

Finest 431

Chapter 431 The Princess Returns to the Palace

Qiaoqiao was puzzled, "Big Brother, what seeds have you lost? Is it important?"

Luo Ning and Qingxuan's faces turned red as they both spat lightly in disgust. Ning'er whispered something into Qiaoqiao's ear, causing her to let out a startled cry. Her little face flushed as red as fire, and she shyly exclaimed, "Big Brother is so naughty!"

Miss Xiao grabbed his arm and twisted it hard, sighing slightly, "You always act so strangely, even when negotiating with others you get caught in their trap. Fortunately, it was Seo Jang Geum this time; if it had been someone else, what would have happened?"

"Yes, yes, it would have been terrible—but how do you know it was Seo Jang Geum?" Lin Wanrong sat up straight, his face full of astonishment.

Ning'er snorted, her face full of grievance, "Don't even mention it. Yesterday, when we turned around, we saw you enter Seo Jang Geum's tavern, with lanterns and red candles everywhere. Even a ghost would know what she was up to. In my opinion, we should have charged in and made that Goryeo woman regret her actions. But my elder sister stopped me, saying that if you were meeting Seo Jang Geum for business, and if we truly loved you, we shouldn't restrict you. We waited here all night for you to come back. My sister even refused to rest, insisting on waiting for you."

Lin Wanrong's eyes filled with tears of emotion as he grabbed Qingxuan's little hand, urgently saying, "Silly girl, why are you so foolish? I was ambushed yesterday and couldn't return. You're carrying our baby; how could you stay up all night? Lie down, lie down quickly; you're breaking my heart."

Struggling to rise, he lifted Xiao Qingxuan's delicate body and gently laid her on the bed.

Miss Xiao's face flushed, and she gently nestled in his arms, saying softly, "I'm trained in martial arts, so a sleepless night won't bother me. But you must not be so careless in the future."

Lin Wanrong hastily agreed, thinking to himself that besides Seo Jang Geum, there was likely no one else who would dare to drug him.

"My Dear," Miss Xiao pressed her cheek to his chest, softly saying, "Do you blame me for secretly following you, monitoring you like that?"

"How could I?" Lin Wanrong stroked her hair like a cloud, chuckling, "Having a fierce wife is a blessing in life. I can hardly contain my joy!"

"You're annoying." Miss Xiao blushed and playfully punched his chest, "I'm not a fierce wife." She sighed wistfully, "I grew up in the Sacred Hall, learning to live a life of purity and detachment. I thought I would live that way my whole life, but then I met you, the source of my troubles, and you ruined my years of quiet cultivation. Since becoming your wife, I've become more greedy and irritable, worrying about whether you are warm and well-fed, and even more worried about you attracting other young ladies, creating unmanageable trouble. I don't know what happened, but after meeting you, I'm no longer the person I was."

Miss Xiao lowered her head, gently shaking it, her eyes wandering, seemingly unable to understand her own behavior.

Lin Wanrong was all smiles, embracing her and kissing her stunning cheek, laughing, "This is jealousy, a sign of love to the utmost degree. As they say, hitting is affection, scolding is love, and kicking with the foot is love at its peak! Qingxuan, you are a celestial being who has taken a fancy to the mortal world, naturally experiencing all human emotions and desires. Ah, what virtue or ability do I have to be favored by a celestial being?"

Xiao Qingxuan chuckled and shot him a coquettish glance, "What celestial's favor? You're just that charming. Jealousy is one of the seven emotions, if I become a jealous and shrewish wife, wouldn't you have to avoid me?"

"How could I?" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. "We've overcome so many obstacles, even dismantled that Hall, to finally reunite as a family. These good days have not come easily, and I must cherish them."

Thinking about how he had attacked the fairy hall for her, unafraid of confronting all the scholars in the world, Miss Xiao felt a warm sensation in her heart, her eyes moistened, as she snuggled into his arms, "My lord, I am a woman, and jealousy is natural for me, but I understand the bigger picture. Your character seems naughty but is indeed sincere and passionate, and this makes you greatly attractive to us women. Just look at all the misses who have had contact with you, which one doesn't harbor some thoughts about you?"

Luo Ning began counting on her fingers, excluding the three of them, there were Eldest Miss Xiao, Qin Xian'er, Xu Zhiqing, and even the young palace maid who had spent the spring night with him. Truly, every one of them had been in some way involved with him.

Lin Wanrong broke into a sweat and laughed dryly, "Qingxuan, you know, I was completely passive, just waiting for an attack. If there's anyone to blame, it's that my charm is too great."

"Shameless!" Xiao Qingxuan laughed and lightly hit his chest, "Though you're not proactive, your nature is the natural nemesis to us women. Anyone who meets you cannot help but be moved, I've suffered this misfortune since meeting you."

She giggled shyly and thought back to their first meeting in Jinling, such a warm scene, her heart felt as warm as the bright sun.

Recalling their leisurely evenings in his little nest in Jinling's Xiao family, talking with Qingxuan, how free and easy they were, Lin Wanrong was deeply touched. He whispered into her ear, "When we have time, let's go back to Jinling and live in that little house for a night, fulfilling our previous wishes. What do you think?"

Xiao Qingxuan looked at him with shy joy, her face flushed, and she gently nodded. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, filled with triumph.

"My Dear, though I may be jealous, I'm not a shrew," Miss Xiao sighed and continued, "If there's a woman who truly and sincerely likes you, and you both share mutual affection, not only will I not object, I'll even personally prepare the betrothal gifts and go to her door, seeking her hand in marriage for you, bringing her into the Lin family's threshold."

Qingxuan was truly virtuous. Lin Wanrong was deeply moved and took her hand, "Wife, you are so good to me."

Xiao Qingxuan's tone shifted, "But governing a nation might be easy, managing a family is hard. You work hard outside, and the management of the household depends entirely on us sisters, as your support. If the sisters are united, our Lin family will naturally prosper, advancing rapidly. But on the other hand, if an impure-hearted woman enters the family, leading to discord and petty strife, it could create misunderstandings and ruin your important matters, which would be a grave mistake. I love you, My Dear, and I love everything you love. The women you fancy, Qingxuan will regard as sisters. There is just one thing, Qingxuan asks My Dear to promise."

Miss Xiao was sensible and sincere in her words, Lin Wanrong nodded continuously, "Qingxuan, whatever you want, just say it!"

Xiao Qingxuan gently caressed his cheek, her voice tender, "Any woman you fancy, you must first tell us sisters. We sisters will personally investigate her, and if she is virtuous and beautiful, without you saying, I will seek her out for you. But if she's unvirtuous, stirring up trouble, even if you scold me, I will never let her enter the door, never allow her to ruin the customs of our Lin family."

Xiao Qingxuan's expression was serious, her words genuine. With her elegant and noble temperament, calm and uncontentious character, if any woman could not get along with Miss Xiao, then that woman was certainly not worth befriending.

Lin Wanrong nodded, 'The girls I know, which one of them isn't virtuous and beautiful? To discard the dross and select the essence has always been my principle. Without Qingxuan saying, I would do so anyway.' Lin Wanrong nodded and laughed, "Of course, you must trust your husband's judgment. Qiaoqiao, Ning'er, and my little fairy Qingxuan, aren't they all top-class girls?"

Luo Ning snorted, "What about that Goryeo palace maid? She used drugs on my husband. Is she a good girl too? I think she's a villainess. Though, I must admit, the eye shadow and mascara she sent me are quite good!"

Lin Wanrong grimaced, baring his teeth at Luo Ning, who was unafraid of him. She poked him in the waist with her little finger, leaned into his ear, and giggled, "Judging by the skin of this Seo Jang Geum, she must feel soft as jade, and her figure isn't bad either. Too bad, my lord, you missed the opportunity."

Seeing Ning'er teasing with Her Dear, Miss Xiao shook her head with a smile, "Ning'er, don't spoil him like this. When the day comes that he goes to propose to another lady, you will be too late to cry."

The possibility was significant, let alone the issues with Eldest Miss and Second Miss, and that quirky Xian'er. He didn't know how Qingxuan would react once she found out Xian'er was her half-sister. However, the rules set by Miss Xiao were far more lenient than Lin Wanrong had anticipated, a thousand times more relaxed. He sighed with emotion, gently kissed her cloud-like hair, and asked, "Qingxuan, if I truly were to marry another lady, would you be upset?"

Miss Xiao's pretty face pressed against his chest, feeling a sourness in her heart, softly said, "A little!" After saying it, she felt unsatisfied, her eyes misty, and she lightly pounded his chest with her fist, "Yes, a little, you villain!"

Lin Wanrong heard her with joy, yet felt a twinge of heartache, and hugged her supple body, chuckling, "Don't worry, from now on I'll rest in your room whenever I can—"

Xiao Qingxuan startled, her heart sweet and her face blushing, "How can that be? How can you favor me over the others? It will make it hard for me among the sisters."

Lin Wanrong laughed playfully, "Don't panic, I haven't finished yet. I'll call Qiaoqiao, Ning'er, and the others, and we'll all rest together, sharing one big quilt, spreading the affection evenly, isn't that a solution?"

"Naughty!" Miss Xiao's body felt as if it was on fire, her delicate finger pointing at his forehead, "You never take things seriously, always teasing us women."

"This is no mere jest!" Master Lin said with utmost seriousness, "This matter concerns the unity and great cause of the Lin family, and we must not take it lightly!"

Xiao Qingxuan, being the chief wife of the Lin family and always considering the unity of the household as her duty, listened to his solemn words and hastily asked, "How does it concern unity?"

Slowly caressing her flawless little belly, the silky, jade-like touch was intoxicating, "My little fairy, think about it. We are all one family. Besides you being my dear big wife, the others are my dear little wives, all of them taking pride in serving their husband well. What's there to be shy about? First, we share a bed, then we share our hearts. This is the best way to achieve unity!"

Miss Xiao's face turned bright red, and she spat lightly, "You scoundrel, you are merely scheming to tease us, but you speak so grandly. I won't listen to your instigation. Qiaoqiao, Ning'er, come here —"

Luo Ning tossed her embroidered shoe and crawled onto the bed. Leaning against her sister and sitting by the bedside, Qiaoqiao sat down, and the three women huddled close together. Xiao Qingxuan reached out her small hands, grabbed Qiaoqiao with her right and Luo Ning with her left, and smiled sweetly at Lin Wanrong, "My husband, we are one family, intimate and united, and we must not be suspicious of each other. Let's not become a laughingstock."

She leaned forward, her cheeks slightly flushed, and pecked My Dear's lips. Luo Ning and Qiaoqiao followed suit, each kissing him to express their determination.

Thinking of Miss Xiao's identity, yet treating him with such genuine affection, and then seeing the three flower-like faces before him, a warm and charming atmosphere welled up in his heart. This was the feeling of home. Lin Wanrong was moved, opened his broad arms, and embraced all three, "My wives, you treat me too well. I must strive to bring more women back for you to review—"

"Eh?!" The three women looked up together.

"Oh, I mean to fetch water and pour tea! Just buying a few maids, my wives, please don't misunderstand." Lin Wanrong wiped his cold sweat!

"You and your tricks!" Miss Xiao gave him a glance, "We've already set the rules. My sisters and I are not jealous. As long as she's a virtuous girl, marrying into the Lin family, you'll have your advantage!"

Master Lin was all smiles, "Oh, not at all, I've never been good at taking advantage. Qingxuan, you know me."

The three wives simply filtered his words, and Xiao Qingxuan suddenly sighed, "Everything else is fine, but this Goryeo palace maid has some schemes. I'm afraid she'll be hard to deal with."

Luo Ning raised her eyebrows and snorted, "She dares to use foul means against my husband; for this alone, she must not enter the Lin family's threshold."

This Seo Jang Geum had incurred everyone's wrath, and Lin Wanrong couldn't get a word in. Miss Xiao shook her head, "What I'm worried about is not whether or not she can enter the Lin family's door, but what she was trying to achieve last night. My Dear, you have had deep interactions with this palace maid. In your view, what was her intent last night?"

Lin Wanrong spread his hands, his face distressed, "Wife, I'm the victim. How can I judge the perpetrator's thoughts? She must have seen your husband's purity and goodness, and his handsome appearance, and harbored evil intentions."

Miss Xiao sighed, "If it was a sudden impulse, that would be one thing. I'm afraid she had plotted it all along, thinking of taking My Dear's essence to bear offspring—"

"No way?!" Lin Wanrong jumped up, "You're worried she's carrying my child? Just once, how could this be possible?!"

What was impossible about that? Miss Xiao's face turned bright red, and she glared at him, clearly annoyed.

Lin Wanrong quickly closed his mouth, knowing that his fiery energy was capable of anything. The very presence of Qingxuan was proof.

"If that really is the case, then it would be quite troublesome. The bloodline of my Lin family falling into a foreign land, and if it were to be abused..." Xiao Qingxuan shook her head and sighed, unable to finish her sentence.

The consequences were that serious? Lin Wanrong was stunned for a moment. It was just a one-night affair; hadn't the little palace girl taken any precautions?

"Don't worry too much. These are just my speculations," Xiao Qingxuan gently comforted him. "Perhaps she truly fell for you, and merely sought pleasure for one night before leaving."

Hopefully that was the case, Lin Wanrong thought, half crying and half laughing. If they really had created a child, that would be the century's biggest joke.

Qiaoqiao, listening with endless longing, blushed and mustered the courage to whisper in his ear, "Big brother, I also want to have a baby."

Lin Wanrong patted her shoulder, smiling gently, "My little darling, my seeds were stolen today. Let me replenish overnight, and tomorrow we'll sow the spring fields together."

They chatted for a while, and the sky gradually brightened. Xiao Qingxuan had not slept all night. Lin Wanrong, feeling sorry for his wife and child, insisted that she lie down, but Luo Ning shook her head, "Big brother, I'm afraid we don't have time. The palanquin from the palace will be arriving soon."

"The palanquin from the palace?" Lin Wanrong was puzzled, "What are they coming for?"

Xiao Qingxuan took his hand, tears in her eyes, "My Dear, the Emperor has issued a decree to summon me back to the palace to reunite and inter my mother's remains in the imperial tomb. As a daughter, how can I not fulfill my filial duty?"

Lin Wanrong suddenly remembered the Emperor's decree from yesterday. As a child, it was natural to show filial piety to parents. He hurriedly reassured, "I will accompany you to the palace. It just so happens that the terms I discussed with Seo Jang Geum yesterday need to be presented to the Emperor."

