

Finest 481

Chapter 481 Something Unusual

Gu Bingyan had long heard of Lin San's eloquence and cunning. Seeing Lin San's sinister smile, he instantly calmed down. He snorted and said coldly, "Lord Lin, your arrival is timely. Do you recognize General Xu Zhen, the commander of the city's defense? He trespassed into the royal mansion and even broke into the inner residence. I suspect he has ulterior motives and was about to send him to the Ministry of War for investigation."

Lin Wanrong glanced at Xu Zhen and chuckled, "You mean this General Xu? I know him, know him well, in fact. We've fought together."

Gu Bingyan snorted disdainfully, "I suspect it's more than just having fought together. If I remember correctly, General Xu Zhen followed you during the campaign against the White Lotus sect. He was among the top commanders under you, as reported by Minister Xu Wei of the Ministry of Revenue to His Majesty. Am I wrong, Lord Lin?"

Lin Wanrong looked at him, feigning surprise, and laughed heartily, "Oh, is that so? My, if you hadn't reminded me, I would've forgotten. As you know, I've always been indifferent to fame and fortune. It's you, Mr. Gu, who remembers even my minor achievements, and for that, I am truly embarrassed."

As the two spoke, the tension between them intensified. Behind Gu Bingyan, a hundred strong men armed with sharp weapons subtly shifted their stance. Xu Zhen, not one to be underestimated, subtly signaled, and a group of Divine Mechanism Unit soldiers advanced, their rapid-firing crossbows aimed squarely at those in front, gleaming darkly.

Seeing Lin San's evasive words, Gu Bingyan gave a cold laugh and declared loudly, "Lord Lin, today is not the day to discuss military achievements. This is a residence bestowed by the late Emperor, a place where his royal descendants reside. It holds a lofty status. You not only condoned your soldiers trespassing into the royal mansion at night and breaking into the inner residence, but you also engaged in violence and arson. What exactly are you plotting? If you don't explain yourself clearly today, no matter who you are, I will report you to the Imperial Palace and ask His Majesty to administer justice!"

Gu Bingyan was indeed a tough opponent; he had just accused Lin San of several severe crimes in a few sentences. Anyone less courageous would have probably retreated in fear by now.

"Report me?" Lin Wanrong put on an innocent face, spreading his hands, "Mr. Gu, what are you accusing me of? Condoning my subordinates to trespass into the royal mansion at night? That hardly makes sense."

"What doesn't make sense? Isn't Xu Zhen under your command?" Gu Bingyan snapped, visibly frustrated.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Xu Zhen was indeed under me—ah, no, let me correct myself. He was under me in the past. Mr. Gu, you seem to know a lot about me, so you should also know that I am now the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Personnel, a minor position. As for General Xu, he has been promoted to the commander of the city's defense. His direct superior should be the high-ranking officials in the Ministry of War, not me. To say he is my subordinate is truly an overestimation. As for the charges of condoning my subordinates to trespass into the royal mansion, ah, I'm a timid man, Mr. Gu, please don't scare me like that."

He spoke with ease. With a few words, he had managed to absolve himself completely, leaving no room for others to pin anything on him. Gu Bingyan pondered his words. Indeed, Xu Zhen was no longer under Lin San's command; based on this point alone, he could not be accused. However, he was still dissatisfied, snorting coldly, "Even if Xu Zhen was not assigned by you, how do you explain assaulting someone in the royal mansion, or even attempted arson?"

"Attempted arson?!" Lin Wanrong's face paled in shock. "One can eat indiscriminately, but one mustn't speak carelessly. Mr. Gu, you accuse me of arson, but with what eyes did you see it?"

"This—" Gu Bingyan hesitated momentarily, then snorted, "What a coincidence it is that just as the palace caught fire, you happened to break in. If you say you're not involved, who would believe it?"

Lin Wanrong smiled faintly, leisurely asking, "So these are all your speculations?"

"What of it?" Gu Bingyan saw the contempt in Lin San's eyes and became enraged.

Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter, then abruptly stopped, slapping his palm heavily onto his wheelchair. "Mr. Gu likes to speculate? Then allow me to follow suit. Are you saying that it was your idea to plant explosives in the Xiao Mansion to harm me?"

His words were like a bolt of lightning, making everyone's ears buzz. Xu Zhen's soldiers, whom he had brought from Shandong, were instantly stirred into a passionate uproar. "Kill him—"

"Chop this scoundrel—"

"Avenge General Lin—"

"You—what did you say?" Gu Bingyan's face turned ashen. He unconsciously took a step back, "You can't falsely accuse me!"

To sneak explosives into a lantern and have them brought back to the Xiao family was a truly ingenious scheme. If it weren't for several advisors, Prince Cheng would never have thought of it. Seeing Gu's eyes flicker and recalling his astonished expression when they first met, Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth and chuckled coldly, "Falsely accuse? Mr. Gu, who did what is clear to the doer. You can speculate about me, but can't I speculate about you? What a joke!" ㄗ

Faced with Lin San's predatory gaze and recalling various rumors about him, Gu Bingyan felt a tinge of fear and snorted softly, lowering his head.

Lin Wanrong gave Xu Zhen a knowing look. Xu Zhen nodded slightly and shouted, "Brothers, charge with me—"

A thousand soldiers roared in unison, brandishing their weapons and rushing towards the crowd on the other side. Gu Bingyan's face turned pale, angrily shouting, "This is a crucial area of the royal palace. Whoever dares to trespass will be accused of rebellion. General Lin, you've seen it; Xu Zhen is assaulting the royal mansion. You'll be my witness on the Imperial Throne tomorrow."

"An assault, you say? Oh, I must testify then." Lin Wanrong laughed. Turning to Xu Zhen, he said, "General Xu, Mr. Gu says you assaulted the royal mansion. Is this true?"

"General Lin, please consider the facts carefully." Xu Zhen saluted with a clenched fist and spoke solemnly, "As the Commander of the City Defense, it is my duty to maintain stability within the capital. Tonight, while I was patrolling the city, I heard that the royal residence was on fire. I immediately rushed here with troops to provide aid. However, to my surprise, Mister Gu here not only obstructed us but also gathered his own forces, brandishing weapons and confronting my official army. I suspect that he harbors malicious intentions and that the prince might already be in his grasp—"

"You're talking nonsense!" Gu Bingyan angrily pointed his finger at Xu Zhen's nose.

"Who is talking nonsense will be clear by tomorrow," Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Mister Gu, you accused General Xu of attacking the royal residence, but I disagree. Ensuring the safety of the capital and maintaining stability are the primary responsibilities of the City Defense Commander. The royal residence is an important place in the city and should be a focal point for defense. If General Xu had ignored the fire at the royal residence, he would be the one neglecting his duties. Therefore, your accusation is baseless. General Xu is dutiful and should be commended. General Xu, please proceed with the firefighting efforts, otherwise, we may have bigger problems."

"Yes!" Xu Zhen smirked, ready to give orders when Gu Bingyan stretched out both arms, standing in front of everyone and shouting, "Hold on—"

"Mister Gu, could it be that you started this fire?" Flames roared, already reaching the inner chambers as the sound of collapsing beams and walls continued to ring. Lin Wanrong spoke with a deceiving smile, "Otherwise, why would you keep stopping General Xu from putting it out?"

"We don't need him to put out this fire!" Gu Bingyan roared, "My royal residence has its own methods for firefighting."

"Is that so?" Lin Wanrong smirked, "Mister Gu, may I ask what your role is within the royal residence?"

Gu Bingyan hesitated. Though he held no official position, he was widely respected and feared. Lin Wanrong feigned ignorance, leaving Gu Bingyan speechless. Finally, Gu Bingyan said, "I am a close friend of the prince—"

"So, you are a guest minister," Lin Wanrong interrupted, speaking indifferently, "The safety of the royal residence concerns the future of our nation. The City Defense cannot and dare not ignore it. Neither the prince nor the young prince have spoken, yet you, a mere guest minister, are giving orders and obstructing the firefighting efforts. What are your intentions?"

Flustered and unable to outwit Lin Wanrong, Gu Bingyan shouted in frustration, "Lin San, how dare you disrespect me! My father is a mentor to both the Emperor and the Prince. I've grown up with them; we are as close as brothers—"

"What is your official position?" Lin Wanrong interrupted, coldly smiling.

Gu Bingyan was furious, "I don't need an official position—"

"How dare you!" Before he could finish, Lin Wanrong interrupted with a shout, "You audacious commoner! Holding no official position, ignorant of state affairs, yet you dare to incite armed resistance and obstruct an official from performing his duties. Your audacity is truly unbearable! General Xu, the Princess is here with me today. Go ahead and perform your duties boldly. I'd like to see who dares to stop you!"

"By your command!" Xu Zhen's face instantly turned cold as he shouted loudly, "All soldiers listen up! Quickly enter the mansion and put out the fire. Should anyone obstruct the execution of official duties, treat them as violently resisting the law, akin to committing treason. Show no mercy!"

"Show no mercy!" A thousand soldiers roared in unison, their voices shaking the heavens.

