

Finest 341

Chapter 341 The Madam Arrives

"A person from Jinling?" Eldest Miss exclaimed joyously, quickly unbolting the door, and called out in a soft voice, "Who has arrived?"

Huan'er shook her head, "This servant does not know. Someone from the manor has ridden here to report that the carriage has reached the northern gate, and it should be arriving at the manor soon."

Having been away from Jinling for so long, this was the first time someone had come from there. A faint surprise arose in Lin Wanrong's heart. Xiao Yuruo, unable to wait any longer, darted out, and the two arrived at the manor's hall. A young servant, animated, walked up and said, "Greetings to Miss, greetings to Brother San."

"You scoundrel, Si De, how did you sneak off to the capital?" Lin Wanrong shouted, grabbing him by the shoulder and laughing.

Si De's eyes brimmed with tears, "Brother San, not only did I come, but also—"

"The carriage is here, the carriage is here!" Standing at the entrance of the inn, Huan'er called out in her delicate voice, "Brother San, Miss, come out and see!"

Lin Wanrong and Eldest Miss hurriedly drew back the curtain and stepped outside. Far off, two carriages approached slowly, creaking gently, their sound growing more distinct as they neared. On the curtain hanging from the front carriage, a large character "Xiao" was written. Both carriages had curtains drawn low; the rear one seemed heavily loaded, looking rather weighed down, while the front appeared lighter.

As the carriages drew near, the coachman stabilized them with a sound, and the carriage fell silent. Then a little maidservant jumped down, opened the curtain, and a beautiful, mature figure stepped out. Dressed in a goose-yellow gown, her figure graceful, a faint smile on her jade-like cheeks, she looked at Eldest Miss and softly called, "Yuruo!"

"Mother!" Eldest Miss exclaimed, surprise followed by joy. Tears welled in her eyes, and she called out sweetly, plunging into her mother's arms, her heart full of words she wanted to say, yet unable to speak, she whimpered and began to cry.

"Silly girl!" The Madam's eyes reddened as she tightly embraced her daughter, gently patting her shoulder. Mother and daughter embraced as one.

So the Madam had arrived! Lin Wanrong could not believe his eyes. How had the Madam come all this way? Had she not said she did not wish to enter the capital?

As the Madam spoke softly with Eldest Miss, she glanced at Lin San's astonished face, and smiled faintly, "Lin San, are you surprised to see me arrive in the capital so quickly?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head and laughed, "Not surprised, not surprised. Madam is always extraordinary and unexpected. If someone were to guess your move, now that would be surprising."

Madam Xiao chuckled, "A month apart, and your mouth has grown even more clever, even daring to tease me. If I don't surprise you, then I shall bring out someone who will indeed surprise you—"

Before her words were finished, another gentle and pretty face appeared from the carriage. Looking at Lin Wanrong, tears in her eyes, lips quivering, her delicate body trembling uncontrollably.

"Big brother—" The young woman softly called, tears covering her cheeks, as she leaped down from the carriage yoke and threw herself into Lin Wanrong's arms.

"Qiaoqiao?!" Lin Wanrong cried out in surprise, still trying to understand what was happening, as that familiar tender body had already thrown itself into his embrace. Qiaoqiao clung tightly to his waist, pressing her cheek to his chest, her tears flowing like a breached dam, her body shaking violently, crying as though she would faint.

Lin Wanrong's eyes reddened as he embraced Qiaoqiao's frail body, feeling an indescribable emotion well up inside him, an intimacy that only Qiaoqiao and Qingxuan could stir within him. They were one, like vines intertwined with the tree's roots. The Eldest Miss, Xian'er, and Luo Ning had yet to take that final step with him, falling short of that blood-tinged closeness, still needing some refinement.

"Silly girl, stop crying, your big brother is here!" Lin Wanrong said, seeing that Qiaoqiao had already become a tear-streaked figure, her sobs soaking the front of his clothes. He wiped the corner of his eye and gently reassured her.

Qiaoqiao clung tightly to him, unwilling to let go even for a moment, her tears falling like rain. "Big brother, is it really you? This isn't a dream, is it? I've missed you so much, I thought I would die!"

Lin Wanrong tightly embraced Qiaoqiao's delicate waist, as though holding the most precious treasure, his voice breaking as he said, "Silly girl, it's not a dream, it's real! Big brother missed you too."

"Big brother, big brother..." Qiaoqiao's hot tears flowed as she murmured, clutching him as if wanting to meld into his very being.

The Eldest Miss wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and looked at Qiaoqiao, who was sobbing in Lin Wanrong's arms. She spoke softly, "Mother, sister Qiaoqiao, it's cold outside, let's go inside and talk!"

"Yes, yes, let's go inside. My little treasure Qiaoqiao, let your husband carry you in," he said, about to lift Qiaoqiao. Startled, she jumped back, her face blushing as she quickly glanced at the Eldest Miss and Madam Xiao. Although she and big brother had performed the formal marriage rites, how could she let him carry her in front of others?

Seeing Qiaoqiao's dust-smeared hair and weary face, Lin Wanrong could imagine the hardships of her journey. The trip from Jinling to the capital was well over a thousand miles, and her devotion could not be hidden, even if the sky fell. His heart ached, and with a light shout, he disregarded her struggles, lifting her by the waist and heading straight to the hall.

"Ah!" Qiaoqiao exclaimed, looking at her big brother's determined face. A mixture of sorrow and sweetness welled up in her heart, and she softly called, "Big brother," unable to speak another word. She buried her face in his chest, letting her tears fall, all her hardships evaporating in that embrace.

"That annoying man!" the Eldest Miss muttered, knowing that now was not the time to be jealous, but the sight of Lin Wanrong's genuine affection for Qiaoqiao left a sour taste in her heart.

"Yuruo, what did you say?" Madam Xiao asked, looking at her meaningfully.

The Eldest Miss's face flushed, and she quickly lowered her eyes, hurriedly saying, "Mother, the wind outside is strong; let's go inside."

Madam Xiao glanced at Lin Wanrong, then at the Eldest Miss, and slowly shook her head with a sigh, making her way to the living room.

Upon entering, maidservants quickly offered hot towels and steaming water. After washing, Huan'er served two cups of hot ginseng tea. The Eldest Miss personally handed one to her mother, then offered the other to Qiaoqiao, "Sister, you must have suffered from the wind and cold on your journey. Drink this to warm yourself."

Qiaoqiao hastily accepted the cup with both hands, thanked the Eldest Miss, and warmed the ginseng tea in her little hands for a moment. Just as she was about to bring it to her lips, she noticed her elder brother beside her smiling warmly at her. She set the tea down and handed it to Lin Wanrong, saying, "Big Brother, you drink it first!"

'This girl, she's going to melt my heart,' thought Lin Wanrong, feeling a sour yet tender emotion he couldn't quite describe. Of all the women he knew and teased—be it the noble and pure Qingxuan, the cunning Xian'er, the lively Luo Ning, or the strong-willed Yuruo—each one had distinct personality and convictions. Among them, Qiaoqiao's radiance was the least conspicuous, yet it was this adorable Qiaoqiao who thought of him all the time, treating him as her everything.

Lin Wanrong held her small cup-bearing hands and said, "Little darling, big brother is not cold. You've traveled such a long distance, so you must drink quickly to warm yourself."

Qiaoqiao shook her head, saying, "Big brother, I'm not cold either. On the road, just thinking about seeing you soon warmed my heart."

Madam Xiao, from across the room, chimed in, "Oh, this girl Qiaoqiao! On the journey, she asked about our progress every hour. In the past half month, if she hasn't asked a thousand times, it must be at least eight hundred."

Qiaoqiao bashfully lowered her head, saying, "I've never traveled far from home before, and I didn't know where the capital was. If I didn't ask every day, I felt uneasy, afraid that if I took a wrong turn, I wouldn't see big brother. Big brother, am I very silly?"

Emotion welled up in Lin Wanrong, and he grasped her hand, saying, "You're not silly; you are the cleverest woman in the world. No one can compare to you. Now drink your tea quickly, or it will cool down."

Qiaoqiao firmly shook her head, speaking shyly, "Big brother, you are the head of the household; you should drink the tea first, or I won't feel right."

The Eldest Miss gazed at Qiaoqiao and sighed softly. No wonder he loved Qiaoqiao so dearly. Though she was from a poor family, her sincerity was as clear as crystal. How many in the world could achieve that?

'Enough, enough, I owe this girl in this lifetime,' Lin Wanrong thought, taking the ginseng tea and lightly touching it to his lips. Only then did Qiaoqiao's brow blossom into a smile, and she joyfully drained her cup. Her charming and adorable manner caused both the Eldest Miss and Madam Xiao, women themselves, to praise her silently in their hearts.

"Qiaoqiao, how did you end up coming to the capital with Madam?" Lin Wanrong asked, once everyone had settled down from the initial excitement of the unexpected reunion.

Qiaoqiao snuggled beside him, her face flushed with gentle happiness, and softly began, "Big brother, after you left, on the eighth day of the first lunar month, our branch of Food for Immortals in the Confucius Temple opened. Now everything is on track, and our Food for Immortals restaurant is the largest in all Jinling. Besides Father, Qingshan and Beidou have come back to help, and I've specifically hired several accountants. Everything is running smoothly. But without big brother there, I felt uncomfortable. Just then, Madam Xiao sent word that she needed someone to accompany her to the capital—"

Madam Xiao laughed and interrupted, saying, "You silly girl, it was you who came to me with the proposal; how has it become that I sought you out?"

"Madam, didn't you promise not to tell?" Qiaoqiao's face turned red, and she protested anxiously. Seeing her elder brother smiling at her, she gently lowered her head, daring not to speak further.

"Silly child," Madam Xiao sighed softly, "wanting to see him is nothing to be ashamed of, so why can't it be spoken of? Are you still afraid he will scold you? If Lin San dares to bully you, I'll be the first to not let him off!"