With her husband accompanying her, Xiao Qingxuan felt greatly relieved. Lin Wanrong took out the terms they had agreed upon the day before and enjoyed them with his wives. Xiao Qingxuan, a phoenix among humans, glanced at the document and nodded with emotion, "My father has been on the throne for over twenty years, but due to various reasons, he never expanded the territory. This is his biggest regret. I never expected that, in his later years, you would present him with such a grand gift, my husband. Our great nation has been founded for hundreds of years, and my father has become the first emperor to expand the territory. My love, on behalf of my father, thank you."

"Why be so formal? We are all family!" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, tossing the imperial edict commanding him to seduce women into the corner. Qingxuan was so understanding that this plaything was useless now.

When the palanquin from the palace arrived, Lin Wanrong was taken aback. The procession was massive, with red-robed eunuchs and colorful palace maids closely following. There were thousands of them, each respectfully holding fine silk, gold plates, and jade utensils. Fifty phoenix sedans and over a hundred carriages lined up from the gate of the Lin mansion, extending all the way to West Straight Street.

"By the grace of Heaven, the Emperor decrees: I have a daughter, named Chuyun, who has been wandering outside the palace for over twenty years. Loyal and righteous, she has fulfilled her duties, maintaining the stability and well-being of the great nation of Great Hua. Now that all is settled, I hereby grant fifty phoenix carriages and a hundred horse-drawn carriages to welcome the princess back to the palace! All people along the way shall kneel and worship! Be it so!"

After announcing the imperial edict, Gao Ping was the first to kneel on the ground, lifting the yellow silk edict above his head, and loudly chanting, "Welcome Princess Chuyun!"

"Welcome Princess Chuyun!" Thousands of eunuchs and palace maidens knelt to the ground, chanting in unison.

Luo Ning and Qiaoqiao had already assisted Miss Xiao, known as Xiao Qingxuan, in dressing properly. Dressed in a phoenix crown and adorned in yellow silk, her face was as lovely as a lotus, her body as graceful as a willow. Lin Wanrong was delighted, thinking, 'My wife indeed is the epitome of heavenly beauty.'

As the unrivaled delicate beauty of Great Hua, Xiao Qingxuan naturally possessed an air of elegance and nobility. She took the imperial edict and smiled gently, saying in a melodious voice, "You may all rise."

"Thank you, Princess!" The crowd bowed again before rising.

"Your servant, following the Emperor's wishes, has come to escort the Princess back to the palace. The carriages are prepared; I respectfully ask the Princess to board," Gao Ping sang in a high-pitched voice, bowing deeply.

Xiao Qingxuan nodded, "Thank you, Eunuch Gao, I will board now." She turned and took Lin Wanrong's hand, whispering, "My Dear, let us go back to the palace together."

Although Lin Wanrong had shared many intimate moments with Princess Chuyun, according to Great Hua's customs, since the Emperor had not yet officially granted them marriage, he was not yet entitled to be called a prince consort. Seeing the princess speaking, Gao Ping saluted him, "Please, Lord Lin, accompany the Princess."

Lin Wanrong had no intention of being polite; he pulled Xiao Qingxuan into the carriage, drew the curtains, and amidst the sound of gongs and drums, the phoenix carriage set off, slowly moving toward the East Straight Street. The return of Princess Chuyun, the last bloodline of the Empress, the undisputed most delicate beauty of the world, caused an uproar that one could easily imagine. The procession specifically started from East Straight Street, weaving through streets and lanes, moving along the main road of the capital, celebrating with the people.

"Princess Chuyun, Princess Chuyun—" The sides of the road were packed tightly; as the phoenix carriage passed, everyone knelt in fearful reverence. Xiao Qingxuan lifted the curtain, smiling and waving to the crowd. Seeing her celestial beauty, the crowd surged like a tidal wave, the shouts resounding continuously, reaching a peak of enthusiasm.

Lin Wanrong lay lazily on the couch, taking her little hand and smiling, "My dear wife, you are now with child, do not tire yourself too much. Come rest in my arms, let me massage you."

Miss Xiao was filled with emotion, shaking her head and sighing, "These are the ordinary people of my Great Hua, hardworking and simple. If not for the invasion of foreign enemies, they could have lived a wealthy and peaceful life. It's the wild ambitions of the nomads, coveting our rich land, attacking our borders, that have plunged our people into suffering, truly detestable."

"Though the nomads are hateful," Lin Wanrong laughed, "as the saying goes, flies do not land on a seamless egg. Our Great Hua, prosperous for many years, full of peace and neglectful of defense, gave the nomads an opportunity. Frankly speaking, we have abandoned our martial spirit; the Emperor himself should reflect on this." Lin Wanrong chuckled.

"You dare to suggest my Imperial Father should reflect on himself?! Speaking such irresponsible words." Miss Xiao, her face flushed, huffed and pounced into his arms, lightly beating his chest. Outside, the cheers of ten thousand people filled the air, but inside the carriage, only the laughter of the husband and wife resounded, creating an atmosphere that was both extraordinary and intimate.

"My Dear, you, you are so naughty!" After the two of them had frolicked for a while, Xiao Qingxuan felt something hard pressing against her, and her cheeks instantly turned a shade of red, pretending to strike him.

"This, I really didn't mean for it to happen." Lin Wanrong wore a face of worry and complained, "My wife is as beautiful as a fairy. If I didn't react in some way, wouldn't I become a eunuch?"

"You rascal!" Miss Xiao's face turned bright red, feeling both sweet and embarrassed, glaring at him with annoyance, her captivating charm almost tearing Lin Wanrong's heart out.

"Wife, this carriage of yours is quite spacious, haha." Lin Wanrong grinned, taking Xiao Qingxuan's small hand, lightly scratching it a few times. There was a subtle, unspoken lustful undertone in his voice.

Although Xiao Qingxuan usually possessed a calm and fairy-like temperament, being pregnant for five months was a time when a woman's desires could easily be aroused. Having her hand held and lightly scratched by her husband, she felt her body weaken, her heart pounding, "My Lord, what are you going to do?"

Lin Wanrong blinked and chuckled, "My love, your question is good. Here and now, there are only the two of us. You play the princess, so naturally, I must play the prince consort."

Miss Xiao cried out in surprise, her face suddenly turning a bright red. Though she had long known her husband to be lawless and unruly, she never thought he would dare make such a request, wanting to act as the prince consort on this carriage in full view of the public. This scoundrel!

Lin Wanrong grabbed her small hand, blew a breath by her sparkling ear, and Xiao Qingxuan's body went limp, unable to struggle. She hurriedly closed her eyes, her long eyelashes quivering slightly, flustered in her heart, "My Dear, you, you wicked thing—"

Miss Xiao's hesitant demeanor only excited Lin Wanrong further. Making love with one's wife was a natural right. He reached into Xiao Qingxuan's dress, giving her perky jade breasts a gentle flick. Miss Xiao cried out, her breath sweet, "My Dear, no, it's not right! You, you smell like someone else!"

Impossible, at this moment she was still concerned about this? Lin Wanrong immediately wilted. Seeing his downcast face, Miss Xiao chuckled, covering her lips, "That's what you get for enjoying yourself so much last night."

"Where was I enjoying myself last night? That was a night of humiliation for me. From my body to my soul, I was in utter agony," he said with a crying face.

Miss Xiao glanced at him, shyly lowering her head, "If it were Ning'er or Qiaoqiao, and you were to indulge with them before seeking my affection, I wouldn't mind. Sisters from the same family, sharing even in wild indulgence. But that Goryeo palace maid is not of our Lin family, and after a night of passion with her, you reek of her scent. If you seek my love afterward, I won't pick up her discarded crumbs. If you don't wash yourself clean, don't touch me."

'Qingxuan has this obsession with cleanliness?' Lin Wanrong's heart ached with an agony he could not voice. Turning his head and pondering Miss Xiao's words, he found them to be profoundly insightful. She was concerned that Seo Jang Geum was not officially his wife, but seemed not to mind Qiaoqiao and Ning'er. Did this mean—Lin Wanrong was overjoyed. Though today's plan had failed, there was great hope for the future!

Seeing her husband deep in thought and assuming he was upset, Miss Xiao felt a little nervous and timidly grabbed his hand, saying, "My Dear, don't be angry. After you wash up, I'll let you do whatever you want, even in this carriage—oh, I'm so embarrassed, you naughty man!" Miss Xiao was so ashamed that she covered her cheeks and buried her face in his chest, not daring to speak.

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, embracing her soft and boneless body, and chuckled lewdly, "Qingxuan, you underestimate your husband. Do you think I'm driven by my lower half? You're

utterly wrong. I'll tell you the truth: my upper half is for thinking, while my lower half is for supporting that thinking!"

Hearing his lewd laughter, Miss Xiao knew she'd been tricked and whimpered twice in his arms, not letting him off. The couple playfully cuddled together, with Lin Wanrong telling tales about monks beating drums and parrots drinking water. Miss Xiao was shy and coy, feeling that years of refinement had been undone by her time with her husband, as if she was falling step by step from heaven to hell. They exchanged sweet nothings and odd little affections, overturning Miss Xiao's traditional thinking, and she was momentarily enthralled and unable to pull away.

The grand procession traveled through the streets, and it was nearly noon before entering the Forbidden City, the entire path covered in red carpet, very festive. As soon as they entered the palace gates, little yellow-clad eunuchs constantly sang praises, reporting the princess's position. Beyond the middle gate, they saw a hundred officials lined up before the Hall of Central Harmony, the Emperor's dragon throne hanging high, the Emperor was welcoming the princess personally!

"Stop, stop quickly!" Xiao Qingxuan urgently commanded, stepping down from the phoenix carriage with Lin Wanrong. The couple teased each other, Miss Xiao's blush still lingering. As they walked, they were graceful and full of charm. She hurriedly took two steps and saw the Emperor on the dragon throne smiling at her. Tears welled in Miss Xiao's eyes, and she knelt on the ground, "Your daughter, appearing from the clouds, greets Father Emperor."

Lin Wanrong felt heartbroken, 'My wife is five months pregnant, how can she kneel? Don't you know to help her, Father-in-law?' The old Emperor naturally knew, and Miss Xiao was held up as she was about to bend down. "My child, rise."

Xiao Qingxuan raised her head to see wrinkles across her father's face, increasingly old, the frost at his temples blooming, no longer his youthful self. She could no longer bear it and wept, throwing herself into the Emperor's arms, "Father Emperor, your daughter has returned."

The old Emperor gently patted Xiao Qingxuan's shoulder, tears streaming down uncontrollably, "Chuyun, you have returned, good, very good! I am very pleased, very pleased!" He released his grip and proudly said to the officials behind him, "My ministers, this is my Princess Chuyun, you have all seen her."

"We, your humble servants, greet Princess Chuyun!" All the officials bowed in unison. Only Prince Cheng gave a slight bow, his face very unhappy.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please, no need for such ceremony," Xiao Qingxuan wiped her tears, graciously speaking, "You all are the backbone of my great nation, supporting my father the Emperor for years, and achieving extraordinary accomplishments for our country. Princess Chuyun thanks you all." The crowd hurriedly responded with humble denials. The atmosphere was lively for a moment.

The old Emperor was in high spirits, leading Princess Chuyun through the ranks of officials, introducing her to the pillars of the court. The Emperor had no sons, only three daughters, and among them, Chuyun, who had been relegated and yet remained graceful and dignified, was undoubtedly his favorite. The ministers all had their thoughts, and they hurriedly paid their respects and good wishes to the princess, hoping to leave a good impression in her presence.

"This is your Uncle, Prince Cheng," the Emperor said to Xiao Qingxuan with a smile. "He is the left arm and right leg of our great nation, holding up half of the country."

Prince Cheng quickly bowed, "Your Majesty exaggerates, I don't deserve such praise. The princess's return has resolved a major concern for you; I extend my congratulations to Your Majesty."

"Mutual joy, mutual joy," the Emperor laughed twice. Xiao Qingxuan knew Prince Cheng's true nature and merely nodded without speaking.

Seeing that the Emperor was busy chatting with Qingxuan and the others, and not paying attention to himself, Lin Wanrong, who had nothing to do, was ignored by everyone. Although his alighting from the princess's carriage was not in accordance with etiquette, since the Emperor had not questioned it, the officials pretended not to see it.

"Congratulations, little brother! I offer my felicitations!" The voice of Xu Wei sounded in Lin Wanrong's ear, his face full of mysterious smiles.

"Mr. Xu, don't joke around. What do I have to celebrate?" Lin Wanrong smiled, thinking of Xu Zhiqing, and how she had claimed she no longer recognized Lin San. He wondered whether it was said in anger or sincerity.

Xu Wei looked around and lowered his voice mysteriously, "So the Miss Qingxuan you've been seeking is indeed our great nation's Princess Chuyun. In a few days, this old man will have to call you the prince consort. Isn't this a joyous matter?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, thinking to himself that as long as he agreed, Xu would likely have to call him a son-in-law instead.

"Mr. Xu, have you seen Miss Zhiqing today? Was there anything unusual about her?" Lin Wanrong thought for a long time before cautiously phrasing his question.

"I saw her, nothing unusual. I even saw her laughing with her aunt at breakfast," Old Xu was surprised, "What's wrong, did something happen to Zhiqing?"

No abnormalities? Lord Lin thought, that itself was the biggest abnormality. He whispered, "Mr. Xu, think carefully, has Miss Xu said or done anything strange recently?"

"Strange words or actions?" Old Xu frowned, thought for a while, and slowly shook his head, "I haven't seen anything different, except..."

"Except what?" Lin Wanrong asked.

Xu Wei smiled, "Recently, I don't know why, but Zhiqing has raised two big dogs, training them to run and fetch all day. She even named them. Her aunt said, it seems like the names are something like..." He looked at Lin Wanrong and chuckled a few times, abruptly stopping himself.

Lin Wanrong naturally knew what Miss Xu's dogs were named and laughed heartily, saying, "So Miss Xu enjoys playing with pets; that's quite interesting. Tomorrow I might keep some wolves for fun; perhaps they could even become kin with your family's dogs and produce some wolf-dogs!"

Xu Wei, unaware of the relationship between Lin Wanrong and Xu Zhiqing, assumed Lord Lin was joking with him, and chuckled a few times before his expression became serious: "Enough about Zhiqing. Little brother, there's something I need to tell you, but please don't get angry."

"What could possibly make me angry?" Lin Wanrong shook his head with a smile.

Xu Wei sighed softly, "The Emperor has released Lu Dongzan and Ashile!"

"Who, who did you say?" Lin Wanrong's eyes widened.

Xu Wei smiled bitterly with a sense of helplessness, "The Turkic Khaganate National Advisor Lu Dongzan and the envoy Ashile. The Emperor issued a decree yesterday proclaiming their crimes to the world, and at the same time sent them back. They have already left for their land overnight."

"Foolish!" Lin Wanrong slapped his thigh, visibly annoyed, "These two were not easy to capture, how could they be released so easily? Especially that National Advisor Lu Dongzan, he is a very difficult person to deal with; I almost fell into his trap last time."