"Who dares?!" Gu Bingyan, his eyes red with desperation, stood firm before the crowd. Behind him, a hundred burly men were ready to move. Xu Zhen sneered and with a swift wave of his hand, the Divine Machine Unit launched their repeating crossbows in unison. These crossbows had been modified by Xu Zhiqing to shoot three or five bolts in quick succession, each with astonishing force and unparalleled power. These royal mansion guards might have been well-trained, but they were no match for battle-hardened elite soldiers, especially the archers of the Divine Machine Unit, carefully chosen by Xu Zhen, whose arrows never missed their mark.

Amidst a shower of arrows, screams rang out incessantly. In the blink of an eye, over a dozen royal mansion guards behind Gu Bingyan had been hit by arrows. Whether struck in the neck or chest, their crimson blood gushed out, staining the garden red.

Gu Bingyan was flustered and exasperated, never having witnessed such a brutal slaughter before. Frightened, he collapsed to the ground, his face as pale as paper. Trembling, he raised his head, "Lin San, you... you have a lot of nerve! I will report you, I will tell the Emperor!"

In the heat of the moment, no one was paying attention to what he was saying. Xu Zhen's elite soldiers rushed in, clashing with the remaining guards. The royal mansion garden was expansive and the royal mansion guards had the advantage of superior martial arts skills and familiarity with the terrain. The official army excelled in disciplined training and tactical formations, and with the support of their expert archers, the sounds of killing filled the air as flames and bloodshed lit up the chaotic scene.

Lin Wanrong furrowed his brows. Such slaughter was costly and ultimately pointless; those who could have fled had already done so.

He whispered a few words into Qin Xian'er's ear. She nodded and spoke in a soft yet commanding voice, "Everyone in the royal mansion, listen! General Xu is here on official duty. Resisting him is the same as resisting the imperial army, and resisting the court. This is treason, a crime punishable by death and the extermination of nine generations of one's family! I, under the name of Princess Nishang, command you to lay down your weapons. Considering that you may have been misled or even be completely unaware, I can plead for leniency on your behalf. Anyone who continues to resist will be deemed a traitor, subject to death and the extermination of their family. Think carefully!"

Qin Xian'er was no ordinary person; many in the royal mansion recognized her. Having a princess here represented the will of the Emperor. To continue resisting her would mean committing treason, even if they were in the right. Understanding this, the remaining guards' resistance gradually weakened.

The soldiers' spirits lifted, their formations tightened, quickly capturing the remaining guards. Lin Wanrong nodded at Miss Qin, who then ordered the ropes binding the captured individuals to be untied. She spoke softly, "I keep my word. You are free to go! Just remember never to commit unjust acts in the future."

The captured guards, numbering around forty or fifty, initially assumed that although they might escape execution, imprisonment was inevitable. To their surprise, Princess Nishang graciously set them free herself. Confused, they glanced at each other, uncertain of how to react. A few of the braver ones cautiously moved toward the door. Seeing that both the princess and Master Lin paid them no mind, as if they were invisible, they felt a sudden surge of confidence and bolted. Within moments, all the captured guards had vanished without a trace.

Qin Xian'er looked at Lin Wanrong and smiled, "Husband, your strategy really worked wonders. Had I known, I would have shouted earlier, sparing your men some casualties."

"Darling, if you had shouted earlier, it wouldn't have been convincing," Lin Wanrong playfully caressed her cheek, "Ah, your skin is getting smoother. Let your husband touch it some more!" He was entirely unserious, a mysterious smile on his face.

Gu Bingyan collapsed on the ground, speechless. No matter what, he couldn't have predicted that a massive conflict would end like this. It was as if the collapse of a tree had sent the monkeys scattering. Lin Wanrong's tactics were truly unfathomable.

"Lin Wanrong, I will report you to the Emperor," Gu Bingyan's face flushed with rage as he struggled to his feet.

"You're more than welcome to," Lin Wanrong grinned, "By the way, Mr. Gu, you might want to bring the prince along when you go to the Imperial Throne. Otherwise, with your obstruction of official duty, calling you a troublemaker would be putting it lightly. Accusing you of treason—well, your father wouldn't be pleased, would he?"

"You, you—" In a battle of words, no one could match Lin Wanrong. Gu Bingyan was choked silent, his face turning pale, nearly gasping for breath.

Xu Zhen emerged from the inner residence, his face serious, and shook his head slowly at Lin Wanrong, indicating that they had found nothing. Although Lin Wanrong had expected this outcome, he couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment. The cunning Prince Cheng had emptied the residence in advance. If he had escaped, the empire would never know peace.

The air was filled with the acrid smells of gunpowder and dust. Soldiers were busy using water hoses to extinguish the flames. Xu Zhen had sent a dozen more to clean the garden battlefield. The crimson stains of blood had seeped into the soil, and the garden was in ruins, its beauty lost.

All the servants and maids, along with Gu Bingyan, were detained in the garden. A few soldiers with shovels started digging beneath a large tree nearby, burying various remnants and blood stains, a sight that made everyone's hearts quiver.

"What's this?" A soldier unearthed something while they were covering up the stains. As they lifted the soil, a glint of golden fabric was revealed beneath the tree. Though it was just a corner, it shimmered brilliantly under the lamplight.

The garden's servants and maids were gathered around the area. When they saw the soldiers dig up this object, their faces filled with astonishment. Those with keen senses immediately changed their expressions, and a buzzing sound filled the garden as people whispered amongst themselves, tension rising. Gu Bingyan, hearing the commotion and casting an inadvertent glance, turned as white as a sheet when he saw what it was.

"What is the commotion?" Lin Wanrong asked, furrowing his brow.

Xu Zhen rushed over, falling to his knees in a state of panic. "Report, report to Lord Lin, something unusual has been found under the large tree over there."

Chapter 482 Framed

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "What's so alarming? Do you really need to be this flustered? What exactly happened?"

Xu Zhen's face was flushed with excitement as he panted for a few moments, his voice trembling, "I, I dare not say!"

"You dare not say?" Lord Lin looked surprised and signaled for Qin Xian'er to push his wheelchair forward a couple of steps. "General Xu, you were personally appointed by the Emperor to oversee the city's defenses. Every minor and major issue in the capital, especially those concerning its safety, falls under your jurisdiction. What could you possibly dare not say?"

Xu Zhen hesitated for a while before saying, "My Lord, I am but a low-ranking official, unworthy to speak of it. I'd rather you see for yourself."

He waved his hand, and two soldiers approached, holding up a tray. On the tray was a thin, satin yellow robe. The fabric was as smooth as water and glittered with a golden sheen. The robe was adorned with a black silk hat, featuring a Mandarin collar and narrow sleeves. Embroidered on the shoulders were golden dragons, and the robe itself was decorated with various dragon and phoenix patterns.

Upon closer inspection, the dragons on the robe had the head of a bull, the body of a snake, antlers like a deer, and eyes like a shrimp. With different types such as winged dragons, cloud dragons, and coiled dragons, each was unique in its pose, majestic and awe-inspiring. That such a delicate piece of clothing required two soldiers to present it indicated its immense value.

Lin Wanrong looked amazed, "Ah, what a beautiful robe! It's golden and embroidered with so many dragons; it looks awfully familiar—"

Xu Zhen gave him a glance, hesitant to speak, when Lin Wanrong suddenly exclaimed, "I remember now, this, this is the Emperor's dragon robe!"

Among those present, he was the last to realize. Who else but the Emperor would dare to embroider golden dragons on such a robe? Xu Zhen nodded gravely, "Indeed, my Lord, it is the dragon robe."

"A dragon robe?" Lord Lin furrowed his brows, puzzled, "Xu Zhen, this robe is only fit for the Emperor. Where did you find it?"

Xu Zhen quickly bowed, "I dare not deceive you, my Lord. This dragon robe was found under a large tree in the royal mansion garden. Many witnesses saw it there."

"A large tree in the royal mansion garden?" Lin Wanrong expressed his bewilderment, "That is truly strange. Why would the Prince bury a dragon robe? He can't even wear it."

Gu Bingyan, who had been listening, suddenly blurted out, "You mustn't make baseless claims! This dragon robe is not the Prince's."

"I am fully aware that the dragon robe belongs to the Emperor, not the Prince. I'm just puzzled why a robe that should only be worn by the Emperor was buried under a tree in the Prince's garden," Lin Wanrong mused aloud, then turned to Gu Bingyan and asked, "Mr. Gu, do you know why?"

Gu Bingyan roared angrily, "Someone is deliberately framing and setting up the Prince. The Prince would never do such a thing."

"Framing and setting up?" Lin Wanrong let out a cold chuckle, "I hope that is the case. However, what puzzles me is why no one has tried to frame me in the same manner? Mr. Gu, this dragon robe was unearthed from the Prince's estate, witnessed by many. Do you admit that?"

"Yes, but—"

"Sigh—" Lin Wanrong waved his hand, interrupting him with a smile. "Mr. Gu, this matter is of great importance. When I ask you a question, you only need to answer 'yes' or 'no'. No further commentary is required. General Xu, please arrange for a clerk to record Mr. Gu's responses. When we're finished, have him sign and seal the document."

