

Finest 491

Chapter 491 Returning to the Royal Mansion

‘Retire? Has the old man gone senile? I’m only in my twenties; how could I retire so soon? Even if someone had to take the fall, it wouldn’t be me.’ Lord Lin thought indignantly.

The Emperor slowly walked up to Lin San and Chen Biqing, scrutinizing both men carefully. After a lengthy pause, he let out a long sigh. "My loyal subjects, this matter greatly affects the prosperity of our great empire. The responsibility is immense. You both must investigate it thoroughly—I am kin to the prince, and I refuse to believe that he would commit such an act."

Chen Biqing’s face flushed with emotion as he knelt on the ground, respectfully saying, "Your Majesty, please rest assured. I will devote myself entirely to resolving this issue and will not disappoint your trust."

The Emperor nodded slightly and turned his gaze towards Lin San. "And you? Can you handle this task?"

Lin San frowned and said, "Your Majesty, I’m not a learned man, and my insights are shallow compared to Lord Chen here, who excels in rhetoric. What if, while I focus too much on the task, someone takes issue with me and wants to file a complaint? That would certainly disgrace you. Therefore, it might be better if this case is assigned to someone else—"

Lin San’s sarcastic tone did not escape Chen Biqing, but the Emperor was present, so he dared not speak out of turn.

The Emperor chuckled, "If you succeed, the credit is yours; if you fail, then it’s my fault for misjudging character. How cunning of you to absolve yourself of all responsibility in advance."

Lin San put on a humble smile. "Your Majesty, isn’t it because I don’t want to tarnish your reputation? My sincere intentions are as clear as day!"

Despite his casual demeanor, the thick bandages wrapped around his leg bore testament to his capabilities. This young man had always delivered and had never disappointed anyone. The Emperor smiled faintly. "Rest assured, as long as you serve our great empire with all your heart and

soul, even if there are minor mistakes, I will not hold them against you. Minister Chen, my loyal subject—"

"I am here," Chen Biqing hurriedly said.

The Emperor smiled, "Lin San is a bit straightforward. If you encounter any difficulties while working together, do not be too harsh on him."

Straightforward? Lin San's cunning would put even a labyrinthine mountain path to shame. Lord Chen felt helpless. It was clear the Emperor was favoring Lin San, and who knew what problems would arise when they teamed up.

Lin San had the gift of the gab, speaking so eloquently that he could probably convince the stars to fall from the sky. The issue of his toppling was set aside, and the Emperor even assigned him to investigate the case concerning the Prince. It wasn't exactly a favor, but it might as well have been one. Everyone clearly understood this, and their respect for the usually jovial Lin San grew even greater.

"How's your injury, Little brother Lin?" Xu Wei asked, as they left the imperial audience.

'Do you really need to ask? Can't you see I'm still in a wheelchair?' Lord Lin glared at Old Xu, "I'm fine, not going to die."

Xu Wei looked around and saw Chen Biqing waiting in the distance, presumably to discuss collaborating on the case. Lowering his voice, he said, "Little brother, are you confident that you can close this case within two days? General Li was really anxious when he heard you were in trouble. If it weren't for urgent military drills yesterday, he would've personally visited you. Among those in our great empire who can hold their heads high in front of the nomads, besides Li Tai, it's just you. You can't afford to mess this up!"

Old Xu indeed had some skills; he knew how to flatter in a way that felt genuinely pleasant. With a warm smile on his face, Lord Lin said, "Mr. Xu, you give me too much credit. I can only deal with the likes of Lu Dongzan, nothing that would put me on a grand stage. As for this case..." He sighed, "Whether we can solve it or not, we have to. We don't have the luxury of time. It's a real headache."

Indeed, two days was a tight timeframe, but under these critical circumstances, even the Emperor had no other options. Xu Wei nodded in agreement, "Little brother, Gao Qiu has already briefed me on the matter. I also believe your analysis is quite sound. Given the crafty nature of our opponent, there's nothing we can't imagine that he wouldn't dare to do. After operating for so many years, we

easily breached his stronghold. It raises suspicions; there must be something big going on in the royal mansion."

'Great minds think alike,' Lord Lin patted Master Xu's shoulder with satisfaction, even though there was a slight whiff of too-little-too-late in his so-called heroism. Still, it was better than being obstinately wrong.

To look after Lin Wanrong, the Emperor had sent Gao Ping to escort him personally. When the palanquin left the palace gates, it was already late. The head inspector, Imperial Censor Chen Biqing, had been waiting there for some time.

"Master Lin, where are you going now?" Gao Ping asked softly from outside the palanquin.

Where else could he go? The old man had only given him two days. If he didn't hurry, he would really have to retire and go home. Seeing Chen Biqing anxiously looking his way, Lord Lin let out a casual 'oh' and said, "I'm a bit tired today, I think I'll go back to my mansion to rest. Eunuch Gao, you know the way to my place, right?"

Before his words could settle, Chen Biqing hurriedly approached, lifting his official robe, "Lord Lin, there's no time for rest, no time at all!"

"Oh? Isn't that Minister Chen?" Lin Wanrong responded in a leisurely manner, "What are you doing here, watching the sunset? You seem to be in a good mood."

The young man's tone was full of irony, entirely disregarding the authority of the Imperial Censor, a position feared by many officials. Lord Chen had never been treated like this before and couldn't vent his frustration. Suppressing his anger, he said seriously, "Lord Lin, you make it sound so easy. The Emperor has only given us two days, we cannot afford to delay. I've been waiting here specifically to discuss this with you."

'Discuss what? This Chen is clearly trying to make life difficult for me. Does he think I'm an easy target?' Lord Lin yawned and replied lazily, "I don't have much to contribute, given my limited abilities and knowledge. I'm better off going home to sleep. You handle it, Minister Chen. You've submitted so many reports to the Emperor; just send another one asking for an extension. Or, just shift the blame onto me. I've been reported on so many times; the Emperor knows I often get wronged. So, it doesn't bother me much."

Gao Ping, an old servant in the palace accustomed to the internal struggles, quietly listened to their conversation. A subtle smile crossed his lips. Lord Lin was indeed someone who knew how not to be taken advantage of. Anyone who tried to trip him up would get it right back.

Chen Biching was grinding his teeth in fury. 'How did this scoundrel manage to get this far, to utter such outrageous words?' he thought. Suppressing his anger, he said, "Lord Lin, you and I both serve the Emperor. Our duty is to be loyal to the court and the nation. If everyone were as unambitious and evasive as you—"

'To hell with you. I hate sanctimonious people like you who say one thing and mean another,' thought Lin Wanrong, dismissing Minister Chen. Calmly, he said, "Eunuch Gao, wasn't the Emperor's instruction for you to escort me? Why have we stopped?"

"Yes, yes," replied Eunuch Gao, ever so astute. Sensing Minister Chen's disapproval of Lord Lin, he knew better than to stick around. With a wave of his hand, the palanquin bearers lifted Lin Wanrong and proceeded on their way.

Chen Biching stood there, flabbergasted. Seldom had he encountered someone like Lin Wanrong in the bureaucratic circles—someone so forthright that they didn't give a damn about saving face.

Two ministers on a joint case, yet not even a few words were exchanged before negotiations collapsed—a rarity indeed. Lin Wanrong, however, was unfazed. While Minister Chen may have appeared grandiose to others, Lord Lin knew he must be more anxious about the case than himself. After all, Minister Chen sought promotions through his work, whereas Lord Lin was neither hungry for rank nor wealth and acted merely out of goodwill. Who could outdo him?

Sure enough, Minister Chen's palanquin hurriedly caught up with them. His face was ashen, teeth clenched. "Lord Lin, my earlier words were ill-considered. I hope you'll overlook them. Please understand my difficulties and discuss the case with me."

"My, my, Lord Chen, you're too modest," Lin Wanrong said, chuckling under his breath at the man's change in demeanor. "I, too, wish to resolve this case properly. Otherwise, I wouldn't be doing justice to your concerns."

Minister Chen gritted his teeth and remained silent. Lowering his voice, Lin Wanrong grinned, "Lord Chen, there is something I'd like to confirm with you."

"Speak," Minister Chen replied.

Lin Wanrong nodded and sighed, "Rumors have it that Gu Bingyan is your cousin. Is that true?"

‘Everyone in the court knows that, don't they?’ thought Minister Chen, infuriated by Lord Lin's sly appearance. He snorted, "What you said is true. Bingyan is indeed my cousin. But what does this have to do with the case?"

"Oh, nothing much," Lord Lin said, his smile skin-deep. "Today, my residence was besieged by a few ignorant scholars who even engaged in looting. I couldn't help myself, so I detained a couple of them and casually interrogated them—"

"What did you find out?" Minister Chen asked, alarmed.