Lin Wanrong grasped Qiaoqiao's small hand, smiling faintly. The little girl softly acknowledged with a sound, and her heart was immediately filled with joy. Suddenly remembering something, she said, "Big brother, someone asked me to bring a letter to you."

"A letter? What letter?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

Qiaoqiao smiled mysteriously, taking an envelope from her pocket and handing it to him.

Chapter 342 The Sound of Slaughtering a Pig

"A letter? Who sent this letter?" Lin Wanrong asked in puzzlement, gently tearing open the envelope. A faint, delicate fragrance filled his nostrils, and inside the envelope lay a pair of red handkerchiefs and a flawless white sheet of paper.

He unfolded the paper, and several lines of graceful, small characters came into view: "A thread and a line grow white hair; half-shy, half-resentful washes the years away. Last winter I asked the south-flying geese, when shall I pick apricot blossoms with you?"

This poem, written with a lady's longing, was gentle and affectionate, filled with a wistful melancholy and yearning. Unfolding the handkerchief, he saw embroidered with golden thread a pair of mandarin ducks, their appearance so vivid and lifelike.

Lin Wanrong stared blankly for a moment, finally smiling and shaking his head. Qiaoqiao softly asked, "Big brother, do you know who sent you this letter?"

Lin Wanrong said with a smile, "Qiaoqiao, when did you go to see Luo Ning?"

Qiaoqiao, startled, her face full of smiles, replied, "Big brother, how did you know I went to see Luo Ning?"

Lin Wanrong pinched her little nose, "Silly girl, from this poem alone I knew it was written by Luo Ning; no one else could capture this flavor. Is Miss Luo doing well in Jining? How are Lord Luo and Luo Yuan? Last time when I was in a hurry on my way to the capital, I even bypassed Jining; it was truly regrettable."

"Luo Ning is doing very well," Qiaoqiao said wistfully. "She's just a bit lonely there. When Madam and I were traveling to the capital, we stopped in Jining for two days. You wouldn't believe how happy Luo Ning was, chatting with me all day, afraid I'd fly away. She wanted to come to the capital as well, but Lord Luo said the situation was complex and asked her to wait a while longer. She had no choice but to write this letter for me to give you, along with these mandarin ducks, which she embroidered herself. Big brother, Luo Ning has deep affection for you, you must not let her down!"

"Miss Luo's affection for me is profound, but my Qiaoqiao's love pierces my heart even more deeply. My darling, I won't let you down either!" Lin Wanrong whispered in her ear. Qiaoqiao blushed, nodding softly, and tightly held her brother's hand.

In this residence in the capital, only Lin San and the Eldest Miss usually stayed, two frenemies who, amidst their affectionate teasing, also enjoyed quarreling. But they had been staying home less in recent days, making the place feel less lively. The arrival of Madam Xiao and Qiaoqiao was like a burning fire, igniting the atmosphere in the house.

After Madam and Qiaoqiao had eaten, considering their travel fatigue, the Eldest Miss urged them to rest. When Qiaoqiao and her big brother left the room, Madam closed the door and gazed silently at Xiao Yuruo, as if pondering something.

"Mother, why are you looking at your daughter like that?" the Eldest Miss's face reddened, and she lowered her head to say quietly.

Madam Xiao took her daughter's hand and had her sit beside her, gently saying, "Yuruo, your mother has a question to ask you."

‘What does Mother want to ask?’ The Eldest Miss's heart jumped twice, and she shyly replied, "Mother, why be so formal with your daughter? Just speak what's on your mind!"

Madam stared at her, silent for a long while. The Eldest Miss looked up at her mother and then quickly lowered her head again.

Madam Xiao sighed and said, "Yuruo, you and Lin San – have you two become intimate? Have you developed a secret affection for him?"

Xiao Yuruo's heart thumped wildly, her face flushed as she stammered, "Mother, I, I..." She spoke a few words but didn't know how to continue. Panic took hold, and she threw herself into Madam Xiao's arms, sobbing.

Looking at her daughter's expression, Madam Xiao knew all too well what had transpired. Her heart filled with both sighs and anger. Was Lin San sent to ruin the women of the Xiao family? It was one thing for her naive second daughter to be deceived by him, but why had her usually rational eldest daughter been taken in as well?

Madam Xiao stroked her eldest daughter's beautiful hair, lamenting, "Sister Song wrote to me, mentioning something unusual between you and Lin San. That's why I came to the capital this time. My child, how could you be so foolish? Lin San is known for having countless female confidantes; his expertise lies in taking advantage of women. It was one thing for Yushuang to follow him, but how did you fall into his trap as well?"

The Eldest Miss Xiao, still embracing her mother's waist, cried softly, "Mother, it's too late for you to say anything now—"

"What?" Madam Xiao exclaimed, pulling her daughter away to stare at her, "Yuruo, you, you haven't committed any indiscretions with him, have you?"

Miss Xiao's face turned red. If her mother hadn't arrived that night, she feared she might have given in to him.

"Mother, where are you going with this?" Miss Xiao's face was flushed with embarrassment. "How could I do something so lacking in propriety and shame?"

"What do you mean it's 'too late'?" Madam Xiao's mood calmed slightly. She looked her daughter up and down, and with her discerning eye, could naturally tell that Eldest Miss Xiao remained chaste. Thankfully, Lin San seemed to have retained some conscience.

"Mother, I don't know how it happened, but since I met him, I feel an itch of hatred when I see him. Yet when he's not around, I can't help but think of him. It's indeed too late for you to speak to me now; I should never have acknowledged him in the first place." Miss Xiao shook her head softly, her face filled with a mixture of sorrow and longing.

Madam Xiao, wise to the ways of the world, understood her daughter's feelings all too well. After a long silence, she sighed faintly, "Yuruo, your mother is not unreasonable. Lin San's abilities and talents are indeed extraordinary, and I've always thought highly of him. Although we of the Xiao family may be widows and orphans, we are still a respected family in Jinling, and you and Yushuang are our pride. Yushuang marrying him is not demeaning, and I can accept that. But if both

of you sisters become involved with him, what would that make of us? All these years as a widow, I've feared nothing but others pointing at our back!"

Emotion overcame Madam Xiao, and tears welled in her eyes. Lin San might be an extraordinary man, but marrying one of her daughters should have been enough. How could that boy be so insatiable, pursuing even her eldest daughter?

Seeing her mother in tears, Miss Xiao was alarmed and quickly knelt on the ground, "Mother, I have been unfilial and caused you grief. But my relationship with that scoundrel is a mutual affection, and we have not wronged anyone. With his abilities, he could stand before the Emperor in the golden hall without fear and drive back the barbarians on the battlefield. I am willing to be with him, unafraid of others pointing at my back."

"Speaking of your relationship with him, why has it turned to ascending the golden hall and descending to the battlefield?" the Madam helped her daughter to her feet, caressing her beautiful hair with a wry smile. Madam Xiao had been busy traveling these days and was unaware of Lin Wanrong's deeds in the capital. Her daughter recounted everything she had seen and heard during this time, from besting the emissaries of Goryeo and the Turks, to appearing in the golden hall before the Emperor. The Emperor had even granted him the title of Vice Minister of Personnel and personally inscribed "The First Talent Under Heaven." The Madam couldn't contain her astonishment and grabbed her daughter's hand, saying, "Yuruo, is what you've told me really true?"

The Eldest Miss nodded, "How dare I deceive my mother? Many have witnessed it. The First Talent Under Heaven who has thrice defeated the barbarians, his fame must have already resounded throughout the entire capital!" She glanced out the window, sighing faintly, "He is now the Vice Minister of Personnel and bestowed by the Emperor the title of 'The First Talent Under Heaven.' He might move out of our Xiao family's house tomorrow. Whether he admits to all this or not, we still don't know."

The Madam was stunned for a while before sighing, "I had anticipated that Lin San would accomplish something, but I never thought the Emperor would personally dub him 'The First Talent Under Heaven.' In that case, if you follow him, it won't be a humiliation."

A joy sprang in the Eldest Miss's heart, but she dared not reveal it, and gently probed, "Mother, have you... agreed?"

The Madam snorted, "Is it really that simple? Just because he's become 'The First Talent Under Heaven,' he thinks he can take both of my precious daughters away? Even if he became the Emperor, without my consent, he wouldn't dare do anything to you!" The Madam thought for a

moment and then smiled, "Yuruo, don't worry. I don't care about any Vice Minister of Personnel or The First Talent Under Heaven, but the contract with our Xiao Mansion is real. Within this year, when I call him Lin San, he must answer, right?"

The Eldest Miss nodded, and the Madam smiled, "Your affair with him can be set aside for now, but you mustn't indulge him too much. Men are inherently lowly; the more you show you care, the less they will. Stay distant, and he'll think of you."

The Eldest Miss's face flushed, and she whispered, "What Mother says is the same as what Sister Xu said. Could it be that you managed Father this way back in the day?"

A blush spread across the Madam's face, and she playfully slapped her daughter's delicate bottom, "You naughty girl, making jokes about your mother!" She fell silent for a while and softly said, "In the old days, the situation in the capital was unclear. To avoid becoming embroiled in court disputes, your grandfather hastily married me off. Your father and I were married without ever having met, nothing like the freedom you have now. By the way, the Sister Xu you mentioned, who is she?"

"It's Mr. Xu's daughter, Xu Zhiqing. You held her when she was a baby," the Eldest Miss said softly.

"It's that Zhiqing girl!" the Madam exclaimed joyfully, "When I left the capital, she was still a little girl with braids. In the blink of an eye, twenty years have passed, and I wonder what she looks like now."

"Sister Xu, she... she hasn't been doing too well either!" The Eldest Miss recounted Xu Zhiqing's experiences, causing Madam Xiao's fine eyebrows to furrow in distress. Helplessly, she said, "No wonder Mr. Xu was reluctant to speak more about it. A beauty's life is often filled with hardships, and Zhiqing has indeed suffered a great deal."

She glanced at her daughter and after a long moment, waved her hand and said, "You and Lin San, just be sure not to emulate these follies."

