

Finest 441

Chapter 441 The Heavenly Ladder

"Sister, is Big Brother really on this mountain?" Luo Ning lifted the curtain of the carriage window and peered outside, her face full of worry. The moonlight was like water, illuminating the crumbling ruins of the Jade Buddha Temple with an eerie glow. In the vast darkness, distant peaks and ridges loomed, emanating an indescribable, icy allure.

Sitting on a low couch, Xiao Qingxuan gently rubbed her belly and sighed. "It should be correct. Qiaoqiao, when you went to the Xiao family earlier, you didn't see My Dear, did you?"

Qiaoqiao softly hummed, her face filled with sadness. "When Sister Ning went to the palace to find you, I went to the Xiao family and even alerted the Madam and the Second Miss. At first, they also thought Big Brother was in the room. But after calling out to him for quite some time, there was no response. Helplessly, we broke in. The bed was still warm, but Big Brother had disappeared without a trace. The Madam and the Second Miss had no idea where he'd gone. The Second Miss was so anxious she even cried."

"What's there to cry about?" Ning'er's eyes were red. "We entrusted them with a good husband, and they lost him. We're already letting them off easy by not settling accounts. I noticed back in Jinling that the Xiao family's mother and daughter would order Big Brother around yet act cunningly. One moment they'd scold him, the next they'd reward him, making him unsettled. Big Brother is too soft-hearted; they've bullied him for so long that he's actually grown attached. Once we find him tomorrow, I'll forbid him from entering my room for three days. Let's see if he learns his lesson."

Qiaoqiao's face flushed as she thought, 'You wouldn't even last three cups of tea without him, let alone three days. It'll be you pulling Big Brother into the room, for sure.'

Hearing Luo Ning's straightforward words, Qingxuan shook her head and chuckled ruefully. This girl was even more jealous than her. She wondered how the Xiao family's mother and daughter had offended her.

"It's just a man. Is he really worth all this worry?" The young girl, Li Xiangjun, lazily turned on the couch and extended her fair arm from under the silk quilt towards Xiao Qingxuan's belly. "All this noise has kept me up. Honestly, it might be better without him. Then I could just share a room with you, Sis, and be happy. Sister, may I also—"

Her little hand reached toward Xiao Qingxuan's protruding belly. Qingxuan flushed and lightly slapped her hand away. "You cheeky girl, I'm talking with your elder sisters."

Li Xiangjun's eyes reddened slightly. She huffed, "I just wanted to feel what the baby is like, not take advantage of you. Let me guess, if your husband wanted to touch, you'd be delighted. That man was already making waves early yesterday morning. You think I don't know? He's not even afraid he might hurt the baby—"

Qingxuan gasped, her face turning crimson. Ning'er chuckled and covered her red lips. "Sister, Big Brother is a scoundrel of the world; you mustn't indulge him in everything. Little Sister Xiangjun, you sure are well-informed!"

Li Xiangjun huffed again, not sparing her a glance. "I know a lot, indeed. Like a certain someone who cries out so sensuously in the middle of the night—'Big Brother, come quickly!'" She pinched her nose, imitating Luo Ning's seductive tone, capturing the essence perfectly.

"I'll get you, you little minx!" Ning'er's face flushed a deep red. Though she was usually unreserved among her sisters, this was too much for her to bear. She lunged forward, chasing after the mischievous young girl. Li Xiangjun giggled and darted behind her senior sister, sticking her tongue out at Luo Ning.

"Xiangjun, stop fooling around," said Qiaoqiao, the most mild-tempered of them all, as she pulled Li Xiangjun aside. The young girl looked at her gratefully and chuckled, "Qiaoqiao is always the kindest to me. No wonder that awful man dotes on you so much, holding you in his arms every night, even without his clothes on."

Even the ever-patient Qiaoqiao couldn't help but blush. Li Xiangjun was an oddball who always seemed to be up to something. According to her, she had done her fair share of eavesdropping.

Seeing the young girl tease every lady in the carriage, even her own senior sister, Ning'er felt more balanced. She laughed, "Little sister Xiangjun, you're both trained by the same master, so why is the gap between you and my sister Xiao so wide? You seem more like someone taught by my big brother, equally lecherous. Don't get me wrong, I'm praising you. 'A gentleman loves beauty but is disciplined about it.' That's exactly how my big brother is!"

Li Xiangjun's diversion immediately lightened the mood in the carriage. Xiao Qingxuan, however, furrowed her brows and turned cold, "Xiangjun, you're still young and ignorant. Who taught you all this nonsense? A young lady should not speak so recklessly. What will become of you when you grow up?"

Apparently fearful of Xiao Qingxuan, Li Xiangjun stopped her antics and quickly grabbed her hand, pleading, "Senior sister, I didn't mean any harm. You've been daydreaming about your Dear Lin for the past six months. Master is often away, and I don't get along well with the other sisters. So I just read some random books, that's where I learned all this. Please don't be mad. I promise I won't act out again."

"So it's a lack of guidance," mused Luo Ning, pulling Li Xiangjun behind her as she spoke up for her, "Sister, Xiangjun is still young and was just playing around. Don't be too harsh on her. By the way, how are you so certain that my big brother is on this mountain?"

The carriage fell silent as they turned to serious matters. Xiao Qingxuan sighed, "Both you, Ning'er, and My Dear speak with deep meanings. The cucumber carved with his name represents him. Telling the kitchen staff not to kill the cucumber means that my master intends to kill him."

"Master's back?" Li Xiangjun exclaimed in joy before noticing the murderous glares from the women in the carriage. She promptly quieted down.

Ning'er looked horrified, tears slowly streaming down her face, "Your master wants to kill my husband? What are we going to do? Sister, your martial arts are so strong, and your master is even more powerful, my big brother doesn't stand a chance. If he's gone, I won't want to live either."

Xiao Qingxuan shook her head slowly but firmly, "Don't panic, Ning'er. I understand my master's character. She's resolute and decisive. Think about it—if she really wanted to kill My Dear, she would have done it already at the Xiao residence. Why would she bother taking him away?"

This made sense to Luo Ning, and she regained some composure, "But if your master didn't take him away to kill him, then why? They're like fire and water; I can't even imagine what they're going through right now."

Indeed, what could happen when her husband and her master were together? Would they fight? Miss Xiao felt an indescribable sense of worry. She shook her head and sighed softly, "I really can't say. Only Master and My Dear would know. At this critical moment, we can't afford to lose our composure. We must remain focused so that My Dear can feel at ease. Although Master is a skilled martial artist, our husband has never relied solely on martial prowess to win. He has walked all the way from Jinling, facing numerous dangers yet always managing to turn peril into safety through wisdom and calculation. If Master fails to kill him the first time, she will find it even harder thereafter. We must have faith in him."

Xiao Qingxuan spoke rationally and reassuringly. As she pointed out, the best chance to kill Lin San was only once. Miss it, and he'd become as elusive as a cat with nine lives, impossible to kill.

"Sister, do you know where Master has taken Big Brother? It's so cold and damp up in the mountains; I wonder how many layers of clothing he's wearing. What if he catches a cold?" Qiaoqiao muttered, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"I don't know," Xiao Qingxuan shook her head and sighed, her heart even heavier than Qiaoqiao's. On one hand was her master who had raised her and taught her martial arts; on the other was her lifelong companion, her husband. How could she choose between them?

"We'll have to go up the mountain to find out. First, we'll visit Master's residence and then search the surrounding areas. I've already secured a military seal from the Emperor, allowing me to mobilize tens of thousands of soldiers from three different camps. We'll search thoroughly within a twenty-mile radius and won't retreat until my husband is found."

Xiao Qingxuan's words were tinged with determination. Born into a noble family, she carried herself with grace and poise, commanding instant respect. Luo Ning and Qiaoqiao felt much more at ease after hearing her words.

As they arrived in front of the Jade Buddha Temple, their convoy came to a halt. A rider galloped toward them from a distance, swiftly dismounting to kneel in front of the carriage, "General Hu Bugui, at your service, Princess Chuyun. Please give your instructions."

Luo Ning recognized Hu Bugui. He had helped Lin Wanrong find the silver back in Shandong. Elated, she grabbed Xiao Qingxuan's arm and said, "Sister, this General Hu has been working with our husband and is quite competent."

Xiao Qingxuan nodded calmly, "I'm aware. When Ning'er summoned Xu Wei to the palace late at night to find me, I knew something had happened to My Dear. While requesting the military seal from the Emperor, I made sure to mobilize the old forces that my husband had commanded in Shandong. They would be dedicated in their duties, making it easier for me to coordinate efforts."

Indeed, Xiao Qingxuan was a royal princess, wise and seasoned, with a meticulous approach to problem-solving. Luo Ning and Qiaoqiao listened in admiration.

"General, please rise," Xiao Qingxuan said softly from behind the curtain, "My Dear and I are husband and wife, already promised to each other by the Emperor. From now on, I'm a member of

the Lin family, so don't address me as 'Princess' anymore. All of you are good brothers who have been through life and death with my husband. I'll call you Brother Hu."

"I dare not," Hu Bugui was overwhelmed with emotion as he kowtowed repeatedly, "Rest assured, Madam. General Lin is the backbone of our supply army. Without him, we are nothing. The soldiers under my command have all fought bloodily alongside General Lin in Shandong. We will not allow anyone to harm even a hair on his head."

"Indeed, a princess is a princess. With just a few simple words, you've won their hearts," Luo Ning admired, exchanging a glance with Miss Xiao. Xiao Qingxuan paused briefly. "If that's the case, I'll leave it to all of you. Brother Hu, please encircle this area within a radius of twenty miles. Conduct a thorough search, inward from the perimeter. Leave no stone unturned. Fire a cannon every half hour, so that My Dear knows we are close by."

Xiao Qingxuan orchestrated the proceedings seamlessly. Hu Bugui quickly left to carry out the orders. Soon after, the first cannon fired, its roar echoing through the valley.

Supported by Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning, Xiao Qingxuan stepped out of the carriage. As she heard the reverberating cannon fire, she lightly touched her protruding belly and gave a wry smile. "This child is truly unfortunate; its mother has just been freed, and now its father is imprisoned."

Qiaoqiao fretted, "Sister, the mountain is cold, and the journey is hard. You are pregnant; you should not go up. Luo Ning and I can go find big brother."

Xiao Qingxuan shook her head firmly, "That won't do. You two are not familiar with the mountain or the Master's habits. You might easily overlook important details. I am trained in martial arts and can handle myself. Don't worry; we will find My Dear soon so our family can be reunited."

Their pleas were in vain; they had no choice but to agree. Li Xiangjun, the little girl, clapped her hands gleefully, "Wonderful! Both Master and Senior Sister are back, and so am I. This is indeed a family reunion."

Tens of thousands of soldiers lit their torches and lined up to ascend the mountain. From a distance, it looked like a luminous staircase leading to the heavens. The four women walked amidst the army, their anxious hearts pushing their footsteps to be the fastest.

Both Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan's troops were the very soldiers that Lin Wanrong had personally led in Shandong. In everyone's eyes, these insignificant soldiers became overnight heroes because

of Lin Wanrong. General Lin was brave, righteous, and had an illustrious military record; who would not respect him?

Upon learning that these women were the wives of General Lin, and among them was the renowned Princess Chuyun, the troops felt invigorated. They naturally formed a protective circle around the women, using their bodies to shield them from the chilling wind.

"What are they doing? Can they really block the cold wind? How silly!" Li Xiangjun couldn't understand the sentiment and began to mock the soldiers.

"Silence!" All three women shouted in unison. Not just Qingxuan and Ning'er, even the usually good-tempered Qiaoqiao changed her expression and glared at her.