"I won't sign!" Gu Bingyan sneered. "You're taking things out of context to deceive the listeners. I will never sign such a document."

"Not signing?" Lin Wanrong chuckled heartily, spreading his hands in a show of indifference. "No matter, I can hardly manage a case like this myself. I just happened to be on the scene. Ah, what could Prince Cheng be doing burying a dragon robe beneath that tree? Let me ponder—could it be for a play? Ah, how puzzling. General Xu, what do you think?" ㄝㄚ

General Xu Zhen stifled a laugh and shook his head. "I'm as puzzled as you are, sir. I suppose we can only solve this mystery by questioning Prince Cheng himself. Sir, what should be our next step?"

Lin Wanrong laughed uproariously. "General Xu, you are the commander of the city's defense; this matter falls under your jurisdiction. As far as I can tell, Prince Cheng must be putting on some kind of performance. I doubt anything else of value is buried in this garden! — Ah, just forget I said anything. Handle it as you see fit, General Xu!"

Xu Zhen's eyes lit up, and he immediately commanded his men, "Continue the search, dig up this entire garden. Report any abnormalities immediately, and don't slack off!"

The soldiers had been eager to begin. At Xu Zhen's command, they quickly went to work, their spades and pickaxes striking the ground with a clangor. It didn't take long before another startled cry rang out. "Sir, we've found something unusual!"

This time, something was discovered beneath a peony bush in the garden—a golden bundle deeply buried under the flowering branches. It would have been almost impossible to find had it not been for Lin Wanrong's "helpful" hint.

Xu Zhen quickly had it brought over. The small bundle was somewhat heavy, its contents unknown.

"Open it!" Lin Wanrong commanded, squinting his eyes. Two soldiers cautiously placed the bundle on a garden table and slowly unwrapped it.

"Ah—" The sight that met everyone's eyes drew gasps of astonishment. Inside the bundle was a magnificent crown, woven from fine gold thread into the shape of mythical creatures. On each side, golden dragons, crafted from the same thread, faced each other. At the crown's center was a fiery red gemstone. The crown weighed almost two pounds, with the golden dragons appearing to be in flight—majestic and fierce. The craftsmanship was unparalleled, the colors pure, and the design opulent.

"Wow, what a big golden dragon hat!" Lin Wanrong exclaimed.

Qin Xian'er couldn't help but laugh, giving him a disapproving look. "It's not a golden dragon hat. It's called a Golden Silk Crown, also known as Winged Crown. The gemstone in the middle is known as the Flame Pearl. This is the golden crown of our Great Hua Emperor."

"The Emperor's golden crown?" Lin Wanrong let out a prolonged 'oh', as if he had just understood. Then he blinked a few times. "Princess, if I understand correctly, only the Emperor can wear this crown. Is that right?"

"Of course," Qin Xian'er nodded, "If anyone else wears them, it would be considered treason, and they'd be executed."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Now I understand. Ah, the prince really has quite a collection, doesn't he? Aside from the dragon robe, there's also the golden crown. It's enough to make my heart race! Mr. Gu, you've seen these treasures before, haven't you?"

"You're framing me," Gu Bingyan's face turned pale as he urgently responded, "I have never seen these items in the prince's mansion—"

"What?!" Lin Wanrong's expression changed dramatically. He pointed at Gu Bingyan's nose and said, "Mr. Gu, you're very bold to say these dragon robes and golden crowns are mere 'items.' So what are they then?"

Gu Bingyan was startled, instantly regretting his choice of words. Caught in his blunder, he hurriedly tried to explain, "No, no, they are not 'items'—"

"What?!" Lin Wanrong inhaled sharply, pointing at Gu Bingyan's nose again. "Mr. Gu, I thought I was daring, but I have to admit you surpass me! You could actually utter such treacherous words. Very good, very good! General Xu, did you take note of this?"

Xu Zhen chuckled, "Rest assured, my lord. I've taken note of everyone's actions and words here. No one can deny it."

Caught off guard, Gu Bingyan was no match for Lin Wanrong's cunning. Realizing his mistake had been seized upon, he clenched his teeth, his face flushed. "Lin San, are you intending to carry out a literary inquisition? I am not afraid of you. You're framing the prince and harming the loyal and good. I will never let you off."

Lin Wanrong blinked and smiled, "Mr. Gu, you keep saying I'm framing and deceiving. What proof do you have? These dragon robes and golden crowns were unearthed from the prince's mansion, witnessed by everyone here. How can you blame it on me? Mr. Gu, you should be fair. Whether or not I'm framing someone is up for debate, but your crime of defamation cannot be escaped."

"What do I have to fear? My family has been loyal for generations, and my father serves as the Emperor's teacher. I have the favor and grace of the Emperor; whom should I fear?" Gu Bingyan declared defiantly, "Although this dragon robe and golden crown were found in the prince's mansion, where is your evidence that the prince buried them himself? As far as I can see, someone is trying to frame him. I will inform the Emperor and thoroughly investigate this, punishing the villain responsible."

"Mr. Gu is indeed resolute; I admire that," Lin Wanrong sneered dismissively. "While you're investigating, please also find out who the lowbred cur is that wants to harm me. Goddamn it, may that cur have a son whose head is bigger than his own!"

Caught up in his emotion, the pain throughout his body surged again. He spat vehemently, his eyes bloodshot as he burst into curses, as though ready to kill. Qin Xian'er chuckled and gave him a few glances, "You, you're just a rogue!"

Seeing Lin Wanrong cursing like a ruffian, Gu Bingyan trembled with anger, unable to utter a single word.

"Sir, another significant discovery!" Xu Zhen hurriedly ran over, holding a dark green bundle in his hands. His face was visibly elated as he handled the package with extreme care.

"What discovery?" Lin Wanrong's spirits lifted instantly. He twisted his neck to loosen up and said, "Do tell."

"Sir, look—" Xu Zhen carefully unfolded the small bundle with trembling hands. A mysterious glow emanated from it. Everyone present was stunned, their eyes fixated on the phosphorescent object before them.

It was a square piece of green jade, about the size of an adult's palm. The jade was smooth and exquisitely crafted, its dark green hue glowing faintly under the dim light, giving off an aura of warmth. Engraved on the jade were two golden dragons coiled together. Their heads looked back, their bellies touched, and their tails were tightly intertwined. Their whiskers bristled and claws extended, conveying an air of majestic might.

Upon hearing of another discovery, Gu Bingyan had initially shown disdain. However, seeing the jade in Xu Zhen's hands, his face changed dramatically. "Impossible, how can this be?" he murmured.

Lin Wanrong didn't care about what was or wasn't possible. He had seen many fine jades before, but never such a rare treasure. After staring at it for a long time, he cautiously asked, "What is this?"

Qin Xian'er took the jade from Xu Zhen, her face a mix of sorrow and joy. She whispered, "This is the imperial jade seal of our Great Hua Dynasty. It disappeared the night before my father ascended the throne twenty years ago. For all these years, there was no news of it, and my father has always felt ashamed. I can't believe that this symbol of our nation was stolen by these treacherous people —"

"The missing imperial jade seal?" Lin Wanrong gasped, covering his mouth. "My goodness, this is extremely valuable. Let me touch it a hundred times before you put it away—Mr. Gu, what do you say? Is someone still framing this?"

Gu Bingyan seemed lost in his thoughts, murmuring to himself with a disbelieving expression. The imperial jade seal was such a priceless object that not just anyone could bring it out as a set-up.

Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, "Ah, truly astonishing. Dragon robe, golden crown, and now the jade seal—one could lose their head several times over for just one of these items. To think that they were all collected by one person is beyond belief. I've lived a long time, but today I've truly seen it all. General Xu, gather these items and present them to the Emperor. Make sure you note everyone's contributions. It's no small feat for everyone to forgo rest and patrol in this cold weather."

Hearing this, Xu Zhen chuckled inwardly but maintained a serious face, "As you command, General. And what shall we do with Mr. Gu?"

After glancing at Gu Bingyan, Lin Wanrong nodded, "Well, as you know, I'm a man of integrity. Let's hand him over to the court. Whatever the Emperor decides to do, we have no say."

The blaze had been extinguished, but the commotion had left three-quarters of the royal residence in ruins. All the servants and maids were detained. The once bustling and prosperous residence had, in a single night, turned into a scene of desolation and decay.

Xu Zhen left some men behind to put out the fire, then took Gu Bingyan and the others away. Before leaving, Gu Bingyan shot Lin Wanrong a piercing glance. "Lin San, I will never let you go. We'll meet in the Golden Hall!"

"It's better to be missed than met. Farewell, Brother Gu!" Lin Wanrong waved cheerfully, watching as Xu Zhen took him away.

Qin Xian'er stared at the rising plumes of smoke, the charred wooden beams, and the shattered roof tiles scattered everywhere. Her face grew somber, and she sighed softly. "How difficult it was to build this mansion, and yet it was destroyed in a blink. Wealth and status are as fleeting as clouds. Wake up one day, and it all scatters with the wind."

