

Finest 456

Chapter 456 The Method of Undoing Curses

"What else do you want?" Xiao Yuruo chided, gently caressing the scratches on his cheek. She lightly bit her red lips as she inspected his injuries.

Lin Wanrong grabbed her small hand and mournfully responded, "Eldest Miss, I've been severely injured this time. It's hard for me to find peace at night alone. Could you comfort me this evening—ah, why do you look so impure? Don't get any funny ideas. I'm just asking you to take care of the injured; nothing will happen."

Despite his eloquence, Eldest Miss knew what he was thinking. She couldn't help but blush and sternly glared at him. "You're already in such bad shape, and you still can't behave? Tell me, who did this to you in our family's backyard?"

"Ah, that's actually your fault, Eldest Miss. Since we've been apart, tea has lost its flavor, and food is hard to swallow. I think of you day and night. Finally, I get to see you, and you cruelly lock me out. I was so lost in thoughts of you while climbing the wall that I lost my balance and fell, landing on this hoe," Lin Wanrong quickly spun a tale, his eyes twinkling.

Eldest Miss coldly snorted, her eyes sharp as lightning, "What about the scratches on your face?"

"This, well, was caused by the peony flowers," Lin Wanrong pointed to the newly planted flowers in the garden without blinking an eye, chuckling, "The saying goes that peonies have many thorns; I'm sure you've heard of it."

"Peonies have many thorns?" Xiao Yuruo didn't buy his nonsense and said through gritted teeth, "It seems like you'd be more of a romantic ghost under the peonies. The marks on your face are clearly those of a woman's scratch. Do you think I don't recognize it? You must have offended some young lady again, which led to this." She hummed and turned her head, "Si De, who has been to this backyard tonight? I want to see who has the audacity to even make our household's tyrant cower."

Si De, holding a large lantern, stood behind Eldest Miss and Lin Wanrong. Seeing Lin Wanrong's eyes and eyebrows squeezed together, he hesitated, "It's—"

Before he could utter another word, Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "Ah, whose silver bill is this? Si De, it seems to have fallen from you. That's not a small amount—fifty taels, enough to cover your salary for two years. How could you be so careless?"

"Really? Where?" Si De hastily lowered his lantern to find a silver bill right at his feet, precisely fifty taels.

"Ah, thank you, Lin San, for the reminder. This is the betrothal gift my mother prepared for me; I almost lost it." Si De grinned so broadly that his mouth nearly closed, quickly pocketing the fifty-tael note and bowed to Lin Wanrong, "Thank you, Brother San, thank you, Brother San."

"It's no problem," Lin Wanrong chuckled and patted him on the shoulder, "I noticed your vision seems a bit off, Si De. You'll need to take better care of yourself; there'll be more opportunities to pick up silver in the future."

Eldest Miss found their behavior odd and furrowed her brows, asking, "Si De, now tell me, who has been to the backyard tonight?"

Si De peered under his chin, lost in deep thought. After a while, he finally shook his head, "I can't quite remember. I think Second Miss came by, as did the Madam, Huan'er, and you, Eldest Miss. Brother San, am I right?"

"Exactly, exactly. When I jumped down earlier, I only saw a white shadow flash before my eyes and a few streaks of silver light flutter by. Before I could even make out the figure, my face ended up like this," Lin Wanrong nodded, his expression grave.

Xiao Yuruo wouldn't listen to his nonsense. Seeing that he had colluded with Si De to deceive her, she couldn't help but feel both irritated and amused. She shot him a frustrated glance, "What white shadow? What silver light? Are you suggesting it was a ghost? Just who is this woman you are so keen on protecting? I'd really like to see for myself."

Lin Wanrong burst into laughter, "Eldest Miss, you're overthinking it. Why are you still hung up on something even I can't remember? Wait, where are Xian'er and Second Miss? Weren't they with you?"

Since he refused to say anything, Xiao Yuruo had no choice but to drop it. Seeing the bright nail marks on his face and his pitiful appearance, it was clear how ruthless the woman had been. Eldest Miss couldn't bring herself to probe further. She sighed softly and lowered her voice, "You really

need to learn your lesson. Not every woman is as easy to bully as me. Yushuang is with Xian'er visiting Mother. I heard noises in the backyard and came running."

Lin Wanrong merely hummed in response, cautiously asking, "And how is, um, Madam?"

"You do care about Mother," Eldest Miss smiled sweetly, her eyes twinkling with a rosy glow. "I haven't seen her yet. But Yushuang and Miss Qin should be chatting with her right now, so it should be fine."

"That's good, that's good," Lin Wanrong patted his chest, exhaling deeply, visibly invigorated. Eldest Miss cast him a suspicious glance; his behavior was peculiar, as if he'd stolen something.

Upon returning to the courtyard with Eldest Miss, they found the room across brightly lit, soft laughter and chattering from women echoing within. Lin Wanrong listened intently; the charming voice belonged to Yushuang, the gentle and alluring one to Xian'er, and the slightly hoarse and weary voice, to the Madam.

"What are you doing?" Noticing him eavesdropping outside the window, Eldest Miss chuckled, "You look like a thief. If you want to listen, we can go in together and chat with Mother."

"Ah, no, no," Lin Wanrong took a quick step back, visibly uneasy. He chuckled, "Look at the state I'm in. How could I meet Madam like this? It would be better to wait a few days, change into something presentable, and then pay her a visit."

Seeing his muddy face and tattered clothes, she assumed he was being considerate of her. Xiao Yuruo felt a sweet sensation in her heart. She nodded slightly, her face flushing, "In that case, go rest. Tomorrow, we'll change into better clothes and go together to meet Mother."

For now, the matter seemed settled. Seeing Eldest Miss's gentle and loving expression, Lin Wanrong felt a surge of happiness. He grabbed her hand and whispered, "Yuruo, do you remember what I told you earlier? I was injured tonight and need some comfort—it's really quite innocent—"

"Smooth talker, who said anything about comforting you? Go find your Miss Qin," Xiao Yuruo snapped, her heart pounding and her ears flushed red. She quickly lowered her head and hurried into the inner room.

Seeing her coy demeanor, Lin Wanrong chuckled a few times. He went into the house to fetch some hot water, and with a splash, he leapt into the tub, letting out a satisfied sigh. Tonight had been strange indeed—his first venture as a thief had led him to meet someone he shouldn't have, and suffer injuries he shouldn't have sustained.

The scratches on his face burned, and a swollen welt formed on his back. Soaking it in the water, he felt a tingling pain. But the lingering sensation of the woman's soft and voluptuous body made him feel as if his entire being had lightened.

"Husband—" A soft call echoed from behind him. Qin Xian'er had entered the room unannounced, her pretty face flushed in the misty steam. She reached out her small hand and gently touched his bare back.

Lin Wanrong let out a surprised "Oh," his body shuddering. Wiping the water droplets from his face, he smiled, "Xian'er, weren't you talking to the Madam? How did you come back so soon?"

Gently massaging his back, Qin Xian'er's face was flushed and exquisitely beautiful. "I was worried about you, so I came to see how you were doing. Eldest Miss Xiao said that a woman had entered the Xiao residence earlier, and you had a skirmish with her and got injured—"

"No, no," Lin Wanrong hurriedly shook his head. "Eldest Miss is joking. Who in the world would be a match for me in a fight?"

Qin Xian'er giggled, and the mist slowly cleared. The scars on his face and back suddenly came into view. Miss Qin gasped, her eyes filled with tears and her voice turning icy, "So, what Eldest Miss said was true. Who did this, Husband? I will kill her!"

"Kill? There's no need for killing," Lin Wanrong laughed, grabbing her small hand. Seizing the opportunity, he lifted her delicate body into the tub. Qin Xian'er let out a surprised yelp, feeling a sudden warmth envelop her.

A martial arts expert impervious to heat and cold, she wore lightweight clothing. As she plunged into the water, her clothes clung to her like a second skin, tightly wrapping around her voluptuous chest, curvaceous hips, and slender legs—she was like a sculpture made of ice and jade, exquisitely delicate.

The wooden tub was small, barely enough to fit two people, and quite cramped. Qin Xian'er had become his wife but their mutual desires remained unfulfilled. Feeling shy, she clung tightly to his sturdy body, murmuring, "Husband—"

Her flushed face lifted slightly, as if the sky was lit by flying rosy clouds, her eyes misty and enchanting. Her nose twitched slightly, and her alluring lips seemed like ripe lychee, tempting Lin Wanrong to taste their sweet flavor. Between her shy expressions, dimples occasionally flashed, enhancing her seductive gaze.

"Xian'er—" Lin Wanrong was mesmerized, feeling as if he were on fire. He slipped his hand into her clothes, slowly caressing her back, which was as smooth as jade. The sensation was even softer than the water.

"Husband, I want to be your wife, your true wife." Qin Xian'er's mouth opened and closed rapidly, as fragrant as an orchid, her eyes exuding an enchanting allure that seemed as if they could drip water. Nervously and shyly, she took his large hand and slowly covered her own soft chest with it. Her pink shirt was already soaked through, pushed up by her full bosom into a high contour. Under the cover of her thin, white veil, her tender white skin and voluptuous curves were hazily visible. Her slender waist twisted subtly, revealing a deep, enticing cleavage.