His voice was loud, and people around were turning to look. Xu Wei, scared, quickly pulled him back, "Little brother Lin, please keep your voice down. You are the Emperor's son-in-law, not fearing the loss of your head, but this old man still wants to live for a few more years."

Lin Wanrong suppressed his irritation and snorted, "Why did the old man release them? Doesn't he know this is like letting the tiger return to the mountain? Lu Dongzan is the National Advisor of Turkic Khaganate, with a single thought he could send tens of thousands of our brothers to their death. How could he be released so easily?"

"The Emperor is certainly aware of all this," Xu Wei explained. "But as the old saying goes, 'When two countries go to war, do not cut off their envoys.' Even without considering how dangerous Lu Dongzan is, the mere act of capturing the Turkic delegation could become a point of criticism. If they want to steal our cannons and take them back, we can catch them, but what will outsiders think? People can be fearful. They will only believe that we deliberately framed them, turning a white cat into a black cat. Our interactions with other countries would become passive, as no one would trust us. They would see us as treacherous, for capturing the special envoy sent by the Turks. The Emperor found himself in a difficult situation, and after consulting with the cabinet ministers, he decided to issue a reprimand and send them back. Because diplomatic matters are complex, I did not oppose it."

"Diplomatic matters are complex?" Lin Wanrong flicked his sleeve, seething with anger, "My dear Mr. Xu, you are confused. Diplomacy is the simplest thing; it boils down to two words: strength! Strength determines everything! Why are you all so concerned about how other countries view our great nation? Is the opinion of other countries more important than the safety of our land and our people? When we easily conquered Goryeo, did Goryeo have any diplomacy to speak of? Though alliances and strategies matter, strength is what really counts. A weak country has no diplomacy. If our nation is strong, we don't need diplomacy, and all nations will come to pay tribute. If our nation is weak, you can shout about diplomacy a thousand times, and you will only be met with scorn."

He wore a dark expression with cold eyebrows, and his imposing demeanor was intimidating. Even Xu Wei, who was accustomed to grand scenes, was taken aback. He weakly opened his mouth and

said in a soft voice, "Does the strength or weakness of our country mean that we should disregard even diplomatic etiquette?"

"Diplomatic etiquette?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, laughing uproariously, "Mr. Xu, you saw with your own eyes how the Turkic Khaganate special envoy Ashile behaved like a ruffian in our great imperial golden hall. Did he ever talk to you about etiquette? When he dismantled our cannons and secretly transported them back, did he talk to you about etiquette then? Why is it that when it comes to our great nation, you want to speak to him about etiquette? This code of conduct you speak of is a product of the moderate path our great nation has adhered to for many years. We, the people of our great nation, can play by those rules, but the Turks are not our people; they don't follow the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, they don't speak of moderation. These etiquettes you value are worthless in their eyes. How can you impose your own standards on others? How many young lives must our great nation sacrifice, how many beautiful families must be torn apart, all for the sake of this so-called diplomatic etiquette? My dear Mr. Xu, I don't know what to say to you!"

Lin Wanrong's heart ached with fury. Gathering all his strength, he kicked heavily at the small sedan chair beside him. With a crash, the chair wobbled a few times and then collapsed with a thunderous noise.

Chapter 432 Trust Lin San or the Imperial Edict?

Xu Wei remained silent, as quiet as a winter cicada. Lin San's words were intense, but they carried an uncommon sense of reason. Releasing Ashile and Lu Dongzan, he had once thought it was a righteous act, dispelling the rumors of other countries and proving the innocence of the Great Hua Empire, all perfectly executed.

But Lin San's words awakened him to regret and shock: Why should we care so much about how others view our Great Hua? Is saving face truly more important than the rise and fall of the country and the safety of the people?

"Mr. Xu, I am a man without great ambition," Lin Wanrong sighed slightly, feeling a sense of helplessness in his heart, "But I am also a citizen of Great Hua. I do not wish to see anything happen that endangers our people and compatriots. Sometimes I think, I would rather bear more blame, be scolded as shameless and despicable, than let others harm my simple-minded brethren. But what have we done—"

Xu Wei shook his head in shame: "Little brother, your words have awakened a dreamer. In the matter of Lu Dongzan, I truly made a mistake, failing to stop the Emperor in time. It's too late to say anything now, I don't know what can be done to remedy it?"

"How long have Lu Dongzan and Ashile been gone?" Lin Wanrong asked.

Xu Wei understood his meaning and smiled bitterly: "The imperial edict was issued yesterday evening, and the Turkic horses can travel a thousand miles in a day. By now, they must be seven or eight hundred miles away; it's too late for us to take any action."

Lin Wanrong was helpless and didn't know what to say. Even Xu Wei, the most learned man in the world, had made a mistake on this matter. Who else could Great Hua rely on? A deep sense of fatigue suddenly welled up in his heart; he felt drained and lost all his spirited appearance, longing to go home and sleep, forgetting these vexing matters.

He pulled out the treaty signed with Seo Jang Geum and handed it to Xu Wei, saying indifferently: "Mr. Xu, you give this to the Emperor. The matter with Goryeo has been settled. The recruiting in the northeast must be expedited. Don't wait until the troops are full; best to set off immediately, enter Goryeo directly, giving the Goryeo king no time to rest or prepare, and also effectively deter the Dongyin."

Xu Wei took the treaty, quickly glanced at it, his expression both excited and ashamed: "Little brother Lin, is this true? You truly are a divine man!"

Lin Wanrong nodded and smiled bitterly: "I have done what I can. As for whether we can firmly hold Goryeo, it depends on you."

The sound of the scattered sedan had already alerted the ministers. The Emperor's eyes swept over, loudly asking: "Minister Xu, what happened?"

"Congratulations, Your Majesty, congratulations," Xu Wei, tears streaming down his old face, ran a few steps and presented the treaty: "Little brother Lin has signed a treaty with Goryeo. In the expansion of the Great Hua's territory over the past hundred years, our Emperor is the first. Long live the Emperor. Long live, long live!"

"Is this true?!" The Emperor's face lit up with joy, and without waiting for the eunuch to act, he strode forward, grabbed the paper from Xu Wei's hand, and began to read it, his hands slightly trembling.

Li Tai asked anxiously: "Brother Xu, do you mean, we've come to terms with Goryeo?"

"Indeed, indeed!" Xu Wei nodded hastily, his smile radiant. "The King of Goryeo has agreed to Little brother Lin's proposal, and both sides have signed the treaty, incorporating Goryeo into the Great Hua system. Our Great Hua's territory will expand several hundred li to the northeast. This is a great joy for the country and the people."

Li Tai's face broke into a smile. As a military general, he had a deeper understanding of territorial matters. A thin piece of paper had pushed the boundary of the Great Hua nation forward by several hundred li. How could this not bring joy?

Back during the debates in the Golden Hall, all the princes and ministers were present when Lin San made his proposal. Everyone thought it was absurd, but no one had expected that within a few short days, the dream had come true, incorporating Goryeo into the Great Hua map. The ministers were abuzz with discussion, filled with admiration and awe. Only Prince Cheng looked displeased, coldly snorting without a word.

The Emperor, looking at the text on the paper, could not hide his joy. "Good, good, today is truly a blessing from heaven. The princess has returned to the palace, Goryeo has come to the court, the might of Great Hua has spread far and wide. Send the decree for a feast in the Imperial Garden tonight. I want to drink heartily with all my ministers, to celebrate this national joy."

The ministers all congratulated the Emperor, flattering words filling the air. The Emperor stroked his beard and smiled, in high spirits. "Lin San, you have achieved this remarkable feat for Great Hua. Whatever reward you want, I will grant it!"

Lin Wanrong shook his head lightly. "This matter with Goryeo was within expectations, and not a great merit. Right now, all I want to do is go home and have a good sleep. I beg the Emperor's permission to leave first."

Everyone was stunned. Lin San had accomplished a great feat, and it was the perfect time to seek rewards. Why would he give it up? The Emperor laughed, "You should think it over. Whatever you want, I will grant it. Miss this chance, and you won't have such an opportunity again."

Lin Wanrong understood the Emperor's meaning, but he was disheartened and bored, having no interest in anything. He shook his head firmly. "Thank you, Your Majesty. Whatever you are willing to give, you will definitely give, and what you're unwilling to give, I won't insist on. Please grant my request."

Xiao Qingxuan, who knew him deeply, saw the deep fatigue in his face, as if he had encountered a significant setback. She didn't care about the presence of others, rushed over, took his hand, and softly said, "My Dear, what's wrong? Have you encountered some difficulties?"

It was more than just difficulties; it was utterly infuriating. Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile, "Qingxuan, I'll tell you about this later. Today you are reunited with your father, so spend some quality time talking with him. I'll go back and rest, and come back for you tomorrow."

What had happened? Seeing her husband looking worn, Miss Xiao felt both sour and pained. She wanted to talk to him, but this place was the Golden Hall, not their home, and many things couldn't be spoken.

"In that case, go back and rest well." The Emperor sighed. "You have done so much for Great Hua; I will keep it all in my heart."

Lin Wanrong bowed and, seeing Xiao Qingxuan's worried face, smiled at her to reassure her. Then he turned and left the palace.

The streets were bustling with people, and the cacophony of vendors hawking their wares resonated in all directions, creating a lively atmosphere. Yet Lin Wanrong could not muster any interest. What had been a wonderful mood evaporated in an instant when he heard that the old Emperor had released Lu Dongzan. Lu Dongzan, a clever and adaptable man, was the right-hand man of the Turkic Khan. Lin Wanrong understood all too well what his release meant for the Great Hua Empire.

He couldn't help but wonder how many of the Great Hua's brave men would have to pay with their lives for this decision. Shaking his head and heaving a deep sigh, he felt a pang of guilt. If he had known this would be the outcome, he would have instructed Du Xiuyuan to take action when they had set the trap. In the end, his methods were not ruthless enough, and he had to bear some of the responsibility.

He let his horse amble along for a few steps, his thoughts turning to the matters at the Xiao family home. Having been away for two days and with Eldest Miss not around, he didn't know what chaos awaited him at home. His anxiety grew, and he quickened his pace, hurrying towards the Xiao residence.

As he approached the entrance, he spotted a graceful figure in the shop, a girl in red around sixteen or seventeen, with a lovely face that seemed a bit pale but determined. Biting her lip, she was busily

moving goods with others, bustling about. Lin Wanrong stared, then exclaimed joyfully, rushing forward, "Second Miss, Second Miss—"

The young woman's delicate body trembled, and she slowly turned to look at him, her face expressionless. Her eyes reddened, and she hurriedly looked away, ignoring him.

Lin Wanrong stepped into the shop and immediately sensed that something was wrong. Not only did the Second Miss, whom he hadn't seen in days, act coldly towards him, but even the little maid Huan'er glared at him and snorted. Only Si De remained loyal, casting knowing glances at him as though something was amiss.

"Second Miss, aren't you at the academy? How did you find time to come back?" Lin Wanrong asked, moving closer with a smile. In just a few days, Xiao Yushuang seemed to have grown taller, her figure more curvaceous, and her innocent liveliness had somewhat diminished, replaced by a hint of maturity.

Seeing him coming closer, the Second Miss retreated a step, her face flushing as she whispered, "What are you doing here? Don't interfere with my work."

"I'll do it, I'll do it." Seeing her delicate hands about to lift the fabric, Lin Wanrong felt a pang of distress. He hurriedly grabbed the goods from her hands, saying softly, "This isn't work for you. Rest, and let me handle it. If I were to ruin your little hands, wouldn't I die of heartache?"

The Second Miss grunted in response, then seemed to think better of it and huffed angrily, her face stern, tears in her eyes.

"Yushuang, when did you come back?" Lin Wanrong stared at her, his face full of tenderness. "I haven't seen you for a few days, and you've lost weight."

"I, I," the Second Miss stammered, tears about to fall, then turned away, hardening her heart, "It's none of your business. I—I'm going inside."

Xiao Yushuang stomped her lotus foot and rushed towards the inner residence, lifting the curtain as she went. Lin Wanrong understood clearly; the Second Miss saying she was going inside was surely a hint for him to follow. But as he took a step to obey her guidance, the little maid Huan'er blocked him like a gust of wind, her face uninviting, "Excuse me, sir, but this inner residence is for the women of the Xiao family. No men or dogs are allowed inside. Please leave."

Two days without seeing her, even this little girl had become arrogant. Lin Wanrong chuckled dryly, grinning and said, "Oh, isn't this Huan'er? You've grown even more charming in just a few days. I think it won't be long before young men line up at our house to beg for mercy. Brother San congratulates you, sends his congratulations to you."

Huan'er snorted, turned around, and ordered Si De, "Today's mood has been ruined for this lady, as I saw a treacherous, ungrateful wretch. Si De, quickly close the door, we won't do business today."

"What do you mean? You don't want to do business just because you saw me? Where is this coming from? I'm Lin San, the highly respected man of the Xiao family mansion." He hurriedly grabbed Huan'er's clothes, "Hey, hey, sister Huan'er, you can eat whatever you want, but you can't talk nonsense. When have I ever been treacherous? I, the handsome servant, protect the Xiao family with loyalty, and Lin San defends the great empire with iron-blooded heart. Everyone knows this, and who doesn't know or understand? Si De, you know me best, isn't that right?"

"Brother San," Si De chuckled twice, his face filled with embarrassment, "It's not that I don't want to help you, but the Madam has made it clear, if you come back, she will chase you out with a broom—"

"The Madam?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "I have no past grievances with her, only recent kindness. How could she do this to me?"

Si De leaned close to him, cautiously saying, "Brother San, you'd better leave quickly. Who knows what might happen if the Madam sees you?"

"The Madam is so cruel?"

Huan'er snorted heavily, "I think she's been more than kind to you. For a treacherous wretch like you who betrays and forgets kindness, you should be beaten to death, bitten to death by dogs, burned to death, choked to death eating food—in short, not die a good death!"

"What do you mean?" Lin Wanrong gasped. This little girl held such deep hatred for him, but he never took advantage of her. "Sister Huan'er, I have been Lin San in the Xiao family for more than a day or two. Everyone knows what kind of person I am, not many call me of bad character, but you're the first to curse me as treacherous, unfaithful, and rebellious. What did I do wrong to deserve such a terrible death?"

Huan'er gave a cold smile, "You didn't do anything wrong, it's our family's two young misses who were wrong, they didn't see your true character and fell for your deceit, you shameless thief. The two young misses are in pain but silent, yet I, Huan'er, am not afraid of you. So what if you became the son-in-law who would bring wealth and honor? You are the one who betrays, even if you cut off my head, I would still curse you to death, you thief. Si De, throw this shameless person out!"