"Why such melancholy?" Lin Wanrong grasped her small hand and smiled. "Where there's destruction, there's also construction. That's the law of societal change, inevitable for anyone."

Xian'er hummed in agreement, slowly resting her head on his shoulder. "Husband, do you think our Lin family might also face such decline one day?"

Lin Wanrong was taken aback; the question was profoundly difficult, rendering him unable to answer.

"Don't worry," he said, stealing a kiss on Xian'er's cheek, not taking it too seriously. "The Lin family has produced talents for generations and led in various fields for centuries. As long as you help our family branch out, one of our descendants will surely inherit my style. No worries, no worries!"

Qin Xian'er smiled sweetly, planting a soft kiss on his lips. "Husband, I love listening to you. When I'm by your side, it seems I can't feel any sorrow. No wonder my master—"

"Sister An? What happened to her?" Lin Wanrong was suddenly alarmed.

"Nothing." Xian'er playfully stuck out her tongue and swallowed her words, giggling. "Husband, where did you find that imperial robe, golden crown, and jade seal? They gave me quite a fright! Those aren't trivial matters, you know."

"Ah, don't make assumptions. I had nothing to do with it," Lord Lin insisted solemnly, putting on a straight face.

Miss Qin playfully scolded, "Stop it, you had Gao Qiu do your bidding, and you think I don't know? Where did you get these three items?"

"Really, it wasn't me," Lord Lin shrugged innocently. "These items were sourced by Xu Wei, and Gao Qiu executed it. I had nothing to do with it, I knew nothing."

Qin Xian'er chuckled and pinched him. "Mr Xu is quite resourceful. All these items are genuine. It would take years to prepare them. Did he start waiting for this day many years ago?"

Lin Wanrong pondered briefly, then slapped his forehead, breaking into an enlightened smile. "I get it now—no wonder Old Xu prepared everything so quickly. Xian'er, my father-in-law is truly the greatest man in the world. Even someone as clever as me has become a pawn in his game!"

"Only now you realize?" Xian'er giggled. "As the revered Emperor of Great Hua, if he didn't have such skills, how could he rule the nation?"

After acknowledging her lineage, her sense of identity with her father had become much stronger. Lin Wanrong nodded and smiled. However, Xian'er sighed again, "Today's affairs may have framed them with crimes, but it allowed the father and son to escape. I fear Great Hua will have much trouble in the future."

"Don't be disheartened," Lin Wanrong said with a mysterious smile, no longer able to hide his satisfaction. "Who says they escaped?"

Chapter 483 Miss Xu's Visit

Lin Wanrong nodded, smiling as he said, "I can't be certain, but according to my guess, they haven't escaped yet. The army is densely deployed outside the city, making escape nearly impossible. They'll only have a chance once we divert the troops."

"I see," Qin Xian'er clapped her hands and spoke in a sweet voice, "Husband, you're using their strategy against them. You're deliberately ordering Xu Wei to deploy troops and search vigorously outside the city. By making a lot of noise, you're creating an illusion, making them think you've been fooled and that our formation is broken—providing them a perfect opportunity."

"You've truly learned well, my darling," Lin Wanrong gave her a thumbs-up, praising both her and himself. "You've picked up so much of my cleverness after being with me for so long."

"Shameless," giggled Miss Qin, her face a mix of allure and annoyance. She then frowned slightly, "However, Prince Cheng is not to be underestimated. If he is determined to hide, how can we find him? What if he comes out to create chaos after our army heads north? Wouldn't that be disastrous?"

"Don't worry, he can't escape from my grasp," Lin Wanrong confidently patted his chest, his smile rather mysterious.

Seeing his expression, Qin Xian'er knew he had a plan. However, no matter how much she pestered him, Lin Wanrong only responded with a smile, not revealing anything. Frustrated, she pinched his arm until it turned blue, regretting it immediately when she saw the bruise.

Time flew by amidst their chatter, and dawn began to break. Lin Wanrong, having not slept all night and still recovering from serious injuries, started to yawn incessantly, overwhelmed by fatigue. Just as Qin Xian'er was about to take him home for some rest, the distant sound of galloping hooves reached their ears. A few moments later, several horses arrived at the entrance of the mansion. Leading them was an aged Xu Wei, his hair and beard both white.

"Little brother," Xu Wei quickly dismounted and walked up to Lin Wanrong, bowing with a fist and a look of shame on his face, "I'm sorry, I've messed up your plans."

Seeing the old man—worn and bloodshot-eyed from traveling through the night—Lin Wanrong couldn't muster any blame. He waved it off and said, "Mr. Xu, it's not your fault. Our enemy is just too cunning. So, any results from the search outside the city?"

"You're teasing me," Xu Wei shook his head with a bitter smile, "The search was merely a show for others to see; what results could there be?"

'Ah, so old Xu had the same idea as me,' Lin Wanrong thought, suddenly filled with renewed confidence. He chuckled, "The more it's a show for others, the more convincing it must be. Think of it as putting on a monkey show."

Miss Qin couldn't help but smile. Whenever something passed through her husband's lips, it took on a different flavor. Xu Wei laughed heartily and said, "Little brother, you do have a way of seeing the lighter side of things. I truly find it hard to reconcile with the fact that the real culprit got away right under my nose, but fortunately, there's still room for redemption."

"How will you redeem it?" Qin Xian'er was eager to glean some information from Xu Wei. However, before she could, he exchanged a glance with Lin Wanrong and both burst into laughter, their understanding mutual and unspoken.

"Little brother, have you captured that Gu Bingyan?" After laughing for a while, Xu Wei suddenly seemed to remember something. His eyebrows furrowed slightly as he quietly asked.

Lin Wanrong, who had apprehended the man, had nothing to hide from Old Xu and nodded, "Yes, I have. Why? Is this Gu Bingyan so formidable that Mr. Xu had to specially mention him?"

Xu Wei nodded and sighed, "You must already have some understanding of Gu Bingyan's identity. Since his youth, he has been reading alongside the Emperor. He was personally appointed by the late Emperor, who was extremely fond of him. I heard he even granted him an 'Imperial Pardon Token.'"

"An Imperial Pardon Token?" Lin Wanrong was stunned. "Good heavens, that's not trivial! It's a talisman that can save one's life! No wonder Gu Bingyan was so arrogant. Even when I found the imperial robe, golden crown, and jade seal in the garden, he didn't seem scared; he was actually planning to retaliate against me."

Qin Xian'er frowned slightly, "Mr. Xu, does he really have an Imperial Pardon Token bestowed by the late Emperor? Wouldn't that mean even my father, the current Emperor, can't do anything to him?"

"Hmm," Xu Wei grunted. "When the late Emperor was alive, I hadn't yet entered court. I can't verify whether this rumor is true or not. However, the late Emperor was very close friends with Mr. Gu Shunzhang, and held Gu Bingyan in high regard. I've even heard he wanted to adopt him as a godson. So granting him an Imperial Pardon Token wouldn't be out of the question."

Lin Wanrong felt like spitting blood upon hearing this. "Why didn't my father-in-law tell me about such a significant matter? If Gu Bingyan really is the godson whom Xian'er's grandfather wanted to adopt, wouldn't that make him another prince? My father-in-law is really insincere, keeping even this from me."

Xian'er shook her head, "That can't be trusted. If my grandfather had indeed adopted him, there would be records in the imperial annals. He would certainly have been granted a title already, and wouldn't have been so easily captured by you today."

"You are absolutely right, Princess," Xu Wei nodded. "These are all folk rumors; no one knows if they're true or false. But since you have captured Gu Bingyan, these things must be considered. Also, there's Mr. Gu Shunzhang; the prestige of that old man—"

"Hold on, hold on—" Lin Wanrong felt his head throbbing and interrupted him, "Mr. Xu, let's clarify one thing first. Is this Mr. Gu Shunzhang you're talking about still alive or not?"

"What kind of question is that?" Xu Wei trembled with fright, looked around, and seeing that no one was nearby, lowered his voice cautiously. "Little brother Lin, we cannot be reckless with our words. Mr. Gu is a venerable teacher of our great empire, highly respected and esteemed. His demeanor and character are admired across the four seas. Even those who haven't read a book have heard of his reputation. At seventy-two, he remains physically robust and mentally sharp, still commanding respect. Even the current Emperor has to address him respectfully. You mustn't offend the public."

Lin Wanrong sensed that things were going awry. 'I've captured Gu Bingyan. Doesn't that mean I've offended this Gu Shunzhang? And offending Gu Shunzhang is like committing a public offense? Goodness, why didn't anyone notify me beforehand?!

He glanced at Xu Wei with a sardonic smile, "Mr. Xu, you've truly done me a favor. Knowing full well that Gu Bingyan is blocking my way, you didn't even give me a heads-up. Are you waiting to see me make a fool of myself?"

"Far from it!" Xu Wei quickly responded, bowing with his fists clasped. Seeing that they were alone, he lowered his voice, "Someone prevented me from telling you. Besides, I thought you had already investigated everything about the royal mansion."

Official Lin felt like spitting blood. 'Is this old man setting a trap for me? What is he really up to by hiding such crucial information?'