Lin Wanrong waved his hand dismissively, "Oh, just some random things. You know me, I'm usually easy-going. But unfortunately, I have two princesses at home, and they are rather... militant in their views. Of course, this should have nothing to do with Brother Bingyan. It's just that I've heard he's quite influential among the scholars. So, Lord Chen, if you happen to meet your cousin, please ask him to mediate. Ah, if the Emperor decides to investigate this—well, I really wouldn't want to see that day come."

Chen Biqing's face turned pale; he fell silent.

After that, Lin Wanrong pondered about the royal mansion, wondering if Gao Qiu had made any progress. He dared not actually go home to sleep. He instructed his palanquin bearers to head straight for the royal mansion, with Chen Biqing closely following behind.

Before they even approached the royal mansion, they saw troops patrolling in formation, a security perimeter established within a two-mile radius—no entry, no exit, the level of security was tight. Once inside the royal mansion, they were even more taken aback: thousands of soldiers maintained their formation as they thoroughly searched every corner of the premises.

"Brother Lin, you're back?" Gao Qiu rushed over upon receiving word, his face visibly worn. Seeing his expression, Lin Wanrong knew that the search had not yielded anything promising.

Chen Biqing surveyed the scene, his brows tightly furrowed, "Lord Lin, what are you doing? This is a royal mansion; how could you let soldiers rampage through it so recklessly?"

Lord Lin spread his hands, "Unless Lord Chen has a better idea? If so, I'll happily go home and sleep."

The audacity! Faced with Lord Lin's unscrupulous tactics, Chen Biqing felt helpless. "Lord Lin, even the Emperor has not yet pronounced judgment on the Prince's actions. Acting so rashly might give people grounds for criticism."

Gao Qiu sneered disdainfully at these supposed words of wisdom. Lin Wanrong shrugged and smiled, "Lord Chen, are you implying that I've convicted the Prince? These soldiers are here to search for him. If you have a better plan, I won't stop you."

Chen Biqing huffed, "If Lord Lin is so confident, who am I to interfere? I'll take a look around the premises and await your good news."

With a few attendants in tow, Chen Biqing headed deeper into the royal mansion. Watching his retreating figure, Gao Qiu muttered menacingly, "Brother Lin, what kind of trouble-making official did this guy turn out to be? Should I have my men tie him up?"

'Dammit, Brother Gao's more of a bandit than I am,' thought Lin Wanrong, laughing heartily. "Why tie him up? The old man is still waiting for him to uncover the 'actual truth.' So, Brother Gao, did you find anything?"

Gao Qiu spat softly and dejectedly said, "Brother Lin, you see the scene. Over a thousand brothers have turned this royal mansion upside down, and we didn't even find a yellow pair of underpants. It's truly bizarre!"

Lin Wanrong responded gravely, "Brother Gao, are you certain those two guards entered the royal mansion and never left?"

"My life's at stake on it!" Gao Qiu declared confidently, "We have sealed off two miles around this area so tightly that not even a fly could get out. Dammit, did they fly away or vanish into thin air?"

"Don't panic," Lin Wanrong patted Gao Qiu on the shoulder. His own anxiety was far greater than Gao Qiu's, but he couldn't show it. "As long as they're hiding here, we will find a way to flush them out. Brother Gao, take me inside to have a look."

Gao Qiu nodded, pushing Lin Wanrong's wheelchair as they entered.

A great fire had long ago altered the appearance of the royal mansion. The air was filled with a choking smog, the gardens were desolate, and the flowers were withered. All the past grandeur was gone. The enormous waterwheel, brought from Yunnan by Prince Cheng, was still turning slowly. The golden dragon root carving—emblazoned with "Dragon Trapped in Shallow Waters"—still stood in the distance. Yet the circumstances within these gardens had already changed beyond recognition.

In stark contrast to the grandeur of the past, with its golden lanterns, glazed cups, wine, and numerous attendants, the present-day decline and disrepair were all too glaring.

"What are you looking at, Brother Lin?" Seeing Lin Wanrong lost in thought as he stared at a clean side room, Gao Qiu quickly tugged on his sleeve.

"Nothing, just reminiscing about the past," Lin Wanrong replied, a hint of nostalgia flashing in his eyes. He gently pushed open the door to the room. It was as neat as ever, with a fine table standing quietly in a corner. The silk quilt on the bed was soft, a faint fragrance still lingering in the air, unchanged from that night so long ago.

"Make haste, you can't mess this up. Think about Xian'er—"

"Don't call me Master Sister—"

"My Lord, go slow, you're tearing me apart—"

Whispers of moans and groans seemed to float back to him, as if he had returned to that exact scene. An Biru's seductive face subtly floated into his view.

"Sister An, don't go—" Lord Lin's eyes brimmed with tears as he grabbed An Biru's small hand.

"Let go of me—" Sister An cried out urgently.

Lord Lin tightened his grip, "Even if it kills me, I won't let go. Sister, come back, I miss you so much—"

"Brother Lin, I beg you, let go of me—" Gao Qiu, full of goosebumps, pleaded, "I have someone else now—"

Startled by the raspy voice, Lord Lin looked closely and found no Sister An but was instead tightly grasping Gao Qiu's bark-like hand, nearly tearing off his skin.

"Brother Gao, what are you doing hiding here? Trying to take advantage of me?" Lord Lin quickly let go of Gao Qiu's sleeve, his body breaking out in a cold sweat.

"Brother Lin, are you delusional? What Sister An? This is the royal mansion!"

"Never mind, never mind," Lord Lin wiped the sweat from his forehead, sighing deeply, and sternly said, "Brother Gao, nobody touches anything in this room. Anybody who does will lose their head!"

"Yes, yes," Gao Qiu nodded. Noticing the redness around Brother Lin's eyes, he whispered, "Don't worry, Brother Lin. Your affairs outside the home will die with me. Your wives will never know."

That scoundrel Gao! Lord Lin cursed silently and hurriedly left the room. As soon as he stepped out, he arrived at the mansion's backyard, and the scene before him took him aback.

The backyard was immensely vast, surrounded by walls that enclosed a clear lake stretching across several acres. There were pavilions and towers on the lake, willows surrounding wooden boats. A gentle breeze made the green waves ripple; it was incredibly charming.

Lin Wanrong had never been to the royal mansion's backyard before. The green hills and clear waters caught his eye. Indeed, the prince knew how to enjoy life. His expression suddenly tightened, "Brother Gao, have you searched the lake?!"

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Gao Qiu nodded, "Do I even need you to tell me? I've searched every nook and cranny of this place—the small bridges, flowing streams, pavilions, and towers. I've even sent dozens of skilled men to explore beneath the lake. Unfortunately, despite the vast waters, we found nothing. As for other areas within the estate, there's not much left to do except dig up the ground three feet deep."

Upon hearing this, Lin Wanrong let out a sigh and felt a great sense of disappointment. Had he guessed wrong? Was Prince Cheng not hiding here at all? But what about the two royal guards who had mysteriously vanished?

Before him, the lake shimmered in the sunlight, and a few agile water birds skimmed the surface as they flew swiftly. It was a picturesque scene, but Lin Wanrong couldn't shake off his gloom. They walked along the pavilion and soon arrived at a tower not far from the lake's edge. Standing in shallow water, the tower was exquisitely designed, with carved railings, flying eaves, and golden bricks and tiles. The walls were adorned with various engravings of golden dragons, creating a spectacle of opulence.

"A mountain is not high if it houses a fairy; a body of water is not deep if it contains a dragon—what arrogance," Gao Qiu grumbled, halting his wheelchair in the middle of the pavilion. He looked around discontentedly.

"What were you just saying?" Lin Wanrong asked, intrigued.

"Look, Brother Lin, over there." Gao Qiu pointed at the pillars on either side, where large golden characters were engraved in a majestic, flamboyant style—exactly the lines of the poem Gao Qiu had just muttered.

"Who wrote this poem, Brother Gao?" Lin Wanrong was curious. "It seems like beautiful things transcend worlds. When I was in Hangzhou, I encountered a verse from Su Dongpo, and today I see this timeless line. Could it be true that beauty is universal?" He felt an overwhelming sense of familiarity.

Gao Qiu chuckled, "Some guy with the last name Liu from a few dynasties ago wrote it. Something about praising a lousy house. Poetry is not my forte, Brother Lin. If you want to know more, I can find a scholar to explain it to you."

"What lousy house? It's called 'Inscription of My Humble Home'!" Lin Wanrong found this amusing, yet it was already quite an achievement for Gao Qiu to remember those lines.

Gao Qiu grinned, "Look at these characters; they're probably penned by the Prince himself. Given the arrogance, you can't tell me he doesn't have ulterior motives."