Annoyed, Xiao Qingxuan snorted, "Xiangjun, you're too young to discern right from wrong. These soldiers are like ordinary folks; their emotions are the most sincere. They are not being good to us because I am a princess, or because you are attractive. They respect not us, but my husband."

Qiaoqiao lowered her head, tears shimmering in her eyes. "The respect they have for big brother was won at the cost of his life. Don't joke about this."

Ning'er's expression hardened. "Little sister, let me warn you very seriously. If you dare to speak like this in front of big brother, he will surely kill you."

"Ah—" Li Xiangjun, startled, burst into tears. "You're all bullying me; I'm going to find Master!" Stamping her small feet, she dashed toward the mountain and disappeared in an instant.

The three ladies exchanged glances, and Miss Xiao sighed, "Xiangjun is a bit headstrong but means no harm. Please don't blame her."

"I don't blame her," Qiaoqiao said as she wiped her tears and held Ning'er's hand, smiling. "Sister Ning'er, your recent mannerisms and expressions seem increasingly similar to big brother's!"

"Really?" Ning'er bashfully covered her cheeks, secretly pleased. "Where do I resemble him? That would be dreadful!"

Qiaoqiao's words served as a revelation. Even Miss Xiao was shocked. Hadn't this sort of talk always been exclusive to Lin San? How had it fallen to her? Truly, a woman takes after the man she marries.

"Is that so?" Ning Yuxi's demeanor suddenly changed, becoming unutterably indifferent, a stark contrast from before. Lin Wanrong carefully spoke, "Fairy Sister, I don't want to leave just yet. But Qingxuan is pregnant and has risked much to find me in these mountains. If something goes wrong, I'll die heartbroken. As they say, better to be fickle than faithless. I'll just step out for a moment and return immediately—"

Ning Yuxi remained silent, eyes closed, a tranquil expression on her face, as if she hadn't heard him at all.

What was this attitude? Was she letting me go, or not? Lin Wanrong frowned, deep in thought. Finally, gritting his teeth, he thought, 'Ning'er, Qingxuan, Qiaoqiao—they're all down the mountain. And Qingxuan is carrying a heavy burden. How could I abandon them? What kind of man would that make me?'

Determined, he stood up and walked to the door, then looked back to see the fairy sitting motionless on the bed. 'So be it,' Lin Wanrong sighed deeply and walked away, never looking back.

Ning Yuxi opened her eyes, looking at the medicinal salve and telescope tossed on the floor. The blazing fire reflected on her face, tinged with a hint of unspoken sorrow.

Exiting the stone cave, crossing the hot springs, he arrived at the cliff's edge. Gazing into the distance through the mist, he could barely make out rows of lights at the bottom of the mountain, like fireflies, slowly moving upwards. Across from the Fairy Hall, obscured by clouds, the thundering sound of cannons was ceaseless.

"I'm here, I'm here. Qingxuan, Qiaoqiao, Ning'er—" cupping his hands around his mouth, he shouted down the mountain with all his might.

The wind whisked his voice away, scattering it before it could travel even ten yards.

'I must have been hungry tonight,' Lin Wanrong thought, gritting his teeth. Gathering all his strength, he yelled at the top of his lungs. This towering peak, Thousand-Forsake Peak, was shrouded in mist and far removed from the closest Fairy Hall. Even if his voice were magnified a hundred times, no one would hear him, no one would see him. In the eyes of the world, he was but a speck of dust on this mountain peak, invisible to all.

His shouts and leaps were all in vain. Having exhausted all his energy, his throat felt scorched. Overwhelmed by both fresh injuries and old pains, he collapsed onto the ground, gasping for air. The Fairy was right; this peak was isolated from the world, unreachable by human effort. Even if he screamed for a lifetime, no one would hear him.

'Am I really going to die here?' A sense of powerlessness washed over him. Lying on the cold ground, he let the icy wind blow over him, lacking the energy to even stir.

"Why have you stopped shouting?" A gentle voice came. Ning Yuxi stood at the entrance of the cave, her face radiant with an indescribable joy.

"All I wanted was to speak a few words with Qingxuan. Why is it so difficult?" Looking up at the hazy stars, Lin Wanrong sighed, "Sister, you are Qingxuan's master. You should care for her as I do. Can you bear to see her lose her husband, and her child lose its father?"

Fairy Ning's expression remained calm. "I do care for Qingxuan, but this situation is your doing. Everyone has to be responsible for their own actions. Did you consider the consequences when you attacked the Fairy Hall? This is your punishment."

Facing the stubborn Ning Yuxi, he felt utterly helpless. He could only shake his head in resignation, his eyes fixed on the twinkling lights in the distance. Though close, they seemed worlds apart—a feeling he knew he'd never forget.

Seeing his dejected state brought an indescribable satisfaction to Ning Yuxi. The two sat silently, facing each other at the cave entrance. The mountain wind was cold, and Lin Wanrong was already numb, but he bore it silently. Ning Yuxi watched him, her eyes full of mysterious thoughts.

After an indeterminate amount of time, shouts erupted from the mountain below: "General Lin, General Lin—" Although the collective cry of tens of thousands was earth-shattering, it became ethereal by the time it reached the peak. Lin Wanrong leapt up, shouting, "I am here, Qingxuan, I am here!"

A pillar of fire suddenly rose in the distance, piercing the clouds. Lin Wanrong's eyes moistened. This was a signal—it had to be Qingxuan and Qiaoqiao.

Fire? Fire! Startled, he turned and dashed back into the cave.

"Are you looking for this?" Ning Yuxi held up a lighter, a faint smile on her lips.

Lin Wanrong's eyes brightened. He was about to nod when he realized something was amiss—the Fairy wouldn't be this cooperative.

"Watch carefully!" With a cold expression, Ning Yuxi hurled the lighter over the cliff. It fell like a gust of wind, disappearing without a trace.

"You—" Lin Wanrong sprang to his feet, his heart already overwhelmed with fury. "You threw away the fire starter. What are we going to eat or drink now? How could you be so malicious?"

"What did you say?" Ning Yuxi stood abruptly, her expression filled with indescribable sorrow and anger. "Say it again!"

"I said you're malicious. Am I wrong?" Lin Wanrong was infuriated, no longer retaining any pretense of politeness.

"I—I will kill you!" Tearfully, Fairy Ning shouted, her feet barely touching the ground as she lunged at him.

Lin Wanrong chuckled disdainfully, holding his head high, "Go ahead and kill me; it won't be the first time. Do you have anything else to offer other than martial arts?"

"I'll kill you, you little thief!" Ning Yuxi charged forward, her fist raised to strike him in the chest. Lin Wanrong steeled himself and took the hit squarely, a grunt escaping his lips as fresh blood trickled down from the corner of his mouth. Yet, he didn't make a sound.

Seeing his unyielding spirit, a pang of unspeakable pain struck Ning Yuxi's heart. Her teeth clenched, she unleashed a volley of punches and kicks onto him.

"If you can't kill me, I'll bite you to death!" Lin Wanrong spat out the blood at the corner of his mouth, his eyes gleaming fiercely.

For some reason, seeing his ferocious eyes made Ning Yuxi's heart quiver. Fearing him for a fleeting moment, she turned her head away and softened her blows.

"Not daring to hit me anymore?" Lin Wanrong sneered, a trace of contempt in his eyes.

Ning Yuxi was even more stubborn than him. Born never to bow her head, upon hearing his words, rage flared up inside her. Gathering all her energy, she aimed a powerful double-palm strike at his chest.

Lin Wanrong lowered his eyebrows slightly, a fleeting look of longing in his eyes, but not of fear. Fresh blood still flowed from the corner of his mouth, yet his face wore a strange, enigmatic smile.

Seeing the fresh blood at the corner of his mouth, Ning Yuxi felt as if she had been stabbed in the heart. Realizing her palms were about to land, she dispersed her inner energy hastily. Her palms landed softly, like tufts of cotton, on his body. Tears involuntarily flowed from her eyes.

Seizing the opportunity of her emotional turmoil, Lin Wanrong swiftly embraced her slender waist and whispered into her ear, "Sister, I'm going to bite you!"

"What are you trying to do—umph—" Ning Yuxi exclaimed in surprise as she was pulled into his arms, her lips met with his bloodstained, fervent kiss.

Her heart rate surged, her mind going blank, unaware of anything. A mixture of sourness, bitterness, and sweetness overwhelmed her as if a bottle containing all flavors had been upended in her heart. She struggled violently, raining punches and kicks on him, but they were feeble. Her ferocity seemed to have vanished.

Lin Wanrong was not to be trifled with. Clenching his teeth, he drew her tender body closer into his embrace as they both tumbled onto the ground.

Ning Yuxi seemed to have forgotten all her martial skills, behaving like a petulant woman as she thrashed around, punching and kicking him. Lin Wanrong tightly clasped her lithe waist, pressing his lips onto her bright red mouth and refusing to let go, come what may.

The two of them tumbled ceaselessly on the cliff, grappling with one another, neither willing to yield. Several times they rolled dangerously close to the cliff's edge, about to plunge down together. Ning Yuxi's heart trembled as she met Lin Wanrong's fearless eyes; not knowing how to warn him, she could only return shyly to their previous position. To Lin Wanrong, it felt as though the celestial beauty before him had willingly kissed him. In that instant, he couldn't help but hold her tighter. His hot tongue invaded her small mouth, seeking out her red, tiny tongue, and sucking on it passionately. Her mouth seemed to have a faint, indescribable sweetness that overwhelmed him.

Ning Yuxi felt lightheaded and dizzy, as if she had lost herself. The only thing she remembered was: This man had overpowered me, I can't defeat him, but I will never submit.

On this isolated peak, no one would disturb them. They embraced tightly, rolling around, back and forth countless times. Lin Wanrong's head felt foggy, and his mouth had been bitten several times by Ning Yuxi. Blood seeped out, causing his lips to swell. Ning Yuxi's willpower was extraordinary; another woman in her situation would have long given up, but she continued to struggle against Lin Wanrong, leaving their battle unresolved.

Suddenly, with a yelp of pain, Lin Wanrong's head collided with a rock, causing him to grimace. Tears nearly escaped his eyes, but he still clung tightly to Ning Yuxi's waist. They lay atop each other, panting heavily, staring into each other's eyes.

In a daze, Lin Wanrong noticed tears brimming in the corners of Ning Yuxi's eyes. They were crystal-clear like pearls, trickling down and landing on his chest. For a moment, he was entranced and softly called out, "Sister..." He lifted his head to kiss her small mouth but felt a sudden sharp pain—Ning Yuxi had bitten his lip. Her tiny white teeth sunk into his flesh, and droplets of blood oozed out.

Ning Yuxi sprang up, her clothes torn and disheveled. Her ample bosom and slender waist occasionally revealed themselves, bursting with youthful allure. She didn't care, though, and her tears flowed freely as she covered her cheeks and cried out, "How could this happen? I hate you, I hate you!"

She had been reduced from her celestial grace, but had gained a touch of worldly charm. Coupled with her stunning face and clear teardrops, she seemed like the world's most beautiful peach blossom, blooming atop the isolated peak.

Her small foot stomped on Lin Wanrong's chest, going back and forth a few times. However, she couldn't muster the strength, and in her teary-eyed vision, she couldn't describe her mixed emotions. Sobbing, she covered her cheeks and rushed into a nearby cave.

Chaos, utter chaos. Lin Wanrong lay on the ground, taking deep breaths. 'Sister is Qingxuan's master, Qingxuan is my wife, and here I am, alone with her master—everything's a complete mess,' he thought. Just the memory of Ning Yuxi's taste made his heart warm up again. Not only was she stunning in appearance and figure, but her strong-willed personality was unlike any he had ever encountered. The clingy tactics he usually disdained proved to be incredibly effective here.