Reading the displeasure on his face, Xu Wei sensed his thoughts and felt a twinge of guilt. He whispered, "Little brother, there are things I would never dare say under normal circumstances. But we have been through thick and thin; it would do no harm to entrust you with my life. His Majesty ordered me not to inform you about Gu Bingyan. He said these are obstacles you will face in the future. Knowing about them in advance might help you this time, but what about next time? You'll encounter more situations like this, and it's an opportunity for you to grow."

'An opportunity? I'd rather not have this kind of opportunity.' Lin Wanrong felt a headache coming on, but there was nothing he could do.

Qin Xian'er, noticing his predicament, couldn't help but hum, "Husband, don't be afraid. What can that imperial tutor, Gu Shunzhang, do? You have solid evidence against Gu Bingyan that everyone witnessed. Besides, you're also a royal son-in-law, and not just an ordinary one. Who in Great Hua could match your prestige? My father has no heirs and cherishes both me and that Xiao girl. You are our husband. Frankly, even if you wanted the throne, my father would give it to you. What's there to fear?"

Qin Xian'er was bold and forthright, causing Xu Wei to secretly marvel. This Princess Nishang, raised in the White Lotus Sect, dared to speak such blasphemous words.

"Don't spout nonsense. If Mr. Xu hears and reports to the Emperor, then I'm finished," Lin Wanrong chuckled.

Xu Wei quickly waved his hands, "I heard nothing, absolutely nothing! Princess, Prince Consort, I have official duties outside the city. I must take my leave." Sensing the situation turning awkward, he didn't dare to linger. Mounting his horse, he galloped away.

'You sure know how to run.' Watching Xu Wei's retreating figure, Official Lin snorted in resentment.

"Husband, do you want to be the Emperor? If you're willing, I'll talk to my father, and the throne could be yours in the future!" Miss Qin was now excited, her face flushed and her long eyelashes trembling. She clung to his arm, chirping melodiously.

'This girl really loves to stir the pot,' Lin Wanrong thought, shaking his head with a wry smile. "Xian'er, don't say such treasonous things in the future. Besides, if that day ever comes, I'd have a harem of wives and concubines. Would you be able to accept that?"

"Absolutely not!" That point seemed to catch her off guard, and her face twisted in jealousy. "You're not even content with my sister and other wives? Even including my master—hmp, if you bring in so many women, I will kill them all. Every single one!"

Her temperament was unlikely to change in a hundred years. But if she were to change, he feared she would no longer be the jealous little woman he loved. Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself and tightly held her small hand.

"In that case," Miss Qin's voice softened as she leaned her head against his shoulder, murmuring with a touch of regret, "Husband, perhaps you shouldn't become the Emperor. Isn't it enough to have all of us by your side, keeping you company? What a shame to miss such an opportunity!"

Looking at her face, a mixture of contradiction and discontent, Lin Wanrong could only respond with a wistful smile.

When they returned to the mansion, the sky was already bright. After a night of turmoil, Lin Wanrong was genuinely exhausted. He collapsed on the bed and fell into a deep sleep. After an uncertain amount of time, he vaguely heard a woman's voice from outside the window, speaking in a low tone, "Is he awake yet?"

"Not yet. Big Brother is still recovering from a serious injury, and yet he went out again last night despite his condition. We were all worried sick. He has just now fallen asleep. Let him rest a bit more," another woman's voice softly replied.

"He's always been restless like this, sometimes enough to infuriate one," said the first woman with a melancholic tone. "It's mysterious how such a clever man fell victim to a plot. He must have been distracted for someone to catch him off guard. Ning'er, don't you think so?"

Luo Ning gave a grunt of agreement. "Sister Zhiqing, it's not entirely Big Brother's fault. Madam Xiao had gone to the temple with good intentions, unaware that she would fall into a trap. When we found Big Brother, he was shielding Madam Xiao with his body, drenched in blood, unmoving. At that sight, my heart broke—"

Luo Ning choked up and couldn't continue, her light sobs trailing off. Xu Zhiqing hastily comforted her, "Ning'er, don't worry. He's fine now, isn't he?"

Luo Ning softly hummed in agreement, sighing, "It's fortunate that Big Brother is alright. If anything happened to him, life would lose its meaning for me. Following him in death would be my only happiness."

'Is she trying to move me on purpose?' Lin Wanrong felt his eyes moisten. Xu Zhiqing sighed, her voice tinged with hesitance, "Ning'er, may I—may I—"

Confused, Luo Ning interjected, "Sister Zhiqing, whatever it is, just say it. Why are you being so polite with me?"

Miss Xu gave a small hum, her voice dropping significantly, "Can I go in and see him? Ah, don't misunderstand. I'm just worried that his severe injuries might delay his journey north."

Wiping away her tears, Luo Ning chuckled, "Sister Zhiqing, it turns out you and Big Brother share the same concerns. Even when he first woke up disoriented, he was still thinking about heading north. If one didn't know better, they would think you two have some sort of agreement."

Miss Xu gasped, hastily shaking her head, "No, no—so will you let me in or not?"

Luo Ning laughed heartily, "You snuck in through the back door and even asked me not to tell Sister Qingxuan. If I don't let you see him, wouldn't that be too heartless? Go on, and I promise I won't eavesdrop!"

"Talking nonsense," Xu Zhiqing muttered dismissively, spitting lightly. All was quiet outside the room. After a long pause, the curtain at the entrance lifted slightly. A woman held her breath and tiptoed inside. Her footsteps were so light they were almost inaudible. Yet, amidst the silence, Lin Wanrong seemed to hear the pounding of her heart.

The woman reached his side and sat down, her breathing growing noticeably rapid. She gazed at Lin San lying on the bed, his body wrapped up like a rice dumpling, his face pale and lips cracked, a far cry from his usual demeanor. She stood there for a moment, muttering under her breath, her voice quivering and tinged with a sob. "Serves you right. For being a womanizer, for bullying others, for always making me angry, for not visiting me—"

Upon hearing her first few words, Lin Wanrong felt a pang of guilt. But her last statement almost made him burst into laughter. Women's logic was truly unfathomable.

Just as he was about to chuckle, he felt a few faint droplets land on his cheek. Sneaking a glance, he saw Xu Zhiqing's lovely face hovering in front of him. Her shoulders trembled, and two streams of crystal-clear tears trickled down her beautiful cheeks. She wept silently, resembling a pear tree in bloom, nourished by spring's rain and dew.

What had happened? Lin Wanrong felt dryness in his mouth and struggled to speak, but no words came out.

Unaware that he was already awake, Xu Zhiqing sighed deeply, her voice tinged with bitterness. "I've never seen you this peaceful. Not bullying people now, are you? What is your relationship with Madam Xiao? For her, you're willing to risk your life? Do you want to infuriate me to death?"

Lin Wanrong was instantly drenched in sweat. What was all this? What had been a simple act of heroism had become so misconstrued. Weren't they concerned about damaging not just Madam Xiao's reputation but also his own?

Miss Xu sighed softly, murmuring to herself. "What relationship you have with her is none of my business—I am no one to you. I had to ask Ning'er to help me come see you, sneaking past the 'tigress' in your family. Is this how you treat me? I've been waiting at home, and nobody came. Is Miss Xiao so important that she can't endure the slightest grievance? Yet you think you can do whatever you want with me. What do you take me for? Huh?"

Xu Zhiqing stifled her sobs, her shoulders shaking as she wept silently. Lin Wanrong was taken aback; Miss Xu's resentment ran deep indeed. Being a smart man, he knew that now was not the time to "wake up."

Just as Miss Xu was about to wipe her tears, her gaze shifted slightly. She noticed the subtle movement of his little finger, the trembling of his eyelashes, and his peculiar facial expression.

"You...you weren't asleep?" She suddenly stood up, her eyebrows furrowing, and her voice unconsciously rising.

"It's a misunderstanding, a misunderstanding," Lin Wanrong hurriedly gestured. "I really was asleep, so asleep that I couldn't wake up!"

Chapter 484 The Poetry in Colors

"You, you—" Miss Xu thought about how every word and action of hers had fallen under his gaze, and yet, this man feigned ignorance. Embarrassed and angered, she was at a loss for words. Tears filled her eyes as she stood up to leave.

Understanding Miss Xu Zhiqing's prideful temperament all too well, Lin Wanrong quickly reached out to grab her sleeve. "Miss Xu, I truly am innocent!"

"Innocent?" The thought of having lowered her guard just to see him, while he played dumb, intensified Xu Zhiqing's feelings of injustice. She sneered bitterly, "Even if you lied in bed to deceive my tears, letting others mock me, you are innocent? I utterly despise you!"

Lin Wanrong was indignant beyond words. By her logic, had he broken his own leg to lie in bed and trick her into visiting him? Wasn't it just that he had not woken up in time to hear her speak? And given what she had said, dare he even wake up? Now he felt like Zhu Bajie [The Pig-demon character in Journey to the West] looking in a mirror, neither human inside nor out!