The little girl rattled on like a string of firecrackers, leaving Lin Wanrong utterly confused, "What son-in-law? What betrayal? What on earth is going on, Huan'er, please explain."

"Brother San," Si De whispered, "You'd better accept it. The Emperor sent someone to take Eldest Miss away, and granted a decree to the Madam, saying that he wants to make you the Imperial son-in-law, and you cannot marry a common woman. The decree is still with the Madam, she's so angry she fell ill. The Second Miss rushed back, and fainted when she heard the news."

Lin Wanrong was furious, "Are you confused? Let me ask you, am I that kind of person? Si De, tell me, which do you believe, Brother San's character or the Emperor's decree?"

Si De hesitated for a moment, and cautiously said, "It seems that the imperial decree from the Emperor is slightly more credible, just a little bit, Brother San. Please don't be angry."

Unjust, it was truly unjust! Lin Wanrong was furious to the extreme. How malicious the old Emperor's intentions were! Just the day before, he had fought tooth and nail for this matter, only to find that the Emperor had stabbed him in the back. Taking advantage of the moment when he "sacrificed" himself for the country, the Emperor had directly issued the imperial decree to Madam Xiao. If he had been the Madam, he would have vomited blood on the spot. And what about Eldest Miss and Second Miss, who admired him deeply? This was simply life-threatening!

"Believable, my foot!" Seeing Si De's ghostly expression, Lin Wanrong slapped him on the head. "You've been with me for so long, and you don't even know my character. I always appreciate the new without despising the old. How could I give up a forest for a single tree? This is a divisive plot by the Emperor, aiming to ruin the great unity within the Xiao family and to damage my relationship with my wife and the two young misses. How can you not see it?"

Huan'er scoffed and said, "You talk as if you're innocent! Dare you say that you have not done anything to wrong Eldest Miss and Second Miss?"

"Oh, this," Lin Wanrong found himself somewhat at a loss, thanks to the sharp-tongued little girl. He had first married Qingxuan and then held a wedding ceremony with Qiaoqiao. While the matter with Second Miss was not so problematic, Eldest Miss had come after, taking precedence. By all

accounts, he had wronged Qingxuan instead. However, at this crucial moment, he couldn't possibly tell the truth.

"Little sister, you are still young, and matters of the heart cannot be explained in a few words," Lin Wanrong helplessly said. "I am devoted to Eldest Miss and Second Miss, as clear as the sun and moon—"

"Don't speak such useless words," Huan'er interrupted, her teeth clenched. "I'll ask you, are you going to marry the Princess?"

"Yes! But—"

"There are no 'buts' about it." Huan'er's small face flushed with anger. "If you truly care for our young misses, then divorce the Princess!"

"Divorce the Princess?" Lin Wanrong almost bit his tongue, astonished at the audacity of the young girl. However, if not for the fact that his princess wives were Qingxuan and Xian'er, he could easily divorce ten princesses for the sake of Eldest Miss. Si De, standing nearby, shivered at the thought. To divorce a princess as a prince consort was like an old man eating poison, a sign of wanting to die.

A soft cry came from behind the curtain, and the voice of Xiao Yushuang, filled with heart-wrenching sorrow, reached them: "You wicked man, I hate you, I hate you to death!"

"Second Miss—" Lin Wanrong jumped, hearing the faint sound of footsteps moving towards the house. He rushed forward, darting inside.

"You heartless and ungrateful man, you've ruined our young misses' lives—" Huan'er slammed the door shut with a loud bang, right on Lin Wanrong's nose. He yelped in pain, jumping up: "Yushuang, Yushuang. Second Miss, listen to me, the truth is not as you imagine, ow—"

Poor Brother San, Si De thought, unable to bear the sight, and quickly reminded him, "Brother San, the back door, the back door is open—"

'Good lad, truly clever indeed, your Brother San will not mistreat you.' Lin Wanrong leaped to his feet and, amidst his haste, gave Si De a big thumbs-up, then rushed towards the rear gate of the courtyard. He moved fast, but someone was even more quick-witted. Before he could reach the

back door, he heard a slight clatter as the door bolt was locked, and it seemed like someone was leaning against it from the other side. Silently, he faintly heard the soft sound of sobbing.

He was a step too late again, and Lin Wanrong could only sigh in desperation. He called out loudly, "Second Miss, Second Miss, are you there? The situation is really not what you think, I am innocent, cough, cough—"

He pinched his nose and coughed for a moment but did not hear any movement inside, and he didn't know whether Xiao Yushuang was there or not. Whether she was there or not, the situation was very dire. Lin Wanrong's mood was utterly depressed. The old Emperor was indeed harmful, and the most hateful part was that he was also the father of Qingxuan and Xian'er, so he couldn't do anything to him. Frustration, extreme frustration.

"Brother San, Brother San, how are things?" Si De arrived, panting heavily.

"Good lad, you are the most loyal," Lin Wanrong patted his shoulder, exclaiming, "Sticking with your Brother San through thick and thin in this critical moment, and never abandoning me, you have a promising future!"

Si De gave a dry laugh, "I had to be loyal—I couldn't get through the door, it was locked!"

So that's how it is! Lin Wanrong dropped his hand and suddenly sighed, "Si De, do you know why I came here today?"

Why had Brother San become so profound? Though Si De was puzzled, he still asked with concern, "Brother San, didn't you come to see Eldest Miss and Madam?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, his face filled with sorrow, "It's true that I came to see Madam and Eldest Miss, but there's actually something else. I came to say goodbye to you all."

"Brother San, are you really going to become a prince consort?" Si De's voice trembled as he spoke, seeing Brother San winking vigorously at him, he asked in confusion, "Brother San, what's wrong with your eyes?"

"Nothing, I'm just moved to tears by you," Lin Wanrong clenched his teeth, wanting to punch the lad, "I'm saying goodbye to you not because I'm going to be a prince consort, but because—" he paused slightly, and sighed deeply, "After today, you might never see me again!"

There was a faint sound from behind the door, as if someone was leaning against it to eavesdrop. Lin Wanrong was elated, this was his chance!

"Brother San, where are you going?" Si De was also startled, suddenly seeming to understand something. He grasped Lin Wanrong's hand tightly, his eyes moist, "Brother San, don't leave! Our Great Hua's medical advancements can cure anything. You must be strong! Hold on!"

'If I had any incurable disease, it would be because of you, you lad. This kid seems to be inheriting my mantle.' Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth, "Actually, it's like this. The northern frontier has been invaded by nomads. They are savage, cruel, burning, killing, looting, and committing all sorts of evil deeds. The Emperor has already issued a conscription order. All able-bodied men in Great Hua who are over sixteen must join the army and valiantly kill the enemy. Every man has a responsibility to protect his homeland. As a true man, I dare not slack off. I've already volunteered to join General Li Tai's army and will soon head to the front lines to fight the nomads. Brother—" he wiped a couple of crocodile tears, "If I die in battle someday, don't forget to burn some paper money on my grave—"

"Brother San, are you serious?" Si De was dumbfounded. If even Brother San could go to battle, those nomads must be easy to defeat!

"It ends here. I suppose today is our last meeting. Brother, take care! Farewell!" Lord Lin turned around, his demeanor gallant and poised. Just as he was about to stride away, he heard a slight clatter. The back door opened, and Xiao Yushuang's charming figure appeared before him.

"Second Miss, you—" Lin Wanrong was both shocked and delighted!

"Lin San, you scoundrel!" Xiao Yushuang's pretty face was covered with tear drops, beautiful as the morning dew. The dagger in her hand glinted sharply, catching the eye. With a whimper, she lunged directly at him.

Chapter 433 The Betrothal Gifts

"Second Miss, what are you doing? Speak your mind, please don't think irrationally!" Lin Wanrong was greatly startled and took a quick step forward, ready to snatch her dagger.

Xiao Yushuang's face was filled with anger, and she let out a delicate hum, the shiny blade poised to strike, "You are the one being irrational, I've come to settle accounts with you, you faithless man!"

She made a slow, threatening gesture with the blade, so slow that even a three-year-old child would be quicker. Lin Wanrong watched in both surprise and joy, quickly snatching the dagger from her hand, "Second Miss, you misunderstand, knowing my character, how could I ever commit such a beastly act?"

"You still dare to speak," Xiao Yushuang's eyes reddened, tears falling down her cheeks, "You just said it yourself, you want to marry some princess, the Emperor even sent his decree to our house, and you say you're not faithless. Give my knife back to me, I want to die with you, you heartless villain!"

Second Miss struggled to snatch the dagger from his hand, but her strength was too little to be a match for Lin San. After a few attempts, she suddenly burst into loud sobs, hitting his chest with her fists, "You ungrateful wretch, I am going to be bullied to death by you, our entire family has been bullied to death by you."

This stubborn but soft-hearted girl made Lin Wanrong ache inside. He let her small fists rain down on his chest, smiling and not saying a word.

"What are you doing?" Second Miss, having vented, her face wet with tears, looked sneakily at his relaxed demeanor and became genuinely annoyed. She twisted her hand hard against his chest.

Lin Wanrong grimaced in pain, holding her small hand and laughed, "Tired? Why don't you rest a bit before continuing to hit me? I promise I won't run away, I haven't had such a relaxing massage in a long time."

"You big head, you always bully me like this," Xiao Yushuang, both embarrassed and angry, scratched at him forcefully a few times, then suddenly gave in to sorrow and threw herself into his arms, sobbing loudly.

It was all the Emperor's fault! Seeing Second Miss sobbing and gasping for breath in his arms, Lin Wanrong felt a great ache in his heart. He gently patted her shoulder, "Second Miss, don't cry, things aren't as you think—"

"I'll cry if I want to, I'll cry," Xiao Yushuang squirmed in his arms, her tears soaking the front of his shirt, "What are you doing here? Go back and be the prince consort. It seems I've misjudged you, you heartless person."

Second Miss cursed fiercely but refused to raise her head from his embrace, her tears flowing like a surging river. Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself; a few days apart, and this little girl's scolding had grown fiercer, but her heart remained soft. He thought to himself, 'Fortunate for her to have met me, if she had met some glib and insatiable guy, he might have bullied her to death.'

Seeing Second Miss crying uncontrollably, Lin Wanrong felt great pain in his heart and quickly signaled to Si De. The young man, showing some cleverness for once, pricked up his ears and pretended, "Brother San, listen, it seems like the Madam is calling you from the house!"

Xiao Yushuang jumped in surprise and hurriedly leaped out of his embrace, pushing him away. "You must leave, quickly leave. Don't let Mother see you—"

"Why?" Lin Wanrong was confused.

Second Miss huffed, angrily saying, "How dare you ask? Mother has fallen ill from anger because of you. If she wakes up and sees you, she'll beat you with a broom, and you, you will just have to bear it. I won't care for you." Second Miss turned her head away in anger.

"So Second Miss actually cares for me." Lin Wanrong's face broke into a broad smile, grabbing her little hand tightly, "Don't worry, the Madam is a reasonable person; she won't resort to such crude measures."

"I don't care for you at all," Second Miss replied, her face turning red. She tried to pull away, but he held her too tightly, and she couldn't break free.

He held her too firmly; it's no wonder, Second Miss thought, finding an excuse for herself. Held by his warm hand, staring at his familiar smiling face, she felt a mixture of bitterness and sweetness in her heart.

"Second Miss, Second Miss," Lin San's calling pulled Xiao Yushuang back from her thoughts. She murmured, "What... what were you saying just now?"

"I said, please believe in me." Lin Wanrong smiled, "You know my character; when have I ever feared anyone? When have I done anything to offend both man and God?"

Thinking back to Lin San's actions since he entered the residence, although occasionally unconventional, he had never acted without reason, and had truly never done anything wrong. Xiao Yushuang nodded, then hurriedly shook her head, "Why are you telling me all this? I don't want to hear it. You go back to being a good son-in-law; my mother, sister, and I will suffer alone for the rest of our lives without your concern."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, taking her small hand and caressing it gently, "All of this is a ploy by the Emperor to drive a wedge between us. You must not fall for it."

"Drive a wedge?" Second Miss pouted, indignantly saying, "The imperial edict has reached our home. Are you telling me your intention to marry the princess is false?"

This time, Lin Wanrong was wise, laughing twice, "Marrying the princess or not is another matter, but my sweet Second Miss, I am determined to marry you. Second Miss, how old are you this year —"

"Seventeen, ah, bah—" Second Miss answered reflexively, then realized she had fallen into his trap, her face turning bright red, "Who wants to marry you, you shameless villain." Xiao Yushuang was so young that she lost her composure after hearing his last sentence and had no time to question the meaning of his previous words.

"You have no choice but to marry me." Lin Wanrong grinned, "I came today to plead with the Madam."

"I won't listen, I won't listen." Second Miss's heart fluttered like a little deer, and she covered her flushed cheeks in embarrassment, "Don't talk to me about it, you, you go talk to Mother, how annoying, you scoundrel!"

Lin Wanrong blinked helplessly, thinking how easily young girls in love were deceived. Fortunately, she met him, the loyal and upright Lin San. He laughed heartily, "I will naturally go to the Madam, but I must also explain everything clearly to Second Miss. Otherwise, if you worry, my honest and upright soul will suffer torment."

"Sweet talker." Second Miss's face flushed, and her eyes were filled with laughter as she lowered her head and muttered, "You certainly know how to charm me with pretty words." Overcoming her shyness, she softly said, "Lin San, come here."

‘Only two steps away, and you won't even pull me?’ Lin Wanrong responded, smiling as he walked to her side. Second Miss extended her small hand, "Give me back my little knife."

Lin Wanrong was taken aback, "Second Miss, what do you want this little knife for? Its gleam is frightening, so better keep it away."

Second Miss snorted, snatching the dagger from his hand, and the blade flashed before his eyes, "This is for self-defense, given to me by my sister. If you dare keep a mistress outside, I will, I will —"

Lin Wanrong shivered, keep a mistress? ‘Among the sisters, they rank by age and learning. No matter what, you're the youngest, so the one I would keep is you.’

"Look, Second Miss, what are you saying?" Master Lin laughed nervously, carefully taking back the small knife, "Si De, go to the street and look for a blacksmith's shop to melt this knife down and forge a fine gold ring. I want to give it to Second Miss. Remember, it must be pure gold, even a tiny bit less wouldn't show my sincerity."

Si De was stunned. A steel knife turned into a gold ring? And it has to be pure gold? Either Brother San has gone mad, or he had become foolish.

Second Miss whined and turned her head away, shyly saying, "I, I don't want it. You should save your silver for future household expenses. Besides, there's my elder sister too—"

‘This little girl truly has touched my heart,’ Lin Wanrong thought, beaming as he touched her small hand, "That's right, Si De, make two gold rings, Eldest Miss will wear the bigger one, and Second Miss will wear—an even bigger one."

