the air again.

A terrible silence still enveloped the crowd.

The host of eyes watched Chen Rong for a long while and then relocated to Wang Hong.

At length, a strange voice spoke up: “Qilang, this lass is quite a looker. Since she harbors such feelings, why don’t you just take her in as a concubine? Make tonight the wedding night and fulfill her love.”

Upon the arrival of this voice, as if frightened, Chen Rong’s fingers trembled and issued a series of sharp broken notes.

With everyone’s eyes on her, her face blanched white and she bit her lips to articulate: “No one, since the days of yore, plays the ‘Phoenix’s Love Song’ to become a concubine.”

Silence returned at her words.

This silence lasted but a moment. It was uncertain who took the lead, but a burst of laughter roared from all sides, rising louder and louder.

Facing this laughter, Chen Rong’s face was as white as a sheet. She dropped her gaze and curtsied, then picked up her zither and receded in fright. Her song hadn’t concluded.

Seeing her recede, the jesting noises increasingly blared. Soon, the entire courtyard were filled with laughter from the young nobles.

As the amusement grew, suddenly, the music just moments ago now resumed from the green path outside.

Ah Rong of the Chen house was actually continuing her song.

Chen Wei and the others were amused. A young lad excitedly cried out: “Let’s go, let’s go. Let’s look at the young lady who dares to confess to Lang’ya Wang Qi.”

The others at once took up his suggestion. They followed the music and left the courtyard.

By the time everyone stepped out of the yard, the ‘Phoenix’s Love Song’ finally entered its conclusion. After Chen Rong had finished playing the last few notes, she bowed her head and held the zither to stand up. Faintly smiling under the moonlight and letting her fringe cover her forehead, her hoarse voice breathed an enchanting ring in the night sky: “One ‘Phoenix’s Love Song’ that speaks of infinite loneliness and sorrows – Sima Xiang’ru did not know he’d be able to

marry Zhuo Wenjun when he played this rhapsody that year. His song was but a cocoon for his feelings. If the person he wished to hear it did not hear it, then his heart would be shrouded in its silk-spun case. I, too, am like him. I do not ask that my feelings be returned. I do not ask for an outcome. My wish was merely to let you know."

Upon the deliverance of her profession, Chen Rong held her zither and again bowed toward Wang Qilang, then turned her head and unhesitatingly turned to leave.

At this time, an autumn wind passed by, fluttering her hip-length hair and gown, making it seem as if her figure was gradually fading into the night.

"My, isn't Chen Rong shameless to actually dare say such things?" the 7th lady of the Wang house snickered on the sideline.

A few girls laughed along with her.

"Silence!" Wang Hong frowningly shouted at this juncture, startling everyone.

In this muteness, Wang Hong raised his head to stare after Chen Rong's retreating figure, slowly saying: "Nobody is to ridicule her for this matter hereupon."

He then flapped his sleeves and walked away.

Only until he disappeared behind the arched doorway with his servants did the scholars snap awake. Chen Yuan watched Wang Hong's retreating figure in the distance, stunned. After a long time, he startlingly turned around to look at the Prince of Nan'yang.

There was a gloomy irritation on the prince's plump face. Seeing Chen Yuan looking in his direction, he glared and shouted: "Let's go!"

"Aye, my lord."

The aide escorted his master to where the carriage was parked, and when he saw Chen Yuan chasing out, gave a wink.

Chen Yuan halted.

He was discovering that in just a short while, the full hall of guests had dwindled to half. Those who remained were small groups of youngsters prattling

about what had just transpired.

Chen Shu came to stand behind Chen Yuan, sighingly saying: “What did I say? This lass is very headstrong and prickly, but you wouldn’t listen. Well, it’s great now. The Prince of Nan’yang got thwarted just as he became interested in her. Aren’t you just setting yourself up to irritate him?”

The Prince of Nanyang’s status was such that even if he wanted Chen Rong, he could no longer take her in. He could not make her his concubine knowing she harbored admiration for Qilang, even if all it was, was admiration. If he took in such a woman, how would he be able to face the public’s scrutiny?

At this thought, Chen Yuan gritted his teeth bitterly and growled: “I won’t let her get her way! Hmph, as soon as this matter dies down, I will send her to the Prince of Nan’yang!”

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Chapter 34: General Ran's Return

Chen Rong came to face with Nurse Ping's and Old Shang's teary eyes when she got back to her courtyard, both looking at her sadly.

"What's wrong?" she asked in surprise.

Nurse Ping dabbed her tears with her sleeve and woefully said, "I didn't know your admiration for Qilang of the Wang house was that deep!"

Old Shang likewise sighed: "Miss, what kind of person is Wang Qilang? It's best you forget him from now on."

Chen Rong was too dumbfounded to laugh. Without bothering to explain, she turned away and headed for her bedchamber.

The next day, as Chen Rong was going through her morning grooming, female chattering and laughter could be heard outside her doors. As though she could sense some movements inside, a young lady called in, "Ah Rong, come out to play with us."

Another girl followed along: "Are you busy, Ah Rong? The water on the outskirts of town is very blue and clear. Everybody is going there."

"These people are up to no good!" Nurse Ping angrily muttered.

She next worriedly looked to Chen Rong. However, looking back from the mirror was the same faint smile that often appeared ever since the lady concluded her zither piece. Nurse Ping could never explain this smile whenever she saw it.

Chen Rong stood up and opened her door.

The door squeaked open, and all the young ladies turned to look. They watched Chen Rong with interest as she slowly stepped out, every single one of them suppressing their laughter.

Chen Rong did not seem to notice any of this. She walked to the girls and asked, "Are you going to the purlieus?"

Chen Wei was the closest to her. She scurried to her side, tugged her sleeve and whispered: “Are… are you all right?”

She was met with Chen Rong’s bright eyes. Looking at Chen Wei, Chen Rong nodded her head and faintly replied, “Very well, thank you.”

Another Chen girl covered her smile. “When the banquet started yesterday, your servants said you were bedridden and even requested for a doctor. It turned out you were not sick from the fatigue of traveling, but you were lovesick from the fatigue of the heart.”

Chen Rong did not refute nor paid attention to her words. She knew this would be her plight to face from the moment she made her decision last night.

The girls’ smiles did not fade because they did not receive Chen Rong’s response. The eyes they used to watch her at this time contained a trace of sympathy in addition to scorn. Were there even girls in this world who did not love the celestial Qilang of the Wang house? Ah Rong was ultimately just another pitiful soul.

At this moment, Chen Wei pulled on Chen Rong’s hand and led her to the carriage: “Let’s go.”

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This was the first time Chen Rong stepped out of the house since she came to Nan’yang.

The city looked much cleaner compared to several days ago. The beggars had also disappeared.

A girl poked her head out and laughed at Chen Rong, who was looking around. “Ah Rong, there’s no need to look. Qilang isn’t here.”

Laughter rose as soon as she said these words.

Another girl exclaimed: “Ah Rong is famous now. Quite a few people are asking about you. Hee hee, our estate will be rowdy from now on.”

Amid these girls’ laughter, Chen Rong remained to gaze down dutifully. Her calm expression was a look that said ‘no matter what people may say, it has nothing to do with me.’

Fewer beggars on the streets made space for more carriages. Elegant coaches ran along in a steady stream. Each time one drove by, a burst of perfume would drift into one's nostrils.

The closer they got to the outskirts, the more carriages gathered. There were many fashionable youngsters, many powdered faces, and even more perfumed clothing.

Presently well into autumn, the southern purlieus were a barren scene. The river had dried up and in addition to an open field, there was not much scenery to see.

Nevertheless, it was a rare balmy day. For that reason, some carriages belonging to the young aristocrats could even be seen.

Young lads quickly neared when they saw the girls' carriage. About seven or eight pairs of bright eyes swept across the girls. By the time they got to Chen Rong, one exclaimed: "Could it be that this lady is…?"

Before he could finish, one of the Chen girls from Nan'yang laughed. "She is indeed Ah Rong."

A dozen pairs of eyes turned, simultaneously looking at Chen Rong.

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"You are quite brave, miss, for picking Wang Qilang as your heart's desire!" cackled a young lad.

As soon as he opened his mouth to say this, another lad who stood beside the carriage, his long robe flapping in the wind and his face abnormally pale, at once coldly smiled: "Wang Qilang said no one is allowed to ridicule her!"

All was silent.

The young man turned his head toward Chen Rong and seriously appraised her for a while before sighing: "'I do not ask that my feelings be returned. I do not ask for an outcome. My wish was merely to let you know…' In reality, Ah Rong of the Chen house is just someone in love. Those who fall in love are bound to get hurt. Why rub salt in someone's wounds?"

His last sentence was directed at the Chen girls. They pursed their lips, glaring

at him and Chen Rong in irritation, their expression of mockery and jest quite clear.

A legitimate daughter of the Nan'yang house of Chen named Chen Qi opened her mouth wanting to refute this man. Her fellow sisters tugged at her sleeves and said, "This person likes to pass on messages. Say no more for now lest you offend Wang Qilang."

Chen Qi quickly closed her mouth. She directed her glare at Chen Rong and said in frustration, "She's done something so preposterous yet she still gets protected by Qilang? Hmph, what a joke."

Seeing that the atmosphere had gotten stiff, Chen Wei quickly commented, "Let's not stand around here. The warm weather is perfect to enjoy the autumn scenery. That's right, Ah Rong, your zither playing is so good, why don't you offer everybody a tune?"

Upon hearing her, Chen Rong looked up for the first time. She was about to respond when a sudden surge of rumbling hooves emerged.

The youngsters turned at the same time to look unto the dusty distance.

The young man who had just come to Chen Rong's rescue was quick to purse his lips in displeasure. "It's that commoner Ran Min!"

Chen Wei was flushed with anger. Her lips moved to dispute, but she stopped herself in time.

However, Chen Qi who stood next to her gazed in the direction of the dust and laughed instead: "General Ran is as tall and majestic as the snow-capped mountains – an admirable man."

The young man scoffed but offered no rebuttal.

Chen Rong also raised her head to look toward the road. A few hundred knights scattered smoke and dust under their horses' hooves, obscuring the sparse woods on either side. Watching the fluttering banners ahead, as well as the handsome male on his crimson stallion, Chen Rong quietly said, "He came in from the south gate."

After saying so, whatever she may be thinking, Chen Rong turned her gaze to

Chen Wei.

Like her, there were several people looking at Chen Wei. Under the crowd's scrutiny, Chen Wei's small face faintly blushed. Her autumn-like eyes dazedly followed the red horse as she softly replied: "Yes, he's come back."

Chapter 35: Ran Min's Marriage

Chen Wei had been a little distracted up to this moment. By the time Ran Min and his men disappeared from sight, she had twice proposed to go home.

By the third time, Chen Rong offered, "Ah Wei, let's go home together."

Chen Wei was thrilled to hear this. She looked at Chen Rong with sparkles in her eyes and hurried to reply: "Yes, yes."

While sitting inside the carriage on their way back, with her cheeks flushed bright, Chen Wei wrung her skirt and moved her lips awhile before turning to Chen Rong and said, "Ah Rong, we're just the same, you and I."

"Why do you say that?" Chen Rong looked up at her in surprise.

Chen Wei's eyes were amazingly bright when she stared to the road ahead and replied: "You are in love with Qilang of the Wang house while I am in love with General Ran." She squinted and then added a little smugly: "However, the person you love is the one and only Wang Qilang. You'll only look at him from afar your whole life. But I, I will be marrying my love in the very near future."

Really? Chen Rong quietly sneered and then turned to look in the other direction.

Chen Wei did not notice her expression for she was immersed in her own reverie. At the thought that she could see her admired soon, her grip on her skirt fabric tightened with each twisting motion.

While the two were lost in thought, the driver's voice came to them from outside: "Misses, we've arrived at the estate."

"Oh? Very good."

Chen Wei recovered and quickly grabbed Chen Rong's hand to dismount the carriage. Because she jumped in haste, Chen Rong staggered and, if not for her quickness, had fallen to the ground.

Slowed down by Chen Rong who almost fell, Chen Wei impatiently cast her cousin's hand away and said, "Ah Rong, I'll go on first to change my clothes."

And then she was quickly off.

Chen Rong stared after Chen Wei's back as she thought to herself: *She is unusually eager. Is Ran Min coming directly to the Chen estate?*

While she wondered about this point, she slowly walked forward.

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Tall bare trees reached for the sky on either side of the road. Each time the wind blew, withered leaves would float to the ground. Chen Rong walked on, suddenly feeling a chill. She swiftly pulled on her sleeves, turned the corner, and walked toward the edge of the woods.

The windy currents alleviated once she was in the woods. She slowed down and let her thoughts wander again.

It was after more than an hour of aimless walking that a burst of boisterous laughter rang from behind the rockery to her left. Chen Rong strolled to the sound.

There, Chen Wei's shy voice came to her ears: "Ran da'ge (Brother Ran), this time, this time, you'll…" She was stuttering in her bashfulness when Ran Min's strong and deep voice had impatiently snapped: "Speak up! Come talk to me when you've thought of what you want to say."

His tone was stern and irritated. Stunned, Chen Wei's blushing face drained white, tears also threatening to fall.

Ran Min frowned and turned to go at this sight. Chen Wei hastily held onto his sleeves, crying. "No, don't. I…"

At this time, a lovely crystalline voice spoke on her behalf: "General Ran, my cousin wanted to ask how long will you stay this time now that you're back?"

Chen Wei repeated in delight: "Yes, yes."

She gratefully turned her head to look at Chen Rong, who was walking out from the woods. "Ah Rong, you're here."

The one who came was indeed Chen Rong.

Ran Min had turned around when she last spoke, staring at her quietly. His eyes were as paralyzing as she remembered them, as if there was an eternal flame burning in them yet also as if they were a bottomless abyss. This time, however, was she perhaps seeing from them a hint of curiosity and interest?

Chen Rong raised her head to meet his gaze.

She moved away after a brief glance, turned to Chen Wei, smiled and said, “Ah Wei, General Ran is accustomed to the battlefields, so he prefers things to be straightforward. When you speak to him, you must be direct.”

Chen Wei’s face suddenly darkened. She watched Ran Min, who was watching a charming Chen Rong. Suddenly, she stewed with an intense loathing for Ran Min’s excessive attention to Chen Rong and for the knowing tone of Chen Rong toward him. Moreover, how could Chen Rong, being so bold and direct, possibly understand the coquettish way of a young maiden like her?

Because of her distaste and differences, Chen Wei pursed her lips to say: “I naturally cannot compare to you. You dared to play ‘The Phoenix’s Love Song’ last night for the celestial Wang Qilang in the presence of so many people. But this is how I am. I cannot do that embarrassing kind of thing.”

Ran Min scowled at her words. There was a flash of displeasure on his handsome face at the time he beheld two ladies of the Chen house.

As Chen Wei was beginning to regret her words, he turned away and strode toward the grassy front where the elders were congregating without saying another word.

Chen Wei was flushed with anger; she furiously stomped on the ground and turned to berate Chen Rong: “You-you-you why did you have to appear? Now you’ve made General Ran angry with me.”

Chen Rong gave her a brief glance and then moved to go around her. When she passed by Chen Wei, she gently advised: “Ah Wei, I had meant well, and I was only trying to help. Why are you so hostile toward me? A man like General Ran does not like petty women causing a rowdy scene.”

After leaving behind these words, she went ahead without turning back.

Behind her, Chen Wei sputtered furiously: “Who do you think you are? Who told you to put on that knowing look in front of him?”

Chen Rong started at these words, but her feet did not stop. She turned away with the intention to go home.

Just then, Chen Yuan, who was sitting on the grass to enjoy the courtesans’ performances, suddenly raised his voice: “Ah Rong, come here.”

Chen Rong halted.

She looked up and slowly forced a smile onto her lips. Then she fisted her hands and walked to Chen Yuan with her head kept low.

By the time she approached, Chen Shu was in the middle of gaily conversing with Ran Min: “General Ran, that girl there is Ah Wei. She’ll be sixteen in a few months. You were talking to her just moments ago. How do you feel about the lass?”

Chen Shu’s tone had carried a touch of spontaneous pleasantry. It seemed he was only saying what he said offhandedly and meant nothing more.

Ran Min took a swig of his wine. After a long while, he insouciantly replied, “Let’s talk about this some other time.”

He caught everybody by surprise. Chen Shu was taken aback. Chen Rong, too, whipped her head up to look at him.

Chen Yuan retrieved his attention from Chen Rong and turned around to look at Ran Min, asking unhappily: “What do you mean, General?”

Ran Min placed his cup back on the table and curtly answered, “Merely that I do not want to talk of marriage these days.”

Four sides quieted at his words.

Everyone looked to one another. Originally, the Chen house invited Ran Min and he also accepted their invitation to come. For both sides, the intention had been very clear. That is, the Chens would betroth one of their daughters to him and he had also agreed. What’s more, hadn’t Chen Yuan talked to him about Chen Wei on the way to Nan’yang?

In all of Nan’yang and in addition to the prince, the Chens were the most

prominent nobles. With this said, this union not only concerned the house of Chen and Ran Min, but having been tacitly agreed by the prince, it was also an affair between Nan'yang and Ran Min.

He had come to the estate, met with Chen Wei, and spoken to her. Did he mean to say he was having second thoughts?

Ran Min looked up only to come to face with a stunned crowd. His dashing countenance all the more rendered people spellbound with the sudden birth of a smile. He poured himself a cup of wine while slowly saying: "Gentlemen, don't be this way. It's not as if your family only has one daughter named Ah Wei." Whether intentional or not, his eyes cast a glance on Chen Rong's figure before he continued. "It's still best to carefully consider one's marriage."

Thus said, he threw his head back and downed his wine. He then pounded the empty cup onto the table, flapped his long sleeves and strode out.

When he had gone a long way off, Chen Yuan peevishly muttered: "He's nothing but a commoner without a surname. If it were not for his escorting grace, who among the nobles would even see him out of the corner of their eyes? Don't tell me that this commoner dares to despise my Ah Wei for being concubine-born in favor of marrying a legitimate daughter of the Chens? Bah! Legitimate daughters of the Chen house are all worthy of princes and aristocrats. The bloke should take a look at his own background!"

Chapter 36: Palm Print

While Chen Yuan seethed, Chen Gongrang, who had expedited his return, smiled on the side with tolerance and generosity. "Why are you getting so worked up over one marriage of a daughter?"

His influence in the family was great, and at his words, Chen Yuan immediately bowed and replied, "Brother, you're right."

Chen Gongrang stroked his beard saying: "This man Ran Min is fearless, smart, and ambitious. Such man does not like being led by the nose. It's only a marriage between our house and him, why are you all so hasty?"

Thus said, he cast a glance at Chen Yuan.

Chen Yuan bowed his head in shame, naturally perceiving that Chen Gongrang

was talking about the fact that he was too aggressive when it came to his daughter's wedding. As long as Ran Min married a Chen lady, it didn't matter which one they gave him provided that her status was suitable.

Chen Gongrang waved and closed his eyes, listening to the courtesans' music.

His silence implied that this matter had come to an end. Chen Yuan withdrew his gaze.

He noticed Chen Rong again at this time and at once beckoned her to come closer.

He stared at her and scowled. Because he was already feeling offended, it couldn't be helped that he would become irritated at Chen Rong's sight. When he spoke, a slight chill was heard in his voice: "Ah Rong, do you know why I've called you over?"

"Aye."

"Do you? Then tell me."

Chen Rong slightly pressed her lips, saying: "Are you referring to last night's affair, uncle?"

"So you do know?" Chen Yuan sneered and clapped his hands. He then thought of something. "I really don't know how your father has taught you. How can you do something so shameless! You! If Qilang had been less generous, the Chen house would've lost our face last night!"

Chen Rong kept her head low while Chen Yuan barked at her. At this point, her face betrayed a hint of a sneer, but she did not talk back.

Chen Yuan roared for a while and finally gasped for breath. His tone softened to say: "There is a dinner at the Nan'yang Prince estate tonight. You'll go with me."

"I won't go!"

Everybody froze. Even Chen Gongrang opened his eyes to look at her.

Chen Yuan's thin face scrunched up. "What did you say?"

Chen Rong slowly raised her head. Looking at Chen Yuan, she deliberately said,

“I won’t participate in anyone’s dinner with you.”

And then she slowly got up.

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Chen Yuan didn’t expect she would talk back to him like this, furthermore doing so while standing. Furious, he slapped on the table and was about to explode when Chen Gongrang gently interjected on the side: “You’re speaking to a child. There’s no reason to be so angry.”

Chen Yuan suppressed his ire at once. He stared at Chen Rong and barked: “Repeat that again.”

Chen Rong’s back was very straight though her eyes were looking at the ground. “On this trip to the south, I’d first warned the Wangs about the refugees and in the time of a drought had reacted faster than ordinary men. When we stopped by the City of Pu, not many men could do what I did to stock up on food. I dare say I have both uncommon wits and beauty and as such am perfectly suitable to marry young men of talents.”

Silence all around.

Chen Yuan pointed at her in shock and was about to scold her when Chen Gongrang laughed: “This lass has quite the confidence.”

“All right,” he said to Chen Yuan, “don’t get angry with a youngster.” Then he turned to Chen Rong: “You may leave.”

“Aye.”

After leaving with her back rod-straight, she followed the green path, stepping on the yellow leaves on the ground, as she bit her lips thinking: *On the way here, Chen Yuan had accepted me into his household. It can be said that unless my father and brother return, he is now my father and can directly decide all of my matters. Chen Gongrang will not interfere with whatever decision he makes. He’s so determined to take me to the Prince of Nan’yang, what should I do?*

Suddenly her mind turned to Ran Min: *Ran Min is being very strange. Listening to his tone, one would think he isn’t very pleased with this marriage! Yes, in the past, Ran Min had come to the estate several times but never settled his*

marriage with my cousin. I wouldn't have gotten my opportunity had they not dragged it on like that.

In the middle of chasing her running thoughts, a shadow suddenly obscured her sight out in front.

Chen Rong looked up and was surprised to see a tearful Chen Wei.

While the pair of cousins stared at each other, Chen Wei suddenly lifted her right hand and slapped across Chen Rong's face.

Chen Wei's slap was both resounding and precise. Instantly, a swelling palm print appeared on Chen Rong's left cheek.

After Chen Wei threw a slap in her face, she did not wait for Chen Rong's reaction to suddenly burst out in tears. She covered her face and took a turn into a pebble trail.

Chen Rong recovered from the shock and anger and clutched her left burning cheek as her dark eyes stared in the direction Chen Wei had gone. After some time, she coldly smiled and quietly thought: *I know you like Ran Min. Though I hated you, I wasn't determined to take revenge. But now… hmph!"*

At the time she turned around, the servants on either side of the road diverted their prying eyes to the ground.

Chen Rong did not care; she strode to her courtyard.

Along the way, passersby would turn to look at her and notice the palm print on her face, their eyes becoming curious.

Without knowing, everyone stopped to watch her. There were a few idle ones who followed behind her to laugh and jest.

Nurse Ping rushed over the moment Chen Rong got into her courtyard entrance. She had heard noises outside and, now at a closer look, exclaimed: "Miss, miss, what happened? Who hit you?"

She darted to Chen Rong and reached out to her face.

Unlike her usual self, Chen Rong grasped her hands and tearfully said, "Nothing. It's just that General Ran came by a moment ago and… I-I was just standing there."

She abruptly shushed.

Sudden realization dawned on everyone's expression.

Behind Chen Rong's closed courtyard, a few gossips had given sound and made the rounds:

"I heard General Ran rejected Ah Wei."

"Then why did Ah Wei slap her?"

"Could it be that General Ran had fallen for Ah Rong and changed his mind? Not to mention, Ah Rong is rather bewitching with that slender waist of hers. If I were General Ran, I would choose Ah Rong too."

"What nonsense are you saying? What kind of status does Ah Rong have? We're not talking about taking in a concubine, how can General Ran leave Ah Wei for her? I think that Ah Wei is just taking it out on Ah Rong because she is unhappy about her matter with General Ran."

"I suppose that's possible. With Ah Rong's status, anyone here can take our anger out on her. She's the only one Ah Wei dares to bully, in any case."

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Chapter 37: Invitation

Back in the courtyard, Nurse Ping pressed a cold towel onto Chen Rong's face while choking back tears. "Your father and brother's absence is all to blame. We'd be able to move out if they were here."

"Nurse, don't cry."

Nurse Ping nodded vigorously in reply: "Aye, I won't cry, I won't cry."

Footsteps were heard at this time, followed by Old Shang's hesitant voice outside the door: "Miss?"

Hearing his tone, Chen Rong immediately asked, "What is it?"

When she sensed no movement outside, she frowned and said, "Just say it, whatever it is."

"Aye." His voice was still a bit shaky as he relayed: "The master has just ordered each courtyard to dismiss five servants."

"Did he say why?"

"Nay, miss."

While Chen Rong was in rumination, Nurse Ping nervously asked, "Miss, what do we do now?"

Chen Rong glanced at her, naturally knowing why she and Old Shang were so apprehensive. She presently had but fifteen servants. These fifteen were all loyal individuals who had served her throughout the years and had come with her all the way to the south. There was a strong bond between them. It hadn't been easy to get here, and now she was forced to chase them out. Without the support of a large clan, these people would be homeless and helpless once they left her door.

Chen Rong received the hand towel, dressed her face and said, "There's no need to panic."

Nurse Ping and Old Shang quieted down, looking at her at the same time.

“Old Shang, go tell the steward that I’ll no longer require the clan’s help with paying for my servants’ keep. I’ll assume the responsibility myself.”

“Miss, the clan has never helped us!” Nurse Ping exclaimed.

Chen Rong smirked and dismissively said, “You’re right, they have never helped us. Old Shang, if the steward insists, tell him: ‘Our mistress says we still have plenty of food to feed these few people.’”

When she saw the old man giving no reaction, Chen Rong sighed: “I gather the master has made this decision mainly due to the lack of grains and silk in the estate. I heard that at present, the exchange price is two carriages of silk for half a carriage of grains in Nan’yang.”

“Aye, aye,” Old Shang recovered to say. “I’ll go and let him know.”

Listening to his hasty footsteps running off, Nurse Ping was also delirious with joy. “Why, you must be one of the gods, miss. If you hadn’t bought so much food on the way here, we would be miserable right now.” Yes, they would be very miserable. This was just the first instance of dismissing servants at the Chen estate. The Chen house of Nan’yang would be downsizing their labor force three times before they weathered the storm. In her previous life, she had only been a parasitic orphan and had, therefore, become the primary cutting target. After six months living in Nan’yang, only Nurse Ping and Old Shang were left by her side.

Old Shang came back very quickly. Sure enough, after the steward heard what he had to say, he swiftly decided that all expenditures in Chen Rong’s courtyard would be her sole responsibility hereafter. Though she had been responsible for them all this time, the steward’s verbal acknowledgment was now tantamount to publicizing the matter.

The servants finally relaxed after Chen Rong’s decision. Especially now that they knew of the tension outside due to food, for a whole day with nothing better to do, they went to the warehouse and stared silly at the grains. Even Nurse Ping stared at the two dozen carriages in the warehouse for a long time. By the time she returned to Chen Rong’s side, there still remained a giddy smile on her face.

If the grains were used solely as food, two dozen carriages would last them up to twenty years. During a time when everyone was worried about food, holding so much wealth naturally felt very satisfying.

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Time flew by.

The next afternoon arrived in the blink of an eye.

Chen Rong had remained inside her own courtyard for the past two days. She knew Chen Wei must be fuming mad. With her nature, how could she stand others' pointing at her? She must be crying and then trying to explain to them that Ran Min never said he wouldn't marry her or that she had never bullied Chen Rong out of jealousy. Chen Rong'd only cause more trouble if she showed herself now.

In the evening, Chen Rong was idly sitting in her study to practice her zither when suddenly a loud voice reached her ears: "Is Ah Rong of the Chen house in?"

Not waiting for Nurse Ping to reply, Old Shang answered back: "My lady is in."

"I come bearing the Wang estate's invitation. Please come to dinner tonight at the hour of the dog (7 pm)."

Overjoyed, Old Shang profusely thanked him. "Even our lady has an invitation? How wonderful."

The man from the Wang estate chuckled. "Why do you think so lightly of yourselves? Everybody could see your lady's intelligence and we all admire her for it. If she were born to a slightly better status, her name would've been propagated by the scholars by now and she would've become a prominent guest among the noblewomen's circles. Even now, if we did not invite her to the estate, I fear people would gossip. Haha, let me stop talking. Please remind your lady to come on time tonight."

He was a humorous one. After having walked a few steps, he turned around to tease: "Qilang of the Wang house will also be there. Ah Rong will certain rejoice to see him haha."

As soon as the man went away, Old Shang ran to the door and called in: "Miss,

haha, it's an invitation from the Wang estate."

The door squeaked open.

This time, Chen Rong was wreathed in smiles.

Old Shang chuckled at the sight of her being so happy, but his face soured a moment later. *The lady is so happy,* he thought, *is it because she gets to see Wang Qilang?*

Because the dinner would soon be underway, Chen Rong quickly bathed with Nurse Ping's help. As for clothes – her old outfits had all been from Ping and were now outdated in Nan'yang, and new clothes had not been bought, thus she could only put on the set of yellow and purple gown again.

The hour quickly arrived.

Chen Rong, who had groomed herself anew and donned beautiful clothes, mounted her carriage.

By the time her carriage drove out of the courtyard, Chen Wei and several girls from next door all stopped laughing as they turned to look at her.

Staring after her departing vehicle, Chen Qian bitterly kicked the ground and said in indignation, "The Wang estate is being unfair! They said people from the Wang house of Lang'ya would be coming and invitations were limited! Hmph, why did they even bother to say so much? That Chen Rong did nothing but casually say two things on the way and play a song to seduce Wang Qilang. Yet they actually disregarded a legitimate daughter like me to invite someone like her?"

At this juncture in her grousing, Chen Qian turned to see an ashen-faced Chen Wei. She laughed: "My situation's not so bad. So I just won't go to a banquet. Ah Wei, I heard that your dear Mr. Ran has been snatched away by that shameless woman, isn't that so?"

Chen Wei was none too happy to hear these words. Her face reddened as she hastily exclaimed: "That's not true! I've just said there's no such thing."

Once again, the girls listened to her clarification with a knowing smile on their faces – the loathsome kind of knowing smile. Chen Wei was purple with rage.

Chapter 38: His Remarks

Chen Rong's horse-drawn carriage slowly drove on the street. It was at a time when the lights were beginning to go up. Rows of lanterns swayed under the eaves, pedestrians were getting sparse on the streets, and only when they passed by small alleys could they come upon rosy lights and laughing sounds behind the windows that gave rise to a sense of prosperity brought about by extravagant cosmetics, fragrance and music.
Inside the carriage, Chen Rong was now bowing her head and looking to be very calm, but her hands were tightly wringing her skirt. Her nurse looked on worriedly, afraid that the only formal gown she owned would be ruined.

At this point in time, Chen Rong freed her skirt and took a deep breath. "Nurse, I'm feeling a little nervous," she whispered with her eyes closed.

"Miss," Nurse Ping watched her with pity, "Wang Qilang belongs to the sky above. Forget him."

Chen Rong wanted to laugh. She pressed her lips together to suppress her laughter as she replied: "Your words make me feel a lot better."

Nurse Ping only looked at her confusedly.

Chen Rong reached her hand out to lift the shade. She murmured while looking up to the sparsely dotted sky: "I've died once. What is there to be afraid of?" Her voice was very low.

At this time, the carriage had turned into a small lane to cut to another street. Once there, the road ahead was awash in light, and amid the flurry of noises, carriages were weaving in and out in every direction.

"We'll be there soon, miss," Old Shang told her from outside.

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Chen Rong was about to answer him when another carriage pulled up to their side.

It was a great ebony carriage, its two pulling horses also jet black and tall. As Chen Rong gazed toward the vehicle, its cover slightly lifted to reveal a handsome yet grim-looking face.

Chen Rong almost instinctively pulled her curtain down at the sudden sight of this man. She stopped herself, however, just as her hand touched the draping fabric.

His intensely dark and chilly eyes paused on her right hand before moving to its owner.

Whatever gesture he gave, his coach began to move closer to Chen Rong's.

All of a sudden, the two vehicles were separated by only an arm's length. Chen Rong pinched herself and forced a smile onto her face. "Good greetings, General Ran."

Who else could he be but Ran Min?

Ran Min ignored her hello. He studied her fixedly and, after some time, his deep, authoritative voice made its way into her ears: "Little miss, though you've tried to collect yourself, you always seem different from your usual self every time you see me. Now why is that?"

He was so close that when he spoke, his breath gently swept past her hair and into her ears.

Chen Rong stiffened. She pinched her palms and tried her best to suppress her rushing emotions as she slightly lowered her eyes to avoid his. "General, you jest. How can I be different to you when I've never known you?"

She at last looked up.

Under the lights, her eyes were just like his – dark and bottomless.

As they locked gazes, her lips upturned to say: "I'd venture to say that with your being so remarkably handsome, there is no shortage of women in this world who would act differently when they see you."

"Is that so?"

Chen Rong nodded.

Ran Min laughed. He watched her with an intense gaze, asking: "Do you like Wang Qilang?"

Chen Rong paused before slowly nodding her head.

He laughed again.

Laughing for a while, his voice lowered to a deeper note but retained its softness as he asked her, “If I ask the Chen house for your hand, would you agree?”

Boom —

It was a clap of thunder straight from the sky!

Everything was becoming a blur to Chen Rong. Her heart thumped unendingly, almost threatening to leap out from her throat. A feeling filled her heart, she couldn’t tell whether it was bitterness or hilarity. Suddenly, she wanted to laugh.

But she did not laugh, only slowly raising her eyes.

She studied the man from her bumpy carriage. She hadn’t had a close look at him since meeting again after her rebirth. Chen Rong’s mouth twitched; she matched his tone to say: “General Ran, this joke isn’t funny.”

And then she decisively pulled down the curtain. With the thin cloth standing between them, Chen Rong sank against her seat and almost collapsed into Nurse Ping’s arms.

The nurse was about to question her when Chen Rong’s right hand outstretched to cover her mouth – she’d never want to reveal her vulnerability in front of this man. It was she who was stupid and stubborn in the past…

On the other side, Ran Min’s deep eyes remained to stare at the fluttering curtain; his brow furrowed, but his mouth unknowingly curved upward.

Slowly, he also leaned back into his carriage. He closed his eyes and relaxed the grip from his strong and large palms that usually wielded weapons, tapping them as if he was strumming a musical instrument.

At length, the carriage made a jerk and came to a stop. Old Shang called: “Miss, we’re here.”

Chen Rong gritted her teeth, wanting to sit up but her body was still too limp to do so. Nurse Ping swiftly lent her a hand. She dismounted the carriage first, and with the help of Old Shang, supported Chen Rong down.

As soon as she left the coach, Chen Rong could feel a pair of eyes staring at

her. She turned her head and once again came to face with those intensely dark eyes. Almost instinctively, she turned around and straightened her back, then threw off Nurse Ping and Old Shang's support to stalk forward.

The grounds outside the Wang estate's main compound were crammed with parked carriages. In the lantern light, waves of laughter and whiffs of scents floated to them. Chen Rong's eyes made a turn to find that the people present were all wearing exquisite clothing and appeared to be fully at ease; and she was not acquainted with very many of them.

While she was scanning the area, strong footsteps passed her as Ran Min strode into the illuminated area.

All eyes turned to him almost as soon as he appeared.

He was wearing a black robe with red patterns, his long hair left loose over his shoulders as was the fashion. He was already very tall, with broad shoulders and a tapered waist. When he was dressed this way, he possessed a kind of blinding handsomeness like that of the rising sun.

This type of imposing good looks and aura were entirely different from that of the moon and clouds, the popular feminine style everyone appeared to favor.

Ran Min seemed unaware that he had become the center of attention. He marched to the door and went inside.

Silence surrounded Chen Rong after he went in, for the crowd ceased their noises and began to take turn entering.

Chapter 39: Banquet

Chen Rong paused to receive the veiled hat Nurse Ping had prepared for her and then entered the hall from a side door.

The hall was scented by its guests' garments; lights from crimson lanterns and candles intertwined. As the smoke wafted, the finely dressed youngsters all seemed as though they had come out of a painting. There were quite a few ladies within Chen Rong's peripheral view who were as beautiful as she, and therefore her arrival did not stir as much excitement as did Ran Min's.

She took several steps and passed her gaze over others' shoulders toward the

host seat.

There, she saw Wang Qilang standing out like a crane among fowls. Ran Min was sitting at the same table. They were in rapt conversation, clapping and laughing from time to time.

Next to Wang Qilang were two dignified-looking men and a handsome young boy. Surrounding them were other people. They seemed to be members of the Lang'ya house of Wang.

Chen Rong was still looking around when Wang Wulang glanced over at her in the midst of chatting to other lads.

"Ah Rong."

Chen Rong halted and looked up.

Wang Wulang's handsome face seemed a little gloomy. "Come with me, your seat is over there."

Sensing the displeasure in his voice, Chen Rong followed behind after catching a brief glimpse of him.

Her seat was in the second row on the right side, close to the wall.

After Wang Wulang asked her to sit down at her table, several maids immediately stepped forward and blocked her area with a screen.

Not only her, but all ladies present would be enclosed behind screens as soon as they sat down. The screens were only a man's height, their surface made of a layer of gossamer silk. Due to the candlelight on the tables, the ladies behind these silk screens seemed to be brighter than the others, but of course, they also seemed somewhat hazier.

Wang Wulang turned to go after Chen Rong took her seat. But after just two steps, he paused to look back at her, saying in a low voice: "Your mind can be quite profound even though you are so young. Do you think someone like Qilang would fancy you?"

He stood in front of her screen with his head bowed. Contemptuously, he stared at Chen Rong with a slight ire. "With your status, it is already difficult to find an able man who will marry you. But you have no self-respect and did this

unto yourself. In my opinion, your life might as well be over."

His voice was very low and the few nearby tables were empty. Except for Chen Rong, no others heard his remark.

Listening to these harsh words, Chen Rong's heart was lit with indignation. She whipped her head up to look at him.

She opened her mouth to counter, but when she saw his resentful and grudging eyes, she felt bad and bowed her head to softly say: "What does it matter whether my life is over or not? My uncle already intends to give me to the Prince of Nan'yang as his concubine."

Her voice was low, stifling back a choke while carrying a subtle hidden meaning. She seemed to be asking for his help while at the same time wishing to explain herself.

Wang Wulang was astounded.

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Pressing his lips together, he watched Chen Rong's vaguely fragile face under the candlelight and unknowingly softened his voice: "Give you to that old Nan'yang Prince who refuses to die? That fellow Chen Yuan must be mad! Does he not know the prince likes to collect pretty women but has no kindness for them? Your life would be ruined once you entered his inner quarters!"

Chen Rong was near tears at his words. She muffled her sobbing to say: "But he is my uncle. I, Wulang, you're the only one I can say this to…" She quietly raised her misty eyes at him in a quick glance before lowering them down again.

It was only a glance, but the picture of a languishing pear blossom in the rain and dew drops weeping from a white lotus completely bewildered Wang Wulang in just a moment's time.

He stared agape at Chen Rong and did not look away.

At this time, a man not far from there called to him: "Wulang, Wulang, come over here for a moment."

Wang Wulang sobered at the call. He dithered for a while and then lowered his voice to say: "Don't panic. I'll, I'll think about it." His voice was actually very

gentle.

He had barely stepped away when someone's voice urged him on. After a few steps, he turned to look at her despite himself. From his vantage point, the only thing he could see was Chen Rong's brightly lit yet hazy figure. *She seems even more beautiful in only a few days,* he couldn't help himself from thinking.

By this time, a steady stream of nobles were filing in. A quarter of an hour later, the entire hall was filled with seated guests.

Being only a young lady, Chen Rong's prominent position in the second row next to an elder was attracting more and more attention.

Gradually, whispers rose from all sides: "Who is that girl? Is she a legitimate daughter of the Wang house of Lang'ya?"

"No, she is Ah Rong of the Chen house who played 'The Phoenix's Love Song' for Wang Qilang in front of everyone. I heard that on the trip going south, she had twice helped the Wang house of Ping overcome their troubles. She's remarkably clever."

"Don't take her lightly. This girl is very intelligent. Even the old fox Wang Zhuo is far inferior to her."

"Aye, I heard that when she was still in the City of Ping, she even made the generous act of dispersing her family wealth right before moving south."

Amid the clamor, people's regard of Chen Rong grew warm and welcoming. This talk even drew the attention of several members of the Lang'ya Wang house who proceeded to glance over.

Listening to the crowd and feeling the looks they cast her way, Chen Rong's back progressively straightened.

Acknowledging Chen Rong was equivalent to invalidating the Wang house of Ping. With each murmur in the hall, the members of the Wang house of Ping all looked to be slightly discomfited.

Almost out of the blue, a girl's sharp laughter rose from the corner behind Chen Rong: "Ah Rong of the Chen house, my cousin Qilang is here, you must be happy to see him?" It was the voice belonging to the 7th lady of the Wang

house, Wang Han'yun.

The dialogues stopped dead.

The youngsters in the hall all looked up in intrigue at Chen Rong and Wang Qilang.

What stunned everybody at this time was that Wang Qilang, who had been conversing easily, also turned his head like the rest of the room to look in the direction of Chen Rong's seat.

Under the room's scrutiny, Chen Rong sat behind the screen with her head lowered, wringing her skirt for a good long while before saying: "I was unable to refrain myself at the time… Upon careful reflection, I'm now very ashamed of what I've done."

She slowly rose, but without raising her head, she bowed in the direction of Wang Qilang and said shakily: "I was imprudent that day… I'm grateful that you did not take offense and have allowed me to remain in society." There was a vulnerable humility in her voice.

Wang Hong slowly placed his cup down and fixed his gaze on the person behind the screen. Under the light, Chen Rong seemed to become ever more enchanting.

Beside him, even Ran Min turned his head at this moment to watch her quietly.

In this silence, Yu Zhi laughed and clapped his hands, attracting the crowd's attention. "Ah Rong of the Chen house, what are you ashamed of?" he inquired loudly. "If you love him then Qilang will naturally appreciate your feelings! Now that you've secured his appreciation, you should bravely chase after him. Who knows, maybe one day Wang Qilang will get a dizzy head and marry you as his wife. Hahaha."

At this point, as if he didn't want anyone else to interject, he cleared his throat and explained: "What I mean to say is that this young lady seems the kind to talk the talk and walk the talk! I'm sure she'll finish what she started. You…" He wanted to go on, but Wang Hong had already scowled and shouted: "Hold your tongue!"

Yu Zhi immediately shut his mouth. To express obedience, he even tightly covered his mouth with his hands, leaving only a pair of round, woeful eyes looking to Wang Hong. He looked so comical that in a short while, laughter began to fill the hall. The solemn atmosphere, in the blink of an eye, had been swept away.

Chapter 40: Questioning

At this time, a middle-aged scholar sitting in the middle stood up. He raised his cup to the crowd and laughed: “On this moonlit autumn day we have been spared from the barbarians’ horseshoes and successfully arrived in Nan’yang. We are truly fortunate. Gentlemen, to our blessings!”

When he finished, he threw his head back and took the wine in one gulp.

Those seated raised their cups and likewise drank up.

After the middle-aged scholar refilled his wine, he raised his cup toward Ran Min to say loud and clear: “General Ran, without your help this time, we wouldn’t have escaped from the clutches of the barbarians. The house of Wang will never forget your kindness. Cheers!”

Ran Min stood up and raised his cup toward the scholar, lightly saying, “I, too, am a Han. It’s merely my duty.”

Next to him, Wang Hong raised his voice: “No, that’s not all!” He stood up and turned to the crowd. “Gentlemen, do you know who we met the second time we encountered the Hu?”

All shook their heads.

“Murong Ke! That masked boy was called Murong Ke!” Here, his face expressed a slight disappointment, the reason being that the bunch of scented youngsters all carried a uniform perplexity on their faces at the mention of Murong Ke.

Wang Hong sighingly said: “Murong Ke of the Xianbei tribe isn’t any ordinary man. It was to General Ran’s credit that we were able to get away from his cavalry that time.”

He turned to face Ran Min, suddenly bending over in a deep bow.

The hall erupted in commotion to see Wang Hong give such a salute.

Having offered his ceremony, Wang Hong walked back to his seat and sat down. He picked up his wine to drink as he sighed, “There’s no difference between the nobles and commoners. There are few men of honor left among the people of Jin.”

Ran Min’s countenance remained quiet, his deep eyes staring at the stirred wine in his hand.

Ever since Wang Hong bowed to Ran Min, the crowd’s regard for Ran Min finally turned more considerate and respectful.

Just then, the sound of stringed and wind instruments drifted in from a corner of the hall.

With the music, the hall became even noisier and all the youngsters stood up and began to come in.

The ladies also quietly cleared their screens and moved the tables together to talk and jest.

With her head lowered, Chen Rong was in the midst of sipping her wine when her screen shifted to reveal the 7th lady of the Wang house and several other young girls.

The 7th lady reached her hand out and unceremoniously snatched Chen Rong’s cup, then pulled on her sleeve and whispered: “Come out, I have something to ask you.”

Chen Rong didn’t resist. She let herself be pulled away as she followed behind them to the side hall.

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Shortly after, they came to a small corridor on the right of the side hall. The 7th Wang lady let go of her sleeve, then holding onto the railings, she glared at Chen Rong and said, “Ah Rong of the Chen house, do you even feel shame? Who asked you to play ‘The Phoenix’s Love Song’ for my cousin?”

With her head still lowered, Chen Rong lightly replied, “No one.”

“No one, and yet you dare to be that shameless?”

Chen Rong slowly looked up.

She stared at the 7th lady of the Wang house with eyes that carried a slight murderous intent. The 7th lady froze; she thought she was seeing things. Another girl beside her sighed: “Han’yun, she already lost her face, what are you anxious for?”

“But… she implicated our cousin and-and my brother, too.”

“Your brother? How does this have anything to do with him?”

This time, the girls were all curious.

The 7th lady clammed up. The girls around her all belonged to the Nan’yang branch and did not know Wang Zhuo had once intended Chen Rong for Wang Wulang.

Unlike the Chen house, the Wang house of Nan’yang was only a branch within a branch, its status inferior to the Wang house of Ping. Though Wang Han’yun was a guest, she did not need to be mindful of them.

At the 7th lady’s indecision, a delicate voice rose from behind: “Ah Rong of the Chen house, just now Wulang said your uncle Chen Yuan wants to give you to the Prince of Nan’yang?”

This was sensational news.

Whirl. All the girls turned to look at Chen Rong.

She blanched under their peering eyes, then pressing her lips together, she curtsied to them and turned away.

This time, the 7th lady of the Wang house did not stop her. She stared after Chen Rong’s frightful receding figure, murmuring: “So it’s like that. No wonder.” Her voice was full of pity, faintly however, there was even some pleasure taken at the expense of others’ misfortunes.

With her lowly station, what good was Chen Rong’s intelligence? Doesn’t her own family want to sacrifice her?! Hmph, luckily my brother did not want to make public the fact that he wanted to marry her, or else this shameless Ah Rong might not have seduced my cousin, but my brother instead.

Chen Rong walked with her head down for several steps before she saw a side

door not far from there and strolled outside.

Stepping out of the hall, a burst of wind passed by. It would soon be winter and the rush of night wind already carried a bone-deep chill with it.

Walking on, Chen Rong unconsciously arrived at a small lake. This lake was only two acres in size, its water so clear one could see to its bottom. Unfortunately it was now late autumn, and there was nothing more than a bright reflection of the moon in the water.

Chen Rong bowed her head, looking at her reflection. Even though the water was rippling and the moonlight faint, it was clear the girl in the water was as pretty as a flower and at the height of her youth. Watching herself, Chen Rong reached her hand forth without bending her waist to fish her own reflection out.

As she was doing so, a strong force pulled her back, followed by a man's shout: "What are you trying to do?"

Chen Rong stopped and raised her head. The man who pulled her in was a muscular guard about thirty years of age. This man seemed rather familiar. When she saw him, Chen Rong's eyes instinctively followed the lakeshore.

She saw a white-attired man as handsome as jade by the rolling waves.

Wang Hong!

She never expected to see Wang Hong here and now. For some reason, Chen Rong actually felt a little embarrassed. She quickly curtsied and addressed him, "Good greetings, Qilang."

In the clopping of wooden clogs, Wang Hong slowly came up to her.

Before long, his willowy and snow-white figure appeared in her purview. Bowing down to look at her, Wang Qilang remarked: "Why is it that the brilliant Ah Rong of the Chen house is actually ashamed to see me? Do you not have the courage to even raise your eyes?"

Chapter 41: Mud and Cloud

Always the refined gentleman, an inspiring air was born from Wang Hong's very presence.

With that said, Chen Rong did not need to raise her head at this moment to

sense the overwhelming superiority of one who came from high society.

Wang Qilang watched a stock-still Chen Rong briefly and then smiled. He tilted his head, clasped his hands behind his back to watch the moon's reflection in the lake and softly asked, "Were you thinking of casting yourself in the lake just now?"

"No!" Chen Rong abruptly looked up. "Life is a gift from the gods. I wouldn't dare to think of death!"

She was suddenly met with Wang Hong's lofty, clear eyes under the moonlight – eyes that seemed to show he *knew*. She couldn't help lowering her head.

Chen Rong gripped her right hand tightly and, after making her palm ache with her nails, she took Wang Hong's lead in staring into the water and softly said, "Just now I saw myself in the lake, young and beautiful. But in a matter of seconds, I'd turned gray and old. It was as if the reflection in the water was just an illusion so I could not help myself from wanting to hold onto it."

She finally collected herself at this point. She thus looked up and bravely regarded Wang Hong.

Under the moonlight, Wang Hong was attired in a large robe, wearing a tall headpiece and a broad belt. It was obviously only an ordinary robe, but on him, it had the elegance of jade and moonlight.

Chen Rong watched him with eyes slightly dazed.

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After struggling to snap awake, she was met with Wang Hong's scrutinizing eyes.

His eyes were like the moon: so clear yet so high, obviously very near, but also unreachably far.

Standing face to face, Wang Hong's lips unturned as he slowly said, "Ah Rong of the Chen house, don't you have something to say to me?"

His voice was especially supple, his words clashing like jade and ice. Such spoken tone accompanied by his lofty, ethereal temperament made Chen Rong felt for the first time that the man before her eyes was as far as the clouds,

separated from her by more than just thousands of miles.

Strangely enough, as she recognized this, her shame and discomfort all vanished like wisps of smoke.

Chen Rong lowered her eyes, quietly staring at the reflections in the lake. “There are countless girls who admire you in this world,” she whispered, and then as though she was glancing at him yet as though she was not, her gaze turned to reveal a natural bewitchment on her beautiful face: “Do you ask every girl you meet ‘why’?”

Light breeze and rippling waves, and such a bright moon!

Wang Hong regarded Chen Rong quietly and then broke out laughing. He turned his head to say: “It is I who have thought too much.”

And then he turned to go.

As Chen Rong watched his fluttering sleeves going farther and farther in the distance, she couldn’t help herself from murmuring: “The gentleman is a cloud in the sky; a smile of yours can topple the mountains. I am a leaf on the bough. I’ll become mud as soon as the wind brings me to the ground after the autumn rain.”

There was no sorrow in her voice. She was merely stating a fact in calmness. It was but an objective fact.

Unconsciously, Wang Hong paused and looked back at her.

Under the pouring moonlight, the Chen maiden’s obsidian eyes were unfathomable. Though her youthful face was innocent, her charming figure was beguiling. As she said, she was like a leaf with an earthly tawdriness.

Nonetheless, such a tawdry girl, standing by the rippling lake under this moonlit sky, was telling him their differences in so frank a fashion. She so blithely praised him for his ‘toppling smile’ and called herself a leaf that would turn into mud after the storm. Because of her helplessness and desolation, her attitude appeared to have been stemmed from the resignation of someone who had been hurt before and had now learned to let go. It pricked Wang hong’s heart.

His eyes seemed to carry the moonlight in them as he contemplated her. “Ah

Rong, don't say such things about yourself. Everyone in the world is like that; we'll all become mud after the autumn rain. There is no difference between you and me in this regard."

After a pause, he gently said, "You're not mud, neither am I that cloud."

Chen Rong bowed her head and softly replied, "Truly?"

"Truly!"

Wang Hong quietly watched her from ten paces away. At length, he smiled ruefully and murmured: "Heaven help me, this woman…"

By the time Chen Rong raised her head, she was left with only the moonlight; Wang Hong's figure had drifted into the yonder.

He was so far away, but his figure still resembled the moon and clouds. Chen Rong shook her head, thinking: *Which girl can catch such a man's attention, I wonder?*

She did not want to think anymore, so she lifted her soles and walked back toward the main hall.

From a long way away, before she was anywhere near the gathering, a series of troubled zither notes accompanied by quiet singing rose in the air: "The orchid is the plant of the king's fragrance. Though it still flourishes, it now mingles with the likes of the grasses. Similarly, there lies the difference between a sage who bides his time and a common fool…"

Chen Rong shook her head listening to the lyrics. *Perhaps this is how the world is. Even men have sorrows they cannot let known. Take him for example. He spent so many years wishing to kill all the Hu, why was he not yet overtaken with hatred and anger?*

Chen Rong entered the hall in the middle of her pondering.

In the center of the hall, a courtesan was strumming and singing. Everyone else listened to her in mesmerization, nodding their heads to the music.

Chen Rong took her seat. After repositioning her screen again, she quietly leaned back and raised her head to peer through the screens, which was also peering at that man.

All along, she did not want others to read her thoughts through her eyes. Whenever she looked at other people, she only gave a quick sweep and never stayed long.

Presently however, she could watch as much as she pleased thanks to the blocking screens.

In particular, the black-robed man sitting in front of her. She could observe him all she wanted without concern: *Just a while ago he said he would ask the Chen house for my hand. Why would he say that?*

Despite the fact that Chen Rong was married to him for years, they spent very little time together and she could never guess this man's mind.

She shook her head. *I've lived once more, what am I still thinking about this for? No matter what, I will never repeat my mistakes this time around! I won't be the fool who puts all my love and devotion on a man only to be driven to a point of no return!*

Never again.

Amid her thoughts, some noises gave sound from the hall's doorway, the most audible being those of female laughter.

Chen Rong turned around to look.

She was met with Wang Hong's waltzing into the hall in his white robe.

No matter where this man went, he was always the center of attention. Along with each of his movements, all the ladies who were talking, smiling, whispering, or simply sitting there without fail turned their attention to him.

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Chapter 42: Heart-to-heart

The hall came to life again once Wang Hong entered it.

Yu Zhi spotted him from the distance and called him over: “Come, that boy Wang You was saying ‘if you want good health, your energy must first flow’. He also said I only know of tranquil void but do not know I must be like the generals to have true health, that one needs to vent when he’s angry, one needs to kill when he’s filled with hatred, and one should express his resentment if he feels such emotion. Only then are you living the ways of the Yin and Yang, Heaven and Earth. I couldn’t argue with this guy. Qilang, you should help me now that you’re here.”

Wang Hong laughed in reply. “All right, let’s go have a debate with him.”

As she listened to the scholars debate, a girl from the Wang house who sat behind Chen Rong said in distaste: “Didn’t I say Nan’yang is a shallow place? Even the men’s debate can’t be heard. If the Wang house of Lang’ya hadn’t come, tsk, we wouldn’t be able to hear these philosophical talks.”

Another lad cast a glance at Ran Min and lightly echoed her thoughts: “With a commoner like General Ran here, what kind of debates can Nan’yang possibly have?”

Sitting behind the screen, Chen Rong bowed her head in thoughts. She shook her head when she heard these words.

The buzzing behind her intensified at this point, every sentence turning blunt. Most had come to surround the scholars and listen to their arguments in rapture.

Unable to sit still any longer, Chen Rong moved her screen and walked out.

She followed the side hall and went out to the brightly lit area. Very few ventured outside at this time; when she turned and glanced around, there were only a few sparse silhouettes under the moonlight.

Chen Rong slowly walked along the gravel path.

Her head was bowed, watching her shadow and pondering as she walked. Tonight's banquet was of particular significance to her. Now that it was coming to an end, Chen Rong recalled her words and behaviors and, for some reason, felt a little disappointed.

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At the end of the path was a small silvery lake glittering under the moonlight.

Chen Rong paused to raise her head and turn around, at which point she stopped in her tracks.

To the left of the lake just ten paces away from her stood a tall and great figure. At this moment, the owner of that figure was also turning around, his eyes staring at her quietly in the dark.

Chen Rong forced a smile onto her face and turned to curtsy to the man. "Good greetings, General Ran," she softly spoke.

Standing there was indeed Ran Min. How strange, he was still inside when she left the hall. How was he able to walk ahead of her?

Ahem, now isn't the time to think about this.

Ran Min's eyes were astoundingly bright in the dark. As he watched Chen Rong, his gaze shifted to her feet – ones that were ready to sprint at any time. He curved his lips and said to her in a low voice: "Come here."

"Pardon?" Chen Rong exclaimed.

Ran Min furrowed his brow and repeated: "I said come over!" It was a command.

"Aye," Chen Rong replied almost involuntarily and lifted her soles to move toward him. And yet her footsteps loitered more and more as she walked.

Ran Min had turned to look at the horizon by this time and did not notice her struggle.

His hands were clasped behind his back, his black robe fluttering in the wind. At this moment, his thin lips were slightly upturned, making his chiseled profile

even more handsome.

By the time Chen Rong dragged herself to his side, Ran Min's deep and dynamic voice gently spoke: "These nobles are all our people, they are all Hans, the core of our country. Ha –" He burst out laughing somewhat mournfully. "The Hu Army must've laid siege to the city of Luo'yang tonight. Those who could not bear to leave their hometown will turn into corpses along with the ashes of the houses they have dwelled in for generations."

He suddenly turned to look at Chen Rong.

He saw her watching him with respect and a faint tenderness.

Her gaze was apparently beyond his expectation. Ran Min chuckled as he contemplated her. "Are you not afraid of these bloody things, a young maiden like you who wears perfumed sachets?"

Chen Rong shook her head and lowered her gaze.

If she wanted to, there were a number of ways to please him. But she didn't want to say any of those things. If this had been her past life, she'd try to make a good impression and keep comforting him. She'd praise him and try to tell him just how much respect and sympathy she had for him.

Even if her respect for him had indeed come from her heart every time she saw him like this.

Ran Min wasn't waiting for her answer either. His eyes remained staring to the north, fiery flames dancing in its black pupils.

"My people…" he murmured at length.

As if it had a mind of its own, Chen Rong's right hand outstretched to almost touch his sleeve.

Luckily she reacted in time and only completed half of this action.

Just as she drew breath and was about to quietly withdraw her hand, Ran Min looked down and saw it.

He eyed her milky hand under the moonlight and then slowly raised his head to look at Chen Rong.

What he saw was her turned profile. She was pressing her lips together, distractedly staring at the lake. She seemed to be a little vexed.

Ran Min laughed despite himself.

“I say, little miss, did I somehow offend you?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Nay.”

Chen Rong emphatically shook her head.

“I’m sure I’ve offended you somehow,” Ran Min chuckled. “From the way you look, to say ‘offend’ might even be making light of the matter.”

Chen Rong’s lips drew into a line when she heard what he said. She hurriedly turned and curtsied to Ran Min, saying: “You haven’t, sir. I must head back now. Goodbye.”

She didn’t wait for his reply. She flapped her sleeves and hastily rushed off.

Watching the figure that was rapidly dissolving in the dark, Ran Min, whatever he might be thinking, burst out laughing again.

His laughter still rang in Chen Rong’s ears by the time she was a long distance away.

“Hmph!” Chen Rong stomped her foot on the ground. But as she was clenching her teeth, her dark eyes suddenly gleamed and, gradually, a little smile emerged on her stiffened face.

She straightened her back, lifted her soles, and walked like the wind in the direction of the hall.

Chapter 43: Sisters

Just as Chen Rong arrived at the steps, the hall door opened to a burst of fragrance. The nobles were now flocking out; the banquet had come to an end.

She froze and then quickly retreated into a corner, gazing at Wang Wulang’s figure among the flitting shadows with a pinch of disappointment. She hadn’t any opportunity to be alone with him the entire night.

She dithered awhile and then followed the stream of people as they flocked to the carriage square.

Nurse Ping and Old Shang were both there standing beside her coach. When they sighted her, they hurried over with twinkles in their eyes.

Old Shang laughed: “Miss, did you meet anyone else from the Lang’ya House of Wang? Do they also have a godly bearing like Wang Qilang?”

Nurse Ping gave him a poke and then proceeded with her own question. “Miss, were you able to ask for the Wang house’s help? We are both from Ping, and they had furthermore received your help on the way. It’s said that close neighbors are better than distant relatives. You can ask Sir Wang to persuade your uncle. It’d be best if Wang Wulang asked for your hand.”

Chen Rong gave her a wry smile and shook her head. “It’s not that simple, Nurse.”

Then she passed the two of them and climbed onto the carriage.

But they did not immediately leave after Chen Rong mounted the carriage.

Her status was the lowest among the people in this square. She did not want to compete with those distinguished people for the travel way.

After half an hour when the square was finally empty, Chen Rong’s carriage slowly pulled out of the Wang estate.

The streets of Nan’yang were enveloped in pitch darkness in these hours. There were only scattered lanterns hanging under the eaves of wealthy homes.

It had been fine when they left, but the sky suddenly sprinkled moments later.

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Through the shade, Chen Rong looked back at the Wang estate under the drizzling rain. Their gates were still wide open, faint voices were heard inside, eight gold foiled lanterns lined both sides of the gates, swinging in the rain. Their flickering light radiated a sense of solitude in the mist.

Chen Rong withdrew her gaze after a brief glance.

The two estates of Wang and Chen were not far apart. In half an hour, her carriage quietly entered the Chen compound and pulled into her courtyard.

As soon as Chen Rong stepped away from her carriage, peals of laughter rang

out from Chen Wei's courtyard next-door. She paid little attention to them and continued on. "Is Ah Rong back? You there, open the door!" a girl's voice was heard outside her yard.

The courtyard door's squeaked open at this girl's order.

At once, several girls in splendid gowns filled the courtyard with their chattering.

Chen Rong raised her head looking at the clouds that had receded and the moon that once again hung in the sky. *Why did the rain have to stop? If it kept on raining, these girls wouldn't endure the rain to come. That's just too bad.*

Once the girls came in, Nurse Ping and the others were put to work again. Soon, her study was brightly lit and filled with the fragrance of meat and wine.

Chen Qian looked around the room full of bamboo slips and burst out laughing: "I heard from people who came from Ping that you don't read. That being the case, why do you have so many books on display? Are you trying to appear learned?"

Chen Rong was sitting in the host's seat. Hearing this question, her docile face gave a smile as she softly answered, "Who says I don't read?"

Chen Qian paused.

She tilted her head to appraise Chen Rong. She had thought of a thing or two to rebut before she suddenly thought of her recent display, which was truly not something an unread girl could have. "Perhaps I heard wrong," she said with pursed lips.

At this time, Chen Wei who had been sitting silently in a corner suddenly spoke up. "Ah Rong, were you the one to say General Ran doesn't want me anymore? Were you the one to say I bullied you?"

There was a sharpness that she couldn't control by the end of her sentence.

Chen Rong looked up.

She widened her eyes in surprise at Chen Wei and then clutched the left cheek that had been slapped. "When had I said General Ran doesn't want you? And when had I said that you bullied me?"

Chen Wei sprang to her feet, pointing at Chen Rong shakily. “If you didn’t say anything, then why did everyone laugh at me? You-you’re even covering your face. Aren’t you trying to let everyone know I had slapped you?”

Chen Rong swiftly let go of her hand, dropped her gaze and earnestly said, “Ah Wei, I swear I’ve never said General Ran doesn’t want you, nor have I said that you bullied me.”

Her dark eyes were penetrating in the candlelight. She looked at Chen Wei and said somewhat obscurely: “Our marriages are arranged by our parents. They’re also our parents’ order. How can General Ran not want you?”

Chen Wei went silent.

Slowly, a smile materialized on her face.

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“All right, let’s not talk about these boring things,” said Chen Qian impatiently.

She was a legitimate daughter of the direct line in Nan’yang. Ranked second, her status was higher than all the girls here. Once she opened her mouth, both Chen Rong and Chen Wei bowed their heads to reply: “Aye.”

“Tell us now Ah Rong, who did you see at the Wang estate?”

At this juncture, Chen Qian looked up to see Chen Rong’s charming face under the lights. She suddenly interrupted her from answering: “These things aside, did you get to see Wang Qilang? What did he say when he saw you?”

About seven or eight faces turned around, staring at Chen Rong with interest while awaiting her answer.

Watched by these eager eyes, Chen Rong opened her mouth and really wanted to tell them that Wang Qilang never blamed or spurned her. Instead, he was gentle enough to even comfort her.

She couldn’t say these words, however. If not handled properly, her coming days would only worsen.

She dropped her gaze and displayed a slight weariness on her face.

Such expression greatly amused the girls. Chen Qian laughingly remarked,

“What did I say? To have someone like you confess in public and plainly say you want to be his first wife is an insult to the distinguished Wang Qi. Even *I* am not worthy to be his wife, much less you.”

Chen Wei, too, looked to be quite pleased. She covered her mouth as her eyes bent into lines.

While the girls giggled mirthfully, Chen Rong’s lips curved to reveal a secretive smile, one of joy and contentment.

This expression gave the girls pause. As they were staring at her in careful appraisal, Chen Rong stood up, curtsied to the girls and wearily said, “Sisters, I’m really tired.”

“Hmph, who wants to loiter at this place of yours?”

Chen Qian flapped her sleeves and led the girls away.

Staring after the girls going farther away, Nurse Ping came to her and sighed. “You’ve always run around with boys when you were younger. You were the only girl in our estate so of course you don’t even have any experience of getting along with other girls. Just now you should have waited for them to be bored. Then when they wanted to leave you still would’ve needed to try to keep them. That’s how you should treat your fellow sisters.”

Chen Rong merely smiled and softened her voice: “Nurse, get the water ready. I want to bathe.”

“Aye.”

Chapter 44: Temporary Peace

The next day came quickly.

At noon, Chen Wei’s voice sounded from beyond the door: “Is Ah Rong in?”

Not waiting for Chen Rong to stand up, she pushed the door and went inside. Standing from some distance away, Chen Wei curtsied to her and softly said, “Ah Rong, it was my fault that day. Don’t be upset with me.”

Chen Rong never imagined she would come to apologize. She swiftly curtsied back after a momentary pause. “You are my jiejie, it’s within your rights to teach me. How can I be upset with you?”

Chen Wei smiled upon hearing this.

She neared and held Chen Rong's arm, smilingly saying: "It's warm today. Let's go for a walk, Ah Rong."

"Aye."

Walking side-by-side, Chen Wei whispered to her cousin: "I hadn't been able to sleep for the past two nights."

She turned her head to a surprised Chen Rong and continued: "Cousin, does your face still hurt?"

Yes, she was just *that* gentle.

Chen Rong looked at her in surprise, shook her head, and said with a moved expression: "Nay, it has stopped hurting a long time ago. Jiejie, don't worry about it."

Chen Wei hummed a reply, her long eyelashes fluttering as she looked to be a little absent-minded.

"What's wrong?" Chen Rong hurried to ask with concern.

Chen Wei shook her head. After a moment, her mouth curved and then she winked at Chen Rong. "That's right," she cheerily began, "what did Wang Qilang say when you met him last night?"

Her smile was natural, her change of tone was also smooth. But as someone who had lived twice, Chen Rong had some understanding of this cousin. Her heart took a dip, her eyes lowered, and she shyly smiled. "Nothing."

"How can it be nothing?"

Chen Wei sounded a little anxious. "You don't want to tell me, is that right?" she pursed her lips and said with some chagrin.

Chen Rong's mind quickly turned before she looked down and sighed for a while. "He, he was not upset with me."

"And what else?"

"He also said he isn't a cloud and I'm not mud. He told me to not be too concerned about it."

……

Not seeing Chen Wei move for some time, Chen Rong looked up to see a stiff smile on her face. “Ah Wei? Ah Wei?”

By the fourth call, Chen Wei whispered back: “Really?” Her tone sounded a bit complicated: “He said that to you?”

Facing Chen Wei’s questioning eyes, Chen Rong emphatically nodded.

Chen Wei again forced a smile on her face and pressed her lips to say: “All right, let’s not talk about this anymore. That’s right Ah Rong, did General Ran also speak to you last night? What did he say?”

Chen Rong shook her head. Under Chen Wei’s stare, she gently said, “I didn’t say anything, and all he asked was a casual thing or two.”

“What did he ask you?” She sounded a smidge urgent.

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Chen Rong hesitated for a moment, looking as though she was pondering. At length, she replied, “He asked about my fellow sisters in the clan. He also said that my approach to problems is like that of a man when I expected there would be a food shortage in Nan’yang and knew to stock up on grains. He said if I weren’t a woman, I could join his camp as a clerk or something.”

Chen Wei was completely stunned this time. “He said you were like a man?” she murmured. “I heard General Ran does not easily praise others, why did he praise you?”

“I don’t know.” Chen Rong shook her head.

“The barbarians call him the ‘Heavenly Prince’. My father said that though the nobles do not like him, the prominent clans along with the Prince of Nan’yang all hold him in high esteem. Father also said even the city of Nan’yang needs his protection at this time. What was his meaning when he praised you?”

“Who can really know the thoughts of a man like him?”

Chen Wei seemed a bit restless by this time. She slowly withdrew her hand from Chen Rong’s arm and tried her best to smile. “Ah Rong, I have something I must go to do. Let’s talk again in the afternoon.”

“Aye.”

“I’ll go on ahead. You don’t have to see me out.”

“Aye.”

Chen Rong stopped and stared after Chen Wei’s vanishing figure. Slowly, her mouth upturned to reveal an unsmiling smile.

Sure enough, this cousin had come on someone else’s order to probe around. It seemed she was fairly successful at last night’s banquet.

Having lived twice, Chen Rong learned that borrowing someone else’s influence did not necessarily mean she must have his promise. An intimate walk or talk was equally of great use.

The next few days passed by peacefully.

From what Nurse Ping was able to inquire, the Nan’yang house of Wang’s banquet lasted for four nights. In these four nights, clans brought their concubine-born daughters along to attend. Her Uncle Chen Yuan had also brought a daughter born to him by an unloved concubine. She was allegedly very frail. Besides her daily reading, she only meditated for she had the weak frame of a storm-worn blossom.

Then just last night, a small palanquin had quietly taken the sick girl away from the estate, never to return. Nurse Ping said that if you stood near the palanquin, you could hear her weeping.

Even so, Chen Rong knew it was no time to relax. Men like the Prince of Nan’yang could never have too many women in his inner quarters. If she knew this, then Chen Yuan would know it even better.

Winter had arrived.

Those first few days of winter were bright and cloudless. If she could go for a walk on such beautiful days, watching the blue sky and azure waters on the outskirts and speaking to friends, what a pleasure it would be.

In those nice days, Chen Wei next-door had sat in the carriage happy as a bird to drive in and out with the Chen girls of the Nan’yang branch.

Chen Rong also wanted to go. But she did not dare.

She had no other way. She was only a trifling concubine-born girl, looked down upon by everyone in this estate. She couldn’t bother listening to the other girls’ ridicules and insults if she were to join them. Knowing her personality, she feared there would come a time when she couldn’t refrain herself and instead burst out. Then all her efforts would be for naught.

She could also drive to the purlieus with a few servants, but she did not dare to – the refugees who had filled the city of Nan’yang couldn’t have all disappeared. They must be nesting in some remote corner at this time. It was easy for her to leave, but once she left, she might not be able to come back.

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Chapter 45: She Is a Double-sided Blade

It was noon that a round of horse hooves tore along the streets of Nan'yang.

Before long, a guard hurried in the direction of the Chen estate. He ran in haste, stumbling along, and did not stop to wipe the dripping sweat on his forehead.

He arrived at the main courtyard within a short time. Presently, Chen Yuan and Chen Shu were sitting on either side of Chen Gongrang to talk over books and wine.

The guard hurtled to the door as he cried urgently: "Masters! The barbarians had taken over Luo'yang."

"Thump." "Thump." Chen Yuan and another noble fell to the ground.

Chen Gongrang sprang to his feet and asked, "When was this?"

"The news had just arrived, sir."

"Wu Xian," he murmured with a blanched face, staggering backward, "Wu Xian and his men are still in Luo'yang…"

He shut his eyes, and then opened them again. "Was anyone able to escape?"

The guard shook his head and sobbed: "No, none. Apart from the soldiers, no one escaped. I heard that several thousand nobles including men and women, young and old, had dressed properly and moments before the barbarians broke into the city had jumped into the Luo River."

Chen Gongrang dropped to his seat, paralyzed.

Chen Shu and Chen Yuan themselves are as white as sheets, both taken by dread.

At long last, Chen Gongrang waved his hand and feebly bade, "I got it, go."

"Aye."

A suppressed sob was heard the moment the guard took the steps. Listening

to the cries, he himself was choked up and could not help stretching his sleeve to wipe his tears. Then he briskly walked out with his head down. A scholar who was walking to them paused when he saw this scene.

After some deliberation, he continued forth and called out softly from the steps: “Shihua?”

Shihua was Chen Yuan’s courtesy name.

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Soon, a red-eyed Chen Yuan appeared on the stairs. He looked to the scholar, frowning: “What is it?” The scholar took a few steps to Chen Yuan’s side, raised his clasped hands and softly replied, “Have you forgotten, Shihua? You asked me to go to the prince’s estate and ask Xu Zhiming for an explanation.”

Chen Yuan nodded and impatiently said, “Speak.”

“Aye, Xu Zhiming said the Prince of Nan’yang is dissatisfied with your daughter. He also said that unless you send Ah Rong of the Chen house over, dialogue will be difficult.”

Chen Yuan’s face turned blue. “If Ah Rong could be sent over, why would I need to waste a daughter?” he growled. “Bah! That Xu fellow is a debaucher himself. It must be he who whispered troubles in the Nan’yang Prince’s ears!”

At this point in his rumble, Chen Yuan took a deep breath and suggested, “Let’s do this, is there not a lantern festival three days from now? Go do some preparation work. Remember, there must not be any errors this time.”

“Aye.”

The scholar turned when he suddenly heard Chen Shu’s voice raised from inside: “Wait a minute.”

He strode to Chen Yuan, frowned and said, “Shihua, I forgot to tell you that Wang Hong sent people yesterday looking for our older brother. He asked why the Chen house of Nan’yang, being such a great family, does not treat a concubine-born daughter well?”

“What?!” Chen Yuan was infuriated. “Wang Qilang belongs to the Wang house of Lang’ya. What can they do? They have the nerve to interfere with our family’s

affairs?”

“Why should he interfere?” Chen Shu coldly replied. “He merely said there are rumors circulating outside that are detrimental to our family’s name.”

Instantly, Chen Yuan suppressed his anger to reply in diffidence: “Ah Shu, it’s not as if you don’t know that the Prince of Nan’yang has been making things difficult for me ever since I offended him. I wasted a daughter but he still wouldn’t bend. What else can I do?”

Chen Shu flapped his sleeves and unsympathetically replied, “It’s your own doing in any case. I think that Ah Rong, although young, is very sophisticated in her purposes. Didn’t you send someone to inquire on the matter of the Wang estate’s banquet? Not only Wang Hong, but I heard Ran Min also talked and laughed with her. Think about the status quo. Are you going to offend both Wang Hong and Ran Min for this tiny thing? Hmph, Ah Rong is a double-sided knife. You’ll easily cut your hand. You better be careful!”

Apparently not wanting to say more to Chen Yuan, he flapped his sleeves and strode back into the room.

Chen Yuan stood ashen-faced for a moment before turning around to bark at the scholar: “Go!”

“What about the lantern festival?”

“What festival can we have now?!” Unable to release his anger, he labored for his breath for a while and then growled: “Good for Chen Rong. She’s not even fifteen yet she already has the skill to seduce men. Isn’t that just extraordinary, hmph!”

“What are you standing frozen here for? Go!”

“Aye, aye.”

Just as the scholar turned to go, Chen Gongrang’s displeased voice rang from the room: “Shihua, how can you be so vulgar even till now! Go! Refrain from coming to my place in the near future!”

Stunned, Chen Yuan quickly turned around in a deep bow as he pleaded: “Brother, I…” He had not finished when Chen Gongrang thundered from the

room: “Men, take Chen Shihua back to his courtyard.”

“Aye!”

Two servants at once came forward. Before they could speak, Chen Yuan flapped his sleeves and yelled: “I can walk myself!”

When he finished, he harrumphed and stalked away.

On this day, not only the house of Chen found out about Luoyang’s fall, but so did everyone else.

Like thunder striking in broad daylight, this news struck brutally on the Nan’yang residents who were singing of peace not long ago. Only now did they realize they may not be as safe as they thought. Awaiting them ahead were swarms of barbaric iron heels!

Chapter 46: The Teenage General

Luo’yang was under siege!

Not long ago, it was still the Jin’s capital – a bustling place where every great clan wanted to dwell, where all migrant Hans would turn to kneel in homage at the time of their death.

But it had actually fallen!

All of a sudden, Nan’yang was overcome with grief.

Accompanying the cries was a sense of insecurity and, suddenly, Ran Min shot to celebrity status. Almost every major clan would invite him to guest its banquet.

It just so happened, however, that he went missing right at this time.

Dismayed, they all sent people to ask the Prince of Nan’yang. Even the Chen house who was to be his in-laws became the object of everyone’s inquiries.

And yet, no one had an answer to give.

Panic reached its tipping point with each passing day. Some families packed up to move again, this time fleeing to Jiankang.

In the midst of this scene, a cavalry broke the calm and barged in each estate with its arrival. “Sir – there are two thousand soldiers outside the city, sent by

General Ran to protect the Nan'yang Prince."

"General Ran? And where is he?"

"I do not know, the young general said one of General Ran's soldiers is capable of handling ten barbarians. With them here, Nan'yang will be unharmed."

"Did he really say that?"

"I dare not lie."

"Good, good good."

Cheers soon spread to the streets of Nan'yang, gradually booming into ecstasy.

Listening to the waves of roars heightening like a tide outside, Chen Rong said to Nurse Ping: "Let's us also go and see."

"Aye."

Because they did not intend to go far, she did not ride in a carriage and ran out of the courtyard just like that. When she got to the front door, she found Chen Wei, Chen Qian, and the other girls also there. However, they were wearing veiled hats, perfumed sachets and decorative jades, neatly dressed as though they were leaving for an outing.

A sea of people was currently pouring out onto the streets, everyone looking toward the north gate.

"What are they looking at?" Chen Rong asked curiously.

"The soldiers General Ran had sent," a servant respectfully answered her. "They had originally wanted to camp outside the city, but the masters were worried so they asked them to come in."

Another middle-aged man smiled and added, "I heard that General Ran's soldiers are the bravest among the braves. They always encounter the strongest opponents in every expedition. He is always surrounded by more people, but he only needs a few thousand men to return victorious. It's not every day we get to see two thousand of his soldiers in Nan'yang; everyone is curious to see them today."

With his voice came a series of orderly and powerful footsteps, so powerful and orderly that every step taken shook the ground.

Without knowing, the crowd solemnly looked up.

But none of this concerned Chen Rong. She had seen much more of Ran Min's soldiers in her past life.

Just as an uninterested Chen Rong turned her head and was about to return to her home, from far away, a somewhat familiar voice came to their ears: "Remember, we cannot let the Hu succeed!"

"Aye!" Two thousand voices answered in unison, thundering in people's ears.

Chen Rong paused and inwardly thought: *Odd, how come this voice sounds so familiar and yet so strange?*

"Miss, do you want to go take a look?" Nurse Ping asked her.

Chen Rong shook her head, saying: "No need," and then took large strides back to her courtyard.

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The entire city of Nan'yang was in a fervor today. By the time the roars gradually subsided, it had come to the evening hours.

The sun had just set, and Chen Rong was resting in her room when she heard a young man's voice: "Is Ah Rong of the Chen house in?"

Chen Rong paused. After trading glances with Nurse Ping, she stood up and replied, "I am."

"Come out, the young general is looking for you."

The young general?

Increasingly surprised, she smoothed her hair and stepped out. Nurse Ping quickly caught up, asking: "Miss, should you freshen up first?"

Chen Rong shook her head. "Men of the army like to be straightforward; they do not have the patience to wait."

When she finished, she pushed open the courtyard door.

Outside, Chen Wei, her sister, and a dozen servants were all present. Chen Rong swept her eyes past them, searching around.

She saw a young lad standing under the willow tree. He was clad in golden armor and robed in a white cloak. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, under the sun, his small face was so handsome that it was almost bewitching!

Chen Rong was instantly wreathed in smiles.

He watched her astonished expression as he gave a toothy grin, waved and shouted: “You’re all dismissed!” His voice was very sharp and clear.

“Aye,” the dozens of soldiers standing at his side answered and retreated.

He turned his head and laid his sharp eyes on Chen Wei and the other girls. Though he was young, his countenance was already carrying a kind of bloody and deadly air. Aghast, they quickly lowered their heads and rushed off.

Within seconds, only Chen Rong remained in the large area.

The young man turned and stared at Chen Rong before lifting his heels to come to her.

When he was within three steps from her, he stopped. Tilting his head, he eyed her from head to toe and then harrumphed, “It hadn’t even been that long yet I heard you’re already struggling to make it? Are you already driven to the point of flattering Wang Qilang with a tune of ‘The Phoenix’s Love Song’?” His tone was heated, his eyes burning in fury.

Chen Rong glared at him before slightly lifting her mouth to sneer: “It’s only been a couple of months yet you’ve already turned from a child actor to a young general. Don’t tell me Ran Min took pity on you so he gave you this position?”

“Humbug! I’m the direct descendant of Sun Zhongmou in Jiangdong (1). I have warfare blood coursing inside of me!”

1. better known as Sun Quan, Emperor of Wu in the Three Kingdoms period.

He was apparently beyond indignation, his fair, pretty face flushing red.

Seeing him huffing so angrily, Chen Rong laughed despite herself. She reached

out to hold his hand, her eyes gleaming as she yielded: “All right, all right, I know you’re very valiant. I was only teasing but you actually got angry, hah!”

His anger vanished at her beatific smile. He outstretched his right hand to grab her wrist and led her across the courtyard.

After a few steps, he glanced over and said, “Ah Rong of the Chen house, why can’t you stay out of trouble? If I hear anything about you right now then it’s guaranteed to be a bunch of crap!”

His spoken words were harsh but his grip on her hand was gentle and firm. It felt as though his fiery breath was driving away the cold that shrouded her.

Chen Rong tilted her head to look at the boy. It was twilight presently, the amber sunlight glittering on his golden armor. The cold metal coupled with his fair skin made for a unique beauty, one that was extremely strong yet extremely soft.

He did not turn away from her perusal, but chose to grin smugly instead. “So? Don’t I look dashing? Like a heavenly god?” He paused and then added: “My voice has changed, can you tell? Doesn’t it sound nice now?”

Looking at his triumphant face, Chen Rong finally could not stop herself from laughing out loud.

Chapter 47: Custom

The young man nodded his head proudly when he heard her laughter. “Actually, I don’t need you to tell me. All the besotted damsels in the city of Nan’yang were ogling me on the way here. I only have to open my mouth for some of them to scream and squeal.”

As Chen Rong went on laughing, he abruptly turned to her peevishly. “What, is that not so?”

She stopped and immediately retrieved her smile. She nodded vigorously, saying: “Of course, of course, the dashing General Sun has the aura of dragons, the courage of Lu Bu (1), and the brilliance of Zhuge (2).”

2. Lu Bu – a famous general in the Three Kingdoms period
3. Zhuge – Zhuge Liang, a famous strategist in the Three Kingdoms period

He was listening to her in rapt attention when her last few words stoked his temper. He swiftly cuffed her hands behind her back and demanded, “You little minx, did you just tease me?”

Unable to move, Chen Rong was quick to exclaim: “Let me go!”

