

步步惊心/ Bu Bu Jing Xin

Startling Surprises with Every Step

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Chapter 7 (Complete)

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Characters Introduced So Far

(In Alphabetical Order)

Crown Prince (Aisin-Gioro Yinreng): The second son of Emperor Kangxi. Currently the Crown Prince and thus next in line for the throne.

Dong Yun: One of Ruolan's maids.

Fourteenth-prince (Aisin-Gioro Yinzheng): The fourteenth son of Emperor Kangxi. He is described as being quite handsome. Is currently around fourteen to fifteen years of age.

Fourth-prince (Asin-Gioro Yinzhen): The fourth son of Emperor Kangxi and the future Emperor Yongzheng. Slightly pale and has an impassive demeanour.

Eighth-prince (Aisin-Gioro Yinsi): The eighth son of Emperor Kangxi. Also known as the Eighth Bei'le. Ruolan is his Ce'fujin (Second Wife). Is often seen smiling out of the corners of his mouth as well as conducting himself with a calm and gentle disposition.

Kangxi: The current Emperor of China.

Mingyu Ge'ge (Guoluoluo Mingyu): Younger sister of the Eighth-prince's Di'fujin, Guoluoluo Minghui. Not on good terms with Ruoxi. Most likely the one who caused the original Ruoxi's accident after an argument. During the Tenth-prince's Birthday banquet, Ruoxi and Mingyu gets into a fight, resulting in quite a spectacle. Arranged to marry the Tenth-prince by Kangxi.

Ninth-prince (Aisin-Gioro Yintang): The ninth son of Emperor Kangxi. Currently not given a peerage title. Seems to have a more taciturn personality. Nicknamed "the venomous snake" by Ruoxi.

Qiao Hui: One of Ruolan's maids. Qiao Hui used to serve Ruolan even before Ruolan's marriage. When Ruolan married, Qiaohui accompanied Ruolan to Eighth-prince's household. Seems to be concerned for her mistress especially regarding Ruolan and Eighth's relationship.

Ruolan, Maertai: Ruoxi's older sister. The two are especially close as they are born from the same mother. She is also the Ce'fujin (Second Wife) of the Eighth-prince. Mild and gentle in nature, Ruolan likes to spend a better part of her days reciting Buddhist scriptures. Has a deceased lover who was a soldier in her father's army. The man was of Han descent and had taught Ruolan how to ride.

Ruoxi, Maertai (Zhang Xiao): Protagonist of the story. Originally a modern day, white collar professional named Zhang Xiao. Under certain unexplainable, supernatural occurrence, Zhang Xiao's spirit travelled through time upon her death and took over a young Manchurian girl's body. Now stuck in ancient times, Ruoxi must navigate through an

entirely foreign environment armed only with the little historical knowledge she remembers.

Tenth-prince (Aisin-Gioro Yin'e): The tenth son of Emperor Kangxi. Currently not given a peerage title. A bit of a simpleton. Likes to tease and bicker with Ruoxi. Nicknamed "the blockhead" by Ruoxi. Likes Ruoxi but is forced to marry Mingyu Ge'ge.

Thirteenth-prince (Aisin-Gioro Yinxiang): The thirteenth son of the Emperor Kangxi. Nicknamed "the Death Challenging Thirteenth" by his brothers. Has a more carefree and unrestrained demeanour.

Glossary of Terms

(In Alphabetical Order)

Bei'le: Shortened from Duo'luo Bei'le. A peerage title that can be bestowed to those within the royal family. It is the third rank in the Qing peerage system for the imperial line.

Ce'fujin: A title. Meaning second wife or 'side' wife in Manchurian.

Di'fujin: A title. Meaning first wife or main wife in Manchurian.

Ge'ge: A Manchurian word for young mistress, or lady. It is a title you would call an unmarried noblewoman (or before they are bestowed an official title by the Emperor) above a certain rank.

Jie-jie: Older sister in Chinese.