Lin Wanrong exhaled deeply, his hands holding onto the protruding jade-like softness. The silk-like sensation sent a thrill through his heart. In that busy moment, he couldn't help but think of the woman he encountered tonight. Compared to her, his wife's figure wasn't bad at all.

A hot sensation surged from her chest into her heart, making Qin Xian'er's entire body tremble. Unable to hold back a soft whimper, she rushed into his arms, panting, "Husband, I don't want to wait any longer. Take me, I want to be your wife."

Her voice seemed like a spell, igniting the fire of desire in Lin Wanrong's heart. But there was a glimmer of rationality left in him. Although his hands were busy, he suppressed his lustful feelings, thinking of their future happiness: "Xian'er, the Love Bug in you—"

Qin Xian'er let out a soft cry and threw herself into his arms, sobbing, "Husband, if I can't rid myself of the Love Bug, will you never want me?"

"How could that be?" Remembering Qin Xian'er's deep affection, Lin Wanrong was overwhelmingly touched. With newfound courage, he gave her a light kiss on the ear and softly said, "Silly girl, we've exchanged vows as husband and wife. We are to be together for life. You,

such a good girl, are a precious gift from heaven. Not only do I want you, but I will also treasure you as the most beautiful gem in the world."

Hearing his sweet words, Qin Xian'er trembled, her arms wrapped tightly around him, their bodies close. She choked up, "Husband, I have a Love Bug in me, and I'm a jealous type. Are you not worried that I might harm Xiao Qingxuan, as well as the two young ladies of the Xiao family?"

Lin Wanrong affectionately stroked her little nose, chuckling, "Just because of what you've said, I would marry you in this life and every life to come. Xian'er, you're a good girl who would never harm anyone. I trust you."

Joy and excitement rushed to her head, so sweet it was almost unbearable. Qin Xian'er nestled in his arms, looking up at him, her tender body trembling, "Husband, kiss me! Kiss me once, and I will tell you a secret."

"How could one kiss be enough? Let's make it a hundred." Lin Wanrong chuckled, leaning in to cover her luscious red lips with his own. The silky, sweet sensation made both of their hearts tremble.

Qin Xian'er pulled away from his arms, her breath rapid. She looked at him with an enchanting smile, her slender hand slowly unhooking her wet gown. She tossed it aside, revealing her ivory-like translucent body in the water. Her full, soft chest pushed the warm water into a surging channel.

She slowly pressed herself against him, her soft breasts pressing against his chest. Her face flushed with a mix of pride and joy, she allowed him to caress her legs, hips, and chest. Her emotions surged like waves.

"Husband, there's no need to be afraid," Qin Xian'er whispered, her voice trembling with excitement. She felt weak, as if all her strength had been drained. Leaning close to his ear, she continued, "My master has found a way to get rid of the curse. She said you would be pleased. From tonight, I will truly be your wife."

Chapter 457 The Deceitful Husband and the Sensuous Wife

"Really?" Lin Wanrong was overjoyed, hugging Qin Xian'er's delicate and soft body tightly. His face was filled with disbelief. "Tell me quickly, what's the solution?"

"Do you think I would lie to you?" Qin Xian'er lowered her head to nestle in his embrace, her ears flushed red, her pretty face radiant as if kissed by fire. She lightly traced circles on his chest with her finger, incredibly shy as she spoke, "But I have a condition. After I tell you the method to get rid of the curse, you must not mock me. Xian'er is doing this all for you—"

"Alright, alright," Lin Wanrong was utterly infatuated, his passions aflame. He had been waiting impatiently for this moment. He lightly pressed her full, soft bosom and shamelessly chuckled, "Don't you know me by now? As long as my little Xian'er's wishes are fulfilled, I'm willing to try any method."

Flustered, Qin Xian'er hummed for a moment but was too shy to speak. Encouraged and enticed by Lin Wanrong, she finally mustered enough courage to whisper a few words in his ear. She buried her head in his chest immediately after, not daring to look up at him, her heart pounding like a drum.

Lin Wanrong let out a soft "Ah," his eyes filled with lascivious glee, yet his face feigned surprise. "Xian'er, is this really going to work? You do know that I'm quite pure at heart, right? I've never even heard of such unconventional methods of intimacy."

Her face flushed a deep red, Qin Xian'er playfully punched him. Her voice was as soft as a mosquito's, filled with both shyness and annoyance. "You're teasing me. What about that picture book you have? It has every lovemaking technique known to man. I don't know how many hundreds or thousands of times you've looked at it, and now you pretend to be all pure? I'm not scared anymore, yet you still mock me."

Not embarrassed in the least at being exposed by Qin Xian'er, Lin Wanrong laughed heartily and caressed her smooth, soft belly, frivolously saying, "My little darling, who came up with this ingenious and challenging method? She must have looked at that erotic book even more than I have. When I have the time, I should definitely exchange ideas with her."

Qin Xian'er's eyebrows were tinged with red, her face as if painted with rouge, her red lips alluring. She lightly touched his forehead and scolded, "Who else but my master? She exhausted all her wits to think of this way for you to take advantage of me. Even you, a man as insensitive as you, should not make fun of her."

"That's true," Lin Wanrong nodded solemnly, "Reading an erotic book is really tough work, it subjects you to both psychological and physical torture. I speak from personal experience." His expression suddenly shifted, and he groped Qin Xian'er's curvaceous hips, his smile utterly lascivious, "In that case, my little darling, we shouldn't let Sister An's good intentions go to waste."

Let me help you dispel the curse now. Ah, this is both hard work and technical work, it might take several hours."

Qin Xian'er was already too shy to contain herself, and hearing her husband's teasing made her entire body soften. She let out a soft cry and rested her cheek against his bare chest, her hands unsure of where to go.

Lin Wanrong chuckled heartily, rising to his full height. Qin Xian'er's voluptuous figure clung to him like a shy octopus, her smooth, jade-like legs wrapped tightly around his waist.

In the misty moisture, the atmosphere was warm and romantic, carrying a humid, fragrant scent. The dim light flickered, revealing a captivating body sculpted from jade and ice before his eyes.

Qin Xian'er's features were as if drawn by an artist, her delicate lips parting lightly, appearing as frail as a freshly budded flower. Her slender eyebrows, crystal-clear eyes, and jade-smooth cheeks framed her exquisite face, making it exceptionally charming. Her crimson lips opened and closed as if hiding endless expectations in her dreamy eyes.

Her body was as white as jade, flawless and voluptuous. Her curves were clear and distinct, and her bosom rose in high crimson points like freshly bloomed roses. Under the dim light, they shimmered in a rainbow of colors. Her flat abdomen was smooth as satin, and the soft curve of her waist and the swell of her hips formed a flowing line. Her long, slender, and lustrous legs were taut and powerful, as captivating as a newly risen moon.

"Husband, stop staring; you'll make me die of embarrassment!" Qin Xian'er seemed to feel the heat of his gaze piercing her body, her entire being quivering slightly, her face blushing unbearably.

"Xian'er, you are my wife, how could I not take a good look?" Lin Wanrong swallowed hard, picked up a towel next to him, and meticulously wiped away the droplets of water on her body, missing not a single detail. His slightly rough fingers gently moved over Qin Xian'er's delicate frame, arousing a wave of heat within her. She could no longer contain herself, throwing her arms around him and panting, "Husband, take me, take me—"

Planting a soft kiss on her alluring cheek, Lin Wanrong swiftly moved her to the warm bed. Her peerless face, her full and snowy bosom, and her round and elevated hips seemed like the best aphrodisiacs. His heart ablaze, Lin Wanrong licked his dry lips and chuckled, "Xian'er, let me rid you of your curse—"

"Husband, I am yours." The overwhelming heat carried a piercing sting, making Qin Xian'er let out a cry that sounded like both pain and, more so, joy. She bit her red lips and looked at him seductively, her slender fingers deeply digging into his back. Her hips swayed, accepting his embrace, and tears of joy spilled over her cheeks.

After an unknown period, Qin Xian'er's panting voice sounded in Lin Wanrong's ear, "Husband, quickly, let's change positions, dispel the curse, oh—"

Finally fulfilling her heart's desire, she became his true wife. Holding onto his strong arms, her eyes still wet with tears, she fell into a satisfying sleep, both joyful and relieved.

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The next morning, Lin Wanrong was sound asleep when he heard a soft call from outside the door, "Lin San, Lin San, are you awake?"

"It's the Eldest Miss," Lin Wanrong lazily rolled over, embracing the delicate body beside him. He lightly caressed her ample breasts and yawned, "Of everyone in the Xiao family, she's the one who can't stand to see me idle."

Qin Xian'er, newlywed and deeply in love with her husband, was reluctant to let him leave. Her flushed face clung tightly to him, as she nuzzled against his chest and softly chided, "Ignore her, Husband, I want you to stay with me a little longer. I haven't slept this comfortably in a long time."

Now truly a woman, the love and affection in her eyes could not be concealed, like pools of autumn water, slowly swirling. An unspeakable affection flooded the room. Lin Wanrong felt the flames rise in his heart and playfully pinched her on her pert bottom, chuckling lasciviously, "Xian'er, are you trying to tempt me into staying in bed? Very well, let's take advantage of the early hour to 'untangle the knot' once more."

At that, Qin Xian'er blushed, her body slipping into the quilt. She covered her cheek with the silk quilt, revealing only her deeply affectionate eyes. "Husband, spare me some mercy. I haven't fully recovered yet," she said shyly, the temperature in the room seemingly rising even further.