“No, you’re my captive, you have to plead to me.”

Chen Rong couldn’t help herself from giggling as she said, “General Sun, please spare me.”

“Say that again, louder.”

“Won’t you be merciful and spare my little life, general?”

The young man was pleased with Chen Rong’s words. He laughed and let go of her hand. “I see you’re a sensible girl.”

While the two of them played around, Chen Wei next-door had been perking her ears to listen in. She stomped on the ground and griped bitterly: “I really don’t get it. She’s only a tawdry girl who knows no shame. How can those men be so beguiled by her?”

To be considered beautiful in this era, one must firstly have fair skin, she must secondly carry an impression of purity, and she must thirdly possess frailty and femineity. Chen Rong’s looks were too striking, her figure too voluptuous. It couldn’t be helped that she would be branded ‘tawdry’ by virtue of her sensuous beauty.

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Nurse Ping arranged a table filled with meat and wine in the courtyard.

Holding Chen Rong’s hand, the young man carelessly sat down and reached for a cup of wine. After a sip, he handed it to Chen Rong and said, “Let’s get drunk tonight.”

Chen Rong only smiled wordlessly. Nurse Ping softly laughed from the side: “That won’t do. My mistress isn’t yet betrothed.”

Sun Yan stared at Chen Rong and demanded, “Then if she’s betrothed, I’d be able to get drunk with her?”

Nurse Ping faltered and, not knowing how to answer, turned to look at Chen Rong.

Chen Rong inwardly thought with a wry smile: *I really want to get drunk with you, but Chen Yuan would be the first to relish in my mistake. He'd bring me straight to the prince's inner quarters and tell the world I'm a contemptible girl. The advantage I created last time by playing 'The Phoenix's Love Song' for Wang Qilang would come to naught.*

At this juncture, she couldn't help herself from looking up at Sun Yan.

What she saw were his clear orbs under the sunlight.

Chen Rong's lips moved as she stared into such eyes, wanting to tell him everything.

Just then, a loud voice came from the courtyard gate: "Is General Sun here? My master is very glad to learn of your visit. He has prepared a humble meal in your honor and especially sent me to invite you."

Sun Yan scowled and muttered: "I hate these customs the most."

He was about to refuse when a warmth lay over his hand. It was Chen Rong who gently pressed him down.

She was looking at him, her eyes dark yet steady. "My young sir, you mustn't refuse them." Upon seeing Sun Yan's quizzical expression, she smiled and playfully said, "General Ran didn't give you orders to take advantage of the nobles' panic and pressure them for some military provisions, seeing as how they are filled with grains and money?"

Sun Yan laughed. He covered his mouth and whispered: "I'd have forgotten if not for your reminder."

Upon his last word, he rose to his feet.

At the moment he agreed, Chen Rong picked up the veiled hat on the side and wore in over her head, then she took a few steps backward and demurely stood behind him.

The door squeaked open.

Into the door were Chen Yuan and two other scholars. As soon as he entered,

his eyes glanced to Chen Rong and then back to Sun Yan.

After appraising them, he pleasantly raised his clasped hands: “General Sun, it’s an honor.”

Sun Yan also returned him an acknowledgment per gentry standards. “My pleasure,” he smiled.

Chen Yuan laughed jovially. “Are you surnamed Sun, general? Then who are your ancestors, if I may ask?”

“I am a direct descendant of Sun Zhongmou of Jiangdong,” Sun Yan lightly replied.

This one sentence made Chen Yuan widen his eyes and put away his nonchalant face. “The Sun clan from Jiangdong?” he exclaimed. “That being your identity, why are you involved in these gory battles? If your elders in Jiangdong know, they will be very terrified.”

Sun Yan scowled and impatiently said, “If the barbarians come at me, I will come at them. As a man, I pay blood with blood. What is there to be afraid of?”

Chen Yuan laughed, again clasped his hands together and exclaimed: “Young general, you truly are a man of honor with valiant blood coursing inside. After you.”

Sun Yan nodded this time.

After having gone two steps, he turned his head to look at Chen Rong.

Seeing Chen Rong especially reserved behind her veiled hat, he secretly gave her a wink, turned his head in a careful bow to her and raised his voice: “Ah Rong, you’d given me food and clothes on the road south. I shall eternally engrave your life-saving grace in my heart.”

Chen Rong stared blankly before she quickly realized his meaning. Leaning sideway to avoid his ceremony, she curtsied and said, “You’re too kind, general.” And then she blushed and stammered: “It’s only right for me to have done so.”

Seeing her put on this appearance, Sun Yan had to squint his eyes and cleared his throat before he could barely hide his smile to say, “No matter what happens, I shall never forget your kindness. I’ll pay you another visit in two

days.”

“Aye.”

He flapped his long sleeves, turned and strode out. Following behind him, Chen Yuan, at the moment they left the gate, shot a look back at Chen Rong a few more times.

Only until they were gone in the distance did Chen Rong recover.

At this time, Nurse Ping ran to her side and remarked in joy: “Miss, miss, how wonderful that General Sun has also come to Nan’yang. With him here, your coming days should be looking up.”

Thinking awhile, Nurse Ping proceeded to mutter: “Unfortunately the young general insists on going off to kill the barbarians. Otherwise, while he has not returned to his clan, he can quickly marry you. How good would that be?”

While the nurse muttered from the side, Chen Rong slowly removed her veiled hat and thought to herself: *No matter what Sun Yan did, it’s impossible to become second-in-command to Ran Min in a short span of two months. That’s right, Ran Min must’ve learned of his identity. To protect him, he is sending him to Nan’yang where it’s safe.*

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Chapter 48: Clarification

After having whispered to herself for a while, Nurse Ping then turned to Chen Rong, saying: “Miss, young Mr. Sun isn’t that young anymore. He shouldn’t have a wife yet, right? Should I go see him and get a feel for what he thinks?”

Chen Rong shook her head. She stared into the distance and faintly said, “Some things can’t be hurried. If you’re hasty you’ll only be left with nothing.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean, miss.”

Chen Rong lowered her gaze and plucked the strings. After a series of melodious notes was issued, she went on saying: “At present everyone in Nan’yang thinks I’m in love with Wang Qilang. If right away I seek another man to marry, then wouldn’t my affections have been insincere? Nurse, you should know how damaging an insincere reputation can be.”

Anxious, the nurse exclaimed, “Then what will we do? Are you saying that you can’t marry anyone else in your life besides the Wangs’ 7th son?”

Chen Rong’s right hand continued moving along the zither strings as the instrument issued a flow of crystalline notes.

Nurse Ping stood quietly for a while and at last couldn’t refrain herself from crying out: “Miss, miss?”

Chen Rong relaxed her hands and brought the music to a halt. “Nurse,” she slowly began, “I can relax for a few days now that Sun Yan is back.”

She slowly looked up.

Her eyes seemed a bit strange. It contained a faint smile, one that was nevertheless somewhat faraway.

She stared at her nurse and then suddenly asked, “Nurse, do you know where Wang Qilang is?”

Nurse Ping didn’t expect for her to suddenly mention Wang Qilang. She stared blankly and shook her head: “Nay miss.”

“Tell Old Shang to go and see where he is.”

The nurse rounded her eyes. “Miss, what are you planning to do?” she asked with some caution and concern.

“Nothing.” Chen Rong raised her small chin, turned around in the direction of the main compound and said, “Young Mr. Sun has returned, wielding two thousand soldiers in his hands. The whole of Nan’yang is under his protection. Would you say that I am now very safe? And nobody will easily touch me?”

Nurse Ping nodded in bewilderment.

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Chen Rong glanced at her. “Then tell Old Shang to go find out where Wang Qilang is. I want to see him. In fact, I believe *he’s* waiting for me to come see him and make things clear.” *I’ll stop feel guilty once I see him. He, too, won’t develop bad impression because of my intentional dallying.*

One should know that it didn’t matter to the scholars whether one had made mistakes. What mattered was when someone had the nerve to talk glibly after not admitting to his mistakes.

It wouldn’t be too late if she could see him now.

Nurse Ping again nodded dumbly.

By the time the sun completely sank to the west and numerous stars emerged in the vast sky, Chen Rong’s carriage made its appearance on the street.

At this moment, cries had taken over the streets of Nan’yang.

There were very few pedestrians out and about; those who were had their eyes glued to their feet. Houses were tightly latched, as if the city dwellers believed doing these things would ensure their safety.

Before long, Chen Rong’s carriage had pulled up to the facade of the Huan estate.

As the third largest family in Nan’yang, the house of Huan was hosting a banquet at this time, its compound awash in light and music.

Old Shang announced himself to the guard and, after showing the Chen

estate's bamboo card, smoothly went into the compound.

When the carriage drove past the Huans' nine-section corridor, Chen Rong stopped Old Shang and said to him, "Go over there and wait. Let me know when Wang Qilang comes out. He actually doesn't like to socialize, I'm sure he'll leave eventually. Pay careful attention."

"Aye, miss."

After Old Shang was gone, Chen Rong leaned her hands on the railing and looked down to the bending corridors below. There, acres of azure water rippled and gleamed in the strewing starlight.

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Some time later, a series of rapid steps neared her. Forthwith, Old Shang came up behind her and whispered: "Miss, as you expected, Wang Qilang had gotten to the other side of the South Bridge."

"Good, you may go."

Old Shang did not leave. He took a few dithering steps before looking back to Chen Rong. "Why are you in such a hurry, miss? Why can't we make an appointment to see him at the Wang estate?"

Chen Rong looked up, her eyes dark and gloomy under the starlight. "Old Shang, the literati have always believed that people should be free-spirited. If I wanted to see him, I should do what my heart is telling me to do. But if I made an appointment, my visit would then become deliberate."

Old Shang only stared at her with a confused expression.

Chen Rong shook her head and walked ahead.

Her wooden clogs made particularly clear tapping that sounded almost like music.

As she walked on, Ah Rong's feet flitted as though she was dancing. Perhaps because the weight had been lifted from her heart, her footsteps, too, became lighter.

With her dancing steps, she tread on the starlight and went down the winding path.

After making a turn, she took a misstep and saw a handsome man leaning against the railing, his face turning sideway and looking at her with a faint smile.

It was Wang Hong.

Chen Rong lit up at the sudden sight of him.

She quickly stopped her waltzing and retreated backward, then she curtsied to him and said, “Are you just now leaving, Qilang? Ah Rong of the Chen house has waited for you for some time now.”

Under the moonlight, Wang Hong’s eyes were as bright as the stars. He clasped his hands behind his back and quietly regarded Chen Rong, giving a low chuckle: “Have you especially come to see me?”

“Aye.”

“And without the Huan estate’s consent nor a prior appointment, you’ve come and then wait by yourself?”

“Aye.”

Wang Hong laughed. He smirked his lips saying: “Ah Rong, this doesn’t seem like something you’d do.”

Smiling, Chen Rong briskly replied, “Perhaps it’s because I can finally let go of a few things today.”

“Oh, what are you letting of?” Wang Hong watched her with interest.

Chen Rong looked up.

She looked at him quietly, her eyes remarkably bright in the dark.

Watching the man who looked as ethereal as a heavenly being though he was standing under the celestial stars themselves, Chen Rong took a step forward, carefully bowed to him and raised her voice: “I’ve come to see Qilang for I have something to say.”

Wang Hong didn’t ask her what. He only stared at her in silence, his eyes deep and unfathomable.

Chen Rong lowered her head, clasped her hands together and continued: “I’ve arrived in Nan’yang only to inadvertently learn that my uncle Chen Yuan was

going to send me to the Nan'yang Prince the night he invited the prince to our banquet." She bit her lips, her originally crisp voice turning timid: "I know I'm only an orphan girl. I have no one to depend on, no one to beg. If my uncle really chases me out, there aren't any other options for me besides my death."

"For that reason, you thought of me and how you could borrow me to get rid of the Nan'yang Prince? Is that why you played 'The Phoenix's Love Song' for me?"

Startlingly, Wang Hong sounded a little cutting.

Chapter 49: Kiss

Chen Rong shook her head, prompting Wang Hong to furrow his brow.

Without looking at him, she bowed her head saying: "You are a god on earth. Your aura is so superior that I had had difficulty controlling my heartbeat the first time I met you. My admiration for you has always been sincere."

At this juncture, she wryly smiled. "Of course, if not for the Prince of Nan'yang, I might never say these words to you nor play that song. And perhaps even when I'm laid six feet under and my soul has returned to my hometown, my hair then gray and my children abundant, you would never know that a tawdry girl called Ah Rong of the Chen house had once harbored such affections for you."

Her head bowed lower and lower, her voice shaking: "My origin is humble, my nature vulgar. I took advantage of your generosity to express myself, taking this as a gamble hoping to escape from my clan's arrangement." She briefly paused, her voice growing even more fearful: "Regardless of whether my feelings for you are true or not, at the moment I did what I did, my motive wasn't simply to find an escape. Since then, I've repeatedly evaded your questions whenever you asked. I've always felt sorry about this, so I've especially come here tonight hoping to have your forgiveness."

At this time, she had bowed so low that it seemed she could not rise.

The starry sky and distant lights shed a faint sheen on her graceful and voluptuous curves and on her raven hair. Her tilt of the head gave her a beguilement that turned his mouth dry. Unconsciously, Wang Hong diverted his gaze.

Only an instant later, however, he was turning his head to watch her, his eyes fathomless.

“I already know these things,” he said.

“I am ashamed.”

He slowly approached her.

Coming to stand before her, he lowered his head and watched the beautiful girl under the moonlight. Very slowly, he outstretched his hand to stroke her hair.

“Ah Rong.”

His touch was extremely gentle.

“Aye.”

“Why have you come to explain everything to me today?”

Words were caught in Chen Rong’s throat before she could murmur: “Young Mr. Sun Yan has returned. While he is here, I do not need to be afraid of the Nan’yang Prince. As my fear lightened, I thought of you and felt awful for what I’ve done.”

“Is that so?”

“I would not lie to you.”

Wang Hong suddenly grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to him.

His movement took Chen Rong by surprise. Caught off guard, she fell forward into a warm embrace.

Wang Hong’s embrace.

Flummoxed, Chen Rong stared at his lapel, slightly gaping her rosy mouth. She stiffened, not daring to move.

Wang Hong held her in his arms and with his head slightly tilting, leaned his mouth against her ear, tickling her with his breath. While she trembled involuntarily, he whispered: “And then what? Do you want me to explain to the world that whatever happened that day was just forced by circumstances? Do you want me to say that though you love me, you are not good enough for me?

Would it be best to let the world feel that your admiration for Wang Qilang is a thing of the past? That you can still find a good man to marry?”

His voice sounded in the air like silky tendrils, very gentle, but also very cold. In its elegance hid a wisp of frosty chill.

Chen Rong was too tense to move.

Wang Hong slowly turned to face her, his hands cupping her cheeks. His inky eyes were slightly squinted, but he did not smile. “Have I been so consistently magnanimous that you can just use me when you want to use me and then leave me when you want to leave me?”

Chen Rong finally recovered. Her rosy lips trembled as she hastily tried to clarify: “No, that’s not true.”

Wang Hong’s hands suddenly stilled on her cheeks. He kept them firmly there and lowered his head to catch her lips.

Their lips met.

With her eyes widened, Chen Rong dazedly let him inhale her lips and intrude inside to probe deeper into the depths of her mouth.

Abruptly, Wang Qilang parted her lips with the speed of light in the middle of the fiery kiss and tilted his head away.

He gasped for a brief moment.

Then he pushed Chen Rong away, turned around and, without another word, flapped his long sleeves and strode away.

Chen Rong gave a cry only by the time he was off in the far distance. As quiet as she was, it was uncertain whether she wanted to stop him or to question him.

In a blink, Wang Hong’s elegantly white and spotless figure completely disappeared from her sight.

Some time passed when Old Shang went to her and pulled on her hand. “Miss, what’s wrong? What happened? Why are you standing here stock-still like this?”

Chen Rong looked up in a daze. She vacantly looked at Old Shang and muttered: “He… got angry.” Then she moved her hand to her lips and flushed

even redder as she brushed across them.

Her blush soon spread to her neck. Furiously rubbing her lips, Chen Rong railed: “The rotten rogue! He dared took liberties with me…”

At this point, Chen Rong noticed Old Shang’s curious and confused expression and clamped her mouth shut. She leaned on him to stand upright, her knees numbing, as she murmured: “Let’s go, let us leave now.” She repeated herself, sounding a little as though she was crying: “Old Shang, let’s go!”

The elderly man was completely flummoxed to see her angry, embarrassed, and crying. He quickly helped her, replying as he walked: “Aye, we’ll leave at once. We’ll leave at once.”

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At long last, Chen Rong found her voice again. “Old Shang, was there any outsider nearby just now?”

“I don’t think so,” he told her after thinking about it. He turned to Chen Rong, asking quizzically: “Miss, is something wrong?”

Chen Rong only blinked, saying nothing in return.

She couldn’t tell him Wang Hong took liberties with her. She wouldn’t believe such words herself, much less Old Shang.

So she clamped her teeth and feebly said, “No, nothing’s the matter.”

“Nothing’s the matter,” she repeated as she angrily wiped her lips.

Chapter 50: Food

All the way until she was seated inside the carriage, Chen Rong’s limbs were still in want of strength.

The vehicle slowly pulled out of the Huan estate and headed for the street.

Old Shang looked back from time to time as he drove along the quiet street. From his vantage point, he could see his mistress’s flustered look, one he hadn’t seen before.

The night passed by with Chen Rong’s tossing and turning.

The weather began to turn cold the next day, chilly wind sweeping by bitingly.

Chen Rong was sitting in her courtyard and absentmindedly plucking her strings. At length, she suddenly called for Old Shang.

The elderly retainer ran to her side and replied, “What is it, miss?”

“What’s the commotion outside?”

“It’s General Sun. He’s lining empty carriages in the middle of South Street, waiting for the major clans to send food over. Haha, this young general really doesn’t give a hoot. Can’t he go to their homes and quietly discuss with them? Making such a big racket is the same as forcing them to provide rations.”

Is that so?!

Chen Rong smiled, her eyes curving. “He *is* someone who would do such a thing.” This very moment, Chen Rong suddenly came to respect Ran Min. He must’ve known this about Sun Yan’s character, as well as his identity as the direct descendant of the Sun clan of Jiangdong and had thus let him come to Nan’yang, calling it protection but raising rations in reality. Only someone with his background would have the gall to do such things. The major clans hadn’t the courage to resent him. Not only could they not resent him, but if anyone were to mention anything about it, they would also have to praise him for ‘acting in a way the literati would’.

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While Chen Rong was feeling amused, a series of footsteps arrived. They were odd sounding, somewhat chaotic and pressing, and made her look back.

She saw from the corner of her eyes Chen Yuan and several stewards striding toward her.

Why are they coming here?

Chen Rong furrowed her brow, her mind turning almost instantly.

She quietly glanced to the door. Just as their figures arrived at the courtyard, Chen Rong’s voice sounded, calling Old Shang.

“Aye, miss.”

“Luo’yang had fallen and the Hu now run rampant. If not for General Sun’s stationing in Nan’yang, we wouldn’t have our present peace.”

Old Shang peeked up and quizzically looked at her, not getting why she was speaking such banality all of a sudden.

Without warning, Chen Rong gave him a shrewd smile and said in a crisp, resounding voice: “Old Shang, lead the guards to load ten carriages with grains from our warehouse and send them to General Sun.”

Chen Yuan and his stewards were entering the courtyard at the same time these words landed.

Among them, one had already stepped into the door and poised to speak. He froze on the spot when he heard Chen Rong’s words. Whirl – they all turned their heads to look at Chen Yuan.

Chen Yuan, too, was dumbfounded.

He stayed silly for a moment before clearing his throat, stepped into the courtyard and called Chen Rong. “Ah Rong.”

Surprised, Chen Rong quickly stepped away from her seat, respectfully curtsied to him and said, “Uncle, you’re here.”

Chen Yuan nodded and then cleared his throat again. “Ah Rong, when I came in, you were saying…”

This was all he had managed before Chen Rong interrupted him. Like a child wanting to win the adult’s praises, she excitedly explained: “Oh, did you hear me? If General Sun hadn’t led his army to protect Nan’yang this time, I as a woman wouldn’t have this peace to enjoy. Uncle, uncle, I just told Old Shang that I want to send them half of my food. I’m sure General Sun will be delighted.”

Chen Rong turned around, shot Old Shang a look and shouted, “What are you freezing there for? Go load the food! Remember, you must bring it over with big fanfare so that the world will know that this food is sent by the House of Chen!”

She said one sentence after another, giving no room for Chen Yuan to interrupt.

After Old Shang left with her orders, Chen Rong turned around to see her uncle. She again curtsied and said to him: “Dear me, I kept talking about my own matter. Don’t mind me, uncle. Is there anything I can do for you today?”

Chen Yuan opened his mouth but could not spit out half a word.

He had come to take Chen Rong’s grains under the pretext of General Sun’s supply urgency. He had intended to take about ten carriages and then with his own name give Sun Yan five while keeping the rest for himself. It should be known that food in Nan’yang at present was becoming increasingly scarcer. Possessing food was much more important than possessing gold and gems.

For this, he even brought four stewards along and thought of all the excuses and pretexts that could be used. Chen Rong was under his control to begin with. If he asked for food from her, it was but for the overall good and there was nothing anyone could say.

But he never imagined that this young girl, whatever mental illness she might have contracted, had taken it upon herself to announce she would be giving food to General Sun and even sent all of ten carriages in her own name before he could open his mouth to speak!

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He was livid, but what could he do? There was no longer any excuse for him to demand her grains.

Chen Rong turned around and blinked her large eyes curiously at a tongue-tied Chen Yuan. “Uncle, uncle?”

Only after she called a few times in a row did Chen Yuan snap awake. He again cleared his throat and wanted to open his mouth, but stopped himself after looking around and seeing the admiration his stewards accorded Chen Rong. After a length, he nodded and somberly said, “Excellent, excellent. Ah Rong, though you’re only a young lady, it is very good that you know how to handle tough situations.”

He gave another cough. “I only came by to visit you. Now I see that you are very commendable.”

Chen Rong blushed as she happily bowed toward him saying: “Thank you,

uncle.”

“All right, let’s go,” he barked at the others.

Chen Rong swiftly sent him out with due respect. “Uncle, take you time.”

After Chen Yuan was sent away, Nurse Ping asked in surprise, “Miss, what does the master mean?”

What does he mean? What else but scheming against me? Chen Rong inwardly sneered.

Not receiving a reply, Nurse Ping sighed and muttered: “Miss, aren’t you a little too generous? Gifting all of ten carriages of food. *Ten* carriages of food, we’re talking about! Even the entire Chen estate cannot come up with so much food.”

Chen Rong lowered her eyes and thought to herself: *If I didn’t come up with this number, would Chen Yuan have let me off the hook?*

She naturally wouldn’t explain to Nurse Ping, only telling her: “Let Old Shang know that when he gives the grains away, he needs to smile and, if anyone asks, tell them loudly that the person who sends the grains is Ah Rong of the Chen house – a young lady from the Chen estate who’s not yet fifteen. If they seem interested, you may then tell them about my generous act of distributing my wealth in Ping and about the prophecy matter on the way here.”

“Aye,” Nurse Ping answered bewilderedly.

“Go.”

“Aye.”

Staring after Nurse Ping’s retreating back, Chen Rong slowly sat down and again plucked her zither strings.

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51,52,53,54,55,56

Chapter 51: Gifting Grains

Grains were loaded into ten carriages to the sound of carefree music. Even when they finished, Old Shang and the servants were still reluctantly looking at the food and gazing longingly at Chen Rong, waiting for her to change her mind.

Chen Rong paid them little attention. She looked down and softly bade, “Old Shang, pay more attention and see if any families are moving away to Jiankang. If they are, ask them whether they are selling their land. Take nine carriages out of the ten my uncle gifted us the last time. I’ll also give you ten gold leaves. Remember, you must exchange all of them for land within this month. Ah yes, record the titles under General Sun’s name.”

Now that Luo’yang had fallen, Nan’yang would be facing the barbarians directly; and without the natural barrier of the Yangtze River, most clans would want to leave. Due to the prince’s intervention, however, few of them had the actual freedom to go as they pleased.

Purchasing land was unexpectedly not a bad idea. “Miss, did you say to record under General Sun’s name?” Nurse Ping asked tentatively.

Chen Rong nodded. “Yes. If the selling families ask, you can tell them that General Sun wants to settle here.”

“But what if something were to happen and the titles are under his name?” Old Shang tried to caution her. Nurse Ping likewise suggested: “Miss, why not have them under your own name?”

Chen Rong raised an eyebrow and dismissively said, “Because what’s mine is the clan’s.”

And like that realization dawned upon them.

It was Chen Rong’s turn to hesitate at this point. After a very long time, she at last quietly said, “Then why don’t we record it under General Ran’s name.”

“… Miss, I don’t think that’s a good idea either.”

Chen Rong smiled confidently this time. She shook her head saying: “Nothing will go wrong. He is completely trustworthy regarding this point,” smiling wryly as she did.

Seeing how adamant she was, Old Shang stood quietly for a moment before asking: “Then should we let General Sun know about it? We’re sending so much food to him today; it’s a good time to mention it to him.” It had always been the practice across the country to record one’s lands under the name of highly-ranked friends and family to evade taxation. It could be said that Chen Rong’s method wasn’t anything new. But how could she have so much trust in General Ran when she was merely his acquaintance?

Chen Rong shook her head. “That’s not necessary. Tell him only if he finds out.”

“Aye.”

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The delivery team comprising of Old Shang and the servants attracted widespread attention the second it left the Chen estate.

One should know that it was overly aggressive for Sun Yan to display empty carriages on the street waiting for major clans to send food. The clans were furthermore suffering food shortages themselves. In the short given time, they looked at one another but none took the initiative to send food.

It was in this stifling atmosphere that Chen Rong’s team appeared.

Her cavalcade had belonged to the Chen estate in Ping, the carriages painted yellow and the servants also dressed differently from the local Chen estate. Both commoners and nobles couldn’t help themselves from inquiring around as they watched the spectacle.

Listening to the buzz coming from time to time around him, Old Shang laughed aloud and exclaimed in a rather proud voice: “My lady’s donating these chestnuts to the warriors from her own inventory. Have you heard of her? She is Ah Rong of the Chen House. She’s the very same generous Chen Rong in Ping who had foretold correctly three times on the way south.”

Once Old Shang’s voice rang out, the group of servants next to him loudly

followed suit resulting in a dozen people chattering and spreading Chen Rong's story from beginning to end.

"Ah Rong of the Chen house?" an old man exclaimed. "Isn't she a concubine-born daughter? How did she acquire so much food?"

"Aye aye, this young lady is so wealthy! Her gift alone is comparable to that of an entire clan. She's indeed very generous. How incredible she is!"

Old Shang's voice boomed louder when he heard the passers-by asking. At once, he meticulously recounted over and over to them what Chen Rong had done.

When the team reached the middle of the street where Sun Yan was, Old Shang had to swallow back his words in the middle of his narration. Glancing at Sun Yan in his golden armor trying to suppress his laughter, he quickly jumped down and bowed to him. "I come on the order of my mistress, Ah Rong of the Chen house, to deliver ten carriages of grains to you, general."

Sun Yan raised his clasped hands and responded: "I thank you kindly."

"Don't mention it, sir. My mistress says it is due to you and your men that she can enjoy peace in Nan'yang. Gifting food is only a matter of course."

Sun Yan laughed and remarked, "Though Ah Rong of the Chen house is a woman, her generosity and gallantry have put us men to shame."

As he said this, many passers-by quietly retreated and turned to hurry away.

Sun Yan took note of everything that went on and smiled again. This smile attracted screams and cheers from the girls standing around.

Apparently accustomed to the girls' admiration, he stepped forward, helped Old Shang up from his deference, and softly chuckled: "Did that little girl Ah Rong tell you to spread her name?"

"Aye."

"Haha, she never misses any opportunity, does she?" He paused and then continued: "I was a bit reckless about today's matter. Thank Ah Rong for me after you return. Without her help, I would've caused great trouble."

Still not really clear, Old Shang only replied, "Aye."

“Also, tell her that I had stood on the street in my armor today. So handsome and swashbuckling was I that droves of women gathered around me. Ask her why she didn’t come to join such spectacular a scene.” He was now bursting out in laughter on his own.

“Aye, I will definitely relay your words,” Old Shang replied, almost too honestly.

In a good mood, Sun Yan laughed aloud again. After some time, he withdrew his smile, took two steps back, raised his clasped hands to Old Shang and said, “I thank your lady on behalf of General Ran. Goodbye.”

“There’s no need to be so polite, general.”

Sun Yan sat back down on the seat he had placed in the middle of the street. Watching Old Shang getting on the carriage and continuing to tout Chen Rong, he couldn’t stop himself from laughing again.

Chapter 52: Undercurrent

After returning to the estate and thoroughly recounting to Chen Rong everything that had happened, Old Shang’s lips then twitched hesitantly.

Chen Rong gave him a glance, asking: “Are you worried?”

“Aye.” Old Shang had served her for so long that he was as comfortable around her as his own family. “Would our praises for you cause the literati to disapprove of you?”

Smiling, Chen Rong stood up looking to the distant sky and lightly said, “No, General Sun’s demanding for food on the street has placed the major clans in a difficult situation; they can only now hide behind their doors. There are not many scholars wandering the streets of Nan’yang at this time. There should only be commoners and women out there right now.”

Her lips revealed a smirk. “To achieve eternal fame in this world, one must either come from a good background and thereby attract the world’s attention with his every move, or his deeds must be spread through others’ mouths. The saying ‘three humans make a tiger’ merely means the more people repeat an idea, the more it becomes true.”

To Nurse Ping standing behind her, she said, “Bring me my veiled hat,” her eyes curving into crescents. “Let’s go see young General Sun.”

“Aye.”

When Chen Rong left her courtyard, the side door opened to show Chen Wei and several other girls gathering around Chen Qian as they were also walking out.

Chen Rong slowed down when she saw them.

Even so, Chen Wei had noticed her. At once, she smiled and called, “Ah Rong?”

The girls stopped and all turned to look at Chen Rong.

Their expressions were a little strange. At length, a girl standing next to Chen Wei called and asked, “Ah Rong, are you going to General Sun’s place?”

She sounded quite grim.

“I’m just taking a walk,” Chen Rong replied with a curtsy.

“But the one Ah Rong admires is Wang Qilang,” smiled Chen Wei. “She doesn’t have anything to do with General Sun, right?”

Faced with her inquiry, Chen Rong just smiled wordlessly.

She slightly turned and called Nurse Ping from behind: “Nurse, let’s go.”

“Ah, aye aye.”

Chen Rong turned around, curtsied to the girls and said, “Sisters, I’ll go on ahead.” When she finished, she proceeded to straighten her back and head for the door.

Quite a while later, a girl shook her head saying: “Ah Rong is merely a concubine-born daughter from a subsidiary branch. I’m rather stumped where she got this arrogance from. How dare she speak so rudely to us?”

Chen Qian, too, harrumphed at this.

Among them, only Chen Wei had lived with her long enough to faintly understand that: *Chen Rong simple wouldn’t get along with these girls, and it was hard to blame her. She was born with that look, so she was born only to deal with men.*

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The hustle and bustle returned to the streets of Nan'yang at this time. Several small teams of carriages filled with grains and chestnuts could be seen making their way to the city center.

It seemed hers was quite the opening act.

"Is there a festival today?" Nurse Ping asked in surprise when she saw the flow of people surging on the street, many of them splendidly dressed girls. Just as quickly, she realized and laughed: "But of course, it's General Sun. I don't think I've told you, miss, that though General Sun was handsome on the road south, he was nothing like this. Only now do I know how dashing a man in armor can be."

Chen Rong chuckled. "Nurse, he'll have a field day if you say this to him."

The nurse and her mistress laughed in good humor as they arrived at the street where Sun Yan was.

This place was overflowing with people.

In addition to the congregation of girls who gathered laughingly around Sun Yan, there were also carriages brimmed with food, being loaded under the soldiers' direction.

Whose ever idea it was, each time a clan sent food to them, the recording officer would chant aloud: "The Wu house of Luo'yang sent five carriages."

"The Wu House of Jiang sent seven carriages." (1)

1. These are two different last names. The first is 虞 while the second is 吳

As she listened to these announcements, Chen Rong watched the distress on the stewards' faces and felt like laughing: *What a shrewd trick Sun Yan has devised. How can these families who place face above everything else dare to be perfunctory in their efforts now?*

She cocked her head, looking at Sun Yan who was surrounded by the girls. Through the crowd, she could see his golden armor and his handsome, almost enchantingly soft and fair face. Nonetheless, that face was growing impatient.

Sun Yan turned his head at this moment and met Chen Rong's eyes.

Almost instantly, he grinned and winked at her.

Chen Rong didn't expect him to recognize her. Afraid this man, who feared nothing, would call her name, she quickly placed a finger on her lips and rounded her eyes to warn him.

Sun Yan burst out laughing, making the girls squeal with one hastily asking: "Young sir, what made you laugh so joyously?"

Another round-faced girl who was as lovely as a doll happily sang: "Mr. Sun is exceedingly handsome, his laughter beyond compare. Ah, please take this pine from me."

She next held a pine branch and brought it before Sun Yan, blinking her large, sparkling eyes.

Sun Yan halted his laughter in stupefaction.

Just as he stood there immobilized, Chen Rong laughed out loud amusedly. Afraid Sun Yan would turn angry, she quickly turned and stifled her laughter.

While the young girls larked in merry frolic, two scholars passed by Chen Rong, one whispering: "Nan'yang can't stand much longer!"

The other sighed in bitterness: "Cursed! The Prince of Nan'yang tried his best to block the news ahead of time and didn't allow anyone to leave. Tsk, what can be done now?"

The first man glanced at Sun Yan, Chen Rong, and the other girls. He mockingly said, "What's funny is that the entire Nan'yang is singing of peace. They think that with Ran Min's promise, no one will dare to breach Nan'yang. They had forgotten that Ran Min is surnamed Shi! Hmph, Shi Hu had ordered him to take Nan'yang. I cannot imagine when that time comes, with an army outside and their back up in here, who's going to be able to climb to the sky for an escape?"

Watching the two men leave, Nurse Ping worriedly asked, "Miss, do they speak the truth?"

Chen Rong didn't answer her. She gazed down in thought for a moment and then said, "Let's go back first."

“Aye.”

Because they were unnerved, they took very little time to return. Just as Chen Rong entered her courtyard, a steward of the Chen estate strode forward, complaining the moment he saw her: “Miss, where have you gone to? The prince’s estate sent people over saying there’s something important they’d like you to go over for. They have been waiting for very a long time.”

Chapter 53: Entering the Estate

When the steward finished what he had to say, he saw Chen Rong’s and Nurse Ping’s expressions both changing. “What is it?” he scowled and snapped.

Neither spoke. Nurse Ping looked worriedly at Chen Rong.

The colors on Chen Rong’s face alternated between blue and white. Up until now, many things had developed no differently from the past and had all been within her grasp.

But what was happening right in front of her was clearly deviating from the previous track.

She quelled her flustered heartbeat to inquire softly: “May I ask what’s so important?”

“How should I know?” The steward’s tone was a little impatient. He urged, “Miss, you should hurry. Don’t let the prince’s people wait for a long time.”

“After you,” he gestured toward the parking square.

Chen Rong did not move. She curtsied to the steward and said to him, “Please wait. It’s a bit of a surprise. I’ll need to prepare a few things.”

“That’s not necessary.”

The steward glowered, his voice hardening: “People from the prince’s estate said they have prepared everything for you, miss.”

He again requested: “Let’s go!”

Chen Rong bowed her head in thought and then whispered to Nurse Ping who stood beside her: “Stay here for now, let General Sun know about this and everything leading up to it.”

“Aye, miss.”

Chen Rong nodded then walked to the square.

There, people from the prince’s estate were growing tired of waiting. When one of the maidservants saw Chen Rong, she set her face and impatiently fussed: “You really know how to make others wait, young miss.”

Chen Rong kept her head bowed without refuting her, quietly climbing into the carriage.

And then the vehicle began to pull out from the side door.

Inside, Chen Rong was flanked by a maid on each side. They were staring at her at this time, looking her up and down with eyes that were both frank and rude.

Chen Rong remained to look docile.

Under her wide sleeves, her hands wrung together as she tried to think. Eventually, she could only decide to take one step at a time.

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The prince’s estate was located on the south side of the city, encompassing an immense expanse which housed rows of houses; it was quite breathtaking.

After the carriage passed the main entrance, it entered a side door from the roadway.

Past the doorway was a small garden where maids shuttled to and fro, all wearing brocades and silks, jades and sachets. They appeared to be even more extravagant compared to her – a noble lady.

Chen Rong noticed that there was no guard in the entire garden.

Seeing her looking around attentively ever since they entered the estate, a maid couldn’t help from laughing: “You haven’t seen such an opulent place, have you miss?”

Chen Rong didn’t answer her.

At this time, the older maidservant to her right gave a sigh: “People keep telling me you’re unmannered, now I see that’s the case…” Her sigh was drawn long and thick.

Chen Rong turned around to glance at her, slightly bowing her head to show gratitude.

Even so, her acknowledgment carried a slight haughtiness so unlike other young ladies who hailed from subsidiary branches that the young maid promptly scoffed in disdain.

After the carriage crossed the small garden and into a forested path, it then turned into a lakeside corridor. Coming into Chen Rong's sight was now a square.

The two maids kept quiet. They supported Chen Rong down from the carriage on either side and led her heading south. Within a few dozen steps, a courtyard appeared to them.

Chen Rong had yet to arrive when she heard a wave of women's frolicking laughter.

She paused and slowly asked, "Didn't you say His Highness needed me for something important? Why have you brought me to the women's quarters?"

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The two maids laughed.

The younger one covered her mouth and replied, "His Highness said that there's an important matter, but this important matter may come tomorrow, or it may come the day after tomorrow. In other words, you'll have to wait for His Highness's schedule to clear before he can call for you. You don't suppose that an insignificant damsel like you can make His Highness drop everything to greet you?"

Chen Rong turned her head.

Her eyes were now glaring sharply at the two women. How could they've seen such murderous intent before? Instantly alarmed, they faltered backward.

"Is that so?"

Chen Rong smirked. She flapped her long sleeves and turned to go: "It seems your master has forgotten that sincerity is the key to getting along with other people. He says there is something important he needs me for, but he calls me here and then ignores me. Is this what you call hospitality? Disregarding me is

bad enough, he even has me brought to his inner quarters. I really don't have the audacity to accept this kind of humiliation."

When she finished, she removed a golden hairpin from her head, flipped her right hand and pointed the sharp object at her throat.

Her action was very smooth, both swift and decisive!

The two maids were surprised at first and next wanted to laugh. But when they saw Chen Rong's deadly eyes, they could not bring themselves to laugh. They suddenly realized that this young girl was capable of doing anything.

They froze.

Chen Rong pointed the golden hairpin to her throat, stared at them unblinkingly, and did not speak.

Silence ensued.

At this time, a slightly shrill voice came from the arched doorway behind Chen Rong: "Haha, there's no need to be like this."

A thin man in his fifties outfitted in a scholar's robe appeared at Chen Rong's side.

Chen Rong knew this man. He was Advisor Xu who worked for the Prince of Nan'yang. In her previous lifetime, this old man was regularly eyeing her like a predator and did everything he could to get his hands on her.

As soon as he appeared, a pair of foul rat eyes latched onto Chen Rong's bosom and hips. While his eyes were almost glued to her, his mouth moved to say: "Just as Chen Shu says, you have quite a personality. Hehe, Ah Rong, why are you so angry? They're just joking with you. Aren't you condescending yourself by losing your temper with the servants like this?"

He then clapped his hands, yelling: "Where's the carriage? His Highness is still waiting to see Chen Rong."

Chapter 54: The Prince of Nan'yang

It was very uncomfortable to have such a pair of rat eyes glued to her body. Chen Rong reached for her veiled hat and strode to the carriage that was pulling out.

Only when she mounted the carriage did Advisor Xu's eyes reluctantly move away. He shouted to the driver: "Let's go."

"Aye."

The prince's estate was indeed very large. After half an hour of driving round and round, outside finally came a holler: "We've arrived."

The curtain lifted and the young maid helped Chen Rong down.

She alighted the carriage, looking around. This was a small house that was completely isolated from the buildings behind it. She secretly exhaled in relief as she watched the comings and goings of the scholars in the vicinity.

Advisor Xu's eyes were again on her. He revealed yellowish teeth with a smile as he watched her. "It seems Ah Rong of the Chen house does not trust His Highness very much." His tone was very odd.

Chen Rong walked forward and did not look back. "If you want others to believe you, then don't resort to deception."

Her pertinacious tone startled Advisor Xu. He had thought Chen Rong would be afraid to offend the prince and him. He hadn't known this young lady was fundamentally not afraid of offending anyone.

Hers was indeed a very infuriating personality.

Chen Rong hadn't gone more than ten steps when a familiar laughter rang out in front of her. Forthwith, Chen Yuan and a few Chen scholars were seen walking out from the reception hall.

She stopped at the sight of them.

As he was laughing, Chen Yuan's eyes turned to see Chen Rong. He stepped forward and gently inquired: "Have you come, Ah Rong?"

"Aye." She looked up at him: "Where are you going, uncle?"

She was now pressing her lips together. Though her eyes were turning moist behind the veil, her voice was unyielding: "It can't be that you're planning to bring an unmarried lady like me to the prince's estate and then readily leaves by yourself?"

Chen Yuan stiffened.

Seconds later, he scowled and snapped: “What nonsense are you speaking, Ah Rong? His Highness heard of your three predictions on the way here and is impressed by your extraordinary discernment. He calls you over to ask about the war. What a great honor this is! You’re an ill-advised girl.”

Ah Rong curtsied to him but obstinately insisted, “I only know that I am an unmarried lady. It is rather improper to expose myself in the estate in the presence of men.”

“Improper?” Chen Yuan scoffed and was about to say something but quickly closed his mouth.

He flapped his long sleeves and impatiently snapped: “That’s enough, His Highness has waited long enough. Go in.”

When he finished, he hurriedly walked away without waiting for Chen Rong to counter.

She watched his back but did not make any move.

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At this time, the two maids came up to her. Before they could speak, Chen Rong lowered her head and continued forward.

Advisor Xu led them east then west before they entered the hall through a side door next to a small pond.

Through a few side halls, the main hall appeared before Chen Rong’s eyes. While they were some distance away, a burst of fragrance had entered her nose; along with these scents was also an older man’s low and dull laughter.

Advisor Xu was smiling broadly by this time. His eyes had also recovered from Chen Rong’s body: “Go in, His Highness is inside.”

She slightly leaned and curtsied to Advisor Xu, saying: “If His Highness asks, please allow me to sit behind a screen.”

Advisor Xu scowled as he glared at Chen Rong. “Why are you so troublesome?” He turned to the two maids and shouted: “Take her in!”

At his order, each maid came to either side of Chen Rong and stared at her after their curtsies.

By now Chen Rong had composed herself. She unhappily said, “Do the people of the Prince’s Estate not understand etiquette?”

Advisor Xu was growing impatient. “It’s so chaotic that His Highness has thrown etiquette to the wind, else he wouldn’t be so muddled and absurd. Is that what you want to say?”

He was satisfied to see Chen Rong freeze on the spot, her small face aghast.

He chuckled and then actually reached his hand over, lightly brushing across her full bosom. “Go in, it can be bad if little girls are stubborn like this. You’ll only force men to use force on you.” When he finished, he placed his hand on Chen Rong’s back and pushed her into the hall.

Inside, four gossamer curtains were billowing in the wind, and the scent of ambergris was slowly rising from the incense burner in the corner.

Chen Rong raised her head and looked to the host seat.

Sure enough, a portly man was spreading his legs on the divan, on each of his sides was a splendidly dressed woman.

Chen Rong looked left and right and finally saw someone scribbling away in the corner on the right side.

She gave some thought and, without the maids’ urge, came forward, curtsied and said, “Good greetings, Your Royal Highness.”

“Ah Rong of the Chen house? Hehe, come here, come here.”

The Prince of Nan’yang pushed the two beauties away and hurriedly turned his head to watch Chen Rong with the pair of small eyes that was hidden behind fatty folds.

Chen Rong wrung her hands under her sleeves, pressed her lips, and took another step forward.

Just then, two figures entered the door.

They were two scholars carrying two thick stacks of documents. They both

wore long robes, their faces rather somber.

Chen Rong relaxed.

They strode past her and went to sit in front of the prince's seat. The man on the left pointed to a few of the letters and said, "Your Highness, these are the strategies the noblemen have drafted to resist the Hu."

"Open them."

Another scholar opened a roll of silk manuscript, painted a few strokes onto it, and then turned toward Chen Rong: "Is this the young lady of the Chen house?"

"Aye," Chen Rong respectfully bowed.

"Bring a seat and a screen for the young lady."

"Aye."

"Miss, have a seat," he said, indifferently glancing at Chen Rong.

"Aye."

Chen Rong lifted her soles, went around the screen and sat down.

Up until that moment, her heart was still secretly wondering: *Could it be that the Prince of Nan'yang had really invited me to talk about the Hu?*

Chapter 55: An Inexorable Chen Rong

"Did you give ten carriages of grains to General Sun?" a scholar was heard asking.

"Aye," Chen Rong softly answered.

He nodded, asking again: "Did you meet General Sun on the way to Nan'yang? I heard that as soon as he settled here, the first thing he did was to visit you, is that true?"

"Aye."

Why does he mention Sun Yan the moment he opens his mouth? she thought to herself. *Could it be that they actually believe Ran Min will be attacking Nan'yang?*

While she was chasing her thoughts, the prince's muddy voice rang out: "Then

in your opinion, what kind of man is General Sun?”

Here comes the main subject.

Chen Rong looked up. She spoke in a crystalline yet firm voice, saying: “Despite his young age, he is a true man of honor.”

The minute she said this, a scholar laughed aloud: “Is your remark due to his beautiful face, perchance?”

Chen Rong rose and lifted her curtain, showing her delicate face as she angrily said, “General Sun is a descendant of Sun Zhongmou in Jiangdong; he is an honorable man. His family has been killed by the barbarians on their way south. There is an irreconcilable enmity between him and the barbarians. How can you ridicule such a man, sir?”

Here, she flapped her long sleeves and censured him: “Hmph, I have no desire to speak to people like you.”

And then she actually turned around and stalked away.

They didn’t expect her to be so quick tempered. The scholar swiftly rose to his feet and bowed deeply toward her, saying: “I am ashamed. I’ve misspoken. Please do not be offended, miss.”

They were very sincere words.

Chen Rong’s face remained hardened. She gave him no reply and continued to head straight out.

“Stop her!” roared the Prince of Nan’yang.

Several guards answered to his ordered and blocked the doorway.

Chen Rong stopped in her track. She looked to be very angry, her entire face flushing red. She was presently looking at the exit that was only several steps away, sighing inwardly.

Behind her, the Prince of Nan’yang stood up with the support of a beautiful woman. He glared at Chen Rong and chillingly said, “You’re nothing but an insignificant concubine-born daughter from a subsidiary branch of the Chen house, yet have you learned to act like the scholars? Or maybe it’s the rubbish aristocrats that you’ve learned from? Ah Rong of the Chen house, your backbone

is misplaced. I do not like women with such a temper."

Nothing would please me more than your not liking me, Chen Rong spat inwardly.

But outwardly she only scoffed and slowly turned her head around.

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Cocking her head, Chen Rong looked sideways at the Nan'yang Prince and haughtily questioned, "Then why don't you kill this insignificant woman, Your Highness?" She threw her head back in laughter. "Luo'yang has fallen; the Hu are now preying on Nan'yang. Yet you're suspecting the assistance of General Ran and General Sun. Aren't you worried that you might fall for the enemy's sabotaging plan and thereby cut off your own arm?"

Her words were very spirited and plausible. The Nan'yang Prince involuntarily turned around to the two scholars.

They whispered to each other, one of them nodding as he said: "I really couldn't tell from your age that you are so astute."

What were the chances that she would be ignorant when she had followed Ran Min to the front line for so many years in her previous life? Moreover, Ran Min's being suspected had also occurred in the past.

"Miss, please take your seat," the other scholar said to her.

She didn't move. She remained staring at them with that same haughty and supercilious attitude.

The Prince of Nan'yang was apparently growing irritated. He heaved loudly and shouted: "Men!"

"Your Highness, you mustn't be angry," a scholar exclaimed. Another opened his mouth wanting to warn them that although Ah Rong of the Chen house was but an insignificant concubine-born daughter, she was famous throughout Nan'yang and could not easily be touched.

The prince suppressed his anger to order: "Escort Ah Rong of the Chen house back and make arrangements for her."

"Aye," the two maids who had been waiting outside answered him and went

to Chen Rong.

Chen Rong scoffed, flapped her long sleeves and said, “I can go by myself.” When she finished, she strode out.

Looking at her receding figure, the Prince of Nan’yang sat back on his seat with a headache, lamenting: “How can such a ravishing girl have this temper?” He repeatedly shook his head.

Seeing him in thought, a scholar carefully leaned over and whispered an advice: “Your Highness, this girl isn’t ordinary. If nothing else, once her remarks spread, General Ran and General Sun will know.”

The prince waved his hand: “Announce my order that none is to let this leak out.”

“Aye,” they gave him their word.

The Prince of Nan’yang massaged his forehead while muttering: “Cursed, such a fetching girl actually learned to act like the scholars. Every word she speaks is cutting… and that expression! How irritating. Alas, any interest I had is now gone.”

The two scholars heaved in relief to see the prince’s lust was no more.

Supported, or rather abducted, by a maid on either side, Chen Rong departed the courtyard, mounted the carriage and rode to the west courtyard. With her eyes closed, she looked composed and indifferent, and disdainful even.

The maidservants glanced at her and exchanged looks, but they did not make any sound. Only now did they realize the girl in front of them didn’t give a fig about their prince. They dared not disrespect her anymore.

The two women did not notice that though Chen Rong’s face was as calm as water, her hands were wrenching together: *What am I going to do? Sun Yan himself is also suspected. He’s likely watched by other people, how can he come to rescue me? Had I known, I would’ve told Nurse Ping to seek out Wang Hong’s help. Hmph, that brat had taken liberties with me. Whatever happens, he should come to save me this once.*

Chapter 56: Sky Lanterns

The western courtyard was located between the main compound and the inner quarters. It was lined with trees, rockeries, and streams, the entire place exquisitely decorated.

When the maids helped Chen Rong down the carriage, a head would appear from the small lofts from time to time. They were beautiful young girls; when they saw Chen Rong, their eyes invariably showed a hint of sympathy.

Soon, the three of them arrived at a small loft. The two maids curtsied to her while saying: “Miss, here is your place of residence. The two of us will also be at your disposal.”

Without looking up, Chen Rong lightly said, “Go to the Chen estate and bring me my clothes and servants.”

“There’s no need for that,” the young maid smiled. “I’ve prepared everything for you.”

She turned around and took a dress from the room, smilingly saying, “Miss, you must feel dirty from the travel. Why don’t you change your clothes?”

Chen Rong lifted her eyes.

She drew her lips into a tight line at the sight of the dress in the maid’s hands. It was light yellow trimmed with purple. Be it style or color, it was very similar to the one the Chen estate had bought for her.

The younger maid laughed seeing Chen Rong’s startled expression: “There’s more over here.”

She led Chen Rong to a hall, pointing to three wooden chests filled to the brim with new clothes. What’s more, every piece, if not light yellow trimmed with purple, would be bright yellow or dark yellow trimmed with purple. All three chests contained the same general style and color.

Chen Rong’s face stiffened. “When were these made?” she asked at length.

The younger maid smiled cheerfully: “It’s been some time. You may rest assured, miss, that these new clothes have been made according to your figure. Even the colors are perfect on you.”

She then slightly lifted her chin and said in an advisory tone: “Not just here in

Nan'yang, you can't find many as rich as our prince even in Jiankang."

Chen Rong curved her eyes in a smile.

At this time, her heart was a chaotic mess. She'd always known the Prince of Nan'yang was interested in her, but she hadn't expected his interest to be this manic. He must've started having these outfits made right after he saw her that night!

Three whole chests! Is he really set on taking me?

As her mind turned, Chen Rong finally couldn't smile anymore. Her small beautiful face was drained of its colors, her nails digging her palms under her sleeves.

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The two maids seemed to know of her struggle. They kept their heads bowed and did not speak nor do anything.

After some time, Chen Rong at last collected herself and quietly said, "Put them away."

"Aye."

The two maids closed the chests. "Put away this one too," Chen Rong ordered, pointing to the outfit in the younger maid's hand.

The maid smiled and respectfully asked, "Then what do you want to wear?"

Chen Rong hardened her face: "Go back to the Chen estate and bring my clothes here."

The younger maid couldn't help herself from laughing aloud. She watched Chen Rong and said mildly: "Have you forgotten, miss? I've just said that there are clothes here if you want them. I am also here if you need help. As for returning to the Chen estate, please don't mention such thing again in the future."

"In the future?"

Chen Rong likewise icily smiled and lifted her chin, slowly saying: "Does you master intend to keep me here indefinitely?"

Her eyes were sharp and, almost instantly, the air around her shifted with a terrible ruthlessness.

Startled, the young maid faltered backward and lowered her head as she stammered: “Why are you getting angry with us servants, miss? As long as His Highness agrees, you can leave at any time.”

Chen Rong withdrew her gaze.

She had known it was going to be like this from the time she stepped into the estate. When she saw the Nan’yang Prince just now, the two scholars there had evidently bent to him and no longer possessed the slightest bit of pride and character belonging to the literati. It’d still be useless if they knew; thus, she did not say anything about wanting to leave.

She stepped into the room after taking a deep breath and telling herself to calm down: *I’ll be safe tonight at the very least. No, I should say that I’ll be safe for two more days.*

The two maids watched Chen Rong’s back and, after a moment, the younger one spat and said irately, “I haven’t met anyone like her! Does she think that she is a legitimate daughter from a noble family? Does she think she can afford to care about honor like the men?”

The older maidservant shook her head but did not speak.

Chen Rong suppressed her anger, bathed as quickly as she could, put on the light yellow dress trimmed with purple that the Prince of Nan’yang had provided and sat in the courtyard.

It was now sunset and the lanterns had begun to rise. There was a zither in front of her with exquisite workmanship. Chen Rong knew with one glance that it was very valuable. It seemed the Prince of Nan’yang had expended much effort on her.

She bowed her head, staring at the zither for a length of time and then suddenly called: “Bring me some bamboo, paper, and candles. I want to make sky lanterns to while the hours away.”

“Aye,” the older maid replied.

After she had gone a few steps, the younger one called after her: “Bring her extra so that she’ll feel less lonely at night.” There was sarcasm in her voice.

Chen Rong didn’t bother to raise her head.

Before long, everything was laid out in front of her.

Chen Rong knelt down and, with the help of the lantern’s light, began to tie up the bamboo strips.

She went at it very slowly and with great focus.

At first, the two maids stared at her for a while, but when they saw her fumbling for half an hour without being able to finish a proper lantern, they left to do their own work.

The moment they left, Chen Rong’s action noticeably quickened.

Within a short while, she was able to make three lanterns. Her lanterns were very strange-looking, however. There was a face, simply drawn with a few brush strokes, on each silk surface.

It was a man’s face. The young maid walked to stand behind her, angled her head to take a look, and suddenly asked, “Who is he?”

Chen Rong ignored her.

She painted this face on two sides. On the other two sides, using the nomadic script that Ran Min’s house of Shi often used, she drew spiraling symbols resembling a flower to say: “Wang Hong, Ah Rong.”

After she had finished, she lit the small candles inside the lanterns and lightly let them go. The simple and makeshift lanterns began to rise and, in the blink of an eye, flew over the building.

The young maid mirrored Chen Rong as she looked up at the three lanterns flying to the sky. Seeing that Chen Rong was beginning to make more, she couldn’t help her curiosity by asking: “Is he your sweetheart? Are you making a promise with him?” Her voice dipped by the end of her remark, revealing a sympathetic undertone.

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I hope my fellow Americans had a great Thanksgiving! And didn't spend too much money ^_^

Chapter 57: Lament of the Scholar

Chen Rong did not bother about the maids' increasingly empathic eyes. She only concentrated on making the sky lanterns and releasing them one after another to the sky.

The entire evening was spent by making lanterns and floating them.

By midnight, when Chen Rong had fallen asleep from fatigue, the younger maid gave her companion a push and whispered: "She's just another pitiful woman, this Ah Rong." There was a vague melancholy of youth found in her voice.

The next day swiftly arrived.

Early in the morning, reed music filtered past the windows from the woods. Chen Rong slowly opened her eyes and gazed past the silk screens.

The overcast sky was very dark and looking as though it would rain any minute now.

She propped her arms to sit up, hugged the quilt and looked to the sky in a trance.

At the same time, the younger maid called out to her: "Miss, would you like to wash?" Her voice was noticeably milder compared to yesterday; the eyes she used to look at Chen Rong were also faintly sympathetic.

Chen Rong shook her head without looking at her.

Watching a blank Chen Rong, the young maid suddenly spoke. "Miss, even though His Highness often abandons the old for the new, and has the tendency of giving the old to his subordinates, you ultimately will still be wrapped in silk." At this juncture, she suddenly stopped to recall that Ah Rong wasn't poor; on the contrary, she came from a large clan and had always enjoyed this kind of

sheltering.

Ah Rong raised her head.

Without morning grooming, her face remained surprisingly fresh and fair. She looked at the maid and managed to whisper a thank you.

The young maid bowed her head, stammering: “Don’t mention it,” before hurrying outside.

Gradually, a flute joined the floating reed music. When the distant and lingering flute intertwined with the reed, they produced a sentimentality belonging to springtide.

Chen Rong lowered her eyes, muttering all the while: “There’s already reed music so early in the morning. The Prince’s Estate is certainly home to peace and pleasure.”

She put on her wooden clogs and walked to the screens where the window opened to two beautiful women.

They hastily turned away. By the time they reached a barren peach orchard, Chen Rong had heard one of them say: “His Highness didn’t come to keep the new woman company? That’s rather odd.”

“I asked,” the other replied. “They said she is a guest. Hah, a visiting beauty. His Highness has only ever used this trick five times.”

Taking a deep inhale, Chen Rong ordered: “Bring me water.”

“Aye,” the maids answered her in unison. They came in with a water basin, towel, and some blue salt for washing.

While they quietly helped her wash and comb, Chen Rong asked, “Is there anywhere in the estate I’m not allowed to go?”

The older maid helped put her hair into a cloud-shaped chignon as she answered, “In addition to the main courtyard, you are free to go anywhere within the inner quarters and the east and west wings.”

Chen Rong hummed a reply. She noted that this maid’s plaiting technique was rather ingenious. The quivering cloud chignon gave off a languid loveliness. With no ornamental pin on top, it had a most romantic charm.

Chen Rong wrung her sleeves. She had expected just as much and had taken her own hairpin.

When the two finished their work, Chen Rong rose to turn and leave.

The younger maid gave her long skirt and slender waist a look, cocked her head and murmured: “She has a lovely figure. No wonder the prince has to have her.”

When Chen Rong got to the courtyard, she saw fashionable girls flooding the small path, the pavilions, and everywhere else.

However, her steps halted this time.

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While Chen Rong stood there, a good dozen pairs of eyes stared in her direction. Facing these eyes, Chen Rong suddenly thought: *The longer I live in the Nanyang Prince’s estate, the more detrimental it will be to my reputation. Even if I can deal with these women and even if I know what’s going on, the worst will be idle rumors. If they manipulate the things I inadvertently say, then what will I do? Forget it, it’s better for me to return.*

Once back, she ordered: “Close the door to the courtyard.”

The two maids looked at her in puzzlement.

Chen Rong stared at them and repeated her order: “Close the door to the courtyard. Regardless who comes, you can’t open it without my consent. Did I make myself clear?”

The two maids looked at each other and then complied.

Once the courtyard closed, Chen Rong ordered them to bring the zither and then began to play.

The piece she played was called “Lament of the Scholar”, a song she had overheard one of the scholars play during her marriage to Ran Min in her past life.

“Lament of the Scholar” was lofty and distant, fairly proud and haughty. It was much to her liking due to its melodious and sinuous appeal, and she, therefore, had always remembered it.

The light zither was born and slowly mingled with the reed and flute, gradually weaving into the gloomy clouds.

Each of the present beauties, even if she did not play the instrument, was at least accustomed to listening. Once Chen Rong's "Lament of the Scholar" sounded, the girls that had been pointing curiously at her closed doors eventually quieted down.

As they listened, they soon found that this song was a new piece they had not heard before, and quite an elegant one.

Gradually, as the zither heightened, the reed and flute came to a halt.

Steadily, the lofty and lonely zither was the only sound that wove through the dark clouds in the west wing.

A handsomely dressed girl closed her eyes as she quietly listened for a moment. "Actually quite noble," she murmured.

Another girl with features as gentle as water lowered her gaze. She softly said, "Has the prince forced even someone so upright and honorable to come here? Her life is not for long, it seems."

Standing behind them, an enticing woman in her thirties sneered: "So what if she's noble? So what if she's upright? That's because His Highness hasn't slept with her yet. Wait until she has gone to his bed; she would not be playing these sounds then."

What they didn't know was that Chen Rong was playing this song to let everyone know she was a guest of the estate, that she hadn't had intimate relations with the Prince of Nan'yang.

Amid the murmuring and drifting zither, night gradually descended.

By suppertime, the racing wind was whipping leaves and branches, and shaking the shingles outside.
Chen Rong placed her chopsticks down and looked out to the sky. "Is it going to rain tonight?" she softly asked.

Hearing disappointment in her question, the younger maid couldn't help but chuckle. "Do you want to release lanterns again, miss?"

Chen Rong nodded and hummed an answer.

So rare was her mild demeanor that the maid sighingly advised her: “Miss, you should forget him.”

Chen Rong made no reply.

Just then, the wind subsided outside. Chen Rong placed her utensils down, walked to the courtyard to look up at the gradually dispersing cloud in the sky and said cheerfully: “The stars have come out.”

She turned around, her eyes vividly bright. “Prepare the materials. I want to float at least ten lanterns tonight.”

Chapter 58: Shooting the Lanterns Down

The two maids gave her a sympathetic look and replied, “Aye.”

Before long, a heap of bamboo strips and candles was placed in front of Chen Rong.

Not caring about image, she squatted down and began to focus on making the lanterns.

The night drew on.

Stars filled the sky along the gleaming Milky Way. As time went by, lanterns were floated away again and again.

Chen Rong released her hand and watched the lantern rising from her palm. In the red candlelight, the man’s face on the paper faintly smiled with a cold, distant expression she was afraid to look at.

On the fortress wall.

Seeing the general who was slowly approaching, the soldiers bowed to him. “Good greetings, general.”

The general nodded.

He looked to the dark wilderness out in front where, even with only dotting starlight, he could see a black stretch ahead. This mark had been caused by wildfire.

This was the first thing he did after Luo’yang fell.

He quietly stood on the fortress and, looking toward the horizon for a while, suddenly said, “Thinking back on that year, hadn’t Sun Zhongmou and Zhuge Liang also watched the sky like this, quietly waiting for the other side to attack?”

There were satisfaction and ease in his voice.
The soldiers behind him did not respond. The general had been a scholar. At any given time, he could spout a series of sentiments they had no way of understanding.

The general sighed. He looked back to the wooden soldiers and shook his head murmuring: “The wise are always alone.”

When he finished, he sighed again.

Suddenly, he saw something at a glance and shouted: “What is that?”

The soldiers quickly turned and looked, one laughingly answering him: “It’s a sky lantern. There was quite a few last night; I didn’t expect there to be more tonight.”
The general knitted his brow.

A gust of wind at this time blew a flying lantern to him.

He stared at it and suddenly paled, anxiously yelling: “Shoot it down!”

Seeing his soldiers standing there looking at him in puzzlement, he shouted: “There’s a Hu script on it!”

Hu script?

This was no small matter.

The soldiers shuddered. Almost simultaneously, two young soldiers took their bows and aimed to the sky.

Whoosh –

Arrows flew out like meteorites.

Within seconds, a sky lantern had been shot to the ground.

It had just landed on the ground, however, when the crooked candle began to burn through the paper. Not waiting for the soldiers to make their way down the fortress, it soon left only a few charred bamboo strips.

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“Shoot them down, shoot them all down!” the general barked.

“Aye!” orderly answers sounded as a dozen soldiers raised their bows and fired into the sky.

The general watched the arrows flying into the empty space and shouted: “Bring my bow and arrows!”

“Aye!”

Before long, his bodyguard had brought a gorgeously painted black bow and three arrows to him.

He raised the bow and drew an arrow.

The lanterns had flown very high by now and the soldiers’ arrows could not reach them. They stopped and turned to look at their leader.

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh –
Three consecutive arrows flew out like meteorites in the night sky.

The first shot through a lantern.

Just when the candle inside bent over, the second arrow arrived to put the burning core out.

Directly, the third arrow struck another lantern and put the wick out in one single shot. In the blink of an eye, two lanterns drifted to the ground.

The soldiers cried out in cheers and looked back at their leader with admiration.

He puffed up his chest and barked: “Pick them up!”

“Aye!”

“Aye!”

Two soldiers ran down and rushed to the fallen lanterns.

Within a short while, the two sky lanterns had been brought before the general.

He put them together and frowned. “They’re the same.”

He picked one up, stared at the portrait on it and murmured: “Who is this?”

Needless to say, no one answered.

He turned the lantern over and looked at the written words on the other side. Staring at the flowery script like that of the Hu, he stood up and yelled: “Shoot all the sky lanterns down!”

“Aye.”

“Ask around to see where these had flown in from.”

“Aye!”

“Ask Sir Yu to come here. He is familiar with the Hu scripts. I’m sure he’ll know what this says.”

“Aye.”

While he was issuing one command after another, almost suddenly, one of his soldiers pointed to the prince’s estate and cried: “Over there. The lanterns are flying out from there.”

The general turned around.

He looked to the rows of houses and eaves and softly murmured, “The prince’s estate?”

“Pay close attention.”

“Aye!”

Chen Rong didn’t know her lanterns had been shot down. She was still tirelessly making them, one after another.

The young maid walked to stand behind her and whispered: “Miss, are you tired? Why don’t you take a break?”

Chen Rong looked up.

She was met with the young maid’s empathic eyes. She smiled, looked down again and quietly said, “I’m not tired.” Her voice had started to turn hoarse.

She was too anxious, but today was already the second day.

What she did that day could only keep her safe through tonight. But could it tomorrow and the night after?

“We’ll help you,” the younger maid offered.

Chen Rong’s eyes lit up as she nodded her head vigorously: “Yes? Thank you, thank you.”

The maid shook her head: “Don’t mention it.” She looked to the older servant.

But the other was showing obvious reluctance. The young maid alone squatted down.

Because someone was now helping her, Chen Rong shook her sore arm and leaned back.

At this time, a sorrowful, lingering flute piece drifted in the air. Accompanying the flute was a woman’s singing voice. Seeing Chen Rong looking to the brightly lit building ahead, the younger maid said to her: “I heard the Cui House of Hedong has sent a girl over tonight. The prince is now patronizing her.”

She stared at Chen Rong. When she saw that her face was slightly ashen, she couldn’t help comforting her: “If that girl wins the prince’s heart, then perhaps he will forget you.” There was something vacant about her voice. *Those who are forgotten by the prince will still be remembered by his underlings,* she had also left out.

Chapter 59: Attending the Banquet

Sir Yu had been invited.

He silently stared at the Hu script on the sky lantern for a length.

The middle-aged general frowned and asked, “Sir Yu, what does this say?”

Sir Yu looked up at him, pointed to the words and replied, “This means Wang, this means Hong.”

“Wang Hong? Does it really say Wang Hong?” exclaimed the general.

Sir Gong nodded. “There are two other words on the back: Ah Rong. It’s also someone’s name. General Wen, the two sides join together to make four words: Wang Hong, Ah Rong. They’re both names.”

General Wen went blank as he murmured: “Wang Qilang? This is related to Wang Qilang?”

A change came over his expression. After a long while, he deeply bowed toward Sir Yu and asked, “Sir, how do you think this matter should be dealt with?”

Sir Yu turned a supercilious eye and answered him: “What’s the big deal? Just give these lanterns to Wang Qilang.”

Detecting hesitation from General Wen, he continued: “You must stay composed when you work with Wang Qilang’s personality.” He then paused and sighed: “But Wang Qilang is not in Nan’yang at present. You’ll have to wait two more days to see him.”

General Wen nodded, laughed and said, “Since these sky lanterns mention Wang Qilang, they must not have anything to do with the Hu. We’ll wait two days, then.” He laughed heartily though uncertainty was still heard in his voice.

Sir Yu nodded, said no more, and bowed to take his leave.

At the prince’s estate.

Another night passed.

Chen Rong had spent an entire night floating sky lanterns. When she at last fell asleep due to exhaustion, in addition to the sky lanterns, she also saw the man she had drawn glowing in her dream.

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Early next morning, Chen Rong woke up to a burst of chirping.

With the help of the two maids, she groomed herself and began her day’s routine of playing “Lament of the Scholar”. Fortunately, it was a tolerable piece, else even if she could stand playing it day after day like this, the two maids and nearby women would not be able to bear it.
The afternoon quickly came.

Exhausted from playing, Chen Rong went back to her divan and took a nap. At this moment, the young maid’s voice called from outside: “Miss, are you awake? His Highness has sent someone to invite you to a banquet!”

Chen Rong was awakened from her dream. She sat up staring at the door, asking: “A banquet?”

“Aye,” the young maid answered. “He says for you to freshen up well so that you can attend dinner in half an hour.”

Chen Rong very slowly extended her sleeves. After wiping the sweat on her brows, she blinked and said in lowered voice: “Prepare warm water.”

“Aye,” the maid answered after a brief silence.

Even at the prince’s estate, not every house had a washroom. Besides, Chen Rong’s status was not entitled to such luxury.

The two maids swiftly boiled water and filled a large barrel with it.

Behind the veil of steam, Chen Rong watched her rippling reflection in the water.

The two maids stood on either side but did not urge her when they saw her hesitate.

A while later, Chen Rong opened her arms and said, “Undress me.”

“Aye.”

Almost half an hour had lapsed by the time Chen Rong finished washing, combing, and simply putting on a gown.

At the main compound, reed music and songs drifted out. Even from a distance away, she could smell the powder and perfume wafting in the wind.

“Let’s go.” Chen Rong picked up her pace.

The two maids exchanged looks. The younger one bowed her head, curtsied and said, “Miss, please leave behind the hairpin.”

Chen Rong stared at them, smiled coldly, and merely reiterated: “Let’s go.”

She then flapped her sleeves and turned to go.

The maidservants watched her leaving back. “What should we do?” the younger one whispered.

The older shook her head and said, “Pretend like we don’t know. We’ll follow

her.”

“All right.”

Twilight was approaching by this time.

The western horizon blazed red with brightly dyed clouds. As she looked to the sky, Chen Rong’s stiff pace began to relax.

Many young and beautiful girls came to attend dinner. But the beauties all without fail turned to look at Chen Rong when they saw her.

Chen Rong had been painstakingly dressed up by the two maids. She had a fine figured to begin with, coupled with the outfit that complemented her skin color and body, she could be said to be so luminous that she overshadowed all those standing around.

Facing the girls’ stunned eyes, she flapped her sleeves and pained herself with the tightening of her grip on the hairpin.

Chen Rong left the west wing.

Walking down the path that led to the main compound, the scents of cosmetics and sound of music gave forth a sense of prosperity. Chen Rong watched the steady stream of beauties as she suddenly thought: *Does someone like the Prince of Nan’yang really deserve Ran Min and his men’s protection at the risk of their lives?*

This idea only lasted a moment, for she was instantly reminded of the fate of everyone in the city should Nan’yang fell. She shook off the disgust in her heart and went on.

To go from the west courtyard to the main compound only took a few hundred steps. Even if Chen Rong did not ride in a carriage and was moseying very slowly, she arrived within half an hour.

Standing in the yard and watching the brightly lit hall, Chen Rong took a deep breath and strode inside.

The prince’s estate was different from other estates in that whether a woman had status or not, as long as she came to attend a banquet, she would be coming in from the main entrance.

By the time Chen Rong stepped into the hall, in front of her was already a myriad of beautiful women while behind her were still many more.

In front of the hall, the Prince of Nan'yang and his dozen subordinates were sitting on the main divan, sipping wine in enjoyment. With the help of music, they delighted in the scene of beautiful women lightly streaming in.

Chapter 60: Drawing Attention

Chen Rong took a few steps before seeing herself among a group of beautiful women. No one was particularly paying attention to her, and a thought flashed across her mind.

She slowed down and stepped backward as if nothing was happening.

At this time, all the women had assembled and nobody noticed her leaving. Moreover, she had only entered and was therefore only a few steps from the door.
Chen Rong retreated outside.

There, the two waiting-maids were startled by her reappearance. They hastened after her and reached out to pull her sleeve.
Chen Rong bade in a low voice: "Bring my zither here."

When this was said, she did not turn around, her face smiling.

The pair of maids exchanged glances. The younger one frowned and admonished her: "Miss, stop causing trouble!" Impatience was already detected from her voice.

The older one also iced up as she tiredly asked, "Where do you think we are? Why would you need the zither?"

Chen Rong slowly turned around, staring at the two of them.

They gave a start and involuntarily faltered back.

Chen Rong lifted her soles and joined the beautiful women, again gliding forward.

Only then did the maids exhale in relief.

Chen Rong walked as she looked around, but in the large hall, besides a large

number of musicians and beautiful women, there was only a handful of men sitting in the main seats. It seemed these were prince's favorite subordinates. Chen Rong carefully observed her surroundings, her hands wringing under her sleeves.

At this time, the beautiful women entering ahead of Chen Rong had each found a place to sit.

The women's seats were altogether different from the men's. They were blocks of jade shaped like a stool. Each of these translucent jade was extremely valuable, and yet they had actually been carved into chairs for the women to sit on.

To thus preserve these jade, as well as to enhance their beauty, the women only half-sat on the jade blocks and made sure to straighten their postures.

Chen Rong also sat down on such a jade.

She had scarcely sat down when she heard the Nan'yang Prince order: "Open the main gate."

"Aye!"

Answers from all sides rang out to the appearance of four handsome lads. They went to the entrance and opened the east and west doors.

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A blast of cold current instantaneously rolled in. When this wind rushed into the hall, it swayed the candlelight and blew the women's long skirts, making them float like lotus leaves. Immediately, tens of hundreds of beautiful women and tens of hundreds of colorful dresses were swaying and blossoming in the wind, the scents of rouge and perfume permeating in the air. It was a scene straight from a painting!

The Nan'yang Prince laughed, clapping his hands as he said to the crowd at large: "Gentlemen, even immortality does not compare to the pleasure we have here."

All the men followed along to laugh with him.

Meanwhile, Advisor Xu squinted his eyes and leered at these women from

head to toe. Soon, he pointed toward a few inside and said, “Your Highness, even though beautiful women are like the clouds, there are five that particularly resemble the moonlight protected by encircling stars, a red flower surrounded by green leaves. One glance and I cannot move my eyes away.”

The prince also narrowed his puffy eyes to stare with interest in the direction his advisor was pointing to. Soon, his eyes fell upon Chen Rong.

Watching her slightly bowed head, full bosoms, round buttocks on the jade block, and thin, slender waist, all culminating in a most beguiling figure, the prince licked his plump lips and croaked: “You’re absolutely right.”

He hooked a finger toward Chen Rong and bade, “Pretty one, come here.”

Dozens of eyes at once turned to Chen Rong.

She slowly looked up to meet his eyes.

The Prince of Nan’yang apparently didn’t expect it to be her. He first widened his eyes, then laughed, “So it’s this young lady? You look so beautiful tonight, my dear, that you’ve made me very pleased. Come, come.”

His tone was disrespectful, his smile odious. He was really treating Chen Rong like a part of his harem.

Chen Rong slowly rose to her feet.

She very slowly straightened her back and walked toward him.

In the large open hall, cool wind swirled her dress like a lotus flower in full bloom, outlining her small waist even more distinctly.

The prince’s eyes were glued to her body, unable to move away come what may.

There was a reticence in Chen Rong’s expression. Under her wide sleeves, her right hand slightly moved and in an instant a golden hairpin had fallen into her palm.

The prince squinted his eyes as he admired her swaying figure, smiling to the crowd at large: “This young lady comes on waves and steps on silks…”

His eyes shifted to her feet. He stroked his short graying beard and pleasantly

said, “Next, I will send her to go barefoot on the gravel path. She’ll certainly sway side to side like a rose in the wind.”

They all unanimously praised him. “How extraordinary Your Royal Highness’s literary talent is. Every word you speak becomes poetry.”

“’Swaying side to side like a rose in the wind,’ even Zuo Si’s *Odes to the Three Capitals* pale in comparison to this line.” (1)

1. Zuo Si is a poet in the Western Jin period, his *Three Capital Odes* include ‘Ode to the Capital of Shu’, ‘Ode to the Capital of Wu’, and ‘Ode to the Capital of Wei’.

“Precisely so; such beautiful words would overshadow even Cao Zijian’s ‘Ode to Luoyang’.” (2)

2. Cao Zijian is better known as Cao Zhi, prince and son of Cao Cao in the Three Kingdoms period.

The Prince of Nan’yang appeared to enjoy the flattery heaped upon him; he raised his head, stroked his short beard, and nodded his head in pleasure.

In the noisy merry-making, powerful footsteps thumped, thumped, thumped across the ground.

A guard came within ten steps of the front hall, clasped his hands, and said, “Your Highness, General Wen requests an audience.”

The prince scowled, waved his hand and barked: “I don’t want to see him. Really, what is he seeking audience at this time for? Cursed!”

“Aye,” the guard answered and then turned around to go.

With the guard gone, Advisor Xu saw Ah Rong pausing and not taking another step. He said, “Miss, what are you still standing there for? Hurry over here.”

The Prince of Nan’yang also turned his head to look at her, smiling pleasantly. “Pretty one, don’t be afraid. There are two things I’m good at in my life, wherein the first is that I treasure beautiful women like jade and gems, hahaha.” The crowd followed suit in laughing with him.

Chen Rong slowly looked up, lifted her soles, and started in the direction of the musicians.

She had barely taken a step by the time the sound of other footfalls arrived. Forthwith, a guard raised his voice to report: “Your Highness, General Sun Yan requests an audience!”

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Chapter 61: He Came

Sun Yan has come?

Overjoyed, Chen Rong couldn't help herself from turning her vivid eyes to the doors.

"Why is he here?" asked a scowling Prince of Nan'yang.

One of his advisors leaned over and softly whispered something in his ear.

The prince nodded and waved his hand, ordering: "Tell General Sun I'm busy. Whatever it is, we'll talk tomorrow."

And then his voice increased in volume when he next bellowed: "I won't meet anyone tonight."

"Aye," the guard replied him, his footsteps instantaneously distant the moment he finished speaking.

Chen Rong pressed her lips staring at the doors before she turned around to the prince.

Advisor Xu was watching her expression when he said jeeringly, "Pretty one, there's really no need to look so unhappy. Time is golden; pleasure ought to be taken when you can!" His eyes then clung onto Chen Rong's chest and legs.

She lowered her gaze and, not waiting for the prince to urge her, strode to the musicians.

"Pretty one, what are you doing?" the prince asked in surprise.

She did not answer him. As she was slowly walking to the group of musicians, a burst of clamor out of the blue gave sound from outside.

"Your Highness," a voice cried in, "General Sun insists on entering and is forcing his way in!"

"What?" Furious, the prince's face sank as he screamed: "How dare he?! What does he treat me as? And where does he think my residence is?"

“Could it be that General Sun has come here to assassinate you?” an advisor uneasily supposed.

What a stupid thing to say. Even Chen Rong knew the factor of surprise was key to an assassination. Where was there ever an assassin who insists his way in like this? Besides, the Prince of Nan’yang wasn’t worth assassinating!

Sadly, the prince did not understand such rationality. The color drained from his face as he hastily shouted: “Send him away. Send them all away.”

“Aye!”

Together with these disciplined answers was a series of orderly footsteps leaving the courtyard.

Chen Rong’s face was completely ashen. She bit her lips as she hopelessly thought: *It seems nothing can be done now.*

After a few interruptions, the prince’s face had soured terribly. Huffing and puffing, he turned around to glare at Chen Rong, thundering as he did: “You woman there, I’ve told you to come over here, why did you go there? One more time and I won’t be playing nice!”

Guards armed with spears promptly encircled the hall amid his thundering. They coldly stared at Chen Rong, one of them lifting his spear, casting an icy beam at her.

Chen Rong’s pallor worsened.

The noisy laughter and music had also quieted.

Even the advisors behind the prince all lowered their heads and made not a sound.

The prince hardened his face. Heaving, he gave his seat a slap and furiously barked: “This world is getting worse by the day. Damnation, even this infantile Sun Yan dares to break into my home? Men!”

“Present!”

He stood up, pointed outside and screamed: “Throw Sun Yan and his…” His voice all of a sudden diminished.

With his finger shaking, the Nan'yang Prince wheezed and turned around inside. His murky, puffy eyes almost popped out of their sockets as they swept across the crowd.

Everybody lowered his head under his glare; some of the women even began to quake.

And then his eyes came upon Chen Rong.

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As he stared at her standing in front of the musicians, gradually, those muddy old eyes revealed a hint of indescribable violence. He gasped for air and hissed: "You're but an insignificant concubine-born girl. It's your good fortune that I've taken a fancy to you! How dare you disobey me time and time again? Bah! If that's the case, what use is there to keep you around?"

He waved his hand to stop a panicking Advisor Xu from speaking. "Damnation, you shitheads, all day long telling me to exercise restraint. 'One should bear in mind social consensus'? Bah, I can't even have a good time playing with a woman."

Here, he pointed at Chen Rong, who was herself shaking. "Men, drag this wench away and kill her…"

Another burst of rapid footsteps sounded and, at the same time, a resounding voice cried: "Your Royal Highness, Lang'ya Wang Qi requests an audience."

"Lang'ya Wang Qi?" the Prince of Nan'yang slowly turned around to ask.

"Aye."

His hand was still outstretched in the air. He slowly retrieved it and frowningly asked, "What did he come here for?"

"I do not know, Your Highness."

He slowly went back to his seat and reached for the wine cup, taking slow sips next.

His twisted face markedly eased after he completed these actions. He placed the cup down, his voice softening: "Wang Qi's quite a fascinating character. If he has come, then let's see him."

“Aye.”

At the time the man left with his order, the hall was filled with a burst of heaving.

While the crowd sighed in relief, Chen Rong’s feet went soft, and she almost dropped to the ground. Only now did she discover that the perspiration on her forehead had seeped into her eyes, stinging them immensely.

She looked down and slowly released her right hand from which a few drops of scarlet spilled onto the floor – the hairpin had jabbed her palm because she’d been too nervous.

Footsteps pattered outside.

Almost suddenly, Chen Rong discovered that everyone’s attention had turned to the entrance. The Prince of Nan’yang was repeatedly calling: “Quick, open the door, open the door.”

Seeing that nobody was giving her any notice, Chen Rong quietly retreated to the back where she inadvertently came to stand among the group of women. Unbeknownst to her, Advisor Xu had seen her movement and was nodding his head.

The gate squeaked open to a gleaming halo that filled their eyes.

At the end of the light was a fluttering white robe that was swiftly coming toward them.

Even at this distance, his figure conveyed to everyone a kind of tranquil ease, elegance, and latitude…

The Prince of Nan’yang got to his feet and rushed outside to welcome him. “Is Qilang here? Capital, Capital.” He laughed and then paused to study the snow-white figure awhile before remarking: “Oh? Why is it that you seem to me to be in a hurry, Qilang? Why have you come here so travel-worn?” He sounded both surprised and ironic.