Ji'xiang: A standard greeting one of lower status uses to greet people with higher status in court. The word literally means auspicious and can be translated as, 'I wish good fortunes, prosperity and happiness to you'

Chapter 7

The Lunar New Year was approaching, filling everyone with anticipation. I, however, was getting more desolate by each day. Thinking that after the New Years, it would be the Lantern Festival and after that, the Concubine Selection would start. No matter how many times I counted, the truth was that there was barely a month left. In my heart I just did not have an ounce of anticipation for the impending year. Instead, I wished it would never come. But there were many things in life that never goes the way people want them to, so, as unwilling as I was, I still had to welcome the forty fourth year of Kangxi's reign¹.

In celebration of the New Year, the Palace had planned a large, lavish banquet. In the past six months, I had already attended several Palace banquets, big and small; therefore, the sense of novelty that existed in the beginning was long gone. Not to mention, I was already troubled at heart and therefore was feeling rather listless. One the day of the New Year banquet, I allowed Dongyun to do whatever she wanted with me. As everything was prepared and packed, I then followed Jie-jie and the Eighth-prince into the Palace.

In low spirits, all the beautiful and exquisite decorations of our surrounding were lost on me. If someone told me to curtsy, I curtsied; if someone told me to sit, I sat. I was like a puppet to be control by everyone, but at least this way, I was sure not to make any mistakes.

This party was unlike the one at Mid-Autumn. Almost all the court officials and their wives were here, creating a livelier atmosphere. I thought that this was a good thing and no one should notice me in such a crowd. I could then be allowed to wallow in my own thoughts. However, what was the saying the ancient Chinese had said? *"In life, eight to nine times out of ten, things will not go as you wished."* The Tenth prince and his wife was the prime example of this saying.

The Tenth-prince saw me first and regardless of the fact that his Fu'jin was sitting right next to him, he began to look at me from top to bottom. I then had to endure two pairs of eyes burning into me; one pair was like fire, and the other like ice. The uneasiness brought on by combination of fire and ice made me feel as if I was sitting on pins and needles. Finally, I couldn't take it any longer. I raised my head and glared fiercely at the Tenth-prince. He saw that I looked as if I wanted to eat someone and finally withdrew his sight. The Tenth Fu'jin, seeing that he was no longer looking at me, shot me a disdainful look before also steering her gaze elsewhere.

The world was at last at peace. I sighed and settled back into my daze. After a little while, I once again felt someone was looking at me. My heart burned with anger. Old Tenth, would you stop! I looked up using what I imagined was my most evil glare, only to be greeted with the Thirteenth-prince's friendly, smiling face. His friendly smile froze the moment he saw my malicious glare.

I quickly smiled back at him. My expression had changed so quickly that it actually hurt my face. I laughed, looking at him helplessly, not sure if he understood. Regardless, he laughed

¹ 1705 AD

along and held his cup toward me in a toast. I happily picked up my cup and return his toast from a distance.

Just as I finished drinking and was prepared to once again go back to my thoughts, I saw that the Eighth-prince was looking at me with a faint smile on the corner of his lips. Feeling flustered and did not know how to react; I quickly poured myself another cup of wine and held it out in a toast to him. With a smile, he also picked up his cup and drank with me.

Putting the cup down, I was thinking that I could finally rest now, but then my gaze fell upon the Fourteenth-prince who was staring at me thoughtfully. I didn't know what he was thinking, or even bothered to care. I merely smiled at him and made a funny face towards him. He saw my ugly expression and shook his head slightly. Nevertheless, his mouth curved into a small smile.

I started to smile too, only to discover that sitting right next to the Fourteenth-prince; the Fourth-prince has seemingly witnessed all that had just occurred. Though his expression was cool, his eyes seemed to be gazing into me with some sort of intense contemplation. I thought to myself that this was definitely someone I couldn't offend, or else it would be hard to survive later. Therefore, I hastily smiled sweetly at him before quickly turning my head away, not daring to look up.

After the banquet was over and we returned to the mansion, I was extremely tired. I sigh loudly in my heart, "unwise it was already to engage in a political dance with facial expressions; not to mention doing so with people who are *dragons among men*"².

