

## Finest 461

### Chapter 461 The True and False Lin San

‘Known or unknown, the name will not be disclosed?’ What did that mean? The servants and maids at the entrance of the Xu family estate were utterly baffled. They couldn't figure out who had sent this mysterious gift, or who had thought of such a strange congratulatory message.

"What should we do, Sister Yuzhu? Should we accept this gift or not?" whispered a young maid standing beside Yuzhu. Yuzhu was Xu Zhiqing's personal maid, and her status within the Xu household was naturally significant. After pondering for a moment, she said, "You all wait here; I will go inform Miss Xu and let her decide."

Yuzhu quickly walked into the mansion, leaving those who had brought the gift waiting outside. After waiting long enough for a cup of tea to be brewed, she still had not returned. Gao Qiu, growing anxious, asked, "Brother Lin, it's been quite some time. Do you think we've been discovered?"

Lin Wanrong had already staked his reputation on this. If he couldn't gain entry to the Xu mansion today, it would be a significant loss of face. He chuckled, "I'm not afraid of being discovered; I'm afraid of not being discovered! Miss Xu should be clever enough to see through this, right?"

Brother Lin's words were indeed mysterious, and Gao Qiu was puzzled. Just when even Lin Wanrong was beginning to grow impatient, the grand doors of the Xu mansion suddenly creaked open. Yuzhu emerged from the crowd and smiled, "My mistress thanks the nameless benefactor for the gift. Please, follow me."

The sound of drums and music filled the air as eight bearers lifted a large palanquin and followed Yuzhu. Everyone filed in, creating a lively atmosphere. Gao Qiu joyfully exclaimed, "Brother Lin, we're in! We're in!"

Lin Wanrong shook his head and smiled, "Getting in is just the first step; the key is what comes next."

The eight bearers carried the palanquin into the Xu mansion and followed Yuzhu gracefully. Soon, they arrived at the back garden. There stood a mature, stunningly beautiful woman, clad in a pink

robe. She gave the bearers and musicians a slight nod and smiled faintly, "Thank you all. Yuzhu, give them their reward."

The young maid took out some small silver pieces and distributed them to everyone, who then thanked her and left. Once the area was quiet, Yuzhu curiously asked, "Miss, who sent this gift? He didn't even include a name!"

Xu Zhiqing snorted, "Known or unknown, the name will not be disclosed, he clearly has something to hide, so naturally, he wouldn't reveal his name. Does he think he can trick me with some gimmicks? I won't fall for it."

Yuzhu nodded, "Deceiving our Miss is not so easy. So, should we open the gift or not?"

"Don't open it!" Xu Zhiqing hesitated for a moment, then huffed, "Does he think I am so easily deceived? There's no sincerity here!"

Yuzhu looked at the large palanquin, wondering what could be inside that had the Miss both irritated and intrigued. She saw Xu Zhiqing's lithe figure heading toward the embroidered tower and quickly followed her.

Once upstairs, Yuzhu found Xu Zhiqing leaning against the railing, silently gazing at the palanquin in the garden. Her expression changed from red to white, from joy to irritation; her eyes held an array of complex emotions that were difficult to read.

"M-Miss," Yuzhu, growing impatient after a long silence, softly asked, "Shall we open the gift and take a look?"

"If you want to see it, go ahead. I won't fall for his tricks," Xu Zhiqing said, her tone gentle and lacking any firmness.

Yuzhu found it odd and asked, "Miss, do you know who sent this gift?"

"I don't know," Xu Zhiqing gritted her teeth, her cheeks gradually flushing. "It must be from some damn scoundrel."

Upon hearing this, Yuzhu chuckled. The person who could make her mistress so irritated didn't need to be named; it was clear who it was. Yuzhu nodded nonchalantly. "It's rare for such a scoundrel to

remember Miss's birthday. But since the gift is not to your liking, shall I have it returned to spare you the displeasure?"

"Do as you please. I don't care," Xu Zhiqing turned away and said lightly.

Yuzhu acknowledged and hurried downstairs. Hearing her footsteps grow faint, Xu Zhiqing felt a pang in her heart and quickly shouted, "Yuzhu, Yuzhu!"

Yuzhu turned back, puzzled, "Miss, what is it? I was about to have the gift returned."

Xu Zhiqing's cheeks were pink. She shook her head and huffed, "After all the awful things he's done, why should I return his gift? Consider it found property. Open it and take a glance, then throw it away. Don't report back to me."

Yuzhu responded with a sweet smile, "Understood, Miss. But if you don't want to see it, there's no point in my looking either. We might as well throw it away directly."

Just as she began to speak, she saw Xu Zhiqing rushing downstairs, her face a mixture of embarrassment and irritation. "What are you thinking, girl? Even my jokes you dare to take seriously?"

Yuzhu giggled and whispered into Xu Zhiqing's ear, "Miss, what harm is there in just taking a look? If you don't like it, you can throw it away."

Xu Zhiqing pondered for a moment, her face flushed. She spoke softly, "This is something you want to see, not me. Don't tell anyone."

"Yes, it's me who wants to see," Yuzhu giggled, impressed in her heart. To make her usually astute and decisive mistress act this way, the young man who sent the gift must be quite something.

Watching Yuzhu walk toward the palanquin, Xu Zhiqing's heartbeat quickened. She suddenly called out again, "Yuzhu!"

Turning her head, puzzled, Xu Zhiqing lowered hers, "There are too many people in the garden. Don't make a spectacle; better to bring it to my loft before opening it."

"Understood." Yuzhu made a face at her mistress and winked mysteriously. Xu Zhiqing couldn't contain her embarrassment and turned her head away, cursing the man who had upset her so much.

Yuzhu instructed several servants to carry the palanquin to Xu Zhiqing's loft. Once it was set down and everyone else had dispersed, only the two of them remained. Yuzhu finally said with a smile, "Miss, I'm going to look at the gift now."

Xu Zhiqing responded with a soft 'hmm,' her cheeks flushed, "If you want to look, go ahead. Why do you need to inform me?"

Yu Zhu chuckled as she lifted the curtain of the sedan. After just a glance, she couldn't help but exclaim, "What is this?!"

Upon hearing her words, Xu Zhiqing looked up and saw that the contents of the sedan were quite peculiar. Approximately as tall as a person—taller than the two of them by more than half a head—whatever it was had been completely covered by a cloth, making it difficult to identify. Yu Zhu touched it through the cloth a few times; it was soft and seemed to weigh very little. In her astonishment, she wrapped her arms around it and, with a slight effort, lifted it.

The surprise on Miss Xu's face was needless to say. What kind of gift was this, to be so large? She quickly stepped forward to assist Yu Zhu in holding it. The object was light to the touch; the two women could easily lift it.

Once they had placed the gift properly, Yu Zhu giggled, "Judging by the size of this gift, it's not something small. Maybe it's a dashing and handsome young man."

"You silly girl, what are you talking about?" Miss Xu's face turned red, and she let out a soft "tsk."

Yu Zhu laughed lightly and took scissors to cut open the cloth that covered the gift. What could this gift be? Xu Zhiqing felt her skin heating up and her heartbeat accelerating—both scared and excited.

"Ah—" When the cloth fell to the ground and they saw the gift for what it was, both women opened their mouths wide, unable to close them again.

The gift was an exact replica of Lin San, matching him in height, appearance, and even attire. Even his wheat-colored skin, half-closed eyes, and mischievous smile were all vividly depicted, almost lifelike.

"Young-Young Master Lin, why are you here?!" Yu Zhu's voice trembled with unbelievable surprise.

Xu Zhiqing chuckled lightly, "Silly girl, this isn't him! It's just a cloth puppet! I don't know what that scoundrel was thinking, coming up with such an idea; it's maddening!"

"A puppet?!" Yu Zhu still couldn't believe it. She gently touched the "Lin San" figure and immediately exclaimed, "It really is a cloth doll! I've never seen one so large, and it's modeled after Young Master Lin. Miss, you should feel it too—it's so soft and comfortable!" Given that the puppet was so realistic and the lighting in the attic was dim, it was understandable that Yu Zhu had mistaken it at first.

"Why would I touch it, when you're so shameless?" Xu Zhiqing's pretty face flushed as she whispered.

"Miss, there's nothing to fear; it's just a cloth doll. What harm is there in touching it? Just imagine, if you could sleep holding a doll like this every day, wouldn't that be incredibly comfortable?" Yu Zhu touched "Lin San," clearly enchanted, and said, "Miss, do you want this gift? If you don't, you should just give it to me."