Chapter 62: Getting Out

Outside, Wang Hong’s raspy chuckle answered him: “No sooner had I returned than I heard a hundred beauties are blossoming at Your Highness’s estate. In a

moment of curiosity, I've brought a few friends over." He had come to the door at this time. From the doorway, Wang Hong cast a glance at the women inside, causing them to flirtatiously smile in return when they felt his attention on them. Wang Hong smiled, his eyes crystal under the starlight.

Chen Rong raised her head looking at him helplessly.

She was conspicuously standing among the musicians at present, and it only took Wang Hong a single glance to detect her.

Her eyes got misty as they stood there face to face.

Wang Hong gave her a long gaze before turning around to face the Nan'yang Prince.

At this time, the prince also regarded him with a chill in his murky and puffy eyes. Involuntarily, the prince's face sank. "I'm afraid you've come but for one among those hundred," he said deliberately.

Wang Hong laughed. He did not answer him, merely waving to the back and ordering: "All of you may step down."

As soon as he said this, everyone discovered that there were some carriages behind him. With his command, the curtains simultaneously lifted to a burst of fragrance. They promptly looked, all the men lighting up. Sitting in those five carriages were five splendidly dressed beauties.

The prince's eyes twinkled. He laughed in surprise: "My, oh my, do you also have such interest, Qilang?"

Wang Hong merely said in reply, "Beautiful woman can be a feast for the heart and eyes, and can assuage worries. Being a man myself, how can I not have a fondness for them?" He gave a dazzling smile, flapped his sleeves, and leisurely said, "Come down and let His Highness have the pleasure of meeting the beauties of the Wang house of Lang'ya."

"Aye," replied the five women in unison who then proceeded to alight from the carriages.

The prince's unblinking eyes were locked on the five of them. Seeing that the light in the room was not bright enough, he clapped his hands and anxiously

called: “Quick, light the lanterns!”

“Aye.” Following the rush of running sound, illumination began to wash over the courtyard.

Five beautiful figures plainly appeared in front of the crowd.

Once the lights went on, the Nan’yang Prince narrowed his eyes, clucked his tongue and struggled to take in the beautiful scene as he exclaimed: “Superb, superb indeed! Alas, Nan’yang cannot compete with Jiankang after all.”

He wasn’t the only one affected by such sentiments. His subordinates, too, were staring at the five women fixedly, all beguiled and drunken by their allure.

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With Wang Hong’s wave of the hand, the five women gracefully shook their hips and sashayed into the hall.

Chen Rong shifted her gaze as she also watched them in stupefaction.

None of them was quite as beautiful as she, but for some reason when they stood together, they called to mind the orchid in springtime, the plum blossom in winter, the lotus in summer, and the chrysanthemum in autumn, dazzling people’s eyes with a feeling of surreality.

While the men gaped at them witlessly, Wang Hong in his fluttering white outfit had made straight for Chen Rong.

Looking at his smiling face, Chen Rong slightly bowed her head and curtsied to him, her voice sounding a little astringent as she said, “Good greetings, Qilang.”

Wang Hong smiled. He gently regarded Chen Rong and remarked, “I heard the Xianbei tribe is planning to attack the southern regions. You, miss, are intelligent with astute discernment. I was prepared to visit the Chen estate upon my return to ask for your opinion. I hadn’t expected His Highness to beat me to it.”

He did not speak quietly. Furthermore, someone like him was always the center of attention no matter where he went. Thus, when he made these remarks, everyone including the Nan’yang Prince and Advisor Xu heard him loud and clear.

Slowly, the prince’s attention moved away from the five beauties and turned to

Chen Rong, which was also to Wang Hong.

Wang Hong turned around. He faced the prince's darkened eyes, smiled, flapped his long sleeves and nonchalantly headed to the center of the hall to take the seat to left of the prince. Once seated, he poured his own wine and, after throwing his head back for a swig, he waved the wine cup toward Chen Rong and smiled to her: "Ah Rong, why are you standing there? Come and have a seat." That was all he needed to say to make her a proper guest.

Whirl. The people in the hall, whether consciously or not, turned to the Nan'yang Prince.

The prince's plump face had darkened by this time. One could not see whether he was angry or joyous. With the support of his guard, he sat back down on his seat.

Chen Rong broke from her static state, her long sleeves fluttering as she walked around Wang Hong and sat down. As she touched her chair, her legs gave out and almost dropped to the seat. Luckily, she was able to swiftly reach her hand out to support herself.

The hall was very quiet. Everyone's eyes were quietly glancing sideway at the Prince of Nan'yang, Wang Hong, and Chen Rong.

After Wang Hong had emptied the wine in his cup, he placed it down and said, "Bring me the zither!"

Wang Qilang's zither playing was world famous. His announcement caused quite a stir.

A musician quickly picked a zither up and pattered to Wang Hong. After she curtsied to him, she respectfully presented the instrument.

Wang Hong received it from her. His slender fingers gave a pluck and a strum. After creating a series of melodious notes, he smiled and glanced at the prince. "Your Highness, have you heard of a popular dance these days in Jiankang called "Whirling Steps of the Jadeite Beauty'? Though it is composed of five distinct styles, each beauty alike would be dressed in gossamer silk and dance barefoot to the music. What do you say to a performance today?"

Ever since he entered the hall, the prince's eyes had been carrying unspoken

undercurrent whenever he looked at him. At the moment, he stroked his short beard, nodded and said, “Your zither playing alone is unrivaled in the world, not to mention beauties will be dancing along. Very well, let’s see it, let’s see it!”

Wang Hong slightly lifted his hands, his fingers sweeping across the strings. Instantaneously, a melodious and vivid string of music floated in the air.

The moment his music wafted, the five beauties stepped out and pointed their toes, all rotating outward.

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…

Out of the blue, the zither pulsated like drums, colliding rapidly and passionately.

To this sound, the five women together writhed their waists and lightly kicked their feet into the air. In ten rhythmic beats, their shoes simultaneously flung at the Nan’yang Prince. Just as the guard behind him swiftly got up, ten slippers had neatly landed at the prince’s feet, lining into a pair of five-petal plums.

The prince was greatly delighted; he clapped and laughed aloud.

Chen Rong closed her eyes and slowly pushed the golden hairpin away under her sleeve, taking a deep breath of fresh air all the while.

In the hall, the briskly changing zither notes continued to flow. Accompanying the sound of the zither were five beauties writhing their waists, their jade legs kicking beautifully, vaguely seen from time to time, in an exceedingly bewitching dance.

The music slowly reached its conclusion. The dancers spun their way to the Prince of Nan’yang and waved their sleeves while throwing flirtatious gazes his way – their smiles sweet, their feet milky and slender.

As he watched them, the prince sighingly acquiesced: “Never mind, never mind. Do as you wish.” He reached out to catch one of the women and gave a resounding smack on her cheek. Then he turned toward Wang Hong, unexpectedly saying: “It appears you also harbor affection for this insignificant concubine-born daughter of the Chen house.”

Wang Hong smiled. He placed the cup down and rose to his feet. After bidding goodbye to the prince, he said to Chen Rong: “Let’s go.” Then he turned around and left. Not another word was said.

Chen Rong hung her head and quickly followed him out.

Soon, their figures disappeared at the doors of the large hall.

An advisor sitting behind the Nan’yang Prince stroked his long beard and exclaimed as he watched their backs: “He is indeed Lang’ya Wang Qi; that is truly the poise of a savant!”

At this time, Advisor Xu took the lead and said to the Nan’yang Prince: “Congratulations, Your Highness, on attaining five beautiful women.” He leered at the five girls dripping in fragrant perspiration and said, “They must have been specially trained by the Wang house of Lang’ya, for such style and charm aren’t qualities the dancers in Nan’yang can possess.”

The Nan’yang Prince nodded. He reached his right hand into the breasts of the woman in his arms and, after kneading them a couple of times, said with satisfaction: “Whether they look pure and proper, supple and graceful, or haughty and indifferent, they are all luscious inside. The training skill of the Wang house of Lang’ya is indeed amazing.”

Advisor Xu stared after Chen Rong’s departing figure, sighing: “This Ah Rong of the Chen house is a sought-after woman, it seems.”

The Nan’yang Prince lowered his head to kiss the beauty in his arms, vaguely replying: “We’ll talk of tomorrow tomorrow. Wang Qilang won’t stay in Nan’yang for long.”

Chen Rong hastily chased after Wang Hong. Under the light, she quietly peered at him for a long time but did not speak.

At the same time, Wang Hong paused. He slightly tilted his head looking at Chen Rong.

Facing his gaze, Chen Rong pressed her lips and said despite herself: “I-I haven’t been sullied!”

Wang Hong was taken aback by her remark.

Chen Rong herself was astounded. Her mouth gaped speechlessly, seemingly in disbelief that she spoke such words. She blushed all the way to her neck, hung her head for a long while before stammering: “I-I-I…” She “I” for a length only to find the elegant white figure had already walked away. Looking at his tall figure under the starlight, Chen Rong dazed for a time before hurrying after him.

Wang Hong had come to his carriage. He momentarily leaned on the carriage shaft and then suddenly said, “If others ask, say you were with me in the prince’s estate during your stay.” Then he lifted the curtain and went inside.

Chen Rong bowed her head and at length softly answered, “Aye,” also climbing onto a carriage.

The horse-drawn carriages began to move. Their wheels’ rolling rhythm steadily sounded, and soon, Chen Rong heard the iron gates open.

She had left the Nan’yang Prince’s estate. She had finally escaped! Chen Rong’s left hand gripped her right one tightly, her lips upturning into a smile. Unconsciously, tears brimmed her eyes, which dilated to allow the drops to freely roll down her cheeks. She quietly lifted a corner of the curtain and let the biting cold wind dry her face. Her tears ran steady like a stream, however. No matter how the wind blew, it would not dry. Quietly, Chen Rong sniffed and wiped her tears in the dark.

Unexpectedly, Wang Hong’s gentle and pleasing voice whispered to her: “Are you crying?”

Surprised, Chen Rong quickly dabbed with her sleeve and replied, “Nay.”

Wang Hong softly laughed.

Chen Rong was vexed by his laughter. “What are you laughing at?” she fiercely demanded.

Wang Hong gave a low chuckle: “I used to think the mind of Ah Rong of the Chen house is as unfathomable as a lake.”

Taken aback, it took Chen Rong a good long while before she finally said, “Fortunately you were there this time… I’ll certainly repay your life-saving grace!”

Wang Hong blanked. At length, his surprised voice came to her: “Life-saving grace? Were you prepared to kill yourself?”

Chen Rong did not provide an answer.

Amid the moving clops of the carriages and at a rustle, her curtain lifted. Under the starlight, Wang Hong’s handsome, lofty, and enigmatic face appeared to her.

He was watching her fixedly and Chen Rong had to tilt her head away to avoid his scorching gaze.

“Is the Nan’yang Prince so insufferable?” he asked.

In the dark, Chen Rong faintly nodded. “Such a man is naturally insufferable.”

“You aren’t afraid of dying?”

Chen Rong lowered her eyes. “I am, but there are things that are worse than death.”

Wang Hong studied her. At long last, he softened his voice to say: “It’s fortunate that I’ve come in time,” and drew the curtain down.

With the dropped curtain, Chen Rong turned her head to look at the tall shadow under the faint starlight.

All of a sudden, the atmosphere settled into silence.

“Ah Rong of the Chen house,” whispered Wang Hong at length.

“Aye.”

“Do you really like me?” he asked after a short pause.

Flustered, Chen Rong slowly moved her lips to reply: “How many girls can resist admiring you?”

Wang Hong spoke no more.

Against the sound of spinning wheels, the driver’s voice was heard: “We’ve arrived at the Chen estate.”

Was it so fast? Chen Rong awoke from her spell and quickly lifted the curtain.

At this moment, Wang Hong’s soft voice sounded from the carriage opposite

hers: “Go home. Remember to consider your answers first if anyone asks.”

Chen Rong hummed a reply and hopped down from the carriage, then turned and walked to the Chen estate’s entrance. While in the middle of walking, she stopped and then slowly turned around. Her eyes were steady and bright in the darkness as she stared at the carriage and the vague silhouette inside it. Suddenly, she took a big stride toward the vehicle, lifted the curtain, and thereupon encountered Wang Hong’s quiet gaze.

Chen Rong looked at him with her quivering lips pressed together. At length, she suddenly stepped back and bowed deeply to him, saying tremulously: “I’ll forever remember your grace today.” Pausing, she looked up to the handsome face looming in the swaying lantern light as she blinked her tears away and softly smiled. Her smile was exceedingly radiant. At Wang Hong’s surprised look, Chen Rong added: “Wang Qilang, if you weren’t from the Wang house of Lang’ya, I would hang onto you so untiringly that you’d have no other way but to marry me.” She next giggled, tossed her sleeves, and turned to go.

After five steps, Wang Hong’s gentle and pleasing voice called out to her: “Ah Rong of the Chen house.”

Chen Rong paused to turn around, whirling her head to look at him. In her eyes was a hopefulness even she wasn’t aware of.

Wang Hong regarded her as he grinned a toothy grin. “Remember, you owe me five first-class courtesans.” Forthwith, he lowered the shade and ordered: “Let’s go.”

The carriage drove away.

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This is the last chapter update for 2015. I’m spending the rest of the month finishing up typing Prissana Volume 2 and making an e-book for it. ~~If anyone knows how to make a PRC file, please volunteer yourself. As it stands, I can only make PDF and Epub, but I know Kindle readers would love to have the PRC option.~~

Everyone stay safe and warm, and I’ll see you in 2016!

p.s. the comments got me interested in knowing the shipping percentage, so here’s a poll for you shippers:

63,64

Chapter 63: Wang Qilang's "Kindness"?

Chen Rong watched the departing carriage for quite some time before she turned around and walked to the Chen estate's entrance.

It only took her a few steps by the time a black shadow hurtled out from the roadside ditch.

Startled, Chen Rong was about to scream when this shadow raised his clasped hands and said to her, "Are you Ah Rong of the Chen house? General Sun has asked me to wait here for you."

Sun Yan? Chen Rong recovered herself and inquired, "Where is he?"

"After slashing the two advisors sent by the prince, General Sun has moved out of the city on Wang Qilang's advice." He paused. "General Sun was worried about you, so he told me to stand here and wait. Now that you've come home, I'll take my leave." He again raised his clasped hands to Ah Rong and turned away. When his figure disappeared from the ditch, Chen Rong noticed other shadows joining him as they all left together.

The surroundings resumed their frightening silence when he was no longer with her, and she hastily ran toward the gate.

The iron gate creaked wide open the moment she got to the front. Two doormen gave her a bow as they said in unison, "You've come back, miss!"

Chen Rong nodded, knowing these people must've heard the noises outside and had been waiting behind the door. She hurried inside and to her own courtyard.

It was late; besides a few scattered lanterns hung for decoration, there only existed the chirping of insects at the Chen estate.

Chen Rong's pace quickened, rushing to her courtyard. When she got to the door, she pounded on it and called: "Old Shang, Nurse Ping, I'm back, open the door for me."

Her loud call was resounding in the silent night. She hadn't detected any movement inside her courtyard while a candle had already lit up in Chen Wei's courtyard.

Chen Rong quickly hushed herself and just desperately continued to knock on the door.

Footsteps sounded.

"Who's there?" Nurse Ping's voice nervously asked from the other side of the door.

"It's me."

The nurse's voice went hoarse, shakily asking: "Miss?"

"It's me."

The door opened to the nurse and Old Shang with a lantern raised, both thrilled to see her.

Their eyes moistened when they saw her bright and refreshed face. Nurse Ping quickly walked over and touched her face, gasping, "Miss, miss, have you really come back?"

"Yes, it's me." Chen Rong's voice was similarly raspy. She had been thinking of them every day during her stay at the prince's estate. To her, the two people standing here were even closer than her father and brother.

Nurse Ping raised her hand to dab the tears on her face, then tugged Chen Rong's sleeve and repeatedly said, "Come in, come in."

By the time the door closed, four or five lanterns must have been lit in Chen Wei's courtyard.

Chen Rong glanced that way, asking Nurse Ping in a low voice: "Nurse, that day you…"

The nurse struggled to find her voice as she said, "You had barely left that day when the master had sent people here to watch me. It was the same for Old Shang. We were only allowed to go about our activities in the courtyard. Old Shang tried to climb out a few times at night, but they always caught him."

Chen Rong's face grew dark. "Did Chen Yuan send them to watch you? And now? When did they leave?"

"I reckon it was an hour ago." Noticing Chen Rong's expression, Nurse Ping quickly tugged her sleeve and whispered, "Miss, the master is your elder. Filial piety stands first among all virtues. You must never speak imprudence."

Chen Rong nodded, suppressing her loathing, and whispered back, "I know." Having lived twice, she certainly knew how important 'filial piety' was. Many humble-born scholars had risen to fame due to their filial piety. Likewise, an unfilial reputation could destroy any man.

Old Shang, who had been standing in the back, looked at Chen Rong in concern. "You look so pale, miss. You must not have had any rest. It's late. Let's talk tomorrow, whatever it is." He then glanced to Chen Wei's increasingly bright courtyard next door.

Chen Rong and Nurse Ping knew what he meant; both nodded their heads and said no more.

The night passed by in Chen Rong's tossing and turning.

Early next morning, she heard noises outside when she was yet fully awake. The chattering of girls came to her ears from time to time: "Why isn't Ah Rong up yet?"

"Old man, why are you standing there? Go and wake your mistress up! How can she be so rude when she has guests waiting?"

Listening, Chen Rong sat up and opened her mouth to say: "Come to help me wash."

The noises outside came to a halt.

Nurse Ping and another maidservant carried a water basin inside.

As she helped her comb her hair, Nurse Ping angrily said in a lowered voice: "None of them mean well." And then she worriedly looked at Chen Rong, wanting to say something but thought better of it.

After they had finished washing and combing, Nurse Ping turned to watch Chen Rong, concernedly saying: "Miss, you must think twice about everything

you say.”

Chen Rong nodded and stepped out.

As soon as she appeared, Chen Wei, Chen Qian, and the other girls all turned around, their eyes lighting up as they watched her, their faces curious and pitying.

Chen Rong smiled. She curtsied to them and then sat down on the host’s seat, saying: “You’re here so early, sisters.”

Chen Qian laughed. “It’s not that early. The sun has come out.” She leaned over looking at Chen Rong with concern as she said, “Why did you return from the prince’s estate in the middle of the night? I’m sure the past two days hadn’t been easy?” She sounded caring, but there was something like malicious insinuation in her words.

Chen Rong smiled. She took the teacup from her maid’s hands and, after a sip, dropped her gaze abashedly yet boastfully said, “Like me, Wang Qilang was also asked to guest at the Prince’s Estate. It was Wang Qilang who sent me home yesterday.”

“Don’t lie!” It was Chen Qian who cried out. She unkindly pointed out: “Wang Qilang had only returned to Nan’yang yesterday.”

“Is that so?” Chen Rong smiled, looking as though she didn’t care to argue. “Why don’t you ask Wang Qilang when you next see him?”

Chen Qian sneered. She had wanted to take a little jab at her but then it grew noisy outside.

The girls turned at the same time to look.

Three carriages were slowly entering the courtyard. Beside them were two stalwart-looking guards. They jumped down from their horses, raised their clasped hands toward the inner courtyard and called: “Is Ah Rong of the Chen house here?”

Chen Rong rose, replying: “Aye,” and quickly went out.

They raised their clasped hands to her and then pointed to the three horse-drawn carriages to say: “We brought you back so hastily last night that the

clothes and merchandise especially ordered for you on the trip were all left behind. Qilang asked that I bring them over again for you."

Not only Chen Qian and Chen Wei, but even Chen Rong was too shocked to move.

The other guard produced a jade ornament from his lapel, took one step forward and presented it to Chen Rong. He bowed respectfully, saying: "This is from Qilang. If you ever need to, you can use it to enter the Wang house of Nan'yang and the Wang house of Lang'ya."

Chen Rong accepted the jade in a trance.

The guards stepped down. When they saw that the wooden chests had all been moved down from the carriages, they waved their hands and told the drivers to drive away. In just moments, their figures had vanished from Chen Rong's yard.

But the girls were still frozen on the spot.

However long it may have been, Chen Qian suddenly whipped around to look at Chen Rong, exclaiming: "Ah Rong, are you that close to Wang Qilang? You-you haven't decided on your own to become his, have you?"

Chen Wei and the other girls also turned their heads to simultaneously stare at Chen Rong, waiting for her answer.

And what was Chen Rong supposed to say? She could only gape her mouth. After a long while, she awkwardly produced a smile and bowed to the girls, saying: "Make yourselves at home. I'll be just a moment away." Having said so, she turned and rushed, nay fled back to her room.

While the girls looked at one another, Nurse Ping also chased after her mistress.

In her bedchamber, Chen Rong was pushing her hands against the bed's wooden post. From behind, it seemed she was biting her lips, her small face both red and white.

Nurse Ping looked at her mistress in befuddlement. At long last she quietly asked, "Miss, didn't you say you won't become anyone's concubine? Why are

you and Wang Qilang…?”

Chen Rong abruptly flung her hand and sent the jade pillow on the divan flying to the ground. “Good for you, Wang Qilang,” she huffed. “How can you destroy my reputation like this?”

But she couldn’t go on. In retrospect, she had stayed at the prince’s estate for two days and two nights. No matter what excuse she came up with, her reputation had been ruined. For it to be ruined in the hands of Wang Qilang was far better than in the hands of the Nan’yang Prince.

Nonetheless…

Chen Rong gritted her teeth for a while before she suddenly said to Nurse Ping in disgruntlement: “Nurse, don’t take Wang Qilang for an angel. He’s a dastard!”

Nurse Ping blinked, staring at an embarrassed and indignant Chen Rong in bemusement.

Chen Rong was flushing now. She fiercely stomped on the ground and angrily said, “He told me to say I was with him if someone else asks. And I was even grateful for his caring consideration. What’s more, he could’ve just left but chose to remind me again to carefully consider my answers to others’ questions. Fright and joy must’ve addled my brain for me not to see it as an issue.”

She was continuously stomping her feet, her small face was flushed bright, and her full bosom rose and fell with each breath she took.

She had just told Chen Qian and the girls that she was an invited guest at the prince’s estate. With Wang Qilang also being there, she had hoped he’d defend her position. With his status, everybody would believe him no matter what he said. As long as he said Ah Rong of the Chen house was innocent, the world would have believed in her innocence.

It was, however, different now. Not only did he not clarify the situation for her, he instead sent those carriages over and even gave her a bloody piece of jade. Wasn’t he, then, telling everybody that there was a clandestine affair going on between the two of them?

He clearly knew he was Lang’ya Wang Qi and she was only a small concubine-born daughter of the Chen house in Ping. One was like a cloud in the sky, the

other like the trampled mud on the ground. While she was not good enough to marry him, what he did had hindered her ability to marry any other man. *The bastard!*

All of a sudden, Chen Rong stiffened with anger. She stroked her lips while her beautiful face flushed as though it had been dyed by the sunset, growing redder and redder… until it became so red that it looked as if it could start to bleed.

Chapter 64: Profane or Not

"Miss, the master is here," Old Shang called Chen Rong while she was stewing.

Chen Yuan? Almost as a reflex, Chen Rong's hand reached for the whip hanging on the wall. She took a deep breath, tightened her grip on the whip before releasing it, and then turned around to go outside. "Ask him to wait a moment. I'll be there right away."

"Aye."

By the time Chen Rong got to the door, she could hear voices inside. It was clear to her that they belonged to the father and daughter pair of Chen Yuan and Chen Wei.

She paused, and then went forth with heavy stomps.

The laughter in the room ceased. Chen Yuan looked up and solemnly appraised Chen Rong when she appeared at the door. He waved his hand, gently saying: "Ah Rong, come sit here."

Chen Rong curtsied to him, replying: "Aye." She slowly walked over to the chair Chen Yuan had pointed to and sat down across from him.

After he saw her sit down, Chen Yuan released the wine cup and regarded her as he sternly said, "Ah Rong, I heard Wang Qilang, Wang Hong, had sent clothing and jade to you this morning."

"Aye," Chen Rong replied dutifully.

"Oh? What is your relationship with him, anyhow?"

He paused and, when he didn't see Chen Rong reply, frowningly continued. "Ah Rong, you're an unwed lady. It does your name great harm to be traipsing around so intimately with a man."

Chen Rong kept her head lowered. Under her loose sleeve, her right hand was clenching into a fist. She had a brief impulse to throw out a punch. Luckily, she was able to refrain herself.

Chen Yuan's expression softened seeing that she did not talk back. He sighed and then said in a somber voice as though he was lamenting: "Even though the Prince of Nan'yang had brought you into his estate, it had been for your foresight; it poses no harm to your reputation. You are, however, on too intimate terms with Wang Qilang." He shook his head, looking quite torn. "Considering your status, it is not possible for you to become his wife; but to be his concubine would be a pity for you."

Chen Rong secretly sneered at these words. *Is it because his actions had ruined your plans? It's wrong for me to be his concubine, but I'm sure it would be great if I became someone else's concubine!*

Seeing that it was the third time she hadn't replied and was being as quiet as a piece of wood, Chen Yuan again shook his head. He waved his hand, saying: "Now that you have Wang Qilang's jade ornament, you should visit the Wang estate more often. When there's a chance, invite Wang Qilang to our home as well." He knitted his brow, barking: "Have you been listening to what I'm saying?"

"Aye."

Chen Yuan harrumphed, stood up, and turned to leave. He abruptly stopped and turned back to Chen Rong. Her demure and honest appearance was still all he saw. Chen Yuan moved his gaze and hurried away.

Chen Wei hurriedly got up and also followed him out.

After Chen Yuan had left Chen Rong's courtyard, he dismissed his carriage and took a stroll for he was still feeling a little agitated.

Having walked around for half an hour, he next came to a garden where the sound of laughter could be heard ringing out. He adopted a smile and, from the distance, called out to a middle-aged scholar who was sitting in the pavilion to fish in the cold weather: "Elder brother."

This scholar was Chen Gongrang.

Upon hearing his name, Chen Gongrang raised his head, but when he saw that it was Chen Yuan, his face hardened and he averted his gaze.

Chen Yuan's expression sank. He sheepishly glanced at the nearby maids and again offered Chen Gongrang a smile.

Still staring at the lake, Chen Gongrang suddenly asked, "Did you go to see Ah Rong again? Who are you preparing to give her to this time?"

Rattled, Chen Yuan stammered with the same smile on his face: "Elder brother, what are you saying? She is of marriageable age. Since her father isn't here, I ought to be looking out for her."

Chen Gongrang frowned. "There's no need to tell me this."

Chen Yuan quickly complied. Seeing that Chen Gongrang was looking rather displeased, he couldn't help himself from saying: "Brother, why let our relationship be affected by a lass?" He muttered when Chen Gongrang did not bother to give him a glance: "Even that Wang Qi turns out to be nothing more than a vulgar man. He was taking five courtesans around with him even in these turbulent times. Those who told me about it were all shaking their heads. Now they are saying that Lang'ya Wang Qi is but common and profane. Giving beautiful women to the Prince of Nan'yang – his action belies his reputation." There was disdain in his voice.

Chen Gongrang slowly looked up. He spared Chen Yuan a glance as Chen Yuan had hoped for. But it was one of distaste. "Those five women didn't belong to Wang Qi," Chen Gongrang unhurriedly stated.

"Oh?" Chen Yuan took no notice of the distaste, asking in surprise: "I heard those five women are so uncommonly stunning that even the Prince of Nan'yang treats them like precious treasures. If such women didn't belong to Wang Qi, then who could they possibly belong to?"

"There were a few others from the Wang house of Lang'ya who came here, weren't there? They had been his uncle's, Wang Zishi." Chen Gongrang chuckled despite himself: "I must say it was quite funny an affair. Wang Qi had hurried back to the Wang estate the moment he returned last night. Wang Zishi was out on a lake excursion with me at the time. Without so much as a word, Wang Qi took Wang Zishi's five prized courtesans away. When Wang Zishi returned and

asked about them, he was told that they had been given away to the Prince of Nan'yang. Wang Zishi was cursing up a storm, seizing Wang Qi and asking for recompense. Hahaha."

Chen Yuan stiffened. He forced a smile on his lips and struggled to say: "So those five women weren't Wang Qilang's." His voice was full of disappointment.

Chen Gongrang turned to look at him. He was also giving him a look that was full of disappointment. Chen Gongrang sighed, seemingly spent of his patience. He waved his hand, saying: "Leave, it makes me ill every time I see you."

Chen Yuan's smile froze on his face. He harrumphed, flapped his sleeves, and turned away.

He had only gone seven or eight strides by the time Chen Gongrang's voice sounded behind him: "Let's not count the daughter you've used to pay for the mess you've created, you even want to give Ah Rong away. Ah Rong is just a lass; it shouldn't have mattered if she was given away. However, you clearly knew Wang Qilang and General Sun both hold her in high regard. Not only have you failed to steal the chicken, but you've also lost your feeds in the process. You've offended everyone yet have you succeeded in pleasing the prince?"

At this juncture, Chen Gongrang's voice clipped low: "No one knows when the barbarians will attack Nan'yang. For all that you've planned and schemed, it may not amount to anything."

These were words Chen Yuan didn't want to hear. Luo'yang and Nan'yang were so far apart; he didn't believe that the trivial Hu force couldn't be stopped with the Prince of Nanyang's military strength! Even if the Prince of Nan'yang were to be met with danger, wasn't Jiankang still there? Advisor Xu had promised that he would help him settle in Jiankang. At this thought, Chen Yuan's pace quickened and, in a flash, had left the incessantly nagging Chen Gongrang behind him.

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Chapter 65: Ran Min and Chen Rong

The news that Wang Qilang had sent gifts along with the fact that he had stayed with Chen Rong through two days and nights at the prince's estate simultaneously traveled through the grapevines. Almost suddenly, Chen Rong discovered that carriages and young ladies were coming to visit her courtyard in streams.

It was the third day following Chen Rong's return to the estate.

With the laughter in the guest hall ringing in her ears, she gave Nurse Ping a wink and quietly made her exit. She was drained by these people's endless questions and insinuating words after a full hour of conversation with them.

Nurse Ping quietly nodded her head when she saw her retreating.

Chen Rong walked to the back door, made a turn, and then stepped into the bushes.

It was a warm and sunny day. She looked around, paused, and then thought of returning to her room to take the riding-whip out for some fun.

At this moment, a soft voice gave sound beyond the garden walls: "I heard there are now traces of the barbarians outside the city."

After a brief silence, it was Chen Shu's voice that answered: "General Ran is on his way. He says he'll be here by noon." Worries lurked in his voice.

Ran Min has come back? Chen Rong smirked and turned around to go.

After only two strides, however, she suddenly stiffened and couldn't make another movement.

Ran Min has come back? At this time?

That's not right; something's not right.

… She started. There was something, yes, she remembers it now. Something big should occur with his return this time.

Chen Rong rushed into her house like the wind. She then took the riding-whip from her bedchamber and ran back outside.

"Ah Rong, Ah Rong, where are you going?" Chen Qian called after her.

"Ah Rong, why are you holding a whip?" Chen Wei likewise exclaimed. "That's for boorish men."

Chen Rong didn't answer them. Her feet flew and carried her away like an arrow. In the blink of an eye, she had left the girls behind in a whirlwind of dust.

They stood dumbstruck.

Chen Rong hastened as fast as she could to the stable and shouted to a servant: "Take me to the north gate!"

It had been some time since the boy last saw his mistress panicking this badly. "Aye," he answered and picked out a good coach, jumping onto the driver's seat.

Chen Rong gazed out toward the sun in the sky, pressing: "Drive faster!"

"Aye."

"A little faster."

"Aye."

Under her repeated urging, Chen Rong's carriage gained speed and, with no heed for the gatekeeper's questioning, rushed out of the Chen estate.

Nan'yang was emptier than it had been two days prior. There were no pedestrians on the streets, and even the noblemen's outing carriages were nowhere to be seen.

Under these circumstances, her carriage smoothly arrived at the north gate.

The vehicle suddenly came to a stop. "Miss," the driver's uncertain voice said to her.

Chen Rong lifted her curtain.

She saw two rows of heavily armed soldiers stationed at the gate. As she gazed upward, some dozen middle-aged scholars in long robes and tall headpieces appeared at the top of the walls. She at once recognized them.

There were Sir Yu, Zhang Gongqian, and even Chen Gongrang of the Chen estate – all were influential clan chiefs in the city of Nan'yang.

Chen Rong withdrew her gaze, saying: "Go forward."

Seeing her firm expression, the servant cried "Yah -" and propelled the vehicle forward once more.

At this time, Chen Rong had drawn her curtain all the way up, presenting herself and everything inside the carriage to the soldiers.

They peered at her and then withdrew their spears.

Moments later, the carriage had driven out of the north gate.

As they exited, Chen Rong heard a soldier mutter: "I can't believe she's taking a trip at this time." His voice unnerved the driver, who turned around and say: "Miss, let's…"

Chen Rong interrupted him, saying decisively: "Continue forward."

"Aye."

They drove out of the city limits and onto the highway.

The road was bleak, with little more than dry wilderness on either side. From time to time, they could see blocks of tiny huts and refugees who lay by the roadside, their stench assailing their nostrils.

"Miss," the driver blurted upon seeing this scene.

"Don't speak. Steer the carriage straight ahead. If there are refugees in the way, I don't care who they are, run over them." She had now lowered the curtain down.

The driver reluctantly obeyed and drove the carriage forward.

The farther they went, the more thatched huts and refugees appeared to them on either side of the road. Chen Rong even saw some young ones digging up grass to eat. There were ten to twenty people who huddled together for warmth. Their eyes lit up when they saw Chen Rong's lone carriage coming toward them. At someone's croaky command, two young children staggered out to the middle of the road.

The driver involuntarily slowed down when he saw them in the way.

"Why are we slowing down?" Chen Rong asked from the carriage.

"Two wee ones in the road, miss," the driver nervously answered. "One of them a baby girl. They be blocking us."

Chen Rong's face sank as she ordered: "Yell at them to move out of the way. Don't let the carriage slow down!"

"Aye." The driver gave his whip a flick and shouted: "Get outta the way, outta the way! Outta the way for me!"

His shouts grew increasingly harsher, but the two children stayed rooted on the road. Worse, a young woman also rose to her feet and came out to stand behind them.

The driver's shouts were growing anxious; he yelled: "I told ya to move, d'ya hear me?"

Chen Rong gave a listen and then lightly lifted a corner of the screen. She looked to the road ahead where seventy to eighty people had gathered; behind them were a dozen children corpses. These corpses had completely been scraped out, as if each and every piece of flesh had been licked off and the bones had been boiled many a time for them to be that clean. She looked at the three people blocking the roadway, pulled her curtain down, and forcibly ordered: "Full speed ahead."

"Them just children, miss!" the driver exclaimed.

"Go full speed ahead if you don't want to die!" There was a ruthlessness in Chen Rong's voice that belonged to one who had been used to seeing death. In truth, she had seen her share of manslaughter when she had been with Ran Min in her previous life. "Go! I command you to go!" yelled Chen Rong when she didn't receive the driver's answer.

Finally, the driver clenched his teeth to reply: "Aye." He screamed at the top of his lungs: "Get outta the way, d'ya hear me? I'ma run over ya if ya don't! Yah…"

Clopping horseshoes, rolling wheels. Seeing that they weren't slowing down, Chen Rong's heart finally settled.

The carriage went faster and faster. The two children and the woman standing in the middle of the road stayed where they were. They didn't mean to dodge at all.

Next to them, a man with eyes as large as bells screamed out: "Stop the carriage, stop the carriage quickly."

Behind him, another beautiful young woman cried: "Stop the carriage, stop the carriage. You wicked nobles!"

Two men nearby watched this scene with wooden eyes and a doltish expression.

As the carriage sent dust scattering high, Chen Rong ordered her driver: "Ignore them and press on!"

"Aye." The driver cracked his whip, shut his eyes and yelled: "Yah…!"

The carriage pulled through. Bang, bang, bang. The carriage suddenly leaned over and slowed down.

A dozen cheers erupted while the refugees surrounded their carriage.

The driver quickly opened his eyes. His driving technique remained quite excellent. Within a few shouts, the carriage had been stabilized.

It surged through, knocking the band of refugees and also flinging the three bloody bodies behind.

The driver turned around and almost vomited at what he saw.

The man with bell-like eyes walked to the three wounded ones with a knife. At the swing of his blade, their twisting bodies ceased to move.

Next to him, the beautiful young woman led several others to fill ceramic pots with the flowing blood.

The driver retched twice and couldn't help himself from saying to Chen Rong: "Miss, good thing ya smart."

Chen Rong didn't answer him.

The carriage rushed along for an hour until a blanket of dust appeared ahead. A banner with the character "Min" seemed to loom in the midst of it.

“Stop,” Chen Rong ordered when she saw the banner.

“Aye.” The carriage slowly came to a stop on the side of the road.

Chen Rong lifted the curtain to see that the distant smoke was suddenly approaching them.

She opened the carriage’s door and peered outside.

Under the banner, that black armored man, handsome and cruel, turned to look at her while another man was whispering something to him.

He waved his right hand and brought the 200-people queue to a stop.

Ran Min rode his horse near Chen Rong. Shortly, he halted his fiery red stallion and regarded her. He raised his clasped hands and politely said, “It’s all thanks to you that Sun Yan’s provision raising was successful. I’m much obliged.”

Chen Rong regarded him. Faced with his dark, smiling eyes, she lowered her head, slightly bowed and said, “Please come over, General. I have something to say.”

Ran Min kicked the horse’s girth and came to her side.

He leaned in very close, close enough that she could smell the familiar essence of him.

Chen Rong looked up. She glanced behind him and whispered, “Are you returning to Nan’yang, General?”

“I am.” Ran Min raised an eyebrow in surprise, suddenly asking: “Have you left the city by yourself just to look for me?”

Chen Rong nodded.

Ran Min’s expression sobered up. He raised his clasped his hands to her again. “Please speak.”

Chen Rong gazed down and asked, “Have you arrived with a few assistant generals who came from gentry backgrounds?”

Ran Min regarded her and said in displeasure, “Sun Yan even told this kind of thing to a woman like you?”

Chen Rong whipped her head up looking at him. Glaring, she said, “This

woman has risked her life to come here only to tell you one thing. The City of Nan'yang is currently swamped with rumors. Many among the literati believe that you will attack Nan'yang in Shi Hu's stead. But there are also those who don't believe such stories and know that you despise the barbarians. Many nobles will come to greet you upon your arrival at the city. If, at this time, your men were to unexpectedly assassinate several highly respected clan chiefs, what would you do?"

Chen Rong lifted her small chin, staring at Ran Min. "Hmph, do you think I want to come here?" she scathingly spat. "If I hadn't heard a few whispers and sensed that something may be amiss, I wouldn't have bothered to come."

At this juncture, she flicked the whip in her right hand and yelled at her driver: "Let's go!"

He complied and began to put the vehicle into motion.

Just then, Ran Min reached for Chen Rong's wrist. He stared at her, lowering his voice to say: "Let's go together."

Casting a glance, he noticed blood on her carriage and horses. He promptly grinned at her. "You went as far as taking lives just to see me, little miss?"

Chen Rong gave a scoff. She twisted her left hand to shake off his grasp.

Ran Min's grip grew tighter.

With her so near to him, he slightly leaned over and charged: "Stay still while I go question them. We'll leave together after I'm done."

His warm breath had tickled her ear when he spoke. Before she knew it, her small face was flushing, and her heart was beating erratically.

Ran Min first raised an eyebrow before studying her carefully. "Only now do I know how bewitchingly beautiful you are, little miss," he suddenly crooned.

"Hold your tongue!" growled Chen Rong. She raised her whip and viciously added: "Say things like that again and don't blame me for being ruthless!"

Ran Min had paused at first before his laughter gave sound. As he laughed, he turned his horse and returned to the troop.

Seated on horseback, he surveyed the crowd with an icy glare. Shortly after,

he pointed his spear and barked, "You, you, you, you, and you. Come out for me!"

The five men he referred to traded looks, hesitated, and then shuffled out.

Whoosh. Ran Min's spear pointed to the throat of the man in the middle.

The spear's tip was bone-chillingly cold as it was frightening. The man involuntarily reeled backward, warbling as he did: "General, why are you doing this?"

Ran Min's handsome face iced up. "Speak!" he roared. "For what purpose did Shi Hu send you here?"

Thump. The nobleman standing fourth from the right dropped to the ground – his knees had gone soft for some reason.

Upon seeing this, Ran Min glared with a ray of icy ferocity: something's indeed awry!

He lifted his right hand and thrust the spear forward.

The scholar who was pointed at by the long spear could not hold out. He dropped to his knees and cried: "D-don't kill me. I'll talk, I'll talk… His Majesty, His Majesty said your heart is entirely with the Han people. That won't do, so he wants us to kill some respected clan chiefs when you enter the city."

It was just as Ah Rong of the Chen house had said. But she was only a young girl, where did she hear such accurate and confidential information? In spite of himself, Ran Min turned and stared at Chen Rong.

What he saw was a beautiful, delicate girl.

Ran Min averted his gaze from her and returned his attention to the scholars, issuing a low bark: "What about the Prince of Nan'yang? Does His Majesty want you to kill him while you are at it too?"

The scholar repeatedly shook his head. Crouching on the ground, he hastily answered, "Nay, nay, His Majesty said the old fogy poses no problem even if he's in Nan'yang."

Ran Min withdrew his spear. "Li Wei," he called.

“Present.”

“Drag them down and find out whether they have other accomplices. They’re yours to deal with afterward.”

“Aye!” A lanky middle-aged man who seemed rather forbidding rode out of the line, waved his hand and started to drag the pleading scholar away.

Ran Min turned his horse to Chen Rong. When he saw that she was still turned away, he faintly smiled and said, “Stop looking. There’s nothing scenic that way, nor handsome men!”

Chen Rong scoffed and turned back to look at him.

As they faced each other, Ran Min frowned and quite sincerely asked, “Little miss, have I really not offended you?”

“No,” Chen Rong quickly replied.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.” Chen Rong gave him a supercilious glance. “We’ll leave now that we’re done here,” she added and reached for the curtain, intending to pull it down.

Like lightning, Ran Min’s hand outstretched to fasten her wrist before sliding down and taking hold of her hand.

His large palm completely encased her smaller one. Chen Rong’s blush instantaneously reached her neck. She gazed up with panic and tears in her eyes.

Greatly befuddled, Ran Min again drew near. They were only inches apart this time, their breaths lacing each other.

From his height, Ran Min stared at her beautiful face as his thin lips, intentionally or otherwise, touched her small crimson face.

Chen Rong seemed to be scared senseless by the contact of his lips. Her mouth gaped while she tearfully looked up at him.

Ran Min’s eyes did not stray away from her as he watched every change in her expression. Upon seeing her look, which had changed from condemnation to

surging tears and grievances in a matter of seconds, his brow furrowed as a hint of an amused smile appeared on his flawlessly handsome face. His thin lips upturned to hoarsely articulate: "Ah Rong of the Chen house, I'll ask the Chen estate for your hand in marriage."

"No!" Chen Rong as good as screamed out loud. Her hands came up, wildly beating his chest. "Stay away from me."

Ran Min didn't move, letting her push him. He reached out to gently wipe the tears from her face. Then, he gazed down at the teardrop on his fingertip and swallowed it into his stomach.

Chen Rong was surprised by what he did. She parted her rosy lips as she watched his movements in disbelief.

"A little salty," Ran Min declared with a raised eyebrow after he had sipped her tears. He next stared up at Chen Rong, asking: "You truly haven't met me before?"

"I said no!"

Ran Min lightly chuckled at Chen Rong's low growl. He reached out once more to caress her face. His calloused fingers gently stroked her cheek until, little by little, he had slowly wiped her face of all its tears. He then bowed his head, his nose almost touching hers, as he softly asked, "Don't you want me to marry you?"

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Chapter 66: Trifled With

This familiar man was too close, and he was using such a gentle, seductive, and ardent voice to tell her those words.

Chen Rong's eyes reddened.

She swallowed her tears, pursed her lips and impetuously cried: "Of course I don't want you to marry me!"

"Really?"

His warm breath gently blew over her pores and seeped into her body.

Chen Rong genuinely wanted to scream at him and rebuke his impudent teasing of a proper lady. Nonetheless, one look into his eyes was all that was needed for her tears to roll uncontrollably.

She promptly dropped her gaze, both of her hands pounding on his chest and pushing him away. Because she was putting in quite an effort, her entire face flushed red.

Ran Min slightly cocked his head, the corner of his mouth curving, as he amusedly looked at the girl who was refusing him with all her might. At last, he couldn't help himself from laughing out loud.

He suddenly sat up.

It was too sudden that Chen Rong, who was trying her best to push him away, couldn't have expected his action. As soon as he withdrew, she fell entirely forward into empty air and dropped off the carriage.

At that very moment, a pair of steely arms went around her, and just like that, Ran Min had picked her up and deposited her on his horse. He held her close, his face pressing against hers, as he gently admonished: "Why were you so careless? See, you would have fallen down had I not been agile. Wouldn't it have been unsightly for a beautiful girl like you to get her face dirtied?"

His countenance was as gentle and considerate as one could ask it to be.

Unknowingly, more than two hundred soldiers had burst out laughing.

As she was held on horseback, Chen Rong got so indignant that her entire being choked for words. She trembled for a moment, found her voice, and hurried to say: “Let me go, let go me at once…”

“You really want me to let go?”

“Isn’t it obvious?!”

“Very well, I’ll do as you say.” Ran Min chuckled and let his hands go.

At the same time he let go, his right foot quietly gave the horse’s girth a kick.

The red stallion let out a long neigh and reared on its hind legs.

Chen Rong had just been freed at this time and was still struggling to jump down to the ground. She lost her balance from the horse’s sudden rearing and fell to the ground like a rolling mutt.

When Chen Rong began her journey, she was doubtlessly tidily dressed with proper garments and makeup; but now, a roll on the sandy ground had left her body as sooty as a monkey.

Caught off guard and with her face now to the ground, Chen Rong sat up and faced more than two hundred pairs of teasing eyes. Immediately, she also faced Ran Min’s mischievous gaze from his position on horseback.

Shame and anger gushed into her heart. She drew her lips into a tight line, her watery eyes fiercely glaring at him. Her eyes increasingly reddened as she stared, and finally when she couldn’t bear it any longer, she burst into tears. Following the first wail, she covered her face and hid behind her sleeves to sob.

Her suppressed grievance was rather difficult to watch.

Ran Min sighed and alighted from his horse.

He picked her up and pulled her into his arms. Recovering her face from her sleeves, he helped her wipe off the dirt as he sighed: “Hadn’t you even the grit to kill? Why, then, would you cry so sadly from a fall? I guess you’re a little girl, after all.”

He gave her two wipes, lifted her with his right arm and placed her onto his

horse again.

Chen Rong hastened to squirm from his hold. She widened her reddened eyes, crying as she insisted: “I want to sit in my own carriage.” And then she twisted around and jumped down.

Once on the ground, Chen Rong dashed into her carriage and yanked the curtain down. Ran Min watched her rabbit-like actions with a helpless smile and shook his head. Just then, the curtain lifted again at a whoosh. Chen Rong raised her whip and placed the handle against his throat, growling fiercely: “Careful with your dishonest ways, Mister Ran, or don’t blame me when I make you an invalid!”

Her growl was both resounding as it was spirited – a rather vociferous threat.

And yet, her face still had traces of dirt and tears, and her entire body resembled a spotted kitten.

When they saw her image alongside her threatening action, and at the thought that she was pointing at none other than their invincible Heavenly Prince, all of the soldiers roared with laughter.

Chen Rong stopped to turn around.

When they saw her, the two hundred soldiers’ laughter boomed louder. And Chen Rong’s face, after a brief silence, was taken by boundless shame and agitation in place of the previous anger. She quickly shrank into the carriage and soon, her soft white hand stretched out to pull the curtain down again.

Ran Min, too, burst into laughter.

He leaped onto his fiery horse, waved his right hand and shouted: “Let’s go.”

The sandy smoke scattered anew.

Amid orderly and powerful footsteps, Ran Min rode near Chen Rong’s carriage and softly chuckled to her: “Little miss, you’ve let me hold and kiss you. Just marry me, eh?”

Chen Rong’s muffled voice came out as a low gnarl: “In your dreams.”

At her words, the soldiers laughed again.

Ran Min also laughed, saying: “Alright, I won’t tease you anymore.”

He went to the front of the queue, recovered his smile and demanded: “Any accomplices?”

The forbidding-looking Li Wei stepped out, clasped his hands and replied: “There are two, sir. They all gave the same answers when we questioned them.”

Ran Min nodded. “Kill them off.”

Li Wei hedged. “General, why don’t we tie them up and hand them to the Nan’yang nobles? That way, they’ll stop pointing their fingers at you.”

“I am a man,” Ran Min answered with a hardened expression. “Why must I care about the words of scoundrels? Besides, they’ll find excuses even if we hand them over.”

Li Wei mulled over his words, nodded, and spoke no more.

After half an hour of travel, Nan’yang was already in sight.

Chen Rong’s icy voice sounded from the carriage at this time: “General Ran, we’ve arrived in Nan’yang. Please allow me to leave ahead.”

Ran Min kept quiet. He turned and stared at the fluttering curtain and the vague silhouette behind it. At length, he smiled and said, “Even if you’re angry with me, you don’t have to speak to me in this tone.”

Replying him was Chen Rong’s emphatic harrumph.

Amused, Ran Min laughed and waved. “Go on, then.”

Chen Rong did not thanked him but instead shouted at her driver: “Drive a little faster.”

“Aye.”

Stunned by the intimacy between his mistress and Ran Min, the poor boy only snapped awake at this time. He complied in a trance and drove the carriage forward.

Ran Min laughed out loud again as he watched Chen Rong’s carriage going away.

Chen Rong’s carriage blitzed through as it scattered smoke and dust into the

air. By the time they were two miles from reaching the city gate, she told the driver to stop by a lake. They started again only after they had washed the blood stains from the carriage and horses.

Soon after they continued, smoke was seen billowing from the south. Thousands of men on horseback were galloping forth. Chen Rong saw two flying flags amid that smoke; one read “Min”, the other read “Sun”. Sun Yan had brought his troop to welcome Ran Min’s return.

Chen Rong knew that according to the rules, Sun Yan’s thousand-man team wouldn’t be following Ran Min into the city. He would only welcome him at the gate, report the situation at hand, and then bring his team back to the camp site outside of Nan’yang.

Chen Rong looked at the banner that read ‘Sun’ and bit her lips in hesitation. Ultimately, she did not tell her driver to stop… She was too embarrassed to see that dastard Ran Min again in the presence of Sun Yan.

Before long, her carriage reached the city walls.

Many prominent nobles were standing on both sides of the entrance at this time. They were speaking in pairs, playing the zither, or requesting songs and dances from the courtesans. The Chen house’s chief in particular, Chen Gongrang, was standing at the center of the gate, tilting his head in conversation with Sir Yu.

Chen Rong watched Chen Gongrang in his long robe, with his long beard and benevolent temperament, as she thought to herself: *He won’t be stabbed to death this time, right?*

Chen Gongrang had died in this incident in her previous life. After some contention, Chen Yuan had gained control of all of the Chen house’s affairs in Nan’yang. Without Chen Gongrang to restrict him, he had acted very selfishly and tyrannically. Chen Rong couldn’t imagine what would happen to her this time if Chen Yuan again took control of the entire Chen house in Nan’yang.

Chen Rong lifted the curtain and, at Chen Gongrang’s surprised eyes, entered the city.

Her carriage went straight into the Chen estate and to her courtyard.

Inside, Nurse Ping and Old Shang both came to greet her, along with Chen Qian, Chen Qi, and Chen Wei's band. They were all shocked to see Chen Rong's smeared face and dirty outfit. Chen Wei and the other girls rounded their eyes and started to snicker.

Chen Rong ignored them. She casually gave the crowd a curtsy and, without another word, went into her backyard and began washing up.

Chen Qian watched Chen Rong flee away before she turned to the driver and asked, "Hey, what happened to your mistress?"

The driver bowed, replying: "I'd drove badly and made the miss fall."

"She has the worst luck,"Chen Qian snickered. "It's fortunate that no noblemen saw her. It would've been a big joke otherwise."

Not answering her, the driver brought the carriage to the backyard.

Chen Rong spent nearly an hour to wash herself. Once she came out, Chen Wei and the other girls had already left.

She sighed in relief and then walked to the hall with her head kept low.

Nonetheless, Nurse Ping and Old Shang now surrounded her.

Chen Rong raised her head as she came to face with her servants' elated expressions. Nurse Ping came up to her, took her hands and said happily, "Miss, I heard from the young helper that General Ran has asked you to marry him?"

Standing nearby, Old Shang added with a beaming grin: "Miss, General Ran is a man of honor. You used to always praise him whenever you heard his name in Ping. How great it is that you can marry him now. What did I say? Our lady is blessed."

Chen Rong's expression was one of suffering.

She hadn't replied by the time Nurse Ping suddenly put on the same pained look: "But what will we do about Wang Qilang?"

Chapter 67: A Sharpened Blade for the Wolf

Chen Rong glowered. "No one is allowed to mention this again," she unhappily blurted.

Her servants stopped.

Glaring at the young driver, Chen Rong angrily repeated: “You’re to never speak of this matter again. Remember well: nothing had happened today!”

Still a little frightened by her, the young helper was quick to agree. Nurse Ping, however, hastily asked, “Why? General Ran is the only man who doesn’t place so much importance on social standing like other nobles. He’ll be able to marry you. If you let him go, then what will you do?”

Chen Rong’s eyes glowed red. She stubbornly pursed her lips and stood her ground. “Even if I stay unmarried for the rest of my life, I will not marry this man.”

And then she turned and walked back into her room.

“Miss,” Old Shang called after her, “the clan won’t let you stay unmarried. It’s much worse to be someone else’s concubine than to be General Ran’s wife.”

Answering Old Shang was a slamming door.

Chen Rong locked herself inside all the way till the afternoon when she heard waves of laughter coming from the streets.

After listening for a while, she couldn’t help calling from behind the door: “Nurse.”

At length, Nurse Ping answered: “I’m here, I’m here. What is it, miss?”

Chen Rong tilted her head looking beyond the silk screens. “What’s going on out there? Why is it so raucous?”

Nurse Ping had watched her grow up and knew curiosity was nibbing at her. She said helplessly, “If you want to know, why don’t you go to take a look, miss?”

Chen Rong didn’t say a word.

Nurse Ping had to tell her: “Well, General Ran brought two hundred soldiers to Nan’yang. Everyone is overjoyed for they think that he had really come to protect the city.”

Chen Rong gave a hum.

Seeing her again quiet, Nurse Ping walked over and cautiously asked, “Miss,

you hadn't eaten breakfast. It's past noon now. Are you hungry? Would you like to come out?"

Chen Rong didn't answer.

"I don't know who you are angry with that you won't even eat," the nurse muttered. "Really… you're being more childish as you get older."

The door suddenly opened and Chen Rong swept out like the wind. Her hands were even gleaming!

Nurse Ping gave a jump. "Miss, what are you doing?" she nervously called after her.

Chen Rong went to the backyard without turning around, shouting: "Sharpening my dagger!"

Stunned, Nurse Ping watched her with a silly look and sighed in relief. She had thought that her mistress was going to kill someone. She next shook her head, increasingly uncertain of what was in her mistress's mind these days.

Another day passed by in the blink of an eye.

By eventide, Chen Rong was squatting beside a well as she repeated over and over to her reflection in the water: "You can't cry! Do you hear me? You're not allowed to cry next time you see him!" She forced her eyes to open wide and, by the time she saw her reflection looking determined and without a single tear, she raised her head in satisfaction.

Just then, a servant's call reached her: "Miss, General Sun is here."

What? Sun Yan is here?

Chen Rong happily rushed out. After few steps, she remembered that she was still holding a dagger in her hand and promptly tossed it behind her.

By the time Chen Rong got to the door, a handsome boy in golden armor was seen striding inside under the brilliant sunset.

The pair saw each other at the same time and promptly broke into a smile.

After Sun Yan regarded her from head to toe, fury emerged on his fair face. "Sorry Ah Rong, I couldn't help you kill that old pervert," he ground out.

His eyes were apologetic. The entire city was talking about Chen Rong's two-night stay at the prince's estate. Outsiders either said she had slept with the Nan'yang Prince or they said she had slept with Wang Qilang. In short, her name was as good as ruined.

Chen Rong repeatedly shook her head and a put on a wry smile. "You'd done what you could."

She gratefully looked at the boy who had, for her, almost directly opposed the Prince of Nan'yang. In this world, there were not many who were as good to her as he was.

Sun Yan patted the sword on his hip and strode inside. "That old fart. Fuck, if I hadn't worried that the Hu would attack Nan'yang, I wouldn't have spared him face."

He went to the stone table underneath a tree, reached for the bottle of wine Chen Rong had drunk from, and threw his head back for a swig. Chen Rong was about to remind him when she saw that he had finished, so she in turn closed her mouth.

Sun Yan sat down, patted the spot next to him, and called Chen Rong: "What are you standing there for? Come here and have a talk with me."

Chen Rong quickly went over.

After they sat down across from each other, Chen Rong concernedly looked at him and asked, "Didn't you move out of the city? Why have you come back in?"

Sun Yan poured a drink, picked up a piece of pastry and threw it into his mouth. He mumbled as he chewed: "The troops are still outside, only I can come in."

He looked up and took another gulp of wine, then casually inquired after her. "But enough about me. What about you? How are you doing? What happened that day anyway? When I saw General Wen that day, he said you had released sky lanterns. Your name and Wang Hong's name were also written on them in Hu script. I was fearful for you when I heard that you were at the prince's estate and immediately thought that you were in danger. If not, you wouldn't have risked alarming others by releasing those sky lanterns and writing Hu script."

He pounded the cup onto the table, stared at Chen Rong and indignantly said, "Why did you write Wang Hong's name? Why didn't you write my name? Dammit, even if I couldn't have saved you, I could've looked for Wang Hong like I had!"

Chen Rong watched the young boy huffing and puffing and couldn't help smiling despite herself.

Upon seeing her smile, Sun Yan came to realize that his words were quite irrational and he therefore glumly lowered his head.

Chen Rong had wanted to talk to him about this matter. Now that he took the lead in mentioning it, she cleared her throat and began to speak.

Sun Yan's face darkened. He slapped the stone table and growled: "I can't believe Chen Yuan is that kind of a person!"

He raised his head worriedly. "When will your father and brother come to Nan'yang? Or… should I find a way to bring you to Jiankang? You'll get into trouble sooner or later under this man's custody."

My father and brother in Jiankang?

Chen Rong smiled wistfully and shook her head.

Sun Yan studied her and, when he saw that she had seemed sad, a thought came to him which made him smile wryly: "Your name is as good as destroyed by the Prince of Nan'yang and Wang Hong. Or else, I could go ahead without the approval of my family and marry you."

Chen Rong's head was bowed in silence. She naturally understood Sun Yan's meaning. Although the boy was footloose, he was after all a direct descendant of the Sun house in Jiangdong. Even if his parents were no longer by his side, he couldn't arrange himself a marriage that would bring dishonor to his family and ancestors. For him to marry someone with a ruined name like her, he'd first need to win his family's consent.

At this thought, Chen Rong couldn't help but to be angry with Wang Qilang.

She pursed her lips and fumed: "You're all a bad lot!"

Sun Yan was bemused by her words. "I'm a man of honor," he claimed. "And

so is General Ran!”

Just then, a woman’s voice came: “Is Ah Rong in? Jiejie has come to see you.”

It was Chen Wei’s voice.

She’s here?

“Ah Yan, leave for now,” Chen Rong immediately said to Sun Yan. “My cousins are the most troublesome.”

Sun Yan nodded, stood up, and turned around to go.

He had just gotten to the gate by the time Chen Wei gracefully came in.

She paused at the sudden meeting with Sun Yan, then glanced at Chen Rong in jealousy before turning to give him a curtsy. “Good greetings, General Sun,” she sweetly said.

Sun Yan snorted, flapped his sleeves, and went out the door without any concern for her.

Chen Wei froze at being snubbed. She turned to watch Sun Yan’s departing back while, slowly, her face grew ugly.

But in mere seconds, Chen Wei forced a smile on her lips and turned to her cousin. “Ah Rong.”

Chen Rong curtsied and smilingly said, “Jiejie, have a seat.”

Chen Wei nodded. She walked over, asking: “Did General Sun come to see you? How kind of him.” Here, she maliciously added: “Did he know you had stayed at the prince’s estate?”

Upon hearing these words, Chen Rong’s face couldn’t help but darken.

Chen Wei felt slightly regretful the moment her words left her mouth. When she saw Chen Rong’s sullen face, she quickly offered a smile. “I apologize. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Chen Rong lowered her head in acceptance of her apology. “I know you didn’t mean anything by it. Jiejie, you’re my guest, please have a seat.”

Chen Wei took the seat Sun Yan had vacated. She reached to accept the wine cup, her thin and pale fingers stroking it, but she did not talk.

Seeing so, Chen Rong looked at her with some surprise. She deliberately did not ask when she saw her being bashful.

“Ah Rong,” Chen Wei softly said some time later.

“Hmm.”

Chen Rong’s tone sounded somewhat indifferent.

Chen Wei didn’t notice it, however. She was apparently too distracted, as she was constantly stroking her cup. At length, she finally asked, “You said last time that General Ran disliked women who aren’t frank. Did you mean it?”

Sure enough, she has come for him.

Chen Rong smirked, casually replying: “Aye.”

Chen Wei looked up.

Her face was blushing and her eyes were bright. Her entire being exuded joy and excitement, and even nervousness. She hastened to ask: “Ah Rong, did you know that General Ran has returned to Nan’yang?”

Chen Rong nodded in reply. “So I’ve heard from the servants.”

Chen Wei lit up, happily saying: “Yes, it’s true, the entire city of Nan’yang is talking about him right now. Even the servants who never leave the house know his name. This time, he only brought two hundred soldiers back. Chen Gongrang said it was evidence enough that General Ran truly wants to protect the Hans and this city.”

At this juncture, she bit her lower lip and shyly smiled. Wringing her skirt, she said, “Father says he’ll host another banquet in honor of the general. He also says he’ll bring up the wedding so that General Ran can officially marry me.”

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Chapter 68: Assets

Seeing Chen Rong lower her eyes wordlessly, Chen Wei leaned forward in spite of herself and wrung her hands together as she nervously said, “Father says that my last meeting with General Ran had been a bit regrettable, and he wants me to make a better showing this time. Ah Rong, you had said that General Ran likes those who are sharp and frank. What else does he like in someone?”

Chen Wei seemed to have forgotten that she had slapped Chen Rong last time for the very same matter.

Chen Rong looked up and shook her head, softly replying: “I don’t know.”

“But you must.” She sounded a little anxious. She reached out for Chen Rong’s hand, shaking it as she smilingly said, “Dearest cousin, tell me. You must let me know.”

Chen Rong continued to shake her head.

Chen Wei was riled now. She got up and angrily demanded, “Is it because I’ve offended you last time that you’re purposely not telling me?”

Yes, I’m not telling you on purpose! Do I owe you anything? Chen Rong secretly scoffed.

Chen Wei got even more incensed when she saw her cousin indifferently hanging her head in silence. She stomped on the ground and yelled: “Ah Rong of the Chen house, why are you like this? Hmph, no wonder none of the girls like you.”

Chen Rong shot to her feet at the same time Chen Wei blurted these words. She lifted her long skirt and turned back into her room. Before long, her bedchamber door had slammed shut.

Chen Wei was infuriated. She screamed at the door: “Ah Rong of the Chen house, you have no sense of social hierarchy! No wonder nobody likes you. Hmph, you’re not betrothed yet, you know. I’ll tell father to throw you to any

random old man."

When she said her peace, she turned and stalked out.

By the time she got the the gate, she was a little surprised that Chen Rong hadn't chased after her. *Was she not afraid?*

Chen Wei had always felt that Chen Rong should curry favor with her. Not only because she had a higher status, but also because Chen Rong was under her father's guard. It stood to reason that she ought to be careful in how she treated her.

After a length of bewilderment, Chen Wei paused to suddenly remember that: *yes, Chen Rong has caught Wang Qilang's attention. No wonder. Hmph, does she think it's all good and well? I'll tell father not to give Ah Rong to Wang Qilang so that she can't be together with her beloved.*

At this thought, Chen Wei began walking again and headed directly for the main compound.

Nurse Ping and the others had been watching since they began to fight, but all they could do was look on. They couldn't expect too much from their lady when they knew what her personality was like. She was, after all, much gentler now compared to the times they were still in Ping.

After staying quiet for some time, Old Shang went to Chen Rong's door to report to her: "Miss, land has been bought."

"Has it really?"

Chen Rong was thrilled. She threw her door open and happily asked the retainer: "How much did you buy?"

"The entire city is in a state of panic," he replied with his hands clasped together. "Everybody wants to leave his land to run away from here. Land's now very cheap. Usually, we could only buy a hundred acres or so with the amount of silk we have on hand. But we can now buy up to six or seven hundred acres, and they're all good, fertile land. In addition to the farmland, the laborers have also been left behind. They said they are willing to work day and night so long as the landlord gives them a bowl of gruel to drink. I've agreed seeing that these people are reliable enough; the rules will be as before. We are buying under

General Ran's name, after all. If we are too harsh, we'll give him a bad name."

Chen Rong nodded, waved and said, "You don't need to tell me these things. Do as you see fit."

She gazed outside and thought to herself: Six to seven hundred acres of good farmland? Cousin Chen Wei's dowry are at most this much if not less. Finally, I have some assets of my own.

Thinking awhile, Chen Rong lowered her voice and bade: "Old Shang, trade seven carriages of grains for some storefronts within the next two days. Remember to use General Ran's name again, and they must be on South Street." After a pause, she added: "I want all of you to tell outsiders the same thing: that I'm exchanging the grains for books." There had been a few of her father's treasured volumes from the bamboo collection she brought with her. They could be used to fill out the numbers.

Old Shang remained looking at her in worriment, sighing as he did. "Miss, if your father sends a missive and asks that you come to Jiankang, we are not going to be able to find buyers."

Chen Rong shook her head, smiled and said, "Don't worry, just go do as I say."

She watched Old Shang leave and mulled over things for a while, then went to her room and picked up the whip to play in the backyard.

Another day swiftly passed.

Nan'yang was in a festive mood again with the return of Ran Min. The major clans took turn to hold banquets and invite him to guest.

Many of them didn't believe that Ran Min was wholly on the Hans' side. They nonetheless thought that should Ran Min were to really attack Nan'yang, perhaps he'd remember their kind treatment and spare their lives.

On the third day, Chen Rong's courtyard was again taken over by young ladies.

It must be said that these girls were rather strange. They loved going to her courtyard even though they despised Chen Rong and never failed to taunt her. Those who had similar personality as Chen Wei, Chen Qi, and Chen Qian's

seemed to enjoy the bluntness even more whenever they talked to Chen Rong.

Today, they were again sitting in Chen Rong's home.

After Chen Qian had had a mouthful of pastry, she frowned to Chen Rong and remarked, "Haven't you plenty of food and wealth? Why are you scrimping on a little sugar? The pastry was awfully bland."

Chen Rong smiled and, intentionally or otherwise, glanced toward Nurse Ping.

The nurse promptly got her meaning. She chuckled from the side: "Misses, my lady has given up seven carriages of grains in exchange for some rare books. Now we only have four to five carriages of grains at home."

The girls' chattering halted at her words. They looked up at Chen Rong with eyes that were filled with amusement as well as regret for the vanished wealth.

And yet, no one could say a thing. How tasteful and noble it was to exchange precious food supply for books in these times.

While the girls sat there, stunned, Chen Rong lowered her head, raised her cup for a small sip behind her sleeve, and smiled a telltale smile.

It took a good while before Chen Wei demanded, "Ah Rong, how can you do something like that without asking my father first?" Hearing the anxiousness in her voice, the girls all turned to look at her.

Chen Wei froze as she swiftly realized her gaffe. Chen Rong was from another branch, in any case. She had the absolute discretion of how to deal with her own assets. Chen Wei's remark had sounded as if she and her father were calculating for Chen Rong's wealth.

Chen Wei produced an awkward smile and quickly explained, "I didn't mean it that way. What I meant was that food is extremely precious at this time. I'm just feeling bad for Ah Rong, that's all."

Chen Qian burst out laughing. "Ah Wei, how vulgar of you."

Chen Qian's older sister, Chen Qi, slowly mocked: "Ah Wei has always been vulgar."

Chen Wei wanted to cry. Her eyes reddened and her lips pressed tight. These cousins were both legitimate daughters, and she did not dare to offend them.

Chen Rong kept her head bowed. She again covered her face with her sleeve and drank a mouthful of wine while hiding the delight on her face.

Following her return, she had heard from Nurse Ping that the people Chen Yuan had sent to keep an eye on them had gone to the warehouse several times. That was when she knew Chen Yuan was still designing for her food.

It turned out to be true.

While Chen Wei was brimming with tears, arriving footsteps sounded to them.

"Is Ah Rong of the Chen House home?" a clear voice soon called in.

The girls paused while Nurse Ping quickly replied, "Aye."

"I'm from the House of Wang," the other person announced.

The House of Wang? Nurse Ping hastened out and gave the people in the yard a bow. "Please speak."

He presented an exquisitely made invitation and smilingly said, "The lords will have a boating excursion on the lake by Hushan Mountain tomorrow at noon. That being the case, how can they be without a beautiful companion? Since Ah Rong of the Chen House is in possession of Wang Qilang's jade ornament, the gentlemen wish to see her impart some inspiration through her zither playing."

Nurse Ping received the invitation and watched the Wang House's people leave before turning her head to look at Chen Rong.

The girls were also watching her.

Chen Qian took the lead with a laugh; she covered her mouth and snickered. "Ah Rong, your Qilang misses you."

She had sounded sore. This invitation wasn't simple. It clearly originated from the literati. To be asked to such an elegant gathering was an honor in itself.

Like Chen Qian, the other girls were green with envy.

At this time, Chen Wei suddenly interjected: "If Ah Rong follows Qilang, the most she can be is his concubine. What rights does she have to say that Qilang is hers?"

Chen Wei lifted her chin staring contemptuously at Chen Rong before turning

to Chen Qian: "Jiejie, you're breaking all sorts of social hierarchy with those words of yours."

Chen Qian knew she was retaliating on her for calling her 'vulgar' just now. She had wanted to trade barbs, but since Chen Wei's words were true, she could only shut up in chagrin.

At this time, Chen Rong stood up and curtsied to the others. "I'm not feeling very well. Please excuse me."

She then ran back to her bedchamber as soon as she finished.

Looking at her fleeing figure, Chen Wei blurted out: "Are you hurt, Ah Rong? But why, when being Wang Qilang's concubine is already a favor to your station in life?" At this point in her statement, she covered her mouth with her sleeve and felt some remorse for saying such blunt and unkind words. Nonetheless, when she stared after Chen Rong who could do nothing but flee away, she felt a little burst of happiness.

Chen Rong went into her bedchamber.

She took the whip down from the wall, cracked it twice in the air and ground out: "How I wish I could rip their mouths!"

Her anger lessened after the curse. She tiredly plopped down onto a chair and startlingly thought: Go to the lakeside tomorrow at noon, and bring my zither? That's to say I will be seeing Wang Hong? And perhaps even other famous scholars?

At the thought of Wang Qilang, her hand balled into a fist as she swore to herself: Do not let him say or do anything that cannot be reversed this time.

Chapter 69: Rubbing Elbows

In the afternoon, an unfamiliar voice called in: "Is Ah Rong home?"

"She is," Nurse Ping smiling said with a greeting.

A girl about 18 or 19 with a round face and large eyes came forth. Although she was dressed in a servant's attire, her garment was violet silk and she carried a modest smile. She seemed to be even more genteel than some of the young noblewomen.

She glanced toward Nurse Ping then looked to the bedchamber with a smile. "Lady Ruan has asked for Ah Rong."

Lady Ruan? Chen Yuan's primary wife?

Chen Rong shuddered and quickly got to her feet, answering from her room: "A moment please, I'll be right there."

"Aye," the maid smiled in reply.

Before long, Chen Rong had changed into an old dress she had often worn in Ping and appeared at the steps.

When the maid saw her come out, she curtsied again and stepped back to let her walk in front.

Chen Rong went on ahead.

The maid led two younger girls and gracefully followed behind. From her movements, propriety and a polished deportment gained through years of training could be seen. They were things Chen Rong did not know, for she had come from the north and her father's discipline had been lax.

Glancing over, Chen Rong slowed down to imitate her steps. But almost as quickly, she discerned that she didn't need to curry favor with Lady Ruan. Moreover, nothing would change even if she were to curry favor with her, so why should she bother learning to walk from the people of Handan? (1)

1. *Residents of Handan, capital of Zhao, were known for their graceful steps. A Yan citizen who visited Handan had imitated the way they walked only to forget how to walk himself.*

At this thought, she simply relaxed her gait and strode away.

Puzzled by her sudden quickened pace, the maids hurried to catch up to her.

They were a little out of breath by the time Chen Rong arrived at Lady Ruan's courtyard.

At the gate, one of them panted as she smiled at Chen Rong: "Miss, please wait while we let the madam know."

Chen Rong nodded and then tilted her head to view the surrounding scenery.

“Ah Rong, come in.”

“Aye,” Chen Rong replied and walked into the courtyard.

The maid modestly smiled at Chen Rong from the steps. When she saw her approach, she gave a small bow and said, “The madam is waiting inside.”

“Aye.”

Chen Rong passed her and went straight into the room.

The area was lavishly decorated. The first thing that caught Chen Rong’s eyes was a three feet tall coral. It was superior than the one she had casually smashed in Ping in both luster and integrity.

And yet this precious object was so casually placed on a mahogany table.

Chen Rong withdrew her gaze, curtsied to the woman sitting on the divan by the exquisite jade wall divider in the center of the room and greeted her: “Aunt.”

The woman was in her forties. Her skin was smooth and plump. Her long face, on which she wore a faint smile, was without a trace of wrinkle.

Behind her was a young woman in her late twenties whom Chen Rong had met before. She was the one who had come to expose her malingering that day. Chen Rong knew her as Chen Yuan’s concubine.

She was, nonetheless, one of Lady Ruan’s people. She was clever and competent, and was favored by Chen Yuan. Despite being a concubine, her status was much higher than those of common concubines.

Lady Ruan smiled at Chen Rong in appraisal and then pointed to a chair: “Have a seat.”

“Aye.”

Chen Rong went to the chair and unreservedly sat down… From start to finish, her conducts were both untactful and graceless. Unknowingly, Lady Ruan’s slender eyebrows had knitted.

“Ah Rong, I’ve just arrived in Nan’yang a few days ago,” the older lady gently began as she watched Chen Rong silently sit with her head bowed. “I’ve been

busy with so many things that I've neglected you. I hope you didn't mind."

"I'd never dare to," Chen Rong quickly bowed to her.

Lady Ruan gave an unhurried smile. "I shall be your mother in place of your absent parents. Don't stand on ceremony."

"Aye."

Lady Ruan withdrew her gaze, the smile on her face now diminished, as she said, "Ah Rong, you'll turn 15 next month, won't you?"

Had she called me here to talk about my marriage? Chen Rong's heart pounded.

She bowed again, replying: "Aye, your memory is very good, aunt."

Lady Ruan sighed. "You're soon to be a young lady of fifteen."

There was a reprehensive undertone in her voice that Chen Rong did not understand.

If Chen Rong didn't understand something, then it was the same as if she hadn't heard it. For a moment, she remained looking down dutifully and betrayed no guilt on her face.

The crease between Lady Ruan's brow couldn't help worsening.

She lifted her cup, took a sip of milk and then slowly inquired, "Who's managing Ah Rong's courtyard?"

The young woman standing behind her stepped forward, respectfully bowed and replied, "The little miss has great wealth herself and has told the steward that she will be bearing all of her expenditures."

Lady Ruan frowned and released her cup. "That won't do," she said. "Now that her uncle and I have taken her in, how can we leave her to herself like this?"

She turned to Chen Rong and warmly asserted, "I only had one daughter in Ah Wei; now I have another in you. It's something to be happy about. Ah Rong, you'll have the same allotment for food and clothing expenses as Ah Wei does from now on. How does that sound?"

Chen Rong broke from her obedient appearance upon hearing this. She hesitated before saying: "Aunt, it is like this: A while ago my uncle said the estate was low on grains and requested to cut servants. My servants have been with me since I was born and I really don't want to dismiss them. For this reason I had asked my uncle to let me bear all of my expenses."

She paused, smiled, and then frankly said, "If you don't cut my servants, then I'll agree to everything."

Lady Ruan, who had been frowning, quietly shook her head when she heard this.

She waited for Chen Rong to finish speaking and then softly sighed. "It's all my fault. It's true with Ah Wei and it's true with you. Such imprudent manners and speech…"

Common sense suggests that when an elder blamed herself like this, Chen Rong should get up and apologize. But whether Chen Rong didn't understand or elseways, she actually just sat there in silence and stillness.

The crease between Lady Ruan's brows worsened.

She turned her gaze unto the younger woman.

The latter stepped forward to whisper to her from behind: "Perhaps Wang Qilang likes this about her."

Lady Ruan considered the comment for a moment and then nodded her head.

When she looked back at Chen Rong, her smile had grown more sincere.

Again raising the cup of milk for a sip, she laughed, "Ah Rong, you're just as your uncle said. You're so frank and darling."

Chen Yuan said she was frank and darling? Chen Rong almost laughed out loud.

Lady Ruan didn't seem as though she wanted to stay with her for too long. Her soft voice quickened a touch: "Ah Rong, you're now fifteen. That's not young anymore. When you become a man's wife in the future, you should pay more attention to things."

She looked up and called outside: "Nong'er, call Sanlang here." (1)

1. *Sanlang = third son, same naming convention as Wulang and Qilang of the Wang house, except this is Sanlang of the Chen house.*

"Aye."

While Chen Rong was in bewilderment, a young man's raspy voice soon called in: "Mother, have you asked for me?"

Lady Ruan was delighted to hear his voice. "Sanlang, come in," she lovingly called to him.

A young man about 18 or 19 stepped in.

He involuntarily paused at the unexpected sight of Chen Rong.

However, he withdrew his gaze quickly enough to bow to Lady Ruan and respectfully greeted her.

"Sit down, my son."

"Aye."

After he took his seat, the young man turned his attention to Chen Rong and asked, "Mother, she's…?"

"Her? She's Ah Rong."

"Pardon?"

Surprised, the young man curiously stared at Chen Rong and exclaimed, "The Ah Rong who played 'The Phoenix's Love Song'?"

Lady Ruan patted his hand in admonishment: "Don't say that about your meimei."

"Ah Rong," she smilingly said, "this is your third cousin. Treat him like your elder brother from now on as Ah Wei does."

"Aye."

Chen Rong stood up, curtsied to the man and said, "How do you do, third brother?"

Chen Sanlang got up at her words and also bowed in return. "Let's not stand on ceremony, Ah Rong."

Gratified, Lady Ruan smiled and warmly said, "Ah Rong, your third brother is also a very accomplished man. You should spend more time with him in the future. As for those with careless manners and speech, it's best to limit your interaction with them." She could see that Chen Rong was a little slow. Her words had been said very bluntly.

She had put it so bluntly, but Chen Rong still didn't understand.

The younger girl looked up in puzzlement and asked her aunt, "Careless manners and speech? Who do you mean, aunt?"

In Chen Rong's memory, except for herself, she honestly didn't know anyone who would deserve this evaluation.

Lady Ruan stared at her confused look while impatience flashed in her eyes.

Sitting beside her, Chen Sanlang had finally discovered that Chen Rong's looks were rather attractive. He kept staring at her.

In this awkward atmosphere, the young woman stood up and sweetly smiled. "All right, all right. Ah Rong, your aunt is feeling tired. I'll see you out."

Chen Rong almost heaved in relief. She quickly got up and answered, "Aye."

The woman sashayed out in front of Chen Rong.

When they got to the steps, she leaned into Chen Rong and whispered, "Ah Rong, we've always loathed those other people in the estate. Hmph, even if they are legitimate daughters, how can their learning and beauty compare to yours?"

Realization suddenly dawned on Chen Rong. So Lady Ruan had meant Chen Qian and Chen Qi. Nay, Chen Wei was also close to her. Lady Ruan's words were probably meant for her too.

Once she saw that Chen Rong had finally caught on, the young woman's stiff smile lifted from her face. She glanced toward the room and again said to Chen Rong, "Wang Qilang has asked you out for a lake excursion tomorrow, hasn't he?"

Chen Rong nodded in surprise.

The woman's smile stiffened again seeing that Chen Rong still didn't manage

to follow. She whispered helplessly: “Let your third brother take you to the lake excursion tomorrow.”

Realization dawned on Chen Rong once more.

“Aye,” she respectfully replied and gave a curtsy.

The young woman nodded with satisfaction and affectionately said, “Go on.”

“Aye.”

She watched Chen Rong leave as she shook her head.

A maid walked to stand behind her while refraining herself from laughing out loud. “It’s my first time seeing a young lady so dense.”

The other nodded, sighed and said, “We can’t help it if Wang Qilang holds her in high regard. I’m sure you know that in Jiankang, even the royal family cannot compare to the Wang house’s prestige! If Sanlang can receive a word of praise from Wang Qilang, it will do him a lot of good for his upcoming trip to Jiankang.”

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Chapter 70: Personality

It was yet noon when Chen Sanlang's carriage pulled up to Chen Rong's courtyard the next day. "Ah Rong, let's go," a servant called in.

Chen Rong gave a reply and then carried her zither out.

When she got to the gate, she was surprised to find Chen Wei peering over from next door, curiously watching her and Chen Sanlang's carriages. She appeared a little fearful of him, for her eyes were nervously darting around.

When Chen Rong approached, Chen Sanlang lifted his carriage curtain and gave the zither in her hands a glance. "Won't so ordinary a zither make us look bad?" he commented with a frown.

He next leaned outward and handed an exquisitely made zither studded with jade and pearls to Chen Rong, smiling all the while: "Luckily, your third brother is well prepared. Ah Rong, use this one."

Intentionally or not, his hand grazed the back of her porcelain one when he gave her the instrument.

Chen Rong held her zither with the same faithful appearance and took a step backward, faintly smiling: "You're needlessly worried, third brother. Qilang has seen my zither before."

Chen Sanlang paused to recall that Chen Rong had played 'The Phoenix's Love Song' in front of everyone for Wang Qilang. He shook his head, mumbling: "Never mind, then. Do as you wish."

He placed his zither back down and then glanced at Chen Rong's full bosom, laughing as he did: "Ah Rong, come sit with me in the same carriage. We should let outsiders know just how close us siblings are."

"Thank you third brother, but they've already prepared my ride," said Chen Rong with a shake of her head and a smile. She then turned and walked toward her carriage.

Inadvertently, Chen Rong noticed Chen Wei peeking from behind the door with some envy.

Chen Rong withdrew her gaze, lifted her skirt and stepped inside, after which the two vehicles drove to the main gate, one following the other.

“I heard you and Wang Qilang had met on the road, is that right?” Chen Sanlang raised his curtain and smiled at Chen Rong. “And that was when you drew his attention?”

Behind the curtain came Chen Rong’s charming voice, which had an eerie allure just like her looks. Chen Sanlang squinted his eyes as he enjoyed listening to her reply. “Wang Qilang is quite the gentleman,” she said. “I’ve merely spoken to him once or twice.”

“The House of Wang ranks first among the nobility,” Chen Sanlang told her, “and their totem is Qilang. Meimei, it’s great luck for someone with your station to befriend him and receive his good opinion.”

Chen Rong could hear from his words that he thought she was reaching for the moon even if she were to become Wang Qilang’s concubine. But though she would only be a concubine, she’d be a favored one thanks to Wang Qilang’s good opinion of her.