Lin Wanrong swallowed hard, pulling her into his arms, and gently caressing her backside. He chuckled, "You really had a tough time last night, my little darling, playing the bride twice."

"You're awful, don't say that—" Qin Xian'er's cheeks flushed even redder, her slender jade fingers covering his lips as her body relaxed.

'This girl is indeed sensitive,' Lin Wanrong laughed out loud and then sighed, "I really have to hand it to Sister An, coming up with such a brilliant idea. We are kindred spirits. I must find time to consult her more—huh, Xian'er, why are you giving me that look? Sister An and I are merely engaged in academic discussions, don't get the wrong idea."

Qin Xian'er gave him a coquettish glance, "You men always want to take advantage without looking guilty. You even dare to say such things to my master? Aren't you ashamed?"

"That's a fair point," Lin Wanrong nodded, recalling the night with An Biru. He felt warmer and chuckled suggestively, "In that case, Xian'er, you can speak on my behalf. Discuss last night's positions with your master. I feel there are several aspects we didn't quite grasp. Consult Sister An; you're both women, it will be easier to discuss."

Qin Xian'er scoffed lightly, covering his eyes with her hand and laughing shyly, "Positions? I think you know more than my master does. She only taught me the basics, how to 'untangle knots.' You, however, are a lecher wanting to make groundbreaking contributions to the 'doctrine of lechery.'"

"To become a grandmaster in that field, I am still far too inexperienced and need more cultivation. It would be best if Sister An could personally guide me. That way, I would progress faster," Lin Wanrong sighed with a look of regret on his face.

Xian'er slapped him lightly on the face and giggled, "Keep dreaming! My master is busy; she has no time for you."

"Busy?" Lin Wanrong asked in surprise, "Isn't she home visiting relatives? What's so busy about that?"

Qin Xian'er shook her head and chuckled softly. "It's not as simple as you think. My master is busy with matchmaking; how could she have time to entertain you?"

"What? Matchmaking?!" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, his tongue almost sticking out. He sprang up from his bed, the covers falling away, exposing his muscular physique.

"Lin San, what's going on? Are you up?" Eldest Miss had been waiting outside the room for some time. Hearing the commotion inside, she hastily called out.

Lin Wanrong responded, "Eldest Miss, please wait. I'll be out in a moment." He grabbed Qin Xian'er's hand and asked frantically, "Xian'er, who is Sister An meeting for matchmaking? By heavens, when I'm not home she's busy with this? Where is justice, where is law?"

Qin Xian'er giggled again and glanced at his exposed body. Blushing, she quickly pulled him back under the covers and teased, "What's your rush? What does my master's matchmaking have to do with you? She is a Miao leader, and according to their customs, only someone who is married can lead the tribe. My master has been drifting outside for many years; it's rare that she can finally reunite with her people. Therefore, she has to go through matchmaking."

"Matchmaking can't be better than love by choice," Lin Wanrong grumbled, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "Xian'er, who are the men Sister An is meeting? Are any of them taller or handsomer than me? If so, I'll go cut them down!"

Xian'er laughed and shot him a flirtatious glance. "You've been spoiled by my master. How can you say such things? If she succeeds in matchmaking, then she will have found her life's partner and we will have a new master. We should congratulate her, not talk about cutting him down."

'I want to be your master,' Lin Wanrong mouthed silently to Xian'er. The very thought excited him so much that he felt like he was being scratched by a cat. He wished he could fly to the Miao village right then to take that vixen into his arms and ravish her to death.

"Husband, what did you say?" Not hearing his words but seeing his peculiar expression, Qin Xian'er looked at him curiously and whispered.

"Ah, I said I want to be your husband," Lin Wanrong grinned, and then clenched his teeth. "Xian'er, tell me, who are the men meeting Sister An for matchmaking? Are they men or women, Han or Miao? If any are handsomer or more talented than me, list their names. I'll personally investigate them. Those that Sister An doesn't like, she can eliminate—and those she likes, I'll eliminate!"

Seeing his brash and domineering attitude, and recalling how he was accustomed to fooling around with her master as well, Qin Xian'er didn't take him seriously and giggled. "Both Miao and Han people are involved, and yes, some are better looking than you. However, none of that matters. Since my master is the leader of the Miao village, the matchmaking will naturally follow the village's traditions. They have to pass through the Peach Blossom Miasma, walk on fire, duel in songs, and choose the bravest warrior—there are many such customs in the Miao village."

Peach Blossom Miasma? Walk on fire? Duel in songs? Lin Wanrong's head felt like it was about to burst. He knew nothing about Miao customs, and it was clear to him that Sister An was setting up a situation that would benefit someone else.

Qin Xian'er wore a faint smile on her face as she softly spoke, "I visited the Miao Village festival when I was a child. It's quite lively. Husband, when you return from the frontier, we can go visit my master and also see how her matchmaking is going."

The thought of watching the vixen An match with another man was more unbearable for Lin Wanrong than death itself. He grunted and reluctantly said, "I have to set off immediately. There's no time to go to the Miao Village. How about this, Xian'er? Write a letter to Sister An and ask her to delay the matchmaking for a decade or so. After I finish the battle and return, I'll accompany her in the matchmaking."

Seeing her husband's face tinged with bitterness, looking thoroughly vexed, Qin Xian'er shook her head and smiled. She recalled the times when her master and her husband would banter and argue, while she listened attentively at the side, feeling immensely warm at heart. She missed her master a little. Grabbing Lin Wanrong's hand, she giggled, "Don't worry. Every year around June or July, the Miao Village holds a Torch Festival. It's a time when unmarried men and women are free to meet and match. My master will also be matchmaking then. If you can't make it back, I will find a way to ruin it—hmph, I don't like seeing other men beside my master either."

"Exactly, exactly," Lin Wanrong exclaimed, overjoyed, and gave her a thumbs-up. "My darling, we are truly of one heart. I can't stand the sight of other men with Sister An either. So this crucial task is yours. Once I return from battle, I'll go to match—"

"Hm?!" Xian'er looked at him quizzically.

"Ah, no, no, I mean to watch Sister An's matchmaking," Lin Wanrong hastily corrected himself, a smile blossoming in his heart.

When it came to causing trouble, this couple was indeed a match made in heaven. Qin Xian'er was top-notch at spoiling others' plans, and Lin Wanrong was no gentleman keen on making people's lives better either. They quickly conspired and set a major plan in motion. With Xian'er taking care of things, Lin Wanrong was completely at ease—these were lessons learned from his own experiences, after all.

Eldest Miss called from outside the room several times before the two finally emerged. Xiao Yuruo's face looked pale, and there were traces of red in her eyes as if she hadn't slept well the previous night.

"What happened to you, Eldest Miss?" Lin Wanrong was concerned and was about to take her jade-like hand, but Qin Xian'er preemptively stepped between them, holding Xiao Yuruo's delicate hand, asking affectionately, "Yes, Sister Xiao, what's the matter? Didn't you sleep well last night?"

'This girl still couldn't change her jealous nature,' Lin Wanrong thought, smiling without taking offense.

Upon seeing the couple step out together, with Lin San looking pleased, and his face blooming with smiles, and Qin Xian'er had a gleam in her eyes, her beauty seemed to blossom overnight, transforming into a mesmerizing young woman, Xiao Yuruo sensed something had happened; she felt a twinge of sorrow and her nose tingled. She turned her head away and spoke defiantly, "Nothing. I stayed up talking with Yushuang and Mother until late. I didn't sleep until the third watch of the night and woke up early. So I'm a bit down."

"So that's how it is," Qin Xian'er's beautiful eyes flickered as she smiled and nodded. "Eldest Miss and her family, mother and daughters, all get along so well. I'm envious. I, on the other hand, have been unfortunate, sharing a bed only with my husband and being teased by him. Sister Xiao—" She slowly lowered her head, a tempting blush appearing at the roots of her ears. Her lips parted shyly, and she whispered, "You probably don't know yet. I won't be the subject of your mockery anymore. Last night, I—I became his wife. He also—oh, it's too embarrassing—"

Qin Xian'er lowered her head, unable to conceal the happiness and pride on her face. Though she had mended her relationship with Xiao Yuruo, her competitive spirit was hard to change overnight. By saying this, she intended to recover the ground she had lost to Xiao Yuruo's taunts the previous night.

Noticing the raging fire in Eldest Miss's eyes, Lin Wanrong hurriedly shrank his neck and chuckled awkwardly. "Well, I was injured last night and needed someone to take care of me—"

"You dare to speak—Who told me last night that taking care of each other was something very pure?" Tears began to form in Eldest Miss's eyes. She bit her red lips, wishing she could punch him.

Qin Xian'er, sensing victory, couldn't help but giggle. With flushed cheeks, she warmly took Xiao Yuruo's hand and said, "Eldest Miss, don't you know your husband? When he speaks of purity, he means purity of the soul. He won't shirk any of his responsibilities."

'This little minx is undermining me,' thought Lin Wanrong as he glared at her. Qin Xian'er ignored him, fluttering her eyelashes seductively and smiling coquettishly, her whole demeanor exuding a sense of spring that even Xiao Yuruo could somewhat feel.