Her words grew increasingly brazen. Xu Zhiqing felt her heart flutter, her face reddening as if painted by the evening glow. "I don't want it. My room is just missing a few sandbags for practicing my martial arts. So, just take this puppet to my room. I can kick it a few times every day to feel better—"

"Oh—" Yu Zhu suddenly understood and smiled mysteriously, "So Miss is using Young Master Lin as a punching bag. I see, I see!"

"You impertinent girl—" Xu Zhiqing chuckled and attempted to swat her maid, the two embroiled in playful banter, when the sudden sound of drums and music echoed from outside. A young maidservant rushed in, exclaiming, "Miss, Miss, something's amiss! Someone has sent another congratulatory gift!"

"Let them send, what's so strange about that? Oh, who is it from?" Yuzhu ceased her frolics and grinned.

The young servant hesitantly replied, "The man said, 'Known or unknown, the name will not be disclosed!'"

"It's him again!" Eldest Miss Xu's face flushed a rosy pink, her expression tinged with unspoken bashfulness.

Yuzhu acted quickly this time. Without waiting for her mistress's instructions, she waved her hand and said, "Quick, quick, bring the palanquin to Miss's chamber." Once the young maidservant went to convey the orders, Yuzhu leaned into Xu Zhiqing's ear and giggled, "Miss, congratulations are in order. Judging by Mr. Lin's behavior, it seems he won't rest until he accomplishes something wonderful today." Xu Zhiqing softly spat, unable to utter a word.

When the palanquin was brought in, Xu Zhiqing felt much more at ease thanks to the experience of the first time; her heart also felt sweeter.

Yuzhu lifted the palanquin curtain and peered inside. She instantly laughed, "Miss, Mr. Lin has sent another cloth doll. Ah, why is there no veil this time? And the legs are even flexible!"

"Young girl, I warn you, don't touch my butt!" Lin San's languid voice resonated from within the palanquin. Miss Xu let out a sound of surprise and stood there, stunned!@@novelbin@@

## Chapter 462 You Are My Teacup

Yuzhu trembled in fright, her small feet hopping as she hid behind Xu Zhiqing. She peeked out her head, both astonished and delighted, "Miss, Miss, this doll can talk! And his voice sounds just like Young Master Lin's! Ah, look, he can even walk! Oh my heavens, he's actually walking out by himself! What an adorable plush toy!"

Lin Wanrong rolled his eyes at hearing this. 'How on earth did you grow those eyes of yours? Have you ever seen a plush toy so dashing? I'm the first one you've dared call 'cute,' aren't I?'

Xu Zhiqing's eyes were sharp as daggers. Her delicate face flushed a light pink as she hummed dismissively, "What plush toy? More like a living ghost. You are becoming more and more ignorant.

This is my private chamber; how could you let a strange man barge in? Have someone kick him out immediately."

"Are you really Young Master Lin? Not a doll?" Yuzhu was still unconvinced, pointing a tiny finger and blinking her large eyes inquisitively.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Have you ever seen such a handsome 'doll'? If you still don't believe, come and touch me again—just don't go for any crucial areas this time. Don't worry; I won't charge you."

Yuzhu let out a soft cry, her hands clamping over her reddened cheeks, not daring to make a sound. Who else would dare to speak so frivolously in front of the Miss? No one would believe he was anyone but Lin San.

Lin Wanrong took a few slow steps and propped himself next to a life-sized plush toy that was about his height. After giving it a quick once-over, he nodded approvingly, "Old pal, the more I look at you, the more handsome you seem."

"Yuzhu, why are you still talking to him?" Watching Lin Wanrong praise himself, Xu Zhiqing felt like laughing but restrained herself and let out another hum, "Quickly, kick this shameless man out before my father and stepmother see him."

Lin Wanrong winked, "That's the funniest joke I've ever heard. Your father sold you off long ago; you probably just don't know it yet." Xu Zhiqing saw his suggestive expression and her heart pounded. Forcing down her embarrassment, she whispered, "Yuzhu, what are you waiting for? Quickly, tell him to leave."

Yuzhu did not dare to go against Xu Zhiqing's wishes. Lowering her hands, she said timidly, "Master Lin, this is the Miss's chamber. She, she requests that you leave."

Master Lin's eyes widened, "Leave? Yuzhu, my dear, you must be mistaken! When did I even enter? I was sitting in my sedan, here to talk with Lord Xu, and before I knew it, I was carried into this chamber. I haven't even uttered a single word and you want to kick me out? This seems somewhat unreasonable. You should know that I haven't done anything wrong from beginning to end!"

This seemed reasonable enough. Just moments ago, she and the Miss hadn't yet determined the right or wrong of the situation and had already carried Master Lin's sedan in. Ultimately, he wasn't to blame.

"Miss—" Yuzhu looked at Xu Zhiqing in embarrassment, not knowing how to proceed.

Xu Zhiqing knew very well that Yuzhu was no match for a slick character like Lin San. Even if she herself were to step up, she would likely be defeated within a few moves. Seeing Lin San's eyes gleaming as they looked at her, her heart rate quickened. She quickly lowered her head and huffed softly, "Yuzhu, ask him what he's here for. If he can't give a satisfactory answer, then kick him out!"

Yuzhu playfully stuck out her tongue and giggled, "Master Lin, did you hear that? My Miss is asking, what business brings you here to seek her? If you have none, you're kindly asked to leave."

Master Lin sighed, a look of sorrow covering his face. "The world is truly a difficult place; people have lost their virtues. Who would have thought that even giving someone a gift would be met with so much scrutiny? Think about it, young lady, I've gone through great trouble to find out someone's birthday, painstakingly prepared a gift for them, and even discreetly avoided her parents. And yet, all I receive is suspicion and interrogation. How would you feel in my shoes?"

Yuzhu nodded sympathetically. Xu Zhiqing blushed and muttered under her breath, "You scoundrel, always bullying people. I don't believe you. Yuzhu, ask him where he learned my birthdate."

Chuckling, Yuzhu relayed, "Master Lin, my Miss says you're a scoundrel who loves to bully people. She also wants to know how you found out her birthdate."

Xu Zhiqing huffed softly, her face flushed. "You silly girl, who asked you to repeat it word for word?"

In this era, a woman's birthdate, much like her age, was a closely guarded secret, discussed only in the context of marriage arrangements. Understandably, Miss Xu wanted to clarify this matter. Lin Wanrong and Xu Zhiqing were standing just a few steps apart, and could hear each other clearly. Despite her embarrassment, Miss Xu spoke through her maid. Lin Wanrong didn't mind; he chuckled, "As for the birthdate, I searched for it in the Household Registry. Oh my, such a thick volume, I flipped through each page, and it took me three days and nights without sleep."

His exaggerated hand gestures had Yuzhu laughing uncontrollably, and even Xu Zhiqing couldn't help but smile. Though she knew he was lying, she no longer cared to pursue it. What a woman wanted was the feeling of being cherished and protected.

Seeing her Miss' flushed cheeks and soft gaze, Yuzhu whispered in Xu Zhiqing's ear, "Miss, do you still want to send him away?"



Xu Zhiqing hesitated and quickly turned her head, "Send him away—later! Ask him, what exactly is this gift? It's so big; isn't he intentionally making my parents laugh?"

Lin Wanrong almost burst out laughing. This Miss Xu always had her father in mind. He patted the large cloth doll and said, "This? It's called Lin San Doll, my own unique invention. Look how tall and handsome it is, absolutely lovable. There's only one in the whole world. Yuzhu, could you please ask Miss Xu if she likes this Lin San Doll?"

Yuzhu looked at the doll once more, "It's such a big Lin San! Miss, do you like it?"

What kind of question was this? How could she answer? Her cheeks burning, Xu Zhiqing hummed softly, not daring to look up. She sneaked a glance at Lin San who was nodding and shaking his head, looking incomprehensibly pleased with himself. Unwilling to concede, she whispered a few words into Yuzhu's ear. Yuzhu stifled a laugh and said, "Master Lin, my Miss says that if the doll's face were covered and its appearance concealed, she would like it very, very much. But if its true face were exposed, she would dislike it very, very much."

Hearing the maidservant's coquettish tone and seeing Xu Zhiqing's bashful beauty, Lin Wanrong felt as if a weight had been lifted from his bones. He chuckled in a flirtatious manner, "Really? I also find him quite annoying, quite annoying indeed!"

"Scoundrel!" Both the maidservant and her mistress spat out the word, their faces blushing beyond their ears. They intended to scold him, but somehow, their words stuck in their throats.

"Miss, should we continue to question him? From what I see, it seems we'll never get a straight answer out of Master Lin. He's quite the rascal," the maidservant hesitantly and softly inquired, her face flushed.

"Ask. Of course we will ask," Xu Zhiqing replied, her pretty face burning. Despite her embarrassment, there was a hint of defiance in her voice. "We can't let him get away with it. Ask him again, what am I to him? Why is he giving me this gift?"