She lowered her eyes in a secret sneer, but obediently replied, “Aye, you’re right.” Chen Sanlang watched Chen Rong’s graceful figure while his insides prickled with itches. None of the courtesans he had met could match this girl named Ah Rong, be it their figures or their faces. Not to mention she had the poise and air of the nobility so entirely different from those lowborn women. The girl before his eyes was such a stunner; pity she was a cousin.

After some time, he regrettably withdrew his gaze and, when he recalled his own affairs, smiled to say: “Ah Rong, do recommend your third brother to Qilang’s acquaintance when you see him.”

“That is of course,” Chen Rong docilely replied.

Amid the sound of rolling wheels, the two carriages left the Chen estate and entered town.

Restlessness permeated in Nanyang’s air. Chen Rong lifted her curtain to see

the streets just as deserted as they had been in her previous life. The shops were especially empty, for many of them were closed.

A warmth neared her while she was lost in reverie. Chen Sanlang had directed his carriage closer to hers. Watching Chen Rong who was only an arm-length away, he gave a hearty laugh: “What are you looking at, meimei?” He next leaned over and took a whiff, grinning as he did: “You smell very nice. Who made your sachet?”

Chen Rong quietly moved away and dropped her gaze. “You tease me, cousin.”

She retreated to the other side of the carriage.

When he saw her move away from him, Chen Sanlang sighed and recited: “Prosperity can disappear in the blink of an eye. Like flowers in the spring, women are at their most beautiful for but a few days. No one knows what tomorrow holds in this troubled world. Why, then, do we not take pleasure here and now? Don’t you think so, too, meimei?”

He flashed Chen Rong a tender look.

The fluttering curtain revealed Chen Rong’s quiet countenance. She faintly smiled and answered, “It’s only natural that flowers bloom and die. That said, there are a few silly flowers that only bloom for someone someday.”

A rejection.

Chen Sanlang withdrew his smile when he said, “Someday? Are you still hoping to become Qilang’s wife?” He had sounded amused.

Chen Rong kept her head bowed dutifully. Not giving him an answer, she only slowly let her curtain down. Her movements were languid, with a trace of loneliness that seemed to have been engraved in her bones.

Chen Sanlang unblinkingly stared at her. “Wang Qilang’s a lucky man,” he suddenly remarked when her curtain dropped.

Chen Rong remained unspeaking.

The bumpy rides soon arrived at the lake on the east side of Nan’yang.

A dozen small boats were dotting the lake. Rippling waves spread into rings under the winter sun.

The playing of zither floated from one of the boats. It was clear and ethereal, as if it had descended from heaven.

Just then, a young man lifted his carriage curtain and asked, “Are you Ah Rong of the Chen house?”

“Aye.”

“Good, very good.”

The lad laughed and waved his right hand.

Whoosh. Five carriages lined up to block Chen Rong’s way, the largest one completely obstructing Chen Rong’s view of the lake.

“Play a song for us, Ah Rong of the Chen house,” the lad said to her in her bewilderment. “If I like it, then you may pass through. If not, then I’m sorry, you can’t see your Qilang today.”

He had the cheek to ask this of her.

Chen Rong couldn’t help laughing.

She lifted her curtain to look at the vehicles lining in the front. “Very well,” she said with a smile.

She reached for her zither, gave a pluck and began the music.

Her playing was very much like herself in that the changing notes were exquisite and the intricate strumming was victorious.

But all of a sudden, the melodious zither came to a halt.

While the surprised lad was about to open his mouth, Chen Rong giggled and asked, “Are you Ah Lin of the Huan house, my lord? It’s said that Huan Jiulang (1) has an excellent memory. I haven’t the talent to continue the song. If you would, please resume what I was playing. All is well if your continuation proves to be satisfying. But if not, then I am sorry, I’ll sit right here and won’t go anywhere.”

1. Huan Jiulang = ninth son of the Huan clan

“Little miss, you know full well that I’m not a good zither player. Oh all right, never mind.”

He waved his hand and let the five carriages move out of her way.

Chen Rong and the young man came face to face.

“I hadn’t known you to be so ill-mannered, Miss Chen,” he frowned.

Chen Rong was greatly peeved. She glared at him and scoffed, “And I hadn’t known you to be so sickly, sir.” Despite his handsome features, Huan Jiulang was pallid and fragile, and had blue hues under his eyes.

He stilled, stared back and blurted, “Young miss, there is savageness in the crinkle of your brow. I can’t see how you are suitable for Wang Hong.”

His voice had barely landed by the time Chen Rong lifted her head, narrowed her eyes and stated: “I’m merely a concubine-born daughter from a subsidiary branch. My station is humble, my demeanor inferior to everyone else’s. If I don’t arm myself with savageness, I’d be letting others trample on me. A feeble young man who picks on others’ faults like you is just as loathsome!” There was something threatening in her tone unlike other young ladies.

Chen Sanlang was startled listening to her tirade. “Ah Rong, mind yourself!” he cried. “You must know who he is. He’s Jiulang of the Huan estate. His station is incomparable as their eldest son (2)! You ought not be so disrespectful!”

2. He is the ninth son overall, but likely eldest/heir based on legitimacy.

Waves of laughter reached them at this time.

A few boats appeared on the water; their arrival had been unnoticed until now. It had been Yu Zhi and another young scholar who were clapping and laughing.

“Excellent, well put,” Yu Zhi said in good humor. “I must agree that this sickly guy who likes to pick on others’ faults is really annoying.”

The other lad smilingly added, “Oh, there’s a whip hanging in Ah Rong’s carriage. Why don’t you take it down for a swing? Don’t go overboard, though. If he dies, the Huan estate is going to make a fuss. Ah Rong, just beat him partly dead and let him stay in bed for half a year.”

The pair’s laughter slightly flustered Chen Rong. She turned to look at them,

meeting Wang Hong's faint smile in the process. She blushed and turned her head away.

At this time, Huan Jiulang stroked his throat and wryly smiled at Wang Hong. "Just a stare from your woman has given me cold sweat. My throat feels so sore that I think I'm going to die."

"Isn't this great?!" Yu Zhi merrily interjected. "Whenever the ladies saw sickly you, they always spoke flowery words. It's not often a lady can make you so terrified. What a pleasant turn of events."

Wang Hong smiled at Yu Zhi's loud exclamation. Under the sunlight, his eyes twinkled like the clearest and deepest jewels. "She's already reined her temper, you know." His gentle and mild voice had sounded very sure.

Chen Rong whipped around to look at Wang Hong.

Huan Jiulang cried in objection as he repeatedly asked, "Do you still want so crude a woman, Qilang?"

Wang Qilang didn't have a chance to answer. An older scholar, who had been stroking his zither at the stern of the boat, slowly rested his hands with a sigh and said, "Just as the young lady said, her station is humble and her demeanors are inferior to everyone else's. If she didn't arm herself with savageness, she'd be trampled on by other people. Qilang, she's just like us. She, too, has quite a personality. She may be feral, but that can be tempered."

He had used a light tone to say these joking words. Once more, waves of laughter simultaneously rang forth.

The older scholar then glanced at Chen Sanlang who stood to the left of Chen Rong, frowned, flapped his long sleeves and said, "Whence hath the foul one come? Leave us. Don't stand here and damper our mood."

He was rather unceremonious with his words.

Chen Sanlang never thought he'd be snubbed after uttering only one line. His pale face momentarily flushed red. Not knowing what to say, he reluctantly smiled and bowed to the older scholar, explaining himself: "Lord Xie, do overlook my blunder."

The scholar surnamed Xie did not care to give him a glance.

None of the people here had given Chen Sanlang a glance.

He stiffly turned to Chen Rong.

At this time, Chen Rong gave him a curtsy and quietly said, “Third brother, go on ahead.”

Seeing that she was willing to acknowledge him and thereby saving his face, he quickly replied, “Alright, I’ll go on ahead.”

Huan Jiulang gave a sigh the moment he left. “You may be a fascinating person, miss, but you nevertheless can’t help being common in the end!”

“How can I relieve myself from the common ways when I’m in someone else’s domain?” Chen Rong lightly replied without looking back. “As long as I’m true to myself, why must I care?”

Her response was rather cutting. Huan Jiulang paused and then instantly laughed out loud.

Chen Rong felt more at ease when she heard his laughter, for she knew she had passed the first hurdle. Everyone in front of her was a distinguished member of the literati. For them, there was only one type of person worthy of respect, and that was a genuine person. Always better a genuine knave than a dishonest gentleman.

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Chapter 71: He Calls Her Darling

Wang Hong took two steps forward and offered his hand to Chen Rong.

His tall figure wavered with each undulating wave. Under the sunlight, his lofty and clear eyes were carrying a hint of a smile as they gently regarded her.

Chen Rong's heart somehow missed a beat when she looked into those eyes. She quickly lowered her head to avoid his gaze and thought to herself: *This man is too handsome, and knows his ways with women. I have to avoid his gaze if I want to talk to him.*

While she was busy thinking, he reached out to grab her supple hands. Chen Rong trembled at his touch and instinctively pulled back, but Wang Hong tightened his grip, preventing her from doing so. He held her hand and gently drew her onto the boat.

He did not, however, let go of her once she was aboard. Instead, he held onto her hand and walked to the bow.

Chen Rong halted and didn't move again. "Let me go," she issued a low shout, blushing and with her head lowered. Her voice was laced with a defensive tone.

Wang Hong turned around, squinting his eyes at her with a soft smile. "Darling (1), who are you talking to with such a fierce voice?"

1. 卿卿: a term of endearment between spouses or very close lovers

The blush on Chen Rong's face deepened. She bit her lip and stated: "I'm not yet married."

"Oh?" Wang Hong nodded, turned his head disapprovingly and continued to pull her hand along. "I already know that," he replied with a 'but of course' expression.

Chen Rong glanced around, momentarily feeling rankled. She saw several scholars merrily watching her and Wang Hong, all of them having a good time

with the show.

She buried her head in embarrassment and quickly went on, letting Wang Hong lead her to the front.

Two tables were anchored down with wires, and meat and wine, as well as a zither were placed on them.

Wang Hong sat down and pointed across from him: “Have a seat.”

After Chen Rong obediently sat down, the man at the stern helmed the boat and let it lightly float away.

She couldn’t help herself from cowering as the boat glided out. She had come from the north, and while she liked to ride and use the whip, she couldn’t swim to save her life. As rippling waves crashed against the boat, her eyes lost their focus and her legs buckled.

Chen Rong looked elsewhere, both of her hands now clasping her cup, as she forced herself to stop looking unto the rolling waves.

At this time, Wang Hong’s soft voice came to her from the opposite side: “Did you have something to say to me, darling?” As soon as he asked her, the boat landed inside a whirlpool and made a sudden turn. Chen Rong hunched over in panic and reached her hands out to grab onto something, anything. Her beautiful face had gone terribly blanched.

By the time the boat finally stabilized some moments later, Chen Rong heaved a sigh and suddenly discovered that whatever she was pressing down on was very warm.

She turned her head.

Her small face immediately flared red. It turned out she had grabbed Wang Hong’s arm. And this fact wasn’t even what mattered. What mattered was that her body was now falling forward against his in a classic posture that a girl might throw herself at someone.

At this time, Wang Hong’s wine cup had been transferred to his left hand while he helped Chen Rong with his right one. His lips slightly upturned into a faint smile.

When she looked at him with blushing cheeks, he raised a brow and softly asked, “Are you nauseated? Come sit with me, then.”

“No.” Chen Rong hastily retracted her hands as her cry flew out. She had already let him see her panicked state, in any case, so she simply gripped onto the boat.

Once she calmed down after finally finding stability, she looked around to see that everyone was enjoying the lake and mountain view. She sighed in relief before returning her gaze back to Wang Hong.

Looking at him at this close distance, Chen Rong discovered that not only were his features extremely handsome, but his face was also glowing in a kind of light. Furthermore, his extraordinarily clear and lofty eyes were robbing her of breath.

She was surprised to realize that this was the first time she saw his facial features up close. It was the first time she had the courage to look at him, and the first time her eyes were no longer blinded by his radiance even though she had known him for so long.

While Chen Rong was staring at him fixedly, a sharp ringing laughter rose from behind them: “When this young lady looks at Wang Qilang, her eyes are as bright as a thief’s.” It had been Huan Jiulang’s voice.

The others roared with laughter, discomfiting Chen Rong with their jollity.

Yu Zhi slapped his thigh in high spirit and cried out: “Don’t be that way, Miss Chen. Qilang is already yours. There’s no need to stare at him like a thief.”

The crowd’s laughter grew louder as Chen Rong’s small face flushed deeper.

She quickly looked down and even raised her sleeve over her face. Her large and lovely eyes were firmly glued to the rippling water, not daring to look in Wang Hong’s direction.

Seeing her so, Huan Jiulang said with a quizzical smile: “My, is the young lady embarrassed? Let me tell you, Miss Chen. The entire Jiankang stares at Qilang as if they were a pack of wolves. You merely look at him as if you were a thief. That being the case, there’s really no need to feel bashful.”

Chen Rong reckoned he was right. Whether in Ping or Nan’yang, girls always

made a commotion whenever they saw handsome men. What did she need to feel bashful for?

She lifted her chin and boldly looked at Wang Qilang again. She saw him suppressing a smile as he received a cup of wine from the boatman's hands. Ignoring the drifting boat, he took a sip and chuckled: "I only now know that Ah Rong really does like me."

Chen Rong froze and then almost told him off by reflex. Fortunately, she saw Wang Hong glancing over with narrowed eyes the moment her lips started to move and quickly closed her mouth.

Chen Rong bowed her head, took a deep breath, and bravely said to him: "Qilang, you-you should really stop calling me 'darling'."

"Oh, why?" Wang Hong looked at her curiously.

Chen Rong's small face began to crumple. She blinked her long lashes and mumbled: "If you call me like that, how will I get married?" She took a deep inhale and begged him: "Though I may be humble, I really won't be a concubine. Sir, kindly take back what you said."

Wang Qilang glanced at her, placed the wine cup into her left hand, and softly smiled. "I'm afraid I can't."

His tone was extremely resolute.

Staring at him, Chen Rong lowered her voice and hastily demanded, "B-but what am I going to do?"

Wang Hong smiled brightly and dismissively said, "Do nothing. Just console yourself and try to shower Wang Qilang with lots of love in the future. Try harder, and perhaps this man will marry you as his wife."

Chen Rong was completely stunned by what he said.

"Qilang, pay attention!" Yu Zhi shouted at this moment.

Wang Hong stood up and turned his head. With his elegant white robe fluttering in the wind, Chen Rong discovered that all the boats had come into a circle on the water. Leading them, Yu Zhi was now pouring wine into a cup and then spinning it toward a corner of the lake.

The light cup stayed afloat until Yu Zhi gently stirred the water and created a few rings of ripples. It then slowly turned toward Huan Jiulang and Wang Hong.

“Same rules,” Yu Zhi said when the cup began to move. “Whomever the wine cup spins to would have to recite verses or play music.”

He glanced at a puzzled Chen Rong and gave a peculiar smile. “Qilang, you can also ask your ferocious darling to play the zither in your stead.” He capped his sentence off with a howling laughter.

Chen Rong was still staring numbly. She blinked and took quite a while before she turned her eyes to Wang Hong.

She slowly rose to her feet.

“That’s it, it’s over for me,” Chen Rong glumly sighed as she looked at Wang Qilang, standing against the wind as though he was in a cloud castle. Her voice was beyond dejected.

Wang Hong’s lips curved upward. The cup had, at this time, swung to him and Huan Jiulang.

He took over the bamboo pole from the boatman and gently drew the cup to him. He next reached over and fished it out, then stuffed it into Chen Rong’s hand and said, “Your turn.”

Chen Rong finally awoke. She blinked a few times at Wang Hong and asked in surprise: “I thought the cup has to spin to us. Why did you fish it out and give it to me?”

Wang Hong smiled. He hadn’t answered by the time Huan Jiulang intruded: “Isn’t it obvious? Your Qilang wants to enjoy watching the beauty play music.”

Chen Rong wasn’t stupid. She caught on quite quickly.

As Huan Jiulang said, Wang Qilang didn’t want her to dwell on that incident and foul her mood. He wanted her to relax and enjoy the lake scenery.

At this thought, Chen Rong beamed and answered, “All right, then.”

The boatman brought her zither over.

Chen Rong received it and sat down.

But just as she got seated, she remembered that they were still on a boat.

Her small face instantaneously paled. She had forgotten that she was nauseated because she had been preoccupied by her troubles.

A warmth suddenly encased her small hands. It was Wang Hong, leaning over and holding her zither.

With the strum of his right hand, a melodious tune wafted to the heights as he lightly said to her, “Sing a song.”

As soon as he made the request, the zither notes surged forth like crashing waves.

There was a worldly struggle in the music. But the pain it told carried a loftiness like that of someone who was looking down at the chaos from above.

Chen Rong moved her lips, softly singing along: “We drink to today’s prosperity and let tomorrow’s ship weather tomorrow’s storm. When I ask my lord where to find the gods’ dwellings, he tells me they do not exist. The world is full of mortals, and this one is especially heartless.”

Chen Rong had an excellent singing voice. There was a sentimental enchantment in its clarity. When she sang, there was richness and splendor even in the careless song.

However, this song…

The scholars looked at one another and then turned to Chen Rong in bemusement.

Wang Qilang pressed on the strings and halted the music. He looked up, glancing at Chen Rong. “Is there such a folksong?”

“Not originally; your music has brought it to life.”

She had simply made up the song. It had no rhymes or rules, and it was meaningless and hardly presentable in front of those present on the lake. It had its good points, nonetheless. It was plain and simple, yet also interesting.

After some baffled moments, Huan Jiulang led with a laugh: “Qilang, it seems your woman’s resentment runs deep.”

“Aye, aye, Qilang, what did you do to offend the young lady?” Yu Zhi likewise

guffawed. “So that she calls you a mere earthling and even says you’re especially heartless?”

The older scholars joined in with their laughter. “Has the young lady come to lament, then? Capital, capital. We rarely come across anything nearly as interesting. Miss Chen, say what you will and rest assured. We’ll do whatever you wish including chopping Wang Qilang into eighths.”

Every one of them was playfully taking Chen Rong’s side.

Wang Hong looked up and met her smug face.

He smiled, and then turned away to glance at the crowd before slowly saying: “Hey, why have all of you joined in to disturb our flirting?”

He was saying the song had been words of their flirtation… and she was too baffled to retort.

Lowering her gaze helplessly, Chen Rong drew her lips and fumed: “You’ve stained my name, sir. Be careful or I’ll cling onto you so that you’ll have to marry me.”

“And if your clan arranges any women for you,” her voice took a fierce turn, “I’ll chase each and every one of them away. Hmph, don’t think I won’t do it.”

Answering her was Wang Qilang’s faint smiling eyes. She must admit that the man in front of her was as ethereal as chiseled jade. When he looked at her like that, he really did dazzle her eyes. Chen Rong again found herself fumbling for words.

By the time she snapped awake, Wang Qi had already filled the wine cup and sent it into the waves.

Chen Rong watched him stand in the wind and sighed to herself, deciding to forget her troubles for now.

At this moment, the cup had gone to the middle-aged scholar. In the midst of wind and waves, he ordered a servant to bring a roll of parchment to him before brandishing some brushwork on it.

Chen Rong admired his strong calligraphy and was quietly impressed by it.

Soon, a flamboyant cursive script appeared before the crowd.

While the scholars marveled at it, the wine cup had drifted to Wang Hong several times. Each time it did so, he waved his sleeve and sent it away.

Yu Zhi hotly cried out: “Wang Qilang, how can you not follow the rules?”

Wang Hong gave him a glance out of the corner of his eyes and answered, “Whatever I want to do is the rules.”

His words were very capricious, and they made the scholars laugh.

Huan Jiulang led in applauding: “Good for you, well put. Whatever I want to do is the rules. Hahaha.”

While the men laughed, Chen Rong incredulously blinked at Wang Hong and thought to herself: *He actually said ‘Whatever I want to do is the rules’; he actually has the conceit to say that, does he?*

She had felt down and was having a difficult time trying to feel at ease. But when she was with these people, her mood was somehow lifted and she became much happier.

Without knowing it, she was now full of smiles.

Wang Hong’s lips upturned when he inadvertently looked her way. He retrieved the wine cup from the lake and took a swig. With the stroke of his right hand, a ray of music quietly wandered onto the water and floated into the clouds.

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How did you guys like the date with ten other interlopers? lol
I find it adorable that she enjoys hanging out with his friends.

This weekend will be a flurry of new year activities in our home so Happy Early New Year to everyone who celebrates! May the Monkey brings luck and fortune to all of you.

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Chapter 72: Sometimes, It's All Right to be Ruthless

Presently well into winter, coldness seeped chillingly whenever the wind came even when warm sunlight is present.

None could stand it any longer after half an hour of sightseeing. After another round of wine, the physically weakest, Huan Jiulang, began to talk of going home.

Once they got off the boats, the crowd took turn to mount their carriages.

After two paces, Chen Rong told her driver to stop so she could turn to look at Wang Hong and his group.

All of these famous scholars boasted talents and excellent temperaments. Had this been her past life, she wouldn't even be watching them from the distance let alone being in their company – the shame she had felt was too difficult to put into words. But perhaps because she had Wang Hong's endorsement this time, Chen Rong did not feel their overwhelming superiority. Instead, she even felt comfortable to be with them, and time also seemed to have flown by.

As she was looking at Wang Hong in a daze, he turned his head in the middle of conversation with Yu Zhi, and smiled and waved to her: "Ah Rong, don't feel sad for having to part with me. Go ahead and return home. If you miss me, you can always come to the Wang estate."

He had barely finished speaking when he saw Chen Rong's face flushing red; sparks were flickering in her bottomless eyes.

At this sight, Wang Qilang knitted his brow and quizically asked, "Darling, are you looking at me that way because you had meant differently?"

Chen Rong bit her lip and almost blurted out an expletive.

Yu Zhi and the others doubled over with laughter.

"Go," Chen Rong turned and shouted to her driver.

The laughter boomed louder at her words.

Wang Hong did not laugh, however. He quietly watched Chen Rong's hastily fleeing figure and only lazily turned his head around when the flying dust had obscured her from sight.

Chen Rong's carriage directly pulled into her courtyard.

She stepped down and then raised her head to look around, calling with furrowed brow: "Nurse Ping?"

The nurse did not come out.

Slightly frowning, Chen Rong strode up the stairs and called: "Anyone here? Come out for a moment."

After five or six calls, Old Shang rushed out from the backyard. He was covered in dirt and appeared to have been busy at work.

"Where's everyone? Why is it so quiet today?"

Old Shang didn't answer her, instead looking around and dashing over to whisper: "Let's talk after we go inside."

Surprised, Chen Rong nodded her head and went inside with him.

Old Shang glanced outside, gently shut the door, and then turned to Chen Rong while saying with a long face: "The lesser madam (1), Lady Li, has just come by. She said now that you're the master's ward, you are naturally under his wife's authority. Your meals and accommodation will be just like Ah Wei's. She also said that since you are still young, she would like to help you manage the grains. For that reason, she has sent people to move the grains from our warehouse. She's also forcibly dismissed five of our servants; Nurse Ping was among those who were let go." After a pause, he next whispered: "I've arranged them to stay in the stores that we bought. The others have gone to send them away and should be back soon." As he said this, the old retainer watched Chen Rong with concern, fearing she would recklessly blow up as she had in the past.

1. Her title is 如夫人 which lit. means "like madam", *i.e. like* the lady of the house, but not *quite* the lady of the house. It denotes that she's a concubine, but presumably higher ranked than the others.

However, Chen Rong remained utterly calm even by the time he finished. At his surprised look, Chen Rong lowered her head to ponder for a while before quietly bidding: “Let them stay in the stores. That’s right, have you traded the seven carriages of grains for storefronts?”

He repeatedly nodded and said in high spirit: “Aye, aye. I’m so glad that you’ve thought ahead, else those seven carriages would’ve been taken away, too. As it turns out, everybody is caught in hysteria. So long as we use grains to trade, those stores are much cheaper these days compared to before. Seven carriages of grains used to only be worth three stores. But I’d gained twelve this time. There were only ten for sale on South Street. I bought them all up in addition to two on Main Street.”

Nodding, Chen Rong softly said, “Don’t disclose this matter. Go tell them that if anyone in the family asks, say the stores are under General Ran’s name.”

“Aye, miss.”

“Go.”

Old Shang complied and then turned to leave. He took two steps, dithered, then turned back to ask: “Miss, you’re used to having Nurse Ping with you. Will you be all right without her here?”

“I know what to do. Go,” Chen Rong said and waved her hand.

“Aye.”

Her brow increasingly creased while she watched Old Shang leave. She didn’t expect Lady Ruan and Lady Li to be so callous. Although their husband, Chen Yuan, was a knave, he at least took into account what other people say. These two, on the other hand, had openly taken away all of her grains and dismissed her servants! Fortunately, the fabrics Chen Shu had given her were considered her maiden assets, or else all of her living finances would be controlled by other people.

Things were still so good yesterday, why had the two of them turned so ugly all of a sudden? Chen Rong just couldn’t figure it out. She paced the room and suddenly thought of it: *It must be because of Chen Sanlang! Those two must be blaming me for the scholars’ snubbing of Chen Sanlang! It seems everybody*

thinks they can walk all over me just because I don't have anyone's protection!

Chen Rong wasn't quick-witted, but she was often quick-tempered. All along, she had tried to be patient knowing her weaknesses. Every time conflicts arose, she would do her best to avoid them. Were they telling her she needed to refrain herself even more than she had been?

She scoffed. It seemed she needed to stop these people from thinking they could push her around because she was weak.

At this thought, she stowed the dagger into her sleeve and went outside.

Soon, Chen Rong gracefully appeared outside of Lady Ruan's courtyard.

She stood at the arched doorway and curtsied to a maid, quietly inquiring: "Is my aunt home? Ah Rong would like to see her."

While the maid blankly stared at her, another came behind the first one and whispered something to her.

The first maid nodded and then returned Chen Rong's curtsy. "Are you Ah Rong? Go on in."

"Thank you." Chen Rong gently said her thanks and gracefully walked inside.

She soon got to the stairs. "I'd like to see the Madam," she said with a curtsy.

"Oh, is it Ah Rong? Come in."

"Aye," Chen Rong walked inside.

Only the younger Lady Li was there. Four maidservants stood to her left and right.

She was bowing her head having a drink. When she saw Chen Rong come in, she slowly placed the cup down and smilingly said, "Ah Rong, come over and have a seat."

"Aye," Chen Rong took a seat on the divan to the right. She raised her eyes and peered inside, asking: "Is my aunt not home?"

Lady Li smiled and lightly said, "She is away on business. You can tell me what you need."

"Aye," Chen Rong put on a docile appearance. "My old servant has just told

me that I'm to be treated just like my cousin Ah Wei per my aunt's order. I'm very grateful and have specially come to express my thanks."

Lady Li lifted her cup, blew at it and then took a sip. Without even looking at Chen Rong, she said, "It's good that you understand propriety. Your aunt hails from a large clan and does not like to hear gossips from other people. Though you are from a different branch, since the master has taken you in you'll be her daughter just like Ah Wei. I see you are prudent to have appreciated her caring actions." Her tone was vague, having layered meanings in her speech.

Chen Rong neither paid attention to nor wanted to think about it. She innocently smiled, and then, slowly, her right hand made a waving motion.

Whoosh, a cold glint flashed from her sleeve.

The women gave a startled cry.

Lady Li widened her eyes as she stopped the impulse to cry out loud. "Ah Rong, why are you brandishing a dagger here? What do you think you're doing?"

Chen Rong innocently giggled with squinted eyes: "Don't be afraid, ma'am. It's only a short dagger. I had also taken it out to play with Qilang and Huan Jiulang just now. They both thought it was fun." At this juncture, Chen Rong suddenly tossed the glinting blade into the air.

As it twirled, it caught a ray of sunlight and suddenly issued a dense coldness.

The women drew sharp breaths as color drained from their faces.

Chen Rong paid no attention to their dismay. She laughed and got on her feet. Glancing out of the corner of her eyes, she smiled quite murderously at Lady Li. "Where are my four carriages of grains? I would like to divide it amongst my five dismissed servants. What do you think, ma'am?" She walked over as she flicked her dagger. By the end of her sentence, she was only three paces away from Lady Li.

When Lady Li raised her brow and began calling for help, Chen Rong's wrist slightly turned and cast the glaring sunlight into her eyes.

The older woman was so frightened that she fell backward onto the divan shrieking out loud.

Several maids and guards rushed into the room. They looked around in bewilderment at Lady Li's slumping on the divan, then looked at Chen Rong who was putting away her dagger and waltzing back to her seat. They were startled for a moment before they cried out: "Ma'am, what happened?"

Lady Li tremblingly pointed at Chen Rong, stuttering: "She, she, she…" She couldn't manage any other word. To be fair, Chen Rong hadn't done anything. She was just playing with a knife.

Lady Li watched the servants who were watching her in confusion, then stared at Chen Rong and violently screamed: "Ah Rong, how dare you! You have no sense of order."

Chen Rong tilted her head, blinking her large eyes blamelessly. She smiled and replied, "But I *hadn't* done anything, Ma'am."

After stumping Lady Li, she curved her lips and slowly muttered: "Just now Qilang said he would be giving third brother some help so that I wouldn't be put in a difficult situation." Her voice was audible enough so that Lady Li could vaguely hear her.

"What did you say?"

Chen Rong didn't speak.

Lady Li glanced at the full house of servants, waved, and shouted: "Nothing's the matter, nothing's the matter. Everybody's dismissed. Leave us."

"Aye." They followed one another out and the hall quieted down again.

When she saw them gone, Chen Rong drew her lips in both a flummoxed and aggrieved fashion, saying: "I was just playing with a dagger. I had also played with it in front of Qilang just now. He even laughed and tried to steal it from me. Why are you so fainthearted, ma'am? You got so frightened!"

Lady Li was livid upon hearing her words. She stroked her chest in a low growl. "You, you…" After a few gasps, she decided to rest the matter for the time being. She leaned forward, asking: "Ah Rong, what did you say about your third brother?"

Chen Rong blinked and countered: "Ma'am, where are my four carriages of

grains? My servants had come with me all the way to the south and had gone through life and death with me. Since the clan is willing to bear my expenses, I want to give the grains to them so that they won't have to live on the street."

Lady Li knitted her brow in a solemn expression. "Ah Rong, four carriages of grains are too valuable, and you're too young. It's best I keep them for you. Don't say those kinds of things again… giving them to servants and what not."

She finished speaking just as Chen Rong shot to her feet, screaming: "Why? They had protected me the entire way here. Do you want people to accuse me of being heartless? No, that won't do. You must give me those four carriages of grains." She was apparently beside herself. As she screamed, a blinding coldness again flashed from the dagger hidden inside her sleeve.

Lady Li was indeed afraid of the dagger, as she was likewise afraid of its owner who was completely disregarding the rules. She was especially afraid of her at this very moment, for her eyes were showing a kind of savage madness. When Chen Rong's dagger again flickered under the sunlight into her eyes, she dropped to the floor and cried: "It's yours, it's yours, it's all yours."

"Send this mad girl Chen Rong outside," she yelled.

By the time the servants ran into the room, Chen Rong had slid the dagger back into her sleeve. She quickly gave Lady Li a curtsy and quietly said, "No need to send me, I'll go out by myself."

She turned around and shouted to the servants: "Come along to load the grains with me."

The servants paused to look at Lady Li.

The older woman was suppressing her shock by pressing on her chest. She waved her hand, feebly saying with a wan face: "Do as she says, do as she says."

At her words, the servants gave a bow and followed Chen Rong out.

Only until Chen Rong had gone far away did a maid recover to cry in disgruntlement: "How dare Ah Rong be so rude to her elders? Does she still care about social order?" She turned her head toward Lady Li and exclaimed: "Ma'am, you can't let her go like this. It won't do, we must punish her!"

The pallor on Lady Li's face hadn't gone away. She bit her lip and at long last said, "How are we going to punish her? She brandished a knife in front of her elders, but she was only playing around. She was also several steps away and had never pointed it at us. If people talked, they'd only laugh at us for being easily spooked. Besides, if you really want to quibble, she can say that she wanted the grains back for her servants. She was being righteous!" A pause. "Most importantly, she is Wang Qi's in name," she feebly added. "Even the master doesn't dare offend Wang Qi. When the city knows she's doing this to be charitable, they'll only say she is good and kind. Whether anyone believes what we say is going to be the problem." She felt more and more powerless the longer she spoke.

At length, another maid stuttered: "She's crazy, that Ah Rong of the Chen house."

The others pecked their heads in agreement and, looking in the direction Chen Rong had gone, involuntarily thought: *The girl is mad; it'd be best to stay away from her in the future*. "Confront them with annihilation, and they will then survive; plunge them into a deadly situation, and they will then live (2)," teaches *The Art of War*. "Softness is daunted by hardness; hardness is daunted by foolhardiness; foolhardiness is daunted by recklessness," someone else once said. There was something both murderous and ruthless in Chen Rong's dagger dance that made her appear both foolhardy and reckless. Needless to say, it'd be best to stay far away from her.

2. This is the common translation for the phrase. I did not translate it myself.

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73-74

Chapter 73: In the Eye of the Storm

As a result, Chen Rong led four carriages of grains and quietly returned to her home under the curious eyes of Chen Wei and her friends.

Once they got inside, she called for Old Shang, pointed to the carriages and said, “When we do not know what tomorrow holds, how can I leave you all, who have been with me for so many years, without any assets? Take the grains to Nurse Ping and let her decide what she wants to do with them.”

And then she gave him a wink.

Catching on, Old Shang clasped his hands and loudly answered: “Aye.”

He turned to the servants who had just returned from seeing Nurse Ping off, and said, “Come, now. Load the grains onto our carriages. It’s getting late. We must be quick in sending them out.”

“Aye.”

Once the grains were moved down from Lady Li’s four carriages, the vehicles turned around and went back to their owner.

As soon as they left, Chen Wei and Chen Qian circled behind Chen Rong and curiously asked, “Ah Rong, what mischief are you up to again?”

“Nothing,” Chen Rong simply smiled.

“How can it be nothing?” Chen Qian was greatly dissatisfied. She glared at Chen Rong and raised her voice: “Ah Rong, you’re becoming more and more unruly.”

Chen Rong smiled. She turned around to give them a curtsy and said, “Cousins, there’s really nothing going on.”

Chen Qian stuttered for words. Faced with her displeased expression, Chen Rong kept her faint smile with absolutely no intention to explain.

The night had come by the time everybody left. Nan’yang was again awash in

light.

Chen Rong was playing her zither in the courtyard. Old Shang stood behind her as he listened to the melodious music.

After a while, the music came to a stop. Old Shang approached her, remarking: “I can hear solace from your music.” He had been listening to Chen Rong’s music every day for the past few months and could naturally understand some of it. With concern showing on his face, he paused and asked, “Miss, how did you get the madam to return the grains to you?”

“Only Lady Li was there. I threatened her so she gave them back to me.”

Astonished, Old Shang repeatedly reminded her: “Lady Li is your elder in any case. How could you think of threatening her? If she bears grudges, she’ll find ways to harm you… then what will we do?” Chen Rong plucked the strings with her right index finger. After issuing a series of crisp notes, she said, “If I hadn’t gone and asked for the grains, would they have left me alone? Would they have treated me better or would they not harm me?”

Old Shang shook his head and sighed, “Nay.”

“That being the case, why should I have to think about all those things?” she bristled.

Old Shang kept quiet before murmuring at length: “I still don’t feel very good about this.”

Chen Rong did not answer him.

As darkness deepened, waves of laughter filled Chen Wei’s courtyard.

After staring at the lights in her home and listening to the merry voices, Old Shang turned to Chen Rong and sighed. “It’d be great if you were with your father and brother.”

The music took a quick turn in reply.

That night, the main compound was filled with music and light, but none of it had anything to do with Chen Rong.

The next day was very sunny.

Winter had arrived and stayed for some time, but the sweltering weather was quite worrying. If it were to be another warm winter, next year's harvest might even be worse.

Since early morning, Chen Rong had put on the green dress lined with yellow patterns sent to her the day before. It was her favorite, the reason being it subdued her glamor and gave her a quiet elegance.

With the new dress and a veiled hat, Chen Rong got into her carriage and prepared to visit Nurse Ping.

As her carriage drove on the street, she found that the city dwellers were clustered into small groups while they murmured in worriment.

Old Shang tilted his head and whispered to her: "Miss, something big likely has happened."

Almost immediately, they heard a young lad's lament from the carriage in front of them: "Luo'yang has fallen yet we cannot return to Jiankang. What will we do?"

And then a cry.

Sympathy lurked in their eyes as the crowd listened to the suppressed sobbing.

Old Shang stopped the carriage to ask a portly man dressed in servant clothes: "What's happening, man?"

It was apparent the man was a steward. He glanced toward Chen Rong's carriage with some disdain but still answered Old Shang: "We've just received news that the families who left Nan'yang to return to Jiankang had run into the barbarians and gotten killed along the way!"

Shocked, Old Shang hastily asked, "All of them? Does that mean the barbarians had waited to ambush them on the road?"

The plump steward nodded. "That's what they all say." He sighed: "My master had sold his land and properties, thinking of returning to Jiankang. But with these news, tsk, tsk…" He shook his head and limply left the scene.

Old Shang also sighed for a while. He then suddenly thought of something and turned to Chen Rong, whispering: "Miss, did you by chance have some

premonitions?” Why else would she ask him to buy all the farmland within a month?

“I’m not a divine being,” Chen Rong’s voice was heard. “How would I know anything? It was only a coincidence.”

Old Shang considered her answer and gave a nod.

The carriage made its way to South Street.

As they drove along, Old Shang pointed to the storefronts and said, “Miss, this one is also yours. They used to sell food here, but by the time we bought it, the warehouse had been empty and the shop had already closed. This one over here was a restaurant; it’s now also closed. That’s right, miss, when I gave the grains to Nurse Ping yesterday, she said she’ll save three carriages for you and use the last to open up three shops. It should be no problem to provide for five people with three shops.”

Chen Rong had no interest in any of the details. She carelessly nodded.

Just then, a burst of noises sounded out in front.

Chen Rong curiously peeked through the curtain.

Into her sight was a team composed of six carriages, with the large and extravagant one leading them painted in gold.

A dozen other carriages surrounded this team. The encircling people kept flattering smiles on their faces as they spoke in a solicitous manner to the golden carriage.

Chen Rong gave the scene a glance and hastily ordered, “Pull over, pull over to the side.”

“Aye.” Old Shang quickly steered the vehicle to the roadside.

Chen Rong looked to her left, saying: “There’s an alley, go there.”

“Aye.”

Old Shang’s driving was fortunately excellent. He repeatedly lashed his whip and entered the vehicle into the dark alley.

Chen Rong sighed in relief once they were there.

She quietly lifted the curtain to peer outside.

From her vantage point, she could see that the curtain of the golden carriage had also lifted. The pudgy Prince of Nan'yang was nodding haughtily while saying something. Submissive nobles stood at his side; Chen Rong recognized Chen Shu among them.

Suddenly, Chen Rong's expression altered as she inwardly thought: *Drat, the major clans cannot leave Nan'yang and now have to make every effort to curry favor with him.*

Old Shang craned his neck looking at the scene and wondered: "That's odd, why don't these people go the the prince's estate to seek an audience with him instead of making a ruckus out in the streets?"

Chen Rong pursed her lips. "That's because everyone knows the Prince of Nan'yang likes to tell everyone that he is the mightiest in this city!"

"It seems they won't leave for the time being, let's go home," she lowered her voice.

"Aye."

When the carriage turned around, Chen Rong pulled her curtain down as she sat inside, wringing her hands in contemplation.

When the vehicle drove out of South Street, Chen Rong heard weeping coming from the carriage next to hers: "Why? I'm already betrothed to Mister Liu. Why must I attend the prince's banquet."

An older woman whispered, "What else can we do? Your father even sent him Sima Qian's handwritten records that he had treasured for years, but Advisor Xu said the prince does not like such complicated amusements. There's nothing else your father can do."

"Even if we cannot go back to Jiankang for the time being, why must we be so hasty? Isn't General Ran here to protect us? Why must we go curry favor with the old lecher?"

The older woman's voice turned pained: "Miss, you must not have heard. With the pretext that we need to bolster Nanyang's security because the barbarians

will soon move south, the prince intends to send some families to station outside the city."

The young girl stopped crying to exclaim: "Station outside the city?"

"Aye, why else would your father go to this length? Not only your father, but all of the major clans are sending their beautiful daughters to him in order to make him change his mind."

The conversation was left behind as the wheels rolled on.

At this time, Old Shang spoke to her: "Miss?" He sounded quite unnerved.

Inside, Chen Rong kept wringing her hands. "Stop, Old Shang. Ask to see which estate General Ran is guesting at right now."

"Aye, miss."

Moments later, he jumped back onto the carriage. "Miss, he's at the Huan estate."

"To the Huan estate, then."

"Aye."

The Huan estate was situated on South Street. To avoid the prince's fleet, Old Shang had circled the long way and spent nearly an hour to arrive at its side door.

The carriage came to a stop and, as Old Shang went to the gatekeeper, Chen Rong lifted a corner of the curtain. Although she was looking at them, her eyes seemed to be well away.

A while later, Old Shang came back and drove the carriage into the estate from the side door.

A round of distant music streamed to them as soon as they entered.

It was different from the usual reed pipes, however. There was an unusual ringing of zither in this music.

While Chen Rong was listening to it, a sudden burst of applause sounded. Pounding drum beats soon began when the cheers quieted down.

"Miss, the gatekeeper said General Ran is currently drumming at the square.

He added that all the major clans who came to look for him had been refused at the door. Young ladies, however, are always exceptions."

Chen Rong hummed a reply.

Soon, the carriage drove to the square.

They hadn't approached but the scents of cosmetics and perfume were already assailing Chen Rong's nostrils. "Why are there so many young ladies?!" Old Shang asked.

Chen Rong quickly lifted her curtain.

She was surprised to find a colorful array of outfits covering the square, all of them being young ladies'. There must have been at least fifty to sixty of them.

They were presently watching the square's center.

Chen Rong followed their gazes.

After a brief glance, she quickly withdrew her gaze.

Sure enough, it was Ran Min who stood at the center. His arms were bare, his long black hair was tied back with a red ribbon, and his thin lips were tightly drawn into a line.

It must be said that Ran Min had acquired a perfect body through years on the battleground. His sun-kissed skin, broad shoulders, and long legs made him stand out and outshine all other aristocrats. Even Huan Jiulang's remarkable aura paled in comparison.

He was presently beating the drum. Huan Jiulang sat beside him with a zither (1) placed in front. His left hand lightly pressed on the strings as the right one did the plucking.

1. this zither is called the *zheng* which is different from the *qin* that Chen Rong plays. The *zheng* has picks and movable bridges whereas the *qin* has neither of those characteristics.

The pair harmonized excellently. Whenever the melodious zither drifted on, the drum was faint; whenever the sonorous zither swelled, the drum pounded

heavily. Listeners were made to feel as though they'd returned to centuries past, to the time when Zhuge Liang had sat in the wide open and played the zither on a deserted fortress while below him stood Sima Yi's massive army.

The sounds of zither were melodious and ethereal. They carried neither joy nor sorrow, like outsiders who stood on the clouds looking down at the ashes of time. The anguished drum pattern, on the other hand, was sonorous, like a general who had gone through a hundred battles and who now stood before the corpses as he cried for the civilians.

The aloof and the mournful brought together a most magnificent feeling.

This was a music Chen Rong had never heard before – sounds beyond her recognition.

She was so immersed in the music that it could be said it was speaking to her soul. But all of a sudden she was overcome with a shocking realization! She now felt her complicated zither playing had been too trivial and shallow compared to these melancholic and unspoken sounds.

Chen Rong wasn't the only shallow one. Along with his drum rhythm, Ran Min's strong muscles flexed in the sunlight – his masculine beauty comparable to the beauty of Ji Kang when he had played "The Guangling Song" before his execution (1).

1. read about Ji Kang here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ji_Kang

Hence each time the drumming came to an end, girls would squeal all at once as they watched him in rapture. As if he didn't perceive their admiring eyes, however, Ran Min never once looked up.

No one noticed Chen Rong's arrival.

She lifted her curtain to listen to the extraordinary music. It must be the work of serendipity and good fortune for this wonderful duet to take place. For a very long time, she closed her eyes and tightly clutched her hands.

Uncertain for how long, the zither's abrupt end was followed by Ran Min's laughter as he threw his head back, flinging the drumsticks to the far distance

and shouting: “Now, that was exhilarating!”

His soaring laughter hadn’t ceased by the time the female congregation squealed and rushed toward him and Huan Jiulang.

Before they knew what was happening, the pair had been submerged under the scents of perfume and powder.

At this time, Chen Rong withdrew her gaze and quietly said, “Let’s go home.” Old Shang nodded and turned the carriage around: *It appears General Ran won’t have time to spare my insignificant mistress.*

Chapter 74: Tagging Along

“Go to the south gate,” Chen Rong said to Old Shang the moment her carriage left the Huan estate.

Knowing she wanted to look for General Sun, he at once nodded with an “Aye” and then directed the vehicle in that direction.

They went past the panicking and murmuring crowd and soon came to the south gate.

“I’ll ask around, miss,” Old Shang said as he looked at the guards.

Chen Rong hummed an agreement.

Moments later, he ran back to her and nervously relayed, “Miss, they said General Sun’s troop had already departed. They aren’t camping outside the city anymore.”

“I see, let’s go home then,” Chen Rong said at length.

“Aye.”

Old Shang jumped onto the carriage, gave a shout and said, “Don’t worry, miss. Don’t you have Wang Qilang’s affection? No one will give you trouble anymore.”

“I just want to be a little more assured, that’s all,” Chen Rong softly replied.

Old Shang sighed. It hadn’t crossed his mind when they had been in Ping, but when they arrived in Nan’yang, he discovered that without the elder and younger masters, his mistress was only a feeble girl and life hadn’t been easy for

her.

The carriage drove back to the Chen estate.

Despite also in clamoring state, the estate was much quieter than the world outside. Nobody paid her passing carriage any notice.

When they drove by Chen Wei's silent courtyard, they could not hear the girls' usual laughter.

Chen Rong knitted her brow and let her carriage proceed to her home.

There, everything was as it had always been. It was as if the storm and controversy beyond its walls hadn't anything to do with it.

A day flew by.

The next day, Old Shang asked around on Chen Rong's bidding and found that all major clans who had moved from the north were required to attend the prince's banquet. The Chen estate also participated, but nothing else was out of the ordinary.

In the blink of an eye, the third day passed by.

Just past noon, Old Shang ran over with an apprehensive face. Without finding his footing, he hastily relayed when he saw Chen Rong, "Miss, I've got news. The Xianbei army has surrounded Mo'yang. The day before yesterday, General Sun and Wang Qilang's groups had already headed to Mo'yang."

Mo'yang lay northwest of Nan'yang and along the direct route to Luo'yang. It was coveted territory despite being only a medium-sized city.

"They say Mo'yang got surrounded by forty thousand Xianbei soldiers moments after General Sun and Wang Qilang arrived there." His voice began to tremble. "Forty thousand Xianbei soldiers! Unless General Ran personally came with his army, no one will be able to defeat them. But they keep saying the north is under threat and General Ran had already gone there last night."

Old Shang received the tea Chen Rong handed over, took a drink, sighed and continued: "They say that General Sun and Wang Qilang will die in Mo'yang once it's taken, that their fates are sealed. They also say as soon as Mo'yang is taken, Nan'yang will be next. Everyone in the city is crippled with fear."

At this juncture, he saw Chen Rong staring off absently with knitted brow and couldn't help exclaiming: "Miss, miss?"

After five or six calls, Chen Rong recovered. "Wang Qilang and General Sun had gone to Mo'yang, you say?"

"Aye."

Just then, footsteps sounded outside.

She hadn't entered but her voice was already heard: "Ah Rong, Ah Rong."

Chen Wei strode in and, paying Old Shang and the bowing servants no notice, loudly said to Chen Rong, "Ah Rong, I heard Wang Qilang had gone to Mo'yang and no one knows whether he's alive."

"You already knew?" she asked when she saw no surprise on her cousin's face.

Chen Rong nodded.

Chen Wei came to stand before her, held her hands and sighed. "Don't worry. My father said Wang Qilang is so extraordinary that he won't be met with any danger."

Chen Rong bowed her head and said, "Thank you," before withdrawing her hands.

Chen Wei waved to a servant and ordered, "Bring a seat to the yard. Goodness, when Nurse Ping isn't here, the rest of you don't have any manners."

While she was ordering the servants around, Chen Rong curtsied to her and said, "Forgive me, I must excuse myself for now." She didn't wait for Chen Wei to speak before turning and running into her backyard.

Surprised, Chen Wei watched her, and then heaved and turned around to leave.

After taking a turn in the garden for a couple of hours or so, Chen Rong mounted her carriage and said to Old Shang: "Let's go out."

"Aye."

The carriage moved and headed for town.

The streets had become chaotic, with many nobles urging their carriages here

and there like headless flies. Every time they crossed a street, they could hear songs of grief and mourning.

All of a sudden, the entire city of Nan'yang had fallen into panic.

Chen Rong lifted her curtain and watched the city with furrowed brow.

"Ah Rong?" a familiar voice called to her some time later.

Chen Rong turned around.

She was facing a pair of glowing thief eyes, their owner being Chen Sanlang. He looked Chen Rong up and down with a flame in his eyes that was different from their previous meetings.

"Third brother." Chen Rong bowed to him from the carriage.

As she bowed to him, his eyes were glued to her slender waist and round buttocks.

He waved his hand and signaled his driver to move closer to Chen Rong.

He poked his head out, looked at Chen Rong and sighed: "Ah Rong, I heard that Wang Qilang had died in Mo'yang." He sounded absolutely certain.

Chen Rong paled but tried to laugh. "That can't be. Haven't the Hu only surrounded Mo'yang?"

"Is that so?" Chen Sanlang gave two hollow laughs.

He looked at Chen Rong and affectedly said, "Murong Ke of the Xianbei tribe is an invincible warlord. Since he has laid Mo'yang under siege, the odds are against the city."

At this juncture, he softly sighed. "It's fortunate that you hadn't been promised to Wang Qilang." He paused, shook his head, and continuously lamented: "But your reputation had regrettably been ruined by him. Otherwise, I would've helped you find another man to marry. But now…"

He drew near, his eyes roaming on Chen Rong's full bosom. "Ah Rong, would you like me to help you?"

Chen Rong retreated to the back, bowed her head and said, "How can I talk of marriage when I don't even know if he's dead or alive?"

Chen Sanlang repeatedly sighed.

“Goodbye, third brother,” Chen Rong said to him with a curtsy.

“Wait.”

Chen Sanlang hastily stopped her. He ordered his carriage to near Chen Rong’s, poked his head out and whispered: “Ah Rong, there’s something… that you may have heard?”

Chen Rong looked back at him, her naturally bewitching eyes robbing Chen Sanlang of his mind.

“Third brother, what is it? Third brother, third brother?”

Chen Rong had to cry a few times before Chen Sanlang reacted. He composed himself, glanced around, leaned again toward Chen Rong and whispered: “I heard that after knowing Wang Qilang is unlikely to escape death, someone had reminded the Prince about you.”

He then stared at her and deliberately said, “I’m sure you know that I’m well-acquainted. My words may carry some weight with the prince.” He smiled cryptically, turned around and said to the driver, “Let’s go.”

“Aye.”

By the time his carriage had driven a distance away, Chen Sanlang turned around to look at Chen Rong and grinned with satisfaction when he saw her blanched face bowing low.

Once Chen Sanlang was gone, Old Shang turned around and worriedly called: “Miss?”

Chen Rong looked up.

She shook her head and said to Old Shang, “We’ll take it one step at a time.”

Seemingly sad, the man feebly shook his head.

“Go to the Wang estate.”

Old Shang whirled around to look at her and quizzically repeated, “To the Wang estate?” Something came to his mind and he quickly reminded her: “Miss, you’re still unwed. The rumors will only worsen if you go to there.”

“Go, I have my plans,” Chen Rong remained firm.

Seeing that she had made up her mind, Old Shang had no choice but to drive the carriage forward.

As the vehicle was rolling, he did not give up and continued to warn her. “Miss, you’re an unwed young lady. I know Sanlang says the Prince of Nan’yang hasn’t given up, but that news may not be true. They say “The wife weds while the concubine elopes.” Young ladies who run away will always be looked down upon. If you go to the Wang estate now, how will you live in the future?”

There was grief in his voice.

After a good while, Chen Rong’s answer remained resolute: “Say no more. Let’s just go to the Wang estate.”

Old Shang had given up by now. He sighed and slowly drove the carriage to the Wang estate.

Soon, Chen Rong’s horse-drawn carriage pulled up to the Wangs’ side entrance.

She stared at a hesitant Old Shang, who jumped off with a glum face and walked to the gatekeeper.

The gatekeeper was a lanky man in his late twenties; he glanced at Chen Rong’s carriage and shouted at Old Shang: “Due to the current circumstances, our master has ordered that those who come with an invitation may enter through the main entrance.” When he finished, he impatiently waved Old Shang away.

At this time, Chen Rong showed her face and raised the jade ornament Wang Hong had given her. “Qilang has given me permission to come.”

The gatekeeper trotted over to look at the jade pendant, giving it several glances before suddenly crying: “Are you Ah Rong of the Chen house?”

“Aye.”

He looked her up and down and muttered, “Sure is fetching. No wonder.” He then frowningly said, “Didn’t you know? Qilang isn’t home.”

Chen Rong dropped her gaze. “I want to see the servants who had come here with Qilang.”

He nodded and waved her in. “Come in, come in. Qilang had stayed in the south courtyard.”

The side gate opened to let the carriage pull inside.

Chen Rong ignored the gatekeeper who was still eyeing her with curiosity and disregard. She held her head high and glanced around the Wang estate’s décor.

After the carriage went some ten paces, Chen Rong removed her veiled hat and smoothed out her dress.

Soon, they arrived in the south courtyard. Old Shang parked by the arched doorway where a burly man in his mid twenties came out. He gave the carriage a quick glance and shouted: “Who’s there?”

Old Shang jumped down and respectfully said, “My mistress…”

Not waiting for him to finish, the man impatiently waved his hand and yelled: “Why have you come now of all times? Qilang isn’t here!”

At this point, Chen Rong’s lovely voice sounded from her carriage. “I’m Ah Rong of the Chen house.” She lifted the curtain and hopped down, walking to the large man and showing him the jade ornament. “This is the jade pendant Qilang had given me.”

The large man gave it a look, bowed and said, “Good greetings, miss.”

He stepped back and welcomed Chen Rong inside.

Once she entered the courtyard that was filled with trees and rockeries, Chen Rong found ten parked carriages and a hundred armored servants. They were all large and strong. When they saw Chen Rong approach, they couldn’t help but stare at her.

At this time, the man behind Chen Rong explained, “We’ve just finished preparations and were about to leave.”

“I know,” Chen Rong said with a nod to his surprise.

She stopped and curtsied to the servants, bowing her head humbly while stating with a clear voice: “I’ve come to go with you to Mo’yang.”

“Miss?” Old Shang cried. He sounded both confused and dismayed.

Chen Rong did not answer his call. She kept her curtsying posture, resolute in her dutiful look.

The servants exchanged gazes and then turned to a scholar, who stared at Chen Rong, asking: “Are you Ah Rong of the Chen house?”

“Aye.”

He frowned and said in seriousness, “Do you know that Mo’yang is currently under the barbarians’ siege? The odds are against us if we go there at this time.” He pointed behind him. “They are all retainers from the house of Wang. None hope to keep their lives on this trip. What about you?”

“I have two friends in my life,” Chen Rong calmly replied. “Young General Sun is the first, and Qilang is the second. They are now both in Mo’yang.” She paused, then added: “I told Qilang that I owe him my life. If there’s a chance to repay him, then I will.”

“Will you regret your decision?”

“Nay.”

“Excellent!”

The scholar lit up. He bowed deeply to Chen Rong and said, “I didn’t peg you for a lady of heroics! This way, miss!”

Chen Rong nodded and walked to the carriage behind him.

At this time, Old Shang cried out: “Miss, let me go with you.”

Chen Rong turned around and met Old Shang’s eyes. Seeing insistence in them, she gave some thought, nodded and said, “Go back and bring some luggage for me. Then come meet us at the north gate.”

“Aye,” Old Shang replied glumly.

Chen Rong watched him drive away and then turned and walked to an empty carriage.

“Why are you in such a hurry, miss?” a scholar asked, staring at her.

“I made a guess that you gentlemen would be leaving. I was afraid I’d be late so I didn’t think I had time to prepare any luggage.”

The scholar exclaimed in surprise: “My, were you able to even guess this? You’re just as extraordinary as Qilang says you are. Please, this way.”

At his invitation, Chen Rong bowed and mounted the carriage.

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75-76

Chapter 75: Waltzing in Under the Enemies' Noses

When people of the Wang house made their appearance in the city, nobles would, from time to time, come to see them off. They watched the burly servants while they pointed and murmured. Young ladies hung their heads in tears as they silently followed the carriages and sent them all the way to the city gate.

Luckily, Chen Rong was sitting inside a Wang carriage and no one knew a girl had joined the team.

By the time they arrived at the gate, when fewer ladies and nobles remained, Chen Rong peeked through the curtain slit and saw Old Shang's carriage parked in the distance away from others' attention. She quietly heaved.

When they were two hundred meters out of the city, the crowd stopped following to only watch them leave, with the girls still sobbing by the time scattered dust had disappeared from view.

Old Shang quickly drove over when he saw the troop approaching. "Miss?"

Chen Rong gave a reply and got off.

"Miss," Old Shang whispered. "I've told them to say, if anyone were to ask, that Nurse Ping wants to look for her relatives in Ximing. You've gone to send her off because you are concerned for her and you won't be back for several months. I've also told the nurse to lock her door and not see anyone during this time."

Chen Rong knew he was thinking of her reputation. Even now, Old Shang was still holding onto a ray of hope, however slight it was, so shouldn't she, too? She momentarily lowered her head and answered, "I know."

At this time, a large man shouted: "Let's go. Let's not waste any more time." Whips cracked as soon as he finished his words.

With his departure, the crowd also gave repeated shouts. They feared that

Mo'yang would be completely surrounded, and even their aid would arrive too late.

Old Shang quickly drove along to keep up with them.

They went on without any breaks.

To everyone's surprise, Chen Rong was actually very fit. When she was tired from sitting, she would ride; when she was tired of riding, she would sit. She didn't have one word of complaint or did she give them any extra trouble. This alone made her far better than the vast majority of the noble children. The servants were secretly appreciative of it.

After having gone all day and through most of the night, the scholar looked at the moon in the sky and shouted: "Let's take a break."

"Aye."

The cavalcade stopped, and the servants rounded the carriages up with the riders on horseback and Chen Rong's carriage encircled inside. To save time, everyone either slept in the vehicles or sat leaning against their horses to get some rest. They did not set camp.

After the scholar took care of things, he turned around to look at Chen Rong's carriage. Seeing the fluttering curtain and an extremely quiet Chen Rong, he clasped his hands and politely informed her: "Miss, we'll arrive in Mo'yang by noon tomorrow."

Chen Rong nodded. "May I ask which gate you're planning to enter from?" she asked.

"From the south, of course."

Nan'yang was located to the southeast of Mo'yang. It was a matter of course to enter from the south gate.

"We can't!" Chen Rong's crisp and decisive voice sounded. "The tribesmen are well-versed in warfare strategies. They'll certainly position their men at the south gate to discourage reinforcements from Nan'yang. Even the north gate is no good. I think we should go in from the west gate."

The scholar paused. He exchanged glances with the others and then asked her,

“You think we can enter from the west entrance?”

“Aye,” Chen Rong was convinced.

The scholar frowned. “Let us have a discussion,” he said and then retreated.

Moments later, he came back and said to Chen Rong, “You may be right, miss. We’ll enter through the west gate tomorrow.”

Chen Rong hummed an answer, seemingly indifferent to their acceptance of her opinion.

The scholar stared at the fluttering curtain and quietly thought to himself: *She’s very courageous and intelligent for a girl so young. She’s also maintaining her calm very well. The master is indeed perceptive!*

They started out again early next morning.

After deciding they would be going in from the west gate, they began to circle to the other side.

As noon neared, the travel became increasingly difficult for the Hu would appear from time to time. Everyone would hold his breath whenever this happened. They wrapped cloth over the wheels to hide their tracks and quietly went forward.

By noon, the tall fortress and its rugged walls appeared ahead. Even from afar, they could see shadows atop the walls.

The scholar gazed that way for a while from horseback, and then frowned and said to Chen Rong: “There are Hu soldiers at the west gate.”

Chen Rong’s voice was as tranquil as before, without joy or sorrow: “It’s all right. The notorious Murong Ke of the Xianbei tribe is the one laying siege to the city. He’s using the tactic of trapping three while letting one go, which means he intends to force the people of Mo’yang to escape from the west gate. The soldiers he placed here is only for show. They won’t stop us if we go in.”

People looked at one another once Chen Rong had voiced her opinion. Her simple articulation had contained a wealth of military knowledge, but she had explained these strategies as if they were as obvious as the weather.

“How do you know, miss?”

“Why don’t you send someone knowledgeable about military tactics to take a look at the west gate’s setup?”

The scholar nodded to a lanky man, who bent over and disappeared into the bushes in a whirl.

He again turned to Chen Rong and asked, “We haven’t been met by their ambush along the way. If they really wanted to force the civilians to escape from the west gate, why don’t they employ better arrangements?”

After a long beat of silence, Chen Rong replied, “If Murong Ke’s schemes can be seen through by people like us, then he wouldn’t be a famous general.” Her tone was unexpectedly certain and aloof, giving him an answer that wasn’t really one.

Taken by surprise, he gave it some thought and in the end decided to wait for the lanky man to come back.

That man returned less than half an hour later. He clasped his hands and reported to the scholar: “Not a wisp of smoke outside of the west gate. There are few thousand of them lying around and looking relaxed. I think we can give it a go!”

The scholar nodded, gritted and said, “Excellent! Let’s head to the west gate, then!”

They began packing up and taking out their weapons.

While glancing at Chen Rong, the scholar pointed out several strapping men so that they would protect her carriage.

Outside the west gate was a wide open field. When their hundred-person team surged forth, the clopping hooves made the Hu turn around in alarm.

“Sir,” Chen Rong suddenly called.

At this time, the scholar could not see Chen Rong. He rode over and raised his voice to say: “What is it, miss?”

“We only have a hundred people. We’d be beating our heads against the wall if we were to go up against them. If we can’t best them in any case, why must we be so anxious? I’d rather act normal. We’ll get through more easily that way!”

Her words had the semblance of sageness! “Very true, very true!” the scholar cried. He waved his right hand and told the crowd at large: “Put away your weapons and stop yelling. Go at leisure as though we are on an excursion.”

Perplexed at first, they then snapped awake to stow their weapons away and slow the horses down.

As they reached the west gate, their conversations grew more and more lively. The Hu who had jumped onto their horses in haste had calmed down by now. They slowly turned around to look unto the distance. Similarly, the people on the fortress walls had also quieted down and were now looking below in bewilderment.

In the distance and outside the tall city gate, more than a hundred strong men were riding or driving carriages at a leisure pace. They all seemed to be so relaxed that even the unhurriedly turning wheels did not cause dust to fly. It was as if they hadn’t come to break headlong into the city, but to walk into an empty yard instead.

While the Hu were in bafflement, the Hans had begun to crowd the fortress walls.

The middle-aged scholar rode to Chen Rong’s carriage. Without diverting his eyes from the Hu, he wiped the sweat on his forehead and said, “Miss, they don’t have any weapons.”

Another burly man kept close to her carriage; he scanned the area and asked, “Miss Chen, these barbarians are not riding horses or wielding any weapons. Will they really not attack us?”

Chen Rong’s noncommittal voice sounded to them from inside.

The men only wanted to talk to her because they felt restless, however. It mattered little whether she answered them or not.

Closer and closer they went, until both sides could gradually see the others’ faces. The Wang servants finally started to breathe again. They simply withdrew their gazes and went on with their easy conversations, idly going forward.

They were now only two hundred paces apart. Typically at this distance, both sides would have had to prepare themselves for a surprise attack. And yet

neither the Hu nor the people of the Wang house did anything. The Hu innocently watched the Wangs converse, while the Wangs didn't even bat an eye at the Hu.

One hundred more steps! By this time, the Hu were still haphazardly standing there, never once getting on their horses or taking out their spears.

Eighty more steps! The Hu were still staring at them in a daze.

Fifty more steps!

Thirty more steps! They could now see the expressions on the others' faces at this distance. The tribesmen had seemed curious and surprised, but not murderous. They didn't take their weapons out either. The people of the Wang house all heaved in relief.

Twenty more steps! Both sides' conversations were now audible.

Ten more steps. Those leading in the front were facing the enemies.

At this moment, a man stepped forth from the Hu troop. He was donning a long robe and a tree-strand beard. Be it his attire or appearance, he looked very much like the Han scholars.

He bowed deeply to the people of the Wang house before asking in curiosity: "May I ask which clan you belong to?"

The elderly scholar returned his bow. "The Wang house of Lang'ya."

"The Wang house of Lang'ya? You are indeed worthy of your reputation." He raised his clasped hands and receded.

At this point, they had narrowly gone past the Hu, and they all knew that, just as Miss Chen had said, the nomadic tribesmen would not be stopping them.

By the time they were about one hundred paces away from the city entrance, the gates slowly opened to the creaking of heavy iron.

A group of Jin citizens appeared behind the gates. When they saw the Wang entourage, they simultaneously broke out in appreciative smiles.

Not waiting for them to speak, a roar of laughter sounded to the appearance of a middle-aged scholar. He was walking as he was laughing to the person

beside him. “My admiration is yours today, Wang Qi!”

Who could the handsome and ethereal youth standing beside him be, if not Wang Hong?

At this time, Wang Hong slightly curved his mouth in a seeming smile, but there was a trace of uncommon brightness in those clear and lofty eyes. He strode out.

Seeing him walking to them, everyone from the Wang house quickly dismounted their horses or carriage and at once bowed to him, crying: “My lord.”

Wang Hong nodded before turning to look at Old Shang and Chen Rong’s carriage.

For the sake of her reputation, Chen Rong did not step down or lift her curtain in an effort to prevent others from seeing she was a young lady.

Wang Hong intently watched Chen Rong’s carriage for some time before nodding to his attendants, saying: “Come in.”

“Aye.”

Surrounded by several hundred nobles, the attendants played to the crowd and went inside.

At the gates’ closing creak, the Wang entourage sighed in relief with some even beginning to buckle.

Wang Hong gave them a glance, then gave Chen Rong’s carriage a glance before withdrawing his gaze.

Excitement soon took over. They, as humble servants, were presently surrounded by a few hundred nobles and respectfully welcomed into the city! It was unprecedented! They tried their best to suppress their joy and excitement, kept their heads high, and slowly entered the mayor’s estate amid the cheers of Mo’yang residents who lined the street.

When they arrived at the west wing where Wang Hong resided, the older scholar stopped to give everyone, including Wang Hong, a deep bow as he laughed out loud. “Qilang, death may be frightening, but I won’t be afraid with

you and these martyrs as my companions.”

He straightened up and gave the surrounding attendants a bow, sighing: “Gentlemen, if death evades you this time, the world will certainly know of your honor.”

“Wang Hong, Wang Hong, if such is your retainers’ dignity, then what of their master, I wonder!”

He waved his long sleeves, said goodbye to everyone and then took his leave.

As soon as they left, Wang Hong turned around and glanced at his attendants. After taking note of their expressions, he turned and looked toward Chen Rong who was sitting inside her carriage.

Chapter 76: Chen Rong’s Good Name

“Come down,” Wang Hong faintly smiled, looking at Chen Rong’s carriage.

She drew her curtain and revealed her beautiful face to him. She was slightly wan at the moment, apparently affrighted by the earlier events.

Wang Hong looked at her but did not ask. He then turned around, waved his sleeve and said, “Let’s go in.”

The servants followed him inside, and so did Chen Rong.

Sitting in a corner of the study and with her head bowed, Chen Rong was now dazedly watching a ray of sunlight that had beamed through the door and into the space in front of her. The dust floating in the light column was rather effervescent.

She sat there for some time until a figure came to stand in front of her and blocked the light.

She looked up and was met with Wang Hong’s gentle eyes.

He held her gaze, then slowly leaned forward as he reached out to cup her delicate face – his fingers yet to touch her, but his warmth already palpable.

Chen Rong lowered her eyes and forced herself to remain still despite instinctively wanting to pull away. Because she had held her breath for too long, however, a faint and dull pain pricked her chest.

Like a spring breeze, his hand brushed across her face as he laughed and softly said, “You’re so careless. Look, your hair is plastered all over your face.” His voice flowed like the wind at night, gently sweeping by.

He pulled away.

Chen Rong quietly exhaled. She couldn’t tell whether her heart had sighed in disappointment or relief.

Wang Hong sat down across from her. Without looking up, he bade, “Prepare meat and wine! I want to drink these last hours away with the young lady!”

The last hours? Chen Rong whipped her head up and quietly studied him, her lips quivering.

Wang Hong didn’t look at her. He lifted the wine jug and gracefully filled their cups. At this time, a beam of sunlight was shining on his fair, handsome face, bringing to light his fine hair and gentle smile.

Chen Rong dropped her gaze.

The last hours. That would have been true. Previously, he had been killed when the city fell on the morrow! At the time, the Xianbei army had feasted in celebration of his death. And such had been her last impression of the man called Wang Qilang.

In unprecedented fashion, the Hu had given him a gold coffin and a jade burial gown, and ceremoniously escorted his corpse back to Jiankang. The whole world had been stunned. One ought to know that to the Hans, the cannibal Hu weren’t human. It was unimaginable that such beasts would treat a Central Plains scholar with so much respect, that they would send his corpse home though he was only a boy yet to have his capping ceremony (1). In the ten years that had followed, the people of Jin had all been befuddled whenever they spoke of Wang Hong, and everything about him had likewise become a complete mystery.

1. 及冠 – ancient coming-of-age ritual for a boy when he turns 20

It was now another lifetime and she was sitting across from him. Whether for herself or for him, because of the promise she had made the day he saved her from the prince’s estate, she would not let him die. No, she wouldn’t allow it!

While Chen Rong was preoccupied, her hand grew warm by a wine cup Wang Hong had placed into her palm.

His hand did not move away; its slender fingers wound around her middle finger and gently stroking it. He lowered his gaze, shadowing his eyes with fluttering long lashes. He continued caressing her finger as he whispered to her: “Why have you come?” His voice was very soft and airy, like a night breeze passing by.

Chen Rong pressed her lips together, not knowing how to answer him.

He looked up and beheld her face, waiting for an answer.

After a long time, Chen Rong swallowed and hoarsely replied, “Without you there, I was afraid the Prince of Nan’yang would harass me.” There was a dozen answers rushing from her mind, but she herself hadn’t thought through them, and in the end, she gave him the most indifferent and unpleasant reason of them all.

Wang Hong lightly chuckled and, ever so softly, stroked her finger. “You’d rather come here to rid yourself of the Nan’yang Prince, even though you’ll end up dead?”

His caressing gave her fingertips a tremble that coursed all the way to her heart.

Chen Rong bit her lip and suppressed the strange feeling gushing from deep inside. “We don’t have to end up dead!” She quietly lifted her eyes to look at him.

Wang Hong’s handsome and lofty face remained as it was. He did not seem to hear the certainty in Chen Rong’s voice. He just smiled. Slowly, he let go of her hand and stood up.

As he rose, Chen Rong found that the man in front of her had suddenly become distant and foggy. It was only moments ago that he had made her feel as though they were very close. But in just a blink of an eye, Chen Rong discovered with fright that he was still the cloud in the sky and she was still that piece of drifting leaf!

Wang Hong stood tall and looked down at Chen Rong, his smiling face both

tranquil and distant: “You must be tired from the long trip, Ah Rong. Get some rest.” When he finished, he waved his wide sleeves, turned and went away.

Chen Rong sat in place for a long, long time to watch him drift farther away until he gradually disappeared in the sunlight. Facing the empty study, she answered, “Aye.” Even now, her legs were soft and her heart was beating erratically from seeing him again. She needed some quiet and peace to herself.

Half an hour later, Chen Rong left the study.

At this time, the Hu’s shouts and horses’ neighs beyond the city walls were mixed with the clamoring from inside, growing into a riotous din.

In addition to several frenzied maids in the courtyard, only Old Shang was around.

Chen Rong beckoned a maidservant over. “Bring me a set of your master’s clothes.”

The maid wasn’t in the frame of mind to ask her why; she bowed her head and ran to the bedchamber.

Soon, a light blue robe and a white robe were presented to Chen Rong. “These are both Qilang’s old clothes. Which one would you like, miss?”

“The blue one.”

Ever since she was a young girl, Chen Rong had never liked to wear white clothes. Firstly, she couldn’t wear something so pure and clean, and secondly, they were in the commoner’s style that she didn’t like.

After taking the outfit, Chen Rong said to the maid when she saw her turning to leave: “Help me with my hair.” When she finished, she sat down in front of the mirror.

The maid absentmindedly complied and came to stand behind her, asking: “What hairstyle would you like, miss?”

“The men’s, of course, since I’m wearing men’s clothes. By the way, speak to the servants and tell them that only a young man had come here, never a young lady.”

Puzzled, the maid asked, “Why, miss?” But she immediately thought of the

reason and quickly complied, “Aye.”

Before long, Chen Rong had been disguised as a young, dashing man. In reality, her male disguise was ineffectual. Her features were too exquisite and her body was too well-endowed. No matter how large the robe, there was inevitably some degree of femineity. The battle was soon to come, nevertheless, and she couldn’t afford to care about these details.

Chen Rong glanced at herself in the mirror once more before striding out.

When she left, she did not see too many people on the streets. She occasionally saw a few servants who were also dashing about, both hurried and tumultuous. It appeared that the calmest place in the entire mayor’s estate was still Wang Qilang’s courtyard.

After walking for a while, Chen Rong saw a servant from the Wang house and quickly asked, “Where’s Qilang?”

The servant was in a hurry and didn’t look to see who was asking him. He waved his hand: “On the watchtower.”

“Thank you.”

Chen Rong strode to the tower.

Before long, she saw Wang Qilang standing on the tall tower in his snowy robe that was always spotless and pure.

It was the strangest thing. There were obviously people in front of and behind him; there was obviously an uproar outside the city. But when he stood there, the sky seemed cloudless, and Chen Rong thought she only saw him stand alone.

She walked to stand behind him. But instead of looking to the horizon as he was, Chen Rong looked down at the Hu below the city walls.

This was the south gate where the Hu numbered tens of thousands. Tens of thousands of Hu were crouching below the city walls, cooking or laughing in small groups. They appeared to be disorderly at first glance, but at a closer look, Chen Rong immediately found that these tribesmen had organized into disciplined formations. They were armored and their weapons never left their side.

She stared below for a while and then suddenly said, “Qilang, I think we can leave from this gate!”

Wang Hong roused at her words. He turned around and lit up when he saw Chen Rong, a faint smile playing on his lips. He tilted his head and quietly stared at her, then suddenly outstretched a hand: “I’ll gladly hold your hand!” He had said this with a strange tone and an unusual expression, as if he was making her a promise.

Of course Chen Rong didn’t give him her hand. She smiled instead, looking into his eyes and saying in seriousness: “Qilang, let’s break our way out from the south gate.” She turned to look at the gate below. “Look Qilang,” she pointed and said, “isn’t there something different about the left and right sides, as well as the middle and rear of the Hu force?”

When she didn’t hear a reply, she turned around.

Wang Hong was tilting his head staring at her.

Under the sunset, Chen Rong’s beautiful face was blanketed by a layer of golden light. Her eyes were so bright and her youthful skin was so vibrant that even though her figure was hidden behind the large robe, she maintained a sense of passion and vivacity all the same.

Wang Hong withdrew his gaze to also look below. “It *is* odd. What do you think, Ah Rong?”

She was about to answer him when a series of footsteps approached them. A bright laughter accompanied these footsteps. “Is Qilang here? Eh? And who might this young master be?” He sounded somewhat suspicious of her.

Chen Rong turned around and came to face with the charismatic and nonchalant mayor of Mo’yang.

Even when war was imminent, when the city was awaiting its fall and people would be dying, his smile was ever present and it seemed as though he wasn’t facing life and death, but a banquet or poetry meet.

Chen Rong stepped forward with the intention of offering an answer.

Before she could speak, Wang Hong walked behind her, held out his hand and

so very naturally placed it onto her shoulder, smilingly saying: “This is my love, who has come to die with me.”

Chen Rong’s smile froze on her face. The greeting she wanted to say was lodged in her throat. She didn’t expect Wang Hong to give that kind of an answer!

The mayor’s eyes lit up. He gave Chen Rong an appraising look, stroked his long beard, nodded and lamented: “What a virginal, beautiful face. With a sweetheart like you, it’s no wonder the famous Wang Qilang is willing to love men.”

He looked to the barbarians below and murmured, “You’re doing better than me, Qilang. I haven’t anyone to join me in the afterlife.”

He proceeded to sigh, not noticing that Chen Rong had been stunned speechless, that her legs had gone soft and her entire body was threatening to keel on the spot.

Just as Chen Rong fell backward, Wang Hong came to catch her. He lovingly held her in his arms, pressed his thin lips against her cheek, and softly breathed: “Darling, are you not feeling well?”

Chen Rong hadn’t the strength to answer him. All she could do at this moment was to close her eyes in woe.

The truth was that she had come to Mo’yang to firstly avoid misfortune, but secondly because she also knew how this battle would be played out. She believed that as long as they had a good grasp of the situation, as long as things still followed the same tracks of the past, she could take both Wang Hong and Sun Yan out alive. That was why she had stayed inside the carriage, why she had worn men’s attire, and why she still made an effort to protect her reputation.

But right now, Wang Hong’s arm was around her waist, his chest was pressed against her back, and his lips were attached to her cheek. The poor girl had been a maiden, still, when she burned herself to death in her previous life. She had never been in such proximity to a man before. But damn it, he stole her first kiss in this life, then he hugged her and called her darling left and right. Why was this man so thoroughly insufferable?

Chen Rong quietly gritted her teeth. Once she opened her eyes, she saw the

mayor of Mo'yang looking at her and Wang Hong enviously. She stopped gnashing her teeth and immediately broke into a bashful smile.

After cropping out a smile, Chen Rong bowed her head and tried to remove his hand away from her waist. It refused to move. She bit her lower lip and pulled harder, but he held on. She knitted her brow and gave him a hard pinch.

"Ouch!" Wang Hong cried in pain.

The mayor turned to look at him in surprise and asked, "What's the matter?"

Wang Hong curved his lips and put on a charming smile. "Nothing, I was just bitten by an ant."

"You aren't afraid of death, but you're afraid of ants?" the mayor laughingly asked.

Wang Hong raised a brow and lightly replied, "This ant always chooses the fleshy part when it bites, and it bites very hard. It just won't let go no matter what, of course I'm scared of it." He said he was scared, but one certainly couldn't tell from his expression or tone.

The mayor laughed out loud.

Wang Hong lowered his head. Softly smiling, he gently nipped at Chen Rong's earlobe. "Are you afraid of death or of an ant bite, darling?"

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Chapter 77: Young Lover

His warm breath wormed its way from Chen Rong's ear into her heart, bringing with it a grassy scent that seemed to dissolve her.

Her legs buckled. Ashamed and angry, she watched the mayor of Mo'yang walking away as she took a quick inhale to bark at Wang Hong: "Let me go!"

She elbowed him when he did not comply and again told him to let her go after he gave a grunt.

Wang Hong slightly squinted his eyes at her while clutching his stomach. Then, he raised a lock of her hair to his nose and took a whiff.

He was about to say something when, below the walls, thundering drums drowned out all other sounds and brought with them a deadly air.

Wang Hong gently took hold of Chen Rong's hand. "I had thought that Ah Rong wasn't afraid of death," he said to her with a smile. "It's all right, don't be afraid," he next told her, his voice having softened like mellow spring.

Startled, Chen Rong quickly broke away and turned her head from him.

She saw the Hu slowly retreating to the sides below the walls like a receding tide, making a clear path.

A masked general appeared in the open space. Behind him, a powerful army ceremoniously knelt down on either of his sides.

All Chen Rong could see was rows upon rows of soldiers. Her heart suddenly sank. She placed her hand over her chest and found it the only way she could bring her rampantly pounding heart back down. It certainly appeared that these Hu were united as one! Were the so-called flaws in the past still really there?

At this time, Wang Hong's light voice sounded beside her: "He is Murong Ke, the Xianbei's God of War."

When he didn't hear Chen Rong's response, he couldn't help but turn around.

He was made to see Chen Rong's ashen face, empty eyes, and lips that were tightly drawn into a line. Down below, the Hu soldiers rose to their feet at Murong Ke's wave of the hand.

The Xianbei general gazed up at the walls, his eyes translucent behind his mask.

No matter where he was or how many people were around, Wang Hong always seemed to attract attention with ease. Murong Ke only needed to shift his gaze before he found him.

Meanwhile, Chen Rong cast a glance to see that Wang Hong was also looking down at Murong Ke with a smile.

This strange smile was entirely different from his usually nonchalant and gentle expression. It has seemed threatening to her.

Nobody knew whether Murong Ke had seen Wang Hong's expression. He merely looked up and quietly appraised the man who stood like an unmoving pine in the wind, as airy as a celestial being.

After a while, Murong Ke withdrew his gaze, waved his hand and whispered something to his generals. They spoke quietly and at a far distance that no one could really hear what they said.

"Let's go," said Wang Hong at this point.

He flapped his sleeves and took the lead to descend the fortress wall.

Chen Rong briefly dithered before picking up her pace to follow him.

She blindly followed him with her head down as she tried to recall the details she had heard in the past.

Wang Hong stayed ahead and did not say anything.

At length, the beating of drums sounded.

Chen Rong looked up.

She only now realized she had followed him to the streets in town. Mo'yang was surprisingly quiet at present. Even when they saw the occasional pedestrians, these people's faces would be clouded by restlessness as they

hurriedly came and went on the streets that were guarded by marching soldiers.

Chen Rong gave the surroundings a scan before turning her attention back to Wang Hong.

He was still walking in front of her.

In the bright daylight and at such a perilous time, his figure remained straight and tall, clothed entirely in white and enveloped by an air of transcendent unworldliness.

Chen Rong watched him, her lips quivering.

Wang Hong chose this moment to turn around.

His eyes were exceedingly transparent under the sun. He looked at Chen Rong and said with a faint smile, “You’ve been preoccupied ever since we met again. May I know what it is that’s on your mind?”

Chen Rong didn’t have a chance to open her mouth. A burst of rapid hooves was fast approaching them.

“Wang Qilang!” a loud cry woke Chen Rong from her reverie.

A young captain was galloping forth. After he pulled his horse to an urgent stop, he raised his clasped hands toward Wang Hong and relayed: “Sun Yan is looking for you.”

He glanced at Chen Rong who stood next to Wang Hong. Almost at once, he frowned and ironically smiled: “Only you scholars would still be traipsing around with a lover boy at a time like this.”

As soon as these words were said, Wang Hong heard a sharp draw of breath next to him.

He slightly tilted his head.

At his side, Chen Rong’s face had reddened. She shot daggers at the young captain and eventually drew her lips into a tight line.

Wang Hong outstretched his hand to lightly press a slender finger on Chen Rong’s lips.

After successfully stiffening her, he turned around, smiled at the young captain

and replied, “We should go, in that case.”

When he finished, he was the first to leave.

The captain alighted from his horse, caught up to him and said, “Murong Ke is here. Qilang, do you think he’ll begin the attack tonight?”

From the front, Wang Hong’s airy voice sounded: “Tonight? He won’t.”

He sounded rather certain.

“Why not?” asked the young captain in surprise.

They talked as they walked, going farther and farther until their figures disappeared around the corner. Only then did Chen Rong stomp on the ground in vexation and made a sound, flushing and gnashing her teeth all the while. But her voice was small and vague, and never did form a complete sentence.