"A mountain is not high if it houses a fairy; a body of water is not deep if it contains a dragon—" Lin Wanrong seemed not to hear him. He stared at the golden characters and muttered, "Water is not deep if it contains a dragon, if it contains a dragon—Ah, my brilliant Brother Gao!"

Lin Wanrong was ecstatic, slapping Gao Qiu on the back, startling him, "What's gotten into you, Brother Lin?"

"What a line—'A body of water is not deep if it contains a dragon'! Brother Gao, you are the smartest man in the world; I admire you!" Lin Wanrong was beside himself, his face glowing and his demeanor exhilarated.

Gao Qiu was bewildered, "Brother Lin, don't flatter me. I'm hardly the smartest in front of you—second place, maybe. Did you figure something out?"

Lin Wanrong snorted and said, "Brother Gao, based on your experience, was this lake in the royal mansion naturally formed, or was it dug out by human effort later?"

"I'd have to consult the mansion's records for that," Gao Qiu replied with an air of seriousness. He waved his hand to summon a guard and gave him a few instructions. In a short while, the guard returned with a small book. Gao Qiu flipped through a few pages and said, "According to the records, this site was personally chosen by the late emperor. The lake already existed when the mansion was built—"

"So, it's natural?" Lord Lin frowned slightly. "Did I guess wrong again?"

"However," Gao Qiu continued reading, "the records state that the royal mansion underwent significant renovations about a decade ago. The lake's area was nearly doubled—"

"Really?" Lin Wanrong's face lit up. He snatched the book from Gao Qiu's hands. "Let me see, let me see."

The dense, traditional characters made his head ache, but Lord Lin persevered and read each one. Just as Gao Qiu had said, the mansion had been renovated a decade ago, and the lake had been expanded by more than double. This matched almost perfectly with what he had expected. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily and tossed the book back to Gao Qiu. "Brother Gao, say no more. If this case is solved, the greatest credit goes to you. Now, do me a favor—drain this lake within a day, and leave not a single drop."

Gao Qiu drew a sharp breath and said with a worried face, "Brother Lin, how can I possibly drain so much water in just one day? Where would it go?"

Indeed, where could it go? Lord Lin pondered, even if he were to mobilize all his troops to dig canals, a day wouldn't be enough.

"It's difficult, so difficult," Lord Lin sighed twice. As the sun set and a cold breeze began to blow over the lake, he shivered involuntarily, unable to think of a solution. P❖

"My Dear—" Just when he was lost in thought, a soft call broke the silence. He looked up to see Xiao Qingxuan, dressed in a simple gown, her eyes like a painting, standing quietly beside him. Her slightly protruding belly was elegantly concealed under her white dress, exuding an indescribable harmony and beauty.

"Qingxuan, what brings you here?" Seeing Miss Xiao enveloped in the dim glow of twilight, her face tinged with a light blush and her delicate body frail as a willow, Lin Wanrong grew anxious and grabbed her hand tightly. "The wind is strong here; don't catch a cold, especially for the sake of our son!"

"I'm not as fragile as you make it sound," she replied as a guard brought over a cushioned stool for her to sit beside him. She then took out a white porcelain jar from her small basket and chided, "Don't forget, I beat you soundly back in Jinling."

"Yes, yes, soundly indeed," Lin Wanrong chuckled at the memory, and Xiao Qingxuan's face flushed charmingly.

"This is freshly cooked pear and fritillary soup. It contains premium thousand-year-old ginseng, good for invigorating the blood and clearing heat. Have some," she said, handing him the porcelain bowl. The handle was still warm. It turned out that she had a small stove in her basket, keeping the bowl warm all the way here.

Lin Wanrong gulped down several mouthfuls of the pear and ginseng soup, so overwhelmed with gratitude that he hardly noticed the scalding heat.

Xiao Qingxuan quickly took out a pristine white silk handkerchief and delicately wiped away the soup from the corners of his mouth. "You fool, no one's competing with you for it. Why are you in such a rush?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly, draining the last of the soup from the bowl and smacking his lips in contentment. Xiao Qingxuan found it amusing and lightly tapped him on the nose, saying, "You really are a bull devouring peonies. This soup took a lot of effort to make. Madam Xiao spent two hours teaching Qiaoqiao how to perfect it, and it simmered for a whole day to attain this flavor. You've squandered it."

"But isn't the point of cooking it for me to eat?" Lin Wanrong replied with a laugh. "Madam Xiao is very thoughtful to have taught all these culinary skills to Qiaoqiao."

Xiao Qingxuan sighed softly, shaking her head. "She did this because she's going back to Jinling. She's concerned about your recovery, so she taught all her culinary skills to Qiaoqiao. She even instructed her in many finer points of taking care of people, details I wouldn't even have thought of. Madam Xiao's sense of gratitude is quite profound."

"Of course, of course, after all, it was a life I risked to save her," Lin Wanrong said with a hearty laugh, not showing the least bit of shame. "By the way, when is Madam Xiao leaving?"

"The departure is set for the morning after next. We couldn't persuade her otherwise. Madam Xiao is truly a woman of indomitable spirit! The Eldest Miss definitely inherits her disposition," Xiao Qingxuan said, a hint of regret in her voice.

'So she's leaving the day after tomorrow, and Madam Xiao didn't even notify me! Did I save the wrong person?' Lin Wanrong grunted and fell silent, feeling slightly irked.

Seeing his lowered spirits, Xiao Qingxuan tightened her grip on his hand and softly said, "All feasts must end, and if Madam Xiao wishes to return to Jinling, we can't hold her back. How about we go to Jinling to visit once you return from the northern campaign? Would you like that?"

"Of course, I'd love to," Lin Wanrong quickly nodded, boasting, "Jinling is where I started to make my name, and it's also where I conquered you—"

"Conquered? What nonsense! You brat!" Xiao Qingxuan playfully scolded, her face turning pink. She was both annoyed and amused.

"My Dear, I heard from Commander Gao that you intend to drain this lake?" Their sweet moment over, Xiao Qingxuan shifted to a more serious tone.

Lin Wanrong hummed in agreement, letting out a sigh of frustration. "It's easier to shake the heavens than to drain a dike. How could draining such a large body of water be simple?"

Xiao Qingxuan was silent for a moment before breaking into a mysterious smile. "Why would you want to drain such a beautiful lake? I find it quite pleasing to look at."

"Ah, so Qingxuan likes it too," Lin Wanrong responded earnestly, nodding his head. "That settles it. Tomorrow, we'll have a large swimming pool built in our backyard. You and your sisters can swim whenever you like—wear less clothing to reduce water resistance and increase my motivation—"

"Ugh, you!" Xiao Qingxuan's face flushed crimson. "What do you think about all day? Your mind wanders so much, no wonder you're becoming increasingly foolish!"

"Foolish? How am I foolish?" Master Lin protested.

"Still denying it?" Qingxuan said with a smile, "Only you would think of such a clumsy way to drain the water. Haven't you ever heard of the idiom 'a bird startled by the mere twang of a bow'?"

"A bird startled by the mere twang of a bow?" A flash of insight crossed Master Lin's mind. With a swift peck on Miss Xiao's rosy cheek, he exclaimed, "Ah, how could I overlook such a method? People say that beauty and brains don't go hand in hand, but you, Qingxuan, you're different. Your wit is as remarkable as your beauty; I'm absolutely smitten!"

"What nonsense are you talking about?!" Flustered by her husband's cheeky compliments, Qingxuan covered her cheeks with both hands. Luckily, they were alone; if anyone had heard such intimate dialogue, she would have wanted to crawl into a hole.

"It's been a while since we've, you know," Master Lin snuggled into her embrace, pressing against her soft bosom, "Let me feel you—oh, even bigger than Ning'er's—"

Before she knew it, a few pinches from him left her weak, her face flushed like fire. Seeing her husband act like a child, playing around in her arms, Xiao Qingxuan felt her heart soften. Being with him always brought new joys and made her irresistibly happy.

"What are you trying to do? Haven't you had enough fun with Ning'er today?" She struggled as he started unbuttoning her top. Although she indulged him, she knew his nature. If she allowed his mischief, he'd never recover from his injuries.

Master Lin was a man with many wives, but none he respected more than Xiao Qingxuan. Withdrawing his hand, he chuckled, "I wasn't being mischievous. It's just natural attraction, the highest level of mutual love. Every moment with you is the happiest time in the world—"

Xiao Qingxuan felt overwhelmed. She had been tempted by his sweet talk more than once or twice and always found it delightful. If things continued this way, she feared she would follow in Ning'er's footsteps.

"Stop it, you flatterer," her voice softened against her will, "Hurry and get your work done, then come home. Your wives are waiting for you."