Yuzhu nodded repeatedly, thinking her mistress indeed was astute for not overlooking such a crucial question. She stared at Lin Wanrong and smilingly said, "Master Lin, my mistress wants to know why you're giving her such an extravagant gift. What exactly is she to you?"

This was a difficult question. Answer too deeply, and they might not understand; answer too shallowly, and he would appear superficial. Lin Wanrong pondered for a moment before grinning, "She's my teacup!"

"Teacup?" Not only was Yuzhu puzzled, but even Xu Zhiqing was at a loss. She mused for a while, then subtly signaled Yuzhu with her eyes. The maidservant caught on quickly and sweetly asked, "Master Lin, could you please clarify? I'm having some difficulty understanding."

Lin Wanrong shook his head, offering a shy smile, "Little sister, let's leave it at that. I'm an introverted person and not very good at expressing my emotions—besides, it might not be appropriate to discuss this with you."

"Ha!" Xu Zhiqing and the maidservant both scoffed simultaneously. Lin San, introverted? Even pigs would laugh at that.

Yuzhu leaned into Xu Zhiqing's ear and whispered, "Miss, Master Lin is truly an interesting man. Whoever ends up with him would have an endless supply of happiness in life."

Xu Zhiqing blushed, retorting, "What do you know, little girl? Mere wit won't suffice. He must be resourceful, adaptable, and capable of serving the people—"

Yuzhu looked at her in astonishment and broke into laughter, "Ah, I see, Miss. Are these criteria for choosing your husband?"

Xu Zhiqing's cheeks were suffused with a rosy glow. She lightly spat out, "Nonsense! What choosing a husband? You're the one with spring fever."

Yuzhu giggled, "If it's not the criteria for choosing a husband, why are you comparing Master Lin to them? Aren't all the qualities you mentioned Lin Wanrong's strong points? Not only is he romantic, but he also stands up for the people. Could you find someone better who'd earn both your and the master's admiration?"

Xu Zhiqing lowered her gaze, remaining silent. Just as her maidservant had pointed out, although Lin San appeared to be unserious and frivolous, everything he had done was extraordinary and awe-inspiring. Even the gift he presented was consistently surprising and delightful. She softly smiled, her voice gentle, "This man certainly knows how to scheme. Don't be taken in by him. Quickly find out, what does he mean by saying I'm his teacup? What a vulgar metaphor!"

The mistress and her maid were conversing in hushed tones. Lin Wanrong pricked up his ears but couldn't catch a single word. Just as he was about to inch closer to eavesdrop, Yuzhu looked up and grinned. "Master Lin, my Miss said that as long as you explain the story behind this teacup, she will not drive you away."

"Must I really explain?" Lin Wanrong asked awkwardly. Seeing the maid's assured expression and Miss Xu's coy, bashful gaze, he sighed and shook his head. "Little sister Yuzhu, please pour me a cup of tea."

Before the Miss could give the order, Yuzhu happily complied, handing him a cup of hot tea. After watching him take a sip, she softly said, "Master Lin, tell us, why did you ask my mistress to be your teacup?"

Lin Wanrong grinned mysteriously and sighed, "—So I can hold her in the palm of my hand."

"Ah!" Both women blushed furiously. Lin San had no filter; he could actually utter such cheesy lines. Yuzhu chuckled, her face red, "Miss, Master Lin, better save such words for yourselves. They're not quite appropriate for a maid like me to hear— hee hee—"

Twirling around, the young maid gracefully scampered out. Xu Zhiqing called out a few times but to no avail. Only she and Lin Wanrong remained in the room, in total silence.

Noticing that he was staring at her but saying nothing, Xu Zhiqing felt uneasy. Her face flushed up to her neck. She spat out, "What are you looking at?"

Lin Wanrong took a few steps closer, looked her up and down, and asked solemnly, "Miss Xu, how old are you today?"

Hearing this, Xu Zhiqing's face darkened. She was a widow who had lost her husband before even crossing the threshold into his home. She had been in mourning for years, her youth slipping away. In the capital, everyone knew her story. Lin Wanrong's question struck her where it hurt the most. She lowered her head, tears forming, and angrily turned away. "If you're repulsed by me, just say it. I don't need your pity!"

Lin Wanrong seemed not to have heard her. Fixated on her lovely face, he sighed, "Ah, you look more beautiful than a dew-kissed begonia, more stunning by far. How will I celebrate your nineteenth birthday next year? It's really a headache!"@@novelbin@@

"You— you're annoying!" Xu Zhiqing was both angry and pleased, bursting into a smile. She finally understood that this scoundrel was deliberately praising her beauty, making her feel miserable for a moment.

Already renowned for her beauty, Miss Xu looked even more enchanting with her coyness, resembling a begonia blushing in shame—unparalleled in the world. Lin Wanrong took her trembling hand and said softly, "Miss Xu, let's stop being at odds. Wasn't it nice when we got along in Shandong?"

With a snort, Xu Zhiqing almost conceded. Though famous for her intelligence, she couldn't withstand his sweet talk. A flush of red soared to her cheeks, and she tried to pull her hand away. "You scoundrel! You're only good at talking. I don't know how many innocent girls you've deceived. I don't believe a word you say—what was so good about our time in Shandong? All you did was bully me!"

"I'm not just good with words," Lin Wanrong chuckled, tightly holding her small hand. "Miss Xu, you are mistaken if you think I'd bother with just any woman. It's only you—"

Seeing his shameless demeanor, Miss Xu wanted nothing more than to give him a good whack on the head. After hesitating for a moment, she couldn't bring herself to do it. Instead, she humphed, "Don't just say things that sound nice. You have a strong-willed wife at home. Can you even make such decisions? Let her speak for herself!"

## Chapter 463 The First Man

A strong-willed wife? Lin Wanrong was caught between laughter and tears. Miss Xu seemed like no easy person to deal with either. Qingxuan, such a beautiful and magnanimous woman, was considered "strong-willed" in her eyes? Comparing the two, it wasn't clear who was more domineering.

"Why, can't you speak now?" Seeing Lin Wanrong's hesitance, Miss Xu felt a pang of bitterness. She bit her lip and turned her head away. "Are you really that afraid of her? You can't even express what's in your heart?"

The young woman's thoughts were getting increasingly muddled. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Miss Xu, you've probably heard of how Qingxuan and I met. Princess Chuyun is both beautiful and kind, renowned far and wide. She's not the arrogant person you make her out to be. On the contrary, Qingxuan understands me and always puts me first. She's never once complained. She also gets along well with Ning'er and Qiaoqiao, like they are sisters. Where else would I find such a good wife? As for what's on my mind, I've already spoken it. What do you mean, 'dare not say'?"

Xu Zhiqing lowered her head, remaining silent for a while before finally speaking, "So, what you're saying is that earlier, those words were instructed by Miss Xiao?"

‘That's not the case. Qingxuan has already made it clear: any woman I take an interest in must first be approved by them before they can join the family. Considering your strong-willed nature, it remains to be seen whether you would pass their scrutiny.’@@novelbin@@

"Do I even need Qingxuan's instructions?" Lin Wanrong didn't even blink as he chuckled mysteriously, glancing at Xu Zhiqing. "I came of my own accord."

Among all the things he said, this sentence appealed to her the most. Xu Zhiqing's face turned red; she lowered her head and whispered, "So, you came here yourself? Aren't you afraid she will—"

"Will what? Catch me cheating?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

"Catch your big head!" Miss Xu was both angry and annoyed. Her face flushed, she clenched her fist and landed a punch on the chest of the nearby Lin San doll, creating a dull thud. The doll wobbled a bit. Lin Wanrong couldn't help but marvel—had this young woman been practicing boxing recently? That punch was not light. ‘Poor doll,’ he thought.

"Miss Xu, is your boudoir upstairs?" Lin Wanrong asked with a teasing smile.

Feeling his gaze deeply fixed on her face, Xu Zhiqing's heart began to race. Struggling under his scrutiny, she lowered her head, her voice trembling, "What are you trying to do? Don't act recklessly. I—I will call for help!"

"What could I possibly do?" Lin Wanrong laughed boisterously, picking up the cloth doll and moving step by step toward the stairs. "I'll carry this doll upstairs for you. If you're ever angry, just take it out on him. You can even cuddle him in bed at night—no one will see."