"Mother!" The Eldest Miss exclaimed joyfully, throwing herself into her mother's embrace, reluctant to stand up for a long time.

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"Brother San, the hot water is ready. It's in the room next to yours, so please take Miss Dong to bathe and change her clothes!" Lin Wanrong had just stepped out of his room with Qiaoqiao when Huan'er approached them, smiling.

Qiaoqiao hurriedly said, "Thank you, Sister, but I can manage on my own. I wouldn't want to trouble you."

Lin Wanrong laughed, pulling her in, "You've been traveling in the carriage for so long, you must be tired. How could I let you do this yourself? Huan'er, on behalf of my wife, I thank you!"

Qiaoqiao was filled with endless joy, bashfully snuggling up to her big brother. Huan'er stared blankly for a moment before murmuring, "Brother San, you have a wife now, but what about the Eldest Miss?"

Lin Wanrong's room was directly across from the Eldest Miss's, and Madame Xiao had settled into her daughter's room. Mother and daughter, having been apart for a long time, naturally had much to talk about. Lin Wanrong's room was left for the two of them to reside in.

After Qiaoqiao entered the room, Huan'er was about to follow to serve them, but Lin Wanrong gently stopped her, smiling, "It's getting late; you should go rest. I can handle things here."

The smile on Brother San's face was inexplicably mischievous. The couple's long-awaited reunion meant certain activities would occur, clear without need of explanation. Huan'er let out a soft cry and hurriedly ran off.

Seeing big brother also entering the room, Qiaoqiao's face flushed all the way down to her neck, whispering, "Big brother, why did you come in too?"

Lin Wanrong smiled slightly, "Silly girl, big brother is here to help you bathe and dress."

Qiaoqiao bowed her head, her face burning like fire, not daring to speak. Lin Wanrong came to her side, gently massaging her shoulders, tenderly saying, "My little treasure, you must be tired from all the traveling these days, aren't you?"

"Not tired!" Qiaoqiao softly replied, "As long as big brother is here, I'm not afraid of anything!"

Lin Wanrong squeezed her shoulders firmly, lightly saying, "You silly girl!" But then, he was at a loss for words, and the atmosphere became profoundly warm.

"Big brother, I never thought that the Xiao family's residence in the capital would be so grand!" Qiaoqiao glanced around, her face showing a hint of envy.

"Don't worry; our home will be even bigger!" Lin Wanrong laughed.

"Our home?" Qiaoqiao was startled, "Big brother, are you going back to Jinling? Our house in Jinling has been empty all this time!"

"We won't be returning to Jinling for now, but big brother has a house in the capital now. It was bestowed by the Emperor. I'll take you to see it tomorrow!"

"Bestowed by the Emperor?" Qiaoqiao opened her mouth in amazement, and Lin Wanrong kissed her there, briefly recounting the day's events. Qiaoqiao's eyes filled with tears of excitement, "Big brother, thank you!"

"Thank me? Thank me for what?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

"Thank you for allowing me to meet you. Since I've met you, Qiaoqiao has become the happiest woman in the world!" Qiaoqiao said hurriedly, wiping away her tears, her face showing inexpressible joy and happiness.

This contented little girl made Lin Wanrong's heart fill with tenderness. He gently pressed his large, warm hands onto her back.

Qiaoqiao felt warmth in her heart, and suddenly realized something. She quickly turned her head and said, "No! Big brother, you are my husband; how can I allow you to serve me—"

"What's not allowed!" Lin Wanrong cut her off: "You are my wife; Big brother will serve you today. Is that alright?"

Seeing Big brother's determined expression, Qiaoqiao responded with a joyful and shy hum, her face breaking into a sweet smile, yet her eyes were brimming with tears.

"I'm sorry, my dear; Big brother has done too little for you before—" Lin Wanrong's voice was filled with remorse. But just as he was about to continue, a warm little hand covered his lips: "Big brother, you are a man of great deeds. What Qiaoqiao likes about you is your disregard for everything else. I'm willing to do anything for you."

Seeing the little girl's face flushed, her long eyelashes trembling, her pitch-black pupils bright as the stars at night, and her cherry-like mouth opening and closing, Lin Wanrong gently kissed her lips. His hands moved to her waist and slowly began to unbutton her heavy winter coat.

As big brother was about to attend to her, Qiaoqiao's heart filled with shyness. After days without seeing him, her pent-up longing was clear, like the transparent flow of water in Xuanwu Lake. As he pulled open her outer clothing, her heart pounded rapidly; her head almost bowed to her chest, but infinite joy resided in her heart.

After removing the coat, a thin layer of winter clothing was revealed. Qiaoqiao's figure had become even more outstanding after just a few days apart. Though separated by winter garments, he could see the high contour of her peaks, her slender jade legs tightly together, and her full chest and slender waist, all hinting at the mature charm of a young woman.

Seeing big brother staring at her, Qiaoqiao's face turned as red as hibiscus, and she softly called, "Big brother—"

Upon unbuttoning the winter clothing, Lin Wanrong's eyes brightened. A light red undergarment clung tightly to Qiaoqiao's body. She bashfully lowered her head, covering her shoulders, her snow-white skin peeking through her fingers. Over a month had passed, and her chest had grown even fuller, dazzling Lin Wanrong as it appeared before him.

Lin Wanrong clicked his tongue in admiration and slowly embraced Qiaoqiao. The little girl let out a soft cry and then felt warmth as she looked down to find herself in a wooden tub filled with petals. The hot water reached her waist, and a faint soapy fragrance entered her nostrils, bringing an indescribable sense of coziness and warmth.

Lin Wanrong smiled as he scooped the warm water over her head, soaking her beautiful hair. A sensation as warm as spring sun instantly filled her entire body. Qiaoqiao stretched out her delicate little hands, gently rubbing her cheeks, her eyes radiating soft and blissful light.

Lin Wanrong extended his large hand into the water, gently unfastening that last layer of intimate clothing. Silently, the last barrier on the young girl's body was removed. As Lin Wanrong was about to gently rub her body, a glance led to a surprising discovery. On the young girl's full and soft chest, there was a thin bra cup, made of silk gauze, half-hidden and half-revealed, making her chest appear even fuller and more enchanting.

Lin Wanrong was stunned, even dropping the water scoop into the bucket without noticing. Qiaoqiao's face turned blood-red, and she dared not lift her head, only using the corner of her eyes to gauge her big brother's expression.

"Little darling!" Lin Wanrong hurriedly swallowed and said, "This, where did you get this?"

Qiaoqiao, blushing, covered her cheeks and whispered like a mosquito, "Big brother, how could you forget? This is what you prepared for me when you were making women's clothes for the Xiao family. I brought it with me to the capital, thinking you would like it, and only put it on today as we were nearing the city."

This girl truly knew his heart. Qiaoqiao softly hummed, her breath becoming more rapid, her face as if painted with the finest rouge, her eyes tightly closed, her cheeks peach-red, her chest heaving enticingly, and her silk dress tightly outlining her voluptuous figure, indescribably tempting.

Lin Wanrong reached out, slowly touching her back, feeling her skin smooth and moist like beautiful jade. His heart stirred, his eyes gleamed, and he caressed her forward, with a snap, unfastening that thin piece of lingerie.

Qiaoqiao exclaimed, her clothing falling into the water, two bright buds breaking the surface, standing tall, the fresh scent of a young girl's body wafting over the water, endlessly tempting his senses.

'Damn, it's killing me,' Lin Wanrong swallowed hard, restraining himself with great willpower, slowly washing Qiaoqiao's body. The two had already become husband and wife in Jinling, and had been intimate many times. Today, after a long separation, they should have been excited. But with the Eldest Miss and Madame Xiao in the next room, they had to be cautious. Otherwise, Lin San could be shameless, but could Qiaoqiao still face the world?

After finally washing her, Lin Wanrong held Qiaoqiao in the tub, not letting her get up, her breathing becoming even more rapid. He listened carefully for a while before saying, "It's alright, they're asleep."

This poorly concealed sentence made Qiaoqiao go weak from head to toe. She turned her head away, not daring to speak, hearing her big brother's hot breath, her heart pounding wildly.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, suddenly lifting Qiaoqiao out of the water, a flawless beautiful body appearing before his eyes.

Qiaoqiao softly cried out, but Lin Wanrong had already covered her with a clean bathrobe, wiping her body dry, then carrying her slowly towards the bed.

"Big brother—" Qiaoqiao's face was flushed, tightly holding his body, and from somewhere found the courage to lift her head and look at him, "Qiaoqiao loves you so much!"

No language could express his feelings. Lin Wanrong opened his mouth wide, taking her full and bright red cherry lips into his mouth, his tongue gently gliding between her tender lips, savoring the sweet taste of lilac.

With a soft "uh" sound, Qiaoqiao's arms involuntarily wrapped around her big brother. She felt him kiss her tongue, then her cheek, and then, with increasing intensity, nibble at her delicate and exquisite earlobe. His right hand, through the bathrobe, caressed her full and upright chest.

A moan, both painful and joyful, escaped from between Qiaoqiao's teeth. Lin Wanrong undid her bathrobe, and her jade-like breasts surged forth, the two red points on her chest quivering ceaselessly.

"Baby darling, you've grown again," Lin Wanrong chuckled, gently grasping the soft peaks, and the candlelight was extinguished in an instant...

"Ah, big brother—" A woman's moan, both painful and pleasurable, reached the room across. The Eldest Miss who was speaking with her mother couldn't help but frown: "Mother, what is that sound?"

Madam Xiao's face turned red, and she huffed: "The sound of slaughtering a pig! That detestable Lin San!"

Chapter 343 "The Mansion"

The next morning, Lin Wanrong rose early and took Qiaoqiao out with him. As soon as they reached the door, they bumped into the Eldest Miss, Xiao Yuruo. Her pretty cheeks looked slightly pale, and her eyes were tinged with red, as if she hadn't slept well the night before.