"Yes, yes." Master Lin found her as enchanting as a fairy. Her stunning beauty turned him weak, and he nodded his agreement, wishing he could fall into her soft bosom and never wake up.

"Master Lin, Master Lin, the princess has left!" Noticing Master Lin gazing lustfully at the direction in which Xiao Qingxuan had disappeared, saliva dribbling down his chin, Commander Gao couldn't bear it and rushed over to shake him.

"Oh, really?" Master Lin wiped the drool from the corner of his mouth, his face a bit embarrassed. 'I must be getting worse with age, drooling over my own wife. But then again, Qingxuan does have a devilish figure; she could hold her own against Sister An and Fairy Ning.'

Seeing Master Lin drifting off again, Commander Gao urgently added, "Master Lin, wake up, have you thought of a solution?!"

"A solution? Ah," Lord Lin's expression turned serious. "Brother Gao, go issue a notice for me."

"A notice? What kind of notice?"

Lord Lin chuckled. "Say that last night, there was a great fire. In the pond behind the royal palace, a large stash of hidden jewels was found. Following the principle of 'acquired from the people, used for the people,' and with the Emperor's grace, we are openly seeking skilled divers to excavate the jewels. Three-tenths of the find will be given as a reward to those who contribute."

"Huh?" Gao Qiu was dumbfounded. "Brother Lin, once this notice is issued, won't the secret of this lake become common knowledge?"

"So be it. Let everyone get rich together," Lord Lin said, grinning sinisterly. "Also, make it clear that the digging is to take place only tomorrow. Any attempts after that will be invalid."

"And what if someone actually finds something but decides to embezzle it?" Gao Qiu was very thorough in his considerations.

"Embezzle?" Lord Lin chuckled. "I hope they do! I'd like them to turn over every inch of the lakebed for me. The more gold and silver found, the better."

"I get it! This is driven by self-interest!" Gao Qiu's eyes lit up, and he gave a sincere thumbs-up. "Lord Lin, among all the people in the world, you are the most cunning—I'll go take care of it right away!"

"Hold on, hold on—" As Gao Qiu was about to leave, Lin Wanrong laughed. "Don't rush. I haven't finished yet. Gather our brothers and have them divert some water. If they find silver in the lake, it will be theirs. We can't show favoritism, can we? Also, bring a few cannons—"

"Cannons? What for?" Gao Qiu was shocked.

"Nothing much," Lord Lin said with a faint smile. "In our free time, we can fire a few shots at the lake, perhaps to hunt some waterfowl."

"Hunting waterfowl with cannons?" Gao Qiu was completely convinced. With many men under his command and a knack for efficiency, it didn't take long before hundreds of notices were posted and new cannons were brought in.

Imperial Censor Chen Biqing arrived upon hearing the news and was taken aback by the four cannons lined up, their dark barrels shimmering ominously.

"Lord Lin, what are you doing?" Although Chen Biqing held a high position, he had never seen such a spectacle.

"Are you asking me?" Lin Wanrong replied with a smile. "Oh, I noticed that our brothers have been working hard, so I thought I'd shoot some waterfowl to add to their meals. Lord Chen, do you prefer them grilled or roasted?"

"Lord Lin, this is the royal mansion!" Chen Biqing was so furious that his beard trembled. "How can you act so recklessly? Is there no law left?"

Lord Lin remained composed, cranked the cannon a few times, and shook his head. "You're overthinking it, Lord Chen. Does shooting a couple of wild birds at the royal mansion really break the law?"

Lord Lin personally took aim to shoot the birds, making Gao Qiu break out in a cold sweat. If something were to happen to Lord Lin, Gao Qiu knew he would be irrevocably doomed. "Be careful, Lord Lin," he advised nervously.

"Don't worry; I'm an expert cannoneer!" [It has a modern double meaning, master of sex] Just as Lord Lin's words left his lips, a loud boom resounded, and a massive wave surged in the distant water.

Chapter 493 Treasure Hunting

Lord Lin fired a cannon without warning, the thunderous explosion nearly rupturing everyone's eardrums. Lord Chen let out a frightened scream, quickly covering his ears, his legs trembling. "Lord Lin, how dare you fire a cannon within the royal mansion! You're audacious—"

Far away, the surface of the water surged with gigantic waves. Beautiful splashes slowly meandered in all directions before disappearing. Lin Wanrong appeared completely unfazed, as if he hadn't heard Lord Chen's words. He chuckled smugly, "Brother Gao, how did I do with that shot?"

"Excellent, truly excellent—" Gao Qiu gave a thumbs-up: "I've lived for many years and never have I seen anyone shoot as well as you. This shot was powerful and shook the heavens. Brother Lin, you are indeed brilliant and unparalleled in valor—"

"What valor?" Seeing Gao Qiu excessively flattering him, Lin Wanrong patted the dark cannon barrel and laughed, "The waterfowl flew too fast; I intended to shoot its behind, but I miscalculated and didn't even hit a feather. Ah, skills do rust without practice; seems like I'll have to find time to practice my cannon shooting more."

The two men laughed and talked, completely ignoring Chen Biqing. Gao Qiu was the chief of the palace guards and a man close to the Emperor. Why would he be afraid of a mere Imperial Censor?

Lord Lin randomly fired several more shots into the lake. Waterfowl scattered, waves roared, and dozens of white fish belly-up floated to the surface.

Gao Qiu sighed in admiration, "Lord Lin, you care for your soldiers like a father, personally firing cannons to catch fish for them. If this story gets out, it will surely be another splendid tale."

Having seen shameless people before, Chen Biqing couldn't bear it anymore: "Lord Lin, this royal mansion was personally chosen by the late Emperor as an auspicious place. You disregard the late Emperor's kindness by firing cannons within the mansion. How could you be so disrespectful? I will certainly report you to His Majesty—"

"Would you give it a rest, Lord Chen?" Lin Wanrong made a sour face, "Every day you talk about reporting this and that; I'm worried for you. Can't you do something else? Go home, hug your wife, play with your concubines; anything's better than this!"

Vulgar! Despicable! Chen Biqing was about to speak when Gao Qiu interjected with a strange tone, "Brother Lin, you don't understand. Lord Chen is specialized in writing petitions. Moreover, playing with one's own concubines never brings any novelty. Tormenting others is far more satisfying. Right, Lord Chen? Ha ha—"

Feeling ridiculed by the two, Chen Biqing was about to explode, but he remembered what the Emperor had told him before leaving. Reporting Lord Lin would likely be fruitless. Moreover, he was relying on Lord Lin for the investigation of Prince Cheng's case, so Lord Chen swallowed his anger with a grunt.

As soon as the announcement was posted, news of the royal mansion's treasure hunt spread like wildfire throughout the city.

The Emperor was recruiting people for a treasure hunt and promised a generous reward of thirty percent. This was an unheard-of good fortune, leaving the public both intrigued and skeptical. Later, soldiers "accidentally" leaked insider information that the person in charge of this treasure hunt was the highly regarded commoner-hero, Lord Lin. His deeds had long been compiled into books and widely disseminated; naturally, there wouldn't be any questions about his character.

With the allure of the gold-lettered sign, everyone was reassured. Within a short span of time, hundreds had already gathered at Gao Qiu's place to register, with the number of arrivals continuing to grow unabated.

Lin Wanrong, aware that time was of the essence, chose to stay at the royal mansion. Gao Qiu, perceptive as always, personally escorted Mr. Lin to the chamber once occupied by Sister An. "Brother Lin, I see you have taken quite a liking to this room. How about this? I'll send word to the ladies at your residence that you'll be tending to official matters here tonight. Does that sound alright to you?"

'Gao Qiu truly knows how to get things done,' thought Lin Wanrong. He chuckled, waving his hand to send Gao Qiu off to make the arrangements.

Lying on the soft bed, he was enveloped by a faint, pleasant aroma, as if Sister An's warmth lingered in the room. Memories of their intimate night came flooding back—every smile, every frown of hers vividly playing out before his eyes. He wondered if she, now living a luxurious life in Miao Village, even remembered him. Torn between joy and sorrow, Lin Wanrong grabbed the soft blanket, imagining it was Sister An's silky skin, and roughly kneaded it. "I pinch, I touch, I pinch and touch..."

Finally tiring of fantasizing about Sister An, he fell into a restless sleep. He didn't know how much time had passed when he suddenly felt a gentle breath near his ear. "Husband, Husband—"

Startled awake, he saw Miss Qin smiling at the bedside, blinking at him.

Lin Wanrong grabbed her hand. "Xian'er, where have you been? I didn't see you when I came back this afternoon!"

"I'm not telling you." Xian'er giggled, tapping him on the nose. "Husband, it's time to change the dressing."

"Oh!" Lin Wanrong sighed resignedly. These bone injuries were indeed troublesome; the externally applied salve couldn't be neglected and had to be changed every few hours.