"Scoundrel!" Miss Xu muttered, not even having the chance to stop him. The indecent man had already quickly ascended the stairs with the cloth doll. Xu Zhiqing became anxious, hurriedly saying, "Wait, wait a minute, there's something upstairs—"

"What is it? Could it be a hidden portrait of me?" Lin Wanrong was pleased with himself as he effortlessly entered Miss Xu's boudoir. He chuckled softly and stepped in, only to feel a warm sensation at his leg, as if something was nearing him. Unconcerned, he chortled, "Move away. Move away, don't hinder me from moving things! Hey, what are you licking me with—"

"Woof—Woof—" Two fierce barks suddenly erupted within the room, akin to the abrupt roll of spring thunder, jolting Lin Wanrong to his core. He stood motionless, sweat trickling down his forehead. He finally looked down to see a menacing large dog beside him, its green eyes glaring and its red tongue slowly licking his pant leg.

He let out an involuntary "Ah!" before hurriedly covering his mouth, standing frozen as sweat drenched him. 'I've been careless, very careless. I didn't expect Miss Xu to keep this vicious dog 'Lin San' in her boudoir. She cares for this beast more than me!'

Xu Zhiqing quickly ascended the stairs and couldn't help but giggle at the sight of him standing in a cold sweat, trembling in fear. Lin San was renowned for his intelligence and bravery, but nobody would ever guess that the celebrated hero was actually afraid of dogs. If word of this got out, it would be utterly laughable.

"Miss Xu, could you ask this creature to leave? It and I don't quite get along," Lin Wanrong cautiously said, wiping his forehead.

"You brought this upon yourself!" Miss Xu rolled her eyes at him, her cheeks flushed. She softly said, "Stay still, I'll come to your rescue!" Her voice was tinged with an indefinable tenderness, and her face was radiant with a maternal glow. Seeing Lin San, usually so clever and cunning, look so helpless for once was akin to seeing a child.

"Come with me." Xu Zhiqing gently gripped Lin Wanrong's rough hand with her own trembling one. Her whisper seemed to possess a magical allure, causing him to feel somewhat entranced. He turned his head and saw her blushing radiant ears and slightly quivering long eyelashes, undeniably enchanting.

Strangely enough, as soon as Xu Zhiqing held Lin Wanrong's hand, the menacing dog ceased its barking and sat down. Its eyes glowed green as it watched the pair, giving Lin Wanrong a chill

down his spine. They walked into the inner chamber, and he caught a subtle fragrance in the air. "Rose perfume? Miss Xu, so you like this scent!"

"What nonsense are you talking about?" Xu Zhiqing frowned, slightly irritated. "This was a gift from Aunt Guo. I didn't know initially that you were the one who made this perfume. By the time I found out, it was too late to refuse. I've grown fond of the scent."

Lin Wanrong let out a long "Oh," grinning from ear to ear. "So, Miss Xu and the Madam share the same taste, both fond of this rich rose scent. Understood, understood!"

Confused by his implication, Xu Zhiqing, a diligent learner, couldn't help but knit her brows. "What's wrong with liking a rich rose scent? Is there some sort of classification for this perfume?"

This was Miss Xu's boudoir, a room furnished with only a single square stool, placed before a vanity. The mirror reflected the faces of two individuals: one as fragrant and pink as a peach blossom in March, the other grinning mischievously like a monkey in the mountains.

‘At a time like this, you still can't manage to look serious. How annoying.’ Xu Zhiqing cast a furtive glance at their reflections, her cheeks flushed with a mixture of shame and delight. She led him to sit on the square stool, then quietly lowered her head, unwilling to speak.

A light white gauze curtain obscured the room's pink ivory bed, faintly revealing the rosy quilt and jade pillows. A subtle fragrance filled the air, creating an atmosphere of warmth. Lin Wanrong's heart pounded as he imagined the enchanting scene of Miss Xu, her chest partially covered, her icy skin glowing against the jade and ivory bedding. It seemed as though Xu Zhiqing had seen right through him, her blushing cheeks now even more radiant than the embroidered quilt, as if she were a freshly bloomed peach blossom. R A NOBES

Lin Wanrong has entered quite a few boudoirs—Qiaoqiao's, Qin Xian'er's, Luo Ning's, the Eldest Miss's, Yu Shuang's, and even Madam's. Each room was unique in its arrangement, each woman with her own style, creating unforgettable impressions. But this room of Miss Xu's contrasted sharply with her usually aloof demeanor; here, subdued pinks prevailed, revealing a unique taste. Swallowing, Lin Wanrong grinned and said, "There's some truth to it. It's been studied that girls who like rose perfume are generally outgoing, and those who prefer a stronger scent are even more passionate—"

Xu Zhiqing scoffed, "More nonsense. I bet the only one who enjoys studying such ridiculous theories is you. Do I look like such a person to you?"

"That remains to be seen," Lin Wanrong replied with a lecherous smile. "You haven't explored certain aspects yet. How can you be sure you're not that kind of person?"

At first, she didn't catch his implication, but Xu Zhiqing was Xu Zhiqing—the renowned intelligent woman. A brief moment of thought made her understand his devious intentions. Her face flushed deep red, and she glared at him, speechless.

Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly. In Shandong, he had held, touched, and kissed Miss Xu to the point of crossing almost every boundary. At this juncture, any pretense of being refined but not vulgar would not only make him lose respect for himself but would likely not sit well with Miss Xu either.

"Eh, what's this?" Noticing Xu Zhiqing's silence, Lin Wanrong's gaze wandered and landed on a cradle near the door. Laid with straw and holding a knitted sweater, it puzzled him. "What is this for?"

Xu Zhiqing gave a secretive smile and clapped her hands lightly. From outside the door, the fierce dog "Lin San" leapt in with a swish. Lin Wanrong, however, was even quicker to react. He jumped up and hid behind Xu Zhiqing, stammering, "Miss Xu, why did it come in?"

"Don't worry," Xu Zhiqing said, patting his hand reassuringly. "Without my permission, it won't bite you. Lin San, go to sleep."

Sleep? Lin Wanrong was stunned for a moment. Could it be? Miss Xu was telling him to sleep? In her private chamber, on this sole ivory bed, and in broad daylight? Could she share the same hobbies as he did?

"What are you waiting for? Sleep, quickly!" Xu Zhiqing raised her voice again, her tone tinged with impatience.

‘This girl isn't afraid, so what am I afraid of?’ Lin Wanrong let out a grunt and lay straight down on the bed, grinning as he said, "Alright, I'll heed your words and sleep well. Miss Xu, you should join me."

Startled by the voice behind her, Xu Zhiqing turned around abruptly. Seeing Lin Wanrong stretched out on her embroidered bed, her cheeks flushed red. She hurriedly pulled him up and stammered,



"What are you doing? If my parents see this, how would I ever explain? You scoundrel, you're trying to get me killed!"

"Don't cry, don't cry," Lin Wanrong quickly said, bewildered by her tears. "Didn't you tell me to sleep? Ah, I get it now. You want me to sleep on the floor, to strengthen my core, right? Ah, such a unique hobby; it's my first time hearing about it."

"What nonsense are you talking about!" Xu Zhiqing was a mix of embarrassment and annoyance. She realized the problem in her prior words and actions, her tears falling faster even as she wanted to laugh. She pointed at the dog, "I was telling it to sleep, not you!"

The dog had already leaped into the cradle, poking its head mysteriously through the sweater and closing its eyes. From a distance, it appeared to be napping.

He had really been wronged here. Lin Wanrong couldn't express his grievance. This misunderstanding was not the first of its kind, and he blamed it on Miss Xu. Why did she have to name the dog "Lin San"? Was that a name she could just casually give?

"Are you alright?" Seeing the changing expressions on Lin Wanrong's face, Xu Zhiqing wanted to laugh but dared not to. She secretly clasped his hand, feeling an indescribable warmth in her heart, and softly asked.

"I'm fine," Lin Wanrong said, his voice full of disdain. "I didn't expect this Brother Lin San to enjoy such high standards—sleeping in a sweater. It really makes me jealous. Miss Xu, may I ask, did you knit this sweater yourself?"

Xu Zhiqing turned her head away, a shy and slightly annoyed expression on her face. "I won't tell you."

"This beast, even wears a branded sweater." Miss Xu's attitude said it all, and Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth. Observing the dog's peaceful slumber and with Miss Xu beside him, he figured the dog wouldn't dare to do anything. He chuckled twice and discreetly stretched out his hand, tugging at the sweater on the dog.

"What are you doing?" Xu Zhiqing, partly annoyed and partly amused, found herself puzzled. She wasn't young and was usually considered mature and steady by everyone. Yet, why did she feel as if she lost herself when she was around this rascal? Laughing and crying, fighting and playing along with him, and yet never growing tired of it—what an odd predicament!

Lin Wanrong chuckled without answering, eyeing the "napping" Lin San cautiously, his movements slow and subtle. Xu Zhiqing's cheeks flushed; she wanted to stop him but couldn't find a reason to.