"Good morning, Miss!" Lin Wanrong said, holding Qiaoqiao's little hand and smiling cheerfully. He had shown off his prowess the previous night, and this morning he was still feeling invincible. Qiaoqiao, the little girl, was both clever and charming. The two of them were as harmonious as fish in water, indescribably carefree and happy.

"What's good about this morning? The sun is already three poles high!" the Eldest Miss glared at him and snorted.

"Oh my, the sun is 'three poles high?' How rude of me! Miss, don't worry, from now on I'll get up when the sun is only 'two poles high!'" Lin Wanrong said, a mischievous smile playing on his face, speaking in a lewd manner.

"You should get up when the sun is only one pole high, you bad man! I've never seen anyone as tormenting as you!" The Eldest Miss didn't understand Lin Wanrong's hidden meaning, but seeing his strange smile and winking, she blushed and hurriedly lowered her head.

"Miss Xiao, it's my fault for getting up late, don't blame him," Qiaoqiao said, her face flushed with embarrassment.

"Qiaoqiao, don't protect him too much, or he'll only take advantage of you. How did you sleep last night?" the Eldest Miss asked, seemingly both intentionally and unintentionally.

"Good, good!" Qiaoqiao answered, lowering her head, her face already tinged with layers of rouge.

'Why am I asking about this?' The Eldest Miss thought, her face turning red. She stole a glance at Lin San, who was smiling at her, and remembering the chaotic sounds of the previous night, she quickly turned her head and asked, "Qiaoqiao, where are you two going?"

"Big brother is taking me to see the mansion. Miss, come with us!" Qiaoqiao looked up, her beautiful little face filled with excitement and anticipation.

"Going to see the mansion?" The Eldest Miss felt a faint sense of loss and said softly, "You go ahead. I have things to do. The thousand bottles of perfume my mother brought from Jinling are going on sale today, and I can't get away."

Seeing her look of deep resentment, Lin Wanrong grabbed her hand and said, "The perfume sale is fine with Sister Song watching over it. You don't need to do it yourself." He looked around sneakily and whispered in her ear, "You go choose a room with a big bed, so we won't be afraid of falling off."

Xiao Yuruo's face turned peach-red, and she spat softly, saying in an almost inaudible voice, "Who wants to sleep with you? I hate you, you bad man."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily three times, and the Eldest Miss's face turned red with embarrassment. She glared at him, her heart in turmoil, and hurriedly fled.

"What is the Eldest Miss doing going to the kitchen?" Qiaoqiao asked, watching Xiao Yuruo's hurried steps.

"Oh, perhaps she's changed her ways recently and wants to be a good wife and mother," Lin Wanrong said, chuckling to himself and making up a story.

Qiaoqiao smiled and looked at him, saying softly, "Big brother, if you marry Second Miss Xiao and Miss Xiao, and our two families merge, opening a restaurant and selling perfume, then no one in Jinling will be able to compare to us."

"That's a constructive proposal; I'll consider it. But, my little darling, I have a secret affair with Yushuang and the Eldest Miss; aren't you jealous?" Lin Wanrong said, laughing.

"What secret affair? That sounds awful!" Qiaoqiao scolded. "The two Miss Xiaos are like phoenixes among people. As long as they are good to you, what's wrong with marrying them both? As for me —" A shadow of sadness flashed in her eyes, "I'm just a girl from a poor family, and I can't compare to the two young ladies. Big brother, Qiaoqiao doesn't want anything else; I just want to be by your side for the rest of my life, and I'll be content."

"You silly girl, what nonsense are you talking about? In terms of intelligence and capability, you're second to none. You are my good wife, and even if Yushuang and the others come in, they'll have to call you senior sister, understand?" Lin Wanrong said seriously.

Tears welled in Qiaoqiao's eyes, and she nodded softly, tightly gripping her big brother's arm, her heart filled with boundless joy. They hadn't walked far from the door when they happened to run into Madam Xiao. Qiaoqiao and Madam Xiao had traveled to the capital together, caring for each other deeply, and their feelings were profound. She quickly went up and took Madam Xiao's hand, saying, "Madam, big brother and I are going to see the mansion; you should come with us!"

Madam Xiao, dressed in a new lotus-colored long skirt, lightly made up, with elegant brows and a mature and charming face, looked graceful and dignified. Hearing Qiaoqiao's words, she smiled slightly and said to Lin Wanrong, "Lin San, I heard from Yuruo yesterday that you are truly capable. Not only did you defeat the northern nomad and Goryeo, bringing glory to our great nation, but even the Emperor values you so much, granting you an official position and awarding you a place. It's truly a joyous occasion!"

"Madam, I'm just a small sapling, basking in your sunshine and rain, growing healthy and strong every day. It's all thanks to your diligent cultivation," Lin Wanrong said, flattering her effortlessly.

Madam Xiao covered her mouth and laughed lightly, "You speak so sweetly; aren't you afraid of rotting your teeth? What sunshine and rain? You make me sound like the compassionate Guanyin Bodhisattva."

"Isn't that the case? Madam's benevolent light shines everywhere, spreading rain and dew, even more gentle and beautiful than Guanyin Bodhisattva," Lin Wanrong said, laughing.

Lin San's words could charm all the women in the world, and that was no exaggeration. Madam Xiao's face turned slightly red, and she laughed lightly, her full bosom trembling like a brilliant flowering tree. She glanced at Qiaoqiao and smiled, "Since Qiaoqiao has kindly invited me, I'll bask in Lin San's glory and go see the majestic mansion bestowed by the Emperor! But—" she changed the subject, "Lin San, even though you've become an official, our Xiao family still has a contract with you! You mustn't break your promise!"

Lin Wanrong waved his hand and laughed heartily, "Madam, what are you talking about? What kind of person am I, Lin San? My word is my bond. In this world, one must uphold righteousness; better to lose one's life than one's trust—and besides, what's our relationship? We're family. Being a small servant in the Xiao family, accompanying the madam and young ladies every day, is a hundred times better than being an official. It's like living a fairy's life!"

What was this about "better to lose one's life than one's trust"? How could this man say anything that came to his mind? As the Madam listened to his nonsense, she had already ordered Si De to fetch a carriage.

Qiaoqiao helped the Madam into the carriage, and Lin Wanrong followed them, one hand lifting the curtain, just about to enter when he suddenly realized something. He couldn't barge into the Madam's chamber. However, he often frequented her daughter's boudoir.

"Lin San, why aren't you coming in?" Madam Xiao lifted the curtain and smiled.

"Well, it might not be appropriate! I'm a very polite person," Lin Wanrong said, his face wearing a hypocritical smile, feigning sincerity. One hand was already on the curtain, ready to slip inside.

With a rustling sound, the curtain fell, hitting Lin Wanrong's nose. The Madam laughed from inside, "Lin San, even after becoming the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Personnel, you still show such filial piety. That's truly rare. In that case, I won't make things difficult for you. Si De, drive on."

"Yes, madam!" Si De cracked the whip, and the carriage began to move forward. Lin Wanrong touched his nose resentfully. If she didn't want him to come in, she could have just said so. Instead, she deliberately mocked him. This move was ruthless. The Eldest Miss's mother was indeed more difficult to deal with than the Eldest Miss herself!

Lin Wanrong sat next to Si De, and the two of them drove the carriage quickly forward. The mansion bestowed by the Emperor was a place Lin Wanrong had never been to, located near the East Straight Gate and not small in scale. Although he had been in the capital for some time, he hadn't really explored the city. Today, taking advantage of his leisure time, he wasn't in a hurry to get there, driving the carriage slowly, as if strolling through the city.

Upon reaching the East Straight Gate, Lin Wanrong was unfamiliar with the route and looked around. Si De pulled over an old man and asked, "Sir, do you know where Lord Lin's mansion is?"

"Lord Lin?" The old man said, "Which Lord Lin?"

"The newly appointed Vice Minister of the Ministry of Personnel, Lord Lin San!" Si De said, his face full of reverence.

"Vice Minister of the Ministry of Personnel?" The old man sneered, "Around the East Straight Gate, those who live here are either royal relatives or high-ranking officials. Even scholars from the Hall of Literary Brilliance must tread lightly. A Vice Minister of the Ministry of Personnel, a small official like a sesame seed or green bean, who knows where he lives? You should look in Huairou District or Tongzhou District; you might find him there!" [Both districts are far from the inner city wall where important people reside.]

Si De, who was already directionally challenged, was even more confused in the capital. He turned and asked, "Brother San, how do we get to Huairou or Tongzhou? The old man said your mansion is there!"

Lin Wanrong slapped him hard on the head. 'This kid was quite clever in Jinling; how had he become so foolish in the capital? Couldn't he hear that the old man was mocking me? Damn, even a random old man asking for directions was so arrogant. A Vice Minister of the Ministry of Personnel is a small official? It's at least a deputy department level, right?'

Lin Wanrong leaned over, not willing to concede, and said, "Old brother, I don't understand what you're saying. A Vice Minister of the Ministry of Personnel is a small official? I heard that Vice Minister Tong has retired, and besides Lord Ye, the Minister, there's only the Vice Minister left in the Ministry of Personnel."

"It's only the Vice Ministers left—seventeen of them," the old man laughed. "And that's just in the Ministry of Personnel. Among the six ministries, which one doesn't have Vice Ministers as numerous as cow hairs? There must be over a hundred in total. Then there are the ministers and elders of the three chambers, the scholars of the six halls, and the grand scholars, numbering several hundred. A mere Vice Minister of the Ministry of Personnel, what does that amount to? The Lord Lin you're looking for, I reckon you won't find him in Tongzhou; perhaps you'll have to go to Cangzhou."

'You bastard, the more you talk, the more absurd it becomes. Am I so insignificant that you'd demote me from the capital to Hebei? If I keep asking, I'll probably end up being sent directly to Mohe. Wasn't I just asking for directions? Did I deserve such a blow?'