"Ah—" he let out a long, loud cry, finally venting his pent-up emotions. His body was covered with injuries, and not a shred of his clothing remained intact. Worst of all, his lips had swollen like under-fermented steamed buns. Luckily, he was in a place where no one could see him; otherwise, he would have been a laughingstock.

The cliff on the opposite side had been ablaze since the fire was kindled, and it never ceased. Amid the roaring flames, he thought he saw the smiling faces of Qingxuan, Ning'er, and the others. The taste of being so near yet so far was enough to break his heart.

He lay still for a long while, concerned about the fairy inside the cave. Finally, unable to put his mind at ease, he mustered the strength in his fractured bones to walk inside.

As soon as he entered the stone chamber, he saw Ning Yuxi seated on a couch. Her complexion changed from pale to flushed, her tears not yet dried. Her lips were slightly open and red, and her beautiful eyes were swollen from crying. Her dark hair hung down softly, and she seemed lost in thought. Her clothes were tattered and could no longer be worn.

"Get out!" Ning Yuxi coldly huffed.

"I won't leave, even if it kills me," Lin San stubbornly replied. "Fairy Sister, can we talk?"

"You won't leave?" Seeing his swollen lips, Ning Yuxi was annoyed and embarrassed. She wished she could bite him again and suddenly stood up. "Then I will leave—"

Her expression was resolute, showing no sign of jest. Lin San quickly grabbed her and sighed, "Fine, I'll leave. My skin is thick; I'll be fine even if I freeze for ten or twenty days."

Noting that the fairy made no attempt to stop him, he reluctantly exited. As he turned the corner, he saw the homemade communication device and picked up the bamboo tube, shouting loudly, "Hello, hello, sister, I like you, I like you. Did you hear me? Please reply if you did. Ou Wu Er!"

What did Ou Wu Er mean? Ning Yuxi felt her face turning red as she grasped the bamboo tube. She thought to herself, 'Nonsense, sweet talker. I don't believe you.' Her heart was pounding, a feeling she couldn't describe. She almost threw the bamboo tube away several times but kept it eventually.

After an indeterminate amount of time, she snapped back to reality. She opened her eyes to find that it was already dawn and there was a faint light outside. Lin San had gone silent, and she wondered what he was doing.

Looking at her tattered clothes, she shook her head slightly. She could no longer wear her beloved white dress. She was on a cliff, isolated—where could she find a second set of clothes? She couldn't hide from his gaze even if she were dressed; what would happen if she were not? Her face flushed at the thought. Pushing aside these concerns, she adjusted her appearance and slowly stepped outside.

The flames on the opposite cliff had not been extinguished all night. It must have been Qingxuan's idea. The sky was bright, mist was rising, and the clouds obscured everything. Neither sound nor sight could cross this distance; it would be strange if the others thought of looking here.

She glanced around but saw no sign of Lin San, which struck her as odd. Suddenly, she heard the sound of tinkling from the edge of the cliff. Panicked, she leapt over and found Lin San hanging onto a rock at the edge of the cliff. Half his body was leaning out as he held the precious sword, making tinkling sounds as he carved something into the cliffside.

"Sister, you're awake?" Lin San turned his head and smiled at her, dew still clinging to the hair beside his ear, his face flushed from the mountain wind.

She clenched her teeth and grunted, averting her eyes, "What are you doing here?"

"Your clothes are torn," Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, a look of regret in his eyes. "Don't worry, one day I'll get you new ones, and you'll be the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Don't bother with sweet talk," Ning Yuxi retorted, her voice trembling slightly as she feigned indifference. "Aren't you afraid of heights? What if I kick you off this cliff?"

"I've grown accustomed to it," Lin Wanrong chuckled, going back to his work. The morning sun, breaking through the thin mist, illuminated his face, painting it a golden hue. Ning Yuxi looked at him silently, a warm feeling stirring within her. It made her heart tremble, though his swollen lips annoyed her enough to look away.

Down the mountain, the search party's steps never ceased. Every so often, horns would sound, and cannons would roar. Several times, distant drumming echoed from across the sea of clouds. At each of these moments, Lin Wanrong would stand and shout in that direction, hoping someone would hear him.

It was all in vain. Ning Yuxi offered a faint smile, not stopping him. Watching him oscillate between hope and disappointment was, in its own way, enjoyable.

By midday, utterly exhausted, Lin Wanrong leaned back and sighed. Suddenly, a strange fragrance filled the air. Turning his head, he found some vibrantly red fruits wrapped in verdant leaves beside him. They were warm to the touch, obviously freshly washed in hot springs. Ning Yuxi looked away, refusing to make eye contact.

"Sister, are you afraid I might fall?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, noting Ning Yuxi's proximity. He picked a fruit and tasted it; it was wonderfully aromatic and flavorful.

"Who's worried about you?" Ning Yuxi quickly backed away, snorting dismissively.

After gobbling two fruits, Lin Wanrong nodded, "Fairy Sister, were these fruits washed in the hot springs?"

"Why so many questions?" Annoyed, she took a small bite from a fruit, her movement graceful.

"They taste wonderful. You must have bathed in the spring last night!" Lin Wanrong chuckled, trying to gather the remaining fruits.

"You're asking for trouble!" Flushing red, Ning Yuxi flicked her fingers, sending the fruits plummeting into the ravine. Lin Wanrong broke into hearty laughter and returned to his work.

Ning Yuxi stood by his side, resisting several urges to see what he was doing. His teasing remarks made her grit her teeth and hold back.

The army searching for Lin Wanrong had camped below the mountain. Every so often, they would call out his name, cannons firing and lights visible across the way. Lin Wanrong looked longingly in their direction, eyes moist. Once the calls ceased, he threw himself back into his work.

Days and years seemed irrelevant in the mountain. Three days had swiftly passed. Each night, he slept outside the stone chamber. Although the fairy sister never invited him in, he always woke up inside, mysteriously relocated, while Ning Yuxi slept soundly on a bed far from his own.

The army at the base of the mountain had never ceased their search, their clamor growing louder by the day. Lin Wanrong could even faintly hear a woman's cries among the noise. Gritting his teeth, he wished he could leap off the cliff right then.

By the morning of the fourth day, unable to contain her curiosity any longer, Ning Yuxi peeked out. She saw that Lin Wanrong was carving a series of footholds into the cliffside, each with holes—steps that could be scaled by hand and foot.

"What are you doing?" Her expression turned cold.

"Building a staircase to the heavens," he chuckled. "This mountain may be thousands of feet high, but my energy is boundless. I've calculated it; if I keep up this pace, carving one or two steps each day, I'll reach the base of the mountain in thirty years."

"Thirty years?" Ning Yuxi sneered. "By then, you'll be an old man. What would you go down for?"

"It doesn't matter how old I am," Lin Wanrong sighed softly. "What's crucial is that I fulfill the promises I've made to you."

"What promises have you made to me?" Ning Yuxi was puzzled.

Lin Wanrong smiled gently, "This is called the Ladder of Love. One step a day, and in thirty years, I can carry you down this staircase. I told you, I will get you a brand-new outfit, making you the most beautiful woman in the world. I will keep my word. Sister, you must wait for me."

Ning Yuxi was stunned. How could this fool have such thoughts? Her shoulders trembled, her body quaked, and her eyes filled with tears as if a dam had burst. She lunged at him frantically, "You're courting death! You're risking your life, you thief! I hate you, I absolutely loathe you—"

Pounding his chest with all her might, her heart felt as if it had been emptied. Unable to contain her aching sorrow, she buried herself in his arms and burst into uncontrollable tears.

Chapter 442 Sinking Into Despair

The eastern horizon was barely tinged with a fish-belly white, and looking into the distant sky, all was still shrouded in darkness. No sign of dawn was in sight. The mountain wind howled, and bursts of bone-chilling gusts made faces ache with cold.

Xiao Qingxuan stood on the edge of the cliff, her face pallid, her eyes filled with a subtle melancholy. The mountain wind rustled through her flowing hair and long gown, making her seem like a fairy who had been banished to the mortal realm.

"Sister, why didn't you sleep a bit longer?" A soft voice came. Daintily, a cashmere shawl was draped over Xiao Qingxuan's shoulders. Teardrops glimmered in the eyes of the speaker, who whispered, "Sister."

Xiao Qingxuan turned around, took her sister's hand, and said with a bitter smile, "Aren't you the same as me? Even Ning'er was calling out for My Dear in her dreams last night."

"It's not the same," the younger sister, Qiaoqiao, responded, her cheeks flushed red from the cold. A trace of resolve appeared on her face. "Without Big Brother by our side, you are the backbone of our family. Moreover, you're carrying our family's heir. If something happens to you, Big Brother will be devastated when he returns."

"Don't listen to his nonsense," Xiao Qingxuan's cheeks flushed as she retorted, "My Dear is just a smooth talker. The child hasn't even been born yet; how would he know it's a boy?"

"Big Brother is never wrong about serious matters," Qiaoqiao said earnestly, "Even if he jokes around, he has never been wrong about important things. If he says you're carrying our family's heir, then it must be a boy."

Xiao Qingxuan broke into a delicate smile, "You really spoil him, placing so much trust in him."

"He's my Big Brother, my husband," Qiaoqiao said, her face flushing with shyness as she gripped Xiao Qingxuan's hand tightly. "I must confess, from the moment I first saw him in Jinling, I knew he was different from others. He seems indifferent about everything, but he handles everything well. From that moment, I trusted him completely, believing every word he said. Even when he was deceiving the tavern owner and tricking the Xiao family, I felt joyous and fulfilled being with such a 'bad man.'"

"He didn't just deceive the tavern owner and the Xiao family; he has also stolen our Qiaoqiao's heart," Xiao Qingxuan said with a gentle smile.

Qiaoqiao shyly twisted the corner of her dress, her eyes filled with unwavering affection, "I don't blame him! I... I willingly give him my heart."

"My sweet sister, you really make my heart ache for you," Overwhelmed by emotion, Xiao Qingxuan pulled her into her arms, "Don't worry, as long as I'm here, no one will ever harm you."

Blushing, Qiaoqiao nodded softly, "I've only ever told you these things, sister. I've never said any of this to Big Brother. Seeing him happy and joyful every day brings me an indescribable happiness."

Feeling an unspeakable emotion well up inside her, Xiao Qingxuan hugged her younger sister tighter, stroking her flowing hair, "My silly sister, you really know how to make one's heart break for you." She sighed softly, "The connections between people are truly mysterious. Just half a year ago, you, Ning'er, and I were merely strangers. Now, we share our deepest secrets like sisters. As for My Dear, that scoundrel, although his heart might be fickle, he has chosen extraordinary women. Even if he could bring himself to leave us, I could never let go."

In the biting wind, two figures huddled close, exchanging words that brought their hearts and minds even closer. The sound of shuffling footsteps drew near. It was Hu Bugui, his hair crowned with dewdrops and his bushy beard encrusted with frost, who came running up the cliff.

"Madams," he reported, his tone tinged with disappointment, "My men have meticulously searched twice within a twenty-mile radius and found no trace of the General."

Xiao Qingxuan nodded gently, "Thank you for your efforts, brother Hu. Please relay my order: the troops will make camp here and rest for three hours."

Hu Bugui shook his head stubbornly, "We're not tired. The General is our backbone. As long as he remains missing, we will not rest."

Xiao Qingxuan sighed, "I understand the sentiments of our soldiers. But please, brother Hu, convey my words: our rest now is to expedite our search for My Dear later. We mustn't let our emotions dictate our actions. The scope of our search will gradually narrow down, focusing on the Jade Buddha Temple and Thousand-Forsaken Peak."