The vicious dog, known as Lin San, seemed unaware of his movements. Lying there quietly, Lin Wanrong's courage swelled. With a flick of his wrist, he snatched the woolen sweater from the dog's head. The beast let out a howl and rolled its eyes but, noticing that Miss Xu was too shy to pay any attention to him, it closed its eyes and went back to sleep.

"That was close," Lin Wanrong patted his chest, a smug expression on his face. However, when he looked at the woolen sweater, he paused. The craftsmanship was exquisite, large and roomy with complete sleeves. It didn't look like it was meant for a dog; instead, it seemed tailored for him.

"What a waste to put something this fine on a brute!" Lin Wanrong held the sweater up against himself, and the more he looked, the more it seemed to fit. He couldn't help but shake his head in wonder.

Miss Xu's eyes moistened, tears swirling, on the brink of falling. Abruptly, she yanked the sweater from his hands and sobbed, "It's none of your business! I made it for the dog, not you. Give it back to me! Ugh, you're so annoying."

No matter how brilliant or wise a woman is, in the end, she is still a woman, sharing many of the same petty tempers. Sighing, Lin Wanrong embraced Xu Zhiqing and whispered in her ear, "It's not that I'm ungrateful; you never told me, so how could I know?"

"You never thought of me in the first place! I started knitting this in Shandong, and you never had any clue. I hate you, I hate you!" Xu Zhiqing seemed to erupt like a volcano, tears flowing freely. She threw a few small punches at the Lin San toy, then, finding it not satisfying enough, her fists came like a torrential rain against the real Lin San's chest.

"You started in Shandong?" Lin Wanrong felt a pang of guilt. Back then, he had been busy searching for the silver and deeply engrossed in his studies with Ning'er, not having the time to consider Xu Zhiqing's feelings.

Stubbornly, Xu Zhiqing nodded, tears streaming down her face. "That night you barged into Ning'er's room and mistook me for her, treating me like that... I hate you to death," she said through gritted teeth, her eyes tinged red, but also showing a hint of nostalgic tenderness.

"From the next day on, I started secretly knitting and crocheting, with only one thought in mind: to fill this sweater with steel needles and kill you, you wretched man!" Miss Xu both laughed and cried, her expression bitter. "Back then, I had to deceive everyone, including you and that clever, tricky Ning'er. When she was walking, I talked to her; when she was asleep, I worked in secret. From Shandong back to the capital, I couldn't get a single good night's sleep."

It must have been hard. Deceiving others might be easy, but deceiving Ning'er was another matter entirely. She was a vixen far craftier than a fox spirit. How could she not notice any rustling?

Lost in thought, Lin Wanrong was jolted back to reality by the escalating intensity in Xu Zhiqing's voice. "So I, Xu Zhiqing, am just unlucky, huh? Just as this gift was nearly finished, you happened to reunite with Miss Xiao again. I planned to give you this and invite you over, yet you, you scoundrel, treated me like this. I might as well turn this gift into a doghouse—you wretch, I hate you! Now, get out!"

Fiery by nature, tears rolled down Xu Zhiqing's cheeks as she forcefully pushed him towards the door. Lin Wanrong had known Xu Zhiqing for more than a day or two and understood her temperament well. No wonder she harbored such resentment; there was more to this situation than met the eye.

Just as he was about to be pushed out the door, he softly sighed into her ear, "Zhiqing, am I not the first man to enter your chamber? Would you really send me away like this?"

"You're not the first!" Xu Zhiqing's heart softened, her body relaxing considerably.

Not the first? There had been men before me? Lin Wanrong froze in place.

"You fool!" Seeing his sullen face, a sense of unspeakable sweetness filled Xu Zhiqing's heart, and she pushed him down the stairs without hesitation. "The first one was my father!"

Ah, how could he be so foolish! Slapping his own face, Lin Wanrong leapt up as if waking from a dream, only to smack his forehead against a decorative rock by the side. The loud thud resounded clearly, even to Xu Zhiqing who was secretly watching him from the upstairs embroidery room.

"Idiot!" She bashfully covered her cheeks, her heart filled with sweet happiness.

Gao Qiu had been waiting outside the gate for quite a while. When he saw Lin Wanrong coming out in high spirits, he hurriedly approached, inspecting Lin San's forehead. His face immediately turned into a look of shock. "Brother Lin, what happened to you? Were there assassins in the mansion? How did you get such a serious injury?"

Lin Wanrong had been too elated to think about it earlier. Only when Gao Qiu mentioned it did he suddenly feel a burning pain on his forehead. He touched it with his hand and found a large bump forming. "It's nothing serious," he grimaced. "It's just that the rockery in the Xu Mansion walked into me without looking. Brother Gao, can you check if it's serious? Will it affect my handsome face? Damn it, my livelihood depends on this face."

Gao Qiu burst into hearty laughter, waving his hand dismissively, "It's no big deal. As long as it didn't hit your mouth, it won't hinder you from eating or flirting with girls."

"Look who's talking," Lin Wanrong rolled his eyes, unimpressed. "I earn my meals and woo women with real skills, not just smooth talk."

Gao Qiu rummaged through his pouch, revealing various small bottles and jars. Lin Wanrong, with keen eyes, noticed several famous miracle cures among them, like the "Arhat's Mighty Stick" and "Immortal's Undressing Elixir". He whistled admiringly, "Brother Gao, you really live up to your reputation. With all these miraculous medicines you carry, you won't use them up in ten lifetimes. The chivalrous women out there are truly lucky."

Seeing Lin Wanrong's lecherous grin, and recalling their last run-in in scamming Young Master Tao on their way from Hangzhou, Gao Qiu felt a bit apprehensive. He quickly put away his treasures, chuckling awkwardly, "What are you talking about? When it comes to women I'm fond of, it's all about building emotional connections, with medicines as a supplement, a supplement—"

'What a supplement! How can you even say that? How did I end up befriending a scoundrel like you? One with character, just like me!' Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, slapping Gao Qiu on the shoulder, suddenly feeling a sense of camaraderie.

After some searching, Gao Qiu took out a bottle of bruise ointment and carefully applied it to Lin Wanrong's forehead. Then, grinning slyly, he asked, "So, how did things go? Judging by your cheerful demeanor, did you succeed? Miss Xu is a renowned icy beauty in the capital, both aloof and educated. I didn't think you'd be the one to win her over. Let me congratulate you in advance!"

‘This old Gao is surely someone who’s accustomed to “supplementing with medicines,”’ Lin Wanrong thought, disdainful. ‘With all his talk about “succeeding” and “winning over,” what kind of person does he think I am? I’ve always believed in mutual affection and resonance of the soul and body, without relying on medicines.’ Wanting to answer Gao Qiu’s question, Lin Wanrong found himself puzzled. Speaking with Miss Xu, he had been abruptly sent away. What did that mean? Was it a success or not?

"Brother, how did it go? Did you succeed? Ah, we're brothers, there's no need to hold back. Just tell me honestly!" Gao Qiu looked at him eagerly, pressing for an answer.

"I've truly let you down, Brother Gao," Lin Wanrong lowered his head in shame. "I failed."

"Failed?" Gao Qiu's expression instantly turned serious. He nodded gravely, "Miss Xu is indeed worthy of her reputation. She even managed to rebuff you, Brother Lin. If word of this gets out, her prestige will likely soar even higher. No, we can't let her succeed. I must lend you a hand, Brother Lin." He shook the vials and jars tucked in his clothing, looking around conspiratorially. "Choose whichever medicine you like; my entire inventory is right here. How about this one? It's called 'Fiery Maiden's Chant,' the latest trend. It's what all the brothels use on their new girls—one packet is equivalent to ten—"

‘How could you be so audacious? Do you think I’m that kind of person?’ Lin Wanrong chuckled, awkwardly dismissing the notion. "Thank you for your kind offer, Brother Gao, but there's no rush. I'll come to you for medicine when the need arises."

The two chatted for a bit. Just as Gao Qiu finished applying ointment for him and they were about to leave, the grand vermilion gates of the Xu residence suddenly swung open. A young maid named Yuzhu rushed out, shouting urgently, "Master Lin, Master Lin, please hold on—"

"Young miss, what's the matter?" Lin Wanrong grinned playfully. "We're outside the residence now; if you touch me again, you'll have to pay!"

Blushing a deep red, Yuzhu lowered her head and muttered softly, "Master Lin, my mistress asked me to give you this letter and bottle. Please take a look for yourself. I—I have to go now."

Yuzhu hurriedly handed him a letter and a small bottle before turning and running off as quickly as she could. Intrigued, Gao Qiu picked up the bottle and examined it. "Well, well, well, Brother Lin, you've already won her over and you didn't tell me. And here I was, worrying about you."