"How annoying!" Second Miss, overwhelmed with embarrassment, tried to run away but was tightly caught by him, unable to move.

"Yu Shuang, when did you come back? Why didn't you tell me?" Lin Wanrong caressed Second Miss's tender hand, smiling sheepishly, his mind contemplating how to approach the Madam. Big words had already been spoken here, and to console the Madam and Second Miss's fragile hearts, he had to follow through with the marriage proposal today.

Seeing that she couldn't escape, Second Miss resigned herself, quietly nestling in his embrace, and sulkily hummed, "I've been in the academy all this time, thinking about you coming to see me every day, but you were nowhere to be seen. My sister said you were enjoying yourself outside, beyond her and mother's control. So, I asked my sister to bring the General of Zhenyuan from Jinling. If you dare misbehave, I'll—"

"What will you do?" Lin Wanrong stared at her, smiling.

"I'll bite you, umm—" Her words were cut off, as Lin San sealed her mouth. Having not seen each other for days, Xiao Yushuang's longing was strong, especially after recently clearing up a misunderstanding. Overwhelmed with emotion, she clung tightly to him, tears and smiles appearing simultaneously on her face. Her body went limp, as she murmured, hiding in his embrace, unable to lift her head again.

After tasting Second Miss's sweet, red lips, Lin Wanrong contentedly raised his head and sighed, "Yushuang, you've really grown in these few days, you've filled out."

"Of course," the Second Miss said proudly, lifting her head and puffing out her chest. "I'm seventeen this year; naturally, I've grown up."

The older she became, the more Lin Wanrong loved her. He chuckled deviously a couple of times, taking hold of the Second Miss's hand, and they headed towards the house.

"Lin San, you, you really want to—" The Second Miss's heart was in turmoil, and she lowered her head to whisper, "But what about my sister? What will she do?"

"There's no way around it," Lin San sighed deeply, his face filled with pain. "Who can blame you, Second Miss, for being so enchanting that you stole my heart and soul! As for Eldest Miss, alas, she will have to wait—"

"How can that be?" Yushuang exclaimed anxiously. "My sister's affection for you is known to everyone in the mansion. Even my mother has heard the rumors. How can you treat her like this?"

Lin San looked pained and helpless, spreading his hands. "I don't want to be like this either, but how can one have both the fish and the bear's paw?"

The Second Miss thought for a moment, bit her silver teeth, holding back her tears, and said, "Then propose to my sister. She has been holding up the Xiao family on her own; she deserves someone to look after her. You, you should just marry her."

"How can that be?" Lin San shook his head quickly. "Second Miss, think about it. If I am with Eldest Miss but thinking of you in my heart, how can I face Eldest Miss, how can I face the Madam?"

Tears fell like rain from the Second Miss, and she suddenly threw herself into his arms, pounding his chest with her tiny fists. "You scoundrel. If you marry me and still think of my sister, how can you face me, face my mother?"

"It's truly a difficult situation," Lin San said, his face filled with sorrow as he stroked the Second Miss's silky hair, his voice full of helplessness. "Is there not a better solution—ah, Second Miss, what are you doing?"

Xiao Yushuang twisted his waist muscles with all her strength, grinding her teeth, and said, "You scoundrel, don't think I don't know what you're up to. You've bullied our entire family."

When Yushuang entered the door with him, she pouted all the way, ignoring him, and Lin Wanrong couldn't figure out what she was really thinking. This little girl had indeed grown up, knowing how to keep her feelings hidden. He sighed helplessly.

Upon arriving in the courtyard, he noticed that Eldest Miss's room, as well as the Madam's, was eerily silent. Opposite was his own room. He hadn't returned in two days and missed it greatly.

The young maid named Huan'er came out of the Madam's room holding a bowl of medicine. When she saw Lin San, she was startled. "How did you get in? Who let you in? Do you want to enrage my mistress to death?"

The Second Miss's face turned red, and she quietly said, "Huan'er, I told him to come in. There may have been a misunderstanding about the imperial decree. Don't blame him." She was too shy to say that Lin San was here to propose, so she vaguely referred to it as a misunderstanding.

Since the Second Miss had spoken, Huan'er naturally stopped insisting. She glanced at Lin Wanrong and said, "Brother San, is what Second Miss said true? You are not fickle, ungrateful?"

"Of course not, with my character, how could such things be associated with me?" Lin Wanrong said, smiling awkwardly.

"Huan, has mother awakened yet?" The Second Miss looked anxiously into the room, her concern evident in her voice.

Huan'er was about to speak when a faint and weary voice came from inside the room, "Is that Yushuang speaking outside?"

"Mother, it's me," the Second Miss gently pushed the door open and stepped in. Madam Xiao slightly nodded, only to see Lin San's head peeking from behind, grinning, "Madam, I'm here too!"

Madam Xiao's face was a mixture of shock and anger, and she began to cough urgently, "You, what are you here for? Come, take the broom and chase him out for me."

In the two days they hadn't seen each other, Madam Xiao had become more emaciated. Her appearance had diminished, her eyes slightly red, wearing all white pajamas, her neck as white as jade. Even in anger, there was an extreme sense of mature charm.

"Mother, don't be angry!" the Second Miss hurriedly knelt before the Madam, gently patting her back, "I asked him to come in. He said, he said... well, you speak up already—"

The Second Miss glanced at Lin Wanrong anxiously, annoyed in her heart. 'You fool, you were so bold in front of me just now, but in front of mother, you've fallen silent.'

"What is there to say?" Madam Xiao wiped her tears, "Considering how much my Xiao family has valued you, you still betrayed us behind our backs, harming not only Yushuang but also getting Yuruo into trouble for you. I, I will kill you for harming my daughters."

Madam Xiao's anger made her abruptly sit up from the bed. Yushuang was startled and quickly embraced her, weeping, "Mother, he's not that kind of person; we've misunderstood him."

Lin Wanrong slightly smiled, walked to the divine cabinet in the room, and took down the yellow imperial decree, "I dare to ask Madam, is this the imperial edict that allows me to marry only a princess and not a common girl?"

"So what if it is?" Madam Xiao, in her plain white dress and flushed with anger, looked stunning, "Now you're triumphant, the unparalleled son-in-law of the great empire, but you still come to humiliate the widowed and orphaned women of the Xiao family—"

Madam Xiao's words were cut short by the sound of the imperial edict being carelessly thrown to the ground by Lin San. In her brief moment of shock, she saw Lin San's face wearing a cold smile, as he stepped on the decree, making a rustling noise.

"What are you doing?" Madam Xiao cried out, "This could lead to your execution. Yushuang, quickly, close the door."

The fool doesn't even care about his life or death. The Second Miss was moved, tears falling, as she hurried to the door and slammed it shut.

"Madam, do you still want to chase me out with a broom?" Lin Wanrong said with a smile.

"You evildoer." Madam Xiao didn't know what else to say. She quickly put on embroidered shoes, rushed to him, and bent down to pick up the imperial edict. The edict's delicate and smooth silk was trampled upon and was now unrecognizable. She carefully smoothed the silk, but the dirt marks would not be erased.

"What shall we do now?" Madam Xiao's tears fell, "By destroying the imperial edict, my Xiao family will suffer a great calamity. Lin San, you foolish man, you have brought no small harm."

"Don't worry, Madam." Lin Wanrong smiled generously, "A decree once issued, will the Emperor take it back? Who knows his intentions better than me? If I want it, he would be happy to draft a thousand, ten thousand such edicts for me."

"Speaking grandiosely," the Madam cast a glance at him, but her expression relaxed considerably. "You have so wantonly mishandled the imperial edict; if you dare to be anything less than fully dedicated in the Xiao family, beware, I might report you to the court."

He must say, this Madam sure knew how to turn things around! Just now, she had looked at him with a stern gaze, and in a moment's time, she had undergone a complete 180-degree transformation. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "My attitude, as the Madam must have seen, is as firm as it can be. Do you still have any doubts, Madam? Second Miss, please do me the favor of handing a broom to the Madam. It's been many years since I've tasted this sensation."

"You're asking for trouble," said Madam Xiao, her eyebrows slightly tinged with red in anger as she shot him an irritated glance. Wearing only a thin nightgown, with her full chest and rounded hips, she exuded beauty mixed with an air of solidity, incredibly enticing.

"Cough, cough," noticing Lin San's eyes were fixed where they shouldn't be, the Madam's face blushed, and she hurriedly threw on a garment, glaring at him in annoyance. "Where have you been these past two days? If you had business to attend to, why didn't you ask for leave?"

"Busy—uh," Lin Wanrong forced out a couple of dry laughs, struggling to avert his gaze before suddenly exclaiming in shock, "Madam, you're not thinking of docking my pay, are you?! Let me tell you, don't even think about plucking feathers from a stingy rooster."

Madam Xiao looked at him with amusement: "You always act so strangely. I don't know where your luck comes from, to have even caught the princess's fancy."

Seeing Lin San chatting and laughing with her mother, Second Miss finally breathed a sigh of relief. But he kept avoiding the matter at hand, making her anxious. Being a woman, how could she brazenly urge him to speak?

"Huh, Second Miss, what's wrong with your eyes? Why are they blinking so much?" Lin San wondered.

Second Miss, both shy and annoyed, quickly turned and left, "Mother, I—I'm going out to check on the shop. Lin San, don't you have something to say to mother?"

Second Miss stamped her small feet and ran off like the wind, and the Madam shook her head in affection, "This mischievous girl, always up to something mysterious. Lin San, what do you want to say to me?"

Lin Wanrong gave out a couple of dry laughs, "Madam, this time I've been grievously wronged by you. I wonder if you have any compensation for me?"

"Wronged? How have I wronged you?" The Madam smiled, "You've been absent for two days without reason, and I want to beat you with a broom. How is that wronging you? If you hadn't returned today, I'd have reported you to the authorities and seen where you could run."

Madam Xiao's light laughter was like the wind rustling through the willows, her beauty even surpassing the flowers. Lin Wanrong's heart skipped a beat. Damn it, even though she was Second Miss's mother, she looked just as beautiful.

"I never expected the Madam to play word games," Lin Wanrong chuckled and gestured with his hands, "In that case, I won't hold back. Madam, I have one piece of great good news and one piece of great bad news to tell you. Which would you like to hear first?"

Great good news and great bad news? The Madam pondered for a moment, unsure of what he was getting at, and hesitantly said, "Then tell me the bad news first!"

Lin Wanrong nodded, his expression suddenly turning mournful, "Madam, please, you must contain your grief after hearing this news. Eldest Miss and Second Miss, they—"

Madam Xiao's heart tightened. "What happened to them? Tell me quickly!"

"They are getting married!"

"Married?!" Madam Xiao's face was a mask of bewilderment as she slowly sank into a chair. "How is this possible? How did I not know? Where's the good news?"

"The good news," Lin Wanrong said with a slight smile, "is that the men they are marrying are none other than humble me."

Madam Xiao paused in surprise, then broke into a delicate laughter. "Lin San, if you want to propose, just say it directly. Why indulge in such mysterious talk?"

"Madam, I'm serious." Lin Wanrong's expression shifted, his face grave. "I have never been this serious in my life."

From his robe, he hastily produced a jumble of items: a knockout drug, a firearm, Dongxuanzi Thirty-Six Scattered Pages some white, some black, others colored — a dazzling array that made one's head spin.

Madam Xiao asked with puzzlement, "What are these?"

Biting his lip, Lin Wanrong felt a pain in his heart as if he were slicing off a piece of his own flesh. "These are items as precious to me as my honor. They are the betrothal gifts I bring for your elder and younger daughter."

Chapter 434 If She's Well, Then So Am I

"What is all this mess?" Madam Xiao's face blushed as she glanced at the mysterious pages of the erotic book, and she turned her head away, lightly spitting, "What are you doing with these? Put them away quickly."

"Does Madam perhaps find this dowry too modest?" Lin San shook his head, his face serious, "Madam, these items are ranked alongside my life and chastity as the three treasures of the Lin family, and are by no means a mere hollow reputation. Take this knockout drug, for instance; it's an essential medicine for anyone who walks the Jianghu, and it has saved me from danger several times. Then there's this musket, incredibly powerful, saving my life countless times on the battlefield. As for the thirty-six loose pages of the Dongxuanzi, which Madam has also seen, it's my master's treasure, its importance goes without saying. What's even more precious is that this is a colorful handwritten version. These are more important than gold, silver, pearls, or agates, and show my sincerity."

Madam Xiao nodded, a faint smile appearing on her face, "You indeed seem sincere. However, as I mentioned last time, although the Xiao family is few in number, we cannot let people gossip. Yushuang and Yuruo, you can only marry one."

Lin Wanrong did not argue with her, instead, stuffing all the dowry into her arms, "Madam, please put away these treasures, lest any thieves lay eyes on them and become envious. Keep the loose pages close; it would be terrible if they fall into the wrong hands."

"This knockout drug, musket, and those embarrassing pictures, what should a lady like me do with them?" Madam Xiao hurriedly pushed them away, her face flushed, "You keep them. You may need them someday. If you are serious, please hire a matchmaker and prepare cakes and red silk, and come to propose directly. Keep these treasures of your family."

She quickly stepped back, her face red and transparent, as if what Lin San was holding were fearsome wild beasts.

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Madam is indeed benevolent and kind, a model for us all. In that case, Madam, let's settle this matter. Once I've handled my affairs, I will pick an auspicious day to marry the young lady, and our two families will become one, intimately close."

Madam Xiao hummed in agreement but then looked up, "Wait, Lin San, after all this talking, are you going to marry Yushuang or Yuruo?"

"I'll decide later," Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, looking troubled, "Whether it's Eldest Miss or Second Miss, whoever is in the better mood can enter the bridal palanquin. I can't make it difficult for you, Madam! It's settled then. I'm going to work now."

"What are you talking about?" Madam Xiao hurriedly blocked his way, her eyebrows frowning, angrily saying, "Carrying the bridal palanquin to the doorstep without knowing who the bride is? Where is such a thing heard of? How could either Yushuang or Yuruo be in a good mood? No, you must settle this matter today, or I won't let you off!" Her face was angry, her cheeks flushed, and a faint blush spread across her white face, giving her a charming demeanor, making her look like a young woman in her twenties.

"Madam, if I could decide, I wouldn't be so troubled." Lin Wanrong spread his hands with a distressed smile, "I know Eldest Miss well, and I'm in love with Second Miss. My feelings for them are equal. How can you ask me to choose one? Can you bear to make me choose? Either way, one will be heartbroken. No matter whom I choose, it's the same, so you might as well decide for me."