As he was stewing in his frustration, he heard a soft "giggle" from the carriage, followed by a sudden silence. Through the curtain, Lin Wanrong seemed to see Madam Xiao's cherry lips suppressing a laugh, her cheeks flushed red. His own face felt a sudden heat, and he coughed awkwardly, "Well, let's keep looking. If we can't find it, we'll spend the night in Tongzhou and continue to Cangzhou tomorrow."

This time, not only Madam Xiao but also Qiaoqiao laughed lightly. Being with big brother was always so joyful and carefree.

Unable to find the mansion, Madam Xiao and Qiaoqiao also alighted from the carriage, joining Si De and Lin San in asking for directions. Madam Xiao had been away from the capital for many years, and much had changed. Her feelings were indescribable. Exploring with Lin San allowed her to appreciate the local customs and recall memories of her youth. This was an experience she had never had before, and she found it delightful and interesting.

The old man's words were not false. The area around the East Straight Gate was indeed filled with grand mansions, royal relatives, and high-ranking officials. Each residence was guarded by stone lions and throngs of servants, and the courtyards were extraordinary.

As they were about to reach the end of the East Straight Gate Street, all that remained were a few old, dilapidated mansions. They had not yet seen the grand residence of Vice Minister Lin San, and not only Si De and Madam Xiao but even Lin Wanrong himself was disheartened.

‘The Emperor, my father-in-law, better not be playing tricks on me,’ he thought. ‘He said he had bestowed a mansion near the East Straight Gate, spacious enough for many people to live in. But we're almost at the end of the road, and I haven't seen my mansion yet!’

"Brother San, Brother San!" Just as he was feeling disappointed, Si De excitedly shouted, "Brother San, look, The First Under Heaven, The First Under Heaven!"

Lin Wanrong glanced over and angrily smacked him on the head, "What's this 'The First Under Heaven'? You're so old, and you still can't count? Clearly, it's five characters, 'The First Talent Under Heaven'—wait, 'The First Talent Under Heaven'? Wow—"

Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "Is this... could this be my 'mansion'? It's truly damn grand!"

Madam Xiao and Qiaoqiao quickly looked up, and at nearly the end of the street, they saw a dark red door, slightly wider and taller than the gates of ordinary houses. The outer wall's paint had peeled off, revealing patches of red and green. Most of the red tiles on the roof beams were broken, and the house looked utterly defeated. On the grand East Straight Gate Street, filled with luxurious mansions, this small, dilapidated house stood out like a caterpillar among phoenixes. If not for the plaque hanging on the door, with the five gleaming golden characters "The First Talent Under Heaven" shining in the sunlight, no one would have guessed that this was the "grand mansion" the Emperor had bestowed upon Lord Lin!

Lin Wanrong looked up at the newly hung plaque with those five golden characters and couldn't help but shake his head and sigh. After all, it was a gift from the Emperor; it should have been magnified a thousand times for the world to admire! Why make such a small plaque? Even the four characters "Former Residence of Prosperity" personally inscribed by Minister Ye, which they had just passed, were several times larger. What was this? What was this? This was not the first talent under heaven; it was clearly the last.

"Brother San, shall we go in?" Si De saw that his brother's expression was listless, a far cry from his initial enthusiasm, and cautiously asked, fearing he might provoke his irritation.

"Enter! Of course, we must enter!" Lin Wanrong declared without hesitation. "A son does not despise his mother's ugliness, a dog does not despise its home's poverty. Though the shelter is broken, it can protect us from wind and rain. My ladies, let's reclaim our home together!"

Qiaoqiao smiled sweetly and nodded, while Madam Xiao couldn't help but shake her head. 'This child,' she thought, 'he's been so struck that he's become confused and started talking nonsense.'

"Brother San, when they say a dog doesn't despise its home's poverty, they're talking about a dog. But you're not a dog!" Si De said, bewildered.

Lin San was furious: "I'm not a dog, you're a dog! Is that good enough for you? Are you coming in or not?"

Madam Xiao covered her lips, suppressing a laugh. Every moment with Lin San brought more joy and warmth. Even if Yushuang and Yuruo followed him, they wouldn't feel wronged.

Lord Lin, puffing with anger, led the way, pushing open the courtyard door. As he stepped in, accumulated dust flew into his face, choking his mouth and nose, covering him with dirt.

"Cough, cough—" Lin Wanrong quickly stepped back, dust in his eyes, unable to open them, and hurriedly rolled up his sleeves to wipe them.

"Don't move!" Madam Xiao, standing beside him, quickly called out and took a silk handkerchief from her bosom to gently wipe his eyes.

"Madam, let me do it!" Qiaoqiao rushed forward, taking the handkerchief from Madam Xiao and gently wiping her big brother's face.

Lin Wanrong spat out the dust from his mouth, managing to open his eyes, and grumbled, "What a ghostly mess! How does the Emperor rule? I won't say anything about bestowing a broken mansion, but couldn't he have had someone clean it up? Next time we meet, I must have a serious talk with him."

Madam Xiao shook her head secretly, thinking, 'This child, he's really been driven to distraction. The Emperor's grace is boundless; how could he discuss it with you?'

Qiaoqiao took his hand and smiled sweetly, "Big brother, this is our home, and it will be more meaningful if we clean it ourselves. Madam, don't you agree?"

Madam Xiao laughed and said, "That's true. Qiaoqiao is clever and skillful; she will surely tidy up this mansion properly. When the time comes, I'll bring Yuruo and Yushuang to stay here as well!"

"Welcome, welcome!" Lin Wanrong clapped his hands and grinned, "You're all welcome to stay as long as you like!"

Seeing his dirt-covered face and strange appearance, Madam Xiao could no longer contain herself and covered her mouth, laughing delicately. Qiaoqiao buried her head in her big brother's face, happily nestling in his arms.

Upon entering the small gate, they found a two-story gatehouse, with a large door tightly closed below. The ground floor consisted of several empty rooms filled with all sorts of clutter: furniture, calligraphy, inkstones, and even a baby's cradle. Everything was in disarray, covered in dust, as if no one had lived there for many years.

"Why do these rooms look like storage rooms?" Qiaoqiao, gentle and observant, glanced around and asked.

"Who cares if they're storage rooms? As long as we can live here!" Lin Wanrong laughed, "And there are stairs, with three rooms on each floor. In my time, this might be called a garden villa. Oh, there's no garden here, so there's a slight difference!"

"Your time?" Madam Xiao frowned, "Lin San, what do you mean?"

"Oh, just this time, Madam. You don't need to understand! Wow, these two floors are so tall, even taller than me!" He chuckled, changing the subject.

Madam Xiao smiled and shook her head. Lin San was either mad or mysterious, always full of inexplicable ideas, but he was indeed interesting.

"Garden villa?" Si De, who was rummaging around, saw the thick dust on the large door and, undeterred, pulled hard. The door didn't budge.

"Heave!" Si De gathered his strength, grunting with effort. With a creak, the heavy iron doors slowly swung open. A ray of sunlight pierced through from the other side, filling the air with dust. The light dazzled Lin Wanrong's eyes, and he couldn't see anything clearly.

"Wow, what a big garden!" Si De's cry of astonishment awakened the others. Lin Wanrong was the first to recover, rushing forward to look outside the iron gate.

Facing him was a vast garden, nearly half the size of a football field, surrounded by high walls made of red bricks and green tiles, extending as far as the eye could see. The garden was filled with flowerbeds, pavilions, bridges, and streams, but due to years of neglect, the flowers had withered, and weeds had overgrown. Only the sound of the spring, tinkling like a bell, stirred their hearts.

"Big, it's damn big!" Opening a door revealed a whole new world, leaving everyone agape. Lin Wanrong stared at the wonder before him, murmuring to himself.

Madam Xiao, with her extensive knowledge and understanding of architectural layouts, took a few more glances before saying, "Lin San, this seems to be a back garden."

"A back garden? What do you mean?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

Madam Xiao cast a charming glance at him and laughed softly, "Lin San, you're usually quite clever, but how come you're so slow to catch on at this crucial moment! Look, what is that?"

Her delicate finger pointed forward, and Lin Wanrong followed the direction of her gesture. He saw, directly facing the garden, a three-story hall-style building with a round archway leading from the

back to the front. Looking further, he could faintly make out more buildings, appearing and disappearing in the sunlight.

"What do you see?" Madam Xiao asked gently.

"Fingers, ah, no, buildings!" Lin Wanrong's gaze shifted from Madam Xiao's tender, greenish finger, and he couldn't help but wonder. Madam Xiao was in her mid-thirties, yet her skin was still so fine, rivaling even Seo Jang Geum's!

"You, where is your mind wandering off to?" Madam Xiao glanced at him and laughed, "If I'm not mistaken, we've entered through the wrong door."

"Entered through the wrong door?" Lin Wanrong chuckled lasciviously, "Impossible! I always find my way in! There's no such thing as entering the wrong door!"

Madam Xiao didn't understand his innuendo and shook her head firmly, "We've entered the back garden."

"The back garden?" Lin Wanrong understood this time and exclaimed with joy, "Madam, do you mean that what we've entered is—"

"Exactly," Madam Xiao smiled, "We are facing the back garden. There must be the main house, front hall, side rooms, and front garden ahead. This is undoubtedly a mansion. Who would have thought that you, Lin San, so clever all your life, would be confused for a moment and enter your home for the first time through the back door? Hee hee—"

Madam Xiao couldn't help but laugh delicately, and Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "The back door is good! Entering through the back door has a unique flavor! Damn it, who made such a small plaque and hung it on the back door? Tomorrow I'll report to the Emperor and have this little one beheaded!"

"It was I who had it hung!" A clear and authoritative voice rang out from outside the door.

"Who?" Lin Wanrong quickly looked outside, his face instantly changing, "You, you—Your Majesty?"

Chapter 344 I Grant Her to You

Qiaoqiao was astonished by his words and quickly asked, "Big brother, where is the Emperor?"

As she spoke, a man appeared at the door, his face rosy but with an unusually pale hue. His temples were tinged with the frost of autumn, and he wore a yellow satin robe, walking with the grace of a dragon and the stride of a tiger, exuding majesty. Behind him followed the Eunuch Gao and a group of plain-clothed guards and attendants, tightly surrounding him.