As soon as I followed Jie-jie back into our room, I immediately told the maids to help me wash my face. Seeing that I looked as if I haven't seen my bed in three hundred years, Jie-jie tried holding in her laugh and said, "You're not allowed to go to sleep so early tonight. You have to stay up and greet the New Year with me³."

I was stunned for a moment after hearing that. It had been many years since I've stayed up past twelve o'clock on New Year's Eve. However, as I was in the ancient times, I had to do as the ancients did. Jie-jie ordered the maids to bring the prepared fruit pastries out. She then pulled Qiaohui and Dongyun to sit and we chatted while waiting for the New Year to arrive. Qiaohui saw my sleepy state and quickly went to find a string to play cat's cradle with me.

The two of us made shapes one after another with the string, passing the rope back and forth. Meanwhile Jie-jie and Dongyun continued to chat and laugh as they watched Qiaohui and me play cat's cradle. Suddenly the maid outside called out, "Bei'le, ji'xiang!" Qiaohui

² Alluding to the princes being of royal blood (Children of the Emperor).

³ Orgi. 'Shou shui'守岁. Literally means to "observe/guard the year". It's a custom where one does not sleep on the last day of the year until he or she greets the new one. In old Chinese customs, 'shou shui' usually begins during New Year's Eve dinner, where the family would eat very slowly, often into the wee hours of the night and into the New Year. It's supposed to reflect the nostalgic longing of the passing year, as well as the anticipation and the placing of good hope for the new dawning year.

and Dongyun quickly got on their feet. Jie-jie and I looked at each other in surprise but also stood up.

We hadn't had the time to go out to greet him before the Eighth-prince entered the room. Everyone hurriedly performed the ceremonial greetings. The Eighth-prince smiled and allowed for us to rise. With their heads down, Qiaohui and Dongyun left the room. The Eighth-prince saw Jie-jie and I stand motionlessly on the spot and smiled, asking, "Do you not welcome me here to greet New Year together?"

Jie-jie immediately laughed, "I just didn't think that you'd be coming and therefore was just a bit surprised." As she spoke, she went to help him sit down.

The Eighth-prince smiled, "Everybody, sit. It's rare for us to be able to welcome the New Year together."

I quietly sat down and conveniently grabbed a few snacks.

The Eighth-prince and Jie-jie laughed and said a few words. But after a while, Jie-jie talked less and stayed quiet more, so the conversation eventually ceased. As the three of us sat in silence, my head began to feel heavy and started to nod off. My eyelids seemed like they were about to shut at any second. Jie-jie saw my sluggish condition, and pulled me into her arms, saying, "Sleep for a while, when it's time, I'll wake you up."

I leaned on Jie-jie to sleep. Drowsily I heard Jie-jie and the Eighth-prince talking, the topics all revolved around me. Although my eyes were closed, my mind was becoming more and more awake.

Jie-jie whispered, "I have a presumptuous request. Ruoxi grew up in a military compound and cannot be compared to the young ladies in the Capital. I'm afraid that after she enters the Palace, she will cause some kind of trouble. I want to ask milord⁴ to help, and ask some knowledgeable servants in the Palace look after her."

"That is not a presumptuous request. Even if you do not ask, I would have still done so."

Jie-jie's hands stroked my head; I didn't have to look up to feel her hesitation and sadness.

The Eighth-prince could also see she has more words in her heart and said, "If there's something else you wish to say, please say it."

"If Ruoxi can luckily escape the concubine selection and Imperial Father is willing to grant her a marriage, I feel that since she and Thirteenth brother get along really well, we could let Thirteenth brother to ask for some help. Since he's really close with Fourth brother, out

⁴ Referring to the Eighth prince.

of respect for the Fourth prince, the Crown Prince might just help as well. And if milord were to put in a few more good words, the situation can easily be arranged⁵."

The corner of my eye became wet. Jie-jie had always been lukewarm to the Eighth-prince, refusing to even say an extra word to him. But, for my sake, she could even plead with him.

The Eighth-prince remained silent for a moment before smiling, "It's still too early to discuss such matters." After a while, perhaps seeing that Jie-jie looked sad, he added, "But don't you worry, I will not watch her suffer."