"Win her over? That's not true!" Lin Wanrong felt wronged. Gao Qiu chuckled and shook the bottle in his hand, "Trying to hide it from me? Look, what is this?" **ráNÓbEŠ**

"It's medicine for bruises and sprains," Lin Wanrong replied, puzzled. "What's so special about that?"

"It's not just any medicine for bruises. It's top-grade stuff. This ointment contains dew from willow branches collected in the springtime and year-old snow lotus flowers from ice mountains. It's incredibly effective for reducing swelling and relieving pain," Gao Qiu proudly proclaimed, flaunting his expertise.

Lin Wanrong felt confused. Dew from willow branches and year-old snow lotus might relieve pain, but what did that have to do with whether he'd won someone over?

"Still pretending, eh?" Gao Qiu laughed. "Brother Lin, you're so knowledgeable, skilled in both poetry and prose. You surely know what this medicine is called among scholars like you, don't you?"

‘Do I look like some kind of scholar to you?’ Lin Wanrong laughed. "Brother Gao, do you really not understand my character? Have you ever seen a burly and strong scholar like me who goes around causing trouble?"

‘True enough,’ Gao Qiu nodded in agreement, chuckling. ‘Given the way Brother Lin carries himself—neither wearing white robes nor holding a folding fan, but instead flirting with the young ladies from various households all day—you could hardly consider him a scholarly figure.’ He laughed heartily, "No wonder you're unaware. Think about it—'Dew of Spring,' 'Snow of the Iceberg.' Such poetic names would surely be transformed if they passed through the lips of scholars and beauties. 'Bruise ointment'—what a vulgar name!"

"So what's it really called?" Growing impatient at Gao Qiu's rambling, Lin Wanrong hurriedly interrupted, "Out with it!"

"How can you not guess it?" Gao Qiu grinned. "The Dew of Spring, the Snow of the Iceberg. Combine them, and isn't it 'Spring Wind and Jade Dew'? That's what this medicinal balm is called! I have no idea how those idle young masters and mistresses came up with such a name."

"Spring Wind and Jade Dew?" [In Chinese literature, it has romantic and sexual undertones] Lin Wanrong gasped. ‘What an...erotic name, almost comparable to the immortals shedding their

garments!' He quickly opened the letter and glanced at its contents. "Flowers wilt at dawn with the spring wind; jade dew knows of the cold years. Who cuts the window's candle, when tears fall in the night's rain?"

The handwriting was elegant and neat; it was penned by none other than Miss Xu. The meaning of the poem was clear to Lin Wanrong: the waning of flowers was known to the spring wind, and the coming of the cold was felt first by the jade dew. The lines seemed to lament the tears shed by a lonely young woman on a rainy spring night. A genuine poem of emotion; Miss Xu did indeed have remarkable talent.

As he continued reading, a line of smaller characters caught his eye: "My affairs you already know. Only hope for the golden phoenix to come; the doors will open by themselves."

This cryptic sentence puzzled Lin Wanrong. Golden phoenix? Doors opening? What kind of riddle was this? Upon reflection, he understood. The 'golden phoenix' must be Qingxuan; Xu Zhiqing was indicating that only if Qingxuan personally came to propose could she agree to the match. This young lady was indeed vying for a rivalry with Qingxuan; it seemed like all proud and talented women had this sort of disposition.

But Miss Xu ought to consider: before Qingxuan knew him, she barely paid attention to anyone else. If she knew of Xu Zhiqing's competitive mindset, how could she possibly make a house call to propose?

Lin Wanrong felt as if his head would explode. Already at home were two factions: one led by Xian'er, supported by the Xiao mother and daughters, and another looking up to Qingxuan, guarded by Ning'er. If he added an unpredictable Xu Zhiqing into the mix, wouldn't his household turn into a complete mess?

"Brother Lin, is it good news? Is Miss Xu urging you to propose?" Seeing the changing expressions on Lin Wanrong's face, Gao Qiu laughed.

Lin Wanrong's face turned serious: "Propose what? The moment I propose, all hell would break loose. I'm not indulging her whims!"

Gao Qiu gave Lin Wanrong a thumbs-up in admiration. To dare ignore Miss Xu—this Brother Lin was truly extraordinary.

Gathering the 'Spring Wind and Jade Dew' medicine and the love letter, Lin Wanrong put them into his chest pocket, his thoughts lingering as he glanced back at the Xu residence. He wondered if Miss Xu was secretly watching him from somewhere. Once he left, his wooden puppet left in the residence—Lin San—would probably suffer all kinds of abuse and torment.

Unwilling to fuss over it any longer, Lin Wanrong tugged Gao Qiu along for a few steps. His mansion was just beside them. Thinking of Qingxuan, Ning'er, and Qiaoqiao busy packing his luggage at home, he missed them dearly and strode toward the front door.

"Brother Lin, you can't go there," Gao Qiu hurriedly stopped him, pointing mysteriously at Lin Wanrong's forehead. "You're injured. The princess and Miss Luo are astute people; they will realize something is amiss after only a few words."

Gao Qiu had a point; his caution was invaluable. Lin Wanrong promptly halted, reminded of the challenging question posed by Xu Zhiqing. He shook his head in resignation. What a mess, caught between a rock and a hard place. With injuries to show, if Qingxuan and the others saw him, they would surely blame Xu Zhiqing, making matters even more complicated. Unable to think of a solution on the spot, he decided to ignore these trivial issues and turned to ask, "Brother Gao, how many men are watching Prince Cheng's mansion?"

Gao Qiu became serious when it came to important matters, "At least a hundred or so reliable brothers, all concealed around his mansion. Mr. Xu has instructed that, without military orders, no one is to alert the big fish."

A hundred or so men—it was not a small operation. Lin Wanrong pondered for a moment and then resumed walking. "Brother Gao, come with me and let's take a look." Gao Qiu nodded, quickening his pace to follow.

Lin Wanrong had visited Prince Cheng's mansion several days before. It was the night when he had seen the true face of An Biru. Recalling her flirtatious eyes and helpless tears, a wave of emotions surged within him. If he could turn back time, he wouldn't make the same foolish mistake.

What was she doing now, still busy with matchmaking? Was she deliberately trying to irritate him to death? As he looked at the majestic mansion, adorned with golden walls and jade railings, the vivid expressions of Sister An flashed before his eyes, leaving Lin Wanrong bitter and nostalgic.

The mansion's gates were still bustling with carriages and horses, seemingly as prosperous as before. However, those who paid attention knew that things had changed significantly since Prince Cheng's days of power. Despite the Emperor's subtle maneuvers that didn't feel as drastic as a swift



cut, the nobles in the court, who made their living in such a sensitive environment, had keen instincts. Any slight movements were enough for them to sense the shifting winds, and they had gradually distanced themselves from Prince Cheng.

"Brother Lin, this is the place," Gao Qiu said as they reached an alley opposite the mansion. After fumbling around in the dark, he found the front door of an ordinary residence and knocked in a distinct pattern: three long knocks, followed by two short ones.

The door creaked open and a robust man peered out. Seeing Gao Qiu, his face lit up, "Commander Gao, you're here."

Gao Qiu nodded and gestured toward Lin Wanrong, "This is Lin San, Mr. Lin. Come and pay your respects."

"Are you the Mr. Lin who defeated the Turkic military advisor?" The guard's eyes lit up as he hurriedly bowed and clenched his fists in greeting.

When it came to the matter at hand, Lin Wanrong still felt uneasy. He sighed helplessly, "It's a shame, truly a shame. He escaped again, disappointing the brothers."

"You can't be blamed for this. We all understand," the guard quickly comforted him, and then continued, "Master Lin, Commander Gao, your timing is perfect. Lord Xu just arrived and is inside speaking."

Before the words had fully left his mouth, Xu Wei's voice rang out from inside, "Is that little brother Lin? Come in and let's talk."

Lin Wanrong and Gao Qiu entered the room and saw Xu Wei wearing a tattered cotton robe, his head drooping under a winter hat, and his face smudged with soot. At first glance, he was nearly unrecognizable.

So, the old Xu is in disguise, Lin Wanrong thought amusingly. For someone as famous as Xu Wei, going out in public without altering his appearance would be impossible.

"Mr. Xu, for the sake of the nation, you've made such sacrifices. I am impressed, truly impressed," Lin Wanrong greeted with a smile and a fist-clasp. The compliment was not entirely sarcastic; for a man of Xu Wei's scholarly demeanor to disguise himself in this manner was no small feat.