"Your Majesty, what brings you here?" Lin Wanrong, without showing any formalities, greeted the Emperor with a smile.

The Emperor seemed not to hear his words, ignoring him completely. His eyes were fixed straight behind Lin San, his face a mixture of shock and joy. He stammered a few times before finally asking, "Miss Guo, is it really you?"

"I, Guo Junyi, pay my respects to Your Majesty. Long live, long live, long live the Emperor!" Madam Xiao bowed slightly, kneeling on the ground and respectfully saluting.

A series of emotions flashed across the old Emperor's face, his cheeks becoming even more flushed. He coughed violently twice, and Eunuch Gao hurriedly handed him two pills, soothingly saying, "Your Majesty, here is your medicine!"

With a wave of his hand, the Emperor flung the pills away. They bounced on the ground a few times before shattering into pieces.

"I'm not ill. What do I need these pills for?" the Emperor roared. He then glanced at Madam Xiao kneeling on the ground and reached out to help her up.

Madam Xiao's body moved slightly backward, avoiding his hand, and bowed again, "I, Guo Junyi, pay my respects to Your Majesty. Long live, long live, long live the Emperor!"

The old Emperor's hand stopped in mid-air, and he stood there for a moment, his expression changing. After a long pause, he withdrew his hand and sighed, "Miss Guo, please rise! Gao Ping, help Miss Guo up!"

Eunuch Gao moved to assist Miss Guo, and Madam Xiao bowed her head, saying, "Thank you for Your Majesty's grace." She rose gracefully, her face showing a faint smile.

Lin Wanrong observed the Emperor's expression and felt very puzzled. This old Emperor appeared frail and even weak on the outside, but his determination and will were unmatched by anyone. Those who underestimated him would surely suffer greatly. He believed that Prince Cheng must have felt this most acutely. Such a stoic and inscrutable ruler, but seeing Madam Xiao, he revealed such emotions. Could it be that there was something between them? Lin Wanrong's eyes darted between the two, seeing the Emperor's eyes flashing intensely, fixed on Madam Xiao, as if he wanted to devour her. Madam Xiao stood gracefully to one side, her eyes downcast, her face showing a hint of a calm smile, utterly tranquil!

There was an illicit affair! Lin Wanrong slapped his palm, cursing inwardly. No wonder Madam Xiao had remained a widow for so many years, cold as ice to everyone. It turned out she had once been entangled with the Emperor! He knew that Madam Xiao was no ordinary woman, but he never thought she had become involved with the Emperor. Incredible, truly incredible!

"Miss Guo, how have you been these years?" the Emperor looked at Madam Xiao, a glint in his eyes, and said softly, "Twenty years have passed in the blink of an eye! Seeing you now, you are still as stunning as you were back then, while I have grown old and decrepit. Time is truly unforgiving!"

"Thank you for your concern, Your Majesty. I am well," Madam Xiao replied with a bow, her expression extremely calm, showing no sign of any clandestine relationship.

So, there had been an attempt, but no success. It seemed even the Emperor could falter. Lin Wanrong chuckled and then heard the Emperor sigh, "Miss Guo, after twenty years, why does there seem to be a distance between us? I still prefer to hear you call me Mr. Zhao. In the past, we were friends despite our age difference, discussing scholarship, composing poems, and playing with words. Those moments have remained in my eyes, hard to forget even now."

Madam Xiao smiled slightly, as if recalling the years gone by, and shook her head, "In my youthful ignorance, I did not know your true identity, Your Majesty. I hope you will forgive me."

The Emperor forced a smile, "Had I known that Miss Guo would become so distant, I would rather have remained the anonymous Mr. Zhao. Had it not been for the complicated situation in the capital back then, and your honorable father's wish to avoid entanglement, we might have grown much closer—"

"Your Majesty," Madam Xiao interrupted, "I have been married for many years and have never entertained any foolish fantasies. My friendship with Mr. Zhao was based on his extraordinary learning and wisdom, nothing more. Not only with Mr. Zhao, but I also knew the top scholar of the South, Liu Dongsheng, and the famous gentleman of the Southwest, Jia Fan. They were all my friends, and there was never any romantic attachment. If you have misunderstood, I deeply apologize." Madam Xiao's eyes were clear, her words firm. She had been a widow for many years, strictly adhering to the code of conduct for women, maintaining her integrity. Her strong character was well-known in Jinling.

'I can't listen to this anymore. If the old Emperor is rejected, who knows if he'll become furious and punish me?' Lin Wanrong thought, and quickly bowed, "Your Majesty, since you and the Madam are old acquaintances, please take your time and enjoy your conversation. My wife and I will continue our tour of the residence. Please excuse us, we take our leave!"

A flicker of approval appeared in the Emperor's eyes. At least this boy knows when to advance and retreat. Madam Xiao's face showed a hint of urgency, but before she could speak, Lin Wanrong, pulling Qiaoqiao, darted out of the room and into the garden, where he finally breathed a sigh of relief.

Qiaoqiao glanced at him, hesitating to speak. Lin Wanrong smiled, "Little darling, speak your mind."

Qiaoqiao nodded and looked worriedly back at the room, "Big brother, leaving the Madam alone in there like that, it seems, it seems—"

"It seems wrong, is that it?" Lin Wanrong said with a smile.

Qiaoqiao quickly shook her head, anxiously saying, "Big brother, I'm not blaming you. But since the Madam came with us, and the Emperor obviously has designs on her, leaving her alone there, I can't help but feel uneasy!"

Lin Wanrong gently stroked her hair and smiled, "Silly girl, if I left you there as well, would that make you feel better? I think it would make you feel even more uneasy!"

Qiaoqiao bit her red lip and whispered, "But with the Madam alone there, what if, what if something happens—"

"There's no 'what if'," Lin Wanrong said as he took her little hand and walked towards the center of the garden. "The reason the Emperor is the Emperor is that he can endure more than ordinary people. If he wanted to force the issue, even if we were there, we wouldn't be able to help Madam Xiao. It's better to give them space to sort it out directly. Without outsiders present, Madam can speak more freely, and the Emperor won't lose face in front of others. Isn't that better?"

The young girl thought it over carefully, deeply feeling that her big brother was right, so she didn't worry anymore and leisurely strolled with him around the mansion. The grand residence the Emperor had spoken of was indeed as magnificent as described. It covered a vast area, with an extravagant setup, and buildings layered upon each other. There were three large gardens alone. Besides the front and back gardens, there was also a smaller garden within the living quarters reserved for the closest intimates to enjoy. However, this mansion had been unused for many years, and the accumulation of dust was such that it would require thorough cleaning before they could move in.

The two of them wandered from the back door to the front, and upon reaching the front, they were both stunned to find that this place was directly facing the inner courtyard of the imperial palace. Across the way was the moat that protected the Forbidden City, and they could faintly see the guards on the Golden Jade Bridge.

Lin Wanrong turned his head to look at his front gate, and he saw that it was painted in a grand shade of vermillion, with wide horizontal beams, capable of admitting five sedan chairs side by side. Above the door frame, two large characters were hanging—Lin Mansion! Two stone lions, carved from fine rock and as tall as a man, stood on either side, looking very majestic.

"Little darling, what do you think of our home?" Lord Lin asked proudly.

Qiaoqiao nodded, saying, "Big brother, our house is so big! It's two or three times bigger than the mansion of the Eldest Miss' in Jinling!"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I have many people to support, so of course, the mansion has to be larger. The old Emperor is, after all, not completely muddled. Heh heh, what's so great about East Straight Gate Street? I don't care about them at all; our back door opens there. Once you all have babies, I will build a swimming pool in our home, a horse-riding field, and also a great big love-bed—little darling, you've never seen this love-bed, let me explain its functions to you, you can preview it first!"

Qiaoqiao blushed, letting out a small whimper and lowering her head, not daring to speak. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, saying, "It's alright to listen, you'll have to practice in the future—"

He was going on enthusiastically, explaining to Qiaoqiao the "Bowling Buddha" function of the love-bed when his glance swept across the two large mansions on either side of his front gate, each one no smaller than his own. The one on the left had a sign reading "Li Mansion", and the one on the right bore a plaque that said "Xu Mansion".

Although Lord Lin's title of Vice Minister of the Ministry of Personnel was nominal, the Emperor's favor he enjoyed was real. The mansion granted to him was already top-notch in the capital, but these "Li Mansion" and "Xu Mansion" were not smaller, and the imperial favor bestowed upon them could easily be inferred.

Lost in thought, Lin Wanrong was suddenly startled by the sound of the mansion's door on the right swinging open. A young woman stepped out, her radiant face blooming with a smile, cheeks flushed like peach blossoms. She inclined her head slightly toward him.

Lin Wanrong was taken aback and exclaimed, "Miss Xu, what are you doing here?"

Responding with a gentle smile, Miss Xu said, "What a question! This is my home. Where else would I be?"

"Oh my, it turns out we are neighbors with old Xu," Lin Wanrong laughed. "So that's how it is, Miss Xu! From now on, we will be neighbors. Ha ha, I've finally found a place to mooch meals."

Qiaoqiao playfully pinched his wrist, saying, "Big brother, I'm here, aren't I? I'll cook for you every day, alright?"

Miss Xu snorted and said, "Lin San, it's only been a few days, and you've already changed your affections. What's this, not going to be a prince consort anymore?"

Before Lin Wanrong could reply, he saw Eunuch Gao running toward him, calling out, "Master Lin, Master Lin, the Emperor wishes to see you!"

‘See me? Isn't he reminiscing with the Madam?’ Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled, "Eunuch Gao, isn't His Majesty speaking with Miss Guo? Why does he want to see me again?"

Eunuch Gao gestured with his mouth toward something behind him. Lin Wanrong looked and saw Madam Xiao standing behind Eunuch Gao, smiling at him. "I'm touched you still remember me. You ran faster than a rabbit earlier!"