After fuming for a time, Chen Rong turned around.

She kept her head down while limply walking back to the mayor’s estate.

She had scarcely entered the front door when she heard Old Shang’s voice: “Miss.”

Worry was apparent on his face. “Miss, you and Wang Qilang…” he began. He then sighed and murmured: “The city will soon fall. There are only a few more days for indulgences. If you like him, then do as you please.”

Chen Rong didn’t expect to hear such a suggestion from the ever old-fashioned and loyal Old Shang.

She was so infuriated that her small face flamed red. She opened her mouth to curse, but then closed it up, flapped her sleeves, and whipped around to go inside.

She stopped after five paces, whirled back and shouted at Old Shang: “Prepare the carriage. I’m going to see General Sun.”

Chapter 78: Like-minded

Hearing this, Old Shang frowned and said, “General Sun must be busy and can’t get away at a time like this. Miss, not everyone is as patient as Wang Qilang.”

Chen Rong wrinkled her brow and yelled: “Enough nonsense, go on.”

Hearing her resolute voice and thinking of her conduct when they had entered the city gates, he nodded and gave his reply: “Aye.”

The carriage drove to West Street where Sun Yan was staying.

Chen Rong had found out that there were about twenty thousand soldiers in Mo’yang, with the addition of two thousand more Sun Yan had brought with him, and more than ten thousand commoners along with the major clan’s private guards. In total, they had much more manpower than the Hu.

Nonetheless, the opposition was led by the God of War, Murong Ke! In this world, he was only second to Ran Min in military prowess, the reason being this handsome general who perennially wore a mask to the battlefield was notably crafty in his tactics.

Furthermore, if they were to really go to battle, the twenty thousand soldiers in Mo’yang weren’t nearly as good as Sun Yan’s two thousand men. Only when the major clans sent out their private guards might they have any chance.

Sitting in her carriage, Chen Rong organized the information she had collected while frantically searching her memory. She must think and figure out all the important things she had heard in the past.

While Chen Rong was pondering, the carriage stopped and Old Shang announced at the same time: “Miss, we’re here.”

Chen Rong hummed a reply and lifted the curtain.

The north gate appeared before her eyes. Sun Yan’s two thousand men were stationed here, with their general living on the tower.

She hopped down and strode forward.

Soldiers were standing like an unmoving mountain range from the ground to the top. Their eyes did not shift when they saw the pretty lad Chen Rong.

She began to climb the steps.

She had scarcely embarked on the wall when a desolate song rang into her ears: “The world is without heroes and so begins an illegitimate man’s reign. The barbarians run rampant and the Hans’ bones are laid under the snow…”

She looked back to see a raggedy beggar dragging his leg forward, tapping on his broken bowl. His bleak voice drew long to harmonize with the howling wind. Suddenly, the world was cloaked under a frightening chill.

Watching him, Chen Rong couldn't help thinking: *This man is literate and has most likely fallen to destitution after moving south. Not only is he reduced to begging on the street, but he also can no longer guarantee the safety of his life.* Not a sentimental girl, she gave him no more than a glance before continuing to stride forward.

She soon reached the tower where she raised her clasped hands to a guard and asked, "Is General Sun here?"

When he saw that she was wearing a noble outfit and footwear, the guard knew she belonged to the gentry. He at once respectfully replied, "General Sun has gone to see the mayor."

Chen Rong naturally knew he had gone to see the mayor. She raised her voice to say: "I have important business with him. Please let me wait for him inside."

"Aye."

She had only entered when she heard the guard whisper: "This young lad looks just like a maiden, down to his figure. Unfortunately, someone so beautiful is also waiting to be killed like us."

For whatever reason, the people in this era had always cherished and valued young, beautiful men. Take this guard for example. He was going to get killed himself, but he only bothered to feel sorry for Chen Rong.

Chen Rong came into the guest hall and chose a corner to sit. It was dark, significantly blurring her figure and facial features.

Time trickled by.

A while later, a tired voice sounded: "Aren't we supposed to be a team? Clearly, the mayor only wants it his way. Had I known the nobles in Mo'yang are so united, I wouldn't have brought my brothers to this bloody place." This extremely disgruntled voice had belonged to Sun Yan.

Another voice, gruff, exclaimed: "It's useless to say that now. Murong Ke's

tactic of surrounding three while letting one go is written in the *Art of War*. But if the mayor doesn't say it's a ruse then he calls it a bluff. Fine, we'll let them break out from the west gate."

At this juncture, Sun Yan harrumphed and wearily said, "Even the Wang retainers are better than these noblemen!"

"Aye, the Wang house from Lang'ya is renowned. But every time Wang Qilang opens his mouth, the mayor always opposes him. Sir, why don't we listen to Wang Qilang? Let's gather all the troops and break out from the south gate!"

Chen Rong's eyes lit up upon hearing these words. Her hands knotted together as her hope rose.

The second voice started again after a short pause: "The barbarians arrived too suddenly… as if there's something they're after."

Sun Yan absently hummed a reply.

"General Sun," the gatekeeper said at this time, "there's a pretty young man looking for you. He's been waiting for a long time in the guest hall."

He only relayed the facts without recalling that Sun Yan was beautiful himself. The young general hated "pretty" as a word used to describe men. He instantly barked: "I got it. Go."

The man with the gruff voice laughed. "A pretty lad? How does he compare to our young General Sun?"

"Shut your fuckin trap!" Sun Yan shouted before stalking away.

Clad in armor and with a weary face, Sun Yan soon strode in. He searched around the moment he entered through the door.

Chen Rong quickly got up when she saw him.

He first tilted his head to stare at her, then gave a start and waved his hand: "Out, everybody out for me!"

The young captain also appraised Chen Rong. He did not seem to mind Sun Yan's rudeness. He only cocked his head to study Chen Rong and then looked back at Sun Yan. "Quite like a pair of sculpted statues," he murmured after a while.

“Men!” Sun Yan barked.

“Present!” Two guards came in.

Sun Yan pointed to the young captain and shouted, “Kick this guy out for me!”

The guards unhesitatingly complied and went for the young man.

Seeing that he really got mad, the young captain waved his hand. “All right, all right, I’ll leave.” By the time he reached the door, he still peered back inside with a rather annoying look. He glanced at Chen Rong, then at Sun Yan, gave a sigh, glanced back at Chen Rong, then at Sun Yan, and sighed again…

After Sun Yan dismissed his guards, he took a few long strides to Chen Rong, took her hands and shakily said, “Why did you come here, Ah Rong?” His eyes reddened as he angrily yelled: “Ah Rong of the Chen house, do you know where we are? Do you know the consequences of being here?”

Chen Rong wanted to cry when she saw the intensity of his concern. Looking up at him, she suddenly said in a decisive tone: “I know how to break out of here!”

Sun Yan stilled. He placed his hand on Chen Rong’s forehead and questioned, “Little girl, do you know what you’re saying?”

Chen Rong steadily held her gaze and repeated herself: “I know how to take you guys out of here!”

Sun Yan tilted his head. His beautiful face was full of doubt. He reached out and pressed on Chen Rong’s forehead. When he saw her brightly staunch eyes, he raised an eyebrow and released her. He next stepped back and took a seat across from Chen Rong. Having seated, he picked up a bottle of wine, took a swig, then eyed Chen Rong and said, “Repeat that again!”

Chen Rong took her time to gracefully sit down. She overlapped her hands on her knees, straightened her back, stared at him and repeated: “I know how to break out of here.” Not waiting for Sun Yan to respond, she lowered her voice to continue: “But I won’t tell you how I know, or do I want to tell you. Sun Yan, I just know that by the Ox hour at dawnlight tonight, the Hu soldiers at the south gate will suddenly be called away, leaving only three thousand of them behind. These soldiers moreover do not belong to Murong Ke, and will not be united.

This will be our only chance of survival.”

Sun San suddenly stared at Chen Rong and asked, “Did Wang Qilang tell you this?”

Chen Rong wasn’t sure what he was talking about.

“Just now, Wang Qilang had carefully suggested this again, but he hadn’t offered any specifics. He only said we should gather all of our troops and break out from the south gate tonight, and perhaps we’d have some hope of surviving. The nobles of Mo’yang didn’t listen to him, however. The mayor didn’t even let him finish talking. Ah Rong, what do you mean by repeating his words?”

“Is that what he also said?” Chen Rong murmured. She lowered her gaze, which caught a ray of twilight that revealed wistfulness in her eyes. “It turns out he doesn’t have any other way either…”

Sun Yan watched her expression in perplexity.

She collected herself, then looked up at him and decisively said, “If they don’t listen to us, then that’s their problem. We’ll leave by ourselves! We’ll bring your two thousand soldiers and the Wang house’s retainers, then break out from the south gate tonight!”

Sun Yan looked her up and down. After a moment, he waved his right hand and shouted: “Anyone out there? Go and invite Wang Qilang over, and tell him that he might have found a best friend.”

“Aye.”

Chen Rong’s face lightened upon hearing the footsteps receding in obedience, glowing instantly with a smile. Sun Yan flushed as he watched her enchanting countenance. He slightly tilted his head and looked no more.

The room fell into silence.

“That’s right,” Sun Yan began some time later, “I heard the Wang retainers had been unflappable when they entered the city, even smiling with ease. Ah Rong, you must’ve come in with them.”

Detecting the tone in his voice, Chen Rong reckoned her display of wisdom upon entering the city had not been spread. It appeared to be at Wang Hong’s

private behest. She could never see through that man.

Chen Rong checked herself, nodded and replied, “Aye,” a pause, “it was my idea. I knew we could come in from the west gate, and that the Hu would not attack us.”

Sun Yan whipped up looking at her. “It was your idea?”

She nodded.

Sun Yan got up and paced around the room. After a few steps, he stopped and turned to look at Chen Rong with eyes that shone increasingly brighter. “You know warfare strategies?! That’s great! If you also think that way, then we will break out tonight.” He turned and walked outside.

Chen Rong quickly called after him: “You won’t wait for Wang Qilang?”

“Why would I wait for him? I’ll go find the mayor of Mo’yang and the heads of the major clans to tell them my decision. I don’t give a fuck if they don’t listen to us. Wang Qilang is practically a god, I’d rather believe him.” He strode out as he spoke, and was gone in the blink of an eye.

Chen Rong smiled at his departing figure and finally calmed down.

She had been a little rash at the time she had just arrived in Mo’yang. Thinking she was merely a young girl and that no one would believe what she said, she ventured to offer an idea to the Wang entourage in hope that she would win credence and show that she was trustworthy. At the time, it seemed she had achieved the result she wanted. Nonetheless, she hadn’t expected the Wangs to neglect crediting her to outsiders. What’s more, Wang Hong had always brushed her off the several times she tried to speak to him. Luckily enough, what she said happened to coincide with Wang Hong’s words! Luckily enough, Sun Yan was willing to believe the two of them!

Chen Rong slumped onto the divan, raised her wine, and threw her head back for a swig.

The moment she threw her head back, her sight was suddenly darkened. Chen Rong released her cup, used her sleeve to dab her mouth, and then glanced out of the corner of her eye whereupon her graceless wiping stiffened.

A snow-white figure was standing at the door, his head slightly tilting to the side with a faint smile, looking with interest at Chen Rong.

Wang Qilang.

Chen Rong's face instantly colored.

She knew the nobles in the south placed great emphasis on demeanors and appearances, so much so that they even had special instructions and trainings for their children. Up until now, she had always remembered to behave with a bit more grace in front of others, for it was of great importance. When people believed that one was noble due to his bloodline, then his courtliness was expected to exude from within. If a man was uncouth, they could say that he was straightforward or contemptuous of traditions, that he did not mind what other people said, and that his conduct was befitting of the carefree literati. But if a woman was uncouth, it could only prove that she did not belong to the gentry.

Of course, the reason why Chen Rong placed so much emphasis on it was because these trivial behaviors of hers had been ridiculed by the noble ladies as well as the maids and concubines of the Ran estate in the past. These unending ridicules that jabbed at her self-respect day after day had become a psychological haunt.

To think that she got caught by an illustrious nobleman the first time she exposed her true uncouth self, and he was also the perfectly refined and godlike Wang Hong!

He moved toward her. When he was half an arm's length away from her, he bent slightly forward and closed their distance.

In the dark corner, his eyes shone as bright as stars. Looking at her with breathing that could be heard, Wang Hong extended his slender fingers to help her wipe the wine from her mouth as he gently said, "How careless of you." His voice sounded like a spring breeze that was passing by.

At his touch, Chen Rong slowly lowered her hand from the air. She looked to the floor and slowly resumed her sitting position.

At the same time, Wang Hong also took a seat on the divan. He raised the wine

and threw his head back for a swig, dabbing at his mouth with his sleeve after – every action being just as Chen Rong had done. And yet, his elegance was that which truly exuded from within. They had been the exact same actions, but there was a completely different charm when he performed them compared to everyone else.

It was enough to put others to shame. Chen Rong sighed quietly but was grateful to him. He was, she knew, comforting her in his own way.

Wang Hong let go of his wine-stained sleeve, lifted his eyes to look at Chen Rong and asked, “Didn’t Sun Yan say I might find my best friend here? Why is it that he himself isn’t here either?

Hearing him, Chen Rong immediately put away her wandering thoughts. She straightened her back, took a breath and then looked at Wang Hong. “I’ve just told Sun Yan that the Hu soldiers at the south gate will suddenly be transferred away at the Ox hour tonight, leaving only three thousand soldiers behind. These soldiers are moreover not under Murong Ke’s camp; they are not united. That will be our only chance of survival.” In the dark, her expression was steadfast, but her eyes were a bit evasive when she faced Wang Hong. “After Sun Yan decided to call you here, he had gone to look for the mayor of Mo’yang. He said that if they do not listen to him, he will take his two thousand men and break out of here themselves.”

She said all of this in one breath, after which silence resumed in the room.

Wang Hong looked at her, slowly poured himself some wine and softly smiled. “So the best friend Sun Yan spoke of was you, Ah Rong.”

He kept his voice light, and Chen Rong didn’t know whether he meant it as a compliment or something else.

He emptied his wine and placed the cup down. “If that’s the case, then let’s do as you say.”

Ecstatic, Chen Rong couldn’t help but ask: “Why aren’t you asking me why I can be so certain?”

Wang Hong tilted his head looking at her with a smile. “Would you tell me if I asked?”

Chen Rong shook her head.

He laughed and said, “Then why should I ask you?”

She also gave him a smile as she lowered her head.

At this time, Wang Hong’s pleasant voice sounded: “Ah Rong, you’re blushing again.”

Chen Rong dropped her gaze, wrung her hands and murmured: “I’m always making a fool out of myself in front of you.”

“Is that so?”

“Aye.” She mustered up all of her courage to look at him, blinking and appearing as though she was waiting for his consolation.

He did not console her. He curved his lips and lightly said, “You have to be careful.”

Be careful? What did he mean? Was he saying that she had always been an uncouth person, so she needed to be more careful?

All of a sudden, Chen Rong’s small face turned ruddier. She pursed her lips, but did not form any words.

She did not notice that, at this time, Wang Hong was lazily studying her from the shadows.

A while later, Chen Rong composed herself and inwardly bristled: *So what if he found out? He isn’t a prattling person who will go around to tell others about my uncouth nature. I… I won’t marry him either, so why should I care what he thinks?* She felt much better at this thought.

The sky was darkening.

Chen Rong watched Wang Hong drinking his wine and somehow did not feel the passage of time.

This was a very strange thing. Sometimes, she truly felt that time went by very quickly whenever she was with him, even when nothing was said.

They sat that way for some time before hurried footsteps approached them. These footsteps swiftly made their way to the stairs and were followed by Sun

Yan's command: "Tell our brothers to make dinner and prepare to act. Remember to keep your voices down."

"Aye."

Forthwith, Sun Yan entered the hall. He strode to Chen Rong and Wang Hong, reached for the cup on the table that Chen Rong had drank from, threw his head back and took a swig.

He next placed the cup down and, without paying attention to Chen Rong and Wang Hong's expressions, angrily fumed, "These Mo'yang nobles are fucking annoying. Fuck! They insist on breaking out from the west gate and won't let me take my soldiers away. Motherfuckers, they want my men to be the first to die."

He sat down and said to Wang Hong, "I already know what they decided. I don't want to talk about it anymore. Wang Hong, I'm not going to let them know what I'll do." There was a faint unease in his voice.

It was understandable. Every move at this time would implicate the lives in the city. If Sun Yan were to act on his own, it would be a huge blow to the people of Mo'yang who were counting on his two thousand men. Thus, he looked at Wang Hong and waited for his verdict.

"If it's been decided, then act on it," Wang Hong smilingly said.

"You agree?" Sun Yan exclaimed in excitement.

Wang Hong smirked, lightly saying: "They're too like-minded. If you tell them that you want to break out on your own, they'll only lock you up and then take control of your soldiers."

Sun Yan sprang to his feet, growling: "I dare them to!" As soon as his shout was let out, he recalled that the seemingly refined mayor of Mo'yang was actually someone who would do such a thing at a time like this.

At this thought, he said resolutely, "Good, we won't let them know. We'll break out of here ourselves." He again reached for Chen Rong's half-drank cup.

But he was grabbing at empty air.

Wang Hong had unhurriedly and gracefully reached out to take Chen Rong's cup ahead of him. He then threw it into the corner as if he was tossing away

rubbish, held the bottle and poured each of them a new cup.

He did this series of actions so smoothly that Sun Yan naturally did not notice anything out of the ordinary. He pulled his hand back, lifted the wine cup Wang Hong had filled and drank up.

Chen Rong had taken a pause at first, but when she saw Wang Hong's natural actions, his smiling face and tranquil countenance, thought nothing more of it.

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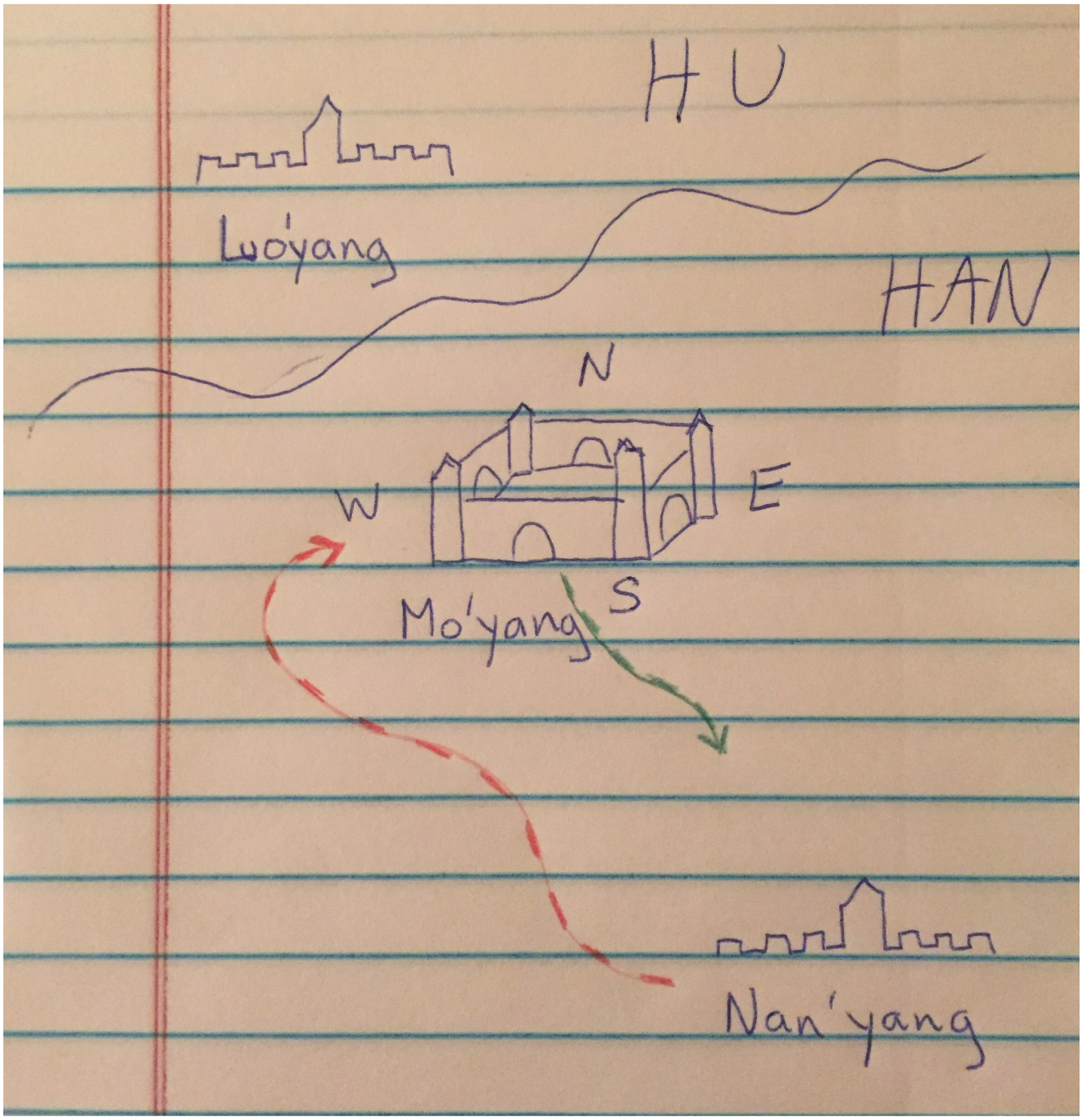
Edited: Here is Hamster's low-tech explanation of the situation:



The Hu's expansion campaign begins from the north and thus far, they had captured Luo'yang. So it makes sense that the majority of their troops will be at the north gate. They also blocked east and south because those are easily accessible from Nan'yang, where aids would most likely come from. Thus Chen Rong suggested entering from the West. But now, if they think they can get out the same way (like the mayor thinks, though he attributed it to a double bluff instead of a single bluff) then they are wrong because Murong Ke had purposely left it open to lure them. It's the south gate that would open up. This is why Wang Hong also deduce the same conclusion as Ah Rong.

He had likely died previously because he had not gotten concurrence from the

others and did not have Sun Yan’s support.

79

Chapter 79: The Way Out

The trio started to act after they had talked it over.

Time flew like lightning.

In a flash, darkness had begun to descend.

Almost as soon as night fell, reed music rose from the mayor's estate and carried on unceasingly.

Whether the nobles had lost all hope for tomorrow's escape, or they were wanting to show that they did not care about life and death, they were now letting loose with their amusements and merry-making.

Inside her carriage, Chen Rong wrung her hands and nervously watched the mayor's gate.

Wang Hong had barely returned when the mayor had come to whisk him away. Time trickled on as she waited for him to come out so that they could meet up with Sun Yan.

While Chen Rong sat tight in anticipation, a tall and familiar figure came into sight.

He soon appeared in front of her carriage, leaning against the carriage shaft with a smile. She was in a slight trance when he looked at her and softly remarked, "You always fall into a trance whenever you look at me, darling. What are we going to do?"

He sounded unbelievably caring.

Chen Rong's face colored. She withdrew her gaze and returned, "Who looks at you in a trance? Hmph!"

The man curved his mouth in a smile and turned back to his carriage.

At present, Wang Hong was donning a black outfit. Chen Rong hadn't known there to be a man like him, whose gorgeous clothes could only serve as

superfluous embellishment but whose plain clothes could be worn with regal elegance.

As the evening wore on, the streets in Mo'yang became enveloped in silence. The wheels rolled at a monotonous rhythm, the kind of rhythm that distressed people.

The carriage stopped at length.

Chen Rong stepped down to the sight of soldiers lining in front of her. Armored and standing beside their horses, they stoically queued in straight rows.

Nearby, Sun Yan strode out to greet them.

After he gave her a reassuring glance, he turned to Wang Hong who had just gotten down from the carriage. "Something's not right," Sun Yan frowningly told him. "Since three quarters past the Rat hour (12:30 am), the number of barbarians outside the south gate has seemed to increase."

"But that can't be!" cried Chen Rong.

Sun Yan knitted his brow and turned around to look at Wang Hong.

Wang Hong nodded towards him and said, "Let's go take a look."

"All right."

Wang Hong flapped his sleeves and began to climb the fortress stairs.

Because of the operation tonight, Sun Yan had taken complete control of the south gate.

Chen Rong followed behind them.

They soon reached the top.

There was a torch every ten paces. In the flickering light, they could clearly see the Hu camp below.

Something indeed seemed out of place. Troops were occasionally entering the Hu camp. Even under the dim starlight, one could see the billowing dust they provoked.

Sun Yan lowered his voice: "The situation is entirely contrary to what Ah Rong had said."

Wang Hong didn’t make an answer. He slightly narrowed his eyes, quietly gazing down.

At this time, everyone looked at him waiting for an answer.

Of course, there were also those who turned to Chen Rong, but when they saw her ashen face and restless eyes, they couldn’t help thinking: She’s just a girl, after all.

It was deathly silent.

At length, Wang Hong suddenly laughed: “Good for Murong Ke!”

Everyone whirled around to look at him.

“Wang Qilang, did you see something?” Sun Yan quickly asked.

Wang Hong nodded. He pointed ahead and chuckled. “They aren’t lighting their torches and there are no drums. There’s just scattered smoke as if someone is constantly entering. Murong Ke always employs deceptions. It seems Ah Rong is right. Half of the forces guarding the south gate had been temporarily called away. He’s using this one trick to prevent us from breaking out.”

At this juncture, he did not bother to explain in detail to the crowd at large. He waved his long sleeves and quietly ordered: “We’ll do as planned!”

Sun Yan looked at Wang Hong in uncertainty. Nonetheless, he became assured by the composure on his handsome face. “Excellent!”

He swiftly took off.

As soon as the Ox hour (1-3 am) arrived, the reed music in the mayor’s estate came to a stop and was replaced by the sound of drums from three directions.

From the east gate, west gate, and north gate, loud beating of drums and the lighting of torches suddenly launched!

The city broke into a commotion.

Panicking cries and footsteps ensued; torches and lanterns came alive.

While people dashed out of their houses to ask what was happening, a dozen knights galloped toward the south gate, declaring loudly: “The south gate is empty. If you don’t want to die then follow General Sun to break out from the

south gate!”

Their booming echoes woke everyone up.

In the mayor’s estate, a clan elder dashed out and shouted at one of the knights: “Who’s breaking out from the south gate with Sun Yan? Come back, come back this instant!”

The reply he received was the knight’s galloping past like the wind.

Another clan elder hastily exclaimed: “Wait, give us a minute. We’ll pack and break out of here with you.”

Again, answering him was just a whirlwind of smoke.

The south gate.

Sun Yan coldly watched the clamoring nobles, saying: “I’ll give them thirty minutes!”

He and Chen Rong both knew that in this moment of life and death, the families in Mo’yang had had their carriages ready and their luggages loaded, ready to flee. Within thirty minutes, if they wanted to, they without a doubt could keep up with the troops. Besides, there was still much time until dawn.

Chen Rong stared straight ahead at the yelling and hurtling nobles, then turned and walked toward her carriage.

After five steps, Wang Hong’s tender voice sounded to her: “Ah Rong, come sit in my carriage.”

She paused and turned around.

She came to face with Wang Hong’s “but-of-course” expression and faint smile.

Chen Rong opened her mouth to blurt out a refusal, but ended up swallowing it back. She glanced at a shivering and pale faced Old Shang – how can he drive like this?

Under the lights, Chen Rong curtsied to Wang Hong, went over, and said beseechingly, “My retainer is old, please allow him to ride inside. If you will, my

lord, let someone else drive the carriage."

Wang Hong nodded and gave his servants instructions. Without glancing at Chen Rong again, he got into the carriage.

Chen Rong followed him and also climbed in.

Just then, they heard a frantic cry: "How brazen you are, Sun Yan! Do you want to escape by yourself? Come down, come down this instant!"

It was the mayor of Mo'yang. He was barefoot, his trousers were loosely belted, his hair ruffled and his face ashen. Where had his graces gone?

Upon his arrival, Sun Yan jumped onto his horse, turned around, and said to him with a deep bow, "I do apologize."

Wang Hong's supple voice resonated at this time: "Why don't you pack up and wait for us to break out, mayor? If we can fight our way out with two thousand men, it will prove that the south gate is indeed empty. You can then follow us."

His voice was particularly clear, his goodbye easily heard. The mayor of Mo'yang paused. "At this point, we can only do as Wang Hong says."

"Open the gate, let's break our way out…" yelled Sun Yan.

The two thousand soldiers and the Wang retainers tightened their grips on their weapons.

Squeak – the iron gates opened wide.

A night wind swept by.

Amid Sun Yan's hollers, the riding knights together rode out.

Chen Rong sat inside, clutching the carriage shaft. Her small face was as white as a sheet of parchment and it was dripping with sweat. She shut her eyes. In the complete stillness, she listened to the sound of horseshoes, horse neighs, rolling wheels, as well as screams, war drums, and clashing metal.

There had never been any time as long as this, so long that every second felt like an entire lifetime.

There had never been a time as tormenting as this, so tormenting that her heart threatened to jump out from her throat.

“Fwoosh–” It was the sound of impaled flesh. Immediately, a stream of blood sprayed onto the curtain like a fountain, a few drops sprinkling onto Chen Rong’s face and body.

This was only the beginning.

Screams tore across the night sky where anguish became the darkness’s main refrain.

Gradually, Chen Rong lost her composure as her knees gave out; she crawled into a corner of the carriage and huddled there.

Yet time did not stop for her.

And the battle cries never seemed to end.

…

A long time later, Chen Rong felt a warmth.

Almost subconsciously, she curled up and rolled into his embrace. Her hands reached around to hold his waist, her face buried against his chest, sinking into his body.

In darkness and confusion, she could only feel that he was like a soothing air. Like a drowning man, she tightly clung onto this air – hugging this person tightly and never to let go.

Uncertain after how long, Sun Yan gasped for breath while his hoarse voice sounded outside the carriage: “Five hundred meters. We only need to push another five hundred meters!”

There was boundless excitement in his croaking voice.

Amid the orderly shouts of compliance, metals began to clash anew.

Another long time passed before Sun Yan excitedly shouted: “Brothers, the barbarians have no reinforcements. They have no reinforcements! They have the same number of men as we do.”

He wasn’t the only ecstatic one. At this time, a scratchy voice suddenly howled: “Brothers, let’s kill these barbarians and go home…”

“Go home” ought to be the world’s most appealing slogan. All of a sudden,

hollers boomed louder outside along with the increase of clashing metal.

After a series of slaying noises, only galloping hooves and heavy breathing could be heard.

And then, Chen Rong heard Wang Hong's habitually pleasant voice: "Have we broken out?"

"We've gone past the Hu camp, just a bit more and we will be at the main road," answered the driver, who then hoarsely cried.

His voice trembled a little in excitement: "My lord, if we don't get ambushed from here on out, our escape is going to be successful."

At this time, Sun Yan's cursing sounded: "The mayor's a fucking idiot. Why is he still watching the show from up there? They should follow our lead and get the fuck out of here. What a shithead!"

After cursing a while, he next howled: "Everybody, put more effort in and push our way to the main road. We'll be safe and then we'll be home."

The crowd responded in eagerness .

The carriage proceeded in bumpiness.

Some time later, perhaps a hundred years, or a thousand, it finally slowed down.

A tired voice floated in from the distant horizon: "The barbarians aren't following us. Let's take a short break before moving forth."

"Aye."

Sun Yan neared Wang Hong's carriage and grunted: "Wang Qilang, come out and see what we need to do next." He raised the curtain as he spoke.

He froze when the fire glow spilled inside.

"What's going on?" He sputtered.

He was met with Wang Hong's nonchalance. Even in disarray, even if blood was staining his face, his smile remained airily light.

At Sun Yan's glare, his left arm wound around the girl while his right one lifted her face, saying: "I guess she's a little girl, after all. She's just frightened."

Sun Yan jumped down from his horse and rushed forth. He reached out to pull Chen Rong away – she was clinging to Wang Hong like an octopus. Just as he was about to growl, he thought of something and lowered his voice. Staring chillingly at Wang Hong, he stated: “Wang Qilang, she still has to get married!”

His voice was filled with barely suppressed ire.

Wang Hong lifted his eyes to look at Sun Yan, his mouth slightly curving into a smile. “Do you like Ah Rong, General Sun?”

Sun Yan’s exquisite face flared up. He glanced around and, when he saw everyone staring at them, swiftly pulled the curtain down. Afterwards, he poked his head inside, glared at Wang Hong and ground each word out: “Wang Qilang, don’t trifle with her. Do you hear me? Don’t mess with her if you can’t marry her! A girl like Ah Rong deserves to be someone’s wife. You’ll ruin her like this. I know her. Someone like her will only be stubborn once she becomes serious about a man. She’ll entrust her life to him and follow him in death. They won’t be consequences you can bear!”

Facing a furious Sun Yan, Wang Hong only gave a smile as he gently brushed Chen Rong’s cheek. Her eyes were lifeless and her face as blanched as a sheet of parchment. Apparently, the girl had not recovered from her fright.

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80-81

Chapter 80: Jealousy

Wang Hong stroked Chen Rong's porcelain face and faintly smiled. "Listening to your tone, you must know her very well?" He raised an eyebrow, slowly adding: "Ah Rong does whatever she pleases and I do whatever I please. Don't you think you're concerning yourself too much, general?"

Sun Yan angrily balled his hand into a fist and was about to throw a punch at Wang Hong's face, just as Chen Rong chose this exact moment to stir awake. While Sun Yan paused, she poked her head past him, gripped the shaft, and retched.

Color was finally restored to her face once she vomited. Not paying much attention to his ire, she looked up at Sun Yan and shakily asked, "Where's Old Shang, is he here? Is he still alive?"

They never thought the first person she asked for upon waking up would be her servant.

Sun Yan hadn't opened his mouth by the time Wang Hong pulled her back into his arms. He gently looked into her eyes and reassured her that: "Old Shang's fine."

At the same time Wang Hong answered her, a Wang servant added: "Miss, that old servant of yours had fainted. His leg got wounded by an arrow so he was bleeding a bit. Don't worry, he won't die."

Having received this answer, Chen Rong relaxed, exhaled, and closed her eyes. It wasn't long before her eyes flew open again. Looking up, she saw that Wang Hong was holding her while looking at a cranky Sun Yan with slightly amused eyes. Chen Rong broke into a smile and murmured: "You're both here. I'm so very glad." As though she had spent all her strength, her eyes closed again and her limbs slackened.

Sun Yan harrumphed, grabbed Chen Rong's arm and, after giving Wang Hong a warning glare, pulled her out of the carriage. He staggeringly stuffed her into

another carriage, then turned and shouted: “Got enough rest? Let’s move it.”

Everyone swiftly complied. They urged their horses, took arms, and made sure that their wounds were well bandaged. Those who could continue to ride, rode; those who couldn’t ride were thrown onto the carriages. The cavalcade again rushed away in the direction of Nan’yang.

As they pressed on, unending battle cries and neighs could still be heard from Mo’yang.

Looking at the growing number of torches at the south gate, Sun Yan quietly thought: *It seems the barbarians have begun to send reinforcements from the other gates. If those nobles hesitate any longer, they are going to lose their chance.* However, it had nothing to do with him, for he felt he had done everything he could.

In the dark, the crackles of fire and cries became the main sounds that helped mask their footsteps.

They hastened on and soon found that dawn had arrived. They had gone 100 miles from Mo’yang and finally reached safety.

The crowd cheered loudly and began to dismount the vehicles and horses. The moment they got off, the horses staggered with some even foaming at the mouth. It was time to rest.

By the time Chen Rong recovered her spirit, daylight had lit the sky. She sat up, stretched her sleeve to wipe her eyes, and found blood stains on it.

While she was staring at her sleeve in a daze, a familiar voice called to her: “Miss.” It sounded weak, as if it wanted to cry but also to laugh; it was Old Shang’s voice.

Chen Rong raised her head to see Old Shang crawling over to her, shakily saying: “Miss, we got out alive.” And then he burst into tears.

On Chen Rong’s wan face bloomed a brilliant smile. “Yes, we got out alive,” she hoarsely repeated. “And so did they.” Her eyes shone brightly as she spoke, her face likewise vibrant. She sat upright, reached for the curtain, and looked outside.

Watching Wang Hong's carriage and Sun Yan on horseback, Chen Rong shakily whispered, "Old Shang, I have gone to hell and back with them. From this day forth, my situation should be better."

Old Shang didn't expect this would be the first thing she thought about after waking up. He momentarily grinned and replied, "Aye," giving her a look of sympathy and heartache.

Sun Yan turned around to see Chen Rong poking her head out of the carriage. He galloped over to her, leaned a little forward and whispered: "I've already warned them. They've agreed not to speak nonsense. You can rest assured, Ah Rong."

"What are you talking about?" she quizzically asked.

Caught for words, Sun Yan stared at her and clamped his mouth with no intention to explain. He waved his hand to one of his soldiers and shouted: "Bring the bamboo tube here."

"Aye." The soldier handed him a freshly cut bamboo tube.

Sun Yan stuffed it into Chen Rong's hands and told her, "Clean the blood on your face." When he finished, he turned to go back.

Two paces later, he stopped and turned around to look in Chen Rong's direction, wanting so say something to her but decided not to after some thought.

The bamboo tube was filled with water, which Chen Rong used to clean her face and rinse her mouth.

At the time she threw the tube away, she could see Wang Hong dressed in a black robe, strolling in the wilderness with his hands clasped behind his back. The cold wind was blowing his hair, brushing it across his handsome face.

Looking at his profile, Chen Rong could not help but think: *Whenever I see him, I'm always made to feel that I'm in a wondrous place. This man always has excellent bearings and graceful manners that he makes others feel small.*

She withdrew her gaze. Having suddenly remembered something, she slightly tilted her head and asked Old Shang with a lowered voice: "Old Shang, wasn't I in

Wang Qilang's carriage before?"

"Aye, it was General Sun who brought you back." His voice remained the same.

Chen Rong's face was turning from white to ruddy, then ruddy to white, however. After a long pause, she suddenly exclaimed: "So this was what Sun Yan meant." She raised her curtain and walked to him.

Sun Yan was talking to a young captain. When he saw her approach, he waved his hand to dismiss the other man and walked up to her.

At three paces from him, Chen Rong gave a curtsy and gratefully said, "Thank you for that."

Sun Yan's beautiful face flared up in irritation. He stared at Chen Rong for a long while and then suddenly asked, "Do you like Wang Hong that much?"

When Chen Rong's response didn't come fast enough, he scoffed, "You're not even betrothed but you're already throwing yourself at him! Ah Rong of the Chen house, have you decided to be his concubine?"

Chen Rong turned cold; she replied by reflex, "No!"

Sun Yan's rigid face slightly relaxed. He glared and her and snapped, "Then be a little more careful!" He seemed to be very angry at Chen Rong when he harrumphed and turned away.

She began to chase him but stopped herself.

Unconsciously, she looked back in Wang Hong's direction. She suddenly stiffened at this turn. Wang Hong was folding his arms in front of his chest, watching her and Sun Yan… for some reason, his eyes flustered Chen Rong.

At this time, Sun Yan's loud bark gave an order: "We're leaving right after breakfast." He glanced to see Chen Rong and Wang Hong trading glances, and harrumphed in disgust.

He wasn't far from Chen Rong, and she had heard his disapproval loud and clear. She shuddered, quickly withdrew her gaze and went back to her carriage with her head bowed low.

After partaking some dried food, they took off again.

With Mo'yang farther and farther behind them, people gradually allowed themselves to be more at ease.

At noon, the scouts sent by Sun Yan returned and relayed that the Hu were sighted near a fork ahead, but they were few in number.

Since they were few in number, there was no need to fear and the team moved on.

By late afternoon, Sun Yan chose a site to camp so that the troops can begin a thorough rest.

Chen Rong languidly leaned against the carriage wall. With Mo'yang far away, her heart also eased up. For some reason, the relaxation made way for an overwhelming exhaustion, and her limbs felt strengthless as though she was seriously ill.

The moon came out in the evening.

Sun Yan pulled Chen Rong to a tree. She lazily leaned against her seat, looked up and watched the moon in the sky.

At this time, the melodious zither floated to them.

Chen Rong slowly turned around.

She saw Wang Hong sitting in the wilderness with a zither placed in front. His delicate fingers flitted across the strings. Like the silvery moonlight, his profile was also emitting a faint glow. At this very second, he seemed as if he belonged in a painting, unreachable by her… He was clearly right there close to her, but she felt they were separated by rivers and hills.

Chen Rong idly turned sideways to watch him, enjoying the arresting sight under the moonlight.

There were sounds of death in his usually ethereal music. As she listened, Chen Rong could almost see a blood moon in the sky.

At this time, her leg received a kick. She looked up in surprise to find Sun Yan's glower. She glared at the handsome boy and asked, "What?" Because she was tired, her voice had started to sound hoarse.

Sun Yan glared back in annoyance, looked around, and lowered his voice to tell

her: “You were drooling.”

Chen Rong gasped. She quickly wiped her mouth before stiffening half way through. “Liar.”

Sun Yan gave her a supercilious look and unceremoniously sat down. He had taken off his armor and was now wearing a blue robe. He sat in front of Chen Rong, hugging his knees to watch the sky for a while, then suddenly asked, “Ah Rong, do you really like Wang Qilang?” He hadn’t looked at her, but his question was serious.

Chen Rong thought about it. “Aye.” She paused, and then innocently smiled, “Doesn’t every girl in the world like a man like him?”

Sun Yan turned around. There was something strange about the way he looked at her that Chen Rong didn’t quite get. After some time, he suddenly got up and turned to go, his footsteps striding faster and faster.

Chen Rong opened her mouth to call him back, but stopped when she saw several people staring her way.

By the time Sun Yan had gone twenty paces, a series of clopping hooves approached.

All chatters halted. Some hastily turned and ran to their horses. They had all experienced killing and deaths, and knew something must’ve happened the moment they heard the horse hooves.

Sun Yan also stopped, his handsome face growing somber.

The rider approached him, dismounted and gave a bow. “General Sun, our men are spotted a hundred miles from here. They said General Ran and Murong Ke had met up.” He looked up, raised his clasped hands toward Sun Yan and hastily said, “The general does not have sufficient force. General Sun, let’s go lend him a hand.”

“Alright,” Sun Yan quickly made up his mind.

Wang Hong finally finished his tune at this time. He slowly dropped his hands from the instrument and looked up at Sun Yan. “Murong Ke? Where is he right now?”

“There’s a valley a hundred miles to the west from here,” replied the soldier.

Wang Hong turned to look in the direction the soldier told him and murmured, “So that’s what happened.”

“What?” asked the young captain who was on good terms with Sun Yan.

Wang Hong faintly smiled. “The troops were transferred away from the south gate last night because Murong Ke had wanted to use them against Ran Min. It seems your general has come pretty quick to have taken Murong Ke by enough surprise that it was too late for him to call his own men.”

The young captain had a square face, a dark complexion, and a large booming voice to go with his large body. When he heard Wang Hong’s explanation, he came to realize the situation and thus proudly said, “I heard Murong Ke is bent on killing all the Han heroes, especially those who has an understanding of the military. But defeat is his only option when it comes to our general.” He excitedly went on: “Once, our general only brought with him 2000 men, but he was able to repel 15000 of his. If you ask me, there’s no one who can rival our general in this world!”

He was still basking in pride when Sun Yan shouted: “Li, shut your yapping for me. The general’s still waiting for us to bring reinforcements.”

The young man named Li shuddered and quickly replied, “Aye.” He raised his head, turned and ran back to his subordinates.

While people were finishing up, Sun Yan urged his horse to Wang Hong’s side. He stared down from above and shouted, “Wang Hong, will you return to Nan’yang by yourself or will you go with us to see General Ran?”

Since last night, Sun Yan had started to shout and scream at Wang Hong whenever he saw him, with not one thought given to cordiality.

Wang Hong smiled and turned his gaze to Chen Rong, slowly walking toward her.

Sun Yan’s hair stood on their ends as he yelled: “Stop right there!” When he saw nearby people looking at him, he lowered his voice, stared warily at Wang Hong and asked, “Wang Qilang, what are you doing?”

Wang Hong merely smiled as he watched Sun Yan baring his claws. He beckoned Chen Rong over and insouciantly explained, “Nothing, I just want to call my *darling* over to ask for her opinion.” Whether he was intentional or not, there was an extra emphasis placed on the word “darling”. He amusedly watched Sun Yan and unhurriedly remarked, “You look so nervous, general. Or have you taken a fancy to Ah Rong of the Chen house and want to marry her?”

Sun Yan froze on the spot at these words.

Chapter 81: Return to Nan’yang

Wang Hong smiled to see that he was speechless.

At this time, Chen Rong saw Wang Hong waving to her and thus quickly came over. Seeing Sun Yan’s irritated expression, she turned and looked at him with concern before asking Wang Hong: “What’s the matter?”

“General Sun wants to go rescue General Ran. Do you want to go with him?”

“I’d like to go with you, Qilang.”

Wang Hong nodded. He turned to face Sun Yan, raised his clasped hands and said, “That being the case, we’ll not go there. I’ll see you again, General Sun. Let’s have a drink then.”

Despite giving a scoff, Sun Yan also returned his clasped hand gesture.

He went to Chen Rong and whispered to her: “Come with me.”

After he had led Chen Rong a hundred paces away, he tilted his head glancing at Wang Hong, then turned to Chen Rong and frowningly said, “Ah Rong, that Wang Qilang is a playboy; he knows how to win over the women. You mustn’t be fooled.”

At this moment, his jet black eyes, which resembled those of wolves, gave off a flash of tenderness. He gently held Chen Rong’s shoulders, regarded her and said, “We are the same, you and I… we cannot afford to fool around.”

Chen Rong returned his gaze with one of gratefulness. Slowly, she dropped into a curtsy, lowered her gaze and replied, “I’ll remember your words, my lord.”

After giving him this formal reply, she looked up, blinked her large eyes, and playfully asked, “Sun Yan, if one day you can be in control of your marriage, and

you don’t have someone you love, will you marry me?” Her smile was one of innocence, but her eyes were those of earnestness.

The same earnestness with which a wolf longs for warmth and companionship after countless years of loneliness and disappointment.

Sun Yan could not understand this earnestness. He frowned and pondered, but in the end shook his head and whispered back, “I don’t want to promise what I don’t yet know if I can do.”

He lightly pressed on Chen Rong’s arms, rasping: “I do not know whether we will see each other again after this parting. Ah Rong, you must stay strong; and stay smart. You mustn’t let them deceive you or destroy you.”

Having said this, he turned to go.

Chen Rong’s gaze followed him. She looked at the young man who was striding away then was mounting his horse, and at the two thousand men sending smoke into the moonlit sky.

While she was lost in thought, a string of melodious music sounded. Different from what was played just now, it was full of melancholy and the sorrow of separation. It contained the sentiments of a gentleman who was sending his friends far away – a willow branch of sorts, a promise of next year’s reunion.

Chen Rong turned around. Under the moonlight, she saw Wang Hong attired in black and masked under a layer of fog, playing his zither. She slowly approached him.

When she reached him, a maid swiftly brought out a seat at Wang Hong’s right side.

Chen Rong sat down and startlingly stared at Wang Hong’s handsome profile.

His dancing fingers slowed down. He turned his head to look at Chen Rong, his eyes shining like the stars. They were real stars, as far as she was concerned – very bright, very clear, and so very far away…

Chen Rong looked up at him.

Wang Hong upturned his lips in a smile: “What are you looking at, Ah Rong?”

“You’re still alive.” Her gaze remained dazed.

She actually gave him such baffling words. She actually gave him those words with eyes that were empty and dazed.

Wang Hong raised his brow. He put the zither down, turned, and contemplated her.

At this point, Chen Rong gave a start, hesitantly smiled, and rose to leave.

“Ah Rong?”

Her footsteps paused.

He stood up and came up behind her. When she was only half an arm’s length away, he stopped, lowered his head, and softly asked, “Will you let me know why you came to Mo’yang?”

“I’ve already given you an answer,” she replied. Without waiting for him to ask again, she hastily went on.

Wang Hong faintly smiled watching her escape.

At this time, the middle-aged scholar came and said as he looked at Chen Rong’s back: “My lord, this Ah Rong of the Chen house is exceedingly strange. When she came with us to Mo’yang, she had led and planned our way in. She was very calm and confident, in fact. She was also very confident when we had plans to break out from the south gate. She was even crystal clear about the specific hour and the enemy’s number. But when she really faced the battlefield, she became so frightened that she was no different from other young girls. My lord, what do you make of Ah Rong of the Chen house?”

Wang Hong shook his head. He stared after Chen Rong’s departing figure, lightly smiled, and murmured: “Puzzling, isn’t she?”

Everyone fell asleep from exhaustion shortly after.

Early next morning, the team set off again.

Yesterday, they still had two thousand individuals; now they are left with a little over one hundred, thirty of which were wounded. With so few people, they had to be more vigilant on the trip. Wang Hong dispatched several pathfinders so that they could change their route if anything abnormal were to happen.

Finally, Nan’yang appeared to them on the third day.

They gave cries of joy at its familiar sight.

“Wang Hong,” a clear voice suddenly called.

Everyone turned around. From the carriage, Chen Rong was calling out to call Wang Hong, but she had put on men’s robe in order to not attract attention, her face was even painted with dirt.

While the crowd looked on in curiosity, Chen Rong urged her horse to Wang Hong and said to him in all seriousness: “Qilang, we’ll be in Nan’yang soon, I have something to ask of you.”

Wang Hong narrowed his eyes. He studied her, slowly smiled, and then very gently remarked, “Darling, have you dressed like this to tell the world that Ah Rong of the Chen house has never been to Mo’yang? And never mind the fact that you’ve followed my family’s retainers to accompany me?”

His smile had seemed cold, and it made Chen Rong shudder.

She was asking for something she thought was quite reasonable, but Chen Rong was suddenly made to feel guilty. She bowed her head, biting her lips to murmur: “I, I’m still unwed.”

And then she seemed to gain strength, looking up at Wang Hong and softly pleading to him: “We are separated by far more than what’s measured in miles. I will not be a concubine, sir.”

With these words, she snapped her whip, turned and ran back to her carriage.

Wang Hong looked after her and lazily said at length, “Did everyone hear what Ah Rong of the Chen house said?”

“Aye.”

“Then do as she says.”

“Aye.”

The middle-aged scholar gazed at Chen Rong’s pleased expression. He couldn’t help shaking his head as he said to Wang Hong: “But who is she trying to fool?”

Wang Hong merely smiled.

Hi again. Sorry it's been a while. Several things happened but most of it was me spending a full week in bed, on painkillers, post surgery. I'm okay, it's not life-threatening, so no need for commiserations I did get to limp my way to see Yuzuru skate at Worlds though I participated in very little fangirl stalking

With that said, since I'm not in the best of conditions, I will begin to skip some chapters in the interest of keeping things moving. Just a heads up.

89

Chapters 82-88 summary

In the skipped chapters, Chen Rong spent most of her time settling back in the Nan'yang Chen estate and dealing with her relatives' snide remarks as usual. Because WH had called a mysterious man (CR in male clothes) "darling" when they entered the city, the heartbroken female population now thought QL was gay lol, and her cousins kept rubbing it in CR's face. No one knew she had gone to Mo'yang. They were suspicious because she had come back at the same time Qilang did, but quickly dispelled that thought because they didn't think anyone could risk their life for someone else like that. During this time, she had also met up with Nurse Ping and was able to bring her home.

Then one day, a banquet is held at the Liu estate. Her sorry-excuse-for-a human-being uncle, Chen Yuan, brought her along to pimp her to other rich men. His wife wanted to put too much makeup on her face, so at the banquet in front of everyone, Wang Hong told the servant to give her a basin of water to wash it off. It put CR in an awkward spot, but then all the girls went away to wash their faces too, lest WH thinks they're gaudy haha And that's where we will pick up. I'll fill the gaps when I eventually can, but for now please make do with what's available.

Chapter 89: Renewing Marriage Talks

At this time, the maidservants began to bring forth the screens to shield the young ladies.

Chen Rong let out a sigh as soon as the screens went around her. The crowd's prying eyes had made her rather uncomfortable just now.

She bowed her head, took a small sip of wine, and watched Wang Hong's shadow on the other side of the screen.

Just then, the doorway grew clamorous. The scholars and even Wang Hong all rose to welcome the newcomer.

Chen Rong paused while, next to her, Chen Wei happily cried: "He's here." Her

voice slightly trembled due to her anxiousness.

Ran Min has come?

Chen Rong turned her head to look.

Through the screen, she could only see a vague silhouette striding inside. He was tall and majestic in the wavering lantern light.

Accompanied by Wang Hong, Ran Min was engaged in conversation while walking in.

Before long, he had sat down a few tables in front of Chen Rong.

The nobles continued to encircle Ran Min even after he had taken his seat. Amid the jollity, Chen Gongrang solemnly stood up, accorded Ran Min a deep bow and proceeded to say: “Nan’yang is lucky to have you in its time of danger. The city is joyous that you can be here, general.”

Chen Gongrang was well-respected. His speech immediately drew the crowd’s attention.

Under everyone’s scrutiny, Ran Min simply smiled. His voice was laced with exhaustion and hoarseness when he said: “Sir, there is no need for these words.”

Chen Gongrang laughed. “Aye aye, there is no need for these words. I’m sure it’s quite obvious to you.” He waved his sleeves and returned to his seat.

At this moment, Chen Wei leaned toward Chen Rong, whispering: “Ah Rong, my heart’s pounding.”

Chen Rong stared at the tall, imposing man, smiled and unhurriedly replied, “Jiejie, it won’t help to be nervous.”

“But I *am* nervous,” Chen Wei muttered. “I didn’t make a good impression when I last saw him. I don’t even know if he’ll ever like me again.”

Chen Rong couldn’t give her the answer to this matter, or did she want to.

She only looked to Ran Min’s side and was disappointed when she did not see Sun Yan among the men who came with him.

With all notable guests gathered by this time, the prettily dressed servants entered and began to place food and drinks on the guests’ tables.

When food was brought to Chen Rong's and Chen Wei's tables, the screens had to be moved.

The moment Chen Rong looked up, she and Chen Wei both received Ran Min's gaze. In the bright lights, his blade-sharp eyes caused Chen Wei to subconsciously shrink back, her face reddening from embarrasment. Chen Rong was also made to shudder at his stare.

In an instant, the screens shielded them once more, and the man also looked away.

Wang Hong suddenly left his seat and brought wine to Ran Min's table. He unceremoniously waved his hand and bade: "Prepare my table."

"Aye."

Two servants moved his table and placed it opposite Ran Min.

After he had sat down, Wang Hong raised his cup and smilingly said, "I would've died in Mo'yang if it hadn't been for your two thousand knights. I'll never forget your life-saving grace. Please accept this toast."

Then he threw his head back and emptied the drink.

Ran Min laughed. He took his cup and also emptied it in one swig.

Afterwards, Ran Min regarded Wang Hong and suddenly asked, "But I don't know why Murong Ke must have your head at all costs."

He hadn't spoken very softly. Within a short time, numerous heads turned toward them and the noisy hall returned to silence. Everyone was now listening to their dialogues.

"He was just petty, that's all. He couldn't accept his defeat," Wang Hong blithely replied.

Murmurs arose at his words.

Ran Min, too, asked in surprise: "Couldn't accept his defeat? When have you made his acquaintance?"

Wang Hong smiled but did not give a response.

Seeing that he did not want to answer, Ran Min again laughed and poured the

two of them more wine. “Come, let’s have another drink.”

As they drank, Wang Yi scowled from his seat. He disdainfully glanced at Ran Min and asked his nearby peers: “Why does Qilang befriend this commoner who goes by two surnames?”

The servants kept quiet. At length, the middle-aged scholar who often accompanied Wang Hong softly replied, “Qilang has always liked to do as he pleases. Why concern yourself, sir?”

His blunt words caused Wang Yi to shoot him a glance. Seeing that the scholar did not look afraid though he was bowing, he quietly harrumphed and returned, “He’s only a barbarian. Qilang is degrading his station by befriending him.” Despite uttering these words, his voice was kept low enough for Ran Min not to hear.

The nobles began to make their rounds in the hall. Amid the merry-making, Chen Gongrang remained at his table.

In front of him, Ran Min and Wang Hong were both stepping out.

Chen Gongrang pleasantly smiled at everyone who came to greet him, but still did not go to Wang Yi. An attendant came behind him to remind that: “Master, why don’t you go and talk to Sir Wang?”

Chen Gongrang was drinking with another clan chief when he good-naturedly asked, “About what?”

The man hedged. He glanced at Chen Rong and replied, “Hadn’t you agreed to Chen Yuan’s request last night? Qilang isn’t here right now and no one is by Wang Yi’s side. It’s a good time to mention Miss Rong to him.”

Chen Gongrang placed his wine down, slowly asking: “Wang Suo, how much grains have you received from Chen Yuan?”

Startled, Wang Suo shifted his eyes uncomfortably and stammered: “One bag, sir.”

Chen Gongrang nodded. “Since you’ve recently obtained a concubine, it is expected that you’d have extra expenditures.“

He said this nicely enough, but Wang Suo was dripping with sweat. He

blanched and sputtered, “I wouldn’t dare, master, I’d never dare again.”

While he hastily looked at him for forgiveness, Chen Gongrang continued in his gracious way: “Didn’t Wang Qilang just give Miss Rong a basin of water? That meant he is fond of her. In this case, if I mentioned giving Ah Rong to Wang Yi, not only would Wang Yi not accept, but Qilang would also bear a grudge against the Chen house. Chen Yuan is short-sighted; his character is impatient. Don’t listen to his words anymore.”

Upon hearing his words, Wang Suo hurriedly answered, “Aye aye, you’re right, master.”

Wang Yi rose from his seat, at which time everyone surrounded him. Chen Gongrang also took his wine to walk over.

Wang Suo watched him and again wiped the sweat on his temples, his expression still one of nervousness.

Chen Rong and Chen Wei sat in a corner many tables away and thus could not hear their conversation.

Chen Wei was completely immersed in her own thoughts. She again leaned into Chen Rong and asked with worry: “Ah Rong, what do you think I should say when I see General Ran?”

She had, at this time, moved her and Chen Rong’s screens away, and had moved her table a little closer to Chen Rong.

Chen Rong smiled in return of seeing her pleading eyes, a smile that was a little fake.

She dropped her gaze while shaking her head. “I don’t know.”

Chen Wei was slightly riled. “Aren’t you his good friend? How can you not know?” Looking at her, Chen Rong soberly cautioned: “Ah Wei, you can’t casually call us good friends like that. He is a man while I am a woman. Our stations are also different. How can we ever become friends? Your words are detrimental to, not only his, but also my reputation.”

Chen Rong’s voice carried both gravity and conviction, taking Chen Wei by surprise. But soon, her eyes brimmed with tears as she said with chagrin: “Even if

you won't tell me, I know what to say to him." She turned and irately moved away.

"Ah Wei," Chen Gongrang's voice sounded from the side at this time.

Chen Wei quickly turned to answer him: "Aye."

"Come with me."

"Aye."

Chen Wei unsteadily got up and moved her screen aside. Whatever she might have been thinking, she reached over and suddenly tugged Chen Rong's sleeve.

She held her cousin's hand and pleadingly looked at her. "Ah Rong, let's go together."

Chen Rong freely nodded and got up.

They moved the screens and followed Chen Gongrang.

Amid the merry conversations and streams of people, Chen Gongrang unhurriedly walked toward the front.

By the time they got out the door and went down the steps where it was less crowded, Chen Gongrang shook his head and sighed to Chen Wei: "Marriage is something that should be discussed by the elders. It's harmless for you youngsters to meet, but Ran Min belongs to the battlefields, and is in a hurry to leave again. As your uncle, I can only accommodate him and cannot keep to traditions."

As he spoke, Chen Wei's face turned so red that it could have bled. Her legs buckled, and she had to lean against Chen Rong while replying in a timid voice: "Aye, I leave everything in your hands, uncle."

Chen Gongrang didn't turn around, merely nodding at her words.

A dozen steps later, he made a turn toward the row of houses on the left.

The room was brightly lit, with people coming and going. The servants all gave Chen Gongrang a bow when they saw him.

He leisurely stepped inside.

In the empty room, Chen Wei went from being nervous to not even breathing.

When she saw that the room was empty, she couldn't help from exhaling in disappointment.

At her exhalation, Chen Gongrang turned to give her a glance while unhurriedly remarking: "A gentlewoman should conduct herself with grace and poise no matter the situation."

This was an admonition.

Chen Wei quickly gave a bow. "Aye."

She appeared to be obedient, but her yearning and zeal could not be concealed.

Chen Gongrang could not help frowning upon seeing Chen Wei like this.

However, he quickly relaxed his brow and Chen Wei did not notice the change.

He strode to the seat on the left side, slowly sat down, waved his sleeve and said, "Invite General Ran over."

"Aye."

When the servant stepped away, Chen Gongrang sighed again. While Chen Wei looked at him in perplexity, he helplessly remarked, "How absurd, is this marrying a wife? I guess a Hu has no sense of priority."

Chen Wei was happy as long as Chen Gongrang didn't change his mind. She immediately heaved in relief. She glanced to see that Chen Rong was standing in a corner, and so she called: "Ah Rong, come and accompany me."

Chen Rong hummed a reply and walked over.

Chen Wei's call made Chen Gongrang turn around. He studied Chen Rong and then suddenly asked, "Are you Ah Rong?"

"Aye."

Chen Rong gave him a curtsy.

"Come here."

"Aye."

Chen Rong neared, stopping when she was three paces from Chen Gongrang.

She kept her head bowed and nervously let him appraise her.

After perusing her for a length of time, Chen Gongrang warmly said, “Ah Rong.”

“Aye.”

“Have you and Wang Qilang decided on your future together?” Both his eyes and expression were exceedingly benevolent.

“Nay,” Chen Rong immediately said.

Sensing she had answered too coldly, she bowed deeper and softly added, “How can a man like Qilang decide his future with me?”

Chen Gongrang nodded and kindly said, “I’m glad you know this. Then let me ask you, Ah Rong. Had he done anything to you?”

Had he done anything? He meant to ask if Wang Hong had taken liberties with her.

Chen Rong’s face colored. She couldn’t help thinking about that kiss and their two embraces, nevertheless carefully replying: “Qilang is a man of honor, how could he have done anything?”

Chen Gongrang maintained his expression and only smiled.

“Then are you willing to serve him?” he then asked.

Upon the utterance of his words, Chen Wei could not prevent herself from a small gasp. She covered ver mouth, rounded her eyes, and intently watched Chen Rong and Chen Gongrang.

Chen Rong’s expression remained unchanged. She only lowered her head and dutifully replied, “Though Qilang is a very good man, I do not want to be anyone’s concubine.”

Hearing her reply, Chen Wei couldn’t help herself from scoffing.

Chen Gongrang’s long-time aid also turned and seriously regarded Chen Rong.

Her uncle sat in silence for a while before sighing: “You’re too naïve, child!”

He shook his head, having lost interest in speaking with her. Shortly after he waved at her to step down, a clear voice from the door relayed: “Master,

General Ran is here.”

Chen Gongrang chuckled, rose from his seat and said, “Invite him in.”

No sooner had his voice sounded than Ran Min quickly strode in.

The second he entered, Chen Rong withdrew to the back and hid herself in the shadows.

It was apparent that Ran Min had become thinner. Even so, his features were still handsome, and his acute eyes still exuded an intimidating chill. His entrance seemed to have sucked the air out of the room, ushering in a threatening deadliness.

Chen Rong knew he was only emitting this vibe unintentionally. It was nothing compared to the frightening aura she had experienced in her previous life. Nonetheless, color had drained from Chen Wei’s face, and even Chen Gongrang and the others had lost some of their fortitude.

The Jin aristocrats, who did not care for the royal house of Sima, had loathed this kind of imposing repression the most; Chen Gongrang was no exception.

He knitted his brow and slowly stood up.

As if standing up had empowered him to confront Ran Min, grace returned to his face as he smiled and said, “General Ran? Have a seat.”

Ran Min was not aware that the atmosphere in the room had changed. In truth, there were few whose expression did not alter upon meeting him; he had become used to it.

Having received Chen Gongrang’s greeting, he laughed and strode forth.

Waiting until Chen Gongrang had sat down across from him, Ran Min reached for the wine bottle and threw his head back for a swig. He wiped his mouth, regarded the older man, and pleasantly asked, “For what are you meeting me, sir?”

His sword-like eyes never once glanced at Chen Wei, as if he had no idea a girl was in the room.

Chen Gongrang poured himself some wine. After a slow sip, he warmly inquired, “I heard you will be leaving Nan’yang tonight?”

“Your information is very accurate, sir. Aye, the war is not waiting for me. I really can’t step away from it.”

Chen Gongrang chuckled. “Even if the war is pressing, a man must not be without descendents. Considering the turbulent times we live in, I will not hold onto formalities. I do not know when you will next return after you leave, so I would like to ask you about the betrothal between you and the Chen estate.”

He then waved his right hand and called, “Ah Wei, come and greet General Ran.”

With a blushing face, Chen Wei slowly came to Chen Gongrang’s side and stood facing Ran Min.

Ran Min glanced at her.

“I’ve met this young lady before,” he said with a nod.

Chen Gongrang laughed, clasped his hands together and said, “As suspected for someone who lives and dies on the battlefields, you are not one to beat around the bushes. Ah Wei, offer General Ran a cup of tea. General, she is Ah Wei; her father is Chen Yuan, Chen Shihua. Though she is only a concubine’s daughter, she is well treasured and has always stayed with Chen Yuan’s wife. He does not have a legitimate daughter, so she is as good as one. If you find it agreeable, how about staying in Nan’yang a few more days to proceed with the wedding?”

Throughout Chen Gongrang’s long speech, he had constantly frowned and his tone had also been stiff from time to time. It couldn’t be helped. He honestly felt as if he was giving a daughter to the other party as a concubine instead of marrying her away as a wife. He had seen many scenarios, but never any wedding talks as ridiculous as this.

After he finished, Chen Gongrang bade a servant to bring a cup of tea to Chen Wei. Chen Wei held it with both hands and abashedly walked toward Ran Min.

When she couldn’t see him, her legs were lifeless and her mind was in a state of panic. For whatever reason, she felt alive again now that she got to see him. Although she was still nervous, pouring from her heart was mostly elation, longing and adoration. If only she could worship the ground he walked on!

Chen Wei came before Ran Min and, with the most beautiful posture, curtsied to him with the teacup raised above her head. She gazed up, her beautiful face taken by emotions and a deep flush, her bright eyes mad with love. “General Ran, have a cup of tea.”

Her voice drew long, her eyes a dreamy lull.

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Chapter 90: Ran Min's Reason for Liking Chen Rong

Ran Min stared at Chen Wei's blushing face and graceful pose.

Under his stare, her eyes shimmered with the shyness and joy of a young lady about to be married away, both enough to soften any man's heart.

She was full of hope as she looked at him.

But he did not extend his hand.

Eventually, Chen Wei's hands couldn't control themselves from trembling; her small blushing face was also gradually turning white.

Slowly, tears brimmed her lashes when she looked up at him. Her pallid face and eyes that were filled with longing and adoration all depicted a sort of deliberate preparation and an immaculately made-up beauty.

Ran Min merely gave her a glance before quietly lifting his head.

His gaze turned to the corner of the room as his lips curved into a smile: "Isn't there another young lady in the Chen estate called Ah Rong?"

His words caused Chen Gongrang to widen his eyes while Chen Rong turned sideways to glare at him with a complicated look.

Chen Wei's lips started to quiver, but her pose of ceremony remained every bit as beautiful as it had been. She bit her lips. Her face resembled a fragile pear blossom, yet a faint stubbornness was flickering in her eyes: *Sure enough, this is still happening. But it might as well. With Chen Gongrang here, he will give Ran Min an explanation. Chen Rong's also here, and she will be made to understand that she should never attempt heedless things to take what doesn't belong to her.*

While Chen Wei and Chen Rong hadn't been acquainted for long, she felt that she knew this cousin of hers well enough. She had always felt that though Chen Rong appeared straightforward at first sight, she was rather taciturn in her conducts. After discovering that Ran Min was interested in Chen Rong, Chen Wei

had constantly feared that one day, while she had her back turned, her humble yet beautiful cousin would quietly climb onto General Ran's bed and make him agree to marrying her.

He may very well be the only great man who wouldn't mind the world's disapproval to marry her lowly cousin. And as such, he makes too great of a temptation.

In her mind, both General Ran and Chen Rong were smart people. For smart people like them, keeping things out in the open was always better than hiding them.

As expected, Chen Gongrang frowningly turned to Ran Min and carefully chose his words: "Ah Rong? She is in Wang Qilang's good favor."

Normally, such explanation should be enough.

But Ran Min apparently didn't care. He smiled, stared into the dark at Chen Rong, waved and called, "Chen Rong, come out."

Intimacy was heard in his voice.

Instantaneously, Chen Gongrang's face soured while Chen Wei's blanched to another shade of white.

Chen Rong slowly walked out.

She kept her head down, neither looking at Ran Min nor Chen Gongrang.

She came before Ran Min and dropped into a curtsy.

When she was within reach, he outstretched his hand to draw her arm.

Even Chen Gongrang, who was as good-natured as they came, could not stop from indignantly shouting: "General Ran, please watch yourself!"

His reprehension was very severe.

Ran Min's hand paused in mid-air. He glanced askance at Chen Gongrang and lazily dropped it.

He lifted his wine, had a slow sip and said, "Don't be alarmed, sir. I will talk to Wang Hong. Ah Rong is the only one in the Chen estate whom I find to my liking."

Chen Wei was as white as a sheet of parchment by this point. Her lip had unwittingly bled from being bitten. Her posture of ceremony was starting to tremble: *Ran Min and Chen Rong had barely met a few times. He's also not the type to care about women and love. Why? Why is he so persistent this time?*

Not only Chen Wei, but even Chen Rong was feeling her legs weakening, her heart drumming. Being so close to this man was bringing a rush of complicated emotions out from the forgotten depths of her soul. She almost blurted back at him: *I don't love you, I want revenge!*

Luckily, Chen Rong had vowed to live well this time. She thus suppressed the hatred creeping up from her heart as well as the impulsive thought that could ruin the rest of her life.

Ran Min's seriousness caused Chen Gongrang to withdraw his ire. He, too, began to carefully consider the matter.

He turned to Ran Min, asking: "Why would a man of talents such as yourself like Ah Rong?" His eyes then glanced toward Chen Rong with wary, his voice turning chilly: "Or, have you and Ah Rong also decided your future together?"

He used the word "also".

Athough he had said it lightly enough, it had made Ran Min knit his brow.

He slowly placed his wine down.

Raising his head to look at Chen Rong, he saw that she was still bowing her head and not looking at him. He sighed in reply: "I heard from Sun Yan that this young lady had risked her life for her friends by going all the way to Mo'yang to die with them."

Gasps were let out at his words.

Chen Wei and the servants all rounded their eyes, staring disbelievingly at Chen Rong.

Even Chen Gongrang whipped his head around, contemplating her.

This was their first time hearing of such a thing!

Chen Rong felt a pang in her heart. Even though she had expressedly reminded Sun Yan, Wang Hong and the Wang servants, she did not expect that this matter

would now surface from Ran Min's mouth!

She bowed her head, shut her eyes, and felt bitterness taking over her heart. Only two words resided in her mind right now: *It's over.*

If this got out, she could only choose among Sun Yan, Wang Hong, and this man Ran Min who was trying to marry her. In the future, even if Wang Hong was magnanimous enough to clarify to the world that she was innocent, no other men would want to take her as his wife.

There was no undoing this.

No matter the reason for her journey to Mo'yang, as a young lady, her action had only one explanation others woud believe: Eloping with a lover because she'd rather die with him!

How could Ran Min know the complexity of the matter? He continued to admire her with fiery eyes that he was using for the first time to look at a woman. "As you well know, my life will undoubtedly end with a horsehide over my corpse (dying on battlefields). If I can have a sincere companion who does not mind accompanying me in life as in death, then even a death of ten thousand arrows would be worth it."

He watched Chen Rong, lowered his voice and said with some emotion: "I've always envied the King of Chu; regrettably, Ah Rong does not want to be my Consort Yu." (1)

1. The King of Chu refers to the warlord Xiang Yu of Western Chu. His and Consort Yu's love story remains one of the most famous romances in ancient China. Read more here.

At this juncture, he looked skyward and gave a sigh, then flapped his sleeves and, without giving Chen Gongrang and Chen Wei another glance, turned to leave.

By the time Ran Min had gone in the distance, the room was still filled with silence.

A long time later, Chen Gongrang's gentle voice sounded: "Ah Rong, come here."

Chen Rong lifted her soles and slowly walked over to him.

Chen Gongrang studied her and unhurriedly said, “Tell me about Mo’yang.”

“Aye.”

Chen Rong accorded him ceremony, bowed her head and began: “That day, I heard Mo’yang was under seige, and General Sun and Wang Qilang were both trapped in the city with their lives hanging by a thread. The sorrow I felt then was difficult to contain. I had met General Sun on our way here; the affections we have are like that of brother and sister. As for Wang Qilang, when I was trapped in the Nan’yang Prince’s estate and ready to take my life, he had brought five courtesans to rescue me out.”

At this juncture in her story, Chen Gongrang’s expression perceivably altered. He leaned forward and slowly asked her, “You had wanted to kill yourself when you were at the prince’s estate?”

“Aye,” Chen Rong answered very simply.

She raised her head, looking at Chen Gongrang with bright and steadfast eyes, before softly continuing. “After I was saved that day, I thought to myself that I must one day repay Qilang’s grace. But what ability do I have to repay him as a woman? No matter how I thought about it, only dying with my savior and my friend would let my heart rest in peace.”

Chen Gongrang gave a sigh.

He waved his sleeve and bade, “Stand.”

“Aye.”

After she got up, Chen Gongrang for the first time regarded her with seriousness. At length, he warmly said, “You’re only a woman but you’re willing to give up your life out of gratitude and friendship. How rare, indeed.”

He pointed to the right and kindly said, “Prepare a seat for Ah Rong.”

“Aye.”

Chen Rong gave Chen Gongrang a curtsy, slowly retreated and took her seat.

The elderly man next turned his head to look at Chen Wei.

Chen Wei was on the verge of collapse. Of the tens and hundreds of scenarios in her mind, this was never a result she'd entertained.

Chen Gongrang watched a near-tear Chen Wei whose face was full of despair. He frowned, sternly asking: "Ah Wei, have you affection for General Ran?"

Chen Wei struggled to keep balance. Quite a while later, she sobbed out loud and replied in an astringent voice, "Aye."

She dropped to her knees and crawled to Chen Gongrang. Holding onto his robe, she tremblingly said, "Uncle, you said you'll convince General Ran to marry me, you can't go back on your words. If I can't be his wife, then I'd rather stay unwed. I don't care if it takes ten or twenty years. There will be one day when I'll make him turn around to look at me; he'll make me his wife, then!"

She was determined in her speech, and was completely serious about what she was saying.

But saying such a thing at this time had sounded rather like a threat. Even Chen Gongrang who had the best temper was displeased.

He stood up, flung his long sleeves, and strode ahead. "Stop causing embarrasment to yourself. Go home."

Only the young ladies went home, of course. Chen Gongrang could not act inappropriately just because of the girls' triviality; he had to remain at the banquet until its conclusion.

With the guards' escort, the girls' carriages drove on the dark street, their rolling wheels clanking along.

Chen Rong looked at the carriage alongside hers. There, desperate and heartbroken sobs remained. One second they filled her with glee, the next they made her sympathize with the heartache she once knew.

It was fortunate that there were very few vehicles on the streets. With only commoners walking on foot, they did not draw too much attention to themselves.

"I hate you!" Chen Wei all of a sudden blurted.

She was, of course, talking to Chen Rong.

Chen Rong coldly snapped, “Chen Wei, let’s be clear that I’ve never solicited General Ran. He’s the one who says he wants to marry me.”

“It must be you,” Chen Wei screamed. “You must have flattered him whenever you have the chance, you must’ve put on that fake smile and tell him what he wanted to hear, and pretend to be bashful so that he would think that you like him. Why else would he say what he said!”

Chen Rong hadn’t expected her cousin to still understand her so well after two lifetimes.

She inwardly sneered and then unceremoniously returned, “General Ran is a heroic man. There’s no shortage of admirers who blush at the sight of him. Ah Wei, you must know that my name is now completely tied to Wang Qilang. What you need to do is change General Ran’s mind. What use is it to bear a grudge against me?”

Her words woke Chen Wei up.

Instantly, sobbing filled her carriage.

When the blubbering eventually softened, Chen Wei stopped her tears and said, “You’re right.”

How sober, Chen Rong couldn’t help scoffing upon hearing her.

Chen Wei raised her voice again, hatefully saying: “Ah Rong, I’ve never treated you poorly, but you’ve taken the man I love from me. I’ll never forget this wrong!” She spoke so emphatically that it sounded as if she were making a vow.

“The more you’re being this way, the more General Ran won’t like you,” sneered her cousin.

Chen Wei froze.

Chen Rong didn’t want to trade barbs with her. She told the driver: “Go faster.”

“Aye.”

She didn’t really need to tell him. With two mistresses fighting in the middle of the street and giving no thought to propriety, the servants had felt ill at ease and had long sped up out of anxiety.

The carriages soon drove into the Chen estate.

Nevertheless, both Chen Wei and Chen Rong ordered their vehicles to go directly into their own courtyard before getting off.

When she saw Chen Rong come down, Nurse Ping who had been waiting quickly walked up to her. There was a rare gravity on Chen Rong's face that was illuminated by the lantern light. "What happened, miss?" the nurse asked in apprehension.

"Nothing."

Chen Rong flapped her sleeve and entered her home.

Shortly, the door slammed shut.

Chen Rong rushed into her bedchamber, pacing back and forth while scolding: "Stupid Sun Yan. Who told you to run your mouth?" The outburst did little to lessen her anger. She took the whip from the wall, lashed into the air and yelled: "How I want to whip you to shreds, stupid, stupid boy!"

Her voice was full of fury.

Deep down inside, Chen Rong knew perfectly well that when Sun Yan had told Ran Min these things, he hadn't known a man like Ran Min would actually fall for her and furthermore propose in this manner.

Even she had no idea that the one Ran Min liked turned out to be this incarnation of her.

Her lashing slowed down with her train of thoughts. Soon, Chen Rong gasped for breath, slowly retreated several steps and weakly sat down.

She released her whip and dropped her head into her hands, dejectedly thinking that: Sun Yan cannot marry her, it's impossible with Wang Hong, and only Ran Min was willing to marry her. But she would never in a million years marry him. What was she supposed to do now?

Before, she used to think that she might somehow meet a scholar who came from a humble background like hers. They'd then wed and live a peaceful and comfortable life.

But this dream had now shattered!

Oh Heaven, what was she going to do?

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Chapter 91: Wang Qilang Adding Fuel to the Fire

Chen Rong tossed and turned that night, and was unable to fall asleep. In this slumber, she first dreamed of being brought into an extravagant mansion by a horse-drawn carriage. In his bridegroom attire, Wang Hong was looking at her with tender affections. She didn’t know why, but when she saw his eyes, the hall full of guests, and the formality with which the ceremony was held, her tears could not stop from falling onto her pillow. By the time she awoke from the dream, her tears were still flowing and soon soaking through her quilt.

After more tossing and turning, Chen Rong again drifted off to sleep.

She saw Ran Min this time. She saw herself standing in the fire, and Ran Min in his bridegroom attire was madly running to her before carrying her out of the flames. At the time he looked down at her, she who was fast slipping away, he actually burst into tears; these tears fell onto her gradually closing eyes.

Both of these dreams, no matter which, kept her

awake long after she roused from them.

It was yet dawn when Chen Rong sat up from bed. She slowly went to the window screen and absently gazed at the morning star in the eastern sky.

At this moment, the sky was so fresh and clear, as if it did not matter how troubled the world or how wretched the people.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed when Nurse Ping's voice sounded outside: "Are you up, miss?"

Chen Rong hummed a reply.

The door opened with a creak and in came Nurse Ping with the washing items. She worriedly looked at Chen Rong, asking: "You woke up several times last night, yelling and screaming each time. Did you have nightmares, miss?"

Last time, when Chen Rong had gone through a series of nightmares, she remembered both her behaviors and personality had completely changed. For this reason, the worry in her voice was ill-concealed.

Chen Rong shook her head and, watching the sun rise over the rooftop, mumbled back: "It's nothing."

Nurse Ping went to her and untied her long hair to comb it. Admiring the dark, silky tresses that came all the way to her waist, she suddenly sighed and

muttered: “If your looks hadn’t been so ravishing, your marriage would have certainly been easier.”

She looked up only to see the sunlight illuminating Chen Rong’s exquisite face. Her porcelain skin had flushed red, her large indignant eyes were shimmering like an autumn lake, and her rosy lips looking as if they were made to be kissed. She could not help sighing and inwardly thinking: *Her looks are exactly the kind that older men of influence like.*

Whenever she dressed Chen Rong, she always tried her best to hide this natural allure of hers so that the girl could look more elegant.

While Nurse Ping was busy helping Chen Rong, voices gave sound outside.

Listening to these voices, Chen Rong suddenly said, “Nurse, just tell everyone who comes to see me today that I’m sick.”

“Aye.”

Nurse Ping could now also hear the many guests in their courtyard. She quickly placed the comb down and stepped outside.

Soon, Chen Qian’s high voice sounded: “No, I must see your mistress. Hmph, that news is too outrageous, I must ask her about it.”

Then came Chen Sanlang’s gentle but emphatic

voice: “Tell your mistress that it’s useless to play sick. Since her older brother has come in person, how can she not come to greet me?”

Listening to the sounds of aggressive questioning, Chen Rong walked to the door and whispererd to Nurse Ping who was about to report back to her: “Nurse, invite them in. I’ll answer them from behind the screen.”

“Aye.”

The older woman hurriedly brought a two meters tall screen to place in front of Chen Rong’s bed.

Amid the footsteps, Chen Qian’s laughing voice was heard. “Oh no, or is she really ill?”

“Calm down, jiejie,” a gentler voice spoke. “Ah Rong had just had a narrow escape from death. Even those with the best fortitude cannot bear such distress.”

Hers were rational words, and they stopped questioning whether Chen Rong was malingering or not.

After everyone took his seat, Chen Sanlang’s voice was the first to speak. “Ah Rong, your aunt told me to come and ask if you had really gone to Mo’yang.”

Chen Rong remained quiet for a moment and then answered, “Aye.”

“Then that’s to say you didn’t go with your servant to find her relatives?”

Chen Rong bit her lip, again quietly replying: “Aye.”

Chen Sanlang lasped into silence. After some time, he sighingly said, “I’ll relay these truths to your aunt.”

After he left, Chen Qian pleasantly asked, “Ah Rong, did you really go to Mo’yang?”

“Aye,” Chen Rong tiredly replied.

“Really? You aren’t lying to me? I still can’t believe it!”

Chen Rong could only smile wryly.

Not receiving an answer, Chen Qian suddenly remarked, “Ah Rong, you’re really not afraid of death, are you? I have to admit I’m inferior to you in this regard.”

Answering her was still silence.

“Ah Rong, I heard General Ran didn’t want Ah Wei, but you instead,” Chen Qi took over.

Chen Rong contemplated her answer and tiredly replied, “Marriage is arranged by the elders. I prefer not to say anything about this.”

Chen Qian laughed out loud, jovially saying: “Oh please, everyone knows how to use this excuse.

Good for you, Ah Rong. The celestial Wang Qilang, the handsome General Ran, they all somehow have ties with you. I'm quite envious, to be honest."

The girls had a good laugh at her words.

While the bedchamber was filled with boisterous laughter, a high voice announced: "Ah Zi of the Yu House is here to call upon Miss Chen Rong."

Yu Zi?

Chen Qian exclaimed, "Oh, doesn't this girl Yu Zi always have her nose in the air because she thinks she's an accomplished lady? Why has she come to see Ah Rong?"