Qin Xian'er took out a small bottle from her chest and slowly removed the cork, releasing a unique, mild fragrance. It was neither the scent of herbs nor flowers, yet it was incredibly soothing. She opened his clothes and applied some of the medicine onto his leg. Lin Wanrong felt a wave of

coolness penetrating deep into his bones, making him sigh in relief. "Xian'er, where did you get this miraculous potion? It looks and smells so different from what Qingxuan uses."

Qin Xian'er smiled proudly. "Well, of course. This potion is incredibly magical, it's from the Miao —"

"Miao? Miao what?" Lin Wanrong looked at her, intrigued.

Qin Xian'er hurriedly corrected herself. "This medicine is made from herbs collected from the Great Snow Mountain behind the temple, so naturally, it's different. According to my Mast—uh, according to those who've tried it, you'll be able to walk in less than ten days. Husband, what do you think?"

"What temple has a Great Snow Mountain behind it?" Seeing Xian'er stammer, Lin Wanrong chuckled dismissively. "No need to comfort me about being able to walk in ten days. Qingxuan said the same thing when she applied her salve. In my view, when you sisters say I'll be able to walk in ten days, you probably mean I'll have to crawl!"

"How annoying," Xian'er giggled, giving him a playful glare. "If you don't believe me, don't you even trust my Mast—trust others?"

"Fine, fine, I believe you," Lin Wanrong said with a laugh as he pulled her beside him and lay down. "Xian'er, your timing is perfect. Come, lie with me for a while."

Xian'er hummed in agreement and slowly nestled into his arms. Suddenly, as if recalling something, she hastily raised her head and asked, "Husband, did you favor that little demon Luo Ning earlier?"

"Ah, that... I don't remember," Lord Lin hastily tried to brush it off.

Qin Xian'er's expression turned stern: "Husband, you are gravely injured and weak. If you recklessly expend your vitality, you risk further harm. This is no trifling matter."

Lord Lin broke into a cold sweat. "Yes, yes, Qingxuan has already admonished me. I will be careful from now on. Xian'er, I didn't know you understood these things!"

"Of course!" Qin Xian'er giggled, hugging his neck and burrowing further into his arms.

As Lin Wanrong took in the faint fragrance wafting off Xian'er, he was reminded of a passionate night he had spent there with Sister An. Despite trying, he couldn't fall asleep. He gently caressed Xian'er's smooth arm, sighing, "Xian'er, there's something I must tell you. Otherwise, I won't be able to ease my conscience. The truth is, Sister An and I have a little secret—Xian'er, Xian'er—"

He nudged Qin Xian'er lightly, only to find her breathing even, with a sweet smile on her lips, already lost in her dreams.

The next morning, Gao Qiu was shirtless, splashing about in the lake when he heard someone clap and laugh. "Brother Gao, good morning! So you're swimming this early?"

Gao Qiu looked up and saw Lin Wanrong seated in a wheelchair, his eyes bloodshot and looking drained, clearly having had a restless night. Behind him, Princess Nishang looked radiant and full of life, like a celestial nymph.

Gao Qiu wondered if Lord Lin had been subjected to the princess's 'wiles' last night. 'Poor man, down to four limbs from five,' he thought sympathetically. Treading carefully, he asked, "Brother Lin, are you alright?"

"What could be wrong with me?" Lord Lin, oblivious to Gao Qiu's thoughts, chuckled at the sight of Gao Qiu's comical doggy-paddle. "Brother Gao, your swimming style is indeed unique."

Gao Qiu laughed heartily. "Don't mock me, brother. I was born in Cangzhou, a landlocked area. Today is my first time swimming. Look, these skilled swimmers are all here because of you. I'm just learning from them."

He gestured towards the shoreline, where hundreds had already gathered, their skin tanned and shirtless. When Lin Wanrong's gaze swept over them, they all saluted in unison, "Greetings, Lord Lin!"

"Ah, good, good," Lin Wanrong nodded and smiled. "Thank you for your hard work, brothers. I didn't expect so many of you to come. But rest assured, if I've promised you a share of the treasure, you will have it."

Seeing Lord Lin's magnanimity, the faces of the hundreds present lit up with joy. Lin Wanrong smiled and continued, "The specific requirements and rewards have already been made clear in the

announcement, so I won't repeat them. All I ask is that you search thoroughly once underwater. Report anything unusual immediately. If we let even a single silver coin slip through our fingers—well, that would be a real shame."

Upon hearing Master Lin's alluring words, each and every one of the underwater experts had their eyes sparkling with anticipation, as if they couldn't wait to dig up every single underwater grass and mud in the lake.

The lake itself wasn't very large, but there were a good five to six hundred people assembled to seek treasures. With this many people diving in, overturning the lake wouldn't be a challenge at all.

"Alright, time is of the essence. Enough chit-chat," Lord Lin said, waving his hand and chuckling heartily. "Brother Gao, please arrange for a few strong men to take a preliminary feel and test the waters, just to see if I, Lord Lin, have been lying."

A preliminary feel? What did that mean? The crowd was puzzled, and even Qin Xian'er couldn't grasp his intentions. "Husband, what do you mean by 'a preliminary feel'? What scheme are you concocting now?"

"Just like this—" Seizing a moment when no one was looking, Lord Lin sneakily pinched Qin Xian'er's bottom and lewdly chuckled, "This is what I call a 'preliminary feel.'"

"You!" Qin Xian'er blushed and scolded him softly.

Meanwhile, Gao Qiu had already taken action. He demarcated various areas in the lake with colorful ropes, forming grids of similar sizes. Then he divided the treasure seekers into teams, each responsible for excavating within their designated grid. The arrangement was fair, and everyone was satisfied.

Gao Qiu picked a few random teams and selected one person from each, gathering around seven or eight people. He instructed them to stand in their allocated grids and then, clearing his throat, announced loudly, "What do we mean by a 'preliminary feel'? Master Lin has already mentioned that this lake hides treasures. Once found, thirty percent will belong to everyone. Now, I know some of you may doubt this, thinking that 'man does not live by pie in the sky.' But today, Master Lin is going to prove just that. These brave souls have been randomly selected—so let's find out if there's any pie after all!"

The crowd buzzed with anticipation. Gao Qiu grinned, "The auspicious time has come—Master Lin, please light the fuse!"

Master Lin, his expression serious, lit the fuse with a torch. A loud boom resonated, and the lake water erupted into a splash.

"Begin the 'preliminary feel!'" Master Lin exclaimed, and the selected divers plunged into the water, eager and competitive.

A momentary calm settled over the lake, disturbed only by startled water birds that flapped their wings. Those who remained above water held their breath, waiting for news from the underwater divers.

"Husband, what are you up to?" Qin Xian'er twisted Master Lin's arm, visibly annoyed.

Master Lin flashed a mysterious smile. "Patience, you'll find out soon."

Just as he finished speaking, a splash broke the stillness as one of the divers emerged. Everyone's anxious gaze immediately focused on him.

The man lifted a small wooden box out of the water and announced, "Master, I found a silver box in the underwater silt."

"Ah?" Master Lin was overjoyed, "Quickly check its contents!"

Gao Qiu rowed a small boat over and took a quick glance before excitedly reporting, "Master Lin, this man has found a hundred taels of silver!"

"Excellent!" Master Lin slapped his thigh and burst into laughter. "According to the rules, thirty taels of that silver will belong to this brave man."

"Sir," another man emerged from the water, brimming with joy, "I've found twenty taels of gold—"

"I've found three pieces of agate—"

"I've found sixty taels of silver—"

One after another, good news poured in. Every man who had gone underwater came up with something, with the least finding a piece of silk fabric. It seemed that Master Lin's promises had indeed come true: the lakebed was full of treasure. Those who remained on the surface grew impatient, their eyes pleading for Master Lin to give the signal.

Master Lin straightened his expression and sternly declared, "Before you all dive, let me make one thing clear. You'll get thirty percent of whatever you find. I've been generous, and I expect no less from you. Should anyone attempt to pocket any of these treasures illicitly, they will be considered as robbing the state treasury! And report immediately if you find anything unusual underwater. Understood?"

"Understood!" With the motivation of personal gain, the men responded loudly.

"Very well, the treasure hunt officially begins!" Master Lin waved his hand grandly, and the remaining hundreds of men plunged into the water like dumplings tossed into a pot, sending ripples across the lake.

"Brother Gao, how much silver did you send down?" Master Lin hastily inquired as Gao Qiu approached him.