"He indeed shirked no responsibilities," said Xiao Yuruo, her competitive spirit roused by Qin Xian'er's triumph. She hummed dismissively and said, half-mocking, half-serious, "Sister Xian'er, you are indeed charming. No wonder he cherishes you so much. Even I feel a bit of heartache hearing it. 'Husband, quickly, quickly, change position, lift the curse, oh—'. My mother, Yushuang, and I listened to your melodious cries all night."

Even the bold Qin Xian'er was struck dumb by Xiao Yuruo's sharp retort. Her cheeks instantly turned red, and she hurriedly covered her face, stomping her feet, "You—you all heard? What should I do, how can I face people now?"

'These two women, neither of them is easy to handle,' thought Lin Wanrong. Xian'er did indeed make quite a noise last night, but it wouldn't have been audible unless one was intentionally listening. He chuckled nervously and patted her on the shoulder, "Don't worry, don't worry. This courtyard is only occupied by a few women, all of whom you know—Eldest Miss and the Second Miss. We're all one family now; there's nothing to be ashamed of. Besides, didn't I make more noise than you?"

This wasn't consoling; it was more like mutual self-indulgence. Eldest Miss blushed and huffed softly.

Qin Xian'er nodded, incredibly shy, and said softly, "Letting Eldest Miss and Yushuang hear is one thing; after all, we'll be sharing a bed as sisters in the future. It's no big deal if they hear and I hear back. But what about Madam Xiao, the elder? If our behavior reaches her ears, wouldn't it be against propriety?"

'Is this what you call chaos?' Lin Wanrong chuckled. "It's fine, it's fine. I bet that the Madam didn't hear anything. If you don't believe me, go ask her yourself."

Qin Xian'er chuckled, her face flushed with color. Suddenly, she turned to Xiao Yuruo and softly said, "Sister Xiao, if you must laugh, then laugh. I, Qin Xian'er, love as deeply as I hate. Since everything already belongs to my husband, I give myself completely to him without any reservations, and I'm not afraid of being laughed at. Husband, don't you agree?"

She shot Lin Wanrong a seductive smile, surpassing the beauty of blooming flowers, causing even the Eldest Miss to stare in awe.

Lin Wanrong felt a warmth inside, and hurriedly nodded his head. Xian'er giggled, "Husband, Sister Xiao is looking for you. I won't disturb you any longer. I'll go and see Sister Yushuang and chat with the Madam."

With that, she turned and left, her petite figure as captivating as ever, leaving Lin Wanrong feeling as warm as if he were bathed in bright sunlight.

"Even your soul has been charmed away, hasn't it?" Eldest Miss gazed at him sadly, her tone laced with a mixture of bitterness and melancholy.

Lin Wanrong quickly replied with a smile, "If it were you, my soul would've scattered long ago."

Xiao Yuruo's expression softened slightly. She hummed, lowering her head, "Then you may not stay in her room tonight."

"What?!" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "Where will I sleep, then?"

"I don't care." The Eldest Miss felt her cheeks burn. Her fists clenched as she saw his bewildered expression. Hurriedly lowering her head, she whispered, "Someone will take care of you tonight."

"What do you mean by that?" Lin Wanrong was utterly confused.

"You fool!" Xiao Yuruo was a mix of embarrassment and frustration, yet unable to explain herself. Suddenly remembering that they had been squabbling for quite a while without addressing the important matter, her cheeks flushed even more. She hurriedly reached out to straighten his clothes and softly said, "Quickly go to the front hall; Mr. Xu has been waiting for you all morning. I heard something happened in the palace."

Chapter 458 Asking for Your Help

Xu Wei had arrived? Lin Wanrong nodded without surprise. Judging from Prince Cheng's reactions yesterday, there had likely been some unusual happenings in the capital these past few days. Xu Wei must have come specifically for this matter.

Watching Eldest Miss gracefully walk away, he pondered for a moment before taking large strides toward the front hall. As he reached the doorway, he saw Xu Wei pacing back and forth in the hall, his face lined with worry and eyes bloodshot. The teacup placed beside him hadn't been touched and had long since gone cold.

"Ah, Little brother Lin, you're finally out," Xu Wei hurried over as soon as he saw him, visibly relieved.

"Good morning, Master Xu," Lin Wanrong greeted with a fist-clasp and a smile. "On such a fine spring day, why didn't you get some extra sleep instead of coming over here?"

With a wry smile, Xu Wei shook his head. "I've been unlucky. From yesterday to this morning, I've been in constant discussions with His Majesty. Haven't even had a moment to rest my eyes. Unlike you, who seems to have all the leisure in the world." He paused, looked around to ensure that no one else was around, and lowered his voice. "Enough small talk. His Majesty already knows about the assassination attempt on you last night. He's also read the confession from the assassin. You really are audacious, aren't you? Do you have any idea what the consequences could be if this document were to leak?"

"Consequences?" Lin Wanrong gave a faint smile. "I only report what I see and hear. As for the consequences, that's something for His Majesty and people like you, the pillars of the state, to consider. It's not within my jurisdiction."

Hearing how Lin Wanrong had deflected responsibility with just a few words, Xu Wei chuckled. "Little brother Lin, you're being too modest. Even if you want to stay out of this, I'm afraid it's not possible anymore. With Li Tai's army soon to mobilize and the political situation in the capital growing increasingly volatile, not to mention your unique standing as the favored husband to two princesses, you can't possibly extricate yourself. As far as I can see, the document you submitted last night is like adding fuel to an already raging fire."

Lin Wanrong chuckled a few times, quite pleased with himself. "From the way you put it, do I look like someone who thrives on chaos?"

'Thrive on chaos? That's hardly an association with you, Lin San,' Xu Wei thought, a touch of disdain in his heart. The two were old acquaintances, and Xu Wei knew all too well the tricks Lin Wanrong played. Still, he maintained a friendly smile on his face. "Of course not, of course not. If the world falls into chaos, it benefits neither of us and only harms the common people. It gives

opportunists an opening." He glanced outside before whispering, "Little brother Lin, the reason I sought you out today is to inform you about something—"

Lin Wanrong nodded, unperturbed. "Is it related to the palace?"

Xu Wei looked him up and down in surprise. "How did you know? Don't tell me you've learned to tell fortunes?"

'Fortune-telling my ass,' Lin Wanrong laughed. "Eldest Miss told me. I suppose you, Brother Xu must have deliberately leaked this news, huh? Your tactic to confuse the enemy has already fooled us, your own allies."

Xu Wei chuckled awkwardly, glancing around to make sure no one was nearby before whispering, "Little brother Lin, there has been a mishap in the palace recently—someone is plotting against the Emperor!"

Plotting against the Emperor? Lin Wanrong softly exclaimed, feeling a vague sense of unease. At this moment, Li Tai's army was still in the capital, and the city was heavily guarded. Who would be foolish enough to target the Emperor now? In a few days, when Li Tai's forces moved north and the capital was vulnerable, that would be the opportune moment. Glimpsing some understanding, he looked at Xu Wei with a mysterious smile, "Mr. Xu, who is plotting against the Emperor? Is His Majesty unharmed?"

"A palace eunuch on duty took advantage of the Emperor reading reports late at night in the Imperial Study and lit candles there!" Xu Wei huffed, grinding his teeth. "Fortunately, heaven protects our sovereign. A palace maid on duty discovered his plot, shouted loudly, and palace guards rushed in. They apprehended the eunuch on the spot, but half of the Imperial Study was already burned. Although the Emperor was uninjured, the shock he suffered was not insignificant. Enraged, he immediately replaced the head of the palace guards, the manager of internal affairs, and dismissed several city defense generals—"

Xu Wei's words abruptly stopped there. Lin Wanrong uttered an 'Ah', piecing it together, and smiled, "Mr. Xu, you haven't finished your sentence, have there been changes within the court as well?"

"You are indeed sharp," Xu Wei gave a thumbs-up, genuinely praising him. "Over the past month, the Emperor has quietly reshuffled the Three Chambers and Six Ministries, recently appointing a new batch of assistant ministers and scholars. Just the night before last, under the pretext of investigating corruption, he dismissed the Minister of Rites and several senior scholars from the Pavilion of the Source of Literature. Altogether, they discovered embezzled money, jewelry, and financial documents totaling more than five hundred thousand taels—"

The Emperor was taking action, Lin Wanrong nodded, "Mr. Xu, with such significant personnel changes in the court, has no one interceded or opposed?"

"Of course there are those who oppose. Prince Cheng has entered the palace three days in a row to plead on behalf of several people," Xu Wei chuckled, a trace of sternness flashing in his eyes. "You have little contact with court affairs and probably don't understand. The dismissed individuals are more or less connected to the Prince, either as his students or people he has promoted. The links between them are intricate!"

Xu Wei was so forthright that it was clear he understood the Emperor's intentions. This was a calculated move to cut off the Prince's branches and limbs, clearly forcing Prince Cheng to make a move. After years of restraint, the old man was finally going to explode.

"Starting from yesterday, fifty thousand imperial guards responsible for defending the capital sealed the city gates, on alert day and night. Until Li Tai's army departs, the capital will only allow entry and no exits. Additionally, the Emperor has transferred thirty thousand troops from Shandong and Hebei for defense—Little brother Lin, we can expect great things!"

Having said all this in one breath, Xu Wei could hardly contain his excitement. He picked up the tea cup beside him, which had long since gone cold, and gulped down the tea until it was empty, then wiped the corner of his mouth with lingering satisfaction.