Seeing him silent, Xu Zhiqing's heart sank further. She scoffed, "Mr. Lin, you're quite the actor! Was your life-risking rescue of Madam Xiao just as pretentious? Unwilling to abandon her even at the point of death—"

"What did you say?" Hearing her words, Lin Wanrong's anger surged. His impulsive rescue of Madam Xiao had been a pure act, misunderstood repeatedly, causing an inner frustration. Yet Miss Xu chose to bring it up, fueling his fury.

His face darkened, and he exuded a murderous aura that made it hard for anyone to meet his eyes. His presence was truly imposing. Xu Zhiqing had never seen him this way and felt a pang of fear. But seeing his anger peak for Madam Xiao, she bit her silver teeth and retorted, "So, was I wrong? You risked your life to protect her, witnessed by all. Ning'er and the others love you, so they dare not speak up—"

"Enough!" Lin Wanrong's expression suddenly softened, and he took a deep breath. His eyes became so calm that they were frightening. "Miss Xu, thank you for visiting me. I will repay this favor as long as I live. Please go now."

"You're telling me to leave?" Seeing his intent to drive her away, Xu Zhiqing's face changed rapidly. A piercing pain surged in her heart, and tears uncontrollably streamed down.

Lin Wanrong spoke softly, "Miss Xu, as a woman, you should know that a woman's reputation is even more precious than her life. I, as a man, can afford not to care, but it's different for a lady. Her reputation is her life. By doubting her, you're essentially taking her life. I admit, Madam Xiao is quite beautiful, but what does that prove? I saved her simply because she is a woman, and I am a man. A man saving a woman is natural, and not as sordid as you imagine."

"You're calling me sordid?" Her tears fell like raindrops, pouring out of her.

"Perhaps it's a bit too heavy," Lin Wanrong sighed faintly. "Miss Xu, I wronged you back in Shandong. I admit it. I was despicable. Ask of me whatever you will, even if you want me to admit my guilt before the world. But remember one thing: I, Lin San, may not admit to good deeds, but I'll never deny the wrongs I've done! This applies to you, and even more so for Madam."

His words cut through Xu Zhiqing like a sharp knife, bringing back memories of Shandong like a reel of film. She mumbled to herself through tears, "What do I want? What do I want? What a good question—what can I want?"

Had she been too harsh? Had she ever considered how his wife felt? Seeing Xu Zhiqing's tears fall like rain, Lin Wanrong felt an indescribable emotion. He lightly tugged at her sleeve, "Miss Xu—"

"Don't touch me—" Xu Zhiqing violently shook off his grip, momentarily forgetting that Lin Wanrong was wounded. He lost his balance, and a sharp pain shot through him as he clenched his teeth.

"Big Brother—" Luo Ning rushed in from outside the door, holding a porcelain cup. She witnessed the scene and felt her heart shatter. She hurriedly embraced Lin Wanrong, tears falling uncontrollably, "Big Brother, how are you? What happened? Sister Zhiqing, what are you doing?"

"I'm fine," Lin Wanrong gasped for air, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. "Ning'er, it's not Miss Xu's fault."

Looking at Lin Wanrong's pain-stricken face, Xu Zhiqing was stunned. Was this still the same Lin San? How had he become so frail? "You, you—" she couldn't contain her pain as tears fell like broken pearls. Trembling, she reached out to touch his forehead.

Luo Ning clutched her brother tightly, not allowing Xu Zhiqing to touch him. She sobbed, "Sister Zhiqing, what are you doing? If you're angry, take it out on me. Big Brother is badly injured, he can't handle this kind of stress. In our family, he is the most precious treasure to all my sisters. How can I explain this to them?"

'Me, their treasure?' Lin Wanrong couldn't help but feel both amused and exasperated, though he had no inclination to argue.

Unbeknownst to her, today's visit would end like this. Xu Zhiqing muttered to herself, then stormed out of the room, flinging her sleeves dramatically. "Lin San, I hate you, I hate you!"

"Sister Zhiqing, Sister Zhiqing—" Luo Ning realized she had been too harsh. However, her concern for her husband left no room for other considerations. She deeply cherished her sisterly bond with Xu Zhiqing. Seeing her leave in such haste, Luo Ning called out several times, but to no avail.

"Big Brother, what should we do?" Ning'er was anxious and confused. She murmured, "Sister Zhiqing must be angry with me now."

"If I knew what to do, I wouldn't have ended up like this," Lin Wanrong said with a bitter smile. Yet he didn't feel he was in the wrong. Miss Xu could be capricious in other matters, and he would not mind, but today she took issue with Madam Xiao, leaving him with a lingering sense of unease.

"Big brother, does it still hurt?" A warm, soft hand gently massaged his shoulder, moving to his arm with practiced finesse.

Lin Wanrong sighed in relief; the pain in his body instantly diminished. "Not at all, do you think I'm that fragile? Ning'er, who taught you this technique? Ah, it feels so good—"

Ning'er hummed softly and sighed, "Sister Zhiqing taught me. She heard you were injured and rushed here from outside the city before dawn. She hesitated for a long time at the back door, too shy to enter. It wasn't until one of the Xu family's servants informed me that I knew and discreetly invited her in."

Comparing Xu Zhiqing with Xiao Qingxuan, given Zhiqing's nature, she wouldn't easily enter the house of a romantic rival. Ning'er continued massaging him, "You have no idea, big brother. When Zhiqing came, it was like she brought an entire pharmacy with her. All kinds of medicinal herbs and dozens of ointments. She taught me which to apply in the morning, which at night, and even what to use when you're in a palanquin. Despite her shyness, she insisted it was a gift from General Li Tai, and took advantage of your absence to teach me these massage techniques. She said it would benefit your recovery since you and I are close. She even taught me many other ways to tend to bone injuries—I suspect she would willingly do the massages herself."

"Is that so?" Lin Wanrong sighed softly, "Miss Xu is a renowned healer; treating me with a parent's heart, she wouldn't consider it improper."

"Are you pretending to be confused or are you really clueless?" Ning'er exclaimed, tapping him lightly on the arm, eliciting a yelp from Lin Wanrong.

Miss Luo chimed in, "You really don't understand Xu Zhiqing's feelings for you? Even back in Shandong, you treated her as you did, and she never complained. Learning you were injured, she rushed here in the middle of the night. Think about it: for a young woman to take such steps, to be so busy on your behalf, she's all but given you her heart. What more do you want?"

"Is that so?" After hearing Ning'er's words, Lin Wanrong was genuinely moved. Considering his history with Miss Xu, it seemed he had only ever taken advantage of her; she had never wronged him—today's incident with Madam Xiao notwithstanding.

Xu Zhiqing was stubborn, the type to act rather than speak. It was touching, but it was also this obstinate nature that created an invisible divide between them, making it difficult to get closer.

"Big brother, what exactly do you feel for Sister Zhiqing? When I see her looking so sad, it breaks my heart." Seeing Lin Wanrong lost in thought, Ning'er pouted her rosy lips and huffed softly.

"The blame isn't mine, as the old saying goes: choose a concubine for beauty, but choose a wife for virtue. Miss Xu is proud and haughty, and she doesn't get along with Qingxuan. If she doesn't change her ways, wouldn't bringing her into the family just create chaos?" Lin Wanrong sighed, "Let's discuss this matter after the war, provided we both survive."

That seemed to be the only option. Luo Ning nodded and then suddenly asked, "Big Brother, why did you have a falling out with Sister Zhiqing today? When she came to see you, she was so happy. How did she end up so upset after just a few words?"

Lin Wanrong dared not mention that it was due to the mention of Madam Xiao, so he laughed and said, "Maybe I was too blunt, saying things I shouldn't have said in front of her."

Blunt? Big Brother? She'd never believe that. Luo Ning gave him a playful glance, "Big Brother, what's gotten into you? Sister Zhiqing came all the way to see you; all you had to do was say something pleasing to win her over. Isn't this your strong suit? Hasn't every sister in our family come under your spell this way? Why would you not use your secret weapon and waste a good opportunity?"

"You make it sound like I'm deceiving you all. That's all heartfelt, more genuine than gold or silver. If you don't believe me, feel my chest; this heart beats for you," Lin Wanrong said earnestly.

Listening to this, Luo Ning was both embarrassed and delighted. She giggled, her eyes glazed with enchantment, "Big Brother, if you say these things to Sister Zhiqing, I guarantee you won't have any

problems. When women like us meet you, we meet our nemesis—stop that, don't touch me inappropriately; I'm giving you a massage!"

After the commotion with Xu Zhiqing and the teasingly sensual massage from the playful Luo Ning, Lin Wanrong had lost all desire for sleep. He caressed Luo Ning's soft, smooth chest, the silky texture making it hard for him to let go. He lazily sighed, "Ning'er, do you know what is the most vast thing in the world?"

"The ocean!" Luo Ning answered without thinking.

"And what's vaster than the ocean?" Lin Wanrong nodded, a sly smile creeping onto his face.

Luo Ning thought for a moment before slowly saying, "The sky!"

"And what's vaster than the sky?"