"Thank you, milord."

There were no more words coming from the two; they merely continued to sit in silence. Suddenly there were several loud firecracker bangs. Startled and caught off-guard, I sat up from my sister's embrace. Jie-jie brushed back my hair for me, "It's New Year."

The Eighth-prince also looked at me and laughed, "Yes, it is."

I quickly stood up, "Good. Since everything is done, I am going to bed." I did not wait for them to respond and ran to my room, jumped onto my bed, and was soon deep asleep.

When I woke up the next day, I realized that my first New Year in the ancient times had gone by quite uneventfully. There was a bit of regret, but, thinking it over, if every New Year here can pass like this one, it wouldn't be such a bad thing.

Dongyun stood behind me, brushing my hair. I asked her, "Did the Eighth Bei'le stay here last night?"

Dongyun's hands stopped, sighing, "No, a bit after Ge'ge went back, Master also left."

I silently looked at myself in the mirror, not saying another word.

The festive atmosphere of New Year has yet to dissipate when the Lantern Festival arrived. Although there were still many worries in my heart, I was definitely interested in the Lantern Festival. On this day, every household must hang decorative lanterns and at night, there are lion dances, dragon dances, as well as lantern riddles⁶ and fireworks. Normally, females rarely have a chance to go outside, but on the day of the Lantern Festival, they're

⁵ It's not explicitly clear to what Ruolan is trying to get the Princes to help arrange, but most likely she's trying to pull some strings to try to find a more suitable and favourable suitor for Ruoxi; one that Ruoxi would also like.

⁶ Solving riddles written on lanterns during Mid-Autumn was a custom established since the Song Dynasty and continued on until today. The riddle usually has the challenger guessing a word, poem, or phrase, from the clues it gives.

allowed to go out with another female companion to solve riddles and look at lanterns. For this reason, this was the festival that every girl anticipates the most every year. In addition, many ancient poems have described beautiful meetings of gifted scholars and beautiful maidens beneath the romantic moon during this holiday. As a result, even I looked forward to this festival with eagerness.

It was not night yet, but I have already told Dongyun to do my hair. I had put on my new yellow jacket, and rushed Qiaohui to go change.

Qiaohui laughed, "My dear Ge'ge, you still have to wait for sky to turn dark to be able to view the lanterns and solve the riddles."

I ignored her and persisted. Qiaohui, finally submitted to my urges, and hurriedly went to change. Taking along two cloaks, she left the manor with me.

I had just gone several steps away from the front door when I heard someone call behind me, "Thirteenth sister!" I frowned. Although this nickname of mine was well known throughout the Forbidden City, no one had actually dared to use it in front of me. Who could be this insolent? I turned around to see the Thirteenth-prince, wearing a light blue robe, looking like an ordinary scholar, walking slowly towards me. Next to him was a delicate and attractive looking male servant.

I was extremely happy to see him, so I smiled and asked, "How can there be such a coincidence?"

He laughed, "If one has the intention, then of course there can be such coincidence."

I realized that he came specially to wait for me and immediately asked, "How did you know that I would come out to play today?"

He laughed, "During such a festive day, would you just sit and rot in your room?"

The two of us walked side by side while Qiaohui followed from behind with the Thirteenth-prince's servant. We walked for a while when the Thirteenth-prince said, "I invited Miss Lu to come and enjoy the festival with us."

I thought back, "She's the girl from the courtyard that we went to last time?"

He nodded. I laughed and said, "Very good! I was just thinking that it would be boring with so few people. Not to mention that I haven't got a chance to thank her for letting me borrow her cloak last time."

Hearing my answer, the Thirteenth-prince suddenly stopped, and turned to grin at his servant, "Did I not say so?"

I also stopped and turned around confusingly.

The young servant smiled, walked forward two steps and with both hand clasped, bowed and said, "Lord Thirteenth had told me that you were not an ordinary girl, but I didn't believe it. Today, after meeting you, I see that what he said is definitely right."