The situation was clear. The Great Hua Empire was mobilizing its entire strength for a decisive battle against the northern nomads; the old Emperor would not allow a ticking bomb to remain in the court. Removing Prince Cheng was just a matter of time. But why had he chosen to act just a few days before Li Tai's departure? If this triggered a large-scale upheaval, leading to attacks from both inside and outside, wouldn't it be a case of losing more than gaining?

Lin Wanrong's brow was tightly furrowed as he sank deep into thought. Xu Wei seemed to see right through him and said with a faint smile, "Little brother, let me be frank with you. In the past few days, there's been frequent movement of the guards around the capital. His Majesty also suddenly announced an investigation into corruption. Not just me, but everyone in the court was taken aback. At this critical moment when Li Tai's army is about to march, everyone was thinking about maintaining stability. No one expected the Emperor to suddenly reform the court. Think about it, if the hidden puppeteer behind the scenes wanted to make a move, they would never choose a day when Li Tai is still in the capital. Everyone thought the same, but the Emperor acted against expectations, striking when the enemy was unprepared. This audacity, this momentum, is something we, as subjects, wouldn't dare even dream of."

Xu Wei's analysis made sense. An Emperor should indeed possess such thunderous tactics. Lin Wanrong nodded, deeply impressed by the old Emperor's decisiveness and cunning. "Mr. Xu, based on what you're saying, the real mastermind is now trapped in the capital?"

"Of course," Xu Wei laughed triumphantly. "The Emperor acted so suddenly that everyone was caught off guard. How could he possibly escape? Right now, his residence is under close surveillance. Not even a fly could escape."

"Has he shown any abnormalities himself?"

Xu Wei shook his head, "During the early morning court session today, he was chatting and laughing with his colleagues, showing no signs of irregularity. Truly, 'great villains have extraordinary dispositions.' If one could easily read his thoughts, he would not be Prince Cheng."

This made sense. With Prince Cheng's cunning, he would never wear his heart on his sleeve. Seeing Xu Wei's animated expression, Lin Wanrong said seriously, "Mr. Xu, it's not a time to celebrate yet. Prince Cheng has been planning diligently for years. He will not sit and wait for death. Beneath this calm exterior, a storm is surely brewing. Please relay to His Majesty that he must be extremely cautious."

"Don't worry, little brother Lin. We have a full-proof plan. We are just waiting for that scoundrel to make his move," Xu Wei said, nodding slowly. He then took out a small yellow folded note from his robe, "This is a confidential letter from the Emperor. His Majesty specifically instructed me to tell you to handle this matter well. As for Eldest Miss Xiao, consider her an advance reward. After you read this confidential directive, I will immediately destroy it."

Lin Wanrong couldn't help but smile wryly. This old man was not losing out on anything. Eldest Miss Xiao was captured by him in the first place; the reward he promised him was essentially meaningless. Shaking his head, he opened the letter. It was a simple piece of white paper with a single line of small characters: "Traitor or brother? Only my father's entrustment is something I cannot and dare not forget. Handle it! Do not disappoint me."

These few words, lacking both a heading and a signature, were like a hot potato that Lin Wanrong couldn't push away or accept. The old man really trusted him, giving him such a difficult task, he sighed, his face full of helplessness.

"Little brother, have you finished reading?" Xu Wei cautiously asked.

Lin Wanrong chuckled bitterly, "Brother Xu, I won't hide it from you. What the Emperor has assigned me is an almost impossible task. I'd rather not have read this letter."

"What's there to be modest about? Your talents are known to the world, little brother Lin. If it were a simple task, would the Emperor even come to you?" Xu Wei laughed, lit a taper, and burned the letter to ashes.

After discussing with Xu Wei, Lin Wanrong was deeply convinced that as long as Prince Cheng was trapped in the capital, even if he didn't initiate any trouble, the Emperor would surely have other plans to corner him. Given the cunning and shrewd nature of the old man, Lin Wanrong had no doubt about it. At the moment, both sides were in a tug-of-war, unsure who would make the first move. However, one thing was certain: a significant event was bound to happen in the next few days.

"Little Brother Lin, do you have any other instructions? The Emperor has decreed that in this important matter, I should listen to you completely." Despite the tense atmosphere in the capital, both sides understood each other well. The Emperor had not yet issued a royal edict announcing this to the world. Xu Wei felt somewhat awkward confronting Prince Cheng without formal authority.

"Well, I guess we're in a bit of a predicament then," Lin Wanrong sighed. "There's nothing else for it but to grit our teeth and proceed. Luckily, Prince Cheng and his son are old adversaries of mine. I even narrowly escaped an assassination attempt yesterday. So, I have no psychological barriers in dealing with them. My instruction is simple: keep a close eye on them. If they make a move, strike them down mercilessly. Additionally, have our brothers guarding the city outskirts push the perimeter ten li outward and intensify patrols. Not even a mosquito should be allowed to leave the city."

Xu Wei nodded in agreement. He had personally witnessed Lin Wanrong's strategic brilliance. None who had opposed him had met with a good end.

"Little brother Lin, there is a personal matter I am unsure whether to discuss," Xu Wei hesitated for a moment before finally speaking, his expression full of anticipation.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Why be so formal, Mr. Xu? You know I don't separate personal matters from official ones."

Xu Wei nodded, "Little brother Lin, what exactly happened between you and Zhiqing? Today at the court, I met with the general. He told me that Zhiqing was quite rude to you yesterday. Didn't you two get along well back in Shandong? I even heard that—well, Hu Bugui already told me. Why has the situation deteriorated like this?"

Love was such—quarrels and break-ups were normal. Lin Wanrong sighed, "Miss Xu's emotional fluctuations have indeed been somewhat erratic lately. It's hard to grasp, and as you know, I've never really understood the minds of young ladies."

Hearing this, Old Xu nearly spat blood. Not understand the minds of young ladies? The audacity of Lin San to say that, when each of his wives was lured by his sweet words.

"Little brother Lin," Xu Wei sighed deeply, his eyes moistening, "Zhiqing's future happiness was ruined by me, her foolish father. I'm getting old and don't have many aspirations left. All I wish for in my remaining years is to see Zhiqing laugh happily once, and I would be content. Could you please help me?"

Moved by Xu Wei's sincerity, Lin Wanrong responded, "Helping others is the foundation of happiness. Even if it sacrifices my own dignity, I will do it without regret. Mr. Xu, when shall we act?"

This young man certainly had thick skin. Xu Wei sighed again, feeling like he was throwing his daughter to the wolves. After hesitating for a while, he finally said, "Today is Zhiqing's birthday. Could you go and see her on my behalf? Don't worry about the gifts—cakes, rouge, and cosmetics, I'll cover all the expenses."

Chapter 459 The Battle Robe

"Miss Xu's birthday?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "That's an important day indeed! It'll take a birthday cake, roses, a diamond ring, and so on. I don't see how you can manage without spending at least a thousand taels of silver."

"That much?" Xu Wei was taken aback. He had no clue about a birthday cake and a diamond ring, but seeing Lin Wanrong speak so confidently and fluently, he assumed they must be no trifling matters. He pondered for a moment before gritting his teeth. "A thousand taels it is then. As long as Zhiqing smiles, I'd be willing to eat plain cabbage and tofu for a whole year."

Lin Wanrong patted him on the shoulder and gave a thumbs-up, smiling, "Rest assured, Mr. Xu. For others, it might cost a thousand taels, but in my hands, a mere few dozen taels will suffice. Spending dozens of taels on a birthday is extravagant enough."

Xu Wei looked at him skeptically, "Little brother Lin, are you sure a few dozen taels will be enough? Don't cut corners now."

Humans are odd creatures; the more expensive you tell them something is, the happier they are, yet if you quote them a low price, they grow suspicious. Even Xu Wei, despite his scholarly brilliance, was no exception to this rule. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Since Mr. Xu has doubts, let's stick to the one-thousand-tael rule then. After all, you're not short of money."

Xu Wei hurriedly waved his hands, chuckling apologetically, "I was only joking with you. Please don't take it to heart. My entire fortune isn't worth a thousand taels. Here's a promissory note for fifty taels, my entire stash of private funds. Please accept it."

Carefully, Xu Wei pulled out a piece of red silk from his bosom and unwrapped it. Indeed, it was a well-preserved promissory note for fifty taels. Though he held a position of power, he lived a life of integrity, never forming factions or mingling with the rich and powerful. Fifty taels was not a small sum for him.

"My good Mr. Xu, there's no need for this extravagance." Lin Wanrong smiled as he pushed the note back, "Keep this money and buy some cosmetics to please your new wife. Miss Xu and I are good enough friends to exchange gifts without her father footing the bill. Wouldn't want to become the laughingstock, would I?"

"You truly are a loyal friend, Little brother Lin," Xu Wei said, happily tucking the note back into his pocket. He made a fist and palm salute, "In that case, I'll leave Zhiqing's matters in your capable hands. I look forward to hearing good news soon. By the way—" He looked around furtively and whispered, "My wife has gone to the Grand Prime Minister Temple to pray today. Other than Zhiqing, there's no one else at home, so feel free to make your move."

"W-what do you mean, Mr. Xu? Don't underestimate me; I, Lin San, am not someone to act recklessly." Lin Wanrong thought less of the old man and felt his heart race; he could hardly speak clearly.