Gao Qiu replied, "Wasn't it you who instructed to spread as much as possible? Considering the size of this lake, at least a thousand taels of silver would be needed. I also scattered some gold leaves, pearls that glow in the dark, and silk. In some spots, I even hid boxes of top-grade Bi Luo Chun tea and Longjing tea—"

Master Lin felt dizzy listening to Gao Qiu; the man had taken it too seriously, as if organizing a treasure appraisal event. "Brother Gao, just tell me, how much did we spend in total?"

Gao Qiu counted on his fingers, "Around two thousand taels! Don't worry, I had the Xiao family handle all the purchases. The old Zhao family in the east of the city also wanted the contract and promised me a ten percent kickback, but I sternly refused. We let the Xiao family make all the money and didn't favor anyone else—"

Damn it, my two thousand taels are gone! Master Lin felt as if his flesh had been cut off. He grunted a few times without speaking.

Qin Xian'er suddenly realized, "Ah, I understand now. Husband, you were the one who threw the silver into the lake—"

"Shh—" Master Lin hurriedly glanced around to see if anyone was watching, then grimaced, "Me, throw silver? Am I insane?! Xian'er, your husband is losing money on this venture, all for my future father-in-law! Speaking of which, Brother Gao, how much budget did the Emperor give for this?"

"Budget? It seems the Emperor never mentioned it!" Gao Qiu pondered, then added, "However, from my many years of experience serving in the palace, when you're working for the Emperor, it's always about picking the expensive over the economical. As for expenses— it's all reimbursement!"

What a wonderful word, reimbursement, Master Lin thought cheerfully. He slowly raised three fingers, "Brother Gao, what did you say we've spent so far?!"

"Two thousand, oh, no, three thousand—"

"Look again!" Master Lin waved his three fingers before Gao Qiu.

"—Oh, no, that's wrong, it's thirty thousand! My, my memory! I clearly threw thirty thousand taels into the lake!" Gao Qiu slapped his palm and feigned a sudden realization.

'This old Gao is too crafty,' Master Lin thought, wishing he could give the man a good kick in the rear. "Brother Gao, one should be honest. How could you speak so carelessly? I clearly only used three times the two thousand taels—just six thousand taels!"

Chapter 494 The Discovery at the Bottom of the Lake

"So it was actually 6,000 taels," Gao Qiu patted his own head, his face flushed with shame. "Look at my memory, how could I have mistakenly calculated an excess of more than 20,000 taels? Truly disgraceful. Brother Lin, you are a paragon of nobility and integrity, a role model for us all."

Qin Xian'er couldn't take it anymore. She glared at Gao Qiu and snapped, "Commander Gao, are you pretending I don't exist? We clearly spent only 2,000 taels, so why did you report 6,000 taels to my father? Do you not value your life?"

Cold sweat streamed down Gao Qiu's face. Not daring to talk back to the princess, he looked to Lord Lin for support.

Unexpectedly, Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. "Xian'er, how can you call this embezzlement? Commander Gao is not that kind of person! The truth is, we did throw 2,000 taels into the lake, but that's just the visible expense. There are other hidden costs, like transportation and overtime pay for Commander Gao's men—those things also cost money."

Hearing his ridiculous explanation, Qin Xian'er burst into laughter. "Don't lie to me. All those transportation and labor costs are already covered by the military provisions, which my father has already provided. They have nothing to do with the 6,000 taels."

"Brilliant!" Lin Wanrong gave her a thumbs-up. "But consider this, Xian'er. What's a mere 6,000 taels compared to eliminating treasonous scum? This is a case of spending a little to achieve a lot. If it ensures the peace and security of the empire, not to mention 6,000 taels—even 60,000 or 600,000 taels would be acceptable. And look at me—" He waved his arms theatrically, pointing to the heavy bandages on his leg. "Your husband here is a disabled man who selflessly labors for the Emperor day and night. This small labor fee doesn't even cover my medical expenses!"

Moved by his words, Qin Xian'er lowered her head in shame and gripped his hand tightly. "You're right, my husband. You're so committed that you don't even take care of yourself. Taking a bit more money is justified. After all, my father's money will eventually be yours anyway. Commander Gao, as you said, report 30,000 taels. After deducting expenses, the rest will serve as my husband's hardship fee."

Gao Qiu quickly agreed, utterly impressed by Brother Lin's ability to manage his wife.

"That's unacceptable," Lin Wanrong said, his tone turning serious. "Xian'er, as the saying goes, the world has its own righteous ways, and one should act with conscience. What belongs to me, I won't be shortchanged a single cent; what doesn't, I won't take. Commander Gao, only report 6,000 taels, not a cent more. After deducting expenses, distribute another 2,000 taels among your men. The remaining 2,000 may be insufficient, but it should barely cover my medical costs. Ah, is kindness a fault? If so, I am willing to err again and again!"

He shook his head in sorrow. Touched, Qin Xian'er held his hand tightly. "My husband, you truly are the best person in the world. Don't worry, my father's money will all be yours someday."

Lord Lin hummed twice, and Gao Qiu leaned into his ear, whispering, "Are you really only reporting six thousand taels? Brother Lin, this isn't like you. How about I arrange for someone to renovate the garden at your residence, add that to the bill, and round it up to ten thousand taels?"

"Are you a fool?!" Lord Lin shot Gao Qiu an annoyed glance while Qin Xian'er wasn't paying attention. "One must be savvy. Considering the nature of what we're doing, do you really think the Emperor will believe us if we report ten thousand taels? Wait for a big occasion. The next time we fight the nomads, you can report a small fortune of a hundred thousand taels and recoup everything!"

Gao Qiu felt a cold sweat running down his back. He was utterly convinced by Lord Lin, thinking to himself, 'No wonder Brother Lin has the princess tightly wrapped around his finger.'

The mist gradually dispersed, revealing a radiant sun that cast a faint golden glow over the water's surface. The warm morning sun made everyone feel comfortable and relaxed. Divers, filled with vigor, surfaced from time to time, reporting they had found treasures of gold and silver. Of course, there were those less fortunate who searched underwater without finding anything. Watching others collect silver and jade made their frustration grow, driving them to work even harder. Spurred by this, the atmosphere at the site was incredibly heated.

After finishing breakfast, a fair amount of silver was indeed brought up, but the item they were supposed to find still remained elusive.

"I can't stand this anymore!" Gao Qiu shoved the last bun into his mouth, ripped off his coat, and was about to dive in. "What if they're so focused on the silver that they forget what they're really supposed to be doing? I'll go down and see."

Enjoying a gentle shoulder massage from Xian'er, Lord Lin sighed contentedly. Shaking his head, he chuckled, "Brother Gao, you better stay put. With your dog-paddling skills, I'm afraid you'll achieve nothing, and I'll end up holding a memorial service for you." 呸

"What should we do then?" Gao Qiu lamented. "How long are we supposed to wait like this? The Emperor only gave us two days. We need to report back to him tomorrow morning."

"Don't worry, someone is even more anxious than us," Lord Lin gave a mysterious smile, then suddenly exclaimed, "Where's Lord Chen? Why isn't he here?"

"No idea! Probably went back to write a memorial to the Emperor."

"Writing a memorial, huh? Well, let him go ahead then," Lord Lin said, unconcerned.

As the two men were conversing, a diver surfaced in the middle of the lake, holding something in his hand and excitedly waving his arm, "My Lord, I've found it! I've found the treasure!"

In the morning light, the object glittered with a dazzling gold. It was a large golden ring, of excellent quality and considerable weight, as large as two adult palms.

Gao Qiu lowered his voice and said to Lord Lin, "This team worked all morning and didn't even touch a mud egg. Now, it seems their luck has turned. Damn it, I remember throwing a gold needle into this area myself. How come they haven't found it yet?"

‘You old rascal!’ Lord Lin shook his head disapprovingly and chuckled, "Brother Gao, these fellows are really serving you well. You throw in a gold needle, and they pick up a golden ring for you."

"A gold ring? I've never thrown a gold ring into the water. How could they have found one?" Gao Qiu exclaimed in astonishment.

Lin Wanrong looked puzzled for a moment, but then his face suddenly brightened. "My good man, bring it over quickly!" he waved frantically at the man who had found the ring.

Once the man swam over and handed the gold ring to Lin Wanrong, he examined it closely. The ring was dazzlingly brilliant and of fine quality; traces of friction were visible on its band.

"Where did you find this?" Lin Wanrong hastily inquired.

The man respectfully replied, "Sir, I spotted it in a crevice between some chaotic rocks underwater. The ring was pinned down by several large stones. I've passed that area dozens of times, and had it not been for a glint of gold, I would have completely missed it. The ring was embedded in a large stone, which was quite heavy. I had a hard time extracting it, so I brought it directly to you, sir."

Embedded in a stone? Lin Wanrong and Gao Qiu exchanged glances, both eyes filled with excitement. "Can you find that place again? Take me there immediately," Gao Qiu commanded.