I also smiled, "This must be Luwu jie-jie. I didn't know that you would be coming today, or else I would have brought your cloak to give back to you." As I was saying this, I remembered back to the decoration of her room and realized that, though she was a courtesan, she was still a proud individual, afraid to be look down upon, and therefore, did not want make direct acquaintance with me.

The sky gradually darkened, and the lanterns hanging on both sides of the street seemed endless, as if it was a sea of stars. More and more people filled the streets, with many extravagantly dressed women, drowned in noisy laughter. I tried to take in each and every new sight. Even if it's just a girl passing by, I couldn't help but turned around to have a second look. The other three laughed. Luwu teased, "You looked as if you have never been out on the streets before."

I shook my head, sighing, "Is that not the case? Every day I am trapped in the manor, as if I am in jail." She was stunned for a moment, then started to chuckle.

I have never solved riddles before and therefore I stuck with gazing at the lanterns. The Thirteenth-prince and Luwu also didn't seem too interested so the four of us just walked along casually.

The Thirteenth-prince then led us to a small restaurant. The waiter, recognizing the Thirteenth-prince, hurriedly went to find us a seat near the window, saying, "When the lion dance starts, you can watch clearly from here, where it's not crowded."

The four of us sat there, chatting lively while watching the coming and going of people below. Suddenly a voice called out, "Thirteenth brother is also here?"

We turned around to see the Fourteenth-prince standing behind us with a few young men. The young men hurried to perform the ceremonial greetings to Thirteenth prince while Qiaohui and I went forward to greet the Fourteenth-prince, creating a lively scene. However, both the Thirteenth and Fourteenth prince did not wait for us to speak, but wave their hands, saying, "We are dressed in civilian clothes, there's no need for so many customs."

The atmosphere suddenly became extremely quiet. Luwu was standing next to me, staring out the window while Qiaohui stood with her head down casted. I looked at the Thirteenth-prince then at the Fourteenth-prince. Though both of them were smiling, the meanings behind those smiles were totally different. The Thirteenth-prince smiled languidly, looking as if nothing had happened. On the other hand, though the Fourteenth-prince's smile was very refined, the corner of his mouth bought on a certain chill. He saw me looking at him and glared at me coldly. I pouted and lowered my head.

As we were standing there, a thin young man with the Fourteenth-prince called out, "Is this not Miss Luwu?" Luwu at this time turned around to look at the speaker, her face remained impassive and she said nothing before lowering her head. The Fourteenth-prince just then noticed that Luwu was a woman and could not help but give her a few extra glances. Luwu kept her head down, her expression indifferent. I reached under the table to lightly take her hand, she leaned her head to look at me, I smiled briefly at her then let go.

At this time, a short and pudgy teenaged boy with a mocking expression said, "To not be a libertine is definitely a waste of youth. Lord Thirteenth is surrounded by beautiful ladies left and right. You're a truly fortunate person."

He barely finished talking when the Thirteenth-prince's face had hardened. However, he had not gotten a chance to retort when the Fourteenth-prince let out an icy, "humph!"

With his face severe, he coldly said, "Cha'cha'lin, what nonsense are you saying?"

Cha'cha'lin obviously did not understand how his attempt at flattery had annoyed the Fourteenth-prince and could only stand there dumbly. A few if the people next to him had recognized me and wanted to warn him, but was too late.

I secretly smiled. I was, after all, still a part of the imperial family. It was alright for the princes to tease me, but definitely not outsiders.

The Thirteenth-prince and the Fourteenth-prince were still standing, facing each other. I looked up and asked, "Are you here to view the lanterns or to gaze at people?" Finally, everyone sat down.

The lion dance wasn't bad, the dragon dance was also rather pretty, but of all the people on the scene, the only ones who were truly watching were just Qiaohui and I. The others seemed to be deep in thought; some secretly took glances at me, while a few glanced at Luwu.