Hu Bugui nodded, his face etched with anxiety. "Today is the fourth day, and there's still no word from the General. Could it be—"

"No," Xiao Qingxuan interrupted, her face radiating a steadfast resolve. "My Dear is unmatched in his wit and intelligence. Nobody can claim his life. Not only is he alive, but he's also surely doing well."

Seeing such faith from the princess, Hu Bugui felt reassured and hurried down the mountain to make arrangements. Qiaoqiao, still filled with worry, said, "We've searched everywhere around us but haven't seen a trace of Big Brother. I wonder where your master has taken him."

"Where he is, I don't know yet," Xiao Qingxuan smiled, "But what I do know for certain is that My Dear is still alive." She slowly opened her hand to reveal a small white medicine pouch. Qiaoqiao exclaimed, "Sister, what is this?"

"This is a knockout drug," Xiao Qingxuan's eyes softened as she smiled. "I gave it to My Dear for self-defense when we were in Jinling. It suits his nature well. The night he went missing, I found traces of this drug sprinkled across the slope, leading all the way here."

"Really?" Qiaoqiao's eyes brimmed with joyful tears. "No wonder you ordered our camp to be set here and had torches burning throughout the night. Big Brother is so clever!"

Qingxuan gripped her hand, her face wearing a deep look of pride. "I've said it before, my husband is the smartest man in the world. No one can take his life."

Excited, Qiaoqiao clapped her hands and turned to dash towards their tent. Xiao Qingxuan quickly pulled her back, "Qiaoqiao, where are you going?"

"I'm going to share this wonderful news with Sister Ning," Qiaoqiao's face flushed with excitement.

"Let her sleep a bit longer," Qingxuan sighed deeply. "These past days, Ning'er has been running around like a madwoman, never resting for a moment, personally verifying every single location. Seeing how frail she usually appears, who would have thought she had such strength within her?"

"Ning'er is just like that, daring to say and do whatever she believes in," Qiaoqiao said with a smile. "Sister, by your account, if big brother has scattered the medicinal powder all the way here, why do we still need to search within a twenty-mile radius?"

"Although the powder has reached this point, I can't determine where Master took him. We have to search the vicinity first to narrow down the area; only then can I gain a clearer understanding," Xiao Qingxuan replied.

"Then where is big brother now?" Qiaoqiao furrowed her brows. "We've already searched this area thoroughly."

"We haven't searched everywhere," Xiao Qingxuan said, lifting her eyebrow slightly. She extended a slender finger to point at a distant peak. "There's still Thousand-Forsake Peak!"

"Thousand-Forsake Peak?!" Qiaoqiao was shocked. "According to General Hu's investigation these past two days, Thousand-Forsake Peak is extremely steep. The cliffs are practically unscalable. How could big brother and your master have climbed it?"

"My master and my husband are extraordinary—one is unmatched in martial arts, and the other in intelligence. What's impossible for them?" A misty layer appeared in Xiao Qingxuan's beautiful eyes, and her expression suddenly grew somber. "I grew up here and know every plant and tree. The day we camped here, I noticed that the chain linking the two peaks was broken. I had people pull it up yesterday and found it had been severed by a sword—"

"Is big brother really on the other side?" Qiaoqiao stood still for a moment and then suddenly leaped up, frantically waving toward the opposite peak. "Big brother, big brother, we've found you!"

"Silly girl." Xiao Qingxuan grabbed her and wore a bitter expression. "That chain was the only path between the two peaks. With it broken, we're cut off from him. Even if My Dear is truly there, how could we bring him back?"

"Don't worry, don't worry—" A charming voice sounded from behind. Luo Ning, half-awake and with her clothes still unbuttoned, rushed over with a face full of joy and embraced Xiao Qingxuan's arm. "Sister, you're saying big brother is really over there?"

Seeing that Luo Ning had not fastened her clothes properly and had left most of her ample bosom exposed, Xiao Qingxuan laughed. "You little wench, aren't you afraid of catching a cold? What if big brother comes back and is heartbroken?"

"I'm not afraid. If he sees, he won't even blink, and his mouth will be watering," Luo Ning said, exaggeratingly acting it out. Her face flushed as she giggled. "Sister, you've worked hard these past few days. Let me reward you. You can touch it, hehe, big brother's favorite!"

"You naughty girl! Let him touch it, then!" Xiao Qingxuan blushed and chuckled. Yet deep inside, she felt an indescribable sense of joy. The playful banter between the sisters seemed to lift the oppressive mood of the past days. Most endearing was this little imp Luo Ning, who appeared to enjoy being mischievous but had a heart of gold. She somehow always managed to make everyone happy.

"Sister—" After frolicking with Xiao Qingxuan for a while, Luo Ning could hold back no longer. Her shoulders began to shake, and she buried her face in Xiao Qingxuan's embrace, quietly breaking into tears.

"Don't worry, don't worry," Xiao Qingxuan quickly patted her on the back, her heart aching. "It's all that scoundrel's fault. Once he comes back, I'll forbid him from entering the house for three days, to avenge my sister Ning."

"Sister, if you punish him like that, he'll be more than happy." Luo Ning wiped away her tears and said softly, "He has plenty of vixens outside. Even if he doesn't come home for half a month, he'll be thrilled. In my opinion, we sisters should employ some tactics to capture his heart and make him forget about those other women."

Xiao Qingxuan chuckled, "You little minx, if you want him to spend more time in your room, just say so. Why pin the blame on others? I think you're the most beguiling vixen."

Flustered at being caught out, Luo Ning hurriedly snuggled into Miss Xiao's arms and cooed, "That's not true! Anyway, big brother is so wicked that neither Qiaoqiao and I can handle him. You're welcome to join us—"

Miss Xiao gave a soft tsk, her cheeks flushed. She wouldn't underestimate this bewitching young girl anymore. The three ladies laughed and played for a while, their bonds deepening. Then Xiao

Qingxuan's thoughts returned to the pressing issue, "Ning'er, what did you mean earlier? If My Dear is on that peak, how can we get him down?"

Luo Ning nodded seriously, "I can't figure it out, but someone else might! Besides big brother, there's another genius when it comes to mechanical traps!"

"Xu Zhiqing?!" Miss Xiao exclaimed.

Luo Ning nodded softly, "Yes, though I wonder if she'd be willing to help, given how big brother treats her."

"You little minx," Miss Xiao pointed a finger at her forehead and smiled, "Just now you said he has many vixens, and now you're speaking up for another woman. Don't worry—" A resolute look crossed her face, "If Xu Zhiqing can really save My Dear, I'll beg her to come, even if it means serving her tea and kowtowing."

Qiaoqiao frowned, "The most important thing now is to confirm whether big brother is really on Thousand-Forsake Peak. Besides, with your master around, even if we invite Sister Zhiqing and she builds a mechanical device, big brother wouldn't be able to use it!"

It was a harsh reality. Fairy Ning was so skilled that even ten My Dears together couldn't match her. If she didn't approve, the best mechanical device would be useless. The three ladies felt a headache coming on. Luo Ning clenched her teeth and grumbled, "Don't worry, I trust big brother's capabilities; he'll defeat sister's master."

Defeat the master? How could he? Xiao Qingxuan gazed at the opposite peak, feeling a headache approaching.

Ning Yuxi threw herself into Lin Wanrong's arms, crying uncontrollably. She didn't resemble a celestial being from the ethereal realms, but rather a common woman ensnared by love.

So the celestial being has descended! Lin Wanrong sighed emotionally and held her slender waist. He kissed her ear softly and whispered, "Sister, don't believe my words. I was lying to make you cry. I'm actually a bad person—vulgar, despicable, shameless. I built this ladder to escape—"

"What nonsense are you talking about!" Ning Yuxi's tears flowed like rain. She grabbed the sword from his hand and threw it to the ground, then hid back in his arms, pounding his chest desperately, "You thief, even at a time like this, you're still lying to me. I know better than anyone what kind of person you are."

‘Am I really a good person in Fairy Sister's eyes?’ Lin Wanrong deeply wondered.

"I—I am a shameless woman, aren't I?" After an unknown amount of time had passed, Ning Yuxi stopped her tears and collapsed into his arms, her voice soft and full of tenderness. "I am Qingxuan's master, and you are Qingxuan's husband. We—"

Before she could finish her sentence, his burning lips met hers, sealing them in a passionate kiss. The heat seemed to fill her whole being, warming her thoroughly.

This was the third time, and that fiery sensation was becoming strangely familiar. Her heart pounded wildly, and an indescribable joy filled her. Trained from youth in spiritual practice, aspiring to be a fairy, she felt in that moment as though he had led her into hell—and she reveled in it.

She surrendered. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she tightly wrapped her arms around him. Their embrace was so close, so intimate, that not even a piece of paper could fit between them. Her eyes closed, her long eyelashes quivering, she offered her lips once more, her tongue mingling with his.

The kiss shook the heavens and stirred the earth, intensifying with each moment. Both of them, like newborn babes, cast aside all societal norms and reveled in their joyous ocean. Even someone as powerful as Ning Yuxi found herself trembling, as if she couldn't get enough air.

"Am I a shameless woman?" Finally freeing herself from his entanglement, a faint tenderness glimmered in her eyes. Her face flushed, and her lips parted slightly, oozing an indescribable allure.

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Sister, don't talk about shamelessness in front of me. All the thick-skinned people in the world combined couldn't match me. With an ancestor like me to back you, what do you have to fear? Up here, it's just the two of us—no Qingxuan's master, no Qingxuan's husband. I am a man, and you are a woman. It's as simple as that."

Ning Yuxi's face reddened, "I've never met anyone like you—someone who isn't ashamed of shamelessness but takes pride in it. Meeting you must be my karmic retribution."

"Who cares about fate or karmic retribution? Even the gods can't tear apart lovers!" Lin Wanrong waved his hand dismissively, arrogant and domineering.

This rascal! Ning Yuxi glanced at him, wanting to laugh but found herself shedding tears instead. Lying in his arms felt like the calmest harbor in the world. She felt at peace and couldn't think of anything troublesome. An inexplicable weariness crept into her heart, and she found herself falling asleep.

Her long eyelashes were wet with glistening tears. In the morning light, they shimmered with a rainbow of colors. Her pure, white face looked as translucent as crystal, as if sculpted from the most beautiful jade, without a single flaw. Her disheveled clothes revealed a voluptuous chest smooth as jade. Her curvy hips rested on his legs, soft as silk. Her long, beautiful legs, white as snow and smooth as satin, entwined together, forming the most perfect curve.

Holding her body—a masterpiece of art and beauty—Lin Wanrong felt tremors of emotion swell within him. He suddenly leaned down and gently kissed her lips. "Sister, I never wish to know how long the heavens will last or how eternal the earth is. My aspirations are modest: I hope to remember you for ten lifetimes. By the eleventh, I wish to become a stone, knowing nothing at all."

In her deep sleep, Ning Yuxi's tears trickled down silently, falling to the ground without a sound.

The two remained close, from sunrise to sunset, neither moving an inch. Lin Wanrong felt significantly calmer. Looking at the raging fires in the distance, he experienced conflicting feelings. He wanted both to rush over there and to stay right where he was. It was the most difficult decision he'd ever faced in his life.

By evening, Ning Yuxi finally awoke. Seeing him gaze at her, her face flushed with embarrassment. "What are you looking at, you rascal?" she chided, then suddenly covered her face with her hands, anxiously asking, "Do I look ugly right now?"

"I wouldn't know," Lin Wanrong chuckled, "because I've never seen you look ugly."

"Flatterer!" Ning Yuxi lightly scolded. Her face flushed as she quickly stood up from his embrace. She moved to the edge of the hot spring, washing her face with its clear water, then began tidying

her disheveled hair. Every now and then, she would look back at him and smile, an indescribable sense of tranquility and warmth emanating from her.