Luo Ning frowned, deep in thought but unable to find an answer. She laughed, "Big Brother, you're just making it hard for me on purpose. What is it, then?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled lasciviously as his hand lightly pressed against the prominent curve on Luo Ning's chest, "Vaster than the sky, of course, is the breadth of my Ning'er's heart—goodness, Ning'er, how did you grow such a soft and abundant chest? I can barely get my hands around it!"

"You're incorrigible!" Luo Ning blushed crimson, realizing that her Big Brother's winding conversation was meant to tease her. But he even turned his lecherousness into poetry. Luo Ning felt a warm, tingling sensation, completely smitten by him.

The husband and wife laughed and played for a while, the atmosphere truly intimate and warm. Luo Ning then took out some ointment to reapply on Lin Wanrong's wounds. The variety was stunning, with a dozen different colors. She didn't know how Miss Xu had managed to concoct it; it must have been hard for her.

Luo Ning carefully undressed her husband Lin Wanrong to change his medicine. After being married for quite some time, she had seen his body countless times. Although she still felt shy, she could endure it. Lin Wanrong, however, was not content. "Ning'er, this isn't fair! Why am I the only one who has to undress? No, we must have equity. You should undress while applying medicine to

me. That way, I can check if your body has developed symmetrically. We wouldn't want any imbalances now, would we?"

Miss Luo chuckled and playfully punched him, lightening the atmosphere and making it rather romantic.

After changing the medicine, Lin Wanrong's eyes fell on the porcelain cup that Luo Ning had brought in earlier. The cup was deep, set on a stove in the room to heat. A gentle steam arose, accompanied by an inviting aroma. Lin Wanrong's stomach growled audibly, making his mouth water. "Ning'er, what's this that smells so good?"

"It's Ginseng and Blood Swallow soup; it's been simmering for a whole day and night," Luo Ning said as she uncovered the dish. The soup looked like a rich, translucent gruel, faintly tinged with red. The aroma filled the entire room.

Wonderful! Lin Wanrong swallowed a mouthful of saliva. Seeing his hungry look, Luo Ning lovingly brought the small dish to his lips. "Big Brother, have a taste!"

Lin Wanrong took a sip; the soup was creamy and smooth, steaming hot yet immediately comforting. The moment it touched his lips, a sweet aroma filled his senses. He gulped down several mouthfuls, almost wishing he could swallow the entire dish. Luo Ning looked on, her eyes full of love and tenderness. "Big Brother, slow down. No one is competing with you."

Lin Wanrong took another sip and exclaimed, "Ning'er, did you make this? It's amazing! Your cooking is as good as your figure."

'Ugh, Big Brother always has to bring that up,' Luo Ning thought as she playfully rolled her eyes. "You're mistaken, Big Brother. How could I make this? I told you about it yesterday; you're just pretending to forget, aren't you?"

"Yesterday?" Realizing what she meant, Lin Wanrong was stunned. "Wait, did Madam make this?"

"Who else could it be?" Luo Ning nodded. "She said that making Ginseng and Blood Swallow soup is a delicate art. From the pot used to the firewood and the heat level, nothing can be overlooked. This soup simmered for two full days and nights. It's invaluable and extremely precious."

"Is that so? She must have worked really hard," Lin Wanrong said, touched by the gesture.

Luo Ning hummed in agreement. "Earlier, when you were speaking with Sister Zhiqing, the Madam came by. She personally brought this soup—"

"What? She was here?" Lin Wanrong was visibly shocked.

Luo Ning nodded softly. "I was helping in the kitchen at the time. When I returned, I saw the Madam hurrying down the stairs, carrying the soup. She asked me to give it to you. Didn't you see her?"

Oh no, Lin Wanrong thought. Did the Madam hear something she shouldn't have? He worried what she would think, given her strong-willed nature. What if she misconstrued something?

"Big Brother, Big Brother—" Luo Ning called out, jolting him back to reality.

"It's okay, it's okay. Did the Madam say anything?"

Luo Ning paused to think and then shook her head. "Aside from looking a bit pale, she seemed fine. It's probably just fatigue from the last few days."

Chapter 485 Ning'er's Touching Moment

A pale face? Ah, all these confusing matters. What on earth were they about? He sighed, his mood immediately soured. Even the most exquisite ginseng and bird's nest, though fragrant and delicious, became unpalatable.

Ning'er sensed his mood intuitively. After hesitating for a moment, she finally spoke. "Big Brother, don't worry too much. The matters of the world exist for those who believe, and are nonexistent for those who don't. If you have a clear conscience, why concern yourself with what others think or say?"

This girl Ning'er was becoming increasingly philosophical. Lin Wanrong listened and smiled. "Ning'er, how did you know what I was worrying about?"

Miss Luo nodded gently, "Your nature, Big Brother, is inherently carefree. Few things in this world can make you frown. Furthermore, based on what Sister Zhiqing told me earlier, I could guess what's on your mind. Sister Zhiqing has her own temperament. If she said something wrong, don't take it to heart. Over time, when she meets with Madam to catch up, perhaps any misunderstandings will naturally be cleared up."

Ning'er's words were always comforting. Lin Wanrong embraced her tender body, groping aimlessly for a moment, then said with grateful emotion, "Ning'er, you've been so good to me. In this world, you're one of the people who understand me the best. However, you got one thing wrong!"

"What did I get wrong?" Miss Luo asked curiously.

"I may be unrestrained, but it's not a façade. I truly am dissolute." Lin Wanrong chuckled, pulling her close and planting a light kiss on her delicate ear. Miss Luo blushed, snuggling tightly against him. She felt his warm body heat, and a sense of happiness filled her heart. She wished that time could stand still at this very moment.

"Ning'er, has everything been quiet in the house these past few days?" After basking in warmth for a bit, the troubles brought by Xu Zhiqing didn't seem to lessen. Thinking about Xian'er and Qingxuan made his head ache, so he turned to Miss Luo with a question.

Ning'er was clever enough to catch his drift and answered, "Things are relatively peaceful. Everyone is busy with their own matters, all while thinking of you, of course."

Lin Wanrong asked in confusion, "Busy? Busy with what?"

"What could they not be busy with?" Miss Luo smiled charmingly, tapping him lightly on the forehead. "Qiaoqiao is busy setting up a food shop; she's already found a location and has started the interior decoration. As for Sister, she is planning an academy in the Fairy Hall, collecting funds, and recruiting staff. There are countless tasks."

"What about you? What are you doing?" Lin Wanrong naturally had some doubts, as she hadn't mentioned herself at all.

"What else could I be doing?" Ning'er huffed, "I am your decorative vase—just kidding. I've organized a charitable school, taking in children from poor families to educate them. You said it yourself, Big Brother, that I am your vase, and spending your money is only right. You're not allowed to be stingy."

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong burst into laughter and planted a kiss on her cheek, "Don't worry, Ning'er. In this world, I might worry about many things, but money isn't one of them. Besides, what you're doing is meaningful. Compared to you, gold and jewels are nothing but rubbish!"

Miss Luo felt irked and annoyed, her fingers tightening into a pinch on his arm. "Why do those words sound so strange?"

At home, all the beautiful ladies were preoccupied with their own affairs. The Eldest Miss was, needless to say, busy enough with the reconstruction of the Xiao family mansion. Lin Wanrong listened and felt somewhat disappointed. "Living in the same courtyard yet keeping to ourselves—is this how it should be? We should be more intimate as a family. At night, when the lights are off and clothes are shed, even I can't tell who is who among us. What boundaries could there be?"

Hearing his lewd remarks, Ning'er felt so embarrassed she wished she could burrow into the ground. Annoyed, she knocked him on the head. "You're the one undressing. How disgusting!"

Lin Wanrong chuckled lasciviously, but the sadness on his face remained. Luo Ning knew what he was thinking and whispered softly in his ear, "Big Brother, these things can't be rushed. You've just gone through an ordeal, and the mood at home is understandably somber. Besides, the two Misses from the Xiao family haven't formally moved in, and naturally, they'll feel constrained. With Miss Qin also being at odds with her sister, they're hesitant to get too close to us. Give it some time for everyone to get comfortable. Actually, Madam Xiao and the Second Miss are quite approachable."

'A hidden message, huh?' Lin Wanrong chuckled. "So, you're saying the Eldest Miss is difficult?"

Luo Ning had never gotten along well with Xiao Yuruo, a tension that had started back in Jinling. Lin Wanrong knew this, of course. Ning'er hummed softly, saying, "The Eldest Miss rarely talks to us, always busy with her business. It's as if she thinks she's too good for us. If it weren't for your fondness for her, I wouldn't even care!"

Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile. "Jealousy, eh? The Eldest Miss may be reserved, but she's passionate and committed in her relationships. Didn't you notice that when we were in Jinling?" He couldn't help but give her curvaceous rear a light pat.

Miss Luo let out a soft, sultry moan. "I'm jealous because you're so fond of her, because you tie red threads for her, solving her marital issues. You hold her so high in your affections!"

Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly. This had become common knowledge, it seemed. "Ning'er, my fondness for her doesn't surpass what I feel for you. The best part of my life, I've given to you, while she hasn't received any."

"What best part?" Miss Luo was puzzled.