Finally, all that should be seen was seen, all that should be played was played; it had become late and was time for us to return to the manor. The Fourteenth-prince was the first to say, "I will take Ruoxi back." I heard this and, taking advantage of when the Fourteenth-prince wasn't looking, I looked at the Thirteenth-prince and gave him shrug. The Thirteenth-prince smiled. After that, the Thirteenth-prince left with Luwu and the Fourteenth-prince escorted me and Qiaohui back, while the rest scattered off by themselves.

The night had become chilly; lucky Qiaohui had brought extra cloaks for me to wear. I walked side by side with the Fourteenth-prince while Qiaohui followed behind, all of us silent the entire way back to the manor.

A young male servant opened the door, then, seeing me with the Fourteenth-prince, he hurriedly bowed, and smiled, "Young Miss is finally back. Mistress Lan had sent people to ask several times."

The Fourteenth-prince let him rise, "Is Eighth brother in?"

The servant quickly answered, "He's at Di'Fujin's place. Does Lord Fourteenth want servant to go tell him you're here?"

The Fourteenth-prince walked ahead saying, "Tell Eighth brother I'm waiting for him in the study."

I was heading ack to Jie-jie's when the Fourteenth-prince called me over, his face serious, "Come with me to the study."

I thought for a minute, *why would it matter much if I do to go to the study with him*, so I nodded. I told Qiaohui to go and let Jie-jie know, and then followed the Fourteenth-prince to the study.

We sat in the study for a bit when Li Fu lifted the curtains and a smiling Eighth-prince walked in. Seeing that I was also sitting there, a hint of surprise flashed across his face.

The Fourteenth-prince didn't bother with the greetings, but instead stood up and said hurriedly, "Eighth brother, guess who I saw Ruoxi with today." The Eighth-prince remained smiling, giving Li Fu a glance. Li Fu quickly left, closing the door behind him.

The Eighth-prince sat down and at the same time, asked, "Who?"

The Fourteenth-prince looked at me and said, "I don't know when she and Thirteenth brother became so close that she and Thirteenth brother decided to go out together." He grunted then continued, "As if that wasn't enough, she was also consorting with a lady from the brothel."

The more I listened, the angrier I became. Who was he to me, that he could control my actions? I retorted, "So what if I was with the Thirteenth-prince? So what if I was with a lady from the brothel?"

The Fourteenth-prince looked at me angrily and asked, "So what? Have you ever seen any young maidens or Ge'ge from the Forbidden City hang out with a courtesan?"

I've become even more angry, standing up to look at him, sneering, "I only know that Liu Rushi was a courtesan who jumped off a building to preserve her love⁷, that Liang Hongyu⁸

⁷ Liu Rushi was a famous prostitute who married Qian Qianyi and committed suicide upon his death

⁸ Liang Hongyu was a prostitute during the Song Dynasty, famous for her drums-playing skills. She and Han Shizhong met and fell in love, but, because of Han's low rank, could not marry until he was made general. Hongyu was said to have a heart of steel and often follow her husband into battle. At Huangtian Lake, Han's army of 8,000 was badly outnumbered against the Jin's 100,000. Hongyu then devised a plan for her husband and a small number of men to lure the Jin's warships away from their main force, where the rest of the Song's armies would attack with flaming arrows. Hongyu climbed onto a mountain to have clear view of the battle and used her drum to pass to guide the soldiers. One drumbeat was to signal the start of the attack, two meant to lure them deeper into ambush, and three let the hiding soldiers know to release the arrows. Thanks to Hongyu, the battle was won and the Jins suffered heavy losses.

was a courtesan who beat a drum to fight against the Jins⁹, that Li ShiShi was a courtesan who would rather swallow a hairpin to die than serve the Jins¹⁰, that Lin SiNiang was a courtesan who risked her life to save the emperor, that Yuan Bao'er was a courtesan who gladly die..." I suddenly remembered that Yuan Bao'er was from the Ming Dynasty who protested against the Manchus, and therefore stopped abruptly but continued to scowl at the Fourteenth-prince.

The Fourteenth-prince obviously didn't expect that his two sentences would make me explode like that. He was still angry, but didn't know how to refute. He could only glare at me with clenched teeth, and nodded to the Eighth prince, "Eighth brother, you hear? She's really studious alright, but what kind of nonsense books has she been reading?!"