He pulled the door bolt and was about to step outside, his movements resolute. Madam Xiao was infuriated by Lin San's cunning, pushing all these matters onto her. Both sides were like flesh to her, and she was unsure how to decide.

She hesitated for a moment, and seeing Lin San about to leave the room, she quickly gritted her teeth and shouted, "Lin San, come back here."

This was the response Lin Wanrong was waiting for. He turned around with a joyful smile, "Madam, did you call me?"

Madam Xiao glared at him, annoyed, and humphed, "Don't think I don't know what's on your mind. If you want to marry both Yushuang and Yuruo, just say so outright. Where did you learn this nonsense?"

"Madam, your insight is profound. You saw right through what I was thinking. Truly, you're a hero among women, and you do not concede to men." Lin Wanrong gave a thumbs-up in praise.

Madam Xiao sighed, shaking her head with a bitter smile, "Lin San, it's not that I want to make things difficult for you. But we of the Xiao family are widowed mother and daughters, already conspicuous. Those who gossip behind our backs and wait to mock us are countless. We must be cautious not to give them any reason to talk. Yuruo and Yushuang are renowned beauties in Jinling, and many suitors have worn out our doorstep. If I promise both to you, even if they don't mind, what will the world think? How will I explain to our family? Wouldn't the rumors fly?"

Madam Xiao, widowed for many years, was known for her loyalty and chastity in Jinling, respected by all. This, Lin Wanrong was aware of. He snorted, "Madam, why should you care about these things? Eldest Miss, Second Miss, and I are in a relationship of our own free will. Who dares gossip about us?"

"You are a man; of course, you can disregard it." Madam Xiao glared at him, her expression both shy and angry, "But a woman's reputation is hard-won and easily lost. If Yuruo and Yushuang both marry you, wouldn't Jinling erupt into chaos? People's hearts are hidden behind their bellies; any malicious rumors could arise. I'm afraid even I would be implicated—" Madam Xiao angrily humphed, her pretty face tinged with a faint blush, unable to continue.

"So that's how it is," Lin Wanrong shook his head and sighed, "Madam, you worry too much. If everyone lived like you, looking forward and backward, never daring to express love or hate, what joy could be found in life?"

Madam Xiao sighed deeply, murmuring as she sat down, "This is my fate, and I've long grown accustomed to it. But Yushuang and Yuruo are different; they're still young, with many years ahead. If their lives were ruined by rumors, it would be my fault. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Her expression was desolate, tears glistening in her eyes, her face full of helplessness. Lin Wanrong laughed aloud, "Madam, I can understand your plight, but I cannot agree with your actions. As you said, we must not ruin the lives of Eldest Miss and the Second Miss because of rumors. Please think, Madam, what is love for them, and what is misleading them? Breaking up their love and denying them happiness for a lifetime, is that protecting them? Think about the sufferings of your own life, and then think of Eldest Miss and the Second Miss; you should understand what happiness is even more profoundly than I do."

His words abruptly ended there. Madam Xiao's brow furrowed as she pondered deeply, the room falling into an extreme silence, with only the sound of her gentle and urgent breathing.

She was wearing only a thin nightgown that clung to her body, accentuating her full breasts, slender waist, and curvy hips. Her full and rounded figure was highlighted by her fair, jade-like complexion, giving her a unique, mature charm. Madam Xiao had been a beauty without parallel in her youth; even the current Emperor had once lost sleep over her. Now, although her daughters had grown up, her beauty remained unchanged, enhanced by a touch of wistful elegance that was truly admirable.

Lin Wanrong's eyes were dazzled by her. He wondered how she managed to maintain herself so well, appearing like a young maiden despite being in her mid-thirties. If his other loves had this ability, he would be the most fortunate man in the world.

"What a sharp tongue you have." He was enjoying the view when he noticed the color in her face, a hint of pink. She softly spoke. Lin Wanrong quickly composed himself and leaned in to listen.

Madam Xiao sighed slightly, "Perhaps you are right. Nothing is more important than the lifelong happiness of Yushuang and Yuruo. Lin San, I agree—"

"Really?!" Lin Wanrong jumped up, grabbing her small hand, "Madam, thank you so much!"

"Don't be too happy too soon," Madam Xiao calmly withdrew her hand, glaring at him, "I have a few conditions that you must agree to. Then I can promise you."

"What conditions?" Lin Wanrong, in his excitement, could not contain himself.

"First, although the Xiao family is not a prominent and wealthy household, we are not obscure either. Yuruo and Yushuang's marriage to your family must be honorable and public, with Xu Wei as the matchmaker, announced to the world. We must not disgrace my daughters."

"Of course, of course." Lin Wanrong was overjoyed, "I played matchmaker for Xu Wei in Hangzhou; now it's time for him to return the favor."

"Secondly, Yushuang and Yuruo are virtuous daughters and will never be concubines. Though you have married a princess, if she forces my daughters to be concubines, forget it."

This condition wasn't an issue, for in Lin Wanrong's mind, there was no distinction between wives and concubines. All were his wives, and he would treat them equally. "Madam, rest assured,

Qingxuan is virtuous and will surely get along well with Eldest Miss and the Second Miss. I guarantee it."

Madam Xiao said coldly, "Virtue is not something that is merely spoken of; keep your head for my daughters. Thirdly, I want you to—"

She paused, and Lin Wanrong stepped back in alarm, exclaiming, "Madam, what are you saying? You want me? Don't go too far! I'm not a frivolous person!"

"What nonsense are you spouting?" the Madam exclaimed in anger and embarrassment, wishing she could run up and kick him with her delicate foot. "I want you to marry into my Xiao family!"

"Oh, forget it then," Master Lin shook his head in disappointment, but he was startled by the Madam's next words. "Marry into the family? Are you marrying off a daughter or taking a son-in-law? My old Lin family has been passed down through nine generations, and I would rather die than marry into another family. Give up on that idea."

The Madam shook her head, helplessly saying, "I know this is unfair to you, but I am giving both my daughters from the Xiao family to you. There has to be some explanation to the clan and relatives. If you don't want to marry into the family, there might be an alternative way, but I don't know if you would agree."

"Let's hear it." Wiping the cold sweat from his forehead, Lin Wanrong was trembling with fear. "Marrying into your Xiao family, Madam, you truly are extraordinarily courageous."

"This matter is quite difficult to explain," Madam Xiao said softly. "My Xiao family is thin in numbers, and with a vast estate, only two daughters to inherit it. Once they marry you, more than half of the Xiao family's wealth will belong to you, making it hard to explain to the clan. But there's a way to silence them, although I fear you may not agree."

"You almost had me marrying into the family, so what else could I possibly refuse?" Lin Wanrong generously waved his hand, signaling her to continue.

"After Yuruo and Yushuang marry you, if they bear sons, would you allow one to take the surname Xiao?" the Madam whispered, her face showing some embarrassment. "In this way, the Xiao family will have descendants, and the clan will have nothing to complain about. What do you think?"

The children of Eldest Miss and Second Miss should bear the Lin surname after marrying Lin San. That was the ancestral rule. Taking a foreign surname was a great taboo for the Lin family, hence Madam Xiao's caution.

"I see," Lin Wanrong said, his face full of difficulty. "Madam, a child is the flesh of my body. To have him not bear the Lin name and instead take the surname Xiao is simply bullying."

"No, no," Madam Xiao quickly explained. "Only one child will bear the mother's surname. He's still flesh of your flesh, raised and taught by you, no different from your other children. He will just inherit the Xiao family's estate, establishing a new branch."

Changing a child's surname was a great taboo in that era, but to Lin Wanrong, it was nothing serious. He pretended to ponder for a while, finally speaking, "Madam, you are carving the flesh from my heart. But fine, since I am deeply devoted to the two young misses, let one child bear the surname Xiao. However, whether or not children are born isn't up to me alone. The process is troublesome; you must prepare Eldest Miss and Second Miss mentally so that they cooperate fully."

The Madam gave a light 'tsk,' her face showing joy and surprise. "So you agree? Lin San, I never expected you to be so open-minded. I have underestimated you. Today should be a joyful day, but Yuruo... We still don't know where she has been taken."

Her face turned bleak, but Lin Wanrong shook his head, saying, "Madam, rest assured, Eldest Miss will be fine. I guarantee that in a few days, she will appear before you, safe and sound."

Lin San was boastful in small matters but never careless in serious affairs. Madam listened with delight, "That's good, Lin San. Hurry and find Xu Wei to be the matchmaker, lest there be any further complications. Humph, no matter the imperial decree, my daughter will surpass that princess!"

Seeing the smile in Madam Xiao's eyes, Lin Wanrong had a faint feeling of being deceived. After all the fuss, it turned out that Madam was setting a trap for him. He had thought himself smart, but damn, her acting skills were simply divine.

Lin Wanrong turned to leave but then suddenly turned back, smiling, "Madam, you just mentioned having a child with the surname Xiao. Was that true or false?"

"Of course it's true," Madam Xiao smiled, "Why, are you thinking of going back on your word?"

"I'm not reneging," Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I just suddenly thought of something very important. Madam, you are still young, you could have a child on your own. Why would you need me?"

"You're asking for it!" With a light snap, Madam Xiao, in her anger, picked up her embroidered shoe and threw it hard. It hit the door frame. Lin Wanrong dodged and laughed gleefully. Teasing her a little was a way to regain face.

Upon reaching the front shop, he saw the Second Miss hiding behind the door, peeping into the yard. Her face was bright with anticipation yet shy and reserved, radiating an indescribable charm.

Seeing Lin San approaching, the girl named Yushuang was both ashamed and delighted. She wanted to walk away but couldn't move. She lowered her head and whispered, "Wicked man, what did you tell my mother?"

Lin Wanrong grabbed her little hand, laughing, "I didn't say anything much, just had a casual chat, and then I came out."

The Second Miss's expression tightened, "Then, our...our matter—"

"What matter?" Lin Wanrong grinned, "I've forgotten!"

Yushuang's face turned pale, tears welling in her eyes, "So, you didn't mention it to mother? You coward, I hate you!"

"I'm not a coward," Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, spinning her delicate body around, "You better prepare your bridal gown and red veil, and wait for the grand bridal sedan to arrive."

The Second Miss felt a momentary dizziness, her face flushed like autumn leaves, her joy mixed with tears. "I'll teach you to tease me," she struck him twice on the chest, then gently rubbed the spot, her face radiant with a smile. Afraid he might see her, she buried her head in his chest with a whimper.

Lin Wanrong was filled with mixed emotions and gave her a soft kiss on the ear. The Second Miss whispered, "Lin San, did you mention your matter with my sister to mother?"

Lin Wanrong hadn't answered when Yushuang spoke again, "If you didn't, I will ignore you forever."

Such a threat? Lin Wanrong laughed, "Of course I mentioned it. It's just Madam's attitude—"

"What's mother's attitude?" Yushuang became tense, "Did she not agree? You, useless person, usually so eloquent, yet unable to persuade even mother. If my sister doesn't marry, I won't marry either."

"Second Miss, honestly, aren't you jealous?" Lin Wanrong asked with utmost seriousness.

Xiao Yushuang's face was wet with tears, and she bit his chest fiercely, "You wicked thing, who's jealous—I'll bite you to death! It's not enough to bully me, you have to bully my sister too."

Lin Wanrong gently patted her shoulder twice, and the Second Miss loosened her bite, sighing softly, "She's my sister; I shouldn't be jealous of her. You scoundrel, if you dare to bully my sister, I won't forgive you."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "So, would you prefer me to dote on Eldest Miss more, or dote on you more?"

The little girl pondered for a moment, pouting her small mouth and giving him a look, then huffed indignantly, "Be good to my sister, and be even better to me. If she's good, I must be good too, not one less!"

Chapter 435 The Fairy Reappears

"Not a single one shall be left out!" Lin Wanrong's heart blossomed with joy, and he embraced her delicate body, gently caressing her back. "Second Miss, your words are wonderful. I will certainly adhere to your instructions without faltering, holding fast to the principles of fairness, justice, and openness. I'll make sure you and Eldest Miss live a happy and contented life."

Yushuang gave a soft acknowledgment and shyly said, "You've taken all the advantages. You must not fail me and my sister. Otherwise, I will die before your eyes."

"How could that be? Am I that kind of person?" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily twice, looking around mysteriously and saying, "In fact, Madam has made an improper request of me, but I cannot do it alone; I need your cooperation and that of Eldest Miss."

Second Miss was intrigued and anxiously asked, "What request did Mother make? Is it difficult to accomplish? You always leave your words hanging and make me worry."

Lin San whispered a few words into her ear. Yushuang blushed with embarrassment, lightly spat, and covered her burning cheeks. "How shameful! Why would Mother mention this here? If you want to have a child with my sister, I won't care about you."

The young girl's face was tender, and Lin Wanrong could not help but laugh, yet he sighed. "Yushuang, I am telling you this out of concern for you. Just think, once you, as my wife, have given birth to a child and added to our Lin family's bloodline, who would dare to bully you in our home? Wouldn't everyone dote on you and love you?"

Second Miss thought for a moment, feeling that his words were reasonable, and shyly lowered her small hand. She hesitantly asked, "Are you really telling the truth? But I have never been a mother, and I don't know how to have a baby. Lin San, you must teach me!"

"Teach? Of course, I will teach." Lin San said with a mischievous smile, "I have a colorful illustrated educational book here on how to have a baby. It's full of various positions, very vivid and lively. Let's study it together tonight."

"Whatever you say," Second Miss, unaware of his wicked intentions, snuggled into his arms and softly said, "Lin San, don't move out. How joyful the old days were, listening to your jokes and stories, and feeling happy in my heart. Now, if I don't see you for a day, I feel uneasy. This place is my home, but it's also your home. You can't abandon us."

Second Miss spoke warmly and sweetly, and Lin Wanrong was also moved. The grand mansion bestowed by the Emperor, with Qingxuan, Ning'er, and Qiaoqiao, gave a feeling of warmth and joy. In the Xiao family, with Madam and Eldest Miss taking care of everything, life was carefree and joyful. Both flavors were appealing, but he couldn't quite articulate which one he preferred more.

"I know you don't want to give up those little ones you're raising outside." Seeing that he remained silent for a long time, Second Miss pouted and hummed, her face full of grievance. "What's so good about them? Do my sister and I combined not compare to those little foxes you keep outside?"

He had quite a few wives, both young and old. Considering age, knowledge, or even cup size, it was hard to tell who was the youngest. Lin Wanrong laughed dryly, "What are you talking about, Second Miss? There's no big or small. We're all family. Even if she's small, I can make her big. Besides, you should have heard of these sisters. You've seen Miss Luo from Jinling Prefecture, right? She's a famous talent, but once you're married to me, you'll discover her other side. You also know Qiaoqiao, gentle and kind, and neither Madam nor Eldest Miss dislikes her. Then there's Qingxuan, who's rarely matched in beauty and virtue. When Eldest Miss and I were captured by the White Lotus Cult, she saved us on Mount Dangtu. I bet you'll like her the moment you meet her."