Xu Wei nodded with a sly grin, "I'm aware. With so many wives, little brother Lin, how could you be reckless? They were won over by your true capabilities. I entrust Zhiqing to you. I have urgent matters to attend to and must take my leave."

Having wrapped up both official and personal matters, Xu Wei didn't linger. He patted his trousers and made to leave. Lin Wanrong escorted him to the door and watched as he climbed into his carriage. Still a bit uneasy, Lin Wanrong grabbed hold of him and admonished, "Mr. Xu, make sure you find some sharp-witted fellows to keep tabs on that traitor. Should anything suspicious arise, hesitate not—"

He stopped mid-sentence, making a slashing gesture with his hand. Xu Wei, wise beyond his years, understood his meaning perfectly. A flash of intensity glinted in his eyes as he nodded. He signaled the carriage driver to proceed and slowly faded into the distance.

Upon returning to the hall, Lin Wanrong's mind was far from calm. If the old man had chosen this time to act against Prince Cheng, it was a desperate gamble. Qingxuan and Xian'er were both his wives, and he had various grudges against Prince Cheng; both personally and publicly, he had to win this battle so he could set his mind at ease and head to the front lines.

"Husband, what are you thinking about?" A gentle voice broke into his reverie. Qin Xian'er stood there, a hint of a smile on her face, her cheeks faintly flushed. Her body had the enchanting curves of a woman, alluring and irresistible.

"I was thinking about when to dispel another curse for you," Lin Wanrong felt his heart stir. He took his wife's hand and joked, a look of desire unabashedly filling his eyes. "Sweetheart, whenever you have time, why not teach this technique of curse lifting to Qiaoqiao and Yushuang? I really enjoy it, and good things should be shared, haha."

"Husband—" Qin Xian'er's voice trailed off in a tender outcry, her body weak, her face flushed with embarrassment. "Stop talking nonsense, the Eldest Miss is coming."

"Eldest Miss?" Lin Wanrong jumped up as if a monkey had just had its tail stepped on. He looked around frantically, "Where is she? Ah, I remember, Old Xu asked me to take care of an urgent matter, and I can't delay any longer. Sweetheart, I'll step out for a bit. If the Eldest Miss comes, don't tell her you've seen me."

Qin Xian'er stared behind him, a strange look on her face, as if she were fighting hard not to laugh.

Feeling unusually uneasy, as if needles were pricking his back, Lin Wanrong slowly turned around. He found himself face to face with a beautiful yet somewhat pale countenance, the eyes piercing his chest like sharp swords.

"Too close to see clearly. I have urgent matters to attend to, I must take my leave." Lowering his head, he tried to walk past the figure in front of him.

Qin Xian'er chuckled and grabbed his arm, "Husband, are you actually blind? Can't you recognize the Madam of the Xiao family?"

It wasn't that he couldn't recognize her, but that he shouldn't. Lin Wanrong inwardly groaned. With an audible gasp, his face turned a shade paler. He jumped back, eyes widening, "Ma, Ma, Madam? Ah, I was wondering who could be so beautifully divine, transcending the immortals. So it is you, Madam. What brings you here? I was just about to buy some pastries to honor you."

Madam Xiao looked indifferent, her face tinged with annoyance. She stared at him, a cold smirk on her lips, but said nothing.

What Lin Wanrong feared the most was this kind of silence. After a few glib remarks, he saw her gaze sharp as a sword, as if she wished to stab him full of holes. He could only force a few awkward laughs and shut his mouth.

Second Miss followed behind her mother. Seeing him hanging his head in a dejected manner, she couldn't help but chuckle. "You scoundrel, why have you become so meek in front of my mother? Have you done something you shouldn't have?"

"How could I? I've always been honest and upright—" Lin Wanrong was abruptly cut off by a fierce glare from Madam Xiao, as if she wanted to drink his blood and eat his flesh. His forced laughter fizzled out, his voice involuntarily softened, and his face flushed red.

Qin Xian'er observed their expressions and felt that her husband's behavior in front of Madam Xiao was exceedingly strange, a far cry from his usual self. This naturally puzzled her.

"Husband, I have talked to Madam. From now on, I'll be staying with them. I will keep Madam Xiao and Xiao sisters company, and we will all accompany you. What do you think?" Qin Xian'er gently grabbed Madam Xiao's hand, her face flush with affection and her voice sweet as a songbird. Madam Xiao was forthright with Lin San but seemed to get along wonderfully with Qin Xian'er. As Qin Xian'er held her hand, Madam Xiao showed a genuinely warm smile.

"Good, good—wait, what did you say?!" Lin Wanrong, who had been covertly gauging Madam Xiao's expression, was initially not bothered by her words. But upon hearing them clearly, he was somewhat surprised. 'In just this short amount of time, how did Xian'er become so close with

Madam Xiao, almost like a mother and daughter?' He quickly lowered his voice and said, "Xian'er, you're going to live here? What about Qiaoqiao and Ning'er?"

He was quite the expert at flirting with women and deliberately avoided mentioning Qingxuan to gauge Qin Xian'er's reaction. She pouted and snorted, "If you can't bear to part with that Xiao woman, just say so. Why bring up Qiaoqiao and the others? I get along well with Yushuang and Yuruo, and we're like sisters in the same household. Madam Xiao treats me as warmly as a mother, so this is my home now. Madam Guo, may I become your daughter? Is that alright?"

Madam Xiao smiled softly and affectionately took her hand, her lips lightly parting to say, "You are a princess of royal blood; our humble home may not be worthy of you."

"What are you talking about, Madam?" Qin Xian'er threw herself into Madam Xiao's arms, her eyes brimming with tears. "I'm not some royal princess. In the past, I followed my master across the lands, wandering everywhere and suffering much hardship. Now that I have my husband and you, Madam, I'm truly happy. Where is the suffering? Madam, will you take me or not? Tell me quickly!"

Qin Xian'er was as beautiful as a celestial being; not only men but even women were captivated by her. Madam Xiao was extremely fond of her and gently patted her on the back, showing heartfelt affection as she smiled and said, "How could I refuse? Where would I find another such wonderfully gentle and beautiful young woman?"

"Good, good." The Second Miss eagerly clapped her hands, overjoyed. "Sister Xian'er is like a celestial being and is so educated. Having her as my sister is a wonderful thing indeed. Scoundrel, don't you agree?"

What a mess, Lin Wanrong thought, unable to voice his grievances. Now things had come to this: a handful of wives divided into two factions. One faction was led by Qingxuan, with Ning'er as her accomplice. The other faction was headed by Xian'er, with the Eldest Miss and Second Miss leading the charge. And then there was the cute and obedient Qiaoqiao, who obviously stood neutral. Xian'er's intentions were clear—she sought to unite with the sisters of the Xiao family and use them as a base to counter Qingxuan.

Two princesses, two opposing factions, age-old grudges between their families, rivals in life and love—the situation had all the elements for an intriguing drama. 'My household could host its own martial arts tournament,' Lin Wanrong sighed, his face full of worry.

"Husband, do you not want me here?" Xian'er, who loved him deeply, saw the worry on his face and asked softly, looking down.

"How dare he?!" Madam Xiao glared angrily at Lin Wanrong, her face flushed. "Xian'er, don't worry. If he dares to mistreat you, I'll—I'll—"

"What will you do, Madam? Sic the dogs on me?" Lin Wanrong said, half-smiling.

Madam Xiao spat out a contemptuous "Hmph!" Her face was red, her ears burned, and her eyes were ablaze with anger, as if ready to devour him.

"Husband," Qin Xian'er gently tugged at his sleeve and said timidly, "It's not that I want to make things difficult for you. I've been enemies with the Xiao girl and her master for so long; it's not easy to change overnight. Even if we are to be sisters, there should be an order—why should I be the one to ask her for forgiveness? Why doesn't she come to me first?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled at her logic. This was just her nature; if she changed, she wouldn't be Qin Xian'er anymore. "Life is short, and time is fleeting. The most enduring thing is the bond of blood and kinship," he said, taking her small hand gently. "Xian'er, I won't force you to reconcile with Qingxuan. But I must remind you—the blood that flows in both you and Qingxuan is the same. No matter how the world changes, this is an unalterable truth. Do you remember what I told you in Jinling? Wealth, status, glory—all these are fleeting. When you grow old, the only ones who will be there for you, calling your name with love and accompanying you in your final moments, are your kin. Don't be stubborn now and regret it later when it's too late."

His heartfelt words touched Yushuang, who nodded in agreement. Qin Xian'er pondered for a while, then slowly nestled into his arms and said softly, "Husband, you can make people laugh to death when you joke, but you move them deeply when you are serious. The happiest moment of my life was meeting you and becoming your wife."

Madam Xiao sighed. Lin San could infuriate people when he acted improperly, but when he was serious, he seemed like the best man in the world—his words full of deep wisdom, leaving people wanting to hear more.

Seeing Qin Xian'er deep in thought and seemingly moved, Lin Wanrong didn't press her further. He smiled and said, "Since Madam has graciously invited you, Xian'er, why don't you stay here? We are all family, sooner or later. Feel free to ask for whatever you'd like to eat or drink. Don't stand on ceremony!"

After uttering these words, his true colors shone through. Madam Xiao bit her red lips in annoyance but glanced at him less harshly, her eyes softening.

Recalling the words of Xu Wei, Lin Wanrong quickly regained his composure and spoke solemnly, "Madam, and you, Second Miss, there will be some disturbances in the city in the next few days. It would be best if you stayed home and avoided going out."