I stared at him, "What kind of books I'm reading, my father and sister can ask but it definitely not your place to speak!"

Seeing how the Fourteenth-prince and I was glowering at each other, the Eighth-prince couldn't help but to chuckle, shaking his head, "Stop glaring Fourteenth brother, you should go back now. This matter with Ruoxi, I will deal with it."

The Fourteenth-prince stared at me, and then looked back at the Eighth-prince. He started to say something but stopped. He turned to stare at me once more before flinging his sleeves back and left.

Facing the Fourteenth-prince, I did not feel any fear, but now that he has left leaving me alone with the Eighth-prince, I began to feel tense. I stood with my head lowered, playing with the ribbon on my cloak, unsure of what to do.

The Eighth-prince looked at me and smilingly said, "The Crown Prince's joke is actually very accurate. I feel that not only is your vigor the same as Thirteenth brother, but also your respect for the lower class as well as your free and inhibited character is the same as well." He smiling he continued, "Don't just keep standing there."

I was about to sit down when he said, "Come sit over here. I have some things to discuss with you." I became even more nervous, but since I cannot disobey, I slowly walked over and sat down next to him.

He watched me sit down and sighed before facing forward again in silence.

The two of us sat silently for a while when he suddenly said, "Scared?"

⁹ Referring to the Jin Dynasty(1115-1234) also known as the Jurchen Dynasty. They were the ancestors of the Manchus. Contemporary with the Song Dynasty, the Jins had ruled the North-eastern part of China today. Eventually they were even able to capture the Northern Song and pushed the Song Chinese Southwards. However, the Jin Dynasty collapsed after the invasion of the Mongolians.

¹⁰ Li ShiShi was a famous courtesan during the Northern Song Dynasty and was known to serve even the Emperor. When the Northern Song fell, the king of Jin wanted to have her. Li ShiShi refused and tried to kill herself by stabbing her throat with a hairpin. This failed and she thus proceeded to swallow that hairpin to die.

Startled and not knowing what he meant, I looked at him in confusion.

He turned to me, "The concubine selection, are you scared?"

After hearing that, the fear that already filled my body welled up. I quietly nodded, then lowered my head, frowning worriedly.

After a while, he suddenly began to talk softly, as if to himself, "The first time I saw your sister was when she was fifteen."

I hurriedly swept my fears to the side and listened with rapt attention.

"That year, your father had come to Beijing, and your sister had come along with him. It was springtime and the weather was exceptionally nice. The blue sky seemed like it had just been washed by water and the breeze was filled with the fragrance of flowers, blowing right through people's hearts. I went with two servants to the outskirts for some horseback riding. From far, I could see a young lady riding her horse on a hill," he stopped and smiled, "You've seen Ruolan ride; you should also know how beautiful and exquisite she is."

I recalled my sister's elegance at the racecourse and unconsciously nodded.

He continued, "Her riding that day was even better than at the racecourse. Her laughter was like silver bells, ringing through the wind. It was filled with so much happiness, that it makes anyone who has heard it filled with happiness as well, instilling the desire to laugh along with her." He stopped for a bit before resuming, "I couldn't believe what I saw. There were many beautiful ladies in the Forbidden City, but Ruolan was different."

I thought, Jie-jie at that time was a young girl in love, believing that she and her lover would stay forever on cloud nine. Her happiness glowed from within. Of course the girls in the Forbidden City who have never experience true love before cannot compare.

He went on, "After I came back, I hurriedly went and inquired about your sister. I kept thinking about how I can get Imperial Father to grant her to me when my mother told me that Imperial Father decided to make the Maertai family's eldest daughter my Ce'Fujin. At that time, I thought that my life had never been so happy before. The very next day after Imperial Father's announcement, I went all over the capital in search of a gift. It took me more than six months to be able to find a Phoenix Blood bracelet. I had intended to give it to her on the day of our marriage."

I looked down at the bracelet on my wrist and couldn't help but raise it, asking, "Is this the one? That you wanted to give to Jie-jie?"