Second Miss hummed annoyedly, pouting her little mouth high: "You really live up to the name Lin San, keeping three little ones. I don't care; since you proposed marriage to my mother today, this is your home now. How can you abandon it and mess around outside? I've cleaned up your room for you. If those little foxes give you a hard time, tell them to come to me. The general of Zhenyuan has already prepared everything, and they'll see the power of Second Miss Xiao, hmph!"

Xiao Yushuang's face was stern, and her expression stubborn. The light green lotus-lined gown highlighted her newly developed body, making her look quite adorable.

"Alright, I'll stay." Lin Wanrong waved his hand generously, smiling, but he was thinking, 'Living in the Xiao family is fine, but there's no one to keep the bed warm. The back yard is full of women, Eldest Miss isn't around, Second Miss is still a blooming flower, unable to withstand my cannon's assault, and Madam Xiao can't help either. It seems I'll have to trouble Ning'er. But with this special environment to stimulate, maybe this little fox spirit will be more than happy.'

Second Miss, although grown up, still had a little girl's temperament. Seeing Lin San agree to come back, her joy was beyond words. She was busy preparing new quilts and clothes for him, carefully cleaning the doghouse he hadn't stayed in for two days, looking very focused.

Two days without returning, and with Eldest Miss not home and Madam falling ill, there was indeed much accumulated work in the Xiao family. The Tao family in Suzhou, being heavily hit, gradually declined, allowing the Xiao family to reclaim the top spot in the cloth business. They expanded by absorbing many of the Tao family's shops, becoming even more powerful than before. All the cloth shops across the country had to act according to the Xiao family's wishes. It was no wonder that Prince Cheng had to buy fake canvases from them.

Perfume and soap were already popular in Jinling and the capital, leading the trends of the great nation. The storm stirred up by the Xiao family was spreading to other provinces. Xiao's perfume and soap monopolized over half of the rouge and powder market. If they could lower the prices, capturing eighty percent wouldn't be impossible. Fubo from Jinling also brought good news; the newly cultivated gardens were flourishing, ensuring a supply of petals, greatly alleviating the

demand for perfume and soap. With the emerging perfume business and reclaimed cloth trade, the Xiao family was making money hand over fist, drawing envy from peers in various industries.

Never having lost in a battle with anyone, dealing in business was, for Lin Wanrong, as simple as could be, especially since it was his old trade. He had lived two lifetimes, witnessed three thousand people, wooed women, fought wars, killed men, played cunning games, and swindled. Whether it was something he should do or not, nothing was left undone. With his experience, what could possibly baffle him?

After reading the news reported from various regions and Jinling, he approved what needed approval and rewarded what needed rewarding. His handling of matters was clear-cut and orderly, even surpassing the Eldest Miss.

The young maid Huan'er watched with great astonishment and said, "This is Brother San's true skill. Once he returned to his old trade, our Xiao family was blessed. Second Miss, Huan'er offers you her congratulations."

Second Miss pouted, "You little girl, just a moment ago, you didn't even ask what was right or wrong and scolded him so badly. Luckily, he's good-natured. If it were me, I would have spanked your little bottom to bits."

Huan'er stuck out her tongue, "When Brother San wasn't here, weren't you the one complaining the most, Second Miss? How did you change so quickly after hearing a few kind words from him?"

"Yes, yes, I wronged Brother San," Huan'er chuckled, "I was just looking out for the two young misses! Second Miss, when should I prepare the wedding clothes and red robes for you? Brother San is quite impatient; I'm afraid he might not be able to wait."

Xiao Yuruo's little face turned bright red as she spat lightly, "Silly girl, it seems you're the one who's anxious. When you were scolding him earlier, it looked like he had let you down. If you can't wait, you can go warm his bed first. When it comes to sharing his affection, you won't be left out."

The mistress and servant teased each other, but their joy was evident. Seeing Lin San work hard, Second Miss tenderly served him tea and water herself. Si De, who was assisting Brother San, watched with envy, thinking, "A servant doing the master's work, and the young miss serving tea – when will such good fortune fall upon me?"

Because the Eldest Miss was invited by the Emperor, Madam fell ill, and Brother San disappeared, the Xiao family was left without a head, and Second Miss had to be called back reluctantly. Having spent a long time at the academy, Xiao Yushuang had matured and become sensible. Upon hearing of her family's misfortunes, although her heart was filled with grief, she persevered and managed things quite well.

Lin Wanrong, seeing the small abacus on the counter and recalling Yushuang's vow, smiled and asked, "Second Miss, you've been in the academy for a long time. How have you been learning the art of calculation?"

Yuruo playfully moved the beads on the abacus, making a rattling sound, and charmingly complained, "Do you even need to ask? Except for that Cheng Dawei, I'm the best student. Even Mr. Xu praised me for being clever and quick-witted. Look, three down five except two, four down five go one..."

Second Miss's face was full of smiles, her fingers nimble as she demonstrated her skill. Indeed, she was an excellent candidate for an accountant. Thinking of the young man named Cheng Dawei, Lin Wanrong smiled and nodded. Calculation was the foundation of natural science; teaching this young man the essentials of bead arithmetic so that he could carry it forward was, perhaps, a small contribution he could make to Great Hua.

"Lin San, I have a question for you." Second Miss remembered something and suddenly stopped moving the abacus beads. "That Jade Virtue Fairy Hall, was it really destroyed by your hand?"

Even the Second Miss had asked about this matter, revealing the extraordinary influence of the sacred institution. Lin Wanrong nodded, "I suppose so, but to be precise, it was destroyed by their own hands. Second Miss, why do you ask about this?"

"You," Xiao Yushuang, looked at him helplessly, her face filled with warmth, "You are truly capable of anything. The academy was turned upside down over this matter. Everyone divided into two factions, those attacking you and those supporting you, arguing to the point of almost coming to blows."

"Is that so? Second Miss, please tell me, what were they supporting, and what were they opposing?" Lin Wanrong became quite interested upon hearing this. The Capital Academy was the grand school of the land, filled with the elite of the elite. The fact that they argued so fiercely was indeed a great pleasure to him.

Seeing his delighted expression, Yushuang scolded, "You can still laugh about it? When I heard about it that day, I was nearly worried to death. Just by hearing the name, I knew it was you. There's no one else in the world as daring as Lin San. You bombarded that sacred institution, and the teachers and students of the academy instantly divided into two factions. One side accused you of reckless arrogance, daring to insult the sacred place in the hearts of scholars everywhere. They even talked about petitioning the Emperor together to punish you severely. These were venerable and respected scholars teaching political theory, history, poetry, and prose, and their fame was known throughout the land."

Lin Wanrong smiled dismissively, "What about the other side?"

"The other side consists of us, the students learning all kinds of extraordinary techniques. Those studying mathematics, agriculture, metallurgy, and also military strategy." Second Miss shook her head, laughing, "What we learn is considered unworthy of public display, incompatible with others studying poetry, history, music, chess, calligraphy, painting, and without status in the school. Hearing that you bombarded the sacred institution and planned to transform it into a school to teach all these various arts, offering great prizes to reward talented artisans and thinkers, everyone was thrilled and overjoyed, spontaneously forming a faction to support you, fighting against the other side."

"But they couldn't beat us," Second Miss giggled, covering her lips, "Our people are proficient in mechanical calculations, all clever and skillful, while all they could do was reason with us, quoting classics and giving long speeches that would make one's ears grow calluses, yet without making any clear point. Why, when we are all people of the land, should they be considered above us?"

Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter, proud of the influence he'd had, "Second Miss, you hit the nail on the head. This world belongs to the people, not the Jade Virtue Fairy Hall. The so-called sacred institution is only representative of those great scholars and aristocrats. It's quite normal for the students in the Capital Academy, who study these extraordinary skills and are mostly from humble backgrounds, to be indifferent to the sacred institution."

After resting for a moment, listening to Second Miss's sweet voice narrate interesting stories from the school, everything felt relaxed and pleasant. Suddenly, her expression tightened, and she firmly grabbed his hand, "Lin San, you told Si De earlier that you are going to the front line to fight the nomads. Is it true or false?"

Lin Wanrong sighed, his expression incredibly serious as he spoke, "Second Miss, I have a question for you. If there was a man, somewhat clever and somewhat lucky, having accomplished many things, and everyone looked up to him, hoping he could contribute to the country. But he himself

knew that his true abilities fell far short. If he hastily accepted the task, he might jeopardize national affairs. If you were him, what would you do?"

Yushuang pondered for a moment and shook her head, saying, "I am not well-versed in military and national affairs. However, since everyone praises him, and he has done many good deeds, it's impossible to say that he has only small cleverness and no great wisdom. If he is concerned about causing harm to the country because of himself, he is not a foolish person. With this motivation, how could he jeopardize the country? In my view, he is quite intelligent and capable of significant responsibility."

Lin Wanrong's face broke into a smile upon hearing this, playfully teasing the young girl, "So, if I go to the front lines, do you want me to go?"

Tears welled in Second Miss's eyes, and she nestled in his arms, clutching him tightly, "Of course I don't want you to go. In the battle at the front lines, swords and spears have no eyes. If you are harmed even slightly, I will not go on living."

Though she was young, her emotions were sincere. Lin Wanrong was moved, and as he was about to speak, Yushuang's delicate finger touched his lips, her tears glinting, "But a good man's ambition knows no bounds, and if you must go, I won't stop you. My sister and I will wait for you forever. If you live, I live; if you die, I die!"

The emotions in Lin Wanrong's heart were beyond words. He hugged her, comforting her earnestly. This little girl couldn't hide anything, and after hearing some jokes, her worries vanished. She served him cheerfully in his office, giving him sweet smiles now and then, dispelling Lin San's fatigue and filling him with energy.

Having dealt with all the major and minor affairs of the Xiao family, Lin Wanrong looked up to find that the day was drawing to a close. Shaking his sore wrist, he sighed, 'Eldest Miss really has it tough. Handling all these matters alone for so many years, I don't know how she managed.'

Qingxuan would undoubtedly be staying in the palace that night, as father and daughter had much to discuss. He sent Si De to deliver messages to Qiaoqiao and Ning'er, each wife replying with a letter. Qiaoqiao's handwriting was elegant and neat, "At noon, the Emperor issued a decree, sending Gao Qiu to guard our home with palace guards. Big brother, please take good care of the two Young Misses and the Madam, and don't worry about us."

Gao Qiu has come? Lin Wanrong was delighted, 'He's a familiar face. With him here, I'm reassured. I wonder if this is Qingxuan's arrangement or the Emperor intentionally trying to please me.'

Miss Luo's reply was much simpler, only a faint red kiss mark on the pure white paper, reminiscent of Ning'er's bright little mouth. It was indeed a letter that matched its sender. Lin Wanrong's heart fluttered. This little vixen didn't write a word; calling her to warm the bed tonight, would she be willing or not?

"What are you looking at? You haven't even lit the lamp?" A soft voice rang in the room, and the one who entered was Madam Xiao, whom he had seen at noon. Compared to earlier, she was now dressed much more modestly, her pale pink gown enhancing her elegant and graceful appearance. Her figure seemed more upright and full. She lit a match and ignited the oil lamp. In the dim lamp's glow, her face appeared as radiant as peach blossoms, revealing her charm.

"I didn't see anything." Lin Wanrong tucked the letter from the foxy Ning'er into his bosom and laughed, saying, "Madam, you've just recovered from a severe illness; you should be resting. Why are you up?"

"You remember that I've just recovered from a severe illness?" Madam Xiao looked at him helplessly, lightly coughed, and her face flushed with a hint of anger, "I see you're like a cat crying over a mouse. Who angered me with their words this noon?"

"Is Madam referring to me?" Lin Wanrong widened his eyes, feigning innocence, "What have I done? I've been dizzy from working all afternoon, and I don't remember anything I shouldn't."

Madam Xiao was well-acquainted with his shameless tactics, so she wasn't surprised by his words. She smiled faintly and said, "No need to boast in front of me. It's your duty to work in my house. Moreover, you've deceived and taken away my two daughters. What else do you want? Do you expect to be worshiped like a Bodhisattva?"

It seems like Madam bears some resentment towards him; her cold words have increased since he returned. But it was understandable, as he had stolen her two precious daughters. Sadness was inevitable.

"Ah, Madam, what's this?" Seeing Madam holding a porcelain cup and smelling a faint fragrance, Lin Wanrong asked in surprise.

"Nothing much, just a cup of bird's nest soup." Madam sighed slightly, "I've raised my daughter so well, and yet she turns against me. She prepared the bird's nest and then went to take care of your daily necessities, making me bring you food. Tell me, shouldn't I be annoyed?"

"Annoyed, of course you should be!" Lin Wanrong laughed, accepting the small cup, tasting it, and the light sweetness danced down his throat, intoxicating him, "But you see, I'm not a stranger. It's a waste to have such good things lying around unused at home. It's better to favor me. As the saying goes, 'the nourishing water should not be allowed to flow into others' fields.' That's exactly the point."

"What nourishing water not flowing into others' fields? You're quite shameless," Madam chuckled, glancing over the letters from various places on the table, surprised to find key points marked with circles. The replies were concise and powerful—Read! Send to Madam!

"You've already approved them. Do you need me to go through them again?" Madam shook her head, smiling, becoming more amazed as she continued, "Lin San, where did you learn these business tactics?"

"This is called 'marking points,'" Lin Wanrong shamelessly declared, "I only leave the decisions to Madam that I agree with; the others, I reject. As for business skills—natural talent!"

Madam had no time to respond, busily going through the documents on the table. The papers Lin San had agreed to were one thing, but what was strange were those he had rejected. With just a few words, he often pointed out a new path, inexplicable but possible to explore. It truly opened one's eyes and astonished.

Madam's expression was focused, graceful, her delicate face as translucent as crystal. Her eyebrows tightened and relaxed at times, her face now worried, now smiling, various emotions intermingling. Seeing her silence, Lin Wanrong was content with the peace, savoring the bird's nest soup, but thinking about when to cut a piece of the ginseng sent by Dae Jang Geum and add it to the bird's nest to see the effect.

"Sometimes, I must thank Yushuang, that girl." Madam closed the letter and sighed with a smile, "If not for her foresight in bringing you into my Xiao family, I would have missed out on such a great talent, and the Xiao family wouldn't have flourished as it is today. Although, the price was high, costing me my two daughters, and allowing them to fall into your clutches."

"Pain brings pleasure," Lin Wanrong said with a roguish smile. "It's called a win-win situation; no one loses."