"Don't joke, don't joke," Xu Wei laughed, pulling Lin Wanrong aside. Making sure no one was listening, he lowered his voice and asked, "Little brother Lin, how did the matter I entrusted to you go? Have you seen Zhiqing? Didn't I tell you that the house would be empty today, so you could take action?"@@novelbin@@

‘That's a long story,’ thought Lin Wanrong, not wishing to admit he had been turned away halfway by Miss Xu. After some deliberation, he replied, "As for Miss Xu, yes, I saw her—"

"You did?" Xu Wei was overjoyed, gripping Lin Wanrong's hand even tighter. "How was it? What gifts did you bring for her? Today is Zhiqing's birthday; did she enjoy it?"

Lin Wanrong gave a bashful smile, "I gave myself as a gift to her—"

"What?" Xu Wei was stunned, his beard trembling. "How could you two do something so immoral? My Zhiqing is still an innocent girl! Quick, find a matchmaker and propose tomorrow!"

‘Old Xu really has a twisted mind, jumping to conclusions before I even finish talking,’ Lin Wanrong thought. Looking disdainfully at Xu Wei, he clarified, "Mr. Xu, you misunderstood. I simply gave her a gift; nothing inappropriate happened between Miss Xu and me. We are perfectly innocent."

"Innocent?" Xu Wei's face visibly fell. "Why didn't anything happen—ah, I mean, why didn't you celebrate her birthday together? Ah, what happened to your forehead? Are you hurt?"

Lin Wanrong touched the large bump on his forehead and sighed, "Due to technical issues, a minor human error occurred, causing the birthday celebration to go awry. But rest assured, Miss Xu probably had a good time."

Old Xu, despite being the most learned man in the land, couldn't fathom the cryptic message. Helplessly waving his hand, he chuckled, "You young people, do whatever you want to do. I can't manage your affairs, as long as my Zhiqing is happy, it's all good."

‘Typical of him to pass the buck,’ Lin Wanrong thought. He laughed and responded, "Mr. Xu, listen to you talk. We young people lack experience and could really use your guidance. Others might not know, but I know very well that you were once a master who roamed the four seas—"

"Brother Lin, Lord Xu, this is terrible," Gao Qiu burst into the room before Lin San could finish, exclaiming, "Prince Cheng is here!"

## Chapter 465 I Did It On Purpose

"Who did you say has arrived?" Lin Wanrong felt momentarily dizzy. "This can't be a coincidence. How did Old Xu's agents carry out their work? They were supposed to be watching others, but it seems they've been watched instead."

Xu Wei was equally shocked. "Prince Cheng is here? How is that possible? He couldn't possibly know we're here. Gao Qiu, calm down and speak slowly."

Gao Qiu swallowed hard, visibly deflated. "I don't know what's happening. The gates of Prince Cheng's mansion suddenly opened, and the prince led dozens of people straight toward us. Our perimeter guards just sent word. He and his men are already at the entrance of the alley, practically here."

"He really came?" Xu Wei stroked his beard, pondering for a while before looking at Lin Wanrong. "Little brother Lin, what do you suggest we do?"

Old Xu was cunning, passing the hot potato to him at a crucial moment. Lin Wanrong was visibly displeased. He chuckled, "Brother Gao, are you certain that Prince Cheng has brought only dozens of people?"

Gao Qiu nodded repeatedly. "Absolutely certain. The alley is narrow; even a hundred people would have to queue to enter. Bringing more men would be pointless."

"I see," Lin Wanrong nodded, then asked, "One more question, Brother Gao. How many eyes do we have around the mansion?"

"Not a hundred, at least eighty. They are skilled men from the palace. If things turn ugly, we won't be at a disadvantage," Gao Qiu answered confidently. He was the captain of the palace's inner guards; he knew his men well.

"That's strange," Lin Wanrong slowly paced back and forth, smiling as he spoke. "Judging by the situation, we're in the dark and they're in the light. In terms of manpower, we have around a

hundred men in the surrounding alleys; he has only dozens. They wouldn't stand a chance in a fight. So, why would he actively seek us out? To find trouble?"

Upon hearing Lin San's analysis, Gao Qiu became puzzled too. By all accounts, Prince Cheng was deeply cunning and shouldn't take such risks. What was he up to?

"Brother Lin, this alley is the largest one opposite the mansion, and it houses dozens of families. Could he be visiting relatives or friends?" Gao Qiu pondered, as if asking himself, offering an opinion.

This old fellow really knew how to console himself. Lin Wanrong shook his head, smiling. "Brother Gao, would anyone visit relatives or friends at night? Moreover, he's a royal prince; if there were visits, others should go to him, not the other way around."

"Makes sense," Gao Qiu nodded in agreement. Xu Wei, stroking his beard, asked, "Could it be that he has discovered our whereabouts? This old man has some confidence. I personally arranged the guards and watchers around here, all highly competent men. There's no way they could have leaked information. Even I came here in disguise, unrecognizable. They shouldn't have discovered this place."

"That's unlikely," Lin Wanrong shook his head. "If this residence had truly been exposed, he wouldn't show up personally."

Xu Wei nodded repeatedly, finding that Lin San's words struck right to the point. "If Prince Cheng really discovered this place, he would never reveal it so openly. In your opinion, Little brother Lin, what is he up to?"

The fact that even Xu Wei, a man of renowned reputation, sought advice from Lin San showed how increasingly extraordinary Brother Lin was becoming. Gao Qiu listened intently, his admiration unabated.

"From what I can gather, he's here to show off his power," Lin Wanrong said softly.

"To show off?" Both Gao Qiu and Xu Wei were taken aback.

"Exactly, to show off," Lin Wanrong confirmed, his expression solemn. "Mr. Xu, you've been an official in the court for quite some time and are well aware of the fickleness of human nature. The Emperor's recent actions in the court, although carried out in secret, are already the subject of

speculation even among commoners. Do you think someone as experienced as Prince Cheng is unaware?"

Xu Wei nodded, "He understands better than anyone else, but given his cunning, he would never show his hand."

"Exactly," Lin Wanrong slapped his palm. "Who the Emperor's actions are targeting is public knowledge. How could Prince Cheng not know? If my guess is correct, he already knows there are people spying outside his residence. We're in a standoff right now, and all that's missing is a spark to ignite things. He's probably expecting that we still lack a good reason to make a move. Thus, he staged this sudden show of force to both catch us off guard and unsettle our arrangements. At the same time, it serves as a subtle warning, discouraging us from taking any hasty actions."

"Ah, I see. So, you're saying Prince Cheng might not even know we're here? His sudden appearance is to intimidate the spies we've planted around?" Gao Qiu finally grasped the idea.

Lin Wanrong grinned, "Exactly. He's not specifically targeting us. His goal is to show his face and let the news spread back to us. This is a psychological battle to see who loses their nerve first."

When it came to reading people's minds, Lin San was second to none. Xu Wei found the argument convincing. Just then, a guard hurriedly entered and whispered something into Gao Qiu's ear. Lowering his voice, Gao Qiu said, "Mr. Xu, Brother Lin, Prince Cheng is only a few steps away from us—" R

Just a few steps? Lin Wanrong's heart skipped a beat. Though his analysis had been thorough, it was based on speculation. What Prince Cheng was actually thinking remained a mystery. Seeing him brazenly advancing, in stark contrast to his usual calculated demeanor, Lin Wanrong felt a surge of anxiety. Biting his lip, he gestured for silence, then quietly moved with Gao Qiu and Xu Wei into the courtyard. They had just taken their positions against the wall when they heard the pitter-patter of footsteps approaching.

"Father, it's so late, why are you heading to the Grand Prime Minister Temple? Why not wait until tomorrow?" A clear voice rang out. Lin Wanrong recognized the speaker as none other than Zhao Kangning, the young prince who had once crossed paths with Luo Ning and Seo Jang Geum.

Prince Cheng heaved a light sigh, his voice tinged with age. "Is there a right or wrong time to visit the Grand Prime Minister Temple to pray? Just yesterday, my late father appeared in my dreams, reproaching me for not having offered incense to him for some time. I feel like a failure as both a

son and a subject. I've been restless all day, unable to concentrate even in court. Tonight, I'll go to Grand Prime Minister Temple and keep him company."

Upon hearing that the message came through a dream from the late Emperor, Zhao Kangning immediately held his tongue. Prince Cheng paused briefly, glancing around with a look of infinite wistfulness. "Ever since I moved out of the palace as an adult, more than three decades have passed in the blink of an eye. These residential lanes and houses haven't changed much. They still look like they did years ago, yet I have aged."

Zhao Kangning hurriedly offered words of deference, "Father is in the prime of life, as unyielding as evergreen trees. How could you be aging?"