She had barely spoken when another voice announced: "Ah Ru of the Liu House is here to call upon Miss Chen Rong."

And yet another: "Ah Su of the Wu House is here to call upon Miss Chen Rong."

"Ah Qin of the Yang House is here to call upon Miss Chen Rong."

…

Continuous announcements resonated in the courtyard while successfully bringing the conversation in the room to a halt.

Amid the excitement, Nurse Ping hurried outside, bowed to the visitors and respectfully answered,

“Thank you for holding my lady in high esteem and coming yourselves to visit her, but it just so happens that she came down with a cold last night. She cannot leave bed to welcome you, regrettably.”

Following a momentary pause, a gracious voice replied, “Since Ah Rong isn’t well she should take her time to rest. Please let her know, nurse, that I will come back to pay her a visit another day.”

Forthwith, wheels started rolling to the successive departure of the young ladies.

The courtyard soon returned to its quiet state.

Chen Qian, Chen Qi and the rest of the girls together looked back at Chen Rong who sat behind the screen.

A brief contemplation was followed by Chen Qian’s jealous voice: “Ah Rong, your reputation sure is great.”

“I am ashamed,” Chen Rong wearily replied.

Chen Qi stood up. She had a delicate beauty that comprised a fair skintone and a pair of lucent eyes. Hers was the kind of looks the nobles loved.

She watched Chen Rong on the other side of the screen and used a rare gentleness that she typically only used with men to say: “You had the bravado to seek death in Mo’yang. Regardless of reason, Ah Rong, your fearless reputation has reverberated in

Nan’yang. All men of wisdom and courage will appreciate your strength of character.”

Strength of character.

Behind the screen, Chen Rong’s hands twisted into a knot. A smile appeared on her beautiful face, although one couldn’t be sure whether it was joy or irony.

After her second chance at life, she had always wanted to win for herself a praise of character, but no matter what she did, because of her background, because of her looks, everybody turned a blind eye to her merits.

This was, of course, to be expected. Just like Ran Min, no matter how many Jin lives he saved, no matter how many storms he weathered for the residents of Nan’yang, people would always look down on his surname behind his back.

She at last received the evaluation she wanted, even if it came from an unknown young lady like Chen Qi. Alas, such evaluation did not come without a dilemma.

The girls chatted for an hour and then began to take their leave.

Listening to their distancing footsteps, Chen Rong lay back down and sprawled motionlessly for a long while before suddenly yelling out: “Nurse Ping!”

The nurse hastily ran in while repeatedly asking, “Miss, what’s the matter?”

Answering her was Chen Rong’s suddenly feeble voice: “Nothing, nothing. You may go.”

Subsequently, Chen Rong’s courtyard became completely swamped with even more girls who came to visit.

After consistently pleading illness to turn her guests away, Chen Rong suddenly found in the late afternoon that her courtyard had fallen to a strange silence.

Though it was usually quiet, the servants’ whispers and distant sound of laughter were always heard. At present, however, all voices had vanished from the world.

Chen Rong paid the silence little attention at first. Slowly, when she felt something was amiss, she sat up in bed to call for Nurse Ping.

She had scarcely sat up when she heard Nurse Ping’s voice trembling with joy: “H-have you personally come to visit my young lady? Please, come in, come in.”

Chen Rong quickly closed her mouth and stifled her voice.

At this time, a familiar voice rang soft and pleasant like springwater. “All, please rise.”

Just three words. Three single words.

And yet the dead silent yard erupted into cheers and chatter.

Amid the excitement, leisure footsteps steadily fell on the ground.

Listening to the footfall that was advancing toward her bedchamber, Chen Rong jumped down from bed and reached for the whip on the wall.

She had only touched the handle by the time a low laughter sounded at the door.

His laughter was gentle and soft, and had a teasing note that stiffened Chen Rong's movement.

Chen Rong only paused for a second before she removed the whip, narrowed her eyes, and then turned around to look at the man.

Leaning against the door frame and faintly smiling at her in his snow white attire, while illuminating the entire room with his beauty, was that not Wang Hong?

Chen Rong glanced behind him and quietly barked, "Close the door!"

It was an order.

Wang Hong couldn't help upturning the corner of his mouth when he heard her. He waved his wide sleeves and closed the door as told.

As soon as the door was closed, Chen Rong dashed in front of him.

She outstretched her hand and held the whip against his throat.

“Who told you to come?”

After growling thus, Chen Rong really wanted to cry. She blinked a few times and, not able to stop her tears from falling, proceeded to rub her face red with her sleeve. She then stared at him and seethed, “I’m being watched by the entire city right now. Wang Hong, what do you mean by coming here at this time? You don’t want to see me get married, is that it?!”

Wang Hong sighed.

He held out his hand with the kind of elegance and grace that stilled Chen Rong in awe.

He gently wiped her face with an index finger. By the time her tears had been wiped away, she was still standing there motionlessly.

After he had wiped her tears, he sighingly said, “If you knew that, then why did you tell me to close the door when I came in?”

He looked at her so very tenderly, his bright and lofty eyes appearing utterly regrettable. “A man and a woman left alone inside a room, and the door is also closed… now what are we going to do about

this?”

Chen Rong’s face immediately turned purple.

Her whip-holding hand shook terribly.

A good while later, she pressed the whip harder against his throat and fumed: “Then why didn’t you remind me?” She burst into tears as she furiously wiped them away. Suppressing her fury, she quietly growled: “You even went along and closed it.”

“But you wanted me to close it, Ah Rong!” he blamelessly replied.

His voice was as sincere as one could ask for.

Chen Rong was livid enough to sputter blood. Her hands shook for some time. Finally when she could no longer stand it, she took a step back, slumped on the ground, held her face and wailed, “You jerk, you jerk!”

She was incredibly angry, incoherently scolding him over and over using only these words.

Warmth enveloped her when a pair of gentle arms drew her into a hug.

He held her in his arms and softly stroked her hair. Even his voice was intoxicatingly gentle. “Darling, the door is closed, but you are crying and yelling at me… When people talk, they will surely say that I was the man for whom you sought death.”

He paused, lowered his head, and then said to a frozen Chen Rong who still hadn’t moved: “Look, I reminded you this time.”

He had sounded so proud of himself that he might as well have asked for her praise.

Stiff as a board, Chen Rong still did not move.

At length, she sprang up and, intentionally or otherwise, bumped her head into Wang Hong.

This bump was quite hard, and it knocked Wang Hong backward against the door.

At the loud bang, the whispers outside came to a hush.

In the meanwhile, Chen Rong had shot to the door and, as she haphazardly rubbed the tears on her face, reached for the knob to open it.

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Chapter 92: Honored Concubine

“Darling,” Wang Hong unhurriedly said, “you can hardly hold back your tears as soon as you see me, if others see you being this way…”

Chen Rong’s hand froze on the door before he could finish what he was saying.

She, too, had considered this point, but had completely forgotten thanks to the anger caused by Wang Hong’s provocation.

She withdrew her hand, turned around and glared at him.

Facing his frustrating smile, Chen Rong took a step forward and again thrusted the whip handle to his throat.

This time, her forcefulness made him lift his head.

She stared at him, lowered her voice and ordered: “Wang Hong, I want you to find an excuse so that we can have a clean break.”

The smile on his face continued to be as frustrating as it had been. Chen Rong pushed the whip handle up. Immediately, the rough golden thread had drawn a small cut on his throat.

At the sight of the scarlet drop, Chen Rong softened and moved the whip in her hand away.

Wang Hong just looked at her quietly.

There was something strange about his eyes that made her

inexplicably fraught with guilt. She lowered her gaze to avoid his eyes, muttering as she did: “You can’t marry me anyway.”

Wang Hong let out a long sigh.

He waved his wide sleeves and then slowly walked out.

In a flash, his hand had grabbed the door.

He stopped to look back at Chen Rong who was dazedly watching him. They stood face to face, sadness lurking in his clear and lofty eyes.

This sadness was very light and transient, but for some reason, she felt extremely guilty when she saw such eyes. She opened her rosy lips, instinctively wanting to comfort him. But when the words reached her mouth, she thought there would be no return if she kept dragging things on, so she whirled her back to him.

A sigh slowly sounded.

In the bedchamber, a very gentle, very soft, and very sad voice spoke to her: “I guess Ah Rong doesn’t love me after all…”

He sounded forlorn and grievous, as though the fact that Chen Rong did not love him had given him inconsolable grief.

Chen Rong knew perfectly well that the man behind her was smart enough to have known her intentions. And yet she still whispered back, “No, I do feel something for you… but having feelings for you will drive me beyond salvation!”

Squeak. The door opened, shortly after which his tall snowy figure went farther and farther from her.

For some reason, as she listened to the footsteps that were

drifting farther away, Chen Rong whirled around to helplessly stare after him, her lips pressing into a line.

The moment Wang Hong left the room, the entire courtyard all turned around to stare at him.

He resembled a tree in the wind when he was dressed in white this way. His smile was so distant and faint.

He kept the smile on his face, flapped his wide sleeves and sauntered away.

Before she knew it, he had gotten into his carriage, took his servants and left her courtyard.

As Chen Rong looked at the crowd that was watching his departure, she had a niggling feeling that something wasn't quite right.

By the time Nurse Ping hastened to her side, she suddenly heard Chen Rong gasping a curse: "Damnit! He didn't say a thing! I wanted him to end our relationship!"

Befuddled, Nurse Ping swiftly closed the door and rushed to her when saw the tear stains on her face.

She paid attention to Chen Rong's hands and carefully asked, "Miss, is something wrong?"

Chen Rong numbly turned to see Nurse Ping. Her mouth drew even flatter, and suddenly she broke into sobbing tears.

She threw herself into Nurse Ping's arms, helplessly clutched her sleeves and blubbered, "Nurse, I don't want to like him. I don't want to like this man!"

Seeing her gasping for breath with tears, Nurse Ping worriedly patted her back and asked, “Are you talking about Wang Qi?”

Chen Rong nodded, sobbing: “Yes, him. I don’t understand this man one bit. And he has such a noble background. Nurse, I really don’t want to like him.”

At this point, Chen Rong’s crying softened. She slowly left the nurse’s arms, lowered her head to wipe her tears and murmured, “When I heard him say with a sigh that I didn’t love him, my chest hurt so much.”

She pressed her hand on her chest, stared ahead and whispered, “Sun Yan was right. People like me can’t love but can’t lose either… I had lost once and I refuse to plunge to the depths again!”

Her voice was very low, her words were vague. “What did you say miss? I didn’t catch you,” asked her nurse.

Of course Chen Rong wouldn’t explain. She took a few steps outside, hung the whip back on the wall, and sat on the divan quietly for some time.

At length, knocks rapped on the door followed by a group of people rushing in.

They began to twitter when they saw Chen Rong sitting there absently.

“Ah Rong, why did Wang Qilang come to see you?”

“Ah Rong, did you go to Mo’yang for him?”

“Ah Rong, I also admire Qilang but I’m not as good as you. I’d

never want to die for him.”

…

The onslaught of noisy questions almost overturned the roof.

Chen Rong looked up at these girls, then slowly clutched her forehead. She closed her eyes and thought with a headache: *Not only did he not end our relationship, I’ve… also let all the truths out… what am I going to do?*

Receiving the girls’ curiously questioning eyes, Chen Rong stood up.

She looked at them, shook her head, and hoarsely said, “No, it was not for love, it was out of gratitude.”

Chen Qian bursted into laughter. “Oh please, there are still tears on your face. You are distracted by joy as soon as Wang Qilang came. How can you say it wasn’t for love?”

Another Chen lady, who had a gentle disposition, softly interjected, “I’m afraid even the Wang House in Lang’ya will be alarmed by Ah Rong’s action. Perhaps they will think it over and use the bridal ceremony to welcome her into their family as an honored concubine.” (1)

1. 贵妾 An honored concubine is a step above regular concubines. 娶妻之礼 Bridal ceremony is typically the formal ceremony performed to wed a wife, not a concubine.

Considering Chen Rong’s status, this was the greatest honor she could possibly enjoy!

And thus, the girls stood still at her remarks.

“Welcome her into the family with a bridal ceremony?” murmured Chen Qian at length. She looked at Chen Rong; for the first time envy showed in her eyes.

Even though she was a legitimate daughter of the Chen House in Nan’yang, she could only be Wang Qilang’s honored concubine, at most.

Chen Rong faced the girls’ envious eyes.

She forced a smile onto her face and insisted, “As I said, I didn’t do it for him, I did it out of gratitude.”

Of course not one person listened to her.

Chen Rong sighed and added: “What kind of family is the Wang House in Lang’ya? I shall never reach them.”

At this juncture, she waved her sleeves and said, “Please leave, sisters. I’m actually tired and want to rest.”

Without waiting for their reaction, she lay down with her clothes and shoes still on and turned her back against them.

The girls ignored her request and went on to twitter. They only began to go half an hour later.

They had scarcely left when a steady stream of carriages arrived outside. This time, the young ladies of various clans were sending their invitations to Chen Rong’s door, inviting her to their winter banquet, poetry meet, zither competition and similar such.

Chen Rong declined them all.

The next morning, she had just finished grooming when a

servant called in: “Is Ah Rong home? The master is asking for her.”

Chen Yuan wanted to see her?

Chen Rong shot to her feet and, involuntarily pressing her hand on her chest, quietly replied, “Give me a moment.”

She turned and rushed to her bedchamber, then picked up the whip.

Nonetheless, she gave a sigh when she touched the handle and slowly withdrew her hand. She took a gold hairpin from the drawer instead and went out the door.

Seeing this, a maid who had come with her from Ping walked up with a curtsy, “Miss?”

She sent her a look that meant to ask whether she needed to come along or not. Nurse Ping had gone with Old Shang to the shops since early morning, and so this maid was the only one by Chen Rong’s side at present.

Chen Rong shook her head. Pressing her lips into a line, she followed the other out.

It was winter, and even the sun in the sky seemed sodden and cold. Chen Rong looked at the surrounding bare trees and quietly thought: *It will be spring in another two months.*

While she was looking around, the servant raised his voice to tell her: “Please go in, miss. The master is inside.”

Chen Rong recovered to see that she had arrived at Lady Ruan’s courtyard.

She slowly walked in.

Lady Li was standing outside. When she saw Chen Rong coming in, she gave her a long stare before relaying to the people inside.

Shortly, Chen Rong got to the steps. She bent her knees, lowered her head and softly said, “My good greetings, uncle, aunt.”

Lady Li’s voice answered: “Ah Rong? Come in.”

“Aye.”

Chen Rong raised her head, took a deep breath, and stepped onto the stairs.

Inside, Chen Yuan was sitting on the host seat while Lady Ruan sat next to him.

Chen Rong glanced to see that in addition to the servants standing around, Chen Wei was not present.

She withdrew her gaze, accorded Chen Yuan and Lady Ruan ceremony, and bowed her head as she asked after their health.

Chen Yuan gave her an appraising look from his seat. Seeing that she had given ceremony, he nodded and pointed to the seat on the right, mildly saying: “Have a seat, Ah Rong.”

“Thank you, uncle.”

Chen Rong docilely curtsied and stepped to her seat.

Chen Yuan withdrew his appraising gaze and cleared his throat to ask: “Ah Rong, did you go to Mo’yang?”

“Aye.”

“Tell me everything that had happened.”

“Aye.”

Chen Rong lowered her head and repeated what she had told Chen Gongrang.

Chen Yuan sneered as soon as she finished.

He did not yet speak by the time Lady Li howled with laughter. “That’s funny. You are a young lady; for what kind of gratitude must you give up your life? Don’t take us all for fools!”

She stared at Chen Rong, raised her shrill voice and demanded: “There must be untold reasons. Tell me at once!”

Chen Rong left her seat, dropped to her knees, bowed her head and firmly said, “Nay, there is none.”

Lady Li chortled.

While she laughed, Lady Ruan shook her head, quietly saying: “Ah Rong, we are all women. Why are you hiding things from your elders?

Chen Rong stilled. She looked up at Lady Ruan and asked in surprise, “Hide? What would I want to hide?”

Lady Ruan smiled. Before she could speak, Lady Li laughingly said from the side: “What else? You must’ve carried a man’s child. With nowhere to go, you had run to him so you coud die together.”

Her voice turned sharp again when she snapped, “Well, isn’t that right?”

Chen Rong was baffled before she broke out laughing.

She didn’t look at Lady Li, but turned her eyes to Lady Ruan and lightly said, “It’s quite easy to find out whether I’m still a maiden or not. If you don’t believe me, aunt, please perform a check.”

The young lady was actually asking others to examine her body.

While Lady Ruan was having an attack of palpitation, Lady Li shrilled: “Shameless!”

Chen Rong almost laughed out loud upon hearing her: *They can freely wrong me, but when I want to use facts to prove myself, they call me shameless.*

What a strange concept.

Chen Rong ignored her to look at Lady Ruan with the same clarity and conviction.

Lady Ruan turned to Chen Yuan.

At this time, Chen Yuan cleared his throat and lamented, “Ah Rong, you are a young lady yet you have the courage to die for love. It’s quite incredible, indeed. However…” He somberly continued: “You had not only hidden this matter from your elders, but you had also used lies to deceive us. If the truth hadn’t come out, then I would’ve been none the wiser. You are now quite the expert at lying, I’d reckon.”

Chen Rong dropped her gaze. She waited for him to finish and then replied, “I am ashamed.”

She said she was ashamed, but where did it show on her face? Chen Yuan shook his head in disappointment.

He sighed again; then leaning forward and staring at Chen Rong,

he slowly said, “Ah Rong, you love Wang Qilang enough to be willing to die for him. Such love is strong enough to move Heaven and Earth.”

He stroked his beard, smiling affectionately. “I’ve asked you over to tell you that I have sent a marriage proposal to the Wang estate.”

Chen Rong whipped her head up.

Chen Yuan smiled beatifically upon receiving her attention. “Luckily Wang Yi of the Lang’ya branch is also here in Nan’yang. I’ve asked my people to let him know about your story, so that the Wang clan can use the bridal ceremony to bring you into their family as an honored concubine.”

At this juncture, he proudly looked at Chen Rong as if he were a benefactor who had bestowed a favor upon her. “Ah Rong, considering your background, it is a blessing of several lifetimes to be able to reach the heights of the Wang House in Lang’ya. After you join Wang Hong’s household, I’m sure you’ll return to Jiankang with them. By then, you’ll need to abide by the virtues of a married woman and conduct yourself with propriety; you must not offend people in the Wang estate. But you can rest assured that your third brother and I will both help you. No matter what happens, know that we are on your side!”

He suddenly sighed and murmured: “Wang Hong currently does not have any wife or concubines. Wouldn’t it be great if you can conceive his child? He would be Lang’ya Wang Qi’s first-born!”

Wistfulness filled his eyes. It was as if Chen Rong’s out-of-

wedlock pregnancy, her condemnation by the world, or her inability to thereafter live with dignity in the Wang estate had each been of little significance to him; as if so long as she had the child, there was more he could gain and more he could demand from the Wang House of Lang’ya.

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Chapter 93: Promise to Self

Chen Rong did not look up during this entire time.

Her hands clasped together under her wide sleeves while her heart was sent on a tumbling ride.

She didn't know what else to do.

Was this the kind of ending she were to receive after two lifetimes of struggle and strife?

But because she had lived twice, Chen Rong knew that if her father and brother had been reliable, she wouldn't have ended up that way in her previous life.

Whether in her last life or this life, whether she had come to a dead end or been pushed to a corner, she had never once thought of leaving her clan. Firstly, she was no different from everyone else in that the notion of kinship had been deeply rooted in her. Secondly, without a clan's protection in these troubled times, she would be robbed destitute or sold into slavery in a matter of seconds no matter how much wealth she possessed.

On her trip south with the Wang family, innumerable nobles had been killed or sent to ruination. Even imperial consorts had been abducted by human traffickers, their safety unknown till this day.

Thinking awhile, Chen Rong bitterly smiled: *Never mind*, *Chen*

Rong, stop fighting it!

Chen Yuan chuckled to see Chen Rong in silence. He stroked his beard and said, “Don’t be too happy. Lang’ya Wang Qi is a prized man even amongst the princesses. Even if you became his honored concubine, you would still sit below his wife. You’re too young to know that family is one’s sole support in this world.”

When he got to “sole,” there was an extra emphasis in his voice.

Chen Rong’s head remained bowed.

Chen Yuan laughed, thinking that she was feeling abashed. He then nicely said, “Ah Rong, it had been the Nan’yang Prince’s aggression that forced me to send you to him. Have you held a grudge against me because of that?”

Here, he leaned forward and attentively watched her.

Chen Rong kept her head down. A good while later, she weakly uttered between her teeth: “I dare not.”

Chen Yuan did not detect anything unusual and thus kept on smiling. On the other hand, Lady Li mistrustfully looked back to appraise the silent and dutiful Chen Rong.

Chen Yuan raised his head and looked out at the sun. He then waved at Chen Rong and said, “You may leave. You’ll have preparations to make.”

Chen Rong slowly stood up at his words.

She had barely gotten to her feet when footsteps sounded outside.

Before long, an unsteady and wheezing voice called in, “Master,

we're back."

Hearing this voice, Chen Yuan rose and went out to meet them. "Why have you returned so soon? Did you not see Wang Yi?"

Chen Rong paused upon hearing Wang Yi's name after she had given Lady Ruan and Lady Li curtsies and was ready to leave.

She wasn't the only one; even Lady Ruan and Lady Li anxiously stood up. They rushed from their seats to the steps.

Down the steps were a dozen strapping servants. Standing in front was one about thirty years old, with pale skin and delicate features. One could tell he was an articulate speaker.

Nevertheless, he had his head bowed at this time while looking rather hesitant.

Anxious, Chen Yuan angrily yelled, "What happened? Tell me."

The servant dithered before softly saying: "I'm afraid to."

Chen Yuan's heart sank. He stared at the servant and warily asked, "Did Wang Yi say something foul?"

Seeing the servant shaking his head, he sighed in relief and impatiently said, "So what happened, anyway? Just tell me the truth."

"Aye."

The servant gave him a ceremony and began to haltingly speak: "We followed your instructions and brought gifts to the Wang estate. We went in from the main entrance and presented our card, asking to see Sir Wang Yi."

At this juncture, he looked up at Chen Yuan before quietly

continuing: “No sooner had the gatekeeper taken our card than Wang Qilang’s carriage arrived. When he saw us, he approached and made inquiry.”

The servant’s voice softened to a stammer. “After we informed him, Wang Hong wanted us to go back, with a message he said to tell you.”

At this time, Chen Yuan’s heart had completely sunk.

He turned to glance at Chen Rong and inwardly thought: *Perhaps Wang Hong has never liked this lass Ah Rong? What a useless piece of trash. What is the point of those seductive looks when she cannot even snare a man!*

The servant stopped speaking when he saw Chen Yuan looking back.

After Chen Yuan had callously glared at the dutiful-looking Chen Rong, he turned around and yelled, “And what did he say? What are you freezing there for? Why aren’t you telling me?”

The servant shrank away at his rage and repeatedly said “aye.”

Once he had waited for Chen Yuan’s barking to stop, he stammered: “T-this is what Wang Hong said: Are you giving a daughter’s hand in marriage? Or are you selling your daughter for an office? How can we allow this virtuous woman to suffer thus an insult, when she had lived and died for her friends?”

Silence all around.

Chen Yuan was also at a loss for words.

He stared at the servant, momentarily unable to believe his ears.

His face was beginning to blanch. “W-what did you say?”

Seeing him thus, the servant stopped speaking and dropped to his knees.

In just seconds, Chen Yuan’s face turned even whiter.

He was still staring at the servant, mumbling in disbelief: “Impossible! Everyone says Wang Hong is gentle and refined. He’d never injure others with harsh words like this…”

His voice failed to sound at this point.

Chen Rong was also made speechless.

However, she was relaxed and full of glee though she was wordless. When she saw Chen Yuan’s pretentious face growing increasingly paler with even shades of blue, she picked up her pace and swiftly disappeared from the courtyard.

As soon as she left the gate, Chen Rong couldn’t help herself from burtsing into laugher. Quickly enough, she covered her mouth and, with her head lowered, hurried back home.

Soon, Chen Rong entered her courtyard.

Nurse Ping hastily went up to her when she saw her come in. She suddenly stopped.

All she saw was Chen Rong flinging her sleeves in laughter.

Her laugh was so loud, clear, free and pleasant!

The nurse hadn’t heard such laughter in a long time.

She was surprised at first, then quickly followed suit in the

merry action.

Chen Rong covered her mouth, madly laughing for a while. She eventually clutched her stomach and gave a cry. Nurse Ping quickly stepped over to caress her.

Chen Rong leaned into her nurse while she continued to double over with laughter.

It took quite some time before her laughter finally ceased. Nurse Ping laughed, “What’s going on? Why are you in such a good mood today?”

Chen Rong crinkled her eyes in delight and gazed toward Lady Ruan’s courtyard. She moved closer toward her servants, whispering: “Chen Yuan had just gotten rebuked by Wang Qilang!”

“A very stern rebuke,” she solemnly informed them. “Haha, I’m not sure if he can withstand Wang Qilang’s rebuke or not!”

Seeing the bewilderment on her servants’ faces, she did not want to say more. She pushed Nurse Ping away and bounced back to her room.

Skipping and singing all the while.

Last time, Chen Sanlang had gotten himself humiliated by one of the scholars when he was in a rush to come with her to the gathering. As a result, he had been holed up at home till now, too afraid to even go out with his scroundrel friends.

It was so bad that Chen Yuan had started to prepare farmland and stores for him in Jiankang. He was to quit the literati circle

and buy a small title or live as a tradesman.

There wasn't any other way. They were disparaging words that could destroy a person's life!

It was now Chen Yuan's turn.

What kind of consequences would come of Wang Qilang's disparaging words? Chen Rong raised her head in anticipation.

She got her answer the next day. In the evening, Chen Gongrang confined Chen Yuan to the ancestral temple and officially revoked his inheritance. If Chen Gongrang were to pass away at this very moment, the successor of the Chen House in Nan'yang would be the tradesman-born Chen Shu.

Unfortunately, such was the extent of Chen Yuan's loss. Having been engrossed in obtaining an office title, he had long had the reputation of an ill-educated and vulgar man among the literati.

Thus, Wang Hong's rebuke now caused him to receive even more pointing and supercilious look.

Several days passed by in the blink of an eye; it was presently well into winter.

In the morning on this day, Chen Rong tilted her head to look outside as she asked in surprise: "Why is it so bright?"

Nurse Ping carried a basin of steaming water in. She twisted the towel as she laughingly answered, "It's snowing, miss!"

"There's snow?" exclaimed Chen Rong.

Nurse Ping crinkled her eyes into a kind smile. "Aye, that's right, it's snowing quite heavily, too. What great news."

Her voice quivered with emotion.

Chen Rong was no different.

They couldn't help it. The city had been waiting for this snowfall for far too long.

The snow's descent meant that the Hu would not be progressing south! One only wished this snow could continue to fall, forever and ever.

Chen Rong tilted her face so that her nurse could wipe it more easily. She listened to the waves of cheers outside and murmured: "It's snowing. It's really snowing."

She knew perfectly well that it would be snowing at this time, but the tense atmosphere in the city was infectious enough to unnerve her. Only until the snow fell did she heave in relief.

Nurse Ping was apparently thrilled. While preparing blue salt for Chen Rong's washing, she looked toward Chen Wei's courtyard and whispered, "Miss, I heard sobbing last night. Ah Wei was crying for nearly an hour."

Chen Rong smiled, a hint of delight flashed in her eyes.

After she rinsed her mouth, her nurse again handed her a hot towel and lamented, "It would be great if Chen Gongrang ordered to remove master Chen Yuan's guardianship of you. Goodness, you've offended the entire family this time. I even heard Chen Wei say how she wished she could kill you."

Chen Rong slowly withdrew her smile.

She dropped her gaze and sneered, "It can't be helped."

Nurse Ping did not answer.

After she finished washing, Chen Rong went to the door and gave it a push.

As the door opened, a wave of biting cold rushed into the room. At the same time, white snow upon white snow came into view.

Watching the world that had been dyed pristine, Chen Rong laughingly remarked, “How much it’s snowing.”

Nurse Ping laughed along hearing her pleasantly talk about the snow.

Chen Rong raised her small face to feel the piercing air blowing at her. It was so cold that she thought her nostrils might freeze with each breath she took.

She looked at a brown mound peeking under the whiteness in front of her, along with a tree trunk that had accumulated a thick layer of snow, and thought to herself: *Yes, I’ve offended their entire family, but I reckon Chen Gongrang will protect me. He is the type to look at the big picture and, knowing that both Ran Min and Wang Hong are interested in me, he will never allow anybody to hurt me.*

She felt more assured at this thought .

The heavy snowfall sent Nan’yang into a tizzy.

All of a sudden, cheers and reed music filled the streets. Young men and women at this time ran loose like wild horses, indulging themselves all across the city.

Unlike Chen Wei who did not leave her home, Chen Rong’s

courtyard was filled every day with servants from various estates who came to seek her audience and invite her to attend their banquets.

Nonetheless, Chen Rong declined them all no matter who came to ask. She knew she didn't have much interpersonal skill. Going to these dinners would not gain her fame, but would instead make a fool out of herself.

What Chen Rong obtained in her two lives was the understanding of herself. She knew she wasn't smart; and that she was full of faults. Each day, what she could think of was how to find in-laws that would not shun her, a family that had no complicated internal strife so that she could be left to her prosperous life.

But even something so simple was getting farther and farther from her reach…

At this point in her train of thoughts, Chen Rong blew warm breath at the snow-covered screen and called without turning around, "Nurse."

A burst of rapid footsteps was followed shortly by Nurse Ping's appearance. "What is it?" she laughed.

Chen Rong stared at the gradually melting snowflakes. Through the sparkling crystallites, she coud almost see the lofty handsome face as well as the wounded expression as he left that day.

Unconsciously, she pressed a hand on her chest.

She bit her lips while softly saying: "Can you prepare a card for me? I want to go see him."

“Him?” Nurse Ping asked in surprise. “Whom, miss?”

Chen Rong stammered, “Wang Qilang. Last time he told Chen Yuan that I’m a ‘virtuous woman who lives and dies for my friends.’ I ought to make a visit and express my gratitude.”

Nurse Ping did not speak for a while. Then, she mumbled: “I’d rather he takes you as an honored concubine.” She looked at Chen Rong, saying sadly: “Miss, not everyone can be Wang Qilang’s honored concubine even if she wishes for it! He’s vexed at the moment, yet you want to go thank him?”

Chen Rong lowered her eyes. “Even if I were to become a courtier or a savant one day, I’d always be a concubine,” she coldly said. “Nurse, I’ve made a promise to myself that I would live like a human this time! As a woman, my fate is solely dependant on my marriage. Come what may, I want to be married to a worthy man and have a dignified life. I won’t lose again, nurse!”

After some silence, the nurse sighed and quizzically asked, “Why do you say you won’t lose again?”

Chen Rong stiffened. At long last, she whispered back, “You misheard me.” For her tone was somber, the nurse did not continue to ask.

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94-95

Chapter 94: Abducted by Ran Min

The announcement card was soon ready. Chen Rong headed out of the estate in her carriage.

Once they left the gate, she lifted the curtain to survey Chen Wei’s courtyard. Its gate was wide open, but its perimeter was very quiet. At a glance, she saw the busy servants scurrying around with their heads down, daring not to breathe even a puff too loud.

Looking at this scene, a sneer hovered over Chen Rong’s mouth. But just as quickly, her eyes blurred to see that such a scene had also happened in the past. At the time, Chen Wei had also suffered the same lost and she had also smirked the same sneer.

In the end, however, she wasn’t the one to have the last laugh.

At this thought, Chen Rong immediately snapped awake.

It was snowy white no matter where one looked. It had not stopped snowing in the last few days, continuously floating down to dye the earth a silvery white.

The muddy and messy path was covered in wheel traces. On the roadside, trees were coated with snow. From time to time, traveling vehicles would make a thump that caused a thick layer of snow to fall and hit their rooftops.

Brr…

Chen Rong drew her curtain down and then rubbed her hands together. She quickly shifted toward the furnace to warm her hands. Remembering that Old shang was driving outside, she picked one of the two small charcoal heaters and handed it out, calling: “Old Shang, keep your hands warm.”

Old Shang’s laughter rang in. “No need, no need, miss. I have to drive so I can’t free my hands.” His wrinkles were highlighted by his merry laughter. Like Nurse Ping, he felt that Chen Rong had become so much more mature ever since they moved south. She was indeed making him feel more reassured.

Inside, Chen Rong hummed a reply and retracted the heater.

At this time, the carriage had left the Chen estate and begun heading into town.

The streets were buzzing, surprisingly enough. In addition to raggedy commoners who made up most of the crowd, the nobles’ carriages were also shuttling back and forth.

Old Shang watched the scene and smilingly said, “Miss, everyone is enjoying the peace.”

Chen Rong hummed her reply.

The carriage had a tough time moving on the muddy street that was covered in uneven snow. It slid to the side several times and almost hit the carriage beside it.

Chen Rong poked her head out calling: “Slow down, Old Shang.”

“Will do!”

As Old Shang cheerfully answered her, a man’s voice made its way to Chen Rong’s ears: “Did they say General Ran Min is back in Nan’yang?”

“Aye, since last night,” another man answered him. “Haha, I felt assured once the snow fell. And now with General Ran’s return, I can finally relax.”

Listening to their easy conversation, Chen Rong smiled and withdrew inside.

Her carriage continued along.

Soon, it arrived at South Street.

After she had bought some stores here, Chen Rong would come to see them each time she went out. She felt rich just by looking at the closed shops.

She lifted her curtain, staring from shop to shop. After a while, she briskly called, “Old Shang, hold

on.”

Old Shang complied and slowed the vehicle down.

Chen Rong lowered her head and was preparing to hop down when suddenly a familiar, deep voice called out to her. “Ah Rong of the Chen House?”

Chen Rong tensed almost as soon as she heard him.

She very slowly looked up.

At the moment she saw the man, a distant and polite smile displayed on her face.

Looking at the approaching man, Chen Rong gave a slight bow and dutifully said, “Good greetings, General Ran.” Speaking of the devil, she got to see him quite soon.

It was indeed Ran Min who had appeared in front of her. Unlike last time, he was now sitting in a carriage.

He first stared at Chen Rong before turning his eyes to his driver.

The driver was large and tall, his eyes as big as copper bells. One could tell he was a man of the military. At Ran Min’s cue, he chuckled in understanding and steered the carriage toward Chen Rong’s.

Chen Rong’s carriage had stoped on the side of the

road by a store. The other carriage swiftly drew near and tightly trapped it.

Ran Min again looked at Chen Rong.

Appraising her from head to toe, he watched her unconsciously pursed lips as well as that flushing face full of wariness.

As he watched her, he softly laughed. “Little miss, we’ve even shared skinship before. Now that we finally meet again, why are you acting so distant toward me?”

Chen Rong’s flush deepened. She looked up and sent him a glare.

Facing his handsome face, authoritative though it was not angry, her eyes wavered. Chen Rong bit her lips and quietly said, “Please watch your words, General!”

Her voice was unyielding.

Ran Min continued to stare at her.

He unblinkingly regarded her and, after quite a while, he sighed and asked, “Tell me, little miss, how have I offended you?”

At this point, he wryly smiled and amusedly said with his magnetic voice: “You’re always furious like this whenever you see me. You keep looking at me with so much animosity. I would ask you every

time, but you never give me an answer.”

He was apparently in a good mood. There was a rare gentleness and clarity in his dark, bottomless eyes. On his chiseled face was also a faint smile.

This was a Ran Min not often seen.

Chen Rong gave a brief glance at him before quickly looking away.

Ran Min was still looking at her.

She tried her best to appear milder. With a dutiful look, she softly replied, “You haven’t offended me.”

Ran Min slapped the carriage shaft in laughter. Almost suddenly, he outstretched his right hand towards her and smilingly said, “In that case, would you like to go for a drive with me?”

His large hand was placed out in front of Chen Rong, its slender and caloused fingers that carried his body warmth, too, were in front of her.

He looked at her with a focus she had never seen before… Faintly, might there even be persistence?

Seeing Chen Rong hesitate, Ran Min’s deep and powerful voice came to her: “Little lady, aren’t you angry with me? Why don’t you come here and give me a beating?” His eyes flickered over to the whip

hanging in her carriage. “Or give me a few whips, if that would make you feel better,” he continued to tempt her.

And indeed, his were tempting words. They were precisely speaking to Chen Rong’s heart.

She whipped her head up, glaring at him. If only she could kill this man with her eyes. “Do you mean it?” Chen Rong asked. “Can I hit you and give you a few whips?”

She had barely spoken when two riotous laughters simultaneously sounded. Aside from Ran Min, his driver was also laughing.

The driver laughed in utter hilarity; he slapped the carriage shaft and cried to Ran Min: “General, it seems this young lady really hates you.”

Ran Min was also laughing in delight. He narrowed his eyes in amusement and regarded Chen Rong with interest, saying: “You’ve just said I have never offended you. How soon you forget.”

Chen Rong didn’t think her blurting words would cause two grown men to laugh without a care for propriety. The startled passers-by kept looking their way. She bit her lip, then turned around to tell Old Shang to drive away.

At this point, Ran Min’s right hand reached out like a flash and accurately grabbed her arm, easily

picking her up.

Finding that her body was suddenly in the air, Chen Rong cried out in fright.

Ran Min was still laughing at this time. He carried her as he laughed, gently pulling her out of the carriage. It was a very difficult maneuver, but he did it ever so effortlessly.

Instantly, the tall and lithe Chen Rong was placed like a child into his carriage.

Glancing at a paling Chen Rong who was staring at him speechlessly, his intensely fiery eyes squinted in great relish.

He turned to Old Shang with a hardened face and ordered, “Go back on your own!”

To have a battle-hardened and lethal general speaking to him with such a glower, even a learned Confucian would be terrified, much less Old Shang who was a mere servant.

Color instantly drained from his face. He involuntarily repeated, “Aye, aye,” while steering the carriage away in hasty departure.

A dozen paces later, Old Shang recovered from his fright and quickly looked back in concern for Ah Rong.

But their carriage was already driving away. From

time to time, a man’s laughter and a woman’s hissing could be heard. Old Shang was still completely flummoxed.

Ran Min placed Chen Rong inside next to him. After he had scared Old Shang away, he shouted at his cackling driver: “Let’s go.”

“Aye, General!”

The carriage advanced forward.

Ran Min turned to look at Chen Rong.

She dazedly blinked back at him.

He smiled at her.

Chen Rong suppressed her fury and shouted, “Look here you Ran fellow, I’m an unwed lady, how can you take me into your carriage with absolutely no regard like this? Y-you, this is despicable!”

The driver howled with laughter: “Aye aye, well admonished. General Ran is indeed despicable!” As if he had become addicted, he roared with laughter again. “Shucks, the general has carried out many an abduction, but this is the first time he abducts a young lady. How despicable! How very despicable!” He slapped the shaft and laughed.

Because of the driver’s interjection, Chen Rong’s righteous accusations had all of a sudden turned into flirtation. She was furious. She shot daggers at

the driver before turning to see that Ran Min was still looking at her with interest. She glared back and gave him a low bark: “Let me down!”

Chapter 95: Drinking His Blood

Ran Min grinned at Chen Rong and, ignoring her avoidance, stretched his large hand to stroke her face.

His rough fingers moved in a deliberate ease that when they brushed across her face, she felt a softness in the roughness, like a winter breeze that was gently prickling her heart.

“No,” he answered her.

It was quite final.

Chen Rong choked with anger. She stared at him, growling: “Ran Min, stay away from me!” Though she was growling at him, she still sounded as though she was pleading.

She didn’t want to, but for some reason, once those words left her mouth, her voice was choked.

Ran Min ignored her. Seeing her head tilting away to avoid him, he closed his fingers around her chin and smilingly repeated, “No!”

This man was actually playing with her so roguishly.

Chen Rong was beyond livid.

Her face flamed red as she glared at him. If looks could kill, Ran Min would've been stabbed by ten thousand arrows.

Unfortunately, looks cannot kill. Inherently, Chen Rong's beguiling eyes still cast an implicit seduction even when she was angry.

By the time Chen Rong was gasping from anger, Ran Min knitted his brow and muttered, "You must really be angry with me."

After talking to himself, he pulled her forward.

The sudden force caused Chen Rong to fall into his arms.

Despite the pain on her chin, Chen Rong threw her hands against his chest when she sensed his body heat and strong male breath.

She pushed hard, her face reddening from the effort. One could even see the artery popping on her neck as she tried to avoid falling into his arms.

Normally, others might have let go and stopped forcing the matter. Unfortunately, Ran Min wasn't a normal person.

He raised an eyebrow. A flicker flashed in his eyes as his right hand let go of her chin.

Finding herself freed, Chen Rong was about to jump off when Ran Min swiftly held her waist and

locked her in his embrace.

What kind of strength did Ran Min use? It was the invincible force of a thousand pounds! All he did was give a slight pull, and Chen Rong had fallen into his arms, her nose colliding against his chest.

Instantaneously, the surge of warmth she had dreamed and longed for after so many years made its way into her nose.

Chen Rong froze.

She widened her eyes but did not move.

Sensing that she had tensed up, Ran Min's muffled chuckle faintly rang.

Gently, his powerful palms came to rest on her wasp waist.

While her virgin self couldn't help trembling at his touch, Ran Min bowed his head and whispered into her ear, "You long for me so, how can there be no animosity? Ah Rong, you always make a gaffe every time you see me. Do you know why?"

Chen Rong dazedly shook her head. Her eyes were still widened – damp with a resistance from the depth of her soul.

Ran Min's right hand moved from her waist to her back, its fingers combing through her thick, dark hair and unknowingly causing her bead hairpin to

come free. “Because you love me,” he murmured when her hair spilled down.

While Chen Rong stiffened, he softly laughed. “Ah Rong of the Chen House, you’ve loved me for a very long time.”

Chen Rong became unhinged as soon as these words were said.

She suddenly leapt forward, clutched his neck, and crouched down to bite his neck.

It was a vital spot that could kill him.

The battle-scarred Ran Min laughed and swiftly dodged her attack. He then offered his shoulder to her with a husky chuckle. “Bite here instead.”

He had not finished by the time Chen Rong already chomped down.

She was actually biting him.

Instantly, blood oozed out and dripped from her mouth.

Chen Rong savagely swallowed a mouthful of that blood. Ran Min was stunned at first when he heard the gulping sound, but he soon broke out laughing.

While he was laughing, Chen Rong shoved him away with a sudden and maddening strength.

Ran Min certainly didn’t think the girl would

suddenly gain that much strength. He gave a grunt, his large body crashing backward and hitting the carriage wall with a loud thud.

Just as his grip loosened, Chen Rong swiftly fled like an agile rabbit. She flung the curtain and jumped off the moving vehicle.

The driver cried out in shock. Quickly enough, he exclaimed with great admiration: “Impressive!”

Chen Rong, who had jumped off the carriage, steadily landed on the snow with a graceful somersault.

As soon as the driver spoke, as if she was spooked, Chen Rong lifted her skirt and ran toward the city center – unknowingly, Ran Min’s carriage had taken her to the suburb near the city gate.

Watching Chen Rong’s figure dashing away, the driver again applauded her before turning around.

He widened his oxen eyes, shouting: “Golly, this young lady is quite something if she can draw blood from our valiant General Ran!”

Ran Min shot him a glare. Caring little about his bleeding left shoulder, he looked in the direction Chen Rong had gone and muttered, “I don’t know what I’ve done to her to deserve this spite.”

The driver laughed in hilarity. “Isn’t this just capital?! It’s not every day I get to see a girl being

so harsh to you.”

Listening to his gloating laughter, Ran Min gave him another glare and then also laughed out loud. He reached for a cloth and carelessly wrapped his bitten shoulder. “Aren’t you going to help me?” he snapped at his driver.

The driver unhappily took his time to get off his seat and go over to his boss, muttering as he tied the bandage: “But it’s such a pity to bandage it. You should leave it so the guys can know you’ve mistreated someone else’s daughter.”

Ran Min ignored his rambling driver. Still looking in the direction Chen Rong had gone, he murmured, “You really hate me that much, huh?” There was a laughing note in his voice.

Chen Rong maddeningly ran forward.

Before she knew it, her hair had become disheveled and rendered her appearance a sorry state.

She didn’t know how long she had run when she heard someone say: “Hey, this crazy looking girl seems a little familiar.”

Along with the cold wind, this voice startlingly doused her burning anger.

Chen Rong stopped.

At this moment, she had run to North Street, past which would be Nanyang's bustling Main Street.

Chen Rong gazed at the increasingly crowded throng ahead and saw that many people were curiously staring at her. "Eep, she's bleeding. She looks scary," a child cried.

Facing those people's eyes and hearing the child's voice, Chen Rong's dizzying brain gained more awareness. With the fastest speed she could muster, she looked down at the ground and quietly wiped her mouth before undoing her hair to comb her fingers through it. Then, she followed the curbside and walked on.

After hurrying away for a few dozen steps, Chen Rong saw no more strangers paying attention to her.

Quickly recalling the scene just now, she vigorously scrubbed her mouth and scathingly said, "I'll bite you dead!"

She was surprised at her own words.

Slowly, she blinked back her tears and sped up.

Chen Rong walked for nearly an hour in the snow to go from North Street to the Chen estate.

Listening to the monotonous sloshing of snow and feeling the rush of biting wind, Chen Rong slowly recovered.

By the time she got to the Chen estate, she saw Old Shang's carriage still parked in an alley. He was standing beside it looking out to the larger road.

He was overjoyed to see her.

Chen Rong also hastened to him. After she had lifted the curtain and climbed onto the carriage, she sat motionlessly on her seat.

At this time, Old Shang's worried voice sounded outside. "Are you crying, miss?"

She did not answer.

The vehicle was put into motion.

A moment later, Old Shang again asked, "Do you still want to go to the Wang estate, miss?"

"What for? Let's go home," Chen Rong wearily replied.

"Aye."

Amid the clopping wheels, Old Shang's cautious voice again spoke to her. "Did General Ran do anything untoward to you?"

Chen Rong again did not answer him.

After Old Shang had hollered twice to command the horses, he continued to mumble to her: "I heard that General Ran had asked from Chen Gongrang, not for Ah Wei's hand in marriage, but for yours. Miss, is it because of Wang Qilang that

you are turning General Ran down?”

At this juncture, he sighed and dolefully said, “Miss, I don’t understand why you won’t agree to it. Whether becoming Wang Qilang’s concubine or marrying General Ran, you should make a decision and extend your acceptance soon, no? If this drags on, I’m really worried…” What he was worried about was naturally Chen Rong’s reputation.

Inside, Chen Rong remained unspoken.

Her limbs were lifeless, and she could only lie still on her seat, staring absently at the ceiling.

The carriage slowly approached the side entrance.

A gateman shouted to Old Shang: “Where did Ah Rong go in this freezing snow?”

He eyed Chen Rong’s carriage with a flicker of curiosity.

Old Shang laughed. “Nowhere, really. My mistress felt stuffy so we went out for a drive. Yah – Yah –”

At his holler, the carriage passed and drove through the green path.

It eventually entered Chen Rong’s courtyard.

At the squeak of the opening gate, Old Shang’s voice was suddenly heard: “Miss, Ah Wei is here.”

There was still no sound from the carriage.

At length, Chen Rong repeated: “Ah Wei?”

“Aye.”

Old Shang brought the carriage to a stop. He walked to the side and, with a smile displayed on his face, whispered to her, “She brought a lot of people with her. They’re sitting on the steps looking at us.”

Chen Rong at once sat up. She lifted a corner of the curtain, turning her head to take a peer.

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Chapter 96: Who's Bullying Whom?

Chen Wei sat on the steps while letting the wind burn her face. She was looking straight at Chen Rong with a queue of maids and servants behind her.

After several days of not seeing Chen Wei, Chen Rong noted that her chin was now more pointed and her face was sallow and haggard.

As they looked at each other, she found that Chen Wei's eyes were in an empty daze. If she looked like this, then perhaps she had not come to condemn her?

Chen Rong dismounted her carriage while contemplating the situation.

She kept her head lowered and walked ahead.

Her hair was disheveled, there was also dried blood on the corner of her mouth. When she got to Chen Wei, she curtsied and softly said, "Please wait, jiejie. I'll see you after I take a bath."

When she finished, she walked past Chen Wei and went straight toward her room.

"Stop!"

Chen Wei's shout was both hoarse and

strengthless.

Chen Rong stopped but did not look back. She merely said, “I accidentally fell so I’m looking unpresentable right now. Please allow me to take a bath and change my clothes first.”

Her explanation was delivered after careful deliberation.

But Chen Wei wasn’t in the mood to listen to her. She stared at her cousin and obstinately insisted: “That’s not necessary, I don’t want to wait.”

She rose and walked over to Chen Rong.

Seeing that she was standing behind her without doing or saying anything, and just staring at her, Chen Rong couldn’t help but feel the chills. She turned around with a smile and called, “Cousin?”

“Let’s speak inside,” Chen Wei said. “Why are you just standing there?” she aded when she didn’t see Chen Rong move.

Chen Rong glanced at the servants who were looking at her with concern, gave some thought, then turned and walked toward the room.

Chen Wei was right behind her. Once she entered the room, she flung her sleeves and shut the door.

Hearing the slamming door and sensing Chen Wei’s anxious breathing, Chen Rong worriedly

thought: *What happened can't possibly have reached her ears, can it?*

While Chen Rong pondered to herself, a loud thud all of a sudden sounded behind her.

She turned around.

She instantaneously froze and stared in shock at Chen Wei who had dropped to her knees and was now pleadingly looking at her even though the lips on her pallid face was still stubbornly pressed into a line. Chen Rong didn't know what to do.

Chen Wei kept her back straight as she stared up at Chen Rong. She bit her lip when she faced her cousin's beautiful face.

She was biting herself quite hard. In a flash, her mouth was already bleeding.

After staring at Chen Rong for a while, she suddenly knocked her head on the floor and said, "Ah Rong, have mercy on me."

Upon hearing these words, all of Chen Rong's surprise and shock went away. She coldly smiled and replied, "Ah Wei, I've never provoked you!"

She might have sought her own happiness previously, but she hadn't initiated anything this time! Nothing at all!

Chen Wei wasn't convinced. She gave Chen Rong another kowtow. "Ah Rong, I love General Ran. From the first time I saw him, nay, from the first time I heard his name and saw his portrait, I have loved him. Every night when I dream, I would dream of him. Every day when I eat, I would think of him. Ah Rong, all I want is to spend my life with him. Why do you have to appear? Why do you have his attention? Why?!"

She was practically screaming by the end of her speech.

Quiet murmuring rose outside.

Chen Rong looked toward the door and then turned to Chen Wei. She drew her lips into a line and quietly said, "Ah Wei, it's useless to tell me these things. If you love General Ran, go and tell him!"

Still, nothing Chen Rong said went into Chen Wei's ears. "Ah Rong, you have Wang Qilang," she insisted in her hoarse voice. "I beg you to let General Ran go. Tell him that you don't like him, that you've had intimite relations with Wang Qilang and have lost your virginity to him. If you tell him that, he wouldn't like you anymore."

Her tone of voice increased toward the end. Only now did Chen Rong realize she had said so much just for that last line!

Chen Wei had kowtowed as she spoke, her forehead soon bruising.

After going on and on, Chen Wei at last looked up at Chen Rong.

She saw Chen Rong pouring herself some wine and drinking it from her seat.

Here she was, prostrating and kowtowing to her, but she was going to act this way?!

All of a sudden, a nameless ire rose inside of her.

While Chen Wei was shaking with anger, Chen Rong glanced at her and coldly said, “Ah Wei, what makes you think that I would sacrifice my own reputation for your happiness? Do you think all you have to do is kneel down and give me two kowtows, and I would destroy my future, my happiness and my life just to fulfill your wish?”

Chen Rong’s face was livid. She was also looking at Chen Wei in outrage and contempt. She placed her cup down, sprang to her feet, and pointed outside while howling: “Get out! Do you hear me? Leave!”

Chen Wei didn’t expect Chen Rong to be the angrier one. She completely froze.

While she was still in a befuddled state, Chen Rong went to her and started to drag her up by the arm.

Forthwith, she pushed Chen Wei out.

Chen Rong took Chen Wei by surprise by completing these actions swiftly and determinedly. Additionally, she had learned some martial arts and her strength was great. In just a flash, Chen Wei had been pushed to the doorway.

Chen Rong threw the door open and shoved her cousin outside.

Chen Wei staggered out the door, which then slammed shut amid the maids' exclamations. Chen Rong's outraged scream went roaring: "Ah Wei of the Chen House, you're making a fuss over nothing. Don't think you can walk all over me like this! Get out –"

Hearing the scream inside and seeing Chen Wei's bruising forehead, both girls' servants could only look at one another. They were making them awfully confused. Who was bullying whom, exactly?

At the servants' scrutiny, Chen Wei recovered from her trance. She wordlessly looked at Chen Rong's closed door, pressed her lips, then turned and walked away.

As soon as they left, Nurse Ping took two steps forward, leaned into the door and whispered, "Miss, Ah Wei has left."

After a good long while, Chen Rong's tired voice

replied behind the door: “Good riddance.”

Seeing that she was willing to answer, the nurse continued to ask: “Miss, what had happened? Why did we hear the sound of head knocking on the ground?”

Chen Rong did not answer.

Nurse Ping waited for a while, but when she didn’t hear anything, she shook her head and walked off.

The day flew by.

The next day, the sky cleared up and snow began to melt.

It was the coldest then. Chen Rong stayed in her room and kept several coal trays in front of her bed. With two layers of quilt, she still felt cold.

She had felt cold since last night.

From her previous life, she had known Ran Min to be an ardent sort of person. But now that she was on the receiving end of his ardency, she couldn’t keep calm.

In her dream last night, Wang Hong’s beguiling eyes and gentle voice appeared in one moment and Ran Min’s laughing and letting her bite him appeared in the next.

She sat there for a long time and at length dropped her gaze. She lightly sneered, “Why are

you thinking so much? You shouldn't think about either of these men. Chen Rong, time waits for no one, you have to quickly find a suitable man."

She hadn't felt this urgency before, but this time for some reason, she suddenly worried for her innocence when she recalled Ran Min's attitude… She truly feared there would be one day when one of these two men would be incited to tease her and then cause outsiders to see her disheveled appearance, giving her no way back.

At this thought, Chen Rong blushingly shook her head and then hopped down from bed, calling: "Nurse, help me with my morning wash."

"Coming!" Hearing the clarity and lightness finally restored to Chen Rong's voice, Nurse Ping's answer was likewise crisp and clear.

While Nurse Ping combed her hair, Old Shang called in: "Miss, do you still want to go to the Wang estate today and ask to see Wang Qilang?"

Chen Rong knitted her brow.

She pursed her lips, thinking: *If this keeps up, things will only get more tangled. If you know you're not good enough for him, don't indulge yourself. Don't keep drowning, or you'll sink into boundless misery like before.*

At this thought, she decisively said, "That's not

necessary anymore.” Before her eyes appeared his handsome face and wounded expression.

Chen Rong vigorously shook her head and stood up.

Having washed and put on a fox fur coat with Nurse Ping’s help, she now stepped outside.

Even though the sun was shining, the deep snow remained in the yard and made sloshing sound when she walked.

Step by step, Chen Rong slowly left her courtyard.

She had unknowingly embarked on the same familiar road. But this time, the trees on either of its sides were leafless and buried under snow, its surface also covered in messy footprints.

Along the way, the servants and maids who encountered her would curiously peered at her.

Nonetheless, after a turn off of the tree-lined road and onto a smaller path in the garden, she was left to more peace and quiet.

The wind brought with it biting chill and Chen Rong who had walked for half an hour could no longer stand the cold. After some reluctance, she turned around to go back.

At this moment, a clear and tranquil voice came to her from the woods: “I think you’re overstating the

situation, Zirun. Although I have not met your younger cousin, a helpless woman who dared to enter a city that had been laid under siege by the barbarians is a very admirable woman. And perhaps it’s as she says; it might be for gratitude and not love.”

After a pause, he sighed and added, “Whether for gratitude or love, it isn’t easy to find a young lady like that. If she would have me, I’d marry her in a heartbeat!”

Chen Rong stiffened when she heard this. Unconsciously, her steps softened as she went to hide behind a tall banyan tree.

Chapter 97: Seeing Qilang Again

The people in the woods stopped talking.

Suddenly, Chen Sanlang’s laughter sounded: “Zhang Xiang, you’re a brave one for wanting to marry such a woman. Aren’t you worried that she would wash her face every day with her tears after she is married to you because she misses her old lover?” He laughed again, disdainfully saying: “But honestly speaking, your situation makes a good match with hers.”

Chen Rong whipped around upon hearing these word. She widened her eyes wanting to see the man behind the dense foliage. But how could she?

“I have faith that she wouldn’t agree to marry me if she was in love with another man,” replied Zhang Xiang’s steady and placid voice. “But once she agreed to marry me, then she would’ve thoroughly thought through her choices.”

Chen Sanlang laughed out loud. “You’re very generous.”

She heard more sloshing on the snow; the men were nearing her.

Eventually, Chen Sanlang’s voice sounded from a place only fifteen paces away from her: “All right, let’s not talk about women anymore. Zhang Xiang, ever since I was humiliated, I haven’t seen a single shadow of my old friends and acquaintances. Only you still come to see me. The ancients say true friends are the ones who stay with us through adversities. We weren’t that close, but you are unexpectedly the only reliable one when something went wrong.”

Zhang Xiang smiled.

They had walked to a lakeside path fifteen paces from where Chen Rong stood. The snow was calf-deep in this area, and the two men had to tread very slowly.

Chen Rong quietly took a peek.

On the left was Chen Sanlang. Accompanying him was a young man of eighteen or nineteen, with a rectangular face, even features, a dark complexion, and a pair of large dynamic eyes. He was also very tall. Although he was neither fair-skinned nor handsome, his straight posture and healthy glow overshadowed Chen Sanlang's pallor that had resulted from excessive wine and women.

Chen Rong's eyes moved to his clothes. He was also wearing a fox fur coat on this cold day. If one paid closer attention, however, one could see that there were signs of wear on his cuffs and collar.

He must be Zhang Xiang. His looks, his family background, as well as his temperament, all made him exactly the humble scholar she had been looking for!

Chen Rong's eyes opened wide, looking at him and Chen Sanlang walking away. Only until they disappeared did she begin to go home herself.

The sky hadn't cleared for half a day when snow began to fall again in the evening.

To the people of Nan'yang, the snow had been protection sent by the gods. For the time being, the apprehensive residents laughed once more. There was widespread music even in the Chen estate. Since early in the day, Chen Gongrang and his friends had taken courtesans on a snow

rendezvous.

These things didn’t concern Chen Rong.

She spent the day thinking without success on how to find an opportunity to meet the scholar named Zhang Xiang. There was nothing she could do. Without her parents, as a young lady, she didn’t have any chance to meet people of the opposite sex.

After sighing for a while, Chen Rong decided to look for something to pass the time. She summoned Old Shang to take her to her stores.

As she lifted the curtain and stepped onto the vehicle, footsteps approached the yard. Suddenly, a maid called in, “Is Ah Rong home?”

“Aye,” replied Chen Rong, a little perplexed.

Four maids came in, leading them was the one who served Lady Ruan.

Not expecting Lady Ruan to be the one who would look for her, Chen Rong at once put her guard up while hopping down and asking: “What is it that my aunt wishes from me?”

The leading maid scornfully watched her careless action. She gave a cursory bow and then said, “There is a banquet at the Nan’yang Prince’s estate tonight. You are now famous in the city, Madam wants me to ask you to get ready so that you can

attend on time.” Once she finished, she turned to go.

Chen Rong contemplated as she watched them leave.

Nurse Ping went up behind her and warily asked, “But miss, the Prince of Nan’yang…?”

Chen Rong shook her head, quietly saying: “They didn’t even try to pretend. There’s likely no deception.”

It was already late in the day. Seeing that there was now a banquet to attend, she would have to hurry in getting dressed.

It got dark two hours later but the night seemed brighter thanks to the snow.

From inside out, lanterns hung high, torches swayed in the wind.

Chen Rong’s carriage slowly began to exit the estate. She should have followed behind Chen Yuan, but after waiting to no avail, Chen Rong had to get into her carriage and set off on her own.

In the sky, thick snowflakes continued to float down. The lights ahead flickered through them.

Old Shang hollered a command at the horses, then asked Chen Rong: “Miss, we don’t have an invitation. It would be embarrassing to be denied at

the door.”

Chen Rong lifted her curtain. While surveying the scene and road traffic, she replied, “If we were to be denied at the door, then Chen Yuan would also be embarrassed. Don’t worry.”

She looked around for a while and found that there were many carriages on the road. It appeared that the rich and famous were all in a hurry to get to the prince’s estate. It made Chen Rong greatly relieved.

She released the curtain and rested against the carriage wall.

At this time, the vehicle jolted and came to a stop.

She opened her eyes, sat up and asked, “What is it?”

“There’s a group of young ladies blocking the road ahead,” Old Shang replied.

Not waiting for Chen Rong to inquire again, women’s cheers and screams erupted.

Amid the deafening din, a girl cried in mesmerization: “Qilang, Qilang, if you have gone out then why don’t you reveal your face to us? Don’t intoxicate me with the wait.”

She had used ‘intoxicate’ rather ingeniously. A dozen women abruptly laughed. “Aye aye, please

reveal your face and intoxicate us all."

"Qilang, we never get to see you. If I can't see your face today even with this encounter, then wouldn't that be too cruel?"

"Qilang, let me see you."

Amid the waves of laughter, Old Shang smilingly said, "Miss, Wang Qilang is here. His carriage is stopped by the young ladies."

Chen Rong gave a hum in reply. She slowly raised the curtain and looked ahead.

At the same time, Wang Hong's curtain also lifted. In the screaming, his handsome face and pure white appearance appeared in front of Chen Rong.

Snow continued to fall from the sky – the earth a vast expanse of white. Dressed in the same color, he smiled at the female congregation, and just like that, Chen Rong felt as though the most dazzling star from above had descended among them.

This was how he would always be. Regardless where and when, his appearance would always blind others into feeling that the world was as beautiful as a dream.

Chen Rong looked at him awhile and then lowered her gaze to wryly say: "How can I harbor feelings for a man made of jade and moonlight like him?"

She decisively pulled her curtain down and said to Old Shang: “Take another road.”

“Aye.” He drove the carriage into another path.

After half an hour, Chen Rong’s ride arrived outside of the prince’s estate.

The mansion was built in a very extravagant style. The walls were so high that the large marble exuded a majestic and impregnable aura against the snowy background.

Chen Rong glanced at the armed guards standing on both sides of the gate as she said to Old Shang: “Don’t dither, go on.”

“Aye.”

They queued behind a dozen other carriages. By the time it was her turn, a quarter of an hour had passed.

A guard respectfully asked, “Which clan does the young lady belong to? Please present your name card.”

Old Shang pleasantly said, “My mistress has come with her uncle, but we’ve fallen behind…”

Not waiting for him to finish, the guard loudly shouted, “Name card!”

While Old Shang faltered, Chen Rong’s voice rose from inside, “Let us go home.”

Old Shang hedged. With everyone's eyes looking at them, he chuckled again, turned and said to the guard, "We're leaving, then."

At this point, a young scholar walked up behind the guard and raised his voice to ask: "I see that this is one of the young ladies from the Chen estate. Is she Ah Rong of the Chen House?"

All around them was silent.

Chen Rong was surprised as well. Recognizing the familiarity in his voice, she quickly looked through the curtain slit and found that he was Chen Sanlang's friend, Zhang Xiang. But how could he be in the prince's estate?

Amid Chen Rong's silence, Old Shang replied: "Aye, my mistress is Ah Rong of the Chen House."

The guard stepped back and loudly said, "Ah Rong of the Chen House? Of coure she may come in. This way."

Chen Rong lifted her curtain when Old Shang hollered at the horses. Wearing a blue and purple dress, the exquisitely beautiful girl appeared before everyone's eyes.

Just as they looked at her in appraisal, Chen Rong's eyes turned to Zhang Xiang. She smiled at him and was about to speak when she saw him turning his attention to something behind her.

The others did the same.

Chen Rong turned around in curiosity. She hadn’t seen the newcomer by the time a carriage drove up next to her. At the same time, a soothing voice like spring water said, “Ah Rong, you’re also here? Let’s go in together.” This was Wang Hong’s voice!

Chen Rong slowly looked up at him.

What she saw was his smiling handsome face.

At this moment, Zhang Xiang was standing sideways behind Wang Hong, both their faces simultaneously appearing in her view.

Zhang Xiang raised his head as he cast an admiring glance at Wang Hong. Chen Rong couldn’t help lamenting to herself: *Next to this man, I fear all men will become as common as fowls and canines!* At this thought, she withdrew her gaze.

No sooner had she turned her gaze back to Wang Hong than his charming voice teasingly rang by her ears: “Who were you looking at, Ah Rong? Your eyes twinkle like a thief’s!”

98-99

Chapter 98: Is Wang Qilang Attached Or Indifferent? (1)

How close he was leaning!

Chen Rong shrank back by reflex. When she turned her gaze, she caught numerous eyes burning with jealousy.

Although she was occupied enough, Chen Rong didn't forget to glance at Zhang Xiang. At this time, he was looking at her and Wang Hong with a faint admiration in his eyes – the kind of admiration one might have for a well-matched couple.

Chen Rong's heart pounded: *Among the thousands of scholars in the world, this stranger named Zhang Xiang might very well be the only one who doesn't mind my humble background and tainted reputation. Although I've forgotten his face the moment I looked away, although he himself might have only said it jokingly, shouldn't I at least give it a try?*

She turned her head in Wang Hong's direction at this point in her thought.

He was smiling at her. Without her realizing it until now, his carriage had been driving alongside hers, separated by less than an arm's length.

Glancing at him, Chen Rong bowed from her seat and politely said in a crystalline voice: “I thank you for asking, sir. I’m in good health; I even had two bowls of rice at lunch.”

Upon hearing her words, a girl was quick to laugh: “What did I say? Qilang was simply making inquiries; he’s not that close to her.”

The surrounding stares simmered down.

It was to Chen Rong’s satisfaction. She turned back at Wang Hong.

Again, she saw his faint smiling eyes that looked as gentle as it did taunting.

She dropped her gaze to avoid them, gave their owner a bow and said to Old Shang, “Let’s go.”

The carriage began rolling and easily entered the prince’s estate.

A long line filed in front of them while another waited behind.

Chen Rong stared at the quartized road to force herself from looking back.

The road was narrow, and could only accommodate two vehicles running side by side.

While her eyes were glued to the road ahead, her ears were alert to the surrounding sounds. Just as she reached for her curtain after not hearing his

familiar voice, she caught another carriage running beside her – was it not Wang Hong's? Heaven, how could he have passed all the other vehicles so quickly?

As Chen Rong stared in surprise at Wang Hong's carriage, he laughed and came closer to her. He looked at her with a smile so gentle that it could drown her alive.

Chen Rong's heart suddenly palpitated. But forthwith, she decidedly turned her head and dropped the curtain.

Just as she did so, she heard his charming voice speak: "You're being very clear-cut, darling. Your eyes can't sparkle any brighter to see the young man. Or do you wish to clarify yourself again? How soon you discard your old love." Then he sadly added, "You can be quite cruel!"

Chen Rong's hand froze on the curtain. Her smile stiffened. A while later, she rigidly turned to look at him. When she saw his quiet eyes, something like guilt and discomfort flickered across her face.

It was just like Wang Hong to make snide remarks so mildly. Even so, they had carried the weighty accusation that her confession to him that day had been a lie.

And yet his voice was too sweet, his eyes too

quiet. Momentarily, Chen Rong was wracked with guilt.

Soon, her shame dissolved into emptiness. She stared at his intricately embroidered white robe and mumbled back: “But you can’t marry me!”

“If you have never tried, how do you know I can’t?” Wang Hong’s beguiling voice returned.

Her head snapped up. She stared at him without knowing that her eyes were, at this moment, as bright as the stars in the sky.

In just a flash, however, they darkened as Chen Rong looked down and let the cold wind blow her hair over her eyes. “What good is trying?” There was something that sounded like a broken soul, a crushed dream, and a devastated melancholy in her voice. She opened her misty eyes and, looking only at his white robe, slowly said, “Asking for too much will only result in our demise… Trying won’t be of any use.”

Wang Hong froze. His cloudless and smiling eyes all of a sudden grew stagnant. He stared at her and searched her eyes with his own.

Chen Rong did not look at him. She sniffed, retracted her head inside, and pulled the curtain down.

The carriages went on.

This time, she did not hear Wang Hong speak again.

When her carriage stopped in the square, Chen Rong got down with Old Shang's help and looked around only to find that Wang Hong's carriage was nowhere to be found. It goes without saying that she was even less privy to his whereabouts.

By the time Chen Rong entered the main hall, endless streams of guests had flooded the site. All was dressed in fashion, their intoxicating scents and fluttering fabric weaving the night scene.

Due to the presence of these sophisticated guests, Chen Rong's arrival did not catch anyone's attention.

She kept her eyes to the ground and quietly went around the corner.

The room was awash in light and music. At a glance, Chen Rong saw her kinsmen sitting in the third row. In addition to Chen Gongrang, there were also Chen Yuan and Chen Shu; no young ladies were in attendance.

Chen Rong took two brisk steps and sat down on the last seat in the corner.

She had barely sat down by the time a servant came over and said to her, "Ah Rong, this way."

She got up and followed him.

The servant went to Chen Gongrang’s side and made a bow.

Not waiting for him to speak, Chen Gongrang turned to Chen Rong with a kind smile. “Ah Rong? Come and sit next to me.”

“Aye.” Chen Rong slowly sat down.

The maids at once stepped forward and placed partitioning screens around her.

Just then, the crowd quieted and all at once turned to look at the doorway.

Due to the screens, what Chen Rong could see were only blurry images. Even so, she could recognize him in just one glance. The tall snowy figure was Wang Hong. He was now striding in together with Wang Yi.

While Wang Hong and Wang Yi entered the hall, clamor also rose at the inner side door. The portly Prince of Nan’yang were slowly making his way in while with his subordinates and concubines encircling him.

The crowd gave the Prince of Nan’yang a fleeting look before turning and continuing to look at Wang Hong and Wang Yi. Of course, most of the nobility in the hall didn’t even turn their heads or give the Prince of Nan’yang a glance to begin with.

Upon witnessing this, the Prince of Nan'yang laughed as he wiggled his way to Wang Hong. "Qilang is like a peony in the garden, garnering attention everywhere you go," he croaked.

The subordinates behind him were quick to show their delight of his coarse analogy. Wang Hong's lips twitched enough to make a smile but Wang Yi didn't even raise his eyes; he walked past the Prince of Nan'yang and went to his seat.

Wang Hong's and Wang Yi's tables were right in front of the Chen House. After Wang Yi took his seat, he reached for his wine and began to drink.

Meanwhile, Chen Rong's view was shadowed by the white figure that had sat down in front of her.

Behind the screen, she quietly looked at him before lowering her head again.

Her hands knotted together as Wang Hong's words rang in her ears over and over again: *"You're being very clear-cut, darling. Your eyes can't sparkle any brighter to see the young man. Or do you wish to clarify yourself again? How soon you discard your old love."*

"If you've never tried, how do you know I can't marry you?"

Her ten fingers twined around each other. Eventually, Chen Rong took a deep breath and

inwardly thought: *Ah Rong, what are you dreaming about? Don't forget who Lang'ya Wang Qi is! Did Chen Qi not say? Even two royal princesses are ill with heartbreak because of him. Why would you fall for him when you haven't fully understood him? Can you afford to lose?*

She calmed down having asked herself these questions. Nonetheless, looking at the white figure in front of her and smelling the fresh scent belonging to him caused her heart to thump in weak confusion.

At this time, the Prince of Nan'yang had also seated. He took a drink from his jade cup, wiped his mouth, and then bit off a chunk of meat from the hands of a beauty.

He waved his hand as he chewed and swallowed, all the while garbling to his guests: "Speaking of the snowfall, I'd like to thank the gods by presenting them beautiful dancers. To hell with it, enjoy yourselves at this feast. If you want meat and wine, I have meat and wine. If you want women, I have plenty of those too. If you see one you like, feel free to find a room and have fun."

At this juncture, perhaps feeling that his speech was rather amusing, his greasy mouth curved into a grin before laughing out loud with his yellow teeth in full display.

With the prince’s laughter booming, the hall followed suit.

At this point, Chen Rong heard Wang Yi impatiently saying in front of her: “Disgusting.” He then turned to Wang Hong and asked, “Xiao Qi, Nan’yang isn’t a very good place to stay. I will leave come springtide. Will you go with me?”

Wang Hong will leave? Chen Rong’s head snapped up, staring at him through the screen with her ears perked and her breath in suspension.

With Wang Yi’s attention on him, Wang Hong leaned back toward Chen Rong and faintly smiled with his hands interlaced before his abdomen. “Leave Nan’yang? I suppose that’s possible.” While beads of perspiration collected on Chen Rong’s brows, his handsome face slightly turned, as if toward her yet at the same time as if toward the aisle. “But there is someone I will have to bring with me,” he gently added.

Chapter 99: Is Wang Qilang Attached Or Indifferent? (2)

Wang Hong’s voice was so soft and faint that Wang Yi only heard him vaguely; he nodded: “As long as you are willing to leave.”

On the other hand, Chen Rong had heard him clearly. Her heart thrummed wild. She couldn’t help

herself from thinking: *Could he be talking about me? He appeared to be talking about me, but that's not right, he was looking at the aisle…*

Does he really want to take me away?

Despite having lived twice and always feeling guarded, at this very second, she still felt flustered and lost.

From his seat, the Prince of Nan'yang swallowed a pastry off of a beauty's hand as his gaze shifted to Chen Rong.

Almost immediately, Advisor Xu leaned into him and whispered something while staring at Chen Rong and Wang Hong.

The Prince of Nan'yang nodded. His eyes were still locked on Chen Rong's body, but since she was concealed by the screen, he could not see her.

He thus moved his gaze away.

At this point, Wang Yi suddenly said to Chen Gongrang out in front: "I heard there's an Ah Rong in your clan who had gone through life and death with Qilang. Has she come?"

Chen Gongrang chuckled. Stroking his beard, he looked in Chen Rong's direction and replied, "She's the lassie over there…"

Wang Yi raised a brow as he followed Chen

Gongrang's gaze.

He looked at the screen where Chen Rong sat and then glanced away. "Is she betrothed to anyone?" he casually asked Chen Gongrang.

Chen Rong felt cold upon hearing his words. Her head snapped up to look at him.

"Nay, that she is not," Chen Gongrang replied with a frown.

Before he could finish, Wang Yi continued: "If that's the case, then give her to our family's Qilang. It would be fine to elevate her to an honored concubine, too."

He had sounded supremely condescending.

Chen Rong didn't expect him to suddenly bring the matter up. She felt the chills and drew a sharp breath despite herself.

When he heard her gasp, Wang Yi frowned at Chen Rong before asking a contemplative Chen Gongrang: "Is anything the matter?"

Nearby, Chen Yuan was looking ill with disappointment.

"Forgive me, sir," Chen Rong broke the silence. "Although my station is humble, I've vowed to never be a concubine in this life."

All eyes turned at her words.

Wang Hong, too, turned to look at her.

She could not see his expression through the screens. Looking at his blurry face, she unhurriedly said, “I had risked my life for him simply out of gratitude. It had nothing to do with personal attachments. Please pay no heed to it, sir.”

These words were even more resolute compared to the previous ones!

Almost as soon as she finished, Wang Hong raised his head staring at her.

Chen Rong was also looking at him.

Unfortunately, there was a screen dividing them, and neither could see the other’s expression…

Before Chen Gongrang could scold her, Wang Yi inattentively nodded and said, “If you don’t want to, then never mind. How about this: I’ll give you ten carriages of valuables; should you want to return to Jiankang, I can find an honest husband for you.”

This was his repayment to her.

It was a fairly trivial repayment for a clan as influential as the Wangs. While Chen Yuan was scowling in dissatisfaction, Chen Rong joyously replied, “I thank you…”

She hadn’t said more by the time Wang Hong’s tranquil voice interjected: “Uncle, you needn’t intervene in the young lady’s business.”

His tone was both nonchalant and curt.

Wang Yi paused. He turned his head to regard Wang Hong, nodding: “Then do as you wish.” Then he turned away and did not look at Chen Rong again.

Poor Chen Rong still had her mouth open, yet to finish what she was saying… A good while later, she closed her mouth and irritably glared at Wang Hong.

On the other side of the screens, his blurry face broke into a smile. Chen Rong gave him a brief glance before dropping her gaze. She did not know that right after she looked down, Wang Hong turned around and quietly stared at her. If he wasn’t mistaken, she had clearly been tempted and moved just now when he said he wanted to take her away from Nan’yang… It was astonishing that a girl so young could restrain her emotions and return to being cold and heartless in a matter of seconds!

Chen Rong’s imprudent interjection had obviously caused displeasure to the House of Chen. A servant went to her and flatly relayed, “Please return to the corner, miss.”

Chen Gongrang had dismissed her.

Chen Rong mumbled her answer and got up while several maids came to move the screens around her.

With the screens taken away, members of the Wang estate all turned to look. Those more senior in age lit up at the sight of her while the bookish scholars furrowed their brows disapprovingly.

Wang Yi also turned back to gaze her way when he heard the servant utter a gasp.

He gave a noticeable start, looked her up and down and said, “Her eyebrows are the tides of spring. There are only wrath and seduction in her eyes, and no nobleness. Would a woman like this go to Mo’yang to die out of gratitude? How odd, how very odd!”

People of this era loved to pay attention to appearances and demeanors. At the same time, they liked to assess an individual based on his temperament, poise, physical build and facial features. Elders who had read countless people could typically see through a man’s essence. The art of discerning people and its evaluating words were therefore very prevalent.

At this time, Wang Yi was also using the art of discerning people on Chen Rong. But for all his

appraising looks and winded comments, he could only end in: “How very odd.”

When Wang Yi began staring at Chen Rong, the hall had silenced to await his assessment.

Murmur hence broke out after he had spoken. Like Wang Yi, they found her curious.

Their peering eyes were intolerably uncomfortable to Chen Rong. She lowered her head, accorded Chen Gongrang and Wang Yi ceremony, and turned to go.

Barely two steps later, she heard Wang Yi’s voice behind her: “No wonder Qilang is interested in this Ah Rong. Even my curiosity is piqued. Since he has come across something so interesting, he can have fun if he wants to.”

Chen Rong flinched before moving her rigid self to the corner.

As soon as she took her new seat, several maids came back to replace the screens around her.

Behind the screens, Chen Rong slowly sat down and curled up.

She had known since long ago that she possessed no strength of character let alone a noble poise. She was just a vulgar thing, a nobody, a mercenary monger, an uncultured fishwife.

After her rebirth, she had tried to arm herself with the illusion that she was as sophisticated and noble as the scholars.

It seemed he who had real insight could still see right through her.

But so what? Chen Rong quietly sneered.

Her hands twisted into a ball under her sleeves. Time seemed to still with her brooding.

At length, the hall grew livelier and livelier. In the brightly lit space, song and dance along with laughter filled the air.

Chen Rong saw Chen Gongrang, Wang Hong and Wang Yi gathered in the hall as they drank and bantered.

Seeing that no one was paying attention to her little corner, she quietly moved the screens and retreated to the shadows where the tradesman Chen Shu was sitting lest people deride him if he went out. “Uncle,” she began with a curtsy, “I’d like to go home.”

Chen Shu turned his head.

He looked at Chen Rong, slowly placed his cup down, nodded and said, “There are no young ladies at this banquet, I’m not surprised you would feel bored here. Go ahead if you want to. Unluckily for me, I have to stick around.”

While Chen Shu was trapped, Chen Rong again curtsied to him and followed the corner out.

She soon left the hall.

Once outside, the bright snow and another light greeted her eyes. Chen Rong looked up at the bright moon in the sky, thinking: *Tomorrow will be another clear day.*

After a moment of musing, whatever she may be thinking, she slowly turned her head and looked back at the hall.

Dances and songs of peace gaily rang in the night. Even through the throng of shadows, Chen Rong knew that the most crowded corner was were Wang Hong sat.

She watched the scene, laughed out loud, then turned and headed straight for the square.

She went to the carriage, lifted the curtain and climbed inside. As she was about to order Old Shang to drive off, someone fast approached her.

Spotting her from afar, the man called aloud: “Ah Rong of the Chen House?”

Chen Rong paused to focus her sight. She immediately recognized that he was the middle-aged scholar who often accompanied Wang Hong, the same one who had been with them in Mo’yang.

Chen Rong quickly accorded him a curtsy and respectfully said, “Aye, how may I help you, sir?”

The scholar strode to her carriage. Under the moonlight, he used a strange look to regard Chen Rong.

Afterward, he presented something to her and said, “This is for you.”

“For me?” Chen Rong curiously received it from his hand. She found that it was a sachet made from the finest palace silk. Soft and warm, it apparently had only been taken off of its owner not too long ago.

The scholar chuckled and said, “Or rather, it’s from Qilang.”

Thump thump thump, Chen Rong’s heart pounded faster.

She bit her lips and stared in the direction of the lights. Her heart that had just frozen up was fast melting. Slowly, she dropped her gaze and asked, “Why did he give this to me?”

“I don’t know,” the middle-aged scholar smiled, “When I asked, Qilang only said you’ll understand.”

He laughed pleasantly. Watching Chen Rong’s face, he nodded his head in satisfaction and added: “I’ve traveled far and wide and have come across many things, but this is my first time passing personal belongings to a little girl. Haha, what a novel

experience.”

Read more about Scented Sachets

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Chapter 100: He Is the Culprit; He Is the Savior

The middle-aged scholar laughed as he prattled on.

Chen Rong held the sachet in her hand feeling tumultuous inside. Why, this was a love token. Before, she could say that her being close to Wang Qilang was for self-preservation. But she had accepted his jade ornament last time, if she were to take his sachet this time, wouldn’t she be saying that she had accepted this man?

Both of her hands shook. One hand wanted to hug the sachet to her bosom. He was Lang’ya Wang Qi; even as his concubine, splendor and wealth would never be far from her. The other hand wanted to refuse the gift. So what if it was the Wang House in Lang’ya? Was she even good enough? Not being good enough would only bring heartbreak. Had she not tasted the consequences of this in her previous life?

At the thought of her past life, the beautiful dream along with all of her longings went away as fast as they had come.

Seeing the scholar turn away, Chen Rong hopped

down from the carriage and ran up to him. She put the sachet back into his hand and gave him a hasty curtsy. “Ah Rong of the Chen House is but a humble girl,” she tremulously began. “I am unworthy of Qilang’s personal item. Please take it back.” Then without looking up, she turned and ran back to her carriage, fleeing in panic even though she had been the one to dole out the rejection.

The scholar raised an eyebrow, stared after her back in surprise, and at length looked down at the sachet. “There’s a girl in this world who is indifferent to Qilang? Now that’s interesting.” He then turned around, hummed a song and returned inside.

The carriage began moving.

Outside the carriage, Old Shang, who did not know that Wang Yi had mentioned matrimonial ties to Chen Gongrang, began to mutter: “What is Lang’ya Wang Qi thinking? He isn’t willing to take my mistress yet he gives her his sachet. Does he just want to play around with her?”

His muttering made its way to Chen Rong’s ears. She was leaning absently on her seat, hands in a knot. Her beautiful face glowed one moment, then fell dejectedly the next, apparently conflicted…

The wheels clopped on the snow. Silvery moonlight filtered onto Chen Rong through the

curtain slit.

After some time, she raised the curtain to let the chilly wind sober her troubled heart. By the time her cheeks grew red, tranquility had gradually been restored to her eyes.

When the carriage headed for the side entrance, she looked to the front gate and suddenly said, “Let’s go to the main entrance.”

“Aye.” Old Shang drove the vehicle around a bend and to the front gate.