What more could be said at this point? Madam shook her head and started to walk out. When she reached the door, she turned back suddenly, "Lin San, Yushuang tells me you're thinking of moving back to the Xiao residence?"

"I haven't decided—"

"Come back sooner," Madam sighed lightly. "It's rare for the Xiao family to find a reliable man like you. Inside and outside the residence, everyone has become accustomed to having you around. These past few days when you were out, the house seemed lifeless."

These words would have meant little coming from someone else, but from Madam's mouth, it was a genuine compliment, "Thank you for the praise, Madam. I will strive harder to achieve even greater glory—Oh, Madam, why are you leaving so quickly?"

Before he could finish expressing his loyalty, Madam Xiao had already walked far away, seemingly unwilling to listen to his nonsense. He helplessly tasted the bird's nest soup again. It was delicious!

After working at the Xiao residence, he felt a bit fatigued, but his mind was exceptionally clear. Yushuang was right; he was not a man without talent. He wasn't afraid to go to battle; avoiding it only made him seem less of a man. He had mostly taken care of the matters in the capital, found Qingxuan, and settled the marriage issues for Eldest Miss and Second Miss. Once he resolved the quarrels between Xian'er and Qingxuan, the home front would be unified and stable. When the time came, he could ask the Emperor for a hundred or so skilled guards to stand by his side on the battlefield. Even if they lost a battle, the guards would hold off the enemy, and he could escape back home to his wives with ease.

Going to war was not like other matters; a retreat plan was essential. He considered his strategies well laid out, ensuring his safety, and this made him feel more at ease about leading troops into battle.

Regarding Lu Dongzan, though he was still outraged, he gradually calmed down. What was done was done, and complaining was useless. If he could catch him once, he could catch him again. He feared nothing.

However, the situation with Eldest Miss was difficult, and thinking of the Emperor's three-day deadline made his head ache. That old man was as stubborn as him. It was truly vexing, even Qingxuan didn't care about him taking more wives! Madam and Yushuang both looked forward to Eldest Miss's return, and he knew he had to think of more ways to handle it.

After dinner, he couldn't find Second Miss anywhere. He asked Huan'er and Si De, and both were unaware of her whereabouts. This was strange; the residence was not that large, and where could Yushuang have flown to?

With a deep sense of bewilderment, he entered his room and was immediately taken aback. The room was cleaned and neat, spotless, with a pink silk curtain dividing it in the middle, gently swaying, its tassels making a soft sound, adding warmth. Looking beyond the curtain, the small bed he usually slept in had been replaced by a sturdy rosewood bed, spacious and strong, suitable for any activity. The bed was adorned with yellow and pink curtains, adding an element of allure.

Had he mistakenly entered the wrong room? The surprise in his heart was evident. As he was about to take a step, he suddenly heard a hurried breath from behind the curtain.

"Where has the Second Miss gone?" He whispered to himself with a slight smile, "It feels like ages since I last saw her. I miss her so much it hurts."

The breathing grew more rapid, as if one could hear the pounding of a heart. Lin Wanrong sighed sorrowfully, "Second Miss, where are you? I miss you so much I can't sleep."

A soft chuckle came from behind the curtain. Xiao Yushuang couldn't hold back any longer, her face flushed as she teased, "You fool, what nonsense are you spouting? When did you ever miss me so much that you couldn't sleep?"

"Ah, Second Miss, why are you hiding here?" Master Lin looked as if he'd seen a ghost, taking two steps back, his face flushed with embarrassment. "Oh no, you heard everything I said. How will I ever face anyone now?"

"Annoying!" The Second Miss, her face glowing, playfully threw a small pillow at him. Lin Wanrong caught it with a laugh. The pillowcase was brand new, embroidered on the front with a pair of mandarin ducks. Turning it over, he burst into laughter, for the other side had an embroidered lazy bear.

"Second Miss, you truly are imaginative," Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, giving Yushuang a meaningful glance. Overwhelmed with embarrassment, she lunged at him, trying to tickle him. "That's for laughing at me!"

He finally took a moment to admire her. The Second Miss wore a pink dress, her eyebrows delicate, her eyes bright, her nose pert, and her lips as red as cherries. She exuded joy from every pore. Her chest was proudly raised, her waist slender, and her curvaceous hips hinted at maturity. Her long legs accentuated her graceful figure, reminiscent of a newly bloomed lotus floating in clear water.

Lin Wanrong was utterly entranced. 'She's only seventeen and already so enchanting. When she reaches her mother's age, she'll be absolutely irresistible.'

Noticing Lin San's gaze lingering on her, especially on her chest and hips, the Second Miss blushed deeply. Yet, she unconsciously puffed out her chest, allowing him to admire her. With rosy cheeks and misty eyes, she whispered, "Why are you staring at me like that?"

Indeed, why was he just staring? It was time to act. Sensing the signals from the Second Miss, Lin Wanrong embraced her tightly, his hand gently caressing her back. "Yushuang, you look stunning. You've completely captivated me. I won't be able to sleep tonight. It's better not to meet than to be tormented like this after seeing you."

His sweet words came naturally, and at her tender age, the Second Miss was completely taken in. She blushed even more but listened intently, hanging on to every word. Feeling his hand slide down her waist, she felt a warmth throughout her body but let him take the advantage.

"Second Miss, when did you sneak in here? I searched for you all night and couldn't find you. I almost went to the Madam to ask for you." His flattery came effortlessly, unfairly implicating Madam Xiao.

"After preparing the room for you, I felt a bit tired, so I took a nap on the bed. Don't misunderstand, I, I didn't come looking for you on purpose," said the Second Miss, her face as red as rouge, even her ears were flushed through.

This was a clear case of the guilty party protesting his innocence. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "I understand, I understand. Second Miss surely didn't come on purpose; she must have walked into the wrong room. Second Miss, where is your room? I might walk into the wrong one tomorrow. What, you sleep in the same room as Madam? Never mind then."

As he spoke, his hands were not idle, caressing her small buttocks, as smooth as milk. He buried his head in her chest, feeling the soft protrusion, the fine warmth, and suddenly laughed, "Yushuang, you've really grown up. At least two sizes bigger. Eh, the left one seems a little bigger than the right one, could there be some development issues? Let me examine it closely."

As he spoke, his hand slyly reached for her chest. Second Miss blushed feverishly, quickly covering her chest with both hands, and gave him an annoyed glance, "You little thief, you're completely wicked. Mother says I can't let you take advantage until we're married."

"Is that so?" Lin Wanrong sighed, "Then I'll wait until I return from the battlefield. It won't take too long, just a year or so."

Second Miss, shocked, tightly grabbed his hand, "You, you are really going?"

Lin Wanrong sighed lightly, "If something is destined for me to do, I will not shirk. Life is like being r*p*d; if you can't resist, you might as well enjoy the pleasure."

Tears welled in Second Miss's eyes, and she grasped his big hand, pressing it to her chest, a fiery sensation turning her face red, "Wicked man, I promised myself to you, forever waiting for you. If you want to touch, touch to your heart's content, I won't tell Mother."

'I'm a beast, I'm worse than a beast,' Lin San thought, as he stroked her chest twice, his face full of shame. He withdrew his hand and chuckled twice, "Just joking with you, I'm not that kind of person."

The young girl nodded, suddenly pressing herself into his hand, hugged him tightly, then quickly stepped back, blushing all over, "How do you like the room I prepared for you? It took me several days to do it, I started organizing it yesterday."

"Good, very good," Lin San laughed, flipping over the mandarin duck pillow, "I love this teddy bear the most."

"Really?" Second Miss's eyes lit up with joy, "I embroidered this bear myself, and my elder sister embroidered the mandarin ducks. So you mean you like me more? That won't do, you must be fair. She's my own sister."

Another twist? Lin Wanrong was taken aback.

Second Miss's face was flushed, and she plucked up the courage to whisper in his ear, "The dress I'm wearing has a little bear embroidered on it too. When you come back from the war, I'll wear it for you."

Your dress? Lin Wanrong looked up and down; there were no bears, only flowers and grass.

"Dummy!" Second Miss punched him, her face as bright as the morning glow. She rushed out the door with a flash, casting a glance back at him, a mix of coyness, shyness, and resentment.

Oh dear, what a failure! Lin Wanrong slapped his hands together in annoyance. 'How have I become so inept?' he thought. 'I've regressed so noticeably, wasting all of Second Miss's efforts. You really can't underestimate the courage of these girls.'

He had spoken with Second Miss for a while, and although he had mostly taken advantage of the situation, there were moments of warmth and emotion. Lying in bed, he couldn't help but daydream. "If one day I go to the battlefield, I'm afraid I'll never find such touching moments again. Where is Ning'er? Why hasn't she come yet?"

Tossing and turning in bed, he drifted into a haze, not knowing what time he fell asleep. Suddenly, he felt a chill around his neck, but thought nothing of it. Turning over, he reached out to embrace the figure, saying, "Ning'er, you foxy temptress, why are you still wearing so many clothes?"

His hand had only reached halfway when he felt the chill tighten around his neck, a slight pain emerging. His drowsiness vanished, and his eyes snapped open to see a faintly pretty face before him.

The woman was dressed in white, her face without makeup, her brows like distant mountains, and her eyes like autumn waters. Her cherry-red lips were set in a pale face that was touched with vulnerability. Her expression was indifferent, and in her hand, she held a sword of autumn water, pressing it firmly against Lin Wanrong's throat, the tip almost piercing into his skin.

Lin Wanrong was stunned, his eyes widening in shock and joy. Suddenly, he yelled, "Fairy Sister, where have you been? I've missed you to death!"

As he spoke, his throat moved, and the sword's tip broke his skin. Although it was a shallow wound, it drew blood. Ning Yuxi's expression remained calm, showing no intention of withdrawing.

The piercing pain in his throat jolted Lin Wanrong awake. 'I haven't seen blood in a long time. I never thought that Fairy Ning would come to kill me today,' he thought with a look of despair, waving his hand in resignation. "Fairy Sister, you saved my life once. If you want to kill me now, just do it. If I even frown, I'm not Qingxuan's husband."

Fairy Ning's expression did not change. She coldly stared at him, the sword's tip inching further in. Sweat beads rolled down Lin Wanrong's forehead, and he could almost taste the approach of death. 'Damn it, I don't have to die on the battlefield now. That relieves many of my worries.'

He had faced life-and-death situations before, but none as perplexing and difficult as today. If Ning Yuxi had spoken, he would have had a fifty percent chance of saving himself. But Fairy Ning was like a person turned to stone, silent and emotionless. He had no choice but to lament.

"Big Brother—" a trembling voice called from outside the door. It was Luo Ning's voice. Fairy Ning's sword stopped abruptly, just a fingertip's distance from his most vital artery.

"Ning'er," Lin Wanrong said, tears filling his eyes. 'Good girl, your call came at just the right moment. If your husband survives this catastrophe, I'll spoil you three times a day.'

"Tell her to leave!" Fairy Ning finally spoke, her voice cold as iron, but to Lin Wanrong, it was heavenly music. 'As long as you speak, I have a fifty percent chance of surviving.'

"Lin San, are you asleep?" Madame Xiao's voice sounded outside the door. "Miss Luo says she has urgent business with you. She also said that if she doesn't find you, you'll be unable to sleep all night."

'This little vixen, still trying to seduce me at this time?' Lin Wanrong was torn between laughter and tears, wondering why Ning'er was so late. Then he remembered that she knew no martial arts, and besides entering through the main door, she had no other way. Her courage to rush here to warm his bed was already commendable, let alone saving his life temporarily.

He glanced at Ning Yuxi, noticing that her expression remained unchanged, but her sword was once again pressing closer.

"Ning'er, I'm alright." Under someone's roof, one must bow one's head, Lin Wanrong called out, "Under my bed, there's a cucumber with my name carved on it. You can use it for now and tell Qingxuan to instruct the kitchen chef not to kill the cucumber. Go back quickly."

"What cucumber? What nonsense?" Madam frowned and laughed at his words.

Miss Luo was also puzzled about her husband's intention with the cucumber. That her lecherous big brother stayed in his room and didn't come out was strange enough, let alone his random calling for cucumbers and Qingxuan.

"If that's the case, I'll go find my sister." Although Luo Ning didn't understand his intentions, she knew her big brother well enough to know this was no ordinary matter. Since he insisted on finding her sister, she mustn't delay. Being decisive, she turned and walked away.

Once their footsteps had faded, and everyone had gone, Ning Yuxi snorted without expression, "You think Qingxuan can save you?"

'Only a fool would think that way; I'm saving myself.' With just one word from the fairy, his chances of escape increased. Lin Wanrong was no ordinary man, his expression unchanged, he sighed, "My heart is dead; no one can save me. Fairy sister, I've died once at Qingxuan's hands and once at Sister An's hands. Now it's your turn. In truth, even if I die a hundred more times, I won't be frightened. Kill me; I've already become numb and have nothing to care about."

He closed his eyes, silent, his face wearing a strange expression, neither crying nor laughing, as if he had truly seen through the mortal world, his expression extremely calm.

"You think you can play games with me?" Ning Yuxi slightly raised her wrist, a sword light accompanied by a whooshing sound aimed directly at his neck. Lin Wanrong felt a chill to the bone, suddenly opened his eyes, "Fairy Sister—"

His eyes sparkled like lightning, Ning Yuxi was taken aback, her hand unconsciously slowed, "I'll never let you go. If you have any last words, get it over with; I'll give you a quick death."

"It's not really a last word." Lin Wanrong smiled faintly, his expression filled with reminiscence and bitterness, "Life is like a dream. The process of knowing you, Sister, is even more mysterious like a dreamland. Initially, a misunderstanding made us enemies, but gradually, after you saved me several times, we got to know each other. During the trip to Shandong, you, the fairy, accompanied me all the way, even risking your life to save mine. I once swore that, in my lifetime, I would never be against you again. But the fate of life is not in our control, as if heaven is playing with us. My acquaintance with Fairy Sister began with killing and ends with killing. It's like drawing a circle,

starting and ending in the same place. Even if you kill me, I will not resent. Dead, dead, dying once ends it all. Sister, please act quickly to avoid Qingxuan's arrival and spoil your mood."

He spoke with determination, his demeanor full of masculine fortitude. Fairy Ning faced him with cold brows, as though she hadn't heard his words at all. Her icy sword stirred a chilling wind as it whooshed past, striking beside his neck with a swish.

With a loud "boom," the sword grazed his neck, and Lin Wanrong felt a surge of hot blood, his body as light and soaring as a swallow.

Dead, he was dead, his soul had left his body. His whole body broke into a cold sweat, wanting to scream but unable to utter a sound. Struggling to look down, he was instantly overcome with wild joy.