‘So even a celestial being like her could have such gentle moments,’ Lin Wanrong thought. He was captivated by her every charming move, and even more so by the glimpses of her alluring figure, partially concealed by her clothing.

"What are you looking at?" Ning Yuxi's face flushed, hastily covering herself. Yet her hurried action revealed even more, delighting his eyes.

"Stop it!" she lightly spat, but felt an indescribable sense of happiness. Though she was the master of Qingxuan and already in her thirties, her feelings toward such matters were as naive as a young girl's—experiencing a mixture of sweet and sour emotions she'd never felt before.

"I haven't taken advantage of you," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "I'm showing even more skin than you are!"

"You vulgar rascal," Ning Yuxi murmured. Realizing that she couldn't properly conceal herself, she finally gave up and gestured for him to come over. "Come here!"

"What for, Sister?" Lin Wanrong leapt over to her side.

Shaking her head and smiling, she softly said, "You're as restless as a monkey. I've never seen you so obedient."

"I was actually at Qing—" He caught himself midway, halting his words abruptly.

Ning Yuxi seemed not to hear him. She helped him sit down and scooped up a handful of spring water. Gently she poured it over his face and hair, her tender hands softly scrubbing away the dirt and tears from his face, then meticulously arranging his disheveled hair. Her actions were so gentle and caring that she resembled a newlywed wife.

"Sister, I—" Lin Wanrong's voice choked up. But Ning Yuxi interrupted him, pulling him by the hand, "Come here!"

Both of them squatted by the edge of the spring, looking into the water. The pool was crystal clear, reflecting their two faces: one a young man, sharp and rugged, brimming with masculine vitality; the other a woman, extraordinarily beautiful, as enchanting as a flowering branch.

Fairy Ning stood still for a long time, torn between joy and sorrow. She both laughed and cried, her tears falling into the water below. She murmured, "I was born before you, and by the time you were born, I had already grown old—"

"Both branches bloom in spring, eternally youthful year after year!" Lin Wanrong tightened his grip on her hand as he responded, his voice unwavering.

Fairy Ning's tears fell like rain. She pointed to the opposite shore and sobbed softly, "You speak so beautifully, but I must ask you one question—will you go back?"

At this, Lin Wanrong hesitated. As he gazed upon the towering flames on the opposite peak and then looked back at Fairy Ning's stunningly beautiful face, he was momentarily lost for words.

Chapter 443 Lighting a Fire

He pondered for a long while, cautiously saying, "Theoretically, I should go back because Qingxuan, Qiaoqiao, and my unborn child are all waiting for me there. But emotionally, I want to spend more time with you. Sister, if you were me, what would you do?"

Fairy Ning looked at him and said softly, "You're quite slippery, turning the topic back to ask me. Your heart is your own; who can control you?"

Ning Yuxi's expression remained indifferent, but a tinge of melancholy was visible in her eyes that she couldn't quite conceal. Lin Wanrong felt a pang of heartache. He quietly grasped her small hand and ventured, "Sister, why don't we go down the mountain together—"

"Go down the mountain?" Ning Yuxi's face revealed a trace of bitterness. She nestled into his arms and murmured, "Up here on this isolated peak, we're just a man and a woman—not Master of Qingxuan, nor husband of her either—free from the world's vendettas. I can be happy and carefree only when I'm with you. But if we go down—" She paused, unable to continue.

Lin Wanrong pulled her delicate frame into his arms, lightly kissed her hair, and laughed loudly. "So what if we go down? Happiness is something you have to fight for yourself. We've been honest with

each other and never committed any atrocities. Even Heaven can't control us. I don't care about other people's opinions."

"But what about Qingxuan? Wouldn't she care?" Tears filled Ning Yuxi's face as she wept silently. "Even if she doesn't care—I do! I'm her Master, and you and I share a blood feud. We've broken taboos—"

"What taboos?!" Lin Wanrong stood up, his eyebrows arching in anger. "What taboos could there be between you and me? Yes, you're Qingxuan's Master, but you're also my Fairy Sister. I've never called you 'Master.' In my eyes, you're a Fairy Sister, not a Master. We are a single woman and a devoted man, mutually in love, neither kin nor trivial. Not even Heaven would dare to separate us. What talk is there of taboos?"

"But how would the world see it—"

"What world?" Lin Wanrong swung his sleeve and shouted, "Who is the world? Who can speak for the world? Sister, it's ridiculous. For someone as divine as you, you're less open-minded than a mere mortal like me. Life is but a fleeting moment; how can we live for others? If we can't even fight for our own happiness, what's the point of living?"

He cupped his hands around his mouth and, using all his strength, yelled across the empty valley, "Let the whole world hear me—let the whole world hear me! I, Lin Wanrong, love Ning Yuxi! I love my Fairy Sister, and I will marry her and love her forever, taking care of her for all eternity! Should I break this vow, may I be struck by lightning, pierced by a thousand arrows, suffer unbearable agony, and meet an untimely end—"

Exerting all the strength he could muster, his voice traveled far and wide, echoing through the vacant valley, faintly reverberating, "—I love my Fairy Sister—will love her forever—take care of her forever—should I break this vow—meet an untimely end—"

"You've gone mad—" Fairy Ning hastily covered his mouth. Tears streamed down her face as she hid in his embrace, her shoulders trembling violently. She wore a smile that clashed with her tears and was choked with emotion, as if on the verge of fainting.

"I'm not mad!" Lin Wanrong gently stroked her hair and spoke softly, "Reputation, honor—these things are worthless in my eyes. Happiness is what truly matters. If one day you choose to leave me in secret, I'll write a love letter, make a million copies, and distribute them door to door. Aren't you afraid of people knowing? I'll announce it to the world that the elegant, fairy-like Ning Yuxi is the woman I, Lin Wanrong, adore as my wife. That we were blessed with seven sons and eight

daughters, among them a pair of twins. I'll make sure you can never be a 'fairy' ever again! You know how ruthless I can be, so don't doubt my determination."

Ning Yuxi's face flushed with both sweetness and bitterness in her heart. She pounded his chest and wept, "Seven sons and eight daughters, twins? You wicked rogue, always bullying me like this—just kill me!"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Not seven sons and eight daughters? Would it be eight sons and seven daughters then? Ah, it seems I remembered wrong. Your memory is certainly better."

This man had no shame. Ning Yuxi felt a profound sense of helplessness. Facing him, all her strategies seemed to fail. Yet, his cheerful, shamelessly domineering attitude filled her with a joy she couldn't resist.

After talking for a while, Ning Yuxi's mood gradually calmed down. Regarding the matter of leaving the mountain, she neither shook her head nor nodded, leaving her true thoughts a mystery.

In the past, Lin Wanrong could easily deal with Qingxuan using shameless tricks, but Fairy Ning was different. She had devoted herself to rigorous cultivation from a young age and faced far more trials. Her resolve was incomparable to ordinary people, so Lin Wanrong dared not pressure her excessively.

As dusk settled, the flickering light from a burning fire on the opposite peak faintly glowed. He wondered anxiously about the situation with Qingxuan and her companions. Casting a glance toward the opposite peak, Lin Wanrong was torn between conflicting emotions—an uncommon experience for someone usually so decisive. Sensing his inner turmoil, Ning Yuxi's eyes dimmed as she lowered her head in silence.

The mountain was full of exotic flowers and fruits, and with Ning Yuxi's extraordinary knowledge, they had no trouble finding delicious fruits. They would never go hungry if they stayed here for a lifetime.

"It's late. Let's go inside," said Fairy Ning, who had spent the day both crying and laughing. Though not physically tired, she felt emotionally drained. She gently pulled Lin Wanrong's hand and smiled softly.

"Alright, alright," Lin Wanrong nodded hurriedly, feeling as if he'd received an unexpected favor. He grinned, "Let's quickly go into the cave—our room."

Ning Yuxi's face flushed, and she slapped him, "What nonsense are you talking about? I'm a cultivator, I can't indulge in worldly desires. Who would want to be with you—" She let out a light 'tch' and couldn't continue.

"I know, I know," Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. "Cultivators don't call it a bridal chamber, they call it dual cultivation. Essentially, it's the same thing. I get it, I get it."

"Scoundrel!" Fairy Ning glared at him, her face flushed, and chided softly, "What dual cultivation? I am practicing spiritual arts, not Daoist rituals. I am no different from an ordinary person."

"In that case, we should be talking about the bridal chamber!" Lin Wanrong nodded, "I was just saying, the bridal chamber is much more straightforward and universally understood!" Hearing his nonsensical rambling, Fairy Sister blushed and shot him a glance before she hurriedly pulled him inside the cave.

He had been in and out of this stone cave dozens of times, but this one time felt the most exhilarating. Holding Fairy Sister's delicate hand and admiring her exquisite figure and peerless beauty, he might have abandoned everything to stay with her on this mountain forever, had he not already had loving wives waiting at home.

As they reached the entrance of the stone chamber, Lin Wanrong paused out of habit. Ning Yuxi glanced at him, her cheeks tinged with a slight red hue. "What are you doing? Haven't you had enough sleep on that cold stone floor?"

What did she mean? Elated, Lin Wanrong saw Ning Yuxi had already left him behind and entered the chamber.

He hurriedly followed her in, only to find Fairy Ning gracefully using the tip of her sword to flick on a dimmer switch, illuminating the room. As she turned her head, her cheeks appeared as if they had been lightly brushed with rouge, a captivating blend of pink and red, utterly enchanting.

Ning Yuxi sat on the edge of the stone bed. She beckoned him with a soft wave of her hand, "Come over here!"

Bridal chamber or dual cultivation? He had never seen such a stunningly tender celestial being. Lin Wanrong's heart pounded uncontrollably. He swiftly leapt to the edge of the stone bed, sitting closely beside Ning Yuxi, the subtle fragrance emanating from her body delighting his senses.

Ning Yuxi's face was flushed, her expression gentle. She placed her hands on his chest and slowly leaned into his embrace, "Don't get the wrong idea. I'm concerned you might catch a chill outside, not that I want to—" Her voice trailed off as she lowered her eyelids, her cheeks burning against his chest, unable to speak.

Good heavens, how could he possibly not misunderstand? Fairy Sister's soft, boneless body nestled against him felt like a piece of precious silk that could slip away at any moment. Her full breasts pressed against his chest were indescribably plump and soft, while her long, tense legs were pressed against his, creating an indescribably intoxicating sensation through inadvertent friction.

"What, what do you want to do with me?" Lin Wanrong's voice quivered as he gently caressed the soft curve of Fairy Sister's waist.

"You shameless rogue!" Ning Yuxi's face was suffused with blush, her body limp in his arms as if drained of all her strength, her own heartbeat loud in her ears, "I have been practicing rigorously for years, you—you cannot ruin me—ah—"

His heated hands had already slipped under her clothes, caressing her smooth, jade-like back. Her heartbeat quickened, her lips parted, a mist forming in her eyes.

"Rogue!" She suddenly let out a soft cry, two tear drops rolling down her beautiful cheeks, falling silently.

Startled, Lin Wanrong looked up to find Ning Yuxi biting her red lips, her eyes clouded like rain, large tear drops falling one by one. Her face expressed a mixture of joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure, her beauty both poignant and heartrending.

"Sister—" Lin Wanrong stared in a daze, catching a glimpse of the faint sorrow in her eyes. A profound sense of guilt surged within him. 'I'm really such a base creature.' Fairy Ning had an unparalleled resolve, and she had recently experienced a roller coaster of emotions, falling from the heavens to the mortal realm with no cushion in between. Anyone would be unable to bear such a turn of events. Lin Wanrong quickly embraced her tightly and sheepishly said, "Sister, I was only teasing you. Do you really think I'm that kind of person?"