As he drove, he curiously looked back at Chen Rong. Against the moonlight and snowy background, her lips were drawn into a stubborn line. He suppressed his curiosity and did not open his mouth to ask.

It took about half an hour to get to the front gate from the side gate.

Once this half hour had passed, abashment and joy had both disappeared from Chen Rong’s face, replaced by a clarity in her eyes.

When the carriage got closer to the front gate, Chen Rong poked her head out and gazed to where the gatemen stood. It didn’t take her long to see the upright and temperate Zhang Xiang, humbly dressed, among the strapping guards.

The carriage slowly approached them.

Everyone turned to look when they heard the rolling carriage, some lighting up at the sight of Chen Rong.

This had included Zhang Xiang. He fixedly stared at her with a smile of admiration in his eyes.

Chen Rong returned his gaze.

While Zhang Xiang was taken by surprise, she slowly smiled a sweet smile at him, one that was all at once charming and luminous.

In the past, she had practiced this smile countless times in front of her mirror, believing that it could change Ran Min's ill feeling toward her. This was a smile a woman used to seduce a man.

Zhang Xiang was obviously taken by surprise for he dumbly looked at Chen Rong. As her carriage got closer and closer to him, he suddenly looked to the ground and retreated behind a tall guard, thereby cutting off Chen Rong's view of him.

Chen Rong paused. She slowly dropped her gaze and retracted her head inside.

The horse-drawn carriage drove out the front gate.

When she turned to look back a dozen paces later, all she could see were still a group of tall guards and a corner of Zhang Xiang's robe. She wryly smiled and thought to herself: *I was too hasty. My smile had not only failed to make a good*

impression, I fear, but it had also made him suspicious and disdainful of me. She sighed, having suddenly lost her mood.

Hearing her sigh, Old Shang tilted his head and asked, “Miss, are you alright?”

Chen Rong did not care whether he had seen her; she shook her head.

The carriage’s rolling became a lonely tune in the night.

At this time, Old Shang whispered, “Miss, you should marry Qilang if he is serious. I believe that he will protect you. He won’t let his future wife harass you.” Though he said this, there was an uncertainty in his voice that sounded as though he didn’t believe himself.

He hadn’t expected Chen Rong to answer, but after a while, she hoarsely replied, “I might as well be General Ran’s wife if I have to be his concubine.”

“Please think about it carefully, miss,” Old Shang hurriedly said. “General Ran is the match the clan has prepared for Ah Wei, you’ll anger the clan if you snatch him away. We won’t have their protection if something were to happen in the future.”

Once again, he didn’t think Chen Rong would answer, but her hoarse voice sounded: “I won’t, Old Shang, I won’t.” There was something like sadness

in her voice.

And then the carriage arrived at the Chen estate.

As expected, the next day was bright and clear. The sun in the sky helped to speed the melting of the snow along. The next several days were also sunny.

Chen Rong stayed in her courtyard during this time and didn't once step outside.

Today, a maid hurried over, curtsied and pleasantly said, "Miss, someone brought an invitation for you."

Invitation? Chen Rong received an invitation every day. She reached for it and gave a glance, then paused.

An elegant script read thus: "This afternoon. By the lake we previously met. I hope you'll come again!"

Wang Qilang. It must be Wang Qilang! Chen Rong had never seen his handwriting, but he was the only one to have called her out to the lake.

Chen Rong's heart again gave a thump.

Despite staying inside for the past few days, once she had composed herself, she would think of his handsome face and smiling eyes.

She felt as if she could float in the air, but chose to suppress the feeling. The sadness she had felt

from thinking she would never see him again when she had rejected his sachet was now swept away.

She sprang to her feet and loudly called, “Old Shang, prepare the carriage for me.”

“Do you want to go out, miss?” Nurse Ping asked, poking in the door.

Chen Rong hesitated. She looked at the invitation on the table, caressing the words written on it, as her face altered from ruddy to white. She was apparently struggling with herself.

At long last she slowly looked up and replied, “Aye, I want to go out.” She placed her hand on her chest and murmured, “What’s the point of living if I’m always minding myself?”

Nurse Ping was surprised to see Chen Rong talking to herself. Curious, she cast a glance at the note on the table. Despite being a servant, she was Chen Rong’s personal maid and therefore the face of her mistress. Under Chen Rong’s father’s request, she had also learned a word or two.

When Chen Rong saw her nurse looking at the invitation, she blushed and put it away in her sleeve.

She hurried outside.

It was already noon and would soon be time.

Old Shang answered back at the same time she walked out. “Old Shang, prepare the carriage,” she said to him.

“Aye.”

It was a fine day.

Snow had melted into slush on the streets of Nan’yang. Only the deep ditches still had some remaining white traces.

Chen Rong clasped the invitation under her sleeves. Even though she had repeatedly rejected him, a telling blush spread on her cheeks.

Slowly, the carriage drove out of the city gate and headed to the lake.

As time went by, their surrounding grew quiet and people’s voices receded to the distance.

At long last, Old Shang informed her: “We’re here, miss!”

Chen Rong poked her head out from the carriage.

She frowned – nobody was around. Well that’s strange, she had met Wang Hong and Huan Jiulang here last time.

Chen Rong gave the scene a sweep and gestured ahead where a few shadows were seen: “Go over there.”

Once they got near, Chen Rong’s frown worsened.

She looked at those people and said, “Still not him.”

Old Shang also frowned. “The snow had only melted and it’s so windy out here. I told you, Wang Hong wouldn’t be strolling on the lake right now.”

Chen Rong shuddered as soon as she heard him. She immediately said, “Turn around, Old Shang. Let’s go home.”

She had barely spoken when a gruff laughter rang from the hillside behind the woods: “Ain’t you in a hurry, sweetheart? You arrived so early. Damnit, I would’ve gotten here too late!”

“Old Shang, turn around,” cried Chen Rong in alarm.

She leaned forward and grabbed the whip she had taken with her out of habit.

“It’s too late.”

The one to laugh this time was a thin, sallow man. He widened his rat eyes to gawk at Chen Rong while cackling: “That man was right, you’re quite a stunner.”

Eyes glued to her full chest, he quite salivated when he said, “I’d be damned, I don’t think I’ve ever played with such a pretty woman before, old as I am.”

While he was speaking, six other men darted out

from the foothill; the two or three who had been standing nearby were also making their way over.

Old Shang repeatedly flung his whip and shouted, “Yah – yah – ”

The horse sprang forward.

This place was different from the city, however. The unpaved ground had turned muddy from the newly melted snow. How could they run with the carriage rocking back and forth?

The wheels got stuck in the mud. While they were unable to extract themselves, the six men had closed in on them and blocked the carriage’s path.

Old Shang was so fretful that he was sweating buckets. “Yah, yah –” His right hand continued to fling the whip, but the more anxious he was, the worse the carriage shook. It leaned to the side several times, almost throwing Chen Rong outside.

At this point, the men had encircled the carriage. They did not move, merely smiling at the scene. The first to speak was the stick-thin one in his forties. He leered at Chen Rong, gleefully saying: “Don’t be alarmed, sweetie. You aristocratic girls can only taste the flavor of one man your entire life. Now ya get to have a full feast with us today. Why would ya be afraid of such a good thing?”

His cohorts roared in bawdy laughter.

Chen Rong's heart was in knots; she hopelessly thought: *It seems Heaven wants to take me away. He knows I'm not supposed to exist in the world, so he wants to take me back.*

Her heart stilled at this thought.

Ever since she escaped from Mo'yang, Chen Rong discovered that her heart had truly hardened. Right now for example, once she understood that there was no escape, fear was no longer one of her thoughts.

She drew her lips and issued a low bark: "Old shang, forget it."

Old Shang broke down and hoarsely cried: "Then what are we going to do?"

Chen Rong ignored him.

Amid the men's sharp laughter, she searched and removed the hairpin from her hair.

She put it away in her sleeve, raised her whip, and coldly said, "If I'm going to die, I'll be dragging a few with me." She paused and then said through her teeth, "Too bad I have no way of dealing with the ones who had stabbed me behind my back."

Her eyes murderous and her voice ruthless, she stared at the men and shouted: "Who had ordered you to harm me? Why don't you tell me so I won't die an ignorant ghost?"

The sallow-faced man laughed out loud. “It’s a waste to be a ghost, pretty as you. Ya better off as our leader’s wife.”

Chen Rong whipped around to look at him. “Who wanted to harm me? I can’t escape anyway, why won’t you tell me?”

He stared at her bottom, saliva frothing over his yellow teeth. “All we know is that he’s a bearded man with a northern accent. He didn’t say who had sent him.”

“So I don’t even know who my enemy is?” Chen Rong said disappointedly.

While she exchanged with them, Old Shang continued to blubber, his hand trembling to hold the whip.

Seeing him and a seething Chen Rong, the men went on laughing. At this time, several other had also joined them, making a total of nine that completely blocked the carriage and its passengers. Now nine pairs of eyes were vulgarly leering at Chen Rong’s face and body, their laughter and obscene language becoming increasingly insufferable.

At this time, Chen Rong whipped around and snapped, “What are you crying for, so we’ll die, big deal!”

Old Shang choked at her outburst.

Still staring at him, she yelled, “Stop quaking. If I’m not afraid to die, then why should you when you’ve lived for so long?”

Old Shang looked at her in tears. His grief had mostly been for her; he could not bear to see her ruined like this. Now seeing that the young girl wasn’t panicking herself, he felt slightly better.

Wiping his snot and tears, Old Shang also raised his whip and tremulously said, “You’re right, we’ll just die at the most.”

Chen Rong softened to see him finally calm down.

She turned around to look at the men.

The criminal at the forefront turned his gaze to the whip in Chen Rong’s hand, grinning. “Missy, this whip ain’t easy to fling, why don’t ya put it down? Careful lest ya hurt ya self.”

Another roar of laughter broke out.

Chen Rong scoffed, thinking: Yes*, it’s very hard to fling. But if I fling it well, the impact will be formidable!*

The men watched a ravishing Chen Rong and laughed more loudly when they saw her grip tightening around the whip.

A dark and thin man came out from the group,

saying as he strode toward Chen Rong: “Fuck, I can’t wait anymore to get intimate with you.”

He got closer to her with each word he spoke. There were five steps between them, then four, then three, then two.

The dark man stretched his right hand toward Chen Rong’s whip and lewdly laugh: “Sweetheart, you’d better give it to me, keke.”

As he spoke, he went for Chen Rong’s pearly wrist.

“Pop” – the whip cracked through the air and like a flash struck down onto the man.

It was precise and hard, how could it have been issued by this frail girl?

Startled, the dark and thin man instinctively dodged to the side.

“Pop.” They abruptly heard another dull sound of contact between the whip and human flesh. Accompanying it was the man’s sharp scream.

His painful scream had barely sounded when the whip continuously cracked down again. Every time it flashed by, another scream was heard.

Whoosh. A stream of blood dyed the sky red. A dying scream pierced through the sky to the shock of everyone.

Forthwith, they heard the weight of the man fall to

the ground.

Everyone stood in disbelief.

All sounds were gone.

They widened their eyes, numbly gawking at the twitching body on the ground. His neck had been broken, from which blood was flowing out into a pool of sanguine mud. It was a terrifying scene!

They all raised their heads to look at Chen Rong.

They saw a beautiful girl who was frighteningly indifferent. This aristocratic girl not only did not panic, but she went so far as to spitefully kill someone without any qualms!

Didn’t she feel faint from the sight of blood?

In their befuddlement, some had begun to retreat backward.

At this point, Chen Rong’s piercing voice woke Old Shang up: “What are you freezing there for? Break away!”

Old Shang shuddered at her intimidating voice. “Aye.” He cracked the whip and hollered at the horse.

Perhaps because Old Shang is calmer now, or perhaps of their luck, the horse lurched and pulled the carriage out of the mud pit, running to the solid gravel path ahead.

As soon as Chen Rong's carriage dashed out, the man in front furiously shouted, "Catch her! Fuck, catch her –"

He was positively roaring by his last word.

The men snapped awake.

They howled in unison and rushed toward Chen Rong's carriage.

Old Shang sweated buckets, but did not care to wipe himself. He whipped the horse all the while hollering at it.

Chen Rong turned her head to face the men. Whenever someone advanced, she would ruthlessly crack her whip.

Her bloody whip emitted a deathly glare in the sunlight. Whenever she cracked it down, the bandits would rush to escape.

Dodging that way was causing them to slow down.

By the third time, Chen Rong's carriage had gained five paces.

At this time, one among them yelled out, "We can't let this girl run away. Chase after her, we must chase her down!"

At his reminder, the leading one shouted, "Horses. We fucking have horses, too!"

His men simultaneously woke up, turned and ran

back to their hiding place.

In just minutes, six horses had appeared in Chen Rong's sight.

Chen Rong looked at them while telling Old Shang: "Pay attention to the ground. We can't let the carriage overturn."

She thought that as long as they didn't overturn, they would have a chance to escape.

Old Shang cried: "Aye." Chen Rong's calm was infectious; his answer this time was loud and steady.

The carriage ,madly dashed straight ahead with six horses following behind.

"After her – fuck, y'all can't even deal with a woman. *And* we lost one man. I can't let this go!"

Five other men shouted at the same time.

Their shouts and cries came to Chen Rong with the whistling cold wind.

She pressed her lips together and unblinkingly stared at them. The cold wind tangled her long hair, blowing into her eyes.

Her heart tightened as she faintly thought: *Thankfully I had been in Mo'yang, else I would not be so calm today.*

The carriage was still bolting away, with the six

horses in hot pursuit.

It stood to reason that those horses, because of their lighter loads, should've been able to catch up to the carriage by now. Yet they were separated by twenty to thirty paces and had not caught up.

What could they do? They were skin and bones while Chen Rong's strong horse had been specially culled.

Half an hour went by.

They had pulled fifty paces away.

Even though Chen Rong's horse was among the finest, it had been pampered all these years and momentarily could not yet gain its top speed. Its endurance, however, was far better than the six horses that had nothing to eat but grass.

Watching Chen Rong's carriage going farther and farther, the bandit yelled, "After her! Look at her luscious breasts and ass. It's ecstasy once we chased her down!"

His words roused the men. They hollered, cracked their whips, kicked the horses' girth, and urged the animals on.

"Think about stripping the pretty little sheep. Doesn't it give you more strength? Eh? After her!"

Another man cried against the wind: “Boss, we have strength enough but these stupid horses can’t run anymore!”

Another man also shouted, “Fuck, this deal has fallen through. Can’t even chase a carriage, what exactly can we do?”

When their words were carried by the wind to Old Shang’s ears, his spirit lifted as he gladly said, “Do you hear, miss? Do you hear? They can’t run anymore, they can’t run anymore.”

Chen Rong was still turned the other way, staring at those people. Of course she had also heard their dialogues. “Aye aye, Old Shang, keep up a little more and we will be safe,” she shakily replied.

Old Shang laughed.

He raised the riding whip again.

The vehicle sped up.

Eventually, the people behind them grew more distant. Even though their shouts still came to them with the wind, the cracking whip and galloping horses grew increasingly weaker and slower.

Eventually, their faces had begun to blur, their shouts no longer heard.

Chen Rong turned around in jubilation.

“Old Shang, we’re safe.”

Old Shang laughed, “We’re safe, we’re safe,” breaking into a sob by his last syllable.

Chen Rong’s eyes also reddened.

At this point, she looked around and alarmingly cried, “Old shang, where are we?”

Old Shang stopped to take a look, paling as he did. Ahead was an endless dirt trail, to the left a tall mountain, to the right a barren field. What part of this place was still Nan’yang?

Chen Rong looked at the sun and dropped her voice to say: “I think we’re lost.”

…

Old Shang panicked. “Miss, it’s my fault, it’s all my fault.” Not waiting for him to go on, Chen Rong unceremoniously ordered, “What’s done is done. Let’s not talk about it. Since they aren’t chasing us, lets slow down a little. Once we see where we are, we can speed up again.”

Old Shang complied and brought the horses to a slow.

They jumped down and looked around. They couldn’t see an end to this place. Desolate mountains stood on one side while the fields on the other side were even bleaker.

“Miss, I’m gonna go up that hill for a look and see if anyone is around,” said the older man.

Chen Rong quickly stopped him and said, “It’ll be faster with the horse. Let’s go together.”

Old Shang halted, immediately realizing he couldn’t leave Chen Rong here alone.

He took the driver’s seat and drove the carriage ahead.

Chen Rong raised her curtain to look outside. Looking at the sun, she sighed, “Luckily we had left at noon. There should be half an hour left before it gets dark. Old Shang, we have to return to Nan’yang before then.”

In a time when the Hu army could come south at any time, the city of Nan’yang closed its gates as soon as the sun set. If they didn’t return before dark, they’d have to spend the night outside the city where refugees were gathered at each turn.

Old Shang had also thought of this. He cracked the whip and sent the carriage speeding forward.

The carriage dashed ahead.

Half an hour must’ve gone by when they reached a peak higher than the last hill. There was nothing they could do about it. The long mountain range had appeared to be very close, but once they set off, they found that it was very far away.

When they arrived, Old Shang jumped down and hurried to the peak.

Chen Rong did not move. She brought the carriage to a grassy area and let the horse graze while anxiously watching Old Shang.

After a quarter of an hour, he came back.

He didn’t look too positive. He looked at Chen Rong, stammering: “It’s still too low. All I could see are the mountains. I couldn’t see Nan’yang at all.” He sounded as if he wanted to cry.

Chen Rong pursed her lips.

“Don’t be afraid, Old Shang,” she quietly said. “Let us take some time to think about it.”

She jumped onto the carriage and looked around.

At this time, Old Shang exclaimed, “Miss, it’s soon to be supper time. We can look around for the sign of smoke.”

Chen Rong contemplated and then said, “Nan’yang is full of refugees right now.” What she meant was that the smoke, if there was any, might just be ignited by the refugees.

An anxious man, Old Shang cried in panic, “Then what should we do, what should we do, miss?”

Chen Rong wasn’t patient herself; she irately snapped: “Why are you asking me? How would I

know?”

Startled, Old Shang slowly lowered his head.

At this time, Chen Rong ordered him to use the carriage so that they’d have a way to leave even if the refugees came to them.

“Aye.”

“Right, isn’t Nan’yang situated in the south? Let’s try going south,” Chen Rong said soon after. She thought that there would surely be less barbarians the further south they went, even if there were likely more displaced refugees.

Old Shang hollered, flung the whip, and drove south.

The sun slowly dipped west as they went on, plunging them in more apprehension.

On their left was an endless mountain range; on their right was forever barrenness. Completely deserted, the road ahead seemed to have no end in sight.

At this point, Chen Rong quietly said, “We don’t have to go on.”

Old Shang turned around.

Chen Rong slightly turned her head to the side to look at a cleft. She pointed and said, “We’ve gone for so long without seeing anyone. That must mean

that it’s safe here. This place isn’t so bad. Let’s spend the night here and think of something tomorrow.”

“But miss, we’re so deep in the mountains, what if wild beasts are around?”

Chen Rong started to scream at him: “Then tell me what are we supposed to do? It’s gotten dark, Nan’yang had closed all its gates. Even if we knew our way, we wouldn’t be able to get in.”

Old Shang was given a scare. He hung his head, flung the riding whip, and drove the carriage toward the cleft Chen Rong had spoken of.

They went around a small hill to enter the cleft. It was small and narrow. A short hillside blockaded its front while a mountain backed into it. It had just enough space for five carriages to fit.

Chen Rong hopped down. She looked left and right before murmuring: “It’s winter, I reckon there aren’t any beasts around.” So she said, but what did she know about the habits of wildlife? They were nothing but self-comforting words.

Looking at the only entrance to the cleft, Chen Rong whispered: “Old Shang, should we block this place with a boulder?”

Old Shang looked at her and asked, “To block the wind?”

Of course not! As Chen Rong was about to blow up, she suddenly thought to herself: *If they discover us here, what use would the boulder be? Anybody could move it, and besides, if someone or a beast were to come down from the hill side, we could escape by carriage. Blocking would only stop our own vehicle.*

Thinking so, she closed her mouth.

It got dark frightfully fast.

Chen Rong stayed in the carriage while Old Shang sat on the driving seat. They listened to the rustling grass outside as they whispered to each other.

At a time so quiet, the roars of wild beasts and incessant insect chirping were more pronounced in the night. The rush of cold wind made any light breathing feel like a movement.

The more she listened, the more Chen Rong grew fearful.

Just then, Old Shang spoke in: “Miss, are you afraid?”

His voice was trembling a little.

While Old Shang was old, he was a house servant who had grown up in the estate, and had never gone through adversities.

“I’m alright,” Chen Rong softly replied. She paused, and then ordered, “Stop talking and listen. Is that the sound of hoofs?”

In the silence, Old Shang answered after a while, “I don’t hear anything.”

“Oh.” It was uncertain whether Chen Rong’s answer was filled with disappointment or relief.

She did not know that, at this time, two hundred guards were escorting a carriage toward the city gate.

Outside the carriage, a servant leaned in and whispered to the man inside: “Master, they’re only speculating words of an old servant. It’s not worth using up the prince’s badge for such a trifling matter.” Ever since the Hu army began to push south, once it got dark, the city gates would close from all four sides. No one could come in or out. Only a handful of families such as the Wang could get three badges and have three opportunities to enter or leave after curfew. This was largely thanks to the presence of members of the Lang’ya branch. The Chen estate, for example, only had one such badge.

After a while, a smooth and pleasant voice mildly replied, “They aren’t speculating words. I never sent her an invitation.” The speaker was Wang Hong.

He swiftly lifted the curtain.

As he watched the people on the street and the last glimmer of the setting sun in the west, a faint smirk formed on his ethereal countenance. “Using my name to call her out? I hate this kind of thing.”

The servant nodded.

At this time, the troop had arrived at the gate.

The city gate had been closed. His servant rode forward, raised a badge and loudly stated, “My master Wang Hong of Lang’ya wants to leave on urgent business.”

An officer rode forward. As he was about to deny them exit, the servant held up another badge and then threw it at his feet. “This was given to our master by the Prince of Nan’yang.”

The officer picked the badge up. He at once clasped his hands and replied, “Aye sir, go on!”

The carriage was put in motion.

And soon, their horses disappeared into the night.

The officer watched their distancing figures as he murmured, “Wang Hong of Lang’ya? Could there be another battle? What else can make someone like him leave the city in the middle of the night?”

Two hundred riders rode at a uniform pace. They

rode the finest horses and carried weapons with them. At their appearance, the refugees crouching on either side of the road receded back, whether because they heard the clopping or beheld their silhouettes. They hid in the corners and watched them ride away.

They soon arrived at the lake.

Wang Hong took a look at the fifty-acre lake and lightly ordered, “Fifty of you split up and go around the lake. See whether there are any unusual footprints, hoof prints, or wheel tracks. Also, stop and ask anyone you see.”

“Aye.”

Fifty riders rode off with their order.

After a quarter of an hour, five riders rode back to him. A young guard clasped his hands as soon as he dismounted his horse, saying: “Master, wheel traces of a carriage and nine people’s footprints were found two hundred paces from here, as well as human blood and a dead body on the ground.”

He paused at this juncture to look at Wang Hong.

In the flickering fire, Wang Hong’s handsome face seemed as though it was hidden behind a layer of mist. What could the guard possibly see?

“The carriage had been stuck in the mud,” the young guard continued. “It later went to the west.

Following the traces, we saw footprints of eight people followed by the hooves of six horses. These hoof prints came from the hillside.”

He stopped and looked toward Wang Hong.

In the swaying flames, Wang Hong nodded and said, “It’s unmistakably her. Relay my order to track down the traces.”

“Aye.”

Horseshoes kicking, wheels clopping.

The young guard was clearly a tracking expert. He rode at the forefront and jumped down every ten paces to take a look.

By and by, he neared the carriage and said to Wang Hong, “Master, the six horses did not have enough stamina to continue chasing. Only the carriage went on in that direction.”

He pointed ahead.

Wang Hong lowered the curtain and lightly said, “I got it, let’s go.”

“Aye.”

The horses again sprinted forward.

The young guard still led the way. He went for about a hundred paces, jumped down to take a look, and then mounted his horse again.

They went that way for an hour before the guard pointed to a wheel track and said, “They had stopped here for some time but had since gone toward that mountain.”

“Let’s continue.”

“Aye.”

Some time later, the guard stopped and turned to Wang Hong with his hands clasped in ceremony. “Master, the carriage is nearby.”

He paused, then asked, “Should we call their names?” Since they were surrounded by mountains, one call would send echoes ringing and they’d very soon find her.

In the flickering glow of the fire, Wang Hong smiled.

His smile was a little mysterious, a little shrewd, and at the same time a little weary.

He lifted the curtain and hopped down. Walking toward the guard, he lightly chuckled: “What are you calling her name for? I think she’s had enough fright for today.”

The guard did not fully understand what he meant.

Wang Hong jumped onto a horse belonging to another guard and said to the young one: “Let us go and find her.”

“Aye,” replied the young guard while looking quizzically at his master. Some time later, he confirmed his answer and rode off.

This time, he would look around every ten paces or so, Wang Hong following closely behind.

Soon, he got to a place and pointed inside. “Master, she’s probably in here.”

Wang Hong hummed in reply. As he listened, his lips gradually upturned to show a soft smile.

“Go and make some noises,” he said. “But don’t come up to greet when you see someone come out. Just go and find a place to pass your time.”

This time, the young man was quick to understand. He laughed out loud, winked and whispered to Wang Hong: “Do you want her to commit to you out of gratefulness?”

Ethereal and pure, Wang Hong stood with his hands clasped behind his back as he faintly smiled. “Commit herself to me? Adoration, perhaps, but commitment will be difficult given her personality.”

The bodyguard stifled his laugh, stomped on the ground, and headed for the cleft.

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Chapter 101: Fallen in Love

Chen Rong huddled inside the cleft and like Old Shang, did not make a movement. Though they knew nothing of battlefields, they could sense a difference in the air, particularly the hoofbeats that were causing the insects to cease chirping and the beasts to cease howling. It was making them feel a dreadful chill.

Afraid to speak, afraid to move, each second arduously trickled by.

Chen Rong forced her eyes to stay open as she motionlessly stared out into the darkness.

They had stuffed the horse's mouth with a piece of cloth. Only that way could they keep their hiding place from being discovered.

All of a sudden, a series of footsteps sounded, eerily approaching them in the dark.

Chen Rong turned pale. *Have the bandits found us?* It was unlikely, but her heart was in such a knot that she had no way to think.

The footsteps were getting closer and closer.

They were indeed coming to the cleft.

Beads of sweat condensed on Chen Rong's

forehead. Old Shang leaned back toward her, shakily saying: “M-miss, they’re heading our way.”

His voice was filled with distress.

Chen Rong wanted to contradict him, but she was also hearing the same footsteps walking faster toward the cleft.

We must have really been found!

Chen Rong blanched as white as a sheet.

At this point, Old Shang hoarsely said to her, “Miss, let me see if I can distract them.” In his mind, he was nothing but an old man who would die sooner or later. His mistress was different, however. She was still too young, and more importantly, she was a beautiful maiden. No matter whose hands she fell into, she would either die or live a living death.

With this thought, he gained courage and, in a short time, felt he had become much taller and bigger.

Without waiting for Chen Rong’s answer, he jumped off the carriage and dashed outside.

In a flash, he had gotten to the cleft’s entrance.

Poking his head out to look, he saw a tall, strapping figure, blurry though it was, about a hundred paces away. The flickering torch behind

him made him look terrifyingly massive.

The man was moving toward the cleft's entrance. Some distance from him was the indistinct darkness where it appeared as if numerous troops were waiting to ambush them.

He was blocking the exit. If they drove out, they would be falling straight into their trap.

Old Shang clenched his teeth, turned and whispered to Chen Rong: "Take care, miss!" Then he strode out.

His footsteps pounded on the ground as he ran away from the cleft.

He frequently looked back during his flight. Sure enough, the tall man was startled by his running. He snapped his head up to bark: "Who's there?" He spoke with a humorless tone and a vigilance only men of the military would have.

Old Shang deliberately ran up the hill, causing rolling rocks to rumble in the night.

As expected, the man stopped what he was doing and quickly gave chase.

He is chasing, and there are no cohorts behind him! The lady is safe for now.

At this thought, Old Shang's heart lightened as he began to frantically run ahead. Behind him, the

man’s height caused him to move clumsily. It had only been a few dozens steps but he was getting away from him.

Chen Rong had a sinking feeling once Old Shang left.

With her right hand holding the whip and her left hand holding her hairpin, she kept her eyes wide open and unblinkingly stared into the dark.

It was very quiet. The only thing she heard was the sprinting steps going farther and farther from her.

Has Old Shang succeeded in leading them away?

Chen Rong held her breath, slowly climbed down the carriage, and tentatively walked out.

Starlight sparsely dotted overhead so that Heaven and Earth were not submerged in total darkness.

Step by step, she moved to the cleft’s entrance.

She stepped on something and almost fell down. Luckily, she caught herself by propping the whip’s handle on the ground.

She slowly pull herself up, and then froze.

In the bleak night, a white figure appeared at the cleft’s entrance.

The man dressed in white shouldn’t be a ghost right?

She almost screamed.

At a time when she couldn’t be more frightened, the white figure spoke. His voice was sweet and light, and most importantly, it was very familiar: “Ah Rong?”

Wang Hong!

Heaven, it’s really Wang Hong!

So this was what a man in despair would feel when he saw a ray of hope, when he found joy within his grief.

Her legs gave out as she slid to the ground, shakily asking: “Wang Hong?”

“It is I.”

Wang Hong’s voice remained elegant and light. She didn’t need to look at him to know that he must be coming to her in his serene way, smiling as always.

Chen Rong’s eyes instantaneously turned red. She chokingly ran to him.

She ran desperately. In the blink of an eye, she had gotten before him. She was so astonished and overcome with emotions that she didn’t think of anything else. She just flew into his arms and clung onto him.

Hugging him tight, Chen Rong began to cry. “Why

did it take you so long?" she tremulously said. Pausing to sob, she lightly beat his chest with her small fists before hoarsely crying again: "Why did it take you so long, why did it take you so long?"

All of her happiness, relief, and emotions had, at this moment, turned into streaming tears and one single line: "Why did it take you so long?"

Chen Rong hadn't known that she was looking forward to his rescue this much…

At this time, Wang Hong stretched his arms and gently hugged her back.

His hug was as warm as it was strong. The arms that didn't seem to be so wide turned out to be large and steady. They were the stronghold she had longed for, had missed, had gazed at from her confines, but had never dared to wish for herself.

Like someone who was clutching onto her lifeline, Chen Rong hugged him as though she was holding onto the warmth she had sought for far too long. She burried her face in the crook of his neck and, as she felt his warmth, burst into tears. "Wang Hong, Wang Hong, Wang Hong…" again and again, she sobbed.

Under the stars, Wang Hong seemed to be startled by her passionate calls. Some time later, his arms tightened around her.

Chen Rong dabbed her tears on his collar, her soft and fragrant lips occasional grazing his pulses as she sobbed. "Wang Hong, Wang Hong, Wang Hong……" Gradually, her sobbing reduced into stillness.

At this time, Wang Hong reached out to carry her.

He hadn't appeared to be that strong, but he was holding her quite effortlessly.

He carried her forward two steps and gently deposited her in the carriage.

Chen Rong clutched his sleeve, murmuring: "Don't go, don't go… I beg you."

"I won't go," he gently assured her. In the dark, his eyes gleamed as bright as the stars in the sky. Smiling down at her, he held out his hand to wipe her tears.

When his slender hand moved downward, intentionally or otherwise, its fingertips brushed across her lips. After making her shudder, he smilingly said, "You are here, where would I go?"

Chen Rong calmed down. She slowly let go of her grasp on his clothes.

Wang Hong also mounted the carriage.

She again clung onto him, ducking her face in his chest. Her arms wound around him, clearly still

afraid he would leave her.

Wang Hong lifted her up and gently placed her on his lap. Then, he languidly leaned back against the seat.

Now hugging Chen Rong in a more comfortable position, Wang Hong's fingers brushed across her cheek to wipe her tears. "There's nothing to be afraid of anymore," he murmured.

"Uhm," Chen Rong hummed. She buried her face in his arms. "Now that you're here, I'm not afraid."

With her arms wrapped around his waist, she lay still in his embrace and felt the warmth emanating from his body. "I had thought I was done for."

Wang Hong hummed.

Like a chatterbox that had been opened, Chen Rong went on to talk: "There were nine of them. They had blocked my carriage. My carriage was stuck in the mud and wouldn't budge no matter what. I had thought I was done for." She sounded terrified.

Wang Hong stroked her hair, comforting: "Everything's all right now."

Both his action and words were simple, but they did enough to take away the panic from Chen Rong's voice and she calmed down on the whole.

She hid in his arms, murmuring: "I even killed one of them! Wang Hong, I killed him with my own hands. I cracked the whip and broke his neck. He had bled so much that his blood was spraying onto me."

Hoarsely, she described her killing in detail.

Wang Hong gently combed his fingers through her hair, lowered his head and very softly said, "Stop thinking about it. They deserved to die."

Again, his simple words took the edge off of her.

"I'm glad you're here," she murmured as she was hugging him. "Qilang, I used to think there was no one who cared about me, loved me, or cherished me in this world… Qilang, I'm glad you're here."

Her voice drew long, and so did her affection.

Wang Hong gazed down. His extraordinarily starry eyes quietly watched the exhausted Chen Rong finally closing her eyes in ease.

…

Some time had passed when Chen Rong suddenly screamed and then hysterically yelled, "Old Shang. Qilang, you have to go save Old Shang!"

Wang Hong stroked her hair, softly shushing her: "Sleep, he'll be fine."

His tone and voice had a strange calming affect on

Chen Rong.

She closed her eyes; light sonorous breathing slowly followed.

She had slipped into a slumber.

Under the stars, whistling cold wind blew through the curtain, insects chirped around them, and beasts roared from the top of the hills.

But none of it had anything to do with them.

It was as if spring had blossomed inside the carriage. He held her as she lay in his arms, their breaths mingling…

When the stars in the sky had become brighter, Chen Rong suddenly gave a start and widened her eyes screaming: "I don't want to die, I don't want to die… Old Shang! Old Shang!"

She looked around.

She saw Wang Hong quietly looking at her.

In the dark, his lucent eyes calmed Chen Rong down. She hid her face in his embrace, closed her eyes again, and went back to sleep.

Wang Hong reached out to stroke her long hair.

Combing his fingers through her tresses, he removed the pins and ornaments from her head.

Her long hair came spilling down, but she was still fast asleep.

He looked down at her lying on his chest, gingerly reaching out to touch her long eyelashes.

His fingers moved like a breeze, his eyes undulated like the waves.

…

Chen Rong roused to the sound of chirping.

Dreamily, she slowly opened her eyes.

A second, two seconds.

She blinked to clear her view.

Gradually, she sensed something strange underneath her body. She slowly tilted her head and looked up to see a remarkably handsome face only inches from her, his breathing grazing her face.

She instantaneously flushed.

She hurriedly propped herself up, wanting to sit.

Unfortunately, she felt prickling in her limbs as soon as she moved. It turned out she hadn't changed position the entire night.

Chen Rong clenched her teeth, relaxed her limbs, and just moved her face away.

She again studied the handsome man she was lying on top of.

His eyes were closed and his breathing was faint.

The dawn light revealed a few beads on frost on his silky, dark hair. On his shapely thin lips were also small beads of frost, sparkling on his stubble.

He was so radiant even in his sleep. It was as if pearls and moonlight were washing over his features, so that anyone who might give him a glance would be stunned and blinded, and be without time to enjoy the contour of his face.

Such was his handsomeness and matchless elegance.

Qilang of the Wang House in Lang'ya. Unparalleled among the most famous of them all.

And yet he had come in the middle of the night only to save her…

Chen Rong closed her eyes and crawled into his arms again.

Unconsciously, she was wreathed in smiles.

Only now did Chen Rong realize she had long been in love with him, admiringly so and deeply so… That was why when she saw him come for her, she had forgotten to ask about Old Shang. She didn't even wonder whether he had come alone, or how he knew she was hiding in this place. Who had informed him? And what about that invitation.

When she saw him, she hadn't the least bit of sensibility and sobriety left. She was just surprised

and joyous that he had come to her rescue; she was just relieved, touched, happy, and filled with emotions…

As she thought of this, the overwhelming joy and happiness made Chen Rong, who had never experienced what it felt like to have her love returned, felt for the first time that the world could be so beautiful… How she wished time could stop – so happy was she, that she could die right there and then!

After daydreaming for a while, Chen Rong suddenly remembered that her hands and feet had fallen asleep, then what of Wang Hong who got slept on all night long?

Feeling bad, she quickly stretched her hand and endured the horrible prickling sensation to slowly move away.

Her strengthless hand caused her entire body to plop over on the side. Her shoulders crashed onto the shaft with a loud thud.

She endured the pain to rise halfway and looked toward Wang Hong. When she saw that his eyes were still closed, soundly asleep, she thought with relief: Fortunately I've not woken him.

She gritted her teeth, propped herself on the shaft using her other arm, and then slowly dismounted

the carriage. Due to the excruciating pain, her soft white neck and forehead broke out in cold sweat.

Step by step, she struggled to walk to the front.

Chen Rong's figure had just left the cleft when the sleeping Wang Hong opened his eyes. He slightly tilted his head and stared after her slowly moving figure before turning to her injured right shoulder.

When Chen Rong came back, she noticed his snow-white figure sitting inside the open carriage.

Upon hearing Chen Rong's footsteps, he looked up and softly smiled.

And just like that, daylight dawned upon them, and the flowers cast their sweet perfume!

Unconsciously, Chen Rong also broke into a beatific smile. After she had bashfully stared at him, almost as a reflex, she hid her left hand that was holding a handful of wild fruits behind her.

After she had exchanged them behind her, she struggled to raise the fruits with her injured right hand and laughingly said, "Look, I've picked a bunch of wild fruits. These are edible; they smell heavenly, too. Do you want to try some?"

Wang Hong softly smiled. He glanced at the grape-like fruits and noticed that there were a few drops of fresh blood on them.

These fruits had apparently just been washed, drops of water still sparkling on their skin.

Wang Hong looked at Chen Rong and then slowly outstretched his right hand.

He was unhurried and elegant, but Chen Rong, whose mind was entirely on him, found that his movement appeared slightly stiff.

She walked up to him and hastily asked, "Is your arm numb?" She had slept on top of him and even her hands and feet were numb for a long time. What must he feel, then, having slept underneath her?

She stretched her uninjured left hand to him, but thought better of it and quickly switched for her right one.

Wang Hong was still smiling by the time he caressed her cheeks.

His touch swept across her face like a spring breeze.

Then, he quietly searched for her left hand and took it in his.

He looked down at the creamy hand in his palm. It was pretty and soft, and had small circular rings.

He turned to look at her index finger.

There, an inch-long cut was found. The bleeding

had stopped though it was an open wound.

He slowly lowered his head.

He lowered his thin lips and gently pressed them onto her injured finger, causing her to tremble at his touch.

Wang Hong looked up.

He held her finger in his mouth, and, in the morning light, his lucent eyes were so absorbing that it made Chen Rong flustered.

The frost on his hair playfully fell onto his tall nose, another one even rolled down and sank into his lips…

Chen Rong's face reddened.

She lowered her head and only lifted her eyes enough to timidly look at him, quietly saying: "D-don't."

Her voice was weak and so were her legs.

Wang Hong obediently moved his lips away.

A silvery ray drew from his departed lips to her fingertip, reflecting a myriad of colors.

Chen Rong's legs went soft. She fell into his arms, murmuring, "Don't, don't…"

She didn't know what she was trying to say.

All she knew was that Wang Hong was especially

bewitching at this moment. He was especially flustering her and stirring her. His effect on her was so strong that a strange urge coursed in her loins.

Chen Rong had lived as a maiden in both lifetimes. All she really knew was that she was not herself right now. She seemed to want him to do something. She wished he would meld her into him, she wished… She didn't dare to think more.

Wang Hong reached out to support her.

Tenderly, he looked down and concernedly asked, "Do you feel unwell, Ah Rong? Why is your face so red? Your body is feverish too."

His eyes were too kind and caring!

Though she had been a lady of boudoir confines, and had never been told of anything by anybody, she knew well enough what was causing her abnormal reaction.

Instantly, her face flushed from her ears to her neck.

She hastily turned and scooted away. Mortified with herself, she turned her back to him, lowered her head and said, "Aye, I'm feeling unwell. I might have caught a cold."

She heard the sound of pouring liquid.

She turned her head in surprise.

She saw Wang Hong smiling – beads of frost adhering on his skin. With his head bowed, he was now filling two cups with wine.

His movements were graceful and his smile was elegant. They were the grace of the privileged and the elegance of one who did not know of life's turmoils.

Chen Rong lifted her head and dazedly looked at him, startlingly finding that she was slowly falling deeper… If there was ever a love that could humble a woman to a speck of dust, then it was because she loved this man, she thought.

If loving Ran Min had made her feel hopeless, then loving this man was making her feel small.

Slowly, Chen Rong dropped her gaze and placed her hand on her chest.

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Chapter 102: Qilang, Drive a Sword Through Me!

She clutched her chest and took a deep breath.

Slowly, she looked up.

In the morning light, she was regarding him with eyes that were enchantingly lucent. Her gaze was especially somber and distant.

Her strange look caused Wang Hong to tilt his head, so that his hair was falling across his face. “What is it?”

Chen Rong’s mouth opened only to close again. She was looking at him with a luminous smile that was both childlike and earnest. “Heaven is teasing me, I’m sure. I don’t think I’ll ever find happiness in this life.”

Wang Hong lifted his head. His right hand involuntarily propped on the seat as he nimbly sat up.

He stared at Chen Rong with an unhurried smile. “What do you mean, Ah Rong?”

Chen Rong looked at him with a fervor in her eyes. The kind of fervor with which someone would engrave another in his heart. She derived

contentment from merely looking at him; she was filled with love by merely being next to him.

She was besotted, but she merely smiled: “Nothing.”

Wang Hong continued to study her.

He should know what Chen Rong meant, smart as he was. She was obviously telling him that even if she loved him with all of her soul, even if she was madly in love with him, she was sober enough to know he was beyond her reach and that she would never have him… They were never to be, and so she would never find happiness.

How could there be a girl like her? So young and passionate, yet always possessing a sage’s composure, sophistication, and even jadedness.

How could she contemplate with such a terrifying sobriety when she was so very clearly stirred?

Wang Hong faintly smiled.

He dropped his gaze and leaned against the carriage’s left shaft, his dark hair spilling against his pristine robe.

He was basking in the morning sun and mild breeze. Behind him was only a mountain that couldn’t be any more ordinary; he was only sitting in a horse carriage; and yet he remained as poised

and refined as he would in a resplendent courtyard.

His thin and fair hand slowly stroked the wine vessel on the table while he unhurriedly said to her: “Are you trying to tell me that once we return to Nan’yang, you’ll go back to being you and I’ll go back to being me? That what happened here was no more than a dream?”

He spoke slowly, and his voice was soothing and pleasant as he looked at her.

For whatever reason, Chen Rong’s heart constricted to see Wang Hong this way.

She looked down, at which time Wang Hong placed his hand on hers.

His fingers gently grazed her palm.

Instantly, a numbing sensation sent Chen Rong’s heart aflutter.

But Wang Hong only took a fruit from her hand.

He played with it in the palm of his hand. “You can be heartless sometimes,” he said, sounding rather insouciant.

Chen Rong bowed her head and quietly explained, “Life doesn’t come easily. If we keep asking for things that don’t belong to us, we will only fall to our demise.”

Wang Hong smiled, his voice light and cold: “That being the case, why are you leaning so close to me?” He picked up a wild fruit and played with it in his palm, faintly smiling all the while: “If people see us, wouldn’t they think that we are engaged in some dirty affair?”

He used “dirty” (1), a term that was generally used to described adulterers, it was vulgar and had always been meant as an insult.

1. He really said 苟且 “careless” as in loose or improper, but it doesn’t have the same slighting connotation in English, so I opted for dirty.

The noble and untainted Wang Qilang had used such a word with her!

Chen Rong’s face blanched as she lowered her head and said, “It is a wondrous thing to be by your side… I know now what it feels like to ‘not be able to contain one’s feelings’.” This was a lie, of course. In her previous life, she had known what it feels like to not be able to contain her feelings, she had known she could not let go.

Wang Hong slowly looked up at her, staring at her beautiful face, the face that was stunningly exquisite even after yesterday’s shock and being washed in only water, glowing cheeks and shapely eyebrows.

“Come here,” he beckoned, extending his hand.

Chen Rong dazedly looked up and approached him.

She placed her small hand into his.

Wang Hong closed his hand.

With his right hand holding her trembling left hand, his left hand enveloped her waist.

She didn’t resist his affection. She even leaned against him, unable to keep herself from trembling in his arms.

Wang Hong held her.

He stroked her long dark hair and softly asked, “Was last night frightful?”

Only when he asked did Chen Rong remember she still had many unanswered questions. She closed her eyes, her face flushed from wine, and murmured, “Aye, extremely. I had thought that fate had come for me.”

“Fate?” Wang Hong whispered.

“It was really fate.”

They both understood what she meant.

Chen Rong lay still in his arms, facing his collarbone, her fragrant respiration breathing into him.

Inhaling the fresh scent and relishing the warmth

that was radiating from him, Chen Rong suddenly called, “Qilang.”

“Hmm?”

“Did you bring anyone with you? Call someone here and tell him to kill me.”

Wang Hong looked down at her fixedly.

Her eyes were still closed, and the corners of her mouth were tugging into a smile, but her voice was stoic as she murmured: “Just like that, stab me from behind. Make sure to drive the sword through my heart so my death would be quick. But don’t pull the blade out too fast, else my blood would stain your white robe; that wouldn’t be very good.”

She slowly looked up and gazed at him, tremulously saying: “Truly, I beg you, Qilang. I’m afraid I’m going to regret it in a moment.”

Wang Hong smiled back. He gently looked at her and asked, “Why are you uttering these delirious words?”

Chen Rong smiled. She lowered her eyes and again fell into his embrace. She even extended her arms to wrap around his waist, quietly saying as she hugged him tight: “You’re so smart, how can you not know whether it’s delirium or not? Qilang, I don’t think there’ll be a happier moment in my life

or a moment more fulfilled. If I can die at my happiest moment, then I reckon I'm still luckier than most."

Wang Hong didn't answer.

He let her hug him and snuggle up to him.

After a long time, he smilingly asked, "And now? Do you still want to die?"

Chen Rong shook her head, sounding pained when she next replied, "Nay, dying is the hardest thing to do."

She didn't let go of him.

She was still hugging him tight.

Leaning against his embrace and inhaling his scent, she softly said to him, "I really don't want to go back to Nan'yang." She encircled her arms around his neck and impishly asked, "Qilang, can we not return today? If you get hungry, I'll pick wild fruits for you. If you get thirsty, we can drink from the stream. Can't we go back tomorrow?"

Wang Hong softly smiled and returned her gaze. "If you have such a hard time letting go, then why must you push me away, Ah Rong?"

This time, he made it clear: "If you love me, you and I can be together."

Chen Rong likewise smiled. She got up from his

arms, combed her long hair and smoothed out her dress.

Afterwards, she took a step outside before turning around to give him a smile as vibrant as the nightblooming cereus. “Because I know myself,” she began. “My greed is insatiable and I’ll always want more. Once I got to be your concubine, I’d do everything I could to be an honored concubine. Who knows, I might even scheme to kill your wife. If I couldn’t kill her the first time, I’d try a second time, if I couldn’t kill her the second time, I’d try a third time. As long as I wasn’t dead, I’d harm them all, your wife, your concubines. I’ll harm as many as you bring into your household. How ever many there would be is how ever many that would die.”

She smiled brilliantly like the season in autumn, but why was it that her words were cruel and cold, and so matter-of-fact: “So if you’re going to start anything, you should think about marrying and loving only me. Otherwise, your life and mine will never be in peace.”

She turned her head and walked to the front, her back as straight as a bamboo stem.

Her figure was exceptionally radiant under the sunlight.

Wang Hong tilted his head and let his hair shade his eyes as he watched her going farther and

farther away from him.

Chen Rong soon got to the exit. She looked outside and asked, “Qilang, where are your people? Why haven’t they come to look for you?”

Wang Hong jumped off the carriage to walk up from behind her. He also looked outside and then smiled and said, “I’ll drive, get in. We’ll go back to Nan’yang on our own.” He didn’t explain to Chen Rong about the servants.

Chen Rong didn’t think that far. Once she heard that he would be driving, and furthermore for her, her eyes abruptly rounded.

She whipped around, lighting up as she buoyantly cried, “You will drive?” Her eyes curved up, and she broke into a fit of giggles.

She was inside the carriage within a few steps. “Hah, Wang Qilang is driving me! Wang Qilang is going to be my driver!”

Her voice crisply rang, sounding to be very happy.

When he heard her joyous exclamation, Wang Hong wryly smiled and headed to the carriage.

At the crack of his whip, the horse kicked off its hooves and trotted out.

The carriage left the mountain cleft and drove out to the open road.

Wang Hong turned around when he didn’t hear Chen Rong’s voice.

This time, her bewildered eyes were also arched with gratification and curiosity.

She dazedly looked at him as she repeatedly murmured, “Lang’ya Wang Qi will be driving me?”

She was still in utter disbelief.

No one would believe her if they heard of it. In this era, the aristocrats valued their faces far more than their lives. There’s a saying: “There are no poor scholars at the highest ranks and no aristocrats at the lowest ranks.” (2) The disparity between the upper and lower classes was like the great galaxy that nobody had managed to cross for thousands of years.

Yet the golden child of the Wang House in Lang’ya was volunteering himself as a driver for a lowly concubine’s daughter. Even if the situation required it, such would be a shocking matter to tell.

2. This line is derived from the Nine-rank System (九品中正制) which selected and assigned officials to their positions based on family status instead of merits. This system was eventually replaced by the Imperial Examination (科举). Note that Chen Rong’s father and brother are thought to

still be 8th ranked, which is at the bottom rung in a system with 9 ranks.

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Chapter 103: Who Sent the Gold Coffin?

The carriage slowly made its way outside.

Chen Rong felt, for some reason, that Wang Hong was driving very slowly. Did he perhaps know what she was thinking, and thus wanted to make this moment last a little longer?

At this thought, she wryly smiled and pulled the curtain down.

Quickly regretting her decision, however, she lifted one corner to maintain her view of his back.

Eventually, the carriage pulled onto the main road.

Yellow dust soared skyward along the road. Some time later, Chen Rong noticed that Wang Hong had only driven on it for about half an hour before turning onto a mountain trail.

Rippling streams and occasional bamboo groves lined their way. It being winter, dried weeds as tall as a man’s waist intertwined with vines and wrapped around the trees.

Mountainsides flanked the seemingly untraveled path where human dwellings could not be found.

Chen Rong poked her head out and asked in surprise: “Qilang, where are we?”

Wang Hong, who was lazily sitting on the driver's seat, didn't turn around. Even though the rolling carriage had dyed his robe yellow, he still looked as if he was dressed in finery at a Wang banquet.

With a smile, he carelessly flung the whip, saying: "It's a small trail. There are few travelers who come through this area, and no pastures to speak of. The refugees don't like it here."

Chen Rong understood that he was telling her this road was safe.

"I'm familiar with all the small trails around here," Wang Hong said just as she was about to ask him another question. He seemed to have known what she would ask, and went ahead with telling her.

Chen Rong found it hard to believe. She gave a start and then stared at his back.

Nevertheless, she didn't question him. She knew both Ran Min and Wang Hong, being men of high standing, did not like their words to be questioned; neither did they like to explain themselves. Their words were final, as far as they were concerned.

Morrow wind leisurely came, rustling Wang Hong's hair and stirring the curtain.

After half an hour, Wang Hong's free hand began tapping on the wood panel as he sang: "My heart grows somber when I look to Luo'yang. For I recall

the sunset over the western hills and my king who is no longer there. In his place is an abandoned grave amid the cawing of crows.”

His voice went paralyzed.

All of a sudden, he looked skyward and howled, his ringing voice traveling to the far distance.

As Chen Rong quizzically watched this unfamiliar Wang Hong, his long howl gradually turned into sobs…

Amid his sobs and Chen Rong’s bewilderment, a high singing voice rose from the distant mountainside. Hoarse and old, it sang bleakly: “He had once been a hero, now reduced to a mound; once dressed in finery, now a graveless heap of bones.”

He stopped singing at this juncture and also began to howl. This translation belongs to hamster428.wordpress.com

Chen Rong looked back to see a bearded woodcutter in his forties, with hands akimbo and head howling skyward. He stood three hundred paces away by the mountainside full of dead trees.

His bleak and stark howl rang long and far.

As she looked at the man, Chen Rong suddenly realized that he must be a recluse scholar.

As she reflected upon this thought, the woodcutter bent over to pick up his ax to cut the small tree in front of him while gruffly yelling: “Who is singing at the foothill? Everything was fine until you sang. Now I am full of grief!” The woodcutter was obviously conversant with music. His rather rhythmic cutting and shouts were perfectly coordinated.

Wang Hong went on flinging the whip and did not look up when he called out his answer: “Lang’ya Wang Qi.”

“Hahaha. Lang’ya Wang Qi? That’s an illustrious name you’ve got there.”

At this time, the carriage had pulled to within two hundred paces of him.

The woodcutter looked down and cried in surprise: “Alas, who sits inside that Wang Hong of Lang’ya has to bother himself to drive?”

Wang Hong smiled, telling Chen Rong: “Lift your curtain and let the elder see you.”

Chen Rong complied and lifted her curtain.

Due to embarrassment, her head remained bowed nevertheless.

The woodcutter paused and then suddenly laughed out loud. Apparently in a good mood, he threw his ax to the side, placed his hands on his hips and

burst into delighted laughter.

After causing a string of echoes, he said, “Capital, capital. Good for you, son of the Wang House in Lang’ya who is willing to drive a woman around.”

After a while, he turned to Wang Hong and asked, “Your song just now was of varying lengths. Is it a new rhyme scheme?”

Wang Hong smiled and replied, “Nay. I had heard this lady of mine recite it last time and thought that the varying lengths are light and breezy, and have a good flow.”

The woodcutter continued to laugh.

He picked up his ax, turned and went into the deep mountain. Eventually, his laughter turned into sad chokes, their melancholy sounded like Heaven’s mourning in the rustling wind.

The carriage moved on and continued to drive forward.

Not only was the road Wang Hong picked remote, but it was also a short cut. In less than two hours, the city walls of Nan’yang appeared before Chen Rong’s eyes.

She looked at the tall wall and the distant silhouettes where people had amassed outside the city. Had the refugees gathered to make trouble?

At this thought, Chen Rong looked to the front at Wang Hong.

He was still leisurely flinging the whip. His dusty robe was fluttering in the wind and his dark hair also flying. Even so, he was astonishingly beautiful from her vantage point in the back.

Before long, their carriage had arrived outside the city.

A sea of people had amassed here. In the center of the throng were quarreling noblemen who were encircled by armed soldiers.

These soldiers were clad in gleaming brass armor; in their hands were long polearms. At least 5000 of them were surrounding the nobles.

They were the prince’s guards. This translation belongs to hamster428.wordpress.com

“What’s happening?!” Chen Rong couldn’t help herself from exclaiming.

But the crowd was too occupied with the clamor and none could answer her.

At this point, a young scholar among the nobles raised his voice: “What does the Prince of Nan’yang mean by doing this? Last time, he had prevented us from leaving the city. This time, he is even blocking the Wang House in Lang’ya. Does he really think that nobody in this world can subdue a prefectural

prince like him?”

His voice had turned sour and he was practically thundering by the end of his speech.

Someone from the Wang House in Lang’ya wanted to go out?

Chen Rong whipped around to look at Wang Hong.

What she saw was still his nonchalant back.

Once the young scholar stopped, a general took his turn to sneer: “It’s true that the Wang House in Lang’ya is an exalted family. But now that Lang’ya Wang Qi has provoked Murong Ke, don’t think that you can soundlessly push all the troubles onto Nan’yang and leave by yourselves!”

At this juncture, he took a step back, waved his right hand and shouted, “Stop them, not a soul may pass!”

The young scholar laughed in indignation before shouting back: “Open your dog eyes and see for yourself whether Lang’ya Wang Qi is even here!”

Needless to say, the general had known that Wang Hong wasn’t in the crowd. But he didn’t care; he held his head high, raised the badge in his hand and ordered: “I have His Highness’s decree! I don’t care whether Wang Qi is here or not, none of the carriages belonging to the Wang House in Lang’ya may leave!”

Wang Hong was understandably puzzled to hear this. He waved his hand and beckoned a young servant boy over.

The boy had been standing among a dozen refugees, his clothes looking the neatest. He was watching the commotion with great enjoyment when he turned his head and saw a waving Wang Hong. He did not immediately recognize who it was. Dumbfounded by his radiance, he unblinkingly stared at Wang Hong in curiosity and admiration before sprinting over.

Wang Hong pointed to the crowd three hundred paces from them and smilingly asked, “Young lad, do you know what is going on?”

“Aye aye, of course I do,” he said loud and clear. “Last night, two hundred barbarians suddenly appeared outside the city with a gold coffin. They shouted in, saying that their general admires Lang’ya Wang Qi’s talents and has been wanting to befriend him. He was very sad when Wang Lang left Mo’yang without saying goodbye. Now learning that he’s in Nan’yang, he specially presents a gold coffin and wishes to see Wang Lang once more.”

The boy was articulate, with a clear voice and a good memory. His recount had been said in one breath up to this point, when he had to gasp for breath before continuing. “The barbarians also said

that General Murong had prepared burial clothes for Wang Lang. They are luxurious and took great efforts to make. They hope Wang Lang will not reject their gifts. After saying this, the barbarians laid the gold coffin down and promptly left."

This time, both Chen Rong and Wang Hong understood what had happened.

Wang Hong smiled.

His beautiful smile blinded the boy such that he could only stare in a stupor.

Wang Hong chuckled and lightly said, "So this morning, the Prince of Nan'yang woke up to find that there were people from the Wang House in Lang'ya who wanted to leave?"

"Precisely so, precisely so." Disappointment showed on the boy's juvenile face. But in an instant, his eyes lit up, full of confidence: "Everybody says the Wang House in Lang'ya would never run away from a fight like this. The ones who left only did so to seek reinforcement from Jiankang. As for Wang Qilang, more than half of the Wang family's forces will stay behind in Nan'yang. Someone else says that since Murong Ke wants Qilang, if Qilang leaves Nan'yang, Murong Ke will no longer be interested in the city. The Prince of Nan'yang is therefore short-sighted for not letting them leave."

Wang Hong smiled and said his thanks. After letting the boy go, he raised his head and unhurriedly looked at the crowd.

Then, he leaned back toward Chen Rong and called, “Ah Rong.”

“Aye.”

“If you want to leave Nan’yang, then you best go within the next two days. I’ll have everything arranged.”

Chen Rong didn’t expect that, after learning the news, his first thought was to get her safely out of Nan’yang.

She watched him, her cheeks aglow, gratefulness and adoration evident in her eyes.

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Chapter 104: Waiting for a Hapless Hare

"And you? Where will you be?" she asked.

Wang Hong smiled. "Me? I'll stay in Nan'yang, of course. Could there be a bigger joke than Lang'ya Wang Qi fleeing at the mere sight of a barbarian?"

Chen Rong gave some thoughts before lowering her voice to say: "Then I'll also remain in Nan'yang."

Wang Hong still had his back turned to her, his posture ever the same. "Are you not afraid of dying, my darling?"

Dying? Of course she was afraid of dying.

"If my lord is not afraid of dying, Ah Rong would not dare to be afraid."

When she did not hear his reply after some length of time, she turned around to take a look.

Standing face to face at that moment, she saw in his fixed gaze something like love… but in the blink of an eye, he had returned to his smiling mien.

At this time, a burst of billowing smoke appeared behind them, causing the dozen refugees on the roadside to turn their attention from the city gate.

They scurried backward. Even the boy retreated far away where he curiously gazed over.

Two hundred armored men came into Chen Rong's sight. They were tall and large, and dauntless in appearance. These men must have been from the north, for each of them was the size of three refugees.

They rode forth and encircled the carriage.

Chen Rong turned to look at Wang Hong, and was reassured to see that he didn't appear to mind these men.

One man rode out of his rank; he clasped his hands toward Wang Hong, calling him: "M'lord?"

They turned out to be Wang Hong's guards, after all. *So they had been behind us the entire time,* Chen Rong thought. Only now did she realize that she hadn't asked Wang Hong how he had looked for her alone last night. Logically speaking, his servants would never leave his side like that.

Wang Hong stepped down from the carriage and, casting Chen Rong a glance, ordered: "Wang Sheng, escort Miss Chen back to the city."

"Aye."

A guard in his late twenties with a rectangular face rode forward. He accorded Chen Rong ceremony, then dismounted his horse and stepped

onto the driver’s seat.

The carriage moved forth.

A few paces later, Chen Rong gazed back at Wang Hong and opened her mouth to say something. But seeing Wang Hong surrounded by his guards, smiling but distant and stern, she decided to close her mouth after all.

Her carriage gradually drove away and shortly after arrived at the gate.

The prince’s personal soldiers were blocking the gate. They were preventing the nobles from leaving the city but did not care who was entering.

Chen Rong smoothly entered Nan’yang and returned to her courtyard.

When she stepped down, she thanked the guard who was hastily turning to leave, then rushed to her courtyard, crying: “Old Shang! Old Shang!”

Her voice began to panic when no one answered even though she had called twice.

At this time, Nurse Ping’s ecstatic voice sounded inside. “Are you back, miss? Are you back?” She ran out to Chen Rong’s side, holding onto her arm to take a good look at her.

Chen Rong pried her hand away and asked, “Where’s Old Shang?”

“Lying in bed.”

Chen Rong exhaled in relief. She broke into a smile and said, “I’m glad he’s home. When did he come back?”

“Early this morning,” Nurse Ping answered. She glanced outside, leaned into Chen Rong’s ear and whispered, “The moment the gate opened at dawn, Old Shang had appeared at the store on South Street.” Her voice took an anxious turn: “He passed out as soon as he saw someone coming out. After he woke up, he kept crying for you.”

Chen Rong pressed her lips together, whispering, “Is he staying at one of the stores on South Street?”

“Aye.”

Nurse Ping looked up at Chen Rong, stammering a long time before asking: “Miss, last night, you…”

Chen Rong could hear the worry in her voice. She immediately glared and snapped, “I’m still chaste!”

“Aye, aye, aye, you’re chaste, you’re chaste.” Despite saying so, the anxiety in her voice was evident.

At this time, it got clamorous outside.

Lady Li’s shrill voice rose amid the noises: “Is Ah Rong home?”

Chen Rong hadn’t reacted but her nurse had already paled and muttered: “I knew it, I knew it. They came last night asking for you twice. Then this morning at dawn, they came again to say your aunt has called for you. Now you’re barely home and already they’ve followed you here. I knew they wouldn’t let you off!”

Chen Rong’s heart sank upon hearing this. She thought of the invitation that had brought her into peril.

“She is home, ma’am,” she heard a maid reply.

“Oh is she?” Lady Li laughed. She sashayed in with the escort of four maids, eyeing Chen Rong once she was inside.

Looking at Chen Rong’s wrinkly outfit and tangled hair, she laughed and narrowed her slanted eyes, shrilling: “My my my, if it isn’t the audacious Ah Rong who had dared to go to Mo’yang to die with her lover.” She walked to Chen Rong, made a turn about her, and clucked her tongue: “How bold you are. Last time you disappeared for several days and then made a fool out of your elders with your lies after you returned. This time it’s early morning yet your clothes are unchanged and your hair is uncombed. Tsk tsk tsk, there’s also a lingering smell of a man on your body.” She made an exaggerated sniff: “It seems that the little girl

cannot contain herself for a few days without a tryst, now that she knows the taste of a man!”

These were harsh and humiliating words!

Chen Rong suppressed her anger and was about to speak when Lady Li waved toward the four maids and ordered: “Seize her!”

The four women immediately took two steps forward and surrounded Chen Rong, reaching out to grab her.

Chen Rong eyed Lady Li, flicked her arms and threw the maids off. “Ma’am, my every movement is being watched these days. Please tell them to move, I can walk myself!”

Her voice had barely faded when Lady Li broke out laughing.

Her laughter was both shrill and haughty.

Once she had had enough, she stared at Chen Rong and mockingly said, “Do you still think that you’re under the Wangs’ protection? Tsk tsk tsk. Ah Rong, you must not have known, your Wang Qilang is being targeted by both the barbarians and the Prince of Nan’yang. Even Wang Yi who tried to escape this morning with his private guards is now under the prince’s control. Even if he hadn’t been controlled, you had rejected his offer in front of everyone that night. How important do you still

think you are?”

With the smug face of a villain, Lady Li shrilly laughed as she ridiculed: “The exalted Wang House of Lang’ya is full of cowards. Tsk, they’re nothing compared to our Chen House of Yingchuan.”

Chen Rong’s heart sank as she listened. She could tell from her voice that she was deferential to the Nan’yang Prince but disdainful of the Wang clan. Had something happened at home? Had Chen Yuan completely sided with the prince?

In a good mood, Lady Li stopped her taunting and waved her hand again. “Seize her!”

Several maids grabbed Chen Rong’s arms and held her down by the shoulders.

The wheels in Chen Rong’s brain rapidly turned.

Yesterday’s invitation was clearly meant to kill her. Even though she didn’t know who had done it, she knew she had only ever offended this family!

Lady Li’s behavior and expression were much too arrogant! Something was amiss!

Making a quick decision, Chen Rong shook her shoulders and pushed the two maids away to retreat backward.

Her resistance caused Lady Li to scream: “Blasphemy, blasphemy!” Then she loudly ordered,

“You, get her.”

She was pointing to the two guards who had just crossed into the yard.

Chen Rong knew these guards. They had come as part of Lady Ruan’s dowry. It had been with their competent escort that Lady Ruan was able to reach the south safely.

Chen Rong stopped when she saw the large guards, and her own nurse and servants huddling in a corner screaming and crying for help.

She ceased her futile struggle.

The two guards in front of her stopped when they saw that she did not try to run anymore. At the same time, the four maids swarmed Chen Rong and cuffed her hands again. They pushed her to thebfront and yelled, “Let’s go.”

Just like that, Lady Li sashayed out in front, spewing insults along the way as they marched Chen Rong to Lady Ruan’s courtyard.

Before long, they had entered Lady Ruan’s courtyard. The moment they got to the main hall, a maid gave Chen Rong a shove and caused her to stumble forward. “On your knees!” a stern voice spoke.

Chen Rong did not kneel.

She raised her head to stare at Lady Ruan, her eyes unfathomable. “Madam, even if the Wang House in Lang’ya has discarded me, General Ran will undoubtedly remember me. I don’t imagine our strife to be so great that you must detain me with so much fanfare.”

Once again, Lady Li shrilly laughed the moment she finished talking. “Don’t tell me you’re still thinking of protecting your reputation? Hahaha, you stayed outside an entire night. Who knows how many men you’ve slept with. Still has the audacity to blame us for detaining you with fanfare.”

At once, Chen Rong’s face was purple with rage. She whipped around glaring at Lady Li.

“Slap your mouth!” Lady Ruan softly admonished.

Lady Li first halted before her face reddened. She slowly lifted her hand and lightly slapped herself, crying: “Madam!”

Lady Ruan didn’t bother to look at her. She sipped her tea and unhurriedly said, “The Chen family prides ourselves in generations of gentility. The peasants may say these vulgar things, but you may not.”

Lady Li quickly bowed her head saying: “Aye Aye,” and gave herself a few light slaps.

Lady Ruan turned toward Chen Rong.

A hint of a smile appeared on her round and pampered face as she stared at the girl.

Chapter 105: The Twists and Turns

Smilingly, Lady Ruan extended her painted fingers, sipped her drink, and then quietly said, “You’re right, you’re a temptress whom Lang’ya Wang Qi, General Ran, as well as the Prince of Nan’yang had all sold their souls to.” Whatever she may be thinking, she added with a disgusted smile: “It’d be a pity if you died.”

She waved her right hand and ordered, “Take her away, remember to watch her. Keep an eye on her people, too.”

“Aye.”

Lady Li walked up behind Chen Rong, gave her a shove and yelled, “Go!”

Chen Rong turned around to glare at her. The murderous intent in her eyes caused Lady Li to retreat despite herself. Only then did she turn and walk outside.

As she crossed the door step, Chen Rong suddenly paused and asked, “When we were in Mo’yang, people of the Wang House had asked me what I was afraid of. Do you know what my answer was, aunt?”

Lady Ruan frowned and impatiently placed her teacup down. As she was about to order the maids

to drag her away, Chen Rong audibly stated: “I said that what I fear most isn’t death, but that I can’t make my uncle Chen Yuan and his wife happy.”

She gave Lady Li and Lady Ruan a smirk, turned and strode away.

Staring after Chen Rong’s back, Lady Ruan slapped the table, her face red with anger. “Did she threaten me? How dare she threaten me?!”

Lady Ruan sat down again to sip her tea and sneered: “Did you use the Wang House in Lang’ya to scare me? Ah Rong of the Chen House, Wang Hong can’t even guarantee his own life at this point. And even if he could, he wouldn’t make you his honored concubine. You have no worth. Hmph, why don’t you take a good look at your situation before you rely on a fleeting lover!”

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Chen Rong entered the same cabin she had been to in her previous life.

When the door closed, the maid who stood beside Lady Li – the one with a pointy chin and a beauty mark by her mouth – shrilly laughed at her. “Ah Rong of the Chen House, I thought your dagger was fun to play with? Why aren’t you playing with it today?” At this juncture, she turned to Lady Li with

a look of flattery.

Lady Li haughtily raised her chin to stare at Chen Rong.

Chen Rong turned away, not bothering with them.

At this sight, the maid smiled and said, “Let’s see how long you can turn your nose up at us!” At this time, Lady Li also shrilled, “Keep an eye on her at all times. Lock the door.”

“Aye, aye.”

After the door was locked, Chen Rong heard her shouting outside: “Keep a close watch on her.”

“Aye.”

Time gradually passed.

Chen Rong held her knees as she sat in bed, looking at the skylight on the ceiling.

She wasn’t particularly smart, otherwise, she wouldn’t have met her end in her last life.

She sat wracking her brain but was unable to find any way to escape. She could only pray that the invitation hadn’t been sent by Lady Ruan and Lady Li. Otherwise, she was really done for.

Chen Rong buried her face between her knees and saw Wang Hong in her trance. The terrifying memories of last night played in her mind over and over again.

Darkness descended in the blink of an eye.

The cabin was already too dark for her to see her own fingers. If not for the voices and laughter outside, Chen Rong might have been driven mad from her own heartbeats.

Uncertain how long had passed, starlight gradually filtered through the skylight while the chatter lessened outside.

At this time, she heard footsteps approaching.

She dashed to the door and helplessly looked out.

Sure enough, they were coming for her.

Thump thump, Chen Rong's heart beat rapidly.

Soon, the footsteps stopped at the door. Then came the sound of the door unlocking.

Chen Rong walked back to the divan and sat down again.

The door opened at a squeak, letting starlight spilling in.

Two maids and two tall guards appeared. After the maids shot Chen Rong a look, they turned to the guards and whispered, "Make it quick."

Make it quick!

Chen Rong panicked.

She quickly stood up. Before she could do

anything, the four of them had swarmed her and gagged her mouth with a white cloth. At the same time, her hands were cuffed and she involuntarily stumbled forward.

A carriage was parked by the door.

The guards swiftly threw her in. As soon she was released from their grasps, Chen Rong made a move to jump down. Unexpectedly, the maids knew martial arts, and they rushed up on either of her sides to hold her down by the shoulders as soon as she made a movement. The cloth that had just loosened gagged her mouth once more.

As the carriage began to move, the maids took out a rope and tied her up.

Once Chen Rong had been tied into a zongzi and none of her limbs could move, they dragged her down to sit.

By this time, the carriage had driven out of the estate.

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Since she couldn’t move, Chen Rong did not continue her struggle. She lay on the carriage floor wide eyed and thought to herself: *They’re planning to take me out of the Chen estate. Do they want to kill me or lock me up somewhere else?*

Strangely enough, she didn’t panic at the thought of death. Perhaps it was because she had died once already. Or perhaps it was because she didn’t know herself how to keep going down this path.

The carriage made its way out of the Chen estate and headed into town.

It was late, and the city was cloaked in silence. Only the gilded houses located deep in the roadways produced singing and laughter… It was always like this, even if the Hu captured Nan’yang tomorrow, the nobles never forgot to indulge in their music.

While Chen Rong was lost in her train of thought, the carriage produced a tipping sound and made a turn.

A burst of cold wind lifted the curtain, affording Chen Rong a glimpse of the tall wall that enclosed a village.

She knew this village from the past as a village Lady Ruan had set up in Nan’yang.

The curtain dropped again.

Chen Rong closed her eyes and began to estimate the distance from the sound of the wheels.

After half an hour, the carriage pulled to a stop.

The maids carried Chen Rong down and threw her

into a simple room.

After untying the rope, they locked the door and left.

Chen Rong moved her numb feet to slowly stand up.

Although it was simple, the room was furnished with a divan and a table, and had doors and windows. Nevertheless, the windows were covered by cow hide and prevented her from seeing outside. Behind the divan was a small door which led to a toilet.

From the footsteps she heard, she reckoned there were at least four guards outside.

Seeing that her life was safe for now, Chen Rong exhaled and went to the divan to get some sleep.

Unsurprisingly, sleep didn’t come, and she lay there eyes wide open listening to the footsteps and frogs croaking outside.

Murmuring sounded at length. Finally hearing people’s voices, Chen Rong quickly stood up and soundlessly went to the door to listen.

“She should be sleeping, right?”

“It’s almost morning, a little girl like her has to be falling asleep after suffering all night.”

“You sound as if you know her?” the first one

asked in surprise.

The second voice was a little hoarse when he chuckled: “Of course I do. There may be many girls in Nan’yang, but none can compare to her. Tsk tsk, that ass and those tits, tsk tsk, just looking at her makes me go weak. I wouldn’t mind dying if I could sleep with her for one night.” He laughed lewdly.

At this time, a third voice interjected: “That’s enough, Madam has told us to watch our mouths.”

The first one laughed it off and lowered his voice. “She can’t escape anyway, what’s the harm in talking a little?” A pause. “Besides, she’s sleeping,” he muttered.

Seeing that the third man did not rebuke him, the second man hoarsely spoke: “Aye aye, what’s the harm? And what a pity it’ll be. According to Sister Hong, Madam wants to watch her for a couple of days and if nothing happens, to give her a white cloth.”

Chen Rong made a shiver when she heard him. Lady Ruan actually wanted to kill her? Moreover, she even wanted to make it look like a suicide?

The voices outside went on. This time, the one to speak was the man with the gloomy voice. His interest was apparently piqued, sounding slightly excited now. “You’re right.” He lowered his voice:

“Y’all don’t know this, but Sister Hong said that when that time comes, we can enjoy ourselves to our content, and even if she dies from our playing it wouldn’t matter.”

His words caused low gasps from the other men.

“Keep your voices down!” he barked.

After a stretch of silence, he laughingly whispered: “Of course, it would be even better if we can get her to kill herself. I heard Sister Hong said she’s an unwed girl who had stayed out all night, and no one knows what had happened. Everybody is gonna believe it if we say she took things hard after coming home.”

Once more, four crude laughter simultaneously sounded.

Chen Rong sat up.

She coldly smiled in the night.

Soon, light was born in the east.

Followed by a din of voices.

And quickly went down in the west.

Time continued to go by but no one had come to give her food.

At last, as the light gradually left the room, the door opened at a creak.

A maidservant stood by the door with a basket in

hand. She glanced at Chen Rong, who was staring warily at her from the divan, and placed the basket down. Then she wordlessly shut the door again.

Chen Rong caught a glimpse of four middle-aged men standing outside. They were lecherously smiling at her until the door was closed.

Night fell once more.

The frogs came out to croak. Reed music sounded from a distant place.

Chen Rong sat motionlessly on the divan while her nails dug into the palms of her hands. She told herself that if she escaped this time and even if it showed her vulgar nature, she would ask Wang Hong and Sun Yan to help her dispose of Lady Ruan and Lady Li.

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Time did not stop.

Unknowingly, Chen Rong had fallen asleep.

When she next woke up in cold sweat, the room was still pitch black but the footsteps had ceased outside.

Chen Rong perked her ears to confirm it was really quiet before quickly running barefoot to the door and giving it a hard push.

The door was securely locked.

She ran to the window.

As she was about to push it, footsteps again sounded outside.

They stayed for nearly an hour, and thus Chen Rong had to go back to the divan and fell to a groggy slumber.

By the time she woke up, the east was bright again.

The sun was blazing when the maid brought her food.

Like yesterday, the four men huddled together and leered at Chen Rong when the door opened, clamping their mouths so their drool wouldn’t spill.

The maid locked the door and went away again, leaving Chen Rong panicking by each passing second.

She had known this village. It was located by the northern gate of Nan’yang, in a remote and sparsely populated area. It was also often left vacant. By listening for the past two nights, she discovered that there were only her and the four guards in the entire village.

All she could do now was pray that Wang Hong could quickly make his own escape and remember

about her… Aside from that, she really didn’t know what else to do.

She spent three more days in this groggy state.

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On the fourth morning, she heard the sound of rolling wheels.

Listening to them getting closer, Chen Rong suddenly broke away from her trance, jumped down from the divan and ran to the door.

She clasped the hairpin in her palm, unblinkingly staring at the door.

Soon, the carriage stopped in the courtyard. Subsequently, Chen Sanlang’s voice spoke: “Is she here?”

He sounded somewhat angry.

The maid with the pointy chin and a beauty mark cried, “Aye, aye.”

She only managed two words by the time she made gurgling sounds. She sounded to have been gagged.

Chen Rong pauded, holding onto a ray of hope.

Pattering footsteps.

Before long, Chen Sanlang’s voice came to her, gentle and warm: “Ah Rong, Ah Rong? Dear sister,

are you inside? Your brother is here to take you home.”

Chen Rong stared outside and ecstatically replied, “Third brother? Is that you? Have you come to take me out?”

She pounded on the door.

Chen Sanlang shouted: “What are you waiting for? Open the door.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

The door creaked opened amid the repeated answers.

Due to sunlight in her eyes, Chen Rong covered her face with her sleeve.

At this time, Chen Sanlang strode up to her as he painfully exclaimed, “Ah Rong, you’ve gotten thinner. Look at your chin. It breaks my heart to see how pointy it has become.” He spoke as he held Chen Rong. Behind him were several maids and tall guards. Intentionally or otherwise, they blocked Chen Rong’s view, as if they didn’t want her to see this village.

When she heard his concerned voice, grief overtook her and she covered her face to cry.

Chen Sanlang went to her. He stared at her slender waist and satin-like hair that retained its

silkiness though it had been a few days. He reached out trying to hug Chen Rong.

At this point, her feet gave out, sending her falling forward.

Chen Sanlang quickly let her go and brushed away the sleeve that was covering her face. Looking at her closed eyes and wan face, she couldn’t help himself from falling into a daze.

“The young lady has fainted from joy,” whispered a servant behind him.

Chen Sanlang snapped awake and quickly shouted: “Quick, take my sister to my carriage.”

Two maids stepped up to take Chen Rong. Intentionally or not, their long sleeves were placed over Chen Rong’s face and blocked her eyes.

After only two paces, Chen Rong woke up and broke into tears. She was as loud and annoying as could be!

Stunned, Chen Sanlang couldn’t help from grimacing. “Don’t cry, dear sister.”

Unknowingly, his words prompted Chen Rong’s wails to grow even louder.

Her cries were sharp enough that they could tear his eardrums apart. Chen Sanlang screamed. When he saw that she didn’t hear him, he got irritated,

waved his sleeves and shouted, “Get her in.”

The two maids almost pushed Chen Rong into his carriage when Chen Sanlang thundered: “Are you blind? Let her sit with you!”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

They took Chen Rong and stuffed her into their smaller carriage.

At this time, the maid with the beauty mark, who had been thrown aside after Chen Sanlang had gagged her mouth with a cloth, was lifted by the guards and thrown into the last carriage.

The vehicles drove on. With each jolt, the curtain stayed down and didn’t lift even when the cold wind blew.

Gradually, Chen Rong’s sharp cries softened and eventually ceased.

By now, the carriage had left the village and onto the paved road.

Finally receiving some peace, Chen Sanlang took a deep breath and a mouthful of tea before cursing: “Damnation. It’s as if the sky is falling every time a woman cries!”

He then thought of his own matter. He lifted the curtain and kindly smiled toward the other carriage. “Dear sister, are you feeling better now?”

Some time later, Chen Rong's hoarse voice quietly replied: "Aye, much better… thank you."

Chen Sanlang chuckled, but quickly frowned and said, "I got here too late and caused you to be locked up for many days."

At this juncture, he hatefully cursed: "It was that lowly wench! Speaking nonsense to my mother using her silver tongue. But rest assured, dear sister, I won't forgive her. After we return, you can beat her or kill her however you want!"

He had sounded so sincere and moving.

Chen Rong sneered. If she hadn't heard the guards last night, she would also have thought that Lady Ruan only wanted to lock her up for a few days.

"I won't let her off easy," she gritted her teeth. Her voice was cutting and spiteful: "So that wench was the one to harm me? Third brother, I won't forgive her!"

"Aye aye, don't forgive her."

Chen Sanlang laughed twice and then signaled his carriage to near Chen Rong's.

He poked his head out, leaned toward Chen Rong's carriage and concernedly said, "Ah Rong, the past few days have been hard on you. Go home, vent, and take a few days to rest. I have told the cook to

make chicken soup and lamb stew to nourish you back to health.”

“Thank you, third brother.”

Chen Sanlang laughed.

He retracted his head, cast a glance at Chen Rong’s vague figure inside her carriage, and inwardly thought, *No, it cannot be rushed. Lets broach that matter after she’s had a day to rest.*

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The carriage arrived at the Chen estate.

It did not go to Chen Rong’s courtyard, but instead went directly to Chen Yuan’s.

Soon, it pulled to a stop.

Chen Rong had just stepped off the carriage when vague sobs were heard. She saw the maid with the beauty mark kneeling in front of Chen Yuan with her hands tied behind her and her mouth gagged with cloth.

Chen Yuan sat before her while both Lady Ruan and Lady Li stood below with their heads bowing in shame.

At the time Chen Sanlang led Chen Rong in, Chen Yuan stood up to welcome her. He concernedly looked at her and said, “Ah Rong, do forgive me.”

There was anger in his voice.

He was genuinely angry.

Chen Rong looked at him in surprise. Chen Yuan's face was drawn long in a shade of black, his eyes were also cracking fire. His anger didn't seem to be pretense.

At this time, Chen Yuan noticed her looking at him. He regarded her and again said, "Ah Rong, do forgive me."

She heard sincerity in his voice.

Chen Rong bowed her head and feebly said, "You're exaggerating, uncle."

"Not at all." Chen Yuan was very angry. He paced in place and gravely said, "I've only left for a few days but the house is turned upside down. These days…" He gasped for breath, strode to the maid and gave her a hard kick.

He had used all of his strength. The maid gave a cry and rolled backward. Even Lady Li and Lady Ruan who were standing nearby made a shiver, their heads bowing lower.

The kick did little to lessen his ire. Chen Yuan again rushed forth to give the maid another kick in the chest. She lurched to the side and spat out blood. Due to her mouth being stuffed with cloth, the blood stained through the fabric in a red blob.

Despite this, Chen Yuan was still furiously kicking and thundering: “A blind lot of fools. Is Ah Rong someone you can touch, you lowly wench?”

Though Chen Yuan wasn’t a scholar, he was educated and had been keeping appearances until now. And yet, he was being so brutal that his anger seemed to seep out from his disguise.