"Oh, well, I didn't want to interrupt your reunion," Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. "Madam, how did your talk with the Emperor go? Did you, uh, make any progress?"

Madam Xiao shot him a charming glance and snorted, "Progress? Only you would think of such nonsense. Mr. Zhao and I are old friends who have not seen each other for years. We were merely chatting. It has nothing to do with anything else."

"Of course, of course. Madam, your loyalty, strength, and integrity are truly exemplary to all of us," Lin Wanrong said, smiling sheepishly.

Miss Xu, suddenly alert, hurried over and exclaimed, "Aunt Guo, Aunt Guo, is that really you?"

Madam Xiao studied her closely and asked, "You are—?"

"I am Zhiqing! Aunt Guo, I am Zhiqing!" Miss Xu said excitedly.

"Zhiqing?!" Madam Xiao exclaimed, grasping her hand. "Are you truly Zhiqing?!"

Miss Xu nodded lightly, and the two embraced tightly, tears streaming down their faces. Miss Xu had lost her mother at a young age, and she had been particularly stubborn. Madam Xiao had taken care of her back then, and their bond was profound. After many years apart, they wept in each other's arms.

Lin Wanrong naturally didn't understand their relationship, nor did he intend to. Admiring these two flower-like women was his immediate desire. Madam Xiao, like a mature begonia, and Xu Zhiqing, like a vibrant hibiscus, were both ripe peaches, and their figures were beyond description. Watching them embrace, Lin San swallowed and suddenly thought of the phrase: true affection "face-to-face."

"Lord Lin, Lord Lin—" A somewhat effeminate voice rang in his ear, and Lin Wanrong, impatiently, said, "Who is it? Don't block my view of the game—!"

"Lord Lin, the Emperor is still waiting for you!" exclaimed Eunuch Gao in a hurry.

"Oh, is that so?" Lord Lin reluctantly shifted his gaze from Miss Xu's chest, only to find her eyes wide open in anger, glaring at him fiercely, apparently aware of his previous actions.

If Lord Lin could be embarrassed, then all the roosters in the world would be laying eggs. He stared back at her unabashedly and laughed a few times, saying, "Miss Xu, please continue. Embrace each other tightly to express true love and affection. Ah, I'm so moved!"

"Despicable, shameless, hateful, lowly!" Miss Xu exclaimed vehemently.

"Zhiqing, who are you talking about?" Madam Xiao, who stood beside Xu Zhiqing, asked upon hearing this.

"Oh, it's nothing! I'm just playing around," Miss Xu replied, a bit embarrassed. "Aunt Guo, where were we in our conversation?"

Eunuch Gao finally managed to drag Lord Lin away, but sighed helplessly in his heart. When the Emperor summoned his ministers, who wasn't terrified and anxious? They would even rush without tying their pockets properly. Why was this Lord Lin so different from the others? The Emperor's discernment truly had a unique perspective.

Eunuch Gao said as they walked, "Lord Lin, I must say, having served the Emperor for decades, I have never seen anyone enjoy such favor as you. His Majesty initially left the palace today to visit the Grand Prime Minister Temple but suddenly thought of the mansion bestowed upon you yesterday. He wanted to have a look, and after inspecting it for quite some time, instructed the craftsmen to renovate it for your residence. His concern for you even makes me, a mere servant, envious!"

So that was the case; no wonder the Emperor had appeared here. 'Xian'er is my wife, and the Emperor is my father-in-law; his kindness to me is only natural, and I've been good to him as well.'

When they reached the front hall, Eunuch Gao pointed to a side room and whispered, "Lord Lin, please go in by yourself; the Emperor is inside."

Upon entering, Lord Lin saw the old Emperor standing with his back to the door, hands clasped behind him, gazing intently at a portrait on the wall. Looking up, Lord Lin recognized the woman in

the painting, clad in a goose-yellow gown, her features finely drawn, an expression of calm on her face. It was a young Madam Xiao.

The old Emperor was indeed a sentimental man. Alas, the gallant King was willing, but the goddess unwilling, truly pitiable. Feeling sympathy for his father-in-law, Lord Lin softly began, "Old man —"

The old Emperor waved his hand, pointing at the woman in the painting, "Lin San, do you recognize her?"

"I do, it's Madam Xiao!"

"Wrong!" the Emperor snorted. "When I knew her, she was not Madam Xiao, she was Miss Guo! Back when the two princes were vying for the throne, if it weren't for stubborn old Guo's self-righteousness, unwilling to get involved, I would have asked for her hand long ago. Junyi would now be my beloved consort, perhaps even bearing several princes for me! Cursed old Guo, so headstrong, harming others and himself. To avoid factional strife, he even resigned his post and secretly betrothed Junyi to another. By the time I learned the truth, she was already a thousand miles away in Jinling. Tell me, isn't he hateful? Isn't he hateful?!!!"

The Emperor slapped the table forcefully, breaking into a series of violent coughs, his voice sternly booming. The momentum was so intense that even Lin Wanrong, who feared neither heaven nor earth, couldn't help but frown. He had had many interactions with the Emperor and was deeply impressed by his inscrutable demeanor. A ruler's emotions were often well-hidden, and this old Emperor was indeed a master of such concealment. Yet, now, he was thunderously angry on account of Madame Xiao, clearly displaying his deep affection for her.

"About this," Lin Wanrong sighed lightly, "Your Majesty, the matter with Miss Guo has already passed. Whether you accept it or not, she is no longer Guo Junyi; she is now Madame Xiao. Even if she is a widow, given her steadfast character, she will not succumb to you."

"She won't? Why won't she? If this were twenty years ago, I was the mighty Emperor of Great Hua, even if Junyi were another man's wife. If I wanted to take her into the palace, who would dare to say no!" The Emperor snorted, his ruddy face turning pale, his breath becoming more and more rapid. "Twenty years ago, twenty years ago—"

He murmured to himself, his eyes suddenly widening, his face showing a ferocious, murderous look. With a fierce sweep of his sleeve, he shattered all the tea pots and cups on the table, roaring: "Zhao Mingcheng, I will never share the same sky with you!"

His expression was terrifying, his coughing intense, his face flushed like fresh blood, and he suddenly slumped weakly in his chair.

‘Damn, he better not die, or there will be no fun at all.’ Lin Wanrong hurried over, supporting him, calling out, "Your Majesty, Old man, how are you, Eunuch Gao, Eunuch Gao—"

"Don't call for him!" The Emperor slowly opened his eyes, his voice weak but filled with undeniable authority.

"Old man, your illness—" Lin Wanrong said anxiously.

"I am not sick!" The Emperor gave a dark smile. "Lin San, look at me! Remember this, I am not ill. Do you understand?"

Looking at his aged and pale face, Lin Wanrong felt an inexplicable pang of discomfort. He turned his head and said, "Old man, since it has come to this, please say less. I know what to say!"

The Emperor glanced at him, snorting, "Lin San, your greatest weakness is that your hand is too soft, your heart not cruel enough. Do you know what power is?"

Without waiting for Lin Wanrong to shake his head, he continued, "Power is what makes you forget your parents, siblings, wife, and children. You will only remember a chair, a chair of supreme authority in the world! For it, you can do anything, dare to do anything! Lin San, ask yourself, can you do it?!"

‘The old Emperor has gone mad, why is he asking me this,’ Lin Wanrong thought, shaking his head, "Old man, I have never considered such things. My position is different from yours, so I won't think about those things. This is what they mean by not concerning oneself with affairs outside one's position."

"Not concerning oneself with affairs outside one's position?" The Emperor looked deeply into his eyes, "If you were in my position, what would you do?"

This topic was somewhat taboo, Lin Wanrong laughed, "Your Majesty is joking. I am content being a minor servant, also holding the position of Vice Minister of the Ministry of Personnel, and I have no other thoughts!"

The Emperor's face gradually softened, and he slowly laughed, saying, "A joke, perhaps it was a joke. Lin San, do you know why I wanted to hang that First Talent Under Heaven plaque on your back door?"

"Perhaps because you saw that my back door was in disrepair, so you decided to give me a heavyweight plaque to guard my backyard," Lord Lin seriously analyzed.

"Guard the backyard?!" The Emperor wished he could press this youngster's head to the ground and stomp on it a few times, but instead of becoming angry, he laughed, "You're the first, Lin San, to dare to use my bestowed plaque to guard your backyard. Did you know that I wouldn't chop off your head?!"

Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "Old man, I feel that there might be some connection between us, perhaps even a familial relationship. What use is there for that plaque to hang on my back door?"

The Emperor shook his head and sighed bitterly, "I am the supreme ruler, and others would empty their hearts and souls to understand even a word of mine. Only you, young man, are so arrogant that I must explain it myself. I bestowed you that plaque in the great hall so that everyone knows you have strength, and I trust you! But hanging that plaque at your back door is to remind you—"

"To remind me to be patient!" Lin Wanrong laughed, "Is it not?!"

The Emperor laughed, nodding, "So you guessed it all along, but you still deceived me. I should chop off your head!"

Lin Wanrong looked at him and sighed softly, "Old man, how comfortable it is to talk to you! Your health is more important than anything else."

There was a hint of moisture in the Emperor's eyes, and he turned his head and exclaimed loudly, "Lin San, do you still have the gold medallion I gave you?"

"Yes." Lin Wanrong laughed, pulling out the gold medallion.

The Emperor snatched it, laughing loudly, "Excellent, excellent! I will reward you with something." He lightly clapped twice, "Fairy Ning—"

A charming figure floated down like a ghost, standing in front of Lin Wanrong. Her absolutely beautiful face left Lord Lin stunned, exclaiming, "Fairy Ning?! Ning Yuxi?!"

"Lin San, I bestow her upon you—" the Emperor said.

Chapter 345 The Greatest Mistake

With a booming sound, Lord Lin felt as if his head was no longer clear. 'Granting the fairy to me? This must be a joke.' Fairy Ning was elegant and pure, like a celestial being exiled to the mortal world. Even glancing at her was a sin. How could the Emperor grant her to him?