Ning Yuxi suddenly bit his arm and sobbed, "You are exactly that kind of person, do you think I don't know?"

'I'll endure it!' Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth and clenched his jaw, keeping silent. After a moment, Ning Yuxi suddenly lifted her tear-streaked face. Though her visage was awash in tears, she was enchantingly beautiful as she gazed at him with a heartfelt smile. "Little thief, thank you!"

"Thank me for what?" Lin Wanrong asked in bewilderment.

Fairy Ning nestled her cheek against his chest, gently rubbing it, her face flushed in bashful emotion. She spoke softly, "Thank you for treating me this way. Making you restrain yourself must be the hardest thing in the world."

'Is this praise or criticism?' Lin Wanrong didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Seeing his puzzled expression, Ning Yuxi chuckled and shook her head, guiding his hand to her waist as a flush rose on her face. "Since you've pulled me into the mortal world, I can no longer be a fairy. Why worry then?"

"No worries, no worries!" Lin Wanrong chuckled, "The most precious moments should be saved for the best times. I'll just wait for our wedding night then."

"The wedding night?" Ning Yuxi murmured. Her rosy face turned slightly pale, and tears suddenly fell like rain. Her voice trembled like a mosquito, "Let's leave that to fate then. Little thief, hold me tighter, even tighter..."

...

"I love Fairy Sister... if I break this oath... I will never die in peace..." On the cliff edge, Xiao Qingxuan was startled by an elusive voice carried by the intermittent mountain wind. She quickly strained her ears to listen, but the voice vanished. Anxiously, she grabbed Qiaoqiao's hand beside her. "Qiaoqiao, did you hear that? What was that sound?"

"Where's the sound? It's just the wind; I hear nothing."

"No, no, there was a sound, it must be My Dear, it must be him!" Miss Xiao became visibly excited, staring intently towards the opposite peak. "He must be there!"

Qiaoqiao glanced across to the opposite cliff; clouds and fog obscured the peak, making it impossible to see clearly. She hurriedly grabbed Xiao Qingxuan's hand, "Sister, Thousand-Forsake Peak is hundreds of feet away from us. Even if Big Brother shouted, the sound wouldn't reach us. Are you so smitten that you're delusional?"

"No, it has to be My Dear." A mist appeared in Xiao Qingxuan's eyes, "I heard him shout!"

"Really?" Qiaoqiao was skeptical, "Is Big Brother really there? What did he shout?"

"He said he—" Xiao Qingxuan paused and then shook her head, "No matter what he said, he must be there. Qiaoqiao, go down the mountain and inform Miss Xu right away!"

"Sister, is Big Brother really there?" Looking at the hurriedly retreating figure of Qiaoqiao as she descended the mountain, Luo Ning was filled with worry.

Xiao Qingxuan's expression was resolute, "There's no mistake. I heard my husband's voice; he must be there."

That night, Miss Xiao tossed and turned, unable to sleep. Just as dawn was breaking and she was about to close her eyes, an urgent report from a soldier came from outside the tent. "General's wife, terrible news—the opposing peak, the Thousand-Forsake Peak, is on fire!"

"What?!" Luo Ning felt a mixture of joy and shock. She quickly dressed along with Miss Xiao and rushed out. The sky was just beginning to lighten, but a thick plume of black smoke was slowly rising from Thousand-Forsake Peak, visible even from miles away.

Luo Ning leapt up and clapped her hands. "Big Brother—it must be a fire set by Big Brother!"

Miss Xiao stared intently for a long moment before gently shaking her head, her eyes slightly moist. "It's not My Dear, it's Master."

Chapter 444 The Telescope

It was a rare peaceful night. Holding Ning Yuxi's delicate and boneless body close to him, Lin Wanrong felt exceptionally calm and, unknowingly, drifted into sleep. When he woke early the next morning, Fairy Ning's figure was nowhere to be found. The room was immaculate, a faint fragrance wafting through the air, inducing a sense of tranquility.

After dozing contentedly for a short while and still not seeing Ning Yuxi, he wondered where she might be. Lin Wanrong got up, freshened up, and slowly walked towards the mouth of the cave.

Dawn was breaking. A myriad of rays burst through the fog in the east. The clouds that rested between two peaks gradually dispersed, making the opposite scene still somewhat blurry, but visibility had significantly improved.

Stretching luxuriously, Lin Wanrong was about to wash his face in a hot spring when, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a figure of transcendent beauty standing atop a towering rock in the distance. Her form was slender, her posture graceful. The morning breeze caressed her flowing hair, and dewdrops clung to her cheeks, shimmering in the dim morning light with a kaleidoscope of colors.

Elated, Lin Wanrong hastily scooped up some spring water to splash his face, then leaped atop the rock, exclaiming, "Fairy Sister, you're out enjoying the scenery? Why didn't you call me—huh, what is this?"

Beneath the rock was a large pile of dry wood, tightly stacked, evidently collected by Ning Yuxi herself. A faint scent of lamp oil emanated from the branches. Lin Wanrong's expression changed, and he hesitated, "Sister, what are you doing?"

Ning Yuxi gently stroked her hair, gazing at him with a tender smile. Her eyes hinted at both pain and relief, "You once said that fairness is important in life. I don't wish to put Qingxuan in a difficult position, nor you. So, let's be fair and leave our fate to Heaven—" Her eyelids dropped, tears sparkling in her eyes. She slowly reached into her robe and produced a match, identical to the one she had thrown off the cliff the day before.

'So, Fairy Sister was only scaring me. She actually had two matches with her all along,' Lin Wanrong thought, a myriad of emotions washing over him. Just then, he heard a soft "snap" as the match ignited. Ning Yuxi's eyelashes quivered, and a silent tear dropped. Before Lin Wanrong could react, she raised her slender hand, and the burning match fell onto the pile of dry wood.

With a "whoosh," the lamp oil quickly ignited, setting the dry wood aflame. Thick, black smoke billowed into the sky, visible from miles away. The fire illuminated Ning Yuxi's beautiful face, casting a heartbreaking pallor over it.

"You fool, what are you doing?" Through her tearful eyes, she saw Lin Wanrong frantically jump down from the rock, stomping on the burning wood, trying to put out the flames. Ning Yuxi was taken aback. With a light step, she swooped past him, pulling him back several feet before coming to a stop.

Looking at his tattered pants, smoke-blackened legs, and arms—his face even had some ash smears—Ning Yuxi clutched his hand tightly. Before she could speak, tears uncontrollably fell, "You fool, do you not value your life?"

"Sister, do you realize what you're doing?" Lin Wanrong muttered, seemingly oblivious to her words.

Ning Yuxi clenched her red lips tightly and nodded silently. "The hardest thing in this world is fairness. I have brought you to the pinnacle of this isolated peak where few tread. But to Qingxuan and the others, that is profoundly unfair, and it unsettles my heart. Given that, I'll make a bet with the heavens. If they cannot find a way to save you, then I win, and I will have no more guilt. Then, we can spend our lives together here, happy as immortals!"

The mountain wind tousled her long hair. With an unwavering look on her face, she gritted her teeth and continued, "But if they do find a way, then I lose and—"

"And what?" Lin Wanrong suddenly gripped her small hand, glared into her eyes, and loudly asked.

"I, I don't know." Seeing his resolute expression, Ning Yuxi's heart softened. She gently nestled into his arms, tears flowing freely as she whispered, "Don't force me, you scoundrel. I've entrusted my fate to the heavens so that I can live at peace with myself, to pass my own internal test. Otherwise, even if I'm with you, my heart will never be free, and I'll be miserable for the rest of my life."

Ning Yuxi was not exaggerating. Such was her nature; without resolving her inner turmoil, she would never know happiness.

Lin Wanrong felt a sharp pain in his heart and shook his head, sighing, "Sister, you've left one loop only to become ensnared in another. Why make things so difficult? Getting off this mountain is far from impossible; the way we came—"

"What did you say?" Ning Yuxi interrupted, surprised.

Lin Wanrong shook his head with a bitter smile, saying nothing. Ning Yuxi buried her face in his chest and softly said, "I know, with your intelligence, you must have already figured out a way. But I don't care. Win or lose, I've already fallen into the mortal world and can never return. What I am doing is giving Qingxuan a chance, as well as giving myself one, so that I can justly pursue what I want. Scoundrel, can you understand me?"

Could he understand? Despite Lin Wanrong's usual eloquence, he found himself at a loss for words. The kindling fire roared brighter and brighter, casting flickering shadows on his face. A mixture of joy and sorrow surged in his heart, leaving him speechless for a long time.

After saying her piece, Ning Yuxi seemed as if she had shed all her burdens, her expression inexplicably light. She looked at him and smiled tenderly, whispering, "Don't worry about me. Although you've thought of a solution, Qingxuan across from us has no idea. How many people in this world could match your intellect? I may not necessarily lose!"

"It wouldn't matter even if you did lose!" Lin Wanrong leaned in to kiss her cherry lips, suddenly breaking into laughter. "You might not believe it, but my existence in this world is a great miracle. There's nothing I can't do. What I'm best at is turning the impossible into the possible. For instance, we will definitely have a large family with seven sons and eight daughters, and this will not change with time—"

"You shameless scoundrel!" Ning Yuxi gently spat, her cheeks flushing crimson as she nestled closer in his arms, ineffably shy.

"General Lin—Thousand-Forsake Peak—General Lin—Thousand-Forsake Peak—" Just as the two were enjoying a sweet moment, a synchronized shout suddenly came from the cliff opposite them. The sky was clear, and in the distance, one could vaguely see countless soldiers standing on the peak, shouting in unison toward their location. Soon after, a deep voice carried over on the wind: "General Lin, General Lin—"

"It's Brother Hu!" Lin Wanrong quickly stood up.

The weather was splendid, and the clouds were thin. Ning Yuxi, with her remarkable skills, squinted her eyes and noticed a massive bamboo tube like a horn set up on the opposing peak. Only through this tube could their voices carry so far.

"We know you're on Thousand-Forsake Peak, rest assured. With tens of thousands of us brothers, even if we have to build a human ladder, we will bring you down. The northern nomads are rampant; the blood of our brothers is boiling, waiting only for you to lead us north to slay the enemy and bring honor to our country! For the General, my brothers, charge—"

A sudden burst of cannon fire erupted from below, followed by countless soldiers rushing out, setting up ladders against the sheer cliff. Numerous dark spots started to climb the ladders toward the summit.

"Hu Bugui, tell them to stop, tell them to stop! Those are our brothers' lives, damn it! Are you out of your mind? Out of your mind—" Lin Wanrong roared, his eyes bloodshot, his fists clenched so tightly they seemed as if they'd shatter. But his voice was too soft to reach the other side.

Ning Yuxi gently took his hand and sighed softly, "With so many brave men guarding you, you are indeed an extraordinary person. Do you really intend to go north to the frontline to fight the nomads?"

Lin Wanrong felt a surge of passion, clenched his teeth and said, "With brothers treating me this way, if I don't go, I'm no longer human!"

"Stop speaking nonsense." Ning Yuxi covered his mouth, her face periodically turning pale, then shouted, "Hu Bugui on the opposite cliff, listen! General Lin orders you to immediately withdraw troops and not to waste the lives of soldiers. Disobey, and face military law!"

Her skills were unparalleled; her voice carried far and floated over to the opposite cliff. Hu Bugui was overjoyed, "Your subordinate obeys the order. Withdraw the troops. Withdraw the troops! The General orders a retreat!"