Chen Rong looked toward Lady Ruan and Lady Li who were shrinking back in fear. She couldn’t help herself from thinking: *Perhaps Chen Yuan really had not consented to any of this?*

Chen Yuan gave a few more kicks and only stopped to catch his breath. After a while, he waved to Chen Sanlang and said, “Ah Rong must be tired. Take her back and let her rest.”

“Aye, father.”

Chen Rong had just turned around by the time Chen Yuan’s barely suppressed fury again roared behind her. “And you, stay inside. You’re not allowed to go anywhere without my permission!”

“Aye,” Lady Ruan replied at long last.

“Have you gone mother fucking blind?!” He next cursed. “Drag this woman away and lock her up for three days. Nobody is to give her any food.”

Lady Li’s weeping sounded at this point: “My lord.” Her voice had lowered into a whisper, but she did

not beg to be pardoned.

As the voices behind her faded away, Chen Rong grew increasingly curious: *Had something happened? Why have Chen Yuan come for me? And appearing so livid, at that?*

Chapter 106: Traveling a Thousand Miles to Seek His Help

When Chen Rong came home, Nurse Ping and Old Shang rushed up to hold her as they cried.

Chen Rong was already immensely exhausted. She impatiently pried them off and bade for a tonic bath to be prepared.

Feeling better after some time in the water, Chen Rong lay in the tub as she tried to relax amid the rising vapor.

She kept her eyes wide open staring at the ceiling.

She knew that no one in Chen Yuan's family had liked her in the past and that Chen Yuan had also repeatedly schemed to give her away. Even so, she was only angry at the time, never feeling any strong hatred.

But now, to come home to this after having just received an invitation to hell only proved to her that she had wholly offended Chen Yuan's family, and there was no possibility for further harmony or compromises.

As far as Chen Rong was concerned, that invitation must have been forged by someone in Chen Yuan’s household. Why else did Lady Ruan and Lady Li send people to inquire after her whereabouts as soon as she left for her appointment? Moreover, she had only ever offended this family.

Ruthlessness glinted in her eyes as they narrowed at this thought.

Then, she thought of Chen Yuan and Chen Sanlang’s abnormal behaviors.

But that was of little concern. Whatever act they may be putting on, she expected them to show their hands to her in a few days.

The night went on in her tossing and turning.

The next day was bright and sunny again. As she looked at the sky outside, like the people on the streets of Nan’yang, Chen Rong grew nervous about the Hu’s impending attack.

She had asked Old Shang to find out about Wang Hong and his clan’s development. After much inquiry, however, there was still no news to relay.

After breakfast, while looking at the gradually rising sun, Chen Rong who was finally in better spirit after having had some sleep called Nurse Ping over to help her get ready for an outing.

Just then, footsteps sounded.

"The master has asked for Ah Rong," a maid announced.

Chen Yuan?

Chen Rong stood up and drew her lips into a cold smile, thinking to herself: *Showing your hands so soon already?*

She replied, got dressed, and then followed the maid to Chen Yuan's courtyard.

After they entered the courtyard, she saw that both the servants and nobles alike were all hanging their heads in apprehension.

The girl walking in front of her was one she hadn't seen before. She was also keeping her head down and just quietly leading the way.

When Chen Rong arrived at Chen Yuan's yard, a tall and beautiful maid was waiting for her at the steps. Upon seeing Ah Rong, she dropped into a curtsy and said, "The master is inside."

Chen Rong hummed an acknowledgement and went in.

Only two people sat in the spacious hall. The host was no other than Chen Yuan; below him was Chen Sanlang.

Upon Chen Rong's arrival, Chen Yuan put his wine

down and gave her a good look. Then he sighed and smiled at her. “You seem to have recovered your spirit after a good rest, Ah Rong.”

Chen Rong dutifully went to her uncle, curtsied, and replied, “I didn’t mean to be a cause of concern, uncle. I rested very well last night.”

Chen Yuan nodded, pointed to the seat on his right and kindly said, “Ah Rong, sit down.”

“Thank you.”

Silence pursued after she took her seat. If they wouldn’t speak, then neither would she.

At length, Chen Sanlang’s voice broke the silence. He looked at Chen Rong and lamented: “I’m sorry for being late and causing you to be frightened for days.” He looked at her guiltily. “Ah Rong, do you resent me for it?”

Chen Rong quickly shook her head. “How could I?”

She quietly hung her head in again.

Chen Yuan cleared his throat, stroked his long beard and said, “Your aunts only gave you troubles because they had listened to that wench’s provocation.” He then ordered, “This matter is over now. Don’t bear a grudge, Ah Rong.”

Chen Rong hurriedly stood up and placed her palms together: “Aye, I wouldn’t dare.”

Chen Yuan nodded and then motioned for her to sit down.

Again, he cleared his throat and said to her, “Ah Rong, General Ran seems to have a good impression of you?”

Ran Min?

Chen Rong looked up.

Her uncle was stroking his beard, appearing to be pondering his words.

Soon, he coughed yet again and looked at Chen Rong who had lowered her head back down, before finally winking at Chen Sanlang.

Chen Sanlang caught on and turned to Chen Rong to lament. “Ah Rong, did you know that the clan is in trouble?”

Chen Rong rounded her eyes at Chen Sanlang and anxiously asked, “Has something happened?”

Seeing that she was concerned about the clan, Chen Sanlang began to smile before quickly putting on a frown. “Aye, something terrible has happened,” he woefully replied.

He stood up and paced the room while saying to his cousin: “I don’t expect a young lady like you would know this. Life has been difficult this year. With so many of us arriving in Nan’yang, even the

cost of feeding the horses amounts to the cost of feeding a few hundred refugees, let alone the cost of room and board."

At this juncture, he looked toward Chen Rong's bewildered face and chuckled. "I've forgotten that Ah Rong is just a young lady. You only need to enjoy the clan's finance while thinking about your fashionable clothing and sumptuous meals. How would you know any of this?"

Chen Rong maintained her bewildered look, but she was inwardly sneering: *You sound as if I've received so much help from you people. I pay for all of the expenses in my courtyard, why wouldn't I be aware of this?*

"Ah Rong, you know the Hu will lay siege to the city," Chen Sanlang added after a brief pause. "If we are fortunate, we might endure for six months and drive them back. But if we are unfortunate, we might be under attack for a year or two only to lose in the end. I wouldn't be surprised."

Chen Rong softly hummed to show she was listening.

"Ah Rong," Chen Sanlang murmured after a sigh, "you didn't know this, but not too long ago, the clan had spent a large sum of money to acquire some food supply. Unluckily, news arrived a few days ago that our cavalcade had been robbed by the Hu when

we were passing by Ximing.”

Chen Rong was surprised to hear this. The Hu had robbed their food cargoes? But what was the use of telling a girl like her?

Chen Sanlang obviously knew what she was wondering. After looking to Chen Yuan, he briefly deliberated and continued with the story: “Our people happen to know that General Ran is also nearby. With his valiance, it would be child’s play to seize the grains back.”

He paused, struggling to say these next words: “But when we looked for General Ran, we were prevented from seeing even his shadow. It was like that every time we tried… Ah Rong, I heard that General Ran is very good to you. It seems only you can shoulder this task.”

These words were indeed difficult to say. She, an unwed girl, was actually being asked to travel such distance to see a man!

Chen Rong inwardly sneered having understood the whole story now. She slowly looked up at Chen Sanlang, blinked, and ventured: “But Ah Wei is also acquainted with General Ran, why doesn’t the clan send her?” She paused and then dipped into a whisper: “And you would’ve helped a good match.”

She had barely finished when Chen Sanlang

blurted, “If she was useful, we wouldn’t need to look for you.”

Chen Yuan gave him a warning glare.

Knowing he had slipped, Chen Sanlang immediately put on a harmless smile. He went to Chen Rong, sighed and said, “Ah Rong, I know asking you to do this is disadvantageous to your reputation. But this is an exceptional time, the Hu will attack Nan’yang before we know it. If we were to have a food shortage, the first to starve would be you girls.”

He paused, and then seemingly said in passing: “I heard there had been cities where even women and children were killed for food due to famine…”

His voice was low and unintentional, but it was just enough for Chen Rong to hear.

At this time, Chen Yuan impatiently said to Chen Sanlang, “Enough already.” He then turned to Chen Rong and cut to the chase: “Ah Rong, go and make preparations. It’s best to leave this evening.”

He was so resolute that he gave her almost no room to refuse.

Based on the fury he had directed at Lady Li and Lady Ruan, she could see how important this matter was to him.

She had known they wouldn’t let her refuse.

For that reason, she said nothing more and just stood up to give them a curtsy and head out.

"Where are you staring off to? Go and make arrangements for Ah Rong's escorts!" Chen Yuan snapped at Chen Sanlang who was still staring after Chen Rong's departing figure.

"Aye, father."

Chen Rong returned home. After telling her servants what had happened, she turned and went into her room.

Behind her, Nurse Ping was struggling to contain herself. "That means the clan has relented! They must have decided to give you to General Ran. Isn't this wonderful? This is so wonderful!"

She wasn't alone in her celebration. Even Old Shang and the other servants lit up at their young mistress.

It was only a few days ago that Chen Rong had spent a night outside the city and come back at dawn with the escort of the Wang House of Lang'ya. They didn't say how they had met her or did they offer to explain that Ah Rong of the Chen House was still chaste.

Because they had said nothing, people had had to guess. Talks shuttled across the estate. Some said Ah Rong had encountered the refugees and gotten

raped, meeting the Wang House and receiving their help by chance. Others said she was meeting her lover and was already carrying his child.

The stories were endless.

Listening to such stories, her servants had felt that their mistress had better to ask Wang Qilang to accept her as a concubine. Never in their wildest dreams did they think that the clan would relent and that General Ran might ask to marry her. They only hoped that before these rumors could reach Ran Min's ears, Chen Rong's fate would be sealed with marriage.

As she packed, Chen Rong looked at Nurse Ping bursting with joy beside her. She dropped her gaze with a pensive expression.

She had barely finished packing by the time Chen Sanlang came to find her.

He brought her to the square where fifty to sixty guards stood waiting alongside several carriages. Chen Sanlang waved the tallest guard over, pointed at Chen Rong and ordered: "Li Cheng, remember well. No matter what happens, you must protect your mistress. Come back if she is safe, but there's no need to return to Nan'yang should anything happen to her."

"Aye," the man named Li Cheng solemnly replied.

He turned his head toward the troop and shouted: “Brothers, do you hear what the master said?”

“Aye!”

Chen Sanlang nodded.

He turned around to look at Chen Rong.

“Ah Rong, these people will be at your beck and call. They are all extraordinarily skilled. Rest assured, they will bring you safely to General Ran.”

Chen Rong dutifully curtsied to him. “Aye, third brother.”

Chen Sanlang sighed and added, “I had wanted to send you off, but I’m swamped with work and cannot extract myself.”

You mean you know the journey isn’t safe and you’re afraid of misadventure? Chen Rong smirked but kept saying: “Don’t worry about it, third brother.”

After Chen Sanlang said a few more words, he looked at Chen Rong, gave some thought, leaned in and said, “Ah Rong, if General Ran still wants you, you ought to accept. I’ll explain to the clan.”

Chen Rong looked up at him in surprise. “What about Ah Wei?”

Chen Sanlang furrowed his brow, waved dismissively and said, “Ah Wei is a lady, but so are

you. You don’t have to yield to her when it comes to marriage.” Despite saying this, his eyes could not hide contempt when he looked at her. *Does she really think General Ran would want to marry her? He’ll take her as a bed maid at most.* (1)

1. 房中人 This is not a concubine. This is a maid whose duty also includes sleeping with her master.

Chen Rong lowered her eyes and, shortly after, gave him a curtsy.

Chen Sanlang said another thing or two, waved his right hand and ordered, “Go and Godspeed to your return.”

“Aye.”

The cavalcade set off.

Chen Rong brought Nurse Ping to sit with her. As she lifted her curtain, she saw Chen Wei standing under a willow tree and dazedly staring after her. Her face was now skin and bones, her eyes welling with tears.

When she met Chen Rong’s eyes, Chen Wei bit her lips and made little effort to conceal her hatred.

Chen Rong withdrew her gaze and drew the curtain down.

The city of Nan’yang remained shrouded under a

morbid atmosphere. Because of what had happened with the Wang House of Lang'ya, travelers were now only allowed in but not out.

Nevertheless, when Chen Rong's cavalcade left the city, she saw Li Cheng holding something up while saying: "We're on His Highness's official business." The polearms withdrew and gave way to them.

Chen Rong stopped looking and secretly sneered: *No wonder Chen Yuan was in such a panic. The Prince of Nan'yang also has a share in that shipment.*

Her carriage drove out of the city.

Seeing Chen Rong looking around, Li Cheng rode to her and respectfully said, "Don't worry, miss, we're taking a smaller road this time and won't be running into any refugees. We may not even run into any barbarians if we are careful."

Chen Rong nodded, then bowed from her seat and softly said, "Sir, our safety hinges on you, please act with prudence."

Li Cheng scratched his head and boyishly grinned at the flattery, saying: "Don't worry miss, I would be careful even for myself."

He turned his head shouting: "Faster."

The cavalcade turned onto a smaller road after thirty miles outside of Nan'yang just like Li Cheng

had said. The rugged road was difficult to navigate, and was muted in desolation. The day went by with only the sound of rolling wheels and the guards' chatter and laughs.

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In the blink of an eye, three days had passed.

Throughout this time, their team traveled during the day and camped at night. Because it was winter, there were few wild animals around, and their journey was surprisingly smooth.

By noon, the cavalcade rerouted back onto the paved road.

Li Cheng rode to Chen Rong's carriage and said while looking ahead: "I had thought it would take five more days. But it looks like we'll arrive in Ximing tomorrow morning."

Chen Rong lifted her curtain to look to the barrenness ahead. "Is General Ran in Ximing? Then he must be nearby?"

Li Cheng hummed his reply.

He turned to look at Chen Rong's vague features behind her veil, praising her: "Miss, what a fine example you make. You do not say a word even though it must be hard on you." He paused and then murmured, "Other masters and mistresses are

even fussy about their meals. They make it tiring and time consuming for all of us.”

Chen Rong smiled without answering.

They rushed away at full speed with the reminder that Ximing was just ahead, and especially when they began to see refugees and a few Hu from time to time.

In the evening, Chen Rong and everyone else ate some dry food and quickly went on.

A full moon hung in the clear sky tonight.

After consulting with Chen Rong, Li Cheng decided to continue through the night and stop to camp only after they arrived in Ximing. After his order was passed down, the guards lit torches and urged their horses ahead.

Li Cheng was apparently knowledgeable in militarism. He ordered each guard to hold two torches and tie ten more to each carriage. All of a sudden, a few dozen people had turned into a few hundred. They rushed through the night, their rumbling hooves no longer cautious.

Two hours later at midnight, Ximing’s tall city walls appeared before their eyes.

The guards erupted into cheers, their hollers carried to the distance by the wind.

Li Cheng likewise smiled at the sight of the city. He waved his right hand, shouting: “Set camp.”

“Aye.”

They were used to pitching tents, having spent most of their time in the wilderness. Everything was in order in less than a quarter of an hour. Chen Rong and Nurse Ping’s tent was placed in the center.

After her tent was set, Chen Rong bent down to go inside. She watched Nurse Ping occupying herself with lighting the incense and making her bed. Then, looking at the moonlight spilling into the tent entrance, she whispered, “Nurse.”

“Aye, miss?”

Nurse Ping turned to look at Chen Rong when she didn’t hear an answer.

“Miss, what is it?” she called again at the sight of a pensive Chen Rong.

“Tell me, nurse, if General Ran still wants to marry me, should I accept his offer?”

This was the first time she volunteered to talk to Nurse Ping about this.

Overjoyed, Nurse Ping threw her work aside, ran to her and happily said, “Of course you should, of course you should.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Heaven will spite you if you keep rejecting such a good thing!”

Chen Rong slowly turned to look at the doorway that was dusted over by a silvery light. She didn’t move for a very long time. Just as Nurse Ping was running out of patience and wanting to speak, she heard Chen Rong hoarsely say: “Whenever I think of him now, there is neither hate nor resentment. Sometimes when I try to recall him, even his face has become blurry… Which is great, because I have finally let it go… But *him*, he’s so noble and extraordinary that even a princess isn’t good enough for him. When will it ever be my turn? I know myself, once I recognize my feelings, I won’t tolerate a grain of sand in my eyes. I won’t be satisfied as his honored concubine let alone an ordinary concubine. If I see him with his wife, I will be driven mad with jealousy… Nurse, since I’ve forgotten my hatred for him, does that mean I can marry him? Is this unhappy ending the only way can I get the peace I want?”

At this juncture, Chen Rong slowly turned around to look at her nurse.

Nurse Ping was blinking her small eyes in puzzlement.

“What are you talking about, miss? You keep

saying ‘he’ this and ‘he’ that. I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

The nurse looked up at her mistress, coaxing her: “Why don’t you tell me again?”

“Never mind if you can’t understand,” said Chen Rong, dismissively.

She turned away staring at the silvery light on the ground.

Nurse Ping watched the contemplative Chen Rong and thought that she couldn’t look lonelier. It was an eternal loneliness that would last a lifetime and into eternity, the loneliness of someone who could only confide in herself be it joy or heartache.

Nurse Ping hurt for her. She hastened to put on a smile and almost spoke if not for a series of hooves arriving outside.

They came with a dreadful rumble and eerie air.

Laughter halted to the sound of the fast approaching gallops. At once, Li Cheng shouted: “Take arms and mount your horses.”

“Aye, aye.” Nervous answers and neighing simultaneously returned.

Chen Rong got up and went out to see that all the guards had finished tidying up, now riding into their ranks.

At the same time, a dozen knights had come to within 200 paces of them, lurking in the darkness ahead.

Chapter 107: Chen Rong's Request

Looking at the knights whose faces were obscured behind their helmets, Li Cheng strode out, raised his clasped hands, and began to speak.

Before he could offer his greetings, however, one of the knights had spoken to him in the tongue of the Jins: "Do you belong to the Chen House in Nan'yang?"

They recognize who we are.

Li Cheng and his guards erupted in cheers. Only Han people would be able to recognize their many complicated family crests.

"Aye," Li Cheng quickly answered. He placed his hands together and respectfully asked, "And you are…?"

"We work under General Ran," the armored knight replied, motioning his subordinates to remove their masks and reveal their faces.

Li Cheng and his men laughed like loonies when they heard their answer and saw their faces. Some of them were even making their horses run in circles while they laugh.

Li Cheng likewise beamed from ear to ear. “I beg your pardon, our guys are beyond thrilled to hear that you are General Ran’s men.”

The dozen or so knights hadn’t bothered lifting their eyes amid the guards’ guffaw. Only until Li Cheng spoke did the Jin voice sound again: “It’s getting late, ask your mistress to go see General Ran.”

Li Cheng did not question how they knew a young lady was with them. He just joyously replied: “Aye, aye, aye.” He waved his right hand and shouted, “Stop horsing around and get ready. We’ll go and meet General Ran tonight.”

“Aye,” the guards replied and started to get busy.

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Soon after, they had tidied up and followed the knights forward.

Chen Rong quietly lifted her curtain to look around, beckoning Li Cheng closer as she did so.

He rode over and broke into a pleasant laugh: “Miss, how may I be of service?”

His booming voice caused the knights to turn their heads.

Chen Rong shyly bowed her head and waited until

the knights impatiently turn away before motioning Li Cheng near again. “Li Cheng, are these men truly General Ran’s subordinates?” she whispered.

Li Cheng chuckled, but seeing Chen Rong’s unimpressed face, he quickly dropped his voice and replied, “Rest assured, miss. They are General Ran’s personal guards. We’ve met them before.”

Only then did Chen Rong relax.

Li Cheng laughed again and then caught up to the knights.

After nearly an hour, the torch-lit cavalcade arrived at a mountain cleft lined with tents.

Chen Rong peered outside and saw numerous flying banners in the distance with the character “Min” on them.

The camp site was packed with tents. Besides the flapping flags, all was quiet.

Having arrived at such a solemn place, Li Cheng and his men ceased their noises and followed the armored knights to the centermost tent.

Chen Rong’s carriage stopped outside while Li Cheng and several guards followed the knights inside.

Nurse Ping eyed them as she whispered from Chen Rong’s side: “It’s already so late, General Ran won’t

summon you, will he?” Unease was heard in her voice.

At length, footsteps sounded.

Chen Rong looked up only to find her gaze suspended.

A handsome yet severe man in a black outfit appeared at the entrance. He apparently had just bathed, water dripping from his dark hair. A few droplets rolled down his chiseled face and onto the strong chest hidden behind his black undergarment.

Ran Min.

His appearance caused the guards and knights to bow their heads, not daring to breathe a breath too loud.

Chen Rong was no exception. She lowered her head the moment his inky eyes set upon her.

Ran Min strode to her carriage and then stopped.

He stared at her and, all of a sudden, huskily laughed. “Little lady, we meet again.”

In the carriage, Chen Rong bowed to him and respectfully replied, “Aye, good greetings, general.”

Her voice was cool and calm.

“Lift your head,” he abruptly commanded.

Chen Rong stiffened, but still obediently looked up.

They faced each other in the moonlight.

As he carefully studied her, Ran Min's eyebrows ever slightly furrowed.

A second later, he moved his thin lips, waved and barked, "Be sure to make arrangements for Miss Chen!"

"Aye." Several soldiers stepped out, surrounded Chen Rong's carriage, and steered it in a different direction.

At this point, Nurse Ping exhaled and said in a hopeful tone: "Miss, had a man of his station actually come to see you? It seems General Ran has great respect for you."

Chen Rong softly hummed a reply. She knew Ran Min hated the nobles' bureaucratic rules and had obviously come out just to see her. He had taken into account that it was too late to summon her into his tent. It was indeed rare of him to do something like that.

The soldiers had vacated a tent in the west for Chen Rong and Nurse Ping to stay.

As Chen Rong went inside with her nurse's help, she suddenly stopped and asked one of the soldiers, "What about the Chens' family guards?"

The soldier bowed to her and loudly replied, "I do not know, miss."

Chen Rong pressed her lips together and then bent down to enter the tent.

On the other side, Li Cheng and the guards were also led away by the soldiers.

Looking at Li Cheng and his group leave, a middle-aged scholar approached Ran Min from behind and smilingly said, “That knave Chen Yuan hasn’t come to his senses. He’s still sending people here.”

Ran Min faintly smiled. His smile was both unconcerned as it was sarcastic.

“But I must say,” the middle-aged scholar added, ”that was an enormous amount of food. Not even Chen Gongrang would be able to bear losing so much food, let alone Chen Yuan.”

Ran Min smirked and lightly said, “Those food cargos were entrusted to Chen Yuan by the Prince of Nan’yang to transport.”

Another scholar, tall and thin, walked up behind them and chuckled to Ran Min: “You had posed as the barbarians to rob his food. How funny that Chen Yuan still places hope on receiving your help. He even sends two young ladies here, one after another.”

Five or six men laughed out loud.

Ran Min did not join them. He looked in the

direction Chen Rong had left and unhurriedly said, “But I want *this* young lady to come.”

He smiled and walked back to his tent, leaving the remaining advisors to look at one another.

The military camp was surrounded by neighing, heavy breathing, and insect chirping. Even the wind sounded dreary and bleak. Nurse Ping tossed and turned throughout the night. She looked at Chen Rong’s bed several times, wanting to talk to her. But no matter how many times she looked, she only saw Chen Rong in a deep sleep.

Early next morning, with dark circles under her eyes, Nurse Ping yawningly combed Chen Rong’s hair and said, “You slept so well last night. I was so scared, but you didn’t even turn once.”

Chen Rong’s mouth made a twitch but she did not answer.

Just then, a loud voice called in: “Is the young miss ready? The general wants to see her.”

Nurse Ping was startled by his voice. Her hand jerked and almost dropped all the combs to the floor. She quickly picked them up, winced twice, and hollered back: “Almost finished, just a second.”

She soon finished dressing Chen Rong, at which time she tilted her head to take a look, nodded with satisfaction, and urged her mistress: “Miss, let’s

go.”

Chen Rong hummed and stepped out of the tent.

Nurse Ping followed behind. After a few steps, she began to worry and thus leaned in to say: “Miss, when you’re with General Ran, do try to make a good impression. If he expresses his wish to marry you, then you mustn’t reject him.” She stared at Chen Rong and sincerely added, “Please agree. Don’t change your mind then!”

Chen Rong paid little attention to her. She just kept her head down, wove her hands in front of her abdomen, and slowly walked ahead.

The soldiers had all left their tents by now. A few paces later, they heard footsteps pounding from the other side of the cleft, along with rumbling hooves and billowing smoke.

By the time Chen Rong arrived at the centermost tent, a line of soldiers were already standing there, holding polearms and staring expressionlessly at her.

Nurse Ping’s legs gave out upon seeing these people.

Chen Rong hastened to hold her. She kept her head down and soon passed the heavily guarded area into the tent.

Inside, Ran Min was sitting on the divan using a

red cloth to wipe his spear. He slowly raised his head when he heard the arriving footsteps.

His inky eyes patiently fixed upon Chen Rong before they glanced over at Nurse Ping. By the time he turned back to Chen Rong, his thin lips were smiling.

"Sit," he motioned.

"Thank you."

Chen Rong let go of Nurse Ping and scurried to the seat he had pointed to.

Ran Min poured her a cup of wine, then pointed and ordered: "Drink."

Chen Rong received it from him and threw her head back for a swig.

"How straightforward," Ran Min laughed.

He put the flagon down and then turned to stare at her.

Eventually, his thin lips curved into a smile. "You seem calmer this time."

Chen Rong demurely smiled back. "It's not as if you will eat me."

Ran Min's brow slowly furrowed.

He leaned down in front of Chen Rong, stiffening her when his breathing fluttered across her face.

Then, he reached out and lifted her chin.

Carefully watching her, Ran Min cocked a brow and quizzically asked, “Why aren’t you affronted by me anymore?”

Chen Rong also raised a brow upon hearing him ask. “Do you want me to be afraid of you?”

Ran Min did not answer.

He just held her chin and continued to stare at her. There was a sense of loss in those habitually fiery eye… it was extremely hard to detect, and was gone in a flash. If Chen Rong didn’t know him better, she wouldn’t have noticed it.

Just then, footfalls sounded outside.

They swiftly arrived at the tent, yet Ran Min still wouldn’t let go of Chen Rong’s chin.

Chen Rong didn’t panic when he didn’t let go. She merely looked back at him with unruffled eyes.

Sure enough, he slowly let go by the time the footsteps reached just outside the tent.

Several advisors came in. They gave Chen Rong a glance before indifferently turning to Ran Min.

She did not wait to be reminded. She stood up from the divan, quietly retreated to a corner behind Ran Min, and sat down on a bench.

Ran Min glanced at her action and wanted to

laugh, but whatever he may be thinking, he stopped himself before his smile could bloom.

Several advisors stood before Ran Min. One of them stepped forward, placed his hands together and said, “General, Xianbei scouts are showing up in the Mo’yang area.”

After he finished, another advisor stepped forward, placed his hands together and said, “General, His Majesty boiled the Chancellor’s family a month ago. He then gave each minister a piece of meat and forced them to eat it.”

After they had finished reporting to him, they began withdrawing from the tent.

Chen Rong quietly stepped out and sat down on the same divan again.

Ran Min slowly turned to regard her.

The appreciation she saw in his eyes threw her off for a moment. She vaguely remembered the sense of loss she had felt each time she saw him look at others this way, and how she had wished she could trade her life for such a look. During those years, she would collect everything that had anything to do with him, always wanting to know him better. She had longed to be alone with him, if only for a short second, so that he would glance at her with this regard… but even so simple a wish was a

luxury she couldn’t afford.

Funniest of all was that she finally got what she wanted, but she couldn’t feel a thing.

“You flatter me, general,” Chen Rong softly said.

Ran Min furrowed his brow and again looked at her, suddenly asking: “Little miss, for what ha an unwed girl like you traveled the distance to see me?”

His voice was slightly humored, asking as though he didn’t already know.

Chen Rong looked up at him, her eyes flashing a light so extraordinary that they made Ran Min lean back in anticipation.

Sure enough, she slowly dropped her gaze and, after contemplating her wording, quietly said, “I’ve come at the request of Chen Yuan to ask for your help in taking back our food supply from the Hu.”

Without waiting for Ran Min to reply, she mustered her courage to look up at him and said, “However, I knew as soon as I received his order that Chen Yuan is foolish.”

Ran Min cocked an eyebrow, and leaned closer. “Oh? Tell me, then.”

Chen Rong looked at him and lightly said, “I think with you here, the bandits are too terrified to rob

the food and flex their muscles with that kind of fanfare. I'm fairly sure the grains had been retrieved by you." What an elegant word she had used – *retrieved*.

Ran Min burst out laughing.

He shook with laughter and slapped his hand on the table, prompting a few turning heads.

He waved to a middle-aged scholar and laughingly said, "Sir Zhang, do you know what this young lady had just said? She said that with me here, the bandits are too terrified to come close. And then she said the food supply was retrieved by me."

Upon hearing his words, several advisors widened their eyes looking at Chen Rong in surprise. The middle-aged scholar strode in and repeatedly exclaimed, "Impressive, young lady. I thought I was smart, but it turns out I'm not even as good as a little girl!"

Ran Min was still booming with laughter.

He stopped to catch his breath, then waved hid men away. "Leave, I still want to talk to the little miss."

His advisors chuckled and took their leave.

Ran Min swiched his gaze to Chen Rong. He raised an eyebrow and laughed, "Since you know Chen Yuan is foolish, why had you come at his behest?"

He leaned in, his deep magnetic voice breathing into her ear: “Or do you miss me so much, Ah Rong, that you want to take this opportunity to see me?”

Chen Rong looked back at him and then solemnly shook her head.

His handsome features appeared to be chiseled under the sunlight. For the first time in her life, her voice was calm and cold when she looked at him: “Nay, I have come to ask a favor of you.”

Ran Min’s interest was piqued. He folded his hands across his chest and laughed. “A favor? Let me hear it, then.”

Chen Rong pressed her lips together and lowered her eyes. After a while, she decisively looked up at him and said, “General, I know that you are on a battlefield year round and thus provisions are your lifeline.”

Her hands entwined under her wide sleeves. Her eyes had a quiet ruthlessly when they looked to Ran Min. “As luck would have it, I know of a secret route that Lady Ruan and Chen Yuan are using to trade food and transport money.”

Chen Rong had followed Ran Min away from Nan’yang after she had gotten married to him in her previous life. Not knowing she was unloved, Lady

Ruan had sent people to seek her after they had been robbed by the Hu, and asked her to find Ran Min so he could send troops to guard the route. This was how Chen Rong had such information.

The smile on Ran Min's face faded upon hearing her words.

His eyes bored into her.

Anyone would tremble and sweat under the gaze of his eyes – ones as dark as the night sky and as intense as fire.

But not Chen Rong. In her previous life, she had seen this appearance of his too many times. Besides, when she prepared herself to say these words, she had thought of all the possible consequences that could come of them.

Chen Rong's eyes remained a state of calm.

"Since it's a secret route," Ran Min said, "at a time when the Hu can attack at any moment, Lady Ruan and Chen Yuan will certainly increase their transport. Little miss, do you know the weight of your words?"

Chen Rong looked at him.

Her eyes were still bright and calm, having no trace of shame or fluster.

She nodded, coldly smiling a tight-lip smile: "I

want him to suffer the worst of losses!”

Ran Min leaned back to quietly stare at Chen Rong and asked, “Aren’t you afraid that your clan will be wiped out due to food shortage when the Hu lay seige to the city?”

“Nay,” Chen Rong resolutely replied.

“Chen Yuan is a very selfish man. What he owns would likely be given to help the Ruan family or to curry favor with the Prince of Nan’yang. But he will never give them to our clan no matter what happens.”

She knew what Ran Min must be wondering. She wryly smiled, dropped her gaze, blinked back tears, and whispered, “If I hadn’t been pushed into a corner, why would a woman of gentry descent think of scheming against her own elders?”

Her lips quivered. “In the eyes of Chen Yuan and his wives, I am someone they can freely trample and insult.” Colors drained from her face when she thought of the night she had been locked in the small cabin and of the guards’ conversation… She couldn’t stop herself from shuddering. Due to her pain, her hatred, and her helplessness, her beautiful face perceptibly contorted.

At this point, Ran Min’s deep and powerful voice sounded: “Deal!”

Chen Rong whipped her head up looking at him.

Ran Min was still staring at her. His eyes were without disgust, faintly displaying tenderness and approval, even. He nodded his head, laughed and said, “You’re right, Ah Rong. I’m in great need of provisions.”

Chen Rong happily got up and curtsied to him. “I thank you, general.”

She knew Ran Min held too much stake to reject the proposal. Even so, she kept her rain-beaten flower appearance and used a pitiful voice to thank him.

Chen Rong maintained her curtsy, lowered her eyes, and said after a while, “I have another favor to ask.”

“Go on.”

“The Prince of Nan’yang has a share in the food supply you are robbing from Chen Yuan,” she softly articulated.

Her words caused a nonchalantly sitting Ran Min to lower to her, asking, “How do you know?”

A smile displayed on Chen Rong’s pale face. “I overheard it, of course.”

Seeing that Ran Min seemed to have believed her, she continued: “I would like to ask you to

announce that the supply route had been disclosed by an aid named Li Mu and an aid named Xu Qian from the Nan'yang Prince's estate." She paused and then eagerly explained to Ran Min: "Li Mu is the older brother of Chen Yuan's lesser madam, Lady Li. She depends on him the most. As for Xu Qian, he deserves to die for his odious appearance and vileness!"

After she finished, she kept her bowing head and ceremony posture. She did not rise or dare to look up at Ran Min.

Silence, great silence.

Some time later, Ran Min still didn't answer.

As she waited, Chen Rong's graceful posture couldn't keep from shaking. Two drops of tears gradually hung on her long lashes.

It had been some length of time but Chen Rong had not received Ran Min's answer nor had she the courage to look up at him. She grew white as she bitterly smiled. The words from her mouth were ruthless and bleak: "I beg your pardon, general. Since they are unkind they cannot blame me for being unrighteous! I admit I'm just a petty, vengeful woman. Anyone who wants to trample on me best look out for his own two feet!"

Although she was trembling, her voice was as

calm as her eyes.

Chen Rong maintained her posture of ceremony and dutiful look. In the stifling atmosphere, her heart quietly hardened: *If he doesn't agree, I will remind him of the time I had risked my life to leave the city and help him get rid of the moles and recoup major losses for him. That's right, I had also donated ten carriages of grains to him.*

However long it had been, so long that Chen Rong started to lose her confidence, so long that her mouth hesitated to speak. As she was about to collect her debt of gratitude, a burst of mad laughter abruptly erupted.

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Sorry for the wait. I didn't want anyone flipping tables after Ch 104 & 105 so I wanted to add 106 & 107 as a batch update. With that said, I am coming up to a pretty busy period so updates from now on will be infrequent, batch or not. Hopefully you guys can distract yourselves with the Olympics or something

Chapter 108: Getting Along This Time

Ran Min slapped his right hand and burst out laughing.

He laughed until tears almost came out before he would stop.

He tilted his head, not minding the stray hair falling over his face.

Ran Min smiled at Chen Rong saying: “Missy, you’ve quite the gall.” He paused before adding: “And quite the ruthless heart!”

Chen Rong did not answer him. She merely kept her head bowed and her lips pressed together as her tears trickled down.

Ran Min laughed when he saw her appearance: “Hah, you’re ruthlessly scheming against other people yet you’re putting on this grievous look. I’m seeing you in a new light, young miss.”

Chen Rong still wouldn’t raise her head although her face was growing paler and paler.

Ran Min lifted his wine and threw his head back for a swig. When he next placed the cup down, he said, “It’s a deal.”

Only now did Chen Rong look up at him. There

were accusation and grievance in her eyes, as if she was miffed that he had called her ruthless.

She lowered her head again to accord Ran Min ceremony before walking back to her seat and slowly sitting down.

Ran Min laced his palms together as he shouted, “One of you come in here.”

“Aye.”

An advisor came in.

Ran Min turned his gaze to Chen Rong and ordered: “Tell him where that route is.”

“Aye.”

Chen Rong rose, dropped to another curtsy, and described the route in detail while the advisor laid out his paper.

Although the route was from her previous life’s memory, she had thought long and hard about it on the way here and tried to remember it as best as she could, repeating it over and over in her mind. Her description was thus very articulate and clear.

In just moments, the advisor put away the silk parchment and said to Ran Min: “I have it down.”

Ran Min nodded and then waved his hand to dismiss him.

Footsteps were heard outside at this time.

“General, it’s time,” a soldier called in.

Chen Rong at once curtsied and dismissed herself.

After she was gone, an advisor walked in and, looking at Ran Min, smilingly said, “You should have seized the opportunity to be more affectionate to the young lady, general.”

Ran Min stood up to let the soldiers help him put his armor on. His face was cold at this time, reticent before saying: “She’s very normal around me this time.” His words made those in the tent break out in laughter. Ran Min did not join them; he thoughtfully turned to look in the direction Chen Rong had gone and said, “Her temperament is just like mine.”

His advisor laughed: “Like yours, general? I find that difficult to believe.” The nobility of this era was a mild breed, and it was funny to hear a fiercesome Ran Min say a noblewoman was his parallel.

Nurse Ping was waiting for Chen Rong when she stepped out. She had been at Chen Rong’s side, but when Chen Rong and Ran Min began talking, Ran Min had waved his hand to dismiss her. Because Chen Rong didn’t want to reveal the scheme against her elders, she did not stop her from leaving.

She stepped up to greet her mistress and, after taking a careful look at her, couldn’t stop herself

from asking: “Miss, how are things?” Her eyes were filled with hope.

Chen Rong smiled at her. “Very good.”

Overjoyed, Nurse Ping lowered her voice: “Then, did he mention anything about marriage?”

Marriage?

Chen Rong shook her head and distractedly looked at the tents ahead. Moments ago, she had thought Ran Min would be disappointed with how selfish and cruel she was, and would not be interested in her anymore – even then, she didn’t care, she must exact her revenge!

Unexpectedly, Ran Min had agreed and even laughed at her request. She had tried and tried to put her best foot forward in the past yet she had always been cast aside. Why was she receiving his appreciation now that she was showing her true self and no longer needing it?

Chen Rong couldn’t find an answer to this question, or did she want to. She strode to the front as she shook her head.

Nurse Ping followed behind. In a few steps, she again asked, “Miss, did the general say anything else? Such as your uncle’s matter? Also, did you let him know that the clan no longer objects to your marrying him?”

Chen Rong didn’t bother turning her head when she lightly said, “Do you think someone like Ran Min would care about what the clan thinks?”

The nurse was thus silenced.

Chen Rong had gotten to her tent. She bent down and went in.

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Four days passed in the blink of an eye.

At noon on one day, Nurse Ping hurried after Chen Rong when she saw her step out. “Miss.” She glanced at the tent and whispered, “What did General Ran say?”

Just now, Ran Min had called Chen Rong to his tent again and told her nurse to leave.

Yet again, Chen Rong shook her head and softly replied, “He did not speak to me.”

“Ah? But why not?”

Chen Rong blankly smiled. “He’s too busy.”

Nurse Ping could see this, too. “Then what did he call you for?”

Chen Rong again shook her head.

She was just sitting next to him and watching him give orders to his subordinates. From beginning to end, he hadn’t had any time to spare her.

Odd, did Ran Min call her to his tent just so she could watch him work?

In the midst of Chen Rong's puzzlement, she was called to Ran Min's tent again in the evening.

Docilely sitting in a corner, she watched the fluttering curtain in front of her and recalled that there had been none at noon.

She looked at it for a while until she saw the last advisor leave and only Ran Min was left. "General."

Ran Min was flipping through his silk manuscripts and didn't bother raising his head: "Get to the point."

Chen Rong knew his personality well enough to quickly say: "I don't know why you've called me here, and even placed a screen in front of me like this."

Ran Min still didn't look up. He matter-of-factly told her, "People come and go in my tent, the screen will keep them from getting distracted."

Chen Rong bit her lips and then stammered after a good while: "Then what have you… summoned me for, general?"

He placed his brush aside, leaned back, massaged his temples and tiredly said, "I can't call for you without a reason?"

What?

Chen Rong's mouth gaped as she thought in befuddlement: *If you don't have any reason to, then of course you can't call for me.* Knowing Ran Min, however, he would be irritable when he was tired, so she didn't ask anymore.

At this time, two soldiers welcomed in a thin and feeble scholar of about 30 to 40 years old.

He was sweating profusely, his face was smeared in dust, and his lips were chapped and dry.

He sat down and then amenably placed his hands in front of him, quietly waiting for Ran Min to speak.

Ran Min raised his head.

He glanced at the wine in front of the scholar, then looked down and continued to write something onto the silk parchment.

Seeing that he was unspeaking, the intimidated scholar sweated even more profusely. He licked his chapped lips and didn't dare to make a slightest movement.

Hunched over the desk and swiftly writing, Ran Min soon finished a paragraph. He placed the brush down and looked up, at which point his brow furrowed into a glower.

The scholar broke into cold sweat and shrank back, almost dropping to his knees.

Chen Rong's voice sounded at this time: "My good sir, why don't you have a drink if your mouth is dry? Why don't you wipe your face if your are perspiring?"

The scholar halted, realizing that Ran Min was annoyed at him for this. He awkwardly lifted the wine for a drink, wiped his sweat, and lastly sat back down.

Chen Rong shook her head and again said, "If you have something to report, then do say it, sir. General Ran is a busy man; he can't ask you everything first."

"Aye, aye, aye."

The scholar finally realized why the general seemed to fume every time he came.

He got up, placed his palms together, and said to Ran Min, "General, we've taken twenty grain carriages from the Prince of Nan'yang, along with a hundred carriages of fine silk. The records are here." He then took a piece of parchment out from his lapel.

Ran Min didn't take it, waving to the back: "Give it to her."

The scholar did as told and walked over to Chen

Rong.

Chen Rong was too stunned to speak. Some time later, she wryly smiled and received the paper from the scholar's hand, reading the information on it.

Afterwards, Ran Min waved his hand to dismiss the scholar.

Before she knew it, only Ran Min and her were left in the tent.

In the midst of rustling brushwork, Ran Min suddenly asked, "Missy, now do you know why I've called you here?"

Chen Rong looked at him.

"Aye," she managed after a while.

Ran Min was apparently in a very good mood. He laughed and affably said, "Out of all whom I've met, there has never been one who knows me as well as you do."

Chen Rong's heart pounded to hear this. Her hands wrung under her sleeves despite herself. Why is he saying this all of a sudden? Would he mention the marriage again? If he does, should I agree?

Her mind was in a tumult, but Ran Min did not add anything thereafter.

He was still writing away at his desk.

At length, he ordered without looking up: "If you

have nothing to do then organize the silk manuscripts and military orders for me."

"Pardon?" Chen Rong startlingly cried.

She looked around with a weak smile. They were the only ones in the tent, if he wasn't talking to her who else was he talking to?

Never mind. Perhaps she would have to spend the rest of her life with him, better to start pleasing him now.

At this thought, Chen Rong finally got up and walked over to Ran Min. She bent down to move the silk manuscripts and the military orders to her table, then took out another set of stationery and began to scribble away as well.

It wasn't long before an advisor walked in, took a book from his lapels and said, "General, things are going well. We've succeeded in preventing a food cavalcade from reaching Nan'yang." He clucked his tongue and said in great delight: "There's really tons of food, about 40 carriages, I would say! From our questioning, the fleet had indeed been used by Chen Yuan and the Ruan House in Nan'yang to secretly transport goods. Haha, it's the main route they use to transport their wealth and we've captured the entire group. Those in Nan'yang won't know they've lost their shipments for another ten days or so. Because of our arrangements, they will

think it’s the work of the barbarians from Mo’yang. They also won’t know that the route had been revealed, and will keep transporting more goods through there.”

He laughed at this juncture: “General, we’ve hit a gold mine.”

Ran Min lightly smiled. He seemed to know Chen Rong was anxious, and thus waved his hand to shush and shoo away the enthusiastic advisor.

For this reason, the moon was already hanging overhead by the time Chen Rong left.

Nurse Ping walked up to her. When she saw Chen Rong massaging her own arms, looking exhausted, she couldn’t help but ask: “Miss, are you all right?”

Chen Rong glanced at her and tiredly said, “I can’t believe how much work he has. I spent an hour only to get a fraction of it done.”

Nurse Ping gaped in surprise. “What are you talking about?”

Chen Rong impatiently replied, “Nothing, I was just helping him organize his documents for an hour. Whenever his staff came to report to him, I would remind them to not dither lest they irritate Ran Min.”

Eh? Nurse Ping was completely dumbfounded.

She stood there on the spot and only awoke from her trance after a while. Seeing that Chen Rong had left, she hurried after her and asked, “Miss, did you ask him about the food supply? Your uncle is still waiting for an answer.”

At Nurse Ping’s hopeful look, Chen Rong lightly shook her head.

This time, her nurse was about to cry from panic. She quavered: “Then what are we going to do? What is still left of your reputation if we keep delaying another day?”

Chen Rong didn’t turn around and just kept striding ahead. She hadn’t had any reputation to speak of anyway. In any case, if she were to return to Nan’yang, she was worried Chen Yuan and Lady Ruan would kill her when they didn’t see the grains. Or they would unconcernedly give her to another man.

Chen Rong couldn’t see the road ahead anymore and she no longer knew how to go on. *Wait just a while, just a while longer, in a few days perhaps something would happen for the better…*

Early next morning, Chen Rong was awakened by a spate of noises.

She got out of bed, listened to the continuous neighing and human voices outside, as well as the

sound of moving objects. All kind of sounds filled the camp ground.

"What's with the ruckus?" Nurse Ping sleepily wondered.

Chen Rong didn't reply. She turned and faced the people outside to ask: "What's happening?"

At once, a soldier loudly replied, "We're setting off."

What? Setting off?

Chen Rong stepped onto the ground. She then remembered she hadn't had a chance to wash her face and said to Nurse Ping, "Quickly, help me wash up."

"Aye, aye." Nurse Ping frantically went to her.

After a frenzied spell, Chen Rong finished washing and hastily put on her veiled hat to head to Ran Min's tent.

When she arrived, there were about 30 to 40 captains standing outside of his tent, lined in two rows as they listened to his commands.

Given the situation, Chen Rong could only stop and wait.

Before long, the captains mounted their horses and left.

As Ran Min turned to go inside, she quickly chased

after him.

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By the time she got to him, Ran Min was being helped into his armor. The heavy black metal pieces one by one draped over him, the metal clinking together to create a deadly chill.

Chen Rong strode to stand before Ran Min. She cast him a quick glance only to bow her head afterwards. Ran Min had been imposing to begin with. Now with his armor and helmet, his blood lust was suffocating her in a truly terrifying way.

She bit her lips, and then raised her head and angrily questioned him: “General Ran, what is the meaning of this? Why didn’t you tell me your army would be setting off?” She even took her veiled hat off to show him how angry she was.

Ran Min lifted his chin to let the soldier tie his helmet. Hearing Chen Rong’s accusations, he gave her a glance and lazily answered: “Why should I tell you?”

Chen Rong had been intimidated by his aura, but his answer had fanned that nameless fire anew. She clenched her teeth, took a deep breath, and fumed: “General, don’t forget that aside from your soldiers, you still have a young girl as your guest!”

At her words, Ran Min curved his thin lips into a ringing laugh.

He quietly regarded Chen Rong. Seeing her face growing red and anger rising in her eyes, he stopped smiling and said, “Nan’yang is now a troublesome place, you’ve also offended your clan, why would you still go back there?”

He hadn’t finished by the time Chen Rong bristled: “That’s my own business!”

Ran Min laughed again. He turned his back, spread his arms so that the soldiers could begin helping him wear the backplate and put on his cloak.

After a long time, Chen Rong still didn’t hear him speak.

She made a turn and dashed before him again. “General, you still haven’t answered me,” she growled with a glare.

Ran Min lazily glanced at her, wanting to laugh when he saw her glaring at him.

He soon finished dressing, upon which he turned and stepped outside.

He still did not speak.

Seeing the guard lead his horse to him, Ran Min strode off and left Chen Rong to chase after him while shouting: “Ran Min!” All of a sudden, he bent

down to lift her elbow and gently placed her in front of him on the saddle.

After taking a stockstill Chen Rong, as fast as lightning, he stretched his left hand to take hold of her waist.

Afterwards, he said with a smile, “Haven’t you ignored the world’s censure and come all the way here to be with me? That being the case, why would you go back to Nan’yang?”

He kicked the horse’s girth to send it galloping away.

The ride caused his hard armor to scrape against her delicate skin.

Ran Min’s left arm obliviously tightened around the girl who sat in front of him. He bowed his head and breathed into her ear: “As for your reputation, you don’t need to worry. When the time comes, I will officially marry you. Haha, Zhuo Wenjun and Sima Xiangru’s elopement has become quite a legend. With their story as precedence, then have you not also eloped with me out of ‘gratitude’, Ah Rong? Just think that we are eloping right now.”

At this juncture, Ran Min laughed when he saw Chen Rong growing completely still. He gave a kick, causing the horse to rear and shoot forward. The whistling wind from both sides brought pain to her

eardrums.

Ran Min's breastplate was still scraping against her back, smarting her each time.

She kept her head down, nonetheless.

She tightly shut her eyes.

"General Ran," she rasped at length, "my guardians may not be here, but I'm still a noblewoman. Please let me down so I can follow along by carriage." Those last words "follow along" was rather ambiguous.

Ran Min paused.

And then quickly enough broke into a low laughter. "Missy, have you accepted my proposal?"

"Ah right," he said to himself, "you can only marry me now. The nobles with their tedious rules won't want to marry you."

Chen Rong's smile stiffened at his words. "Even in the past," she faintly said, "none of the nobles had wanted to marry me." As for the ethereal Wang Qilang, he would never marry her either.

She shut her eyes to blink her tears away. Biting her lips, she said in seriousness, "General Ran, please let me down. I beg you to let me sit in a carriage!"

She was insistent about it.

Listening to her unusually serious tone, Ran Min laughed out loud and slowed down. Then he let her on the ground.

After letting go of her, he maintained his stooping posture as he fixedly stared at her. “Ah Rong of the Chen House, are you really in love with that fella Wang Qilang?”

Chen Rong looked up at him.

In her large, bright eyes were struggle and hesitancy…

At long last, she faced him and solemnly replied, “Aye.”

When she spoke, her eyes did not stray from his face and the expression on it.

The smile on Ran Min’s handsome face froze at once.

He gave a holler and brought his stallion to a stop.

Then he dismounted and lowered his head to regard Chen Rong. Suddenly, he reached out to take her chin. Fury was brewing in his inky eyes.

His lips drew into a tight line, his voice was also grave and chilly. “Since when?”

Murderous intent circled over his handsome face. “Tell me, since when?!”

At first, Chen Rong had regretted her words the

moment she said them. She hated herself for being so stupid – how could she have given him such an answer? She hated herself for ruining her own future – since she had made up her mind to marry him, she should've buried everything about Wang Hong, bury them till she was gray and old, till she lay six feet under!

And yet, she knew the hatred from her previous life was too strong, such that it was always lurking inside of her. And thus when she saw him so arrogantly thinking that he could control everything, she suddenly had an impulsive desire to shatter it all! She wanted to see the look on his face at this moment even if it meant throwing this life of hers away.

Chapter 109: Perfectly Frank

Well, she got to see it now.

She got to see his fury and she got to see his hatred!

Chen Rong lifted her head to look straight at him… both the joy and ironic pain of this moment brought tears to her eyes.

The angry Ran Min hadn't expected Chen Rong to shed tears due to his questioning.

He loosened his grip on her chin, anger receding from his eyes, as he quizzically asked, "Why are

you crying?”

Chen Rong dropped her gaze, blinked, and then hoarsely laughed. “I just didn’t expect you to be this furious.”

She glanced sideways at him. “Can you let me know why you are so angry, general?”

Her eyes were welling with tears, but when they moved, their inherent allure bewitched him so.

Caught off guard, Ran Min unconsciously moved his hand away and gently used his thumb to stroke her rosy lips. “Answer me, why are you crying?”

He spoke with a finality though his voice was gentle. It was clearly a command.

Chen Rong blinked her wet long lashes and slowly looked down.

She didn’t give him an answer.

Her subconsciousness wanted to continue riling him, but her rationality was telling her not to do so. And thus she decided to keep quiet.

Ran Min’s lips drew tighter, his brow furrowed angrily.

Just then, a loud holler called out: “General? Why aren’t you going?”

Ran Min whipped around and violently shouted, “Shut up! Go on ahead!”

He was so irritable that his soldiers all shrank away. “Aye, aye, sir,” replied the man as he trotted off.

Ran Min turned back to Chen Rong.

Coldly, he issued a low bark: “Ah Rong of the Chen House, you should know that I’m never one to be patient!”

This was his warning.

Chen Rong pursed her lips. She looked at him and said in her crystalline voice, “Yes, I am now in love with Wang Qilang. And yes, the one I used to love was you – very much so.”

After articulating each word to him, she slowly smiled a smile that was both ironic and liberating. “Even now, I’m not entirely indifferent to you, but the one I love the most is already him.”

She quietly watched Ran Min, but also past him to where the vast mountains stood as she murmured: “A human life is no different from a blade of grass. We never know when the wind will carry us to a rain puddle where we have no way to preserve our lives. You know, for some reason, it makes me happy to discover that I don’t like you as much as I had thought I did. Even now, I am happy to be saying these words.”

Even if this happiness was as ephemeral as a

night-blooming cereus, even if she would have to bear all the terrible consequences only seconds from now, she was fine with it… after all, it was a joy she had waited too long for.

Ran Min unblinkingly stared at her.

"How have I offended you?" he suddenly asked her again. "When did you fall in love with me?" he added after a brief pause.

Chen Rong shook her head and withdrew her gaze, offering him a wooden smile and an obscure answer: "I can't say."

Ran Min hollowly laughed.

After laughing twice, he turned and strode away.

As he walked, his fiery horse automatically followed him.

Chen Rong, too, hurried after them.

"Since you are so strong willed, why do you still want to come with me?" scoffed Ran Min.

Clad in a golden armor, his tall and great stature appeared all at once unworldly, majestic and grave.

Chen Rong glanced at his side profile and softly replied, "Besides following you, I have nowhere to go."

Ran Min seemed to have been provoked. Almost abruptly, he throated an audible growl.

It sounded like thunder, like drums, like a tiger's roaring, like a dreadful furor lashing at the world.

After he ceased to roar, he jumped onto his horse and dashed away.

What kind of horse did he have? How extraordinary was his riding? In a flash the arrogant golden figure and his horse had pulled into the distance, leaving only dust swirling in the air.

Chen Rong hung her head.

She dragged her feet and went on. A constant stream of soldiers continuously passed her, sending smoke skyward. Their hooves were still rumbling by her ears after they had disappeared from her sight…

At length, she suddenly found that there was no one left around her.

No men, no horses, no dust, no sound.

She was the only one walking in the vast expanse.

Chen Rong slowed to a stop.

She titled her head to gaze at the sunset in the west where she saw their dense shadows. They were definitely gone, alright.

She turned around at the cleft where abandoned pots and pans were strewn all over. Not long ago, this place was still bustling with the troops and their horses.

She didn’t even know where Nurse Ping had gone in this emptiness.

Chen Rong looked around, wrapped her arms around herself, and continued to drag herself toward the sunlight in the west, which was also toward the direction the army had gone to.

Eventually, the setting sun went down.

Eventually, the last ray of light also faded from the horizon where heaven and earth met.

Eventually, stars filled the sky and out came the crescent moon.

The earth was wide and heaven was vast.

Chen Rong trekked on.

Time did not stop.

Gradually, there remained only the stars and the moon.

Neighing and voices sounded from the far distance, but they were so far away that Chen Rong didn’t know whether they were real or whether they were her hallucinations.

At this time, she felt a sharp pain under her soles. She knelt down to take her shoes off. After taking a look at her blistered feet, she put her shoes on again and faintly smiled. Unknowingly, she had walked for an entire day…

A night wind blew past and brought along a bone-deep chill though it had been sunny during the day.

Chen Rong wrapped her arms tighter around herself and shrank her neck into her collar.

She slowly looked up but did not otherwise make a move.

In her purview, at the end of the road, a tall horse was carrying a stalwart man galloping toward her.

In the watery starlight, the rider and his horse appeared as though they were coming from the far end of the earth, and from another time.

Chen Rong rubbed her eyes.

He eventually reached her.

His electrifying eyes fixed upon her under the stars. At last, he slightly bent down, offered his hand and ordered: “Up!”

Seeing Chen Rong still rubbing her eyes, her beautiful face now besmirched with dirt and tears, his voice softened despite himself: “Do I have to repeat myself? Up!”

Chen Rong finally broke from her trance. She hurriedly took his hand.

He pulled her up and deposited her onto the saddle.

He stretched his right hand around her waist,

kicked the horse’s girth, and dashed forward.

In the midst of clopping hooves, the chorus made by his hard armor and her fluttering dress as well as the heavy breathing of the man behind her all occupied Chen Rong’s ears.

All of a sudden, she burst into tears.

The flood gate broke too frantically and too fast. Chen Rong wanted to wipe her tears as soon as she understood what was happening but they came out even more violently.

All she could do was hide behind her sleeves and cry.

Her sobs minglef with the clopping hooves and whistling wind, unceasingly it seemed…

“Enough!” Ran Min impatiently snapped. He suceeded in startling Chen Rong who quickly stopped.

From behind, he brusquely said to her, “If you miss Wang Qilang so much, then why don’t you ask to be his concubine and go to him?”

He thought she was crying her heart out because she was missing Wang Hong.

Chen Rong bit her lips. She did not turn around, merely crying indignantly: “I’m just a girl. You left me for an entire day, a-and didn’t come back until

now… You treated me so awfully but you won’t even let me cry?”

Ran Min didn’t expect her to cry so disconsolately for such a reason. He stopped in his tracks and felt like laughing out loud.

After having blurted out her grievances, Chen Rong thought of her previous life when she had died in the flames. This man had unhesitatingly walked away at the time… Why, then, did she feel aggrieved when he left her for just half a day now? Why would she even cry over a heartless man’s heartlessness?

At this thought, Chen Rong felt a pang in her heart. It wrung her and pricked her. She hastened to hide her face behind her sleeves and sat still.

Behind her, Ran Min harrumphed to see her so. “You can be quite daft, missy. When you said what you said, you should’ve expected it to end our relationship.” Whatever he may be thinking, he gave a sigh, his arms also tightening around Chen Rong.

…

Under the starlight, all was quiet.

She wasn’t sure how much time had passed before Ran Min murmured, “Ah Rong of the Chen House.”

“Aye.”

“Forget Wang Qilang.”

Chen Rong froze at his words.

He told her to forget Wang Qilang! He actually told her to forget Wang Qilang!

Did he still want her even though she plainly said she didn’t care a whit for him?

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Chapter 110: Understanding

Chen Rong looked up in surprise as she observed the quiet face under the starlight.

Ran Min ignored her look, choosing instead to stare straight ahead at the distant horizon.

Chen Rong withdrew her gaze. At length, her lips slowly curved into a faint smile that seemed ironic, triumphant, bitter, and resigned all at once…

"Aye," she finally opened her mouth to answer him.

Ran Min gave a kick which spurred the horse on.

His dragon horse was one of the rarest in the world. When it dashed, it was as fast as a lightning bolt.

Nested in his arms, Chen Rong bit her lip at the abrasive contact with his armor.

A long while later, she softly asked, "Where are we going this time?"

"Luo'yang."

Luo'yang?

Chen Rong lapsed into thought. *Luo'yang? Would it not be a very long journey? Wouldn't the people of*

Nan'yang have been gone by the time she came back, even if remnants of the city survived? And wouldn't the white-robed idol who'd never needed her to interfere in his affairs have also met his end?

At long last, Chen Rong whispered back: "I see."

"You needn't worry, Ah Rong," scoffed Ran Min. "By the time you return, Wang Qilang would've been killed by Murong Ke."

He regretted these words almost as soon as he uttered them. So he clamped his thin lips and sulked on his own.

Chen Rong didn't notice his strange behavior. She lowered her eyes, and softly yet staunchly replied, "Lang'ya Wang Qi isn't an incompetent man. You aren't the only one Murong Ke fears, general!"

This time, Ran Min broke into laughter as soon as she finished.

By the time he stopped, he furrowed his thick brows and ordered her: "Stop thinking about him hereafter!"

Chen Rong dropped her gaze and at length answered, "Aye." Being familiar with his temper and knowing his disposition, Chen Rong understood she could not wade against the current. "Though I am a woman," she quietly said, "I will be resolute in my action… I won't think of him any longer." *The same*

way I don't love you any longer. Even if I stay by your side, even if I'm with you day and night, I will not love you, never again!

Ran Min harrumphed to hear her answer.

The pair and their horse raced forward.

Gradually, the moon rose to the sky.

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At this time, the horse suddenly reared and neighed skyward.

"There's an ambush!" barked Ran Min.

His handsome face iced up, his eyes murderous as he tightened his grip on the reins.

Chen Rong paled when she heard him. She glanced to the side only to see that his weapon was not with him.

Ran Min was the invincible Heavenly Prince with his stallion and weapon. But what if he didn't have his weapon?

…If it weren't for finding her, his weapon would never leave his hand!

While Chen Rong was dwelling on this, Ran Min turned around to look at her.

As he turned around, Chen Rong looked up and faced his icy eyes, whispering: "Your fine horse can

certainly break out of here. General, let me down to lighten its load. You'll be able to take them by surprise that way." At Ran Min's surprised look, she softly added: "Don't worry about me."

At this very moment, her eyes were wholly bright and kind…

Ran Min was obviously moved. "This girl," he sighed, staring fixedly at her while gently stroking her face.

Swiftly, he turned around and slowly rode forth.

With her head bowed, a cold smile was gradually formed from Chen Rong's lips.

She knew that, here and now, only such words would move him, would make him do all he could to protect her, would make his steely heart – whether he decided in the end to keep her or abandon her – remember her all the same… this remembrance would be one that lasts a lifetime!

Watery starlight, sickle-shaped moon. The pair and their horse slowly went on.

In less than 100 paces, Ran Min abruptly hollered: "Yah-" as he kicked the horse's girth.

Years of companionship told the fiery horse to rear and race forward.

In a flash, they were carried away like the wind!

His abrupt action prompted urgent shouts from the roadside bushes: “Stop him, stop him!”

It was a Hu dialect, specifically the Xianbei clan’s.

In the midst of these shouts, more than a hundred shooters rose from the bushes with their longbows raised and their arrows loaded.

Whoosh whoosh……

In the whistling wind, the shower of arrows rained down on Ran Min and Chen Rong.

Chen Rong suddenly remembered something and broke from Ran Min’s hold. She quickly removed her outer blue robe, threw it to him and called, “General, use this!”

Ran Min laughed.

He kept rein with his left hand while swirling Chen Rong’s robe with his right.

Like an open tent, the cloth flapped in the wind and thwarted the assailing arrows.

How good was Ran Min? His strength could even turn leaves and petals into weaponry. Two mere twirls had succeeded in blocking them.

For this reason, no matter how many arrows there were or how sharp they were, at the flick of his wrist, they would be swatted away.

Meanwhile, his mount was still charging forth like

wind and light.

In less than two quarters of an hour, they had reached the eye of the storm and were gradually riding out of the ambush encirclement.

The Hu assailants were beyond agitated. “A useless lot!” one of them yelled. “There are so many of you but you can’t apprehend one Shi Min holding a woman! Shoot! Shoot him!”

Even through the endless shouts and raining arrows, the flapping cloth firmly protected them forward.

In the blink of an eye, the fiery horse had broken out. At a whistle, a hundred Hu jumped out from the grass and rushed at Ran Min.

At the same time, Ran Min faced the sky and roared in laughter.

Then he turned around at the Hu and shouted: “It wouldn’t be polite of me to not return a favor. Murong Lu, go back and tell Murong Ke to wash his neck and wait outside of Nan’yang for me!”

He laughed to the sky again.

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Amid his laughter, they had broken out and disappeared into the night’s shadow behind the

flying dust.

Mid chase, the Hu found they could not catch up. They stopped and looked at each other. Almost suddenly, Murong Lu screamed: “Idiots. You said too many people would raise his suspicions. But had we a thousand archers, how could Shi Min have escaped?” He slashed his whip down on a sickly Han scholar.

Some dozen miles later, Ran Min hollered at his horse to stop.

He alighted and reached out to Chen Rong. “Come down.”

Chen Rong knew he wanted to let his horse rest, so she swiftly did as told.

Just as she made a turn to jump down in an open space, Ran Min crinkled his eyes and also moved a step, causing her to land into a rugged embrace.

Wham, her nose rammed into his hard breast plate, so painfully she could cry.

Ran Min didn’t notice anything. He reached around her, stroke her long hair, and softly called, “Ah Rong of the Chen House.”

“Aye.”

“Why did you tell me to escape by myself? Aren’t you afraid to die?”

…

Having not received Chen Rong's answer after a long time, he couldn't but gaze down and impatiently look at her.

Under the starlight, Chen Rong's smile seemed both faint and strange.

Chen Rong startlingly thought: *Everything was too familiar. This was how Ah Wei had made him fall for her last time. Now that I think about it, did he also ask her these same questions?* Chen Rong broke from her trance.

She lowered her head.

Unconsciously, she pushed him away and quietly said, "You came back by yourself for me. I may be a woman, but I won't let anything happen to you on account of me!"

After so much thought, she gave him the most honest, unsentimental answer.

Ran Min turned toward Chen Rong.

At length he asked, "Missy, are you upset with me again?"

Chen Rong quickly shook her head. "Nay." Upset with him again? Of course not. The only one she was upset with was herself. When she was first reborn, she had thought of vengeance, of making

him fall in love with her, and of letting him taste the same pain she had suffered.

But for whatever reason, she suddenly lost her interest.

She pushed Ran Min away and walked ahead.

Staring at the vast starry sky in front of her, Chen Rong for the first time found that everything had completely and utterly changed… She suddenly felt that there was no longer any meaning to her revenge; she suddenly realized that, all along, she hadn’t worried for Wang Hong because she knew she could not help him. Moreover, she only now decided that if anything were to happen to him, she should go with the other man. Life was hard enough. Just like that, she should follow him to where he and his clansmen were, to a corner where no one would see her or know her.

This thought came so naturally that it freed her…

Finally, after spending a lifetime loving this man in pain, after using her understanding of him to slowly make him fall for her, when her revenge was only a hair away, all the fog suddenly dissipated to reveal that she had really let it go, she had really fallen in love with the man named Wang Hong!

How funny it all was! She did all she could, used all tactics she knew, and even burned herself to

death. Even while she was hesitant to really seek her revenge, she somehow got everything she had ever wanted. It turned out all obsession and even the deepest memories would fade with time… and there was no such thing as forever in this world.

At this time, she felt something pressing on her hand.

Ran Min had grabbed her wrist.

He pulled her closer to see her face. After regarding her for a while, he impatiently furrowed his brow. However, he did not yell at her, simply pulling her to the horse: “It’s getting late, let’s go.”

By the time the moon rose to the center of the sky, they had caught up to the troops.

After Ran Min tossed her to a soldier, he strode alone to his brightly lit tent.

Chen Rong cast him a glance before she turned and was led to her tent.

She was still some distance away when Nurse Ping hastened to her. She took hold of Chen Rong’s robe and tremulously whispered: “Miss, why are you only back now?”

Chen Rong shook her head and said nothing in reply.

Forthwith, the two of them entered inside.

Nurse Ping lit the candles and watched Chen Rong.

She quizzically asked, “Miss, has something good happened?” when she saw a smile on Chen Rong’s face. It was a lighthearted one that should not appear in this situation.

Chen Rong looked up at her and curved her lips. “No. I’ve figured out a few things, that’s all.”

Nurse Ping curiously followed her to the divan, continuing to ask: “What did you figure out?”

Chen Rong picked up her wine cup, unhurriedly took a sip, and casually replied, “That alive or dead, having one person worthy of remembering is more than enough.” She lifted her cup for a swig, saying ironically: “I can finally get along with him now.”

Nurse Ping was made even more confused.

Chen Rong did not have the patience to say more. She waved her hand and ordered, “Go see if you can get some water. I want to have a bath.”

“Aye, aye.”

That night, Chen Rong slept very well, much better than she ever had.

The next day, she could sense that Ran Min’s plan had changed. The troops slowed down, scouts were sent in all directions, and his advisors regularly visited his tent. Even his mien was nonchalant, as

if he was waiting for something interesting to happen according to his plans.

Per chance, did he change his mind due to the ambush? Was he no longer going to Luo'yang, but instead staying to take a part in Murong Ke and Wang Hong's contest?

In the afternoon, Nurse Ping entered the tent with a tray as she called out to Chen Rong: "Miss, miss."

"What is it?"

The old nurse came before her, set the tray down, lifted the satin cover and uneasily smiled, "Isn't it strange, the general gave you two male outfits for whatever reason."

Chen Rong curiously got down from the divan and held the clothes up for a look. "Oh, it's really a man's outfit." Then understanding dawned. "This being a military camp, it'd be more appropriate for me to walk around dressed as a lad."

Hearing her, Nurse Ping nodded, "I suppose you're right."

Having understood Ran Min's meaning, Chen Rong promptly changed into the light blue robe. She mulled a bit and then added a hat before going to Ran Min's tent.

Before long, she had appeared at the tent. An advisor walked out and looked surprised to see her.

He then seemed to have thought of something when he accorded her ceremony before leaving.

Chen Rong wasn't quite sure what that was about.

She watched the advisor leave and another walking out. This man also accorded her ceremony when he saw her before going away.

Chen Rong lowered her head.

She reckoned Ran Min must have told them something. If they accorded her ceremony, then they must see her as his wife.

…Though she may never find happiness in this life, at least she had found a home to belong to.

Chen Rong strode into the tent.

Only Ran Min was inside. As she watched him kneel at his desk, writing away, her determined gait softened with each step.

Even so, she had only taken two steps by the time Ran Min spoke: "Ah Rong."

"Aye."

Chen Rong dropped into a curtsy.

"From now on, you are to stay next to me and must not stray one step away," he ordered.

He did not receive Chen Rong's answer for a long time.

So he looked up.

Glancing at the wordless Chen Rong, he propped his hands on his knees, leaned forward and seriously said, “Army life can lead to death at any given moment. Why think so much? Don’t worry, I’ll surely give you a title.”

He knew, as did Chen Rong, that his work was endless from day to night. It was expected that Chen Rong would not leave his side or even spend the night with him.

As a noblewoman who hadn’t officially married him, however, Chen Rong of course couldn’t agree. Ran Min’s words were meant to give her reassurance.

After seeing her still in silence, he scowled: “What are you hesitant about?”

Chen Rong knew that he took his promises seriously. If he gave his words then he would keep them. Even so, she really couldn’t make herself stay day and night with a man she hadn’t married.

Blushing, Chen Rong bit her lip. As she was wondering how to proceed, footsteps sounded outside.

Soon, an advisor appeared at the entrance.

Chen Rong quickly curtsied and retreated to a corner.

The advisor cast her a glance. Because he comprehended the situation but also because he couldn’t care less, he simply turned to Ran Min and reported: “General, Murong Ke has shown up.”

Ran Min placed his hands on his knees, leaned forward and asked, “What about Wang Hong?”

Chen Rong looked up at the mention of his name.

The advisor shook his head and frowningly said, “The strange thing is that the Wang House of Lang’ya hasn’t made the slightest movement.”

He quizzically added, “If I hadn’t known Wang Qilang was still in Nan’yang, I would’ve thought he had fled.”

Ran Min smirked. “Wang Hong may be young, but he’s not very easy to fathom.”

He leaned back and muttered, “I’m also looking forward to this contest. Pass my order down that our men must not, under any circumstances, appear in their sight. Don’t let them discover our presence.”

“Aye.”

“How’s the situation in Nan’yang?”

The advisor sneered. “Still the same, panic and chaos. They say the Prince of Nan’yang has lost half his weight in only so many days. His head is also

half-gray.” At this juncture, he smiled in glee.

Ran Min nodded.

He looked down at a silk scroll and asked, “What about the other clans? Are they doing anything?”

“The Hu are coming from the west and the north, they are sighted in the east, too.”

“Stop all those who want to come here! Hmph, the Murong family has no real man. Since he’s publicly sent a declaration of war to Wang Qilang, he ought to fight him one on one until a winner is determined!”

The advisor laughed out loud. He looked at Ran Min in admiration and said, “Did you not want others to come here and mess things up? Hahaha, very well, let me go, then.”

A straightforward man himself, he quickly turned and went outside.

Within a few steps, the advisor suddenly stopped and looked toward Chen Rong.

Seeing her in the blue male outfit and quietly standing in the corner, he noddingly said to Ran Min: “This young lady really doesn’t stand on decorum, you’re quite lucky, general. Haha.”

He then sped out, not waiting for Ran Min’s reply.

Ran Min kept his head buried in his books.

Chen Rong went to his side and slowly sat down, glancing at the words on the silk books as she reorganized them.

It was all about the impending battle in Nan'yang.

Ran Min wasn't just famous for his bravery, he was also very astute – a self-taught genius in things such as strategic warfare. He couldn't have become a world renowned general otherwise.

Chen Rong tidied his silk books and cast him glances from time to time. She was occupied enough that she did not notice the passage of time.

A while later, Ran Min's voice suddenly sounded: "Ah Rong, do you want to return to Nan'yang?"

Return to Nan'yang?

Chen Rong paused and whipped her head looking up.

Ran Min didn't see her; he was busy writing something.

At length, Chen Rong softly asked, "Can we still get through the city gates?"

Ran Min placed his brush down, looked up at Chen Rong, and mysteriously smiled.

He reached for Chen Rong and pulled her into his arms.

Hugging her, he chuckled: "Why do we have to use

the city gates?”

Chen Rong stared at him in puzzlement.

Ran Min leaned back and, combing through her dark hair, explained, “Nan’yang has a secret passageway.”

Chen Rong let out a cry in surprise. She rounded her eyes, mouth agape and wordless for a long time.

Nan’yang has a passageway… Her heart drummed. *Then that’s to say, even if the worst were to happen, he could still be saved?*

While she was lost in her train of thought, Chen Rong saw Ran Min’s suspiciously narrowing eyes.

Quickly, she collected herself, dropped her gaze, and murmured, “Then that’s to say I can freely go in and out of Nan’yang?” She crinkled her eyes in anticipation: “I can also see what’s happening to Chen Yuan, his two wives, and his sons and daughters?”

Viciousness was evident in her eyes.

Ran Min withdrew his suspicion and burst into laughter. “Good for you, Ah Rong. One really mustn’t offend you. Very well, I’ll take you to see that family!”

Chapter 111: The Chens’ State of Affairs

Ran Min had always been decisive with his actions. He made some preparations and then took Chen Rong to Nan'yang early morning of the very next day.

He had changed into an ordinary scholar's robe, while Chen Rong was also donning a lad's outfit in light blue with a straw hat over her head. If not for such disguise, her graceful figure would have no hope of being concealed.

The entrance was behind a mountain cleft on the west side of Nan'yang. Ran Min gave his mount and weapon to his bodyguard and then led Chen Rong by the hand into the tunnel.

The passage was both small and narrow, and could only accommodate a stooping person. As Ran Min led the way in the front, Chen Rong looked at him and quietly asked, "General, you didn't bring any bodyguard with you. Will it be alright?"

Ran Min's muffled voice rang in the tunnel: "There's nothing to worry about as long as the Prince of Nan'yang doesn't detect us."

He smirked and added mockingly, "We scholars of the Jin Court are elegant and mild; very few of us know how to use brute strength. Rest assured missy, they will only suffer if they run into me." Rather than mockery, Chen Rong thought she had heard in his voice a sense of wistfulness.

They were surrounded by a pack of wolves, yet the Jin Court was filled with nobles competing for splendor and literati competing in grace. Sometimes, even Chen Rong felt rueful herself. Of course, these excess feelings hadn’t existed until her marriage to Ran Min.

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In the pitch black tunnel, Ran Min raised the torch and teetered ahead. With him in front, Chen Rong did not think the passage was very gloomy. Before she knew it, the 400 paces or so of passage came to a dead-end.

Ran Min handed her the torch and slowly pushed a boulder open.

Light spilled into Chen Rong’s eyes.

Ran Min jumped out, looked down and offered his hand: “Come up.”

Chen Rong put the torch out and carefully put it away, then took his hand and jumped up.

She was standing in the stable of an abandoned house. The tunnel exit had been from an old shallow well. The stable was vacant and had accumulated layers upon layers of dirt and leaves. No one had apparently been here for a long time.

Chen Rong looked back at the tunnel and said to

herself, “I thought there would be some kind of mechanism, turns out it was just a heavy stone blocking the door.” Such a stone would indeed be impossible for a weakling to move.

Chen Rong looked around only to see that Ran Min had put his wide-rim hat on and walked off.

She chased after him.

A dilapidated wall came into sight within 300 steps from the stable, beyond which was an alley. Another 200 steps from there took them to Nanyang’s South Street.

As she walked on South Street and as she observed the dread on people’s faces and the closed houses, Chen Rong suddenly felt ages had gone by.

They weaved in the crowd until the Chens’ door appeared to them about an hour later.

At this time, Ran Min’s footsteps took a turn as he walked toward an open restaurant.

It had once been a bustling joint, but the dining hall that could accommodate 100 guests was now woefully empty. Seeing the pair come in, the owner miserably glanced at them and gave a weak welcome: “Gentlemen, we have neither wine nor roast. All we have is some chestnut porridge. Will that serve you?”

Ran Min nodded. “Aye, that will serve us fine.” He

readily tossed him a gold leaf.

The shopkeeper glanced at it and heaved a long sigh. “I wonder if I can use such thing again in this lifetime.” He feebly put the gold away and then turned inside to prepare the meal.

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Moments later, two large bowls of translucent gruel appeared before Chen Rong and Ran Min. The shopkeeper, apparently a talkative one, cleared the tables as he bemoaned, “That’s all we’re left with. Back then, your gold leaf could’ve paid for a carriage full of chestnuts. Now it’s only worth two bowls of gruel. My wife has been nagging me, too. Who knows, tomorrow my restaurant may have to close after 20 years of operation. In any case, gold and copper are useless when the barbarians come, only this porridge will save a life, I say.”

Ran Min partook his meal and ignored the rambling owner.

Chen Rong looked at Ran Min’s unhurried eating before glancing at the Chens’ side door. “Uncle, why is the Chen estate so deserted? It wasn’t like this before,” she softly asked.

The shopkeeper followed her gaze and then shook his head to say: “Deserted? The Hu army will lay

siege to the city any day now. The gates are heavily guarded per the prince's order. They only allow people to come in, not out. Now all the clans in the city are very quiet."

Chen Rong glanced at a reticent Ran Min. She wanted to ask about Wang Hong, but changed her mind after some thought. "Then have you heard anything about Chen Yuan?"

She added with a smile, "I met Mr. Chen not long ago, and he was quite agreeable. I wonder how he's doing?"

"Chen Yuan? Do you mean the one who moved back from the South?" At Chen Rong's expectant look, the shopkeeper shook his head and replied, "I saw him yesterday. He seemed fretful and very gaunt. In times like these, even the prince's head is graying, I tell you."

Chen Rong frowned to see that she couldn't get the answer to what she wanted to know.

When they were walking along South Street moments ago, she saw that her stores were all closed. Evidently information was not easy to come by.

At this time, Ran Min produced another gold leaf from his sleeve and smilingly said, "Can I trouble you to go in from the side door and find a servant

called Old Shang? Let him know a friend would like to see him. I reckon there's no one to guard against an outsider like you in these times."

The shopkeeper looked at the gold leaf and eventually took it after some deliberation. "Let me try," he said.

No sooner had he left than a carriage drove up from the opposite direction.

After it stopped at the side door of the Chen estate, a young man staggered down and crawled forth, chewing his driver out all the while: "You baseborn slave, we're already at the door. Why can't you take me a little farther?"

Amid his berating, he also shouted at the guard in the distance, "You slave there, why aren't you welcoming and helping your master? Are you tired of living?"

His voice was abusive, with the stench of alcohol.

Chen Rong lit up at the sight of him. "It's Chen Sanlang!" she exclaimed.

She eagerly whirled around to look at Ran Min. Seeing that he did not mind, Chen Rong called to the shopkeeper: "Uncle, don't go into the Chen estate, you can just call that drunk gentleman over."

"Aye." He tottered to Chen Sanlang.

Before he had a chance to open his mouth, Chen Sanlang had lurched and swatted the shopkeeper away.

The shopkeeper was quick to find his balance. He approached Chen Sanlang again and pleasingly said something to him. Chen Sanlang laughed out loud. “Let’s go, let us go to see him.”

When he finished, he wobbled to the store.

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Chen Rong looked at Ran Min again. Seeing that he was still slurping his gruel and had no intention to get up and greet Chen Sanlang, Chen Rong had to rise and go up to him herself, pleasantly saying: “Sir, you must be Chen Sanlang? I’ve heard of your extraordinary talents and superior grace. If you’d been born to the Wang clan in Lang’ya, I’m sure you won’t be any worse than Lang’ya Wang Qi.”

While Chen Rong stroked his ego, Ran Min turned his face to the side and looked at her with a twinkle in his eyes.

Chen Sanlang was boastful of his literary talents and had always been jealous of other well-known scholars. He laughed in delight to hear such praises from Chen Rong. “Aye, aye, aye, you got that right. How satisfying to hear.”

He reached out to grab her by the shoulders.

She slightly leaned to the side and pointed at the table, saying: “Have a seat, sir.”

Chen Sanlang didn’t move. He tilted his head to stare at Chen Rong with his bloodshot eyes. “How is it that you look so familiar?”

She chuckled and merely pulled on her hat. “There are many similar-looking people in the world; you’re seeing things, sir.”

Chen Sanlang was still looking at her suspiciously. He sniffed and muttered, “Something’s not right, though.” He staggered to the table and fell face up, lying there for a while before suddenly letting out a scream. After startling the shopkeeper and Chen Rong, he cried: “Bring me more wine.”

Without waiting for the shopkeeper to speak, Chen Rong poured some gruel to hand him and concernedly asked, “What made you so sloshed? Did some ignorant deadbeat mess with you?”

Her marketplace slang caused Ran Min to turn his head and watch her in amusement.

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Chen Sanlang had been spending his days drinking his sorrows away, and thus had fallen deeper into depression. Upon hearing Chen Rong’s

question, he covered his face and burst into tears.

Sniveling, he replied, “Messing with me? The motherfucking Heaven is messing with me.”

“Aye, aye, the nerve of Heaven for messing with you.” Chen Rong didn’t dare to utter more blasphemy. Ever since her rebirth, she had begun to recognize and fear the divine.

Hearing her follow suit, Chen Sanlang drank the gruel and said, “Good wine.” Then with Chen Rong’s coaxing, he eventually wept: “It’s over, it’s over, it’s all over…”

Chen Rong suppressed her joy as she hastily asked him, “Why do you say it’s all over?”

Chen Sanlang didn’t hear her question. He murmured on: “It’s over, it’s all over. My father’s finished, as am I. Boohoohoo…”

“Why is your father finished?” she asked, handing him more gruel.

“Why is he finished?” Chen Sanlang hoarsely laughed. “He lost the food supply we raised for the Prince of Nan’yang, and even mother’s family’s share as well. Boohoohoo… the barbarians are upon us, yet I have such a foolish father. Our home is empty, we are turned away by the clan members, and the Prince of Nan’yang is constantly after him and Old Dong.” Even in his drunken state, his heart

knew fear, and he dared not denounce his father.

While Chen Rong struggled to hide her smile, Chen Sanlang went on to wail: “They even said he and the one named Li and the one named Xu are thieving traitors who had plotted to stab him in the back in these precarious times. Had it not been for my uncle’s interference, my father’s head would’ve rolled, too. Boohoohoo, it’s over, everything’s over now.”

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