The location was in the middle of the lake, requiring a small boat to get there. Qin Xian'er carefully helped Lin Wanrong onto the boat, and they rowed towards the center of the lake. Once there, Lin

Wanrong took a bamboo pole and slowly lowered it into the water. The pole didn't hit the bottom, indicating the great depth of the lake.

"Brother Gao, get some of the men who are good swimmers to go down with you," Lin Wanrong murmured. "Let's see what exactly is beneath that stone!"

"Understood," Gao Qiu signaled, and a group of well-prepared soldiers, all skilled in swimming, plunged into the water. In an instant, they were gone, leaving only ripples behind. Gao Qiu, despite his lack of swimming skills, called for assistance and followed suit.

When the surface of the lake finally calmed, Lin Wanrong stared intently at the gently rippling green water, his fists clenched.

Seeing his serious expression, Qin Xian'er suddenly giggled, "Husband, do you remember the time you accompanied the Eldest Miss boating on West Lake in Hangzhou?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, "You mean the time you cut the red thread? Hehe, how could I forget? But let's be clear, Xian'er, it wasn't me accompanying her; it was Xu Wei who wanted to meet his old lover and invited us onto the boat under the guise of having floral wine. Don't mix up the story."

Xian'er laughed teasingly, "What about that time on Weishan Lake? Did you enjoy accompanying me or my Master?"

"W-what do you mean? Sis-Sister An and I, we didn't—" Lord Lin found himself stuttering as Qin Xian'er seemed to imply something.

"Husband, why are you sweating so much?" Qin Xian'er cooed, seductively wiping the sweat from his face with her sleeve. "I know you were just fooling around with my Master. There are no little secrets between you two, right?"

"Ah, well, little secrets—" Lord Lin was lost for words, especially given the difference in the atmosphere from the night before.

Qin Xian'er sighed softly, "Husband, are you thinking of my Master?"

"I want to—Ah, no, that's not what I mean—I do miss her, just a little!" Lord Lin felt a chill run through him under Miss Qin's penetrating gaze, and he had no choice but to lower his head.

Miss Qin's voice seemed to float from far away, ethereal and elusive. "What exactly do you miss about her? The times she hit you, teased you, mocked you?"

The question was profound, and Lin Wanrong didn't know how to answer. Seeing his silence, Miss Qin, both shy and annoyed, lightly tapped his forehead with her delicate finger. "You always go mute when you're supposed to speak. No wonder my Master scolds you—"

"Sister An scolded me? What did she say?" Lord Lin immediately perked up at the mention.

Miss Qin looked amused and rolled her eyes at him. "I won't tell you. All desire, no courage. Look at you!"

"All desire, no courage?" Lin Wanrong sighed, "Xian'er, once all the chaos surrounding me has settled, I will take you and Sister An to visit Weishan Lake again and relive those warm moments."

Miss Qin nodded and smiled. "Wherever you go, I will follow. But persuading Master is another matter altogether. You know her temperament."

"Yes, yes," Lin Wanrong wiped the sweat from his forehead, finding hidden meanings in Xian'er's words that he wanted to ponder further.

As he was lost in thought, he suddenly heard splashing noises. Several heads emerged from the water, belonging to the soldiers who had gone underwater for the investigation. Gao Qiu appeared last, his face flushed from lack of air. "Damn it, I almost suffocated!"

'You can barely swim; I'd be surprised if you didn't,' Lin Wanrong laughed. "Brother Gao, what did you find down there?"

Gao Qiu wiped water from his cheeks and spat out some mud. "The stone with the gold ring weighs around 800 pounds; we couldn't move it. However, we made another discovery—there are two characters carved on the stone!"

"Stop beating around the bush, Brother Gao! What are the characters?" Lord Lin was so anxious he felt like jumping.

"Dragon—Palace," Gao Qiu enunciated slowly, grinding his teeth.

"Dragon Palace? Are you sure you didn't misread it?" Lin Wanrong asked nervously.

"With my swimming skills, how could I see clearly?" Gao Qiu chuckled self-deprecatingly. "But these gentlemen here are like dragons in water; they saw it with their own eyes, it can't be fake."

Lord Lin's eyes sharpened as he looked at the men, who quickly nodded in agreement.

This is it! Lin Wanrong slapped his palm with delight. "A Dragon Palace indeed! Brother Gao, send the news immediately. Tell everyone that we've found a Dragon Palace in the lake behind the royal mansion. Spread the word as far and as quickly as possible—let everyone know, even the deaf should hear of it."

Gao Qiu nodded; he was no stranger to the art of rumor-mongering under Lord Lin's tutelage.

"Additionally," Lord Lin said with a sinister smile, "prepare a hundred pounds of explosives and place them right at the entrance of this Dragon Palace. Damn it, I'll set this Dragon Palace on fire. Let's see how long this fake Dragon King can remain untroubled."

Chapter 495 The Big Fish Appears

"Planting explosives? Excellent, that will surely liven things up." Gao Qiu clapped his hands in delight and quickly dispatched a few nimble underlings to spread rumors and prepare the explosives.

Lin Wanrong nodded, then abruptly asked, "Brother Gao, how is the perimeter defense outside the city?"

"Don't you worry," Gao Qiu grinned. "Lord Xu is personally overseeing it. Following your instructions, we've scattered our formation. We're just waiting for the big fish to take the bait."

"Good!" Lord Lin chuckled and patted Gao Qiu on the shoulder. "Brother Gao, the glorious task of blowing up the Dragon Palace is entirely yours. Please give it your full attention."

"You're entrusting it to me?" Gao Qiu looked at him in confusion. "Brother Lin, are you saying you won't be staying here? That won't do. What if that Lord Chen tries to stop me? I wouldn't be able to outwit him. I'd feel more secure if you stayed."

Gao Qiu's concerns were not unfounded. Although Lord Lin didn't take Lord Chen seriously, Chen Biqing was not someone easily dealt with. Even if Gao Qiu wasn't afraid of him, he was certainly no match for him in a battle of wits.

After pondering for a moment, Lin Wanrong called for Xian'er to bring paper and brush. With flamboyant strokes, he quickly wrote down a few large characters and handed them to Gao Qiu.

Gao Qiu glanced at the document. Lord Lin's calligraphy was awkward but the message was strikingly clear: "All affairs of the mansion shall be handled by Gao Qiu. Anyone who dares to obstruct or disobey shall be arrested first and questioned later. Lin San, effective immediately."

"Brother Gao, you don't have to worry anymore. If anyone dares to obstruct you, proceed as I've instructed. I will take full responsibility for any consequences. Damn it, I refuse to believe there's anyone bolder than me in this world," Lord Lin confidently declared.

Gao Qiu thought about it and realized it was true. Better to offend the King of Hell than to cross Lin San. Those who had opposed Lord Lin never met good ends. Reassured, he tucked the document into his robe.

As they left the mansion, Lin Wanrong appeared lost in thought. Noticing his silence, Qin Xian'er stopped the palanquin and softly asked, "Husband, where are we going now?"

After contemplating for a moment, Lin Wanrong grinned, "Xian'er, take a guess. What do you think your uncle Prince Cheng is doing right now?"

Xian'er gave him a look. "How would I know? If you ask me, meeting you was his downfall. You've destroyed his base; what else can he do? His only option is to leave the city."

"Smart, truly worthy of being my wife," Lin Wanrong gave her a thumbs-up and chuckled. "Now let me ask you, he has two choices. One is to flee north and join the nomads; the other is to go south to Fujian and collude with the Dongyin. If you were Prince Cheng, which would you choose?"

Qin Xian'er furrowed her beautiful brows, deep in thought. As Lin Wanrong had said, Prince Cheng had lost his troops and was now utterly alone. If he fled, his only chance of survival would be to rely on a powerful faction. The nomads and the Dongyin were indeed his last options in desperation.

After contemplating for a long time, Miss Qin finally spoke, "In my opinion, he will choose the nomads!"

"Oh? And why is that?" Lin Wanrong asked, intrigued.

"The reasons can be summed up in two points," Miss Qin began, her mind as sharp as a blade. "Firstly, the nomads possess a strong military and sturdy horses, making them formidable in battle. They've long coveted our Great Hua, and now as both sides are in a standoff at the border, war is imminent. Should Prince Cheng flee to the nomad camp, he could potentially employ their military might to conquer the Central Plains—a path to fulfill his dreams most swiftly. On the other hand, the land of the Dongyin is narrow and their military strength is a hundred times weaker than that of the nomads. There's no reason for him to abandon strength for weakness."

Lin Wanrong nodded, his face wearing a smile. "Well reasoned. And the second point?"