Lin Wanrong grasped Ning Yuxi's hand and expressed his gratitude, "Sister, I thank you on behalf of these brothers!"

Ning Yuxi nestled into his arms, her tears falling freely as she choked up, "Don't thank me; I don't even know if this is right or wrong."

"Master—" A frantic female voice came from the other side. Lin Wanrong clearly recognized it as Qingxuan's voice. Miss Xiao's voice carried a hint of choking, "Master, My Dear, don't worry. Miss Xu will be here shortly. I'll definitely find a way to get you down."

"It's Qingxuan!" Ning Yuxi mumbled, her expression intermittently blank, unsure how to respond.

Lin Wanrong's mind raced. He understood in a flash that Hu Bugui's earlier move to set up the ladders must have been instigated by Qingxuan. Being Fairy Ning's disciple, she naturally understood Ning Yuxi's character and used this as a bait to confirm whether the two were on the cliff.

"Master, Master, it's Xiangjun. I miss you so much!" Another immature female voice came from the other side, "Please wait a moment. My senior sister and I will bring you down shortly. First, you should beat up that man who bullied my senior sister!"

Lin Wanrong was caught between laughter and tears. Just as he was about to speak, holding onto Fairy Sister's hand, he noticed her face turning increasingly pale and cried out in alarm, "Sister, what's wrong with you?"

Ning Yuxi covered her cheek, a tear quietly falling. "Rascal, did I... did I do something wrong? Hearing their voices makes me feel like a sinner."

Lin Wanrong quickly pulled her into his embrace, "Sister, you've done nothing wrong, and neither has Qingxuan. Although the situation is somewhat complex, it's not without a solution. Like you said, this is a gamble with the heavens; win or lose, you can still find peace within yourself."

After a moment of silence, Ning Yuxi spoke softly, "Then I shall say nothing now—Rascal, I'm afraid I might lose."

"There's nothing to fear if you lose," Lin Wanrong reassured her, "I've told you, there's nothing I can't do. I swore to make you my wife, so—"

Before he could finish, her soft lips suddenly sealed his. The tender sensation made his heart quiver. Feeling Fairy Sister's burning, trembling body against his, Lin Wanrong felt a pang of emotion. This fallen celestial being, emotionally even more fragile than a mortal, would be a tragedy to abandon.

"Senior Sister, what did you see? Did you see our Master? Let me look too!" Seeing her sister's pale face, Li Xiangjun stretched out her small hand, trying to snatch the mysterious object from Miss Xiao.

Suppressing her tears, Miss Xiao quickly put the object away, saying flatly, "I saw nothing. Perhaps Master has gone to rest."

Luo Ning wiped her own tears and pleaded, "What about big brother?! Can you see him? Sister, let me have just one glance! I haven't seen him for days; I wonder if he's gained or lost weight?"

Miss Xiao clenched the object tightly, almost biting her lips until they bled, as she turned her head away and tears fell, "I can't see him either, probably he's resting too. Don't worry, both he and Master are perfectly fine."

Luo Ning quickly hugged her, "Sister, why are you crying? You can't afford to ruin your health after finally finding your husband!"

"Ning'er, I'm fine," said Xiao Qingxuan, leaning on Luo Ning's shoulder. Her spirit felt incredibly weak, and her shoulders trembled as she sobbed, "I just miss him after not seeing him for a few days, this damn scoundrel—"

Confused by her words, Luo Ning patted her shoulder for comfort, "Sister, I hate big brother too, but I also miss him terribly. When he comes back, we'll both ignore him."

"Ignore him," Xiao Qingxuan murmured, but there wasn't a shred of conviction in her voice.

Li Xiangjun, watching the two of them sobbing, couldn't help but pout, "Senior Sister, what is this thing in your hand you called a 'telescope'? Can it really see Master or are you fooling me?"

At the mention of the telescope, Luo Ning also became interested, her eyes fixed on Xiao Qingxuan. Miss Xiao gave a bitter smile, "I wish I could see nothing with it—This telescope is a foreign object from the West. It was gifted to Father by a Frenchman named Tavernier just yesterday. He said it can see for miles. Father had it sent to me overnight. But who knew—this damn thing—"

Xiao Qingshuan choked on her words, unable to continue. Luo Ning and Li Xiangjun looked at each other in confusion. Who was her sister scolding?

Sensing that the atmosphere had turned tense, Luo Ning hurriedly spoke up, "Right, where is Qiaoqiao? She went to invite Sister Xu. Why haven't we heard anything? Could it be that she refused to come?"

"This audacious woman, daring to defy even my senior sister's words," Li Xiangjun abruptly stood up. "I'll go and kill her!"

Luo Ning jumped in surprise and quickly waved her hands to stop him. Miss Xiao shot Li Xiangjun a stern glance and sighed softly, "It's likely that Qiaoqiao failed to invite her. This Miss Xu does have a rather strong personality." She clenched her teeth and declared, "I'll go invite her myself."

Chapter 445 What Is That?

"How could we allow this?" Luo Ning was startled and quickly grasped her sister's hand. "Sister, you're pregnant; how could you travel around like this? Let me go instead. I've been friends with Zhiqing for a long time; she would certainly do me this favor."

"It's not a matter of personal favors," Xiao Qingxuan gently shook her head and sighed. "Ning'er, do you know why I secretly stopped My Dear from meeting Miss Xu a few days ago?"

"Ah, you wanted to keep a tighter rein on big brother, didn't you?" Luo Ning cautiously ventured. She had known Xu Zhiqing since childhood and was naturally inclined to speak in her favor.

Xiao Qingxuan smiled and shook her head. "Restraining him is only a pretext—just to keep him in check. You know his personality; even gods descending from the heavens would find it hard to control him. I've only met this Miss Xu a few times. She is indeed flawless in character and appearance, but one thing left a deep impression on me—her personality. You don't know, Ning'er, when My Dear and I were reunited at the Fairy Hall, it was a moment of both joy and sorrow. Anyone else would have slipped away, leaving us some private time. But this Miss Xu was different; she not only stayed by My Dear's side but also openly flirted with him in front of me. Her intention was clear: she wanted to outdo me."

Luo Ning was stunned. She could only imagine what it felt like for her sister to be emotionally stirred upon reuniting with her brother, only to have another woman make advances on him in her presence. No wonder Xiao Qingxuan had been so indifferent towards Xu Zhiqing.

Xiao Qingxuan gave a bitter smile. "I'm not a vindictive person, and I rarely hold grudges. But this incident reveals Miss Xu's nature—she's independent and assertive, unwilling to concede to others. Perhaps she is waiting for me to come and beg her now."

Luo Ning didn't know what to say and sighed quietly. "Zhiqing's personality is tied to her past experiences. She lost her fiancé even before their wedding night and later took up arms herself. If she weren't strong and independent, how could she have persevered until now? Big brother will inevitably have dealings with her if he's going to the northern frontlines—"

Xiao Qingxuan walked a few steps and pondered for a moment before finally saying, "This is exactly what I'm worried about. Miss Xu's personality can be described as strong, but being too strong can lead to stubbornness. If My Dear were to go to the battlefield with her someday, who knows what might happen."

Luo Ning was speechless; her sister had a point. Experience shaped personality, and she knew Xu Zhiqing's temperament all too well.

"Sister, will you still ask Zhiqing to save big brother?"

"Ask? Of course, I'll ask," Xiao Qingxuan affirmed, her expression resolute. "Nothing is more important than My Dear. Even if I have to serve tea and water, I'll still ask Miss Xu to make the trip. Ning'er, you stay here and take good care of My Dear." She paused, hesitated for a moment, and then handed a telescope to Luo Ning. "You keep this for now. Remember, only use it if something happens to My Dear. Don't use it for any other reason."

"Why?" Luo Ning looked at her quizzically.

Miss Xiao bit her lip, her cheeks flushed. She lowered her head and spoke softly, "I've heard that the telescope made by Westerners has a restriction; it can only be used three times a day. If you use up those opportunities, it will be much more difficult for us to save My Dear."

Startled, Luo Ning quickly waved her hands, "Then I won't look for now. I'll just talk to big brother here, and I'll take a good look at him when he comes back."

The cruel deceiver. Tears welled up in Miss Xiao's eyes, causing her heart to ache. She hurriedly turned her head away, gave a hum, and climbed into her sedan chair. The chair set off at once, hastily descending the mountain. Hu Bugui, who was keenly observant, already knew that Princess Chuyun had considerable influence over General Lin. He immediately arranged for a team of cavalry to escort her, led by Xu Zhen, as they followed the general's wife.

The sun was brilliant, the spring scenery splendid. Despite the bustling streets, Miss Xiao had no heart to enjoy it. Urging the sedan chair forward, they had just reached the gates of the Lin Mansion when they heard a guard shout, "Who dares obstruct the Princess's path?"

A voice tinged with both urgency and trembling came forth, "Is Princess Chuyun in this sedan chair?" The woman's voice was crisp, and she sounded young. Miss Xiao lifted the curtain to find a small troop of soldiers, their weapons gleaming, blocking a young girl.

The girl looked to be about sixteen or seventeen, dressed in a pink shirt. Her lips were red and her teeth white; despite her pallor, her natural beauty remained. She exuded an inexplicable charm, like a flower that had bloomed in the morning—given time, she would surely become a great beauty.

Who was this girl, and why did she look so familiar? Confused, Miss Xiao couldn't recall where she'd seen her before.

Desperately clutching the soldiers' weapons, the girl was on the brink of tears. "Princess, I need to see the Princess!" she cried out.

Before Miss Xiao could respond, a figure burst forth from inside the Lin Mansion, grabbing the girl's sleeve, "Second Miss, don't disturb the Princess. She's back now and will surely inform you of Mr. Lin's whereabouts."

The man who rushed out would certainly excite Lin Wanrong if he saw him. It was Gao Qiu, the leader of the guards assigned to protect the Lin Mansion by royal decree. He had accompanied Lin Wanrong and Xiao Yuruo all the way back from Hangzhou and was very familiar with Lin Wanrong.

Second Miss? Miss Xiao nodded slightly. The young girl bore some resemblance to her sister, which explained her sense of familiarity. It was this Second Miss who had introduced Lin Wanrong to the Xiao family and had even shielded him from the swords of the White Lotus Sect. Lin San's rise to prominence had started with her, and even Xiao Qingxuan's own marriage to Lin Wanrong could be partially credited to this young girl. Grateful and delighted to see how bright and attractive the young girl had grown, Miss Xiao waved her hand, signaling the guards to lower their weapons.

"You're calling for me, little sister?" A clear, composed voice with an indescribable air of grace resonated beside Xiao Yushuang.

Second Miss lifted her gaze for a moment, and instantly found herself stunned. A woman gracefully stepped out from the palanquin. She wore a satin yellow gown, her figure alluring, her eyebrows reminiscent of distant mountains, and her eyes like autumn water. She radiated an ethereal air that set her apart, utterly entrancing everyone around her.

"You, you are—" As her eyes met Xiao Qingxuan's stunning face, Xiao Yushuang seemed to lose her train of thought and murmured, "Sister, you are incredibly beautiful."

The word "sister" filled Xiao Qingxuan's heart with joy. She quickly took Yushuang's small hand and offered a slight smile. "Dear sister, you are truly charming. Were you waiting for me here?"

Meanwhile, Gao Qiu bowed deeply, then said, "Princess, you've finally returned. Ever since Miss Qiaoqiao and Miss Luo left, Second Miss has been standing outside the mansion, waiting for news of you. This is already the fourth day. I've not seen her rest for even a moment."

Xiao Yushuang looked haggard. Upon seeing Miss Xiao's unparalleled beauty, her eyes dimmed as she lowered her head and softly said, "Sister, are you the princess? You truly are a fairy. I hate that bad guy for telling me this—I didn't believe him and even dared to compare myself with you. How ridiculous, utterly ridiculous!"