He looked towards Ning Yuxi, and saw the fairy's face calm and peaceful. Her exceptionally beautiful cheeks adorned with a faint smile, she looked utterly composed, as if she hadn't heard the Emperor's words at all.

"Your Majesty, you must be jesting with me," Lin Wanrong chuckled, testing the waters. "This Fairy Ning, with her incomparable beauty and outstanding martial arts, is like a deity. Granting her to me, heh heh—" He leered, eyeing Fairy Ning up and down. Dressed in a white robe and gown, her figure perfectly poised, she resembled a pure and sacred white lotus flower.

Ning Yuxi glanced at him, seeing the lascivious gleam in his sly eyes, and snorted lightly without speaking.

"Hahaha—" the Emperor roared with laughter. "Grant the fairy to you? You surely dare to dream, young man. I may rule over the people of the world, but I do not rule over Fairy Ning."

"What did Your Majesty mean by what you said just now?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

The Emperor didn't answer his question but slowly handed over a gold medallion he had retrieved from Lord Lin to Ning Yuxi. Fairy Ning said calmly, "Have you considered it carefully? This is the last gold medallion, and the last of the three promises 'Jade Virtue Fairy Hall' made to you."

The Emperor gently caressed the gold medallion in his hand, a trace of longing in his eyes. "Twenty years. I have kept this last medallion all these years, and today it finally has a use." He turned his head and looked at Lin Wanrong, nodding, "Lin San, come here."

Lin Wanrong hurried over, and the old Emperor grasped his hand. "Years ago, to ascend the throne, I collaborated with 'Jade Virtue Fairy Hall,' promising them generous terms. In return, they were to fulfill three conditions for me, as represented by these three gold medallions in my possession."

"Your Majesty, do you mean this one?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed in wonder. No wonder the medallion seemed so unusual; it turned out to be a token of agreement between the Emperor and Jade Virtue Fairy Hall. The Jade Virtue Fairy Hall had always prided itself on purity, keeping away from worldly affairs. To lower itself to assist the old Emperor in ascending the throne, the benefits must have been significant.

"Indeed, this is it." The Emperor smiled, "The first two conditions were fulfilled by Fairy Ning's master years ago. Only the last one remained unused."

Lin Wanrong shook his head, sighing, "Your Majesty, forgive my insolence as your younger subject. Such a precious item, how could you just throw it away? Last time at the Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou, you so casually gave it to me. If I had sold it for silver, wouldn't you have suffered a great loss?"

The Emperor laughed heartily, "I trust my judgment; the medallion has returned to me, hasn't it?" He handed the gold medallion to Ning Yuxi. The fairy gracefully took it in hand, nodding slightly, "This is the final condition. After this matter is settled, 'Jade Virtue Fairy Hall' and the Imperial Palace will owe each other nothing. I hope Your Majesty will keep your promise and not bring up the past again."

A faint glimmer of moisture shone in the old Emperor's eyes, and after a long silence, he heaved a sigh, "Fairy Ning, I beg a favor of you."

Fairy Ning nodded slightly, and the Emperor continued in a quiet voice, "I hope that you can treat my child kindly. In this life, the one I have wronged the most is her." A fierce glint flashed in the old Emperor's eyes, and he turned and spoke loudly, "Lin San, you reveal your sharp edges, attracting envy easily. I will do a good deed, and grant Fairy Ning to you as your bodyguard. Are you willing?"

'Sweat, after talking so much, it turns out that she was to protect me. This old man was deliberately teasing me.'

"Old man, there are many kinds of bodyguards. For example, gatekeepers, courtyard protectors, and there's one kind called a personal guard. That is, when I sit, she stands; when I sleep, she accompanies me. I wonder to what extent can this golden token let Fairy Ning guard me?" Lin Wanrong glanced at Ning Yuxi, and chuckled lasciviously.

"I will guard your life with all my might." Fairy Ning's eyebrows slightly furrowed, her disgust for this lascivious man unspeakable.

Lin Wanrong pretended not to notice the revulsion on her face, and tittered, "Is that so? Then please stay away from me, Fairy. I have many wives, many activities. If you accidentally see something you shouldn't, I would suffer a great loss."

Fairy Ning gave a faint smile, disdainfully glanced at him, and closed her eyes, ignoring him. Lin Wanrong's biggest flaw was not fearing one's words, but fearing one's silence. As Fairy Ning shut her mouth and said nothing, he was at a loss, feeling entirely disappointed, and turned to the Emperor, "Old man, if you grant the Fairy to me, what about your safety?"

"My safety will be looked after by those in the palace, don't worry about it," the Emperor calmly replied, his face expressionless. "Lin San, do you know why I treat you this way?"

"How would I know if you don't tell me?" Lin Wanrong said helplessly.

The Emperor glanced at Fairy Ning, and Ning Yuxi nodded slightly, "The promise of 'Jade Virtue Fairy Hall' will certainly be kept. Please rest assured, Your Majesty."

She turned and walked towards the door, only to see Lin Wanrong making a face at her, gesturing a shooting motion with his hand, his eyes filled with an indescribable expression, half-smiling yet not quite.

After Fairy Ning left the room, the ever-silent old Emperor's eyes suddenly sparkled, and a fierce killing intent flashed across his face, "Lin San, Ning Yuxi is the top martial artist in the world. Are you afraid of her?"

"Old man, you are mistaken. I, Lin San, fear cats and dogs, but never women," Lin Wanrong giggled, speaking without concern.

"Excellent, excellent." The killing intent in the Emperor's eyes intensified. "Once you have used her up, deploy Divine Machine Unit with all cannons firing, and uproot that 'Jade Virtue Fairy Hall' entirely."

"Uproot?" Lin Wanrong frowned. "Old man, are you worried that—"

The old Emperor glanced at him lightly, "Under heaven, all lands are royal soil. Along its shores, all are royal subjects. I am the Emperor of Great Hua, and I will not allow a 'Jade Virtue Fairy Hall' to exist independently of my realm. Do you understand?"

Lin Wanrong nodded but said nothing. Though Fairy Ning appeared as elegant as a fairy, she was solely devoted to defending the so-called 'Jade Virtue Fairy Hall,' even daring to stand on equal footing with the Emperor. If you didn't wipe her out, who would you wipe out? Bombarding the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall was unnecessary; if he, Lord Lin, bombarded Fairy Ning, everything would be settled. He chuckled lewdly a few times, wiping the saliva from the corner of his mouth, and said, "Old man, you've had Fairy Ning protect me, but what exactly do you want me to do? Is it very dangerous?"

"Not particularly dangerous," the Emperor replied, patting his shoulder. "I just want you to help me deal with someone."

"Deal with someone?" Lin Wanrong's mind raced, understanding that this person must not be simple if the Emperor was taking great pains. Could it be—his face turned pale as he cried, "Prince Cheng?"

"I didn't say that; you did," the Emperor said, eyes slightly closed.

Cold sweat flowed down Lin Wanrong's body. What kind of character was Prince Cheng? Even the cunning and crafty old Emperor had battled with him for over twenty years without success. Sending him now, wasn't it just to make him cannon fodder?

"Emperor, Emperor," Master Lin stammered, "Can I return Fairy Ning to you? I don't want her anymore."

The Emperor's eyes flashed like a tiger's, as he glanced at him, "What's the matter, you're scared? You fear him, yet you don't fear me? Bring someone—"

Eunuch Gao was waiting outside the door and hurriedly said, "Your servant is here!"

"Dong Qiaoqiao, Luo Ning, Xiao Yuruo, Xiao Yushuang," the Emperor stared at Lord Lin, his eyes flickering with a fierce and murderous light as he pronounced each name, "Gao Ping, send fast horses to invite these ladies here. I wish to speak with them—"

"Hold on!" Lin Wanrong waved his hand, his face changing with various shades of displeasure, "Your Majesty, are you trying to force me?"

"Lin San, you're an intelligent man. In this world, what isn't done under coercion?" The Emperor patted his shoulder, his face breaking into a sly smile, "If you handle this matter well, I won't treat you unfairly. You'll receive what you can't even dream of."

Looking at the Emperor's sinister smile, recalling their conversation moments ago—how warm and harmonious it was—Lin Wanrong shook his head and sighed, "Old man, the greatest mistake I've made is treating the Emperor as a friend!"

"You understand now? Very good, very good!" The Emperor slowly nodded, then loudly commanded, "Gao Ping, prepare the carriage to return to the palace."

"By your command!" Eunuch Gao ran off to arrange the imperial carriage. The Emperor was about to leave, pulling open the door latch, but suddenly turned back, smiling, "By the way, Lin San, my dear subject, I heard that tonight, Goryeo, the Turks, and even Prince Cheng have arranged feasts and all have invited you. Is this true?"

'That old man, knowing everything yet still asking me,' Lin Wanrong snorted and replied irritably, "No, I've declined all of them. Tonight, I'll be at home sleeping with my wife."

"You'll first have to protect your wives. This mansion is big enough, and you have more wives than I can count on my ten fingers." The Emperor said with a slight smile, "Lin San, remember this: I'm not making things difficult for you; I'm teaching you. Take care of yourself."

The old Emperor pushed the door open and left. Eunuch Gao hurriedly assisted him onto the small sedan, and the imperial carriage slowly moved away, gradually disappearing from sight.

"Lord Lin, the Emperor is really good to you," Xu Zhiqing said, standing beside Madam Xiao with a smile.

"Yes, the Emperor is indeed very good to me," Lin Wanrong replied with a forced smile, glancing at her, and spoke menacingly, "Maybe I'll plead with him tomorrow, and perhaps he might even grant me Miss Xu's hand in marriage."

"You—" Xu Zhiqing's face turned red, and she was about to argue with him, but Lin Wanrong waved his hand, his face dark, and said, "Miss Xu, I don't have time to tease you today. Qiaoqiao, my darling, come and embrace your big brother; he's been injured."