Lin Wanrong chuckled lewdly, his hand lightly exploring her smooth abdomen, eliciting a series of soft moans from Ning'er. He whispered something into her ear, and her face instantly flushed. "You naughty man, so that's what you mean by 'the best part.' In that case, I'll give you a son first. She'll never catch up with me then!"

"Is that how it works?" Lord Lin was sweating bullets. Ning'er chuckled softly and gave him a teasing glance, "I told you to be moderate in your affections, but look at you, a bee buzzing among the flowers. Are you finding it difficult now?"

'Governing a nation is easier than managing a household. It's really becoming a struggle,' Lin Wanrong sighed. 'What will it be like if one day both Fairy Ning and Sister An join in? Will my house become a marketplace?'

"Big Brother, I'm just teasing you." Seeing his troubled expression, Miss Luo whispered into his ear, "Let me tell you a secret. Although it appears that I fight and argue with Miss Xiao, deep down, she is the person I respect the most. She's strong and resilient, holding up the Xiao family in a way many men could not. The more I fight with her, the more I like her!"

"The more you fight, the more you like? What kind of logic is that? Ning'er, are you just saying this to console me?" Lord Lin was growing increasingly bewildered.

"Don't be silly, I'm not consoling you," Miss Luo responded with a playful huff, her eyes brimming with a blend of coyness and charm. She lowered her voice to a whisper, "Big Brother, when you and Miss Xiao have your wedding night, may I hide in your room and watch?"

"You can't be serious—" Lord Lin was so shocked he almost leaped from the bed. "Ning'er, do you actually have such a fetish? This is quite the surprise!"

"What fetish? That sounds terrible!" Ning'er pouted, her face flushed, yet she couldn't help but chuckle. "I just want to see what a strong, dominant woman like her is like during her moments of intimacy. Whether she would be playful—" Her voice grew softer and softer, almost inaudible at the end, "—or whether she could outperform me."

Ning'er was relentless, leaving Lord Lin utterly speechless.

"Big Brother, what's the matter?" Ning'er gently nudged him.

"It's nothing," Lin Wanrong sighed faintly. "Ning'er, it's only now that I realize how old-fashioned and conservative I am. I should strive to be more like you."

"You're teasing me again. No matter what you say, I'm just going to watch. I'm bad like that, what are you going to do about it?" Ning'er was about to resume their playful banter when she noticed the soft look in her Big Brother's eyes. It was as deep and fathomless as the sea. He pulled her close, squeezing the air from her lungs.

"Ning'er, thank you. Thank you for spoiling me like this," Lin Wanrong's voice trembled slightly.

"Big Brother—" Luo Ning's eyes filled with tears, "You, you know?"

"How could I not know?" Wiping away the tears from Ning'er's eyes, Lin Wanrong's own eyes misted over, "You sacrificed your dignity to console me, to help me forget my worries. I could never find a better, more pure-hearted girl than you in this world. Ning'er, you're going to spoil me rotten."

Luo Ning's eyes widened, blinking as she stared at him. "Big Brother—" Unable to contain the joy of being understood, she flung herself into his arms and burst into tears. With that one sentence, she felt all her hardships, all her grievances, were worth it. There was no moment more blissful in life than the moment when two people truly understood each other.

"Ning'er, thank you!" Lin Wanrong was overwhelmed with emotion. Meeting such a good girl was a blessing from heaven.

"I want to spoil you like this," Miss Luo sobbed, "So that no one can surpass me, and so you will always remember me."

She buried her head in Lin Wanrong's chest, tears soaking through his clothes. "Big Brother, do you remember when you were in Shandong? You told me that you wanted me to be your most beautiful vase, that you would take care of me for all your lifetimes, that you would always make me happy.

At that moment, I felt like the happiest woman in the world, a woman spoiled by her Big Brother! I don't care for money; it's useless to me. I just like the feeling of being spoiled by you. I want to spoil you just like how you spoil me, make you as happy as I am. Do you know, Big Brother? Do you?"

She choked on her words, gasping for breath. Her tears fell like broken strings of pearls, her tear-streaked cheeks were as clear as hawthorn in the morning dew, vibrant and gorgeous.

The impact on Lin Wanrong's heart was immeasurable. There were not that many forms of heartlessness in the world, but each form of deep affection was unique. Ning'er was foolish, foolish to the point it made one's heart ache!

"Big Brother, do you like me?" Luo Ning suddenly lifted her head from his embrace, her face wet with tears, and gave him a soft smile. Her tear-stained cheeks blossomed like spring flowers, indescribably beautiful.

"Ning'er, I love you," he solemnly nodded, without a trace of jest.

"You naughty, making me cry again. Big Brother, I will spoil you forever—" Before Miss Luo could finish her sentence, she felt a passionate kiss sealing her tender lips, the fire burning in Lin Wanrong's body instantly melting her.

"What happened to you?!" Xiao Qingxuan carefully unwound the bandage on his body, looking at the newly formed scar. The wound seemed like it was about to tear open again, making her incredibly worried.

"It's nothing. I just moved too much in my sleep," Lin Wanrong grinned sheepishly, "Don't worry, my love, it will be fine in a few days."

"What kind of movement was so intense?" Xiao Qingxuan tucked him in, mildly scolding, "You even neglected your own health! Ning'er, you've been taking care of him. Tell me, what happened to make him like this?"

Luo Ning stood by the bedside, blushing crimson as her sister questioned her. "I, I... Big Brother, he, he—"

Xiao Qingxuan frowned at her, "Ning'er, what's with you? Why is your face so red? Are you feeling unwell?"

"Ah, she must be sleepy," seeing Ning'er almost embarrassingly looking down, Lin Wanrong quickly came to her rescue. "Actually, I was bored sleeping alone. Luckily, Ning'er was also tired, so we took a little nap. Somehow, in my dream, I moved up and down for a bit. When I woke up, I was like this. It has nothing to do with Ning'er."

"What moving up and down? What exactly were you doing?" Seeing his playful demeanor, Xiao Qingxuan was both angry and amused. "He's not being honest. Ning'er, you tell me."

"Sister—" Luo Ning didn't dare to speak her mind openly. Xiao Qingxuan had a stern expression and an intangible aura of authority. Luo Ning respected her and couldn't bear not to answer. Her cheeks flushed as she leaned in and whispered a few words into her sister's ear. Before she could finish, she was already too embarrassed to look up, casting her eyes down.

"What—" Xiao Qingxuan was so angered that tears swirled in her eyes. She pointed at Lin Wanrong and exclaimed, "My Dear, are you trying to infuriate me to death?"

"No, not at all." Seeing that Miss Xiao was genuinely upset, Lord Lin became anxious. "Qingxuan, this was merely an accidental event. In the heat of the moment, Luo Ning and I—Don't worry, the position we adopted was such that she wouldn't get hurt."

"You brute—" Xiao Qingxuan's tears streamed down her face. "Look at yourself! You can't even take care of your own body, and yet you still want to involve my sisters?!"

"Sister—" Seeing that Miss Xiao was truly angry, Luo Ning fell to her knees in fright and quickly hugged her sister's arm. "It wasn't Big Brother's fault; I seduced him!"

"No, it's not Luo Ning's fault. I was the one who lost my senses, promising to give her a son," Master Lin hurriedly defended her.

Upon seeing Luo Ning secretly gazing at Master Lin with eyes full of softness, as if they could melt steel, Xiao Qingxuan realized that these two must have truly fallen for each other. She felt both annoyed and amused. She hurriedly helped Luo Ning up and softly said, "Luo Ning, you mustn't

spoil him like this. With his recklessness and neglect of his health, what would we do if something were to go wrong?"

Luo Ning felt both embarrassed and guilty. She lowered her head, unable to speak, but her hands subconsciously caressed her abdomen, her face lighting up with joy at the thought of having a son.

"From today on, I will be the one taking care of My Dear." Seeing her husband chastised a bit, like a scolded child, Miss Xiao felt a sudden surge of tenderness but didn't dare to let it show. She sternly said.

"How could that be?" Lin Wanrong hurriedly cried out. "Qingxuan, you're carrying our son; you can't tire yourself out like this. Why not let Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning take care of me?"

"Do you think they're a match for you?" Xiao Qingxuan gave him a sidelong glance and slowly sat beside him. "If you truly care for our child, stop acting so recklessly and focus on your health. All the meat in this pot will eventually be yours; it's not going to fly away."

"Yes, yes." Lin Wanrong felt guilty. He hastily grabbed Qingxuan's hand. "Wife, I know you're doing this for my good. There is no better woman in this world than you. I was wrong; please scold me more. Please don't spoil me; I'm afraid I won't be able to handle it."

"Stubborn man!" His words melted her heart instantly. Raising a man was like raising a child; you had to tolerate their mistakes. A strong wave of maternal love surged within Miss Xiao. Her cheeks flushed, and she couldn't bring herself to scold him any further.

'So, Sister also likes this approach; Big Brother is really amazing.' Luo Ning covered her lips with her hand to hide a smile. She stole a glance at her Big Brother, and a flood of warmth enveloped her heart.