Her tears flowed freely, her body swaying as if she would fall. Xiao Qingxuan was shocked and quickly embraced her. "Dear sister, what are you talking about? In My Dear's eyes, you are a little fairy. I am also grateful to you."

Second Miss's tears streamed down, her red lips broken and slowly oozing blood. She stubbornly turned her head away, refusing to let anyone see her tears, her voice trembling, "Sister Princess, how is that scoundrel from our house? Has anyone hurt him?"

Seeing Second Miss's stubborn demeanor, Xiao Qingxuan felt a surge of pity rise in her heart. She embraced her and said, "Don't worry, your scoundrel is safe and sound, currently enjoying himself."

Xiao Yushuang nodded, tears spilling over. "Sister Princess, may I, may I see him? Please don't misunderstand, I have no other intention, I just want to see him."

Second Miss choked silently, her small hand covering her cheek tightly, "That scoundrel is not here, our house is in total disarray. Mother is sick, sister is gone, and I—I can't hold on anymore. I miss him—no, I don't miss him—I—"

She had met Xiao Qingxuan, and upon seeing Miss Xiao's angelic beauty, her emotions were shattered. Muttering incoherently, she could no longer contain her sorrow and suddenly burst into loud sobs.

Xiao Qingxuan was deeply moved, her eyes wet as she patted her on the shoulder, "Yushuang, don't worry. Once I'm done with my tasks here, I'll take you to see him."

Xiao Yushuang could hardly believe her ears. She abruptly looked up, her face still streaked with tears. "Sister, are you serious?" Seeing Xiao Qingxuan nodding affirmatively, Xiao Yushuang stood in a daze for a moment, and then suddenly threw herself into her arms, sobbing loudly, "Sister, thank you. I miss that scoundrel, I miss him so much—"

Having waited in front of Lin's mansion for four days and nights without sleep, Xiao Yushuang finally had her wish fulfilled. Relieved, her body went limp, like a rigid stone, falling backward.

Xiao Qingxuan acted swiftly, reaching out to catch her. Xiao Yushuang's body softened, and she nestled in Miss Xiao's arms, her eyes slightly closed, finally falling into a gentle slumber.

What a tragedy! Staring at the sweet smile on Xiao Yushuang's sleeping face, her eyelashes still wet with unshed tears, Xiao Qingxuan silently shook her head. "Such a young girl already evokes my pity; what then of my naturally passionate husband?"

Having settled Xiao Yushuang in the fragrant chamber of her carriage, Xiao Qingxuan turned to ask the tall guard, "Officer Gao, have you seen Qiaoqiao?"

"Miss Qiaoqiao is back?" Officer Gao shook his head in surprise. "I have not seen her."

The girl must still be at the Xu mansion. Miss Xiao nodded slightly and, without entering her own home, headed toward the adjacent Xu estate. Being of high standing, several servants were already kneeling at the Xu entrance to greet her. A quick scan revealed only stewards and servants; neither Xu Wei nor Xu Zhiqing were present.

It was the time of the morning court, so Xu Wei's absence was not surprising. However, not seeing Xu Zhiqing made her heart skip a beat.

"Sister, you've come," Qiaoqiao said, her eyes red. She stepped out from the Xu mansion and took her hand, her voice choked. "The servants and maids in the mansion said that Sister Zhiqing left for a trip a few days ago and has not returned. I didn't believe them, so I waited in her room all night, but she never appeared. My brother can't afford any delay. What should we do if Sister Xu is not home?"

"Not home? What a coincidence." Xiao Qingxuan was slightly taken aback. "When did she leave?"

"The servants said she left the day before yesterday," Qiaoqiao replied.

"The day before yesterday?" Xiao Qingxuan suddenly smiled, taking Qiaoqiao's hand and softly saying, "Then there's no need to worry."

"How can we not worry? My brother is on that perilous peak, underfed, cold, and on guard against your master. Each day's delay increases the danger," Qiaoqiao fretted.

"Danger? He probably doesn't know how happy and comfortable he is," Xiao Qingxuan said, biting back her own worries. "Silly little sister, do you really think Miss Xu has left?"

"She hasn't?" Qiaoqiao exclaimed, delighted.

Xiao Qingxuan nodded, "General Li Tai's army is set to march northward soon. Miss Xu, as a military strategist, wouldn't leave at this time. I suspect she's deliberately avoiding us."

"Avoiding us? That shouldn't be the case. We all know how fond Sister Xu is of my brother—" Qiaoqiao paused, looking like she wanted to say something but stopped.

Miss Xiao's eyes were cool as she scanned the Xu family's servants. Her gaze landed on a pretty young maid. She smiled slightly, "If I remember correctly, you're named Yuzhu, Miss Xu's personal maid, aren't you? Yuzhu, I suspect your mistress left a letter, didn't she?"

Yuzhu hastily knelt and offered a formal salute, raising a letter high in her hands, "Please forgive my deceit, Princess. My mistress gave instructions before she left: If the Princess inquires, present this letter; if not, burn it on the spot."

Burn it on the spot? Xiao Qingxuan shook her head and chuckled softly. 'Miss Xu is indeed stubborn, already matching wits with me.' Qiaoqiao quickly took the letter from her, and Miss Xiao opened the envelope. A quick glance revealed that the letter was brief and to the point. Only four concise characters (five words) were elegantly penned— "Return to the mountain immediately!"

"What are you doing?" Fairy Ning leaned quietly against him, watching as he carefully ground down the bamboo joint to fashion it into a tube. One eye was aimed into the tube as he looked around.

"Making a simple telescope—to peek at sister taking a bath!" Lin Wanrong giggled and planted a kiss on her crystal-clear cheek.

"You annoying thief!" Fairy Ning's face flushed a vivid red. She remembered the night he had spied on her during her bath, her cheeks growing hotter. She pinched his arm and warned, "No more peeking from now on!"

"I don't need to peek; I am a decent man," Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. "Now I can look openly."

When it came to shameless matters, he always became more animated. Ning Yuxi muttered a soft 'tsk,' her face as beautiful as a blooming flower, but her heart relished the warmth.

Seeing that the bamboo joint was nearly ready, Lin Wanrong took out a small glass bottle from his pocket. The bottle contained a light blue liquid, only a little left. He held the bottle up to the sunlight, squinting at it, apparently focused on something.

"Is this perfume?" Fairy Ning scrutinized the small glass bottle and whispered.

Lin Wanrong nodded and smiled. "This is called Orchid Perfume, perfectly suited for a lady of your delicate, orchid-like nature." He poured a drop onto Fairy Ning's arm. Ning Yuxi took a gentle sniff—subtly fragrant, delicate and not greasy. The perfume lived up to its name.

Women loved beauty, and Fairy Ning was no exception. Delighted by the unique scent, Ning Yuxi took a deeper sniff. Just as she was smiling, her expression changed abruptly. She stared at the small bottle in her hand and sighed softly, "So, the perfume Qingxuan uses is this Orchid Perfume. Thief, did you give it to her?"

'Women are indeed sensitive,' Lin Wanrong thought, smiling as he grasped her hand. "This perfume has countless nuances and moods. No two are the same. When I plant a garden full of orchids, I'll create a perfume just for you—one of a kind in all the world."

Ning Yuxi responded with a soft "mm-hmm," lowering her head, lost in thought. Lin Wanrong gently tapped the bottle against a stone, shattering it. The perfume spilled onto the ground. He picked up two larger shards of glass and smiled at Fairy Ning, "Sister, let me show you a magic trick."

"What magic? Be careful not to cut your hand," Ning Yuxi sat on a rock, lazily and carefreely crossing her legs, looking like a teenage girl. Her clothes were already torn, revealing flashes of her smooth, jade-like skin. Even from a few steps away, Lin Wanrong could sense the luster and vitality of her legs.

"Thief," Ning Yuxi's face flushed a beautiful shade of red as she looked at him and smiled gently. The sunlight cascaded on her face, casting a colorful glow.

Lin Wanrong hurriedly swallowed a mouthful of water, carefully placed a few dried leaves on the ground, and held a lens in his hand. He repeatedly adjusted the angle to capture the sunlight just right.

Ning Yuxi had no idea what he was doing. She watched as he crouched on the ground, completely absorbed in his task. He would occasionally glance at the leaves and then look up at the sun, sweating profusely in his anxiety. The sunlight glinted off the glass lens, almost blinding. As Ning Yuxi stared at him, a feeling of happiness she had never experienced before filled her heart.

"It's burning, it's burning!" Lin Wanrong suddenly shouted excitedly. Ning Yuxi looked down to see a small, bright white spot focused on one of the leaves. Wisps of smoke began to rise, and the leaf had indeed caught fire.

Still exuberant, Lin Wanrong waited for Ning Yuxi's reaction. When none came, he looked up to see her turned away, her shoulders shaking, her cheeks wet with tears.

"Sister, what's wrong?" Lin Wanrong quickly leapt to embrace her trembling shoulders.

Frustrated, Ning Yuxi pounded on his chest. Biting her lip, tears streamed down her face, "So, it seems I was just fooling myself. You can start a fire even without my fire starter. What use is it for me to keep it then?"

She pulled out the fire starter from her pocket and was about to throw it away when Lin Wanrong swiftly grabbed it from her hand. Annoyed, Ning Yuxi huffed and kicked a small stone into the abyss below.

Lin Wanrong stared at her tear-streaked face for a moment before bursting into laughter.

"What are you laughing at?" Ning Yuxi looked at him, both embarrassed and irritated.

Holding her tightly, Lin Wanrong gazed into her eyes and said softly, "Sister, you're becoming more and more like a woman, a real woman!"

"Have I really changed?" Ning Yuxi paused, her tears silently falling as she nestled further into his arms.

Lin Wanrong polished two pieces of lens and fitted them into a bamboo tube. Raising the makeshift telescope to his eyes, he could finally see figures on the opposite cliff. Although the faces were blurry, Lin Wanrong was elated, "Sister, come take a look. This is a telescope I made myself; I am a genius."

Taking the telescope, Ning Yuxi looked through it and then shook her head, laughing, "You are certainly full of tall tales. This telescope makes me dizzy and the view is unclear. I can see much further without it."

Given Ning Yuxi's extraordinary skills, her claim was not an exaggeration. Lin Wanrong uttered a disappointed, "Oh," and his spirits drooped. Feeling a softening in her heart, Ning Yuxi took his hand and said gently, "Among millions, only one might possess my abilities. Yet your telescope can give millions my gift of sight; you are truly the most amazing."

Seeing that Lin Wanrong was still downcast, she hesitated for a moment, then quickly pecked him on the cheek, her face flushed as she said, "You strange little thief, be content!"

Lin Wanrong felt as if his scheme had succeeded. Grinning, he started to play with the telescope again, looking in all directions. The smile on his face was so radiant, it simply couldn't be concealed.

"That little thief!" Ning Yuxi exclaimed with a mix of annoyance and affection, choosing not to say anything more.

The sky was clear, without a cloud in sight. Ning Yuxi looked ahead, her gaze settling on the cliff on the opposite side. At first, nothing seemed amiss, but gradually her expression changed. Suddenly, she grabbed Lin Wanrong's hand, her voice trembling as she said, "Little thief, what—what is that?"

"What are you talking about?" Lin Wanrong adjusted the angle of his telescope and saw a dark mass on the opposite cliff, though he couldn't make out the details.

Sensing something was off, he quickly closed his eyes to center himself. When he opened them again, this time he saw clearly: dozens of dark, sturdy cannon barrels aimed directly at them from across the cliff.

Lin Wanrong was terrified, "Cannons—"