He looked at the bracelet on my wrist, reached out to hold my hand, then said, "I waited night and day; finally, my wedding day had arrived. But when I lifted the wedding veil, I felt as if nothing was as I had imagined. The person that I've been missing for two years and the person sitting in front of me were like two complete different people. She never goes riding and rarely smiles. I kept asking myself, how did things become like this? Could it be that I

have the wrong person? Later I sent someone to the Northwest to investigate, and, after many obstacles, I finally found the reason.” He smiled wryly, not saying anything else.

I sighed heavily, *how Fate played us humans!* I was deep in thought for a while when my heart suddenly raced. I let out a small breath, and nervously asked, “How did that person die?”

He was quiet for a minute then replied, “My sending someone to inquire about your sister alerted your father. He wanted to send that person away and therefore made him a frontline soldier¹¹. After that...” He stopped, not saying anything further.

I could only feel my heart still racing vigorously. *You did not kill him, but he did die because of you.*

I pulled at my wrist, wanting to take off the bracelet and give it back to him. He suddenly grabbed my hand, “Don’t take it off.”

I looked down, staring at the bracelet, “This is for my sister.”

He tightened his hold on my hand and whispered, “This is for the one I love.” He used his other hand to lift my chin up and, staring in my eyes, said, “Promise me, never to take this off.”

I looked deep into his bottomless black eyes. There was gentleness in them that I have never seen before. At the same time, they were filled with so much sadness that it seemed as if it would overflow. I was unable to restrain the confusion in my heart, mixed with a strange bitterness, therefore slowly nodded. He saw that I’ve agreed and couldn’t help but beam.

He smilingly said, “Don’t be afraid. I will think of a way for Imperial Father to bestow you to me.”

I stared at him, stunned. He smiled at me. I quickly shook my head, exclaiming, “Don’t!”

He looked at me, his smile fading, his face turning pale, and suddenly asked, “You’re actually willing to be Imperial Father’s woman?”

I’ve become panic-stricken, hurriedly shook my head. I’m not willing, I’m not willing to do anything. I only wanted to live well, to find someone who truly loves me, who will take care of me, and not just viewed me as a plaything. There’s no need to bestow me; I am a person, not a thing.

He stared at me for a while, suddenly closed his eyes, took a deep breath, reopened them, and, sighed, “I will not force you. As you will!” Saying that, he released me, called Li Fu to come in and instructed him to bring me back to Jie-jie’s place.

¹¹ A frontline soldier heads a military formation and is often the first one into battle, therefore the most easily targeted and killed.

I was at the door when he suddenly spoke out from behind, "After entering the palace, don't dress up like how you did at Ol' Ten's birthday."

I couldn't understand and turned around to look at him. He looked down and slowly said, "If you don't want Imperial Father's attention, then the plainer you look, the better." I finally understood. I didn't know whether to be happy or sad, and merely turned around to follow Li Fu.

After returning to the room, Jie-jie saw that I looked pale and thought that the Eighth-prince had lectured me. She came to caress my face, then, sighed, and told Dongyun to help me prepare for bed.

I lay in bed but couldn't fall asleep. I thought about Jie-jie then thought about myself. I kept wondering whether or not Jie-jie knew of the Eighth-prince's feelings for her. Then, I suddenly felt stupid. In fact, it was not difficult to see proof of the Eighth-prince's feelings for Jie-jie.

For example, the Eighth prince was surprised when he first saw me, but was disappointed when he found out that I don't know how to ride. Jie-jie rarely went to pay respect to Di'Fujin but she didn't directly make things difficult for Jie-jie. Another example is, on the surface, it looked as if Jie-jie wasn't well-favored; the servants even gossiped about it in secret. However, from the food and clothing to everyday things, even the most snobbish eunuchs don't dare to make any mistakes or treat Jie-jie unwell. The more I thought about it, the more I realized how clearly things were laid out in front of me. It was just that I never considered it.

But what about me? What was I? A substitute for Jie-jie? Why did I keep the bracelet? Why didn't I give it back to him? Was it only because I was softhearted for a moment?

I just couldn't sleep.