"The second point is that he has already revealed his intentions," Miss Qin continued. "Husband, do you remember what Xu Wei told you? The sudden attack on the southern camp the other night involving hundreds of his devoted followers? If Prince Cheng truly intended to join the Dongyin, given his cunning nature, he wouldn't have rashly exposed his intentions. If we consider this sudden attack as a test of the defenses to the south, isn't he telling us that he intends to go south? This is inconsistent with his character. Therefore, I boldly speculate that this is a diversionary tactic—his real target must be the nomads in the north. Our focus should probably be on fortifying the northern part of the city."

"North? So your view aligns with Xu Wei's?" Lin Wanrong murmured, as if asking her and also pondering to himself.

Xu Wei was personally overseeing the defense of the north to cut off Prince Cheng's path that way. It seemed that his thoughts were closely aligned with those of Miss Qin.

Lin Wanrong paused to think, then slowly shook his head. "Xian'er, if we go by your reasoning—that he'll join whoever is strongest and sacrifice hundreds of followers as a diversion—then Prince Cheng's thinking seems a bit too simplistic."

"Then where do you think he's headed?" Hearing her husband question her judgment, Qin Xian'er pouted and pinched his arm in annoyance.

"My thinking is actually the opposite of yours," Lin Wanrong chuckled, a glint of enlightenment flashing in his eyes. "If I'm not mistaken, I believe your royal uncle intends to flee southeast."

"Southeast?" Miss Qin blinked, grasping his arm, her lips forming a pout. "Husband, you can't just bluff me. Give me a reason! If you can't convince me, I'll pinch you ten times!"

"Pinch my bottom? Oh my, what a severe punishment—I'm really looking forward to it," Lin Wanrong said, his tone facetious. This prompted a flurry of bashful annoyance from Qin Xian'er. The couple exchanged jests in the carriage for a moment before Lin Wanrong finally stopped laughing. "The reason is actually simple, Xian'er. You only see the nomads as strong and the Dongyin as weak, but in reality, who is strong or weak is irrelevant to Prince Cheng. No matter where he is, he's just a guest. Even if the nomads or the Dongyin were to seize the land of our Great Hua, they would never bestow it upon Prince Cheng. Don't you agree?"

Miss Qin considered his words and slightly nodded, conceding that he had a point.

"Therefore, for Prince Cheng, once he fled, his primary concern was not how to return to Great Hua, but rather how to secure his footing in the enemy camp. This was the crux of the matter. Just as you said, the nomads are confident in their military and consider themselves strong; they have a powerful nation and have never taken Great Hua seriously. A fleeing Prince Cheng would be of little use to them, merely a gilding on the lily. The Dongyin, however, see things differently. They have long coveted the vast territories and abundant resources of our Great Hua but have been unable to act due to their weaker national power. Now that war between Great Hua and the nomad is imminent, this is a golden opportunity for the Dongyin. Their risky military campaign in Goryeo reflects their ambitions toward Great Hua. Prince Cheng defecting to their side would greatly boost their morale and public sentiment. It's like sending charcoal in snowy weather, exactly to their taste."

"Moreover, the nomads look very different from us, making it hard to feel a sense of belonging. The Dongyin, however, resemble us in appearance, and psychologically speaking, it may give one the illusion that controlling them would be easier than controlling the nomads. On one side, you feel

like an outsider, on the other, you're treated as an honored guest—even capable of wielding control. If it were you, Xian'er, what would you do?"

Hearing these words, Miss Qin felt that there was some truth to it, but her pride prevented her from admitting that she had been shortsighted. She snorted, "If he truly plans to seek refuge with the Dongyin in the southeast, then why send people to attack the southern gate? Isn't that intentionally exposing his target? How do you explain that?"

"Do I even need to explain?" Lin Wanrong laughed with open palms. "That old fox is doing it precisely to trick the clever ones. As the art of war states: when we are weak, we must make the enemy believe we are strong; when we are strong, make them believe we are weak. Misdirection and deception are separated by a paper-thin margin, easily pierced by a little finger."

Lin Wanrong spoke as if he were reading Prince Cheng's mind. The more he talked, the more convincing he sounded. Miss Qin began to doubt her own thoughts. However, having finally arrived at her own conclusions, she couldn't easily abandon them. She grabbed the sleeve of Lin Wanrong's robe and pouted, "Husband, you're just guessing, too! I don't believe you can always guess right!"

"Why don't we make a bet then?" Lin Wanrong winked, smiling. "Old Xu is guarding the northern city, so we can go to the south gate. Ah, what should we wager, let me think..."

Miss Qin giggled flirtatiously, looking enchantingly at him. Warmth filled Lin Wanrong's heart, and he grinned, "How about this—keep it simple. Xian'er, if I win, I get to kiss you ten times, alright?"

"Um," Miss Qin blushed and lowered her gaze. "What if I win?"

"You winning? That's basically impossible—" Seeing Miss Qin raise her hand as if to strike him, he quickly changed his tone, "—If you win, I'll take the loss and let you kiss me a hundred times. Ah, I'm not an easy man, you know!"

"You're asking for it!" With rosy cheeks, Miss Qin pinched his arm and pouted, "You're too self-serving—win or lose, you still come out ahead!"

"A grave injustice throughout the ages!" Lord Lin raised his fists high, seething with indignation. "When a man kisses a woman, he's accused of taking advantage! When a woman kisses a man, the man still gets blamed. Is there no justice? Where are human rights?"

Qin Xian'er's face softened as she leaned gently into his embrace. Blushing, she whispered, "You're always so dramatic—husband, win or lose, Xian'er is happy."

"My sweetheart," Lord Lin said with a roguish grin, his hands wandering over her soft, fragrant chest.

Xian'er let out a soft moan, her body warm as burning coals. "Husband, if I lose, I'll bear you a child —"

His heart melting at her words, Lord Lin lightly touched her delicate, translucent skin. "My sweetheart, and what if I lose?"

"Then we'll have ten—"

Now that posed a dilemma for Lord Lin. Win or lose?

As their palanquin left the south gate of the city, Miss Qin was limp as mud, leaning weakly against him. Her half-exposed chest faintly revealed her voluptuous form. With each sway of the palanquin, her delicate features seemed to captivate one's soul. Now she understood why the talented lady Luo had so easily given in; married to such a libertine, sainthood was impossible. Fortunately, Lord Lin heeded the advice of Qingxuan and took only minor liberties; the line had not yet been crossed. The couple continued their affectionate interactions in the palanquin, savoring the endless tender moments.

They traveled another dozen or so miles to the south, encountering soldiers grouped in threes and fives, sporadically searching the area. Their formation was notably disorganized. Lin Wanrong recognized it as General Xu's trap, but paid it no mind.

Further south, they came upon a makeshift large camp situated next to the main road. Several miles ahead was a lush, dense forest that, even in daylight, seemed dark and impenetrable.

In the camp were only about a thousand soldiers. Xu Zhen had been waiting. Seeing Lin Wanrong's bandaged leg, Xu Zhen was both elated and concerned. "General Lin, why have you come personally?"

"To catch a big fish, how could I miss it?" Lin Wanrong gave a slight smile and continued, "Xu Zhen, where are the men in your camp? Why are there so few left?"

Xu Zhen looked around slyly, chuckling. "Lord Xu has taken some of our men, claiming to give 'that person' some room to operate—there are five or six thousand scattered around. Don't underestimate them; these are the elite of our army. General Lin, where do you think 'that person' will flee?"

"It doesn't matter where he flees. Just keep a tight guard." Lin Wanrong nodded, glancing toward the distant forest. Suddenly, he grinned, "You're crafty. Tell me, how many men are ambushed up ahead?"

Astonished, Xu Zhen's mouth fell open. "General, how did you know?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head and laughed, "The sun hasn't even set, yet the forest is this quiet—If you haven't hidden men there, have ghosts occupied it?"

Xu Zhen shook his head and gave a wry smile. What he had initially considered a masterstroke was effortlessly seen through by General Lin with just a single glance.

As the sun dipped below the western horizon and twilight began to envelop the sky, there was still no movement from Gao Qiu within the city. Qin Xian'er grew anxious. Just as she was about to speak with her husband, a loud explosion suddenly echoed from within the city walls. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Old Gao, that youngster, has finally set off the explosion for me."

Before his words had even settled, a series of additional explosions followed, each more intense than the first. Lin Wanrong leaned forward for a closer look and saw multiple columns of thick smoke rising from the northern part of the city. Faint sounds of battle cries could also be heard.

Suddenly, in the dim light, two signal arrows shot up into the sky, slicing through the clouds. "General, look, to the north of the city—a big fish has appeared!" Xu Zhen pointed at the signal arrows, shouting excitedly.

"Bad news!" General Lin was so startled that he almost leaped out of his wheelchair. "Xu Zhen, quick, tell our brothers hiding in the woods to pull out! Withdraw immediately!"