"How could we do that? Our family business can't be put on hold—" Madam Xiao, being stubborn by nature, was about to argue when she noticed Lin San looking solemn and serious, emanating an aura of authority she had never seen before. It was as if he were a truly extraordinary man! She lowered her head, unable to muster the heart to oppose him any further.

"Xian'er, be extra cautious in the mansion during these days," Lin Wanrong said as he gently held onto Qin Xian'er's hand, making a special point to remind her. Qin Xian'er was originally a seductress from the White Lotus sect, skilled and knowledgeable, so Lin Wanrong was quite at ease with her. Her staying in the Xiao residence would surely prevent any mishaps.

Seeing his serious expression, Qin Xian'er obediently nodded her head, speaking softly, "Husband, what about you?"

"I have some very important things to do," Lin Wanrong nodded gravely. Such a serious matter as romancing women needed to be kept a secret, especially from Xian'er, who was prone to jealousy. The consequences otherwise would be unthinkable.

"You naughty man, come back early; we can't do without you," the Second Miss whispered, setting aside her shyness.

Gazing at her rosy face, Lin Wanrong found it hard to keep a straight face. A roguish smile broke out as he lightly touched her cheek, "Second Miss, I can't do without you either—Ah, Madam, I was just shooing away a mosquito for the Second Miss."

Madam Xiao pulled her daughter back and gave him a sharp look, "Yushuang is young and you're not yet wed. There's plenty of time ahead, don't corrupt her early on."

"Yes, yes!" Lin Wanrong lowered his head, taking the opportunity to size up Madam Xiao's voluptuous figure. Her body was well-proportioned, like a ripe peach. He secretly swallowed his saliva, humming to himself, 'You're not that young yourself. I'd corrupt you if you'd let me!'

Madam Xiao noticed his eyes flickering to her chest. Though irritated, she felt a touch of resignation. She was used to it by now. If anyone could elevate shamelessness to this level, it was Lin San and Lin San alone.

As Lin Wanrong stepped outside burdened with "important tasks," he pondered what sort of gift to bring Xu Zhiqing. Just then, a voice rang out beside him, "Brother Lin, Brother Lin—"

This time, Gao Qiu had learned his lesson. He held something in his hands and called out to Lin San from a few steps away, so as not to startle him.

"Oh, Brother Gao, did you make a new outfit?" Lin Wanrong smiled. Gao Qiu was holding a set of brand new clothes, made of an unknown material that was soft, white, and as light as air.

Gao Qiu shook his head solemnly, saying, "Brother Lin, I've brought you a battle robe."

A battle robe? For womanizing? Intrigued, Lin Wanrong took the garment from him and saw that it was intricately woven from countless strands of silk, light as paper and meticulously crafted by hand.

"This is made from the finest heavenly silk. Wearing it will protect you with divine power; blades and spears will not harm you. It's a gift from the Emperor for your protection," Gao Qiu hastily explained, seeing Lin Wanrong examining it intently.

Lin Wanrong gave a knowing nod, increasingly interested. "What about cannon fire? Would that harm me?"

Gao Qiu hesitated for a moment, "We haven't tested that—the ones who did are all dead."

Lin Wanrong chuckled slyly at the clever response. "Brother Gao, your timing is impeccable. Come with me to take care of some business. We'll test the durability of this battle robe while we're at it."

Gao Qiu extended his arms, shielding him as he asked anxiously, "Brother Lin, is someone trying to kill you?"

Lin Wanrong sighed, "Not trying to kill me, no. I'm just concerned about being bitten to death. Your gift is timely—I could really use this robe for my romantic endeavors!"

Chapter 460 The Gift

Walking down the bustling main street with Gao Qiu, Lin Wanrong was enveloped by a cacophony of vendors shouting their wares. Tea houses and restaurants teemed with people, lively as ever, seemingly unaware that the capital was teetering on the brink of chaos.

Seeing Lin Wanrong meandering about, picking up trinkets that seemed tailored to feminine tastes, Gao Qiu laughed, "So, you really are meeting up with a young lady. I thought you were joking with me. You're truly fortunate; your wives at home are all gentle beauties, like celestial beings, and yet you keep mistresses on the side. Such luck in love is enviable to people like us."

"What's there to envy?" Lin Wanrong made a grimacing face. "Being a man isn't easy either. You have to be good-looking, make money, and be skilled at sweet-talking. Act like a gentleman by day and become a beast by night. Fall short in any of these aspects, and you'll fail. Maintaining a harmonious household while entertaining affairs outside—do you think it's that easy?"

Gao Qiu burst into hearty laughter. "Every conversation with you, Brother Lin, is more entertaining than flipping through ten erotic paintings."

Lin Wanrong had boasted loudly in front of Mr. Xu about how impressive he was, but when it came to picking a gift for Miss Xu, he was scratching his head. Not to mention the icy state of their current relationship, but the young lady's tastes were particularly hard to cater to. No wonder Mr. Xu seemed so eager to marry her off, even if it came at a cost to himself.

"What's troubling you?" Seeing Lin Wanrong stop in his tracks, lost in thought, Gao Qiu looked puzzled but quickly grasped the situation. He casually picked up some rouge and powder from a small stall by the road. "When it comes to gifts for women, why hesitate? Buy her heaps of cosmetics and fine silk. She will be delighted and cling to you, calling you 'my dear' incessantly. If all else fails, just whip out a stack of silver notes and make it rain."

'You must frequent the brothels often,' Lin Wanrong clicked his tongue, looking Gao Qiu up and down. He chuckled, "Brother Gao, I never would have guessed. Such wisdom and insight coming from your mouth? No wonder the ladies at the brothels must adore you."

"They do adore me, and I adore them," Gao Qiu replied, grinning lasciviously.

"Truly profound. I'm impressed!" Lin Wanrong first gave him a thumbs-up, then flipped him off, expressing disdain from head to toe.

They walked for a while but found nothing that truly caught his eye. Something that would be both unique and unforgettable to Xu Zhiqing was proving to be a real challenge.

"Brother Gao, is there a good toy or doll shop in the capital? One with skilled artisans and fine craftsmanship?" Lin Wanrong asked Gao Qiu, who was walking beside him.

Having lived in the capital for many years and being familiar with the lay of the land, Gao Qiu nodded, "Of course, there is an old, reputable shop not far from here called De Sheng Tower. They specialize in handcrafted puppets and cloth toys. Why the sudden interest in children's playthings? Are you expecting a son or daughter?"

Lin Wanrong grinned slightly, not replying. He motioned for Gao Qiu to lead the way and headed straight for the De Sheng Tower. As soon as he walked through the door, he was immediately captivated by the sight before him. The shelves across the three levels were filled with a plethora of curiosities—various dolls, wooden tools, flora and fauna, predators and prey, everything imaginable.

Surveying the merchandise from top to bottom, Lin Wanrong slowly shook his head. "Too small, all too small. Shopkeeper, have you ever made anything bigger? Something my size, for example!"

"Something your size?" The shopkeeper followed him, shaking his head repeatedly. "We've been in business for a hundred years, and the biggest puppet we've ever made was a tiger or a leopard. We've never seen anything as large as what you're suggesting."

"My requirements are indeed not small," Lin Wanrong chuckled, whispering something in the shopkeeper's ear. The shopkeeper looked visibly surprised, scrutinizing Lin Wanrong for a while before finally saying, "We've never undertaken such a project before. Your idea is feasible, but the size of what you want is rather... excessive."

"Enough with the nonsense, just say if you can do it or not!" Gao Qiu, the leader of the imperial guards, was used to giving orders and was a man of impatient temper. He didn't care what Lin Wanrong was up to; annoyed by the shopkeeper's evasiveness, he barked out his demand.

Being close to the Emperor, Gao Qiu's shout carried weight. Startled, the shopkeeper's legs trembled as he stammered, "M-Mercy, sir—"

"What did you say?!" Gao Qiu slammed the table, glaring with his eyes wide. "Mercy? What do you take me for?! I rule by virtue, do you understand? By virtue!"

'A person even more shameless than me has finally appeared!' Lin Wanrong, standing nearby, couldn't help but feel grateful. He wished he could shake Gao Qiu's hand and burst into laughter.

"Don't be afraid, shopkeeper," Lin Wanrong smiled, "My dear brother Gao here just has a fiery temperament. But when it comes to punishing the wicked and protecting the innocent, he's top-notch. Now, can you or can you not make this object? How long will it take? We need it urgently."

"We can, we can!" Seeing the young man's friendly demeanor, the shopkeeper nodded hastily, finding him far more agreeable than the terrifying Gao Qiu. "As long as you cooperate, I can gather the best craftsmen in our shop to rush the work. I assure you, it will be done before sunset. However, regarding the price—" He hesitated, glancing cautiously at Gao Qiu, his face tinged with fear.

"What, afraid we won't pay you?" Gao Qiu snorted angrily. "I rule by virtue—"

'Oh, here we go again!' Lin Wanrong found this rather amusing. 'If you rule by virtue, then I, Lin San, must be Guanyin reincarnated.' Seeing the shopkeeper fall silent, fearful that he might be scared off, Lin Wanrong reassured him. "Shopkeeper, don't worry. I have the utmost respect for people who earn their keep through skill. Your workers feed their families with their craftsmanship, which is in no way inferior to anyone else, and is far better than corrupt officials. Just name your price."