Prince Cheng softly coughed twice and shook his head. "There's no need for flattery. I know my own body. I've been declining year by year. I'm not even sure if I'll be able to see this autumn's red leaves. Kangning, if I can't make it this year, go in my stead, and fulfill my final dream for me."

"Father—" Zhao Kangning burst into tears, unable to speak further.

As footsteps in the lane grew fainter and voices were no longer audible, Lin Wanrong finally let out a long sigh of relief. Gao Qiu said, "Brother Lin, did we get it wrong? Was the Prince actually here to show remorse? He seemed regretful to me."

Xu Wei laughed out loud. "They say that great villains have great wisdom. If he truly felt remorse, he would have kept it to himself at home. Why venture into this lane to announce it? In my opinion, Brother Lin got it right; he's here to intimidate us, catch us off guard, and perhaps even confuse us with his words."

Gao Qiu's face reddened as he heard this. Although he served in the palace, he was a man of the martial world and didn't understand the cunning ways of a figure like Prince Cheng. Smiles and tears were his unyielding weapons, and had Xu Wei not woken him up, he might well have been deceived by the Prince's heartfelt remarks.

"It's not necessarily all fake," Lin Wanrong smiled. "Human nature always has elements that are real and cannot be concealed. But Mr. Xu has reminded me of something: a personage like the Prince would never act without purpose. When he expresses his thoughts in public, what exactly is he trying to convey to us?"

Xu Wei nodded. A man like Prince Cheng would imbue every word with deep meaning. It was rare for little brother Lin to be so perceptive; it was truly a shame he hadn't pursued a career in officialdom. With his talents, rising to a high position wouldn't be mere talk.

Gao Qiu, lacking the analytical abilities of Lin San and Xu Wei, thought in simpler terms. He snorted, "What's there to think about? Either he's genuinely showing weakness, or he's faking it. One of the two has to be true."

"Brother Gao's insight is indeed extraordinary," Lin Wanrong gave a thumbs-up and laughed.

Xu Wei was also quite amused. The words of Gao Qiu basically amounted to saying nothing at all. He sighed, "If he is truly showing weakness and begging for mercy, then it would be a blessing for our great empire. Unfortunately, matters are probably not that simple. He must have other plans. The White Lotus Sect that he painstakingly built was completely destroyed by us last year. Now, with no troops at his command and trapped in the capital, what can he do?"

Xu Wei furrowed his brow, deep in thought, as if speaking to himself.

"Who says he has no troops?" Lin Wanrong said calmly, "Can't he borrow some?"

Borrow? Xu Wei looked horrified, suddenly enlightened, "Little brother Lin, are you suggesting he could ally with the nomads? Would he dare to commit such a treacherous act?"

The notion Lin Wanrong put forth was audacious. Even Xu Wei, a man seasoned by the harsh realities of life, could hardly bring himself to voice it. Ever since the founding emperor established the nation, nomad invasions had been incessant, each battle at the frontier stealing away land from the empire, their power growing upon the spilled blood of their people. Even the founding emperor, on his deathbed, lamented the need to eliminate the nomad threat. If Prince Cheng, a royal descendant, were to ally with the nomads, it would be more than a betrayal of his ancestors; it would be a monumental disgrace for the empire.

"There is no question of daring. When interests are at stake, all are vulnerable," Lin Wanrong responded, shaking his head with a bitter smile, "Mr. Xu, you've been in the court for many years. You should have seen more of this than I have."

Xu Wei had no reply. There had been countless examples throughout history of people betraying their heritage for personal gain. Prince Cheng wouldn't be the first, nor would he be the last. Xu Wei

sighed, "Little brother Lin, this matter is grave. Without substantial evidence, we shouldn't recklessly spread rumors."

Lin Wanrong knew what he was talking about. Given that the Turkic Khan could gift Zhao Kangning something as precious as tobacco leaves, their relationship must be extraordinary. Zhao Kangning did not have Lin Wanrong's knack for trickery, to obtain those leaves with just words.

"I too hope I have misunderstood Prince Cheng," Lin Wanrong chuckled twice, "but I fear the situation is more severe than you think, Mr. Xu. Don't you know? The army that Prince Cheng has borrowed has already set out."

"Set out? Where to?" The more Xu Wei listened to Lin Wanrong, the more horrified he became. Why had Lin Wanrong changed his style today? It used to be good when he just joked around. Now, when he spoke of military and national affairs, it was as if he wouldn't stop unless he shocked people to their core.

"Goryeo!" Lin Wanrong's answer was concise yet powerful.

Xu Wei collapsed into his chair, his face turning pale in an instant.

"Goryeo! Goryeo!" he muttered to himself. If Lin Wanrong's speculation was correct, Prince Cheng had not only allied with nomads but also colluded with Dongyin. He would be a sinner against the people for all of eternity. Considering the case of the Shandong army provisions and the timing of the Dongyin invasion of Goryeo, Lin Wanrong's words hardly needed any evidence to support them.

"Mr. Xu, what's the situation in Goryeo? How far have our Loyal and Brave troops advanced?" Lin Wanrong continued, unperturbed by Xu Wei's astonishment.

Xu Wei was, after all, a man of worldly experience. He regained his composure after a brief silence. "The warships from Dongyin have already arrived. For the past few days, the Dongyin people have been sending small units of soldiers to attempt landings. The Goryeo army has sworn to resist to the death, and both sides are now in a stalemate. The King of Goryeo has already sent several urgent reports, requesting reinforcements from the imperial court. Our Great Hua Loyal and Brave Army is moving at a snail's pace due to the large number of new recruits, and we have yet to cross the river."

"There's no rush, no rush at all," Lin Wanrong said with a sly grin. "If Goryeo and Dongyin are still locked in a stalemate, let our men practice a bit more. We can cross the river in a couple of days. The Goryeo soldiers are willing to die for their land, so let's just wish them bravery and valor."



Lin Wanrong's words were veiled, but Xu Wei understood immediately. This was a soft-kill strategy—let the people of Goryeo fight the Dongyin people first, clearing obstacles for the entry of the Great Hua Loyal and Brave Army. Even if the King of Goryeo knew it was a trap, he had no choice but to jump in.

Hearing Lin Wanrong's crafty words, the unease Xu Wei had felt due to Prince Cheng's collusion with the Dongyin people seemed to dissipate considerably. "Little brother Lin," Xu Wei said approvingly, "listening to you is better than reading ten years of books on sages and virtuous men. With you here, Great Hua will surely not suffer any losses."

"That's because we've already suffered enough," Lin Wanrong sighed, then chuckled and saluted. "You are too kind, Mr. Xu. Actually, I have another favor to ask."

He whispered something in Xu Wei's ear. "Ah," Xu Wei exclaimed, looking at him with a smile. "You really are young and romantic, even going after a little palace girl from Goryeo. Though she is rather knowledgeable; if she weren't a foreigner, she might even be suitable for you. Don't worry, I'll have someone look into it right away."

Lin Wanrong was at a loss for words. That incident was his great shame. If people were to find out that the competent and resourceful Lin San was deceived by a little palace girl from Goryeo, what face would he have left to live in this world?

"It's not about being romantic," he said with an awkward smile. "Unknowingly, I left something very important behind with her, something that may trigger a chain of unpredictable adverse reactions in the future. That's why I need your help to investigate."

Here we go again, thought Xu Wei. Every time Little brother Lin spoke in riddles, it left him scratching his head. Fortunately, he too was a man of the world and gave Lin Wanrong a knowing look. "Don't worry, I'll handle this for you."

"By the way, Mr. Xu, are there any plans from the Grand Prime Minister Temple?" Lin San asked Xu Wei as he was leaving with Gao Qiu, noticing that it had already gotten dark.@@novelbin@@

Lin Wanrong was truly diligent and indefatigable. Xu Wei praised him, nodding his approval. "Rest assured, little brother Lin, wherever the big fish goes, a net will follow."

Lin Wanrong nodded without saying a word. A vague sense of unease settled in his heart, but despite pondering over it, he couldn't pinpoint what was bothering him. This remained on his mind as he returned to the Xiao residence and entered the main courtyard. Absorbed in his thoughts and not watching his step, he almost bumped into someone. The soft, silky feeling immediately relaxed his nerves that had been tense all day. Grinning mischievously, he reached out and said, "Ah, Xian'er, did you intentionally bump into me? You've done quite a number; look, you've even raised two big bumps."

"Who intentionally bumped into you?!" The woman exclaimed, her face a blend of embarrassment and anger as she quickly evaded his groping hand.

Still not lifting his head, he teased, "You may not have done it on purpose— but I certainly did! Come, let your husband give you a hug—"

"What? You did it on purpose?!" Several indignant, yet melodious reprimands simultaneously filled his ears, making them buzz.