"Sir, your words warm my heart. Just for that sentiment alone, I'm eternally grateful. Today, I'll only charge you the cost price—ten taels of silver!" The shopkeeper sighed with gratitude. Since ancient times, craftsmen have been considered inferior, looked down upon by all trades. High officials and nobles in the court had never been willing to speak on their behalf. This gentleman, Lin San, was the only one who dared to openly advocate for them, leaving him deeply moved.

"Here is twenty taels." Lin Wanrong smiled as he shoved the silver note into the shopkeeper's hand. "I can't let my brothers labor for nothing, can I? I just hope you'll hasten your work. Don't disappoint me."

"Yes, yes, please come with me, sir." The shopkeeper joyfully pocketed the silver note and led Lin Wanrong into the inner chamber. Gao Qiu stayed outside, hearing the chattering of craftsmen from within. Some complained that the figure was too tall; others claimed the shoulders were too broad. He had no idea what Lin Wanrong was having made.

After a considerable wait, Lin Wanrong emerged from behind the curtain, smiling and looking quite satisfied.

"Brother Lin, is everything done? What are you having made?" Gao Qiu, who had been waiting impatiently, rushed to ask as Lin came out.

Calling it an object wouldn't be quite accurate, yet it wasn't something else either. Lin Wanrong wasn't sure how to answer, so he chuckled and said, "It's a secret. You'll find out when the time comes."

Lin San was famous for his intelligence and wisdom, so Gao Qiu had no doubt about his capabilities. He gave Lin San a thumbs-up and said with a laugh, "When Lin San takes action, he conquers hearts! I wonder which young lady will be captivated this time. This is truly a cause for celebration."

Lin Wanrong shuddered. 'Good grief, has this guy been influenced by me? He's even more lewd in his laughter.'

"Sir, did you just say Lin San? Is this gentleman the Lin San who bombarded the Fairy Hall, reformed the Hall, and is planning a grand competition for all trades?" The shopkeeper, who had been following Lin San, overheard Gao Qiu and couldn't contain his surprise. He grabbed at Gao Qiu's sleeve and inquired.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "It's true that I'm Lin San, and I did bombard the Fairy Hall. But what is this competition for all trades you speak of? I've never heard of it."

"My heavens! You really are Lord Lin? I failed to recognize your greatness!" The shopkeeper was thrilled and quickly pulled out the silver note from his pocket, offering it back to Lin Wanrong.

Tears filled his eyes, "I've been so foolish. You are our great benefactor. How could I accept money from you? If this were to get out, I'd be cursed by my peers!"

"Shopkeeper, what are you talking about? What is this competition for all trades? I don't understand a word." Lin Wanrong smiled as he pushed the silver note back. "You make an honest living through your craftsmanship. Even the Thunder God wouldn't dare to strike you down. Even if the Emperor came here, he would have to accept this payment. If you refuse, you're looking down on me, Lin San."

"Exactly, exactly," Gao Qiu chimed in. "We believe in winning people over through virtue, not taking advantage of them. Now, quickly tell us about this competition for all trades. What is it all about?"

Lord Lin persistently refused, leaving the shopkeeper with no choice but to accept the banknote. The shopkeeper took out a notice from the counter, gleefully saying, "Lord Lin, how could you not know about this? This is the announcement you issued — 'By the order of His Majesty, Lin San, the Chief Libation Officer, has been appointed to establish the Holy Virtue Academy, to promote craftsmanship and teach a wide range of skills. We will select the most skilled artisans from all over the realm, rewarding excellence and encouraging innovation. Generous rewards will be given for outstanding performances in various fields.' This notice has been posted all over the streets and alleys. It bears your illustrious name and even the imperial edict of the Emperor. How could this not be your doing?"

True, this was his intention, but he had never issued a public announcement before, only 'classroom blackboard notices.' Lin Wanrong held the notice in his hands, scrutinizing it. The calligraphy was neat and precise, and the imperial seal of the Emperor was prominently displayed. The scale of this announcement was grand, leaving no room for doubt about its authenticity.

'I get it!' Lin Wanrong slapped his hand in sudden realization, his face lighting up with joy. "Qingxuan, you are truly my good wife; your handling of this matter is a hundred times better than if I had done it myself."

"Lord Lin, you have no idea how powerful this announcement is," the shopkeeper wiped away a tear. "For generations, craftsmen like us have been looked down upon. Nobody wants their children to learn our trade, considering it lowly. Many crafts are at risk of being lost, and we've dishonored the legacies of our ancestors. But now that you've posted this notice, everything has changed—"

Suddenly, the shopkeeper was animated, his hands waving excitedly. "It has the golden seal and the imperial edict. It's silenced so many critics. This is not just an announcement; it's a declaration of

grace for us craftsmen! You have no idea how many lives and crafts you've saved—Sir, I must bow to you!"

As the shopkeeper bent down and began to kowtow fervently, Lin Wanrong was startled and quickly lifted him up. "It's a small matter, shopkeeper. Don't shorten my life by doing this; I can't bear it!"

"To you, it might be a small thing, but for craftsmen like us, it's a tremendous benefit for our descendants and an endless blessing. You have no idea how many craftsmen are lighting incense and worshiping you as if you were the Guanyin Bodhisattva, the Goddess of Mercy."

'Worship me? I'm in the prime of my life.' Lin Wanrong was torn between laughter and tears, but deep inside he was thrilled. The outcome had exceeded his expectations. 'Qingxuan truly understands my heart.'

"A nation grows strong when its industries thrive, and falls into decay when they languish," Lin Wanrong sighed. "Shopkeeper, please tell everyone that this academy will be managed by me, Lin San, for a long time to come. Talent will be rewarded and put to good use, regardless of the field."

With those words, he quickened his pace and left, almost too fast for Gao Qiu to keep up with him.

What got into Brother Lin? Gao Qiu was puzzled.

After walking a good distance, Lin Wanrong's repressed emotions began to ease. He slowed his steps, gazing pensively into the distance, his thoughts flying to some unknown place.

"Brother Lin, Brother Lin—" Gao Qiu's soft calls roused him. He quickly nodded and smiled, "What's the matter, Brother Gao?"

Gao Qiu looked puzzled, "Brother Lin, what's come over you? I've always seen you happier than anyone else. Never seen you like this before."

"It's nothing. I just find the common folk of our Great Hua to be really simple-hearted. Something that should have been done long ago finally takes place after hundreds of years, yet it elicits shouts of joy and dancing in the streets from them. They've only learned gratitude and forgotten to demand accountability. Can there be anything more naive than this?"

Seeing Lin Wanrong's downcast expression, Gao Qiu shook his head, "Brother Lin, what you're saying is too profound for me to understand. I only know one thing—better late than never."

Lin Wanrong paused for a moment, then burst into laughter, "Brother Gao, you're not confused; you are truly wise, very wise indeed!"

After speaking a few words with Gao Qiu, his mood gradually improved. His thoughts also became more agile. What was the use of dwelling on pointless things? It was better to focus on important matters.

Speaking of important matters, Gao Qiu got excited, "Brother Lin, which young lady are you meeting clandestinely today? I can go scout for you."

Lin Wanrong didn't answer him and instead hurriedly led him forward. Gao Qiu looked around at the familiar scenery and couldn't help but exclaim, "Hey, isn't this the way back to the mansion? Brother Lin, are you meeting the Princess or perhaps the Ladies Qiaoqiao and Ning'er?"

'How could he be so dense? Does sneaking around like this look like I'm going home to see my wife? Clearly, I'm off to see a mistress!' Lin Wanrong sighed, "Brother Gao, keep quiet and stay alert. There are guard dogs ahead."

Gao Qiu quickly took the lead to protect him. When he saw Lin Wanrong peeping towards the Xu Mansion, he understood instantly. Filled with awe and admiration, he thought, 'Brother Lin actually dares to have a secret rendezvous with Master Xu's daughter under the very noses of his wives. What audacity, what courage; truly unparalleled!'

"Brother Lin, are we going in? The ladder is ready for you," Gao Qiu whispered, suppressing a laugh as he saw Lin Wanrong staring silently at the wall of the Xu Mansion.

'Damn it, do I look addicted to scaling walls? The guard dogs in the Xu Mansion are even more ferocious than I am; I can't afford to provoke them lightly!' Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Brother Gao, you may not know this, but I have a habit. Whenever I enter my own yard, I like to climb the wall. If I have to enter someone else's house, I prefer to be carried in on a palanquin."

'You're planning to steal someone's daughter, and you expect to be carried in on a palanquin?' Gao Qiu stifled a few laughs and said nothing. His expression clearly spelled out four big words—I don't believe it!

"You don't believe me, Brother Gao?" Lin Wanrong smirked, "Have you forgotten my name? When has Lin San ever failed in doing what he intends?"

It wasn't boasting; indeed, there were no records of Lin San ever failing. Just as Gao Qiu was about to speak, a distant clamor of gongs and drums, along with firecrackers, broke the air. Slowly approaching was a large palanquin, carried by none other than eight bearers!

The eight-bearer palanquin stopped in front of the Xu Mansion. An official began loudly announcing from a scroll, "In celebration of Miss Xu's youth and beauty, a gift of longevity and ritual is specially presented. Please graciously accept it—no need to ask who it's from, as known or unknown, the name will not be disclosed!"